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## **Conservation**

### **A Sharing Session on Film Restoration**

Speakers: Kit Wong, Assistant Curator II (Film-related Materials Conservation),  
HKFA

Stephen Fung, Assistant Curator II (Film), HKFA

Collator: Nicky Lam

Film conservation has always been an important part of the work of a film archive. The goal is to restore and preserve classic films in their original glory, giving viewers a chance to appreciate them. Film restoration involves highly professional knowledge and skills that have evolved due to the rapid changes in digital technology. Kit Wong and Stephen Fung of our Conservation Unit have travelled to Singapore and Italy respectively to learn about the latest technology and knowledge. During our end-of-the-year sharing session, they presented some of the key concepts in relation to digital film restoration.

#### **The film structure**

Before there was digital photography, film was the medium used to record motion pictures. In order to understand the principles of film conservation, basic knowledge of film as a medium is essential. Black-and-white and colour film largely share the same basic structure, which includes the image-capturing emulsion and the emulsion-holding film base. Emulsion consists of photosensitive chemicals that record images based on the level of exposure. Black-and-white film only has one layer of emulsion while colour film is made of three layers – blue, green and red – of emulsion. With each layer reacting to specific colours in the visible spectrum, each photosensitive layer creates a corresponding image.

There are basically three different types of film bases. The earliest type is nitrate film, which was commonly used from the late 19th century to the 1950s. Nitrate film, also known as flash paper, is highly unstable and must be kept in a low-temperature environment because it will spontaneously ignite at 40°C. Since the film's combustion process produces oxygen, it is virtually impossible to extinguish the fire caused by burning nitrate film until it is reduced to ashes. The second type of film is made of acetate, a more fireproof option that replaced nitrate film in the 1950s. However, acetate film will release the corrosive acetic acid in a high-temperature and humid environment. This degradation process is known as the 'vinegar syndrome'. Then polyester film was invented in the mid-1950s and gradually became the most

commonly used film base. Its stability was a huge upgrade from the previous two kinds of materials. Its physical sturdiness and resistance to degradation is ideal for preservation. Due to their relatively fireproof nature, acetate and polyester films are also called safety film.

On most film stocks, besides the frames where the images are recorded, there are also perforations on both sides that allow the film to move continuously and stably. The soundtrack is often located on the left side of the frame. There are three main types of soundtrack on film – variable area, variable density optical soundtrack and magnetic soundtrack. In the case of variable area and variable density tracks, when light passes through the optical soundtrack of film, photocells will produce varying degrees of electrical current that will be converted into different sounds as the film plays. On the other hand, specific magnetic sound heads are used to read magnetic soundtracks.

### **The problems with film**

Due to improper storage conditions and other environmental factors, old films often picked up an assortment of damages over the years. The problems occurred to the image and sound quality include the muddling of dialogues, erroneous noises on the soundtrack, flickering, scratches on the images, missing frames, among others.

Every part of the print is vulnerable to damage. For example, the connecting area can be weakened by splice-related mistakes or ageing adhesive material; the colours on the frame can fade and change; the emulsion can be scratched or damaged; not to mention all the stains that can be caused by tape, dust, fingerprints and rust. In more serious cases, prints are left with creases, broken perforations, incomplete frames, missing soundtracks, shrinkage, physical deformation, mould or the vinegar syndrome.

Film conservators can respond to these issues accordingly. If the goal is to preserve the film and the print is in relatively good condition, one can choose to duplicate and reproduce the film on a safe medium such as polyester film. This method of handling, namely preservation, does not involve any sort of modification of the original content. The sound and image of the film is thus preserved in the condition that is as close to its original state as possible. Yet if the original print is riddled with more serious issues, conservators might have to adopt a more intervening approach that is known as film restoration, which entails the modification of original content and removal of noticeable damages and defects by means of photochemical and/or digital technology.

### **The three steps in digital restoration**

The advancement of digital technology has allowed us to tackle issues that could not be resolved by traditional photochemical technology while affording greater flexibility. Here are the three steps in digital restoration:

1. Film preparation. This includes identifying the nature of the print and making decisions regarding its repair, duplication and development of new prints.
2. Film scanning. In this process, the processed print will be scanned and transformed into a digital file.
3. Digital restoration. The sound and image will be digitally restored during this step. At last, the mastering process will finalise the product for screening and preservation.

