

Winnie Fu

## Heroes Behind the Silver Screen

Ever since the camera and light-sensitive film were invented, people have been attracted by the strange magic of photography, to the extent that they spend the whole life studying it, playing with it, creating with it, and collecting its works.

Those technicians who studied the camera and the science of optics in the 30s and 40s became the first generation of cinematography professionals in our film industry. Their stories are rarely told, but without these technicians, it would be impossible for directors and actors to shine in all their glory.

What do cameras of the 40s and 50s look like? How did they achieve the special effects on the screen? What was film development like in those days without mechanised film developing equipment? How were fade-ins, fade-outs and dissolves achieved in the lab? The Hong Kong Film Archive has spent days and nights to track down the veterans of our early film industry and interview them. This time we have focused on cinematographers, editors, film developers, and from the interviews, we have attempted to draw out a picture of the early days -- to discover the kind of equipment employed, the development and breakthroughs in technology, and the methods involved.

We were fortunate to have tracked down two of the earliest cinematographers in Hong Kong cinema: Ho Luk-ying (who was nicknamed "Celestial King") and Suen Lun (who was nicknamed "Earth King"). We also managed to locate Law Kwun-hung, the cinematographer who was the pioneer in studying colour photography and colour film developing. Through the introduction of Pun Hung of the Union Film Laboratory, we also contacted Kong Yum, a veteran editor and Kwan Lie-po, seasoned editor and film developer of the industry. All these veterans have retired from the industry. From talking with them, we found out that there were inadequate records and documentation of the methods and procedures of their work in the early days of the film industry, particularly those methods that were unique to local practices. Whatever secrets these veterans might have evolved from their careers would remain lost to us if they were not to commit their words to posterity.

Thus, we learned that the first film developing machine was originally bought by an engineer on board a vessel. It was said that the equipment was used for developing films of newsreel on board the ship. The engineer's name was Kwan Kwan-chun, who now lives in Canada. He had studied in Germany and because of his interest in

photography, had established a laboratory called Dachangcheng located in Grandview Studio. The equipment he rigged up eventually replaced the earlier developing equipment and manual methods of film developing.

The earliest labs were usually a part of the film studio complex. Things were done manually for the most part and the staff worked under an apprentice system. A wooden roller was first used as a rack to suspend the exposed film which was then dipped into developing solution contained in a square wooden barrel. Later on, the manual process was replaced by a mechanised one. In the black and white days, effects such as fade-in and fade-out, as well as dissolves, were achieved manually with processing by a cyanide solution. This process was eliminated with the adoption of colour developing equipment.

After the war, there were only a few labs that were still attached to film studio complexes, such as Yung Hwa (later MP & GI and Cathay), Dachangcheng and Sing Kwong (which were attached to Grandview Studio, later the Kin Sing Studio), and Wader Studio. There were no great changes involved during the black and white film era, but when colour film technology was adopted in the 50s and 60s, technicians had to learn colour separation and how to use the optical printer to achieve special effects. Because editing rooms were usually set up near the dark room, the developing technicians and the editors had close associations, and sometimes they worked together in the area of optical effects. The cinematographer also cooperated with the developing technician and the editor in the stages of cutting scenes and in colour separation.

Fans of black and white Cantonese pictures should be no strangers to the name of Ho Luk-ying. Nicknamed the "Celestial King," Ho Luk-ying is one of Hong Kong cinema's most experienced cinematographers and one who achieved many individual effects such as lap dissolves and other optical effects. He began his career during the days of the Sino-Japanese War, shooting documentaries and fictional feature films. He came to Hong Kong in 1949 to work in the Dazhonghua Film Company, and quickly established himself as a director of photography. Among his contemporaries in the field were Suen Lun and Ngai Hoi-fung. In those days, Ho was among the first to use overlapping exposures to achieve doppelganger effects, for example two Chow Kwun-lings or Lin Dais hugging each other in the same scene or shaking each other's hands. Ho was an expert in achieving such overlapping exposure effects without even a minor defect. (Photo shows a scene from *A Romantic Affair of Borrowing a Wife*, 1952, directed by Lee Sun-fung, where we see three Chow Kwun-lings appearing in the scene together).

