

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

Thoughts on the Revised Edition (In Lieu of a Preface)

Po Fung

The Hong Kong Film Archive's *Hong Kong Filmography Vol I* was first published in 1997. After the book's publication, I was invited to write an article discussing it in the first issue of the Archive's *Newsletter*, published in August of the same year. Twenty-two years later, a revised edition of the *Filmography Vol I* has been published, and fate has brought me back to it, as its earliest reader. The following are some personal observations.

The editorial objective of the *Hong Kong Filmography* series was to collate information about every Hong Kong film for the purpose of research. It involved chronologically ordering the basic information of each film, including public release dates, film format, name lists of cast and crew, synopses, etc. At least one film still was also included where possible. It may sound like a common practice, but it was in fact no easy feat, made especially challenging as the number of Hong Kong productions was among the top in the world. The *Filmography* series has published eight volumes, spanning 1914 to 1979, during which time every single Hong Kong film that was made, if it could be found, was added to the record. This is a remarkable achievement. Many regions with a shorter production history and fewer film productions do not have such a complete record; and for those who do, the information is often not as complete, and the fact-checking not as rigorous. The editing of the *Filmography* series has indeed laid a solid foundation for the research of Hong Kong film history and plays a pivotal role for countless researchers.

Filmography Vol I begins with the first Hong Kong film in 1914 and ends with the fall of Hong Kong in 1941.^{Ed's note 1} Since this was such a long time ago and many pre-war films have been damaged or lost, very few films are preserved today. As such, much of the research on Hong Kong cinema in this period was essentially only on paper: one could only learn about the films via their paper trail. But due to the chaos of war, public and private records all suffered heavy damage, so even paper trails were a challenge to trace. When *Filmography Vol I* was first published in 1997, it offered many pieces of a large puzzle for Hong Kong film researchers. For example, thanks to its chronological order of film release dates, by taking stock of yearly production numbers, an interesting picture was revealed: in the first 28 years between

1914 and 1941, Hong Kong film development did not progress by the year, but only sporadically. In the two decades leading up to 1933, there was not a year with more than five films made; during this time, there were even several years in which zero films were made. Come 1934, the number of productions began to reach double digits, up to 14. Hong Kong film industry then suddenly boomed in the mid-1930s, with production numbers beginning to surge in 1935, continuing through to 1941. Simply by ordering these films according to year, *Filmography Vol 1* already presented us with the shape of Hong Kong cinema in its earliest development.

Allow me to explore this a little deeper based on my personal experience. From 2016 to 2018, I was the Chief Editor for *The Ultimate Guide to Hong Kong Film Directors 1914–1978*, published by Hong Kong Film Directors' Guild, which aimed at introducing every Hong Kong film director up to 1978. The first step was to draft up a list of directors up to 1978. This was done by using the *Filmography* series as a basic reference, entering the directors' names of each film in a computer file, then filtering out situations such as the same person having different names and the same name shared by different people, and completing the final list step-by-step. If not for the *Filmography* series, this work would have effectively been impossible, and its completeness not guaranteed. I benefitted greatly from the *Filmography* series: as I leafed through the information in order, I was often able to connect dots that inspired research questions and directions.

Hong Kong Filmography Vol 1 has been sold out for many years, and I have long heard many voices asking for a reprint. After all, the book had been published 22 years ago, when the Archive at its current location was not even built yet. Today, the Sai Wan Ho building has already been in service for almost 19 years. When I edited *The Ultimate Guide to Hong Kong Film Directors 1914–1978*, I did find that some information did not look quite accurate and needed amendments; there were also areas in which I knew there were blanks that could now be filled in with new information. The Archive's current collection, compared with 1997, has significantly grown; just within the time span covered by *Filmography Vol 1*, there have been many breakthroughs in terms of acquisitions. Moreover, the access and convenience provided by online information gathering, on top of new research done by scholars in recent years, have created the conditions for the Archive to publish a revised edition of *Filmography Vol 1*, with significant additions. In the following section, I will discuss some salient examples.

