

Adventures in Acquisition

Acquisition is comparable to a game of treasure hunt. Each time there is a clue, we pursue it actively to locate the source. Then a process of persuasion takes over whereby permission is sought from the owner to deposit or donate a film print or any other documentary materials. In the process of the search, naturally we may hit upon surprises or new discoveries. Each surprise finding has a story to it...

Local Treasures I: The Moving of the Golden Harvest Studio



The last days of the Golden Harvest Studio was as busy as usual, with staff packing and sealing boxes.

It's October 30th - the last two days at the Golden Harvest Studio before it moved out of Hammer Hill Road.

With the generous support of the Golden Harvest Ltd, the Film Archive received a bulk of the studio's library of film prints and documents. Together with the Acquisition Unit, we arrived at the studio premises on this day to collect the historical materials, and hence the chance to bear witness to the studio's moving event.

It's difficult to bid farewell to the two big iron gates which have stood there for over 40 years. These gates were still inscribed with the alphabets "YH", denoting Yung Hwa, a studio that marked another era in our film history. The gates are still glittering under the sun as we passed by. It's sad to bid farewell to the shooting chambers, props storage rooms and the subtitling rooms where many great films were made in the confines of these shooting set-ups, not to mention those who have sweated and even shed blood to make the pictures. Bidding farewell was equally hard to those huge Bruce Lee posters that have been hung there for twenty years, as well as the motorcycles used by Jackie Chan in *Police Story* (1985).

The removal of the Golden Harvest studio away from its old Diamond Hill site signaled the turned of another chapter in the development of the history of Hong Kong cinema. On that site, a large slice of Hong Kong cinema's production history took place for nearly half the century. On that site, cinematic trends and fads came and went, from 1955, when the Yung Hwa Studio was established, to the mid-50s, when the premises were taken over by the MP and GI Studio (later the renamed Cathay), to the 70s when Golden Harvest finally took over. Establishing the internationally-known stars such as Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Michael Hui, Golden Harvest became a pillar of the Hong Kong film industry, and it spouted off many co-production companies such as Golden Way, Bo Ho, Hui Brothers, etc.

Time was running out. The staffs, while busy packing stuff into boxes, were also discussing about where to take the big group photo on the following day. As truckloads of studio belongings were moved out of the premises, some boxes made their way to the Hong Kong Film Archive...

The final tally of our collection from the studio reaches over 200 films, adding to them are other film-related materials like posters, film stills, brochures and film magazines.

Local Treasures II: The Collection That Risked Life



The Eight Hundred Heroes (1938): surviving the ravages of war.

Mr Daniel Wang was a devoted film lover in Shanghai back in the 1930s. He ran a film processing laboratory named Yin Guang (or Silver Light), and had helped process many anti-Japanese patriotic features and documentary films. In 1937, Mr Wang decided to move his whole family to Hong Kong, taking along with them his collection of film prints and negatives. Having settled in Hong Kong, Mr Wang reopened his film laboratory. However, in 1941, the war was spread to Hong Kong and knowing that the films he owned would cause him a lot of trouble if discovered by the Japanese, Mr Wang closed down his lab and turned to the manufacturing of household goods. He took quick action to bury his film collection in the ground underneath his shop. It wasn't until after the war that this collection was unearthed.

Because of Mr Wang's love for cinema, we are now able to see some of the classics from his 1930s collection, including *The Eight Hundred Heroes* (1939), *Protect My Country* (1939) and *Scenes of Yan'an* (1938). These classic films, having been moved about over ten locations, have survived the ravages of war. They are now in the possession of the Hong Kong Film Archive due to the generous arrangement of Ms Dolores Wang, daughter of the late Mr Daniel Wang.

Local Treasures III: The Stars' Shining Support

It was Chow Yun-fat who first showed his support of the Hong Kong Film Archive by generously donating all the awards he has won to the Archive. Following on Chow was Josephine Siao and her awards now become part of the Archive's treasures. The support of these two superstars formed the linchpin which allowed the Archive to communicate with other actors and film personalities and helps substantiate the Archive's future acquisition.

What readers may not know is that the Archive has already signed agreements with veteran superstars, such as Li Lihua, Fong Yim-fen, etc, allowing the Archive to take in as research materials any film materials related to their work of which they have copyrights.

Local Treasures IV: Closure of Cinemas

The Acquisition Section is always on red alert for signs or announcements of cinema closures or deaths of film personalities, for such occasions, sad as they ultimately are, provide opportunities for the Archive to add to its collection.

