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Porn Power: Sexual and Gender Politics in Li Han-hsiang's *Fengyue* Films¹

Yau Ching

This chapter seeks to queer a part of Hong Kong cinema history considered to be most heteronormative through studying some of the most controversial works of one of the most prolific and influential Chinese filmmakers. Li Han-hsiang's (Li Hanxiang) (1926–96) achievement is best remembered for his big-budget, elaborate Chinese historical epics. Alongside his award-winning *huangmei diao* (romantic musicals) and *gongwei* (palace chamber) dramas, he has also directed and scripted a significant number of "smaller" and less discussed softcore pornographic films mostly set in the late Ming. These films constitute a genre of its own known as *fengyue pian*, a genre invented by Li, who was especially attracted to late Ming literature deemed obscene. In re-examining Li's film authorship of various genres in Hong Kong from the 1970s to 1990s intertextually, focusing on *fengyue* as a discursive site in foregrounding the contradictions produced by the meeting of early modern (late Ming) and contemporary (Hong Kong) Chinese desires, I seek to explore the various ways in which diverse and non-normative forms of sexual representations and spectatorships (could) have been constructed in Hong Kong cinema, including at moments when this cinema has been considered culturally traditional, as well as artistically and politically conservative. This chapter, in strategically reading between Li's genres and mapping their consistencies, traces the cultural assumptions and prejudices underlying the dismissal of *fengyue* as a genre, in contrast to Li's other genres, and the ways in which in retrospect, the invention of *fengyue* could be re-read as an interventionist response against (increasing) sexual conservatism in contemporary Hong Kong. In order to shed light on a much suppressed trajectory in Hong Kong cinema, this chapter reclaims Li as a radical classicist not only to further illuminate the political criticality of his authorship held in high regard by film history but also to highlight the ways in which this criticality was represented specifically and no less, through the representation of sexuality.

A Different Modern

In the process of working on this project, I found an overwhelming stereotype of the *fengyue* genre among Hong Kong intelligentsia. Audiences in Hong Kong somehow expect the genre to be mildly softcore, with very little or even entirely without any sexually explicit material. Once when I was cueing my clips (one of them being the action sequence of Pan Jinlian raping Wu Song in *The Amorous Lotus Pan*, discussed later in this chapter) before a paper presentation when most people had left the conference room for a tea break, a colleague responded with shock: “You’re not for real, are you?”. She just couldn’t believe I was going to show *that* to a room full of square-faced middle-aged academics.

Li Han-hsiang has been lauded effusively by critics for inaugurating two genres of huangmei diao opera films and palace epics in Chinese cinema, but critics remain tight-lipped about the sizable body of softcore erotica known euphemistically as *fengyue*, literally meaning “wind and moon”, that Li made upon his return to Shaw Studios in the 1970s. Should the subject ever crop up in a commentary, it was brushed off as in the following: “Run Run Shaw made him (make these films)”,² “folding under the pressure of money” (Dou 1997: 410), “selling his soul to the lowbrow” (Dou 1997: 410), “bad taste” (Teo 1984: 96), “cynically forgoing his convictions, or obligations, as an artist” (Teo 1984: 96), losing his faith in film and sullyng himself with the vulgar (Teo 1984: 93), etc.

A consummate multi-tasker, Li was shooting *Golden Lotus* (1974) while making plans for *The Empress Dowager* (1975) and *The Last Tempest* (1976), and between the little hiatus of *Empress* and *Tempest* he put out *That’s Adultery!* (1975) and *Love Swindlers* (1976); when he was scouring Bangkok and Los Angeles for the elusive beast in *Tiger Killer* (1982), he set in motion the pre-production for *The Burning of the Imperial Palace* (1983) and *Reign Behind a Curtain* (1983), and timed *Palace’s* release before *Take Care, Your Majesty!* (1983) shot back to back. So what could possibly propel the critics to reach the antipodal verdict that Li has a Jekyll-and-Hyde character—the painstakingly thorough historian and meticulous filmmaker of his palace epics, and a revolting cynic who had effectively made his “statement of faithlessness” (Teo 1984: 98) with *fengyue* films? Is this assumption of artistic haves and have-nots useful in helping us understand Li’s multi-tasking authorship with a vast and varied body of work? Or is it rather that steeped in our sexphobic tradition, Li’s *fengyue* films are doomed to suppression, buried in oblivion, deprived of public discussion alongside their literary counterparts? Consider for example, *Forever Li Han-hsiang*, a 144-page publication (Yu 1997) that details twenty of his “magnum opuses”, but contains a scanty one-page commentary each on *The Warlord* and *Tiger Killer* (1982), and even scantier and more ambiguous notes on his twenty odd *fengyue* films.³

Li Han-hsiang was the trailblazer of *fengyue* films, but the genre—one of the most important contributions he made to Hong Kong cinema history—has been shunned by film scholars and critics alike. Those few critics who did review the genre readily delineated a boundary between the “refined” (Li’s “joyous but not indecent” *fengyue* films) and the “crude” (i.e. the “obscene” hardcore ones made by others), in manners similar to the dichotomy of the erotica/pornography divide.⁴ Such dichotomy is not only arbitrary (what strikes me as erotica might be porn to you, an oft made point), it also entails a politics of deliberately desexualizing sexual imagery and representation, blatantly creating an imaginary space for cryptic referencing and inviting a sanctified reading of sexually explicit material to repress its affect of producing sexual arousal. Beneath this assumption is a hypocritical and biased moral swipe at sex as a biological, social and cultural need, and source of pleasure. Is the space of imagination created by the representation of pornographic (or erotic) materials necessarily at odds with sexual responses of the body? How likely are consumers of erotica/pornography going to attain a “sanctified” reading of the subject of sex minus the sexual responses? Is a “sublimated” reading of sex what viewers want or crave for, and if not, whom does it serve and against what standards is it measured?