Ho Luk-ying recalls that when the famous Chinese-American cinematographer James Wong Howe visited Hong Kong, he consulted Wong Howe for ways of achieving certain camera effects, such as showing footsteps of an invisible man on the snow, how to use reflectors to alter colours, etc.

Another veteran who simply exudes enthusiasm when talking of his career is Law Kwun-hung, credited as photographer of Hong Kong's first 35 mm colour feature *Madame Butterfly*. His career spans the black and white days to the adoption of colour film, working as he did for various studios such as Grandview and Dazhonghua. At one point in the early days, Law would go to the office of director Dan Duyu (one of the first generation of Shanghai directors who migrated to Hong Kong) after getting off from work and the two would study the art of photography. At the time, many actors were willing to follow Law from dusk till dawn to have their studio pictures taken. This was an invaluable process for learning how to use light, composition, etc. Law remained an enthusiastic raconteur when talking about lighting and how he designed shots for classic films *Mutual Understanding* and *The Show Must Go On*.



The screen magic achieved by Ho Luk-ying.



Ho Luk-ying (left) with James Wong Howe.

## Oral History Interview Highlights

### Ho Luk-ying (1913- ) - Cinematographer



(When cameras were hand-cranked) My mentor was Zhang Shichuan. At the time, the Mingxing Film Company had a production department that was staffed by some forty apprentices, and everybody called Zhang master. Cameras were hand-cranked then, at 16 frames, 24 frames - you used your hand to crank up the speed but the needle must be held constant so you had to train yourself very hard all day. It was a torturous process.

(Winning fame with a ghost film) When I shot Li Hanxiang's *The Enchanting Shadow* (1960), we had to do a shot of a ghost - its shadow, rather - entering the door of a temple. Just doing this shot took the whole day and we couldn't get it right because we couldn't synchronise the shadow and the light. Eventually, we succeeded. *The Enchanting Shadow* was later shown in a festival in France and even Hitchcock had seen it. The shooting took over three months and it's my favourite picture.

(Pouring brainwork for special effects) I could also achieve visual effects of a man shaking hands with himself, or embracing himself, even a scene of three people doing that. I thought a lot about such special effects and came up with the double exposure technique. We did it almost without any defects. Later on, I was much sought after, not simply to work as a cinematographer, but as a special effects technician.

**Ho Luk-ying** entered the film industry at 20 when he worked for the Mingxing Company in Shanghai. He had worked for the China Film Company in the 30s as a newsreel cameraman on the war front. After the war, Ho settled in Hong Kong to become director of photography. He won the Golden Horse Award for B&W photography for the film *Little Lotus* (1963). *Rear Entrance* (1960), the film he shot for Li Hanxiang, was the Best Film awardee in the Asian Film Festival.

## Law Kwun-hung (1919- ) - Cinematographer



(Drilling on colour photography) Dan Duyu was my mentor. We were among the first in Hong Kong to research on colour photography. At that time, Kodak supplied us with colour negative and photo paper for experimenting - three by four inches, eight by ten inches. This was the earliest attempt in colour photography in Hong Kong.

(A camera shaped like an accordion) I joined the Grandview Studio in 1937, as a script continuity man. Later, I worked as editor. At the time, developing stills was not a convenient process as it is now. The camera was an accordion box linked with the lens. We would open the box manually and then close it. Open it, count up to four, and then close it again. This counted on experience. The light sensitivity was very low, only 16 degrees, or 25 degrees.

(First experimenting on cranes) I first used the crane in Zhu Shilin's *The Show Must Go On* (1952). At the time, the crane was a wooden wheel between two wooden pillars and the cameraman was raised or lowered on a wooden platform powered by two crank gears on a rail track.

**Law** cultivated a love for photography since his childhood. In 1937, he joined the Grandview Film Studio to work in script continuity and editing. At this point, he experimented with film processing. In 1947, he joined the Dazhonghua Company in the capacity of an assistant. He re-joined Grandview in 1948, working under Law Wing-cheung. Law has been through many stages of cinematographic developments, and he has invented his own techniques, such as wheel cranes, inclining tracks, and flying carpet platforms, etc.

