

Crossings: Asian Cinema and Media Culture

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Screening Communities

Negotiating Narratives of Empire, Nation, and
the Cold War in Hong Kong Cinema

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Introduction

In 1953, two pivotal filmic events painted very different but related pictures of postwar Hong Kong's political, cultural, and social life. First was the release of *In the Face of Demolition* (*Weilou chunxiao*, dir. Lee Tit, 1953) by the leftist Cantonese film company the Union Film Enterprise Ltd. (henceforth, the Union) (1952–1967). *In the Face of Demolition* tells the story of a group of tenants living in a dilapidated tenement building in 1950s Hong Kong, struggling to make ends meet. At the end of the film, a tenant who had become the rent collector after losing his post as a teacher redeems himself by voluntarily donating blood to save a neighbor from dying after childbirth. Many residents of colonial Hong Kong during the postwar decades shared similar chronic problems of unemployment, poverty, and housing shortages as portrayed in the film. Despite its seemingly realistic depiction of postwar social life, *In the Face of Demolition* avoided any contentious themes related to colonial or Cold War politics. Its narrative instead focuses on and praises the importance of community solidarity and support during tough times. An oft-repeated phrase in the film—*renren wei wo, wo wei renren* (all for one, one for all)—became a motto for the message that left-leaning film companies such as the Union and Xinlian were sending to their targeted audiences in Hong Kong and beyond.

The second pivotal event of 1953 was the Hong Kong government's official promulgation of film censorship regulations in order to standardize the procedures and composition of its panel of film censors. Previously, an unlegislated and unpublicized process was in force, through which internal directives were sent to government-appointed censors. Such directives were often devised in consultation with the Colonial Office in Great Britain and other former British colonies. Many points in the unlegislated directives, which would be excluded from official and published legislation, identified political themes.¹ Posters, film scenes, or entire films could be banned from exhibition if they were deemed to intentionally “provoke feelings of racial or national hostility,” “exacerbate political rivalries,” “prejudice unfavorably relations with friendly powers,” or “incite any section of the community to

attempt to overthrow by force the established Government."² These pre-1953 directives continued to instruct film censors as to which films were appropriate for viewing by postwar Hong Kong audiences.

On the surface, there is no causal relationship between the release of *In the Face of Demolition* and the 1953 legislation of censorship regulations. But their coincidence allows us to see how the colonial government and filmmakers participated in forging Hong Kong's filmic culture and constructing its postwar "screened" community—one that contains the double sense of the word as both concealing and revealing.³ The film and emergence of new regulations were part of what Wai-man Lam calls a "culture of depoliticization" implemented from above.⁴ The concept may seem to be an oxymoron but exposes how a seemingly apolitical culture was often politically charged. Film censorship was a fact of life when *In the Face of Demolition* was shown in Hong Kong. Those who governed the British colony saw film culture not only as mass entertainment but also as a powerful tool for public persuasion and thus a potential threat to order, stability, and, by extension, their continued legitimacy to rule within the Cold War context. Films such as *In the Face of Demolition* reveal much about the social experiences of postwar Hong Kong's underprivileged communities. Yet, they were arguably already self-censoring by muting and concealing geopolitical critique and focusing instead on the drama of human experience. However, although the government seemed transparent in publicizing its censorship regulations, it continued to "depoliticize" the process from above by concealing actual reasons for banning films that were deemed politically contentious. *Screening Communities* argues first and foremost that postwar Hong Kong cinema must be conceived as a process of "screening community" that takes into account the factors of colonial governance, filmic expression, and social makeup during the transitional yet politically volatile period between the 1950s and 1960s. This book recognizes the intricate interweaving between politics and postwar culture in Hong Kong, defined here as the transformative two-and-a-half decades following World War II.

Screening Communities conceives Hong Kong's postwar cinema during this period as being not so much the sum of all films produced in the colony but as a process of "screening community" at the intersection of politics, culture, and society during the Cold War period. As such, my intervention in *Screening Communities* is to highlight an analysis that is sensitive to a "poetics" of Hong Kong cinema but also very much grounded in archival and historical readings of the postwar Hong Kong community.⁵ The overarching narrative of *Screening Communities* lies in the story of postwar Hong Kong cinema's transformative nature and its crucial role in the process of "screening community," alongside Hong Kong cinema's contribution to the making of the colony's social and cultural experience through the postwar decades.

Thus, I examine how postwar Hong Kong's community is constructed at the intersection of a triangulated relationship among colonial politics, Chinese culture, and film audiences—actual and presumed, real and implied. That is, I see a three-pronged nexus of colonial intervention in postwar Hong Kong film culture, the rise of left-leaning Cantonese filmmakers as new cultural elites, and the emergence of audiences as discursive agents and fans through narrative tropes. In order to reconceptualize postwar Hong Kong's screened community in the colony's journey toward industrial modernity, postwar Hong Kong community in this book is as much defined by lived experiences as by a cinematic construction, forged through negotiations between narratives of empire, nation, and the Cold War in and beyond Hong Kong. To appreciate the complex formation of colonial Hong Kong society, *Screening Communities* situates the analysis of postwar Hong Kong film culture and poetics within the larger global scope of colonial governance, nationalism, industrialization, and Cold War tensions during the postwar decades.

The building of Hong Kong's postwar community—lived, imagined, and screened—was a direct result of border-crossing encounters among the colonial state (as both censor and film producer), local filmmakers (my focus being primarily Cantonese), and film audiences (both implied and real) in all the diversity of their political, social, ideological, and theoretical aspects. *Screening Communities* anchors its close textual readings of 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong films to the notion that perceptions and constructions of potential audiences were shaped by discourses about the Cold War, British colonial rule, and about Chinese nationalism that were circulating in postwar Hong Kong. Therefore, my narrative of postwar film culture development in Hong Kong is not only about the stories that the films being studied here tell us but also about the politics surrounding the production, distribution, and reception of these films. My goal is to recover the agency of Hong Kong cinema during the 1950s and 1960s, not only as a contributor to postwar Hong Kong film culture but also to the former colony's social and political life. Therefore, I privilege the methodological potential of the act of "screening" in addition to "reflecting" or "viewing" when exploring the interplay between image and idea, politics and culture, film talent, and audience. While the concepts of reflecting and viewing imply a unilateral, unidirectional relationship between film and subject, "screening" focuses more on the processes through which cinema contributed to the building of Hong Kong's postwar community—a milieu that served as an ideological battleground for Communists and Nationalists, colonizer and colonized—and diverse conceptions of empire, nation, and identity politics.

Finally, *Screening Communities* explores many ideological exchanges, not only within Hong Kong but also across geopolitical and temporal boundaries. Hong Kong cinema was poised to become a global cinema since the

1950s; thus the 1950s and 1960s evolved as a transitional period, complicated by Cold War ideological tensions and the decolonization experience around the world. The unstable circumstances of postwar Hong Kong transformed it into a site par excellence for the emergence of a “golden age” of cinema. Despite Hong Kong’s politically precarious colonial status, it experienced a huge influx of migrants and refugees from mainland China, drawn there for various economic and political reasons. For filmmakers, Hong Kong’s turbulent colonial status offered a safe haven in which to create a Chinese-language film production center that would eventually surpass that of prewar Shanghai. I contend that, as a form of mass entertainment, films produced by companies such as the Union and the colony’s own Hong Kong Film Unit provided artistic and cultural expressions of the shifting experiences, interactions, and identities of local and diasporic Chinese-speaking communities. In fact, postwar Hong Kong society was formed by fluid border-crossing encounters involving state, society, and cinema, all of which acted as equal contributors. Below, I will review scholarship drawn from Hong Kong studies and Chinese cinemas to demonstrate how *Screening Communities* contributes to an exciting intersection of two vibrant fields of literature.

