

## Grand Opening

The Hong Kong Film Archive building was officially opened on 3 January 2001. Financial Secretary Mr Donald Tsang presided over the opening ceremony to mark the auspicious occasion. The opening ceremony was held at the piazza of the Hong Kong Film Archive and the Island East Sports Centre.

The officiating party, accompanied by Mr Paul Leung, Director of Leisure and Cultural Services; Ms Choi Suk-kuen, Deputy Director of Leisure and Cultural Services (Culture); Mr Tony Ma, Assistant Director of Leisure and Cultural Services (Heritage and Museums); Mr T S Lo, Chief Manager (Culture and Film Exchange) and the Archive staff Ms Cynthia Liu (Head), Mr Law Kar (Programmer) and Mr Yu Mo-wan (Research Officer), enjoyed the opening exhibition *Hong Kong on the Silver Screen* and toured the resource centre and film stores. Mr Chow Yun-fat stayed in the cinema and met the press there, giving many of his witty remarks. The guests were delighted to meet each other at the beautifully decorated piazza and on the way touring the Archive.



Officiating Party (from left): Mr Paul S W Leung, JP, Director of Leisure and Cultural Services; Ms Christina Y C Ting, JP, Chairman, Eastern District Council; Mr Chow Yun-fat, film star; the Honourable Donald Y K Tsang, JP, Financial Secretary; Mr Lam Woon-kwong, GBS, JP, Secretary for Home Affairs; Dr Patrick C P Ho, Chairman, Hong Kong Arts Development Council; Mr Pau Shiu-hung, JP, Director of Architectural Services.



VIP guest Chow Yun-fat took the opportunity to donate a print of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) to the Archive on behalf of the United China Vision Inc and Edko Columbia Tristar Film.



Mr Donald Tsang visiting the resource centre accompanied by (from left) Ms Choi Suk-kuen (Deputy Director of LCSD (Culture)), Mr Paul Leung (Director of LCSD) and Ms Cynthia Liu (Head of HKFA).



The officiating party and Mr Law Kar (1st left) enjoying the opening exhibition *Hong Kong on the Silver Screen*.



Mr Tony Ma (1st right) accepting a souvenir from Ms Vinasandhi (National Film Archive, Thailand). (1st left) Mr T S Lo.



Film archiving experts from overseas and Beijing: Mr Park Jin-seok, Ms Belina Capul, Ms Vinasandhi, Mr Ray Edmondson, Mr Song Kun, Mr Okajima Hisashi, Mr Lalit Kumar Upadhyaya, Mr Okajima Hisashi, Mr Tran Luan Kim and Mr Wang Xueming.



(From left) Ms Yu Mo-lin, Mr Yu Mo-wan, Mr Lam Kau and Mr Tso Tat-wah.



(From left) Mr Wong Kee-chee, Ms Yao Li, Ms Koo Kam-wah, Ms Qiu Ping and Mr Chang Tseng.



Ms Chin Tsi-ang (left) and Ms Tong Yuejuan.



Mr Lee Sau-kei (left) and Mr Cheung Tung-joe.



Ms Yao Li (left) and Mr Paul Fonoroff.



Ms Chu Yan-yan (left) and Mr Tso Tat-wah.



(From left) Ms Wong Woon-chun, Ms Yu Mo-lin and Mr Chang Tseng.

## **FRAGILE HERITAGE AND PROMISING OUTLOOK: Asian Film Archives Look Ahead While Looking Back**

by Sam Ho



Taken in front of the Archive building - (from left) Mr Okajima Hisashi, Mr Sam Ho, Mr Ray Edmondson, Ms Belina Capul, Ms Cynthia Liu, Mr Lalit Kumar Upadhyaya, Ms Vinasandhi, Mr Winston Lee and Mr Park Jin-seok.

"I had the chance to shake the hands of many great directors," says Okajima Hisashi. "It was exciting, but not as exciting as touching the original print of a Lumière Brothers film."

Okajima, Curator of Film at the National Film Center of Tokyo's National Museum of Modern Art, is at a dinner of Asian archivists, who are in the SAR for the official opening of the Hong Kong Film Archive and to attend a symposium held on 8 January. Film archivists are a special breed. As Ray Edmondson, President of South East Asia/Pacific Audio Visual Archive Association observes in the symposium, they love film. Or they wouldn't have put up with their always demanding work. But they also have to exercise their passion with control. That's why Okajima is careful to point out that despite his excitement at touching the vintage celluloid, he didn't leave any fingerprints.

