STANLEY KWAN'S
Center Stage

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1

On Method, Production, and Reception

Center Stage (a.k.a. *Actress*, *Ruan Lingyu* and *Yuen Ling-yuk*), the fifth of Stanley Kwan's feature films, was released in Hong Kong on February 20, 1992. As the film's various titles jointly suggest, this work references the early Chinese film star, Ruan Lingyu (Yuen Ling-yuk), who committed suicide on International Women's Day in 1935, at the young age of 25 and at the height of her career. During her short life Ruan Lingyu made 29 films, playing roles as 'peasant, worker, social butterfly, beggar, student, teacher, nun' and prostitute in films directed by many of the directors associated with the golden age of Chinese cinema (Meyer 2005: 2). Kwan's film begins in 1929, the year in which Ruan Lingyu started working for the newly established Lianhua studio in Shanghai, and concludes with her suicide in 1935. While Ruan Lingyu was the object of pernicious gossip during her short life, and the occasion for all kinds of mythmaking after her death, some of the narrative elements have become part of a settled consensus view, thereby qualifying as factually correct.

Ruan Lingyu's family was originally from Guangdong, but had settled in Shanghai, where her father found modestly paying work with a foreign company. When Ruan Lingyu's father died some six years after her birth, her mother sought employment as a maid with the wealthy Zhang family, also originally from Guangdong. The youngest son, Zhang Damin, became Ruan Lingyu's common law husband in due course. When the couple separated some years later, it was Ruan Lingyu who supported the gambling womanizer Zhang Damin through alimony payments derived from her acting contract with Lianhua. While Zhang's motives are a matter of some speculation, he is known in 1935 to have filed a legal suit against Ruan Lingyu and Tang Jishan, a wealthy, married tea merchant with whom she was living. The charges leveled against Ruan Lingyu and Tang Jishan were adultery, theft, and falsification of documents.

The legal battle initiated by Zhang coincided with the release of Cai Chusheng's *New Woman* (*Xin Nuxing*, 1934), in which Ruan Lingyu played the role of Ai Xia, an actress who had actually committed suicide in 1934 as a result of rumours about her person circulated by the popular press. Scandalized no doubt by the critical depiction of the press as a mere rumour machine, journalists found a ready scapegoat in Cai Chusheng's lead actress, whose personal life they proceeded to expose in lurid and distorted detail. The kind of strategic and exploitative maneuvering that caused Ruan Lingyu to take her own life continued after her death, with Tang Jishan releasing two suicide notes, the one addressed 'To Society', the other to himself, both of which were subsequently shown to be forgeries. Ruan Lingyu, it turned out, had in fact written notes to both Tang Jishan and Zhang Damin in which she linked her suicide to physical abuse at the hands of the former and psychological abuse inflicted by the latter (Meyer 2005: xvi, 61–66). One of the phrases from the false note addressed 'To Society' — 'gossip is a fearful thing' — has, however, come over the years somehow to summarize the

complex causes leading to Ruan Lingyu's death, a result no doubt of Chinese modernist writer Lu Xun's critical essay, which uses the line as its title and as part of a serious condemnation of the popular press and its scandal-minded readers. Noted around the world for its spectacular nature, Ruan Lingyu's funeral procession drew over 100,000 mourners. This massive mobilization clearly suggests the extent to which Ruan Lingyu had touched Chinese audiences through her many evocations of the sufferings of women in China, but it no doubt also points to the variability of public opinion and to guilt-ridden realizations of the tragic consequences of actually generating or passively condoning malicious talk.

Although Kwan's film explores the legend that is Ruan Lingyu, it defies easy generic classification as a biopic or as one of a number of different kinds of documentary filmmaking. The film's reflexive, documentary dimension marks its departure from the generic regularities of typical biopics, while its invitation to engage in a certain amount of make-believe complicates its relation to some of the more standard approaches to non-fiction film. The film's referent, we shall see, is more inclusive than some of its titles suggest, for the point is not simply to explore the legendary life and works of Ruan Lingyu, but also to display the persona and abilities of the actress who stands in for the Cantonese-speaking Shanghai actress in reconstructions pertaining to her life and to scenes from several of her lost films. Footage documenting Kwan and his crew as they research and shoot their film, or as they reflect on the cinematic process in which they are engaged, further expands the referential scope of the film, making it a reflection on the nature of film itself, and, more important, on one possible model for filmmaking and its implications within a Hong Kong and larger Chinese context. While 'biopic' and 'documentary' are classificatory terms that immediately come to mind in connection with *Center Stage*, it is clear that the film also warrants consideration as a heritage or nostalgia film, or in terms of the genres that largely

define Kwan's career up until the making of the highly personal film essay, *Yang + Yin: Gender in the Chinese Cinema* (*Nan Sheng Nu Xiang*, 1996): melodrama and women's film.[1]

That *Center Stage* should occupy a privileged site within the New Hong Kong film canon is not surprising, for the film brings into play many of the elements that define the very concept of a New Hong Kong cinema: a significant work by a director with a distinctive style or voice who is able to move audiences (be they local, transnational, or global) through reflections (whether direct or indirect) on Hong Kong culture and identity in the period following the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration dictating Hong Kong's reversion to China in 1997, a timeframe that coincides with the intensification of various globalizing processes. While neo-realism, the nouvelle vague and the New German Cinema all relied on the idea of a radical break with the past, it is the New Hong Kong cinema that has the most intimate relation to the rupturous and potentially creative dynamics of socially significant time, what the Greek-born French philosopher, Cornelius Castoriadis (1998), calls kairotic time. Unlike chronological time, which measures the passing of equally insignificant moments, kairotic time transcends the banalities of interchangeable units and introduces a properly existential dimension. If chronological time is the temporality of petty bureaucrats, kairotic time is the temporality of festival and revolution, of creativity and change. By virtue of the chronologies of its conception (early 1989), production (1990–91), and release (1991/92), *Center Stage*, much more so than many of the other titles associated with the New Hong Kong cinema, is deeply imbricated with the kairotic temporality of postcolonial Hong Kong. *Center Stage* is produced and released at a time when Hong Kongers were given traumatic occasion (as a result of the Tiananmen massacre on June Fourth, 1989) to engage, yet again, with the implications of the handover. As we shall see, the film's formal features (and arguably generic characteristics) are

themselves affected by the events in question. *Center Stage* is, then, quite literally marked by the kind of socially significant temporality that underwrites the idea of an ever-expanding corpus of films capable of articulating the being and becoming of Hong Kong as it envisages, or actually grapples with, various postcolonial possibilities and realities.

Angles and Approaches

Even the most cursory survey of the history of film scholarship reveals a plethora of methodological choices, encompassing (among many others) the stylistic analysis of early film historians, the more theory-driven Marxist psycho-semiology of the 1970s and 80s, the more recent cognitive turn, and the largely concurrent emphasis on culture, broadly speaking, that characterizes a cultural studies approach to film. Some of these positions on film and its appropriate study insist on the importance of context, on the need, for example, to understand the history of a given film's production, distribution, and reception, whereas others foreground the autonomy of cinematic works, in some cases even from authorial intention, encouraging attention to intrinsic (acontextual) formal properties and, in some mobilizations of the autonomy thesis, to the ideological effects that can be derived, at a theoretical rather than empirical level, from these properties. While most film scholars, myself included, tend to work if not entirely within, then at least in ongoing conversation with, one of the major paradigms on offer, the question does arise as to how best to approach the particular task at hand, which is to shed light on *Center Stage* as an instance of the New Hong Kong cinema. Let me briefly outline some of the duties, challenges, and temptations as I see them.

