How to be human, good, and civilized -- everyday modernity in the crevices (a study of movie ads for the 16 lost local films produced and screened in Hong Kong 1934)

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Abstract:

Following the imperatives of Revisionist Film History debated since 1979, this research examines the bulk of movie ads for the 16 films made and shown in Hong Kong in the entire year of 1934 in order to solicit portraits of the everyday that concern ideal citizenship – as a British colonial subject, a patriotic Chinese and new personhood for modern society – as well as negotiations in embracing these conflicting subject/object positions. Mainly movie ads are studied because they are the only surviving fragments of the films made or exhibited that year. An immediate survey finds these ads phenomenally verbose and burdened with moral admonition. By writing a theory of fragments, and arguing for a spatial approach to historiography that results in a ‘slicing’ method, I study movie ads of the same films found in major Chinese-language newspapers as these films travelled from one movie house to the next across the year.

The original full study of all the movies and movie ads in question is about 100 pages long, which I have adapted for my presentation in the WCU Project 2011 in three parts: (I) the basic conceptual set-up on my historiographic methodology; (II) illustrative data and examples of interpretive strategies I applied to the raw material; and (III) extracts of historical knowledge produced in this study, i.e. arguable portraits of colonial modernity translated into paradigms of everyday ethics. The historiographic problematic underscoring this study has three facets. First, is film history possible when no viewable films are available? Second, as the bulk of raw material available for this piece of history is primarily ideas and sayings (in the form of movie ads)? How can ideas pass for ‘making’, the key to the notion of ‘lifeworld’ (Lebenswelt) and ‘being-in-the-world’, as Husserl and Heidegger use these terms? What kind of everydayness is speech and persuasion via language? Third, what interpretive model best serves the writing of a piece of history concentrated on the fragmentary, often contradicting, trade of thoughts and verbal persuasion? The use of theory is to direct me where to look, how to access, and what narrative strategies to adopt to communicate my findings.

The year 1934 can be characterized as lacking in events of monumental value. A brief moment of peace soon to be rocked by the growing impact of Japan’s aggression in China, 1934 can be described as a ‘crevice’ that has gained little attention in the attempted history of Hong Kong. In fact, it is a unique space-time allowing access to the richness of many everyday operations. The study of ads suggests a de-centering model of film culture: cinema is productively generating knowledge both as concentrated cultural texts and as activities that are only the results and effects of other domains of everyday life. In the context of this study, I have detected explicit persuasion in daily ethics and paradigms of conduct. The discourse effect I read phenomenally falls upon gender divisions: women’s behavior became the central object to define the up and down side of modernity. The government’s most power instrumental reason at the time, especially the promotion of sports, health and sanitation, found its way into the commercial strategies of the film business. In the mean time, what I call ‘Cantonization’ – the differentiation and re-invention of the Cantonese-ness of Hong Kong people, as opposed to their Chinese ethnicity or being a British colonial subject – transformed local filmmaking that resulted in a new boom in the coming few years. (END of abstract)

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survey finds these ads phenomenally verbose and burdened with moral admonition.

My presentation for the WCU Project 2011 has three parts: (I) the basic conceptual set-up on my historiographic methodology; (II) illustrative data and examples of interpretive strategies I applied to the raw material; and (III) extracts of historical knowledge produced in this study, i.e. arguable portraits of colonial modernity translated into paradigms of everyday ethics.

I. Conceptual/Methodological Set-up

The theoretical impetus in this research is to define frameworks that address the problematic specific to this historical enquiry. The use of theory is to direct me where to look, how to access, and what narrative strategies to adopt to communicate my findings.

The historiographic problematic underscoring this study has three aspects:

*First, is film history possible when no viewable films are available?
*Second, the bulk of raw material available for this piece of history is primarily ideas and sayings (in the form of movie ads)? How can ideas pass for ‘making’, the key to the notion of ‘lifeworld’ (lebenswelt) and ‘being-in-the-world’, as Husserl and Heidegger use these terms?
*Third, what kind of everydayness is speech and persuasion via language? What interpretive model best serve the writing of a piece of history concentrated on the fragmentary, often contradicting, trade of thoughts and verbal persuasion?

First, as a work of cinema studies, is the writing of film history possible when no viewing copies of films are available? This question intensifies by the fact that the earliest surviving Hongkong-made film on record is from 1939, leaving over 30 years of Hong Kong cinema in the dark. If this is the case, are we to say that the first 30 years of Hong Kong cinema cannot be written? For the year 1934, the subject of this study, all that is available are movie ads from newspaper plus no more than a handful of film writings still in search of methods and purposes. This takes us to a central question in cinema studies, broadly debated since the early 1980s, which challenges a documentary approach to film history that focuses on who-when-what-how alone of filmmaking. One of my purposes in this research, therefore, is to affirm the rich possibilities of writing Hong Kong’s film history even when the films are not viewable. In the light of revisionist film historiography, the activities of filmmaking, distribution and exhibitions are only specific locations in the broader field of cultural production.

