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Feature

A Glimpse of Hong Kong Film Industry Pre- and Post-Japanese Occupation

Wong Ha-pak

Editor's note: *Hong Kong Filmography (Vols 1&2)*, published by the Hong Kong Film Archive in 1997 and 1998, document Hong Kong film history through the first half of the last century with a listing of all local productions prior to 1949. 15 years on, the Archive has expanded considerably its film holdings from this period through donation and acquisition. In recent years, apart from adding newfound resources to the research files for these film titles, an effort has been made to wade through newspapers and magazines of the day in order to gain better insights into the film industry. What follows are the findings by Wong Ha-pak, who has spent a great deal of time gathering new materials for *Filmography Vol 2 (1942–1949)*.

In Hong Kong between 1942 and 1949, over 430 motion pictures, mainly in Cantonese, were made. The industry however came to a halt during the Japanese Occupation from late 1941 to August 1945; many film workers, as a result, had to change jobs or flee overseas. That period was a void in Hong Kong cinematic history.

The Film Archive, since it came to exist, has worked to compile press clippings and other resources into research files for films produced in Hong Kong. With more and more older publications coming our way, the Research Unit decided to go through the materials all over again in an attempt to know more about the production background of the films, as well as the overall development of the movie industry. The newspapers and magazines I combed through this time include *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, *Wah Kiu Man Po*, *Heung To Daily*, *Kung Sheung Evening News*, *Sing Pao*, *Hwa Shiang Pao* and *Ling Sing*. In the following, I will briefly go through part of the research findings in three areas.

Movie Theatres during Early Occupation

Hong Kong fell under Japanese Occupation on 25 December 1941. Theatres were quick in making their way back compared with other businesses. On 3 January 1942, Good World Theatre in Sham Shui Po took out a newspaper advert announcing that it would be 'back to business shortly showing Japanese newsreel epics.' Another 6 January report read, 'Good World reopened its doors the other day', hence the theatre practically re-entered the fray in less than a fortnight since the Occupation. Other theatres followed suit, such as Victory, Yau Ma Tei, King's, Queen's, Oriental, and Cathay.

It is hard to identify the exact reason behind the swift recovery of the theatre

business based on newspaper adverts alone; ultimately it might have been due to the Japanese Army. The theatres, when first resumed operations, all played Japanese newsreel documentaries including *Today's Tokyo*, *The Army's Might*, and *Japan's Industries*. Tickets were sold initially but admission became free a few days later. From 12 January on, some theatres began to run dramatic features, such as the Queen's which played *The Black-Garbed Ghost*, a first-run Cantonese feature starting 15 January. Some other theatres put on stage performances: Astor had the Fuk Hing Cantonese Opera Troupe led by Pak Yuk-tong, Yau Ma Tei had the East Asia Men and Women Cantonese Opera Troupe fronted by Law Kar-kuen, and Majestic had the Moon Opera Troupe grace the stage.

Ever since the Occupation, film distribution and exhibition came under Japanese control, the details of which await further studies. Yet the control appeared to be lax before the Japanese-run Motion Picture Distribution Company set up its Hong Kong branch in January 1943. In August 1942, for instance, a cache of American films previously shelved in Hong Kong were greenlighted for release after scrutiny by the censors; this however only lasted for a short while. In the days that followed, only motion pictures from Japan and Germany and new Mandarin titles shipped in from Shanghai were allowed for public exhibition, apart from reruns of prewar Cantonese fare and occasional showings of a few all-new titles.

Ten Newfound Gems

Film production was brought to a complete standstill in Japanese-occupied Hong Kong; only 11 new releases hit the cinemas, all shot prior to the war. Theatrical releases of these films were not concentrated in the early days of Occupation but spread over the period. Works such as *A Colourful World* and *Bitter Phoenix and Sorrowful Oriole*, which had been publicised before the war, didn't make it to the screen until early 1947. While reading the old newspapers, I found ten films that are not yet collected in *Hong Kong Filmography*, including six documentaries and the following four features:

Golden Gate Girl

Golden Gate Film Company's founding production, directed by Kwan Man-ching (aka Moon Kwan)¹, starring Tso Yi-man and Wong Hok-sing, shot in USA; Bruce Lee's screen debut as an infant. Adverts dated 7 December 1941 first announced the upcoming release of the film, which however failed to materialise due to the Occupation. As per the 9 July 1942 *Heung To Daily*, Tso Yi-man initially scheduled its release at the Central Theatre before the war; but it was left to languish in the film studio vaults ever since the Occupation, and first greeted the audience at the World

Theatre only on 11 January 1946.

