CHAPTER 1

Hong Kong, Britain, China: The Documentary Film, 1896–1941, A Page of History (1941) and The Battle of Shanghai (1937)

HISTORICAL SUMMARY

Hong Kong entered the orbit of British imperial power when that power was almost at its zenith in the middle of the nineteenth century. The manner of entry was also a particularly violent, and in some ways also atypical, one. At that point in time the British Empire was expanding across the world out of the older eighteenth-century mercantile imperium, in search of new trading opportunities elsewhere. At the same time, imperial strategy was moving away from the formal annexation of new territories to the establishment of trading settlements, some of which also doubled as strategic military outposts. The older, more ruthless mercantilist approach, in which a conquered country’s markets would be deployed to the advantage of the metropole, and that country then be forced to import goods from said metropole, generated inevitable hostility amongst subject populations, and, in addition, and most importantly from the point of view of the British Treasury, finally proved to be overly expensive to maintain.

By the mid-nineteenth century British imperialist officials and traders had largely moved on from this subjugation-mercantilist model to one based on adherence to the principles of ‘free trade’, and the establishment of trading settlements and arrangements based – usually quite loosely – on such principles. Now, the primary concern was to ensure that trade could take place ‘fairly’, according to the ‘laws’ of supply and demand, and unhindered by local protectionist obstructions. ‘Free trade’ inevitably came to favour the biggest and most developed players in a supposedly free market, and Britain was the biggest of them all in the mid-nineteenth century. That favouratism was augmented by the fact that free trade rarely if ever existed in the pure form
that its ideological proponents, such as Smith and Ricardo, envisaged; and, in fact, a mercantalist insistence on trade-balance calculation also ensured that, where that balance went against British interests, action would be taken to remedy the situation. Hence, from the mid-nineteenth century, Britain took on a role of imperial arbitrator, enforcing a *Pax Britannica* based overtly on adherence to the rules and practices associated with free trade, and covertly on mercantalist trade-balance calculation. Within this new stratagem the gunboats were no longer sent in directly, and it was only when the balance of trade went seriously askew, or when impediments to British trading interests emerged, through local internal political struggle, supply restrictions, or the imposition of tariffs, that military force would be proposed. Before such force was employed attempts would be made to persuade recalcitrant rulers to trade ‘fairly’. However, when such persuasion failed, and sufficient interest was at stake, overwhelming force might be, and was, used quickly and decisively, in order to force a prompt return to the apposite ante.

When matters had reached this stage, the British also showed scant regard for the sensitivities of humbled rulers or states, as became apparent when the British and Chinese empires came into conflict with each other in the 1840s.

By the mid-nineteenth century, British (and other western) officials, politicians, businessmen and others generally regarded the international exchange of trade based on free-trade principles as inseparable from the notion of benevolent ‘modernisation’. Modernisation, as far as British and other imperialists were concerned, implied taking underdeveloped countries into the international economic order, establishing the rule of law in those countries, and also abolishing disagreeable local customs such as torture, slavery or radical nationalism. The apologia was that, when a country became engaged within the international economic order, and modernised in this manner, it would be enhanced. However such modernisation also provided an *a priori* rationale for the use of force, and such engagement always took place on terms dictated by the metropole. Since the sixteenth century, it had supposedly been illegal under ‘international law’ for any country to stand outside of fair international exchange in trade. However, one country that had always done so was China. Consequently, by the mid-nineteenth century, ‘modernising’ China through the opening up of the huge Chinese market, and the establishment of European business, legal, political and other practices there, became a key objective for free-trade imperialists. It was also inevitable that, by the mid-nineteenth century, those imperialists should form the vocal pro-interventionist advance guard of the then leading industrial and military power: Britain. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, Britain had sought to conduct diplomatic negotiations with China in the standard western manner. However, this had proved to be a difficult undertaking given the very large differences in legal and diplomatic practice which existed between the two empires, and also given
a proclivity for Chinese officials to treat visiting British diplomats as inferior foreign ‘barbarians’. This lack of respect for the British servants of Queen and country caused sizeable and long-lasting umbrage in London. Beyond all this, what was also occurring in this series of early-to-mid-nineteenth-century spats between Britain and China was that two antinomic empires were jostling for position, with the more powerful of the two entities intent on achieving trade parity, at least. Conflict between Britain and China was, therefore, virtually inevitable, and it was a conflict that could only ever have one outcome.

The feudal Qing dynasty had always been insular, hostile to foreign influence, intrusion and trade; and, by the mid-nineteenth century, to the seditious idea that its own laws could be superseded by international imperatives related to the so-called fair exchange of trade. During the 1830s, and counter to such imperatives, the dynastic government repeatedly acted to limit the ingress of foreign trade into China through, amongst other means, allowing such trade to occur in only one port: Canton (Guangzhou); and applying a sizeable 20 per cent tariff to imported goods. Such protectionism was regarded by Britain as insupportable in itself, but, more to the immediate point, it also led to the emergence of a serious trade imbalance between Britain and China, with British traders suffering significant losses. These traders, spurred on by the mercantalist trade-balance imperative, responded by exporting opium to China, thus restoring the balance of trade in their favour. Opium sales to China then grew from 300 tons in 1810 to 2,600 tons in 1839. Opium was legal in Britain, where it was used as a medicinal drug, but had been banned in China from as early as 1729 because it was being consumed there as a debilitating intoxicating one. The British traders knew full well that they were exporting a harmful proscribed drug into China, but they viewed this as the only way to stop Chinese manipulation of the market, and stem their mounting losses. The Chinese response was then to stop the flow of opium coming into China through confiscating and destroying supplies of considerable monetary value to the British, and also incarcerating British merchants and their ships under threat. This was a violation of the free-trade desiderata, and also threatened the commercial future of British traders. Beyond that it could also be construed as an assault upon British subjects that might require a military response. The Chinese officials who initiated and carried out these acts seemed unaware that they were providing the British – or at least the opium traders and their political allies – with a pretext for war.

After attempts at negotiating a way out of the predicament failed, British traders, headed by the Jardine Matheson Company, lobbied hard for the British Government to take military action. That lobbying was also sweetened by a provision of £20,000 which the traders made available to help finance any such action. Eventually the traders managed to convince the British Government to proceed. However, the Government did not act on behalf of
the opium trade, which was criticised at the time in Britain, but in order to defend and advance British trade generally. Indeed, from the beginning, a considerable gulf existed between British high officials and the opium traders, with both sides antagonistic to each other. Despite such antipathy, though, a powerful naval expeditionary flotilla was eventually sent into China, and that fleet then proceeded to bombard Chinese military forces into submission. In this confrontation between feudalism and modernity the Qing government had underestimated the power of the largest and most advanced navy on Earth.

The first stage of the ‘First Opium War’ of 1839–42 resulted in the Chuenpi Convention, which ensured continued British trade into Canton, the provision of reparations to Britain, and the cession of the small, undeveloped island of Hong Kong to Britain. However, the decision to annex Hong Kong was not made by London but by British military officers engaged in the China expedition egged on by China traders such as Jardine Matheson. London had never wanted anything to do with Hong Kong in the first place. The objective of the British expedition was to punish China for transgression, obtain reparations, and open up trade. To this end, the expedition commanders were instructed to seize control of another island of the Chinese coast, Zoushan, far to the north of Hong Kong, and close to Shanghai. In addition, this island was to be captured, not formally annexed. However, the commander in charge of the British expedition, Captain Charles Elliot, came to the stand that Hong Kong offered greater security, and then also came under pressure from the traders to take the island on a permanent basis. The traders’ primary concern here was that Hong Kong be used to protect the nearby trading base in Canton. However, in seizing Hong Kong, Elliot exceeded his powers, and disobeyed the instructions of his superior, the Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston. Elliot, who had no authority to insist upon such a forced cession from China, was reprimanded for forcing this through, and eventually replaced. Nevertheless, and before London could do anything about the matter, Elliot took formal possession of the island, and British rule of Hong Kong began on 26 January 1841.

The treaty which Elliot concluded satisfied neither the British Government’s intent to open up the China market, nor the opium traders’ desire that further islands off the Chinese coast be seized in addition to Hong Kong. Largely ignoring the opium traders over the issue of further sequestration, though, the Government now continued to pursue its own objectives through the further and more determined exercise of force; and the second stage of the ‘First Opium War’ commenced. The chastened Elliot was replaced by Sir Henry Pottinger and the British expeditionary squadron, now increased in size and strength, proceeded to pound the forces of the Chinese dynastic government into submission once more. The final outcome was the Treaty of Nanking (1842), which opened up a number of new trading posts along the Chinese coast and led to the formal ratification of Hong Kong as a Crown
Colony on 26 June 1843. After the unanticipated annexation of the island, London’s initial intent had been to eventually hand Hong Kong back to China, even though Elliot had taken formal possession of the island on behalf of the Crown. However, the holding had now proved its clear worth as the base from which a victorious British fleet had sailed to force the Treaty of Nanking. In addition, before Hong Kong could be given up, it had already been quickly settled by a significant number of British and Chinese adventurers, including the opium traders. London was therefore forced to accept the *fait accompli*, although Pottinger, who would become the first Governor of Hong Kong, was instructed – in an ordinance which would also anticipate the future development of the colony – to ensure that the new colonial administration would not become a burden on the British Treasury, and would cover its limited costs as best it could.

Britain’s ‘informal’ commercial empire in its far-flung tropical places began to experience a number of problems during the last third of the nineteenth century, caused largely by an inevitable and predictable contradiction between a British desire to ensure, and often control, the flow of trade, and local resentment of such control, and of the colonial presence itself. These problems also continued to emerge in China as, following the Treaty of Nanking, Chinese obstruction of foreign trade continued in violation of the terms of the treaty: a treaty which the Chinese authorities regarded as forced, prejudicial, and rightly to be opposed. Eventually, such opposition, and the British response, led to the ‘Second Opium War’ of 1857–60, which further opened up the Chinese market for British commerce, and also annexed the adjoining area of the Chinese mainland to Hong Kong – Kowloon – to the colony. The Second Opium War was a major defeat for China, and the Anglo-French expeditionary force which successfully prosecuted the war, and could have taken Peking if its commanders had so wished, had, like the fleet of 1841, sailed from Hong Kong. After this, Hong Kong’s position within the British Empire was established for the foreseeable future. It would, in the first place, be a military imperial outpost whose primary purpose was to secure and protect British trading posts along the Chinese coast; and only in the second place would it be a sustainable trading settlement in its own right. However, this also meant that Hong Kong had little general strategic value for the Empire outside of the China coast, and this lack of imperative strategic consequence would come to influence the progress of the colony from then on.

It was partly because of this martial mandate that Hong Kong was established as a Crown Colony in 1843, though this was also a common form of constitutional structure for British overseas territories at the time.¹¹ The Crown Colony model did, in theory, allow for some degree of local representation, even though all formal power was vested in the Governor, who, in turn, answered directly to London. However, the model adopted in Hong Kong did
not allow for any representational element, and even the Executive Council was granted an advisory role only. This was unusual. During the late nineteenth century highly autocratic forms of Crown Colony were gradually modified as local and expatriate inhabitants demanded a degree of representation, and as London and colonial administrations saw no good reason to deny this. So, for example, during the latter half of the nineteenth century, some elected members were permitted in Jamaica, Trinidad and Mauritius. However, in 1895 the Colonial Office warned against extending such reform to Hong Kong, and, whilst other colonies proceeded towards the inclusion of elected members of government, no such members were permitted in principle in Hong Kong until as startlingly late as 1985.

