

Airwave Novels and the Movie World

Winnie Fu, Agnes Lam

*Love, subsided by hate and flimsy,
Where romance subsists in a sea of hatred, the sea of love is vexed,
If heaven has emotion, jealous it will be,
When feelings deepen, hatred follows in pursuit,
Though bestowed with descendants as flourishing as the exuberant greens,
Can stop her not from casting off husband and son.*

Lyrics of song number in *Pear Blossom in a Winter Storm*, written and sung by Li Ngaw

So abundant are the visions of tragedy and sorrow in the melodramas of Cantonese cinema that one is prone to regard them as unique to that cinema. But many of these visions of unrelenting sorrow in fact originated from the airwave novels. According to author and broadcaster Li Ngaw, the term airwave novel was first suggested by director Yam Wu-fa when he bought the rights to *Crime Doesn't Pay* (original title *Flame of Lust*) and turned it into a movie in 1949. The term refers to the voice of a radio broadcaster narrating the story, which in turn is transmitted via the air to listeners who tuned in on the radio station. Thus, the term "airwave novel" came into currency.

Li Ngaw was one of the pioneers of radio broadcasting and probably the originator of the airwave novel. He became famous with the radio drama *Fickleness Bought Off With Gold*, aired over Guangzhou's Fengxing Radio Station, and subsequently became the narrator of countless airwave novels such as *Crime Doesn't Pay*, which was the first to be adapted into a movie. In 1949, Li came to Hong Kong to work for Rediffusion Radio. In later years, Li subsequently worked for Macau's Radio Vila Verde (1951) and Hong Kong's Commercial Radio (1957) until he retired from the broadcasting industry in 1975. Over the years, Li's works numbered over a hundred. Among Li Ngaw's contemporaries in the field of airwave novels were Tang Kei-chen, Chiang Sing, Ms Piu Yeung, Fong Wing, Siu Sheung (Li's wife) and Ngai Mun. After this came younger airwave novelists such as Lui Kei-man, Lang Wun and Chung Wai-ming. From solo narrators, the format advanced into multiple narrators taking on different roles. The shows also started to inject social and contemporary issues into main plots revolving around family dramas and romances.

As society recovered from the ravages of war and the economy started to revive, the film industry itself began to recover and prosper. Airwave novels of talents Li Ngaw, Siu Sheung, Ngai Mun, etc were adapted into movies. Because of the popularity of radio broadcasting, the movie scripts were themselves turned into airwave novels in order to publicise the movies.

So popular were the airwave novels and their guaranteed success at the box office that film producers were willing to purchase their rights for amounts ranging from several thousands to over ten thousand, quite rewarding at the time. The close association between the airwave novels of radio and the cinema continued until the mid-70s, when radio broadcast was essentially replaced by television.

Interview Highlights with Airwave Novelists

Li Ngaw



(On writing airwave novels) I told the stories myself, and wrote them myself ... there were no scripts at all, I narrated the stories in the dark. I would write fifty words on paper ... and with it I could narrate the story for half an hour without anybody feeling bored ...

(On screenplay skills) A screenplay's bad if he resorts to tired old devices like deus ex machina and is rejuvenated through the intervention of the Supernatural. A screenplay who uses that device is useless. What I am saying is the law of probability versus that of inevitability. I know I'm offending a lot of screenwriters when I say that but I dare say they use the law of probability more than that of inevitability.

(On *Pear Blossom in a Winter Storm*) The character of Kong Suet-ying is me, while that of Hon So-mui is my first wife. I married at 17. My mother died when I was 14 and I put myself through school where I met this girl. When I was poor, she left me to return to Guangzhou. ...Why did I use the name Li Ngaw? I didn't have parents, brothers, sisters, uncles, nor anyone. There was only myself, thus "Ngwa" (which means I). It's simple and plain, and therefore people found it interesting. It made me famous.

Li Ngaw, real name Li Man-king, became popular in Guangzhou with his airwave novels broadcast after the war. His fame preceded him to Hong Kong where he performed solo story-telling shows in radio stations. Li's airwave novels were widely adapted for the cinema.

