

Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore

Hong Kong film industry has always opened a welcoming door to its overseas counterparts: the influx and outflow of capitals, distributions of Hong Kong films overseas and vice versa, the exchanges of talents to and from Taiwan and neighbouring areas... Before Shanghai, still struggling to revive from the ravages of war, surrendered the throne of the Chinese language film pictorials empire in the 1940s to its soon-to-be successor Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia arrived on the scene to facilitate a smooth transition. The Malaysian researcher Roth Lai sheds light on the once thriving Southeast Asian film pictorial scene, which has been largely overlooked until now. Decades later, cultural exchanges of national cinemas take place on the front and centre of the world stage, an exemplar being the annual FIAF Congress. Film festivals and collaborative efforts take turn to steal the limelight of the international scene, which testify to the cosmopolitan nature of Hong Kong's film research and studies.

A look back to remember and a look forward with resolve. In paying tribute to the people and stories that the camera has 'forgotten or neglected', Sam Ho offers his afterthoughts on the recent visit of the Korean director Chung Chang-wha who helped Hong Kong conquer the West in the 1970s; Wong Kee-chee laments for Helen Li Mei, whose maturity and sophistication was sadly not 'in' in her time. Film, old or new, knows no bounds. [clkwok@lcsd.gov.hk]



Cover: Twin sisters of *Sunrise*: Mui Yee (left) in the Cantonese version (1953) and Hsia Moon in the Mandarin version (1956). Above from left: *Garden of Repose*, *Human Relationships*, *Sunrise* (Mandarin & Cantonese eds).

The Mandarin edition of the 'Novel • Drama • Melodrama' programme will follow immediately after the Cantonese instalment in May and June, making for an interesting comparison of the twin adaptations of Cao Yu's novel *Sunrise*. The positive note posted by the orphan girl following her redemption (played by the sweet Betty Loh Ti in the Mandarin version) has clearly stirred the creative mind of the screenwriters to vigorously apply the cinematic language to their big screen adaptations. Adapted by the Cantonese director Lee Sun-fung in 1959 and the Mandarin director Zhu Shilin in 1964, the two screen versions of Ba Jin's *Spring Dream in Old Garden* had both abandoned the original book title as well as the narrative perspective. The performance of Bao Fong and Ng Cho-fan, who played the central character, was a tour-de-force.

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A Not-Quite Native Son Returns



Sam Ho

Chung Chang-wha helped Hong Kong conquer the West in the 1970s. Last November, he returned from the U.S. and conquered the SAR.

Hailed originally from Korea, Chung established himself in the 1950s as a fixture of Chungmu Road, the hub of filmmaking in Seoul. He was a consummate professional who had honed his craft on genre pictures, leaving his mark on a wide variety of projects that ranged from historical dramas to youth romances. Chung enjoyed a remarkable boost in his career when action films started to gain popularity in Korea, as his mastery of film basics lent itself to a dynamic style best suited for action set pieces. Before long, Chung had earned a reputation as an 'action film director' whose work was enthusiastically embraced by audiences at the box office.

When the Hong Kong film industry started collaborating with other Asian cinemas with an intention to expand its horizon, Chung was tapped to direct the Korean co-production *Longing for Home* (aka *Watching Home Town*) in 1958. That led to more joint projects in the 1960s, most of them action films or romantic melodramas seasoned with action scenes to add excitement, such as *Deep in My Heart* (released in Hong Kong in 1966 and in Korea in 1967) and *Tragic Love* (1967 in Korea, 1968 in Hong Kong). Among those action films was *Special Agent X-7* (1966 in Korea, 1968 in Hong Kong), a James Bond-type spy thriller shot in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and South Korea. It caught the eyes of Run Run Shaw, who was in the middle of an ambitious endeavour to strengthen the dominance of his powerful studio, Shaw Brothers. Impressed by Chung's talent for staging action, the mogul offered the Korean a contract. Chung signed the papers and became a house director.

Hong Kong film was going through a revolution at the time and Shaw Brothers was at its forefront. Run Run Shaw had sensed that audience taste was shifting and decided to give his products a tougher, more energetic edge by launching a campaign of action films. Chung was assigned a series of spy flicks and martial arts films - among them *Temptress of a Thousand Faces* (1969), *Valley of the Fangs* (1970) and *Six Assassins* (1971) - adapting quickly to local ways and earning the respect of the industry with his competence and innovations in directing action scenes.

In 1971, when rival studio Golden Harvest's Bruce Lee vehicle *The Big Boss* swept box offices everywhere in Asia, Shaw Brothers responded with its own kung fu entry. The task to answer this challenge fell into the hands of Chung Chang-wha. The film he was entrusted to make was *King Boxer* (1972), which went on to face another even bigger challenge and met it with more success than anyone could imagine.

After enjoying a rewarding run in Asia, *King Boxer* became the designated project to spearhead Shaw Brothers' effort to break into the West. Renamed *Five Fingers of Death*, it was released in the U.S. and Europe in 1973 and became a big hit, making the Top Ten Box-Office list in America for several weeks, at one point reaching third place.



King Boxer (1972), the first Hong Kong feature to break open the Western market



Chung's *Valley of the Fangs* (1970) launched Shaw Bros' campaign of action films

The film was the first Hong Kong feature to break open the Western market, doing so before Golden Harvest had a chance to unleash the mighty Bruce Lee on it. *Five Fingers of Death* stands in history as the film that introduced Chinese martial arts films to a wide Western audience, winning them for years to come and sewing the seeds for Hong Kong cinema's international esteem today.

Unfortunately, he didn't stay long in Shaw Brothers after *Five Fingers of Death*. He got into arguments with Mona Fong, who was put in charge of production, and left the studio in 1973 to join the fledgling Golden Harvest, where he made several action films. After directing *Broken Oath* (1977), Chung returned to Korea. Back home, he enjoyed a highly successful tenure as a producer while operating a film company, but he never directed another film again. After retiring from film altogether, he with his family moved to San Diego, California, where he still lives today.

Despite his many distinctions, Chung's contributions to Hong Kong cinema had been largely neglected throughout the years. One major reason was that he came from Korea. It cannot be denied that back in the 1960s and 70s, Hong Kong still harboured certain degrees of prejudice against other Asians. As such, Shaw Brothers had to play down Chung's ethnicity. Though the rest of the industry was well aware of his being Korean and the press occasionally reported on it, the studio essentially took advantage of the Chinese roots of his name (Korean culture was highly influenced by China, and Korean names often have Chinese equivalents) and passed him along as one of us. (In English credits, Chung was most often listed as 'Cheng Chang Ho'.)

Last November, Chung enjoyed a triumphant return to Hong Kong. He was invited as Guest of Honour to launch the LCSD film series *Looking Back: Fifty Years of South Korean Cinema*, presented by the Film Programmes Office. Although he had frequently returned on personal business, this is the first time he set foot on the SAR for film-related activities since his withdrawal from Hong Kong cinema in 1977.

After a screening of his Korean film *Sunset on the Sarbin River* (1965), he met with the audience at the Hong Kong Film Archive cinema with his former colleague, the famed producer and writer Chua Lam. He shared his experience working in Hong Kong as a foreigner and regaled the audience with amusing anecdotes, taking them through a time when the film industry was undergoing drastic changes.

A few days later, he made another visit to the Film Archive. After donating some of the equipment that he used during his tenure in the Hong Kong film industry, he sat down for a three-hour Oral History interview, imparting in more details his memories, from working with Run Run Shaw and Raymond Chow to his near collaboration with Bruce Lee, who asked to work with Chung a few days before he died. ●



(From left) Law Kar, Chung Chang-waha, Chua Lam and Sam Ho

Sam Ho is a film critic who splits his time between Hong Kong and Houston, Texas. He teaches at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. He is the editor of *The Swordsman and His Jiang Hu: Tsui Hark and Hong Kong Film* (co-edited with Ho Wai-leng, 2002).



