

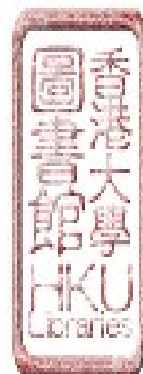
ANN HUI AS A FEMALE FILMMAKER: IN SEARCH OF HONG KONG CULTURE

By

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*A dissertation undertaken in partial
fulfillment for the Master of Arts in Literary
and Cultural Studies (1996-98)*

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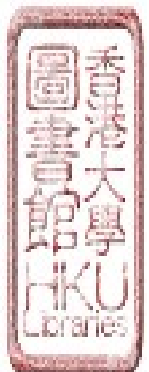


DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis represents my own work, except where due acknowledge is made, and that it has not been previously included in a thesis, dissertation or report submitted to this University or any other institution of a degree, diploma or other qualification.

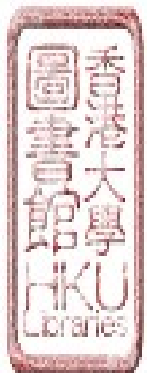


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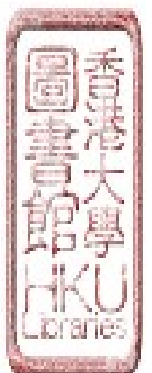
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my foremost gratitude to my supervisor, Mr. Abbas, for his sound suggestions on Hong Kong cinematic space. I am also deeply indebted to my course lecturers for their guidance in various disciplines of literary and cultural studies. And special thanks are given to the inner circle of my family and friends, particularly, Ada and Crystal, for their encouragement.



ABSTRACT

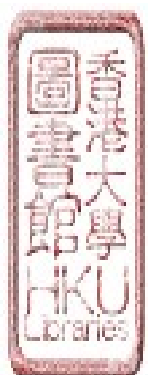
This paper is an examination of Ann Hui's cinematic images and practice in relation to Hong Kong cultural space from 1979 to date. Hui is an avant-garde with social consciousness and autuerism. Facing the impasse of 1997 and social change in Hong Kong, she has have postcolonial responses by destabilizing the conventional cinematic meanings and subverting the dominant cultural representations. She has further articulated her new expressions through deep investigations into authority system, the personal, women space, her own self and history. Her attempt can be considered as local creativity to substitute the cultural loss experienced by Hong Kong people being colonized. As a result, a local cultural space is created with new possibilities and opportunities.



INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong people are still living in memory of 1997 which poses as a provocation to change and a point to evaluate. But change "after" 1997 is still difficult to grasp, even people are haunted by the recent economic recession and serious unemployment. The obvious change may be the spatial redevelopment brought by the New Airport in Lantau, which makes Hong Kong to be more understood in terms of speed of communication, information and transportation of people. Behind this change, Hong Kong in fact has negotiated various processes of social mutations, colonial history, capitalism and international economy. The negotiations are in continuity and actively find expressions in various cultural forms.

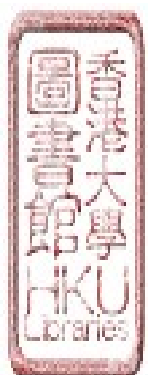
Most of cultural expressions have centered their discussions on elusion of the "floating identity" and "cultural desert", or a search for a more definite identity in response to the political change. Hong Kong people have cultivated a great interest in local culture, by direct exploration of their own identities and preservation of local history and its images. But above all, the most innovative and critical responses come from those who are able to reinvent and to articulate their cultural expressions with new perspectives and dimensions.



Ann Hui is one of the local filmmakers who can demonstrate this strength. She, together with other filmmakers like Tsui Hark and Wong Kar-wai, has come up with new cinematic images in response to the historical situations of Hong Kong. They represent many disparate attempts to evoke a problematic cultural space in which a new Hong Kong subjectivity is found. Since 1982, their innovative film practices have inspired a "new Hong Kong cinema" which places Hong Kong as a subject itself. As Abbas suggests, "the new Hong Kong cinema claims our attention because it has finally found a subject—it has found itself as a subject."¹ It is a response to "a space of disappearance", a cultural space in which Hong Kong subject is self-invented. In short, Hong Kong cinema has evolved into a medium capable of giving new expressions to shape Hong Kong subjectivity, for instances, through constructing images out of cliches, problematizing our viewing process and experimenting new cinematic techniques.

Ann Hui is able to articulate her cinematic expressions 'in response to Hong Kong changing cultural space. Her works is a way of re framing and reinventing to avoid a civilization of cliché in Hong Kong culture. Her film practice involves not only a conversion from the genre norms, the narrative logic and the market rules, but also a creation of new filmic images which are deviant, complex and inconsistent, forming

¹ Abbas (1997:23).

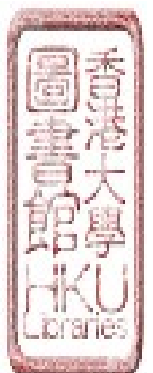


discontinuities within continuities in appropriation of the changing local environment.

In this paper, I will attempt to examine her cinematic images in relation to Hong Kong cultural space from 1979 to date. Hui seldom directly thematizes Hong Kong culture. Her films are the products of Hong Kong culture as well as responses to it. It is assumed that her cinematic expressions or practice is a response to Hong Kong cultural space. I will investigate how and why her cinematic expressions and practice, including the film content, thematic concerns, style, genre and characters, respond to the local cultural space, and to what extent Hong Kong is found as a subject itself in her films. The study will be structured in a rather chronological way for indicating the significant changes of Hui's responses in different periods. Six of Hui's representative films will be studied in greater detail to provide references. The study will begin with an analysis of the New Wave which is the starting point of Hui's film career.

AVANT-GARDE IN THE NEW WAVE

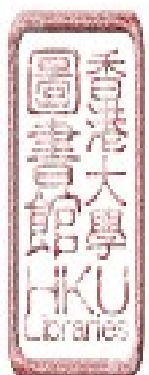
The New Wave is a point to start re-examining Hui's location in local film history. Hong Kong's New Wave first appeared in 1979, when a new generation of local-born



filmmakers, who were educated in film schools abroad, turned to filmmaking from television production. They formed a big gap with the generation of filmmakers who came from China throughout the 1940s and 1950s. As the film critic, Li Cheuk-to notes, "the New Wave embodied a consciousness, experience, and memory that were markedly different from what had come before. In the area of aesthetic preferences, they were more Westernized or internationalized in outlook. They tended to view problems or societal questions from the Hong Kong perspective. The territory, not traditional Chinese culture, was their main frame of reference. Hence, the cinematic gap between Hong Kong and China grew wider."² So in those days, the new filmmakers were largely accepted by Hong Kong audiences who were expecting for a "breakthrough" or some things "new".

The emergence of the New Wave, more or less, was a result of the social changes around the 70s. Hong Kong in the 70s was characterized by economic prosperity and development of television industry, which formed its proximity with everyday culture. Indigenous young generations were "beneficiaries" of the British colonial education and were supposed to be culturally different from their China-born parents as they had different life experiences. Nurtured under such circumstances, most of the new directors were

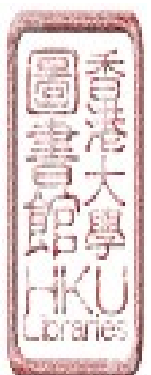
² Li Cheuk-to (1994:161).



well-educated and well-equipped with film techniques and theories. They entered the film industry forming an impulse to explore the local cinema and to express their experiences in homeland.

Ann Hui is a notable example. Full name, Hui On-wah, born in 1948 in Manchuria. She moved to Hong Kong with her family in 1952. She received tertiary education in English and Comparative Literature in Hong Kong University and then pursued film studies in London. On returning to Hong Kong in 1975, she worked as an assistant to the great martial arts film director, King Hu and as director of television and documentaries. She had joined the Television Broadcasting Limited and the Radio Television Hong Kong. During that time, she had produced successful works such as *The Lion Rock* (1978), *CID* (1976), and *Social Worker* (1977) which showed the initial traces of Hui's social sentiments.

In 1979, Hui shifted to filmmaking and produced her first debut, *The Secret*, which was followed by *The Spooky Bunch* (1980). Hui also took the initiative to produce a number of films in response to the pressing issue of 1997. The prominent examples were *The Story of Woo Viet* (1981) and *The Boat People* (1982). She was able to keep drawing the New Wave inspiration in her later film works, *Song of the Exile* (1990) and *Summer Snow* (1995), which again exemplified



her artistic creativity and social sentiments.

Even though the New Wave was criticized as one of the major "myths" created by the media itself³, Hui was a concrete case for representing a great qualitative leap in thematic richness and technical improvement. Her films had received a lot of attention in the papers and she was highly regarded as an avant-garde in the New Wave. In the West, "Avant-garde" had been used to designate those "whose techniques, employed with a view to a renewed expressiveness of image and sound, break with established traditions to search out, in the strictly visual and auditory realm, new emotional chords," and those filmmakers who, "detached from motives of profit, march boldly on towards the conquest of the new modes of expression....to expand cinematic thought."