Siu Sheung



(A rare chance to catch a glimpse of hidden narrators) In Commercial Radio alone, I narrated airwave novels for 17 years (1959-76). Before that I worked in Radio Vila Verde in Macau. All in all, I've been in the business for over 20 years. ... My deepest impression is that of *Bitter Love* (1964). It was the first time that the world of radio broadcasting was to make an appearance in the cinema. (Note) At that time, we broadcast behind the microphone and nobody knew what we looked like... Each time we finished our radio shows, a group of listeners would wait by the gate. My husband (Li Ngaw) said many fans were eager to know how radio personalities looked like, so why not make a movie? *Bitter Love* was written by Li Ngaw and I was the narrator. Later, the show was used to raise funds to help disaster victims. The actors, narrators, and so on all appeared on stage, despite a raging typhoon at the time and floods. The film was a tremendous success, with box office at the close of its run exceeding that of newly released films!

(Taken from Guangdong Cable TV's Hong Kong film series)

Note: Prior to this film, individual broadcasters did have appeared on the screen, but *Bitter Love* is the first time to have a cast of all broadcasting personalities, including Li Ngaw, Wan Fong-ling, Chung Wai-ming, etc.

Siu Sheung, real name Ho Lui-wan, is wife of Li Ngaw. Both household names of airwave novel broadcast, the couple later established a film company, with Siu as producer.

Lang Wun



(The era of listening to the radio in herbal tea rooms) After the war, it was quite expensive to go and see a movie, the film source then was inadequate. The only form of entertainment was to listen to the radio. When I was small, I used to listen to the radio in herbal tea houses. For ten cents a cup of bitter herbal tea, you could sit and listen to Rediffusion Radio for the whole evening. For this reason, the genre of dramatised fiction became popular with listeners. Businessmen exploited the opportunity to advertise on radio. I wasn't happy with the state of affairs when you were listening to a romance between a man and a woman, a voice came about to suddenly interrupt and said, "XXX cleaning powder works best!" followed by a ditty. This totally destroyed the mood.

Lang Wun, real name Chow Chak-hung, husband of airwave novelist and screenwriter, Ngai Mun.

Screenwriter of the acclaimed *A Mother Remembers*, Lang continued to co-write scripts with Ngai and to work as a broadcaster during his tenure as teacher and headmaster.

Lui Kai-man



(On publicity tricks) The taboo for a broadcaster is to reveal your ending. You have to create suspense everytime you reach the end of a show. This was the

golden rule behind a novel, be it a melodrama, a family drama, or a detective thriller. That's why a section of our listeners found their craving never satisfied. For example, our story might tell of a girl who's depressed and she's grasping a bottle of Dettol, hoping to end it all (it was quite childish at the time, actually taking Dettol isn't fatal). Or perhaps we have a man who finds the pressures of life too much and he wants to jump down a building. The narrator would pop a question to the listeners: Will he actually jump? Time's up for today and if you want to know what happens, please buy a ticket to see the movie that is showing in a chain of 17 theatres. That kind of thing. It was very effective.

Lui Kai-man entered the radio industry in the 50s. He wrote, directed, and played in the show "*Legends of Life*" which incorporated social issues of contemporary Hong Kong. Lui later worked mainly as a screenwriter-adaptor and publicist in the broadcasting industry.

Airwave Novels in Their Prime: On Airwave Novels and the Cantonese Cinema in the 50s and 60s

Lang Wun

Those who research the history of Hong Kong cinema will come across a long period of development when airwave novels of radio broadcasting and the Cantonese cinema had a very close relationship. How did this come by? A saga it may be, but suffice it to say that the development of the airwave novel is closely tied up with Hong Kong's social conditions, its economic circumstances, the people's level of knowledge and their mode of entertainment at the time, plus their technological know-how, etc.

Henceforth, we must return to the old days.

