Yin as the specificity of Hong Kong cinema: mediated tradition and critical potential

Benjamin Freudenberg
Hong Kong Baptist University

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.hkbu.edu.hk/etd_oa

Recommended Citation
Freudenberg, Benjamin, "Yin as the specificity of Hong Kong cinema: mediated tradition and critical potential" (2015). Open Access Theses and Dissertations. 188. https://repository.hkbu.edu.hk/etd_oa/188

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Electronic Theses and Dissertations at HKBU Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of HKBU Institutional Repository. For more information, please contact repository@hkbu.edu.hk.
Yin as the Specificity of Hong Kong Cinema: Mediated Tradition and Critical Potential

FREUDENBERG, Benjamin

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Principal Supervisor: Prof. LO Kwai Cheung
Hong Kong Baptist University
January 2015
Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work which has been done after registration for the degree of PhD at Hong Kong Baptist University, and has not been previously included in a thesis or dissertation submitted to this or any other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualifications.

Signature: _____________________

Date: January 2015
Acknowledgement

I am extremely grateful for the continuous assistance from my partner and our families. Without their generous help and encouragement this thesis would not have been possible.

I wish to express my gratitude to Prof. Lo Kwai Cheung for his support, academic as well as spiritual, of the dissertation throughout its development and realization. Furthermore, I want to thank the Humanities Dept. at Hong Kong Baptist University, Prof. Zhou Ning (Xiamen University) for his contributions at the outset of the project, and my external examiners Prof. James A. Steintrager (UC Irvine) and Prof. Lin Song Hwee (CUHK).
Abstract

In the analysis of Hong Kong cinema side notes on the relationship between particular motifs or stylistic features and Chinese intellectual history are relatively common. Fleshing out this relationship, however, is problematic due to the intricacies of Chinese thought as well as pace and volume of popular culture. In spite of this difficult relation, the thesis reconstructs the narrative and stylistic development of post-war Hong Kong cinema against relevant aspects of pre-modern Chinese thought, demonstrating how the latter provides an effective framework in which to explicate prominent motifs and visual architecture. Yin, or ‘concealment’, furnishes the conceptual space for the encounter, isolating relevant elements in the Legalist, Confucian, Daoist, and aesthetic canon and informing the analysis of select Hong Kong films.

The body of the dissertation is comprised of four chapters; each juxtaposes an aspect of pre-modern thought with cinematic texts chosen to illustrate distinct discursive movements around themes essential to an understanding of post-/colonial Hong Kong modernity. Beginning with the depiction of the legal order, the first chapter details the narrative characterization of modern law and its subversion in the extra-legal space of the *jianghu*. The debate between Legalism and Confucian natural law thus ‘grounds’ a pop-cultural suspicion regarding the efficacy of positive law as such. The following chapter tackles the issue of identity: recounting early attempts to stabilize a traditional culturalist version of belonging, narrative criticism of traditional patriarchy and Western hegemony, and recent fears of re-colonization by the motherland, Chineseness is shown to denote an event eluding popular culture. A third chapter interrogates the construction of fate and, implicit in it, narrativity as such. A discussion of Daoism - expressing both a faith in ontologically guaranteed restoration and a critical insight into virtual potential concealed in acculturation - connects pre-modern thought to Hong Kong cinema which first embraces restoration in popular formula and later attempts to escape its circularity. The fourth chapter focuses on stylistic evolution; an influential pre-modern treatise on the aesthetics of landscape painting provides the framework for an account of the characteristic sinicization of visual architecture subjecting space and time to momentum in careful framing and editing. While this style is characteristic of action-oriented plots, it also conditions aesthetic refutations and recent returns to more realist approaches.

Conceptually explicating Hong Kong cinema through Chinese intellectual tradition runs the risk of merely subsuming the former to the latter. This would miss the characteristic mediation of tradition as it is ‘resuscitated’ in popular culture, its imbrication in the contemporary situation. As such, the thesis cannot evade addressing the meaning of this mediation, a task requiring additional conceptual tools. Critical theory fulfills this purpose throughout the main body of the thesis supporting arguments regarding the critical potential of mediated tradition within post-/colonial modernity. A concluding chapter summarizes the thesis’ findings, reflects on the aesthetic impasses of mass culture even where it expresses discontent with modernity, and reiterates the persisting relevance of Adorno’s critique of the culture industry, especially for the analysis of popular culture.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texts and Concepts</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Premodern Root and Modern Invocation</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing Critical Potential</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addressing the Whole</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Within and Without the Legal Order</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Unicorn of Justice</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familial Law and Alien Law</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawlessness and Corruption</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radicalizing Law</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Law of Enjoyment</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yin and the Law</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Identity between Recognition and Indignity</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundations</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unification and Expansion</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embodying the Traditional</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backlash</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity in Symptoms</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging and Restlessness</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Fate between Restoration and Rupture</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daoist Tension</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unnatural Love</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transsexual Harmony</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming Monkey</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listless Drifting Interrupted</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monkey King Revisited</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Against Symmetry</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of Loss</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Visual Specificity</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Typical Scene of Instruction</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Problem of Space</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinetic Construction</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The End of Hong Kong Cinema</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Stylistic Trajectory and Yin</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Structuralism of Specificity</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nostalgia and Mockery</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Untruth of the Whole</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particular and Structure</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The aim of this thesis is to explore and conceptualize the relation between Chinese tradition and Hong Kong cinema. Although invoked sporadically, usually in the form of narrative reflections of Confucian ethics, this relation is not particularly well developed for a number of reasons, most of which I hope to address in due course. Obviously the objects whose relation is in question here are comparatively large which complicates matters. Indeed their ‘size’ is of such an extent that one might deny the existence of an object corresponding to the respective term, particularly in the case of ‘Chinese tradition’. Clearly the mere notion active in thought does not secure such a correspondence. Couching the inquiry in such ‘grand’ terms will thus necessarily involve some philosophical terminology.

To elaborate the relation between Chinese tradition and Hong Kong cinema is to circumscribe the peculiarities or specific character of the latter. Following established practice in scholarly work, one could say the hypothesis of the thesis is that the specificity of Hong Kong cinema, its narrative and stylistic character, derives from Chinese tradition. This is of course not much of a hypothesis, for where else could contemporary culture gain specific traits if not from the sediments of the past. Both are part of culture in the broad sense, yet distinct: Chinese tradition in the emphatic sense denotes a canon of relatively stable philosophical and quasi-/religious ideas already institutionalized in the premodern and active into modernity. Hong Kong cinema, on the other hand, is a site of aesthetic (mass) production at which the post-/colonial sociality and the element of tradition are mediated.

Mediation here has (at least) two meanings: for one, aspects of the socio-political situation find an aesthetisized expression in the medium of film.

---

1 Hegel, *Lectures*, 224.
2 In this case the problem of nominalism and metaphysical conceptualism (*Begriffsrealismus*). See Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie* 2, 247.
Additionally and more importantly, this expression mediates tradition in the modern setting. That is, it negotiates between recognizably traditional motifs and modernity in the specific situation of Hong Kong. Cinema as a mass medium is both conditioned by and conditions tradition in its ongoing narration. As will become apparent, this reciprocal relationship complicates an academic inquiry. In so far as narration relies on more or less determinate aspects of the traditional and deploys them in the modern context, simply identifying elements from a number of films with tradition would obscure the movement characteristic of the mediation. By the same token, opening ‘orthodox’ tradition to vernacular images of the traditional and their ab-/use in popular culture constantly threatens to undermine the coherence necessary to delineate specificity.

Treating culture as the critique of culture, or one part of culture as the critique of another, will create a certain hermeneutic tension throughout. This is already implicit in the (Western) etymology of the term ‘tradition’ denoting what is delivered across (time) but also linked to betrayal. Because tradition is defined in usage through time and to some extent anchored to premodern sources but also imbricated, already interpreted in the modern context, it may always be turned against itself: the source can be historicized to counter a received understanding of its meaning just as much as the exposure of a traditional element to (Hong Kong) modernity could reveal new meaning. The possibility of the latter is particularly important in so far as addressing the specificity of Hong Kong cinema as its relation to Chinese tradition readily tends towards subsumption.

Furthermore, if specificity in Hong Kong cinema forms in local dis-/continuities with tradition, and this is the assumption, this specificity has to be argued ‘upwards’ of the individual text. On the level of a cinema this means addressing the structure of genres, the evolution of formulas, specific narrative motifs and stylistic tropes in their development. As these are abstractions across particular films, the ‘upwards’ is constituted in the relation between individual texts. This makes for a discursive treatment in which aspects of narration related to tradition are thrown into relief in their movement between texts or the way in which they stabilize in form and formula but also take on new meaning in the
process of formation. The necessity of discursivity will also inform my discussions of methodology, particularly with regard to a variety of secondary sources dealing with Hong Kong cinema.

As the discursive approach constructs a trajectory between *select* texts - a problematic, yet unavoidable practice - some degree of process will undoubtedly emerge. In other words, even though there are discernibly stable tendencies across the ever growing number of films making up the cinema, things change even between original and remake. As a result, it would be unsatisfactory, impossible even, to merely describe this process and the way in which tradition conditions it. The question of judgement interferes with such an ‘outside perspective’, especially with regard to the function of tradition. Due to the reflective or narrative character of aesthetic mediation, any identification of traditional elements forces the issue of meaning, most notably a differentiation between tradition deployed as the semblance of indigeneity staged against global modernity and moments of authentic resistance. While such judgements are very difficult, the underlying issues still impose themselves on the discussion, particularly in the context of Hong Kong. Critical potential, the possibility for critique and its neutralization, is thus central to the thesis and as such reflected in the title.

In order to proceed, a number of tools will be needed: firstly, an adequately flexible, yet recognizable concept of Chinese tradition. Flexible in so far as a certain amount of ‘wiggle room’ is required to outline an image of the traditional today which connects to its premodern sources. Secondly, this space should enable a thematic circumscription to allow for a selection of relevant texts among the many available titles making up Hong Kong cinema. Thirdly, the issue of critical potential can only be addressed by falling back on a theoretical framework which exceeds film as an object, since critique implies an effect beyond the medium. All three of these problems of approach and method will be dealt with in the introduction. In the first section I will address the tension between data and concept already hinted at in the context of discursivity and trajectory. Since various approaches have been used in other works dealing with different aspects
of Hong Kong cinema and through different disciplines, this seems an opportune moment to supply a literature review. A second section will outline the problem space of specificity, that is the dynamics of the traditional between historic roots and modern (cinematic) invocations. The last component, a framework to interrogate critical potential, will make up the following section, essentially a legitimization of my choice of Adorno in this context. Lastly, I will synthesize these components into an outlook towards the five chapters making up the thesis.

**Texts and Concepts**

Apparent in the introductory sketch of the thesis’ aim and approach is that the negotiation between particular texts and concepts is a complex endeavor. This complexity is inherent to the field of the humanities, which forces conceptualization in its claim to scientificity but deals in meaning. That is, short of subscribing to relativism *tout court*, work in the humanities makes definitive statements within some framework of meaning. But in contrast to the natural sciences which guarantee the general validity of empirically verified knowledge by way of axioms and thus labor within a metaphysics structured to exclude history as well as psychology, frameworks in the humanities shift relative to socio-historically conditioned presuppositions. History as such, that is as a whole, therefore lurks underneath all frameworks of meaning and has to be accounted for. Hegel, “the first thinker to integrate the historical and systematic aspects within a single philosophical vision”\(^3\), attests to the complexity this brings about, especially with regard to the interpenetration of particular and universal.

If we were to affirm the individual text against conceptualization, the element of meaning would be lost, because it is a function of context. In other words, a purely empiricist description of a film would have to exhaustively capture all aspects of the text in a completely abstract fashion - the ‘1’s and ‘0’s making up the information of its digital copy are perhaps the best example of such a description. Preference for an individual figure or motif would already constitute a

---

\(^3\) Rockmore, *Before and After Hegel*, 54.
bias and contaminate such an empiricism, as would any relating such a figure or motif across texts. The other extreme, the pure affirmation of a concept against texts, is of course equally unhelpful: if I simply bring in a concept to subsume texts in whatever aspect conforms to it, very little is gained. I say ‘very little’ because it might appear as if this method proves the concept in a kind of case study. But while the application of a concept to the individual text can further our understanding of both, the former is technically impervious to the latter. Since we are not dealing with mechanical ‘laws’ in the humanities, the individual thing can neither confirm nor refute a concept. Rather, if there is dissonance between the two, the particularity of the thing has to be conceptualized in turn. Or as Dolar explains apropos of Hegel (on whose apparatus I will rely throughout),

 [...] for Hegel, facts cannot contradict theory not because of their lowly nature, but because they are always facts only if seized by a concept; a fact can acquire the dignity of a fact only by virtue of a concept that has selected it and represented it as relevant, so that there is no common ground where facts and concepts could meet, no interface between the two, and if there is indeed a confrontation it is only ever between concepts and concepts.4

Inversely then, whenever a ‘bare’ fact is cited against a concept, the question of the opposing concept lurking in the background of such a citation (otherwise known as ideology) arises.

In light of this constant tension between texts and concept, we are forced to abandon the safe footing both appear to afford on their own. I have already hinted at the complications this brings about here in the context of mediation: any academic inquiry requires a horizon or framework to even get off the ground, yet following the movement in and between texts can distend this horizon and destabilize the framework. To accommodate for the incoherence movement causes with regard to the conceptual frame, space will be granted to reflexive assessments of the necessary preconceptions active throughout.

Issues of frameworks and preconceptions are equally important in the communication with secondary sources. Depending on the respective field which

4 Dolar, “Hegel and Freud.”
informs inquiries into Hong Kong cinema, specific entry points are favored in the academic treatment to produce manageable corpora of texts for analysis. The input of a specific individual – the director in the auteur approach – is perhaps the most common example of this practice and Hong Kong cinema is no exception as we find monographs devoted to directors John Woo (吳宇森)⁵, Wong Kar-wai (王家衛)⁶, and Tang Shu Shuen (唐書璇)⁷. Individual articles organized around directors are numerous and often integrated into anthologies dealing with a particular period or genre (I will cite these sources further down). Furthermore, the Hong Kong Film Archive has produced a number of publications dedicated to prominent local directors, including Lung Kong (龍剛)⁸, Wong Tin-lam (王天林)⁹, and Chor Yuen (楚原)¹⁰ as well as Lee Tit (李鐵)¹¹, Kuei Chih-hung (桂治洪)¹², Zhu Shilin (朱石麟)¹³, Li Han-hsiang (李翰祥)¹⁴, and Lee Sun-fung (李晨風)¹⁵.

Since the corpus for the auteur approach can often accommodate the totality of the individual’s works, its selection of texts is immediately legitimized and potentially exhaustive. The framework in this case is often biographical, organizing sources of influence throughout a career into a coherent trajectory, a concept of the oeuvre. Although explicitly self-sufficient, grounded in cross-referencing a limited amount of texts and biographical fact, an implicit assumption necessarily goes beyond this empiricism: the initial choice to acknowledge the individual’s work in scholarly critique remains unfounded. Recourse to facts such as critical acclaim or box office success only opens the

---

⁵ Hall, John Woo.
⁶ Huang, Wu Yisen Zhan.
⁷ Teo, Wong Kar Wai.
⁸ Brunnete, Wong Kar Wai.
⁹ Bettinson, The Sensuous Cinema.
¹⁰ Pan and Ling, Wang Jiawei.
¹¹ Yau C., Filming Margins.
¹² Shing and Lau, Lung Kong.
¹³ Wong and Shing, Wong Tin-lam.
¹⁴ Ng and Kwok, Director Chor Yuen.
¹⁵ Ho and Chan, The Cinema of Lee Tit.
¹⁶ Ho and Li, Kuet Chih-hung.
¹⁷ Wong, Zhu Shilin.
¹⁸ Wong, Li Han-hsiang.
inquiry up to the multiple relations of films forming a cinema and the larger context of socio-cultural presuppositions.

Conversely, adopting the ‘global’ perspective on a cinema from the get-go, the immediate choice of texts is lost. A number of options arise to accommodate this lack in footing. One can for instance focus on just one film to facilitate a more in-depth look not just at the text in question but rather at a variety of ‘environmental factors’ like cultural context, production, distribution, reception, etc. Of particular importance in this context is a series of studies on the “New Hong Kong Cinema”\textsuperscript{16}. Apart from this particular publishing effort, individual films are of course routinely explored in essays and articles too numerous to cite here (many are included in anthologies indicated further down the line). One can also limit the oeuvre of an auteur to works of a particular genre to situate it in between the auteur and genre approaches\textsuperscript{17} or explore the contributions of a particular individual to various aspects of film production in a broader context possibly introducing a variety of source materials\textsuperscript{18}.

In the context of film studies the use of the genre as a framework marks an important departure from the seemingly safe grounding afforded by the single text or the oeuvre. Since it openly addresses a whole host of texts presumed accessible as the totality of a particular narrative or stylistic variety, it necessarily has to wrestle with the conceptual core lending coherence to a genre, yet represented only by a subset of texts. In the case of established genres this subset tends to

\textsuperscript{16} The following volumes on a variety of more or less acclaimed films have been published so far: Hjort, \textit{Stanley Kwan’s Center Stage.} Stokes, \textit{Peter Ho-Sun Chan’s He’s a Woman, She’s a Man.} Marchetti, \textit{Andrew Lau and Alan Mak’s Infernal Affairs.} Yue, \textit{Ann Hui’s Song of the Exile.} Gan, \textit{Fruit Chan’s Durian Durian.} Cheung, \textit{Fruit Chan’s Made in Hong Kong.} Fang, \textit{John Woo’s A Better Tomorrow.} Williams, \textit{John Woo’s Bullet in the Head.} Hall, \textit{John Woo’s The Killer.} Ingham, \textit{Johnny To Kei-Fung’s PTU.} Teo, \textit{King Hu’s A Touch of Zen.} Ford, \textit{Mabel Cheung Yuen-Ting’s An Autumn Tale.} Schroeder, \textit{Tsui Hark’s Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain.} Dissanayake, \textit{Wong Kar-wai’s Ashes of Time.} Tambling, \textit{Wong Kar-wai’s Happy Together.} Vojković, \textit{Yuen Woo Ping’s Wing Chun.} \textsuperscript{17} Ho and Ho, \textit{The Swordsman and his Jianghu.}
begin with the already canonized - *deferring* the issue of legitimate selection - and possibly move towards examples not yet considered in critical discourse, perhaps in some ways at odds with the conceptual outline of the genre. Especially in the fields of film studies and film history a number of genres specific to Hong Kong cinema have been explored in edited volumes.

The publications by the Urban Council following the yearly Hong Kong International Film Festival have been particularly important for the development of film historical and critical analyses of Hong Kong cinema. Covering multiple angles “from auteur to genre research to ideological analysis”\(^\text{19}\), these collections build on retrospective showings at the festival and bring together varying perspectives on the central genres of the Cantonese Opera film\(^\text{20}\), melodrama\(^\text{21}\), swordplay film\(^\text{22}\), *gongfu* film\(^\text{23}\), comedy\(^\text{24}\), and the New Wave 「新浪潮」\(^\text{25}\). Genre characteristics are of course taken up routinely in essays and anthologies\(^\text{26}\) beyond the institutional support the festival has granted, but the latter has opened up the space for sustained, in-depth discussion. Apart from the genre perspective, a second prominent angle has been the (somewhat arbitrary) periodization by decade: following a survey on the postwar years\(^\text{27}\), critical essays, short biographies, and plot summaries for major titles of the 1950s\(^\text{28}\), 1960s\(^\text{29}\), 1970s\(^\text{30}\), and 1980s\(^\text{31}\) were issued. Similarly anchored in a specific period (rather than a genre), we find another Film Archive entry on 60s cinema\(^\text{32}\), an edited volume on the hybridity of 1970s cinema\(^\text{33}\) as well as monographs and articles analyzing

\(^{19}\) Ng and Cheung, Introduction, xix; 「...由作者論到類型研究，到意識形態分析...」my translation.
\(^{20}\) Li C., *Cantonese Opera*.
\(^{21}\) Li C., *Cantonese Melodrama*.
\(^{22}\) Leong, *A Study of Hong Kong Swordplay Film*.
\(^{23}\) Lau S., *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film*.
\(^{24}\) Li C., *The Traditions of Hong Kong Comedy*.
\(^{25}\) Law K., *The Hong Kong New Wave*.
\(^{26}\) Chang, B., *Jianghu Wei Ding*.
\(^{27}\) Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema*.
\(^{28}\) Law, Ng, and Cheuk, *Xianggang Dianying*.
\(^{29}\) Cheuk, *Hong Kong New Wave Cinema*.
\(^{30}\) Lin, *Hong Kong Cinema Survey*.
\(^{31}\) Lin and Yeung, *Cantonese Cinema Retrospective (1950-1959)*.
\(^{32}\) Shu, *Cantonese Cinema Retrospective (1960-69)*.
\(^{33}\) Li C., *A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies*.
\(^{34}\) Law K., *Hong Kong Cinema in the Eighties*.
\(^{35}\) Kwok, *An Emerging Modernity*.
\(^{36}\) Lo and Man, *Age of Hybridity*.
developments since the handover\textsuperscript{34}.

Also situated within the context of film studies and history is the culturo-economic perspective using the studio as a framework. The Hong Kong Film Archive has published collections of film-historical/critical essays augmented by a range of information on major studios, including the Shaw Brothers (邵氏兄弟)\textsuperscript{35}, Cathay (國泰)\textsuperscript{36}, Kong Ngee (光藝)\textsuperscript{37}, Golden Harvest (嘉禾)\textsuperscript{38}, Union (中聯)\textsuperscript{39}, Sun Luen (新聯)\textsuperscript{40} as well as Great Wall (长城) and Feng Huang (鳳凰)\textsuperscript{41}. While the film-historic data here provides an empirical foundation for the studio as an object of inquiry, the cultural import and meaning of their \textit{products} is still mostly explored through the genre and auteur approaches.

Aligning the developments of the industry with its genres and acclaimed auteurs results in broader histories like Zhao’s \textit{History of Hong Kong Film}\textsuperscript{42} which traces developments and shifts in the processes of production and channels of distribution while integrating narrative and stylistic characteristics. Bordwell’s \textit{Planet Hong Kong}\textsuperscript{43} limits the time frame considerably but equally builds a description around the economic structure of studios, specific genres, and known directors. While certainly a point of reference, the book’s general argument for quality of composition in contrast to Hollywood and rather unreflected use of the term ‘entertainment’ limit its usefulness in the context of tradition and in light of the ‘Theoretical’ thrust. Additionally, Desser recently outlined the development of the Cantonese film industry in the first two post-war decades\textsuperscript{44}.

Due to the rather low number of monographs dedicated to Hong Kong cinema as a whole, however, recourse to these works is informative, particularly in regards to film selection and methodological approach. Besides the histories just

\textsuperscript{34} Lee, V., \textit{Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997}.
\textsuperscript{35} Veg, “Anatomy of the Ordinary.”
\textsuperscript{36} Wong, \textit{The Shaw Screen}.
\textsuperscript{37} For another volume dedicated to the Shaw Brothers see: Fu, \textit{China Forever}.
\textsuperscript{38} Wong, \textit{The Cathay Story}.
\textsuperscript{39} Wong, \textit{The Glorious Modernity of Kong Ngee}.
\textsuperscript{40} Po and Lau, \textit{Golden Harvest}.
\textsuperscript{41} Ng, G., \textit{One For All}.
\textsuperscript{42} Ho, \textit{The Mission}.
\textsuperscript{43} Wong, \textit{An Age of Idealism}.
\textsuperscript{44} Zhao, \textit{Xianggang Dianying}.
\textsuperscript{45} Bordwell, \textit{Planet Hong Kong}, 2nd ed.
\textsuperscript{46} Desser, “A New Orphan Island Paradise.”
mentioned, Stephen Teo has explored the “extra dimensions” of Hong Kong film in chronological fashion by compacting just under a century of film production, personalities, movements and the socio-political contexts into a single volume45. Working within a similar time frame, Chu Yingchi explored that same totality around the question of Hong Kong film as a quasi-national cinema and identity between colonial past and repatriation46. Chu Yiu-Wai notes how,

Critics did not begin to turn the spotlight on Hong Kong cinema until the turn of the new millennium, when, together with the publication of a number of monographs, including Planet Hong Kong, Hong Kong cinema achieved the “status” of national cinema at long last.47

No matter the status, the (impending) handover has forced the issue of Hong Kong and its cinema; an increasing number of publications addressing the latter demonstrate the growing interest.

Evidenced (not just) by Chu’s treatment of Hong Kong cinema in the context of national identity, the meaning of cinematic texts easily extends beyond business organization, distribution, or craftsmanship. The necessary contextuality of meaning is most pronounced in approaches to (Hong Kong) cinema which select and read cinematic texts to interrogate non-cinematic issues. Particularly in the disciplines of cultural studies and film theory, the text is often explicitly addressed as a (distorted) reflection of objective social relations to be decoded as ideological smoke screen, set of symptoms, or even aesthetic resistance.

Works of this type can be very specific reconstructions of events and contexts in their cinematic reverberations like the handover48, the Cold War49, or even the social influence of cinema50. Edited volumes offer the opportunity to trace the trajectory of broader phenomena through history by bringing together a range of contributions of varying scope and across the boundaries of genre and sophistication; such phenomena include aspects of gender51 or the issues of

45 Teo, Hong Kong Cinema.
46 Chu Yingchi, Hong Kong Cinema.
47 Chu Yiu-Wai, Lost in Transition, 92.
48 Chen and Zhu, Wu Zhu Zhi Cheng.
49 Wong and Lee, The Cold War.
50 Li C., Changes in Hong Kong Society.
51 Pang and Wong, Masculinities.
transnationalism and transnational stardom. They can also be organized entirely around a concept: Ackbar Abbas’ description of Hong Kong as shaped by the “politics of disappearance”, in which the author has dedicated a larger section to the cinematic symptoms of these politics in post-70s cinema, particularly New Wave entries and the ‘arthouse’ of Wong Kar-wai, is perhaps the most prominent entry of this type. Additionally, the series of Hong Kong Readers has brought together a number of important papers originally published in a variety of anthologies and magazines thematically; of particular interest here are the volumes on culture and identity, popular culture, and literature. Somewhat less focused is an edited volume on 80 Years of Hong Kong Cinema.

Evident in this overview of relevant scholarship on Hong Kong cinema is the variety of descriptive and critical approaches ranging from film history to socio-cultural theory. I will rely on much of this material in the discussion of individual works, assessments of directors, genres, and periods, as well as the many connections between Hong Kong cinema and its socio-political environment elaborated throughout this array of contributions. While the secondary sources cited are not structured around the relation of Chinese tradition and cinema, certain aspects are nevertheless often outlined or at least grazed. Specifically in the historically inspired genres, informing much of the narrative and stylistic formations of Hong Kong cinema, connections to the premodern abound. In the context of masculinity, for instance, Pang notes how “[m]ost Hong Kong action films are [...] indebted to Chinese opera and other forms of traditional arts/philosophy, developing a cinematic style emphasizing the beauty and performativity of violence more than its destruction and brutality.”

---

52 Lo, Chinese Face/Off. 
Yau, E., At Full Speed. 
Louie, Hong Kong Culture. 
Chan, Remade in Hollywood. 
Szeto, The Martial Arts Cinema. 
Funnell, Warrior Women 
Leung and Willis, East Asian Film Stars. 
Abbas, Hong Kong. 
53 Pun and Yee, Narrating Hong Kong Culture. 
54 Ng and Cheung, Reading Hong Kong Popular Cultures. 
55 Cheung and Chu, Hong Kong Literature. 
56 Cai, Song, and Liu, Xianggang Dianying. 
57 Pang, “Post-1997 Hong Kong Masculinity,” 46. 
58
deceptively straightforward side note demonstrates the degree of complexity the ‘background’ of traditional performance, art, and thought imposes on Hong Kong cinema with respect to developments of both its content and form.

Consequently, addressing these continuities directly is a challenging task. In edited volumes analyses of cinematic texts are often framed by first situating the issue in its larger historico-cultural context; in the case of the “Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective”, for instance, the somewhat ungrateful task of providing this context fell to Sek Kei while the following essay explores the equally extensive field of the supernatural and cannibalism between opera and opera film.

More commonly, however, tradition and cultural heritage are invoked in very general terms as Confucian ‘family values’ or opera stage aesthetics. Cai’s essay on the “Chinese Cultural Network in Hong Kong Film” brings up many features of Chineseness as tradition (in this general sense) in an attempt to assert this ‘Greater Chinese’ context against a perceived cultural separatism. By mapping a number of traditional elements onto various phases in the development of Hong Kong cinema, Cai links “Confucian culture” with the cinema of Zhu Shilin, Lee Tit, another “realizer of traditional Chinese culture”, adds the element of “fierce class struggle”, Li Han-hsiang reintegrates regional opera into film, etc. This emphatic insistence on Chinese culture and tradition undergirding Hong Kong cinema functions primarily against a perceived “muddling of [Hong Kong’s] own national-ethnic consciousness, [to the point] where they almost aren’t Chinese anymore”, particularly in the wake of the economic rise of the 60s and 70s. As a result, Bruce Lee’s “Chinese gongfu” or Tsui Hark’s Wong Fei-hung indicate for Cai how “the subject isn’t limited to the small scope of a ‘Hongkonger’, but includes the whole ‘Chinese’ inside the ‘Hongkonger.’”

59 Sek, “Thoughts on Chinese Opera.”
60 Ng H., “Some Primitive Reminiscences.”
61 Cai, Xianggang Dianying.
62 Ibid., 44.
63 Ibid., 45; 「中華傳統文化的體現者」 (my translation).
64 Ibid.; 「激烈的階級鬥爭」 (my translation).
65 Ibid., p. 46.
66 Ibid.; 「...模糊了自己的民族意識，似乎自己已經不再是中國人...」 (my translation).
67 Ibid.; 「...主體沒有局限於“香港人”的小範疇，而是包括了“香港人”在內的整個“中國人”」 (my translation).
Clearly, the relationship between Chinese tradition and Hong Kong cinema is an immediately political topic caught in the either/or of re-/unification and separation. The pressure of this ‘simple’ decision will be felt throughout and the question of critical potential will hinge on the ability of texts to extricate themselves from this pressure.

Although there are occasional papers directly addressing the problem space of this thesis, even a recent anthology devoted to the question of *East Asian Cinema and Cultural Heritage*, much of the dialogue with secondary sources will take a rather piecemeal form. To throw into relief what Hong Kong cinema inherited from the premodern highbrow entails various points of contact with secondary sources: chiefly among them are large-scale presentations of Hong Kong cinema as a totality, conceptualizations of local genres as well as oeuvres, and links between Chinese thought and Hong Kong film around specific socio-cultural issues. The opposite direction - accounts of premodern aesthetics and intellectual history bridging into contemporary film - is negligible in its import; for any account seeking to explain cultural phenomena within their respective historical horizons such a bridging would be counterproductive.

*Premodern Root and Modern Invocation*

My initial remarks on tradition indicated a problem in its treatment as a stable entity to be linked to narrative and stylistic characteristics of Hong Kong cinema: the former is only the inert material mediated in narration when its meaning is fixed. For reasons of focus, this thesis is not the place to properly historicize the larger currents of Chinese intellectual history undergirding what I take to be Chinese tradition readily represented in the formula 「儒道墨法」, the four major schools of ‘Confucianism, Daoism, Mohism, Legalism’. To understand the evolution of these schools of thought and explain how and why they became ‘major schools’ as opposed to other minor ones obviously far exceeds the scope

---

68 Rodríguez, “Questions of Chinese Aesthetics.”
Collier, “A Repetition Compulsion.”
here and would lead away from Hong Kong cinema.

There are of course other traditions evident, for instance, in folk culture, regional opera or local deities and customs. Limiting tradition to premodern Chinese philosophy here is not meant to disqualify those other elements of culture which have historically stabilized in discernible forms. Rather, the focus on intellectual tradition orients the discussion of Hong Kong cinema towards its politically contested association with Chineseness. The narrow definition of tradition here emphasizes an enduring commitment to Chinese intellectual roots which finds expression in general education as much as in popular culture. By contrast, zeroing in on the particularity of regional and local traditions would highlight historical moments of tension always accompanying the split between high- and lowbrow. Because the latter denotes a difference with respect to Chinese tradition overall, that which was not institutionalized throughout Greater China, outlining a notion of folk tradition to be used in the analysis of Hong Kong cinema would be comparatively difficult.

Moreover, the idea of tradition active in narration is itself mediated by film. That is to say, the image of the traditional deployed in Hong Kong cinema is a reflection of a general education in and cultural consensus on intellectual heritage somewhat removed from ongoing scholarship on the historical meaning of Chinese philosophy. Solidified in formula and motif, popular culture essentially furnishes its own distinct image of tradition and deploys it discursively. The historically inspired genres, a mainstay of Hong Kong cinema, present aspects of this (mystified) image of tradition, but in the interest of exploration the selection will extend beyond these genres.

To bridge premodern tradition and its modern, pop-cultural mis-/appropriations, I will first outline and in the course of the following chapters flesh out a conceptual space or *topos* to explore the relation in a way that resonates with both. The term I have chosen to denote this *topos* is *yin* 「隱」, a character usually translated as ‘hide/hidden’, ‘conceal/concealed’, or ‘dormant’. All of these English meanings naturally lend themselves to an interrogation of aesthetics looking to reveal ideology and expose its mechanism. But the premodern sources
I will cite are much more specific in their (Confucian) injunction to conceal or their (Daoist) appeals to the hidden. This is part of the reason why I chose the Chinese character instead of an adequate translation (if such a translation is indeed possible). It also expresses a possibly wider applicability of the topos throughout cultures using Chinese characters 「漢字」 beyond the context of Hong Kong.

I speak of a conceptual space (or topos) as opposed to a concept because for the purposes of an exploration elements of intellectual heritage have to first be juxtaposed with narrative motifs and stylistic tendencies to then interrogate their possible relation and dynamics. Yin in this sense is first a keyword that can be tracked throughout the premodern classics of various schools to highlight characteristic traits. Forced to give an adequate translation, it would have to be something like ‘power’ or ‘ideology’ because that is what any discussion of culture ultimately boils down to. This makes an approach difficult. As Dolar explains,

[…] power cannot be reduced to something more fundamental lying behind it and of which it would be a mask, e.g. the economic sphere, productive forces and relations of production. It is not an epiphenomenon or a superstructure whose basis is somewhere else. There is no hidden depth of power, it is all on the surface and what is on the surface is all there is to it. Neither can it be reduced to an origin, transcendent or ‘natural’, from which it would derive and which would endow it with authority. There is nothing behind power and power is always already there, supported only by itself.70

In so far as power always already conditions relations and its structure is universal, we are dealing with general characteristics. But the particular culture which envelops and in this sense interacts with, rationalizes, occludes or perhaps exposes power is not. The thematic focal points of this thesis - law, identity, fate, and aesthetic form - all offer entry to this structure of power. I generally prefer the term ‘coherence’ over ‘power’ mainly because it fits the contexts of these focal points more readily. As the analysis moves to concrete texts, however, power will emerge as the central concern supporting the question of critical potential, which always denotes a contestation and destabilization of power structures.

This also entails that *yin* cannot be a concept foreign to non-Chinese thought as such, because that would lead to essentialism. As the discussions to follow will demonstrate, the philosophical positions espoused in Chinese thought are not without parallels in Western tradition, at least not as far as individual statements are concerned. Consequently, *yin* is not supposed to supplant Western theory - all application of theory to text already effects sufficiently frustrating amounts of resistance - but to ground and provide entry to the question of specificity, that is characteristic trait and particularity. *Yin* will thus describe the general structure of power and the particular articulations of Chinese power structure as conditioning Hong Kong cinema narratives and styles.

As is customary in Chinese philology, I will begin this outline with an etymology of the character: according to Xu Shen’s (*許慎*) *Shuowen Jiezi* 《說文解字》 (an important 2nd century dictionary), “*yin* is to cover/hide.”\(^{71}\) The character is made up of the radical on the left 「阝」 defined as “a big landmass, a mountain without rock (cliff)"\(^{72}\) and the phonetic component on the right which, as a character in its own right 「㥯」, is in turn explained as “to be attentive, prudent, or to act cautiously.”\(^{73}\) Although Chinese characters appear pictographic, most of them are developed in this manner, essentially differentiating homophones by adding radicals which indicate a broad semantic direction, while only a comparatively small amount of characters actually sketch the signified in a pictogram or assemble these ‘pictures’ into an ideogram without any recourse to phonetics. Nevertheless homophones are traditionally treated as being semantically related. That is, even though technically the only semantically relevant component in the character is the radical, phonetic proximity still authorizes our taking into account the meaning of the phonetic component. Xu Shen, for instance, tends to define one character by another which approximates both meaning and pronunciation, thus supporting his metonymy in a kind of sound symbolism.

\(^{71}\) 「隱蔽也。」 (my translation)
\(^{72}\) 「大大陸，山無石者。」 (my translation)
\(^{73}\) 「謹也。」 (my translation)
Based in this ‘naive’ etymology which constructs *yin* as the intersection of topography (the radical) and mental acuity (the phonetic component), the *topos* takes a more distinct shape. It does not, however, rival any of the key concepts of Chinese philosophy such as virtue 「德」, way 「道」, or filial piety 「孝」. This is deliberate. Employing any of these key concepts would not just necessitate extensive inroads into respective scholarship, but they also do not lend themselves as a frame in this context. In the case of ‘way’, for instance, competing constructions of the concept between schools would have to be presented or at least excluded before moving on to readings of individual films. The selection of these texts would pose an additional problem, for ‘way’ is both too concrete in its historically philosophical meaning/s and too universal to reductively attach it to a narrative motif or stylistic tendency. Similarly, ‘filial piety’ would limit the range of possible texts for the corpus.

In contrast, *yin* has a specific function in Confucianism as well as Daoism and can be tracked by way of cultural motifs into Hong Kong cinema. As a keyword in the Chinese intellectual tradition, its most prominent use is discernible in early Daoism where it ‘insinuates’ an ontological wholeness. So we find in the *Dao De Jing* 《道德經》 the well-known statement: “The Tâo is hidden, and has no name; but it is the Tâo which is skilful at imparting (to all things what they need) and making them complete.”

The concealment of the *Dao* is connected to our inability to properly express the wholeness of *Dao* in language. For the Daoist primitivist this motivates a return to pre-cultural balance. *Yin* here denotes an ontological coherence defaced in the bifurcation characteristic of language - the judgement of a thing as either useful or useless, for instance.

In Confucianism *yin* is directly connected to a stabilization of the family and the hierarchical difference between ‘noble’ 「君子」 and ‘small man’ 「小人」. Apropos of Confucian education, for instance, we find in the *Analects* chapter “Shu Er” 《論語·述而》 the following: “The Master said, 'Do you think, my disciples, that I have any concealments? I conceal nothing from you. There is

---

nothing which I do that is not shown to you, my disciples;—that is my way.”

The *Li ji* chapter “Tan Gong I” demonstrates the hierarchical divide around concealment,

In serving his father, (a son) should conceal (his faults), and not openly or strongly remonstrate with him about them; [...] In serving his ruler, (a minister) should remonstrate with him openly and strongly (about his faults), and make no concealment (of them).

The ‘way’ here leads through language and concealment becomes a necessary strategy to ensure the social bond. Whereas the familial hierarchy supersedes truth, government depends on it to fully function. The classed division between necessary concealment and equally necessary exposure is further stabilized in concealment:

When any of the ruler’s kindred were guilty of offences, notwithstanding their kinship, they were not allowed to transgress with impunity, but the proper officers had their methods of dealing with them - this showed the regard cherished for the people. That the offender was punished in secret, and not associated with common people, showed (the ruler’s) concern for his brethren.

In spite of this rather straightforward distinction between those who should conceal in the interest of stability and those who should not in the interest of effective leadership, *yin* obviously comes up in a variety of contexts throughout the classics.

As a general strategy concealment is applied to warfare as evidenced by Sunzi’s (孫子) chapter on “The Use of Spies” and his ‘economic’ approach to

---

75 Legge, *The Chinese Classics 1*, 66; 「子曰，二三子，以我為隱乎，吾無隱乎爾，吾無行而不與二三子者，是丘也」.
76 Müller, *The Sacred Books* 27, 121. 「事親有隱而無犯，（……）事君有犯而無隱（……）」 (Wang, *Li ji*, 62.)
77 From *The Book of Rites* “King Wen as Son and Heir” 《禮記．文王世子》translated in: Müller, *The Sacred Books* 27, 359. 「公族之罪，雖親不以犯有司，正術也，所以體百姓也。刑於隱者，不與國人慮兄弟也。」 (Wang, *Li ji* I, 284.)
78 The last chapter in his *Art of War* 《孫子兵法．用間》.
conflicts in general. In everyday life a tendency of ‘understatement’ effects a
certain aura as,

The superior man, in obscurity, yet makes himself manifest; without giving
himself any airs, his gravity is acknowledged; without the exercise of severity,
he inspires awe; without using words, he is believed.\(^79\)

Power is in this sense softened; it takes the shape of ‘natural’ respect for the
cultivated, circumventing coercion or open conflict. In the Confucian context \(yin\)
thus affords stability \(in\) culture as opposed to (primitivist) Daoism which
postulates balance in nature. While this opposition appears absolute, it is not as
neatly separable as one might think at first glance. In its reliance on the familial
bond a recognizably ‘natural’ relation is elevated to a moral universal. As such,
order in the Confucian sense secures the innate, albeit by reinforcing culture. As a
result, (early) Daoism appears much more radical in its refutation of culture \(in\)
toto whereas Confucianism comes across as rather conservative.

A second and possibly more important reason why we cannot neatly separate
Daoism and Confucianism is Chinese intellectual history itself which held on to
and collected a majority of writings no matter their espoused position. To some
extent Daoism, Legalism, and Buddhism are all assimilated into Confucian
cultivation. Their integration in education thus fostered a certain hybridization
which left its mark, particularly in the context of aesthetics. Here \(yin\) is a keyword
which again terms coherence. But in aesthetic coherence both the Daoist and the
Confucian appeal to \(yin\) come together: in the depiction of nature coherence is a
feature effected by emulating organic growth whereas certain technical aspects are
the result of thorough training. Nature and culture are further woven together as
the image of nature is infused with social meaning, while aesthetic innovation
requires an instinctual transcendence of mechanical training.

Finally, when conflicts between individual and government threaten to
deteriorate, \(yin\) denotes an exit to the periphery. This movement again relates the

\(^{79}\) From *The Book of Rites* “The Record on Example” 《禮記·表記》 translated in: Müller, *The
689.)
Daoist and the Confucian readings of concealment. In so far as Daoism turns its back on culture and the mundane, the figure of the hermit 「隱居」 embraces a more fundamental balance. But since this opposition to worldly leadership remains unstated except for the departure itself, it is not an immediate act of political insurrection. In terms of cultural aspirations this dynamic of yin illustrates a ‘floating’ in concealment - the tendency to stabilize without open conflict or reconciliation. Yin is thus the attempt to preserve the particular in concealment and support order by postponing negativity.

As the thesis is concerned primarily with Hong Kong cinema, the connections to the traditions outlined above are not straightforward, some might consider them tenuous. None of the films discussed in the following chapters directly portray or discuss premodern Chinese philosophy. Nevertheless, viewing Hong Kong cinema from the perspective of this highbrow tradition has particular explanatory power, especially with regard to the underlying concerns of specific motifs and the structure of certain narratives. Below I outline the content of the thesis and the movement within the topos of yin to elaborate the proposed route.

The first chapter will take up the question of the legal order and the cinematic discourse around it. I argue that the latter extends a discussion on the fundamental tension between legal text and legal order, the conflict between Legalism and Confucianism. As Confucianism constructs coherence by partial occlusion, particularly when truth collides with familial hierarchy, the letter of the law becomes (potentially) immoral. In so far as a general Confucian orientation directs Chinese thought and governance, the legal code is seen as inferior to a form of natural law. The chapter tracks this tendency to distrust the codex, oppose it, or amend it at the discretion of privileged individuals as it presents in cinematic negotiations and against the modern environment and its legal institutions.

This theme is shaped by the characteristic narrative space of jianghu 「江湖」. The importance of jianghu for popular imagination can hardly be understated, and it is routinely assessed in academic work. It is also the kernel around which the idea of yin took shape, because I take jianghu to be the spatialized image of tradition at work, most clearly in many of the action titles of
Hong Kong cinema. In its most immediate form the ‘rivers and lakes’ merely indicate a geographical limit to (Imperial) power in areas cut off by bodies of water or marshlands. Figuratively, however, this borderland houses a whole array of related meanings and figures: to ‘run the jianghu」「跑江湖」, for instance, denotes a range of itinerant professions like fortune telling or (quack) medicine. Beyond the clear topographical limit to jurisdiction, jianghu also shelters resistances internal to the state such as (exiled) hermits, wandering swordsmen 「游俠」, and modern-day triads.

In order to expand on these literary, almost mythical elements against the broader issues of Chinese intellectual history, the proposed topos outlines a wider frame in which to unpack them and explore their deployment into Hong Kong’s post-/colonial environment. With the idea of critical potential in mind, the more conceptual structure of yin will serve to focus the discussion on the problem of the limit in four related areas: firstly, while the topographic and mental components of yin add up to control of territory, the character in its use denotes a concealment used both to evade control and to stabilize relations. Secondly, this latter aspect is emphasized in Confucianism where it orients identities towards deontic integration. Thirdly, in Daoism yin describes the metaphysical power of fate to restore balance and motivates an opposing ethics of evading usefulness. In mature Daoism, on the other hand, it can be linked to a virtuality of human potential severely curtailed in acculturation. Lastly, in the aesthetic synthesis of Confucianism and Daoism yin denotes both artistic techniques to overcome the material’s lifelessness and the excess of innovation over training by imitation.

The first chapter will address the limit of jurisdiction. Sketching out the problem of the legal text between Confucian reservations and Legalist embrace will situate readings of films as elaborations of this problem. I argue that a premodern skepticism of codification (or language more generally) as ensuring legal order effects a sophisticated discourse on the limits of law in Hong Kong cinema. Particularly in presentations of jianghu and its transposition into the modern city the law is sometimes nostalgically sidelined, sometimes cast as catastrophic negativity. As such these constructions resonate both with the local
element of resistance to colonial law and with theoretical concerns over the inherent excess of law in general.

The second chapter is devoted to the issue of identity, a topic which for obvious reasons is highly debated in the context of Hong Kong. In linking terrain with mental activity, the character yin roughly indicates the operation of non-/belonging to the (nation) state. I contrast this territorial mode of identification, which does not quite fit past or present fragmentations of China, with the deontic dimension of Confucianism, an anchoring of identity to clan, family, and office irrespective of territory. This ‘culturalist’ version of Chineseness can accommodate the localization of individuals along a periphery now encompassing areas along the South China Sea and throughout the world. In spite of the particulars of environment and spoken language, these diasporic communities still share in Chineseness as anchored to ancestral clan and written language. The downside to ‘concealing’ this emerging particularity lies in the general disregard for the non-Chinese other and the larger political contexts. I illustrate this stable Chineseness through two post-war examples before turning to the films of Bruce Lee as a forceful rebuttal to this strategy of preserving identity. By mobilizing the narrative space of jianghu his films question the meaning of tradition as rigid formalism and attack both Chinese patriarchy and Western hegemony. I then follow the path of an emerging Hong Kong identity through the 80s and 90s with texts highlighting discontent and guilt found in capitalist affluence. The trajectory constructed follows Chineseness initially projected as stable into failure; yin here terms how positive identity suppresses particularity and disregards the other so as to expand as civilization irrespective of political borders. As the imbrication of such an identity in the modern power structure becomes evident, representations of Hong Kong identity turn increasingly negative. From the modern critical vantage the chapter thus illustrates the failure of positive identity as such and the resultant aesthetic re-evaluation of (previously concealed) particularity. As such, premodern Chineseness forms the starting point to the possibility of negotiating the impasse of identity between static prescription and complete dissolution in the Hong Kong context.
After Legalism and Confucianism a third chapter will relate the metaphysical commitment of (quasi-religious) Daoism, its faith in the circularity of fate to restore balance, to its representation in film and cinematic attempts to overcome the tendency for restoration in narration as such. In the Daoist context *yin* often describes the obscure profundity of the ‘way’ as an ordering principle. Roughly half of the readings will contextualize this ‘esoteric’ understanding in representations of necessary reversal by way of the feminine principle or a ‘becoming-monkey’. In so far as *yin* is perched between a coherence in nature occluded by culture on the one hand, and a strategic concealment necessary to preserve social stability in culture on the other, the figures of the feminine and of the monkey make for a particularly interesting examples. Two texts mobilize the female to counteract an overabundance of masculinity effectively transposing Daoist logic onto the action formula. A classic *gongfu* entry harnesses the power of the animal in the service of social justice. I follow these circular narratives restoring balance from moral and physical deficit with three examples which extricate themselves from this logic of restoration in different ways. This will serve to highlight narrative strategies of undercutting faith and illustrate the consequences for narrativity when ‘mechanical’ reversal is denied.

The fourth chapter revolves around stylistic specificity. In the aesthetic synthesis of Confucian learning with Daoist spontaneity directed at capturing vitality, *yin* takes the distinct role of masking the traces of the craft and emulating the dynamic processes of life. Drawing primarily on the tradition of landscape painting by way of a theoretical treatise, the chapter first outlines premodern aesthetics as the aesthetics of the ‘w/ hole’: in contrast to Western realism, Chinese art strategically subtracts from the image to produce (ontological) wholeness. Furthermore, it strives to emulate natural dynamism in subject matter that mirrors sociality in a number of established metaphors. *Yin* here terms formal subtraction from the image supporting a representation of living presence in its capacity for future growth. Patterns of momentum set against white canvas thus impart vitality to the image. I argue that this aesthetic *yin* grounds the sinicization of Hong Kong cinema in its development of stylistic specificity and construct its trajectory by
revisiting the films read in terms of narrative content in the first chapters.

While post-war cinema is generally static even when it captures movement or enhances visuals by manually etching ‘special effects’ onto the celluloid, it is around momentum that defining features of Hong Kong style develop. Primarily in the action genres individual movement engenders a thorough subjugation of space and time to individual movement. Because cinema as a medium cannot directly accommodate premodern aesthetic form, it translates the primary category of vitality in a characteristic manner. In so far as the superior vitality projected in action is enhanced and made transparent in the cinematic medium, the audience now occupies a privileged position. What is concealed in speed and control is made visible. By the same token, artistic appropriation of this style, in art house and comedy for instance, can also destabilize such visual coherence and thus question the comfort afforded by style in the modern context. The specificity of style is thus taken up beyond its genre of origin and conditions the perspective on Hong Kong cinema as a whole. Additionally, the chapter tracks an aesthetic interest in space independent of movement and reflects on the resultant realism qua stylistic specificity.

Although yin might appear a rather loose collection of marginally related figures and forms, it is consistent in so far as these figures and forms are all elements or effects of a tradition which, though certainly not without its contradictions, is characterized precisely by its attempts at integration. As a function of (deliberately) reduced transparency running counter to general illumination, yin first throws into relief a reactionary privilege to knowledge by a minority - a knowledge which the characteristic Hong Kong style developed in the action genres makes available visually. Transposed into the modern problem space, it also exposes the obscured limit of law, the negativity of identity, and - at its most general level - the excess of the future over the present. The thesis thus outlines relevant aspects of tradition through the topos of yin and then follows their mediation in Hong Kong cinema to specify salient narrative and stylistic features and follow them in their discursive development. The fifth chapter will summarize the body of readings and reflect on the importance of the Adornian
framework for the critical analysis of popular culture.

Assessing Critical Potential

Inherent to cinema’s mediation of tradition in the present, its continuous reapplication of the established, is ongoing process. To shed light on a number of characteristic traits of these forms and formulas, the thesis moves within the topos of yin to highlight a specific preoccupation with concealment in its dual nature as both an instrument/quality of power and a strategy of resistance. The topography of the jianghu is already highly suggestive of such a general structure of power: if power in the Foucauldian sense “is not a place, a definable location, a locus in the social that could be limited to a particular point or site”80, the concealed (or rather missing) locus is made concrete in the jianghu and its literary inhabitants. In order to address this preoccupation with concealment beyond those narrative genres directly linked with the jianghu, the broader topos will facilitate the encounter between premodern thought and Hong Kong cinema.

Although the emphasis throughout is placed on this relation, Hong Kong cinema develops the traditional locally in the modern context of post-/colonialism. Consequently, the question of how well power was understood in premodern China is secondary to an inquiry into how commercial cinema utilizes traditional thought and motifs against the situation of contemporary Hong Kong. This also necessitates a theoretical framework developed in this modern context. Construing yin with the modern problem space of limit and excess in mind would be somewhat misleading otherwise.

While yin will be fleshed out with reference to premodern sources and relevant secondary material situating these sources within scholarship on Chinese intellectual history, I hesitate to develop from it an apparatus to address modernity as such. Precisely because I cannot deliver a genealogy tracing these premodern elements of yin through two millennia in intellectual history itself, but merely juxtapose premodern root and modern invocation within a topos clearly

constructed to lend itself to the discourse of modernity, the approach is entirely contaminated by Western thought. However, this is only problematic if one were to dispute the general structure of power which “became fully deployed only in a certain historic junction.” As such, it would be disingenuous to purport a Chinese framework when the *topos* serves primarily to orient a discussion of tradition in cinema along the modern problem space.

Furthermore, because the material of the thesis consists mostly of cinematic texts, the question of critical potential can only be properly articulated by connecting this material with its socio-cultural environment. As I indicated at the beginning, meaning in text is already a function of its socio-cultural context, perhaps most strikingly in film, this “impure art” or “‘plus-one’ of the arts” which Badiou describes as both “parasitic and inconsistent”. Citations, allusions, and permutations of forms and formulas connect individual texts as films “circulate across national, language, and community boundaries reaching deep into social space.” But the imbrication of cinema within objective social relations as a whole does not secure knowledge of the medium’s functional position. The problem, in other words, concerns the effect of cinema on the sociality it refracts and informs.

Because the *topos* is designed to steer the discussion into the problem space of modernity, this design has to be made clear which entails exposing my theoretical affiliations throughout instead of trying to develop underlying commitments again from Chinese sources independently of Western thought. Secondly, although cinema is imbricated in objective social relations, it would be difficult to extrapolate its function within those relations from cinematic texts alone. It is for these reasons that I will reference critical theory, specifically Adorno’s thought, in the thesis. Other important thinkers, even other affiliates of the Frankfurt School (like Benjamin, for instance) could possibly provide more theoretical support in the endeavor to vindicate the popular. But Adorno’s vehement resistance to the culture industry is equally useful, because his framework grounds the analysis of

---

82 Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 83.
critical potential.

Treating Adorno as a touchstone for a concept of critique in modernity brings with it a number of advantages. First of all, he combines philosophical depth with a systematic account of aesthetics in the age of mass mediation. His work is thus certainly adequate to correlate my readings of cinematic texts with the structure of (late) capitalism as such. Articulating the “dual nature of artworks as autonomous structures and social phenomena” undoubtedly forms the centre of his thought. The inherent aporia is already implicit in this formulation: modern aesthetics is split between, on the one hand, autonomous, highly individual art which resists direct social contextualization, and culture industry on the other. Art in the modern sense becomes possible only after the Hegelian ‘end of art’; that is, the end of a single authoritative aesthetics permeating all aspects of cultural production in a given (premodern) sociality. In contrast,

[in] a society in which the art form has become relatively autonomous from other social institutions which it re-presents, that is, art as we understand it, it loses the integrity of the classical ideal and becomes contradictory.85

With the end of art mass culture and art become irreconcilable; Adorno was fervent in his efforts to elucidate the problems this split causes. As Bernstein explains,

The division of high and low art as a division, reveals the fate of particular and universal in contemporary society. That division, which spells domination, is again, only perceivable from the perspective of ‘integral freedom’, the speculative unity of particular and universal, high and low. Because the ‘truth’ about culture is neither an empirical nor theoretical truth - both these forms of truth-stating have been taken over by instrumental rationality - because ‘truth’ itself is no longer true, there is a difficulty in revealing the ‘truth’ about culture.86

Since Hong Kong cinema here denotes only commercial cinema, that is part of the local culture industry, this split lies outside the scope of the thesis. But this

84 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 248.
85 Rose, Hegel, 136.
86 Bernstein, introduction, 7-8.
does not disqualify Adorno’s diagnosis of the culture industry. One cannot simply dismiss his apparent pessimism with regard to the latter as a symptom of elitism and evade him in a search for elements of resistance in mass culture, because Adorno’s critique is grounded in a conceptual understanding of objective social relations as a whole. Critical potential is the term chosen to denote resistance within an Adornian framework. Cinema as a medium is of course capable of making statements critical of social relations. However, when it does, it is a ‘social phenomenon’, a text voicing an opinion to be translated into (calls for) action, and hence an aesthetic instrument rather than an autonomous structure pointing ‘beyond’.