Since the Archive opened its doors, it has collected film synopses, film brochures and early film magazines; together these bits and pieces form the basis of the additions to *Filmography Vol 1*. One of the sources of material in particular was the New York State Archives in the US, which had a trove of information because

pre-war Hong Kong films were required to submit an English dialogue script for censorship review before being accepted into the American market. After the Archive received the news, it brought back copies of the relevant information from the New York State Archives. Each film came with different information: apart from the required dialogue script, some also had a synopsis or handbill. Such material was especially helpful in adding to the story synopses of many films in the revised edition, as quite a few lacked a plotline in the original edition.

Another great source of material for the revised edition was the Archive's discovery of a large batch of film prints in San Francisco, in the US, in 2012, which included more than ten pre-war Hong Kong films. These were left over by Palace Theatre and owned by its Chinese-American founder, Mr Jack Lee Fong. Mr Fong generously donated all these precious film prints to the Archive,¹ offering crucial information for the revised edition of the *Filmography Vol 1*, all of which were extremely inspirational clues for research. This we will discuss later.

Apart from the growth of the Archive collection, another key factor was that in 1997, the Internet was not widely in use in Hong Kong, yet today it has become a critical part of life and an incredible source of precious information at the tap of a key. In today's world, many places have built various online databases, such as the Hong Kong Central Library, which has scanned entire newspapers for its database, including *The Chinese Mail* and *The Kung Sheung Daily News*, allowing anyone to view them online. Previously, to read pre-war papers, one would have to go to a university library to view them on a microfilm reader, which is not only a complicated procedure but may also lead to oversight, given the nature of the old equipment. Now, anyone can connect to the public library website to read them online, which has been greatly convenient for the researchers looking up the release dates of films; this ease of information-gathering has also often brought surprise finds.

Moreover, to look for references overseas in the past, researchers were required to physically visit the site of interest to search for the material. This is both costly and difficult, as such trips can be like finding a needle in a haystack in a limited time. Hong Kong cinema has intricate ties with Shanghai; during the Republican era, Shanghai publications regularly reported on Hong Kong films. The Archive has a limited collection in this regard, but the Shanghai Library and Institute of Scientific & Technical Information of Shanghai have amassed some 20,000 items from different publications spanning the late Qing dynasty to the early Republic era in a national publication database. This means researchers in Hong Kong only need login permission to read through all the information, which has been made even easier by

¹ For the backstory of Mr Jack Lee Fong's discovery of the film reels, see Priscilla Chan, 'Mr Jack Lee Fong and His Time Capsule', *Newsletter* (Issue 66), Hong Kong Film Archive, November 2013, pp 4-6.

the addition of a keyword search function. The convenience and efficiency provided by technology today has far outstripped previous research methods. For example, in the late editing stages of the revised edition, the synopsis was still missing for the 1941 Mandarin film *Lover of the World*; but a quick search on the national publication database brought up the Shanghai-published *Film Daily*, which included an article about the film's story. The Shanghai magazine contained information about it because the Hong Kong-shot Mandarin film had been sent to Shanghai for general release back then. In the book's editing process, many painstaking efforts of fact-checking that were previously unresolvable can now reliably be resolved thanks to all the online databases.

The revision of *Filmography Vol 1* also could not have been achieved without its researchers' hard work. Among them, Mr Frank Bren and Mr Law Kar worked together to track down the journey of Benjamin Brodsky coming to Hong Kong to make films. Their perseverance eventually led to them locating an interview of the cinematographer of *Zhuang Zi Tests His Wife*, R.F. Van Velzer, in a 1914 edition of US magazine *The Moving Picture World*. That finding became the strongest evidence to date to resolve the debate on Hong Kong's earliest feature film, which also helped reposition the first few Hong Kong films in *Filmography Vol 1*. Bren also found in *The China Mail* a Hong Kong film even earlier than *Zhuang Zi Tests His Wife*, which was the documentary *The Sport of Kings* (1914).² These valuable discoveries refuted some long-running theories, and have all been absorbed by the revised edition of *Filmography Vol 1*.

