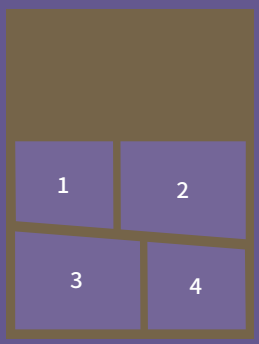
Hong Kong Film Archive

Exploring Hong Kong Films of the 1930s and 1940s

Part 2: Genres · Regions · Culture



Cover

1. *A Forgotten Woman* (1949): (left) Yan Jun; (right) Bai Guang
2. *The Amazon* (1948): (left) Gu Yelu; (right) Wu Lai-chu
3. *Sable Cicada* (1938): (left) Violet Koo; (right) Jin Shan
4. *Fortress of Flesh and Blood* (1938): Nancy Chan Wan-seung

Special thanks to Mr Jack Lee Fong of Palace Theatre, San Francisco, USA

Exploring Hong Kong Films of the 1930s and 1940s

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Genres and Art

The Arrival of Sound, the Sound of War

Ernst Lubitsch and Cantonese Opera Films of the 1930s: On *Romance on the Stage* and *The General of Dragon City*[1]

Yung Sai-shing

In early December 1934, Cantonese opera star Sit Kok-sin had finished filming *The Deadly Rose* (1937) overnight at Unique Film Productions (aka Tianyi)'s Hong Kong studio. After a short break, he hurried to the Hotel Cecil in Central for an interview with the editor of *Ling Sing* magazine. Also at lunch that day were his wife Tong Suet-hing and Unique's Jackson Sum Kat-sing. They chatted, of course, about *The Deadly Rose* that was about to wrap up, but they also spoke about *Romance on the Stage* (1934), which had finished shooting in Unique's Shanghai studio.[2] *Romance on the Stage* and *The Deadly Rose* were both directed by Runje Shaw (aka Shao Zuiweng), and both were adapted from Sit's opera classics that were known at the time as 'Western costume operas' or 'Europeanised operas'—essentially meaning opera works that were viewed as 'modern and fashionable'. In the 1930s, shortly after sound films emerged, they became a popular form of modern entertainment for the general public in cities in South China. In June 1930, the new Central Theatre in Hong Kong opened with the premiere of the Hollywood sound musical, *The Love Parade* (1929). It was the first talky by German director Ernst Lubitsch, and the premiere was a sensation.[3] Sit's Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe jumped on its popularity and adapted it for the Cantonese opera stage later that year. In 1934, Sit collaborated with Shaws' Unique to make the troupe's *Romance on the Stage* into a film, which premiered

1. I would like to thank Ms Kwok Ching-ling of the Hong Kong Film Archive and her colleagues for the information they have provided. Hereby I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr Lin Pei-yin of The University of Hong Kong for generously sending me a script copy of *The General of Dragon City*, and Goh Song-wei for consolidating the source materials.

2. 'Meeting with Sit Kok-sin at the Hotel Cecil', 'Special Report on Hong Kong Travels', *Ling Sing*, Guangzhou, No 107, 17 December 1934, pp 2-5 (in Chinese). *The Deadly Rose* was shown in Guangzhou in 1935 (note that the film was named *Hong Meigui* [*The Red Rose*] at the time). Due to a copyright lawsuit, the film's screening in Hong Kong was postponed until 1937. For more details, see Jackson Sum Kat-sing (under the byline Lo Kut), 'Runde Shaw in Hong Kong', *Panorama Magazine*, No 22, 1 September 1975, pp 65-68 (in Chinese).

3. See *The Hong Kong Telegraph*, 14 June 1930; *The China Mail*, 14 June 1930. The film premiered at Capitol Theatre and Grand Theatre in Shanghai in March 1930, see 'Capitol, Grand Showing "The Love Parade" All-Talkie', *The China Press*, Shanghai, 3 March 1930. As for the Zhonghua Theatre in Guangzhou, *The Love Parade* was screened on 11 July 1930.

at The World Theatre in Hong Kong on 'Double Ten Day'.[4] But this caught the attention of Paramount Pictures' Chinese representative, who felt there was a potential copyright infringement. At the Hotel Cecil lunch, Sit was munching on his oyster sauce chicken rice as he quipped, 'Paramount wants to sue us! This means the name Sit Kok-sin has rocked all the way to Hollywood.'[5]

The Cantonese opera version of *Romance on the Stage* was also performed by Sit's stage rival, Ma Si-tsang. In October of the same year that the Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe performed their version of *Romance on the Stage*, Ma also performed it at Hong Kong's Lee Theatre as a fundraiser for Chung Sing Benevolent Society.[6] In the history of Cantonese opera, there is the so-called 'Sit-Ma rivalry' narrative. With the advent of talkies and the rise of the record industry, the contest between the two opera virtuosos also extended to the silver screen and the phonograph. Before Ma went to perform in the US in 1931, he had recorded two *Romance on the Stage* songs, 'Casting Love Spells at the Queen' and 'Night Banquet' onto a Cantonese opera album for The New Moon Gramophone & Record Company.[7] As a man of the 1930s, Ma seemed to have a distinct favour for Lubitsch's films. After returning to Hong Kong from performing in the US in 1933, Ma set up the Tai Ping Opera Troupe with the support of Tai Ping Theatre owner, Yuen Hang-kiu, and kept a high profile about it. It was clear that this new troupe would be in tense rivalry with Sit's Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe. Tai Ping Opera Troupe's debut performance of *The General of Dragon City* was adapted from Lubitsch's film *The Man I Killed* (aka *Broken Lullaby*, 1932), while *Modern Charm*, staged around the same time, was adapted from Lubitsch's *The Smiling Lieutenant* (1931).[8] The Marco Polo Bridge Incident stirred up an anti-Japanese sentiment throughout the country. *The General of Dragon City*'s main plotline is about patriotic soldiers killing the enemy on the battlefield following the invasion of foreign tribes; in the same year, Nanyang Film Company (aka Nan Yeung Film Company) adapted *The General of Dragon City* into a film, which premiered on New Year's Day in 1938. At the time, it was already labelled a 'national defence film'.[9]

Innovations in recording technology and the popularity of sound films provided the material conditions for the globalisation of American pop culture in the 1930s. It also led

4. *The Industrial & Commercial Daily Press*, 10 October 1934 (in Chinese).
5. 'Meeting with Sit Kok-sin at the Hotel Cecil', note 2, p 4.
6. See the advertisement for Lee Theatre in *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 31 October 1930 (in Chinese). Also, in an article named 'On My New Dramatic Endeavours', published in *Qian Li Zhuang You Ji* (*A Tough Journey of a Thousand Miles*), Ma Si-tsang wrote: 'For Hong Kong Chung Sing Benevolent Society's drama section, I participated in an adaptation of *Romance on the Stage*, playing the role of Count Alfred Renard. The filming of it is to score a victory against the sound film!' (Preface in 1931, missing publication information, p 2, in Chinese).
7. 'Sheet Music' in *The New Moon*, Chin Kwong-yan (ed), Hong Kong: The New Moon Gramophone & Record Company, No 3, 1 August 1931, pp 30-33 (in Chinese). Sit Kok-sin recorded the song 'Night Feast at the Jade Hall' for EMI Records, see Huang Long Record Company in Canton-Hong Kong (ed), *Qian Nian Wan Zai* (*The Millennium*), Hong Kong: EMI Limited in Canton-Hong Kong, 1932, p 57 (in Chinese).
8. Huanghun Guilai, 'Watching Ma's Performance at Tai Ping', *Ling Sing*, Guangzhou, No 56, 10 February 1933, p 2 (in Chinese). According to an online source, *The General of Dragon City* was inspired by and based on a work by Ma Si-tsang's Tai Law Tin Opera Troupe. In the 1920s, the Cantonese opera troupe Tai Law Tin did stage a play titled *Fei Jiangjun* (*Flying General*). But further research is needed to prove if there is indeed any linkage between the play and the film.
9. *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 1 January 1938; *The Nanyang Siang Pau*, Singapore, 3 March 1938 (both in Chinese).

The 'Sit-Ma rivalry' went beyond the Cantonese opera stage extending to the silver screen and the phonograph in the 1930s (Left: Sit Kok-sin; right: Ma Si-tsang)

to complex, multi-layered interactions between Hollywood films, dialect films and Cantonese opera stage performances in Guangdong, Hong Kong and Shanghai. The aforementioned two films, *Romance on the Stage* and *The General of Dragon City*, can offer a glimpse into the market competition at the time and the positions in different cultural arenas occupied by the film industry's 'agents' (such as Sit Kok-sin, Ma Si-tsang, the Shaw brothers) and 'production institution' (for example Unique, Star Motion Picture Co., Ltd. [aka Mingxing], Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe, Tai Ping Opera Troupe). This essay will first focus on the impact of the arrival of talkies on the ecology of Cantonese opera stage shows, as well as the competition among local film companies following the emergence of the 'Cantonese opera film'.[10] The second half of the essay will take *The General of Dragon City* as an example to discuss how Cantonese opera troupes in the 1930s 'appropriated and adapted' a Hollywood film to create a local 'war resistance Cantonese opera', and even shot a Cantonese 'national defence film' based on it.

In fact, the first to bring Kok Sin Sing's *Romance on the Stage* to the silver screen was not Unique; neither was Sit the leading star. Furthermore, *Romance on the Stage* was also not Unique's first Sit Kok-sin 'Western costume opera' film. Let us begin from the day when Lubitsch's *The Love Parade* was screened in Central Theatre, as we unravel this story about Cantonese opera films in the 1930s.

The Arrival of Sound: From *The Love Parade* to *Romance on the Stage*

In June 1930, Hong Kong's Central Theatre opened its doors on Queen's Road Central and screened the aforementioned Hollywood sound musical film, *The Love Parade*. This was a grand event in the city at the time, with the English newspapers *The China Mail* and *The*

10. This essay takes a broad definition of 'Cantonese opera films', covering sound films of the 1930s that were adapted from Cantonese opera performances on stage. This type of 'Cantonese opera films' usually featured signature arias or significant sections from stage performances that showcased the vocal styles of renowned Cantonese opera players (*laoguan*), and even used this as a selling point for the film. For examinations of 'Cantonese opera films' from a macro perspective, see Luo Li, *Yueju Dianying Shi* (*The History of Cantonese Opera Film*), Beijing: China Theatre Press, 2007, pp 8-15 (in Chinese). For discussions on 'Cantonese opera films' and 'Cantonese sing-song films', see Po Fung, 'Clanging Gongs and Thundering Drums—The Dividing Line Between Musicals and Cantonese Opera Films' in *Heritage and Integration—A Study of Hong Kong Cantonese Opera Films* (Electronic Publication), May Ng (ed), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2019, pp 28-29.

Hong Kong Telegraph covering it in feature reports.[11] The two papers also published a full-page film advertisement, featuring the French actor, Maurice Chevalier, and the glamorous light-opera singer, Jeanette MacDonald. In addition, it introduced Central Theatre's newest electrically powered 'Western Electric [Sound] System', emphasising that it was used to screen this 'Paramount's All-Talking-Singing Comedy' to provide sound and dialogue in high clarity.[12] In the early 1930s, cinemas in Guangdong and Hong Kong invested in renovations and purchased sound film projectors to show Hollywood and Chinese films. For example, the Zhonghua Theatre in Guangzhou spent 20 days installing the 'Western Electric Large Loudspeaker' from the US. When the theatre reopened in July 1930, it also premiered Lubitsch's *The Love Parade*.[13] The transcript of the theatre's newspaper advertisement is as follows:


SATURDAY, JUNE 14, 1930. THE CHINA MAIL. 3

CENTRAL THEATRE

Paramount's Sound Pictures

FOR ONE WEEK

SATURDAY to FRIDAY at 2.15, 5.15, 7.15 & 9.15 p.m.

PARAMOUNT'S GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT OF THE YEAR!

BROKE ALL RECORDS IN NEW YORK!

MAURICE CHEVALIER

IN

"THE LOVE PARADE"

WITH

BEAUTIFUL JEANETTE MacDONALD

GORGEOUS SINGING

GLORIOUS MUSIC

SPARKLING COMEDY

MAGNIFICENT SETS

PERFECT CAST

CHEVALIER *The Love Parade* LUBITSCH PRODUCTION

THE SUPREME SENSATION OF THE YEAR. BIGGEST PRODUCTION FROM THE MOST POPULAR MALE STAR IN PICTURES.

PARAMOUNT'S ALL-TALKING-SINGING COMEDY "DAISY BELL"

HEAR SOUND AND TALKING PICTURES AT THEIR BEST ON

WESTERN ELECTRIC SYSTEM

AT THE

CENTRAL THEATRE

BOOKING AT ANDERSONS AND AT THE THEATRE (Telephone 28/203)

An advertisement for *The Love Parade* (1929), revealing that this first talky by the German director Ernst Lubitsch was screened at Central Theatre, Hong Kong in 1930 (*The China Mail*, 14 June 1930)

> For the retrofitting of the 'Western Electric Large Loudspeaker' in our theatre, 20 days have flown by in a flash, and now all the installation procedures are complete. We will begin to use the new machine today—the 11th—and we will be open for business as usual. We will premiere directorial master Lubitsch's most recent and spectacularly successful film, *The Love Parade*, which is a magnificent sound film with dialogue, singing and dancing—an unparalleled masterpiece that is out of this world. Hong Kong's Central Theatre premiered this film for its grand opening and those who have seen it say its splendour is unprecedented. Words of praise spread out claiming that it must be watched and listened to again. Its power to move the soul is as great as a thunder hitting the ground, reverberating far and wide! … [Our loudspeaker] is one of the latest models, in fact the same type as the one installed in Hong Kong's Central Theatre. Ask the people of Hong Kong who have seen *The Love Parade*, as they know just how incredible it is to witness the pioneering scientific progress that is evolving by the day; it is no surprise then, that the construction of the loudspeaker is also becoming increasingly exquisite as it catches up![14]

11. 'The Colony's New Cinema. "Love Parade" at To-day's Opening.', *The Hong Kong Telegraph*, 14 June 1930; 'Central Theatre. Press View of "The Love Parade."', *The China Mail*, 14 June 1930.
12. Ibid; see also advertisement for *The Love Parade*, *The China Mail*, 14 June 1930.
13. 'Zhonghua Theatre Screens *The Love Parade*', *The Min Kao Daily News, Canton*, Guangzhou, 11 July 1930 (in Chinese). This was the date of the film's premiere.
14. Ibid.

Around the same time, Guangzhou's Wing Hon Theatre, Haizhu Theatre, Nanguan Theatre and Xinguomin Theatre also raced to convert their venues to screen talkies.[15] In Hong Kong, Tai Ping Theatre, which had first opened its doors in 1904, began its renovations in 1932. The reconstruction took architectural reference from Western opera houses, with sound film projectors and first-class audio equipment installed to embrace the new sound film trend.[16]

The emergence of Hollywood talkies impacted the film and theatre industries and their ecology in Hong Kong and Guangdong. Aside from the competition among theatres regarding 'hardware', Cantonese opera troupes and performance venues also faced a most direct challenge from sound films. Sit Kok-sin said in the aforementioned Hotel Cecil interview that he had returned from Shanghai to perform in Guangdong and Hong Kong in the hopes of contributing to the industry amid the 'decline of Cantonese opera'. Separately, Ma Si-tsang also stated, 'The filming of *Romance on the Stage* is to score a victory against the sound film!'[17] Behind today's discussion of the glorious 'Sit-Ma rivalry' hides another facet of the times: the decline of Cantonese opera and the major changes in Cantonese opera troupes in the 1930s. In December 1932, *Ling Sing* published an article, 'Enormous Change in Cantonese Opera Troupes', which took stock of the unprecedented impact and difficulties faced by Cantonese opera's 'Guangdong and Hong Kong troupes'. The author writes:

> This decline of the Cantonese opera world is unprecedented since Cantonese troupes first came into being. Of course, there are many reasons for the decline…. In vying to lay claim to the stage, the Guangdong and Hong Kong troupes have spent far too much of their resources in their productions, which has led to an increase in ticket prices, putting off those in society who are struggling with their livelihoods. This leaves Guangdong and Hong Kong troupes struggling to carry the costs. Now Hong Kong's Tai Ping Theatre has switched over to talkies, and Haizhu, which is considered the home base of Cantonese opera in Guangdong, has also switched over to films, causing opera troupes to lose their turf. For all these reasons, Cantonese opera troupes are undergoing enormous change that is inevitable.[18]

Amid the globalisation of Hollywood film, Tai Ping Theatre and Haizhu Theatre 'switched over to talkies...switched over to films' simultaneously, resulting in Cantonese opera troupes losing their performance venues. The above article criticised the Guangdong and Hong Kong opera troupes for 'vying to lay claim to the stage', leading to an increase in production costs. Cantonese opera troupes at the time—including Kok Sin Sing Opera

15. See the associated advertisements in the *Ling Sing* magazine, Guangzhou (in Chinese).
16. See Ching May-bo & Ye Ruihong, '"Silent Films or Talkies?" On the Importation, Production and Reception of Sound Films in China in the 1930s' in Part 1 of this book, pp 14-31. See also Judith Ng Suet-kwan, 'The Development of Cantonese Opera Theatres in Hong Kong (1840–1940)', and Joey Wong, 'Family Business and Hong Kong Cinema Industry: A Story of the Yuen Hang-kiu Family (1930s to the early 1950s)', in *A Study of the Tai Ping Theatre Collection*, Yung Sai-shing (ed), Hong Kong: Leisure and Cultural Services Department, 2015, pp 98-117 & pp 246-267 (both in Chinese).
17. 'Meeting with Sit Kok-sin at the Hotel Cecil', note 2, p 3; Ma Si-tsang, note 6, p 2.
18. 'Enormous Change in Cantonese Opera Troupes', *Ling Sing*, Guangzhou, No 51, 14 December 1932, p 1 (in Chinese). Reference is also taken from Zhang Fangwei, 'The Rise and Decline of Cantonese Opera in Guangzhou in the 1930s' in *Yueju Chunqiu* (*Annals of Cantonese Opera*), Literary and Historical Materials on Guangzhou Vol 42, Cultural and Historical Research Committee of the Guangzhou Political Consultative Conference & Cantonese Opera Research Centre (eds), Guangzhou: Guangdong People's Publishing House, 1990, pp 84-85 (in Chinese).

Troupe and Tai Ping Opera Troupe—did not hesitate to spend money on lavish scenery and glamorous costumes; they also performed more 'Western costume operas' and other modern operas such as *Romance on the Stage* and *The General of Dragon City*, deviating from (or 'reforming') the minimal Chinese opera stage aesthetic of 'one table, two chairs'. All this, in fact, was to a large extent in response to the competition and challenges coming from Hollywood talkies.

The 1930 Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe's production of *Romance on the Stage* was written by Leung Kam-tong; Sit Kok-sin played Count Alfred, the ambassador to Paris; male *huadan* Tse Sing-nung played Queen Louise of the 'Snow Country' (known as Sylvania in the original film); the *chou* (comic acting role) Yip Fut-yuek played the Count's servant Jack; and Chan Kam-tong played the Commander of the Forbidden Army.[19] The Cantonese opera songs in the show include 'Palace Banquet', 'Adieu, Paris' and 'Marching On', which intentionally correspond to the film's songs, 'My Love Parade', 'Paris, Stay the Same' and 'March of the Grenadiers'.[20] Transplanting a modern Hollywood musical film to the Cantonese opera stage to present an exotic European palace comedy story—the troupe's ideas and motives were clear. Yet on the other side of the 'copy and adapt' coin were feelings of angst and unease. In 1930, Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe published *Romance on the Stage Special Publication*, which included an article authored by 'Siu Ha'. The author argues:

> Since the emergence of the wildly popular talkies, mute films have quietly faded into obsolescence. Many people therefore suspect that the key shortcoming of film, that it is images without sound, has been fixed, and thus the stage play can be eliminated. This notion may seem true at first, but it is far from the truth if you think deeply about it.[21]

'Siu Ha' should have been Mak Siu-ha, publicity manager of Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe. 'Mute film' is now called 'silent film'. The article raises a question: With silent films gradually being replaced by sound films, could the Cantonese opera stage performance survive this new trend, or will it be eliminated as well? The author's answer was: 'far from the truth'. He then moves on to compare five artistic characteristics between Cantonese opera shows and talkies, in order to affirm that the former was bound to stand strong. Written in 1930, the article reflects the Cantonese opera industry's assessment and reflections on sound film after this external competitor emerged. It is worth noting that the author Mak Siu-ha was a multi-talented artist himself, with a career that spanned Cantonese opera, film and art. He was not only the plot-writing creative mastermind for the Tai Law Tin and Kok Sin Sing opera troupes, but had also studied film production under Lai Buk-hoi (aka Lai Pak-hoi) and became a well-known director and screenwriter in the 1930s.[22] In

19. 'Cast List of *Romance on the Stage*', *Xuangong Yanshi Zhuankan* (*Romance on the Stage Special Publication*) (Preface in 1930), Mak Siu-ha (ed), Guangzhou: Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe (in Chinese).
20. 'Synopsis of *Romance on the Stage*', ibid.
21. Siu Ha, 'Sound Film and Theatre: Sit Kok-sin's *Romance on the Stage* and Maurice Chevalier's *The Love Parade*', same as note 19. Maurice Chevalier played the lead character in *The Love Parade*.
22. See Chan Sau-yan, 'Mak Siu-ha Painted Blood on the Peach Blossom Fan', *e-Newsletter*, Hong Kong Film Archive, Issue 76, May 2016; Chan Sau-yan, 'A Timeline of Mak Siu-ha's Life' and Cheung Man-shan, 'A Brief Biography of Mak Siu-ha', *Hong Kong Chinese Opera Newsletter*, Chinese Opera Information Centre of The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Combined Issue 37/38, 17 December 2012, p 13 & pp 2-3 (both in Chinese).

his remarks on *Romance on the Stage*, Mak Siu-ha repeatedly emphasises that 'Even with sound, there are many other aspects in which film falls short of the stage'; and that Sit Kok-sin's stage performance is 'magnificent beyond the reach of a sound film'.[23] However, in shouting out 'far from the truth', the writer's underlying worry and unease is palpable. In the face of this 'barbarian warrior' from the West invading all of a sudden, could the opera industry find a deux ex machina to solve their conundrum?

As the saying goes, if you can't beat them, join them! In 1933, Sit Kok-sin, who was living in Shanghai at the time, undertook a pioneering collaboration with the Shaws' Unique Film Productions to shoot one of the earliest Cantonese opera sound films in Chinese film history, *The White Gold Dragon* (aka *The Platinum Dragon*, 1933). It was adapted from a 'Western costume Cantonese opera' of the same name, as performed by Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe.[24] In the same year, Sit and the Shaws continued working together to produce the second Cantonese opera talky, *Song Parade* (1934). In the autumn of 1934, Sit Kok-sin and Unique collaborated for a third time to complete the aforementioned *Romance on the Stage* film. The three Cantonese opera talkies, *The White Gold Dragon*, *Song Parade* and *Romance on the Stage*, all starred Sit and Tong Suet-hing as the leads; they could collectively be called the 'Sit Kok-sin Trilogy' by Unique's Shanghai studio. However, this had not been Unique's original plan. At the time, Runje Shaw only spent eight days in a rushed shoot for *Romance on the Stage*,[25] because Unique's archrival—Star—was filming another Cantonese opera talky, *Mrs. Mai* (aka *Story in a Cantonese Opera Company*, 1934), starring prominent film star Butterfly Wu.

Hollywood talkies swung into the Chinese market with great momentum. Even filmmakers in Shanghai began exploring the production methods and genres of sound films, as 'sound' on film screens became a major novelty selling point. In 1931, Star raced ahead, spending six months to successfully produce the first wax cylinder-recorded sound film, *The Singing Peony*. It was written by Hong Shen (aka Hung Sum), directed by Zhang Shichuan and starred Butterfly Wu. The story surrounds the tumultuous life of a Peking opera diva, Red Peony. Butterfly Wu, who plays the title character, is a Cantonese native, so the Peking opera songs in the film, 'Muke Fortress', 'Yu Tang Chun', 'The Fourth Son Visits His Mother' and 'Subduing Gao Deng at Yanyang Tower' are sung by the Peking opera master, Mei Lanfang, in a post-production recording.[26] For the first time, Star combined sound film technology and opera art to bring traditional Peking opera (known

23. See note 21.

24. For recent academic discussions on *The White Gold Dragon*, see Zhou Chengren, 'Shanghai's Unique Film Productions and Hong Kong's Early Cinema' in *The Shaw Screen: A Preliminary Study*, Wong Ain-ling (ed), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2003, pp 19-35. See also Kenny K. K. Ng, 'The Way of *The Platinum Dragon*: Xue Juexian and the Sound of Politics in 1930s Cantonese Cinema' in *Early Film Culture in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Republican China: Kaleidoscopic Histories*, Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh (ed), Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018, pp 156-176.

25. Runje Shaw finished the shooting of *Romance on the Stage* in eight days, see 'Meeting with Sit Kok-sin at the Hotel Cecil', note 2, p 4. Another article reported that the shooting lasted for ten days. The former account came from Sit Kok-sin himself, and so is believed to be of higher credibility. See also Sha Shi, 'The Boss Runje Shaw Takes the Lead Sit Kok-sin Finishes *Romance on the Stage* in Ten Days', *Cinema Weekly*, Shanghai, Vol 1, No 13, 5 September 1934, p 308 (in Chinese).

26. Lu Lin, 'An Exotic and Nationalizing Chinese Film', *Contemporary Cinema*, Beijing, No 6, 2008, pp 50-53 (in Chinese).

Pleasures of the Dance Hall (1931) is a modern song-and-dance 'sound-on-film' talky invested by Shanghai's Unique to cater to the increasing popularity of talkies at the time.

as 'Ping opera' in those days) singing to the silver screen, and it was a blockbuster hit. In response, its competitor Unique jumped into action, immediately investing in the production of a modern song-and-dance 'sound-on-film' talky, *Pleasures of the Dance Hall* (1931).[27] Two years later in 1933, Unique and Sit Kok-sin's Southern Film Corporation co-produced *The White Gold Dragon*, expanding the types of talkies as well as their market to local dialect operas and overseas Chinese communities. We can gain a deeper understanding of the historical background of the Sit Kok-sin Trilogy's Shanghai production by examining the historical context of this 'sonic culture'.

Unique's Cantonese opera film *The White Gold Dragon* achieved outstanding box-office results,[28] which in turn prompted Star's interest in the dialect film market, so it began shooting the company's first Cantonese talky, *Mrs. Mai*. The film is about the wife of a wealthy Shanghai businessman, Mrs Mai (played by Butterfly Wu), who is passionate about doing charity work and performs alongside the Gwok Gwong Cantonese Opera Troupe, who are visiting Shanghai, to raise funds for nursery schools. Along the way, she experiences family disputes triggered by an escort (played by Leung Choi-chun [aka Liang Sai-zhen]), but all misunderstandings are resolved for a happy ending, and finally she steps on stage for the performance.[29] The film was previewed in *The Industrial & Commercial Daily Press* (aka *The Kung Sheung Daily News*):

> Star has had a long history in our country's film industry but has seldom produced Cantonese sound films. However, a few months ago, when Sun Moon Star Cantonese Opera Troupe went to perform in Shanghai, general manager Zhang Shichuan came to know the Cantonese actress Butterfly Wu who is of Guangdong origin, but had never acted in a Cantonese sound film. He then invited her to star in his Cantonese sound production in development, *Mrs. Mai*. He hired Sun Moon Star troupe performers for cameo roles, and brought on Shanghai actress-dancers Leung Choi-chun and her two sisters as well. The film has now arrived in Hong Kong, and will be shown in Central Theatre shortly.[30]

27. Lo Kut, 'Runje Shaw and *Pleasures of the Dance Hall*', *Panorama Magazine*, No 18, 1 May 1975, pp 62-64 (in Chinese).
28. According to a credit report on Unique compiled by The Shanghai Commercial & Savings Bank in 1937, *The White Gold Dragon* made a profit of more than 200,000 yuan. See Lee Pui-tak, 'Rivalries in the Film Industry of Shanghai During the 1920s and 1930s: A Case Study of the Unique Film Production Co. Ltd. and China Sun Motion Picture Co., Ltd.', *Journal of Oriental Studies*, Vol 39, No 1, June 2005, p 38 (in Chinese).
29. Lang Li, '*Mrs. Mai*', *The Min Kao Daily News*, *Canton*, Guangzhou, 18 October 1934 (in Chinese).
30. 'Talky *Mrs. Mai* Arrives in Hong Kong', *The Industrial & Commercial Daily Press*, 2 October 1934 (in Chinese).

The 'Sit Kok-sin Trilogy' produced by Shanghai's Unique

The White Gold Dragon was Sit Kok-sin's first collaboration with Unique in 1933, and one of the earliest Cantonese opera sound film in the history of Chinese cinema. (Left: Sit Kok-sin; right: Tong Suet-hing)

An advertisement for *The White Gold Dragon*, published in *The Kung Sheung Evening Press* on 27 September 1933

An advertisement for *Song Parade*, published in *The Industrial & Commercial Daily Press* on 2 June 1934

An advertisement for *Romance on the Stage*, published in *The Industrial & Commercial Daily Press* on 10 October 1934

The theatrical release of *Mrs. Mai* was promoted with 'sound' as the focus, with taglines such as 'Butterfly Wu's Cantonese debut', 'Cantonese talky with Cantonese operatic songs, a national masterpiece', 'Cantonese opera, every act brilliant, every song glorious', 'Clear sound', and 'Exquisite photography'.[31] As mentioned in the above excerpt, Star was able to invite Sun Moon Star troupe performers, whom were in Shanghai at the time, to guest perform four opera excerpts: 'Marriage Deal for the Royal Lady' (co-starring Butterfly Wu, Kwai Ming-yeung, Tsang Sam-to), 'The Flame of Glacier Mountain', 'Heavenly Maiden Delivers Her Son to the Mortal Father', and 'Romance on the Stage'. However, 'Romance on the Stage' is not sung by Sit Kok-sin in this film. Instead, it is former Kok Sin Sing *xiaowu* (young warrior role), Chan Kam-tong, who plays the role of Count Alfred in the stage play featured within the film, partnering up with male *huadan* Tse Sing-nung.[32] Upon realising that Star intended to compete for the Cantonese sound film market, Unique quickly responded by inviting Sit Kok-sin to shoot the entire *Romance on the Stage* as a film. In 1934, *Cinema Weekly* ran an article describing Unique's 'pre-emptive' strategy:

> Now Star has suddenly brought together Sun Moon Star Opera Troupe, Butterfly Wu and Leung Choi-chun, et al, to collaborate on the Cantonese film *Mrs. Mai*. Unique sees this move as a threat. The company has always made its money in Cantonese films, so if Star eats into this pie, Unique could starve. Therefore, Unique immediately came up with a pre-emptive strike, bringing in Sit Kok-sin and quickly shooting a Cantonese sound film with him to fend off *Mrs. Mai*…. And because the film must be completed in the shortest time possible, the company decided to film it in ten days. Sit Kok-sin, pleased to make a tidy profit in a short period of ten days, was of course willing to do so. So now they have started, and the script selected is Sit's stage opera showpiece, *Romance on the Stage*, with the female lead played by Tong Suet-hing. When the film goes public in the near future, the filming for *Mrs. Mai* might, in all likelihood, not yet be completed.[33]

In the end, Runje Shaw wrapped up the shoot ahead of time, in just eight days. The two films were screened in Hong Kong's Central Theatre and The World Theatre respectively, and full-page or half-page advertisements were taken out every day for publicity, often with publicity texts directly targeting the rival film. The World Theatre's *Romance on the Stage* advertisement led the first attack: 'This is a masterpiece following *The White Gold Dragon* and *Song Parade*'; 'any sort of "story" afterwards will be inferior to this'; 'Any film can be missed, but not *Romance on the Stage*!'[34] The publicity for Central Theatre's *Mrs. Mai* hit right back: 'You would rather not watch other Cantonese films than to miss this Cantonese sound film masterpiece!'; 'Opera fans are better off watching *Mrs. Mai* than 10 Cantonese opera shows. Film fans are better off watching *Mrs. Mai* than a few rotting romances'.[35]

31. *The Industrial & Commercial Daily Press*, 10 October 1934 (in Chinese).
32. For more about the story of Chan Kam-tong leaving Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe to join Sun Moon Star Cantonese Opera Troupe, see Chu Siu-cheung, *Chen Jintang's Life in Performing Arts*, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (Hong Kong) Company Limited, 2018, pp 17-25 (in Chinese).
33. Sha Shi, note 25.
34. *The Industrial & Commercial Daily Press*, 8 & 10 October 1934 (in Chinese).
35. *The Industrial & Commercial Daily Press*, 14 October 1934 (in Chinese).

Romance on the Stage and *Mrs. Mai* were shown in theatres during the same period in 1934, so their advertisements often conveyed a rivalry between the two films.

An advertisement for *Romance on the Stage*: 'Any sort of "story" afterwards will be inferior to this!' (*The Industrial & Commercial Daily Press*, 8 October 1934)

An advertisement for *Mrs. Mai*: 'Film fans are better off watching *Mrs. Mai* than a few rotting romances.' (*The Industrial & Commercial Daily Press*, 14 October 1934)

At this point, the competition among Shanghai production companies for a share in the dialect film market had extended to Hong Kong. There were reports that the box-office revenues of *Romance on the Stage* and *Mrs. Mai* were unsatisfactory, and even considered a 'lose-lose' situation.[36] After this, Star stopped venturing into the Cantonese film market. Meanwhile, the Shaw brothers leaned on the business of their Southeast Asian theatre network, established in the 1920s,[37] and mass-produced Cantonese films from Hong Kong. They included *The Deadly Rose*, as mentioned in the *Ling Sing* interview, and Ma Si-tsang's *The General of Dragon City*, to be discussed hereafter.

The Sounds of War: From Lubitsch's 'Anti-War' to Ma Si-tsang's 'War Resistance'

On Lunar New Year's Day in January 1933, Tai Ping Opera Troupe made their debut with Ma Si-tsang's new work, *The General of Dragon City*, at Tai Ping Theatre. This much-anticipated opera was adapted from Lubitsch's film *The Man I Killed*. *Modern Charm*,

36. Cheng Yan, 'Both *Mrs. Mai* and *Romance on the Stage* Fail in Hong Kong', *Movietone*, Shanghai, Vol 3, No 46, 30 December 1934, p 911 (in Chinese).

37. See Yung Sai-shing, 'Territorialization and the Entertainment Industry of the Shaw Brothers in Southeast Asia' in *China Forever: The Shaw Brothers and Diasporic Cinema*, Poshek Fu (ed), Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008, pp 131-153.

performed on the third night of the Lunar New Year, was adapted from another Lubitsch film, *The Smiling Lieutenant*. On the fifth night of the Lunar New Year, they staged *Love Tale of the Heroic Warrior on Iron Horse*, which was an adaptation of *Mata Hari* (1931), starring Greta Garbo.[38] In other words, the three new operas performed by the Tai Ping Opera Troupe were all adapted from Hollywood films.

Driven by the success of Paramount's *The Love Parade*, Hong Kong theatres saw a wave of romantic comedy films in the early 1930s, all given Chinese titles that referenced the Chinese translated title for *The Love Parade*, loosely tying them into a series of the so-called 'Six Great Romances' or 'Seven Great Romances'. Apart from the original *The Love Parade* directed by Lubitsch, his *Monte Carlo* (1926), *The Smiling Lieutenant, One Hour with You* (1932) and *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) were also part of such 'series'. Films by other directors included Roben Mamoulian's *Love Me Tonight* (1932) and others such as *Du Barry, Woman of Passion* (1930) and *Broadway Scandals* (1929). At the same time when Ma Si-tsang was staging *The General of Dragon City*, King's Theatre was showing Lubitsch's *Trouble in Paradise*. The question to be raised here is: As the city was awash with a wave of 'great romances', why did Ma choose *The Man I Killed* (as the basis for adaptation) and *The General of Dragon City* (as his new troupe's debut act)? Films in Lubitsch's 'Great Romance' series, such as *The Smiling Lieutenant*, which bubbled with humour, glamorous sets, and the fun of song and dance, would have been more appropriate to perform during Lunar New Year celebrations. On the contrary, *The Man I Killed* is based on themes of war, death, guilt and salvation—not exactly the most representative of the 'Lubitsch Touch'. So what led Ma Si-tsang to stage *The General of Dragon City*, which features elements such as war, divorce, death of a son, elimination of a villain and mourning, on the first day of the Lunar New Year? Why did he decide to schedule *Modern Charm*, which was based on *The Smiling Lieutenant*, on the third day of the Lunar New Year instead?

The General of Dragon City has been a long-neglected play and there are not many discussions about it in the academic and performing arts circles. Looking back now to figure out Ma's motivation and mentality, we can see that he was determined to stage a 'war resistance Cantonese opera' in Hong Kong as Tai Ping Opera Troupe's debut. Ma and the troupe's playwright team (led by Lo Yau-yung), supported by the director of Tai Ping Theatre, 'appropriated' Lubitsch's *The Man I Killed*, and created a Cantonese opera on the War of Resistance against Japan. The day of the premiere was 26 January 1933, one year after the Shanghai bombing incident of 1932. This is also a reason why *The General of Dragon City* holds a special status in the history of Cantonese opera. Further, it reflects the common approach by Cantonese opera scriptwriters in the 1930s to 're-create' scripts and 'appropriate' plots from other sources.

First, whether in terms of film language, plotline or symbolic meaning, *The Man I Killed* is unmistakably an 'anti-war' film. The story is set in Europe just after the end of World War I. The male protagonist Paul is a young French musician who kills a German

38. Huanghun Guilai, note 8, pp 1-2.

The General of Dragon City (1938), starring Ma Si-tsang (centre) and Tam Lan-hing (right)

soldier in the trenches during a battle in the frontlines. Paul finds and reads an unfinished letter written by the dead soldier, and is weighed down by guilt to the point that it breaks him mentally. In order to release himself from this mental torture, he follows the address on the letter to a small town in Germany, looking for the family of the dead soldier to beg for forgiveness. But the scars of war remain even after it has ended, and the townsfolk treat the French visitor with resentment and hostility. When the soldier's father, Dr Holderlin, first meets Paul, he wants this stranger to leave immediately. At this point, the soldier's fiancée Elsa recognises Paul, as he had visited the soldier's grave and laid flowers in mourning. As the story progresses, Paul gradually gets the soldier's family to accept him, but could not bring himself to tell the old doctor that he was the one who killed his son. Paul and Elsa fall in love; the old doctor begins to regard Paul as his godson, and even gifts his late son's violin to Paul out of good faith. The film ends with Paul and Elsa playing a duet for the old doctor. Through the harmonious music of the violin and piano, the film sends a message to say, as the war ends, it is time to let go of hatred, and instead find reconciliation, harmony and peace.

Compared with the adaption of *Romance on the Stage* by Kok Sin Sing Opera Troupe, and Tai Ping Opera Troupe's localisation of the film *The Blue Angel* (1930) into *Wild Flower* (aka *Scent of Wild Flowers*, 1935), the situation here is completely different.[39] What Ma Si-tsang did was to flip the 'anti-war' film *The Man I Killed* into *The General of Dragon City* as an expression of protest against the Japanese invasion. There are eight acts in the existing Cantonese opera script of *The General of Dragon City*.[40] The opening scene of the first act is set against the backdrop of the high-end brothels in Shek Tong Tsui (one could imagine that many of the audience seated in Tai Ping Theatre at the time were bona fide Shek Tong Tsui ladies of the night). The protagonist Chu Sing-mou (played by Ma) becomes drunk at a banquet in Shek Tong Tsui and is sent to the famous prostitute Siu Lau's to stay the night. But after offending a powerful client, Siu Lau is falsely accused

39. See Lo Wai-luk, 'Expressing Vision Through Drama: Ma Si-tsang's Cultural Practice in Film', *Newsletter*, Hong Kong Film Archive, Issue 92, May 2020, pp 15-22.

40. There is no author listed for *The General of Dragon City* (Typograpical Edition, in Chinese). The cover of this 20-page playscript says 'Printed and Published by Cantonese Operatic Songs Institute', '*The General of Dragon City* by the Tai Ping Opera Troupe', 'Starring Ma Si-tsang and Chan Fei-nung'. It is believed that the play was published in the 1930s in Guangzhou. It is currently part of the collection of Cambridge University Library in the UK.

of having leprosy and sent to hospital that day. When Sing-mou sobers up, he thinks he is infected with leprosy too, so, to avoid spreading it to his family, he cruelly throws his wife (played by Chan Fei-nung) out of their home. As an enemy nation from the east begins invading the country, Sing-mou goes to the battlefield to join the resistance.

Twenty-five years later, Sing-mou claims victory on the frontlines and returns home. His son, Chu Dai-mun (played by Fung Hap-wan), now grown up, joins the frontline troops along with his cousin Chan Gai-jo (played by Poon Yat On) to defend their homeland. But on the battlefield, Dai-mun is lured into changing sides and begins collaborating with the enemy. In desperation, Gai-jo draws a gun and fires at his cousin. Before he dies, Dai-mun is overcome with regret and writes a letter to his parents in repentance. In the last act, Sing-mou dreams that the deceased Dai-mun has returned home wearing a military uniform, only to wake up realising it was a dream; the whole family is in despair. At this point, Gai-jo shows up with Dai-mun's letter and tells Sing-mou everything. Sing-mou is ashamed that his son became a traitor to his country, but appreciates Gai-jo's loyalty and patriotism. In the final scene of the opera, Sing-mou acts according to the final wishes of Dai-mun and arranges for Gai-jo to marry his daughter. In short, the first six acts of *The General of Dragon City* are original, after which it begins incorporating themes and plot points from *The Man I Killed*, such as dying on the battlefield, writing letters of regret, death of one's beloved son and ending with a happy marriage. Meanwhile, as an early 'war resistance Cantonese opera', the script also contains thematic sets such as leaving home for war, killing on the battlefield, colluding with the enemies, wiping out the traitors and mourning over the deaths. Through a look at such elements and themes in this script, we can explore how the formula and tropes of the 'war resistance Cantonese opera' in the 1930s would later develop.

The General of Dragon City was an important opera piece in Ma's acting career. However, it never became a representative work of the Tai Ping Opera Troupe and was rarely performed on the Cantonese opera stage.[41] Yet when the nation's survival hit crisis point, this 'war resistance Cantonese opera' that had been idling around for many years suddenly regained favour among film companies. In 1937, the Shaws' Nanyang Film Company started to adapt *The General of Dragon City* into a film which was to be directed by So Yee, with Ma playing Chu Sing-mou, Tam Lan-hing playing Chu's wife Chan Gwun-hing, Tam Sau-zhen as Siu Lau, and Fung Fung as Chu Dai-mun. The film premiered at Singapore's Palace Theatre and Grand Theatre on 17 November 1937, and was released in Hong Kong on New Year's Day, 1938.[42] Its original Chinese title, *Loong Sing Fei Jeung* (literally meaning 'Dragon City Flying General') was changed to *Loong Sing Fu Jeung* (literally meaning 'Dragon City Tiger General') for its release in Singapore.

41. The frustrations and drawbacks Ma Si-tsang faced in his attempt to introduce innovations in *The General of Dragon City* was one of the reasons, and will be discussed separately. For more information, see Fenmian Shisanlang, 'Ma Si-tsang's Innovations in Cantonese Opera: A Huge Failure', *Ling Sing*, Guangzhou, No 56, 10 February 1933, pp 17-20 (in Chinese).
42. *The Nanyang Siang Pau*, Singapore, 17 November 1937; *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 1 January 1938 (both in Chinese).

As mentioned above, the Cantonese opera *The General of Dragon City* was created after the Shanghai bombing incident of 1932, while the Marco Polo Bridge Incident led to its film adaptation. Today, the film prints of *The General of Dragon City* no longer exist, and very few related film reviews and essays remain. On the day of its premiere, an advertisement in the *Wah Kiu Yat Po* described the film's plot in a poetic form:

> One night in the brothel leaves endless regret. The man abandons his family and joins his countrymen to fight the enemy. He charges bravely and is wounded in the fields.
>
> Fatherless, husbandless, the family moves on. The boy grows up and goes searching for his father on the battlefield. He is deceived by the enemy and uses his weapons against his foes.
>
> The servant kills his young master in service to the country. Father, now aged, again loses his son. He mourns, heartbroken.
>
> Famous opera, famous songs, superstars in a superb film.[43]

The promotional text of Singapore's Palace Theatre emphasised that the film was 'a must-see among the voices of resistance'. Its content focused on the three main characters in the film:

> Ma Si-tsang misbelieves he has caught leprosy, so he divorces his wife, throws out his son, and joins the army to fight the enemy.
>
> Tam Lan-hing is abandoned out of the blue, but she perseveres through heartbreak and poverty, and raises her son to be a man.
>
> Tam Sau-zhen is a vagrant who wanders down a wrong path, so she heads to the frontline to serve as a nurse in the battlefield.[44]

From this point of view, the plotline of the film *The General of Dragon City* largely follows the original stage version. But it appears to have beefed up the role of the prostitute, Siu Lau. In the film version, Siu Lau goes to the frontline to work as a nurse, where she meets Sing-mou again and tells him that she never did contract leprosy. In the end, she is killed in an enemy airstrike. In addition, Gai-jo, who shoots and kills Dai-mun on the battlefield, was changed in the film version from Dai-mun's cousin to the family servant's son (as mentioned in the film's description above, 'the servant kills his young master'). At the end of the film, Sing-mou makes Gai-jo his son-in-law, and together they rejoin the battlefield to continue defending the country.[45] Adapted from the stage version of *The General of Dragon City*, the Cantonese opera singing by Ma Si-tsang and Tam Lan-hing was the main box-office draw. The film included the 'five famous songs': 'Lady

43. *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, ibid.
44. *The Nanyang Siang Pau*, note 42.
45. For the synopsis of *The General of Dragon City*, see Kwok Ching-ling (ed), *Hong Kong Filmography Vol I (1914–1941)* (Revised Edition), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2020, p 72 (in Chinese).

of the Moon' (sung by Tam), 'Song of Wounded Soldiers' (sung by Ma), 'Lullaby' (sung by Tam), 'Congratulations to the Newlyweds' (sung by Ma) and 'Song of the Trench' (sung by Ma). In 1939, Ma recorded the Cantonese opera record of *The General of Dragon City* for Columbia-Wo Shing Record Company, with songs taken from this 'national defence film'.[46]

An advertisement for *The General of Dragon City*: An overbearing Ma Si-tsang stands chivalrously on the city wall (*Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 1 January 1938)

From the original Lubitsch film, *The Man I Killed*, to *The General of Dragon City* on stage and screen, Ma Si-tsang was the main 'agent' pushing things forward. The aforementioned *Wah Kiu Yat Po* film advertisement included an image of Ma Si-tsang in military uniform holding up an army knife, standing majestically atop the city wall. It creates a powerful image of the title character and complements the film's poetic subheading that describes the fearless flying general of Dragon City.[47] Below this advertisement for The World Theatre, there was another for Tai Ping Theatre. On the day of the film premiere of *The General of Dragon City*, Ma and Tam staged a new 'national defence opera', *Final Victory*, at Tai Ping Theatre, written and directed by Ma himself. New operas, *The End of the Traitors* and *My Husband is a Patriot*, were also staged in the same period. On the same day, Ma served as a guest editor for *Tsun Wan Yat Po* (*Universal Circulating Herald*), to edit its *National Salvation Opera Weekly*.[48] On New Year's Eve (31 December 1937), the Tai Ping Opera Troupe staged a fundraising performance for the Fifth Route Army of the Guangxi National Revolutionary Army to buy medication and first aid items. Li Zongren, the Commander-in-Chief; Bai Chongxi, the Deputy Commander; and Huang Xuchu, Chairman of the Guangxi provincial government all sent over flower baskets on the day as tokens of thanks. All of this can be traced back to Ma's patriotic intentions when he debuted *The General of Dragon City* on stage in 1933.

46. See the advertisement of Columbia-Wo Shing Record Company on their 22nd release, *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 23 February 1939 (in Chinese). Reference is also taken from Wong Chi-wah, 'Insights on Cantonese Opera Songs and Cantonese Music Records, 1939'. http://blog.chinaunix.net/uid-20375883-id-4011685.html (in Chinese). Accessed on 15 July 2021.
47. *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, note 42.
48. Ibid.

Afterword

In 1945, the Chinese won the War of Resistance and the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949. After the Korean War, there was the Cold War, and as 'anti-American and anti-imperialist' ideology began to dominate Chinese literature and art, the 'Western costume opera' adapted from Hollywood films also became a target of criticism. Opera maestro Ouyang Yuqian once rebuked Cantonese opera that imitated American films for 'viciously spreading corrupt, shameless, and extremely evil criminal thinking'.[49] By the 1950s, under the political atmosphere of the Cold War, *The White Gold Dragon*, *Romance on the Stage* and *The Vagabond Prince* (1939) were long gone from the Mainland, but remained on Hong Kong cinema screens.

1955 was an important year. It was when Motion Picture and General Investment Co. Ltd. (MP & GI) in Hong Kong officially established its Cantonese Film Department and had Tso Kea direct the remake of *Romance on the Stage*, as *My Kingdom for a Husband* (1957). By this point, Sit Kok-sin had passed away in Guangzhou, so the filmmakers invited Hong Kong's number-one Cantonese film leading actor Cheung Ying to play Prince Ali, and Law Yim-hing to play the Queen Law Yee. In the 'Palace Banquet' scene, Cheung Ying, looking striking in a fashionable Western suit, 'opens his mouth and belts out tunes in the Sit Vocal Style'. This Hong Kong adaptation of *The Love Parade* also included the queen's bathing scene from the original film, with Law Yim-hing and her 'god-given beautiful figure' taking on this glamorous, sexy scene.[50] Tam Lan-hing, who was the female lead of 1938's *The General of Dragon City*, plays the lady-in-waiting Lo Lo, in a comedic partnership with 'King of Comedians' Leung Sing-por. *My Kingdom for a Husband* achieved good box-office results,[51] so the following year, MP & GI immediately started filming its sequel *My Kingdom for a Honeymoon* (1958). In the same year, Hong Kong's Golden Gate Film Company filmed *The Prince's Romantic Affairs* (1958), based on the 1932 film *Love Me Tonight*. It stars the graceful and glamorous Mui Yee as the princess, who performs Cantonese opera and tap dances in the film. All the music in it was created by the famous Cantonese opera music maestro, Loo Kah-chi (aka Lo Ka-chi), who synthesised Cantonese opera, Cantonese music, Western pop music, and world famous songs for a unique film soundtrack.[52]

49. Ouyang Yuqian, 'A Brief Discussion of Cantonese Opera', *Zhongguo Xiqu Yanjiu Ziliao Chuji* (*The First Collection of Research Material for the Study of Chinese Opera*), Ouyang Yuqian (ed), Beijing: Yishu Chubanshe (Art Publisher), 1956, p 128 (in Chinese).
50. Promotional pamphlet for *My Kingdom for a Husband*, September 1957 (in Chinese).
51. Weng Lingwen, 'The Dian Mou Film Company: Cantonese Film Group' in *Cantonese Cinema Retrospective (1950–1959)* (The 2nd Hong Kong International Film Festival), Lin Nien-tung & Paul Yeung (eds), Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1978, pp 58-59.
52. Such 'hybridity' in Hong Kong film music can also be observed in other Hong Kong film genres. See Yu Siu-wah, 'The Music in 1950s Amoy-dialect Films: An Indicator of Cultural Interactions in Hong Kong' in *The Amoy-dialect Films of Hong Kong*, May Ng (ed), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2012, pp 110-127 (in Chinese).

Also in 1955, Ma Si-tsang and Hung Sin Nui returned to Guangzhou to settle. That same year, Premier Zhou Enlai led a delegation to the 'Bandung Conference' in Indonesia, where he proposed a foreign policy to 'expand the world's united front for peace' and 'enhance relations between countries'. Under the new political situation, Chinese opera films took up the mission of breaking through the West's 'cultural containment' and establishing a 'united front'. During this period, among the opera films that made major waves overseas were Yue opera films *Liang Shan-po and Chu Ying-tai* (1954) and *Dream of the Red Chamber* (1962), the Huangmei opera film *Marriage of the Fairy Princess* (1955), Chao opera films *The Story of Sixth Madam Su* (aka *So Luk Neung*, 1959) and *Chen San and Fifth Madam* (aka *Chen San Wuniang*, 1962), and Peking opera films *Stage Art of Mei Lanfang* (1955–1956), *Battle of Wits* (1957) and *Borrowing East Wind* (1957). The representative Cantonese opera films of course included *The Lost Kite* (1956) and *Guan Hanqing* (1960), both starring Ma and Hung. *The Lost Kite*'s distributor at the time Shu Don-lok said, 'The extraordinary achievements made by the opera films *Liang Shan-po and Chu Ying-tai*, *Marriage of the Fairy Princess* and *The Lost Kite* have strengthened our confidence in the prospects of Chinese film distribution in Hong Kong and overseas.'[53] *The Lost Kite* was filmed in Shanghai, and released in Hong Kong in 1957, with 20 theatres across three circuits screening this Cantonese opera film. By now, the 1930s and its 'Sit-Ma rivalry' had gone with the wind. In 1957, *My Kingdom for a Husband* and *The Lost Kite* crossed paths in Hong Kong. This marked a new historical setting that quietly embodied another level of rivalry: between the merry music of 'Night Banquet' and 'Reflections under the Moonlight', and between the German director Lubitsch and ancient Chinese playwright Guan Hanqing, manifested a subtle and symbolic layer of confrontation between the left and the right.[54] [Translated by Diane To]

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53. Shu Don-lok, *50 Years of Chinese Film Distribution in HK*, Hong Kong: MCCM Creations, 2005, p 39 (in Chinese). For more about the role of Yue opera *Liang Shan-po and Chu Ying-tai* in 'cultural diplomacy' during the Cold War period, see Lanjun Xu, 'The Southern Film Corporation, Opera films, and the PRC's Cultural Diplomacy in Cold War Asia, 1950s and 1960s', *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, Columbus, Ohio, Vol 29, No 1, Spring 2017, pp 239-282.
54. For the relationship between MP & GI and cultural cold war, see Poshek Fu, 'More than Just Entertaining: Cinematic Containment and Asia's Cold War in Hong Kong, 1949–1959', in *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, Columbus, Ohio, Vol 30, No 2, Fall 2018, pp 1-55; see also Grace Mak, *Lengzhan Shiqi Xianggang Dianmao Yingpian De 'Linglei Gaibian' Yu Chongpai* (*The 'Alternative Adaptations' and Remakes of the Hong Kong Films from MP & GI During the Cold War Period*), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2019 (in Chinese).

Genre, Socio-Cultural Identity and Artistic Value:
An Exploration of Hong Kong's National Defence Cinema in the Pre-Occupation Era

Stephen Sze Man-hung

Genre

1. Characteristics of 'National Defence (Patriotic)' Films

According to historical records of Chinese cinema, 'national defence films' originated from the development of 'left-wing cinema'. Due to Japan's invasion of China, patriotic directors made a series of national defence films, including *Bloodshed on Wolf Mountain* (directed by Fei Mu, 1936), *Revolutionaries* (aka *Unchanged Heart in Life and Death*, directed by Ying Yunwei, 1936), and *Soaring Aspirations* (aka *The Pioneers*, directed by Wu Yonggang, 1936). Later in December 1936, the Xi'an Incident led to a united front being formed between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in order to join forces against Japan. The next year, in 1937, after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, full-on war broke out between China and Japan. A new phase of 'war resistance films' emerged, which included *Symphony of Lianhua* (aka *Lianhua Symphony*, co-directed by eight directors, 1937), *Youth on the March* (directed by Shi Dongshan, 1937), *Wang Laowu* (directed by Cai Chusheng, 1938), *Eight Hundred Heroes* (directed by Ying Yunwei, 1938), and *Storm on the Border* (aka *Beyond the Great Wall*, directed by Ying Yunwei, made in 1940 and released in 1942), etc.[1]

To apply this somewhat nebulous categorisation framework of 'left-wing', 'national defence', and 'war resistance' films devised by Chinese theorists to Hong Kong films of similar subject matters is clearly unsuitable. Firstly, although Hong Kong cinema was no

1. For more about the delineation of 'left-wing cinema', 'national defence films', and 'war resistance films' and their relationships, please refer to the YouTube video series entitled 'Brief History on Chinese Film Art' (2020), featuring Professor Yuan Qingfeng of the Communication University of China, especially the discussions on 'left-wing cinema' in section 2 and on 'national defence and war resistance films' in section 5 (in Chinese). For more on the premiere of *Storm on the Border*, see *The Central Daily News*, Chongqing, 8 February 1942 (in Chinese).

stranger to the social critique and patriotic sentiments expressed in these Chinese films, Hong Kong as a city did not experience Japanese imperialist invasion until the Pacific War that was triggered by the Pearl Harbor attack. Therefore, after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, Hong Kong did not experience the frenzied pressure and brutality resulting from the severing of ties, and subsequent widespread conflict, between China and Japan the same way the Mainland did; nor did Hong Kong cinema experience abrupt transition from national defence to war resistance overnight. Thus, it is appropriate to continue to name Hong Kong films from this period as 'national defence' or 'war resistance' films. Furthermore, at this point in time, Hong Kong's colonial ruler, the UK, still maintained diplomatic relations with imperial Japan. With regards to Chinese national defence and war resistance films screened in Hong Kong, as well as local filmmakers broaching such topics, the colonial government applied strict censorship, at times even banning these films outright. As a colony, the local Hong Kong population, as well as the large numbers of Mainland refugees who had flocked to the city between 1931 to 1941, reacted strongly to images of Chinese suffering under Japanese invasion. This resulted in a stunning number of national defence (or war resistance) films in Hong Kong, but unfortunately, only a handful of such pictures remain. The titles that are still available are nonetheless valuable resources for us to study and analyse.

2. Production Numbers of Hong Kong National Defence Films

In *Hong Kong Filmography Vol I (1914–1941)* (Revised Edition) (Hong Kong Film Archive, 2020), 69 national defence films are listed under the 'war resistance' genre, from Wong Toi's *Return from the Battleground* (1934)—often touted as the first ever 'national defence film'—to the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941. Factoring in six additional titles that are 'related to war resistance', including *My Friend, the Ghost* (aka *Mr. Mar Kai Foo*) and *Village Hero* (aka *The Knight of the Whip*) in 1936; *The General of Dragon City*, *The Merry Bachelor* (aka *Rich Man, Poor Man*) and *The Vagabond* (aka *New Citizens*) in 1938, and *Follow Your Dream* in 1941, a total of 75 national defence and war resistance-related films were produced during this period (see Table 1 below).

[Table 1] Number of Films Produced in Hong Kong (1934–1941)

Year	Number of Films	National Defence and Related Films
1934	14	1
1935	31	1
1936	48	6
1937	86	20
1938	86	19
1939	127	8
1940	90	6
1941	80	14
Total	**562**	**75**

3. What Are the Genre Characteristics of Hong Kong National Defence Films?

One obvious question regarding such 'national defence and war resistance-related films' is to ask how a film qualifies for such a genre label. Here, we need to first discuss the meaning of 'genre'.

The word 'genre' could, first of all, have a broad cultural and artistic meaning, in the sense of general categories within art forms such as literature, painting and cinema, e.g. epic, lyric poetry, comedy, tragedy and romantic literature under literature.[2] However, works belonging to the same style could also be incorporated across different artistic mediums. A more specific usage of 'genre' is, of course, the idea of the 'genre film' in commercial Hollywood cinema, which refers to feature films belonging to a certain form of cinematic expression that, more often than not, have a commercial purpose. Barry Keith Grant gives a comprehensive definition of 'genre film' that is worth referring to:

> Stated simply, genre movies are those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations. They also encourage expectations and experiences similar to those of similar films we have already seen. Genre movies have comprised the bulk of film practice, the iceberg of film history beneath the visible tip that in the past has commonly been understood as film art. [3]

Under Grant's definition, genre films have commercial value and constitute the majority of commercial cinema output. The rest (i.e. 'the visible tip' of 'the iceberg of film history') is 'film art', which may be understood as alternative pictures. Yet here one must emphasise that Grant does not deny the artistic merit of such genre films, as evidenced by the collection of essays he has edited. He simply acknowledges that genre films were produced, first and foremost, for the purpose of appealing to a mass audience and making a profit at the box office. From this perspective, we can extrapolate: Hong Kong's 'national defence and war resistance-related films', as commercial ventures, fulfil this basic definition of 'genre film'. To delve deeper, however, does Hong Kong's 'national defence and war resistance-related films' align with Hollywood's traditionally defined genres? In Grant's *Film Genre Reader II*, he lists out many genres such as the Western, gangster film, film noir, disaster film, historical epic, horror, science fiction, melodrama, comedy, musical and war film, etc. Likewise, in *Genre and Hollywood*, Steve Neale makes even finer distinctions, such as action-adventure, biopics/biographical film, detective and gangster film, suspense thriller, social problem film, teenpics and war film.[4]

Neale quotes Jeanine Basinger, who offers very original insights into the genre of war films:

2. The concept of 'genre' was first analysed in a systematic way by Aristotle in *Poetics* (1447a 2-3), in which he mentions various artistic forms, including epic poetry, tragic drama, comedy and dithyrambic poetry. These forms all seek to imitate reality (mimesis), albeit through different means, subject matters, and manners of imitation. See Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, London: British Film Institute, 1999, pp 1-2.
3. Barry Keith Grant (ed), *Film Genre Reader II*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995, p xv.
4. See Steve Neale, Chapter 3 'Major genres', *Genre and Hollywood*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000, pp 45-141.

> The war film itself does not exist in a coherent generic form…. 'War' is a setting, and it is also an issue. If you fight it, you have a combat film; if you sit home and worry about it, you have a family or domestic film; if you sit in board rooms and plan it, you have a historical biography or a political film of some sort.[5]

As Basinger astutely observes, war films can be presented in different forms. Yet, since these examples all share the same context and content—that of war—how can they be deemed as not having a generic form? They should, at the very least, be considered as one genre with varying sub-genres. The Western, for example, comprises sub-genres such as ethnic genocide, the triumph of good over evil, historical epic on the development of the American Old West and heroic biographies. However, Hong Kong's 'national defence and war resistance-related films' involved not only commercial considerations, but political ones as well. For this reason, there are significant differences between them and other war films from Hollywood and other countries. In other words, Hong Kong's 'national defence and war resistance-related films' were resistance films inspired by a nationalist sentiment among Hong Kong filmmakers that was largely steamed up by Japanese imperialist aggression against China. This was somewhat rare at the time in world cinema. Conversely, there was no equivalent of such national defence pictures being produced before the war in the UK, the US or Germany. In these countries, mass productions of war films only emerged after the war broke out, and their ideologies and forms were complex.

From the analysis above on the war film genre in world cinema, we can see that pre-war Hong Kong national defence films represent something very special and unique: within a colonial context, the Hong Kong film industry and its filmmakers were moved by nationalistic sentiments to express empathetic support for their compatriots, despite not having personally experienced invasion and war prior to the end of 1941, so much so that they pre-emptively depict these experiences and subjects onscreen. Their films are therefore very much worthy of in-depth exploration and study.

Analyses of Existing 'National Defence and War Resistance-Related Films' in Hong Kong

According to the aforementioned tally, a total of 75 'national defence and war resistance-related films' were made in Hong Kong during the period from 1934 to 1941. Unfortunately, out of this list, only eight can be located presently. It is important for film criticism to be grounded in engagement with available films, so any meaningful, in-depth exploration can only be based on these eight titles and related textual material.

Obviously, we have to wonder, can these eight remaining pictures offer enough representation and coverage to justify the value of our scholarly study? I believe the answer is affirmative, based on the following reasons:

5. Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, p 10.

1. There is no significant time gap between the eight productions: they were made from 1938 to 1941. In 1941, Japanese invasion efforts intensified and gained serious ground, and in this context, a total of 14 'national defence and war resistance-related films' were made in response. Three of them are still available as part of the remaining group of eight pictures.
2. The directors of these eight films include Hou Yao, Cai Chusheng, Situ Huimin and Tang Xiaodan, etc. Not only were they Hong Kong directors, but also important filmmakers in Chinese film history. Their productions are representative works that have attained a certain level of artistic value and social importance.
3. In terms of content and technique, these feature films cover a range of topics and a variety of different social backgrounds, and are thus worthy of social and artistic deliberations.