The premise of my historical investigation, therefore, is that cinema should better be understood as fragments and traceable material presences, even as relics or ruins, not necessarily as systems, textual or institutional. Even in the most ideal research situation, each occasion of cinema is at best elliptical, leaving many visible but inconclusive possibilities that beg the practice of genealogy and archaeology, in Foucault’s terms. Pro-filmic activities as such are foci of a nexus of realities and doings that forms the dynamic lifeworld, pointing to the realm of the everyday. (Lai, 2006: 7-8)
Cinema as fragments leads to the de-construction of the notion of “film culture.” I argue that the study of cinema is equally productive whether we place filmic events and objects in the center or peripheral, whether we look at cinema as the function of other social, cultural, political and economic reality, or as the generative center of other human activities and realms of beliefs, or as a point in the vector of a non-filmic process. In spite of nominal ‘film culture’, cinema should be studied for its specific role in the larger fabric of social, cultural life in a particular moment in history, but without assuming that it is necessarily the center of activity. This **de-centering approach to ‘film culture’** is also a characteristic of the fragment-oriented, nexus model I am setting up. (Lai, 2006: 8)

The **nexus approach** I just described leads me to the defense of a spatial, as opposed to temporal, approach to historiography, which many theorists, including Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, Henri Lefebvre and Gilles Deleuze, have debated.¹ A spatial, horizontal view of how pro-filmic events could be studied on a geographic plane with other immediately and subsequently corresponding lived experiences justifies a ‘slicing’ approach, described in the Australian bicentennial project. (Inglis, 1999: 177-83) In my adaptation, a ‘slicing’ approach does not fall back on arbitrary periodization; it liberates trends, events and lived moments from the constraint of chronologies to allow fragments to be gathered together to form pictures of making, doing and living, dynamic or stable as they should be. A ‘slicing’ approach also provides a basic narrative framework for the historian to organize historical knowledge that evolves from the (re-)assemblage of the fragmentary. A spatial approach to history based on slicing and the fragmentary calls our attention to distribution, trajectories, moving shapes and contours rather than spatial-temporal coherent stories. (Lai, 2006: 9)

Second, given that the history of everyday life highlights ‘making’ in specific time and space rather than ‘happenings’ within a chronological and spatial given, how should I position my study which is primarily about writings and proclamations in language? How should I write this piece of history whose available raw material is solely on the ideational level?

In his work *Heidegger’s Topology: Being, Place, World* (2007), Jeff Malpas argues that the philosopher’s emphasis on ‘being’ in his earlier works was to anticipate his later works (post mid-1940s) in which the notion of place and topology is the ultimate concern. In Malpas’ analysis, “being and place are inextricably bound together.” Even though ‘being’ evolves through space, it is place-bound. ‘Thought’ is not out of place in the life-world of making in so far as it is generative of actions and doing in places where experiences are made. The life-world is self-evident, immediately experienced in the subjectivity of everyday life. It is pre-epistemological, and its cognition is practical and communal. To philosophers of life such as Dilthey, ‘thought’ is a part of the totality of life, and emerges as a life-serving process, whereas thought can never be the foundation of life. Moral dictums pertain to ‘being’ as ‘doing’ – paradigms of experience in the making moderated by the necessity of the place-ness of Hong Kong, interpolated by the excitement with modernity, the anxiety for the future of China as well as the call to pass as a proper British colonial subject.

¹ The nexus approach I propose here differs from Wilhelm Dilthey’s idea of ‘life-nexus’ in that I confine myself to empirical surfaces without having to appeal to depth hermeneutics, deep structures, or any kind of systems approach analysis.
This research highlights personhood not just as abstractions of morality, but in material forms of persuasion (movie ads), which subsequently point to hypothetical human drama (movies). These filmed dramas flesh out paradigms of everyday behavior into narrative persuasion grounded in moral reasoning. In this way, personhood is integral to special everyday circumstances in concrete places, and moral dilemmas are transformed into questions of doings and crisis of actions within a specific set of spatial-temporal coordinates, fictional as well as mimetic. The dramatic situations construct the potential crisis of ‘being’ as a ponderable effect of everyday drama, thus calling for ‘making’.

In Wittgenstein’s view, everyday language activities pertain to the location of unique forms of ‘everydayness’. The everyday is the ‘home’ for making sense of ‘words’, especially in the case of ‘words in exiles’, that is, words uttered in the flow of ordinary language activities that suddenly fall out of context. (Das, 183, 187)

Third, the use of movie ads requires a concept of fragments. Print advertisements are never self-sufficient texts even though they may give that impression. Like a photograph, a print ad is as much a physical object as a composed design that captures unstated purposes via sensual, psychological, or moral persuasion. It is also an object at a specific point of cultural networks, or, say, at most a point in a series of communication. A print ad is always part of something else.