### **Film preparation**

Regardless of the method of restoration, this step is of paramount importance. A successful start in this step lays the foundation for an ideal restoration by ridding as many of the print's issues as possible. Getting acquainted with the source material is the first step of restoration. By studying and researching the details and information of the films, one could choose the best material to be scanned and set a guiding baseline for an authentic restoration.

The details of a print, such as its materials, measurements and film gauge, can be helpful hints for a conservator. For example, the word 'nitrate' could be found on a nitrate print. Different film manufacturers also used to add codes on the margin in order to record details such as the manufacture year and country of origin. Besides, the condition of a print's decomposition and shrinkage could help in identifying the type of film base. The aspect ratios, film gauges, sprocket holes of different shapes and sizes are also helpful in identifying the print and setting the foundation for restoration. The bottom line is that conservators will inspect the prints gently in hopes to cause the least damage to it.

While choosing the source material, one should try to find the original negative, the earliest generation print or the print with the most complete content, which could yield the most ideal results for the restoration. Once the source material is chosen, conservators will begin to repair the print in order to ensure that scanning and duplication will proceed smoothly in the future. This part of the process aims to repair the print's damaged sprocket holes, ravaged frames, tears, and worn-out adhesive materials. As the conservators examine each and every frame, the goal is to use the least invasive method to repair the print to the condition that will allow it to be loaded onto and go through the film scanner safely and smoothly.

Once the repairs are done, the conservators may have to do a film comparison

when there are different versions before they can move on to the scanning process. Since a film could have been screened in a different version and different length while it was shown in different countries, conservators have to choose a reliable version with a known release date for comparison with the print that they are working on. They have to compare and examine every scene of this released version with the print at hand so as to ensure that their materials are as complete as possible. Sometimes, conservators have to ask the print's donor, or even the film's director and crew, about the details of the film or check out the available home video formats to confirm the completeness of the print and compare the qualities of different prints. Once the scenes are lined up chronologically for the print, conservators can then decide which part is appropriate for scanning and restoration.

Prior to the invention of film scanner, conservators could use a printer to make a copy of the film. Different printers offer different advantages. For example, traditional optical printers have the ability to enlarge or reduce the image and the flexibility to make duplicates of films of different film gauges. Yet since this kind of printer requires the film to be projected frame-by-frame during the duplication process, it is relatively slow and thus reserved for duplicating archaic and fragile prints. Optical printers also allow what is known as wet gate printing, which makes use of chemical fluids in the duplication process in hopes to minimise the effects of scratches and moulding on the original negative and thus reduces the time-consuming workload for the following digital restoration process. On the other hand, the negative/print in a contact printer runs continuously, expediting the copying process, which is more suitable for newer and sturdier prints. Since the original print and the new printing stock are in contact with each other during the process, the information on the two sides of the frame will also be duplicated. Afterwards, the developing and fixing process will be done by a film processor.

### **Film scanning**

When a relatively complete print has been prepared after repair and comparison, it is then ready for scanning and to be digitised. The image and sound on the print will be handled separately. The images will be stored in DPX format while the soundtrack will be recorded as a WAV file.

The scanning process is the most crucial step in the restoration process. The results of the scan will directly influence the quality of the digital restoration. If the scan was not satisfactory, the following restoration work could be a lot harder and heavier. Besides, the original prints that are being scanned are possibly one of its kind, so one must handle them with great care to avoid any irreversible damage that could happen to the film. Therefore, in order to produce the most suitable digital file,

conservators often spend a good amount of time testing and deciding the appropriate scanning methods based on the information and research at hand.

There are many factors that could affect the outcome of a scan. Hence before the scanning process begins, conservators must make a decision on several items. For example, the use of a sprocket transport could stabilise the print and thus increase its resolution during a scan. The choice of a wet gate option or otherwise could also affect the final product. From the speed of the scanner to film tension at the platter, conservators must pay close attention to the condition of the film while it is running through the scanner and determine the most suitable course of action.

### **Digital restoration**

After a print is converted into digital information, the digital restoration, which includes ingesting, cleaning up, grading and mastering, is ready to begin.

Once the file of the scanned film is downloaded from the server, conservators will usually choose between two image restoration work stations – Phoenix on Microsoft Windows or Revival on Linux – to work on the images. While each has its own advantages, Revival has a longer history and is still widely used. Working on the work station, conservators will first repair the flickering, vibrating images, twisted images and distorted angles before moving on to clearing significant scratches and stains. Without altering the film's authenticity, conservators will refer to the preceding and proceeding frames, in addition to the film's narrative progression, as they determine the areas that require modification and the degree of modification. Meanwhile, conservators will also adjust the film's brightness, which could only be changed minimally by a traditional printer before the advent of digital technology. The advancement of restoration work stations has provided a higher degree of flexibility and better results by allowing conservators to adjust the image partially in fine details.

