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## **BORDER CROSSING MAINLAND CHINA'S PRESENCE IN HONG KONG CINEMA**

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*When they ask me for my nationality or ethnic identity, I can't respond with one word, since my "identity" now possesses multiple repertoires.... I am a child of crisis and cultural syncretism.*

Guillermo Gbmez-Pena (1989)

In many respects, Hong Kong appears to be an inappropriate place for post colonial arguments. Since the early 1900s, residents of mainland China have left their own country for the British colony. Although the natives challenged colonial authority in the early years and are still negotiating with the government for better political representation, since the late 1970s, many of them have also become compliant. One of the most impressive capitalist enclaves in Asia, Hong Kong has an expanding middle class, which, well-educated and articulate, serves the administration effectively. The dominant cultural mode is a syncretic one: Chinese customs and values are being observed, forgotten, revived, passed on from one generation to the next and modified while Western forms of social organization are practiced. The ideology of acquiescence dominates, and in the late 1980s, an extension of British rule was even proposed by local residents. Reluctance to return to the motherland reflects the popular support for colonial capitalism, while the socialist experience next door is not favored. In short, the Hong Kong people seem more or less satisfied with their situation and have few postcolonial interests.

Yet this impression needs to be revised, and film provides a suitable medium for approaching the complexities of Hong Kong's cultural identity. Often trivialized as "cheap violence" by Western critics and local elites, Hong Kong films fit the derogatory label by their relatively low production costs and the frequency of martial art sequences in popular genres. Seen more carefully, however, the films demonstrate a skillful adaptation of the ideological codes and functions of Hollywood to a context in which the public's preoccupations are survival and upward mobility. Many films address and capitalize upon the frustrations and fantasies of the working class; they also rationalize the modes of existence available within the social context as much as express, often in narrative terms, the breakdown and redefinition of these modes. In broad terms, Hong Kong films are actively engaged in producing the meaning of existence for the local population. This essay argues that the Hong Kong films participating in the 1997 discourse construct the complex dynamics and symbolic structures that mark the cultural repositioning of a population whose ambivalence toward the colonial administration is accompanied by nationalistic sentiments toward China.

### The 1997 Consciousness

Following British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's visit to Beijing in September 1982, formal diplomatic negotiations were undertaken to arrange for Hong Kong's official return to the People's Republic of China in the year 1997. Subsequent Sino-British talks indicated that these two countries would reach a final settlement

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on Hong Kong on the basis of their mutual political and economic interests. The blunt reminder that Hong Kong has no self-determination contradicted the government's policy and rhetoric of localization since the riots of the late 1960s and tested the residents' tenuous sense of belonging. If the prospering residents have entered a more or less complacent "postexile" phase since the late 1970s, Thatcher's historic visit brought back memories of a refugee past and created collective anxieties regarding Hong Kong's unknown political future. Clearly, the year 1997 has become a horizon beyond which few are able to locate themselves.

In addressing the "1997 consciousness" of its spectators, films participate in public contemplation of Hong Kong's changing "identity." Films like *Burning of the Imperial Palace* [Huoshao Yuanming Yuan, 1983] and *Hong Kong 1941* [Dengdai liming, 1984], for example, recall well-known incidents of China's losses under imperial forces and recount survival stories from the early colonial period respectively. In retracing and reconstructing the past, these films acknowledge explicitly or implicitly that Hong Kong's historical destiny has always been intertwined with China's. Historical representation thus provides an allegorical space for contemporary sentiments to be conveyed without presenting the 1997 question on a realistic plane. These films provide different positions, which range from patriotic engagement to cynical distance, from which one looks at a revived past. Nevertheless, viewers' responses are far from uniform, and such factors as age, class, and political stance come into play. Viewers' varying emotional responses to the reenacted past testify to Hong Kong's perception of its relationship with China as distinct (i.e., dictated neither by Britain nor by China) and mediated by social and personal factors, including class, expressed as the ability (or lack thereof) to emigrate overseas. Of course, films made in the early 1980s that have 1997 as an implied point of reference were subjected to government censorship that discouraged direct representation of this sensitive subject.

Emotional bonds between Hong Kong and mainland China still exist, of course. Though quite obvious, it needs to be said that the exiles' loyalty toward the motherland is different from allegiance to the regime(s) in power in the past or at present. That is, while not every Chinese feels the same toward the country's political leadership, many agree on nationalist principles of some sort. Benedict Anderson's discussion on the magical power of nationalism in his *Imagined Communities* (1983) is relevant here considering that "China" refers to at least five different Chinese political entities that either existed in the past or still exist: the Middle Kingdom (with multiple identities) under imperial rule before 1911; Republican China led by the Nationalists; socialist China under the Communists after 1949; Taiwan under the Nationalists after 1949; and Hong Kong ruled by the British since 1842. In each case, the emotional association between the people and the rulers has been neither uniform nor unchanged.

