

In Memory of the Star-Studded MP & GI

In 1956, Loke Wan-tho of Singapore's Cathay Organisation established in Hong Kong Motion Picture & General Investment Co Ltd (MP & GI) which thrived in just a few years. Loke Wan-tho, the life and soul of star-studded MP & GI, is himself the brightest star.

MP & GI was famed for its Mandarin comedies and musicals. In fact, its Cantonese unit was set up before the Mandarin unit, producing box office successes such as *The Romance of Jade Hall* (1957) and *Bitter Lotus* (1960), though it was those middlebrow and westernised features which became MP & GI's trade mark. MP & GI's Cantonese features thus provide useful yardsticks against which their origin and interrelationship with the Mandarin ones are measured. What connections and conflicts do these Cantonese films have with the rest of the Cantonese film world? The two units converged, at the release of *The Greatest Civil War on Earth* (1961), breaking the deadlock reached by the segregated Mandarin and Cantonese worlds. The world of homeland sentiments and classy Shanghai school so frequently portrayed in Mandarin contemporaries is slowly fading away, pulling itself closer to the Hong Kong society.

The focus on Cathay/MP & GI in this issue allows us to share with the writers opinions, first-hand experience, and research that they have of the company, apart from supplying us with the tracks left behind by those involved in the preparation of the film retrospective to be launched between March and June. Despite the vanishing of the MP & GI myth, we still remember fondly the orbit once frequented by the galaxy of stars and how precious it was to have these stars, both on and off the screen, gathered together for a united goal.

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Fine acting by comedians Liu Enjia (left) and Leung Sing-po sparkles with wit in *The Greatest Civil War on Earth* (1961)



The direction that MP & GI's Mandarin and Cantonese features trend towards can be glimpsed in these stories characterised by multi-talented young women: (Pictures from top) Cantonese star Tsi Lo-lin in her rarely seen Western costume in *The Tender Age*; in *Double Date* (Cantonese), Christine Pai Lu-ming and Patricia Lam Fung (from right) help each other through a difficult time of high unemployment; in *Spring Song* (Mandarin), the argufy Grace Chang (right) and Jeannette Lin Tsui engage in rounds of duel, an opportune time to show off their performing talents.

Focus: Retrospective on Cathay

A Sketch of MP & GI's Golden Age

Law Kar



Photo taken in the 6th Asian Film Festival. (Front row from left) Wang Lai, Kitty Ting Hao, Julie Yeh Feng, Jeannette Lin Tsui, Loke Wan-tho, Lucilla You Min, Helen Li Mei, Christine Pai Lu-ming, Dolly Soo Fong and Nellie Chin Yu; (back row from left) Robert Chung, Tang Huang, Lai Chin, Cheung Ching, Chang Yang, Wang Tianlin, Evan Young. (Photo courtesy of Ms Meileen Choo)

Motion Picture & General Investment Co Ltd (MP & GI), at the very beginning of its establishment. Top boss Loke Wan-tho, general manager Robert Chung, and production supervisor Stephen Soong were well educated in the Western school of thoughts. They admired ardently the Hollywood dream world, and yet took pride in traditional Chinese culture. Its pool of key screenwriters-directors Yue Feng, Tao Chin, Evan Young, Eileen Chang, Nellie Chin Yu all hailed from a similar background. From day one, MP & GI had in mind the notion to incorporate elements of the East and West in their films, or more aptly put, the tendency to modernise the traditional.

The first seven years of MP & GI era (1957-65) had largely realised this notion. Its mainstream productions modeled on popular dramas, romantic melodramas, and light comedies of the West which fell back on a dramatic backbone, as well as

on the Hollywood school of dance dramas and musicals. Though the form and style are reminiscent of Hollywood products, the sentiments are essentially Chinese, only that they are all trying hard to beat about the post-war trauma and poverty bush and direct themselves to bourgeois sentiments. It even gradually merged with the Hong Kong society towards the end of the 1950s, producing the likes of *Mambo Girl* (1957), *Spring Song* (1959), *Air Hostess* (1959), *Bachelors Beware* (1960), *The Wild, Wild Rose* (1960), *The Greatest Civil War on Earth* (1961), *Education of Love* (1961), *Star of Hong Kong* (1961), and *The Greatest Wedding on Earth* (1962). Though the treatment of the subject matters prevents it from closing on the real life, MP & GI has at least voiced its concerns, by gesturing to the audience to freely escape into a half-dream, half-reality realm. It has also firmly established its own house style -- warm and tender, sad but rarely tragic, truly reflecting its middle class concerns. Of the many films, the trilogy of *The Greatest Civil War on Earth* shines with its positive portrayals of the conflicts and similarities between Hong Kong people and its close relations from the Mainland. Its freshness, wit and humour far outweigh the overdose of local favours.



(From Left) Lucilla You Min, Julie Yeh Feng and Grace Chang in *Sun, Moon and Star* (1961).

The years between 1957 and 1963 were the heyday of MP & GI. Since 1963, perhaps the company was busying fencing off Shaw's advances, its strategies had plunged into passivity. Not only was the development of genres stagnant, new ideas stopped to breed, and productions failed to disentangle themselves from the already worn-out folktale period dramas and Huangmei (Yellow Plum) musicals. MP & GI failed to make up for the losses of backbone members such as Stephen Soong, Tao Chin, Yue Feng, Wang Liuzhao, and Linda Lin Dai to Shaws, and the subsequent withdrawals of Grace Chang, Lucilla You Min, and Eileen Chang after 1964. Having no luck in recruiting and cultivating on and off screen talents to fill the vacuum, MP & GI found itself trapped in a fast knot. The years between 1964 and 1967 were a turbulent time which saw the surfacing of societal conflicts and protests voiced by impetuous youths. Yet MP & GI failed to change its tune from the mellow tenderness, sentimentality, and the usual promise of

grand reunions to one which echoed the voice of a repressed and angry generation. Inevitably, the company fell behind a new sophisticated terrain. Robert Chung's resignation in 1962 and Loke Wan-tho's tragic death in an air disaster two years later triggered off a series of management changes. It is then not surprising that the company went on a decline after 1967.

MP & GI's artistic contribution is the making of a movie series that blends aptly elements of the East and West to cater for bourgeois interests still being savoured today. Its contributions to the industry are the introduction of the star-system and lending of support to independents. Since the early 50s, MP & GI had been financing independent Mandarin and Cantonese films, and in the 60s, provided distributing channels for independents such as Golden Dragon Films (established by Yan Jun and Li Lihua), Jinqian Film Company (established by Kuang Yinquan), then later for Jinying Film Company (established by Yuan Qiufeng and Betty Loh Tih), and Raymond Chow's Golden Harvest after his breakaway from Shaws. The actor training class had bred such fine talents as Lai Chin, Kitty Ting Hao, Dolly Soo Fong, Maggie Li, Tien Ching, and Cheung Ching. Few have noticed MP & GI's over seventy Cantonese films produced between the years 1955 and 64, including *The Romance of Jade Hall* (1957) which grossed over a staggering HK\$ 400,000 at the box office.* Noted works such as *Our Sister Hedy* (1957), *Beware of Pickpockets* (1958), *Little Darling* (1958), *Pretty Tease* (1958) and *The Scout Master* (1959) were dubbed into Cantonese released alongside the Mandarin version. Yet no other films can better illustrate the efforts in fusing the bilingual (Cantonese and Mandarin) and bicultural (southerners vs northerners) camps than the *The Greatest Civil War on Earth* trilogy. [•]

* **Editor's note:** For more info on MP & GI's Cantonese features, please refer to the unpublished interviews of Tau Hon-fun *et al* for the HKFA's Oral History Project.

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The Fading Away of a Way of Life

Peter Dunn



(From left) Peter Dunn forms close tie with Kitty Ting Hao and Xiao Peipei in *The Greatest Civil War on Earth* (1961).

The golden era of Motion Picture & General Investment Co Ltd (MP & GI), that is the few years from 1957 onwards, produced a series of classics apparently set in Hong Kong. Yet the society and aura portrayed bear no resemblance with the Hong Kong SAR in 2002. After all, these works are strictly products of a definite time, social class, and style of living, all slowly fading away as if they never really existed.

In the October 1977 issue of City Magazine, I wrote an article on MP & GI entitled 'Atlantis'. Like the Atlantean culture once flourished in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, MP & GI, then only had been out of business for a decade, became a lost continent itself and is now calling for an out-and-out retreat from our world in a quarter of a century's time.

If there are a few individuals out there who still remember fondly the films of MP & GI, the reasons will not be of aesthetic concerns, nor a recognition of their achievements in the arts. The reasons will be a longing for the kind of lifestyle that those films represent, or some may say, advocate. Let's count the jewels on the MP & GI's crown: *Mambo Girl* (1957), *Air Hostess* (1959), *Sister Long Legs* (1960), *Our Dream Car* (1959), *June Bride* (1960), *Calendar Girl* (1959), *Our Sister Hedy* (1957), *The Battle of Love* (1957)... Nearly all of them are contemporaries characterised by the bourgeoisie. Even the film titles smell of rich western aromas. In the article, I wrote: Though these Mandarin contemporaries may not fit in our expectation of a "realist", without a slightest doubt, they all utilise Hong Kong as the setting. I believe this series of films truly reflect the earnestness of southward bound immigrants to integrate into the Hong Kong society, and their ability to speedily adapt to the local environment.'

