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**Transregional Imagination in Hong Kong Cinema:  
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Yingjin Zhang

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Contact details:

**Yingjin Zhang, Department of Literature, 0410, UC San Diego, 9500 Gilman Drive, La Jolla, CA 92093, USA.**

**Tel: + 1 858 534 5991; Email: [yinzhang@ucsd.edu](mailto:yinzhang@ucsd.edu).**

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## Transregional Imagination in Hong Kong Cinema: Questions of Culture, Identity, and Industry

Yingjin Zhang  
University of California, San Diego, USA

### **Abstract**

This paper argues that transregional imagination characterizes Hong Kong cinema from its incipient stage all the way to the new millennium. Such a strategic transregionalism is central not only to recent debates of ideological questions such as Hong Kong's cultural identity and the 'China syndrome' in Hong Kong cinema but is also crucial to industry practices throughout Hong Kong film history. The paper first analyzes the anxiety and instability in film critics' attempts to define what counts as 'authentic' Hong Kong culture in relation to regional Cantonese tradition and cosmopolitan Shanghai influence in the 1950s-1960s. By discussing the instances in which films of the period confronted and acknowledged the heterogeneity and hybridity of Hong Kong identity, this paper calls attention to the cinematic negotiation and integration of regional Chinese cultures as seen in fashionable urban comedies showcasing 'nanbei he' (literally, the mixture of south and north), as in some Eileen Chang films. Even in the martial arts genre of the 1970s, cultural nationalism played to the popular imagination in Hong Kong and overseas, and historically helped Hong Kong cinema expand its market in Taiwan, Southeast Asia and Euro-America. Citing historical evidence from major industry players like Minxin, Tianyi, Grandview, MP&GI, Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest, this paper concludes that transregional imagination is both fundamental and beneficial to Hong Kong cinema.

## **Hong Kong: A Culture of Disappearance and Reembedding**

Since the mid-1980s, scholars have confronted the issue of Hong Kong culture with a sense of unprecedented urgency and, in some cases, intense apprehension. Among the various attempts to conceptualize Hong Kong culture, Ackbar Abbas's thesis regarding a culture of disappearance (1997) caught the eye of Western academia right before Hong Kong's return to China's sovereignty in July 1997. However, based on an extremely limited number of examples from the new wave Hong Kong cinema (in particular films by Wong Kar-Wai), Abbas's work has been faulted in his theorization of space, time and speed and in his neglect of Hong Kong people's quotidian experience (Matthews 1998). As I argued in Screening China (2002: 255-63), what is important to a given culture is not merely what is said to have disappeared or is disappearing but also what conditions the dialectic of 'disembedding' and 'reembedding' in a local culture over time, to use Anthony Giddens's terms (1990: 79-80). In other words, rather than an alarmist view of the doomsday scenario of cultural disappearance, the history of cultural formation and transformation in Hong Kong deserve close attention.

This paper is part of my effort to revisit the 1950s-1970s as a period of radical transformation in Hong Kong cinema. A study of this period demonstrates that the identity of Hong Kong culture cannot be adequately assessed through a narrow focus on Hong Kong itself but must be approached by way of situating Hong Kong in relation to other cultures with which it has established close contacts. To confront a problematic issue right away, let me start with a discussion of Hong Kong film critics' uneasiness and ambivalence when evaluating Hong Kong cinema vis-à-vis Cantonese and Shanghai cultures and then proceed to interrogate their geo-cultural conceptualization of Hong Kong.

## Hong Kong Culture: Locality, Historicity and Identity

In his manifesto-sounding introduction to the 1988 Hong Kong International Film Festival retrospective catalogue entitled 'Changes in Hong Kong Society Through Cinema', Li Cheuk-to (Li Zhuotao) states:

Hong Kong is a city commonly thought of as having no history . . . Where the last generation is concerned, Hong Kong was a place of refuge but whose time and locality were borrowed. Hence, a sense of belonging was lacking. To the newer generations, the sense of belonging is stronger but their perspective of history (especially that of China) is sadly limited . . . Hong Kong's history has been subdued and a new historical consciousness was never nurtured.