The following are my observations and analyses of the eight films:

1. *Storm over Pacific*

Hou Yao's *Storm over Pacific* (aka *Incident in the Pacific*, 1938) is an adaptation of Hou's eponymous serialised novel, published in *The Kung Sheung Evening Press* (aka *The Kung Sheung Evening News*) from 1934 to 1935. It tells the story of a soldier in the Nationalist army who meets a girl and her father in Southern China, and after understanding how southern villages suffer from exorbitant taxes, lawless bandits and oppressive landlords, he joins the Northeastern Volunteer Righteous and Brave Fighters and goes to serve in the Northeast. The female protagonist even spies for intelligence and helps her lover fight against the Japanese forces and the puppet army. The film features Hakka tunes, the Cantonese song 'Embracing the Blade as Your Wife' and Mandarin songs that promoted patriotism and resistance, such as 'March of the Volunteers'. Patriotic declarations in the dialogue, such as 'We'd rather die from gunfire than be conquered slaves', were intended to stir up nationalistic emotions.

Like-minded people coming together to fight against the Japanese invasion in *Storm over Pacific* (1938). (Left: Lee Yi-nin; right: Luo Pinchao)

On the day of the film premiere, Hou outlines his understanding of the national defence film in *The Kung Sheung Evening News*. Firstly, it has to stand out from past works in the genre, so it must establish 'correct (political) awareness!... The film should feature more than the deaths of one or two traitors, kill some enemies, or even stimulate the audience through a triumphant

battle…. [It should] thoroughly emphasise and advocate for complete resistance until final victory…. Secondly…[the film] should have the spirit of "unity against a common enemy", so that everyone will be steadfast in their roles and responsibilities in the War of Resistance, and be motivated as one united nation to struggle for final victory out of an undying sense of determination….Thirdly…we should not simply use one or two popular Cantonese songs as the theme songs!… [Hou requested] that the power of music in his film to be on par with the impact of the narrative…'[6]

2. *Fortress of Flesh and Blood*

The main message of *Fortress of Flesh and Blood* (aka *Provoking Father*, 1938) is to encourage young students to make sacrifices and save their country, to give up their books and pens and instead take up arms. Apart from directing, Hou Yao also stars as an elderly professor who offers strategic advice. He devises plans to encourage his children and students to fight against the enemy, and also organises a 'Student Association for National Salvation' that engages in guerrilla activities. The standout scene in the film is when the elderly professor (who calls himself 'Mr. Two Shafts', i.e. the pen shaft and the gun shaft) personally guns down and kills his own son (played by Lau Hark-suen) for cowardly leaking intelligence to the enemy. The subsequent close-up reaction shot of the professor's daughter (played by Nancy Chan Wan-seung) expressing restrained sadness implies that she accepts and understands her father's decision. The story ends with the professor and two young lovers (the protagonists) sacrificing their lives under enemy attack. Without doubt, the fight scenes in the film are limited by low budget, resulting in an overly dramatic and romanticised portrayal, but the ending acknowledges the brutal reality that the human cost of resistance was high and blood must be shed.

These two pictures by Hou are understandably extremely low-budget productions shot with one single camera. To avoid continuity problems, Hou opted not to move his camera or shoot from multiple angles, and thus the two films are dominated by talking heads. As a result, they do not seem particularly cinematic. The sets are also simple and sparse studio sets. Yet the films' greatest flaws are caused by the lack of rehearsal time and the effort to save film rolls where necessary, which led to many awkward,

In *Fortress of Flesh and Blood* (1938), director Hou Yao stars as a professor who organises the 'Student Association for National Salvation'. (From left: Jiang Junchao, Nancy Chan Wan-seung, Hou Yao, Lau Hark-suen, Wong Cho-shan)

6. Hou Yao, 'The Fundamental Premise of National Defence Films: Self-Criticism of *Storm over Pacific*', *The Kung Sheung Evening News*, 7 April 1938 (in Chinese).

abrupt scenes, occasionally with 'dead air'. The performances of the supporting cast are particularly weak. Yet we also have to understand that *Storm over Pacific* and *Fortress of Flesh and Blood* were two early works by Hou, which were relatively low-budget films with very limited access to professional actors and crew, different from later works by directors such as Cai Chusheng, Situ Huimin and Tang Xiaodan. Nonetheless, through these two films, Hou expresses patriotism and the people's spirit of sacrifice and determination to fight the enemy to the end.

3. *The Devils' Paradise*

Cai Chusheng's *The Devils' Paradise* (aka *Orphan Island Paradise*, 1939) is a rich, layered film. The story takes place in Shanghai, despite the fact that Cai had sought refuge in Hong Kong in November 1937 after escaping the persecution of the Japanese army. The film opens with a documentary excerpt about Shanghai before properly diving into its story. The narrative of the story is very comprehensive, dealing with characters of various social backgrounds, such as the mysterious male lead who is a war resistance fighter, his landlord, a club hostess who assists him, a wealthy playboy and his lover, a mute peanut-seller, a dim-witted man who sells cigarettes, a widow and her child who are driven out of their home for not being able to pay the rent, a patriotic street urchin, a treasonous Skull Gang and the bullying thugs who are under the gang's control, etc. Together, they form a complex picture of different social strata mingling with each other. The film features scenes of

In *The Devils' Paradise* (1939), a group of guerrilla fighters disguise themselves to infiltrate a costume party and attack the Skull Gang. In this scene, bursting balloons are used to imply Skull Gang members being shot down, while fast cutting of close-up shots creates tension.

working-class members helping each other out: the mute, the dim-witted man and the street urchin help to build a temporary home for the widow and her son; the club hostess helps to bandage the wounds of the mysterious young fighter after he attempts to assassinate a division chief in cahoots with the Skull Gang, and later, she even helps to entice the gang to participate in a New Year's Eve party so that the patriotic fighters can vanquish them in one go. In the end, after the neighbourhood defeats the thugs who have long tormented them, they organise a flag-raising ceremony. Cai weaves together such rich details and complex subplots and characters in a coherent, fluid narrative—a testament to his directorial prowess.

Clearly, Cai had a bigger budget to execute and express his vision, and to create more atmospheric scenes. For example, in the flashback of the female protagonist's past, Cai sets a montage of her photos to the tune of 'Along the Sungari River'. In the climax, a group of guerrilla fighters disguise themselves to infiltrate a costume party, in order to attack the Skull Gang. Cai rapidly knits together a series of close-up shots of various body parts (such as different people's eyes), reminiscent of the scene in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) where a montage of various onlookers' eyes are used to convey the wide-eyed shock at the emergence of Maria the robot. In *The Devils' Paradise*, shots of the partygoers' faces and limbs are juxtaposed against close-ups of guns and burst balloons (to imply Skull Gang members have been shot down in the ruckus).

Cai's picture features several scenes that praise the wisdom and achievements of its working-class characters. For instance, shortly after the opening, we see the street urchin refusing and burning up the newspapers printed by traitors; and at the end, the mute, the dim-witted man and the street urchins are able to defeat their bullies through working together and with the assistance of other good-hearted citizens. The film ends with a flag-raising ceremony shot at a low angle, depicting these plebeian characters paying tribute to the national flag flying high above them.

4. *The Blood-Stained Peach Blossom Fan*

Mak Siu-ha's *The Blood-Stained Peach Blossom Fan* (aka *The Blood's All Over The Fan*, 1940) can be said to be a national defence comedy set in Hong Kong during China's War of Resistance against Japan. Referencing on and adapting Kong Shangren's classic play *The Peach Blossom Fan*, it tells the story of Lady Perfume, a 'patriotic Cantonese opera star' (an allusion to the historic Li Xiangjun [aka Li Hsiang-chun] of late Ming/early Qing dynasty, who is also the female protagonist of Kong's *The Peach*

Lady Perfume (played by Cheang Mang-ha) dazzles in *The Blood-Stained Peach Blossom Fan* (1940) with her Cantonese opera performances.

Blossom Fan).

The film is set in the midst of the Sino-Japanese war, and to illustrate this, it opens with a map of China, interspersed with documentary footage of Japanese war planes launching airstrikes and the Nationalist forces fighting back. Afterwards, the following intertitles appear: 'Spring Below the Victoria Peak of Peace', 'A Paradise in Wartime', 'A Land for Refuge and Escape', which convey the reality of how Hong Kong, as a colony, was yet unaffected by the ravages of war.

The film then cuts to a cinema advertisement that proclaims Lady Perfume (played by Cheang Mang-ha, a Shanghai-born amateur Peking opera performer as well as film star, who later married Tong Tik-sang, renowned Cantonese opera playwright, in 1942) as a 'patriotic Cantonese opera star'.

Lady Perfume shares a budding romance with Cheung Sang (played by Cheng Sang), who is studying to be a pilot. As a wealthy playboy, however, Cheung is uninterested in participating in the war or saving his country, despite encouragement from Lady Perfume. Other characters of the film include Cantonese opera playwright Chu (played by Chu Po-chuen), as well as Cheung's elderly father Cheung Yam-ting (played by Lam Kwun-shan), who originally travelled to Hong Kong from the Mainland to keep a tighter leash on his son. In the end, both father and son are attracted to Lady Perfume, and a series of comedic situations arise from their attempts to win her affections: the traditional father learns how to dance in a Western-style suit; indifferent to the plight of his country, he refuses to donate any part of his fortune to the war effort, even so far as to foolishly promise to donate 'hundred thousand grains of rice' instead.

The film ends with Cheung Sang's little brother seeking refuge in Hong Kong, as he tells his brother and father about the devastating Japanese invasion of their home. Facing this great loss, Cheung Yam-ting finally decides to donate his entire fortune to save his nation, and Cheung Sang and Chu both decide to return to the Mainland to join the war effort.

The Blood-Stained Peach Blossom Fan is a highly entertaining picture filled with variety. It features a number of notable opera performances by Cheang: as a *qingyi* female role, as a *wudan* martial role, and also in a sword-dancing sequence. Furthermore, Cheng Sang (nicknamed the 'Adaptable *Xiaosheng* Performer') also performs a few Cantonese operatic tunes, adding to the rich entertainment value of the picture. In fact, most of the film's running time (over 90 minutes) is devoted to comedy, and it only changes gears to focus on the characters' tragic experiences of the war and their determination to play their part to save the country in the final seven minutes. Indeed, it very much falls under Hou Yao's aforementioned criticism of national defence pictures, when he argued that they should not simply pursue entertainment value by relying on popular Cantonese tunes, as this would diminish the seriousness of their social message.

5. *Glorious Parade*

Cai Chusheng's *Glorious Parade* (aka *Ten Thousand Li Ahead*, 1941) was the box-office champion of the year. The film is set in Hong Kong and tells a 'local' story. Hong Kong driver Gao Hua (played by Lee Ching) and his good friend Zhang (played by Li Jingbo) learn that traitors are smuggling and selling tungsten to the (Japanese) enemy, so they join forces with the workers to start a scuffle with the traitorous gang, which ends with Gao being sent to jail. After he completes his sentence, he is shocked to find Zhang, in order to eke out a living, dressing up in ghost costume in public to promote a supernatural horror picture. Gao lectures his friend for promoting unhealthy trends in the film industry, and together they rescue a refugee girl from the Northeast who has resorted to prostitution in Hong Kong. The three main characters lead a hard life. Later, the girl finds a job at a song-and-dance troupe, but got bullied and harassed by her boss Wang Bogao (played by Zhao Yishan, the pronunciation of 'Wong Bak-go' in Cantonese alludes that he is a 'bastard'), coercing her to perform dances in nude. Gao, Zhang and their worker friends wreak havoc at the theatre and embarrass Wang. At the end of the film, Gao answers the rallying call from Brother Lau (played by Yan Shuo), a fighter participating in the resistance. He and his friends form a patriotic group and decide to return to the Mainland and join resistance efforts together.

Glorious Parade (1941): Gao Hua (played by Lee Ching) embraces a prosperous Hong Kong after being released from prison.

Cai's direction is, first of all, highly cinematic. The film opens with a documentary-style long shot of Hong Kong, which then cuts to a frame of its prosperous streets at night. Yet there is a lurking sense of darkness underlying the glittering prosperity. The female protagonist, her madam, and other prostitutes are filmed accosting potential patrons, with a lecherous traitor leering at them. Afterwards, Gao Hua and Zhang are seen driving a delivery van as they discover the traitors' plot to smuggle tungsten to the enemy. This sequence of scenes exposes the existence of prostitution, worker exploitation and traitorous activities belying the affluent city governed by the British. Gao's arrest and imprisonment also imply the colonial government's reluctance to offend the Japanese and in contrast, their readiness to oppress the working class instead. When Zhang dons his costume to publicly promote the supernatural horror film, Cai firstly shows how terrified the female protagonist and her madam are of his grotesque disguise. He also uses a series of shots to show the disgust on the faces of many passers-by, including children, to reflect the sense of revulsion towards such supernatural pictures of the period between 1938 and 1940, a sentiment common among patriotic directors such as Cai himself. One of the highlights of the picture

Glorious Parade (1941) criticises the 'patriotic song-and-dance troupe' at the time as hypocritical.

is when Cai scathingly critiques the hypocrisy of contemporary 'national defence musicals' that mask their vapid entertainment with high-sounding messages of patriotism. Cai uses a track in shot to capture the female protagonist dancing at the front of a group of chorus girls, freezes the shot, and then pulls back using a track out shot to show an advertisement for a 'Patriotic Song-and-Dance Troupe' (i.e. the freeze-frame is revealed to be part of the poster). Right in the middle of the advertisement is the heading 'Crazy Bees and Lusty Butterflies' and the subheadings 'High Kicks and Curves That Leave Nothing to the Imagination!', 'National Defence Song-and-Dance Performances with Noble Ideologies', and it is also written that the show is performed by 'Pretty and Sexy Dancing Stars'. The scene then fades out into the female protagonist dancing with a feather fan, and once again, the camera pushes into a freeze-frame photo that pulls out to reveal a second poster. This time, the heading 'Seductive Moon and Pretty Flowers' is subtitled 'National Defence Ideology' and 'Epic Musical with Mystery, Horror, Erotica and Farce'. The next advertisement presented in the montage features the double entendre 'Can't Hold It in Anymore', which fades into the photo caption 'Sweetheart, I Love You', 'Heart to Heart', and another photo of 'Reciprocated Love'. The final advertisement has a couplet 'Let's Sing and Dance, But Don't Forget to Save Our Country / Let's Save Our Country, But Don't Forget to Sing and Dance', a heading 'Boozy Songs and Drunken Dances', and a smaller line of text that reads 'Epoch-Defining Romance that Intoxicates'. It turns out that by now, this is the ninth iteration of the show by the troupe. The camera then zooms into one of the photos in the poster, which unfreezes into another performance with the female protagonist and her back-up dancers. It is obvious that the girls are even more scantily clad than before. The shot pulls back to reveal that the audience in the theatre has dwindled to a pathetic handful, a sharp contrast to the full house of the first performance.

Clutching a copy of a newspaper that condemns 'national defence musicals' as 'a sham', the theatre owner gets into an argument with the troupe manager, Wang Bogao. The film implies that contemporary theatre owners were, in fact, in favour of more serious-minded national defence works, but Wang nonetheless manages to persuade the owner to accept his new proposal. His latest plan is to force the girl into performing erotic dances

in nude. Horrified, she informs Gao and Zhang of her predicament by showing them a published advert, which says, 'Naked Girls' Erotic Dance', 'Extremely Sultry, Extremely Perverted', and also claims that the performance will 'Make Public the Secrets of Women: Their Soft Breasts and Shapely Legs, Their Enticing Eyes and Sweet Lips'. Of course, Cai was clearly satirising and decrying Hong Kong's entertainment industry and their producers in an exaggerated way. Following the girl's pleas, Gao and Zhang lead their worker comrades to wreck and ruin Wang's show. This sequence, like the fight scene between Gao, Zhang and the traitors at the beginning of the film, is heavily reliant on clever editing to create cinematic effects. As one party punches his fist towards the camera, Cai cuts to the next shot of the other party falling back. Such techniques create a fight sequence that is full of dynamism. The film ends with Gao, the girl, Zhang and the group of workers deciding to return to the Mainland to fight against the enemy, under the leadership of Brother Lau. Together, they sing the film's theme song, 'Ten Thousand Li Ahead'.

Cai's film is bilingual. The male and female leads, Zhang, and other key roles such as Wang, the theatre owner, Brother Lau and the neighbour's son all speak Mandarin, whereas the traitors speak a mix of Mandarin and Cantonese. The girl's madam, her landlady, the staff at the theatre, the police, the prison wardens, and other supporting roles speak Cantonese. Cai mostly uses classical music in his non-diegetic soundtrack, and in particular, Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 (*Pathétique*) is employed multiple times for sentimental effect. When the girl auditions at the music theatre, the waltz duet 'Lippen Schweigen', from Franz Lehar's *Die lustige Witwe* plays in the background. In contrast, the three musical numbers in the film feature American pop tunes. Cai's choices are mainstream, but nonetheless well-thought-out.

There is little doubt that Cai is satirising the disorder and collapse of values in Hong Kong society through Zhang's universally reviled promotion of the supernatural film *Millions of Ghosts* and the erotic music numbers towards the end of the film. Ironically, however, Cai's treatment of the musical scenes is highly sophisticated, just as his fight sequences are very watchable and sensational. The treatment towards the ending, when Wang is humiliated and forced to take off his clothes in public, is overtly exaggerated. At this point, we have to wonder, despite Cai's attempts to express politically correct ideas about patriotism and national defence, isn't he still using the techniques and film language of commercial cinema to create sentimentalism and sensationalism, in order to generate mainstream appeal?

6. *Song of Retribution*

Situ Huimin's *Song of Retribution* (originally *March of the Guerrillas*, 1941) was completed in 1938, but its release was delayed due to the long-drawn censorship process by the authorities. It was finally screened in 1941, albeit heavily trimmed.

Set in China, the film begins with a sequence that highlights Situ's directorial prowess: the words 'Raging fires of war in China' are set against a backdrop of burning flames, which is followed by various long shots of Japanese documentary footage of their invasion

Song of Retribution (1941): While indulging in woman and alcohol, the Japanese commanding officer hears gunshots and explosions; the scene then cuts to attacks on the military base launched by the guerrilla group.

of China. Afterwards, we see Japanese soldiers charging forward, low-angle close-ups of Japanese cavalry officers, as well as close-ups of the Japanese flag. These scenes are juxtaposed against other scenes depicting Chinese civilians, chickens, and dogs fleeing from war, a visual pun on the Chinese saying 'chickens flying and dogs scampering'. The underlying symbolism is clear: the Japanese invasion has caused complete pandemonium in China. The male protagonist, Wong Chi-keung (played by Lee Ching), and his teen brother Wong Chi-ming (played by Cheung Chung), are then introduced. The film focuses on how the brothers participate in the resistance. After Chi-keung's sick father dies in the course of saving his son, he joins a guerrilla resistance group. As Chi-ming buries his father, he is discovered by a traitor, who snitches on him to the Japanese. He is subsequently arrested and tortured for information on the whereabouts of the guerrilla group. Out of frustration and guilt, the Japanese soldier responsible for torturing Chi-ming hits a prison column furiously after his commanding officer leaves the scene. The soldier conveying the message that Chi-ming is to be remanded in prison witnesses the saga, but does not report it to his superiors. Eventually, the soldier who hit and tortured Chi-ming lets him go, and even dresses his wounds. The female protagonist's home is burned down after Japanese soldiers set fire to her village, heeding the counsel of a traitor. She is taken away and her father is shot for cursing the traitor.

These developments lead to an important sub-plot: the two Japanese soldiers who show sympathy for Chi-ming share a moment of honesty, expressing hatred for the war and the wish to unite anti-war pacifists from both sides to support the force of resistance. They release Chi-ming and make a pact with him to work in collusion to defeat the Japanese army. Meanwhile, another Japanese guard watching over Chi-ming is asleep and dreaming of harassing a Chinese woman, who slaps him and wakes him up. Awake, he is shocked to find that Chi-ming has escaped. This is a brilliant display of the director's wit and his deftness of technique.

As the story develops, the guerrilla group's plan to attack and wipe out a Japanese army unit succeeds and they raid their military supplies in preparation for an attack on the Japanese army base. At the base, the two anti-war soldiers plan to support the guerrilla group, but are exposed by the shrewd traitor, who reports them to their commanding officer. Yet upon the arrival of the female protagonist, the commanding officer sets aside

the issue at hand. This series of plot development is skilfully handled by the director, as a lot of cross-cutting is employed. For example, the guerrilla group's departure is juxtaposed against a sumo match at the Japanese army's celebratory party; as the female protagonist plies the commanding officer with alcohol, he hears gunshots and explosions outside; and scenes of the guerrilla group attacking the base are cross-cut with shots of the two Japanese anti-war soldiers fighting against their compatriots, as well as that of the commanding officer struggling against and eventually getting assassinated by the female protagonist.

The film ends with the traitor falling to his death from a cliff after being beaten up. Unfortunately, the female protagonist does not survive a shot wound sustained in the battle, and she dies clutching a national flag at the top of a mountain. Overall, *Song of Retribution* does feature certain realist elements, such as its depiction of Japanese atrocity and the wily character of the traitor. At the same time, the portrayal of certain Japanese characters, such as the commanding officer, are particularly vilifying and exaggerated. Last but not least, Situ very much romanticises and embellishes the actions of the guerrilla group to highlight their heroism.

Although obviously filmed in Cantonese, the only remaining high-quality copies of the film online are dubbed in Mandarin. Situ also uses a lot of mellifluous classical music and passionate tunes to create ambience—like *Glorious Parade*, this is reminiscent of the mainstream Hollywood larger-than-life approach to music scores, with a Tchaikovsky-Rachmaninoff Touch.

7. *Roar of the Nation*

Tang Xiaodan's *Roar of the Nation* (aka *Roar of the People*, 1941) can be said to be a Hong Kong version of *The Devils' Paradise*. It tells the story of three young men—intellectual Lui Pang (played by Cheung Ying), peasant Chan Tai (played by Fung Fung) and coolie Ah Ng (played by Ng Wui)—after they arrive in Hong Kong. They meet rich businessman Ho Pak-hung (played by Chan Tin-tsung), who exploits Ah Ng for his labour. The three youngsters live a hard life, and even take in Ah Ying (played by Wong Ang), a girl who is sexually harassed by Ho Pak-hung and subsequently fired by his wife. The film also features a scene where Chan Tai and local residents line up to buy opium sold by the authorities in the hopes of

Roar of the Nation (1941): After arriving in Hong Kong, intellectual Lui Pang (front, played by Cheung Ying) and his friends live in hardship under the exploitation of a rich businessman.

selling it at a higher price—a searing indictment of the colonial government's policies.

Ho Pak-hung's arrival in Hong Kong is a portrait of unethical capitalists who take refuge in Hong Kong with ill intentions in the face of national disaster. His mill uses low-quality materials from Japan, while he plots with corrupt officials to sell valuable tungsten mines to the Japanese. In the end, to save money for his son's wedding, he withholds the salaries of his employees, leading to a mass strike by the mill's workers, including Ah Ying. Lui Pang exposes the boss's evil deeds at the wedding, which puts the latter in a most awkward predicament and completely destroys his reputation. This tale of contrasts between the rich and the impoverished masses ends with its working-class characters deciding to return to the Mainland to join its resistance efforts.

Tang's direction is marked by straightforward realism, without any elaborate editing techniques, fancy cinematography nor unusual camera angles.

In an essay explaining his directorial intentions to the public, Tang states that the film intends to critique 'corruption and injustice' and 'profiteering from national disaster'. He also wanted the film to encourage 'the entire nation to unite and stick together' in the War of Resistance, and for young people 'to join and align themselves with the people'. Tang claims *Roar of the Nation* is a 'national defence picture' that is 'seriously made', while condemning the mainstream view that films with 'aggressive slogan-shouting and weapon-brandishing' were automatically national defence films. He emphasises that art and propaganda should go hand-in-hand in order to convey 'the utmost truth, goodness, and beauty'.[7] Tang's comments will be further analysed in my conclusion.

8. *Follow Your Dream*

Lo Duen's *Follow Your Dream* (1941) follows various working-class characters who are unable to leave Hong Kong due to the war in the Mainland. Among these are a teacher who misses his hometown Guangzhou and desires to go back, a young girl who has to sell her body to take care of her sick mother, a club hostess who struggles to eke out a living, and a business-owner and his wife who are reluctant to go back to Guangzhou due to the economic recession there and the ban on their business by the Japanese army. The film ends, once again, with the male and female protagonists vowing to return to fight for their motherland. As the film was long thought to be lost, and perhaps because of misleading information, the first edition of *Hong Kong Filmography Vol I (1913–1941)* (Hong Kong Film Archive, 1997) erroneously lists *Follow Your Dream* as a comedy, when it really is a social realist drama that is related to national defence. There are certain similarities between Lo's picture, Mak Siu-ha's *The Blood-Stained Peach Blossom Fan* and Cai Chusheng's *Glorious Parade*. All three films are about characters who are stuck in Hong Kong and struggle to find a way out of their predicament. For them, in face of the Japanese invasion, returning to the Mainland to join the fight is an important choice to make. *Hong Kong*

7. Tang Xiaodan, 'How *Roar of the Nation* Was Made', *Hwa Shiang Pao*, 5 July 1941 (in Chinese).

Follow Your Dream (1941): A story of the struggles of the working class stuck in Hong Kong due to the war in the Mainland (Clockwise from bottom left: Mei Fung, Wu Mei-lun, Ko Lo-chuen, Ng Wui, Chan Hung, Cheung Ying, Lui Lui)

Filmography Vol I (1914–1941) (Revised Edition) corrects the picture's genre classification as 'realist', but there is little denying that it is ultimately a national defence and a 'war resistance' picture.

Conclusion: The Artistic Value and Social Significance of Hong Kong National Defence Films

In terms of style and expressing technique (film language), Hong Kong national defence films of this period essentially belong in the fictional drama category of feature films. Mainly driven by character, interpersonal interaction and narrative, such films are also part of long-lasting traditions of novel fiction and drama in China. But we can extrapolate two general directions or 'sub-genres' from the important examples of national defence films analysed above. The first kind is where the protagonists suffer oppression under Japanese invasion in the Mainland, and thereby resolve to join the resistance, or where actual organised resistance (i.e. scenes of war) is depicted, such as *Storm over Pacific*, *Fortress of Flesh and Blood*, *The Devils' Paradise*, *Song of Retribution*, etc.

The other kind of national defence film takes place in Hong Kong, although the war in the Mainland is looming in the background, such as *The Blood-Stained Peach Blossom Fan*, *Glorious Parade*, *Roar of the Nation* and *Follow Your Dream*. Such films do not feature any war scenes because Hong Kong had not yet been invaded by the Japanese. Instead, they focus on the hard lives of Mainland refugees in Hong Kong, and the behaviour of the uncharitable rich men who are also seeking refuge in the city, in addition to the struggle with the wicked traitors.

The cinematic approach of these films, especially regarding its working-class subjects,

is realist, close to French director Jean Renoir's poetic realism in *Toni* (1935), *Les Bas-fonds* (1936) and *La Bête humaine* (1938).

However, in terms of their dramatic narrative and musical score, Hong Kong's national defence films employ a sensational approach that is close to Hollywood's style. The reason for this is obvious: contemporary Hong Kong audiences were very used to Hollywood films, so this was an attempt to tailor solemn social messages in a palatable fashion for them.

Films that belong to the former sub-category, which mostly take place on the Mainland and describes civilian life and resistance during the war, had a clear purpose: to disseminate information about the war and to educate the masses into social mobilisation. There is little doubt that they hoped to help Hong Kong audiences understand more about the reality of the war on the Mainland, to trigger their nationalistic feelings so much so that they would support the resistance.

Yet films in the second sub-genre, which are set in Hong Kong with the ever-present spectre of the war in the Mainland in the shadows, are definitely more interesting. They reflect the attitudes of contemporary 'Hongkongers' and how they feel about their social and national identities. From these films, we can conclude the following:

1. The aforementioned directors express a general contempt for villainous characters, who are mostly the rich and the powerful, or those who have betrayed their country. In their films, the colonial government of Hong Kong is either ignored or portrayed in a negative light. The most obvious example is *Glorious Parade*, where the authorities collaborate with traitors to oppress the patriotic workers. It is not difficult to understand the directors' feelings in this respect: as patriotic intellectuals who were forced to flee Shanghai and come to Hong Kong, how could they not despise the immoral capitalists or the colonial government, who shared many commonalities with Japanese imperialism and also dubious links with their government? On top of this, the Hong Kong authorities had long been a dominating force in suppressing national defence films that were critical of Japanese imperialism and colonialism.

2. The directors' identification with the working classes and their disdain towards Hong Kong society are quite understandable. Since the Japanese invasion in 1937, many Mainland Chinese refugees fled towards the South, and the population in Hong Kong ballooned quickly from around 800,000 in 1937 to 1.8 million in 1940. This led to a shortage of housing and other resources, and many lived in destitution. The government was unable to resolve the situation effectively, and in such a context, how could the city's residents be content or identify with Hong Kong society? Therefore, partly in response to these social realities, the national defence films portray a negative picture of Hong Kong and often fail to embrace its society or the Hong Kong identity. Instead, they emphasise the Chinese national identity, and their characters look

northward hoping that they can return home soon, and some even give up their hard lives in Hong Kong, preferring to live or fight on the Mainland. At the end of *Glorious Parade*, the male protagonist overhears someone saying 'Goodbye, Hong Kong!' just as he is about to leave for his homeland. To express his determination to leave, he replies, 'I've had enough!'

3. Lastly, the Hong Kong culture reflected in these national defence films are commercial and vulgar. From 1937 onwards, given the spike in the refugee population, the Hong Kong film industry was developing rapidly. Commercial genres such as melodrama, supernatural and martial arts films dominated the market, which were sharply criticised by many directors and intellectuals. This phenomenon was also ruthlessly skewered by Cai in *Glorious Parade*, where he heavily condemned contemporary supernatural films and pornographic culture. In fact, Hong Kong's consumerist lifestyle and culture in terms of food, fashion, pop music and film had long been following the trends of Guangzhou and Shanghai. The Hong Kong local culture scene was populated by artists and intellectuals from the Mainland, and what the city has inherited is Mainland culture. There is no such a thing as Hong Kong local cultural identity indeed. The clearest illustration of this is that after Japan invaded Hong Kong, the majority of its intellectuals and a large portion of its population fled the city and sought refuge in the Mainland. The Japanese invaders could not find any Hong Kong intellectuals to collaborate with. Shortly after the war ended, the Hong Kong population dropped to only 600,000. Although, as Tang Xiaodan pointed out, some Hong Kong national defence films were crude productions, they were in general works of great popular appeal. They expressed a sincere nationalism, an innate goodness and a convincing social and political message of high artistic value, thereby fulfilling Tang's criterion: 'the utmost truth, goodness, and beauty'. [Translated by Rachel Ng]

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Nüxia in a Migrating *Jianghu*: Yam Pang-nin and Wu Lai-chu in 1940s Hong Kong

Yau Ching

Hong Kong *wuxia* films have been discussed within the discursive framework of cultural nationalism, while the imagery of *nüxia* is usually evaluated in terms of Euro-American feminist considerations.[1] I seek rather in this article to trace how the *nüxia* subgenre is informed by the Chinese *xia* (Chinese 'do-gooder warrior') literary tradition as well as by early 20th century Shanghai modernities. Through tracing the career trajectory of Yam Pang-nin (aka Ren Pengnian, 1894–1968), one of the first-generation *wuxia* film directors, and that of his wife Wu Lai-chu (aka Wu Lizhu, 1910–1978), dubbed 'The Oriental Female Fairbanks', from Shanghai to Hong Kong, and studying several of their Hong Kong films of the 1940s, this article seeks to examine the characteristics and development of the *nüxia* subgenre in relation to national(ist) imaginary and gender reconfiguration, and explore the ways in which post-war Hong Kong cinema regains its strengths, paving the way to the peak of martial arts cinema in the 1970s.

This article does not follow the conventional approach of fragmented generic differentiation in categorising kung fu vs martial arts/*wuxia* vs action vs spy. Instead, these are identified wholesomely as belonging to and growing out of the same major genre,[2] especially in the early days of Chinese and Hong Kong cinemas. This helps to highlight the way these films were marketed and received, as well as the fluidity of the creative personnel working within these subgenres and the audience consuming them.

1. *Nüxia* in Chinese cinema is often translated as 'woman warriors' in English. However, *nüxia* is a variant of *wuxia*, which is traditionally defined in Confucian terms to the extent that the highest form of kung fu is to resolve a fight.
2. The use of hyphenated genres like *wuxia*-action in this article is designated to highlight the hybridity of subgenres at the time.

First-Generation *Wuxia* Film Director

Yam Pang-nin

According to *The General Catalogue of Chinese Film* published by the China Film Archive,[3] the Commercial Press in Shanghai bought some equipment from an American film crew in China, and built the first film studio in China by remodelling their printshop in 1917. A short film entitled *The Thief* was made in this studio, apparently based on an American detective fiction story (or on the film *The Great Train Robbery* [1903], another saying goes). Directed by Yam Pang-nin and premiered in Shanghai in 1921, this film was produced by the Motion Picture Department of the Commercial Press, showing a 'man with ethics' fighting with robbers on a train in action sequences, which was then coined a '*wuxia*-action' piece. On 1 July 1921, China's first narrative feature *Yan Ruisheng*, also directed by Yam, premiered in Shanghai, causing a sensation and becoming a big hit. The film was based on a true story of the murder of a sex worker by a clerk, who was then arrested and sentenced to death.[4]

Yam had joined the Commercial Press in Shanghai as an apprentice when he was 16, and was transferred to the Motion Picture Department in 1918. Partly due to the success of *Yan Ruisheng*, he founded his own company Shanghai Yueming Film Company in 1927, and produced and directed numerous features, mostly *wuxia*-action films. By 1949, record has it that he had already directed 73 films.[5] A full-page coverage found in *Ta-ya Pictorial News* in 1929 publicised the silent film series *A Warrior of the Northeast* (13 episodes, 1928–1934) in production,[6] reporting on Yam's claim to fame, emphasising that Yam himself was a member of the Hong Kong Chin Woo Athletic Association who knew kung fu quite well, and was the most experienced action film director in China that enjoyed a reputation in Nanyang. A report in *The Chin-Chin Screen* in 1940 said that upon Yueming's arrival in Hong Kong, the company was preparing its production for a talkie version of *A Warrior of the Northeast*.[7]

These write-ups clearly showed that one of the key markets for at least Chinese *wuxia*-action films at the time was Nanyang, which roughly referred to regions including

3. *Zhongguo Dianying Zong Mulu* (*The General Catalogue of Chinese Film*), Beijing: China Film Archive, 1960, p 7 (in Chinese).
4. Huang Zhiwei (ed), *Lao Shanghai Dianying* (*Old Shanghai Films*), Shanghai: Wenhui Press, 1998, p 4 (in Chinese).
5. Ibid, p 147.
6. 'A Feature Article on *A Warrior of the Northeast*', *Ta-ya Pictorial News*, Mukden (Shenyang), Issue 177, 30 August 1929, p 3 (in Chinese).
7. 'A Revival of Yueming Film Company in Hong Kong', *The Chin-Chin Screen*, Shanghai, 5th Year, No 17, 30 April 1940 (in Chinese).

Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand, where there were large Chinese-film consuming markets made up of Cantonese and/or Hoklo-speaking migrant populations. This might serve to explain why Yam chose Hong Kong as a relocation site for the Yueming Film Company in 1940. Hong Kong, being geographically closer to Nanyang than Shanghai and being a tax-free treaty port, was a convenient production site to import raw materials, such as celluloid, and export prints. Many film production personnel moved from Shanghai to Hong Kong precisely to take advantage of Hong Kong's financial and geopolitical conditions for greater accessibility to the Nanyang market.

First Wave and Migration of *Wuxia*

Wuxia/kung fu/martial arts and action genres have often been assumed to be distinctive markers for Hong Kong cinema. However, *Hong Kong Filmography Vol I (1914–1941)* (Revised Edition) revealed that the mainstream film genres of Hong Kong from 1914 to 1935 were modern melodrama and romance, with several comedies making sporadic appearances.[8] There was almost no documentation of any *wuxia*-action film. According to film historians Zhou Chengren and Li Yizhuang, the first Hong Kong kung fu film was *Village Hero* (aka *The Knight of the Whip*, 1936), a film advocating nationalist sentiments against the Japanese invasion.[9] Not long after, Hung Chung-ho accepted the invitation from the Shaw brothers' Unique Film Productions' Hong Kong studio (later restructured as Nanyang Film Company [aka Nan Yeung Film Company]) to relocate to Hong Kong and made his Hong Kong debut with *The Young Fighter* (aka *The Adventures of Fang Shiyu*, 1938) for his own company. In contrast, the first Chinese *wuxia* production craze had already taken place in Shanghai around 1928–1931.[10] During 1928–1932, it was documented that about 240 *wuxia* and hybrid 'martial arts-magic spirit' (*wuxia shenguai*) films were made by some 50 Shanghai studios[11]; many of which featured female protagonists as the chief warriors. The subgenre of *nüxia* (re)produced a large number of screen heroines endowed with extraordinary bodily techniques; their transformation was signalled by mobility, visible iconography (costume and/or facial make up) and physiognomy (new body language and style), all distinctive from screen images of actresses from previous generations.[12]

8. Kwok Ching-ling (ed), *Hong Kong Filmography Vol I (1914–1941)* (Revised Edition), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2020 (in Chinese).
9. Zhou Chengren & Li Yizhuang, *Zaoqi Xianggang Dianying Shi (1897–1945)* (*The History of Early Hong Kong Cinema [1897–1945]*), Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (Hong Kong) Company Limited, 2005, p 249 (in Chinese).
10. Jia Leilei, *Zhongguo Wuxia Dianying Shi* (*A History of Chinese Martial Arts Film*), Beijing: Culture and Art Publishing House, 2005, p 52 (in Chinese).
11. Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema 1896–1937*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, p 199.
12. Ibid, pp 200-233; Weihong Bao, 'From Pearl White to White Rose Woo: Tracing the Vernacular Body of *Nüxia* in Chinese Silent Cinema, 1927–1931', *Camera Obscura*, Durham, North Carolina, Vol 20, No 3 (60), 2005, pp 193-231.

The Kuomingtang elitist government considered the *wuxia*-action genre lowbrow, full of remnants of feudal superstitions. In February 1931, the National Film Censorship Committee was established, requiring films to apply for screening permits. Within three years, more than 60 martial arts-magic spirit films, including the highly influential *The Burning of Red Lotus Temple* (1928), were banned, amounting to 70% of all banned Chinese films.[13] With the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war, Shanghai entered the so-called 'Orphan Island period' (1938–1941). There were still some productions ongoing during this period, including a remake of *The Burning of Red Lotus Temple* (1940), and *The Red Butterfly* (1941), speaking to Shanghai's semi-colonial resources. Political unrest, including censorship and foreign invasion, contributed to the mass exodus of human, technological and financial resources of the film industry from Shanghai to Hong Kong.

Genderised Modernity

The ways Republican Chinese modernity was genderised could be explored through the *wuxia* genre. The development of cinematic special effects technology was facilitated by the popularity of the *wuxia* genre. The production team for the earliest film episodes of *The Burning of Red Lotus Temple* invented visual illusions of characters riding winds and clouds or becoming invisible, plus animation effects showing flying swords and *qi* as weapons, on top of colouring techniques that highlighted the clothing of female protagonist-warrior in red on essentially monochrome film.[14] The representation of these technologised female warriors reconciled with their feminised heritage by overstating a colourised image, in red no less, rendering their bodies more susceptible to spectacularisation; while their colourised images in a black-and-white reality made them literally outsiders of *any* realities or physicalities—in other words, more superhuman. From what we can see today, the modern characteristics of this genre in Republican Shanghai directly laid the groundwork for the development of *wuxia* films in post-war Hong Kong cinema, including but not limited to films such as *The Vagabond Master, Parts Two, Three and Four* (1948), which were marketed with taglines such as 'featuring as rooftop-flashing kung fu-fighting Lady Red' and 'Lady Red dashing into midnight danger to rescue her son' in advertisements, all the way to the mid-1960s, when Shaw Brothers (HK) Limited rolled out their '*Wuxia* Millennium in Technicolor' campaign, as masterminded by Chang Cheh. The first film featured in the campaign was *Temple of the Red Lotus* (1965), which was yet another adaptation of *The Burning of Red Lotus Temple*, starring Ivy Ling Po as the female lead Lady Red.

13. See note 11, pp 235-236.
14. See note 10.

The 'Oriental Female Fairbanks' Wu Lai-chu's driving scenes were something rare and refreshing in the 1930s.

The popularity of action film stars facilitated a stardom-consuming market to come into being. The collective presence of these *wuxia* stars, many of them female, produced a genderised vernacular, from refreshing image representations to multiple desires from the audience. Zhang Zhen has analysed how female action stars in the *nüxia* subgenre transformed the prior normative and suppressed body language of women on screen into a different lingo of healthy, flexible, and sometimes muscular female bodies. The audience tended to conflate the female stars playing the warriors with the warriors themselves. Wu Lai-chu was coined the 'Oriental Female Fairbanks', for example.[15]

In the special feature on the aforementioned *A Warrior of the Northeast* series, the write-up on Wu was clearly the focus of publicity. One emphasised her smartness and sensitivity, and most poignantly, her talent, training and skills in martial arts, making her 'second to no one', and hence the most appropriate star to play the Grand Master in the film. The captions for the stills included: 'Feminine or Masculine, a Mystery', 'Heroic Boys and Girls Share the Same Spirit', 'A Flower-selling Girl Turns Out to be a Hero', 'Building Up an Ironman Body'. Wu in the pictures was indeed pretty and fit, manly and feminine, all at once.

In the extant *nüxia* films of the late 1920s to early 1930s, it seems that male characters were either deliberately portrayed as absent or feeble so that women had to take up the roles in protecting the clan in crisis against invaders, or in planning revenge against enemies. During this process of assuming leadership, these female leads refabricated their physicality by picking up kung fu and becoming androgynous. The fact that they transgressed between genders and between human and superhuman boundaries, powerfully expanded the newly invented capacity of cinema in creating spectacles larger than life, and rendered projection of fluid desires from multiple genders possible.

15. See note 11, p 200.

It has been noted that Chinese modern *wuxia* literature, the vernacular language movement, and Chinese narrative films all emerged around the same time, serving as mediators of modernity for Republican China. Zhang Zhen reckoned that the vernacular modern in early Chinese *wuxia* films reconciled the historical *xia* from feudal times with superhuman, producing populist, charismatic beings that spoke to collective desires, lowbrow interests, avant-garde practices, and utopian folk culture.[16] Experiments in cinematography, camera movement, special effects and editing technologies in this genre contributed to it being the early 'cinema of attractions' while its pacing and effects also imitated the quickening stimulation and visual spectacularisation of the city presented to the human body and eye in the modern world. Weihong Bao also noted that the Chinese *nüxia* subgenre was informed by muscular women's bodies and their physical flexibility, as seen in American serial detective films which were circulating in Shanghai cinemas at the time.[17]

The development of the *wuxia* genre, if taken as a continuum at least from 1920s Shanghai to 1940s Hong Kong and hereafter, was indeed a venue for blending many diverse elements, including dance, theatre, legends, vernacular pulp fiction, magic and spirits, Euro-American influences, sci-fi, philosophical and moral values, hero, gangster, adventure, action and kung fu altogether. In affective terms, it granted its audience a safe escape route from their messy sociopolitical realities through rendering fighting non-violent, and delivering them to a black-and-white, evil-never-wins-over-good, ethics-centred comfort zone. Popular among colonised peoples, it offered moral solace as well as fulfilled desires in social mobility from non-normative identities (in terms of race, clan and gender).

Female Masculinity and Political Righteousness

A closer look at the films made by Yam Pang-nin and Wu Lai-chu in post-war Hong Kong revealed that *nüxia* was a prototype for Chinese modernity, and an object of desire for modern Chinese women simultaneously. In the first scene of *Female Spy 76* (1947), Spy 76 (played by Wu) was seen driving a small sedan to outside a building, and then in a long shot climbing up the tall wall via abseiling, all by herself and without any safety equipment. This introduction of the protagonist was clearly designed to demonstrate her extraordinary physical skills. Upon passing a few more physical and loyalty tests, 76 was sent by the party-state to 'Island H' to rival Kawashima Yoshiko. Once on board to Island H (and in most of the scenes set on Island H), she was dressed in male attire, mostly in business suit and tie, even in scenes without company. Her Westernised masculinity, with various capitalist signifiers of power, was particularly emphasised in shots of her mounting or unmounting male outfits, wearing male hats or looking at her (male) watch, etc.

16. See note 11, pp 203-206.
17. See note 12, Weihong Bao.

Female Spy 76 (1947)

Spy 76 (played by Wu Lai-chu) climbing up the tall wall via abseiling, demonstrating her agility

Spy 76 dressed in (male) business suit and tie

The film *Lady Robin Hood* (aka *The Adventures of Lo Bun Hon*, 1947) might have been made in the footsteps of *Chinese Robinwood* (1941, print no longer available), and the character's outfit and facial appearance closely resembled that of the protagonist in *The Valiant Girl Nicknamed White Rose* (1929), but Wu's body language was much more masculine than that of White Rose. Again, Wu was in menswear with a moustache on her face in the entire film except in the bedroom scene, in which she was ironically in disguise of *not* being Robin Hood. In the meeting scene, Robin's assistants expressed the gang members' desire: 'they all wanna see Brother Robin.' This line served also to voice the audience's desires of how they wanted to plant their gaze on Robin, whose performance of masculinity took up much more cinematic time and space than was required by the narrative or characterisation.

Wu's star persona in drag had been most familiar to Chinese audiences since 1930s Shanghai. Wu was featured as a swordsman on the cover of *Movie Weekly* (*Yingxi Shenghuo*) (Issue 14) published in 1931, with a commentary which highlighted her androgyny.[18] This outfit of hers was quite similar to the one in *Lady Robin Hood* 16 years later, which only came without the moustache. Publicity stories emphasising Wu's masculinity, including her having acquired a driver's licence *on top of* her driving skills, were abundant in film trivia throughout the 1930s. Film magazine *The Screen Pictorial* (No 5), for example, contained a full page coverage of Wu smoking a pipe and driving a motorbike,

18. Yu Feng, *Movie Weekly* (*Yingxi Shenghuo*), Shanghai, Vol 1, Issue 14, 1931, cover (in Chinese).

with a tagline regarding her 'manliness', and a write-up on Wu picking up male hobbies even faster than men.[19] What was most intriguing though, was while Wu's cross-dressing was taken for granted in films such as *Female Spy 76*, the legendary role of Kawashima as a cross-dressing spy was completely displaced/replaced, to the extent that Kawashima was only portrayed as a middle-aged woman in modern female dress, with no cross-dressing whatsoever. All the cross-dressing was reserved for 76 solely; only the one in the politically correct camp in the film had the privilege of gender mobility. Likewise, the racial and cultural mobility of the legendary Kawashima was also displaced by the cultural mobility of 76, who said at the beginning of the film that she had come back from Japan for three years. This showed how *Female Spy 76*, within the parameters of the *nüxia* subgenre, puts the female protagonist in the subject position of a Chinese patriot (and therefore morally correct), as a condition for her to be granted the largest flexibility in crossing gender and cultural boundaries; through such, she assumed the role in representing the most desirable form of modernity for the audience. This gender discursive tradition would have a lasting impact in Hong Kong cinema for the next 30 years, perhaps until the (re-)emergence of Bruce Lee on the Hong Kong screen in 1970 as the hypermasculine kung fu star, whose ethnocentric nationalism also granted him the most morally correct position and thus mobility in crossing geographical and cultural—but not gender—boundaries.

Real Kung Fu

The emergence of Bruce Lee in Hong Kong cinema was often considered a benchmark for realist and/or authentic representation of kung fu. This also marked the conventional differentiation of early *wuxia* genre films from the kung fu genre in most of film history.[20] Wu, however, had already made her fame with hand-to-hand combat on screen three decades before Bruce Lee, in works made by the first *wuxia*-action director in Chinese film history. In extant films including *Female Spy 76*, *Lady Robin Hood* and *Bloodshed in a Besieged Citadel* (aka *United as One*, 1948), there was much screen time dedicated to Wu's fighting with no dialogue or post-production visual effects of flying *qi* or weapons (gravity-defying wire work had not yet been invented). The only way a man could stop 76 was to hold her at gunpoint, and even so, she could still flee without being hurt, simply by grabbing the man's gun with bare hands and hit back. Fantastical it might seem, a fan from

19. 'Ms Wu Lai-chu with Manliness', *The Screen Pictorial*, Shanghai, No 5, 1935, p 2 (in Chinese).

20. This generic differentiation of *wuxia* vs kung fu is common in Chinese film history and film criticism. One recent example: 'Beginning with Shanghai productions in the 1920s, early martial arts films drew influence from Chinese opera and *wuxia* novels: narratives set in Ancient China focusing on heroes with supernatural martial arts abilities. Fight scenes in these early films emphasised flowing dramatised movements, but rarely showcased actual martial arts skills. This changed with the transformation of Hong Kong cinema in the 1970s. Resisting the fantastical elements of the *wuxia* style, local studios Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest put actual martial artists into their films. With this move, the kung fu genre was born.' See Joyleen Christensen, 'From Bruce Lee to Shang-Chi: a short history of the kung fu film in cinema', 26 September 2021. https://theconversation.com/from-bruce-lee-to-shang-chi-a-short-history-of-the-kung-fu-film-in-cinema-168273. Accessed on 18 October 2021.

Defeating the enemy with bare fists in *Female Spy 76* (1947)

The extraordinary archer who never missed a target in *Lady Robin Hood* (1947)

Intense fights at close range in *Bloodshed in a Besieged Citadel* (1948)

Xiamen commented on how impressed s/he was with Wu's 'real kung fu'.[21] Would 'real kung fu' here mean a form of realist/authentic representation of choreographed fighting that emphasised verisimilitude and the possibility of reformulating the human body and its intervention into physical reality and interpersonal encounter, involving real martial arts skills while limiting cinematographic or editing manipulation to a minimum? As such, was the claim of 'real kung fu' also a response to the Shanghai martial arts-magic spirit craze from the 1920s to 1930s and its heavy reliance on the inventions of visual effects technology, while deliberately calling for a more tactile (i.e. 'anti-superstitious' modern) imagination of bodily physicality in moving away from the spectacular attractions of early cinema? In this light then, these films, while bringing with them their Shanghai memories and heritage, could also be seen as speaking to a Chinese Hong Kong colonial present.

About 18 minutes into the film, there was a two-minute sequence of 76 approaching and arriving at Island H with her assistants. Here they were seen on a boat in Victoria Harbour, on a tram in Central, then arriving at Repulse Bay Hotel in a car. The speed and convenience of modern transportation were featured in this arrival scene as well as the protagonists themselves. While 76 was monitoring the conversations of Kawashima next door, we heard the names of Hong Kong's places in the soundtrack and saw them

21. Han Chao, 'On Local *Wuxia* Films', *Movie Weekly* (*Yingxi Shenghuo*), Shanghai, Vol 1, Issue 29, 1931, pp 2-3 (in Chinese).

on Kawashima's map, including Mount Cameron, Sha Tin, Kennedy Town, Aberdeen, Kowloon City, and so on. Kawashima referred to Island H as 'the military outpost in the Far East, together with Singapore they form the eyes of the empire'. Hong Kong's colonial modernity was placed in the midst of this struggle between powers; its position in the centre of history was emphasised through the visuality of it being a cosmopolitan spectacle. The migration of battlegrounds for 76 and her team could be seen as a metaphorical encore of Yam's and Wu's personal journey from Shanghai to Hong Kong, how they moved and rebuilt a possible space to continue to perform their cinematic skills, not unlike 76's travels to Hong Kong to continue her spy mission.

Family-State Reunion

The *Ta-ya Pictorial News* (Issue 177, 1929) on *A Warrior of the Northeast* described that one feature of Yam's work was his tendency to use family members as crew and cast. He founded Oriental First Film Company in Shanghai, where he employed his first wife Wu Aizhu (aka Ren Aizhu) as the main actress, and his younger brother Ren Pengshou as actor. After Aizhu passed away, Yam married her younger sister Lai-chu, who then became the key actress in Yam's films. In both *Lady Robin Hood* and *Female Spy 76*, Yam Pang-nin's daughter Ren Yizhi was also cast as the supporting actress, assistant to the protagonist. In the former picture, Robin Hood played by the cross-dressing Wu Lai-chu had a (somewhat) romantic relationship with the fisherman's daughter played by Ren Yizhi, Wu's stepdaughter in real life. How was Yam's investment in the *wuxia*-action-spy genre related to his commitment to this tightly knit circle of family members on and off screen?

The traditional Chinese *nüxia* is usually caught in a mission involving revenge and/or paying a debt of gratitude, as the *xia* tradition obliges the warrior to comply with Confucian values concerned with communal, social and/or state benefits beyond the self. The characterisation of *nüxia* in Yam's films, as in *For the Righteousness* (1924), *The Patriotic Umbrella* (1924), *Bloodshed in a Besieged Citadel* and *Female Spy 76*, translated the motif of loyalty and revenge into patriotic obligations, modernising and politicising the genre in specific ways to respond to contemporary needs. The Robin Hood legend has been narrated as a yeoman turned fugitive since the 13th century; and since the 15th century the character has developed into an anti-authority hero righting the wrong. Though sometimes represented as loyal to King Richard/Richard I, partly due to the rewrite in *Ivanhoe* (1820) by Sir Walter Scott[22], Robin Hood's commitment to supporting the royal was rarely the central motif. *Lady Robin Hood*, however, began with a state crisis of the king having fallen ill, making a will for his court to hand the throne to the prince. Upon the king's death, Minister Situ Yangming (played by Wang Hao) forfeited the king's will and imprisoned the prince. To keep his life, Minister Luo Zhengqing (played by Jiang Rui) resigned from court

22. Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (Revised Edition), London and New York: Penguin Classics, 2020.

In the scene of an honours ceremony in *Lady Robin Hood* (1947), it was only when Robin Hood (played by Wu Lai-chu) removed 'his' moustache after a bow that Minister Luo (played by Jiang Rui) recognised 'him' as his daughter.

and moved to the countryside with his daughter (played by Wu Lai-chu), who cross-dressed as Robin to organise the rescue of the prince and restore his reign. In the last scene, Robin Hood, bowing humbly in front of the newly crowned prince, removed her moustache so Minister Luo recognised her as his daughter.

So, the trope of cross-dressing/gender transgression in *Female Spy 76* and *Lady Robin Hood* served ultimately as a ploy to uphold state sovereignty. Women warriors stood in for male literati in the Confucianism-infused state—in which the male literati, family and state were seen as a continuum—to protect the wholesomeness of the family and the state, at a time when the Chinese nation-state, and by implication Chinese masculinity and the literary tradition, was undergoing unprecedented crisis. In this light, the employment of family members on and off screen, could be read as a self-empowering or self-defensive tactic when the state, and by implication the family, was under serious attack.

A *Jianghu* of North-South Cultures

Yam Pang-nin and Wu Lai-chu moving from Shanghai to Hong Kong marked the beginning of Hong Kong's *nüxia* tradition, with its tendency to train and use non-Cantonese actresses

as the martial arts stars hereafter, including Beijinger Yu So-chau and Hubei-born Suet Nei. By the 1960s, we saw Yu starring in Yam's films as the chief woman warrior, with Wu as the supporting actress. Ren Yizhi, who made her first screen appearances in *Lady Robin Hood* and *Female Spy 76*, joined the Feng Huang Motion Picture Co in the 1950s and became a screenwriter as well as a director, one of the few women directors in Hong Kong film history, making no fewer than 20 films.

Post-war Hong Kong provided a new meeting platform for people all over China, from the North and from the South. The Hong Kong film scene took advantage of the city's geopolitical position, utilised cultural and financial resources from the pre-war Republican film industry to diversify and strengthen itself, and developed new possibilities for a new *Jianghu*, taking the *nüxia* tradition to stunning new heights in decades to come.

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Representations of History on Film: A Brief Exploration of Hong Kong Historical Costume Dramas of the 1930s and 1940s

Joyce Yang

Costume dramas are a special genre in the history of 1930s and 1940s Hong Kong cinema. Firstly, Chinese costume drama films emerged in early 20th-century Shanghai, where there was a first wave of costume drama films between the years 1926 to 1928. By the 1930s and 1940s, costume dramas made in Hong Kong bore the distinct stamp of Shanghai influence, from cast and crew members, technique, to ideology. Secondly, in terms of film genre, it would be too ambiguous to simply classify a film as 'costume drama' from the use of costumes. Indeed, 'costume dramas' encompass a wide range of sub-genres, including historical dramas, *baishi* dramas (i.e. anecdotal historical dramas), palace dramas, supernatural films, as well as hybrids such as period melodramas, period comedies, etc., among which include many artistically and commercially successful classics. Thirdly, although costume drama production in Hong Kong during the 1930s and 1940s could not match the scale of Shanghai productions, it nonetheless managed to reach a high point in 1939, which sustained until the end of the 1940s, producing film classics such as *The Soul of China* (1948) and *Sorrows of the Forbidden City* (1948). During this period, costume dramas inherited the best of their predecessors and also broke new ground, laying a solid foundation for innovation and development in the coming decades, eventually becoming one of the most important genres in Hong Kong film history. By the 1980s and 1990s, the genre reached its peak and costume dramas became one of the most dazzling achievements of Hong Kong cinema. Fourthly, of the historical costume dramas produced in Hong Kong in the 1930s and 1940s, the majority featured women as their main characters. Such female characters constituted a distinctive spectacle, and were often pivoted at the centre of the story, carrying out the functions of challenging pre-modern feudal society and advocating for nationalism. This creative approach was both subversive in its depiction of history and also conciliatory in its ultimate surrender to traditional ideologies bound by family ethics and nationalistic morale. Lastly, the meaning of costume dramas is not defined simply by their use of costumes, but rather, their collective representations of time, tradition and historical concepts through filmmaking. The comparative loose concepts of time while

Classics such as *The Soul of China* (1948; left photo, from left: Liu Qiong, Wang Xichun) and *Sorrows of the Forbidden City* (1948; right photo, from left: Shu Shi, Zhou Xuan) inherited the best of their predecessors and also broke new ground.

depicting an old feudal China provide a rich soil for filmmakers' storytelling to take root. The 'past' is visualised and exemplified on screen, and undergoes constant reconstruction through modern thinking.

To shed the burdens of history and approach the past in a playful way; to borrow the framework of historical tales to depict modern emotions and ideas; to make 'ancient' a narrative arena where one can freely traverse, adapt and explore various reincarnations: this characteristic treatment is deeply rooted at the heart of Hong Kong cinema, and proves that it's part of the imaginative power long embedded in the creative genes of local filmmakers. Even to this day, it still bears significant influence on how Chinese cinema approaches costume dramas and tells stories about the past. In other words, how Hong Kong cinema represents history and how it adapts and uses traditions is an important area for both film studies and wider cultural research on Hong Kong. With a focus on costume dramas made in Hong Kong during the 1930s and 1940s and through examining pieces of historical evidence, this essay highlights certain observations about early costume dramas in Hong Kong, namely, 1) the cultural uniqueness of costume dramas in their spectacular depictions of the past; 2) the production of costume dramas in Hong Kong during the late 1930s; 3) the definition of 'costume drama films'; 4) the function of historical costume drama films as narratives of nation and race, as well as how they compare with folktale films; and 5) the treatment of female characters as both a subversive and stabilising force through the analytical lens of narrative technique and gender representation.

I. Representations of the Past

As an imported commodity from the West, film was widely embraced in China by the end of the 19th century. As an art form, its development was closely aligned with the modernisation of Chinese society. During the early 20th century, China was undergoing a period of transformation from the old to the new, as the Chinese people took off their traditional garb, participated in wars and revolutions, pursued democracy and science, spoke

vernacular Chinese, and opened their minds to the enlightenment of modern civilisation. Chinese cinema developed within this exciting context of historical change and cultural shake-up. In their exploration of the medium, Chinese filmmakers not only imitated their Western counterparts, but also felt strongly compelled to relate stories about the Orient. Characters appearing in period costume very much helped audiences feel closer to this new form of entertainment and culture.

'[I]dentities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.'[1] Film is an art form that narrates through images, whereas history is the source of story. The Chinese understanding of story is embedded in history and culture, so the development of historical costume dramas is effectively the initiation of Chinese society's collective experience of the past, an exclusive claim on Chinese film narrative to depict and tell stories about the nation and its people. The ongoing 'present' can be captured any time, whereas the 'past' must be reconstructed and remade in order to be represented on screen. It exists as an open temporality that can be entered, revisited, assembled and parodied—a bottomless treasure trove of archetypes and topics for cinematic creation. Once Chinese cinema discovered the expediency and the suggestive richness of the past, it never could bring itself to abandon such a source of inspiration. The characters, costumes, sets, even the ideologies and values of thousands of years of feudal society—all these elements serve as a familiar spectacle that the contemporary Chinese state, in the process of modernisation, could never return to. In effect, they form a collective cultural semiotics of yearning and nostalgia.

Costume dramas are a unique genre in Chinese-language cinema, not only because of China's transition from an ancient civilisation to a modern post-feudal, postcolonial state, but also because they align well with the traditional Chinese view of time. To divide historical time into clearly demarcated periods is now a generally accepted approach in modern educational system, but in traditional Chinese culture, the ancient past and the modern present are loosely defined by popular convention. Marcel Granet discusses the Chinese conception of time in his 1934 book *La pensée chinoise*: 'In the West, people think of time in an "objective" way, and time is often seen as "difficult to comprehend"; yet the Chinese has never attempted a non-objective approach to understanding objective time. The reason why the Chinese never thought about time is that they have the "spirit of figuration"…. Even the Chinese themselves say, "The Chinese (way of thinking) is fundamentally figurative in nature"…. And they believe that time, too, should be "figurative"—"Time must be figurative"'[2] Much like Confucius's remark over a running stream: 'Things slide away just like this, regardless of day or night', the Chinese understanding of time depends on figurative images. In film, history is represented and

1. Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Jonathan Rutherford (ed), London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, p 225.
2. François Jullien, *Du "temps". Éléments d'une philosophie du vivre* (*The Theory of Time: The Essence of Life Philosophy*), Chang Chun-yi (trans), Beijing: Peking University Press, 2016, p 33 (in Chinese).

demarcated using symbols such as period costumes, space and characters. Audiences of early costume dramas did not examine closely whether the costumes on screen matched the era they were depicting; no matter whether characters wore opera costumes or Qing-dynasty clothing, they effectively transported the story to 'the past' and posed no problem of understanding whatsoever. In fact, most of the actors wore stage costumes from Chinese opera in early costume dramas. A figurative conception of time, inherited from tradition, gives 'costume dramas' a unique complexity.

II. The Popular Wave of Costume Dramas and Their Mission

Historical costume dramas, by nature, respond to a need for onscreen national identity representation. They bear the mission of advocating national narratives and history, as well as promoting distinct representations of Chinese people on screen so as to correct misunderstandings and distortions prevalent abroad—a refusal to yield one's cinematic 'right to speak'. As a film genre, costume dramas first appeared in Shanghai in the 1920s, a form of exploration and experimentation that was prompted and inspired by historical pictures from Europe and the US.

The first popular wave of costume dramas in Chinese cinema emerged in Shanghai between 1926 and 1928. During the silent film period, Western historical pictures were highly popular, but audiences were dissatisfied with their inaccurate depictions of China. In 'A Brief History of Modern Chinese Cinema', Zheng Junli cites *The Red Lantern* (1919) and *The First Born* (1921), which premiered in New York around 1920, as examples of Hollywood films that were insulting to China.[3] In an essay entitled 'A Statement on the Improvement of Chinese Cinema', published in *Shun Pao* on 22 August 1922, the writer points out, 'At present, many of the films screened in various cinema venues around Shanghai are from abroad, and often feature inauthentic depictions of our country's customs and our people. Invariably, there are offensive elements: all the characters wearing Chinese costumes are thieves and thugs; they are played mostly by non-Chinese actors, albeit bearing a resemblance to Chinese people.' Under the banner of 'anti-Europeanism', Chinese historical pictures gradually became more popular,[4] so as to establish a more appropriate national style. 'As Mr Bao Tianxiao proposes, "To build a robust Chinese film industry… we must first develop historical films…"', and the industry should 'adapt awe-inspiring events from history in order to depict the spirit and wisdom of the East…and thereby establish the national character of Chinese cinema.'[5]

3. Zheng Junli, 'A Brief History of Modern Chinese Cinema' in *Zhongguo Wusheng Dianying* (*Chinese Silent Cinema*), China Film Archive (ed), Beijing: China Film Press, 1996, p 1394 (in Chinese).
4. Li Suyuan & Hu Jubin, *Zhongguo Wusheng Dianying Shi* (*Chinese Silent Film History*), Beijing: China Film Press, 1996, pp 211-214 (in Chinese).
5. See note 3, pp 1409-1410.