After revising the image, the next step is to correct and adjust the distorted colours on each frame. During the colour correction process, conservators will adjust the highlights, midtones and shadows accordingly in hopes of fine-tuning the images to their best. Conservators will also dim the lights while they are working on the colour correction as a way to minimise environmental influences and imitate the atmosphere of a cinema, thus resulting in possibly the most accurate colours.

Sound is handled separately during the restoration process. Soundtracks could be recorded on magnetic tapes or on the prints. Conservators would scan the positive for a digital sound file. The most common issues related to soundtracks include the loss of high frequency, the distortion of human voices and the occurrence of noise. Most of these problems are caused by fading soundtracks, dust, scratches on the print and/or

distortion of the film. The number of times which the print have been duplicated could also affect the quality of the soundtrack.

The sound-restoring work station will display the sounds of a film as a spectrum on the computer screen, where conservators can pick out the problematic sound waves and rid the soundtrack of its noise or correct parts that are out of tune. Also, conservators will establish certain low pass filters that will filter out certain common low frequency noises, including those created by alternating current (50 Hz) and running perforations (96 Hz).

Mastering is the final step in the process of digital restoration. Conservator will ensure they have taken all necessary steps in enhancing the video file and sound file before combining the two into one with the help of software such as DVS Clipster, which could also incorporate the subtitles (if any). The digital file of the complete film can then be compressed and transferred to different screening formats, such as tapes, optical discs, Digital Cinema Package (DCP, which is the most common format in cinemas today) and even film (without compression). Thus concludes the entire process of digital restoration.

## **Conclusion**

From the perspective of a film archive, using traditional film stock is still the most ideal format to preserve a film. The images on a reel of film can be seen directly as long as there is a light source while the content on tapes and computer files must be retrieved by means of the suitable playback machines. Therefore, the Hong Kong Film Archive will produce a copy of the picture negative and a copy of the soundtrack negative for preservation while creating two copies on film – one of which is used for screening.

Even though film restoration has already made great leaps from a technical perspective, the success of a film restoration project still relies on the professional judgement of conservators. Every decision must be deliberated with the knowledge of the film and experience of the conservators in mind so that the most authentic version of the film can be presented to the audience. For every HKFA restoration project, our staff have acquired a huge amount of information and consulted the professional opinions of various researchers and experts as we determine the standard and extent of each restoration. When we encounter any doubts, we would still adopt a relatively conservative approach and refrain from altering the film excessively because our principle is to preserve as much original content as possible. (Translated by Francisco Lo)

## Research

### ***A Window to a Dust-Laden View: The Taiwanese-language Film *Xue Ping-gui* and *Wang Bao-chuan****

May Ng

Film research is often intricately tied to the discovery and preservation of film reels and artefacts. The unearthing of an important artefact not only helps us fill the gaps in our knowledge and understanding of film history, but also inspire questions worthy of further exploration and reflection. In the summer of 2013, a team from the Graduate Institute of Studies in Documentary and Film Archiving at the Tainan National University of the Arts found a 35mm copy of the three installments of the Taiwanese opera films, *Xue Ping-gui* and *Wang Bao-chuan*, which were long considered lost. Although the copy is a Hakka-dubbed version, it still provides invaluable insight into the aesthetics and production of early Taiwanese cinema, and into the richness of mutual influence between different Chinese-speaking cultures and regions.

The university has started restoration work ever since the recovery of the three films. Last October, I participated in the 4th Cross-Strait Conference on Minnan-dialect Film Culture in Xiamen, and was privileged enough to watch some of the restored scenes during a session held by the university's film restoration team as they reported on the progress and achievements of their project.

