

Censorship and Creativity: The Offense of Hong Kong Cinema

Review of *Yesterday Today Tomorrow: Hong Kong Cinema with Sino-links in Politics, Art, and Tradition*, by Kenny Kwok-kwan Ng (Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Co., 2021) (吳國坤,《昨天今天明天:內地與香港電影的政治、藝術與傳統》)

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On October 27, 2021, Hong Kong legislators passed an amendment bill on the censorship law, which would allow the government to halt film productions deemed threatening to national security. The amendment was an extension of the national security law which Beijing imposed on Hong Kong in July 2020 in the aftermath of the 2019 social protests against the enactment of the criminal extraction bill. Aligned with the national security law, the newly amended censorship regulation bans films that may “endorse, support, glorify, encourage, and incite activities that might endanger national security,” and citizens who hold illegal screenings of these films will face heavy penalties and jail sentence (Yau, Leung, and Ng).

The amendment was seen as the government’s continued measures to tighten their grip on cultural workers and media organizations that showed sympathy for the protesters and their cause in their film productions. In March 2021, a commercial cinema canceled the screening of *Inside the Red Brick*, the documentary that depicts the violent confrontation between the students and the police at the

Polytechnic University campus in November 2019. The management of the cinema canceled the showing of the documentary, which had gained the approval of the city's censors, just three hours before the scheduled screening. It was understood that the cancellation had to do with criticism launched by the pro-Beijing newspaper *Wen Wei Po*, which accused the documentary of violating the national security law (Chau).

Hong Kong film workers, creative sectors, and media critics expressed their worries that the amendment of the censorship bill will bring serious impairment to the city's film industry, which is already in a fragile position. Kenny Kwok-kwan Ng, Associate Professor in the Academic of Film of the Hong Kong Baptist University, has been a regular press commentator on this issue. In an interview, Ng pointed out that the government's plan to toughen its censorship policies was "heavy-handed": "The film industry will need time to adapt" (qtd. in Pang). He expected that filmmakers who made politically sensitive films would end up screening their films outside Hong Kong, or practice self-censorship to evade direct confrontation with the regulators (Cheung). "Self-reflection, experimental and critical spirits are very important values for arts and culture," Ng said. "If the opposition voices and spaces for thinking are allowed in the arts [sic] scene, the place can truly be a mature and open city or country. Only in this way can it be a true arts and cultural hub" (qtd. in Kawase and Wong).

Is the new censorship bill inflicting a deadly blow to the film industry and asphyxiating filmmakers' creativity? The interactions of censorship, prohibition, and creativity forms the core inquiry in Ng's latest book *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow: Hong Kong Cinema with Sino-links in Politics, Arts, and Tradition* (text in Chinese), which came out around the same time when the censorship bill amendment was passed.

In the book Ng makes a compelling argument regarding the relationship between creativity and censorship. The concept of censorship has often been associated with state repression in the name of law imposing normative and regulative measures on what ought not to be produced, circulated, and disseminated. For Ng, however, it is too simplistic to see censorship as the imposition of a straightforward, stifling effect on the creativity of filmmakers and cultural producers at large. His study engages with the complexity of suppression, negotiation, and creation of ambiguous meanings in the film text, while he recasts censorship less as a repressive-inhibiting force than as a productive drive that generates new forms of discourse, new forms of communication, and new genres of speech. Just as he asserts in the introductory chapter of the book:

Censorship itself is a paradoxical phenomenon. If we simply regard censorship as a totalitarian government's suppression of creative individuals or the deletion and modification of cultural works to avoid ideological taboos, we will inevitably ignore the regenerative aspect of censorship that stimulates creativity in the form of "betrayal," that is, the departure from the original intention of the author and movement toward the "subtle subversion" of the externally imposed state censorship on the text. (17-18)

Grounded in archival research, historical contextualization, and film textual exegesis, Ng demonstrates through his analysis of cinematic texts and historical contexts how filmmakers could utilize a variety of deceptive tactics to deal with authoritarian censorship, and strategically carve out a critical space for their works despite the constraints set by censorial policies as well as market demands (21). Filmmakers are able to utilize their creativity to produce films at once entertaining and socially critical or artistically self-conscious, producing "electric shadows" (cinematography) that offend and challenge the prohibitive culture," as couched in Ng's own Chinese terminology *yi ying fan jin* (以影犯禁).

