

### Re-start and Re-discovery

Few possess the vision of stage masters Sit Kok-sin (1904-1956) and Ma Si-tsang (1900-1964), who devoted their careers to rejuvenating the stage art, and advocated the crossing-over of Cantonese opera and film. Early Cantonese opera films borrowed directly the story plots and scores from their stage originals in order to appeal to a ready audience. But towards the end of the 1950s, opera masters Yam Kim-fai, Pak Suet-sin and others took the lead to refine the techniques so that their singing styles and stage arts may be preserved on celluloid. This marks the golden age of Cantonese opera film. (See pp 6-9)

*Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective* (Revised edition, 2003) is the latest HKFA publication. The catalogue, out of print for some years now, was first published by the Hong Kong International Film Festival 16 years ago, devoting to the study of the history, development and genres of Cantonese opera and the origin of its screen appearance. Opera stars are featured in a profile section. This preliminary research, though, has all the makings of a real gem waiting to be further explored. We hope that further studies and research will be undertaken in future.



*Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective*

(Revised Edition, 2003)

Published by HKFA

'Ethical dilemmas' is a thought-provoking topic brought up by renowned film archivist Ray Edmondson during his visit to the HKFA. And how do we operate in the real world? Our staff at the Resource Centre has some interesting anecdotes to share. Also, film conservation jargons are discussed from this issue onwards. The local film industry will no doubt benefit from the closer economic partnership arrangement with the mainland, and trading on our world-class facilities and expertise, we believe a treasure trove is lying ahead for our grasp. [[clkwok@lcsd.gov.hk](mailto:clkwok@lcsd.gov.hk)]



Left to right: Screen icons Yam Kim-fai, Pak Suet-sin in *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* (1959); Yam and Fong Yim-fun in *A Buddhist Recluse for Fourteen Years* (1958); Yam and Yu Lai-zhen in *Muk Kwai-ying* (1959).

*Newsletter Cover: The Legend of Purple Hairpin* (1959) - Reunion of the heavenly match

Photos courtesy of Chi Leun Film Company Limited, Hong Kong Honour Publishing Co Ltd, Sil-Metropole Organization Limited, Mr Kwan Chee-kong and Mr Li Shek-hung.

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Edith Chiu

Mr Ray Edmondson, celebrated Australian film archivist, arrived in the Hong Kong Film Archive to present a five-day specialist workshop on audio-visual archiving (15-19 September, 2003). Edmondson was Deputy Director of ScreenSound Australia (formerly known as the National Film and Sound Archive) from 1984 to 2001, and the first president of SEAPAVAA from 1996 to 2002. He is also the author of *A Philosophy of Audio-visual Archiving* (UNESCO, 1998). After his retirement, he has been writing general guidelines for UNESCO's Memory of the World programme and teaching in a number of courses on audio-visual archiving including philosophy, ethics and practical skills for audio-visual archivists and other institutions, such as the Charles Sturt University and the George Eastman House.

The following is a summary of the workshop and an interview with Ray Edmondson, which will shed light on audio-visual archiving as well as the archivist himself.



Ray Edmondson hosting the specialist workshop

#### **The Five-day Specialist Workshop**

Ray Edmondson conducted the five-day specialist workshop in the form of both lecture and open floor discussion to offer an insight into the philosophy and ethics of audio-visual archiving, as well as the role and function of an audio-visual archive. The objective of the workshop was to familiarise the participants with concepts and best practices of

audio-visual archiving, and the roles played by the various departments. The workshop was attended by Archive staff, archivists and specialists from LCSD museums and libraries.

Edmondson gave an analysis of the unique arrangement undertaken by an audio-visual archive of its collection that differs considerably from that adopted by general archives, libraries and museums. The library of the former consists mainly of image and sound carriers - film prints and VHS tapes - and associated documents and artefacts. The objectives are the preservation and accessibility of audio-visual heritage. General archives, on the other hand, acquire selected inactive records in

any format, though usually unique and unpublished, with the aim to preserve these precious records and their evidential and information values. Libraries collect and preserve published materials in all formats for the benefit of facilitating access to materials and information. A similar objective is set out by museums, which acquire historical objects, artefacts and associated documents.

The acquisition of audio-visual materials should follow the standards and guidelines outlined in legislations and charters regarding their acquisition, exchange, purchase and loan. In fact, in some countries, film distributors are required by law to deposit their films into the national archive for preservation. Such legislation has so far eluded the archives in Hong Kong and Australia. Legal deposit is of course a feasible means of ensuring the continual and proper preservation of our heritage, but fostering a long-term relationship with donors is equally important. Edmondson also stressed the importance of taking initiatives in acquisition.

Furthermore, as far as acquisition and disposal are concerned, the preservation of artefacts should always come first and under no circumstances should private possession be tolerated. The International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) has published a Code of Ethics that sets out the principles of professional conduct required of an archivist. The compliance with the code, nevertheless, leaves a lot to the discretion of individual archives.

Edmondson also congratulated the Hong Kong Film Archive on its facilities and the expertise of its staff that ranked among the best of Asia. Besides, from the perspective of conservation, an archive must resolutely protect our cultural heritage, however deteriorated and damaged the artefacts are. An incomplete film print may well be supplemented by film stills for the purpose of screening. In this connection, he also introduced concepts of the preservation and conservation of film, the most fundamental of which were the cleansing of negatives and the removal of scratches on the film prints. Of course, it poses a bigger challenge to a conservation specialist - to achieve the objectives of promoting archival films and education - if his/her task is to orchestrate non-sequential negatives and renders a 'new film' that not only reflects its former glory but also follows a logical plot and sequence.

Edmondson suggested that each audio-visual archive should keep its own search catalogue to minimise the confusion of data collection, assembly and retrieval. A computerised catalogue has the advantage of easy storage and retrieval of film data. Such catalogue must also offer access on the internet so as to allow a flexible input

and output of computer data, which in turn encourages the exchange and sharing of information among archives.

Another issue that Edmondson touched on was the governance mode of the Hong Kong Film Archive. As a member of the FIAF, the Hong Kong Film Archive, like its fellow members, does not see commercial sponsorship as a significant source of funding, which may otherwise jeopardise its curatorial-driven policies. National archives of England, New Zealand, Canada, America and Indonesia - either non-profit making bodies or partially subsidised by the government - offer their Hong Kong counterpart excellent alternative governance mode role models. Edmondson, speaking from his years of observation, believed that the governance structure of the Archive should remain status quo, which is funded by the government.

#### **An Interview with Ray Edmondson**

#### **How did you devise the five-day workshop for the Hong Kong Film Archive?**

In devising this workshop, I had corresponded with Angela, the head of HKFA, and Monique Shiu, the librarian of HKFA, listing various topics for the archive. Though I brought some examples of restoration and reconstruction done in Australia, it is important to pick up some topics that matter for this archive. Besides, we tried to make the whole thing as interactive as possible, so it actually was a discussion instead of a talk.



Ray Edmondson (back row, middle), Albert Lee (back row, 1st right, Chief Manager, Film and Cultural Exchange, LCSD), Angela Tong (Archive Head) and Archive staff

#### **You are one of the advisers who sets up the HKFA. What do you think the positioning of HKFA in Asia should be? What are the strengths of HKFA? Which aspects do we need to improve on?**

Every archive has room to improve. I think this archive has gone a long way in a short time, and it is a quite impressive performance in world term. This archive has a terrific building, and the most important aspect of an archive is the people who work there. I judge this place by people, and by world standard, it's a very good team. That is again surprising for a young archive. I'm impressed by the enthusiasm

and commitment that the people radiate to you. You can tell whether the people like what they are doing or they are just doing a job. Every archive has to grow, but it certainly needs more money. Every archive is under the constriction of what the government prepares to give it. It also needs time to develop a relationship with the industry. I would like to see it becomes more visible outside Hong Kong.

**Do you have any preference in working in a particular department(s) in a film archive?**

I really enjoy acquisition and conservation work. But I have to make choices. In my case, because our archive was growing, I became a supervisor and an administrator. I could possibly let others do the enjoyable things, and I did other stuff. You learn your skills in things like sponsorship and fund-raising. I don't like asking people for money, but in an institution with partial government grant, that is what you have to do. The best person to raise money for an archive is an archivist like myself, but not a fund-raiser, because I have the passion and the belief that can communicate with the potential sponsor. That is what convinces people to give money.

**How do your experiences help shape your philosophy of audio-visual archiving?**

I have been working in this field since 1968. The philosophy of audio-visual archiving is aroused by observation and contact over a long period with many archives and associations. And then we saw the need to create a document of the philosophy of audio-visual archiving which originally came out of an informal discussion group, which has been lasting for years. Then we got reactions, rewrote it and eventually wrote a final text and got it published in 1998. When the first edition was published, we got feedback from all over the world. I am currently working on the second edition, because this thing is never fixed. Issues like digitisation become important, which we did not cover in the document. We need this sort of basic theoretical reference point to be the foundation of a film archive. Besides, we now have formal university courses on audio-visual archiving, and the document can be used as a standard text for the courses likewise.