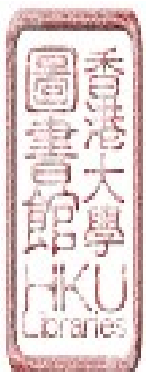
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Hui's films involved a critical revision of cinema, but not a mark of radical break with cinema of the past. She could not be considered as the avant-garde in western sense, who claims to originality – "The self as origin is safe from contamination by tradition."⁵ Hui was located in a culture which had been contaminated by western colonization. Her works did not make a distinction between a present

³ The idea is first put forward by a local film critic, Huang Cang who writes for Hong Kong Economic Journal between 1981 to 1984.

⁴ Hoberman, J. (1996:59).

⁵ Krauss, R. (1996:18).



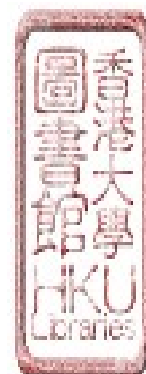
experienced and a tradition-laden past. But her works could be regarded as a liberating force to Hong Kong cinema by helping renew the past, diverting away from a set of stale conventions and reinventing new cinematic expressions. I will examine her film practice in more details in the later part of this paper.

Alternative within Commercialism

Keeping in mind of Janet Bergstrom's observation that "avant-garde does not mean "in advance of " a developing film tradition; it is taken to mean, rather, apart from the commercial cinema."⁶ Avant-garde film is always seen as an opposition to commercial cinema.

In Hong Kong, cinema industry has long been dominated by popular movies. There is always criticism that the film producers and distributors have exerted strong commercial pressures for satisfaction of the market need. Thus little room is left for film directors to cultivate artistic maneuvering. The New Wave in the beginning was seen as a force to efface commercialism in cinema culture. But its demise, was due to its gradual failure in making in-depth analysis on new local development and commercial pressures.

⁶ Bergstorm (1978:43).

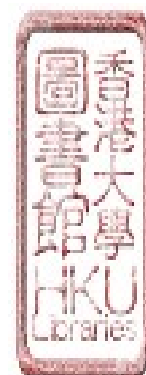


Ann Hui is an avant-garde director who does not completely efface commercialism. But she will not compromise with the commercial pressure when it comes to limit her artistic maneuvering. She is the pioneer in carving out a local film space, intertwining art and popularity, and problematizing the division between high and low culture.

To date, Ann Hui has made a total of fifteen films.⁷ Her films are popular in the sense that they can attract a stable group of audience. They not only include the educated, but also the masses who can share in the sentimentality of Hui's melodramas. Though her films do not gross as much as some pure popular movies do, they receive stable gross. Besides, Hui's film practice is within the popular mainstream as she maintains to use the established stars and fictional narrative form.

But on the other hand, Hui does not maintain the status quo as most popular movies do. She has not conciliated with any established genres and spectacle, nor did she make films accordingly to set of rules. She knows precisely how to exploit the conventions of long-established melodrama genre and is able to develop her cinematic images in different ways for different times.

⁷ Refer to Hui's filmography listed out on page 59.

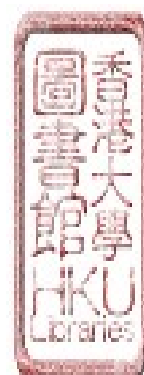


Besides, Hui is able to convert cinema into a more indigenous instrument of communication by drawing on the strengths and vitality of local culture. She is not to endow cinema with a distinct cultural identity, but with a sense of local passion in exploration of society, self, memory and history. Because of this discovery of ^M'the local', in effect, Hui has gained both local acclaim and international recognition.

Apart from her practice, Hui is a director with an attitude to make film with clear vision. For a period in the early 1990s, most of the offers she received from producers were to direct Category III pornography and sword-fighting epics. She declined all those offers, and said she would continue to make movies her way: ^W"One thing I appreciate about the Hong Kong film industry is that people acknowledge good quality, and you always get a chance to work if you try hard*" ⁸. Even art and commercial are not mutually exclusive, Hui must resist the lure of local commercialism when it constitutes a threat to her independence in artistic maneuvering.

In a word, Hui is successful to develop an aura proper to commercialism. She is not caught in dilemma between art and entertainment or between high and low cultures. Her

⁸ Dannen & Long (1997:7).



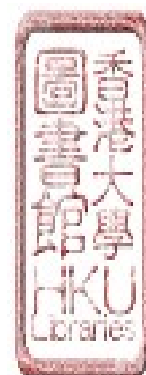
strategy is to find alternatives within the system, forming an ambiguity towards commercialism and popular culture. As a consequence, the local cinematic space is problematized. It is no longer homogeneous and only confined to commercialism. Popular culture is also problematized by Hui's films that dogmatic look, conformity and homogenization are undermined by diversity and new possibilities in provoking thoughts and passion.

An anti-tradition Response

The ghost movies, *The Secret* (1979) and *The Spooky Bunch* (1980) formed the first series of Hui's films to herald the arrival of Hong Kong New Wave. They were released with above-average success. Both films had made certain breakthroughs from the conventional ghost narratives. Most of the ghost films in the 50s and 60s displayed supernatural thrills or featured a beautiful female ghost who was a victim of fallen love or the oppressive feudalism. But the ghost genre underwent variations in the mid-80s⁹.

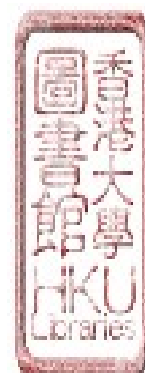
Hui is the pioneer to renew the ghost genre* She has experimented a psychological horror effect in *The Secret*, with combinations of murder thriller, suspense and social relevance. And in *The Spooky Bunch*, which does not exist

⁹ Teo Stephan (1997:221-224).



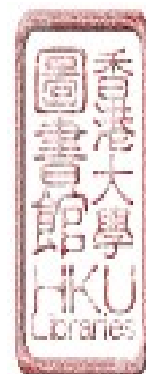
any grand guignol or erotic ghost images, seriousness and fear are far undermined by comedy embedded with elements of suspense and romance. Hui's reinvention has paved the way for a mushrooming of new horror films in the mid-80s. Notable examples include Tsui Hark's *We're Going to Eat You*, Samo Hung's *Encounter of the Spooky Kind* and *The Happy Ghost* comedian series.

But a twisting change in genre does not divert Hui from the oldest strand in archetypal horror cinema which usually draws inspiration from Chinese tradition. In the two films, Hui explores a space in which the present is haunted by people's cultural memories of traditional customs and the past. They are understood in term of binaries between tradition and modernity, Yin and Yang, West and East, the present and the past. The opposition relationship is inscribed in term of spatial relation in her films. For instance, *The Secret* is situated in Western District while *The Spooky Bunch* is completely located on Cheung Chau Island. The two places are peripheries outside the city center of Hong Kong. They are considered as spaces with images of tradition, isolation and decadence. The characters living in the two places lose themselves in ancient Chinese superstitions. In the following, I will make further illustration by analyzing her first film, *The Secret*.



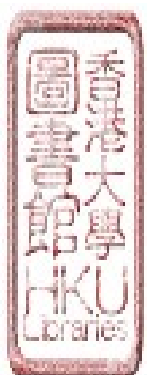
The Secret is based on a real murder case, the "Pokfulam Hill" incident involving the murder of a young couple in 1970. The subject matter of the film is reexamination of Chinese beliefs and customs, and its replacement by modernity. The characters are mostly young men and women but they hang around in an old and obsolete place, Western District, beset by the seedy old streets and back alleys. The space is dominated by Chinese rituals and customs and evokes a sense of impending doom and decay* At the very start of the film, the shots of the memorial service for the dead girl and the tea ceremony at her grandmother's birthday with the girl kneeling in front of all family elders, give the audience a series of images of oppression and tragedy. The girl, Li Yuen represents the victim being oppressed by the traditional codes of Chinese morality. Her pregnancy before a wedding would be a serious violation of traditional codes and Li's only concern is to get married before her condition has been revealed to the elder of her family. Thus she is forced to negotiate with another lover of her boy friend, but their meeting unfortunately results in tragedy.

Then a couple is found dead in the wooden suburb, A lunatic who lives in the vicinity is suspected of committing the murder. One of the victims is falsely identified by the police as Li's. But Li returns home secretly to get back "a name card". Her image is haunting the residence of Western



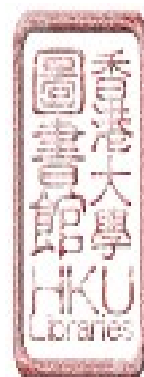
District. And she is seen by her next-door neighbor, a nurse called Lian who starts to probe into the case. "Is the girl a ghost or is she alive?" remains a question and the audiences would follow Lian's perspective to make investigation. As the story proceeds, through a number of scenes of Li's memory recall, the triangular love relationship is gradually revealed. Lian finally resolves the case by finding out the "name card" of a doctor who can verify Li's pregnancy. And with autopsy report, the true identity of the victim is proved to be her love enemy who is actually attacked by Li and finally killed by the lunatic.