However, the autocratic form of the Crown Colony should not necessarily, or automatically, be considered a form of despotism, and, at one level, was founded on a faith in the incorruptibility of high officials: men (rarely women) who had been trained always to put duty and responsibility to the Empire above personal and sectarian interests at all times. These were the individuals who would rule the Crown Colony. Amongst other things this meant that, in practice as well as theory, these senior officials would not allow the dominant colonial expatriate class in a colony to run the colony in their interests, and at the expense of the local population. This was particularly important and necessary in the case of Hong Kong because, from the very founding of the colony, senior officials in London and the Crown Colony did not trust the expatriate community in the territory to treat the extensive Chinese community humanely or fairly. Thus the Crown Colony model was adopted partly in order to keep this dubious expatriate minority from establishing itself as a race-based oligarchy; although it was, of course, also adopted in order to keep the majority colonised Chinese population out of power. Finally, the autocratic form of the Crown Colony was adopted for Hong Kong because London felt that almost any issue that arose in the colony would inevitably involve or relate to China in some way, and would, therefore, have a bearing on general Anglo-Chinese relations. This was important, and it was because London insisted upon exercising oversight of these relations that it also insisted upon taking direct control of the colony’s affairs through the Governor.

What happened in Hong Kong during 1841–61 was characteristic of British imperial strategy at the time. A limited but decisive military intervention was employed to defend or advance economic interests. When the desired result was achieved, action was halted and the business of trading resumed. In order to continue defending such interests, though, something relatively unusual happened: the island of Hong Kong was formally annexed, and not as a settlement colony run primarily on the basis of trade, but as an imperial outpost with a remit to defend and advance trade elsewhere. This distinguished Hong Kong from the newly established British trading settlements on
the Chinese coast, and also from others nearby. For example, in Malaya Britain established coastal trading settlements in Penang, Malacca and Singapore, and only resorted to political and military intervention when those settlements were threatened by native power struggles occurring within the hinterland. In Malaya the local population was still largely governed by local rulers, with the British playing an ‘advisory’ but covertly executive role through various forms of treaty and contract. As in China, in Malaya the British were primarily interested in developing trade and commerce, and not in expensive and risky annexation on the eighteenth-century model. However, Hong Kong was different. The colony was formally annexed, and completely controlled by the British. At the beginning, its native population of around 7,000 fishermen and farmers was only slightly double that of the substantial colonial presence, and could have easily been subjugated, had that proved necessary. This degree of colonial domination was also to have important consequences for the future development of culture and society within the colony.

After 1861 the situation in imperial China deteriorated sharply as internal political divisions led to the deaths of millions, and to the great Chinese diaspora of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A significant part of that diaspora also came to Hong Kong. By 1901 census figures indicate a population of 301,000; by 1921 it was 625,000; and by 1939 over 1 million. By 1939 around 95 per cent of the population in Hong Kong was Chinese, with the colonial class and other ethnic minorities (such as Sikh soldiers and policemen brought in from India) amounting to no more than 5 per cent of the total population. Against this background of native population explosion Hong Kong also began to modernise and develop industrially. Traders such as Jardine Matheson eventually gave up the controversial opium trade (though it was not formally abolished until 1911) and invested in a variety of less injurious industries and services. The port of Hong Kong expanded, and important new capital industries such as shipbuilding and electricity generation grew rapidly. The newly expanded Chinese population also worked in these industries, developing technical, engineering and other modern skills in the process. In addition, many new, small-scale production units and factories sprang up which were owned and staffed by this local population. As this occurred, this previously rural immigrant population became increasingly integrated into a modern, knowledge and skills-based western way of life. However, despite this process of grass-roots economic augmentation and incorporation, the major companies in Hong Kong remained firmly under colonial control, and this was also especially true of the big trading companies, given that, although industrial production had expanded significantly by 1939, trade, and particularly trade with China, remained the most important sector of the Hong Kong economy.

Such control also stemmed from the persistence of what has been described
as a ‘colonial’ culture in Hong Kong, within which a significant separation existed between a dominant expatriate minority and a subordinate Chinese majority.20 The expatriate class in Hong Kong was not required to, and did not want to mix with the Chinese population. Most of the members of that class came from the middle class or lower middle class, rather than upper-class, well educated or aristocratic backgrounds. However, their privileged racial position within the colony bred arrogance and worse, leading them to behave as though they were the ‘merchant princes’ and ‘senior mandarins’ that they were most definitely not.21 Such conduct on the part of the expatriates may have played a role in causing the Chinese community similarly to want to stay at arm’s length from these status-conscious elitists, but, in truth, that community generally shared a similarly racial-segregationist predilection anyway. Up to the 1880s, and beyond, a more or less completely parallel society existed in Hong Kong, as racial exclusion became accepted as the preferred resolution by both communities.22 It would have been near impossible for liberal-minded expatriates to traverse this divide as such an act would bring attendant upon it significant loss of status and social position. However, some Chinese could, and did, aspire to do so, as when some amassed sufficient wealth to build or buy houses in expatriate areas. Up to that point segregation had not required legislation, but that was now introduced in 1888, 1904 and 1919, in order to create exclusive ‘European districts’ from which the Chinese were excluded. This legal basis for racial discrimination was not annulled until as late as 1946.23

Nevertheless, this cultural and racial divide was not absolute. Hong Kong may have been founded as a ‘colony of rule’, in which expatriate settlement was not even particularly encouraged at the beginning, and in which a tiny minority of colonial officials, and other expatriates, held sway over a substantial population of locals;24 but, in practice, it was impossible for the colonial minority to control such a colony alone, and, therefore, the emergence of a compliant – local elite was encouraged almost from the founding years of the colony.25 Although this elite group did not have a place within the system of government, its members were consulted by high officials, and played a role in helping to manage the fast-growing local population. From the earliest days, individual members of these elites also distinguished themselves from their counterparts in mainland China, and contrasted the administration of nearby ‘chaotic Canton’ with the stability brought to Hong Kong by the British.26 This cut both ways, though, as mainland elites, in turn, regarded Chinese in Hong Kong as less than fully Chinese because they lived within a compromised colonised jurisdiction.27 These contrasting affiliations and differences marked the source, rise and internal paradoxes inherent to the development of an initial sense of ‘Hong Kong Chinese’ identity within the colony of Hong Kong, though that sense remained the preserve of select Chinese groups, and
was not shared by the general Chinese population, who remained psychologically and emotionally affiliated to the mainland.

From the late nineteenth century onwards the racial gulf between the expatriate and overall Chinese community in Hong Kong also took on a more pronounced political dimension as anti-imperialist, anti-foreigner Chinese nationalism began to flourish in China. The situation then deteriorated further following the overthrow of the Chinese Imperial Government in 1911 by the nationalist and republican Kuomintang (KMT). British officials in Hong Kong had earlier reached a disdainful accommodation with the declining and dissolute Qing dynasty, which had more pressing problems to deal with than the question of Hong Kong’s retrocession. However, the KMT had always been stridently critical of British imperialism and the annexation of Hong Kong, and, after the events of 1911, helped provoke an upsurge of nationalist sentiment and activity within the colony, leading the British to believe that they had more to fear from the new government than its predecessor.28

However, the British position over the KMT was to change during the late 1920s as the KMT Chinese Nationalist Government took up arms against Chinese communist authorities, who were by then more actively trying to destabilise Hong Kong than were the KMT; and who were also abhorred more by the British precisely because they were communist. During the 1930s, and particularly after the Japanese invasion of China in 1937, the Nationalist Government also became a political and military ally of Britain in the build-up to the Second World War; whilst, during the war, the KMT commander, Chiang Kai-shek, was granted overall military command of China-theatre operations, including those affecting Hong Kong. Even so, and despite such co-operation, as Chinese nationalists, the KMT retained an unyielding conviction that Hong Kong must be returned to China as soon as was practicable.

By 1930 Hong Kong remained the same culturally ‘colonial’ society that it had been in the 1840s and a substantial division still persisted between the bulk of the population and the small dominant expatriate class. That division had, to a large extent, also been both sustained and augmented by a policy of minimum government intervention in the affairs of the Chinese community. The British preference was to allow informal native committees led by members of the local elite to run most Chinese affairs, whilst the colonial administration retained a firm, arm’s-length hand and watch over proceedings.29 This policy of limited intervention also, of course, stretched to limited fiscal intervention, and, under direction from both the British Treasury and its own intrinsic predilections, the colonial administration tried to spend as little money as possible on the Chinese community.30 During the 1930s gradual but persistent social and economic enlargement and concomitant problems did, however,
force a reluctant administration to become more involved in Chinese civil society, and, amongst other matters, this eventually led to the enactment of legislation concerning areas such as child labour, employment rights and the protection of domestic helpers. Educational provision for the local population was also improved (though compulsory primary education was not introduced until the 1960s). However, in virtually all these, albeit still limited, reforms, the pressure to force through change came mainly from concerned groups in London, rather than from colonial philanthropists in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Government did not yet particularly see that it had a responsibility to aid the Chinese population overmuch, whilst pressure for reform was resisted by the highly conservative expatriate (and Chinese) elites within the colony.31

In this sense, the model of the Crown Colony actually worked relatively benevolently. The model was premised on the idea that colonial officials and governments would ultimately be subject to the British Parliament, and what happened in the 1930s was that a democratically elected House of Commons forced through social-welfare legislation in Hong Kong against the wishes of much of the city’s official, Chinese and expatriate elites. However, this also meant that these elites had no real power and authority within the colony other than that granted to them by London, and, whilst London-empowered high officials might have few problems with this, given that they remained in control of local power structures, it was a different matter for the disenfranchised expatriate community and Chinese elite. From the 1860s onwards expatriate and Chinese groups in Hong Kong had – mainly separately, it has to be said – called for additional democracy to be introduced, as was occurring elsewhere in the British Empire. However, the Colonial Office in London continued to believe that such democratisation would have been impossible in Hong Kong, and for three principal reasons related to the three main parties involved. First, the Colonial Office recognised that any attempt to create a franchise for a whites-only electorate would have been rejected by Parliament. Second, it was believed that extending any franchise to a privileged sector of the Chinese community would have led to civil resentment and unrest within the Chinese population overall. Finally, it was believed that extending the franchise to a substantial sector of the largely antagonistic Chinese population might hasten the return of the territory to China.32 This is why, by 1939, no elective, representational reform had taken place in Hong Kong.33 However, this is also partly why, by the time war broke out, the vast majority of the Chinese population there had developed little or no allegiance to the British Empire or colonial Hong Kong.34
The first films shot in Hong Kong portrayed the colony from a western perspective and for western spectators. This was inevitable given that film was a western invention, and it was not until the early 1920s that the first locally made documentary films, directed at local audiences, began to appear. Film first reached China in 1896. That year an unidentified operative screened films as part of a vaudeville programme in Shanghai, though it is not known if he also shot films there. It is also not known for certain who this person was, though it appears that he was not associated with the French Lumière brothers, whose cinématographe camera-projector appeared in 1895, as it has been claimed that Lumière operatives did not go to China that year, but only to ‘Indochina and Cambodia’. In July 1897 the American Edison Company sent its showman and photographer James Ricalton to China, where he shot and screened films in Shanghai and several other large cities (though it is not known which). Edison was quickly off the mark here, as the first screenings using the company’s Vitascope machine only took place in April 1896. These relatively few film-based activities in China do also have to be put in perspective, because, by 1897, hundreds of projectors were then in use in America, screening films regularly in a wide variety of exhibition venues to an extensive audience. By 1897 China remained an insular and inward-looking imperial dynasty which habitually tried to limit foreign intrusion, and this made it difficult for western films to enter.