Over the last two years, many theatres have had to close down, such as the State Theatre (March 1997), Liberty Theatre (September 1997), United Theatre (May 1995), Fairview Theatre (August 1998), The Yuen Long Palace Theatre (August 1998) and Yau Ma Tei Theatre (July 1998). Witnessing these a relatively new cinema winding up its operations is a sad sight to behold.

Overseas Adventure I: An Orphan in England



The Orphan (1960) with Ng Cho-fan and Bruce Lee.

There is probably no tale stranger than the one we have to tell about how a Hong Kong film laid in the vaults of the Rank Film Laboratory, England, for over 30 years undiscovered until a staff member of the Hong Kong Film Archive visited the laboratory on an observation tour and found the negatives. *The Orphan* (1960) lying on a shelf. *The Orphan*, directed by Lee Sun-fung, was the last film to star the teenaged Bruce Lee before he left Hong Kong for America.

Apparently, it was the practice for some Hong Kong film production companies to process the colour negatives of their films overseas in those days. This way, some negatives of Hong Kong films have been forgotten and left on shelves in distant foreign lands for decades.

The Orphan thus acquired was an Eastman-colour production. Prior to this discovery and restoration of *The Orphan*, the only version of the film shown on Hong Kong TV was a grainy black-and-white copy.

Overseas Treasures II: San Francisco



Home-coming: the renowned Hong Kong classic films in San Francisco's World Theatre were transported back to Hong Kong.

The largest overseas acquisition exercise took place in San Francisco's Chinatown. In 1996, news was received that the famous World Theatre was to revamp its operations and change management. The theatre would no longer show old Cantonese films and thus its stock of over 600 Chinese classic films would be redundant. The Acquisition Section entered into negotiations with the World Theatre and finally succeeded in bring in this library of classic Hong Kong films to the Film Archive. Many of the films in this collection were originally thought lost, such as *Fisherman's Song of the South Sea* (1950), *So Far Yet So Near* (1952), *Aren't the Kids Lovely?* (1953) and *A Mother's Tear* (1953), etc.

At present, the Acquisition Section attempts to get in touch with other theatres in Chinatown in the hope that other forgotten or lost classics will be retrieved.

Overseas Treasures III: Southeast Asia

Being one of the Hong Kong film industry's major markets and favourite spots for location shooting, Southeast Asia is almost a second home for many Hong Kong film industry insiders, such as producer Chua Lam. Chua Lam's father, Mr. Chua Boon-hean, lived in Singapore, and through his work associated with Shaw Brothers, kept a collection of rare screenplays. The scripts were finely bound into hard-cover volumes. After obtaining agreement from the Chua family, a huge part of his collection is now in the safekeeping of the Archive.

In addition, during a visit to Japan by our Senior Manager Ms Cynthia Liu, two rare Hong Kong films were discovered at the Kawakita Foundation. With the Foundation's kind donation, these two classic pictures starring Li Lihua - *What Price Beauty?* (1954) and *Blood Will Tell* (1955) now also come under the Archive collection.

Preserving Film Heritage: Searching with a Mission

Ms Angela Tong, Manager of the Acquisition Section, has witnessed how film acquisition develops at the Archive for the past two years. She has clocked up an experience which allows her to grasp the historical significance of preserving Hong Kong's film culture. Below is an interview with Ms Tong.

Q: There are so many film materials. Apart from the film prints themselves, there are printed materials, posters, stills, etc. How do you go about collecting them?

*A: We follow leads given to us either by insiders within the film industry or local and overseas friends who give us information. For example, in the case of King Hu's *The Valiant Ones* (1975), we learned that the negative of the film was still placed in a laboratory in Hong Kong through a friend of Mr Law Kar, programmer in the Hong Kong International Film Festival. We conducted investigations of our own to establish the veracity of this information, then we contacted the late director himself to get his consent. After agreement had been established, we then proceeded to arrange it to be donated to the Archive. It's more or less the same for other acquisitions.*

Q: What is the biggest difficulty faced by the Acquisition Section?

A: The Film Archive was established somewhat late in the day and over the years, many films have been lost. In contrast with many other countries, we have a lot of gaps to fill. Unlike some countries which demand legal deposit, Hong Kong does not have such a law and that's why we have to take the initiative ourselves to contact the film production companies and explain to them our work and the kind of facilities we have, etc. There's a long way to go for film preservation. Sometimes, the companies might have the misunderstanding that once a film is delivered to the Archive, they will no longer be able to use it or retrieve it. In fact, the owner can retrieve the film where necessary so long as they adhere to the principle "preservation". The rights naturally still belong to the owner.

