Outtakes and Lost Film: The Fragmentary Encounter between “Newsreel” Wong and the “Chinese Colleen Moore”

The newsreel archive, as with archives of mass media broadly writ, is by default “incomplete, only partially accessible, and often arbitrary in what remains.”¹ The footage itself reveals little about the history it represents. Instead, as Joseph Clark argues, “the power and meaning of newsreels lay largely in how they circulated among the publics they addressed and helped to create.”² My study takes up this insight to consider the newsreel as a system. But it deals with the distinct challenge of approaching footage that was not publicly distributed and therefore, to follow Jaimie Baron, did not contribute to the formation of historical discourse because, from a reception-centered perspective, undistributed footage was never experienced by a historical

². Clark, 204.

audience to be historically meaningful.\textsuperscript{3} Newsreel outtakes, in their fragmentary and uncompleted forms, provide important venues for media scholars to interrogate both the historiographical and ethnographical value of moving images while challenging dominant methodologies for studying mass media and visual culture that assume and rely on the production-distribution-exhibition circuit of completed work.

This essay examines the unedited and historically undistributed Fox Movietone newsreel footage titled “Chinese Motion Picture Studio—outtakes” preserved at the Moving Image Research Collections (MIRC) at the University of South Carolina.\textsuperscript{4} Among the large amount of China-related Fox Movietone footage available for streaming in the collection, this five-minute, unedited black-and-white sound newsfilm shot on January 23, 1934, records a presumably silent film production of a nightclub scene, probably taken at the Shanghai Tianyi Studio. The footage is an invaluable filmic record of the making of a Chinese film in an era of which the majority of films are lost. The footage is also curious for its paratext available in the online database identifying the actress as the “Chinese Colleen Moore,” making her the Chinese equivalent of one of the most iconic flappers and American stars of the 1920s. More curious still, among the crew who shot the film was the legendary cameraman H. S. “Newsreel” Wong (a.k.a. Wang Haisheng or Wang Xiaoting). Most famous for his photograph \textit{Bloody Saturday} (1937) shot during the Battle of Shanghai in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), Wong’s work was so sensational that Hearst Metrotone produced and released a news story about the “ace movie photographer” himself, titled “Chinese Cameraman Proves War Hero.”\textsuperscript{5} Wong contributed a vast array of images to both the US and Chinese mass media in the 1920s and 1930s, yet there remains a dearth of information and scholarship regarding this transpacific media worker.

To understand “Chinese Motion Picture Studio—outtakes” as the fragment of an encounter between the “Chinese Colleen Moore” and H. S. Wong, the outtakes provide an important venue for media scholars to interrogate both the historiographical and ethnographical value of moving images while challenging dominant methodologies for studying mass media and visual culture that assume and rely on the production-distribution-exhibition circuit of completed work.


4. The official Fox library identification number for the story is “Fox Movietone News story 21-169.” The footage can be accessed through the Fox Movietone News Collection at the University of South Carolina Libraries, accessed January 31, 2024, \url{https://digital.tcl.sc.edu/digital/collection/MVTN/id/5887/rec/6}. Evolved from the silent newsreel Fox News, established in 1919, Fox Movietone News ran from October 1927 to October 1963, delivering twice-weekly news stories that kept the American moviegoing audience informed about current events as well as foreign cultures and traditions. Audiences outside the United States were presented with American pastimes and stories of regional interest. Shown before the feature film presentation alongside cartoons and other short subjects, newsreel (similar to newspaper) covers a variety of topics, including domestic and international politics, emerging technologies, fashion, sports, and human-interest stories. The advent of television news ended the golden age of newsreel even though it continued to be distributed theatrically into the late 1960s. See Clark, \textit{News Parade}, 4; Fox Movietone Newsreel Collection, accessed January 31, 2024, \url{https://www.foxmovietonenums.com}; and Hearst Metrotone News Collection, UCLA Library Film & Television Archive, accessed January 31, 2024, \url{https://www.cinema.ucla.edu/hearst-metrotone-news}.