In the two decades after the Second World War, Hong Kong's residents could roughly be divided into three categories -- the foreigners and "Upper class" Chinese; intellectuals and Chinese migrants from the north; and the general public who spoke Cantonese and adhered to local Cantonese customs. In cinematic tastes, the first category was strictly limited to watching Western films; the second category liked to watch Mandarin films (Note 1) ; while the third category formed the audience base of Cantonese films. Audiences in the latter category were on average of the lower-income groups with a lower base of literacy. Little was expected from them of Cantonese cinema and producers played up to this audience with low-calibre works. Filmmakers generally avoided sensitive subjects to do with politics or sex, and concentrated on family dramas and historical anecdotes. Both audiences and filmmakers were happy about this. Cantonese pictures generally played in so-called third-rate theatres. They were never shown in first-rate theatres such as the King's, Queen's, Alhambra, etc, nor even in second-rank cinemas such as Oriental, Cathay, etc.

It was little wonder therefore that Cantonese pictures were regarded as crude products. Indeed such films were churned out in double-quick time. For some time, Cantonese pictures were known as seven day wonders. (Note 2) Fortunately, in the early 50s, things began to improve as a group of conscientious stars and directors, such as Ng Cho-fan, Cheung Ying, Pak Yin, Cheung Wood-yau, Tsi Lo-lin, Mui Yee, Wong Man-lei, Lo Dun, Lee Ching, Lee Tit, Ng Wui, Lee Sun-fung, Wong Toi, Mok Hong-si, Chan Pei, and many others, formed the Union Film Company. The company produced a series of outstanding pictures (Note 3), putting the warped production standards of Cantonese cinema to a halt.

It was at this stage that the airwave novels came into popularity. After the second world war, a broadcaster in Guangzhou by the name of Li Ngaw won the hearts of many listeners with a single-person narration show called *Crime Doesn't Pay* that was aired in the Fengxing Radio Station. Several years passed and Li Ngaw was then in Hong Kong employed on a high salary by the cable radio station, Rediffusion. (Note 4) Rediffusion soon monopolised the airwave since its rival station was the government-run Radio Hong Kong (Note 5), whose Chinese-language station only went on air for a limited time each day. Rediffusion became popular with single-person narration shows presented by Fong Wing, Tang Kei-chen, Chung Wai-ming, etc. Soon, airwave novels sealed its popularity among the common people.

The people of Hong Kong at the time were economically hard pressed. Going to the cinema was an occasional past time. Rediffusion thus provided the most accessible source of entertainment. Its subscription fee was an affordable 10 dollars a month, and it went on air from seven in the morning to midnight each day. Old and young took to the programmes with alacrity. At its peak, Rediffusion attracted as many as a million listeners.

The station employed many formidable talents, such as the Soccer King Lee Wai-tong, the opera librettist Tong Tik-sang, playwright Yao Ke and journalist Jimmy Shen either as consultants or administrators and they undoubtedly enriched the programmes. Apart from the single-person narration shows, the drama *The Ten Year Marriage* presented by Ms Piu Yeung in 1951 was a staple in the hearts of ordinary listeners. The story was adapted from a novel by Su Qing, with Chung Wai-ming and Ngai Mun (Note 6) playing the leading roles.

However, our first airwave novel to be conceived, broadcast and later turned into a movie adaptation was *A Mother Remembers*, first aired in the autumn of 1952. The broadcast script was written by me and directed by Ngai Mun, who also played the female lead; she was partnered by Chung Wai-ming, the male lead. The film adaptation was directed by Chun Kim, with Hung Sin-nui, Cheung Ying and Wong Cho-shan leading the cast. The film was released in June 1953 in the first-rate theatres Roxy and Broadway, and was an immense box-office success. (Note 7)

From the time of *A Mother Remembers* onwards, both the film industry and the radio industry recognised that the genre of airwave novels was a gold mine. In particular, the dramatised ones found favour with listeners, so did they with film audiences. Listeners already formed an audience base. In 1954, *The Spirit of Azalea*, which was written, directed and acted by Ngai Mun, was also turned into a movie starring Siu Yin-fei, with Ngai Mun playing a supporting part. The film did

well in box-office. In 1955, right of another Ngai Mun show *The Wild Rose* was secured by, allegedly, Ms Pak Suet-sin. Production of the film was somehow never materialised. After that, another Ngai Mun's work *My Friend's Wife* (1962) was produced by the newly established Guangyi Company, featuring Patrick Tse, Chow Chung, Nam Hung and Ka Ling. Chan Wan was the director.