The years 1895–7 were those in which the main attraction of film lay in its ability to reproduce temporal perceptual reality and show foreign or unusual sights, or celebrities. During this period, and for some years to come, the camera was static, and films consisted of only a single shot. Usually, an event was filmed from beginning to end or as that event passed off in front of the camera. Sometimes referred to as the ‘animated photograph’ at the time, this was the first format of the film. Although it remains unclear what films were actually shown in China in 1896–7, they would necessarily have been of this type, and, in 1897, would have been part of an Edison travelling stock of films, supplemented by films shot on the road. This also means, of course, that many of these films were shot in America, not China, and that the Chinese audiences who saw them would, therefore, have been treated to a glimpse of the ‘exotic’ occident.

In 1898 the Edison Company sent another studio photographer, James H. White, to China. White filmed, and possibly also projected, in Shanghai, before travelling on to Japan, where he shot footage, and may also have projected films, in Osaka. He then embarked for Hong Kong by ship from Yokohama, near Tokyo, in February 1898, and, in Hong Kong, shot what may well have been the first Hong Kong films (White also shot film in Canton, though it is
not known whether this occurred on a trip from Hong Kong, or before he went to Shanghai). There is no evidence to suggest that White screened any Edison films in Hong Kong. Nor, in addition, is there any evidence to suggest that the footage he shot in Hong Kong was screened there; and it seems that it may have been sent back to America, where the exotic orientalism and colonial imagery it had captured was displayed before American audiences. Fourteen of White’s Edison films can be found in the Hong Kong Film Archive, and, of these, six were shot in Hong Kong. They are: *The Sikh Artillery, Hong Kong; Street Scene in Hong Kong; Hong Kong Wharf Scene; Hong Kong Regiment No. 1; Hong Kong Regiment No. 2;* and *Government House at Hong Kong.* All are 50 feet (one reel) in length.

What is foregrounded in these films, perhaps unsurprisingly, is both the ‘orientalism’ (or ‘Chinese-ness’) of Hong Kong, and the British colonial presence. For example, *The Sikh Artillery, Hong Kong* shows members of the Sikh force practising in their battery. The Indian community in Hong Kong was originally derived from soldiers and policemen brought in by the colonial authorities from the 1860s onwards. They were a relatively isolated, lower-class community in Hong Kong around the turn of the century, and this simple film appears to bring out such seclusion to some extent by showing the soldiers as an autonomous, sequestered group. Perhaps White thought American audiences might find it of interest to see turbaned Indian soldiers in a colonised Chinese place: an aggregation which throws up paradoxes related to differentiated racial hierarchy, and colonial power and subjection. *Street Scene in Hong Kong*, on the other hand, accentuates the oriental/Chinese setting. Like all these films, this one consists of a single fixed shot, this time of a traditional Chinese local street, probably in the China Town of Sheung Wan, adjacent to the colonial city of Victoria. The film shows rickshaws, single-wheel and double-wheel vehicles, and Chinese people bustling along the road against a background of traditional two-storey Chinese residences. *Hong Kong Wharf Scene* occupies a thematic and pictorial point between these two films. Shot on the harbour side of the port area, this film shows a variety of policemen, coolies and rickshaw passengers walking along the wharf, thus mingling the colonial and Chinese elements together. *Hong Kong Regiment* returns to the colonial theme fully, and is divided into two parts. The first reel is a static shot of the regiment marching in full colonial uniform past the camera, the second a long-shot of a section of infantry equipped with rifles and bayonets, and engaged in drill practice. What is also of note here is that the ‘regiment’ seems to consist entirely of turbanned Sikhs, without any white soldiers or officers being evident. The final film, *Government House at Hong Kong* shows the Governor’s residence with hawkers seen in the foreground. What is chiefly of interest about this film, though, is that the shooting angle employed hardly shows Government House at all. Only a small section of the doorway of the
official residence is shown, and nothing is seen which indicates that this is an important or imposing colonial headquarters. There is no attempt to portray colonial grandeur here, and, instead, the emphasis is on the everyday business and imagery of people walking past the camera.

Despite their limited capacity, these simple short films provide an important record of mores, places, dress codes and behaviour. What they also demonstrate, through their imagery, is the deep divide which existed between the colonial and Chinese communities at the time, and, also, the overriding position of the colonists. The colonists and Chinese are shown mingling together in these films because the chief intent is to show a visual panoply of people in movement against an oriental-colonial background. However, the two groups appear as very different from each other in terms of appearance, status, wealth and race. The fact that these films do not, in addition, overly emphasise or celebrate colonial stateliness may also be due to the American background of White and the Edison Company, and also to their understanding of the ultimate audience for these films: a largely lower-class American audience unlikely to be overly impressed by scenes of British colonial stateliness. These films also display the prevailing western conception at the time of Hong Kong as a far-flung colonial outpost, peopled locally by an obviously underprivileged native population (some of the Chinese coolies shown appear decidedly undernourished). Nevertheless the films do not intentionally show poverty, squalor or hardship, and neither do the very poor living conditions endured by the vast majority of Hong Kong Chinese at the time enter their sphere of representation. These films are essentially scenic, in the sense of providing and relating to views of things, and they are mainly concerned to display an ordinary, everyday context of lived experience.

In 1899 the first known screening of films is believed to have taken place in Hong Kong, organised by an American named ‘Binton’, whose affiliation still remains unknown. He first screened his films in an exterior location in an empty plot of land on the colony’s harbour front, and then in a restaurant somewhere. All the details about this remain vague and open to conjecture, including even the designation ‘Binton’. Other sources, for example, name him as ‘MacDunn’. The films consisted of a number of reels on different subjects, shot in different countries, and it is unlikely, though not impossible, that some were also shot in Hong Kong (unfortunately these films have been lost, and so the latter cannot be verified). Again these films were single-reel, or 50 feet, in length. What these particular screenings also indicate is that, by 1899, there was still no dedicated place to screen films in Hong Kong, and, from 1899 until around 1914, the most common venues for such screenings were buildings or lots used for the performance of Cantonese opera. After the opera had ceased, films would be shown. There is some debate as to when the first dedicated cinema appeared in Hong Kong, with sources dating this
variously as 1907, and as late as 1910 (the latter date is, of course, long after numerous small cinemas had appeared in most of the major North American and European cities).

In addition to the Edison films already referred to, it appears that approximately fourteen other films were shot in Hong Kong up to 1910 by British French and American companies. The companies involved here were the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, Lubin (USA), Urban–Eclipse (France), Warwick Trading Company (UK), Hepworth (UK), Harrison (UK) and the Charles Urban Trading Company (UK). The predominance of the British companies here presumably reflects the overall British governance of the colony. As in the other Crown Colonies, whilst the rhetoric of free trade might be bandied about, British trade interests were often privileged, and these early British film may have benefitted from this. Whether that was so or not, it remains the case that all four films shot and produced in 1900 were made by British companies, with Warwick Trading Company predominating. From the beginning, in 1900, these films also often went beyond a single reel in length. For example, Review of the Fourth Gurkhas at Hong Kong (Joseph Rosenthal, Warwick Trading Company, 1900) is 125 feet in length, whilst Circular Panorama Hong Kong (Rosenthal, Warwick Trading Company, 1900) is 100 feet in length. Later, length increased significantly, as, for example, in Through Hong Kong (Urban–Eclipse, 627 feet, 1907), Hong Kong From Peak To Shwsika (Charles Urban Trading Company, 575 feet, 1907), and Up The Mountain From Hong Kong (Urban–Eclipse, 287 feet, 1909). Again, it is unlikely, though not impossible, that these films were shown in Hong Kong, and they were probably shipped back to Britain, the USA or France, instead.

The titles of these films also reveal that their main concern was to show the scenic – and usually urban – landscape of Hong Kong, as in Panorama of Hong Kong (Hepworth, 1904), Chinatown Bazaar (Warwick, 1900), Chinese Junks in Hong Kong Harbour (Warwick, 1900), Queens Road Hong Kong (Warwick, 1901), and In Old Hong Kong (American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, 1901). Interestingly, the colonial context does not feature strongly in these films in a direct sense, as it did to a greater extent in the earlier Edison films; and a film such as Review of Fourth Gurkhas (Warwick, 1900) is, in this respect, an exception. Whilst the Edison films did not exactly celebrate colonialism, they did show it. However, in these later films there is more of a shift away from this to the presentation of daily life, and none of the British companies involved appears to be particularly interested in the British colonial context. Because of their scenic orientation, these films are rich in detail, and full of objects, places, people and events. Compositionally, the content of the films is fairly disorganised, as the intent is to fit in as much as possible for the visual enjoyment of the spectator. The films also mainly retain the standard convention of the time of showing movement occurring across a fixed camera point.
Over the period between 1910 and 1939 only a further ten of these films can be identified through the available record, a considerable decline if the record is correct, though one corroborated by the fact that most of the pioneering American, British and French companies just referred to disappeared from the scene over the same period. In fact, most of these small companies failed to survive the First World War. The Charles Urban Trading Company, Warwick Trading Company and Urban-Eclipse all ceased production during the First World War, whilst Hepworth went over to making entertainment films. The American Mutoscope and Biograph Company actually moved away from documentary film-making from as early as 1903, as the early fascination with the tableau-style ‘animated photographs’ gave way to a preference for narrative-based fiction-film entertainment. One new, late arrival on the scene, however, in terms of Hong Kong scenic film-making, was Pathé Frères, who made La Chine moderne in 1914. At the time, French film companies were shooting films in the nearby French colonies of Indochine (Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam), and this may have led to the additional filming of footage for La Chine moderne in Hong Kong. Whether that was the case or not is unclear, but what is clear is that, as with the British companies, this type of French colonial scenic film-making tailed off during the First World War, and sadly, like so many other early scenic-documentary films, La Chine moderne has also disappeared.

These films shot in Hong Kong were destined for the international market, rather than Hong Kong. However, the companies which shot them also made films in and for their own home markets which were distributed to and screened in Hong Kong from as early as 1900. Between 1900 and 1914 screenings of such western films took place frequently. For example, a screening of ‘Exotic Western Pictures’ was held in the Chung King Theatre, Hong Kong Island, in February 1900, whilst, in 1902, the Kok Sun Garden Theatre in Kowloon staged a programme which included recordings of Chinese and western music and song, and a screening of the British film The Coronation of King Edward VII (1902). By the time that the first film actually made in Hong Kong appeared, in 1909, the city already had a ‘bustling’ film market consisting of the distribution and exhibition of western films, and, up to the rise of the fictional silent feature film, around 1915, western documentary films dominated the film industry in Hong Kong. After the First World War, as the early pioneering documentary film-making companies disappeared, the flow of western actuality films into Hong Kong largely dried up, and, in place of such films, western – mainly American – feature films then continued to dominate the local cinema up to and long after the Second World War. The divided society created by both the colonial British establishment and the local Chinese population was, therefore, at least to some extent, recoupled through the experience of watching film; and, through this meeting of east and west,
a nascent and tentatively composite Chinese-Hong Kong culture began to crystallise; or, at the least, the local population in Hong Kong became more familiar with the west not only as colonial autocracy in Hong Kong but also as more extensive place of interest, entertainment and, possibly, identification.