“Pornography” as a category did not come into being in Europe until it had been “invented” during the process of modernization; the construction of the genre has been closely tied to the major moments in the emergence of Western modernity: the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the protection of class privileges of upper class males during the Victorian age (Hunt 1993; Kendrick 1987). Benefiting from the advances of printing and education, what used to be an exclusive domain of the elite could be accessed by the masses, which riled the privileged enough to turn to the legislation of pornography and to set up the dichotomy of art and pornography to protect their social advantages, regulating and keeping a curb on the circulation of sexual imagery. Urbanization, coupled with the emergence of the nuclear family, the petite bourgeoisie and the middle-class lifestyles justified a more complex regulation system which sought to limit and contain sexual expression within the private and domesticated bounds of the family.

In this chapter, I will discuss the ways in which Li’s *fengyue* complicates the genre of pornography on three fronts. First, Li’s body of *fengyue* work engages with film critics who struggle to unify, simplify and/or stereotype his work and the sexual hierarchies assumed in their characterization/categorization of art versus porn (versus erotica). Second, this body of work invents Chinese pornography through appropriating Chinese literary and sexual culture as a theorizing of modernity different than the one studied by Euro-American scholars, localizing

and relocating a historicity of sexuality as a root to modern capitalist culture. As a migrant artist from modern China who had seen a much less evenly regulated sexuality than the one propagated in colonial Hong Kong, Li, in his writings and his films, celebrates obscene texts (*yinshu*) and obscene women (*yinfu*) as a critique of Hong Kong's desexualizing colonial modernity. Third, Li seduces his audience through a variety of cinematic styles and techniques not normative in Western porn, including the use of period drama and subtle dialogues, elaborate plots and *mise-en-scène*, shifting and multiple perspectives, centring women's subjectivity, deferral of, blocking and maintaining camera distance from sexual acts, variable self-referential rewrites of the same plot, and malleability of genders. In its endless titillating of its audience through and coupled with self-reflexive strategies, Li's *fengyue* challenges its audience to reflect on our (endless) want to be titillated as voyeurs and *only* as voyeurs, leaving us to be confronted with our *own* construction of pornography and with the fact of pornography *only* as representation.

Hong Kong Bound

Li grew up and studied western painting under Xu Beihong⁵ in the turbulent days of the 1940s when the revolutionary and feudal monarchical forces collided, and his initiation into the world of modern art clashed with a wave of reorganizing sexual and gender roles that was sweeping the new China. The young Li Hansiang was caught up in the fervor and became a revolutionary and an exile of sorts: a stranger in the totalitarian modernizing China (of the north) and a dreamer with a yearning in both body and mind for the liberating and exuberant south in his imaginary, foundering on the shores of colonial Hong Kong.⁶ These contradictory sensibilities collided and blended in Li's *fengyue* films where rare glimpses into representations of (Hong Kong and) Chinese sexual politics offer a vantage point from which to reflect on the social, political and ideological operations of his times.

The rapid urbanization and the emergence of the middle class in the 1970s and 1980s in Hong Kong coincided with Li's creative summit in the *fengyue* genre in the wake of an increasingly tight institutional control over sexual identities and behaviours. The principle of monogamy was affirmed by the law enforced in Hong Kong in 1971, stipulating that no man can lawfully take concubines or child brides as in Chinese custom, which saw non-heterosexual, polygynist and other sexual relationships outside the institution of marriage increasingly marginalized. In 1988, a three-tier film rating system came into effect, and films rated Category III became limited for exhibition to adults over the age of eighteen only. This censorship system on the one hand makes more

sexually explicit representations previously banned from viewing possible, thus providing a short-term stimulus to the porn film industry in the early 1990s. On the other hand, it institutionalized the regulation of consuming sexual expression according to arbitrary age categories. Most of Li's works, produced in the 1970s and 1980s, have been available for all ages during the times of their theatrical release. But in the spring of 2007, just before the Li Han-hsiang retrospective was held at the Hong Kong Film Archive, many of these previously uncensored works found themselves classified as IIb (not recommended for teenagers and children) and III (18 or above only), leaving much of the publicity materials to be corrected last minute. In one of the symposiums held concurrently with the retrospective, Li Han-hsiang's daughter, Margaret Li, alluded to this historical irony by retelling the story of how her father enjoyed bringing his children to watch his *fengyue* films, and would not shy away from encouraging her to browse freely in daddy's collection of magazines like *Playboy* so that she could learn "aesthetics" from them. Apparently Li saw porn as a venue for the "education of desire", not unlike Richard Dyer's affinity with gay porn: "Gay porn seems to make that [education of desire] all the clearer, because there is greater equality between the participants (performers, filmmakers, audiences) which permits a fuller exploration of the education of desire that is going on. Porn involves us bodily in that education ..." (1992 [1982]: 484).

It is important to remember that locally made porn films—mainly softcore but with some hardcore too by today's standard—constituted one of the most dominant genres of the 1970s and was considered *the* most innovative genre at the time. "Explicit depiction of sex and nudity was an important feature of Hong Kong cinema in the seventies. Though the number of sex films was not as great as that of comedies and action films, it was nonetheless substantial—and besides, a good number of films incorporated all three genres. While comedies and action films reworked existing formulae, sex and nudity were 'new' inventions and 'breakthroughs'—not only in Hong Kong cinema, but in Chinese cinema as a whole" (Sek 1984: 82). "In 1973, Lung Kong's *The Call Girls* was the third top grosser, Li Han-hsiang's *Illicit Desire* and *Facets of Love* were the 5th and the 6th respective ... Among the 40 top blockbusters, 13 of them were erotic films" (Chen 2000: 50). This 1970s trend of popularizing porn films subsided in the 1980s, and except with a small comeback in the early 1990s due to the stimulus of the three-tier classification system, came all the way downhill to a Hong Kong today when almost all porn films are imported and porn is seen as an "underground" genre.