In 1959, Commercial Radio was established and also took to broadcasting airwave novels. Perhaps because Ngai Mun's dramatic novels took their subject matter from the mass and addressed social problems, they were close to the people's heart. Added to this her increasingly vivid and livelier techniques, and one could understand why Ngai Mun had more of her airwave novels turned into film adaptations than other writers. In 1963, Ngai Mun became Commercial Radio's contract writer-director. Her first work, *What Now My Love* (1964) was bought by Shaw Brothers and turned into a Mandarin movie starring Bai Luming and Tian Qing. However, it was not a success. Nevertheless, Ngai Mun's novels continued to be bought by producers eager to turn them into pictures. They included such hits as *Terror Over Nothing* (1967, starring Wu Fung), *Poor Daughter-in-law* (1965, with Tam Bing-man and Nam Hung), *Two Orphans* (1964, with Lam Kar-sing, Nam Hung, Wong Man-lei, Tsui Siu-ming, and Leung Kar-bo; Ngai Mun personally introduced the story at the start). Because Ngai Mun's name was a box-office guarantee, later companies (such as Xingfa and Lingguang), regardless of whether her stories were airwave novels, bought the rights. Thus, Ngai Mun came to write the scripts of several Chinese New Year pictures such as *A Spring Celebration of the Swallows Return* (1966), and *Flowers Forever Blossoming, Moon Forever Full* (1962), and even some of Chan Po-chu's Lady Bond series of adventure spoofs in the 60s, such as *Return of Lady Bond* (1966), and *The Flying Killer* (1967).

There is perhaps only one reason why the airwave novels and Hong Kong cinema were so intimately attached to each other in that span of 13 to 14 years, and that is because cinema exploited the medium of radio to propagate itself. To summarise, radio and cinema cooperated in the following three areas:

1. First radio, then movie: those stories which were popular with listeners were selected for film adaptations.
2. Broadcasting it while shooting: A film project under production was turned into an airwave novel and the radio station profits from the rights sold to the film producers.
3. Broadcasting before a film is released: an expert was employed to adapt the screenplay into a radio novel, with the aim of publicising the movie (most prominently, Leiming Company).

The airwave novel has given broadcasting artistes opportunities to appear on the screen. They included Tang Kei-chen, Chung Wai-ming, Ngai Mun, Tam Bing-man, Wan Fong-ling, Yu Ming, Ho Suet-ying. As to their achievement in the cinema, opinions varied from audience to audience.

To sum up, the airwave novel has indeed flourished at a certain stage in the development of Hong Kong cinema. The trend declined from the mid-60s onwards, with the invasion of Taiwan-produced Mandarin pictures and the making of Mandarin martial arts pictures in Hong Kong such as *The One-Armed Swordsman* (1967) and *Come Drink With Me* (1966). In addition, wireless television was launched in Hong Kong. Radio broadcasting was undergoing great changes in response, and Cantonese cinema itself was in the throes of a revolution involving its talents, market and audience demand. As a result, the airwave novel and its film adaptation gradually declined.



The acclaimed *A Mother Remembers* (1959), in which Hung Sin-nui played the selfless mother. (From left) Yeung Fan, Hung Sin-nui, Ngai Mun and Wong Cho-shan.



Inside page of the film brochure of *The Spirit of Azaleam* introducing Ngai Mun.

Notes:

- 1 The Mandarin films at the time stemmed from Mainland China, such as *The Tears of Yangtze*, *Under Ten Thousand Roofs*, *The Barber Takes a Wife*, *Joy and Sadness at Middle Age*, *My Life*, etc.
- 2 So called because a picture from conception to production to final release allegedly took seven days to complete.
- 3 Union's productions included literary adaptations such as *Family*, *Spring*, *Autumn*, *Thunderstorm*, *The Wilderness*, etc.
- 4 Rediffusion was a British company headquartered in London and set up in Hong Kong in 1948 with an English and a Chinese channel.
- 5 Radio Hong Kong's Chinese-language station was ZEK, and its English-language station was ZBW. Each station went on air for several hours a day.
- 6 (Editor's note) Ngai Mun, original name Ivy Tuet Wai-ching, was a renowned airwave novelist in the 50s, and also the author's wife.
- 7 The author's work includes the unpublished article "Ngai Mun [1931-1989]: A Personality Not to be Forgotten in the History of Hong Kong Broadcasting", detailing the writing of *A Mother Remembers*. See also the article "Playing on the Air: Recollections from a Hong Kong Childhood" written by the author's daughter, Rey Chow, in *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese* 1.1 (July 1997, Lingnan College).