From 1918 to 1945 documentary film-making activity in Hong Kong developed in a number of new and different ways, one of which was through the establishment of local production companies. For example, Guangya Film Company made five films between 1925 and 1928, one of which was the documentary film *The Hong Kong Grand Hotel Fire* (1925). Another company to emerge in the 1920s, China Sun, was of particular importance and will be discussed in more depth shortly. In the 1930s another major company to emerge was Grandview Film Company Ltd, which produced, amongst other films, *The King’s Coronation Parade* (1937), *Commander in-Chief Yu Han-Mou Reviews the Troops on His Hong Kong Visit* (1937), and *Provincial Government Chairman Wu Tiecheng on Transit via Hong Kong* (1937). As their titles indicate, the latter two of these films were also made against a backdrop of the run-up to the Sino-Japanese war. As with China Sun, Grandview is important, and so will also be discussed in more depth later. Yet another direction which documentary film-making took in relation to Hong Kong during this period related to the expansion of the Hollywood film industry into South-East Asia. During the 1920s, as the Hollywood studio system consolidated and expanded, capital was channelled into the production of bigger-budget feature films, and, against this context, the early ‘scenic’ documentaries ceased to be made, and American companies also ceased to come to shoot film in Hong Kong. However, this was to change in the late 1930s, albeit on a small scale, when films such as *Hong Kong: The Hub of the Orient* (Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1937) and *From Singapore to Hong Kong* (Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1940) were produced. These films were, of course, sound documentaries, as were the Grandview films just referred to. They were made by the American documentary film-maker James Fitzpatrick. Fitzpatrick made feel-good, undemanding, scenic travel documentaries. For example, in 1937 he made both *China: Land of Charm* and *Floral Japan*. 1937 is, of course, the year that Japan invaded China, though that seems to have passed this particular film-maker by. Fitzpatrick continued to make such films, which only showed affirmative aspects of the places he filmed, up until the mid-1950s. Like the early western films of 1898–1914, these films were also destined for an international audience, but unlike those early films, the Fitzpatrick films were also shown in Hong Kong.
The first locally produced documentary film to be made in Hong Kong was *Chinese Competitors at the Sixth Far East Sports Games in Japan* (1923). As the title indicates, this film was not shot in Hong Kong. However, it was produced by the Hong Kong China Sun Film Company, which opened in 1923, and was shot by the owner of the company, photographer and director Lai Man-wai. Lai, who would go on to become one of the most influential figures in the early Hong Kong and Chinese film industries, initially came from a theatrical background, and also had a strong interest in photography, and both of these factors may have helped direct him towards the cinema. In 1913 Lai met the American financier and businessman Benjamin Brodsky, who had earlier produced the first commercial film in Hong Kong, a melodrama entitled *Stealing a Roast Duck* (1909). In 1913 Brodsky also established the first film studio in Hong Kong, Chinese American Film. However, the studio made only one film: *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* (1913), scripted and acted by Lai, and adapted from Cantonese opera, before closing the same year that it was founded. *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* was never shown in Hong Kong, as Brodsky took the only print back to the United States with him when Chinese American Film closed. It then became the earliest Hong Kong-produced fiction film to be screened in the United States.46 One year after Lai made *Zhuangzi* came the outbreak of the First World War, and the film industry in Hong Kong came to a complete standstill, as not only were the rare metals used to produce nitrate film stock in short supply, but the enemy power, Germany, was then also the main provider of such stock to Hong Kong.47

After forming China Sun in 1923, and making *Chinese Competitors at the Sixth Far East Sports Games in Japan*, Lai went on to shoot a number of short films of local scenes and cultural events, somewhat on the model of the pre-First World War western films. In 1923 these included *Hong Kong Scenery, Hong Kong Soccer Match, Hong Kong Dragon Boat Race*, and *Hong Kong Police Force Parade*. In these films we see the same combination of colonial and local subject-matter as in the early scenic western films. However, the tone is rather different now, and the Chinese people who appear in the films are no longer either the impoverished pre-modern figures from the nineteenth-century films, or the indistinct ones from the early twentieth-century films. As in these earlier films, colonialism is displayed but not celebrated. After 1923, China Sun also became the most important newsreel producer in the crown colony, and, in most of these newsreels, Lai Man-wai, or his associate, Law Wing-cheung, was the cinematographer.

In addition to being a film-maker Lai was a committed political activist and revolutionary. In 1909, at the age of only sixteen, he joined the Hong Kong branch of the anti-feudal Revolutionary Alliance of Sun Yat-sen, and, after
the founding of the KMT (the successor to the Revolutionary Alliance) in 1912, he engaged in pro-KMT activities up to and beyond the outbreak of the Second World War. As a committed Chinese nationalist Lai believed, and openly advocated, that Hong Kong should be returned to China. However, as a consequence of such advocacy, when, in 1924, he asked the British colonial government for permission to build a permanent stage set for China Film, his request was refused. Lai then moved the company to Guangzhou, close by Hong Kong, where he made the melodrama Rouge (1924), often considered to be Hong Kong’s first feature-length film (though it was not produced in Hong Kong). Then, in 1925–6, labour unrest and an outbreak of Chinese nationalist sentiment led to the declaration of a general strike in both Guangzhou and Hong Kong. This, once more, effectively closed down the developing Hong Kong film industry, and led Lai and China Sun to relocate again, this time to Shanghai, then the centre of the Chinese film industry. Lai continued to make both feature films and documentaries in Shanghai. However, his documentaries now became more politically oriented, and centred on the KMT, and, later, Sino-Japanese War. Thus, from making minor scenic documentaries such as Hong Kong Scenery in 1923, and against the background of the KMT attempt to establish a unified republican China, Lai moved on to the type of committed documentary film-making which found expression in his most imperative, though nevertheless flawed work, A Page of History. In order to make proper sense of A Page of History, though, it will first be necessary to outline the complex historical events and developments which the film attempted to depict.

**A PAGE OF HISTORY (LAI MAN-WAI, 1921–8, 1941)**

In 1911 the declining Qing dynasty in China was finally overthrown. Sun Yat-sen, leader of the republican Revolutionary Alliance which had helped to bring down the dynasty, was then proclaimed Provisional President of the new Republic of China on 1 January 1912. However, Sun quickly handed over the post of President to Yuan Shikai, the most powerful figure in the service of the previous regime, in order to strike a deal which would ensure the final abdication of the Emperor. Later, though, Yuan attempted to overthrow the republic and restore the empire, with himself as emperor. In 1916 the Yuan regime collapsed and China fragmented into a number of dictatorships ruled by regional warlords, who also dominated what was left of the Peking administration. In response, in 1917 Sun moved the central base of the KMT to the relative safety of the southern city of Guangzhou. In 1919 Sun was forced out of Guangzhou by the then Governor of Guangdong Province. In 1920, though, he returned to re-establish his base in the city, and, in 1921,
was elected ‘Grand Marshall’ of the KMT Military Government, which he founded that year. In 1923 Sun was forced to leave Guangzhou once more, but again returned, quickly, to take overall control of the city in 1924.

By as early as 1919–20 Sun had already come to the conclusion that the only way to reunify China was through building an army which would march northwards to engage and defeat the various cliques, and the clique-controlled Beijing government, which then ruled a divided China. To this end, in 1924, and with the help of the Soviet Union, he established the Whampoa Military Academy in order to train such an army for what would become known as the ‘Northern Expedition’. At the same time, Chiang Kai-shek, whom Sun had known since 1918, was designated Commander-in-Chief-in-Waiting of the nascent army, which was in turn given the honorific of National Revolutionary Army (NRA). The NRA was then formally instated the following year, in 1925. Prior to that, in September 1924, Sun and various KMT dignitaries, including Chiang, had left Guangzhou to address a KMT rally in the city of Shaoguan, just north of Guangzhou. At that point in time the intention was to begin the Northern Expedition more or less immediately. However, before that could occur Sun received an invitation to come to Beijing in order to enter into discussions which might dispel the need for any military action. The context of this was the ‘Beijing Coup’ of October 1924, in which the existing government in Beijing was overthrown, and a new Provisional Government established which sought national unification through negotiation and reform. Believing that an important new development had occurred, Sun suspended the Northern Expedition, and travelled to Beijing by ship in November 1924. However, he died in Beijing in March 1925, and KMT negotiations with the Provisional Government were first deferred, and then annulled.

Following this, in July 1926, Chiang Kai-shek addressed a gathering of KMT troops in Guangdong which had met in order to begin the First Northern Expedition. Along with the KMT, the other major power group to have emerged from the 1911 revolution was the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The two groups were politically apart: the KMT under Sun committed to western-style democracy, the CCP to Soviet-style communism. Both also had their own standing armies. Despite these differences, though, both KMT and CCP had a shared and vested interest in ending the political fragmentation widespread in China, and, in 1926, their combined forces marched north, under the overall leadership of Chiang. However, Chiang was a more politically conservative figure than Sun had been, and, as part of this, was also anti-communist in disposition. Consequently, and unlike Sun, Chiang chose to form an allegiance with anti-communist Nazi Germany, rather than the Soviet Union and Chinese communism. Chiang would come to rely on military and tactical support from Germany throughout the late 1920s, and into the 1930s. However, the first major manifestation of his new ideological
alignment came in 1927, when he violently expelled communists from the Northern Expedition; a contentious move which also created serious divisions within the KMT. Despite these difficulties, though, the Northern Expedition continued onwards, gradually overpowering the forces arrayed against it, and finally achieving a victory which led to the eventual consolidation of large sections of the country under one regime, based in the new capital of Nanjing, south of Beijing. This, in brief, is the complicated story of Sun, Chiang and the Northern Expedition which Lai Man-wei attempted to tell in *A Page of History*.

Between 1921 and 1928 Lai Man-wai and his cinematographers travelled across China shooting footage of the surrounding scenery. However, Lai and his group also produced fifteen separate but loosely structured and unfinished ‘films’ on Sun, Chiang and the Northern Expedition which were then gradually edited together by Lai over the period between 1937 and 1941. The result was *A Page of History*. A Page of History had – or was victim to – an extremely complex history itself, and, because of this, it will be necessary to reconstruct that history here before proceeding further. This will also have to be attempted in some detail, as much of what happened to *A Page of History* is difficult to grasp clearly. The final 34-minute master-negative of *A Page of History* was completed in October or November 1941. It appears that three prints were then made from this negative, and that these were released on 12 November 1941 by Lai’s China Sun Motion Picture Company, and shown in cinemas in Hong Kong, and possibly also in the southern Guangdong area, during November–December 1941. However, the details of these screenings remain unclear. During the Japanese attack on Hong Kong the China Sun film studio suffered bomb damage and most of the films made by Lai during the 1920s and 1930s were destroyed. Apparently, the only ones to survive were *A Page of History* and *The Battle of Shanghai*. Following this substantial loss the occupying Japanese authorities ‘asked’ Lai to oversee film production in Hong Kong. The patriotic Lai of course refused to comply, a response which then forced him to flee Hong Kong with his extensive family of nine.

