

Abstracts from *Chinese Cinema: Tracing the Origins*

I Origins of Chinese Cinema

China's First Feature? The Canonisation of *The Difficult Couple*

By Huang Xuelei (PhD in Chinese Studies, Heidelberg University)

It has been a widely accepted assertion that *The Difficult Couple* (Dir: Zhang Shichuan, Scr: Zheng Zhengqiu, China Cinema Company, 1913) was 'the first Chinese fictional film'. Supported by solid evidence collected from a wide range of primary source materials, this article calls this assertion into question. It examines the dual process of film-making and canon-making, addressing the questions including: To what extent can (or cannot) the film be labelled as the 'Chinese first'? In which ways and for what reasons has it been 'canonised' in historical writings? Under what historical circumstances was the film produced and distributed? In so doing, this study devotes its effort in the direction of revisionist historical writing, attempting to correct a number of factual mistakes resulting from, among others, ideological biases. By conducting a close examination of this particular film, this article further seeks to inquire into broader issues relating to the widespread obsession with origins and canon in human thought and scholarly research.

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

By Law Kar (Film researcher)

Recently, the question of which date and film marked the beginning of Hong Kong cinema has raised considerable controversy. The author cites an interview with R.F. Van Velzer from *The Moving Picture World* (1914) in hopes of discovering the truth behind the origins of Hong Kong's movie industry. In the process, he rebuts certain claims made about the films, *Stealing a Roast Duck* (aka *The Trip of the Roast Duck*) and *Zhuang Zi Tests His Wife* (aka *The Defamation of Choung Chow*), and clarifies several other arguments. He also offers insight into how we should view the beginnings of Chinese and Hong Kong cinema: Were we too focused on Chinese national cinema that we overlooked the efforts of the first Westerners who made movies in China and Hong Kong? If so, it might have led us to neglect the achievements of pioneers such as B. Brodsky and A.E. Lauro, as well as the legacy that they have passed down to forward-thinking Chinese filmmakers like the Lai Brothers from Hong Kong, and Zhang Shichuan, Zheng Zhengqiu from Shanghai. This piece discusses and explains these issues.

The Road to Unravelling the Mysteries Behind Hong Kong's Cinematic History

By Zhou Chengren & Li Yizhuang (Film researchers)

Did 2009 really mark the centenary of Hong Kong cinema? This is a subject which raises much debate. Many professionals in the industry agree that *Stealing a Roast Duck*, a collaboration between a Chinese director and an American producer completed in 1909, is the legitimate ground breaker. However, some scholars believe that *New Bijou Theatre Catalogue* (1924), in which author Ming Ming states the film's completion date to be 1912, is more credible due to its publication date. Furthermore, the recent discovery of an interview with R.F. Van Velzer in the 1914 July–September edition of the American publication, *The Moving Picture World*, reveals that *Zhuang Zi Tests His Wife* was filmed in 1914, ahead of three other shorts which included *Roast Duck*. Some even doubt the actual existence of *Roast Duck*. Two key points are raised by the various arguments:

- (a) Which of the two films was produced first?
- (b) If *Roast Duck* was completed first, then 2009 marks the centenary of Hong Kong cinema, but if it turns out to be *Zhuang Zi*, the correct centenary would be 2014.

This essay explores the production date of the two films using relevant historical data.

Stealing a Roast Duck: Researching the Myth

By Wong Ain-ling & Grace Ng (Film researchers)

2009 marked the centenary of Hong Kong cinema as industry professionals and the government concur that *Stealing a Roast Duck*, produced in 1909, is Hong Kong's first locally-produced film. This movie has been the subject of much controversy as there are many discrepancies present in the information regarding its production. There is insufficient evidence to support any single argument and a lack of firsthand information for further investigation, rendering the origins of Hong Kong cinema a mystery. This piece attempts to sort all information and references relevant to *Roast Duck*, starting from the earliest available source, and also discusses the difficulties encountered in the research process. The authors aim to trace and study discourses on this movie in the context of Hong Kong's early film history, and to draw a conclusion from all relevant information obtained through past research.

The Fabulous Adventures of Benjamin Brodsky

By Frank Bren (Film researcher)

The early history of a regional cinema begs certain questions: When did its people first experience the cinema and who made its first filmed dramas?