Combined together, the chapters arranged in the book's three parts draw a comprehensive picture of the history of film censorship in Hong Kong and Chinese cinema. Part One deals with filmmakers and their cinematic works produced when Kuomintang's (the Chinese Nationalists) cultural bureaucrats had imposed strict censorship measures in the 1930s. The Republican government implemented censorship policies to eliminate supernatural/ghost movies and the martial arts genre which glorified superhuman powers: they were censured as "fantastic movies" (*shenguai pian*) that were unscientific and backward, spreading superstitions and "feudalistic" beliefs and thereby threatening the goals of state-building and national progress.

In the eyes of the Kuomintang government, more seriously, the Cantonese dialect cinema, which had been thriving in the southern parts of China and colonial Hong Kong since the invention of talkies, was the chief ideological suspect in hampering the linguistic and political unification of the nation. Since the introduction of sound into Chinese cinema in the 1930s, Cantonese films have been engaging with ghosts and superstitious subjects, understandably easy targets for censorship. Part One of Ng's book first traces Cantonese opera maestro Sit Gok-sin's (Xue Juexian) cinematic series *Baijinlong* (*The Platinum Dragon*, 1933). Ng considers Xue's earliest Cantonese films, a crossover of Chinese opera and Western cinema, as an elusive response to the political imperative of the nation and to the regional commercial interest in the volatile 1930s that witnessed Chinese cinema's

transition to sound filmmaking. Ng also delineates the cosmopolitan outlook of *The Platinum Dragon*, which originated from Xue's successful opera-and-film fusion and theatrical productions of "Western-costume Cantonese opera" (*xizhuang Yueju*). Xue's opera performance was adapted from the Hollywood film *The Grand Duchess and the Waiter* (dir. Malcolm St. Clair) released in 1926. After producing a sequel, *The Platinum Dragon: Part Two*, in 1937 (codirected by Ko Lei-hen [Gao Lihen] and Xue himself), Xue remade Part One of the story in 1947 as *The New Platinum Dragon* (dir. Yeung Kung-leong [Yang Gongliang]). Ng highlights the Hong Kong-Shanghai connections in the formation of early Cantonese cinema, as seen in Xue's embrace of Hollywood's global appeal and his creation of a dandyish gentleman in *The Platinum Dragon*. His case study will convince readers as to how the presence of dialects, accents, and music in film disputes the uniformity and commonality of the national identity in cinematic history. The Cantonese talkies featuring undesirable spirits, supernatural beings, and spectral fantasies proved to be a popular medium of entertainment for the vast majority of Cantonese-speaking viewers in southern China and Hong Kong.

Part One of Ng's book contains two more chapters that engage with the transitional decades of the 1940s and 1950s when memories of war, family separation, and unrequited love still held sway over filmmakers' cinematic representations. Ng discusses the strategic storytelling of Chinese filmmakers who delved into the melodramatic or emotional expressions in film, beginning from the powerful story and war memories in *Yijiang chunshui xiangdong liu* (*A Spring River Flows East*, 1948). He then moves to the Mandarin-language and Shanghai-based film, *Xiaocheng zhi chun* (*Spring in a Small Town*, 1948) by Fei Mu. What is noteworthy is that Fei Mu's film had a history of repression in Chinese film historiography. Yet it was salvaged and positively reevaluated in colonial Hong Kong precisely because of the city's unique cultural situation that allowed a higher degree of freedom of expression, hence offering a critical space in Chinese-speaking regions for recognizing the film's supreme artistic achievements and subtle socio-historical critique. These three chapters focus on film's emotional articulations as a response to postwar situations in mainland China and Hong Kong.