It is within a historical trajectory of contradictions in which Hong Kong has witnessed a mainstreaming of sexually explicit materials since the 1970s alongside the increasing regulation of sexuality—especially non-normative ones—in the

name of modernity that Li's groundbreaking and prolonged engaging with the erotic discourse developed in late Ming fiction could be mapped as a politicizing move. Most of the novels rewritten in films by Li had emerged towards the end of the sixteenth century and flourished in the first half of the seventeenth. These novels were later categorized and policed by the Qing state as *yinshu*/"obscene books". Can the (re)making of erotica full of references to historic Chinese sexual imagery be seen as a filmmaker's response to a more disciplined space for (non-normative) sexual expression and the systemic domestication of sexual imagery in 1970s Hong Kong be a self-reflexive response to the construction of (Hong Kong) Chinese modernity? When we re-situate these films within the historical contexts wherein they were made and consumed, perhaps we could begin to discern the dissident spirit of Li's work in refusing to obey the strictures of procreative heterosexuality, not unlike the anecdotes of his newspaper column:

There was this famed courtesan in Shanghai called Wang Wenlan who went by the nickname Supremo.⁷ As the story goes, Wang threw an all-celebrity dinner party for her 14 guests, 13 men and a woman, who were big names either of the screen or stage, and who all shared one common bond—each of the fourteen of them had had an intimate episode with the hostess which therefore made her everyone's 'Babe'. Arriving in Hong Kong after the war, Wang resumed her 'old trade' and stayed true to her indiscriminatory nature ... Coming home at midnight, Wang had an encounter with an exhibitionist who was inching his way towards her while in the process of disrobing and exposing his genitalia. It was only a matter of seconds before Wang regained her composure and gave the exhibited body part a generous once-over and offered her sympathetic annotation, in her native Shanghainese: 'Jeez, innit a bit small?' As she turned away, she couldn't help but render a more refined Cantonese translation of her remark to the man's baffling 'Pardon?'...

A famous actor who was on his way home after a friend's wedding had a real urge to answer the call of nature. Finding a shady spot by the roadside, he unbuttoned his fly and was about to relieve himself when a cop's howl of 'Pissing in the street, Fella?' fell upon him like a thunderbolt. But an actor is an actor and he answered nonchalantly, 'Me pissing? I was just checking on John Thomas.' And lowering his head, with a deep sigh he said: 'Still the same good old John as fifty years ago.' (Li 1997b: 34–35)

These are two of the numerous sex jokes/juicy sexual narratives extracted from the column "Heaven on Earth" that Li Han-hsiang penned for the *Oriental Daily News* in the 1990s. Trading his camera for a pen as a sideline, Li was equally unequivocal in his penchant for licentious/lustful women (*yinfu*), a social type notoriously stigmatized for their expertise in breaking up (heteronormative) families or pathologized for not being able to play the virtuous feminine roles in

such families themselves. Under Li's pen, the seen-it-all and had-it-all woman of the world Supremo needs no sympathy or congeniality during her second tenure down south. She easily weasels her way out of the role of a "victim" of a man who exposes himself with her sharp mind and even sharper banter. The "pissing in the Street" joke was also a parody of legislative hubris to keep private matters to homes and off the street, and to anybody who has lived in Hong Kong during the 1980s and 1990s, an obvious taunting of the pre-1997 political discourse of Sino-Hong Kong relations (China promised: "Hong Kong will remain unchanged for 50 years after 1997"). With vividly crafted language Li told two jokes, of two exhibitionist and licentious characters from both genders, both without shame in their sexuality and in fighting intimidation, both prompting their readers to ponder on sexual politics and representation, issues pertinent to understanding Li's work.

Power Relations in History

In constructing a site that seduces the erotic imagination, Li's pornographic imagery turns seemingly harmless tangible elements into a hair-raising and nerve-racking rollercoaster of sensual delights, and manifests meanings that range from the allegorical to the workings of social and political signification. Unlike most pornography made in the West, Li's *fengyue* consistently takes pleasure in classical narratives, busy with characterization, plots and camera movements, elaborate sets and costumes, understated expressions and lyrical dialogues. It is often Li's meticulous *mise-en-scène*—rather than naked bodies or the sexual acts themselves—that takes centre stage, foregrounding the power of "settings" and "narratives" in providing prohibitions, deferrals and digressions which all serve to sexualize human relationships. The cinematic quality of Li's work constantly reminds its audience that pornography as a language of sexual representation extracts its voice and potency from prohibitive contexts where sexuality is surveillanced and regulated all around. The meanings and significance of Li's pornography is derived from the power of the moral institutions, social situations/scenes and political narratives in which it has been embedded and subjugated.

Anti-porn discourses have argued that pornography universally perpetuates unequal power relations between the sexes, is demeaning to women, reinforces gender stereotypes, degrades the quality of sexual relationships and justifies sexual violence such as rape. It has also been concerned with the way the porn industry has been prejudiced against women and how its consumption is shaped by a chauvinistic view of sexuality and sexual desire (Dworkin 1981; Griffin 1979, 1981; Marcus 1981; Steinem 1978; Hong Kong Film Critics' Association