Identity Politics: Hong Kong Studies and Chinese Cinemas

The question of what constitutes the unique identity of Hong Kong in the postwar period remains one of the most contested areas of research. However, instead of only asking when this unique identity emerged, I also ask about the language of Hong Kong’s identity and place in which its changing nature has been negotiated. Therefore, *Screening Communities* dialogues with and contributes to existing scholarly work on Hong Kong studies and Chinese cinemas, while also being informed by debates arising from Cold War culture and postcolonial studies. I am particularly interested in how Hong Kong identity is defined through the field of Hong Kong studies. For more than three decades, scholars (primarily from Hong Kong and the West) have examined the intersections of Hong Kong’s historical and economic development, its political culture, and its social life. Scholarship since the 1980s has seen the development of Hong Kong beyond a unilateral relationship between political hegemony and grassroots social disruption. This approach has challenged both British colonial and mainland Chinese nationalist and Marxist (Peking School) historiographies that portrayed Hong Kong as either a “barren rock turned cosmopolitan metropolis” or as an example of imperialist domination and humiliation. New Hong Kong historiography, however, seeks to recover the very process of collaboration whereby ruler and ruled contributed to Hong Kong’s distinct path to modernity.⁶ This

current scholarship seeks knowledge beyond the binary pattern of colonialism and nationalism that informed much scholarship of earlier decades.⁷ The goal of contemporary scholars is to recover the agency of Hong Kong society and its diverse Chinese population in the development of the colony's political, social, and cultural life.

Central to many debates about Hong Kong's identity is the question of when and in what ways identity politics and local belonging emerged and shifted. The 1950s through the 1980s were crucial decades that saw Hong Kong's transformation from an entrepôt of trade to a manufacturing-oriented economy. There have been numerous and largely inconclusive debates about when Hong Kong's local identity emerged, based on studies primarily concerned with how residents of the colony made sense of their experience. I classify much of this research as serving either a top-down approach, or a sociocultural bottom-up ("grass-roots") approach. For instance, Agnes Ku asks: "[W]hat social and cultural processes had brought about the transition from a refugee identity to a locally rooted Hong Kong identity?"⁸ She focuses on "the role of immigration policies, practices, and discourses as a set of inclusionary and exclusionary mechanisms involved in the making of local identity in Hong Kong between 1950 and 1980."⁹ In Ku's analysis, Hong Kong's identity was formed through processes of localization and exclusion, pitting Hong Kongers, or "us," against Chinese Mainlanders, or "them."

Scholarly consensus has been that a distinctive indigenous Hong Kong identity emerged after the 1967 riots.¹⁰ Gordon Mathews, Eric Kit-wai Ma, and Tai-lok Lui move the emergence of that unique identity into the 1970s, basing their conclusions on historical research and demographics.¹¹ During the 1950s, Hong Kong was a city of migrants; most residents were refugees or intentional immigrants from mainland China, living in the colony on "borrowed time, borrowed place."¹² Their sense of belonging remained with the Chinese nation, so their "refugee mentality" continued through the 1950s and well into the 1960s. They preferred the relative political stability of Hong Kong to the instability of mainland China. By the 1970s and 1980s, however, their refugee mentality was replaced by a "market mentality" as Hong Kong's industrial base grew. In the words of Mathews, Ma, and Lui, a market mentality is one "based not in a flight from poverty and national oppression but in affluence, confidence, and cosmopolitanism."¹³ The above-cited authors have tried to redefine the concept of "nation" and dismantle its importance relative to what constitutes Hong Kong residents' sense of belonging. They argue that "Hong Kong people may be creating a new form of 'belonging to a nation,' one based on the discourse not of state but of the market."¹⁴ I would counter that they still adhere to the "political apathy" and political indifference argument that anchors Siu-kai Lau's theory of "utilitarian familism," whereby primary allegiance is to family values and

one's efforts are focused on bettering the family instead of on participating in politics.¹⁵

Screening Communities is inspired by what I see as attempts by bottom-up histories to negate the myth of political apathy, combined with the laissez-faire and noninterventionist style of British rule, in order to redefine the parameters of Hong Kong political and cultural life.¹⁶ To unearth new "discursive activities, new actors and arenas," sociologist Wai-man Lam offers an "alternative conception of political participation" in Hong Kong, which includes activities of the former colony's social organizations.¹⁷ Lam argues that the period between the late 1940s and mid-1970s was characterized by tension and paradox between "political activism and a culture of depoliticization" which led to a "pervasive self-imposed suppression of politics" and "reinforced alternative political expression."¹⁸ It follows that this "alternative political expression" can also be found in the media. If, as Eric Ma convincingly contends, a "distinctive local identity" took root during the late 1970s when the cultural differences between Hong Kongers and mainland Chinese were highlighted in mass media,¹⁹ then Hong Kong's identity is not only historically contingent with "fluid and shifting boundaries,"²⁰ but its sense of belonging, identity, and community formation have always been linked to appropriation of the "culture of depoliticization" in all aspects of postwar cultural and social experience.

In addition to expanding on the concerns of new Hong Kong history scholarship, *Screening Communities* reconceives the ideological and cultural work of Hong Kong film culture and its role in the building of a postwar community. Therefore, my work also draws from and dialogues with the rich scholarship on Chinese cinemas from the past three decades, which has long recognized the significance of political and social change to the development of film cultures in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China. For the past three decades, scholars have not only tried to define the components of Chinese cinemas, but they have also struggled with the methodological limitations of an essentially hegemonic structure where China is always at the center. Scholars of Chinese cinemas writing in English have adopted four critical approaches over the past three decades:²¹ national cinema,²² transnational cinema,²³ Chinese-language cinema,²⁴ and Sinophone cinema.²⁵ Influenced by seminal works from European cinema scholars such as Andrew Higson,²⁶ scholarship in Chinese cinema has adopted the national cinema paradigm to examine films produced in Greater China (including the Mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong). While privileging the paradigm of national cinema, Yingjin Zhang nonetheless argues in *Chinese National Cinema* that the "national" in this paradigm is "historically constructed, circulated and contested."²⁷

Yet, just as notions of what constitutes the “national” in Chinese cinema are debatable, the diversified strategies taken by film industries in and beyond China in the past decades have led to an increase in coproductions across different regions. The second paradigm in vogue in Chinese cinema scholarship is transnational cinema, which has been adopted by scholars in our age of globalization, a time when nation-state boundaries are increasingly fluid, constantly being crossed, and redefined. Though it recognizes cinema as a cultural industry in the capitalist mode of production, the transnational approach does not celebrate this mode, seeing itself instead as “progressive.”²⁸ The third paradigm, Chinese-language cinema, includes films produced in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Chinese diaspora.²⁹ This paradigm is able to resolve the methodological impasse of Chinese national cinema that privileges Mandarin Chinese as a national language and the modern Chinese nation-state (the People’s Republic of China) as the center. Finally, the Sinophone paradigm is an approach of resistance. While Shu-mei Shih defines the Sinophone model as “anti-sinocentrism,” Sheldon Lu argues that the Sinophone approach should not exclude mainland China but rather include it along with Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and the global Chinese diaspora.³⁰

Each of the above approaches offers a different and distinct perspective that inspires my reconception of postwar Hong Kong cinema. In the final analysis, the above paradigms recognize that there are certainly methodological and theoretical limitations in defining local cinematic traditions as merely “Chinese,” “Chinese national,” or even “Chinese transnational.” I do not abandon these categories altogether but rather see new possibilities in their fluidity when examining postwar Hong Kong film culture. I contend that any cultural center may shift, depending on the historical and political forces at play. Instead of conceiving Hong Kong cinema as either integrally part of Chinese cinema or a departure from it, Hong Kong cinema is conceived here in tandem with multivalent influences within and beyond its borders. In order to appreciate the intersections between such global processes and the aesthetics and language of 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong cinema, *Screening Communities* examines postwar Hong Kong cinema as a process of “screening community” that combines the bottom-up approaches of cinematic poetics and new Hong Kong history. This also includes a cultural and historical approach that takes into consideration the competing rhetoric, practices, and policies of Hong Kong’s political engagement with Cold War politics, colonialism, nationalism, the decolonization process, and industrial modernization.

