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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Identity dismissed: Hong Kong leftist cinema of the 1950s

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ABSTRACT

There has been a reconstitution of a 'local' identity in opposition to leftist politics in articulating recent pro-democratic activist movements in Hong Kong. In light of this context, this article examines this historical formation through the lens of using Hong Kong leftist cinema of the 1950s, especially productions from the Union Film Studio, as a case study. Through focusing on some key examples from the Hong Kong Cantonese leftist cinema of the 1950s, this paper traces the historical construction of a politicized ethical consciousness in Hong Kong poignant throughout the 1950s but became increasingly marginalized from the mid-1960s on. It argues that the class and gender analysis that post-war filmmakers made of colonial capitalism needs to be re-read in relation to a form of Chinese anti-imperial patriotism heavily marked by traumatized historical feelings from feudal, colonial and wartime experiences, driven by an emotional need for an idealized community through identifying with the underclass and the dispossessed. It proposes a reconsideration of Hong Kong's cultural and film histories through mapping the development of this politicized film discourse which has inherited the rich tradition of Shanghai leftist cinema while fueled with an anti-colonial, anti-capitalist ethic to effectively respond to the post-war Chinese refugee-dominated society. This article problematizes the often taken-for-granted meanings and values of a Hong Kong 'local' identity defined as opposed to those of Mainland China, serving to perpetuate the Cold War binarism, and argues that the successful neoliberalization of Hong Kong from the 1970s on is a result of the collaborative efforts among the PRC 'extreme left' during the Cultural Revolution, globalized Cold War forces, KMT cultural-political demands from Taiwan, and British colonial polices, not without irony.

KEYWORDS

Sinophone cinemas; Hong Kong film history; Hong Kong local identity and cultural politics; British colonial modernity; Cold War

Hong Kong history books often formulate the historical development of Hong Kong's local consciousness as based on its stark social and economic differences from China from the 1970s onwards. A school textbook entitled *A Pictorial Hong Kong History (1949–2012)* (Zhou, 2012) traced how Hong Kong developed a sense of collective identification culturally and politically since being separated from China post-1949, and having experienced a rise in the quality of public services in the 1970s. Likewise, Hugh D. R. Baker has attributed the emergence of a Hong Kong identity to the construction of public housing in the 1970s, free universal primary education in 1971, among other public services, and describes a typical 'Hong Konger' as 'active, competitive, adaptive, responsive and contingent. They wear western attire, speak English, and for those who do not, they wish that their children will speak

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the language' (Baker 1983, 478). This article seeks to problematize this historical discourse as it fails to account for the continuities and disruptions in Hong Kong's cultural history during 1949–1970.[1] It perpetuates a certain interpretation of Hong Kong local identity by systematically suppressing and ignoring a leftist[2] cultural tradition which has been politically ruptured and driven underground during the mid-late-1960s, and excluded from a redefined native Hong Kongness from the 1970s onwards.

This article retraces the development of some of Hong Kong's ethical discourse once popular and repressed in Hong Kong cultural history through focusing on some key examples from the 1950s Hong Kong leftist cinema. It argues that in order to understand the historical construction of Hong Kong's ethical consciousness, the political and class analysis that filmmakers made of colonial capitalism needs to be re-read in relation to a form of Chinese patriotism alongside a need for an idealized ethic, identifying with the underclass and the dispossessed; all fueled by traumatized historical feelings accumulated from feudal, colonial and wartime experiences. The fact that a critique of capitalist values enabled by colonial structures is only possible in Hong Kong after 1949 (as representation of capitalism and/or colonialism is no longer considered relevant in the PRC), and that this articulation in Hong Kong leftist cinema gained popularity in the 1950s since it provided the Hong Kong migrant population discursive resources to cope with the society they live in, deserves to be taken seriously.

Until the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in June 1966, most of the Hong Kong leftist films 'did not engage overtly in advocating the party line of class struggles' while embodying 'a criticism on a moral/ethical level of capitalist society and life, of extortion and deceit, of greed and of luxury', 'advocating instead an independence in character, self-empowerment and a spirit to fight it out' (Zhou 2009, 31). The colonial cold war depoliticization project, taking full effect in suppressing the leftist cultural critique and reformulating neoliberal values and structures from the late-1970s on, has redefined the 'localized' conditions for Hong Kong activism since.

