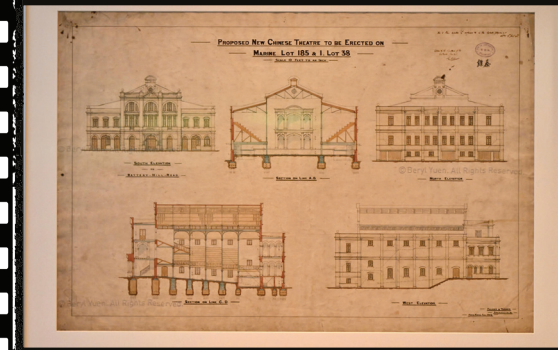




Above: A poster from the 1986 film *A Better Tomorrow*, starring Chow Yun-fat and directed by John Woo, on display at the Hong Kong Film Archive anniversary exhibition.



Above: A 1903 building plan for the Tai Ping Theatre, one of Hong Kong's earliest cinema halls, built in Sai Wan in the early 20th century.



Above: An installation view of the *Hong Kong Film Archive Stories: Treasure Hunting for 25 Years* exhibition at the Hong Kong Heritage Museum.



Above: A wall that pays homage to both Hong Kong's film and neon heritage.



Right: The dance costume worn by Zhang Ziyi in *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), directed by Zhang Yimou.



Above: The Silver Bear for Best Actress won by Josephine Siao in 1995 for her role in the Ann Hui-directed *Summer Snow*.



Film archive scores a hit



Top: Film stills displayed at the exhibition entrance. **Above:** Photos of Esther Eng (1914-70), one of Hong Kong's pioneer female film directors, from a collection donated to the Hong Kong Film Archive by James Wong.

When the Hong Kong Film Archive (HKFA) was officially opened — on Jan 3, 2001 — it was tasked with both preserving the city's film heritage, and creating a facility with public access. The launch came at a curious time for Hong Kong cinema.

On the one hand, the Edko Films-produced *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) was on its way to a record 10 Academy Awards nominations and four wins. The *wuxia* epic — starring Hong Kong cinema icons Chow Yun-fat, Michelle Yeoh and Cheng Pei-pei — epitomized all that was great and good about Hong Kong-made movies. But it was also a time when the glory days of Hong Kong cinema had officially started to fade, with the number of productions soon to drop from around 250 per year in the '90s to around 50 per year. Box-office collections

were steadily depleting. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government saw the need for a permanent, purpose-built facility that would help celebrate the importance of homegrown cinema in shaping Hong Kong culture as well as ensure that the city's film history was kept safe in storage. The process began with sending out a very public call to source copies of old movies and movie memorabilia. "It was an invitation to local collectors, and to people across the Hong Kong film industry to donate film-related items," says exhibition curator May Ng Kwan-yuk, who also serves as an HKFA assistant curator. "Today we have 1.3 million items in our collection." **The pioneers** The walk-through thematic Galleries 1 and 2 at the Hong Kong Heritage Museum (HKHM) — venue of the anniversary exhibition — amply demonstrate the archive's expertise in preserving and

promoting the legacy of the city's cinema industry. Just past the entrance on one's right is a gallery dedicated to Hong Kong film legends. Lai Man-wai (1893-1953), the "Father of Hong Kong Cinema" who directed and also acted in the city's first film, *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* (1913), is seen staring back at visitors with ever-keen eyes from photos taken in the early 1900s. On one's left is a gallery celebrating some of the unsung heroes who helped save Hong Kong film industry's history. Among them is James Wong, the California-based Hong Kong film fanatic who bought a collection of photos of the groundbreaking director Esther Eng (1914-70) in the early 2000s — and duly donated them to the archive so that her story continued to be told. Eng is featured as well, looking at us from photos taken long ago. Move further inside and you can continue to celebrate just what an integral part of Hong Kong life cinema has always been — since the first screenings and the emergence of the first film studios at the turn of the 20th century. International awards won by the city's film personalities are on display. These include Kwan Shan's Best Actor award won at the Locarno International Film Festival in 1958 for his role in *The True Story of Ah Q*, and the Silver Bear for Best Actress won by Josephine Siao for her performance in the Ann Hui-directed *Summer Snow* in 1995. Iconic costumes, including one worn by Zhang Ziyi in the Zhang Yimou-directed *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), are also on display. **Fighting the weather** The exhibition celebrates HKFA's success with fulfill-