Practitioner's agency

One of the privileges of writing about contemporary Hong Kong cinema is that the people who make the films are available for discussions about their works, as is indeed characteristically the case with small-nation cinemas. Hong Kong qualifies as a small nation on two counts: it qualifies for small nation status by virtue of its history of foreign rule, and on account of its limited territory and population size (Hjort 2005). The handover, interestingly, marks the beginning of a process of transformation that will likely result in large nation status. In a small-nation context it is possible to ask directors, scriptwriters, cinematographers, producers, and any number of other film professionals about the specific intentions that informed their contributions to a given work, about the problems they encountered in the course of executing those intentions, and about their overall assessment of the final work. In small-nation contexts, in short, the details of what I want to call practitioner's agency can be accessed to a significant degree. The temptation that arises as a result is to assume that it is somehow the duty of the film scholar faithfully to describe the aims, conflicts, problems, and solutions associated with a film's production, as they are more or less accurately remembered, and more or less accurately recounted, by its makers. Indeed, inasmuch as the very possibility of accessing practitioner's agency hinges on a dialogic or properly communicative stance, on a manifest orientation toward mutual understanding, any critical scrutinizing of stated intentions in what Paul Ricoeur (1970) famously referred to as a hermeneutics of suspicion easily becomes a form of betrayal, one that quickly forecloses future dialogue between critic and practitioner about the small-nation cinema in question. Yet, a critical discussion must do more than simply rehearse the views of practitioners, and not only because the narrative that emerges from various exchanges may fail to produce a coherent picture. The challenge, then, is to

interpret and analyze aspects of practitioner's agency, but to do so in a way that does not betray the trust upon which interviews and friendly conversations are based.

Film form

Unlike monographs or articles, a film classics series presents a welcome opportunity to explore every aspect of the chosen work. There is room, for example, for careful dissections of the film into sequences and scenes with an eye to understanding the relation between story and plot and the nature of the film's narration. And within this more general dissection, a more detailed analysis of the film in terms of shots (their type, angle, and duration), sound-image relations, mise-en-scene, and art design can be readily accommodated. While any film deserving classification as a classic or canonical text is likely to be characterized by a formal complexity that merits description, *Center Stage* displays a level of intricacy that even critics committed to formal or stylistic analysis have been unable to detail in shorter pieces. The *pars pro toto* strategy adopted by Julian Stringer in his generally helpful '*Center Stage*: Reconstructing the Bio-Pic', is thus in many ways characteristic of the literature on Kwan's film:

> *Center Stage* as a whole is extremely difficult to segment — its mix of baffling scene transitions, flashforwards, and non-simultaneous voice-overs would make even Christian Metz spit in impotent rage — but one relatively autonomous segment that I would like to concentrate on is based around the filming of *New Woman* at Lianhua Studios. (1997: 35)

The result of the *pars pro toto* strategy, unavoidably so, is that the workings and dynamics of *Center Stage* as a semiotic system generated by formal elements and their motivated combination has yet to be analyzed in depth. The case for extensive formal analysis

of *Center Stage* is further strengthened by the existence — sometimes entirely overlooked by critics, other times merely noted in passing — of an original director's cut and shortened version of the work that differ in many important respects. Like most approaches to film, formal analysis is caught up with its own temptations, tending as it does towards a fetishism of form, the idea of form as an end in-and-of-itself becoming all the more convincing somehow as the mind focuses intensely on various intrinsic properties. The challenge, then, is to ensure that the compelling need for formal analysis of *Center Stage* does not efface questions having to do with what the formal system ultimately amounts to in cultural, political, or existential terms.

Relevance: theoretical and pre-theoretical conceptions

To do justice to a film classic is also to speak to its deeper meanings, understood as cultural significance, to provide some sense of why the work actually does or should matter. It is to provide answers to the question of relevance that linguists (Sperber and Wilson 1986), following the example of Paul Grice (1991), have singled out as central to communicative processes. Many film scholars, particularly those committed to self-understandings involving resistance to dominant and largely unjust arrangements, are strongly attuned to the importance of relevance, although sometimes at the expense of careful attention to the work's intrinsic features. An interest in cultural analysis often finds expression in terms of a consistent gravitation towards certain recurring problems and social dynamics. And the temptation, in some cases, is for the critic to discover the work's deeper significance in that very cluster of concepts, theories, and interpretations that make up her general framework for understanding cultural matters at a given moment in time. Yet, the film classic disappears from view in the very moment when such general theories are simply imposed on the

work, making it mean or matter in ways that focus only on elements happily coincident with a favoured interpretive stance. At the same time, it is worth pointing out that we are drawn to works, as critics and film scholars, because we see them as using a 'subtler language' (Taylor 1989) to explore the very issues with which we are theoretically, but also pre-theoretically, engaged. The decision to focus on one work rather than another is by no means an arbitrary one, but one connected in many instances to an ongoing project of exploration fueled by a number of driving concerns. If I am motivated to write at such length about *Center Stage* it is because I see this film as a cogent and deeply incisive exploration of norms, virtues, ideals, and pathologies that have long been of compelling interest to me. Caught up as it is with a life eclipsed by gossip, *Center Stage* is, in my mind, centrally about communication and scapegoating, about distorted and less distorted models of communication and the role that film (and especially the film milieu qua social system) can play in somewhat displacing various social ties constituted by pernicious forms of violence beyond legal sanction in favour of human connections forged through sympathy, charity, mutuality, and generosity. When it comes to the question of meaning, the challenge is to show, through a combination of careful formal, intentional, and historical analysis, that these phenomena do not emerge in a process of mere projection, but genuinely constitute the film's field of concern and significance.

Center Stage and discourse

To write about *Center Stage*, more than a decade after its release, is to enter into a rich and still ongoing conversation about the contributions, cinematic and other, that this now classic film makes. Inasmuch as the point must surely be to understand the film's emergence as a central text, and not merely to present a personal account of why it merits classification as an admirable example of

the New Hong Kong cinema, the idea of a work having what is known in the hermeneutic tradition as an 'effective history' (Gadamer 1989) deserves serious attention. Films that manage to animate communities, be they local, national, regional, transnational, or global, necessarily generate a certain amount of talk across a wide range of genres. Film juries provide discursive justification, be it formally or informally, for the allocation of prizes and awards. Journalists interview stars and directors, allowing for the discursive construction of a personal legend. And film scholars collectively contribute to an interpretive and theoretical discourse about these films, a discourse involving claims and counter-claims, but also, quite simply, a further nuancing of views. The concept of effective history invites us to see this multi-genred talk as integral somehow to these works and their meanings, rather than as a detachable or more or less insignificant second-order discourse. More realistically, perhaps, it encourages a commitment to charting the discursively mediated reception of works and to reconstructing, as fairly and charitably as possible, the various views and arguments that constitute works as classics and thereby ensure their continued circulation among us.

I have outlined some basic methodological principles involving contextualizing and other impulses. The aim in what follows will not be to take up the identified tasks separately and in the order discussed, but to allow the various approaches to work together as required to suggest points of emphasis, lines of reasoning, and modes of justification in an unfolding argument designed to spell out how a given film has come to us, how it works, and why it ultimately matters.