In Part Two Ng's study moves from the censorship history in Republican China to Hong Kong's colonial censorship in the postwar period, in particular the Cold War scenarios. In the course of its unstable but vibrant development, Ng argues, the Hong Kong film scene was under double surveillance: both by the British colonial authorities and by the ruling regimes on the mainland, namely Hong Kong's cultural motherland. After 1949, the colonial cultural field became

a battleground for the ideological combat between the Chinese communists and the Kuomintang nationalists, between the Soviet-centered communist bloc and the American-led “liberal camp.” Realizing the strategic geopolitical position of Hong Kong, the British government stealthily introduced and vigorously exercised stringent measures in censoring film and print culture. The colonial regime sneakily interfered with the production and dissemination of undesirable images and messages on cinema screens. British officials proactively censored communist movies, pro-Taiwan pictures, and politically provocative Hollywood productions from the 1950s to the 1980s with varying degrees of focus on specific targets at different times. In the early 1950s, the Hong Kong British rule went to the extremes to deport back to the mainland those Chinese filmmakers believed to be underground communist agents.

The chapters in Part Two study a number of cinematic censorship cases and film’s responses, in effect a concealed cultural history now unravelled by the author through his meticulous archival investigation. There were constant bloody riots and violent combats involving Hong Kong’s left-wing and right-wing unionists and political activists during the 1950s. As a result, Elia Kazan’s Hollywood classic *On the Waterfront* (1954) was banned in Hong Kong in 1954 for three years because the Hong Kong government at the time was worried that the film’s depiction of labor unions might incite unrest among local workers. Interestingly, Ng’s research reveals that J. Lee Thompson’s *The Chairman* (1969), a Twentieth Century Fox picture and an up-to-date espionage film on Chairman Mao and the Cultural Revolution in “Red China,” was never shown to the Hong Kong public. But an alleged shooting arrangement of the film in the colony in 1968 agitated radical opponents and caused riotous incidents in both Hong Kong and China, including bomb threats and the sending of life-threatening warnings to the movie star Gregory Peck.

The same chapter also reveals that in 1974, the British Hong Kong government banned *Zaijian Zhongguo* (*China Behind*) directed by Hong Kong independent female filmmaker Tang Shu-shuen. This early independent Hong Kong film depicted four Chinese students fleeing China to Hong Kong during the Cultural Revolution. In 1981, Taiwan director Bai Jingrui released *Huangtian houtu* (*The Coldest Winter in Peking*), a movie concerning the atrocities of the Gang of Four during the Cultural Revolution. The film was screened for only one day in Hong Kong, on March 26, before it was abruptly withdrawn from public viewing. Another Taiwanese production, Wang Tong’s *Jiaru woshi zhende* (*If I Were for Real*), telling the story of how a young man extorted a fortune by claiming to be the son of a Chinese general, was rejected in the same year. The

ensorship cases mentioned in the book were heavily intertwined with Cold War politics, as Ng demonstrates with his careful treatment of historical materials.

In the other two chapters in Part Two, the author makes a strong case for the creative possibility of new symbolism and new codes of storytelling in films that engage with Chinese legends and classical literature on ghosts or other-worldly beings. Ng highlights the ethics of “betrayal” in cinematic adaptation as a viable survival strategy of filmmakers to get around traditional moral taboos and modern censorial rules. Ng’s study emphasises that the histories of censorship and the resistance of Hong Kong cinema have often involved the contestation over “Chineseness” against the state’s politics of cultural unity and the collective consciousness of the nation. Instead of constraining creativity, this contestation of identity has stimulated creative works invested with new symbolism and unique audio-visual sensuality, and led to an array of styles in cinematic representation.

