

# Hong Kong Filmography Vol I (1914–1941) (Revised Edition)

## Foreword

Kwok Ching-ling

My generation grew up watching old Cantonese films. I can still picture in monochrome Ng Cho-fan, Pak Yin, Cheung Ying, Wong Man-lei... all these ‘household’ names as if they were family. Back then, when I saw Ng Wui in a television drama, I recognised him as a veteran character actor, but I had no idea he had been a film director who was yelling ‘Camera!’ as early as in the 1940s. This should have come as no surprise—many mainstays of Cantonese cinema in the 1950s and 1960s had joined the industry in the 1930s. As I pored over the materials on pre-WWII Hong Kong films, I was repeatedly struck by how young and radiant they looked, with their entire careers ahead of them. If *Hong Kong Filmography Vol I* is a witness to the spring of Hong Kong Cantonese films, tracing the latter’s ancestry will shine a new light on Cantonese cinema after WWII.

Let us drift backwards to silent films and the birth of Hong Kong cinema. Did *The Trip of the Roast Duck*, allegedly shot in 1909, really mark the dawn of Hong Kong cinema? Reservations about this claim sent the Hong Kong Film Archive (HKFA) on a journey of origin tracing in 2009. That journey led us to more questions. A major breakthrough came when a 1914 interview of the film’s American cinematographer, R.F. Van Velzer, was found. In the interview, Velzer stated that he had made *The Trip of the Roast Duck* (1914) and other films after shooting *Zhuang Zi Tests His Wife* (1914)!<sup>1</sup> Our Research Officer at the time, Wong Ain-ling, agreed that ‘according to existing materials, this opinion is very persuasive’, but she added, ‘...whether it is watertight will depend on our luck in finding further proof...In the meantime let’s be on the lookout.’<sup>2</sup> Our team was hoping there would be more revelations on this topic.

In 1914, the glory of locally made shorts was short-lived. Conditions were simply not conducive to the growth of the film industry. It was not until a decade later that Lu Juefei (alias William Lo)’s Liangyi Film Company made *Money* (1924). But

---

<sup>1</sup> See Hugh Hoffman, ‘Film Conditions in China—Odd Experiences of a Returning Pilgrim Who Went to the Flowery Kingdom on Small Salary and Returns a Director-General’, *The Moving Picture World*, New York, Vol 21, No 4, 25 July 1914, p 577. In Wong Ain-ling ed: *Chinese Cinema: Tracing the Origins*, Hong Kong Film Archive, 2011, pp 49-50 (in Chinese).

<sup>2</sup> For more details, see Wong Ain-ling ed: *Chinese Cinema: Tracing the Origins*, Ibid, p 77.

the brothers Lai Buk-hoi and Lai Man-wai, who were involved in *Zhuang Zi Tests His Wife*, were still fixated on filmmaking. Nine years later, in 1923, the two established China Sun Motion Picture Co Ltd. Unfortunately, they could not get a license even after a year, and the plan for a studio fell through. They made documentaries while working on the fictional feature *Love is Dangerous* (1925), which eventually materialised in Guangzhou. Shortly afterwards, the Great Guangzhou-Hong Kong Strike erupted, and for over a year, film companies like Liangyi, China Sun, Sichi Film Company, Mantianhong Company and Guangya Film Company either closed down or relocated. Lai Mai-wai took his filmmaking to Shanghai. This lasted until 1931 when Lai Buk-hoi and Lee Hysan's Hong Kong Film Company launched *The Witty Sorcerer*. The Hong Kong film industry had staggered to its feet again. In the same year, after the Mukden Incident, Lo Ming-yau of Shanghai's United Photoplay Service Limited established UPS 3rd Studio. Between 1931 and 1934, United Photoplay produced films in the territory, in the later stages, they even partnered with the Grandview Film Company Limited of Joseph Sunn Jue (aka Chiu Shu-sun), an overseas Chinese in the US. In the meantime, many early graduates of the Hong Kong Actors Training School of Hong Kong Film Company (including Chu Po-chuen, Hui Mung-han, Mak Siu-ha, and Sit Siu-wing) and the Actor Training School of The United Photoplay Service Limited (including Lee Tit, Wong Toi, Tony Shak Yau-yue, Yip Yan-fu, Tong Sing-to, and Chan Ki-yui) went on to become the pillars of the local film industry.<sup>3</sup>

1933 was an opportune year. Although Hong Kong produced only four films in 1933, the number soared to 14 the following year, then 31 the year after. Besides United Photoplay's new studio in Hong Kong, *The White Gold Dragon* (1933), a Cantonese opera film made jointly by Shanghai's Unique Film Productions (aka Tianyi) and opera master Sit Kok-sin, turned out to be a big hit. The following year, Runje Shaw, the eldest of the Shaw brothers, came to Hong Kong and founded Unique's Hong Kong Studio. However, two fires broke out in the studio in 1936, destroying much of the equipment and film. Runde Shaw, the second eldest of the brothers, made a trip to Hong Kong in the wake of the catastrophe to take over the business. The studio was renamed Nan Yeung Film Company in 1937. The Shaw film empire had taken root in Hong Kong; its productions constituted a sixth of the pre-war total in the territory, not to mention the many other titles that were shot in its studio.