## Suen Lun (1919- ) - Cinematographer



(A lighting man from start) In 1937, the Jinqiu Film Company had moved to Kowloon City, and it was then that I began my career as a lighting man. The equipment we had included a common 50 watt light scatterer, a 1,000 or 2,000 watt spotlight; some were called top light, those for lighting up the whole sky, and thus carrying more bulbs, a very wide light. If you wanted a scene of moon and stars, you would have to achieve that with a white screen ... if you wanted to do a close-up, a spotlight could help slimming a chubby face, while the filler light had to be a thin light ... the back light would be different - it had to shine from the back so that the actor would be illuminated when he turned around.

Real name **Suen Siu-lun**. He entered the Fenghuang Film Studio at age 16, odd jobbing, and soon after joined the Quankiu Company, working in the lighting department. He then joined the Qiming Company to work as electrician and lighting cameraman. He was promoted to director of photography after the war, and worked for various film studios including Zhonglian, Huaqiao, Lingguang.

## Kong Yum (1927- ) - Editor



(Good pay for an editor) At first, I joined the Grandview Film Studio, through the introduction of a prop man, earning \$50 a month. Later, I learned editing under Yu Shun. Among Yu's contemporaries were Choi Cheung, Poon Chiu, etc. As an editor,

you would earn around \$400 per movie. This was raised to \$600, then \$800, \$1,200. When I was doing Taiwanese films, I was paid \$2,000, and that was very good pay at the time.

(Animation, a handiwork) I did the hand-drawn special effects for *Buddha's Palm* (1965, directed by Ling Wan). The effect of "Thousand Buddha Joining Forces" was drawn frame by frame - it was tough. ...16 frames a feet, that makes 160 frames in ten feet. ... I was also the editor of *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* (1963, directed by Ling Wan). In the old days, there was a guy named Kau Yat-wai who was a very good animator. He opened a laboratory in Ngau Chi-wan and called it Big Earth - it was later changed to Sun Ngai.

**Kong Yum** came to Hong Kong in 1948. He first worked in Grandview Film Studio, then became a freelance editor. He has edited more than 100 pictures, including those produced by independent firms and the bulk of the pictures produced by Yulin. His son, Kwong Chi-leung, is now a distinguished editor.

### **Kwan Lie-po (1933- ) - Film Lab Technician**



(The first developing machine) The earliest processing machine was very slow. It took five hours to process a film. I heard it was bought from a ship and was used to process newsreel. When it was bought, it wasn't expected to develop so many films. Later, an upgraded machine was used to develop duplicate prints (including photographic sound films and subtitle films). The slow model was then used to develop negatives.

(Film embargo) During the Korean War (1951-53), there was an embargo on Kodak films and so we had a shortage. We even used to record sound on both sides of photographic sound negatives. This was 17.5mm film, not 35mm film. You had to modify the sprocket wheels to adjust the spinning procedure. I think this was the brainwork of Uncle Keung from the Grandview Studio. (Referring to the recently deceased Kwok Keung who used to build his own sound and laboratory equipment.)

(The age of manual labour) We used our hands in the absence of mechanised

implements. The film were whirled round a wooden roller that was raised and dipped into a wooden barrel containing the developing solution. It was a square barrel... the films were secured on the wooden racks with pegs on both ends, and then dipped into the barrel. In processing copies, you could have the green light on. You calculated the time, then washed it with the fixing solution, then rinsed with water.

**Kwan Lie-po** came to Hong Kong in 1950 and worked in the Dachangcheng Laboratory in the Grandview Studio. He then worked in Sing Kwong, Universal and, Kin Sing . He also worked for a time with Kong Yum as editor. His last stint of employment was with the Union Film Lab where he worked until his retirement in 1994. Kwan's working career has spanned the black and white days to colour.

### **Pun Hung (1950- ) - Film Lab Technician**



(Small gain from wasted substances) There was this practice that prevailed in the dark room. For each 100 feet of film, the fixing solution would be changed but the used solution was actually saved and not thrown away. So the "chemical traders" would come to collect the solution and the income divided among the dark room staff. If you were an apprentice, you would get half of the share - this was the sort of largesse you had in the 60s.