Under the Banyan Tree

Film Pictorial Culture at a Glance

- Singapore as the Bridge Between Shanghai and Hong Kong Cinemas

Roth Lai

The three coastal cities of Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore played a momentous role in early Chinese cinema. Shanghai was Hollywood of the East in the first half of the 20th century, while Hong Kong established itself as Asia's filmmaking centre over the next five decades. Singapore's major contributions to early Chinese cinema were the provisions of a large overseas market (together with Malaysia) and enormous capital (the influential Shaw Brothers, MP & GI and Kong Ngee studios all had Singaporean roots), not to mention being the capital of Chinese language film pictorials. It is thus not far wrong to say that the island country served as a bridge to facilitate the smooth transition of film pictorial culture from Shanghai to Hong Kong.

Between 1945 and 1949, Hong Kong cinema was dominated by Cantonese films. With the economy still struggling to revive from the ravages of war, there was only a handful of film pictorials published in the territory. Meanwhile, Shanghai was also undergoing an unsettling spell, both politically and economically, with native Shanghai filmmakers flooding into Hong Kong. The exit of these southbound filmmakers to their new haven of filmmaking took away the halo once gracing the blooming film pictorials scene in their native Shanghai. Boosting the biggest overseas market for Chinese films, Singapore swiftly replaced Shanghai to become the production hub of film pictorials in the few years between 1946 and 1953 in order to meet the overwhelming demand of the Southeast Asian audiences.

First launched in 1938, the Singapore edition of *Screen Voice* was regarded as the sole film pictorial available in Southeast Asia in the 1930s. In fact, it could well be among the handful of early movie journals. Boosting a sale of 20,000 copies at its peak, the publisher of the Singapore edition of *Screen Voice* was none other than Run Run Shaw, who at the time based his soon-to-be movie empire on the island. *Screen Voice* was a fortnightly publication before the war, and had once ceased publication during the Japanese occupation. When *Screen Voice* was relaunched in April 1946, it was published on a monthly basis until its last issue released in June 1952. (From July 1952 onwards, the *Screen Voice* desk had been shifted from Singapore to Hong Kong.) There were 182 issues in all, making *Screen Voice* the

longest running film pictorial ever published in Singapore and Malaysia. Features and articles on Cantonese films used to fill the pages of the pictorial, but their dominance was gradually replaced by Mandarin films after its relaunch in the postwar years.

Other big circulation giants at around the same time were *Allied Screen Review* (launched in January 1946) and *Ally Movie Pictorial* (launched in October 1947). Unlike *Screen Voice*, these two pictorials received no studio backing, devoting massive coverage to Mandarin cinema and often featuring Mandarin screen goddesses on their covers as attractions. Under the banner of 'independent reportage', *Allied Screen Review* unfortunately enjoyed a relatively short lifespan, while *Ally Movie Pictorial* ceased publication in around 1953, ranking it just behind Shaw's vehicle in standing.



Screen Voice (No 161, Sept 1950)

Classically Bai Guang: a special issue launched to boost publicity of the legendary star's Southeast Asian tour



Ally Movie Pictorial (6th anniversary special edition, No 10, Oct 1952)

Linda Lin Dai: a star is born

The Singapore based Kong Ngee Company first published their *Kong Ngee Movie Pictorial* in May 1948. Its editorial staff found a healthy balance between Mandarin and Cantonese cinemas, punctuated by zoom-ins on films they distributed. Up till 1953 when it stopped press, the pictorial had enjoyed a large readership in Southeast Asia, aided by its charming layout and design that helped create a modern feel. Just like other pictorials mentioned previously, the art direction and editorial approach of this distinctively contemporary organ had inherited the

legacies of old Shanghai. Loke Wan Tho, the Southeast Asian mogul on the helm of International Films Distributing Agency, also published *International Screen* in Singapore in January 1952. Essentially a mouthpiece of the studio, the pictorial was an interesting fusion of the East and West, featuring their own studio stars on the front covers and Western screen icons on the back. The content was devoted to Hong Kong films and Western films released on both sides of the Atlantic which the studio distributed. *International Screen* received a lukewarm response in Southeast Asia. Ebbing and flowing in its short three-year lifespan, the pictorial finally wrapped up in the later half of 1955.



Kong Ngee (No 19, Nov 1949)

Nancy Chan turned Kong Ngee cover girl during her visit to Singapore



International Screen (No 5, May 1952)

Li Lihua (left) and the Malaysian film mogul Loke Wan Tho's first wife Christina Loke

Apart from the Big Five mentioned above, Singapore also played host to a number of other film pictorials between the 1946 and 1953, among them *United Movie Pictorial* (first published in March 1950), *Movie Scene* (first published in May 1950) and *The Screens Pictorial* (first published in January 1951). These pictorials represented one-off efforts by opportunistic publishing firms, but their ventures often fell through because of limited resources and personnel. Most pictorials could no longer be found on the newsstands after the first few issues or within a year.



United Movie Pictorial (No 2, April 1950)

Cantonese film star Mui Yee



Movie Scene (No 3, July 1950)

Bai Yun and Pak Yin: two most sought-after stars

From the 1950s onwards, Hong Kong replaced Shanghai to be the production hub of Cantonese and Mandarin films in the Chinese Diaspora. The standard of production, diversity and prolificacy were unprecedented. During its heydays, this new Hollywood of the East not only spawned motion pictures but also gave rise to a range of tie-in products, including film pictorials. Deprived from a home-grown film industry and a pool of competent editorial staff (on the other hand, Hong Kong reaped the benefit of the southbound literati influx), Singaporean film pictorials lost their appeal as their standard became increasingly crude. Failing to adapt to the fast changing readers' preference and trends, the once glittering scene dimmed out after 1953. On the other hand, the publication of *International Screen* (Hong Kong edition) in October 1955 by International's affiliate MP & GI, and *Southern Screen* in December 1957 by Shaw Brothers, ushered Hong Kong's film pictorial scene in a golden age that lasted for ten long years. The two major forces also helped shape a unique pictorial style previously not found in either pre or postwar years - sensuous Oriental beauty complete with an international vision. ◆

Roth Lai is the editor-in-chief of a string of contemporary lifestyle magazines in Malaysia. He has amassed a huge collection of classic movie fanzines as well as photographs on the subject of the Golden Age of Mandarin/Cantonese cinema from the 1930s to 60s.

The Archive that Rises from an Earthquake

Bede Cheng

From December 2003 through March 2004, the Hong Kong Film Archive has presented the programme entitled 'Early European Cinema', putting on show archival treasures from the cinemas of Italy, France and Germany made between the years 1909 and 1929.* Journalist and film buff Lorenzo Codelli has been instrumental in the selection of titles from Italy, with many films loaned from the collection of La Cineteca del Friuli. Lorenzo was in Hong Kong in December last year for the opening of this programme, and he talked to me about the founding of a film archive and a prestigious film festival in the aftermath of a disaster.

In 1976, a massive earthquake hit the northeastern Italian region of Friuli; the town of Gemona was hardest hit. With classes suspended, student/film buff Livio Jacob, now chairman of the Pordenone Silent Film Festival, and his wife Piera Patat started to show their own collection of 16mm cartoons and Chaplin



Lorenzo Codelli (right) and Bede Cheng

shorts to local students and teachers, providing them with timely relief from the humdrumness of life after the quake. Through their connection with a film club run by Lorenzo, they were able to acquire more 16mm copies of old American films. With most of the movie theatres out of business, the film club screened silent films at whatever locations possible: in the open air, public halls or private homes. Through purchases, donations, and acquisitions from other public sources, a collection of old 16mm copies was soon built up, which became the foundation of La Cineteca del Friuli, an archive founded by Livio and Piera in Gemona.

Having shown the animation series for a few years running, this group of film lovers decided to host a weekend gathering at a theatre in nearby Pordenone in 1982. The debut event was a retrospective on French comic Max Linder. This event, with only eight guests in attendance, didn't even have a name at that time. Their efforts soon paid off. The event attracted film buffs and archives around the world, and people were taking their own collections to be shown there, some even without a title. That weekend in 1982 was later referred to as the first 'Le Giornate del Cinema Muto' literally 'The Days of Silent Cinema', or in the English-speaking world 'The

Pordenone Silent Film Festival'.

Since its very humble beginning, the Festival has grown to become the annual premiere event of silent films, attracting a worldwide presence of archivists, scholars, critics, or just the average moviegoer who is crazy about Lillian Gish! Some of the previous festival highlights include the screening of Kevin Brownlow's reconstruction of Abel Gance's monumental *Napoléon* (1927), with a score written by Carmine Coppola. Other memorable editions include the focus on Chinese cinema in 1995 and the 2001 edition on Japan, both of which have served as a springboard to introduce Asian silent cinema to the world's audiences.