These films are concerned with those northerners (particularly Shanghai natives) migrating to Hong Kong after the liberation, bringing with them a kind of

'nouveau' lifestyle and values radically different from those of old Canton. Like the popular hit tunes recorded by Yao Lee and Chang Loo around the same time, the Shanghai school philosophy was in perfect accord with the Hong Kong natives, and in no time found its root in the colony. MP & GI assumed a leading role in the process, and in the end fulfilled its historical duty.

Let's take a closer look first at Helen Li Mei, the female writer, alone, writing her article in a small café (a scene from *Between Tears and Laughter*, 1960); and Kitty Ting Hao who more than once in her films plays the role of an air hostess; there're Grace Chang, Jeannette Lin Tsui and co dancing cha-chas at parties when the dance swept the territory; *Calendar Girl* features a beauty pageant, at the time a modish event; in *June Bride*, Grace Chang arrives in Hong Kong on board a luxury liner; the four sisters in *Our Sister Hedy* all bring to their father the same gift - a pipe - out of an odd coincidence and in the next scene, the sisters gather to brew coffee in their flat located in the posh Happy Valley area.

Forgot whether it is in *Our Sister Hedy* or its sequel *Wedding Bells for Hedy* (1959) where Julie Yeh Feng dances barefoot, so wildly, on the long bar table (editor's note: should be in the latter); in *Father Takes a Bride* (1963), we are introduced to the middle-class couple Wang Yin and Wang Lai, who are enjoying high-tea in the garden of a modest home...

These pictures can be said at the least striking to the still poverty-stricken and conservative Hong Kong society, perhaps also to Chinese societies across Southeast Asia at the time. They seem to prophesy the coming of a new era and take the stance to demonstrate the full picture to the middle-class members-to-be. As if they are to reassure us that a higher living quality is attainable as long as we dream a little dream, hang on to our hope, and use a bit of imagination.



A family visit to the aunt in *For Better, For Worse* (1959): Peter Dunn, parents (Chang Yang, Helen Li Mei) and sister (Chan Po-chu).

I chanced to become a child star of MP & GI during its heyday and thus bear

witness to the Shanghai school of living projected on the big screen and faithfully realised in real life. I remember Helen Li Mei drove a Chrysler to work, undeniably a grand gesture be the car a second or third-hand one. The café on Prince Edward Road was the stars' favourite hangout. Wang Lai's favourite restaurant is Ruby, where classical music was played.

I have fond memories of Fang Yuan, the famed make-up artist we called Grandpa Fang. He has a head of silvery grey hair and a stylishly trimmed moustache. His trade mark attire is a French peaked cap, a tartan shirt, a silk scarf, and a pair of khaki trousers. Fang travels at high speed to and fro the studios on his motorbike. A self-proclaimed artist, Fang's stature exceeds that of a make-up artist, for he is always unabashedly proud of his trade and his professionalism never fails to gain the respect of others.



Famed make-up artist Fang Yuan (centre) made a guest appearance in *Wedding Bells for Hedy* (1959), starring Dolly Soo Fong, Julie Yeh Feng, Jeannette Lin Tsui, Moh Hong (back row from left).

Are we short of that sense of pride and dignity in today's society? In 1996, I attended for the last time the get-together dinner regularly held by old MP & GI personnel. In attendance were Grace Chang, Julie Yeh Feng, Wang Lai, Lai Chin, Wang Tianlin, Tu Meiqing of the production department, and Sister Li, the refreshment lady. When those elderly waiters warmly greeted Wang Lai, it's hard to imagine that their first encounter dates back nearly half a century ago.



MP & GI get-together dinner in 1996. (Back row from left) Lai Chin, Wang Lai, Julie Yeh Feng, Grace Chang, and Peter Dunn; (front row from left) Sister Li, Wang Tianlin, Tu Meiqing (Photo courtesy of Mr Peter Dunn)

The MP & GI era has long faded away, but in the hearts of the few devotees, stars like Grace Chang and Julie Yeh Feng never lose their charm. In one particular evening seizing a stolen moment, the 50s crept back to haunt us all. [•]

Peter Dunn, born in Hong Kong, has starred in over ten Mandarin features as a child actor, including *Our Beloved Son* (1959) and *Father Takes a Bride* (1963). Returning from his studies in America in 1976, he established *City Magazine* with John Chan Koon-chung and Henry Wu. A freelance writer, he now works in the commercial sector.

Cathay's HK-Singaporean Connections

Sam Ho

There is a special relationship between Hong Kong and Singapore when it comes to film. Collectors and aficionados of Hong Kong films have been trekking to that island state for years to dig for artefacts that are often impossible to locate locally. One reason is that ever since there was a Hong Kong film industry, Singapore had been a major market for its products. Another is because Cathay (once called MP & GI) and Shaw Brothers, the two biggest film companies in the history of Hong Kong, had their roots in Singapore.

The Film Archive is gearing up for a special programme this spring on Cathay Organisation, including screenings of some well-known titles and the publication of a book on the company to coincide with the 26th Hong Kong International Film Festival, which will take place in late March and early April. To prepare for the programme, I took a trip to Singapore in early December to meet with two Cathay veterans. I was joined by scholar Louie Kin-sheun, and Arthur Wong, who served as camera operator. Both interviews were also taken as part of the Archive's Oral History Project.

I first met with former Cathay Organisation head Meileen Choo. Because Cathay's headquarters was under renovation, the interview took place at the organisation's temporary office. There, I was joined by Valerie Wong of the Archive's acquisition team and they were treated to a brief survey of the company's library of film-related material.

Choo is the niece of former Cathay head Loke Wan-tho. When Loke died in 1964 in a plane crash, Choo's father and Loke's brother-in-law, Choo Kok-leong, took over the company business. When her father retired in 1985, Choo was given the charge.



Growing up among the glamour of the movie world, Meileen Choo (teenage girl in the middle) naturally succeeded her father Choo Kok-leong (man next to Meileen Choo) to take up the leadership at Cathay.

(Photo courtesy of Meileen Choo)

She remembered fondly her childhood, growing up among the glamour of the film industry and following around the legendary Loke, who built Cathay - during the MP & GI era - into a movie empire, one of the biggest in the history of Asia. Cathay was a family business and Choo provided a lively portrait of the family, including her relationship with her father and Loke's with his mother, an immigrant's wife who became an active businesswoman and family matriarch.

Choo also talked briefly about the relationship between Cathay and its arch-rival Shaw Brothers. Although the companies were engaged in fierce competitions, they had a gentlemen's agreement not to raid each other's personnel ranks. The years after Loke's death were tough, and the company decided in the 70s to withdraw from film production, concentrating on distribution, exhibition and other non-film ventures such as real estate and investment. Despite that retreat, Cathay was still engaged in the film business and Choo proudly recounted her friendships with such noted stars as Chow Yun-fat, Eric Tsang, Karl Maka and Raymond Wong. In fact, her office walls are lined with photos of her with some of those stars.

The next day after interviewing Choo, Louie and I met with Albert Odell, a well-known figure of 50s cinema who had not granted interviews in recent years. He was born in Hong Kong in 1924, to a Russian American father and a French mother who was also born in the then colony. His father, Harry, was General Manager of Hong Kong's Empire Theatre. Speaking fluent Cantonese up to this date, Odell endeared himself to many Hong Kong filmmakers.

Initially working in the distribution of Hollywood films, Odell moved to Singapore after convincing Loke to get into the film business and became a partner with Loke at the International Films Distributing Agency. When Cathay took over Hong Kong's Yung Hwa studios in 1954/55, he was asked to oversee the transition and the subsequent operation of the studios. It was at Yung Hwa that Cathay started getting into film production, though it initially was not involved in the company's signature Mandarin films. Instead, under the International Films banner, it produced Cantonese films.



Loke Wan-tho (left) and Albert Odell inspecting the Yung Hwa studios under renovation.

Odell returned to Singapore in 1956 to resume his work in film distribution, but when International Films went into financial trouble, he took the bold step of suing Loke in court. Odell recounted that he was talked into legal action by Runme Shaw, who even connected him with an attorney - a young, up-and-coming lawyer by the name of Lee Kuan-yew. Despite the help of the man who would be Prime Minister, Odell lost his case and was ordered to pay Cathay. An installment plan was worked out and Odell remembered that after Loke died, Choo Kok-leong agreed to cancel payment before the full amount was settled.

Now retired from film, Odell remains active, running a video rental store well-known in Singapore for its library of foreign films and alternative titles. To round off the trip, Louie also visited the National Archives of Singapore which houses a vast collection of precious material, lovingly preserved and meticulously catalogued, including several full microfilm reels on Loke Wan-tho. The Hong Kong Film Archive crew had to leave Singapore before we had the chance to fully explore the place, and we vowed to take a return trip. Another illustration of the special relationship between Hong Kong and Singapore. [•]

Sam Ho is a film critic who splits time between Hong Kong and Houston, Texas. He is editor of the book on Tsui Hark to be published by HKFA in March 2002.