As I study the ads, I was amazed by the heavy use of text, and the heavy didacticism of its content. The ads studied in this research are full of 4-character idiomatic expressions formed into groups, each with different font sizes, scattered around the rectangular print space without any obvious logic of graphic organization. The broken phrases of moral overtones are full of imperatives of moral propriety, interpellating readers as those who are urgently in need of advice for their citizenship in crisis. The voice(s) of these groups of expressions are sometimes similar and unanimous, other times diverse and tangential. These fragmentary articulations allow us to see consistencies and inconsistencies, continuity and fractures, and most importantly, the silences, absences and gaps among these fragments.

In this study, I regard the ad fragments of the 16 films concerned as instances of speech acts. I observe each ad and consecutive ads of repeated screenings of the same film on two levels: for the illocutionary force of moral persuasion that commands compliance by providing ‘facts’ and warning, and the perlocutionary force of emotive persuasion and potential ‘correction’ in everyday life choices. A performative approach based on speech act allows me to see these ads as forms of interpellation, that is, language activities that seek to force a situation upon the fabric of unquestioned daily practices and pictures of personhood.

The speech act orientation and the approach to these movie acts as fragments suggest the need to revisit as well as re-invent textual models such as Althusser’s Marxian notion of ‘interpellation’ which describes how pre-existing structures constitute viewers as subjects. Whereas the notion of ‘interpellation’ describes how ideology dominates people, and the process by which ideology address people (especially through mass media texts), the theory of speech act turns around the analytical process back to individual fragmentary moments and speech instances. Without
assuming ideology as a uniform totality and all pervasive given, I take these movie ads, polysemic and multiaccentual by nature, to allow the fragmentary to challenge and contradict my initial assumptions.

The heavy dosage of moral admonition hides nothing of the film companies’ commercial motive. These ads manifest the film companies’ imagination of who the readers/viewers are and assumptions of what they need. The interpellated subjects, one induces from the ads, are torn between patriotic loyalty as Chinese by ethnicity and the need to be a good colonial subject. The commercial impetus to catch audience in keen competition with Hollywood and Shanghai films exploits the assumptions of an individual’s yearnings to fit the picture of ideal subjects voluntarily.

What I call ‘fragments’ has different names. They are data as autonomous units, a programmable artifact with modular possibilities. As a kind of document, these ads are at the conjuncture of being left as open raw materials and about to be organized into discourses. Whereas photographs as ‘fragments’ are open-ended tokens that invoke memory or form mnemonic systems that lend us access to the past, the ads in question are explicit in content, and precise in communication via the use of language.

In visual ethnography, ‘fragments’ are ‘documents’. A number of theorists have discussed the idea of ‘document’. To Buckland, a document is anything that forms the material basis for extending our knowledge; a source of information in material form to be used as evidence in support of a fact, be it physical or symbolic. Documents inform us if we spend time studying and observing. (Buckland, 1997) Rosen emphasizes documents as proofs, something with a factual look, with a teaching function. (Rosen, 1993) To Chevrier, “a document, precise as it may be, is not addressed to anyone. A document may be addressed to a particular purpose, but the best documents are often unintentional productions, which found meaning afterwards.” (Chevier, Gevers & Holert, 2006: p. 53)

The notion of fragments calls attention to ‘gaps’ and ‘absences.’ The gaps between ads, especially the evolving content of ads of the same movie as it traveled from one movie house to the next across the year, demand us to look at these ads as not just a small print with messages, but object fragments that are better understood as ‘objectiles’. According to Bryant, ‘objectiles’ are verbs rather than nouns, acts than substances. ‘Objectiles’ are objects that unfold what is in-folded, explicates what is implicated, each “a spatio-temporal dynamism … moving from position to position.” (Bryant 2009) ‘Objectile’ is a liberating thought; it asserts audio-visual-textual documents as rich fragments and, when subject to the exercise of ‘thick description’, a single fragment points divergently to different realities.

In my theory of fragments, there is an important distinction to make. On the one hand, I talked of ‘fragments’ as accessible traces, and the most realistic forms, of lived experiences left to us from the past as artifacts. On the other hand, I consider the implication of the fragmentary on my interpretive approaches and narrative strategies. The former is comparable to gleaning, that is, picking up found traces to use them, whereas the latter is like taking the fragments for a walk.

The weaving together of fragments via writing and analysis may or may not result in seamless pictures of reality or immediately coherent narratives. In my study, I have
chosen to present my material as many pictures of citizenship and ethics, each around an evolving series of newspaper ads of the same local film.