Feuillade's *Les Vampires* (1915-16) was featured on a postcard given away at the 2000 Pordenone Silent Film Festival.

Bordering Austria at the foot of the Alps, Friuli was the site of some fierce WWI battles, and the Cineteca has set its goal to preserve the newsreels and moving images of the province, particularly of this crucial episode in the province's recent history. Though primarily a regional archive, they are active in international collaboration, such as *Ko-Ko the Clown* animation series (1927-1928) with UCLA Film & Television Archive, and the 1917 film *Il Fauno*, both showcased in the HKFA's programme. Friuli now boasts a collection of 2,600 films in 16mm and 35mm, and some lesser-known formats such as 9.5 or 17mm. Amongst the special collection were some 600 to 700 German features in Italian, and many Spaghetti Westerns made in the 1950s and 60s.

On Hong Kong cinema, Lorenzo mentioned that it was Paul Fonoroff's books on Hong Kong films of the classic era that initially hooked him. His first visit to the territory was a stopover on a Beijing visit during the mid-1990s. When internet became popular in recent years, there was a sudden explosion of the studies of Hong Kong cinema. The previous editions of the Hong Kong International Film Festival retrospective catalogues were also great tools for the research on Hong Kong's cinema history. Now this interest in Asian cinema is spreading to Thailand and Korea, though very few of their films have been released commercially in Europe. When asked what interests him most about Hong Kong cinema, Lorenzo thinks our stars are multi-talented - they sing and act on film and stage, and sometimes even in the cabaret! ●

*Most academics refer 'early' as the end of 19th century, but it is used here for the ease of understanding.

Editor's Note: For related essay on the event, see Law Kar's 'Autumn Glory in a Small Town - Pordenone Silent Film Festival' in the HKFA *Newsletter*, No 22, November 2002.

Bede Cheng is the Programme Assistant of the HKFA.

When the Spring Splendour was Over
- Helen Li Mei



Wong Kee-chee

Recently, when my thoughts fell upon Mao Zedong's 'Ode to the Plum Blossom' lyrics, and the one with the same title by the Song dynasty poet Lu You, I tended to fuse the two versions:

*Humble despite her beauty,
She contented herself with being Spring's herald.
To dust she may be consigned,
But her fragrance was eternal.*

The culprit - for want of one - who led to such eccentric fusions, was Helen Li Mei, an actress of Hong Kong Mandarin films of the 1950s and early 1960s. She was no A-list star by the standard of her time, but certainly well known enough to ensure her the leading lady status. Physically, she was tall, and was more akin to her Western counterparts than the average Oriental beauty. To those who liked her, she was the epitome of the sophisticated, mature woman, aloof but with a mysterious charm.

It was another matter with those who disliked her. To these film fans, she was 'just another starlet', with nothing to show but to look cool and sexy. There was one episode, some ten years ago, when I was producing CDs of Mandarin oldies for an international recording company. One of the CDs included two songs sung by Li. The girl who designed the CD covers took one look at her picture, and decided on the spot that she had to find another more 'decent' picture. The reason? The young lady proclaimed Li's photo 'morally incorrect' - she looked like 'a siren' and certainly must be one of those detested '*femmes fatales*'.

But from what I heard, Li was a rather frank and candid person.

Helen Li Mei may be considered a 'low-key' actress, which could be a disadvantage when histrionics seemed the order of the day. She appeared in musicals, comedies as well as tearjerkers, and apart from her 'gorgeous lady' parts, she played independent, forward and aggressive modern career women, and even, quite successfully, a long-suffering lower middle class widow. It came as a somewhat hilarious shock when she was cast as the Empress Dowager Ci Xi in a historical drama. This, however, may simply be due to the fact that the director had confidence in her.



A World of Gold (1953)

It is always with the passage of time, and the accompanying turmoil one experienced, that one begins to remember, and reevaluate some of the neglected people and events of the past. There was recently a flood of DVDs of 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong Mandarin films in the market, among which featured Li's major titles. It was then that her naturalistic style became a revelation. She looked thoroughly 'modern' in the most positive sense - undated, contemporary, but without the trappings of some of the so-called 'art house' actors' soulless inscrutability. But then, at times when youth and blatancy were worshipped, maturity and sophistication definitely was not 'in'.

Which reminded me of the lines from the Song dynasty poet Su Shi's lyrics about the pomegranate blossom:

*The scarlet pomegranate unfurls,
When the brevity of springtime splendour was over,
To be your companion in solitude.*

Indeed, it was only after broken dreams, and empty expectations, that the solitary pomegranate appeared all the more arresting. What came to past then took on new meanings.



The long-suffering widow in *For Better, For Worse* (1959)

The pomegranate is a bright, eye-catching flower; she would definitely not be 'contented in resignation, and oblivious to her jealous companions' stares'. The poet though, was understanding: 'her saddened heart, if you care to look, knits itself into thousands of folds'. Helen Li Mei, throughout her film career, attempted at running her own film company, had written scripts, and was active also on stage.

But then, there is always the human factor, without which, a person, however talented, or even strategically positioned, can never succeed. This gives rise to laments of being overlooked - being born in the wrong time and the wrong place. The pomegranate blossom indeed has had her fear of 'the relentless autumn breeze'.

It has been sometime now that the pomegranate blossom faded. One might find comfort in the fact that, pomegranates always bear fruit in autumn - large, red fruits, whose bright, purplish red juice tastes slightly bitter - but is nevertheless refreshingly sweet. ●

Editor's Note: The 'Cathay Classics Revisited' this June will present Cathay classics of the 1950s and 60s, including Li's *Torrents of Spring* (1960) and *Death Traps* (1960).

Wong Kee-chee, artist, translator, writer and host of the RTHK Putonghua Channel programme 'The Enchanted Melodies of Western Classics'. He used to work as lecturer in the School of Communication of the Hong Kong Baptist University and as producer/director for local television stations. His publications include *Mei Shao Yue (Moon over the Plum Groves, 1982)* and *The Age of Shanghainese Pops 1930-1970 (2000)*.



Nitrate Film

Edward Tse

The birth of cinema was not a miracle. It came with several momentous discoveries and technological breakthroughs: the phenomenon of persistence of vision, the invention of the intermittent mechanism for film transport used in projecting machine, and the discovery of cellulose nitrate, a transparent and flexible plastic, as a carrier of moving images, to name but a few.

Celluloid, as the first brand name of plasticised cellulose nitrate film, was the only available man-made plastic that was flexible enough to go through the camera, printer and subsequently the projector, while at the same time having the desirable physical strength and optical properties. It was a product of the chemical process of nitrating the cellulose, a most commonly found plant material in nature. The addition of chemical components in the nitration process enhanced the flammability and instability nature of cellulose nitrate, turning the natural plant material into gun cotton. Although its chemical instability was well known at the time of its discovery, it was still considered as the ideal medium for use as motion picture film.

Owing to the fire risk involved in storing large volume of nitrate film, and after several catastrophes of fire in cinemas caused by nitrate film burning during projection, many governments have laid down very strict rules in handling, transporting, storing and exhibiting nitrate film. Since 1923, other less dangerous alternatives have been used to replace cellulose nitrate in motion picture film manufacturing. These alternatives were commonly known as 'safety' film in contrast to the notoriously 'unsafe' nitrate film. It was reported that no nitrate film was manufactured after 1950 in the U.S. and Europe, though the production line of nitrate film in China was operating until the 1980s.



Originally a nitrate film, *Songs of the Songstress* (1948) was later restored and duplicated onto safety film for preservation in the HKFA collection

Nitrate film also poses a dilemma to film archivists. While nitrate film recorded the earliest moving images of human history of the best available quality, it is also highly unstable and risky to access and store. In order to resolve the dilemma, the film archive community adopted a compromising approach by duplicating the image content onto other safety base material so as to preserve the original nitrate material for future reference. In the past, it was not uncommon for film production companies to destroy nitrate films on a large scale. Nowadays, the projection of nitrate films in cinema is totally banned in all European countries. Even in the U.S., less than five cinemas are certified as eligible to project nitrate films. It is a pity that a mere four per cent of all nitrate films ever produced in Hong Kong survived and were preserved in the HKFA collection. It is, therefore, of pressing importance to save our nitrate films, which provide us and our future generations with the only surviving moving images of life in the last century. ◆

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

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Thank You!

