

Prelude to the Opening: Integrating Wares Hard and Soft

The construction of the Hong Kong Film Archive building has finally been completed. In August, we bid farewell to our Planning Office and moved into the new building. All sections of the Archive are busy working with each other to make sure that the new environment will serve as an effective site for the preservation and promotion of our film culture.

The Administration Section has shouldered the responsibility of coordinating the relocation, from supervising the progress of construction to purchasing furnishings. While the Conservation Section is testing the temperature and humidity of our storage vaults, the Cataloguing Section is shelving publications, prints and audio-visual materials as well as working with the IT Systems Section to input data of our collection into the computer system. Our new structure also includes the Programming Section, which has been established to take over the curation of screenings and exhibitions from the Research and Editorial Sections.

We are putting our facilities through vigorous testing to ensure that when the Archive opens, we can share the 80-year treasures of Hong Kong cinema with the public. In what way can we expediently serve the citizens of Hong Kong and researchers of the world? In what manner do we share our collection with the public? Heads of the Programming and Conservation Sections are invited to answer these questions, providing a key to understanding our operation. We will continue to introduce other facilities and services in our coming issues.

Prelude to the Opening - Some Thoughts on Assuming a New Responsibility

Law Kar, HKFA Programmer

The Hong Kong Film Archive has come about as a result of repeated urgings from the public. Now, at the turn of the millennium, the Archive is finally set to take its course in new high-tech surroundings.

I recall some twelve or thirteen years ago that I participated in initiating a forum that we called on the Government to establish a fund for the promotion of film culture, and to set up a film archive as soon as possible to preserve Hong Kong's film legacy. In a flash, it is another century and what we advocated in the forum have come to pass. Now the hardware exists but how we put it to good use remains to be seen. The burden is heavy and the road is long.

From being an observer to being a cheerleader all these years, I now find myself right in the midst of things, having joined the Film Archive as a staff member in the middle of the year. From now on, I will not be wishing or provoking, but getting down to the thick of it. The job is not just serving a small group of researchers. Film culture and its legacy belong to the citizens, not just to film industry insiders, or critics, or cultural scholars. We see how our society has changed and developed through old film images. They show us the passage of time and how far we have come from the past. Cinema is a living document and it is living history! We should make use of the Film Archive through nothing but love of one's own culture and history. That is my fervent hope.



Mr Law Kar

Prelude to the Opening - Preservation and Access: The True Essence of Conservation

Interview: Kwok Ching-ling and Yam Yim-lan

On the eve of our removal, we paid a visit to the Conservation Section located at Lei Yue Mun Country Park. Housed inside an old military barrack, the conservation team had worked in its present premise since 1997. As with everybody else in the Archive, the team moved to the new permanent site in August. Edward Tse, Assistant Curator I (Conservation), and Andy Yuen, Assistant Curator II (Conservation), spoke about the "Great responsibility" of moving house and the team's projects following the opening of the permanent archive. Through our conversations, we have got hold of a picture of the conservationists' blueprint for film preservation in the direction of a film culture that could be enjoyed by the public.

From the perspective of preservation, the Archive's objective is to keep the films and other related materials in good shape for at least one hundred years. In terms of "active conservation," of all films and other related materials collected, those that are in a serious state of deterioration, such as shrinkage of film, colour fading, scratches, torn sprocket holes and other forms of physical damages will be immediately submitted to a restoration regime. Apart from using the Archive's own equipment for "emergency" situations, the ailing film may also be handed to professional film laboratories or organisations for restoration. The conservation team would then supervise and ensure the quality of the restored product. From the angle of "passive conservation," the Archive would create an ideal environment for the permanent storage of our treasures. The new permanent building is precisely such an environment, containing purpose-built systems and sensors for regulating the temperature and humidity in order to preserve the films at optimum conditions.

The conservation team has been working on compiling technical information on the conditions and production credits of the films acquired, to make sure that they correspond to our database records. Their expertise is vital to the planning and execution of the removal of our treasures, to ensure that the materials arrive at the permanent site safe and sound.