**How does the advance of technology reshape the landscape of film archiving? For example, there may be no carrier for film projection in the future.**

We could make the prediction that the auditorium you go to see the movies will never disappear, because watching a film in an auditorium is a social experience, and not like watching television. I think all of the experiences survived because

there was something unique about them. I don't know whether digital projection will replace optical projection in future, but there has always been an archive to show films as well as videos. ♦

### **Related websites**

**AMIA** Association of Moving Image Archivists

<http://www.amianet.org>

**FIAF** International Federation of Film Archives

<http://www.fiafnet.org>

**FIAT / IFTA** International Federation of Television Archives

<http://www.fiatifta.org>

**IASA** International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives

<http://www.iasa-web.org>

**SEAPAVAA** Southeast Asia-Pacific Audiovisual Archive Association

<http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Academy/9772>

**SCENAA** Standing Committee of European National Audiovisual Archives

<http://www.scenaa.net>

**UNESCO** United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation

<http://www.unesco.org>





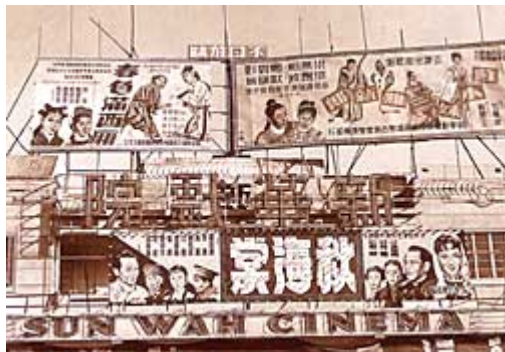
## Under the Banyan Tree

### Cantonese Opera Film and Its Times

Stephanie Chung Po-yin

After the Word War II, there was an influx of capital and talent into Hong Kong from the mainland, transforming the territory into a melting pot of the best of north and south. The film industry also benefited from this mass migration. Southbound filmmakers began to engage fervorously in transplanting the Mandarin cinema to their newfound home. However, the political turmoil in the mainland in 1949 has decimated the budding cinema. In contrast, its Cantonese counterpart has taken a great leap forward since the war, riding on the wave of the opera film craze. There were many reasons attributed to the bloom, among which was the abundant supply of capital from pre-sales to Southeast Asian countries and the well developed Cantonese cinema circuits.

In the 1950s, the *nouveaux riches* among the Southeast Asian Chinese communities developed a healthy appetite for Cantonese films. The system of pre-sale resulted in inflows of hot money into the territory. A local filmmaker needed only to produce a title, a story and a cast list to receive down payment from Southeast Asian cinema owners to cover initial shooting expenses, or to pay its big name cast. In the heyday of the pre-sale system, the down payment amounted to some 30% to 50% of the total production cost. The Cantonese cinema, with its eye on quick returns, responded to this craze by churning out low-budget productions. In no time, a host of small and medium sized film companies and those aptly named 'one-film companies' sprouted. In total, over 200 films were made each year.



Sun Wah Cinema in 1955 (Photo: Chung Man-lurk)

Apart from pre-sales in Southeast Asia, local cinema owners were another major source of capital. The four leading Cantonese film circuits were: 1) The 'Globe and Tai Ping', which screened contemporary melodramas produced by The Union, Sun Luen, Kong Ngee, Overseas Chinese, Lan Kwong, etc; 2) the 'Kam Kwok', which was devoted to Cantonese opera films produced by Tai Seng, Zhili, Lishi, Xinyi, etc; 3) the 'Hong



Kong, Central and Ying King' (also known as the Fourth Circuit), which showed a good mix of melodramas and Cantonese opera films sourcing from Dalian, Kowloon, Yule, etc; 4) the 'New York and Great World', managed by Cheung Kwun-fung, screened both melodramas and musicals, the most acclaimed of which was *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* (1959), starring Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin. Cheung's wife was responsible for scheduling screenings. Their son Cheung Wai-lun was the chairman of the Hong Kong Confucian Society. On an average of one film per week, the four circuits would each demand 52 films to satisfy its cinema houses, or an aggregate of nearly 200 films for the four circuits each year.

To ensure a stable supply of films and the standard of the products, cinema owners often provided financial backup to filmmakers in return of the right to screen their films. Kwan Kar-pak and Kwan Kar-yu who ran the National Theatre were those financiers who provided a regular team of filmmakers with the capital to launch new productions. Opera stars, too, worked with their regular teams both on the stage and screen. Opera diva Fong Yim-fun founded her own Zhili Company to shoot adaptations of her stage performances, including the masterpiece *The Tragic Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* (1958). Yu Lai-zhen collaborated with director Chan Cheuk-sang on a string of fantasies for Dalian-Chan's personal outfit. Yu was best remembered for her role in *The Headless Empress Bears a Son* (1957) and *The Crab's Son Offers Nocturnal Sacrifice to the Crab Beauty* (1958). Yu's husband Lee Siu-wan, a celebrated composer and librettist, founded Lishi Company and many of its productions were shown on the Kam Kwok Circuit. The most prolific company of all was Kwans' Tai Seng Film Company set up in the 1950s. It managed to clock up more than 150 films in just a decade, directed almost exclusively by Chiang Wai-kwong and featuring a star-studded cast including Yam Kim-fai, Fong Yim-fun and Pak Suet-sin. Tai Seng was also a breeding ground for budding talents, such as Ng Kwan-lai and Wu Fung.

In view of the intense competition, filmmakers also became increasingly cautious about the creative path their productions were treading. Films were pigeonholed as set genres, with opera film being the mainstay. Many believed that the appearance of opera stars by and large determined the success of a film. Filmmakers wrecked their brains to land the service of their secret weapons - the opera stars - indeed the more, the merrier. Filmmakers were competing among themselves as to who would get the most star-studded cast; some even claimed that their film boasted from 'two male leads and two female leads' to the extreme of 'four male leads and four female leads'. Stage veterans became the sole guarantor of box office success. This success, nevertheless, didn't come cheap. Their acting fees alone claimed a substantial part of the cost and yet a record was set every day. A staggering \$17,000 per film was lavished on securing the services of the likes of Sun Ma Si-tsang and Yam Kim-fai, or \$13,000 of Pak Suet-sin.

The bloom inevitably came with a catch. Many of these opera films were mocked as 'seven-day quickies', which borrowed conveniently ready-to-use scripts, scores, music, costumes and props from the stage. Though not entirely unfounded, the fault shouldn't be blamed on the investors and filmmakers alone. Many dismissed Cantonese opera film on the ground of its low budget. By nature, both a stage opera and its screen adaptation require actors to lip sync and attune their movement to the pre-recorded music (usually tired, archaic tunes which made new renditions and even the slightest alterations extremely difficult); location shooting and the breaking down of shots were also un-necessary (medium long shots were preferred). As the craze grew, filmmakers came up with yet another gimmick, which is to pair up opera stars with screen stars in contemporary features. But the move spawned signs of friction between the players. The Union Film Enterprise was formed as a response to the call for the de-crossing over of the opera and cinema artiste, and to advocate the 'Cleansing Up of the Cantonese Cinema Campaign'. Its founding members included Hung Sin Nui and Ma Si-tsang originally hailed from the stage.



The phenomenal success of Sin Fung Ming Troupe's *The Legend of Purple Hairpin* in February 1959 was followed by a string of opera classics. Photo shows the ad on *Sing Tao Daily*, 23 Feb 1959.

Underlying the opera film spree was a real crisis that threatened to shatter the fundamentals of the Cantonese film industry. With the dying out of the pre-sale system in the 1960s, the Cantonese film industry plummeted to its all-time low. ♦

**Stephanie Chung Po-yin** is Associate Professor of History at the Hong Kong Baptist University.

## **And the Music Lingers on : Librettist Poon Cheuk**

**Donna Chu**

A gifted librettist, who also excels in writing scripts for both the screen and stage, possesses what some describe as 'God sent talent'.

The artistry of writing, though, bears a direct relationship with Poon Cheuk's family background and childhood: 'Both my grand-father and my father were men of letters, "scholars of the first degree" as they were known back then. I was born in Shunde in 1921. My father passed away when I was just a small kid. My brothers and their classmates used to gather at our place to recite poems, and even composed new ones. They were my greatest influence. I listened and learned on the side.' At ten years of age, a Cantonese opera-obsessed Poon Cheuk would hang around the theatres to watch his beloved plays. But it didn't occur to him then that he would one day make a living out of it.