2000). Critics of *fengyue* followed a similar track: “The women of Li’s *fengyue* films exploited their sexuality and functioned as sexual objects of male desires ... The worst of the *fengyue* films assume that sex is vulgar, a form of human behaviour in the same register as spitting and farting” (Teo 1997: 83–84). Li’s films, however, illuminate the female protagonists’ sexual subjectivity in his *fengyue* films as much as the women’s political subjectivity in the palace epics and *huangmei diao* films: *Diao Charn* (1958), *The Kingdom and the Beauty* (1959), *Yang Kwei Fei, the Magnificent Concubine* (1962), *Empress Wu Tse-tien* (1963), *Beyond the Great Wall* (1964), *Hsi Shih: The Beauty of Beauties* (1966), and the mini Cixi series kicked off by *The Empress Dowager* (1975–83), representing a historical who’s who of women with a beady eye in bed as much as on the throne. Women who have been blamed for the downfall of men (too much sex) and men’s kingdoms (women with too much power) get their grievances and agencies redressed side by side in these narratives. Li’s making *fengyue* films alongside epics and musicals could thus be re-read as a political intertextual strategy in commenting on women’s social positioning in Chinese history, rather than as merely a financial necessity or as moral degeneration. It is through reading between Li’s various genres that one might begin to see how in Chinese history, women have always been subjugated to the territory of the pornographic—were they having sex or not is besides the point—thus redressing the power of porn becomes a useful and in fact essential strategy to redress the power of women.

Rather than functioning as sexual objects of male desires and deprived of agency, women in Li’s films are endowed with sharp-sightedness, courage to both love and hate, a strong sense of self-determination, and a feisty can-do-it-all spirit; they are shrews, sluts, dreamers and fighters all at once.⁸ In Li’s films, women are marked and admired for their boldness and agency, especially in their relation to their sex. It is in the representation of women’s sexuality that the vacillating dynamics of power and resistance are most foregrounded. Inevitably imbecilic and muddle-minded, (male) emperors and / or the literati scholars who are both guarantors and victims of the feudal system pale in comparison. The released DVD of *The Amorous Lotus Pan* (1994) comes with this official synopsis: “Helmed by the aesthetic Li Han-hsiang, *The Amorous Lotus Pan* features former Blue Jeans band member Shan Li-wen [Shan Liwen/Sinn Lap-man] in a dual role as Wu Sung [Wu Song] and Hsimen Ching [Ximen Qing]. The reverse narrative tells the story of Wu Sung [Wu Song], who was pardoned from prison and seeks the libidinous Pan Chin-lien [Pan Jinlian] (Huang Mei-ting) to avenge his brother’s death. The remorseful Pan recounted her pathetic life, which began when she was traded to the rich Changs as a maid. But she was raped by her master and flirted with Hsimen Ching [Ximen Qing] and other gentleman callers ...” The film itself, however, establishes a narrative revealed through Pan Jinlian’s

literally gazing (back) into *her* past, with close-ups of her face and point-of-view shots, as she unfolds for the audience from the gendered vantage point her life story. While the novel *Jin Ping Mei* (Lan Ling Xiao Xiao Sheng) tends to be read as organized toward the male protagonist's point-of-view, luring the readers to identify with him as the privileged subject of the narration,⁹ Li's last filmic adaptation of the novel is, from the outset, paced through a "woman's time". This is not to say that this structural device necessarily avoids all the potential violence exuded by Pan's permissive to be looked at ness, but rather carves out a spectatorial space for viewers of all genders to identify with the self-reflexive female subject looking at her own objecthood, and the negotiations in-between. In the scene in which Pan Jinlian rapes Wu Song after drugging him,¹⁰ a moment most radically departing from the novel but one that obviously parallels Wu Song with Ximen Qing and Wu Dalang, the camera stays in a series of long shots with deep focus near the bedroom door, far from and moving along and around the bed, with veils, curtains and pieces of furniture blocking most of the shots, creating simultaneously a possible sense of critical distance from the sex act, as well as seducing the audience even more into the tabooed outburst of incestuous intimacy. While the meticulous attention to design details emphasizes the materiality of desire and power (a ploy which Li uses constantly in his palace films), the scene further perfects its art of titillation through weaving between the eyes of the (bystanding, spatially confined and not omnipresent) voyeur and the all-powerful seducer (in this case a woman), thus slowly luring its viewer-participants into a vertigo of delayed, anticipatory pleasures and the erotics of transgression. In contrast to commonplace arguments of sexual imagery seen from third-person perspectives as necessarily ineffective,¹¹ Li demonstrates how a choreographed shifting of diverse perspectives, produced by a combination of *mise-en-scène*, camera movements, spatial and material details could be employed to accentuate the pornographic affect.

In genres other than the historical epics, *huangmei diao* and *fengyue*, such as the romance melodrama which Li has also tried his hands at, female subjectivity also takes up a central place. *The Winter* (1967), made during Li's Grand Motion Pictures tenure, is a contemporary social realist tale of Old Wu's forbidden love for Jin which he silently buries beneath the dividing walls of class and age, the disapproving gaze of the onlookers (his brother warns him that he has "a reputation to uphold", and that "love between a man and woman shouldn't be taken frivolously"), and her marriage to another man. Jin finally returns, a divorced mother of a son, to seek solace with the man she yearns for as well as the answer to a riddle haunting both of them for decades. "You really don't seem to like me much, do you?" Jin says as she browbeats Wu into a confession long overdue in the deep of the night. Li's ambitions in subverting

conventional gender stereotypes and relations, and in representing non-normative sexual relations could be traced consistently beyond his *fengyue* films, though they are most explicitly realized in his *fengyue* films. In other words, Li's films could be seen as "pornifying" cinema in order to comment on the ways in which women have long been "pornified". "First, pornification provides spaces for media performances subverting the generic conventions of porn and facilitates novel representational spaces, ideas, and agencies. Second, and perhaps more paradoxically, pornification also implies reiteration and recycling of representation conventions that are telling of the generic rigidity of porn. In this sense pornification has implications for pornography different from those for mainstream media" (Nikunen and Paasonen 2007: 30). Not only does Li's work blur the boundaries between porn and other genres, his films also push the conventional expectations of porn (and cinema) in order to foreground and challenge the ways women have been *seen as* disempowered in order to reduce the threat of women's sexuality. Through remaking porn as one of the (many) genres capable to be turned around for and about women, Li re-examines the locus of sexuality as a locus of women's power, and not as always already *at the expense of* women.