Li is not dead. She exists like a ghost and becomes a wandering figure without identity. Li's image has particular relevance to Hong Kong. Hong Kong people had long carried the embarrassing identity of being half-Chinese, and half-Western (gewlois). The question of one's identity remained urgency and immediacy in particular with pressing issue of 1997. Li is local-born, but is loaded with the past sin of tradition which associates with love decadence, suppression, crime and identity confusion. In contrast, Lian represents the new, and the modernity. She finds out the truth with scientific and rational perspectives. Her disbelief in return of ghost and her demand for scientific evidence are in sharp contradiction with Li's image.



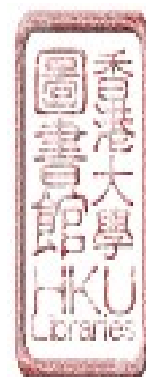
Old and New are in conflict. In the end, Lian discovers Li at the murder places where they have a confrontation. The truth is reviewed through a series of flashback of the lunatic's memory of the entire murder case. Then once again the lunatic's voyeurism is associated with violence. He finally distirbs their confrontation and breaks Li's neck. Very soon, the lunatic's mother arrives and immediately cuts open Li's body to save her baby. The shot is mixed with unexpected violence and horror. It suggests the replacement of the old by the new or the release of burden of the past. A close-up shot of the newborn baby is followed by two weightless shots of the grandmother and the mirror image of a Chinese goddess statute. The two shots are immediately replaced by a final long shot of trees with abundant young leaves which give images of hope and bright future. Hui ends the film in a closed value system that the traditional convention should be substituted by a new and modern perspective.

The Secret is a new experiment, with adoption of new film techniques such as shifting from multiple angles to a single perspective of Lian, use of montages and flashbacks, complexities in plot and non-linearity of conventional narrative form. Above all, the most obvious feature is transcending a colonial space of decadence, hysterical violence and confusion between human and ghost, the dead



and the alive, and even irrational and rational. There are no ghosts at all in the film. Conventionally, the distrusts of the Chinese are reserved for the "evil" ghosts, but now horror comes from our cultural memory and preservation of the past and traditional rituals. It is a psychological effect of the colonial past. Hui adopts a rational and scientific approach as a resolution to people's fascination with "things Chinese" which are deteriorating human lives. But the whole question of identity is still posed by taking our bearings from the old binaries between "East" and "West" and "Old" and "New".

The argument about modern and tradition held by Hui can be considered as a response to the cultural mentality in the 70s. In the early age, Hong Kong culture totally relied on the traditions of the Cantonese common people who came from China and lived in the territory. It lacked a proper historical perspective of its own. It was only after the 1967 riots inspired by the Cultural Revolution, a new local-born generation began to demand so that the government started to infuse a sense of belonging to the people through various local development policies such as education, housing and administrative absorption of elite. Being western-educated and inspired with a sense of belonging, Hui responded by questioning the charm of tradition and making us aware of the unresolved problems of history. In

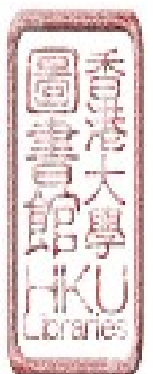


addition, her use of ghost genre in exploration of history and tradition was to project city's desire and fear and to express the cultural gap between Hong Kong and China- In fact, as the spectre of 1997 was approaching the city, it was not surprising that horror films had occupied its soul in the early 80s of Hong Kong.

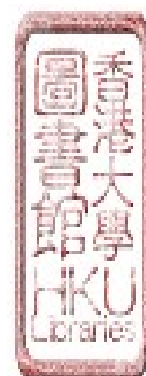
A Post-colonial Response

Starting from the 80s, Hui had critically revised her cinematic images. She had identified 1997 as the real and symbolic moment of locality of melodramatic imagination. Melodramas were consciously implicated in what Jean Baudrillard called "the characteristic hysteria of our time: the hysteria of production and reproduction of the real"¹⁰ Hence, Hui had produced lots of films in melodrama genre propelled by political narrative and powered by passion. She drew her material from and reflected certain social phenomena and political situations throughout the 80s and the 90s. Political issues such as government corruption, 1991 Direct Election and Vietnamese refugees all found expression in her films. Her political narrative modes had inhibited a local cultural space in which postcolonial inspiration could be found.

¹⁰ Baudrillard (1983:44).



But we should bear in mind, the post-colonial discourse cannot be straightly applied to Hong Kong in the fact that Hong Kong people are still living in colonialism. The territory was only transferred from the British colonizer, to another colonizer, China. Hong Kong indigenous culture was once repressed under British colonization. It only started to grow when Britain and China came up with 1997 issue. With Margaret Thatcher's visit to China to negotiate on the matter of Hong Kong in 1982 and the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, alongside the increasing influx of Vietnamese refugees and Chinese illegal migrants, Hong Kong people became very much concerned about their political autonomy and cultural identity. But they had no say in any political decision and they were trapped in the political struggle between Britain and China. People felt helpless and impotent. Their responses were limited to demanding "localization" and democratization of political system. Their relationship to China was more subtle. The hand-over was seen as a journey of Hong Kong returning to its homeland. But this news was a embarrassment to the new generation of Hong Kong people whose culture were greatly different from that of Mainland China. It led to a confidence crisis which was reflected by high emigration rate and the brain drain in mid-80s. To resolve the conflict, in politics, it brought into political settlements stated in the Basic Law; in economical and cultural discourses,



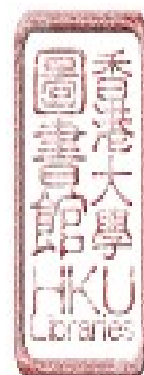
the situation could be explained by the concept of "northbound imaginary"¹¹ which exposed Hong Kong's invasion of capitalism and commercial culture into China. In a nutshell, Hong Kong has not gone through colonialism. It is never free from the rule of colonizer, either Britain or China, which is considered as the centre marginalizing the territory politically. But the cultural relationship is more ambivalent and complicated in case with China.

Though the postcolonial discourse is not applicable to Hong Kong situation, some analyses of the colonial discourse will provide contextual background for our understanding of Hui's films. Hui's strategy can be more understood in the notion of postcoloniality, which suggested by Abbas, is a tactic and a practice in response to the current political exigencies. As Abbas states,

*"Postcoloniality can only be understood in a nonliteralist sense...ostcolonialitybegins, it has already begun. It means finding ways of operating under a set of difficult conditions that threatens to appropriate us as subjects, an appropriation that can work just as well by way of acceptance as it can by rejection."*¹²

¹¹ Lo Sze-ping (1995:4-6).

¹² Abbas (1997:10) .



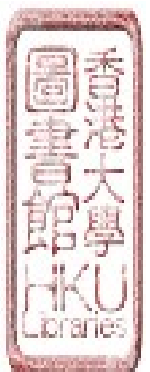
Hui's work on political melodramas is a practice in response to the historical epoch of 1997 and the changing social conditions of Hong Kong. And Hui has drawn the inspiration of postcolonial criticism in her treatment of argument •

*"They (postcolonial criticisms) formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority, and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the "rationalizations" of modernity."*¹³

The principle of postcolonial criticisms is deconstruction of the binary opposition of centre and margin. Legitimized by the postmodern discourse, it challenges any hegemonic force that presumes centrality and universality. It evacuates the idea of centre through "constellations of voices", "plurality of meanings" and "specificity and political local projects".

Hui tries to employ the postcolonial criticisms in articulation of two major concerns, namely subjectivity of Hong Kong people and subjectivity of local women who are "double" colonized. We can detect from her films the strategies she had adopted to articulate the two concerns. Basically, three strategies has been observed.

¹³ Bhabha (1994:171) .



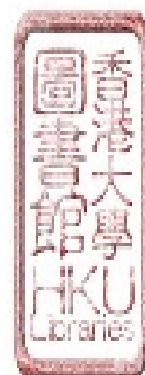
One of Hui's strategies is articulation of the margins. Amongst the three temptations (the local, the marginal, the cosmopolitan) for Hong Kong postcolonial situation discussed by Abbas, the lure of the marginal, "one version of which is the argument that Lyotard makes in *The Postmodern Condition* about little narratives, local knowledge, and paralogies as so many strategies for resisting the master discourses, scientific and legitimated, of the centre."¹⁴ It is also "a figure for the self-invention of the postcolonial subject, marginality is of doubtful value, an avant-gardist romance."¹⁵ "The marginal then becomes what Baudrillard calls a form of deterrence that reconfirms the centre as centre, not a form of resistance. Marginality does not necessarily shake up the centre or initiate a process of decentering. It might merely exercise the centre and in so doing strengthen it."¹⁶

In Hui's films, most of the central characters are outcasts, marginal people and the oppressed. They are not the figures of resisting "the centre", either the colonial authority or the patriarchal society. Hui tries to exemplify their refusal to be marginalized as Other in the discourses of the colonizers who placed themselves in the centre

¹⁴ Abbas (1997:17) .

