

Made in Hong Kong: tempered self, reasoned Narrativity, and the logic of everyday modernity (a study of movie ads for the 16 lost local films produced and exhibited in Hong Kong 1934)

OR

How to be human, good, and civilized -- everyday modernity in the crevices (a study of movie ads for the 16 lost local films produced and screened in Hong Kong 1934)

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Following the imperatives of Revisionist Film History debated since 1979, this research examines the bulk of movie ads for the 16 films made and shown in Hong Kong in the entire year of 1934 in order to solicit portraits of the everyday that concern ideal citizenship – as a British colonial subject, new personhood for modern society, and Chinese patriotic sentiments – as well as negotiations in embracing these conflicting subject/object positions. Mainly movie ads are studied because they are the only surviving fragments of the films made or exhibited that year. An immediate survey finds these ads phenomenally verbose and burdened with moral admonition.

My presentation for the WCU Project 2011 has three parts: (I) the basic conceptual set-up on my historiographic methodology; (II) illustrative data and examples of interpretive strategies I applied to the raw material; and (III) extracts of historical knowledge produced in this study, i.e. arguable portraits of colonial modernity translated into paradigms of everyday ethics.

I.

The theoretical impetus in this research is to define frameworks that address the problematic specific to this historical enquiry. The use of theory is to direct me where to look, how to access, and what narrative strategies to adopt to communicate my findings.

The historiographic problematic underscoring this study can be summarized in three facets:

- *First, is film history possible when no viewable films are available?
- *Second, the bulk of raw material available for this piece of history is primarily ideas and sayings (in the form of movie ads)? How can ideas pass for ‘making’, the key to the notion of ‘lifeworld’ (*lebenswelt*) and ‘being-in-the-world’, as Husserl and Heidegger use these terms?
- *Third, what kind of everydayness is speech and persuasion via language? What interpretive model best serve the writing of a piece of history concentrated on the fragmentary, often contradicting, trade of thoughts and verbal persuasion?

First, as a work of cinema studies, is the writing of film history possible when no viewing copies of films are available? This question intensifies by the fact that the earliest surviving Hongkong-made film on record is from 1939, leaving over 30 years of Hong Kong cinema in the dark. If this is the case, are we to say that the first 30 years of Hong Kong cinema cannot be written? For the year 1934, the subject of this study, all that is available are movie ads from newspaper plus no more than a handful of film writings still in search of methods and purposes. This takes us to a central

question in cinema studies, broadly debated since the early 1980s, which challenges a documentary approach to film history that focuses on who-when-what-how alone of filmmaking. One of my purposes in this research, therefore, is to affirm the rich possibilities of writing Hong Kong's film history even when the films are not viewable. In the light of revisionist film historiography, the activities of filmmaking, distribution and exhibitions are only specific locations in the broader field of cultural production.

The premise of my historical investigation, therefore, is that cinema should better be understood as **fragments** and **traceable material presences, even as relics or ruins**, not necessarily as systems, textual or institutional. Even in the most ideal research situation, each occasion of cinema is at best elliptical, leaving many visible but inconclusive possibilities that beg the practice of genealogy and archaeology, in Foucault's terms. Pro-filmic activities as such are foci of a nexus of realities and doings that forms the dynamic lifeworld, pointing to the realm of the everyday. (Lai, 2006: 7-8)

Cinema as fragments leads to the de-construction of the notion of "film culture." I argue that the study of cinema is equally productive whether we place filmic events and objects in the center or peripheral, whether we look at cinema as the function of other social, cultural, political and economic reality, or as the generative center of other human activities and realms of beliefs, or as a point in the vector of a non-filmic process. In spite of nominal 'film culture', cinema should be studied for its specific role in the larger fabric of social, cultural life in a particular moment in history, but without assuming that it is necessarily the center of activity. This **de-centering approach to 'film culture'** is also a characteristic of the fragment-oriented, nexus model I am setting up. (Lai, 2006: 8)

The **nexus approach** I just described leads me to the defense of a spatial, as opposed to temporal, approach to historiography, which many theorists, including Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, Henri Lefebvre and Gilles Deleuze, have debated.¹ A spatial, horizontal view of how pro-filmic events could be studied on a geographic plane with other immediately and subsequently corresponding lived experiences justifies a 'slicing' approach, described in the Australian bicentennial project. (Inglis, 1999: 177-83) In my adaptation, a 'slicing' approach does not fall back on arbitrary periodization; it liberates trends, events and lived moments from the constraint of chronologies to allow fragments to be gathered together to form pictures of making, doing and living, dynamic or stable as they should be. A 'slicing' approach also provides a basic narrative framework for the historian to organize historical knowledge that evolves from the (re-)assemblage of the fragmentary. A spatial approach to history based on slicing and the fragmentary calls our attention to distribution, trajectories, moving shapes and contours rather than spatial-temporal coherent stories. (Lai, 2006: 9)

Second, given that the history of everyday life highlights 'making' in specific time and space rather than 'happenings' within a chronological and spatial given, how should I position my study which is primarily about writings and proclamations in

¹ The nexus approach I propose here differs from Wilhelm Dilthey's idea of 'life-nexus' in that I confine myself to empirical surfaces without having to appeal to depth hermeneutics, deep structures, or any kind of systems approach analysis.

language? How should I write this piece of history whose available raw material is solely on the ideational level? How should moral paradigms be talked about as ‘making’?

In his work *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World* (2007), Jeff Malpas argues that the philosopher's emphasis on ‘being’ in his earlier works was to anticipate his later works (post mid-1940s) in which the notion of place and topology is the ultimate concern. In Malpas' analysis, “being and place are inextricably bound together.” Even though ‘being’ evolves through space, it is place-bound.

According to the contribution of the various philosophers of life such as Dilthey, ‘thought’ is not out of place. Thought is a part of the totality of life, and emerges as a life-serving process, whereas thought can never be the foundation of life. The life-world is self-evident, immediately experienced in the subjectivity of everyday life. It is pre-epistemological, and its cognition is practical and communal.

This research highlights personhood not just as abstractions of morality, but in material forms of persuasion (movie ads), which subsequently point to hypothetical human drama (movies). These filmed dramas flesh out paradigms of everyday behavior into narrative persuasion grounded in moral reasoning. In this way, personhood is integral to special everyday circumstances in concrete places, and moral dilemmas are transformed into questions of doings and crisis of actions within a specific set of spatial-temporal coordinates, fictional as well as mimetic. The dramatic situations construct the potential crisis of ‘being’ as a ponderable effect of everyday drama, thus calling for ‘making’.

In a nutshell, moral dictums pertain to ‘being’ as ‘doing’ – paradigms of experience in the making moderated by the necessity of the place-ness of Hong Kong, on the one hand interpolated by the excitement with modernity, and, on the other hand, the anxiety for the future of China as well as the call to pass as a proper British colonial subject. [Citizenship became \(Miller...\)](#)

Third, the use of movie ads requires a concept of fragments. These ads are full of 4-character idiomatic expressions. Many of these broken phrases of moral overtones are implicit imperatives, sometimes open interpolations. Written expressions are formed into groups, each with different font sizes, scattered around the rectangular print space without any obvious logic of graphic organization. The voice(s) of these groups of expressions are sometimes similar and unanimous, other times diverse and tangential. These fragmentary articulations allow us to see consistencies and inconsistencies, continuity and fractures, and most importantly, the silences, absences and gaps among these fragments.

In Wittgenstein's view, everyday language activities pertain to the location of unique forms of ‘everydayness’. The everyday is the ‘home’ for making sense of ‘words’, especially in the case of ‘words in exiles’, that is, words uttered in the flow of ordinary language activities that suddenly fall out of context. (Das, 183, 187)

In this study, I regard the ad fragments of the 16 films concerned as instances of speech acts. I observe each ad and consecutive ads of repeated screenings of the same film on two levels: for the illocutionary force of moral persuasion that commands

compliance by providing ‘facts’ and warning, and the perlocutionary force of emotive persuasion and potential ‘correction’ in everyday life choices.

A performative approach based on speech act allows me to see these ads as forms of interpellation, that is, language activities that seek to force a situation upon the fabric of unquestioned daily practices and pictures of personhood.

The Speech Act orientation and the approach to these movie acts as fragments suggest the need to revisit as well as re-invent textual models such as Althusser’s Marxian notion of ‘interpellation’ which describes how pre-existing structures constitute viewers as subjects. Whereas the notion of ‘interpellation’ describes how ideology dominates people, and the process by which ideology address people (especially through mass media texts), the use of speech act turns around the analytical process by going back to individual fragmentary moments and speech instances. This allows me to multi...without assuming ideology as a uniform totality and all pervasive given. Polysemic and multiaccetual nature of text...

In my theory of fragments, there is an important distinction to make. On the one hand, I talked of ‘fragments’ as accessible traces, and the most realistic forms, of lived experiences left to us from the past as artifacts. On the other hand, I consider the implication of the fragmentary on interpretive approaches as narrative strategies

Taking the fragments for a walk...

Photographs and print advertisements are never self-sufficient texts even though they may give that impression. Like a photograph, a print ad is as much a physical object as a composed design that captures unstated purposes via sensual, psychological, or moral persuasion. It is also an object at a specific point of cultural networks, so, say, at most a point in a series of communication. A print ad is always part of a specific event of persuasion.

As I study the ads, I was amazed by the heavy use of text, and the heavy didacticism of its content. These ads are full of imperatives of moral propriety and interpellation of readers as those who are urgently in need of advice for their citizenship in crisis. The heavy dosage of moral admonition hides nothing of the commercial motive. I do not look at these ads of didactic moral overtones as pedagogic projects out of good will. These ads speak of their imagination and assumption of who the readers/viewers are and what they need. The interpellated subjects, one induces from the ads, are torn between patriotic loyalty as Chinese by ethnicity and the need to be a good colonial subject. The commercial impetus to catch audience in keen competition with Hollywood and Shanghai films exploits the assumptions of an individual’s yearnings to fit the picture of ideal subjects voluntarily.

The axioms I set up pave the way for the construction of a ‘theory of fragments’. What I call ‘fragments’ has different names. They are data as autonomous units, a programmable artifact with modular possibilities. As a kind of document, these ads are at the conjuncture of being left as open raw materials and about to be organized into discourses. Whereas photographs as ‘fragments’ are open-ended tokens that invoke memory or form mnemonic systems that lend us access to the past, the ads in question are explicit in content, and precise in communication via the use of language.

However, the gaps between ads, especially the evolving content of ads of the same movie as it traveled from one movie house to the next across the year, demand us to look at these ads as not just a small print with messages, but object fragments that are better understood as ‘objectiles’. According to Bryant, ‘objectiles’ are verbs rather than nouns, acts than substances. ‘Objectiles’ are objects that unfold what is in-folded, explicates what is implicated, each “a spatio-temporal dynamism ... moving from position to position.” (Bryant 2009) ‘Objectile’ is a liberating thought; it asserts audio-visual-textual documents as rich fragments and, when subject to the exercise of ‘thick description’, a single fragment points divergently to different realities.

In visual ethnography, ‘fragments’ are ‘documents’. A number of theorists have discussed the idea of ‘document’. To Buckland, a document is anything that forms the material basis for extending our knowledge; a source of information in material form to be used as evidence in support of a fact, be it physical or symbolic. Documents inform us if we spend time studying and observing. (Buckland, 1997) Rosen emphasizes documents as proofs, something with a factual look, with a teaching function. (Rosen, 1993) To Chevrier, “a document, precise as it may be, is not addressed to anyone. A document may be addressed to a particular purpose, but the best documents are often unintentional productions, which found meaning afterwards.” (Chevier, Gevers & Holert, 2006: p. 53)

[From ‘fragments’ to ‘open document’ – HOEL writes itself?]

The notion of fragments calls attention to ‘gaps’ and ‘absences.’

The weaving together of fragments via writing and analysis may or may not generate the comprehensible or logically structured discourse normally expected of classical history-writing. In my study, I have chosen to present my material as many pictures of citizenship and ethics, each around an evolving series of newspaper ads of the same local film.

II.

The Lifeworld of Hong Kong around 1934: competing or complying discourses?

In the history of the British colony of Hong Kong, the year 1934 falls into a time, roughly between 1929-36, that I have described as the period of pacification strategies. It was a brief period of peace – after the 3-year-long Great Strike, and before Japanese aggression affected the general landscape of everyday life in the colony around 1937. Cultural anecdotists often call the first half of 1930s in Hong Kong the “golden age of leisure,” whereby tea houses and Cantonese songs forums flourished to nourish new yearnings for the Cantonese dialect as a vehicle to forge a sense of local Hongkongness that is neither just Chinese nor British.

While 1934 is mid-way through the 3-year grace period whereby the government ordained all brothels to close down before deemed illegal, the Legislative Council meetings were filled with agenda items to complete new roads that linked distant areas to the urban core. In relation to that, Legco Members also discussed plans and strategies to promote internal tourism, that is, to encourage citizens to go to peripheral areas beyond the urban areas for picnic, and to the seaside for bathing. The government’s active production of space, using Henri Lefebvre’s term, had impact on multiple realities. It encouraged the local people to focus on everyday life especially to learn how to relax and secure good health via leisure. Physically, the production of space facilitated the urban development. Territories of no practical purpose were

transformed into land that would generate usage and benefits. The promotion of leisure and pleasure premised on the production of more land, that is, turning measurable ‘space’ into accessible ‘place’, was, taking a high angle, a strategic step of population management, at least in regulating the spatial mobility of the colony’s inhabitants, making marked territories on the map signifiable.

From a regime-oriented approach to history, year 1934 in Hong Kong is of little significance. Without

The context of Cantonization (move to back)?

[need a map of HK]

Of the fifteen films studied for this research, three were produced in 1933 and staying on movie screens in 1934, twelve of them produced and screened in 1934, and one produced near the end of the year but was not released until January 1935.

	Film title	Silent / sound (Cantonese)	Rounds screened	Screened Days	Shown in how many different movie houses	Film company (total: ??)	Film genre
Made 1933, exhibited 1934							
01	良心 Conscience	Sound	7		7	中華製造聲默	Last performance with life Cantonese opera performance
02	傻仔洞房 Idiot's Wedding Night	Sound	11		9	中華製造聲默	
03	戰地歸來 Return from Battle Ground	Silent	3		3	Guolian	
Made 1934, exhibited 1934							
01	洞房雙屍案 Case of the Wedding Night Twin- corpse	Silent	7	17	6	Huayi (debut)	
02	苦海 Bitter Sea	Silent	6	16	6	Huayi	
03	婚後的問題 Problems after Marriage	Silent	4	9	4	Huayi	Family ethics
04	浪花村 Spoondrift Village	Silent	6	13	4	聯華 United Photoplay Services(Overs eas Lianhua Film Company)	
05	破浪 Breaking Waves	Silent	6	9	6	United Photoplay	
06	難兄 Brothers	Silent	10	21	8	United Photoplay + Grandview	A US-HK co- production; Grandview was US-based
07	薄倖 Tragedy of Love	Sound	10	22	8	Zhonghua Sound and Silent Movies Production Company 中華 製造聲默	
08	扭計祖宗 Mischief Makers	Sound	11	21	11	Zhonghua Sound and Silent	
09	繁華夢 Nightmare of Fortune	Sound	10	22	9	Zhonghua Sound and Silent	
10	呂純陽三戲白牡丹 Lu	Sound	11	36	8	Nanyue 南粵	Cantonese Song Film

	Chunyang Tricked the White Peony Thrice						
11	仕林祭塔 Memorial at the Pagoda	Sound	2	7	1	南粵	
12	泣荊花 Mourning of the Chaste Tree Flower	Sound	2		2	Tianyi 天一	
Made 1934, exhibited 1935							
13	夕陽 Setting Sun		0	0	0	Quanqiu 全球	Released Jan 1935; film adaptation of Blasco Vicente Ibanez's novel

Local made films on movie screens in 1934 totaled 15, 3 of which were made in the previous. The last HK-made film of the year, whose report appeared in as early as November, was not released until early 1935. The year 1934 in a way was a period of anticipation for the boom of local film production in the next few years.