5. This news story was recently made available to stream online by the UCLA Film & Television Archive at \url{https://newsreels.net/v/4mr522a}.
“Newsreel” Wong, I navigate two methodological conundrums: the problematic status of newsreel outtakes that were never seen by a historical audience and the potentials and pitfalls of using digital archives to identify and track historical figures. My attempt to excavate the backstory of the five-minute outtakes resulted in a fragmentary tale, one that is reflective of the miscellaneous materials that I was able to gather.

The problematic status of outtakes has been discussed and debated in recent scholarship. According to Dan Streible, outtakes is a broad and not always accurate “catchall.”6 Yet, as Mark Garrett Cooper contends, the term is useful and necessary firstly because “modern cataloging schemes consider titles indispensable.”7 As an archival marker appended to the descriptive title, the term outtakes helps researchers distinguish materials that had not reached historical audiences from the ones that were included in released prints and exhibited.8

But this overly general distinction can be misleading, not only because the status of circulation isn’t always certain. Outtakes can also give the inaccurate impression of the actual existence of a finished work, with the outtakes consisting of materials that were taken out. As Cooper notes, “most of the material that survives in their archives cannot be ‘outtakes’ in the strict sense [of] the term. In the most likely scenario, there never was a completed, ‘cut,’ or manifest story that might have included any given shot.”9 In this sense, the “Chinese Motion Picture Studio—outtakes” could be more accurately described as unedited footage—“rolls shot by crews on newsreel assignment but never cut or previewed.”10 Unedited footage, Streible clarifies, “offers exceptional documentation of the world as seen before editorial intervention”; although such footage did not reach historical audiences, it is “in retrospect often a more valued ‘asset,’ serving a time capsule function, a pointer to the production process, and sometimes an ethnographic record of sorts.”11 Streible’s statement echoes Jane Gaines’s notion that we interrogate documentary’s complicated relationship to the real and, in particular, to see historical ethnographic filmmaking not only as the negatively defined “cinema of taxidermy” or “cinema of romantic preservationism” but also as “the genuine quest for knowledge about the totally unknown and unfamiliar.”12 “Chinese Motion Picture Studio—outtakes” indeed might be read as an instance of “fascinated documentary looking,” an epistaphilic and self-reflexive view that invites speculative inquiries not only about the profilmic event it documents, but also the production of the footage itself.13

8. Cooper and Baron, 310–312.
9. Cooper and Baron, 312.
10. Streible, “Fifty Terms for Newsfilm,” 258.
11. Streible, 258.
The “Camera Man’s Dope Sheet” for “Chinese Motion Picture Studio—outtakes” states that the footage shows “[h]ow motion pictures are filmed in China.” A document used by crew members to record what they’ve shot on an assignment, the dope sheet can be indicative of the intention behind production. The outtakes contain about twenty shots of the production of a cabaret scene in what the dope sheet calls “the China studio [sic] which is the most up to date motion picture studio in the Far East.” The shots were taken from various angles, at different distances, foregrounding the scale and modern technologies of the studio set. Indeed, the dope sheet states that “[the studio] has modern equipments [sic] with trained men to work them.” A high-angle panning shot, for instance, oversees a dancing crowd, the director, and the cameraman, while taking in the array of tall lighting equipment. The studio’s complex lighting system is of obvious importance to the newsreel filmmakers because it is also mentioned in the notation of shot 4 (“Full cabaret scene with lighting system”). The film was designed to introduce familiar, modern filmmaking practices in China to a general moviegoing audience, even as its potential appeal derives from a sense of so-called authentic exoticism—a peek behind the scenes in a movie studio in the “Far East.”