'Patriotic Progressive cinema'

Hong Kong leftist cinema, that has occupied a dominant position in the 1950s Hong Kong cultural scene, was comprised of Putonghua and Cantonese-speaking productions. At the 'Hong Kong Film Industry Working Conference' held in Beijing in 1964, Liao Chengzhi,[3] head of the Overseas Chinese Commission of CCP, officially classified the Hong Kong film industry as 'different from that of the mainland, and should be seen as distinct' – 'I think that Hong Kong cinema should aim at overseas Chinese, and the peoples of Asia and Africa'; 'its artistic ideology should be that of the revolutionary bourgeois cinema', or that of 'New Democratic Revolution'. Liao wanted this bourgeoisie-informed Hong Kong film industry to become 'the side flank of the socialist-revolutionary and proletarian-revolutionary film industry of the motherland' (Liao, 2011, 190).

Three film companies: Great Wall, Phoenix/Feng Huang and Sun Luen ('G-P-S') formed Hong Kong's base camp of leftist filmmaking, with Great Wall founded in 1948, Sun Luen in 1952, and Feng Huang in 1953. Liu Yat-yuen, successively the General Director of the 'G-P-S' companies since 1956, referred to their films as the 'Patriotic Progressive Cinema'. When interviewed by the Hong Kong Film Archive in 1997, Liu explained their ethical motives: 'Capital was in short supply for the 'G-P-S triumvirate' and pay was low, but nobody

cared, because *they understood that they needed to shoot something beneficial to the Chinese social masses and their hearts/conscience*' (Chu 154, italics mine). Born in Hong Kong, Liu worked as a war journalist in the front against Japan in the late 1930s. While working for *Sao T'ang Pao* (aka *Eradication*, a newspaper founded by the KMT/Nationalist military authorities) in Kunming in 1946, he witnessed the assassination by KMT secret agents of his friends, the opposition politician Li K'ung-pu (Li Gongpu) and poet Wen I-t'uo (Wen Yiduo). Liu then decided to return to Hong Kong, and in 1951 was appointed editorial director of the pro-China newspaper *Wen Wei Pao* in Hong Kong. Like Liu, most of the leftist cultural leadership in Hong Kong had an anti-imperialist, anticolonial background and were disillusioned by the KMT rule.

There were other film companies like Union Film which did not belong to the base league but were borne out of it. Union Film, which I will focus on in this paper, tried to rid itself of an 'exploiting class', made itself a joint venture between 21 directors and actors, in the form of a co-op. It was not bound by distributors or the star-system, and the members decided to take a collective wage-cut, since they believed that an overly high salary for the actors (i.e. stars) would affect the quality of production. Producers and directors decided the actors' pay, and vice versa. Coined 'South China King of Cinema', and one of the founders of Union Film, Ng Cho-fan (1910–1993), who played Brother Wai the taxi driver in *In the Face of Demolition* (1953, Lee Tit), a film which will be discussed below, was deeply influenced by Shanghai leftist cinema in the 1930s. Lo Dun, one of the two screenwriters of *In the Face of Demolition*, also a writer, director and producer for Sun Luen, recounts how he cultivated anti-colonial sentiments while studying in Guangzhou in the 1920s, then capital of revolutionary Nationalist China. During the Guangzhou-Hong Kong strikes of 1925–26, the British army fired whenever they saw cadets of the Whampoa Military Academy; 'the cadets spread out in a line protecting the crowds and told us to run'. Hence he believed that cultural production should be politicized in order to respond to the colonial conditions ethically (Zhou 2009, 29).

Two forms of 'shame'

In the Face of Demolition, a tightly-knit realist drama about grassroots families and individuals residing in a crumbling apartment complex and trying to get by with limited means,[4] was a critical and commercial milestone for Union Film. Not only does it question the feudalist tradition which prioritizes family and blood relations through emphasizing collective problem-solving creativity, communal self-help and mutual-aid relationships, it also poignantly reflects on the elitist-led Confucius and May-Fourth traditions which attribute shame to the poor and working classes.

The line 'All for One and One for All',[5] which immortalizes the film, is an attack on the feudalist family hierarchy. In the first scene Taipan Wang, played by Lo Dun, taking advantage of the fact that he has lent money to the rent collector and that he is a comprador working for a foreign firm, takes up the privileged language of colonial law to justify his occupation of an extra bed space without paying. He tells the rent collector that it would be an infringement of his rights if she rents the bed to a poor tenant instead of letting him use it for free, and says in English, 'You know, it's criminal'. Soon after Taipan Wong rapes his wife's sister, the recent-immigrant from China Ah Fong, and forces her to be his concubine. The feudal patriarch and the colonial capitalist are seen as collaborators, practically

embodied in one character. The film places Taipan Wong, who defends his individualistic middle class interests through citing the law, in a morally condemnable position, thus rendering a critical distance towards upwardly mobile class identification and colonial capitalism. The film criticizes the measurement and instrumentalization of human relations by capitalist logic, and exposes without mercy the dominant classes which participate in the collaboration between the colonial government and the financial classes.