I would like to offer another interesting example, involving both collection acquisition and research efforts that helped the revised edition. In late 2004, Tai Ping Theatre's third-generation owner Ms Beryl Yuen reached out to the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, offering to donate artefacts from Tai Ping Theatre to the Hong Kong SAR Government. Due to the time required to take stock of all the material, the official donation ceremony was not held until 2008. The Yuen family became the owners of Tai Ping Theatre in 1907. In 1914, when its subsidiary Tai'an Company registered at Guangzhou's Jiqing Guild, Tai Ping sent out its opera troupe to perform Cantonese opera in villages and towns along the Pearl River. In 1932, when the theatre was reconstructed, Ma Si-tsang was invited to lead the Tai Ping Opera Troupe, which then became one of Hong Kong's top two opera troupes. After the war, the theatre slowly changed its operations to mainly screening films, with the big four

² Law Kar and Frank Bren's discoveries are published in *Chinese Cinema: Tracing the Origins* (Hong Kong Film Archive, 2011). Law Kar, 'Further Exploration of the Origins of Hong Kong Cinema—A Closer Look at Benjamin Brodsky, Van Velzer, the Lai Brothers, and Some Issues Arising from Research on Early Hong Kong Cinema', pp 32-51; Frank Bren, 'The Fabulous Adventures of Benjamin Brodsky', pp 82-93 (in Chinese).

Cantonese film companies, such as The Union Film Enterprise Ltd and Kong Ngee Co, all selected to screen at Tai Ping-led theatres. Since the artefacts span Cantonese opera and film, the Tai Ping Theatre donations were divided between the Hong Kong Film Archive, the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, the Hong Kong Central Library and the Hong Kong Museum of History. The artefacts piqued the interest of experts and scholars from different fields, and under the organisation of National University of Singapore professor Yung Sai-shing, two small-scale interdisciplinary conferences were held, from which *A Study of the Tai Ping Theatre Collection* was published.³ In the first issue of the Archive's *Newsletter*, I wrote, 'Film history and Cantonese opera history are inextricably intertwined; many pieces of film history are hiding in what already exists as Cantonese opera history'; this describes the Tai Ping Theatre research precisely. The research relevant to the revised edition of *Filmography Vol 1* is the information Professor Li Siu-leung and Ms Lam Man-yee put together on the Tai Ping Opera Troupe's opera performances. It helped draw connections between films that starred Ma Si-tsang and the performances of the Tai Ping Opera Troupe. In the 1930s, Ma Si-tsang was not only a Cantonese opera veteran, but also a film star featured in a large number of films. Tai Ping Theatre's artefacts and research offered *Filmography Vol 1* very meaningful information for its revisions.

With all these developments, *Filmography Vol 1* revised edition was able to make a number of amendments to the old version. There have been additions and deletions of film titles; while not many feature films have been added, including *The Trip of the Roast Duck* (1914), *The Haunted Pot* (1914), *Chinese Tarzan* (1937), *The Prodigal* (1939), *The Golden Gate Girl* (1941), and *Female Robin Hood* (1941), quite a few documentaries including *The Sport of Kings*, have been added. Although there have not been many new entries, the amendments are crucial to filling gaps in Hong Kong's film history.