Lang Wun, real name Chow Chak-hung, husband of airwave novelist and screenwriter, Ngai Mun.

Screenwriter of the acclaimed *A Mother Remembers*, Lang continued to co-write scripts with Ngai and to work as a broadcaster during his tenure as teacher and headmaster.

Uncle Keung's Donation of Books

Mable Ho

How many cartons of books can be put inside a room of 40 square metres? The answer is 220 full boxes.

The home of "Uncle Keung" is a veritable "Fortress of books." Needless to say, it is filled with cabinets and shelves from wall to wall with books piled up occupying every single available room. As a matter of fact, books are spotted everywhere -- in the kitchen, bedroom, corridor, the living room, leaving only a narrow pathway for him to pass through. For his bed, Uncle Keung sleeps on a bench put up in the midst of his "book fortress." Each day after getting up, Uncle Keung walks through the narrow passage that he allows as a thoroughfare to a neighbouring dining hall to eat his breakfast, lunch and dinner. Occasionally, he would browse the bookstores outside and add another new title to his reading list. This is how life in retirement is, he says.

His friends are mostly dismayed at the sight of his living environment. They see that his living space is getting smaller and that ventilation is getting worse. The worst fear is that his mountains of books may collapse and cause an accident. Thus, they plead with Uncle Keung to donate his books away. After much pleading, Uncle Keung has at last assented, and the beneficiary of the old man's books is none other than the Hong Kong Film Archive. How does the old man feel about giving his books away after living with them for so many years? Does he hate to part with his treasure trove of books? "Not really," Uncle Keung says with a restrained look of helplessness -- or is it a look of equanimity? Anyway, life must go on.

Uncle Keung's real name is Kwok Keung. He had worked in the film business for over 50 years. Except for the post of director, he has worked in almost every position one can think of in the film industry. His most outstanding post was as film editor, then as sound recordist. He has clocked up credits in more than 400 pictures and has worked with countless film personalities throughout his career. He won the award for Best Editor in the Hong Kong Film Awards for the 1986 release, *Just Like Weather*. His name crops up in the credits lists from pictures produced by the Grandview Studio in the old days to the modern-day pictures produced by the Sil-Metropole Studio.

Uncle Keung is a quiet and sober person. At first, we felt a bit apprehensive about him, fearful that we might give offense to this veteran of the film world. But over

two days of handing over his books, we became close to him and the gap between us narrowed down. He would sometimes speak about the old days, when filmmaking equipment was scarce and it was necessary to import facilities from foreign countries. Some were rented, or if the rent could not be afforded, Uncle Keung himself would try to build his own by looking at designs in books. This way, while constructing his own equipment, Uncle Keung became an expert respected by colleagues. Gently, and with nary a sense of hurry, Uncle Keung recounted his experiences as he worked with sound and editing equipment and the changes that overtook them as the years passed, the rise and decline of the studios, the replacement of personnel, and so on and so forth.

From our initial estimate, the books in Uncle Keung's collection amounted to not less than 10,000. Books relating to the field of cinema amounted to over 2,000 titles. Quite a few of the cinema books have long been out of print and are priceless in value. With Uncle Keung's consent, books on literature, history, law and so on were transferred to other Urban Council libraries to cater for a bigger readership. We deeply thank Uncle Keung and hope that there are many more generous donors out there willing to donate their books to the Archive so that the general public may benefit from them.



It takes a true movie-maniac to accumulate piles of literary collection.



Mable Ho (1st left) with Uncle Keung (seated), assistant Priscilla Chan and Producer Wong Ying-cheong of Sil-Metropole.