The semi-colonial Republican Chinese urban culture is embodied in the studio replica of a cabaret, the fashionable young men and women on set, the dancing bodies and movements, and the jazz music. Out of all these elements, the figure of the Chinese Modern Girl stands out. “With its painted face, bobbed or permed hair, fashionable qipao, and high-heel shoes,” the Modern Girl look, as Madeleine Y. Dong has argued, “had become a passport to opportunity and a dress code of necessity for young female city dwellers” by the 1930s. The Modern Girl look pervades and is unmistakably celebrated and fetishized in the newsreel outtakes. The most aesthetically stunning shot in the outtakes may be the low angle, close-up of a woman’s high-heeled feet and calves under her hemline in the left foreground, while the busy dancing legs and flowing drapes of other figures shuttle in the background of the shot. Almost half of the shots revolve around an actress identified in the dope sheet as “Miss Grace Nee known in China as the Chinese Colleen Moore” performing different intimate relationships with men.

No information pertaining to a “Grace Nee” exists in the archive. While Colleen Moore was immensely popular with Chinese audiences, I have found no other record that compares a Chinese star with her. As with any research

15. The dope sheet records eighteen shots, obviously counting the shot interrupted by camera stops as one single shot.
16. “Camera Man’s Dope Sheet.”
18. The practice of comparison is common in Republican Chinese movie magazines. See, for instance, “Zhongmei mingxing duizhao biao” [A table of comparisons between Chinese and American stars], Yingxi Shenghuo [Movie weekly] 24, in which Hu Die is compared with Janet Gaynor, Ruan Lingyu with Renée Adorée, Lin Chuchu with Mary Pickford, and so on.
endeavor, luck is a necessary element. And I am in luck because “Nee” or “Ni” is not a terribly common surname in Chinese. Using different keyword combinations in the Chinese Periodical Full-Text Database (1911–1949), I was able to locate a few actresses surnamed Ni during the 1920s and 1930s. Finally, a photo of Ni Miaoyu published in the illustrated paper Movie Pictorial on July 6, 1927 appears to be identifiable with the actress in the unedited footage. This exciting find only leads to more puzzles, however. For instance, Ni seems to have been active only in the years of 1927 and 1928, with newspapers reporting her appearance in three films produced by Tianyi Film Company. To complicate matters further, I found that Ni Miaoyu might have been the “society star” Ni Ailian, whom in one English caption in a 1928 Peiyang Pictorial News also is called “Miss Alice Nie.”

Chinese high-end illustrated magazines or pictorials from this era routinely published photographs of socialites, courtesans, and fashionable girls without supplying much background information about the subject. Yet for consumers as well as scholars of Republican Chinese mass media, these women remain of interest as types. Falling short of a coherent narrative of the person herself, Ni’s photos are typical Modern Girl views—snippets added to the already fragmentary and fleeting moving images of the newsreel out-takes, emblematic of a kaleidoscopic modernity that embraces the design aesthetics of fragmentation and discontinuity. Rather than identify the actress in front of the camera, the naming of Ni as the “Chinese Colleen Moore” leads us to the cameraman who likely left this trace in the dope sheet.

H. S. “Newsreel” Wong achieved fame as a photojournalist for documenting major historical events. However his repertoire encompasses an array of genres such as scenic landscapes, ethnographic photo essays, celebrity culture, and even location shooting in China for the Hollywood production The Good Earth (Sidney Franklin, 1937). Existing accounts of Wong’s early career are extremely elliptical, largely anecdotal, and oftentimes contradictory. Having cross-referenced multiple sources, I was able to confirm that around 1923, Wong joined an American excursion team to the highland Northwest of China, from Inner Mongolia, through Gansu, Xinjiang, to Tibet. The arduous journey lasted more than two years and might have been the starting point of his career in photojournalism. The photos of deserts, snow land, mountains, exotic animals, peoples, and cultures as well as Wong’s own weathered and rugged figure were brought to readers of the newly founded pictorial the Young Companion in 1926, along with his narration written in half-literary, half-vernacular Chinese. Targeting a Chinese urban

23. “Wangjun tanxian ji” [Adventures of Mr. Wang], Liangyou [The Young Companion], no. 4, May 15, 1926, 10–11.
readership, Wong frequently drew on discourses of modernity, masculinity, and orientalism not unlike cameramen from the West.24