Yet in most people's minds, all these "Chinas" signify one and the same nation - Zhongguo (the Middle Kingdom). Zhongguo, symbol of an abstract community, is to most the motherland where Chinese peoples of the past, present, and, conceivably, the future believe that they share a civilization, a written language, a general culture, and a continuous history. As one identifies with this nation (i.e., as one imagines being within it by responding to the interpellating power of Zhongguo), the similarities and differences among the histories and lives of the peoples otherwise distinguished by

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region, dialect, class, gender, generation, and so on become integral parts of a totality. It is on such a basis of symbolic oneness that the political boundaries separating Chinese peoples appear arbitrary and inconsequential to national identification. On a similar basis, the regimes can rightfully make calls for unification to Chinese subjects who are living in divided political territories.

This essay focuses on the importance of the border and the act of border crossing in considering the character and complexity of Hong Kong's popular perception of its relationship with China as 1997 approaches. The terms "self" and "other" are significant concepts with which to approach the mixed modes of identification, differentiation, and distance in this changing perception. Conceivably, the difficulties for collective maintenance of strict boundaries between Hong Kong as "self" and mainland China under socialism as totally "other" point toward an ambivalence that can be attributed to a nationalistic logic. Stuart Hall has defined cultural identity as "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.'" <sup>8</sup> Adapting Hall, I suggest that the in-between political positioning put forth by certain Hong Kong films of the 1980s is connected to the collective anxiety over the Colony's imminent return to socialist mainland China. Such a collective anxiety toward an inevitable "becoming" directs filmic exploration of history and change. In this sense, Hong Kong films in the 1980s both expressed and constructed the identity crisis of a society that, during the last years of its colonial experience, seeks to redefine its relation to the still-distanced mother country.

This essay proposes an understanding of the films' complex dynamics and symbolic structures through the Althusserian concepts of "conjuncture" and "mediation."<sup>9</sup> It approaches film as the textual site of contradiction and negotiation informed by the historical conjuncture. Institutional, formal, and textual terms serve as mediating levels between the conjuncture and each individual film. Thus, though one may describe certain correspondences between the constructed "present" of the film texts and the analyzed "present" of history, the correspondences are mediated by narrative and filmic terms including the codes of popular genres. The consideration of history as instantiated in the texts enables one to define and describe more fully the meaning and position(s) produced for the spectator-subject. Such an approach to textual functions justifies the reading of the fictional character as a figure of historical and social agency. I would submit that the symbolic import of popular Hong Kong films of the 1980s that address the 1997 issue lies in their appeal to the spectators' shared understanding of historical references and in their creation of compelling figures of historical and social agency. It is within this framework that the films are considered for their symbolic relevance to the "being" and "becoming" of Hong Kong as well as for their symbolic resolution of contradictions.

### Colonial-Chinese Cultural Syncretism

Before the full implications of the border can be comprehended, it is necessary to contextualize Hong Kong's political ambivalence in relation to its cultural syncretism. Metonymic of Britain's imperialist forays in Asia in the nineteenth century, Hong Kong bears witness to the Middle Kingdom's failings in the expansionist era. <sup>10</sup> In the late twentieth century, however, the city has achieved competitiveness, prosperity, and attractiveness to investors in ways that go beyond Britain's and the People's Republic of China's own appeal. While late Qing and

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Republican intellectuals, as well as economists, wanted China to build wealth and strength, it is the colonized territory that has efficiently and steadily produced them.

The economic environment of Hong Kong is the result of international collaboration. British laissez-faire policies gave incentives to local and overseas investors, while daily imports from mainland China supplied the city with subsistence goods. For four decades, as a thriving entrepot trade brought income to both Britain and the People's Republic, neither nation wanted to jeopardize its interests by making either capitalist democracy or socialist revolution a serious issue in this extraterritorial site. The political identity of Hong Kong is thus the product of a pragmatic kind of complicity conducive to ideological ambivalence or dubiety. The residents' political indifference, often associated with an inherently Chinese attitude, is, in fact, an expression of this pragmatic complicity.

Nevertheless, explicit challenges to the colonial government have been raised from time to time. In 1951, 1956, and 1967 respectively, local demonstrations and confrontations with the Royal Hong Kong Police brought to the surface class and other political tensions in the territory. The vigor of these and other labor and student movements in the early 1970s can be attributed to those who believed, for one reason or another, in the inevitability of an increasingly prominent Chinese presence in world politics (which coincided with Western attention to the Cultural Revolution.) Demands that the Chinese language be given the same official status as the English language, however, were made by university students and white-collar workers who shared nationalistic sentiments and marked an important step in the "decolonizing" direction. An eclectic politics, inspired by both local interests and Communist China's example, informed protests that demanded localization and equal rights between expatriates and indigenous residents. Members of the indigenous, Westernized middle class, who became important political players in the late 1980s, emerged out of this period, an important moment of political and social change alluded to in *Starry Is the Night* [*Jinye xingguang canlan*, 1988], directed by Ann Hui [Xu Anhua].