Metropolis Revelations - the Making of Fritz Lang Special

Winnie Fu

Quite an Invaluable Experience

The entire Fritz Lang programme is a process of learning - from knowing just a few Lang's titles to drilling into the private life and personal thoughts of the great master; from understanding just a little about the conservation of historic artefacts to the mastery of the techniques involved in exhibiting and showcasing them to the public.... Edward Tse and Chaing Chi-leung of the Conservation team have spared no efforts and time in all matters relating to the treatment of archival artefacts and the technical aspects of projecting film prints. We were briefed on methods to display the exhibits and proper procedures of framing the entire collection of original sketches and stills, all executed in painstaking details.



Conservator Edward Tse is handling artefacts with care.

Engagement of Overseas Professionals

Ms Christina Ohlrogge, our special guest-cum-curator from Germany, had no choice but to spend her New Year in Hong Kong-these few action-packed days proved to be very worthwhile! Besides Christina, valuable advice was provided by Mr Peter Manz and Mr Nils Warnecke, her two colleagues based in Berlin.



Ms Ohlrogge, our guest from Germany, helping with the exhibition setup

The Grand Opening

A dark blue poster featuring the mysterious MOLOCH scene in *Metropolis* (1927), the Master of Ceremony's choice of a black costume, the sombre attires of our music performers all accumulated to an evening of great suspense and excitement at the grand opening of the Fritz Lang show. Mr Jurgen Keil, Director of Goethe-Institut Inter Nationes Hong Kong, greeted the guests with wits while not forgetting to congratulate the Film Archive on its 1st Anniversary. Mr Tony Ma, Assistant Director (Heritage and Museums) of the Leisure and Cultural Service Department addressed the audience on what unveiled to be a film screening of exceptionally fine quality. [•]

Winnie Fu has undertaken Cultural Studies in Germany and has edited a number of film-related publications. She is now the Programmer (D&S) of the HKFA.

Donna Chu

On 10 January, 2001, I arrived in Shanghai. The date wasn't picked intentionally. It was like any other Thursdays on my calendar. Despite the countless intricate connections threading the cinemas of Hong Kong and Shanghai, events are inevitably rendered in the past form, and the many exchanges of personnel and cinematic techniques between these two places all occurred some three, four decades ago in the last century. The vast number of filmmaking migrants to Hong Kong means that any casual mentions of names are capable of igniting boundless historical accounts. Past happenings are long gone, but the face of history remains evidently vivid. Yet only those involved in the actual cause of events can flesh out each single episode.

The journey back to Shanghai has one sole purpose: to track down story-telling masters who are still good at their old trade. The entire Oral History project, instead of naming them mere 'interviews' holds the key to letting the people involved be the story-tellers themselves, whereby words speak just as loud as actions. Even though their accounts may not enter as new established historical evidence, they are unarguably personal, close-to-the heart points of view providing the silver lining to the so-called 'Grand History'.

The Yesterday of Five Decades Ago

I kept flipping through the interview outlines miles up in the sky, reassuring myself I would be my usual meticulous self. We were merely breaking the ice with the screenwriter Shen Ji when the topic took a detour and touched on the date matter. 'Yesterday, fifty years ago, I was deported by the Hong Kong Government,' Shen remarked.

This delicate coincidence was overlooked. 10 January, 1952, eight filmmakers were deported back to the Mainland; five days later, two more shared the same fate. Since most of them were to resume their old business, returning to Shanghai seemed to be the obvious choice. Fifty years have seen the comings and goings of the 'anti-right movement', the Cultural Revolution, and the launch of the 'Open Door' policy twenty years onwards. And I, an outsider from Hong Kong, dared to touch upon this issue at this juncture of time. I could not think for Shen, the insider.

Shen, now seventy-eight years of age, is surprisingly willing to share with us his thoughts. Shen's stay in Hong Kong lasted three and a half years, from 49 - 52,

clocking up ten screenplays including *Witch, Devil, Man* (1952), *Festival Moon* (1953), and *Year In, Year Out* (1955). It is an understatement to say that the Hong Kong Government was disturbed by this group of 'leftist' filmmakers. Asked how Shen would define 'left' or 'leftist' he explained, 'Anything that's not blue. Our themes are sociological realistic, and patriotic too.' When shooting *The Dividing Wall* (1952), director Bai Chen was expelled before he could complete his job. Zhu Shilin took over, while Lee Ching replaced Liu Qiong who was also expelled.

Director Bai Chen vividly recalled every detail of the saga, how he resisted the arrest by the plain-clothes police and insisted that evidence of deportation be presented by the government. 'They beat about the bush and said it's according to Law ABC that we were to be deported, but finally admitted to saying the arrest was acted upon the governor's wish. "His Excellency is not interested in you," they said. But when I arrived in Guangzhou and told my friends about it, my response at the time was that I wasn't interested in the Hong Kong Governor from day one.'

Today, we have no colonial governors governing Hong Kong, and no 'left' or 'right' camps dividing the Hong Kong cinema. It's hard to imagine the risks and the painstaking endeavour it took to make a film touching on sensitive topics.

Gu Yelu was an actor, arriving in Hong Kong in 1947. He was one of the founders of Daguangming Film Company, being also the line producer. His memoirs on filming *Peasant Takes a Wife* (1950) was one filled with obstacles. No companies would lend their studios to Gu & co, for fear of a film portraying the liberated area. In the end, they got the studios at Grandview. There was a scene which features a Mao Zedong portrait, so shooting was carried out at night in order not to put the government on the spot. In the end, funds were running out, and the entire company was relocated to Shanghai.



(Back row from right) Chu Hung, Donna Chu, Cen Fan; (front row from right) Shu Shi and wife Feng Huang

Night Talks on the Twin Cities

Our five-day itinerary covered interviews with six film veterans. Besides Shen Ji, Bai Chen and Gu Yelu, there were also actors Liu Qiong and Qin Yi, and director Tang Xiaodan, a pioneer among the southward bound filmmakers who first directed a Hong Kong feature in 1933.

Liu Qiong has been so many times crowned the best actor. Definitely not a person who would grant interviews easily. Qin Yi was a famed actress in Shanghai. At age eighty, Qin is still busy with her board director role at the Shanghai Film & TV Company, so to pencil in an interview on her packed schedule was not easy. Tang Xiaodan is turning ninety-three, still sharp-minded, only that an earlier heart attack might put a damper on our meeting with the renowned director.

But the ship sets sail and returns safe and sound. Bringing good catch too. All credits to Ms Chu Hung, Mr Li Jinbao of Shanghai Film Studio and Mr Yang Cheng who took up the roles of a go-between, setting the stage alight for these remarkable stories which might otherwise be buried infinitely.

Sitting in a lounge on the 53th floor of the Jinmao Building, I overheard the debate of 'Pearl of the Orient' versus 'The Night View of Shanghai Bund' yet once again. Casting the glittering lights aside, I would rather spare my thoughts on the legacies and tales left behind by these twin cities. [•]

Donna Chu is a freelance research writer.

New Acquisitions

Waves of Generosity at the Year End

Mable Ho

Our 'First' Thanks

The chilling winter winds have not dampened our fervent spirit as we head off to First Organisation Limited to retrieve the collection of film copies and materials held and donated by its entrepreneur, Mr Wong Cheuk-hon. Our thanks to Mr Wong's son, Mr Wong Hoi, for arranging this trip.



Legend of the Mountain (1979)

King Hu's classic *Legend of the Mountain* (1979) left vivid imprints in the memories of my youth. Such aura of lofty romanticism still strikes me as strongly today, and so it was with indescribable pleasure that I salvaged this treasured piece from its dusty hibernation. Of course without the support of Mr Wong Cheuk-hon, this masterpiece, which took two years to make, would not have made its onscreen appearance. The production of such classic films is undoubtedly the result of hard work by a team of professionals not the least of which the producer bears the major bulk. Our gratitude to the Wong family for their generous contribution to the Film Archive so that the invaluable assets of Liberty Film, Lan Kwong and First Organisation, operated by Mr Wong, may be resuscitated and admired for years to come. A rough estimation of the inventory from this trip totals some over two hundred films and tens of thousands of other valuable items such as posters, stills and clippings from the 50s to 80s, all being the pinnacles of these three companies.



The vast collection of First Organisation was transported to the Archive by experienced archival personnel.

Mr Wong was a multi-talented entrepreneur whose dedication was a testament to the film development of his time. Not only was he a producer and director, he also nurtured a group of great directors and talented actors - Chun Kim, Jeannette Lin Tsui, Patrick Tse Yin, Ting Ying - to name but a few. After some revival work, the warm images of such classics as *Sweet Seventeen* (1954), *Taps Off, Down Stairs!* (1954), *Madam Kam* (1963), *Factory Queen* (1963) and *Legend of the Mountain* can once again be admired by a new generation.