#### **A Shared Heritage between Xiamen and Taiwan**

The Amoy-dialect features produced in Hong Kong and distributed overseas in the 1940s to 60s form an interesting comparison with the Taiwanese-dialect films which remained extremely popular in Taiwan from mid-1950s to mid-1970s. The two types of films enjoyed a unique and intricate relationship within the wider context of Chinese-dialect cinema – they shared common roots and mutually influenced each other. The first Hong Kong-produced Amoy film to reach Taiwan was *Xue Mei Misses Her Husband* (1949), and newspaper ads of the time called it ‘an original sound Minnan-dialect film’<sup>1</sup>. Subsequently, a great number of Amoy films, no matter whether they were originally in that dialect or dubbed, were shipped to Taiwan and marketed as Taiwanese-dialect productions. Spurred on by the promising box-office numbers of the Amoy films, the Taiwanese film industry began to produce its own Taiwanese features in the mid-1950s. The first production, released in June 1955, was the Taiwanese opera film *Six Talents' Romance of the West Chamber*, directed by Shao Lo-hui and featuring the cast of Tu-Ma Taiwanese Opera Group. However, since it

was filmed in 16mm, it could not be screened in the 35mm format and this impacted on its box-office business negatively. The film was pulled from theatres after three days, and for the next six months, no Taiwanese Hokkien films were released at all.<sup>2</sup> At the start of the following year, a second Taiwanese opera film came along, which was director Ho Chi-ming's *Xue Ping-gui and Wang Bao-chuan* (1956) on 35 mm.

### **A Cornerstone of Taiwanese-dialect Cinema**

Upon its release, *Xue Ping-gui and Wang Bao-chuan* was an immediate success. As more cinemas agreed to show the film, the box-office numbers kept climbing higher and higher. The extent of the film's influence and the audience's deep appreciation of locally made Taiwanese productions can be gleaned from the following words from Taiwanese film scholar Ye Longyan: 'To think how many people were touched by the climax of the movie when Wu Biyü's character Wang Bao-chuan sang of her devotion to her lover ...'<sup>3</sup> *Xue Ping-gui and Wang Bao-chuan* was recognised as a cornerstone in Taiwanese-dialect cinema, and two sequels were released soon afterwards. It also inspired a wave of similar films: in 1956 alone, the number of Taiwanese productions rose from 1 to 11; in 1957, this number rose to a staggering 51.<sup>4</sup> As Taiwanese films gained popularity, their Amoy counterparts had lost its luster by comparison. Although they once stirred much excitement in the market a couple of years earlier, Amoy films were now doomed to be replaced by a new generation of Taiwanese cinema.

Ho, director of *Xue Ping-gui and Wang Bao-chuan*, studied in Japan before working for the Toho Film Company in Japan, making films for educational purposes. After the war, he returned to Taiwan from Japan, and became art director at the Mass Education Museum. Before directing this film, he made some 'serials'—film adaptations of Taiwanese opera's supernatural scenes that were screened during the live performances. He reportedly made five or six of these works, all of which were immensely popular. They were arguably the precursors to the full-length Taiwanese opera films.<sup>5</sup>

Bai Ke, then the head of Taiwan Film Studio, had expressed his appreciation of the film and the director, 'The cast and crew of Taiwan Film Studio have done a commendable job in creating a Taiwanese opera film independently. They overcame technical difficulties and many other extenuating circumstances, and although the finished product is by no means perfect, it is nonetheless a rare achievement to have accomplished so much with one hand-held camera, some simple lighting equipment and post-production dubbing... We can tell that the crew did their jobs in a professional and serious manner, and despite the lack of onscreen experience, the cast worked hard to give their best possible performance. Further, it is obvious that the

director has given much thought in the use of outdoor scenery, the beautiful cinema angles and set changes. He has managed to strip away the theatricality of Taiwanese opera and have presented these elements in a natural and vivid way. And although the sets are not lavish from the lack of budget and resources, they are still exquisitely designed and contribute effectively to the film's tone and atmosphere.'<sup>6</sup> Bai's only criticisms were reserved for the decision to cast actresses in male parts, as well as the inclusion of contemporary tunes in the film.

*Xue Ping-gui and Wang Bao-chuan* was a commercial and critical success upon its release, but because it has been lost for so many years, many contemporary film scholars and critics have expressed skepticism at its production values and artistic merits. As Ray Jiing, Director of the Tainan National University of the Arts Image Restoration Project, has said, Ho devoted many years of his life looking for this film, wishing to validate the work that he and his team had done. However, much to his regret, the film remained elusive during his lifetime.

Fortunately, with the discovery of this copy of the film, the final wishes of this pioneer of Taiwanese-dialect cinema have been, to a certain extent, fulfilled. At the conference, the restoration team showed the last third of the first installment of *Xue Ping-gui and Wang Bao-chuan*. The audience was deeply touched by the complexity of its images and the richness of its storytelling.