Cultural syncretism in Hong Kong is possible not only because of colonial policies (e.g., regarding school curriculum) but also because the colonial presence has become less direct and not visibly oppressive during the past decade. Even if there are areas with little freedom of choice (such as qualification for certain positions), mixed linguistic and cultural codes are used on an everyday basis. Interpretation aside, the coexistence of mixed codes in the same social space mandates adaptative work within their parameters. In the semiautobiographical *Father and Son* [*Fuziqing*, 1981] of Allen Fong [Fang Yuping], relationships in the workplace and at home are structured respectively according to Westernized and traditional standards. Apparently, the father is subordinate in the former context and dominant in the latter; but in fact his authority at home is threatened by colonial standards and his struggles exemplify the complex dynamics involved. Denied promotion in the 1960s because he lacked English language skills, the father supervised his son's English homework in an authoritarian manner and later sacrificed his daughter's marital freedom so that his son could receive a university education overseas - a gesture that pushes the son to succeed in a Western system on behalf of the family. The son, however, rebels against both formal colonial education and traditional paternal desires; attracted by visual images instead, he adapts Chinese pulp fiction to amateur film projects and

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later pursues a degree in filmmaking at the University of Southern California in the United States. In other words, if the older generation has succumbed to colonial standards for economic reasons, the inscription is perceived as cultural for the younger generation. Interestingly, U.S. popular culture in Fong's films provides an imaginary alternative to the constricting conditions, and in *Father and Son* film education becomes a self-actualizing alternative to both traditional patriarchy and colonial authority. Though it is beyond the scope of this essay, the Americanization of Hong Kong as a notable aspect of colonial-Chinese cultural syncretism is worth exploring.

### The Vanishing Border

The Hong Kong-China border, closed on June 16, 1951, to prohibit undocumented travel, became a more fragile divider of Chinese people living on both sides by 1978. Continued southern migration of mainlanders promoted Hong Kong's diversity in dialects and habits. The reverse northern movement of capital and businesses into the mainland's special economic zone, Shenzhen, accelerated southern China's modernization and enhanced its capitalistic outlook. By the late 1980s, as many as 11,000 trucks and cars traveled daily across the border, and as many as 27 million people did the same annually."

In the climate of increasing exchange between Hong Kong and China's southern provinces, mutual awareness of each other's proximity and difference was enhanced by media on both sides of the border. Hong Kong cinema and television, through co-production projects and other ventures, took advantage of mainland scenery. This touristic gaze is implicitly complemented by a narcissistic look at the successful self that supports a condescending attitude toward new mainland immigrants.<sup>12</sup> In a comparable spirit, mainland studios chose commercial districts in Shenzhen for location filming to display China's modernization and Westernization. The gaze of fantasy in this case was often complemented by a warning of the criminal nature of materialistic Hong Kong. In Hong Kong television's *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* [Wangzhongren, 1979], Pearl River Studio's *Sunshine and Showers* [Taiyangyu, 1986], and *Escape to Hong Kong* [Taogangzhe, 1988], media imaging of each other mirrors the defensive ways in which each acknowledges the increasing presence of the other in its own territory.

### Ambivalence and Border-Crossing Figures: Invaders or Tourists?

In a state of mind where one loves and hates China, one also loves and hates Hong Kong. Hong Kong is a haven where one takes refuge from oppression but it *is* also a desert, both a paradise and a forever insecure place.

Ng Ho

Two Hong Kong films, *Long Arm of the Law* [Shenggang gibing] and *Homecoming* [Sishui liunian], both made in 1984, place border crossing and its consequences at the center of the narrative. Though censorship makes it impossible to portray what it will be like when Hong Kong is returned to the PRC, the films that feature border crossing so as to place Hong Kong and mainland residents within the same imaginary space, in fact, amount to efforts to do so. By representing two activities that characterize the period of the vanishing border, the films provide grounds for popular assessment of

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values and social behavior that are products of economic and political realities. Explicit as well as subtle tensions are brought to light, while the films express different notions about the mainlanders and the state of Hong Kong's being.

The directors of both films began their media career in television. Johnny Mak (Mai Dangxiong), director of *Long Arm of the Law*, produced and directed very macho, Peckinpah-type television drama series in the 1970s that gave sensational treatment to police investigation, criminal violence, and prostitution. Yim Ho (Yan Hao), the director of *Homecoming*, completed a number of government-funded projects in the 1970s on student movements, teenage delinquents, and corruption. The differences in the backgrounds of Mak and Yim are apparent in these two films as well. *Long Arm of the Law* is a local, purely commercial production that derives its material from news stories of Hong Kong's recent robberies carried out by armed *daquanzai* gangsters ("Big Circle" guys) from the mainland. *Homecoming*, in contrast, involves mainland and Hong Kong personnel in both screenwriting and acting and expresses a nostalgic view of the mainland, the basis of which is autobiographical and poetic.