Rereading Lust

Among Li's *fengyue* films, the most famous are his various adaptations of *Jin Ping Mei*, five in all. The earliest is one of the episodes in *Illicit Desire* (1973) which quotes from *Jin Ping Mei* under the title "Tianxia Qishu" ("Wonder Book of the World"), made to test the waters for *Golden Lotus* slated for release the following year. The latter had become the benchmark of the genre and made Hu Chin (who played Pan Jinlian, translated as Lotus Pan in the English titles and subtitles in Li's films) and Tanny Tien (who played Li Ping'er) sex goddess archetypes of two appeals. Li took a leaf out of the romantic arc between Wu Song and Pan Jinlian in the novel *The Water Margin* (Shi) and concocted *Tiger Killer*, and by shifting the narrative voice to Li Ping'er put together *The Golden Lotus: Love and Desire* (1991), and finally reconstructed Pan's life from childhood on in *The Amorous Lotus Pan*. The sex scenes get more explicit with each of these renditions, true to a maverick who defied the rules of the game that *fengyue* necessarily equals "non-gamy, non-fishy",¹² "savourous", hinting towards titillating (but not graphic), contributing to the stereotype of the genre. Li helped himself to an infinitely rewritable text in offering annotations and footnotes to the "same" vernacular literary text over and again, trespassing his old selves in every step.¹³ In doing so, he found creative ways to register his own limitations in each adaptation and engage with these limitations.

Branded a licentious woman (*yinfu*) in *The Water Margin*, Pan Jinlian has an illicit affair with Ximen Qing and when found out, kills her own husband. Wu Song, the victim's brother, is on the hunt for the murderer: in front of the spirit tablet of Wu Dalang, Wu "rips open her [Pan's] bodice. In just a fraction of a second he draws his whetted blade and stabs her in the chest. Blade between lips, he reaches for her butchered torso and guts it, sprawling its content out on the tablet as tribute. With great speed and ferociousness, he hacks off the head, and blood is spilling all over the place" (Shi 1970: 314). Sung wraps the head up with a bed sheet before setting off to take on Ximen Qing. "To be devoid of love [romantic love], desire [sexual desire], and women [especially pretty ones]" (Wei 1997: 2) is the number one doctrine of the 108 heroes of *The Water Margin*, in which the biggest enemy of a hero is not ill fate, treacherous officials, or death but the temptation of a woman. Wu Song senses a threat in Pan's allure and flirtation and possibly incestuous affection for the sister-in-law he cannot fight. Writers and scholars have attempted to reverse the verdict for Pan Jinlian since *The Water Margin*. Zhou Zuoren described Shi Nai'an's depiction of Pan's death as "overtly detailed and gruesome", to the extent of "gratuitous self-lauding" as if the writer derives from it sadistic pleasure (Zhou). Wei Chongxin identifies four male archetypes: "The lewd and filthy Old Man Zhang" who rapes the teenage Jinlian, "The diminutive and sterile Wu Dalang", "The dauntless Wu Song capable of killing a tiger but incapable to love", "The sly womanizer Ximen Qing"; in total, it charted the journey of Pan's broken life, floating from one man to another: doled out by the landlord Zhang to Wu Dalang, and driven by Wu Song's rejection to the arms of Ximen Qing. "She is a plaything, a victim in the patriarchal world, a sacrifice offered by a male-dominated society, the offering on the altar of moral rectitude" (Wei 1997: 27). Pan is either touted as a rebellious woman who sees no fault in pursuing free love, or condoled for her degradation and ill-fated sacrifice in petitions written by those who have attempted to right her wrongs. Pan Jinlian in *Jin Ping Mei*, however, has been commonly read as a bad seed rotten to the core (her yielding to Zhang without putting up a fight), and step by step profiles a malicious and venomous killer (responsible for the death of Dalang and woes inflicted on Song Huilian, Laiwang, Li Ping'er, Guan'ge and Ximen Qing, the ultimate prey of her sexual aggression) thus evoking more spite than pathos for her. In the wake of this onslaught, her petitioner-scholars have sought to "rescue" this woman with a humble origin and a "fragile heart" by attributing her "tragic fate" to her "degenerated" body and soul (Zeng et al. 2000: 39-49). "Pan isn't a yinfu!", "Pan is a victim of [Ximen Qing's] lust!" have been the two main arguments made in Pan's favour, both of which embody a puritanical zealotry that echoes a Confucius condemnation of "lust as the primary evil".

In retrieving the Pan case from the closed shelves time and again, Li Hansiang rewrites the file of a condemned woman through, first and foremost, acknowledging her lust and her “badness”. In the 35-page introduction to his script of “The Golden Lotus Trilogy”, Li quotes tirelessly from passages in *Jin Ping Mei* which illustrates Pan Jilian’s “licentious character” as “alive and kicking”, to come to his conclusion that “C’mon, keep trying to reverse her file if you want! Pan Jinlian is too alive/strong to be reversed” (Li 1985: 40–42).