### **CHALLENGES IN THE ARCHIVING JOURNEY**

Film archivists must express their love for film with control because they are at the front line of preserving film's heritage. Cinema may have a glorious history, but its physical heritage is a fragile one. Since the introduction of projection cinema by the Lumière Brothers in 1895, the world has been playing a catch-up game with the deterioration of the stock on which images - and, later, sound too - are recorded

Initially though, the game was not of catch-up but of ridicule. Edmondson quotes a 1897 British newspaper report that raved against the inclusion of such early film treasures as *The Prince's Derby* and *The Beach at Brighton* in the hallowed halls of the British Museum: "Seriously, does not the collection of rubbish become a trifle absurd?" Edmondson goes on to wittily characterise the emergence of film archives in Europe and North America three decades later as establishing "proper home(s)... for the rubbish bin."

The heritage of film in Asia is particularly fragile. For a long while, the garbage bins of Asian cinema were a homeless bunch, not so much because of snobbish rejection of a new and popular medium but simply of indifference. While the West waited three decades before establishing archives, it took a lot longer for Asia to get going. The first film archives in the continent are the ones in Iran, China and India, launched respectively in 1949, 1958 and 1964. Japan, perhaps the best among Asian nations in protecting its cultural heritage, did not start preserving films systematically until the 1970s, under the banner of the National Film Center.

Here in Hong Kong, one of the most prolific film centres of the world, the call for a film archive wasn't even made until the late 1970s. Not that the people of Hong Kong didn't care about film - we did, in a big way, and still do - but we had more pressing matters on our mind than preservation. When the Hong Kong Film Archive was established in 1993 in the form of a Planning Office, it faced an uphill battle in playing catch-up.

Belina Capul, Staff Director at the Motion Picture Division of the Philippine Information Agency, tells the symposium audience that the Philippines does not even have a full-fledged film archive despite its long history of filmmaking. A national archive was indeed established in 1982 by the Marcos government, but after only three years, with the collapse of the despotic regime imminent, it was unceremoniously absorbed into the censorship department. The role of archiving is now left to the small and under-funded Society of Film Archivists (SOFIA), a coalition of concerned individuals. The Society, however, has no resources to carry out preservation tasks, serving mainly as a networking body and clearing house for activities.

Political upheavals such as the overthrow of Marcos are commonplace in Asia. In fact, the long and magnificent history of film in Asia also coincides with a punishing history of turbulence in Asia. The continent in the 20th century was marked by world wars, civil wars, all kinds of political turmoil and violent economic ups and downs, none of which favourable to the preservation of film. The area was also mired in various forms of colonial or authoritarian rules, which

often imposed denials, if not outright distortions, of local histories. In Hong Kong, for example, the combination of a colonial government not eager to acknowledge the dubious origin of its rule and a people only too happy to forget what transpired resulted in a willing negligence of its past. It wasn't until the 1980s, with the rise of a search for identity, did the Hong Kong people rediscover its history.

## **DAUNTING TASKS**

Asian archives face daunting tasks once they are set up. With long-lasting and highly productive industries throughout the continent, a large number of films had been made. The late start of the preservation movement means huge quantities of cinematic treasures had already been lost even before the archives begin looking for them. The severity of the situation is best illustrated by India, the most prolific film-producing country in the world. According to Lalit Kumar Upadhyaya, Director of India's National Film Archive, an average of 700 to 800 films are made annually. Without a legal deposit system, a substantial percentage will meet no other fate than being lost forever. Take the silent era, for example. About 1,300 films were made in India between 1913 and 1931. Of those, less than a dozen survive.

One common problem is the casual destruction of prints by the film industry. Upadhyaya says in the HKFA symposium that many prints are lost when producers or film companies destroyed them once the films lost their commercial viabilities. In the Philippines, Capul adds, negatives are sometimes burned to extract silver in last-ditch efforts to squeeze profit out of products. To underscore this point, Edmondson provides a remarkable example in which the destruction was actually carried out for a cause. A cinematic cause no less. He shows a clip of an early Australian picture, *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1927), in which a ship is engulfed in flame. The producers of the film created the fire by stuffing the ship with stocks of old films and setting them ablaze. One can only say that the effects are truly special.