Q: Are there any unforgettable moments that you have come across?

A: Acquisition is like looking for treasure. Your instincts have to be sharp. Once there's a lead, you have to follow it up immediately. We do come across a lot of happy surprises. My most profound impression was the generous donation by Mr Kwan Hon-chuen, son of the late Kwan Tak-hing, who donated many of the materials relating to his father's career and he has now become a good friend of the Archive. Recently, he came across a stack of well-preserved handbills of Hong Kong films from the 60s in San Francisco, and this is now in the Archive's possession. There's also Mr Cheng Fat-ming, a collector, who would buy film stills with his own money and then donate them to the Film Archive.

Another person I admire is Miss Dorothy Au, a fan of the actress Hsia Moon. She told us she was very fond of her private collection but in order to let others share in it, she generously donated it to the Archive. Such selfless spirits have given us a lot of encouragement. Enormous support has also been shown by film companies such as Sil-Metropole Organisation, which readily authorise us to acquire films under their ownership. Because of our work, we come across a lot of veteran producers and film workers who are all very friendly. They regularly call us up and ask us out for tea or lunch. Such are bonuses of our regular acquisition work!

Q: The Acquisition Section is regarded as the Archive's front line with its extension to the outside world. Do you feel being involved in a mission?

A: The Acquisition Section does often take a pro-active role. In the beginning, our department often faced up to a brick wall, so to speak. Many film companies found us annoying because it meant extra administration work for them, whether it was donation or deposit. In time, they came to feel that our work was

important and that the Archive would help them to preserve their most precious films for posterity. We therefore succeeded in collecting some very rare and precious films and this made us feel that we were taking part in a grand project. I think that the slogan "mending while preserving" that we used in our Collection Campaign is very fitting and exactly this makes our work so meaningful.

We often witness the decay of many film prints due to the unfavourable storage conditions, to the extent that they have turned rotten and become irrecoverable. The earlier these prints could get into the hands of the Archive, the better the chance for them to be preserved. We also know that many movie fans might possess film prints of other film materials at home. If they could think ahead, the best way to preserve these materials and let them be of use to more people is to donate or deposit them to the Archive.



Manager of the Acquisition Unit, Ms Angela Tong.



Ms Tong on one of her acquisition trips.

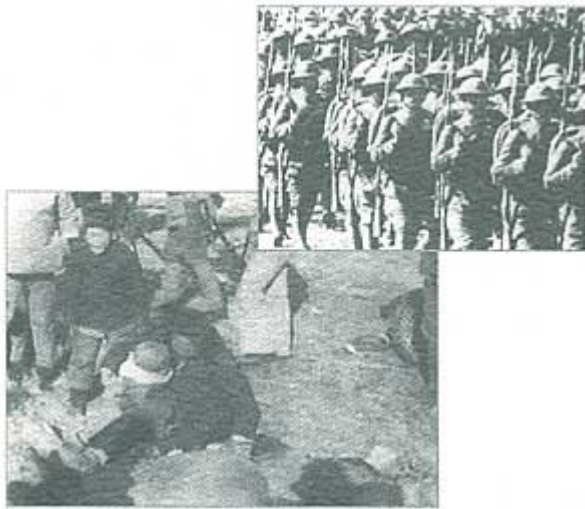


We witnessed the decay of many film prints due to unfavourable storage conditions.

New Acquisitions



Besides the valuable hard-cover scripts kept by his late father, Mr Chua Lam has also donated many film-related books from his own collection.



Mr Edwin Kong of EDKO Communications Ltd donated a few film prints directed by himself, including a documentary, *Rising Sun* (79), which carries important footages of the anti-Japanese War and the World War II.



Handbills of 1960s Hong Kong pictures distributed by a San Francisco Chinatown theatre, Great Star, a donation of Mr David Quan. These handbills carry information and synopses of over two hundred Hong Kong films.

Review on Hong Kong Filmography, Volume Two



Following the publication of the *Hong Kong Filmography, Volume Two*, the Archive has sent out questionnaires to our advisers and a meeting with film experts was also held to review this volume and discuss the preparation work of the next publication, particularly relating to its research and editorial direction.