The martial arts features produced by Wong Cheuk-hon (left) in collaboration with director-cum-actor Wang Yu go down in film history as one of First Organisation's high points. (Photo courtesy of Mr Wong Cheuk-hon)

May Beauty Live On

Of the directors active in the industry, Yonfan can be said to be a most valued supporter of the Film Archive. Having already donated a number of film prints of his works, Director Yonfan continues to enrich our cache with his publications and photo negatives. This is no light statement as his collection never fails to capture the radiance and essence of many a celebrity throughout his career starting as a

professional photographer. His recent film *Peony Pavilion* (2001) is an international success, garnering the Best Actress award for lead actress Miyazawa Rie at the Moscow International Film Festival. Yonfan's intention to bequeath a copy of the film print, major pieces of costumes and props to the Film Archive has left us all with breathless anticipation. It's a well-known fact that Yonfan is an avid collector and perfectionist; this film is a showcase of these qualities as he gently portrays the silent longing, captivating each moment with minute details. Indeed, the period costumes that so elaborately depict its era in the film are from his personal collection. His rendering of these definitive masterpieces means that their true glory will be preserved in the most ideal environment and appreciated by the public for years to come.



Director Yonfan unfolds to us the stories behind his donations.

A Friend Indeed

I've recently had the good fortune to meet two passionate members of the public.

Mr Tse Sui-kay has kindly donated his precious memoirs on some eighty years of cinema. Writing since his six-year-old experience at the movies in Guangzhou of *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* (1923), this detailed journal touches upon local and international celebrities as well as noted classic films. Sometimes I believe the importance of collecting cinematic artefacts is that each artefact encapsulates the spirit, memories and efforts of the many who have worked on it. Mr Tse's memories so entwined with cinematic influence prove that he's truly a connoisseur of the arts.

Another now retired gentleman, Mr Pang Lok has become a frequent visitor to the Film Archive. Since the kick-off of *Panorama of Great Wall, Feng Huang & Sun Luen*, Mr Pang has been at the Film Archive's cinema once every few days. Mr Pang would make full use of the Resource Centre even in between shows. One day, he finally summoned the courage to ask us whether we would like to accept his collection of old movie magazines. Mr Pang once took the dream profession of many die-hard movie fans - an usher. Apart from a few theatres on the outskirts of town, Mr Pang has visited over ninety theatres throughout Hong Kong. The film

show has not only re-ignited Mr Pang's passion for the movies but has also touched him profoundly, so much so that in an article, he wrote:

... In this recent year, the establishment of the Film Archive has once again bridged the distance between me and the films. It is in their cinema that I rediscover the beauty of films from the 40s and 50s. I am pleased to learn that there is no shortage of like-minded folks out there. Among them, audience from a younger generation. My earnest hope is that people from the film industry will bring back the production of movies to the right track and produce entertaining yet educational films for the benefit of our young generation.

For those interested in the full article, please inquire at our Resource Centre.

(Translated by Louisa Ho) [•]

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.



The dance scene in *Peony Pavilion* (2001) featuring Miyazawa Rie (left) and Joey Wang.

Donor List (11.2001 - 02.2002)

First Organization Ltd

D & B Ltd

MPIA

Chan, Evans

Chan, Jackie

Chang, Debbie

Chou, Kam-lun

Dunn, Peter

Fu, May

Hammond, Stefan

Ou, Fung-yee Meody

Pang, Lok

Shu Kei

Sinarwi, John

Tai, Pauline

Tau, Hon-fun

Tse, Sui-kay

Wong, Ain-ling

Wong, Chi-wah

Yee Yee

Yonfan

Reports on HKFA seminars

Local Culture and Foreign Influence: The Film Environment that Shaped John Woo

Date: 12 December 2001

Time: 6:00pm to 8:00pm

Venue: Hong Kong Film Archives, Cinema

Part 1: John Woo and Young John Woo's Favourite Films

Beauty and Sadness

When I was a kid, my family was poor, but my mum loved movies, so she brought me along every time she went to the cinema. At that time, a parent could take a kid to the cinema for free. If she didn't have time, I would wait outside the cinema with other kids. When an adult went in, we just tagged along.

I was really fascinated by films. Other than the Cantonese ones, my favourites included musicals, westerns and gangster movies. I loved all kinds of films. I was particularly obsessed with musicals. I was living in a terrible environment. Felt like living in hell. There were lots of injustice, crimes, violence and disappointments. To me, life seemed desperate.

When I watched musicals, not only did I find a world full of beautiful music and songs, but characters and story of a perfect world. A good musical brims with love, hope and happiness. When I watched it, I shared that happiness. I felt that life still abounded with truth, benevolence and beauty.

I also loved the powerful music and the charm of the dance. Musical brought me exuberant vitality. The first musical I saw was *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) with Judy Garland as the female lead. It brought me a lot of joy and hopes and I remember it vividly. I also loved Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire and tons of other musicals.

As for the New Wave films of France, other than Francois Truffaut's works, I loved the musicals by Jacques Demy the most. My favourites were *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964) and *The Young Girls of Rochefort* (1967). From him, I learned for the first time what romance and love were. His films were tinted heavily with romanticism. Aside from being poetic, the French romanticism was also sad. His films contained not only love and romance, but sadness as well. The songs and music were also perfectly rendered. Watching his film was like reading a poem. I adored Jacques Demy's films and they had a great influence on me.

Jean-Pierre Melville

On top of musicals, I also liked westerns and gangster movies. Gangster movies had the greatest impact on me. I once lived in a world of crime and injustice. I have witnessed life and death, and gang fights. I even took part in street fights with hooligans. That's why I had an intense interest in gangster movies. In as early as 1976 or 1977, I told my boss that the film I wanted to make most was a gangster movie. I hoped to make a film with character. I didn't like costume drama, action film or comedy. I wanted to make a lone killer film like Melville's *The Samurai* or a gangster movie like those in which Humphrey Bogart played. I myself was particularly fond of that genre of film.

When I was in Taiwan, I talked with Tsui Hark one day about a film that we both wanted to remake - *Story of a Discharged Prisoner* (1967), because we both adored the director Patrick Lung Kong and we appreciated the spirit of the film. We hoped to present again the spirit of the swordsman. His ideal version was a feminist one with three female protagonists. I wanted to make a male version. The role of Patsy Kar Ling would now be taken up by a male hero. I had been longing to make a Melville-style gangster movie. (Note: *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) is the remake of the *Story of a Discharged Prisoner*.)

Chow Yun-fat is a distinguished actor. He acts from his heart. His image is exactly the image of hero in my mind, showcasing the spirit of a swordsman with a literary temperament, a swordsman with profound thinking. Chow Yun-fat epitomises all my favourite characters: Alain Delon, Clint Eastwood, Steve McQueen and Ken Takakura with regard to action design. I learned a lot from the action aesthetics in Sam Peckinpah's films. I wanted to create some classic shooting scenes which were unprecedented in Hong Kong movies. Amidst the intensity of the shooting scenes, death, violence and beauty would be completely mixed.

Melville and The Killer

The film *The Killer* (1989) was a tribute to Jean-Pierre Melville and Martin Scorsese. They were the directors I adored the most. The spirit and story of Melville's *The Samurai* were my blueprint. At the beginning of the film, Chow accepted a mission in a church. He then went to a nightclub where he encountered Sally Yeh. When he was aiming his gun at his target in the mission, he accidentally injured Sally's eyes. Their romance resembled that of the lone killer. I loved Melville's films so much that I ended up borrowing his idea to mark the opening scene of my film. I hoped that the style of the whole film could be very European, so romantic that it defied all conventional film making techniques. The film was a great success overseas. I attracted a lot of Western fans who

wrote to me. It was also very popular in Japan. The film also drew the attention of Hollywood studios. Many actors and studio bosses saw the film. Subsequently they invited me over to make Hollywood movies. *The Killer* was the beginning of it all.

New Wave

The days at University Film Club were the happiest time of my life. While I got to know a group of ardent cinephiles, I also learned the sound knowledge of film from them. I am very grateful to Kirk Wong, Ada Loke, Joe Chan, Law Kar, Lin Nien-tung, Chiu Tak-hak, Chan Kwun-yeung, Chan Kai-yan. They are all my good friends, especially Ada Loke, Law Kar, Sek Kei and Kam Bing-hing. They wrote and translated numerous articles on film which were published in *Chinese Student Weekly*. I learned lots of film knowledge and theories from these articles. Other than learning a lot about film, I also made experimental movies with Sek Kei and Chiu Tak-hak.

I am also grateful to Ada Loke, Sai Sai and some other good friends. They translated many articles on French literature and film and introduced to us the New Wave films of France. I learned about French films in these articles and I began to fall for the works of Melville, in particular, *The Samurai* and *The Red Circle* (1970). I also loved Francois Truffaut and other New Wave directors. The films of the French new wave directors didn't only change the cinematic world, they also influenced us greatly. I felt that since the French directors could do it, we could also do it. That was a great inspiration to us. I thought the Hong Kong movies then were laden with problems. Many were just copycats and we needed improvements. I believed that the spirit of the French New Wave directors could change the Hong Kong films. So at that juncture I decided to become a director, in the hope that I could contribute to the cinema of Hong Kong.