In 1933, Lai Buk-hoi's China Sound and Silent Movies Production Company jumped on the talkie bandwagon by launching *A Stupid Bridegroom* in August. Thereafter, the industry boomed, reaching a pre-war climax of a hundred Cantonese

---

<sup>3</sup> Yu Mo-wan: *Anecdotes of Hong Kong Cinema*, (Vols. 1-3), Hong Kong: Subculture Ltd, 1996-1998 (in Chinese).

films premiering in 1939. Mandarin films did not fare as well by comparison. Hsin Hwa Motion Picture Company made *Sable Cicada* (1938) in Hong Kong, after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in 1937. It was the city's first Mandarin film. But from then until its fall into Japanese hands in 1941, there were under 20 Mandarin films.

In 1933, Grandview Film Company Limited, founded in San Francisco by overseas Chinese Joseph Sunn Jue with the help of film director Moon Kwan Man-ching, produced its first film *Blossom Time*, starring Sun Liang Chau (aka Kwan Tak-hing) and Wu Tip-ying. In 1931, Joseph Sunn Jue built Grandview. The next year, he relocated the studio from the US to Hong Kong and went on to write and direct numerous titles. In 1939, Sunn Jue embarked on a field trip to the US where he researched and learned about the latest technologies and skills, acquired new gear, and sold shares of his company. While there, he shot, partially in colour, *The Light of Overseas Chinese* (1940), and built the Grandview Theatre, a cinema dedicated to screening Hong Kong films. When Hong Kong fell in 1941, Sunn Jue opened Grandview Film Company Limited (U.S. Branch).<sup>4</sup>

Among the pre-war film companies, Nanyue Film Company was second in scale to Unique/Nan Yeung and Grandview. Nanyue's founder, Chuk Ching-yin, a graduate of Shanghai Jiao Tong University, was passionate about filmmaking technology. The former cinematographer and sound effects technician made his own equipment. In 1932, Chuk travelled south to Hong Kong after the January 28 Incident. With an eye to the untapped potential of the local film industry, he founded Nanyue. By 1934, films were being made in the city with the 'Ching Yin' film and sound recording device; one such film was *Memorial at the Pagoda*. Nanyue produced 28 titles in its own name between 1935 and 1939, and shot another 20. Interestingly, Chuk had intended to open a Nanyue branch in Shanghai in 1937 but the war intervened; his plan materialised in the Philippines two years later. The studio's final work in Hong Kong was *Scent of a Woman* (1939, written and directed by Nam Hoi Sap-sam Long). It did not revive after the war.

Hong Kong's three major film companies—Unique/Nan Yeung, Grandview, and Nanyue encapsulate the intimate ties among Shanghai, Hong Kong and the US in the history of Hong Kong cinema. Hong Kong films had long developed an American market, alongside its Southeast Asian market. In addition to the big names, there were also smaller studios. In 1937, the Japanese occupied Shanghai, triggering an influx of Shanghainese filmmaking professionals into the city. Cai Chusheng, Situ Huimin, Shen Xiling, Tan Youliu and others joined up with So Yee to found the Shanghai-Hong Kong venture, Xinshidai Film Company. The industry spent almost

---

<sup>4</sup> Liu Fang: 'Fifteen Years of the Grandview Film Company', Brochure of *Angel*, (in Chinese). *Angel* is also known as *The Gold Braided Dress/White Powder and Neon Lights*.

the entire 1930s in the shadow of war, under transformation, until Hong Kong, too, fell, and all operations came to a halt.

The film synopses in the debut volume (1997) of *Hong Kong Filmography* were, as Po Fung says (see ‘Thoughts on the Revised Edition’ [In Lieu of a Preface]), ‘extracted from advertisement descriptions’. While these advertisements are fascinating, they are so fragmented that combing through them for a narrative was a massive challenge—that was my first *Filmography* task. I took over the series as the editor from the fourth volume; it was 2001, the year HKFA moved to its current address. Since its beginning, the series has relied on the meticulous work of the Research Officers (Yu Mo-wan, Wong Ain-ling, Po Fung, and May Ng) and their team of researchers. Uncle Mo-wan was the very first. In the years that followed, whenever questions popped up while delving into different historical eras, we would discuss each of them, seated around Ain-ling. Such discussions would morph into editorial themes for the subsequent volumes. As research and topics became increasingly diversified, Po Fung and May Ng would carefully help to resolve each and every challenge encountered. We do this because we believe that, despite our limitations, the support the *Filmography* series offers to the study of Hong Kong cinema is limitless. The road ahead always leads to more paths into the future.

From the fourth to the eighth, and from the eighth, I have returned to the first—updating and expanding the first volume is my present responsibility. The most thrilling part of this—I was somewhat surprised to learn—is that there are over 10 films from the era that I have yet to watch. Most are part of a rare collection donated by Mr Jack Lee Fong, founder of the Palace Theatre in San Francisco. Another bonus is being able to pore over the film materials and dialogue scripts of the New York State Archives. For this, we thank Mr Frank Bren for reminding us of this valuable research channel for old Hong Kong films! We are also immensely grateful to Singaporean collector Mr Wong Han-min for generously lending us over a hundred handbills from 1930s and 1940s Hong Kong, which was a tremendous help for the revision and update of our film database. We sincerely extend our deep appreciation to all individuals for their support and assistance in this endeavor.

For the revised *Filmography Vol I*, I wish to thank Mr Law Kar and Mr Po Fung for their crucial and generous advice on areas that warrant attention. And of course, this publication carries the hard work of all participating as well as assisting colleagues and friends. I hope this updated edition will serve as a bedrock for the study of Hong Kong cinema and will lead to deeper dives. I also hope that all deficiencies will continue to be addressed. (Translated by Piera Chen)