Belle from the South

A Ganlu Film Company production; opera and screen diva Tsi Lo Lan's first Mandarin-speaking film, co-starring Fung Fung, Li Jingbo and Ku Wen-chung; directed and scripted by Yan Meng. According to newspapers, *Belle* was adapted from *The Lady of the Camellias*, with Siu Tit-hung responsible for the score and Tong Kim-ting the camerawork. Premiered at Meiji Theatre (predecessor of the Queen's) on 13 June 1942, the film print was lost after the war. Ganlu Film Company consequently published a statement in newspapers, demanding compensations from Grandview Film Company Limited which did the shooting.

Love in War Times

A Nanyang Film Company production, advertised as a 'nationalist epic in a turbulent time' in as early as September 1941; starring Ng Cho-fan, Pak Yin and directed by But Fu, opened at New World Theatre on 2 February 1946.

Spring Blossoms

As stated in *Heung To Daily* dated 5 July 1942, this Lung To-directed movie was basically completed before the war. Adapted from Kit Hak's novel serialised in *Tianguang Daily*, starring Pak Yin and Tse Tin, first brought to the public eye on 1 February 1947 at Sun Wah Cinema, and one of the several dozen early gems donated by Mr Jack Lee Fong to the Film Archive.

Also found were six documentaries on news events and Chinese opera performances. *Wu Tak-hing Travelling to USA* is a short film that follows actress Wu Tip-ying (aka Wu Tak-hing) on her trip. It was screened along with *Twin Sisters of the South*, a prewar piece of hers, at New World on 13 March 1947.

Slow Recovery after the War

Following Hong Kong's liberation from the Japanese in August 1945, all trades began to pick up but the film business remained sluggish as ever. In the Cantonese film sector up till February 1947, for example, most theatres were only rerunning pre-existing works, alongside productions by Grandview's US studio and those that were nearing completion in the prewar years.

Reasons behind the stagnation can be deduced from the press clippings. Firstly, years of warfare left the film industry beset on various fronts, depriving it of funds, equipment, as well as talents who had fled and yet to return; larger studios such as

Grandview and Nanyang were severely damaged and needed repair. Secondly, the pre-Occupation ban on Cantonese films by the mainland Nationalist Government was read by some as a nail in the coffin for Hong Kong Cantonese cinema. Only Mandarin projects were put on the table, but the fact that only a handful of local actors could speak fluent Mandarin posed a major obstacle.

Political reasons also had a part to play. A 26 March 1947 *Wah Kiu Yat Po* article observed that despite all the talk about the industry's rejuvenation, it was problematic when putting things into action. 'One is the distribution rights in northern China, another is the political integrity of the southbound actors from Shanghai...' Anxiety over markets and filmmakers' backgrounds ran deep. Back then there was this term called 'traitorous film workers'. The 2 March 1946 issue of *Ling Sing* ran an interview with Runde Shaw, the owner of Nanyang Film Company. 'Who are traitors and who are patriots? Without a thorough purge by the government, we have no clue how to choose.' He added that casting was a big headache, as the company would suffer losses if the government banned a new film on the grounds that the cast were branded traitors.

After the war, reporting collaborators became a widespread phenomenon across various communities. In December 1945, film magnate Lo Ming-yau, who came to Hong Kong from the north, was quoted as saying: 'Any actors or directors who had helped the enemies propagandise would have no second chance in film.' Meanwhile, the act against defectors was also underway in the Cantonese opera circles. 8 February 1946, *Wah Kiu Yat Po* reported Guangzhou's Chinese Artists Association's intent to scale down prosecution: 'It's not that we don't report collaborators altogether, but that we would take a different line from that for lawyers, doctors and reporters; we're planning on minimising the scale, targeting those who had worked for the enemies as their mountpiece.'

Wu Tip-ying, protagonist of the aforesaid *Wu Tak-hing Travelling to USA*, was also embroiled indirectly. The documentary was filmed during the trip in late 1946, when Wu Tip-ying was engaged to perform Cantonese operas in the States; the deal, however, fell through eventually. According to *Sing Pao* dated 25 December 1946, this was caused by Wu's actress sister, Wu Tip-lai, who had been 'mistakenly sent to jail on allegations of collaboration.' Even though Wu Tip-lai had her name cleared in the end, her sister's image in the Chinese audience in America was so badly blemished that her performance was called off. As indicated in *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, Wu Tip-lai, then living in Guangzhou, was arrested for her involvement in wartime propaganda and film work with the Japanese. She denied all the charges, which were proved to be trumped-up and subsequently dropped. Wu Tip-lai retired from the industry thereafter, while her sister brought out years later *Hawaii Beauty* (1953), a

self-starring feature directed and written all by herself.