Why did I also adore the films of Fellini? Fellini's world of image was extremely rich. Every image was like a painting and the message conveyed by each image reflected his inner world. His techniques and camera movements also influenced me deeply. He had a great impact on the visual effects design in my films. And of course I loved Truffaut very much. His works were full of love and he experimented with every film. His bold and unrestrained film techniques boasted liberalism. For American directors, I liked Sam Peckinpah and Stanley Kubrick. Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) was one of my favourite Westerns. I liked the way he manipulated slow motions and I also found romanticism in his movies. Of course I had affection for the films of Akira Kurosawa too. His works were teeming with the spirit of humanitarianism. His characters' integrity and boldness of vision were appealing. I also liked his series of films depicting samurai. My favourites were *Seven Samurai* (1954), *Yojimbo* (1961) and *Heaven and Hell*

(1963). Almost all of his works were outstanding. [•]

- Extracted from the HKFA's oral history interview with John Woo

Part 2: The Seminar

Host: Bede Cheng (Hong Kong Film Archive)

Guest speakers: Law Kar (Programmer, Hong Kong Film Archive)
Sam Ho (Film Critic)
Dorothy Lau (Graduate student, Cinema and Television,
HKBU)
Simon Lee (Graduate student, Cinema and Television, HKBU)



(From left) Law Kar, Simon Lee, Bede Cheng and Dorothy Lau

Law Kar: The Movie Breeding Grounds - Hong Kong of the 1960s and 1970s

The Hong Kong of the 1950s was shadowed by injustice and corruption. Films used the grisly reality of life to foil the higher nature of humans and to inspire a better sense of reality. The audience of this era idolised film celebrities and worshipped film as a cult. This was the era that nurtured John Woo.

By the early 1960s, Hong Kong came to import different brands of foreign films from countries as close as North Korea, The Philippines and Thailand to the further markets of Hollywood later on. As the Hong Kong audience became more cultured, their taste quickly developed to devour the international talents of the day, most prominently French New Wave like the French director Francois Truffaut. Empowered by the same sense of melancholy and oppression these foreign films offered, the Hong Kong audience began to form a new attitude on life and used art to battle the tyranny of the world. In this, they found a new sense of righteousness and hope.

At the start, John Woo was an unnamed hero but following the release of *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), John Woo's talent slowly came into the limelight. His films possess a certain confidence and vision so much that not only the product becomes an art form, it also transforms into a mantra that gives John Woo a 'raison d'etre' (reason to live).

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, Japanese films made its mark and showcased talents such as Teruo Ishii. John Woo was a huge fan of Japanese films. One powerful piece, *Narazu Mono* (1964) by Teruo Ishii, impressed him so much that elements of this film were adapted by later works rendered in the John Woo style. Most obvious would be the similar treatment of violence in the film. Each frame of near violence and firework effects is portrayed in stunning detail. Although nontraditional in approach, John Woo also plays heavily on human emotions, like the works of the French New Wave, to arouse sentiments to fight against the vices of the world about.

Simon Lee: The Beautiful World of John Woo

The directorial style of John Woo was greatly inspired by the cinematic techniques of the French films, especially those of *The Four Hundred Blows* (1959) and *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964). With his constant pursuit of beauty and form, John Woo's intention is visibly contrasted to those of other directors, such as Tsui Hark.

The similarities found in French films and those of John Woo are:

1. Beauty in Form
 - A) Outcast of the society
In *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, the leading man returning from the war is reintroduced to society with his experiences during the war unaccounted for. In *A Better Tomorrow*, Brother Ho (Ti Lung) also experiences a reprieve from society and as with *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, the time in jail remains absent in the narration. This voluntary act of omission serves to isolate the man in question from his society so as to shock the character and the audience as he experiences freedom again.
 - B) A Different World
When *The Four Hundred Blows* brought the topic of boy juvenile detention centre into focus, the audience's interest peaked at this unraveling of an unknown world. Similarly, John Woo uses the previously unknown world of Vietnam as the background of his film *Bullet in the Head* (1990) to juxtapose with the 1967 riots to create a dynamic storyline so that the audience too can feel the terror and the passion.

2. Romantic Beauty A) Romanticism in the aura

When the protagonist in *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* takes the female lead home on bike, the scene captures the beauty of its environment with an offhand moving sequence. This exploration of beauty in movement is demonstrated in the character Brother Mark's escape in *A Better Tomorrow*. The wooden cart becomes his vehicle of salvation despite the sparse hope the environment offers.

B) Flawed Beauty

In both *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* and *A Better Tomorrow*, the male protagonists are crippled towards the end, yet their deficiencies magnify their inner beauty, strength and heroism. Flaws as such do not deflect from their graceful exterior.

C) Sacred romance

John Woo designs sequences of his films insets like the French films whereby beauty is infused with religious symbols. In *The Four Hundred Blows*, the male protagonist flees through a courtyard releasing a torrent of doves. John Woo capitalises on the visual splendour of the doves in flight and at the same time, evokes the spiritual significance the birds represent. This is also seen in many of the John Woo films.

As demonstrated by the above examples, John Woo not only uses the best of the French film techniques, he also blends them with Chinese elements to create a unique John Woo stroke.

Dorothy Lau: John Woo, the Author

According to the Auteur Theory borne from the French New Wave school, the director becomes the author and the film is transformed into a literary piece. Perceptions transmute into a pen and imagination becomes the ink to create a masterpiece in the distinct style of the director-author, easily recognisable to the audience.

After *A Better Tomorrow*, the subsequent John Woo films amply demonstrate this particular directorial method, blended with many of his own:

1. Action as an Art

In a carefully choreographed sequence, each of the action scenes in *A Better Tomorrow*, *The Killer* and *Hard Boiled* (1992) exuberates a beauty in form even if the atmosphere is heavy in gunpowder and violence.

2. Brothers United

The bonds and conflicts between brothers, whether brothers-in-society or brothers-of-blood, are common themes in John Woo films, for example *A Better Tomorrow*. Elegant killers and heroes are often found in Woo's films. Through these heroic/vulour figures, Woo tries to exhibit

the passion and strife of human beings.

3. Political Undertone

Woo's films reveal an underlying political tone as expressed in the fatalistic outlook on life and an undermining uncertainty towards the future.

Sam Ho - Influence of Hollywood and Western Cultures on John Woo

John Woo is very much a product of the late 1960s and early 1970s Hong Kong. For youths of his time, the cultural scene was international in scope as Hong Kong was bombarded with multi-faceted forces. In addition to the French New Wave such as director Jean-Pierre Melville, American films and directors such as Sam Peckinpah and Martin Scorsese also left a strong impression. John Woo also counted the Japanese film *Hara Kir* (1928) as one of his top ten favourite films as well as a host of other Japanese influences, especially those of actor Ken Takakura and such works as *Shichinin No samurai* (Seven Samurai, 1954), etc.

Many had written about the above influences but far little recognition has been given to the role of American director Samuel Fuller. Samuel Fuller was a veteran of Hollywood's classical age, having produced many B-pictures in the 1950s and 1960s. His films and his artistry was not recognised by scholars and critics until the 1960s and 1970s. Fuller's influence on John Woo was only noticed by Martin Scorsese, who had pointed it out to Woo, prompting Woo to look at Fuller's works again. And similarities do exist.

Also prevalent are the influences of Don Siegel and Robert Aldrich, both action directors of Hollywood in the 1950s and 1960s. One common thread is the sentimental tough guy - as tender-hearted as he is strong. The operatic passion exhibited by John Woo's is closer to the Western pathos than that of the Chinese. Along with the dashes of Chinese traditions and local culture in the mix, the result is a uniquely Hong Kong sentiment, struggling to negotiate a definition of its blend of modernity. The sentimental tough guy of the John Woo films can also be seen as a reflection of Hong Kong people's expression of the repressed animosity and frustration in the face of the impending reunification with the mainland in 1997.

A point of interest is that John Woo's two favourite French films, *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* and *The Samurai* (1967), were both French directors' tribute to Hollywood films. The former is an homage to Hollywood musicals while the latter pays respects to the American film noir and detective genre. Thus, these films bring an indirect American influence to John Woo in a roundabout way.

Another heavy Hollywood influence was action director Sam Peckinpah, also known as a poet of violence, whose action sequences were marked by compelling camera movements and heavy uses of slow-motion shooting. One other theme borrowed from Peckinpah was the 'violent man out of their time'. In the *Wild Bunch* (1969), Peckinpah explores the relevance of a Western hero whose values are no longer supported in modern times. In Woo's films, the hero, though filled with traditional Chinese virtues and beliefs, is also supplanted by crude late capitalist society encapsulated by Hong Kong in the 1980s. This suggests a vanishing code of honour in the face of modernity.

This type of character has also been portrayed in films of Don Siegel and Robert Aldrich and earlier in the noir films of the 1940s. Humphrey Bogart as the forlorn and honorable inspector is an archetypal model who represents the pillar of virtue in a society that already deemed him passé. He, the existentialist hero, has no place in the new modernity.

Samuel Fuller comes from a tradition of movies. I believe that even if John Woo had not seen a Samuel Fuller film, he would have seen war genre films - both very similar in type and approach - featuring the emotional action hero. As with any war flicks, emphasis is placed heavily on the relationship and bravery amongst men while females are delegated to minor roles. No better example of that influence is there than the scene in *A Better Tomorrow* where Chow Yun-fat, Ti Lung and Leslie Cheung grapple together to fight against a common enemy. So similar is the treatment of this scene that one can almost picture an American soldier fighting the German or Japanese in the place of the John Woo characters.