Documentary Filmmaking in Hong Kong

Up until *Center Stage* Kwan had consistently gravitated toward fiction film-making and the generic regularities of women's film

and melodrama. In its creative use of documentary materials and innovative referencing of actual historical figures, *Center Stage* thus marked a new direction for Kwan even if the tragic figure of Ruan Lingyu made clear continuities with the earlier works and their central concerns almost inevitable. *Center Stage* introduces something new and different into a cinematic oeuvre defined until that moment by a high degree of internal consistency, and to some extent the same can be said about the film's contribution to the larger context of Hong Kong filmmaking. Let us, then, briefly consider the place of documentary filmmaking in Hong Kong, not only in 1990 when Kwan first started developing his film about Ruan Lingyu, but also more recently.

Whereas documentary filmmaking has a long and venerable history in countries such as France, Britain, Canada, and Denmark, *Center Stage* and its mobilization of documentary elements stood out as a striking exception to Hong Kong cinematic norms when it premiered in 1992. Documentary filmmaking continues to play a marginal role in Hong Kong, although the situation has changed somewhat in the intervening years. Videopower, a collective founded some ten years ago, has, for example, produced a steady stream of documentaries about local social issues with the help of a series of grants provided by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. Unlike *Center Stage*, however, the productions associated with Videopower target, not the art film circuit, but various networks engaged in political activism. Ying E Chi, a non-profit organization created in 1997 and also funded by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, has done much to promote independent filmmaking in Hong Kong. Supporting visual styles and types of films at odds with mainstream commercial tendencies, Ying E Chi has helped to provide support for initiatives involving realism and nonfiction filmmaking. Ying E Chi's commitment to realism, among other things, is clearly articulated by founding member Vincent Chui in various discussions of his Dogma-inspired *Leaving in*

Sorrow (1999). Dogma 95 is a manifesto-based film movement initiated by the Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier, in collaboration with his younger colleague, Thomas Vinterberg. The stripped down approach to filmmaking that the Dogma rules and manifesto encourage is cited by Chui as facilitating an exploration, involving both realism and documentary tendencies, of key moments in Hong Kong history, most notably Tiananmen and the handover.

A more recent initiative launched by Tammy Cheung, award-winning director of *Secondary School* (2002), promises to make documentary filmmaking a more significant feature of the Hong Kong film landscape. In 2004, Cheung founded a non-profit organization called 'Visible Record Limited', once again, with the help of a grant from the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. A letter sent to potential donors as part of a Fundraising Campaign in the fall of 2004 describes the objectives of Visible Record Limited as follows: 'firstly, to promote documentary films and raise the level of appreciation; and secondly, to provide training for potential documentary filmmakers. Our jobs include: presenting filmmaking courses, organizing screenings and talks, organizing an annual documentary film festival; and distributing films from around the world.' While the Hong Kong Arts Development Council's support for Videopower, Ying E Chi, and now Visible Record Limited clearly reflects an awareness of the many important roles that documentary filmmaking can play in a given community, the actual creation of these various collectives testifies indirectly to the striking marginality of documentary film production in Hong Kong when Kwan first embarked on *Center Stage*.

In 'China and Hong Kong Movies in Retrospect', Kwan draws a number of telling comparisons between Shanghainese film in the 1930s and 40s and Hong Kong filmmaking during the new wave period of the late 1970s and early 80s. In Kwan's short narrative a number of Hong Kong directors and titles become the vehicle for what he calls a 'new creative spirit' reminiscent of the golden age

of Chinese filmmaking: 'This new creative spirit prevailed for a time in the late 70s and early 80s, in films like *Father and Son* and *Ah Ying* by Allen Fong, *The Story of Woo Viet* and *Boat People* by Ann Hui, and *Dangerous Encounters of the First Kind* and *Zu* by Hark Tsui.'[2] In the present context, the reference to Allen Fong, and especially to *Father and Son*, is particularly suggestive. Fong has long been an idiosyncratic figure in Hong Kong film milieus on account of his insistence on a realist style at odds with the kinetic pace and generic features of mainstream productions. *Father and Son* (*Fuzi Qing*), winner of the first annual Hong Kong Film Awards 'Best Picture', was released in 1981 and is a now classic semiautobiographical exploration of a boy's childhood years, especially his conflicts with his father. Kwan's deep respect for Allen Fong's work also finds clear expression in *Yang + Yin: Gender in the Chinese Cinema*, where the director is interviewed in the section devoted to father-son relationships and reflects on gender-related dynamics in a typical Hakka family. Ann Hui, evoked by Kwan in connection with *The Story of Woo Viet* and *Boat People* has, of course, long been associated with a unique ability to make room within the parameters of mainstream dramatic genres for the exploration of current problems and conflicts that more than warrant documentary treatment.[3]

Sunless Days (1990), a documentary by the filmmaker, producer, distributor, and critic Shu Kei deserves more detailed discussion as possibly the first Hong Kong example of documentary filmmaking in an art house style. The film, which was shown at the Hong Kong film festival and went on to win the Ecumenical Prize at the Berlin film festival, began circulating just as Kwan was beginning to think seriously about making a complicated relation among fiction, nonfiction, and metacinema a structuring feature of *Center Stage*. *Sunless Days* was to have been part of a documentary TV series on Asian cities for NHK in Japan, the original plan having been to focus on the rock singer Hou Dejian.

Shu Kei's stated interest in focusing on this Taiwanese star in connection with the idea of Asian cities had a great deal to do with the highly atypical direction of the singer's personal trajectory, which began in Taipei and seems to have ended in Beijing, with Hong Kong as the transitional moment. Hou Dejian played a galvanizing role among the student activists in Beijing in the days, and indeed hours, preceding the massacre. Known to have been living with some of the students, he is also believed to have led them to Tiananmen Square with the intent to engage the authorities through negotiation. Hou Dejian's disappearance after the massacre, coupled with the trauma of the massacre itself, had the effect of completely transforming Shu Kei's documentary project, which became a deeply personal exploration of the repercussions of Tiananmen. Inspired to some extent by Chris Marker's *Sunless*, Shu Kei's *Sunless Days* records the Hong Kong director's conversations with family and friends in Hong Kong, Australia, and Canada as they find ways of coping with Tiananmen. Although deeply personal, the film includes moments that are very much a matter of public awareness. One such moment concerns Hou Hsiao Hsien's award for *A City of Sadness* at the Venice film festival in 1990. The Taiwanese director's film about the brutal suppression in 1947 of a Taiwanese uprising targeting the corruption of Mainland officials becomes an unintended comment on Tiananmen in *Sunless Days*, as does the absence of the Taiwanese flag among the many other flags representing the nationality of films in competition. *Sunless Days* also includes a documentary made by twenty Hong Kong film professionals about the construction, by Hong Kong artists, of a replica of the Tiananmen Square Goddess of Democracy. The replica, Shu Kei tells us, was publicly displayed for three weeks in Hong Kong, before being assigned to a laboratory at Hong Kong University, where it is believed to have been destroyed. The documentary's fate is presented as equally telling. Although Shu Kei and his friends and colleagues offered the film,

at no cost, to 130 cinemas in Hong Kong, none of them, with the exception of the Hong Kong Arts Centre, agreed to show it.