#### Disturbed Condescension in *Long Arm of the Law*

In *Long Arm of the Law*, mainland border crossers enter the territory as armed robbers. *Qibing* (bannermen) in the film's Chinese title alludes to the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution. *Qi* in *qibing* can also refer to the Manchus (as in *Qiren*). In either case, Hong Kong is represented as vulnerable to a military entity coming from the north; that is, it is being transgressed by a physically threatening "other" (Figure 36). *Shenggang*, a shorthand combining *Guangdong sheng* (province) and *Xianggang* (Hong Kong) can be taken to mean the visitation or inspection of Hong Kong (in which case the same characters should be pronounced *xinggang* instead). The film makes it clear that it is the glittering gold of the capitalist city that captures the greed of the Big Circle gangs in Guangdong, who want to "cross the river that divides the two worlds" for money. It attributes the mainlanders' readiness to use armed violence to their Red Guard experience in the Cultural Revolution. In this way, the disparity between the mainland people's lack of material comforts under a socialist system and the Hong Kong people's enjoyment of it under a different system is clearly laid out. This becomes the basis for dramatic conflicts culminating in armed confrontation. The conventions of the crime/gangster film are thus invoked to differentiate between those who have settled down in Hong Kong and the newcomers from the mainland.

In a mildly revisionist manner, *Long Arm of the Law* undermines its scheme of clear contrasts between Hong Kong residents and mainland intruders. By making the local gangsters a double of the Big Circle who are in some ways inferior to the latter, the film acknowledges comparable elements of illegality and violence between these two groups. Colonial law, figured in the Royal Hong Kong Police, is implicated in this comparison and shown to be as violent as the other parties. Hence, the narration does not operate on a simplistic logic of complacency and superiority that distinguishes the self and the other; instead, it operates on the logic of transgression and cynicism.

Consistent with undermining the law as theme, the film's narration moves back and forth between the position of the law and that of the criminal. It is through the Big Circle members' eyes that one sees and experiences life in Hong Kong. The mainland's gaze - that of the have-nots - on Hong Kong's plenitude is full of envy and the desire to

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possess. The criminal perspective common to films of the gangster genre has, in *Long Arm of the Law*, an additional dimension of "cultural difference," represented by the mainlanders' lack of urban sophistication and an unruly appetite for vulgar sensual pleasures. This characterization makes the Big Circle members objects of the condescending voyeurism of the Hong Kong spectator already situated within the discourse of plenitude. As shifts in perspectives continue to take place in the film, the "raping" of Hong Kong is seen from both the rapist's and the rape victim's experience, a double perspective duplicated in a scene where a mainland gangster points his gun at a snobbish prostitute.

Consistent with the playful attitude toward generic conventions in popular films of the 1980s, criminal interest in Hong Kong's wealth is given a subtly humorous treatment in *Long Arm of the Law*. When the mainland gangsters attempt their first armed robbery of a jewelry shop in Tsimshatsui, the plan is thwarted because another criminal is already robbing the place. This unexpected circumstance draws attention to the temptations that show windows have for mainland and local outlaws alike. As the gangsters run away, the viewer stays with them, sharing their disappointment, confusion, desperation, and loyalty to one another. This strategy of narration, common to the gangster genre, partly humanizes the mainlanders and reduces their "alien" character to some extent. Yet as the film attributes crime to greed and focuses on criminal fraternity, it displaces any possibility of analyzing deprivation and political difference and simply sensationalizes the superficial action effects.

By romanticizing the mainland criminal fraternity, *Long Arm of the Law* actually mobilizes a kind of "developed sector" sentiment concerning an "underdeveloped sector." In the film, the Big Circle members are loyal to one another while Hong Kong gangsters are selfish. In addition, relationships between the latter and local police are characterized by mutual exploitation and treacherous betrayal. The film makes such a "self-indictment" possible by showing the superior aspects of the (otherwise inferior) outsiders. This treatment echoes the "First World's" idealization of the "Third World" as a closely-knit community whose members have shared needs and feelings. Thus, loyalty and community are values necessary for survival under economically deprived conditions, while (First World) economic progress mandates individualism and manipulation conducive to internal destruction. The film reveals a self-perception of industrialized Hong Kong as having lost the previous values still held by members of preindustrialized China. Though self-critical, the implications of the difference are not explored by the film beyond this schematic contrast.

The local gangster informant, Ah Tai (A Tai), plays the role of both manipulator and victim of the breakdown of trust in a society that is ruthlessly pragmatic. As an unsympathetic figure of the local underworld, Ah Tai makes it difficult for the spectator to identify with either the "outsiders" or the "insiders." The following scenes are most relevant. As the gang members refuse to help, Ah Tai goes through the humiliating process of seeking police help and offers himself as bait so that the Big Circle members can be arrested. Shortly after, Ah Tai, who has played double entendre with the Big Circle members, is discovered and, as the escaping gangsters use him as a human shield, he is gunned down mercilessly by police officers. The death of Ah Tai dramatizes the readiness of the police to abandon an "associate." The pact of complicity that quickly disintegrates under trial is driven by self-interest and treachery. Ah Tai's mobility between criminals and the law, between Hong Kong and mainland, is more

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than a simple generic feature. Rather, the in-between position set up by his trajectory in the narrative inspires an analogy that points to a pessimistic vision of the 1997 future. Ah Tai is the narrative agent that refers to a Hong Kong caught between merciless British and mainland forces.