Another important motif of Woo's cinema is the concept of religion. Much had been said of Catholic images in his films, but there is another recurring religious figure - *guandi*, the Chinese god of righteousness. In fact, we can say that, in a blend of East and West, *guandi* is the spiritual surrogate father in Woo's cinema and the Virgin Mary, as a generalised representation of Catholicism, is its surrogate mother.

Scenes featuring *guandi* usually take on an ironic tone, suggesting that truth and righteousness no longer exist in modern society. On the other hand, "Virgin Mary" scenes - those of Catholic imageries or symbols - express a facile cultural integration of western religion. Truly spiritual foundations are lacking in both types of scenes, an indication that although informed by both Chinese and western influences, the new modernity of Hong Kong forges a new religious identity of its own, an update of Chinese pan-theistic practices.

Woo uses an emblem of Christianity frequently - the dove. Many scenes enthrall audiences with the visually stunning effect of white birds in gracious flight, often in slow motion. However, the doves are used more for their visual effects than their religious symbolism. The role of doves as spiritual messengers in the Christian sense, for example, is not as strong as their embodiment of innocence, peace or the goodness represented by religion. The dove in John Woo's films is more an abstract vision of idealised western values than true Catholic devotion. This is actually typical of many Hong Kongers of the 60s and 70s and even today, to whom Christianity is not so much a religion than a trendy Westernised lifestyle, one that gives us Christmas and church weddings in white.

On the other hand, *guandi* embodies honour and duty in an abstract form. Looking at history, the Chinese have mythologised this figure as the personification of virtues that may never have been widely practised - in recent years or in the distant past. Woo's nostalgia is more for myth than for the past. Yet comparing the two religious motifs, Woo's depiction of *guandi* is much more immediate and with deeper moral relevance than his allusions to Christianity. This probably has to do with his own personal experience as well as the culture in which he grew up. Both religious motifs represent the Hong Kong people's attempts to deal with modernity.

Open Discussion

Audience: After watching the excerpt from John Woo's interview, it seems that Woo favours form, music and imagery more than plot which explains his preference towards action films and musicals.

Sam Ho: John Woo had often said that he likes to make a musical someday. There is a lot in common between Hong Kong action films and musicals. In fact, the similarity of body movements in martial arts films to musicals was one of the early reasons that attracted Western critics to Hong Kong films.

Audience: Love stories are quite popular in Hong Kong. Why has John Woo not attempted in this genre?

Law Kar: Unlike Western films, there are fewer love scenes in a John Woo film - not because he doesn't believe in love. Rather, his expectations for love are very high. The love demonstrated in his film gears towards empathy if not compassion that surpasses the conventional type of love between men and women.

Dorothy Lau: As noted by the audience, John Woo's forte is in his depiction of men as focal points while females play a minor role. As in *The Killer*, the two lead characters enter a relationship but the female character is only lightly touched upon as her main roles are to propel the storyline and act as a support to the male

lead.

Collated by Queenie Law and May Ng, Translated by Louisa Ho

Seminar on Fritz Lang I

Visions of *Metropolis*: Architecture in Film

Date: 12 January 2002 (Sat)

Time: 4.30 pm - 6.00pm

Venue: Hong Kong Film Archive Cinema

Host: Bede Cheng (Hong Kong Film Archive)

Speakers: Winnie Fu (Hong Kong Film Archive)

Stephen Sze (Principal Lecturer, General Education Centre of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University)

Alexander Hui (Art Officer, University Museum & Art Gallery of the University of Hong Kong)



(From left) Alexander Hui, Bede Cheng, Stephen Sze and Winnie Fu

Winnie Fu: Restoration of *Metropolis*

A restoration team in the Munich Film Archive had started work on restoring *Metropolis* in the early 1980s, based on a first-generation copy of the film released in 1927. In the process, the film print was embezzled for illicit distribution. In 1998, the Munich Film Archive has finally gained authorization and funding from the Murnau Foundation, and proceeded to put together the most complete version of the film from all archival material it could gather. The 2001 restoration added the original music score, the original story line and the intertitles. After digital restoration, the film was printed, and it now stands as the version that is the most faithful to the original. In fact, the computer restoration work is not yet finished - this part of the work is slated to be completed by the middle of 2002.

The music and visuals of *Metropolis* have since been adopted many times. For example, Queen's MTV 'Radio Ga Ga' (1984) and Madonna's MTV 'Express Yourself' (1989) contained images from *Metropolis*; the film *Bodyguard* (1992) borrowed the shot of the robot Maria turning into a human.

Stephen Sze: The Film Architecture and Images of Fritz Lang's Cinema

The 'film architecture' of Lang's films refers to his sets, which reflect the director's expressionist concepts. The images are important because in expressionism it is believed that one could express in substance what is within oneself or one's emotions. The whole notion of expressionism includes not only the images, but symbolism and pictures. Basically, there are two methods by which expressionism is portrayed:

1. The method of painted sets, which is used to produce atmosphere because they can portray one's complex emotions. Later generations view this method as too simplistic and artificial, not suitable to the film medium.
2. The method of abstraction, as for example, in the films of Murnau. Each material object in Murnau's films contains abstract significance, and often he introduces a chain of such objects, each embodying different meanings. For example, in *Nosferatu* (1922), Murnau puts crosses into a scene set on a beach to signify the leading lady's longing for her lover. Murnau favours simple setting to express his meaning. Lang, on the other hand, was fond of using very complex sets. His method was architectonic. Lang would use architecture, construction, sets construction to visually express his ideas.

There are special qualities in each of the different periods in Lang's career. In the silent period, his images were very strong and explosive. By the 1930s, the emphasis was on drama and the construction of atmosphere through lighting effects, such as in *M* (1931). In the Hollywood period, he would use lighting in the form of nets and railings to show how his protagonists were imprisoned or isolated within themselves. The films below are some of Lang's classic expressionist movies:

Destiny (1921) employs a variety of objects, close-ups and long shots to express different meanings. Lang used a very high wall to symbolise death, expressing the separation of the yin and the yang. The story tells of a woman killing herself in order to search for her dead lover. She enters a dazzling staircase. The staircase and the contrasting lighting symbolise death as an extremely long and complicated journey. The spirit of death leads the heroine into a hall filled with candles large and small. Each candle represents a person's life - the scene is a classic expressionist scene. Expressionism and classical Hollywood cinema are two quite different entities. The former can lead to sudden transitions from close-ups to long shots, while the latter would be more orderly in their use of shots. The deductive style of Hollywood filmmaking is too direct, which tends to shut out the audience's space for thought.

Dr Mabuse The Gambler, Part 1: A Portrait of Our Time (1921) shows that Lang's images are rich with symbolism. In *Dr Mabuse*, the title character stirs up trouble in a stock market exchange. Lang shows the crowd as the main setting with superimpositions of Mabuse's changing faces to express how Mabuse was exploiting the market with his devilish force. The bell in the stock market symbolises the concept of 'time is money'.

Metropolis (1927). One of the most unusual features of the film is its use of large architectural objects as a spatial controlling device, showing the motif of imprisonment of the workers. This is a classical expressionist device. Lang presents a satire of modern industrial society by showing the way in such a society enforces a structure of oppression on human beings. Some people have referred to a 'prison of skyscrapers' to describe Lang's proficiency in using imposing sets to build an atmosphere of oppression. There are two meanings implied: firstly, it represents society as an overbearing system, which requires a huge environment to efficiently and collectively imprison its population; secondly, it represents a challenge to humanity, since humanity is imprisoned within a prison of skyscrapers, mankind feels helpless and its individuality threatened. The architectural concepts of Fascist and Communist regimes, such as Berlin's Olympia Stadium constructed in 1936 and Beijing's Tian'anmen Square, utilise this principle. Situated in these architectural sites, human beings feel helpless, challenged, oppressed and subdued. Besides, Lang loved using his imposing sets to express mockery.

Alexander Hui: The City and the Dream of Architecture

Hong Kong is a very unique city. It was a British colony during the years of the industrial revolution. Beginning from 1855, the world discovered many inventions, including the lift and the X-ray. In 1889, George Eastman invented celluloid. In 1896, the first film was shown. Hong Kong's history developed along side the periods of such startling changes and inventions in the world.

Looking at an old photograph of Hong Kong in 1930, one would discover that the territory was filled with old Victorian-style buildings only, in the not too distant future, to be demolished by the government at a staggering rate. At the same time, Germany was dreaming of a new world and new vista of the city. The conception of *Metropolis* was romantic, and as such, it came out of a simple and great dream. The merits and demerits are not important. Martin Scorsese remarked, 'A good film is usually a record of the things of a period, a record of the dreams of the people of that period'. *Metropolis* achieved this. The sets and designs of Erich Kettelhut in *Metropolis* may be envisioned by a futurist of look,

yet viewing this film today, it is like standing in the hub of the Central District here and now.