(From black and white to colour) I turned to colour developing in the 70s. At the time, only Shaw Brothers, Hong Kong Colour Movie Lab, Mandarin Film Lab, Fo Ngai and Universal Lab had colour processing. Their facilities varied. When I was working in Fo Ngai, there were colour scanners but few people used them... perhaps because they were not used to them.

At age 19, **Pun Hung** was already working as a laboratory apprentice in the Grandview Studio, introduced by his father, Poon Chiu, a noted editor. Later, Pun joined the Fo Ngai to study colour processing. At present, Pun is the light controller at Union. He has recently helped the Film Archive to restore the film *A Royal Wedding*, which was coincidentally edited by his father.

### **An Historical Perspective**

<b>Era</b>	<b>Photography</b>	<b>Editing</b>	<b>Developing</b>
The 30s up to the	Cameras were	No editing machines; cyanide	Processes were manually done,

time of Sino-Japanese War	hand-cranked, on 100 feet film rolls. Film were low-speed, and the lighting from carbon arc lamps were so inadequate that actors had to paint their faces white.	solution used to process film manually to achieve fade-in, fade-out, and lap dissolves.	including pouring processing solutions, wooden racks, and dipping film into wooden barrels.
Postwar 40s	Chiu Shu-sun imported 16mm and 35mm Kodachrome commercial film in 1948. Cameras were mechanized, on 1,000 feet rolls, and facilitated changing of lenses.	Films were cut on sound. Special effects, animation, and colour tints were achieved manually.	Black and white film developing machines were imported. Kwan Kwan-chun sets up his own mechanised system. Labs were located in film studio complexes, so that film could be developed at once.
The 50s	Cinematographers came up with their own styles and methods of achieving special optical effects, such as double exposures to allow oneself to shake hands with oneself, to fly, to walk through walls. Cranes came into popular usage.	Steenbeck machines were introduced. Films are cut on images.	Colour films in experimental stage. Early colour films were sent to be processed in Japan or in UK's Rank Laboratory.
The 60s	Colour film technology gradually replaces black and white film. Cinematographers went to Japan for training in colour photography.	Mechanised machines were introduced to achieve effects such as frame-freeze, lap dissolves, etc.	The first colour labs were established in the mid 60s, using imported developing machines. Early technology entailed colour subtractive process, later, additive process used.
The 70s	Colour photography becomes established; light-sensitivity improved greatly.	Steenbecks were improved.	Colour labs multiplied, many using professional colour scanners.



The Hong Kong Film Archive has recently obtained the agreement of over twenty film organisations and film personalities to use film clips and stills in its multi-media bilingual computerised library system. When the Film Archive is permanently installed next year, the public will have an opportunity to access the computerised library system and view film clips and other photographic materials for study and research.

The Archive's computerisation programme has proceeded as planned, beginning from the end of 1997. The SCS Information Technology (HK) Limited was commissioned to supply and install the computer system and computerise all our information resources. The programme will input bilingual (English and Chinese) documentary resources numbering 37,000 items, including film materials, audio-visual materials, books and magazines, cuttings and documents. The database will also include 20,000 items of still pictures and some 3,200 items of film clips. Because of the great number of items and breadth of its materials, it is imperative that the Archive comes up with a comprehensive storage and indexing system. In point of fact, with the multiplication of resource materials, one film title may engender many forms of materials, including negatives, positive copy prints, laser discs, videos, etc. In addition, there are screenplays, stills, handbills, cuttings, posters, etc. All these materials ought to be cross-referenced in order to achieve a unified standard of retrieval. The whole project will cost over HK\$16 million.

The availability of an indexing system which integrates audio-visual and written materials is surely good news for film enthusiasts and students. The Hong Kong Film Archive takes this opportunity to thank the organisations and individuals that have generously given authorisation to the Archive. (See acknowledgement list below)

## **Acknowledgement**

Kong Chiao Film Company  
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Archive manager Isaac Leung discusses with SCS staff on methods of data input.



## Revelation of the Great Star Theatre: Always Follow Up on a Clue

In 1998, Mr David Quan, eldest son of the late Master Kwan Tak-hing, was in San Francisco's Chinatown where he was invited to attend a meeting to deliberate over the building of a memorial gallery devoted to his father. During the meeting, Mr Quan met many Chinese Americans, including one Mr Allan Wu who made a gift of cinema handbills in his possession to Mr Quan. When he returned to Hong Kong, Mr Quan immediately contacted the Hong Kong Film Archive and donated the handbills. With the handbills in our possession, we got in touch with Mr Wu and through him, we discovered another precious library of old Hong Kong film classics - the Great Star Theatre.