In preserving the old, the conservation team has resorted to adopting new digital technology to keep up with the times and transformations in media platforms and technology. Thus, with one eye trained on traditional means of conservation, the other eye must keep up with the realities of a world in flux. Only then will the objective of preserving a film for one hundred years be realised. The conservation team is ready to meet the challenge and face the dilemma of how to conserve

films on the one hand, while making them accessible to the public on the other hand. A bridge has to be built to cross the preservation of films via the use of technology and the facilitation of public access to these old films via a conveniently accessible format.

The tasks of conservation and restoration are in fact done for the propagation of film culture in the interests of the public. The new archive building will provide a channel through which this film culture may reach the public, through film exhibitions and other forms of activities. The Archive's Resource Centre, to be opened at the same time, will provide yet another venue for the public to gain access to our treasure cove.



Edward Tse (left) and Andy Yuen



Simultaneously watching two copies of a film with a double-screen viewing table, one can determine the quality of the copies. The Kid (1950) was submitted to this technique in order to restore missing sections in the Archive's incomplete copy. The restored The Kid will be a highlight in the programme commemorating the 60th birthday of the late Bruce Lee in November.

Oral History Project - Tales Told in Canada

Donna Chu

Having gone to Canada for a visit, I took the opportunity to set up interviews with four veterans of the Hong Kong film industry who had migrated to that wonderful country. Luckily, I travelled to Canada more or less prepared to assume the role of a journalist and interviewer as well, having packed a video camera for the purpose.

The first veteran I interviewed in Vancouver was Chang Tseng, an actor and director. He was one of the first Hong Kong filmmakers to return to China to make films. In retiring to Canada, Chang thought he would have a leisure life after migrating, but of late, he has made frequent appearances in Western films and on television. On the day before the interview, he had just returned from Los Angeles where he had gone to act in a new production. On his return, he busied himself writing. He was hardly leading a life of retirement!

Perhaps this is the life pattern of film people. After migrating to Canada, actor Yue Hua joined the Cathay TV and is now active as a broadcaster, winning an audience of overseas Chinese migrants with his radio programme. Through Yue Hua's broad contacts, I was able to get in touch with actress Liu Qi, who had been absent from the screen for over 30 years, and the veteran photographer Ocean Leung.

Liu Qi was active in films in the 50s and 60s. She retired in the mid-60s and came to Vancouver to start a new life. I saw a gorgeous Liu Qi in pictures taken by an American photographer from her album. Time flies and now her children are all grown-ups.

Ocean Leung was a portrait photographer who took pictures of the stars for film magazines such as *Southern Screen* and *Hong Kong Movie News*. A fastidious and meticulous craftsman, Leung took much pain in taking photographs of the stars ensuring that they be shown in their best profiles and camera angles. In Vancouver today, Leung runs his own photo studio where he kept his priceless collections of a full set of *Southern Screen* and *Hong Kong Movie News*.

In my short trip, I was fortunate to be able to meet and interview these four great veterans of the Hong Kong cinema. For this, I must thank Sister Ching, Linda and Ms Li Linlin. Finally, I would like to thank my sister-in-law. Without her to drive me around, it would not have been possible to do this series of interviews.



Liu Qi (right) and Donna Chu

Donna Chu is a freelance research writer.

Oral History Project - Interview Highlights



Liu Qi born in Beijing in 1930. She took up acting in drama at age 14 and entered the film industry in Shanghai in 1945. She came to Hong Kong in 1949 and starred in many pictures, including *A Fisherman's Honour* (1949) and *Half Way Down* (1957). She retired from the screen in the mid-60s and migrated to Canada.

On returning Hong Kong to visit friends [Before] although I was working in the film industry, I didn't have much contact with people inside the industry. As I grew older, I wanted to come back when I still had the ability to, and tell people that "I was sorry, I couldn't get closer to you at the time." I returned to Hong Kong [in 1992] to hook up my old colleagues and followed up the contacts. Some were staying in nursing homes, others were in hospitals, and yet others were staying inside their homes unable to come down, I visited them all.