Apart from the aforementioned revisions, some film release dates have also been corrected. Previously, some entries only offered the production years, but now they have precise general release dates, such as *The Body Snatchers*, which changed from 1934 to 23 July 1935, and *The Sun Rises Again*, which was amended from 1937 to 31 January 1938. Some release dates were changed to the day before or after, or even by several months, and this could mean a change of year entirely, for example, *My Friend, the Ghost*, which is now listed as released in 1936 instead of 1935. This has a certain impact on our analysis of the annual production rates. Some others have more unique reasons for amendments, for example, *The Deadly Rose* starring Sit Kok-sin, produced by Unique Film Productions, was initially marked as released in

³ Yung Sai-shing, 'Theatres • Red Boats • Motion Pictures', Yung Sai-shing (ed), *A Study of the Tai Ping Theatre Collection*, Hong Kong Heritage Museum, 2015, pp 10-27 (in Chinese).

1935, but this has been changed to 1937 in the revised edition. This is because the film was released in 1935 in Guangzhou, but due to a copyright lawsuit in Hong Kong, it was not released here until 1937. The revised edition follows the format of the *Filmography* series, listing the films according to their Hong Kong release dates. For *The Deadly Rose*, it has a footnote that specifies 1935 as the Guangzhou release date.^{Ed's note 2} Another relatively big change was *Incident in the Turtle Mountain*, co-directed by Hou Yao and Wan Hoi-ling. It was changed from 1936 to 1939. This took some tracking of the directors' career paths: Wan was still an assistant screenwriter and continuity in 1937 when she worked on Hou's film *The Desert Flower*; this means the two very unlikely co-directed *Incident in the Turtle Mountain* the year before. A more plausible scenario is that a film of the same name (likely a Shanghai production) was confused with the later film directed by Hou and Wan. The revised edition has also deleted the 1933 Zhenye Company production of *The Fool Pays Respects*, directed by Hou Yao; Zhenye did indeed begin the filming of *The Fool Pays Respects*, but it appears that the film was never completed and instead taken over by the foreigner-founded Fenghuang Film Production Company. It ended up being the 1935 production of *A Fool at a Birthday Party*, starring Wong Man-lei and Tsi-hau Tsat.⁴

In the revised edition, the most changes and additions took place in the synopses, which have become much more detailed. For example, in the original edition, there were no plot outlines for the 1935 productions *The Country Bumpkin Tours the City*, *Remembering the Past*, *The Dim Pig-Seller*, *The Modern Bride*, *Half-Blossomed Rose*, *The Joyful Night*, *The Incautious Father-in-Law*, or at most two or three lines of an introduction. Some of these rough accounts were unable to even give a basic story outline; they were merely descriptions taken from film advertisements. But in the revised edition, these have become more comprehensive accounts of the plot, enough to allow readers to gain a clearer idea of the film.

Here we can take the 1940 Cantonese film *The Goddess Helps the Bridge Builder* as an example of how a more detailed synopsis can help with research. *The Goddess Helps the Bridge Builder* is based on a legend that was popular in Zhejiang and Fujian: Choi Chung-hing is building the Luoyang Bridge in Quanzhou when the

⁴ 'Fenghuang—formerly Zhenye; ever since the collapse of Ming Tat Trading Company, led by Lo Ken, Zhenye was also unable to continue. After hiring the additional foreign technician Jian Yangdong, the company's name was changed to Fenghuang, and continued filming Zhenye's unfinished *A Fool at a Birthday Party*, starring the Cantonese opera *chou* star Tsi-hau Tsat, with Wong Man-lei. The shoot has finished, but there are many problems and the film is still at this moment being fixed and put together. Its public premiere is scheduled for the 18th of this month at Alhambra Theatre.' Hong Gejiao: 'A Glimpse of the Cantonese Studio in Hong Kong', *The Screen Pictorial* (Issue 2), 1935, Shanghai Tuwen Publishing House (in Chinese).