A lack of appropriate safekeeping facilities and adequate maintenance procedures sees many films decay in storage. It doesn't help that south and southeast Asia, where filmmaking activities have always been plenty, are blessed with warm climates that nevertheless are harsh on prints. In India, for example, heat, dust and humidity - which Upadhyaya vividly terms "the three enemies of film preservation" - add to the deterioration. The same can be said of Hong Kong. Cynthia Liu, Head of the Hong Kong Film Archive, reports that some films, recovered after years of sitting unattended in poorly ventilated vaults or even apartment corners, are in such poor shape that the staff has no choice but to give



up on them. In fact, about one third of the archive's collection is repatriated from collectors and Chinatown theatres in North America, where storage conditions are less damaging and the climate much kinder.

And when proper storage facilities are available, there is always the issue of space. The Hong Kong Film Archive, since the establishment of its Planning Office in 1993, has been launching an aggressive campaign to locate prints and collect related material. Its efforts are so successful and the response, both from the industry and the public, so enthusiastic that at its 2001 official opening, its world-class vaults are on the brink of running out of room.

The space problem is even more pronounced in India. With its voluminous output throughout the years, simply putting a small percentage of it together creates a housing crunch. The National Film Archive is forced to implement an acquisition policy, says Upadhyaya, limiting its collection to films of special significance, such as winners in national awards, titles selected for the Panorama section of the International Film Festival of India and box-office performers that indicate social trends. Similar guidelines are also adopted by other archives, such as SOFIA in the Philippines. But exceptions do apply. In India, films produced before 1955, the collection of which is considered urgent, are not subjected to these criteria.

## **FRUSTRATIONS**

The lack of resources, a universal problem in archiving, is just as serious in Asia, if not more so. Preservation and restoration are at once fund- and labour-intensive. With most governments' indifference to matters of culture and most film industries' apathy towards endeavours that do not generate income, archives often feel handcuffed in their work. Many are too under-funded to install the necessary equipment or delegate staff to implement pressing projects. Others are too strapped for resources to give personnel proper training. Here in Hong Kong, the Archive had to put a hold on the negotiations for several big donations because it did not have enough facilities to handle the conservation work required before the Archive building was completed. The very thought of cinematic treasures rotting in a dark corner somewhere is a source of distress for the staff.

Such a case of known whereabouts is of course exceptional. In most instances, it is the locating of films and artefacts that frustrates dedicated archivists. In her symposium presentation, Capul lists the lack of information on important films as one of the biggest concerns of Filipino archivists. Even in Japan, well known for its meticulous record keeping, the National Film Center has difficulties keeping track of prints. Okajima explains that although Japan does not have provisions for the legal deposit of films, the law does require companies to file a copy of each film

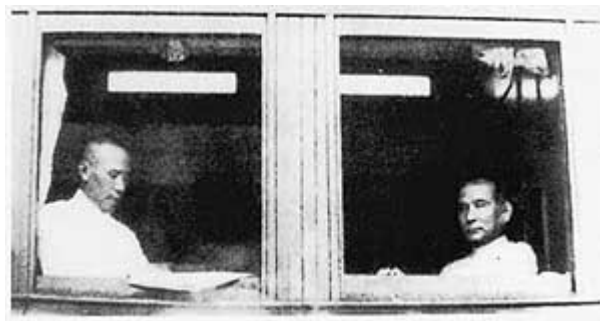
with the National Diet. Problem is, the law also allows for a delay with the filing without specifying the time span of that delay. As a result, many companies were able to get away with not submitting prints decades after the films' completion.

Having a legal deposit system also does not ensure that all the prints are in the bag. Zhu Tianwei, Assistant Director of the Department of Cataloguing and Research at the China Film Archive, discloses that under the new economic structure of China, more and more films produced through privatised channels are not deposited in the archive, not to mention the works made without official approval.

### **STORIES BEHIND RESTORED TREASURES**

Despite all the problems, the film archives of Asia have a lot to be proud of. Struggling against almost every odd imaginable, they have managed to preserve and restore considerable parts of their cinemas' fragile heritage. The *Asian Film Archive Treasures* programme that commemorates the official opening of the HKFA is a testament to their accomplishment.