According to the Hong Kong Film Archive's record, the number of HK-made films rose to 34 in 1935, of which 10 were made by the Shaw brothers' Tianyi; and 52 in 1936, of which 9 were by the Shaw brothers.

The following table provides a broader view of where these 15 films may stand in the general movie-going experience in that year:

Type of film (by place of production)	Total number of films	Total number of rounds (1 round = a film being shown in consecutive days in the same cinema)	remarks
Foreign films	725	1563	*Predominantly Hollywood movies *Film shown highest number of rounds: <i>The Invisible Man</i>
	344	1 round only	
	165	2 rounds	
	82	3 rounds	
	64	4 rounds	
	33	5 rounds	
	17	6 rounds	
	14	7 rounds	
	7	8 rounds	
	1	11 rounds	
Chinese Films made in Shanghai	252	738 (6-8 rounds the highest frequency)	The longest lasting film from Shanghai was <i>Sisters' Flowers</i> 姊妹花 (1933), shown 18 rounds in 11 movie houses from May through October.
Chinese Films made in Guangzhou	2	11	
Films made in Hong Kong	15	103	Including one US-HK co-production

Non-HK-made films exhibited and promoted in 1934 for their 'Cantonese-ness':

Film title	Year	company	Place of production	Remarks
The Little Actress 小女伶	1932	Tianyi 天一	Shanghai	
Two Orphans from the Battle Field 戰地二孤女	1932	Tianyi	Shanghai	battle film, part color; aka <i>Two Daughters of the Northeast</i> 東北二女子
Modern Tears 摩登淚	1933	亞洲 (Asia / Yazhou)	Guangzhou	
A Female Star 一個女明星	1933	Tianyi	Shanghai	
Fortunate Place 吉地	1933	Tianyi	Shanghai	Could be dubbed into Cantonese;

				original language uncertain
Struggling 掙扎	1933	Tianyi	Shanghai	
Platinum Dragon 白金龍	1933	南方 Southern	Shanghai	actually shot by Tianyi
Pursuit 追求	1933	Tianyi	Shanghai	based on a real murder in HK that involved a love triangle
The Romantic Tides of the Singing Couple 歌侶情潮	1933	大觀 Grandview + 聯華 United Photoplay Services	USA	
The Unofficial History of the Red Boat 紅船外史	1933? 1934?	明星 (Star / Mingxing)	Shanghai	
Lu Dongbin Tricked the White Peony Thrice 呂洞賓三戲白牡丹	1934	暨南 (Jinan)	Shanghai	Jinan, founded 1927, was forced to close down by the gov'n't in July 1934 with the reason to combat fantasy (取締神怪)
Love in the Jade Palace 璇宮艷史	1934	Tianyi	Shanghai	Same as <i>Love on the Stage</i> 《歌台艷史》; the longest lasting screen exhibition in Hong Kong by then
Pear Blossom in the Storm 暴雨梨花	1934	聯華 Lianhua (United Photoplay)	Shanghai	
Love on the Stage 歌台艷史	1934	Tianyi	Shanghai	orig. known as GetanYanshi 《歌壇艷史》 & same as <i>Love in the Jade Palace</i> 《璇宮艷史》
璇宮金粉獄 (the glittering prison of the jade palace)	?	廣州現代 (Canton Modern)	Guangzhou	Comedy

These 14 films are all ‘sound’ films, either with dubbed Cantonese dialogues or what is called Cantonese Song films based on existing Cantonese opera numbers. My intensive analysis of daily movie ads across the year shows that the division between silent and sound film did not acquire as much fanfare as the highlights of films that use Cantonese – made by Cantonese people, using Cantonese dialects, or adopting well known Cantonese opera songs.

Number of movie houses: total count: 41, which includes cinemas exclusive for motion pictures and theatres for both movies and Cantonese opera performances. Listing in South China Daily of movie theatres with screening activities amounts to a total of 24 theatres (as on November 1, 1934, 4:13)

CITIZENSHIP

text and models of citizenship...

***to go beyond the confines of meaning-making, interpretation and criticism.

Taking a film work as a nexus cut through by many histories of fictional and factual discourses is to regard a work as a location of multiple interpolations and concrete moments of articulation.

***Rise of the intermediate elite

Newspaper writers in 1934 talked about films as if they were generators of meanings extractable from a coherent form composed of dramatic and photographic elements. Not only were they highly conscious of their roles as critics and moral leaders, they were also sensitive to the fact that writing about film was a relatively fresh, open and fluid space in the public channels. ...the newspaper writers’ highly conscious efforts to make sense of a film by drawing from as well as making connection to other social cultural discourses. They would turn a well-made (film) text into a productive category for a broad range of usage. They transposed textual criticism to other activist paradigms such as the promotion of local cinema, a re-definition of humanness, adaptation of Western modernity and so on. Conscious articulations were

established between film/drama activities and other everyday arenas such as falling in love and courtship, being a university student, sports and health and so on.

... cinema can be sufficiently highlighted as part of a much more complex cultural and urban-spatial landscape... The identification of the ideational vectors of the films through a narrative of chain association engaged in fragments of the absent text is to seek the communion between Chartier's idea of text as nodal points and Deleuze and Guattari's notion of rhizome...

In this study, I examine the movie ads of the same film across the year to track down how certain ideas and concerns repeated in various story forms across the year and how often they repeated. The method also reveals strategies of persuasion of the producing companies and their implicit diagnosis of its (ideal) audience. The original study, of which this essay is a part, also takes a chronological approach, that is, to follow the order of film exhibition. This facilitates my observation of changes across the year – as 1934 was the last year when local film companies made silent films, as well as the trial year for the Shaw brothers to test their business in Hong Kong before they became the local champion in 1935 with ??? films.

Newspaper ads and less than a handful of newspaper writings on the local films allow me to piece together a synopsis, or plot summary of each work. Without the need of much induction, I also easily extract the moral themes of each film – or else what the film producers want audience to think what the films were worthy of. My work of interpretive mediation takes the form of associative approach, marking connections between each film as a fragment with a voice and its possible connection with other fragments in the everyday landscape of 1934. These other possible fragments, which amount to 70% of my original research which is a study of space and the effect of walking, include a variety of found traces, from moral exegesis, objects, international and local news pieces, speeches, meeting notes, maps, photographs, stories told, folk and opera sounds, consumer products, daily radio programs and leisure facilities to address books, posters, personal diaries published in newspapers and so on. As a result, the associative expositional chain I made for each film varies, and within each chain, I shift constantly between the concrete, the social and the ideational. In other words, each film I studied forms a network of ideational/practical/material connectivity – each film becomes a world of its own; each film posited horizontally with other connective fragments, resisting any simple “figure and ground” reading. As suggested earlier, the 13 to 15 local films involved in this study is only less than ?% of all the films enjoyed by the local people. In this way, what I am studying are objects of the “in-between-ness”: my associational map of each film text is to turn crevices into a productive site of historiography.

Films as Open Works, Individual Films as Nexus

Example 1: *Modern Tears*²

² “Modern Tears” is my own translation of the film *Mo deng lei* 摩登淚. The film was heavily publicized for its Cantonese song numbers and its male lead, Yip Fut-yeuk [Ye Furuo], a local Hongkong actor. The film is not included in the Film Archive's first volume of Hong Kong Filmography. My suspicion is that the film was either produced in Guangzhou, or was a Hongkong-Guangzhou co-production. However, the production company *Ya zhou gongsi* [Asia Company], billed in all movie ads, cannot be located so far in all the Mainland or Hongkong publications available to me.

[modernity]

- *modern life, modern education: what it is and isn't
- *failure of permissive morality;

[crisis model]

- *women's erroneous views of a modern life
- *the amorous life of the songstress

[local culture]

- *Songstress: image, life-style, stereotype;
- *debates on male-only performance practice

[film culture]

- *Cantonese Sound, Cantonese songs (business formula)

TRANSLATION:

All Cantonese dialogues and singing
Romantic, Passionate, Astounding, Moving

- ▲ a history of the fall of modern men and women
- ▲ a revealing portrait of modern men and women

(With the most famous Cantonese opera performer and songstress...) bringing to live the ugliness of modern men and women in amazing details

The five movie ads I have collected from *WKYP* and *Renaissance* basically directed the readers' attention to three aspects: Cantonese dialogs and singing, the ensemble of performers from a few closely related entertainment circles, and the visual representation of modern life in a hand-drawn sketch placed in the centre of the ads.

The explanatory texts in the movie ads were unanimously didactic for *Modern Tears*. An ad on January 5, 1934 in the upper right area of the front page in *Renaissance* stipulated, "a history of the fall of 'modern' men and women; a map-work unveiling the true faces of 'modern' men and women." The same ad with the same lines appeared on *WKYP*'s front page the same day.³ On January 6, the day before the film opened, *WKYP*'s front page again featured a big ad for the film, this time in the upper left corner. The highlights this time were given to the "romantic performance," "admonishing plot line," "humorous songs" and "tasteful dialogs." Still, the minor text in the lower right corner of the ad preached, "the modern' turns one into a heartless rascal: this film offers forceful warning to young men and women who have misunderstood the meaning of 'the modern'." On the day the film opened, the ad in *WKYP* was moved to the second page, while the message on 'the modern' was given equal emphasis and lumped together with other selling points, but nonetheless claiming the film's devotion to "a full-fledged portrayal of the shameful ways of young men and women who misunderstand the meaning of 'the modern'." The message took on a poetic license in the ad on January 9 on *WKYP*'s front page: "the midnight mourning bells for those who misunderstand the meaning of the modern – a screaming strike on their heads!"

³ *WKYP* is the abbreviation for *Wah Kiu Yat Po* 華僑日報, a Chinese-language daily newspaper. *Renaissance* (*Zhong Xing Pao* 中興報) is also a Chinese-language daily.

The sketch in the movie ads was a convenient symbolic summary representation of the so-called “perversities” of modern life. One sees a woman sitting by a round table full of wine bottles, surrounded by five men (two standing and three sitting), with a background unmistakably showing a nightclub with a band and female performers. The woman in the night club was an obvious signifier of a “social butterfly,” a special category identified in the metropolis of modern Shanghai to refer to women who maintained a relatively well-kept life-style by hanging out with men in entertainment institutions. And the sketch could easily be a convenient portrait of the personal life of Suen Nei-ah, the film’s female lead, who was known for being an active social butterfly in Shanghai. WKYP’s column page writer Mao Dan devoted a short article to Suen’s marriage and divorce with musician Lui Man-shing [Lv Wencheng].⁴ In this context, the moral tale of the “modern tears” seems to demand a double take as a story centered around the woman played by Suen Nei-ah in the film and yet Suen’s own personal life.

The ads are the only surviving documents on the film and no further information is available on the actual story or the narrative flow. However, the theme of “modern life” being misunderstood was recurrent in various discussion contexts in the local Chinese newspaper. It was a topic explored and investigated from many different angles. The image of the woman in a nightclub in the ad reminds me of a news item on a case of attempted suicide with the headline: “Cecil Hotel: Modern Female Swallowed Poison.” A 28-year-old “modern female” [sic] was found unconscious after swallowing opium given to her by her boyfriend in Room 56 on the fifth floor of Cecil Hotel at around 3:00pm on December 3. She was rushed to hospital and seemed to have survived. Other than the above facts, there were no further details in the article that provided further reasons for the use of the term “modern.” [WKYP December 4; 2:3]

What is to be modern? A two-part article appearing on two consecutive days in *Renaissance* listed three “prerequisites” all “modern” women had to fulfill: eyebrow-drawing, lip-painting, and nail-painting.⁵ The piece clearly declared physical appearance as the top priority for women in both the West and the East, if they ever wanted to stand out and be desired. The instructions on lip-painting appealed to romance in movies as the evidence of the lips’ importance, linking attractive lips to irresistible kisses. The advice on nail-painting emphasized instead the danger of infection and solutions for such problems.

In most cases, the “modern” is a mind-boggling category since its meanings basically remained unsaid in most of the accounts or, if given a voice, only negatively in terms of what it destroyed and what undesirable consequences it could have

A short humor piece would perhaps give us some images of what “modern” means or how the term was used – but again – negatively.⁶ Below is what the writer Man Yee thought a modern person would do in contrast to an archaic person:

“... When a modern person meets his bride, he checks to see if she is pregnant.
... A modern person marries a wife like he is purchasing a clothes-hanger in a

⁴ Mao Dan [Mu Dan], “Lv Wencheng juannian Sun Niya” [Lui Man-shing misses Suen Nei-ah], WKYP May 10, 1934; 4:3.

⁵ Bing Yuk [Bing Yu], “modeng funv de bi xiu ke (shang)” [must-have subjects for modern women – part I], “nanguo zhi feng” [wind of the southern country] section no. 437, *Renaissance* August 31, 1934; 1:4. Wing Si [yong shi], “modeng funv de bi xiu ke (xia)” [must-have subjects for modern women – part II], “nanguo zhi feng” [wind of the southern country] section no. 438, *Renaissance* September 1, 1934; 1:4.

⁶ Man Yee [Man Er], “gulao yu modeng” [the archaic and the modern], WKYP October 20, 1934; 4:2.

boutique.

... A modern person gets married because his child is coming and can wait no more.

... When a modern person is expecting a child, the most mind-boggling thing is to count the number of months of pregnancy.

... A modern bride comes in a motor car: she comes fast and leaves soon.

... A modern person's wife is like an America sofa, pleasant-looking and comfortable, but its cover needs changing all the time, therefore it is neither economical nor durable. ... When it breaks, it means a major project: there's no way but to change the entire sofa.

... A newly-wed modern person usually gains three children within two years."

Again, the subtext of the above was obviously about marital fidelity, with suggestions on pre-marital sex and divorce as the emblem of the modern – except that the writer this time, despite the tone of mockery, was embracing the above as reality rather than warning the readers.