We have received much favourable response and positive feedback on Volume Two. Among them:

Mr Shu Kei finds the *Filmography* "all very satisfactory" and urges the Archive to keep up with the good work.

Mr Ng Ho regards the extracted information and quotations from the original film brochures as very valuable reference materials and as Volume Three chronicles films of the 50s where such materials are abundant, emphasis should be placed on enriching these texts. He further suggests a selection of only the finer original film stills for publication.

Mr Dennis Chan gives credits to the layout, content and appended notes of the *Filmography*, saying that the information presented is "very complete and clear", commenting the design and layout as "A Class", and that "no effort (of the Archive) is wasted".

These and other feedback and reviews will be taken into consideration by our Research and Editorial Units while preparing for the coming volumes. More than 2,000 local productions were produced in the 50s and it is our aim to chronicle more film titles in the coming volume so as to speed up publication of the whole *Filmography* series.

Photography and Electricity - A New Chronology of Hong Kong Early Cinema

by Frank Bren

Editor's Note:

The debate continues. In what year exactly were the first films ever shown in Hong Kong? Who was responsible for these first showings using what projector? Were they in any way related to the Lumiere photographers who were dispatched all over the world by the Lumiere Brothers to show their new found inventions? All these questions have been touched upon by various researchers before. In this issue, we publish an article by Mr Frank Bren that continues the debate. Mr Bren has researched into early English-language newspapers and followed up on the previous analyses, coming up with his own formulations. His article also brings up other interesting questions for more scholarly research, and is a significant contribution to the study of Hong Kong's early film history.

Early Cinema in Hong Kong

The *Cinematograph* first came to Hong Kong with a whiff of piracy.

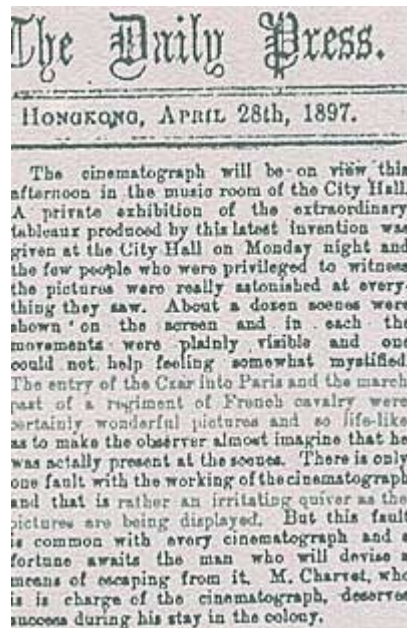
Like "Nike" or "Sony", *Cinematograph[e]* was a trade name, belonging to the acknowledged inventors of cinema, the Lumiere brothers in France. From 1896, Lumiere representatives were touring the globe, promoting the invention and making films, so it seems natural that a Frenchman should be the first to publicly exhibit the *Cinematograph* in Hong Kong.

That is indeed what happened.

Hong Kong - First Port of Call

On April 23, 1897, "Professor Maurice Charvet", supposedly from Paris, arrived in Hong Kong aboard the *Peru*, direct from San Francisco. The newspapers, announcing his arrival, were enthused by the '*Cinematograph*' and '*Kinetoscope*' he had brought for a series of film exhibitions at City Hall. The machines were the scientific marvels of the age and, according to the *Hong Kong Daily Press*, "the marvels have not been in Hong Kong before, but everybody has heard of the astonishing pictures they throw on to the screen" (26/4/1897). Said the *China Mail*: "These marvels have never been shown in Hong Kong or the Far East before" (24/4/1897).

Somehow, the alleged *Kinetoscope* then disappeared. In City Hall, on Monday, April 26, Mr Charvet ran a press show of the *Cinematograph* alone. He projected short films depicting the entry of the Czar into Paris, the march past of a regiment of French cavalry and "queer bits from out-of-the-way corners of the world". With one reservation ("a rather irritating quiver"), the newspapers hailed this astounding marriage of photography and electricity, adding that the life-like photographs passed "the lenses, at the rate of fifty per second."



News cutting from *The Daily Press* (HK) over a century ago.

Unfortunately, the next day's scheduled opening was cancelled. As Mr Charvet announced: "The delicate and intricate mechanical arrangements combined with the elaborate and most modern of electrical appliances of the machine require such perfect adjustment and manipulation that Professor Maurice Charvet has decided to Postpone his Opening Exhibition for One Day". In other words, the machine malfunctioned.