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

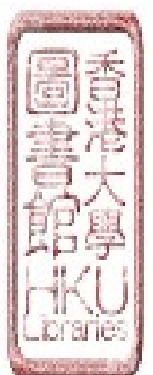


politically and culturally. They struggle with the centre by distancing from it or found alternative by discovering another space. Their conditions echo the plight of Hong Kong people who face unfathomable political changes and seem caught in a dilemma. In this light, marginals are imaged as the subjects. And Hui tries to question the political space of Hong Kong by creating a destabilizing force to the totalizing impulse of colonialist/ masculine representations.

Another strategy adopted by Hui is re-treatment of history. Linda Hutcheon suggests, "after modernism's ahistorical rejection of the burden of the past, postmodern art had sought self-consciously (and often even parodically) to reconstruct its relationship to what came before; similarly, after that imposition of an imperial culture and that truncated indigenous history which colonialism has meant to many nations, post-colonial literatures are also negotiating (often parodically) the once tyrannical weight of colonial history in conjunction with the revalued local past."¹⁷

In *The Secret*, Hui eliminates the burden of the past. But in her later films, she treats history with a nostalgic mode. Nostalgic sentiment dwells at the very heart of our

¹⁷ Hutcheon (1991:149-75).

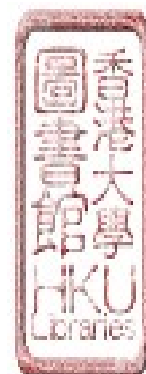


identity and reminds us of "precious things" about to be lost or forgotten. It involves a special kind of creation. As Fred Davis notes, "generational nostalgic sentiment..... creates because the past is never something simply there just waiting to be discovered. Rather, the remembered past like all other products of human consciousness is something that must constantly be filtered, selected, arranged, constructed, and reconstructed from collective experience. And the fulcrum for this great labour can only be the present with its shared anxieties, aspirations, hopes, fears, and fantasies."¹⁸

Allegory is another strategy often used by Hui. Allegory is not only to describe one thing under the image of another. According to Craig Owen, allegorical impulse works, with a desire to redeem the past for the present, in appropriation of images. As Craig Owen says, "allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter.....Rather, he adds another meaning to image. If he adds, however, he does so only to replace; the allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement."¹⁹ The allegorical impulse reflects a new way of seeing. It appropriates images

¹⁸ Davis, Fred (1979:116).

¹⁹ Craig Owen (1984:205) .

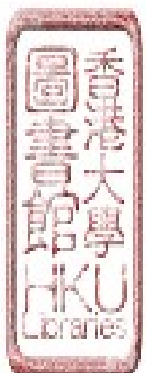


from different sources and provides new perspectives for the viewing subject to re-read signs of the subject and the object. Ann Hui's films usually describe a different era or another country. For instance, the allegories impulses about the corruption of Communist rule in Vietnam, in *Hie Boat People*, alert Hong Kong audience to take a critical perspective on the political sovereign issue.

AN ANTI-COMMUNIST RESPONSE

In the early 80s, Hui had released *The Story of Woo Viet* (1981) and *The Boat People* (1982). Both films captured Vietnamese's struggle to foreign countries under extremely perilous conditions. Vietnamese boat people was a controversial issue which troubled Hong Kong from the late 70s onwards. Hui did not pretend to analyze the political and social aspects of the Vietnamese refugee problem, but to make them as allegories of 1997. She made *Woo Viet* a stylish exercise in the heroic thriller genre which was later further recycled and internationalized by the director, John Woo.

The Story of Woo Viet tells a story about a Vietnamese, Woo Viet, who goes to the United States to escape from a murderous tussle. He ends up in the Philippines where he attempts to rescue his girl friend, Sum Ching who has been

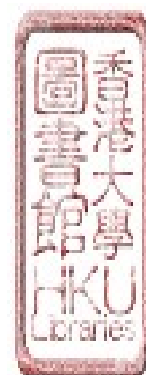


procured by "snake head" for prostitution. It evokes a vision of the "other" world. But its political point is undermined by the excess of heroic sensation.

Comparatively, Hui has a deeper exploration of politics in *The Boat People* which poses a displaced sign of resistance to Chinese rule. She attempts to expose the ills of the Communist political system and to explore a space for the marginal natives whose struggles echo the situation of Hong Kong people. Hui's anti-system approach could be understood as she has two fundamental beliefs: "all the political systems are not perfect and affinity between human relationships should be greater than that within systems. For instance, her conflicts with system must be greater than her conflicts with a mainlander because people are basically striving for the same thing."²⁰ In her films, we rarely find villains or victims. Hui seems to be saying that the oppressor and the oppressed are both preys to the problematic political system and ideology.

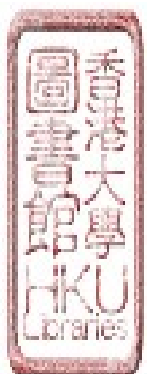
The Boat People is set in post-revolution Vietnam. A renowned Japanese photographer called Akutagawa who has witnessed the first day of Vietnam's liberation, returns to Vietnam three years later. Akutagawa is treated as a "foreign friend" and he expects to capture the "real" images

²⁰ Interviewed by Li Cheuk-to (1982, 9, 23:22).



of people⁷'s lives under the Communist rule. But the authority sweeps the truth under the carpet and controls Akutagawa's gaze by exposing only the hilarious life aspect to him. The truth of "liberated" Vietnam is only revealed when he strikes up a friendship with a Vietnamese girl, Cam Nuong. Soon he discovers the harsh realities of life in the country. People are in fact living under the scrutiny of the authority and in a condition of misery: freedoms of communication and movement are not allowed; people are restricted to keep touch with foreigners; good and bad people are being classified and located into different zones. People's subjectivities are defined in their relationship to the State. All people must be obedient to the State. Comrade Nguyen is no exceptional. He only boasts that he has studied in France. He is appearing to be a person who only drinks wine and has no job performance at all. In regardless of his official status, he is punished by the State to serve in economic Zone.

Cam Nuong's family is the representative of "the marginal". They are colonized by the Communist rule, living poorly and without power and dignity. Cam Nuong's father is dead. She and her brothers scavenge the bodies of corpses for living. Her mother is forced to be a prostitute. She finally commits suicide because the authority discloses her business and then publicly humiliates her. And one of Cam

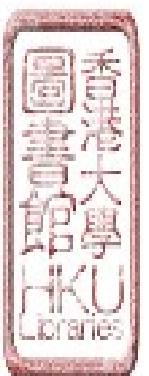


Nuong' s brothers is at last exploded to death by live mines when scavenging for scrap iron.

The film is intersected with another story of a young Vietnamese man, Jo-ming. As a new generation, he should be the hope of the country. But he is embodied with thought of refusing to turn himself into the "Same"—same condition of the marginal, or totality of Communism. He plans to leave for America, to drive himself away from the center control. Because of stealing Akutagawa's camera, he is sent to a "New Economic Zone", an internment camp in which prisoners are forced to digging up live mines. Even he is successfully on board, but all the people on the boat are finally killed by the brutal bullets of the authority. The scene is closed with a sense of catastrophe, which easily recalls my memory of the Tiananmen Massacre.

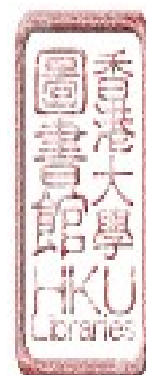
The film is finally closed with another tragic story. In our eyes, Akutagawa's role is very ambiguous. A local film critic, Li Cheuk-to analyzes that the character of the Japanese journalist is employed to convey a strong sense of disillusionment with politics, which is also reflective of the disillusionment with Communist China felt generally by Hong Kong people.²¹ Akutagawa is more than an outsider who tries to dismantle the myth of Communist rule. He comes

²¹ Li Cheuk-to (1994:167).



from the colonizer, Japan. His camera is a sign of authority with aim of capturing "reality". After the death of Cam Nuong's mother, Akutagawa packs up his camera and does not use it, because he feels depressed that he cannot capture the reality through it. But he is still adhered to the colonizer's culture and tries to impose his value on the "other". It is shown in the ways he dines with Cam Nuong in a western restaurant and he tries to "save" her out of the country. Hui tries to create the image of the death of colonizer through the character of Akutagawa. He is dead with a striking image. He is shot and devoured by flames sparked off by the gas tank he is carrying to help Cam Nuong leave Vietnam. Though presented in a very dramatic way, the unexpected ending is mixed with blazing passion which is able to stir up people's sentimentality. Cam Nuong is finally safe on boat, that seems to fulfill the "hope" of Jo-ming. The last shot is a freeze-frame of Cam Nuong hugging her brother, both staring at the sea. The image of sea gives a sense of unlimited boundaries, uncertainty and possibilities in future.