Included in the programme are several recently restored prints, each telling a story of the great efforts that go into the preservation of film culture. *A Page of History (1924-27)* is a rare document on the early years of the Chinese republic, made by legendary Hong Kong filmmaker Li Minwei. The print was safeguarded by the Li family for years and restored in the 1970s, only to be lost afterwards. Li's descendants tracked it down recently after much hard work and donated the print to the HKFA. Recently brought back to its glory by the China Film Archive is a print of *Goodbye, Shanghai(1934)*, a gem of the "progressive" school of filmmaking, directed by a Korean immigrant and featuring a sublime performance by the screen diva Ruan Lingyu.



*A Page of History (1924-1927)*



The Vietnamese film *A Passerine Bird* (1962)



*Muraliwala* (1927), from India.

In 1994, the Vietnam Film Institute stumbled upon the deteriorating 16mm positive of *A Passerine Bird* (1962), a 50-minute feature about the War of Liberation against the French. The print shown in the HKFA programme is a 35mm version the Institute restored from it. The silent film *Muraliwala* (1927), belonging to the uniquely Indian genre of mythological films, was recently restored by the National Film Archive of India. From the Philippines is one of only four remaining pre-war titles, *My Love* (1939), which was restored by the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia in collaboration with the Philippine Information Agency in 1998 as a centenary gift from one country to another. And blown up in 1999 to 35mm from three separate 16mm prints is *The Water Magician* (1933), a silent classic by the Japanese master Mizoguchi Kenji.

Asian archives also enjoy other triumphs of their work. The China Film Archive, in addition to collecting and preserving an extraordinary number of films produced in the country, is also dedicated to sharing its riches with the world by publishing reference texts, historical studies, picture books and film studies. In the Philippines, the Society of Film Archivists has, despite its non-governmental nature and limited resources, successfully coordinated many projects by bringing national and international agencies together. The National Film Center in Japan has managed to acquire a large number of its country's cinematic output despite less than enthusiastic support from the major film companies. In India, the National Film Archive has successfully salvaged many of its country's vast treasure of films. Currently, it is expanding its scope into also preserving television materials. The Archive is also in the process of building a nitrate vault for the delicate prints.

### **UPHOLDING CULTURAL MEMORIES**

Here in Hong Kong, the establishment of the Film Archive has been met with an enthusiastic response from both the public and the film industry. A vast amount of prints and artefacts have been collected, preserved or restored, keeping alive a heritage that had been neglected for a long time. Even before its official opening, the HKFA has conducted a wide variety of public-serving activities to share its work with a people among the most film-loving in the world. It has staged exhibitions of various scales that showcased the area's cinematic history and it has published several series of books that cover different aspects of Hong Kong film history.

Asian film archives have indeed played an important role in upholding the cultural memory of the continent. In his concluding speech in the HKFA symposium, Edmondson points out that the moving-image memory of the 20th century is largely a Euro-American one, a practice that "must not and cannot continue." He reiterates the position of the Singapore Declaration, made in 2000 at a meeting of the South East Asia/Pacific Audio Visual Archive Association, that "the audio-visual memory of the 21st century should be truly and equitably reflective of all nations and cultures."

If anything, Asian cinema has certainly made its presence felt at the turn of the century. Films from the Chinese diaspora have at long last established themselves in the pantheon of world cinema. Countries with fine film traditions have also continued to shine, such as the Philippines, Indonesia and, especially, Japan. And in South Korea, Thailand and Singapore, the film industries have been coming of age in a big way, both commercially and artistically. What's more encouraging is that, in the increasingly globalised climate of the 21st century, different Asian

cinemas are collaborating with each other, at once to counter the powerful invasion of Hollywood and to explore shared values in art and entertainment.

Much had been said of the new century as the Asian Century. To many in Asia, that had been mere hype or, worse, spin. But it is not an overstatement to say that Asia will - and definitely should - play an increasingly equal role on the global stage. It is hoped that Asian cinema will continue to contribute to that equity by keeping up with its amazing performance in the latter years of the last century. Regardless, Asian film archives, in their capacities to at once look back and ahead, will - and should - be an important part of that effort.

**Sam Ho**, a film critic who splits time between Hong Kong and Houston, Texas.

## Uncle Mo-wan, Remaining Active in Retirement

The Research Officer of the Hong Kong Film Archive, Mr Yu Mo-wan (known as Uncle Mo-wan), celebrated his 70th birthday a few months ago. Since the official opening of the Archive in January, he has announced his retirement from the post of Research Officer. However, the Archive will continue to enjoy his services through contractual assignments.

