

## Foreword

The year 2009 arguably marked the centenary of Hong Kong cinema. This occasion, along with its celebratory events, captures the attention of media both home and abroad. In the majority of discourses on Hong Kong or Chinese film history, the comic short film *Stealing a Roast Duck* (aka *The Trip of the Roast Duck*) was reputedly made in 1909, thus marking the inception of Hong Kong cinema for film historians. There had been controversies on this issue among the academic community, especially on two questions: Was *Roast Duck* made in 1909? Secondly, is this movie a 'Hong Kong movie'? The former question is one of historicity whereas the latter is one of conceptuality. Instead of making a conclusive response towards the first question, the Hong Kong Film Archive chose an alternative response: by conducting careful, meticulous research and ongoing exploration without limiting to Hong Kong films. This would be an opportunity to re-examine the writings on early Chinese film history. Collectively, these considerations led to the conference entitled 'History of Early Chinese Cinema(s) Revisited' held on 15, 16 and 17 December 2009.

During the roundtable and concluding discussion on the last day of the conference, one key issue for the scholars in attendance is on defining 'early Chinese cinema': Can it be defined? How can it be defined? What is the significance of this designation? Similar questions generated controversies in the United States and Europe before. Upon the proposal for the conference, the same questions were ardently discussed. As a 'compromise', the timeframe for 'early Chinese cinema' is set at the period before 1930. This was the era in China when film entered the horizon up until its move into industrialisation. Star Film Company was founded in 1922, with a boom of sizeable studios establishing in 1924 and 1925, including Great China, Lily, Great Wall, Shenzhou, Unique and China Sun. The 1920s were an important stage when commercial filmmaking flourished into intense competition. From a technical standpoint, this era remained one with silent films. Sound films from the United States entered the Chinese market in 1929, with Chinese sound films making its debut in the start of 1930. Unfortunately, film prints before 1930 are pitifully scarce, making studies on Chinese films of this era close to impossible. In other words, there is a serious lack of 'film text' on formulating 'early' Chinese film history prior to 1930, thus making the study based heavily on publication archives. When films were first introduced, they hardly qualified as art. This cold reception held true in both the West and the East, with China belittling this medium. Records at the times were understandably limited, with no attention placed in preserving related archives. The tumultuous times which followed contributed to further loss of such material. Therefore, scholars have to double their research efforts with this limitation of even print archive material, a situation strongly reflected in the essays within this book.

In the context of film history, there has been no comprehensive treatment of what constitutes Chinese film. Not that the question was never pondered upon, but it was likely sidetracked by the turbulent times and the complicated confluence of factors. The effect of colonial history, continuous foreign aggression and civil strife, fragmentation and dichotomy of ideologies have all interfered with the writing of cultural history.

This volume of essays is named *Chinese Cinema: Tracing the Origins*. As the name suggests, the aim is to discover the ancestral roots of Chinese motion pictures. The writing of history is never cast in stone. To conduct historical research, one needs the receptiveness to accommodate revision and re-writing. When new material is

unearthed, analytical perspectives are readjusted along with the current times. Nearly all essays mentioned *History of the Development of Chinese Cinema* co-written by Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai and Xing Zuwen. Considering it being works from a particular historical era, it is only natural that there are queries or proposed revisions. However, these two sizeable volumes are generally agreed to be the most extensive and influential book within the study of Chinese film history. Over the years, Chinese and foreign scholars inevitably based their amendments and re-writing of film history from these two volumes. Two years ago, veteran film historian Li Shaobai was unable to attend the conference due to leg health issues. However, he sent us a letter in support of the event:

History is a science. Unlike experimental science, one can only conduct study relying on historical data, which is constantly being discovered and developed. There is new historical data in the study of early Chinese film history, along with new channels in discovering as well as new methodologies for such data... Historical data and historical knowledge are complementary in nature. Studies that are cross-regional, inter-disciplinary, cross-media, cross-cultural – they are poised to become the new starting point in studying early Chinese films.