Equal Opportunity

The evolution and complexity of Li’s interpretations can be further appreciated if Li’s various “rewrites” of *Jin Ping Mei* are put side by side and read as provocatively and intricately woven (inter-)texts (“alive and kicking”). To reduce Pan Jinlian to a jealous but nevertheless devoted wife of the philandering Ximen Qing in *Golden Lotus* might be the biggest flaw of Li’s earliest adaptation, especially in comparison with his later renditions. Li made *Golden Lotus* with the premise that there is genuine consent and mutual attraction by opening the film with the meeting of Pan and Ximen in lieu of a Wu Song-centered narrative. Suspecting an affair between his wife and the young zither player, Ximen gives the young man the boot and yanks out a whip and begins to lash Pan, who assures indignantly: “Let me tell you this. I did have a fling once. With Ximen Qing!” (This is a scene redone by Li in the later adaptations with very different overtones.) It sings of Pan’s unrequited love for Ximen, aching for his care and attention which he generously parcels out amongst his women (Pan, Li Ping’er and Chunmei, among others). Under Li’s camera, Pan fights tenaciously for the freedom of love and struggles to serve dutifully as a wife. Corraling the same cast as *Golden Lotus*, *Illicit Desire*, in contrast, features a very different and elaborate bedroom sequence that involves Ximen Qing and Song Huilian in bed and Pan outside the bedroom door. As Ximen lights the scented incense on Huilian’s nipples and gives her oral sex, the camera moves onto Huilian’s face and her groaning and moaning, and on Pan and her lustful gaze. The scenes are intercut, suggesting the currents of desire and passion flowing through and among them. Has the swooning woman leaning against the door just telepathed her blessing to Huilian and Ximen or invited herself to a threesome in an arena of sexual power play? Dispelling her indignation and teeth-clenching outbursts, her jealous rage finds new expression in the voyeuristic gaze which catalyzes her first foray into self-gratification and the zone of desire. Li further takes Pan to another level of proactiveness with her flirting with son-in-law Chen Jingji in the code of a cat meowing in the backyard, and affords the film a broader space for the art of titillating. Sexual imagery grows bolder and more diverse after

Golden Lotus (where Pan takes little pleasure and demonstrates much pain in masochism), manifested in Ximen's obsession with Huilian's dinky bound feet (Pan's three-inch lotus feet pale in comparison) admitting to the unbounded pleasures of foot fetishism (which the entire narrative of *Jin Ping Mei* could be said to rest on, with the first character of the novel "Jin" referring to Jinlian's name—which refers to her bound feet), and his engaging of various women in an array of experimental BDSM games, shown to be enjoyed by all parties involved. In these renditions towards a polygynist utopia playing out many subjects' desires, the binary of public vs. private (domain), upper vs. lower (order), male vs. female (gender roles), pain vs. pleasure are powerfully blurred and transgressed.

In *The Golden Lotus: Love and Desire* the sites/sights of desire become more polygamous and diverse than ever. The one-on-one sex acts in *Golden Lotus* have escalated into games of three or four (that involve Li Ping'er, Ximen Qing and two bondmaids, or Ximen Qing, Pan and Chunmei). Pan's voyeuristic gaze in *Illicit Desire* has erupted into diverse voyeuristic possibilities: Li Ping'er and Pan Jinlian are seen masturbating to pornographic books (and hence disputes the assumption by anti-porn discourse of men being exclusive users and consumers of pornography), and then educate Ximen in anal sex and perform it as illustrated. Women, young and old, find joy in voyeurism: Old Ma Feng, Li Ping'er's wet nurse, is shown blown away catching Li and Ximen in the act, thus breaking the deeply embedded taboo of elderly (women's) sex. Pan is no longer confined to the masochistic, passive roles of being flirted with, and made love to, in the marital chamber in *The Golden Lotus: Love and Desire*. She actively seduces the zither boy (which she is wrongly accused of doing in Li's earlier *Golden Lotus*), strips the clothes off the maid and whips her naked (a treatment she has been subjected to), and lords over Ximen in the bedroom. Although in bondage, she bellows commands at Ximen like a drill sergeant—"Don't you stop! Keep going!" These scenes know no boundaries of age (the players range from sixteen to sixties), sex, the direction of the sexual gaze and sexual act traffic, parading a dazzling variety of sex in its many manifestations and in doing so, making the seeking of sexual pleasure by both men and women (and not only Pan) in (and outside) the filmic text seem like an everyday event.

Reconfiguring Gender

Li Han-hsiang's strategies in facilitating his audience's identification with female subjectivity could be witnessed through his renditions of male characters as venues for critique and parody. Wu Song, the hero in *Tiger Killer*, announces self-righteously: "I want to see (if you have) your heart!" holding a knife about to

plunge in Pan, whereas Pan protests: "My heart is made of flesh, unlike yours—of stone!" *Tiger Killer* the film is largely faithful to *The Water Margin* the novel but Pan's seduction of Ximen is portrayed as her dire effort to fill the emotional void left by Wu Song's rejection. The moral lesson: "venomous is a woman's heart" (as the source of all evil) in *The Water Margin* is unlearned as "stone-hard is a man's heart" takes its place.

The Amorous Lotus Pan is not only Li's last annotation and conclusion to the serial adaptation but could also be seen as his response to Clara Law's *The Reincarnation of Golden Lotus* (1989) released a few years back, in which Joey Wang plays the contemporary reincarnation of Pan Jinlian. In Law's adaptation, her doomed encounter with Wu Song begins in the Mainland during the Cultural Revolution. Their reunion comes too late for Pan who has already married his brother, the cake shop owner Wu Dalang in Yuen Long (a suburban town located in the New Territories of Hong Kong mostly seen to be populated by new immigrants and the working class). Reclaiming her right to pursue happiness as a modern woman, Jinlian, when called a slut by Wu Song, rebukes him with: "You said you love me so why didn't you leave with me? You're a jealous coward faking as a martyr and I have nothing but contempt for you! So leave your brother alone and be done with me!" Wu Song's last-ditch effort to "start all over again" (a favourite trope with Hong Kong films, as if the ways things go are always wrong) is thwarted by his fatal car accident. This romanticized tale of star-crossed lovers seeks to clear Pan's name by transferring the stigma away from Pan to the country bumpkin cum nouveau riche Wu Dalang who stands for "banality", Ximen Qing for "lust" ("sexual promiscuity"), and "adultery" repudiated by Hong Kong's apparently modern legal system and moral dogma that (re)define the bounds of sexual expression. While re-appropriated as a feminist symbol of a woman's right to "free" love, the late 1980s Pan Jinlian in *The Reincarnation of Golden Lotus* conforms and contributes to a homogenized Hong Kong modernity partly constructed through the ideologies of romantic equalitarian coupledness, monogamous marriage and middle class superiority.