When Li announces the intention of the 1988 retrospective to be 'a beginning towards understanding Hong Kong's history', his ultimate goal is not history per se but culture: 'Without a local history, there is no local culture. Without a local culture, the meeting of minds from both east and west would essentially come to naught' (HKIFF 1988: 9). The Chinese phrase Li uses for 'local culture' is wenhua benwei, literally 'culture's original locale', which foregrounds both the locality of Hong Kong culture and the historicity of this culture's transformation. In this sense, cinema furnishes a means of retrieving collective memory and experience as well as reconstructing local history and culture.

Li Cheuk-to's overview of Hong Kong cinema of the 1970s represents an effort at such historical reconstruction of a 'local culture' through cinema. On the one hand, Li locates in Cantonese comedies like The House of Seventy-two Tenants (Qishi'er jia fangke, dir. Chor Yuen [Chu Yuan], 1973) a sign of renewed interest in 'the strong oral tradition of the Cantonese culture', which added to local color and fostered a 'genuine Hong Kong consciousness'. On the other hand, insatiable desires permeated the screen, as exemplified by Zhang Che's swordsmen fighting for personal gain rather than moral integrity or by Li Hanxiang's women seeking emotional and sexual fulfillment while volunteering themselves as an object of the male gaze. As affection and morality became objects of distrust or ridicule, cynicism spread across all genres and furnished an outlet for discontented Hong Kong audiences: While submitting to the status

quo, they at least could deride authority, injustice and decency. Such cynicism, nonetheless, betrayed a fundamental contradiction in Hong Kong culture and engendered an intensifying crisis of identity that sometimes verged on schizophrenia (as in soft porn pictures produced by Lui Kei [Lü Qi]). For Li Cheuk-to, the cinematic search for Hong Kong's 'original locale' (benwei) or local culture failed to go beyond native legends and folk wisdom, and the indifference to contemporary politics and marginality in history continued to characterize Hong Kong identity in the 1970s (HKIFF 1984: 123-31).

It is evident from Li Cheuk-to's overview that an uneasy relationship exists between 'Cantonese culture' and Hong Kong's 'local culture'. Significantly, in a 1966 film review Law Kar (Luo Ka) chose 'Cantonese woman' rather than 'Hong Kong woman' to describe Chan Po-chu (Chen Baozhu), who was said to represent 'a progressive new woman' entirely independent in a male-centered society and thus distinguished herself from the previous Cantonese female stars. Law detected in Chan's endearing screen images such 'traditional Cantonese qualities' as empathy, filial piety, perseverance, reticence and righteousness. Already 'modernized but not completely Hong Kong-ized' as were some of her counterparts in Mandarin cinema, Chan's was an outstanding image of 'a new generation of Hong Kong's Cantonese women' (HKIFF 1982: 88-90).

For both Law Kar and Li Cheuk-to, Cantonese culture surely extends beyond Hong Kong's borders; therefore, Hong Kong's local culture is intimately related to Cantonese culture as a regional culture, at least up to the late 1960s. This intimate relationship is illustrated in the case of Li Wo's radio storytelling (tiankong xiaoshuo), which reached hundreds of thousands of listeners in the region of Guangzhou (originally designated as Canton), Hong Kong and Macao in the late 1940s and the 1950s. Understandably, film adaptations of Li Wo's stories were immensely popular and over forty of them were produced in Hong Kong from 1949 to 1964

(HKIFF 1986: 57-66). Li Wo's case thus demonstrates the power of an oral tradition in Cantonese culture years before the revival of Cantonese cinema in the mid-1970s.