But his hour-long show successfully opened on Wednesday morning, April 28, running 5 times daily until at least May 4. The images were still jumpy but business boomed for, according to "Notes from the South" (14/5/1897) in *The Peking and Tientsin Times*, "the *Cinematograph* has been exhibiting in St Andrew's Hall [in City Hall], attracting large audiences every day".

Hong Kong was Mr Charvet's first port of call. In June, he headed for Shanghai, to prepare further exhibitions of his *Cinematograph* in China.

Five Cinema Shows in Year

On August 21, in City Hall's Theatre Royal, a rival presented the *Animatoscope* ("Edison's latest wonder"), which had already appeared before "Sir Claude McDonald at the British Legation, Peking." Indeed, on July 24, *The Peking and Tientsin Times* had favourably compared the *Animatoscope* over its rival, Charvet's *Cinematograph*. The former's "300,000 to 400,000 photographs" were "thrown on the sheet at the rate of forty-eight per second, so that they appear to be continually moving without any interruption."

On October 16, Charvet, with his partner, a "Professor Johnson", returned for another season, this time in the Theatre Royal, with 17 shorts. Subjects included Queen Victoria's Jubilee procession in London, a comic *Dispute between Bicyclists*, Parisian scenes such as the Place de la Concorde and Seine River, an intriguing *The Haunted Castle* plus sundry other titles, all rather like a Lumiere repertoire. Unfortunately, the images sometimes shook and some had "a haziness of outline which detracted slightly from their value".

THEATRE ROYAL,
CITY HALL
TO-NIGHT,
(SATURDAY), the 16th October, 1897,
at 9.15 P.M.

THE CINEMATOGRAPH!
THE CINEMATOGRAPH!

THE latest improved projecting machine in which the vibration so noticeable and trying to the eyes is now entirely eliminated.

VIEWS OF THE QUEEN'S DIAMOND JUBILEE IN LONDON will be the special feature of the entertainment. The following interesting scenes will also be shown:—

- A dispute between Bicyclists.
- The "Bolero," Spanish Dance.
- Place de la Concorde, Paris.
- French Cavalry returning from Drill.
- Love Scene—Columbine and Clown.
- Arrival of the Czar in Paris.
- Pleasure Boats on the Seine.
- Children playing on the Seashore.
- The Nurse Maid.
- The Lightning Artist.
- Arrival of the Express Train.
- The Magician.
- Place de la Republique, Paris.
- Workmen leaving a Factory.
- The Haunted Castle.
- A Troubled Dream, and a series of pictures depicting the

QUEEN'S JUBILEE PROCESSION IN LONDON.

INCIDENTAL MUSIC.

The Theatre will be illuminated between each view.

USUAL PRICES.

Seats can be reserved at Messrs. ROBINSON & Co's.

JOHNSON & CHARVET,
Proprietors.

Hongkong, 16th October, 1897. [1568]

Advertisement from *The Hong Kong Telegraph* on Oct 16, 1897.

On January 23, 1898, the *Animatoscope* returned, this time playing at No 5, Arsenal Street, Queen's Road East, under the proprietorship of Naftaly Bros.

Then, on April 2, 1898, conjuror Carl Hertz brought his famous stage show to the Theatre Royal, featuring a *Cinematographe* with a vast repertoire of movies ("200 subjects"). "You are not up to date," Hertz warned, "if you fail to see the Original and Marvellous *Cinematographe*, recently the Craze of the West!" Short dramas and comedies like *The Death of Nelson*, *The Widow's Kiss* and *The Nightmare* wowed HK audiences. "The *Cinematograph* is far beyond those previously exhibited here." waxed a reporter, though another complained that it was "less steady than the last '*squintograph*' exhibited here." Hertz' show ran until at least April 16.

For Hong Kong, it was a busy time, moviewise - five exhibitions in a year!

Pirates and Underground Movies

The above list of facts - and other recent discoveries - from contemporary newspapers in English, based in either Hong Kong or mainland China¹, offers a new chronology for the earliest film shows in the territory. However, the discoveries raise other questions.

Was Charvet's *Cinematograph* the first such machine to operate in Hong Kong, let alone the "Far East" as claimed in the *China Mail*?