This section of the film describes protagonist Xue Ping-gui's visit to his father-in-law's house, which caused him a beating. Afterwards, he studies martial arts under a master and tames a wild red horse later in the film. At the end, he bids farewell to his wife before riding off to war. The scenes interchange frequently between indoors and outdoors, including ones filmed in natural settings, as well as those filmed in the sets of the couple's humble abode, Xue Ping-gui's dreamscape, the courtyard outside the minister's house where he tames the horse, the palace, the princess's study and the city walls. The film is well-paced, and its use of camera movements is rich and unrestricted by the theatrical conventions of Taiwanese opera. Overall, the quality of the production belies its small budget, very much confirming Bai's comments on the film.

### **Hou Shou-feng on the production of *Xue Ping-gui and Wang Bao-chuan***

During their report of their restoration efforts, the team invited Hou, who then participated in the set designs of *Xue Ping-gui and Wang Bao-chuan* and now an esteemed painter. His comments and thoughts lend great insight into the background of this important Taiwanese film.

Born in 1938 and initially trained in folk painting, Hou was formally apprenticed to Huang Liangxiong, famed set decorator, at the age of 16. Under his tutelage, Hou

learned the art of decorating and creating sets for puppet theatre, Taiwanese opera as well as contemporary modern theatre. In 1955, Huang was hired to be set designer and decorator for the three installments of *Xue Ping-gui and Wang Bao-chuan*. Hou was part of the set designing team.

According to his recollection, it was the first time that the main members of the crew, including the director Ho, cinematographer He Lingming, music composer Huang Jinkun and his mentor Huang, had participated in making a full-length feature film. Excited by the opportunity, they took their jobs seriously and spent many sleepless nights working on it. The set designers often worked from day till 11 pm at night, and the actors from their theatre group would return after a day of live performances, be rushed into make-up and costume, before performing before the camera again. The cast were extremely professional and never let their fatigue affect their performance.

During this early period of development for Taiwanese cinema, there were few locations suitable for filming. The three *Xue Ping-gui and Wang Bao-chuan* films were shot mainly in three different locations. The first was an old theatre they had rented in Caotun, Nantou. Since it was cheap rates and spacious, many of the films' major scenes were filmed there. Because the second installment featured more palace scenes, the crew rented a Zhongshan Hall in Taichung City, where there were a conference room that had high ceilings, a lectern and audience seating. The room could be cleared and a staircase erected in the middle, so then it would look like two separate storeys in the palace hall. The third film was shot in a theatre at Xinzhuang District in New Taipei. The many horse-riding scenes in the movie were filmed in the military-run stables in Houli, Taichung. Many of the actors who had no previous riding experience were trained there as well.

### **From Theatre to Film: The Aesthetics of *Xue Ping-gui and Wang Bao-chuan***

While the story of *Xue Ping-gui and Wang Bao-chuan* is a well-known folklore, the 1956 film version features some minor changes. Alongside its Minnan characteristics, the trilogy incorporates certain *wuxia* and supernatural elements which seem to be inherited from the *wuxia* pictures from Shanghai in the 1920s and 30s. The first example of this is while a beaten and injured Xue is nursed to health by his wife, he dreams of an immortal who teaches him martial arts. Another instance is the episode of the horse demon who wreaks havoc in the mortal world before being defeated by Xue. The demon then takes the form of a horse and follows the hero as he departs for war in the west.

The supernatural is featured not only as part of the plot, but is also an important part of the film aesthetics. As the demon, the actor had to don a mask – an interesting

aesthetic detail. As Jiing points out, the film's aesthetic and costume designs are in the tradition of Chinese opera, a significant and inspired decision on the part of the filmmakers, as the movie was made during a time when Japanese rule (1895–1945) had just ended in Taiwan. The sole trace of Japanese influence in the film is the mask design of the horse demon. According to Hou, this scene was not present in the live theatrical version, and the mask had been borrowed from another Taiwanese opera *The Gold and Silver Tengu*.

*Xue Ping-gui and Wang Bao-chuan* is also a fine example of how early Taiwanese opera films borrowed from traditional stage aesthetics to create fantasy sequences on the silver screen that looked vivid and real. According to Hou, the set designers used a theatrical technique to film the scene where the horse demon appears in the cave— while the foreground was constructed with props, the background of the cave was handpainted, and the two was separated by some smoke effects. This novel and creative way of presenting the scene was very well-received by the audiences. The sequence where Xue learns martial arts, however, was taken from the stage version and is therefore not unique to the film.