The deliberate implication of politically sensitive matters in *Long Arm of the Law* is evident in the choice of the Kowloon Walled City for the film's climactic final scenes. For decades before its strategic demolition and transformation into a public park in 1992, the Kowloon Walled City had been an "illegitimate" territory of Hong Kong. Since the area had not been included in any of the SinoBritish treaties signed in the nineteenth century, it was isolated from the rule of the Qing court and later from that of the Republican and the People's Republic governments, and was likewise left alone by the colonial administration. As a domain immune to the jurisdiction of the police, it was nicknamed *a san buguan*, or "three no-control" district, and was not officially serviced with water or power. The Kowloon Walled City, an anomalous urban ghetto where unlicensed doctors and dentists operated and where drug and other illegal operations flourished, was a temporary shelter for struggling new immigrants. The film fully exploits its narrow and tortuous alleys leading to abrupt dead ends in chase sequences between the police and gangsters; the Walled City thereby becomes a metaphor for repressed political disorder - it disrupts colonial authority and unravels Hong Kong's myth of affluence by revealing the marginalized and underdeveloped sector within this materialistic paradise.

Li Cheuk-to, a notable local film critic, once suggested that Hong Kong films in the 1970s were more cynical than films of other decades. To a large extent, such cynicism reflects the films' inscription of working-class ambivalence toward the status quo. The prominent mode of that inscription is demonstrated in *Long Arm of the Law* in the disavowal of any illusions of Hong Kong's political autonomy and respectability. Arguably, generic coding of the film depoliticizes, relatively speaking, the disavowal as it constantly displaces the potential force of the political critique into a mode of narrative action. Still, the process is not a simple one, and the concluding scenes in *Long Arm of the Law* function to reinstate law and order to the territory while representing the process as a murderous and traumatic one.

In the ending scenes, the entry of the police squad into the Walled City is obviously a transgression. Strictly speaking, the squad has crossed over into "noncolonial" territory - the realm of potential political disorder. The death of innocent people during the ambush further underlines the "illegitimate" nature of the police's armed presence. Still, the mainland gangsters' readiness to use excessive force calls for rightful intervention of the law. Before the gang is exterminated, however, the film introduces an immigrant couple whose role as helper/betrayer/victim is a variant of that of Ah Tai. The gangsters seek medical help and shelter in the home of an unlicensed doctor from mainland China who is studying for his qualifying examination. The doctor has agreed to help, but his wife, who feels no responsibility for the mainlanders, leads them to an attic and locks them in. This incident dramatizes the dilemma of struggling immigrants who try hard to become legitimate insiders. Like Ah Tai, as the reluctant couple get in the way of a confrontation between the Hong Kong police and the mainland gangsters, they are shot to death, the husband by the police, the wife by the gangsters.

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In the ending sequence, the police firing squad shoots continuously at the ceiling until they can hear no more movement from the attic. This merciless display of deadly force is the culminating moment of the action film's trajectory toward magnified violence. Again, not only do the shifts in camera position throughout the sequence offer privileged views of the attic above, they also ensure an experience so violent and traumatic that it is hard to welcome the reestablishment of law and order. Spatially speaking, the sequence is extremely claustrophobic and the attic is literally a death trap. The gunshots fired by the squad are depicted, by special effects, as coming through the floor. More significantly, the view of dying criminals reeling in pain and falling through space in slow motion onto a floor littered with bleeding rats is denied to the firing squad. The officers, satisfied with proof of death by blood dripping from the ceiling above, simply leave. The camera and the spectator, however, stay with the scene of muted death inside the attic as sunlight shines through a tiny window. The shot, echoing the strange serenity of violent death conjured by the ending shot of *Sophie's Choice* (1982), epitomizes the film's ambivalence toward the self and the other.

### The Mythic Nation in *Homecoming*

The release of *Homecoming* in 1984 brought a delightful surprise to both filmmakers and critics in Hong Kong and mainland China. Reviews of the film that appeared in major newspapers and film magazines in both regions were unanimously positive, a phenomenon quite unusual for Hong Kong films. In October 1986, China Film Press in Beijing published the film's screenplay together with a selection of reviews and interviews written by both mainland and Hong Kong critics in an anthology titled "*Sishui liunian*": *tong juben dao yingpian* [*Homecoming: From Screenplay to Film*]

Such critical attention, reserved in China for its own notable status productions that meet the criteria of artistic quality and political interest, was unprecedented for a (co-produced) Hong Kong film. Undoubtedly, *Homecoming* was and continues to be one of the rare art films made within the commercial constraints of Hong Kong cinema. This widely acknowledged achievement, which, moreover, was based on the film's poetic engagement with rural life on the mainland, appeared uniquely comforting at a time when other productions such as *Long Arm of the Law* were busily capitalizing on hostility toward the People Republic's claims of sovereignty. China's official film institutions' appreciation of *Homecoming* thus reflected their members' recognition of the film's unusual capacity to accommodate mainland China's reunification goals in artistic and human terms - a recognition that partly accounts for the content of some of the essays only and does not explain director Yim Ho's original creative motives.