Because the inquiry into the mediation of tradition in Hong Kong cinema confronts us with the question of its meaning, the interpretation is to a large extent a reconstruction of discourses around relevant aspects of *yin* - around law, identity, fate, and visual structure. Such a discursive reading treats films as social phenomena by definition: in so far as it aligns texts to form an evolving dialogue, none of them are (treated as) autonomous. Nevertheless, the division between high and low, the dual nature between social phenomenon and autonomous structure, has to be accounted for in the assessment of critical potential. In other words, for Adorno there is a critique which exceeds the dialogical back and forth construed between selected films, a discourse fixed to the coordinates of social relations. As a result, the thesis is not an attempt at amending Adorno through the discussion of Hong Kong cinema. I merely seek to reiterate the relevance of his thinking for film studies in general.

Furthermore, an important methodological point is Adorno’s rejection of positivism. On the one hand this informs certain interactions with the more empirically inclined secondary sources cited in this thesis. In so far as I move discursively between a number texts across time periods and genres, I take the conceptualizing of narrative positions vis-a-vis sociality to be the ultimate aim of all inquiry into text. This ‘work on the concept’ (*Arbeit am Begriff*) cannot be ensured by accumulating data in the humanities, no matter how extensive it may be. On the other hand, the commitment to the conceptual also emphasizes
Adorno’s reliance on the Hegelian apparatus (even within his anti-Hegelian outlook). Apart from Hegel, Adorno also routinely applies Freudian psychoanalysis which forms an important tool in contemporary film theory, and productively engages Marxism, another significant element to socio-cultural theory. Between Hegel, Marx, and Freud, Adorno thus synthesizes a significant chunk of Western thought.

In spite of these advantages to Adorno in the general context of the fate of aesthetics in modernity, the approach of the thesis is somewhat anti-Adornian. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the culture industry as such is the concept developed from the paradigmatic case of 1940s America. Adorno argues this stage of ‘culture management’ (*Kulturverwaltung*) in the larger framework of a dialectical reversal of Enlightenment and supported by remarks on a range of items including individual actors and studios, popular music, the experience of reception in everyday life, advertisement, as well as a wide array of socio-economic phenomena. In contrast, the material of this thesis consists for the most part of cinematic texts and does not argue for Hong Kong cinema as paradigmatic in that sense.

Also, the circumscription accomplished in the *topos* tends towards subsumption (as frameworks generally do). The issue here is that entry to and direction within the outlined problem space levels particularity and thereby potential prospects for novelty. A certain looseness to *yin* is thus useful as it provides room for an inquiry open to the particularity of the selected texts. In Adornian terms, the methodological approach should not inadvertently reproduce in identity thinking the instrumental reason it criticizes. But the discursive readings are necessarily instrumental when they reduce the text to a statement that becomes transparent from the perspective of mediated tradition. This is after all the main goal. Critical potential thus does not imply a prophetic knowledge of futures encapsulated in some film. Rather, invoking Adorno’s framework serves to highlight and properly assess the limits of discursive criticism.

While the *topos* ensures a reasonable connection to premodern thought and should guide a selection of texts adequate to an interrogation of the appropriation
of tradition in pop-cultural mediation, I will cite Adorno and his interlocutor Hegel throughout. In so far as Adorno frequently relies on Hegel, citations of the latter are justified to the degree that my use of Adorno in this context is justified. But although Hegel is not commonly employed in the analysis of film, his understanding of particular and universal, form and content, history, etc. rarely necessitates justification.

In summary, Adornian critical theory will strengthen assessments of individual films as discursive statements and support the reflection on the thesis’ methodology and its results in the last chapter. Because the primary concern here is with the specificity of Hong Kong cinema which means laboring almost exclusively on one side of the divide between high and low, critical theory ensures a vantage mindful of the structural limitations of mass culture and our understanding of aesthetics in modernity in general.

Addressing the Whole

At the outset I identified the two ‘objects’ whose relation form the focus of this thesis: Chinese tradition understood as ethical and metaphysical commitments rooted in premodern philosophy and represented by aspects of Legalism, Confucianism, and Daoism on the one hand, and Hong Kong cinema on the other. In order to throw this relation into relief and interrogate its dynamics, I outlined the topos of yin which will steer the inquiry along significant narrative motifs and stylistic tendencies resonating with premodern thought into the distinctly modern problem space of limit and excess. This orientation in turn will ensure relevance with respect to the assessment of mediated tradition in its critical potential.

As indicated, the topos narrows the perspective on Hong Kong cinema significantly. If this wasn’t the case, we would not have adequate access to the multitude of films making up the cinema. But although yin structures the inquiry, it is clearly not capable of reducing the material down to a manageable size. In other words, the corpus of cinematic texts does not exhaust the amount of films that could possibly be discussed in this context. The general aim in selection was
to include at least one Cantonese title for each post-war decade up to and including the post-handover period and represent a majority of genres as well as prominent directors. While this is not an arbitrary process but the aggregate of personal choice and general consensus, the movements constructed between individual texts will exhibit a certain necessity transcending any empiricist injunction.

Because one can never exhaust the multitude of films making up a cinema (or a genre/period for that matter), it is the framework which supports selection and reading. It does so by recourse to the conceptual, as indicated by my early reference to Hegel. The initially subjective selection of films is ‘raised’ to objectivity by clarifying their relation as the logic of their discursive association. Elaborating the specificity of Hong Kong cinema as mediated tradition thus entails treating all its constituents as participating in a common discourse to some degree. The perspective afforded by yin structures the reading of all texts making up the cinema - a perspective which no film can escape altogether. In so far as form and formula are attributable to yin, the concept obtains on evolving motifs and genres irrespective of their reinvention, amendment or refutation of tradition.

As an exploration of the relation between Chinese tradition and Hong Kong cinema, the thesis aims to demonstrate the explanatory power of the former in the analysis of the latter. I argue that the readings developed adequately capture characteristic narrative and stylistic elements as grounded in yin. This does not imply that all Hong Kong filmmakers are constantly deliberating and aesthetically processing Chinese intellectual traditions. But the adopted perspective - that of yin as specificity - necessarily finds and highlights its origin, a concept of Chinese tradition, in the texts interrogated much like any perspective conditions the appearance of the objects viewed. This apparent deformation of the object by perspective, however, is justified in so far as frameworks of meaning necessarily totalize, ideology being the prime example.

Furthermore, narrative and stylistic specificity is found in established genres and motifs, components which proliferate by definition, and in this sense stabilize into form. In spite of the iteration inherent to their continued mediation, form and
formula point towards the framework of meaning which spawned them and in
which they can be understood. The framework in question here is Chinese
tradition and its correlation to form specific to Hong Kong cinema is the reference
singled out in order to explore its explanatory power. The latent activity of
traditional heritage in cultural production is thus itself postulated by the approach
and cannot be verified in an empirical fashion.

This brings up the aforementioned problem of positivism. Narratives cohere
only by virtue of frameworks of meaning which they reflect and negotiate; they
do not make sense as objects for the natural sciences. These frameworks cannot
be approached by slowly working towards an empirical totality gathering
supposedly objective truths about one title or another. In the context of his
engagement with sociology, Adorno notes,

[...] whenever you come across such a consolation in the future, it is because
aporias or structural impossibilities already inherent in the matter have been
painted over; that what is being postponed into the future cannot be achieved
due to the matter itself.87

What he formulated and defended, particularly during the so-called ‘Positivist
Dispute’ (Positivismusstreit)88, can be readily reapplied to the ‘piecemeal’
approach of post-Theory advocated by Bordwell and Carroll89. This is not to say
that we cannot isolate individual narrative or stylistic traits in films. The problem
is rather that singling out any such trait as relevant or specific betrays a subjective
perspective which itself remains unfounded. Citing various social contexts such as
economic success, relative novelty, or critical reception merely defers the problem
of the perspective grounding any reading.

For Adorno subjective perspective or rather engagement takes a relatively
precise and often repeated form:

87 Adorno, Ontologie, 119. “[...] wann immer Ihnen diese Vertröstung auf die Zukunft begegnet,
handelt es sich darum, daß Aporien oder strukturelle, durch die Sache selbst vorgezeichnete
Unmöglichten verschminkt werden; daß das auf die Zukunft verschoben wird, was der Sache
wegen überhaupt nicht sich leisten läßt.” (my translation)
88 See Adorno et al., The Positivist Dispute.
89 Cf. Bordwell and Carroll, Post-Theory.
I mean that is is not possible to think a right thought unless one wills the right thing [to happen]; that is to say, unless, underlying this thought, and providing it with a truly animating power, there is the desire that it should be right for human beings to enter into a condition in which meaningless suffering should come to an end and in which - I can only express it negatively - the spell hanging over mankind should be lifted.\footnote{Adorno, Lectures, 53.}

Accordingly, all activity - especially aesthetic activity and its critique - is judged by its engaging this spell \textit{(Bann)} or \textit{Verblendungszusammenhang} (‘blinding context' or false consciousness) stabilizing the now irrational totality of social relations in which a naively eschatological notion of Hegelian spirit driving antagonisms towards historical resolution has become untenable.

Interrogating the pop-cultural mediation of Chinese tradition in Hong Kong cinema aligns with a critical view of modernity in so far as such a mediation is in itself indicative of critical potential, either subjectively articulated in a reaffirmation of traditional values against the corrosion of globalization or as an objective contradiction in local resistances to the progressing homogenization of the world concomitant with globalization. This is why critical potential is, strictly speaking, not added to this inquiry of specificity grounded in tradition but part and parcel of the thesis. While there might be concepts other than \textit{yin} which represent the traditional elements active in contemporary Hong Kong more adequately, the application of this concept to Hong Kong cinema cannot evade a judgement as to its relationship with modernity, at least when the latter is understood as one singular modernity.

The problem spaces interrogated in the main body of the thesis - the legal order, identity, fate, and visual architecture - are conditioned by what can reasonably be unpacked from \textit{yin} on the one hand, and a deliberate focus on those aspects of Chinese intellectual history that promise productive tension in the context of Hong Kong modernity. In so far as narrative and stylistic forms specific to Hong Kong cinema suggest a broad socio-cultural investment in the framework of meaning reflected and negotiated through such specific forms, this approach is readily justified.
Viewing Hong Kong cinema in the larger context of local cultural resistance to global modernity, the terms specificity and particularity appear interchangeable. But judging a local particular to be constructively critical is an extremely complex task, especially in reference to popular mass culture. In an exploration of specificity particularity in the emphatic sense - as critical moment - is the aim not the starting point. As such, the differentiation between the terms indicates the openness inherent in mediation; specificity outlines elements of tradition which are already contained and thereby understood in mass culture. This also supports the necessary assumption that all tradition which finds expression in popular culture is critically relevant, because the narrative representation of tradition cannot be read as neutral or indifferent to the contemporary situation into which it is deployed.

Specificity terms the discursive or instrumental deployment of tradition in Hong Kong cinema, the way in which form evolves along a trajectory of amendment and refutation. In this manner the perspective of yin explicates characteristic motifs and genres in their development and their relation to events of the last 60 years. The Adornian ‘blinding context’ is an important reference here as it terms the inability to derive a critical practice from such a development. While the framework is capable of illuminating the role of traditional thought in the cinematic representation of Hong Kong modernity, it thus also forces the issues of teleological thinking and a historicization of the present.
1) Within and Without the Legal Order

The expressed aim of this thesis concerns the specificity of Hong Kong cinema. This appears a rather grand claim if taken to mean an exhaustive account of the ‘spirit’ distinguishing such a multitude of texts. Instead I emphasized the necessarily subjective starting point to any interrogation in the humanities, which, beginning with a certain (libidinal) investment in some peculiarity, strives to develop its relevance through conceptualization. For if we were to take a multitude as infinitely diverse, grasping it conceptually would be impossible, negating all efforts with respect to any text (now) arbitrarily singled out from such an unknowable diversity. Demonstrating the relevance of a text through the concept, on the other hand, entails the assumption of a ‘system’ in which all texts are imbricated, that is a ‘whole’ which the text originates in, reflects, and interacts with. Grandness is thus a logical feature of a certain need of thought and theoretical commitment.

One such peculiarity in this particular context is a pronounced concern for the outside of and the limit to (codified) law. The legal order is usually thought of as an integral part, if not the source of power as it determines and enforces the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. At the heart of the law, however, we find a certain paradox:

[…] power is irreducible to either violence or law. The two entities are opposed - the rule of law being, supposedly, the end of the rule of violence - and implicated in each other - for the law takes support in violence by assigning a monopoly over it to certain institutions.91

The spontaneous interpretation of jianghu understands the outside of law as ‘non-law’ and its inside as complete law. But in so far as law holds the monopoly on violence (Gewaltmonopol), ‘non-law’ also forms its concealed centre. In a more Hegelian manner, we might say that law merely ‘sublates’ the previous state of ‘non-law’ and in this sense necessarily retains violence in its cancellation. This

chapter will develop the relation of these two concealments - that is the concealment from law in the jianghu and the concealment of violence at the heart of the law. I argue that a specific cultural skepticism with regard to positive law, grounded in traditional concerns over the negativity of total law, motivates cinematic engagements which directly address the modern problem of law as/and power. Yin here denotes appeals to ‘open’ natural law as opposed to the letter of the codex as well as various facets of concealment from or in the law.

Crucial among the specific formulas developed in this context is the “Hong Kong gangster/police hybrid”\(^92\) in which the legal text is not just routinely sidelined but becomes a constant obstacle to identity and moral being. As such it is unlike the Western underworld from which the element of crime rises only to fall against the arsenal of modern law enforcement. Of course more sophisticated entries do not just solicit our admiration for the “‘great’ criminal”\(^93\) in his individual resistance to our shared discontent in culture (Freudian Unbehagen)\(^94\) but problematize the untenable violence these anti-social figures inflict. But the specificity thrown into relief in the context of Hong Kong cinema extends beyond such a ‘realism’ and can be read as a discourse skeptical of the efficacy of law as such.

I already highlighted jianghu, the kernel from which the topos of yin is developed, in its importance for the narrative discourse on law in Hong Kong cinema. As a space instantiating the topographical limit to the enforcement of a codex, jianghu effectively formalizes the excess to sociality regulated by law. Unpacking jianghu produces a whole range of issues around power: from constructions of superiority with respect to regulated, civil life to ‘disorderly’ elements disturbing the balance inside a realm governed by a set of laws and regulations. Indeed the first three chapters are all (more or less) directly derived from this range.

Additionally, one can hint at the relation of jianghu and Chinese modernity as it has already been observed; in his discussion of Jin Yong’s (金庸) immensely

---

\(^92\) Marchetti, Andrew Lau and Alan Mak’s Infernal Affairs, 23.  
\(^93\) Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” 281.  
\(^94\) Cf. Freud, “Das Unbehagen in der Kultur.”
popular martial arts novels, for instance, Hamm remarks on a

[...] displacement of the locus of authority for this culturalist imaginary away
from the geographic center of the Chinese mainland [which] resonates not
merely with the geopolitical circumstances of Jin Yong and his readers but
more broadly with positions enunciated by diasporic intellectuals such as Tu
Wei-ming, who argues for the “transformative potential of the periphery.”

In other words, the narrative focus on the periphery not only highlights the
structural horizon of power in conceptual terms but can also be mapped onto the
modern historico-political fragmentation of China in which Hong Kong, Taiwan,
and various overseas Chinese communities come to challenge the centre.

With regard to the movement of mediated tradition within Hong Kong
modernity, two additional notions appear particularly salient in this context.
Firstly, from a sinological perspective, a (perceived) aversion to codified law can
not only be linked to the premodern intellectual debate between Confucianism and
Legalism (which will be outlined shortly) but also resonates with a more general
philosophical skepticism towards language and its power to express ‘living
thought’ commonly associated with Daoism. In so far as speech ‘mortifies’ the
vitality of its referent, an important part of the object appears lost or concealed.
This will return as the yin of aesthetic production where it denotes ways of
capturing or emulating this hidden vitality. Here I will argue the lasting cultural
influence of these elements of traditional Chinese thought on attitudes towards
(modern) law as expressed in its narrative negotiation. Secondly, positive
depictions of figures operating outside the law concomitant with the particular
narrative space of jianghu invite an optimism of transgression, which seems to
immediately lend itself to the issue of critical potential. By tracking the cinematic
discourse around transgressions of the legal order as well as transgressive law, the

---

95 Hamm, Paper Swordsmen, 27.
96 Cf. Pohl, Ästhetik, 63-65. Pohl cites Zhuangzi’s provocative assertion that the Dao can be
found “in that excrement” [“Outer Chapters - Knowledge Rambling in the North” 莊子·外篇·知北遊]
translated in: Müller, The Sacred Books 40, 66. 「在屎溺。」 (Zhuangzi, 575.)
and his subordination of ideas to words expressed in the rhetorical request to “talk with such a man
who has forgot the words” [“Miscellaneous Chapters - What Comes from Without” 莊子·雜篇·外物]
translated in Müller, The Sacred Books 40, 141. 「吾安得忘言之人而與之言」
(Zhuangzi, 725.)
chapter aims to interrogate this discourse in its meaning and ideological implications.

Before addressing narrative negotiations of traditional loyalties with modern (Western) law, the readings will be situated within classical intellectual traditions in the form of a broad outline of the early discourse on law in China. In light of the focus of the thesis it seems neither possible nor necessary to deliver a genealogy of Chinese law or make a sustained attempt to properly historicize premodern law in its historical environment and practice. Instead a schema of the rift between Legalism 「法家」 and Confucianism, exemplified by a critique of law from the Confucian canon and a famous chapter in the Han Fei (韓非), will provide the properly cultural background for the readings to follow. From the perspective of legal studies or legal history this approach is unsatisfactory as it “tends to conflate the normative tradition with ‘law’”97. Film, however, is relatively immune to the realities of law enforcement and jurisdiction. While some plots might be based in a documented case, it is attitudes towards the law as such which find narrative representation. In so far as “tradition helped shape the assumptions and perspective in terms of which the Chinese conceived the role of legal practices”98, and, one should add, continues to shape the assumptions and perspective, fictional texts do not so much offer insight into the legal system as into ‘ethical substance’ (Hegelian Sittlichkeit), that is the socio-cultural environment conditioning legal practice and general sentiment towards the latter.

With an outline of the Confucian critique and Legalist embrace of the codex in hand, I will move to cinematic depictions of traditional law in in-/action as well as negotiations of the legal in the modern context. The relationship between premodern source and modern narration will of course be more of a juxtaposition due to the immense temporal gulf separating Classics from cinema. This is not to reduce said temporal gulf to unhistorical history, two millennia wasted in stagnation. Rather, the aim is to throw into relief an affinity between highbrow thought and popular culture motivating an aspect of specificity in Hong Kong

98 Ibid., 39.
cinema. As a result, there is little historicizing of premodern sources, opposing philosophy with actual jurisdiction and historical modes of production. Instead the question of specificity focuses the aestheticized afterlife of tradition in its deployment. The premodern source thus indicates a certain attachment to the traditional continuously recontextualized in modern mass culture, not only in texts situated within modern law, that is the legal system of Hong Kong in pre- and post-handover times, but also in allegorical bridgings and reflections of different times and spaces.

*The Unicorn of Justice*

The central problem to law and jurisdiction in the Western tradition is the impasse between natural and positive law. This paradigm is universal, in so far as there is an apparently innate sense of right and wrong but also a practical necessity for codified law in arbitration. Structurally the “natural law tradition [is] predicated on the claim that there is a tranhistorical Good toward which human action can and should comport itself”99, while positive law denies such a “natural or given Good [...] and so instead looks to the means themselves for legitimation of human action.”100 The modern Chinese term for ‘law’ 「法律」 expresses both sides of the opposition: the second character 「律」 originally denoted an “equal division” (reminiscent of the German *Urteil* or judgement), but later came to mean a specific official rank and finally written legal statutes (the right portion 「聿」 is a hand holding a brush, but in Xu Shen’s etymology this denotes the character’s phonetic value). In this sense the character implies positive law. The first character 「法」, on the other hand, tends towards natural law etymologically if we consider the older variant 「廌」 featuring a Chinese unicorn 「廌」, a mythical creature said to appear on the scene of an argument.

100 Ibid.
and deciding the matter with its horn\textsuperscript{101}. The mythological character of the unicorn seems to imply an outside agent imposing metaphysical justice, but in a premodern environment which doesn’t distinguish between myth and ‘scientific truth’ it might simply entail the complete equivalence of law and natural law. In other words, natural law as the order of the universe physically reacts to the moral problem of injustice with a specific zoological phenomenon. Hegel sees here the problem of unfreedom noting that,

The Chinese look on their moral rules as if they were laws of nature, positive external commandments, mandatory rights and duties, or rules of mutual courtesy. Freedom, through which the substantial determinations of reason can alone be translated into ethical attitudes, is absent; morality is a political matter that is administered by government officials and courts of law.\textsuperscript{102}

In spite of these interesting etymological considerations, the paradigm of natural and positive law (transposed onto the early Chinese intellectual debate) presents primarily in the opposition between Confucian li 「禮」, or rites, and Legalist codified law fa 「法」. Needham outlines,

The fundamental idea of the Legalists was that li, the complex of customs, usages, ceremonies and compromises, paternalistically administered according to Confucian ideals, was inadequate for forceful and authoritarian government. Their watchword, therefore, was fa, positive law [...] to which everyone in the State, from the ruler himself down to the lowest public slave, was bound to submit, subject to sanctions of the severest, and cruellest kind.\textsuperscript{103}

\textsuperscript{101} The creature is also known as Xiezhi 「獬豸」 and said to resemble an ox or goat with the ability to differentiate right and wrong in human arguments, which it judges with its single horn. I owe this reference to Prof. Kwan Tze-wan at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Interestingly, Cheng Chung-ying does not remark on the connection to the unicorn in his account of 「法」 in spite of his reference to Xu Shen. He writes, the “character 警 is a combination of two characters, water and an instrument for straightening crooked wood.” (Cheng C., New Dimensions, 315) Xu Shen’s entry, however, also includes the statement that the “rectification of men by law is like the unicorn’s driving out evil” 「法之正人，如廌之去惡也」 (my translation). In a footnote, Needham draws on this definition and explicates: “The ancient origin of this word is not without interest. Its old form was fa, a character which incorporates the water radical with the word chai, meaning a kind of unicorn, and the sign for going away or being driven out [...] Granet [...] describes an ancient magic rite or ordeal ceremony in which a bull was presented to the altar of the god of soil, over which lustrations were sprinkled (hence the water radical). The contestants then read their oaths of innocence, but the guilty party was unable to finish, and was gored to death by the bull. Evil was thus driven out.” (Needham, J., History of Scientific Thought, 205.)

\textsuperscript{102} Hegel, Lectures, 125.

\textsuperscript{103} Needham, J., History of Scientific Thought, 205.
Some of the earliest evidence of Chinese legal thought already exhibits the problems of positive law and ‘sophistry’ in legal arguments. Harbsmeier cites the conflict between Deng Xi (鄧析) whom the “Tso Chuan 左傳 commentary credits [...] with the authorship of a penal code written on bamboo (chu hsing 竹刑) [...] in deliberate opposition to the official bronze code of [his] apparent political enemy, the formidable Tzu Chhan 子產, [...] effective ruler of Cheng from -542 to -522.”

Since neither code has survived into our time, however, I will invoke another text illustrating “that uncompromising objection to codification which characterised Confucian thought throughout Chinese history.”

In the Book of Documents, part of the Confucian canon, we find a section titled “The Marquis Lü on Punishments” 《書經·尚書·呂刑》, which expounds on the problems of legal retaliation (ius talionis), specifically of the ‘five punishments’ 「五刑」. The central problematic is immediately opened up with the example of the Sanmiao Clan (三苗氏), a legendary ‘barbarian’ tribe, who

[...] did not use the power of goodness, but the restraint of punishments. They made the five punishments engines of oppression, calling them laws. They slaughtered the innocent, and were the first also to go to excess in cutting off the nose, cutting off the ears, castration and branding. All who became liable to those punishments were dealt with without distinction, no difference being made in favour of those who could offer some excuse.”

Embedded in the context of the legendary feud between Chi You (蚩尤) of the Nine Li tribes (九黎族), “the first to produce disorder, which spread among the
quiet, orderly people, till all became robbers and murderers”\(^{108}\), and the mythical Han patriarch Shennong (神農), the excessive use of physical coercion is – not surprisingly – said to originate with those who were swept away by history, or rather by the emperor (皇帝) who “restrained and (finally) extinguished the people of Miao, so that they should not continue to future generations.”\(^{109}\)

The text then goes on to elaborate on the alternative, which is not an abandonment of legal practice but moderate or enlightened jurisdiction, exemplified by the question of “how to make punishments a blessing.”\(^{110}\) Interestingly the emphasis is not so much on proper proceedings - “When both parties are present, their documents and witnesses all complete, let the judges listen to the fivefold statements that may be made.”\(^{111}\) - but mainly on a kind of staggered adjustment of punishment. Considering the circumstances of both crime and perpetrator, the legally codified punishment can be commuted to a fine 「罰」 or stayed 「過」, options which in turn make the process of jurisdiction vulnerable to certain defects 「疵」 like “being warped by the influence of power, or by private grudge, or by female solicitation, or by bribes, or by applications.”\(^{112}\) Evident in the longer passage quoted above, a difference between laws 「法」 and punishments 「刑」 is constructed; the phrase “calling them laws” is perhaps better rendered as “calling that jurisdiction” or even “calling that justice”. For ‘law’, as presented here, means the practice of jurisdiction as opposed to the mechanical application of the legal text or penal code.

Although the etymological root implied a natural ‘meting out of justice’ and, as already hinted at, the Legalists take \(fa\) as their ‘watchword’, ‘law’ in the context of the Marquis implies a concern for the social environment in which the offense occurs and the impact punishment will have - ‘spirit’ to be weighed against the ‘letter’ of the law. Rigidly enforcing the legal code and thereby granting it a universal claim is what drove the ‘barbarian’ Miao into excess 「淫」. Not the

\(^{108}\) Ibid., 590; 「蚩尤惟始作亂，延及於平民，罔不寇賊」.

\(^{109}\) Ibid., 593; 「遏絕苗民，無世在下」.

\(^{110}\) Ibid., 601; 「告爾祥刑」.

\(^{111}\) Ibid., 602; 「兩造具備，師聽五辭。」

\(^{112}\) Ibid., 603; 「惟官，惟反，惟內，惟貨，惟來。」
excess of mutilations, but rather the excessive use of these punishments “without
distinction”. From today’s perspective this emphasis on a legal interpretation
open to the specific context of a crime and heavily invested in containing the
damage punitive law might incur on the social fabric seems remarkably modern.
One primary example of distinctions to be made is found in “the debate as to
whether a son should conceal his father’s crime, or denounce it and give evidence
against him.” Concealment, or yin, is thus a keyword indicating the Confucian
‘natural Good’ superior to codified law.

A particularly scathing critique of Confucianism arrived with the Legalists.
Where the former emphasized the ways of Great Kings of the past, the “return to
the rites of Zhou” 「復周禮」, and an hierarchical order based on virtue and
tradition, the latter introduced an interesting variety of materialism. In the classic
of Han Fei Zi we find a famous chapter titled “The Five Vermin” 《韓非子・五
蠹》, referring to (Confucian) scholars 「學者」 “who put on a fair appearance
and speak in elegant phrases, thus casting doubt upon the laws of the time and
causing the ruler to be of two minds”114, as well as “speechmakers” 「言古者」,
lawless “swordsmen” 「帶劍者」, “anxious soldiers” 「患御者」 who bribe
their way out of service, and “merchants and artisans” 「商工之民」 exploiting
the market. Han Fei first demystifies the revered kings of old, legendary leaders
like Yao 「堯」 and Yu 「禹」, “who abdicated and relinquished the rule of the
world”, but “were, in a manner of speaking, merely forsaking the life of a
gatekeeper and escaping from the toil of a slave.”115 Because,

[w]hen men lightly relinquish the position of Son of Heaven, it is not because
they are high-minded but because the advantages of the post are slight; when
men strive for sinecures in the government, it is not because they are base but

---

113 Needham, J., History of Scientific Thought, 208.
114 De Bary and Bloom, Sources, 2nd ed., 203. 「盛容服而飾辯說,以疑當世之法,而貳人主
之心。」 (Zhu D., Zhongguo Lidai Wensue 1-1, 215.)
115 De Bary and Bloom, Sources, 2nd ed., 199. 「以是言之，夫古之讓天子者，是去監門之養
而離臣虜之勞也。」 (Zhu D., Zhongguo Lidai Wensue 1-1, 210.)
because the power they acquire is great.”

The Legalists here quickly dispense with Confucian idealism and disassemble the myth of past virtue as merely a matter of benefits. In his general outline of the “realists” or “Amoralists” (for the term School of Law “only indicates one aspect of their teaching”) Arthur Waley summarizes, that “they rejected all appeals to tradition, all reliance on supernatural sanctions and trust in supernatural guidance.” A kind of functional utilitarianism was to supplant old hierarchies, which relied precisely on the kind of exhaustive, articulated totality of the legal text one is accustomed to find in the Western tradition.

Now in administering your rule and dealing with the people, if you do not speak in terms that any man or woman can plainly understand, but long to apply the doctrines of the wise men, then you will defeat your own efforts at rule. Subtle and mysterious words are no business of the people.

In his account of the debate Cheng describes Confucianists as “democracy-oriented, society oriented, internalistic, individually-inclined, educationalistic, realizational, and developmental; whereas the Legalists are deterministic, dictatorship-oriented, ruler-oriented, manipulational, state-dominated, and externalistic.” He further asserts that “[w]e can easily decide that the Confucian model of government is a thoroughly humanistic and thoroughly humanitarian model, whereas the Legalist model is a thoroughly anti-humanistic and thoroughly non-humanitarian model.” But even if we read a premodern debate in this manner, as immediately informing our modern predicaments, the upshot to the Legalist venture is in the sort of absolute transparency envisioned to be effected through the legal text. Not simply “a few general commandments inscribed, in

---

116 De Bary and Bloom, Sources, 2nd ed., 200. 「輕辭天子，非高也，勢薄也。爭土土橐，非下
117 也，權重也。」(Zhu D., Zhongguo Lidai Wenxue 1-1, 210.)
118 Waley, Three Ways, 199.
119 Ibid.
120 DeBary and Bloom, Sources, 2nd ed., 202. 「今所治之政，民閒之事，夫婦所明知者不⽤用，
而慕上知之論，則其於治反矣。故微妙之言，非民務也。」(Zhu D., Zhongguo Lidai Wenxue
121 I-I, 213.)
123 Ibid.
order to give them supernatural validity, upon sacrificial tripods,”¹²² but a
generally accessible codex to assume universal power:

[...] in the state of an enlightened ruler there are no books written on bamboo
slips; law supplies the only instruction. There are no sermons on the former
kings; the officials serve as the only teachers. There are no fierce feuds of
private swordsmen; cutting off the heads of the enemy is the only deed of
valor. Hence, when the people of such a state make a speech, they say nothing
that is in contradiction to the law; when they act, it is in some way that will
bring useful results; and when they do brave deeds, they do them in the
army.¹²³

No doubt the Legalist view of human nature is exceedingly bleak. Li and Liu
describe the fundamental outlook as one in which “one only strives for personal
gain, the wife necessarily hopes for the death of the husband, the son necessarily
hopes for the death of the father, and there definitely is no compassion.”¹²⁴ But the
Legalist discourse develops its own version of ‘educationalism’ from this gloomy
precept: it means to employ “punishment to end punishment”¹²⁵, the idea being
that “if punishments are sufficiently heavy, no one will dare to transgress the
law.”¹²⁶ This interpretation could also explain the ‘strange’ affection for Daoism
exhibited by Han Fei, who devoted two chapters to the explication of Laozi 「老子」. Read as the pinnacle of ‘Machiavellian’ manipulation, the Legalist project
appears ‘non-humanitarian’ in its demand for the universal subjugation across
hierarchies and classes to the legal text. Crucially, though, it also opens up a
moment of self-determination in so far as the law is founded on the contingent
‘will to power’ of the ruler and cuts across all ‘natural Good’. As Needham points
out,

¹²² Waley, Three Ways, 209.
¹²³ De Bary and Bloom, Sources, 2nd ed., 203. 「故明主之國，無書簡之文，以法為教；無先
王之語，以吏為師；無私劍之捍，以斬首為勇。是境內之民，其言談者必軌於法，動者
歸之於功，為勇者盡之於軍。」(Zhu D., Zhongguo Lidai Wenxue 1-1, 214.)
¹²⁴ Li and Liu, Xiangjin Meixue Shi 2, 220; 「只要對自己有利，妻就一定希望夫死，子就一定
希望父死，而絕不會有什麼憐惜。」 (my translation)
¹²⁵ Needham, J., History of Scientific Thought, 207. The phrase appears in the Book of Documents
“Zhou Shu - Jun-chen” 《書經．周書．君陳》 as 「辟以止辟」 (Legge, The Chinese Classics
3-2, 542.)
In feudal times it was natural enough that the feudal lords should not consider themselves subject to the positive laws which they themselves gave forth; *li*, therefore, was the ‘code of honour’ of the ruling groups, and *fa* the ordinances [...] to which the common people were subject. This is enshrined in the famous passage in the *Li Chi* (Record of Rites): ‘*Li* does not reach down to the people; *hsing* (punishments, or penal statutes) do not reach up to the great officers.’

The Legalist anti-traditionalism and relative ‘equality’ “embodying the danger of encroachment of fixed laws upon the whole class of feudal nobility” certainly vitiate any clear-cut division between ‘good’ Confucianism and ‘bad’ Legalism. Rather, their opposition illustrates the impasse between natural and positive law, the neuralgic point of the controversy persisting meta-philosophically into the present. That is, to quote Adorno, “the problem of morality [as] the relation between freedom and law”

In traditional historiography the efforts of Han Fei are generally regarded as a failure, especially in light of his own demise as he apparently fell prey to the law he himself promoted with such vigor. However, in spite of this failure, a common saying asserts an “outer Confucianism and inner Legalism” in China as “Confucians who in later ages operated the bureaucratic machine [...] became jurists of positive law.” Recent studies of legal practice in China support a certain synthesis in practice; outlining the implications of the Guodian Chu Slips for our understanding of the idea of law during the Warring States period, for instance, Weld maintains,

[…] it is no longer possible to say, as some have in the past, “law played little role in Early Chinese culture, as we know from the following verses in the *Analects*”; or “the Chinese state preferred to rule by Virtue, Yielding and Ritual, rather than law and punishment”; although we might be able to say “some Confucian thinkers from the fifth century forward offered in their writings and teachings a powerful critique of the coercive methods used to

---

127 Needham, J., *History of Scientific Thought*, 530-1. The phrase in question is from “Qu Li I” and reads 「禮不下庶人，刑不上大夫」 (Wang, *Liji* I, 32.)

128 Ibid., 531.


130 「外儒內法」

achieve social control in some of the states of their day.”

Law in later periods of Chinese history became a highly complex structure of texts consisting of the traditional codex, statutes and sub-statutes (those of the Qing criminal law “were received almost verbatim from the Ming Dynasty”), imperial orders, and precedents. But the high level of sophistication to which both legislature and jurisdiction rose, did not culminate in the total law envisioned by the Legalists and the Confucian shielding of the social fabric against damages incurred by penal law remained a permanent and extremely important element of Chinese law, often reinscribed into the legal text as the various case studies Edwards analyzes illustrate. Old age or filial piety (in cases were the only remaining offspring was sentenced) were widely acknowledged as possible extenuating circumstances.

Although the terms and the development of intellectual reflection around the legal certainly present as specifically Chinese, it is difficult still to pinpoint the aspect/s of difference in comparison to Western thought. The Confucian idea of legal order is constructed through an adaptive application and transcendence of the penal code in a natural law which not only requires concealment (yin) but is itself concealed, in so far as it escapes codification. This intellectual ‘bias’ combines several important elements of the (received) image of Chinese thought: a skepticism of language, an affinity to organic composition and growth, and a conception of societal order as essentially familial, which finds a certain ‘divinity’ in the patriarchal origin where nature and nurture intersected in accord.

This characterization, however, does not imply a simple opposition of Eastern holism against Western totalization. The problem of enforcing a codex ‘to the end’ was equally understood in Western antiquity and expressed in Cicero’s ‘summum ius, summa iniuria’ (supreme justice, supreme injustice). Specificity then is not necessarily bound to understanding in the sense of knowledge, but cultural self-understanding and aspirations. As two sides of the same coin, natural law and positive law condition each other, no matter which side one feels ‘spontaneously’

134 Cf. Edwards, “The Role of Case Precedent.”
attracted to. It is this inclination or ideological attachment that continues to shape narrative representations and negotiations of law.

Familial Law and Alien Law

From today’s perspective the legal order in Hong Kong appears secure, threatened only by the possibility of interference from the motherland. Just as the English language has ‘morphed’ from an aspect of foreign control to universal prerequisite to (financial) success in life, the British legal apparatus seems accepted and successful in turning the ex-colony into “one of the world’s safest metropolises.” Chui and Lo characterize the current situation as follows,

Despite the low crime rate, Hong Kong’s anti-crime efforts and support of law enforcement are reflected in the relatively high incarceration rate (176.8 per 100,000 in 2005) and a large police service (486.6 police per 100,000 in 2000). An average of 10 per cent of total public expenditure is devoted to security. [...] Cultural factors such as utilitarian familism, Confucianism and extended kinship structures are often cited as contributing factors to the low crime rates. Analysis indicates that most Hong Kong citizens are conformist and public attitudes favour a government that is hostile to crime and supportive of severe punishment to adult offenders.

Judging by such a wide support for a conservative ‘law and order’ regime and certain ‘cultural factors’ positively influencing crime rates, “concepts of the law [have indeed] entered deeply into the social psyche.” Yet the relationship between said ‘cultural factors’ and the thorough internalization of the modern legal apparatus remains unclear. Particularly in light of the long-standing history of the Chinese legal system with its own sophisticated apparatus, the general appreciation of law enforcement remains ambiguous in so far as it is both a remnant of foreign imperialism and formally an extension to the established practice of positive law in China.

135 Chui and Lo, “Introduction,” 5.
136 Ibid.
137 Lee Y., Xianggang Sichao, 41; «法律觀念深入民心» (my translation).
138 For a debunking of the myth of British law supplanting ‘Oriental despotism’ in the region see Munn, “The Criminal Trial Under Early Colonial Rule.”
To address these issues, which find representation in the fictional and are more effectively tackled in readings of cultural texts than through properly legal material, I will first take up two films from the post-war period: Chun Kim’s (秦劍) *Dial 999 for Murder* 《999命案》 from 1956 and Lung Kong’s (龍剛) *Story of a Discharged Prisoner* 《英雄本色》 from 1967. The ‘pair’ will serve to illustrate the attempt to adapt the Western noir and ‘whodunnit’ to the Hong Kong locale and the narrative exclusion of law (enforcement) from the moral problem of crime respectively. While the elements of the murder mystery in *999* seem to contradict the thesis of a general aversion to codified law, it is in the interest of a more detailed picture of the cinematic discourse around the legal order not to simply ignore such an example. Especially because *999* is by no means an irregularity in the 1950s and 60s, but “set a trend for detective and mystery films using ‘999’ (the number for emergency calls) in their titles”\(^1\).

The post-war decades were marked by the “impact of the new Cantonese cinema represented by Union Film Enterprises”\(^2\) as a number of important companies followed suit contributing to a “golden age”\(^3\) of ‘local’ productions. The “999 detective mystery series [was] launched by Kong Ngee in its early days”\(^4\) and is indicative of the wide range of themes and influences which found expression during this period of investment and competition. Due to the subject matter and certain stylistic features Mak hints at a certain Hitchcockian vibe\(^5\) and in the context of Hollywood cinema one can easily read the wave of detective narratives in post-war Cantonese cinema against the *noir* and related ‘genres’.

---

139 Law and Bren, *Hong Kong Cinema*, 171. Law Kar details the extent of Cantonese mysteries/thrillers in the 50s and 60s in a more recent article: “Another significant contribution of Chun Kim to Kong Ngee was the series of detective/crime thrillers he initiated and developed, beginning with *Dragnet* (aka *Dial 999 for Murder*) (1956). The film did well in the box office, which led to the making of similar films by Kong Ngee and other companies. Kong Ngee followed up with *Ransom* (aka *Murder on the Beach*) (Chan Man, 1957), *24 Hours* (aka *Dial 999 for 24-Hour Murder Case*) (Tso Kea, 1961), and *999 Grotesque Corpse* (Ng Wui, 1962), while other companies came up with the likes of *999 I Am the Murderer* (1963) and *999 The Poisonous Swan* (1964). Kong Ngee continued the trend with offerings such as *Case in the Mansion* (aka *Crime of Passion in the Mansion*) (Chan Man, 1959), *Macabre* (aka *A Case of ‘Missing Corpse’*) (Fung Fong, 1960) and *A Mysterious Night in a Dead Corner* (Chor Yuen, 1964).” (Law, “Rules and Exceptions,” 114-16.)


141 Ibid.

142 Mak, “Intimate Partners,” 93.

143 Ibid.
Comparisons to the English tradition of the murder mystery are equally salient in so far as characters such as Agatha Christie’s archetypal sleuths excel at detailing class character in the everyday while affirming justice within the legal order, in rare cases even against it.

*Dial 999* establishes the presence of modern law enforcement right from the start as a caravan of police cars and motorcycles makes its way to the relatively affluent milieu of Sassoon Road 「沙宣道」 in response to the eponymous phone call. The modernism of the police force is further expressed in formal Western attire and profuse pipe-smoking, although the inspector, played by Lee Pang-fei (李鹏飞), occasionally appears in traditional Chinese clothes as if to emphasize a universally ‘natural Good’ irrespective of cultural particularity. The status of the legal order is in this sense clearly articulated and the final arrest of Geung Chung-Ping (姜中平) in the role of the villain Fan Yu San (范玉山) certainly affirms the ‘long arm of the law’. Yet while much of the character background is delivered in the form of police interviews, the plot is driven by another element. Mak explains,

True to form, romance remains the overriding element in Chun’s interpretation of the genre. In *Dragnet* [the alternate English title of the film], Patrick Tse 谢贤 plays a reporter who delves into a mysterious crime case after a fateful nocturnal encounter with a *femme fatale* played by Kar Ling 嘉玲. One thing leads to another, and the catalyst of each dramatic turn is a love interest.144

The impression of ‘Hitchcockian’ overtones and *noir* borrowings derive from this ‘catalyst’ as reporter Ling Wan (凌云) becomes personally involved with ‘*femme fatale*’ Tse Siu-king 谢小琼, a suspect in the investigation who is unwilling to account for her escape from the family home on the night of the first murder. The moral danger of actively concealing this fact from the law, however, never truly takes hold of the plot. That is, the possibility of Ling Wan actually falling for the ‘wrong’ woman appears an extremely distant one; while the conventions of the murder mystery and the *noir* certainly open it up, it is constantly undermined in pace and acting. No wonder then that Law Kar

144 Ibid.
subsumes the Kong Ngee mysteries under melodramas\textsuperscript{145}. While the search for the murderer is no doubt pivotal, the healthiness of the love interest is never in doubt.

The narrative construction of modernity in 999 is in this sense unhindered, ‘glorious’ even, as the interests of law enforcement, individual romance, and morality align. An early, somewhat rude, police interrogation of Siu-king’s mother reveals that she used to be a dancer who married into some wealth, a background indicative of a somewhat archaic version of social mobility. In his plan to force a marriage with Siu-king villain Fan reinforces this image of traditional patriarchy. The ruthlessness of his plan to usurp the family fortune by murder and denunciation thus reads as a side blow against outdated forms of social relations. Of course traditional morality would equally condemn the scheme and in this sense presents no obstacle to the general affirmation of modern law and individualist love. As such 999 presents a modernity unequivocally compatible with Hong Kong culture.

With regard to later developments of the mystery genre, we can detect in Chun Kim’s film an interesting preoccupation with the criminal act itself. When the killer intrudes at night, close-ups of his muffled foot steps in the hall and gloved hands preparing the deed, the style (almost) echoes the Italian \textit{giallo} which in the ‘aftermath’ of Hitchcock’s \textit{Psycho} (1960) rapidly escalates the voyeurism around mentally disturbed murderers and unwitting amateur detectives. In the context of later developments in Hong Kong cinema one can read the post-war mysteries as pushing towards the later ‘strange case’ 「奇案」 formula in its fascination with the weird and inhuman. Titles such as Ng Wui’s (吳回) \textit{999 Grotesque Corpse 《999怪屍案》} (1962) imply as much, at least in title.

The ‘melodramatically’ conservative \textit{Dial 999} emphasizing individual love and the power of law enforcement perhaps strikes one today as overly optimistic in its positively modern outlook. Situated against the historical background of Japanese occupation, British ‘re-occupation’, Chinese civil war, and a constant influx of immigrants to the city, however, such an optimism certainly makes sense. Lau

\textsuperscript{145} “Melodramas (which could be further classified as romantic melodramas, family melodramas and mysteries) constitute the major bulk [of Kong Ngee’s Cantonese films], totalling 37.” (Law K., “Rules and Exceptions,” 113.)
Siu-kai describes Hong Kong law as “geared very much to the purposes of stability and administration [which] accords quite well with the needs of a Chinese people weary of turmoil and disturbance”\(^{146}\). The riots of 1956 「雙十暴動」 in which a “celebration of the 1911 Revolution [...] turned into a 3-day-long violent dispute attacking Communist businesses, offices and schools in Hong Kong and causing the death of fifty-nine people”\(^{147}\) undoubtedly impressed that need, validating the status of Hong Kong’s colonial police force as ‘keepers of the peace’\(^{148}\).

Ten years later Patrick Tse takes on a very different character in Lung Kong’s *Story of a Discharged Prisoner*. But although the film again falls into a period of violent uprising, the depiction of the legal apparatus in this film differs dramatically from *999*. It is not so much “conflicts between the legal norms and the Chinese customary practices [which] flare up [or] bring about serious disruptions in the legal process”\(^{149}\) as the now familiar ‘sidelining’ of the law which make the title particularly interesting in the context of a cinematic discourse on the legal order. Tse plays Lee Cheuk-hong (李卓雄), a thief known for his skill with safes in the employ of Boss One-Eyed Dragon (獨眼龍), played

---

\(^{146}\) Lau S., *Society and Politics*, 36.

\(^{147}\) Chu Yingchi, *Hong Kong Cinema*, 27.

\(^{148}\) The Yearbook details events and government response as follows: “Public Disorder. On 10th October, 1956, the day of the principal Nationalist Chinese Festival known as the ‘Double Tenth’, a disturbance occurred in the Li Cheng Uk Resettlement Estate following a dispute over the removal of some Nationalist flags and emblems which had been pasted on the walls of the buildings contrary to previously notified instructions. On that day police were already at a state of alertness as part of the usual precautions taken on the occasion of such celebrations, and by immediate intervention were able to restore order, although feelings continued high among the inhabitants of the area. Later in the day, however, crowds continued to assemble in the area and criminal elements were quick to exploit the situation with the result that widespread public disorder broke out in the Shamshuipo district. Throughout the first night the disorder was confined to a limited area of the town, and the police endeavoured with the minimum of force to contain it and prevent it from spreading. The situation was brought under control during the early morning hours of the 11th October. Shortly after 10 a.m. trouble again broke out, indicating a much more serious threat to law and order. At 12.30 p.m. it was decided to call in military forces to cordon off the affected areas. Rioting continued in Kowloon from approximately 10 a.m. onwards and at 7.30 p.m. curfew was imposed. Meanwhile serious disorder had broken out at Tsuen Wan where right-wing trade unionists collaborated with Triad gangs to redress old scores and to attempt to win a dominant position in the labour world. Apart from sporadic incidents, order restored in Kowloon at approximately 7.30 p.m. on the 11th October and in Tsuen Wan during the early hours of the 12 October. After the disturbances intensive police action continued against gangs of criminals, hooligans and Triad Societies who had been engaged in the rioting, resulting in the arrest of approximately 6,000 persons, many of whom were subsequently brought before the courts on serious charges connected with the rioting, including 5 persons charged with murder.” *(Hong Kong Annual Report 1956, 190-1.)*

\(^{149}\) Lau S., *Society and Politics*, 36.
by Shek Kin (石堅), who is caught during a robbery gone wrong as the film opens.

What follows is his way to reform against the forces to be: initial attempts to find work are thwarted by One-Eyed Dragon who fears the protagonist might end up with another organization. At the same time he is followed by the police who hope to catch him in the act and produce leverage forcing him back into his old line of work, but this time as an undercover agent. All the while only his mother is aware of his stint in the penitentiary and Lee is committed to preserving his healthy appearance in the eyes of his younger brother. But One-Eyed Dragon continues to interfere and as things move towards the climactic final confrontation, the protagonist’s past is revealed and his brother tricked into participating in a violent heist. Finally, Lee sacrifices his own future for that of his family, fabricating the narrative of a criminal relapse the police were convinced of all along.

*Discharged Prisoner* is commonly read as indicative of a movement towards negativity, motivating its pairing with *Dial 999* here. Zhang maintains that “Lung Kong’s films articulated anxiety and pessimism in post-riot Hong Kong.” Shu Kei equally registers a ‘mood swing’,

[...] whereas community spirit had its place in the Cantonese films made before the mid 60s, it disappeared from the films that followed. The new films now dealt with powerlessness of the individual against the system or external forces, and were defeatist in tone.

But while the film portrays such an individual struggle, a peculiar kind of justice is asserted in the end. The conflict essentially involves three ‘systems’ in a tripartite opposition: there is Lee’s immediate family, his *jianghu* clan led by One-Eyed Dragon, and the law. Of course his original loyalties lie with his natural family, but youthful ‘invincibility’ and drive lead him to ‘come out and

---

150 Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, 175.
walk’ 「出嚟行」. This lifestyle inevitably fails him as he is interned by the law, and worse, even after he has ‘repaid’ his supposed debt to civil society it will not let him go. He is who he was, both in the eyes of the law and in the eyes of One-Eyed Dragon. Unwilling to go back to a life of crime, yet unable to fully integrate into civil society as neither Triad boss nor police inspector can accept such a resocialization, his final ‘play’ is to ensure his younger brother will not be marked by either in the same way. His negotiation of three ‘systems’ leads him back to the natural family as the only ‘true’ Good to be redeemed.

In his comments, Lin Nien-tung describes the film as “heavily tinged with a feeling of original sin in the Christian sense, with the tragic fate of a released prisoner being explained as the punishment that God had meted out to man - a way of treatment which was the very expression of paranoia.” This somewhat cryptic assessment (which Shu Kei opposes in asserting that the film “is the least religious in tone” among the director’s works) has to be read against the presentation of the legal order as an edifice. The first series of shots recounting his release from prison are telling in this respect: in an establishing shot the Stanley Prison appears a somewhat menacing artifact against the backdrop of ocean and hinterland. No other prisoners are visible when an impersonal Gurkha guard leads him across the courtyard and off to the front gate. As the protagonist walks towards the viewer awaiting his release and away from the black hole the gate leaves against the white structure, the camera suddenly zooms out, reproducing or rather exacerbating the original distance - Lee appears again absorbed by the facility, a movement powerfully foreshadowing the events to come.

A sense of paranoia thus undoubtedly accompanies the visual presentation of the legal edifice. Of equal import is the artificial nature of the prison structure itself in its surrounding, its foreignness highlighted racially by a proxy of British imperial rule, the Gurkha. As a result, law is imposingly present but strangely

\[152\] This Cantonese phrase literally translates as ‘to come out and walk’ and denotes the exit from civil society into the Triad hierarchy. It is possibly short for 「出嚟行蠱惑」, that is (somewhat clunkily) “to come out and engage in felonious activity”. The meaning of 「蠱惑」 ranges from a more positive ‘street smart’ to a decidedly negative ‘fraudulent’.


\[154\] Shu, “A Postscript,” 117.
detached. Later on the court house of Kowloon Bay radiates with a very similar quality as if the giant edifice had been airdropped next to the slums in which the protagonist walks. Architecturally the legal order appears the product of (Western) modernity imposed on the indigenous, yet the plot does little to indict it as an element of imperialism. Rather, it is presented as ‘merely’ alien. Its agent, a pipe-smoking inspector, played by Lung Kong himself, never actually catches up with Lee. His attempts to convince the protagonist to join forces against One-Eyed Dragon are casually rejected, and when speaking to the woman in charge of an ex-convict organization his reliance on statistical chance and circumstantial evidence betray his textbook approach. The legal edifice thus looms as a foreign body ‘arbitrarily’ providing penance, while its clumsy agent, not attuned to the intricacies and contradictions of the social body under observation, is unable to insinuate the law into the opposition between the blood relations of family and loyalties to the *jianghu* clan.

Law in *Story of a Discharged Prisoner*, while completely materialized and effective in its punitive function, is not fully naturalized and the legal order has not taken hold on the social fabric of the community. Lee is thus not “defeated by the system”\(^{155}\) but can easily manipulate the legal order to serve a higher morality. When he “takes the blame for a crime committed by his brother [as] an act of penance”\(^{156}\), he obviously conceals the truth for the purposes of ‘the Good’. Lin interprets this as a Christian motif, a valid reading precisely in so far as it is Lee himself who freely takes on the burden of a guilt which legally (or empirically) is not his. While the law ‘hounds’ him, it cannot actually touch him without his decision to become his ‘brother’s keeper’. The detached appearance of the law in this sense opens a certain Christian perspective, strengthened by the protagonist’s renunciation of wealth, his rejection of One-Eyed Dragon’s advances and his developing sense of duty, not just towards his immediate family but also to the various inhabitants of the slum and other ex-convicts.

However, a reading along the lines of Chinese tradition is equally feasible: the protagonist, first drawn to the fame and wealth of the *jianghu*, matures to take on

---

\(^{155}\) Ibid.  
\(^{156}\) Ibid.
his ‘natural’ responsibilities towards his family. Positive law facilitates this only in so far as it allows him to reflect on his past choices in seclusion, cuts him off from his ‘adopted’ Triad father, and finally reconnects him with his family. While the legal apparatus is not completely useless in this context, it is characteristically ‘blind’ to morality, bound as it is to the letter of the law. Lee’s choice to ‘take the hit’ and ensure a future for his younger brother is now justified not just as a gesture of concern for his natural family or to provide the law with the obligatory ‘pound of flesh’, but as moral penance for abandoning his relatives in the first place. The concealment of truth for the purposes of moral righteousness and the development of responsibility towards both immediate family and the larger social environment thus certainly resonate with Confucian heritage. Yin thus asserts itself as the need to take responsibility beyond the letter of the law and cultivate a righteousness rooted in (a form of) natural law. Intransparency is concomitant with the latter, because it preserves a privacy of knowledges on the basis of which the individual decides the moral quagmire. Legalism demonstrated the obverse in its call for total visibility, which in turn tends towards a ‘mechanization’ of morality. In *Discharged Prisoner* this conflict between intransparency and increasing visibility is effectively reflected in its presentation of architecture.

The strong visual presence of architecture, split between horizontal shanty towns on one hand, and newly erected official installations, government housing 「公屋」 and housing estates 「屋邨」 on the other, directly links the relative foreignness of the law to a specific period of transition, one which “allowed the colonial government to take control of the spatial and social development of Hong Kong”157. The paradigmatic case illustrating the relationship of architecture and control usually cited in this context is of course the Kowloon Walled City 「九龍城寨」158, that utterly impenetrable ‘double’ to government housing. In *Discharged Prisoner*, however, the vertical is synonymous with government control, affluence, and modern civil life, while the plane of the slum community before organized resettlement forms a background of traditional social structure

---

157 Smart, *The Shek Kip Mei Myth*, x.
158 Cf. ibid., 59-71.
and commitments. Lung Kong presents these two spaces as inevitably linked: One-Eyed Dragon has risen to wealth just as Lee’s family has climbed the social ladder, but the ‘moral compass’ necessary to navigate the rapidly modernizing space is developed in the protagonist’s path through the modern *jianghu* and return to the family.