The Witty Sorcerer (1931), scripted and directed by Lai Buk-hoi, was the inaugural work of Hong Kong Film Company.
(From left: Lui Tin-lun, Lai Buk-hoi)

In 1926, Shanghai experienced a boom in the production of costume dramas and fantasy films. Unique Film Productions (aka Tianyi) was the first to attempt this genre, in order to 'truly speak for the people'.[6] Their productions including *The Lovers* (1926) and *Legend of the White Snake, Parts One, Two and Three* (aka *The Righteous Snake*, 1926–1927) were notable box-office successes. The Chinese diaspora in the Southeast Asian market shared a common nostalgia for China, and so costume dramas had a unique commercial advantage,[7] in that they were able to 'satisfy the majority of working-class Chinese diaspora's longing for home'.[8] Yet such early-stage costume dramas were marred by poor production quality and did not truly fulfil their cultural and political mission of 'speaking for the people'. Instead, they were mostly commercial experiments and displays of new forms. Under the umbrella of costume dramas, many sub-genres emerged. *Wuxia* and fantasy films were especially popular, but due to the rapid decline in quality, they quickly peaked and by 1928, the wave had almost died out.

In 1928, after the Canton-Hong Kong Strike, the Hong Kong economy was slowly recovering, and film production was returning to normality. As a genre that requires particular expertise in terms of crew, props and production, costume dramas became the preferred choice of genre for Hong Kong Film Company's debut feature. In addition to writing and directing the silent film *The Witty Sorcerer* (1931), Lai Buk-hoi (aka Lai Pak-hoi) also starred in the leading role as the sorcerer Joh Tsz who pranks Lord Cho Cho with his sly tricks. The film premiered in Hong Kong in March 1931, and it was promoted as a film that tried to be 'as faithful to historical truth as possible', that had been 'made over a long period of time'.[9] Marketed as a big-budget production with impressive scenes, the film was revered as the first costume drama epic in Hong Kong.

6. See note 4.
7. Chun Chou, 'The Future Prospects of Chinese Cinema', *Silver Light*, No 1, 25 November 1926, p 23 (in Chinese).
8. See note 3, p 1409.
9. *Chinese Mail*, 14 March 1931 (in Chinese).

In the 1930s, China was hard hit by a host of troubles both internally and externally. Politically, films were strongly demanded to convey certain messages in their art. Once again, costume dramas saw a rise in popularity in Shanghai. In particular, historical films were seen as prime examples of how cinema could perform a social function. 1934 was a crucial year for Shanghai directors moving to Hong Kong, as they brought with them many talented production crew members. The Hong Kong film industry, in turn, entered a key phase of development. Unique, too, decided to establish a studio in Hong Kong. Buoyed by previous successes such as *Sable Cicada* (produced by Hsin Hwa, 1938) and *Hua Mu Lan* (aka *Maiden in Armour* / *Mulan Joins the Army*, produced by Shanghai's Huacheng, 1939), a wave of costume dramas appeared in Hong Kong toward the end of the 1930s, following the footsteps of Shanghai.

With reference to *Hong Kong Filmography Vol I (1914–1941)* (Revised Edition) (Hong Kong Film Archive, 2020) and statistical data from the HKFA as at December 2021, Figure 1 summarises the total number of films labelled 'costume drama' between the years of 1914 and 1949. The years 1940 and 1949 saw the highest number of costume dramas produced. In 1940, out of a total of 90 productions, 41 were costume dramas. In 1949, there were 79 costume dramas among the 184 films produced. In 1946, several film companies were established in Hong Kong, such as Great China Film Development Co., Ltd. (aka Dazhonghua), Yung Hwa Motion Picture Industries Ltd and Great Wall Pictures Corporation. Upon Yung Hwa's inauguration, the company invested a great amount of money on making historical epics such as *The Soul of China* and *Sorrows of the Forbidden City*, hoping to provoke reflection on contemporary times through its depiction of history and also to express its political stance. Between 1935 and 1950, notable sound productions of historical costume dramas include:

Behind the Great Wall (aka *Burning of the Efang Palace*) / 1935 / Cantonese

Sable Cicada / 1938 / Mandarin

The Woman General / 1939 / Cantonese

The Legend of Wang Zhaojun / 1940 / Cantonese

The Perfect Beauty / 1940 / Mandarin

The Empress Dowager / 1940 / Cantonese

The General / 1940 / Cantonese

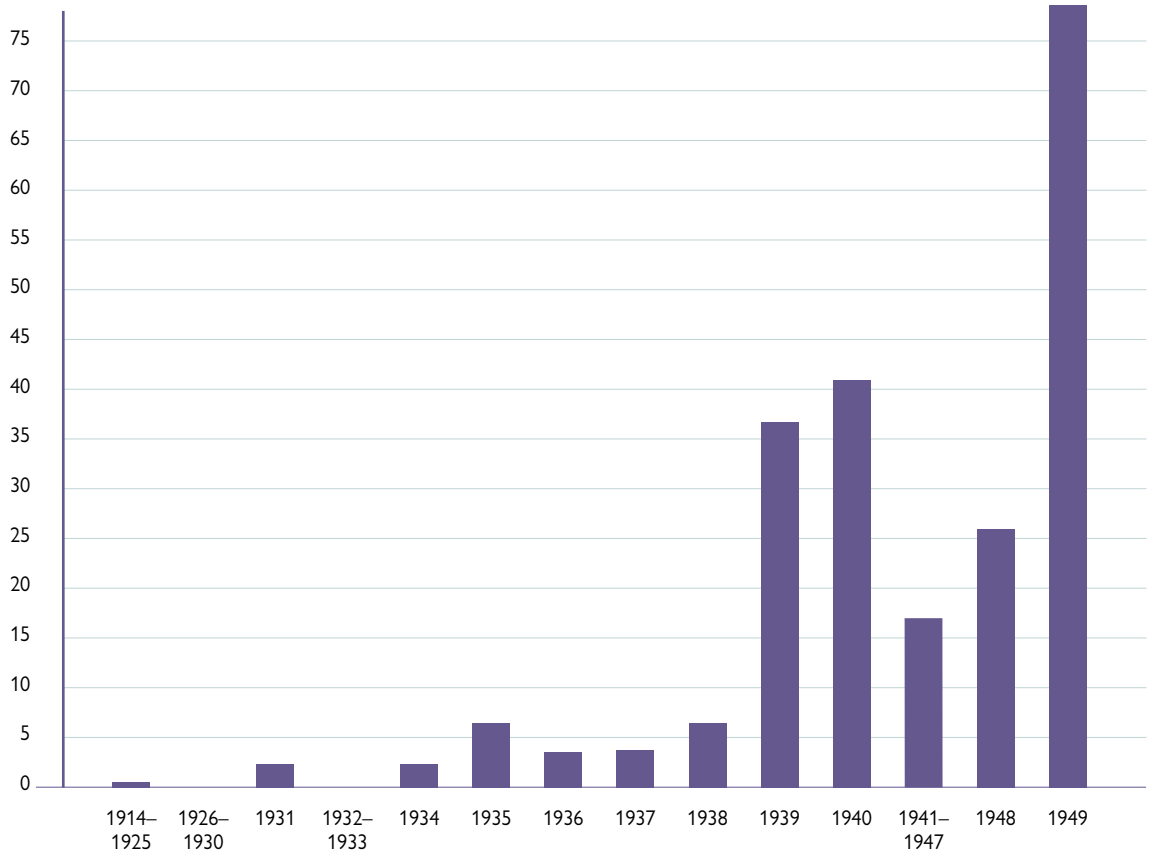
The Lady Takes Command / 1940 / Cantonese

The Soul of China / 1948 / Mandarin

Sorrows of the Forbidden City / 1948 / Mandarin

Compared with the frustrated genre experiments of the late 1920s, costume dramas of the 1930s and 1940s clearly shouldered a more pressing political-cultural mission, namely that of advocating and inspiring nationalist sentiment. The complex political context of the time forced costume dramas, especially those that dealt with historical topics, out of adapting purely commercial considerations. Instead, filmmakers had to absorb nationalist elements into their traditional narratives. Stories such as a legendary beauty

[Figure 1] Statistics of Costume Drama Films Made in Hong Kong from 1914 to 1949



making sacrifices for her country in crisis became a convenient vehicle for exemplifying national identity. The return of costume dramas reflected people's 'extreme frustration and boredom' as well as their wish to 'free themselves from the limitations of their present circumstances' and to see their thoughts and feelings expressed through 'characters from the past'.[10] In effect, history is treated as a literary source that can be repeatedly revisited throughout cinematic history. It enjoys a clear and apparent distance from reality and thus from current tensions; yet filmmakers can make references to the present through narrative conflicts about power and gender. With their polysemiotic nature, historical costume dramas are effectively a kind of funhouse mirror in turbulent times: filmmakers use the optics of history to represent present-day troubles of modern China and to subvert tradition, but ultimately, they return to the established order of traditional society.

III. The Definition of 'Costume Drama'

Costume dramas are difficult to classify, given how ambiguously they are defined. In film history, costume dramas are seen as a genre concept with distinct Chinese characteristics

10. Wu Yonggang, 'About Yue Fei's Loyalty to the Nation', *The Movie World*, Shanghai, No 12, May 1940 (in Chinese).

developed in the context of early Chinese cinema, so Western genre frameworks are not applicable. In 'A Word from the Editor' in *Hong Kong Filmography Vol I (1913–1941)* (Hong Kong Film Archive, 1997), Mary Wong writes about the challenges of genre classification of Chinese films: 'It is a matter that is still under study. To define a certain film's genre, one needs to understand how a story is told apart from what the story is about, and how the story inherits the conventions of a genre while having its own adaptation.' In general, scholars tend to distinguish between period backdrops in Hong Kong films, where all period settings from the Qing dynasty or earlier are classified as 'costume dramas', whereas films set in subsequent eras are considered 'contemporary'.[11]

According to *History of Chinese Film*, early costume dramas were 'simply defined in comparison with how the characters were dressed in contemporary dramas; they were mostly screen adaptations of stories from anecdotal history, legends, and classical novels.'[12] It is worth noting that such debates surrounding the definition of 'costume drama' have long existed, due to its extensive history and widespread popularity. In terms of topics and themes, costume dramas can be further categorised into melodrama, fantasy, etc., and one could even classify them according to the source of material, for instance *xiqu* (Chinese opera), classic works of literature, myths and legends. Such categories often overlap and are used in tandem with terms such as 'historical' and 'folktale' films. For example, from 1926 to 1927, there was a discussion on historical films among the cultural circles of Shanghai, and in reality, the discussion around 'historical films' actually extended to a much wider scope covering all costume dramas.

The name 'costume drama' (*guzhuang pian*, literally 'period costume drama films') implies that the film genre is defined and classified primarily from its use of costumes, as opposed to any other story element. Yet with the development of film as an art form, even costumes can be classified in increasingly sophisticated ways, such as opera costumes, Ming-dynasty costumes, Qing-dynasty costumes, etc. However, characters' attire in early-era costume dramas did not indicate any particular dynasty; they were simply a signifier of ancient times in China under imperial dynastic rule, as opposed to the post-feudal, contemporary state known as modern China today. Thus, early costume dramas usually featured costumes from Chinese operas, and characters and other story elements were treated with similar flexibility and creativity. In 1939, the big-budget Mandarin costume drama *Lady Precious Stream* from Shanghai's Yee Hwa Motion Picture Co. was released. It was 'directed by Wu Cun and starred Zhang Cuihong [aka Cheung Chui-hung], Li Ying [aka Lee Ying] and Diao Banhua [aka Diu Ban-wah]. The film sets, including the Minister's gardens, outdoor scenery, prison dungeons and palace halls, were meticulously researched and costed upwards of tens of thousands of dollars, a rare feat for Chinese cinema'.[13] Like many other costume drama epics of the time, the film was marketed as a well-researched,

11. 'A Note from the Editor' in *Hong Kong Filmography Vol I (1914–1941)* (Revised Edition), Kwok Ching-ling (ed), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2020, p xvi (in Chinese).
12. Li Shaobai (ed), *History of Chinese Film*, Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2006, p 45 (in Chinese).
13. *'Lady Precious Stream'*, inside cover of *Screen Voice*, Singapore, No 59, 6 December 1939 (in Chinese).

big-budget production. In actual fact, however, the story had been rewritten extensively and the characters were still dressed in opera costumes—a far cry from 'historical truth'.

Couched within the term 'costume drama' is a series of industrial standards concerning film set, story and character. All these elements stand in stark contrast to how they are treated in 'contemporary dramas', and they do not stem from any straightforward imitation of Western narrative conventions. To watch a costume drama on the silver screen is to observe how filmmakers use a technology imported from the West to tell stories about China's past, to extract cultural archetypes, and fundamentally, to establish narrative authority in the realm of Chinese cinema. After all, only those who have experienced the past or those who have long immersed themselves in the culture hold the right to tell these stories. Thus, to scholars of Chinese film history, costume dramas may be regarded as a form of practical genre experimentation in early Chinese cinema; its significance far outstrips surface identifiers such as the use of costumes.

IV. Implications of Nation and Race in Historical Costume Dramas

Within Hong Kong's cinematic discourse, various sub-genres overlap with and sit under the umbrella term of 'costume drama', such as folktales, historical costume dramas, *muyu shu* (Chinese woodblock singing), *wuxia*, fantasy, etc. *Muyu shu* is a special vocal performance that belongs to Lingnan culture. *Wuxia* (i.e. swordplay martial arts) and fantasy films are relatively easy to understand and define. Folktale films and historical costume dramas are trickier to classify. How can we justify a film as being sufficiently 'true to historical fact' for it to be categorised as a 'historical costume drama'? Should costume dramas that lack historical authenticity simply be grouped under 'folktales'? In other words, is the source of reference—whether it is official or unofficial accounts of history—the only factor that differentiates historical costume dramas from folktales? The distinction does not seem to be so clear-cut. To present history through cinematic techniques is in itself an act of re-creation of history. Even with the continuous development of historical research and greater attention paid to re-creating period costumes and cultural habits on screen, no historical costume drama can be equated with 'history'. Despite similarities in their traditional and cultural roots, folktale films and historical costume dramas were seen in very different light in Shanghai and Hong Kong in the 1930s.

Although both cities saw a brief wave of popular costume dramas in 1939, such films were quickly replaced by folktale films. In 1940, out of the 83 Cantonese pictures released in Hong Kong, over 60% were melodramas, *wuxia*, folktales, and *baishi* stories.[14] Many of them comprised elements that appealed to corrupt feudal practices or pornographic sensibilities. From the 1930s to the 1950s, there were three Film Clean-up Movements in Hong Kong. The second one, the Cantonese Film Reform Movement, was held in the early

14. See note 12, p 122. A total of 84 Cantonese pictures were released in Hong Kong in 1940, same as note 11, pp 239-242.

1940s, and advocated that 'reform starts with the screenplay; only good screenplays can lead to good films'.[15] The movement targeted *wuxia*, fantasy, and other films which seemed to aimlessly incorporate monsters and ghosts. In other words, outlandish folktale films were lambasted, and there was a call to boycott such vulgar and indecent pictures with poor production values. Folktale films were branded as easy escapism, even 'traitorous pictures that were no different from being our enemies' accomplice.'[16] What stood apart from such toxic, feudal folktale films were historical costume dramas. They depicted stories that were carefully chosen for their historical meaning, even though the plots might similarly contain fabricated content. However, since they were seen to be aligned with narratives of national and racial dignity, historical costume dramas were often hailed as anti-feudal and patriotic. When Hong Kong's Zhongguo Production Company decided to hire Moon Kwan Man-ching to direct *For Love or Money* (1939), the production was classified as a 'folktale film'. Contemporary news media reported, 'the company initially wanted Lee Yi-nin for the leading role Madam To, but she was unwilling to break her pledge not to star in any folktale films, so she declined the offer.' Lee's refusal was widely praised in the media, which described her as 'truly an actress with integrity and character'.[17]

In 1939, Nanyang Film Company (aka Nan Yeung Film Company) rearranged its production strategy and schedule, delaying the production of *Sheung Ngo Dashing to the Moon*, which initially would have been promoted as 'a prelude to costume dramas'. Instead, *Yang Kwei-fei, the Magnificent Concubine* took its place. In Number 55 of *Screen Voice*, we can find Runde Shaw's explanation for this adjustment: '[*Sheung Ngo Dashing to the Moon*] has a weakness that makes it unsuitable as the company's first costume drama—its name is not as evocative or grand as *Yang Kwei-fei, the Magnificent Concubine*. Nanyang has yet to reveal its stance on producing costume dramas, and at this stage, audiences may mistakenly think that *Sheung Ngo Dashing to the Moon* is nothing but an ordinary folktale film.' Apart from distancing itself from negative critiques that are commonly associated with folktale films, such as 'frivolous' and 'not grand', Nanyang's choice of a historical epic such as *Yang Kwei-fei, the Magnificent Concubine* also highlighted the company's 'earnestness in making historical costume dramas. Nanyang wishes to show audiences the scale of Nanyang's investment, their cast and crew, as well as their meticulous attitude towards building a first-of-its-kind cinematic legacy—that of making historical costume dramas.'[18]

Behind the difference in attitude towards historical costume dramas and folktales is

15. Feng, 'Nanyang in One Year', *Chinese Mail*, 24 December 1940 (in Chinese).
16. 'On Studios' Competition to Shoot Folktale Films' in 'A Word from Us', *Movietone*, Shanghai, 9th Year, No 19, 5 July 1940, p 1 (in Chinese).
17. 'Lee Yi-nin Refuses to Star in *For Love or Money*', *Screen Voice*, Singapore, No 45, 16 May 1939 (in Chinese). Eventually Wong Man-lei took the role of Madam To while Sun Ma Si-tsang played Lee Siu-yu. The film was changed to a contemporary setting.
18. 'Nanyang Changes Strategy Postpones *Sheung Ngo Dashing to the Moon* Prioritises Shooting of *Yang Kwei-fei, the Magnificent Concubine*, a Palace Drama with Emphasis on Sets and Costumes', *Screen Voice*, Singapore, No 55, 16 October 1939 (in Chinese). Later Zhang Shankun successfully persuaded Nanyang to pass the film's shooting to Hsin Hwa.

essentially the distinction between national narrative and grassroots entertainment. Above all, film is valued for its didactic function, its power to convey messages and ideas about the nation through its art. In the editor's foreword of *Screen Voice* (Number 53) titled 'A Word from Us', a series of costume dramas in production are mentioned, and these words reflect the contemporary standards and criteria for choosing the appropriate historical topics for screen adaptation: 'Recently, under pressure from the public and the media, Hong Kong and Shanghai film companies are indeed displaying a commendable attitude towards their work. They are avoiding explicit, scandalous material, and instead are investing heavily in patriotic stories about Chinese legendary figures in the past, such as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (aka *The Marriage Trap*), *Beauty of Beauties*, *The Legend of Wang Zhaojun*, *Lady Precious Stream*, etc. These productions are all about to kick off. Each story is infused with new material to maximise their educational effect. Also, many other companies are preparing to film Guan Yu, Su Wu, Leung Hung-yuk, etc. As more and more glorious stories about the Chinese legends are getting filmed, one must admit this is a trend worth celebrating.'[19] The aforementioned examples highlight how female characters were especially popular with filmmakers of costume dramas. Furthermore, in discussions about how easily translatable a historical story was for the big screen and its wider social meaning, both the media and filmmakers emphasised the nationalistic value being represented. This was a reflection of contemporary calls to defend the country in a time of war, which also marked the fundamental difference of historical costume dramas from their folktale counterparts.

V. The Modern Mission of Nation-Saving Beauties

During Shanghai's Orphan Island period, costume dramas of the time expressed a clear patriotic inclination and treated the subject of national defence very seriously. *Sable Cicada*, *Hua Mu Lan, The Imperial Maid Fei Zhen'e* (1939), *Ge Nenniang* (1939), *Qin Liangyu* (1940), *Confucius* (aka *Story of Confucius*, 1940), etc. all featured heroic characters with the spirit of resistance and nationalism. In Hong Kong in the 1930s and 1940s, historical costume dramas were also dominated by female characters, such as *The Woman General*, *The Legend of Wang Zhaojun*, *The Empress Dowager*, and *The Lady Takes Command*. Even in films featuring male heroes, such as *The General* and *The Soul of China*, female characters often steal the scene due to their amplified anti-feudal stance. Such portrayals of women can be said to be quite subversive at the time, and though these were labelled 'historical' pictures, they were clearly an interpretation and reimagination of ancient history. In other words, they were historical vessels for holding modern concepts and beliefs.

In 1935, Unique's Hong Kong studio spent HK$70,000 on making the historical costume drama *Behind the Great Wall*, at a time when the average Cantonese film costed around HK$5,000. The Cantonese epic was directed by Runje Shaw (aka Shao Zuiweng),

19. 'A Word from Us', *Screen Voice*, Singapore, No 53, 16 September 1939 (in Chinese).

with assistant directors Wen Yimin, Tse Yik-chi, and Wong Ban. Based on the 'Biographies of the Assassins' of *Records of the Grand Historian* by Sima Qian and also with reference to other historical accounts, the film tells the story of Prince Dan of Yan's experience as a hostage in the Qin state, as well as Jing Ke's failed assassination of the Emperor of Qin. The newspaper advertisements of the time exemplify the film's nationalist agenda, as its slogan says, 'Every scene is filled with passion for the motherland, as characters sacrifice their lives in the most heroic and tragic manner; every line is couched with the determination to save the nation, as our heroes embark on their valiant quest together.' As Xu Dishan remarks in his review of the film, *Behind the Great Wall* is 'filled with patriotic thought. It is able to base its story on historical fact…a fine example of pleasing the audience without losing its original intent.'[20]

Behind the Great Wall (1935)

Behind the Great Wall can be said to be the first film in history to depict the assassination of the Emperor of Qin, and it highlights the idea of sacrificing everything, including one's life, for the country. Characters that embody this spirit include, of course, Jing Ke the assassin, and also the 'untrustworthy' and 'unheroic' Tian Guang as well as Fan Wuji, who offers his head for the mission. The film also incorporates two female characters, including Jing Ke's wife, whom he has to kill because she unintentionally learns of the assassination plan; and his mother, who commits suicide so as to not burden her son with any further worries beyond his mission. These two characters are obviously created for the purpose of the film, as neither of them is mentioned in Sima Qian's account at all. The insertion underlines the bravery of women despite their historically subordinate position in society, and the idea that both sexes make unimaginable sacrifices for their country further heightens the emotions and the stakes of this historical tragedy.

The vast majority of historical costume dramas of the 1930s and 1940s promoted nationalist feelings, and ancient history became 'a new weapon in national resistance education!' Examples include 'the promotion of political participation through Yang Kwei-fei and the Tang Emperor, Chen Yuanyuan's refusal of puppet regimes, Xi Shi's avenging of her country, Jing Ke's courage to face death, the display of excellence by Wang Baochuan in the face of adversity, the loyalty and bravery of Yue Fei…'[21] The 1936 film made by

20. Xu Dishan, 'An Unprecedented Review of *Behind the Great Wall*' in an advertisement for the film, *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 29 December 1935 (in Chinese).
21. 'A Word from Us', *Screen Voice*, Singapore, No 60, 1 January 1940 (in Chinese).

Dazhongguo Production Company, *Beauty of Beauties*, was a historical palace epic filmed in Cantonese and marketed as follows: 'the stunning laundress Xi Shi of Zhuluo Village uses her beauty to avenge her country, and her sorrow will not cease until she accomplishes her mission.'[22] Clearly, Xi Shi was portrayed as a courageous woman who sacrifices her virtue to destroy her enemy state.

Sable Cicada was the first ever Mandarin film produced in Hong Kong. It was directed by Richard Poh (aka Bu Wancang) and the project was proposed by Zhang Shankun. Costing a total of HK$500,000, the picture was filmed in both cities, with 90% of it shot in Shanghai and the other 10% in Hong Kong. It was very well-received among audiences of both markets, and directly spun off a trend of competing historical costume dramas across different studios. Zhang later made a series of films in Shanghai, including *The Empress Wu Tse-Tien* (1939), *The Beauty of Beauties* (1941) and *Zhuo Wenjun* (1942). In the film, Diao Chan is a heroine who reverses the course of her nation's destiny, representing a breakthrough from traditionally 'domestic' female roles that are subordinate to the patriarchy. Having said that, she is still loyal and subservient to the state. Before Minister Wang Yun tells Diao Chan about the grand plan, he kneels down formally to her, a symbolic gesture of putting aside his rights and position as a father figure and man. He explains to Diao Chan the enormity of the stakes, 'The one single chance that the Han state has is in your hands', and he tells her that 'You are the only one who can save the nation and the people.' Thus, Diao Chan agrees to instigate conflict between Dong Zhuo and Lü Bu. Using her beauty, dance and song performances, and her tears as weapons, she persuades Lü to kill Dong, thereby eliminating the villain who posed the greatest threat to her nation and saving the Han regime, which was at its last gasp. The story of a physically weak woman who is willing to lay down her life to reverse the course of history for her country seems to share a similar narrative framework as that of martial heroines (*nüxia*). Both, after all, depict female characters who display formidable strength and influence in the world of men. However, there lies a fundamental difference: Diao Chan is ultimately subservient to her father's wishes and to her country; her 'revolutionary' actions are but a sacrifice of the individual to defend the nation state.

Historical costume dramas after *Sable Cicada* attempted to follow its footsteps and cast themselves as 'patriotic costume dramas' that featured female characters prominently in their grand-scale narratives, in the hopes of displaying inventiveness and progressivism. Shanghai's Hsin Hwa Motion Picture Company claimed to have spent even more money and manpower than *Sable Cicada* to make *The Empress Wu Tse-Tien*. With a script by Gao Jilin (aka Ke Ling) and starring Violet Koo (aka Gu Lanjun), the eponymous empress was described as 'a revolutionary who was the first woman to participate in politics in China'.[23] Big-screen adaptations of historical stories that are familiar to global Chinese audiences

22. *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 31 May 1936 (in Chinese).
23. '*The Empress Wu Tse-Tien*', inside cover of *Screen Voice*, Singapore, No 57, 16 November 1939 (in Chinese).

Sable Cicada (1938)

Wang Yun (right, played by Wei Heling) tells Diao Chan (left, played by Gu Lanjun) about the grand plan, and explains to her the virtuous cause behind their schemes.

Diao Chan (left, played by Gu Lanjun) uses her beauty, dancing, singing and tears as weapons to persuade Lü Bu (right, played by Jin Shan) into killing Dong Zhuo.

were a way to affirm national and cultural identity, a cinematic call of nostalgia for the homeland, as well as an opportunity to examine past ethical systems while conveying and rallying support for new ideas. Between the years 1937 and 1950, China experienced extreme unrest due to the Japanese invasion, the War of Resistance against Japan, as well as the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists. Such a context necessarily complicates cinematic recreations of history. Many women in history were depicted as female warriors. Maintaining a certain distance from—and at the same time gesturing at—the real-life present, these characters express a hope and a plea for how reality will play out in the future: 'If women fail to avenge their country, or fail to bear any suffering, then that is just too pitiable.'[24]

These words encapsulate the predicament of female characters in Hong Kong historical costume dramas. The 1940 Mandarin picture *The Perfect Beauty*, produced by Nanhua Film Company and directed by Wang Cilong, starred Butterfly Wu and Wang Yin. It dramatises the story of Chen Yuanyuan whose beauty infamously led to the fall of her country, and makes it a tale about defending a nation in peril. Chen is recast as 'an embodiment of a certain spirit' within the context of national crisis. The film is set in the waning years of the Ming dynasty, as the once-mighty state is almost brought to its knees by its enemies at the border. The general Wu Sangui is persuaded by his beautiful consort Chen Yuanyuan to lead his troops into battle and drive the foreign enemies away from the gate. However, when Chen is captured by a rebel leader Li Zicheng, Wu is so incensed that he opens the gate to the Manchurians, finally defeating Li. Chen is destroyed by guilt for having triggered a series of events that led to the collapse of the Ming regime,

24. The lines spoken by Wang Baochuan, female protagonist of *Lady Precious Stream*, as quoted from the article 'Shanghai's Yee Hwa Costume Drama Epic *Lady Precious Stream* Arrives in Singapore', *Screen Voice*, Singapore, No 61, 16 January 1940 (in Chinese).

eventually poisoning herself. In the end, Wu realises his mistake and swears to devote himself to reestablishing the Ming state. 'Allegedly, there is a very special scene in the film where Wu Sangui meets Chen Yuanyuan at the Shanhaiguan Gate Tower, but one is inside and the other outside. Both on horseback, Wu beckons Chen to leave her home and join him in enjoying the riches and success offered by the Manchurians. Yet Chen rejects him adamantly, forcing Wu to turn back in disappointment.'[25] Such an approach highlights the female character's integrity and patriotism, demonstrating respectable qualities which override martial prowess and make her the heroine of the story.

In such historical costume dramas, women are often both the narrators and the subjects of the film. Dressed lavishly in beautiful period costumes, their unassuming figures enact and demonstrate the highest order of duty and sacrifice for the nation. History, transfigured through their actions, is a kind of misdirection—audiences are immersed in different signifiers of ancient China, but they are pointed towards an anti-feudal, modernised ideology. During times of war, disorder and national catastrophe, it falls to a single individual—a woman like Diao Chan, Hua Mulan, Muk Kwai-ying and Wang Zhaojun—to save the day and restore society to a semblance of order that the people can recognise as justice. The national narrative thereby concludes with a happy ending.

The development of Chinese cinema runs in tandem with great revolutions in social and political thought throughout the ages. In every era, costume dramas have been involved in the construction and reconstruction of the onscreen Chinese national identity. The same historical texts were given different 'facelifts' with varying modern and political influences, thereby rewriting the original material in subversive ways. Yet it is important to note that such 'subversions' were still based on mainstream moral standards and limited by traditional ethics, and therefore the 'history' that they depicted was innovative, but only up to a certain point. Historical costume dramas made in Hong Kong in the 1930s and 1940s were a response to their times, a natural product of the film industry at a certain stage of development. These dramas consciously adapted from familiar stories and traditional tales to appeal to the mainstream audience. Such topics proved to be profitable, easily approved by censorship boards, and also highly useful as metaphors for present-day society. They provided recognisable signifiers of nationalism, thereby injecting into the films a call to conscience for defending the country and its people, as well as the values of loyalty, filial piety and justice. These national narratives also helped establish a cinematic tradition for telling stories about the Chinese people, regaining the right and platform for narrating one's own country. At the same time, however, historical costume dramas contained inherent contradictions. Ideologically, they encompassed symbols of both feudal and anti-feudal culture, such as emperors, generals, ministers, scholars, and beautiful ladies. Fundamentally, nationalist ideology was still housed within the confinement of 'the ancient past'. Although

25. 'Shooting About to Begin for Butterfly Wu's New Film, *The Perfect Beauty*', *Screen Voice*, Singapore, No 57, 16 November 1939 (in Chinese).

the funhouse mirror of history affords great multiplicity and freedom, including the space to reflect on contemporary anti-feudal ideology, these representations remain fluid: in different times and contexts, the political meanings of such films can be interpreted in vastly different ways. [Translated by Rachel Ng]

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Zhou Xuan and Chen Gexin's Hong Kong Films in the Late 1940s

Yu Siu-wah

In preparing this essay, I saw several Mandarin films (all black and white) from the 1940s at the Hong Kong Film Archive, including *Forever in My Heart* (aka *An All-Consuming Love*, January 1947), *Orioles Banished from the Flowers* (July 1948), *Song of a Songstress* (August 1948), *Sorrows of the Forbidden City* (screenplay completed in March 1948; released in November 1948), *Enjoy While Young* (aka *Waste Not Our Youth*, April 1949) and *Latecomer in the Snow* (June 1949). Apart from *Latecomer in the Snow*, Zhou Xuan starred in all the other films as the female lead. Although Zhou's Mandarin *shidaiqu*—Chinese popular music originated from 1920s Shanghai—disappeared from the Mainland between the 1950s and 1980s, they remained popular in Hong Kong and overseas Chinese communities. The key composer behind the music and songs of these films was Chen Gexin. Chen lived in Hong Kong from 1946 to 1950, and there has been little discussion about his contributions to film music and *shidaiqu*. This essay attempts to portray or reconstruct a picture of Hong Kong Mandarin film production in the late 1940s through a discussion on the film music of Zhou Xuan and Chen Gexin, as well as the related filmmaking activities of some of their cinematic contemporaries.

Zhou Xuan is obviously the focus of these films, herself being an important culture bearer, serving as a link between Hong Kong and Shanghai films and *shidaiqu*. In Hong Kong, Zhou Xuan and Shu Shi starred together in *Forever in My Heart* and *Sorrows of the Forbidden City*, though their collaboration had begun in Shanghai in the late 1930s with *Li Sanniang* (June 1939) and three other works in 1940: *Dong Xiaowan* (February), *Meng Lijun* (July) and *Love Story of Su San* (September). The pair's final screen work together were *Forever in My Heart* and *Sorrows of the Forbidden City*, both filmed in Hong Kong.[1]

1. The years of Zhou Xuan's songs in this essay are based on the information from Hung Fang-yi's *Tianya Genü: Zhou Xuan Yu Ta De Ge* (*Wandering Songstress: Zhou Xuan and Her Songs*), Taipei: Showwe Information Co., Ltd., 2008 (in Chinese). See Appendices 1 and 2 on pp 269 to 297 in Hung's book for a chronology of Zhou Xuan's works and a list of her songs. For the release years of Zhou Xuan's films, reference is taken from *Hong Kong Filmography Vol II (1942–1949)*, Winnie Fu (ed), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 1998, in which some of the films' premiere years are slightly different from the chronology compiled by Hung in her book. Presumably, Hung's chronology is based on the years of the films' Shanghai premiere, while *Hong Kong Filmography Vol II* is based on the years of their Hong Kong premiere.

The last two films in which Zhou Xuan and Shu Shi starred together were *Forever in My Heart* (1947; left photo) and *Sorrows of the Forbidden City* (1948; right photo).

The two 1949 films, *Enjoy While Young* (starring Lü Yukun, Zhou Xuan) and *Latecomer in the Snow* (starring Lü Yukun, Sun Jinglu), were both written and directed by Wu Zuguang. In 1948, Zhou starred in *Orioles Banished from the Flowers* and *Song of a Songstress*, both directed by Fang Peilin. They were also the last works directed by Fang. Zhou began to act in films directed by Fang as early as 1936, in *Tomboy*, followed by the 1938 film, *Stars Moving Around the Moon* (featuring the song 'Waiting for Your Return'), and the 1944 films, *The Happy Couple* and *Music in the Air*.

As for *Sorrows of the Forbidden City*, which stirred controversy in the Mainland, the influence of its screenwriter Yao Ke (aka Shen Nong) in Hong Kong was not limited to the film industry. Yao named his residence in Kowloon 'Zuowang Zhai' (i.e. 'Meditation Studio'). In 1958, under this name, Yao published a monograph on Chinese *Ci*-poetry, titled *Collected Essays on Ci-Poetry*. When I was working at Radio Television Hong Kong in the early 1980s, I once saw an open reel recording of Professor Yao Ke introducing Chinese classical music in English archived by the station's English channel. His *Sorrows of the Forbidden City* had considerable influence on later Hong Kong films and TV series about the Qing Palace.

I have always thought that Zhou Xuan's Mandarin films and film songs were produced in Shanghai or elsewhere in the Mainland. After studying the relevant information, however, it turns out that the aforementioned Mandarin films were all produced in Hong Kong, as bona fide 'Hong Kong Mandarin films'. In other words, these Mandarin titles are the forerunners of Mandarin productions made by companies such as Shaws, Cathay/MP & GI, The Great Wall and Feng Huang that we know so well today. The actors, production crew and funds for these Zhou Xuan films mainly came from Shanghai. Yao recollects the situation clearly as follows:

> By the summer of 1948, China's financial crisis had reached a very serious stage; the credibility of the fiat currency had long been sullied, and the issuance of Chinese gold yuan could not turn the tide. At the time, profiteers accumulated a lot of money, and the wealthy monopolised resources,

causing inflation to skyrocket and the general public to resort to panic buying.... Shanghai's economy was then as bad as Germany after World War I... [2]

That is why Shanghai film companies began to move south to Hong Kong, where the financial environment and currency were much more stable, to continue making films. This facilitated the production of a batch of Hong Kong Mandarin films before the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power in 1949.

Forever in My Heart

Forever in My Heart was written by Fan Yanqiao, and co-directed by Zhang Shichuan and He Zhaozhang. The filming took place in 1946 and the film premiered the next year on 7 January 1947. *Forever in My Heart* (version held by the Hong Kong Film Archive) does not include any song with the same name. There was indeed a song of the same name sung by Zhou Xuan (music and lyrics by Wu Cun), but that is featured instead in the 1940 film she co-starred in with Shu Shi, *Love Story of Su San*. There are only seven songs in *Forever in My Heart*: 'Age of Bloom', 'Night Life in Shanghai', 'Children Song' 'Victory Song', 'Dance of the Autumn Leaves', 'Hearts Together' and 'The Swallows Fly'. The lyrics to all these seven songs were written by the film's screenwriter Fan Yanqiao.

The first three songs listed above were composed by Chen Gexin, while the composer of the latter four songs was Li Jinguang (aka Li Qiniu). According to Hung Fang-yi's research, with the exception of 'Children Song', the other six songs were published by Pathé-EMI Records in 1946 and given record numbers.[3] That is to say, these songs were recorded as early as 1946. A question worth pondering is: were these songs recorded in Hong Kong or Shanghai? EMI (Pathé) Records Hong Kong was only established in 1953, so I believe that they were recorded in Shanghai. In those days, Hong Kong's jazz musicians and recording capabilities were still not as good as Shanghai's. Record companies such as The New Moon Gramophone & Record Company (founded by Chin Kwong-yan [aka Chin Tai-soak] in 1926) recorded a large number of Cantonese songs and music, and they also did their recordings in Shanghai.[4]

It was not until *Sorrows of the Forbidden City* (completed in 1948) that we have concrete proof confirming the recording of its soundtrack had been done in Hong Kong. On 19 March 1949, Guangzhou's *Gong Ping Bao* published a report titled '*Sorrows of the Forbidden City*: Sounds Beyond the Shoot', in which the writer describes: 'In the recording studio that evening, apart from Zhou Xuan, composer Chen Gexin, director Zhu Shilin and his wife, and the head of Yung Hwa Motion Picture Industries Ltd's music department,

2. See Yao Ke, 'Confessions from the Script Writer of *Sorrows of the Forbidden City*', *Qing Gong Mi Shi Dianying Shezhi Ben* (*Sorrows of the Forbidden City's Film Shooting Records*), Hong Kong: Rightman Publishing, 1967, p 190 (in Chinese).
3. Hung Fang-yi, note 1, pp 289-290.
4. For more on The New Moon Gramophone & Record Company, see Yung Sai-shing, *Cantonese Opera from the Gramophone: A Cultural History (1903–1953)*, Hong Kong: Cosmos Books Ltd., 2006, pp 113-183 (in Chinese).

Zhang Zhengfan, were also present. The Yung Hwa Band had a total of 15 members playing Western instruments, as well as Chinese instruments such as *pipa*, *erhu*, and Chinese flute that were especially arranged for this song. As they perform, a very strong Chinese sentiment permeated the room, and everyone listening to it praised the music effusively.' The article also states that this took place in Hong Kong.

Chen Gexin and Liang Yueyin (aka Leung Ngok-yam) were responsible for the music in *Forever in My Heart*. According to a Taiwan website[5], Liang took part in the production of *Forever in My Heart*. The website uses the term 'music design' to describe his role, which should mean being in charge of selecting the opening, ending and background music in the film. Except for the songs first published by Pathé-EMI Records, the film features no original music. The soundtrack comprises ready-made records, mainly of Russian composer Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony, known as *Pathétique*, as well as his *Manfred* Symphony. Following this line of logic, it may be inferred that Chen Gexin was responsible for the use of the seven songs (including three of his own works and four by Li Jinguang) in the film, while Liang Yueyin might have been responsible for the background music.

Born in Japan, Liang returned to China at the age of 16 to study at Tianjin Nankai High School. After graduation, he returned to Japan to study music composition and theory. During the Japanese occupation of Shanghai, Liang served as the director of the music department of China United Film Holdings Company Ltd ('Huaying' in short). Liang moved to Hong Kong in the 1950s and worked in providing music soundtracks for Great China Film Development Co., Ltd. (aka Dazhonghua) and other film studios. He composed music for Mandarin and Cantonese films in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Taiwan, many of which have become classics, including 'The Candy Song', 'The Opium Song' and 'Plum Blossom' sung by Li Xianglan (aka Yamaguchi Yoshiko); Zhou Xuan's 'The Exchange', Bai Ying's 'The Modest Girl', Nancy Chan Wan-seung's 'The Moon-Blanched Land', and 'Song of Benevolence', 'Life Resembles a Bouquet', etc. He settled in Taiwan in 1957, and in 1975, his 'Lion Dance Song' debuted at a pop song composition contest in Hong Kong.[6]

Forever in My Heart is set in Shanghai during the War of Resistance against Japan. Gao Zhijian (played by Shu Shi) is a close friend of Hou Xinming (played by Liang Fu) and his wife Li Xiangmei (played by Zhou Xuan). After the Japanese occupied Shanghai, Xinming leaves his wife and mother to participate in underground activities; no one hears from him again. Zhijian helps Xiangmei and Xinming's mother in many ways. Zhijian and Xiangmei develop a brief relationship after they hear that Xinming has died in battle. However, Xinming is still alive and returns home wounded after the war. Xiangmei decides to return to her husband, and Zhijian sadly leaves for Taiwan, which is depicted in both the film's opening and final scenes.

The film starts with protagonist Zhijian sitting in the long corridor of the Taiwan Provincial Guomin School, smoking. The background music is Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*,

5. See https://www.easyatm.com.tw/wiki/%E6%A2%81%E6%A8%82%E9%9F%B3 (in Chinese).
6. See https://movie.douban.com/celebrity/1401573/ (in Chinese).


Chen Gexin (left) and Liang Yueyin (right)
Image courtesy of Professor Yu Siu-wah

which is extremely melancholic. Later he brings along a gramophone and walks to the beach to play music; here the soundtrack continues to convey a sense of crushing melancholy, setting the tragic tone of the film. This piece of music was obviously chosen because of its emotion and mood, which reflects the mood of the character at that particular moment as well as the overall sentiment of the film: a sense of depression and repression.

Tchaikovsky's autobiographical symphony is his last work, dedicated to his lover, Vladimir 'Bob' Davydov. Homosexuality was still a taboo in Russia at the end of the 19th century, so the relationships between Tchaikovsky and several young men had all ended miserably.[7] The composer died nine days after the premiere of the symphony (rumoured to be a suicide). The background of this piece rather appropriately echoes Zhijian's struggle to quash his love for Xiangmei. In the end, Zhijian retreats to Tamsui in Taiwan and his long-suppressed feelings can only be vented by throwing the record that Xiangmei gave him into the vast ocean.

When the Japanese military surrenders, Tchaikovsky's *Manfred* Symphony is played in the background, followed by *Pathétique*. During 'Victory Song' (composed by Li Jinguang), the national flags of the US and the Republic of China are juxtaposed onscreen, and President Chiang Kai-shek makes an appearance to celebrate the victory.

Back at the beginning of the film, at Xiangmei's birthday party, Zhijian gives her a gramophone of the same brand and model as Xinming gifts his wife. In turn, Xiangmei gives the one that Xinming gave her, along with her record, to Zhijian. The emotional dynamics between the trio are complex and fascinating. Only when the audience sees Zhijian throwing the record into the ocean at the end, do they understand that the opening scene, with him bringing the gramophone to the beach, was in fact the ending. The film cuts from a shot of the gramophone to a flashback of the birthday party, unravelling the story of the characters in Shanghai before and after the Japanese occupation. At the party, the song Xiangmei sings before the gramophone is 'Age of Bloom', typical of jazzy, brass-heavy big band[8] music that was popular in American nightclubs back then. The other songs

7. For more on Tchaikovsky's sexual orientation and its relationship with his musical works, see Timothy L. Jackson, *Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 6 (Pathétique)*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp 36-73.
8. 'Big band' refers to the specific type of jazz band that started to flourish in nightclubs, dance halls and music clubs in the US during the 1920s and 1930s. Depending on their leader, a big band is usually made up of brass instruments such as the trumpet (Louis Armstrong being one of the most famous players), the trombone and the saxophone, etc.

Forever in My Heart (1947): Gao Zhijian (played by Shu Shi), carrying a gramophone, walks to the beach to play music; as Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* plays in the background, he vents his long-suppressed love for his friend's wife into the vast ocean.

in the film also belong to this style of music.[9] It is worth noting that such use of big band music stood in stark contrast to the Western classical music in the film's opening, ending, and background music.

Chen Gexin

The birth name of Chen Gexin (1914–1961) was Chen Changshou, and he also wrote under the pen names Lin Mei and Ge Xin. He was credited respectfully as '*gexian*', a wordplay on his name that means 'Song Sage'. Chen was partly of Indian descent, and studied music theory and composition in Shanghai under the Jewish musician Wolfgang Fraenkel (1897-1983).[10] He created the musical *Xi Shi*, and wrote a large number of classic pop songs, such as 'Rose, Rose, I Love You', 'My Unchanging Heart', 'Daughter of the Fisherman', 'Lovely Morning', 'Enjoy While Young', 'The Little Wedding Chamber', 'Song of a Songstress', 'Top of the Mountain', 'Orioles Banished from the Flowers', 'Shores of the Suzhou River', as well as the aforementioned 'Night Life in Shanghai' and 'Age of Bloom', etc. Chen was also good at writing lyrics, for example, the songs and lyrics of 'Forever Smiling' were both composed by him. Chen also wrote the lyrics to 'Wind in May', composed by Li Jinguang and sung by Zhou Xuan.

Chen's music creations 'spanned across Zhou's entire singing career, covering both the beginning (1937) and the end (1957).'[11] Between 29 and 31 March 1945, at the 'Silver Screen Trilogy: Zhou Xuan Concert' held at Shanghai's Golden Castle Theatre, Zhou sang songs from three films: *Daughter of the Fisherman* (1943), *The Happy Couple* and *Music in the Air*, most of which were works by Chen. On 30 June the same year, in Chen's 'Works by Changshou Concert', Zhou performed a total of four songs by Chen: 'Lovely Morning', 'My

9. For a thorough discussion of Wong Kar-wai's use of the same song from *Forever in My Heart* in his film *In the Mood for Love* (2000) and the corresponding intertextuality, see Angela Law Tsin-fung, '*Forever in My Heart*: A Key to Understanding *In the Mood for Love*', 2011 in the film review archive webpage of the Hong Kong Film Critics Society at https://www.filmcritics.org.hk/film-review/ (in Chinese).
10. For more on Wolfgang Fraenkel's experiences in China, see Christian Utz, 'Triggering Musical Modernism in China: The Work of Wolfgang Fraenkel in Shanghai Exile' in *Musical Composition in the Context of Globalization: New Perspectives on Music History in the 20th and 21st Century*, Laurence Sinclair Willis (trans), Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2021, pp 167-194.
11. Hung Fang-yi, note 1, p 104.

Unchanging Heart', 'Fly Together' and 'Daughter of the Fisherman'.[12] Chen also composed songs for Zhou's two final films, *Pigeon of Peace* (1951) and *Message of Spring*. In Zhou's music career and personal life, Chen Gexin played the roles of both mentor and friend; their reputations and career achievements complemented each other's.[13]

'Age of Bloom'

The song 'Age of Bloom' was composed by Chen Gexin for *Forever in My Heart*, with its music and lyrics (written by Fan Yanqiao) closely following the film's plot. The song is introduced in the aforementioned birthday party scene. Its introduction uses a clarinet and a muted trumpet to play the first two lines of the 'Happy Birthday' song, which matches the context of the scene. The melody of 'Age of Bloom' is then extended and developed from the 'Happy Birthday' song.

A1 Age of blooming beauty / Spirit of the moon / Intelligence beaming like ice and snow

A2 A beautiful life / Affectionate loved ones / A fulfilled family

B1 All of a sudden / This secluded island / Is shrouded in clouds of misery / Clouds of misery

B2 Ah! Lovely Motherland! / When will I be able to / Throw myself into your arms?

B3 When can I see the fog disperse / And see your gleaming light again?

A1' Age of blooming beauty / Spirit of the moon

'Age of Bloom' uses a relaxed foxtrot rhythm, borrowing the melody of the first line of the 'Happy Birthday' song, changing only the pitch of the note at the end of the line. This is followed by an answering phrase 'Spirit of the moon', which begins to veer the song away from its original melody. In the third line, 'Intelligence beaming like ice and snow', the ascending octave of the words 'ice and snow' also has echoes of 'Happy Birthday's third line. The original song contains just four lines, and under Chen Gexin's variation development, it becomes an ABA' ternary form with sharp contrasts, while its original musical framework is still vaguely recognisable.[14]

Section A's melody is calm and relaxed, and each sentence starts on the downbeat. Section B is closer to the tone and speed of speaking, with a more rapid rhythm. A series of three short lines ('All of a sudden / This secluded island / Is shrouded in') all start on the upbeat, in a more intense development, which contradicts the calmness of Section A. When 'clouds of misery' is repeated (still starting on the upbeat), it slows slightly on the final syllable (allowing the singer to take a breath), and then when the song reaches 'Ah! Lovely Motherland', the syllable after 'Ah' is extended, whereby we arrive at the song's

12. Ibid, pp 279-280.
13. Ibid, p 107. Also, Hung quotes from Wu Jian's *Jieyuhua* and argues that there is no solid proof that *Message of Spring* was ever shot (ibid, p 68).
14. 'Forever Smiling', composed by Chen Gexin and released by Pathé-EMI Records, was also a song by Zhou Xuan. Its melody and rhythm share similarities with 'Age of Bloom': both use a foxtrot rhythm, and share echoes of the 'Happy Birthday' song.

climax. Then, the rhythm gradually intensifies with each word, almost like recitative singing in Western opera, and a fast-paced chanting takes place just ahead of the downbeat,[15] until we reach the end of the line 'And see your gleaming light again?'. Here, the words 'gleaming light' are slowed down and extended, before finally ending the song with Section A1'.

Section A sings soothingly about youth, family happiness, and the satisfactions of love and life. Section B, with a rapid pace, brings out the reality that Shanghai has become a 'secluded island', and asks questions about when light and glory can be restored to the country and when society will find serenity again. The final hope lies in the longing for an 'Age of blooming beauty / Spirit of the moon'.

'Night Life in Shanghai'

'Night Life in Shanghai' is Zhou Xuan's most famous song. It is widely propagated and remains legendary till today. What it describes is, of course, Shanghai nightlife in the foreign settlements of the old city. The 'she' in the lyrics refers to the women working in the decadent and glamorous nightclubs and dance halls of the time:

A Shanghai by night / Shanghai by night / You are a city that never sleeps
Bright lights dazzle / Car horns blare / It's time to sing and dance
There she is / Smiling and welcoming / Who knows of her weariness inside?
All this nightlife / Just to / Make a living

B Not drunk from liquor / But intoxicating themselves / In debauchery / The young waste their youth
The dawn is hazy / Tired eyes are bleary / Everyone goes home / Their souls dragging behind the rolling wheels

A Time for change / New places to roam / A brand new environment
Reminiscing / All the nightlife / Like waking up from a dream

The lyrics are mainly composed of three- to four-character short phrases, accompanied by a swing jazz rhythm. It reproaches the decadence of Shanghai nightlife, perhaps even warning against it, with a playful, ironic rhythm similar to the clapper reciting style of *shulaibao* (or *bak lam* patter speech in Guangdong). But the last line alone, 'Reminiscing / All the nightlife / Like waking up from a dream' was enough to see the song being erased from the Mainland after 1949.

In the scene where Xiangmei sings 'Night Life in Shanghai' at the Labyrinth Dance Hall, there is a big band playing in the background. Four saxophones can be seen in the front row, while behind there are trombones and trumpets, jazz drums and the piano; the band of a dozen-plus members gives a glimpse of just how grand it was back in the day.

15. This is also similar to the effect of adding *chenzi* before singing a line of lyric in Chinese opera (or *lap zi* in Cantonese opera). However, Chen Gexin's style here is closer to the recitative style of Western opera.

Since Zhou Xuan had made famous the songs 'The Wandering Songstress' (aka 'Songstress at the End of the World') and 'The Song of Four Seasons' in *Street Angel* in 1937, she had established a reputation of being good at singing traditional Chinese ballads. In *Forever in My Heart*, Xiangmei reunites with her old classmate Liu Qing (played by Huang Wansu), who earnestly invites her to start singing again. Liu suggests Xiangmei try out her vocal cords as she plays the piano. Xiangmei sings along, ascending and descending broken chords, which is basic in Western vocal exercise. Xiangmei's ease and familiarity here clearly reflect the Western vocal training Zhou Xuan had received in the past ten years.

Forever in My Heart (1947): The performance of 'Night Life in Shanghai' by Li Xiangmei (played by Zhou Xuan) in the dance hall is accompanied by a big band.

Fang Peilin's Final Two Films

In 1948, Zhou Xuan starred in two films directed by Fang Peilin in Hong Kong: *Orioles Banished from the Flowers* (July) and *Song of a Songstress* (August). In the former title, the male protagonist is played by Yan Hua (the father of Paul Chun and John Chiang [aka David Chiang]); the latter's male leads are Gu Yelu (aka Ku Ya-lo) and Wang Hao. Chen Dieyi wrote the lyrics to the songs of both films, while Chan Gexin was in charge of the music.

The six songs in *Orioles Banished from the Flowers* include Li Jinguang's 'Spring Morning', Li Houxiang's 'Prayers Under the Moon', Yao Min's 'Peach and Plum Spring Breeze' and 'From the Bottom of My Heart', as well as Chen Gexin's 'Top of the Mountain' and 'Orioles Banished from the Flowers'. 'Top of the Mountain' uses a brisk foxtrot rhythm, and starts with a harmonica solo, which quite accurately reflects the atmosphere of students' trips to the countryside back then.

In the song 'Orioles Banished from the Flowers', the solo singer (Zhou Xuan) sings with a long, high note in the middle section. Accompanying her is a chorus that sings in moving figures. The arrangement is similar to that of the academic choral style of the time (such as the work of Huang Zi, Zhao Yuanren, etc.), but with a jazz rhythm and band added in. In her treatment of the elongated notes, Zhou almost approaches the Western vibrato, which matches the Western choral arrangement of the song. Li Jinguang's 'Victory Song' in *Forever in My Heart* also has a similar soprano and chorus counterpoint. The choral harmonies in Yao Min's 'Peach and Plum Spring Breeze', featured in *Orioles Banished from the Flowers*, blend well with Chen Gexin's arrangement.

While Chen only composed the theme song out of the six songs in *Song of a*

Song of a Songstress (1948)

Painter Fang Zhiwei (played by Gu Yelu) resembles the artist in Puccini's opera *La Bohème*. (Top: Gu Yelu; bottom: Zhou Xuan)

The mysterious old man (played by Ngai Pang-fei) who secretly helps the nightclub singer Zhu Lan (played by Zhou Xuan) bears similarities to Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*. (From left: Fung Ying-seong, Ngai Pang-fei, Zhou Xuan)

Songstress, he was responsible for the soundtrack of the entire film. The opening credits and film title are set to an instrumental overture based on the melody of his 'Song of a Songstress'. In the film, the music for the scene in which painter Fang Zhiwei (played by Gu Yelu) is at home with his young mentee also uses the same theme, played with the clarinet, flute and strings.

The overall impression one has of *Song of a Songstress* is that it has a strong flair for the theatrica. Painter Fang and his home remind viewers of the artist in Puccini's 1896 opera *La Bohème*, while the mysterious old man Zhu Yongtai (played by Ngai Pang-fei), who secretly helps the nightclub singer Zhu Lan (played by Zhou Xuan), reminds one of Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo's 1862 novel *Les Misérables*.

Wu Zuguang's *Enjoy While Young*

Dramatist and director Wu Zuguang (1917–2003) was a native of Wujin, Jiangsu, but he was born in Beijing. In 1947, he came to Hong Kong to work as screenwriter and director for Great China and later, as director for Yung Hwa. He filmed both *Enjoy While Young* and *Latecomer in the Snow* in Hong Kong. Wu spent his whole life writing scripts for Chinese operas (*xiqu*), and also directed *Goddess Luo River* (1955), the documentary *Stage Art of Mei Lanfang, Parts One and Two* (1955–1956; which features Peking operas *Beauty Defies Tyranny* [aka *The Cosmic Sword*], *Farewell My Concubine*, *The Drunken Beauty*, and Kun opera *Legend of the White Snake: Broken Bridge*); as well as Peking opera films such as *Tears of Huangshan*, starring Cheng Yanqiu.[16] In 1957, Wu was labelled a rightist. His wife was the famous Ping opera actor Xin Feng Xia (they married in 1951). Both were subjected to critical denouncement during the Cultural Revolution, but joined the CCP in the early 1980s. In 1987, Wu Zuguang was accused of 'promoting bourgeois liberalisation' and Hu

16. See https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%90%B4%E7%A5%96%E5%85%89 (in Chinese).

Enjoy While Young (1949)

The story begins with Axiu (played by Zhou Xuan) singing 'Enjoy While Young'.

Jiang Ming (right) and Zhou Xuan (left) give heart-warming performances as father and daughter.

The setting outside the Fairy Temple and the music of the scene resemble 'Dance of Window Paper-Cuts' in *The White-Haired Girl*.

Qiaomu, then a member of the Standing Committee of the Central Advisory Commission, personally visited him to persuade him to quit the party.

As both director and screenwriter, Wu Zuguang published an article 'Declaration on *Enjoy While Young*' in *Wen Wei Pao* (aka *Wen Wei Po*) on 11 April 1949, in which he insisted the film was simply a comedy adapted from the story 'Axiu' from *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, and did not carry any specific meanings (referring to leftist ideology). However, if one listens carefully to the theme song 'Enjoy While Young', its roots in the culture of *jiefang* (liberated) area are quite obvious.[17]

The song 'Enjoy While Young' was adapted from the tunes of the *yangge* opera (a rural theatrical form originated from Shaanxi) *Brother and Sister Opening Up the Wasteland* by the *Yangge* Team of Lu Xun Arts College in 1943. It was originally called *Wang Erxiao Opening Up the Wasteland*. The melodies come from Shaanbei folk tunes, and the musical was credited to An Bo, who must have composed and arranged the tunes, on top of writing all the music in the opera.[18]

In early 1949, Wu Zuguang, who was screenwriter and director of the film, penned new lyrics for the song, and then handed it to Chen Gexin to adapt the tune. Here are the first lines of the lyrics of 'Brother and Sister Opening Up the Wasteland' and 'Enjoy While Young' side by side. We can observe from the relationship between the syntax and rhythm in the two songs that their melodies are in fact 90 per cent identical:

> 'Brother and Sister Opening Up the Wasteland': Rooster big, rooster strong / Loudly so loudly it crows / The sun is red and oh so red
>
> 'Enjoy While Young': Mountains south, mountains north / All belongs to Zhaojiazhuang / In Zhaojiazhuang lives a fair lady

17. In 1967, Cathay Organisation (HK) (1965) Ltd. made the colour Mandarin film *The Magic Fan* basing on the tale of 'Axiu' from *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. Directed by Tang Huang, the film starred Betty Loh Ti and Chao Lei, with Yao Min as the music composer and Li Junqing and Lee Hoy-shan as lyricists.
18. In 'Biography of An Bo, Part Four', Wang Liwen describes how Wang Dahua and Lu You wrote the story, lyrics and dialogues before sending them to An Bo, who wrote the music for the story. See Wang Liwen: 'Biography of An Bo, Part Four, Section Three The "King of Folk Tunes" by the Yan River', *Music Life*, Shengyang, No 2, 2017, p 57 (in Chinese). According to the epilogue of *Yangge Ju: Xiongmei Kaihuang* (*Yangge Opera: Brother and Sister Opening Up the Wasteland*, Beijing: People's Music Publishing House, 1978, p 18, in Chinese), An Bo made alterations to the script and the music score of the musical when recording the album for it in 1962.

Wu Zuguang transforms the masculine Shaanbei peasant propaganda song, 'Brother and Sister Opening Up the Wasteland', into a simple romantic folk song, 'Enjoy While Young'. Chen Gexin replaces the *suona*, *banhu*, gongs and drums commonly used in *yangge* with the Western oboe, flute, strings and light percussion music, gentrifying the rough peasant timbre. It can be said that Chen Gexin uses his relatively Western orchestration and arrangement to transform the original Shaanbei song into a new song which has a touch of cosmopolitan sophistication that is distinctly Shanghai. In addition, Zhou Xuan's gentle Jiangnan singing style further softens the tough Shaanbei tone.

Chen Gexin wrote all three songs in *Enjoy While Young*: 'Enjoy While Young', 'Three Turtledoves' and 'The Little Wedding Chamber', as well as the film's entire soundtrack. If the band's intonation had been better in the recording, Chen's composition could be said to foreshadow the musical elements of the later revolutionary ballet *The White-Haired Girl* (1964; film directed by Sang Hu in 1972). If the gongs and drums of 'Enjoy While Young' had been more obvious, it would have been the predecessor of 'Dance of Window Paper-Cuts' in *The White-Haired Girl*. The heartwarming exchange in the small shop between Axiu (played by Zhou Xuan) and her father (as well as when they turn against each other later) presupposes the scene of *The White-Haired Girl*'s 'Tying the Plait with a Red Ribbon'. Furthermore, in the scene after Liu Sheng (played by Lü Yukun) loses Axiu, when he sees children chasing each other and playing outside the Fairy Temple, the setting and music also reminds one of 'Dance of Window Paper-Cuts'. In other words, Wu Zuguang's handling of the scenes and plots in *Enjoy While Young* and Chen Gexin's music in the film's soundtrack, had begun to construct various 'post-liberation models' long before the liberation. Looking at it from another angle, the success of the scene design and soundtrack of *Enjoy While Young* went on to influence important stage productions, even revolutionary model operas such as *The White-Haired Girl*, in the Mainland in the 1960s and 1970s.[19]

The Fate of Zhou Xuan and Her Songs

Zhou Xuan's song 'Waiting for Your Return' in her film *Stars Moving Around the Moon* (1938) was banned in the era of the Nationalist government, because of its homophony that could mean 'celebrating the return of the Japanese army'. After 1949, the Chinese government regarded the song as a reflection of Shanghai's decadent life, while in 1958, the song's composer Liu Xue'an was branded as a 'rightist' and 'bourgeois reactionary scholar'.

19. Before this, the version of 'new-opera' *The White-Haired Girl* that premiered in Yan'an in 1945 was a stage performance similar to musicals. In 1950, the feature film *The White-Haired Girl* (co-directed by Wang Bin and Shui Hua) used the famous songs from the new-opera. The recording of this version of the opera and film was released in Japan. There, The Matsuyama Ballet adapted it into a ballet, which was performed in Beijing in 1958 when the troupe visited. It was not until 1964 that it was performed by a Shanghai ballet school, and subsequently it was further adapted into a revolutionary model opera. See Yu Siu-wah, 'Interchanges Among the Music of China, Japan and Korea in the Past and Present', in *Integration and Differentiation among China, Japan and Korea*, Joseph Siu Kam-wah (ed), Hong Kong: Cosmos Books Ltd., 2017, pp 48-49 (in Chinese).

The song and Zhou Xuan's voice were from that point expunged from the Mainland.

It was not until the 1980s, when cassette tapes of Teresa Teng's singing flowed into the Mainland through Hong Kong, that Zhou Xuan's old song 'Waiting for Your Return' was revived across the country. Officials at Publicity Department of the CCP Central Committee launched the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in 1983 in an attempt to suppress the influx of pop music from Hong Kong and Taiwan, and designated 'Waiting for Your Return' an 'incorrect, semi-feudal, semi-colonial "yellow (pornographic) song"'.[20] Of course, among the music suppressed by the CCP, there were many songs originally sung by Zhou Xuan, such as 'Night Life in Shanghai', 'Age of Bloom', and other famous songs that harked back to the period of Shanghai concessions.