Sure enough, the essays in this book aptly reflect the exploration and attempts in these two aspects.

‘Origins of Chinese Cinema’, the first part of the book, is a journey of methodically tracing the origins in question. Traversing from *The Difficult Couple*, the first movie of China, to *Stealing a Roast Duck* and *Zhuang Zi Tests His Wife* (aka *The Defamation of Choung Chow*), the first movies of Hong Kong, the authors attempt to explicate and re-examine with historical data the behind-the-scene story and significance of how these films have become film history classics. The analysis involves many facets – the discovery, filtering, arrangement and interpretation of the historical data, the intricate relationship between colonial culture of the early Republican era and early Chinese films, the influences of ideological and historical baggage towards the writing of film history. This approach underlies a ‘decentralised’ research methodology and theory which obviously differs from mainstream Chinese film history. Interestingly enough, this journey of exploration makes Benjamin Brodsky the focus of discussion, which likely would have been a surprise to him. The significant documents pertaining to the discussion are contained in the CD included in this book.

With issues of globalisation in the spotlight of academic scenes in recent years, research of a transnational nature has become the contemporary modus operandi. The study of Chinese film history also adapts to this trend – with the information superhighway, no words can adequately describe the convenience in which archival material is made available online. Data collection had become more ‘transnational’ in nature. On one hand, this is an opportunity for reconsidering the strategy of the discourse in film history; on the other hand, there is the pitfall of getting lost amid the enormous magnitude of data. In this situation, the traditional methods of scholarly research and training remain a ‘stabilising force’ and a guiding light.

While the first half of the book attempts to trace the concrete origin of Chinese film through evidential material, the second part, ‘Industry and Art’, provides a sketch of early Chinese motion pictures which surfaces while unearthing historical material. It also reflects on the conceptual and artistic format of Chinese cinema in its primordial state. What is the relationship between early Chinese films and

contemporary China? How does it evolve in constructing its genre and language? As mentioned above, related research material is seriously lacking: after all, the films themselves are most critical and conducive to discussion of cinematic art. Under this extreme scarcity of ‘film text’, our authors strive to find the link between history and aesthetics with the most strenuous of efforts. We must admit this deficiency of research in early Chinese film aesthetics. In the course of editing this book, we have more heartfelt understanding of the difficulties encountered by our predecessors in constructing early Chinese film history, and empathy for the anxiety of current scholars faced with this task. We can only hope that film archives worldwide will strengthen in both cooperation and sharing of resources. We do remain hopeful in view that Hou Yao’s *A Poet from the Sea* (1927) was indeed discovered at the Swiss Film Archive in Lausanne.<sup>1</sup>

The conference ‘History of Early Chinese Cinema(s) Revisited’ was held in 2009, with this book almost two years in the making. We are extremely thankful towards Dr Lee Pui-tak from our event co-organiser, the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (incorporating the Centre of Asian Studies), Hong Kong University; event sponsor Prof Poshek Fu from the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies, University of Illinois, as well as Prof Emilie Yeh Yueh-yu from the Centre for Media and Communication Research, School of Communication, Hong Kong Baptist University. With the enthusiastic support from our conference participants, essays on a broad range of topics were submitted. Due to space constraints, this volume focuses solely on the topic of ‘tracing the origins’, and many substantial essays are not featured in this publication. We extend our sincere gratitude and appreciation towards all the authors in this book, as well as Prof Li Shaobai, Prof Paul G. Pickowicz, Prof Li Daoxin, Mr Lai Shek, Dr Liu Hui, Ms Wei Ping, Prof Stephanie Chung Po-yin, Dr Misawa Mamie, Dr Kinnia Yau Shuk-ting, Ms Takishita Saeko and Mr Li Zhen. (Translated by Richard Lee)

**Editorial Committee: Wong Ain-ling, Kwok Ching-ling, Grace Ng & Sam Ho**

**Note**

1. Zhang Zhen, ‘Hou Yao, “Griffith Fever”, and the Cultural Environment of Early Chinese Melodrama’, p 223 in this volume (in Chinese).