II. From Fragments to Open Documents

(1) Some basic counting exercises
Of the sixteen films studied for this research, three were produced in 1933 and staying on movie screens in 1934, twelve of them produced and screened in 1934, and one produced near the end of the year but was not released until January 1935.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film title</th>
<th>Silent / sound (Cantonese)</th>
<th>Rounds screened</th>
<th>Screened Days</th>
<th>Shown in how many different movie houses</th>
<th>Film company (total: ??)</th>
<th>Film genre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Made 1933, exhibited 1934</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01 良心 Conscience</td>
<td>Sound</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zhonghua Sound and Silent Movies Production Company</td>
<td>Last performance with life Cantonese opera performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02 傻仔洞房 Idiot’s Wedding Night</td>
<td>Sound</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zhonghua Sound and Silent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03 戰地歸來 Return from Battle Ground</td>
<td>Silent</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Luolian 国联</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Made 1934, exhibited 19344</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01 洞房雙屍案 Case of the Wedding Night Twin-corpsed</td>
<td>Silent</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Huayi 富艺 (debut)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02 苦海 Bitter Sea</td>
<td>Silent</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Huayi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03 婚後的問題 Problems after Marriage</td>
<td>Silent</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Huayi</td>
<td>Family ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04 浪花村 Spoondrift Village</td>
<td>Silent</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>联合 United Photoplay Services (Overseas Lianhua Film Company)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05 破浪 Breaking Waves</td>
<td>Silent</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>United Photoplay</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06 雙兄 Brothers</td>
<td>Silent</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>United Photoplay + Grandview</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07 薄倖 Tragedy of Love</td>
<td>Sound</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Zhonghua Sound and Silent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08 搞計風雲 Mischief Makers</td>
<td>Sound</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Zhonghua Sound and Silent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09 繁華夢 Nightmare of Fortune</td>
<td>Sound</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Zhonghua Sound and Silent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 吕純陽三戲白牡丹 Lu Chunyang Tricked the White Peony Thrice</td>
<td>Sound</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Nanyue 南粤</td>
<td>Cantonese Song Film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 仕林祭塔 Memorial at the Pagoda</td>
<td>Sound</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Nanyue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The year 1934 in a way was a period of anticipation for the boom of local film production in the next few years. The Shaw brothers who owned Tianyi Company in Shanghai finally expanded their business in Hong Kong by setting up Unique Hongkong, which was renamed Nanyang (southern ocean) in 1936. The Shaw’s arrival in Hong Kong was to exploit the colony’s majority Cantonese population for Cantonese song films, which they had experimented with success while still in Shanghai. According to the Hong Kong Film Archive’s record, the total number of HK-made films rose from 13 to 34 in 1935, ten of them made by the Shaw brothers’ Unique Hong Kong; and 52 in 1936, nine of them Shaw productions.

Taking a broader view, local films took up less than 10% of movie screens in 1934. The average repetition of a local film was about 5 rounds through the year, whereas Hollywood and Shanghai-made films were repeated in general. The following table provides a broader view of where these 15 local films stood in the general movie-going situation that year:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of film (by place of production)</th>
<th>Total number of films</th>
<th>Total number of rounds (1 round = a film being shown in consecutive days in the same cinema)</th>
<th>remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Foreign films                         | 725                   | 1563                                                                            | *Predominantly Hollywood movies  
*Film shown highest number of rounds: *The Invisible Man |
|                                      | 344                   | 1 round only                                                                    |         |
|                                      | 165                   | 2 rounds                                                                        |         |
|                                      | 82                    | 3 rounds                                                                        |         |
|                                      | 64                    | 4 rounds                                                                        |         |
|                                      | 33                    | 5 rounds                                                                        |         |
|                                      | 17                    | 6 rounds                                                                        |         |
|                                      | 14                    | 7 rounds                                                                        |         |
|                                      | 7                     | 8 rounds                                                                        |         |
|                                      | 1                     | 11 rounds                                                                       |         |
| Chinese Films made in Shanghai       | 252                   | 738 (6-8 rounds the highest frequency)                                           | The longest lasting film from Shanghai was *Sisters' Flowers (1933), shown 18 rounds in 11 movie houses from May through October. |
| Chinese Films made in Guangzhou      | 2                     | 11                                                                               |         |
| Films made in Hong Kong              | 15                    | 103                                                                             | Including one US-HK co-production |