### **Coexistence and Transformation**

Certain critics argue that the discovery of Hakka-dubbed copies of Taiwanese Hokkien films showed that the Hakka market was substantial enough for Taiwanese films to be dubbed, which suggested the cultural reciprocity of the Minnan and Hakka people.<sup>7</sup> To this end, when distributed overseas, these films were also dubbed in the Chaozhou dialect, not unlike Cantonese and Amoy movies produced in Hong Kong. For example, according to *Sing Sian Yit Pao Daily News* on April 22, 1958, the film was renamed *The Return of Shi Pinggui* during its release in Bangkok theatres. This also marked the beginning of Chaozhou cinema in Hong Kong. (Translated by Rachel Ng)

<sup>1</sup> *Central Daily News*, Taipei, September 16, 1949 (in Chinese).

<sup>2</sup> Ye Longyan, *Blossoms of Spring, Dew of Dreams— The Rise and Fall of Authentic Taiwanese-dialect Films*, Taipei: BoyYoung Cultural Enterprise Publisher, 1999, p67 (in Chinese).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p69 (in Chinese).

<sup>4</sup> Oral History Unit, *Taiwanese-dialect Filmography (1955–1981)*, Taipei: Chinese Taipei Film Archive, 1994 (in Chinese).

<sup>5</sup> 'Xue Ping-gui and Wang Bao-chuan opens on New Year's Day', *United Daily News*, Taipei, December 27, 1955 (in Chinese).

<sup>6</sup> Bai Ke, 'Xue Ping-gui and Wang Bao-chuan', *United Daily News*, Taipei, January 6, 1956 (in Chinese).

<sup>7</sup> Hong Jianlun, 'Tainan National University of the Arts Discovers the first 35mm Taiwanese-language film, *Xue Ping-gui and Wang Bao-chuan*', *Xue Ping-gui and Wang Bao-chuan Taipei Premiere Booklet*, Taipei: Chinese Taipei Film Archive, Tainan National University of the Arts, 2014, pp17–19 (in Chinese).

**May Ng** is Research Officer of the HKFA.

**Writer's note:** In the previous issue, Ji An Tang Chief Executive Zeng Xiaomi's name was misstated as Cao Xiaomi on page 17. We would like to offer our correction and apology.

## Feature

### Lui Pui-yuen and Hong Kong Film Musicians

#### Po Fung

Currently residing in the US, Lui Pui-yuen is a *pipa* and *guzhen* maestro who contributed scores for many Hong Kong films back in the 1950s and 1960s – a role that largely went unnoticed. While the names of musicians performing on Cantonese opera film scores were often listed in credits, Lui and his contemporaries were mostly left out of the credits roll in the more generously-budgeted Mandarin films. Even when film songs were released on albums, the musicians remained uncredited on the record sleeves. For that season, the name of Lui Pui-yuen made its first and only appearance in as many years, in the Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin vehicle, *The Tragedy of a Poet King* (1968), when in fact he was a most active Chinese music band leader and a much sought-after musician of his time, scoring and providing music accompaniment to a string of *huangmei diao* (yellow plum tunes) and Mandarin period films.

Lui returned to Hong Kong in December 2014 for a performance at the University of Hong Kong. Thanks to the coordinating efforts of Professor Yu Siu-wah of the Department of Music at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, several Chinese music enthusiasts and I had the opportunity to interview the maestro. The rest of this article will include stories about his career as a film composer and the milieu of film musicians in that era.

Lui began to play *pipa* since his formative years in Shanghai. In the 1940s, a teenaged Lui performed on a radio station in Shanghai, providing live accompaniment for the silky-voiced Jin Yi. In 1951, at 18 years of age, Lui moved to Hong Kong where he became a session player in a just few years' time. In 1953, Hong Kong composer Ye Chunzhi invited him to record but Lui declined since he was not interested in recording at the time. Later, Ye resettled in mainland China because of political reasons. Lui made his recording debut at the invitation of composer Lee Yee-chi on the song 'Visiting Darling'. Accomplished as Lui was on the *pipa*, his performance on the recording fell short of expectations due to his unfamiliarity in reading sheet music.