By 1949, Hong Kong cinema had rallied with an ever-increasing size of output; quality-wise, however, Cantonese films were the butt of criticism. 8 April 1949, a group of 164 film professionals made a joint declaration in newspapers, lifting the curtain on the Cantonese Cinema Clean-up Campaign. From the prewar ban on Cantonese films to the Clean-up Campaign spearheaded by southbound filmmakers, what Cantonese cinema went through and how it was related with mainland cinema deserve indeed a closer look. (Translated by Estella Fung)

Wong Ha-pak is a media veteran, editor, freelance writer, and researcher for multiple HKFA projects, such as the one on Yau Ma Tei Theatre. His authored works (in Chinese) include *Remembrances of the Theatre* (2007) and *Chronicle of Macau's Movie Theatres* (2012).

Note

- 1 In *Hong Kong Cinema: A Cross-Cultural View (Revised Edition)* co-written by Law Kar and Frank Bren, Golden Gate Film Company is said to be financed by Lau Dai-wah and Guan Baichuan, while *Golden Gate Girl* co-directed by Esther Eng and Kwan Man-ching.

Programme

Musings on Hitchcock Silents

Ka Ming

The Hong Kong Film Archive is currently presenting six of Hitchcock's silent films in the 'Captivating Hitchcock Silents' series, a survey of the master director's early works. The restoration of these films is the British Film Institute's largest and most ambitious undertaking to date.^[1] The six films include *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* (1927), *Downhill* (1927), *The Ring* (1927), *Champagne* (1928), *The Manxman* (1929) and *Blackmail* (1929).

For cinephiles, the greatest pleasure in revisiting these early works is seeing the influence of German Expressionism on Hitchcock's cinematic style that ultimately inspired him to create his own genre of psychological thriller. The recurring elements that became the hallmarks of his later films: suspense, murder, sexual passion, blonde women, domineering mothers, the McGuffin,^[2] etc. were all explored in these early works. For casual viewers, these six films are still fun to watch. Hitchcock was a great storyteller. His seamless storylines and structures unfold in a logical and well-paced manner, even by today's standards. In fact, I found these old silent films more engaging than most of the films produced today.

Taboo and Representation of Women

The Lodger (1927) was the film where Hitchcock arrived at a style and subject that he was later known for. 'The wrong man' narrative in this film, for example, was repeated in many of his later works, such as *The Wrong Man* (1957), and *North by Northwest* (1959). The situations and characters may vary, but the core narrative remains constant: the protagonist is a victim of mistaken identity, sometimes even mistaken for a murderer. His predicament becomes the source of anxiety and suspense for the audience. *The Lodger* is possibly the first 'Hitchcockian' film. There are two scenes where the treatment is so effective that I'm still overwhelmed when I rewatch the film today. The first involves the lodger who lives on the top floor. His behaviour is suspicious. He comes and goes without notice, causing his landlord and landlady much fear and concern. They even instruct their daughter never be alone with the lodger. Hitchcock employed a transparent ceiling and a swinging chandelier, revealing the lodger's footsteps to create suspense and an eerie atmosphere. In another scene, the lodger is handcuffed, desperately attempting to escape from a furious mob. When he attempts to climb over an iron fence, his handcuffs are caught in the

metalwork. He dangles from the fence by the handcuffs and watches helplessly as the angry mob approaches, ready to tear him apart.

Audiences were conflicted about the character of the lodger; they found him terrifying and intriguing at the same time, some even experienced a mixture of sympathy and attraction, just like Daisy, the landlord's daughter in the film. In Hitchcock's later crime films, the director continued to play with the audience's ambiguous feelings towards criminals, allowing them to even identify and sympathise with the predicament of a criminal. The 1948 production of *Rope* is a perfect example. The film opens with a murder scene, revealing the identity of the killer from the start. As the story progresses, the audience becomes a kind of silent accomplice to the killer rather than waiting for the criminal to be exposed, they actually hope the killer would get away. Hitchcock was ingenious and appreciated the relationship between cinema and mass mentality; he understood the audience's craving for sex and crime while sitting in dark cinemas. His crime films were never simply about finding the perpetrators. How could you not admire him? He already had it all figured out when he made *The Lodger*, at the age of 27!