Whilst preparing to leave Hong Kong, Lai attempted to smuggle the master-negative of *A Page of History* out of the territory on board a ship bound for Zhanjiang, on the southern coast of China near Hainan Island. However, the ship was sunk by the Japanese and the master-negative lost. This meant that only the three prints of the film remained, all of which were, at that point, in Lai’s possession. Before leaving Hong Kong, Lai decided to bury one of these in a sealed container in the garden of his house. After this the Lai family left Hong Kong for the city of Guilin, in Guangxi Province, to the west of Guangzhou, and then outside the Japanese area of occupation in southern China. From here Lai sent the second of the three prints of *A Page of History* to the Chinese Government in Chongqing to be used for propaganda purposes.
Utility for such purpose had, of course, been the reason that Lai had made the film in the first place. This print was then later taken to Taiwan in 1949 when the retreating KMT government was forced into exile there. However, in 1961 the print was destroyed by fire.\textsuperscript{55} Upon returning to Hong Kong following the defeat of Japan in 1945 Lai dug up the buried print of \textit{A Page of History} but ill-advisedly kept it in its container without seeking to preserve it further. At that point Lai, therefore, had two prints of \textit{A Page of History} in his possession. Shortly before his death in 1953, and apparently virtually destitute, Lai requested that one of these prints (not the one in the container) be bequeathed to the ‘authorities [in] . . . Beijing’.\textsuperscript{56} Lai wished the film to be given to the nation as a mark of his legacy. The print was then taken to Beijing in 1954 by Lai’s widow, along with a print of Lai’s other major war-time documentary \textit{The Battle of Shanghai} (1937), which will be discussed in further depth later in this chapter. By 1954, therefore, two prints of \textit{A Page of History} remained: one in a box kept in unknown condition in the Hong Kong home of the Lai family, the other in the Central Film Bureau in Beijing.\textsuperscript{57}

In the late 1970s and early 1980s the Lai family was visited by the film critic and historian Yu Mo-wan, and, during this period Yu persuaded the family to open the boxed print of \textit{A Page of History}.\textsuperscript{58} Yu discovered that the film had been badly damaged by humidity, and, with the Lai family’s permission, he organised its restoration by a curator referred to as Luo Jinghao. However, in the process much of the print had to be disposed of, and the original 34-minute print was eventually reduced to a final copy of only 16 minutes duration.\textsuperscript{59} Then, in 1985, Lai’s wife and others went to Beijing in order to have a copy made of the print which Lai had bequeathed to the Central Government in 1954. They paid for the film to be copied themselves, and then brought the copied print back to Hong Kong. Unfortunately, they found the 34-minute film to be in poor condition, with many sections virtually unviewable. In contrast, the 16-minute version which had been restored in the early 1980s was in much better condition. In 1995 the Lai family then donated the 34-minute version of \textit{A Page of History} to the Hong Kong Film Archive and followed this up by bequeathing the 16-minute version in 2002.\textsuperscript{60} Finally, in 2003 curatorial staff at the Archive, assisted by Lai’s son, Lai Shek, produced an edited amalgamation of the two prints in an attempt to create a definitive version. It is this copy which is currently available for viewing at the Hong Kong Film Archive. This 26-minute version covers a period from the appointment of Sun as Grand Marshall of the Military Government in 1921 to the final success of the Northern Expedition under Chiang in 1928. This, then, is the highly complicated and troubled history – one that covered a period of approximately eighty-two years – of one of the most important documentary films to be made in Hong Kong.
When the Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937, Lai found himself in a position to film the Japanese attack on Shanghai. He then used this footage to make *The Battle of Shanghai*. It was also while carrying out the shooting and editing of this film that Lai decided to re-edit the extensive amount of material on the KMT he had shot during the 1920s. In particular, Lai believed that this was the ideal time to foreground Sun’s nationalist idealism as a boost for the war effort against Japan. Consequently, when, after the fall of Shanghai, Lai returned to Hong Kong, he commenced work on what would eventually become *A Page of History*. This context of the events of the late 1930s shapes the overall point of reference of *A Page of History*, and, although the film’s imagery portrays events which took place in the 1920s, the late-1930s commentary which accompanies this is mainly directed towards the struggle then taking place against Japan. So, for example, at the beginning of *A Page of History* we are informed that the film is ‘a great revolutionary historical film’ which shows the New Revolutionary Army under Chiang ‘reuniting China’; whilst, near the end of the film, we are told that such reunification was not won without the ‘sacrifices of soldiers’, and that ‘now we are facing new problems’ which will entail further sacrifice. Here, the idealistic nationalist spirit of Sun and Chiang’s attempt to overcome hostile forces and re-establish national sovereignty is appropriated in order to boost the morale of those engaged in the contemporary struggle against Japan. In this sense, therefore, it could be argued that the ideological project of *A Page of History* is presented in the form of a lesson based on prior, hard-won experience; and that what we see and hear in the film is meant to function both as exemplar and inspirational instructional treatise.

Japan also features elsewhere in *A Page of History* more directly. For example, as we see the expeditionary force moving northwards to engage warlords, we are told that ‘Japanese forces are intervening’ to help the warlords. This is a reference to Japanese troops stationed in Shandong province at that time, and allied to one of the northern warlords the KMT were marching against. More specifically, the reference is to the ‘Jinan Incident’ of 3 May 1928, and subsequent related events which eventually led to the Japanese execution of a senior KMT negotiator, and the defeat and expulsion of KMT forces from around the city of Jinan. However, although *A Page of History* refers to the execution of the KMT mediator, it makes no mention of the Chinese military defeat. Instead, and in contrast to such reference, towards the end of this section of the film we see KMT troops entering Jinan on horseback, apparently ‘liberating’ the city, and receiving the enthusiastic welcome of its residents.

The portrayal of the Jinan Incident in *A Page of History* is indicative of both the propagandist imperatives of Lai’s film and how those imperatives also created limitations for and within the film. As mentioned, the fact of
the defeat by the Japanese is not referred to, and neither is the role played by KMT troops in bringing about the Incident in the first place. Japanese soldiers had been placed in Jinan for some time with the collusion of local war-lords. However, in 1927 their numbers were increased incrementally, an act which KMT and Beijing government commanders deemed to be intentional provocation. Nonetheless, when this supplementation took place, a Beijing government army which was also based in the city withdrew in order to avoid possible confrontation. However, and against Chiang’s explicit orders to the contrary, KMT militias then moved into the city. The inevitable conflict – the ‘Jinan Incident’ – erupted on 3 May when a confrontation between KMT and Japanese troops left twelve Japanese soldiers dead (and castrated). An uneasy truce was then declared, and both KMT and Japanese forces regrouped outside the perimeter of the city. The truce ended when the Japanese general in command, also disobeying orders, engaged and defeated the KMT forces (this is the battle which A Page of History fails to make reference to). Whilst A Page of History gives the impression that the KMT somehow liberated Jinan from the Japanese, the record shows that the Japanese simply left the city of their own volition some ten months later, in 1929. Moreover, given that no footage from A Page of History dates from as late as 1929, the sequences in the film showing KMT troops entering Jinan, if at all authentic, must have been of the detachment which entered the city against Chiang’s orders prior to the 3 May Incident. If this is the case, then Lai, or one of his cameramen, must also have been with that detachment. As far as the Jinan Incident itself is concerned, what we have, in reality, is a shambolic situation in which KMT troops disobey their commander, Japanese troops disobey theirs, KMT and Japanese leaderships try but fail to avoid an escalation of conflict, a city which was not, and could not have been, ‘liberated’ by the KMT, and a significant KMT defeat. However, this confused and muddled scenario could not be accommodated within the partisan and schematic ideological trajectory propounded by A Page of History.

A Page of History is structured as a straightforward narrative which covers the outset, progress and conclusion of the Northern Expedition. However, in addition to this linear, chronological structure, the film also contains a series of tableaux in which the narrative largely stops, and in which people and events are displayed in a more exhaustive manner. This is also particularly the case with the opening sequences of the film, which are made up of footage shot during the 1921-6 period, and before the march of the Northern Expedition. And the film actually begins with one of these sequences, in which the leadership of the KMT is portrayed. The backdrop for these shots is a number of imposing buildings, and it is reasonable to conclude that the shots were taken in the city of Guangzhou. Unsurprisingly, the first person we see is Sun. After that, we are shown the various other KMT leaders, including Chiang. The
photography here is classical, and, in its way, impressive, possibly revealing Lai’s talents and previous training as a photographer, although, as will be argued shortly, there is considerable doubt as to whether Lai actually shot this footage. However, whoever did shoot these sequences knew how to construct the background and prepare the sitter. One by one the KMT leadership faces the camera formally and directly, looking as though carved out of stone, as the film seeks to emphasise the gravity and earnestness of their commitment. After these opening sequences introducing the leadership we see Sun, Chiang and the others board a train headed for a KMT rally. In one significant shot we see Sun and Chiang sitting opposite each other in one of the compartments of the train as the commentary informs us that we are witnessing the auspicious propinquity of the ‘President’ and ‘new commander’. Sun and Chiang are very clearly singled out from the rest of the KMT leadership here, and joined emblematically as one. Following this we arrive at the rally. At this point the 1930s commentary gives us some of the background to the need for the KMT to expand its influence and initiate the Northern Expedition. We are told that the northern warlord-controlled government in Peking is ‘corrupt’, that the warlords are ‘evil’, and that it is the duty of the KMT New Revolutionary Army to ‘unite the four-hundred million’ Chinese. Throughout these sequences we also cut frequently to images of the KMT flag. It appears that the rally shown at this point in A Page of History was the 1921 inauguration of Sun as ‘Grand Marshall’ of the KMT and Military Government, and that the train journey we see was the relatively short journey from Guangzhou to Shaoguan, where the inauguration ceremony was held. The key part of this section of the film is also one in which Sun takes his oath as Grand Marshall and delivers a long speech outlining the aims of the KMT, and future Northern Expedition.

As previously mentioned, this first section of A Page of History, covering events in Guangzhou and Shaoguan, was shot in 1921. However, there are doubts as to whether or not Lai and his team actually shot them, and it has been suggested that the footage was actually shot by a visiting French team. This suggestion is also backed up by a number of factors. First, the photography in this section of the film differs from that found in later sections in the sense that, and as stated earlier, this prefatory photography is quite formally set and framed. Later photography in A Page of History is less arranged and relatively more disordered, and the same is also the case with Lai’s other major film, The Battle of Shanghai. Second, in his diary, Lai himself mentions that the first time he filmed Sun was in February 1923, when Sun visited Hong Kong. The picture here in terms of authorship remains unclear. However, the weight of evidence seems to suggest that this section of A Page of History may not have been shot by Lai and his team. But whether Lai shot these sequences, he certainly edited them into A Page of History.