In the mid 1990s, the Archive's planning office still had hardly a collection worthy of the name. Uncle Mo-wan transferred much of his rich collection of film magazines and memorabilia to the Archive, and meticulously went through the items with the staff, extending to them the benefits of his encyclopaedic knowledge of Hong Kong cinema (particularly its early history). We were moved by his enthusiasm and generosity. Before the official opening of the Archive, Uncle Mo-wan and his assistant, Ms Janice Chow, had always been busy working on the programming and exhibition events in addition to the research work. Both have now resigned their posts, for different reasons, but we are fortunate that they will still devote themselves to the tasks of film research. We wish them both well. To Uncle Mo-wan in particular, we wish to say that we are proud of you!



The Assistant Director (Heritage and Museums) of the Leisure and Cultural Services, Mr Tony Ma (1st left) praises Uncle Mo-wan as "the Father of the Hong Kong Film Archive."



Mr and Mrs Yu, (back row from right) his long-time working partner and assistant Ms Janice Chow and Ms Wong Ain-ling, the new Research Officer of the Film Archive.

## **When the Film Industry Meets the Film Archive**

Over the past month or so, the Film Archive has been graced with the visits of many film industry personnel. This is more evidence of our policy of fostering links and cooperation with the industry through which we learn to improve our services and the quality of our collections. Enhancing our links with professionals in the industry can help strengthening their trust in us, so that they may donate prints and supply materials to enrich our collections. It is also imperative that we understand the needs of the industry in our tasks of streamlining and improving our services.

Professionals and celebrities who have visited us in January and February included Mr & Mrs Raymond Chow, and Mr Stephen Chu of Golden Harvest Entertainment (Holdings) Ltd; Mr Raymond Wong of Mandarin Films Holding Ltd; Ms Jenny Wong of Mandarin Laboratory (International) Ltd; director Gordon Chan of Emperor Multimedia Ltd; director Clifton Ko of Spring-time Film Production Ltd; Mr John Chong, Mr Wellington Fung and Ms Cora Yim of Media Asia Group; Mr Kenny Chow, director Joe Ma and Mr Patrick Tong of Mei Ah Entertainment Group Ltd; Mr Kam Kwok-leung, Mr Ma Fung-kwok, actress Cheng Pei-pei, actor Di Long, Ms Ada Loke, director Fan Ho, Mr Lai Kit, Mr Jimmy Pang and Mr Donald Chow. The distinguished visitors were taken on tours of the Archive building, including its state-of-the-art film stores and resource centre. Discussions were held over possible cooperation in the future.



(From left) Mr Stephen Chu, Mr & Mrs Raymond Chow, and the Archive staff Mr Chris Tsang (Asst Librarian) and Ms Cynthia Liu (Head).



Ms Cynthia Liu (middle), Head of HKFA, and Mr Wellington Fung (1st right), (from left) Ms Cora Yim and Mr John Chong of Media Asia Group, and Mr Daneil Lam (2nd right) of Universe International Holdings Ltd.



## **Film Programme:**

### **Superstars in *Time to Laugh, Time to Sing***

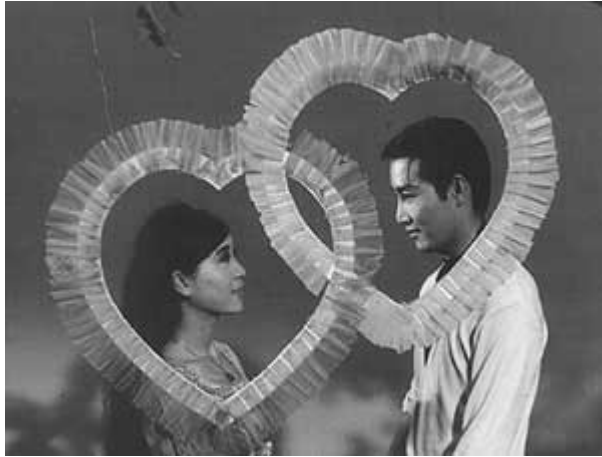
by Yam Yim-lan

The 50s and 60s, despite being times of hardship, were the "golden era" of Cantonese cinema. The post-war conditions of Hong Kong were marked by the influx of refugees from China, which put a strain on housing and employment - a theme that was regularly exploited in Cantonese films, a classic example being *The Apartment of 14 Families* (1964). The audiences of the 50s were the ordinary battlers of society, living in cramped and straitened circumstances. To escape the dreariness of reality, these people would go to the cinema and laugh it off. The comedies of the period were close to the people in that they also dealt with the problems of the common people, such as *Taps Off, Downstairs!* (1954), a self-explanatory title that reflected the social environment of the day. Comedy stars of the period became household names: Sun Ma Si-tsang, Tang Kei-chen, Leung Sing-po, and many more. They brought laughter and lively tunes to the ordinary people.