Redefining Hong Kong Identity in the Cold War

The arguments postulated by scholars in Hong Kong studies and Chinese cinemas discussed above continue to seek that singular moment when a distinctive local Hong Kong identity emerged. Their overall consensus is that, beginning in the late 1960s and extending well into the 1970s, a locally distinctive identity did in fact emerge. In local immigration law, the notion of a “Hong Kong believer” emerged during the same period.³¹ Established literature on Hong Kong cinema also recognized that it was during the 1970s when locally born-and-raised Hong Kong New Wave directors began to make their mark in the television and film industries. *Screening Communities* offers a slightly different take on the question of Hong Kong identity by shifting the analytical focus away from merely asking “when” it happened to exploring the “where” and “how” behind the impact of identity politics. Shifting the object of analysis and perspective in this way recalibrates how Chinese cinema has been previously conceived and the role it has played in the formation of the postwar Chinese community in Hong Kong. Even today, Hong Kong’s population is in a “constant state of fluctuation.” Helen Siu’s notion of Hong Kong as a “cultural kaleidoscope” is very apt, and I have adopted this image to extend the definition of Hong Kong identity and community from a temporal quest to a spatial and a cinematic one,³² where filmic image, ideological conviction, displaced populations, and nostalgic yearning traverse the borders and boundaries of empire, nation, and local community, both real and screened.

Taking the context of Cold War politics seriously also sheds new light on the contributions of postwar Hong Kong cinema to the making of today’s community. In the past two decades, as more and more archives have become declassified, Cold War studies has moved beyond examining US versus USSR politics to encompass how filmmaking was an integral part of Cold War struggles in cultures and societies around the world. Recent studies have moved our understanding of the Cold War battle for hearts and minds beyond that of a bipolar contest between Washington and Moscow, or between the Hollywood and Soviet film industries.³³ By exploring the broader impact of Cold War politics in Asia, as well as identity politics within postwar Hong Kong’s populace, *Screening Communities* expands the range of dialogue to embrace a more holistic concept of Cold War culture in Asia. The Cold War in Asia could not easily be defined as a competition between the left and the right, for it also changed the face and trajectory of colonial rule in Hong Kong as well as the very conception of Chinese nationalism. The 1950s not only saw competition between pro-Taiwan Nationalist and the pro-Beijing leftist factions but also witnessed rising nationalist sentiments amid the decolonization process in Southeast Asia, as well as the

eventual falling-out between China and the USSR. Cold War politics in Asia also facilitated the transplantation and cross-fertilization of talent, image, and capital throughout the Asian film production and cultural industries, as well as the transformation of colonial Hong Kong into a global site for transnational film productions. These new political tides pushed postwar Hong Kong cinema to adopt new engagements with competing states and societies in and through its diversified filmic genres, linguistic registers, and social impact.³⁴

Reassessing 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong cinema through its engagement with global encounters and social change helps move us away from a teleological reading of Hong Kong cinema history as a singular narrative of emergence, rise and fall, and against a background of continually resisting hegemonic discourses produced by mainland China or the British colonial government. The desire to see the trajectory of Hong Kong cinema as one of orderly life, death, and rebirth also has repercussions for the periodization and reading of contemporary Hong Kong cinema on the world stage. Yiu-wai Chu writes: "To stay alive, Hong Kong cinema must refuse to believe that the Mainland is their only source of hope."³⁵ He also laments that coproductions in the aftermath of the 1997 handover would transform Hong Kong cinema—"once popular not only in Chinese communities but worldwide"—into "Chinese cinema." He emphasizes that "One Country, Two Systems" does not translate into "One Country, Two Cultures."³⁶ Chu and other scholars tend to see mainland China as a hindrance to Hong Kong cinema, and by extension to Hong Kong culture and society, in the ongoing quest to acquire a truly distinctive identity. But mainland China need not be seen only as Hong Kong's nemesis. If we recognize that both mainland China and the British Empire are political entities that do not have fixed identities or policies, we can then appreciate that their roles in the making of both Hong Kong cinema and the Hong Kong community have been historically contingent upon colonial, Cold War, national, and local politics. In this light, I concur with Helen Siu, who writes:

[T]he Hong Kong experience has been neither entirely colonial/Western or narrowly territorial . . . In sum, the Hong Kong identity is attached to a territory without clear boundaries. It constitutes fluid layers of social meaning, economic interests, and political preferences and has grown global without losing its Chinese bearing.³⁷

As I will demonstrate further in *Screening Communities*, postwar Hong Kong cinema was constituted by various political and social concerns and created by both commercial filmmakers and government film producers. It can therefore be seen simultaneously as part of Chinese national cinema,³⁸ Sinophone cinema,³⁹ diasporic cinema,⁴⁰ or local cinema: it need not be defined in exclusion from any of these categories. Only if and when Hong

Kong cinema is defined more broadly and approached from multiple perspectives can we come to appreciate even more fully its integral and constitutive role in the postwar and post-handover experience of screening communities in and beyond Hong Kong.

Screening Community and Negotiating Spectatorship

Screening Communities is an interdisciplinary study of the Cold War and colonial history of Hong Kong cinema. The key film genres examined in this study include 1950s and 1960s official documentary films, leftist family melodrama, and youth films. Yet, as my introductory reflections demonstrate, I do not study these genres in isolation. Instead, I incorporate in-depth analyses of the poetics of Hong Kong cinema that also bring to bear industrial, political, and cultural readings of the role of Hong Kong's postwar cinema in the making of a postwar Hong Kong community. Through a close study of genre conventions, characterization, and modes of filmic narration across select Cantonese films and government documentaries, I contend that 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong cinema, broadly construed, became a site par excellence for the construction and translation (on the ground and on screen) of a postwar Hong Kong community, whose context was continually shifting—at once indigenous and hybrid, postcolonial, and global. In order to consider the intimate and intricate connections between politics and culture, censorship and film narrative, *Screening Communities* uses multimedia archival sources, including government archives, memoirs, fan magazines, newspaper reports, and films, to narrate the complexity of social change and political turmoil, both screened and lived, in postwar Hong Kong. As noted, my study builds on new Hong Kong history in that I focus on the transformative nature of cinema in exposing the entanglements between politics and culture; that is, between the colonial state, postwar cultural elites, and Hong Kong's social actors, as they are addressed by narratives of postwar Hong Kong cinema in the process of creating a postwar community.

Thus, the framework of *Screening Communities* is built around the process of "screening" the postwar Hong Kong community. Inspired by the "spatial turn" in new imperial history and colonial cinema historiography, my analysis of this process involves multidirectional global elements predicated on constantly shifting relational identities.⁴¹ It is multidirectional because Hong Kong cinema, from its inception, has never been restrained by national boundaries in production, distribution, or reception. This framework argues not only for the inclusion of minoritarian and majoritarian, imperial and indigenous, local, regional, and global perspectives but also expands the parameters of my analysis of Hong Kong cinema (primarily 1950s and 1960s Cantonese cinema) as a site of translation, where diverse influences contest

and negotiate for space and recognition. It follows, then, that the identity of Hong Kong should not be understood as singular, fixed, or preformed around any specific moments in time or space. Rather, it should be defined as “relational” and fluid, with multiple centers and peripheries of becoming, where both national and metropolitan centers and colonial and diasporic margins enter into a process of exchange in local, regional, and transnational contexts. Therefore, community is defined here not only as a lived reality but a rhetorical and discursive construction at the intersection of colonial governance, filmic expressions, and spectatorship. Therefore, the screening of this community is a process defined from multiple and at times conflicting perspectives and overlapping registers. Indeed, a focus on the formation of postwar Hong Kong community challenges what has been a largely bifurcated understanding of its colonial society as either “part of” or “apart from” China.⁴² Through analyzing the history of screening community in postwar Hong Kong, we see how diversified Hong Kong cinema actually was and how it contributed to the complex postwar experience of living in Hong Kong, amid the Cold War in Asia.