Over a month earlier, Man Yee contributed to the same page of the daily *WKYP* a playful glossary for the modern woman.⁷ The piece was a list of local Cantonese colloquial expressions circulated especially among women, which the writer described as "terms and expressions often used among female students" as "modern women" at that time were "fond of using implicit allusive expressions." The writer also explained, "When boys listen to a girls' conversation, they often don't get what's going on. I therefore compile a short glossary here for the boys' use. I hope girls won't blame this writer for leaking their secrets." Some interesting expressions included: "*lian hua bei*" [ice-cream cup], "*bei*" (a cup or a glass) as in "boy" in English, referring to handsome boys with great manners and who spend generously; "*shui bei*" [a glass for water], referring to boys cheap and ugly-looking; "*maying dan ji zai*" [an eagle snatching a chicken], referring to situations in which a girl gets kissed by a boy even before he buys her chocolate or takes her out to movies, suggesting the wish of "good luck, see how heaven treats you." All the other expressions on the list were either about boy-girl relations ("*D to*" [D dates], "*T to*" [T dates], "*FF zhuyi*" [FF-ism], "*K.O.*" and constructions with similar looks), or about women's physiology, such as "*diandeng xin*" [a lamp post], "*che fengbo*" [hoisting a typhoon signal] and "*luo bo*" [lowering a typhoon signal]. Pragmatic values as well as a calculative mentality to balance physical and material exchange were highlighted, among other issues.

Serious and positive discussions (of "the modern") were not lacking when it was not gender-specific. A newspaper article "*Mo deng jiaoyu*" [modern education] in two parts appeared in December 1934, arguing for a reasonable agenda for appropriate education for the modern times.⁸ Part I of the article was mainly a justification of education's primary role in modern society. The writer began by celebrating the wonder of the motorcar as an automated device and their supreme capability in overcoming rugged landscape. However, the writer pointed out, automation was in fact energized mechanical motion, impossible without a power supply – a situation analogical to that of a strong nation. The short article concluded that loyal public servants were not enough. To have a full personhood, a nation

⁷ Man Yee [Man Yi], "*modeng guniang cidian*" [glossary for the modern women], *WKYP* Sep 2, 1934; 4:2.

⁸ See articles by Kim Yeuk [Jian Yue] in *WKYP* December 18; 4:2 and December 19; 4:2.

required perfect education, the lack of which would be like an automatic vehicle without gas.

The project of education was then reasoned in Part II of the article, which argues that “educating the body is not enough, one must educate the intellect” to “educating the body and the mind is not enough, education must address morality.”

Example 2: *Breaking Waves* 破浪

油麻地 有聲院 贈品是期 實事求是 深得一觀 一般衆情 同觀一深求實贈 結果：場場擠擁，竟打破了香港影壇的沉悶局面！ 特別送雪梨條規一條 影院提倡國貨運大犧牲之鼻祖 過去五期中之成績，確可以傲視同儕之……者！ 凡購券入座者 二三等位均贈 彩上好規 映起六十 巨製神育 本港的游泳名 家均在此表演 下期換映 明星公司特製 飛劍門法巨片 一寺紅火 集十蓮燒 映放結接八十至二十 送贈源源積堆品贈	[modernity] *modern spirit = true athletic spirit (positive models): *athletes and athletic spirit *swimming as a nation-building project *sports and physical exercises help to train the mind of women – call for revised notion of beauty [crisis model] *Virtuous woman = devoted athlete *life-style of female movie-stars [local culture] * HK needs stronger commitment in sports * sports as spectacle: sports as drama, sports in drama [film culture] (business formula) *Outstanding female swimmer in real life as well as in the story *blending of sports events and melodrama (what is good film): * Effective scene composition, photogenicie TRANSLATION: The first movie house to promote the ‘use of national products’ campaign (4 counts of emphasis of endless supply of free gifts, mainly soap bars, for customers) (highlighting the film company’s wonderful track records in the past 5 periods) (highlighting male and female protagonists) Yeung Sau-king, nicknamed ‘mermaid’ (a famous female professional swimmer) seen live on the silver screen Many of Hong Kong’s well known swimmers are performing in this film
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A review on January 19, 1934 and the synopsis on a movie theater publicity flyer provide meticulous details of the evolvment of the love triangle between the male protagonist and the two women who are both outstanding swimmers.⁹ In these accounts, the focus of the film seems to fall on the Tanka girl, telling the story of a woman rewarded with access to education for her good deeds, which also breeds the central conflict of the film. Glancing through the variety of publicity flyers and reviews, the star personae of the two female leads and their general life-style as a

⁹ Kok Sang [Jue Sheng], “kan liao *Po Lang* hou de gan yan” [Thoughts after viewing *Breaking Waves*], *I&C* (?) January 19, 1934. *I&C* is the abbreviation for the Chinese-language daily, *Industrial & Commercial Daily* 工商日報.

performer received as much emphasis as the romantic triangle in the story. An obvious selling point was Lai Cheuk-cheuk [*Li Zhuozhuo*],¹⁰ who played the treacherous Yeuk-lan. Lai was then already a well known star of Lianhua's, having played in quite a few of its Shanghai productions. Kwok Tak-yau [*Guo Deyou*] (aka Kwok Wa-wa [*Guo wawa*]), who played the virtuous Yuk-ying, was a first-time performer, and stories regarding the discovery of her for the role were numerous. What strikes me as most fascinating is the presumed tie between the discourse of a good woman and a devoted (female) athlete, which colored most publicity literature.

A news piece on November 9, 1933 pointed out that three months before shooting, Lai already arrived in Hong Kong to practice swimming and diving despite her general competence in the sport.¹¹ But “since her swimming skill had not reached the top level, she trained at Repulse Bay (in the southern part of Hong Kong Island).” The piece praised not only Lai's devotion as an actress, but also promoted the picture of a competent socialite good at dancing and swimming. The necessity of putting in extra hours in swimming was presented as a responsible act to meet the requirement of the role she played – a female student who excelled in the sport (whereas the male lead's role required no swimming at all). Her devotion also redeemed her from the implicit negative connotation of the “social butterfly” unsaid in public discourses.

The stories of how Kwok was finally chosen for the role of Yuek-lan were even more explicit in equating a virtuous woman with a devoted sportsperson. One account said Hong Kong's top swimmers, Yeung Sau-king [*Yang Xiuqiong*] and her sisters were the stars originally targeted. But due to family opposition, the Yeung sisters finally turned down the roles offered to them. In the end, Yeung Sau-king, nicknamed the “Hong Kong mermaid,” did show up in the film as her participation in an actual athletic meet was documented as newsreel, a segment of which was incorporated into the fictional discourse of *Breaking Waves*. Then the story continued that Lai attended a province-wide swimming gala for Guangdong, where she spotted one of the participant-swimmers Kwok. It was reported that Lai found Kwok's face rather pleasant, and asked her if she would be interested in playing the role of Yeuk-lan. Kwok was enthusiastic and asked to be introduced to the film's director. Additional notes described Kwok as outstanding in the swimming arena of Canton (Guangzhou). A follow-up anecdote detailed her devotion to sports:

“Since about three years ago, Kwok would practice at *Dong Shan* every day under the guidance of her coaches, the brothers Yeung Heng-wah [*Yang Kenghua*] and Yeung Yuen-wah [*Yang Yuanhua*]. ... Whether sunny days or rainy days, she would always arrive with her flowery-patterned umbrella, practicing with other outstanding sportswomen Yip Kei-wah [*Ye Qihua*] from the Teacher's Training College for Women, and Lee Jim [*Li Jian*], the ‘school flower’ of Canton's Arts School. Yip and Lee were far better than Kwok in terms of swimming skill. Kwok took additional training sessions and worked really hard, in summers as well as winters. Now her effort pays off, and she finds herself among the movie stars. She should feel rested.”¹²

¹⁰ Lai Cheuk-cheuk [*Li Zhuozhuo*] was born in Hong Kong, Guangdong by origin, niece of Lai Man-wai [*Li Minwei*], who was known as “the father of Hong Kong cinema.” Her film career began in Shanghai with Lianhua. In late 1930s, she moved back to Hong Kong as Japanese aggression escalated in the Mainland. She lived on Hong Kong Island with Cheung Yik. Since she spoke perfect Cantonese, she continued to secure her role in the prospering sound films of Hong Kong cinema.

¹¹ Chik Mok [*Zhi Mo*], “*Po Lang san zhujiao*” [the three leads in *Breaking Waves*], *Nam Keung Yat Po* [*Nan Qiang Ribao*] November 9, 1933.

¹² Ibid..

Strangely, when the film was actually on in 1934, all the ads billed Kwok as “a fine virgin daughter of Hong Kong” [*ben gang guixiu*], and with a different name Kwok Wa-wa, meaning “baby Kwok.” She was presented in most publicity literature as “famous Hong Kong daughter who excels in swimming.” Supposing the report in November 1933 was accurate, then Lianhua-Hongkong was playing with the time gap to re-package Kwok’s image, assuming that her background was largely unknown to the local audience.

The role of physical exercises in disciplining the minds of women, thus the desirable image of the female who engages herself in sports, was a rather common “antidote” proposed to cure a woman from the obsession with the negative practices of a “modern woman.” A short piece titled “*fu nv buxing mei*” [the beauty of walking for women] openly recommended Chinese women to revise their notion of “beauty.”¹³ Rather than spending on cosmetics to pursue beauty for the face, the writer recommended they should turn to walking to acquire “beauty as health” [*jiankang mei*]. An eight-point guideline was detailed regarding how to position the different parts of the body when walking, pacing, the desirable length of each stride and so on. Such a method was described as balancing the appearance and the physiological aspects of a woman who wants to stay young. Another article titled “*Zhongguo nvzi*” [Chinese females] in September praised the achievement of two Chinese female marathon walkers’ setting the example for a new notion of “health-beauty” [*jiankang mei*] to supercede the indulgence in “pathetic beauty” [*bingtai mei*] which cherished fragility and vulnerability of the physique.¹⁴ The essayist regretted that despite the new awareness, Chinese women were much behind European women: for example, the essay cited, there was the story of the latter successfully climbing the Himalayas, something which would take Chinese women a long time to emulate.

The technologies of truth that surrounded women were surprisingly coherent. On the one hand, they hinted at the destructiveness of permissive morality and indulgence in leisure and entertainment, both of which were seen as harmful to the survival of the family institution. On the other hand, they called for a revised notion of recreation via sports activities to achieve a disciplined body and the resultant attenuation of the human will. Against such context, I find the occasional literary columns in newspapers a unique space where the subjectivities of individuals found legitimate expressions. In the second issue of “*nuan liu*” [warm stream], a special periodic feature of WKYP’s column page, the subjectivity of a young female athlete was delivered in a prose piece titled “*yi ge nv qiuyuan de ji ye riji*” [a few pages from the diaries of a female basket-ball player].¹⁵ The piece consisted of six diary entries from the month of February. These entries, a deliberate selection, together formed a multiple-self with a broad range of subject positions: an athlete sensitive to sports ethics and reflective of the struggles of her fellow women athletes; a newspaper contributor who wrote regularly on the general questions of sports and individual types of sport games; a young woman going to the movies for a trial date, anxiously anticipating a friendship turning into romance; a young woman experiencing her first kiss with a man; a young intellectual who read Goethe’s *The Sorrows of the Young Werther*, Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, Pushkin’s poetry and other literary journals as a sustained habit; a young woman who aspired to be a “virtuous wife and mother” upon

¹³ Hon Yuet [*Han Yue*, meaning a cold moon], “*fu nv buxing mei*” [the beauty of walking for women], WKYP April 25; 4:3.

¹⁴ Jim Jim [*Zhan Zhan*], “*Zhongguo nvzi*” [Chinese females], WKYP September 2, 1934; 4:2.

¹⁵ WKYP April 10, 1934; 4:3 (*nuan liu* semi-monthly no. 2).

seeing the intimacy of her cousin and her new-born child; an amateur poet; a literature-lover who noticed the importance of women in male writers' works and wondered if men were equally important to a female writer; and an all-round athlete wishing her name to be made known to Europe one day.

The highly personalized concerns of the writer resembled many of the issues propagated in the various technologies of truth. In my view, the personal diary segments were the very acts as much as the evidence of intensive self-techniques in the form of conscientious documentation of "significant" events in everyday life resulting in the confession of the self. The accumulation of small details in everyday life was an intense project to the writer as it set the individual onto fine procedures of "recall-selection-reflection-critique-and-confession," which resulted in a deliberate selective ensemble of the appropriate pages for publishing: it is the kind of "care-for-the-self" process that, in Foucault's view, turns power domination from above to self-initiated and self-tempering ethical practices, by which moral judgment and decisions for action become a matter of personal accountability.¹⁶ Along this line, literary columns as a forum for free expression and individual articulation also framed the space for willing, active engagement with dominant discourses through voluntary reflection and free response.

Lianhua-Hongkong's business formula for Breaking Waves was in many ways exploiting the ensemble of sports stars within the fabric of a fictional romantic triangle. Next to the appearance of Yeung Sau-king, the "Hongkong mermaid," there were also the various members of the swimming team of the famous SCAA (South China Athletic Association), and the participants including the winners of the annual cross-harbor swimming competition. Their presence was one of the selling points in movie ads. Next to the cross-harbor swimming [*du hai yong*] competition, there was also the Guangdong Province Swimming Gala [*Quan sheng shuiyun hui*]. The appearance of these sport celebrities were evenly spread out across the film in the numerous newsreel segments of major sports events incorporated into its fictional discourse.

Highly conscious of swimming as a significant sport in Hong Kong, two different reviewers commented on the film's paying mere lip service to "promoting sports" as the objective of the film. In their views, the project to promote sports should be properly understood as the training of both a person's physique and character (personhood), and the cultivation of a collaborative spirit. The inter-textual connection between the discourse of swimming as a popular sport and swimming as one of the contesting grounds for new moral norms was presumed but not really debated.

Writer Sing Sing [*Xing Xing*] pointed out the following lack in the opening of his review before he moved on to his critique of the method of cinema. First, he said, the makers of the film lacked deep understanding of sports, and were therefore unable to elaborate on themes as basic as "sports enhance health" and "sports develop the tenacity of will." Second, the author was unaware of the fact that sports activities should be available for all without limits, an open arena for the enhancement of both spiritual and physical health. There was no explicit exposition of the social meanings of sports. The writer therefore only acknowledged the film's negative achievement,

¹⁶ "Care of the self" is not only the title of one of Foucault's books, but a key theme ruling his thought from 1976 to 1984. See, for example, "the Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: an interview with Michel Foucault on January 20, 1984" by Raul Fornet-Betancourt, Helmut Becker and Alfredo Gomez-Muller, in Bernauer and Rasmussen (eds.), The Final Foucault (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 1-20.

which was to show the vain side of sports people, a still worthy moral reminder. On the other hand, distortions were many: disciplined swimming routines, for example, were turned into leisure (pastime) in the film, and there was too much emphasis on winning the championship as the final motive of swimming.¹⁷

Writer Kwok Sang explained that he was attracted to the film because he heard it concerned itself with the future of sports. After a paraphrase of the story, he concluded, “Overall speaking, I don’t see anything at all about the importance of swimming. It’s no more than a romantic tale that sinks and floats in the green waves.”¹⁸ He then continued to critique the film’s contemptuous attitude towards the fishing community: for to him, “there’s nothing lowly about being the daughter of a fisherman,” so what kind of struggle should there be for the male protagonist?

Indeed, a brief overview of all surviving movie ads finds the repeated slogan of “promoting sports” [*tichang tiyu*] and many redundant variations, such as Lee Theatre’s “down with the sick man’s image” slogan [*da dao bing fu kou hao*] (March 15). An interesting twist would be when the film traveled to its sixth and final stop of that year at Yaumati Sound Cinema (July 27-28), where the film was chosen for the cinema’s sixth round “advocate *guo pian* and *guo huo*” campaign featuring bar soap for laundry to reward viewers of *Breaking Waves*.