After this A Page of History moves on unexpectedly to 1924 as we see Sun
journeying by ship to Beijing, an event which occurred in November 1924. It seems, therefore, that there is no footage in the film from 1922 or 1923. We then see Sun in Beijing, and see some of the landmarks of Beijing. Then *A Page of History* takes a curious historical lacuna. The next sequences we see consist of shots showing NRA troops marching north, out of Guangzhou (or Shaoguan, it is unclear which); and the commentary informs us that they are already in Jiangxi Province, the adjacent province to the north and east of Guangdong. This means that these sequences must be of the Northern Expedition, and that they must date from July 1926. However, after this, the sequences which follow first show Sun in Beijing, still very much alive, and then his coffin, lying in state – Sun died of cancer of the liver in March 1925. We therefore appear to have journeyed from November 1924 to July 1926, then back to March 1925. How can the insertion of sequences showing NRA troops moving into Jiangxi Province at this point in the film be explained? How can 1926 occur before 1925? If this is supposed to be a subjective sequence – a vision of the future imagining the progress of a future Northern Expedition – it has to be said that there are no other sequences of such a kind in *A Page of History*, and the more likely explanation is that this is an error of editing, caused by the various vicissitudes that *A Page of History* underwent during its difficult production and post-production history. In particular, this apparent error in the editing may have occurred either during the Beijing restoration of the film in 1978, or the Hong Kong restoration of 2003.

After this, *A Page of History* does take us to 1926: to be precise, July 1926, when Chiang gave a key address to 100,000 NRA troops who had assembled for the ceremony that was to launch the Northern Expedition, which began later that month. As Chiang gives his address, the commentary informs us that he is cautioning his troops to keep their morale firm, despite the fact that the Grand Marshall, Sun, had passed away. Like the speech given by Sun in 1921, this is also a long one, and the camera focuses insistently on the uniformed Chiang, who is on horseback, whilst the commentary paraphrases his speech, and also stresses the nationalist-idealist sentiment of the address. After this we see more shots of troops marching on parade in front of a raised platform on which Chiang, other KMT leaders and some foreign dignitaries sit. Particular attention is given to the American representative here (which may reflect the Chinese Government’s attempt to attract US aid and assistance during the Sino-Japanese War). This section of *A Page of History* then ends with a full-screen copy of the written version of the oath taken by Chiang and the troops of the NRA.

*A Page of History* then proceeds to follow the chronological narrative of the progress of the Northern Expedition beginning with the first engagement at Wuhan, south-west of Shanghai. After this we see a succession of troop movements and what look like re-enactments of battle scenes. The composition of
the shots is relatively unsystematic here, displaying a mass of soldiers scurrying across the countryside. We also see shots of enemy planes bombing the NRA troops, and then some obviously staged explosions. At one point there is also a sequence of photography taken from on board an aircraft, though it remains unclear who the cameraman was, or why there is only one sequence of such photography. The general purport of the narrative mission is very clearly stated by both the imagery and commentary here: continuous and unremitting NRA victory, without setback. Then we come to the previously mentioned sequences dealing with the Jinan Incident, and ‘Japanese interference’ with the onwards march of the Northern Expedition. Around this point we also have an extensive sequence in which the narrative of the Northern Expedition’s progress is set aside. Suddenly, and confusingly, we see KMT ships and aircraft. There is no indication of where we are here, and, indeed, that does not particularly matter, because the purpose of this section of the film is not to advance the narrative or contribute to narrative coherence, but to display the substantial military might of the KMT and NRA. This is, in effect, an extensive tableau sequence within the film, similar in form to those sequences of the KMT leadership which open A Page of History, and is not linked to the film’s otherwise persistent linear, chronological narrative. Finally, A Page of History comes to its finale in Beijing, as Chiang and the KMT celebrate the final success of the Northern Expedition. The KMT flag fills the screen as the commentary pleads that the spectator should ‘remember the sacrifices of the soldiers’; and A Page of History finally concludes with a reference to the previously mentioned ‘new problems’ that China was facing in the late 1930s. The film then cuts out unexpectedly, without any concluding fade-out or closing citations, and it appears that the final sequences may be missing.

As a work of history, A Page of History must be found wanting. The narrative it presents of continuous military success leading to inevitable victory flies in the face of the historical reality. Many things are left out of A Page of History. To name but a few, the film does not mention events in the chaotic year of 1927, in which the KMT split following Chiang’s decision to turn against the communists. The Shanghai Massacre of 12 April 1927 led to the execution of thousands of communists and their sympathisers, and Chiang was directly responsible for this. However, A Page of History could not accommodate such a diminishing reference within its unalloyed story of triumph and unity. Neither does the film mention the serious military defeats which occurred in 1927, or Chiang’s resignation in August 1927 as a result of those defeats. Finally, A Page of History does not mention the fact that, following the end of the Northern Expedition, China was not fully united. The reality was that warlordism was not vanquished, but actually became stronger during the 1930s. In addition, by 1928, when Lai was still filming the sequences which he later inserted within A Page of History, virtually the entire north,
west and centre of China remained outside KMT control. Even by as late as 1941, when Lai completed the final edit of *A Page of History*, large parts of the country were still under the control of warlords and other parties. However, *A Page of History* was never intended to be a critical study of its subject, but a highly partial valorisation of Sun, Chiang, the KMT and Chinese nationalism. Whilst the film’s account of its subject provides us with images which are important, the lack of detail and balance evident here, when combined with the crowing, over-strident commentary, leads, in the end, to a film which holds intrinsic weakness. In particular, *A Page of History* is characterised by a substantial disparity between the essentially descriptive nature of its images from the 1920s, which show us things, and the fundamentally propagandist nature of its 1930s commentary, which instructs us on how to think. These content-related weaknesses, plus the various vicissitudes suffered by *A Page of History* during its tortuous pre- and post-production history, have resulted in a film which cannot be regarded as any kind of masterpiece. The discontinuities which marked the film’s origins, despoilments and editorial development are clearly evident, to the detriment of narrative coherence, and the film as a whole. Essentially, it is a rather fragmented compilation film: a film, precisely, composed of segments, shot over a wide span of time, which do not, in the end, add up to an overall totality. In fact, without the commentary, the sense of a linear structure present in the film would be seriously weakened. However, the film remains important at the level of its documentary film footage of historical record, which contains sequences showing major historical figures and events.

**DOCUMENTARY FILM AND THE SINO–JAPANESE WAR, 1937–41**

In 1933 the first Cantonese-language sound film, *White Golden Dragon*, was made in Shanghai by the Tianyi Film Company, then one of the three major producers in the city. Tianyi had frequently incurred the displeasure of KMT authorities in Nanking for not adhering closely enough to the government policy of making anti-feudal anti-imperialist films which embodied Chinese-nationalist rhetoric. In other words, Tianyi did not play the role expected of it in helping the KMT to develop an officially endorsed model of Chinese national cinema. Instead, the company made generic martial arts and horror films, and costumed melodramas set in the Imperial past which KMT associated critics and others condemned as ‘feudalist’. Tianyi incurred even more official wrath in 1934 when, following the success of *White Golden Dragon*, the company opened operations in Hong Kong through a company called Nanyang with the intention of specialising in the production of Cantonese sound films, thus directly contravening the official policy...
of establishing Mandarin as both the national language and basis of a new Chinese sound-cinema. In 1934 ‘Tianyi-Nanyang’ (as the company will be referred to here) also produced its first sound documentary in Hong Kong, entitled *The Soccer Clash between South China and the Infantry*. As the title suggests, the film records the highlights of a football match between the British army team and one of the best known teams in Hong Kong: ‘South China’. Tianyi-Nanyang continued to make documentaries after 1934, though none was of any great merit or significance. That, however, was to change after 1937, when the company made more committed documentary films against the background of the Sino-Japanese War.

In addition to Tianyi-Nanyang, another important company to emerge in the 1930s was the Grandview Film Company, which was established in 1933. The two founders of the company, Joe Chiu Shu-sun and Moon Kwan Man-ching, had been educated in California, and, when they returned to Hong Kong, they attempted to set up Grandview along down-scaled Hollywood studio lines, raising technical standards of film-making in the process. Grandview eventually became a fairly large-scale enterprise, and, like Tianyi-Nanyang, largely concentrated on the production of martial arts films, horror films, melodramas and filmed versions of operas. However, Grandview also made documentaries, and, after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, would go on to become the most important producer of documentary film in Hong Kong up to 1941, when the territory fell to the Japanese. From 1936 the company also produced the first magazine-type sound documentary film series to appear in Hong Kong entitled *The Grandview Review*. The Review covered a mixture of nationalist and colonial news. For example, the December 1936 edition contained items on ‘The Funeral of Chairman Hu’ (a KMT leader) and ‘Appointments to the Hong Kong Government’. In addition to the *Review*, between 1936 and 1937 Grandview also produced eleven or so individual documentary films on a variety of topics, including the local scenery, local and national festivals, the activities of celebrities, and the visits of important figures from the Chinese government. These latter films included the previously mentioned 1937 *Commander in-Chief Yu Han-Mou Reviews the Troops on His Hong Kong Visit*, and *Provincial Government Chairman Wu Tiecheng on Transit via Hong Kong*. Prior to 1936 neither Grandview nor Tianyi had produced overtly political films. However, from 1936 both companies began to produce feature films and documentaries which addressed the evolving political-military situation.

The population of Hong Kong almost doubled between 1937 and 1939 as mainland refugees flooded into the colony in order to escape the Sino-Japanese War. The huge influx involuntarily created an unregulated industrial and commercial boom, and, as part of that, also led to significant growth within
the film industry, to the extent that, by 1939, up to forty film studios were in operation. A significant number of these were also Mandarin-language studios staffed by recently arrived incomers from Shanghai.67 Many of these northern Mandarin-speaking film-makers were committed nationalists, keen to observe the KMT stratagem of creating a cinema based on nationalist, anti-feudal and anti-western lines. Others were communist sympathisers with a similarly strong, though communist-oriented, commitment to make films which would advance their cause. However, when they reached Hong Kong just prior to the outbreak of war these upright film-makers encountered a Cantonese genre cinema that appeared to uphold few of their ideals; a cinema characterised by the sort of horror, fantasy and ‘feudal’ films which Chiang Kai-shek had sought to have removed from mainland screens. Given the urgent context of a seemingly inevitable war with Japan, these film-makers then began to lobby for reform of what appeared to them to be a dissolute cinema, and for the production of more purposive films; and pressure was also applied to achieve these ends by KMT officials in both China and Hong Kong.68 By late 1937, and shortly after the outbreak of war, the Chinese government had become so concerned about the situation within the Hong Kong film industry that it proposed a ban on the entry of Hong Kong-made Cantonese films into China. However, faced with opposition over this from the Hong Kong film industry, and sectors of the film industry in China which relied upon the importation of these films, the Nationalist government eventually decided to postpone any such action for a period of three years, after which the issue of ‘whether the ideological content of Cantonese film was suitable to the Chinese nation’ would be re-evaluated definitively.69 Faced with the prospect of such a re-evaluation, and possible interdiction, and also given the fact that the China market was of fundamental importance for the film industry in Hong Kong, Cantonese film studios in the colony began to make a number of patriotic and anti-Japanese films. However, such production soon declined as it was not commercially successful.70 This decline was, in addition, also hastened by the policy of neutrality which the British and Hong Kong governments adopted towards the Sino-Japanese War during the late 1930s; a policy which led the colonial Hong Kong Government to proscribe the more blatantly anti-Japanese films produced within the colony. This, in conjunction with a lack of box-office appeal, led to a reduction in ‘patriotic’ film-making in Hong Kong which only served to increase nationalist protestations further.