Nevertheless, upon closer scrutiny, Law Kar and Li Cheuk-to differ in their conceptions of Hong Kong culture. Law's term 'Hong Kong-ized' (Xianggang hua) reveals his suspicion of the 'contaminating' effects of a 'Westernized' Hong Kong culture of the 1960s, which as a cosmopolitan culture (represented by Mandarin musicals) was not 'local' to Hong Kong but was originally imported from Shanghai in the postwar period. Li's insistence on a 'local culture' in Hong Kong is therefore problematic. For what was 'local' to Li (Cantonese orality) was part of a regional culture and what was 'Hong Kong' to Law (Westernization)—elsewhere described by Stephen Teo (Zhang Jiande) as 'Shanghai hangover' and 'Shanghai redone' (1997: 14-39)—was obviously alien to the local in the 1960s.

### **From Shanghai to Hong Kong: Images, Songs and Attitudes**

Teo's reference to Shanghai brings us to postwar Hong Kong when Shanghai émigrés established Mandarin cinema as a prosperous industry in Hong Kong. Two Shanghai cinematic traditions were prominent during the 1950s: Ideologically inspired social realism and entertainment-driven 'musicals' (gechang pian). The leftist tradition of social realism was most pronounced in the releases from 'leftwing' companies such as Great Wall (Changcheng) and Phoenix (Fenghuang), especially in the works of Zhu Shilin. Yet sometimes, Shanghai influence might take an unexpected twist, as in the case of Half Way Down (Ban xialiu shehui, dir. Tu Guangqi, 1955).

A production of Asia Pictures (Yazhou), which was founded in 1953 with the support of the US-based Free Asia Association, Half Way Down criticizes the corrupting forces of money and bourgeois lifestyles and promotes solidarity among a group of poverty-stricken mainland

intellectuals stranded in a Hong Kong slum. Ironically, by portraying human dignity, traditional ethics and urban alienation, Half Way Down resembles many contemporary leftwing releases and thus identifies itself with a cultural tradition traceable from Shanghai leftist cinema of the 1930s to Taiwan 'healthy realism' (jiankang xieshi zhuyi) of the 1960s. Supposedly an anti-Communist feature, Half Way Down thus fails in its political mission and betrays its entrenched rural mentality and its paranoiac anti-urbanism. For the stranded mainland refugees, Hong Kong is an alienating, corrupting city, a nightmarish reality and a test of their moral strength.

In comparison, Peach Blossom River (Taohua jiang, dir. Wang Tianlin, Zhang Shankun, 1956), a musical production from Xinhua (Hsin Hwa), presents a much more optimistic view of Hong Kong. The producer Zhang Shankun had experience with musicals in wartime Shanghai and was familiar with Greater China's (Da Zhonghua) postwar showcases of Zhou Xuan (nicknamed the 'golden voice') in such popular hits as Song of a Songstress (Genü zhi ge, dir. Fang Peilin, 1948). An ingenious businessman, Zhang did something new with Peach Blossom River by shifting his focus from Shanghai to Hong Kong. The film features an innocent country maiden (Zhong Qing the 'wildcat'), whose singing talent was discovered by a visiting urban artist (Lo Wei [Luo Wei]). In the first part, Peach Blossom River depicts the scenes of an idyllic village, where young people sing amidst peach blossoms and under the moon. In the second part, the film quickly glosses over the rural refugees' traumatic experience of migration and separation by making the country maiden a singing star overnight. The images of the glamorous theater and modern apartment represent no corrupting force, and Hong Kong emerges as a welcoming place for the newcomers to call home.

Film historian Yu Muyun identifies five sources of Hong Kong 'Mandarin pops' (shidai qu): Shanghai popular songs, Chinese folk songs, Chinese regional operas, Chinese composers and popular foreign songs (including folk songs and opera). Despite their non-Hong Kong origins,

however, Law Kar argues that Hong Kong musicals gradually abandoned Chinese ‘central plain culture’ (zhongyuan wenhua) and embraced cosmopolitan cultures elsewhere. Progressing from the Shanghai songstress (Zhou Xuan) through the country maiden (Zhong Qing) to the Hong Kong modern girl (Ge Lan), a new kind of cosmopolitanism grounded in Hong Kong began to take shape. Peach Blossom River, in this view, represents a turning point. Subsequent musicals, such as Hong Kong Nocturne (Xiangjian huayue ye, dir. Inoue Umetsugu, 1967), contributed to a construction of Hong Kong identity as unabashedly hybrid (HKIFF 1993: 75-7).