A study of how film contributes to the making of a community inevitably invites questions about the reception of the very films that audiences within that community might have seen. This book recognizes that it is not always possible to tap into individual audience members’ reactions to specific films, given the scarcity of such material. Similarly, it can be difficult to gauge how effectively filmmakers transmitted their messages to viewers in Hong Kong and elsewhere, or gauge how audiences responded to colonial censorship policies and propaganda. While this book privileges the analysis of postwar Hong Kong cinema from a theorized “viewing position,”⁴³ it does not jettison the moments when the voices of actual audiences do come to the foreground. However, my research did not include conducting ethnographic surveys or analysis. As printed sources are used, my analysis also recognizes the risk of skewed perspectives. Therefore, what I am interested in are the intersections across various discourses of address and reception. For this task, I draw on theories by feminist film scholars Miriam Hansen, Judith Mayne, and Linda Williams. Each has discussed the potential and limitations of spectatorship, reception, and ethnography.

In her groundbreaking study *Babel and Babylon*, which examines the construction of the public sphere and spectatorship in early American film, Miriam Hansen writes:

There is no doubt that theoretical concepts of spectatorship need to be historicized so as to include empirical formations of reception. By the same token, however, a reception-oriented film history cannot be written without a theoretical framework that conceptualizes the possible relations between films and viewers.⁴⁴

What Hansen suggests here is that an ethnographic study cannot completely recover and reconstruct empirical audience reception, and a theorization of spectatorship cannot be divorced from a historically grounded understanding of the production context of the films under study. Film scholar Judith Mayne's notion of negotiation is also helpful here to appreciate the negotiation between interpellation and actual audience response.⁴⁵ Mayne's article examines the development of spectator studies since the 1970s. She outlines the tension between a "monolithic" reading of the implied spectator from the perspective of cinematic apparatus and the heterogeneous and diverse viewer responses to the singular imposition of cinema as institution. In other words, it is a difference between the ideal spectator "structured into the [filmic] text" and the real viewers who are "socially defined" and "heterogeneous" and between address and reception.⁴⁶

According to Mayne, 1970s film theory, which constructed the ideal spectator's positionality within the film narrative, has its limitations. She remains suspicious, however, of the claims and conclusions made by ethnographic reader-response and cultural studies, which conceptualize "readers/viewers as completely free and autonomous."⁴⁷ Reading responses of the real viewer to the "monolithic conception of the cinematic apparatus" as either "contestatory" or "resistant" does not problematize or undo the "ideal reader" but rather displaces it.⁴⁸ In order to appreciate the complexity of diverse viewing positions and to expose the biases of any critical reading of cultural texts, Mayne draws from the concept of negotiation in cultural studies. Yet while Stuart Hall proposed three "decoding strategies"—dominant reading, negotiated reading, and oppositional reading—Mayne suggests that, since "it is highly unlikely that one will find any pure instances of dominant or oppositional readings," it is more useful to think of all readings as "negotiated ones,"⁴⁹ further arguing that "What remains vital, in the critical examination of spectatorship, is the recognition that no negotiation is inherently or purely oppositional, but that the desire for anything inherent or pure is itself a fiction that must be contested."⁵⁰ It follows that, in my reading of postwar Hong Kong cinema, I explore how meanings are negotiated in the very process of screening communities, which themselves are as much lived realities as fictive constructions, born of the intersections between top-down policies and interpellation and bottom-up cinematic poetics and experiences and reception.

If Hong Kong's postwar community is itself a construction, then screening as a process is also a negotiated one. The sense in which I use the term "screening" is also in part inspired by Linda Williams.⁵¹ In addition to identifying negotiation between address and reception, "screening" thus retains the double meaning she suggested. Throughout the pages of *Screening Communities*, I will argue that postwar Hong Kong cinema inevitably

exposes and whitewashes the Cold War and colonial politics of Hong Kong cinema. Although it is difficult to gauge the reception of Hong Kong film audiences, being mindful of the intersections between address and reception reminds us that both the targeted and the actual audiences of the era did in fact contribute to the making of postwar Hong Kong cinema and its community. Since meanings are created both in tension and in intersection, *Screening Communities* is concerned with the fluidity of the functions of cinema as a spatial and conceptual legacy and transformation, in which producers and consumers alike were responsible for its shifting narratives, subjective constructions, identities, and communities during the 1950s through the late 1960s.

Indeed, it is important to not jettison elements of reader and viewer reception, or theorizing about implied spectators. Not only are meanings produced in negotiation between theory and practice, but the complexity of meaning and function of cinema during the Cold War period is exposed through analyzing these intersections between address and reception. It follows that my analysis throughout this book fluctuates at times between an interpellated sense of address and the reception of “actual” audiences, albeit one already filtered through print media. I recognize that my focus on Cantonese cinema has inevitably resulted in less comprehensive inclusion of other major players, such as the Shaw Brothers, who produced films primarily in the Mandarin tongue. Yet the narrative focus of *Screening Communities* effectively reminds us that this story of postwar Hong Kong cinema is in fact one of many. Indeed, my goal is to open up more critical space for ongoing dialogue to include text and context, producer and consumer, filmmaker and film viewer, fans and narrative, politics and discourse. Only then will we be able to embrace new interpretations and “viewing positions” of postwar Hong Kong cinema.

Book Overview: Transformation from Colonial Enclave to Industrialized Metropolis

Screening Communities exposes transformative ways in which Hong Kong cinema contributed to the construction of postwar Hong Kong identity and community. In three parts, comprising thematically organized and chronologically overlapping chapters, this book narrates the political, cultural, social, and generic developments of Hong Kong film culture during the 1950s and 1960s. Each part presents two related chapters that explore the legacy of imperial politics (Part 1), nationalistic and familial ideals (Part 2), and gender dynamics (Part 3), amid negotiations between definitions and practices of spectatorship, identity, and community in Hong Kong during two-and-a-half decades following World War II. The overarching goal of

each part is to explore the transformation of Hong Kong film culture during the Cold War period. Ultimately, my intervention is in presenting a narrative of postwar Hong Kong film culture as a process of “screening communities” in subsequent chapters. The goal of this narrative logic is to introduce methodological possibilities for studying the history of Hong Kong cinema beyond master narratives based merely on established film canons, critically acclaimed auteurs, famed studios, and nation-state defined cinemas, among others. The narrative I privilege instead explores the borders and boundaries of “screening community” as a process that at once obscures and reveals the cultural work and political functions of Hong Kong cinema, as well as the different “viewing positions” occupied by diversified audiences.⁵² Such audiences are positioned as colonial subjects (Part 1), national subjects (Part 2), or gendered subjects (Part 3), through the Cold War period during which projects of colonial, national, and alternative local modernities have been promoted in tandem and are ongoing and unfinished.

Part 1 argues that colonial governance in postwar Hong Kong, especially as manifested in Hong Kong film culture, must be assessed within the shifting context of the ongoing influence of British imperial politics and local response to global Cold War politics. The two chapters in this part trace how the political regime of British Hong Kong “screened community” in the colony by controlling film culture both through censorship legislation and production of filmic propaganda. The objective of Chapter 1 is to map out the contours of the Cold War regulatory context in Hong Kong, setting the stage in subsequent chapters for analyses of how films of various political persuasions navigated within this context. This first chapter argues that British Hong Kong exercised a policy of accommodation and neutrality in order for its censorship legislations to function during a period of global decolonization. Chapter 2 uses Hong Kong Film Unit-produced short features, such as *Report to the Gods* (dir. Brian Salt, 1967), starring local opera talent Leung Sing-por, as archival sources to argue that the colonial regime’s relationship with Hong Kong’s population was not a static vertical imposition of the “culture of depoliticization” but one that was shifting and characterized by manipulation, misunderstanding, and negotiation amid bipolarized Cold War tension. I argue here that British Hong Kong’s censorship and filmmaking activities expose the top-down imposition of a colonial regime as well as the transformative nature of colonial rule during the Cold War period of the 1950s through 1960s.