The relation between nation-building, swimming and sports in general, and the training of the body as well as one’s will might perhaps appear to be loose, scattered and discursive in the above. But an introductory essay to the sports section for the non-government published *Hong Kong Year Book 1934* succinctly turns the many ideas I have assembled here into a coherent, logically reasoned discourse. The following is my summary of the essay. I have simplified elaborative details but have deliberately preserved the essay’s path of reasoning.

“Physical education is as important as intellectual education; strong body and an active mind are complementary, without which a person is sub-human. It follows that a strong nation is impossible without strong physique of its national subjects.

“Hong Kong as a key commercial harbor in South China has a sure obligation. Guangzhou is the sports centre in South China. Hong Kong, Guangzhou’s close neighbor, should catch the same fire. *However* [sic] it was only in the past few years that sports became prosperous in Hong Kong, thanks to the many immigrants from the Mainland, and the emergence of more schools and sports associations.

“As a British colony, Hong Kong’s top sport has been soccer. Each stationing naval vessel has its own soccer team. Hong Kong also had the track record of having the best soccer players in the whole of China, and almost the best in East Asia. Only until recently did Guangzhou and Shanghai gradually prove themselves Hong Kong’s competitors. The two cities owed Hong Kong for the training personnel the latter supplied.

“Next to soccer is swimming due to the plentiful swimming facilities. There is a long list of local British swimming stars, and at least three male and three female outstanding Chinese swimmers. Yeung Sau-king, for example, won

¹⁷ Sing Sing [*Xing Xing*], *Renaissance* Jan 17, 1934; 2:1.

¹⁸ Kok Sang [*Jue Sheng*], *I&C* (?) January 19, 1934.

many events in the second National.

“Next to soccer and swimming are cricket and tennis. The popularity of cricket in Hong Kong has spread to Guangzhou and Shanghai.

“The recent installation of a basketball court in government or private schools naturally encouraged basketball.

“By comparison, Hong Kong is weak in track and field events due to three main reasons: the lack of systematic training due to the rarity of boarding schools; the lack of space to train people on actual fields and tracks; and HKU alone, the only university in the colony, could not provide enough space to absorb those outstanding track and field athletes from secondary schools.”¹⁹

The essay does not only provide a handy summary of the dominant discourse to tie sports to healthy citizenship. It moves from discursive exposition to the assessment of Hong Kong's prospects in sports, almost turning it into a practical project with action plans.

Example 3: *Problems After Marriage* 婚後的問題

中央大戲院
即日
起映

作傑新人驚綿纏艷哀的獻貢殊特有 社現對司公片影藝華

幽麗 緊張 結構 細膩 婉轉 劇情

婚前 她本思潔 身自愛 然而金錢 的魔力使 終於使她 由羨慕虛 榮而為虛 榮所誤 婚後 她祇望夫 婿回頭 幸而環境 的惡劣 使她由 苦奮鬥 奮鬥成功

！治共爐一思想新與德道舊

是兒這

生之舞蹈者的笑容
情場失意者的覺悟
誤入歧途者的回頭

細緻的描寫
令人心神嚮往！
大胆的暴露
令人痛心疾首！
強烈的情感
令人肝腸寸斷！
這是修身家齊
的借鏡！
這是賢母良妻
的典型！
這是冒昧成婚
的當頭棒！
無論男女老幼
皆應一看此片

監製 梁石 鍾石 鍾石 鍾石
編劇 鍾石 鍾石 鍾石 鍾石
導演 鍾石 鍾石 鍾石 鍾石
主演 鍾石 鍾石 鍾石 鍾石

這裏有：
——丈夫的盡情揮霍……放蕩……騙害……受
淫於花天酒地之間！
——妻子的忍痛分離……悽愴……悲切……輾
轉於顛沛流離之境！
——舞女們對豪富者的諷刺……欺騙……到頭
來，竟將情侶作替仇！
——情愛者對已結婚的追求……爭愛……到頭
來，卒化干戈為玉帛！

¹⁹ Hong Kong Year Book 1934, section on sports, p. 1-5.

Story or Narrative?

The film's narrative involvement, as it was claimed, culminated in the assertion of the genuine, pure romantic love relationship capable of surviving all kinds of hardships, unshaken by material trials and temptation.²⁰ Publicity literature presented the film's story as carrying a deliberate sampling of intellectuals as its basic characters with the university campus as the initial setting. Two male university students fall in love with the same woman. One of them is from a rich family. To him, money is almighty and love can be bought. The woman falls into his trap: "fooled by money," she marries the rich guy. After marriage, she begins to feel dismayed with her husband's "problematic behavior." But every small complaint on her part only results in his outburst of rage. As a result, she is driven out of the house and becomes homeless. Later on, she hears that her husband is the victim of a fraud, loses his entire family fortune, hangs out with triad gangsters, gets involved in a robbery and is sent to prison. She makes up her mind: she will do everything she can to save her husband from jail and be reconciled with him to "repair their broken love." [WKYP August 6, 1934; 4:2] In the end, she "waits patiently for her husband to come out of jail," longing for "the day when they will be reunited."²¹

The above is probably only good enough for a general story idea, but gives little hints as to the actual film narrative. For almost all publicity materials and reviews heralded the film's sampling of typical social roles. Information available on the more filmic aspects is scanty – except in one citation when a reviewer praised the film for its use of beautiful outdoor locations, refined performances, tight structure and a plot line with twists and turns.²²

One still photo repeatedly printed in various ads gives us one of the few hints of the film's visual look – or the preferred visual representation of the story. The photo is a medium shot of a couple cuddling and kissing each other.²³ An inverted triangle arrangement suggests the relation between two men and one woman: the two men, on leveled ground facing the reader, stoop over the woman who stands one step below, one on each side, while the woman mildly turns her head back to the man on the left, receiving the kiss and cuddle from behind and above. The photo has a line-sketch version, presenting similar visual content, except that the three characters are cut into two pictures with their heads only, assembled on the printed page to form an inverted triangle. [I&C Daily August 5, 1934]. In the photo version, all three persons wear tennis outfits or hold a racket. The man on the left is leaning close to and looking down on the woman. The one on the right recedes slightly into the background, looks smaller in size and is dominated by the couple. [WKYP August 6] In the sketch version, the woman in the lower tip of the inverted triangle has a plate above and behind her head saying "problems after marriage" (title of film). The two men above her are in stark contrast: the one on the right looks unshaven behind (prison) bars whereas the one on the left is clean-shave and looks calm and contemplative. Composition in both places the woman in the center: she is the subject of dilemma, facing choices and decision; and she is the center of attention, the central problem herself, and the contested object of desire of the two men.

²⁰ See the section titled "city voices" (*shi sheng*), in WKYP July 14, 1934; 2:4. See also similar briefs in the same section on May 5; 2:3.

²¹ See synopsis in *Hong Kong Filmography vol. 1, 1913-1941*, p. 32.

²² See the section "short news" in WKYP November 15, 1934; 2:3.

²³ The photo appeared in a newspaper ad dated August 4, 1934 (source not specified) in the Hong Kong Film Archive's folder for the film.

Techniques of the Self: Open Circulation, Divergent Articulation

One of the film's key selling points was the background of its producer Shek Chung-shan, who, as Huayi Film Company's Director/Manager, was also Chairman of the Catholic Youth Association, Treasurer and Manager for the Cricket Association, and headmaster of Sacred Heart Secondary School where he had served and taught for over ten years. [WKYP July 4, 1934; 2:4] The fact of his turning personal experience as counselor and educator into scriptwriting was always brought up in connection with his Catholic background. Taking a broad view, Shek's insightful counseling on young people's love relations was only one addition to the bulk of expositions on boy-girl relationships extensively present in Chinese-language newspaper writings.

Four different versions of the film's ads produced a typification framework for four kinds of generic role situations.²⁴ First is the Husband, described as extravagant (in spending), unrestrained, arrogant, and lustful (indulging in drinking and women). Second is the Wife, "sad and miserable," "grieving at heart," who has to put up with "separation from husband" and being tossed about in a life that lacks stability and security. Third is the Dancing Hostess, who plays tricks on big spenders and tycoons and as a result turns her lover into her enemy. The fourth is the story's Romance-pursuer. He is pursuing a married woman, but in the end gives up and "turns battle into peace." The third and fourth characters, in a way doubles of the second and first, are explicitly in accordance with gender stereotyping: the male "repents" whereas female is "lost in enmity." The film was recommended in general as a due social critique for contemporary young men and women in love, a proclamation of the necessity of mutual respect and fidelity in love relations. The ads also claimed the film to be addressing those who were married, as its story would be a good reminder of the happiness they deserve.²⁵

A closer look, however, finds an obvious gender bias in the film's interpellation. The sets of binary opposition presented in the ads mainly addressed female viewers as the problematic subjects of ethical incompleteness: before marriage versus after marriage, self-respect versus helplessness (with the husband's returning home being the only way out), loss to greed and vanity versus struggle for propriety and well-being, old morality versus new ways of thinking. Such gender-biased address was particularly obvious in an elaborate ad on the day before the release of the film, which hailed the film for presenting "the paradigm of virtuous mothers and fine wives [*shan mu liang qi de dian xing*], and "the exemplary model for perfecting the family and tempering one's self" (*xiu shen qi jia de bangyang*). An additional line was added to these two in the coming days, claiming the film to be "a big strike on the head of those who get married mindlessly" [*moawei chenghun de dangtou pan*]. In general, the so-called paradigm of roles and model behavior underlined the woman as both the victim and the victimizer. The burden of morality in contemporary life was represented as a gender tug-of-war.

The ads also clearly marked the space for those viewers who did not fit one of the four role categories but potentially could. Thus some ads selectively addressed them, claiming the film to be "the torch of life for unmarried men and women" [*wei hun nannv shengming qiantu de huoba*], next to being the "bright light for the prospect of love relationships for married couples" [*yi hun fufu aiqing qianlu de mingdeng*]. A brief news piece had different wordings, but similar emphasis: "a

²⁴ The various versions of the film's ad were from Tien Kwong Po, *Industrial and Commercial Daily News*, *Industrial and Commercial Evening News* and WKYP.

²⁵ See the section titled "city voices" (*shi sheng*), in WKYP July 14, 1934; 2:4. See also similar briefs in the same section on May 5; 2:3.

compass for love relation” and “an antidote for family reform” [WKYP November 15, 1934; 2:3].

In general, most ads for this film were extremely wordy. The effective summary of a film’s moral themes and lessons in a menu form was far more vigorous than for any of the films I have discussed so far. Each ad carried a slightly different “menu” that listed all the issues, problems and dramatic themes covered, providing the viewers with a conceptual framework for what to expect. The menus mapped out categories of fictional characters and implied viewers so the audience would know which role model to identify themselves with. The menus also summarized the dramatic aspect of the film in terms of typical phases of life or generic pathos in widely known dramatic formulae.

The bold assumptions of a film’s moral rigor and healthy message as valid selling points spoke of a specific moment in history in which the demand for explicitly shared and broadly applicable self-techniques was projected onto, and co-opted in, the production of cultural texts in the popular media. The menu-style movie ads would have to be read and understood imaginatively as if they carried a voice to address all, which needed to be heard in public. The points in the menu communicated standards of normality as they were understood, digested and absorbed by cultural practitioners who also occupied the role of the intermediate élite, defenders and debaters of moral propriety. In Foucauldian terms, the menu expressed (moral) control in the form of an open invitation for self-initiated personal ethics, marking the space for human agencies.

A viewer’s response offered me a glimpse of how the need for practical self techniques via role models was mapped onto the broader everyday terrain. A reader/writer with a “feminine” name, Kit-bing [*Jiebing*, meaning clean ice] wrote an article titled, “*Hun hou de wenti*” [problems after marriage] published in WKYP [November 1, 1934; 4:2], which made explicit allusion to the film’s title. Framing marriage as a story form, the essay opens, “Marriage is a necessary phase of life. To organize a small family may produce jolly stories or tragedies. The problem after marriage is a serious question to tackle.” The writer then provides an account of the social roots of the problem:

“According to China’s family system, small families unite to form big families, together they become a huge clan, signifying the abundance of luck. It is in such a context that many young men and women become very conscious of the [problematic] environment they find themselves after getting married.

The explicit verbalization of commonsense everyday life ethics may appear to be obsessive to a contemporary reader. But exposition like the above found its ways into many articles that filled up the column pages of Chinese-language daily news in 1934, complementing the elaborate moral interpellation carried in the menu-style movie ads of ethical dramas.

The power relations between a man and woman in a romantic relationship was a widely “studied” issue in the public space, in literary and journalist writing as well as in cinema. A most light-hearted response I found was in an article titled “*‘nu zi zui nan liaojie’ zhi miao wen*” [the wonderful essay of ‘women are most difficult to understand’], which included a Chinese translation of an Indian folk tale about a god who created women because he felt tired of the qualities of men.

University Students: the romantic imaginary

There is a perhaps minor and yet recurrent point in local films in 1934 I have

studied: the category of “university students” was more than once turned into the typical model adult in the form of the dramatic protagonist. As a social group, university students were practically the minority, a supposedly rather hidden and inaccessible species in the everyday life setting of Hong Kong in 1934, considering how few places there were in the university place and how costly education was. In any case, precisely because their life-style was almost unknown, my attention has been drawn to the wild imagination they incited among makers of popular culture. In fact, more than one film discussed from this year imagined university students as the protagonists of their moral/ethical drama. Readers may recall two films discussed earlier on in this chapter, Breaking Waves and Brothers (both by Overseas Lianhua), which, through the protagonist-“university student,” upheld the intellectual young person as an ideal audience to address.

There are few facts about the actual university students, but the issue at hand has nothing to do with documentary truth or fairness of coverage. It is about how the subject of ethical discipline was inscribed. The location of the imaginary ideal youth - and at the same time subject of interpellation for imperfection -- was not elsewhere but within a group of enigmatic, almost absent subjects. From another angle, the obsession with the representation of university students’ life-style was underlined by the need to care for them as a since they were the social élite in the making. University students, ideally the noblest group, were also the best subjects to uphold for the general admonition against misguided “modern” life.

The above would shed light on the consistent discussion – not coverage – of the university student in Chinese-language newspapers. The group was indeed consistently highlighted – for misdemeanors or examples of bad conduct that were basically alive among young people at large – time out in dancing halls, falling in love with dancing hostesses and so on.²⁶ An article titled “*da xuesheng de chulu*” [the prospects of a university student], for example, articulates once again the core qualities expected of a university student. [WKYP July 18; 4:3] Citing a fresh news report on an alliance formed among university students in Beijing to plead with the government in Nanjing to ensure university graduates’ employment prospects, writer Chim Chim [*Jian Jian*] made explicit his critique,

“The lack of prospects is only the surface. There are many hidden factors. In China, while we are all yelling for ‘going to the people’ as the only way to save our country and her subjects, [many] are not willing to turn that into practice. Those who become university graduates only think of becoming someone with a status above others. Everyone wants to find a place as a government official, not realizing that the house of the politicians is already over-populated... How would [a university graduate] find any prospect?”