Poon Cheuk at an interview for the HKFA Oral History Project in 1998

'I came to Hong Kong in 1949. Having no luck in finding a job, I instead came to meet the renowned musician Lo Ka-chi through my nephew. Lo was appreciative of my literary gift, and my (limited) musical knowledge. He asked me to give it a try. I went on to write my first libretto, "Autumn Sentiments".' At first, Lo helped revising the librettos that Poon wrote, but not long after, Poon began to make a name for himself. 'I went to song parlours every night, such as Go Sing and Lin Heung, where I made the acquaintance of a group of musicians. Later, when Ma Si-tsang and Hung Sin Nui founded their own "Zhen Sin Mei Troupe", the couple asked Lo to recommend a librettist for their troupe. I hardly knew anything about Cantonese opera, but Ma assured me that they would complement my scores with the intermediary and main scenes. He also put me up in a hotel in Wanchai, and even footed my bills while I concentrated on writing the music. Ma would drop by at night and shed light on the scenes that I got stuck with.'



Stunning stage arts performed by Lam Kar-sing and Ma Si-tsang and Hung Sin Nui, the upholders of Chan Ho-kau in *The Pitiless Sword* (1964).



justice, in the Cantonese opera film *Butterfly Beauty* (1959).

'At the time when the Union Film Enterprise was just established, I wrote librettos for their films. To add spark to the tired gimmick of employing theme songs in their films, director Ng Wui came and discussed on making an all-singing film. It was how *The Precious Lotus Lamp* (1956) came about. Period costume films were void of the dazzling movements and gestures that graced the stage, and *The Precious Lotus Lamp* was the first of its kind to exploit on these visual elements. The film was an instant hit, a trendsetter. Filmmakers jumped on the bandwagon by recruiting opera actors to star in their films.... Then later, someone proposed to shoot opera films against a contemporary setting. MP & GI hired me to write the scores in *My Kingdom for a Honeymoon* (1957). The craze evolved into a bloom of opera documentaries released in the 1960s, such as *Battling Sounds* (1963) and *The Pitiless Sword* (1964). With the exceptions of Wong Hok-sing and Lung To, most directors' techniques of shooting opera documentaries were found wanting, let alone the artistry of the stage. They had no idea of how to break down the shots in accordance with the musical segments. Often librettists or stage veterans were asked to attend the shooting and gave them prompts on the set.' Poon Cheuk thus became a sought after cross media, multi-disciplinary talent.

'The Union paid me \$1,500 for each script. As a free agent, I charged \$2,500, which was worth ten taels of gold in those days! It was dead easy to make a film: a film cost between \$70,000 and \$80,000 to make; a producer could pocket \$20,000 to \$30,000 from pre-sale alone. The rest of the expenses would be paid by cinema owners. Even film could be purchased on credit. So someone who had \$20,000 to spare, a story to sell and convinced the opera stars to act could easily start shooting a film. Cinemas at one time were flooded by those aptly named "seven-day

quickies". We were not part of the game, because they couldn't afford us. They turned to librettists who charged less, and...the results were dismal. The craze died down toward the end of the 1960s.'

Poon Cheuk worked as a librettist and screenwriter between 1956 and 1965 before switching to writing Cantonese opera librettos for Tai Lung Fung Troupe and others. He retired in 1973. Another three decades passed. But his timeless librettos and scripts linger on and serve as testimony to his talent and glory days. ♦

**Donna Chu** was a freelance cultural worker until joining the General Education Unit of the University of Hong Kong early this year. She has conducted over 120 interviews with Hong Kong film veterans for the HKFA Oral History Project since 1996.

## On the Evaluation of Lai Man-wai and Lai Pak-hoi

Law Kar

At the seminar 'Lai Man-wai: Between Hong Kong and China' held on 19 October 2003, our distinguished speakers from Guangzhou, film historians Li Yizhuang and Zhou Chengren, provided stimulating thoughts on some controversial aspects of Lai's film journey, some of which were also addressed by film historian Yu Mo-wan and Lai's son, Mr Lai Shek. Due to time constraints, many unresolved issues had to be picked up after the session, which I would like to mention here for our readers' reference.

Mr Zhou highlighted the intricacies of power struggles within United Photoplay that helped shed light on the merits or otherwise of Luo Mingyou and Lai. It was a noteworthy direction, and I agree with Li's advocacy to pursue more vigorously the study on Lai Pak-hoi. There is, until recent years, only sparse research on pioneering filmmakers such as Law, Lai, Leung Siu-po and Kwan Man-ching, and a new appraisal will not be possible until new materials and evidence are brought to light. The Lai brothers collaborated (Pak-hoi started at an even earlier time) to open up Hong Kong cinema and their efforts deserve equal recognition and praise. When Hong Kong Minxin dissolved, the brother went separate ways. Pak-hoi was instrumental in the revival of Hong Kong film industry in the late 1920s. The brothers later joined hands at United Photoplay, with Man-wai overseeing the production unit in Shanghai and Pak-hoi taking charge of the Hong Kong studio. (I'd like to make a correction in Paragraph 22 of the *Lai Man-wai's Footsteps* exhibition leaflet on the account of Lai Pak-hoi's participation in United Photoplay: the ownership of Lai's Hong Kong Film Company were transferred to United Photoplay under a merger, and his share of filming equipment hailed from the dissolved Minxin went into United Photoplay for setting up its Third Studio in Hong Kong. My thanks to Zhou for reminding me the discrepancy.) My views concur with Zhou's that future studies should dwell on the operations of United Photoplay in order to better understand the roles and contributions of the trio made to Hong Kong cinema.

Of course, 'Father of Hong Kong cinema' is more an honorific than a historical appraisal. Lai Man-wai's involvement in filmmaking was diverse, ranging from cinemas, film companies and studios, and he was among the first to shoot newsreels and documentaries. With a few good decades of filmmaking experience under his belt, Lai returned to Hong Kong in 1938 to run a studio during wartime,

and in the post-war years introduced the latest processing techniques to local cinema. Comparing his long presence to Pak-hoi, who faded out after mid-1930s, I believe his contributions are still greater than his brother's and to hail him as 'Father of Hong Kong cinema' is appropriate withal. 🍀

**Law Kar** is a renowned film culture researcher and has been a programmer for the Hong Kong International Film Festival between 1991 and 2000. He is now Programmer of HKFA.





## Conservation, Preservation and Restoration of Film

Edward Tse

'Conservation, preservation, restoration' - these are some of those confusing but frequently used terms that have created a lot of trouble for literature and documentation in our world of film archiving. Even before the recent advance in film or audio-visual material archiving, they were very difficult to define without ambiguity when applied to other disciplines like museums and libraries.

Traditionally, 'preservation' means a preventive mode of 'conservation', which employs every means to control the climate around the object of interest so as to provide it with the optimum surviving environment for long-term storage and display. It explains why the control of climatic parameters such as temperature, relative humidity, light intensity, ultraviolet radiation exposure and air quality are so important in this aspect. When deteriorating factors of the materials that make up the object are reduced to their minimum, the item is said to be 'preserved'. 'Restoration', on the other hand, can be considered as an active mode of conservation whereby direct and active intervention is deemed necessary to either arrest the active deterioration, or to restore the condition of the object to its original state. Of course, there are ethical considerations and practice guidelines for conservators to decide on the most suitable treatment for a particular object and the same treatment method may be modified to suit individual cases.

To film archiving, these terms have yet another level of meaning. In its most general sense, 'film preservation' includes activities such as duplication, restoration, conservation and reconstruction, access and exhibition under suitable conditions. Its aim is to preserve the integrity of a film and to bring back the original cinematic experience when the film is released to a present-day audience. Thus, preservation not only secures the continual survival of an original work by



During a recent film restoration project of *A Page of History* (1941), the concept of reconstruction from two different print sources was applied to improve the overall image quality of the film.

preventing further damage, it also tries to return it to a state as close to its original as possible and to provide access to the artefact. It follows that 'film conservation' is a set of practices to protect the film from further degradation through proper handling techniques and the use of suitable storage materials. Recent trend in museum conservation, which emphasises minimum intervention and a passive mode of conservation (by controlling the environment instead of interfering the object itself) as described above, may also be applied here for film. Obviously, the objective of 'film restoration' is to return the film back to its original state - a near impossible task - by compensating for the loss and degradation using technical, photochemical, mechanical, optical or other editorial means of manipulating the film.

It is interesting to see that these are practices specific to and may only be applicable to film or audio-visual material preservation. The most obvious example is the extensive use of duplication in film preservation. Another one is the reconstruction of a film obtained from different sources in typical film restoration projects. ♦

**Edward Tse** is the Assistant Curator I (Conservation) of HKFA.



### Behind the RC Help Desk: Enquiries Service

People who envisage that librarians are professionals responsible for the arrangement, cataloguing and circulation service of library collections only have half of the picture. Serving the public as a front-line division, librarians at our Resource Centre (RC) also have to attend to film reference enquires every day, and have enjoyed many amusing moments...