My study of movie ads found that dialect division could more significant than place of production, at least to movie publicists. About 98% of Hong Kong’s population spoke Cantonese. Cantonese films were made not only in Hong Kong, but also in Guangzhou and Shanghai. Except in the case of silent films, the advertising strategy
for all sound films highlighted the use of Cantonese over production place. Below is a list of non-HK-made films exhibited and promoted in 1934 for their ‘Cantonese-ness’:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>company</th>
<th>Place of production</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Little Actress 小女伶</td>
<td>1932</td>
<td>Tianyi 天一</td>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Orphans from the Battle Field 戰地 巳孤女</td>
<td>1932</td>
<td>Tianyi 天一</td>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>battle film, part color; aka Two Daughters of the Northeast 萬北二女子</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Tears 摩登淚</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>亞洲 (Asia / Yazhou)</td>
<td>Guangzhou</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Female Star 一個女明星</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Tianyi 天一</td>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortunate Place 吉地</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Tianyi 天一</td>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>Could be dubbed into Cantonese; original language uncertain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggling 挣扎</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Tianyi 天一</td>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platinum Dragon 白金龍</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>南方 Southern</td>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>actually shot by Tianyi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pursuit 追求</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Tianyi 天一</td>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Romantic Tides of the Singing Couple 歌侶情潮</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>大觀 Grandview + 明星 United Photoplay Services</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Unofficial History of the Red Boat 紅船外史</td>
<td>1933?</td>
<td>明星 (Star / Mingxing)</td>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lu Dongbin Tricked the White Peony Thrice 呂洞賓三戲白牡丹</td>
<td>1934</td>
<td>廣東 Jinan</td>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>Jinan, founded 1927, was forced to close down by the govn't in July 1934 with the reason to combat fantasy (取締神怪)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love in the Jade Palace 旋宮艷史</td>
<td>1934</td>
<td>Tianyi 天一</td>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>Same as Love on the Stage (歌壇艷史); the longest lasting screen exhibition in Hong Kong by then</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pear Blossom in the Storm 暴雨梨花</td>
<td>1934</td>
<td>Lianhua 聯華 (United Photoplay)</td>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love on the Stage 歌台艷史</td>
<td>1934</td>
<td>Tianyi 天一</td>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>orig. known as GetanYanshi (歌壇艷史) &amp; same as Love in the Jade Palace (旋宮艷史)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>銀宫金粉狱 (the glittering prison of the jade palace)</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>廣州現代 (Canton Modern)</td>
<td>Guangzhou</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These 14 films are all ‘sound’ films, either with dubbed Cantonese dialogues or what is called Cantonese Song films based on existing Cantonese opera numbers. My intensive analysis of daily move ads across the year shows that the division between silent and sound film did not acquire as much fanfare as the highlights of films that use Cantonese – made by Cantonese people, using Cantonese dialects, or adopting well known Cantonese opera songs.²

I counted a total of 41 movie theatres in business in 1934, which includes cinemas exclusive for motion pictures and theatres for both movies and Cantonese opera performances. On one sampled day, November 1, 1934, 24 theatres placed movie ads in South China Daily.

(2) Some basic tagging/coding exercises

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variety of selling points…</th>
<th>6 films had 4 selling points or more, including: Setting Sun, Bitter Sea, Problems after</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful 具意義</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music is engaging 音樂陶醉</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Cast 陣容強大</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Art direction is good, beautiful outdoor location | Marriage, Tragedy of Love, Mourning of the Chaste Tree Flower. |
| Sound recording: clear and sharp | The most frequently mentioned selling points were: meaningful, music, and cast. |
| Sound film | |
| Outstanding acting | |
| Story is attractive | |
| Free gifts | |
| Discount | |
| Artistic | |
| Cinematography | |
| Spectacle | |
| Festival | |
| Director’s track record | |
| Debut of a film company | |
| Cantonese | |
| Female body | |
| Film company’s track record | |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Range of writing styles</th>
<th>Variety of genres</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poem</td>
<td>Romance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proverbs</td>
<td>War</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paragraph</td>
<td>Blood-shed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Idiomatic expression</td>
<td>Tragedy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exclamation</td>
<td>Motivational / inspirational</td>
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<tr>
<td>Duplets</td>
<td>Conflicts between families</td>
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<tr>
<td>Complementary parallels</td>
<td>Passion &amp; Eros</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exposition</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
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<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>Fantasy</td>
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<td>Thriller</td>
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<td>Family love</td>
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<td>Ethics</td>
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<td>Society</td>
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<td>suspense</td>
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<td></td>
<td>sports</td>
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</table>

Two films have a mix of 4 or more writing styles in their ads: Bitter Sea and Problems after marriage

(3) Films as Open Works, Individual Films as Nexus

Newspaper writers in 1934 talked about films as if they were generators of meanings extractable from a coherent form composed of dramatic and photographic elements. They explicitly related a film to other social cultural discourses, turning a well-made (film) text into a productive category for a broad range of usage. They transposed textual criticism to other activist paradigms such as the promotion of local cinema, a re-definition of humanness, adaptation of Western modernity and so on. Conscious articulations were established between film/drama activities and other everyday arenas such as falling in love and courtship, being a university student, sports and health and so on. In doing this, they presented to me a highly complex cultural and urban landscape. In response, I identify the ideational vectors of the movie ads through a narrative of chain association to bring together found fragments to use them for what Chartier calls ‘nodal points’.