Shu Kei recalls Kwan as having seen *Sunless Days* at the Hong Kong Arts Centre and as having engaged him at some length about the film itself, as well as about the tasks, choices, and challenges involved in documentary filmmaking. The exchange points to the extent to which *Center Stage* was perceived by Kwan as a turning point within his filmmaking career, as a new direction involving a kind of expertise and understanding that was both different from that required by the fiction film and less readily available in Hong Kong filmmaking milieus. Kwan's ingenious insistence in *Center Stage* on the dynamics of belief and, more specifically, on the problems of distinguishing between unfounded and justified beliefs, was to make elements of documentary form salient in ways that were groundbreaking in Hong Kong by virtue of the absence of a vigorous documentary tradition, and certainly of documentary filmmaking in a reflexive or poetic vein. And these same elements would eventually define *Center Stage* as an innovative work within the largely transnational framework of the biopic's characteristic genre formulae. To point to striking absences that highlight the singularities of *Center Stage* is not, however, to suggest that the film emerged in a complete vacuum. Indeed, it is crucial to grasp the ways in which Kwan's film reflects his deep respect for local filmmakers such as Shu Kei, Allen Fong, and Ann Hui, all of whom have demonstrated an unswerving commitment to a form of critical or political practice, to the idea of personal voice rather than standardized expression, and to some notion of the real, be it in the form of a style or through the referential dimensions of fictions with a highly topical or clearly autobiographical dimension. Remarkable works are always at some level the result of an actual or merely internal dialogue with other works or filmmakers, and Kwan's *Center Stage* is no exception.

Kwan has gone on since *Center Stage* to direct a number of documentary films: *Siqin Gaowa Special* (*Siqin Gaowa Er-dan Shi*, 1993), *Yang + Yin: Gender in Chinese Cinema* (mentioned above), and *Still Love You After All These* (*Nian Ni Rushi*, 1997). *Siqin Gaowa* focuses on the Cantonese opera singer by the same name and was produced for Taiwanese television by Peggy Chiao. As we shall see, this Taiwanese critic and producer played an important role in the conception of *Center Stage*. *Still Love You After All These* is Kwan's personal memoir of Hong Kong on the eve of the Handover. Kwan's 'Director's Statement' at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival in 1997 describes the thread that connects these different works:

> I made this documentary [*Still Love You After All These*] during the final months of British rule, and chose to look back at the Hong Kong I grew up in rather than forward to the future under China's sovereignty. In some ways, this film carries on what I began in my previous documentary *Yang + Yin: Gender in Chinese Cinema* ... these projects are rooted in my own memories from childhood: my experience of growing up in a poor family, my feelings towards my parents, my discovery of my own sexual orientation. The touchstone is my deep identification with the local tradition of Cantonese opera, and particularly with the opera *Princess Chang Ping*, in which the climactic line 'I deny, I deny, but in the end I can not deny' has resonances not only for me personally but also for all Hong Kong people.[4]

The Making of *Center Stage*

Kwan's idea for a film about Ruan Lingyu was by no means without precedent. The mainland Chinese filmmaker Zhu Shi Lin had written a five-page treatment for such a film shortly after Ruan Lingyu's death, but never realized his project.[5] In 1985, however,

Asia Television Limited (ATV), one of two terrestrial television stations in Hong Kong, broadcast a 20-episode series about Ruan Lingyu, with Hong Kong actress Cecilia Wong Hang-san in the role of the early silent film star.[6] As Christopher Violet points out, the series was watched by record numbers of viewers in Hong Kong, was sold to the Mainland, and further distributed to the diasporic Chinese community via video clubs.[7] While the series has been described by cinephiles with a detailed knowledge of Ruan Lingyu's films as superficial and therefore unilluminating, it did bring Ruan Lingyu to the attention of popular audiences and in some ways served as a point of contrast for Kwan as he was developing his own approach to the actress and star Ruan Lingyu.

In an interview with Jean-Pierre Dionnet, the well-known presenter of Canal+'s *Cinéma de quartier*, Kwan foregrounds two temporally coincident instances of fascination as the starting point for the *Center Stage* film. The experience of directing *Rouge*, Kwan claims, made the thought of working with Anita Mui on a subsequent project deeply compelling, while a retrospective of Ruan Lingyu's existing films (organized by the Hong Kong Arts Centre) helped to generate a creatively motivating appreciation for the early Chinese film actress's unique qualities and contributions. *Rouge* (1998), an innovative ghost story featuring Anita Mui and Leslie Cheung, established Kwan's reputation internationally and initiated the wave of 'nostalgia films' (Natalia Chan 2002: 255) that now features as one distinctive thread within the New Hong Kong cinema (see also Chow 2001). It is no secret that Kwan's original intention was to cast Anita Mui, rather than Maggie Cheung, in the role of Ruan Lingyu, and it is not uncommon for commentators to reflect on the wisdom of the original or actual choice and on the implications of the two quite different casting scenarios. One view has it that Anita Mui's physiognomy, body language, and even life history would have lent themselves more readily to the kind of cinematic project in which audiences are encouraged to make

believe that the contemporary actress somehow incarnates the earlier one, as in the more classic biopic. Cheung, the argument goes, somehow expresses an energetic, pragmatic, and essentially forward-looking Hong Kong sensibility, making her the antithesis of the kind of tragic figure that a film such as *Center Stage* would appear to require. Statements by Kwan about his initial intentions focus on precisely such putative similarities and their desirability within an original conception. That Maggie Cheung should have replaced Anita Mui is one of the many repercussive effects of a key traumatic historical event occurring beyond Hong Kong's borders, but in a site with direct implications for Hong Kong. During the night of June 4th, 1989, and following several weeks of martial law, the Tiananmen square in Beijing was violently cleared of demonstrators advocating democratic reform in the People's Republic of China, confirming many Hong Kongers' worst fears about the future of Hong Kong in a post-colonial era. While many Hong Kongers manifested their horror at the June Fourth massacre through vigils and demonstrations, a pragmatic accommodation with fate quickly became the norm among those who chose or had no choice but to remain in Hong Kong. Yet, in some cases the trauma of Tiananmen prompted a far more definitive stance on the PRC and what appeared to be its core dynamics. Anita Mui was one of those who insisted on norms over pragmatics, swearing on principle never to set foot in the PRC again. Although *Center Stage* involves only the occasional shot of well-known Shanghai landmarks, such as the Bund, and for the most part relies on elaborate sets, location shooting in Shanghai was critical to the artistic success of *Center Stage* as Kwan understood it. The unintended consequences of Mui's position was thus to trouble Kwan's plans for a more standard biopic, and ultimately to send the *Center Stage* project in a rather different and far more interesting direction. Indeed, *Center Stage* as we know it is valued precisely for the way in which meta-cinematic reflections combine with attempts at historical reconstruction and actual footage from Ruan Lingyu's

films to produce an intriguingly innovative hybrid work that defies easy classification. As Cheung replaced Mui, so, according to Kwan, did the idea of a sustained tension and dialogue between actresses and historical periods come to replace original notions of make believe underwritten somehow by verisimilitude.