French-German Cinema of the 1920s

A seminar titled 'French-German Cinema of the 1920s' organised by the Hong Kong Film Archive was held in the cinema of the Archive on 20 March 2004. Our speaker Dr Ian Aitken, Associate Professor of the Department of Cinema and Television of Hong Kong Baptist University invited the audience to delve into the aesthetics of the French impressionist movement and the German expressionist movement flourished in the 1920s.

France and Germany emerged from the WWI one victorious and the other a defeated nation. Ironically, the post-war Weimar Republic was able to implement protective measures for its cinema and fended off the Hollywood onslaught. With the distinctive style it subsequently developed, the German cinema even attempted to take on Hollywood by counter-programming. Dr Aitken said that it was one of the rare challenges to Hollywood supremacy until recent times. France, on the other hand, could not close its door to the U.S., an ally during the war. From the 20s on, French cinema had been fighting a losing battle.

Two film movements arose in France and Germany during the 20s, the impressionist movement in France and the expressionist movement in Germany. Despite their importance in establishing the European critical and artistic film culture, it has to be said that they were the minority cinemas, vying with the mainstream for audience.

Though generally known as the impressionist movement, three major artistic themes, realism, naturalism and impressionism dominated French cinema of this period. In fact, the term 'impressionist' was not applied to these films until 1925. The films made in the first half of this decade were mainly realist films. A number of important films of the 20s were adapted from 19th century realist literature, especially the works of Emile Zola, such as *I Accuse* (1919) and *Nana* (1925). Later, in answering a question of Zola adaptations raised by an audience member, Dr Aitken said that Zola was the towering literary figure of the time, his works, such as *Les Rougon-Macquart* (1871-1893), with their intriguing drama and characters, and social critique, are ready material for cinema. Besides, Renoir was a personal friend of Zola.

The concern with realism and naturalism in literature was translated to the screen; with pictorial and atmospheric landscape the backgrounds and the concern for regional communities the main themes. Aesthetically, these early films were influenced by 19th century French realist and impressionist painting. Impressionist elements can be found in films such as *I Accuse*, *The Red Inn* (1923), *The Flood* (1923) and *The Late Mathias Pascal* (1925). After 1925, the realist characteristics were gradually superseded by the impressionist characteristics.

One of the objectives of impressionist cinema was to create a 'poetic' effect through the use of film technique, and also to render 'subjective' experience as vividly as possible. These films also contained modernist characteristics, and



Dr Ian Aitken (right) and Bede Cheng

experimented with filmic techniques, such as rapid editing, montages and so on. One of the world's first film concept was thus developed out of this movement: photogenie, the ability of the film image to render an object or character in an expressive manner, and also express the 'vision' of the film-maker. A fifteen-minute segment of *Napol é on* (1927) was later shown to demonstrate the use of such techniques and the epic scale of films of that time. An audience member later asked why *Napol é on* was so long. Dr Aitken said that technical development made long films possible, and it was a trend started from the adaptation of Zola's massive tomes.

Towards the end of the decade more experimental traditions of film-making began to appear, such as cinema pur, dadaism and surrealist film-making. They were more influenced by 20th century modernist movements in the arts. With the coming of talkies, the impressionist films went into decline.

In the neighbouring country of Germany, the appearance *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920), the most important expressionist film, set the expressionist tone for the German cinema. Aesthetically, the German expressionist cinema was influenced by the expressionist tradition in the arts, which was evident in *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, with its use of harsh and angular pictorial forms, and visual distortions. The German films use the full range of chiaroscuro, the play of light and shade, to evoke atmosphere. But unlike German expressionist literature and theatre of the period, German expressionist cinema preferred not to deal with the contemporary political context but either the past, as *The Nibelungen* (1924) or the future, *Metropolis*

(1927). Thematically, alienation and insanity are common, as is a concern for tyrannical figures, ghosts and monster, many of which are present in *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, *The Golem* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922).

It is hard not to see the development of German expressionist cinema through the political development of the time. The period of German expressionist cinema coincided with the rise and fall of the Weimar Republic. This was a period of liberal democracy in which the arts flourished, but Germany also experienced political and economic upheaval. Above all, the 20s saw the rise of fascism in Germany. This was a period preceded and succeeded by State Dictatorships. Could the political atmosphere have an influence upon the expressionist cinema? Dr Aitken said that one of the most influential books to be written on the expressionist cinema, Seigfried Karcauer's *From Caligari to Hitler*, has attempted to show that the political context had a direct influence upon the thematic and stylistic content of the expressionist films, with the tyrannical figures, monsters and ghosts. Analysis of the films does seem to bear out his argument that they portray a sense of the dark times in which they were made. Though Karcauer's theories are still influential in Germany, Dr Aitken said that they are being challenged in the Anglo-American circle.

One audience member was interested in the long shadow cast by *Metropolis*, which literally gave rise to sci-fi films. Dr Aitken pointed out that the special effect of the film, not only groundbreaking at the time, but was still awesome to behold. Moreover, the story does touch a cord with the audience, raising the fear of the unknown future, the rise of technology and tyranny. Another audience member asked why the vampire in *Nosferatu*, despite his most distinctive look, failed to become the archetype of vampires in cinema. Dr Aitken said that it was due to the clout of British films and Hollywood in popular cinema. (Compiled and edited by Teri Chan)

French Movie Dreams

The 'French Movie Dreams' seminar organised in conjunction with the 'Early European Cinema France (1895 - 1928)' programme was held on 28 February 2004 in the cinema of the Hong Kong Film Archive. Wong Ain-ling, HKFA's Research Officer and a connoisseur of French cinema, was meeting an audience of like-minded cinephiles with the host Bede Cheng to probe into the films showcased in a retrospective dedicated to the best in early French filmmaking.

Early French cinema was able to fully exploit the possibilities given by the screen. The screenings given by the Lumi è re brothers in the newly risen public spheres of salons and caf é s - the Grand Caf é in their first ever - established the country as the cradle of cinema. A series of shorts and travelogues filmed over the world were compiled into *The Lumi è re Selection* (1895) for exhibition in the retrospective. Among the many silent shorts in the Lumi è re library was the 'Childhood Series', the first of its kind to immortalise the magical moments of baby steps. Zooming from the background to the foreground before the entire wide angle shot falls within in a single frame, the light-sensitive camera follows each of wobbly steps taken by a toddler, trailing the shadow and the light variations as the toddler braves one of the first monumental stages of his life. Colour and light contrasts are instrumental in the next sequence which captures the embrace of a white-cad girl of a black cat. At the first glance, the cat's strolling in and out of the frame appears to be an inconsequential documentation on the filmmaker's part, but the orchestrated movements suggest otherwise. The next sequence is dominated by a medium shot of three children munching on food. A touch of lyricism is added to the seemingly mundane life with the light breezes gently stroking the leafy branches in the background.

The Late Mathias Pascal (1925) is a dark comedy about a man's fantasia. Splitting at the crossroads of a life about to undergo a radical transformation, the first half of the plot centres on the vicissitudes of Pascal's wretched early life, with his sorrows heightened by the use of close-ups and grim and dim lighting. The latter half, shot on location in Rome, focuses on the new lease of life granted to Pascal. Moving to a free city and living under a pseudonym, Pascal is sadly apprehensive about his new found liberty, a theme which easily reminds one of Kieslowski's *Three Colours: Blue* (1994). Liberty, echoing the recurring theme in Pirandello's original story, comes with a hefty price tag - grief and pain following the failure to shake off the yoke of one's past. The exiled Soviet actor Mosjoukine was appropriately cast as the lead

actor. *Casanova* (1927), directed by Volkoff also from the former Soviet Union, mobilised a cast of Russian and French actors and took the world by storm with extravagant carnival scenes shot in Venice. Exchanges in the world of filmmaking testified to influences and clashes among the European cultures, even in as early as the first decades of the last century.