Lo Ming (played by Cheung Ying, also a Union shareholder) is an unemployed teacher and he is forced to work for his Uncle as a rent collector. At the end of the film, the Uncle makes Lo Ming collect all due rent in three days because the apartment block, which is structurally unsound, will be demolished by the government in ten days' time, a fact which Lo Ming's Uncle insists that he not tell the occupants. 'Rights' and 'criminality'—institutions and beliefs reinforcing the legitimacy of the legal system, all forming the basis for colonial modernity—would face much less critique in Hong Kong from the 1970s on. These, alongside the collaborative partnership between developers and the government by engineering 'real estate' and 'demolition of unsound structures', are depicted in the film as tropes that have rendered life increasingly difficult for the populace.

The central theme of the film—communal emotional and psychological support were maintained and expressed in economic terms. At the beginning of the story, a poor mid-aged couple with their newborn are being evicted because they cannot afford to pay their rent. They only manage to stay when their rent is covered by Brother Wai the taxi driver, and Big Sister, a dancing girl; played by Ng Chor Fan and Tsi Lo Lin, both shareholders of Union Film. Everything from paying rent, to having dinner and birthday parties, buying coffins, staying in hospital and even giving birth are paid collectively by the neighbors. At the end of the film, the wife of Brother Wai suffers from an excessive haemorrhage in labor. Lo Ming volunteers to donate blood to her contrary to the doctor's advice. In an era when blood could be sold (the character previously evicted died of ill-health after selling his blood twice in order to pay rent), this is the last bit of economic capital they are left with. In the end, when the doctor learns that Lo donates blood in order to help a (non-family-related) friend, he exclaims 'this is the most precious thing about friends', and that 'true compassion is only seen in times of trouble'. In contrast, blood relations are portrayed as rather heartless in the film, in the mistreatment by Mrs. Wong of her newly arrived migrant cousin; or in Lo Ming's Uncle, the owner of a real estate company who forces him to collect rent from poverty-stricken neighbors during a typhoon.

Lo Ming has the credentials to be a teacher but this society does not value education. Lo Ming's statement personifies this: 'One does not teach unless he is poor'. Bak Ying, a high school graduate, has no choice but to be a dancing girl under the severe unemployment that marks Hong Kong's transition from an entrepot to an industrial center at the height of the mainland refugee crisis. The nightclub manager does not allow her to choose her clients, and she is told off when she requests some advanced salary on her birthday. Bak Ying and Lo Ming both possess a certain degree of cultural capital, but in such a society, which pursues economic efficiency and 'talks nothing but money', they can only 'get accustomed to enduring the hardships of life', as Bak Ying describes it. Confucian values help during dating talks but are represented in the overall narrative as an obstruction to understanding class oppression. Lo Ming wants to celebrate his and Bak Ying's birthdays together but having received the neighbors' gifts he finds himself suddenly unemployed, and no longer has the money to throw a banquet. He feels ashamed, because he is losing 'a literati's face'. Brother Wai

gallantly helps with buying food, but can only change the menu—which normally would include 'a suckling pig, abalone and shark's fin'—to fishballs and noodles. Lo Ming finds this humiliating and blames Brother Wai. A (could-be) newspaper editor introduced to Bak Ying by her nightclub colleague wants to please her by letting Lo Ming be a columnist. Their hopes fall through, and Lo Ming blames his loss of 'a man's face' on Bak Ying.

This paves the way to Lo Ming's characterization in the latter part of the film as a sell-out, the one who betrays the entire household of grassroots folks. It is not until the end of the film that he regrets over selling himself to the capitalist, and apologizes to the workers. The film speaks of the alienation of and calls for a turning around/repentance of a 'literati'. It shows how, in a colonial society placing the dollar above the letter, the intellectual is caught between capitalist and cultural shame(s). This depiction reveals a self-reflexive disillusionment in the intellectual-led Confucius and May-Fourth traditions in colonial Hong Kong.[6] A system of ethical values contrast to what the colonial capitalist system advocates is represented in the film. Resistance against individualistic tendencies, critiques of aggressiveness in the collaboration between comprador middlemen and the legal system are highlighted while there is no shame assigned to poverty, nor to working class women in sexualized professions such as that of the dancing girls—unless they succumb to greed. Rather, shame was to be found in the accumulation of capital at the expense of others.