#### Monique Shiu

##### Librarian

Since the opening of the Hong Kong Film Archive in January 2001, the Resource Centre (RC) has received more than 76,600 local and overseas film reference enquiries through various channels, be they in person, by telephone, email, facsimile, or by post. Whether expressed in a matter-of-fact or restrained manner, with a keen enthusiasm, or with a tinge of shyness, they invariably taught me the importance of communication and mutual understanding on the 'information superhighway'.

In order to effectively attend to an enquiry and offer our users more favourable solutions, one must first understand the nature of the question. In cases of generic questions that are vague in context and with broad subject scope, we will usually direct the users to conduct a preliminary search on our Internet database, or to visit the RC to review literature and audio-visual materials that may offer them useful clues.

Besides assisting users in their research endeavours, the RC is an excellent platform to facilitate exchanges and promote mutual understandings. A couple of years ago, a student came all the way from Italy to research on her screen idol Jet Li for her graduation thesis. I happened to introduce her to a range of archival materials and mentioned to her the Cantonese film star Kwan Tak-hing, a forerunner of Li, who starred in a series of early Wong Fei-hung kung fu films. The discovery stuck her a perfect foil to her object of research, and thus a discourse on the legendary actor made its way to her thesis. Last year, the new graduate visited us again, bringing her thesis as a gift. We were glad to have acquired a unique academic paper to our collection along with illustrations drawn by her boyfriend. One of the pictures features a *Lohan* striking a kung fu pose!

Many of our regular patrons are either film buffs or ardent followers of screen icons of their times, and many a time they would selflessly donate their precious collections to the Archive for preservation, or act as a middleman to arrange for the visits by film stars. From time to time, the RC would be graced by the 'incognito tours' - made by film workers, actors and their friends and relatives, and families of late filmmakers. We would greet our important guests with stills and brochures of the films they starred or participated in. While they fondly reminisced on the old days, we felt that our efforts were well rewarded.

Handling public enquiries is, to me, a challenging but interesting task. It is through exchanging film knowledge and dwelling into intriguing and complex issues that gave me the most satisfaction. I love this challenge!

### **Yvonne Chow**

#### **Assistant Librarian**

It's been almost a year since I joined the Film Archive. The work at the RC is hectic but fun. Compared to other libraries that receive mostly personal and telephone enquiries, our users (many of whom are from our overseas users) tend to communicate via emails. From my experience, a friendly tone and an organised presentation always help in conducting a thorough research on the enquiry. Sometimes, though, the economical use of words typical to email correspondences means that an enquiry won't be clearly expressed and comprehended unless the two parties follow up with further email exchanges. I think I must have become pen friends of many of our users in the Internet Age!

### **Pinky Tam**

#### **Assistant Librarian**

The RC has received a fair amount of technical enquiries. A few amateur filmmakers have learned from our on-line catalogue that film prints kept in the Archive collection were transferred to the video format for permanent storage. It occurs to them that their footages and film prints might deteriorate with the passage of time. They would convey their concerns to the RC with queries about transferring film prints to the video or digital format. Usually they are pleased to be informed that such kind of services are widely provided by local post production companies.

## **Karen Kan**

### **Cataloguer**

Many of our film reference enquiries are related to copyrights issues and services provided by the RC, and a few odd ones have left us a deeper impression. One user wanted to find out where to purchase the props employed in a certain film, and some were interested in the theme songs and profiles of the actors. Unfortunately, little information of early films survives today. Though exhausting printed and Internet sources for the answers took up a great deal of time, it is a valuable learning process for us.



The RC team: Monique Shiu (middle, sitting) and Pinky Tam, Karen Kan and Yvonne Chow (from left)

## **New Services at the RC**

Starting from 8 September 2003, via our computer workstation, you can access the web world of films. Simply by the touch of a single button, or explore our electronic resources including CD-ROMs of film information, and electronic news such as 'WiseNews Database', which houses news articles published by over a hundred local, mainland, Taiwan and Macau newspapers since 1998.



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Mr Yon Fan

**Thank You!**

### Encounter with Ann Hui

Those who clung to their seats in the Archive cinema after the screening of *The Spooky Bunch* (1980) on 17 August 2003 were no doubt running on an emotional high as they joined the alumni reunion of the film's director Ann Hui, art director Rebecca Lee and actor-cum-PA Tina Lau - the three success elements of a thriller that the producer-cum-actress Josephine Siao claimed 'still gives [her] a "spiritual high"'.

Hui opened the session with a short, witty remark: her biggest relief of watching *The Spooky Bunch* again after all these years was that members of her crew (many now her chums) were all 'alive and kicking'. Hui has always been known for her frankness.

The alumni gathering was the perfect occasion to reminisce about the fun times. Lee was thrilled to work with an all-female crew. A meeting had even been set up with a Buddhist priest who would shed light on the compatibility of the women. A graphic designer working in advertising, Lee finally fulfilled her aspiration to work on 3-D images while indulging herself in the glittering and dazzling world of colours in *The Spooky Bunch*. The film, incidentally, was her cinematic debut. She described, with humour, the psychic experiences encountered during the shooting. Understandably worried that the shooting of a ghost film bordered on trespassing upon the supernatural zone, the crew superstitiously followed stage customs, especially during night shooting; once, she tried to snap a spirit tablet placed inside an ancestral temple with a Polaroid but no matter how many shots she took, the images still came out blurred. She jokingly said it would take a virgin to accomplish the task. Lee was impressed by Hui's professionalism and looked to her as a role model in making films.





(From left) Tina Lau, Ann Hui, Rebecca Lee

Tina Lau, who played a female ghost in the film, originally worked as a production assistant. Her first break in acting, as she remembered, was the outcome of some hilarious and odd coincidences. One day the crew assembled at Josephine Siao's place for a meeting. Lau was loitering about aimlessly, until everyone gazed at this unfamiliar face and started to 'examine' her. It was Siao who tapped her for the role. Lau ended up busying herself both on-and behind-the-scenes. She was generous enough to share with the audience an embarrassing episode. One of her duties was to collect the cash for paying the temporary workers on every Sunday but there was one time she forgot to drop by the bank the day before. With cash dispensers unheard of in those days, an anxious Lau shed tears in front of producer Chui Po-chu. Luckily, the resourceful producer saved the day, by raising enough cash to pay the staff. She learned her lesson well and had since always prepared for a rainy day. Lau enjoyed a lifelong friendship with the cast and crew of *The Spooky Bunch* and more importantly, she fell in love with the cinema and was influenced by it so profoundly so that she terminated the contract with TVB and pursued film studies in Canada.

Hui's exclusive behind-the-scenes reports jolted the audience into laughter: the feeble Chui Po-chu would dare to negotiate with triad members who came extorting protection money; deputy director Stanley Kwan resorted to his secret weapon - tears - in a row with the property master, who finally gave in to his whining. She said that Kwan truly lived up to being the deputy director of an all-female crew. It was Hui's idea to shoot the film on Cheung Chau. She knew the island like the back of her hand having conducted on site research for a RTHK television series there. She was especially fond of the holiday bungalows, more specifically the unique décor of each room. Hui herself couldn't but harbour the suspicion that those infamous haunted bungalows in the Tung Tai area was the aftermath of her film! This time, even Hui couldn't hold back her laughter at the joke.

Of course, the soul of the film was Josephine Siao, who first conceived the story. Ann Hui remembered vividly the day Siao approached her to direct a story about an opera troupe. Striking a cord, Hui agreed immediately. Turned out that the film wasn't a tragic melodrama as she first thought to be—Siao wanted to shoot a scary movie! But it was a comic ghost film so light-hearted that even the children would embrace it. Hui doubted her own ability, but Siao's persistence and stamina gave her the much needed confidence. Each day before the shooting commenced, Siao would go through the shooting script to make sure that it was flawless. Of course, there were scenes improvised on the set, such as the hilarious English line uttered while burning the paper offerings for the little lady ghost. Hui gave her rendition live and it did its trick again. The audience burst into laughter. She also confessed that, being young and hotheaded, she didn't see eye to eye with Siao at first, but their subsequent conversations left her in awe of the actress. While concerning herself only with the camera movement and techniques, Hui said, Siao who enjoyed an early start in the cinema saw things from a broad perspective and knew exactly how a film should look and her acting would be apprehended by the audience. Hui first dismissed the all-female creative ensemble as a flashy gimmick and only later did she appreciate it as a celebration of the liberation of Hong Kong women from the kitchen.