The Woman and the Puppet (1928) is every woman's fantasy, daring to challenge the audience's expectation of the 'hero saving the heroine' scenario. The cabaret dancer declines the offer to be redeemed by the rich playboy in a tug of war between the sexes and complex interplays of identities. French cinema has more than its share of defiant women,



Wong Ain-ling (right) and Bede Cheng

Catherine epitomised by Jeanne Moreau in Francois Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* for one. These women vow to defy judgment of moral upholders, and indeed of any kind and anyone.

Women again take centre stage in Jean Renoir's *Nana* (1925). Though admittedly a less accomplished work in the director's repertory, Renoir's portrait of the non-conformist heroine Nana became the archetype of the many more female characters dominating his later work. The absence of sound track seems not to undermine the effectiveness of a tight-knit narrative structure, which was demonstrative of Renoir's full potentials to forge ahead with the world of sound films. Jean has certainly taken after his father Pierre-Auguste, the impressionistic painter, in capturing the ever-changing aspects of reflected light in the scene where the court maidens are sitting under the shades of umbrellas in the courtyard, and later, more evidently, in *A Day in the Country* (1936). French impressionist painters of the early 1920s arrived at their artistry breakthroughs via their keen observation of immediate environments and affinities to light, which were aptly reflected in the arena of filmmaking. As a result, the traditional literature and stage-inspired *The Woman and the Puppet* and others had largely gone unnoticed by the critics.

Like Jean-Luc Godard and Eric Rohmer among the nouvelle vague of director bursting onto the scene, Louis Delluc was also a film critic-turned-director. Though not a prolific filmmaker in his short-lived career, Delluc was an influential figure in French cinema, having established several film societies to facilitate direct dialogues between film workers and the industry, and to promote the consumer awareness of

film and theatre-going as a national pastime. *The Flood* (1923) composes the entrance scene of the male lead into the city with an almost documentary-like fluidity. The agility of the camerawork conveys perfectly the realistic, direct and simple idyllic aura, a stark contrast to Abel Gance's often innovative and dazzling cinematic extravaganzas.

Germaine Dula was a flamboyant woman director who remained firmly in the forefront of avant garde cinema. Though *The Devil in the Town* (1925) follows a mainstream commercial narrative, the overlapping technique and its probe into the effects of mass hysteria on the human psyche shrewdly elevate the film above the average melodrama, all the while under the scrutiny of the feminist gaze. While the director/screenwriter acknowledges the feebleness of the individual to break free from human and society constraints, as human beings, we are born with freedom of choice that always allows us to find another way of living. The ending of the film echoes this typical French sentiment.

The beauty of French cinema and its dreams lies in its literary aesthetics intertwined with a new sense of realism. (Compiled and edited by Edith Chiu)

Director Lee Sun-fung, Style and Achievement

Tug of wars between the sexes, suppression of emotions and desires, human weaknesses...how did human nature and relationships unfold under Lee Sun-fung's whetted camera? In the 'Director Lee Sun-fung, Style and Achievement' seminar held in the HKFA cinema on 16 April 2001, Law Kar, HKFA Programmer, teamed up with HKFA Research Officer Wong Ain-ling and local film critic Sam Ho to delve into Lee's signature works in search of the imprints left by one of Cantonese cinema greatest directors.

Lee Sun-fung relinquished the emphasis on plot in his earlier works for the overall ambience that characterised his later films, all the while maintaining a firm grasp on the complementing nature between film, novel and drama. In his 1953 notes, Lee stressed that 'expressive drama is the apex of dramatic cinema ambience', and dismissed plot-driven drama as having 'no value'.¹ Take the example of *Forever Lily* (1953). Xu Zhenya's original Mandarin Duck and Butterfly novel has a minimal plot woven together by love poems and correspondences exchanged between the lovers. The refined and elegant language of the original text posed a big challenge to the director, who had to rise to the occasion by translating the text into highly visualised

cinematic expressions. Sam Ho, who teaches film studies in local universities, noted that plot-driven dramas remained firm favourites with his students, which only goes to show that Lee is a true maverick, who had decades ago championed ambience and atmosphere over the plot with his foresight and pioneering efforts.

The speakers cited the example of the seduction scene between Pak Yin and Ng Cho-fan in *Blood-stained Azaleas* (1951) to demonstrate Lee Sun-fung's mastery of film language. Wong pointed out that the lighting of the film was akin to classic American film noir that emerged in the early 1940s, creating scenes and capturing the mood ('ambience' in Lee's term) in ways that are almost expressionist. Pak Yin, wearing her dark, wavy hair and slipping on her flowing nightdress, is arguably the best embodiment of the femme fatale on local screen. Ho highlighted the gradual change in body language and attitudes of the characters during these exchanges: the transformation of the Ng Cho-fan character from down-and-out early in the film to confident and relaxed in the seduction scenes. The seducer Pak Yin navigates with perfect ease the battle of the sexes, aggressively commanding in one moment and subtly passive in another. While applauding the fine acting and Lee Sun-fung's extraordinary mise-en-scène, Ho felt compelled to exclaim: 'This is simply a...seduction!' The restrained but suggestive dialogues give the audience more than just words to savour, such as Ng's flirting lines directed at Pak, 'You have a happy family, and now that your son has grown up....' Wong thought that the line best sums up the intricacy of the power struggle between the sexes - men have the upper hand when it comes to the subject of family, and a woman without a happy family automatically becomes socially discredited.

Both *A Flower Reborn* (1953) and *Spring* (1953) testify to Lee Sun-fung's commanding knowledge of the art of cinema and stage, the former set in a cramped tenement and the latter evolving around a large family. In the former, the camera candidly reveals the happenings inside the flat as it would have done on an open stage, before it penetrates the walls and enters into the private universe of its occupants to give a three-dimensional perspective. Wong also noted that Ng Cho-fan's room in *A Flower Reborn* is separated from the rooms of other tenants by a flight of stairs, which mirrors the self-isolation of the mean, unsociable and ill-tempered Ng. The Autumn Festival scene in *Spring* is hailed as a 'classic' by Ho. The camera captures the presence of some twenty members of the family in the idyllic setting of the garden: Third Uncle represents the respected and unchallenged elders of the clan, Second Young Master the young and hopeful, and the suppressed members represented by the weary-laden Wai and Kok-sun. The movements and

gestures of the characters are strung together by the captivating singing of the blind songstress to create a powerful scene. A typical Lee Sun-fung scene often begins on a tableau plane, slowly gathering pace and momentum as his camera fluidly ventures into the scene to track the movements of the characters, punctuated by cutaways, to juxtapose with the reaction shots to reach the height of an emotionally charged scene, merging the beauty of stage plays with the silver screen.

Wong Ain-ling then focused her discussion on *It Was a Cold Winter Night* (1955). In stark contrast to the stage-inspired *Spring*, the confined main setting of the house is livened up by the intermittent night street scenes. At this stage of his career, Lee Sun-fung had developed a simple, pure style displayed in his later works, including *Anna* (1955)



(From left) Law Kar, Wong Ain-ling and Sam Ho

which delves into the aching heart of a married woman, and *The Lone Swan* which was adapted from Su Manshu's semi-autobiography of the forlorn love a monk has for his Japanese cousin. Sam Ho described *The Lone Swan* as a poetic and expressive film with a minimal plot. Lee had accomplished a highly stylised work emulating the Japanese landscape by exploiting the visual qualities of kimonos, cherry blossoms and decorative lines. This distinctly Japanese flavour, however, was filtered through Hollywood influence. But it is nonetheless an exemplum of Lee's unrelenting pursuit of detail and the ambience.

Sadly, both films failed at the box office. In his film notes, Lee Sun-fung attributed their failure to the Union's declining popularity, and that the failure of the tales of doomed romance of a monk or a married woman to strike a cord with the audience.² Before long, Lee returned to the embrace of more populist roots, which was a pity to both himself and Cantonese cinema as a whole.

In Wong's view, *God of Wealth*, completed in 1962, marked a watershed in Lee Sun-fung's filmmaking career. *So Siu Siu* (1962) was in effect directed by a 'different' Lee Sun-fung. The decline of the Union following the retirement of Pak Yin, the death from suicide of Mui Yee and the departure of Siu Yin Fei demonstrated the interdependence of Lee's success and his stable of actors. The exit of these stars left a void in more than the studio itself. Wong remarked that Lee Sun-fung later did make several attempts to touch the pulse of the modern society, notably the clean

and crisp editing in Kong Ngee's *Heartbroken Flower* (1963), but Lee's failure to tap the right tempo ultimately resulted in below-par efforts. *Under Hong Kong's Roof* (1964) features the veteran Ng Cho-fan starring opposite a cast of newcomers. Albeit a more solid work, most of the actors are newcomers who fail to measure up to the veteran. Also, the film takes on a hysterical tone which, to a certain extent, reflected a profound uneasiness besetting a whole generation.