One consequence of these various pressures was that a considerable gulf opened up between the two main communities of film-makers in Hong Kong: the newly-arrived northern Mandarin-speakers and the longer-established Cantonese-speakers. That division was, though, also blurred and complicated by the fact that some of the recent incomers had previously made Cantonese films in Shanghai, and had come to Hong Kong in order to continue making
them, and also escape the sort of ‘ethical’ KMT film policies now being advocated for Hong Kong by other Shanghai film-makers who had come into the colony. The film-making community within Hong Kong was, therefore, riven by factional disagreement. Under pressure, and as the Sino-Japanese War advanced, some uneasy and hesitant collaboration did eventually take place within the Mandarin and Cantonese groups over the production of the patriotic films referred to previously, films such as, for example, Little Cantonese (1940), directed by the mainland director Tan Xiaodan but made in the Cantonese language. However, Little Cantonese was also seen in some quarters as a somewhat conceited northern Chinese portrayal of Cantonese society, whilst the idea of the Cantonese being ‘little’ was also perceived to be a possibly condescending reference to their typically shorter stature.71

Setting such real or imagined condescension aside, the nationalist film-makers and their supporters also failed to appreciate something that the colonial Hong Kong government understood well. In a way, the development of a Cantonese sound cinema during the 1930s was in line with the Hong Kong government’s preferred policy of establishing a local culture and society in Hong Kong which would be apart from but also framed by the colonial order of things. Essentially, and as argued previously, the colonial approach was to persuade local society that the government would provide a framework (of law, order, stability and other alleviating factors) which would enable a local culture and society to consolidate, prosper and develop its own means of intra-civic expression and communication. The development of the Cantonese sound film in the 1930s fell squarely in line with this strategy, as it enabled a local culture to express itself relatively unfettered through the familiar myths and stories of southern China. In encouraging – or even merely sanctioning – the use of the film to reinforce Cantonese culture within Hong Kong, the colonial authorities played a role in inculcating a sense of Hong Kong Chinese identity within the local population, because, precisely that identity, culture and cinema, was developing within the colonial context and environment of Hong Kong, a setting and milieu quite unlike that to be encountered in nearby southern China. To the chagrin of KMT adherents the rise of the Cantonese sound film augmented a developing sense of Chinese Hong Kong rather than (or as well as) mainland China identity within the local population, and, rather than attack the Cantonese cinema as they had, it might have been more productive for such adherents to attempt to accommodate that cinema within their own ideological project, as the colonial government had theirs. Here, northern haughtiness and refutation had not borne fruit, whilst it could be argued that the colonial stratagem had done so.

In July 1937 Japan launched full-scale war against China, eventually taking over most of northern and eastern China, and establishing a puppet government in
the capital, Nanking, in December 1938. In addition to northern and eastern China, the Japanese also eventually took Canton and Hong Kong, the latter falling on 25 December 1941. However, Japan failed to complete the conquest of China. The Soviet Union halted Japanese expansion to the north in 1938 and 1939, and also supported the Chinese resistance, which was then head-quartered in the Nationalist Government’s war-time capital of Chongqing, to the far south-west of Nanking. In the north and south of the country Chinese-communist forces – now working loosely with the KMT – also resisted the Japanese advance. As KMT and communist forces became better supported, organised and armed, a stalemate was reached which continued up until the surrender of Japan in 1945. It is also against this context of conflict and war that important documentary films were produced in Hong Kong, and shot by Hong Kong-based film-makers.

Over the period from the appearance of the first sound documentaries in 1933 to the Japanese invasion of 1941, documentary film-making in Hong Kong expanded exponentially, and also fell into a number of distinct genres. The largest of these, the ‘political-military’, will be dealt with here last, and in depth, as it was also the most important. In total, around nine distinct genres of production can be identified over this period. Of these, the ‘colonial’ film group was relatively small in number, accommodating only four (or so) films. They are: Scenes of the King’s Silver Jubilee Celebration in Hong Kong (Tianyi, 1935); Dragon Dance in the Government House (Quanqiu, 1935); Views of Hong Kong (Hong Kong Tourist Association, 1936); and The Hong Kong Parade/The King’s Coronation Parade (Grandview, 1937). It is also notable that when the Sino-Japanese war broke out, this particular genre of filmmaking virtually ceased, as though a victim of the rise of Chinese nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiment. In addition to these ‘colonial’ films, another minor genre evident over this period was the ‘sport and leisure’ genre. Films falling into this category include The Athletic Meet: Day One to Day Seven (1935); Cooking Competition at the Meifang School (Grandview, 1939); Soccer Match Between Opera and Movie Stars (Grandview, 1939); The Grand Soccer Match (Nanyue, 1939); and The Opening Ceremony of the Fourth Chinese Goods Exhibition (Hong Kong Newsreel Agency, 1941) (this latter film could also be classed as ‘colonial’, as it featured the then acting governor of Hong Kong). Related to these genres were also two others: the ‘celebrity-song’ and ‘scenic’ genres. Both of these apparently consisted of only two films each during the period in question: Cantonese Song Review (1933) and The Private Lives of Movie People (Grandview, 1937) in the first genre; and Scenery of the West Lake (Grandview, 1937) and Scenery of Suzhou (Grandview, 1937) in the second. Apart from these genres, one film which can perhaps be classed as a ‘scenic-disaster’ film was Calamity in Sichuan (Nanyue, 1937). However, this film, on the effect of an earthquake on the landscape of Sichuan, appears to
have been singular. Virtually all of these films were made in Cantonese rather than Mandarin, and, with the exception of the two ‘scenic’ films, their locale is Hong Kong, rather than China. It is also apparent that Grandview was involved in making the majority of them.

As mentioned, by far the most important genre of documentary film-making to appear in Hong Kong over the period from 1934 to 1941 was the ‘political-military’. It seems that three of these films also predated the Sino-Japanese War by some distance. They are: *Eliminating the Communists at Qiong Cliff* (1933), which depicts military conflict between nationalists and communists; *Life in the Military Academy* (1935), which may have been set in the KMT Academy in Guangdong; and *The Death of Chairman Hu Hanmin* (1936). All of these films were in Cantonese. In addition to these earlier films a flurry of ‘political-military’ films also appeared in 1937, just prior to the outbreak of war. They are: *Commander in Chief Yu Hanmou Visits Hong Kong* (Grandview, 1937); *Provincial Government Chairman Wu Tiecheng on Transit via Hong Kong* (Grandview, 1937); *Tour of Nationalist Government Chairman Lin Sen to Guangdong and His Tribute to the Revolutionary Martyrs* (Grandview, 1937); *The Naming Ceremony of Military Aircraft in Guangdong* (Grandview, 1937); *The Southern Trip of Nationalist Government Chairman Lin Sen* (Nanyang, 1937); and *Convocation of the Guangzhou Government School* (Nanyang, 1937). All of these, with the exception of the latter two, are in Cantonese. As is evident, all of these films support the Chinese Nationalist Government cause in the coming struggle with Japan, and, once more, Grandview is the major production company involved. What is also evident is that the locale for these films has now switched from Hong Kong to China; a harbinger of things soon to come.

The year 1937 also saw the appearance of the earliest major war-time films. *The War Effort in Guangzhou* (Grandview, 1937) was a large-scale production directed by Lee Man-kwong and Tong Kim-ting. The film shows how:

The people of Guangzhou are mobilized towards the war effort, including the organization of machine gun forces, the security force, the firefighting brigade, the ambulance brigade, and the general work force. The film also shows Guangzhou during a Japanese air attack. War hero Fang Zhenwu and flying ace Huang Guangqiong also appear in the film.73

In addition to *The War Effort in Guangzhou* 1937 saw the appearance of at least two films shot during the Japanese assault on Shanghai in 1937: *Massacre in the Shanghai Region* (China War Front News Agency); and *The Battle of Shanghai* (Lai Man-wai, Minxin, 1937), which will be discussed in depth later in this chapter. The year 1938 marks a high point of Hong Kong documentary film production, and virtually all the films made that year were concerned with
the Sino-Japanese War. That year, eight films appear on the record, though more may have been made. They are: *Protect Southern China and Guangdong: Special Edition* (Dazhonghua); *The War in Xiamen* (Jianhua); *The Anniversary in Memory of the 13 August Episode* (North China News Agency); *The Achievements of the Guangdong-Guangxi Troops* (Hualian Newsreel Company); *The Eighth Route Army Recovers Pingxing Pass* (International Photography Group); *The Bombing of Sanzoo Island* (unknown producer); *Xiamen on Alert* (unknown producer); and *Protect Guangdong* (Dapeng).

Over 1939–41, and as the Japanese advanced into the southern China region, the number of these political-military films declined sharply. In 1939 there are only *Flame of Southern China* (China Newsreel Agency) and *Battle at the West and the North Rivers* (Aiqun Photography Group). Nothing appears on the record for 1940, and, in the final year of Hong Kong documentary film production, 1941, there are only four films, one of which merits particular attention. In June 1938, with the support of the China War Time Film Research Association, Hong Kong director Lam Tsang went to Yan’an, in the north-west of China, and lived there for nine months shooting the documentary film *On the Northwest Frontline*. The film, which eventually appeared in 1941 as a silent film, is significant because it has a certain degree of communist focus, unlike virtually all the other films made over the 1937–41 period. The film shows various scenes of life in Yan’an, which was, as the title of the film suggests, on the frontline of the Japanese advance into China; and also a centre for communist forces under Mao Zedong. The film is divided into eight sections, entitled: (1) ‘The activities of Mao Zedong, Lin Biao, and writer Ding Ling’; (2) ‘The Anti-Japanese Military University’; (3) ‘The Lu Xun Art Academy’; (4) ‘The battle strategy of the Eighteenth Corps’; (5) ‘The youth of Yan’an’; (6) ‘Labour Day festive activities’; (7) ‘The New Fourth Army’; and (8) ‘The Life of people in the ‘Red’ Territories. As these titles suggest, the film was essentially a compilation effort rather than a fully structured film, and, like all the films referred to in these last few pages, was intended to drum up support for the anti-Japanese struggle. In addition to *On the Northwest Front Line*, the final films to appear are *The Guangdong Front* (China War–Time Film Research Association); Lai Man-wai’s *A Page of History*; and *A Bowl of Rice Movement in America* (Grandview). The latter film shows Chinese-American support for the struggle in China. Originally organised by the American Bureau for Medical Aid to China, the Bowl of Rice Movement collected donations from Americans and Chinese-Americans in order to send medical and food supplies to China. The film records a series of charity events organised by the Chinese-American community in San Francisco, and also includes footage of anti-war demonstrations and the unveiling of a bronze statue of Sun Yat-sen.74
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**THE BATTLE OF SHANGHAI (1937)**

Probably the most important film to emerge from the context of Hong Kong associated film-making during the Sino-Japanese War was Lai Man-wai’s *The Battle of Shanghai* (1937). *The Battle of Shanghai* is a very different film to *A Page of History*. Whilst *A Page of History* consists of footage shot over an expansive period of time, *The Battle of Shanghai* was shot entirely during the Japanese assault on the city between August and November 1937. This gives *The Battle of Shanghai* a heightened focus which is further accentuated by the film’s driven, instrumental objectives. *The Battle of Shanghai* is an activist film, shot for a purpose: that of gaining national and, above all, international support, for the China war effort. *The Battle of Shanghai* was also filmed amidst actual hostilities, a factor which further intensifies the trenchant quality of the film; and, in place of the re-enactments evident within *A Page of History*, we see tangible conflict here. In addition, despite the fact that the subject-matter of *A Page of History* is military engagement, we do not see a single body in that film, whilst, in *The Battle of Shanghai*, we see many bodies, and also many body parts. In one particularly poignant scene, for example, we see a father grieving over the prostrate bodies of his wife and children. These are actual corpses that we see here, and the film does not flinch from showing them. If *A Page of History* was meant to inculcate a refined sense of idealist nationalism, *The Battle of Shanghai* was designed to inculcate much stronger and darker emotional reactions, and to shock.