Zhou returned to Shanghai after filming *Sorrows of the Forbidden City* in Hong Kong, starring in several films including *The Flower Street* (1950), *Rainbow as You Wish* (aka *Rainbow Rhythms*, 1953) and *Pigeon of Peace*. Weighed down by relationship and marital problems, she became mentally frail, and was admitted to the Hongqiao Nursing Home, Shanghai in 1952. She died on 22 September 1957, thus avoiding the suffering of the Cultural Revolution. If Zhou had not died prematurely due to illness, in addition to the ideology and 'political issues' of the song 'Waiting for Your Return' (of course based on unwarranted reasons), other 'problematic' songs would have included her debut song that shot her to fame, 'The Wandering Songstress' (arranged by He Lüting and lyrics by Tian Han). The two great heroes behind 'The Wandering Songstress' are Tian Han (the lyricist for the Chinese national anthem, 'March of the Volunteers'), and He Lüting, who was Director of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. In 1949, Tian Han became Director of the Ministry of Culture's Bureau for the Improvement of Chinese Indigenous Theatre and the Arts Bureau, and was subjected to political denouncement during the Cultural Revolution. He was admitted to Qincheng Prison in 1967 and died in 1968 under the name 'Li Wu'; he was not allowed to take back his real name even after death. He Lüting had his possessions confiscated during the Cultural Revolution, while he and his wife were beaten by the Red Guards. In 1968, he was imprisoned for five years. His second daughter could not handle the distress and committed suicide by gassing herself. If Zhou had not retreated from the spotlight and had lived to experience the Cultural Revolution, as the original singer of 'The Wandering Songstress', 'Night Life in Shanghai' and 'Waiting for Your Return', in addition to having starred in the so-called 'treasonous film', *Sorrows of the Forbidden City*, I believe these 'achievements' certainly would have cost her a lot of suffering!

The famous *erhu* piece 'Moon Reflected on Erquan Spring', which shares obvious musical origins with 'The Wandering Songstress', became popular all over the country and overseas in the 1950s. However, in the publication of records and music scores, and in national broadcasting, the names 'The Wandering Songstress' and Zhou Xuan were never mentioned, reflecting the fact that Zhou remained a taboo in domestic cultural circles from

20. For more on 'yellow music' and Zhou Xuan, see Andrew Jones, *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001.

1949 to the early 1990s, and could not be brought up. In order to protect the transmission of 'Moon Reflected on Erquan Spring', the famous music historian Yang Yinliu wrote an article denying any relationship between the song and the folk tune 'One Who Knows Me Well' (the song from which 'The Wandering Songstress' was adapted).[21] Obviously, it was necessary to draw a clear line between the blind 'proletariat's musician' Hua Yanjun (aka Ah Bing) and the 'Night Life in Shanghai' songstress Zhou Xuan.[22]

'Age of Bloom' and 'Night Life in Shanghai' were recorded in 1946 and became popular in early 1947 in Hong Kong, Shanghai and all of China, along with the release of the film *Forever in My Heart*. In 'Age of Bloom', the lamented secluded island 'shrouded in clouds of misery' is also the party city that never sleeps. But by the time 'Night Life in Shanghai' unabashedly laid bare its debauched nightlife, the Shanghai concessions were already no more, following the defeat of Japan. Filmmakers Zhou Xuan, Shu Shi, Fan Yanqiao, Zhang Shichuan, He Zhaozhang, Chen Gexin, Liang Yueyin, who all went south from Shanghai to Hong Kong, were in fact recalling, reminiscing and reconstructing a Shanghai of the past. The ensuing civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists, as well as social, economic and political instability, led to the gradual transfer of Shanghai's leading cultural industries, such as film, recording and Mandarin *shidaiqu* music, to Hong Kong, bringing cultural vitality to the southern city. If it were not for such coincidence in history, which led capital and business (such as textiles, shipping) and cultural industries to flow from Shanghai to this Cantonese-speaking city around 1949, post-1950s Hong Kong Mandarin films and *shidaiqu* music probably would not have continued to develop until the end of the 1970s. The abovementioned films involving Zhou Xuan, Chen Gexin, and others, were shot in Hong Kong at the end of the 1940s, and are a reflection of, as well as witness to, the social and cultural realities of Hong Kong in those times. The relationship between Shanghai and Hong Kong was close, to an extent that many people may not understand today. If we had not looked back at this period of history, many people may think that Zhou Xuan, Shu Shi, Lü Yukun, Yan Hua, Gu Yelu and other major Mainland stars, together with Wu Zuguang, Zhu Shilin, Chen Gexin, etc., shot these Mandarin films in Shanghai! Due to length constraints of this essay, I have not been able to discuss the two films *Sorrows of the Forbidden City* and *Latecomer in the Snow*. I can only look forward to another chance in the future for such a discussion. [Translated by Diane To]

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21. Yu Siu Wah, 'Movies and Politics in the History of a Chinese Popular Song: From Tang Wei, Li Koran, Zhou Xuan to Abing the Blind', *Asian Musicology*, Seoul, Vol 17, 2011, pp 105-142.
22. There is another popular folk song 'Flying the Kites' in Shanxi, Hebei and nearby. The song is recognisably close in its melody to 'The Wandering Songstress'.

Memories of the Past, Reflections on the Self, Historical Retelling and Projection: An Exploration of Flashbacks in the Narrative Art of Hong Kong Post-War Mandarin Cinema

Lau Yam

Apart from a few Cantonese filmmakers making Mandarin pictures, the post-war Hong Kong film industry also saw an influx of Shanghai investors and professionals, including onscreen or behind-the-screen talents. Within a few years, local Mandarin cinema had developed into a sizeable industry, and although its output could not compare to the number of Cantonese films, it still managed to release over 100 pictures in the post-war period up to the end of 1951. Effectively, this marked the establishment of an important category in Hong Kong cinema for the next 30 years, one that would rival the Mandarin film systems in the Mainland and Taiwan. This essay will focus more on the history of film art, such as narrative, aesthetics, subject matter and genre, in the hopes of examining and reconstructing the history of post-war Hong Kong Mandarin and Cantonese cinema. As an initial exploration of the subject, this essay will deal mainly with Mandarin films made after the war, between the years 1945 and 1950. In particular, I will focus on their use of flashbacks in their narrative strategies, especially how they are introduced and concluded in the films.

Flashbacks have long been established as a cinematic device since the silent film era, and by the 1940s and 1950s, they were widely adopted internationally as a popular narrative technique. Filmmakers deftly employed flashbacks in a variety of forms in their work, often using it as the basic dramatic structure upon which film narrative and style are built on. Hollywood—the productions of which were often referred to and imitated by local filmmakers—rolled out at least 25 pictures that featured flashbacks each year in the period from 1942 to the end of 1950. For an industry that produced some 400 feature films per year, this number may not seem impressive, but they include many film classics, such as *Citizen Kane* (1941), *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), *Casablanca* (1942), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *Spellbound* (1945), *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945), *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), *Humoresque* (1946), *Possessed* (1946), *Crossfire* (1947), *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949), *All about Eve* (1950), etc. Not only were many of them nominated for or awarded Best Film at the Oscars, a significant number are now also considered genre classics or works that crossed genre boundaries. It is apparent that by this point in time, flashbacks

had become an important, even commonplace, technique as part of classic Hollywood storytelling.[1]

Between August 1945 and the end of December 1949, around 425 Mandarin and Cantonese feature films were produced in Hong Kong.[2] About 70 of these were in Mandarin,[3] and out of the 46 Mandarin titles still available, 21 of them use flashbacks of some form—10 before 1949 and 11 in 1949. In other words, these make up around 30 per cent of the total number of Mandarin films made during this period. For details, please refer to the table below:

No.	Film Title	Premiere Date (HK if not specified)	Director	Screenwriter	Flashback Style
1	*Forever in My Heart*	1947.1.7	He Zhaozhang	Fan Yanqiao	Protagonist's recalling
2	*Yonder My Love*	1947.2.9 (Singapore)	Zheng Xiaoqiu	Zhu Shilin	Protagonist's recounting
3	*A Dream of Spring* *	1947.8.30	Zhu Shilin	Zhu Shilin	Supporting character's recounting
4	*Madame X* *	1947.9.16	He Feiguang	Han Beiping	Protagonist's recalling
5	*Nothing Compares to You*	1947.11.15 (Liuzhou, Guangxi)	Hung Suk-wan	Hung Suk-wan	Protagonist's recalling
6	*Three Females* #	1947.12.14	Griffin Yue Feng	Cao Xuesong	Supporting character's recounting
7	*Bloodshed in a Besieged Citadel* *	1948.6.3	Yam Pang-nin	—	Protagonist's recalling
8	*Lion-Hearted Warriors* #	1948.8.10	Wang Yuen-lung	Wang Yang	Supporting character reading the protagonist's diary
9	*Song of a Songstress* #	1948.8.13	Fang Peilin	Wu Tieyi	Supporting character's recounting
10	*Everlasting Green*	1948.12.11	Ouyang Yuqian	Ouyang Yuqian	Protagonist's recalling
11	*Our Husband*	1949.2.5	Li Pingqian	Li Pingqian	Protagonist's recalling
12	*The Unmarried Mother*	1949.6.4	Hu Xinling	Qin Fuji (aka Doe Ching)	Protagonist's recounting
13	*Latecomer in the Snow*	1949.6.10	Wu Zuguang	Wu Zuguang	Protagonist's recalling
14	*Way to Love*	1949.6.29	Ouyang Yuqian	Ouyang Yuqian	Protagonist's recounting
15	*The Pangs of Love*	1949.7.10	Chen Shi, Dan Duyu	Bian Xun	Protagonist's recalling
16	*A Forgotten Woman*	1949.7.10	Griffin Yue Feng	Doe Ching	Protagonist's recounting
17	*The Hunchbacked Dragon with Twin Pistols*	1949.7.16	Wang Yuen-lung	Mei Qian	Protagonist's recounting

1. For more on the use of flashbacks in film, especially concerning its development in the US, Europe, and Japan from the silent film era, see Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History*, New York: Routledge, 1989. For analysis on the use of flashbacks in Hollywood films in the 1940s, see David Bordwell, *Reinventing Hollywood: How 1940s Filmmakers Changed Movie Storytelling*, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017 (Chapter 2 in particular). Other useful references include Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis* (2nd Edition), London: Starword, 1992; David Bordwell, Janet Staiger & Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.
2. The number of Hong Kong films produced is based on data provided by the Research and Editorial Unit of the Hong Kong Film Archive as of 31 December 2021. The figure has been cross-checked against other sources, consolidated, and further examined by the HKFA. Hopefully, more films produced during this period would be 'rediscovered' for further study, especially in relation to narrative technique and style, including the use of flashbacks.
3. Mandarin films discussed in this essay consist of two categories. The first category refers to Mandarin films which were promoted as Mandarin pictures in advertisements during its first run in Hong Kong. The second category covers films which were probably produced in Mandarin, but premiered with Cantonese-dubbed versions.

No.	Film Title	Premiere Date (HK if not specified)	Director	Screenwriter	Flashback Style
18	*Gia Liang Kiang Be My Destiny*	1949.10.22	Zhang Min	Zhang Min	Protagonist's recalling
19	*The Haunted House*	1949.12.4	Ma Xu Weibang	Wu Mofang	Supporting character's recounting
20	*The Revenge of the Great Swordsman*	1949.12.22	Wang Yuen-lung, Wen Yimin	Lau Chen-yung	Protagonist's recounting
21	*The Mystery of the Jade Fish*	1949.12.31 (Singapore)/ 1953.2.5	Li Ying	Li Ying	Protagonist's recounting

* Cantonese-dubbed version during first run in Hong Kong

Mandarin and Cantonese-dubbed versions screened at the same time during first run in Hong Kong

Framing Devices

Judging from the date of its Hong Kong release, *Forever in My Heart* (aka *An All-Consuming Love*), premiered on 7 January 1947, can be considered as the first picture in this group of films to feature flashbacks. Directed by He Zhaozhang, the film uses flashback in a simple but effective way to depict characters' memories. It opens with a day scene in Taiwan after Japan's surrender in World War II. Gao Zhijian (played by Shu Shi) is alone listening to a vinyl record by the seaside. A shot of the spinning record on the gramophone fades out into a paper box held by a person walking, signifying that we have been drawn into Gao's memories. The man is revealed to be Gao himself, and the time and place have changed to Shanghai, 7 December 1941, i.e. the day of the Pearl Harbor attack. Towards the end of the film, after the war has been won, a close-up of Li Xiangmei (played by Zhou Xuan) as she is performing a Mandopop song likewise fades out into a shot of the spinning record. The director then cuts to a shot of Gao by the seaside same as the opening of the film. His memories hereby come to an end. This is the one single use of flashback in the film, and neither dialogue nor voiceover is used to introduce or close it. As we enter the flashback, we hear the Western music that has been playing since the beginning of the film. The background music does not switch to Li Xiangmei's song even as the records starts to spin and play, the significance of which is revealed later in the film. Li's close-up and song are used instead to bridge the end of the flashback with the present. The entire flashback sequence is that of Gao recalling the past, and He Zhaozhang uses only music and song to connect the present and the past, an artistic choice that creates a somber, melancholic mood throughout the film. Perhaps this was influenced by He's extensive background in sound recording, and his insights and experience from working with film sound.

Nothing Compares to You was also made in Hong Kong in 1946 (sources indicate that it was released in Liuzhou of Guangxi and Singapore the following year). Although a similar framing device is deployed at the start and end of the film, different scenes and settings are used to bookend the flashback. The male protagonist is shown standing in front of the grave of his lover before cutting to a close-up of the flowers on the ground. The flashback then begins: his lover (the female protagonist) is chatting with a female friend. As the flashback ends, the film cuts to the male protagonist in the living room of a large mansion, in conversation with that same friend about their common memories of the deceased.

In other words, the flashback begins as one man's reminiscence before transforming into a shared recollection between two people. Furthermore, there is a flashback within this flashback, as the female protagonist herself recounts the love story between the two protagonists. When the film returns to 'the present', one more twist is introduced: in the living room, the female friend flips through the dead girl's diary, and the camera pushes in before cutting to another flashback—this time, the friend's recollection reveals details about the female protagonist's illness and last wishes that her lover is unaware of. The film ends after the flashback is completed and the narrative returns to 'the present'. Director and screenwriter Hung Suk-wan is well-known for his fluent and meticulous style, and his aesthetics can be described as 'art for art's sake'. Through the three flashbacks in *Nothing Compares to You*, he constructs a carefully layered narrative, full of twists and turns, that complements the romantic and mournful atmosphere of the film.

Of the 40 Hong Kong-produced Mandarin films made after the war and before the end of 1948, *Nothing Compares to You* and *Forever in My Heart* are examples that use framing devices, with flashbacks making up most of their narratives. *A Dream of Spring* (1947) is another example of an existing title from the era that utilises a similar narrative device. In the film, the flashback narrative is interrupted by two returns to 'the present', one featuring both picture and sound while the other only featuring a voiceover narration. Other films, such as *Yonder My Love* (1947), *Madame X* (1947), *Three Females* (1947), *Bloodshed in a Besieged Citadel* (aka *United as One*, 1948), *Lion-Hearted Warriors* (1948), *Song of a Songstress* (1948) and *Everlasting Green* (aka *Wild Fire and Spring Wind*, 1948) all feature flashbacks, but not extensively. A total of 11 pictures made in 1949 that are still available today contain flashbacks, and of these, four adopted framing devices: *Latecomer in the Snow*, *Way to Love*, *The Revenge of the Great Swordsman* (aka *Assassin Zhang Wenxiang*), and *A Forgotten Woman*. In particular, the latter two films switch back and forth between the past and the present multiple times in its use of sound and images. The flashback in *The Pangs of Love* (made in 1947 and released in Shanghai that same year; released in Hong Kong in 1949) is relatively longer, taking up two-thirds of the film's running time.

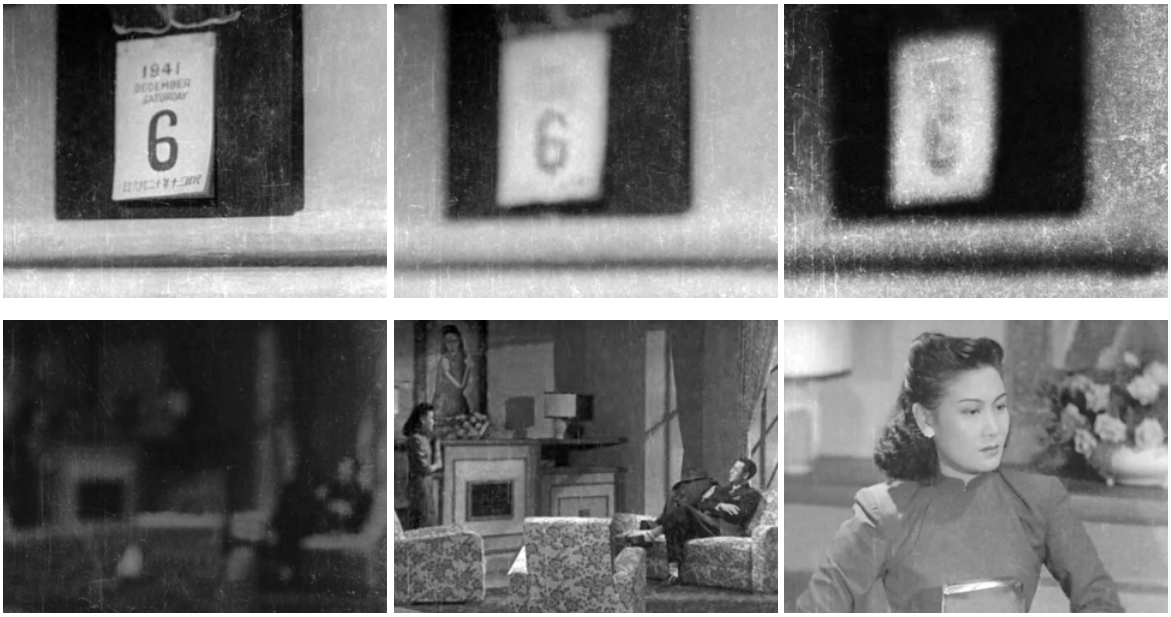
Protagonists' Recounting and Recalling

As seen in these 21 Mandarin films, titles using the framing device usually feature a protagonist reminiscing or recounting his/her memories to another character. For example, in *Way to Love*, the husband tells his wife of their life together over the past 20 odd years; Zhang Wenxiang in *The Revenge of the Great Swordsman* relates the story of how he met and assassinated his sworn brother Ma Xinyi; and the old man in *A Dream of Spring*, though just a supporting character, narrates to his granddaughter the fateful story of the wealthy mistress he once served. The flashback in *Latecomer in the Snow* seems to be the protagonist's recalling (see further analysis below); he quietly reminiscing on past events without verbalising them. This form of recalling is also featured in *Forever in My Heart*,

Nothing Compares to You (1947)

Different settings before and after the flashback

Ouyang Wenxin (played by Bai Yun) stands in front of the grave of his lover Zhu Meigui (played by Ji Hezi); after a close-up of flowers on the ground, the flashback kicks in, showing Zhu sitting alone on a bench, while her friend Shen Xiuqing (played by Chen Jing) comes to join her for a chat.



After the flashback ends, Ouyang is seen not in the graveyard, but in a luxurious living room recounting the stories of his lover with Shen.

The Pangs of Love and *Madame X*. It is worth pointing out that the protagonists of *The Pangs of Love, Madame X*, and *Latecomer in the Snow* are all showbiz performers, so the films often contrast their present solitary recollections with the raucous glamour of their past. Towards the end of the flashbacks, the scenarios would always switch from a tragic or exciting past back to the present. As the scenes switch back and forth in time, it is not simply a temporal and spatial change, but a sharp contrast in atmosphere between the past and the present.

In *The Pangs of Love* and *Madame X*, the female protagonists' recollections of the past are shown clearly through the use of flashbacks. Yet the flashback of Mrs Hu (played by Wu Lai-chu) in *Bloodshed in a Besieged Citadel* is slightly different. When a fellow comrade in the War of Resistance asks her about her family, there is a pensive expression on her face as she says, 'Home…my home…' The film then cuts to a beautiful countryside scenery, and Mrs Hu's flashback begins and it is supplemented with her voiceover. However, it ends by fading back into a 'present' scene that does not match the setting or the shot before the flashback. Therefore, it is unclear: was the flashback a verbal recounting of the past, or simply a recalling in the mind's eye? Although one cannot completely rule out the former, the latter seems more likely, and in this case, the voiceover narration during the flashback is the character's inner monologue. From the point of view of Hollywood narrative standards, such an approach seems awkward and incomplete, requiring some level of revision and readjustment.

Voiceovers and Diaries

Indeed, if one were to judge Hong Kong films using Hollywood standards, one would invariably find a good deal of 'inadequacies'. Another 'odd' example of a flashback is *Yonder My Love*. Through a flashback, the male protagonist, a fugitive from justice, narrates to a girl the story of how he was framed and given the death sentence. The flashback scene lasts around 90 seconds, and the images are narrated by the fugitive's voiceover without deploying any dialogue, music nor diegetic sound. If one were to take out the voiceover track, the scene would resemble a silent film. Back in the silent era, storytellers would be stationed at film screenings in certain regions to narrate the film onscreen. In Japan, these people who offered on-site narration were called *benshi*. In this particular sequence in *Yonder My Love*, the character delivers the voiceover narration for this film sequence starring himself. The two versions of the character are so intricately tied together that a somewhat extraordinary effect is produced. In the 1934 Shanghai production, *A Bible for Girls*, a similar technique is employed and in greater length, but it is used to recount another character's story. The self-narration in *Yonder My Love* is an extreme application of the flashback technique that, looking back today, seems unintentionally experimental.

It was common for Hollywood films of this period to have a film character or an unseen narrator initiate a flashback via voiceover, and even deploying such narrated

flashbacks throughout the film. Such techniques were rare in Mandarin cinema (*A Forgotten Woman* was an obvious exception). Yet the use of voiceover narration in *Everlasting Green* is remarkable. The male and female protagonists each have a scene where they recall a line from the past that is spoken in voiceover, albeit without any image flashbacks—we only see the characters deep in thought. The male protagonist 'hears' the voice of his interlocutor, whereas the female protagonist 'hears' her own voice. Another difference is the scene recalled by the male protagonist has really appeared in the film prior to his 'flashback', but what his female counterpart recalled does not happen in the film at all. Unfortunately, there was little opportunity for Mandarin films of this period to further explore such small-scale narrative experiments, despite their apparent interest and potential.

When supporting characters narrate the past, they usually recount the story to a third party about the protagonists of the film. Examples in the 21 films include the aforementioned *A Dream of Spring*, *Song of a Songstress* and *The Haunted House* (released in Hong Kong in December 1949). Notably, the flashback in *Lion-Hearted Warriors* occurs as a supporting character reads through the protagonist's diary, guiding us through his past history. This is a rare flashback instance of a Mandarin film of this era to use text to mediate history and memory. *The Mystery of the Jade Fish* (aka *The Sex-Maniac*, released in Singapore on 31 December 1949 and in Hong Kong on 5 February 1953) is yet another interesting case. Two supporting characters recount their pasts through brief flashbacks, and at the end of the film, Main Character A recounts and reveals the past vile behaviour of Main Character B, after having read his diary.

Lion-Hearted Warriors (1948)

The backstory of protagonist Huang San (played by Wang Yuen-lung) is introduced cleverly through the side character Xiao Cui (played by Ji Lulu) reading his diary.

Voiceover Narrations and Monologue Usage in 1949

1949 was an important year in many ways. Films released this year in Hong Kong that featured the use of flashbacks conveyed more complex ideas and artistic purposes. These films contained hints of individual and national trauma and humiliation, which gauged audience support through shared pain and memory, thereby building up a collective mission and hope for the future image of their nation and race.

Latecomer in the Snow, released in Shanghai on 8 January 1948 and in Hong Kong on 10 June 1949, opens with two monologues from the male protagonist Wei Liansheng (played by Lü Yukun):

> I've been wandering around, wandering for 20 years. I've walked a long, long road, and made friends along the way. My friends are all suffering. I've seen tragedy and loss…too much of it. I feel like getting old. So, tonight, amidst wind and snow, I've returned.
>
> The sky is getting dark and it is getting cold. This…this place is so desolate. Desolate? Oh, where is this place? I shouldn't have come back here. What am I supposed to do here? I…I want to trace my footsteps from the past, I want to find my own shadow…the shadow that I cast here 20 years ago.

These two passages run consecutively in the film. Three shots are shown over the course of the first: two top shots of the protagonist's feet as he walks; the third captures his footsteps from behind that slowly tilts up to show the profile of the upper half of Wei's body. But before we get a chance to see his face, his monologue is already finished. As the second passage begins, we can clearly see that he is talking to himself, and the soundtrack consists of the diegetic sound recorded at the film studio—both the visuals and the audio have changed in between the two monologues. Thus, it is possible to determine that the first one had been a voiceover and the second a monologue the character delivers to himself. At the end of the latter, the camera pushes into a shot of Wei's right hand as he presses against a tree branch, showing a close-up of his bracelet. The shot then fades into a parallel shot of the bracelet of Yuchun (played by Sun Jinglu) when she was among the audience of Wei's Peking opera performance years ago. The flashback sequence hereby begins.

Towards the end of the flashback, we see a montage that signifies Wei's many years of fruitless travelling. The last six shots of this montage are medium shots of the lower half of his body as he travels through harsh natural conditions and close-ups of his worn-down clothes and shoes. His voiceover narrates:

> What a big city. How crowded it is. How lively the world is. How tough the times are.

The flashback ends by fading out back into a shot of present-day Wei pressing against the tree branch, but this time, it is a medium shot. He turns back to touch the tree with both his hands as he looks towards the house, his body flat against the tree. We then hear his monologue:

> Still the same old place…the same old tree. The same old house, and this…this same old fellow.

Like the opening of the film, this combination of voiceover narration and monologue brings us out of the past and takes us to the tragic ending of such an ordinary man living in extraordinarily corrupt times. The narrative structure of *Latecomer in the Snow* is quite stylised, complementing Lü's performance, the script, as well as the use of simple but meaningful montage. The double use of voiceover and monologue switches back and forth between reality and memory. As Wei says, 'My friends are all suffering. I've seen tragedy and loss…', 'How lively the world is. How tough the times are.' If the film is set in 1949, the time of its release, then '20 years ago' would be 1929, when the country was still embroiled in the first civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists after Chiang Kai-shek's 1927 purge of communists. This means that Wei's tragic love affair and life story are inextricably linked to left-wing views and critiques of contemporary politics and society.

Alternating Between Memory and the Present

Daosheng: Meiying, do you not recognise me?

(Meiying walks away)

Daosheng: (taking out a scent bag) Meiying, do you remember to whom this belong?

Meiying: Do you have a cigarette?

Daosheng: It was you who asked me to quit. Have you forgotten?

Meiying: Hmm.

Daosheng: Meiying, what made you change? Do you still remember?

(Meiying sits down on the sofa)

Daosheng: Do you still remember how you were before?

A Forgotten Woman (the first production by Great Wall Pictures Corporation, released in Hong Kong on 10 July 1949) begins with prostitute Huali (played by Bai Guang) under arrest and awaiting sentence for murder. Her real name is revealed to be Cai Meiying, and as the prison guard takes her to the office of judge Chen Daosheng (played by Yan Jun), she is recognised by Daosheng. The exchange transcribed above takes place here. From here until roughly three-quarters into the film, the story of these two characters is told through flashback. In other words, it takes up some 90 minutes of this 104-minute picture. It tells the backstory of Meiying from when she was sold to the Chan family to work as a maid in her childhood, until she was eventually arrested for murder. Divided into three parts, this 'recollection' is broken up by scenes of 'the present', i.e. Daosheng and Meiying's conversation in the prison office. The rest of the film presents events chronologically, as Daosheng visits defence lawyer Ma Yanren (played by Han Fei); Meiying's trial; her final fate, etc. This remaining portion of the film can be divided into four parts. In the first 'present-day' scene, confronted with Daosheng's questions, the camera zooms into a close-up of Meiying's face, as she wordlessly looks into the distance. The frame fades into a long pan shot of the countryside, which is accompanied by Meiying's voiceover narration. It

is clear to viewers—both then and now—that we are watching a flashback of Meiying's memories. Weaving together Daosheng and Meiying's 'present-day' conversation with their memories and Meiying's narration, director Griffin Yue Feng and screenwriter Doe Ching had successfully established an ingenious, adaptive flashback framework for the film.

In the first flashback, Meiying initially uses a third-person point of view in her narration, as she objectively describes the power dynamic between the land-owning Chan family and the peasants. The pronoun 'I' is not used until the second and third parts of the flashback, where she is being sold to the Chans as a servant. The rest of her story is shown onscreen without voiceover narration: she grows up as companion to the Chans' young son, Daosheng, who later moves to Shanghai for his studies and returns home some time later. Before he leaves, he and Meiying consummate their relationship. The flashback ends, and the film returns to the present-day office, where the two characters have the following conversation:

> Daosheng: I couldn't find you all through these years. The memory of you was my only consolation. I'll always remember what we said that day on the top of the hill. You said…
>
> (Meiying laughs, gets up from the sofa and walks away.)
>
> Daosheng: Meiying, you hate me, don't you? What happened after we separated?
>
> (Meiying takes a drag on her cigarette and blows out the smoke.)
>
> Daosheng: You…you've changed.
>
> Meiying: (turning suddenly towards Daosheng) Are you willing to listen?

As Daosheng nods, the low-angle medium shot of the two characters fades into a frame of the countryside, marking the start of the second flashback, which features two of Meiying's voiceover narrations. As this flashback concludes, it is apparent how different it is from the first one, and that the two flashbacks are not a continuous narrative by Meiying. They have been separated by a dialogue sequence in the office, and Meiying addresses Daosheng as 'you' in her voiceover for the second flashback, which also depicts a number of events that Daosheng was not personally involved in. Therefore, it is clear that the second flashback is a recounting of the past by Meiying to Daosheng. In contrast, the first flashback is preceded by shots showing Meiying's silent pondering, and her narration does not use the pronoun 'you' either. Most of the past experiences shown here were shared by both characters, so it is not necessary for Meiying to recount them to Daosheng. Thus, the first flashback is likely Meiying's personal reminiscence—a recollection of events in her mind's eye, a monologue addressed to herself.

The office conversation immediately before the third flashback is handled in a different, creative manner. Daosheng dominates the dialogue with his recollections, as he picks up the story where it left off in Meiying's narration in the second flashback. He tells her about what he has gone through. He lets her know that he still loves her and has not stopped looking for her, but unlike Meiying, his side of the story is told verbally and not through flashback. He ends by saying:

Tell me: what happened after you left home?

This is more or less a moment of 'passing the baton' to Meiying, as the camera moves from a medium shot of both characters to a close-up of her face. She lowers her head and takes another drag on her cigarette as the shot fades out and into a long shot of a model-constructed city scene. Her voiceover narration follows:

We tried hard to make a living, but what could we do? I walked, walked, walked down every street and alley, but there was no place for me. I was penniless, starving, and cold, so…

This is the only voiceover narration that is used in the third flashback, as everything else is dramatised and directly depicted. As the film cuts back to 'the present', Meiying is blowing out a puff of smoke, a continuation of her inhaling action prior to the flashback. Daosheng speaks:

Meiying, I shouldn't have asked you to retell your story. It's upsetting you.

Unlike the previous two flashbacks, the use of the word 'retell' here sends a clear signal to the audience that this third flashback has been a recounting of the past by Meiying.

Third-Person Narration and Flash-Forwards

The first 90 minutes of *A Forgotten Woman* are dominated by flashbacks that show Meiying's childhood as a maid and her subsequent experiences, up to the point where she allegedly commits murder. Whether through recounting or reminiscence that is verbalised or not, the audience's understanding of past events is largely seen through her perspective. Yet as the film moves on to the court trial scene, it immediately switches its narrative tact. Meiying's lawyer, Ma Yanren, launches into a speech that is 3 minutes 13 seconds long, like a condensed version of Meiying's story as depicted in the previous 90 minutes. In other words, the same content is expressed in two different ways. What was previously conveyed via cinematic flashbacks with voiceover narration is now retold through speech, specifically through the mouth of a lawyer who is now the primary subject onscreen.

Analepsis in *A Forgotten Woman* is not limited to the use of flashbacks and voiceovers. Its usage increases in variety as the film approaches its final act. Soon after the lawyer's speech, the camera focuses on a man in the public gallery of the court. He is a released prisoner who appeared in the third flashback when he came to Meiying's house to seek help from her lover. His efforts proved to be in vain, and the two men parted on bad terms. At this point in the trial, he stands up to confess that he is the real killer. Like many Hollywood films, the flashbacks in *A Forgotten Woman* are not necessarily a complete account of the truth. To create tension and sensationalism, certain key details around the murder, including the act of murder, are omitted in the flashbacks. They are revealed at the last minute, the critical moment when Meiying is reunited with her son and no longer seeks death, as the judge is about to pass judgement on her case. Not only is the murder largely

'concealed' in the flashback, the director even puts emphasis on a shot where, upon being beaten up by her lover, Meiying stares at a kitchen knife (later the murder weapon) with intense hatred in her eyes, as though she is about to pick it up. Visual imagery in flashbacks can be elliptical or obscured, and occasionally, they may even be deliberately misleading, so as to open up imaginative possibilities that distract us from the truth.

The Unmarried Mother (released in Shanghai on 10 June 1948 and in Hong Kong on 4 June 1949) is a good example of a similar approach in use. In the present-day timeline, the female protagonist and her brother-in-law are enjoying their day out at a picnic with his children. The weather suddenly turns bad and everyone gets busy packing up in anticipation of a big storm. The scene then cuts to a shot of the female protagonist leaning against a cabinet at her sister's living room. She is dressed differently—clearly, it is a few days after the picnic. Only towards the end of the film does she confess to her sister in a flashback how on that day, to take cover from the rain, she and her brother-in-law stayed overnight at a hotel, getting increasingly close to each other and eventually having sex. In *The Unmarried Mother*, important parts of the truth are hidden and omitted during 'the present', and such secrets are only revealed in flashback. In the case of *A Forgotten Woman*, it creates suspense by not showing the truth in full in Meiying's flashbacks. The mystery is finally resolved when the real killer confesses his crime in 'the present', where flashback of his perspective of events is not needed.

At the end of *A Forgotten Woman*, Meiying is released after she is pronounced not guilty. She departs without saying goodbye, only leaving a letter to Daosheng. Here, the director both subverts and enhances the use of flashback.

The end of the film is accompanied by Meiying's voiceover reading out her letter. The camera moves away from the prison and the shot fades out into a frame of the sky, panning left and tilting downwards to show a view of the mountains (with Hong Kong's Lion Rock right in the middle). From here, the final sequence consists of eight shots, as father and son set out to look for Meiying, who has started a new life in the countryside. Although this sequence can be interpreted as events that have actually happened, they seem more like a leftist fantasy: the corrupt old China has to perish and the Chinese people have to abandon the trappings of their former ideologies. After a spiritual awakening, they have to work hard to transform and create a new life for themselves. This ideal is beyond the scope of a private relationship between two people or even a family; it describes a vision of collective happiness concerning the entire community. In other words, the images we see onscreen depict a future state, an implied fantasy of what is to come. Thus, after three flashbacks, *A Forgotten Woman* ends with a 'flash-forward', a projection of the future as tinted by revolutionary ideals. This is a richly complex move that exceeds and enhances the original narrative of the film. Not only does it conclude the previous events, it guides the audience into looking ahead to the future—a powerful and affecting narrative strategy, especially in terms of how film can express or represent political ideology.

Historical Education and Revolution Propaganda

Likewise, *Way to Love* (released in Hong Kong on 29 June 1949), written and directed by well-known playwright Ouyang Yuqian, employs flashbacks heavily and is coloured by an obvious political leaning and substantially more pronounced ideological conflicts. The film offers yet another variation on the use of cinematic flashback. It opens on Christmas night in contemporary Shanghai, where an elderly couple Zhou Jiahao and Qian Lanying (played by Feng Zhe [aka Feng Jie] and Shu Xiuwen) receive news of their daughter's engagement. Jiahao takes out an album and shows his wife a photo of them from 1925, when she was only 20 years old. This two-shot of the couple then cuts to a close-up of the photo, which then fades into a flashback sequence. Jiahao's lines from henceforth become voiceover narration. This flashback takes up the entire length of the film, save for its first nine minutes and the final one-minute shot. The past is shown chronologically, and there are six instances of Jiahao's voiceover covering the sequences of montage onscreen, which also serve to break up the flashback into shorter sections.

Jiahao's narration tells his and Lanying's story from their engagement, marriage to their life during WWII, including details about dates and contemporary political and historical events. He paints a picture of how the times change alongside each stage of their personal lives. The beginning and end of the film set in the present is simply that of the old couple spending their night in, without any narrative or imagined development beyond this point in time. Its form is therefore neater and more airtight than that of *A Forgotten Woman*. Also, the husband's voiceover dominates *Way to Love*, and the wife's thoughts are never vocalised. This stands in sharp contrast to *A Forgotten Woman*, which, despite its single-perspective narration from Meiying, plays on the ambiguity that arises from the two main characters' recollections and perceptions. *Way to Love* is written from a left-wing historical view point, articulating the state of the nation from the Northern Expedition up to 1949, and the struggles of the generation as represented by the characters of Zhou Jiahao and Qian Lanying. Regarding the future, Jiahao reassures his wife, 'Youngsters nowadays are braver than we were. Their future is bright.' This is the final line of the film. Although sentimental, it expresses a vision of the future that is more certain than that presented in Meiying's letter in *A Forgotten Woman*, both in tone and content. Flashbacks in both films are used to dramatise events and induce interest, as well as convey political ideas and ideals. In terms of film narrative, *Way to Love* is simpler in scope and ambition. It seeks to evaluate the history of political struggle in modern Chinese history from the Northern Expedition to the post-war period from a left-wing perspective. On the other hand, *A Forgotten Woman* deploys a more complicated structure, occasionally omitting certain details to generate suspense and tension. The endings of both films emphasise stepping out of the shadow of the past to welcome more hopeful times ahead, encouraging people to create new pastures for themselves—a display of Communist ideal.

Way to Love (1949)

Flashbacks can be a portrayal of historical progression from an ideological point of view, interpreting cause-and-effect relationships and shaping a vision for the future so as to educate or 'transform' human beings.




The film begins in the late 1940s, when Zhou Jiahao (played by Feng Zhe) realises that his wife Qian Lanying (played by Shu Xiuwen) is worried about their daughter's engagement with a workman's son. He takes out a photo album and starts recounting how his wife supported him (in his 20s) going south to join the Northern Expedition, and then the flashback begins.




As Jiahao finishes recounting their struggles during the War of Resistance against evil forces such as the government and merchants, the film goes back to the late 1940s and comes to an end with a yearning for a better future. By flipping through old photos and recounting the past, Jiahao leads his wife to revisit past struggles with the aim of encouraging her to keep her faith and not to give in to selfishness, and pass on such spirit to their daughter.

The Melancholy of Revisiting the Past

Of all the films in the same period, one picture that rivals *A Forgotten Woman* in terms of the level of sophistication with which it employs the flashback is *The Revenge of the Great Swordsman* (released in Hong Kong on 22 December 1949). Co-directed by Wang Yuen-lung and Wen Yimin, this mainstream *xiayi* (heroic brotherhood) film is an adaptation of the semi-fictional historical tale of *Ci Ma*, the Ma Xinyi assassination. It opens with the trial of Zhang Wenxiang (played by Wang Yuen-lung), as he recalls how he became sworn brothers with Ma Xinyi (played by Wen Yimin) many years ago. The flashback starts at

approximately 3 minutes 30 seconds into the picture, and finally ends at around 91 minutes 7 seconds, when Zhang assassinates Ma in revenge for murdering their sworn brothers, and the film returns to the courtroom. The whole film is 92 minutes and 19 seconds long. In other words, the flashback takes up most of the film. In terms of its layered complexity and narrative depth, the film's use of flashback is one of the finest examples of this technique among Chinese films of this period. Firstly, apart from the bookend scenes set in the present-day trial, there are three brief interludes that cut back to the courtroom during the flashback. They are only around 17 seconds (one shot), 44 seconds (three shots) and 38 seconds (two shots) in length respectively. All of them concern Zhang's recounting or interrogation from the judge. These dialogue scenes offer supplementary information, adding tension and overall effect to the story and the film. Although one may argue that these instances of switching back and forth between the past and present are relatively common, it is necessary to note that the film's flashback also contain three 'flashbacks within flashbacks':

1. In the first flashback within flashback, Fourth Brother Shi Xingbiao (played by Deng Nan [aka Tang Nam]) reflects on Zhang's words to him, which are conveyed via Zhang's voiceover against the image of Shi's silent contemplation.
2. In the third flashback within flashback, when Second Brother Zheng Shi (played by Zhao Yishan) tells Zhang about his discovery of the adulterous affair between Ma and his wife, we are shown these events from his subjective perspective onscreen.
3. In the final flashback within flashback, Zhang looks around his room in the inn, reminiscing about the good times he had had with his wife, brothers and sister-in-law here years ago.

In depicting these memories of the past via flashbacks within flashbacks, the audience is introduced to a complex and layered narrative structure. In the first instance, only one shot of a character lost in thought is shown alongside a voiceover, while in the second instance, the flashback contains a total of six shots. The audience is shown both objective views of Zheng Shi's actions as well as his subjective perspective of the other characters and what they say. The third flashback within a flashback is deceptively simple, as a facially disfigured Zhang sits in the room, saying to himself, 'This was the place I used to meet with Second Brother and Fourth Brother.' The camera pans left, following his gaze, and we see Zhang and his two brothers, his sister-in-law, his wife, and a maid. The six characters greet each other, and the camera pans to the right, returning to the lonesome figure of Zhang, head bowed as he says, 'Now I am the only one left.' The gathering of the six friends is obviously from the past, but it is filmed from a different angle; the characters stand in different positions; and their lines are not exactly the same either. The camera moving between present-day Zhang and his past self with his friends seems to present one continuous shot that traverses the limits of time and space, when in fact it is a feat achieved technically by editing and processing three different shots so that they link together. So rare is this seen in Hong Kong cinema of the time that it may very well be the only example of this technique among Mandarin and Cantonese pictures of this period. There is a similar

scene in *The Passenger* (aka *Professione: Reporter*, 1975), directed by Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni, that also takes place in a small hotel room in the African desert. The protagonist, a journalist, is playing back a recording of a conversation he had with an arms dealer, and the camera pans from a single-shot of him to a flashback of the conversation as it happened. Likewise, the soundtrack changes to diegetic. After a few shots of the conversation, the camera yet again pans from a two-shot back to a single-shot of the present-day journalist as a reflection in the mirror. Here, this sequence was probably achieved by having the actors change their costumes when the camera moves away, and then returning into the frame. It is a product of experimentation that merges together 1960s European arthouse sensibilities and traditional mise-en-scène with long takes. It capitalises on the realism of long takes, and expresses the polysemantic nature of reality, even connecting the past and the present through the spatial continuity. The 'fake long take' in *The Revenge of the Great Swordsman* seeks to create an emotional, melancholic effect by highlighting the transmutability and unpredictability of life. Made in a relatively early period with limited resources, the filmmakers naturally used production effects that were typical of contemporary Mandarin and Cantonese cinema.

Preliminary Conclusions

The exact number of existing Mandarin films made in Hong Kong between 1945 and 1949 that use the flashback technique is unclear, and 21 is the closest estimate we can come up with to date. Although this current review may not provide the most complete description or analysis, some preliminary observations can still be made.

Almost half of the 21 films employ a framing device, in which a lengthy flashback sits between bookending sequences set in the present. They mostly feature a protagonist in reminiscence or recounting the past to another character. Screenwriters and directors of Mandarin films at the time were more familiar with linear narration that takes place in the present timeline, so even when they chose to deploy flashbacks, they were mostly brief, one-off occurrences in the middle of the story. The majority of these are simple reminiscences of the protagonist characters, and examples include *Madame X*, *The Pangs of Love*, *Bloodshed in a Besieged Citadel*, *Our Husband* (1949), and *Gia Liang Kiang Be My Destiny* (aka *All Quiet in the Kialing River/Quietly Flows the Jialing River*, 1949). Other films, such as *Yonder My Love*, *The Unmarried Mother*, *The Hunchbacked Dragon with Two Pistols* (aka *The Hunchbacked Dragon*, 1949) and *The Mystery of the Jade Fish*, involve a recounting of the past by the protagonists. While none of the films feature recalling flashbacks from a supporting character, *Three Females, Song of a Songstress* and *The Haunted House* do contain a recounting from a supporting character. Most of the flashbacks in *Nothing Compares to You* are the protagonist's recalling, but there is one single instance of recounting from a supporting character. In *The Mystery of the Jade Fish*, the protagonist's recounting of the past is considerably longer than that of the supporting characters, whose memories are

presented in a piecemeal fashion. Last but not least, the flashback in *Lion-Hearted Warriors* stands out for its unique set-up: the main character's backstory is introduced through a supporting character voyeuristically reading his diary.

By nature, flashbacks take us into the past and history through a certain point of view or via a mediating agent. Extrapolating from examples throughout film history, the mediating agent can be one person or several people, a named character who appears in the film, a character who never appears, a narrator who is unrelated to the story, or even an animal or an object. All of the 21 Mandarin films adopt the most common approach, that is, having their flashbacks adopt the perspective of a character who appears in the film. In other words, there are no purely objective or 'external' flashbacks, nor are there any characters revealed only within a flashback (e.g. featuring only their voiceover or written text).

Although the flashbacks in the 21 films are all told from the perspective of certain characters, this does not restrict the scope of their narrative. Often, in these flashbacks, a more omniscient perspective is adopted. Nonetheless, there are currently not many cases where more than one point of view is shown in the flashbacks. *Nothing Compares to You*, *Everlasting Green*, *A Forgotten Woman*, *The Haunted House* and *The Mystery of the Jade Fish* are exceptions. Yet in *A Forgotten Woman* and *The Haunted House*, the act of recounting by the second character is directly achieved through speech, without the support of images from the past. Within the flashbacks, the storylines are straightforward and linear without any jumps or interludes, and thus very easy to understand. Hollywood films at the time were already confidently employing and playing around with multiple-perspective flashbacks and time jumps within flashbacks, such as *Citizen Kane* and *The Power and the Glory* (1933), the latter of which was believed to have been a big influence on the former. Moreover, courtroom dramas were also inclined to showing contradicting testimonies between characters, and occasionally disrupted their narrative chronology.

Without doubt, Hong Kong cinema did not use the flashback as inventively as their Hollywood peers, and seemed less playful in their narrative experiments. Hollywood had more advanced abilities and resources, and thus allowed a certain amount of space for filmmakers to test out different narrative perspectives or spatial-temporal narration. In many instances, after extensive periods of trial and error, some of these narrative techniques became genre markers, and thus flashbacks were used with increasing sophistication and variety. In Hong Kong, both Mandarin and Cantonese filmmakers referred to Hollywood cinema, often imitating their filmmaking traditions, but always adopted them selectively according to local customs, culture, and production conditions. In terms of flashbacks alone, Hong Kong filmmakers did not copy Hollywood slavishly. Instead, they adapted and fused together different elements to gradually construct their own narrative system, such as the use of the voiceover in *Yonder My Love* and the diary in *Lion-Hearted Warriors*. Filmmakers also displayed ingenuity and depth when they occasionally found it necessary to challenge tradition. For example, the framing device in *Latecomer in the Snow* is used in conjunction with a montage and a theatre-influenced style

A Dream of Spring (1947)

After Lao Zhang (played by Jin Sha) and his granddaughter put together the fragmented pieces they picked up and restore the portrait of Fang Ah Cui (played by Butterfly Wu), he starts reminiscing about the past, and the flashback begins.

The flashback ends and the film shifts back to the present. Losing sight of Ah Cui, Lao Zhang picks up the portrait's fragments and throws them in the fire, marking the end of the film.

of performance, while *A Forgotten Woman* adeptly skips between the past and the present before finally presenting a vision of an awakened China. The flashbacks within flashbacks in *The Revenge of the Great Swordsman* create a palimpsestic experience where different memories are layered upon each other, thereby creating greater emotional effect.

Chinese-language filmmakers studied Hollywood films and appreciated their achievements, while also being very aware that they have more limitations and fewer choices than their American counterparts. In the opening of *A Dream of Spring*, a scavenging old man and his granddaughter discover scraps of the female protagonist's portrait, and after they put it back together, the old man's narration brings us into a flashback of the past. After it finishes, the film returns to the present, where the old man picks up the scraps and burns them in a special 'word cherishing paper incinerator'. Compared to the famous multiple-perspective narration structure of *Citizen Kane*, where five flashbacks from various points of view are triggered by a journalist's investigations, Zhu Shilin's approach in *A Dream of Spring* is to use the symbolism of various props (e.g. scraps of a portrait) in his framing device to create meaning and effect. The end of *Citizen Kane* finally reveals the mystery of what 'Rosebud' is, but in *A Dream of Spring*, the audience is not privy to any extra information that the characters of *A Dream of Spring* do not already know. As the two final lines of the film say,

> What a pity. A fine portrait, but it's missing so many pieces.
>
> Even if there's just one piece missing, it'd still be incomplete. Leave it. Let's just burn it.

Zhu would likely have been a fan of *Citizen Kane* and its use of flashbacks, as *A Dream of Spring* seems to be a response to Hollywood filmmaking, made out of envy for the better conditions that American directors enjoyed. Yet in *A Dream of Spring*, the cultural symbolism of burning a painting in a paper incinerator, part of ancient China's tradition of 'cherishing paper and the written word', is a thoughtful statement on the relationship between history and memory. It expresses meanings even more profound and far-reaching than that of the sled in *Citizen Kane*. [Translated by Rachel Ng]

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Transcending Cultures

Hong Kong Film Directors and Their Shanghai Connections Prior to the Japanese Occupation of Hong Kong

Po Fung

When looking at the Hong Kong film industry in terms of output alone, we see that the first Hong Kong fiction film was made in 1914—and over the next 20 years, no more than five films a year were being made. There were even several years in which no films were produced at all. It was not until 1934 that a pivotal change occurred. In 1933, three Hong Kong films were made; in 1934, the number increased by ten to a total of 13. In 1935, the increase was more than twofold, up to 31. In 1936, the number shot up to 48. In 1937, it almost doubled to 86. From 1938 to 1941, prior to the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, over 80 films were produced every year.[1]

In the five years from 1933 to 1937, the number of Hong Kong films jumped from three to 86, nearly a thirty-fold increase. Film production comes with technical demands. A film director must be able to coordinate all the different processes of film production, therefore one must have sufficient professional knowledge in order to fill the position. Hong Kong would not have had sufficient directing talents to sustain such a rapid increase in the number of films. The place for importing filmmaking talent was none other than Shanghai, at the time already the centre of film production in China.

Some of the contributions that Shanghai filmmakers made to Hong Kong cinema have been mentioned in *A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema* (China Film Press, 1963), written and edited by Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai and Xing Zuwen. The book utilises Communist political ideology to explain and evaluate Chinese film history. It basically views the commercial aspects of film in a negative light, and in its description of Shanghai filmmakers' contributions to Hong Kong, the emphasis is on the two occasions when left-wing filmmakers arrived in Hong Kong en masse, after war commenced in 1937 and in

1. The statistics on Hong Kong films and Hong Kong film directors in this essay are based on *Hong Kong Filmography Vol I (1914–1941)* (Revised Edition) (Kwok Ching-ling [ed], Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2020, in Chinese). But I have excluded two films in my tally: *Flowers Fall and Catkins Fly*, which was made in Vietnam and was only released there on 8 January 1933; and *Memorial at the Pagoda*, a film released on 20 December 1934 which, further to Stephanie Ng Yuet-wah's examination, was believed to be produced in Shanghai. For more details on Ng's study, see her essay 'Responding to Challenges: The Production Strategy of Nanyue Film Company' in Part 1 of this book, pp 84-99.

the latter half of 1948. The book praises their contributions in spreading their political ideologies in Hong Kong through their films. The other influences of Shanghai cinema to Hong Kong's film industry are either condemned or ignored.

The above narrative was largely rectified in the 1990s by Hong Kong film scholar Mr Yu Mo-wan. In 1994, he published the essay 'The Historical Link Between Hong Kong and Shanghai Cinemas', which makes a broader and much more comprehensive description of the influences of Shanghai cinema to Hong Kong cinema (and vice versa). His statistical study indicates that 'In the 1930s, there were over 60 directors of Cantonese films in Hong Kong. Over 40 of them came from Shanghai. They directed over 200 Cantonese films, which accounted for more than half of the total number of Cantonese films made in the 1930s.' Yu also observes that 'eight Mandarin films were produced in Hong Kong in the 1930s, all made by Shanghai filmmakers', and that 'from 1940 to December 1941, just prior to the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong…of the 11 Mandarin films produced during this time…their writers, directors and the main cast all came from Shanghai.' In his final count, he concludes that 'out of the 160 Cantonese films produced during this time, 109 of them were directed by Shanghai filmmakers.'[2] Yu's statistical analysis points out that Shanghai filmmakers influenced Hong Kong cinema in ways far wider and deeper than the impression given by *A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema*, which only elaborated on the work of left-wing filmmakers. In 1930s and 1940s Hong Kong, film directors who came from Shanghai accounted for over half of the total number of directors, as well as over half of the number of films produced. This indicated a deeper hereditary connection between Hong Kong and Shanghai cinemas. However, Yu's essay puts together statistics from two very different eras—before the occupation and after the war—and treats them as a whole. As a starting point, this essay will attempt to adopt Yu's approach and thinking process to perform a similar statistical analysis, but focusing on the Shanghai filmmakers who came to Hong Kong prior to the Japanese occupation. The study will then extend to cover the various situations under which Shanghai filmmakers arrived in Hong Kong to work as directors and the changes they went through, as well as their significance in the formation of Hong Kong's film industry prior to the fall of Hong Kong.

Definition of 'Shanghai Filmmakers'

Here we will first define the term 'Shanghai filmmakers'. This essay attempts to analyse how the experiences and techniques of the Shanghai film industry were introduced to its Hong Kong counterpart through the medium of directors. Therefore, 'Shanghai filmmakers' does not simply refer to filmmakers whose hometowns were in the Jiangsu and Zhejiang region and who had worked in the film industry in Shanghai, but includes

2. Yu Mo-wan, 'The Historical Link Between Hong Kong and Shanghai Cinemas' in *Cinema of Two Cities: Hong Kong–Shanghai* (The 18th Hong Kong International Film Festival), Law Kar (ed), Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1994, pp 93-94 (in Chinese).

many Cantonese filmmakers as well. Anyone who had started out working in the Shanghai film industry and then went to Hong Kong to direct films are included in this definition. From this point of view, many directors of Cantonese heritage who are familiar to us, such as Wong Toi,[3] Lee Fa, Wu Pang, Lee Ying-yuen, Fung Chi-kong, Mok Hong-si, and Lo Duen are also considered to be 'Shanghai filmmakers'. Some of them had never worked as directors in Shanghai, but they had background experience in other areas of the Shanghai film industry—especially behind-the-camera work experience—and were thus granted the important role as directors when they went to Hong Kong.

With the above definition in mind, I used the information in the book *Hong Kong Filmography Vol I (1914–1941)* (Revised Edition), newly published by the Hong Kong Film Archive (hereafter *Filmography Vol I* (Revised)) as the basis for my calculations. From 1914, the year Hong Kong made its first feature film, to 1941, the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, there was a total of 133 feature film directors. From 1934, the first year Shanghai filmmakers began directing Hong Kong films, a total of 52 persons are qualified as Shanghai filmmakers. These include Wong Toi, Yeung Kung-leong, Runje Shaw (aka Shao Zuiweng), Runme Shaw, So Yee, Sit Kok-sin, Tang Xiaodan, Wen Yimin, Lee Ying-yuen, Keung Pak-kuk, Run Run Shaw, Ngai Pang-fei, Jackson Sum Kat-sing, Lee Fa, Hung Chung-ho, Wu Tsung-lei, Wang Naiding, Chan Tin, Ko Lei-hen, Hou Yao, Mu Shiying, Jeffrey Huang Yi-cho, Lo Si, Wong Fook-hing, Fung Chi-kong, Tung Chu-sek, Chuk Ching-yin (aka Zhu Qingxian), Situ Huimin, Dan Duyu, Richard Poh (aka Bu Wancang), Griffin Yue Feng, Yeung Tin-lok, Chuk Ching-yung, Wu Yonggang, Tong Tak-pui, Hung Suk-wan, Wu Pang, Yan Meng, Chuang Kuo-chun (aka Zhuang Guojun), Cai Chusheng, Yau Kwun-yan, Wang Cilong, Man Hen-fei, Wang Yin, Mok Hong-si, Yam Pang-nin, But Fu, Chen Kengran (aka Chan Hang-yin), Wong Hing-shu, Lo Duen, Wang Yuen-lung and Yip Yat-sing.[4] The number of Shanghai filmmakers made up almost 40% of the total number of directors in Hong Kong.

Next, we calculate the number of films these 52 Shanghai filmmakers made. According to *Filmography Vol I* (Revised), from 1914 to 1941, a total of 580 feature films were made,[5]

3. Wong Toi is a rather unusual example. He was originally a student of the UPS Actors Training School, and starred in the productions of UPS (Hong Kong branch). He was then promoted to the role of supervisor in the production department of the UPS 1st Studio in Shanghai. This behind-the-scenes experience was apparently of great help to his career development as director in Hong Kong, according to a report on his passing away: 'Ng Cho-fan's account of Wong Toi's life events can be summarised as follows: Mr Wong Toi was a native of the Dong'an Village, Liuqu, Zhongshan in Guangdong Province, and passed away at age 61. In 1928, during the early days of Hong Kong's film industry when silent films were still being made, Uncle Toi had already joined the Actors Training School of the UPS 3rd Studio. After graduation, he served the company as a regular actor and starred in three Cantonese films, namely *The Flame of Love* (aka *Iron Bone and Orchid Heart*), *The Shot Fired at Midnight* (aka *Gunshot at Midnight*), and *Temple Bells* (aka *Cry of the Cuckoo in the Temple*). In 1931, Uncle Toi was promoted and became production supervisor of the UPS 1st Studio in Shanghai. In the fall of 1932, he returned to Hong Kong and joined Grandview Film Company Limited, which had been formed by Joseph Sunn Jue upon his return from the US, as assistant director.' See '30 Years Dedicated to the Film Industry The Honourable Life and Sorrowful Death of Wong Toi', *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 4 April 1964 (in Chinese).
4. The names are listed in chronological order of the release year of their first directorial work in Hong Kong. Note that on top of these 52 confirmed names, there are other potential Shanghai filmmakers, such as He Qiang, Bi Shengfeng, Lam Tsong, and Yip Lui, etc. As further verification is needed, their names have not been included in the list.
5. The count according to listing in *Filmography Vol I* (Revised) is 582. I have counted out two non-Hong Kong productions to come up with the figure of 580. See note 1.

but this figure does not include the films that were completed but did not have a chance to be released due to the fall of Hong Kong in December 1941. Quite a few of these completed films were released gradually over the next few years. In order to reflect the full picture of Hong Kong film production prior to the Japanese occupation, it is necessary to include these films. I have identified 23 films in this category.[6] Together with these 23 films, there were 603 Hong Kong films made between 1914 and 1941. Among the 603, there is no data regarding the directors for 21 of them. Another 39 films were co-directed by Shanghai and non-Shanghai filmmakers. After deducting them, the total number of films, whether directed by a Shanghai filmmaker or not, was 543. Out of this remaining number, 322 feature films were directed solely by Shanghai filmmakers, amounting to almost 60% of the total number of films. These statistical parameters and numbers may be different from Mr Yu Mo-wan's, but my conclusion is basically the same as his: by sheer numbers alone, Shanghai filmmakers made up a significant percentage of the Hong Kong film industry. They accounted for more than half of the total number of films made in Hong Kong during this period.

1934 and Unique Film Productions' Hong Kong Studio

To further examine the stories of these Shanghai filmmakers before they came to Hong Kong, let us take stock of the local situation in Hong Kong prior to their arrival, in particular, local directors. We can use 1934, the year the Hong Kong film industry became markedly prosperous, as the watershed year. In the 20 years between 1914 and 1933, Hong Kong made 19 films. Only nine Hong Kong directors were on record: Lu Juefei (aka William Lo), Lai Buk-hoi (aka Lai Pak-hoi), Liu Lei-chuan, Chan Pei, Chan Kwun-chiu, Leung Siu-bo, Moon Kwan Man-ching, Chow Wing-loi and Mak Siu-ha. Lai Buk-hoi and Chow Wing-loi each made only one more film in 1934 before ceasing to work as directors. The only three directors who continued to direct films after 1934 were Chan Pei, Moon Kwan and Mak Siu-ha.[7]

6. I hereby thank Mr Wong Ha-pak and the research & editorial team of the upcoming *Hong Kong Filmography Vol II (1942–1949)* (Revised Edition) for sharing their research findings on films from 1942–1949, which supplemented a number of missing film titles in my list. According to their release dates, the 23 films are: *Unrivalled Female Heroine* (released in Shanghai in 1941); *A Colorful World* (released in Macao), *The Black-Garbed Ghost*, *Blood Drips on the Withered Flowers*, *Lovely Flower of the South*, *The Female Pirate* and *The Rich House* (1942 for all); *Sword Stained with Blood*, *Stubborn Lovers (Parts One and Two)*, *Forsaken in Humanity*, *A Couple Forever*, *Gone With the Song* and *Under the Roofs of Shanghai* (1943 for all); *Marriage of Marquis Qi's Sister* (1944); *Illusion of Happiness* and *Children of the Earth* (1945 for both); *Faster Than Lightning*, *Love in War Times*, and *The Storm* (1946 for all); *The Black Wolf Bandit*, *Sheung Ngo Dashing to the Moon* and *The Blooming Flower* (1947 for all). In addition, *The Lady Escort, Part Two* (1947) was probably produced prior to the Japanese occupation. Yet due to the lack of concrete evidence, it has been excluded from the list.
7. Chan Kwun-chiu is another noteworthy figure. During the 1930s and 1940s, though he no longer took up any directorial work, he managed Central Theatre and Cathay Theatre. He also established film production companies, including Chi Min Motion Picture Co., Ltd., Xinzhong Film Company, and Lianan Film Company, etc. Chi Min would rent its own studio in Shau Kei Wan to other companies for production. He also founded Zhongtai Film Trading Company to distribute Chinese and foreign films. Before the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, Chan was an influential figure in the industry in ways other than directing.

Tang Xiaodan

1934 was not only the year the Hong Kong film industry became significantly more productive; it was also a pivotal year for Shanghai directors to come to Hong Kong. That was because in 1934, Shanghai's Unique Film Productions (aka Tianyi) established its Hong Kong studio to make Cantonese films. The establishment of Unique's Hong Kong studio was not without tremendous struggles. After the advent of sound films, Unique had made China's first 'sound-on-film' talky, *Pleasures of the Dance Hall* (1931), and continued with Cantonese sing-song films such as *The White Gold Dragon* (aka *The Platinum Dragon*, 1933), *Song Parade* (1934) and *Romance on the Stage* (1934), which were extremely popular in Southeast Asia. Runme Shaw and Run Run Shaw, who were in charge of distributing Unique's films in the region, thus planned to make more Cantonese films in Hong Kong. Runme Shaw hired Tang Xiaodan, director of *The White Gold Dragon*, and a British sound recordist working in Singapore, to come to Hong Kong to make a Cantonese talky, *Unworthy of Love* (1935), under his personal supervision. But due to technical problems, all the visual images and sound were blurry. Desperate, Runme Shaw asked his elder brother Runje Shaw to come to Hong Kong to help him. At that time, Runje was experiencing some difficulties in Shanghai, so he brought his Unique production staff to Hong Kong. He delayed the release date of the completed film, and made *Mourning of the Chaste Tree Flower*, starring Pak Kui-wing, as the debut film of Unique in Hong Kong, which was released in 1934. He then re-shot some portions of *Unworthy of Love* and released it at a later date, crediting himself as the sole director.[8] The release of these two films established Unique's production mode of making films in Hong Kong mainly for the Southeast Asian market.

