

## Preface:

# The Resurfacing and Restoring of **Confucius**

Written and directed by Fei Mu, *Confucius* was made in Shanghai by Min Hwa Motion Picture (Minhua) but was inextricably entwined with Hong Kong in many ways. In 1938, Fei Mu, Min Hwa's boss Jin Xinmin and actor Zhang Yi fled the war to Hong Kong where the idea of making the film first germinated. *Confucius* was premiered in Shanghai towards the end of 1940 and was thought lost after a brief re-run in 1948. That a nitrate negative of the archival gem was rediscovered more than half a century in the place it was conceived was a reunion almost destined to happen.

In October 2001, we received a list of donations made anonymously. While the list contains mostly of books and other textual materials, an entry struck us as particularly notable – a print of *Confucius*. This cache of film-related materials, according to the donor, had been bequeathed by the donor's uncle. One month later on 24 November, five staff members from the Archive's acquisition and conservation teams set out for Wan Chai to collect books and other textual materials put up for donation. They then followed the donor to retrieve the film in Tsim Sha Tsui. Boxed-up neatly, the film canisters emitted a pungent almond aroma, the distinctive odour of nitrate film stock from the early days of cinema, quietly but surely awaiting its rediscovery.

The film canisters contained a picture negative, an optical sound track, negatives and composite print of loose fragments (see Appendix). The film was in very poor condition: two reels of optical sound track were found missing, with some of them stuck together; the base material was shrunken and partially liquefied due to nitrate decomposition. In 2008, with the help of the experts from the renowned film restoration and conservation workshop L'Immagine Ritrovata of Italy, the Archive's conservation team embarked on the first step of a most challenging restoration project: extensive repair of the original materials; using full immersion wet gate systems to reduce scratches on the

original materials in the printing process; and digital restoration of the sound track. The result was a new copy struck from both the original negative and sound track, each fully synchronised with the other. With part of the sound track missing, this first-restored version of *Confucius* made from the nitrate negatives has a running time of 87 minutes, plus nine minutes of loose footage. This year, based on scientific evidence and research on available literature, we proceeded to the second stage of restoration, inserting most of the break-off scenes back into the film.

*Confucius* was shown in Shanghai and across China from the end of 1940 through 1941, according to the film's producer Jin Xinmin. The Chinese distribution rights were sold to Xu Foluo and the Southeast Asian rights to Zhang Weitao for \$40,000 – a reasonably good price compared to the average price tag of \$10,000. After its release in Shanghai, the film was put away in the film vaults of United Photoplay Service (Lianhua) where it sank into oblivion.<sup>1</sup> However, our earlier research on the *Shen Daily* published in Shanghai in the 1940s yielded a surprise: an 'overseas version' of the film was re-released in 1948 at three cinemas in Shanghai – The Queen's, Golden and International – on *Confucius*' birthday on 27 August by a company called Yihua. Indeed, this finding coincides with the opening credits of *Confucius*, which roll out 'A Min Hwa Motion Picture Production Distributed by Yihua Film Company', the line of credit overlaying Min Hwa's unmistakable bell logo.

The edge code of the year 1947 found on the composite print of the loose fragments attests to the fact that it was the master of the 1948 re-released copy. Because these fragments were themselves struck from duplicate negatives, the images had to be digitally enhanced before they could be reintegrated with the rest of the film. It remains a mystery as to who decided to cut these scenes and why. *The Chin Chin Screen* published an article on 8 September 1948, stating

that Fei Mu was not involved in the printing and re-editing of the re-released film. In fact the director went to see it at the Golden Theatre on the first day and 'found it so unsatisfactory that he denounced it in an announcement in the paper the following day, dealing the film's re-run a massive blow.' While the ad was unavailable to support and validate the report, amid this dispute may lie a clue that corroborates with the story: the nine minutes of footage could very well be the scenes edited out from the re-released version without Fei's knowledge; and the 87-minute version of the film the Archive shown last April was very likely the re-edited 1948.

We were cautious enough not to draw conclusions based on a single piece of article. Fortunately, the film brochure published to tie in with *Confucius*' premiere in 1940 offers us further hints. The beautiful booklet contains a 'Synopsis of *Confucius*' (also appended to this volume), a scene-by-scene breakdown so detailed that it's effectively the script of the film. Except for a few missing scenes, the Archive's first-restored version and the synopsis were almost a match. Taking the task of subtitling the film, Koo Siu-sun offered his thoughts on where the loose footage was to be inserted based on his reading of the 'Synopsis of *Confucius*'. Having carefully considered the suggestions made by Mr Koo, as well as weighing new options proposed by our research and programming colleagues and seeking the expert opinions of Shu Kei of the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, we took the bold step of reinserting the fragments (both their negatives and composite print) to where we believed to be their rightful places:

Reel 1: two segments on 'Tsi attacks Lu' and 'Confucius and his disciples'

Reel 2: two segments on 'Revenge' and 'Yen Hwei's "benevolence"'

Reel 7: two segments on 'Disaster in Chen and Tsai'

Reel 9: two segments on 'I will do my utmost to help' and 'Prevail throughout the ages'

Few details escaped our conservationists' meticulous eyes. Poring over the picture negative, not only did they find the points where 'Confucius and his disciples' and 'I will do my utmost to help' were cut off, the edge code on 'I will do my utmost to help' was found to match the torn-half of the code on the picture negative. Traces and marks left on the picture negative, although less noticeable, also pointed out the original locales of four other fragments: 'Revenge', 'Yen Hwei's benevolence', the first segment on 'Disaster in Chen and Tsai' and 'Prevail throughout the ages'. Despite the lack of conservationist evidence, the 'Synopsis of *Confucius*' reinforced our belief that the two segments on 'Tsi attacks Lu' and 'Disaster in Chen and Tsai' are too important to be left out, especially when the latter features Confucius in the pivotal scene of singing his lament on the *qin*.

We also had the odd scene, 'The Empire at "peace" (?)', now missing from the surviving film but found in the synopsis. It was a scene that Qin Pengzhang, who scored the music for the film, distinctly remembered had been shot.<sup>2</sup>

Film conservation has been, is and will be a work in progress. We have used our best endeavour to restore the film as close to its original glory as is currently possible. Whether this further-restored version will be the final one remains to be seen. After all, the story of reunion is always full of twists and turns.

### Hong Kong Film Archive

Translated by Agnes Lam

#### Notes:

1. Wong Ain-ling, 'Interview with Jin Xinmin' in Wong Ain-ling (ed), *Fei Mu: Poet Director (Shiren Daoyan: Fei Mu)* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Critics Society, 1998) (in Chinese).
2. Ibid, Qin Pengzhang, 'Fei Mu's Film and Drama'.