The writer ended the article, making explicit the essentials of a university graduate, “Better go amidst the people. No more contempt for physical labor.”

The Bitter Sea – [practice] identification with Hollywood genres: the “beast” film – [business formula] the “man-eating” sub-humanness in the exotic wilderness – [discourse] nudity, a signifier of the modern

Spectacle or Morality?

²⁶ Among other issues, the question of whether university students should be banned from the dancing halls was raised many times in Chinese-language newspapers. Cases cited to substantiate the debate included those in Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou, as well as in Japan.

Exploiting the company premise's neighborhood in Kowloon City (in the eastern part of the peninsula of Kowloon), Huayi turned the Diamond Hill area into the location for the "wilderness" in Bitter Sea, a place supposed to have escaped the touch of urbanization. The predominant use of outdoor scenes was the main selling point in the newspaper ads.

The "story" extractable from available publicity literature is still highly obscure. The following is the synopsis provided in the Hong Kong Filmography volume I, which leaves us with just a few clues that barely form any coherent narrative:

"The Bitter Sea is a tale of friendship. The plot deals with a young man who flees to the mountains. There he meets ferocious tribesmen with their half-naked women. Later, the young man meets an old hermit and forms a friendship with him. The old man finally dies of illness. Grief-stricken, the young man buries the old man with his own hands."

One short news item described the film to be "about a young man who wants to do something to serve his nation, perseveres through all kinds of hardship until success is achieved." [I&C Daily May 3, 1934; 3:3]

The absence of a clear plot leaves the researcher/historian with two possibilities. Editorials inclined towards the film's engagement with "grand subject matters," as reviewer Si Dan called it, on which he further generalized, noting, "Film is the reflective portrayal of society. Since Shek was originally an educator, he manages to see things from this angle. All the films he has participated in so far have, as their objective, the unveiling of social dark, unlike many who are [making films] after fame."²⁷ From this perspective, the plot details, whatever they were, ultimately contributed to the grand, timeless theme of friendship, thus the positive side of human nature, which was what ultimately counted.

The other direction a researcher may take would be to look at how the movie ads had unanimously represented the film as a string of spectacles, each having its own attraction values, as the many blurbs screamed: "the wild man eating human flesh, shocking and chilling," "hands separated from the legs [i.e. brothers separated], sad and moving," "humongous beastly men performing the most violent and cruel fight," "small-size, monkey-like living creatures showing their most scary and violent faces," and "naked female beauty from the wilderness showing the beautiful curve lines of nature [their body]."²⁸ It would not be unreasonable for me to assume that the film's premise could be that of a patriotic young person in pursuit of a good cause but gets into trouble, which sets the backdrop of his exile and exotic encounters in the wilderness, which form the film's main drama.

Two days before the film opened at Central Theatre, Huayi adopted a publicity strategy they had applied to The Case of the Wedding Night. A news-like coverage appeared among various short news items in the local news page, with the headlines running, "All sectors [of society] take caution: WILD HUMAN DISCOVERED IN HONG KONG." The report continued:

"They drink blood and eat raw meat. They are nine feet tall. The male is ape-like and extremely violent, female carrying her breasts uncovered. These wild human beings hide in uninhabited mountains. Yesterday, movie star Shek

²⁷ Si Dan [*Shi Dan*], "*Shi Youyu cong deng yintan*" [Shek Yau-yu back on the silver screen], WKYP(?) February 9, 1934. The clip was read in the Hong Kong Film Archive's individual film files.

²⁸ See half-page ad appearing on the upper half of I&C Daily April 29, 1934; 3:1.

Yau-yu ran into them and was almost killed. For further details, please visit Central Theatre two days from now.” [WKYP May 1, 1934; 2:2 (local news)]

Curious people, if they ever visited Central Theatre, would find a nine-foot tall model of a “wild man” exhibited in the cinema’s lobby open for free visit, described to be “captured by Shek recently” while “doing location shooting in Diamond Hill.” [I&C Daily May 3, 1934; 3:3 (film news)]

When the film repeated in July at Kau U Fong New Theatre, similar emphases were placed in the ad: “wild human” [ye ren], “man-eating” [chi ren], the humongous body of the male and a bathing scene of the female. [WKYP July 8, 1934; 2:4] However, one may assume that the hyped subject matter of a young intellectual combating the wild human beings was probably only a small portion of the film, put in for additional selling power. It was said that the beastly violence was “overcome” by Shek’s wisdom, not by force.

Beast Films: a species of modernity, a Hollywood reference

“Beast films” was a term coined by local Chinese writers to describe one species of films from Europe and the United States that focused on life and activities in non-urban locations, often characterized by the lurking danger of untamed living animals constantly threatening human lives. According to an article on February 8, the time around 1934 was an extremely flourishing moment for the beast films in the West.²⁹ Prominent examples cited include MGM’s Tarzan the Ape Man (1932), Tarzan and His Mate (1934) and Spectacles of the Human and Beasts(?), Paramount’s King of the Jungle (1933), documentary film Congorilla, RKO’s Kong Kong and so on.³⁰

The “Beast Film” was a local invention in Hong Kong, and probably used in Shanghai as well. An overview of general accounts of Hollywood films in the 1930s finds no such category. In Tony Balio’s survey of US films in the 1930s, films that had been called “beast films” by Hong Kong writers find membership in a broad range of groupings, from horror, ethnic films, B-movies to non-fiction.³¹ Other relative terms for “beast films” include: “exotic travelogue features,” “narrative travelogues” and “African adventure films” (p. 379), “exotic travel features,” “narrative documentary,” “exotic documentaries” and “exotic travel narratives” (p. 380), “jungle pictures” (p. 316), “jungle series” (p. 303), and the “Poverty Row B films” of the Tarzan saga (p. 329). A quick web search finds the term “jungle films” – referring to fictional adventure stories in a jungle background -- the closest match for “beast films.” Another relevant match would be “adventure films,” often stories selling unusual experiences of less known exotic locales, very similar to the action film genre. The term embraces traditional swashbucklers, serialized films, and historical spectacles (similar to the epic film genre), searches or expeditions for lost continents, “jungle” and “desert” epics, treasure hunts, disaster films, or searches for the unknown.

Films called beast films in movie ads in 1934 included the following: The

²⁹ Chi Ping Siu-nin [Shi ping shaonian], “tan guo chan shou pian” (on Chinese-made beast films), WKYP February 8, 1934; 4:3

³⁰ The actual title of the film is not clear in the movie ads. The Chinese translation was “ren shou qiguan” about an expedition in Africa.

³¹ Tino Balio, Grand Design: Hollywood as a modern business enterprise, 1930-1939 (“History of American Cinema, volume 5) (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995). For horror, see pp. 298-303, B Films on pp. 316, 328-329, ethnic films p. 342, non-fiction pp. 379-80.

Devil Tiger (Fox, 1934), shot in Malaya with a cast list;³² Congorilla (Fox, 1932, aka. Adventures among the Big Apes and Little People of Central Africa), a documentary shot in Africa; Eskimo (MGM, 1933, dir. Van Dyke), shot in the North Pole; Tarzan the Ape Man (1932), fiction film; Tarzan and His Mate (MGM, 1934), fiction film; Island of the Lost Souls (Paramount), horror, highlighting beast turned man and featuring Bella Lugosi; King of the Jungle (Paramount, 1933), fiction; Bring 'Em Back Alive (RKO, 1933), documentary; Kongo (RKO, 1932), shot in Africa, with a cast list; King Kong (RKO, 1933), fiction; Son of Kong (RKO, 1933), fiction; Wild Cargo (RKO, 1934), a documentary film made by Van Beuen Company, one of their regular supplies to RKO; Samarang (United Artists), shot in Malaya, with a cast list; Jungle Mystery (Universal Pictures, 1932); and Stark Nature, a documentary on the life of the natives in Africa. Films clearly marked “beast film” but without any original English title include: a bloody battle of the wild beasts(?) (Universal Pictures), the barbaric world(?) (Universal Pictures), king of all beasts(?) (Paramount), spectacles of the human and beasts(?) (on an expedition to Africa), the story of an expedition to conquer the bear in the North Pole(?) (Universal Pictures), shot in the Arctic Ocean, and Robinson (Crusoe) of the south seas(?) (United Artists). About half of the above titles were nonfiction films. It seems what we have now normalized as “documentary” was not a significant category – or at least the reference to beastly attacks on humans was more important. Stock-taking the usage of the term “documentary” finds that the term was more or less equated to newsreels: for it was not uncommon that a feature in a movie theater often opened after a “news” section, mainly on sports events, billed as documentary shorts. Perhaps exotic locales and untamed human species were too titillating to be confined to the plain terms of news-style documentary.

The essay by Chi Ping Siu-nin cited above had a unique concern: to look at the “beast film” as a special category of filmmaking that required extra technical resources. The ultimate question then was whether Hong Kong and Chinese cinema in general managed to catch up with the “latest” moves in Hollywood cinema. An “alarming” situation was detected as the writer phrased it, “The trend to compete in making beast films is likely to persist [in Hollywood]...but Chinese-made beast films are still scanty in the past few years.” Detailed analysis was given of the many reasons why the genre had not taken firm root in Chinese cinema: for *guo pian* was still in such a stage of infancy that a standard production budget and the size of crew in China could barely accommodate any thought of a beast film; Chinese cinema remained elementary in its incorporation of technology; wild animals such as tigers, elephants, lions and leopards were mainly found in Africa; there was a lack of realistic location for jungles where beast stories took place; and so on. The writer provided one additional angle to the newspaper ads’ hyping of exotic values and visual pleasures alone: beast films were founded on advanced techniques and abundance of resources, and only affordable by mature film institutions.

Were there no citable examples of beast films in *guo pian* at all? In the year 1934, one “beast film” made in 1927 returned to different cinemas. Modeng nvzi lixian ji [A Modern Girl Runs into Danger, literally meaning “the story of a modern woman’s dangerous adventure,” dir. *Min Dezhang*], produced by Shanghai’s *Jinxing* [Gold Star] Company, opened at New World Theatre on February 7.³³ This film was cited by writer Chi Ping together with another one called Kuang dao yeren ji [the

³² Quite a few examples look more like documentary films, but have a list of performers. This requires more research to see if these films were made with heavy re-enactment.

³³ Another source said the film was made by *Kuaihuolin* Company.

story of the wild man on a deserted island]. Chi Ping's description of Modern provided researchers with precious information on the points of interest of the genre and its visual appearance. The film's story line builds on the basic situation of a certain young woman falling out of love in search of a quiet life – she chooses union with nature and living by hunting. Adoption of footage from various "beast films" formed the film's compilation structure. As the writer said, the plot line was plain and uninteresting, and many scenes were blurry due to lighting problems. The compilation method, too, was primitive, full of defects, unable to convince the audience that the setting, borrowing from different films, was consistent. One scene in the film showed the woman being chased by a lion threatening to devour her. The writer complained that the woman's body was hidden behind a huge ring of rays, suggesting that it was the work of collage – not the woman herself acting in the scene. Another scene commented on featured a young man pulling out an arrow to kill a lion. When the camera showed the lion struck by the arrow making its final struggle, one noticed the lion was actually made of paper. "Such examples were innumerable," the writer complained.

The above comments suggest that the value of a "beast film" lies precisely in the crew's "having been there" on real locations of exotic territories. Much of what was said also implied a basic demand for cinematic realism – on the one hand, what appears on screen should refer to what appeared in front of the camera when the scene was made and, on the other, an invisible editing style should seal the gaps between fragmented moments of shooting to create the impression of continuity and coherence in space, time and action. To such assumed expectation for the medium and the apparatus, writer Chi Ping added an ethical dimension, concluding, "The biggest mission of cinema is to improve social morality. One should pay extra attention to films that portray social conditions, whereas films like beast films are not of urgent need." His final appeal was directed towards filmmakers: do not imitate [Hollywood] when the situation is not mature enough, for following the trend for the sake of it would result in ridicule.

Bitter Sea did not claim itself to be a beast film, but its publicity and visual hype suggest the association on many levels. "Bitter Sea" is an obscure title when compared to the explicit Tarzan the Ape Man or Shanghai's Modern Girl. It seems to call attention to the humanist aspect of the film. If Chi Ping the writer had been writing a few months later, would he have found Bitter Sea a good compromise? For the filmmaker's reputation and the film's story line together with Huayi's publicity plans seemed to have embraced both exotic interest and social responsibility.

The Quest for Home-made Talent: did Shek Yau-yu qualify?

The diverse publicity of Bitter Sea illustrated its makers' intention to embrace the broadest possible range of viewers. Reviewer Si Dan had made a good case for the film's worth to those not so drawn to exotic subject matters. He was enthusiastic about the film's being another fine performance by Shek Yau-yu. He praised him for being a talented actor and learned film personnel, competent in script-writing, acting as well as directing. The writer also claimed his faith in Shek's ability to make a movie that is a close portrait of society, especially a critique of the social dark, with his background as an educator, a point that needed to be rehearsed again and again every time Shek's name was pronounced. [February 9, 1934] He was also compared to two top male stars in Shanghai, Jin Yan and Gao Jianfei. Although the two stars' fine performances were indisputable, the writer claimed, Shek excelled over them with his multiple talents. [WKYP May 3, 1934; 4:3]

Si Dan's review was one of the few that demanded "an educated, learned

person” as the basic quality of a filmmaker, and Shek Yau-yu’s emerging significance in 1934 was very much a result of that view. We know, though, that such an ideal picture of a filmmaker did not result in a sustained career for Shek. For after the three films he made in 1934, it took him five years to direct his next film, although he did play the lead in Fresh Troops [*Shenglijun*], a national defense film released in 1936, and Grandview’s Felicity and Luck [*Ruyi jixiang*] in 1938. From 1939 to 1941, he made a total of five films: The Jade Pear [*Yuli hun*] (1939), a romantic tragedy set in the early days of the Chinese Republic adapted from a novel of the same name, produced by Grandview Film Company Limited; Vixen with a Human Face [*Roumian huli*] (1940, Grandview), a romance thriller based on a real crime story and The Prince Who Loves a Slave [*Lengmian huangfu*] (1940, Grandview), a Cantonese opera film; Goddess of the Streets [*Huajie shennv*] (1941, Grandview), a social ethics film with a romance story and Cantonese singing; and family melodrama The Good Father [*Tianya cifu*] (1941, Shehui Film Company). After The Good Father, Shek’s name basically disappeared from the filmmaking arena. Shek began his film career as a fine artist churned out by Lianhua’s training program. While social ethics seems to be a persistent concern in his brief repertoire, it is also evident that he had attempted the more popular elements such as Cantonese singing, opera, and national defense to incorporate them into his film projects.

Naked Bodies...