Educated in a Roman Catholic school, Hui believed she was 'overly disciplined' by the nuns, though it didn't put a damper on her obsession with things and ideas bizarre and out of the norm in the slightest. She found the idea of 'watch out or they'll get you' in the film fascinating. When asked if she also released her inner demon while shooting horror films, Hui nodded in agreement. When shooting *The Secret* (1979), her heart was weighed down by the gloomy atmosphere of the psycho-thriller about a person straddling the border between life and death. Naturally, she was exhilarated to learn that Siao had in mind a buzzing, lively film - a much welcome change of mode. The lively film obviously benefited from her emancipation.

Although much had been said about their fondness of the film, the trio pulled no punches in their criticisms. Hui praised the performance of the cast but thought the plot structure was less than perfect, and the haunted night scene dragged on way too long; Lau grumbled at a technical flaw in one of the ending scenes - the bunch of ghosts sadly miss the gourd's mouth where they are supposed to be sucked into.

When asked the merits of an all-female creative ensemble (aside from

cinematographer Tony Hope and deputy director Stanley Kwan), the three speakers thought that women were far more decisive, direct and clear-cut in making decisions and executing them, unlike their male counterparts who often beat about the bush and stammered in their speech. An amused Cheung Man-yee, ex-RTHK head, couldn't have agreed more. A member in the audience said that the female personas are stronger in character than their male counterparts. Tina Lau believed that it was less a manoeuvre than the manifestation of their subconscious mind.

The eloquent speakers and an enthusiastic audience no doubt livened up the session. Younger members of the audience were particularly fascinated by the old, if not ludicrous, indigenous and folk practices depicted in the film. Characters in the film actually believed that a girl would become pregnant by just sitting on a man's bed. While chuckling at its absurdity, Rebecca Lee was quick to point out that she too was brought up to believe in the same old story! Some said that they had been haunted by eerie associations with Cheung Chau since their first viewing. Twenty years later, they learned to see what could very well be a light-hearted comedy in a new light. When congratulated on the dazzling colours of the film, Hui explained that the film print was sent to Japan for colour calibration; she nearly fell off her chair when she saw how different the calibrated images looked from the original; the cinematographer had to clam her nerves and reassured her that the print indeed looked superb. Art director Rebecca Lee also contributed her special part in designing the wardrobe of an opera troupe, which had to be colourful and rich.

Tin Lau ended the session, however reluctantly to an enthusiastic audience, by saying that her participation in the film as a mere twenty something was truly a blessing. She had made friends and knowledge that lasted a lifetime. Lau would, from time to time, take out her digital camera to snap some shots so that she could 'email them to Fong Fong [Josephine Siao].' Rebecca Lee had Ann Hui to thank for the break from 2-D to 3-D.

The film was a fun-packed project to our three guests of honour who cherished the experience to this day. And the magic ingredient of this whimsical comedy-thriller has to be the lively spirit of its key players. (Collated by Kiki Fung; translated by Agnes Lam) ◆

## Lo Dun on Stage and Film

The late Lo Dun (also known affectionately as Uncle Lo) is a vanguard of the stage and the cinema in South China, devoting his life to the pursuit of the two arts. Not only an established figure in the cinema, television and drama, Lo was also an accomplished screenwriter, director and producer. Hosted by HKFA programmer Law Kar, a seminar was held on 13th September devoting to a reminiscence of Lo's theatrical glory with May Tse and Dr Lo Wai-luk, Lo's colleagues at the Hong Kong Movie and TV Theatrical Society which Lo established at his advanced age, and discussion on his artistry and contribution to the arts.

The session began with an oral history interview excerpt with Lo. He recounted how he had to drop out of school at an early age, got himself enrolled in the Guangdong Theatre College in his teen years, and graduated to promote the development of the local drama in the 1930s. A decade later, Lo crossed over to



(From left) May Tse, Law Kar and Dr Lo Wai-luk

the cinema, acting in and directing Cantonese films. Law Kar believed that Lo's greatest 'asset' is the vicissitudes of his life - a profound training in the performing arts, and the turbulent War of Resistance years that steeled Lo and aspired cultural workers to fight against the invading forces and address gross social injustices. *Old Memories of Canton* (1951) and *In the Face of Demolition* (1953) were two of his films imbued with the true spirit of co-operation with his intimate co-workers. Lo benefited enormously from his apprenticeship under Ouyang Yuqian, a man who had unparalleled knowledge of Eastern and Western arts - both contemporary and ancient - and Choi Cho-sang. Lo's rendition of *The Wet Paint* some sixty years after its premiere in 1930s was no doubt a tribute to his mentor. Cai's *Tears of Yangtze* aka *Spring River Flows East* (1947), on the other hand, taught him that education and propaganda had to be appealing and popularist enough to strike a cord with the average viewer. Later, Lo made *Bus Money Wiped out the Evils* (1966) as a satire on capitalist exploitation, which was entertaining and oozing an aura of knight-errantry. Whether in his early years or at an advanced age, Lo Dun never failed to keep his finger firmly on the pulse, and offered his critique through the camera and acting. He was more than willing to nurture new talents, giving promising stars their break and sidelined to play his equally adept antagonistic roles, clown figures and mature roles.

It was in 1988 that May Tse, lead actress of the Hong Kong Movie and TV Theatrical Society, first made the acquaintance of Uncle Lo. It marked the beginning of their subsequent collaborations in *Thunderstorm*, *Family* and *Sunrise*. Tse was awed by the passion of the veteran towards drama. Not only making stage appearances at an advanced age of over 80, Lo paid several visits to the original playwright Cao Yu. Lo's stubbornness and hot temper, according to Tse, was what compelled him to do his best, even if it meant exercising a 'parental control' over the running of the society often down to the nitty-gritty. But a warm, caring senior as Lo was, he coached the players unreservedly and did his best to complement the ones who came short on stage.

Dr Lo Wai-luk remembered how he was in awe of the characteristic earnestness and vibrancy found in a young newcomer that an elderly Lo radiated, when they formed partnership in staging *Under the Roofs of Shanghai* (written by Xia Xian). Originally working behind the curtain, Uncle Lo rediscovered the fun of acting and starred in a cameo part as a teacher. He gave a dazzling performance of an absent-minded but nevertheless responsible teacher - by learning his part well and setting the scenes at perfect, rhythmic pace with the ebb and flow of everyday life. 'Lo and his contemporaries possessed their signature acting system, while differing from the Stanislavsky school, blended the characterisation of the role itself with their own unique quality,' Dr Lo explained. He also believed that a responsible, conscious social advocate and stage and screen pioneer like Lo Dun progressed with the times, and clung to his ideals to the bitter end.

A delighted and emotionally touched Lo Dun's daughter, who was present in the audience, expressed her gratitude to the three speakers and people who appreciated and respected her father's work. (Collated by Edith Chiu; translated by Agnes Lam)



### **The Performing Art of Luo Pinchao**

The Archive had the honour to host 'The Performing Art of Luo Pinchao' seminar on the 18 October, with Luo Pinchao himself as the guest speaker. His fans were already eagerly expecting in the theatre when 92 year-old Uncle Kam (his real name is Luo Siu-kam) walked into venue. Despite his age, Luo was full of spirit, rendering a most animated account of his performing life, with impromptu singings as demonstration. The audience was totally captivated. The lively atmosphere climaxed with the presentation of a memento by Archive Programmer Law Kar. The

seminar had to come to an end, but his fans still surrounded him and refused to call it a day. It shows how Luo, one of the famed artists of his time, has captured the heart of the people.

In his introduction, host Lai Kin pointed out that the performing life of Lo, which strode from the 1920s of last century to the 21st century, is an invaluable reflection of the development of the two art forms, Cantonese opera and cinema. He demarcated Luo's performing life into several stages. The 1920s was his learning period, when he studied Cantonese opera, Peking opera and drama in Guangzhou. When he joined the Kok Sin Sing Troupe in the 1930s his performing career was well on its track. The decade from 1941 to 51 saw the heyday of his career in Cantonese opera and the cinema. He formally retired in the 1980s and settled in America. But he still makes trips to Guangzhou and Hong Kong to take part in performance.

Luo started his account of his life on the stage and the studio with the line 'the world is but a stage, life is but a stage.' He lost his mother when he was very small and in his teens, his father sent him to the Huadi Orphanage. He did not have a comfortable childhood but he was impressed by the Cantonese operas he saw. He first studied the art from Hua Gu Jiang in the Orphanage. He took part in the performance of *How Third Madam Educated Her Son* and played the female role of Third Madam, and in *Guo Ziyi Celebrates His Birthday*, he played the role of Guo Ai. He later studied Peking opera and drama in Guangdong Theatre College of the Guangdong Dramatic Research Institute. He was greatly inspired by drama and the theoretical training helped him develop and access the inner thinking of his characters, which was lacking in Cantonese opera.