In this study, I examine the movie ads of the same film across the year to track down how certain ideas and concerns repeated in various story forms across the year and
how often they repeated. The method also reveals strategies of persuasion of the producing companies and their implicit diagnosis of its (ideal) audience. I give each (movie ad as) fragment a voice and form a chain of discursive association with other fragments in the everyday landscape of 1934. These other possible fragments including photos and maps, which facilitate my study of Hong Kong as ‘place’ via a virtual walk, plus a variety of found traces, from moral exegesis, objects, international and local news pieces, speeches, meeting notes, stories told, folk and opera sounds, consumer products, daily radio programs and leisure facilities to address books, posters, personal diaries published in newspapers and so on. As said, the 13 to 15 local films involved in this study were only less than 10% of all the films enjoyed by the local people. In this way, what I am studying are objects of the “in-between-ness”: my associational map of each film text is to turn crevices into a productive site of historiography.

The original study covers the movie ads of 15 films and connective social layers and cultural meanings. Below, I have picked four examples for close studies, partly to illustrate the interpretive-narrative method of my work, and partly to show the diversity and thickness of each nexus.
Example 1: Breaking Waves 破浪

[modernity]
*modern spirit = true athletic spirit
(positive models):
*athletes and athletic spirit
*swimming as a nation-building project
*sports and physical exercises help to train the mine of women – call for revised notion of beauty
[crisis model]
*Virtuous woman = devoted athlete
*life-style of female movie-stars
[local culture]
* HK needs stronger commitment in sports
* sports as spectacle: sports as drama, sports in drama
[film culture]
(business formula)
*Outstanding female swimmer in real life as well as in the story
*blending of sports events and melodrama
ewhat is good film):
* Effective scene composition, photogenie

TRANSLATION:
The first movie house to promote the ‘use of national products’ campaign
(4 counts of emphasis of endless supply of free gifts, mainly soap bars, for customers)
(highlighting the film company’s wonderful track records in the past 5 periods)
(highlighting male and female protagonists)
Yeung Sau-king, nicknamed ‘mermaid’ (a famous female professional swimmer) seen live on the silver screen,
Many of Hong Kong’s well known swimmers are performing in this film

A review on January 19, 1934 and the synopsis on a movie theater publicity flyer provide meticulous details of the evolvement of the love triangle between the male protagonist and the two women who are both outstanding swimmers. In these accounts, the focus of the film seems to fall on the Tanka girl, telling the story of a woman rewarded with access to education for her good deeds, which also breeds the central conflict of the film. Glancing through the variety of publicity flyers and reviews, the star personae of the two female leads and their general life-style as a performer received as much emphasis as the romantic triangle in the story. An obvious selling point was Lai Cheuk-cheuk [Li Zhuozhuo], who played the

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3 Kok Sang [Jue Sheng], “kan liao Po Lang hou de gan yan” [Thoughts after viewing Breaking Waves], I&C (?) January 19, 1934. I&C is the abbreviation for the Chinese-language daily, Industrial & Commercial Daily 工商日報.
4 “Tanka” literally means ‘boat-household’, or in proper English is translated as the floating population.
5 Lai Cheuk-cheuk [Li Zhuozhuo] was born in Hong Kong, Guangdong by origin, niece of Lai Man-wai [Li Minwei], who was known as “the father of Hong Kong cinema.” Her film career began in Shanghai with Lianhua. In late 1930s, she moved back to Hong Kong as Japanese aggression escalated in the
Treacherous Yeuk-lan. Lai was then already a well-known star of Lianhua’s, having played in quite a few of its Shanghai productions. Kwok Tak-yau [Guo Deyou] (aka Kwok Wa-wa [Guo wawa]), who played the virtuous Yuk-ying, was a first-time performer, and stories regarding the discovery of her for the role were numerous. What strikes me as most fascinating is the presumed tie between the discourse of a good woman and a devoted (female) athlete, which colored most publicity literature. A news piece on November 9, 1933 pointed out that three months before shooting, Lai already arrived in Hong Kong to practice swimming and diving despite her general competence in the sport.\(^6\) Lai’s putting in extra hours in swimming was presented as a responsible act to meet the requirement of the role she played. Her devotion also redeemed her from the implicit negative connotation of the “social butterfly” unsaid in public discourses.