Not coincidentally, the film was shot on location in China's Hainan Island and all the Vietnamese Communist officials were role-played by Chinese actors. "At that time, Sino-Vietnamese relations were at a low point. Chinese authorities had given their support to the production of



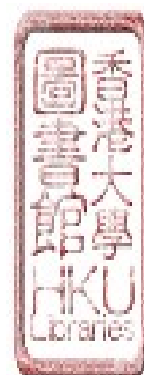
the film, no doubt because they had hoped it would be used as anti-Vietnamese propaganda*"²² But the film was finally turned out to be an indictment of Mainland China. For Hong Kong people, Vietnam was no different from China. They found no difficulty in equating the situation of post-liberalization with post-1997 Hong Kong. A sense of spatial and ideological difference between Hong Kong and China was implicated in the film. Though Hui had responded that she harbored no political motives (such as anti-communism) in making *The Boat People*,²³ the film was still politically censored by the Chinese government.

Apart from her conflict with China, Hui's passion for Vietnamese in the film is in great contrast to the common anguish feeling of Hong Kong people towards Vietnamese. For Hui, Vietnamese and Hongkongers are basically striving for the same thing—better life and political freedom. The film could be said as radical in the sense that it challenges our way of looking at Vietnam as the Other and the centrality of the Communist rule. Thus after its initial release in Hong Kong, the film has not been shown again.

The film has also been read as a political allegory in response to Hong Kong's situation. "It is a work that

²² *ibid.*

²³ Shu Kei (1988:49).

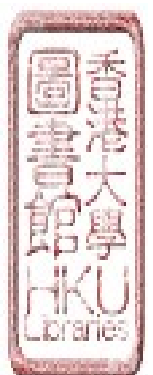


represents the climax of the new wave movement in Hong Kong, its aesthetics reverting to the melodramatic instincts that color the early realism of Hong Kong cinema in the 1950s and 1960s."²⁴ But the film has been criticized for "a reversion to conservatism. Its vision is limited to.... sympathy for the oppressed masses and a mild protest against the totalitarian system. It offers no objective or logical analysis, however, of the great historical tragedy that is Vietnam....Precisely because the Vietnam depicted in the film lacks a specific historical dimension, the Hong Kong audience could empathize with the characters."²⁵

It is not just a simple matter of sympathy. The "marginal" characters who are caught up in an impediment can represent Hong Kong people's conditions under the rule of China in the near future. The marginal does not attempt to resist the authority, but denies its legitimacy by exploring another space for themselves. It echoes Hong Kong situation in the early 80s when people flocked into other countries in fear of the Chinese authority. The tragedy in the film is not treated as a means of recovering human misery, but of provoking intensive emotion which successfully affords Hong Kong audiences an opportunity to get their anxieties and fears off their chest* Emotion is burst out in line with

²⁴ Li Cheuk-to (1994:167).

²⁵ *ibid.*

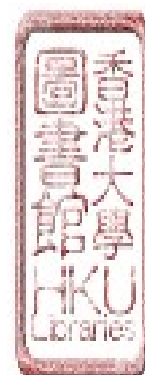


the Chinese film title, *Touben Vuhai*, denoting "darting into the angry sea".

A RETURN TO HISTORY

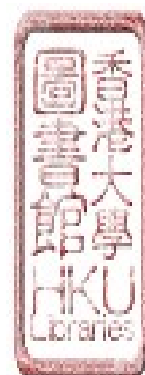
Hui continues to explore Hong Kong's relation to China with different concerns in her next films. *Love in a Fallen City* (1984) and *Romance of the Book and Sword* (1987). The former is a nostalgic mode of the past with romance. The latter is an examination of China's past history and ethnic identity. Both embody Hui's new perspective in articulation of the past history. Hui turns history into memory, an abstract idea which is in great contrast with the ways she condemns the past in *The Secret*.

Love in a Fallen City, together with Stephen Kwan's *Rough*, had swept a nostalgic wave in the late 80s. Its story is based on a well-known novelette by female writer, Eileen Chang. It is a wenyi style romance taking place in Shanghai and Hong Kong during the Sino-Japanese War when a wealthy socialite, Fan Liuyuan and a Shanghai divorcee, Bai Liusu are falling in love. Liusu is the archetypal "hurt" woman in Chinese literature. She is a traditionalist seeking sexual liberation. She personifies the Chineseness, as Fan is attracted to her because her manner suggests she is "100% Chinese". But in our eyes, her character remains traditional,



feminine and submissive. Fan, with western education, is associated with an image of westernized overseas Chinese. When the Japanese bomb Hong Kong, Fan brings Liusu to shelter in the Repulse Bay Hotel and thinks that the Japanese would not dare to attack the respectable hive of expatriates. But the Japanese military finally breaks through the British defense. The story ends with resolution of a happy wedding against the background of Hong Kong "being fallen" to the Japanese rule in 1941. The couple at last stay in Hong Kong.

One of the highlights in the film is the past history of Hong Kong. Since the signing of Treaty of Nanjing in 1842, Hong Kong had been colonized by the British. The Repulse Bay Hotel which was preserved on celluloid before being demolished, represented an old colonial relic. Plus news documentaries on the fall of Hong Kong by Japanese invasion in the film, the story is in fact set in a space where two colonizers meet. Hong Kong critics prefer to see the film as an allegory, linking the Japanese conquest of Hong Kong in 1941 to the impending takeover of the territory by the Chinese, once again bringing into play the anxieties and fears caused by 1997. But Hui seems to articulate the allegory in a different way. She problematizes the tragic images assigned to this historical events by romanticizing it through a love story which is developed regardless of time-space compress during the war. The couple's love

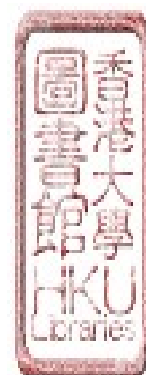


promise results in the mingling of East and West, a hybrid identity and shows their commitment to Hong Kong space.

The film could be further comprehended with reference to the discussions on Hong Kong nostalgia film culture. The local film critic, Li Cheuk-to, in *The postmodern turning-point of Hong Kong Cinema*, 92-93, suggests that Hong Kong nostalgia wave in Hong Kong is attributed to the "disappearance of political consciousness" caused by postmodernity and revealed by 97 question. But Natalia Chan points out the inapplicability of Jameson's concept of "disappearance of political consciousness" to Hong Kong situation. He asserts of "the political consciousness" as a search for our own history reflected in nostalgia cinema. "Nostalgia becomes a space for venting anger and repression caused by 1997 question. Our collective nostalgia is expressed on two levels: first, nostalgia is a way to beautify the past history and memory or to deny/criticize the ills of the present. In this way, the past will turn into an image of golden age. Second, it is a way to build up self-identity. A strong self-consciousness is already aroused by 97 question."²⁶

Nostalgia is a function-mode of pastiche which develops from a desire to go back to the past and re-read the reality.

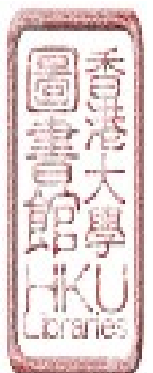
²⁶ Chan, Natalia (1995:161).



It breaks the temporal continuity, and eliminates the historical distance between the past and the present. Hui uses the nostalgic mode to return our memory to the past. The past meaning of our colonized history would be reread and becomes part of the development of our identity. In her treatment of history, Hui does not try to displace or argue a "real" history but to beautify it as a love space for undermining the pressure bequeathed to us on 97 question. And the characters' stay in Hong Kong could be read as a beginning of developing local culture, to counter the war force of cultural distortion. In a word, the film is not using the past to reveal the present²⁷, but keeping our memory of the past alive in the present.

Hui continues her nostalgia pursuit, in *Romance of the Book and Sword* (1987), but this time, for the older days of Chinese history. The narrative is based on a novel by martial arts writer, Jin Yong. It proposes that the Emperor Qianlong, one of the Manchu Qing Dynasty's most successful emperors who reigned between 1735-96, was a Han Chinese and not of Manchu stock. The film confirms continuity of historical rule of Han and brings up the issue of ethnic purity. The film is seen as a typical example with "China

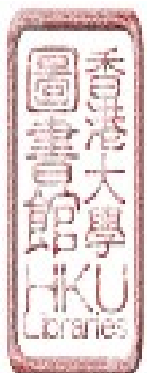
²⁷ The film was criticized of using the past to reveal the present which soon became a cliché and of lacking a mature understanding of politics. See Li Cheuk-to (1994:169).



syndrome" in the mid-80s. "The China syndrome belies the contemporary political equation of Chinese nationalism with the communist regime in China. On the contrary, it asserts Hong Kong's identity as a separate cultural, social and political entity not to be confused with China."^{7,28}

Hui's view on China in this film is sharply different from that in *The Boat People*. It is not so simple that the former puts more emphasis on the past while the latter centers on the present and the future. Nor does Hui intend to maintain purity in Chinese ethic or to glorify our history. The specialty is that she has invoked the martial arts genre within a very different cultural system. She went to take this film in China where filmmaking system and culture are greatly different from those of Hong Kong. And Hui appropriated the culture by only employing Chinese stars and working together with the Chinese crew. As a result, her cinematic images in the film can maintain an aura of classical Chinese's pictures. But Hui's practice should not be treated as a retreat to the origin, China. Her attempt is only a passion for her past which seems to have same link with China. As reflected by the film, Hong Kong people and Chinese mainlanders are sharing a common ethnicity, even they are culturally and politically distinct from each other. It seems to admit that Hong Kong and China have a common

²⁸ Teo Stephan (1997:112).