**Lawlessness and Corruption**

The two cinematic examples of the tumultuous post-war decades illustrated first an optimistic embrace of modern law enforcement which casually integrates an individualism of safe romance and superficial hints of traditionalism; then the moral ineffectiveness of a legal order well under way to reshaping the social space of Hong Kong. Contrasting these two titles obviously does not exhaust cinematic presentations of the law in Hong Kong cinema; approaching the issue from the perspective of ‘left-wing’ contra ‘right-wing’ companies in the 50s and 60s, Yau, for instance, interrogates a different set of films with regard to a ‘(re)making of morality’ during this period, citing (among many titles) Union productions such as Lee Tit’s *In the Face of Demolition* 《危樓春曉》 (1953), which not only “critisize[s] the measurement and instrumentalization of human relations by capitalist logic, [but also] exposes without mercy the dominant classes which participate in the collaboration between the colonial government and business.”

Following the riots of 1967 「六七暴動」, however, this equally non-traditional and anti-authoritarian impulse is lost in a movement towards

---

159 Yau C., “The (Re)Making.”
160 Ibid., 154.
161 The details of these riots are too intricate to present here, but include prolonged ‘leftist’ demonstrations, strikes crippling public transportation, bombings causing deaths and injuries among police and civilians, and even assassinations (the most famous being the killing of radio commentator Lam Bun 林彬). The Yearbook speaks of “disturbances” and “action[s] to restrain and disperse mobs, to counter intimidation, to deal with terrorist activity and to tackle premises harbouring organizations implicated in these activities”, stating that the “police themselves were the main target for the hostility of the communists and were subjected to physical attack, threats and cajolery […] During the year 10 police officers were killed and a total of 212 wounded.” The “troubles” included “mob demonstrations”, “inflammatory posters and the possession and manufacture of offensive weapons”, as well as “the appearance of genuine and fake bombs”, some of which were “thrown into police station compounds”. (*Hong Kong: Report for the Year 1967*, 149-50.)
neoliberalism reflected pop-culturally,

The vacuum left by the recession of “Left-wing” cinema in the aftermath of 1967 allowed the expansion of Shaw Brothers in its place. The films that appeared during the several years that followed, made an apparent tilt towards the establishment. The lush Shaw production of *Dead End* [《死角》] (1969, Cheung Cheh [張徹]) and *My Son* [《春火》] (1970, Luo Ch’en [羅臻]), for example, both of which emphasize the legitimacy of state violence in rounding up youth delinquency, as a necessary means of protecting law and order.¹⁶²

But, returning to the perspective of the legal, the issue is complicated by a whole stratum of narratives set against historical or pseudo-historical backgrounds which regularly circumvent the law through context. In the *gongfu* and *wuxia* genres (premodern) agents of the law are usually non-existent, sometimes antagonists. For the *wuxia* is by definition set in the parallel sphere of the *jianghu*, the ‘rivers and lakes’ meaning marshlands, swamps, and islands traditionally thought of as lying outside imperial jurisdiction - the topographical *yin*. In the *gongfu* genre in particular the background is often one of enemy rule as a great many films set against Manchu control over China during the Qing Dynasty attest to.

The ‘Shaolin Rebellion’ is featured frequently, for instance in films like *Disciples of Shaolin* 《洪拳小子》 (1975) or *Five Shaolin Masters* 《少林五祖》 (1974) by director Chang Cheh (張徹). It is the absence of law which motivates physical self-cultivation and enables the protagonist to “regulate conflict ‘off the books’”.¹⁶³ The films of Lau Kar-leung (劉家良) come to mind here as prominent examples of this martial schooling, like *The 36th Chamber of the Shaolin* 《少林三十六房》 (1978) or *Mad Monkey Kung Fu* 《癲猴》 (1979) - this last title will be discussed in a later chapter. Ho Meng-hua’s (何夢華) *The Flying Guillotine* 《血滴子》 (1975) presents another colorful entry

employing the supposed lawlessness of the Qing \(^{164}\) in a slightly different fashion, as the protagonist is first recruited to Court as part of a secret commando to master the terrible device, only to learn that his service consists mainly of silently assassinating officials the emperor has deemed unreliable.

As a result, lawlessness is a primary feature of much of the historically inspired narratives. While some martial arts films take up historical battles to present a form of “law-preserving” \(^{165}\) violence - Chang Cheh’s *Heroic Ones* 《十三太保》 (1970) comes to mind - *gongfu* titles tend to be concerned with individual resistance and survival. In a climate of tyrannical oppression by the Manchus or localized syndicate extortion, the protagonist ‘makes laws’ only in so far as every act can be thought of as ‘jurisdiction’ in the Kantian sense (that is, an act which is universalizable and thus conforms to the categorical imperative). The law that is preserved is the natural Good of self-defense and autonomy. The moment of resistance to a law that is foreign, imposed, amoral, or unjust is thus not lost altogether, but continually finds expression ‘diverted’ into mythically removed contexts, particularly throughout the late 60s and 70s.

The general lawlessness found in pseudo-/historical narratives is complemented by rampant corruption within modern law enforcement. This can be directly tied to the founding of the ICAC, or Independent Commission Against Corruption (廉政公署), in 1974, which in turn ‘paved the way’ for a number of New Wave directors like Ann Hui (許鞍華) and Patrick Tam (譚家明) through television work on shows like *CID* and other “propaganda vehicles” \(^{166}\). Marchetti notes,

> [...] a public relations campaign was mounted to promote the new commission, and several budding New Wave filmmakers [...] directed television films to promote its efficacy. Commercial features like *Anti-Corruption* [《廉政風暴》] (1975) and *Jumping Ash* [《跳灰》] (1976) dealt with similar themes as well. In fact, police corruption continues to be an important theme within the

\(^{164}\) On paper this ‘lawlessness’, as pointed out earlier, consisted of the law of the Ming “received almost verbatim”, but in the context of these films law is completely subverted by the ‘foreign’ Manchus.

\(^{165}\) Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” 284.

\(^{166}\) Cheuk, *Hong Kong New Wave Cinema*, 56.
triad genre [...]

If *Story of a Discharged Prisoner* presents a legal edifice erected in the course of a general spatial reorganization of Hong Kong, yet unable to reshape popular attitude towards the law, the ongoing transition in the 70s exposes law as both ‘too little’ and ‘too much’. When law is lacking, as is often the case in *wuxia* and *gongfu* titles, it entails a machismo of vengeance, the “fierce feuds of private swordsmen” criticized by Han Fei. But this heroism also resonates with the element of individualism in the modern context when transposed into the Hong Kong of that period, as illustrated by Kuei Chih-hung’s *The Teahouse* 《成記茶樓》 (1974). When civilians have to ‘take the law into their own hands’ or exercise the right to self-defense, law is either discarded in autonomy or indicted as ineffective.

On the other hand, agents of the law are portrayed more frequently, particularly in the early works of the New Wave. Leong Po-chih (梁普智) and Josephine Siao’s (蕭芳芳) *Jumping Ash* (1976) with its “fast-paced, free-moving, and realistic” look comes to mind, as does Alex Cheung’s (章國明) *Man on the Brink* 《邊緣人》 (1981), a forerunner to the undercover trope so prominent in Hong Kong cinema. While the mythical ‘expulsion’ of the law in the pseudo-/historical opens the space for archaic heroism, the narrative reorientation towards the law finds a plethora of cracks in the legal order: *Man on the Brink*, for instance, begins with police clearing unauthorized street vendors; when the protagonist approaches an elderly woman, a man in the back verbally reprimands him for hassling the lady. When he lets her go, though, he is, in turn, reproached by a higher-up; this establishes the problematic ‘grey zone’ between law and morality which will define the undercover work to come in a rather innocuous manner.

‘Too much’ law thus indicates issues of letter versus spirit such as corruption,

---

167 Marchetti, *Andrew Lau and Alan Mak’s Infernal Affairs*, 84-5.
an overly familiar relationship with the illegal, and its obverse, ‘total law’, meaning agents who stick to the law above all else. The former describes the yin of organic interdependence stabilizing sociality as a whole, the latter indicates the breakdown of such a whole as one element asserts itself and exposes its inherent negativity. The narrative preoccupation with the ‘too little’ and ‘too much’ of law conditioning a number of formulas and genres in their development, continuously excavates the instabilities of the legal order in its relationship to ethical substance and individual psychology.

Because the 1970s are a period of immense changes in Hong Kong, it is notoriously difficult to approach, particularly by way of mediations. Kung and Zhang indicate it might be an “insurmountable task to try and analyse the relationships between mass culture and society”170 of the decade. Fortunately, the framework here does not necessitate such a general judgement. Nevertheless, certain simultaneous developments prevent a neat summary of the 70s, even when analysis is confined to relatively specific issues. The rapid developments during the decade include the “collapse of the Cantonese film industry”171 in 1972, its sudden reemergence (usually correlated with Chor Yuen’s House of the 72 Tenants 《七十二家房客》) of the following year, the heyday of the Shaw Brothers and the rise of prominent challengers like Golden Harvest. The aftermath of local riots and the motherland’s Cultural Revolution commonly associated with the birth of a local identity thus presents a strange ‘bricolage’ of old and new side by side. Around the term hybridity 「雜嘜」, Lo describes the resultant ambivalence in the following way,

Of course the hybrid can be pleasing; this is pretty much the consensus between Hong Kong people and those who revel in Hong Kong style culture. But hybridity is a word which also indicates a ‘congenital’ lack, a grounding that is thin, and thus the need to piece things together here and there into a

---

170 Kung and Zhang, “Hong Kong Cinema,” 17.
171 Ibid., 15. Desser outlines the development of Cantonese cinema leading up to the collapse as follows: “Production levels remained high in the period 1960-1963 during which the Cantonese cinema averaged just over 200 films per year. By 1964 that number had fallen to 175 and fell slightly again in 1965. Output declined every year thereafter until 1970, when only seventy-one films were released. The next year there were virtually none.” (Desser, “A New Orphan Island Paradise,” 135.)
With respect to representations of the legal order, the tendency to ‘piece together’ and transpose into new contexts noticeably opens the discourse. While the New Wave brings a certain realism to depictions of life at the periphery, the lawlessness of the past finds its way into the modern setting. Michael Hui’s \( \text{許冠文} \) *The Private Eyes* 《半斤八両》 from 1976, for instance, transposes the figure of the private eye into the newly found affluence of an increasingly globalized Hong Kong, ‘importing’ an apparently modern solution to modern problems. The Hui Brothers are “commissioned by a supermarket to arrest shoplifters and a wealthy man to tail his wife before hitting the jackpot: to investigate a case of blackmail.”\(^{173}\) In so far as the trio steps in where law enforcement can or will not, a rather benign form of lawlessness provides the medium for run-ins with trophy wives, water beds, gym muscle men, etc. Of course, the apparently lucrative line of work as private detectives generates more problems than it resolves. As such, the general ‘Westernization’ is mitigated in humorous mishaps, a certain linguistic and cultural resistance to a straightforward adoption of the modern. In many cases the punchline is delivered by Sam Hui’s \( \text{許冠傑} \) character, a rascal best suited to the world of private security.

The interaction between the brothers makes for much of the entertainment and provides a “coherent theme: the helplessness of oppressed wage-earners [which] is both laughable and miserable.”\(^{174}\) The elements of slapstick most pronounced in ongoing struggles with the inanimate (a pair of shoes slowly disintegrating at the beginning or the famous chicken gag), extensive word humor and puns, as well as cinematic citations across genres, as in the supermarket *gongfu* sequence, set the standard for local comedies to follow. While (cinematic) texts can always be tied to more or less specific sources of outside influence, the hybridity of the 70s is particularly unsettling because the emergence of a local identity in separation

---

\(^{172}\) Lo, introduction, 5-6; 「雜嘜當然可以是美的，這差不多是香港人及酷愛港式文化者的共識。但雜嘜也是先天不足、底子不厚，因而要東拼西湊、張就應代的付名詞。」 (my translation)


from the motherland also forfeits whatever virtual security the ‘fallback’ of a larger Chineseness offered before.

*Private Eyes* illustrates this issue in its attitude towards the law as the film is not concerned with the latter and presents modern Hong Kong as a ‘jungle’; it thus resists a naive ‘Westernization’ and comically recasts the individual heroism of the mythical past. Positive law as part of ‘Westernization’ engenders the emergence of private law enforcement in extra-legal affairs, because the positive ruleset distinguishes between the legally relevant and irrelevant. Ethical substance, on the other hand, knows no such boundary as it regulates both the legally irrelevant and communal attitudes towards the law. It can complement, contradict, or even supersede positive law towards organic unity - here Confucianism and Idealism are comparable. The *yin* of individual moral responsibility (rather than strict application of the letter) produces the possibility of change due to this relation. Accordingly, the casework of the *Private Eyes* targets disconnects between ethical substance and positive law. However, comic effect often threatens to negate the elements ‘pieced together’ in the encounter of modern metropolis and traditional values - an issue I will take up in the conclusion.

We find a more affirmative example in the 80s police actioner like Jackie Chan’s (*成龍*) *Police Story* 《警察故事》 (1985). Chan is of course no stranger to slapstick or making light of tradition as a host of early *gongfu* comedies attest. But in *Police Story* he takes on the role of an officer of the law, putting the underdog at the service of order rather than individual resistance and survival. This ‘betrayal’ can be read in personal as well as social terms: Chan already portrayed an official in *Project A* 《A計劃》 (1983); written and directed by himself, the film appears a wholehearted affirmation of the colony and a “Hong Kong identity based on the negation of a Chinese identity”\(^{175}\). The shift from rebellious no-name to hyperactive government agent thus coincides with his taking over the reigns of production and scripting his own roles. His more recent comments critical of Taiwanese elections and the Chinese people’s ‘need for

\(^{175}\) Pang, *Huanghun*, 44; 「⋯香港身份是建基於對中國身份的否定上。」 (my translation)
administration’ seem to confirm this conservative streak. But judging by his success in the 80s, these productions also clearly struck a chord with local audiences, hinting at a general acceptance of his more playful portrayals of government authority.

While the modern Hong Kong environment does not offer a ‘simple’ enemy to resist without making a clear political statement between Western colonialism and Chinese communism, Police Story does more than merely affirm law and order in the colony. Where Private Eyes easily slips into the illegal in pursuing ‘security’ beyond law enforcement, officer Kevin Chan Ka-kui (陳家駒) has to override the law in order to secure it. His adversary, Triad villain Chu Tao (朱濤) played by Chor Yuen, not only flaunts the law by hiding behind an apparently legitimate business front and lawyers but also bribes other police and succeeds in framing Chan for murder. He is thus forced outside the law while trying to enforce it. Although comedically lightened by Kevin’s interaction with partner May as well as physical humor and acrobatics, the presentation of the legal order here is interesting in so far as both sides resort to guile in order to outplay the other: Kevin stages an attack on Chu’s secretary Selina Fong (Selina 方) to recruit her as a witness against her boss.

Although Chan is clearly on the side of the law, Police Story is not straightforward ‘cops and robbers’, but akin to US action titles such as Richard Donner’s Lethal Weapon (1987) in which the legal order is hollowed out (by internal corruption or diplomatic immunity as in the second installment) and requires a ‘reset’, the law-preserving violence which re-enacts its foundation from a ‘state of emergency’\textsuperscript{176}. The paradox in both examples lies in the disconnect between law and law enforcement: while illegal activities are more or less known, they cannot be addressed using legal means. This clearly entails a critique of the legal order in so far as the (moral) right originally codified in law requires the (momentary) suspension of law in order to make good on its claim. In the framework of Legalism, or more broadly positive law, such a unilateral recourse

\textsuperscript{176} See Agamben, Homo Sacer, 15-29 (“§ 1 The Paradox of Sovereignty”) for an outline of this Schmittian logic, in which the legal order is supported by the threat of its unilateral suspension.
to a higher (natural) Good appears dangerously destabilizing. From the Hegelian perspective on deed and responsibility, however, “the ethical action contains the moment of crime”\(^{177}\) (not just in his reading of Antigone as a conflict between divine and state law). Since law is always complemented by ‘ethical substance’, that is general conduct and ‘unwritten’ social constraints conditioning law enforcement and jurisdiction, the legal order can turn into “state power [which] disowns action \(qua\) individual action and subdues it into obedience.”\(^{178}\) In a situation of diremption in which the law no longer grants mutual recognition but is ‘bent’ in favor of some, the ethical act is necessarily ‘illegal’.

Although this Hegelian structure of the ethical act can be illustrated by the example of Police Story, the film (much like the cited Lethal Weapon) does not strike one as particularly radical. The reason for this lies in the purely law-preserving nature of the ‘transgression’. That is to say, the act does not open onto anything new, does not ‘change the coordinates’, requires no faith. Officer Chan’s heroism is a matter of taking the law ‘too far’ merely in comparison to more timid members of the bureaucracy. The moral wrongness of Chu Tao’s operation and his modus operandi are not at issue. Rather, the film celebrates the ‘hands on’ approach and integrity of a Hong Kong ‘Joe Schmoe’ in contrast to government ‘pen-pushers’. His unrelenting insistence on the ‘spirit’ of the law, which jeopardizes not only his relationship or career but his well-being, make his ‘rebellion’ surprisingly conservative - he is after all easily re-integrated, demoted to traffic control in the second installment. Reading another action entry from the 1990s, we can see how this constellation of ‘too much’ law can be taken even further when pitted against a traditional Chinese model of recognition in concealment.

**Radicalizing Law**

At the outset I outlined the premodern discourse of law as essentially the conflict between positive and natural law. A cursory glance appears to reveal a

\(^{177}\) Hegel, Phenomenology, 282.

\(^{178}\) Ibid., 303.
fundamental disparity between Western and Eastern trajectories: the former moving towards totalizing the legal order around ‘sacred’ law, that is a law put into place by a sovereign who, in turn, represents a higher power on earth. The latter instead emphasizing careful consideration of the social consequences of enforcing the penal code to the letter and (not altogether unselfishly) putting the power to ‘curb’ the letter in favor of spirit into the hands of a highly educated bureaucracy. In spite of this difference in aspiration, this might not have translated into immense differences in legal practice as both West and East suffer from the effects of hierarchies on jurisdiction. While historico-legal inquiries seem to confirm a certain uniformity of legal realities overall, the virtual im-/ possibility of a legal text totalizing social order in thought does produce clear differences observable in culture.

Hollywood titles presenting the underworld tend to be narratives of ‘rise and fall’ (as in Coppola’s The Godfather from 1972 or Scott’s more recent American Gangster, 2007) which does not mean that they promote the idea of a complete victory by law over crime at some point in the future, but rather that the legal apparatus will eventually catch up with any criminal organization. In contrast, the prominence of the figure of the undercover agent 「臥底」 in Hong Kong cinema indicates the acknowledgement of law’s limited claim over society. In so far as the figure is often torn between loyalties, its practice outlines a space for morality outside jurisdiction. As Law Wing-sang notes,

The difficult decision between ‘loyalty’ [忠] and ‘justice’ [義] makes the undercover trope overcome the didacticism of a clear distinction between good and bad in earlier police actioners, opening up a different aspect of the trope in probing the struggle between the order of legal right and [traditional] ‘righteousness’ [義氣].

Of course the ‘rise and fall’ formula also solicits our admiration for the ‘great

---

Law W., “Jiedu Xianggang Wodi,” 154; 「忠’與‘義’的兩難抉擇，使臥底題材超出過去警匪片的忠奸分明的教化傳統(didacticism)，展開了臥底題材的另一面向，探討法律公義秩序與‘義氣’之間的道德掙扎。」 (my translation)
criminal in his/her resistance to the law and (possibly) alternative or archaic sense of morality, but the ‘clear distinction’ of law and non-law, civil and “uncivil society” remains mostly unmediated, while the Hong Kong undercover agent narratively ‘posits’ their identity. Naturally this positing does not guide a successful sublation of (modern) positive law and (traditional) morality in a straightforward manner, but it nevertheless forces issues of their contradiction. The result is a destabilization of law which appears characteristically porous.

John Woo’s *Hard Boiled* (1992), the last film he directed in Hong Kong before his period in Hollywood, is of particular interest in this context as it is constructed precisely around the collision between totalization and concealment embodied in the two dyads of main characters: the Western couple of absolute law/capital in the shape of Tequila Yuen (袁浩雲) played by Chow Yun-fat (周潤發) and Johnny Wong played by Anthony Wong (黃秋生), on the one hand, and Alan (江浪) played by Tony Leung Chiu-Wai (梁朝偉) and Mad Dog (獨眼龍) played by Philip Kwok (郭振鋒) representing the sinic model, on the other.

In an interview with Karen Fang the director has addressed both the meaning of the figure of Tequila and the background to the film as a whole:

Actually, *Hard Boiled* was not set in 1997. It was only slightly an allusion to the handover. My point was to show that at that time, the violence had gone too far in Hong Kong. The gangsters were ruthless with their gun smuggling and brutality. The police had a hard time dealing with them because they did not have the strength or the firepower. I hate to see so many innocent people hurt. There was so much confusion. At the same time Iraq invaded Kuwait. It made me feel so angry. There was so much injustice. So I wanted to make a new kind of hero Chow Yun-Fat - like Dirty Harry, he takes it into his hands to fight evil.

The description of Tequila as both ‘a new kind of hero’ and ‘like Dirty Harry’

---

appears somewhat paradoxical, but it is a useful starting point to the discussion. Is _Hard Boiled’s_ protagonist simply a bootleg Calahan? The film essentially starts with an exposition of Yuen’s character and when it comes to the way the man spends his free time, the parallels to _Dirty Harry_ (1971) and/or Eastwood are easily drawn. But Calahan strives to preserve the societal status quo; he is attacked as a racist and a misogynist simply because he treats every “punk” like a “punk” and feels women weren’t made to police the mean streets (at least initially). In the 1973 sequel _Magnum Force_ (directed by Ted Post) he effectively sheds any trace of vigilantism (in contrast to Bronson in Michael Winner’s _Death Wish_, 1974) as he tracks down a group of renegade police officers who take the law into their own hands, thus reinforcing legal universality. Issues of the construction of race and gender or the origin of law do not concern him.

Tequila Yuen, on the other hand, is the product of a projection of these qualities onto the Oriental other, the subject of English colonial rule. The visual and audial manifestations of this transfer form the opening of the film. There is the bottle of Tequila with the appropriate brand name of “Conquistador”, in other words the beverage the Spanish intruders learned to distill from the indigenous American population before robbing, enslaving and butchering them. It is the perfect symbol for one of the economic pillars of Western modernity: diluted with a soft drink - perhaps in an (unconscious) attempt to cover the lingering aroma of genocide - and forced to amalgamate in a violent pounding, the glass miraculously explodes in abundance. Finishing off his drink, the hard boiled cop then takes the stage of the jazz club for a piece of elevator music, six parts relaxation to four parts melancholy. The musical link to slavery with its kidnapping, torture and murder of millions across the Atlantic is an obvious one, but there is something else, possibly more disturbing, in the choice of instrument. If Blues and Jazz are cultural spaces black communities opened up by ‘misappropriating’ high brow European harmonies and subjecting them to African syncopation and polyrhythm, by taking back from white Western culture, then Benny Goodman’s clarinet, in contrast, signals the reappropriation and domestication of Jazz as a whole by the mainstream, first as pop music and later as an ‘artsy’ and multicultural past time
of the educated.

These are the lifestyle choices of Tequila clearly hinting at the degree of his cultural Westernization, whereas the history behind these choices appears forgotten. Called to the scene of a covert observation of a trade-off between gunrunners, the audience is then introduced to the way Tequila handles his job. The result is dozens of fatalities strewn about a building in shambles (certainly not unlike Dirty Harry). Accordingly, Superintendent Pang (彭Sir), played by Philip Chan (陳欣健), arrives with the usual litany of complaints about reckless endangerment, loss of lives and property, months of investigation ruined, damage to the reputation of the police force, etc. It is this “mix of genuine courage and macho foolhardiness”\textsuperscript{183} that sets him apart as the violence of the confrontation is a direct result of the sudden instigation of open conflict. No matter how elegantly the “impulsive hothead”\textsuperscript{184} moves through the fire fight, his approach is one of brute force. Important about this episode is the death of an undercover operative, a setup for the fraught relationship between Tequila and Alan to follow, the core of the narrative around which it moves towards its climax. Tequila’s uncompromising approach is one of dogmatically following criminal law. No matter how high the collateral damage, the hard boiled cop does not stray from his course of full frontal assault. He is an instigator who drags all the antinomies of law and family carefully concealed within the established order out into the open.

His accomplice in this endeavor is antagonist Johnny Wong, a character not only missing a Chinese name but constructed as Western as possible in the framework of the film: portrayed by Anthony Wong (黃秋生) of mixed blood, Johnny oozes confidence both verbally and non-verbally. He is driven by capitalism, the bigger and faster, illustrated by his derision for the .38 Special commonly used by Hong Kong police. It is relatively safe to assume, that while he is perfectly at ease with the idea of waging secret wars upon other syndicates, it is not his initial plan to turn the hospital into a battlefield, but when developments require a course of total warfare, he does not shy away, confident that it is the

\textsuperscript{183} Scharres, Hard Boiled.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid.
police who are held back by a general discomfort with public order deteriorating into a state of emergency. What makes Tequila and Johnny Wong brothers in spirit is their complete trust in the absolute claim of the systems they represent and embody. Although they might retain some elements of local culture, they are total law and total capital respectively.

Forced to team up with Tequila stands Alan, representative of the whole Hong Kong subgenre modeled around the undercover cop. His assignment comes with the usual problems articulated in similar narratives, particularly the issue of loss of identity. A decade before *Infernal Affairs* 《無間道》(2002) there is the ominous meeting on the rooftop between operative and handler, the only corroboration of Alan’s self and a reminder of his birthday. But in *Hard Boiled* this does not simply serve as a backdrop for an interrogation of the differences and similarities between police and Triads, but rather gives Woo the opportunity to show the decaying standards of the underworld. If there ever was a kind of balance where the revered head of the Triad family could keep up the facade of the legitimate business man, while his sheltering of an undercover officer insured that the ‘true’ criminals would be arrested, then this instance of a ‘translegal’ order is lost. In so far as ethical substance integrates positive law by shaping attitudes towards it, such an organic unity in ‘too little’ law hinges on general acceptance (which is, of course, withdrawn in the course of the film). The meeting at Uncle Hoi’s (海叔, played by Kwan Hoi-Shan 關海山) estate illustrates the last moment of an idyllic equilibrium, where the underworld keeps to a realm agreed upon silently.

Of course the translegal equilibrium in which police and syndicate entertain a (concealed) dependence is more of a (nostalgic) reconstruction since the film does not detail Alan’s history with Uncle Hoi before the arrival of Johnny Wong. But his betrayal of the ‘old school’ kingpin in order to gain the trust of the newcomer clearly weighs heavily on him. As such, undercover operative Alan exemplifies an “old social praxis emphasizing emotional relationships”185. His identity and

---

185 Law W., “Jiedu Xianggang Wodi,” 154; 「⋯講求人情關係的舊社會實踐。」 (my translation)
ultimately his life hinge entirely on networks of trust, secured only through Pang’s knowledge of his true self and his ‘bonding’ with criminals under an assumed persona. Caught between loyalty to the law, which forces him to constantly breach said law in order to keep up appearances, and to a family enforcing its code of honor to the end, the translegal has turned into an impossible limbo. He is no longer able to emotionally sustain the “steeliness”\textsuperscript{186} characteristic of his act when Johnny Wong forces him to kill his family in the aftermath of the warehouse shoot-out. The origami cranes Alan folds and puts up on his boat whenever he has killed someone are a reminder of his own position between law and family, the way he “is often isolated emblematically by Woo in a virtually empty frame”\textsuperscript{187} a method of visualizing the solitude of this position and his dream of moving to Iceland (where the sun shines 24 hours a day) a symbol of the clarity he envisions.

In the final showdown at the hospital Alan finds his counterpart in Mad Dog. The two represent the (pseudo-)classical Chinese hero negotiating obligations to their respective institutions according to contextualized standards of personal honor and conscience. The position of open conflict Tequila and Johnny Wong force upon them comes to a climax when their acrobatic hunt through one of the hospital’s hallways brings about a standstill around a group of sick and handicapped patients. The scene mirrors Alan’s run-in with Tequila in the fog of the smoke-bombs during the warehouse incident. There, however, the stand-off did not lead to a moment of recognition as Tequila simply pulls the trigger on the unknown agent. As a result of Johnny’s uncompromising killing of innocent bystanders in the hospital in an attempt to rid himself of Alan, Mad Dog rejects Wong’s power and is shot himself. This event is not simply an example of a murdering criminal suddenly experiencing a change of heart. Wong transgresses an unwritten law of the \textit{jianghu} disturbing the translegal balance, which absolves Mad Dog from his responsibilities to the family.

Alan faces a similar situation. He is deprived of the duality of his existence between law and family and is completely reabsorbed by the law. But it is important to note that the law Mad Dog holds onto is archaic, personal and

\textsuperscript{186} Scharres, \textit{Hard Boiled}.

\textsuperscript{187} Ibid.
specific to a certain realm, while the one Alan finds his way back to in the end is modern criminal law. His return to the police force in a suicidal attempt at capturing Wong should be read as an acceptance of universal law into a world he is no longer part of. The clarity he longed for forecloses his complicated, but nevertheless culturally specific standing. In the original version of the film both Chinese heroes die, as Woo has stated;

In my version of Hard Boiled, Tony Leung was dead. He sacrificed himself. It was a dark message and he was a dark character. But after I shot the ending, the crew and the actors were not happy. They were strongly asking me to keep him alive. Some of my assistants even cried.\(^{188}\)

He gave in to pressure from crew and actors to change the ending into a mere disappearance of Alan onto the open sea. In the same interview Woo acknowledges a will to satisfy audiences in light of the events of Beijing in 1989\(^{189}\). When read as the end of the Chinese hero, though, there actually is very little difference between death and disappearance.

It is important to note that the majority of Woo’s action films are centered around conflicts which transcend the clarity of codified law. In The Killer 《喋⾎雙雄》 (1989) a professional hitman and a police officer develop an emotional as well as ideological bond that violates the law, in A Better Tomorrow 《英雄本⾊》 (1986) it is family and righteousness which necessitate a similar breach, in Face/Off (1997) the law is portrayed as effectively blind to true identity. In so far as the excess of law, the blind spots inherent in its uncompromising universality prompt transgressions around personal bonds, a Confucian root to this motif is evident. It is the modern world that is ‘wrong’ in foreclosing the option for individual righteousness. Situated in the action genre in which conflict with the law is at hand, the 《喋⾀》 of the literati’s individual moral responsibility is transposed into the modern jianghu. Hall argues a difference between Confucian scholar and the ‘knight-errant’ 「武夾」\(^{190}\). He does so drawing on Liu who initially asserts

\(^{188}\) Woo and Fang, “John Woo’s A Better Tomorrow,” 67.

\(^{189}\) Ibid.

that,

[…] the knight-errant forms a strong contrast to the Confucian scholar. First, the Confucians believed in degrees of love and duty—one must first love one’s parents, and filial duty was more important than abstract justice. The knight-errant, on the other hand, considered the same principles of justice and moral duty applicable to relatives and strangers alike.\textsuperscript{191}

But while the $xia$ is often drawn into conflicts between relative strangers and his itinerant lifestyle precludes loyalty to biological parents, the latter are mostly absent from literary presentations anyways. The issue of a lack of filial piety thus arises only in discussions of the historical $xia$ (as opposed to the fictional archetype). Although obviously removed from the wuxia genre, \textit{Hard Boiled} is exemplary of this fictional lack in background as none of the characters have family apart from their respective ‘schools’, or rather institutions. If this were not so, the pure conflict of total law (Tequila), ‘old social praxis’ (Alan) on one side and total capital (Johnny Wong), modern-day $xia$ (Mad Dog) on the other could not be staged so effectively.

Unburdened of filial piety, the four characters are free to progress along the trajectories of their respective identities. As outlined, this initially takes the shape of an escalation of violence between Tequila and Johnny Wong, which then puts increasing pressure on Alan, the concealed negotiator of law and ‘moderate’ crime. In so far as the narrative unfolds around the ‘Western’ axis of total law and total capital, \textit{Hard Boiled} does read “less Asian in its roots”\textsuperscript{192}, as Hall cites Terence Chang (張家振), the producer of the film. However, an interpretation as simply ‘less Asian’ misses the symmetrical confrontation of modern escalation and traditional balancing. Disregarding the latter ‘Eastern’ element of the narrative has led many to misread the film, particularly its “images of departure and closure, of impending death, fear of the unknown, and regret for what is not to be.”\textsuperscript{193} This atmosphere is used to relate the plot to the handover looming at the time of production. But while Woo acknowledges an unintended statement on the

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{191} Liu, J., \textit{The Chinese Knight-Errant}, 7.
\textsuperscript{192} Hall, \textit{John Woo: The Films}, 17.
\textsuperscript{193} Scharres, \textit{Hard Boiled}.
\end{quote}
political climate, he also rejects the notion of the film being set in 1997, as quoted earlier, and expresses an apparently unshakeable optimism in Hong Kong’s future\textsuperscript{194}. The handover appears to ring through in an early conversation between Tequila and Benny (played by Bowie Lam 林保怡) about the possibility of emigration. Beyond this exchange, though, one would be hard-pressed to further this connection in light of the film’s plot and symbolism.

Instead, the aura of departure and regret is a direct result of the confrontation between Western totalization and Eastern reconciliation. Not only does the latter become increasingly impossible as Tequila and Johnny continuously ‘pour oil into the fire’, but this shift is palpable in the fates of Alan and Mad Dog. The space in which Alan maneuvers between law and (Uncle Hoi’s) family disappears with Johnny’s violent takeover. His qualms are not as evident during and after the library assassination, but having to go against Uncle Hoi during the warehouse shooting clearly strains his position. For Mad Dog, on the other hand, the ethical untenability of his leader’s approach only becomes clear at the very end when Johnny Wong opens fire on a group of innocent patients caught in the middle of their exchange. Neither of these ‘Eastern’ heroes can live right any longer, ensure balance and serve as ‘retainer’ respectively, as the ‘rules of engagement’ go out the window.

To total law and total capital these positions make no sense to begin with and as a result there is no reflection on this process by way of dialogue. Just as Tequila does not accept agents of the law who cannot be identified as such (particularly after running into one during the teahouse operation), Johnny Wong cannot refrain from expanding and maximizing value. They are both unaware of the effect their actions have on the traditional structures around them. In this sense the escalating logic of totalization is presented as completely mechanical. One blow necessarily follows another up to the climax at the hospital. In contrast to other Woo films, particularly \textit{A Better Tomorrow}, the traditional hero no longer forms the centre of

\textsuperscript{194} “My move to Hollywood had nothing to do with the political atmosphere in Hong Kong. I never had any worry about the takeover. I never had a problem with Hong Kong and I don’t have any fear about that. No matter what happens in Hong Kong everything will be OK there.” (Woo and Fang, “John Woo’s \textit{A Better Tomorrow},” 67.)
the plot. Tequila, although headstrong and uncompromising, has, I would think, the sympathy of the audience. As a result, *Hard Boiled* goes beyond the nostalgia of transposing the *xia* archetype into modernity, of presenting “men ‘out of their time’” in a battle already lost.

From Tequila’s perspective Alan’s position corroborates a lack in law. Of course the latter is sanctioned by the law to occupy a privileged space outside legality. In this sense the undercover operative is simply an official response to the *Police Story* dilemma, that is the inability to pursue known criminals by legal means. But against the Chinese cultural context the figure reiterates the Confucian ‘noble’ in so far as the tension between loyalty to the (Triad) family and state law is arbitrated at the discretion of a particular individual who has stakes in both. In contrast to the undercover agent in (most) Western narratives whose true loyalty to the law is never in doubt, the Hong Kong undercover posits a mediation of traditional ethic and positive law. *Hard Boiled* effectively explodes the possibility of such a mediation by withdrawing these *xia*-like figures. While the disappearance of Alan and the death of Mad Dog amplify the atmosphere of loss and regret, *Hard Boiled* does not stop at mourning the end of the Chinese hero. As a traditional curbing of the letter towards ‘less law’ becomes untenable, Tequila’s totalization of law ‘deconstructs’ legality by way of ‘too much law’.

Initially I isolated a distinct difference in the character of Dirty Harry who preserves law, even though he is portrayed as trigger-happy, anti-authoritarian and constantly violating modern standards of political correctness, and Tequila who pushes the law to its breaking point. Tequila’s utter confidence in total law to apprehend all criminals is neither limited by the society which his actions impact nor by the chain of command which integrates the law enforcement into capitalist society. After he becomes aware of the existence of an undercover operative during the warehouse shoot-out there follows a symptomatic dialogue between him and Pang around the phrase “died in the line of duty” 「殉職」. Here the protagonist demands to be told who the criminals are and who the police. Pang initially argues with the chain of command, but understanding the futility of this

---

195 Hall, John Woo’s *The Killer*, 98.
line of reasoning quickly switches to another. He starts interrogating Tequila about the unequal responsibilities of criminals and police (filling out paperwork, proving someone guilty, etc.). This dialogue does not serve to reign in the rogue police officer under the chain of command, but instead marks Pang’s first step towards support for Tequila.

During the showdown at the hospital police and criminals will indeed switch roles for some time, as the latter are easily discernible due to their security uniforms, while the plainclothes police are hidden among the patients. Law enforcement effectively withdraws from its function as a stabilizer of world order under the chain of command and follows Tequila, whereas capital finances its own paramilitary forces. According to Scharres,

In his extended finale, a hospital under siege by legions of gangsters becomes a metaphor for Hong Kong itself. As the institution intended to nurture life is transformed into a deadly and perilous environment, for those inside the choice is to remain and die or to escape and live.196

There is an obvious mistake in this statement in that the hospital is not under siege by gangsters but operated by gangsters (illustrated by the hurried scrubbing of floors and windows after the execution of the informant) and under siege by the police. This difference is crucial for the ‘metaphor’ still holds. The foundation of this institution which nurtures life emblematic of industrial societies as such is a secret basement filled with fire arms. This arsenal is hidden behind the bodies of the deceased hinting at the historical violence in which the institution emerged and the casualties it still claims. At some point Johnny Wong even announces that he will hide his arsenal in the basement of a police station next time; a statement not just illustrating his immense confidence but also a proclamation of the fundamental role capital holds as the foundation of all humane facades erected on top of it. Arguing for the hospital as a metaphor for society thus produces quite a Marxist spin in the narrative context of the film.

The climax at the hospital certainly “show[ed] that Woo could make a Hong

196 Scharres, Hard Boiled.
Kong version of *Die Hard* (1988)” in terms of action choreography. Regarding
the content, however, the films are rather far apart: *Die Hard* rehashes the typical
narrative of apparently revolutionary terrorists who turn out to be particularly
ambitious thieves. In *Hard Boiled*, on the other hand, the hospital of society is
presented as fundamentally imbricated in crime and violence. In the final
confrontation law discovers this fault when Tequila and Alan blow their way into
the basement. Upon this discovery the police as an institution follows the
protagonist’s lead in dismantling the structure from the ground up. Due to this
‘metaphorical’ dimension Tequila does more than fight a syndicate, he incites a
war. Pushed to its limits, law recreates its own origin in lawlessness. Total law,
that is the radical enforcement of the legal text, collapses the legal order into the
‘state of emergency’. Or, to put it in Hegelian terms, law exhibits its negativity,
the “reflection in otherness within itself”.

The image of the protagonist as a Tequila-drinking, clarinet-playing instigator
of revolutionary violence is compounded by the visuals surrounding the figure.
The sequence depicting his rescue of a baby from the maternity ward readily
corroborates the ‘metaphorical’ reading as an attempt to salvage the innocent from
a society in flames. The theatrical poster to *Hard Boiled* enhances this image even
further by showing Tequila in his warehouse assault gear, a shotgun in one hand,
the baby cradled in the other. The ‘language’ of this poster is comparable to war
monuments: the Soviet Cenotaph at Berlin Treptower Park, for instance,
commemorates the Battle of Berlin with the statue of a Soviet soldier carrying a
sword in one hand and a rescued German child in the other, crushing a swastika
under his feet. The impression of *Hard Boiled* as an instance of urban warfare also
resonates with Woo’s style in so far as languorous depictions of exchanges and
typically drawn out death scenes invite our acknowledgement of every life lost
irrespective of affiliation.

This style and extended choreography visually anticipate Tequila’s rebirth as
the “God of Guns” 「鎗神」 in the video game *Stranglehold*. One is easily

---

197 Williams, *John Woo’s Bullet in the Head*, 106.
15.)
199 This is also the title under which *Hard Boiled* was distributed in Taiwan.
drawn into the pure momentum Woo’s style produces through the explosive collision between Tequila’s total law and Johnny Wong’s total capital. This characteristic glorification of violence, while at times extravagant, substantiates a revolutionary heroism. But in spite of the evocative style supporting a ‘metaphorical’ reading, the film cannot but move within the confines of the action genre. Ironically, it seems irrelevant if this cultural product of the “mutant political entity” of Hong Kong, that “hyphenation” of “disjunctures of colonialism and globalism”, brings about the cinematic self-destruction of Western modernity in the collapse of the metaphorical hospital, or simply restores old sovereignties from the state of emergency. The horizon of revolution extends beyond the trajectory of the action genre, which is why in Hard Boiled it merely seeps into the narrative space as a continuous aura of “regret for what is not to be”.

The element of fin-de-siècle is compounded by the fact that, although it is the transplantation of Western universal law onto the East which produces the ultimate modern conflict, Hong Kong is forced to relinquish its cultural specificity. Under pressure from rampant globalized capital in the shape of Johnny Wong all institutions eventually buckle. First the quasi-decent business of Uncle Hoi caves in, then the last remnant of the traditional warrior’s honor embodied by Mad Dog falls in vain before Alan sacrifices himself and his position between the boundaries of law and family. The only enemy to total capital is constructed around the ‘loose cannon’ of law whose one specific affiliation to ‘traditional’ Chinese Hong Kong is a cursory instant of allegiance to the deity of General Guan 「關公」.

Hard Boiled can certainly be read as a simple action film in which the Chinese elements are marginal to a straightforward confrontation between police and organized crime, but the film ‘gains’ an interesting depth when interpreted against the Confucian critique of positive law. In so far as the transplanted Chinese heroes (Alan and Mad Dog) are narratively scrutinized in their encounter with the

---

200 Abbas, Hong Kong, 142.
201 ibid., 143.
202 Scharres, Hard Boiled.
escalating logic of modernity, the film repudiates the efficacy of concealed negotiation and honorable service to the school. In this respect the specific position of Hong Kong between East and West accelerates the liquidation of Chinese tradition. But, and this marks the particular beauty of *Hard Boiled*, the volatile trajectory of total law which originally brought about the Confucian model of concealed arbitration through the ‘noble’ is now fictionally actualized. The Hegelian truth of total law as absolute crime thus reveals itself much more readily in this specific cultural setting, whereas popular Western formulas have long shed any hint as to the structural ambiguity of law.

*The Law of Enjoyment*

The case of *Hard Boiled* illustrated how the negativity of law erupts from total enforcement. Visually this enforcement is quite pleasing in its momentum and impact, but the enjoyment is generated non-diegetically in the reception of Woo’s style. In this sense Tequila’s fervor for battle does not imply pleasure in his work, although the coolness marking his gestures and execution does not attest to the opposite either. In so far as Tequila and Johnny Wong exist entirely in the service to total law and total capital respectively, their enjoyment in embodying these functions is prerequisite to the plot. It is not, however, disturbed and as such reflected in disturbance.

A lack of reflection on the symbiosis of law and pleasure is not surprising as the two terms are usually conceptualized in direct opposition. The legal order restricts pleasure with respect to the integrity and property of another person, and as such produces cultural discontent in the Freudian sense. For Kant the “pure moral law” is rigorously separated from the pathological so as not to “defile the moral attitude at its source.”204 I already hinted at the problem such a strict separation entails in the discussion of 999 where the conflict between the legal obligation to inform the police and the protagonist’s love interest is developed early only to be resolved without much ambiguity as the *femme fatale* turns out to

---

204 Kant, “Critique of Practical Reason,” 113.
be entirely without guilt, projecting a seamless fusion of positive law and traditional morality. While the allure of an illegal encounter can be reconstructed from the plot, the issue of pleasure in the il-/legal is not developed narratively.

One recent entry which assembles some of the pieces to a discussion of the entanglement of pleasure and law is Pang Ho-Cheung’s (彭浩翔) *Exodus* 《出埃及記》 from 2007. Here the legal order is permeated by an ambiguity of sexual relations and sexual difference construed to heighten a sense of surreal mystery. Tsim Kin-Yip (詹建業), played by Simon Yam (任達華), is a relatively well-to-do police officer married to Ann (Annie Liu 劉心悠). One day he is called in to interrogate Kwan Ping-Man (關炳文), played by Nick Cheung (張家輝), who was caught after spying on women in public bathrooms using video cameras. In defense of his indecent surveillance Kwan reports of a conspiracy between women to kill men. According to him they meet in bathrooms and yoga classes to secretly discuss assassination targets. An apparently blatant lie to cover his sexual inclinations, Tsim does not follow up on this testimony initially. But when the record of Kwan’s original statement is altered by a female higher-up and Kwan recants and later disappears, he begins to investigate on his own.

Pang’s film deliberately casts male fantasies to function in the name of the law. As we are led to suspect some truth to Kwan’s initial conspiracy theory, his peeping-Tom-activities turn into legitimate concerns for the safety of male members of society, possibly all of them. Similarly, when Tsim follows up on Kwan’s disappearance and subsequent death, he strikes up a relationship with the latter’s ex-wife. An extra-marital affair develops which again aligns sexual desire with legal inquiry. As such, the film plays with the general pathological contamination of efforts to conform to some (moral) law. Within a Kantian framework the distinction between moral law and legal order is effectively irrelevant, as everything has to cohere in reason alone ‘secured’ by the principle of universalizability. The well-known examples Kant supplies are of course the gallows awaiting a man “after gratifying his lust”205, on the one hand, and the

---

205 Ibid., 44.
“false testimony”\textsuperscript{206} forced by a Prince from an honest man on the other. Thus the legal legitimately deters immoral behavior and is legitimately refused when the law itself is immoral (or non-universalizable).

The case of \textit{Exodus} is not so easily decided. Mired in male paranoia fueling Kwan’s conspiracy theory, the ‘pure moral law’ appears difficult to assert. For the moral course of action depends on a clear vision of the terrain in question. Is the police already infiltrated by dangerous women? Is anyone in immediate danger? Is Kwan’s testimony merely a figment of his perverse imagination? Though purely formal and ‘empty’, Kantian law is too rigid to adequately address these exceptional, or perhaps delusional, circumstances. The surreal end to the film - Tsim is poisoned in a manner he was warned of after his suspicions are finally assuaged - possibly provides the clarity necessary to decide on the morality of Kwan’s and Tsim’s actions in retrospect. But the damage is already done, ‘the moral attitude defiled at its source’.

The opening to the film, perhaps the most striking scene, already sets the tone for such a defiling. An extended slow-motion dolly shot from a close-up to a medium begins with a pair of female Caucasian eyes fixed on events ‘behind’ the audience. This gaze is revealed to be part of the photographic portrait of Queen Elizabeth II. As the camera moves backwards a man in swimming trunks wearing goggles, a snorkel and flippers appears casually leaning against the wall underneath the portrait. When a police officer attempts to enter the hallway the camera is creeping through backwards, the man nonchalantly denies him entrance. Another in snorkeling gear appears and shares a cigarette with his partner as three more ‘frogmen’ come into view in the foreground. They are holding down a man in plain clothing while one is using a phonebook and a hammer to abuse the victim. This ‘introduction’ sets the bizarre tone for events to follow and is later revealed to be a strategy employed by an older generation of officers in illegal interrogations. The elaborate costume makes the abuse appear so ludicrous that testimony from the victim would likely be dismissed.

Since the instance of police brutality is not narratively legitimimized - we know

\textsuperscript{206} Ibid.
nothing of the perpetrator’s supposed crimes or the police involved - the thoroughly decontextualized aestheticization of brute force revels in the monopoly on violence. A privilege ‘contracted’ to the state in the name of general security and to be applied in a sober and reasonable manner thus produces sadistic enjoyment. The ‘ex-timate’ core of founding violence always sustaining the legal order is exposed. Additionally, the image of the Queen stolidly taking in the proceedings not only hints at the prominent theme of sexual difference, but invites speculation on the colonial and raced aspects to this legal obscenity. Alluringly photographed and paced, these insinuations necessarily remain obscure in order to sustain a sense of unease and not spoil this atmosphere with tangible assertions.

Read against Pang Ho-Cheung’s oeuvre, Exodus fits the director’s metacinematic tendencies. In You Shoot, I Shoot 《買兇拍人》 (2001) a professional killer is required to document his kills and invites a struggling film maker along. Vulgaria 《低俗喜劇》 (2012) focuses on the financial challenges to Hong Kong cinema dependent on mainland money to get production off the ground. Both entries thus (cynically) reflect on the practice of film making in the specific environment of Hong Kong. Pang also transplants foreign formulas into this environment: Dream Home 《維多利亞壹號》 (2010) puts a local spin on the Western Slasher and its ‘final girl’ trope as a struggling woman goes on a killing spree in a residential building in order to devalue the now available apartments by ‘spooking’ potential buyers. Exodus picks up on outlandish or futuristic premises which shows like Twilight Zone or Outer Limits build on before ending on a shocking revelation (rather than returning to homely stability).

While indicating the obscene surplus of violence lingering at the heart of the legal order, particularly in its opening, the film makes no attempt to revisit the problematic of natural vs. positive law. Instead Pang effectively insinuates the psychoanalytical entanglement of phantasy and anxiety with (the moral) law. Such an entanglement follows law in all its guises: in Hard Boiled the heroic work of enforcement is represented in an enjoyable form; the conspiracy theory in Exodus, on the other hand, subverts the aspect of individual responsibility by exploiting

---

207 Cf. Clover, “Her Body, Himself.”
the ambiguity of moral decision-making.

Yin and the Law

The inquiry into the narrative treatment of law in Hong Kong cinema produced an interesting amount of movement against the Confucian critique of positive law and its renunciation of Legalism. The central argument throughout has been that this specific cultural environment engenders figures and formulas which evade the law in concealment and remain suspicious of its capacity to deliver justice. Yin here primarily terms the Confucian assertion of individual moral responsibility beyond the law over the Legalist call for 'complete' law and total transparency. While a certain optimism with regard to the colonial legal order in Hong Kong can be detected in the Cantonese murder mysteries of the 50s and early 60s, the inherent tension between codex and loyalty to the family structures a number of subsequent genres: law is naturally lacking in the jianghu of the wuxia and oppressive in the lawless environment of gongfu. It is naively sidelined in transpositions of jianghu to the modern periphery of organized crime before the figure of the undercover agent marks the next important development in this discourse. As concealed mediator between modern positive law and traditional family, his internal division manifests the unresolved contradiction between Eastern heritage and modern totalization.

In this context yin indicates both the territorial limit to jurisdiction, readily exemplified by the root to the jianghu, and the internalization of this limit: those who 'come out and walk' leave civil society for another family and law while physically remaining among ordinary citizenry (more or less) concealed. Outside of these instances of peripheral non-law or internal alternative law, yin also marks the arbitration between codified law and the primacy of family at the discretion of the Confucian 'noble'. Because organic unity requires the integration of law into ethical substance, arbitration between the two is the relation of codified and non-codified, rule and yin. While this orientation towards natural law structurally weakens the codex, it was historically secured through a hierarchical bureaucracy
and a quasi-religious reverence for the Emperor. Unfastened from these historical anchors, both constellations return in mediations of modern Hong Kong. Depicting the alternative law of the Triads bolsters a certain Hong-Kong-ness in its projection of an authentic policing and politics ‘under the noses’ of (colonial) law. Confucian arbitration, on the other hand, now falls to the undercover agent. But the figure no longer has the authority of a ‘noble’ and, facing the impasse between modern law and traditional loyalty, merely posits the necessity of their reconciliation. While the *Discharged Prisoner* could still wrest a (partial) victory from the legal order, the fate of Alan and Mad Dog (modern ‘noble’ and *xia* respectively) in *Hard Boiled* shatters such a positing in light of modernity’s dynamic.

Beginning with the notion of *jianghu* I first identified a lack of law both outside the territory of jurisdiction and within as some withdraw from civil society. Codified law can also lack when the legal means to properly address the illegal are missing. One response also typical of the Western actioner is the enforcement of the codex beyond the mandate provided by law. I illustrated this with the example of *Police Story* in which the breach of the legal order is entirely law-preserving. Structurally, this formula hints at the remnant of founding violence concealed at the heart of the legal order. In so far as law is breached in the name of law, an exception is made unilaterally in order to stabilize the legal order. Furthermore, as the conflict forces the agent of the law into illegality, the narrative conflict again becomes personal. It thus easily deteriorates into “revenge on an enemy [which] is, according to the immediate law; the supreme satisfaction of the injured individuality.”

In this sense the legal order disrupts a source of satisfaction, not by withholding punishment, but by elevating it into a socio-political institution, thereby sublating the simple mechanics of action and reaction, of the ‘eye for an eye’. Whereas “the reinstatement of myself as a person through the destruction of the alien individuality is turned into self-destruction” (Bernstein terms this

---

208 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 97.
209 Ibid.
“causality of fate”\textsuperscript{210}, “punishment is an actualization of the law, whereby the activity exercised by the law as punishment suspends itself, and, from being active, the law becomes again quiescent and is vindicated, and the conflict of individuality with it, and of it with individuality, is extinguished.”\textsuperscript{211} Hegel thus indicates how the law dispenses punishment and settles again into a state of silent efficacy, whereas the individual would be haunted by the destruction of another. Film of course can emulate the satisfaction of revenge without such side effects.

In contrast to a breaching of law in the name of law resulting from the gap between letter and spirit, I highlighted the negativity of total law in \textit{Hard Boiled} as the potential to bring down the metaphorical hospital of society. This negativity results from a decoupling of law (enforcement) from the social whole: total law, in the shape of Tequila, breaks with the original ‘translegal’ order and its intransparency (\textit{yin}). Against an interpretation of \textit{Hard Boiled} as a representation of an abstract anxiety over the handover, the film primarily accelerates total law against total capital. Tequila does not flout the law in order to catch a particularly slippery criminal, but forces the clarity of the letter onto the situation without regard for ‘collateral damage’ or chain of command. He escalates a situation most are struggling to contain in concealed operations and thus actualizes law’s negativity by adhering to it stringently. The resulting ‘state of emergency’ takes on the characteristics of civil war in light of the metaphorical scenario.

In the attempt to define the various moments of instability inherent in the legal, I resorted to the rather crude phrases of ‘too little law’ and ‘too much law’. Both are decidedly non-technical and highly dependent on perspective, but they adequately express the kind of discontent with law characteristic of much of Hong Kong cinema. I unpacked the traditional root to this discontent from \textit{yin} as the limit to the codex: first as the topographic border to jurisdiction, than as a necessarily ‘open’ curbing of the letter at the discretion of the privileged. Both of these aspects can be linked to Hong Kong films in genre-specific constellations and tropes. While the narrative opposition to modern positive law tends to abstractly assert a non-Western authenticity, the specific projection of law as

\textsuperscript{210} Cf. Bernstein, “The Causality of Fate.”
\textsuperscript{211} Hegel, \textit{Phenomenology}, 98.
porous and unstable not only motivates characteristic motifs and genres, but also resonates with the critical reflection on the character of the legal. The next chapter will further the issue of negativity and instability along the theme of identity.
2) Identity between Recognition and Indignity

In the (academic) analysis of Hong Kong and its cinema the issue of identity is ubiquitous and in many ways contested. Generally we can distinguish between attempts to salvage, either descriptively or normatively, stable identities based in histories of varying scope on one hand, and the forceful fragmentation of such more or less identitarian models through explorations of particular identities torn between national, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, or religious affiliations and at home ‘along the interstices’ on the other. Presentations of the development of Hong Kong identity from “Fleeing the nation: creating a local home” to “Rejoining the nation” track the historico-political trajectory of colonial ‘foundation’ and retrocession. As such, positive descriptions of the state of the Hong Kong identity at various times have to negotiate the cultural claim to independence tainted by the colonial past it emerged in with the gravity of the traditional Chinese heritage.