These two chapters focus on films on ghosts and spirits derived from classical Chinese literature. As Ng demonstrates, Cantonese cinema of the 1950s and 1960s assumed an apparently progressive stance in denying the existence of ghosts or spirits. Chinese cinema has dealt with the taboo on the permanent union of mortal men and phantom-heroines in traditional Chinese ghost literature. Li Chenfeng directed *Yanshi huanhun ji* (*A Beautiful Corpse Comes to Life*) in 1956, which was an adaptation of the Chinese classic play *Mudan ting* (*The Peony Pavilion*). The Cantonese film ends by having Du Liniang reincarnated as a human before she fulfils her wish to marry Liu Mengmei. The melodramatic happy ending of the husband and wife who can eventually live together after going through the vicissitudes of love and death promptly brings the audience back to the human world of the Confucian order and social harmony. The motif of reincarnation—rekindling the soul by transplanting it to someone else’s body (*jieshi huanhun*)—became a strategically compromising narrative denouement for both Cantonese- and Mandarin-speaking films, as they modified and humanized classical Chinese ghost tales on screen. Li Hanxiang made *Qiannü youhun* (*The Enchanting Shadow*) in 1960, which was an adaptation of Pu Songling’s story “Nie Xiaoqian.” The film stands out as a salient example of Mandarin cinema’s treatment of the ghostly subject by perpetrating a similar happy ending following the reincarnation of the ghost-heroine.

Ng argues that the contestation of Chineseness by Cantonese- and Mandarin-speaking cinema amounted to mobilizing traditional mythical sources and symbols while shying away from taboos. The Chinese character for ghost, *gui* (鬼), has a broader spectrum of meanings than does the English word “ghost.” In its ancient use, *gui* (歸) means “to return.” Its homophonic character *gui*

means “to go to, to come back, to rely on, to swear allegiance to, to marry (for a woman), to die.” In his textual analysis, Ng pinpoints the sense of homecoming in the adventurous stories of the ghosts with their desire to return home, to return to their cultural roots and origins—the family and the mother culture. The Chinese ghosts in Hong Kong cinema undertake an odyssey from the world of the dead back to the human world. But where is home for the dead? Ng asks. When ghosts cannot return to their home, they are struck by a sense of homelessness, and are immediately rendered as strange and unfamiliar beings, psychoanalytically termed by Sigmund Freud as “the uncanny” (“unhomely,” *unheimlich* in German).

In addition, Ng reads the demon master in Li Hanxiang’s *The Enchanting Shadow* as an archetype of Cold War enemies that can shift between human and non-human forms, playing tricks on the human mind by way of ideological persuasions. Like the Cold War aliens in Hollywood disaster pictures, the demon master symbolizes the threat of dehumanization. This monstrous creature is going to take over humanity by enslaving and forcing the female ghost to suck up the blood of men (and mankind). To counter the danger of dehumanization, the ghost heroine Xiaoqian has a strong wish to go back to becoming human, to seek rebirth and leave the monster family by betraying her demon master, to change her identity back from the “they” of the diabolical enemy to the “we” of fellow human compatriots. The “abrupt” ending in the film seems all the more suggestive, insists Ng, as a conjugal relationship between ghosts and humans were certainly a taboo in popular cinema of the 1950s and 60s, or even today.

As Ng asserts, the ghost narratives can be read allegorically as they articulate the problematic identity of Chineseness in Cold War Asian Chinese societies. Ghosts allude to the spectral presence of the Chinese past. Like diasporic subjects, Chinese ghosts struggle to take root in their motherland (mainland China) or host lands (territories outside of China, including colonial Hong Kong and parts of Southeast Asia). In both stories, the phantom heroines exhibit a desire to return to life in order to enjoy the blissful world of love, marriage, and family. If ghosts are marginalized as the Other in Chinese society, these tales of reincarnation become parabolic texts to denote the renaissance of China’s culture and identity in the Cold War order.