Gender relations

The working girl—as part of the wide and diverse spectrum of sex work/entertainment industries, the professionalized and bread-earning sites of most Hong Kong women at the time– although having to 'earn her pennies with grievances', is depicted *via* Bak Ying's character as 'modern, pretty' and multi-talented. The working girl is outspoken, 'uplifting' towards the common good, puts herself on the same line as the grassroots workers; she is, in the film, an embodiment of a desirable form of modernity, represented as in opposition to the capitalist and the legal systems, which rob the poor and feed the rich. Lo Ming calls Bak Ying someone who "is able to swim nicely in water and jump/dance outside it." Bak Ying's work situation is portrayed as a practical means of survival, a matter of chance and personal choice, and most poignantly, not as a moral issue.

For these revolutionary-leaning cultural workers, issues of gender and sexuality are key to envisioning a new democratic society. Tsi Lo-lin, the female lead in *The Wall* (1956, Wong Hang), *Sworn Sisters* (1954, Ng Wui) and *In the Face of Demolition*, plays eloquent and bold characters with a sense of justice and agency, effectively embodying the prototype of a modern, South Chinese woman. A Phoenix film, *The Wedding Night* (1952) tackles the patriarchal dilemma of whether a newlywed husband should accept the fact that his bride is not a virgin on their wedding night due to her experience in the Sino-Japanese war. The film, although trying to show sympathy for both sides, clearly takes the position of the bride and critiques the feudal/patriarchal value of requiring the bride's virginity as a condition to enter marriage. The female protagonist in this film is played by the so-called "Princess of Phoenix," Hsia Moon (alternatively kn'own as Xia Meng or Miranda Yang). She writes, 'I seem to remember that the first contract I signed (with Phoenix) already stated that I did not need to attend any banquets', i.e. she is not required to socialize with big bosses as an actress (Fu, 2001, 127).

Lee Sun-fung, head of the Producing and Directing Committee at Union Film, writes in his directorial notes, 'Delight, anger, sorrow, happiness, love, hate and desire are emotions. Humans have it; so do beasts. Yet filial piety, fraternal respect, loyalty and faith; courtesy, gallantry, frugality and shame—these are the eight morals unique to man' (Wong, 2004, 123–124). Not all works produced by Union Film embrace the eight morals; and not every character who violates these 'eight morals' is necessary malevolent. Especially in the works made for studios outside Union, one can see how the Union artists negotiate with mainstream values adopted from feudal and Confucius traditions. In *Remembrance of Things Past* (1953, Chu Kei), a married man (also played by Cheung Wood-yau) falls in love with a married woman (also Pak Yin), then later couples with her sister (played by Mui Yee) but is eventually rescued by Pak Yin. *Anna* (1955, Lee Sun-fung), adapted from Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, tackling the subject of adultery in the upper class, with the star Pak Yin as Anna and Cheung Wood-yau as her lover Kei-shu, turned out to be a box-office catastrophe. The close-ups in the film are designed to emphasize the unfulfilled desires of the two adulterous lovers, rendering the suspicious husband an oppressive overarching patriarch attempting by all means to physically and emotionally control Anna. In a climaxing scene for example, he forces an earring onto Anna who is in tears (with the camera staying on Anna's side), which is a visual metaphor for rape. The open ending witnesses Anna leaving the mansion behind alone on a seashore with a suitcase in hand, suggesting the option of a woman choosing independence (and possibly desolate openness) over luxury. Li Sun-fung writes in his notes of self-reflection that although *Anna* could very well compete with other Union masterpieces in terms of production, scriptwriting/directorial, acting, mise-en-scène, and film quality, 'the love that Kei-shu has for Anna runs counter to traditional morality and fails to be accepted by the audience, who do not sympathize with their pain' (Wong, 133). What Li implies is that although he does not agree with this pre-modern ('traditional') morality, he finds the feelings of his audience legitimate, which he would have to reconcile with.

Union Film's overall body of work sheds positive lights on women against feudal teaching and habits and champions the pursuit of non-possessive gender/sexual relationships. Extramarital affairs are looked upon with much sympathy, whilst a husband who refuses to allow his wife to work outside the household is condemnable. The nuclear family and its sexual norms are seldom the central issue of leftist films. In *The Wall*, a story about a married couple where divorce is on the agenda, the husband objecting to his wife working, no matter as a nightclub singer or as a teacher, is meant to expose (pre-modern) patriarchal conservatism and gender inequality. The character played by Tsi Lo-lin turns from a nightclub singer to a teacher in an orphanage overnight, and a responsible mother the next. In *Sworn Sisters* (1954, Ng Wui), the wife of a doctor who picks on the domestic helpers, and the spoiled son of a storeowner who tricks the domestic worker Ah Choi into sleeping with him *via* lying are the villains. The 'civilized' middle class and the capitalists are depicted as oppressors: love and marriage are not questions of two people but issues that need to be fostered or monitored through the mutual aid of sisterhood.