However, Li revisiting Pan Jinlian in the early 1990s gives her yet another new reading. As in *The Reincarnation of Golden Lotus*, Wu Song receives his share of backlash from Pan in *The Amorous Lotus Pan*: "You have the daring to kill a tiger but not to touch a woman ... Ximen Qing does all the women in the world but why can't I? ... You're such a chicken that you wouldn't dare run away with me. I did you but a loser like you only think[s] and never act[s]. So save your acts of fake generosity and moral superiority and kill me if you must. Grab your knife and plunge it in right here!" Pan then goes on to rip her clothes to bare her chest, as if to throw down a challenge to her executioner, who dissolves in painful wails while avoiding meeting the eyes of his "victim". Her death is

portrayed as less an “honour killing” by the righteous brother-in-law than foul play on a subject/object of affection at whom the sexually inhibited man directs his fear and frustration to love and be loved. When Pan said she “did him”, she did so after spiking his drink and forcing herself on him. The scene marks the climax of the film, in which Wu Song revels in the warmth of Pan in his drug-induced stupor and outburst of sexual repression. Sobering up, Wu races to the garden, throws himself down on his knees, and pours out his confession of sin in the rain: “I’m sorry for what I did to you, Brother!” This is a flare up of a man who has unwittingly unlocked the moral shackles of desire, foreshadowing Pan’s death under his blade.

Gender becomes malleable in the pornographic imagination and contingent upon the context in which it is expressed, as demonstrated by Pan Jinlian in *The Golden Lotus* and *The Golden Lotus: Love and Desire*, who slips from the role effortlessly as the worn-out lover, panting and pleading “please spare me” with great tenderness to another where she effects the shrew who dopes and ravages Wu Song and Ximen Qing.¹⁴ “[P]ornography’s fantasy is also of gender malleability, although one in which it’s women who should be the malleable ones. Whereas feminism’s (and romance fiction’s) paradigm of gender malleability is mostly that men should change. It’s possible that the women who are most adversely affected by pornography are those most invested in the idea of femininity as something static and stable, as something inborn that inheres within us” (Kipnis 1999: 200). It is noteworthy that while Kipnis registers that the feminine gender is much more malleable than the masculine in (Western, heterosexual-biased) pornography, creating “a fantastical world composed of two sexes but one gender”, scholars of Chinese literary and cultural studies (Vitiello 1996, 2000; Sommer 2000; Song 2004) have charted a vibrant trajectory of (largely unlexicalized) gender- and sexual-variant subjectivities. These subjectivities developed during late Ming towards the material experience of the body, and clarifies the intellectual contingencies of the emergence of pornography (and its convergence with philosophy) and the discourses on sex and gender articulated therein. Vitiello (1996) argues persuasively that the gender fluidity characterized by (male) heroes who wears both “cap and hairpins” epitomizes in fact a *moral* negotiation between the masculine and the feminine—hybrid “exemplary sodomites” whose romantic originality and perfection is produced by setting the female virtues in an equally virtuous male body, resulting in a movement towards more holistic life forms (of desire) as well as towards a greater sense of integrity and spiritual cultivation (also seen as a form of desire). In these pornographic literary texts, malleability of the masculine gender is the norm; desire leads to salvation *and vice versa*.

Li draws from the resourceful and voluptuous tradition of Chinese erotic/pornographic literature to talk back to the gender and sexual norms of Hong Kong in the 1990s. Filling the shoes of the tiger-killing hero of *The Water Margin* and *Jin Ping Mei* in both Law's *The Reincarnation of Golden Lotus* and Li's *The Amorous Lotus Pan* is Pal Sinn Lap-man, who doesn't look like or even try to act the part. Using the same lead from *The Reincarnation of Golden Lotus* (where he played Wu Song) to play both Wu Song and Ximen Qing in *The Amorous Lotus Pan*, Li's film helps the audience to rethink how the conventions of masculinity, as historical constructs, have evolved from the macho guerrilla-fighting world of *The Water Margin* to "civilized" Hong Kong in the 1980s, foregrounding Sinn as a fine specimen of the moaning, self-pitying and self-loathing sap that frequented Hong Kong cinema in the 1980s and 90s (how unlike Wu Song), and sexually and emotionally inhibited (how like Wu Song). Through establishing Ximen Qing as the "double/stand-in" for Wu Song (and not as the counterpart), this double casting builds in an internal critique of the interchangeable male (Wu Song and Ximen Qing), rendering Pan Jinlian's desires and tragedy in unprecedentedly sympathetic lights, and further highlights the gender malleability of men, both in late Ming and in contemporary Hong Kong, perhaps for different reasons but no less malleable and doubled.

Seeing/Wanting/Making More

Li's pornographic texts expresses our primary longing for plenitude (Pan Jinlian to Ximen Qing: "Don't you stop!"), and foreground the ways in which such desires have been "endlessly activated to keep us tied to the treadmill of the production-consumption cycle" (Kipnis 1999: 202). As a director of more than fifty films, including five rewrites of *Jin Ping Mei*, situated in the historical contexts of a Hong Kong of the 1970s to the 1990s increasingly driven by the capitalist work ethic, Li could be seen as a producer working in and for an economy of desire in which there is always not enough as much as there is always too much. His tireless authorship preempts/seduces/produces an equally tireless spectatorship which, through his films, bears witness to Pan Jinlian's insatiable drive for more sex.