A forgotten article published in 1914 exhumed last August suggested the birth year of

Hong Kong cinema as 1914. The late film historian, Jay Leyda, even described the article in the 1970s, identifying the publication though not its date, naming the four ‘first films’ and confirming their Hong Kong origin. Yet, for more than a generation, historians ignored Leyda’s clue, preferring to recycle the ‘first year’ myth of 1909. Why?

While this paper notes such outcomes of research, its main concern is the fabulous story of Benjamin Brodsky who co-produced those four films with Chinese artists. Brodsky’s seemingly extravagant claims as a ‘Chinese film king’ invite comparison with Baron Munchausen, the greatest teller of tall-tales known to Western literature. Yet Brodsky’s surviving documentary, *A Trip Through China* (1916), and contemporary (1914) newspaper reports on his film work in Hong Kong make him the authentic ‘Western uncle’ of Chinese cinema. His legacy endures today.

Making Connections: Benjamin Brodsky and Early Trans-Pacific Cinema Historiography

By Ramona Curry (Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)

Histories of Chinese cinema have long credited the Russian American immigrant Benjamin Brodsky with founding production companies in Shanghai and Hong Kong as early as 1909 and initiating filmmaking collaborations with local Chinese. Closer examination reveals those accounts to be sketchy assertions offered without documentation. Recent original transnational research, conducted in part among US government archives and library holdings now available online, has yielded evidence that reframes and elaborates the historical narrative. This essay departs from a 1915 American film trade journal report and its illustrating photograph and from a tale in Brodsky’s unpublished autobiography to demonstrate his unexpected connections to members of the Chinese elite around 1912–1916. A chance shipboard meeting led to Brodsky’s acquaintance with several Chinese graduates of American universities and through them the early republican minister Zhou Ziqi. Extensive records suggest that these Chinese returned students themselves motivated and through family and political connections helped to facilitate Brodsky’s shift in 1913–1914 from limited film distribution in China into production, including of *A Trip Through China* (1916). The new findings have intriguing implications for histories of early 20th-century trans-Pacific cultural associations as well as of Chinese cinema.

Anecdotes and Chinese Early Cinema: Renegotiating with Benjamin Brodsky

By Liao Gene-fon (Associate Professor, Department of Motion Picture, National Taiwan University of Arts)

Mainland China claims 2005 to be ‘the Centenary of Chinese Cinema’, celebrating the milestone in high profile for all the world to see. Hong Kong also celebrated its one hundred years of filmmaking in a similar fashion in 2009. Both *Mount Dingjun* (1905?) and *Stealing a*

Roast Duck (1909?) hold very special meaning to Chinese-language cinema as they mark the first ever films to be made by the Chinese people, signifying the beginning of China's and Hong Kong's respective cinematic histories.

Benjamin Brodsky, an American of Russian descent, is an entrepreneur who went to China early last century to lay the foundations of its entertainment industry. Recently, stories of his achievements, as well as his travel documentary, *A Trip Through China*, have surfaced and become the subject of much discussion. Brodsky is undoubtedly one of the champions who has travelled the globe to discover and develop industry opportunities for the Western world since the first motion picture graced the silver screen in 1895. This essay attempts to trace the activities of such 'opportunists' in Shanghai's movie scene and goes further to give readers an in-depth understanding of how this new medium, bearing both entertainment and business value, made its mark in China early last century. It suggests that the real beginning of Chinese cinema was in the mid-1920s, viewing all prior works as 'prehistory'. By adopting different perspectives, not only can we expand and enrich cinematic history research, but also make positive contributions to the development of contemporary Chinese cinema.

The (Possible) Circulation of Movie Industry Professionals Between Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, China and Indochina in the Late 19th Century

By Lee Daw-ming (Associate Professor, Department of Filmmaking, Taipei National University of Arts)

In the past two decades, new information concerning how motion pictures made their way to Hong Kong, Taiwan, China and Japan has been unearthed. With regards to when the first ever movie screening took place in Taiwan, Film researcher Huang Jen believes it to be August and September of 1899, when Thomas Edison's Vitascope made its debut in Taipei. On 4 August 1899, an advertisement on the eighth page of *Taiwan Daily Newspaper* urged Taiwanese citizens, as well as Japanese residents, to flock to Taipei's Dadaocheng City God Temple to watch 'the Great Western Illusion Spectacle'. There were four showings every day, with ten shorts being presented at each hour-long screening. The most significant part of this advertisement to the writer is the fact that it notes the projectionist as being Cheung Pak-kui, a man of Cantonese origin. This hints at the possibility that the arrival of the first films to Taiwan was via Hong Kong.