'Patriotism'

About a million more people lived in Hong Kong in April 1950 than in May 1949. Refugees comprised 40% of the total population. Land supply was monopolized by the British Hong

Kong Government, which maximized gain with the minimum expenditure, lured support from British trading interests and the comprador conglomerates *via* low taxation, and stayed away from making policies to protect the working class, from providing public housing and adequate public medical facilities. For example, 1950s Hong Kong films frequently feature characters that die because they cannot afford medical care. Even when the rare public medical service did appear, as in *Sworn Sisters*, it was reified as a not-easily-accessible resource for the main characters.

The motto 'All for one and one for all' speaks to a social reality in which selfishness is most likely commonplace. This generation of literati see their participation in film-making as contributing to their call to politicize cultural production, having inherited the ideals of the May Fourth Movement with its call to save the nation in popularizing culture, and having collectively experienced European colonization, Japanese imperialism and the Civil War. Patriotism, experienced and practiced as a call to work for the collective good under hard times, is for this generation a moral imperative. These realist dramas engage themselves with the sufferings of the masses, advocating a compassion/kindness (ren) and the loyalty of comraderie/brotherhood/sisterhood (yi). A form of idealism, which does not see as its aim the creation of a utopia somewhere else but the personification of the ethical principles of 'ren' and 'yi' seeks to fashion communal relations through the criticism of unjust social and familial relations, and an advocacy of intersubjective transformation through self-sacrifice and empathy, independent will and solidarity among the Hong Kong working population. This form of pro-communal and pro-working-class patriotism as a collective resistance against and amidst their felt oppressions from imperial and colonial experiences could be in the 1940s and early 1950s easily conflated with the PRC party line but would be seen to part ways as the State apparatus struggled to coopt it into an official and unifying nationalist agenda in the late 1950s and the 1960s.

Ethics represented in cinematic social realism in the leftist films produce a large impact on the right-leaning industrial camp too, including the Shaw Brothers Studios, Cathay/MP&GI, both of which established Cantonese film units modelled on Union. Shaw and Cathay/MP&GI had established inter-dependent relations with the leftist productions by buying Great Wall and Feng Huang films to export to their South East Asian markets and fill their cinemas there, while the actors, directors and producers often moved from camp to camp. Cheung Ying plays the intellectuals reawakened by conscience to become anti-capitalists in films including *Old Memories of Canton* (1951, Lo Dun) and *In the Face of Demolition* but he also plays the exemplary anti-Communist intellectual in *Halfway Down* (1957, Tu Guangqi). Studios with leftist or rightist leanings in the 1950s Hong Kong pool their resources in the exchange of personnel and distribution of the films and shared the markets. Before the Cultural Revolution broke out in China in 1966, soon followed by the 1967 uprisings in Hong Kong, the colonial Government and the KMT leadership which controlled the Taiwanese market did not intervene into the Hong Kong industry heavy-handedly, giving different studios enough room to collaborate with each other for mutual benefits despite political differences. The co-existence of productions from a spectrum of political orientations speak to a diversity which characterizes Hong Kong cinema of the 1950s; all of these witness a sea change at the outbreak of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

A Hong Kong 'identity'

A closer look at the work of 1950s Hong Kong leftist filmmaking might bring forth serious questions to the commonplace claim that the rise of Hong Kong's 'native'/local cultural consciousness should (only) be traced to the social movements of the late 1960s and the 1970s –counting the two Chinese Language Movements of 1967–68, against corruption (1973), and the Golden Jubilee Secondary School incident (1978)—or the 'successes' of a series of policy measures in the 1970s. Could the street views and neon light signage that often appear as background to the cast list at the beginning of many 1950s films, for example, be read as expressions of the production teams' desires to engage with its local audience and construct an imagined community—all of these contribute to an active process of producing a Hong Kong-marked subjectivity? *Bright Night* (1954, Ng Wui, Chu Kei, Ching Kong), with its Chinese title meaning 'The Red Mirroring of Blazing Trees and Silver Flowers', documents the spectacle of the celebrations in Hong Kong at the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, while behind and between the glamorous street scenes, inserts the story of a clerk at a jewelry shop (Cheung Ying again) whose discontent with reality promotes him to 'explore some illicit opportunities' in his own words (he eventually steals the jewelry). His annoyance at the decorated float parades on Nathan Road is a mockery of the urban prosperity ('blazing trees and silver flowers') brandished by the Hong Kong authorities.

