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Asian archives and archivists: travels and revelations

Dina Iordanova

I am not a specialist on archives. As an East Europeanist, I mainly know of archives in places like Tirana – magnificently supported through the Albanian Cinema Project and depicted in Mark Cousins’ film *Here Be Dragons* (2013) or Bucharest, the Romanian capital, where a number of B&W documentaries from the time of state socialism, made at the Sahia studio, were recently restored and published in a series of DVDs, in a project sponsored by the One World Romania film festival. Then, as a specialist on film festivals, I have had the chance to learn about the role of festivals in showcasing restored films, which expands far beyond festivals like Il Cinema Ritrovato or Pordenone, and comprises of a global network of festivals in places like in Chile or Japan, discussed in contributions to the *Archival Film Festivals* volume, edited by Alexander Marlow-Mann in 2013.

However, it so happened that in recent years I travelled a lot across Asia and had the chance to visit and get to know the work of quite a few Asian film archives and preservation organisations that I previously knew next to nothing about.

In 2013, friends from Kasetsart University in Bangkok took me to the Thai Film Archive, an imaginatively designed complex on the outskirts of the city which combines a film museum, a small cinema, as well as storage space. I came to know about the amazing life work of Dome Sukwong, the archive’s committed founder, who had been collecting old films on his own, with no support from the state nor institutional framework until his work came to be

noticed many years later. Having commissioned a contribution from archivist Chalida Uabumrungit for the collection *Film Festivals and East Asia* (2011, which I co-edited with Ruby Cheung), I already knew about the adverse climatic conditions that affect preservation efforts in these parts of Southeast Asia. In Bangkok I witnessed on the spot how they address these difficulties in action, with dedication and perseverance.

Then, whilst guest lecturing at the Beijing Film Academy in 2016, I was invited to give workshops on film festivals at the venerable China Film Archive, which occupies a large 16-storey building in Beijing and features an adjacent cinema that has a full programme of screenings of films from China's rich film heritage, in many respects similar to the programme that one finds on a daily basis at the Cinematheque in Paris. It is here where I saw the largest screen I have ever come across in my lifetime. I also enjoyed the privilege to be shown around their restoration department, which occupies one of the floors and where over twenty young employees are seated in front of advanced computers, each engaged with clearing the scratches from the scanned old prints that they are in process of digitising. From a detailed flowchart displayed on the wall, I learned that a trainload of films for restoration are being shipped to them every week from the storage depot in Xi'an and then processed by the restoration unit. China's whole film heritage is being digitized here. Even if this is not yet released to the public, I was able to realise that the global cinephile community will have access to an amazing resource once a decision is made for the release of this digitized material.



The Big Screen at China Film Archive

Fast forward two years later, to December 2018. Serving a term as Visiting Research Professor at the University of Hong Kong, I chose to live in Kwun Tong, a part of town where few foreigners ever set foot. A former industrial area occupied by large building blocks where various factories were clustered in the past, nowadays this is one of the places in the city where rents are still affordable. So no wonder that even if not obvious on the surface, Kwun Tong is the epicentre for the city's cultural industries. Quite remote from Hong Kong's glossy commercial areas such as Central, Causeway Bay and Tsim Sha Tsui, it is the home of leading modern art galleries such as Agnes Lin's Osage and the Sun Museum, as well as of popular music venues. It only took me a few days in Kwun Tong to discover it is also the centre for Hong Kong's burgeoning film industry, with the venerable Hong Kong International Film Festival having its offices here, as well as many production and distribution companies occupying co-working space in the buildings nearby. One of these older industrial space, The Milky Way Building, is owned by director Johnnie To and his

associates – and it is on its staircase that many scenes of well-known Hong Kong action movies have been shot.

Today the Milky Way is home of various film companies. I visited it one day with my friend, documentary producer Peter Yam, who took me to meet Bede Cheng, the director of [L'Immagine Ritrovata Asia](#), a highly specialised film restoration lab which is local subsidiary of Cineteca di Bologna. I was shown around their premises, witnessed the high-tech equipment and seeing several young women at restoration work in front of large computer screens. The big scanner in one of the back spaces – amidst buzzing FedEx trucks and commercial spaces storing Chinese herbs — was loaded with an old copy of a King Hu film which was being scanned and slowly transferred to the new digital format.

Most recently, whilst attending the first Film Festivals and Restoration Forum at Xiamen University in China in the summer of 2019, I was privileged to join the expedition to their brand new large campus, which, being the size of a small town, is home of one of the newest film archives in China. Its holdings, still in process of being organised, are occupying several floors within their 12 -storey spacious library, which also has a good-sized modern cinema equipped for showing various formats on the ground floor. With many historical posters displayed on the walls, the colleagues from Xiamen showed us many rooms where they had stored historical projection equipment, cans of 35 mm film prints, as well as many other film-related paraphernalia. I had the chance to browse and view some of the material they screened for me, along with colleagues such as Jan-Christopher Horak of the Pacific Film Archive at UCLA and Dan Streible and Juana Suarez from NYU. Even if this archive in Xiamen is not yet organised in a manner that would allow to systematically research their holdings, it is one that will stake its presence soon.



The Film Festivals and Restoration Forum at Xiamen University, July 2019

The restoration part of the conference itself was particularly interesting, not least because it allowed for encounters with archivists from China and various other Asian countries who spoke about their work. Several of the speakers had been invited by Prof. Ray Jing, a well-known archivist and anthropologist and long-standing director of the Taipei Film Archive, whose new venture is the Film Collector's Museum (see Jan Christopher Horack's [blog entry](#) on his subsequent visit to Taiwan and encounter with Jing). I was particularly impressed with the account given by an amateur archivist from Lanzhou, the capital of the remote province of Gansu, who is struggling for the preservation of rich material that he has discovered after the closure of older local cinemas.

Most importantly, the event included screenings of rare restored material with introductions given by Asian archivists who elaborated on how the films were brought back to life. The programme included early ethnographic films made about Yunnan province's numerous ethnic minorities in the 1950s, for example. But there were also screenings of several other restorations of Asian films – including the Thai classic *Santi-Vina* (1954) which had long been believed lost and the Singaporean *gongfu* extravaganza *Fist of Fury* (1973), which had been banned at the time of making and only now restored and shown.



Scene from the restored Thai classic *Santi-Vina* (1954)

In listening to the amazing stories of these restorations as told by archivists such as Sanchai Chotirosseranee of the Thai Film Archive and Karen Chan of the Asian Film Archive, I felt I was particularly inspired to realise the extent of transnational collaborative preservation efforts that each one of these stories revealed. It was also clear that film festivals had played an important part in each case. So, as someone who believes in cinema's transnational essence and the key role of film festivals in global circulation, I felt I wanted to create a resource that would showcase these important aspects of global archiving. So I invited the archivists from Thailand and Singapore to write accounts on the discovery and restoration of the films they were presenting at Xiamen. I also asked two of the doctoral students from our programme at the University of St Andrews to conduct interviews with prominent figures involved with preservation efforts in Asia – such as Bede Cheng of L'Immagine Ritrovata in Hong Kong and Nick Deocampo from the Philippines. The dossier we created will be published in June 2020 as part of the next issue of [*Frames Cinema Journal*](#).