One account said Hong Kong’s top swimmers, Yeung Sau-king [Yang Xiuqiong] and her sisters were the stars originally targeted. But due to family opposition, the Yeung sisters finally turned down the roles offered to them. In the end, Yeung Sau-king, nicknamed the “Hong Kong mermaid,” did show up in the film as her participation in an actual athletic meet was documented as newsreel, a segment of which was incorporated into the fictional discourse of Breaking Waves. Additional notes described Kwok as outstanding in the swimming arena of Canton (Guangzhou). A follow-up anecdote detailed her devotion to sports:

“Since about three years ago, Kwok would practice at Dong Shan every day under the guidance of her coaches, the brothers Yeung Heng-wah [Yang Kenghua] and Yeung Yuen-wah [Yang Yuanhua]. ... Whether sunny days or rainy days, she would always arrive with her flowery-patterned umbrella, practicing with other outstanding sportswomen Yip Kei-wah [Ye Qihua] from the Teacher’s Training College for Women, and Lee Jim [Li Jian], the school flower of Canton’s Arts School. Yip and Lee were far better than Kwok in terms of swimming skill. Kwok took additional training sessions and worked really hard, in summers as well as winters. Now her effort pays off, and she finds herself among the movie stars. She should feel rested.”\(^7\)

Strange enough, when the film was actually on in 1934, all the ads billed Kwok as “a fine virgin daughter of Hong Kong” [ben gang guixiu], and with a different name Kwok Wa-wa, meaning “baby Kwok.” She was presented in most publicity literature as “famous Hong Kong daughter who excels in swimming.” Supposing the report in November 1933 was accurate, Lianhua-Hongkong was playing with the time gap to re-package Kwok’s image as her background was unknown to the local audience.

[CONNECTIVITY]
The role of physical exercises in disciplining the minds of women, thus the desirable image of the female who engages herself in sports, was a rather common “antidote” proposed to cure a woman from the obsession with the negative practices of a “modern woman.” A short piece titled “fu nv buxing mei” [the beauty of walking for

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\(^6\) Chik Mok [Zhi Mo], “Po Lang san zhujiao” [the three leads in Breaking Waves], Nam Keung Yat Po [Nan Qiang Riboa] November 9, 1933.

\(^7\) Ibid.
women] openly recommended Chinese women to revise their notion of “beauty.”

Rather than spending on cosmetics to pursue beauty for the face, the writer recommended they turn to walking to acquire “beauty as health” [jiankang mei]. An eight-point guideline was detailed regarding how to position the different parts of the body when walking, pacing, the desirable length of each stride and so on. Such a method was described as balancing the appearance and the physiological aspects of a woman who wants to stay young. Another article titled “Zhongguo nvzi” [Chinese females] in September praised the achievement of two Chinese female marathon walkers’ setting the example for a new notion of “health-beauty” [jiankang mei] to supercede the indulgence in “pathetic beauty” [bingtai mei] which cherished fragility and vulnerability of the physique. The essayist regretted that despite the new awareness, Chinese women were much behind European women: for example, the essay cited, there was the story of the latter successfully climbing the Himalayas, something which would take Chinese women a long time to emulate.

The technologies of truth that surrounded women were surprisingly coherent. On the one hand, they hinted at the destructiveness of permissive morality and indulgence in leisure and entertainment, both of which were seen as harmful to the survival of the family institution. On the other hand, they called for a revised notion of recreation via sports activities to achieve a disciplined body and the resultant attenuation of the human will. Against such context, I find the occasional literary columns in newspapers a unique space where the subjectivities of individuals found legitimate expressions. In the second issue of “nuan liu” [warm stream], a special periodic feature of WKYP’s column page, the subjectivity of a young female athlete was delivered in a prose piece titled “yi ge nv qiuyuan de ji ye riji” [a few pages from the diaries of a female basketball player]. The piece consisted of six diary entries from the month of February. These entries, a deliberate selection, together formed a multiple-self with a broad range of subject positions: an athlete sensitive to sports ethics and reflective of the struggles of her fellow women athletes; a newspaper contributor who wrote regularly on the general questions of sports and individual types of sport games; a young woman going to the movies for a trial date, anxiously anticipating a friendship turning into romance; a young woman experiencing her first kiss with a man; a young intellectual who read Goethe’s *The Sorrows of the Young Werther*, Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, Pushkin’s poetry and other literary journals as a sustained habit; a young woman who aspired to be a “virtuous wife and mother” upon seeing the intimacy of her cousin and her new-born child; an amateur poet; a literature-lover who noticed the importance of women in male writers’ works and wondered if men were equally important to a female writer; and an all-round athlete wishing her name to be made known to Europe one day.