(From right) Law Kar, Luo Pinchao, Lai Kin

Luo had the chance to see the stage performances of opera legends such as Sit Kok-sin, Ma Si-tsang and Pak Yuk-tong. He was most influenced by Sit Kok-sin as he joined the Kok Sin Sing Troupe in the 1930s and shared the stage with him. He of course drilled on Sit's performance and vocal technique, though he modestly said that he lacked the essence of Sit's art. He later went on tour with other great artists such as Chin Lei Kui and Chan Fei-nung, and gradually made his own name on stage. Seeing the rising star in him, Unique Film Productions asked him to come back to Hong Kong

and starred in *The Butterfly Lovers* (Part One and Two, 1935), which confirmed his star status. During the Japanese Occupation, he formed his own Kwong Wah Troupe and performed *Luo Cheng Writes His Letter*, the play that established his personal style.

Whether in cinema or Cantonese opera, Luo said that the most important thing for an artist is to establish his/her own vocal and performing style. It demands a respect of tradition on top of innovations. He himself had innovated the vocal technique of Cantonese opera by incorporating the bass vocal to his vocal range. He got the inspiration from a black bass vocalist.

Luo is currently busy preparing his world tour to commemorate the eightieth anniversary of his stage career. It is his wish to set a new record, when a 92-year-old artist can still strut his stuff on the stage. It will also be an honour for Cantonese opera.

In his conclusion, Lai Kin attributed Lo's artistic achievement to his comprehensive and solid training and his innovative spirit. He was well grounded in the Southern style and he infused into it the dramatic theories he learned in theatre school. He enriched Cantonese opera technique by incorporating elements from Peking opera. His contributions to the Cantonese opera make him the living treasure of this venerated art form. (Collated by Edith Chiu; translated by Teri Chan.) ●



## In the Footsteps of Lai Man-wai: Seminars

### 1. The Man, The Time, Cinema

In association with Commercial Press

To complement the publication of *The Dairy of Lai Man-wai*, a seminar titled 'Lai Man-wai: The Man, The Time, Cinema' was held on the afternoon of 20 September, in the Exhibition Hall of the Star House Commercial Press. The first collaboration between Hong Kong Film Archive and the Commercial Press, the seminar was chaired by Law Kar, Programmer of Hong Kong Film Archive, with Lai Shek, the sixth child of Lai, as guest speaker, who was generous with anecdotes of his late father, the father of Chinese cinema.

The seminar kicked off with a short film, in which the children of Lai, Lai Lan, Lai Ping, Lai Suen and Lai Shek reminisced on their late father. Overcome with emotion, Lai Suen could not help but let her tears flow. Lai's old friends such as Bao Fong and Zhu Shuhong (cinematographer) also talked about their acquaintances. According to Bao, Lai's ambition was quite evident when once talking about his choosing cinema over business, he compared it to Lu Xun giving up medicine for the pen.

#### A Life-long Commitment

The seminar focused on Lai Man-wai and his time. Law Kar calls him 'a pioneer in cinema, a pioneer in revolution'. Lai was born in Japan and grew up in Hong Kong, and studied in Queen's College and St Paul's College respectively. He exhibited his zeal for revolution and photography in his teens, taking part in Revolutionary Alliance (Hong Kong) activities when he was just seventeen, eighteen years old (late Qing period), promoting revolution through *wenming xi* ('civilised plays'). He had his own ideas on arts and revolution, and could merge the two together. In 1913, he came to know Benjamin Brodsky, who filmed *Stealing Roasted Duck* (1909) in Hong Kong. He collaborated with him in making the first Hong Kong made film, *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* (1913), with the participation of his elder brother Lai Pak-hoi, wife Yim Shan-shan and his friend Law Wing-cheung. In 1925, he made Hong Kong's first feature film *Rouge*, until then he shuttled between Hong Kong and Guangzhou and financed his filmmaking in these two cities. Besides feature films, Lai was also keen on newsreel shooting. For a period of time, he followed Sun Yat-sen around with his camera, and recorded down all the historical moments of the founding father of the Chinese Republic. The newsreels of the Northern

Expedition were later edited into *A Page of History* (1941), the first documentary on the Chinese Revolution. During the War of Resistance, he made *The Battle of Shanghai* (1937), capturing the Japanese invasion of China.

Lai was keen on experiencing new filming techniques. In *Romance of the West Chamber* (1927), the dream sequence was shot with superimposition technique. The double roles of Ruan Lingyu appeared on the same scene in *Love and Duty* (1931). The celebrated aerial shot in *A Page of History* (1941) was filmed by him mounting a camera on an aeroplane.

Lai was also the founder of a number of film companies. He first set up China Sun (Minxin) in Hong Kong and then Shanghai China Sun. He co-founded United Photoplay Service (Lianhua) with Luo Mingyou, which became the biggest film company of China in the 1930s, with studios in Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong and Sichuan, boasting classics such as *Love and Duty* (1931), *The Goddess* (1934), *Song of the Fisherman* (1934) and *Big Road* (1935), and a galaxy of cast and crew such as Ruan Lingyu, Bu Wancang, Fei Mu, Zhu Shilin, Xun Yu and Cai Chusheng.

Lai's life was practically tied up with the development of Chinese cinema. When he was still very young, he already made use of the budding drama and cinema art form to promote revolutionary ideas. Though not very active in directing in the 1920s and 30s, he helped to establish that first golden period of Chinese cinema by actively involved in studio administration and technique development. His passion for cinema was so great that he lived next door to a studio. Encouraged by him, his two wives, Yim Shan-shan and Lam Chor-chor became actresses. The Lai clan is literally an acting family: Lai Hang, Lai Shek (child star and cinematographer), Lai Suen, Lai Cheuk-cheuk.... Law Kar pointed out that though Lai and his family planted the seed and tended the growth of Chinese cinema, his last years was, regretfully, not of rewards and enjoyment but destitution. His fortune was all spent in filmmaking and he suffered from a poor health. Though his eldest daughter and her husband asked him to live with them in Taiwan, and Beijing also invited him to oversee technological development there, he did not want his presence to be interpreted as a political statement, and thus chose to stay in Hong Kong. As a man who gave his fortune and passion to cinema and revolution, he was by any account one of the most important figures in the history of modern China and cinema, yet he was almost forgotten after his death in 1953. Law Kar said that it was about time his achievement and contribution as a pioneer of Chinese cinema be recognised and, with the collaboration of Lai Shek, his life and legacy could finally be appreciated by

the public through the media of text and image.

### Living for Ideals

As the sixth child of Lai Man-wai, Lai Shek's reminiscence and memory of his father was up close and personal. Lai lived through the most turbulent times of modern China, from the overthrowing of the Qing dynasty to the establishment of the Republic to the War of Resistance. Lai



(From right) Lai Shek, Law Kar

Shek said that going through his father's life was like going through a period of Chinese modern history. History alone is not the complete picture. Lai Shek tried to see his father's achievement objectively through the limitations of his times, and demarcated his life into three stages.

#### 1. The Pursuit

Lai Man-wai had a passion for trying new things. He liked to experience new perspectives and techniques in photography when small. With his deep interest in techniques and arts, photography and cinema were, to him, the perfect combination of his two interests. These two art forms, quite naturally, became his life long pursuit. With his close relationship with the revolutionaries, he could easily pursue a career in politics after the overthrowing of the Qing dynasty. But witnessing too much political intrigue, he felt that the edification of the people was a much more meaningful pursuit and turned to the cinema instead.

#### 2. The Realisation

With his pursuit set, it was the long process of realising his ideals. The ten years between filming *Zhuangzi Tests his Wife* and filming Sun Yat-sen in his Northern Expedition was his learning and trying out period. The process was far from easy: the cameras at that time did not come with a motor and the film had to be wound manually. Following the troops around was formidable indeed; he had to navigate mountains with the heavy camera on his shoulder. Most of his films did not make money, which made his works all the more difficult. When China Sun applied for the construction of a studio in Hong Kong, he was asked to grease some palms. At that time he was still a man of fortune, but he refused to partake in bribery. The shooting of *Rouge* was moved to Guangzhou instead. Only after a lot of manoeuvres the films could be taken back to Hong Kong for processing.