The script for *Center Stage* is the result of the combined efforts, if not actual collaboration, of two key figures, the Taiwanese critic Peggy Chiao and the Shanghai-based scriptwriter Yau Dai An-ping.[8] Chiao had spent time in the 1980s studying at UCLA with Zheng Ji Hua, a visiting scholar and leading expert in Chinese film history, and her role was thus to assist Kwan with the various research tasks that *Center Stage* entailed. In 1990 Chiao accompanied Kwan and his art director, Piu Yau-muk, on research trips to Beijing and Shanghai, where the team consulted libraries and archives, and interviewed film professionals who had either worked with Ruan Lingyu or were familiar with the Shanghai film industry in the 1930s. Recalling the research process in a telephone interview, Chiao emphasized the importance of a series of ad hoc informal interviews with people living in the vicinity of what was once the Lianhua studio. Many of these individuals, Chiao remarked, were the children of parents who had either been actively involved with the studio's activities, or very much attuned to its presence. Referring to the much-cited but somewhat hyperbolic biography of Ruan Lingyu by the Shanghainese scenarist Shen Ji, Chiao further foregrounded the nuanced insight that Kwan and his team were able to derive from some key Hong Kong sources, especially materials belonging to Li Minwei's family. Li Minwei, a pivotal figure in the very emergence of an indigenous Chinese film industry and one of the founders of the Lianhua studio, had kept a detailed personal diary over the years, and Chiao identified this document as providing the inspiration for some of the film's most noteworthy scenes. One such scene appears in the film's concluding moments and shows Ruan Lingyu (Maggie Cheung) kissing each of the Lianhua directors in turn at a dinner

party (hosted by Li Minwei and his wife) in what was clearly a private leave-taking, since she committed suicide later that same evening.

Reflecting on the ways in which Kwan's project evolved through exchanges with herself and others, Chiao pointed to the director's commitment early on in the research process to making a fictionalized biopic that would mirror the temporal and narrative complexities of *Rouge*. *Rouge* moves back and forth between Hong Kong in the 1930s and 80s, establishing what Ackbar Abbas calls 'a double temporal framework' (1997: 75), and Kwan's initial thought was that the story of Ruan Lingyu might lend itself to comparable parallels and comparisons, this time between Shanghai in the 1930s and Hong Kong in the late 1980s. Much like Kwan himself, Chiao clearly recalls the director's initial interest in exploring the more scandalous aspects of Ruan Lingyu's life, the melodrama of her unconventional love life, in a biopic format. Chiao claims to have been more interested from the outset in mobilizing some of the tools and effects of the documentary tradition. A documentary dimension, she allegedly argued, would work to politicize the strategy of parallelism and comparison in ways that a fictionalized biopic could not. Once the basic concept for *Center Stage* had been articulated to a significant extent, the scriptwriting task was taken over by Yau Dai An-ping. In Chiao's view, Yau Dai An-ping successfully transformed her own more academic approach to early Chinese film history and Ruan Lingyu's place within it into a detailed script with fully developed characters and very strong dialogue. Kwan recalls the shift from one scriptwriter to another as somewhat more delicate but confirms that the final result commanded the support of all parties involved.

Producers' Decisions, Distributors' Practices

I have mentioned in passing that the contemporary classic *Center Stage* exists, not as a single cinematic text but as a work supported

by different instantiations of the film, and it is time now to spell this point out a little more fully. The film that was first screened for audiences at film festivals in Taipei (Golden Horse Awards 1991) and Berlin (the Berlinale 1992) was the original director's cut lasting 148 minutes. When *Center Stage* was released in Hong Kong in the spring of 1992, the version shown was significantly shorter (121 minutes) and clearly reflected the producers' concerns about the film's marketability. Most viewers, including many Hong Kong film scholars, were unaware until recently of the existence of the director's cut and assumed that the shortened *Center Stage* film constituted the definitive work. A small number of Hong Kong film aficionados were, however, privy to the quite radical cuts that had been made, and rumour had it that the producer Leonard Ho was largely responsible for the changes and also for destroying the director's cut in an effort to eliminate any possible competition between the original work and its significantly edited version. Remarks by Jonathan Rosenbaum reflect this line of thinking: 'Stanley Kwan's 1991 masterpiece ... is still the greatest Hong Kong film I've seen, though shortening the original running time of 148 minutes by around half an hour has been harmful. (Adding insult to injury, the Hong Kong producers have destroyed the original negative; apparently the uncut version survives only on Australian TV.)'[9]

It is not hard to reconstruct a context that would encourage the kind of decision-making that rumour has attributed to the producers of *Center Stage*. Kwan's director's cut was clearly something of an anomaly in the early 1990s, an informal convention having emerged in the course of the 1970s to limit films to a running time of approximately 90 minutes. The film critic and independent filmmaker Shu Kei reminds us that it was not uncommon in the late 1980s and early 90s for money-minded distributors significantly to cut foreign films, or to project these films at 28 rather than 24 frames per second so as to allow for additional

screenings in the course of the day. The two-hour edited version of *Center Stage* is thus already a departure from standard practice, and it makes some sense to assume, as Shu Kei suggests, that the control over distribution venues that Jackie Chan and Golden Harvest enjoyed at the time helped to rule out more drastic cuts.

It is interesting to note, however, that Stanley Kwan recounts a far less sinister tale. According to Kwan, the original *Center Stage* was screened in Hong Kong at an event hosted by the Jackie Chan Charitable Foundation in 1991. Kwan recalls the early departure of a significant number of viewers, presumably on account of boredom, as the main motivation for producing a significantly shorter version of the film. He further points out that he was given a free hand throughout the editing process. The cuts, but also the changed colour scheme, are thus to be attributed to Kwan in his capacity as director in rational discussion with supportive producers, and not to high-minded businessmen intent on imposing an extraneous perspective. The edited version is thus also, technically speaking, a director's cut, although it is not the director's preferred and originally intended instantiation of the work. Considering its art house status, the shorter version of *Center Stage* performed remarkably well at the Hong Kong box office, generating receipts of 7,480,778 Hong Kong dollars at a time when a successful film with more mainstream characteristics could be expected to sell tickets to the tune of anywhere between 10 and 15 million Hong Kong dollars.[10]

Fortunately, the more interesting and cohesive original director's cut from 1991 became available to audiences shortly after its theatrical release in France in 1999. The DVD produced by Le Studio Canal+ includes in-depth interviews with Kwan (conducted by Jean-Pierre Dionnet) and is a precious resource for anyone interested in understanding the film's production history. In 2005 Fortune Star Entertainment Limited released a digitally remastered version of *Center Stage* that runs 154 minutes, 6 minutes longer

than the 1991 film. The additional length is not, as one might have expected, the result of new images or sequences, but of a slightly slower pace that is noticeable only if the two films are projected simultaneously. We shall have the occasion in the next chapter to reflect at some length on the implications of key differences between the director's cut and the shortened film. I shall be using the term 'director's cut' throughout to refer to the 1991 film. However, any claims pertaining to this director's cut hold equally for the digitally remastered and slightly longer version released in 2005. As we shall see the edited version from 1992 removes much of the documentary footage focusing on exchanges between Kwan and his actors, and introduces a new color scheme that was clearly intended by the producers to facilitate audience comprehension and, more specifically, to disambiguate the complex movement within the film among various logical levels.