In this series of silent films, the women depicted are particularly strong. Perhaps it had something to do with the major personal changes that the director was experiencing during this period. In 1927 Hitchcock married his assistant director, Alma Reville. A year later their only child, Patricia, was born. Not only did they have a lasting marriage, she was also his most important creative partner. One could conjecture that she served as the main inspiration for Hitchcock's strong female film characters. The protagonist in *Champagne* (1928) for example, is a rebellious, unruly rich girl. She loves to fly planes but hates to receive help. In Hitchcock's films, the women are true to their feelings. They're open, bold and more interesting to watch than most of the men. In *The Ring* (1927), the boxer's wife still burns a torch for her former lover. His photograph displayed on top of her piano even after she gets married. In *Manxman* (1929), when the female protagonist learns of the death of her long-distance fisherman boyfriend, apart from being sad, she's also able to express her feelings for another man. She proves more daring and self-possessed than even the lawyer she's in love with.

Romantic Fatalism

Maturing at an early age often leads to a pessimistic outlook. Hitchcock was no exception. Clues can be found in the silent films made in his youth. The 1927 production, *Downhill*, for example, tells the story of Roddy, a rich schoolboy with a promising future. The trouble starts after he tries to protect his best friend by confessing to getting a waitress pregnant (a reiteration of the 'wrong man' theme). As

a result, Roddy is expelled from school and castigated by his father. He runs away from home to start a life on his own. After many trials and tribulations, he ends up working as a gigolo in Paris. A few years later, the truth is revealed and Roddy resumes his previous life. He plays rugby at an old boy's match at the end of the film, mirroring the match from his schooldays from the opening scene. It is as if nothing happened; he underwent great suffering due to a cruel twist of fate.

All of the romantic relationships depicted in these six silent films are destructive love triangles filled with sorrow and regret. In *Downhill*, Roddy, who is still wet behind the ears, learns painful life lessons from his marriage to an unfaithful theatre actress. The title of the film, *The Ring*, refers to the wedding ring, the boxing ring and the arm bangle given to the female protagonist by her lover. There is an unforgettable moment during the wedding scene: when the boxer places the wedding ring on his bride's finger, her bangle slides down to her wrist (entering the frame). This simple close-up tells us all that we need to know. It's noteworthy that *The Ring*, another Hitchcock masterpiece, was praised for its narrative fluidity and structural integrity. The transitions between scenes are quite elaborate. The passage of time is sometimes indicated by a series of dissolves of boxing match posters and victories in the ring. Hitchcock's films never seem dated. This silent film may be over 80 years old but it continues to be an exciting and refreshing viewing experience. *The Manxman* (1929) is about yet another love triangle that ends badly. To gain his intended father-in-law's approval, a poor fisherman decides to go to Africa to make his fortune. Before departing, he asks his best friend, a lawyer, to take care of the woman he loves. As time passes, the lawyer and the woman fall in love. The news of the fisherman's death only cements their love and passion. But the news of his death is false; the fisherman returns home a wealthy man. He now has everything that he could hope for, except his lover's heart. The protagonists in both *The Ring* and *The Manxman* tell us that between love and success, you can only choose one but not both.

Blackmail (1929) is even more cynical. The reappearing clown painting clearly serves to mock the characters. In the first half of the film, the female protagonist does everything she can to escape prosecution. In the second half she tries to confess her crime but is repeatedly interrupted. Nothing goes according to her desires. She is yet another victim of fate. There are two versions of *Blackmail*: silent and with sound. Hitchcock did not intend to make the film with sound at first. When the sounded version was finally completed (with parts of the film reshot), it incidentally became the first British 'talkie'. It may have been his first sound film but Hitchcock already had a good grasp of the creative possibilities of sound. In the scene after the female protagonist commits murder, she travels down the street appearing completely distraught. When she encounters a street person with his arms open, she is reminded

of the scream of her victim. The picture immediately cuts back to the crime scene where the housekeeper screams at the sight of the victim's body. The two scenes are connected through the sound of screaming and hysteria, accentuated by the visual montage. Thanks to the training he received from the studio system, Hitchcock was quite resourceful when it came to 'creating something out of nothing.' *Blackmail* has a few anecdotes in that regard. The film's climactic chase scene was originally intended to be shot on location in the British Museum but the production team failed to get permission from the management. Hitchcock resorted to using slide projections as backgrounds and the results are virtually seamless. Contrary to popular opinion, *The Lodger* was the first film in which Hitchcock made a cameo appearance. But since his face was not clearly captured, most people believe *Blackmail* to be the film where he made his debut. The shot of him being annoyed by a small boy in the London subway is quite amusing. It also marked the start of Hitchcock's trademark cameo appearances in his later films. Audience soon caught on and began to actively try to spot the director.