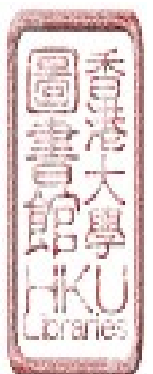


historical past, but they are still two separate cultural and political entities. Ironically, the story might not be true as it is only based on ancient Chinese folklore. "Real" or "unreal" is not a point to justify history here- Attitude and passion to history become more relevant.

POLITICS IN THE "PERSONAL"

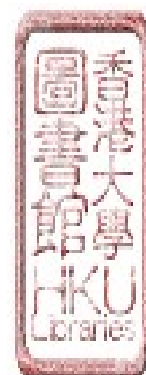
Approaching the 90s, the future of Hong Kong became more unpromising to a climax after the breakout of Tiananmen Massacre in 1989. Confidence Crisis had been intensified. Self-censorship resulted from the tense political situation. Cultural productions with a bearing on China became politically sensitive. Hui made a serious turn towards personal subject matter in respond to this critical situation. She tried to articulate the politics deep in the private space, i.e. "linking politics to the personal" as suggested by Abbas. Her attempt brought into the successful production of a politically tinged family melodrama, *Song of Exile*, in 1990.

Song of Exile is a break with the kind of realism codified by the Chinese family melodramas popular throughout the 50s and 60s when didactic approach was deployed to observe morality and Confucian family ethics. Hui does not make melodrama function as a bridge between everyday life and



moral teaching, but as an interrogation of the self with his/her political context. Hui has taken this experiment in *Starry is the Night* (1988), which features about a doomed romance against the political backgrounds transcending from the Hong Kong riots of the 1960s to the Direct Election in 1980s- But in the film, the political issues perform like a "backdrop" and the political stance is finally lost its way in an ambivalent love relationship. *Song of Exile* (1990) should be a more mature piece of works in articulation of political melodrama. It once again shores up Hui's avant-garde status. The film has been highly regarded because it is a serious examination of the local's future direction, with calamity and introspection. It is strongly distinct from other films of that period or even from Hui's earlier films, which commonly perceive the perplexity and fear of 97 question.

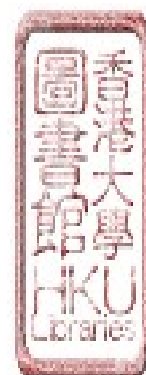
Song of Exile is about a family romance focusing on the mother and daughter relationship. Along with the principal theme of the need for understanding, various issues of displacement/dislocation, and cultural identity are brought up. The film starts with the daughter, Hueyin, who has left Hong Kong to study broadcast reporting in London, returning home for her sister's wedding. She is reunited with her mother, Aiko in Hong Kong. But the two are constantly in conflict. Then the film is followed by a series of



flashbacks including memories of early days in Macau when Hueyin is living happily with her grandparents, but with an absent father working in Hong Kong and a very different mother. After Hueyin realizes that her mother is Japanese, her memories of the past and her mother's behavior are reassessed. Here, Hui has adopted a new technique of "flashbacks of flashbacks". Abbas has observed that the series of flashbacks determining the narrative flow in the film are structured more spatially than chronologically. He points out that the flashback techniques used by Ann Hui show us "the unmeshing of past and present which force a reevaluation of both memory and experience. They are flashbacks of flashbacks as memories themselves are reassessed and finally understood... the film's structure is one of reconciliation, of puzzling experience illuminated by understanding."²⁹

The mother, who is a Japanese getting married with a Chinese after the fall of Japanese rule, is signified as the colonized. In an alien country, she becomes unspeakable, repressed and alienated. Her experience of displacement leads to her emotional confusion about home and her cultural identity. Thus her behavior is so strange and she estranges from her daughter and in-laws. Finally, Akio's visit to Japan reveals her memory to homeland, her past in which her

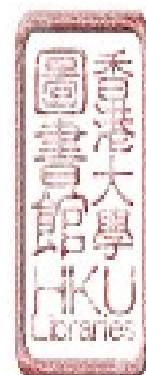
²⁹ Abbas (1997:38) .



identity can be sought. When Cheung accompanies her mother to Japan, she falls into a predicament in communication with the Japanese and their customs. She discovers the strong similarities between her mother and herself, both of whom have lived as exiles • Afterwards, Hueyin becomes reconciled with her mother and realizes her painful experience of living as "the other" in a colonized space.

Displacement also involves the invention of new forms of subjectivities, pleasure and relationships. Hueyin and her mother return happily to Hong Kong and both regard Hong Kong as their home, Heiyin becomes a reporter at a local television station, that is in great contrast with her earlier desire to work in BBC in England. There is a scene in which Heiyin is reporting a local demonstration against corruption in the early 60s. It implicates Heiyin's commitment to Hong Kong society. The film finally ends with Hueyin in China engulfed in the Cultural Revolution. She goes to Guangzhou to visit her ailing grandfather who has been criticized by Red Guards for sending a book of Song Dynasty poetry to his granddaughter. The grandparents "purse the romance back to China, fail to overcome the past and suffer the consequences of their fantasy."³⁰ At last, the granddad dies as a victim of the Cultural Revolution. When he dies, he still persists in imparting to Hueyin one final

³⁰ Abbas (1997:37) .



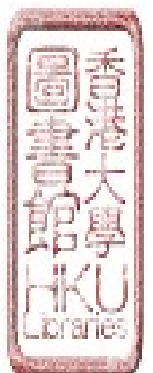
word of wisdom: "China still has hope".

The film consistently conveys that history and political events interfere with personal lives. Abbas has given insightful analyses of the film, stating that "in the film, the personal is political, and understanding one's mother and one's own personal history is the precondition for understanding history and society, specially Hong Kong history and society."³¹ The past and history itself could be changed through the overcoming of misunderstandings. It is the strength of the film but also its weakness due to its simplification of colonialism as a misunderstanding.

Hui is very much concerned with recovering an appropriate identifying relationship between self and place* In the film, Hong Kong is situated in shifting relationships with other social-affective spaces, London, Macau, Japan, Manchuria, China. There is lack of clarity in addressing Hong Kong cultural space. Hong Kong might be manifesting a contradictory dimensions of cultural spatial relations in which conflict could be resolved through understanding, such as the cultural conflict between Hong Kong and China.

But we should note that *Song of the Exile* is Hui's semi-autobiography. Like the protagonist, Ann Hui is the

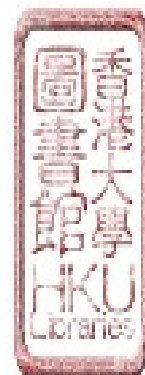
³¹ *ibid.*



daughter of a Japanese mother and a Chinese father, and returned home from London. Manchuria is Hui's birthplace. London is her former study place. Macau, China, Japan and Hong Kong have historically and culturally interrelationships. Hong Kong is where she now lives. We observe that Hui's subjectivity is not based on a definite somewhere but on her own internalized history in relation to confusing spatial relations. The question of self-location in space seems to be addressed in the film. But we will see more clearly how the issue will be further explored in her latest short film, *As Time Goes By*, which is more than self-questioning and self-invention.

A woman space

On the other hand, Hui is one of the very few female filmmakers in Hong Kong and she is the rare who can put new emphasis on local female roles. In her earlier films, Hui had offered women a wider range of roles and always employed them in film production. For instances, both *The Secret* and *The Spooky Bunch* were produced, written and directed by women. *Love in A Fallen City* (1984) and *Eighteen Springs* (1997) are appropriations of the women images constructed in Eileen Chang's novels. *Song of Exile* is an attempt on mother and daughter relationship, but being criticized for "leaving no room for doubt that identity hinges on the patriarchy's



exploitation of its prejudices, under which all women-whether mother or daughter-are expected to submit".³² It is all until the mid~90s when Hui has produced two films particularizing women's struggles. They are *Summer Snow* (1995) and *Ah Kam: The Story of A Stunt Woman* (1996).

But we should bear in mind, a strong mark of feminism has not existed in the local cinema. Nor does Hui claim herself as a feminist. As in a recent interview with Hui by the Film Festival, she ends with half seriousness: "Is violence against women really widespread? Are there any women issues left?" Hui is attracted to *Eighteen Springs* not because of its portrayal of women. She said in an interview, "I am attracted to its world view and not its portrayal of women. But in depicting that world view, it naturally goes into the female conditions."³³ Hui's concern on gender issues may be driven by her social consciousness. But whether she aims at woman issues is not at issue here. My concern focuses on the new cinematic images of women which may problematize the cultural gender space of Hong Kong. Obviously, most of the central protagonists of Hui's films are female and their construction of subjectivities is strongly related to social prohibition.