An interview with Stanley Kwan and the established French scholar of Chinese cinemas, Bérénice Reynaud, usefully highlights the distribution problems that Kwan faced as essentially an art house director working with what was once one of the largest Hong Kong studios and distributors. Occasioned by the French premiere of *Center Stage* this interview was conducted by Lara Melin Siggel in Paris on December 4, 1999.[11] Kwan drew attention to his rather miserable experience at the 1992 Berlin Festival, where *Center Stage* was in competition, but largely invisible as a result of Golden Harvest's failure to grasp the dynamics whereby art house films are made salient to audiences and potential buyers. Golden Harvest subsequently sold all of its distribution rights to MediaAsia, but according to Kwan and Reynaud the situation did not improve as a result. MediaAsia, it appears, tended for many years to assume in advance that *Center Stage* lacked distribution potential. What is more, any genuine expression of interest on the part of foreign distributors quickly became the basis for various larcenous attempts on the part of the distribution company to extract entirely

unrealistic amounts of money from them. At the time of writing, *Center Stage* had been theatrically distributed only in Hong Kong, France, and Japan. Kwan reports, however, that Yu Dong and his company Baoli Bona are exploring the possibility of theatrical release in the PRC. The success and emergence of *Center Stage* as a classic of the New Hong Kong Cinema is largely the result, then, of the workings of the festival circuit and of the informal distribution networks that various forms of cinephilia create and sustain.

The Constitution of *Center Stage* as a Classic of the New Hong Kong Cinema

Center Stage was met with great interest and admiration on the festival circuit, where it garnered a number of prestigious awards. The jury presiding over the 28th Golden Horse Award in Taipei (towards the end of 1991) singled out Poon Hang-sang and Maggie Cheung as best cinematographer and best actress respectively. Cheung's remarkable performance as Ruan Lingyu, but also as the actress and emerging star Maggie Cheung, was further honoured at the 42nd Berlin International Film Festival (February 12–February 24, 1992), where *Center Stage* received a Silver Bear for best actress. Kwan's innovative biopic aroused considerable interest at the 16th Hong Kong International Film Festival (April 10–April 25, 1992), and received a large number of awards at the 12th Hong Kong Film Awards: best actress (Maggie Cheung), best cinematography (Poon Hang-sang), best art direction (Piu Yau-muk), and best original film score (Hsiao Chung). The digitally remastered film was shown at the 29th Hong Kong International Film Festival, where it was featured as follows: 'Unimpeachable in its stature, Stanley Kwan's *Centre Stage* is now enshrined within the pantheon of the greatest Chinese films. For the centennial

anniversary of Chinese cinema, we are proud to present a world premiere of the digitally remastered and newly restored director's cut of this classic' (HKIFF programme: 2005). The film's inclusion and special place in the festival marked the entry of the director's cut into the consciousness of Hong Kong viewers for whom the cinematic work and classic entitled *Center Stage* had simply been, with rare exceptions, the 1992 edited version.

The journalistic discourse initially generated by *Center Stage* in Hong Kong was in many ways disappointing. The Cantonese discussion was largely star-driven and focused almost exclusively on Maggie Cheung's Silver Bear, the first such award to have been won by a Chinese actor. Li Cheuk-to, one of the territory's most important film critics, did, however, discuss the film's formal properties in *Guanyiji: zhongwai dianying pian* (*Reading against the grain: Chinese and foreign films*), his main point being that the multiply layered narrative devised by Kwan seemed somewhat haphazard and reflected an apparent indecisiveness with regard to an abundance of research materials.[12] The English-language *South China Morning Post* provided a fairly detailed review of the film in March 1992. This was written by the American journalist and actor, Paul Fonoroff, who, as one reviewer of *At the Hong Kong Movies: 600 Reviews from 1988 till the Handover* (1998) puts it, 'displays such a tremendous disdain for contemporary HK films that it is difficult to imagine why he would choose a career in reviewing them'.[13] Unsurprisingly, then, *Center Stage* won little praise and a fair amount of harsh criticism from Fonoroff: 'those looking for insights into Ruan's life and death will find few on hand in *Center Stage*, an early contender for the dubious distinction of most pretentious production of 1992 ... in terms of feelings and insights, *Center Stage* is the cinematic equivalent of Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum' (1998: 206–7). A consistently positive journalistic discourse about the film has, however, emerged in the more than ten years that have elapsed since it was first released. Recent

comments by BBC's Tom Dawson in connection with the ICA Hong Kong film festival are characteristic of this discourse: '"Actress" is an ambitiously unorthodox biopic from director Stanley Kwan about Chinese star Ruan Lingyu.'[14] Equally representative is the characterization provided by Channel 4: 'Ruan's story is a winning example of moving, psychologically convincing storytelling. It forms the emotional foundation of a highly complex, scrupulously intelligent and above all, heartfelt film.'[15]

Encompassing discussions of nostalgia, genre, queer spectatorship, allegory, and stardom, the more scholarly literature that now surrounds *Center Stage* has played a particularly important role in defining the film's status as a central text.

Center Stage *as nostalgia film*

Combing the Greek terms *nostos* (to return home) and *algia* (a painful condition), nostalgia was coined in the late seventeenth century by the Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer (1688) to describe the symptoms of Swiss mercenaries fighting abroad:

> In the brain, specifically where images of the desired and familiar places are located, vital spirits surge back and forth through the nerve fibres that store the impressions of the native land. The repeated motion of these vital spirits gradually tires them out to the point where they get out of control and start to move of their own accord, evoking the same images over and over again. Eventually, the *only* images produced in the brain of the diseased are those of home. (cited in Rítívoí 2002, 15)

The meanings of 'nostalgia' have changed considerably since Hofer's time, for whereas the term once identified a pathological and even life-threatening condition, it is now typically used to evoke a rather benign sense of longing prompted by a concept of irretrievability or loss.

Over the past fifteen years or so, nostalgia has received considerable attention from film scholars of various national cinemas. In a British context, for example, nostalgia is associated with what Andrew Higson calls 'heritage film', prototypical instances of this type of filmmaking being *Chariots of Fire* (1981), *A Room with a View* (1986), *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1991), and the Merchant-Ivory adaptation of E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1992). Higson's account of heritage film locates its 'central pleasures' in 'the artful and spectacular projection of an elite, conservative vision of the national past' (Higson 1996: 233), and it is this essentially conservative, elitist and in many instances ethnic nationalist dimension of the prototypical heritage film that makes the genre ideologically problematic. The ideological thrust of the bourgeois heritage film is supported, following Higson, by a 'museum aesthetic' involving a lingering gaze oriented toward a series of heritage fetishes capable of signifying the nation.

In a Hong Kong context, 'nostalgia' figures centrally within a discourse about nostalgia film, rather than heritage film. In nostalgia film (unlike the related genre discussed by Higson), the sense of loss is invariably traceable to a particular historical event and its implications. The handover of 1997 and the unique postcolonial condition — based on absorption rather than autonomy — that it introduced provide the conceptual bases for the cluster of emotions that the Hong Kong nostalgia film ultimately targets. Natalia Chan Sui-hung, a film scholar at Hong Kong's Chinese University, has done much to clarify the origins and workings of Hong Kong nostalgia film. Chan identifies four types of nostalgia films:

> The first group reconstructs the history and social scene of 1960s Hong Kong ... . The second group includes those films that represent 1930s Hong Kong and China, such as Stanley Kwan's *Rouge* and *Center Stage* (*Ruan Lingyu*, 1992). The third group

> refers to those that recycle the film titles or story events of 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong cinema. ... The final type aims to re-create the ancient history in China in terms of the costume genre. (2002: 257)

Chan draws attention to key differences between the historical film and nostalgia film, identifying at least a putative 'authenticity of historical reference' as a feature of the former and 'history ... represented in a stylized or allegorical form' as a feature of the latter (257). Chan's categorization of *Center Stage* as an instance of nostalgia film is by no means controversial. Indeed, in his discussion of *Center Stage* and its contributions to the biopic genre, Julien Stringer remarks that 'there is the suggestion [in *Center Stage* as in *Rouge*] that the past is more attractive, intense, and memorable than the present', commenting further that this past 'is a deliberately selective and "unofficial" past' (1997: 34). In her Harvard dissertation from 2000, *The Cultural Politics of Nostalgia in Contemporary Hong Kong Film and Memoir*, Daisy Ng concludes her discussion of *Center Stage* by evoking its innovative relation to more standard instances of the nostalgia film: 'nostalgia in *Center Stage* is not a lament for an irretrievable past but a dialectic of the past and the present' (2000: 59).