Around the problem of identity, issues of critical approach become immediately apparent. Bettinson, for instance, points to the “specter of homogenization [resulting from the] totalizing assertion” that all of Hong Kong cinema revolves around identity,

oblizing the critic to show how every Hong Kong film makes identity its major theme. The very notion of identity is conceptually (and conveniently) nebulous, the easier to summon evidence of it in a diverse range of films. Identity is no doubt complex and directly imbricated in the structure of power by regulating social order beyond the legal and reproducing specific cultural commitments. Against the ‘culturalism’ of ‘Grand Theory’ Bettinson illustrates,

Not every Hong Kong film in the early 1990s featured bleak endings, a pessimistic mood, accelerated motion, and other purported repositories of 1997 allegory.

---

212 Chapter titles in Mathews, Ma, and Lui, Hong Kong, China.
214 Ibid.
215 Ibid.
This is certainly true and my discussion of *Hard Boiled* from a perspective other than the handover is evidence of this. Nevertheless, it also true that,

The nation is like the fantasmatic kernel of the Hong Kong political imaginary; coming to close to it results in aphanisis [...] of the subject and the subject’s perceptions. The Hong Kong films where the disappearance of the nation is staged cover a wide spectrum from minority art-house productions at one end, to blockbusters and pot-boilers on the other.\(^{216}\)

As my discussion of methodology at the beginning indicated, these conflicting positions - one emphasizing the particular (film), the other the structure of the socio-political environment - can never be integrated exhaustively. Perspective structures every reading; this is how Abbas can affirm the ‘disappearance of the nation’ in *Days of Being Wild* 《阿飛正傳》 (1990), even though “[...] political allegory is noticeably absent from Wong’s film.”\(^{217}\) Holism integrates everything (including negatives like absence), because the structure of the situation forms the environment in which a text gains specific meaning.

This also applies to the aesthetic afterlife of Chinese tradition; its mediation in the present is always conditioned by the modern situation. The perspective here, of course, is somewhat different in that I will develop the ‘disappearance’ of identity from the perspective of premodern Chineseness. *Yin* thus terms the concealment of particularity under a uniform civilization, which will be illustrated in early post-war cinema. Against the impasse between colonialism and communism the chapter then tracks how Chineseness turns increasingly problematic. I will employ the *topos* of *yin* and develop the specificity of the modern situation in the region with reference to the classical heritage. Citations of secondary sources will outline the general consensus with regard to the stages of development Hong Kong identity has undergone in the last 60 years as represented in film to focus the discussion on critical reactions and reflections of those predominant constructions using select examples. In this manner the larger issue of identity and its conception is incorporated into the analysis of particular

---

\(^{216}\) Abbas, “Hong Kong,” 118.

\(^{217}\) Ibid., 121.
texts. The chronological structure of the chapter is dictated both by the dominant adherence to decades and phases in the secondary literature and the need to develop a corpus of texts grounding the exploration of visual architecture in Chapter 4. While presenting the issue of identity as a trajectory through time is certainly not unwarranted, conflicts and reconciliations of identity do not ‘mechanically’ appear at one point in time before being superseded by the next formation. Rather at any point in time one can most likely find both identitarian or culturally prescriptive discourses as well as its recent obverse, the wholesale dismissal of identity beyond the individual or idiosyncratic.

In my naive etymology of the character *yin* «隱» I noted the topographic component comprising the radical 「阝」 and the mental dimension of the phonetic right 「㥯」. The last chapter also demonstrated how the seemingly straightforward division into inside and outside indicated by the topographical aspect of the character takes the shape of a particular dynamic in the context of *jianghu*: the outside of jurisdiction is not strictly speaking its other (in the sense of non-law) but conceals itself in the service of coherence. As such the whole is (always) stabilized through its division. In the modern context the association of territory and mental activity readily abbreviates the paradigm of identity as constructed primarily around the nation, a clearly demarcated territory with a controlled population consolidated through a ‘grand narrative’ stabilizing the nation as the natural *telos* of ethno-cultural belonging. When these narratives and the historical powers which naturalized a territory into a nation are questioned, their original artificiality is easily exposed, yet they retain efficacy (by and large) through the tautological investment of a majority in the national identity – cohering around what Žižek termed the “(national) Thing”\(^\text{218}\). The beginning of the chapter will show how concealment effects a coherent Chineseness beyond the national as a naturally expanding identity incorporates local variation through the bond of ancestral relation and written character.

The dynamics of the ‘Thing’ are useful to psychoanalytically flesh out the sociological distinction between in- and outgroup. Mainly because any empirical

\(^{218}\) Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 202.
description of their genesis likely cannot fully account for the coherence generated by the simple act of narrating a difference or ‘drawing a line in the sand’, especially when the coherence of this “particular Absolute” overrides apparently fundamental ethical standards and leads to barbaric violence against the other. But while unpacking jianghu invokes the separation of inside and outside, its focus is not so much on the foreign. Rather, the setting provides the counterforce to internal corruption when it is not concerned with the secret conflicts of its own parallel realm. In this manner the popular jianghu inverts the trope of the sage in exile. Instead of ‘retiring’ - like Laozi when “[i]n his country goodness had been weakening a little” - they act in concealment. The trust of the sage in metaphysical equilibrium finds concrete support. Either way, the identity in question presents as a return to the stability of selfsameness (an aspect I will discuss at length in the following chapter).

In the contemporary situation Hong Kong identity obviously makes for a difficult subject. Firstly, identity becomes increasingly complex when analysis takes the past into account instead of describing a ‘state’. Diachronically excavating alternate demarcations and ethnic, cultural, linguistic, or religious affiliations and projecting them into the present easily disrupts the spontaneously natural image of the nation. Readings of films through the second half of the last century will illustrate significant shifts in narrative identity construction and problematization. Additionally, one has to take into account the unusual status of Hong Kong as a political entity. As Arrighi has commented, the region is driven by a “[…] variety of territorial and non-territorial organizations that are either something less, or something more, or something different than nation-states, [entities like] city-states, and quasi-states; quasi-empires, and ‘nations’ that are not states, like the Overseas Chinese”.

In contrast to the “Eurocentric capitalist world system [which at] a decisive moment of its evolution […] became embodied in a system of nation-states”, the economic globalization of East Asia is structured around remnants of pre-

---

219 Ibid., 206.
222 Ibid., 41.
modern empires and an array of peripheral quasi-entities demarcated as a result of Western imperialism and other past aggression. Consequently, Hong Kong (like other quasi-entities) is particularly intricate because it coheres both below and above the national depending on the particular context, referring at times to the colonial ‘foundation’, at others to the resulting ‘self’, and also continuously to the background of a larger premodern Chineseness. Grounded in an outline of premodern Chineseness, the chapter explores these diverging vectors of belonging - from Hong Kong as the centre to a Chinese community around the ‘Southern Ocean’ or Nanyang 「南洋」, to depictions of the Hong Kong Chinese experience abroad, and the recent tension between ex-colony and motherland. The trajectory constructed in this selection highlights the productive tensions resulting from this assortment of im-/possible belonging.

Foundations

Delivering an exhaustive account of the historical roots of Chineseness would go beyond the scope here, but it is still useful to impress the kind of cohesion it affords beyond the borders of political entities today. This cohesion is the product of a shift from a topographic demarcation to a conceptual one, which is readily illustrated by the term ‘China’ itself. In the canonized classical texts from the axial age we find ‘geographical’ expressions denoting China like “divine continent” 「神州», “red counties” 「赤縣」223, “the Xia” 「諸夏」 (indicating Chinese across feudal borders), or the “nine territories” 「九州」 of the (Chinese) world. In a manner perhaps comparable to ancient Greekness the cohesion of traditional Chineseness is founded around a topographic centre and a mythic origin bestowing a claim to cultural sophistication beyond particular political divisions. As Chang shows in an analysis of the relationship between “China” 「中國」 and “world” 「天下」224, in texts from the Spring and

223 The phrase 「赤縣神州」 appears in the Shi Ji “Biographies of Mengzi and Xun Qing” 《史記·孟子荀卿傳》.
224 Cf. Chang C., “‘Zhongguo’ yu ‘Tianxia’.”
Autumn Period, the former had already developed a variety of topographically
demarcating meanings – “the Zhou demesne”\(^{225}\), “the Xia states”\(^{226}\) and its “area
of political influence”\(^{227}\), “locations inside the capital”\(^{228}\) or “inside the state”\(^{229}\) -
and taken on the broader sense of “civilization”\(^{230}\). Surviving unifications and
secessions, this Chineseness was, as is often noted, stabilized by fortifications
against the other, ‘barbarian tribes’ 「夷狄」 surrounding the territory, but
continued to expand through and ultimately in spite of mutual aggression.

Hegel famously judged this ‘stability’ as ahistoric (ungeschichtlich), a sign of
perpetual stasis. This is no abstract dismissal of China or the ‘Oriental’ in general
as Hegel was well aware that the,

[...] enormous population of China proper stands under a government that is
well-regulated to the highest degree, that is most just, most benevolent, most
wise. Laws are elaborated, and agriculture, commerce, industry and sciences
flourish.\(^{231}\)

If anything, the Chinese state is organized too well: the elements of ancestor
worship, patriarchic rule, and family hierarchy combined with meritocratic
bureaucracy around the Imperial examination 「科舉」 stabilize the whole to
such a degree that contradictions do not deteriorate enough for the work of
negativity to begin. “No alien principle came to displace the ancient one. To that
extent [China] has no history.”\(^{232}\)

These aspects of premodern Chinese history and thought have led to a
‘culturalist’ (rather than racist/racialist) account of Chineseness. Dikötter
summarizes,

Attitudes towards outsiders in imperial China have often been described as

\(^{225}\) Ibid., 185; 「中國 = 周王王畿」 (my translation).
\(^{226}\) Ibid.; 「中國 = 諸夏集圏」 (my translation).
\(^{227}\) Ibid.; 「中國 = 諸夏集圏之治地理範圍」 (my translation).
\(^{228}\) Ibid.; 「中國 = 國都之內」 (my translation).
\(^{229}\) Ibid.; 「中國 = 國境之內」 (my translation).
\(^{230}\) Ibid.; 「中國 = 文明」 (my translation).
\(^{231}\) Hegel, Lectures, 214.
\(^{232}\) Ibid., 214.
“culturalist”: lack of adherence to the cultural norms and ritual practices of Confucianism were the principal markers distinguishing outsiders, often referred to as “barbarians,” from insiders. In an assimilationist vision, however, barbarians could be culturally absorbed […]

In this context *yin* encapsulates two interrelated aspects of the specificity of Chineseness as identity: first, the aforementioned shift from ‘China’ as a particularistic tradition to universalistic civilization. This premodern turn to the universalistic divorced Chineseness from ethnicity and territory in philosophical reflection; that is, the original topographic limit was elevated to a matter of mind, ‘spirit’ even, sublating particularity. To cite a relevant passage from the Confucian *Analects*,

The Master was wishing to go and live among the nine wild tribes of the east. Some one said, “They are rude. How can you do such a thing?” The Master said, “If a superior man dwelt among them, what rudeness would there be?”

Understood in this premodern sense, Chineseness is indifferent to the outside and not bound to nation or state. This culturalist version will also form the baseline to the cinematic readings, in so far as identity in 50s and 60s Hong Kong cinema largely disregards non-Chinese elements and thus reinforces an ideal image of Chineseness easily associated with premodern aspirations. Universalistic Chineseness founded in the didactical moment gives rise to a kind of Confucian proselytizing grounded in the ‘wind of virtue’ 「德風」, the idea that the ‘superior man 「君子」 positively influences the ‘ethical substance’ of surrounding ‘lesser men 「小人」 like the wind bending grass. Although conceived as guiding governance in ‘Chinese’ territories, the approach appears

---

234 I am alluding here to Huntington’s statement that “[p]owerful societies are universalistic; weak societies are particularistic.” (Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 109.)
236 The relevant quote from the *Analects* “Yan Yuan” 《論語. 顏淵》 reads, “The relation between superiors and inferiors is like that between the wind and the grass. The grass must bend, when the wind blows across it.” 「君子之德風，小人之德草。草上之風，必偃。」 (Legge, *The Chinese Classics I*, 123.)
applicable irrespective of place or race. One also notes the element of concealment to control outlined in the simile of virtuous wind shaping a sea of pliable ‘grass’: in contrast to Legalist coercion, cultivated elites lead by example and integrate into sociality organically.

In view of the historical ‘acculturation’ of Korea and Japan as well as the system of tributaries, I also want to highlight a specific feature of Chineseness as civilization, namely the Chinese script which has granted an extraordinary degree of continuity across millennia due to its specific characteristics. Classical Chinese is extremely stable in terms of its ‘orthography’. Even though the meaning of individual characters might change dramatically over the course of centuries and its pronunciation differ according to the spoken Chinese of various regions, characters themselves remain. As a written language and an enormous corpus of classical texts as well as centuries of exegeses, premodern Chinese appears seamless, unbroken – a sentiment cultivated still and in spite of the break between classical wenyan 「文言」 and modern baihua 「白话」. The perceived weakness of the Chinese script – the divide between living speech and inert characters impervious to the flux of sound shift, resultant regional dialects, annexation of foreign territories, and foreign invasions – forms the cultural backbone to Chineseness as civilization, precisely in so far as the ‘artificiality’ of wenyan concealed linguistic particularity. The relationship between living speech and written standard is still a salient indicator of identity in the context of Hong Kong237; one that escapes Hong Kong cinema except for the slew of 80s and 90s productions which had Cantonese subtitles chemically etched into the celluloid instead of ‘proper’ baihua text.

While the use of Cantonese, both spoken and written, illustrates a certain ‘local patriotism’, Chineseness is not shed, possibly not even deteriorating in the ex-colony. Rather, references to it are abundant throughout Greater China, including the ex-colony. Identity presents in common features like a shared colonial

237 By the same token, the dominance of Hangul over hanja 「漢字」 in Korea or the development of chữ Nôm 「𡨸喃」(an abandoned writing system utilizing and modifying Chinese script) in Vietnam indicate the importance of escaping the Chinese script to assert independence.
experience and cultural heritage, on the one hand, and internal fragmentation amplified by the uneven distribution of capital, military power, and labour in the region on the other. In so far as recent economic success is correlated to ‘Asian values’, this uneven distribution is useful in backing claims to cultural authenticity, or rather the successful synthesis of heritage with the requirements of a globalized economy.

This illustrates the conceptual problem of identity outlined at the beginning: belonging is solidified vis-a-vis an other and yet always already fragmented internally. Chineseness as pan-Asian civilization challenges Western hegemony, but such an overextension beyond national borders is denied by geopolitical realities. The resulting tension obfuscates the difference between political shifts within the same larger system and elements of a universal critique taking concrete shape as (conflicting) constellations of identity. Yin terms this tension in so far as premodern belonging perforates identitarian demarcations and now links populations across those demarcations in cultural history. As a result, it focuses the discussion on narrative representations relevant to the determination of important antagonisms.

Turning to interrogations of identity in the cultural production of Hong Kong, we find a number of approaches tackling the overlap of coherences below and above the national. The usual descriptive solution here is the ‘Russian doll’ model of ‘stacked personalities’ from which an individual selects adaptively according to the environment. In her presentation of almost a century of Hong Kong cinema under the heading of “coloniser, motherland, self” Chu Yingchi charts the territory as a “triangular relationship” between the West, the mainland, and the in-between, resulting in Hong Kong as a “quasi-nation”238, reminiscent of the term “hyphenation” Abbas uses239. Since the aim of this thesis is an exploration of the specificity of Hong Kong film, sketching out the particular character of this in-between-ness forms the primary focus. “Quasi-nation” or “hyphenation” already hint at this focus among much of the academic work in the field.

However, this raises an immediate problem as zeroing in on the particularity of

239 Abbas, *Hong Kong*, 141-146.
Hong Kong’s in-between-ness readily translates into the political call for secession. From a historical perspective this terrain is thoroughly tainted, since Hong Kong as a quasi-entity is the direct result of Western imperialism. While there is a Hong Kong predating imperialism, it is not the quasi-entity cleaved from the motherland. Consequently, the route to a healthy Hong Kong is barred, no natural Hong Kong to de-colonize back into. Similarly, the ‘natural’ reintegration into the motherland necessitated by the imperialist split resembles another instance of colonization (as Rey Chow has suggested now that the political division has taken place. With concepts like Anderson’s ‘imagined community’ or Hobsbawm’s ‘invented tradition’ in mind, one can easily conceive of socio-political cohesion as a kind of inertia, holding together states or a quasi-entity like Hong Kong simply by virtue of a more or less violent (re-)organization of territories and connected populations which was naturalized over time, sometimes helped along (but not necessarily impeded) by factors like language or ethnicity.

In the case of Hong Kong language is of particular interest because linguistically the province of Guangdong serves as an example of a Cantonese-speaking population that did not undergo Hong Kong’s division and shares the last six decades of history with the rest of the PRC. Although care has to be taken since Guangdong does not represent a clean ‘control group’ in the strict sense as there is a significant amount of cultural cross contamination, the comparison nevertheless helps to assess the reality of claims to independence based in arguments of linguistic and/or cultural difference. As a result, the identity problematic necessarily presents as ‘triangular’, that is the British development of the territory on one hand, the predominant ethnic ‘affiliation’ of most of the population (complicated by the dialect and its historical connection to the north-south-divide) on the other, and, finally, the fluctuating product of the two

\[\text{Shih Shu-mei refers to this as the “absence of ‘nativist’ paradigms of culture”; as a result “any assertions of the unique constitution of a Hong Kong identity is bound to be at best tenuous, if not problematic [since …] the option of imagining a ‘national’ identity (as in Taiwan) has never been available for Hong Kong.” (Shih, Visuality and Identity, 107.)}\]

\[\text{Chow, Ethics after Idealism, 151.}\]

\[\text{Cf. Anderson, Imagined Communities.}\]

\[\text{Cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger, The Invention of Tradition.}\]
Interrogating Hong Kong cinema of the past six decades we find instances and even whole periods in which one of these aspects takes precedent and motivates particular narrative choices and aesthetic developments. Providing evidence of this tripartite interaction comes naturally. The key question then concerns what we might hope to learn from analyzing Hong Kong cinema ‘beyond’ an index of Hong Kong’s hybridity. Any endorsement of one of the elements in the triangular relation of colonizer, motherland, and self would, it appears, at least imply a prescriptive political engagement. The difficulty here is not engagement as such, but how to speculatively develop the potential of a specific trajectory from the cluster of antagonisms forming the identity in question. As a general rule of thumb, one can assume that none of the political options available at the moment – roughly corresponding to the three elements in the triangular relationship: the current (somewhat) de-colonizing return to the motherland bolstering PRC power, the concurrent obverse of a liberal-democratic ‘Westernization’ of the PRC through its reintegration of the ‘periphery’, and finally the abstract call for an independent Hong Kong with little basis in the larger economic and political context – indicate a way out of the triangular deadlock.

This is not to say that independence is a useless aim as such. Rather, independence can only have an historic effect if it breaks with the power structures of East and West sandwiching the Hong Kong ‘self’. To go ‘beyond’ description in the analysis of the historical development of Hong Kong cinema thus means to unearth in specific narrative-aesthetic constellations the potential for a global critique necessitated by the speculative identity of contradicting moments (in the triangular relation). It is for this reason that the quasi-national status of Hong Kong poses such a problem and at the same time taunts with the promise of the in-between: east-west, north-south, dialect-language, and other borders connected to histories of varying scope all converge here and shape cultural production. As Abbas notes, “[...] Hong Kong cinema can cast a cold and critical eye on the aspirations typically associated with nationhood - precisely
because they make no sense in a Hong Kong context.”

Although this treatment of narrative presentations of identity in Hong Kong cinema is structured chronologically, exemplifying different borders with a small selection of films from the last six decades, this arrangement is not meant to imply absolute shifts in the cultural reflection of Hong Kong identity. Rather, different conceptions of Hong Kong identity co-exist, but we can nevertheless discern emergences and trends with respect to the popularity of specific presentations linked to certain periods. Furthermore, following narrative developments with examples from each decade is necessary to develop a corpus of films for the visual analysis of the following section. Consequently, the chapter constructs a chronological trajectory through particular texts which stand in for their respective periods as attempts to first narratively stabilize identity in self-sufficient Chineseness and later tackle various ‘ghosts’ - Chinese and non-Chinese others disturbing any straightforward Hong Kong identity.

The starting point is the theme of unification and expansion in 50s and 60s cinema; examples from this post-war period present Chineseness as an update to a traditional social ethics that is decidedly indifferent to the other, the outside of the Chinese-speaking world. As Shu Kei comments, films of the period delivered “what was needed to transform Hong Kong from a backward, refugee community of the 1950s into a metropolitan city in the 60s.” Out of this stabilization and with the political turmoil of the late 60s identity turns much more complex as the division from the mainland is ‘finalized’ in the Cultural Revolution. Moving back and forth between the US and the colony, Bruce Lee addresses this new complexity in criticisms of the traditional Chinese heritage and the role of the West. Introducing elements of the Western 60s into a Chinese perspective, his films will serve to reconstruct a positive strategy to break with rigid identities and still confront Western supremacy head on. As the cinema of the following decade moved noticeably away from colorful presentations of the pre-modern and into

---

244 Abbas, “Hong Kong,” 126.
245 In Cantonese ‘ghost’ 也 denotes the ethnically non-Chinese as in gwai lou  (white man), gwai mui  (white girl), haak gwai  (black person), etc.
the modern cityscape, the Hong Kong identity is troubled by those close to home, yet left behind. A rather obscure entry from the period will illustrate this flip side to the general affirmation of a successful and distinct Hong-Kong-ness. In the equally obscure escape of a Hong Kong gangster to South Africa a dissatisfaction with the persisting racial inequalities in the world is exposed, a departure from narrative representations of identity in the 90s already concentrating on the ramifications of the 1997 handover. Finally, a last section returns to the initial theme of unification: between metaphors of family reunions and thinly veiled criticisms of PRC power a recent entry provocatively reduces local identity to a set of ridiculous symptoms.

Unification and Expansion

When we address the question of identity, there are, as already indicated, at least two conceptions. The first spontaneous position wants to hold on to a static or stable identity and gathers some characteristics that hold a group or sociality together. Empirically, this search is destined to fail: estimating the general ‘mentality’ of a community necessarily abstracts beyond the individual ‘outlier’ and even ethnicity can be destabilized from a diachronic perspective. As such, supporters of stable identity can, in the last instance, only wildly gesticulate in the hopes of invoking the ‘national Thing’. However, this does not imply that we can discount ‘belonging’ in general. The sense of security granted by social networks and a level of familiarity with the historico-political environment one is ‘thrown’ into are real enough. In so far as these coincidental factors of association and background support the national in a world-system significantly skewed in terms of the distribution of power and wealth, though, any reinforcement of borders and calls to national responsibility are, at least partly, hypocritical.

Here a second, dynamic meaning of identity comes into play. The term also indicates a holism in the Hegelian sense; that is, a speculative ‘addition’ of contradicting elements. This entails reading opposing entities or tendencies in thought as mutually conditioning each other and forming one and the same
system. In terms of the national, for instance, the distinction between ‘first’ and ‘third’ worlds as insulated is obviously untenable and their ‘addition’ into one interdependent system the only way to discern constructive paths for the future. In this sense national (static) identity obstructs (dynamic) identity as historic telos.

It is this second, dynamic meaning of identity this chapter is primarily concerned with. Both recognition and indignity are meant to indicate a focus on the inconsistency of identity, its self-defeating or contradictory moments. As a result, the stages in the post-war development of Hong Kong identity will only be correlated en passant. As Hegel reminds us, “[l]ife (and spirit even more so) is the power to endure contradiction”\(^{247}\). Disparate and apparently incompatible aspects to identity are thus part and parcel of a general restlessness ‘awaiting’ reconciliation.

To start, the traditional, culturalist notion of identity will serve to rhetorically unify Hong Kong Chineseness - already a contradiction to many for different reasons - as it presents in the 50s and 60s. Garcia identifies in the Cantonese cinema of that period three characteristics: a “developing discourse on […] the relationship between cinema and society”\(^{248}\) from the image of the “proletarian subjected to injustice”\(^{249}\) in the 50s to a “nostalgia for cultural tradition distanced by a sense of social perspective in which the repressive structure of the Confucian family is criticized”\(^{250}\) in the 60s. Secondly, a cinematic “process of differences [n]ot only between the ‘stage’ and ‘real life’, but also between the past and the present”\(^{251}\) and, thirdly, an “obsession, a fixation even [with the] generation conflict [which] tends to overshadow, or even cause, the problems between the lovers in the [melodramatic] film.”\(^{252}\) Although Garcia’s subsequent judgement of Cantonese cinema as ‘surrogate theatre’ refers only to melodrama, it adequately circumscribes the general thematic focus of 50s and 60s Cantonese productions revolving around the family or quasi-familial relations in close urban quarters.


\(^{249}\) Ibid.

\(^{250}\) Ibid.

\(^{251}\) Ibid.

\(^{252}\) Ibid.
The Mandarin films, especially of the 60s, turn away from the proletarian subject and to the evolving middle class often in romantic contexts promoting the economic success of new found social mobility against the rigid patriarchy of the past. Interesting to the discussion of identity is the way in which these themes extend seamlessly across South-East-Asia and unify ethnically Chinese populations without much narrative concern for the colonial situation of Hong Kong or the political environment throughout Asia in general. This is of course related to those studios and film magnates who expanded into Hong Kong from Singapore like Cathay or from Shanghai and Singapore like the Shaw Brothers. One effect of this inter-Asian networking organizing ‘Hong Kong cinema’ in the middle of the last century is the concern for linguistic variety, evident in non-Cantonese dialect productions and remakes only recently academically interrogated.²⁵³

Tsi Lo Lin’s (紫羅蓮) 1954 film *Malaya Love Affair* 《馬來亞之戀》 is a good example of the narrative expansion into South-East-Asia on the heels of overseas communities around the Nanyang. The film, also known as *Song of Malaya* or *Love in Malaya*, deals with

[...] a young Chinese woman, Leung Yuk-kit [梁⽟玉潔], who arrives alone in Malaya looking for her father (Ng Chor-fan [吳楚帆]), with whom she has lost all contact since before the end of the Sino-Japanese War. In Kuala Lumpur, she meets a devoted teacher, David Wong [⿈黃⼤大偉] (Cheung Wood-yau [張活游]), who freely invites her to stay for a time in his house while she continues to look for her father.²⁵⁴

Tragedy ensues when Leung Yuk-kit eventually finds her father and follows him to Singapore while David Wong stays in Kuala Lumpur and later falls ill. Interestingly war and emigration are not an issue as such but figure indirectly as a disruption to family unity. Her father Leung Sing (梁成) remarried after losing contact to his first wife and life with the stepmother causes exactly the kind of

²⁵³ See Ng, M., *Xiangang Chaozhouyu Dianying*, Ng, M., *Xianggang Xiayu Dianying*, or Taylor, *Rethinking Transnational Chinese Cinemas*.
²⁵⁴ *Law and Bren, Hong Kong Cinema*, 245.
problems Garcia described as the mainstay of Cantonese cinema: Yuk-kit’s long-distance relationship is scrutinized as the elders of the patchwork family attempt to set her up with a business associate. Furthermore, her experience helping around the school in Kuala Lumpur motivates Yuk-kit to continue her education (apparently interrupted during the war) which, again, causes problems with the rather conservative outlook of her father’s second wife. The emerging political picture could be described as a liberal update to Confucian tradition (although one could just as easily fit it into the Western context of the period): education over business, a cautious unfettering from familial bonds, and the element of female emancipation.

Centered around the fresh emigrant from *tongsaan* (唐山 – here denoting the motherland as a whole rather than the district in Hebei province) there is very little room in the film for interaction with the the ethnic/cultural other. There are a few instances of ‘miscommunication’ in which Yuk-kei has to rely on translations by David or some other Chinese-speaking local illustrating the prevalence of bilingualism among the overseas Chinese. More pronounced, however, is the specificity of the local version of Cantonese: working in a nightclub Yuk-kei is told that her reference to currency as *jat man* 「一蚊」 betrays her recent arrival since the locals use *jat kau qin* 「一溝錢」 instead. Manifest in the localized version of the dialect we thus find a tendency to further divide instead of rigorously clinging to the homeland. This produces an alternate triangular relation between China, Guangdong, and Malaya which appears to complicate a static understanding of Chineseness.

But the linguistic diversification remains verbal, whereas Yuk-kei’s investment in the Chinese school run by David exemplifies the cultivation of the larger Chineseness through the static script. Hong Kong cultural critic Leung Man-tao (梁文道) has argued extensively that the colony’s cultural specificity is closely related to its pivotal position in the *Nanyang* network, historically forged by Chinese (mainly from Guangdong and Fujian) moving out and about the
territories around the South China Sea. Chineseness here is unperturbed by the centrifugal force driving its agents outwards, divorced from the nation both in terms of spoken language and of territorial demarcation - two mainstays of Anderson’s account of the naturalization of feudal European borders into the national identities of today. In *Malaya Love Affair* the protagonist Yuk-kei does of course have a compelling reason for leaving China: she is searching for her father. But the ease with which she moves to Kuala Lumpur and later on to Singapore in an apparently seamless fashion strikes one (today) as peculiarly unconcerned with any home country. In this manner identity appears not bound to a singular political entity but ethnically – as an extension to immediate blood relations – and culturally – through the localized dialect as an extension to the stable standard of the written character.

Using the term diaspora in the context of Chinese emigration thus appears appropriate because, similar to the Jewish diaspora, it denotes an openness to opportunities abroad coupled with a strong sense of cultural heritage. The tendency to expand, however, is here not predicated on the political breakdown of the homeland and as such indicative of a difference in the conceptive formation of Chinese identity. It is characterized by a distance to the politics of the center in the present - already a by-product of the pre-modern centralized control over such a large territory - and a loosely ethnic element - evolved through a quasi-religious reverence for the ancestral lineage of the clan but unconstrained by strict ‘rules of engagement’.

Leung Man-tao has also argued that Chinese settling throughout the region of the *Nanyang* was historically promoted by business organizations originating in South China and modeled after colonial Western ‘companies’. These endeavors never resulted in direct imperial control of foreign territories in the modern era but clearly illustrate the impetus to expand trade relations throughout centuries and – for obvious geographic reasons – concentrated around the Southern periphery of Imperial Chinese power. The ‘middle kingdom’ used to be thought of as exerting

---

255 In a short reflection on “*Nanyang Hong Kong*” in the Apple Daily, for instance, he remarked on the sensibilities of Wong Kar-wai to present this cultural heritage. (Leung, “*Nanyang Xianggang.*”)
256 See Ma and Cartier, *Chinese Diaspora.*

108
rather loose control over its neighboring tributaries, barricading itself within ‘great walls’ rather than aggressively expanding outwards, and overcoming two great foreign annexations from within through the complete cultural assimilation of the aggressor. But in a system where only one person is free, as Hegel famously described Imperial China\textsuperscript{257}, identification with the apotheosis of the imperial edifice was likely to remain abstract anyways.

As a result, identity became a focal point of political enterprises during China’s transition into modernity tackling the tensions of language, cultural tradition and (to some degree) ethnicity. In the Republican era, for instance, there was a democratically inspired attempt at standardizing spoken Chinese by creating an artificial lingua franca which incorporated phonetic elements from all the major dialects\textsuperscript{258}. The plan obviously never gained any traction and both the KMT in Taiwan and the communist leadership in the PRC ended up adopting the European model of forcing linguistic homogenization through the education system and the modern media. But this did not spell the end of dialects and the pre-modern ‘compatibility’ of particular tongue and universal character remains\textsuperscript{259} and binds Chinese communities throughout the world in a manner impossible to sustain with the Western script\textsuperscript{260}.

One can also approach the status of the familial bond and script (as opposed to tongue) as unifying factors in the structure of global Chineseness through the

---

\textsuperscript{257} The full quote reads, “The Orientals do not know that spirit, or the the human being as such, is intrinsically free; because they do not know this, they are not themselves free. They only know that one [person] is free, but for this very reason such freedom is merely arbitrariness, savagery, and dull-witted passion, or their mitigation and domestication, which itself is merely a natural happenstance or something capricious. This one is therefore a despot, not a free human being.” (Hegel, \textit{Lectures}, 87.)

\textsuperscript{258} Cf. Kaske, \textit{The Politics of Language}, 323-390; Zhang Binglin (章炳麟) comes to mind who “believed that the Beijing dialect should not be allowed to provide the foundation for the definition of a nationally unified pronunciation. Instead, he advocated that an artificial standard be devised on the basis of a thorough survey of all existing dialects (…)” (Ibid., 385.)

\textsuperscript{259} Early Chinese thought did not mask spoken varieties as illustrated by the historical example of Yang Xiong’s (揚雄) \textit{Fangyan} (方言) (or more accurately: 《輶軒使者絕代語釋別國方言》), an early survey of the differences in spoken Chinese throughout the territory of the Han Dynasty.

\textsuperscript{260} In their treatment of ethnicity in Chinese cinema Berry and Farquhar produce a similar argument: “[T]he very nature of Chinese languages challenges European-derived ideas of ethnicity […] Written Chinese is pictographic [with] no connection between the written form and the spoken forms of the language”. Although written Chinese is not pictographic and the connection between written and spoken forms is readily accessible to linguists and speakers alike, spoken varieties do present as a vector of what they term “inter-Han difference” producing cultural tensions, especially during attempts at naturalization and (forced) homogenization into modern Andersonian nationhood. (Berry and Farquhar, \textit{China on Screen}, 191.)
internal north-south-divide. In this manner a static description of Chineseness can be sustained in spite of the conflicting overlaps constituting Hong Kong: that is 1) its geographic position at the Southern periphery of the motherland, 2) its coming-to-be as an outpost of Western imperialism, 3) its historical function as bridge to the expansion into overseas communities, as outlined above, and 4) its bolstering of the pre-modern north-south-divide into modernity through the aggregate of those developments amidst the socio-political turmoil of the last century.

An exemplary cinematic presentation of this field from the early post-war period is Wong Tin-Lam’s 1961 film *The Greatest Civil War on Earth* 《南北和》. The romantic comedy pits the Cantonese manager of Southern Riches Tailors (南發洋服), played by Cantonese opera icon Leung Sing-Bor (梁醒波), against the newly arrived competition from the mainland, the owner of Northern Expanse Tailors (北大洋服), played by Liu En-Jia (劉恩甲). Noted for its crossover use of both Mandarin and Cantonese, bridging the industry gap between bad Cantonese productions 「粵語殘片」 and the increasingly successful high budget Mandarin studios, the film rewrites “disdainful recognition[s] of versions of Chineseness to co-operative, intra-Chinese engagement”\(^{261}\). Completely devoid of any attempts to tackle the colonial British rule in Hong Kong or the relationship to the West as such, the two families are united as northern girls marry southern boys and vice versa, overcoming the patriarchs’ prejudices who at last merge their competing businesses into the North South Harmony (also the Chinese title of the production).

Linguistic understanding in the film is somehow intuitive - a returning feature in cinematic depictions projecting ‘natural’ communicability between Chinese tongues – as characters either fluently switch between Cantonese and Mandarin or speak one and understand the other. It is in this manner that the “intra-Chinese engagement” can take the shape of a complete reconciliation solidified in the renewed blood relations of the familial bond and in the characters proclaiming harmony between north and south above the entrance to the economic joint

\(^{261}\) Gan, “Southwards and Outwards,” 110.
venture. Couched in those terms – familial bond and universal written character –
this engagement is very much traditional, an attempt to refortify the pillars of
universalistic Chineseness against the pressures of colonial division, emigration,
and cosmopolitan consumerism within the economically safe bubble of an up-and-
coming Chinese middle class.

This traditional form of Chineseness finds stability in the ancestral family and
the cultivation of a common script independent of living speech and is open to
voluntary affiliation. As such, the necessary localization of identity over time, the
fact that groups of people are always already internally fragmented is concealed in
a culturally specific manner. A coherent identity always entails a reciprocal,
ordered relationship between particular individuals, because abstract sameness is
not a living thing. The ‘national Thing’ is one psychoanalytical description of the
nature of this coherence in general terms. Yin, however, denotes the specific
cultural character of coherence as exhibited by Chineseness. This specificity
becomes more and more important as the politics of competing political entities
throughout Greater China now dispute authoritative claim over Chineseness. But
balkanization has not disintegrated the fundamental coherence afforded by
Chinese identity; it merely politically reinforces local indigeneities unwilling to
give up on it. But the possibility of affirming the claim to authority in regulating
the uniformity of Chineseness and thus strengthening a political entity against
Western supremacy is now limited to the steady politico-economic climb of the
PRC.

Of course the periphery has continuously exerted influence on the centre.
“Hong Kong’s role in the process of incorporating the Chinese mainland into the
capitalist world”262 is already being described as a “Northward Expansion” 「北
進」 or the imagination of such a movement263, no doubt helped by, perhaps even
grounded in its pop-/cultural exports. The periphery is lacking the size and
military arsenal to effectively back this influence beyond Greater China, though.

---

263 Ibid.
The role of regulating the uniformity of Chineseness and thus strengthening a political entity against Western economic supremacy thus inevitably falls to Beijing. A ‘radical’ identity politics opposed to any authority enforcing a uniform identity, on the other hand, simply evaporates the notion of Chineseness into millions of individuals who define its meaning on a personal basis. Both the prescriptive and the radically anti-identitarian vector of identity politics thus go too far. The former stifles individual potential, the latter strains recognition in socio-cultural belonging. In so far as premodern identity conceals particularity in the service of stability, *yin* figures as the conceptual and narrative locus of this inquiry. The question of identity thus reproduces the general structure of a regulated whole always already (secretly) perforated, or the issue of (abstract) universal and (empirical) particular.

To arrive at a different notion of Chineseness is thus neither a matter of continuously resolidifying it as stable identity through an updating of one or another characteristic – governmental politics is already engaged in this endeavor – nor is it a matter of dissolving all identitarian definitions in an attempt to resist; in both cases we are merely facilitating shifts in political correctness or, in extreme cases, territorial redistribution among states based in ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious, etc. differences. If Chineseness is to become actual beyond mere cyclical shifts within the (Wallersteinian) world-system, it has to be thought as a specific historic trajectory necessitated by antagonisms which project the potential for a more radical break ‘sublating’ the current deadlock. Moving into Hong Kong cinema of the 70s, we can track an effort to formulate such a universally concrete Chineseness in the works of Bruce Lee.

*Embodying the Traditional*

Illustrating static conceptions of identity, I drew on two films from the 50s and 60s in an attempt to rhetorically save a kernel of traditional, ‘universal’ Chineseness into the modern situation. In the context of post-war Hong Kong as a “lifeboat” insulating refugees “from political tensions created by rivalry between
the communist and nationalist regimes” the narrative overcoming of old linguistic barriers and call to familial cooperation in *The Greatest Civil War* does not require much explanation. Mathews, Ma and Lui note,

The perceptions of Hong Kong residents towards the continuous inflow of refugees from the mainland reflected their identification with China, as did their insistence on seeing these incoming strangers as fellow Chinese rather than as aliens competing for scarce social resources, as they later would.265

Even though the political claim to ‘authentic’ Chineseness is continuously challenged and, as a result, updated, it nevertheless remains static in the manner in which solidifying an identity to certain specifications either abets nationalism in rigid prescriptions of ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, etc. affiliation or atomizes identity in a critical outlook which “privilege[s] the local by invoking the reality of multiple identities and make sacred indigenous truths to counter Orientalist fictions”266. Both these notions of identity present not simply as opposed to each other, but also as self-defeating in and of themselves, since the rigid prescription of (national) identities can never succeed in a complete ethnic cleansing of the (fascist) state, while resistance to identitarian thinking in favor of fragmented multitudes can similarly never fully dismantle the ‘national Thing’ covered in broad cultural characteristics. Identity in the sense of speculative ‘addition’ thus outlines the deadlock of abstract universal and concrete particular and ‘calls’ for movement beyond political updates.

Hegel offers much in this respect, as his universals are always brought forth in particular historical situations (rather than independent and eternal ideas). One could cite the Hegelian Jesus267 as a quasi-historical instance of how an individual resists socio-religious norms by effecting a new form of consciousness – in this case the rejection of God as external, absolute law. The example also illustrates the meaning of freedom in this conception: for Hegel there is no independence in the sense of hermetically closed self-sufficiency. Freedom is always a form of

---

264 Mathews, Ma and Lui, *Hong Kong, China*, 28.
265 Ibid., 30.
liberty in absolute dependency within the social body which institutionalizes in ethical substance. As Hegel explicates in §260 of the Philosophy of Right:

The state is the actuality of concrete freedom. But concrete freedom consists in this, that personal individuality and its particular interests not only achieve their complete development and gain explicit recognition for their right (as they do in the sphere of the family and civil society) but, for one thing, they also pass over of their own accord into the interest of the universal, and, for another thing, they know and will the universal; they even recognise it as their own substantive mind; they take it as their end and aim and are active in its pursuit. The result is that the universal does not prevail or achieve completion except along with particular interests through the co-operation of particular knowing and willing; and individuals likewise do not live as private persons for their own ends alone, but in the very act of willing these they will the universal in the light of the universal, and their activity is consciously aimed at none but the universal end. The principle of modern states has prodigious strength and depth because it allows the principle of subjectivity to progress to its culmination in the extreme of self-subsistent particularity, and yet at the same time brings it back to the substantive unity and so maintains this unity in the principle of subjectivity itself.  

The state is characterized by its sublation of individual trajectories in the organic whole of social relations whereby particular and universal coincide as reflected in consciousness. “Complete development” and “explicit recognition” demonstrate Hegel’s commitment to progress and human dignity, while the absence of any clear prescriptive enumeration of traits in one or another territory make it clear that he is talking about the notion of the state beyond particular political, cultural, or religious constellations. The crux of the Hegelian concept of state is that a political entity first gains nominal consistency from such a particular, contingent constellation in history (and therefore retains a kernel of tradition formed at the transition from natural history to human prehistory) and then develops towards statehood as it is propelled to shed all external, limiting characteristics through an overcoming of its antagonisms.

The traditional Chineseness based in ethno-cultural affiliation is of particular interest in this context because it overextends beyond a single political entity as a result of imperialist occupation, (consequent) political division, and large-scale

---

268 Hegel, Elements, 282.
emigration. Within Greater China political power cannot effectively leave this
Chineseness behind without cutting the bond of the character through a radical
script reform (something Mao had in mind with a gradual simplification and
transition into pinyin only)\textsuperscript{269}. In Hong Kong the use of written dialect took on
semi-official character with the introduction of the “Hong Kong Supplementary
Character Set” 「香港增補字符集」 and self-standardized to a degree through
extensive use in media, advertising, and online communication. But this apparent
departure from the traditions of Cultural China always functioned as a local
supplement only, never superseding standard written Chinese in education,
highbrow publishing, literature, etc., demonstrating the effectiveness of traditional
Chineseness into modernity and beyond the borders of particular political entities.

Invoking the plot element of education in \textit{Malay Love Affair} and north-south-
reunion in \textit{The Greatest Civil War on Earth} served to illustrate how traditional
Chineseness was employed narratively without concern for political divisions, the
motherland, or Western influence and primarily aimed at accommodating
patriarchy within the modern context. By the end of the 1960s Cantonese cinema,
originally heavily invested in socio-political concerns, had lost a lot of ground to
Mandarin studios, but the issue of Hong Kong’s status as colony and its selfhood
gained prominence, particularly in light of the 1967 riots and, more generally, the
mainland Cultural Revolution solidifying the division from the colony.

Considering the drastic cultural developments of the late 60s in the West, it is not
surprising that the themes of traditional Chineseness – ethno-cultural union
through (quasi-)familial bonds as a way of preserving heritage into modernity and
beyond political borders (throughout Greater China and South-East-Asia) – were
revisited with a vengeance, augmented by implications of Western influence, thus
completing the triangular relation of the Hong Kong situation narratively. The
most striking and probably best known examples of this development are the first
three productions the adult Bruce Lee (李小龙) starred in.

I will concentrate on his arguably most iconic role, culminating in the duel at
the Colosseum in \textit{The Way of the Dragon} 《猛龍過江》 (1972), but also

\textsuperscript{269} Cf. Rohsenow, “Fifty Years,” 26-32.
reference *The Big Boss* 《唐山大兄》 (1971) and *Fist of Fury* 《精武門》 (1972) in a reading which treats them as a ‘trilogy’ addressing the whole spectrum of the problematic of Chineseness vis-a-vis the conflicts of tradition and modernity. *Way of the Dragon* will serve to reconstruct Lee’s vision of an individuality couched in and nurtured by a nationalism that serves as a mere container to situate the human being on a culturally distinct platform from which to explore and interact with the global in pursuit of a universal aim.

The model in this context is his lifelong engagement with martial arts, a Chinese tradition which, like all others, depends on a conservative space and community, yet develops with the innovations of individuals towards a universal ‘martial truth’. Consequently, tradition appears as always already past, but never truly dead (enough). Lee essentially reconfigures the relation between traditional ground and local particularity as regulated in culturalist Chineseness: the emphasis is no longer on a universal and immutable bedrock of written language and canon superior to any particular cultural ‘deviation’ which might spring from it in living speech or transient practice. Instead Lee readily accepts the inevitable grounding in whatever tradition one might be ‘thrown’ into, but highlights the transformative power of the individual developing on this ground. In so far as *yin* terms the concealed excess to a homogenous totality - the *jianghu* to a territory regulated by law or linguistic particularity to Chineseness as written Chinese - this reconfiguration draws out the deconstructive current inherent in the dynamic between universal and particular. In the active engagement with its outside Chineseness can no longer isolate itself and *yin* as potential for difference actualized by the individual becomes the focal point.

Lee’s performances of Chinese *gongfu* subvert any clinging to rigid formalism. But he understands the ground of (some) tradition to be the necessary starting point of training. As a result, he aims to preserve the indigenous in its socio-historical contingency as the necessary foundation affording the individual the stability to organically evolve in global competition. Modernity for Lee is reconcilable with this version of ‘abstract nationalism’ as he brackets the intimate, ancestral praxes of diet, physical discipline, and procreation in an ethnic
embodiment posited as impervious to the increasingly homogenized landscapes of modern industrialization.

Chineseness in this context refers to a historic shift restoring recognition to the individual and his/her indigenous environment beyond the ‘first world’ in nationalisms that are *aufgehoben* in the Hegelian sense - a canceling which retains. To outline this Chineseness, I will begin with a reconstruction of the kind of agent Lee envisioned in *The Way of the Dragon*, the one film in which he not only starred but also provided script and direction. Li Siu-leung sums up the plot as,

[…] the story of a country bumpkin from rural backwater of cosmopolitan British Hong Kong, who is utterly illiterate but equipped with formidable kung fu. He goes to Rome to rescue a female relative’s Chinese restaurant from falling prey to a gang-related Italian businessman. Regardless of its contemporary setting, the film builds upon a deep structure of binary opposition: traditional China (intriguingly represented here by diasporic Chinese) versus the modernized west, just like most of the ‘qingmo-minchu kung fu films’ do.\(^{270}\)

It is this binary opposition that is curiously interwoven when we flesh it out in more detail and contrast the elements of “traditional China” and the “modernized west” respectively which Lee picks up and synthesizes into the iconic “diasporic Chinese” hero. Protagonist Tong Lung (唐龍) is portrayed a “country bumpkin” from the New Territories, an area which was only developed in the mid-70s and had been more or less cut off from Hong Kong ‘proper’ by a range of mountains. This makes for a peculiar topography of the periphery of the periphery: Hong Kong itself, that is the island and Kowloon, is already well under way to economic prosperity under colonial supervision and in sharp contrast to the economic and cultural developments on the mainland but Tong Lung hails from the rural outskirts. It is as if the colony accommodated a whole miniature China divided into prosperous coastal region and rural hinterland, a hinterland which crucially appears untouched by the political upheavals of the 20\(^{th}\) century – Tong Lung never comments on socio-political situation of his home. The result is an

\(^{270}\) Li S., “Kung Fu,” 101.
idiosyncratic, or perhaps even contradictory, hybrid who spends his days training traditional martial arts and still entertains a modern consumerist outlook when he inquires about cars or recommends the demolition of historic landmarks to make room for profitable developments.

Along the geopolitical fault lines of the struggle between capitalism and (real existing) communism traditional praxis is sheltered (only) under colonial rule. The ensuing anachronism of the “in-between, heterogeneous, overlapping temporal space”\(^{271}\) narratively lends efficacy to hand-to-hand combat in a world of firearms. Hybridity and its non-traditional moments in the figure of Tong Lung are presented by a number of critics and scholars: Cheng Yu’s account “Anatomy of a Legend”\(^{272}\), for instance, already reads *Way of the Dragon* as a turning point at which Lee rejects the oppressive familial interdiction structuring *The Big Boss* and the tragic hero’s death ending *Fist of Fury*. Respect for the elderly is essentially dismissed when the figure of Uncle Wang (王叔叔) turns out a traitor and the result of working for the Westerner in a subordinated position are drastically illustrated in the figure of Ho in which Paul Ngai (魏平澳) portrays the emasculated “homosexual lackey”\(^{273}\) - the issue of gay rights in this context reveals the familiar moment of ‘torsion’ pitting an individual’s sexual orientation against the larger racist framework which it is irreducible to, yet structurally linked with.

On the surface Lee’s Tong Lung appears strangely neo-conservative in the manner in which he rallies the young restaurant staff around his Chinese *gongfu* in a rebellion against both Western supremacy and its non-white handymen. Familial ties are restructured to mobilize the young against both external aggression and internal paternalism. Tong Lung’s proclamation of Chinese *gongfu*, a “naming that brings an identity […] into being”\(^{274}\), is usually read to indicate Lee’s ‘abstract nationalism’, a continuation of his anti-Japanese *Fist of Fury* and a commitment to the strengthening of a Chinese nation beyond the political divisions of the time.

\(^{271}\) Ibid., 103.
\(^{272}\) Cheng Y., “Anatomy.”
\(^{273}\) Ibid., 21.
\(^{274}\) Li S., *Kung Fu*, 111.
This, however, only functions if we adopt the standpoint of the easily impressionable restaurant staff or the group of mob underlings for whom Tong Lung gives his “tongue-in-cheek pompous demonstration”\textsuperscript{275}, an obvious ad hoc improvisation covered by the traditional veneer of an appropriately grandiose label designating some maneuver \textit{as if} it had been taught for generations. The aspect of a rigid formalism transmitted from master to student which governs much of the peak \textit{gongfu} cinema of the 70s and 80s – the enacting of a written manual in \textit{Drunken Master 《醉拳》} (1978) or the synchronous training of master and student in \textit{Mad Monkey Kung Fu} – was what much of Lee’s criticism of actual martial arts revolved around; he developed a kind of multiculturalism of martial praxes, in which every individual combines bits and pieces of techniques from all over the globe into a personal style furthering an essentially formless, universal philosophy of combat. To sustain Lee’s (or even Tong Lung’s) commitment to a rigid form of nationalism implies ignoring the self-conscious over-performance of Chinese \textit{gongfu} and treating this makeshift maneuver as more than invented tradition.

There is a level of reflection introduced through the dynamic between Lee and the character he scripted for himself, as well as between us as viewers and Tong Lung’s followers. Because reading Tong Lung’s style implies Lee’s outlook on martial arts, while accepting his ‘mastery’ (like his followers from the restaurant) requires us to suspend disbelief and, so to speak, repress Tong Lung’s over-performance of tradition as an illustration of an identity being brought into being. Interpreting Lee’s Tong Lung as an ‘abstract nationalist’ means falling in line behind him, taking him to be a savior of tradition instead of an inventor, one who rigidly follows in the footsteps of elders and resurrects their teachings against modern decay. But Tong Lung parodies formal rigidity and in his performance lays bare the process of identity creation before Chinese \textit{gongfu} is then attached as a label. To reconcile this labeling with Lee’s performance one either has to split character and actor – which would imply Lee mocking Chinese \textit{gongfu} as Tong Lung demonstrates it – or attempt to read label and performance in conjunction.

\textsuperscript{275} fbid.
Opting for the latter interpretation, I suggest that Lee is trying to address one of the primary symptoms of modernity succinctly expressed by Adorno in the statement, “What has terminated tradition can hardly count on one in which it would be given a place.” Lee’s film seeks to ameliorate the effects of this “self-dismantling operation” and general disenchantment (Weber’s Entzauberung) by stabilizing the nationalist ground necessary to preserve various indigenous traditions feeding individual composites thereof on a higher (global) level. He presents this by transposing elements of wuxia-fiction into the modern world, or superimposing the framework of wuxia onto a tale of diasporic survival.

Contrary to entries from the heyday of Kung Fu cinema culminating in a formula focusing on training – say The 36th Chamber of the Shaolin – Way of the Dragon is gongfu in the sense of a precursor to Yuen Woo-ping (袁和平) or Lau Kar-leung primarily through its emphasis on ‘authenticity’ and the teaching subplot. But it is also decidedly wuxia in all its anachronisms: the secret weapon of the handmade throwing darts to counter firearms, followed by the strange adherence to some unwritten law of the jianghu whereby the ‘school’ of Western/Roman expansionism, that is the Italian mob, decides and is capable of summoning the empire’s ‘gladiators’ back to the arena, willing to determine the conflict mano a mano.

In the context of a ‘trilogy’ formed by The Big Boss, Fist of Fury and Way of the Dragon we can detect the claim to historical impact typical of wuxia plots narratively embedded into historic events and supplying a backstory often explained to have been purposefully omitted from official historiography. James Liu points to “the close interrelation between history and literature” by which “historical personages and events provided material for imaginative literature” and summarizes modern texts in the tradition as,

[… ] tales extolling physical strength and prowess written since the decline of Chinese power in the nineteenth century are the results of wishful thinking of an enfeebled nation, while contemporary tales depicting flying swordsmen

---

277 Li S., *Kung Fu*, 100.
afford a means of escape from the often harsh realities of modern life.  

Almost “flying” (or suspended in mid-air) and embedded in the historical context of enfeeblement, *Fist of Fury* seeks to rectify the prevailing account of historical impotence in light of foreign, particularly Japanese aggression and countermand the image of the ‘sick man of Asia’ by exposing the secret poisoning of Chen Zhen’s (陳真) master Huo Yuanjia (霍元甲). Complementing this immunization against the outside, *The Big Boss* stages an internal purge: a heroic individual is mobilized in an uprising against both a primordial father running an enclave of Chinese expatriates in Thailand - an obscene version of traditional patriarchy - and the shackles of his mother’s interdiction (encapsulated by the protagonist’s necklace). This purge exposes the oppressive and degenerate flip side of the family/clan hierarchically fixed in the name of general stability. The ‘moral’ concealment of particularity structuring premodern identity is violently exploded.

Narratively situating the story in Thailand provides an apparently “self-contained local Chinese space” for an experiment in autonomous and ‘traditionally’ Chinese self-regulation, as the film is virtually void of interaction with Thai people apart from the arrest at the very end. In this isolation the direct familial bond, the interdiction by the mother (revisited in *Way of the Dragon* in the figure of Uncle Wang), integrates protagonist Cheng Chao-an (鄭潮安) into a labour force apparently consolidated by ethnic solidarity but policed by the other family, offspring to the early modern secret societies. Both these versions of (quasi-)traditional institutions serve to support a local hegemony that is economically (or at least historically) connected to the expansion of global capitalism through the drug trade - this setting delineates the volatile space between Lee’s strong individualism and the cultural identity this individualism disassembles.