Because *The Battle of Shanghai* was to a large extent directed at winning international sympathy and support for the China war effort, it was made with some English titles, and this in itself makes the film unusual for its period. The film’s internationalist strategic orientation also led it to address the issue of foreign connection almost from the outset. For example, although *The Battle of Shanghai* begins with the now more-or-less obligatory image of Chiang Kai-shek it quickly turns to the notion of a coming together between China and the west, and to a contention that foreign nationals were being directly and adversely affected by the events in Shanghai, as we are told that ‘several hundred Chinese and Foreigners had been killed’. Later, we are informed, more particularly, in terms of the target nations involved here, that ‘British and German property also suffered heavy losses’. Pairing Britain and Germany together here may in retrospect seem paradoxical given that the two countries were at war with each other two years later. However, by 1937 it was not yet clear that this would definitely occur and, from the Chinese point of view, what mainly mattered in 1937 was that Germany had been helping the KMT militarily since 1927, when Chiang Kai-shek broke with the communists; and that Britain was a potential future ally in the fight against Japan. By 1937, therefore, as far as the KMT were concerned, these two countries
were amongst the most important for China, and so it is no surprise that they are especially invoked in *The Battle of Shanghai*, which, in one sequence, provides that invocation with a forceful, though uncommon symbolism. The sequence in question shows two bombed-out buildings adjacent to each other, one with a British flag obtruding from it, the other a German flag. In an obviously staged shot both flags hang forlornly downwards at the same angle, and also point towards each other, as though coupled together in their respective fortunes. Although, as with the overall bonding of Britain and Germany, this intentionally poignant penultimate juxtaposition may appear paradoxical today, that was again not the way the KMT saw things at the time. Beyond Britain and Germany it was also important for the Chinese authorities to maintain and augment as much international support as possible during this period and that imperative is also foregrounded in *The Battle of Shanghai*. Elsewhere in the film, for example, we see shots of westerners of various nationalities caught up in the crowds of Chinese fleeing the conflict, and, at the conclusion of one of these sequences, we are told that China was not just fighting for itself but also for ‘international justice’.

*The Battle of Shanghai* utilises three distinct stylistic approaches in order to carry through its ideological project. One of these is realism, and, in line with this, the film contains a number of sequences in which the disordered city is shown under attack, with smoke billowing from battered buildings. Much of the camera-work in these sequences is unsteady and hand-held. Editing is also not as important here as simply showing the devastated cityscape, and, as a consequence of this need, and through constant camera movement, a disorganised, but highly affective, form of film-making emerges. What is required here is to show as much as possible, and, this requirement leads the camera to behave as though it were a continuously shifting observing eye, repeatedly changing focus and direction of gaze. These sequences are also, as just suggested, highly effective, and that effectiveness is accentuated by the fact that we know the cameraman was very close to the action here, and putting himself at some risk. It is, perhaps, above all else, these actuality shots of the conflict that give *The Battle of Shanghai* its lasting power as a hard-hitting work of cinematic activism.

In addition to such granular realism, *The Battle of Shanghai* contains sequences in which a more emblematic ‘performative-tableaux’ approach is adopted. In these sequences the narrative about the progress of the battle virtually stops, and, instead, the opportunity is taken to ratchet up the level of patriotic expression. The principal means through which this is achieved in these sequences is via the presentation of patriotic songs, though this is backed up by shots of KMT troops on the march, the KMT flag, and so on. There are two principal examples of such sequences in *The Battle of Shanghai*. In the first of these we see a group of children, refugees from the conflict who
have presumably become separated from their families. The children begin to sing a partisan song, their high-pitched voices lending a sense of innocent fervour to the performance, and we then see extra-diegetic footage of KMT troops marching past. This is also the sequence previously mentioned which ends with the refrain that ‘we are fighting for international justice’. In some respects, this sequence, which is intended to intensify patriotism and raise morale, is similar to sequences in *A Page of History* in which first Sun, and then Chiang, address their audiences. The difference here though, is that, in *The Battle of Shanghai*, patriotism does not emerge from a position of growing strength, but from trampled-on, beaten-down defiance. As just mentioned, there is also one other sequence like this, later in the film, in which children are again used to invoke determined resistance through the enactment and singing of patriotic songs; and, in this sequence, we again see extra-diegetic shots of marching troops and the Nationalist flag.

The third main type of stylistic device used in *The Battle of Shanghai* is different again from both the realist and tableaux approaches. Despite being shot on the battlefield, *The Battle of Shanghai* is a comparatively large-scale work and some sequences in the film reveal the presence of concomitantly high production values, as well as sophisticated, well-organised pictorial composition. These sequences, which are considerably dissimilar in style to the grittily realistic ones found elsewhere in *The Battle of Shanghai*, occur towards the end of the film, and are often shot at night. Here, the contrasts of darkened night and illuminating flashes from gunfire establish a more pictorially dramatic atmosphere than can be found elsewhere in the film, as *The Battle of Shanghai* employs forceful and dramatic filmic technique in order to drive home its message. *The Battle of Shanghai* does not end with this, but returns to a more realist mode near the conclusion of the film. Surprisingly, though, and as with *A Page of History*, the print of *The Battle of Shanghai* which is available for viewing does not really have any clear ending as such, but just fades away. Again, and as with *A Page of History*, it seems that the final sequences of the film may be missing. Nevertheless, *The Battle of Shanghai* remains a major achievement, and, arguably, the most important documentary film with a strong Hong Kong association to emerge during the period from the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937 to the fall of Hong Kong, in 1941.

**CONCLUSIONS**

If the documentary film production of Hong Kong between 1898 and 1941 is taken as a whole, a number of points become evident. Up till 1914 documentary film-making was entirely the province of western film-makers and most of the films shot in Hong Kong were destined for western, rather than Hong Kong
audiences. During this period Hong Kong functioned as a scenic, exotic location to which film companies in Britain, the US and France sent film-makers. And Hong Kong was also a film market, within which western films were distributed and screened. However, this period of film-making more or less came to an end with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, although, even prior to that, the genre of the ‘scenic documentary’ had been diminishing, at least as a substantive, industry-backed genre. These films also followed the general development of the actuality film up to 1914. At the beginning, the Edison ‘short’, ‘animated photograph’, or ‘living picture’ *Hong Kong Wharf Scene* (1898) was one reel (50 feet) in length, and one minute in duration. Like all the earliest films it is concerned only with capturing movement through space and time, and evoking ‘awe and admiration for their faithfulness to true-life action’. There is no organisation within the shot here, and, instead, the objective is to capture the random and chance events of the everyday. The added dimension here is, of course, the combination of exotic oriental and colonial. However, this exists as a sub-text only, and it is the realist imperative of *Hong Kong Wharf Scene*, and the other Hong Kong Edison shorts, which is the predominating factor. These films show a far-off place. As such, these ‘animated photographs’ take on the role and legacy of the nineteenth-century photograph, their subjects selected on the basis of visuality and ‘expressing no idea or feeling . . . their frame of reference limited’. As with all the early actuality films shot around the world, by 1900 films shot in Hong Kong were already becoming longer. For example, *Circular Panorama of Hong Kong* (Rosenthal, Warwick, UK, 1900) is already two reels, and two minutes long. Such films still did not employ editing, however, and it appears that it was not until 1907, four years after editing was introduced in America, that the first edited films shot in Hong Kong appear. So, for example, *Through Hong Kong* (Urban-Eclipse, France, 1907), is 627 feet in length, twelve minutes long, and employs basic cuts. As its title suggests, a film such as *Through Hong Kong* is also a film about the city, and it is the city of Hong Kong, rather than its landscape, that predominates in these films. In fact it appears that it was not until 1909 that the first film to explore the Hong Kong landscape in a substantive manner appeared: Urban-Eclipse’s *Up the Mountain from Hong Kong* (1909), which, however, still begins with the city.

The First World War put an end to the genre of the simple scenic documentary film shot in Hong Kong, and also brought the emerging Hong Kong film industry to a halt. It was not until 1923 that one of the first documentary films to be made in Hong Kong appeared: Lai Man-wai’s *Chinese Competitors at the Sixth Far East Sports Games in Japan*. After that, documentary film production continued in a very limited manner, adversely affected by, first, the growth of the silent feature film, and, second, the growth of the sound film; and it was not until 1936, and the run-up to the Sino-Japanese war, that
important documentary films, and also newsreels, began to be made. From 1936 to 1941, apart from a few scenic documentaries made by Hollywood companies, and Grandview’s newsreel, Grandview Review, the documentary film in Hong Kong was increasingly dominated by a China focus, and, amongst other factors, this reflected the fact that, by the late 1930s, the Chinese documentary film-making community in Hong Kong had yet to develop much of a sense of identity with the territory as either Chinese ‘home’ or British-maintained colony. As argued earlier in this chapter, colonial Hong Kong entered the Second World War without any substantive degree of committed support from its local population, and it seems that this lack was reflected in the documentary films which emerged from the colony during the late 1930s, and up to the Japanese invasion of December 1941.

NOTES

8. Tsang, A Modern History, p. 11.
12. Pepper, Keeping Democracy at Bay, p. 40
13. Ibid. p. 41.
17. Porter, The Lion’s Share, p. 10.
20. Ibid. p. 62.
22. Ibid. p. 66.
23. Ibid.
26. Ibid. p. 12.
27. Ibid. p. 11.
29. Ibid.
32. Pepper, *Keeping Democracy at Bay*, p. 76.
33. Ibid.
34. Tsang, *A Modern History*, p. 110
40. Ibid. p. 24.
41. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
46. Stokes and Hoover, *City on Fire*, p. 18.
48. Lam, Agnes (ed.), ‘Oral History: Lai Man-wai’, in *The Hong Kong-Guangdong Film Connection* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2005), p. 132.
50. Ibid. p. 18.
51. Tsang, *A Modern History*, p. 84.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
57. *Beijing Youth Daily*, op. cit.
58. It is not entirely clear if this person was Yu Mo-wan, as the *Beijing Youth Daily* gives the name of a person by the name of Yu Mu-yung.
60. Ibid.
61. Law, Wai-ming, ‘Hong Kong’s Cinematic Beginnings’, p. 23.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid.
66. Wong, Mary (ed.), Hong Kong Filmography, Vol. 1, 1913–1941 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 1997), p. 597.
68. Ibid. p. 208.
69. Chu, Hong Kong Cinema, p. 8.
70. Ibid. p. 9.
71. Fu and Desser, The Cinema, p. 213.
72. Wong, Hong Kong Filmography, p. 605.
73. Ibid. p. 600.
74. Ibid. p. 606.
76. Ibid.