Hong Kong cinema of the 1950s had already launched a painstaking and meticulous critique of the 'Hongkonger' who is 'active, competitive' and would 'wish that their children will speak the language', the characteristics described by Baker earlier in this paper. Another Union production *Father and Son* (1954, Ng Wui) shows how an office-clerk father (Cheung Wood-yau) coerces his son by all means, who has come to the city from rural China, to become a competitive 'Hongkonger': he makes the kid wear western clothes, bury his past (he changes his son's name from 'little shrimp' to 'born rich', which the kid has a hard time responding to), go to an elite school, make friends with kids from the upper classes, and last but not least, eat gateau. Eventually the father finds himself in self-contempt and frustration. The elite school that forces its students to wear a uniform (franchised to a monopolizing and particularly expensive shop) is depicted as bureaucratic, hypocritical, and out of touch with the actual conditions of the working classes, requiring little shrimp to hold birthday parties because 'every child in our school does that'. Little Shrimp works out his own logic by paying the school fees of his dropout friend with the donations that he has collected on behalf of the school for dropout students but to his surprise, he is accused of 'embezzlement'/theft.

A tale of immense psychological and physical costs of a small figure striving to climb up the class ladder in 1950s Hong Kong, the film exposes the institutionalized violence against the body, self-imagination and desire; how colonial capitalism fashions a (new) 'Hong Kong identity' through reorganizing the public and the private. It criticizes a 'Hong Kong characteristic' that is the collaborative monopolization of elitist education and the charity industry on ethics and morality. At Union Film's first anniversary, the commemorative screening of *Father and Son* was programmed as a double bill with a newsreel on the Shek Kip Mei fire of that year.[7] This signaled a commitment to a social realism both in fiction and non-fiction cinema as effectively a tool to intervene into the immediate Hong Kong social reality at the time.

It is noteworthy that an emphasis on the lived and felt experiences of Hong Kong people and receiving official recognition from the Chinese Communist Party was not considered a contradiction. *Family*, a Union Film production in 1957, was given an award in film excellence by the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic. It was precisely because these films were designated by Beijing as 'bourgeoisie' and 'the side flank of the socialist--revolutionary, proletarian-revolutionary cinema of the motherland', that they had a lot of creative freedom and did not have to toe the party line of anti-rightism or 'class struggles' at the time. Instead, they used realism as a tool to analyze colonial capitalist contradictions. In the birthday party scene in *Father and Son*, the sons of rich families arrive with their maids in fancy cars, producing a sharp contrast from the shininess of the cars, the rich kids' bright outfits and their maids' stark-looking uniforms, with the poorly-lit ghetto neighborhood they happen to land in. The camerawork emphasizes the ways in which the neighbors of Little Shrimp gaze at these wealthy counterparts as if the two worlds could never really meet—a remarkable visualization of class contradictions no less.

Towards neoliberalism

The 1967 'riots' in Hong Kong, possibly considered an offshoot of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, removed the patriotic underpinnings and thereafter moral backbone of the 'progressive' cultural workers of Hong Kong, while simultaneously they faced Cold War containment from Taiwan and the US, backed up by a series of colonial anti-Communist makeover campaigns in Hong Kong. The eradication of the Hong Kong Left by the collaborative move of the British Hong Kong authorities and the global right-wing could only come when the increasingly aggressive populist Communists (so called the 'Extreme Left') in the Mainland refused to recognize them. As Liu Yat-yuen recalled, once the Cultural Revolution broke out in the Mainland, the issue-based works of the Hong Kong leftist cinema intended as mapping ethical guidelines for the migrant communities outside PRC were coined 'anti-revolutionary' and 'revisionist' as they did not focus on glorifying worker-peasant-soldier heroes leading class struggles (Chu 154–156). The 'patriotic rhetoric' and its pitch demanded by the PRC state apparatus at the time were obviously very different from those of the 'Patriotic Progressive Cinema' that Liu and his gang had believed in. Their care in treading on the thin ice of colonial grounds could no longer be tolerated. The forced 'coming out' of the 'G-P-S' companies caused a boycott of their films by cinema circuits, pushing Hong Kong leftist filmmaking to its end. 'Shaw Brothers, Cathay, Kong Ngee and Wing Wah issued a joint declaration, drafted by Taiwan, refusing to buy, to distribute and to screen the films of our triumvirate' (Liu as quoted by Chu 155). Liu Yat-yuen was henceforth arrested and imprisoned by the colonial Hong Kong government. After arresting Liu, the British Hong Kong government had planned on getting Ng Cho-fan but after considering the consequences upon public opinion 'which would be grave, and would cause great discontentment towards the British', (Lo Dun as quoted by Kwok 132) the actor-couple Fu Che and Shek Hwei from Great Wall were arrested and deported across the Shenzhen border instead.