The viewing pleasure embodied in Bitter Sea was not just about beasts and jungles, but as much about naked bodies in representation. Naked bodies articulated as part of the exotic, uncivilized landscape in films have a contradictory counter-part, the autonomous human subjects in full control of their choice of life-styles, the mark of a truly modern, enlightened mind. In May 1934, the same month when Bitter Sea was released, the local newspaper reported a series of appeals for the public release of the film Natur und Liebe (Nature and Love, Chinese translation, *hui dao ziran*, meaning “back to nature”), made in the late 1920s by Ufa Kulturfilm. The film, originally a novel, “combines with its scenes of sex life monumental visions of mankind’s birth and rise.” The campaign was led by the head of the nudity club in Hong Kong, Lambert, which demanded the Hong Kong Government to lift the ban on the film for release. The main argument was as follows: since screening of the film had finally been approved in Shanghai and Nanjing by the respective authorities, it should also be allowed to line up for public release in Hong Kong. [WKYP May 11, 1934; 2:2] Five days later on May 16, the local news section [WKYP 2:2] featured the headline, “drama film on nudity ‘hui dao ziran’ has problems showing in Hong Kong: will be discussed at the Legislative Council,” followed by the background story to the dispute and the subsequent treatment. It was argued that once released in Nanjing, the film attracted huge crowds, but the Hongkong-British government’s consideration had been slow and negative. There was concern about the film’s subject matter, suspected to conflict with prohibitions cited in the law, and the public was divided half and half between support and opposition. The issue was scheduled for a thorough Legco discussion on May 16 in three procedural aspects, proposed by Bocker(?): (1) Had the Police Head Office received proper application for the film to be shown? (2) If it had, what were the views of the Police office and the Censorship office? (3) Had the chief of Police ever issued any ban on the film? The meeting together with the subsequent decision was reported on May 18 [WKYP 2:2]. The reply from the Police Superintendent stated the following in response to the three questions: (1) no application was ever received; (2) there was no application on record, therefore no need to answer the second question, i.e. the Police Office’s views on the

film's exhibition; and (3) in case any request for the film to be shown should be received, the police would definitely do everything it could to stop the film from public screening unless it had been approved by the censorship personnel based on article no. 57 of the 1919 Entertainment ordinances. Local news on June 14 [WKYP 2:2] reported the film had arrived in the colony and had been sent for inspection the previous day at the Gloucester House, with the presence of the Inspector General of Police, Hong Kong's Colonial Secretary Southorn, and Secretary of Chinese Affairs. Disappointing news came on June 15 in the newspaper that the film was not approved. The print was said to belong to the manager of Shanghai Independent Film Company [*Shanghai duli dianying gongsi*], and should be returned immediately.

In the provocative section titled “*fang yan*” [meaning “letting out the words”] in the Chinese-language daily *Renaissance*, the second of a two-part essay on nudity was translated from English into Chinese, re-edited into many parts. The original essay was titled “Nudism Indoor” by Frederick Albert, published next to another essay with the same title by John Lowell in United States’ *Real Detective* (January issue, 1934). The translator’s introduction explained the need of the translation as a due address to the confusion arising from the noise of the “nudity movement” in Hong Kong.³⁴ Almost writing like a researcher in a participant observation study, Albert was highly descriptive of the details of the norms and behavior of the members on the one hand and, on the other, his own anxieties such as the imperfect shape of his body and the desire to see female naked bodies. Albert’s tone changes from explicit skepticism for the organization’s actual functions to the relaxation of his struggles, and to his final conversion to a devout nudist. His self-owned rationalization for nudism was, as he wrote to a female friend: to enhance deep understanding of the two sexes through thorough understanding of each sex’s physique, and to reduce unnecessary perverted thoughts for the opposite sex by tearing down the hypocritical mask of moral propriety; whereas for single males and females, nudity provides the most open opportunity to observe one another to achieve the best possible choice [of partner].³⁵

Immediately after Mui Kwan’s series of translation was an article in two parts by Yat Ming [*Ri Ming*], titled “*luoti yundong zai mei guo*” [the nudity movement in the United States]. [*Renaissance* August 31 and September 1, 1934; 2:1] The report was neither a support for the nudity movement, nor an attempt to contextualize the issues for the local society. It read as an ordinary update on a wide-spread trend worldwide, as if nudity activism was just part of one’s common sense. Readers would learn of what nudity groups were active, in which cities in the United States, as well as receiving news on the temporary close of activities in the winter season.

Example 4: *Spoondrift Village*

Defining a Good Film

Female protagonist Yong-tai [*Rongti*] is portrayed as a dependent, weak-willed woman. After a series of adversities -- a hurricane destroying her boat and her father being drowned to death -- her final rescue comes as the film’s male protagonist Choring [*Chuping*] marries her. The male “savior” brings to a close a phase of her life marred by misery. From then on she leaves the monotonous boat life to start her “new

³⁴ Mui Kwan [*Mei Jun*], “*luoti yundong sumiao*” [sketches on the nudity movement] 1-6, *Renaissance* August 24-30, 1934; 2:1 (“*fang yan*” section). There should be more than six parts.

³⁵ The quote is my own translation from the Chinese translation, and may therefore vary from the original English text.

life” on land. For a while, peace lingers: Yong-tai is totally absorbed in her happiness measured by the daily long romantic chats with her husband on the cliff overlooking the sea. But life has to change again as Chor-ping is drafted into the army to go to war. Yong-tai faces a dilemma. Which should weigh more – personal love romance or national security? When Chor-ping is finally gone, Yong-tai is left with her father-in-law and a family business that declines day by day. Heavy tax plus other problems put the old man into a rather helpless situation, and he suggests Yong-tai should beg to the landlord for reduced rent. There Yong-tai’s “weak will” is completely exposed as landlord Wong Ming [*Huang Ming*] refuses to offer any convenience and yet seduces her, promising reduced rent in exchange for her company. The climax of Yong-tai’s fall, which is also her second phase of life, is when Wong takes her on a trip to Hong Kong in a motor car for visits to movies and nice restaurants serving Western cuisine. As reviewer Tung Ha put it, “This bohemian life-style gradually corrupts and destroys the confused and penniless Yong-tai, and it is already too late when she thinks of return. All that is left is anguish, shame, regret, and a dishonored return to the countryside.”³⁶ Yong-tai’s third phase of life begins with her shameful, soul-less return. About the same time, Chor-ping also comes home from war, only to discover that he and his wife are running out of conversations. Chor-ping is silent because he is uncertain whether his wife accepts the permanent injuries he has got from war and is too afraid to ask, whereas Yong-tai is afraid of Chor-ping’s discovering the true reason for her tears, and therefore ashamed to discuss what has happened. Yong-tai’s final choice is to abandon home, jump off the cliff into the sea to end her life.

Based on available print materials, attention was given to the film’s photogenic quality in individual shots, a key factor based on which the film was elevated from the status of pure drama to cinema in critical discussions. Reviewer Tung Ha [*Dong Xia*] praised the film’s achievement in defining drama that is clearly filmic, with no trace of a theatrical indulgence, one example being the care the filmmakers put in to the film’s opening to create a desirable mood with a gentle, enchanting musical prelude. [WKYP July 13, 1934; 4:3]

Nonetheless, like what most film reviews of the time were after, the ultimate qualification of a good film would have to rest upon its commitment to issues of everyday morality, either to let film make more visible the reality of life or to shed light on real problems via carefully plotted dramatic treatment and (re)solutions. In the same essay in which film-specific drama was valorized, the concluding statements concluded with the film’s moral: “the high-class Chinese of capitalist society makes a fool of women, using money and motor cars as bait, and turns the good wife of a national hero into a sacrifice [for unchecked temptations].” The reviewer continued, “I am not here to promote class struggle, but many evil deeds in society are creations of these capitalists. They must be renounced in order that society can be reformed.” For these reasons, the reviewer was extremely appreciative of the film’s story choice, and in particular the filmmaker’s use of inter-titles to make its critique explicit.

Perhaps battles without romance better qualify for a patriotic film? **Return from the Battleground** [*zhandi guilai*] (silent film by the local Guolian Film Company), made in 1933 but not released until February 4, 1934, was based on a dramatic theater piece titled “*bu kan chong du jiu zheng pao*” [the unbearable sight of

³⁶ Note that the way the term “bohemian” was used by writer Tung Ha differed from its normal usage. Judging from the context, a “bohemian life-style” here refers particularly to an unstructured life-style and looseness of moral values, especially the sentiment to lead one’s life after one’s instincts.

the old war-time uniform] by dramatist Fok Yin [*Huo Ran*].³⁷ The selling points of the film were consistent in its ads: “no romantic babbling, no empty slogans of angry youths, but an unreserved warrior sacrificing himself for his nation and for his time.” [WKYP February 6, 1934; 4:3]

The Three-act Dramatic Structure: paradigm for a life story

The three-phase reading of the story of Yong-tai I have described is based on a number of synopses I have consulted. What I find interesting is the parallel between the three-phase account of a woman’s fall from grace and the three-act dramatic structure. One may say that the exposition of the film comprises the events leading to Yong-tai’s redemption by Chor-ping. Act two consists of the first and second phase of Yong-tai’s life, from her “new life” immersed in love and stability to her fall to material temptation embodied in a motor-car tour to the city of Hong Kong with her pursuer. Act three contains the shameful return, and the tragic resolution which is the shameful woman’s suicide, which ends once and for all the source of all forms of shame. The three-act dramatic structure, which tightly contains a three-phase life story, parses the female protagonist’s life into a series of rationally resolvable conflicts underpinned by moral downfall and the need to learn and earn final redemption.

In a way, there is nothing surprising about the film story following a three-act structure, a norm consolidated in Hollywood cinema. Chilean-born contemporary director Raul Ruiz has coined the term “central conflict theory” (CCT) to highlight the alignment of choices within the three-act structure which dictates a protagonist’s action.³⁸ As such, CCT is not just a plotting or structuring principle for drama, but a value system, perpetuating an attitude of mind that refuses purposeful but inconsequential actions.³⁹ Turned into a normalized story formula, CCT cast the protagonist and other characters’ decisions into the dichotomy of rational versus irrational choices. CCT-driven three-act structure, therefore, upholds simplification and homogenization, which is a common cultural practice that has fueled many discussions on the ideological problems of stereotyping.

What issues are at hand on the micro level of cultural production when the life of a fictional character is contained by a central conflict structure streamlined into a series of choices and decision-making judged either right or wrong? In the case of Spoondrift Village, an already highly stereotyping, gender-biased configuration of a character was further instrumentalized for easy recognition. Reductive typification enhanced the pedagogic force of a melodramatic situation by opening up clear options and implied desirable decisions for the imaginary women in real life who were the objects of interpellation. Spoondrift Village uniquely exploits the option of the “wrong” choice: an irreparable decision to visit the city of Hong Kong dictates suicide as her ultimate, only choice, whereas when struggling with whether or not she should follow the temptation of the landlord, she is basically provided with no choices. Thus the so-called existential choices or narrative possibilities are empty sets since the only single worthwhile option is pre-determined way before the story begins. The intricacy of the formulaic flow of events underpinned by streamlined options of choice lies in the act of retelling: along the course of transportation across cultural locations, fictions shift from the status of pure fiction to shared consciousness of reality that can

³⁷ Return from the Battleground was shown at New World, Yaumati and Hongkong Theatre. The film was directed by Wong Toi [*Huang dai*], screenplay by Wu Siu-tin [*Hu Xiaotian*], based on theater work by Fok Yin [*Huo Ran*].

³⁸ Raul Ruiz, “Central Conflict Theory,” Poetics of Cinema (Paris, Dis Voir, 1995), pp. 9-23. Ruiz cites Bernard Shaw and Henrik Ibsen as the sources of what he calls the Central Conflict Theory.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 14-19.

be talked about in daily conversations, and when coming into the hands of the cultural élite, they are elevated to models of moral conduct via “re-telling” and “re-reading.” Like most cultural texts, Spoondrift inscribed its contemporary viewers, especially the female, into the position of absolute instruction, no matter how softened and well paved the (narrative) persuasion strategies were, and journalistic writings ensured the consumption of the films in that way.

Women: the Problematic Subjects of Ethical Incompleteness

Reviewer Tung Ha affirmed the worth of Spoondrift Village’s portrayal of a young woman being victimized by capitalist vices, which I read as the symptomatic modeling of a weak-willed female via a series of decision-making and actions, the film’s most problematic aspect. And yet Tung Ha’s response to Yong-tai’s ending her own life was severe criticism of what was the opposite of the “modern” way: that “it might seem noble in feudal society to die of a sense of shame, but new society’s norm would find her a total victim of cowardice, and it is especially unfortunate that the husband, who has offered his life to his nation, would have to suffer from the wife’s stupid choice, which deprives him of his happiness altogether at a time of national crisis.”

In my view, this last citation turns around a case begging for the preservation of the female subject into that of double indemnity for the male and the nation against the potential danger of a wounded self. The elaborate mapping of the paradigm of the ethically incomplete female via narrativity lays out the order of things in which the female was subjugated to the well-being of the male and his collective, the nation. The narrative scheme also carries a morally reasoned agenda for the tempering of the female self and her everyday behavior. The woman is both the victimizer and the victimized. She is the source of men’s suffering, and at the same time the safeguard of propriety that would protect the nation from falling. Such a view was also the emblem of the multifarious, explicit writings on women in the year I have researched. An essay titled “*shei de zui yu er*” [whose crime and evil?] listed the various forms of gendered mischief of women’s that would hurt the social/national well-being. [WKYP December 1; 4:2] And this was only one among many examples.

Femme Fatale in Fiction

Femmes fatales are everywhere in the history of cinema. Here I would like to include another prominent femme fatale from the year 1934 just for the sake of documentation. Chun Chao [“the tides of spring,” may also mean “the tides of passion” in the metaphoric sense of the Chinese character “*chun*”], probably a Shanghai production, was reported to have attracted huge crowds that crammed Central Theatre on September 2-4, but “for certain reasons, it was not allowed to stay for screening.” [WKYP, Tuesday, Sep 4, 1934 / 2:4 “city news” section]⁴⁰ The film actually returned to Central Theatre five days later on September 9 and stayed for two days. It was then shown in four more theaters: four days in October, and two days each in November and December.

Despite the tone of protest against prohibitions, the story line, as the movie

⁴⁰ In WKYP, the film was described as “*guo pian*,” a sound film, directed by *Zheng Yingshi*. Cast list includes: *Gao Zhanfei*, *Wang Renmei*, *Li Li*, *Yuan Congmei*, *Shangguan Wu*, *Qiu Weiwei* and *Xu Manli*. The film, by He Ming Tong Film Company, was described as the first sound film produced in China in newspaper ads. The film is not listed in recent source books published in the Mainland. The only place I found the film listed is a Filmography compiled by the Hong Kong Chinese Film Association, in their publication titled Dianying: an Interdisciplinary Journal of Chinese Film Studies volume 1: Early Chinese Cinema (I) (Hong Kong: December 1983), p. 238. The film company listed for the film is *Heng Sheng dianying gongsi*, which differs from the information I have found in newspaper ads in WKYP.

news emphasized for its readers, was unmistakably that of a woman corrupting a man: a young man is charmed and lured by a frivolous/amorous woman, as a result of which he indulges himself in alcohol and sex and loses his strong will, gradually turns to crime and is given a life-sentence, breaking the heart of his acquaintances. In addition, the film's publicity had listed all the typical incentives assumed for a popular film. Movie news highlighted Li Li as "a movie star from among the socializing flowers of our nation" [*wo guo jiaoji xing hou*], who demonstrated her "healthy beauty" [*jian mei*], a special quality talked about to describe a Western ideal of beauty for women who look healthy and have a full body, which also, in the Chinese context, carries the connotation of a sex symbol. Movie ads also provided catchy descriptions: "running passion," "beautiful fantasy" versus "painful reality," a "thorough portrayal" of the pleasure of the young generation, topped by explicit recommendation: "never had we seen so many stars in one film in a Chinese production."