The statement is supported - twice - by Shanghai's own *North China Herald* (28/5/1897) which reviewed a May 22 performance of the *Animatoscope* in Astor Hall, Shanghai. It was "the first opportunity in Shanghai of witnessing the demonstration of the wonderful machine which under a variety of names has become so popular" and a "marvellous advance upon the familiar optical lantern." On September 10 that year, the same journal called Charvet's *Cinematograph* a "comparative novelty" for the Shanghainese: "Previously this modern and very clever adaptation of photography has only had one exhibit" (i.e. May 22, as above).

But the *Institut Lumiere* in Lyon, France, says otherwise - that the Societe Lumiere (Lumiere Company) organised film shows at a venue in the Xu Gardens, Shanghai, on August 11, 1896. This is well documented - though vaguely and without mentioning the name 'Lumiere' - in several writings on the history of Chinese cinema. The primary source appears to be 2 contemporary advertisements in the Shanghai daily, *Shen Pao*.

The right to use '*Cinematographe*', adds the *Institut*'s Fabrice Calzетtoni, "was definitely the property of Lumiere, but was impossible to protect. We estimate that, starting in 1896, over 600 copycat machines were soon manufactured or patented in France alone. So, unauthorised screenings under the '*Cinematographe*' name could easily have been done a year later in Hong Kong... As for the name Maurice Charvet, we have no record."

Writer Clive Sowry² notes that, in 1896, the Lumieres refused Carl Hertz the right to use a *Cinematographe* in his show and that the latter obtained another projector from inventor Robert W Paul. But Hertz billed it as a "*Cinematographe*" in his show.

Did Charvet and Hertz, therefore, flout the trademark laws? And what of the suspiciously named "*Ripograph*" - a "giant *Cinematograph*" that successfully did a season in Singapore from May 12, 1897?

Perhaps there were other, more clandestine exhibitions in Hong Kong and China. With the Lumiere *Cinematographe* having played London in February, 1896, a pirated '*Cinematograph*' could certainly have made it to China - with Hong Kong as a first port of call - during 1896. Like the video, VCD or DVD pirates of today, the carriers may have shunned publicity.

The court rests.

Note 1: ie, of the English-language press: *China Mail*, *Hong Kong Daily Press (HK)*, and *The Hong Kong Telegraph*.

Note 2: In his article, "The Illusionist and the Cinematograph (*The Big Picture*, Issue 11, Summer 1997).

First Screenings of Motion Pictures in Hong Kong

First Date:	Name of system:	Venue:	Critical comments:
From 28/4/1897 (Wed) at 11am until at least May 4	"Cinematograph", as presented by Professor Maurice Charvet.	St. Andrew's Hall City Hall	"...extraordinary", "so life-like" but with "a rather irritating quiver as the pictures are being displayed" at "the rate of 50 per second" <i>The Daily Press</i> (HK), April 28, 1897.
From 21/8/1897 (Sat) until at least August 28 (Sat)	H. Wellby-Cooke presented the "Animatoscope" ("Edison's Latest Wonder")	Theatre Royal City Hall	According to a critic at the earlier mainland exhibition, generally superior to the Cinematograph with the images much clearer. Projection at the rate of 48 fps. - <i>Peking and Tientsin Times</i> , July 24, 1897.
From 16/10/1897 (Sat) until at least Oct 20 (Wed)	"Cinematograph" as presented by Professors Johnson & Charvet	Theatre Royal City Hall	Use of a projecting machine "of latest pattern" that "almost entirely eliminated the vibration so trying to the eyes" but with some of the pictures still having "a haziness of outline" - <i>China Mail</i> , Oct 18, 1897.
23/1/ 1898 (Sun)	"Animatoscope" - return season	No 5, Arsenal Street, Queen's Rd East.	
2/4/1898 (Sat) until at least April 16 (Sat)	"Cinematographe" as presented by "London" conjuror Carl Hertz. Machine seems to be "Theatrograph", Robert W Paul's	Theatre Royal City Hall	Pictures "uniformly of excellent clearness and realism." "The Cinematograph is far beyond those previously exhibited here" - <i>HK Telegraph</i> , April 4, 1898.
26/12/1899 (Tue) until at least Dec 30 (Sat)	"Kinematoscope", part of a stage show featuring "Xylophone & Kinematograph."	St Andrew's Hall City Hall	"Excellent ... a most interesting series of kinematograph views." - <i>The Daily Press</i> (HK), Dec 27 1899.

Note: Original quotes in press are in English.

Mr Frank Bren is a Melbourne-based writer, currently co-writing with Hong Kong film researcher Mr Law Kar the book titled *Hong Kong Cinema - a Cross Cultural View* of Screcrow Press (US).