This contestation of Chineseness also demonstrated different modern adaptation versions of the classic Chinese folk legend *The Legend of the White Snake*, which also explores the narrative of reincarnation, fate, and the insurmountable gap between humans and animals. In the PRC, Tian Han’s 1955 Beijing opera rendition of the White Snake legend culminated in Green Snake’s vengeful de-

struction of the pagoda and “liberation” of her sister White Snake. Tian Han’s modern genesis of the myth domesticated White Snake as a virtuous woman dedicated to lover and family, and yet politicized the ancient tale as a lesson of the people’s liberation. In colonial Hong Kong, Lee Bik-wah (Li Bihua) rewrote the legend and made Green Snake the protagonist and narrator. Such a shifting of the marginal perspective to the center of the discourse reflects Hong Kong’s political and geopolitical marginalization and negotiation in the run-up to 1997.

Ng gives a detailed and insightful analysis of how Tsui Hark’s 1993 film adaptation, *The Green Snake*, erased the plot about the Cultural Revolution in Li Bihua’s book. But the filmmaker redeemed his act of self-censorship by adding a critical anthropocentrism with a unique moral outlook—he recreated a fascinating snake monster legend, the duo of White Snake and Green Snake. The modern Hong Kong novel and film adaptations resonate more intimately with the mythic and moral universe of the classical White Snake legend by depicting amorous, sympathetic, and humane snakes, inspiring us to become more human by knowing more about the non-human. Yet, Tsui Hark’s film refigures Fahai as the failed guardian of his human-centered and anthropocentric moral universe, whose strict sense of order finally comes apart at the seams and crumbles like the pagoda. Ng’s reading is original as well as political as he suggests that the film’s final flood scene with the pending destruction of the world is as much a display of cinematic virtuosity as hidden political commentary. The flood scene can be taken as a hidden association with the massive human catastrophes done in the Maoist years, driven by a doctrinal leadership and the desire for ideological purity.

In Part Three Ng explores the uniquely multilingual Chinese cinemas prospering in Cold War Hong Kong by looking into both Mandarin- and Cantonese-language films of romantic comedy, urban drams, and a left-wing studio’s (Zhonglian) adaptations of world literature and British and Hollywood cinema. Two chapters treat MP & GI/Cathay’s productions of romantic comedies in the 1950s and 60s, when new expressions of city culture and modern sensibility were invested in Hong Kong film and a pan-Chinese cinema. While the promotion of comedy and romance can be considered as a commercial move to shy away from politics and the harsh social realities, Ng argues, filmic adaptations by the Cantonese left-wing filmmakers of Western literature and cinema showed how political critique of capitalism and class society was still possible in the shadow of colonial governance and censorship with the veil of cinematic adaptation. The book ends with a chapter that shows Ng’s cosmopolitan vision on and approach to global censorship. He studies Michelangelo Antonioni’s documentary of

communist China, *Chung Kuo: Cina* (*Chung Kuo: China*), a commissioned production made at the peak of the Cultural Revolution in 1972 which resulted in an anti-Western backlash on the mainland and a long period of censoring the documentary in China, when mainland ideologues misread Antonioni's avant-garde photography and cinematography.

The scope of this book is so rich that it is impossible for this review to thoroughly cover all the insights as well as controversies as deliberated in Ng's writing. The book offers an incisive interrogation of the history of film censorship in Hong Kong and Chinese cinema and the way in which filmmakers adapt themselves to constrictions under censorship. Most importantly, the book may serve as a "history lesson" for contemporary filmmakers who are faced with a different censorship atmosphere from that of their predecessors. At a book launch, Ng asserted that he might not be in the right position to offer advice to the young and active filmmakers in Hong Kong, and that the more filmmakers and cultural workers know about the past, the more confident they will become: they are likely to be less anxious and much stronger and more creative in their storytelling and artistic techniques, especially when it comes to politically sensitive issues. As he reiterates in the pages of his book:

Cultural repression has always been present. It has been coexisting with cultural creativity and resistance, and has become the catalyst for historical progress. (27)

When words and speeches in society have to be scrutinized and packaged to meet the needs of (political) reality, Hong Kong films have continued to tell their stories as fables dwelling elsewhere with a great fondness for the strange, the violent, the chaotic, and the spiritual (9).

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