Mable Ho is Acquisition Manager of the Hong Kong Film Archive.

55th FIAF Congress in Madrid

The 55th FIAF Congress held in Madrid from 9-18 April was attended by Angela Tong, Acting Senior Manager of the Hong Kong Film Archive. This was the first time the Archive attended FIAF as a full member. Asian representatives at the Congress included archivists from China, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and North Korea.

At the congress, representatives from archives all over the world exchanged views and experiences about the preservation and conservation of films. Ms Tong also took the opportunity to invite Asian film archives to supply Asian films suitable for screening to mark the opening of the Archive's permanent building next year.

Ms Tong also collected many views and opinions regarding the Film Archive's recent publications and exhibitions. Overseas archives were particularly impressed by the Oral History project and the exhibitions. Quite a few European archives expressed interest in jointly organising events with the Archive, and staging exhibitions of selected displays in their countries.



Asian archivists attending the FIAF Congress included (from left) Liu Chun (China), Angela Wong (Hong Kong), Chen Jingliang (China) and Huang Jianye (Taiwan).

South China Film Industry Workers Union Anniversary Events

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of its founding, the South China Film Industry Workers Union will present the union history in an upcoming exhibition and a retrospective held between 13-25 July.

In coordination with the events, the Hong Kong Film Archive will supply two new prints of Cantonese classics for the retrospective, *Feast of a Rich Family* (1959) and *Men and Women* (1964).

Feast of a Rich Family was produced by the Union in 1958 to raise funds for its new site in Kowloon City. It featured an all-star cast including Cheung Ying, Cheung Wood-yau, Pak Yin, Yung Siu-yi, Mui Yee, Ping Fan, Ng Cho-fan, Wong Man-lei, Lai Cheuk-cheuk, etc. Behind the scenes, several producers and directors stood at the helm. The film was produced and released in 1958 to successful box-office, and was re-released in 1966. A total of 14 films will be shown, including *The Dividing Wall* (1952), *So Siu-siu* (1962), *Three Charming Smiles* (1964), *Mutual Understanding* (1954), *A Girl in Disguise* (1959) at the City Hall and the Space Museum. The retrospective and the exhibition to be held at the City Hall's Exhibition Hall is sponsored by the Provisional Urban Council.

Siu Yin-fei Authorises Film Rights to Archive

Following the oral history interview with prominent actress Siu Yin-fei last year, the Archive was pleased to meet with the film star again on her home visit back in Hong Kong recently. Besides the donation of black and white photos by the actress, our conversation also touched on the films financed by the actress herself in the early years. Amounted to over a dozen, these include classics like *The Girl Minstrel* (1950), *The Evil Mind* (1947), as well as those preserved under the Archive's collection, namely *Her Fickle Heart* (1954), *The Spirit of Azalea* (1954), and *Murder Case in Chinatown* (1961).

On this precious occasion, Siu Yin-fei has generously granted the Film Archive the right to screen and use these film prints for future educational and research purposes.



Siu Yin-fei with Mr Yu Mo-wan, Research Coordinator of the Archive.

Li Minwei and the Early Hong Kong Cinema

Law Kar

To compare Li Beihai and Li Minwei, two pioneers of early Hong Kong cinema, with the Lumiere Brothers may be inappropriate, since the contribution of the Lumieres is of worldwide significance. Though the Li brothers have pioneered the growth of Hong Kong / Chinese cinema, the recognition they received was far from what they deserved, unlike the respect and honour accorded to the Lumieres in France. In early 20th century Hong Kong, Li Minwei and Li Beihai transformed an amateur interest in cinema into a truly professional one, throwing themselves into the task of making Hong Kong's first feature film, *Chuang Tzu Tests His Wife* (1913). They established the first Hong Kong film company, Minxin, and went on to produce documentaries and features (1923-25), expanding their operations into the Mainland itself -- in Guangzhou and Shanghai. Later on, they took part in founding the Lianhua Company, then China's most advanced and biggest film studio, with branch studios set up in Shanghai, Beijing, and Hong Kong. Lianhua cultivated China's and Hong Kong's best filmmaking talents, producing some of the most memorable film classics in the history of the Chinese cinema. However, this outstanding progress was cut short by the chaos brought by the Sino-Japanese War and China's own turbulent politics, and most of the works have been obliterated. Sadly Li Minwei and Li Beihai left their beloved cinema and the audience in the 50s.