Later, he set up Shanghai China Sun with his friend Li Yingsheng in Shanghai, and personally involved in the filming of *Romance of the West Chamber* and *Mulan Congjun/Mulan Joins the Army* (1928). The film crew traversed provinces for the desert, fortress and Great Wall scenes of *Mulan*, which were shot on location. But Unique Film Productions' copycat *Hua Mulan Congjun/Hua Mulan Joins the Army* (1927) beat China Sun's to the theatre, and China Sun's *Mulan Congjun* subsequently flopped at the box office and incurred a huge loss. The first Chinese anti-imperialist film *Tears of the Motherland* (1928) and the docudrama *Cai Gongshi* (1928), because of their sensitive subjects, were banned from overseas distribution and release in the Concession Area. Lai Shek said that Lai lost a total of four hundred thousand dollars of his own money at that time. It was about hundred million in today's money. But Lai did not mind using up his fortune for his ideals.

Lai did go through a low period after the series of setbacks. But he was given a boost when Luo Mingyou asked for his collaboration in the revival of Chinese cinema. With the encouragement from Lam Chor-chor, he and Luo co-founded United Photoplay Service. In its heyday, United Photoplay boasted seven studios in the country. Lai oversaw the seven studios and talents and he personally managed Studio One. But the running of United Photoplay was not as smoothly as it seemed. The studios were quite independent and communication problems were frequent. Because the directors were not given a budget ceiling, filming was generally slow, resulting in high cost and low production. United Photoplay was greatly hit by the suicide of Ruan Lingyu. In 1937, Japan launched its invasion of China; it was detrimental to United Photoplay. But Lai did not give up. He even sold off his own real estates to help ease United Photoplay's financial difficulties.

### 3. Perseverance

Lai exhibited extraordinary tenacity and determination in realising his ideals. He refused to collaborate with the Japanese Occupation Army and escaped back to Hong Kong. When the Japanese invaders in Hong Kong committed Qiming Studio to the fire, he rushed into the vault to salvage the prints, though he could only save a few. More than fifty local filmmakers, like Tso Kea and Yung Siu-yee, sought refuge in his Wong Tai Sin home. He took them all in with hospitality. Even in straitened circumstances, his passion for cinema and photography remained intact. In a time when film was scarce, he would ingeniously use up the film he could get hold of by shooting with a half-frame camera borrowed from a friend.

Lai Shek described his father as an honest man, a hands-on filmmaker who liked to keep a low profile. When group pictures were taken, he always took the corner position. Thus he was not one to blow his own trumpet. His children had to dig up his life and achievements. Lai Shek summed up his cinema achievements as follows: firstly, he founded Hong Kong's first film company, made Hong Kong's first short feature film, the first feature film and the first documentary. Secondly, he made several documentaries of immense historical value, and he reflected the historical times in his feature films. He founded United Photoplay Service, which ushered in the first golden age of Chinese cinema and nurtured some of the most excellent actors and directors of the time. But the most laudable was his innovative spirit. His aerial shot of the Northern Expedition, though lasted but a few seconds, made cinema history. Most importantly, it reflected his total commitment to the art form, and provided the inspiration and aspiration for us all. (Collated by Kiki Fung; translated by Teri Chan) ◆

## 2. Between Film and Theatre

Co-organised with Chung Ying Theatre Company

To explore the contributions of Lai Man-wai to the cinema and theatre of Hong Kong and China, the Archive, together with Chung Ying Theatre Company, organised a seminar at the Archive Exhibition Hall on 11 October. The speakers were Dr Lo Wai-luk, Assistant Professor of the School of Communication, Hong Kong Baptist University, Dr Fong Chee-fun, theatre researcher, and Mr Ko Tin-lung, Artistic Director of the Chung Ying Theatre Company.



(From left) Dr Fong Chee-fun, Dr Lo Wai-luk, Ko Tin-lung

Dr Fong Chee-fun started the seminar with a brief description of the development of theatre in China in the early 20th century. Towards the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), China was in turmoil. Those who cared about China wanted changes. People working in theatre, like those in Qingpingle Theatre Troupe, realised that mass media was an influential and effective medium of bringing changes and added revolutionary elements in theatre. Qingpingle Theatre Troupe was founded in 1911 by Lai with revolutionary comrades like Gao Jianfu, Chen Shaobai and Hu Zhantang. The name of the theatre implied that unless the Qing dynasty was overthrown, peace and happiness would not come. At that time, most of the theatrical works were produced for entertainment, but Lai used theatre as a medium to educate the public and to convey the idea of revolution and patriotism.

### The Son of His Times

Dr Lo Wai-luk called Lai 'The Son of His Times'. Born and grew up in an environment that was fuming of revolutionary spirit and anti-Qing sentiments, Lai, educated in the Western way (he went to Queen's College and St Paul's College), was ready for new ideas and new ways of thinking. In 1910, he cut his pigtail to show his discontent and his determination to cut ties with the old regime. In 1911, at the age of eighteen, he joined the Revolutionary Alliance (Hong Kong) and used theatre to spread his revolutionary ideas. The same year, he took part in the Huang Hua Gang uprising in Guangzhou. Though the uprising had failed, he was not discouraged in the slightest and vowed to overthrow the Qing court. He founded the Qingpingle

with like-minded comrades, using theatre as a means to continue his revolutionary work. After the revolution, Lai renamed his theatre company as Renwojing Theatre Troupe. Between 1912–13, he shot his first fiction film in Hong Kong with Huamei Film Company. The film was called *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife*. After that, he opened a movie theatre and founded the China Sun (Minxin), which marked the beginning of his reform in cinema.

In 1921, carrying with him a camera, Lai followed Dr Sun Yat-sen and made a documentary about the Northern Expedition. It was a very dangerous job. He also went to Japan to make a documentary of the Far Eastern Games as well as to Beijing to record the performance of the well known Peking opera performer Mei Lanfang. He used his camera as a tool to record 'the truth, the good and the beautiful'. He used cinema as 'the means to educate and promote culture', and documented great people and important events.

#### **Lai Man-wai's Revelation to Modern People**

Both Ko Tin-lung and Dr Fong Chee-fun admired the innovative spirit of Lai. Lai was brought up in a traditional and conservative China, but having had a pro-revolutionary Western education, managed to find a place between the contradictory cultures of the East and the West. That was extraordinary because many people had made similar attempts that but ended up feeling frustrated and getting nowhere. Lai did not get lost. He put together the best of East and West and sought breakthroughs and changes.

Towards the end of the session, Ko shared with the audience the experience of creating the drama *Action! Mr Lai!*. He said he learned from Lai the importance of putting together talents. Lai gave opportunities to talented people. When he met someone with ability and ideals, no matter how young or inexperienced he/she was, he gave him/her the break. Ko admired Lai's attitude and said that the Hong Kong Government should follow his example. (Collated by Helen Chan; translated by Yeung Wai-man)





### **3. Between Hong Kong and China**

Co-organised with Chung Ying Theatre Company

At the third session (19 October) of the seminars series held to commemorate the 110-year anniversary of the birth of Lai Man-wai, father of Hong Kong cinema, our three distinguished speakers - film historians Zhou Chengren, wife Li Yizhuang and Yu Mo-wan - and the host Law Kar invited the audience to follow in Lai's early footsteps in the twin cities of Shanghai and Hong Kong where he and brother Lai Pak-hoi founded their first companies and embarked on a film odyssey which would forever change the landscape of Hong Kong cinema.

#### **The Sun Shone in Shanghai**

Zhou Chengren's discussion focused on the period during which Lai Man-wai established his two Shanghai companies, China Sun and United Photoplay, and the obstacles and limitations along the way. Lai founded China Sun (Minxin) Motion Picture Company with his brothers in Hong Kong, and went on to establish China Sun Motion Picture Co Ltd with Li Yingsheng in Shanghai. Despite the apparent affiliation, the former was not a succession of the latter - Shanghai China Sun was not a transplant from its Hong Kong offshore company, but rather an independent entity formed after China Sun (HK)'s closure. Yu Mo-wan also noted the different paths the Lai brothers were treading, which hastened the establishment of China Sun - Man-wai was contemplating shifting the operation to Shanghai, but Pak-hoi wanted to stay behind in the territory.

Directors Bu Wancang and Ouyang Yuqian were the founding members of Shanghai China Sun. It was largely a family affair. Members of the two families were recruited as staple actors of the studio, boosted by the signing of famed actress Zhang Zhiyun. Since both Lai Man-wai and Li Yingsheng were Kuomintang members, it was then no surprise that the studio had gained the party's support one way or another. Responding to Lai's left-wing mentality, Zhou refuted this judgmental pronouncement on someone's political convictions based solely on his/her social life. It was probably true that KMT veterans had had high hopes for China Sun but Lai himself never got involved in politics nor did he get embroiled in the political infightings between the Communists and the KMT.