The relatively benign experiences of the post-war baby boomers had the sacrifices of their parents to thank for. But what was more, society was in the throes of change. Under the impact of Westernisation and industrialisation, the young developed values of their own - they accepted Western-style education, listened to Western pop songs, idolised the likes of James Dean and his libertarian lifestyle. Traditional Cantonese comedies were now out of fashion, and to replace them were new strains of musical-comedies such as *The Country Girl* (1967) and *Manli, I Love You* (1969). New generations of dancing and singing stars came to the fore - Chan Po-chu, Josephine Siao, etc, who created new personae of factory queens, and schoolgirl teeny-boppers.

Time to Laugh, Time to Sing is a programme that brings together the cinematic works of these two generations of Cantonese cinema's most memorable comic and singing stars, including Sun Ma Si-tsang, Leung Sing-po, Josephine Siao, Chan Po-chu. This promises to be a real treat!

**Yam Yim-lan** is the Assistant Editor of the Hong Kong Film Archive.



Chan Po-chu (left) and Lui Kei (right), the perfect match on the silver screen, sing and dance "heart-in-heart" in *Manli, I Love You* (1969).



The scatterbrained Tang Kei-chun in *The Scatterbrain* (1951) provokes laughter that rocks the cinema.



Leung Sing-po (right) and Tam Lan-hing (left) are two funny fellows. Here is a hilarious scene from *The Romance of Jade Hall, 2nd Sequel* (1958).

## **Exhibition:**

### **Production Notes on the Making of *Living in Hong Kong - the 50s & 60s***

by Yam Yim-lan

Planning the exhibition was an educative and active process. All involved found themselves eager participants. Inspiration had been sown when our programmer, Mr Law Kar, shared the idea of organising an exhibition on "Living in Hong Kong - the 50s & 60s" with Professor Kwok Siu-tong of the Department of History in the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Believing that cinema was a window to Hong Kong's past, Professor Kwok had set up a course under the theme "Community, Daily Life and Film Culture". As part of his teaching materials, Professor Kwok had made use of videos in the Film Archive collection. He also encouraged his students to take part in planning and preparing the exhibition. The Archive was more than willing to cooperate as one of its aims is to strengthen cooperation and exchanges with other sectors of the community.



Mr Law Kar conducting a discussion with students through film excerpts.

The younger generation is generally not aware of Hong Kong film history, being prejudiced against old films and their sense of "outdatedness". The only avenue to learn about old Cantonese cinema would be the revivals on television during the graveyard hours. With their participation in preparing the exhibition, the students had the opportunity to see videos of many Cantonese films of the 50s and 60s in the Archive collection. They found the films to be apt materials for researching the lifestyle of Hong Kong people in those eras, and how these habits changed and evolved with the times. Through discussions and analyses, the students soon changed their perceptions about old Cantonese cinema.



*The Adventures of a Strange Man* (1963)



*Teddy Boy in the Gutter* (1967)



*My Darling Grandchild* (1964)



*Love Thy Neighbours* (1964)

*Living in Hong Kong - the 50s & 60s* is held in two parts: "Eating & Dressing" and "Living & Commuting" from 12-28 February and from 5-18 March. Having done their research on old films, the students came up with several themes that were put forward to our Programming Section for selection. The Archive then selected appropriate film clips and stills to accompany these themes for the exhibition. The students also helped in writing captions. This promises to be another fascinating look back at our history, with the focus on social lifestyles that the public will find endearing. More than a nostalgic event, the exhibition will also provide a study of changing tastes and cultures - from tradition to Westernisation.

The Film Archive emphasises the importance of social interplay. It is our privilege to enjoy Hong Kong's film culture with the public.

**Yam Yim-lan** is the Assistant Editor of the Hong Kong Film Archive.