Goddess Guanyin appears from the heavens to help him, triggering a battle with Lui Dong-bun over their heavenly powers. Among the written accounts of the story, there is the mid-Qing dynasty *Luoyang Bridge Precious Scroll* (aka *Shousheng Precious Scroll*), and the later Minnan-dialect *Song of Cai Duan Building the Luoyang Bridge*, while the mid-Qing novel *An Unofficial Record of the Capital of Fujian*, expands the Guanyin story by introducing the legend of Chen Jinggu.⁵ This folklore was also once popular in Guangdong, as recorded in the *nanyin* (Southern tunes)/*muyu shu* (Chinese woodblock storytelling and singing) story of *Building the Luoyang Bridge*.⁶ In 1928, Star Film Company in Shanghai also produced the silent film *The Luoyang Bridge*, directed by Zhang Shichuan and starring Zhu Fei and Ruan Lingyu.⁷ Even though all these different versions were based on the same Luoyang Bridge folk story, the plot details vary hugely. Was the Cantonese film *The Goddess Helps the Bridge Builder* influenced by one of these versions? It is an interesting question worth examining. Due to similarities in culture, the most likely version to have had an impact is of course the Guangdong *nanyin/muyu shu* story, *Building the Luoyang Bridge*. But solely looking at the synopses in the old version of the *Filmography*, without a detailed plot outline, it is difficult to tell. Thanks to the film reel donation by Mr Fong, which included a copy of *The Goddess Helps the Bridge Builder*, the Vol I revised edition was able to include a much richer synopsis. One paragraph describes how the Guanyin ‘turns into a beautiful woman who is seeking a husband, thereby prompting people to throw money to win her favour, and she gains a large amount of riches as a result. Later she tells Choi Chung-hing to visit Fau Yau Suk as a test. With the help of Lui Dong-bun, Choi is given assistance by Fau, who disguises as a blind beggar, in building 100 bridge piers.’ This Fau plotline is very special: Luoyang Bridge is located in Quanzhou, Fujian, and originally had nothing to do with Guangdong. But the film arranges for Choi to travel to Guangdong to look for bridge-building wood, with the assistance of the key figure Fau, who is accompanied by two other blind beggars, who support each other as if they share their ‘eyesight’. This storyline matches the chapter in the *nanyin* version (pronounced as Fau Yuk Juk in *nanyin* but refers to the same character of Fau Yau Suk). Thanks to these new

⁵ Fan Chun-wu: ‘Research Report on the Legend of Luoyang Bridge’, 2005, pp 7-9. Website: <http://fguir.fgu.edu.tw:8080/retrieve/130/NSC93-2411-H431-007.pdf> (Accessed 19 November 2019) (in Chinese).

⁶ The *nanyin* version of ‘Building the Luoyang Bridge’ can be downloaded from the Open Museum of Academia Sinica Center for Digital Cultures, Taiwan. Website: https://openmuseum.tw/muse/digi_object/df93f5f8e4284e232422377f593b1df1 (Accessed 19 November 2019).

⁷ China Film Art Research Center, China Film Archive (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Chinese Films: Feature Films, Opera Films, 1905–1930*, Beijing: China Film Press, 1996, p 157 (in Chinese).

details about *The Goddess Helps the Bridge Builder*, it can be proven that the writing of the Cantonese film was based on the *nanyin* singing narrative.

There was a time in pre-war Hong Kong when Cantonese films based on *nanyin/muyu shu* stories were very popular, which progressive filmmakers were rather critical of. To find out which films were influenced by *nanyin/muyu shu* stories does not necessarily require the efforts involved in *The Goddess Helps the Bridge Builder*. Some can be identified simply from their film names, such as *Madam Sam Neong* (1938), *The Second Marriage of Madam Chow* (1938), *Farewell on a Winter Night* (1939), *Untied the Knot* (1939) and *I Am a Female Companion* (1939), etc. These titles follow those of famous *nanyin/muyu shu* stories, and even if there is an earlier source for the base story—for example, the story of *Madam Sam Neong* comes from the Ming dynasty *nanxi* (Southern opera) *The Story of Liu Zhiyuan and the White Rabbit*. At the very least, if a film has used a *nanyin/muyu shu* title, it can be taken as a major clue to deduce that the film takes its story from the *nanyin/muyu shu* version rather than an older folklore version.