The exaggerated *Nanyang* setting is another example of Lee steering clear of any realistic environments. Li remarks how “Lee’s body fails to provide a solid

---

279 Ibid., 194.
280 Li S., *Kung Fu*, 113.
ground to locate a specific Hong Kong identity”281 and this failure is exposed in “self-negating imagery”282. This self-negation, however, is not simply the result of the discrepancy between his characters and his (extra-diegetic) curriculum vitae. As *Way of the Dragon* illustrates, Lee does not leave the identity he brought into being to transform along the silent trajectory of its inherent negativity. Rather, he himself already exposes the incoherence of this identity in his (over-)performance of Chinese *gongfu* resulting in the split between heroic individual and the collective he forms and strengthens. In this sense the ‘abstractness’ of Lee’s nationalism, commented on by Stephen Teo283, is not just conditioned by the historico-political fragmentation of China but can also be read as Lee’s answer to the problem of the ‘enfeebled nation’. It is not reductively abstract in the sense of Hegel’s “Who Thinks Abstractly?”284 but an attempt to narratively raise to consciousness the path to a national identity that is mere predicate to the individual – never the complete description of a human being overbearingly determining him/her in all action, thought, and interaction. Lee’s own mixed racial and cultural background seems the obvious root to this way of thinking and might have set him apart from a majority of Chinese when his films were first screened.

If we take Bruce Lee’s Chinese nationalism as an “emotional wish among Chinese people living outside China to identify with China and things Chinese” and of “a rather abstract and apolitical type”285, Chineseness remains equivocal. In Tong Lung’s roguish and sometimes smug image we see reflected a narcissism and individual pride that also characterizes modern Hong Kong in its relationship with the world and mainland China. Hong Kongers roam the world, know and value its products, deal in them as connoisseurs, duplicitously utilizing national identity and special status as situations require and afford. Much like Tong Lung, Hong Kong flies the Chinese flag but entertains an highly individualized outlook that is hardly hidden.

This, however, does not necessarily spell secessionism. After all, there is

---

281 Ibid., 112.
282 Ibid., 100.
283 Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema*, 77.
nothing unusual about local patriotism, a widespread phenomenon in metropolises and areas with histories of foreign or independent rule around the world. As such, I am not convinced that “[h]ad Hong Kong been given a choice, it probably would have chosen independence.” Of course, the only ‘choice’ “was between the colonial/’democratic’ and the national/’autocratic’: a choice of nightmares.” More importantly, though, the periphery as corrective is only effective when it is somehow exempted, yet (at least) nominally included, a status for which there are many names in the PRC today. The ‘abstractness’ of Lee’s nationalism entails neither the claim to political independence for Hong Kong (or other peripheries), nor does it openly oppose communist China. In an apparently conscious manner Lee stayed away from any such engagements, avoiding with it all the underlying economic inequalities structuring the divide. Catapulted into affluence relatively early, he is already concerned with the question of the indigenous/particular in an age that leaves little space for an authenticity between individual and universal order.

*Way of the Dragon* highlights this by treating the diaspora in the West as an instance of *jianghu* beyond the homeland. Recall the group of thugs first sent to the restaurant: a ragtag ensemble of various shades all adhering to the same dress code. His Tong Lung, clad in traditional attire, is scripted to counter this specific environment; keeping in mind also the other iconic piece of clothing, the yellow jumpsuit with the black stripe, or his private sense of fashion for that matter, it seems fair to assume that clothing was not a religious matter to Bruce Lee. Yet this does not mean that we have to read the nationalist tendencies in his films as hypocritical profiteering. Rather, Tong Lung indicates an approach to salvage ethnic heritage by reducing it to what it always was: a field of mentalities and praxes shaped by a common historical environment. Martial arts is the perfect vehicle for this message. His origin in Hong Kong and denouncing of Rome’s ancient structures indicate a renunciation of material markers of the nation and the empire, yet the Chinese *gongfu* performed in front of the Chinese restaurant staff emphasizes both the need and the unavoidability of holding on to the indigenous

---

286 Chan, “Postmodernism,” 314.
287 Abbas, “Hong Kong,” 115.
in embodiment – a “physical presence [connoting] resistance to racism, colonialism, and class exploitation.”

This physical presence is shaped by the most intimate and transient praxes: diet, manual labour and play, and, of course, the sexual relations of one’s parents.

Lee’s narcissistic display of his body takes on a specific meaning in this context: it seeks to reconcile the paramilitary discipline of (non-white) resistance with the life praxis of 60s and 70s activism in a world that was already rapidly moving towards entirely global economic interaction. Sexual practice, the hippie element, is hinted at in the (in)famous scene of a failed seduction by ‘Italian Beauty’ Malisa Longo. Following Chen Ching Hua’s (陳清華) advice to be friendly with the locals, Tong Lung is invited home by a stranger.

While the Italian lady slips away, Tang Lung begins practicing martial arts in the mirror, admiring his body’s flexibility and musculature in a moment of spectacle and narcissism. We might also assume that this martial arts warm-up is physical preparation for the sexual encounter about to happen, particularly since Lee’s body is coded in terms of an erotic visual display. The woman appears back in a few minutes, topless, and Tang Lung quickly flees her apartment in panic. In short, he is defeated at some level by the nakedness and sexuality of the female body, unprepared as he is for this type of challenge.

There are no doubt multiple levels and interpretations to this scene. The wuxia framework of the story suggests a reading along the genre formula, which limit the hero to the martial aspect and often only hint at romance by the rescue of a woman from (the threat of) rape. Also, some level of attraction between Tong Lung and Cheng is implied by the alarmed look she gives him as he leaves with the Italian. While Tong Lung follows Cheng’s pointers awkwardly, the gap between the character and the actor interferes with a purely diegetic reading and the Bruce Lee behind Tong Lung is mischievously exploiting the moment to incite her jealousy in the cover of her own somewhat patronizing advice, reminding her of the pitfalls of the modern woman she clearly espouses to be. More importantly, the scene signifies Lee’s resistance to sinic emasculation as his body ‘captures’ a

---

288 Marchetti, From Tian’anmen, 218.
white woman. What do we make then of his sudden escape? The trick here is to resolve the tension between the resistance Lee wants to voice and the genre formula he transposes into the contemporary world. He does so with a visual pun as Tong Lung literally ‘bumps into a ghost’ 「撞鬼」, the partially exposed white body suddenly appearing next to his own reflection. How else could we reconcile Tong Lung’s “defeat” by the white female body with Lee’s personal life? He had married Linda Emery in 1964.

In summary, Lee’s transposition of the wuxia form into the contemporary world effectively equates the ‘West’ with a jianghu under the hegemonic control of one ‘school’ – an artificial entity composed of references to the historical Roman empire, its American successor (hinted at by the English language and Chuck Norris), and organized crime. Although nominally a multicultural, multiracial, multilingual organization, its internal structure does not appear an ‘equal opportunity environment’. In contrast, the Chinese restaurant is an ethnically uniform organization promoting and preserving a more or less authentic, indigenous practice. This is the extent of Lee’s commitment to Chinese nationalism, a mere regional ‘container’, coincidental in its historical coherence and the ‘thrownness’ by which it situates an individual, serving to protect the indigenous in its various forms before it is razed in modernity. As such, the hollowness of his ‘abstract nationalism’ can be taken as intentional, rather than a failure to represent a stable identity. The particular praxis Lee promoted in The Way of the Dragon and in his teaching could thus qualify as an event.

Structured around the field of identity, I began with an attempt to stabilize a ‘static’ version of Chineseness through narratives of 50s and 60s cinema. This proved relatively simple because the portrayal of or return to such a naturally ‘stable’ identity is an underlying feature of these films in the first place. ‘Ghosts’ which could disturb this stability are avoided or ‘muted’ – non-Chinese Asians in

---

290 This phrase literally translates as ‘to bump into a ghost’, but is commonly used as an exclamation of surprise, anger, or frustration. ‘Ghost’ 「鬼」, as already indicated, also denotes the ethnically non-Chinese as in gwai lou 「鬼佬」(white man), gwai mui 「鬼妹」(white girl), haak gwai 「黒鬼」(black person), etc.

291 For an interrogation of Bruce Lee as an event in the emphatic sense (as opposed to a commercial ‘phenomenon’) and his global impact see Bowman, Theorizing Bruce Lee.
Malaya Love Affair and white colonizers in The Greatest Civil War on Earth - and the emerging conflicts are ‘family matters’. This is not to say that we can simply reduce all of pre-70s Hong Kong cinema to so many reiterations of stable Chineseness. Indeed, going back to the politically sponsored moviemaking of the 40s presents a different picture. We can neither present a shift from static conceptions of identity to dynamic ones in direct chronological alignment with periods of history.

Rather, I have chosen the post-war period as my (somewhat arbitrary) starting point and used texts from this period to illustrate a narrative stabilization of identity which is not limited to the 50s and 60s. One could proceed with a detailed analysis of how this stabilization relates to the war and other developments in the first half of the last century, but I am here concerned with narrative constructions of identity as such. As there is always a degree of oscillation between pressing progress in times of affluence and calls for restoration in times of (supposed) crisis, we find what I previously termed ‘updating’: attempts at reconciling the traditional with a changing socio-political environment.

The dynamization of identity, in turn, develops as the artificiality of tradition is exposed and antagonisms are highlighted. The three Hong-Kong-produced titles of the adult Bruce Lee illustrate this dynamization beyond mere

[...] stories of Chinese who live in places dominated and controlled by non-Chinese [and in which Lee’s] ‘hatred’ of these dominant ‘foreign’ groups and his insistence on projecting himself as a ‘real’ Chinese reflect a diasporic consciousness trapped between the fear of living in a host country and the need to retain the myth of motherland.292

Such a reading ignores a variety of narrative elements which openly mock the traditional and undermine the authority of elders. Furthermore, it does not address the overall lack of the traditional and the instances of open endorsement for the modern. To bring all three films together in a ‘trilogy’ means constructing a positive framework which synthesizes: 1) opposition to foreign and familial control, 2) opposition to rigid formalism and edifices of (national) power, 3) a

292 Chu Yingchi, Hong Kong Cinema, 38.
validation of individual endeavors as social activities aimed at competitive progress.

Judging by his theory of martial arts, tradition for Lee is never in danger of being lost or in need of restoration. Instead, the cultural background of an individual is always already active no matter what one chooses to do, because in retrospect we can neither reduce a certain element of an individual’s chosen path to his/her background alone, nor can we completely divorce it from that background. Is this not what Tong Lung demonstrates when he ‘pompously’ performs Chinese gongfu before dispatching the group of thugs with Lee’s signature flow behind the restaurant? Bruce Lee effectively became Chinese gongfu, but, and this is made explicit through the performance as well as the dynamic of actor vis-a-vis character, Chinese gongfu is nothing but a series of engaged martial artists shaping that concept through time. In other words, just as there is no tradition to return to, there is also no complete escape from tradition.

Bruce Lee, although born in the US, was thrown into ‘Chineseness’ and his ethno-cultural background made his engagement with martial arts an exercise of Chinese gongfu. He was not just “too far ahead of his time to be coopted by Hollywood”293, but equally ahead of a Hong Kong that has since converged with his image. Tong Lung has become the perfect description of the attitude and situation of Hong Kong: both are unburdened by (the lack of) material reminders of a glorious (national) past and playfully boast (corporate) muscle in shiny (high rise) reflections. Even worse, in his emphasis on individual embodiment Lee effectively anticipates the cultural developments of the last decades with its mediated recommendations of diets, work-outs, or notions of a ‘healthy’ sex life. In the personal insulation of embodiment from the larger socio-economic context a structural change somehow bypassing or co-opting global capitalism has failed to take shape. What remains, however, is Lee’s attempt to salvage modern rationality, enlightenment even, by freeing the individual from unreflected belief in mythical belonging and the edifices of power such belief supports.

---

293 Chan, “Postmodernism,” 310.
The work of the adult Bruce Lee can be reconstructed as a positive version of a nationalism demarcated by some shared cultural background but defined in the mutual recognition and contest of individuals. It is in this manner that we can read Lee’s avoidance of living Hong Kong culture as well as the politics between Chinese states and quasi-entities as a deliberate maneuver to extricate himself from the constraints of a situation in which any more or less realistic depiction of the Hong Kong environment can be construed as a political statement. Against the structure of yin, we can discern an intensification of negativity in Lee’s work: the other in Malaya Love Affair was merely a bystander to culturalist Chineseness which remains unperturbed by the foreign. Political division does not impede this essentially self-involved notion of identity.

Updates to this Chineseness appear reasonable in so far as they keep the traditional ground intact, but implicitly they react to the pressures of modernity and the geopolitical situation. The result is contradictory as culturalist Chineseness still clings to an apparently immutable universal, while it has already been transformed in its updated interpretation (most notably the affirmation of individualism against traditional family hierarchy). By contrast, Lee exposes this ongoing transformation of tradition in his performance of Chinese gongfu. Whereas culturalist Chineseness only reacts to modernity without acknowledging an encounter with the other, Lee weaponizes the particularity concealed by the former to resist both Western hegemony and reactionary aspects of Chinese tradition supporting this hegemony. In formal terms, this reproduces the structure of the jianghu: a peripheral agent emerges at a moment of crisis, but the engagement is neither purely internal to Chineseness, nor a ‘nationalism’ only directed at fending off outsiders. Lee’s impact is due to the fact that he attacks both.

Culturalist Chineseness which appeared impervious to time and, in this sense, ahistorical, here turns into a problem. To simply bide one’s time and reconstitute elsewhere waiting to undo the effects of political upheaval is no longer an option.
as the encounter with ‘ghosts’ necessitates a re-evaluation of the role of
Chineseness within the larger context of modernity. Whereas the concealment of
particularity within a stable universality could control the deconstructive moment
within yin, Lee’s strategy of embodiment exposes the potential of the peripheral
which now immediately translates into an individual responsibility for
transformation. Uprooted identity notices its fundamental contingency and
relation to power. It is no accident that his efforts are directed at both in- and
outside of Chineseness: acknowledging pressure from the outside already acting
on Chineseness in the form of updates suggests its containment within modernity.
This in turn entails a Chineseness abetting Western hegemony where it sees itself
as self-sufficient. In response, Bruce Lee’s engagement targets its pillars of
stability: he discloses the instability of tradition and attacks both patriarchy and
Western hegemony head on.

I already remarked on the parallels between Lee and elements of 60s US
culture. A more careful exploration could readily read Lee, Hong Kong, China,
and the West in the context of the ‘global 60s’ - events around the world “inspired
by the crisis of colonialism, and the implications for capitalism of de-colonization,
but also by the seeming crisis of ‘actually existing socialism’”\(^{294}\). This, however,
would go far beyond the immediate question of Chinese tradition in Hong Kong
cinema. The problems addressed by Lee are also relatable to

\[\ldots\] \[t]he emergence of Hong Kong identity [which] was partly a result of
demographic change […], the rise of a born-in-Hong-Kong generation. The
post-war baby-boomers made their initial mark in the 1966 Kowloon
disturbances, and then in the student movements of subsequent years.\(^{295}\)

As a result, Hong Kong cinema in the 70s began to (again) “articulate reality by
rehabilitating the indigenous dialect and culture”\(^{296}\), confirming the general
consensus of the birth of a more or less coherent Hong Kong identity in that
period. Moving away from an all too rigid classification attributing distinct

\(^{294}\) Dirlik, “Foreword,” viii.
\(^{295}\) Mathews, Ma and Lui, \textit{Hong Kong, China}, 36.
\(^{296}\) Li C., “Postscript,” 129.
historical meaning to particular decades, this phase stretches well into the 80s and encompasses all of the icons of the local industry: the Shaw Brothers Studio at its peak, the Hui brothers’ comedies, Jackie Chan’s action comedies, and many other staples. Cheuk remarks on “fantasy comedies [produced by Cinema City (新藝城)] that exactly resonated with the escapist mood of the Hong Kong people”\textsuperscript{297}, and links the decline of the company and its 
\textit{Aces Go Places} 《最佳拍档》 franchise (more or less) directly to the Joint Declaration between China and Britain in 1984.

With the financial success of these productions throughout Asia and the world these developments in turn gave rise to the New Wave of the 70s and 80s, which “consolidated the breakthrough in the use of Cantonese and introduced a more sophisticated version of Hongkong cinema.”\textsuperscript{298} Instead of re-examining one of the many canonized entries of this key interval, I have chosen a rather unknown film from a more obscure subgenre. As initially stated, this chapter is not concerned with identity understood as the search for stable characteristics, but as speculative ‘addition’ across borders (recognition) and negativity or restlessness (indignity) in the Hegelian sense. Consequently, I will continue into the period of local identity by way of backlash. In other words, the focus is on narrative constructions of Hong Kong which disturb this new-found ‘independence’.

In an overview of the cinema of the 80s Sek Kei includes a part curiously titled “Ghosts and Humans From China”, in which he outlines specific narrative developments which “pandered to the prevalent sense of crisis felt by Hongkong people”\textsuperscript{299}. An example of this ‘pandering’ somewhat removed from the problematic relationship with the PRC can be found in 
\textit{gong tau} films 「降頭戲」. Interestingly, this subgenre among local horror productions is specific to the period in question, emerging in the early 70s as a theme in Shaw productions like Ho Meng Hua’s 
\textit{Black Magic} 《降頭》 (1975) or his 
\textit{Oily Maniac} 《油鬼子》 of the following year. The term, apparently derived from a Thai word, denotes a kind

\textsuperscript{297} Cheuk, \textit{Hong Kong New Wave Cinema}, 25.
\textsuperscript{298} Teo, “The Legacy,” 87.
\textsuperscript{299} Sek, “Achievement and Crisis,” 59.
of sorcery involving the poison of various insects, used to inflict disease on another or control the bodies of the living and the dead. Versions of this voodoo-like witchcraft can be found in traditions throughout South-East-Asia including South China where it is known as wugu 「巫蠱」 or gushu 「蠱術」.

In Keith Lee’s (李百齡) “Centipede Horror” 《蜈蚣咒》 from 1982 the gong tau theme takes the typical shape of a mystery, which forces the younger generation of an affluent Hong Kong family to get reacquainted with the ghosts of the past. The film begins as the youngest daughter prepares for a trip to Thailand with friends. Ominously, this has to be kept a secret from her mother who has warned against trips to the region. When the daughter goes missing, her brother follows with a magical amulet given to him by his mother for protection. Unconvinced by the superstitions of elders, he arrives at a foreign hospital where his sister lies in critical condition her body covered in centipede bites. Doctors are unable to help her and he is left to deliver her ashes and news of her sudden death back to Hong Kong. Unbeknownst to him, he is already being followed by a local witchdoctor who has cursed him as he cursed his sister. Centipedes start to attack and he returns to Thailand to enlist the help of another shaman and unravel the mystery. It turns out that his grandfather was working in the region decades ago and tried to cover up his own moral defects by setting fire to a building. The fire spread consuming a whole village, a moral debt which is now being collected based in the principle of kin liability.

Storyline and effects – including the extensive use of live centipedes – confirm Sek Kei’s judgement of a pandering to common fears. But we can also detect a number of narrative traits which connect to characteristics specific to the situation of Hong Kong. First of all, there is an enormous attention to the mythic details of the gong tau practice, including a complex description of how to ritually recruit the ghosts of dead children 「養鬼」 for menial tasks around the hut. Recall the popularity of the Phra Phrom or Four-Faced Buddha 「四面佛」 - the Thai representation of the Hindu god Brahma - in Hong Kong and other Chinese communities outside the PRC, illustrating a return (of sorts) to religious roots in a larger ‘pan-Asian’ context. The rapid modernization and cultural isolation
promote processes of inversion by which the repressed returns narratively, blurring the borders between reason and totemic power over life and death.

The heavy fragmentation of this movement globally in which archaic belief systems from every corner of the world are resurrected in an appeal to ‘authentic spirituality’ and packaged in the promise of ‘inner peace’ demonstrates the futility of these efforts. In their multitude and quick succession they are already reduced to products in economic reclamation. The overall trend, however, is evidence of a loss active in the subconscious. Identity figures in this process as the wish to belong. Western globalized Lamaism, in this sense, coheres as a politically correct form to experience ‘neutral’ spirituality with a moment of indigenous, non-Western authenticity included. By the same token, radicalized Christian ‘authenticity’ has not only revived practices like palm healing and snake handling, but also come to represent a xenophobic, even racist, rejection of both modernity and its concurrent dependence on the (non-white) other.

The plot of *Centipede Horror* violently re-embeds the modern, independent Hong Kong subject within a larger pan-Asian context. The economic success of the colonial island has afforded this new subject the opportunity to explore neighboring communities only to find that it is already linked to South-East-Asia by way of familial relations and premodern worship. Furthermore, the sins of the grandfather haunting the protagonist’s family imply economic networks in place all along. Due to Hong Kong’s financial success, these now recast the colonized in the position of the exploiter.

Horror entries like this one coalesce in negativity the diverse articulations of the new-found Hong Kong subject. Whereas a positive account of the latter tends towards an enumeration of the many shades popular narrative presentations of the self take on in reconciliations between colonial foundation and a culturally distanced motherland, the horror genre punishes the comfort in this new-found independence, turning narcissism into indignation. Those left behind as Hong Kong begins to affirm its status as a coherent entity different from all other culturally is resurrected narratively. In Yueng Kuen’s (楊權) *Hell Has No Boundary* 《魔界》, a Shaw production also released in 1982, the spirit of a
young girl who was sold by her family escaping war-torn China possesses another
to exact revenge. A medium later reveals her macabre fate: she was murdered and
her body processed into meat by a man selling ‘provisions’ to the starved
refugees. The motif of cannibalism here negatively confirms the proverbial
wisdom of yixing buxing 「以形補形」 which, roughly, postulates a direct
correlation between dietary intake and specific organs corresponding to the
ingested item.

Returning to Sek Kei’s verdict, we might say local horror emerges as a
pandering to a shared sense of guilt which lays bare the inadequacy of an
independence that is predicated on inequalities of the past and the present. For this
reason the conflict takes the shape of a backwater indigeneity forcing a shared
ancestral bond that was broken in a culture of advanced technological
industrialization. Magic and its mutual recognition expresses the historical
longevity of that bond and thus exemplifies the dynamic of pan-Asian heritage
(beyond a Confucian ‘wind of virtue’) in the modern setting. Whereas the other
presented as irrelevant to earlier projections of Chineseness, both the cultural and
economic dependencies developed in the past now return to haunt it. The
concealment of dependencies necessary to stabilize a now independent Hong-
Kong-ness fails.

In a treatment of “[t]he nation in the Hong Kong mass media” we can discern
an inverted reflection of this in presentations of the PRC as both an “inferior
other” and a “peaceful and happy rural alternative to soulless urban Hong
Kong.” But whereas an escape to the backwater from city life produces the
appearance of a personal choice between industrial bustle and rural tranquility – a
virtual co-existence of both models in the same world – the gong tau formula
imposes the anger of the other onto the Hong Kong subject seemingly at random.
In this manner it implies the systemic failure of an independence housed in
political borders which it trespasses economically without proper recognition of

---

300 The persistence of cannibalism in Hong Kong cinema and TV (like the recent series When
Heaven Burns 《天與地》) possibly provides interesting entry to the issue of folk traditions (as
opposed to highbrow intellectual traditions) in Hong Kong culture.
301 Mathews, Ma and Lui, Hong Kong, China, 66.
the other, that is a recognition actualized in socio-economic equality and the cultural validation of a shared history.

Interpreting the ‘prevalent sense of crisis’ in 1980s Hong Kong in direct correlation to the gain in cultural and economic power, we can read the narrative return of totemic power as an aggregate of the losses typically attributed to such progress: a community based in individual productivity conjuring up a link to a past of blood ties and shared responsibility. Problematically, sorcery as an archaic form of domination cannot effect relevant change. Resurrected into (Western) modernity it can reaffirm premodern cultural ties throughout South-East-Asia against the outside, but the conflict is narratively resolved by a second sorcerer protecting the status quo from the guilt of the past. The detailed illustrations of rituals essentially ‘technologize’ sorcery as a particularly effective weapon and obfuscate the underlying antagonism in superstition nominally distinct from the globalized modern but employed like any other knowledge in the present.

In the context of Bruce Lee I noted a reconfiguration of culturalist Chineseness in so far as he inverts the relationship between universal and particular: tradition as evident in standard writing and classical canon no longer appears as the immutable ground the play of particularity as is the case in *The Greatest Civil War* where natural understanding across varieties, Chinese character, and familial bond reinforce a universal bond. Rather, the particularity concealed in *yin* is mobilized towards transformation at the point at which the premodern supra-national Chineseness outlined at the beginning becomes complicit in Western hegemony by virtue of its false self-sufficiency. Similarly, *Centipede Horror* upsets a Hong-Kong-ness which appears reasonably stable in its affirmation of local exceptionalism. By invoking an alternative, prehistoric ground extending across linguistic and political borders, *gong tau* forces recognition in its claim to original affiliation. The *Nanyang* into which Chineseness expands without ‘bumping into ghosts’ in *Malaya Love Affair* now haunts Hong Kong.

One can read the developments of Hong Kong horror as primarily indicative of
a transnational exploitation of market trends—Dennis Yu’s (余允抗) *The Beasts* 《山狗》 (1980) or Leong Po-chih’s *The Island* 《生死線》 (1985) certainly suggest a reception of films like Wes Craven’s *Last House on the Left* (1972) or Tobe Hooper’s *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) in the way Hong Kong’s peripheral wilderness is found to house pathological urges and degeneration. But the fact that these formulas translate into 1980s Hong Kong also indicates that the underlying constellation translates. Affluence and relative stability effectively summon the ghosts of those left behind.

As such *Centipede Horror* also illustrates the basic (hermeneutic) problem explicated in the introduction: namely how a specific critical outlook is ‘substantiated’ in the individual text. The horror genre, in particular, not only upsets any interpretation of film as mere entertainment, but also continuously draws on issues involving socio-historic guilt in more or less concrete ways. Finding narrative representations of underlying systemic antagonisms - such as inequalities based in identitarian divisions or the tension between global modernity and local tradition - in popular culture becomes rather common. The question of critical potential, however, turns increasingly complex since simply discounting these representations as a commodification of critical concerns is too straightforward a conclusion. Projecting from narrative to socio-political effect, on the other hand, is equally straightforward. The next film reiterates this problematic in rather drastic terms as it stunts the optimism Bruce Lee invoked in the 70s.

Herman Yau’s (邱禮濤) *Ebola Syndrome* 《伊波拉病毒》 (1996) is in many respects the antithesis to *The Way of the Dragon* but also the radical continuation of Lee’s individualist outlook. The protagonist ‘Rooster’ (阿雞) is a small time crook who is caught in the act with his Triad boss’ wife as the film opens. Threatened with castration, he kills both and flees the colony for South Africa!

---

302 Heffernan notes how, “Hong Kong films have a long tradition of working localized variations on Hollywood hits. This is readily apparent in the horror genre, from the cycle of splatter-heavy supernatural films inspired by *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) such as *Black Magic* (Gong Tau, Ho Meng Hua, 1975), the misanthropic *Killer Snakes* (She sha shou, Kwei Chih-Hung, 1975), based on *Willard* (Daniel Mann, 1971), [...]” (Heffernan, “Inner Senses,” 60.)
where he is hired into a Chinese restaurant. The owner, always looking to save on expenses, buys his meat from an indigenous tribe living in apparently premodern conditions and takes Rooster with him into the wilderness. Upon their visit they find the majority of the tribesmen and -women diseased but procure the meat anyway. En route Rooster also comes across an infected woman of the tribe who has collapsed on the banks of a river. He takes the ‘opportunity’ and rapes her before returning to the restaurant. Himself now infected, he goes through severe fevers before recovering, now a living carrier of the deadly virus. In the ‘tradition’ of Yau’s earlier success The Untold Story 《八仙飯店之人肉叉燒包》 (1993) he then goes on to kill the restaurant’s owner, rape and kill the wife, and process the infected human remains into very successful ‘African Hamburger’. As the South African authorities zero in on the origin of the Ebola outbreak, Rooster returns to Hong Kong intent on spreading the virus to as many inhabitants as possible before he dies.

Scripted by jack-of-all-trades Wong Jing (王晶), the plot takes this distinctively strange direction; relevant influences on its development most likely include a ‘recycling’ of the aforementioned Untold Story, the allusions to the heyday of Mondo (say Rolf Olsen’s Shocking Asia from 1974 known as 《古靈精怪東南亞》 in Hong Kong), the popularity of Namibian bushman N!xau (歷蘇) in the South African The Gods Must Be Crazy series (1980 & 1989), which spawned Hong Kong produced sequels like the third installment Crazy Safari 《非洲和尚》 from 1994, and of course the Ebola scare itself.

Similar to Way of the Dragon, Ebola Syndrome takes a Hong Kong protagonist abroad and outside of Asia: Tong Lung to the ‘first’ and Rooster to the ‘third’ world. In both cases accommodation is afforded by the restaurant, that institution of globalized Chineseness. But while Tong Lung travels of his own accord and with the intent to help, Rooster is a fugitive looking for a hideout. The disintegration of the familial bond plays a central role in the development of Rooster’s character; an opportunist, he leaves nothing intact of Lee’s ‘abstract nationalism’ couched in a shared ethnic community. His trajectory is one typical
of the villain - not the altruistic loner who ‘rides into town’, but the dishonored outcast who travels the unknown acquiring the means to retaliate against peers who formed him in their rejection. He is cynical negativity amplified in the hinterlands of South Africa. The ‘first world’ encounter disciplines, focuses, and even heals the Hong Kong man – another potent example would be John Woo’s *A Better Tomorrow II* (1987) in which trauma is overcome in a firefight. In contrast, the ‘third world’ in *Ebola Syndrome* plunges the symptomatic anti-hero even deeper into madness. One line, in particular, seems to politicize the ‘spectacular’ aspects of the film: after some time in South Africa Rooster shares his sexual frustration with an acquaintance, complaining that “black whores treat him as white, while white whores treat him as black.”

In his character and actor Anthony Wong’s features the physical appeal of Lee’s body has more or less evaporated and sexual praxis is unsatisfactory - in spite of the fact that money, the universal medium, should undo all differences. Chineseness is presented here as a limbo between white and black only superficially stabilized by the privileged financial position of Hong Kong. Escaping to South Africa reorients Rooster vis-a-vis the larger geopolitical situation of the colony exacerbating the effects of his violation of and defection from the hierarchy of the Triad family; the mutually reinforcing powers of individualism and hedonism have left his body a ‘consuming machine’ still stifled by its ethnic shell.

All aspects of Lee’s embodiment through praxes are contaminated by the structural position of Rooster evident now that he has distanced himself physically from China. Sexual impulse is constantly ‘boiling over’ in purchases and crimes of opportunity, turning Tong Lung’s narcissism into an equally unabashed performance of the mechanics of love. Any notion of a disciplined shaping and dressing of the body into an agent of individual, yet indigenous appeal is lost in Rooster and he does not shy away from soiling even the most fundamental bastion of Chineseness: food. The cannibalistic motif is certainly an important and strangely persisting phenomenon in Hong Kong pop culture, but one can also

---

303 「啲黒雞當我白人，啲白雞當我黑人。」
stress the element of bootlegging inherent in “African Hamburgers” made from the restaurant owners’ infected flesh. It sketches the self-inflicted annihilation of tradition from shoddy bushmeat to anthropophagy in a thinly veiled metaphor – americanized food items made from the remains of the other.

Identity in both *Centipede Horror* and *Ebola Syndrome* cannot simply provide a stable positive image. It is (a negative) representative of an expansion into South-East-Asia and the world, implied by Hong Kong’s connection to overseas communities and finalized in the division from the mainland after the Cultural Revolution. As illustrations of a systemic resistance to Hong Kong’s affluence and resultant cultural distinctiveness, they complement the predominantly positive constructions of Hong-Kong-ness in the world. Whereas a popular series like *Aces Go Places* humorously conquers the world piggybacking on James Bond’s internationally authoritative ‘whiteness’, negotiations of identity in the horror genre thus reflect a general disavowal of the past and even anger at its role in Western modernity and the concurrent persistence of racial inequality. Consequently, the targets of critique laid out by Bruce Lee remain unchanged, but the efficacy of a resistance based in indigenous embodiment suffers. To mask this defect *Centipede Horror* mobilizes an empty indigeneity capable of culturally unifying Asia against modernity, but cannot extricate itself from its own involvement in an encroaching modernity evident in how superstition takes on quasi-technological functionality. The film effectively sacrifices its engagement with historical guilt for an irrational authenticity already deformed by the logic of instrumental reason.

*Ebola Syndrome*, on the other hand, follows the call of modern individuality as it violently breaks with familial responsibilities only to find that the promise of equality in monetary exchange does not hold true. An “aborted subject of post-colonialism”

looming handover towards the end of the millennium, the two films illustrate first a tendency to appease the Hong Kong consciousness with respect to its neglect of its immediate cultural and economic neighbors, and then to open anger at its inability to assert itself in the global arena.

**Authenticity in Symptoms**

Much like the 70s and 80s offered descriptively positive negotiations of a newly affirmed cultural character distinct from motherland and colonizer, post-handover cinema is so many attempts to continue this negotiation or avoid it altogether. A recent production like Dante Lam’s (林超賢) *The Viral Factor* 《逆戰》 (2012), for instance, narratively reunites the larger Chinese family – a Mandarin-speaking mother on the mainland who informs her son (played by a Taiwanese) of his Cantonese-speaking father living in Malaysia and cared for by his long-lost brother. The theme of anti-terrorism situates this reassembled Chineseness in the larger geopolitical context, a blockbuster designed to step on nobody’s toes and thus extend financial viability throughout.

The latest string of films set in the pre-war era like Teddy Chan’s (陳德森) *Bodyguards and Assassins* 《十月圍城》 (2009) return to Republican era Hong Kong as a hotbed of debate among exiles concerned with Chinese modernity. Communication across dialects enabled by the ‘safety’ of the colony projects a past in which Hong Kong was central to China’s future. This dynamic not only reiterates the dynamic of the periphery as corrective, but also serves to symbolically undo Maoism. By emphasizing the spirit of change characterizing the period across political camps and walks of life the shared and ‘innocent’ optimism of the past is refurbished. One could construct a whole spectrum of narrative reconciliations ranging from blockbuster costume films produced with pan-Chinese resources, wishy-washy in content but indicative in their form, to more open displays of a historical victory of the periphery over a motherland only now catching up in economical terms. The general trend that can be established in light of this re-/integration of the mainland as market into a pan-Chinese cinema is
the reduction of the local. In this sense the development resembles that of the first
decline of Cantonese cinema in the 60s as it was supplanted by large studios
projecting some modern China rather than Hong Kong as a specific locale. In the
repetition of this movement, however, the pronounced, decidedly distinct cultural
entity constructed in the 70s and 80s is still (awkwardly) present.

An adequate example in this context is Johnny To’s (杜琪峯) Life Without
Principle 《奪命金》 (2011). The film constructs a complex (financial)
relationship between a policeman, his wife, a woman working insurance, a small-
time gangster named Panther (三脚豹), and others in order to present the range of
attitudes towards business and money. An elderly lady struggles to turn her
meagre savings into a reliable pension plan. A wife tries to navigate the housing
market, while another plays the stock market. Such a cross section necessarily
depicts various facets of Hong Kong society in a description of the city as a
financial hub with all the pressures and dangers involved. But it is in the
characterization of Panther (portrayed by Lau Ching-Wan 劉青雲), a mid-level
underling who is quick to talk but without any real power in the organization, that
Hong-Kong-ness as something ‘sticking out’ takes shape.

Neither particularly young, nor particularly old, Panther entertains a range of
quirks and a sense of style somewhat out of place wearing sandals, a Hawaii shirt,
and a man purse. Constantly running errands for a host of bosses, he is essentially
defined as an expendable middle man, personified relationship. When the
occasion arises, he says something of little import; otherwise he sits around
waiting, his feet twitching nervously. Most noticeable among his many
compulsions is the constant blinking of his eyes. The decline of Hong-Kong-ness
becomes palpable here culturally in the distance between him and Chan Ho Nam
(陳浩南).

In hindsight, the Young and Dangerous 《古惑仔》 series filmed in the years
around the handover appears one last defiant manifestation of Hong-Kong-ness:
local turf wars turned into events in a world run by gang leaders known by the
unmistakably indigenous term of zaa fit jan 「揸fit人」. The power that once
came with that ‘title’ has become more or less meaningless and bosses, then as now, wear suits and make investments globally. As a result, Panther is the stubborn persistence of Chan Ho Nam stripped of his poise and splendor. When Mr. Song (宋先生), a young leader from the mainland, stabs Panther’s partner ‘Pop-Eyed Dragon’ (凸眼龍) for diverting and consequently losing a large amount of funds, the redistribution of power between Hong Kong and motherland is spelled out clearly. It is in this situation that Panther’s naive insistence on dialogue expresses a disillusioned view of the post-handover situation: Mr. Song’s rhetorical question on the nature of the stock market solicits one of Panther’s verbal spiels and is quickly squashed by a slap in the face. Whatever the Hong Konger feels compelled to share in Cantonese with the mainland upstart is immediately suppressed non-verbally.

As an element of comic relief in the otherwise realistically tense description of impending murder, loss of livelihood, and (moral) bankruptcy Panther appears a cultural fossil. He presents the narrative opportunity for gallows humor by which the economic powerlessness of the Hong Kong individual in light of geopolitical shifts beyond his/her control can be comically made light of. The problem, however, is whether we should interpret this element as a cynical affirmation of defeat, which simply ridicules Panther in his inability to adapt effectively to the new situation. This would imply a disavowal of the identity carved out in the decades preceding the handover. Alternatively, we could be dealing with a Freudian “What a way to start the week.”

The prominence of Panther’s character, his careful characterization, and the large chunk of money dropped into his lap at the end suggest (some variation of) the latter. The joke here is on the viewer as Panther seems blissfully unaware of his effect on people. The comic force is generated in our reaction to his inability to properly restrain his character faced with a changed environment.

In the narrative resistance to the post-handover situation effected through Panther’s character the insistence on symptoms of the local takes shape. In this

305 Freud illustrates the idea of gallows humor with an anecdote of a prisoner on his way to his execution on a Monday who attenuates his impending doom with the joke, “Na, diese Woche fängt gut an.” (Freud, Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten, 213).
manner humor allows for a distance towards locally popular patterns of culture, which are always already ridiculous, and still affirm them against the encroaching dominance of the global out of this distance. Admittedly, Panther’s role in the film also offers viewers an opportunity to conceited schadenfreude, negating the former pride in local culture. But in the context of the development of Hong Kong and its cinema it also functions as an introspection beyond mere amusement. The familiar motif of the natural fool unaware of his undermining authority in ‘idiocy’ is employed as local authenticity is recast as a set of symptoms and tics.

**Belonging and Restlessness**

I began my discussion of identity with Chineseness as a permeable form of ethnocultural belonging, a culturalist vision of Chineseness transposed into modernity. *Malay Love Affair* illustrated its efficacy throughout communities of emigration beyond localized speech and anchored in familial relations and the shared script. A similar underlying conception reunited the northern and southern families after *The Greatest Civil War on Earth* and solidified reunification in marriage and joint venture. With respect to the periphery, be it the *Nanyang* or colonial Hong Kong, this permeable Chineseness is unconcerned with political entities and its crossing of borders. In its disregard for the other, it repeats the ahistoric conception accredited to Imperial China by Hegel. Yin here terms the moment of stability inherent in the concealment of local particularity. Negativity is restrained by simply evading open conflict. And while localization in adaptation to foreign environments and linguistic variation separates, familial relations and script readily recombine into Chineseness. However, this form of belonging is predicated on indifference in so far as political borders and conflicts are not addressed and non-Chinese are barely present to disturb the sense of traditional cohesion when it is already strained by a globalized modernity.

The two examples thus align with the characterization of a “basic identity of the Hong Kong Chinese before the 1960s as ‘Chinese,’ with this ‘Chineseness’
based more on social and cultural factors than on economic or political factors.”

As a result, the riots of the 50s read as external to Hong Kong, in so far as they rehearsed intra-Chinese hostilities in the colony. Outlining developments in the 70s and 80s, Lau and Kuan note how,

[...] Hong Kong identity, though not implying rejection of China or the Chinese people, necessarily takes China or the Chinese people as the reference group and marks out the Hong Kong Chinese as a distinctive group of Chinese. This group is perceived as one with a separate subculture which is more “advanced” than the dominant culture in contemporary China or the so often touted traditional Chinese culture. This Hong Kong identity does not entail much political overtones in terms of “Hong Kong nationalism” or the desire for political independence, thus indicating the lingering dominance of the unitary political ideology (da yitong 大一統) which is probably the fundamental principle in the Chinese political heritage.

Pointing to such a ‘unitary political ideology’ reiterates the gravity of a larger Chineseness holding Hong Kong ‘in orbit’ as part of the corrective periphery. Constructing a positive description of this Hong Kong identity thus yields some version of a “mixture of traditional and modern cultural traits fostered by the particular nature of the Hong Kong society itself”\(^{308}\). That is, empirical data can be interpreted in an attempt to pinpoint Hong Kong identity more accurately within the triangular relationship between colonizer, motherland, and self mentioned earlier.

In contrast, this chapter mainly highlighted how identity becomes problematic in charting the disintegration of culturalist Chineseness. In so far as this disintegration reflects an increasing awareness of Hong Kong’s position between West and PRC, it supports the Adornian dictum that “the possibility of a right life has become wrong.”\(^{309}\) A diasporic conservation of family and linguistic identity is insufficient for a right life. The inability of conventional belonging to extricate itself from the modern ‘blinding context’ is particularly obvious in the case of

\(^{306}\) Lau and Kuan. The Ethos, 2.
\(^{307}\) Ibid.
\(^{308}\) Ibid.
\(^{309}\) Adorno, Philosophische Terminologie 1, 133; “[...] daß die Möglichkeit zu einem richtigen Leben falsch geworden ist.” (my translation)
Hong Kong. Rey Chow notes,

 [...] the sense of immediacy of a particular diasporic reality—of Hong Kong caught, as it always has been since the end of the Second World War, between two dominant cultures, British colonial and Chinese Communist [...] This marginalized position, which is not one chosen by those from Hong Kong but one constructed by history, brings with it a certain privilege of observation and an unwillingness to idealize oppression.310

In other words, precisely in so far as identity becomes problematic, perhaps even properly negative (as Hegel has it), Hong Kong is ‘privileged’. The films discussed here develop this productively negative position specific to Hong Kong.

While culturalist Chineseness can be sketched out as some version of popular Confucianism, Bruce Lee does not endorse any single tradition or anything akin to orthodoxy. The reading of *Way of the Dragon* positively reconstructed his ‘abstract nationalism’ as conditioned by a refusal to address living Hong Kong culture or the political situation of China. His on-screen proclamations of Chinese *gongfu* form his attempt to extricate himself from politics as dictated by various political entities. As Lee negates edifices of national power and imperialist past in favor of a homogenized global landscape, he hopes to shield individualized local cultures of ‘intercourse’, chiefly diet, bodily exercise, and sexual practice. Stripped of its claim to ‘natural’ supremacy, the nation would no longer function as a criterion for the uniformity of its members and the inferiority of its outside, but rather be defined by the advances of individuals bound in a shared culture and language by historical contingency.

Lee’s refusal to address the China of his day, the abstract element, is what generates the open mobilization of individual transformations of traditions towards an event equalizing power relations. Of course this reconstruction functions in so far as his performance is generalized in the possibility of individual practice and thus vulnerable to the Adornian dictum. It nevertheless speaks to a specific understanding of tradition grounded in the problematic Hong Kong identity. This reiterates the tension between mass culture and critical theory:

where film readily translates into thought or instructs practice like a manual, it is instrumental and as such not art in Adorno’s sense.

The problem of instrumental reason also informed the reading of Centipede Horror. In so far as the Hong Kong of the emerging local identity embraces the modern, there is little tradition exhibited in the film. Instead it appears as the superstitious folk element which in itself opposes modernity only at the expense of enlightenment. The plot is indicative of discontent concomitant with Hong Kong’s newly found affluence and the ‘tradition’ of gong tau functions to impress past guilt casting the younger generation of the colony in the role of the exploiter. In this sense the film punishes the local forgetfulness of colonialism, but this defect is only abstractly resolved in the narrative resurgence of an archaic pan-Asian belief system which functions much like modern technology.

Additionally, Ebola Syndrome illustrated how economic success has not afforded the Hong Kong subject the position of equality affluence promised. The problematic addressed by Lee, a restructuring of identity affirming pre-modern cohesion in the indigenous against both Western supremacy externally and traditional power internally, persists as unresolved. Where Lee’s intervention promised the possibility of weaponizing indigeneity as such, only cynicism remains. As if to complete the symmetry between Ebola and Way of the Dragon, the tradition of cooking is transformed according to capitalist principles of maximizing value. The Ebola virus, an indigenous ‘culture’ of sorts, becomes the weapon directed not at thugs or hegemonic power but at the protagonist’s home.

Finally, the discussion of Life Without Principle pointed to an interesting representation of the remnants of pre-97 Hong-Kong-ness in the figure of Panther. As political and economic power in the region has shifted to Beijing, the element of local particularity is not found in the various life styles of characters all struggling within a common financial framework. Instead it expresses itself in the tics and habitual gestures of a figure slightly out of touch with the new situation. The comic effect these reflexes generate, particularly in his confrontation with the new mainland management, are difficult to assess because the distance generated between ridiculous object and audience can create both a moment of sobering
reflection as well as mere schadenfreude. Nevertheless, the emphasis on these symptoms as the only particularity left ‘impeding’ the new order is poignant.

The gradual reduction of a particularity indicative of identity is of course conditioned by the outlook: in the case of the legal order the teleological assumption of a solution to the impasse between letter and spirit finds a ‘concrete’ and specific form in the undercover. Identity, on the other hand, is effectively synonymous with tradition when understood as local difference to global modernity and sketched out positively as a set of culturally specific commitments. Recast as transformative potential emerging in the ‘diasporic reality’, this identity turns increasingly virtual as culturalist Chineseness is undermined within the cinematic discourse outlined. The periphery affords a privileged outlook (much like the topography of the *jianghu*) beyond the national and develops this outlook narratively in representations mindful of transnational dependency. But apart from Bruce Lee’s articulation of embodied tradition, it remains an outlook. The orientation of the chapter towards an articulation of identity capable of constructively engaging Hong Kong’s position as forced by history in this sense only reconfirms the lack of a critically effective practice. Although the periphery excels in exposing the failure and inherent negativity of identity, the realization of this position remains occluded. The following chapter relates the problematic of potential to the Daoist tradition and interprets its influence as an emerging conflict with linear narrativity through select films.
3) Fate between Restoration and Rupture

As the previous chapter argued, the search for a stable identity critically engaging the Hong Kong position produces specificity only in so far as we find narratives which illustrate the need for recognition, the indignity of a lack in practice, and a reflexive persistence of particularity. This reflects the fundamental concern raised by Adorno regarding the impossibility of a ‘right life’: if there was a practice which in and of itself guaranteed critical effect, it could be narratively laid out in an aesthetic didacticism akin to socialist realism and traced as grounded in some tradition. By contrast, the trajectory sketched affirms Adorno’s assertion that tradition - specifically culturalist Chineseness - “is invoked whenever it is no longer existent, when it is perforated and has become problematic.”

As a result, the critical moment appears in constellations mobilizing individual transformation (Bruce Lee), decrying a lack of recognition (Rooster), or expressing residual particularity (Panther). In this chapter I develop another aspect of the tension between the lack of a critical practice and the potential for transformation in the particular, which necessarily remains virtual in cinematic representation. Based in an outline of philosophical Daoism, the analysis moves from films which exhibit a specific commitment to circular resolution to texts which problematize this general feature of narrativity. It is general in so far as narratives are traditionally structured as the solution to a diegetic conflict - the function of narration thus concerns the nature of the ‘surplus’ for audiences generated by this ‘zero-sum game’. Žižek suggests an essentially ideological explanation noting,

Just as teleology makes use of evolutionism to support itself […] , in the same manner fundamental contingency is most effectively concealed in a linear narrative.

---

311 Adorno, *Ontologie*, 215. “[…] daß die Menschen immer dann auf Tradition sich berufen […], wenn die Tradition eigentlich nicht mehr vorhanden ist, wenn sie durchlöchert und wenn sie problematisch geworden ist.” (my translation)

In Chinese intellectual tradition the truth of this concealment of contingency finds expression in (mature) Daoism, which serves as a background to the interrogation. This context presented itself as an adequate space for exploration in response to Bordwell’s comments apropos of Chang Cheh’s gongfu titles with Shaw as “a grimly playful exchange of appendages”313. In the action genres of Hong Kong cinema in particular we can discern the trope of a physical defect often inflicted by an antagonist seeking to retire the hero into a life of resignation and humiliation. Inevitably the injustice and arrogance of this ‘life sentence’ is then annulled either in a direct utilization of the apparent weakness – as in Chang Cheh’s Crippled Avengers 《殘缺》 (1978) – or by way of transmission to another, usually a disciple – as in Lau Kar-leung’s Mad Monkey Kung Fu. The circularity of a protagonist subjected to loss and then utilizing this lack to restore moral balance is indebted to a metaphysical Daoism in its reproduction of an underlying ‘force’ ensuring such a balance.

I will begin by outlining the concerns of Daoism as interpretations diverge between metaphysically ensured balance and a ‘mature’ Daoism which is primarily concerned with virtual potential, yin as alternate paths occluded in acculturation. References to the Daodejing 《道德經》 and the Zhuangzi 《莊子》 illustrate what I take to be the core tension expressed in its concepts: the alienation from natural potential in social acculturation and the circular return to natural balance at extremes. These concepts are then taken up in readings of films from different decades to accommodate instances of the Daoist problematic, the Confucian mitigation of Daoism, and the emerging aesthetic dispute over the logic of restorative justice in fate.

Daoism here exemplifies the problem of dialectics in the Chinese context; for a Daoism of metaphysical balance merely ensures reconstitution while the Daoism of virtual potential emphasizes a moment of rupture or novelty concealed by any single path. The first three films discussed illustrate the kinds of restorations which can be mapped to a common understanding of Daoism. The last three, on the other hand, will demonstrate how Hong Kong cinema has struggled to

extricate itself from the constraints of the general narrative structure encapsulated in this specific constellation.

**Daoist Tension**

Linking the Daoist heritage to a popular idea of restorative justice hinges on the kind of interpretation of the classical texts chosen\(^{314}\). In the context of modern Hong Kong commercial cinema it is usages or appropriations of the popular image of the traditional. As I commented on already, cinema is not (primarily) an aesthetic discourse concerned with the interpretation of the classics, but an appropriation of the traditional, that is some popular image of tradition, in a statement on the modern. For this reason it is for the most part unnecessary or even superfluous to present dissenting positions on the meaning of the classics. The discrepancy between the received position and a return to the original texts is perhaps nowhere greater than with respect to Daoism and, as I will outline here, directly impacts the idea of a restorative fate.

Whereas one might readily identify both Legalism and Confucianism as conservative philosophies of stability, Daoism presents as a curious blending of esoteric metaphysics, ecological concern, and latent anarchic tendencies. However, in a manner structurally not unlike Legalism and Confucianism, Daoism (or at least Daoist primitivism) does refer to a natural state in the past which has since degenerated and is waiting to be restored to balance. It is ‘merely’ diametrically opposed to Legalism and Confucianism in that its preferred ‘past’ is an uncultured one and returning to equilibrium therefore a matter of unlearning knowledges and disengaging from politics rather then reinforcing rites or rigorously enforcing a (legal) code open to the public. Li and Liu historicize the emergence of Daoism thus:

He [Laozi] exposed without mercy all kinds of phenomena of hypocrisy, violence, and sin produced after the entrance into a society of royal power; he regards [the commitments to] righteousness and virtue promoted by Confucius

\(^{314}\) For a recent overview see Liu X., “Daoism (I)” and Shen, “Daoism (II).”
as not only not beneficial, but extremely harmful. What civilization has
brought to society are all previously unknown disasters.315

Expressed here is the radically anti-cultural primitivism of early Daoism which
finds its mythic correlate in Laozi’s ‘retirement’ to the periphery - a story retold
by Brecht in the poem quoted earlier. Daoism thus relates to yin in very
straightforward ways: both as a necessary exit from civil society into natural
balance and the occlusion of said balance in (linguistic) culture. In so far as
balance is an ontological feature, this exit does not signal defeat but a certain faith
in the restorative power of Daoist metaphysics. Practicing concealment is here
part of wuwei 「無為」, of letting things take their natural course. In this
constellation the issue of a dialectical movement does not (explicitly) surface
precisely in so far as movement is circular. One can readily historicize this
circularity as the defining feature of the premodern in general, because it is
modernity that is characterized by faith in progress to come.

At the core of Daoist thought are its “antisocial, anticonventional,
antiauthoritarian attitudes”316 coupled with something akin to ecological
awareness. But there is also its apparently problematic relationship to knowledge
and learning, staples of Eastern Confucianism and Western Enlightenment alike,
encapsulated by the famous assertion that “the sage, in the exercise of his
government, empties [the people’s] minds, fills their bellies, weakens their wills,
and strengthens their bones”, keeping them “without knowledge and without
desire.”317 This anti-political, even anti-humanist statement must be read in the
context of early Daoist primitivism as a response to the challenges of shifts in the
social order. Li Zehou and Liu Gangji describe (the) Laozi as anti-cultural in its/
his reaction to emerging monarchic power. Against the consequences of alienation
in Confucian sociality the primitivist approach of wuwei is positioned completely

315 Li and Liu, Xiangqin Meixue Shi 1, 237; 「他無情地揭露進入王權社會之後所產生的種種虛
偽，殘暴和罪惡的現象，認為孔子所提倡的那一套仁義道德不但無益，而且極端有害，文
明給社會所帶來的全是前所未有的災難。」 (my translation)
316 Hansen, A Daoist Theory, 211.
317 Müller, The Sacred Books 39, 49. 「聖人治：虛其心，實其腹，弱其志，強其骨。常使民
无知无欲。」 (Zhu Q., Laozi, 15-6.)
at odds with gradual cultivation as a general goal. This fundamentally questions the function of Daoism in the socio-political context of Confucianism, empowering a scholarly elite endowed with the (intuitive) ability to decide interpretative struggles around rites, commands, and the like.

*Wuwei* takes more concrete shape in references to the infant linking the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*. In the former we find a number of instances directly referring to the early stage in human development and man’s return to it. Section 55 titled “The mysterious charm” in Legge’s translation puts it so:

He who has in himself abundantly the attributes (of the Dao) is like an infant. Poisonous insects will not sting him; fierce beasts will not seize him; birds of prey will not strike him. (The infant’s) bones are weak and its sinews soft, but yet its grasp is firm. It knows not yet the union of male and female, and yet its virile member may be excited; - showing the perfection of its physical essence. All day long it will cry without its throat becoming hoarse; - showing the harmony (in its constitution). To him by whom this harmony is known, (the secret of) the unchanging (Dao) is shown, and in the knowledge wisdom finds its throne. All life-increasing arts to evil turn; where the mind makes the vital breath to burn, (false) is the strength, (and o’er it we should mourn). When things have become strong, they (then) become old, which may be said to be contrary to the Dao. Whatever is contrary to the Dao soon ends.\(^{318}\)

One can easily identify one of the major aspects of Daoist thought in this passage; the way extremes are linked at their point of circular reversal\(^{319}\) illustrated by the newborn’s anatomic softness/weakness giving rise to strength in grip. This well-known figure of Yin and Yang 『陰陽』\(^{320}\) embraced in Daoist thought “gives rise to a dialectic direction, a self-evidence of dialectics”, as Bloch notes, adding how,

> [...] the average Chinese, the simple man of the people who did not study and

---


\(^{319}\) “The movement of the Tâo by contraries proceeds; and weakness marks the course of Tâo’s mighty deeds.” (Müller, *The Sacred Books 39*, 83.)