Center Stage *as women's film*

In his introduction to the program for the 16th Hong Kong International Film Festival, Li Cheuk-to refers to *Center Stage* as 'the latest installment of Stanley Kwan's "women movies", another high melodrama' (1992: 108). The tendency to trace continuities between *Center Stage* and Kwan's earlier explorations of women's subjectivity is also evident in Reynaud's 'Glamour and Suffering: Gong Li and the History of Chinese Stars': 'There wouldn't be female stars without "women's directors". Zhang Yimou might be

Sternberg to Gong Li, but Stanley Kwan is the Cukor of Hong Kong. Not only has he given Anita Mui, Sylvia Chang, Maggie Cheung and Siqin Gaowa some of their most fulfilling roles, but he has explored the seductions of female stardom by directing a complex video portrait of Siqin Gaowa and by paying homage to Ruan Lingyu in *Actress*, a film as alluring, fragile and mysterious as its subject' (1993: 28). Kwan's own pronouncements support the idea of continuity between an early film such as *Love unto Waste* and *Center Stage*. In *Yang + Yin: Gender in Chinese Cinema*, Kwan's voice-over commentary ponders the reasons for his systematic gravitation towards women in *Red Rose, White Rose*, *Actress*, *Rouge*, and *Love unto Waste*. 'Why,' Kwan asks, 'do I make so many films about women?' The documentary goes on to provide partial answers to this question by foregrounding Kwan's early role as head of the family, and his relation to a mother and sisters who were particularly protective of him, thereby inspiring certain deep attachments and sympathies.

Center Stage *as queer text*

The concluding moments of *Yang + Yin* document an exchange between Kwan and his mother in which the filmmaker refers to his gay sexuality, encouraging her to articulate her feelings about his sexual orientation. As a result of this footage, the BFI documentary effectively became the vehicle for Kwan's open acknowledgement of his gay identity. A central element in the authorial legend that has emerged around Kwan is the idea that *Yang + Yin* marks a decisive turning point in his career, the transition, more specifically, from women's films to films about men and gay sexuality. Kwan's sexual orientation, and, more important, his attitude towards his identity as a gay man, thus become a way of making sense of his early tendency to explore the lives of women in a predominantly melodramatic mode. As Kwan himself points out in the commentary

accompanying *Yang + Yin*, there is a direct correlation between his closeted gayness up until 1996 and his systematic projection of his own gay sexuality onto the women in his melodramatic women's films from the same period. Reynaud's '*Center Stage*: A Shadow in Reverse' (2003) takes this insight and makes it the basis for an extended reflection on Kwan's Ruan Lingyu film. Drawing on the psychoanalytic writings of Tania Modleski, Reynaud focuses on

> the interplay of identification and objectification that connects male subjectivity to the figure of the 'suffering woman' through the double process of denial and displacement: 'the male finds it necessary to repress certain "feminine" aspects of himself, and to project these ... onto the woman, who does the suffering for both of them'. (2003: 31; quote within the quote is from Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much*, 1988)

Kwan's sexual orientation is held by Reynaud to generate an 'ambivalence toward femininity' that is concretized in the behaviour of the man who in the opening moments of the film proposes to play the role that the Lianhua filmmakers are shown discussing in connection with Ruan Lingyu. In this reading, then, *Center Stage* is driven by a complicated psychological process in which identification with the suffering woman gives way on some occasions to a competitive relation to the figure who represents her (Maggie Cheung). Reynaud's interpretation is carefully grounded in detailed evidence culled from the film, and her references to the 'bathhouse sissy' (2003: 31) evoked above, or to the documentary footage in which Kwan and Cheung 'compete to impersonate Ruan' (2003: 32), help her to make a convincing case for seeing *Center Stage* as a cinematic work with a genuinely queer dimension.

Center Stage *as allegory*

As a central film in the emerging canon of the New Hong Kong cinema, *Center Stage*, not surprisingly, has also been discussed in allegorical terms having to do with the handover. As Jeremy Tambling notes in his monograph on Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together*, allegorical readings that rely on isolated phrases or scenes to generate momentous meanings ultimately trivialize the work under discussion (2003: 13). Julian Stringer's '*Center Stage*: Reconstructing the Bio-Pic' provides an excellent account of Kwan's innovations within the biopic genre, but it also shows signs of some of the allegorizing gestures that Tambling would appear to have in mind. Stringer identifies the aim of his discussion as follows: 'In this article, I would like to suggest how the film's fundamental reconstruction of the bio-pic is perfectly in keeping with the search to establish localized forms of Hong Kong space and subjectivity. The utilization of multiple diegeses necessitates a reading of the connections between Hong Kong's colonial past and its "postcolonial" future' (1997: 28). Textual evidence in support of this aim is provided in the way of references to Kwan's question to Maggie Cheung early on in the film. This question asks whether the Hong Kong actress would like to be remembered some 50 years hence, allegedly recalling the terms of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in which provisions were made for 'one country, two systems' within a fifty-year time-frame. Stringer also highlights the scene in which the actress Li Lili parodies lines spoken by Ruan Lingyu in Sun Yu's *Little Toys*: 'the enemy is coming, the enemy is coming.' The scene, as Stringer remarks, is designed to draw attention to film censorship in 1933, the intention having originally been to have Ruan Lingyu exclaim 'the Japanese are coming.' While clearly suggestive, these scenes cannot provide sufficient warrant for Stringer's conclusion: 'In *Center Stage*, then, 1930s Shanghai and 1990s Hong Kong are

clearly contrasted as modern, cosmopolitan cities that suffer invasion by an occupying force (the Japanese and Communists respectively), and this theme is worked out through the experiences of a tragically doomed yet beautiful woman who represents the city itself' (1997: 39). Stringer's argument fails to grasp the deeper cultural significance of *Center Stage* which lies entirely elsewhere, in the positive connections, I contend, that it draws between aspects of the Hong Kong filmmaking milieu and moments in early Chinese film history. It will be the task of the final chapter to spell this point out more fully.

Center Stage *and the dynamics of stardom*

A number of critical commentaries on *Center Stage* foreground the phenomenon of stardom, and especially the significance of maintaining a certain distance throughout between the legendary star Ruan Lingyu and the actress who stands in for her as an emerging star in her own right, Maggie Cheung. In 'Specular Failure and Spectral Returns in Two Films with Maggie Cheung (and one without),' Carlos Rojas argues that *Center Stage* points 'to the way in which new forms of auratic presence can be carved out *within* the system of correspondences established by technologies of mechanical reproduction themselves' (2001: 5). Brett Farmer highlights the same tension between Ruan Lingyu and Maggie Cheung in 'Mémoire en abîme: Remembering (through) *Center Stage*,' his point being that it fosters 'competing star images' and thereby 'new formations of hybridized meaning and desire' (2000: 3).