The production crew at Unique's Hong Kong studio were basically all Shanghai filmmakers. The cinematographer was Chow Sze-luk; the sound recordists were Shaw Vee-ngok and Chan Yoke-mui. In terms of directors, Runje Shaw was himself a director, and he directed most of the studio's films in its early days. As the studio increased production, he transferred director Wen Yimin from Shanghai. From 1934 until 1936, when Runde Shaw came south and reorganised Unique's Hong Kong studio as Nanyang Film Company

8. The production process of *Unworthy of Love* was far from smooth, see Zhou Chengren & Li Yizhuang, *Zaoqi Xianggang Dianying Shi (1897–1945)* (*The History of Early Hong Kong Cinema [1897–1945]*), Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (Hong Kong) Company Limited, 2005, pp 98-99 (in Chinese). The book cites materials from Tang Xiaodan, *Reminiscences of Tang Xiaodan*, Taiyuan: Shanxi Education Press, 1993 (in Chinese). The story of Runme Shaw encountering challenges in his attempts of making Cantonese films and seeking help from Runje Shaw has been recounted in great detail by Jackson Sum Kat-sing, who was close to the Shaw family. See Lo Kut, 'Runje Shaw and Sit Kok-sin', *Panorama Magazine*, No 19, 1 June 1975, pp 61-64 (in Chinese). Several errors in this essay were corrected after referring to May Ng's essay 'From Vertical Integration to Horizontal Alliances: A Preliminary Discussion on the Business Strategies of Unique's Hong Kong Studio and Nanyang Film Company' in Part 1 of this book, pp 66-83.

(aka Nan Yeung Film Company), all the films of the studio were directed by three Shanghai directors, namely Runje Shaw, Wen Yimin and Tang Xiaodan. In addition, Runje Shaw also brought on board Ngai Pang-fei, an actor-turned-production manager. Ngai did not direct while he was at Unique's Hong Kong studio, but after leaving the company, he directed two Cantonese films in Hong Kong. By the time Runde Shaw came to Hong Kong to set up Nanyang, Runje Shaw and the directors he had brought had all left. Runde Shaw hired two other directors from Shanghai, Hung Chung-ho and Ko Lei-hen. In 1937, after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, the director turnover rate at Nanyang was high, but the newly hired directors were all Shanghai filmmakers. Indeed, from Unique to Nanyang, the Shaw family seemed to have a company policy of only trusting Shanghai directors.[9] Unique/Nanyang (Singapore's Shaws Organisation had also produced two films under the name Nanhua Film Company) was the most productive company in pre-occupied Hong Kong, having produced a total of almost 110 films. Among them, only two, *War and Survival* (directed by Nam Hoi Sup-sam Long, 1937) and *Mother's and Aunt's Grave* (aka *Grave of the Sisters-in-Law,* directed by Moon Kwan and Wong Tit-yee, 1939), were directed by non-Shanghai directors.[10] These almost 110 films, mostly directed by Shanghai filmmakers, accounted for one-sixth of all films produced in Hong Kong before the Japanese occupation.

Pei-wah's Wives (1937), produced by Grandview and directed by Tang Xiaodan

Unique/Nanyang brought in numerous directors from Shanghai, among which a small percentage returned to Shanghai soon after leaving the company, for example Wen Yimin. Yet most of them stayed in Hong Kong to continue working as film directors, for example Tang Xiaodan. When the release of Tang's film *Unworthy of Love* was delayed, he directed for other companies. He made several very profitable films, including *The Incautious Father-in-law* (aka *The Bumbling Father-in-Law*, Shanghai's Yee Hwa, 1935), *Loverboy, Parts One and Two* (Nanyue, 1935–1936) and *Pei-wah's Wives* (aka *Twelve Wives*, Grandview, 1937), and became a very active freelance director. Tang had contracts with Grandview, Nanyue, Unique/Nanyang and other companies of all sizes, and was a prolific director. He later directed the iconic national defence film *Roar of the Nation* (aka *Roar of the People*, 1941). Over the course of his career, Tang contributed greatly to Hong Kong cinema.[11]

9. The policy of hiring only filmmakers from Shanghai was adopted by Shaw and Sons Ltd and Shaw Brothers (HK) Limited for many years after the war. From the 1950s to 1970s, only a few renowned directors of Guangdong origin were hired. Even in the mid-1970s, when Run Run Shaw had to discover new directors, he looked for non-Cantonese directors from Taiwan such as Kuei Chih-hung, Sun Chung and Mou Tun-fei. Guangdong directors were not extensively employed until the 1980s.
10. Four other films were co-directed by Hou Yao from Shanghai and Wan Hoi-ling from Hong Kong, the latter of whom was previously trained by Hou as his assistant.
11. Tang Xiaodan, *Bainian Dianying Bainian Xing* (*A Hundred-Year Journey of Films*), Beijing: Peking University Press, 2010, pp 58-69 (in Chinese).


The Hung brothers: Hung Chung-ho (left) and Hung Suk-wan (right)

Also worth noting is the unique situation of Hung Chung-ho. From 1927, Hung had been directing silent films in Shanghai under his original name Hong Chai. He had directed many folktale and martial arts films before joining Unique. When Runde Shaw reorganised Unique's Hong Kong studio as Nanyang, Hung was transferred to Hong Kong, where he directed many films. He left Nanyang in 1938 to form his own company, Zhongnan Film Company. But he did not sever ties with Nanyang. Zhongnan's films were shot on Nanyang's sound stages, and the screening rights of Zhongnan's films for Southeast Asia were always given to Nanyang.[12] In this way, the influence of Nanyang went beyond its own film productions. Through renting out studio space in exchange for screening rights, they assisted the production companies that they supported, and most of these companies were connected with them in their Shanghai days.[13] Under Nanyang's assistance, although Hung had left the company, he was still active in the film industry and was in fact very prolific. From 1937 until the Japanese occupation in 1941, he had directed 58 films in Hong Kong (including co-directed films), far more than in his Shanghai days, and was the most productive director before the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong. Hung mentored and promoted some of the people who worked with him. One was screenwriter Yeung Wang-kwun. Another was his younger brother Hung Suk-wan. Hung Suk-wan (aka Hong Yan), used to work in the art department at Shanghai's The United Photoplay Services Limited (UPS, aka Lianhua).[14] He co-directed with Hung Chung-ho at first, and later also directed independently. He directed 13 films before the war. Unlike Hung Chung-ho, who was known to shoot quickly, Hung Suk-wan's filming technique was known throughout the industry. This is evident in his film *The Rich House* (1942), which can be said to be the most stylistically sophisticated and technically advanced among all the surviving Cantonese films of the period before Hong Kong fell to the Japanese. Unique/Nanyang imported other directors, such as Ko Lei-hen, Wong Fook-hing, But Fu, Yeung Tin-lok and others. Eventually, none of these directors worked exclusively for Unique/

12. 'Now, he (referring to Hung Chung-ho) and Nanyang have reached an agreement on a long-term contract. Every year, Hung has to make 20 films with Nanyang, which owns all the distribution rights of the films. In return, Nanyang has to buy six films from Zhongnan every year, which is clearly laid out in the contract. The production of Hung's latest work *The Seductive Empress Now and Then* has begun shooting in Nanyang Studio. Needless to say, it is another folktale…' See Gao Ming, 'Hung Chung-ho and His Agreement with Nanyang', *Tsun Wan Yat Po* (*The Universal Circulating Herald*), 1 January 1939 (in Chinese).
13. For more about the agreements between Nanyang and other production companies on distribution rights, see May Ng's essay, note 8.
14. See 'A Group Portrait of Directors', *The Great Wall Pictorial*, No 100, November 1959, p 68 (in Chinese).

Nanyang, and all were considered to be active directors in the Cantonese film industry. Unique's policy of only hiring Shanghai filmmakers certainly did bring to Hong Kong a stable and reliable group of directors. They not only made use of their skilled technique in producing Hong Kong films, but also nurtured their local mentees to become the next generation of directors. The more apparent examples were Hung Chung-ho, mentioned above, who trained Yeung Wang-kwun (it is unclear whether Yeung was from Shanghai); and Hou Yao, himself having close ties with Unique/ Nanyang, who trained Wan Hoi-ling.

The Rich House (1942), meticulously and skilfully directed by Hung Suk-wan (Left: Cheung Wood-yau; right: Lu Ming)

The Director Teams at Nanyue and Grandview

Soon after Unique built its Hong Kong studio, another Shanghai company came to Hong Kong to set up operations: Nanyue Film Company, founded by Chuk Ching-yin. Chuk was originally a cinematographer who had served Shanghai's smaller-scale film companies. He later invented the Ching Yin Sound Recording System and recorded sound for the Mandarin film *Fallen Angel* (aka *Spring Wind and Willow*, 1933). While still in Shanghai, he was already secretly making Cantonese films because he knew they had a market in Southeast Asia. Chuk brought his Nanyue Film Company to Hong Kong in 1935.[15] He rented the Lee family's film studio in Lee Gardens Hill, Causeway Bay to set up Nanyue Film Studio. He also hired Shanghai cinematographer Wong Kat-sing (aka Wong Kat-sang), with whom he had worked in *Fallen Angel*, to be Nanyue's cinematographer. At once producing its own film and shooting films for other companies, Nanyue was listed with Unique and Grandview as the three leading film companies in pre-war Hong Kong. Unlike Unique, Chuk's Nanyue did not have a policy of hiring exclusively Shanghai directors. Chuk, having started out as a technician, only directed one film in Hong Kong, and assigned the directing

15. Regarding the rumour about Chuk Ching-yin secretly making Cantonese films in Shanghai before he came to Hong Kong, see 'Planning to Work with Sit Kok-sin Chuk Ching-yin Secretly Filming in Hong Kong', *Movietone*, Shanghai, 4th Year, No 35, 1935, p 722 (in Chinese). The article describes, 'After Chuk Ching-yin invented his Ching Yin Sound Recording System, he has been making sound films in Shanghai for small-scale companies and has occasionally been making Cantonese fantasy films secretly on the side'. Chuk arrived in Hong Kong in mid-1935. See also Lo Kut, 'A Battle of Wits Between Runje Shaw and Lam Kwun-shan', *Panorama Magazine*, No 20, 1 July 1975, p 64 (in Chinese). Lo Kut specifies that Chuk came to Hong Kong for work in June 1935. The first film shot by Nanyue in Hong Kong was *Tragedy of Stone Castle* (aka *The Imperial Appeal*, 1935); but according to *Filmography Vol I* (Revised), the first film produced by Nanyue was *Memorial at the Pagoda*, released on 20 December 1934. My guess was that *Memorial at the Pagoda* had been the fantasy film *Movietone* was referring to. Now this has been verified by the study of Stephanie Ng Yuet-wah, see note 1.

work at his company to others. In the beginning, he still used Shanghai filmmakers such as Yeung Kung-leong and Tang Xiaodan. Yet although Yeung was hired by Chuk in Shanghai, he was Cantonese by birth and knew the Cantonese dialect. He made several horror films in succession, such as *An Evil Thought* (aka *Midnight Vampire*, 1936) and *The Evil Scientist* (aka *The Scientific Murderer*, 1936), making him Hong Kong's pioneer in horror films. Nanyue later discovered Cantonese director Chan Pei, who possessed a deep knowledge of Cantonese opera. They engaged him alternately with Shanghai filmmakers.

As for the other major company, Grandview, its boss was Cantonese-American Joseph Sunn Jue (aka Chiu Shu-sun). He and Moon Kwan had both returned from overseas, and the directors hired by the company were mostly Cantonese friends and relatives of Joseph Sunn Jue. Yet Sunn Jue and Kwan also employed Tang Xiaodan and Lee Fa, both of whom hailed from Shanghai, to direct a great number of films. In particular, Lee's identity as Shanghai filmmaker, his influence on Cantonese films and his unique position in Hong Kong cinema prior to Japanese occupation are worthy of further examination. Lee's hometown was Xinhui, Guangdong. In 1927, he enrolled at the Guangdong Film Academy founded by Wei Biyun, and began to learn about cinema through a three-month training course there.[16] However, after the training course, he did not chance on any filming opportunities or related experience. He and his younger sister Lee Lai-lin instead became amateur theatrical drama aficionados. In 1929, they both entered the theatre scene of Shanghai. One year later, they joined Shanghai's Unique. Lee Fa started as script continuity supervisor and was eventually promoted to assistant director.[17] In 1932, his classmate at Guangdong Film Academy, Kwong Shan-siu, formed Ziwei Film Company in Guangzhou, hoping to take advantage of the rising popularity of talkies to produce the partial 'sound-on-film' Cantonese talky *Invincible Lover*. At the time, there were no facilities in Guangzhou to make sound films, so Kwong went to Shanghai to seek cooperation from Shanghai's Unique. Lee, then working at Unique and also Kwong's old friend, closed the deal. Unique would, for a fee of $6,000, shoot 2,000 feet of sound film. After the shooting of the sound footage, however, Lee left Unique and followed Kwong southward,[18] filming the sound-stage scenes for *Invincible Lover* in Hong Kong, and then to Guangzhou for a location shoot to complete the film, where it would eventually be released in Guangzhou in 1932. The film was in fact directed by Lee but Kwong was credited as director.[19] Interestingly, *Invincible Lover* was released one year ahead of three other Cantonese films that were produced in 1933, i.e. Unique's *The White Gold Dragon*, *Blossom Time* which

16. Gan Lin, 'A Historical Episode of Kwong Shan-siu and Chen Luzhi Devoting Themselves to the Arts Together in the Past Now Taking Separate Paths Towards the Silver Screen', *Youyou* (*Leisure Magazine*), Guangzhou, No 22, 28 July 1936, p 11 (in Chinese).
17. Zi Ling, 'Film and Drama Scenes in South China A History of Lee Fa's Struggles', *Sing Tao Jih Pao* (aka *Sing Tao Daily*), 11 September 1948 (in Chinese).
18. Kai Mai La, 'After Li Pingqian, Meng Junmou and Shen Xiling…. Chow Sze-luk and Lee Fa Suddenly Depart for Guangdong Ziwei Film Company in Trouble…. Runje Shaw Could Never Have Imagined', *Camera News*, Shanghai, No 104, 1932 (in Chinese).
19. Xun, 'Hiring a Pawn Director is Credited as Consultant Instead The Insider Story Behind Kwong Shan-siu's Directorship', *Screen Weekly*, Shanghai, No 29, 1939, p 974 (in Chinese).

Shelling in Mountain Five Fingers (1935), directed by Lee Fa in Guangzhou (*Ling Sing Pictorial*, Issue 18, 28 November 1933)

Lee Fa

Joseph Sunn Jue shot in the US, and *Love Redeemed*, which was financed by Thai Chinese investors; so chronologically, *Invincible Lover* should have been the first ever Cantonese talky, but it was only partially with sound. More significantly, the parts that had sound were not filmed in Guangzhou with local technology and know-how, but were completed by Shanghai's Unique. This proves the leading position held by Shanghai in terms of film technology of the day, and also that Guangzhou lacked filmmaking talent with skills and experience. Although Lee Fa had only been an assistant director at Unique, he was hired to go south to Guangzhou to finish the production of the film, effectively performing the role of a director.

From 1932 to 1936, without counting *Invincible Lover*, for which he did not receive director credit, Lee directed five films in Guangzhou, including *Charming Prison in the Palace* (aka *Golden Prison in the Palace*, 1933), *Writing—A Labour of Love* (1933), *Shelling in Mountain Five Fingers* (aka *Bombarding the Five-Finger Mountain*, 1935), *Miss Guangzhou* (1936) and *Under His Wife's Thumb* (1936),[20] making him one of the most prolific directors in Guangzhou during those years. His southbound adventures made it very clear that, compared to Guangzhou and Hong Kong, Shanghai possessed more advanced production techniques. Lee's work experience and track record in Shanghai and Guangzhou

20. The film information and release years are from Luo Juan, 'A Consolidation and Examination of Materials About Early Cinema: Using Guangzhou Newspapers in the Republican Era as an Example' Appendix Table 3: 'Films Produced in Guangzhou from 1932 to 1936', *Beyond Shanghai: New Perspectives on Early Chinese Cinema*, Emilie Yeh Yueh-yu, Feng Xiaocai & Liu Hui (eds), Beijing: Peking University Press, 2016, pp 182-188 (in Chinese). In the table, no information is provided regarding the director of *Shelling in Mountain Five Fingers*. I base my analysis on an article in *Pictorial Weekly*, Shanghai, Vol 9, No 24, 8 July 1933 (in Chinese). According to the article, 'Guangdong's Hezhong Film Company was at Hainan Island for scouting and filming with cast and crew, including (1) manager Ren Xiaoming (2) director Lee Fa (3) actress Lee Lai-lin and (4) actor Lo Duen'. Although it does not specify the film name, other information, including the year, the production company, the cast and the fact that filming took place on Hainan Island, all point to *Shelling in Mountain Five Fingers*. Also, the table does not list the film *Miss Guangzhou*. I added the title based on Lee Fa, 'A Marching Song Played Two Years Ago' in *Ling Sing Fourth Anniversary Special*, 20 May 1935, p 11 (in Chinese). It confirms that the film had been completed and released around the time when the article was published.

were highly rated in Hong Kong. In 1936, he arrived in Hong Kong and joined Grandview, directing four films over the next two years. Such productivity was very impressive, which shows how important he was to the company. Quite a few Shanghai filmmakers came directly to Hong Kong to work as directors, such as those under Unique. But some others, like Lee Fa, first went to Guangzhou to work in film production before coming to Hong Kong to work as directors. This group of filmmakers also include Keung Pak-kuk, Wang Naiding and Chan Tin.

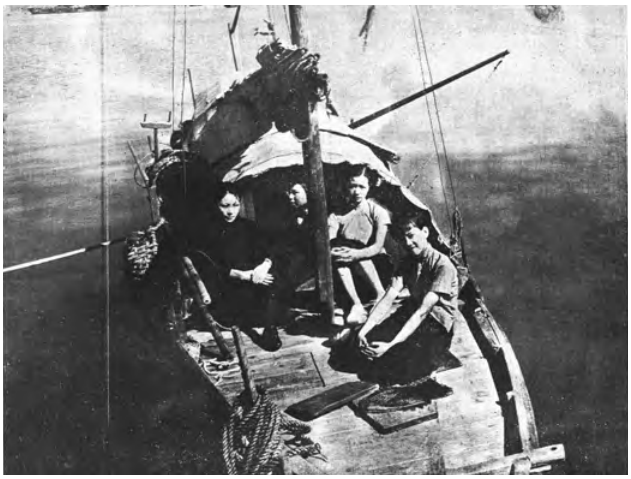
Left-Wing Directors Residing in Hong Kong

In addition to the three major companies, one other film production company, Quanqiu Film Company, had its own studio and considerable creative power in 1934. Quanqiu was located in Aberdeen, and was collectively founded and funded by overseas Chinese. The studio hired Shanghai filmmaker So Yee to be chairman and director. Its cinematographer Lee Man-gwong (aka Li Wenguang) also hailed from Shanghai and was cinematographer for *Return Us Our Territory* (aka *The Gallant Fisherman*, directed by Wang Cilong, 1934) for Shanghai's Dachangcheng Film Company. So Yee adapted Ma Si-tsang's stage play *Wild Flower* (aka *Scent of Wild Flowers*, 1935) into film. It was a box-office hit, so he subsequently adapted a great number of Ma Si-tsang's plays into films. His *New Youth* (1936) was very crucial in making Nancy Chan Wan-seung a star. So Yee was also known to be one of the earliest successful left-wing directors, and because he managed Quanqiu, other left-wing directors joined the company. Wang Weiyi (aka Wong Wai-yat), who later became a director, came to Hong Kong to escape oppression from Kuomintang (KMT), and started working at Quanqiu.[21] In 1937, So Yee and Lo Si, a director of Chaozhou heritage who also hailed from Shanghai, co-directed the Cantonese film *The Sentimental Woman* (aka *The Heartbroken Woman*) for Nanyang. With this film, Lo demonstrated his abilities as a director, and was later hired again by Nanyang in an individual capacity to direct *The Happy Encounter* (1938) and *The Ricksha Puller* (aka *The Humiliation of the Rickshaw Man*, 1938). He then worked for other companies, directing a total of 14 Cantonese films before the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong—quite a considerable number.

A film magazine of the day, *Artland*, published a rather mysterious introduction of Lo Si: 'Among the group of directors active in the South China film industry, Lo Shi's name is a recent discovery. In the film *The Sentimental Woman*, he uses a new method, a new ambience to give the audience a new impression. He is a young man in his thirties…. Lo Shi is not unknown in film circles, but in South China it seems only a few know his name. He has worked at the Board of Political Training at the Military Affairs Commission, and has been a film distributor as well as a film director. He has also owned a film company…'

21. Wang Weiyi, *Nanwang De Suiyue: Wang Weiyi Zizhuan* (*Unforgettable Times: The Autobiography of Wang Weiyi*), Beijing: China Film Press, 2006 (in Chinese).

So Yee



The Sentimental Woman (1937), co-directed by So Yee and Lo Si (1st left: Lee Yi-nin)

The author of the essay wrote his name as 'Lo Shi' instead of 'Lo Si'.[22] Another film magazine *Screen Voice*'s report seems a bit exaggerated: 'Some say the life of Lo Si himself is the stuff of a dramatic film. He has been a party official, a boss, a drifter and a major film director. When he was in Shanghai, he was known as one of the Ten Eccentric Film Geniuses of Chaozhou (i.e. Zheng Zhengqiu and his son, Zheng Yingshi, Zheng Yiji, Chen Kengran, Cai Chusheng, Chen Bo'er [aka Chan Bo-yee], Tan Youliu, Hou Yao and Lo Shi). The name was changed to Lo Si after he came to South China.'[23] Only later was it clarified in *Screen Voice* that Lo Si 'was originally named Lo Shi, and changed his name after his arrival in South China…'[24] In fact, Lo was originally surnamed Hou. When he was in Shanghai, he was a member of left-wing drama movement Shanghai Art Drama Society, and once directed the play *The Second-Story Man*, starring Chen Bo'er. So Yee was a member of the society too. In 1930, some of its members were arrested by the Nationalist government. The society began to operate underground, but in 1931 its core members joined the China Left-Wing Drama Writers Alliance, and the society was disbanded.[25] In Shanghai, Lo formed Lianxing Company with his theatre comrades. He then directed the progressive film *The Wrong Path*, which later had to be retitled *Tears* (1935) before it could be released. When So co-directed *The Sentimental Woman* with Lo, it was in fact to introduce this left-wing comrade of his to Hong Kong's film circle. Later, Lo used the same co-directing method to bring another Shanghai left-wing filmmaker, Yan Meng, to Hong Kong as a director.

22. 'The Extraordinary Style of Lo Shi', *Artland*, No 19, 1 December 1937 (in Chinese).
23. 'Lo Si Becomes Active Again in Film Directing *I Married the Wrong Guy* and *The Great Separation*', *Screen Voice*, Singapore, No 53, 16 September 1939 (in Chinese).
24. 'CLOSE UP · Several Important Characters in *The Great Separation*', *Screen Voice*, Singapore, No 59, 16 December 1939 (in Chinese).
25. Yang Cunren, 'A Short History of Shanghai Art Drama Society', *Maodun* Monthly Magazine, Shanghai, Vol 2, No 5, 1934, pp 127-132 (in Chinese).

Shanghai Directors Head South to Escape Disaster

Before the war, several production companies that had their own studio facilities had, to differing degrees, hired Shanghai filmmakers as directors. With the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, the War of Resistance against Japan officially began. Because Hong Kong's film industry was not immediately threatened by war, it became more prosperous than ever. In 1937, production numbers exceeded 80 films for the first time. This level of productivity lasted until 1941. To keep up with the growth of Hong Kong's film industry, clearly even more directors were needed. At that time, many Shanghai directors were coming to Hong Kong to escape from war in the Mainland. Nanyang therefore expanded its stable of directors in this period. Shanghai directors Lo Si, Wong Fook-hing, Yeung Tin-lok, Yam Pang-nin, But Fu, Chen Kengran and others at some point all directed films for Nanyang during this time. Other Shanghai filmmakers, like Dan Duyu, Jeffrey Huang Yi-cho, Wong Hing-shu, Tung Chu-sek, started their own companies to produce films, but none of them lasted very long.

After the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, Hong Kong cinema experienced a peculiar phenomenon. After the fall of the Chinese-controlled parts of Shanghai, its film industry ground to a halt. It later revived in the concessions, forming the Orphan Island period in Shanghai film history. But because there was no war in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Hong Kong film companies worked together, exploiting Hong Kong's sound stages and sets to shoot Mandarin films. The first example was Richard Poh coming to Hong Kong to complete shooting of the film *Sable Cicada* (1938) for Shanghai's Hsin Hwa Motion Picture Company. Next was Nanyue's cooperation with Shanghai's Yee Hwa Motion Picture Co., with Griffin Yue Feng filming *My Son is a Woman* (1938) in Hong Kong, and then Hsin Hwa's Wu Yonggang coming to Hong Kong to work with Nanyue to produce *Rouge Tears* (1938). Later, there were other Mandarin films produced entirely in Hong Kong for the Shanghai market. Before it fell to the Japanese, Hong Kong produced 22 Mandarin films. Among them, there is no listed director for *The Magic Lamp* (1939); and there is no evidence to show that He Qiang, director of *Boxer Rebellion* (aka *A Prostitute and a General,* 1941), and Bi Shengfeng, director of *The Black Wolf Bandit* (filmed prior to the war and released in 1947), were Shanghai filmmakers. Of the remaining 19 films, only one, *Lover of the World* (aka *400,000,000 Lovers*, 1941), was not directed by a Shanghai filmmaker. Quite a few of these Shanghai directors, like Richard Poh, Griffin Yue Feng and Wu Yonggang, came to Hong Kong just to do a job, and then returned to Shanghai after it was done. However, a notable few such as Cai Chusheng, Situ Huimin and Wang Cilong stayed longer.

Shanghai filmmakers brought to Hong Kong more mature and advanced film technology and technique, and there is little doubt as to their importance to the development of the Hong Kong film industry. Let us now look at the filmmakers' backgrounds in the Shanghai film industry before they came to Hong Kong. Some of them had not directed any films while in Shanghai, but they had participated in behind-the-scenes work, for example Lee Fa, Ngai Pang-fei, Jackson Sum Kat-sing, Chuk Ching-yin,

Chuk Ching-yung, But Fu, and Keung Pak-kuk. As for those who were already directors, they mainly worked for small-scale companies. Examples include Hung Chung-ho, Yam Pang-nin, Chen Kengran, Chan Tin, Lee Ying-yuen and Lo Si. Despite its reputation as a major company, Unique was never known for choosing high-calibre directors. In addition, directors including Dan Duyu, Hou Yao or Wang Cilong had directed films for major companies, but by this time were long past the primes of their careers. Setting aside a few of the filmmakers who just came temporarily for work, the only relatively prolific director with a high status in China's film circle, and who stayed in Hong Kong for a significant period of time, was probably Cai Chusheng.

Film scholar Stephen Teo suggests that 'Hong Kong cinema suffered a kind of inferiority complex'.[26] This not only describes the Hong Kong film industry's point of view. When Shanghai film magazines and periodicals of the day mentioned Hong Kong cinema, it seemed that they had long felt superior to the Hong Kong film industry. Judging from the industry prominence that this group of Shanghai filmmakers had enjoyed before coming to Hong Kong, it is not difficult to understand why the Shanghai filmmakers felt such superiority. We can also compare the surviving films of the era from both places. About 20 pre-Japanese occupation Hong Kong films have survived. In comparison with high-quality Shanghai films of the day, such Cantonese productions fall short by quite a bit. The latter had some rather basic technical errors that were quite obvious. For example, in *Fortress of Flesh and Blood* (aka *Provoking Father*, 1938), there is an on-location scene of a boat journey on a river. Due to technical error, footage of the actors laughing because they made a mistake and couldn't finish the scene was somehow included in its entirety in the final product. In *Miss Flapper* (aka *Pretty Lady*, 1938), the slapstick comedy scenes would have benefitted from sound effects, but they are absent. In *Follow Your Dream* (1941), every once in a while, the dialogue at an edit point is repeated. The sound recording in *Stubborn Lovers, Parts One and Two* (1943) fluctuates badly. These kinds of mistakes were extremely rare in Shanghai films of the same era. Out of all the contemporary Cantonese films, only Hung Suk-wan's *The Rich House* was generally better in terms of skill and technique. The group of Shanghai directors with the highest artistic achievements arrived in Hong Kong after the war. They were greatly helpful in raising the artistic standard of post-war Hong Kong films. [Translated by Roberta Chin]

Special thanks to Mr Jack Lee Fong of Palace Theatre, San Francisco, USA

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26. Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions*, London: British Film Institute, 1997, p 9.

Song of Life: Maternal Melodrama and Early Cantonese Cinema — A Preliminary Study from Records in the New York State Archives[1]

Kenny Ng

Sino-/Canto-Hollywood Cinematic Interflows

> Sixty-three out of 2000 may not sound like a very large proportion, yet the 63 Chinese films, imported for showing in the United States, and puzzled over during the past year by the Motion Picture Department of the New York State Department of Education, were more than four times as many the number viewed in 1936.[2]

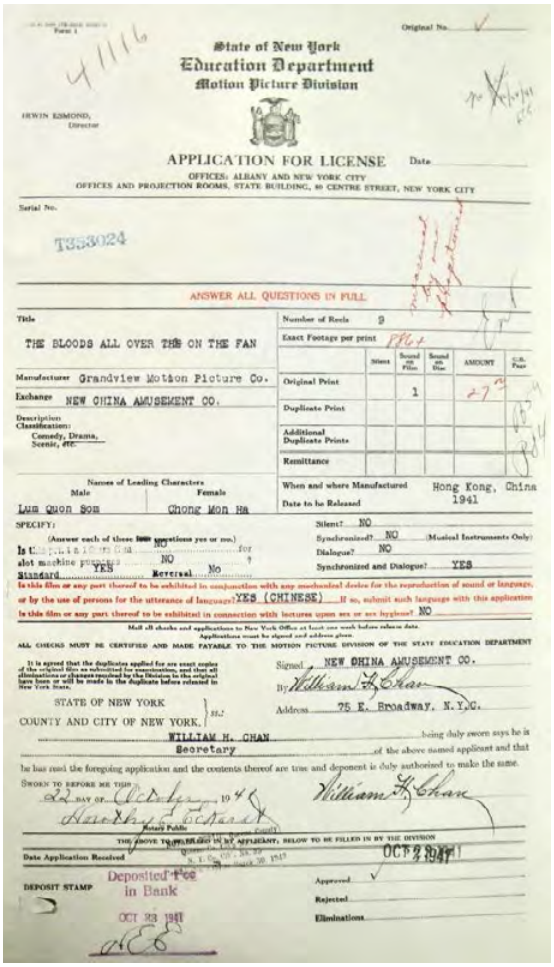
In 1937, *The Christian Science Monitor* noted a surge of Chinese films—mostly Cantonese—which were imported for showing in the US. By today's standards, it should have been a significant number of Cantonese films that comprised 3% of the total number of foreign-language pictures (including films made in the US, Mexico, the USSR, and European countries) showing in theatres in the US. The film houses for screening Chinese pictures were located in San Francisco, Boston, Washington, DC, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and New York. In terms of screen time, Chinese films usually run at midnight after the regular day's programme. But the report found that a New York theatre had recently inaugurated a continuous Chinese programme throughout the day and evening to entertain Chinese audiences there. The report also indicated the favourable subjects of patriotic films and realistic stories that could remind Chinese cinemagoers of their homeland. Chinese audiences preferred tragedies 'compounded of events which conceivably might befall themselves', as 'they do not go to the theater to laugh' but enjoyed weeping in the show.

This working paper is based on my preliminary findings of the censorship records in the New York State Archives. I shall look at Cantonese melodramas and discuss in particular *Song of Life* (aka *A Lost Woman*, directed by Lee Tit, produced by Huangjin Film Company, distributed by Grandview Film Company Limited, 1937), a modern family story and morality play with an 'occidental modern tendency' when viewed through American eyes, in dialogue with Hollywood's melodramatic tradition, especially the maternal melodrama.

1. I am thankful for the assistance of Linda Ou and Joy Kam with my research on the subject.

2. 'Chinese Motion Pictures Show Hollywood Influence', *The Christian Science Monitor*, Boston, Mass., 29 December 1937.

Kenny Ng visited the New York State Archives and read the translated scripts, censorship records and promotion brochures of early Cantonese films.
Image courtesy of Professor Kenny Ng


State of New York
Education Department
Motion Picture Division

APPLICATION FOR LICENSE

ANSWER ALL QUESTIONS IN FULL

THE BLOODS ALL OVER THE ON THE FAN

Manufacturer Grandview Motion Picture Co.

Exchange NEW CHINA AMUSEMENT CO.

Lum Quon Som — Chong Won Ha

Hong Kong, China 1941

Signed NEW CHINA AMUSEMENT CO.

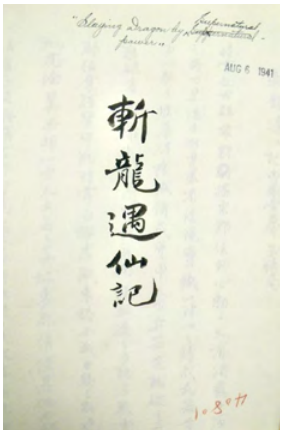
William H. Chan

Address 75 E. Broadway, N.Y.C.

STATE OF NEW YORK
COUNTY AND CITY OF NEW YORK.

WILLIAM H. CHAN
Secretary

Censorship records of *The Blood-Stained Peach Blossom Fan* (1940)


斬龍遇仙記

Cover of the translated dialogue sheet of *Slaying Dragon by Supernatural Power* (1940)


Venice Theatre
207 Park Row, New York City.

Promotional leaflet of Venice Theatre in New York


Handbill of *The Ghost House* (1937)

In April 2019, I went to the New York State Archives in Albany for a week to undertake a preliminary search of early Chinese-language films (mostly Cantonese) of the 1930s and 1940s. Thanks to the recommendation of Hong Kong Film Archive staff, as informed by the late Frank Bren, I travelled to the New York State capital city and found a treasure trove of unrevealed materials of early Cantonese films. The New York State Archives contain the license records and scripts of imported Chinese-language films between 1927 and 1965 (because of the US government's censorship policy on all foreign films shown in the country). With the enforcement of the Motion Picture Production Code censorship guidelines, popularly known as the Hays Code, in mid-1934, all major American/Hollywood film studios and foreign pictures distributors had to submit their films to state governments for censorship to undergo moral and political scrutiny. For Chinese-language films, the companies submitted their films with 'filmscripts'—practically they were 'dialogue sheets' with variable lengths and details translated in English—some alongside promotional materials. These filmscripts and censorship records could potentially be high-value historical materials for the study of many early Cantonese films that were lost, and provide another

perspective to explore Sino-Hollywood, and in our case Canto-Hollywood, film relations and industrial/commercial interactions in the early decades of transnational Cantonese film histories. The US records of Cantonese films are a good indication of Cantonese cinema's transnational distribution (e.g. films by the Grandview Studio in the 1930s) and reception in overseas Chinese communities. Individual case files of censorship on Cantonese films also provide concrete evidence of intercultural perception of Cantonese cinema.

The past decades have seen a surge of critical interest in Hollywood's presence and its impact on early Chinese film history, especially in Republican Shanghai. Scholarly attention and research efforts have yet to pay to the histories and commercial transactions of early Cantonese cinema in the US, particularly the contrastive or similar narrative traditions of Hollywood and Cantonese cinema in the early decades.

Chinese-language cinemas from the very beginning were transregional and transnational activities. Early Hong Kong cinema was no exception, and the American connection played a pivotal part in the development of early Cantonese filmmaking, which enhanced cultural intimacy between members of the Chinese diaspora. Early Cantonese sound films drew on Western and Hollywood inspirations. It also had a close relationship with Cantonese opera, singers and actors crossing between the stage and screen in Hong Kong, Guangdong, and the Chinese diasporas in Southeast Asia and North America. In 1933, Moon Kwan Man-ching and Joseph Sunn Jue (aka Chiu Shu-sun), two Guangdong-born diasporic film pioneers with work experience in Hollywood, envisaged the dawn of talkies and established Grandview Film Company Limited in San Francisco. In the same year, they produced one of the world's earliest Cantonese sound film, *Blossom Time* (1933) and distributed it in American Chinatowns, followed by Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, Sit Kok-sin produced *The White Gold Dragon* (aka *The Platinum Dragon*, 1933), which premiered in Hong Kong, Shanghai and San Francisco. These intricate cultural-geographical circuits with their constant transfer of capital, technology, agents, and talents allow a critical conception of the Cantonese cinema as translocal and transnational from its inception. *Blossom Time* was an opera-and-film fusion drawing on Hollywood's romance film style. Cantonese cinema was translational and hybrid by nature as it kept on adopting and synthesising features from vernacular literature, theatre, and screen, drawing on both Chinese and Western sources.

During World War II, Hong Kong cinema was paralysed when the colonial city was occupied by Japan between 1941 and 1945. Filmmakers like Kwan, Sunn Jue, and Esther Eng (aka Ng Kam-ha) took refuge in the US with San Francisco as their hub.[3] In order to fulfil the expectations from overseas Chinese audience for new Chinese-language talkies and to prepare productions for future transnational release, the Chinese diasporic and exiled filmmakers tried to make films based on local settings. Between 1939 and 1945, Grandview in the US produced more than twenty Cantonese feature films, which were screened in the

3. Zhu Lin, 'Between Hong Kong and San Francisco: A Transnational Approach to Early Chinese Diasporic Cinema', *Canadian Journal of History*, Vol 54, No 3, 2019, pp 361-362.

Chinatowns of the US after their premieres in San Francisco. Most of them were family melodramas, romance stories, and comedies portraying the daily lives of overseas Chinese within the social milieu of contemporary America. In these films, the Cantonese-speaking characters wearing Western-style costumes live in the US, but they still lead a traditional Chinese way of life and talk about the issues taking place in Hong Kong or the Mainland, indicating the nostalgia and concerns they have for their homeland.[4]

Sino-/Canto-Hollywood Intercultural Perceptions

On the other hand, it should not be ignored that Chinese immigrants were not the exclusive audience for Chinese films distributed in the US. Different from their Chinese diasporic counterparts, most local American spectators did not care about what was the 'real' China but had a penchant for a specific type of Chinese films that satisfied their imagination of an 'exotic and oriental' China. In this regard, certain Chinese films, which looked 'less' exotic or oriental, had to undergo special treatment before public screening in the US, including translation via subtitling or even plot alteration by profit-oriented American distribution companies, so as to cater for the viewing expectations of local American cinemagoers.[5]

It is worth pondering how the advent of sound film technology in the 1930s changed the cinematic landscape of a native-dialect cinema and also its audience reception, especially in overseas Chinese communities. In 1936 Lin Yutang wrote to *The New York Times* to explain how the adoption of the native tongue in talkies had enhanced the popularity of a local Chinese cinema.

> Excellent as the American pictures are, the characters and the social background lack familiarity for the majority of the Chinese audience. It is amazing how modern screen technique has made it possible for people ignorant of the English tongue to follow intelligently a story, which almost proves that language is a superfluous invention. But, nevertheless, the audience likes to hear the familiar tones and phrases of their native tongue with the picture. So the coming of the sound pictures has greatly helped in creating a still greater demand for native pictures…[6]

Lin, the famous literatus and 'ambassador' in Sino-American cultural relations, was appraising the premiere in New York city of the Shanghai-produced silent picture *Song of China* (1935) by Fei Mu (as the assistant director). The rave reviews of Fei Mu's work have been unnoticed in studies of Sino-Hollywood film relationships, as is the American perception of an 'authentic' Chinese picture, particularly of a silent film on which the impact of the spoken dialect is insignificant. Frank Nugent explained that the film dramatically appealed to Chinese audiences who had 'been fond of dramas extolling filial

4. Law Kar, 'The American Connection in Early Hong Kong Cinema' in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity,* Poshek Fu & David Desser (eds), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp 54-55.
5. Sun Xiaotian, 'Early Chinese Films in the US (1913–1949)', *Contemporary Cinema*, Beijing, No 4, 2013, pp 136-138 (in Chinese).
6. Lin Yutang, 'China and the Film Business', *The New York Times*, 8 November 1936.

piety'.[7] Secondly, Chinese cinematic preferences appeared to be intercultural, with a generic disposition for sentimental weepies and melodramatic family plays. Chinese audiences' favourite Hollywood pictures were *Way Down East* (1920) and *Over the Hill* (1931). In light of the melodramatic registers, there was definite proof that *Song of China* 'goes to several sentimental extremes in its treatment of the wayward-children theme'.[8] 'What they love most is a melodramatic tragedy woven around a theme of family love,' noted Lin. Lin's remark on the artistic performance of the silent film could well mean what an 'authentic' Chinese picture appeared to American critics and spectators, with all the visual elements playing prominent functions in foreign eyes:

> The technique and tempo of Chinese pictures are slightly different from the American. Expression of emotions is done more often by silent facial gestures than by impetuous talking or acting, and Chinese actors habitually underact, as American players of Chinese roles habitually overact. There is also a slower tempo, consonant with Chinese life and literature, more dwelling on little incidents and less hastening forward to the climax.[9]

Nugent's appreciation for *Song of China* seems to have followed Lin's 'instructions' on how to see the beauty of a Chinese film, characterised by slow tempo and technical fineness. Lin noticed that the director 'has filmed his picture with typical Oriental deliberation and with more than a hint of Russian cinematic technique'. The film 'moves unhurriedly—and silently—to a benign ending'. On the other hand, Nugent also found the performances of actors 'understated' and thus 'disappointing' as they failed to meet up his expectations of 'Oriental' flavours, for, 'being prepared for a Chinese picture, we expected the sweeping gestures, the exaggerated pantomime of the traditional Chinese drama'. Nugent might have in mind Mei Lanfang's performance tours to the US and the USSR in the mid-1930s, which had created a cultural shock as well as shaped the minds of Western critics about Chinese traditional drama, which could be relegated to be the arts of 'Ancient East.'[10] Nonetheless, Nugent was quick to remind his readers that 'We had forgotten that the cinema is a modern institution and is being served by the moderns of the East.' He emphasised that *Song of China* had a 'curiosity value' and nothing more. Still he recommended the film to US viewers 'on that basis primarily, and not as general entertainment'.[11]

Nugent's Orientalist remark was quite typical at the time among the highly laudable commentaries on *Song of China* construed by America's leading reviewers, such as this one from the *New York Herald Tribune*: 'The photography is enchanting and the

7. Frank S. Nugent, '*Song of China*, an All-Chinese Silent Picture, Has a Premiere Here at the Little Carnegie', *The New York Times*, 10 November 1936.
8. Ibid.
9. See note 6.
10. For more on Mei Lanfang's tours and performances in the US and the USSR, see Catherine Yeh, 'Refined Beauty, New Woman, Dynamic Heroine or Fighter for the Nation? Perceptions of China in the Programme Selection for Mei Lanfang's Performances in Japan (1919), the United States (1930) and the Soviet Union (1935)', *European Journal of East Asian Studies,* Vol 6, No 1, 2007, pp 75-102.
11. See note 7.

composition of the individual shots extremely effective: the acting is highly restrained but assured and there is an intriguing musical accompaniment in lieu of dialogue.... As an authentic and illuminating glimpse into the life of a Chinese family, the work is definitely interesting.'[12] 'The action is also distinctly Chinese, slow and smooth—a little too slow perhaps for most foreigners.... They may have found fault, however, with the slow action and the singleness of the story. There was but one thread of interest in the film, the story of filial piety. There was no heart interest and little humor.'[13] Robert Garland, film critic of the *New York American*, told his readers that 'You will learn more about how China looks, [how] ancient China feels in this importation than half a dozen books and a dozen lectures with lantern slides…' 'The critic of the *New York Herald Tribune*, Howard Barnes praised the *Song of China* for enchanting photography, composition of individual shots and highly restrained acting. Write-ups along similar vein appeared in the *New York Sun*, Los Angeles papers and others.'[14]

A review published in the *New York Herald Tribune*, stating that *Song of China* (1935) offers an authentic and illuminating glimpse into the life of a Chinese family (Front row from left: Shang Guanwu, Henry Lai; back row: Florence Lim)

Song of China is noteworthy as the first Chinese production to enjoy a non-Chinatown release in the US, and for that matter mainstream American criticisms manifested cross-cultural issues on Chinese cinema. It is a modern film that rather reveals an 'authentic' picture of 'how China looks' and how 'ancient China feels'. We certainly do not want to end with such a culturally biased view of Chinese pictures in the US. Bearing in mind that during the period between 1936 and 1937, the import of Chinese films in the US included silent films, Mandarin- and mostly Cantonese-speaking pictures at the (belatedly) transitional stage from silent to sound in Chinese filmmaking. How do generic marking, intercultural perception, and historical context shape the cinematic storytelling and affective character of Cantonese cinema of this era? I now turn to *Song of Life* to explore the film's Canto-Hollywood ramifications.

12. Quoted in 'Chinese Film to Start at Grand Today: *Song of China* Comes Home after Tour of United States', *The China Press*, Shanghai, 5 May 1937.
13. Quoted in W.L., 'Critic Finds Grand Picture Truly Chinese: *Song of China* Wins High Praise for Its Beauty', *The China Press*, Shanghai, 6 May 1937.
14. Quoted in 'Hollywood Promises to Aid China: *Song of China* Producer Reports on Trip', *The China Press*, Shanghai, 28 January 1937.

Song of Life: Canto-Hollywood Maternal Melodrama

In *Song of Life*, the mother Ching Wan-man (played by Wong Man-lei), neglected by her husband Cheung Ching (played by Ng Cho-fan), is induced by a womaniser—the 'villain' Ng Tsi-leong (played by Ko Lo-chuen), as the Chinese frankly call him—to follow the latter. The new lover has wooed her but never marries her. She bears a girl with him. Worse, he callously kicks both of them out of the house. For years, the remorseful woman diligently commits to hard work to raise her daughter. In a melodramatic climax, the mother sacrifices her life to save her daughter from the villain, years after she herself has been cast off.

The Christian Science Monitor indicated *Song of Life* as manifesting an 'occidental modern tendency' in Chinese film, and suggested a comparison of the Cantonese picture with *Stella Dallas*, one of the great exemplars of Hollywood maternal melodrama.[15] The plot centres on a mother who is suspected of adultery. She is expelled from her home and becomes separated from her children. The mother figure sinks or degrades to be a drug addict or a prostitute and after going through some tragic happenings, she redeems herself through sacrifice. Henry King's *Stella Dallas* (1925) and King Vidor's 1937 remake are both emotion-laden stories about Stella, a small-town girl, who marries a socialite husband but cannot go on to live with the husband because of their class difference. The daughter is raised by the husband. The film ends in the marriage of the daughter in upper social circles. The last scene, which shows the mother standing in the rain outside the house where the marriage ceremony of her daughter is being held, is dramatically linked to social boundaries and the harsh class exclusion of the mother.[16]

Song of Life, however, projects an even more demoralised world as the second man expels both the mother and her daughter. Years later he seduces his own daughter and almost commits incest. *The Christian Science Monitor* made a perceptive comment on the 'revolutionary' tenor of the Cantonese moral drama: 'How revolutionary this theme is may be gathered from the fact that in China, no matter what he does, the man must be obeyed by his wife.'[17] The 'revolutionary' tenor of the Cantonese picture can be read on two counts. First, the newly wedded wife decides to go for a divorce when she finds her first marriage suffocating and unglamorous. Second, her perseverance to raise her daughter after she is abandoned by the second husband makes her a respected mother figure independent of any economic assistance from a male partner. The determination and redemption of the mother makes her an atypical and non-traditional Chinese woman in foreign eyes.

Further, this 'revolutionary' Cantonese melodrama has to be understood in terms of New Culture advocacy of modern marriage in the May Fourth historical context. Since the film was created in 1937 and the story has a two-generational time span in more than 20 years, we can presume that the couple got married in the late 1910s, an era that witnessed

15. See note 2.
16. Lea Jacobs, 'Unsophisticated Lady: The Vicissitudes of the Maternal Melodrama in Hollywood', *Modernism/modernity*, Vol 16, No 1, 2009, pp 123-140.
17. See note 2.

Song of Life (1937)

Song of Life is also known as *A Lost Woman*.

Song of Life in the eyes of foreign viewers: A modern family drama and morality play with an 'occidental modern tendency' (From left: Wong Sau-nin, Lo Sai-kim, Ng Cho-fan, Wong Man-lei)

Cheung Ching (right, played by Ng Cho-fan) is committed to his writing day and night, neglecting his wife Ching Wan-man (left, played by Wong Man-lei).

Cheung Ming (left, also played by Ng Cho-fan) and mother Ching Wan-man (right) reunite.

the rise of May Fourth culture and literary movements in the major cities of Beijing and Shanghai, among others. What strikes me in reading the filmscript or dialogue sheet is not the elopement of the wife but the couple's decision to go ahead with a divorce. Divorce was not commonly and openly expressed in Chinese popular cinema in the 1930s—not until, say, Eileen Chang's film comedy *Long Live the Wife* (aka *Long Live the Missus*) in 1947; or in May Fourth literature and Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies popular fiction. *Long Live the Wife* was directed by Sang Hu and the screenplay was created by Eileen Chang.

Chang's comic vision can be associated with the popular Hollywood 'screwball' comedies of the 1930s.[18] Her storytelling satirises hypocrisy and infidelity of Shanghai urbanites. More importantly, it derides the idea of new marriage as championed by the May Fourth intellectuals. The film vividly depicts mediocre characters involved in mundane affairs—the social butterfly mistress who chases one man after another, the weak-minded husband who is prone to distractions and seduction, and the tolerant and self-sacrificing wife who finally saves her marriage on the verge of a divorce with her wit. None of these Shanghainese characters are 'enlightened' by the May Fourth ideals of free love and freedom. The husband fails to commit to monogamy. The wife is virtuous by the standards of the Chinese tradition. She is respectful of her mother-in-law. She has a pragmatic outlook of love and marriage, and would try every way she could to restore family harmony and order. She cannot resolve to go ahead with her divorce proposal, and would rather pardon her husband's mistake. Chang gives a surprise ending by concluding her story in an old-fashioned unification of husband and wife, a 'comedy of remarriage' presented as an irony of May Fourth romanticism and radicalism. At best, the wife in Chang's comedy of love in modern China evinces a 'quasi-feminist self-awareness'.[19] But it is precisely in its mockery of modern marriage—which is not a fairy tale but continuous problem-solving—that the comedy seems down-to-earth in its depiction of Chinese sentiments and family realities.

Song of Life concerns the failed marriage of a father and husband who, I presume, is a New Culture personage. More significantly, he is a popular writer of urban literature in the booming literary market in the early Republican era. He is 'a man of literature' who writes big sellers and manages to 'have made a name' for himself. Meanwhile there is no suggestion that the man has married his wife under a family arrangement. Their marriage must have been an outcome of the intellectual advocacy of the freedom of love, which means the man has married the woman of his own choosing. On the other hand, their marital problems stem from a personality clash—the husband is a self-centred, homebound and fame-pursuing writer; the wife is a non-intellectual who aspires to be a socialite lady but finds herself not in the right upper class, burdened by family duty and child care.

18. Kenny K. K. Ng, 'The Screenwriter as Cultural Broker: Travels of Zhang Ailing's Comedy of Love', *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, Vol 20, No 2, Fall 2008, pp 131-184.
19. Lin Pei-yin, 'Comicality in *Long Live the Mistress* and the Making of a Chinese Comedy of Manners', *Tamkang Review*, Vol 47, No 1, December 2016, p 105.

Song of Life departs from the May Fourth critique of the Chinese feudal family system and arranged marriage, as dramatically figured in Ba Jin's *Torrents Trilogy* (with its Cantonese film adaptations in the 1950s).[20] Neither does the film advocate a sense of conjugal bliss in a modern bourgeois marriage as portrayed in *A Pearl Necklace* (1926), written by Hou Yao and directed by C Y Lee (aka Li Zeyuan) for the Great Wall Film Company. The film set out to provide 'a vivid and seemingly unproblematic portrait of an absolutely perfect modern marriage'.[21] The young husband is a white-collar accountant at an insurance company. The wife is nice, intelligent, caring, beautifully dressed in non-traditional style. They own a lavish, Western-style house, that is, a lovely home. The husband has a promising career with upward mobility. The wife has a good social circle and can freely go out to interact with her friends. The husband is also a liberal (ideal) New Culture man who is willing to take care of his baby while his wife attends a party, thus engaging in a bit of modern gender role reversal and gender equality as May Fourth intellectuals advocated. 'The pursuit of individual interests and individual social interactions outside the home is part of the definition of the modern marriage.' But what the film then shows are misfortunes befalling on the couple and their modern family, reminding Chinese audiences of 'the many stresses and strains and pressures associated with maintaining the modern marriage'.[22]

A closer parallel seems to be Lu Xun's *Regret for the Past* (1925), a satire of the ideals of freedom of love and individual liberation about a couple of May Fourth intellectuals who have run away from their family to stay together sadly ends up separating from each other. On the flip side, *Song of Life* narrates a tragic outcome of a modern marriage breaking apart. How should we explain the divided views of 'modernity' and modern family as conveyed by this film and by large early Cantonese-speaking cinema of the 1930s and 1940s? Does *Song of Life* with its 'occidental modern tendency' of Hollywood maternal melodrama speak for the plights of modern women in a changing society? Or does it, as in the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies popular tradition, reconstitute traditional moral codes and glorify the traditional family that cannot do without the maternal presence? Or is it a satire of May Fourth's advocacy of individualism and freedom of love?

As the dialogue sheet suggests, the film begins with a mise-en-abîme narrative device—a 'sensational' newspaper story titled 'Song of Life'. Possibly there is a voiceover or a character introducing the novel, claiming, 'The *Song of Life* is my own history'. Who plays this character? There is no way to tell. Is this the father who introduces the story? (But he dies in the early part of the film.) Does the son introduce the story? (Being a high school teacher, the son is a typical May Fourth intellectual who vows to commit to writing novels

20. The Union Film Enterprise Ltd's penchant for May Fourth literature was reflected in its adaptation of Ba Jin's *Torrents Trilogy*. The studio chose *Family* (directed by Ng Wui, 1953) as its inaugural film. Subsequently, the studio produced *Spring* (directed by Lee Sun-fung, 1953) and *Autumn* (directed by Chun Kim, 1954).

21. Paul G. Pickowicz, *China on Film: A Century of Exploration, Confrontation, and Controversy*, Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012, p 21.

22. Ibid, p 22.

after he is forced to quit his job). Since Ng Cho-fan plays both the father (Cheung Ching) and son (Cheung Ming), is it he who does the voiceover? We don't know. In any case, this 'modernistic' set-up shows the May Fourth tenor of literary interest mingling with early popular Cantonese and Chinese-language cinema.

Dialogue lines:

1. Newspaper: A sensational story has appeared titled 'Song of Life'.
2. This is a wonderful book. By reading it the reader will learn that the author has put his heart and soul into it. It has won international fame so in this great hall of ours we place his picture, as a reward for his efforts spent in writing this book. His picture…. We will now award him the prize.
3. I would like very much to have the author tell you the events that caused him to write this marvelous book.
4. I am very ashamed to step up here and receive this award. It is not that your prize is not beautiful but it is because *Song of Life* is just an ordinary novel and I myself think I should not be rewarded for writing it. I thank you just the same.
5. If you don't mind, won't you tell us how this story came to be written?
6. The *Song of Life* is my own history. I have passed through happiness and suffering. Through these experiences I received the material for this novel. The *Song of Life* is exactly what it means. Life is but a song and when the last note fades the audience either will applaud for an encore or it means the end of the song. In my case I once was…

This New Culture husband is not a real liberated personage, however, who treats his wife equally. Nothing idyllic or admirable appears in the opening scene showing the couple's family life. The wife has to take care of the baby, and the husband keeps writing until 2pm without noticing it is his wife's birthday. The family obviously sticks to fixed traditional gender roles. Seemingly, the filmmakers are not expecting the audience to be sympathetic to the wife/mother rather than the writer/husband. He tells his wife, 'My home, my happiness is involved in my writing. You must make up for it.' He is dedicated to Chinese literature and his fame but not the family: 'But you see. Chinese literature is different from other countries. Every word has a certain meaning. I must put my heart and soul into it or the reader won't understand it.'

Being a New Culture writer, it seems, the husband declines his publisher's suggestion that he sells his personal story of family crisis and divorce to write a sensational and crowd-pleasing novel for a popular newspaper. As the publisher proposes to him:

Publisher: I know you have no more heart to write any more articles but why don't you use the quarrel. All the events that passed between you and your wife. Write it into a story and give it to the public. That way the crowd will know that you were wronged and she was wrong. Also this way, you will be able to have a chance to look for a new wife. Let it appear in installments in my paper. Here is the money.

Husband: Money. Money. I need it. No. I don't. I appreciate your offer but I can't do it. It is my own secret.

The husband hates the idea of trading his privacy for money even in a difficult time. In this sense, the character epitomises the May Fourth intellectual's antipathy to commercial literature in the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies tradition.

Whereas there is no extant copy of the film to watch, we could still read the filmscript for clues about the artistic composition of sight and sound to have an imagined audiovisual picture of this early Cantonese film. Music and songs play a crucial role in *Song of Life* for both its lyricism in narrative and commercial considerations. Produced in the transitional stage from silent to sound, it features three songs as a commercial gimmick. *The Christian Science Monitor* pinpointed the allure of music in the film: '"Foreign" music, but never jazz, often accompanies the announcement of the title of a picture...' It also reported that the musical accompaniments in Cantonese films were eclectically modern: 'A revolution has occurred during the past five years with the addition of the violin, saxophone, clarinet, mandolin, and xylophone to Chinese film orchestras.'[23] In Hollywood, the renewed attention to old-fashioned stories about maternal love came during the transition to sound. Jazz music and songs featured in many maternal melodramas.[24]

Songs are played in two respective episodes when the mother and later the daughter get seduced. The first episode goes with lyrics suggesting the villain's seduction of the mother.

The sun is always chasing the moon.
The moon has eluded him so far.
The sun has never given up hope.
Though being laughed at by the twinkling stars.

In the second instance, the song is played before the daughter gets drunk and almost 'ruined' by the villain womaniser Ng Tsi-leong, actually her own biological father.

Little flower girl…Beautiful flowers.
You are among them every day.
Is it a wonder you are beautiful
Their smell linger amongst your hair
Their prettiness invade[s] your face.
Red, yellow, white and pink.
From flower to you they show.
Little flower girl…Beautiful flowers.

23. See note 2.
24. See note 16, p 134.

You are amongst them every day
Your love for them, their love for you
It's beauty among the beautiful
Little flower girl, your everlasting smile.
They leave a lingering feeling behind.

In the end the mother redeems her 'wrongdoing' by sacrificing her life. In the nick of time she comes to save her daughter. She has a bloody scuffle with the villain, kills him, but she succumbs to fatal injuries. Her confrontation with the wicked ex-husband and father marks her redemptive moment to cleanse her 'sins' of once following this man and abandoning her first writer-husband.

Ching: You heartless beast. You have a man's face but a beast's heart. You ruined my happiness and now you want to ruin your daughter's happiness. Do you recognize me? I am Wun [Wan]. Here is your daughter.

Ng: Who are you? What are you talking about? Are you crazy?

Ching: Crazy? You think you can wash away your sins?

Ng: What sins?

Ching: You enticed me away from my husband and then threw me away, when a daughter was born. Now you try to ruin your own daughter's happiness. If that is not sin what is? Your actions are worse than a beast's.

Noteworthy is that *Song of Life* was also titled *A Lost Woman*,[25] characteristic of the 'fallen woman' prototype in Western film melodramas. In *Stella Dallas*, Stella, an ambitious working-class girl, begins her story and initiates her attempt to pursue an upper-class husband to seek upward social mobility. In the Cantonese picture, the mother is bored by her husband and his literary life; she elopes to marry a rich man and pursue a glitzy urban life. The Hollywood melodrama is an ironic twist on the American Dream, while the Cantonese film intends to impart the lesson of class struggle between the rich and the poor, echoing the call for social reform by concerned Cantonese filmmakers in the 1930s. The drama centres on the woman's elopement and her fallen from grace, which was interpreted as the 'seduction of the opposite sex by the bourgeoisie'.[26] After the mother is expelled from home by her second husband, she transforms herself to assume the role of motherhood. She is an uneducated woman doing the best she can to raise her daughter by running a laundry shop. When she realises that the daughter has fatefully run into the scoundrel who is her father, she is too shamed to reveal to the daughter her secret past. A

25. Lee Tit, 'Director's Words', Brochure of *Song of Life* (in Chinese).
26. Ru Ci, 'A Prologue to *Song of Life*', same as note 25.

comparison of *Song of Life* with *Stella Dallas* can be illuminating from a feminist point of view, as both the Hollywood and Cantonese pictures demonstrate the dramatic effect typical of 'the women's films' in 'devaluing and debasing the actual figure of the mother while sanctifying the institution of motherhood'. It is remarkable that 'the self-sacrificing mother must make her sacrifice that of the connection to her children—either for her or their own good'.[27]

> Ching: Now I can't hide from you. You are my son. Before this man enticed me away from your father he ruined my life. Here, Lo is your step-sister. Take care of her. I know I can't last any longer. Even though I leave I want you to take care of your step-sister as if she were your own sister. Give her some more education. Teach her from time to time. Guard her from evils.

In terms of feminist criticism, the mother and daughter are apparently a double sharing a closeness of fate—both of them are prone to the seduction of the same man. The mother who saves the daughter is also her last conscientious action of redeeming herself. However, what sets the Cantonese film apart from the Hollywood counterpart is the predominating male gaze and voice manifested in the father-and-son cross-generational plot. Ng Cho-fan plays the son, first a high school educator and then a May Fourth literary writer who fulfils his father's unfulfilled ambitions. The problematic mother-daughter relationship in melodrama is displaced by May Fourth patriarchal intellectualism. It is the son who assumes the patriarch's duty to compensate for the guilt of his mother and take care of his uneducated step-sister. (The second-generation daughter still remains illiterate, inferior, and non-independent.) Here I concur with Roger Garcia in his warning about Cantonese family melodrama that tends to privilege the family and the collective over bourgeois individualism and freedom, particularly when it comes to the women's pictures. The melodramatic mode of Chinese cinema 'traditionally recognises the fundamental importance of the family as a unit of socialisation (moral and ethical codes, patriarchy, the Law)...'[28] In this sense, we can understand better the narrative device of *Song of Life*, in which the ending echoes the beginning of the film where it is the man's voiceover (possibly the son's) who narrates—and dictates—the story of *Song of Life* to audiences. *Song of Life*, as a melodrama, provides a resolution at the end to restore the family and ethical order. Yet it privileges a male perception and resolution of the cross-generational crisis with the sacrifice of a woman, the scandalous mother figure.

27. Linda Williams, '"Something Else Besides a Mother": *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama', *Cinema Journal*, Vol 24, No 1, 1984, p 3.
28. Roger Garcia, 'The Melodramatic Landscape' in *Cantonese Cinema Retrospective (1950–1959)* (The 2nd Hong Kong International Film Festival), Lin Nien-tung & Paul Yeung (eds), Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1978, pp 36-39.

CODA: Archive, Early Chinese-Language Cinema, and Griffith

I also suggest that D W Griffith's legacy on Cantonese cinema, particularly his *Way Down East*, a prototypical maternal melodrama, has remained unnoticed. My observation comes from a viewing in 2016 of *Miss Flapper* (aka *Pretty Lady*, directed and written by Wong Fook-hing, 1938), which is among the trove of dozens of recently rediscovered early Cantonese films, some of them released for public viewing in 'Early Cinematic Treasures Rediscovered II', a retrospective organised by the Hong Kong Film Archive. In *Miss Flapper*, Nancy Chan Wan-seung plays a beautiful but naive village girl Hau who goes to the big city to work for a wealthy family. The film derives from the prototypical rural-urban motif in early cinema. The Nancy Chan heroine is mesmerised by the glamorous, glittery big city life. She falls in love with a handsome family heir (played by Kwong Shan-siu). The Cinderella-style dream, of course, is doomed to shattered illusion when the housemaid heroine is seduced by another wealthy heir, a dandy played by Wong Cho-shan. Worse, she gets pregnant and is forced out from her employer's home. Driven to an emotional breakdown, the heroine is saved by her ex-lover from the village (played by Liu Mung-kok).