Wong may have made the acquaintance of Ariel L. Varges during this excursion, who was also a regular contributor to high-end Chinese pictorials under the Chinese name Fan Jishi. Varges allegedly arranged this “trip to Mongolia . . . [during which] he crossed the great Gobi Desert, where white men have hardly ever set foot.”25 Sometime after Wong returned from the excursion, Varges hired him as his assistant and interpreter and together they reported the Northern Expedition in 1926 for International Newsreel.26 By 1934, MGM-Hearst Metrotone hired Wong as a staff cameraman, and he worked as a member of a crew named Orient No. 3. From 1929 to 1934, Hearst partnered with Fox to produce twice-weekly sound newsreels distributed through MGM. During the five years of partnership, Fox-Hearst produced simultaneously Hearst Metrotone News and Fox Movietone News.27 The negatives were frequently developed and stored by Fox Movietone offices in New York, which explains why, although Wong was an employee of Hearst Metrotone, the “Chinese Motion Picture Studio—outtakes” could be found in the Fox Movietone collection.28

Tracing Wong’s career up to the point of the making of the newsreel, I propose the possibility of Mingxing (Star) Motion Picture Company to be the studio featured in the footage.29 Wong had previous connections with Mingxing when he filmed Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford’s 1929 visit to Shanghai and their tour of the studio.30 Wong also filmed Anna May Wong’s trip to Shanghai in 1936, during which the Chinese American star visited the shooting of Jingangzuan (Diamond, dir. Xu Xinfu, 1936) at Mingxing.31 Similar

28. Greg Wilsbacher (Curator, Newsfilm and Military Collections, University of South Carolina Libraries), personal correspondence with author, November 5, 2019. Dr. Wilsbacher also told me that “[w]hen the Fox-Hearst partnership ended in October 1934 Fox kept released and unreleased material produced for Fox Movietone News and much unreleased material left over from Hearst Metrotone News productions.” My special thanks to Dr. Wilsbacher for his generous guidance and assistance along the way.
29. According to curator Greg Wilsbacher, the identification of Tianyi Studio was made in collaboration with students from the Beijing Film Academy over a decade ago. Unfortunately, no research notes can be located in the archive, nor does he know the names of these researchers. Wilsbacher, personal correspondence, January 7, 2021.
31. The newsreel footage of Anna May Wong’s trip to China can be accessed at “Anna May Wong Visits Shanghai, China” (silent, 5/1/1936), UCLA Film & Television Archive, October 12, 2017, YouTube video, 8:22, accessed January 31, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mDJDt2vD7w&t. The film production Anna May Wong visited was documented in the actor Gong Jianong’s memoir. See Gong Jianong, Gong Jianong congying huiyi lu [A memoir of Gong Jianong’s film career], vol. 2 (Beijing: Zhongguo dabaikent quanshu chubanshe, 2013), 476.
art deco production design and the mise-en-scène of the cabaret dancing sequence appear in the extant all-star Mingxing production *Nüer Jing* (Bible for girls, Cheng Bugao et al., 1934). Might the film shoot recorded in the out-takes be a rehearsal in which Ni served as a stand-in for other major stars? Or maybe the production itself was never completed, just like the newsreel story? These questions may be unanswerable, but the processes of excavation and speculation expose us to the infrastructures of film and celebrity culture—the environment of the studio, behind-the-scenes crew, uncredited actors, and journalistic activities—that are oftentimes never seen on-screen. The reward of this circuitous journey is thus not the miraculous recovery of a supposedly lost narrative feature film—the cherished object of film history—but the fragments of encounters picked up on the search for answers across multilingual, multimedia, and transnational archives. The methodological challenges this historically unseen and unedited footage presents push us, as media scholars, to pursue new approaches to hermeneutics and historiography and to embrace the contingency that initiated us on this journey in the first place.

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