Technical Ingenuity

One of the major reasons why Hitchcock's films continue to be engaging and contemporary is his use of innovative cinematic techniques, evident even in the less acclaimed *Champagne* (1928). Near the film's beginning and end, there is a curious POV shot of a character viewing the world through the bottom of a drinking glass.

A transition scene in *Downhill* has been widely praised. After being expelled from school and castigated by his father, Roddy, the rich schoolboy decides to leave home. We see a rear-shot of a dejected Roddy descending down an escalator to the London subway, a metaphor for his 'downhill' descent. (The character is seen physically descending again in a later scene when his life goes from bad to worse for the second time.) In the very next scene, we are greeted with the close-up of a smiling Roddy. The camera pulls back to reveal that he's wearing a waiter's uniform and serving customers. Just when the audience concludes that the poor rich kid has been reduced to working as a waiter, the camera pulls further back and pans right to reveal the fancy restaurant...is in fact on stage; Roddy is in a play. He's a supporting player who joins the singing and dancing chorus in the finale.

Hitchcock is teasing the audience. *Downhill* may tell the sad story of a protagonist whose life is ruined, but contrary to what the audience is led to expect, Roddy doesn't wind up living off others after his father disowns him. He may be a lowly bit actor but he likes his new job and new life. This sequence is significant in several ways. It begins with a close-up with limited scope that denies the audience a full picture. As the picture cuts wider to reveal more information, the audience is

unexpectedly surprised. Hitchcock was known as the ‘Master of Suspense’ for obvious reasons. In his films, suspense is often generated because of the limited perspective of the audience and characters. The series of shots just discussed are a prime example of this mechanism. *Downhill* may be a silent film, but there are few intertitles because Hitchcock preferred to tell the story visually. The film was made in 1927, the same year that *The Jazz Singer*, the first American talking picture, was released. Hitchcock was eager to try his hand at sound films but it wasn’t until *Blackmail* that his wish was granted. This sequence in *Downhill*, however, proved that Hitchcock was a master of the visual narrative. Silent film is an art form in its own right. It doesn’t rely on dialogue or even title cards, to deliver the narrative. Its cinematic charm is in no way inferior to sound film. The visual-centric training that Hitchcock received during the silent film era was especially helpful to the director in his future career, in terms of creating the necessary mood and atmosphere for thrillers. Recall the scene where Cary Grant is being chased by crop-dusting plane in *North by Northwest*? The suspense was achieved through ingenious mise-en-scène and expert pacing.

The World of Make-believe

The aforementioned scene in *Downhill* takes place a third of the way into the film, acting as a transition between the first and second acts of the three-act structure. The narrative transition from his life at school to the world of theatre is ‘larger than life’. In this section, Roddy abandons his privileged background to become a supporting player. He meets an actress, unexpectedly inherits a large fortune, and is caught in a love triangle with the actress and her lover (another love triangle). Most of the scenes in this section take place backstage, featuring a well-designed visual space, apposite positioning of characters and the clever use of dressing room mirrors. The mirrors reflect moments of reality, in contrast to world of theatre, making the affair with the actress seem even more illusory. Hitchcock entitled this section ‘The World of Make-believe,’ referring not only to how the actress treats Roddy, but also to the nature of theatrical arts and the duality of women in general. Hitchcock’s later films often vacillate between reality and fantasy; everything from beautiful women to love is dubious and intangible. The transition from reality to the world of theatre portrayed in *Downhill*, incidentally echoes the cinematic world of Hitchcock.

Thankfully, film conservation has made it possible for new audiences to access Hitchcock’s early gems in their full glory. The six selected films feature countless examples of outstanding montage and spectacular composition. The ‘make-believe’ aspect of Hitchcock’s silent pictures in restored version has become more believable than ever. (Translated by Sandy Ng)

Ka Ming is a film critic whose articles have appeared in *Ming Pao*, *Hong Kong Economic Journal* and more. He is currently teaching at the School of Film and Television, The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts.

Editor's notes

- [1] BFI restored a total of nine Hitchcock films from the silent era for the 'Hitchcock 9' screening series. Films in the series include *Pleasure Garden* (1926), *Easy Virtue* (1927) and *The Farmer's Wife* (1929), as well as the six films to be screened by HKFA.
- [2] McGuffin is a major feature in Hitchcock's cinema. It refers to something instrumental in propelling the narrative but actually doesn't exist. It can be a commodity, a particular person, or someone or something being targeted.

The 'Restored Treasures: Captivating Hitchcock Silents' programme is to be held between August 2013 and January 2014.