At the climatic point towards the end of the film, when the heroine, carrying her baby, confronts the villain seducer in the rainy night, boldly accusing him of his wrongdoing and irresponsibility, I am convinced that this early Cantonese film was inspired by D W Griffith's *Way Down East* (1920). Griffith famously cast Lilian Gish as an innocent country girl from New England who falls prey to a fake marriage by a wealthy womaniser when she comes to visit her rich relatives in Boston. She gets pregnant but soon loses her baby. She is shamed as a once-mother without a proper marriage. Before she is thrown out of the house because of her scandalised past, the Gish heroine stages a tour-de-force accusation scene, in which she exposes the crime committed by the upper-class villain, who is held accountable for her suffering. She runs out of the house in the middle of a snowstorm, chased by the protagonist who loves her. Then comes the rescue scene that has become a definitive cinematic memory of Griffith's cinema and indeed early cinema history. The Gish heroine gets lost in the blizzard and faints on a piece of ice drifting on the thawing river. Her beloved runs towards her, jumping between ice blocks, and manages to save her in the nick of time before she reaches the waterfall.

In both the early Hollywood and Cantonese films, the impoverished girl encounters a depraved womaniser, and staggers down the road to ruin. They both deliver a happy ending, and maintain a strict message on class mobility. In *Way Down East*, it is a well-educated son of a farmer's family who falls in love with the servant girl. The Cantonese film *Miss Flapper* realistically sticks to social class divisions in that the heroine at the end follows her ex-lover from the village. Both films, however, point to the malevolent, polygamous man, itself reflective of the root problem of the huge economic disparities between men and women in early 20th century societies, Western and Chinese ones alike. Griffith inserts in the opening of *Way Down East* moralising and over-religious intertitles: 'Since the beginning of time, man has been polygamous…but the Son of Man gave a new thought, and the world is growing nearer the true ideal. He gave of One Man for One Woman.' In traditional

Miss Flapper (1938)

Pretty but naive village girl Hau (played by Nancy Chan Wan-seung)

Hau, carrying her newborn child in the rain, angrily confronts the villain seducer. (From left: Nancy Chan, Ho Ah-lai, Wong Cho-shan)

Chinese society, polygamy was allowed for the secular reason of fathering male heirs. But it was largely due to economic inequality of the sexes that it was practically still in place in early 20th-century Chinese societies.

The problem of marriage and the disadvantaged social and economic status of women meant the clash of old and new values, when romantic and free love was championed and traditional notions of arranged marriage, male polygamy, and woman's faithfulness to her husband unto death were challenged. It was the clash of Western cultural values with that of traditional Chinese marriage practice that accounted for the enthusiastic reception of Griffith's *Way Down East* in 1920s Shanghai. The film *Way Down East*, Chinese-titled as *Lai Hun*, literally meaning 'disavowed marriage' highlighting the centrality of marriage, caused a sensation when it premiered in Shanghai in 1922. Because of its popularity, it was re-released in 1924. In 1936, Zheng Junli reported in 'A Brief History of Modern Chinese Cinema' that in spring 1924 there was a Griffith fever in Shanghai following the success of *Way Down East* and the ensuing re-exhibition of his earlier films, including *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Intolerance* (1916), *Broken Blossoms* (aka *The Yellow Man and the Girl*, 1919), and *Orphans of the Storm* (1921).[29] Zheng had already pointed out the significance of Griffith on Chinese romantic melodramas earlier on, but it was not until the beginning of the 21st-century that scholars have rediscovered the impact of Griffith's films, especially melodramas, on the emergence of Chinese domestic cinema, providing a global vernacular

29. Zheng Junli, 'A Brief History of Modern Chinese Cinema' in *Jindai Zhongguo Yishu Fazhan Shi* (*History of the Development of Art in Modern China*), Li Puyuan, Li Shuhua, Liang Desuo et al (eds), Shanghai: The Young Companion Publication and Printing Company, 1936, pp 38-39 (in Chinese).

narrative to articulate the clashing family values, marriage norms, and social positions of men and women in transitional modern societies.[30]

When we take into consideration early Cantonese films like *Miss Flapper*, it definitely shares similarities in storytelling and ethical dimensions with early Hollywood film narration and Griffith's cinema, as much as it does with domestic Chinese silent cinema and Mandarin pictures. My questions are: What paradigmatic elements can we use to define (early) Cantonese cinema of the 1930s and 1940s besides its quintessential Cantophone/Cantonese-speaking nature? Another crucial observation on the making of *Song of Life* is Lee Tit's mention that it was Ng Cho-fan who recommended him the story written by Yeung Kung-leong.[31] Lee emphasised that Yeung's story was written in vernacular Chinese, and so he had to rewrite the screenplay with colloquial Cantonese dialects. Yeung's original script of *Song of Life* bespeaks the intimate Shanghai-Hong Kong-Guangdong cultural connections, especially with respect to early Cantonese cinema. Yeung was one of the few directors who directed both Cantonese and Mandarin films, versatile in multiple popular genres like comedy, romance, and horror with a tinge of Hollywood entertainments. He grew up and studied in Shanghai, was good at English and Chinese, familiar with Western cinema and devoted to Chinese filmmaking.[32] In particular, his Shanghai background and growing up there in the 1910s and 1920s convince me that he was indebted to the popular and vernacular literary culture of Shanghai and Republican China, together with his Hollywood interest. It also seems to me that the cinematic storytelling of *Song of Life* shares a similar tone with Republican popular/serious novels/plays, which are in turn following the same traits as the literary and visual culture in Shanghai, while Yeung's story (a popular fiction or drama play?) was written in vernacular Chinese. Suffice it to say that Yeung later directed *New White Golden Dragon* (1947), a remake of legendary *The White Gold Dragon*, allegedly the first Cantonese talky which was produced by Runje Shaw (aka Shao Zuiweng) of Unique Film Productions (aka Tianyi) in Shanghai in collaboration with Cantonese opera maestro Sit Kok-sin.[33]

In the future, the precious finds of early Cantonese films, including *Miss Flapper*, from Palace Theatre in San Francisco, and the written records of early Chinese-language cinema from the New York State Archives, would give us critical resources to reconceive and reconstruct early Cantonese cinema history and Chinese diaspora cinema within the cross-border cine-links of Hong Kong, Shanghai, the Pearl River Delta region, and the Pacific

30. See Jianhua Chen, 'D. W. Griffith and the Rise of Chinese Cinema in Early 1920s Shanghai' in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*, Carlos Rojas & Eileen Chow (eds), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp 23-38; Zhang Zhen, 'Transplanting Melodrama: Observations on the Emergence of Early Chinese Narrative Film' in *A Companion to Chinese Cinema,* Yingjin Zhang (ed), Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, pp 25-41; see also Qijun Han, 'Melodrama as Vernacular Modernism in China: The Case of D. W. Griffith', *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and Television Studies*, Issue 26, February 2014, pp 1-18.

31. See note 25.

32. I am indebted to Stephanie Ng Yuet-wah for her comments on Yeung Kung-leong.

33. For a detailed study of the subject, see Kenny K. K. Ng, 'The Way of *The Platinum Dragon*: Xue Juexian and the Sound of Politics in 1930s Cantonese Cinema' in *Early Film Culture in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Republican China: Kaleidoscopic Histories*, Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh (ed), Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2018, pp 156-176.

Rim network. The 1930s and 1940s Cantonese cinematic melodrama asks for historical, intertextual, and intercultural scrutiny with regard to Cantonese cinema's interplay with Hollywood and the Chinese literary and cinematic traditions, May Fourth reformism, Cantonese cinema reform and Clean-Up Movements, the country versus city motif, and the portrayal of women. We need more comparative, intercultural, and transmedia approaches to turn archival and cinematic evidence into storytelling about Hong Kong and its cosmopolitan cinema since the early days.

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Hong Kong's 'Tolstoy Vogue': A Preliminary Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the 1940s and Adaptations of *Resurrection*

Mary Wong Shuk-han

Resurrection (1899) was the last extant novel by Russian writer Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910). In the story, Katerina Mikhailovna Maslova, a young girl from a peasant family, is adopted as a servant by two landowning sisters who teach her how to read and write.[1] The year she turns 16, the landowners' nephew Dmitri Ivanovich Nekhlyudov pays a brief visit to his aunts, during which he falls in love with Maslova and seduces her. She becomes pregnant and is kicked out of the estate. After the unfortunate death of her baby, she becomes a prostitute. At 26, Maslova is falsely incarcerated for the manslaughter of a client. Nekhlyudov, by now very much enamoured with his upper-class life, is a member of the jury in the trial. Rencountering Maslova brought back his past memories and he tries to help her out. After making the acquaintance of a few prisoners, the sense of righteousness of his youth is rekindled. He casts a critical eye on the system's lack of justice and his own gentry status. Maslova and some anti-Tsarist political prisoners are exiled to Siberia. She is deeply influenced by their beliefs. Nekhlyudov does his best to accompany her on the journey. In the end, she chooses political prisoner Valdemar Simonson over him. Nekhlyudov gives up hope of rekindling his love relationship with her. The novel ends with Nekhlyudov reading the Gospels and reflecting on life and justice.[2]

Hong Kong cinema is riddled with 'bewildering' incidents, and the transcultural adaptations of the novel *Resurrection* discussed here are no exception. The 1980s and 1990s were the heyday of Hong Kong cinema. Literary adaptations were few and far between compared to the 1950s and 1960s; those that existed were based on popular

1. The Chinese edition used as reference: *Resurrection* written by Leo Tolstoy and retranslated by Charles Chen (originally translated by Geng Jizhi), Taipei: The Vista Publishing Co. Ltd., 2014 (in Chinese).
2. *Resurrection* was inspired by a true story, for more about the process, see Hugh McLean, '*Resurrection*' in *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy*, Donna Tussing Orwin (ed), Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp 96-110.

literature, like novels by Isabel Ni, Lilian Lee and Jin Yong (aka Louis Cha). Turning popular literature into commercial films seemed to be a matter of course. But every era has its particular zeitgeist and cultural context; and Hong Kong cinema has continuously evolved with changing societal and cultural temperaments. If we consider Hong Kong films today as emphasising social issues, as opposed to the commercial considerations of their predecessors, the films of the 1940s, born under a very different environment, manifested a social cinema of another kind. Ng Ho, the late Hong Kong film researcher, called Hong Kong films made between 1946 and 1950 'The Cinema of Turbulence'.[3] It was during this 'turbulent' time that *Resurrection* was twice adapted into Hong Kong films. It may be hard today to imagine how a serious novel could have anything to do with commercial film, but this is simply another of many 'bewildering' moments in Hong Kong cinema.

Of Tolstoy's three extant novels, *War and Peace* (1865–1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1875–1877) are more pleasing to the contemporary palate than *Resurrection*. The latter especially with its heroine's extramarital affair and final leaping under a train is a gripping read with the trappings of a popular work. Many scholars find *Resurrection* didactic and artistically inferior to the other two. Yet it has decidedly more adaptations than *Anna Karenina* in the history of Hong Kong's adapted cinema. Director Lee Sun-fung's *Anna* (1955) was an excellent and refreshingly eclectic rendition of *Anna Karenina*—a representative work of 1950s Hong Kong cinema. *Resurrection* was adapted four times into two Cantonese and two Mandarin works—*A Reborn Romantic* (1948) directed by Hung Chung-ho; Griffin Yue Feng's *A Forgotten Woman* (1949); Chan Man's *Resurrection* (1955); and *An Unforgettable Night* (1958) directed by Richard Poh (aka Bu Wancang). Tolstoy's influence was not only felt in Hong Kong. Before the 1940s, adaptations of his works abounded in the USSR, the US, Germany and France; also in Japan, Korea and China, where films, literary writings and dramas were created based on or inspired by his novels. Hence Hong Kong's adaptations can be regarded as part of a worldwide trend.

Interestingly, the novel *Resurrection* was reworked by both leftist and rightist filmmakers in the Mainland and Hong Kong, making it a text of far-reaching influence that transcended political stances. This essay will give an overview of the novel's film adaptations worldwide in the first half of the 20th century before discussing how Hong Kong's social and filmic environments at the end of the 1940s impacted the rendition of two films and their different approaches. Tolstoy's novel was written for intellectuals, with many details and a narrative steeped in Russian culture, but Hong Kong cinema was in service of the masses, hence heavy editing was necessary. The focus of this essay is not to compare the plots and character treatments from film to novel, but to point out how in the unique context of the late 1940s, Hong Kong cinema has changed the novel in order to tell its own story.

3. Ng Ho, 'The Cinema of Turbulence: The Emotional State of Shanghai Film Talents Working in Hong Kong in the Period 1946–50' in *Cinema of Two Cities: Hong Kong–Shanghai* (The 18th Hong Kong International Film Festival), Law Kar (ed), Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1994, pp 30-34.

Tolstoy's 'Russian Vogue'

Resurrection was published serially in the St. Petersburg magazine *Niva* in 1899. By that time, Tolstoy was a writer and thinker of global importance. Worldwide publication of the novel happened almost concurrently—a rare feat at the time. The first English translation appeared in the UK, also published serially and in 1899. Scholars have observed that between 1899 when the novel first came out and 1905, there were already over ten English editions in the UK—proof of the widespread attention received by this Russian writer in the West.[4] Perhaps 'passionate' is not quite the word for it; some have named this fervour for Russian culture 'the Russian vogue',[5] which I find very appropriate. Of course, the label carries a certain measure of irony—how does a sombre story critiquing the Tsarist autocracy become in vogue? It seems to underpin the seriousness of a weighty subject. But as Linda Hutcheon points out in her discussion of transcultural adaptation, the process of indigenisation is to relocate the original work in the local context, and this results in impure adaptations.[6] When grappling with a novel with themes as grand and details as complex as *Resurrection*, fidelity is not a top priority for creatives. That said, they still need to engage with the text, so they extract what they want and integrate it into their own culture.

Tolstoy on Screen[7] is an essay collection that elucidates the adaptation and reception of Tolstoy's novels. One three-essay chapter on *Resurrection* examines North American, Japanese and Soviet adaptations. Why was the world so zealously adapting Tolstoy at the start of the 20th century? The editor has an interesting observation: film needed Tolstoy and Tolstoy needed film. Film was born in 1895, and in the early 20th century, it was just taking baby steps. Tolstoy was an established cultural resource from which this 'cinematic infant' could learn how to dress like an adult. On the other hand, although Tolstoy himself did not like films, he believed in the enormous potential of this new medium, especially for the dissemination of thought.[8] Reality shows that long after Tolstoy's passing, he can still be seen and heard through black and white images and his stories have been kept alive by film adaptations.

One essay on early American director D W Griffith's adaptation brings up a point about commercial considerations that is worthy of further exploration.[9] Griffith had shot a 13-minute adaptation of *Resurrection* in 1909. I was shocked when I read this initially. The Chinese translation I had on hand was over 500 pages with a complex host of characters.

4. M. J. de K. Holman, 'L. N. Tolstoy's *Resurrection*: Eighty Years of Translation into English', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, London, Vol 61, No 1, January 1983, p 125.
5. Oksana Bulgakowa, 'The "Russian Vogue" in Europe and Hollywood: The Transformation of Russian Stereotypes through the 1920s', *The Russian Review*, New York, Vol 64, No 2, April 2005, pp 211-235.
6. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, New York: Routledge, 2006, p 150.
7. Lorna Fitzsimons & Michael A. Denner (eds), *Tolstoy on Screen*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014.
8. Michael A. Denner, 'Introduction', same as note 7, pp 3-20.
9. Vance Kepley, '"A Free Adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's Powerful Novel": D. W. Griffith's *Resurrection* (1909) and American Commercial Cinema', same as note 7, pp 45-58.

How could it have been reduced to 13 minutes? Why this novel when film was still in its short film stage? The writer attributes the running time to a new commercial requirement of screening one-reel films in nickelodeons at the time. At the same time, high-brow literature would have raised the status of film—having the names of famous writers on the reels would sell tickets. Prior to the 1940s, *Resurrection* was adapted by Hollywood four times, which shows how highly it was regarded. This relationship between serious literature and commercial film was also something Hong Kong adaptations had to face. Another essay in the collection, 'The "Russian Vogue" in Europe and Hollywood', discusses how the exoticism of Russian culture, as manifested in the lives of the Tsar and the aristocracy, and Russian religious ceremonies, appealed to the Western public. However, the tragic endings common in Russian art and literature might not go down well with American mainstream commercial cinema, hence tweaks were necessary. Cultural transference necessitates transformation.[10]

A feature of Asian adaptations is they rarely use the original novel settings. In most, it is replaced by the particular locale's way of life and social relationships, making it more convenient for the adaptation to relate to its local story. As early as the 1910s, *Resurrection* enjoyed widespread influence in Japan and Korea. The 35-year colonial relationship between the two countries also meant there was mutual influence on each other. Japan's earliest *Resurrection* adaptation was the 1914 silent film *Kachūsha* (aka *Katyusha*, directed by Hosoyama Kiyomatsu).[11] In Korea, not only were there film adaptations, *The Heartless* (1917), widely regarded as the country's first modern novel, was inspired by *Resurrection*.[12] However, the best-known Asian adaptation is Mizoguchi Kenji's *The Straits of Love and Hate* (1937). The story is about a maidservant who elopes with the young master. She works to support him, but he decides to go back home, leaving her pregnant and living in hardship. Eventually, she meets a travelling artist who takes care of her. Years later, fate throws the young master in the woman's path again. She chooses the artist and life on the road. This film can be considered a classic example of Asian adaptations. It has two distinct elements: the theme of the fallen woman and the melodrama genre. That said, Mizoguchi's handling of the subject matter steers away from common clichés. The essay's author describes *The Straits of Love and Hate* as a melodrama that changed Japanese tradition.

The ill-fated woman is a recurring motif in popular melodramas; it is also a plot element in *Resurrection*. Much of the novel's plot is meant to denounce the upper classes, the Tsarist autocracy, and certain personalities in society, which also ties in the creative themes dominating the late years of Tolstoy's career, making for a very distinctive context.

10. This is a fascinating essay that discusses the adaptation of Hollywood, as well as those of Germany and France. The German version preserves the attributes of high-brow culture, while the French version is marked by modernist tendencies, integrating foreign culture into its own. See note 5.
11. Rie Karatsu, 'Beyond the Melodrama of Kachūsha-mono: Mizoguchi Kenji's *Straits of Love and Hate* (*Aien kyō*, 1937)', same as note 7, pp 59-74.
12. Susanna Lim, 'Singing Katiusha: Tolstoy's *Resurrection* in 1910s Korea', *Journal of Korean Studies*, Washington, DC, Vol 24, Issue 1, 2019, pp 97-125.

The novel's religious and spiritual nuances may be difficult to render for commercial cinema; and how could one assimilate the themes of romance and society? In the following analysis, we will discuss two Hong Kong adaptations and what choices their filmmakers made between the serious and the commercial, between love and society in late 1940s Hong Kong.

Resurrection and Hong Kong's 'Cinema of Turbulence'

The birth of Hong Kong's Tolstoy adaptations *A Reborn Romantic* and *A Forgotten Woman* was related to the global trend, but definitely inseparable from the social background in Hong Kong and the Mainland at the time. Both films were shot in the late 1940s, after World War II had ended and during the civil war between the Communists and the Nationalists, when everything was being reshuffled. The years from 1946 to 1949 were a period of transformation for Hong Kong cinema. Many believe it to be the start of Hong Kong cinema's overtake of its Shanghai counterpart, as film professionals flocked south and began to develop their careers in the British colony.[13] Ng Ho called the works of this transformative phase 'The Cinema of Turbulence'; they reflected the unrest of the times. Although Ng did not organise his essays systematically, his taxonomy has been enlightening for subsequent film research.[14] Hong Kong culture of the 1950s was split into leftist, rightist and centrist camps. But in this 'Cinema of Turbulence' period of the 1940s, leftist influence was the most pronounced. Law Kar states in his essay, 'In the early '50s, the leftist tendency seemed to be the main trend in Hong Kong cinema whether one harboured idealistic sentiments towards the birth of "new China" or focused on vested economic interests.'[15] He points out the ambiguous condition of Hong Kong's 'progressive' films of this period and how it was only after 1952, when the Mainland market shut down, that this ambiguity dissolved.

From another perspective, the leftist stance spanned a spectrum; there were radicals of course, but most people exhibited a general concern for the lower classes and their livelihoods, and a critical stance towards feudal society. Law Kar continues, 'In fact, the great majority of [mandarin films produced by] studios in the early '50s tended to the left in terms of ideological expression. This was certainly true of works where the overall ideological thrust was anti-feudalism, anti-old society, and rejection of capitalism.'[16] What he means is that even the leftists produced different films that should not be lumped together for discussion. Griffin Yue Feng and Doe Ching, respectively director and screenwriter of *A Forgotten Woman*, hailed from Shanghai. Stephen Teo has this to

13. Law Kar, 'Epilogue: Retrospection, Reflection, and Doubts', same as note 3, p 103.
14. See note 3.
15. See note 13.
16. Ibid.

say about them, 'As a result of their southward migration, many directors and stars who later became well established and far from being thought of as radicals, first worked with studios that were politically left: in this category were stars such as Li Lihua, Zhou Xuan, Bai Guang, and directors such as [Griffin] Yue Feng, Bu Wancang [Richard Poh] and Tao Qin [Doe Ching]. Yet, these artists were undeniably idealistic; their work contained and expressed a certain nationalistic sentiment whether in the area of a regional folk culture or a broader patriotism that was often exploited in movies dealing with the anti-Japanese War...'[17] Teo describes the emotional structure of that era—it was patriotism in a broad sense, one arising from having endured hardships, rather than a narrow political ideology. Griffin Yue Feng and Doe Ching went on to join Motion Picture & General Investment Co Ltd (MP & GI) and Shaw Brothers (HK) Limited. They made films without strong political inclinations and were not regarded as leftist filmmakers. Law Kar and Stephen Teo both pointed out that the films at the time intended to express a widespread concern for society that was pervasive in the film circle at the time.

A Forgotten Woman is more 'faithful' to the original than *A Reborn Romantic*. It portrays how a suffering woman chooses to return to the working class, pulls herself up by the bootstraps and regains her freedom. The ending is in line with leftist narratives. *A Forgotten Woman* was the debut work of Great Wall Pictures Corporation. Great Wall was founded by Shanghai filmmaker Zhang Shankun, who interestingly was considered a rightist filmmaker. It was not until he withdrew from the original Great Wall in 1950 and the company was renamed The Great Wall Movie Enterprises Ltd that the studio's leftist leanings became clear.[18] Was the film's ending Zhang's attempt to counter rumours about him that had arisen during the fall of Hong Kong? Was he trumpeting his intent to please the Mainland market? Was this an indication of his concern for society? Or all of the above? These questions are a symptom of the complexities of the different camps in the film industry at the time. We will explore them again in the film analyses below.

Returning to Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, the novel is full of social commentary even before adaptation by Hong Kong filmmakers. Intriguingly, it was well-liked by both the left and the right cultural scenes on the Mainland. China's Geng Jizhi translated the Russian novel in 1921; it was published by The Commercial Press in Shanghai in 1922. But the Tsar's strict monitoring of the publishing industry meant Tolstoy's writings were often censored. The original Russian edition of *Resurrection* was heavily edited. Geng Jizhi had wished to finish translating the censored sections during his lifetime, but was unable to do so. Touchingly, his eldest grandson Charles Chen fulfilled his wish.[19] In the early 20th century, in particular

17. Stephen Teo, 'The Shanghai Hangover—The Early Years of Mandarin Cinema in Hong Kong', same as note 3, p 21.
18. There are different sayings about the reason behind Zhang Shankun's withdrawal from Great Wall; some say it was about politics, or money. Based on information on *The Chin-Chin Screen*, Wong Ain-ling wrote, 'the restructured Great Wall, with financial support from shipping magnate Lü Jiankang, was headed by Yuen [Yuen Yang-an], who recruited Sima Wensen as his script adviser and was assisted by *Ta Kung Pao* [*L'Impartial*] manager Fei Yimin [Fei Yi-ming]. The left-wing background of the new Great Wall was clearly established.' See 'Preface' in *Monographs of Hong Kong Film Veterans (2): An Age of Idealism: Great Wall and Feng Huang Days*, Wong Ain-ling (ed), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2001, p XIX.
19. Charles Chen, 'Preface to the Retranslation', note 1, pp 6-8.

during the May Fourth Movement, literati like Mao Dun, Qu Qiubai, Lu Xun, Ba Jin, and Guo Moruo all wrote about Tolstoy. In 1936, Tian Han adapted *Resurrection* into a script; Xia Yan adapted it again in 1943.[20] Not to mention, in 1937, Liu Na'ou had rendered *Resurrection* into the Wu Cun-directed film *Keep Smiling Forever* for Shanghai's Star Motion Picture Co., Ltd. (aka Mingxing).[21] Fascinatingly, the novel mesmerised both leftist and rightist intellectuals who went on to produce different adaptations. These works require detailed analysis and should not be judged superficially by their preconceived positioning.

A Forgotten Woman: Male Justice, Female Sacrifice

A Forgotten Woman was Great Wall's debut film, launched amid great fanfare with news reports and reviews eclipsing those of the previously screened *A Reborn Romantic*. Besides the usual marketing ploys like a star-studded premiere and sequential drawings of the story in newspapers,[22] Sir Shouson Chow invited some 50 honorary guests, including the governor Sir Alexander Grantham and Mrs Grantham, and the Consul General of the United States in Hong Kong to watch the film at King's Theatre.[23] Clearly, Great Wall in its early days had intended to rub shoulders with politicians and business leaders in the British colony and grow Zhang Shankun's career. Speaking of *A Forgotten Woman* in an interview, Zhang's wife Tong Yuejuan described her husband as 'using ingenious promotional tactics to re-manifest the virility and daring of the "King of Cinema"'.[24] The word 're-manifest' shows his determination to recover the glory of his Shanghai career in Hong Kong.

But interestingly, while building rapport with Hong Kong's politicians and tycoons, Great Wall was adapting *Resurrection*, a work in accord with the leftist perspective. Perhaps the studio was trying to find a mode of existence between the left and the right. The film contained commercial elements, of course. The leading and supporting actors were famous stars on the Mainland. Songs were a major feature; Bai Guang sang four new numbers, 'Ten Sighs' being the best known. The landowner is positioned as the primary antagonist and the childhood of the female protagonist Meiying (played by Bai Guang) is unveiled at length. She was sold by her father to a wealthy landowning family. Master Chen (played by Wen Yimin), the target of the film's criticism, is greedy and treats human beings as objects; he

20. Chen Jianhua (ed), *Wenxue De Yingxiangli: Tuo'er Sitai Zai Zhongguo* (*The Influence of Literature: Tolstoy in China*), Nanchang: Jiangxi University and College Press, 2009 (in Chinese).
21. The screenplay can be found in Kang Lai-shin, Hsu Chin-chen (eds), *Liu Na'ou Quanji: Zengbu Ji* (*The Complete Works of Liu Na'ou: A Supplementary Collection*), Tainan: National Museum of Taiwan Literature & Tainan County Government, 2010 (in Chinese).
22. 'Serial Comic Story of New Film: *A Forgotten Woman* (1–10)', *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 1–10 July 1949 (in Chinese).
23. *'A Forgotten Woman* is Selling Great The Governor will Watch Tonight', *The Kung Sheung Daily News* (aka *The Industrial & Commercial Daily Press*), 12 July 1949 (in Chinese).
24. Tso Kuei-fang & Yao Lee-chun (eds), *Tong Yuejuan: Huiyilu Ji Tuwen Zhiliao Huibian* (*Tong Yuejuan: Memoirs, Pictures and Accompanying Essays*), Taipei: Council for Cultural Affairs of the Executive Yuan & the National Film Archive, 2001, p 92 (in Chinese).

tries to sell Meiying to another man. He is guilty of oppressing women and the lower classes. The film demonstrates a broad-sensed concern for the downtrodden, in line with contemporary attitudes.

The ending of *A Forgotten Woman* is closer to the original than *A Reborn Romantic*; it is also structurally more meticulous. *A Forgotten Woman* opens with a prison scene. The male protagonist Daosheng (played by Yan Jun) wants to help exonerate the falsely incarcerated Meiying. The two reunite; the past feels like a lifetime ago. In a special room inside the prison, they reminisce through three flashbacks that give an account of Meiying's life prior to losing her freedom. Admirably, Doe Ching's adaptation co-relates with the original, as a non-linear narrative with overlaps between past and present can also be found in the novel. Another laudable feature is the cinematography. The outstanding prison scene fully conveys the inmates' sorrow and the injustice inflicted on them, thanks to the film noir style adopted by Dong Keyi from Shanghai. It also shows the influence of American film on these Shanghai filmmakers.

Cover of the brochure of *A Forgotten Woman* (1949)

Despite all this, the film's ending is unconvincing. Why would Meiying, after her exoneration and reunion with her lost son (who is dead in the original novel), give up her family and return to live as a farmer in a village? Especially when she did not meet a political prisoner like Simonson, as Maslova does in the novel. She could have at least chosen to stay with her offspring. Has the problem of oppression by her landowner been resolved? Later, when we discuss *A Reborn Romantic*, we will see the difference between the films' endings. *A Forgotten Woman*, as were Great Wall's other productions, was chiefly targeted at a Mainland Chinese audience. Their stories were set in Zhejiang and other Mainland cities. This ending leads one to speculate whether it is meant to complement the then political situation in China.

Unfortunately, Zhang Shankun's strategy of appeasing both the left and the right was not necessarily successful, not to mention he withdrew from Great Wall after the studio's reorganisation. *A Forgotten Woman* was attacked by leftist film reviewers for beautifying feudal society and sanctifying romance. In particular, a film review signed by seven critics opined that the director and screenwriter were ignorant of the realities of Chinese society.[25]

25. Zi Fu, Yat Kwan, Xiao Ran, Mu Yun, Da Zhi, Wei Fu & Kui Jun, 'The Theme and Its Handling in *A Forgotten Woman*', 'Seven Critics' Review', *Wen Wei Pao* (aka *Wen Wei Po*), 11 July 1949 (in Chinese).

A Forgotten Woman (1949)

Greedy Master Chan (played by Wen Yimin) tries to sell Cai Meiying (played by Bai Guang) off.

Meiying misinterprets Chen Daosheng (right, played by Yan Jun) and Xu Shuhua (played by Kung Chiu-hsia) as lovers.

Film noir techniques are used in the prison scene to convey sorrow and injustice.

Meiying reunites with Daosheng in prison.

Meiying meets her lost son at court.

After Meiying is released, she decides to leave her family and returns to the village alone.

And such views were not confined to Hong Kong reviewers; Shanghai's critics were also disapproving.[26]

I believe the core of the issue lies in the male protagonist. Daosheng's father is a landowner who oppresses the peasantry. But Daosheng himself has from a young age preached and embraced righteousness, although the film does not explain why this is so. The main problem is not the discrepancy in opinion between father and son; but that in such a story centred on a woman's misfortunes, none of it seems to have anything to do with this wealthy young man. He is perfect; society is the root of Meiying's suffering, and sometimes it is even her own fault. For instance, in the scene where Daosheng returns to his hometown, Meiying hurries to the train station to see him. She could have revealed to Daosheng about being kicked out of the house, and it would have prevented some of the subsequent misfortunes from befalling her, but she does not. When she spots Daosheng and Shuhua (played by Kung Chiu-hsia) chatting intimately from afar, she mistakes them for lovers and leaves. But the audience knows the truth. The righteous Daosheng becomes a lawyer. He gives away his land and writes a book expounding his beliefs. Yet he does nothing to help the woman he supposedly loves deeply and has intimate relationship with. Despite this, he is portrayed with his halo intact. I think the issue is not that the film is not critical of his gentry status, but that it does not consider this character's complexity as a man (an issue elaborated upon in the novel and even constitutes part of the main plot).

26. Xiao Qing, 'My Views on *Resurrection*', *Yingju Xindi* (*New Land of Film & Theatre*), Shanghai, Vol 8, 18 November 1949, p 17 (in Chinese).

This makes the film highly male-centric, not only in terms of gender relationships, but also politically. In the end, the film arranges unconvincingly for Meiying to return to the village, thus ending on a grandiose note. The unfounded belief that she would find freedom under such circumstances is but another product of male fantasy.

A Reborn Romantic: Hong Kong's Reality, Women's Rage

Another adaptation of *Resurrection*, *A Reborn Romantic* gives an altogether different impression. In terms of production scale, cast and promotion, it has all the trappings of a local, small-budget project. *A Reborn Romantic* was released during the New Year of 1948, appearing one-and-a-half years before *A Forgotten Woman*. Whether it had any influence on the later film or inspired its adaptation requires further research to ascertain. *A Reborn Romantic*, a Cantonese film, was directed by Hung Chung-ho and scripted by Suen Kit. Hung came from Shanghai where he had made films in the 1920s. There is currently not much research on him. *A Reborn Romantic* was produced by Jianguo Film Company, a film company then run by Hung Chung-ho. One would imagine therefore he had quite a bit of say in the making of the film. Hung was the paternal grandfather of Sammo Hung and a prolific director credited with numerous titles in both Shanghai and Hong Kong, including martial arts and folktale genres.[27] After coming to Hong Kong, he directed a war resistance film for Nanyang Film Company (aka Nan Yeung Film Company), *Back to the Motherland!* (1937). According to Hong Kong Film Archive data, Jianguo Film Company produced a total of nine titles, all released within the two years of 1947 and 1948. Most starred Pak Yin as the female lead and two of them featured Bai Yun (aka Pak Wan). Despite the political connotations of the studio's name 'Jianguo' (literally meaning 'Building the Nation'), its films were not particularly political.

A Reborn Romantic is set in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, with the characters travelling frequently to Hong Kong, then returning to Guangzhou, which was how things were back then. The appearance of Alhambra Theatre and other nostalgic places in the film would have struck a chord with many Hong Kong viewers. *A Reborn Romantic* has neither pomp nor grand narratives. In fact, it feels more or less like a melodrama. That said, its portrayal of the main male and female characters is more nuanced, and Pak Yin proves herself every bit as good an actress as Bai Guang. The film's focus is romance. The linear narrative begins with the male protagonist Lee Wai-tak (played by Bai Yun) visiting his paternal aunt in the country where he meets maidservant Ling (played by Pak Yin). Unlike *A Forgotten Woman*, the film does not spill ink on their childhood. The story opens with the development of their romance until the time they have sex. By clearly foregrounding the romance theme, it makes the rekindling of Ling and Wai-tak's love in the end convincing. The scenes of

27. Regarding the background of Hung Chung-ho, I took reference from Stephanie Ng Yuet-wah's 'A Director Who Was Buried by History: Hung Chung-ho' on the Hong Kong Film Critics Society website at https://www.filmcritics.org.hk/ (in Chinese). Accessed on 2 August 2021.

A Reborn Romantic (1948)

The film contains many Hong Kong scenery.

Romantic scenes between Ling (left, played by Pak Yin) and Lee Wai-tak (right, played by Bai Yun) are very natural.

Wai-tak attempts to evade responsibility by paying Ling off.

Ling roars with grief and pain after learning that her newborn baby has died.

Ling's client Chan Kei-fung (played by Liu Fan) vents his frustrations towards society before his death.

Film noir technique is obvious through the usage of contrasting light and shadow in the scenes in prison.

flirtation and courtship are very natural, such as the one showing Ling and Wai-tak casually eating watermelon seeds on the bed when their bodies touch and sexual intimacy ensues; as well as other depictions of life's small pleasures and everyday details.

A Reborn Romantic is also as critical of society as *A Forgotten Woman*. If the landed gentry is the main culprit in the latter, the former denounces something closer to Hong Kong society: money with all its evils. After Ling leaves the mansion, the characters she meets all demonstrate a dark truth about society: survival is impossible without money. Auntie Wu (played by Law Mo-lan) takes in Ling and her baby. She treats the two decently at first, but being poor herself, she cannot sustain her kindness and eventually arranges for Ling to become a prostitute. There is one remarkable scene where Ling discovers her baby has died, with Auntie Wu in the background. A tormented Ling bellows, 'You're better off dead. You'll never have to see another doctor, eat another meal...' Pak Yin's moving performance brings to life the fate of generations of underprivileged women. Auntie Wu is not a completely unsympathetic character. She is simply someone who does not believe that society can be changed. She tries to help Ling, yet she is also complicit in perpetuating the tragic fate of working class women.

A Reborn Romantic features excellent supporting characters and a wealth of details. Besides Auntie Wu, another important character is Ling's client Chan Kei-fung (played by Liu Fan [aka Liao Fan]). An important scene shows Ling being mistakenly arrested by the police for murdering Chan in a hotel when in reality he has killed himself because of financial problems. Before committing suicide, Chan leaves what remains of his

possessions to Ling. Blissfully, she leaves the hotel. The cops find the corpse, accuse Ling of killing for money, and throw her in jail, fully demonstrating the prejudice society and law enforcement harbours towards prostitutes. Although appearing only once, Chan is the film's spokesperson of sorts, as the character is arranged to vent his complaints towards society before dying. Although he proves no match for reality, he tries to help his close friend Ling. He is kind and loyal, full of the complexities of genuine, ordinary folk.

The key difference between the two adaptations lies in the portrayal of the male protagonist. Wai-tak of *A Reborn Romantic* is a flippant dandy, not the holier-than-thou Daosheng who fails to practise what he preaches. In one scene, Ling travels to the city to try to find Wai-tak. He panics when he spots her outside his mansion; he stuffs some money in her hand like she is a beggar before disappearing into a car. This scene shows Wai-tak's dark side—his cowardice and irresponsibility. Meanwhile, he has started dating a woman called Mary (played by Tsi Po-to). Eventually, Mary breaks up with him as she wants to get rid of his control. Viewers must find it gratifying to see this playboy being punished by a modern woman. In the end, Wai-tak hopes to get back together with Ling. Although the characters' psychological transformations are simplistic, at least the film does not sing unjustified praises of the male protagonist. The novel *Resurrection* describes Nekhlyudov's psychological journey, his struggles with ideals, reality and personal growth, and his final epiphany. In contrast, *A Reborn Romantic* bases its story on a woman's life episodes, which is typical of the melodrama genre. In the prison reunion scene, cinematographer Cui Yam-yuk adopts a film noir style featuring a palette of dramatic light and shadow. This enhances Pak Yin's impressive performance and body gestures to express even more fully the hardships suffered by women—not at all inferior to *A Forgotten Woman*.

Ling gets back together with Wai-tak after leaving prison. First there's suffering, then resurrection; what begins with love ends with love. These developments do not overstep the bounds of Ling's life. *A Reborn Romantic* may be a smaller production than *A Forgotten Woman*, but its adaptation is more straigtforward and its characterisation more complex. It lays bare the fate of women without trying to comply with certain positionings.

Conclusion

Critics often consider *Resurrection* not to be on the same par as *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, because the novel's artistic quality is diminished by its dogmatism. They are right if you consider the main narrative. But the story is also populated by a plethora of characters and details, the former portrayed in all the glory of their complexity and not as stereotypes. This makes for a rich and nuanced texture. And notably, the novel reflects the writer's thinking towards the end of his life, and that in itself deserves respect. The 'Tolstoy vogue' did not end in the 1940s and 1950s, although it waned. For example, Chiu Kang-chien, celebrated writer who moved between Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Mainland, and overseas, co-authored a screenplay of *Resurrection* with Zhao Xiangyang in 2009. The story was set in 1936 Shanghai. If avant-garde cultural elites of the 1960s would choose to

return to *Resurrection* in their old age, it is evident that the story deserves our continued discussion.[28]

This essay discussed *A Reborn Romantic* and *A Forgotten Woman*, two Hong Kong adaptations in the late 1940s, by placing them in the context of the global adaptation of Tolstoy's *Resurrection*; it also examined how the social settings of Hong Kong and the Mainland in the late 1940s impacted the two local adaptations and their different artistic directions. Tolstoy and film is a massive topic with mountains of content covering art, entertainment, politics and philosophy. This essay is just a preliminary exploration in anticipation of future discussions, especially in connection to two 1950s adaptations. [Translated by Piera Chen]

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28. Chiu Kang-chien, 'Second Chapter: Resurrection' in *Zai Xie Jingdian: Qiu Gangjian Wannian Juben Ji* (*Rewriting the Classics: Chiu Kang Chien's Screenplays in His Later Years*), Law Kar & Zhao Xiangyang (curated), Joyce Yang (ed), Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (Hong Kong) Company Limited, 2021, pp 124-211 (in Chinese).

Rethinking Research

Some Observations on Film Archaeology of 1930s Hong Kong Films

Lo Wai-luk

Foreword

When sound film technology reached China in the 1930s, it was quickly adopted and developed by the local industry. As such, Cantonese films gained popularity in Hong Kong, leading to a rapid expansion of the market. Hong Kong became a hub for Chinese-language cinema, and from the period between 1933, when the first Cantonese films were made, and December 1941, when the city fell under Japanese occupation, 566 films were produced in the city. According to *Hong Kong Filmography Vol I (1914–1941)* (Revised Edition), before 1941, Hong Kong produced 27 silent films, 536 Cantonese films and 19 Mandarin films, tabulated as follows:

	1914-30	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939	1940	1941	Total
Films	11	3	2	4	14	31	48	86	86	127	90	80	582
Cantonese	0	0	0	2*	6	30	48*	86	83	123	84	74	536
Mandarin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	4	6	6	19

*One of which is only partially with sound

Unfortunately, due to many external factors such as war, fire accidents, and the lack of awareness regarding film preservation, most of these 582 works are now lost. After a lot of hard work by several generations of archivists at the Hong Kong Film Archive, out of all the films produced before December 1941, only about 20 feature films—in other words a mere 3.4% of the total amount—have been located. We can only reconstruct the synopses of the missing titles through scripts, dialogue lists, handbills, promotional articles and reviews published in newspapers or magazines of the time.

In order to study Hong Kong film history, to understand Hong Kong cinema culture, to discuss the cultural identity of Hongkongers and to explore how relationship between Hong Kong and the Mainland is structured, there is a dire need to conduct

'film archaeological studies' on Hong Kong cinema. For the past four decades, research carried out by scholars of Hong Kong cinema culture studies have laid solid groundwork on a global scale for the discipline. At the present stage, apart from further acquisition and preservation of historical material, or engaging in film and textual analysis, we can also attempt to study the industry as an ecology or an evolving system. Using the limited materials we have on hand, we can open up our imaginations to construct the possible 'cultural products that once existed, but have not re-appeared'. This paper will refer to multiple perspectives, such as comparative arts studies and structuralism, to explore Hong Kong cinema as a sub-system of the wider Chinese cinema. It will study the ten or so currently available Hong Kong films from the 1930s and discuss them textually and structurally, so as to define angles or topics that are worth exploring further in the field.

Film Archaeology

Archaeology is the study of human history through the artefacts and remains created by human activity. The medium of film was born in 1895, considered to be very recent in the scope of the history of human civilisation. The use of the term 'archaeology' here is thus relative: the relevant period is not ancient history, but the modern, post-Industrial Revolution era when science and technology began to progress in leaps and bounds. But since the end of the 19th century, history has undergone tumultuous changes, and culture has been immensely impacted. Just as ancient societies have been buried under thousands of years of desert sandstorms, the storms of time have ravaged film artefacts. Due to numerous wars, revolutions, social upheavals and mass migrations, even the first half of the 20th century seems to harken from the distant past.

In the 1930s, the Hong Kong film industry underwent tremendous development. However, in December 1941, the Japanese army occupied Hong Kong; during those three years and eight months, most filmmakers from South China departed, while those that remained ceased filmmaking activities. Film production ground to a halt. Film reels were destroyed, and other related materials lost. After Japan's unconditional surrender in August 1945, the Hong Kong film industry began to revive under very difficult conditions, marked by a lack of production resources and unstable labour supply. Then, in mid-1946, civil war broke out between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As a British colony at the time, Hong Kong immediately took on a unique cultural and political status. Film is not only a commercial merchandise, but also a product of ideology. During that time, leftist, rightist and centrist parties were vying against one another for political influence, and film was valued for the immediacy and propagation impact of its promotional schemes; its preservation was of very low priority. After the war, Hong Kong's colonial government made great strides in improving the livelihood of its people, and paid some attention to their education, but did not establish a systematic policy for preserving cultural materials. This has contributed to the loss or damage of a large amount of Hong Kong film artefacts.

In the mid-1970s, the Hong Kong Film Culture Centre was established. A number of film professionals proposed the establishment of a Hong Kong Film Archive. The notion of seeking out old films in Hong Kong began to germinate. In the early 1980s, I first heard about the concept of 'film archaeology' from my late mentor Lin Nien-tung. At that time, Lin, together with Wong Kai-chee, Koo Siu-sun, William Tay, Wong Ain-ling, Cheung Chin and others, set up the Chinese Film Association, which in 1984 organised the 'Early Chinese Cinema: The Era of Exploration' retrospective. I assisted with this event and benefitted greatly from the experience.[1]

From Film to Artefact

Often have we been told that 'Today's news is tomorrow's history.' In the same vein, yesteryear's films are today's artefacts.

When a film becomes an artefact, it is, first and foremost, a historical process. Understanding the history of film culture and sorting out the context of contemporary Hong Kong cultural industries are the bases of revealing and organising insights on the subject. At the same time, forming a credible discourse based on the surviving percentage of the artefacts and materials, especially with the very small number of films, may require a considerable degree of cultural imagination in our theorisation.

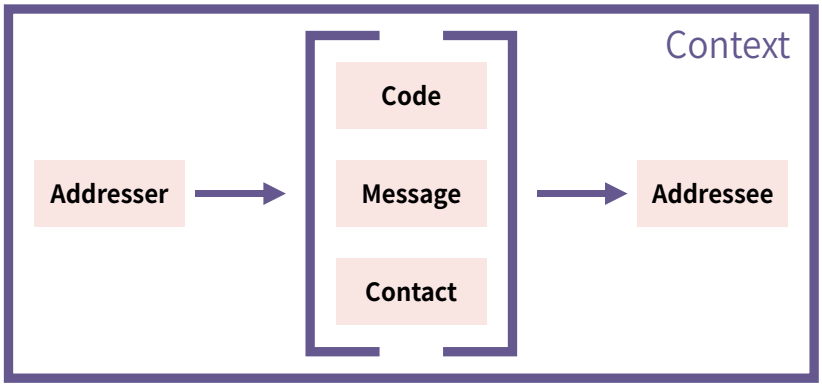
Film archaeology involves determining how a film from the past, under a unique set of historical circumstances, became a cultural product and how it survives today as a contemporary artefact. This is a dynamic process involving systemic organisation and reconstruction.

Chinese and foreign art criticism theories may offer a point of reference. The most well-known of these in cultural circles are the 'poetics of time' in 'The Great Preface' to the *Book of Songs* and Roman Jakobson's ideas about 'poetic communication'. Both link individual creations with other individuals, or even society as a whole, to construct a system and develop a discourse. 'The Great Preface' to the *Book of Songs* is an important ancient Chinese text on poetic theory. Its author cannot be ascertained: one school of thought indicates it is Zixia, a disciple of Confucius; another indicates it was written by Wei Hong of the Han Dynasty as a general preface to the *Book of Songs*. Jakobson was one of the most influential linguists of the 20th century. Born in Russia, he received his PhD in Czechoslovakia and emigrated to New York in 1941. Using semiotics and communication theory, he had a large part in establishing structuralism in linguistics. His essay 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics', published in 1960, elaborates on 'poetic communication'.[2]

1. In the field of film archaeology in Hong Kong, apart from Lin Nien-tung and Yu Mo-wan mentioned in the essay, there are numerous figures in the cultural industry who have made significant contributions. They include Law Kar, Wong Ain-ling, Lai Shek, Li Yizhuang, Zhou Chengren, and Emilie Yeh Yueh-yu, etc. In recent years, Stephanie Ng Yuet-wah and Lau Yam are also among a new generation of researchers who deserve our attention.
2. Roman Jakobson, 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics' in *Style in Language*, Thomas A. Sebeok (ed), Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1960, pp 350-377.

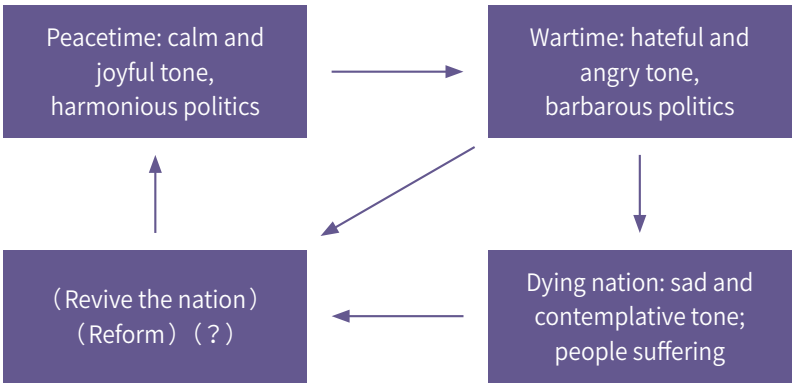
To Jakobson, the existence of poetry (and by extension literary art) in society involves six basic functions, as illustrated by different aspects involved in the communication process: first, at either end of the process are the Addresser and the Addressee. Then, after the parties at either end of the poetic communication process have been established, the Message to be communicated must involve the Contact, to be expressed in a mutually accepted or understood message decipher, i.e. the Code. And these five aspects are all within the boundaries of Context. For the convenience of the reader, I have slightly re-arranged the above into the schematic below:

[Figure 1] Poetic Communication (Roman Jakobson)



The purpose of 'The Great Preface' to the *Book of Songs* is to establish the study of Chinese poetics: 'Poetry is an expression of our aspirations. When hidden in our hearts, it is just our aspirations. Expressed by language, it becomes what is known as "poetry". When emotions in our hearts move us, they tend to be expressed by language. When language is insufficient, we moan and sigh. When moaning and sighing is insufficient, we sing it out loud. When singing is insufficient, we intuitively dance.' This discourse associates Chinese poetry with the expression of feelings: the emotions in our hearts that move us are the source of art. Different means of expression in different languages, sounds, songs, dance and other forms of expression, all start from the heart being moved. Then, the essay links individuals with society and defines the relationship between the prevailing mood of the era and linguistic expression: 'The tone of peacetime is calm and joyful, its politics are harmonious; the tone of wartime is hateful and angry, its politics are barbarous; the tone of a dying nation is sad and contemplative, its people are suffering.' This statement is based on the idea of 'the universality of human feelings'. It also clearly lays out a structure for a 'System Theory of Literary Art and Society'. The following schematic uses a structuralist method to dynamically illustrate this idea:

[Figure 2] System Theory of Literary Art and Society



Literary art has a dialectical relation with the restoration of social order. It is an integral part of social development, as literary artistic creation reflects cultural progress. At the same time, it provides feedback information for this system, ensuring healthy social development. However, the development of China's film industry in the 20th century had tremendous ups and downs, and was also limited by complex cultural politics and impacted by various national crises.

Referring to the above theories, our starting point in the archaeology of 1930s Hong Kong films should include the following questions:

1. In what era were the films produced?
2. How did Hong Kong society operate? How was it connected with China?
3. What was the cultural identity of Hongkongers?
4. Who were involved in the creation, production and distribution of films?
5. Who were the audience?
6. What thoughts and emotions were expressed in the films?
7. What kind of cinematic language, style and aesthetics did the films employ?

Hong Kong Films in the 1930s

In the 1930s, films went from silent to sound, and within a few short years the transition was completed across Chinese-speaking regions of the world. The direct cultural significance is the Mukden (Manchurian) Incident of 1931, when the Japanese invaded China's Northeastern region. This national crisis ignited a strong desire for a voice. Sound film became that medium of expression, coincidentally perfectly timed with historical circumstance. This was the key 'Context' for the Chinese films of the 1930s.

Cantonese films provided a regional context to Hong Kong cinema. Although Hong Kong films are a branch of Chinese-language films, it also has its own identity, especially in its connection with overseas Cantonese-speaking Chinese all over the world. But at the time, Hongkongers (and even many overseas Chinese) identified themselves as Chinese. They lived in Southern China and saw their cultural identity as Chinese. Thus, as the

Japanese invaded more and more of China, Hong Kong also began developing its own genre of 'national defence films' in the mid-to-late 1930s.

Some of the films at the time were based on contemporary social issues, and interaction with other media were also plentiful. Many titles were adaptations of fairy tales, folktales, novels, operas and plays. Filmmakers very consciously referenced foreign films, borrowing elements from across cultures and territories. They mainly adapted subject matters, remade films, and even borrowed plot lines and techniques. Sit Kok-sin's *The White Gold Dragon* (aka *The Platinum Dragon*, 1933) and Ma Si-tsang's *Wild Flower* (aka *Scent of Wild Flowers*, 1935) are very famous examples. Of course, the question of how exactly they borrowed and integrated the film language and techniques of expression from these sources remains unanswered until we have access to rediscovered copies of the films. In addition, considering how contemporary Mainland films were publicly screened all over Southern China and easily available to Hong Kong filmmakers and general audiences, as well as the close ties among filmmakers in Hong Kong, Guangdong and Shanghai, the influence of Mainland films on Hong Kong cinema during this period is a topic worth exploring in more detail.

Film Preservation and History

As far as we know, of the films produced before the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, only 21 have survived. They are listed below (with their directors and premiere dates in parentheses):

1. *The Light of Women* (Ko Lei-hen; 1937.8.10)
2. *The White Gold Dragon, Part Two* (aka *The Platinum Dragon, Part Two*) (Sit Kok-sin, Ko Lei-hen; 1937.9.16)
3. *Storm over Pacific* (aka *Incident in the Pacific*) (Hou Yao; 1938.4.7)
4. *Fortress of Flesh and Blood* (aka *Provoking Father*) (Hou Yao; 1938.6.15)
5. *Sable Cicada* (Richard Poh [aka Bu Wancang]; 1938.6.15)
6. *Miss Flapper* (aka *Pretty Lady*) (Wong Fook-hing; 1938.12.21)
7. *A Lovely Flower with Bloody Tears* (aka *Rivals in Love*) (So Yee; 1939.6.25)
8. *Twin Sisters of the South* (aka *The Sister Flower*) (Lai Ban, Leong Sum; 1939.6.29)
9. *The Heartless* (Hung Chung-ho, Wan Hoi-ling; 1939.9.17)
10. *The Devils' Paradise* (aka *Orphan Island Paradise*) (Cai Chusheng; 1939.9.23)
11. *The Ghost Catchers* (Wong Toi; 1939.11.25)
12. *The Goddess Helps the Bridge Builder* (aka *The Bridge Builder*) (Fung Chi-kong; 1940.2.11)
13. *The Blood-Stained Peach Blossom Fan* (aka *The Blood's All Over The Fan*) (Mak Siu-ha; 1940.9.28)
14. *Glorious Parade* (aka *Ten Thousand Li Ahead*) (Cai Chusheng; 1941.1.1)

15. *Song of Retribution* (aka *March of the Guerrillas*) (Situ Huimin; 1941.6.12)
16. *Roar of the Nation* (aka *Roar of the People*) (Tang Xiaodan; 1941.7.4)
17. *Follow Your Dream* (Lo Duen; 1941.11.9)
18. *The Rich House* (Hung Suk-wan; 1942.12.24/ filmed in 1941)
19. *Stubborn Lovers, Parts One and Two* (Wong Fook-hing; 1943.2.16 and 1943.3.5/ filmed in 1941)
20. *The Blooming Flower* (Lung To; 1947.2.1/filmed in 1941)
21. *Bitter Phoenix, Sorrowful Oriole* (Yeung Kung-leong; 1947.3.1/filmed in 1941)

Among these titles, *The Rich House*, *Stubborn Lovers*, *The Blooming Flower* and *Bitter Phoenix, Sorrowful Oriole* were produced before the fall of Hong Kong but were released during the Japanese occupation or after the war.

Simply putting them together in a list, as above, we can already formulate several questions to facilitate further exploration. The earliest surviving film is *The Light of Women*, released on 10 August 1937, soon after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident on 7 July. From an archaeological point of view, the following questions are important:

1. Why have the films produced in Hong Kong prior to the outbreak of the war against Japan all vanished?
2. Can the wider distribution and better preservation of post-war titles be attributed to the shift in the role of cinema after the War of Resistance against Japan broke out, in that films were seen to be essential tools for upholding national cohesion, thus leading to great changes in the film market?
3. Is it possible that the films missing from this period may be found overseas, in China, or in Japan?

Observations on the Surviving Pre-Fall Hong Kong Films

My interest is in imagining the whole based on a part or fraction of that whole. The following is an analysis based on watching the surviving films made before the fall of Hong Kong with an emphasis on their content. I hope to propose certain aspects of these films that are worthy of further exploration, such as subject matter, setting, acting, audio and visual techniques.

First, in terms of subject, the surviving Hong Kong films of that era more or less touch on the subjects of saving the dying nation and sounding the call to battle. Films that directly deal with the War of Resistance against Japan as their main theme include: *Storm over Pacific*, *Fortress of Flesh and Blood*, *The Devils' Paradise*, *Glorious Parade*, *Song of Retribution* and *Roar of the Nation*. *Song of Retribution* was originally titled *March of the Guerrillas*. The filming was completed in 1938 in Cantonese. In 1939, a Mandarin audio track was added to appeal to audiences in other regions under Nationalist governance. However, the colonial government demanded edits, delaying the actual release until 1941

under the new title *Song of Retribution*. Even the social and ethical issues in the films have underline meanings pertaining to the times. For example, at the end of both *The White Gold Dragon, Part Two* and *A Lovely Flower with Bloody Tears*, the main characters return to the Mainland to serve the nation. Even *The Ghost Catchers*, on the surface a folktale, is in fact an allegory of the time.

In addition, two other important issues are the self-consciousness and social stature of women. *The Light of Women* starts with a woman fighting for her freedom to love. The rest of the story develops as we follow the circumstances of her life and her experiences. The emphasis is on character portrayal, highlighting how she does not emotionally depend on men, and that she is responsible for her own moral duties, dedicating herself to education and social enlightenment. Eventually, the lead character comes into her own and decides to leave her difficult and dangerous situation behind. The film ends on a scene of her sailing forth on the boundless sea in a small boat. Even in a mainstream and modern comedy as *The Heartless*, when the female student is on the way back to her home village from the city upon graduation, she bumps into her schoolmates, and in their conversation, she mentions that women must reform society and the Women's Rights Movement must be implemented.

The imaginings and presentation of the story settings in the surviving Hong Kong films before the fall of the city clearly show the complex emotions of the Chinese in the face of such turbulent times. 'The tone of wartime is hateful and angry': from the rousing instigation in *Glorious Parade* to direct warfare in *Storm over Pacific*, *Fortress of Flesh and Blood* and *Song of Retribution*, there are numerous scenes of impassioned struggle and heroic sacrifice. Among them, in *Fortress of Flesh and Blood*, the university professor leads his students to join the guerrilla militia in the countryside. To him, those who fear death are 'invisible traitors' and he even shoots his own son to death for that reason. Such relentlessly impassioned intelligentsia is almost beyond comprehension.

But during that time, the 'sad and contemplative' tone of a dying nation was also present through images of exile, waste lands, broken families, deaths and nightmares following people like shadows. In *Glorious Parade*, Yung Siu-yi's character, a woman who is abused and humiliated, flees to Hong Kong from the North of China: she is physically and literally bound. In *The Devils' Paradise*, Li Lili's character smiles in front of others but weeps in private, trapped all alone on the 'orphan island' (yet to be occupied regions of Shanghai). Both characters have lost their homes and families to the war and are plagued by nightmares. During such times of conflict, there is a very direct correlation between the portrayal of family ethics and of the fight against the enemy, although the trumping of politics over family ethics in *Fortress of Flesh and Blood* is perhaps not mainstream. Indeed, pre-fall Hong Kong films contained many scenes of families uniting against a common enemy.

The opening scene in *Song of Retribution* shows that the Japanese army are about to invade the village of Chi-keung (played by Lee Ching). He runs to look for his lover, Yuek-lan (played by Yung Siu-yi). Her father suggests that Chi-keung, his parents and younger

Song of Retribution (1941)

Injured in the War of Resistance against Japan, Chi-keung is taken care of by his lover Yuek-lan and his family.

As Chi-keung bids farewell and sets off for the mountains to join the guerrilla forces, the trees cast speckled shadows—an amalgamation of dramatic action, family dynamics and visual aesthetics.

brother move in with them to hide temporarily. When he gets home, Chi-keung takes care of his bed-ridden father and tells his younger brother to contact other young people to gather for a meeting to discuss anti-Japanese tactics. After the young people decide to leave the village and go into the mountains to join the guerrilla forces, two Japanese soldiers barge in to take away strong young men, and also try to draft Chi-keung's father by force. Witnessing their despicable behaviour, Chi-keung lunges from his hiding place to fight the soldiers. Chi-keung's father takes a bullet for him, but with the family working together they succeed in killing the two Japanese soldiers.

In terms of plot and visuals, the young people involved in the war against the Japanese always stick with their families. Chi-keung is injured and moves to Yuek-lan's home with his mother and brother. Yuek-lan's father attends to his wounds.

Chi-keung is a well fleshed out character. While retiring one night, he thoughtfully pulls the blanket up for his younger brother sleeping next to him (in the film, the brother's role is quite important as well). He soon has a nightmare about being stabbed to death by Japanese soldiers with demonic faces. His lover hears the noise and goes to him. Against the backdrop of such uncertain times, we see a pair of young lovers talking affectionately to each other late at night. Later the director purposefully shoots a parting scene: Chi-keung decides to go into the mountains to join the guerrilla forces and bids farewell to his mother, younger brother, lover and her father. A dissolve brings him from the room to the doorway. As Chi-keung starts walking, the trees cast speckled shadows. It is an amalgamation of dramatic action, family dynamics and visual aesthetics.

Of this batch of surviving films, *The Ghost Catchers* is the most extreme example of linking urban family life with sentiments of the times.

By the time *The Ghost Catchers* was released on 25 November 1939, the Japanese had been invading China for two years and had occupied an increasingly large area of the country. In September 1939, World War II had broken out, but Japan had not yet instigated the Pacific War (7 December 1941 to 2 September 1945), so as a British colony, Hong Kong was relatively safe. However, the general public was aware of war erupting all over the world. China was being invaded by Japanese militarism, causing people to flee and suffer. Director Wong Toi filmed *The Ghost Catchers* under these unique historical circumstances.

The Ghost Catchers (1939)

While imageries of the Kingdom of Women, aboriginals and Middle-East exotica are all blended into the film's underworld, it adheres to traditional Chinese punishment and execution methods—a mish-mash style that appeals to popular tastes and incorporates elements of various genres of Chinese cinema that had existed since the 1920s.

The film starts with a realistic portrayal of an ordinary middle-class family. When it is time for bed, neighbouring children climb through the window to share a comic book—a heart-warming moment filled with child-like naiveté. But the scene changes as the ghosts and monsters from the book 'really' appear in a dream. When the children sing 'March of the Volunteers', ghosts turn up and capture the mother and daughter and lock them up in the City of Death. As the plot further develops, imaginings of exotic kingdoms are realised through special effects, set designs, costumes and make-up. For example, images of the Kingdom of Women, aboriginals and Middle-East exotica are juxtaposed against traditional Chinese punishment and execution methods. Together, these elements of popular interest and imagination are a mish-mash of many styles and genres of Chinese film that had emerged since the 1920s. In terms of narrative, in the dream, the ghosts appear after the children sing 'March of the Volunteers'. The subsequent markers of various film genres therefore are given a reference code of time, elevating them to the level of metaphor. In the City of Death, we are entertained by the face-changing, the evil spirits, the portrayal of desire, oppression and combat, but beneath the surface, they also point to actual situations.

Interpreting *The Ghost Catchers*' mish-mash style by today's methods reveals many levels of significance, including elements that are part of the narrative, such as women's sexual desires and the role of children in the family. In the City of Death, there are a lot of different kinds of desires. This is understandable, but the women's sexual desires portrayed in the film are not directly linked to the evil forces being depicted. So, it seems this imagining is based more on fulfilling audience expectations than plot development. In addition, in order to rescue their families, the children go up the mountain to seek advice from the sages and borrow magical tools. In other words, the appearance of the 'ghosts' has destroyed the daily lives of ordinary people.

In the 1930s, there certainly should have been Hong Kong films that portrayed women's sexual desires, urban family life and children's social education. In view of Hong Kong's urban development, plot lines, images and psychology derived from ethics of

modern life and male-female interaction must have been plentiful. Perhaps this was exactly the reason why Hong Kong experienced the First Film Clean-Up Movement in its cultural history.