Noticeably, many essays in the anthology attempt to recapture the poetic mode of *Homecoming* by choosing a vocabulary usually reserved for the discussion of Chinese poetry and painting. Words such as *yijing* (mood and sense emerging from presented images), *yunwei* (subtle meaning and sense), and *qing* (human feeling or emotional content) that are specific to traditional aesthetic and poetic discourse recur throughout. Some essays make an additional effort to correlate the film's aesthetic attributes, characterized as conducive to understanding subtle intent and underlying meaning, with a *Zhongguo hua* (sinified) or *minzu hua* (national-cultural) character. In addition to form, these critics share an appreciation of the film's depiction of interpersonal exchanges to convey the cultural characteristic of subtle expressiveness (*hanxu*). As the critics respond to the film's sensitive, complex, yet stylistically low-key rendering of differences be-

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tween the Hong Kong visitor and her mainland hosts, they respond to the film's approach to life on a human and existential level rather than on a political one. The critical discourse on *Homecoming* re-created the dialogic space in the film's "cross-cultural" venture.

History in *Homecoming* is couched mainly in terms of personal experience rather than political incidents. In the film, two childhood friends, Coral (Shan Shan) and Pearl (A Zhen), who have been separated from each other for twenty years since Coral moved to Hong Kong in the 1960s, meet again in the 1980s when Coral travels back to visit Zhuangyuan village. In the interim years, as the two women put it in plain terms, one has moved from farming in the New Territories to managing a publishing business in Kowloon, while the other has continued teaching at the same rural school and become headmistress. The striking political contexts in which their different lives have unfolded, including such events as the student movements in Hong Kong and the Cultural Revolution in China, are virtually absent from the diegesis. The political events, if they did in fact have an impact on many Chinese in real life, are of no thematic significance in the film, as they are eclipsed by Coral's stories of survival as a new immigrant in Hong Kong and by Pearl's daily routine in the countryside.

As the film's narrative point of view in the present is carried by Coral, who is in the process of retracing her childhood and reexperiencing her ancestors' village, the historical sense is conveyed through objects and situations that revive the faded yet nostalgic memories of a woman-child. Through her memory, the views of the countryside that characterized the 1980s and the 1960s are merged. Thus, narration in the film shows Chinese history as personal, existential, emotional, and to some extent timeless - an ideological context that makes it possible for mainland China to be called "home." However, though the film's ideological context seems susceptible to the charge of political calculation on the part of its mainland sponsors, who would like Hong Kong viewers to become more comfortable about rejoining the People's Republic, its "imperceptible politics" should not be reduced to such calculation

I would suggest that *Homecoming* constructs China as a timeless cultural (read: anthropological) entity that transcends political and social distance and unifies differences. Visualized through a poetic rendering of the spring landscapes of the southern Chinese countryside, a mythic nation is constructed and imaged through an ethnographic sensitivity that gives presence to the details of everyday living and to emblematic features and objects. Individual moments, features, and objects are woven into the rural fabric, which resonates with symbolic significance - critics who connect the film's poetic discourse with traditional painting codes immediately allude to a (transcendental) Chinese sensibility. There are numerous such memorable details, including housewives rubbing clothes on washboards together in public; a woman standing up from her sewing to let someone walk past in a narrow alley; Pearl, the headmistress, seating her family on a school bench to have their picture taken by Coral with her Polaroid camera; the attempt to measure a huge ancient tree by both Coral and the twin great-grandfathers (with the symbolic names Han and Tang), who wrap their arms and bodies around it; sails that flow gracefully along the edge of the paddy fields while children are flying kites; a pool of rainwater lying in the middle of a dirt road around which Coral and Pearl's husband Tsong (Xiao Cong) walk on either side; and an old village house with a pigsty in the open courtyard where one rests after a day's work. From time to time, sounds of nature such as the splattering rain or croaking frogs add to

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the ambience, while a child's rhyme sung in *chaozhou* dialect gives musical expression to the self-contained rural order of things. Some of the images may be described, in Roland Barthes's terms, as containing an "obtuse meaning" (one that arises from the author's "manner of reading `life' and so `reality' itself"). In director Yim Ho's words, the details become a symphony of life. Hence, their "third meaning" contributes to the mythic quality of China's countryside; in addition, their emotional and poetic qualities exceed their signifying role and ideological function and cannot be simply reduced to an analytical language alone.