Part 2 consists of two chapters that examine Hong Kong’s role in the screening of national history and culture through the constructions of postwar Hong Kong communal experience in the Cantonese register by left-leaning Cantonese filmmakers during the 1950s and 1960s. These chapters provide an alternative narrative of struggles experienced by the postwar

Hong Kong community that differ from that constructed by the colonial regime presented in Part 1. Just as Part 1 argues that Hong Kong's colonial government transformed from an imperialistic one to a more collaborative one amid the global forces of Cold War and decolonization within British Hong Kong's colonial context, Part 2 argues that the modernizing project constructed by leftist filmmakers in Hong Kong was inspired by nationalistic agendas from prewar Shanghai but ultimately transformed to incorporate a vernacular reformist modernism rooted in the experience of local Hong Kong families.

In order to appreciate the legacy of the May Fourth Movement in postwar Hong Kong's golden age of cinema, Chapter 3 argues that, just as the unfinished Civil War between the Nationalist Party and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) found a new outlet in postwar Hong Kong's cultural realm, the May Fourth Movement was an unfinished one, carried forward by progressive Cantonese filmmakers who were the torchbearers of its ideology. Here I consider left-leaning filmmakers, including Ng Cho-fan and Lo Dun, as postwar Hong Kong's new "cultural elites." Postwar left-wing Cantonese films, particularly those produced at the Union, became a manifestation of postwar vernacular modernism.⁵³ Through a close reading of the Union's film adaptations of the Ba Jin trilogy, *Family* (*Jia*, dir. Ng Wui, 1953), *Spring* (*Chun*, dir. Lee Sun-fung, 1953), and *Autumn* (*Qiu*, dir. Chun Kim, 1954), this chapter demonstrates the transformative nature of the moral message of postwar Hong Kong's cultural elites.

At the core of Chapter 4 is the task of resolving the epistemological crisis in the meaning and place of Cantonese film in Hong Kong's film history and by extension the periodization of Hong Kong cinema in the postwar era. This chapter examines the family melodrama—also known as social ethics films, or *lunlipian*—one of the predominant genres employed by Cantonese companies of the "left-leaning film constellation," including the Union, Xinlian, Overseas Chinese, and Hualian. In particular, I argue that the pedagogical work of *lunlipian* was not merely through narratives of a reconfigured Confucian family but also through the audience-hailing effect of marketing, which constructed cinemagoers as members of a collective family in Hong Kong's postwar community. This chapter further argues that didacticism, the hallmark and *raison d'être* of *lunlipian*, continued to find new expressions in other genre films during the 1960s as leftist filmmakers in Hong Kong adapted to an increasingly competitive and globalized film industry. In theorizing the *lunli* mode of storytelling, I suggest a new periodization of Cantonese golden age cinema that presents an alternative narrative, from one of aesthetic rupture and commercial decline to one of moral and didactic continuity and industrial adaptation.

Similar to Part 2, Part 3 focuses primarily on Cantonese films. Like other studies of Hong Kong cinema, my focus on Cantonese films inevitably obscures how Mandarin films “screen” communities differently. However, there are two reasons why I privilege how Cantonese films constructed and screened their Hong Kong community. First, I contend that Cantonese films provide an alternative vision to that promoted by vertically integrated film companies such as Shaw Brothers and Cathay, which is the parent company of Hong Kong–based film studio Motion Picture and General Investment Co. Ltd. (MP & GI).⁵⁴ Mandarin-language films produced by the leading right-leaning film studios Shaw Brothers and MP & GI often focus on the upper middle class. In *Screening Communities*, however, I am more interested in the experiences of postwar Hong Kong’s underprivileged and marginalized residents. Secondly, I privilege Cantonese films in order to fill a gap in current scholarship on the subject. Stephanie Chung,⁵⁵ Poshek Fu,⁵⁶ Darrell Davis,⁵⁷ Jean Ma,⁵⁸ and Stacilee Ford,⁵⁹ among others, have extensively covered the history and aesthetics of Shaw Brothers and MP & GI, and interested readers may consult their works to gain a comparative view of the diversified communities that were screened during this period. It follows that Part 3 argues that the industrial modernization of Hong Kong in the 1960s was the result of both a borderless and localized understanding of citizenry and the fruits of gendered labor as the former colony rapidly industrialized during the mid- to late 1960s.

This part focuses on the screening of an industrialized city in the Cantonese register, and its two chapters move beyond paternalistic and patriarchal definitions of screening community discussed in the previous two parts through tracing the narratives of gendered construction in two cinematic figures: the traveling Chinese overseas woman and the factory/teddy girl. I argue that the gendered labor of these two figures contributed greatly to the reconfiguration of Hong Kong’s postwar community from one defined by a duality of local and global, to one defined by constant negotiations and fluidity between centrifugal and centripetal movements. The narratives of colonial film censorship and official propaganda discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, and those of the postwar Cantonese leftist filmmakers and *lunli-pian* of a reconfigured Confucian family examined in Chapters 3 and 4, are paternalistic-centered histories. The final two chapters argue for debunking traditional strictures of Chinese patriarchy in Hong Kong cinema by looking at narrative tropes that move beyond the paternalistic confines created by the Hong Kong Film Unit and leftist Cantonese film companies. Narratives of the traveling Chinese overseas woman and the working girl expose the preoccupation with gendered labor as much as they reveal how the screening of communities has always been forged at the porous interface resulting from the border-crossing activities of film production and film reception.

Although it is difficult to gauge the historical reception of Hong Kong film audiences, these narratives remind us that both potential (i.e., targeted) and actual audiences did indeed contribute to the making of postwar Hong Kong cinema and community.

Chapter 5 argues for the primacy of Chinese overseas (in diaspora) as not only an influential market to ensure the postwar Hong Kong film industry's survival and success but also as a privileged narrative focus providing a vantage point from which to explore the importance of Southeast Asia (Nanyang) as ethos and imaginary in 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong films. Instead of asking whether representations of the Nanyang experience are authentic or not, I ask to what extent we can recover the voice of the traveling Chinese woman in her path toward acculturation in the Nanyang and what this representation exposes about categories such as citizenship, diaspora, labor, and sense of belonging. If Chapter 5 is about traveling and migration, the fluidity of citizenship, and the borderless nature of community in diaspora, Chapter 6 examines the rootedness of gendered labor in 1960s Hong Kong and the connection between working women (as consumers and laborers), their counterparts the young juvenile delinquents or the teddy girls, and 1960s youth films. During the 1960s, young women provided a "source of cheap, unskilled, and flexible laborers that made possible the postwar [manufacturing] industrial success."⁶⁰ Development of Hong Kong's 1960s economy was made possible by the practice and norms of a "centripetal" family structure.⁶¹ Individuals had to rely on their families due to low wages, long working hours, and the lack of colonial governmental welfare support.⁶² Thus, even as they gained financial power, these young and mostly single working women continued to be dictated to by the patriarchal system.⁶³ In this final chapter, I examine the intersections among gendered labor, the Chinese patriarchal family, celebrity culture, and fandom, through films starring 1960s idols Connie Chan Po-chu and Josephine Siao Fong-fong. It may be true that fandom and celebrity culture were created by the real demographics of an increasing number of female workers who became Connie fans (*Baozhu mi*) or Josephine fans (*Fangfang mi*). In this chapter, I also want to emphasize that the viewership of *Fangfang mi* and *Baozhu mi* became discursive sites that contributed to the constructions of a gendered community both within and outside traditional Confucian familial hierarchies. Indeed, factory girls and their counterparts the teddy girls as cinematic tropes in 1960s youth films and their audiences are a gendered embodiment of the 1960s Hong Kong community undergoing industrial modernity.

This book concludes with a coda summarizing once again the overarching thesis and goals of the book, followed by a discussion of the lasting impact of *Those 72 Tenants* (*Qishier jia fangke*, dir. Wang Weiyi, 1963) and its

remake, *The House of 72 Tenants* (*Qishier jia fangke*, dir. Chor Yuen, 1973), on developments in Hong Kong cinema since the 1970s as they intersect with political and social change originating during the mid-1960s disturbances. The 1970s marked not only the end of the Cold War in Asia but also a trend toward increasingly porous boundaries across media formats as well as across political and social preoccupations in Hong Kong filmmaking. Indeed, the very survival of Hong Kong cinema depended a great deal on contributions from the burgeoning television industry. A comparative analysis of the Cantonese leftist melodramas *Those 72 Tenants* and *The House of 72 Tenants*, a Cantonese comedy produced by the right-leaning Mandarin film studio Shaw Brothers and the local Hong Kong Television Broadcasts Ltd. (TVB) (which ironically is often credited as the film that revived Cantonese cinema in the early 1970s), allows us to appreciate one of the most iconic courtyard settings in Hong Kong film history; the scene would subsequently reappear in Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle* (*Gongfu*, dir. Stephen Chow, 2004) as Pig Sty Alley. This comparison will demonstrate the persistence of the portrayal of a screened community—first popularized in leftist melodrama in the postwar period—from the 1970s through the 2000s.