Like Peach Blossom River, Mambo Girl (Manbo nülang, dir. Yi Wen, 1957), an MP&GI (Dianmao) release, furnishes a good place to investigate the changing popular and intellectual attitudes toward Hong Kong. Mambo Girl celebrates urban modernity and its attendant youth culture and establishes Ge Lan as ‘the number one screen musical personality of the era’ (Fonoroff 1997: 188). The film opens with a close-up of two dancing feet, and the camera pulls back to show Kailing (Ge Lan), a cheerful high school student, dances to the applause of her swinging hipster friends. After a few rounds of songs and dances, Kailing suddenly turns sorrowful when she discovers she is adopted. She searches the urban labyrinth and finds her birth mother working as a nightclub janitor, but the latter refuses to confirm their relationship. Kailing is profoundly touched by her adoptive parents, who organize a birthday party and transform Kailing back to a cheerful ‘mambo girl’.

Hailed by Teo as Hong Kong’s ‘first musical masterpiece’ (HKIFF 1993: 35), Mambo Girl reveals the persisting question of identity in Hong Kong cinema. As Sek Kei (Shi Qi) contends, ‘For the Chinese population of Hong Kong, torn between living in the colony and wishing to return to the mainland, this [question of identity] is a familiar predicament on the symbolic level’ (HKIFF 1993: 40). Nonetheless, in its preferred solution to the birth puzzle, Mambo Girl ends with the birth mother secretly watching Kailing in a happy family reunion from outside the house

and slowly walking away, virtually as a dark shadow. The film thus embraces modern bourgeois lifestyles at the expense of a painful memory of the unspeakable past, and endorses what Sam Ho (He Siying) describes as the attitudes of ‘fun, rhythm, innocence and youthfulness’ that prevail in the new generation (HKIFF 1993: 64).

### **Hong Kong and Beyond: Films of South-North Integration**

The Shanghai connection of Hong Kong cinema exemplifies what I call ‘transregional imagination’, which is manifested in artists’ and critics’ acknowledgment of multiple origins in Hong Kong culture and identity. From this perspective, what Leo Lee delineates as the ‘Shanghainization’ of Hong Kong in the 1950s (1999: 330) is only part of a larger, longer process of translocal, transregional, transnational cultural disembedding and reembedding in Hong Kong. What happened in the 1950s-1960s, to put it more accurately than Lee’s tale of two cities, was Hong Kong’s transformation of diverse Chinese regional cultures—Shanghai included—in a gradually self-assertive way, as suggested in the previous section.

Not surprisingly, Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing), who has recaptured increasing attention of Chinese scholars since the early 1990s, is a perfect example of transregional imagination in Hong Kong. With her multiple ties to Shanghai, Hong Kong, and the US from the early 1940s to the mid-1960s, Chang’s screenplays for MP&GI contributed to the formation of an emergent cosmopolitan culture in Hong Kong. Such cosmopolitanism recognizes its multi-regional origins and therefore explains the popular films of ‘South-North integration’ (nanbei he), in which conflicting Chinese regional cultures engage one another and accept compromises in the interest of love, family, and future.