Economist Tsang Shu-ki has characterized the form of capitalism in Hong Kong society around the handover, compared to other places on a similar level of economic development, as having 'a rare degree of purity' (Tsang, 1998, 29). However, the system of values that promotes consumerism, individualism, the zero-sum game, and its emphasis on efficiency,

instrumentalized and technical knowledge, meritocracy and the nuclear family, as dominant as these are in Hong Kong today, only began to emerge in abundance in films at the end of the 1960s. The moral vacuum left by the recession of leftist cinema in the aftermath of 1967 allowed the expansion of Shaw Brothers in its place. Affectual identification with the working classes are displaced onto the desires for the moralizing, salvaging, and comforting images of the ruling and the privileged (the police, social workers, schools, prisons, and the church) and onto the disciplining of sexuality within and beyond the nuclear family, from *The Splendid Love in Winter* (1968, Chor Yuen) to *Teddy Girls* (1969, Lung Kong), to name a few, amidst the seemingly provocative dominant 'youth genre'.[8]

The 'success' of the last thirty years of Hong Kong's colonial rule has rendered us impotent in responding to many historical questions. If 'typical' Hong Kong values and mentality are to be defined as endorsing upward mobility through individualistic competition, and faith in the rule of law, why would *In the Face of Demolition* place Taipan Wong, who defends his individualistic, upwardly mobile class interests through citing the law, in such a morally condemnable position? Why doesn't Lo Ming make use of his Uncle's economic capital to 'fight it out' and become a member of the middle class? How did the common ethic of the 1950s turn into a recognition of, and even 'pride' towards colonial capitalism in Hong Kong? Last but not least, is the sharp critique of capitalism found in the Hong Kong New Wave of the early 1980s, often considered to be the founding movement of a self-identified 'Hong Kong cinema' (no longer Cantonese), formed by the filmmakers' education in colonial Hong Kong or abroad, or does it have a predecessor in Hong Kong cinema history itself, given the fact that these young filmmakers might not have been able to make their claim-to-fame works including *The Boat People* (1982, Ann Hui) and *Homecoming* (1984,Yim Ho), if not produced by Hsia Moon and funded by (formerly) leftist sources?

Research studying British national archival sources and formerly confidential Hong Kong Government documents have discovered that, in the 1970s Hong Kong Governor Maclehose had meticulously resisted pressure from the English Labor Government (1974–79) to introduce social welfare policies to Hong Kong. The objective of the Governor at the time was to increase as much as possible Britain's bargaining chip when it came to negotiations regarding the expiration of the lease in 1997, by 'transforming Hong Kong into a model city of international standing, with high quality education, technology and culture, and equipped with high levels of industrial, commercial and financial infrastructure', 'to make it as prosperous, as harmonious and as satisfied as possible', and it must be done 'at a rapid pace', so that it would become most different from the conditions in China (Lui 2012, 152). As a result of strategic considerations to maintain and prolong its colonial rule, rapid capitalist development and neoliberalization began in earnest Hong Kong in the mid-to-late 1970s, long before Thatcher came to power in Britain. Hong Kong became the laboratory for British neoliberalism, to an extent that has far exceeded that of the UK:

> Speaking of identity recognition, Hongkongers began to develop a sense of pride and recognition in itself beginning in the 1970s with its being one of the four rising Asian dragons. Hong Kong was more modernized and richer than Mainland China. Compared to Britain, Hong Kong had a much stronger economy; it was at that time when Hongkongers began to mock the British people 'for being all beggars (awaiting welfare)'. […] Given an equal legal system, Hongkongers began to exhibit their prowess. This prosperity, created under the protection of a legal system, is not only unseen in China during the past few decades, but also somewhat lacking in the once overly-welfarist Britain. (Li 31)