Flirtation in Film

There should have been quite many Hong Kong films in the 1930s that showed romantic relationships between men and women in urban settings. Although the film *Wild Flower* (4 February 1935), starring Ma Si-tsang and Tam Lan-hing, is lost, according to the English-translated dialogue script submitted to the US censors, we can be sure that the screenwriter and director at the time were already expertly handling the complexities of flirting in the film. The passage below shows morals teacher Yiu Kei-sum (played by Ma Si-tsang), awestruck by the beauty of temptress To Tsui-nung (played by Tam Lan-hing), returns under the guise of teaching her morals to try to get close to her. The small talk between the couple, highly-charged with flirtatious sensitivity, is very entertaining:

Yiu Kei-sum: I will teach you another lesson today.
To Tsui-nung: Another lesson? I don't want to learn any more today.
(pause)
Yiu Kei-sum: I'm getting old, and I don't have any daughters.
To Tsui-nung: If you like, I can be your goddaughter, Daddy. Let me sing a song for you. It's called 'Scent of Wild Flowers'… *(sings)*
To Tsui-nung: How do you like the song?
Yiu Kei-sum: Very much. Can you teach me how to sing it?
To Tsui-nung: It's not easy to learn. You must pour out your heart in order to memorise it.
Yiu Kei-sum: For sure! How long will it take to learn?
To Tsui-nung: Come on in.
(scene break)

There was a Cantonese opera version of *Wild Flower*. Every time it was performed, it drew large audiences. It can thus be seen that Hong Kong audiences in the 1930s were already psychologically accustomed to watching men and women flirting on stage. And with film, the actors' expressions and the details of the scene can be seen at a much closer distance. There is little wonder why *Wild Flower* became part of the collective memory of a whole generation of people, and was re-made twice after the war.

Films made in Hong Kong before the fall of the city that focused on depicting romantic and sexual relationships that can still be seen today include *The White Gold Dragon, Part Two*, as well as *Miss Flapper* and *Stubborn Lovers*.

In *The White Gold Dragon, Part Two*, Pak Kam-lung (played by Sit Kok-sin) goes to Southeast Asia for business, where he falls victim to a scam when rich lady Ng Ma-li (played by Lam Mui-mui) tries to trick him into becoming a shareholder of a certain company (Japanese involvement is implied). Pak falls for Ng, losing interest in his fiancée Cheung Yuk-neong (played by Tong Suet-hing). Cheung's cousin Cheung Yuk-sim (played

Wild Flower (1935): Outstanding scenes of flirtation, where conversations between the protagonists are highly charged with sexual energy

The White Gold Dragon, Part Two (1937): Cheung Yuk-sim and Pak Kam-lung chat and flirt in a scene filled with innuendo.

by Wong Man-lei) stands up for her. She gets close to Pak on purpose, seducing him with her pure, elegant beauty, with the purpose of steering him away from the sultry Ng. This is not a typical drama of two jealous women fighting over a man, but something closer to a Yuan Dynasty *zaju* titled *The Rescue of a Courtesan* (aka *Jiu Fengchen*) where a prostitute uses her beauty to get back at the unfaithful boyfriend of her reformed sworn sister. However, here, Wong Man-lei does not play a prostitute. Quite the opposite, her character has a husband, children and a happy family life, and her husband is fully supportive of her actions. Yuk-sim says, 'I won't let Pak Kam-lung fall into another woman's hands.' But the highlight of the film lies in this subtle but complex web of male-female relations, with added dramatic irony:

Pak: Miss Cheung, I smell something fragrant.
Yuk-sim: Fragrant? I guess it's my perfume.
Pak: *(sniffs)* It's not perfume.
Yuk-sim: *(points at his pocket)* Then it's your boutonnière.
Pak: *(sniffs)* Definitely not the fragrance of a flower…it seems to be the natural fragrance of your body.

The above flirtation scene is in the early part of the film. We observe Wong Man-lei's natural, demure, restrained smile, how her character seems to really have fallen in love with Pak, yet ultimately, she remains true to her goal. This ambiguity is woven into the film and in terms of performance texture, has far exceeded what is necessary for the purposes of narration. It shows the signature charm of Hong Kong cinema of the era. It is precisely this charm that makes Yuk-sim so convincing when she persuades Pak to establish a charity school for overseas Chinese, as well as adding emotional significance to the words 'going back to the motherland to do greater deeds'. They become more than just a slogan and more a line imbued with true emotion.

In *Miss Flapper*, a naive country girl Hau (played by Nancy Chan Wan-seung) goes to work in the city as a maid, becomes materialistic and falls in love with her young master (played by Kwong Shan-siu). The film contains many scenes portraying female desires. One scene shows Hau alone in her young mistress's room, trying on her beautiful clothes and

admiring herself in the mirror. She even smells her young master's clothes when she is all alone by herself. Director Wong Fook-hing captures the young couple in a romantic light: casting speckled shadows of the trees on them to create a serene dating scene under the moonlight. Later, Hau accompanies her young mistress to join a party and while drunk, is raped by the mistress's boyfriend (played by Wong Cho-shan). Pregnant and left adrift in the city, she fails to claim any compensation, and is brought back to her home village by her childhood friend. The film was produced in 1938, and by then the War of Resistance against Japan had already begun. Yet Hau's story was a common one, as beautiful young women may be hurt and humiliated in any given period in time. But this film is particularly worth discussing because of the inclusion of various scenes of female sexual desire that are ahead of its times.

Before Hong Kong fell, Wong also directed *Stubborn Lovers*. Adapted from Kit Hark (aka Huang Tianshi)'s romance novel of the same name and starring Ng Cho-fan and Pak Yin in her debut film performance, its portrayal of male-female relationships is very precise. Cantonese films in those days featured scenes of sexual intimacy that were much more realistic than the Mandarin films made in Shanghai of the same period. It is worth exploring whether that is due to linguistic, geographical or cultural reasons, or the actors involved.

The Various Functions of Songs

With the advent of sound films in the 1930s, film songs became an important aspect of film culture. On the one hand, songs are used in film narrative to link together plot developments, or to showcase a character or characters at a certain activity or event, or to express emotions. On the other hand, filmmakers also use songs to convey setting and context, relay messages and define inter-character relationships and feelings. The partially dubbed silent film *The Big Road* (produced by The United Photoplay Service Limited [UPS, aka Lianhua] in Shanghai and directed by Sun Yu, 1934) is effectively a silent film in terms of narrative technique. Dialogue between characters is shown via inter-titles, but in some scenes, sound effects are added to strengthen impact. Especially worthy of discussion are the songs in the film.

By the mid-1930s, China's Northeastern region had already been occupied by the Japanese. At the height of such national crisis, the idea of saving the nation was at its peak. The overture for *The Big Road*, 'Roadbuilding Pioneers', features images of strong men, bare-chested and robust: 'We don't fear the barriers of tens of thousands hills', 'We must detonate the dynamite buried underground'. The film's theme song 'Song of the Great Road' is played against footage of road construction workers going to work in the Mainland at the beginning of the film; in the middle and ending of the film it is played to emphasise their indomitable spirit. The young men gather at a restaurant to listen to the singing by Jasmine, who has fled from another town. She sings 'New Song of Feng Yang', adapted from the folk tune 'The Fengyang Flower Drum Song', which accompanies a montage of

people made homeless and adrift. The scene is a metaphor of the times.

Song is a form of expression that conveys the emotions of a particular era. Film songs, linked with the record industry, is part of popular culture. Although as of now, Hong Kong films made before the War of Resistance against Japan (i.e. prior to 1937) are not accessible to us, we can be sure that silent films faded out of the Hong Kong market in the mid-1930s; and that songs were an integral part of Hong Kong's talkies. Even non-sing-song films would feature songs.

In the Greater China area, amidst the national crisis of the 1930s, many influential songs were created. Among them, some gained popularity as film songs, for example 'March of the Volunteers' (lyrics by Tian Han, music by Nie Er, 1935) from *Children of Troubled Times*, 'Parental Love' (lyrics by Chung Sek-ken, music by Huang Zi, 1935) from *Song of China*, 'The Song of Four Seasons' and 'The Wandering Songstress' (aka 'Songstress at the End of the World') from *Street Angel* (both lyrics by Tian Han, music by He Lüting, 1937); while some others first appeared in social situations and were later recorded and recognised as music that embodied the times, for example 'Along the Sungari River' (lyrics and music by Zhang Hanhui, 1936) and 'The Great Wall Ballad' (lyrics by Pan Jienong, music by Liu Xue'an, 1937).

Looking at the surviving Hong Kong films before the fall of the city, these songs often provided creative inspiration for filmmakers, playing various functions such as narrative, emotional expression, characterisation, signifying the times and linking the audience's sense of cultural identity. In *Glorious Parade*, when Yung Siu-yi's character is forced to sing, she sings a very sad rendition of 'The Great Wall Ballad'. In *The Devils' Paradise*, the songstress played by Li Lili lives alone in a loft. She cannot sleep at night and sings 'Along the Sungari River' as she thinks of her missing family.

The work that most represents the era is 'March of the Volunteers'. *In Children of Troubled Times*, it is an opening and ending song that stands out from the film's narrative. In the film, characters realise that they are in the midst of a national crisis, so they should ignore their personal feelings and play their part in such turbulent times. The song was so popular throughout all of China that it became a symbol of the fighting spirit of this period in history. Even in *The Devils' Paradise*, street kids hum this song as they play. And in *The Ghost Catchers*, children from middle-class families sing it fluently. This use of the song indicates that the awareness of fighting a battle of resistance was already part of the daily lives of Hong Kong's Chinese families.

Some of the songs in director Hou Yao's *Storm over Pacific* are in Cantonese, and others are in Mandarin, but the theme song is in Mandarin. Ma Bik-chu, played by Lee Yi-nin, sings about the moon in Mandarin but sings a fisherman's ballad in Cantonese. As for the other songs, the fat and thin sentry soldiers sing Cantonese opera, while Ma Yu-long (played by Chan Tin-tsung) sings Peking opera. The plot involves the Mukden (Manchurian) Incident. Ma gathers the villagers to join the volunteer army, and together they sing Mandarin songs aloud to boost morale. As the regimental commander played by Luo Pinchao (aka Lo Ban-chiu) writes a poem with his blood to avow his allegiance to his

nation, 'March of the Volunteers' begins to play in the background. The choice of music in *Storm over Pacific* seems hodge-podge but when assembled together, it represents an imagination of Northeastern China from a Southern Chinese's point of view. Likewise, the actors in the film perform with southern sensibilities, both physically and mentally. However, in the scene calling for everyone to join the resistance, the Mandarin version of 'March of the Volunteers' is used. Why was there not a Cantonese song of resistance? Is it because the Southern Chinese did not have the need, or had the songs of resistance risen beyond linguistic barriers, and become a tuning fork that set the spirit of the people vibrating in harmony?

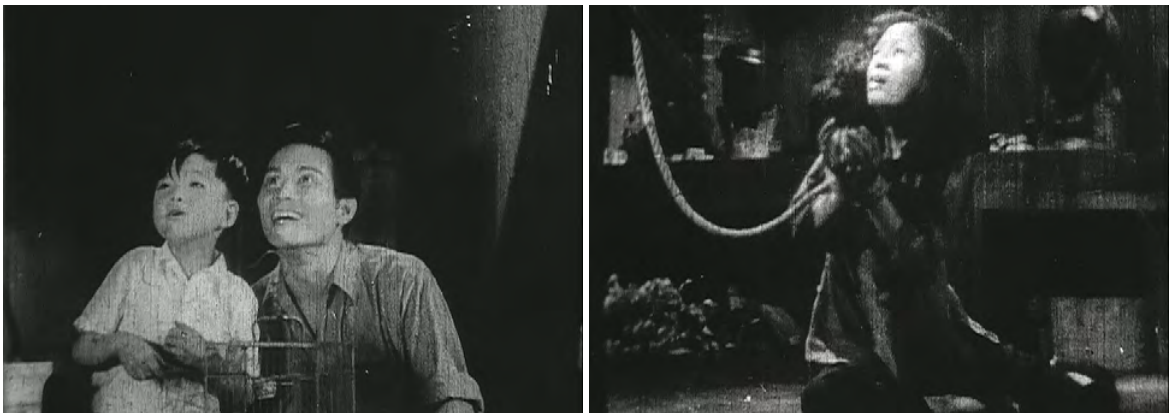
Conclusion

In the 1930s, the emergence of film sound technology coincided with Hong Kong's urban development, against the backdrop of a major national crisis. All at once, the local flavours of Southern China, together with the individuals, families and neighbours of city life, as well as their sense of national identity, unified in harmony, or at least appeared side by side in a patchwork style. This was Hong Kong's film culture during a unique time in history.

In September 1931, Japan invaded China, starting with the northeastern region. By July 1937, their invasion had spread to all of China. In the face of their country crumbling before the enemy, with broken families and a massive death toll, the British colony of Hong Kong was a comparatively safe place before it fell to the Japanese in December 1941. During this interim period, talkies helped Cantonese cinema expand its overseas market rapidly. After 1937, numerous literary artists and filmmakers came southward to Hong Kong from the Mainland. Very quickly, Hong Kong became the creative and production hub for filmmakers, especially those who wished to express their concern for the times, and to arouse patriotic sentiment. Although there are not many films available to us today, it is clear that their stylistic differences are vast. It is worth studying the relationships between filmmakers from the first and second halves of the 1930s, the language used in the films, the messages they contained and the various styles adopted.

First of all, regarding the filmmakers who had travelled south, were the styles and subjects of the films they had made in the Mainland different from their Hong Kong films? If so, were these their personal artistic choices, or were they affected by the local and regional culture? Research in this aspect would prompt us to consider the unique aspects of Hong Kong culture.

To expand in this vein, this discussion on cross-border filmmakers would involve where they hailed from: did it make a difference in emotional content whether they came from Shanghai or Guangzhou? Additional factors would include when they arrived in Hong Kong and how long they stayed. Also, the individual person's hometown, and the groups and organisations they belonged to, would certainly influence their work.



Contrasting realities: In *Glorious Parade* (1941), Gao Hua (left photo) and the child who shares his apartment look skyward in hopeful anticipation for the future; while the next scene (right photo) shows Siu-fung bound, humiliated and without freedom.

Because the surviving films were all made after July 1937, when the Japanese invasion had broken out, numerous titles discussed in this essay feature the 'tone of wartime'. Indeed, many of the plot structures and dramatic developments were based on 'sad and angry' emotions with various scenes showing close-ups of forced confessions, executions and other similar images. At the time, for people of every social stratum, resistance was a matter of course. In *Fortress of Flesh and Blood*, the professor leads his students to form a guerrilla troop to work with the national army in battle, an imagining of joining the war. *The Ghost Catchers* features a normal family where the mother is captured by 'ghosts' and the father and children go to rescue her. Although it is a dream, it is a representation of resistance. In addition, with warfare there is always sacrifice. For example, in *Fortress of Flesh and Blood*, the university students pass away in the end, but the Nationalist flag flies proudly.

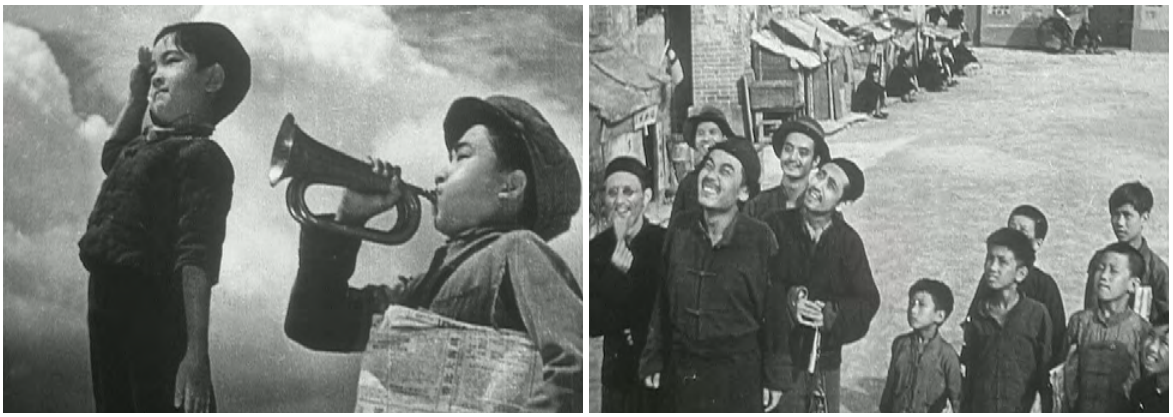
Apart from representations of resistance, the surviving films spend a lot of screen time on the depiction of the loss of personal freedom. Among their characters, quite a few of them sadly but resignedly mourn their fates, striking a 'tone of a dying nation'. However, this is not the only tone that marks these films. Through their narratives and visual images, they create thematic montages. In *Glorious Parade*, Lee Ching joins the port workers in their struggle against the foreman and is jailed. On the day he is released, director Cai Chusheng uses a sequence of images to illustrate his ecstasy. In the film, the character is an optimistic, principled and sympathetic worker not afraid to fight for what is right. In strong contrast to him is the character played by Yung Siu-yi, who was being separated from her family and fled to Hong Kong; in other words, she is a weak woman who has lost her personal freedom. The film consciously places these two life situations side by side: the young man and the children who share his apartment look skyward in anticipation for the future; immediately followed by the woman who is bound, humiliated and has lost her freedom, oppressed by reality. This montage transcends the film and is effectively a hallmark of the era.

Among this batch of surviving films, although they do depict 'peacetime', they are still laced with elements of the era. In the 1930s, before the Japanese formally invaded China, Hong Kong's city life was multi-faceted. The interaction between Cantonese opera and film was very obvious. With the advent of sound films, sing-song films developed as a genre. Numerous Cantonese opera performers participated in these productions, including Sit Kok-sin, Ma Si-tsang, Sun Ma Si-tsang, Luo Pinchao, Pak Kui-wing, Tsang Sam-to, Liu Mung-kok, Lee Suet-fong and Sheung Hoi Mui. In the surviving film *Bitter Phoenix*, *Sorrowful Oriole*, middle-class and rich characters are portrayed as empathetic and caring. The standard of the comic banter between the couple played by Ma Si-tsang and Yuet Yee (aka Cheung Yuet-yee) can rival any Hong Kong comedy film today. The film includes various genres such as detective story, thriller and murder mystery, set in a comedy style; but the genre mixing is done rather seamlessly. In fact, Yeung Kung-leong's use of piano music to accompany Yuet Yee's Cantonese aria is refreshing. Exploration of this film's style would be meaningful to the study of film creation in the 1930s. In the film, Ma Si-tsang's character, a fugitive, sings 'Yu Hap-wan Expresses His Inner Feelings' (aka 'Yu Hap-wan Pours Out His Heart') in his signature 'beggar tone' as he blends in with the thugs and beggars in the ruins of a temple. He even joins forces with them to lure the villainous lawyer, so that he is arrested by the police. This is a dramatic narrative with a moral.

Hong Kong films of the time expressed national anguish with a typically Southern Chinese sensibility, which reflects an attentiveness in their art. A good example is the lyrics of the song sung by the refugees in *The Ghost Catchers*. The style of the song is much more realistic than it is supernatural. Clearly it is inserted by the filmmakers into the scene to express their feelings:

The wind whistles / The rain drizzles
A horrifying sight meets our eyes / People homeless and foodless in the freezing weather
Parents and children suffer the same fate / Families are torn apart
The Huns mobilised their troops for no reason / Ruining families and the nation and leaving a void
Mountains after mountains / Rivers after rivers
We flow rootlessly like duckweed / Thousands of miles we flow

We bear our pain and swallow our tears / Our voices cannot stop the demons
They do evil deeds with toxic claws / Raping, looting, conspiring
Those rats, vermin, and running dogs / Harming people, nation and all the land
Civilians run for their lives / Fleeing and hiding to avoid the enemy
Our beautiful country is no more / Our fields and homes are in ruins
We must fight even with our last breath
Spill our blood / Sacrifice our lives
Swear to fight them to our deaths / One day they will be wiped out
Our national disaster decimated / The people's worries soothed
Our freedom will be restored



The future is now: A child sounds a bugle and people on the street look up to the sky in *The Devils' Paradise* (1939).

The above is not an incidental song in the film. In today's terms, it is an insert, an individual sequence that can stand on its own. At that time there was yet no narratives about the restoration of the nation, but there was a definite call, as well as images, to draw people to do their part. Below is the final image of *The Devils' Paradise*:

Children assemble on a slightly elevated area and one of them sounds a bugle. People on the street raise their heads to look at them. The children symbolise a new force of the era. The future is now. [Translated by Roberta Chin]

Special thanks to Mr Jack Lee Fong of Palace Theatre, San Francisco, USA

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Methodological Perspectives on 1930s and 1940s Hong Kong Cinema: Taking 'Patriotism' and 'Digital Archiving' as Starting Points

Liu Hui

1930s and 1940s Hong Kong Cinema as a Turning Point

In the 1970s, studies on Hong Kong cinema began to gain popularity in the West. This wave of Western interest continued to build and eventually peaked with the publication of renowned scholar David Bordwell's monograph, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, in 2000, offering both structural analyses of cinematic imagery, as well as entertaining elements. Bordwell's book affirms Hong Kong cinema as a unique cinema with its own artistic characteristics from the perspective of Western critique. Since then, research on Hong Kong cinema has continued to expand in Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Mainland, as well as overseas, in terms of both the depth of its historical study and its critique of Hong Kong cinema's artistic qualities.

Today, while the Hong Kong film industry languishes with few obvious successors, the once-flourishing research scene is being caught up in an awkward phase. Research on 1930s and 1940s Hong Kong film is especially niche, as a result of the lack of available films, the particularity of local contexts and the different dialects. Furthermore, the challenge of adopting a suitable research position and methodology has spinned off a host of dilemmas and self-identity issues for potential researchers: 'Who should take up such research?' and 'What to research on?'

At present, it seems that scholars in the field of 1930s and 1940s Hong Kong cinema are highly localised and concentrated in Hong Kong universities and research institutions. Moreover, their research methods largely relied on traditional literature review, focusing on the study of the filmmakers and the synopses of the films. Occasionally, comparisons are drawn with films from Shanghai and overseas, but overall there is little reflection and criticism informed by pedagogical disciplines. This is worrying, for with the aging of local researchers in Hong Kong, one cannot help but ask if this area of research would be further marginalised?

'*Nanguo zimei hua* (*Southern Sisters*, 1940) [Ed note: aka *Twin Sisters of the South* / *The Sister Flower*, 1939]…. This is, however, the only Cantonese film from the 1937–45 period available today, and a systematic analysis…will serve as a good way of proposing an alternative perspective on how a local identity was imagined in Hong Kong cinema and suggesting further research on this important issue.'[1] In his 2003 academic study, Professor Poshek Fu from the University of Illinois found that only one pre-1940 film had survived. This lack of information restricted the research conditions for films from the 1930s and 1940s. Fortunately, with the establishment of the Hong Kong Film Archive (HKFA) in 2001, the available audio-visual data on early Hong Kong cinema has gradually expanded. In particular, the batch of nitrate film copies donated by Mr Jack Lee Fong of San Francisco's Palace Theatre in 2012, which included a batch of films from the 1930s and 1940s, injected new life into research on pre-war Hong Kong cinema.[2] The archaeological insights and points of interest derived from these celluloid copies have created opportunities to study Hong Kong cinema in considerably greater depth!

'It is true that for one narrow form of film historical inquiry prints of films are the only valid data.'[3] American film historians Robert Clyde Allen and Douglas Gomery have argued in *Film History: Theory and Practice* that stylistic and aesthetic textual analyses of a film is an indispensable part of its study. Among the films donated by Mr Jack Lee Fong, 13 were from before 1945 and 19 were from 1945 to 1949. In addition, the HKFA also possesses more than 70 films from other channels, such as from donations or exchanges with the China Film Archive (CFA). Together, this collection forms a preliminary foundation of analytical data for Hong Kong cinema of the 1930s and 1940s.[4]

The study of 1930s and 1940s Hong Kong cinema has just begun. It should not be a closed regional study, but an open project that explores the nature of Hong Kong cinema—with productive relationships with the Mainland, Southeast Asia, Europe and the US, aiming to establish the historical value and interpretative significance of these visual documents. Unlike post-1949 films, Hong Kong films from the 1930s and 1940s fall under the umbrella of 'Chinese cinema', as they often expressed a sense of national identity and a reflection of the times distinct from the new contexts that emerged following the city's political separation from the Mainland. This also means, given the current Chinese film history research boom on the Mainland, there is a chance here for changes in direction and innovations in perspective. These newly discovered 1930s and 1940s Hong Kong films could now serve as an opportunity to reinterpret Hong Kong cinema and Hong Kong society. Moreover, through studying Hong Kong films that were made during the Republican era could also contribute to expanding the conceptions of early 'Chinese

1. Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinemas*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003, pp 82-83.
2. Priscilla Chan, 'Mr Jack Lee Fong and His Time Capsule', *Newsletter*, Hong Kong Film Archive, Issue 66, November 2013, p 5.
3. Robert C. Allen & Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice*, New York: Newbery Award Records, Inc., 1985, p 38.
4. I would like to extend my thanks to the HKFA for providing the information.

cinema'; as the title of Emilie Yeh Yueh-yu's book suggests: *Beyond Shanghai: New Perspectives on Early Chinese Cinema*.[5]

Jack Lee Fong and Early Hong Kong Cinema

HKFA representatives, through the introduction of Mr Gordon Fung Ping-chung, visited Mr Jack Lee Fong of Palace Theatre in San Francisco, who generously donated his collection of valuable prints of 1930s and 1940s Hong Kong film titles. (From left: Gordon Fung Ping-chung, Richie Lam, Jack Lee Fong)

In 2004, veteran Hong Kong film distributor Mr Gordon Fung Ping-chung got acquainted with Mr Jack Lee Fong of Palace Theatre in San Francisco[6], by chance. Through an introduction by Fung, representatives of the HKFA, Richie Lam (Head) and Priscilla Chan (Film Acquisition Officer), visited Fong in San Francisco in 2012. They found 60 hexagonal and 1,000-foot film cans in the basement of his villa, all of which were films that had been screened at Palace Theatre back in the day. This discovery was largely an incredible coincidence, but two factors have helped string things together: One is that Palace Theatre, located on Powell Street near Chinatown, had mainly focused on acquiring and screening good-quality Cantonese films over the years, with their audience comprising mostly of older, Cantonese-speaking San Francisco Chinese; the second is the low temperatures and dry conditions of San Francisco's Mediterranean-like climate, which has helped to preserve these film reels in essentially perfect condition even after half a century. For Fong, his ownership of these wonderful old films was not so much the result of choice as an arrangement by fate.

Even more serendipitous were the dozens of nitrate films from the 1930s and 1940s that were in Fong's collection. Nitro cellulose, an inflammable substance, was the main chemical component of film stock before 1951. 'The volatility of nitrate film stock created problems for producers as well. There was little incentive to store prints of films more than six months or so—after their economic potential had been exhausted. A few cans of film in a theater were dangerous enough, but thousands of warehoused reels constituted a veritable ammunitions depot.'[7] Fong ran Palace Theatre from 1966 to 1972, so these nitrate films are more likely to be stock copies retained by the previous owner after multiple screenings. He did not know much about the nature and content of these film copies.

5. Emilie Yeh Yueh-yu, Feng Xiaocai & Liu Hui (eds), *Beyond Shanghai: New Perspectives on Early Chinese Cinema*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2016, p 1 (in Chinese).
6. The theatre ceased operation in 1972, see note 2.
7. See note 3, p 30.

What a chain of coincidence in history! According to my communications with Ms Priscilla Chan and Ms Kwok Ching-ling of the HKFA, these films are still in the process of restoration and categorisation. Among the collection were not only Hong Kong productions, but also some from Shanghai, such as the recently restored Mandarin film *Struggle* (1933), by director Qiu Qixiang of Unique Film Productions (aka Tianyi), which the CFA does not have a copy either. In November 2019, the HKFA, Shanghai Film Museum and Shanghai Film Archive collaborated on the 'One Tale, Two Cinemas' event, where the film was screened in the Mainland for the first time in more than 80 years.

So far, 32 films in the collection have been restored and digitised. Among them, the most precious are of course the 13 films from before 1945, which have filled some of the gaps in the city's archive of early audio-visual images. Along with the 19 films from 1945 to 1949, the details are as follows:

No.	Film Title	Premiere Date	Director(s)
1	*The Light of Women*	1937.8.10	Ko Lei-hen
2	*The White Gold Dragon, Part Two*	1937.9.16	Sit Kok-sin, Ko Lei-hen
3	*Storm over Pacific*	1938.4.7	Hou Yao
4	*Fortress of Flesh and Blood*	1938.6.15	Hou Yao
5	*Miss Flapper*	1938.12.21	Wong Fook-hing
6	*A Lovely Flower with Bloody Tears* (aka *Rivals in Love*)	1939.6.25	So Yee
7	*The Heartless*	1939.9.17	Hung Chung-ho, Wan Hoi-ling
8	*The Ghost Catchers*	1939.11.25	Wong Toi
9	*The Goddess Helps the Bridge Builder* (aka *The Bridge Builder*)	1940.2.11	Fung Chi-kong
10	*The Blood-Stained Peach Blossom Fan*	1940.9.28	Mak Siu-ha
11	*Follow Your Dream*	1941.11.9	Lo Duen
12	*Bitter Phoenix, Sorrowful Oriole*	Filming completed in 1941, screened on 1947.3.1	Yeung Kung-leong
13	*The Rich House*	1942.12.24	Hung Suk-wan
14	*Flames of Lust*	1946.12.5	Mok Hong-si
15	*The Blooming Flower*	1947.2.1	Lung To
16	*Love Song of the South Island*	1947.4.11	Tam Sun-fung
17	*The Inscrutable Heart of Women*	1947.5.9	But Fu
18	*Cuckoo's Spirit in March*	1947.6.21	Hung Suk-wan
19	*The Evil Mind*	1947.7.17	Wu Pang
20	*My Love for You Is True*	1947.10.29	But Fu
21	*You Are a Nice Lady, But Why...*	1947.11.19	Yeung Heung, Chu Kea
22	*Where Is the Lady's Home?*	1947.12.7	Lee Tit
23	*A Reborn Romantic*	1948.1.1	Hung Chung-ho
24	*Long Live the Wife*	1948.2.22	But Fu
25	*Return of the Swallows*	1948.4.30	Fung Chi-kong, Fung Yat-wai
26	*Crazy Cupid* (aka *The Crazy Matchmaker*)	1948.11.3	Lo Duen
27	*A Poor Lover's Tears*	1948.11.7	Ko Lei-hen
28	*Fishing Village in the War*	1948.11.20	Wu Pang
29	*Life Debt of Our Children*	1949.3.5	Fung Chi-kong
30	*Never Too Late to Meet*	1949.3.18	Chu Kea
31	*The Birth of Kiddy Stone*	1949.3.29	Hung Chung-ho
32	*To Kill the Love*	1949.9.21	Chu Kea

Struggle (Shanghai's Unique, 1933), restored by the HKFA, was screened in the 'One Tale, Two Cinemas' programme held in Shanghai in 2019.

These 32 films were mixed with the existing films of Grandview Film Company Limited and companies in Hong Kong founded by filmmakers and investors from Shanghai who moved south (Yung Hwa, Great China, etc.). HKFA's pre-1949 collection has now reached around 100 films, with nearly 20 of them from before 1945, mainly donated by Fong.[8] The earliest surviving feature film is *The Light of Women* from 1937. In comparison, the CFA has 343 pre-1949 films (including fragments and ruined prints) and 251 films from before 1945.[9] The earliest surviving film in its collection currently is *Labourer's Love* (aka *Romance of a Fruit Peddler*) from 1922. Looking at the big picture, about 2,441 films were produced in China (partially overlapping with Hong Kong films, and excluding Manchukuo Film Association productions) in and prior to 1949, whereas Hong Kong produced approximately 1,036 films. Considering that most of the films in the Republican era were Shanghai productions, this set of comparative figures reflects the situation of the two film capitals during that time. The films donated by Fong expands the library of data available on 1930s Hong Kong cinema and provides the possibility of more in-depth research. 1937 is also a significant year to bear in mind; it suggests how this all inevitably links to the political affairs of the time.

According to the above deductions, the survival of film copies of different companies, directors, and genres is purely accidental, as opposed to the result of selection. So, how can these newly discovered films be understood? If there is no breakthrough in methodology, we will not be able to counteract the tendency of research studies on 1930s and 1940s Hong Kong cinema fading into obscurity. Further, even if more film copies are accidentally discovered in the future, there may still be no great breakthrough in research perspectives beyond a brief moment of excitement. The author cannot help but wonder: what kind of dissemination process and new audiences can this batch of restored films sustain?

'Patriotism' as Methodology

Hong Kong is a city of immigrants, with a population that has always been fluctuating with political and economic change. After the outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japan

8. Information is provided by the HKFA.
9. Information is provided by the CFA.

in 1937, the refugee tide reached its peak—about 100,000 people entered Hong Kong that year; another influx of 500,000 was recorded in the following year; and a further 150,000 in 1939.[10] The large number of immigrants pouring into Hong Kong after 1937 were strongly concerned about the war and the nation, thus patriotism became the theme of the times. If we were to say the films before 1937 simply focused on entertainment, then with the influx of refugees from the North and the Japanese occupation of Southern China in 1938, it was inevitable that patriotic sentiments would become the main point of departure for both film production and critique. This could be seen in patriotic productions by southbound filmmakers (e.g. Cai Chusheng's *The Devils' Paradise* [aka *Orphan Island Paradise*] in 1939), escapist entertainment or melodrama (e.g. Wong Fook-hing's *Miss Flapper* [aka *Pretty Lady*] in 1938 or Hung Suk-wan's *The Rich House* in 1942). 'The film phenomena of different regions during the War of Resistance undoubtedly paint a complex picture of the contemporary cultural landscape.'[11]

The Light of Women (1937): Luk Mo-jing (played by Lee Yi-nin), chooses not to get married and commits her life to education, taking over the management of a girls' school. (Back row from left: Shum Lai-ha, Lee Yi-nin, Wong Cho-shan, Leong Tim-tim)

Through the following textual analyses, I will attempt to identify the markers of patriotism in a number of early Hong Kong films from 1937 to 1945, and describe their characteristics.

The Light of Women, directed by Ko Lei-hen, is the earliest extant Hong Kong feature film and there is a need to emphasise its significance, on the same level as the Mainland's regard for *Labourer's Love*, as evidenced by its repeated analyses and interpretations. *The Light of Women* stars local actor Lee Yi-nin. After Nancy Chan Wan-seung became famous in Shanghai during the Orphan Island period, Lee was also invited there to star in films such as *Liang Hongyu* (1940). In *The Light of Women*, modern woman Mo-jing (played by Lee) champions new ideas about 'independent women' and pursues equality between the genders. She has been engaged twice, but both relationships end in failure. She devotes herself to education, spends the rest of her life single, and takes over a girls' school. It is not an obvious patriotic war film, but more of a progressive film reflecting the rise of

10. Liu Shuyong (ed), *A Brief History of Hong Kong*, Guangzhou: Guangdong People's Publishing House, 2019, p 185 (in Chinese).
11. Lu Hongshi, *Zhongguo Dianyingshi 1905–1949: Zaoqi Zhongguo Dianying De Xushu Yu Jiyi* (*A History of Chinese Cinema 1905–1949: Narratives and Memories in Early Chinese Cinema*), Beijing: Culture and Art Publishing House, 2005, p 94 (in Chinese).

the new woman, similar to the 1935 silent film *New Women* starring Ruan Lingyu. If we position the production as a Hong Kong film during the Republican era, and centre on Dr Yau Ching's arguments about Guangdong's 'self-combing' culture, Mo-jing's actions can be interpreted to be a choice she takes on upon failing in her struggles for empowerment. As Yau observes, 'The representation of the "self-combing" (*zishu*) tradition serves to signify here early modern South Chineseness that the film tries to inherit and explore.'[12] Mr Sam Ho, former Programmer of the HKFA also recognised the theme of female consciousness, especially conveyed through Lee Yi-nin, an actor who carried certain symbolic meanings, not least because of the series of roles she had played: 'Lee was an actor who had fostered a connection with the audience by embodying and articulating women concerns.'[13]

But what needs to be made clearer is that Mo-jing and her adopted daughter Sau-wah (played by Leong Tim-tim) suffer many hardships not only due to traditional forms of oppression, but additionally from challenges arising amid the war. 'In the end, the film concludes with them leaving home again, seeking a new life and injecting a gender-specific energy into the patriotic fight against the Japanese invasion.'[14] Shanghai director Ko Lei-hen made his name with his patriotic films. He wrote and directed *Oppression* (1933), *They Are from Willow Village* (1937), *The Woman Warrior* (1938), and *The Last Stand* (aka *At this Crucial Juncture*, co-directed, 1938). From Ko Lei-hen to Lee Yi-nin, the films of this period had a clear patriotic strain. *The Light of Women* may have ended up in Jack Lee Fong's collection by chance, yet it seems almost destined to fall under the category of 'patriotic film'.

The second-earliest film in the collection, *The White Gold Dragon, Part Two* (aka *The Platinum Dragon, Part Two*, 1937), may serve as an example of exception to the rule. *The White Gold Dragon* (aka *The Platinum Dragon*) is a classic Cantonese film made by Cantonese opera master Sit Kok-sin in 1933. It had a huge impact but the film has long been lost. Therefore, one can only imagine its brilliance indirectly through its sequel. *The White Gold Dragon, Part Two* was adapted from a Cantonese opera script, and puts on display the acting talent of Sit Kok-sin as Pak Kam-lung, a charming and handsome gentleman. It tells the story of business conflicts between Pak and his father-in-law, and how he becomes ensnared by their business competitor's honeypot trap, which results in a series of exploits, including 'three beauties falling in love with one man'. In a sense, this is a mass entertainment film that departs from patriotic themes and allows the audience an escape from the pressures of reality. As May Ng of the HKFA suggests, the film is significant as 'a transitional experiment in which the producers and filmmakers attempted to emulate Hollywood musicals of the 30s by incorporating local and Southeast Asian

12. Yau Ching, 'The Difficulty of Imagining Southern Women/China in Modernity' in *Early Cinematic Treasures Rediscovered* (Electronic Publication), Winnie Fu and May Ng (eds), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2015, p 16.
13. Sam Ho, 'Beyond Virginity: A Precious Glimpse of Women Sensibilities in 1930s Hong Kong Cinema', same as note 2, p 9.
14. China Film Archive, 'Excellence in Both Screenwriting and Directorial Work, A Passionate Life—Ko Lei-hen'. https://www.sohu.com/a/274863804_287936 (in Chinese).

The White Gold Dragon, Part Two (1937): Pak Kam-lung (centre, played by Sit Kok-sin) is seduced by the devious Ng Ma-lai (right, played by Lam Mui-mui); Cheung Yuk-sim (left, played by Wong Man-lei) wittily thwarts the plan.

Fortress of Flesh and Blood (1938) tells the story of a group of intellectuals partaking in guerrilla warfare under the leadership of Professor Lu (2nd right, played by Hou Yao).

elements.'[15] Among the other 1930s films donated by Jack Lee Fong, *Miss Flapper*, *The Ghost Catchers* and *The Blood-Stained Peach Blossom Fan* (aka *The Blood's All Over The Fan*) also share similar elements of folksy, local and vaudeville appeal. Yet '[a]t a time when China was faced with internal and external troubles and overseas Chinese were bound by a common hatred for the enemy, the character Yuk-sim seems to incorporate the public's wishful thinking about entrepreneurs: "Let's develop the technologies while in love! Let's promote the industries through songs!" In the end, the romantic comedy is framed by the grand narrative about the survival of the nation.'[16]

Instead of using indirect metaphors and allusions, every line of dialogue and every plotline in Hou Yao's 'national defence films', *Storm over Pacific* (aka *Incident in the Pacific*, 1938) and *Fortress of Flesh and Blood* (aka *Provoking Father*, 1938), ring with modernity and patriotism. The first film tells the story of the Northeastern Volunteer Righteous and Brave Fighters, and the latter tells the story of intellectuals in guerrilla warfare. Compared with *The Light of Women* and *The White Gold Dragon, Part Two*, Hou Yao's Hong Kong films do not even show the existence of any Hong Kong locales, but the Cantonese dialect clearly indicates that this is indeed a Hong Kong film made for Hong Kong, Southeast Asian and overseas Chinese audiences. Glaring logical issues regarding the plot and dialogue, such as the fact that the Northeastern Volunteer Righteous and Brave Fighters speaks Cantonese, are a result of Hou Yao's strong patriotic sentiments being projected onto Hong Kong, which only so happens to be a place where he made his films. This sense of tension and friction is subjectively treated and reconciled through his art. In fact, Hou's eventual passing away in Singapore is further validation of the core themes in his works.

15. May Ng, 'The Love Battlefield, Business World and Foreign Influence in *The White Gold Dragon, Part Two*', same as note 12, p 41.
16. Ibid.

As Shanghai entered its Orphan Island period (1937–1945), Hong Kong films at the same time could only resort to allusions and expressions of self-pity. *Follow Your Dream* (1941), a film similar to post-war Hong Kong film classics such as *The Dividing Wall* (aka *Neighbours*, 1952) and *In the Face of Demolition* (1953), tells the story of refugees who co-rent an apartment together. The landlady who has fled southward from the Mainland, the intellectual Chu Tse-ching, the Cantonese opera singer Shing, the soldier Elephant, etc. end up living together in a dilapidated Hong Kong apartment because of the chaos of the war, all similarly downcast and glum. On the rooftops where the poor live, there is a couplet on the wall based on a famous saying by President Chiang Kai-shek: 'No discrimination of gender and age, no demarcation between North and South.' The allusion here is obvious. It is clear that all the refugees share a common hatred of the enemy, and a desire for victory in the motherland.

Inevitability often emerges out of serendipity. These films' survival was serendipitous, while their patriotism inevitable. The basic tone of Hong Kong films in the 1930s and 1940s was marked by patriotism, and most of the artistic creations of the time revolved around it, rather than treating it as a disparate element. Taking patriotism in Hong Kong films as a starting point, one can enjoy a different experience of time and space from that in Shanghai, Wuhan, and Chongqing, and this perspective can help frame our understanding of the unique charm of Hong Kong cinema.

The films donated by Jack Lee Fong are rare and precious, but they also challenge researchers to reflect on research methodology: what are these films' commonalities and value? In terms of the nitrate films preserved in the basement of Fong's San Francisco villa, it would simply be happenchance whether one more was found, or several fewer. But should we change the course of our academic research with the discovery of these films? Or should we use academic methodologies to guide their interpretation? The answer may be self-evident.

Prospective Relationships Between Digital Archiving and Hong Kong Film History Research

In recent years, there have been several discoveries of old films that triggered waves of excitement. Examples include *Confucius* (aka *Story of Confucius*, 1940), discovered by the HKFA in 2001; *The Cave of Silken Web* (aka *Spiders*, 1927), uncovered by the National Library of Norway in 2012; *A Poet from the Sea* (1927), found in Italy; the foundational Taiwanese-language film *Hsueh Ping-Kuei and Wang Pao-Chuan* (aka *Sit Ping-kwai and Wong Bo-chuen*, 1956), unearthed by Tainan National University of the Arts in 2013. These all created an effect similar to archaeological finds, and also led to extensive promotion and screening activities in film archives around the world. Yet in actual fact, it is difficult to go beyond textual research with such occasional discoveries, nor could auteur- or genre-level studies be conducted with one single film alone. This means it is even harder for such finds to shake up the current situation of film history research.

We can hypothetically look forward to the future of film archaeology, which could change the fundamental framework of Hong Kong film history of the 1930s and 1940s. Over 1,000 Hong Kong films were made before 1949, and among them, we can anticipate and hope that the following films based on their historical influence to form a systematic study of Hong Kong cinema of this period: *The Trip of the Roast Duck* (aka *Stealing a Roast Duck*, 1914); *Love is Dangerous* (aka *Rouge*, 1925); *Join the Army and Live* (1926); *The Witty Sorcerer* (1931); *The White Gold Dragon* (1933, a Cantonese film made in Shanghai with great influence on Cantonese-speaking regions); *A Stupid Bridegroom* (aka *A Fool's Bridal Night*, 1933); *Dancing Girl* (aka *Opera Stars and Song Girls*), *The Country Bumpkin Tours the City* (aka *Villagers in Town*), *Life Lines* (aka *Lifeline*) (all 1935); *Shantung's Heroes* (aka *The Bandits of Shandong*), *A Lady of Canton* (aka *A Woman of Guangzhou*), *The Poor Slave* (aka *Compassion*), *Resistant* (aka *Resist!*) (all 1936); *Pei-wah's Wives* (aka *Twelve Wives*), *The Heroine* (aka *National Heroine*), *The Three-Day Massacre in Guangzhou* (aka *Stories on Canton 3 Days in Massacre in 1650*) (all 1937); *The General of Dragon City, The Flying Ace* (aka *The Flying General*), *A War at Bow Shan* (aka *The Blood-Stained Baoshan Fortress*), *Storm over Pacific*, *Sable Cicada* (all 1938); *Grand View Garden* (aka *The 1939 Grand Park*), *Twin Sisters of the South*, *The Devils' Paradise* (all 1939), *Small Canton* (aka *Little Guangdong*), *Fatherland Calls* (aka *My Motherland*) (both 1940); *Glorious Parade* (aka *Ten Thousand Li Ahead*), *The Orphan* (aka *Rescue Grandpa*), *Roar of the Nation* (aka *Roar of the People*) (all 1941); *The Rich House* (1942); *Under the Roofs of Shanghai* (1943); *Children of the Earth* (1945); *Gone with the Swallow* (aka *Gone Are the Swallows When the Willow Flowers Wilt*, 1946); *The Inscrutable Heart of Women*, *The Evil Mind*, *The Little Man Gets a Wife* (aka *The Young Couple*), *New White Golden Dragon*, *Drink Poison While Smiling* (aka *Take the Poison with a Smile*), *Where Is the Lady's Home?* (all 1947); *All for the Baby* (aka *Four Generations in One House*), *Welcome the God of Wealth*, *Bloodshed in a Besieged Citadel* (aka *United as One*), *The Soul of China*, *Everlasting Regret*, *Sorrows of the Forbidden City* (all 1948); *A Desperate Woman*, *You Better Return*, *The Little King of the Beggars* (aka *The Pauper King*), *The Sins of Our Fathers*, *Blood Will Tell*, *The Story of Wong Fei-hung, Part One* (aka *Wong Fei-hung's Whip that Smacks the Candle*) (all 1949), etc. Just as the renowned American film critic Andrew Sarris established the 'Pantheon Directors' list, so too should Hong Kong cinema from the 1930s and 1940s have a well-defined evaluation system based on a range of factors such as genre, cast and crew, context and box office. But this is simply a fantasised idea!

DVD of the restored *Confucius* (1940)

Returning to reality, let us discuss the opportunities that arise from present challenges. Although the archaeology and restoration of film are old topics, they have in recent years moved in tandem with the development of film digitisation, and Kodak's decision to discontinue some of its film negative production lines in 2012 made clear the direction in

which the future of film storage was heading. Meanwhile, with the decline in motion picture production due to the 2020 pandemic, and new developments in short videos and future visual media, the restoration of traditional films now takes place in a new context. With the recent boom in restoring commercial films, old films have become a form of 'content production' in the digital age.

Since the 20th century, digitisation issues relating to film data storage have been raised time and again. Joint Technical Symposium (JTS) of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) has continually conducted discussions on the topic, for example, its theme was 'Preserving the Audiovisual Heritage: Transition and Access' in 2004; 'Audiovisual Heritage and the Digital Universe' in 2007, and more directly in 2010, 'Digital Challenges and Digital Opportunities in Audiovisual Archiving'. These triggered a trend among global film archives.[17] Although later symposiums no longer took up the topic as directly, there were always essays on digital archiving. For example, at the symposium held in Singapore in 2019, seven of the 17 papers were about digital archiving and AI restoration.[18] The HKFA and the CFA have successively launched film restoration projects,[19] which saw a number of invaluable films, such as *Horse Thief* (1986) and *Emperor Zhengde's Night Visit to the Dragon and Phoenix Inn* (1958), undergo high-definition restoration. However, for films from the 1930s and 1940s, the problems related to digital restoration and archiving are different.

For the European and American film industries, digital restoration is a process of active selection and construction of film history. The American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has a film archive that stores films connected with the Academy Awards. In 2010, the Science and Technology Council of the Academy conducted a study on digital archiving under the Library of Congress's National Digital Information Infrastructure & Preservation Program, and raised a series of project management issues related to film digitisation.[20] In 2012, a group of film scholars including David Bordwell held a forum to discuss new issues such as artistic standards in restoration, storage safety and management complexity.[21] Although 'nearly half of the theatrical-length motion pictures made in the United States are lost forever',[22] most of them are historically less important films;

17. 'A Short History of the JTS', Joint Technical Symposium, FIAF. https://www.fiafnet.org/pages/Events/Joint-Technical-Symposium.html.
18. Joint Technical Symposium 2019. https://osf.io/meetings/JTS2019/.
19. For more about the Digital Restoration Centre of the CFA and the digital film restoration project in 2006, see Jia Qi, 'Secrets of Film Restoration Unlocked'. https://www.sohu.com/a/323152094_699621 (in Chinese). For the conservation and restoration work of the HKFA, see Janet Young, Head of the HKFA (narrated), Cheung Po-ching (collated), 'A Further Rumination on the "Principles of Film Restoration": Insights from the 75th FIAF Annual Congress and Symposium', *Newsletter*, Hong Kong Film Archive, Issue 89, August 2019, pp 14-15.
20. *Long-term Management and Storage of Digital Motion Picture Materials: A Digital Motion Picture Archive Framework Project Case Study*, Hollywood, CA: Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2010.
21. 'From 35mm to DCP: A Critical Symposium on the Changing Face of Motion Picture Exhibition featuring commentary by David Bordwell, Grover Crisp, The Ferroni Brigade, Scott Foundas, Bruce Goldstein, Haden Guest, Ned Hinkle, J. Hoberman, James Quandt, D. N. Rodowick, and Jonathan Rosenbaum', *Cineaste*, New York, Vol 37, No 4, Fall 2012, pp 32-42.
22. See note 3, p 29.

significant works such as *Citizen Kane* (1941) or *Stagecoach* (1939) have not been lost. Or, consider the case of the 1941 explosion of the Svenska Filminstitutet (Swedish Film Institute) in Sweden: while 95% of their negatives were destroyed, other copies of many of those films could still be found.

For the Hong Kong film industry, the attitude is that of passive acceptance. The preservation of the 100-odd films has been incidental, and they do not necessarily provide the prerequisite evidence needed for the construction of film history. This is also true for the CFA. The main problem faced by foreign countries is to choose which films to restore and archive since they cannot digitise every single title; the problem we face is that there are not too many nitrate films left to digitise. This further leads to inconclusiveness in the descriptions of film history. For example, *Labourer's Love* (1922) may have been retained in New China because of its 'labour' theme highlighting the working class, and has since become the starting point of Chinese cinema studies. This is part of a forced acceptance—we may have preferred watching and studying *Dingjun Mountain* (1905), *Victims of Opium* (1916) or *An Orphan Rescues His Grandpa* (1923).

In face of this problem, scholars have long been reaching beyond film to use other text materials to complement their research, as 'for broader…questions…nonfilmic materials prove invaluable.'[23] However, for early Hong Kong films these are mostly newspaper materials (usually film reviews), publications, oral memoirs; there is a lack of industry annals, financial statements and company files, so the basic conditions to study the history of the film industry remain missing. In the end, analysis of film history reverts back to the aesthetic research that relies on the audio-visual contexts, and is unable to extend to cinema's social, technological, and economic relations.

At this point, we can infer that it is difficult to piece together a comprehensive picture of and conduct sound scientific analyses of the history of 1930s and 1940s Hong Kong films. So, could the much-lauded 'digital archiving' projects in libraries and museums provide a way forward?

Whether it is the 'Digital Dunhuang' project in China, the rare collections digitisation project of the Kyoto Prefecture Library in Japan, or the digital humanities research in Taiwan, such hypertext 'digital archiving' projects have been widely carried out all over the world. A film archive has its asset-heavy side. A series of special factors, such as film conversion, media format and storage space, make the 'digital archiving' of films much harder than that of images, sound, text, maps, etc. Also, in reality, non-filmic materials were never within the purview of a film archive's collection in the first place. This delays and isolates a film archive's digitisation process.

'Digital archives have democratized historical research'[24] by removing the hurdles caused by distance and accessibility problems, which all film historians have suffered from.

23. Ibid, p 38.

24. Cheryl Mason Bolick, 'Digital Archives: Democratizing the Doing of History', *International Journal of Social Education*, Muncie, Indiana, Vol 21, No 1, Spring–Summer 2006, p 122.

A film's artistic integrity, or in other words its non-editability, is often a reason against allowing online access to it. The textual data of hypertext comprises a cross-textuality that transcends the individual, and can form a collection of information surrounding a film. By using a multi-disciplinary perspective to view a film's archival value, we can start from the film itself and extend our understanding to the related historical webs of relationships between society, economy and talent flow. Therefore, by breaking down the existing barriers and using digital archiving, there are indeed possibilities of exploring new facets of Hong Kong cinema from the 1930s and 1940s.

Concluding Thoughts

In 2014, when I first heard about Jack Lee Fong's film donations, I felt deeply that this discovery and restoration of such a large number of films was an opportunity to change the structure of how we understand Hong Kong film history. But after the enthusiasm cooled down, the question to further rethink on was what could be changed by these films. It just so happened that while I was a visiting fellow at the School of Theatre, Film and Television (TFT) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 2015, I often visited the school's film and television archive. It was also thanks to a senior who worked in the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences that I was allowed repeated visits to the Margaret Herrick Library and the Academy Film Archive. This senior acquaintance also introduced me to several staff members, with whom I have stayed in regular contact and have since become friends. It was through this process of exploration and learning that I realised the HKFA's approach to nitrate films is different from the problems faced by other archives. While the US has a large volume of nitrate films and, as a result, has to selectively restore and digitise parts of their collection, the HKFA's approach has always been to treat every single copy as a valuable cultural artefact that merit restoration, digitisation and promotion directed at the general public. This vast difference in collection volume has brought about very different concerns.

I was also surprised by the changes in Hong Kong society in recent years, which have inspired new perspectives in my thinking. I feel that 'patriotism' is the main way to understand this batch of films, or even all Hong Kong films from the 1930s and 1940s. During the Republican era, there was no concept of separation between the Mainland, Taiwan and Hong Kong; nor of 'Chinese-language films'. Hong Kong films were publicly recognised as a part of Chinese cinema. Returning to the starting point of history, looking ahead to the theoretical interpretations and production of meanings of the films donated by Jack Lee Fong, unique reactions will occur, in line with basic historical facts.

Further, I have been influenced by my good friend, Professor Kuo Liangwen from the Institute of Communication Studies of Taiwan's National Chiao Tong University. He has been engaged in the digital archival research of the 'Dawu' (or 'Tao') indigenous people on Taiwan's Lanyu Island for many years, and has a variety of database structures and indexing methods for physical objects and texts—obscure but critical knowledge that he shares with

the world. So, why can't films from the Republican era use the same concepts and methods of dissemination and promotion? 1930s and 1940s Hong Kong films have their strengths and the potential for wider dissemination; what it needs is to be presented through a new medium. This is the technological opportunity to break the shackles of traditional research methodologies around this era of cinema.

Despite the immense challenges, I am deeply hopeful for the future. I hereby offer my humble two cents on the matter, and I look forward to further advice and communication in the future. [Translated by Diane To]

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Ms Kwok Ching-ling and Ms Priscilla Chan of the HKFA for providing information for this essay. As travel had not been possible for various reasons, I had troubled Ms Kwok and Ms Chan with many questions through social media communications.

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Cinema of Parsimony or Thrift:
On the Notion of *Cuzhi Lanzao*

Sam Ho

Film is an art form, a medium, as well as a commercial enterprise. Film is also a personal activity and a collective behaviour. These characteristics interact with one another—in different ways, under different conditions, at different times—contributing to the dynamics of the art of cinema in all its glory.

Looking back at the development of Hong Kong cinema, *cuzhi lanzao* productions (literally 'crudely made, with slipshod work' and, when applied to discussions about film, roughly meaning 'shoddy productions') was a common criticism found in publications. At the symposium 'From Silent to Sound—Hong Kong Films of the 1930s and 1940s' held by the Hong Kong Film Archive, a scholar mentioned the use of the term in the publications of the time, triggering discussions. Unfortunately, the discussion was cut short because of time limits. Here I hope to carry on the discussion for further study.

Shoddy Versus Poor

According to the website ZDIC.net, the term *cuzhi lanzao* originated from 'A Letter About Translation' in Lu Xun's collection *Er Xin Ji* (*Two Hearts*). Its definition is 'to churn out large quantities without regard for quality'.[1] This notion, when applied to art, raises the question: if a work is shoddily made, more concerned with quantity than quality, does it necessarily mean that the work is of low artistic value? This topic has in fact been discussed at length over the course of art history. One theory that has garnered much attention in recent years is the concept of 'poor theatre', put forward in the 1960s by the Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski. As opposed to the elaborate means of staging in 'rich theatre',

1. See 'Cuzhi Lanzao' ('Rough and Slipshod') on the ZDIC website at https://www.zdic.net/hans/%E7%B2%97%E5%88%B6%E6%BB%A5%E9%80%A0. Accessed on 16 December 2021.

Grotowski proposed 'using the smallest amount of fixed elements to obtain maximum results'.[2] His concept mainly involves the actors' techniques, but the idea of 'poor' he proposed also covers sets, props and other production elements. This concept brought profound influence to the theatre world, making Grotowski—alongside Russia's Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski and Germany's Bertolt Brecht—one of the key figures of 20th-century theatre.[3]

The concept of 'poor theatre' has also been applied to film. Over the years, a number of authors and filmmakers have advocated making films with simple methods, encouraging or urging other filmmakers to follow suit. A ready example is scholar and documentary director of African descent Erik Knudsen, who promotes the paradigm of 'Cinema of Poverty'. He claims that in the 'age of abundance and complexity' of today, 'poverty—both in terms of resources and, more philosophically, in terms of artistic expression', could lead to a state of 'creative liberation'.[4]

Knudsen's views share an affinity with 'third cinema' and 'imperfect cinema', two other schools of thought that emerged in the 1960s, roughly the same time Grotowski championed the notion of 'poor theatre'. 'Third cinema' rejects the modes and methods of mainstream production, emphasising the ideological aspects of film. Not only does it decry the production models of Hollywood (first cinema) and European art films (second cinema), it also rejects the view of cinema as a vehicle for personal expression, seeing the director instead as part of a collective.[5] Even earlier, before Grotowski's proposal of 'poor theatre', artist and experimental filmmaker Bruce Conner had advocated in the 1950s the idea of 'cinema povera', i.e. making films 'using what you have'.[6]

Recently, scholar Lim Song Hwee of The Chinese University of Hong Kong takes Grotowski's 'poor theatre' concept further, proposing a version of 'poor cinema' slightly different from Knudsen's theory. Lim believes that the use of extremely simple methods of filmmaking by Taiwanese director Midi Z (aka Chao Te-yin) demonstrates 'poverty as a paradoxically positive premise for a mode of filmmaking'.[7]

British scholar Chris Berry also cites Grotowski's concept in his research on early Taiwanese cinema. His study is also closer to the situation of *cuzhi lanzao* productions in Hong Kong cinema. Berry proposes the use of 'alternative cinema of poverty' to

2. See 'poor theatre' on grotowski.net at https://grotowski.net/en/encyclopedia/poor-theatre. Accessed on 16 December 2021.
3. Jerzy Grotowski, Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski and Bertolt Brecht are considered the 'key figures of the 20th century' on 'furthering the actor's technique'. See 'poor theatre' in Britannica website at https://www.britannica.com/art/poor-theatre. Accessed on 16 December 2021.
4. Erik Knudsen, 'Cinema of Poverty: Independence and Simplicity in an Age of Abundance and Complexity', *Wide Screen*, Vol 2, No 2, 2010, p 1.
5. Fernando Solanas & Octavio Getino, 'Toward a Third Cinema', *Cinéaste*, Vol 4, No 3, latin american militant cinema (winter 1970–1971), pp 1-10.
6. Song Hwee Lim, 'Towards a Poor Cinema: Ubiquitous Trafficking and Poverty as Problematic in Midi Z's Films', *Transnational Cinemas*, Vol 9, No 2, 2018, p 135.
7. Ibid, p 131.

understand the *taiyupian* (the term translates literally as 'Taiwanese-language films', and refers to the type of films which use the *Minnan* dialect of the Fujian Province) of the 1950s and 1960s. He emphasises that the term 'alternative cinema of poverty' 'is not a derogatory remark', nor a praise.[8] He believes that *taiyupian* of the time, under inadequate production conditions, tactically borrowed from various foreign sources, adopting 'ingenious methods to realize a Hollywood-style cinema industry and culture on a low budget'.[9] Such a mode of production concurs with the spirit of 'grabbism' (*nalai zhuyi*) proposed by Lu Xun in the 1930s: 'appropriating anything that works from other cultural forms and overseas'; neither giving things away, or blindly accepting what is brought forth, but to 'grab' what is needed based on practicality, constructing an industry that worked under the socio-economic conditions of the time.[10]

Look Back, Re-Evaluate, Adjust

Even in developed countries, many films are made in impoverished conditions. Some are dismissed or ignored, but others are acknowledged or even valued—B-movies and exploitation films[11] in the US, for example. Most of these films were ignored by the critical establishment when first released, but some went on to become acclaimed works. The B-movies *Detour* (1945) and *Gun Crazy* (1950) are now renowned as outstanding and important classics. *Dementia 13* (1963), the debut feature of Francis Ford Coppola of *The Godfather* (1972) fame, is considered an exploitation film, a product of American International Pictures (AIP), sometimes derided as a factory for crude and slipshod films. Completed in those days with very limited resources, *Dementia 13* is still highly regarded today. Also produced by AIP is Martin Scorsese's sophomore feature *Boxcar Bertha* (1972), disparaged with one star—out of four—by the noted *Chicago Tribune* critic Gene Siskel, calling the film a 'trashy movie'.[12] But across town in the Windy City, *Chicago Sun-Times*'s Roger Ebert praised it as 'a weirdly interesting movie' in which audiences 'got the feeling [they were] inhabiting the dark night of a soul.' Ebert's verdict? Three stars![13]

The concept of exploitation films can be extended towards understanding the situation

8. Chris Berry, 'An Alternative Cinema of Poverty: Understanding the Taiwanese-language Film Industry', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, Vol 14, No 2, 2020, pp 140-149. Special thanks to Jessica Siu-yin Yeung for recommending Chris Berry's works and providing me with his essays.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid, pp 140 & 147.
11. There are many definitions of American 'B-movies' and 'exploitation films'. 'B-movies' are so named because from the 1930s to 1950s, cinemas would screen double features, pairing A-movies with B-movies, the latter being low-budget productions. 'Exploitation films' refer to the films shown in drive-in cinemas and cheaper theatres after the double-feature policy ended.
12. Gene Siskel, 'Now You See…', *Chicago Tribune*, Section 2, 20 July 1972, p 9.
13. See Roger Ebert, 'Boxcar Bertha' on RogerEbert.com at https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/boxcar-bertha-1972. Accessed on 16 December 2021.

of Hong Kong's *cuzhi lanzao* productions. Exploitation films, according to a research guide by The Dartmouth Library, are 'designed by its producers to "exploit", via clever marketing and promotion, the notoriety of certain sensational current events and trends and/or taboo subjects'; and they are 'usually low-budget and calculatedly commercial, venturing into parts of the market neglected by mainstream filmmaking'.[14] This description is applicable to many Hong Kong films that were considered *cuzhi lanzao*. They were often formulated to exploit certain trends; their budgets were usually low, and they were calculated commercially to satisfy audience demands. Just like exploitation films, the *cuzhi lanzao* productions were not necessarily 'trashy'. They could also be 'weirdly interesting movies' that gave audience a feeling of 'inhabiting the dark night of a soul'—or the bright morning of a soul, for that matter—or other emotional states.

Another type of American film worthy of contemplation is the Black film, including the 'race films' made between 1910s and 1950s as a result of racial segregation measures, and the 'Blaxploitation film' of the 1970s. African-Americans, having experienced extreme racial discrimination, made films outside the commercial mainstream. Because of prejudice and the comparatively impoverished production conditions, these works were ignored, even disdained, by the white-dominant society. Today, with moral awakening and improvements in race relations, mainstream American society has come to realise that these films cannot be judged by their rough edges or, perhaps even more importantly, on the differences in creative vision or values. Looking back at our past, it is at once appropriate and necessary to examine the complexity of historical factors, to re-evaluate established concepts accordingly, and to adjust our views and understanding of the past.