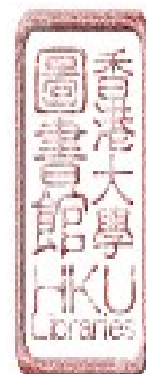
³² Teo, Stephan (1990:91) .

³³Interviewed by Linda Lai (1998:53) .



Suimer Snow and *Ah Kam: The Story of A Stunt Woman* have manifest women content. They concern the subjectivity of local women in their struggle with social pressures and macho values. But *Ah Kam* is not so successful because woman position is lost in masculine space, a male-dominated film production industry. *Summer Snow* in contrast has met enormous success, which partly comes from Siao Fong-fong's outstanding performance, and partly due to its clarity in woman's position. It can be said that *Summer Snow* possesses the highest sensitivities to female subjectivity amongst Ann Hui's films. Not surprisingly, it has swept the Hong Kong Film Awards, and garnered the Best Actress prize at the Berlin Film Festival for Siao Fong-fong.

In the film, Siao plays a married middle-aged woman called Sun, who has a strong character. The narrative develops through her experience and feeling. Sun has two roles, a housewife and a career woman. At home, Sun needs to cook for her family and takes on her in-laws. Traditionally, women were always confined to their kitchens, a private space for women. For instance, a shot taken from a high angle perspective showing Sun and her mother-in-law cooking in a kitchen through a barred window gives us an image of prison women. Since her in-law mother has gone, Sun becomes an isolated figure as the only female member in the family. Her isolation is shown by a scene in which

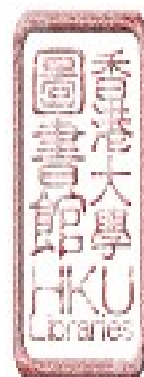


Sun cries alone to express her inner pain.

Sun is a victim overloaded with family responsibility and the responsibility of attending to her father-in-law. The film puts great emphasis on the relationship between Sun and her in-law father who is diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease- Her in-law father suffers memory loss and can only memorize the past day when he was being a lieutenant in Air Force, giving orders and attacking enemies. His mental illness makes him dependent on Sun that is a sign of his diminishing phallic power.

Sun also works as a sales manager in a merchandising company. She is a capable and sophisticated worker, with manual dexterity. Her image is in great contrast with her new colleague, Isabelle, who dresses up trendy and can attract her boss. Besides, her computerization project is fully supported by her boss. She represents an object of male gaze. Sun is soon neglected by her boss. It explicates the career difficulties faced by the middle-aged women who are under the threat of being replaced by technology. It is a pressing social issue for the local women employers nowadays when our space is becoming more digitized.

Sun's subjectivity can be understood in spatial relation between family and workplace. It is articulated between the



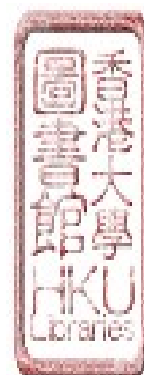
private (family) and the public (society) spaces. Sun can make herself as a subject in the latter space. That is why Sun is not willing to quit her job and claims to her husband that her job is the greatest pleasure of her life. For Sun, home maps the repressions and contradictions of interior spaces. But the film does not focus on how a woman is being oppressed, but on how she lives up and justifies her role in a system wrought by patriarchy and tradition. When the whole family needs to take care of the old. Sun's husband first appears as a coward who cannot handle the family conflict. Sun appears to be the strongest in the family. She is overburdened, but she shows her capability of caring for her father-in-law, consoling her love frustrated son, and even encouraging her husband. For sake of filial piety, she decides to give up her job to fully take care of her in-law. But her resignation is dramatically turned down by her boss and is replaced by a long leave. Sun's burden is also gradually undermined with considerable support from his husband and son. And her relationship with her in-law father becomes more affective.

At last resort, her in-law father is sent to the Old Home. But Sun feels regret of leaving him alone and thus takes him back home. The merit of Confucian ethic of undertaking the duty of filial piety to the old generation is preserved in the film. On their way home, there is a



striking image of petals falling from the trees. The image is associated with a Chinese tale about the frost fall in June. The tale denotes two possible meanings, anticipation of a tragedy and glory of the filial piety. Both meanings are realized in the end of the film. In the end, the whole Sun family enjoy holidays in a farm field. The in-law father tells a very romantic story to Sun that he is going to date with a fairy up on the mountain and he asks Sun about the meaning of life. The story explicates a sense of separation, resonant to his death from heartbreak soon after his sharing. His death seems to be an outlet to Sun, but now is deemed as a loss to her. Hui employs a simple plot but it turns out to be a surprisingly uplifting film. The result makes people feel that there is hope in life and women could face life's pressures accordingly.

The film assesses the space of Hong Kong in terms of masculine and feminine/public and private. Women traditionally took care of children and home life while men worked to feed the family. So women were expected to make a home haven, to safeguard the emotional well being of the family, so as to absorb the contradictions of this separation of production and consumption, work and pay, public and private spheres. But the situation has undergone change. As film critic observes, there are ^vemphases on women and emotion as a natural development in the 80s because women

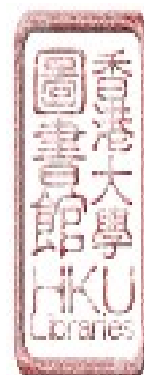


are becoming major players in Hong Kong society as it surges ahead in the road to modernization. Women are becoming more economically independent and cannot be neglected as characters in their own right- The age when women were seen only as housewives was past. Film-makers have to take into account the tastes of the female sector of the audience."³⁴

Hui conducts her discussion of local gender issue on a board level. She does not hold onto the concept of difference or tension between man and woman as a tool to question multiple forms of repression and dominance. Tension which emerges around gender and representation of woman with patriarchal symbol is rarely seen in the film. Instead of ideological criticism, Hui rather articulates for the "other" by returning to concrete basics, the social structure and women's ways of living.

In *Summer Snow*, Sun lives with many burdens. She represents most of the local married women who are faced with double burdens of family and work. Hui tries to shoot the female subject in both spaces, inside and outside, as spatial coordinates of woman's identity- And she is successful to establish new cinematic expression on women and to suggest a space of self-invention for women. Sun's image does not give a sense of tolerance and submission,

³⁴ Sek Kei (1991:59) .

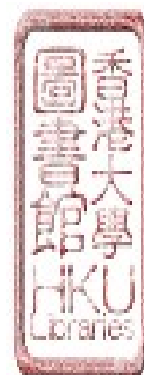


but projects an image of modern woman who has competence in negotiation with conditions and in overcoming difficulties. Her image is subversive to the traditional cinematic women images of "sacrificial victims" or "femme fatal" which are submissive to the macho systems. In the past, Cantonese woman films sided with the powerless, innocence and filled with frail beauties beset by misfortune and woman weepie.³⁵ Hui's new female image turns out to be a method of evoking a problematic gender space and of subverting culturally dominant modes of male spectatorship as well.

Hui is a pioneer in exploration of the woman space in contemporary Hong Kong cinema. As Mulvey notes, the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form, making it a voyeuristic, scopophilic language of desire, with woman as image and man as bearer of the look.³⁶ Hui is deviant from the mainstream cinematic forms that are constructed essentially for the traditionally heterosexual male viewer. For examples, the gangster film and the kung fu movies. In those films, women are either being looked-at, displayed for the gaze of male protagonists as well as of male spectators, or they only hold the look to signify the male desire. In *Summer Snow*, Hui tries to "dis-embodiment"

³⁵ For details, see Wong Ain-ling (1986).

³⁶ Mulvey, Laura (1990).



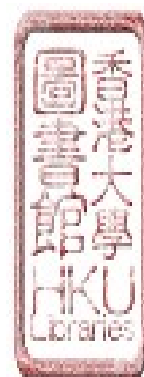
the female voice"³⁷. Sun's voice is not embodied by male subjects. In the film, she can speak for herself and her voice is heard. She is the speaking subject woman instead of being looked-at and remained silent. By this film, Hui has created a female subject of the cinematic gaze and adopts melodrama as the expression of "cultural repression of unconscious desire (sexual, oedipal)" and "a function of expressing what cannot be said"³⁸. She has formed a "woman genre", by privileging female characters and issues, exploring a feminine world of subjectivity, emotion and feeling, giving dis-embodied female voice and constructing woman spectatorship. In this light, Hui explores the possibility of a feminine subject of Hong Kong cinema and the possible role of women in fostering local culture.

AS TIME GOES BY

As hand-over drew near in 1997, a lot of independent film productions were sparked off- Filmmakers put down their thoughts and feelings to moving images at this historical moment of change and new possibilities. They showed signs of commitment to the city. Hui responded by making a short film, *As Time Goes By* (1997) , which has been publicly shown in the Film Festival and the Art Centre this year.