In the Mainland, the history books regarding Chinese cinema include only scant mention of the Li brothers, nor have historians adequately or justly researched into their contributions. In Hong Kong, film history has had a rather late start in the curriculum, constrained by a lack of resources and a lack of social interest in film culture and history. Consequently, the pioneering efforts of the Li brothers have not been properly documented and researched. Ever since Kung-suen Lo devoted an article to describing the founding of the Minxin Company in his *Anecdotes of Chinese Film History* (Nam Tin Publishing House, Hong Kong) in the early 60s, the Li brothers have been ignored by historians and researchers for over 20 years, until the publication of Yu Mo-wan's *Anecdotes of Hong Kong Cinema* (Wide Angle Publishing House, Hong Kong, 1985). The book addressed once again the Li brothers's contribution while also provided quite a few first-hand materials about the early history of Hong Kong cinema.

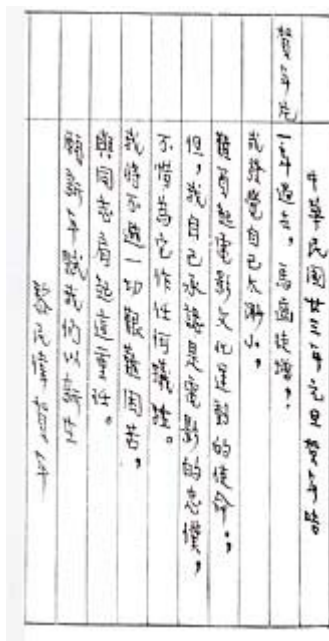
It was only in the late 80s that I met the descendants of the Li family. Because of my work as Programmer of the Hong Kong International Film Festival's Hong Kong Cinema Retrospective section, I came into contact with many early materials and saw many old classic films. At this time, my study of Li Minwei intensified, and through his sixth son, Lai Sek, had the opportunity to see many of Li's old photographs, his diary, hand-written drafts and other materials. In the early 90s, encouraged by Lai Sek and with his help, we began to collect, arrange and organise Li Minwei's materials, including his early films which were scattered all over China and overseas. These films, which were shown in the Hong Kong International Film Festival, include his documentaries *A Page of History* (1922-27), *The Battle of Shanghai* (1937), and his features *Romance of the West Chamber* (1927) and *Love and Duty* (1930). We also followed up with seminars, screenings and a memorial exhibition of Li Minwei for the first time ever. We were then determined to publish a book on Li Minwei that would pass on to future generations. After the efforts of several years, we have finally completed the task, and the book, entitled *Li Minwei: The Man, The Times, Cinema* is now published (Ming Pao Publications, 1999). The near 200 page book is illustrated with about 400 photographs and contains texts totalled at 70,000 words.

In editing and arranging the materials of the book, I came to understand the close links and relationship between the Chinese and Hong Kong cinemas and this connection is reciprocal, not simply a matter of the Mainland influencing Hong Kong. Like the early Chinese cinema centred in Shanghai, the Hong Kong cinema of the early 20th century also imbibed influences from the West, mixed with the local culture. What transpired was a rich and unique local culture and history which went on to interact with China. This development is one that is well worth our time in study and research.

Early Hong Kong cinema is still a virgin territory in many ways. The early Hong Kong pioneers also included many others aside from the Li brothers, Minwei and Beihai. These pioneers await our delving into their careers and our study of their contributions.



Law Kar and Lai Sek's collaboration: "Li Minwei: The Man, The Times, Cinema".



Extracts from Li Minwei's diary with Li's own handwriting.

Law Kar is a veteran film critic specialising in Hong Kong film history. He has been Programmer and Editor for many years in the Hong Kong Cinema Retrospective Section of the Hong Kong International Film Festival. His most recent publication is "Li Minwei: The Man, The Times, Cinema". He has also produced a documentary on Li Minwei together with Clifford Choi.