This paper's emphasis is on discussing the strong trade relationship and workforce circulation between Taiwan and Hong Kong in the late 19th century, as well as the important role that the Cantonese people played in distributing the first films in China, making inferences that Cheung might be the person who introduced the Vitascope to Taiwan. It also cites the letters and diaries of François Constant Girel and Gabriel Veyre, two French technicians who held screenings and shot films with the Lumière Brothers' Cinématographe in Japan. It explores why there were records of their decision to move from Japan to Shanghai (and possibly Hong Kong), Vietnam and Southeast Asia in 1897 or 1899, but a lack of

documentation of screenings taking place in Shanghai (or Hong Kong). Furthermore, it examines the absence of titles related to Shanghai (or Hong Kong) in the Lumière Brothers' filmography. The author makes a bold conclusion about Edison's and the Lumière Brothers' views on the Japanese and Chinese markets, as well as the fact that the shipping relationship between Japan and Hong Kong during Taiwan's early years as a Japanese colony might have been the reason why the Vitascope and Cinématographe did not make it to Taiwanese shores until 1899 and 1900 respectively.

II Industry and Art

The Development of Early Chinese Cinema and Contemporary Nationalism – A Study Centred on Chinese Films of the 1920s

By Wang Chaoguang (Researcher, Institute of Modern History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences)

The emergence of nationalism, especially in the first half of the 20th century, has directly influenced the course of Chinese history, playing a vital role in China's transition from its traditional past into a modern society. The ideology has had a significant impact on various aspects of life in 20th century China, including politics, economics, beliefs and culture, with the decade between the New Culture and May Fourth Movements of the late 1910s and the Nationalist Revolution in the late 1920s being a particularly crucial time of development. This was the key period when the Chinese cinema market began expanding and society's consumption in the cultural and entertainment sectors started gravitating towards the movies. It also marked the era in which films related to nationalism rose to prominence from its humble beginnings, leading China to be at the forefront of film production and consumption by Asian, and even global standards. This essay is centred on how the nationalism wave helped formulate regulations on Chinese filmmaking from its laissez-faire past as the production and consumption of Chinese movies became commonplace and popular, as well as its constructive contributions in helping future generations understand the foundations and development of contemporary Chinese nationalism through multiple perspectives.

Early Chinese Film Companies: Business Models and Operational Problems

By Lee Pui-tak (Research Officer, Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, The University of Hong Kong)

Motion pictures were an exotic import introduced into China in the late 19th century. Since then, Chinese cinema has come a very long way, with the first three decades of the 20th century marking a significant leap forward in development. As Liu Na'ou puts it, the celebrity system of the United States, together with European director and cameraman practices, have planted

deep roots in China. It is fair to say that the West has had substantial influence on Chinese cinema. The urbanisation of China, as well as the popularity of movies, have attracted many investors to the country, and new Chinese-financed and -operated film companies were set up one after another. However, such firms were no match for those under foreign investment in the days when American capital was the most powerful driving force behind the local movie industry.

Competition in the early days of the Chinese film industry did not only exist between domestic and foreign capital, but also amongst locally-owned film companies. By focusing too much on competition, however, the horizontal and vertical development required for film companies to grow as commercial enterprises have been largely overlooked. Much research has gone into examining the emergence of such competition, but not much attention has been directed at studying its impact on the film industry. This paper discusses the capital structure and operational management of Star, China Sun, Unique and United Photoplay, four film companies that surfaced in the 1920s, as well as the problems that they encountered on the road to expansion.

From Loanwords to Conceptual Models: The Application and Definition of ‘Wenyi’ in Early Cinema

By Emilie Yeh Yueh-yu (Professor, Academy of Film, School of Communication, Hong Kong Baptist University)

This paper proposes to use *wenyi* as an alternative concept to melodrama in order to clarify, map and discuss key issues in Chinese film history and criticism. These are: the ethical role of Chinese cinema in modern forms of spectatorship; transmission of progressive ideals to dispersed populations; the role of literary adaptation; stylistic innovations responding to Western melodrama; and the role of filmmakers as socially responsible artists. Film scholarship has been using the standard Western generic term – melodrama – to analyse Chinese family films, romances and art cinema. Given the vast differences between the historical and theoretical construct of melodrama and *wenyi*, it is advisable to locate an intrinsic and perhaps more illuminating *wenyi* than melodrama to explain Chinese-language cinemas. The essay’s review of the term *wenyi* and its shifting meanings, contexts, and applications demonstrates how a new corpus of *wenyi* cinema can emerge as a distinct historiography in film scholarship.