Conclusion

Stephen Chiu and Tai-lok Lui remind us that Hong Kong's path to global city status—its recognition as a world-class industrial and financial center—dates to pre-1950s.⁶⁴ They assert that the “relocation of manufacturing to the Pearl River Delta since the 1980s can be seen as a rediscovery of a hinterland from which it had been disconnected” and that Hong Kong's economic development and growth were always tied to that of mainland China and overseas networks.⁶⁵ Similarly, representations of community in Hong Kong cinema are linked to Chineseness, defined through and against China-centered literary and filmic traditions. The *longue durée* perspective of Chiu and Lui on the role of Hong Kong in globalization also influences my reassessment of how screening the Hong Kong community functioned in the creation of its postwar society and identity. My contribution, therefore, is not only to give agency to Hong Kong cinema per se but also to invite readers to reconceive the meaning of Hong Kong cinema and its role in community building. Hong Kong cinema is not a finite and fixed object, either as entertainment or as politics; rather, it is about the screening of a society where community holds a mirror to itself. It participates in and shapes the larger global processes of colonial politics, Cold War tensions, and identity formation in and beyond Hong Kong.

To this end, it seems fitting to conclude with a quote from the study by Laurent Gutierrez and Valerie Portefaix about Hong Kong's transitional identity:

Soft disappearance defines the brief moment between demolition and redevelopment, when urban fragments are visible like ruins. For instance during the transition period before a new structure emerges, the emptied land is not given a chance to absorb any layers of history, but is turned into a carpark for a few weeks. Like a living organism, Hong Kong disposes of its unadapted cells and replaces them with more adapted or competitive ones. This kind of mutation, or political permutation, changes the image of the city but never its identity. Hong Kong is by definition a place of transition.⁶⁶

If, as Gutierrez and Portefaix argue, Hong Kong is a place of continuous transition, then Hong Kong cinema's relationship with state and society, politics and governance, must also be considered constantly shifting, never fixed. Understanding how Hong Kong's film culture "screened communities" is a key to understanding, and exploding, the binaries created by Cold War and colonial politics. Only then can we conceive Hong Kong cinema as an equal contributor to the making of a viable postwar community, economic growth, social change, and Hong Kong's new identity of always becoming, yet never complete. Indeed, the competing nationalistic and patriotic sentiments of being Chinese, as constructed and projected by Hong Kong cinema and consumed by Hong Kong movie fans around the world, have never been signs of "disappearance" but of a local "community" that has always been global—"mutating" and shifting in dynamic relationship with forces both in and beyond its geographical confines.⁶⁷ Finally, it is my hope that we begin to appreciate Hong Kong society and its identity formation as always being in process, not as an endpoint. Only then can we overcome the methodological and epistemological impasse where we merely see one center, for that center never actually existed.

Coda

The Persistence of Screening Community in Post–Cold War Hong Kong

The foregoing six chapters have traced the history of postwar Hong Kong cinema during the 1950s and 1960s as a shifting process of screening community along Hong Kong's turbulent path from colonial modernity toward localization and industrial modernity. My narrative moved beyond the singular moment when Hong Kong's local identity emerged, in order to pursue the trajectory of how Hong Kong cinema contributed culturally and politically to building the colony's postwar community and identity. Consequently, this exploration of 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong film culture has situated multiple analyses of film "poetics"—generic conventions, narrative economy, and recurrent tropes in British Hong Kong official films, *lun-lipian*, and youth films—within a historical study of production, distribution, and reception contexts in and beyond Hong Kong's geopolitical boundaries. In particular, I have argued that the aesthetics, concerns, and goals of Hong Kong cinema could not be divorced from the competing rhetoric, practices, and policies of the colony's engagement with Cold War politics, colonialism, nationalism, the decolonization process, and industrial modernization. *Screening Communities* argues that postwar Hong Kong cinema must be understood as a process of screened communities at the confluences of the aforementioned global forces, and thus constructed as a negotiation involving viewing positions of the British colonial government, leftist Cantonese filmmakers, and local and diasporic audiences (actual, potential, and theorized). In addition, the preceding six chapters have exposed once-concealed narratives of imperial anxiety during the Cold War (Chapters 1 and 2), competing civilizing and modernizing missions of Chinese nationalisms (Chapters 3 and 4), and the mobilization of audiences through rhetoric of citizenship and gendered labor (Chapters 5 and 6).

In presenting a narrative of postwar Hong Kong cinema that privileged the poetics and politics of making a local community through screening processes, another intervention in this book was to present an alternative trajectory of postwar Hong Kong cinema development. It is customary in film studies to trace the success and failure of films in correlation to box

office receipts and/or production figures. In identifying the precise historical moment and exact aesthetic parameters of the emergence of Hong Kong cinema's unique identity, film studies scholarship has at times perpetuated a teleological narrative of its rise, fall, and revival from the late 1940s to the present. Many scholars agree that *The House of 72 Tenants* (1973) revived Cantonese cinema on the silver screen¹ and that the film's release marked a turning point; in fact, the creation of an entirely new Hong Kong cinema. Stephen Teo argues that this event in Hong Kong film history marks the end of postwar Cantonese film produced from the late 1940s through the late 1960s.² According to Teo, the genre "exists no longer, and its cultural or aesthetic legacy was not necessarily the same as the Cantonese cinema that replaced the old one after 1973."³ Overlooked in such surveys of demise and revival, however, is the continuation and legacy of the postwar community-building narrative that *Screening Communities* has primarily examined.⁴ In this coda, I follow a trajectory of Hong Kong cinema in post-Cold War Asia, after the historic 1972 visit to China by then-US president Richard Nixon, a period that continued the legacy of 1950s and 1960s preoccupation with "screening community."

Indeed, the persistence of filmic vision in building local communities is a supple and pervasive thread, woven through the history of Hong Kong cinema from the 1950s to the present. Certainly, the concerns expressed in 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong cinema were different from those revealed in *The House of 72 Tenants* and its spinoffs, due to shifting historical contingencies. Yet as I will show, the portrayal of a crowded tenement seen in *The House of 72 Tenants* re-creates a community that first appeared in the 1963 leftist film, *Those 72 Tenants*. In fact, *The House of 72 Tenants* became so popular that the film and tenement complex portrayed within it would be remade and alluded to many times in subsequent decades—as digital cinema, television programs, and even videogames. Most famous of these spinoffs was Stephen Chow's absurd action comedy, *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004). Not only does *The House of 72 Tenants* mark a major transition in Hong Kong cinema, but various cinematic reincarnations of the crowded building complex (which would later become Pig Sty Alley in *Kung Fu Hustle*) also bridge diverse geopolitical realities, national sentiments, and globalizing forces found within the long and continuing history of postwar Hong Kong cinema. Below, I trace the imagery of the tenement building and courtyard portrayed in *The House of 72 Tenants* and its reincarnation as Pig Sty Alley in *Kung Fu Hustle*, to demonstrate a perennial preoccupation of screening community, which is often achieved through reinventing the past in cinematic and personal nostalgia.