Pseudo-human Rights Discourse for Marketing Purposes

A month-long newspaper (ad) campaign screamed the agony of women being insulted, illustrated by photographs in which a banner with the line "*wuyu nvxing*" [insulting women] was held in front of the camera.⁴¹ In the end, the campaign turned out to be just another publicity series on the story of a bad woman who destroys the promising life of a man in a film called *Wuyu nvxing* (meaning "insulting women," by Chun Chao Company, with Sheng Xiaotian as the lead). For reasons unknown, this title is missing in the filmographies and film indexes I have searched.⁴² Like many movies of the time, the film was meant to be a public lesson for women to remind them of the importance of constraint. Although the ads claimed the film also carried moral lessons for men, they were sidelines only, whereas the real causes of men's tragedies were clearly stated to be women. One ad on April 29 for Central theatre (half page big, in *I&C Daily*, 3:1) carries two key morals, with the one for women coming first: "this picture warns women not to indulge in instantaneous gratification so as to avoid bringing misfortune to the rest of their life; this picture reminds men not to be misled into passages of the dark so as to avoid ruining their reputation, integrity and future prospects." And yet below the solemn declaration, slightly smaller fonts say: "where romance is explored, it's titillating; in moments of thrills, your heart feels snatched ..."

Across the year investigated, I have only managed to find a few voices that display some kind of awareness of the way women were discursively constructed. One example of this rare species was a short article protesting against the way women were portrayed in *ruo gan* movies, the term literally meaning "flesh sense," referring to films that exploit the viewers' interest in seeing the exposure of women's bodies. [WKYP Sep 17; 4:2] Another article expressed agony for women's being reduced to a pure "entertainer" in both the public and private domains: in the public, they are the signifier of desires in representational practices such as movies and advertisements, whereas at home, one of their main functions is to entertain the husband's sexual

⁴¹ For a thorough reading of the campaign series, see ads on the following days in WKYP: April 2 / 2:3, April 3 / 2:3; April 3 / 2:4; April 5 / 2:3; April 7 / 2:3; April 8 / 2:3; April 10 / 2:2; April 14 / 2:2; April 16 / 2:2 (2 items); April 17 / 1:1 & 2:2 (2 items); April 18 / 2:2; April 20 / 2:4; April 24 / 2:4; April 28 / 2:4; and May 4 / 2:2 & 2:4.

⁴² The film as well as the company are absent from the following publications which are main sourcebooks for existing films: *Zhongguo wusheng dianying* (China Film Archive and China Film Publications, 1996), *Zhongguo zuoyi dianying yundong* (China Film Publications, 1993), *Zhongguo dianying da zhidian* [China cinema encyclopaedia] (Shanghai, 1995), Chen Jihua's *Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi* [a history of the development of Chinese cinema] and *Griffithiana* (no. 54, October 1995, special issue "Chinese Cinema: Filmography, 1905-1937).

needs. [WKYP July 19; 4:3] As discussed earlier in this essay, a couple of newspaper articles framed the problem as the need to modernize the “Chinese” females, by promoting better health and stronger physique such as through walking exercises and other sports activities.⁴³

Writing and Reading “Woman”: the Victimizer and the Victimized

The extensive newspaper writings on women, as previous sessions illustrate, extended to include the many moral film-dramas with a woman as the protagonist, the many consumer products advertised with women as the main target, as well as discussions on legislation centering on women. Together these “writings” covered a spectrum of stock figures: the maid, the prostitute, the songstress, the young student, the murderess and the frivolous, the dutiful mother, the repenting wife and so on. In many instances, the female was the object of benevolence – for example, in writing on charity work providing education for young females, de-legalization of prostitution, anti-*Mui-tzai* [maid-servant] campaigns, and medical consumer products that worried about her health. On other occasions, women were the location of evil: the source of sexually transmitted diseases and the different manifestations of the *femme fatale* in real-life situations read as melodramas.

One typical example of the inscription of women as both the victimizer and the victimized was in the advertisements for drugs and health products. One product, Eno’s Fruit Salt by a London-based company, was available in powder form in three sizes. One of the ads carried the drawing of a woman with short permed hair in a Chinese *cheung-sam* [*qi bao*] with big-petal pattern, sitting in a comfortable armchair with her head leaned against her left arm, and with a lamp standing next to her seat. [ad on Sep 1, 1934 – 3:3] The drawing shows a frontal view, suggesting a domestic setting. Below the sketch, the text runs vertically from right to left after the headline, screaming: “the stagnant situation of the ‘socializing flower’” (social butterflies) [*jiaojihua zhi bu jingqi*], whereas the elaborating text says, making explicit its object of address:

“[To] prominent socializing flowers, going in and out of dancing halls and movie theaters, staying away from home until late night, exhausted in body and spirit with a withered appearance: stagnant business for sure, attention required.

“[We] sincerely hope that you will wake up every morning with a dash of Eno’s Fruit Salt in boiled water to rid your intestines of any stuck waste matter. Continuing to drink it regularly will turn any withered appearance into elegance, and restore the original charm of the socializing flower.”

This ad, which offered help and protection to women, was an unmistakable act of affirmation of the stigmatized woman, at the same time exploiting her need for commercial benefits. Another product with two different print ads was a drug for venereal diseases: one version offered men the solution to staying safe from contact with prostitutes, while the other addressed social butterflies by offering quick recovery to facilitate their business and social activities.

The narrativization of women as both the subject and object of victimization, thus the object of cleansing and protection, across genres in popular cultural practices

⁴³ For the advocacy of sports and walking, see “*Zhongguo nvzi*” [Chinese Females], WKYP Sep 2; 4:2. See also “*Zhongguo nvxing zhi mei*” [The Beauty of Chinese Females], WKYP March 23; 4:3. For a more laudatory account, see article with 20th-century women’s coming of age as theme, WKYP Sep 9; 4:2.

often found dialogues with another sub-discourse, the effort to make-believe the transformed status of women as "equal," "modern" and enlightened, which I have discussed earlier on in this chapter.

Mourning of the Chaste Tree Flower – [business formula] the birth of a new business leader: Unique (Tianyi) Hong Kong testing the local market – [discourse] Cantonese-ness – [marketing strategies/ paradigm] song lyrics, family role models

As in the case of Memorial at the Pagoda, the exhibition of Mourning was also preceded by a live opera version performed on June 17 at Ko Shing Theatre, and also with two superstars, Bak Kui-wing and Wu Dip-ying. [WKYP June 17; 2:4] However, as a film still shows, the Shaw brothers re-adapted the story in a contemporary setting, featuring actress Rachel Mok (aka. Mok Lai-kit, *Mo Lajie*). [I&C November 14, 1934 / 4:1; December 15, 1934 / 4:1] Mourning marked the Shaw brothers' testing of the local market with a deliberate marketing strategy. Four months earlier, while promoting Unworthy of Love, Unique had already announced the immediate beginning of the shooting for Mourning. The film occupied the screen for the Christmas vacation. Free pamphlets with lyrics of the songs and dialogues were published. In a sense, the Shaw brothers wanted to combine into one project all the popular features of *guo pian* of the time. Not only did it tap into the new interest in Cantonese songs played on the movie screen, the film's ads were accompanied by an elaborate "menu" selling the role stereotypes: from the wicked stepmother, brothers in conflict, an uncle who maintains constant surveillance of other family members, a wife who is running away, and so on, exploiting the typical melodrama of conflicts over family inheritance evolving around a problematic will, and the resulting social tragedies.

Unique Hong Kong's Mourning of the Chaste Tree Flower and Nanyue's Memorial at the Pagoda stood at the crossroads of a number of histories around 1934: the rise and fall of the song forum, the flourishing record business, and emergence of the new opera and radio broadcast programs, which I shall give additional treatment in Appendix B. These forces formed the micro-processes of Cantonization I have outlined in Chapter One.

The Setting Sun – [practice] sophisticated cinema [practice] what is a good film? – [business formula] obsession with outdoor locations – [business formula] grand, epic-scale spectacle – [business formula] literary adaptation of Western classics – [discourse] a bent towards high culture -- [discourse] the romantic hero and the femme fatale

.....

Conclusion

Sentiments of a Milieu: a Local Elite's Assessment and Beyond

Lui Lun, not without a touch of his enlightened intellectualism, detected a kind of trapped mediocrity intrinsic to the socio-political make-up of Hong Kong's local culture. He wrote in 1966, reflecting on Hong Kong in the 1920s and 1930s:

“Hong Kong’s new culture (or put simply, the rise of *bai hua*,⁴⁴ the vernacular) began around forty years ago. The advocacy of ‘new culture’ was not at all welcome. The impact the May Fourth Movement had on Hong Kong society was only confined to the idea of boycotting Japanese goods, whereas literary reform, the other facet of the movement, was not able to break through the stronghold of feudalist thinking to invoke any change. At that time, on the one hand, the stubborn minds not only opposed the use of the vernacular language, but also denied that *bai hua* was proper Chinese. People with this way of thinking advocated ‘the respect for the teacher and the traditional way’ [*zun shi zhong dao*] and insisted on the studying of the Four Books and Five Scriptures [*si shu wu jing*] to preserve national treasures. ... On the other hand, most of those who embraced the traditional mindset of the comprador would encourage their children to study overseas so that it would be easier for them to find a job in Western firms. In such a kind of chaotic situation, it would be extremely difficult for any new ideas and new culture to set in.”⁴⁵

The conflicting ideologies marking the colony in those days formed a succinct retrospective portrayal of Lui’s, but were almost undetectable as self-conscious, open discussions in the newspaper writings and other literature I have worked through from the year 1934. Lui’s comments, however, do give me a few clues to the juxtaposition of short articles written in old-style Chinese and those in the vernacular sharing the same column space in Chinese-language newspapers. Almost along the same line of division between old and modern Chinese lay that between moral conservatism and the effort to justify conduct and values that found no place in the traditional moral paradigm. More than just a few times, the question of whether males and females should share the same public space (such as swimming pools, “mahjong” houses, libraries and so on) would be criticized by writers writing in old Chinese, whereas those vigorously defending the practice were mostly writing in *bai hua*. The critique of the negative connotations of “the modern,” however, was a broadly shared concern among writers of both language styles.

The so-called progressive sentiments of the May Fourth Movement should be better understood as a discourse and not pure facts. Lui Lun certainly had a definite picture of progressive-ness of the May-Fourth way which he did not really make explicit, except that it was about absolute renouncement of the so-called feudalist values. To me, “progressive-ness,” as was the case in everyday usage, was more clearly understood as the conscious resistance against moralistic “prohibition,” and especially alive in the demand for ideational freedom. The notion of combating against “prohibitions” was often used to deploy Hong Kong’s modern and progressive sentiments. Banned films elsewhere were often exploited in local film publicity – to generate the impression of Hong Kong as a very open-minded city. One example was Fox’s *Walls of Gold*, featuring Kathleen Norris, Sally Eilers, Norman Foster and Ralph Morgan. The film’s ban in Guangzhou was turned into the main publicity blurb in King’s Theatre’s movie ad, given the same weight as the outline of the film’s

⁴⁴ *Bai hua* literally means “plain language,” referring to the spoken and written form of Mandarin used in the everyday setting of the time, as opposed to a highly stylized form of written Chinese used only in classical writings. The *bai hua* movement was to promote the vernacular as the official Chinese language.

⁴⁵ Lui Lun, “*Xianggang xin wenhua zizhang qi suo yi*” [random recollections of the incubation period of Hong Kong’s new culture] (1966), in *Xian shui wu bi yu* [written words at the house facing the water]. p. 3.

romantic triangle within a family. [WKYP March 1, 1934; 1:1] Many newspaper articles discussing equality of the two sexes often framed the discussion as a problem of “prohibition,” screaming the catchword “*jin*” [meaning prohibition in Chinese] in the headline of the writing.

Reality was far more complex than what Lui Lun’s reading covered. For one thing, not all cultural expressions or acts of progressiveness were about the negotiation with old moral values. I found the cinema particularly ambivalent, marked with the appropriation of contradicting values. Some aspects of cinematic expressions fully embraced the modern way from the West and yet on a second look appeared to be out of pragmatism with an explicit business interest. Some played with moral conflicts and opened up questions of ethics for contemporary city life and yet, if one looks carefully, the populist appeal embodied nothing more than conservative reactionism, reproducing gender-biased discourses in the name of good will, say, in Spoondrift Village, among others. It is therefore worth spending a chapter on individual films exhibited that year. Since contradictions and repetitions across the films were as significant as individual films, it would be more appropriate to present the local films as an assemblage than to isolate the so-called “representative” films.

Addressing Ethical Incompleteness: Creative (Re-)Production of a Desirable Subject

Lui’s quest for textual practices to actively address local experiences might find ripples in the works of filmmakers Shek Chung-shan and Shek Yau-yu, who founded Huayi Film Company in 1934 to materialize their quest for new morality. Although the three films they produced in 1934 all concerned everyday ethics threatened by the “modern” way of life, only the third film, Problems After Marriage (released in August), qualified for Lui’s comradeship. For The Case of the Wedding Night Twin-Corpse (released in March) was mysteriously set in the beginning of Hong Kong’s colonial experience in 1842 even though the wardrobe and set were contemporary. Huayi’s second film of the year, Bitter Sea (released in May), was even more mystical: for even though its story was set in the contemporary time, the location was some kind of wilderness remote from the modern urban core and yet close enough that the film’s protagonist could reach it. The film bore the mark of a curiosity in American films with stories about expeditions to “exotic” parts of the world, to which local writers gave the name “beast films.” It seems in cinema there were constant digressions away from the devotion to the contemporary towards the diverse, eclectic possibilities of film as a new tool of expression. Both Zhonghua Sound and Silent Movies Production Company and the Shaw brothers’ Unique Hong Kong had made films with a contemporary setting, but lacked the interest in framing contemporary issues of any kind. Their effort was to re-package Cantonese pop/folk singing with a contemporary look. Zhonghua’s Nightmare of Fortune (released January), Tragedy of Love (July) and The Mischief Makers (March), and Unique Hong Kong’s Mourning of the Chaste Tree Flower (December) were cases of such.

Lui’s realism materialized through positive engagement with everyday details and contemporary sentiments of the young generation, especially the emotive textuality of their inter-personal relational world. Although the notion of the “modern” subject was problematized in Lui’s works, the issue was approached very much as individual, personal rather than typical social problems. On the contrary, three films I have discussed captured the more widespread popular discourses. The noise of Modern Tears’ publicity called for all possible attention to the problems of an erroneous “modern” attitude, broadly echoed in Chinese-language newspaper writing.

Spoondrift Village and Modern Tears were both particularly paradigmatic in presenting their female protagonists as the exemplars of a confused and misled contemporary female, for whom both stories engineered a course of moral redemption after due repentance or the failure of it. As much engaged in the typification of the good and the bad “modern” woman, Breaking Waves built its gendered interpellation upon the popular discourse of swimming (and sports in general by extension), again a discourse as well as an aspect of local life that was extensively valorized in public communication at the time.