Members of Mr Wu's family had taken over the management of the Great Star Theatre in the late 50s. Mr Wu remembers that there were about six theatres devoted to showing Hong Kong films in Chinatown. The Great Star was built in the 20s and was then a venue for staging Cantonese operas. In the 50s, it was redesigned as a cinema, but on festive occasions such as Chinese New Year, the theatre would still stage operas for a week or two by visiting stars and their travelling troupes. With the downturn in the fortunes of Hong Kong cinema at present, the theatre has yet again been transformed. The film classics that once gave so much enjoyment had been stored away in the basement of the Wu's family home. Numbering a few hundred, the library includes works from the 50s and 60s, such as *Be My Love* (1968), directed by Chor Yuen, starring Patrick Tse and Josephine Siao; *How to Get a Wife* (1961), directed by Chun Kim, starring Keung Chung-ping, Patrick Tse and Ka Ling; *The Unruly Commander-in-Chief and the Blunt General* (1962), directed by Wong Hok-sing, starring Fung Wong-nui and Mak Bing-wing.

Mr Wu is a retired construction engineer. Though he was little involved in his family business, Mr Wu still waxes nostalgic about watching stars like Patrick Tse, Ka Ling, and Kong Suet in that famous series of Cantonese films produced by the Guang Yi Studio. We are grateful to Mr Wu and his family for preserving so well the classic legacy of Cantonese cinema so that rare prints from the 50s and 60s can be added to the Film Archive's collection.



Born and brought up in America, the Wus nonetheless strive to preserve treasures of their ethnic origin.



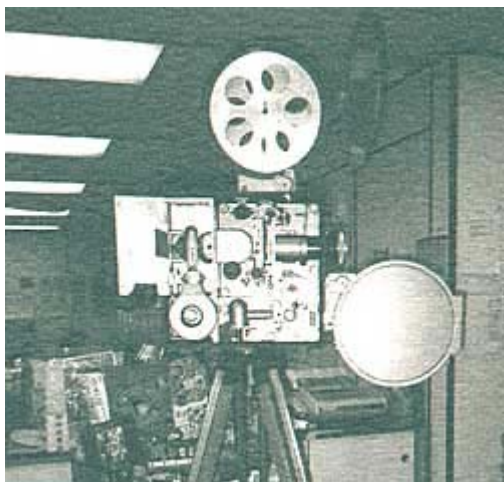
A pallet loaded with film containers was being shipped back to Hong Kong after some thirty long years.

**Mable Ho** is Manager (Acquisition) of HKFA. She had participated in the production of independent films *Long Distance* (1996), *Betrayal* (1997) and *Blue August* (2000). Her poetry and short stories collection was published in 1994.

## *Machinery & Instrument Association Donates Antique Projector*

The Hong Kong and Kowloon Machinery and Instrument Merchants Association Limited has donated an antique 35mm sound projector to the Hong Kong Film Archive. The donation was made possible through the mediation of the South China Film Industry Workers Union. The deputy president of the Association is the son of Liu Yat-yuen, president of the South China Film Industry Workers Union. Originally, the projector was to be donated to the Union but the Union felt that the antiquity would find a more proper home at the Hong Kong Film Archive.

The antique is a 1972 mobile projector of the well-known Jinggang Shan brand of China. This model is suitable for outdoor screenings, and its superiority is revealed by the fact that a new model of the same brand is now used by the Hong Kong International Film Festival for its outdoor screenings. Although its history remains to be researched fully, it is understood that the Machinery and Instrument Association had put the projector to use on numerous outdoor locations. The Film Archive takes this opportunity to thank the Association for their generous donation.



The projector - an antique glory.