Hong Kong witnessed rapid economic shifts at the end of 1960s to early 1970s (three stock exchanges were founded: Far East Exchange 1969; Kam Ngan 1971; Kowloon 1972). Lui Tai-lok believes that the 'double-track development' mechanism of social ascension provided by a 'competitive capitalist' environment has encouraged those who have not received higher education to elevate themselves to middle class status by 'engaging in the combat of life', so much so that even though Hongkong people could see that capitalism 'has its inequalities', they still accepted 'a competitive system' (Lui 1998, 98; 203–206). Alongside this development, the 1950s were to be sidelined as a transitional period where the newcomers from China were unable or struggling to adapt themselves to the colony with their hearts still in the Mainland. This paper questions this discourse through mapping some of the values as represented in the 1950s popular Hong Kong cinema while arguing that they are no less rooted in a social identification with Hong Kong, especially with the disempowered. Rather, the discourse of Hongkongness as a 1970s invention has redefined the Hong Kong ethics and ethnic identity in such a way that Hong Kong is considered to assume a collective identification with the colonial capitalist project—a moral and affectual development that did not become dominant until post-1967—as a required condition for such identity. Through uncovering a systemic project of ostracizing/demonizing some long repressed ethical tales and of replacing them with success narratives on upward class mobility under a competitive capitalist system, I hope to re-examine the beginnings of a remaking/reengineering of Hong Kong ethics *via* colonial modernity.

This re/de-moralizing engineering process is epitomized by the two-to-three-decade long craze, also known as the 'Under the Lion Rock Spirit', which extolled people to sacrifice themselves for capitalism; and even though its deadening work ethic aspect has gradually fallen into bits and pieces post-1997, the moral commitment to colonial capitalism has yet to be shaken, and has become a major affective obstacle standing in the way of Hong Kong's return to China. This paper suggests that the political predicament of Hong Kong post-1997 is partly a result of the collaborative work between an Anglo-American cold war project *via* British colonial and Taiwan forces, and the crackdown from PRC 'anti-right' hardliners. The colonial cold war depoliticization project, while suppressing the leftist cultural critique in Hong Kong history, replacing it with neoliberal values and structures from late-1970s on, redefined what could be read as 'local' for Hong Kong. The current symptomatic use of accusatory terms like 'leftard' or 'left plastic' (left-wingers as utopian, unrealistic and/or stupid) by many younger people in Hong Kong today foregrounds the populist simplification of this historically constructed apparent binarism. This reminds us of the necessity to revisit the discursive attempts of 1950s Hong Kong leftist cinema, how it has adopted and advocated a form of politicized cultural ethics in order to analyze and critique Hong Kong's colonial capitalist modernity, and how these attempts have been marginalized and forgotten in Hong Kong history. It is in revisiting this history that we might begin to unpack some of the problems we live with in Hong Kong today.

Notes

1. This article is revised from a paper presented at the "Neomoralism Under Neoliberalism International Conference," held at Lingnan University in Hong Kong in 2014.The paper draft was first translated by Ernest Fung from Chinese, then revised and shortened significantly by Yau Ching for this journal issue. I would like to particularly acknowledge the support from the reviewers whose suggestions and comments have made this paper more sound and coherent. Special thanks to Natalia Chan Lokfung in helping to confirm citations.

2. I use "leftist" and "left-wing" inter-changeably in this article. Although they might have different connotations according to context, these terms refer to a community of public cultural workers with pro-socialist identifications and values in the historical context studied in this article. Likewise, "rightist," "right-leaning" and "right-wing" for the opposite camp.
3. Liao Chengzhi (1908-1983), head of the Overseas Chinese Commission and Minister of the Office of Overseas Chinese Affairs, was "the Communist Party's specialist on Taiwan and the chief negotiator in talks with Britain on the future of Hong Kong…" http://www.nytimes.com/1983/06/11/obituaries/liao- chengzhi-75-a-chinese-leader.html
4. This plot may be partly inspired by *Crows and Sparrows* (1949, Zheng Junli). I am indebted to one of the reviewers who made this suggestion, yet a comparison of the two films is beyond the scope of this paper.
5. Adapted from "Un pour tous! Tous pour un!" from Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* which Lin Shu (1852-1924) translated as "All for one and one for all."
6. What must be emphasized, though, is that the hope in a literati-dominant nationalism has always been second skin in Union Film productions. For example, in *Sworn Sisters*, the person who rescues everyone from their predicament is Ah Ying (played by Tsi Lo-lin), the only literate person amongst them. At the end of the film a God-like voiceover also reminds the audience to judge the actions of the domestic workers.
7. On Christmas Day, 1953, a massive fire swept the Shek Kip Mei squatter area and made 53,000 people homeless overnight.
8. The complex relationship between colonial modernity, capitalism and Christianity needs to be rendered in greater depth with much more research than the scope of this paper would allow.

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