Dominant Discourse and Micro-movements

Viewed within the grand discourse of Chinese cinema, Hong Kong cinema and its critical practice in 1934 might look extremely narcissistic, burdened with conservative morality, and obsessed with trivialities and marketability. Referring to the achievement of Shanghai cinema in 1933, *Han Sheng*, for example, congratulated Mingxing Company for their finally shedding the feudalist outfit, and Lianhua for abandoning their conservative nationalist slogans, and proclaimed the Chinese audience’s loathing for the domination of Hollywood films.⁴⁶ *Hong Shen*, prominent scriptwriter and key figure of Shanghai’s left-wing progressive cinema movement, wrote at the close of 1933 that the year for Shanghai cinema had been watched with intense expectation under the banner of “the Year of Chinese Cinema.” To him, more than a handful of examples easily filled the year’s list of films with a sharp critique of feudalist mentality within a modern capitalist society, among them, Lianhua’s *San ge moden nvxing* [*The Three Modern Women*] (dir. *Bu Wancang*), Mingxing’s *Kuang Liu* [*The Mad Current*??], *Nvxing de na han* [*Women’s Yelling*??] (script by *Shen Xiling*), *Daohui de zaochen* [*Morning of the Metropolis*??] (dir. *Cai Chusheng*), *Chengshi zhi ye* [*Night of the City*??] (dir. *Fei Mu*), and so on. These films were praised by *Hong* for their being grounded in real social issues, unveiling the social darkness, explicitly resisting revealing conflicts embedded in social structures, discovering timely themes, explicitly resisting against imperialism and the corruption of Chinese warlords, and especially their engagement with issues concerning women. In *Hong Shen*’s view, the year 1934 would be a year of continued fulfillment expectations.⁴⁷ In such an evaluative context, Hong Kong cinema could be dismissed easily. In fact, some of the “negative residues” lingering around in 1933 according to *Hong Shen* were very much Hong Kong cinema’s indulgence – an obsession with the “beast film,” mythologies, and films selling didactic feudal moralities with commercial packaging.

From another perspective, local film reviewers of Hong Kong are relatively burden-free in their discussion. Almost none of the serious writings that I have quoted demonstrate a degree of obligation that would emulate critical trends in Shanghai. There was little pretension to upholding issues of national importance or revolutionary sentiments. Rather, the writers collected in this chapter were in the process of looking for the right language and workable approaches to make sense of a film.

A somewhat perverse “global” vision manifested in the obsession with animal and jungle films such as *King Kong* and *Tarzan the Ape Man*, and echoed in Huayi’s

⁴⁶ *Han Sheng*, “xiang zhao xin de fangxiang qianjin” [progressing towards a new direction], originally published in *Yihua zhou bao* [weekly magazine of *Yihua* film company] no. 2, 1933, reproduced in *Zhongguo zuoyi dianying yundong* [Chinese left-wing cinema movement] (Beijing: *Zhongguo dianying chubanshe* [Chinese film publishing], 1993), pp. 81.

⁴⁷ *Hong Shen*, “1933 nian de Zhongguo dianying [Chinese cinema of 1933]”, *Wenxue* [literature] 2:1, January 1934, reproduced in *Zhongguo zuoyi dianying yundong* [leftist film movement in China], pp. 87-91.

Bitter Sea, was paralleled by the pursuit for high/elite culture via the film adaptation of Western literary classics to a Chinese setting. The beast/animal/jungle films compromised ethnographic value with an excitement in exotic bodies, at the same time underlined by a subscription to the grand discourse of Western civilization. As for local film company Quanqiu, its debut, The Setting Sun, found its literary sources in a mixture of Spanish Blasco-Ibañez's Puesta de sol, German Storm's Imensee and Goethe's young Werther. The enthusiasm for Western literary classics was no pure pursuit of artistic creation, but high culture was deliberately united with national well-being, by which the tragic-romantic pathos of such films was turned into motors for the persuasion for patriotic commitment.

Leo Lee captures vividly the obsession with certain kinds of European cultural objects among the "emancipated" Chinese intellectuals "fresh from college in the early thirties" from the coastal cities of China, as he recalls his parents and his own early days, "There must have been countless Armands and Werthers in the more 'modern' sectors of China in the twenties and thirties."⁴⁸ Most cultural objects and names he recalls – from the music of Chopin to Dumas, Lamartine, Byron, and Romain Rolland -- were mainly romanticist. The typical names to include on one's list of initiation to (Western) literary sensibility were: Tolstoy, Hugo, Byron, Shelley, Goethe, Schiller, Maeterlinck and so on. These names were often presented with portraits in Xin Xiaoshuo [New Fiction] founded (1903) and edited by *Liang Qichao*, a key pre-May-Fourth figure in the promotion of the vernacular [*bai hua*] and the use of popular literature for mass education.⁴⁹

The undifferentiated mix of a bent towards the mediation of reality via creative practices imported from the West with the explicit commodification of traditional creative forms was the one most unmistakable characteristic of local cinema as it was promoted and discussed. At the same time, I found the local films in discussion astoundingly formulaic – in the sense that the moral lessons were obvious, effectuated with a largely functional plot line illustrative of the key ideas. In other cases, I find the crime stories in the Chinese-language daily press often written in such a way that they closely resemble the (melo-)dramatic plot structure found in movies. In a way, the characters, sentiments and everyday life expressed in Lui Lun's short stories, no matter how trivial they were supposed to be, were far more sophisticated than the stories told in the morally overbearing local films, which were marked by over-simplified pictures of humanity, social reality and human motives, typically presented via text menus in newspaper ads.

Women, the object of care, discipline and exasperation

Film was a key agent in (re-)defining the decade's construction of femininity, but far from the only agent. The plentiful writings on/for/about/to the female gender I have extensively quoted in this chapter culminate in a multiple personae of women in the everyday life dramaturgy via the fusion of social, civic and fictional discourses: the songstress, the murderess, the frivolous female, the maid, the prostitute, the mother, the consumer, the intellectual, the athlete and so on. Unlike the 1930s in the United States, where the shifts in the definition of femininity drew upon symbolic power (such as from a heightened interest in fashion) over real status,⁵⁰ the females in

⁴⁸ Leo Ou-fan Lee, "Preface," The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. vii-viii.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵⁰ See Sarah Berry's Screen Style: fashion and femininity in 1930s Hollywood (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), which points out "the significance of popular fashion as an aspect of women's negotiation of modernity and post-traditional identity." Berry's

Hong Kong were locked up in the project of the presentation of their selves and execution of their roles in everyday life, and their life process was turned into a series of rational/irrational decision-making based on a central-conflict model.

The heavy discursive construction of woman as a cultural sign begs the following questions to be further addressed: what conditions encouraged the “talk” about women, what kind of talk and who did the talking? What was the broader ideological vision in society at large? Where did the thin line lie between women as the object of benevolence (charity work, anti-*mui-tzai* campaign, de-legalization of prostitution), the target of health care and medical consumer products, and the object of disciplinary persuasion in movies and column writings? Across the combinatorial match of the new/old/good/bad woman, how did each member of the matrix take form via narrative devices? Through my use of the numerous film texts in this chapter, I have provided a broad view of the many contradicting answers offered to these questions. Perhaps an article titled “family education and women” provided the most concise compound profile of the most wanted woman: strong educational background, good common sense in matters of health, sanitation, and use of medicine.⁵¹ And perhaps to add to these qualities, a woman must demonstrate her virtues by taking care in exercising her body. Thus the writer concludes, “A woman who doesn’t realize the educational responsibility she bears after having children does not qualify for a mother, and thus her due social status. The good or bad of a woman affects the well being of a nation.” Perhaps the discursive construction of woman at hand is more that of social roles than mere cultural signs. And never have I come across a period in Hong Kong’s film history when actual roles and symbolic representation were so closely tied that they almost merged into one.

ANALYSIS

Spatially Travelling Texts: Film as a Site of Divergent Performance

As part of my purpose to write a history of Hong Kong cinema premised on periodic slicing and the de-centering of pro-filmic activities, I sought elaborate documentations of how the films released were presented via newspaper persuasion. The loss of viewing copies of the actual film works themselves makes “writing” in the print medium a productive and positive act of historiography. The use of individual films in study, therefore, goes beyond interpretation and criticism of the film text. Taking a film work as a nexus cut through by many histories of fictional and factual discourses is to regard a work as a location of multiple interpolations and concrete moments of articulation. In this way, signification or the representation of the social world would be looked at as the constituting activities of social reality as much as those that do not concern themselves directly with meaning-making. Newspaper writers in 1934, for example, had no idea of the structuralist text, but they did talk about films as if they were generators of meanings extractable from a coherent form composed of dramatic and photographic elements. Not only were they highly conscious of their roles as critics and moral leaders, they were also sensitive to the fact that writing about film was a relatively fresh, open and fluid space in the public

account discusses the relation between cinema, consumer fashion, advertising, and discourses of class and social status, followed by the two-way traffic of how Hollywood used fashion to enhance the popularity of films and the subsequent popularization of cosmetics. The book ends with the representation of working women and the popularization of menswear.

⁵¹ Siu Fung [*Xiao Feng*] “*jiating jiaoyu yu funv*” [family education and women], *I&C Daily*, March 1, 1934, 4:1.

channels. A lot of the newspaper discussions I shall engage in the rest of this chapter consciously contributed to the gradual formation of a new institution of criticism opened up by non-traditional creative forms such as modern spoken drama and cinema. The very act of negotiating what was worth discussing about a film was also the act of validating the legitimacy of certain formal categories. The writings of the intermediate *élite*, as I call them, were not just the practice of criticism – but they were *about* criticism, interpretation, and the realization of hermeneutics. My engagement with so-called film criticism as read in 1934 is not to borrow their critical lens and therefore affirm criticism as a disciplinary practice, but to examine the very activity of criticism itself and how it functioned.

What often confront me are the newspaper writers' highly conscious efforts to make sense of a film by drawing from as well as making connection to other social cultural discourses. They would turn a well-made (film) text into a productive category for a broad range of usage. They transposed textual criticism to other activist paradigms such as the promotion of local cinema, a re-definition of humanness, adaptation of Western modernity and so on. One sees active, self-conscious "co-authorship" by the makers and reviewers of the film by which the latter embodies both the reader and the author. Conscious articulations were established between film/drama activities and other everyday arenas such as falling in love and courtship, being a university student, sports and health and so on. Criticism became a site of careful meaning-generation, not as the routines of an institutional practice. Film texts were actively reproduced as social texts. The lack of extant viewing copies may have left me with no choice but to make close readings of the critical texts. The situation also intensifies the temptation to re-imagine the actual visual narrative through written descriptions in reviews and advertisements. Some writings have been read for such a purpose, but that is not the ultimate concern of my use of surviving literature. Taking a spatial approach, in this chapter, I proceed from the study of actual, material urban space to explore the fluid space of connectivity through the examination of seventeen films: thirteen local films released in 1934 and one released in January 1935, plus three Cantonese sound films made outside Hong Kong.

A quick overview of my findings suggests engagement with the idea of the 'modern' ..., which gradually evolved into more deliberate investment in raising a more desirable image of local cinema and the local industry's capability to produce "quality films." The slippage within the trajectory takes us into... Two trends were noted towards the end of the year: local cinema should be upgraded by forging a sophisticated local cinema with the "high art" value via adaptation of literary works from the West, as in the case of Setting Sun, and by marketing the production value of a film, as in the case of Lu Chunyang Thrice Tricked the White Peony and Setting Sun.

A number of prominent tendencies can be isolated to give readers some clues of the dense governmentality at work.

First, the space I have studied was a highly gendered space. Gendered hierarchies cut along class-based division of labor in the entertainment industry. Female opera performers were denied guild membership, excluded from top-class performing venues saved for male performers only, and they barely managed the luck of performing with male artists by 1934. Evening song forums provided prostitutes with an "after life" in the final phase of the abolition of brothels, where they found their former training in singing as an intern-prostitute turning into a new form of cultural capital. At the same time, gender segregation gradually endowed female

performers with a special commercial value: their gendered charm became a profitable asset to their owners exploitable for the male audience. Women's roles, public and domestic, were heavily interpellated categories, torn between the subject and object of victimization that put social well-being at stake. Women were the source of men's suffering and at the same time the safeguard of propriety protecting the nation from falling.

Second, the term "the modern" was not only a trendy catchword in the everyday usage of contemporary vernacular Chinese, but also a heavy discursive object, holding together a broad range of concerns, from fashion sense to daily habits to moral bankruptcy. The verbose exposition on the question of the "modern" and the frequent but eclectic use of the term itself stood by the project of the preservation of social well-being by which moral virtues were not assumed or implied, but became explicit categories of open civic education. "The modern" surely found its way into movie titles as well, giving didactic moral exegesis the additional appeal of the texture of human emotions via melodramatic treatment.

Third, sports, broadly upheld for its nation-building capabilities, was also a highly gendered project for the females whose will -- and not their body -- was the ultimate category for reform. Sports activities were also treated as a self-care project, subsequently turned into a micro-process of self-techniques and effective government through ethical practice. The explicit call to modernize the "Chinese" females, for example, promoted stronger will, better health and stronger physique through walking exercises and other sports activities. The so-called proper "athletic spirit" and the personal ethics of an athlete, thus the "social meanings of sports," appealed to standards of sports in western culture imagined at the same time as standards of strong nation. One of the seventeen films discussed in this chapter fully embraced all of the above.

Fourth, the newspaper column pages formed a unique space for the articulation of individuality and the display of private selves. In contrast, local cinema tended to perpetuate moral paradigms as formulaic stories: the individual was necessarily viewed against an ideal paradigm of collective selves whose well-beings were predicated upon set inter-relational norms. A high proportion of local films studied from this year were described as the illustration of the horrible consequences of some of these norms being violated. Film publicity, however, took on a unique fashion via menu-style movie ads that filled up the classified ad space day after day. These "menus" were elaborate lists of all kinds of subject positions tied to moral roles, errors and obligations, offering everyone a possible example for role identification. Romantic love, friendship, and motherhood were repeated themes, whereas embedded in the three sets of human relation, the notion of the vulnerable wounded male was explicitly symptomatic.

Fifth, higher education was a key locus of change. The imaginary indulgence in "the university student" can be extended to that in the educated, civilized young citizen in general. The discourse surrounding the type and the group was no abstract, philosophical exegesis, but again, concrete instructional input on manner and self-stylization. In a sense, cinema was one of the key platforms where the (un)desirable performances of the group were spotlighted.

To highlight the above recurrent themes in a project of film history is not to fall back on thematic studies. The identification of the ideational vectors of the films through a narrative of chain association engaged in fragments of the absent text is to seek the communion between Chartier's idea of text as nodal points and Deleuze and Guattari's notion of rhizome which I have discussed in the Introduction of this work.

This chapter, therefore, adds to my “de-centering film culture” thesis to propose a new approach to the study of culture in which cinema can be sufficiently highlighted as part of a much more complex cultural and urban-spatial landscape. That is, film is neither centered nor marginalized, but understood as always in multiple dialogues, temporally and spatially, with other objects. Film is – in Deleuze and Guattari’s words – a component of urban materiality as a rhizome, and an assemblage in itself.

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