ing the promise made in its mission statement — "To be a world-class film archive devoted to conserving Hong Kong's film heritage and facilitating film research". It's a laudable feat, especially since protecting films on celluloid, given Hong Kong's hit and humid climate conditions, can be quite tricky. "The Hong Kong weather is terrible for film," Ng says, referring, in particular, to the early films, shot on nitrate stock — a highly flammable substance that decays rapidly if not stored in the right conditions. The screenings, exhibitions, publications and talks hosted by HKFA represent the public face of its main work — a continuous process of film recovery, restoration and storage at its Sai Wan Ho base. Old film stock arrives and digital versions are made to ensure that the films do not get lost to decay. How the facility made its very first acquisition — a copy of *The Orphan* from 1960, starring an 18-year-old Bruce Lee — is quite interesting. During a trip to London, an HKFA employee took a chance and called Rank Film Laboratories to ask if they had any Chinese-language films in stock. This led to the discovery of a rare Fei Mu-directed drama, *Confucius* (1940). An anonymous donor had dropped off a print at the lab, which had been subsequently restored. **Stellar lineup** Back at the exhibition on a recent Monday afternoon, this writer found people of all ages milling around, reading up on cinema history and watching on-loop screenings of trailers of Hong Kong classics. Included among them is one

of Patrick Lung's almost tragically neglected *The Story of a Discharged Prisoner* (1967) as well as of the far more well-known film that it inspired — John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* (1986). "We have 1,000 trailers, and they are all in film format," says Ng. "So we needed our conservation unit to digitize them. In the process of digitization, they also make color adjustments and so it's like seeing them for the first time." Elsewhere, you can watch Tsui Hark defend his at-the-time controversial decision to cast Brigitte Lin in *Swordsmen II* (1992) — part of *A Film-maker, A Story* series featuring interviews with more than 100 filmmakers. And then there are the stars. The Starry Portraits section of the show takes visitors back to a time when the featured film personalities were just 25 years old through photos, stills from feature films and posters. Using the artificial-intelligence-powered Galaxy Station interactive feature, visitors can get photos with their favorite film star in the same frame. "This is the first time we have been able to reach out on such a large scale," says Ng, describing the space at the Heritage Museum as "three and half times" the size of the exhibitions previously hosted by HKFA. Her hope is that the show will attract visitors checking out some of the other HKHM exhibitions. "We wanted to create an atmosphere for the younger generations to develop an interest in the city's cinematic heritage, and we think we have done that in an interesting way." *The writer is a freelance contributor to China Daily.*

Film Review

By ALEX PETRESCU

Much-loved Hong Kong films by Tsui Hark, Angie Chen and Sun Chung were among the highlights at the 40th edition of the Il Cinema Ritrovato festival in Bologna, which concluded on June 28. Held annually in the historic town in northern Italy, Il Cinema Ritrovato is one of the world's leading festivals with a focus on restored films. Every year it hosts screenings of more than 500 restored works for a diverse audience comprising cinephiles, archivists and film professionals. Many of these films were restored at the laboratory of L'Immagine Ritrovata in Bologna. The institute's Hong Kong chapter, called L'Immagine Ritrovata Asia, opened in 2015. It is the first 4K-film-restoration facility in Asia. The films by Tsui screened at the festival are a testament to his range. The selection included the *wuxia* — a fantasy genre set in ancient China and delineating the adventures of martial-arts heroes — film *The Blade* (1995) as well as the action-comedy *Peking Opera Blues* (1986).

Warner Bros and The Criterion Collection recently released a new 4K-restored version of *The Blade* on Blu-ray, also screened at the festival. In the program, film critic Alberto Pezzotta notes that *The Blade* was filmed in "a style never seen before", describing the film as "realistic, raw and turbulent" and one that added a twist to familiar *wuxia* tropes "through sudden shifts in narrative speed and the use of ellipses". Film critic and curator Li Cheuk-to, who introduced *Peking Opera Blues* before its screening, described the work as a "genre-bending film" located somewhere "between thriller, opera, action, and comedy". Li highlighted the "camera angles and montages that create a perfect comedy", as well as the film's action scenes, which are "very spectacular, in the most inventive way". The film follows three women from very different backgrounds. Their lives become intertwined when they attempt to overthrow a corrupt military governor. Among the other Hong Kong films screened was *Big Bad Sis* (1976), directed by Sun and produced by Shaw Brothers Studio. The restored version was commissioned in 2026 by Arrow Films, together with L'Immagine Ritrovata and Dragon Studio lab-

Restored Hong Kong films shine in Bologna



Angie Chen makes a point at the screening of her recently restored 1985 film, *My Name Ain't Suzie*, at the 40th Il Cinema Ritrovato festival in Bologna, Italy.