Chang’s early MP&GI comedies of manners, such as The Battle of Love (Qingchang ru zhanchang, 1957) and The Wayward Husband (Taohua yun, 1958), both directed by Yue Feng,

were quite popular in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Among other, similar films, her sequels to The Greatest Civil War on Earth (Nanbei he, dir. Wang Tianlin, 1961), which topped Hong Kong's Mandarin cinema box-office in 1961, are worth mentioning. The tongue-in-cheek exaggeration of the 'greatest' is matched by the reversed meaning of 'civil war' in the Chinese title, which denotes 'integration' and 'compromise' between nanbei—the 'South' (Hong Kong) and the 'North' (the mainland)—the nuance missing in the English title. Indeed, it is this missing nuance that constitutes the focus of the comedy series: the 'mixing' (he) of Cantonese and Mandarin cultures in Hong Kong society. Both directed by Wang Tianlin, Chang's sequels The Greatest Wedding on Earth (Nanbei yijia qin, 1962) and The Greatest Love Affair on Earth (Nanbei xi xiangfeng, 1964) continue to present 'mixed' couples but emphasize 'happiness' (xi), 'affection' (qin), and 'family unity' (yijia).

In a sense, MP&GI's 'south-north' dramas provide another example of convergence in Hong Kong cinema—the mixing of Cantonese and Mandarin speaking casts in the same films. Interpreted at the symbolic level, this kind of mixture points to the self-confidence Hong Kong filmmakers had obtained by the early 1960s: The confidence that by confronting rather than evading the hybridity of their cultural identity they could expect nothing but 'happy' endings. Indeed, by the time Cantonese cinema reinvented itself with The House of Seventy-two Tenants in the early 1970s, even characters from other regional backgrounds (Shanghai, Shandong, and Chaozhou) spoke Cantonese, albeit with their regional accents. In Teo's judgment, The House of Seventy-two Tenants is 'one of the first instances in Hong Kong cinema to show the territory as a Cantonese society able to assimilate Chinese people from different regions' (1997: 145).

Grounded in such transregional imagination, by the late 1970s Hong Kong cinema had gained the flexibility of crossing national and regional borders and the advantage of assimilating East and West as well as North and South. The grounding in transregional imagination also

enabled Hong Kong filmmakers to approach Chinese culture not as a singular entity—what Law Kar calls ‘central plain culture’—but as an ensemble consisting of multiple regional cultures characterized by multiple regional dialects. The awareness of Southern Fujian (or Minnan) thus accounted for a large number of Hong Kong productions of Amoy-dialect features intended predominately for Southeast Asia and Taiwan in the 1950s. Incidentally, it is the importation of Hong Kong’s Amoy-dialect films to Taiwan that prompted Taiwan’s large-scale production of ‘authentic Taiwanese-dialect films’ (zhengzong Taiyu pian) in the late 1950s through the 1960s (Zhang 2004, Chapter 4).

Hong Kong’s cinematic negotiation with Northern Chinese culture in martial arts pictures further confirms the advantage of transregional imagination. It is interesting to note that in the cases of Bruce Lee (Li Xiaolong), King Hu (Hu Jinquan) and Zhang Che, a haunting sense of rootlessness accompanies the physical journeys of these artists and their screen heroes. Traveling between the US, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (and shooting on locations in Thailand and Italy in Lee’s case), these artists presented uprooted knights-errant (youxia) whose claims to certain origins—certain schools of martial arts specific to certain mountains or temples—remain at best nominal and must be periodically and ritualistically tested through duels. The kind of Chinese ‘nationalism’ projected by these martial arts pictures, consequently, cannot but be abstract: ‘China’ exists as an abstract ‘cultural ideal’ that does not impose any obligation on the part of Hong Kong film-makers to support ‘a particular regime or political ideology’ (Teo 1997: 112).