Modern architectural design does not emphasise outer and inner limits. Its outer surface does away with unimportant ornaments. The main materials are steel and concrete. An example is the Bauhaus school of architecture. The Central Market is Hong Kong's most beautiful Bauhaus building. As for the HSBC building, its greatest ornament is its own structure. Eliel Saarinen's shaver-shaped office tower is another fine illustration. The same style of building may be found in the old Bank of China building in Hong Kong. Dr Sze raised an interesting point just now, that Fritz Lang's films make people feel helpless, oppressed and challenged. Modern architecture deemphasises decoration and highlights its own structures, such as columns, thus disconnecting people with the buildings. A sense of helplessness, oppression and being challenged results.

While architects were designing modern cities, artists and filmmakers were prophesying doom in future Metropolises. They were concerned about population explosions, and that people would be increasingly forced to live within restrictive, oppressive spaces. Hong Kong is a fortunate place in that we were late starters in modern development - some twenty, thirty years behind the European and American experience, and because of that we can learn to avoid some of the harms brought by urban living. Hong Kong is a mountainous territory. This fact, and the government's policy of restricting land for development through a high-tariff regime, have meant that only about 30% of Hong Kong's total land area are developed. Though Hong Kong has a lot of skyscrapers, a large area of greenery is preserved, allowing people to enjoy nature. This is rather unlike New York City, where people are packed together within a grid of skyscrapers. Some time ago, a contingent of German architects came to visit Hong Kong, amazed that Hong Kong people could live and work in a highly-populated environment, but they were even more surprised at the preponderance of mountains and greenery. Although most artists and filmmakers adopt a pessimistic attitude to portray modern urban living, I hope that through this seminar, we will come to see how beautiful Hong Kong really is, and appreciate Hong Kong with a romantic attitude.

Open Discussion

Winnie Fu: The art designer of *Metroplis* Kettelhut had originally conceived a design of a church that was a shorter building than the rest, but Lang didn't want a church. He thought that the future had no need for religion. So he changed it to the Tower of Babel, like a watch tower. In the original draughts, buildings were much shorter, only twenty or thirty storeys high. They were changed to buildings of forty or eighty storeys to make them even more imposing and oppressive.

Audience: Do modern architects have a common purpose to design many

grand buildings to create a feeling of oppression?

Alexander Hui: I don't think so. Architects learn to experience different feelings. In the process, they learn another language of architecture and then tell another story, so to speak. They hope to tell different stories. How they tell stories is a different matter.

Audience: Does this mean that architects go through a process of multi-faceted learning?

Alexander Hui: Yes. For example, white walls can reflect light and emit different effects at different times. At sunset, the light is beautiful, but in summer it's very grating. The white wall sends different messages. We learn how to strengthen our awareness of beauty. However, each person has a very individualistic perspective. We must learn how to recognise our own sensations before experiencing the sensations of others.

Stephen Sze: In historical paraphrases, Gothic churches represent faith and humility. The church is a place where economics, religion, and social activities interchange with spiritual comfort. In contrast, some Fascist imperialistic buildings, such as Kim Il-sung Square, express concepts of power and collective society. We should give more thought to the arrangement of space and the social meanings behind them.

Audience: Hong Kong's conceptual plan to be an environmentally-conscious city has yet to achieve this ideal. Isn't Mr Hui too optimistic in your account of Hong Kong? How do you see the future of our city development?

Alexander Hui: I was the class representative of the First Year of the Architectural Conservation Programme provided by the University of Hong Kong. We advocated conservation of our city skyline. Too many of us heap praise on foreign cities. I admit that Hong Kong has a lot of flaws, but it is also a city that we can be proud of. There are a lot of old buildings that merit preservation. We have successfully preserved the Wanchai markets area. Recently, there are rumours that City Hall will be demolished. We will lobby for the preservation of this classical Bauhaus building so rich in history. In the future, we will strive to preserve old buildings as the city develops further. We have many classmates assuming high positions in the Urban Renewal Authority. They will strive to preserve buildings of historical importance. I believe we warrant to look at Hong Kong from a romantic perspective.

Collated by: Jennifer Lai, translated by: Stephen Teo

Seminars on Fritz Lang II

- Aesthetics of Darkness: From Expressionism to Noir

Date: 2 February 2002 (Sat)

Time: 4.00pm - 6.30pm

Venue: Hong Kong Film Archive Cinema

Host: Winnie Fu (HKFA)

Speakers: Stephen Sze (Principal Lecturer, General Education Centre of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University)
Po Fung (The President, Hong Kong Film Critics Society)
Bryan Chang (Independent Filmmaker and Film Critic)



(From left) Stephen Sze, Winnie Fu, Po Fung and Bryan Chang.

Stephen Sze: Fritz Lang and Expressionism

In order to understand Fritz Lang, it is crucial to understand his background first. Lang was a Catholic, although not quite a pious one. But he mentioned that he had received Catholic education. Much important essence of Catholic education's view towards society and humanity was shown in his films. The worldview represented in his films was influenced by his political and religious backgrounds. Also, Lang was largely influenced by the Expressionism (an artistic movement which prevailed during WWI's Germany). Expressionism's rooted influence in Lang's work was also seen in his later works in Hollywood. Lang was a varied and resourceful director, so it is difficult to categorise him into one. A talented director won't just concentrate on one style of filming, and film noir is just one of the many genres he excelled in. He also made westerns and detective movies. Each of his films has special visual effects. His works are dramatic, and contain detailed descriptions of the human nature. Expressionist film is also one of his subject matters, as seen in eg *M* (1931) which is a story of a psycho killer.

Expressionism usually has the following characteristics:

1. Strong light contrast, narrating via the shadow. The earliest usage of the shadow to narrate was in *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919). The usage of shadow was employed by many expressionist directors, including Lang, in various stages of his career. *Scarlet Street* (1945) was the classic usage of the shadow.
2. Using humongous but hollow sets to highlight the isolation and helplessness of human beings and to juxtapose with an objective

environment.

3. 3. Symbolism. Usually symbolises dark humour or ideas. In Expressionism, symbolism represents the worldview of destiny.

The audience would think that what was in the movies were fictional, and as Hollywood movies are mostly fictional, they are happy to embrace this style. Lang's expressionism is more extreme, his characters often twisted.

For example in *Fury* (1936), which is a story about a kidnap suspect. In one scene, the citizens were spreading rumour as if the male lead was the real killer. The camera work of the scene employs the classic Expressionist technique. The scene is also characterised by black humour. *Clash by Night* (1952) tells the story of a married woman having an affair. In a scene with the appearance of the three characters, special lighting effect was used. The husband in the end walked away from the well-lit indoors to the dim outdoors.

Femmes fatales in *Scarlet Street* and *Woman in the Window* (1944) embody typical themes of film noir. Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944) is another example. Lang doesn't demonise his female characters. Lang's *femmes fatales* are not the regular kind, they are not of the extreme cunning demeanour, instead, they were being controlled by others.

Woman in the Window tells the story of a man who kills for an alluring woman and later realises that he's only daydreaming in a cafe. *Scarlet Street* is more complex. It touches on his Catholic background, and discusses conscience. The main character blames himself for the rest of his life as he didn't get convicted for murder. This idea is more profound than the 'what comes around goes around'. *Clash By Night* is about feminism, about a woman tired of her mundane middle class life in a small fishing village. She left her husband, and ran away for ten years. Influenced by Expressionism, Lang uses many different filming styles, such as anti-chronological story-telling, dream sequence, and strong light contrast, pessimistic worldviews, and weaknesses of man typical of film noir. He has created his unique style, and not fallen into the cliché of Hollywood filming.

Po Fung: The Origin of Film Noir

Comparing to other genres such as westerns and *wuxia*, film noir has always been considered by many audiences difficult to grasp, even so in the United States twenty, thirty years ago. In fact, there have been many arguments concerning the definition of film noir and whether it should be considered a genre.

Film noir was actually discovered and named by the French, when they called American crime stories 'black fictions'. And the most famous example would be the detective stories by Raymond Chandler. These types of detective stories are full of realism flavour and obvious social backgrounds. The detective depicted is always a hardboiled one who lives and works with the grass roots of the society, and he will often face some kind of danger while carrying out his investigations. Other black fictions include M M King's *Postman Always Rings Twice*. After the WWII, stories like *Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Big Sleep*, etc were brought to the screen, and these movies reached France. The French movie critics considered these movies depressing, down and out, and filled with a sense of helplessness towards reality. The atmosphere portrayed in these movies is hugely different from the typical American comedy and musicals in the 1930s. Thus in the beginning, 'film noir' was only used to describe an atmosphere/aura.

During WW II, many German directors fled to the United States to evade the Nazis. And these directors brought with them Expressionism. Film noir often uses shadowy screens, diagonally lines, and discordant space together with its particular atmosphere to create a depressing mood. Film noir began as a movement from 1941, and ran until Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* in 1958. In the 1980s, many film noir imitations arose, and hence became a genre. Ridley Scott's 1982 sci-fi film *2020*, *Basic Instinct* (1992), Alan Parker's *Angel Heart* (1987) are all imitations of film noir in the 1940s and 50s.

Film noir always describes the process of self-destruction of a male protagonist due to a certain attractive woman. In most detective movies, the detectives are usually the good guys, but not in film noir. They often are the accomplices. Film noir often stresses that women are men's objects of desire; on the other hand, they are fatal. When Lang was directing, there was no such concept as film noir, Lang just used his usual unique technique, so he could be called as one of the founders of film noir.