Insofar as *Homecoming* tapped an "exotic" countryside for its healing power, the film shared similar interests with mainland films of the same period that were engaged in cultural introspection. Whereas mainland Chinese films sought the magical power of minority cultures in the process of recovering from the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, *Homecoming* found its formal and existential inspiration in the long-abandoned home village. In particular, I am reminded of Zhang Nuanxin's *Sacrificed Youth [Qingchun ji]*, made two years later, in 1986, in which the female protagonist Li Chun reexamines her rigid Han upbringing and adopts spontaneous Dai ways of living while working among minority peasants in Yunnan Province. Li Chun's entrance into the realm of the "minority other" makes possible an internal renewal and gives her the most memorable days of her life. In *Homecoming*, Coral is a disheartened professional with a failing business, a disintegrating family, and broken relationships, who takes a vacation away from Hong Kong to pay tribute to her grandmother's grave. Her temporary immersion in a preindustrial setting enables her to come to terms with the disappointments of a materially oriented society and to savor the paradoxical complexities of life. In both films, a crisis of self-definition (both partly based on the authors' past) precedes a nourishing "cross-cultural" encounter which is, strictly speaking, an internal experience found inside a mythic "China" that encompasses racial and political differences and transcends arbitrary boundaries. It is a natural China from which both films draw inspiration for their visual design. The protagonists' sojourns into the natural, `otherly" realm are temporary in both films: in the end, they depart, only partly recuperated, expecting to go on to an economically more advanced, socially more complex, and emotionally less gratifying Chinese world. "Like water the years flow by," the literal translation of *Homecoming's* Chinese title *Sishui liunian*, lyrically condenses a pervasive sense of loss shared by *Sacrificed Youth*.<sup>25</sup> Integral to the "cross-cultural" venture in *Homecoming* is the representation of "difference," whose textual significance is as important as its intended reception. Given that the film was co-produced by Hong Kong and mainland Chinese personnel, its inscription of difference that emphasizes existential and a-historical aspects is not without social relevance. Hence, fictional characters, though not rigidly typified, are distinguished by a set of social and familial references meant to reflect certain basic differences between capitalist urban Hong Kong and socialist rural China. Coral and Pearl, who are both economically independent professional women in their respective societies, for example, are still differentiated in the following ways: unmarried-married; childless-with child; greater ability-lesser ability to consume, and bold-conservative. These differences inform some of the subtle and not so subtle conflicts and tensions in scenes in which the women attempt to relate to and help each other while making each other uncomfortable at the same time. A similar set of differences underscores the urban versus rural dichotomy that overlaps a capitalist versus socialist form of economy and life-style.

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In spite of such a dichotomy, the film also incorporates other axes of difference to show that the countryside is not monolithic and that changes are already taking place in the villages as well. As a rural couple, Pearl and Tsong do not hold the same views on changes. Distinguished by their statuses as headmistress versus peasant and their temperaments as dominating versus acquiescing, their responses to Coral are also different. The better-educated wife expresses her reservations about Coral quite openly, while the inarticulate husband is quietly supportive. Pearl's defensiveness is exploited by the film, which, in a melodramatic vein, links it with her jealousy of Coral's friendship with her husband. Negotiation between tradition and change within the village is given substance in the father-son conflicts between the village elder Uncle Zhong and little Qiang. In the film, Uncle Zhong's traditional wisdom, adherence to farming, and conservative outlook are challenged by little Qiang's eagerness for modern knowledge, his aspiration to be educated in the city, and his desire for new experiences. The modernizing tendencies in the rural imagination have produced Miss Wang and little Qiang, who are intermediaries between the conservative but wise village elder and the urbane yet disillusioned Coral. The nation's intention to modernize informs the breakdown in the urban-rural dichotomy and, by implication, the differences between an industrial Hong Kong and a preindustrial Chinese village. With the obvious and subtle changes taking place in the 1980s, Coral's ways are no longer "otherly," nor is China a stagnant nation dissociated from the demands of the modern world. The scene that depicts little Qiang's bold and rebellious behavior during the schoolchildren's visit to Guangzhou reinforces what has been hinted at: though not without frustrations, China is taking slow but sure steps toward a modernizing phase.

The tension between Coral and Pearl is in counterpoint to the estrangement between Coral and her sister. Ironically, the sister, who is not separated from Coral by familial, social, or political boundaries, is in fact emotionally and spiritually distanced, and a source of deep frustration. In the film, sisterly communication is brief and indirect - by telephone, letter, and a legal suit. The estrangement, moreover, is consistent with other alienating relationships in Hong Kong that Coral alludes to, including loveless sexual relationships that end in abortions and manipulative social exchanges conducted on the basis of mutual use. Outright hostility between Coral and her sister defines life in Hong Kong as an experience of alienation. The colonial experience is presented as clashing with the national sensibility, and the visual contrast between a cluttered urban apartment and the open countryside supports this comparison.

The colonial experience as alienation supports the border-crossing visit as homecoming that is, in reality, home visiting. Coral, the border-crossing figure, becomes situated between her "doubles," a rural "Chinese" version rooted in a culturally rich community, and an urban, Hong Kong (read: Westernized) version grounded in cultural poverty. For a person whose origins are in the countryside, the urban version becomes a distortion of an early, healthy experience. Thus, even though there are conflicts in the rural-rural or rural-urban contacts, in the film they are somehow self-revolving, while such is not the case with conflicts among the urban residents. Within this system of cultural difference, Uncle Zhong's traditional wisdom and the twin great-grandfathers' charismatic optimism are, within the film text, an integral part of the mythic nation and thus superior to the legal institution in the colony. Given both the characterization of Coral's sister as foreign-educated and the representation of Hong Kong by a noisy, urban apartment room, the film evidently idealizes rural relationships. Interestingly, the film does not find a permanent resolution in China's countryside either, and Coral's inability to identify