Sam Ho also offered a glimpse into the deep recesses of the psyche of Lee Sun-fung's men. *L'homme sans qualit *   was a regular feature in Lee's earlier films. Unable to cast off the shackles of social, circumstantial and psychological constraints, his male characters are often indecisive and weak, unable to discharge themselves from familial and social duties. From the 1960s onward, Lee gravitated towards more several positive male figures, such as the director of the orphanage in *The Orphan* (1960), but they were rather poorly conceived. Lee managed to find some of the missing sparks when his hero reverted to his shilly-shally self in *For Life or for Death*, which once again testified to Lee's forte in portraying the weak male.

The Tragedy of a Poet King (1968) was the last work of Cantonese Opera superstar Yam Kim-fai. Financed by Yam's on-screen partner and off-screen companion Pak Suet-sin, the epic tragedy clearly had a handsome budget, and Ho believed Lee must have enjoyed making the film with such abundant resources. Aside from the sophisticated film language, the signature qualities of Lee's weak-kneed, cowardly man oozed out of the Tang emperor character, further enhanced by the cross-gender casting of Yam Kim-fai, which only made the female qualities of the character even more interesting.

Lee Sun-fung faced an uphill battle to race against the tide of time and to beat with the pulse of his audience. In fact, Law Kar pointed out that Lee was among his generation of filmmakers threatened by the succession gap in the 1960s. Hong Kong cinema has long taken a page from their Western counterpart, albeit mainly the techniques, hence the saying 'Chinese knowledge as the form, Western knowledge as the means'. When the Western-educated post-war generation burst onto the scene in the 1960s, their new sensibilities made traditional values of family and love obsolete. To appeal to the new generation, the film industry tried to emulate Hollywood and Japanese cinema. However, the blind carbon copying only distanced themselves from the society and its people, to the point of being 'an eyesore' from today's perspective. It wasn't until the 1970s and 80s that Hong Kong cinema established its own unique style.

As a tribute to Lee Sun-fung's remarkable oeuvre containing no less than 100 titles, the series of seminar and the publication of *The Cinema of Lee Sun-fung* serves as a starting point to appreciate Lee's keen but subtle observation of human nature in many of his films which shine alongside the works of his contemporaries and remain classics of all time. (Compiled and edited by Kiki Fung)

1 See Lee Sun-fung, 'Study of the Overall Ambience', in Wong Ain-ling (ed), *The Cinema of Lee Sun-fung*, Hong Kong Film Archive, 2004, p 144.

2 See Lee Sun-fung, From '*Spring to A Well-to-Do—An Overall Review*', *ibid*, p 150.

Comparison of Aesthetics between Hong Kong Melodrama and Western Drama

Programmer Law Kar and Dr Lo Wai-luk of the Hong Kong Baptist University shed light on the aesthetics of Hong Kong film and Western drama in the 9 May seminar held in the HKFA cinema as a complement to the 'Novel • Drama • Melodrama' screening programme.

Law Kar identified Cantonese opera and stage play as the hotbed of Cantonese melodramas, influencing the very core of the story and narrative since the birth of sound film in 1933. Resorting to tired, and perhaps crude, scripts, the local cinema had spawned scores of Cantonese opera and folktale adaptations by offering opera stars and ensemble scenes as their sole attractions, until in the war years from 1936/37 when mainland filmmakers organised themselves into drama troupes and embarked on a journey of exile and performance. Their patriotic efforts had struck a cord with local actors like Cheung Ying and Ng Cho-fan who subsequently joined their ranks. The local drama scene began to flourish, imparting on Cantonese cinema its distinct narrative structure and performance method.

Local filmmakers were poised to reinvigorate and revolutionise Cantonese film in the postwar years. Key players like Lee Sun-fung, Ng Wui, Lo Dun, Chun Kim, Tso Kea and Chan Wan were theatre-trained talents well versed in modern literature. To the East, they drew references from May Fourth literature and 'Mandarin Duck and Butterfly' literature; to the West, their works paid homage to translated novels and dramas of literature greats such as Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Ibsen and Maupassant. By liberating themselves from the shackles of traditional operas and fantasies,

these populist, progressive 1950s productions simply outshone their predecessors with a deservedly strong emphasis on the narrative structure. The Union, Sun Luen, Overseas Chinese and Kong Ngee were among the 'progressive' studios responsible for the revival.

So what is melodrama? Law Kar believed that melodrama of the 1950s and 60s, carrying both didactic and entertaining values, was the major defining genre of the local cinema together with martial arts, comedy, fantasy, police and opera, underscoring family values, ways of the world and a 'correct' theme with a social edge. *Typhoon Signal No 10* (1959) depicts how hardships brought about by natural disasters and oppressive dark forces unite the residents of a squatter settlement to turn curses into blessings. It made a pointed observation of social and ethnical issues. The works of Lee Sun-fung and Tso Kea were noted for their fastidious workmanship and artistic accomplishments. *Sunrise* (1953), directed by Lee Sun-fung, unfolds the decadence of man without being undermined by the penchant to expose or criticise social problems.

In approaching the subject of 1950s and 60s melodrama, Dr Lo Wai-luk travelled across time and space to examine the intersection between aesthetics and origin of Western drama. Cantonese cinema acquired a sizable repertoire of adaptations of local airwave novels, modern literature since the 'May Fourth' Movement, as well as Western literature and drama of the mid- and late 19th century, notably Gorky's enlightening social critique *The Lower Depths*, which shares the same relentlessly mordant irony in Maupassant's *The Necklace*. Lo believed that the liking these 1950s filmmakers developed for late 19th century/early 20th century social realist literature over modern Western literature (radically experimental works of literature that dealt with psychoanalytic criticism in particular) was largely due to the impact of the prevailing ideology of the time had had on a generation of new literati growing up in the 1920s and 30s. The revolutionary fervour of the New Literature Movement and New Culture Movement ignited the passion for enlightenment and individualism of these cultural workers/educators, to bring a new immediacy to art and culture to different walks of life stranded at the crossroads of old and new. The May Fourth Movement mounted a strenuous challenge to the established hierarchy and current of thought of both the family and political systems, which was translated into senses-shattering tales of crumbling families in Ba Jin's trilogy *Family*, *Spring* and *Autumn*. The disintegration of big clan families involved restructuring and demographic changes far more profound than smaller family units in-the-making, demanding the yielding of feudal practices like arranged marriage, concubinage,

and the right of hereditary succession enjoyed by the male heir, etc. Free love, a prerequisite of expressive individualism, began to take root in the hearts of the progressive youth, who also decided to take fate into their own hands and steered themselves to 'real' freedom by joining up progressive groups. The enlightenment of the individuals and social groups gave birth to progressive drama and film, incidentally but welcome.

When, in 1949, the Communists won the war and gained control of the mainland and the Nationalists fled to Taiwan, Hong Kong's unique colonial status was given special prominence. How did our filmmakers turn the intriguing political situation to their advantage to enlighten their audiences? They responded with



Law Kar (left) and Dr Lo Wai-luk

overwhelming sympathy for the lower class, a spirit epitomised in Ng Cho-fan's line 'Do unto others as they do unto you' from *In the Face of Demolition* (1953). Sharing similar plight and living under the same roof, the working class represented by a taxi-driver, a female migrant worker, an unemployed technician, and a woman forced to sell herself, allied with the intellectual portrayed by a fence-sitting teacher, to stand against the colonial compradore and strive for rights and a dignified life. However, unlike the 1930s when patriots were prepared to sacrifice their lives in save the nation endeavours, or the goal-driven anti-corruption strifes in the 1940s, the intellectually enlightened literati of the 1950s were deprived from the opportunities to put words into action.