Bryan Chang: Other than Film Noir

Lang is such a varied director that it would be inappropriate to typecast him as a film noir director. In fact, many of his so-called film noir movies are not exactly truly film noir. Po Fung has mentioned how Lang brought Expressionism to the US, and I will talk about how Lang in fact didn't walk into the Film noir direction in terms of content and themes. First, let's make a comparison between Lang's work in Germany and in the US; Universum Film AG (UFA) is very different from Hollywood. UFA is just one studio, but Hollywood is made up of many small studios. Thus the spirit of collective creativity at UFA is very strong. In terms of themes, directors such as Lang and Murnau felt very strongly towards the aesthetics of architecture and space. Although they have their different styles, the themes have close origins. The honour Lang earned from UFA owed to many, including his ex-wife, Thea von Harbou. Lang's themes such as metropolitan and social crimes were concerned topics at the time, and these themes can be found in works by other directors.

Lang's Hollywood debut, *Fury*, has successfully grasped the key to success. He turned his bleak ethnic views and identity as a German man into hatred in his films. Hatred is considered to be a way to express theatrical effects in Hollywood.

His protagonist is no longer the kind of man like Dr Mabuse, a criminal mastermind, but an ordinary American man, oppressed by his surrounding environment. Lang's stories could be very simple, but he is a perfectionist when it comes to movie sets. When Lang was in Hollywood, he focused on the display of layers. The women in his movies were not exactly *femme fatale*. You wouldn't know the background details of the typical *femme fatale*. The female lead in *Scarlet Street* was controlled by a man, *Clash By Night*'s Marlene Dietrich was not the *femme fatale*. In Lang's movies, women are more revengeful than men, such as *The Nibelungen II: Kriemhild's Revenge* (1924), the whole story revolves around the queen's revenge. In German culture, the woman is perceived as both the mother of the earth and the destroyer, eg the character Maria in *Metropolis*

(1927). In Lang's American works, his female characters were not as extremely destructive as the typical *femme fatale*. But then there's always tension between the sexes, and this tension often leads to sudden and violent scenes, such as in *Scarlet Street* where quarrels between the male and female leads results in a fatal bloodshed.

America gave Lang more opportunities to express his talents rather than oppressing his artistic creativity.

Speakers' Responses

Stephen Sze: The root of film noir comes from three major sources. The first was expressionism as discussed previously. The second comes from French Poetic Realism. Although this motif may be perceived as insignificant, it nevertheless has had a large effect on American filmmaking during the 1940s and 1950s.

German films themselves depicted human nature in a twisted and grim manner. They lacked reality and poetic description.

The poetic flavour in American films was greatly influence by the French. The *Femme Fatale* in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* is portrayed in a poetic way, and John Houston's *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) also highlights this notion. The portrayal of such realism rendered Hollywood films in the 1940s and 1950s in a realist and romantic way.

The third group consists of gangster movies. This group of film focuses on the conflicts based on the harsh economic environment, unemployment, and socioeconomic division of the time. Even the interlude of evil and politics at play with each other were brought to light on the big screen.

Actually, the three factors themselves would not be sufficient to bring about the rise of film noir. The catalyst was really the changing times of the American society during WWII. Since a vast majority of the American men were at war, women stayed behind to uphold the country's infrastructure by entering the work force, be it work in factories or management behind the front lines. *Femmes fatales* began to appear on the big screen.

Changes also occurred within their social ideology. During the 1930s, America was content to uphold their isolationism ideology. So they were unwilling to be enlisted into European and international politics. But after the 1941 Pearl Harbour incident, Americans began to participate in the war. For the first time, the concepts of violence, revenge and the need to uphold justice became mixed with complex and twisted issues. It was also during this time that a group of European directors immigrated to the United States. Now international views became more complicated; where gender issue was no longer as simple as it once was.

The *Femme fatale* is not the main focus here; rather the focus should be on the end of a puritan era. Unlike the pure and innocent individuals men were portrayed in early Western films, they are now loaded with desires and repressed sexuality. The techniques of film noir became classical concepts studied in books. But it did not foster the large outpour of creativity. On the other hand, film noir's affect on society in producing a new genre of people with complex inner psychology became its greatest achievement. Hence we should not only remember Lang because he was a great film noir director.

Bryan Chang: We should not place a fixed set of boundaries to explain film noir. Rather, I prefer to look at its origin. German film directors of the 1930s were intellectuals, the first of their kind to enter into the movie making industry. Being knowledgeable in Freudian psychology, they later brought psychoanalysis onto the American screens. Even today American films are still under such influence, making Freudian ideology a father of Hollywood films. Through film portrayals, the most inner part of the self is explicitly revealed, making the person weak and extremely vulnerable.

Open Discussion

Audience: In *Scarlet Street* and *Woman in the Window*, the three main protagonists are played by the same three artists. Is this a mere coincidence or did Lang do this on purpose? Also movies and television programmes with daydream sequences are often done in futile. But I think the daydream sequence in *Woman in the Window* was very effective.

Po Fung: Even the daydream sequence in *Woman in the Window* did not serve its purpose. Using daydream for the ending of *Scarlet Street* is mainly to satisfy censorship requirements. Because regulations on films were quite strict at the time, the filmmaker had to use this technique in order to bypass the censors. In fact, Lang succeeded in creating a stronger climax by combining a series of broken images and idea in the daydream sequence.

Stephen Sze: Lang himself noted that the daydream sequences did not work very well as that was previously used in the earlier Hollywood films. The first person who coined the term 'film noir' was French. At that time (in 1945), Americans did not know that such genre/technique existed.

French audiences did not have contact with Hollywood films in the 1930s and 1940s, so it was not until after the war that American films poured into France. The French began to see American films in a new light.

In comparison to other styles of filmmaking, film noir has a stronger penetration into the society because its roots are from different sources. It is not merely one style or portrayal of the world, but a unique genre that can be incorporated into different styles of filmmaking. Even in Hollywood movies today, film noir is often mixed with other genres in order to satisfy the audience.

Winnie Fu: Many people believed that Lang had abandoned the German filmmaking ideals, to merge completely into American culture by watching local detectives novels and then reinterpreting them. Do you (Bryan Chang) think it is that simple?

Bryan Chang: In the final scene of *The Indian Tomb* (1959), where the princess falls in love with the architect, followed by a group of lepers coming to the fore is recognizable of a scene in *Metropolis*. Of course there is a variance in themes. But the scene where the main protagonist loses control of the crowds has been noted again and again, commencing from his German directed movies to his later American movie like *Fury*. Although this could be an unintentional outcome by the authors, it could also be a conscious repetition of the same theme in an attempt to make certain scenes or affects even more refined and distinctive as it goes along.

Stephen Sze: In comparison with other filmmakers, do you agree that because Lang lacks a definite style it would be easier for him to succeed and that his practical style allows him to easily fit into the Hollywood mode of filmmaking?

Po Fung: He does incorporate various themes. He could make films like the 'Dr Mabuse' series, a genre film of the time. He does not have a definite theme or a prevalent style but he does have his own peculiar style that varies each time, changing with many faces.

Bryan Chang: Lang pays exceptional attention to details and props. Often he would use the power of props to express ideas. His filmmaking days in Germany have been invaluable to refining such skills, allowing him to be extremely experienced with the technique.

In the movie *Woman on the Moon*, he used some thirty minutes to describe the shuttle's launching, revealing his attention to details. In this 1920 work piece, the scene is so sophisticated that it would have been able to satisfy those who were to witness an actual space shuttle launch in the United States in the 1960s. Making us wonder whether or not he can actually foresee the future.

Winnie Fu: Lang once said that every time he directs a particular movie, he will go through the script three times, be well prepared and is willing to spend a long time on fine details of the prop and props design.

Audience: Do you think von Harbou (Lang's second wife) was a positive or negative influence on Lang?

Winnie Fu: My personal feeling was good. In fact, von Harbou was a great influence on the evolution of film. She herself was a novelist and a screenwriter. So her collaboration with Lang worked out well. Some of her works included: *Metropolis*, *Woman on the Moon* and *Spies* (1928).

Later they separated due to inconceivable differences. Lang himself was against the Nazi movement, so he left Germany for the United States. von Harbou on the other hand stayed behind and worked for the Nazi party.

Audience: I read a book that included a film critique of *Metropolis*. At that time, the American film critic noted the scene portraying seven sins as being absurd. Lang's response was that he was originally going to inject more unexplainable sequence into the film. Does this surreal and bizarre filming technique have any

meaning in Expressionism?

Stephen Sze: The seven sins are one of the main doctrines of Christianity. To understand the complexity of Expressionism, I don't think we should use a rational approach. The concepts relating to Freudian psychology, which Bryan Chang mentioned earlier, would be more suitable to explain the concepts. Filmmakers use the big screen to express ideas that are otherwise repressed due to fear or sexuality. Bear in mind Expressionism is not logicism. It's not contained within fixed boundaries.

Po Fung: European culture embodies a duality of science and mysticism.

Bryan Chang: 'Dr Mabuse' specifically notes how man transforms the power of science to produce a force for evil-doing.

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