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fully with either side significantly underlines her in-between position. That is, from Coral's point of view, she is beyond the point of return. This decision, at work from the very beginning (i.e., Coral is simply having a vacation) means that alienation, no matter how painful it is, has been accepted as an everyday reality. This implicit acceptance accounts for a touristic and idealistic approach to Chinese social reality. Traditional stereotypes furnished by the socialist realism of the People's Republic in the 1950s had depicted Hong Kong people as spies, degenerate businessmen, and prostitutes. *Homecoming*, though it does not follow any simplistic political or moralizing logic, nonetheless envisions Hong Kong as lifeless and empty.<sup>26</sup> This time, however, Hong Kong residents are self-critical, and they consciously seek recovery and inspiration from cultural life in the mainland.

### Concluding Remarks

In different ways, Hong Kong films have expressed ambivalence toward the city's postcolonial future. The China to which Hong Kong will be returning in the year 1997 is visualized along three related registers - formal, generic, and in terms of social reception. Through images and icons of violence derived from the gangster/action film, *Long Arm of the Law* creates criminal types out of country hicks. Through images integral to the poetic/painterly tradition, *Homecoming* portrays a pastoral beauty. In other words, guns and gore in the first film reinforce Hong Kong viewers' fear of and repulsion toward greedy and uncouth mainland intruders, while paper butterflies and rice paddies invoke the residents' nostalgia for the mainland's unperturbed preindustrial tranquility. Not coincidentally, the narrative point of view in these two films is differentiated by a masculine (and, indeed, chauvinistic) versus a feminine (or, rather, "feminized") perspective. Yet while an "ethnocentric" outlook dominates the first film and a cultural understanding is pervasive in the second, the sensibility in each film is not monolithic; mixed feelings of empathy and distance are articulated in both films as well. Thus, internal to each film and common to them, the encounter with mainland China (or its metonymic figures) is presented as both appalling and rejuvenating. In this way, these two films of the mid-1980s mark the range of local sensibilities regarding Hong Kong's return to China.

The complexity of the return derives from the simple self-other opposition that undergoes dissolution in these films. That is, the Hong Kong as "self" and mainland China as "other" are not sustained by the film texts as absolute antinomies. This internal textual deconstruction of the pair comes from the shared racial and national heritage between the people in Hong Kong and those on the mainland. Therefore, even though colonial-capitalist Hong Kong may view socialist China as the "other," on the basis of a shared Chinese heritage with the mainlanders, the colonial component in Hong Kong can also be seen viewed as an imposed, "otherly" element. The composite identity of the Hong Kong "self" becomes more evident when, as a result of 1982, contemporary China is incorporated into the configuration. The composite identity includes a colonialcapitalist/Westernized component, which serves as the basis by which Hong Kong can view mainland China as the "other" (and for mainland China to see Hong Kong as the "other"), and a national/racial component, which allows the Hong Kong and mainland Chinese to have a shared opposition to the colonizers. Hong Kong films' ambivalence toward its postcolonial future can thus be ascribed to the composite nature of Hong Kong's cultural identity. Therefore, it is not inconceivable that, in a film as hostile toward the mainlanders as

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*Long Arm of the Law* is, one finds instances that undermine the colonial police's authority; while in a film as nostalgic toward the mainland countryside as *Homecoming is*, one identifies an urban superiority and a lack of interest in long-term relocation. In other words, as the films connote an anxiety about postcolonial transformation and express discontent with the current state of things, they also reproduce the composite identity's paradoxical inclinations and cannot be simply reduced to either "anti-Communist" or "pro-Communist" labels.

Evidently, the 1980s, conceived as a historical conjuncture in this essay, cannot be reduced to any single cultural problematic. Still, the public's sense of betrayal by Britain and of Hong Kong's helplessness after Margaret Thatcher's visit to China in 1982 constitutes a notable collective interpretation of the significant political events unfolding during the decade. Popular films' construction of disadvantaged and weary in-between characters is a trope of this collective interpretation and, as such, constitutes a narrative/filmic response to the historical conjuncture. Seen this way, the cynicism in *Long Arm of the Law* has a popular as well as political basis outside cinema - in the distrust of and disenchantment with the nature and development of the Sino-British talks - while the sentimentality in *Homecoming* appeals to a nationalistic type of thinking that is being appropriated by the discourse of the People's Republic on reunification. Once again, the coexistence of cynicism and sentimentality testifies to the ambivalence and syncretism of Hong Kong cinema of the 1980s.

By supporting the demonstrations in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989, Hong Kong residents have introduced changes in the situation. Having identified with the protesters on the mainland, the residents have begun to empower themselves by participating in altering, however slightly, the terms by which they will be ruled at present and after 1997. The 1989 experience and the changes thereafter have brought about a much more intense political experience, which has implications for Hong Kong cinema and which remain to be explored.