Lui Pui-yuen's elder brother, Lui Tsun-yuen, was also a famed *pipa* player and professional musician before moving to Hong Kong. It was Tsun-yuen whom composer Leung Ngok-yam first enlisted, but Pui-yuen followed suit, establishing himself as a musician of Chinese instruments in his own right, scoring films and

recording and composing music for albums. It was in around 1956 when he first teamed up with Yao Min and provided music accompaniment to Grace Chang's film songs. Wu Yingyin's popular number, 'I Have This Feeling', was recorded in Hong Kong when the singer was visiting from Shanghai in 1957. The Yao Min composition was accompanied by Lui Pui-yuen on *pipa*, Ho Tat on flute, the composer himself on *gaohu* (a bowed string instrument developed from the *erhu*), Wu Nailong on *erhu* and Luk Yiu on *sanxian* (a three-stringed fretless plucked lute). Though the group was trained in Western music, they demonstrated an equal virtuosity and versatility in Chinese instruments. Ho Tat, originally installed as trumpeter, was drafted to stand in for the absent flautist. Wu Nailong, a pianist by training, was equally adept at the *erhu*. Proficient in the guitar, Luk Yiu effortlessly transferred his finger-picking skills to the *sanxian* but was perhaps too solidly grounded in Western music that he eschewed glissandi that produce a softer, delicate timbre, resulting in harder, coarser notes. Wu Nailong later joined Rediffusion Television as music director while Luk Yiu headed the music department at Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB). On the other hand, Lui also played on Li Xianglan's 'Three Years' (from Shaws' *The Unforgettable Night*, 1958).

Lui served as musician at both Shaws and MP & GI. Like Leung Ngok-yam, Kei Shang-tong – the principal composer for MP & GI – initially approached elder brother Tsun-yuen to play the *guqin* (a plucked seven-string instrument of the zither family) before enlisting Pui-yuen to play the *sanxian* or the *yueqin* (a lute with a round, hollow wooden body, also known as the moon guitar). Proficient in neither the *sanxian* nor the *yueqin*, Lui found a perfect substitute in the four-stringed *pipa* and accomplished the task all the same. Kei, however, didn't take a liking to the sounds of the *pipa* and favoured, instead, the deep, sonorous quality of northern instruments like the mandolin or the *sanxian*. Like fellow composers Wang Shun and Chan Chi Keng Sun, Lui had scored for Amoy and Chaozhou films, as well as Mandarin films.

In around 1959, when Shaws made plans to distribute *The Kingdom and the Beauty* (1959) in India, a cast was assembled to make promotional appearances and performances on the tour. Singers were recruited as well as performers of Chinese music. Leonard Ho, right-hand man to Raymond Chow, enlisted the services of Lui who put in two to three performances each day during the two-week tour. Returning to Hong Kong, Ho was so pleased with the outcomes of the tour that he designated Lui to take charge of Chinese music whenever it was called for in Shaws' films. Installed as leader of Chinese music at the studio, Lui teamed up with Wang Fuling working on the scores for director Yuan Qiu-feng's *Dream of the Red Chamber* (1962).

Film musicians serve two primary functions through two different approaches. The first approach involves recording the tracks live, featuring vocalists with

performance of instrumental accompaniment before the shooting so that the actors could perform and mime to the playback on set. In the second approach, the music is recorded as the finished cut of the film is played. The newly edited film sequences are projected onto a small screen to be synchronised to a live performance in the recording studio. Facing the screen, the band leader would be wielding his conductor's baton and orchestrating his musicians – who are positioned with their backs to the visuals – to match the filmed moving images projected on the screen. The recording suite came complete with a cue light. Producing perfectly synchronised music soundtracks for films is a daunting task. The degree of precision in performance and the amount of rehearsal that this implies make it inherently implausible. This is where the sound engineer would come in and suggest inserting or deleting a frame or two to get the visuals aligned with the soundtracks. Still, there were times when the resulted piece was obviously beyond patching up and had to be re-recorded. But because the musicians were *bona fide* professionals, mistakes and re-takes of instrumentals were few and far between, unless when a vocal was recorded simultaneously.

Because a tuner was not a regular fixture of a recording studio, the pitch of musical notes varied from one recording to the next. Different positions of the *pipa*, the microphones and even the slight changes in the weather all had a part to play. Having the musicians tune up their instruments was just as decisive as the sound engineer doing his job right. Because the sound engineer didn't necessarily have an ear for the sound quality of the *pipa*, the notes often came out coarse and broken in the recordings. Professionalism came to the rescue in the form of a sound engineer from Japan. Shaws' Japanese recruit was a consummate professional who would go to such lengths as to measure the precise distance between each piece of instrument and the musician and their respective spots in the studio, allowing the musicians to resume their rightful places when they returned for the next session according to the recorded measurements and thus producing previously unattainable pitch, tone and consistency. The practice was apparently so costly and tedious for Shaws that it was not implemented again.