The neglect and scorn suffered by Black films likewise can contribute to the understanding of the *cuzhi lanzao* issue. Were the *cuzhi lanzao* productions criticised and chided by the media because they had failed to fulfil certain values cherished or pursued by mainstream Chinese or Hong Kong society? Should the audience who enjoyed those films be criticised or scolded for watching them? Did those audience members learn terrible things and become worse human beings for watching the films? And did critics then and now ever consider the situation of the audiences who loved these films? Or did they respect the audience's intention or their need for entertainment or inspiration? In this day and age, with historical distance, is there a need to re-examine those films by considering the complexity of historical factors, to re-evaluate established concepts, and to adjust our views and understanding of the past?

Yet another type of film that enjoyed delayed renown is the low-budget horror flick. Many titles in this category received rejuvenated critical reputation years after its initial release. American bargain-basement productions are an illustrative example. In the 1950s,

14. See 'Exploitation films' on the Dartmouth Library website at https://researchguides.dartmouth.edu/filmgenres/exploitationfilms. Accessed on 16 December 2021.

there were, among many others, *The Thing from Another World* (1951), *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), *The Bad Seed* (1956), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and *The Fly* (1958). Likewise, there were *Spider Baby* (1967) and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) in the 1960s. Even in the 1970s and 1980s, with increased intellectual recognition of popular culture, opinions were split when now-classic horror films like *The Honeymoon Killers* (1970), *Sisters* (1973), *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), *Halloween* (1978), *Friday the 13th* (1980) and *Cujo* (1983) were first released. Many of these titles enjoyed box-office success and even favourable reviews, but most were not regarded with reverence by the mainstream, such as being nominated for Oscars, much less winning awards.

The same is true of Europe, where many horror films were disregarded or criticised initially but have become esteemed today, such as Belgian or Russian productions. Especially outstanding are Italian films like *Black Sunday* (1960), *Suspiria* (1977) and *The Beyond* (1981), now recognised as important works. Also, Europe's Gothic epics, Italian or German soft-core porn and films dubbed 'Eurotrash' were once very popular on one hand and ignored by critics on the other, yet they have managed to win new acclaim in recent years.[15] Japan, with its ready share of 'trashy films', has seen its monster films and pink films favourably re-examined.

Chinese-language horror films had once been criticised by governments or intellectuals as immoral, contributing to superstition and impeding national progress. So severe was the extent of censure that they had even been banned. Today, ghost films *The Enchanting Shadow* (1960) and *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987), adapted from the same literary source, are widely recognised as important accomplishments in the history of Chinese-language cinema. Many other Chinese-language ghost films have also enjoyed popular success, or have been critically acclaimed, or have been both acclaimed and commercially triumphant—*A Beautiful Corpse Comes to Life* (aka *Beauty Raised from the Dead*, 1956) and *Mr Vampire* (1985), two very different films from different eras, for example. Not only were they not banned, ready criticisms of promoting superstition were also spared. The times change constantly, as do thoughts and values.

Can Art Be Raw, Crude or Shoddy?

American B-movies, exploitation films and horror films, together with their counterparts, Eurotrash from across the Atlantic, are sometimes referred to collectively as 'paracinema', the prefix *para-* meaning 'to the side of', 'outside of' or 'further than'. There is also 'paraliterature',[16] such as children's stories, comic books, graphic novels, pornographic

15. Ernest Mathijs & Xavier Mendik (eds), *Alternative Europe: Eurotrash and Exploitation Cinema Since 1945*, London: Wallflower Press, 2004.

16. See 'paraliterature' on the Oxford Reference website at https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100305318. Accessed on 16 December 2021.

novels and pulp fiction like detective stories and romances. Pulp fiction, low-brow literature produced inexpensively and in high volume, was often initially dismissed as cheap, sensational and low in artistic quality. But with time, many have enjoyed rejuvenated esteem. Detective novels are a prime example. Film noir, now universally recognised for its artistic capacity, had its humble beginning in pulp fiction. Here in Hong Kong, 'thirty-cent novels'—our equivalent of the dime novels—went through a similar trajectory, receiving deserved attention or even accolades in recent years.

The *cuzhi lanzao* notion also finds a parallel in music, notably punk rock. This genre—or movement—of Western popular music is a key 'para' development in rock 'n' roll, exploding onto the scene in the mid-1970s. Punk rock aggressively challenged established practices with purposely crude, technically simplistic and formally stripped-down presentations, often backed by inexpensive, bare-bone do-it-yourself production methods. Technical virtuosity and sophisticated skills may be in short supply, but punk rock is not deficient in artistry, for coarse shoddiness and raw expressions are key parts of its artistic essence. Just because presentations are raw, crude or shoddy does not necessarily mean they are not art.

Poor theatre, poor cinema, exploitation films, Eurotrash, pulp fiction and punk rock are reactions against the mainstream of their respective medium. The established ways of the mainstream dominate each respective medium, exerting authority or even monopoly, prompting resistance. Artists unwilling to conform are often limited by constraints in resources and, as such, are forced to either seek alternate paths or express themselves in norm-challenging ways, giving rise to new creative energy and directions.

Hong Kong's *cuzhi lanzao* productions are of course different from these mostly western modes of non-conformity. To begin with, the 'crude and shoddy productions' of Hong Kong are usually products for the industrial mainstream. For example, Chinese scholar Su Tao points out that in the 1940s, *Ta Kung Pao* (*L'Impartial*) in Hong Kong often accused Cantonese films of being *cuzhi lanzao*,[17] and the Cantonese cinema was at the time part of Hong Kong's mainstream industry. It is illustrative of the complicated and often contradictory nature of China's political and historical development in the 20th century that in the early stages of Chinese cinema, Cantonese films, mainstream as they were in Hong Kong and Southern China, were frequently criticised, marginalised or ostracised by established enterprises, be they governmental, civil or cultural. They were in fact almost banned by the government.[18] Not until the mid to late 1970s did that marginalisation come to an end. Meanwhile, ever since the import of cinema as a medium from the West, China's

17. See Su Tao, 'Dialect, Politics, and the Media Mobilisation of Leftist Filmmakers: A Discussion of Criticisms of Cantonese Films in Hong Kong *Ta Kung Pao* (*L'Impartial*) (1948–1950)' in Part 1 of this book, pp 180-191.

18. 'Cantonese films', as discussed in this essay, are Hong Kong films with soundtracks in the Cantonese dialect, which have been produced since the advent of talkies. They once prospered alongside Mandarin films, and declined in popularity in the early 1970s, becoming extinct for a short period.

film industry had been in an ongoing state of imitative negotiation, part of modern China's drive to catch up with the world, integrating Western ways with traditional Chinese ways, a rapidly evolving process. For much of the 20th century, Chinese cinema is an alternate cinema to that of the Western-dictated mainstream, with comparatively lower production budgets and production values. As such, like the film industries of most non-Western countries, Chinese cinema shares in spirit at least some of the tenets of 'third cinema', Knudsen's 'cinema of poverty' and Grotowski's 'poor theatre'. While Cantonese cinema is an alternative to China's Mandarin mainstream, together, both cinemas are part of an alternative to the western mainstream.

It must be emphasised that the alternative qualities of both Cantonese and Mandarin films did not come from purported resistance. Rather, it was a creative mode developed under conditions of comparatively limited resources, all the while manifesting local cultural characteristics. It was a self-made and unique mode of creativity, interacting and integrating with—and not revolting against or divisively opposing—Western ways. In this regard, the *cuzhi lanzao* productions of Hong Kong can be compared with the Taiwanese films described in Chris Berry's 'alternative cinema of poverty'. Although the situations of Cantonese films and *taiyupian* are not exactly the same—Cantonese films enjoyed a much larger overseas market than Taiwanese-dialect films and were therefore not as 'poor', for example—there are still considerable similarities.

Berry notes that the *taiyupian* cinema of the 1950s and 1960s was on the one hand striving to foster a Hollywood-style industry and, on the other, limited by a scarcity of resources. Filmmakers in Taiwan would adopt 'ingenious methods' to emulate Hollywood with low-budget production modes, hammering out a means of expression unique to their own metropolitan culture. This alternative cinema of poverty is therefore also a 'cinema of aspiration'. This kind of approach had in fact been employed by film industries of many developing countries. If evaluated with the criteria of developed countries, these films would certainly appear to be shoddy and easily critiqued with the label of *cuzhi lanzao*. But from a human perspective, not only is such criticism inappropriate, the value of those films should in fact be recognised. Berry also points out that due to historical factors—key among them the urge to promote national unity by restraining the impact of regional dialects— *taiyupian* were suppressed by the Nationalist government led by the Kuomintang (KMT), which was aggressively promoting Mandarin films. Such a situation is not unlike the marginalisation of Cantonese films. Adding to the complexity is that many of the Mandarin films advocated by the KMT and promoted in the Taiwanese market were produced in Hong Kong. Back in Hong Kong, these Mandarin films were often regarded as superior to Cantonese films because of better production values, putting the two dialect cinemas into the same boat. In Hong Kong magazines and newspapers, criticisms of Cantonese films for being *cuzhi lanzao* often refer to the films' Southern Chinese heritage as part of the cause.[19]

19. See Xin Ke, 'Post-Screening Impressions of *Topsy Turvy*', *Youyou* (*Leisure Magazine*), Guangzhou, No 24, 23 August 1936; Cheung Tat-kuen, 'A Rare Gem of the Film Industry *The Empress Dowager*', *Tsun Wan Yat Po* (*The Universal Circulating Herald*), 31 March 1940 (both in Chinese).

In other words, Cantonese films and *taiyupian* share a common predicament of once having been ostracised by mainstream Chinese culture. At the same time, the two also shared the same boat with the industries in mainstream China and other developing countries, aspiring to foster a Hollywood-style cinema or at least one on par with developed nations. While doing so, Cantonese, *taiyu* and the mainstream Chinese films were also striving to foster their own distinctive modes of filmmaking that were appropriate for their respective realities, from industrial infrastructures to the ever-evolving cultures. At the same time, they were also busy establishing operational systems, narrative forms and aesthetic styles that would connect with their audiences. This development was marked by an often-eager attempt to conform to established narrative norms, which had been established by Western and developed countries, starting from the very beginning when cinema was emerging as a medium, and refined throughout the years, mostly by the cultural and socio-economic mores of the developed world. These narrative norms were established without the participation of underdeveloped countries, which had to make constant adjustments to integrate the mainstream modes defined by the West with all the evolving local socio-economic conditions.

The historical development of both Cantonese films and *taiyupian* were therefore carried out under the shadow of two other cinemas, the Mandarin one and the Western one epitomised by Hollywood, both more powerful, more established and better resourced than the dialect cinemas. Yet both the Cantonese and *taiyupian* cinemas managed to foster unique production modes that were in accordance with their respective state of resources, developing into cinemas that connected well with their target audiences, interacting with them under market mechanisms. Measured against those of the more established Mandarin cinema or Hollywood, the products of these two industries would inevitably be found wanting. Cantonese films being derided with the label of *cuzhi lanzao* is a manifestation as such.

Parsimonious or Thrifty

Like the American B-movie, the exploitation film, the European horror flick, the detective dime novel and punk rock music, Cantonese *cuzhi lanzao* productions do not necessarily or inherently lack artistic merits. Take the notorious 'wonton noodles' scenes, for example. These scenes were so called because of rumours that directors would lock the camera position during actors' performances, slipping aside to enjoy a bowl of the Cantonese favourite before resuming his duty. This fabled kind of cavalier work habit has been the target of ridicule over the years, a vivid indictment of Cantonese filmmakers' lack of dedication and an illustrative sign of the cinema's shabby inferiority. But one person's shoddiness can be another's simplicity. Many of these 'wonton noodles' scenes were musical performances, usually involving a performer singing a song while the camera remained stationary to record the act. No doubt from a cinematic perspective, this is a crude way of filmmaking, a static employ of the camera apparatus. But film is an artistic medium with

more than just images. It is an artistic medium with both images and sound. If a scene is dull in visual terms but outstanding in audio terms, it has artistic merits. If this visually dull but aurally outstanding scene can move the audience, it is a scene of value.

Sun Ma Si-tsang, a popular actor of Cantonese cinema, was featured in many films with 'wonton noodles' scenes and he has been duly criticised for it over the years. He was a Cantonese opera star, renowned and beloved for his vocal artistry, his singing regarded by critics and audience alike as supreme. The sustained popularity of his films attests to the power of his performance, that his audience are moved by his artistry. In the many 'wonton noodles' scenes of his films, it seemed not to matter how static the camera positions were and how sorely lacking in cinematic dynamics they were, for the audiences' enjoyment and appreciation of his art did not seem to have diminished. From a critique perspective, these scenes can readily be considered as simple, not shoddy. Of course, if they can excel both visually and aurally, it is entirely possible that audience enjoyment may be further enhanced and critical reception bolstered. But to dismiss them simply for their lack of visual animation is an inadequate consideration of film as a medium of sight and sound.

Making films is a business. Most production companies in the Cantonese industry were operating with less resources than the Mandarin industry and certainly Hollywood, and it was not unusual for them to forgo a dedicated pursuit of visual and audio excellence in favour of greater profit margins. Striving to please the audience with the most cost-effective of ways, 'wonton noodles' scenes, with fixed camera positions that needed no extra setup and attendant requisites like additional blocking for actors and changed lighting arrangements that called for time-consuming procedures, were naturally desirable. When the audience voted in support with their wallets, the practice became common. Equally important is the practice's artistic contribution. The stasis of 'wonton noodles' scenes allowed accomplished opera artists to perform with less constraint, touching audiences in the short term and leaving behind precious records of their artistry in the long term. Art and profit do not have to be mutually exclusive—they can co-exist. It was in fact a win-win-win situation for the industry, the public and the art of Cantonese cinema. But not for the critics who were fixated with the negative aspects of *cuzhi lanzao*.

Grotowski's concept of 'poor theatre' offers help to understand Sun Ma Si-tsang's art. Grotowski believed that because it was impossible for theatre to compete with the more technically advanced media of film and television, 'poor theatre' should focus on a 'proper spectator-actor relationship'.[20] Before Hong Kong's economy took off in the 1960s and 1970s, Cantonese films from the 1930s to the 1950s could not come close to competing with mainstream films from the West, or even the Mandarin films that enjoyed more abundant production resources. But in the process of seeking a form of expression suited to local culture and financial reality, Cantonese films developed a 'proper relationship'

20. Jerzy Grotowski, 'Towards a poor theatre' (1965), Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo (C.A.A.C.). The article is available at http://www.caac.es/programa/grottos10/frame.htm.

between audience and actor with the 'wonton noodles' scene. Also, the long takes used in those scenes are also not without aesthetic value and should not be wantonly disregarded.

Lim, in his discussion of 'poor cinema', applies to film Grotowski's concept of describing mainstream theatre as 'rich theatre' and 'rich in flaws', referring to the work of mainstream Hollywood as 'rich cinema'. Lim posits that films produced under poor conditions have their value because 'poverty signals a departure from the conventional modes of production which depend upon substantial investment in cast, crew, set and equipment, relying instead on skeletal operational scale to achieve its artistic aims'.[21] Along the same trajectory, Berry argues that *taiyupian* used 'exuberantly commercial' methods to put into practice Lu Xun's spirit of 'grabbism'. He believes the 'alternative cinema of poverty' of *taiyupian* is comparable to the 'neglected popular and commercial film industries that emulated Hollywood on a budget' in other regions.[22]

Grotowski's thesis and the concepts of 'imperfect cinema' espoused by Conner and Knudsen are prescriptive, meant to advocate certain modes of artistic endeavours. The 'poor cinema' and 'alternative cinema of poverty' put forward by Lim and Berry, on the other hand, are descriptive. The *cuzhi lanzao* idea of Hong Kong's cinema can be considered with the descriptive approach of 'poor cinema'.

Film industries of underdeveloped or developing nations are always facing deficient production conditions. From the 1920s to the 1950s, the early decades of Hong Kong cinema, the local economy lagged far behind those of developed nations. Although the film industry was not impoverished, production resources were comparatively meagre, and keeping things simple was a necessity. Film companies, always seeking a balance between maximising profit and responding to audience demand, must do so in keeping with the socio-economic conditions of the day. Hardly able to come close to realising the plentiful production values of the West, the *cuzhi lanzao* approach was one of Hong Kong's ways to '(imitate) Hollywood on a budget'.

Grotowski and 'imperfect cinema' advocate economic methods of making non-mainstream films. Cantonese films and *taiyupian* might have been striving to achieve the standards of the West's 'rich cinema', but could only settle for low-budget imitations. Lim points out that although Midi Z's production resources were measly, thanks to technological advancement in the 21st century, the director was able to fabricate 'rich image' under the conditions of 'poor cinema'.[23] Hong Kong Cantonese films, Taiwan's *taiyupian* and Midi Z's films, Knudsen's work and products of 'imperfect cinema' are productions with very different backgrounds and from different eras, but they share certain degrees of non-conformity with mainstream 'rich cinema'. Some are purposefully non-conformist, such as

21. See note 6, p 134.
22. See note 8.
23. See note 6, p 141.

those made with the 'imperfect cinema' mode. Others have no qualms about conforming to the mainstream of developed nations but were unable to do so, such as our *cuzhi lanzao* films. All these works can be collectively regarded as 'cinema of non-conformity'.

Yet another descriptive label can be applied to Hong Kong cinema in general and Cantonese cinema in particular. Hong Kong cinema certainly fits into the category of 'popular and commercial film industries that emulated Hollywood on a budget' described by Berry. However, considering that the Hong Kong industry was enjoying an agreeable degree of fiscal health because of steady demands for its products in both the local and overseas Chinese markets, it would not be accurate to describe it as 'poor'. Hong Kong cinema, including its Cantonese branch, also experienced solid growth in the post-war years, resulting in business expansion and improved production values, though still far from measuring up to Hollywood. And considering the win-win-win situation described above, the industry was in fact very effective in running its business. It can therefore be characterised as either parsimonious or thrifty, the former notion more derogative and the latter more positive. Here, I will venture to label Hong Kong films, especially Cantonese ones, as either the Cinema of Parsimony or the Cinema of Thrift.

Hating Iron for Not Becoming Steel

It cannot be emphasised enough that all the reproach of *cuzhi lanzao* productions cannot be considered without putting into context China's political and historical conditions of the time. Some of the criticisms might have had commercial motivations—part of the industry's established practice then, passing off promotion disguised as reporting—often declaring that certain films were productions of sincere intentions, unlike the other low-down *cuzhi lanzao* films of the day.[24] Yet, many—if not most—accusations appeared to be driven by genuine moral and idealistic convictions.

China in the first half of the 20th century, having experienced the severe and traumatic challenge of Western civilisation, was going through ever-intensifying strife. People were overcome by a strong sense of crisis and were desperate to find solutions to pull the nation out of the troubled waters. Intellectuals and the educated, in particular, were infused with the *ganshi youguo* (feeling for the times and worry for the nation) spirit of the literati tradition. Weighted with the increasingly urgent moral burden to raise the quality of the people's thoughts and values, they sometimes harboured a *hentie bu chenggang* mentality—literally 'hating iron for not becoming steel', somewhat a variation of the Benjamin Franklin quote 'love well, whip well'—towards the masses. Chinese people at the time were eager to follow in the footsteps of the West, trying their best to catch up with the standards of

24. See Lei Qun, '*The Shining Cup* · You Jing · Ko Lei-hen · and Others', '*The Shining Cup* Special Publication', *Sing Tao Jih Pao* (aka *Sing Tao Daily*), 26 March 1939.

Western civilisation on one hand, striving to explore directions and pathways on the other. Such aspirations were sometimes manifested as anxious impatience. Meanwhile, intellectuals imparted with the missionary zeal of *wenyi zaidao*—the Confucian notion of 'writing for the conveying of truth'—were often frustrated with a perceived lack of progress among ordinary people towards improving national character. All these were factored into the traditional hierarchy of 'scholars, farmers, workers, merchants', resulting in the educated sector's mistrust of the 'business is business' rationale of market economy. Hence, a disdain for the profit-driven enterprises of the film industry and the *cuzhi lanzao* criticism of the cost-efficient approach to filmmaking.

Surely there was more than a touch of elitist arrogance to this idealism, invoking a historical contempt among intellectuals for the habits and customs of the populace. To be fair, this attitude was in turn informed by a frustration over the historically widespread illiteracy that was still prevalent at the time. Much of the masses were not well educated, holding onto ingrained beliefs and archaic, deep-rooted everyday habits. Steadfast intellectuals driven by an eager yearning for better society were compelled to voice their 'hatred for the iron for not becoming steel', expressing their love of the people by whipping them well. Hence, an elitist arrogance that sometimes denied the people of the respect they were duly entitled.

Striking a balance between the part and the whole is an eternal human endeavour. And finding a balance in the many interactions between the individual and the collective is the norm of human civilisation. Film is a cultural activity, but also a commercial enterprise operating under market economy principles. The film industry's goal to make products that appeal to the audience naturally involves profit, but catering to the audience also involves respect—a respect for the needs and likes of the masses. This is fundamental to market operations and requires no further elaboration here. But it is also an example of finding a balance in the interactions between the individual and the collective.

Accusations in the previous century of films being *cuzhi lanzao* by the educated sector can be traced to the practice of *aizhishen zezhiqie*—literally 'love deep, reprimand quick and hard', yet another variation of 'love well, whip well'—which intellectuals sometimes imposed on the people, informed by profound passion for the people and urgent concern for the good of nation. Such idealism was naturally at odds with the film industry's market-driven catering to the masses. This was one of the many conflicts in the past 200 years or so that resulted from the impact of Western modern civilisation on traditional, mostly Confucian, beliefs.

Interplays between the past and the present, the traditional and the modern have persisted in provoking conflicts throughout history, part of human beings' eternal endeavour to strike balance between the part and the whole. Looking back at film history, interactions between different elements can be found to have caused inevitable conflicts. In the process, different ways to appeal, touch or move the audience were created. That is the magic of film and of art. In Hong Kong, intellectuals had their own reasons to 'love well, whip well'. The film industry, with its 'business is business' mentality, had also its

own reasons to strive for the best margin of profit with the lowest of costs. The people, negotiating life in its many splendours of good and bad, certainly had their reasons for choosing the films they liked. Everyone has his reasons, but it does not have to be a problem. The educated, the industry and the public, each with legitimate reasons, interacted with each other, generating inevitable conflicts but also ways to communicate, to entertain, to voice opinions, to make money, to touch hearts, to move emotions, to inspire, to transcend. Hong Kong cinema, emerging out of the many historical and socio-economic interactions of its time, managed to develop unique characteristics of its own, making Hong Kong one of the most important film production centres of the world. [Translated by Roberta Chin]

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Appendices

Hong Kong Film Chronology (1930–1949)

Compiled by Wong Ha-pak
Proofread by Po Fung and Paul Cheng

In April 1897, the screening held at the Hong Kong City Hall became the first-ever public film screening to be reported by the media. In 1907, cinemas built specifically for screening films gradually appeared. In 1914, Hong Kong's earliest feature short film came into being, marking the start of the local cinematic industry. In the mid-1920s, film production came to a halt under the impact of the Canton-Hong Kong Strike from 1925 to 1926 and only showed signs of recovery by the end of the 20th century. In 1933, the release of the first locally produced sound film ushered in a new era for Hong Kong cinema.

Year	Event
1930	
1930.6.14	Yau Ma Tei Theatre opened and continued to screen Hong Kong-made film productions until the 1980s.
1930.10.25	The United Photoplay Service Limited (UPS, aka Lianhua), founded by Lo Ming-yau, registered and established its Hong Kong branch office, with its headquarters located in the city. By the following year, three studios were set up in Shanghai and Hong Kong. The UPS 3rd Studio, also known as UPS (Hong Kong branch), was located at Ming Yuen, North Point.
1931	
1931.3.15	*The Witty Sorcerer*, directed by Lai Buk-hoi (aka Lai Pak-hoi) and produced by Hong Kong Film Company, is released, marking the first locally made feature film to be screened in Hong Kong after the Canton-Hong Kong Strike.
April 1931	UPS (Hong Kong branch) opened the Actor Training School, and among its first cohort was Lee Tit, Wong Toi, Tony Shak Yau-yue, Yip Yan-fu, Tong Sing-to and Chan Ki-yui, who would later become key figures in the industry.
1932	
1932.4.10	*Temple Bells* (aka *Cry of the Cuckoo in the Temple*) premiered in Hong Kong. Wong Man-lei had been invited by UPS (Hong Kong branch) to return to Hong Kong from Shanghai to shoot the film.
1932.8.31	Tai Ping Theatre in Shek Tong Tsui reopened after a period of reconstruction. Apart from staging Cantonese opera shows, it also had sound film projectors for screening talkies.
1932.10.18	China Sound and Silent Movies Production Company, founded by Lai Buk-hoi and his partners, launched its shares allotment scheme. The company was formally established in 1933.
1933	
1933.1.26	The Tai Ping Opera Troupe, organised by Tai Ping Theatre and led by Ma Si-tsang, premiered its debut stage production, *The General of Dragon City*. This Cantonese opera piece was later adapted into a film that premiered on 1 January 1938.
1933.4.13	The Hong Kong government announced the seven clauses of 'Censoring of cinematograph films and posters' under the Places of Public Entertainment Regulation Ordinance, thereby enforcing legislation officially on film censorship.
1933.8.13	Hong Kong's first ever sound film, *A Stupid Bridegroom* (aka *A Fool's Bridal Night*), produced by China Sound and Silent Movies Production Company, premiered.

Year	Event
1933.9.27	*The White Gold Dragon* (aka *The Platinum Dragon*), produced and shot by Shanghai's Unique Film Productions (aka Tianyi), directed by Tang Xiaodan and starring Sit Kok-sin, premiered at Central Theatre. It premiered in Shanghai and Guangzhou on 4 and 11 October in the same year respectively. The film was a box-office success in Southern China and Southeast Asian regions, which prompted Unique to develop its Cantonese film market.
December 1933	American-Chinese Joseph Sunn Jue (aka Chiu Shu-sun) established Grandview Film Company Limited in San Francisco, and produced and shot the Cantonese film *Blossom Time* in the same year. After premiering in late December, Sunn Jue brought the film to Hong Kong. He discussed its screening rights with UPS, and on 31 December, the film was screened at Queen's Theatre.
1934	
1934.1.10	*Blossom Time* premiered at Central Theatre.
May 1934	Runme Shaw arrived in Hong Kong to establish Unique's Hong Kong studio, which was devoted to making Cantonese pictures. Runje Shaw (aka Shao Zuiweng) came to Hong Kong from Shanghai to take over the studio in October. The company's debut film, *Mourning of the Chaste Tree Flower*, premiered on 28 December 1934.
Summer 1934	Quanqiu Film Company was established with So Yee as the head of the studio. *Wild Flower* (aka *Scent of Wild Flowers*), Ma Si-tsang's screen debut, was produced by Quanqiu and premiered on 4 February 1935.
1934	UPS (Hong Kong branch) closed and its staff moved out of the studio at Ming Yuen, North Point. Lo Ken (aka Lo Din-hok) founded Zhenye Company in Hong Kong and inherited Ming Yuen studio with the hopes of making Cantonese films.
1935	
1935.2.4	After Joseph Sunn Jue formally established Grandview Film Company Limited in Hong Kong, the company's debut work *Song of the Past* (aka *Yesterday's Song*) premiered.
February 1935	*The Deadly Rose*, starring Sit Kok-sin, was supposed to be released in the Lunar New Year, but intellectual property disputes over its screenplay led to a court case, so the film was pulled. It was then re-titled as *The Red Rose* and premiered on 3 February (Lunar New Year's Eve) in Guangzhou. The case was settled after two and a half years, and the film was finally released in Hong Kong on 22 December 1937.
March 1935	Ho Yim of the Hong Kong Overseas Chinese Education Association launched a Film Clean-Up Movement in the name of the association. The movement was promoted in schools. Film and theatre companies were contacted in the bid to counteract the negative influences of supernatural films.
1935.11.30	Director Moon Kwan Man-ching's *Life Lines* (aka *Lifeline*) had been banned from screening because of its depictions of resistance against an enemy's invasion. However, its appeal was successful and the film was finally screened in its entirety.
1935	Nanyue Film Company was established and became one of the three major pre-war film companies. Its production numbers were only second to those of Unique's Hong Kong studio (later Nanyang Film Company [aka Nan Yeung Film Company]) and Grandview. Nanyue's founder, Chuk Ching-yin (aka Zhu Qingxian), developed a sound film recording machine and named it 'Ching Yin Sound Recording System'.
	Lo Ken's Zhenye Company failed to pay the studio rent. Studio assets were thus seized by the landlord. The company subsequently changed hands and was renamed Feng Huang Motion Picture Co. Lo's planned film project *A Fool at a Birthday Party* (aka *The Idiot Pays Respects*) was completed by Feng Huang and released on 18 September.

Year	Event
1936	
1936.5.17	The South China Film Federation was established in the hopes of uniting the industry. Later, it was informed that the Central Film Censorship Committee of the Mainland would ban the production of all dialect films for the purpose of unifying the nation's language. This decision would have been a crucial matter affecting the survival of Cantonese films, and so the federation initiated the 'Save Cantonese Film Movement', and sent a number of representatives to Guangzhou and Nanjing to lobby the cause.
1936.6.7	The industry hosted a tea reception at a hotel to welcome Esther Eng (aka Ng Kam-ha) and Wai Kim-fong, who had flown to Hong Kong from the US to promote their film *Heartaches* (aka *Iron Blood, Fragrant Soul*). This partial colour Cantonese film was made and shot in the US by Eng's Cathay Pictures Ltd. Eng was the producer, while Wai was the female lead. Afterwards, Eng remained in Hong Kong to develop her film career. She helmed *The Heroine* (aka *National Heroine*), which was released on 13 March the following year, making her Hong Kong's first ever female director.
1936.6.29	A serious fire broke out at Unique's Hong Kong studio.
1936.8.6	A second fire broke out at Unique's Hong Kong studio, and the studio suffered a great loss of equipment and films. In October the same year, Unique was restructured and renamed Nanyang Film Company, and was managed by Runme Shaw and later Runde Shaw. Runje Shaw returned to Shanghai.
1936.8.17	Quanqiu's Aberdeen studio was hard hit by a typhoon, destroying its invaluable sound recorder. The company suffered tens of thousands of dollars' worth of losses, and later had to rebuild its studio in Kowloon City.
October 1936	Chan Kwun-chiu, along with Yu Kui-yin, Lee Ying-yuen, etc. formed Chi Min Motion Picture Co., Ltd., which was devoted to film production. The company's studio was located in Shau Kei Wan. Chan also took control of Central Theatre (opened in 1930), and later Cathay Theatre (opened in 1939).
1936	Runme Shaw arrived in Hong Kong to sign an agreement with Grandview that allotted the latter's Southeast Asian screening rights to Shaw Brothers (Singapore).
	Four films extolling the virtues of womanhood, denouncing the possession of maids, praising filial piety and promoting the spirit of the new age—*A Lady of Canton* (aka *A Woman of Guangzhou*), *The Poor Slave* (aka *Compassion*), *Flowers and Tears* (aka *Tears of the Reed Catkins*) and *New Youth* (all 1936)—received awards and honours from non-governmental organisations in Guangdong and Hong Kong.
1937	
1937.1.14	The South China Film Federation held its 9th general assembly, where Chuk Ching-yin and Lee Fa, who had been the federation's representatives in Nanjing, reported on their trips. The decision was made that the proposal regarding censorship of South China films would be made to the central government, and representatives were subsequently sent to Guangzhou to discuss the matter with local officials.
1937.1.15	The film industry held seminars on six industry-wide topics: national defence films, the ban on Cantonese films and its clean-up movement, the livelihood of industry workers, etc. Figures from the film and cultural circles, such as Lo Duen, So Yee, Lee Sun-fung (aka Lee Ping-Kuen), Cheung Man-bing (aka Mong Wan) and Lui Lun, were all in attendance.
1937.6.10	Dai Ce, a member of the Central Film Censorship Committee, met with the industry and made a speech, where he highlighted the negative influence of Cantonese films and suggested, 'We have to organise a [film] clean-up movement.'
1937.6.11	Eight representatives of the South China film industry, including Chuk Ching-yin, Ko Lei-hen, Joseph Sunn Jue, Chan Kwun-chiu, Lee Fa, travelled to Nanjing by ship to petition against the ban on Cantonese cinema, which was subsequently delayed for three years. After the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, the ban was left unimplemented.

Year	Event
1937.7.7	The Marco Polo Bridge Incident marked the start of China's War of Resistance against Japan. The incident further prompted the film industry to make national defence films that promoted resistance against the enemy and other patriotic messages. The same year, Hong Kong films that contained elements of war and resistance numbered around 20.
1937.8.4	The anti-Japanese patriotic picture, *The Last Stand* (aka *At this Crucial Juncture*, 1938), began shooting with the support of six film companies. The entire industry volunteered to participate in its production. The screening rights of different regions were put up for auction, with all proceeds donated in support of resistance efforts.
1937.10.5	Moon Kwan left Grandview in 1937 and formed Hillmoon Film Company with Kwong Shan-siu. Kwan directed the company's inaugural film, *For Duty's Sake* (aka *Blood and Tears at the Border*), which premiered on this day. Its later works, such as *Enemy of Humanity* (aka *Public Enemy*, 1938) and *The Golden-Leaf Chrysanthemum* (1938), did well at the box office, so the company was able to afford its own equipment and studio.
1937.10.24	The South China Film Federation restructured as the Overseas Chinese Film Association, which devoted to the cause of selling salvation bonds to raise funds for the country.
November 1937	After the fall of Shanghai, the city's filmmakers dispersed to different places. Those who chose to move south include Cai Chusheng, Situ Huimin, Ouyang Yuqian, Luo Jingyu, Butterfly Wu, Zhang Zhiyun, Jiang Junchao, Lee Ching, Li Jingbo, Henry Lai, etc.
December 1937	Filmmakers from Shanghai, such as Cai Chusheng, Situ Huimin, Shen Xiling, and Tan Youliu, collaborated with So Yee to form Xinshidai Film Company, which later produced *A War at Bow Shan* (aka *The Blood-Stained Baoshan Fortress*, 1938).
End of 1937	Runje Shaw, escaping the fires of war, returned to Hong Kong to reorganise Unique's Hong Kong studio. After returning to business, the studio made four films, including *Storm over Pacific* (aka *Incident in the Pacific*, 1938).
1937	*For Duty's Sake* and *Back to the Motherland!* (1937) were awarded honours by the Central Film Censorship Committee.
1938	
January 1938	Chi Min Motion Picture Co., Ltd. moved its Shau Kei Wan studio to Kowloon City.
1938.6.15	*Sable Cicada* of Shanghai's Hsin Hwa Motion Picture Company completed shooting in Hong Kong and premiered on this day. It was the first ever Hong Kong-produced Mandarin film.
1938.9.1	Nanyue underwent restructuring. Wong Pang-yik, originally in charge of production, left the company and Sit Kok-sin joined as partner.
End of 1938	Nancy Chan Wan-seung accepted Zhang Shankun's invitation to travel to Shanghai to shoot *Hua Mu Lan* (aka *Maiden in Armour* / *Mulan Joins the Army*, 1939). It was a big box-office hit and Chan became a star overnight in both the southern and northern parts of the country.
1938	Lo Ming-yau, Lai Man-wai, other filmmakers and members of religious groups established Zhenguang Film Company (aka Chen Kwang Film Company), which was intended to make films with positive moral messages. Its statement read, 'To work hard for the Film Clean-Up Movement and for the renaissance of our people.'
	Folktale films became a fad that lasted until 1939, where almost 40 such films were made in two years. Cultural critics condemned the genre as promoting feudal and superstitious thought.
	Situ Huimin's *March of the Guerrillas* was asked by the local censorship authorities to cut out large parts of the film. Its owner Yuen Yiu-hung was displeased with the decision and postponed the film release date. It premiered on 12 June 1941 under a new name, *Song of Retribution*, albeit still a censored version of the film.

Year	Event
1939	
1939.4.7	*The Ghost* (aka *The Lady Ghost*) premiered and was a huge hit. Five months later, a sequel was released, spinning off a craze for supernatural horror films, much to the dismay and displeasure of critical circles.
1939.4.10	Joseph Sunn Jue left Hong Kong for the US, arriving at San Francisco on the 28th. He would stay there until the end of the war. During this time, Grandview's business was managed by his uncle Chiu Chak-yiu and fifth brother Chiu Shu-ken.
1939.9.23	Cai Chusheng's *The Devils' Paradise* (aka *Orphan Island Paradise*) premiered, and the film went on to play in theatres for 12 consecutive days, a record-breaking feat.
1939.12.12	The Hong Kong branch of National Educational Cinematographic Society of China was established. Lo Ming-yau, Wang Yun-wu, Ye Gongchuo, etc. served as executive council members. So Yee read out the society's 'mission statement' at a meeting, which condemned the proliferation of supernatural and folktale content in South China films. Such themes were vulgar and crude, and the films were often poorly made. The statement summoned the industry's concerted effort 'to ensure that Chinese cinema can return to the right tracks'.
1939	Kwong Tsan travelled southward with 'Kwong Tsan Tone', a sound film recording machine that he had invented in Shanghai. He established the Kwokar Film Studio at Lee Gardens Hill, Causeway Bay, which later moved to Kowloon City.
1940	
1940.3.3	*The Light of Overseas Chinese*, shot by Grandview in the US, premiered. It was the first partial colour film ever to be screened in Hong Kong.
Spring 1940	Runde Shaw, head of Nanyang, initiated the Cantonese Film Reform Movement. He began recruiting screenwriting talents and organised training courses to reform the art of screenwriting, with the aim of enhancing the artistic standards of screenplays. During this time, he produced *The Smile* (aka *The Smile of a Woman*, 1940) and *Seduction on the Plains* (1940), etc.
1940.11.8	Situ Huimin's *Fatherland Calls* (aka *My Motherland*) premiered, and was screened for a record-breaking 18 days. It also broke contemporary Hong Kong box-office records.
1940.11.21	Joseph Sunn Jue's Grandview Theatre at San Francisco opened. The theatre mainly focused on screening Hong Kong films produced by Grandview and other studios.
1941	
1941.5.2	*Little Tiger*, directed by Law Chi-hung and advocating unity against the enemy, premiered. A continuation of the anti-Japanese and patriotic themes of *Small Canton* (aka *Little Guangdong*, 1940), the film was a big critical hit and was also the box-office champion of the year.
1941.12.8	The Pacific War broke out and Japanese troops invaded Hong Kong. The British Hong Kong government surrendered on 25 December, marking the fall of Hong Kong. All film productions were halted.
1942	
1942.1.15	The first Cantonese film to be screened after the fall of Hong Kong was *The Black-Garbed Ghost*, which was screened at Queen's Theatre.
Mid-January 1942	Hong Kong and Kowloon Film Industry Relief Association was established. It took in film industry workers and was located at the Grandview Studio at Pak Tai Street, Kowloon City.
January 1942	Good World Theatre, Victory Theatre, King's Theatre, Oriental Theatre and Queen's Theatre were among the first to resume business. Queen's Theatre was renamed Meiji Theatre; Victory as San Tung Ah; and Nathan as Wo Ping. They would not recover their original names until after the Japanese occupation.

Year	Event
February 1942	The Japanese army organised Chinese opera stars Luo Pinchao (aka Lo Ban-chiu), Lau Hark-suen, Tai Hau Ho (aka Ho Lau-wan), etc. to perform as part of the Greater East Asia Drama Troupe. Film stars Fung Fung, Wong Cho-shan (aka Wong Kim-po), Ning Meng, etc. formed another troupe to perform in Macao.
End of February to early March 1942	The Japanese forces established the Kowloon Correspondence Office to centralise the inspection and censorship of films from different studios. They then established the Hong Kong Film Federation, a film industry organisation chaired by Hung Chung-ho that reported to the Correspondence Office.
1942.3.24	Nishikawa Masayuki, Chief of the Information Bureau of The Governor's Office of the Japanese Occupied Territory of Hong Kong (hereafter 'The Governor's Office'), invited representatives of the film industry to a dinner party. Runde Shaw, Tang Xiaodan, Hung Chung-ho, Lo Duen, Mei Lanfang, Wong Man-lei, Butterfly Wu, Mui Yee, Cheung Ying, Sit Kok-sin, Tong Suet-hing, Tam Lan-hing, etc. were all in attendance.
1942.4.2	Spearheaded by the Hong Kong Film Federation, the film industry formed the Shanghai Filmmakers Drama Troupe, which put on their debut performance of Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* at Meiji Theatre on 2 April. Throughout 1942, the troupe performed a total of 12 plays.
April to June 1942	Sit Kok-sin, Chan Kam-tong, Liu Hap-wai, Tam Lan-hing, Leung Sing-por, Yam Kim-fai, Auyeung Kim, Tang Bik-wan, Chan Yim-nung, etc. took turns to travel to Macao to perform Cantonese operas.
End of May 1942	Nishikawa Masayuki, Chief of the Information Bureau of The Governor's Office, led a group of Hong Kong journalists and representatives of its artistic circles and industries for a visit to Guangzhou, including Tse Yik-chi, Wong Man-lei, Siu Yin Fei (aka Fung Yin-ping / Fung Yin-fei), Kwong Shan-siu, Ng Cho-fan and Sit Kok-sin.
1942.6.5	The Governor's Office issued a total of seven clauses under 'Censorship Regulations for Film and Stage Performance'.
1942.6.9	The Hong Kong Film Federation hosted a dinner to welcome the Japanese filmmakers who arrived in Hong Kong in preparation to shoot *The Battle of Hong Kong* (aka *The Day England Fell* / *The Attack on Hong Kong*, 1942). Representatives of the federation, including Runde Shaw, Hung Chung-ho, Chiu Chak-yiu, Ng Cho-fan, Tse Yik-chi and Wong Man-lei played hosts. During the dinner, Japanese screenwriter and director Muguruma Osamu and actress Kuroda Kiyo gave an introduction to their film.
1942.6.14	*The Battle of Hong Kong* crew travelled to Shenzhen to begin shooting, and later continued the shoot in Hong Kong. Ng Cho-fan, Tse Yik-chi, Pak Yin all declined to participate in the film. They fled the city and went to the Mainland for refuge.
1942.6.25	The Hong Kong newspaper industry underwent a major re-organisation, with only *South China Daily News*, *Heung Tao Daily*, *East Asia Evening News* and *Wah Kiu Yat Po* remaining. To celebrate the merger, the Shanghai Filmmakers Drama Troupe performed *The 100th Episode of Christmas in Hong Kong* at King's Theatre. Wang Yuen-lung was troupe leader who also acted in the play with Li Jingbo, Ku Wen-chung, Zhao Yishan, etc.
1942.7.26	Tsi Lo Lin travelled to Japan to shoot *The Battle of Hong Kong*.
1942.8.21	Nishikawa Masayuki, Chief of the Information Bureau of The Governor's Office, conducted an inspection of the Kowloon Correspondence Office and met with film professionals such as Hung Chung-Ho, Wang Yuen-lung, Yee Chau-shui, Chao Fei-fei, Lee Tan-lo and Ko Lo-chuen (aka Ng Kui-chuen).
1942.8.23	Siu Ming Sing passed away from illness in Guangzhou. Her Hong Kong film colleagues held a remembrance event in her honour on 8 September and raised funds for her mother.
1942.10.11	*Hong Kong*, made under the guidance and supervision of The Governor's Office, was screened at King's Theatre.
1942.10.25	The documentary *Hong Kong Rebirth* began shooting. It was produced and shot by the Hong Kong Film Federation.

Year	Event
Mid-November 1942	Upon completion of *The Battle of Hong Kong*, Tsi Lo Lin set off for Hong Kong, finally arriving in the city on 11 December through Guangzhou.
1942.12.8	The Governor's Office set this day as the 'First Anniversary of the Greater East Asian War', and hosted a series of film screenings in its honour. *The Battle of Hong Kong* premiered at King's Theatre.
1942.12.24	The documentary *Hong Kong Rebirth* premiered at King's Theatre and Alhambra Theatre. It was screened together with *The Battle of Hong Kong*.
1942	Film and stage actors who remained in Hong Kong, including Sun Ma Si-tsang, Luo Pinchao, Yu Lai-zhen, Cheang Mang-ha, Yee Chau-shui, Cheung Wood-yau, Pak Kui-wing, Kwong Shan-siu, Lan Chi Pak, began forming various troupes for performing Cantonese opera.
1943	
1943.1.1	The Hong Kong Branch of the Japan Film Distribution Company was established to centralise the management of film distribution in Hong Kong. It replaced the functions and roles of the Hong Kong Film Federation.
1943.1.16	The Japan Film Distribution Company divided Hong Kong's 29 theatres into five classes to determine their film runs. Meiji Theatre and King's Theatre in the Central district were classified as first-run theatres, while Yau Ma Tei Theatre and others were classified as fifth-run theatres. Each theatre class had different ticket prices. First-run theatres had to charge a minimum of 45 sen; second-run theatres a minimum of 35 sen, etc. At the same time, the Hong Kong and Kowloon Theatre Association was formed to manage the theatre industry.
1943.2.3	Following the fall of the Mainland and Hong Kong to the Japanese, film production and supply ground to a halt. To maintain its overseas business, Grandview continued to make films in the US. After successfully developing his own colour film technology, Joseph Sunn Jue produced *Young Lovers* (aka *Romance of the Golden Country*), his first colour picture. It premiered at Grandview Theatre, San Francisco on this day.
1943.2.17	The Japan Film Distribution Company launched a film registration system to facilitate centralised control. The registration deadline was the 23rd of this month, and films that failed to be registered before this date would not receive distribution. The next day, on the 18th, the notice was updated to announce that the deadline had been extended to the 28th. Producers and filmmakers in possession of unregistered films beyond this date would be severely penalised.
1943.2.25	The Japanese Military Repatriation Bureau had begun implementing its repatriation policy in 1942, and had used three restaurants as temporary residences for repatriates. On this day, they announced yet another policy that listed Tai Ping Theatre as a temporary residence for repatriates who have received approval to stay in as they awaited the ships that would take them home.
1943.3.5	The Hong Kong Film Federation announced its closure and asked film companies to go to their office for handover procedures via newspaper notice.
Spring 1943	Grandview rented new studio spaces in San Francisco's old Chinatown.
1943.7.1	To conserve energy, first-run, second-run and third-run theatres had to reduce their daily showings by one. Apart from holidays, they could only have two showings per day. This lasted until autumn. Fourth-run and fifth-run theatres had already been doing two shows a day.
1943.9.6	Grandview premiered its new studio's first picture, *Caught in the Middle*, at Grandview Theatre, San Francisco.
September 1943	To further conserve energy, all theatres in Hong Kong had to take turns to close four days a month.
November 1943	Shanghai-produced Mandarin films were imported into Hong Kong for screening, as well as Japanese and German films. American films were banned completely.
1943	According to *Heung Tao Daily*, a total of 128 films were screened, including 53 Mandarin films, nine Cantonese films and 50 Japanese films by Shanghai's China United Film Holdings Company Ltd ('Huaying' in short). The best-selling Chinese film was *Fraternity* (1942).

Year	Event
1943	Opera stars who remained in Hong Kong continued to organise and perform in troupes, including Luo Pinchao, Yu Lai-zhen, Cheung Wood-yau, Lee Hoi-chuen, Lan Chi Pak, Pak Suet-sin, Cheang Mang-ha, Chung Shiu-lee (aka Chun Siu-lei), etc. Others, such as Tong Tik-sang and Lee Siu-wan, worked behind the scenes.
1944	
April 1944	Theatre ticket prices were allowed to be adjusted. First-run and second-run theatres were allowed to charge 1.5 yen and 1 yen for their front-seat tickets respectively.
Mid-May 1944	To conserve energy, all theatres in Hong Kong and Kowloon were only allowed one showing at 7:30pm each day. To ensure that Japanese troops and their family members could watch films during the day, King's, Meiji, Alhambra and Majestic Theatres had to show Japanese films during the day on Sundays and Japanese holidays. Mandarin films were limited to evening showings.
1944.6.22	The Charity Opera Stars Extravaganza was held, with enthusiastic participation from opera performers who remained in the city, including Kwong Shan-siu, Luo Pinchao, Cheung Wood-yau, Chu Po-chuen, Chung Shiu-lee, Cheang Mang-ha, Law Yim-hing, etc.
1944.8.20	A city-wide power outage forced all theatres to stop business. Later, King's Theatre installed its own power generator and was the first to resume business on 16 September. Some of the other theatres switched from film screenings to staging Cantonese operas.
1944.9.24	The city's electricity supply was restored, but only six theatres resumed business.
1944.11.1 and 12.1	Due to the high prices of fuel, theatres increased ticket prices in two consecutive months. The cheapest seats for first-run theatres costed 5 yen and for second-run theatres, they costed 3 yen.
1944	There were fewer and fewer performance opportunities for Cantonese opera troupes. Besides the performers listed above in June 22's entry, others who continued to work behind the scenes include Yu Leung, Chu Tsi-kwai, etc.
1945	
January to February 1945	On 19 January, cinemas once again increased ticket prices, this time a 100% hike. On 20 February, ticket prices were increased by an additional 5 yen and all income was assigned as contribution to the celebration of the 3rd anniversary of the administration of The Governor's Office.
1945.3.8 and 3.10	Ticket prices on these two days were increased by an additional 5 yen and the income received was assigned as contribution for the development of aircraft and in celebration of the memorial day for the army.
1945.8.15	With Japan's surrender, the war concluded. The UK resumed control of Hong Kong on 30 August.
1945.9.4	After the dissolution of the Japan Film Distribution Company, Hong Kong and Kowloon Theatre Association assumed control over the stock of Mandarin and Cantonese films in Hong Kong, and temporarily functioned as a trade union.
September 1945	After the end of the Japanese occupation, Western films held by the Japanese army were returned to their original film companies, mostly in good condition, and they were rescheduled for screening again.
1945.10.20	Tai Ping Theatre reopened for business.
1945.11.1	The government started collecting entertainment tax again.
1945.12.23	Ma Si-tsang and Hung Sin Nui returned to Hong Kong from Guangzhou after the war, and formed the Victory Opera Troupe, which performed *Return My Homeland* at the Tai Ping Theatre on the evening of the 27th.
1946	
1946.3.29	Sit Kok-sin and Tong Suet-hing returned to Hong Kong from Guangzhou, and Sit performed *Why Not Return?* at Ko Shing Theatre on 25 April.
1946.5.22	Nanyang Film Company bought Pei Ho Theatre in Sham Shui Po, which reopened on 1 June.

Year	Event
1946.6.23	The Ritz at North Point organised an open international swimming competition for charity, and one of the events was the first ever 'Miss Hong Kong' beauty pageant. The title was won by Lee Lan, who later joined the film industry. She was casted in *Flames of Lust* (1946), the first post-war Mandarin film screened in Hong Kong that was locally produced.
1946.6.24	Projectionists from multiple theatres put on a strike after unsuccessful requests for a raise and better working conditions. Most theatres had to suspend their business until they reached an agreement with their employees. The projectionists gradually returned to work on 3 July.
Mid-1946	Nanyang's studio suffered great damage during the war. Great China Film Development Co., Ltd. (aka Dazhonghua) rented the space and renovated it before using it as their own studio, thus expanding their studio space. It became the largest and the first studio to resume film production in Hong Kong. Great China was founded by Jiang Boying, Zhu Xuhua, etc. Its shareholders included Runde Shaw, Xie Bingjun, Zhou Jianyun of Shanghai's Star Motion Picture Co., Ltd. (aka Mingxing) and Yan Youxiang of Yee Hwa Motion Picture Co. etc. Among the earliest films that were shot at the studio were *Gone with the Swallow* (aka *Gone are the Swallows When the Willow Flowers Wilt*, 1946) and *Two Persons in Trouble Unsympathetic to Each Other* (1946).
September 1946	Wu Tip-lai was arrested in Guangzhou, being accused of participating in enemy propaganda during the war. Wu protested her innocence and was later released without charge in October the same year.
1946.10.3	To prevent British films from being pushed off the market due to the block-booking system adopted by foreign film companies, the Hong Kong government proposed 'An Ordinance to provide for the exhibition of British Cinematograph Films and to restrict the advance booking of cinematograph films' (hereafter 'British Cinematograph Films Ordinance'), based on a set of film laws passed in the UK in 1938 and implemented in Singapore in 1945. The British Cinematograph Films Ordinance passed First Reading on this day. The ordinance stipulated that 1. first-run and second-run theatres to set aside seven out of every 70 days to screen British films; 2. theatres may not sign any public screening contracts longer than six months with any party (but this was not applicable to serial films).
1946.10.11	The British Cinematograph Films Ordinance passed Second Reading and was approved after a Third Reading by a committee.
1946.11.15	Queen's Theatre received a blackmail letter from 'Overseas Youth Activists' (hereafter 'Activists'). The letter threatened a 'big explosion' at the theatre. Prior to Queen's Theatre, a few hotels and restaurants also received similar bomb threats before.
1946.12.5	Weng Guo-yue and Chan Chang-sheung put up investment to renovate what was known as Chi Min Motion Picture Studio before the war, renaming it as World Wide Motion Picture Studio. On this day, the first film made at the studio, *Flames of Lust*, premiered. This Mandarin film was also the first new film to be screened in Hong Kong after the war. The same month, the first Cantonese film to be produced after the war, director Wong Toi's *The Hero Returns Too Late* (aka *My Love Comes Too Late*), began shooting at World Wide. Production was completed on the 22nd of this month.
1946.12.14	Great China's *Gone with the Swallow*, the first Mandarin production made in post-war Hong Kong, premiered. The film company later released *Forever in My Heart* (aka *An All-Consuming Love*, 1947), *Portrait of Four Beauties* (1948), etc.
1947	
1947.1.1	*Angel* (aka *The Gold Braided Dress / White Powder and Neon Lights*) premiered at The World Theatre. It was the first time that a colour motion picture filmed at Grandview's US studio was screened in Hong Kong. It ran for 11 days.
1947.1.6	Following threats from 'Activists', an explosion occurred at The World Theatre during an evening screening of *Angel*. The screening was cut short. Before this, the theatre had twice received blackmail letters from the organisation.

Year	Event
1947.1.22	*The Hero Returns Too Late* premiered and its box office results were positive. This marked an auspicious new start for post-war Cantonese cinema.
February 1947	After staff cuts at Great China, the studio switched to contracting their film production work.
1947.3.1	An explosion at Ko Shing Theatre resulted in one dead and 26 injured. It had twice received blackmail letters from 'Activists'.
1947.4.10	The British Cinematograph Films Ordinance, which had been passed at Legislative Council on 11 October 1946, was rejected by Governor Mark Aitchison Young due to procedural reasons. An amended version of the Ordinance was submitted this day for First Reading at the Legislative Council.
Mid-April 1947	Theatre companies met with officials to discuss the potential challenges of executing the British Cinematograph Films Ordinance.
1947.4.24	The amended version of the British Cinematograph Films Ordinance was submitted for Second Reading at Legislative Council and was approved after a Third Reading by a committee.
1947.4.25	The British Cinematograph Films Ordinance was officially gazetted.
Late June 1947	Grandview began recruiting students for its film actors training course to complement its production work. From 28 to 30 November the same year, the students put on the play *Hong Kong Tempest*.
1947.7.27	Ng Dan-fung became the second Miss Hong Kong. She later acted in films as well.
1947.11.16	The South China Film Industry Workers Union was established with the aim of enhancing professional work, research and friendships. Its board members included So Yee, Law Chi-hung, Lo Duen, Mok Hong-si, Hung Suk-wan, Moon Kwan and Lau Fong.
1947.11.19	Together with Tso Yee-man and Tso Tat-wah, American-Chinese Mui Yau-cheuk founded the Youqiao Film Studio, located in Lo Fu Ngam. The studio was completed after months of construction work and electricity was running. They began shooting *Behind the World of Secret Agents* (1948).
November 1947	As Song Ziwen headed the government of Guangdong Province, he banned the screening of Hong Kong films in Guangzhou. They were not allowed to be imported unless they were approved by the Nanjing Film and Drama Censorship Committee.
1948	
1948.2.6	Librettist Fung Chi-fun filed a court case accusing *The Beautiful and the Handsome* (1947) and *Where Is the Lady's Home?* (1947) of copyright infringement, and asked for $1,000 in compensation from The World Theatre, where the two films were screened. On 19 March, the court awarded the case to The World Theatre regarding *Where Is the Lady's Home?*, but on 9 April, the case for *The Beautiful and the Handsome* was awarded to Fung and he received compensation.
1948.3.2	James Wong Howe, renowned American-Chinese cinematographer, visited Hong Kong. He was welcomed at a dinner banquet hosted by industry veterens.
	Fung Chi-fun filed a court case accusing *Unfortunate Love Affair* (aka *Love with No Result*, 1947) of copyright infringement. The first defendant of the case was National Theatre, which had screened the film; and the second defendant was Great China. On 10 April, Fung won the case and received compensation.
1948.3.5	International Theatre opened for business in Kowloon City. It was the first new theatre to be opened after the war.
1948.3.12	A fire broke out at a film warehouse on the top floor of King's Theatre Building, causing two deaths. The building was where many foreign film companies set up local Hong Kong offices, as well as where five companies, including RKO Pictures, United Artists, etc., set up their warehouses. Columbia Pictures suffered the worst losses in the fire, and in second place was Eagle-Lion Films. Films that the Hong Kong government had acquired as part of enemy property after the war were also stored here and were completely destroyed in the fire.

Year	Event
March to April 1948	*A Baby For Everybody*, Grandview's first post-war work after reopening its Hong Kong studio, began shooting. It was also the first Hong Kong colour picture shot on 35 mm film. After shooting wrapped, the film negatives were shipped to the US in late April, and the film premiered in Hong Kong on 1 January 1949.
1948.4.8	*The Soul of China* (1948), the debut work of Li Zuyong's Yung Hwa Motion Picture Industries Ltd, publicly invited compositions of its theme music, 'Song of the Righteous Spirit'. On this day, the judges selected the work of Professor Fan Jisen of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music.
1948.6.30	The Celluloid and Cinematograph Film [Amendment] Bill (hereafter 'Celluloid Amendment Bill') passed First Reading at the Legislative Council. It proposed amendments to the 1923 law, where the Chief Officer of the Fire Brigade would replace police officers in the supervision of celluloid and film stock storage and usage, to prevent future fire accidents.
1948.7.14	The Celluloid Amendment Bill was submitted for Second Reading at Legislative Council and was approved after a Third Reading by a committee.
1948.7.16	The Celluloid Amendment Bill was officially gazetted.
1948.7.18	Sima Yin became the third Miss Hong Kong and later starred in films. This was the last Miss Hong Kong pageant before it was revived in 1952, when Judy Dan, daughter of director Dan Duyu, was crowned Miss Hong Kong.
1948.8.20	Yung Hwa began recruiting actors for its actor training class. It planned to recruit five male and five female trainees.
1948.8.27	Cheung Nga-yan's China Theatre on Landale Street, Wan Chai opened, becoming the second theatre to open in Hong Kong after the war. The theatre mainly focused on screening Mandarin films from the Mainland.
1948.9.9	*The Soul of China*, Yung Hwa's debut work, premiered.
1948.9.23	A fire broke out at night at Pei Ho Theatre. Apart from causing death and injury, it also destroyed film copies of several Cantonese films. The authorities launched an inquiry into the incident subsequently, charging the theatre for undermining public safety, inadequate fire safety provisions, and illegal storage of an excessive amount of film negatives without approval from the Fire Department. The theatre was found guilty of the above offences and had to pay a penalty.
1948.11.21	Joseph Sunn Jue, who had moved back to the US before the war, returned to Hong Kong after almost ten years with overseas Chinese film star Lai Yee (aka Marianne Quon). Sunn Jue resumed control over the Grandview business.
1948.12.11	*Everlasting Green* (aka *Wild Fire and Spring Wind)* premiered in theatres. It was the first film made by Daguangming Film Company, co-founded by Gu Eryi, Gao Zhanfei and others.
1949	
1949.1.28	Liberty Theatre, located in Jordan, became the third theatre to open in town after the war.
1949.2.15	Over 400 members of the film and drama industries of the North and the South gathered at Kam Ling Restaurant to celebrate Drama Festival. Cao Yu, Cai Chusheng, Ouyang Yuqian, So Yee, Ng Cho-fan, Ma Si-tsang, Sit Kok-sin and Kwan Tak-hing (aka Sun Liang Chau) were all in attendance.
1949.3.22	Rediffusion Television (RTV), a cable broadcasting service, was launched.
1949.3.24	Over 300 film and drama industry workers co-issued a statement condemning members of the Nationalist government for unsealing around 150 'enemy pictures' made by Huaying during the war. Around 12 of them had already been screened in the Philippines.
1949.4.8	The South China film industry workers issued a joint statement affirming their solidarity and commitment to stop making poor-quality pictures. This was later called the Clean-Up Movement of Cantonese cinema.

Year	Event
1949.7.7	Zhang Shankun formed the Great Wall Pictures Corporation, which aspired to establish a new style of Mandarin films with its stable of film talent and plentiful funding. On this evening, a banquet was held in celebration of the studio's inauguration. The following year, Zhang quit the company and Great Wall underwent restructuring.
1949.7.10	The South China Film Industry Workers Union was established and held its first general assembly. Over 300 industry workers became members, and Mok Hong-si was voted its first chairman.
	A Forgotten Woman, the first film by Great Wall, premiered in Hong Kong.
1949.8.1	Great China discontinued all its production business in Hong Kong and shipped its equipment back to Shanghai.
1949.9.8	Hong Kong's first Mandarin film in colour, *Heavenly Souls*, premiered. It was a co-production by Grandview and Great Wall.
1949.10.8	The first Wong Fei-hung film, *The Story of Wong Fei-hung, Part One* (aka *Wong Fei-hung's Whip that Smacks the Candle*) premiered. It was made with investment from Singaporean businessman Wan Pak-ling, directed by Wu Pang. Kwan Tak-hing played Wong Fei-hung and Tso Tat-wah played Leung Foon.
1949.12.15	The 7th Exhibition of Chinese Products opened, and both Yung Hwa and Great Wall participated with large-size booths.

[Translated by Rachel Ng]

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After acquiring a stash of 1930s–1940s Hong Kong Films from the US, the Hong Kong Film Archive held a series of screenings and seminars under the name 'Early Cinematic Treasures Rediscovered' (Chapters 1-4) from 2015 to 2019. Meanwhile, we published not only a special brochure of the same name but also a handful of articles reviewing these films in our *Newsletters*. In addition, a considerable number of essays in *Transcending Space and Time—Early Cinematic Experience of Hong Kong, Book I-III* (E-Brochures) explored the films of our time. The e-publications above may be referred to and are accessible on our website. We also held the 'From Silent to Sound—Hong Kong Films of the 1930s and 1940s' Symposium in early 2021. You may revisit the sensational content of the symposium by enjoying the two edited clips on our YouTube channel.

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Short Clips

Exploring Hong Kong Films of the 1930s–1940s

Years ago, the Hong Kong Film Archive acquired from the US a stash of long-lost Hong Kong films from the 1930s to 1940s as well as batches of archival documents sent for US censorship, which comprised of over several hundreds of Hong Kong titles. Based on the precious clues offered up by these items, the HKFA convened the online symposium ‘From Silent to Sound— Hong Kong Films of the 1930s and 1940s’ on 9-10 January 2021, together with a few dozen local and overseas researchers and scholars. We have now edited the symposium video clips into two parts to share with the public.

Part 1: Era and Film History

The theme of Part 1 is ‘Era and Film History’. It is divided into five chapters, namely ‘From Silent to Sound’, ‘Shanghai—Hong Kong’, ‘National Defence Films’, ‘Documentaries’ and ‘Post-War Demobilisation’. How Hong Kong films evolved from silent to sound in the early 20th century? Before and after the War of Resistance against Japan, how did local cinema cope with the turbulent periods in the city's history? How did filmmakers respond to the times through their work? Our speakers explored further all these key topics.

Part 2: Genres · Regions · Culture

The theme of Part 2 is ‘Genres · Regions · Culture’. It is divided into three chapters, namely ‘Genres’, ‘Regions’ and ‘Culture’. Speakers discussed how filmmakers who travelled south to Hong Kong before and after the war brought about cross-border and cross-cultural interaction and integration, in particular, how such communication enlightened Hong Kong films, especially in forming their unique identities.

Exploring Hong Kong Films of the 1930s and 1940s Part 1: Era and Film History (Chinese edition)

Exploring Hong Kong Films of the 1930s and 1940s Part 2: Genres · Regions · Culture (Chinese edition)

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