Yue Hua real name Elly Leung, was born in Shanghai in 1942. He came to Hong Kong in 1962 and enrolled in Southern Experimental Drama Group. After graduating, he signed a contract with Shaw Brothers and appeared in *Come Drink with Me* (1966), *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan* (1972), etc.



Being Canadian When I came to Canada, I was in a state of disarray for about half a year. TVB faxed a script outline to me and said that I could come back to Hong Kong to work for three months.... By the time, Dr David C Lam, a former Lieutenant-Governor of British Columbia, had some funding to make a film for migrants, my whole family and I were asked to appear in it. The film was called *Being Canadian* and the message was that migrants should burn their bridges behind them and should whole-heartedly adopt Canada as their home. I thought this was the right attitude, so I rejected TVB's invitation and decided to stay on in Canada. I joined the Cathay TV here in 1990. I was the host of an interview show as well as a programme director....



Ocean Leung born in 1944. He came to Hong Kong in 1961 and in 1963 became a photographer. He had worked for film magazines like *Southern Screen* and *Hong Kong Movie News*.

On beautiful qualities In fact, each person has his or her beautiful or ill-favoured side. As a photographer, I have to look for the best way in taking a picture that would make them even more beautiful than they are in real life, and give them even more character. My favourites are those who are cooperative and will listen to my directions during a shoot. An actress can tell me how she would like me to shoot her, but later, she should also follow my instructions. Communication is important in cooperation. When both were satisfied with the discussion, we would proceed and do something creative.

Chang Tseng real name Chang Ku-foo, born in Beijing in 1931. He came to Hong Kong in 1948, and joined the Grall Wall Movie Enterprises Ltd in 1951, first as actor, then as director. He had directed *Red Azalea* (co-directed with Huang Yu, 1970) and *Xin Jiang "Yar-Ck-See"* (1981), etc.



To do the best I've been in show business all these years and I always abide by a principle and that is, to do my best. I'm now the deputy head of the Vancouver Film and Television Artists' Society. I feel that when making Western films, I should not put Chinese to shame. So I try my best. Beginning from 1998, every Saturday, I would learn diction from a teacher who had once worked for Voice of America. I did this for six months. There is an advantage to not having any night life here. I sleep early and get up early. I do my boxing exercises, I write, I watch movies. You have to arrange your own life in whatever circumstances and places.

PS: After the interview, Mr Chang Tseng sent us a copy of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1999), a TV movie produced by Coppola with location shootings in Hong Kong and Australia. He plays the role of a Chinese herbal doctor who excels in his trade. We express our gratitude.

The Wan Brothers and the Cinema of Chinese Animation - A Tribute to Wan Laiming on the 100th Anniversary of his Birth (Continued from issue 12)

Bao Jigui

China's First Animated Sound Film, *The Dance of the Camel*

It took nine years for the Wan Brothers to make the transition from the silent to the sound animated cinema. At the time, this was described as the "Great Mute Talks"!

After watching China's first sound movie *Revelry in the Song Stage* in October 1931, Wan Laiming realised that animated films had to make the transition to sound, otherwise his efforts and those of his brothers would be wiped out by history. Through a process of fumbling and experimentation, the brothers discovered the method of optical sound recording which could be applied in the making of animated sound films.

The Wan Brothers proceeded to make China's first sound animated film in 1935 under the auspices of the Mingxing Film Company. The film was *The Dance of the Camel*, based on one of Aesop's fables. The story tells of a camel who joins a grand banquet given by the lion, king of the beasts. A group of monkeys wins applause with a dance. The camel, a show-off, comes on stage and insists on dancing and is booed off the stage by the audience. Fruits and bottles are thrown at the camel....