Politics of Genre and Narration in the Post–Cold War Period

Shot in Shawscope in color, and coproduced by the Shaw Brothers with the local Hong Kong Television Broadcasts Ltd. (TVB; Wuxian Dianshi),⁵ *The House of 72 Tenants* is still known as the film that popularized a new style of Hong Kong comedy, one whose comedic tone is established right from the outset. The story begins on a morning like many other mornings in a crowded mixed residential and commercial complex, where seventy-two tenants from different walks of life live and toil. Shanghai Po (an affectionate name for a Shanghainese woman “of a certain age”), who works as a laundress, waits impatiently by the public water tap to fill her bucket. Frustrated with the intermittent flow of water, she bangs on the tap but to no avail. Just as she is walking away, water comes gushing out. When she quickly rushes back to the tap, the flow stops. Confused, she peers up the opening of the spout only to have water splash all over her head. A neighbor enters the courtyard and sees Shanghai Po’s drenched hair, creating the film’s first comedic moment by asking innocently: “Shanghai Po, are you already washing your hair this early in the morning?”

While *The House of 72 Tenants* is the remake of a politicized 1963 leftist film, *Those 72 Tenants*, directed by Wang Weiyi, *Those 72 Tenants* was in turn based on a Shanghainese burlesque stage play about life in pre-1949 Shanghai society, performed at the time by the Shanghai Dagong Repertory Company.⁶ Not surprisingly, *Those 72 Tenants* was deeply embedded in nationalistic, commercial, and revolutionary politics. The stage play was in Shanghainese, but the 1963 film adaptation was in Cantonese. China’s Pearl River Film Studio was only given permission to adapt the play after the Central Film Bureau intervened.⁷ Then *Those 72 Tenants* was only allowed distribution in Guangdong and Guangxi. It was barred from the rest of the country in case its popularity might adversely affect performances of the stage play from which it was derived. Since *Those 72 Tenants* was not allowed national distribution in China, the producer aimed further afield to appeal to Chinese overseas audiences; for that reason the Shanghainese burlesque genre was dropped and the melodramatic social ethics genre was adopted instead.⁸

The use of the melodramatic mode was a political move that clearly marked *Those 72 Tenants* as a leftist film. Whereas the stage version focuses primarily on Police Officer 369 and his schemes to make money from the seventy-two tenants, the film narrative tells how the building’s two landlords (a husband and wife) make up excuses to evict all their tenants in order to turn the tenement into a brothel and gambling den. In order to legally evict the residents, the landlords secure the help of a corrupt police chief by agreeing to let him marry their adopted daughter, whom they treat as their

mui tsai. The film highlights the conflict and struggle between the seventy-two tenants and their greedy landlords, but eventually they, as “the masses,” triumph over the “propertied class” building owners. Backed by the solidarity of the tenants, the landlords’ adopted daughter is also saved from a forced marriage.

At first, the border-crossing appeal of *Those 72 Tenants* seems to go beyond politics. Yet the story of police corruption, the failure of the state to control inflation, the loss of human dignity due to rampant unemployment, the critique of gender inequity, and finally the tenants’ struggle against landlord corruption all seem to situate the film within the politics and tradition of left-wing filmmaking from 1930s Shanghai and 1950s Cantonese cinema. However, the various political campaigns underway during the film’s initial run, which culminated in the Cultural Revolution, led to attacks against the film itself as being poisonous and reactionary. As director Wang Weiyi recalled, the Pearl River Studio was vandalized with posters that read “Down with Wang Weiyi.”⁹ After the film was evaluated by the Reassessment Committee and mass criticism groups, however, it experienced a dramatic reversal of fortune. All charges were dropped after the critics reportedly found the film too funny and could not stop laughing while attempting to assess it. *Those 72 Tenants* was subsequently dubbed into Mandarin and finally received distribution across the Mainland.¹⁰

Although the film’s distributor was the left-leaning Xinlian Company, and its narrative genre was melodrama, *Those 72 Tenants’* reversal of fortune may well be due to its comedic elements. Despite becoming enmeshed in politics, the film was able to transcend revolutionary politics through the aesthetics of comedy and sheer audience appeal. Similarly, the right-leaning Shaw Brothers were also able to bridge factional and bilateral politics in remaking it a decade later as *The House of 72 Tenants*. Even back in the 1950s, both Shaw Brothers and Cathay breached Cold War politics through distributing films by Hong Kong-based leftist film studios Changcheng and Fenghuang in their Singapore theaters. So when Run Run Shaw wanted to remake the film for 1970s audiences, Liao Yiyuan, its distributor and then head of the Xinlian Company, allowed him to remake *Those 72 Tenants* without any copyright fees.¹¹

It may seem ironic that Shaw Brothers not only popularized Hong Kong’s 1970s new-style comedies but also brought Cantonese cinema back into vogue, so much so that it effectively displaced Mandarin-language films on Hong Kong screens for the next two decades. *The House of 72 Tenants* was a huge departure from Shaw Brothers’ staple fanfare. Only a few years earlier, Mandarin had been the company’s business language and the preferred language of pan-Chinese globalism. The film also marked a huge departure from Shaw’s Fordist-Taylorist output of epic *huangmei diao* (opera originated

from Huangmei, Hubei Province) films, such as *Love Eterne* (*Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai*, dir. Li Han-hsiang, 1963), and martial arts films, such as *Come Drink with Me* (*Da zui xia*, dir. King Hu, 1966), and *One-Armed Swordsman* (*Dubidao*, dir. Chang Cheh, 1967) in the Mandarin tongue. Yet it should not come as a surprise that the Mandarin-speaking, right-leaning Shaw Brothers would be at the vanguard of a new global Hong Kong film industry. These new-style comedies and martial arts movies came to be identified as uniquely Hong Kong film genres. *The House of 72 Tenants* became one of the most popular 1970s Cantonese comedies. Despite being adapted from a once highly politicized 1960s film, it transcended Cold War politics and appealed to a post-Cold War society.

Spectatorship after the Cold War: From Celluloid to Analog and Back

In addition to shifting Cold War politics, the development of new media technologies transformed the aesthetic of Hong Kong cinema and influenced how audience members engaged with film narratives. Hong Kong television simultaneously became the nemesis and the savior of the colony's post-Cold War Cantonese cinema in that its decline and, ironically, revival have both been attributed to "the tube" that everyone could now afford in their living room. Whereas the very survival of a local film industry depended greatly on the contribution of television programming and talent, as well as Cantonese entertainment's progressive legacy, the rise of free-to-air television occurred just as Cantonese film was experiencing a production drought. Typical of the era, *The House of 72 Tenants* was heavily influenced by television techniques and on-camera personalities. Paul Fonoroff argues that television had replaced the opera stage as a major training ground for film talent, noting that almost all major movie stars and directors of the post-Cold War period began their careers on television, acquiring experience through working on TVB soap operas.¹² Due to the migration of TV talent to film, as well as the adoption of television aesthetics, audiences experienced increasingly interactive spectatorship.

The apex of Hong Kong cinema's golden age (especially for Cantonese productions) was reached in 1966, when annual general attendance peaked at 98,370,000. After that year, filmgoers and theaters declined steadily.¹³ By 1971, audience numbers had dwindled to 80,370,000—a 20 percent drop from that of just half a decade earlier.¹⁴ Attendance continued on a downward trajectory and in 1974 was 70,000,000 or 30 percent less than in 1966–1967.¹⁵ Production figures for Cantonese cinema were also declining, along with the number of theaters showing Cantonese films. This did not mean, however, that Hong Kong residents stopped watching their locally produced movies,

particularly those in Cantonese. Although far fewer contemporary productions were being made, old Cantonese films found a renaissance as television networks such as TVB's Jade Channel aired them frequently as reruns. During the early years of Hong Kong television, stations bought broadcast licenses for numerous Cantonese films; they were called *Yueyu changpian* (lit. Cantonese feature length, or "long" film), using them as fillers in their late-night and afternoon programming schedules.

Indeed, the migration occurred not only from television to movies but also vice versa, as a two-way stream that began during the early to mid-1960s on paid television channels such as Rediffusion TV. This only increased with the advent of free-to-air TVB broadcasts during the late 1960s when, as noted, old Cantonese films were shown during afternoons and late evenings. Although new audiences of the early 1970s did not experience these Cantonese *lunlipian* firsthand in theaters, many who grew up watching TV were inevitably exposed to classic 1950s and 1960s Cantonese features that their parents likely saw on the big screen in theaters. Continuity in the screening of Hong Kong cinema was therefore maintained not only through the movement of talent from television to film but also through the overlapping movement of audiences from television to movies, and from movies to television. This is perhaps why *The House of 72 Tenants* broke box office records when it came out, even surpassing Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon* (dir. Robert Clouse, 1973), demonstrating that the narrative of community building was anything but passé.