Pan Jinlian's life (where work and sex have always been metonymic with each other) becomes his work becomes our desire. From *The Golden Lotus: Love and Desire* to *The Amorous Lotus Pan*, the audience is led to increasingly reflect on Pan Jinlian's position as a worker (motivated and gifted no doubt) on this turf of sexuality—a turf which Pan, like almost all women in *Jin Ping Mei*, has been designated to occupy and one she has perfected her skills to capitalize on. Told in retrospect, *The Amorous Lotus Pan* unfolds Pan's life stories of her childhood

experience, deadly encounters with Wu Da, equally deadly encounters with Wu Song and marriage with Ximen Qing, as they are framed through her present status of a *thing* up for retail sitting in Wang Po's chamber. "So ill-fated all my life I know not happiness. I work and pray for a better day but something, somewhere always turns out wrong". The film has Pang bemoaning her fate, defending her unrelenting quest for lust as a form of resistance against such fate ("I *work* and pray for a better day"), while Wang Po gets to speak on behalf of sex workers and their *mamasans* (brothel madams): "Yours [wives'] are wholesale, and I do retail". At this stage Wang Po not only acts explicitly as Pan's agent and retail broker but Pan, in the interim between jobs (mediated through Wang Po), also does what she does best in taking the initiation to seduce Wang Po's adolescent (uninitiated/virgin) son, thus again turning the tables on herself as a product being sold to becoming the driver of the ebb and flow of her young owner's desires. "... [B]ondmaids-concubines are punished for familial maneuvering and sexual opportunism, via precisely the sex that constitutes their sole resource and recourse to power in the intimate politics of polygamous everyday life" (Ding 2002: 165).

Porn Power and Salvation

In both the episode "The Child Groom" in *Legends of Lust* (1972) and the similarly plotted "Lady of the Hans" in *Madame Bamboo* (1994), a twenty-something girl is coerced into marrying a child heir of a rich family. In protest against the forced marriage of convenience, the (lower class) lover of the (upper class) bride storms into the nuptial chamber and makes love to her the whole night, right next to the (upper class) child groom tied to a chair, with the child's father, his high class acquaintances and police officers pounding helplessly outside. In the last episode of *Legends of Lust* "The Cuckold", the wife, in order to have adulterous sex with the steward, choreographs a scene where a tree in their garden becomes a "licentious tree" (*yinshu*), and one who climbs on it would see everybody down below naked and/or performing sexual acts. Lured into testing its magical powers himself, the landlord husband gets to see the shocking sights of not only his wife having sex with his servant in the garden in broad daylight, but also the bondmaids in line bringing desserts and tea into the garden stark naked—a sight that drives him mad according to the wife's proud recall. These episodes strike as a powerful force to strip naked and destabilize established power structures, political, class, gender and moralistic regulatory forces (you fantasize what you fear; you see what you fantasize). Pornography (what you see under the spell of *yinshu*) is literally represented here as a crucial political space for civil disobedience: an invitation to explore, enjoy and express sexuality and sexual

imagery sanctioned and exiled by the statist male (husband's/father's/police) gaze and the public sphere, denounced as obscene, indecent, immoral, unfaithful, or simply mad. It is also foregrounded as a *necessarily* self-willed fantastical space simultaneously constituted by regulation and one which allows (temporary) exemption from personal liability, class, gender, moral and legal constraints, where one may experience (dangerous) possibilities for redistributing bodily and social resources with previously unregistered scenarios.

Looking at *Fengyue* Looking at You

Li's pornography is, for me, an irresistible invitation to contemplate the pornographic nature of visual images, which perhaps brings me closer to some of the anti-porn arguments than they might have originally intended. "It (pornography) ends with a root meaning 'writing about' or 'description of' which puts still more distance between subject and object, and replaces a spontaneous yearning for closeness with objectification and a voyeur" (Steinem). Whether it is peeping through the camera viewfinder at the activities inside the bedroom across the street in *That's Adultery!*, or peeping through a telescope at Lee Pang-fei sneaking stolen glances at "The Carnal Prayer Mat" in *Take Care, Your Majesty!*, or blatantly gleaning details of what's going on behind the closed doors by backyard voyeurs, we as viewers find ourselves feasting on the sights arising from an innate need for voyeurism which gives birth first to pornography, and then to cinema. The pear tree in *Legends of Lust* becomes an erotically charged symbol during a game played most energetically by the hoaxer and the hoaxed, turning actuality into erotic virtuality, and vice versa. And loitering between the two realms, Hu Chin in *That's Adultery* flashes a bewitching, self-reflexive glance into the camera, teasing her husband who caught her in the act as well as those on the other end of the camera with a mesmerizing smile: "Everything that (you just saw) happen was a misunderstanding. It's all been a misunderstanding!", followed by the Shaw trademark on the freeze frame of her smile (Figure 7.1). It is a delectable joke made directly in the face of the "fourth look" (Willemen 1992), which catches the audience in an act of cinematic voyeurism and causes shame, reminding the audience that they have been conflating materiality with reality, taking the fantastical for the real; it is also a contemplative gaze at this film language at once familiar and defamiliarized, spellbinding, passionate, truly obscene and unapologetic, hence political and pornographic.



Figure 7.1 Freeze frame at the ending of *That's Adultery!* (frame capture)

Conclusion

In rewriting some of the possible meanings of some of Li Han-hsiang's key *fengyue* films, this essay seeks not to uncover the "truths" of sex or of porn, but rather to explore the various subject positions enabled by these texts and their authorship. Linda Williams (2008: 326) has confessed in her study of porn, "the very act of screening has become an intimate part of our sexuality". This small study—rather unprecedented in Hong Kong as well as Chinese cinema studies—aims to explore and take seriously the ways in which Li's work has contributed not only to our cinema history but also to the construction of our sexuality, while such an intimate relationship has been historically denied. Finally, I would add that this history of self-denial is perhaps also an intimate (and invisible) part of our sexuality in contemporary Hong Kong.