Even if we know the source of the story, a comprehensive plotline adds to our understanding of whether or not other creative elements were included. A great example is *Bitter Phoenix, Sorrowful Oriole* (1941), the final entry in the revised edition of *Filmography Vol I. Bitter Phoenix, Sorrowful Oriole* was originally a Cantonese opera, an original creation by Lok Kam-hing that was first performed by the Good Harvest Cantonese Opera Troupe in 1924. The opera saw Ma Si-tsang shoot to fame after playing the role of Yu Hap-wan in his ‘beggar’s tone’.⁸ In the 1930s, the Tai Ping Opera Troupe, led by Ma, performed *Bitter Phoenix, Sorrowful Oriole* multiple times in Hong Kong. The film version was produced in 1941, also starring Ma Si-tsang; and one may of course assume that it is based on the Cantonese opera. In the original *Filmography Vol I*, the entry for the film did not include a synopsis. But in the film reels donated by Mr Jack Lee Fong, there was a copy of *Bitter Phoenix, Sorrowful Oriole*, which allowed researchers to put together a complete plotline for the movie. Armed with that information, researcher Sam Ho was able to point out the influence of the American movie *The Thin Man* (1934).⁹ *The Thin Man* was a film from the 1930s, which means the 1924 Cantonese opera by Lok Kam-hing could not have been influenced by it. However, while the film version of *Bitter Phoenix, Sorrowful Oriole* took after the opera’s name and used its famous songs, in terms of

⁸ See the article ‘*Bitter Phoenix, Sorrowful Oriole*’ in *A Dictionary of Cantonese Opera*, (Editorial Board of *A Dictionary of Cantonese Opera: A Dictionary of Cantonese Opera*, Guangzhou Publishing House, 2008, p 116) (in Chinese).

⁹ Sam Ho, ‘The Thin Man and the Bohemians: Discoveries in Pre-war Hong Kong Films’ *Newsletter* (Issue 69), Hong Kong Film Archive, August 2014, pp 5-9.

the plot, it certainly was influenced by the American film; in fact, it was a combination of the two separate sources and arguably even more deeply influenced by the American film.

Above are merely a couple of examples to briefly explain how the synopses can help us better understand the pre-war Hong Kong film industry. In recent years, I have been studying the powerful impact of the novel *Camille* on Chinese-language *wenyi* films, and because the plotlines in the revised edition have become much more comprehensive than before, I was able to find many new examples. Likewise, the significant additions to the cast and crew list of each film also contribute to our understanding of Hong Kong cinema in its early days.

In terms of format, the revised edition has an additional type of content: some of the film entries now include some descriptions of the film by members of the cast and crew, or excerpts of published reviews. Although these are very simple memories and views, they offer readers a much fuller picture of the films.

The *Filmography Vol I* is both a book for experts and for general readers. As long as they are interested in Hong Kong cinema, they will unquestionably benefit from the book. The publication of a revised edition elevates the book's quality and as such, brings even more joy to readers. This is how I, as the revised edition's earliest reader, deeply feel about it. (Translated by Diane To)

Editor's notes:

1. In the 1997 edition of *Hong Kong Filmography Vol I*, the first film entry was listed as *Zhuang Zi Tests His Wife* in 1913. Based on newly discovered historical evidence, the film's production date has been corrected to 1914.
2. The films in this book are listed in the order of their general release dates (year, month, and day) in Hong Kong. If a film is missing a release date in Hong Kong or has not been publicly released in Hong Kong before, its release date in other regions will be listed as the general release date, with the corresponding regions specified in brackets after the date. See 'Editor's notes' of *Hong Kong Filmography Vol I (1914–1941)* (Revised Edition) (in Chinese).

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