From Stage Aesthetic to Cinematic Aesthetic: The Evolution of Film Language in Early Chinese Cinema

By Lo Wai-luk (Associate Professor, Academy of Film, School of Communication, Hong Kong Baptist University)

In the 1930s, Chinese filmmakers realised the importance of developing a language which specifically belonged to film, and the relationship between a subjective filmmaking process and an objective end product (life put into light and shadow) was established. So how did Chinese film language evolve from 1905's *Mount Dingjun* to the 1930s? This question is especially important to the study of traditional and nationalistic styles of Chinese cinema. From the perspective of how film came about, this paper uses films from the 1920s, namely *Labour's Love* (1922) and *Way Down West* (1927), as well as Lai Man-wai's documentary on the Northern Expedition, *A Page of History*, to conduct a preliminary analysis on the evolution of film language in Chinese cinema in the 1920s.

Hou Yao, 'Griffith Fever', and the Cultural Environment of Early Chinese Melodrama

By Zhang Zhen (Associate Professor, Department of Cinema Studies, New York University)

This essay explores the recently re-discovered film, *A Poet from the Sea* (1927), an important early work by Hou Yao, and its artistic and cultural contexts in Shanghai's early cinematic history. By analysing the film (an incomplete copy), together with Hou's other works and related textual sources, we can gain new insight into the beginnings and the cultural environment of early romance films (narrative dramas). The views of *A Poet from the Sea* and its contemporaries on such motifs as love and marriage, the city-country divide, their narrative structure, as well as the way in which they are captured on film, help us further understand the origins and development of 'wenyi films' in early Shanghai and Chinese cinema.

'Voiceover' and 'Soundtrack' in the Silent Film Era

By Zhang Wei (Researcher, Shanghai Library)

& Yan Jieqiong (Assistant Librarian, Shanghai Library)

The early stages of China's film industry mostly involved the screening of American and European silent movies. In addition to having no sound, which instilled a sense of uneasiness amongst the audience, the subtitles were in English, creating another barrier for those who were not familiar with the language. In order to make up for these shortfalls, 'voiceover' and 'soundtrack' were introduced. The so-called 'voiceover' was in the form of a person who interpreted the subtitles and explained the plot while the film was playing. The methodology originated from Japan and was introduced into China sometime after 1910, becoming prevalent in local lower middle class cinemas. As for the 'soundtrack', musicians were invited to play live according to the plot's needs as it progressed. This phenomenon also became commonplace in post-1910 America and Europe, creating a complete cinematic experience. The Chinese also adopted such techniques after building their interpretation of Western upper class movie theatres in order to show off their sophistication. At the same time, Chinese

filmmakers such as Sun Yu and Bu Wancang have gone a step further, composing the first original soundtracks. Although live interpretation and music were abolished with the advent of modern technology, they remain an integral part of early Chinese film history.

The Brain as a Movie Theatre: A Construction of Modern Subjectivity in Zhou Shoujuan's *Confidante*

By Chen Jianhua (Professor, Division of Humanities, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology)

Zhou Shoujuan's novella, *Confidante*, depicts the encounter between a young man and a young woman and their reunion and marriage through the media of novels and newspapers. It is nothing but a figment of a nation's 'collective imagination', yet it proclaims the virtues of love and family. The narrative used to describe the male lead's recollection of the encounter with his lover, much like the way a film reel is projected on the silver screen, is an indication of how the arrival of film to China in the late 19th century has affected our emotional perception and memory capacity.

This paper traces the historical trajectory of this 'trope' of cinematic memory and goes further to examine how cinema's rise to popularity in the 1920s led to the creation of public exhibition spaces such as movie theatres, newspapers and shop window displays, and consequently, the emergence of local moviegoers and their role in the nation's 'collective imagination'.

(Translated by Johnny Ko)