Amid a 1920s Shanghai cinema inundated with martial arts fantasies churned out by its thirty-three companies, Lai was fighting an uphill battle against the prevailing culture, by instilling moral and social values in the cinema with his films. Of all China Sun productions, Ouyang Yuqian's *Why Not Her* (1926), *Three Years After* (1926) and *A Wandering Songstress* (1927) were the most emblematic of Lai's ideals. Addressing social injustices and singing praises of the spirits of the youth, these critical works were radically different from the fantasy realm portrayed in 'The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple' series in vogue. Hou Yao's *Way Down West* (1927) fulfilled Lai's quest for artistic freedom and expression. Hou interpreted the film allegorically and in a way that he saw fit, sacrificing historical authenticity for aesthetic concerns. He gave full rein to the expression of emotions as the plot dictated, instead of following the original story to the letter. Lai risked losing the acceptance of overseas markets and the occupied territory and insisted to make *Tears of Motherland* (1928) and *Cai Gongshi* (1928). All this time, he was determined to mount resistance to challenge cheap thrills and fantasies. Even the one-off market pleaser *Avalokitesvara's Way* (1927) was Li Yingsheng's idea, as revealed by Lai's wife Lam Chor-chor in an interview with Yu Mo-wan.

The reason for China Sun's closure was mainly financial, but admittedly Lai and Li fell out half way through the partnership due to a personality clash. Unlike Lai who pledged his life to pursuing the art of film, Li saw filmmaking as a business. Zhou Chengren quoted from Ouyang Yuqing's memoirs that the collapse of China Sun was attributable to Lai's failure to find a partner who shared with him the same vision in filmmaking. That aside, Lai's inability to establish long-term partnerships with his directors and screenwriters also resulted in their successive departures. Zhou believed that Lai's reserved and shy personality had a part to play.



(From right) Li Yizhuang, Law Kar, Zhou Chengren,  
Yu Mo-wan

#### **The Melting Pot at United Photoplay**

Following the departure of Li Yingsheng, Lai could no longer run the studio on his own. Zhou quoted Gongsun Lu's and Tu Yün-chih's saying that Lai had lost his zeal for filmmaking having suffered great financial loss and the blows of life, until Luo Mingyou invited him to establish United Photoplay Service Ltd. Its inaugural film was *He's Back From the*

*Jailhouse* (1930). As noted by Zhou in his reading of *The Dairy of Lai Man-wai*, there was a void to be filled between 18 February and 18 December 1929, particularly in regard to three momentous incidents: 1) How did Li and Lai part from each other? 2) Under what circumstances did Sun Yu complete *He's Back From the Jailhouse*? 3) How did Lai begin his collaboration with Luo Mingyou? It is important that future studies address these crucial issues.

Though exhausting free-flowing capital of China Sun in its entirety on making films, according to Yu Mo-wan, part of China Sun's assets were retained which Lai later sold to finance the founding of United Photoplay. Yu took issue with the saying that Lai was dejected by the financial setback. He believed that Lai's persistence and courage sailed him through the roughest seas, and by selling his assets, he bounced back and rejuvenated his career at United Photoplay, reaching a new height with his new collaborator Luo Mingyou.

United enlisted such illustrious names of the industry as Wu Xingzai, Dan Duyu and Sun Yu. Wu and Dan brought in with them a ready set-up of their respective companies that conveniently formed the backbone of United Photoplay. Sun was a pioneer figure, having participated in the New Culture Movement and learned his art in the US. He initiated writing subtitles in modern prose, dwelling in the mind of the characters and depicting even the most subtle psychological changes. His lively and refreshing approach was a league of his own.

United Photoplay had an umbrella structure under which there were a number of independent studios, releasing films of radically different, even conflicting ideologies under the same banner. This gave rise to the forming of cliques within United. The progressive style of Wu Singzai put him in direct confrontation with Lai and Luo Mingyou. The flop of *Filial Piety* (1935) and *Blood and Sand* (1936), which fell short of expectation, turned away potential share buyers. Lai Man-wai and Luo Mingyou sought help from Chen Lifu of the KMT Central Publicity Bureau, but to no avail. Reluctantly, in 1936, Luo signed a pact with Wu surrendering his share of ownership.

#### **Lai Pak-hoi, the Unsung Hero**

Li Yizhuang's discussion centred on the rarely mentioned figure Lai Pak-hoi. Li cited a comparison made by Law Kar of the Lai brothers Man-wai and Pak-hoi with the Lumières, Louis and Auguste. Pak-hoi's venture in film production began as early as

1909 when he took part in Benjamin Brodsky's *Stealing Roasted Duck* (1909) shot in Hong Kong. The making of Hong Kong's first feature film *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* (1913) was the result of Man-wai's meeting with Brodsky four years later.

While the rest of Hong Kong was recuperating from the aftermath of the Guangzhou-Hong Kong general strike, Pak-hoi stayed behind in the territory and took the lead to resurrect local cinema. By that time, Lai Man-wai had migrated to Shanghai bringing along with him a convoy of China Sun equipment. Pak-hoi's steadfastness won him the support of local mogul Hysan Lee. With what was left of China Sun, he went on to establish Hong Kong Film Company and released its inaugural film *The Witty Sorcerer* (1931), Hong Kong's first period film that Lai produced, wrote, directed and acted in. But the financial pressure was further aggravated after the completion of the second film, *The Pain of Separation* (1931). Pak-hoi sold his share of assets and invested \$20,000 in establishing Studio Three (Hong Kong) under the United Photoplay. Among the films produced during this period were *Iron Bone and Orchid Heart* (1931), Hong Kong's first film shot with hand-held camera, and *Gunshot at Midnight* (1932), the first detective film. When a shrinking United Photoplay shut down its branches outside Shanghai, he co-founded Zhonghua Sound and Silent Movies Production with Tong Sing-to and shot Hong Kong's first talkie *The Idiot's Wedding Night* (1933), ushering the local cinema into a brand new era of sound. He spared no efforts in advocating the localisation of Hong Kong cinema and recruited players from the stage to star in his films. Many of Hong Kong cinema's unique qualities were displayed in *The Idiot's Wedding Night*. Unfortunately, the company went out of business after just seven films due to insufficient funds.

Lai Pak-hoi was a selfless educator. He had established four acting schools in all to provide diverse and comprehensive training - ranging from screenwriting, directing and cinematography to make-up - to a group of budding talents crucial to the rebuilding of the film industry. Pak-hoi had demonstrated that blood is thicker than water, by putting aside his engagements in Hong Kong and travelled all the way to Peking with Lam Chor-chor and Ruan Lingyu to assist in the shooting of *He's Back From the Jailhouse* when times were rough for Man-wai and United Photoplay. When business of United Photoplay hit rock bottom in 1936 and the outlook was so bleak that even Chen Lifu refused to lend a hand, Pak-hoi did not hesitate for a second to accept Man-wai's invitation to be his manager of the revamped China Sun. Pak-hoi had always answered his brother's requests, regardless of the difficult circumstances.

Not long after, the opening battle of the Anti-Japanese War broke out in Shanghai. Man-wai returned to Hong Kong but Pak-hoi was stranded in Shanghai until 1948. A broke Pak-hoi took shelter in a rented squatter hut in Kowloon peddling cigarettes to make ends meet. When a fire struck, Pak-hoi yet again moved to Guangzhou where he ran a store selling cigarettes, herbal tea and comics. He lived his twilight years in poverty. Li Yizhuang believed that Pak-hoi truly gave everything for film. His pioneering efforts and spirits are awe-inspiring, and deserve our recognition as much as that given to his brother Man-wai. (Collated by Kiki Fung; translated by Agnes Lam) ◆



## ***In the Footsteps of Lai Man-wai Highlights***



Chung Ling-hoi, Assistant Director (Heritage and Museums), and Lai Shek officiating the opening



Programme assistant Stephanie Ng (4th right) guiding a tour to the YMCA where Lai Man-wai used to stage his plays. Among the participants were Mr and Mrs Lai Shek (2nd and 3rd right).



A special presentation by Chung Ying Theatre before the screening: (from left) William Lo reprising Lai Man-wai's cross-dressing role as Zhuangzi's wife, Ben Yuen and Angus Chan as brothers Lai Hoi-shan and Lai Pak-hoi respectively.

## Hong Kong International Film and TV Market 2003

The Hong Kong Trade Development Council again played host to the annual event held at the Hong Kong Exhibition & Convention Centre from 24 to 26 September. Echoing the theme of 'New Frontiers, Infinite Opportunities', seminars were held to explore the potential of cooperation between Chinese Mainland, Hong Kong and overseas. The HKFA seized the opportunity to introduce local and overseas visitors and the press to our service, while taking some on guided tours around the Archive building. ♦



Sabrina Baracetti (2nd right), President and staff of the Far East Film Festival of Udine, were greeted by our Programmer Law Kar, Programme Assistant Bede Cheng and Acquisition Manager Mable Ho (2nd to 4th left).



Journalists from around the world took time out to visit the Archive during the Filmart period.



The Archive's information booth at the Filmart