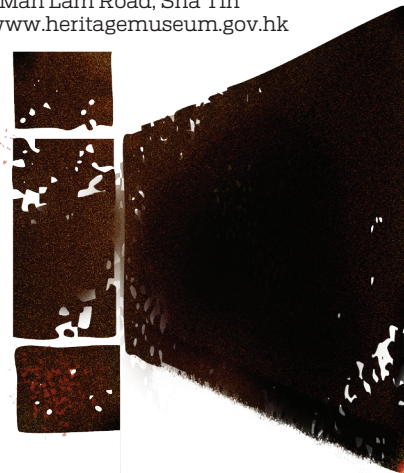
oratories. *Big Bad Sis* is a feminist tale about workplace abuse suffered by women employed in factories. Arrow Films producer James Flower describes the film as featuring "rough-and-tumble fight choreography by the late Tong Kai", as well as a "groovily eclectic soundtrack — featuring composer and multi-instrumentalist Giuliano Sorgini, and curated by Frankie Chan". Chen was present at the screening of her film *My Name Ain't Suzie* (1985). The piece is meant to be a response to the exoticization of the life of a Hong Kong sex worker in the hugely popular Hollywood film *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), by presenting a more realistic picture of the seamier side of '50s Hong Kong.

In *My Name Ain't Suzie*, the story is told "from the woman's point of view and a Hong Kong point of view", thus creating a story that is less "sugary and happy, but more realistic", Chen said, dedicating the film to her mother, "who inspired me to be the woman I am today". The 2K restoration of the film conducted at L'Immagine Ritrovata Asia was commissioned by the North American film distributor Kani Releasing. Some of the newly restored Hong Kong films have already been secured for international distribution. The Golden Princess film production and distribution company, which ceased activity in 1995, owned the rights to 156 titles until Shout Studios acquired them in 2025. For the first time since their theatrical releases, many years ago, these movies will be seen by viewers in the United States in theaters as well as via streaming. Arrow Films has acquired the United Kingdom distribution rights of the 4K-restored *Peking Opera Blues*. After their screenings in Bologna, these films are expected to secure a wider distribution across the world.

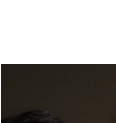
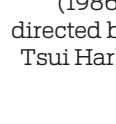
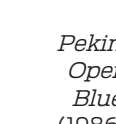
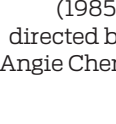
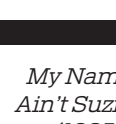
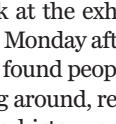
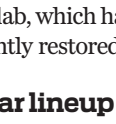
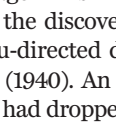
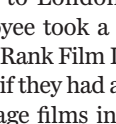
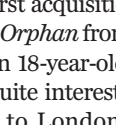
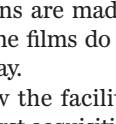
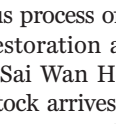
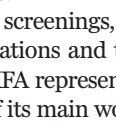
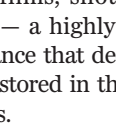
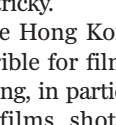
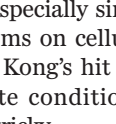
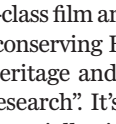
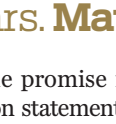
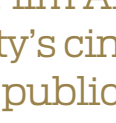
The writer is a freelance contributor to China Daily.

IF YOU GO

Hong Kong Film Archive Stories: Treasure Hunting for 25 years
Dates: Through March 29
Venue: Hong Kong Heritage Museum, 1 Man Lam Road, Sha Tin
www.heritagemuseum.gov.hk



A Hong Kong Heritage Museum exhibition is celebrating the Hong Kong Film Archive's role in protecting the city's cinematic legacy as well as facilitating public access to it over the last 25 years. **Mathew Scott** reports.



The Blade (1995), directed by Tsui Hark.



Peking Opera Blues (1986), directed by Tsui Hark.



Big Bad Sis (1976), directed by Sun Chung.