To replicate the sound of the camel dancing, the Wan Brothers did several experimentations but were dissatisfied. Finally, Laiming suggested the use of Peking Opera percussion instruments and they appeared to produce a good effect. For the elephant drawing water with its trunk, the other Wan Brothers came up with several methods but settled on the use of a rubber tube. A bamboo flute was used to dub the sound of the camel doing a somersault on stage. As for the sounds of thrown objects at the camel, the filmmakers recorded the sound of real glass bottles being broken. In a few seconds of film, dozens of bottles were actually broken. The most difficult part was that of the audience of animals bursting into laughter. At first, the sound of an audience laughing was recorded but the effect produced was lacking dimension and depth. After several failed attempts, the brothers decided to record the sound of laughter from several groups of people standing at different positions. The nearest group laughed first and loudest, followed by the second group and so on. This was sufficient to produce the dimensional effect needed. Such resolutions may seem somewhat simple to us today but sixty years ago, it was indeed a huge problem. That it

could be solved at the time was already an achievement in itself. As for music, there were no live bands and the problem was solved by using records that would be played and taped stretches at a time.

The success of *The Dance of the Camel* signified the entry of Chinese animation into the era of sound and marked a turning point in the genre of animated films.

China's First Animated Feature, *Princess Iron Fan*

Wan Laiming had accompanied his father, who was in the silk trade, on a business trip to Shanghai in 1910. One day, while on the streets, Laiming saw a foreign moving picture and this set him on to thinking that he could draw a series of the Monkey King (Sun Wukong) and make him move. Laiming harboured this thought for many years and it became an aspiration that he would realise one day.

In 1938, the release of Walt Disney's first animated feature *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* caused a great stir in Shanghai. Disney had spent millions of dollars and some three years making the film. Shanghai's investors and film business people became red-eyed at Disney's achievement and seeing the opportunities open to them, began to set up film companies with animation departments. This fitted in nicely with Wan Laiming's aspirations. Laiming and his twin brother Guchan saw *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and thought to themselves: if the Americans can make a *Snow White*, why can't we Chinese make a film with Chinese cultural characteristics? The brothers discussed between themselves and settled on adapting a story from the classic novel *Journey to the West* - the episode entitled *Monkey King Thrice Borrowing the Palm-Leaf Fan*. This episode formed the basis of China's first animated feature film *Princess Iron Fan*, their very own version of *Snow White*.

The investors who invested in *Princess Iron Fan* did so out of business calculations but were only willing to pay the smallest wages to the staff. In addition, they also set a deadline for the production. The Wan Brothers put up with the adverse conditions. They recruited apprentices and taught them the basics while working on the drawings for the production. Working under such harsh conditions, the members of the crew complained, "We were drawing Monkey King, but our ordeal was even more difficult than when Monkey King was passing through the Fire-spewing Mountain." Laiming shored up morale by exhorting, "Let's all be like Monkey King. Whatever difficulties may come our way, we will prevail."

Lacking the availability of colour negative film, the Wan Brothers used prepared

red ink to draw the fiery colours of the Fire-spewing Mountain onto the celluloid itself. The effects produced were quite spectacular.

Princess Iron Fan turned out to be the masterpiece of the Wan Brothers and it has since become a significant work in the annals of Chinese animation cinema. The film runs one hour and twenty minutes (9,700 feet). It is China's first animated feature film, and indeed Asia's first of its kind. It was completed during the Anti-Japanese War. Released in 1941 in the Great Shanghai, Xinguang and Huguang theatres in Shanghai, it pulled in unprecedented crowds seldom seen even for feature films. When released in Hong Kong, Singapore and other territories in Southeast Asia, the receptions were equally unprecedented. *Princess Iron Fan* was also shown in Tokyo, Japan to enthusiastic crowds, but it was later banned by the government. According to Japanese writer Komatsh who wrote in 1975, "Those who came to see China's first animated feature film with a prejudiced mind saw a film of such interest and exuberance that it left them dumbstruck...." (The End)

Editor's note: In our last issue, we published part one of this article which touched on the very beginning of Chinese animation film history. Because of the lack of space, we could not print a longer article dealing with the Wan Brothers' later efforts in the field of Chinese animated cinema. For further information, please refer to *Historical Notes on Shanghai Cinema, Volume Six*, published by Shanghai Film History Office, 1995, co-edited by Bao Jigui and Liu Yong. In addition, *Princess Iron Fan*, a print to be provided by the China Film Archive, will be shown in one of our opening programmes "Asian Film Archive Treasures." Fans of Chinese animation should not miss the event.



Laiming: Let's all be like Monkey King....

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