The most probing discussion of stardom in *Center Stage* is to be found in Ackbar Abbas's *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, where several pages are devoted to a contrastive analysis of *Rouge* and *Center Stage*. Whereas *Rouge* is quite literally a tale about a ghost, *Center Stage*, Abbas argues, is a critical

investigation of the processes that create 'legend and gossip', thereby 'turning an actress into a ghost' (1997: 47).[16] The evident purpose in *Center Stage*, claims Abbas, is by no means that of the biographer, for the point is 'not to establish the facts, which are only too much there, but to interpret them, to speculate about them' (46). Stars have been theorized in a myriad of ways, and Abbas avails himself of two key citations to evoke the basic conception of stardom with which he is operating. 'The star,' claims Paul Virilio, 'is only a spectre of absorption proposed to the gaze of the spectator, a ghost that you can interview.' And 'fame,' Rainer Maria Rilke contends, 'is no more than the sum of misunderstandings gathered around a great name' (cited in Abbas 1997: 46). Loose talk and misunderstandings are elements, then, in a process of effacement wherein the putative object of discussion largely disappears from view. In Abbas's interpretation of *Rouge* and *Center Stage*, Kwan's 'obsession with ghostly figures' becomes 'a method of evoking and representing critically the space of the déjà disparu' (1997: 47). This is a space that somehow defines postcolonial Hong Kong, Hong Kong identity having become a driving and 'visible' concern in the very moment when its disappearance, in the form of the handover to China, was envisaged. Yet, Hong Kong's disappearance is not only a result of the Joint-Declaration of 1984, for a colonial interest in negating indigenous identity construction has long dovetailed with stereotypic representations to hamper the disclosure of Hong Kong's structuring principles and ever mutating properties. In its resistance to clichés understood as biographical probings, and in its insistence on the evidentiary nature of Ruan Lingyu's legacy as an actress and in the form of her films, *Center Stage* effectively thwarts the kind of cultural effacement with which Abbas is concerned. Following Abbas, then, the investigation of stardom in *Center Stage* bears directly on deeper issues having to do with the implications of clichéd thinking about Hong Kong. The significance of *Center Stage* for Hong Kong Cultural Studies is thus shown to

reside, not in individual scenes or particular pronouncements with apparently obvious political connotations, but in the salience of concerns that pervade the entire cinematic work.

The New Hong Kong Cinema is often explored in terms of the problems and paradoxes involved in articulating a Hong Kong identity almost ex nihilo, colonial bureaucracies having systematically discouraged self-confident expressions or mutual understandings of what it means to be a Hong Kong person. What is at stake in the New Hong Kong Cinema is the clarification of various identity-based issues and the recognition, both internally by Hong Kongers and externally by audiences elsewhere, of the worth of, or contribution made by, Hong Kong culture in some broad sense. The point is that when we speak of the New Hong Kong Cinema we have in mind, not the brute or indiscriminate collection of all works made since 1984, but particular films that grapple with the complexities of an atypically prosperous postcolonial small nation as it contemplates and experiences its transformation, through integration spanning a period of 50 years, into one of the largest (in every sense of the term) nations of the world. Cinematic works qualifying for inclusion in the still emerging canon in question bring into public space various largely inchoate understandings of nonetheless crucial Hong Kong realities, and in ways that are of compelling interest. The production history of *Center Stage* provides evidence of the film's imbrication with a kairotic temporality generated by the prospect of Hong Kong's mutation from small to large nation. The history of the film's reception points to its vital capacity to draw critics, scholars, and audiences into the space of probing questions that it effectively generates. The challenge now is to understand exactly how *Center Stage* produces the effects that it does, how it operates as a semiotic system prompting various productions of meaning. It is time, then, to turn to a careful formal analysis of the original director's cut and the significantly edited version of *Center Stage*.

Notes

Chapter 1 Introduction

1. See *Women* (*Nuren Xin*, 1984), *Love unto Waste* (*Dixia qing*, 1986), *Rouge* (*Yanzhi Kou*, 1988), *Full Moon in New York* (*Ren Zai Niu-yue*, 1990), and *Red Rose, White Rose* (*Hong Meigui, Bai Meigui*, 1994).
2. http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/reruns/rr0499/PUcrr6.htm, accessed November 16, 2004.
3. *Ordinary Heroes*, released in 1999, many years after *Center Stage*, is perhaps the clearest example of Hui's use of a dramatic genre to documentary effect. Focusing on the work of the Hong Kong activist, Father Franco Mello, Hui's political drama constantly references actual historical events and existing persons in an effort to evoke, if not literally document, the history of political activism in Hong Kong. The realist impulse, and apparently progressive critical intent that accompanies it in a Hong Kong context, have resurfaced more recently in the work of Fruit Chan, whose low-budget filmmaking with nonprofessional actors and reclaimed scrap film stock serves to

document Hong Kong lives as experienced by the marginal and poor (see for example, *Made in Hong Kong* [*Xianggang zhizao*, 1997]).

4. http://www.city.yamagata.yamagata.jp/yidff/catalog/en/97/special50-1.html, accessed November 24, 2004.
5. My thanks to Shu Kei for furnishing me with the treatment.
6. Li Siu-leung first alerted me to this series.
7. Posted May 26, 2004. www.resonance-online.article.php?fiche=3988, accessed December 2, 2004.
8. The many references to Chiao are based on a phone interview conducted between Hong Kong and Taiwan on November 21, 2004.
9. 'Actress,' *Chicago Reader: Guide to Arts & Entertainment*, http://spacefinder.chicagoreader.com/movies/capsules/0046_ACTRESS.html, accessed November 15, 2004.
10. Shu Kei, personal communication, October 28, 2004.
11. 'Interview with Kwan,' http://Paristransatlantic.com/magazine/interviews/kwan.html, accessed November 29, 2004.
12. Cited in Daisy Ng, p. 53.
13. http://www.brns.com/bblit21.html, accessed November 22, 2004.
14. 'Remarks on *Centre Stage* in connection with the ICA Hong Kong Film Festival,' http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2002/07/09/actress_ 1992-review.shtml, accessed November 22, 2004.
15. 'On *Center Stage*,' http://www.channel4.com/film/reviews/film.isp?id=100191, accessed November 22, 2004.
16. For a discussion of the legends associated with Ruan Lingyu, see Shu Kei (1984).

Chapter 2 Film Style

1. Ponech takes issue with the emphasis that Plantinga's concept of indexing appears to place on social processes and insists that the status of a given work as fiction or non-fiction is determined by authorial intention. But such intentions must be communicated and here the kinds of discourses that Plantinga has in mind are clearly relevant. As Ponech himself points out, 'To wager that non-fictional motion pictures result from a particular kind of intention is not to hope that it will

always be immediately clear what the filmmaker's aims were. Aside from paying close attention to the cinematic work, it is sometimes necessary to steady our inferences about authorial goals with extensive background research, marshaling whatever evidence (notes, production documents, letters, interviews, other works in the filmmaker's corpus) might be pertinent to reconstructing the proximal intentions giving rise to the movie in question' (Ponech 35).

Chapter 3 Relevance and Meaning

1. See Graham, Ashworth and Tunbridge (2000) for a discussion of heritage culture as a resource.
2. Nieh Erh, we might note in passing, composed 'The March of the Volunteers' ('Yiyongjun Jinxingqu') in 1932, in memory of those who chose to respond to Japanese aggression before Japan formally declared war on China. This song was later adopted as the national anthem of Communist China.
3. http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/reruns/rr0499/PUcrr6.htm, accessed December 12, 2004.

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