³⁷ Silverman, Kaja {1990: 309-326}.

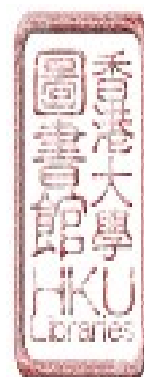
³⁸ Kaplan, Ann (1991:8).



As Time Goes By is Ann Hui's most personal film, with a storyline derived from her own life. The film is about a roundtable formed by Hui's college friends sharing about their past, political involvement, cultural activities and their confused identities as Chinese living in a British colony. It also documents her childhood, living place and good old days. She also talks to her mother, a Japanese woman whom she considers a perfect example of a Hong Kong person. For Hui, it seems that people's relationship is the key in making of her history. As she notes, "What Hong Kong means to me is not the place, but the people- To make this film makes me reflect on the people I intimately know, and of myself-how I have become the person I am. So I grouped some schoolmates together to have a chat about our past specially our education and our cultural lives (which I have never pondered on before), and it has led to some enlightenment even for myself-our limitation and our strength,"³⁹

But *As Time Goes By* does not turn out a proud testimony of Ann Hui's personal history. Nor does the film present an investigation into the issue of identity. The most provocative aspect of the film should be the way she drives an autobiographical documentary project which comes out a fiction of Hong Kong.

³⁹ Extracted from *Artslink* (June 1998:16).

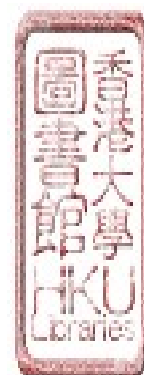


As *Time Goes By* is a mixture of autobiography and documentary style, never before been seen in Hong Kong cinema. In traditional view_f, autobiography was entering into the "dominating subject". It connoted phallocentrism when a coherent individual represented his/her own self by using language as a tool. But according to D.C.Stanton, conception of autobiography has radically changed that the author is ineluctably caught in a temporal gap and any writing of the self is inextricably fiction of the self. As she describes, "the past is never a presence but an absence. This is textual substance necessarily involved a creation, an invention at the moment of enunciation."⁴⁰ And Sprinker speaks of the end of the traditional autobiography as "concepts of the subject, self and author collapse into the act of producing a text."⁴¹ The autobiographical text becomes self-defeating and the subject personal "I" is overridden in indeterminate textual process.

Hui's way of writing autobiography is fictional. She is not documenting or representing her own self and her past life. The film involves a group of people who are telling a story about Hong Kong. The whole filmmaking process involves a self-defeating process to produce a text about Hong Kong. In the film, the subject "I" does not refer to

⁴⁰ Stanton, D.C. (1987:9) .

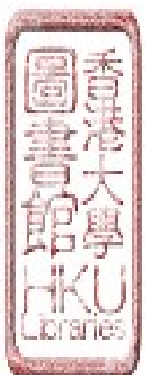
⁴¹ Sprinker Michael (1990:3) .



Hui nor anyone else. The personal "I" is undermined by the positioning of voices in the film. There is no homogenous voice. Rather it allows other voices to be heard with different attitudes and perspectives on Hong Kong. For instance, in the roundtable meeting, Hui sits together with her friends and they recall their university lives. Different voices are expressed and heard. But under a free setting, two out-spoken voices seem to be dominating.

Besides, the documentary style is not used for greater realism. Hui collapses the usual distinction between documentary and fiction. She is in fact impossible to capture reality of the past on the run. Reality runs away in the space. She is only documenting how she is trying to reread the past. A fixed conception of the past reality does not exist. Hui composes it in a collective memory and passion on local history, which is interpreted and created through different voices in the film. "The past is never a presence but an absence." The past disappears in a new form of expression. It could only be expressed in a feeling, as suggested by the Chinese film title, *Qu Ri Ku Duo*, "the past is filled with pains".

Hui's "self-defeating" in autobiography, her use of documentary to create a "reality" and a collective writing of Hong Kong should be considered more innovative than her

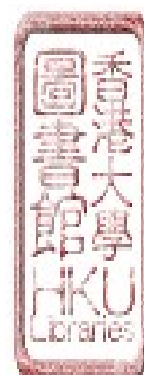


previous fictional narrative films- It is observed that Hui recognizes the necessity of composing history on life in Hong Kong or making this space with history which is absent before. So she turns history in making.

Conclusion: In creation of local culture

It is an unsolved problem that Hong Kong can not be a postcolonial city- But people will continue to response to this political dilemma to prevent their subjectivity from being threatened. Such a postcolonial response is highlighted by Hui's treatment of politics, history, self, woman space and her experimentation of a diversity of genres and film techniques. Her socio-political argument and new cinematic practices we have discussed above, can make a possible rupture with patriarchal filmic codes and conventions, and problematize our way of seeing at Other, our history and gender space, just name a few. She has put much effort on provoking local people's social sentiment, thought and passion to make them alert to their changing political and social contexts.

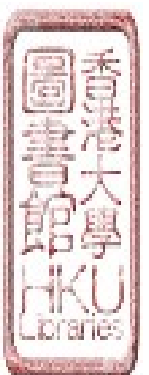
Hui's response is a reaction to Hong Kong's political and social mutations. She has not figured out what Hong Kong culture is like. Nor can we measure the extent of Hong Kong being found a subject itself. Hui has only attempted to evoke



the invisible passion to be more visible, recover the unknown history to be known by us, and grasp the ungraspable emotion. It is a practice in search of a local subject space through articulating new expressions and new possibilities.

Her practice is like in a state of searching out. When we are searching, there should be something/ someone missing or unknown. The missing is a presence not an absence. Hong Kong culture has been contaminated by the colonizers. Hong Kong people are now going to find out what they have lost in their culture. But this loss is "invisible" or "unknown" to them, they need to create and reinvent "the loss" by themselves. Thus there is no a fixed conception of local culture at all. Hong Kong Culture should involve a process of creation and reinvention by the subjects themselves. Otherwise, they will fall into the mis-representation of Hong Kong by employing the old binarisms (for example, the conflict between tradition and modernity in *The Secret*) and the stale conventions only. It is similar to the case of "reverse hallucination", put forward by Abbas,⁴² in which we are seeing what is not there. Reverse hallucination open opportunities for creation of Hong Kong postcolonial subjectivity, but it also sets traps hazardous to the subjectivity because "Hong Kong is such an elusive subject,

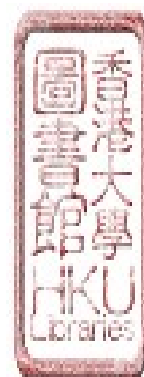
⁴² Abbas (1997:25).



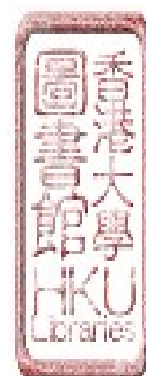
there is a temptation to use, and to believe in, the established forms of (mis) representation* This is disappearance, then, in a very specific sense in that it gives us a reality that is not so much hidden as purloined,"¹

Ann Hui is invulnerable and remarkable for her cinematic works. She is capable of giving artistic expression to the deeper currents and shaping influence of culture. But she does not try to redirect or direct local cinema orientation, but only to locate herself in a cultural space which allows resistance and possibilities for change. After 1997, Hong Kong's film production has been shrunken. But the situation has created more opportunities for independent or auteur filmmakers to take film in low production cost. And people can apply funds from the Arts Development Council for independent filmmaking. We can speculate that the local cinema will become more open to new young local filmmakers and artistic maneuvering. "Cinema After 1997" will draw our attention in near future and a comparative study of Ann Hui's films between pre-1997 and post-1997 will be highly recommended in order to investigate any change in our local cultural space.

When this dissertation is near to fruition, Hui is making a new film which is about a nostalgic love story. The story concerns a love couple returning memory to their childhood



experience against the political background of evacuation of boat people in the 70s in Hong Kong. Re-emphasis on memory and the past may form an impulse for assessing any "changes" in Hong Kong cultural space after 1997.



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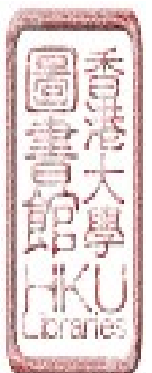
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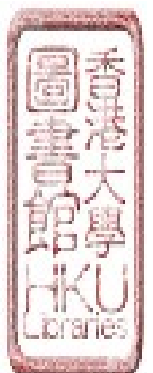
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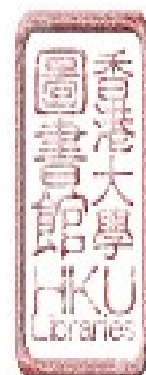
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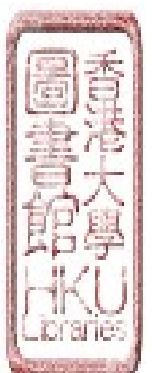
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