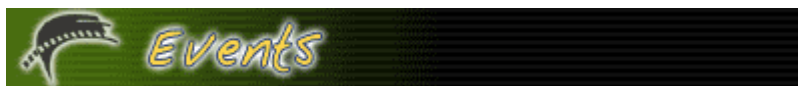
Lo went on to analyse the original text of Cao Yu's *Sunrise* and *Wilderness*, which hit the big screen in 1953 and 1956 respectively. Both screen versions deliver a promising ending different from the original novels: the young prostitute Xiao Dong Xi hangs herself, but resurrects in the film unmarred by her harsh life, thanks to the redeeming love of her benefactors. In *Wilderness*, the original novel concludes with Chou Hu suffering a serious gunshot wound, leaving Jinzi wandering in a mist of darkness; their journey takes a detour on the screen, though, when the fog clears to reveal to the two lost travellers the railway track to suggest a possible way out. The changes made to the plot are a statement made by the director to reassert our faith in taking control of our lives. Films produced two decades earlier, like *Street Angel* (1937), stood in stark contrast to the assertive tone of their successors. They were often characterised by an uncertainty clouding the character's future, reinforced by

a desolate ending. The 1950s filmmakers excelled in playing out film drama on the theatrical stage, telling stories proficiently in cinema language by making good use of narrative devices like flashbacks, and contextualising characters in the environment and putting things in perspective by employing long shots.

Equally remarkable and impressive is their *mise-en-scène*, which effortlessly captivates the audience with dynamic shifts. *Sunrise* captures Fong Tat-sang immersed in his reminiscences of the simply pastoral life with Chan Pak-lo in a sequence of close-ups during a train (an icon for a new era) journey. When the train stops at the next station, Xiao Dong Xi boards the train, enters Fong's compartment, and takes the seat offered by the passenger, foreshadowing Xiao's redemption by Fong who offers a helping hand readily to the weak and marginalised. Lee Sun-fung lets the extreme close-ups swing with the jostle of the cabins as the train speeds the open field, taking a step above and beyond his contemporaries. The surge in social critiques in the early 1950s could be attributed to the lasting influence both progressive mainland pictures of the 1930s and 40s, and the realism, characters and narrative of Western drama had on Hong Kong cinema. Under the banner of 'progressive films', family values and moral standards were given primal significance above bigger moral and ethical responsibilities towards one's society and countries. In *Sunrise*, Chan Pak-lo is a high society courtesan who has given in to the pleasures of the life, but the character only prepares the readers for an onslaught of an entire society indulged in moral and social decadence. In the film adaptation, Chan Pak-lo (played by Mui Yee) is saved from her undignified predicament. She is esteemed for her maturity in thinking and in the ways of the world, which shows the filmmaker's attempt to place human relations over piercing social critique.

Finally, Law added a footnote to the high hopes Hong Kong people had for rebuilding their motherland shortly after its liberation. The daunting task to adapt to the changing, and often hostile, political conditions the mainland set them back to their adopted home. These migrants chose to put their faith in solidarity values embodied in family and neighbourhood, instead of the colonial government, when dealing with everyday problems. This belief was shared by filmmakers, who offered audiences a regular feast for the eyes by spawning one after another endearing, honest family dramas throughout the 1950s and 60s, a fine example being *Parents' Hearts* (1955).

(Compiled and edited by Edith Chiu.)



FIAF and SEAPAVAA Congress and General Assembly

Hanoi, the Vietnam capital, played host to the first joint Congress and General Assembly of the 60th International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) and the 8th South East Asia Pacific Audio Visual Archive Association (SEAPAVAA) which took place between 18-24 April 2004. The theme of this year's symposium was 'No Time, No Money - Moving Image and Sound Archiving in Emergency Conditions', which discussed challenges posed by film repatriation and restoration on the international front, and some of the major problems impeding the development of under-funded film archives in South Asia and Africa. HKFA colleagues Chaing Chi-leung and Priscilla Chan returned from Hanoi with new insights into some of the old dilemmas confronting film archivists all over the world.

A Race Against Time and Money

Priscilla Chan, Acquisition Assistant

Preservation of film culture is a time-consuming and expensive endeavour, and especially costly for developing countries. While every film archive faces its own set of challenges, the paradox for Hong Kong lies in fact that the advantage of our relatively advanced facilities is easily offset by the scarce space available for storage and daily operation.

The subject of repatriation cropped up frequently in the symposium. Tracking and transferring lost films back to their native countries are like finding and adding the missing pieces to the jigsaw - a country's national film history. Vietnam Film Institute has retrieved some of the earliest documentaries produced in Vietnam from her former coloniser, France. The strong diplomatic relationship between the neighbouring Laos and Vietnam has enabled the Lao National Film Archive and Video Centre to retrieve from the latter a collection of the country's most precious film relics, including a newsreel documenting declaration of the founding of Lao People's Democratic Republic. Overseas expeditions undertaken by the Philippine Information Agency to the Library of Congress and the Hong Kong Film Archive also yielded precious rewards. Even the slightest spark of hope can bring a sense of optimism to colleagues who work in the field of film acquisition to face the daunting tasks ahead.

The Hong Kong Film Archive itself has done its share of overseas scoutings of Hong Kong films, which have long enjoyed extensive overseas distribution networks in Southeast Asia, Europe and the U.S. We seized the occasion to establish contacts within our FIAF community with the hope to track down long-lost films for preservation, arrangement and studies of the local film history and culture. *My Life as McDull* (2001) preserved in the Archive collection was one of the ten foreign entries screened at the complementing FIAF International Film Show, which was held at the National Cinema Centre in Hanoi. The simultaneous subtitling in Vietnamese brought the beaming McDull a new exotic look and depth on the big screen. This year's international film show was unanimously hailed as 'a world platform' by delegates to the congress for displaying and sharing the fruit borne by their painstaking acquisition work. Indeed, our biggest joy and satisfaction spring from the vision that Hong Kong film would reach the farthest corner of the earth for all to enjoy and appreciate.



(Back row, 1st, 2nd, 4th left) Liu Dong, Chen Mei and Director Chen Jingliang of the China Film Archive; (back row, 3rd left) Director Winston T.Y. Lee of the Chinese Taipei Film Archive; (front row from left) Chaing Chi-leung, Priscilla Chan, Valerie Wong of HKFA and Hoang Nhu-yen, Director of the Vietnam Film Institute

Conservation Workshops

Chaing Chi-leung, Assistant Curator II (Conservation)

Despite being embroiled in political turmoil and swept by waves of political reforms in the last century, film archives of the once war-torn Southeast Asian countries such as Laos and Cambodia are slowly but steadily overcoming the mounting obstacles in their path to preserve their cultural heritage, aided by FIAF volunteers and participating institutions of the 'Reel Emergency Project' who share the chores of film conservation by providing assistance to those archives whose national film heritage is in a state of extreme or terminal danger.

The three-day workshop of this year's congress dealt with technical issues arising from the preservation of audiovisual material, including 'digital restoration and structure', 'material database' and 'Zeolite Molecular Sieve'. Vietnam Film Institute has developed its home-grown molecular sieves - a recyclable zeolite material as a deterrent to vinegar syndrome effects. Dr Alfonso del Amo García of Spain introduced his compilation work on a custom film material database for film properties and processing procedures worldwide. In the 'Digital Restoration' workshop, Professor Cherchi Usai, George Eastman House's senior curator of the motion picture department, addressed the dilemma conservationists are facing when the merits of film material are apparently outweighed by digital preservation, while trying to solve the challenge of archiving quality digital material in an ever-changing and growing technological environment. International collaborations and joint initiatives were also high on the agenda and will stay so toward accomplishing the global task of preserving the world's audiovisual memory, a vision which echoes the remark made by renowned film archivist Ray Edmondson that film culture is part of the world heritage, and therefore need to be preserved as part of the world heritage of mankind as a whole. ●



(From left) Priscilla Chan, Ray Edmondson, Meg Labrum, Executive Committee of FIAF, and Chaing Chi-leung

Far East Film Festival of Udine

The sixth running of Europe's largest showcase for Asian cinema held between 23 and 30 April featured the retrospective on Cantonese cinema great Chor Yuen co-organised with the HKFA, exhibiting the finest of martial arts films and melodramas to come out of Hong Kong cinema on the world stage.