There is no rule of thumb regarding the choice and number of Chinese instruments needed in each session, so the decision was entirely up to the composer. Perhaps for the practicalities of budgeting, Wang Fuling stuck to an ensemble of 14 musicians, comprising the plucked string instruments of one *pipa*, one *yangqin* (a Chinese hammered dulcimer) and one *sanxian*; one *gaohu* and four *erhu*; one flute, a must; one percussion instrument, one double bass; one *ruan* (a lute with a fretted neck, a circular body and four strings) or its alternative, the *guzheng* (a plucked zither); and if a flute on its own didn't suffice, a *dongxiao* (a vertical end-blown flute) would be

added, give or take, to make up a total of 14. Wang's band consisted of Lui on *pipa* and a regular line-up of musicians: Zhu Yigang on *gaohu*; Wu Nailong, the first *erhu*; Xian Hua, who reprised his *erhu* role at Shaws after following Wu's footsteps to join Wang's band; Liu Zhaoyi almost always landed the seat of the *zhonghu* (a lower-pitched *erhu*); Shen Rong on clapping boards; and Liang Tong and Wu Jiahui made up the perfect duo on percussion. For plucked string instruments, featured on *yangqin* was Lau Siu-wing, a tried and trusted hand whose tuning skills were second to none; on *suona* (a woodwind instrument) was Feng Heting; on *dongxiao* and flute was Wong Ching-kuen, one of Hong Kong's most celebrated flautists and father of the late artist Wong Kee-chee, who was not a musician by profession but rather the then medical superintendent of Tung Wah Eastern Hospital. Lui and other members of the ensemble had a strong work ethic and set the highest standards for themselves. Their work was not about individual brilliance but the overall performance as a band and no musician should ever try to stand out and send things off the rails.

The band leader was supposed to assemble musicians after the composer set the dates for recording. For instruments not available on the set, such as the *bianzhong* (a set of bronze chime-bells) or the bass drum, the band leader would have to hire them from Pui Ching Middle School for a fee of about \$50 per use. Wages were paid by film studios directly to the band leader who distributed them to the musicians and the band leader received a slightly bigger paycheck. Musicians were paid for a minimum of three hours for each session (any portion of the duration would be counted as a full session) and then *pro rata* for the extra hours they worked. For instance, a full three-hour session was more than enough time to record three songs for Pathé Records. Each musician was paid \$12 an hour recording albums and an hourly rate of \$15 recording film tracks. From joining the music industry in the 1950s to making his exit in the late 1960s, Lui's wages have been basically frozen all that time. The conductor was paid double, the band leader 1.5 times and a principal musician 1.25 times. Yet the work of a band leader entailed the extra laborious hand-copying of libretto. A composer would spin out melodies on one end of the phone while the band leader-turned-scribe would have to memorise the musical notes and frantically jot them down on music sheets on the other end. As soon as the piece began to take shape, musical arrangements followed. Joseph Koo and Zhou Lanping were two expeditious music arrangers. There was one time when Zhou dropped Lui a hot potato – the overture in *The Love Eterne* (1963) where Betty Loh Ti impersonates a fortune-teller – a task Lui duly performed with his own brand of shrewd improvisation. According to Lui, Yao Min was the composer who excelled in composing main verses; Zhou was best at orchestration and his music has the edge of flowing fluently and being easy to play. Yao Min often produced challenging pieces,

while Wang Fuling's work featured some of the finest harmony vocals.

Music accompaniment was largely replaced by readily available tracks from the late 1960s onwards as *wuxia* films rose to prominence. The demand for work in scoring and performing film music began to dwindle. Lui, whose career had branched out into various other disciplines by then, left Hong Kong for the US in the 1970s and has remained there to this day. (Translated by Agnes Lam)

**Writer's note:** Professor Yu Siu-wah's guidance was crucial in the completion of this article. After Mr Lui reviewed the draft, quite a few errors were corrected and information which did not come up during the interview was added. Thank you for their assistance.

**Po Fung** is a seasoned film critic and former Research Officer of the HKFA. He is the author of *An Analysis of Martial Arts Films and its Context* (2010).