### **Transregional Imagination in Hong Kong: Nationalism and Business**

Herein lies another definitive advantage of transregional imagination. Hong Kong cinema can effectively evoke cultural nationalism—a sense of cultural pride and national belonging—without endorsing or identifying with the competing representatives of the Chinese

nation-state (CCP or KMT). Teo uses the term ‘cultural nationalism’ to refer to the tendency of Chinese directors in Hong Kong and Taiwan—in particular the ‘Shanghai émigrés’—to instill morale and pride in the audience. However, he also exposes the other side of the ‘Chinese psyche’—the yearning for ‘modernisation and the good life, Hollywood-style’—which he sees as ‘a kind of aestheticized materialism’. ‘The two-faced nature of Chinese film-making,’ Teo asserts, ‘became much more marked in Hong Kong’ (1997: 23). Teo’s argument sheds light on Law Kar’s perception of ‘Hong Kong-ization’ as Westernization in Mandarin musicals—an ‘exotic’ genre Teo describes as ‘les sing-song girls in Hong Kong’. To be sure, Hollywood influence—in narrative and visual styles as in aestheticized materialism—was unmistakable in musicals and melodramas of 1960s Hong Kong and, much earlier, in 1930s Shanghai.

To return to Teo’s notion of cultural nationalism, it becomes apparent that Hong Kong’s cinematic productions of ‘China’ and ‘Chineseness’ are often intended for mass consumption in Taiwan and other overseas Chinese communities and at times have met with critical acclaim. The fact that Hong Kong has served as the site of mass production of signs of China and Chineseness—not just in martial arts but also in opera movies originated from numerous localities (in particular the popular Huangmeidiao [yellow plum tunes] in the 1960s)—has further confirmed the advantage of transregional imagination. Compared with Taiwan and the PRC, Hong Kong cinema may have been denied the status of a ‘national cinema’, but Hong Kong’s marginality in history and politics has cultivated a distinctive type of transregional imagination that transcends the national by drawing on and assimilating both the local and the international.

The history of Hong Kong cinema is full of successful multi-local and translocal business operations, regardless of the ideological and regional differences among its major producers. Li Mingwei (Lai Man-wai), an active supporter of the nationalist revolution who perceived film as

an educational tool for strengthening the nation, moved his Minxin from Hong Kong to Shanghai in the mid-1920s. Motivated by business necessity, Shao Zuiweng, who was often criticized for his conservative ideology, expanded his Tianyi to Hong Kong in the early 1930s and relocated all his operations from Shanghai to Hong Kong when the war with Japan broke out. From the 1930s to the 1950s, Zhao Shusen (Chiu Shu-sun), who was the first to make films of ‘national defense’ (guofang) in Hong Kong, transferred his Grandview (Daguan) operations from San Francisco to Hong Kong before the war, returned to San Francisco during the war and relocated to Hong Kong again after the war. From the opposite ideological camp, Zhang Shankun produced a few Mandarin features in Hong Kong in the late 1930s and, after his controversial wartime collaboration with Japan in Shanghai, reestablished his Xinhua in Hong Kong in the early 1950s. Two rival Hong Kong film-making giants of the 1950s-1960s, MP&GI and Shaw Brothers, both had their origins in Singapore, where MP&GI’s parent company Cathay (Guotai) was located and where Run Run Shaw (Shao Yifu) owned a substantial market share in film exhibition. Not surprisingly, Hong Kong cinema maintained intimate ties to Southeast Asia and Taiwan, and the traffic in capital and manpower (for instance Li Hanxiang, King Hu and Zhang Che) between these localities once more made transregional imagination a necessary business strategy. When Raymond Chow (Zou Wenhui) started Golden Harvest (Jiahe) in 1970, he moved quickly to recruit Bruce Lee from the US and expanded to Taiwan and Southeast Asia. Given the frequency of such traffic and the fluidity of national or regional boundaries in business operations, Hong Kong cinema aspired to be ‘borderless’ long before the era of globalization (Yau 2001).

In conclusion, transregional imagination characterizes the entire history of Hong Kong cinema. As David Bordwell aptly defines, ‘Hong Kong’s is the regional cinema par excellence’ (2000: 61). Moving between local and the global, Hong Kong cinema has benefited a great deal from its distinctive transregional imagination, which is as much a time-honored strategy for

investment and marketing as it is a favorite choice in cultural identity and cinematic representation.

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