## Hong Kong Films Unearthed from Trash in Oakland Chinatown

In May this year, Mr Lambert Yam, a long time associate of the Archive residing in San Francisco, informed about a cache of old Hong Kong films that had been discovered among the garbage bins in Oakland. This was one precious opportunity for the Archive to schedule for yet another acquisition itinerary. At the end of July, the stock of some 170 copies of Hong Kong films of the 50s and 70s, together with 8 cartons of precious stills and printed materials , was shipped back to Hong Kong.

A film fan from childhood, Mr Yam went to study in the United States and had previously worked with the World Theatre in San Francisco, being also the key person behind the theatre's annual Asian Film Festival. Hence, Mr Yam had kept in touch with the Hong Kong International Film Festival. The Archive was fortunate to have obtained the help of Mr Yam, the Oakland Asian Cultural Council and the cultural community of Oakland in this attempt to preserve the precious heritage of Hong Kong cinema. To everyone involved, the Archive extends its sincere gratitude.



Films from trash in Oakland.

## Archive Treasures: The Movie World of Tong Tik-sang

In a career spanning a mere twenty years, the playwright and librettist of operas Tong Tik-sang created over 400 Cantonese operas, beginning with his first piece *The Consoling Lotus of Jiangcheng* (1938). Tong died at 43, on the day of the premiere of *The Reincarnation of Lady Plum Blossom*, his last opera.

Born in Heilongjiang Province, Tong's real name was Tong Hong-nin. His first contact with the opera world came in 1937 in Hong Kong where Tong was working as a copyist in the Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe. Tong caught the attention of the leader and star of the troupe, Sit Kok-sin, and with the support and influence of two distinguished writers Fung Chi-fen and Nam Hoi Sup-sam Long, Tong began his writing career. His first opera was *Bird at Sunset*. His writing talents led to directing, producing notable operas as *Gone the Phoenix from the Cage* (1948), *The Story of Tung Siu-yuen* (1950), *Mysterious Murder* (1951) and *The Queen of Paris* (1955), featuring Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin.

Tong's talent was a singular one: he was able to integrate literature, opera and the art of film into a unique but accessible genre. He created opera pieces that people still enjoy and praise to this day. Tong could indeed be called a genius of opera.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of Tong's death. To commemorate this occasion, the Hong Kong Film Archive has organised a tribute to this opera and film master, to be held in September. Ten films have been selected for a retrospective, each a milestone of the different periods in his career, and encompassing the genres of comedy and melodrama. All these films highlight Tong's genius and his creative artistry.

The Archive has consulted Ms Pak Suet-sin and Ms Fong Yim-fun in organising the retrospective. The opening film will be *The Queen of Paris* (1955), a print retrieved from the World Theatre in San Francisco. The film stars Yam Kim-fai, putting on her familiar male scholar disguise, and Pak Suet-sin, playing the lover. The co-stars are Leung Sing-bo, Fung Wong-nui, and Cheang Mang-ha, Tong's wife. Their brilliant performances, the gorgeous costumes, and the enriching ambience of opera will make this opening film a moment for the fans to savour. Apart from the five films featuring Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin, the retrospective also includes one of Tong's rare forays into contemporary drama, *Nocturnal Dreams of Love* (1956), a story of mistaken gender roles underlying a strong anti-feudal message.

Unfortunately, other keynote films in Tong's career -- films such as *Romance of Fuji Mountain* (1954) and *The Fake Marriage* (1956) ( in which Tong is featured as an actor) -- will be missing in the retrospective because of the unavailability of film

source.

In conjunction with the retrospective, the Archive will publish a catalogue that will include updated versions of Tong Tik-sang's Filmography and Opera Chronology. Also included are the essays by Michael Lam, Lai Kin, and Li Ngaw, which fill in the gaps in our knowledge of Tong's life and career. In addition, an exhibition will be held displaying Tong's scripts, stills, personal calligraphy, film brochures, handbills, records and rare hand-drafted copies personally written by Tong as well as pictures from his home albums. The exhibition is made possible with the generous assistance of Ms Pak Suet-sin, Mr Lee Sek-hung (son of director Lee Tit), Mr Li Ngaw, Mr Cheng Fat-ming, Ms Wong Mei-ling, Hong Kong Heritage Museum, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong.



*The Queen of Paris*



*Butterfly and Red Pear*



*Nocturnal Dreams of Love*



*The Legend of Purple Hairpin*