\(^{320}\) For a recent overview see Cheng C., “The Yi-Jing and Yin-Yang.”
may not even know the extremely complicated abundance of characters, understands the Marxist dialectic much easier than a highly educated Englishman or American.\footnote{Bloch, Antike Philosophie, 24; “Es gibt also im mythisch-philosophischen Denken Chinas seit alters eine dialektische Richtung, eine dialektische Selbstverständlichkeit. […] was bewirkt, daß der durchschnittliche Chinese, der einfache Mann aus dem Volk, der gar nicht studiert hat und vielleicht nicht einmal die ungeheuer komplizierte Fülle der Schriftzeichen kennt, die marxistische Dialektik viel leichter versteht als ein hochgebildeter Engländer oder Amerikaner.” (my translation)}

Bloch is, of course, speaking with respect to Maoism, but his suggestion of a resonance between Daoism and dialectics is intriguing. Returning to the above passage, we also find the peculiar description of fully functional sexual organs without an understanding of sexual relations, which not only foreshadows the subsequent development of religious Daoism where sexual practices become key to longevity, but presents what I take to be the core of philosophical Daoism: the preservation of the virtual.

The “red child” fresh from the womb is endowed with certain physical reflexes or instinctive responses, which are not yet integrated into a knowledge. The perfect “physical essence” in this example is an ability which is neither utilized nor instrumentalized in any particular context. The figure of the infant thus hints at the social in its implications of family and natural growth into the communal fabric, which in turn situates this analogy in opposition to Confucian ethics. To illustrate the behavior of the infant the section gives the additional example of crying – the pure and enduring ability to voice. This voice is perhaps the closest the infant comes to articulating a will or intent and it emanates decidedly from the fragile body, diffuse in its meaning, yet powerful in its unrelenting repetition.

The two examples thus exhibit the same structure, as both the reflexive and intentional movements of the newborn’s body are fully developed and effortlessly performed in this generally diffuse manner. The sixth sentence then goes on to describe the difference between an understanding of the “unchanging (Dao)” 「常」 as opposed to “auspiciousness” 「祥」 and “strength” 「强」, the latter being further elaborated as “robust build” 「壮」 marking “oldness” 「老」, which in turn precipitates an “early end” 「早已」. As the
term “unchanging” implies, we are dealing with time and its effects on the human body, but interestingly time in this Daoist conceptualization is completely subordinated to development, the process of growing into something. While auspiciousness designates a sign that promises change to the better and robustness comes with the completed growth of a human being into an adult – both aspects of a futurity – the unchanging, on the other hand, is the virtuality of all possible avenues of growth already completely laid out in disposition, but not yet harnessed for a particular purpose or refined towards a particular shape. It is this virtuality which encompasses the complete spectrum of human development beyond social functions.

The difference between the received notion of Daoism which will later pave the way to religious Daoism and an interpretation like Hansen’s concerns the metaphysical status of Daoist virtuality. Apropos of the *Daodejing*, Hansen contends that it “entails neither the existence nor the ineffability of a single metaphysical or prescriptive dao.”322 If we follow Legge and many other interpreters and read 「道」 as “the Dao” - capitalized, singular – it turns into a mystical power, a prescriptive or normative principle organizing the course of events, or in a perhaps slightly weaker version “a Dao of sublime power, omnipresent and the origin of all things”323. Similarly Xiao summarizes Chen Chung-hwan (陳忠寰) and his stratified account of static and dynamic senses to Laozi’s *dao* which together form a “universal binding principle”324; among the dynamic features Chen maintains that the *dao*’s “activity is reversion”325.

Individual access to or synchronization with such a supposed principle opens up the path to religiosity and the praxes of religious Daoism. The ineffability experienced with regard to the linguistic description of such an all-encompassing, unifying *Dao* turns from a flaw into metaphysical proof of existence. This gives rise to the kind of personification of *Dao* echoed in modern cinematic narratives and described in section 20 of the *Daodejing* (titled “Being different from

323 Li and Liu, *Xiangin Meixue Shi 1*, 238; 「老老之“道”具有無所不在、產生萬物的偉大力量」 (my translation).
324 Liu X., “Daoism (I),” 220.
325 Ibid.
The multitude of men look satisfied and pleased; as if enjoying a full banquet, as if mounted on a tower in spring. I alone seem listless and still, my desires having as yet given no indication of their presence. I am like an infant which has not yet smiled. I look dejected and forlorn, as if I had no home to go to. The multitude of men all have enough and to spare. I alone seem to have lost everything. My mind is that of a stupid man; I am in a state of chaos. Ordinary men look bright and intelligent, while I alone seem to be benighted. They look full of discrimination, while I alone am dull and confused. I seem to be carried about as on the sea, drifting as if I had nowhere to rest. All men have their spheres of action, while I alone seem dull and incapable, like a rude borderer. (Thus) I alone am different from other men, but I value the nursing-mother (the Dao).

Homeless drifting, childlike confusion, ‘rude bordering’ - these attributes put the Daoist in touch with the “nursing mother” and steer his activities. In the refusal of the social, uselessness with respect to cultivated knowledge, this privileged access turns the Daoist into a vessel actualizing the normativity of the unifying principle. This makes clear how the received notion of Daoism comes to buffer restorative fate: the physical defect, be it inherited, chosen, or inflicted by an antagonist, becomes the moment of weakness incompatible with cultivated techniques which translates into a Daoist restoration of some kind of balance. As Hansen notes in a cinematic reference, this “‘Star Wars’ view of Dao makes grasping it an all or nothing matter.”

A strict adherence to the preservation of virtuality is what motivates the early Daoists’ return to the pre-cultural grounded to no small degree in a critique of language. Famously, dao illustrates the problem of language in its double meaning of ‘path’ and ‘to speak’: if all of the philosophical discourse of the Chinese


327 Hansen, A Daoist Theory, 288.

328 Shen explains: “Lao Zi, in his famous saying, ‘Dao could be told of, but the Dao told is not the constant Dao’ [「道，可道，非常道」 (Zhu Q., Laozi, 3.)], made the distinction between Reality Itself (the constant Dao) and Constructed Reality (the Dao told or articulated), yet he still used linguistic construction and wrote 5,000 words that have fascinated intellectuals worldwide.” (Shen, “Daoism (II),” 238.)
Axial Age is, as Hansen argues, an argument about what term one could legitimately elevate to the rank of a normative ‘path’ both regulating individual behavior and stabilizing sociality, such an elevation inevitably falls short of the whole for the Daoist. Language polarizes the unity of reality into the binary distinctions of antonyms, bringing out particular aspects as concepts from and against the context of the totality they are embedded in. The primitivist rejection of language, we might say, seeks to undo this linguistic bifurcation reverting to an uncultured, asocial unity which would stabilize human life in a primitive precultural anarchy. Herein lies a hint concerning the difference between Daoism and Hegelian dialectics: both realize the nature of Entzweiung (bifurcation) in perspectives structured by language, but Daoist primitivism wants to step back into nature as a unified whole, whereas for Hegel reunification (or identity) is the telos of subjectivity sublating nature.

In the Daoism of the Zhuangzi this primitivist angle of Daoism is overcome in a variety of anecdotes set firmly within culture. A well known instance is the story of wheelwright Bian 「輪扁」 and his encounter with Duke Huan 「桓公」(in a section of the “Outer Chapters” titled “The Way of Heaven” 《莊子·外篇·天道》) illustrating the difference between the wisdom of motor skill and book knowledge. The Duke is reading “the words of sages” 329, but as these sages are long dead and buried the wheelwright concludes that the text merely reproduces “the dregs and sediments of those old men” 330; asked to defend this position Bian continues:

Your servant will look at the thing from the point of view of his own art. In making a wheel, if I proceed gently, that is pleasant enough, but the workmanship is not strong; if I proceed violently, that is toilsome and the joinings do not fit. If the movements of my hand are neither (too) gentle nor (too) violent, the idea in my mind is realised. But I cannot tell (how to do this) by word of mouth; there is a knack in it. I cannot teach the knack to my son, nor can my son learn it from me. Thus it is that I am in my seventieth year, and am (still) making wheels in my old age. But these ancients, and what it was not

329 Müller, The Sacred Books 39, 343. 「聖人之言」 (Zhuangzi, 357.)
330 Müller, The Sacred Books 39, 344. 「古人之糟魄已夫」 (Zhuangzi, 357.)
possible for them to convey, are dead and gone: so then what you, my Ruler, are reading is but their dregs and sediments!\textsuperscript{331}

The *Zhuangzi* mobilizes the Daoist critique of the limits of language and the honed instinct of motor skills in the sphere of the social, of craft and business if you will. Illustrated is the kind of knowledge which cannot be pinned down using the binary pair of “gentleness” 「徐」 and “violence” 「疾」. Indeed the crux of Bian’s approach cannot be properly captured linguistically 「口不能言」. Nevertheless this knowledge is fully available in physical repetition, the completely internalized motor skill.

A similar point is made in the “Inner Chapters” with the example of Cook Ding 「庖丁」 (in a chapter titled “Nourishing the Lord of Life” 《莊子・內篇・養生主》) and his method of carving oxen. The “knack” in this case is dispensing with vision and relying completely on the ‘spirit’ and its ‘will’\textsuperscript{332}. Daoist knowledge hinges on a kind of ‘anti-perception’ that seeks to disengage the mind from a web of meaning already imposed on it by language. In these two examples the problems of the received understanding of Daoism become clear: if we adhere to the metaphysical one-\textit{Dao} interpretation, the skill of the master as a qualitative difference in craftsmanship integrates an intuitive access to the normative – similar to what Confucian scholarship claims with regard to the ethical – into the social body as an eventual transcendence of a skill set acquired in cultivation and learning. In this manner the heresy of Daoism, its repudiation of the social in primitivism, is absorbed into the Confucian framework.

The reason I speak of Daoist tension is that this absorption does not appear a sublation in the Hegelian sense, since the Daoist element in conjunction with the introduction of Buddhism into China will later offer a way out to scholar-officials caught up in or fed up with the intrigues of political life, prompting the exit to the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{331} Müller, \textit{The Sacred Books} 39, 344. 「臣也，以臣之事觀之。斲輪，徐則甘而不固，疾則苦而不可入。不徐不疾，得之於手而應於心，口不能言，有數存焉於其間。臣不能以喻臣之子，臣之子亦不能受之於臣，是以行年七十而老斲輪。古之人與其不可傳也死矣，然則君之所讀者，古人之糟魄已矣。」(*Zhuangzi*, 358.)
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{332} Müller, \textit{The Sacred Books} 39, 199. 「臣以神遇而不以目視，官知止而神欲行。」 (*Zhuangzi*, 96.)
\end{flushleft}
periphery previously outlined. It thus appears as if in times of political crisis it is the Daoist at the periphery whose access to the metaphysical truth of the one-Dao counteracts the perversion at the centre. In another reference to cinema, Hansen comments on,

Chinese martial arts movies [that] sometimes glorify a fighting style known as drunken-style, which excels precisely because it looks so clumsy and out of control.333

Interestingly, Yuen Woo-ping’s “Drunken Master” co-opts the beggar-teacher in a facilitation of revenge and social justice, while attaching the practice of drunken boxing to a book - of all things - on the Eight Immortals 「八仙」. Lau Kar-leung’s “Drunken Master II” 《醉拳II》 (1994), on the other hand, keeps the apparently intuitive, non-formal approach to fighting in an apparently useless alcoholic stupor intact, but situates it within the political fight for independence from colonial exploitation. The (proto-)dialectical element in these constructions lies in the way potential for resistance emerges from what (was) previously moved towards the periphery or remains imperceptible to the casual observer in the midst of regulated sociality.

I outlined this as the topographical and psychological aspects of yin: the limit to state power beyond its borders is both the not yet civilized wilderness where law has to be instated (the West of the Western) and an area for retreat in guerrilla warfare against the state. Both cases entail an identity as negativity, a movement in expansion or through the permeability of borders beyond a closed, stable entity. The development of jianghu from what is legally excluded from royal authority to a parallel realm within the social indicates the shift to the psychological in the sense that the border is no longer topographical, but rather grounded in privileged access to secret conflicts which make up history.

In an instance of yin, the Daoist element emerges as a clever inhabitant of the jianghu shrouded in uselessness, his powers cultivated to a point transcending linguistic description. In so far as this ‘foreign element’ is concealed, it hints at the

333 Hansen, A Daoist Theory, 289.
fact that power is always already lacking, never able to totalize, yet complete in its appearance. This element of resistance is resocialized, aligned with Confucian cultivation, when it puts its faith in metaphysical restoration and postpones open conflict in a naive *wuwei* or non-action. As the discussion of Hong Kong cinema will show, narratives which pick up on the trope of the asocial recluse do so by activating the figure, by mobilizing it in concrete conflicts which demand action. Although these conflicts are often concealed - the final confrontation in *gongfu* tends to take place in rather desolate locales - *yin* now provides a space for individual expression. The circularity of fate as restoration is enacted by an agent against a concrete opponent. As I move past the 70s, the form of fate as such, circularity and equilibrium, becomes problematic.

Received Daoism as a peripheral force actualizing restorative fate informs the readings of films from the 50s, 60s, and 70s. Specificity here terms the recognizably Daoist shape in which the general form of traditional narrativity appears. As aforementioned, cinematic references to Daoist tropes do not imply a claim or commitment to philosophical Daoism. Rather, use of such tropes shapes the characteristic narrative articulation of restorative fate in the context of Hong Kong cinema. It is thus relevant to the description of specificity and can be read discursively in its development. As the general problematic of contingency concealed in narrativity (cited at the beginning of this chapter) emerges as a challenge to circularity, however, specific cinematic answers do not make recourse to mature Daoism.

*Unnatural Love*

To explore the gravity of narrativity moving events towards resolution, an example from the once thriving genre of the Cantonese opera film will provide orientation: Chu Kea (珠璣), one of Union Film’s ‘six great directors’ 「六大導演」, turned the known opera piece *The Swallow’s Message* 《燕子啣來燕子箋》 into a film of the same title in 1959 for Shun Yee Film Co. (信誼影業公司).

---

334 Along with Chun Kim, Ng Wui, Wong Hang (王鏗), Lee Tit, and Lee Sun-fung.
Typical for the period, the narrative revolves around family dynamics.

Ruiqing (蕊卿), the protagonist played by Tang Pik-Wan (鄧碧雲), escapes poverty by marrying the sickly patriarch of the Jia estate (賈府). Her new role puts her in competition with the other members of the family making it difficult to look after her husband and a twin sister she left with the marriage. Things progress from harassment and bullying to a family plot when her husband’s extended family poisons the patriarch and blames her for the death. A poetic lament written by Ruiqing seals her fate when a swallow carries the message to a room on the estate previously occupied by traveling official Zhenghe (正和), played by Law Kim-Long (羅劍郎), and is used as evidence for an extramarital affair producing a motive for the murder of her husband. Desperate, Ruiqing takes her own life in a demonstration of innocence and as Zhenghe’s father is called in to open a trial in which his son has become a suspect, the real perpetrators of the plot to get rid of Ruiqing and share the wealth of the estate come to light. Zhenghe is acquitted and takes Ruiqing’s sister as his wife, turning tragedy into justice and romantic love.

Resonating throughout the plot is the frequently cited traditional Confucian ideal of filial piety or, more broadly speaking, good conduct with regard to one’s parents, ancestors, and within family as such. Accordingly, Ruiqing’s marriage is presented within the framework of the opera first as a transaction in which she gains financial security and in return delivers a form of affective care promised. The conflict of the narrative then takes shape around the familiar motive of lower class familial responsibility against ‘spoiled’ upper class indecency, an outlook not uncommon, particularly for the socially programmatic cinema of Union Films throughout the 50s and 60s. Loss of morality and responsibility then can be seen as the root cause of the ensuing conflict; if the plot simply dealt with the criminal conspiracy to murder a family member and then frame an innocent bystander we would be in the realm of murder mystery with its investigations, interviews, and legal procedures.

But the focus suggested by the title and the contingent plot twist of the swallow carrying a message to the ‘wrong’ place and thereby furbishing evidence for the
false accusation highlight an instance of fate. In an empirical accident, the *Swallow’s Message* exacerbates an already adverse situation for the protagonist and drives the conflict into a loss that will give meaning beyond the legal. First there is the injustice of interactions within the Jia estate, the afamilial animosity driven by greed and envy which culminates in the criminal conspiracy. Then follows the tragedy, here understood in the Greek sense of a fate predetermined, foreseeable at least to the audience, which the protagonist is unable to recast to her advantage: the accidental interference by the swallow compounds the situation for Ruiqing driving her into suicide as the ultimate sacrifice and statement beyond death. Involving the son of the magistrate, however, also ensures proper legal proceedings which in turn not only restabilize communal moral standards but also produces the romantic surplus of a union between Zhenghe and Ruiqing’s twin sister. From a purely mathematical standpoint then, the balance of the narrative transaction is positive as all loose ends are addressed. A reconstitution of sociality in ethical life and familial union recovers the loss of lives and reorients the meaning of the *Swallow’s Message* from apparently meaningless natural assistance to a crime towards a social equilibrium.

As the accidental has to be transformed into meaning - otherwise this reality would remain a traumatic memory - the linearity of the narrative recovers this intrusion of the natural in an adequately upbeat ending. Fate, the fortuitous constellation of individuals 「緣」 and events, is the trajectory formed by accruing loss into transformative energy along the vector of (a) practical reason. Doubling the figure of Ruiqing alleviates this loss; she is essentially reincarnated into a relationship less archaically based in economic transaction and more modernly subjective. Of course this ‘sleight of hand’ also implies a perceived redundancy of the female individual. While Teo notes a “difference in temperament and character” between the “pair of twin sisters”335, the resolution to the plot appears decidedly premodern in this respect.

While the plot of *Swallow’s Message* turns around the familial relation, a Confucian concern, the general narrative structure illustrates the Daoist logic of

335 Teo, “Programme Notes,” 124.
reversion. The message produced by accidental delivery both forces the conflict between relatives and prepares the romantic ending; in this sense, morality is intertwined with the natural as fate. The next example will further this connection as the protagonist embodies Daoist reversion directly.

Transsexual Harmony

To contrast the traditional image of female devotion (in all its negative connotations), I will now turn to Lee Tit’s *The Little Warrior* 《小武士》, also known as *The Small Warrior* or *The Little Samurai*, from 1969. Here a female heroine, played by local icon Petrina Fung Bo-Bo (馮寶寶), directly ensures social stability as an outsider with no discernible familial relation. The projection of a feminine figure as a skilled martial artist is particularly relevant in the discussion of specificity as it marks a discernible difference between East and West. In his discussion of Yuen Woo-ping’s *Wing Chun* 《詠春》 (1994) Vojković asserts the critical moment inherent in this difference producing,

[a] deterritorializing effect on the dominant structures of meaning, in particular those at work in the West. One fixation that these [Chinese martial arts] films definitely challenge is the Freudian division of the sexes between men as active and women as passive.336

His immediate context of Wing Chun, a style of *gongfu* said to have been invented by a woman and characterized by effective low kicks and bursts of punches, seems to readily lend itself to such a ‘deterritorializing’. But the general inclusion of the female as powerful martial artist is traditionally contained by the proto-dialectical structure of Yin-Yang. One thus has to be careful when directly attributing critical effect to the projection of powerful female agents. In fact, similar figures have become a commonplace in global cinemas suggesting they have already been ‘reterritorialized’.

Returning to *The Little Warrior*, the film falls into a period of transformation at

336 Vojković, Yuen Woo Ping’s Wing Chun, 31.
the end of the 60s. The post-war decades produced two rather distinct formulas of historically inspired action: the *gongfu* films epitomized by Kwan Tak-hing’s (關德興) recurrent role of local legend Wong Fei-hung and *wuxia* titles often venturing into the fantastic. A character like Gu Long’s (古龍) Chu Liuxiang (楚留香), for instance, is typical in this respect: wise, yet youthful, skilled in martial arts to a superhuman degree, he lives on a boat and tackles mysteries of the *jianghu* in narratives much more removed from historicity than Jin Yong’s. The space of the *jianghu* thus accommodates a range from the mythical to the pseudo-documentary. While *The Little Warrior* is usually classified as *gongfu*, the heroine’s powers are cinematically augmented, a feature reminiscent of *wuxia*, and has no discernible origin or home. Additionally, the scope of the plot is somewhat grand as she happens onto a conspiracy to kill a prince. As a result, the film is situated in between the two genres.

Produced by Yue Lok (娛樂影業公司), a company responsible for a number of Wong Fei-hung titles throughout the late 60s, the film concerns a young prince, played by Mok Ga Lun (莫家倫), who is sent to a temple to pray for the recovery of the king from sickness under the protection of General Sheung Kwun Hung (上官雄), played by Kenneth Tsang Kong (曾江). As the king’s Counselor (丞相)337, played by Lok Gung (駱恭), sees an opening for a power grab, the party becomes the target of two assassins: the Iron-Faced Tiger (鐵面虎), played by Sek Kin (石堅), and the Monk Tat Lat (達勒), played by Fung Ngai (馮毅). A large part of this storyline takes place in open spaces by the sea or in the woods, while the few settlements featured are rather simple and rural in nature. Filmed mostly in daylight, these settings are visually in line with the spectrum of post-war Cantonese *wuxia* titles and the outdoor style of Shaw epics.

The film establishes the position of its heroine in a sort of prologue, seemingly disconnected from the flow of the major narrative. Stylistically, action directors Lau Kar-leung and Tong Gai (唐佳) choreographed and filmed this introduction in

---

a fashion reminiscent of Japanese *chambara* (チャンバラ) with flashes of sword strikes, movement across an eerily lit stage, an unknown group of ninja-like enemies attacking from the reeds, etc. Prologues illustrating the prowess of the protagonist/s are a relatively common feature and those accustomed to the *gongfu* genre will remember such martial arts demonstrations often shot in front of generic single-color backdrop and later edited to support the titles.

A man in official dress meets the heroine apparently in an attempt to bribe her or enlist her services, the proverbial filthy lucre in hand. As she rejects the offer, the official announces in the same amicable tone that he will take her life instead and conflict ensues. Although apparently disconnected from the main narrative, this introduction both sets the tone stylistically and positions the heroine with respect to governed sociality. The rejection of the bribe picks up on the common premodern motif of scholarly exile/escape from the corruption of official service. While the Confucian distinction between ‘noble’ and ‘small man’ is based in cultivation and therefore permeable (rather than an inherited or otherwise arbitrary privilege), the individual’s integration into the official bureaucracy reinforces the apparatus. Under pressure the initiated retire to the periphery avoiding a violent rupture throughout governed sociality. The fictional counterpart to this movement refashions these figures of cultivated sageliness endowed with access to moral normativity into agents of conflicts determined behind the scenes.

It is important to remember that the ideal of the scholar is a union of intellectual/artistic and martial knowledge evident in expressions like 「文武兼備」, 「文武雙全」, 「文武全才」, 「允文允武」. Kam Louie presents the “dyad wen-wu (cultural attainment-martial valour)” in its “different manifestations and implications […] as a defining feature of Chinese masculinity”\(^{338}\). The paradigm is no doubt central. For while martial valor is expressed and nominally included, it is also suppressed in highbrow aspiration. The ‘high road’ is not open conflict, but the minimally invasive, concealed approach - Sunzi’s *yin* of superior ‘understatement’. Regarding premodern attitudes towards *wu*, Ng Ho comments,

This romantic notion [of jianghu and wulin] is refuted by history: China traditionally favoured the literatus over those with military skills, which led to the martial arts being periodically prohibited and the disdain for this tradition harboured by the average Chinese.\textsuperscript{339}

\textit{Wu} is included in so far as Confucian cultivation is envisioned to provide a holistic development of mind and body from one root. Under regular circumstances, that is as interaction within governed sociality, sageliness asserts itself as ‘wind of virtue’ influencing ‘small men’ like wind shaping grass. But \textit{wenwu} 「文武」, the union of the intellectual and the martial, implies another assertiveness that does not shy away from warfare or combat. In the Confucian tradition the spectrum of knowledges encompassing the intellectual, the artistic, and the martial all derive from cultivation and in this sense condition each other as equal extensions of one and the same ‘heart-mind’ 「心」 (as some choose to translate the character ‘heart’). \textit{Yin} as strategic ‘understatement’ conceals the aspect of martial prowess which the popular imagination unleashes.

The \textit{Little Warrior} is culturally situated within this topography, located at the periphery of sociality but shaped to resemble a Daoist vessel. A small figure on a large horse riding through the title sequence following the prologue, Petrina Fung’s character derives her power in a literal transposition of select statements of early Daoism: her gender ‘naturally’ positions her in opposition to an overabundance of masculinity, her feeble bodily frame harbors enormous physical prowess, her desexualized, androgynous appearance transcends the role to bring forth and nurture life allotted to her gender in sociality, lending her the power to deal death instead. One might say she is the black dot or ‘eye’ of the white, masculine half of the Yin-Yang symbol in a ‘sexualized’ view of the natural world, in which male and female elements condition each other to shape the flux of being like the Heraclitean war as ‘the father of all things’.

Since the role of female protagonists in the action genres of Hong Kong cinema is of ongoing interest not just to approaches directly engaging gender studies or interrogating Hong Kong film from a feminist point of view, it is

\textsuperscript{339} Ng H., “Jiang Hu Revisited,” 74.
worthwhile invoking another example with regard to the prologue: in Wu Ma’s (午馬) *Deaf and Mute Heroine* 《聾啞劍》 (1971) a very similar encounter between a lone female fighter and a host of attackers is staged at the very beginning. Shot against a generic orange background, the sequence might lack in atmosphere but is edited equally dynamically. The fighting here simply commences without an offer of some sort, the prize however is a large bag of pearls which the protagonist, played by Helen Ma (馬海倫), takes with her setting the events of theft, revenge, chase, and escape into motion.

In his comments on “Wu Ma’s Nose” 340, Roger Garcia attests the film the realization that,

> [...] cinema, which for so long dealt with male power, the friendship between men etc. is in reality a maternal medium, giving birth to movement, gestures, life itself.341

In the story of the ‘deaf-mute sword’, the Chinese name of both the film and the protagonist, Garcia sees the “presentation of a non-male point of view” 342 achieved. In light of this assessment which implies the possibility of cinematic empowerment, a quick comparison between two heroines is appropriate. We can define the difference between the two swordswomen in the nature of their respective losses: the Little White Dragon 「小白龍」, Petrina Fung’s character in *The Little Warrior*, insists on her asocial and therefore asexual outsidedness. Her role as peripheral protector of lineage seems to foreclose any romantic or sexual relation. The lack of desire for phallic presence positions her outside sexual difference and the sexual relation. Instead she functions like the result of a metaphysical imbalance between Yin and Yang, the somewhat sterile personification of a cosmic principle which neutralizes lack in a balancing of masculinity.

Wu Ma’s deaf-mute, on the other hand, moves between losses: there is the loss of hearing and speech which propel her into a heroism of the sword. The kind of

---

340 Garcia, “Wu Ma’s Nose.”
341 Ibid., 58.
342 Ibid., 60.
weakness granting martial prowess in line with the aforementioned trope.

[I]njured by her pursuers, [she] manages to seek refuge in the hut of a worker. He is honest, but dull. Gradually they fall in love and, in a non-diegetic sequence, are married (a “phantasy” sequence without referents and probably meant as a sign of mental and physical coupling); she subsequently settles down to a domestic life, removing the two broad silver wrist-bands which function as mirrors and allow her to see attackers coming at her from behind (since she cannot hear them, the bands are essential).  

The loss of the silver bracelets thus signals her transition out of the *jianghu* and into regulated sociality. However, the murder of her partner at the command of Mistress Liu (柳青青), played by Shirley Huang (黃莎莉), destroys this phantasy of domestic life, a common occurrence in the *wuxia*. She dispatches her in a prolonged final battle before defeating the scar-faced assassin, played by Yeung Wai (楊威). As such the plot ‘merely’ reverses gender roles. Garcia argues that “the film gains its feminist reading” at the “level of the image, as opposed to the level of the symbol” in the way the mute/d heroine reflects a world (in wrist-bands) already reflected in film.

By contrast, the *Little Warrior* experiences no transition whatsoever: in rather stark contrast to the gloomy prologue with its exaggerated visual style, the story is developed in long shots of little camera movement highlighting the scenery and mid-range shots of dialogue. The cooperation between Lee Tit with his at that point already rich experience in the industry spanning decades and his martial arts directors makes for the film’s mixture of chamber play drama and single shot action, on the one hand, and the much more elaborate fight scenes constructed in the editing room from a whole range of dynamic shots on the other. As a result, the pace of *The Little Samurai* is comparatively slow, especially compared to more widely known action entries dating to roughly the same period like *The Deaf and Mute Heroine* released only two years later. A significant amount of time is devoted to developing the character of a maid in the young prince’s entourage struggling with her conscience as she was hired to betray him and comic relief.
delivered in the shape of an older farmhand eager to help the group in an attempt to get away from his wife.

Overall, relatively little time is devoted to the Little White Dragon. The division between a heroine who enters the scene in moments of dramatic escape, small-scale battle, or approaches into ambush and the more mundane travels of the company through the countryside impresses the division between governed sociality and *yin*. In her figure the metaphysical balancing power of the one-Dao takes on physical presence. As regulated sociality is corrupted from the inside and elements within threaten to break the lineage of power, an agent emerges who is human, capable of speech, yet not integrated into the social. The Little White Dragon derives her power from her ‘outsidedness’. In other words, the power of an ontological principle regulating equilibrium necessarily manifests itself in her as a natural, that is non- or asocial, agent emerging at decisive moments. In contrast to *wuxia* fiction in general, this outsidedness is not institutionalized in schools of *jianghu* clans, but the initial offer during the prologue does hint at her being known throughout certain circles rather than suddenly dispatched into the world in an instance of divine intervention.

In the framework of the received understanding of Daoism, her inhabiting the periphery and rejecting sociality alone grants her access to a normativity lost in government. Her lifestyle has made her into an arbiter of metaphysical balance and shaped her body into a powerful weapon in nature rather than cultivation. The cultural assimilation of the heresy of Daoism is accomplished when it is made to adhere to the two-tiered model of a sociality of ‘small men’ busy in the everyday and ‘noble men’ invested in coherence by accepting the terms of conflict as decided in/from the periphery to avoid ruptures in the fabric of governed sociality as a whole. As a result, Daoist reclusion, the retirement of individuals from the social, is instituted in the role of peripheral guardian as fate takes the circular shape of reenforcing lineage.

In so far as *yin* terms a concealment of negativity in the Confucian hierarchy and a postponing of negativity in Daoist reclusion, this cultural aspiration supports the Hegelian charge of China’s ahistoricity. The activation of the *wu*
component to the *wen-wu* dyad within the narrative space of the *jianghu* then is to be read not as a neutral sourcing of some staging ground for generic action, but a narrative reaction to the Hegelian charge. *Wuxia* makes sense because it exposes a dynamic history consciously concealed underneath an image of stable social relations. Of course Chinese premodern history is far from stable, but (Hong Kong) cinema rarely narrates along historical fact. Any reaffirmation of some documented case of heroic insurgency would, in fact, be counterproductive to the projection of a coherent, eternal Chineseness, because it would point to internal division before Western colonial aggression. *The Little Warrior* amends some ‘official historiography’ of a young prince’s travels with the exploits of a legendary figure and thereby impresses the potential for martial power which has secured cohesion all along.

The peripheral is effectively reinscribed into a mechanics stabilizing the Chinese social body as a whole. As aforementioned, the space of the *jianghu* thus also functions to rationalize the modern geopolitical division between mainland and Chinese periphery: due to its topographical inclusion of its own ‘outside’, this version of peripheral particularity never concedes its claim as corrective to the center. It is always already the necessary, and in this sense metaphysically guaranteed, resolution to internal division. The constellation of the *jianghu* is specific because it narratively supports a claim to an inclusive Chineseness bound to overcome a balkanization imposed externally. While not addressing the modern context at all, *The Little Warrior* and *wuxia* in general are to be read in this context nevertheless because that is the context of their cinematic projection. The stabilization of this formula functions to abstractly assert the power of cohesion missing in the political.

On one hand the *yin* of *jianghu* thus provides consolation in the promise of weakness producing strength (the Daoist element): triad politics standing in for missing political representation and secret heroism keeping loyalty and friendship alive where modernity has all but atomized the once unconditional bonds of family and replaced them with monetary exchange. On the other, it has the peculiarity of zeroing in on the excess produced by regulated sociality; even when
it reinscribes these excess elements into the service of the whole, it is thus always narrating in close proximity to the possibility of rupture and change, which it has to reign in.

_Becoming Monkey_

I have distinguished between _wuxia_ and _gongfu_ primarily in terms of knowing versus learning, or rather embodying versus transforming. This distinction is derived entirely from the cinematic shift which took place mainly in the 70s whereby _gongfu_ came to be associated with narratives of training: in _Drunken Master_ or _The 36th Chamber of the Shaolin_ the physical hardships of transforming the body make up the bulk of the plot. I take this shift to be decisive in so far as it grounds the subsequent success of the genre outweighing any elements the ‘non-fantastic’, (mostly) unarmed combat films of the 40s, 50s, and 60s displayed in contrast. That such a drastic shift took place in the 70s is certainly not without socio-historic motivation. In my discussion of _Way of the Dragon_ I already mentioned Lee’s proximity to the issues of learning and training in the context of a guided transformation of the body as the last and only space to inscribe local custom, outgrow the national from within and recover culture physically into a technological modernity which homogenizes environments in technological reason and against a cultural modernity which distributes power unevenly from its root of Western imperialism.

But it is in the decade following Lee’s success that the process of learning itself came to make up the bulk of the narrative exemplified by the films of Lau Kar-leung and Yuen Woo-ping. From the point of view of the swordplay movie this shift appears as a mere ‘prequel’. After all, every famous _wuxia_ had to acquire his powers at some stage. As in the _wulin_ of the swordplay movie a new family relation is founded between master and disciple which outweighs former allegiances. But unlike the former, _gongfu_ does not simply impart knowledge by way of a magical token (a scroll or scepter, for instance) or grants power by virtue of initiation into the clan. Instead it takes its physical toll.
Training here is also somewhat magical in that the body it envisions is almost infinitely tensile: if one is used to carry one’s own body weight around with ease simply make a grueling physical routine out of carrying an additional 50 kilos and with time the secret of gravity-defying movement in mid-air 「輕功」 will reveal itself. In the quasi-realistic jianghu of this type the protagonist is not so much enlisting into a (mythical) world beyond sociality but rather searching for the physical means of problem-solving in much more mundane circumstances. In order to interrogate these characteristics further, I will take a closer look at the aforementioned Mad Monkey Kung Fu from 1979. Tony Rayns sums up the plot as follows:

Liu’s most extreme vision of the failure of a shifu is found in Mad Monkey Kung Fu, an idiosyncratic reworking of a popular genre in 20th-century Chinese fiction: stories of the oppression of opera troupes by lustful warlords. The protagonist here is not a martial artist per se but a skilled stage acrobat. A warlord has taken his sister as a concubine, and he has lost the use of his hands thanks to a beating from the warlord’s men. He is reduced to begging with a performing monkey until that, too, is taken from him by protection racketeers. Having reduced his spirit to its lowest ebb, the film proceeds to construct his spiritual rebirth and eventual physical triumph. A young man insistently apprentices himself to the reluctant down-and-out, forcing him into the position of a shifu. The boy first engages the man’s co-operation by impersonating his missing monkey, then pushes him into a more active role by making a near-disastrous strike against the warlord. The man trains the boy and, in the process, retrains himself. Shifu and disciple become a single unit, their movements and rhythms identical and flawlessly synchronised; as such, they can defeat the warlord.345

In the context of Chinese martial arts, one immediately notes the message, most likely central to director Lau Kar-leung’s life, that Chinese opera (or performance in general) is not a place where martial training degenerates into the aesthetics of dance, but rather the concealed shelter for traditional knowledges of combat, safeguarded by peripheral vagrants, traveling artists, and revealed to few only in a time of (political) need. The immediate need in this case is oppression by a criminal syndicate, headed by a pimp (“warlord”) played by Lo Lieh (羅烈).

345 Rayns, “Resilience,” 53.
The chain of events is set in motion when Master Chen (Lau’s character) arrives in the city performing as the Monkey King Sun Wukong (孫悟空) on stage with his sister, played by Kara Hui (惠英紅), and pimp Tuen invites them over in an apparent gesture of patronage. Cunningly exploiting Chen’s exceptional pride in his martial prowess and love of alcohol, a demonstration of practical combat suggested by Tuen allows him to cripple Chen’s hands and force his sister into servitude.

Typical for these titles, one might argue Hong Kong cinema in general, is its opera-like mixture of moments of brutal realism (mutilation, implied sexual bondage, etc.), on one hand, and slapstick comedy on the other. Monkey, Chen’s disciple played by Hsiao Hou (⼩侯), personifies this comedic element in his stubborn insistence on pranking and stealing in spite of retaliation by Tuen’s goons. Optimistic to an inhuman degree his cartoonish monkey-ness is in no way impaired by the drama of life around him. The point of departure is the encounter between a master who was crippled into submission, resigned to his fate in an admission of guilt, able to fight but unable to manually finish enemies off, and a human monkey, a young man who compulsively acts without regard for consequences, quite literally a ‘monkey unleashed’ 「甩繩馬騮」. In the bonding between street-smart orphan and weary father figure both the difference in age and outlook thus signal the affinity of the master-disciple relation to the familial bond. Through the relationship the excessive dwelling in the past and the incessant leaping into a future unknown are balanced as the encounter takes the shape of an instance of fate 「緣」 which (pre-)determines relations between individuals towards an opening into redemption, restoration, and balance.

The role of the monkey in this context is surprisingly complex: first, there is the ‘Darwinian’ dimension of the monkey as the animal-like substratum in humanity. There’s also the related figurative use of a recklessness characteristic of pre-adulthood, an id still unencumbered by a superego, a monkey-ness resonating with the Daoist regard for the infant and tenets of asociality, uselessness, and

---

346 This Cantonese phrase translates to ‘monkey whose leash ripped’ and is used to describe unruly children.
carefreeness. This then leads to the monkey in martial arts, a locomotive system abstracted from natural behavior - much like Cangjie (倉頡) is said to have abstracted Chinese characters from natural signs and formations. Performing different ‘spirit animals’ not only signals a particular character, but the counter to each animal style is found in nature itself, the food chain of the animal kingdom. In the context of such an abstraction we can locate the ambiguity of Chinese culture between nature and culture: Daoist primitivism aims to regress fully into the yin of an ‘unknowing’, while the later aesthetics of a Daoism-in-Confucianism seeks to make recourse to nature, particularly the sprawling growth of its vitality, as understood and artistically enacted by the cultivated mind.

Having been forced to sleep on a rope like a monkey and move on all fours like a monkey, the zenith of gongfu monkey-ness is a strangely non-monkey-like triple punch and the standardized movements master and disciple synchronize in their mountain retreat before the final conflict at the brothel. As a totem, a ‘spirit animal’ as well as a family crest, the monkey floats: it is not just copied from nature – like Jackie Chan’s proto-scientific observations of cat-ness to overcome the snake form in Yuen Woo-ping’s Snake in the Eagle’s Shadow 《蛇形刁手》 (1978) – but a monkey-ness framed by the cultural figure of the Monkey King. Such a construction elevates the monkey fist from the constraints of the natural food chain – an aspect demonstrated literally when Monkey is caught, his head clamped into a hole in the table apparently designed to consume monkey fresh – to a properly unnatural, human style seeking to harness the unpredictable power of instinct within the rigidity of formal repetition. Fate not only ensures the righting of the initial wrong - the destruction of Tuen’s hands and his execution by Monkey - but the fateful encounter between Chen and Monkey also acculturates natural monkey-ness, sublating it into sociality as honed instrument in a just struggle.

The Swallow’s Message and The Little Warrior illustrated a faith in restoration: sexual difference is integrated into the structure of narration in so far as cohesion is secured first by the feminine double and then by the feminine principle outside sociality. In Mad Monkey Kung Fu this principle of balancing takes the more
concrete shape of utilizing the power of the monkey, which ambiguously hints at both natural equilibrium and (physical) cultivation as the narrative synthesizes a handicapped father figure and an uncontrolled ‘child’. The moral deficit of defeat at the hands of Tuen made permanent in the pair of crippled hands and a relative in bondage is cancelled. As such, the general circularity of narrativity takes the specific shape of an impairment granting previously unknown powers; no longer in the direct reversal of *Crippled Avengers* where the four ‘cripples’ directly counteract the antagonist, but through the discovery of a new perspective - that of instruction.

As there is always some (Daoist) reluctance on the part of the master to accept a student in this setting, this perspective is perhaps not entirely new. Be that as it may, the difference with respect to *wuxia* is decisive. Little White Dragon functions like an abstract metaphysical principle precisely in so far as her powers come without context other than ‘outsidedness’ with respect to regulated sociality. In the more mundane circumstances of criminal extortion at the hands of Tuen, *Mad Monkey Kung Fu* and peak *gongfu* in general highlight individual activity and engagement. The *jianghu* is localized and no longer addresses the larger geopolitical situation by instantiating an abstract power of cohesion concealed within Chineseness. But much of *gongfu* remains within that horizon as it situates struggles in apparently concrete instances of anti-Manchu or anti-Western resistance. It thus falls behind the performative dimension of Bruce Lee’s Chinese *gongfu*, because the latter embraces the transformative aspect of individual training, whereas *gongfu* tends to stress rigorous imitation and synchronicity - the complete instantiation of a particular tradition.

However, all of *gongfu* and action more generally is structured by the cinematic necessity to depict an antagonism. Even in an allegorical or metaphorical setting (like *Hard Boiled*’s hospital) the conflict is inevitably mapped to an ensemble, a representation which enables narrative resolution. In *Mad Monkey Kung Fu* broken hands are ‘returned’ and one life is taken for another to restore moral equilibrium. Lee’s efforts do not escape this mapping either, but its character as an artificial representation is much more conspicuous in
the manner in which Way of the Dragon superimposes the wuxia formula onto modern-day Rome ‘forcing’ a reflection of formula as much as of his idea of Chinese tradition. In order to move beyond a naive representationalism, which does not adequately reflect the modern situation and is characterized precisely by our lack of an effective practice to be directed at a target that could be isolated, cinematic discourse becomes critical of the narrative form in its seemingly necessary or fated resolution. Such a resolution betrays a faith in a hidden guarantor of order, like the Daoist-inspired feminine principle emerging as a metaphysical force in The Little Warrior. As outlined at the beginning, philosophical Daoism also offers another concept of the ‘way’ in which (cultural) order conceals any number of virtual alternatives waiting to be realized. Yin then marks the excess of future potential over present structure. In its framework narrativity is an accomplice to this occlusion of potential in culture and the following analysis of three more recent films will illustrate specific strategies in Hong Kong cinema to engage this problem.

Listless Drifting Interrupted

Patrick Tam’s (譚家明) Nomad 《烈火青春》 (1982) is obviously far removed from the gongfu formula of Mad Monkey. Perhaps the difference is adequately expressed in the genre difference between the action of martial arts and the form of realism adopted by the New Wave. Nevertheless, the two films are only separated by a few years. Proximity can be argued with respect to the role of youth: whereas Monkey was reigned in in the relationship to a master providing discipline and a concrete target, Nomad’s contemporary youth lacks an authority figure as well as a worthwhile object of critique. Youth here is not struggling to survive or openly suppressed, but partially orphaned, their resistance aimed diffusely at the state of things as such in the absence of a ‘warlord’.

Essentially Nomad presents a constellation of individuals more so than a plot, although the film does feature a rather startling ending, a “massacre on the beach
[that] seems to be a fragment tacked on\textsuperscript{347}. Viewing this apparently incoherent catastrophe from the angle of structure, it appears the product of an original narrative symmetry deliberately broken: the constellation which marks the film as part romantic comedy, part drama in the specific environment of early 80s Hong Kong is the encounter of the upper class figures of Louis, played by Leslie Cheung (張國榮), and his cousin Kathy, played by Patricia Ha (夏文汐), on one hand, and the more lower class characters of Pong, played by Kent Tong (湯鎮業), and Tomato, played by Cecilia Yip (葉童), on the other. Throughout the first half the narrative structure suggests a naive unification of youth across class divides: Louis enters into a relationship with Tomato who not so much seduces him as nonchalantly requests of him what is needed; Pong and Kathy also turn lovers after he is initially stripped of his authority as pool attendant by a girl gang apparently under Kathy’s command.

Within this even constellation of four individuals forming two heterosexual couples the natural outcome would appear to be a domestication of youthful recklessness into regulated sociality. Sniffing lighter fluid caught in tape recordings of a mother presenting classical Western music to a radio audience before her untimely death is overcome without an authority figure. Just as a mouthful of wasabi or the exposure of sex on a tram can be made to function as moments to be sublated in the (presumably) married life following the ‘excesses’ of youth. This presentation speaks to the cosmopolitan modernity of 80s Hong Kong: particular cultural achievements of China’s historical enemies are present in one form or another: not just the classical Western music making up parts of the soundtrack but also Kathy’s performance of traditional Japanese dance and the linguistic capabilities of the females in the group. All this cultural capital is integrated into the local Chinese context. The latter is reflected most strongly by Pong’s family and neighborhood as well as his antipathy towards Takeda Shinsuke, played by Yung Sai-Kit (翁世傑) and Kathy’s previous partner during a stay in Japan. A taste for foreign fashions and international centers of culture in

\textsuperscript{347} Cheuk, \textit{Hong Kong New Wave Cinema}, 131.
general seems to pull the upper class towards the ocean and further abroad, while
the scenes around Pong’s courtship formulate a Hong Kong Chineseness typical
of the 70s and 80s with its playful circumvention of familial close quarters and
exit into the neon nightlife. But this apparently stable metropolitan hybridity of
Hong Kong modernity is shattered when Shinsuke’s ties to the Japanese Red
Army whose grasp he’s trying to evade lead to the almost surreal ending of the
film along a deserted beach of some outlying island.

The immersion in and knowledge of Hong Kong’s position between a radical
Japanese outlook reaffirming martial heritage in its adoption of Western
rationality and Western imperialism/counter-culture itself seems to foreclose
Pong’s affirmation of Chineseness as original; his attitude is illustrated by his
performance of Chinese *gongfu* and his indictment of Shinsuke’s father in the
events of the Nanjing massacre. The Nomad, a yacht flying the large colonial flag,
is of course indicative of this instability: not an island of an alternative Chinese
modernity in which traditional ritual and industrial affluence combine to give life
to a stable series of generations beyond the turmoil of the 20th century, but a space
of listless and narcotized drifting on the edge interspersed with moments of
attentive absorption of the outside.

Culture in *Nomad* is a disorientation between the traditions of the motherland
on one hand, and aggression at the hands of Asian other and European invader on
the other. Classical Western music, Japanese dance and sword, armed Marxist
insurgency, open sexuality and promiscuity, substance abuse – 19th century culture
and 20th century counter-culture all interrelated in modern globalization enclose
Hong Kong on all sides encroaching on the illusion of a simply additive position
recovering premodern Chinese heritage in industrial modernity. Attributing the
attraction towards the dialectics of a Western modernity which has long engrossed
Japan (and the mainland) to the upper class characters of Louis and Kathy speaks
to the film’s understanding of the inherent impossibility to separate (foreign)
cultural achievements from concomitant acts of violence and barbarism. The
earlier enumeration of instances of culture and counter-culture are all moments
hinting at a Hegelian identity of the world system within the purview of the
‘cunning of Reason’. That is, the insular ‘image’ of Hong Kong projected implies a kind of insulation from the outside in which cultural ‘products’ are available for import while the contradictions of the whole remain afar. This apparent distance to the turmoil of the world is suddenly and traumatically closed.

As such, the dismissal of the ending as an afterthought “for commercial considerations” or even an instance of “incoherence” is premature. The strange eruption of violence along the shoreline is not only hinted at early on visually – notice the blood-soaked piece of white fabric in front of the samurai armor’s helmet at the gallery foreshadowing Kathy’s death much like Louis’ fascination with seppuku (切腹) is realized in Shinsuke’s suicide – or a misplaced homage to Asian action cinema of the 60s and 70s. I would instead argue that the ending realizes the cultural tensions which mark the constellation of characters throughout. It is as accidental as Kathy’s acquaintance with Shinsuke during her time in Japan. If anything, the ending is still too symmetric: Kathy’s fascination with the Asian other relentlessly pursuing universality in spite of historical guilt and fueled by an ancient mercilessness takes its toll. But Louis is saved by his pregnant partner Tomato from the wrath of a female Japanese Red Army member. One healthy half of the protagonists is thus recovered past a precarious Hong Kong and possibly on to the Middle East on board the Nomad without any indication as to what sort of transformation the event might bring about.

Nomad is thus symptomatic for the discontent with narrative structure as such. The film offers no vision of the future; the (more or less) realist framework evades the representationalism of action, the depiction of the antagonism in an ensemble solved in a final confrontation. Instead the film outlines Hong Kong’s position and violently shatters all inclinations towards stability. The former is described with precision as being wedged between agents of ‘big history’, Rey Chow’s ‘diasporic reality’. Hong Kong’s status as exceptional and insular is peripheral not in the positive sense of a privileged space for unencumbered hybridity, but an intoxicated drifting. The early 80s youths in Nomad revel in the freedom this position affords, but there is no Daoist metaphysics which would legitimize such a

348 Ibid.
modern *wuwei* or uselessness. The faith in historical restoration is lost and with it any claim to meaning. Read in the context of one-*Dao*, we might say that nihilism catches up with Hong Kong Chineseness in *Nomad*. Consequently, history as an event explodes into the narrative seemingly ‘out of the blue’. But this explosion is prepared throughout in a web of cultural allusions to Hong Kong’s outside, particularly the violence of Western as well as Japanese imperialisms. The message then is that faith in metaphysical order is no longer tenable. By frustrating our expectations as well as narrative conventions the film asserts the potential for catastrophe. However, while demolishing the *yin* of the one-*Dao*, there is no real affirmation of virtual potential either, something akin to Bruce Lee’s individual transformation. Uselessness and narcotization (as an expression of Daoist *wuwei*) no longer impact the social in the modern metropolis. The Adornian dictum of the impossibility of ‘right life’ bluntly asserts itself against narrativity. The next title returns to the figure of the monkey and reflects on narrative structure by utilizing the gimmick of time travel.

*Monkey King Revisited*

Stephen Chow (周星馳) is one of the most prolific actors/directors in Hong Kong cinema and probably the one Hong Kong film maker most appreciated by Chinese audiences across Greater China and the world. Nevertheless, he “has received little scholarly attention”

349, partly because of the importance of speech to his performance and the constant self-/reference to Hong Kong cinema as whole. Dai characterizes Chow’s work:

The absurdist *mo-lei-tou* (*wulitou*) [「無厘頭」] films, mainly featuring Stephen Chiau, are a revealing part of this wave of quasi-nostalgic remakes. The so-called “Stephen Chiau Films”, such as *King of Beggars* (Gordon Chan 1992) and *The Chinese Odyssey Part One and Two* (Jeff Lau 1995), are full of local Hong Kong elements, profaning and mocking the Mandarin of the original films with long and delirious Cantonese speeches, thus creating a text

of deconstruction and cynicism in an atmosphere of carnival.350

This ‘profaning and mocking’ is also directed at parts of Hong-Kong-ness, precisely in so far as Chow comically ‘recycles’ many of the established genres and formulas. As such, a lot of his output is based on the premise of juxtaposition and amidst the great number of historically inspired productions it is not surprising for Chow to transpose modern Hong Kong sensibilities onto a lawyer of the imperial past (Justice, my foot! 《審死官》), mobilize legendary martial arts in an urban environment (Shaolin Soccer 《少林足球》), or directly time travel into the past (God of Gamblers III: Back to Shanghai 《賭俠2之上海灘賭聖》). Other such out-of-place juxtapositions include an undercover cop infiltrating a high school (Fight Back to School 《逃學威龍》) or a not-so-suave mainland spy on a mission in the colony (From Beijing With Love 《國產凌凌漆》). Although his oeuvre is not completely exhausted in this description, it serves to highlight a particular concern with the relationship of the modern and the traditional by way of a direct engagement, perhaps comedic sabotage, of a great variety of cinematic staples and formulas.

Some of his more recent films like Shaolin Soccer or Kung Fu Hustle 《功夫》 (2004) were received very well internationally testifying to the wide appreciation and knowledge of the Hong Kong cinema conventions these films playfully undermine. The two-part Chinese Odyssey 《西遊記第壹佰零壹回之月光寶盒》，《西遊記大結局之仙履奇緣》 (1994) directed by Chow and Jeffrey Lau (劉鎮偉), on the other hand, is often cited as an instance of a kind of Hong-Kong-ification of Chinese culture outside the ex-colony. Met with decent reception in Hong Kong at the time of release, the film has since turned into a

favorite with young Chinese everywhere\(^{351}\), a common trajectory for the ‘cult movie’. In the context of Chow’s professional development *Chinese Odyssey* indicates a break. Ku provides an overview of Lee Chiu-hing’s account\(^{352}\),

To Lee, Stephen Chow is himself a microcosm of Hong Kong people. He divides his development into four stages. First, Chow was someone with neither power nor responsibility, which reflected Hong Kong people’s sense of detachment in the early transitional period beginning in 1984. Second, by 1990, his nonsensical talk represented the voice of the powerless, especially after the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989. Because people lacked the language to express their feelings of anxiety and helplessness, they then picked up the fragmented ideas offered them in the movies to help voice their feelings as a way of release. [...] Third, around 1995, two years before the handover, a sense of destiny was looming large, hence a shift from the happy-guy image in Chow’s earlier movies to a melancholy mood as in *A Chinese Odyssey* (*Xiyouji*) (1995). After 1997, there was a period of transition for Chow in which he produced [...] *King of Comedy* (*Xiju zhi wang*) (1999) and *The Tricky Master* (*Qianwang zhi wang*) (2000) (1999). In 2001, *Shaolin Soccer* signified a completion in the shift from rejection to an embrace of Greater China. The movie’s subtext was how Chow, who stood for Hong Kong people, was embarking on a new start. But the irony was, in moving toward a universal language for both the Mainland audience and the global market, was Chow not also moving toward un-becoming Hong Kong?\(^{353}\)

The question of an ‘un-becoming’ is not my immediate concern here, although I doubt Chow could truly leave Hong-Kong-ness behind. Interesting about this taxonomy is the correlation of *Chinese Odyssey* with ‘destiny’ or fate as I have labelled a stable projection into the future. The element of ‘melancholy’ and the

\(^{351}\) As Ma explains apropos of the film, “[…] inflated imaginations can be reterrestrialized, or domesticated, by the specificities, preferences and needs from the reception end. One very illustrative case is documented by one of my mainland students who came to Hong Kong in the late 1990s. *A Chinese Odyssey* (Parts I and II) (*西遊記*), a Hong Kong movie produced in 1995, was very popular among university students in Beijing. The movie remakes a well-known Chinese legend into a delicate love story, featuring famous Hong Kong actor Stephen Chow as a romantic lover and a legendary hero. Although it was quite popular at the time of its release many Hong Kong viewers have more or less forgotten about the movie. Yet Beijing university students, since its release, had been screening the VCD version of the movie in lecture halls and dormitories in the 1990s. The movie was renamed *Big West Side Story* (*大話西遊*) in China. As students discussed it with one another and wrote about it in emails and on bulletin boards, more and more people joined in the ‘Big Story Craze’ and became, as they called themselves, ‘Big Fans’. The reading and re-reading of the film was sustained year after year by interpersonal connections, low-tech VCDs and hi-tech Internet bulletin boards. Incoming students had been advised to study the film as an initiation to campus life and as a guide for intimate relations.” (Ma, E., *Desiring Hong Kong*, 43-44)

\(^{352}\) Lee C., *Xianggang Houmodeng*, 133.

\(^{353}\) Ku, “Masculinities,” 234.
inescapable logic of time travel are here used to connect the series to the impending handover in a straightforward historicization.

The films effectively reconstruct the legend of the Monkey King from certain elements of Wu Cheng’en’s (吳承恩) 16th century narrative like the 500 year period of imprisonment, the involvement of Guanyin (觀音), cave hideouts along with a number of key characters in a rather wild romance-action-comedy. Part update to the classic story, part contemporary flimflam, juxtaposition in Odyssey is primarily a function of an anachronistic use of modern Hong Kong vernacular to ‘retell’ the mytho-religious yarn giving rise to the ‘nonsensical’ verbal humour Chow is by now widely known for. In their romantic dimension the films attach to the original material the character of Joker (至尊寶), played by Chow, who falls for the ‘demon ’ 白白骨精, played by Karen Mok (莫文蔚). Pulled into the story by prophecy and cementing his involvement through time travel with its typically tautological, self-grounding il/logic, Joker reincarnates the Monkey King to fulfill a destiny of redemption.