(From left) Thomas Bertacche, Executive Director of the Far East Film Festival of Udine, Mrs Ichikawa, Mr and Mrs Law Kar, Ichikawa Jun, Mark Schilling



(From left) Bede Cheng, Livio Jacob, chairman of the Pordenone Silent Film Festival, Mrs Jacob, Mr and Mrs Law Kar and a staff of La Cineteca del Friuli

'Novel • Drama • Melodrama' Workshops

The 'Novel • Drama • Melodrama' workshops held on 26, 29 May at the Archive Cinema is a collaboration between the Archive and the Lingnan University made possible by tremendous efforts of the Lingnan lecturers, students and the Archive staff over the past months. Lead by Dr Leung Ping-kwan, Dr Mary Wong and Dr Lau Yin-ping (pictures below), the workshops explored the intricate relationship between film and literature.



(From left) Leung Wai-man, Dr Leung Ping-kwan, Au Ka-lai, Lai Ka-pui and Ho Hiu-sin



(From left) Chan Wang-leung, Dr Mary Wong and Chan Hay-ching



(From left) Yeung Yee-wah, Chan So-yee, Dr Lau Yin-ping and Lo Ka-yan

In preparation for the workshop, students from the Lingnan University has since the end of last month plunged into working meetings with our Programming Section, viewing films and conducting research on related topics. Clustered into five groups, the students approached the topic by analysing different genres of text. Their collaborative research contributed to the well-illustrated captions and explanatory text accompanying the exhibits, as well as the scripts of documentaries. On the weekends, they acted as docents taking visitors on tours of the exhibition. Let's hear from these enthusiastic researchers their recollections of the multi-tasking assignments.

Wong Ching: Film workers of the 1950s and 60s maintained a generally open attitude toward literature. Their diversified tastes in literary work propelled them to scour the literary libraries of the East and West for the source of their adaptations. The retelling of world classics, such as the second episode of *This Wonderful Life* (1954, adapted from Maupassant's *The Necklace*) unfolded on the Chinese screen the painful realities of city life: a couple who struggle to put enough food on the table in their bed-space accommodation are hit with bad luck when the wife loses the necklace she has borrowed to flaunt at a party. Instead of staging the drama against the backdrop of the French-German War, *Flora* (1951, adapted from Maupassant's *Boule de Suif*) moved to the more pertinent locale of the Sino-Japanese War. The story evolves around an arduous journey undertaken by a company of travellers, among whom a beautiful woman has attracted the unwanted attention of a Japanese commander. Underneath the plain portrayal of the aggression of the invaders are the mordant cynicism and scorn heaped on those countrymen, who exploit the situation to pursue their own agenda. These adaptations are also infused with the family values, humanity and social customs that characterise the Chinese society, drawing from the vast pool of classic and popular literature made popular by such diverse media as newspapers and radio stations. Literature and film have opened the window to the world of mass media and popular culture.

The workshop provides us with the rare opportunity to dip into first-hand documents and artefacts: Lee Sun-fung's manuscripts, Ngai Mun's scripts and scene breakdown pages, an up-close and personal interview with airwave novelist Lang Wun, and the many more delightful surprises unearthed from the shelves in the Resource Centre. I hope that the discourse on the intricate bond between literature and film will inspire public interest in film, literature and cultures indigenous and unique to Hong Kong.

Yuki Shum: The 'Hong Kong Films and Popular Culture of the 50s and 60s' programme co-organised by the Film Archive and the Lingnan University two years ago was a truly inspiring experience. It was like an insider's guide to research methodologies and techniques, writing essays and curating a sizable exhibition. The workshop this year has taken one step further (from examining the adaptation of Hong Kong literature), delving into the dynamics of May Fourth literature, world classics, classical literature, and Mandarin Duck and Butterfly literature to shed light on the tie between literature and Hong Kong cinema of the 1950s and 60s.

A lot of credit must go to our versatile screen stars: Cheung Ying was equally adept at playing the progressive intellectuals in *Sunrise* (1953) and *Family* (1953), the weak-minded dandy in *Thunderstorm* (1957), the out-and-out villain in *Dawn Must Come* (1950), or the streetwise title character in the 'Brother Lai' series. Pak Yin never failed to dazzle audiences with her powerful performance as the defiant young mistress who breaks free from her repressive life in *Anna* (1955), the very antipode of her submissive character Cousin Wai in *Spring* (1953).

Chan Hay-ching: Though not a fan of Cantonese films, especially not the black and white oldies, I have emerged from the workshop a better appreciator of our screen classics, and the social culture and values of the time.

Lai Ka-pui: I certainly did not expect adaptations of world classics to once take centre stage in our cinema. The new renditions retain the spirit of the original stories, while also reflecting the social realities, humanity and life values of the time. These timeless cinematic works are worthy of our preservation and studies.

Wong Sau-ling: The excellent condition of these vintage films enables us to savour the masterpieces of our cinema for years to come. Through the discussions on cinematic techniques in the workshop, I have acquired a critical awareness of how films work aesthetically.

Yeung Yee-wah: I was involved in the production of the promotional short, and has for the first time, I had delved deeply into a Cantonese classic of the 1950s. Words do not do justice to the awe-inspiring moment when I laid hand on a script penned and donated by the late director Ng Wui.

Wong Wing-ki: Taking part in the retrospective was a rewarding experience. I was struck by the enthusiasm of the Archive staff. The days of watching films of the 1950s and 60s as an inconsequential pastime were gone. I now leave the theatre after a screening with new appreciation and insight.

Kwok Wing-wah: We could reap the benefits of the resources available at the Film Archive to learn more about the relationship between literature and film, not to mention the prevalent culture of the society in the 1950s and 60s.

Lee Ka-man: The course on Hong Kong literature and film has taught me how to appreciate and study film. Through the assistance rendered by the Film Archive, our course mates were able to relish filmic images which conjured on celluloid a vivid, concrete picture of the history and the development of Hong Kong cinema.

Lam Wing-tsz: I used to take Cantonese films, and movies in general, with a pinch of salt. But the course adopted a systematic approach to studying film language and structure, which enabled me to critique a work taking into account its social background and the stance of the film company. It also shed light on the differences in the content, approach and language of the original text and its filmic representation. The Film Archive's remarkably rich and diverse collection provided us with abundant research material and made this learning experience truly invaluable.

Tam Wai-man: My appreciation of a film used to be limited to the plot itself, but the workshop had introduced me to beyond the content to filming approaches and techniques. In preparation for the tutorial presentation and the thesis, I came to understand better the relationship between literature and film, such as the adaptation of a text and their respective characteristics.

Chan Wai-kin: It was demanding but ultimately rewarding to devour the voluminous material preserved in the Archive's collection. Through these precious historical relics, I could catch a glimpse of the lives of my parents back in the 1950s and 60s, the social culture and lifestyle of the time, and the rich tapestry of anecdotes of film veterans who had contributed enormously to the development of local cultures. I was glad to have taken part in the workshop.

Kaleidoscopic Installation

From 3 May to 2 June 2004, the foyer of the Film Archive is displaying an installation which has taken its creator Chan Wing-shan over a year to finish. Entitled 'Kaleidoscope of Old-time Stories in Hong Kong', the exhibit is a collage of 32 large tin cans embellished with Hong Kong film images of the 1950s and 60s. Chan is a participant of the pilot programme organised by the Education and Manpower Bureau for identifying and developing gifted students in visual arts. She has made several trips to the Archive to obtain the desired material. What better way to tell old-time stories than travelling back in time to revisit the local cinema? It is a truly original and insightful piece of art.



Chan Wing-shan and her kaleidoscopic installation

International Museum Day 2004

The annual International Museum Day (IMD) kicked off in Hong Kong on 15 May, and for the first time, the Museum Exposition was housed in the plaza and special exhibition hall of the Hong Kong Science Museum. Under the theme of 'Enjoying, Learning and Exploring at Museums', the participating museums set up their booth or stall to provide visitors with educational infotainment through an array of games, shows and demonstrations. To foster a better understanding and closer cultural cooperation with neighbouring cities in the Pearl River Delta region, museums from Guangdong Province and Macao have also been invited to take part in the IMD this year.

Visitors flocked to the Hong Kong Film Archive booth to experience the thrilling moments offered by our quiz game, or alternatively, to purchase our quality publications and souvenirs.