The House of 72 Tenants is set in a time "long, long ago" according to the voice-over narration in the opening credits. The story is set in an unspecified location, where residents struggle daily due to rampant inflation and the corruption of their local police force. The film was shot on the Shaw Brothers' soundstage, and the tenement complex is portrayed as a solid community that bands together not only in the face of economic hardship but also against the corruption of their landlords and individuals such as Police Officer 369. The cinematic portrayal of this community is a mixture of long takes, long shots, and medium tableau shots of various characters going about their daily routine. The long shot showcases the Shaw Brothers' re-creation (based on the 1963 film version) of the crowded tenement where the seventy-two residents live, while medium close-ups and zoom shots create a collage of the different tenants and their individual situations. As we meet these characters, we simultaneously learn more about their daily struggles. In this light, the comedic tone created at the outset when Shanghai Po struggles with the water tap quickly transforms into a more somber one. The camera follows Shanghai Po as she returns home, then moving to her husband, Shanghai Lo, as she hurries him to deliver the clean laundry. But the camera also captures him stopping to converse with the cigarette vendor,

who complains that inflation has eroded his profit. The strength of the community becomes evident when they all band together to help each other despite their individual struggles. Everyone chips in to help a neighbor's sick child who needs to go to the hospital. And when the elderly cigarette vendor faces eviction, Mrs. Han—forced to work as a prostitute despite her university education in order to support her husband with tuberculosis—gives up his medicine money to help the old man pay his rent.

Yet unlike its precursor, *Those 72 Tenants*, the message of communal solidarity in *The House of 72 Tenants* is not heavy-handed or didactic and does not hail spectators with a typical *lunli* address. To engage and retain the attention of younger audiences unfamiliar with struggles that citizens experienced as Hong Kong's industrial revolution gained momentum, the film contains many comedic moments that were absent from the 1963 version. Officer 369, the major focus of the original Shanghai burlesque play, but deleted from the 1963 film, returns as a comic relief element. He portrays the complete opposite of an upright police officer, even refusing to chase and catch thieves for fear of hurting himself. And when he conspires with the landlords to evict their seventy-two tenants, he fails in his own schemes because of greed and pettiness.

The new Hong Kong audiences were shaped by their television viewing experiences, which were interactive rather than passive. The most famous TV program at the time was a live variety show called *Enjoy Yourself Tonight* (*Huanle jinxiao*) (*EYT*). Making its *début* on the second evening after TVB began broadcasting on November 20, 1967, *EYT* would be like an old friend to more than 80 percent of Hong Kong families for the next thirty years. As Hong Kong's most popular and longest-running variety show, it received the highest ratings for many years on the Jade Network, dominating prime-time television by captivating Hong Kong audiences and being part of their evening routine every night. *EYT* epitomized the rewards of Hong Kong's urbanization and industrialization for the colony's middle and working classes: the fruits of one's hard work should be spent with family, relaxing in front of the television set. Similarly, *The House of 72 Tenants* brought families back to the theaters, because many of the same actors in the film were already familiar faces from television. In fact, Chor Yuen noted that he decided to use a number of TV actors who had never appeared on film, in order to appeal to television audiences (Figure 7.1).¹⁶ Lydia Shum, who played Shanghai Po, was an *EYT* host.¹⁷ In fact, her character was so well loved that she would reprise it on *EYT*. Even the episodic technique used in making *The House of 72 Tenants* resembled that of the *EYT* variety format. Where the TVB show would combine comedic skits with live audience participation games, *The House of 72 Tenants* assimilated the same televisual effect by interweaving the struggles between tenants and landlords with contrasting vignettes, such



Figure 7.1: The residents rejoice at the end, when the landlady is taken away by the police. Second from the left is Lydia Shum, host of *EYT* (*The House of 72 Tenants*, 1973).

as those involving Officer 369. The use of freeze frames at the end of each episode created not only a distancing effect but also imitated the moments when laughter would erupt from *EYT* audiences both in the studio and at home. Due to such fluidity happening between media technologies (including the border-crossing movements of talent, characters, techniques, and even fandoms), the event of family film attendance was revived, much as it had been among *lunlipian* audiences of the 1950s and early 1960s.

Toward a New Globalized Local Community

Kung Fu Hustle is a comedy written, directed, and produced by, Stephen Chow,¹⁸ about Sing (Stephen Chow) and his friend Bone who want to “succeed.” For them, being successful means joining the Axe Gang, the most ruthless in 1930s Shanghai. While the rest of Shanghai seems terrorized by the gang’s violent crimes, the community at Pig Sty Alley remains peaceful. The daily routines of its residents are disrupted, however, when Sing and Bone pretend to be Axe Gang members and blackmail a local barber. When a fight between Sing and Pig Sty Alley’s landlady gets out of hand, he accidentally calls upon the real Axe Gang to avenge him. Pig Sty Alley then becomes the site of a battle between good and evil, whereby Sing is transformed into the most powerful kung fu master in the world. Using CGI and special effects, *Kung Fu Hustle* includes fight sequences that redefine the kung fu genre made iconic by the Shaw Brothers’ new hypermasculine and violent martial arts films, as well as transcending the celluloid and analog film universe to create a digitized Hong Kong cinematic community. In addition to creating imageries with state-of-the-art CGI technologies, *Kung Fu Hustle*

Filmography

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- Air Hostess (Kongzhong xiaojie)*. Dir. Evan Yang. Motion Picture and General Investment Co. Ltd., 1959.
- At This Last Juncture/At This Crucial Juncture (Zuihou guantou)*. Dir. Chan Pei and others. Quanqiu Movie Company (among others), 1938.
- Autumn (Qiu)*. Dir. Chun Kim. The Union Film Enterprise Ltd., 1954.
- Big Clumsy Melon (Da donggua)*. Dir. Ng Wui. Overseas Chinese Films, 1958.
- Big Thunderstorm (Da lei yu)*. Dir. Ng Wui. The Union Film Enterprise Ltd., 1954.
- Black Rose (Hei meigui)*. Dir. Chor Yuen. Rose Motion Picture Company, 1965.
- Bloody Paper Man, The (Xue zhiren)*. Dir. Lee Tit. The Union Film Enterprise Ltd., 1964.
- Bonnie and Clyde*. Dir. Arthur Penn. Warner Bros-Seven Arts, 1967.
- Butterfly Lovers, The (Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yintai)*. Dir. Sang Hu. Shanghai Film Production Studio, 1954
- China Wife (a.k.a. She Married an Overseas Chinese) (Tangshan asao)*. Dir. Chan Man. Kong Ngee Motion Picture Production Company, 1957.
- Chungking Express (Chongqing senlin)*. Dir. Wong Kar-wai. Jet Tone Productions, 1994.
- Coffee Shop Girl, The (a.k.a. Coffee Girl) (Kafei nülang)*. Dir. Wu Pang. Lung Wai, 1963.
- Come Drink with Me (Da zui xia)*. Dir. King Hu. Shaw Brothers Ltd., 1966.
- Deep Throat*. Dir. Gerard Damiano. Gerard Damiano Film Productions, 1972.
- Dr. No*. Dir. Terence Young. Eon Productions, 1962.
- Driver No. 7 (Diqihao siji)*. Dir. Cheung Ying. Overseas Chinese Films, 1958.
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- Lady Bond* (*Nü shashou*). Dir. Mok Hong-see. Hing Fat Film Company, 1966.
- Last Tango in Paris*. Dir. Bernardo Bertolucci. United Artists, 1972.
- Letter with Feathers, The* (*Jimaoxin*). Dir. Shi Hui. Shanghai Film Studio, 1954.
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- Myriad Homes, A* (*Qianwan renjia*). Dir. Chu Kei. The Union Film Enterprise Ltd., 1953.
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