In Mad Monkey Kung Fu the figure of Sun Wukong was already alluded to by Master Chen’s opera performance and complemented by a natural monkey-ness lost to Chen. The overly domesticated Monkey King of the stage had to be renaturalized in the figure of Monkey to again go through the process of acculturation so as to overcome the specific adversary of Tuen. It is important to remember the origin of Sun Wukong when interrogating his pop-cultural re-emergences: first there is the apparently inorganic stone egg, then the organic animal acquiring the power of reflection and his leadership over monkeydom, followed by the hubris of his ascendancy to mythical status opposing the powers which granted him life in a quest against the order of time. It is only with imprisonment and the ‘voyage west’ that his anarchic thirst is reigned in and put to use in a Buddhist framework. Odyssey retraces these steps, in a manner of speaking, in the order of romantic love which triggers Joker’s initial accidental ‘injection’ into the mythical. A love which is then nonchalantly rescinded, reoriented, and betrayed by death before Joker-as-Monkey-King sacrifices the ability altogether and resumes the ‘voyage’ augmented by his new function as
‘Cupid’ at the very end of the film.

By invoking the sci-fi element of time travel the inevitability of narrative resolution is of course always addressed in so far as the course of events becomes an object for potential manipulation. Its use in *Chinese Odyssey* equally highlights the structure of fate entangling the protagonists in its strange logic. That is, the way in which time travel produces loops of self-fulfilling prophecies reflects the narrative structure as such. By beginning with one ending and backtracking through time resolution is made diegetic in the possibility of changing events qua knowledge of that ending. But in *Chinese Odyssey* it is the Monkey King’s new role generating the ‘madness’ of love among everyday life which concludes the film and functions as an antidote to inevitability. In light of Lee Chiu-hing’s account cited earlier, this movement can be historicized as the enduring possibility for individual happiness in spite of history and its melancholy.

Such a liberal outlook on love as an instantiation of modern individuality in the ‘free’ choice of a sexual partner does not quite fit the presentation of the film, though. It is Joker who is tasked with inflicting love in an apparently random fashion turning it into a rather volatile affair. This version of love retrieves the moment of openness missing from Joker’s narrative in spite of time travel. Where fate appears ironclad, love recovers an opportunity for novelty. One could relate such a ‘falling in love’ to the motif of intoxication brought up earlier. It is in this moment of madness that a previously concealed virtuality is made available. This form of *yin* is presented here as potential only, of course. A very different take on love will now illustrate another attempt at narrative extrication from fate.

*Against Symmetry*

*Odyssey* identifies in the Monkey King the anarchic, uncontrollable power of love overriding fate. The power to incite love ‘develops’ after the narrative structure of necessary fate was ‘doubled’ through the use of a ludicrous time travel plot. In so far as Joker mischievously ‘inflicts’ love on passers-by, the openness of the encounter is highlighted and contrasted against narrative structure. But *The
Swallow’s Message also indicated how the necessity of a romantic conclusion tends to comply with the demands of the formula reinforcing stability in the ‘mature’ relationship. Wong Kar-wei’s In the Mood for Love 《花樣年華》(2000) critically dampens such an optimism with respect to romantic togetherness and family union.

Much could be said about the film, but it artfully evades any definite interpretations. Ambiguity abounds and some find interesting ways to explore Wong’s text. Bettinson, for instance, locates a,

[...] detective framework [...] discernible not only in the narrative structure of In the Mood for Love, but also [...] in the film’s mise-en-scène, iconography, and narrational point of view.354

In any case, it is certainly not just a simple melodrama; the atmosphere is too mystifying, the narration too sparse in its connections. This mood is created in the skillful arrangement of slow motion movement lingering in physical proximity and carried by a hypnotic soundtrack to 1960s Hong Kong. Here,

Su Lizhen [(蘇麗珍) played by Maggie Cheung (張曼玉)] and Zhou Muyun [(周慕雲) played by Tony Leung (梁朝偉)] both happen to be looking for a room to rent in a district inhabited by Shanghai immigrants. They find their rooms in adjacent apartments and move in on the same day. Their chance encounter continues in the form of casual chatting as the movers keep misplacing their belongings in each other’s units. After settling in they keep brushing past each other in the company of their spouses and neighbors, at the mah-jongg table, and on the stairway leading up to their apartments. One day, over coffee at a restaurant, they confirm each other's suspicions that their spouses may be having an affair. At this point, the two, perhaps from despondency, actively turn what has so far been a series of haphazard events into a conscious exploration: asking themselves how their spouses might have begun their affair, they start seeing each other on a regular basis, enacting by turns imagined scenes of seduction, confrontation, and breaking-up as though they were rehearsing performances on a stage set.355

Wong deliberately creates the tension between an expectation to leave the

355 Chow, Sentimental Fabulations, 72.
injury of spousal betrayal behind in an embrace of their accidental proximity and their insistence on lingering somewhere between loss and attraction which gives the film its characteristically slow pace. Fate then turns on them as their love does not survive separation: although perhaps consumed physically, it is evaded in Zhou’s move to Singapore. Further ‘accidents’ now seem to ensure the break in symmetry willed years ago.

From this perspective In the Mood for Love is the narrative attempt to emphatically fend off fate: the accident of meeting the second injured party in the extramarital affair of the spouse ‘wants’ to be recovered in the reconstitution of two families from the debris. This would be the obvious trajectory to make sense of the destructive power of love, but here it is consciously evaded, because “they do not want to be like their adulterous spouses.” Attraction is postponed so as not to satisfy the needs of the adulterers - both the need of the spouses who originally destroyed the two marriages and would gain a sense of legitimacy if Zhou and Su would redeem their betrayal in new-found love, and the need for physical proximity displayed by the protagonists and seething underneath their roleplaying and deliberately casual meetings. The “valorization of togetherness [as] the epitome of Chinese sentimentalism” turns into the melancholy of rebelling against the symmetry imposed by fate 「緣」.

Bettinson remarks on another convention which is denied,

Repressing access to a character’s physicality is a strategy more common to detective narration than to melodrama. However, if in the detective film such a strategy arouses and ultimately satisfies our desire for the concealed figure to be “unmasked,” no such satisfaction is afforded the viewer of In the Mood for Love.

In so far as the chance encounter between Zhou and Su turns into a working out of the secret history of their respective spouses, an element of mystery certainly pervades the film which goes beyond the purely melodramatic. However, Wong’s

356 Abbas, “Hong Kong,” 123.
357 Chow, Sentimental Fabulations, 76.
358 Ibid., 77.
film is no hybrid successfully synthesizing strands of previously separate genres. Rather, the film neither satisfies our melodramatic craving nor our curiosity with regard to the spouses.

*In the Mood for Love* represents another example of directly challenging narrative structure and the underlying assumption of and longing for restoration. The blow against (heterosexual) togetherness is possibly more impactful in the Chinese context where tradition attaches an almost religious importance to ‘healthy’ family relations. Projecting the broken couple into the early post-war period only intensifies the blow as a reality covered by wishful narration. Resisting the urge for resolution, the film ‘concludes’ by projecting a mere fragment of the encounter’s ‘aftermath’. In this sense Wong does nothing to alleviate the repressive atmosphere of emotional injury and regret. The possibility of sexual relations between the protagonists is intelligently hinted at. For such a moment of intimacy is irrelevant to the recovery of stability.

As the relationship between the protagonists is founded on their spouses’ betrayal, it is difficult to develop a perspective that would entirely escape it. This dynamic engenders the particular atmosphere of the film: because the relation can neither be recovered into traditional romance, nor redefined into a previously unknown form of togetherness, events stall in resistance. In the context of film as primarily discursive it is not surprising to end on this point. Virtual potential, the *yin* of future potential over present structure, remains conceptual as it did in the last chapter. *In the Mood* instead expresses the slow desperation with the inescapability of structure.

*Out of Loss*

Discussing the issue of loss and sacrifice in German Idealism as motors of a historical dialectic renewing ethical life in the working-through of communal trauma, Adorno describes the Kantian ‘faith’ as the thought that,

[…] injustice and suffering in the world are so infinite, that the idea of a world without, as one says so plainly, poetic justice and its guarantor, God, would be
too cruel to imagine. The spirit of Kantian philosophy is in fact the spirit of metaphysical desperation, and the attempts he then made to ultimately save the existence of God nevertheless on a path across the abyss, are in fact attempts of salvation in a very emphatic sense; they are to point beyond this desperation.360

This “spirit of metaphysical desperation” seeking to salvage causality and order from loss is reproduced in miniature through traditional narrativity as such when the plot rights its initial wrong to return to balance.

I associated this general feature with Daoism as the premodern articulation of a metaphysical guarantee for restoration. In the Daodejing assertions of reversal from weakness imply as much and are, together with associated figures of reclusion and withdrawal, integrated into Hong Kong cinema. Narrative circularity as a general feature is particularized where it motivates presentations specific to the tradition: in The Swallow’s Message I therefore emphasized the reconstitution of family and Confucian values forced after nature intervenes. In The Little Warrior restoration takes the more recognizably metaphysical shape of the Daoist feminine principle intervening to protect moral order. Peripheral elements connected to the Daoist tradition here furbish the patterns in which the metaphysical value of fate is reinforced.

In Mad Monkey Kung Fu and gongfu more generally this Daoist perspective served to explicate the specific trajectory of a physical impairment, weakness as such, harboring the key to resolution. In so far as an apparent lack or uselessness engenders a new capacity, the mechanical reversal of early Daoism here suggests the non-metaphysical virtuality (outlined with respect to Zhuangzi) of individual human existence beyond excepted norm and acculturation. Gongfu then marks the conscious activity of training and struggle against injustice where the wuxia presents traditional power as concealed in an entirely abstract jianghu. I related this movement to the context of modernity and a progressing balkanization of

360 Adorno, Philosophische Terminologie 1, 111. “[…] das Unrecht und das Leiden in der Welt seien so unendlich, daß der Gedanke an die Welt ohne den an eine, wie man so schlicht sagt, ausgleichende Gerechtigkeit und an deren Garanten, nämlich Gott, etwas zu Grauenhaftes wäre, um vorgestellt werden zu können. Der Geist der Kantischen Philosophie ist eigentlich der Geist der metaphysischen Verzweiflung, und die Versuche, die er dann gemacht hat, um schließlich doch auf einem über Abgründe hinwegführenden Weg die Existenz Gottes zu retten, sind eigentlich Versuche der Rettung in einem sehr emphatischen Sinn; sie sollen über diese Verzweiflung hinausweisen.” (my translation)
China. The *wuxia* formula provides a space in which a metaphysical faith in the cohesion of Chineseness finds support in mythic heroism. This mythic or pseudo-historical context defers notions of internal division concomitant with any portrayal of historically factual struggles and thus reiterates the continuity between center and periphery encapsulated in *yin*. Peak *gongfu*, on the other hand, resists balkanization contextually by invoking Manchu oppression or Western aggression.

The idea of *yin* as concealing an immanent power which guarantees cohesion or restores balance structures the specificity of these genres. By the same token, it also structures the specific articulation of their limit as an expression of criticism of modernity. My reconstruction of Bruce Lee illustrated this in his mobilization of virtual potential for the individual transformation of tradition (rather than insistence on rigid form). Aided by the deliberate artificiality of the plot and performance of Chinese *gongfu*, he thus succeeds in pointing to individual responsibility with respect to change and the necessary representationalism of cinema.

Following the problematic of fate beyond motifs sourced from Daoist tradition, films from the following three decades served to illustrate how the issues of representationalism and narrative circularity were addressed cinematically. *Nomad* implicates a culturally orphaned Hong Kong youth in a violent outbreak which is brought on by outside forces essentially invited to the colony. China’s historical enemies, Japan and the West, appear appeased in the cosmopolitan colony with its economic amalgamation of international trends. The explosion of violence brought on by Japanese Communists - an element effectively abbreviating all sides of Hong Kong’s ‘diasporic reality’ - shatters any faith in the viability of peripheral stability. Past loss is amplified in a trauma magnetically drawn to the protagonists and the possibility of living on – rather than resolution – is only hinted at. As such the film acknowledges the position forced onto Hong Kong by history without recourse to an allegorical representation. Consequently, this position lacks the sort of concrete practice enacted in the action genres and thus reflects the fundamental impasse which offers no resolution or metaphysical faith.
In a more commercially conducive manner, *Chinese Odyssey* reflects narrativity by way of time travel. While this somewhat gimmicky plot twist reinforces the overall comedic effect of the vernacular reinvention of the classic tale, the recasting of love as a possession conjured by Joker at the end suggests an opening for novelty. Finally, *In the Mood for Love* has our expectations of a symmetrically romantic resolution collide with a defiance of a fate seeking to sublate past injury. Dwelling on injury, this defiance leads to an undecided in-between-trajectories where existence goes on haunted by regrets of a broken symmetry. In so far as these texts articulate efforts to evade or amend the clean resolution of traditional narrativity and its logic of recovery from loss, specificity is no longer attributable to a Daoist framework.

As these expressions of discontent with narrative resolution all contextualize (heterosexual) love to some degree, a critical moment directed against the relationship as the epitome of stability impervious to historical position appears feasible. But of course this is only specific in so far as we one might attest a particularly strong attachment to this essentially global preoccupation with the traditional family. While virtual potential outside socio-historic structures can only ever be hinted at as abstract potential, these films can still be shown to express this lack to varying degrees. The pressure of Adorno’s “concrete possibility” (*konkrete Möglichkeit*)\(^{361}\) - an unclear ethical demand in a world marked by destitution and suffering in spite of enormous wealth and technological progress - is in this sense articulated in spite of missing practice. The next chapter will chart the development of visual architecture and again map its discursive evolution with respect to critical potential.

\(^{361}\) Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 68.
4) Visual Specificity

Any discussion of cinema has to address the visual as part of its problematic translation of the medium’s various registers – moving image, dialogue, score – into the verbal. Whether a reading can ‘capture’ its text, even outperform the aesthetic in meaning made explicit or perhaps pales against the vitality of genuine art, is one string of nagging questions connected to this procedure. At the outset, this thesis was to be first and foremost an inquiry into visual architecture, because stylistic specificity permeates a cinema across genres, its link to premodern aesthetics or thought more generally appeared easier to construe. The problem with this ‘approach’ is the kind of holism inherent in meaning: style is never simply form in which narrative content is ‘wrapped’ but depends on and develops with (narrative) meaning. In this sense, the first three chapters prepared the ground for this inquiry into stylistic specificity.

The mutual dependence of content and form is readily accepted even when criticism defines film quality in terms of a successful synergy of the medium’s registers (rather than subjecting products of the culture industry to Adorno’s demands). The implication of style in narrative is particularly palpable when it supports an effective atmosphere or even adds a distinct layer of meaning beyond the mere events portrayed. In so far as previous chapters already discussed the meaning of a number of films under specific headings, these meaningful qualities of style have already entered into my discussion.

This chapter, however, reconstructs the discourse of style specific to Hong Kong cinema using the selection of films (and occasionally directors) already effected in the previous chapters. This supposes the kind of congruence between narrative content and stylistic form outlined above and apparently at odds with the structure of this thesis in its division between the two. But the problem does not lie in the separation; abstracting style from content or vice versa is simply part of the analytic gaze. This separation only becomes problematic when either is hypostasized as independent from the other or context more generally. Apropos of artistic style Adorno notes,
The degree to which, beyond the specification of a particular work, a technique is universal or monadological varies historically, yet even in idolized eras, when style was binding, technique had the responsibility of assuring that style did not abstractly rule the work but entered into the dialectic of the work’s individuation.362

Concentrating on style here is not to discount individual technique. Rather, the latter impacts stylistic specificity precisely at those points where an established form is exhausted, incapable of supporting emerging content, or, as a result, itself becomes an object criticized stylistically. In this sense, stylistic specificity can be construed as a discursive trajectory running parallel to narrative developments and forms a distinct vector of critique.

The focused interrogation of style offers the opportunity to connect Hong Kong cinema and classical Chinese aesthetics in line with the structure of previous chapters. As aesthetics occupies a central position in premodern Chinese thought, there is no claim to a comprehensive depiction here. Within the topos of yin I will sketch one particularly salient quality: the way in which traditional Chinese art subtracts from realism, that is conceals, in order to bring out substance - in the case of painting we find swaths of white canvas, while Chinese opera eliminates backdrop and set design to focus the actor in empty space. This aesthetic of the ‘w/hole’ invokes a totality of meaning by partial mediation.

To flesh out and situate this aesthetic practice, the chapter begins with Jing Hao’s (荆浩) 10th century treatise Notes on Brushwork 《筆法記》. Confucian and Daoist thought, their respective life practices, resemblance and essence, the verbal and the visual, production and critique are all synthesized in this dense piece of aesthetic reflection. Reference to the text will thus offer a ground against which to gauge the adaptation of the Chinese aesthetic tradition to the camera in Hong Kong cinema. Conditioned by this perspective, the development of stylistic specificity necessarily reconstructs a sinicization of cinema in Hong Kong as well as the limits of this larger cultural heritage as reflected in local style. The technical implications of the ‘w/hole’ obviously refuse any direct application to the camera.

362 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 214.
because film only subtracts what is outside the frame of a shot and, more importantly, what is cut between shots, yet coheres by virtue of editing. Subtraction as an aesthetic strategy foregrounds the importance of concealment in effecting wholeness in both premodern and modern aesthetics. Film effects continuity precisely in so far as it takes away between shots.

With the reference of the Notes established, the chapter begins with the apparently unproblematic representation of space as static in an emulation of theatre. This spontaneous realism functions reasonably in the socially engaged cinema of the 50s and 60s, but the characteristic genres of wuxia and the opera film soon include techniques enhancing the visual activity level. The action genres gradually overcome space as an obstacle to desired momentum and a recognizably specific style takes shape culminating in a kinetic construction which subjugates space and time to individual vitality. This characteristic style becomes an object of critique, particularly in the hands of the New Wave which subverts the comfortable coherence afforded by accelerating and otherwise modulating speed. Throughout the roughly 60 years in question the realism of the 50s is also continuously reapplied. While lacking the specificity of kinetic construction which has come to epitomize the peak of Hong Kong cinema’s international success, a lingering interest in space as opposed to momentum is then interrogated.

A Typical Scene of Instruction

The discussion of visual specificity in cinemas is always mediated to some degree by a difference with respect to Hollywood and classic continuity. In similar fashion the characteristics of Chinese aesthetics are thrown into relief in contrast to Western tradition. The telos of the latter before the arrival of photography appears to be a form of realism rivaling perception in terms of color and richness of detail. Chinese aesthetics, on the other hand, seems rather uninterested in such a realism. To be sure, its mode of presentation is not anti-realist in any modern sense: it does not flout the objects given to perception. Formulated in its own
terminology, Chinese visual aesthetics is the sustained attempt to bring out the true 「真」 in its vitality 「氣」, the substance 「質」 of the object under the constraints of (mere) optical appearance 「形」.

To flesh out this preliminary the Notes on Brushwork will serve as a guide. Its author Jing Hao lived during the period of the Five Dynasties between Tang and Song. For a majority of his life he did so as a recluse in the Hong-valley (accordingly naming himself Hongguzi 洪谷子) of the Taihang mountains (太行山), corresponding to the area of Qinshui in the province of Shanxi (山西沁水). As such, he was himself a man of the periphery, of withdrawal from the social into relative isolation and from the urban into the rural. This Daoist/Buddhist lifestyle connects with his major area of expertise, landscape painting 「山水畫」, which he both practiced as an artist and critically expounded in the Notes.

In spite of the relative brevity of the text – the Chinese original fits comfortably on two pages in the appendix to an anthology devoted (in part) to the text while a richly annotated German translation takes up 17 – its form as well as its vocabulary, however, make it extraordinarily dense, especially for the modern reader.

Framing the treatise is the writer’s own journey to Spirit Gong Mountain (神鉦山) where he accidentally enters a rock opening into an almost supernatural scenery. This anecdotal frame sets the scene in a decidedly non-didactic fashion; Jing Hao speaking from his own, thoroughly Daoist position embeds the theoretical arguments to follow into a story consciously removed from a classroom to a locale reminiscent of Tao Yuanming’s Peach Blossom Spring 《桃源源記》. Here the narrator/writer finds a group of old pines which he wants to capture. Returning the next day with a brush, he paints thousands before the painted pines are like the real ones. Another year passes before he returns again in spring and meets an old man who engages him in a dialogue about the nature of

364 Obert, Welt als Bild, 476-92.
365 「入大巖扉」 (Yu, P. et al, Ways with Words, 274.)
366 「明日攜筆復就寫之，凡數萬本，方如其真。」 (Yu, P. et al, Ways with Words, 274.)
painting - this forms the openly theoretical content of the treatise. Off to a bad start, he first insults the old man as obviously ignorant of the intricacies of brushwork judging by his exterior.\textsuperscript{367} In other words, the beginning of the encounter reflects the narrator’s mistaking outer appearance for an index of inner quality. Accordingly, his definition of painting is naively realist: the painting is ornament and valuing (visual) resemblance produces truth\textsuperscript{368}, an understanding in line with early Chinese dictionaries - “drawing is demarcation (line)”\textsuperscript{369} in the \textit{Shuowen Jiezi} or “drawing is (to reproduce) shape”\textsuperscript{370} in the \textit{Erya} 《爾雅》.

As Pohl notes in his discussion of the foundation of a Chinese aesthetics of painting, such a “more or less realistic imaging of the shape of an object […] is merely one, for Chinese literati admittedly relatively meaningless, aspect of painting.”\textsuperscript{371} Taking the place of the unwilling master, the old man has a different definition on offer: doubling down on the (relative) Chinese homophony between drawing 「畫」 and ornament 「華」 (which traditionally bestows authority on definitions), he goes for the tautology of “painting is painting.”\textsuperscript{372} Obert develops this in line with the definition of the \textit{Shuowen} as “drawing lines of demarcation” along the variant 「劃也」\textsuperscript{373}. Elucidating on this definition the old man contends that one cannot take ornament for real substance.\textsuperscript{374}

Thus the question boils down to the difference between resemblance and truth\textsuperscript{375}: the former is the capturing of shape without its vitality\textsuperscript{376}, the latter the full development of both.\textsuperscript{377} The term 「象」, translated as “[meaning-like] form of appearance” by Obert\textsuperscript{378}, then comes to define the artistic negotiation of
resemblance and vitality. The category of vitality in its importance for 「象」 is easily understandable and intuitable to us in the modern encounter with classical Chinese painting as its peculiar quality of evoking life rather than neutralizing it in its visual capture. We can think, for instance, of exposure time in the photography of flowing water (itself a powerful, if not cliché, trope in the context of Chinese tradition): shorter exposure will bring the flow to a standstill in the capture of an instant; longer exposure, on the other hand, will transform the reflected light into a sheet of movement conveying the restless motion of the stream (as such).

Reference to the significance of water – think 「知者樂水」 – as a motif in this example leads us to the core of the problematic, a core already prepared in the Notes with the discussion of the pines at the very beginning. As Obert puts it, “it is not about the purely physiological grasping of the ‘essence of imaged objects’ […] but the organic and simultaneously meaning-like ‘rising’ of appearances within a larger context.” He goes on to mark the deliberate reference to the “wind of virtue” made in conjunction to the pines by an apparently Confucian Jing Hao. As a result, vitality incorporates the natural life process of the object into the social framework of meaning and is therefore present at all levels: it is the object’s double life in natural environment and cultural signification, grasped by the artist, imbued into the artwork, and finally striking the viewer in reception as reverberation 「氣韻」.

“The Human World in the Pine”, as Obert titles, circumscribes the complex aesthetic negotiation between the linear mapping of moral hierarchy onto the natural through the metaphorical link of the pine and the integrity of the particular object in its individuality. As much as the particular is allowed to disturb the

---

379 A common proverb from the Confucian Analects “Yong Ye”《論語·雍也》 asserts that, “The wise find pleasure in water; the virtuous find pleasure in hills.” 「知者樂水，仁者樂山。」 (Legge, The Chinese Classics 1, 56.)

380 Obert, Welt als Bild, 271; “Allerdings geht es auch nicht etwa um eine rein physiologische Erfassung des »Wesens der dargestellten Gegenstände«. Vielmehr geht es um das naturwüchsige und zugleich um das bedeutungsmäßige »Entspringen« der Erscheinungsgestalten innerhalb eines größeren Bewandtniszusammenhangs.” (my translation)

381 Cf. Obert, Welt als Bild, 272.

382 Ibid., 271; “Die menschliche Welt im Kieferbaum” (my translation)
hierarchical order projected onto it, we might speak of a critical moment in the modern sense. I am here not concerned with discerning such a critical moment, because it would involve a detailed account not just of theoretical texts like the one at hand, but the praxis of painting. Much like the account of Hong Kong cinema I am developing, it would have to extrapolate the underlying structuralism constraining aesthetic understanding and trace its dialectical unfolding against socio-economic history. Strongly relying on hermeneutics in his conceptual wrestling with the vocabulary of the *Notes*, Obert asks if one “can uncover theoretical foundations on this ground which appear diametrically opposed to most of the conventions of perception of (European) modernity?” In other words, the relationship to the contemporary and thereby to the future cannot be completely denied as evidenced in Obert’s demand to “read against comfortable habit” which would imply at least an enrichment of, if not change in the perspective of the reader.

I want to highlight points from the *Notes* as stylistic demands grounding the received understanding of Chinese aesthetics. First, we find one occurrence of *yin* in the text (lending a modicum of authority to my use of the character) as a definition of reverberation. Obert translates, “with hidden traces (of the brush), the physical shapes are posited” . Although I would tend towards a less cumbersome version along the lines of “establishing shape without visible brushwork”, the implications are (relatively) clear: Chinese landscape painting is “far removed from the abstraction of modern art”, “not the self-portrayal of the brushstroke”, not the “graphically alive line as autonomous aesthetic element, in which the individuality of the artist is expressed”, but the “world as an organic context” mediated in vitality.

---

383 Ibid., 286; “Können auf diesem Boden theoretische Grundlagen aufgedeckt werden, die den meisten Anschauungskonventionen der (europäischen) Moderne diametral zuwider zu laufen scheinen?” (my translation)
384 Ibid. “[…] gegen die bequeme Gewohnheit zu lesen.” (my translation)
385 Ibid., 298; “Mit vergorgener [Pinsel-] Spur werden die körperlichen Gestalten hingestellt, […]” (my translation)
386 「隠迹立形」 (Yu, P. et al, *Ways with Words*, 274.)
387 Obert, *Welt als Bild*, 298; “Das Berg-Wasser-Bild ist weit von der Abstraktion der Moderne entfernt. Was bisher zur leiblichen Bewegung gesagt wurde, impliziert also gerade nicht die graphisch lebendige Linie als autonomes Kunstgebilde, worin sich die Individualität des Künstlers ausdrückt. […] Sonst geht im Bild gerade die Gestimmtheit verloren, die der Welt als einem lebendigen Zusammenhang innenwohnt” (my translation)
The aesthetic position espoused thus values an organic depiction evoking social significance over (what we would now call) photographic realism. Consequently, it allows for the fantastic as an imagined constellation of more or less real objects and in the way moral authority finds expression as (a surplus of) vitality within such an essentially realist frame. Emphasizing the organicity of the whole discernible in its structure of sinew, flesh, bone, and breath (and artistically mediated as the four powers of the brush\(^{388}\)) brought with it the additional twist of expressing potential for growth in the form of empty canvas. Just as the ‘flying white’ 「⾶⾿⽩」 of a brush partly dried up lends delicate momentum to the objectively solid thing, the flooding hole left purposefully is the very material invoking the whole: it is diffuse light, breathing room, and, more importantly, already infested by the progressively smaller scale arterial system mapped out in its thrust as sinew, flesh, bones, and breath. In this context Powers remarks on “[f]ractal-like dispositions”\(^{389}\) evident in Chinese art, aiming at this (implied) repetition of growth at the respectively smaller scale.

Summarizing in a more general form, we can note the tendency to suspend objectively articulated presentation in favor of sketching out momentum. Selected major and minor parts are related teleologically in a space open to the coherence of their virtual growth pattern, forming the ‘w/hole’. \(\text{Yin}\) is found in the way subtraction or ‘lack’ support wholeness; the aesthetic context also foregrounds the relation between order and open futurity fused in \(\text{yin}\): if the growth pattern expressed in its thrust is strictly fractal, it limits organic expansion to a stable form. If, however, the openness of the white canvas is read as virtual potential, it can bring forth all sorts of ruptures and catastrophes beyond mere permutation. Because form is itself order, what is concealed in \(\text{yin}\) is both the reproduction of order and the necessity of transformation depending on perspective.

In the discussion of stylistic characteristics to follow I will rely on this admittedly rough outline of classical Chinese aesthetics in order to discern certain dis-/continuities arising from the transposition of this ideal into the medium of

\(^{388}\) 「凡筆有四勢，謂筋、肉、骨、氣。」 (Yu, P. et al, \textit{Ways with Words}, 274.)

\(^{389}\) Powers, \textit{How to Read a Chinese Painting}, 224.
film. The anecdotal structure of the Notes indicates, again, the general strategy of assimilating the heresy of Daoism by relegating it to the periphery: drawing on my naive etymology of yin as both topographic and mental, the peripheral purposefully integrates the limit of (Confucian) learning into a lifestyle of isolation. The figure of the ragged old man who turns out to be a master is predicated on the insufficiency of learning by repeating. Daoist wuwei is thus neutralized as the element balancing the usual educational regiment of memorizing, repeating, and imitating. The latter reinforces the rules which only authorities shrouded in mystery can break with in a spontaneous growth beyond – in the context of Qing aesthetics around the “rule of the non-rule”\(^\text{390}\), Pohl speaks of “a dialectical interpenetration of the concepts [of] rule (fa) and change (bian)”\(^\text{391}\). The Notes illustrate this integration in their anecdotal framing of the more didactic references to the traditions of the Chinese discourse on aesthetics: Xie He (謝赫), Zhang Yanyuan (張彥遠), a taxonomy of mastery\(^\text{392}\) by which the pantheon of painters is to be judged, and even poetry find a place here.

Yin in this context again demonstrates what I called the proto-dialectical dynamic of the Chinese premodern: negativity does not break the hierarchically structured sociality, but is dispersed away from the centre of power towards the periphery. The hinterland thus becomes a repository of virtual trajectories of change postponed to stabilize the social fabric. In the context of an aesthetics of the ‘whole’ this is evident in so far as what is subtracted from representation does not threaten the integrity of the object presented. Instead, it effectively insinuates the organic relationship between object and (partially) concealed context. The particularity of a some growth pattern implied in the form of vitality is thus already intercepted by the contextual holism. However, in the reflection on aesthetics and the history of artistic achievement this conservative aspect is alleviated by a recognition of masters who transformed this context from within - the only transformation possible precisely in so far as the original can always be

\(^{390}\) Pohl, Ästhetik, 376; “Regel der Nicht-Regel” (my translation)

\(^{391}\) Ibid., 377; “[…] einer dialektischen Durchdringung der beiden Konzepte Regel (fa) und Veränderung (bian)” (my translation)

\(^{392}\) This taxonomy differentiates between “heavenly, wondrous, extraordinary, and proficient” 「神、妙、奇、巧」. (Yu, P. et al, Ways with Words, 274.)
traced to tradition and yet reconfigures the context, our perspective of things, as a whole.

*The Problem of Space*

Although the ‘w/ hole’ as technique cannot be readily applied to cinema because the shot is necessarily fully articulated, the relation of Hong Kong cinema to traditional Chinese aesthetics is noticeable. On the one hand, the latter structures the sinicization of visual architecture in its emphasis on vitality and momentum. On the other, it also supports the reflection of style and an aesthetic understanding of the power of subtraction: in so far as the claim to objectivity inherent in Western realism appears to translate into cinematic continuity as an equally objective emulation of perception through time, the subtraction inherent to camera and cut is occluded. As Hong Kong cinema develops the capacity to subtract effectively towards a teleological presentation of momentum, the implicit context always underlying visual architecture becomes apparent. This, I argue, effects the critical moment of visual specificity.

Looking at tentative connections made between classical Chinese aesthetics and (Hong Kong) cinema, King Hu (胡金銓) is often invoked as a primary example. Lau Shing-hon, for instance, hails his “good grasp of mise-en-scène, character articulation, imagery and rhythm so as to create a fu [賦] mode which embraces the beauty of bi-xing [比·興].” Due to my exclusion of non-Cantonese films none of King Hu’s works are discussed here in detail. For the purposes of this thesis his conscious translation of traditional aesthetics into the medium of film is somewhat problematic. This is not to diminish Hu’s artistic achievement and influence. Rather, the issue is how some of his most obviously classically inspired elements are too immediate. After the discussion of Jing Hao in the context of landscape painting his cinematic recreation of the empty canvas by inordinate amounts of artificial smoke or extreme wide shots reducing individuals to dots in the environment come to mind. Of course such practices

---

393 Lau S., “Three Modes,” 117.
invoke traditional sensibilities, but they do so by way of a direct transplantation which does not en bloc translate into an underlying stylistic structure. Instead it appears as a statement regarding the necessity of a stylistic Chineseness in film, an abstract affirmation where it merely recreates the formal aspects of premodern painting on celluloid.

When we look at the 50s in Hong Kong filmmaking, space – contrary to the title of this section – does not seem to pose a problem, at least as far as filmmakers are concerned. It merely sits there as backdrop to whatever plot is developed and signals some locale, sometimes geographically but more often than not in a rather generic manner. *Malaya Love Affair* is typical in this regard: the arrival of director Tsi Lo Lin’s character on board a ship marks one of the few outdoor sequences of the film, used to support the titles and introduce her basic situation to the audience. Later on montages of life at college and a date break the otherwise static presentations of the Chinese school, the father’s new home and a club, all presumably shot on set. This ‘non-style’ is no doubt partly effected by technical as well as budgetary restrictions at the time. But it also betrays a certain disinterest in space and movement often criticized in later reception.

One of the more harsh critiques of 50s and 60s (Cantonese) filmmaking standards in the colony can be found in Roger Garcia’s “The Natural Image”394; he characterizes it as “essentially a non-montage cinema” in which “sequences follow upon one another like scenes in a play”395. His thesis that “Cantonese cinema fulfilled the role of theatre”396 is explicated as a dissonance between studio and location: following a theatrical script, the visual style is “unobtrusive and efficient, if unimaginative”, while outdoor sequences turn “practically non-diegetic”397 due to lacking integration. Garcia’s idea of the post-war screen as “surrogate theatre” sums up the pervasive disinterest in space. Among the (still) relatively sparse secondary sources available on 50s and 60s Hong Kong cinema we find the idea of an affinity to the stage to varying degrees. Apropos of the efforts of prolific director Cho Kei (左几几), Li Cheuk-to notes a “weak handling of

394 Garcia, “The Natural Image.”
395 Ibid., 104.
396 Ibid., 103.
397 Ibid., 104.
long time-lapse […] derived from stage aesthetics.” Similarly, summarizing the
Retrospective, Shu Kei states,

Until the mid-60s, the most important influence on the Cantonese film was early Chinese colloquial drama. Some critics would point to the ample use of full stage shots and medium long shots as evidence of such influence. […] These conventions had indirectly shaped the film language of the Cantonese cinema. There were more long takes to sustain the unity of time, space and dramatic action. Close-ups are merely inserted between the long takes to register reactions. Track shots were used to follow the movements of the characters and to reduce the emotional distance between the protagonist and the audience. Jump cuts were almost non-existent as they would destroy the unity of space and time. There were rarely exotic camera angles (only low angle shots and high angle shots or point of view). The camera was an observer, like the theatre audience.

Reading this situation we can distinguish between positivist arguments and more critical interpretations: the former can empirically flesh out the the well-known image of early Cantonese films as sub-standard in contrast to Mandarin cinema’s “bigger budgets, longer working days (between 50-60) and rehearsal schedules as well as more elaborate set designs”. Accordingly, limited resources, lack of time, and the interaction between opera and film in terms of both talent and narrative material compound the general situation of Cantonese films of the era. Critical interpretations, on the other hand, read various visual deficiencies as a discursive index to Hong Kong’s socio-cultural development at the time. Garcia illustrates this in the alignment of the 1950s melodrama with proletarian concerns (exemplified first and foremost by the efforts of Union Films) superseded by the new local petty bourgeois after a “sense of belonging (or a realisation that there was nowhere else to go) had begun to develop”, prompting a need to “re-frame”.

The ‘surrogate theatre’ thesis is an important step in the analysis of Hong Kong style, because it conceptualizes the self-understanding of Cantonese filmmakers at

400 They are often pejoratively labelled as “old Cantonese films” 「粵語殘⽚片」.
the time against the non-theatrical cinema it was to become. Before furthering this
connection to the stage I want to discuss Chun Kim’s *Dial 999 for Murder* in
order to facilitate a fuller picture of 50s cinema beyond the melodrama. The film
is certainly not a stylistic failure. In spite of the typical day-for-night problems,
Chun manages changing locales including moving vehicles, on-location and
studio shoots without problems, never looses orientation during dialogues, and
renders the few sequences concerned with murder and fear effective enough by
way of atmospheric lighting and suspenseful cutting. Does this assessment then
deny the pervasiveness of ‘surrogate theatre’ and lack of cinematic style attested
to earlier?

The issue in this case is with the nature of the style employed: where he
improves on the mere frontal observation akin to the static theatre audience, he
does so with clean continuity. In other words, it presents the obverse to King Hu:
where some of his blatant transpositions of classical Chinese brushwork onto the
screen make for a rather abstract affirmation of stylistic Chineseness in the new
medium, the transposition of the British murder mystery to the colony shot and
edited to continuity achieves the abstract affirmation of Western cinematic
practice – abstract in so far as the style coheres only as an extension of Western
tributaries, not as an organic transformation against a new background.
Nevertheless, *Dial 999* attests to the level of technical sophistication the
discussion of the melodrama often decries as absent.

Returning to the issue of post-war filmmaking in its affinity to the stage,
another question is of import; namely which stage. Focussing on the politically
engaged Union cinema with its adaptations of Western and Republican plays
refers us to a rather realist version of foreign theatre. Read against Chinese opera,
which was of course a veritable cinema genre in its own right, a different picture
emerges, particularly in conjunction with premodern painting. As aforementioned,
both invoke the ‘w/hole’: landscape painting reduces the human figure and
presents a partial view of nature as an organic mirror to human society. The opera
stage, on the other hand, reduces background to empty space highlighting social
role in investiture and archetypal character in make-up. Both strategies involve a
cut, an artificial hole used to grasp the whole and can be read in the context of a larger emptiness-abundance paradigm\textsuperscript{403} structuring Chinese aesthetics.

For obvious technical reasons film does not afford control of the ‘w/hole’ as the shot is necessarily full. Consequently, opera was moved from empty space to a set. The spontaneous realism of the new medium imposed itself on its content, blocking or at least complicating a stylistic sinicization of cinema. *Swallow’s Message* illustrates this with its limited number of sets, mostly in and around the family estate. In terms of visual architecture, little of the Chinese or Cantonese opera tradition survives the transition. What inspired Brecht’s alienation or estrangement effect (\textit{Verfremdungseffekt}) is lost in a rather bland back and forth between rooms. What sets opera films apart from historically inspired romance or drama then is only the musical delivery of certain passages. Of course this is not without its charm, especially in a nostalgic reminiscing over a dead genre. As Sek Kei comments:

> Today among the many film versions of famous opera plays, audiences fondly remember only the opera tunes and have vague memories of the films themselves. Only a handful of vintage films are recalled in whole and these usually are the films written by Tang Disheng [唐滌生] and starring Ren Jianhui [Yam Kim Fai 任劍輝], Bai Xuexian [Bak Sheut-sin 白雪仙], Liang Xingbo [Leung Sing-Bor] and Liang Cibo [靚次伯], for example Tragedy of the Emperor’s Daughter [《帝女花》] (1959), The Purple Hairpin [《紫釵記》] (1959) and Butterfly and Red Pear [《蝶影紅梨記》] (1959).\textsuperscript{404}

Fortunately, I am here not concerned with the fate of Cantonese opera - the picture presents as rather bleak. Film obviously could not stabilize it into a local version of the musical (a genre similarly weakened in the West) and even the reduction of opera to mere tunes in local television potpourris ‘augmented’ by celebrity performances seems outdated. But perhaps the restoration of an originally vernacular entertainment to a niche art for the aficionado is preferable

\textsuperscript{403} The paradigm structures the difference between high and low in so far as Chinese folk aesthetics, particularly of the religiously Daoist type, revels in colorful abundance, while highbrow Chinese style conceals and espouses an almost minimalist approach. See Pohl, “Ästhetik der Fülle.”

\textsuperscript{404} Sek, “Thoughts on Chinese Opera,” 17.
to the escalating clearance it was submitted to earlier. In any case, the modernization of opera in opera film was a stylistic impasse. In relation to my image of Chinese aesthetics extracted from the Notes, the problem here is that space could not be manipulated into a representation of vitality resonating with social significance as premodern landscape painting had done. Equally, it could not be subtracted completely from the shot in an emulation of opera, because this would entail an utterly non-cinematic form and defeat the realism inherent to the camera. As a result, space was either left as is, a static backdrop to human action, or mobilized in familiar Western phrases.

To sum up, this impasse finds expression in two tendencies of 50s and 60s filmmaking: first, the necessity of indoor studio work could be directed towards a sinicizing of space as background in the mode of Western theatre. Swallow’s Message, for instance, is obviously specific in so far as its set décor signals its geographic location and cultural background. A title like Lee Sun-fung’s A Beautiful Corpse Comes to Life 《艷屍還魂記》 (1956) also illustrates the degree of atmosphere control the studio set afforded throughout the 50s, 60s and into the 70s, particularly in Shaw productions. Secondly, within these more or less pronounced spaces action is merely stressed against them as background. In Swallow’s Message this translates into vestigial operatic movements: when the protagonist is falsely accused of her husband’s murder, an open conflict ensues composed of a sparse pan capturing the stylized back and forth as opera-like as possible. In early post-war wuxia, on the other hand, it develops a peculiar form of special effect perhaps best described as on-celluloid animation. Liu Damu remarks,

> Animated special effects were a common feature shared by the supernatural category of opera films and the wuxia or martial arts films in the Hongkong cinema. A common effect was the ray of white light which signified elements which were both promoting and fighting themselves within a magic circle of events in a struggle for superiority between good and evil.405

All manner of projected superhuman powers were physically etched into the film

---

material in an effort to present visually what *wuxia* literature could express and allude to with lyrical gracefulness. The resultant gap between masterful elegance and its brittle visual echo is what produces its campy allure, the unintended subversion of culture\(^406\), particularly when revisiting these films today. The representation of momentum is in this sense stifled by the static construction of space which impedes the dynamic thrust demanded by the material. As a result, it takes on little character beyond generic milieus and occasional forays into the eerie. In what follows I will trace the emergence of the kinetic construction which utilizes subtraction in the form of framing and editing and engenders the stylistic specificity commonly associated with Hong Kong cinema.

*Kinetic Construction*

The dramatic changes in 70s cinema at the root of what now strikes us as Hong Kong style form a complex network of interaction. They are routinely and adequately conceptualized as a re-emergence of localized content on the heels of an increasingly independent local identity and certain technical advances. Li Cheuk-to notes an indiscriminate use of zoom lenses “to avoid changing camera positions, or track shots, which take time to set up”\(^407\), particularly in director Chang Cheh’s work, illustrating the dependence of style on budget (as well as a degree of convergence with exploitation cinema of the period in general). Li then characterizes the general changes as follows:

The overuse of zooms was directly related to the popularity of kung-fu films and action movies, since both genres concentrate on action and speed. The more sophisticated directors, when handling action sequences, would employ special lenses, rapid editing, hand-held camera, or solve their problems by camera positions. The less sophisticated filmmakers would try to achieve the same effects by using zooms.

These technical styles were catered to the action films of the 70s, and they are completely different from the theatrical styles of the films in the 50s and 60s. In general, the non-action scenes in 70s films are characterised by rapid cutting and the lack of intricate mise-en-scene. The action scenes, depending on the

\(^{406}\) Cf. Lee C., “Guanyu camp.”

\(^{407}\) Li C., “Postscript,” 131.
nature of the film, can be summarised in two groups: contemporary thrillers are montage based, and kung-fu films are based on long takes, so as to exploit the skills of the stars. It is a pro-filmic event entirely directed by the martial arts instructor, and it has little to do with the art of mise-en-scene. Through the frequent long takes, the tradition of stage aesthetics of post-war Hong Kong cinema is preserved, though the purpose was no longer for “drama”, but to document “spectacles”.408

The distinction between non-action and action is somewhat ambiguous and perhaps not as easy to maintain as it may seem. Nevertheless one notes the general demand for motion, change, and speed. A demand that can be mapped directly to the rapid socio-economic transformation of Hong Kong at the time and manifests itself technically in the more or less sophisticated use of equipment. Before elaborating this set of developments in the framework of classical aesthetics, I will retrace some of Li’s remarks within the selection of this thesis.

One of the arguments made is a retention of post-war stage aesthetics into the genre of gongfu specifically against titles set in contemporary Hong Kong. I covered this stage-like quality with respect to Swallow’s Message, Malaya Love Affair and one could equally include The Greatest Civil War on Earth. Between the stylistically split wuxia entry The Little Warrior and the more typical gongfu title Mad Monkey Kung Fu we can contextualize this moment in stylistic development further. The prologue to Warrior presents the sophisticated mobility both in camera work and editing. In stark contrast to extended outdoor scenes of dialogue and travel, the action scenes, presumably heavily influenced by the choreography work of Lau Kar-leung and Tong Gaai, exhibit the aforementioned affinity to the theatrical of post-war cinema in long choreographed exchanges like the ones highlighting Hsiao Ho’s acrobatic talents in Mad Monkey. In the prologue to The Little Warrior the slow pan is substituted with agile camera movements along the edge of the stage as well as sharp zooms into poses reminiscent of Japanese samurai films. The introduction to Deaf and Mute Heroine takes this further by stopping action at its apex in stills to support the titles. Furthermore, outdoor confrontations in The Little Warrior are shot entirely

408 Ibid.
towards assembly in editing – the fight against Monk Tat Lat illustrates this nicely - and thus tend away from the ‘spectacular long take’.

Amending early ‘non-style’, gongfu illustrates ways of further subjectivizing the constructed point of view. Scenarios are now often doubly framed: static shots from a partly obstructed view of the action no longer read like a neutral view, but rather engage us as secret observers to secret events. Long takes of combat are upgraded with close-ups of technique, further emphasizing our ability to read the macroscopic flow of action as a back and forth of microscopic events. Still firmly attached to a realism of time and space, gongfu exhibits an affinity to traditional aesthetics in the way momentum is assembled from details structuring a larger flow. Furthermore, it now casts the audience in a privileged position to witness and adequately read action.

This transition out of the impasse of ‘surrogate theatre’ in which a spontaneous realism imposed by the medium obstructed local style thus illustrates the necessarily subjective qualities of visual architecture: action is exposed as a coherent ‘dance’, but it also ‘imposes’ the position enabling this coherence. From the perspective of yin it thus exhibits cultural specificity. The visual character of gongfu can of course be related to global cinema as references to the use of zoom lenses and Japanese influences suggested. In Mad Monkey and many titles mainly concerned with the transmission of martial arts and their application, sets, their framing, but most of all the sustained presentation of action elevated into a genre makes for its formula. Space remains the constant against which action is performed. Even a title as innovative as Bruce Lee’s Way of the Dragon is stylistically realist, albeit subjectively engaged: his use of the “pause/burst/pause pattern” can certainly be connected to Japanese cinema and the Western. It presents an economy that is closer to real-life combat, breaking with operatic choreography and cool throughout the tension of the face-off, yet emphatic in the delivery of force out of stasis. In my discussion of the title I noted the many parallels to wuxia in structure and gongfu in articulation: Lee’s warm-up alongside a cat illustrates the latter as a recourse to the origin of Chinese martial arts in

409 Bordwell, Planet Hong Kong, 2nd ed., 140.
totemic mimicry. The Colosseum finale also exhibits the level of subjective engagement Lee wanted to produce as a director when he puts us directly into the heads of the combatants emulating their points of view.

Other basic effects designed to heighten the impact by manipulating time are also part and parcel of 70s and 80s action filmmaking including Lee’s most successful works. Freezing motion at its apex is common as well as the use of slow motion and/or redoubled shots. Inherently these otherwise unnatural devices point towards a more thorough subjection of time in perceived motion, just as Lee’s trademark flying kick points towards a defiance of space and gravity. This kinetic construction, the subjection of space and time to individual momentum, had already developed in wuxia and is most often linked to King Hu. I am here not concerned with pinpointing the exact urtext to these stylistic innovations. While this might be possible in retrospect, style will always be an effect to a whole field of texts. As mentioned, the outdoor confrontation between the protagonist and the Monk Tat Lat in Little Warrior already displays the kind of stylistic features which come to define Hong Kong style from the mid-80s into the 90s.

In order to explicate the stylistic features of kinetic construction in more detail, Hard Boiled will serve as a salient example, although the amplification of momentum by way of kinetic construction could also reference Chinese Odyssey. The teahouse sequence at the beginning of Hard Boiled is preferable in so far as the film presents momentum in a rather serious context (unlike Stephen Chow’s citation of this style) and exemplifies the reach of kinetic construction beyond wuxia. Unfortunately a shot analysis of a single sequence like the one at hand would already require its own chapter, whereas I want to remark on some of its features here in relation to the broader issue of stylistic specificity at stake. To get a feel of just how complex shots and cuts become at this level in the evolution of style, one needs only to look at the parameters of the sequence: starting with the ascent of the teahouse steps (which also marks the last entry of the credits) and ending with Tequila’s ghost-like execution of the gunrunners’ boss it spans roughly 170 shots. At a length of approximately 7 minutes, that is 2-3 seconds per
shot on average. What is remarkable is the success of the scene in relating both
the frantic movements of everybody involved and a relatively clear notion of
combat at the same time.

The key to producing this impression is the subjective construction of time and
space throughout, particularly pronounced around motion. In new school martial
arts titles of the 80s and 90s we find the use of the speed-up in full, medium and
American shots and slow motion in close-ups and ultra close-ups in a manner that
allows for the stretching of time and ‘hang time’ in critical moments while not
impeding the general sensation of speed. Woo, while not employing speed-up,
also uses slow motion extensively. A number of shots during the observation
period at the beginning are slowed down considerably. Often superimposed
dialogue or sound effects will naturalize this slowed time against real-time shots
for the viewer. The use of slow motion first effects a feeling of heightened
awareness continued into the actual fire fight. The exposition of this rather
crammed environment cuts varying shots of the establishment as a whole against a
number of details – bird cages, dim sum, etc. - effecting an almost poetic feel to
the tense atmosphere at the edge of grinding to a complete stop.

Whereas peak *gongfu* engaged us in subjective surveillance by re-framing
action as if viewed from the scenery (as opposed to a theatre seat) and elaborating
technique with interspersed close-ups of ‘micro-events’, the subjective point of
view takes on an almost lyrical quality as it includes shots corresponding to
various characters integrated by way of editing. To follow the action, Woo’s
images have to clarify axes of interchange since the use of fire arms makes for
volatile exchanges not prescribed by the direction of movement. Here the director
employs the traditional architecture of shot and countershot mainly highlighting
origin and impact. In addition to slow-motion, both the artistry of firing at full
speed and the brutality of impact are emphasized through the doubling of similar
shots in slightly different formats.

As a stylistic adaptation of martial arts style to the modern setting, Woo
essentially tones down the exaggeration of fully expanded time by abstaining
from speed-ups and temporally consecutive close-ups, which can potentially delay
landing indefinitely by intercutting between various parties. Instead he stretches


time as subjectively experienced by doubling moments of import: death in


particular replays in the minds of those shot (and for the fascinated viewer). Close-ups and medium close-ups of faces and the fading to and from the birds in


their cages above give a number of cuts an air of personal perception, rather than the third person view used extensively to describe motion. Zooming in and out on faces and around the position of the opponent in frames that see that person enter, leave or getting stuck in some narrow space of the topography all serve to evoke the concentration on a moving target through the eyes of another. This looking-upon carries with it the distinct feel of inhabiting someone’s point of view which the architecture slides in and out of.

The result is a very effective coherence of various angles in subjective time and arrangement. In this manner, Woo succeeds at striking a precarious balance between the kinetic chaos of the teahouse and the precision needed to navigate this environment. Constructed as a play between third person photography and the fluid insinuation of subjectivity, style arises from this juxtaposition. Since the over-the-shoulder shot is commonly used to stand in for the direct point-of-view shot, one can ascribe particular shots to various individuals throughout the teahouse. Shot-countershot exchanges can be interpreted as a dialogue of sorts, but a careful examination also reveals shots which do not appear to correspond to any character’s point of view. In contrast to peak gongfu, our position is no longer that of a stationary (secret) observer but an ‘omniscient’ third person perspective, which is nevertheless caught in the thoroughly subjective perception of movement. Aesthetic order thus hinges on (technical) concealment; the manner in which shots are manipulated and assembled only effects coherence (or continuity) by virtue of sophisticated subtraction.

The features of kinetic construction outlined in this example demonstrate how the demand for momentum achieves coherence by way of editing. The resulting style is not opposed to continuity. In spite of the camera’s spontaneous realism in its apparent emulation of natural perception through time, film necessarily distorts. This distortion is merely easier to recognize in the encounter with this
specific style as it sheds any residual inclination for realism. As such, kinetic construction enables a criticism of style in style I will now address.

*The End of Hong Kong Cinema*

The example of *Hard Boiled* outlines the specificity of kinetic construction we recognize as Hong Kong style in spite of the many idiosyncrasies of Woo’s direction. Motion and exchange, that is the body in action as viewed from an invested position, form its stylistic centre. As a result, both space and time are increasingly warped around kinetic energy. This is achieved technically by framing action at angles insinuating engaged positions, manipulating time against real time, and by assembling shots in ways that stretch time and contract or abbreviate space. The film thus indicates how these stylistic features originally devised in the context of wuxia come to dominate action as such. However, the latter necessarily subdues space in its most complex articulations to a point of launch, an obstacle to be avoided, or a site of impact signaling loss of control. King Hu’s bamboo forest is indicative in this sense because it combines the purely geometric features of an obstacle course in which every element is essentially an exchangeable line with a potent symbol of Chinese tradition, a sociality of growth swaying in the wind of virtue.

*Hard Boiled* as an action thriller is necessarily more grounded in its surroundings, synthesizing a naturalism of non-action with the heightened subjectivity of action. An interesting example of this grounding is the beginning to Michael Hui’s *The Private Eyes*: the empty streets of Hong Kong suddenly explode with people before the relationship between them and the streets is elaborated in the skit around a traveling pair of iconic tennis shoes 「白飯魚」struggling through the environment. Read against the scene at the supermarket aimed at grounding the pazazz of orthodox fist fighting in modern reality in a play on gongfu and Bruce Lee, we can see the effects the emerging localization of Hong Kong cinema in the 70s had in and on the traditions of established genres. If we take the Hui brothers and Stephen Chow to be the definition of Hong Kong
comedy, the latter turns out to be nothing but a play on its iconic genres – the naturalization of myth in modernity and the re-mythification of modernity respectively. In other words, leaving the stage-like presentation of Hong Kong in a title like *The Greatest Civil War* behind, yet taking its clues from the lofty movements of *wuxia* meant that characters would get their hands dirty in style. A title like Jackie Chan’s *Police Story* illustrates this tendency of physically taking on the urban landscape and, in a sense, testing *wuxia* motion in a modern environment. Chan’s performances – like his descent down a cliff face or his jump through the decorations at a mall – are of course highlighted by slow-motion and double takes.

Surveyed from the classically inspired action genres in Hong Kong cinema which ground stylistic specificity, a dynamic between physical hardship in contact with the environment and mythic elevation beyond space/time is easily recognizable. Synthesis of the two as well as resurgences of pure *wuxia* style now aided by CGI have granted this form longevity into the new millennium. Nevertheless, a certain deterioration in style is felt as its expressions, be they fully articulated in the premodern frame or comically set against the realities of gravity and capital, have become less and less pronounced. At least two stylistic paths present themselves at this juncture.

Parallel to the comedic approach of mythological movement and a heroism of pure style, we have already seen more artistic radicalizations of kinetically constructed space. We can read Wong Kar-wai in this context as a director experimenting by both choking movement to dwell “on static compositions and ambivalent moods” like “Western art cinema”\footnote{Ibid., 5.} - *In the Mood for Love* would be a prime example – or accelerate kinetic construction even further. Remarking on the style of *Ashes of Time* 《東邪西毒》 (1994) Dissanayake explains:

The focus of the camera [in the majority of martial arts films] is on the human body and the actions performed by it. Very often the action takes place in a clearly demarcated and limited space. To follow the story is to follow the bodies in action. The long shot and the medium long shot, with their emphasis
on action, are constantly employed by the directors. The objective of camerawork is to intensify the emotions generated through action by maximizing the visibility. In the case of *Ashes of Time* the opposite is the case; as Abbas has pointed out, it is the invisibility that dominates the fight sequences rather than the much sought-after visibility. Very often the action has been speeded up to a blur.\(^{411}\)

The gist of kinetic construction is delivered in this quote, although the relationship to premodern aesthetics is left untouched. Visibility in martial arts is of course usually maintained: its environment is laid out in non-action and only superseded narratively in the kinetic construction of action. For us to follow that action thus implies access to a privileged knowledge enabling accurate observation of the movements depicted. But here,

We no longer see a choreography of bodies in motion but a *chiaroscuro* of light and colour into which figures and actions have dissolved. The heroic space of action found in Bruce Lee is now a blind space [...]\(^{412}\)

In *Ashes* the environment is a desert and the characters are antagonists to *wuxia* heroes. The result is the conundrum of a perfection in martial arts performed by morally dubious individuals whose actions we are no longer in a position to adequately follow – a much more sophisticated deployment of the premodern framework against modern concerns.

Whereas the comedy subverts style by applying its visual glamour to unglamorous everyday life, style itself becomes an issue, particularly in New Wave engagements with *gongfu* and *wuxia*. *Ashes of Time* is exemplary in this regard because it returns concealment to *yin*: the *jianghu* is a parallel realm supported by extraordinary individuals whose powers escape normal vision and reflexes. The kinetic subjugation of space and time in style essentially makes this superhuman power accessible to vision. That is to say, it puts us in the privileged position to follow action in spite of the speed and intensity of movements. While the choreography of *Ashes* produces such a ‘high speed ballet’, the cinematography no longer supports our appreciation of the teleology of

\(^{411}\) Dissanayake, *Wong Kar-wai’s Ashes of Time*, 89.
\(^{412}\) Abbas, “Hong Kong,” 119.
momentum; the action turns into a blur which can no longer be adequately decoded. In this manner style is defamed as ideology, our privilege to partake in extraordinary power rescinded. The Hong Kong style originally developed to adequately represent the power of the jianghu is returned to intransparency, yin. Read against a mapping of wuxia to the dynamic between Chinese periphery and center, such an occlusion is not without disconcerting overtones.

The other path is one of furthering the independence of space, or perhaps the spatial life of human structures. I have already commented on the intricate observations on Hong Kong as space in Story of a Discharged Prisoner. Beyond the more universal spookiness of atmospherically controlled sets and locales, already evident in early post-war films, Story does not just present slums, institutions and government housing as a class topography against which it mobilizes traditional values. It also characterizes structures like the prison and the court house as awkwardly out of synch with the landscape. Against nature as a living mirror to human society, its slow growth expanding in spite of catastrophic events, human architecture now haunts our vision. Alienated in its locale, it exhibits an unnatural life sucking us in. This tendency also runs through Exodus where rooms, hallways, staircases, etc. seem to hypnotically beckon.

It remains to be seen whether such a reassertion of space against the body and its movement will coalesce into specific stylistic features, mainly because it does not resonate with the premodern like the teleological construction of momentum did. The representation of space independent of movement is perhaps too close to spontaneous realism to engender specificity. It is also easily linked to the sheer size and volume of modernity’s transformation of the environment and thus evident in cinema globally. Nevertheless, the dynamic between kinetic construction and an element of independence found in space itself certainly has the discursive potential to become stylistically specific. That is, in the specific context of Hong Kong style long governed by momentum an affirmation or exploration of space reads as a response. In so far as such a development is yet unrealized, the situation presents like the slowly progressing end of Hong Kong cinema. Kinetic construction, already disputed in its comedic and artistic
subversions, feels exhausted.

*The Stylistic Trajectory and Yin*

I began with the premodern aesthetics of the ‘w/hole’, which connects to *yin* in so far as it produces an artificial border – it excludes to express a totality. Stylistically this holds true for both the highbrow methods of painting and the vernacular entertainment of the opera, which in turn was one immediate influence of Cantonese filmmaking in the early post-war period. From this dynamic I extracted the specific concern for growth and living movement as opposed to realism in the general sense. However, the translation of this approach into cinema proved difficult in the new medium. In so far as film can only subtract the outside from the inside of the frame and the ‘space’ between shots that are spliced together in editing, the ‘w/hole’ cannot be reproduced directly in cinema.

The trajectory I constructed in this framework is one of a developing translation of this specificity in spite of these difficulties. The baseline to the stylistic innovations which would turn into formulaic style was the spontaneous realism of the ‘surrogate theatre’. Here action follows the restraint of the medium by adding to the frame in on-celluloid animation or recourse to operatic stylizations, but it controls neither time nor space. The next step consisted in embedding the viewer into the scenery in engaged positions of observation highlighting microscopic details of technique in the macroscopic long-take performance. Here a first movement away from theatricality can be noted. But it is in the kinetic construction which warps space/time around momentum that specific style emerges. What was concealed in extraordinary control over the body can now be adequately represented in the new medium by way of shot composition and editing. Style becomes ideology in so far as this surplus in vitality can now be constructed around any actor cinematically.

As a result, style becomes vulnerable to mis/appropriation: the comedy transposes kinetic construction onto the ordinary to comic effect. This effectively reflects how style can be applied to anything to a similar effect. More artistic
subversions of style return momentum and vitality to concealment by disabling our access to the details of movement - style becomes untrue. Adorno notes,

The aporia of art, pulled between regression to literal magic or surrender of the mimetic impulse to thinglike rationality, dictates its law of motion; its aporia cannot be eliminated.\footnote{Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 54.}

Grounded in the premodern assertion of a congruence between natural and social order, the aesthetic projection of vitality in kinetic construction reinforces a magical or metaphysical faith in balance (discussed narratively in the last chapter). Its comedic subversion represents the moment of subjection to rationality; its artistic subversion, on the other hand, forces the realization of its magical powers of coherence in their occlusion. Adorno’s reference to the seemingly empirical term ‘law of motion’ (Bewegungsgesetz) with its Newtonian ring thus denotes the dialectics of discursivity, the necessary movement towards the modern impasse or aporia.

Kinetic construction as specificity in this sense (retroactively) conditions all attempts to escape style. I hinted at this in the latent stylistic interest in space, specifically in regard to *Story of a Discharged Prisoner* and *Exodus*. This interest eludes specificity because the framework of yin - here unpacked in terms of technique as the notion of the ‘w/whole’ - and momentum grounded in vitality find no characteristic support in these cinematic approaches. Since popular culture tends towards the spectacle, the development of increasingly sophisticated constructions of heroic vitality are not surprising. I detailed this development as a consequence of making the jianghu ‘available’ to vision; but it also makes style vulnerable to comedic misappropriation and stylistic resistance. Extraordinary vitality is as easily occluded as it was exposed in style. Adopting the perspective of yin directly engenders the in- and outside of specificity and postulates their relation in its structuralism. The following conclusion reflects on the effects of this structuralism inherent to university discourse and summarizes the interrogation of specificity vis-a-vis Adornian concerns.
Conclusion

Previous chapters developed the specificity of Hong Kong cinema grounded in its discursive deployment of tradition. The aim was to explicate the meaning of traditional motifs and tropes in their mediation and reconstruct the ‘law of motion’ inherent in their deployment. The framework obviously limits the scope to one type of media, commercial cinema, one comparatively small geographic region, a certain time frame, and point of entry. In an etiology of globalized modernity this seems less problematic in so far as the inquiry into a mainstay of popular culture should yield a set of symptoms in shapes specific to Hong Kong, yet imbricated in the network making up the modern world system as a whole.

The fundamental issue with an academic project such as this or university discourse in general is what Adorno terms “academic polish” (*akademische Glätte*)\(^{414}\). This polish, or smoothness, refers to the reasonable standard of a systematic, coherent, even exhausting presentation of a field. It is the ideal of reducing a multiple to its basic forms and internal dynamics in a manner akin to the natural sciences. However one might revise these standards for the humanities, a fundamental openness with regard to meaning/s is at odds with our necessity to contain and zero in to even begin a reading. The strategy of abstracting towards a general law or tendency which gives concepts their explanatory power also subjugates the particular to identity, reproduces the logic of exchange. Adorno was of course acutely aware of this issue and his interest in art and the individual art work in contrast to industry - cultural, academic, or otherwise - derives from it.

Against ‘identity thinking’ he formulated his *Negative Dialectics* which “stresses that criticism does not reproduce what is criticised.”\(^{415}\) The aim of making sense of Hong Kong cinema through a concept of tradition is in this sense non-Adornian, because construing a discursive relationship between films supposes an instrumental understanding of texts in which a distinct set of positions adequately represents the whole dynamic - a type of structuralism. Adorno’s rejection of the culture industry is based in the judgement of the modern

\(^{414}\)Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 188.
structure as progressively reifying and thus self-reinforcing.

The rejection of this tendency permeates his statements and this negativity marks both format and style of Adorno’s writings: the fragments of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the occasionally labyrinthine sentence structure, or the block of text making up the *Aesthetic Theory*. In so far as thought is to grapple with the remainder of identity and refrain from further adjusting/mangling the thing (both meanings are present in the German *zurichten* which Adorno used)\(^{416}\), his own project took the shape of a “philosophically informed sociology of the culture industry, and a sociologically informed philosophy of high modernist art.”\(^{417}\) Not because interdisciplinary research might open up new fields of knowledge, but because the “same forces of fragmentation and reification which have produced the great divide between high art and the culture industry produced the division of labour among the various disciplines.”\(^{418}\) Adorno’s project can in this sense be characterized as an attempt to break with university discourse.

The problem of specificity, the focus here, is complex, because it develops the holism inherent to Adorno’s theoretical position within the discourse of mass culture presenting as an inescapable structure. As emphasized throughout, specificity cannot be approached from an empirical vantage, because the purely empirical perspective has to treat every film as singular. Consequently, it cannot account for meaning. Where film studies harbor empiricist tendencies, they expresses themselves in references to false objective standards such as financial success or critical acclaim. By the same token, where cultural studies asserts the critical moment of a particular text, it has to do so within a conceptual framework of objective social relations which the excavated critique impacts. As elaborated

---

\(^{416}\) Throughout the thesis I have quoted Hegel where Adorno’s anti-Hegelianism did not appear pertinent. The discussion of Hong Kong cinema simply did not offer the space for a reflection on their differences. On this issue Karen Ng notes, “[…] the closeness of Hegel’s logic to Adornian negative dialectics where ‘objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder’; Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 5. At first glance, the idea ‘that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived’ (ibid.) may seem precisely contrary to speculative logic; however, as long as one does not interpret the ‘remainder’ as that which is inaccessible to thought, but as that which thought must continually redetermine in light of the continual reconfiguration of real (and thus always already thought) conditions and circumstances, then I see Adorno’s statements to be precisely in the spirit of speculative logic and dialectics.” (Ng, K., “Hegel’s Logic of Actuality,” 168.)

\(^{417}\) Bernstein, introduction, 3.

\(^{418}\) Ibid.
in numerous references to Adorno, for him such an impact is blocked in mass
culture due to instrumental rationality. To elaborate the implications of this
deadlock, this chapter will first summarize the specific trajectories developed
highlighting the import of *yin* and discursive development of traditional elements
in its reaction to the Hong Kong position. Towards the end, I will then spell out
the Adornian criticism of the culture industry for an outlook towards critical
engagements initiated through Hong Kong cinema.

*The Structuralism of Specificity*

One of the most obvious features of Hong Kong cinema is the importance of the
historical or, perhaps more adequately, the historically inspired. The
preoccupation with the historically inspired motivated this exploration of
specificity as a mediation of Chinese tradition; it both attests to Hong Kong’s
anchoring in Chineseness and forms the cinematic ground for its discursive
development beyond an abstract projection of tradition. The preoccupation
engenders prominent and characteristic genres, in particular *wuxia*, many *gongfu*
titles, and most of the post-war opera films, but also the period drama 「古装
片」和/or biopic419. The detailed readings in previous chapters covered some of
these genres in the context of various themes.

Approaching specificity from this preoccupation, we are immediately drawn
into a discussion of the cultivated reverence for China’s imperial past - a
reverence which is itself part of a complex history. I remarked on the particular
position of Hong Kong in the ongoing struggle for interpretive supremacy over
the traditional throughout. In contrast to the (initially) clear-cut division between
an overcoming of old hierarchies in the PRC and the retention of the classical
canon in Taiwanese ‘exile’, for the ex-/colony any wholesale affirmation of pan-
Chinese heritage while acting against Western aggression and Communist anti-
traditionalism alike, also marks its particularity as tainted hybridity.

---

419 The discussion here is limited to film, meaning a genre like the historical drama prominent in
local television is excluded, although certainly relevant to the larger context.
Caught in this bind, constantly revisiting the premodern narratively is no surprise. In comparison to Western cinema where premodern settings are not unheard of but distinctly less pronounced, it appears at first glance as escapism into a glorious past. The mere choice of the premodern as narrative space, irrespective of individual plots, effects a non-Western, anti-Communist sentiment aligning Hong Kong with the Cultural Chinese periphery, a periphery invested in the correction of the center. At the same time the position from which these texts are mediated is one of globalized capital. This makes for a performative contradiction in the use of the premodern as a narrative backdrop: the chasm separating socio-political reality from cinematic projection obscures the fact that the flight into indigenous authenticity originates at an epicenter of modernity. In so far as we take the fascination with imperial heroism and grandeur to be an expression of a collective longing for the irretrievably past only, it does indeed amount to little more than escapism.

This obviously limited view on the historically inspired implies a completely external hermeneutical position or the possibility of a text to fully disengage an individual from present circumstances, be it in production or in reception. As soon as one begins to reflect on the particular content framed in pseudo-/history, however, the present interferes. This forms the complex starting point to the thesis as the mediation of tradition in Hong Kong cinema is necessarily critical: a narrative deployment of tradition cannot be neutral and is always a motivated commitment in the context of the whole of Hong Kong’s ‘diasporic reality’. Adopting the perspective of genres, the issue is further illustrated in the contrast with science fiction. As the temporal opposite to the historical, the latter is almost non-existent in Hong Kong cinema apart from a few, perhaps all the more interesting exceptions. Thus a connection between the staging of pseudo-/history and the lack of projection into the future crystallizes.

Yet applying a minimal definition of utopia as “the critique of that which exists

\[\text{Frank, What is Neostructuralism, 447.}\]
and the representation of that which should be,”\textsuperscript{421} the depiction of a past fits just as much as a projected future. Staged past and projected future are in this sense symmetrical with respect to the present from which they originate. However, the insistence on the past restricts concrete plots by framing all the historically inspired genres in an ‘abstract nationalism’ in so far as a vision of Chineseness as concrete universal remains elusive. \textit{Wuxia} in particular screens this lack as tradition is constantly evoked (in contrast to the PRC) but supports only abstract affirmation. The example of \textit{The Little Warrior} emphasized this in the way a metaphysical figure of heroism saves the royal lineage. Emerging from the periphery, much like the Hong Kong produced film, the coherence of Chineseness is guaranteed. But beyond the extra-diegetic locus of production the film cannot relate the two peripheries and constructively articulate the meaning of Hong Kong for a future Chineseness.

The emergence of \textit{gongfu} as a narrative concerned mainly with the acquisition of the power to resist integrates abstract commitments to Chineseness and Hong Kong modernity more convincingly. In contrast to \textit{wuxia} where pro- and antagonists are set to replicate the struggle between secret schools, \textit{gongfu} emancipates the individual nobody against ‘the powers that be’. Loyalty to master and teaching as well as physical discipline become ‘traditional values’ narratively retrieved for modern individualism and the appeal of this formula is underlined by its relative international success. Embedded into historical struggles against foreign occupation, evil usurpers, or extorting bullies, the genre can vaguely allude to a whole spectrum of micro- and macroscopic threats. The upshot with respect to the Hong Kong position is that it no longer presents some mythical whole regulated from the shadows of the \textit{jianghu} but instead emphasizes a process of individualized adaptation of knowledge enabling active resistance.

The \textit{gongfu} comedies in particular depict heroes often inadequately equipped with only half-knowledge and prone to blunder. In so far as choice overrides privilege, and accidental innovation supersedes correct form, a Daoist complementarity integrates the flaw of hybridity haunting Hong Kong. The

\textsuperscript{421} Horkheimer, “Was ist Utopie,” 186; “In der Tat hat die Utopie zwei Seiten; sie ist die Kritik dessen, was ist, und die Darstellung dessen, was sein soll.” (my translation).
downside to action in general is that resistance always finds an individualized
target which can be directly opposed and overcome in physical struggle. Bruce
Lee’s version of Chinese gongfu is exemplary here because it directs the power of
resistance at the appropriate targets - Chinese patriarchy and Western hegemony -
and no longer dwells on the Qing. Furthermore, his film highlights the
representationalism of the action formula by superimposing the rather inadequate
jianghu structure onto the metaphorical struggle against lingering imperialism in
modern-day Rome. Similarly, the performative aspects of his martial arts were
reconstructed as a mobilization of individual transformations of traditions rather
than an advocacy of Chinese gongfu as the only true practice.

The specificity of traditional motifs engendered by the initial transplantation of
popular Chinese materials onto the screen is already critical to the extent that it
abstractly affirms Chineseness against PRC communism and imperialist
balkanization. These materials are then continually developed in Hong Kong
cinema as a specific discourse which - constructed as such - remedies the
shortcomings of previous formulas. The reemergence of wuxia in recent years
confirms this in so far as joint PRC-Hong-Kong-Taiwan productions regress to
abstract projections of inclusive Chineseness consciously evading any
confrontation with the geopolitical situation.

The comfort granted by narrative reverence for the past is complemented by
the relative intensity of interpersonal relationships. When treated with a degree of
seriousness, the premodern setting impresses a severity of life-and-death mostly
lost to the modern everyday and evoking an “awareness of the possibility of
relations without purpose.”422 Whereas the interpersonal bond has continuously
eroded under instrumental reason, friendship and love retain their defining
unconditionality in narrative nostalgia. In the context of predominantly male
martial arts the intensity of this unconditional bonding has led some to detect
homosexual undertones.423 Readings of this type miss the larger point of decrying
the slow decline of bonding in general. I fail to see critical value in such
‘queering’ against the knowledge that “the ideologies of sexism and racism [...]”

422 Adorno, Minima Moralia, 41.
were always incompatible and regressive with respect to the egalitarian logic of legal persons in the market-place\textsuperscript{424} and in light of the kind of raced emasculation Bruce Lee objected to so vigorously.

Of course narrative resuscitations of ‘true’ interpersonal bonding form the core of many genres; one could cite the war movie or the hospital drama as potent examples. But in the action-oriented genres of Hong Kong cinema they gravitate around the premodern either in direct constructions or transpositions into a modern setting. I remarked on John Woo in particular whose films stage the drama of male bonding in the tension between archaic affinities and the legal order: older brother Triad, younger brother police in \textit{A Better Tomorrow} or professional hitman and officer of the law in \textit{The Killer}. It is for this reason that I organized my discussion of this important aspect around the theme of law and the way it cuts across relations of blood and sworn affiliation.

In contrast to the opera film which had considerable success in the early post-war period by visually ‘enriching’ traditional plots and transporting famous opera performers throughout the region, the conflict between forms of family relation and the modern legal order shaped and developed in Hong Kong cinema past the demise of surrogate theatre. I outlined this development particularly between \textit{Story of a Discharged Prisoner} and \textit{Hard Boiled}: both films triangulate familial bonds against the legal order. The former focuses on the \textit{discharged} protagonist between mother, younger brother, and Triad boss against foreign institutions of modern law. Prison, court, and police loom clumsily, partially blind and can therefore be ‘played’ in the protagonist’s final sacrifice to the integrity of his family. In \textit{Hard Boiled}, on the other hand, relentless adherence to the legal text is directly incarnated in the figure of Tequilla, who is in love with another police worker and whose ‘home’ is a jazz club. Pitted against equally relentless entrepreneurship, the result is a total war in which all the more complex positions characteristic of traditional hierarchy become impossible: the benevolent Triad ‘Godfather’, the honorable \textit{jianghu} enforcer, and of course the undercover agent.

Obviously the movement between these two films does not exhaust the process

\textsuperscript{424} Bernstein, introduction, 23.
of Hong Kong cinema - stories of Triads, heists, and undercover work still dominate the action genres. The commercial success of series like *Young and Dangerous* or *Infernal Affairs* attest to that. But these films do not add to the discourse around the legal order in a critically relevant manner. *Young and Dangerous* is successful in so far as it stabilizes the Hong Kong position: the rise through the ranks steeped in the lore of secret societies conserves tradition locally against mainland communism, while inner city clan warfare and cooperation with dynasties of organized crime in Taiwan and Japan divulge an otherwise hidden political power denied to Hong Kong in colonialism. But this apparently positive position - positive in so far as it resists both the mainland and the West - is really nothing more than an affirmation of family and business. Even the ‘lower class’, *Lumpen* element loses its edge when the resultant narrative remystifies power as a secret position of privilege. *Infernal Affairs*, on the other hand, while conspicuously constructed to equate old and new law, fails to resolve the antinomy between the two into anything constructive: the allusion to Buddhism in the Chinese title amounts to little more than stoic indifference to an ‘ocean of suffering’ 「苦海」 underlined by the alternate ending: it literally does not matter whose ‘mole’ wins out in the end as mundane toiling continually reproduces. By contrast, the figure of Panther in *Life Without Principle* who functions as the slightly aged successor to suave Hong Kong criminals accounts for the change in Hong Kong’s position past the handover.

Among the actioners I also invoked *Police Story*, partly as an opportunity to discuss Jackie Chan, but also as an example of a formula equally prominent in the West: namely the paradoxical need to suspend law in order to reinstate it in times of rampant crime and corruption. Such a unilateral reversal into a ‘state of emergency’ in which rules have to be bent, if not dispensed with, to preserve the legal are a commonplace. The traditional Confucian fear of machinic enforcement of the legal text, as presented for instance in Kuei Chih-Hung’s (桂治洪) figure of the *Killer Constable* 《萬人斬》 (1981), however, has all but disappeared from Hong Kong cinema. Although inspired by *Dirty Harry*, Tequila still instantiates this particular constellation and plays out its consequences in a modern day
setting. Since then, however, the problematic of law as such has been mostly abandoned, presumably because the preservation of the legal order in the ex-colony bolsters its image of an ‘Asian values’ open market against the arbitrary rule of party force on the mainland.

Nostalgia and Mockery

Past *Hard Boiled*, the twin symptoms of post-modernity, ‘nostalgia and mockery’[^425], become more and more apparent. We can chart the rise of ironic distancing typical of the post-modern, particularly in the comedies. In *The Greatest Civil War on Earth* we laugh at the elderly patriarchs in their extravagant grumpiness, but the figures and their concerns are left intact. The quintessentially 60s motif of a generational conflict between the romantic interests of the young and their disapproving fathers here serves to support a reforging of Chinese unity in family against the separatism of the old north-south-rivalry. Familial bond and business joint venture thus ensure political accord, while the film’s insistence on the bilingual integrates a prominent element of the local. With the Hui brothers these concerns lose relevance as the microcosm of life in the colony takes precedence. On top of slapstick and puns making up the humorous interactions between the trio (or duo, depending on the title), comedy is now generated from the awkward side-by-side of the traditional and the modern, their non-integration and interaction.

The characteristic position developed in this milieu is that of the street-smart ‘navigator’ who helps himself to whatever aspect of the modern potpourri serves immediate interests best. In itself such an outlook is in no way specific to Hong Kong; rather it marks modernity as such, forcing a perspective of sly, even cynical economizing. Equally typical for the non-Hollywood comedy is the emphasis on local language (influential also in Sam Hui’s singing career) and the fondness for the spoof. Both are refined by Stephen Chow who focuses these aspects through

[^425]: See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 74. (“But capitalism inherently possesses the power to derealize familiar objects, social roles, and institutions to such a degree that the so-called realistic representations can no longer evoke reality except as nostalgia or mockery, as an occasion for suffering rather than for satisfaction.”)
the staged juxtaposition of premodern and modern. Inserting a modern mindset into the premodern hierarchy or the phantasy of magical martial prowess into the contemporary city, the comedic ‘fusion of horizons’ leaves very little safe from ridicule. Throughout the 80s and 90s the position created is the smart-alecky persona Chow reiterated many times. Post-handover, however, individual outwitting has given way to quirky appeals to the marginalized communal beyond Hong Kong.426

Chow’s comic recycling tends towards post-modern mockery. In so far as he comically subverts the traditional elements already deployed in Hong Kong cinema and ossified in formula, he is certainly part of the discourse which developed precisely on the basis of these traditional elements. His mocking of tradition is indecisive, however, where it sabotages formula in its (partial) reproduction. Lai offers an explanation along a,

[…] practice [of] “enigmatization,” that is, the selection and reorganization of existing images from popular culture in order to distinctly select the local audience as a privileged hermeneutic community, thus facilitating a state of internal dialogue, distinguishing those within from the “outsiders” by marking who partakes in a shared history of popular culture. Enigmatization is necessary, I argue, to preserve a textual domain where local expressions, memories, and contentions that may potentially contradict official views will find articulation. Enigmatization preserves freedom - of sentiments, thoughts, and speech - from below. I shall identify two groups of films that carry enigmatizing functions for detailed examinations - the “nostalgia films” and the comedian Stephen Chiau’s “cinema of nonsense.”427

She thus invokes the structure of a corrective periphery. ‘Enigmatization’ is a way to conceal contradicting views and support a ‘secret’ dialogue. Inclusive Chineseness is no longer a wish but a reality for Hong Kong. As a result, the originally internal dynamics of yin restrain the negativity of peripheral culture to a privileged space of dissent. Imbricated in the dynamic, however, the critical impact of such dissent is questionable as the special status of the ex-colony is expressively founded as an inclusion of the alternate. As the discursive

426 See also Yam, “A Secular Gospel for the Marginal.”
development reaches the post-modern impasse of cynicism and romanticism, this inclusion appears to foreclose any impact one might attribute to their aesthetic particularity.

In the context of subversion I also discussed films commonly labelled as art house and CAT III. As ‘quasi-genres’, the former shelters the (abstract) claim to cinematic art beyond mere entertainment, the latter the direct promise to indulge the id against standard morality. Both terms are perhaps more commonly employed in the reception of Hong Kong cinema abroad, where a respected filmmaker like Wong Kar-Wai tours festivals and *The Untold Story* is remastered for an exclusive box set. In cases like Tsui Hark’s *Butterfly Murders* 《蝶變》 (1979) or Wong’s *Ashes of Time* subversion takes the shape of the hijacking of an established formula and thus participates in specificity by reflecting narrative and stylistic form. A film like *Nomad* similarly shatters the romantic comedy by inserting the traumatic element of foreign terrorism. In contrast to comedic subversion tending towards mockery, this openly reflexive element often denying definite resolution sets these titles apart from the mainstream.

*Gong tau* as a relatively short-lived sub-genre of the late 70s and early 80s and *Ebola Syndrome* were the examples I isolated from the ‘genre’ of CAT III in sketching the negativity of Hong Kong identity promoted by the colony’s position constructed by history. As the former exhibit an affinity to the *mondo* films of the 60s and 70s, they are a product of transnational reception. While these entries do not resonate with highbrow tradition as conceptualized in *yin*, they could be traced to long-standing folk traditions. The fear of voodoo sorcery returning to claim the now modern Hong Kong subject appears rooted in some religious practice — *Sex & Zen* 《⽟⽟蒲團》 (1991) comes to mind as an additional reference in this context. Much like CAT III in general, the universal interest in graphic representations of (deviant) sexuality and (exaggerated) violence beyond concrete narrative content can presumably be tracked to various fairy tales and ghost stories specific to the Chinese cultural environment. The CAT III films touched upon in previous chapters, however, were contextualized not in some affinity to the premodern sources informing the notion of *yin*, but as critically relevant advances within the
specific discourse grounded in tradition.

Few films in Hong Kong cinema have managed, or rather hazarded the consequences of a CAT III rating for reasons other than gratuitous visuals. I remarked on Pang Ho-cheung’s *Exodus*, one among many of the director’s efforts to gain the rating for the use of unflattering language. A film like *Love in a Puff*《志明與春嬌》 (2010) is CAT III merely in the locally legal sense, but otherwise reads as an independent ‘romcom’ or drama. Against a changed market dominated by big budget co-productions filmed and released across borders, CAT III and art house converge in a smaller space rearticulating the local in enigmatic formulations. Veg remarks, how *Love*,

us[ed] the recent anti-smoking laws as a pretext for capturing Hong Kong’s spirit of independence and mistrust of government. This film, however, was followed by a more commercial sequel, *Love in a Buff* (2012) [《春嬌與志明》], which was tellingly set in Beijing and qualified as a mainland co-production.428

In contrast to the 80s and 90s when Hong Kong cinema could project itself without concern for the PRC as a market, narratives are now necessarily ‘streamlined’ to fit diverging concerns between those producing, those investing, and potential audiences. Pang’s cinema is the result of such an overextension beyond concrete environments and culturo-political divisions: in place of clean pan-Chinese communicability (supported by dubbing), we find misrecognition between Mandarin and Cantonese speakers; instead of historical epics which lend themselves well to a digestibly ‘abstract nationalism’, the tensions and horrors of Hong Kong are enjoyably inflated and distorted.

Between the general categories of action, both in historical and contemporary settings, comedy, art house and CAT III, I cited the idea of a bifurcation into nostalgia and mockery. As mentioned with respect to the historically inspired, nostalgia is readily attributable to a mainstay of Hong Kong cinema. ‘Abstract nationalism’ is the adequate term in this context because this nostalgia is not a

longing for a concrete historic situation, but a narrative vehicle to affirm the peripheral retention of tradition in virtual cohesion. As the jianghu and its heroes are transposed into urban modernity, so follows the charge of a nostalgic escapism out of the ‘iron cage’ reality. Mockery runs equally strong in the comedies often working precisely the same conjunction of premodern values transposed into the modern, which I employed to ‘lump together’ the majority of Stephen Chow’s work.

The question emerging then is if and how these mindsets are overcome in Hong Kong cinema. Already for Hegel nostalgia and mockery are forms of ‘empty’ or ‘bad subjectivity’: as a form of longing (Sehnsucht) nostalgia evades the present into a subjective interiority. But “Hegel refers all longing to fulfillment in reality, the longing directed at something it itself places at a distance, like the longing roaming in an empty future or a distant past.” Mockery, on the other hand, potentially inflates the ego in the utter ridicule of everything present. As Pöggeler explains, Hegel differentiates particularly between the comical (das Komische) and irony (Ironie): the former,

[…] means the destruction of what is void in itself through the power of the subject. The comical must demonstrate how people, beings and things propped up to false greatness and in themselves contradictory in their empty shape are destroyed by a subjectivity, which recognizes itself as the power over everything untrue [...].

The latter, on the other hand, “is directed against the substantial [...], a subjectivity fixed to itself.”

There is no need to follow Hegel’s complex, historical discussion of humor (between Socratic irony, the Hellenic comedy, Romantic irony, and objective

---

429 Pöggeler, Hegels Kritik, 68; “Hegel verweist jede Sehnsucht auf die Erfüllung in der Wirklichkeit, die Sehnsucht, die sich auf etwas richtet, das sie selbst in die Ferne rückt, wie die Sehnsucht, die in eine leere Zukunft oder in eine ferne Vergangenheit schweift.” (my translation)
430 Ibid., 54; “Für Hegel bedeutet das Komische das Vernichten des in sich Nichtigten durch die Kraft des Subjekts. Das Komische muß zeigen, wie Menschen, Wesenheiten und Dinge, die sich zu falscher Größe aufspreizen und in sich widersprüchlich sind, in ihrer hohen Gestalt durch eine Subjektivität, die sich als Macht über alles Unwahre erkennt […] zerstört werden.” (my translation)
431 Ibid., 57; “Die Ironie richtet sich gegen das Substantielle […] eine sich in sich festsetzende Subjektivität […]” (my translation)
humor\textsuperscript{432}); suffice it to say that both the escapism of nostalgia and the general dismissal inherent to mockery are already identified as forms of impotent ideality, comparable to stoicism and skepticism respectively. Roughly speaking, the escape to an inner ‘sanctuary’ entails a negation of the ‘outside’; like the Stoic, the romantic puts the inner goings-on before an actualization which would externalize thought. Irony or cynicism, on the other hand, engage the outside, but they do so in an abstract negation: everything becomes laughable, no cause worthy of an effort. As such, externalization and actualization are equally lacking in spite of a vocal involvement with the world. Nostalgia and mockery thus form a deadlock of inactivity and escape, but both positions appear internally stable. Their self-defeating character is clearly visible when ‘added’ to expose the structuralism of the whole. Progress here hinges on a dialectical sublation and in so far as the staged past has the potential to alter (the meaning of) history in the present and (Hegelian objective) humor is tasked with demolition of the untrue, no wholesale indictment of one genre or another follows.

Considering my selection of texts - roughly three per post-war decade up to the new millennium - and the general approach of tracing elements of premodern thought in their cultural application, both nostalgic recreation and ironic distancing seem unavoidable. A title like \textit{Swallow’s Message}, conceived as a faithful adaptation of the original opera, could hardly be faulted with a certain traditionalism: set and costume design obviously evoke the premodern environment while certain liberties in the updating of librettos to modern-day Cantonese naturalize the characters and their speech for audiences. Rendering the traditional accessible in this manner - however detrimental the strategy proved for opera overall in retrospect - illustrates the problem of judging texts: on the one hand, a nostalgic reveling in the past is abetted precisely in so far as the adaptation eliminates stilted and archaic phrasing and ‘fills in’ minimalist opera visuals. On the other hand, the content is ‘resocialized’, made accessible again to the ‘masses’ as it was during its premodern success as early popular entertainment.

Union certainly developed their projects with an eye towards culturo-political

\textsuperscript{432} See Pöggeler’s excursus on the topic: ibid., 54-61.
conditions at the time. In this instance the plot’s critique of greed paired with a hint of class struggle made for a relatively progressive message compatible with the group’s general outlook. The classical framework also effected a “return to Confucian lunli” easily traceable in much of the post-war cinema. In this sense the original opera demonstrated a degree of continuity between premodern and modern concerns, fusing the call for (social) justice with ‘family values’. As commented on earlier, more questionable aspects - particularly the use of a twin to realize a romantic moment in spite of the heroine’s tragic end - are adapted as well. The manner in which content is ‘merely’ transposed into the new medium makes for the baseline character the films from the 50s and 60s are attributed with here, no doubt partly as a result of the chosen time frame.

With *Malay Love Affair*, discussed to illustrate both the strong ties to the larger *Nanyang* Chinese community and the kind of ‘social realism’ synonymous with Cantonese cinema of the time the issue of nostalgia is even less clear. Extended to the naturally harmonious integrity of the family - a universally conservative, rather than a specifically traditional idea - a great many texts would most likely have to be labelled nostalgic. In light of the many broken ties the film depicts (between father, daughter, stepmother, romantic interest, and endorsed bachelor), nostalgia for the family as such is effected only in so far as we are mourning the absence of its stability and a certain cruelty of fate barring a ‘happy end’, the union between the protagonist struggling to finish her education and the poor, idealistic teacher who succumbs to sickness. Implying the possibility of such a perfect resolution to the protagonist’s loss of home and family is of course what drives our interest in her life - the chance meeting resulting in lasting affection reiterating the image of love only intensified by its ultimate narrative foreclosure. As fate aligns with the plans of her elders, a ‘convenient’ integration of familial hierarchy and youthful emancipation becomes possible.

Implicit in nostalgia as homesickness is the general longing for a secure place in the world beyond any actual experience of such a position in the past. In so far as *Malay Love Affair* denies the realization of the love interest in marriage in line

433 Chu Yingchi, *Hong Kong Cinema*, 35.
with the family’s intentions, affection retains its idealized purity while family integrity is affirmed. However, if the plot was altered to accommodate the realization of love implied throughout, it would simply evoke a more recognizably modern nostalgia: a young woman in search of her lost father emancipates herself against his wishes and finds fulfillment with the man and the profession of her choice. In terms of narrative structure, it appears the only possible difference to be made is whether fate is to favor traditional hierarchy or modern individuality.

I addressed this problem of narrative form in its relation to fate along a number of examples. It is the problem of narrativity in its concealment of contingency: stories set up an antagonism only to necessarily resolve it in the end. The Little Warrior instantiates this ‘natural’ tendency towards balance, the balance of ensured lineage against usurpation, in a quasi-religious personification of the feminine principle. Mad Monkey Kung Fu also bears the trace of a mechanical, and as such ontologically guaranteed, reversal of fate towards balance: hands broken to ensure unilateral control train a disciple to retaliate, a monkey no longer contained in the pillory of culture.

Cinema is not oblivious to this tendency for ‘poetic justice’ but has difficulties breaking with the inevitability of resolution. It can resort to an anti-hero like Rooster in Ebola Syndrome and flaunt its indifference to nostalgia by narratively dragging it through the mud. But the resulting cynicism is easily dismantled to reveal a helpless frustration with the status quo beyond vulgar appetite for destruction. Or it can explode the already fragile lives of protagonists in Nomad to emulate the violent entrance of the Real into a fabric otherwise narratively secured by formula. Reconstructing a developing discourse, these more recent tendencies disclose the general crisis of resolution in which ‘poetic justice’ as the form of a circular return to balance is challenged. Depending on what the players in such a necessarily concrete antagonism are invested with, the nostalgia of resolution nevertheless can present certain shifts in perception. I argued such a shift particularly in the case of Hard Boiled where Tequila certainly saves the day, but the casualties far exceed one extreme arms dealer.

A similar fluctuation complicating an unambiguous judgement of escapist
nostalgia troubles readings of comedy. The Hegelian differentiation between objective humour and self-indulgent irony is already based in the difference between falsity and truth and as such requires an understanding of the ‘whole’. How then are we to read the comedies of Stephen Chow? As I indicated, his juxtapositions of the pre-/modern swing both ways depending on which target yields the more effective result. Apart from pies to the face and kicks to the groin, the confrontation of already romanticized images of the premodern with both non- and common sense tends towards mockery. The resulting tension is particularly pronounced in the later comedies like *Shaolin Soccer* and *Kung Fu Hustle* in which the idea that everyone can release ‘superhuman’ powers (exploding into reality like one young man’s dream of dancing) vies with the element of ridicule elicited by the unkempt, bald, fat, and generally undesirable appearances of many characters. Hidden among the social periphery, and in this sense playing on *jianghu* secrecy, the antithesis to glamorous stardom only works in so far as the formula of the spoof consists in ridiculous exaggerations and inversions of the materials it recycles. As a result, the meaning of these texts is questionable beyond a general over-saturation with specific genre formulas to a point where their redundancy can only be broken up by reflexive satire. Here text selection becomes paramount as detailed analysis and conceptualization are required to judge the effect of individual titles. Szeto, for instance, characterizes Jackie Chan’s output in the following manner,

Through comedy, physicality, and parody, his works actively and creatively reflect his cosmopolitical intervention in [...] hegemonic discourses and practices.\(^{434}\)

In contrast, my (limited) discussion of *Police Story* in the context of law, did not yield such a relatively positive position. Mockery, or comedy more generally, hinge on a thorough understanding of the larger cultural environment to adequately gauge their effect.

\(^{434}\) Szeto, *The Martial Arts Cinema*, 143.
Developing the discursive interactions between Hong Kong films of the last 60 years from the concept of yin illustrated an affinity of specific forms and formulas to the notion of Chinese tradition encapsulated in that concept. In the first chapter I traced the premodern skepticism of the legal text as guarantor of legal order in cinematic texts. This is expressed in a variety of specific narrative conflicts between family loyalties and institutions of legal equality. The prominence of the undercover operative as the characteristic figure of the modern jianghu here marked the narrative reemergence of the ‘noble' now lacking Confucian access to normative practice, yet persisting as a positing of the necessary sublation of traditional natural law aspirations and legal codex. While this traditional figure is withdrawn in Hard Boiled, the film impressed how the formula effects an understanding of the inherent negativity of law, a feature developed in its unsettling portrayal in Exodus.

In the discussion of identity the specific configuration of a culturalist Chineseness only functioned as a starting point to the cinematic discourse on identity. In so far as yin denotes peripheral particularity concealed and thereby contained within Chineseness itself, negotiations of identity in Hong Kong cinema never part with the center. However, as an actionable version of Hong Kong identity is missing, critical particularity shrinks to the residue of tics in the figure of Panther. Similarly, the third chapter demonstrated how a naively metaphysical concept of circular fate formulated in accordance with early Daoist assertions of necessary reversal first gives way to individual resistance in gongfu, then leads to discursive reflections on narrativity and the denial of resolution in light of the impossibility of ‘right life'. In the last chapter on style a similar impasse presented itself as visual architecture developing into the specificity of kinetic construction can only be mocked in comedic subversion or exposed as a nostalgia longing for traditional cohesion. The explication of these twin symptoms took up a significant portion of this conclusion.

As mediated tradition grounds a discourse which I followed into entries further
removed from recognizably traditional motifs, the exploration sketched the ‘diasporic reality’ of Hong Kong’s position in the development of distinct cinematic articulations of its inherent impasse. Evident in the reflection on this development, formula is eventually caught in the general post-modern bifurcation of mockery and nostalgia. In so far as yin was designed to capture elements of tradition which lend themselves to the modern problem space, it is not surprising that the exploration identified recognizably traditional motifs and structures in formulas established relatively early, while their discursive development tended towards the abstract or virtual potential for transformation ‘diasporic reality’ seems to be teeming with and which expresses itself in cinema in reflexive or destructive tendencies often discursively latching on to specific motifs and formulas which have turned reactionary or static.

One might object that yin forces the structural impasse ex ante by binding Hong Kong to Chineseness as periphery and tasking the latter with the aesthetic resolution to its tension between East and West. Instead of such a resolution the specific cinematic discourse reconstructed on the basis of yin only impressed the inability to evade this position and reaffirmed the Adornian dictum. In so far as the discursive interpretation of texts identifies a number of characteristic positions in their opposition and mutual conditioning, this strategy necessarily completes a structuralist description of the whole. Exploring the role of tradition, itself intrinsically critical of modernity, as the ground to Hong Kong cinema’s specificity thus exemplifies one particular constellation as representative of a general deadlock. Making sense of Hong Kong cinema in this manner illustrates one half of,

[The dual nature of artworks as autonomous structures and social phenomena result[ing] in oscillating criteria: Autonomous works provoke the verdict of social indifference and ultimately of being criminally reactionary; conversely, works that make socially univocal discursive judgments thereby negate art as well as themselves.435]

Reading narrative and stylistic movements in Hong Kong cinema as responses in

435 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 248.
an evolving socio-cultural context necessarily reduces them to statements within
that context, that is, as messages imbricated in its (aporetic) structure. Although
aesthetic, they deny art precisely in so far as they are readily understood and
obtain on a discourse negotiating a (semblance of) particularity against global
modernity. In this sense the whole project of developing specificity or the
particular structure (of meaning) of Hong Kong cinema is non-Adornian.
However, this does not mean that the framework of his thought has no bearing on
the project. Rather, the structuralism emerging as Hong Kong cinema develops
narrative and stylistic specificity outlines the particular constellation and
trajectory and forms the ground on which we can judge critical impulses against
the Adornian deadlock.

Particular and Structure

At some point in the unfinished *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno states that “[w]hoever
wants to abolish art cherishes the illusion that decisive change is not blocked.” 436 I
avoided the term ‘art’ throughout, relying instead on the (seemingly) more neutral
‘aesthetic’ to evade any discussion of how one might differentiate between the
two in the context of cinema. Adorno, of course, unequivocally asserts that
“[f]ailed artworks are not art” 437 and the oscillation between autonomy and
discursivity defines his demand of art, that is Beckett’s theatre or Berg’s *Neue
Musik*. If these are not capable of breaking open the aporia of an Enlightenment
turned into myth, what then of film?

The first thing to recall when reading deceptively straightforward statements of
this type is the tradition in which Adorno is writing: first and foremost in, with,
and against Hegel. This entails the kind of holism the latter’s system is
constructed to represent, 438 in which all finite things constituting reality
participate in the truth of the whole partially and even the false is a necessary
misstep in the process towards unity. As outlined before in the context of Adorno’s

436 Ibid., 251.
437 Ibid., 188.
438 For a detailed account see the section titled “Monismus und Holismus” in Lau C., *Hegels Urteilskritik*, 58–62.
critique of positivism, a similar kind of holism is espoused with the proviso that
history has made any trust in the ‘cunning of Reason’ to steer us towards unity
utterly impossible. This, however, does not mean the rejection of dialectics and
the difficulty it imposes on thought and its expression. Apropos of Hegel’s
language Adorno notes,

One can say, that in Hegel - and I am here pointing out the real terminological
difficulty for the understanding of Hegel for you - there is an ongoing conflict
between the obligation to operate with a rigid terminology facing this thought
if it is to express itself as a system, and, on the other hand, the dynamic quality
moving to dissolve every single, rigidly terminologic determination and, one
could almost say, free or heal philosophy of its own terminology.439

Although Adorno deliberately avoids the system, albeit towards a
transformation of systematicity (Systemgedanke), the same dynamic quality
complicates the capture of dialectical thought in verbal expression. I discussed the
problem of ‘rigid terminology’ in the introduction and it complicates the issue at
hand immensely; for any clear academic work relies on a strict definition of terms
under which a certain specified set of phenomena can be subsumed. As such,
capturing the movement characteristic of the ongoing mediation of tradition in
Hong Kong cinema enables a university discourse which fixes meaning in
structure and does not allow for the contingency of the particular.

Using the Lacanian term ‘university discourse’ here is not to indulge another
juxtaposition. In spite of differences in style, the term is adequate in this context.
Lacan famously developed pseudo-scientific formulas to present his ‘return to
Freud’ in rigorous fashion440. These mathemes are similar to Adorno’s categorical
assertions: they appear in the form of solid, universal truth, but resist any
straightforward ‘application’ to their object. Whereas Adorno qualifies blunt

439 Adorno, Philosophische Terminologie 1, 40; “Man kann sagen, daß bei Hegel – und ich weise
Sie damit auf die eigentliche terminologische Schwierigkeit für das Verständnis von Hegel hin –
immerwährend ein Konflikt herrscht zwischen der Nötigung, mit einer festen Terminologie zu
operieren, der dieses Denken sich gegenüberstellt, wenn es sich als System ausdrücken will, und
auf der anderen Seite seinem dynamischen Zug, in dem es ja eigentlich jede solche einzelne, feste
terminologische Bestimmung auflösen und, man könnte fast sagen, die Philosophie von ihrer
eigenen Terminologie befreien oder heilen will.” (my translation)
440 For a comprehensive account of Lacan’s relationship with philosophical systems and his use of
mathemes see Johnston, “This Philosophy Which Is Not One.”
statements by way of a context of aporetic contradictions and fragmentary texts to allow for the ‘dynamic quality’ (dynamischer Zug) of dialectics, Lacanian ‘math’ forces an equally dynamic relating of formula with concrete environments and events. For both the aim is not a stabilization of knowledges (based in a master signifier), but their respective strategies of destabilization obviously differ.

One denounces directly the irrationality of modernity in a quasi-ethical call, the other unsettles the relationship between student and master and thus presses the same relation between (barred) subject and Other. The downside to these respective strategies is apparent in attempts at neutralization. In the case of Lacan it is the charge of ‘imposture’ and ‘non-sense’ by people who are not serious.\textsuperscript{441} Adorno, on the other hand, is neutralized in so far as his sweeping assertions ‘prove’ his complete pessimism with regard to popular culture and elitist adulation of high modernism. As Bernstein notes,

\begin{quote}
Adorno’s \textit{apparently} uncompromising defence of modernist art and his \textit{apparently} uncompromising critique of mass culture as a product of ‘culture industry’ has served the proponents of postmodernism as a negative image against which their claims for a democratic transformation of culture may be secured.\textsuperscript{442}
\end{quote}

That is, precisely in so far as Adorno judges the whole to be untrue, irrational, he can serve as “negative image.” But if this judgement foreclosed any attempt at aesthetic or philosophical critique, why bother reconstruct the aporia between a culture management (\textit{Kulturverwaltung}) of liquidated individuality and art as pointing beyond irrational modernity? It is the (failed) relation between the two which forms the centre of Adorno’s thought. Consequently, it is not the case that Adorno proscribes our staying away from popular culture or its abstract dismissal - the chapter on culture industry in the \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment} obviously offers a detailed analysis of the paradigmatic example. There is no complete reification of the culture industry, a fact easily illustrated by the example of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item See Derrida, “Sokal and Bricmont Aren’t Serious.”
\item Bernstein, introduction, 1. (emphasis added)
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
“riders, acrobats, and clowns”\textsuperscript{443} cited as a critical moment preserved in latent affinities to the circus. He does, however, remind us that any optimism with regard to a text, a form, or a movement be assessed against the irrational whole.

Hong Kong cinema is of course not as paradigmatic a case as the ‘classic’ Hollywood cinema discussed in \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}. This distance in itself makes it an attractive object of study for those who suspect differences which escape a holism of the German Idealist type. In the context of this thesis, on the other hand, asserting a singular modernity across cultures and yet inquiring into the specificity of Hong Kong cinema appear at odds. That is, against culture industry the reconstruction of cinematic discourse is bound to be an account of failed transformation, of process without progress. Between Adorno’s definition of a hermetically sealed, seemingly ‘reactionary’ art and the discursive judgements read from Hong Kong cinema critical potential appears to have evaporated. But in so far as the reconstruction of specificity and exploration of its discursive trajectories substantiate the Adornian criticism of just such a thinking, it is also the prerequisite to an accurate assessment of critical moments, and, as such, itself critical potential.

\textsuperscript{443} Horkheimer and Adorno, \textit{Dialectic}, 114. “Traces of something better persist in those features of the culture industry by which it resembles the circus—in the stubbornly purposeless expertise of riders, acrobats, and clowns, in the ‘defense and justification of physical as against intellectual art.’”
Bibliography


Cai Hongsheng, Song Jialing, and Liu Guiqing 蔡鸿声、宋家玲、刘桂清, editors. Xianggang Dianying 80 Nian 香港電影80年 [80 Years of Hong Kong Film]. Beijing: Guangbo Xueyuan 廣播學院出版社, 2000.


Chen Jiale and Zhu Li 陳家樂、朱立, editors. Wu Zhu Zhi Cheng: Xianggang Dianying Zhong de Jiuqi Huigui yu Gangren Rentong 無主之城：香港電影中的九七回歸與港人認同 [City without Master: The ‘97 Handover and Hong Kong People’s Identification in Hong Kong Cinema]. Hong Kong: Cosmos Books 天地圖書, 2008.


Cheung, Esther M.K. *Fruit Chan’s Made in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009.

Cheung, Esther M.K. and Chu Yiu-Wai 張美君、朱耀偉, editors. *Hong Kong Literature as/and Cultural Studies 香港文學@文化研究*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2002.


Collier, Joelle. “A Repetition Compulsion: Discontinuity Editing, Classical Chinese Aesthetics, and Hong Kong’s Culture of Disappearance.” *Asian


—. *Fruit Chan’s Durian Durian.* Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005.


Hall, Kenneth E. *John Woo’s The Killer.* Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009.


Hjort, Mette. *Stanley Kwan's Center Stage*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006.


Ho, Sam and Ernest Chan 何思穎、陳志華, editors. *The Cinema of Lee Tit* 紫釵、兇影、小市民：李鐵的電影藝術. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive 香港電影資料館, 2013.
Ho, Sam and Ho Wai-leng. *The Swordsman and His Jiang Hu: Tsui Hark and Hong Kong Film* 劍嘯江湖：徐克與香港電影. Hong Kong: Film Archive, 2002.

Ho, Sam and Li Cheuk-to, editors. *Kuei Chih-hung, the Rebel in the System*. Hong Kong: Film Archive, 2011.


Law Kar. “Rules and Exceptions: Cantonese Productions by Kong Ngee and


Law Kar, Ng Ho, Cheuk Pak Tong. *香香港電影類型論*: [Discussing Hong Kong Film Genres]. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press 牛津大學出版社, 1997.


Legge, James, trans. *The Chinese Classics (Vol. 3, Part 2: The Fifth Part of the Shoo King, or The Books of Chow; and the Indexes)*. Hong Kong: At the Author’s, 1865.

—, trans. *The Chinese Classics (Vol. 1: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean)*. Hong Kong: At the Author’s, 1861.


Marchetti, Gina. *Andrew Lau and Alan Mak's Infernal Affairs - The Trilogy*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007.


Needham, Joseph. *History of Scientific Thought (Science and Civilisation in


Ng, Grace 藍天雲, editor. One For All: The Union Film Spirit 我為人人：中聯的時代印記. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive 香港電影資料館, 2011.

Ng, Grace and Kwok Ching-ling, editors. Director Chor Yuen. Hong Kong: Film Archive, 2006.


Ng, May 吳君⽟, editor. Xianggang Chaozhouyu Dianying Xunji 香港潮語電影尋跡 [The Chaozhou-dialect Films of Hong Kong]. Hong Kong: Film Archive, 2013.

—, editor. Xianggang Xiayu Dianying Fangzong 香港廈語電影訪蹤 [The Amoy-dialect Films of Hong Kong]. Hong Kong: Film Archive, 2012.


Pang Laikwan 彭麗君. Huanghun Wei Wan: Houjiuqi Xianggang Dianying 黃昏
未晚：後九七香港電影 [Nightfall: Post-97 Hong Kong Film]. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press 香港中文大學, 2010.


Po Fung and Lau Yam 蒲鋒、劉嶔, editors. Golden Harvest: Leading Change in Changing Times 乘風變化：嘉禾電影研究. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive 香港電影資料館, 2013.


Rohsenow, John S. “Fifty Years of Script and Written Language Reform in the


Shing, Angel and Lau Yam 香港電影資料館. Lung Kong 龍剛. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive 香港電影資料館, 2010.


Smart, Alan. The Shek Kip Mei Myth: Squatters, Fires and Colonial Rule in Hong


Stokes, Lisa Odham. Peter Ho-Sun Chan’s He’s a Woman, She’s a Man. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009.


—. Director in Action: Johnnie To and the Hong Kong Action Film. Hong Kong: University Press, 2007.


—. King Hu’s A Touch of Zen. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006.


Tian Yan. “An Interview with Cinematographer Wen Gui.” In Cantonese Cinema


Wong Ain-ling and Angel Shing 黃愛玲、盛安琪, editors. Wong Tin-lam 王天林. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive 香港電影資料館, 2007.

Wong Ain-ling and Lee Pui-tak 黃愛玲、李培德, editors. The Cold War and Hong Kong Cinema 冷戰與香港電影. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive 香港電影資料館, 2009.


Yau Ching. “The (Re)Making of the Hong Kong Ethic” (Very Rough Draft) [presentation delivered during the “Neo-Moralism und Neoliberalism Conference” at Lingnan University May 2014]. commons.ln.edu.hk/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1010&context=neomoralism_conference


Yue, Audrey. Ann Hui’s Song of the Exile. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010.


Zhao Weifang. Xianggang Dianying Shi: 1897-2006 香港電影史1897-2006 [The History of Hong Kong Film 1897-2006]. Beijing: Zhongguo Guangbo Dianshi


Curriculum Vitae

Academic qualifications of the thesis author, Mr. FREUDENBERG, Benjamin:

• Received a diploma in Video Production from Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, 2003.
• Received the degree of Magister Artium of Sinology, Classical Chinese Philology, and Media Studies from Trier University, 2008.

January 2015