The personal diary segments were the very acts and the evidence of intensive self-techniques in the form of conscientious documentation of “significant” events in everyday life resulting in the confession of the self. The accumulation of small details in everyday life was an intense project to the writer as it set the individual onto fine procedures of “recall-selection-reflection-critique-and-confession,” which resulted in a deliberate selective ensemble of the appropriate pages for publishing: it is the kind of...

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8 Hon Yuet [Han Yue, meaning a cold moon], “fu nv buxing mei” [the beauty of walking for women], *WKYP* April 25; 4:3.
9 Jim Jim [Zhan Zhan], “Zhongguo nvzi” [Chinese females], *WKYP* September 2, 1934; 4:2.
10 *WKYP* April 10, 1934; 4:3 (nuan liu semi-monthly no. 2).
of “care-for-the-self” process that, in Foucault’s view, turns power domination from above to self-initiated and self-tempering ethical practices, by which moral judgment and decisions for action become a matter of personal accountability. Along this line, literary columns as a forum for free expression and individual articulation also framed the space for willing, active engagement with dominant discourses through voluntary reflection and free response.

Lianhua-Hongkong’s business formula for Breaking Waves was in many ways exploiting the ensemble of sports stars within the fabric of a fictional romantic triangle. Next to the appearance of Yeung Sau-king, the “Hongkong mermaid,” there were also the various members of the swimming team of the famous SCAA (South China Athletic Association), and the participants including the winners of the annual cross-harbor swimming competition. Their presence was one of the selling points in movie ads. The ‘documentary’ components of the film include two real sports events -- the cross-harbor swimming [du hai yong] competition, and the Guangdong Province Swimming Gala [Quan sheng shuiyun hui]. The appearance of these sport celebrities were evenly spread out across the film in the numerous newsreel segments of major sports events incorporated into its fictional discourse.

Highly conscious of swimming as a significant sport in Hong Kong, two reviewers commented on the film’s paying mere lip service to “promoting sports” as the objective of the film. In their views, the project to promote sports should be properly understood as the training of both a person’s physique and character (personhood), and the cultivation of a collaborative spirit. The inter-textual connection between the discourse of swimming as a popular sport and swimming as a contesting ground for new moral norms was presumed but not really debated. Writer Sing Sing [Xing Xing] pointed out the makers of the film lacked deep understanding of sports, and were unable to elaborate on themes as basic as “sports enhance health” and “sports develop the tenacity of will.” A second writer Kwok Sang critiqued the film’s contemptuous attitude towards the fishing community.

Indeed, a brief overview of all surviving movie ads finds the repeated slogan of “promoting sports” [tichang tiyu] and many redundant variations, such as Lee Theatre’s “down with the sick man’s image” slogan [da dao bing fu kou hao] (March 15). An interesting twist would be when the film traveled to its sixth and final stop of that year at Yaumati Sound Cinema (July 27-28), where the film was chosen for the cinema’s sixth round “advocate guo pian and guo huo” campaign featuring bar soap for laundry to reward viewers of Breaking Waves.

An introductory essay to the sports section for the non-government published Hong Kong Year Book 1934 succinctly turns the many ideas I have assembled here into a coherent, logically reasoned discourse. The following is my summary of the essay. I have simplified elaborative details but have deliberately preserved the essay’s path of reasoning.

11 “Care of the self” is not only the title of one of Foucault’s books, but a key theme ruling his thought from 1976 to 1984. See, for example, “the Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: an interview with Michel Foucault on January 20, 1984” by Raul Fornet-Betancourt, Helmut Becker and Alfredo Gomez-Muller, in Bernauer and Rasmussen (eds.), The Final Foucault (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 1-20.
12 Sing Sing [Xing Xing], Renaissance Jan 17, 1934; 2:1.
“Physical education is as important as intellectual education; strong body and an active mind are complementary, without which a person is sub-human. It follows that a strong nation is impossible without strong physique of its national subjects.

“Hong Kong as a key commercial harbor in South China has a sure obligation. Guangzhou is the sports centre in South China. Hong Kong, Guangzhou’s close neighbor, should catch the same fire. However [sic] it was only in the past few years that sports became prosperous in Hong Kong, thanks to the many immigrants from the Mainland, and the emergence of more schools and sports associations.

“As a British colony, Hong Kong’s top sport has been soccer. Each stationing naval vessel has its own soccer team. Hong Kong also had the track record of having the best soccer players in the whole of China, and almost the best in East Asia. Only until recently did Guangzhou and Shanghai gradually prove themselves Hong Kong’s competitors. The two cities owed Hong Kong for the training personnel the latter supplied.

“Next to soccer is swimming due to the plentiful swimming facilities. There is a long list of local British swimming stars, and at least three male and three female outstanding Chinese swimmers. Yeung Sau-king, for example, won many events in the second National.

“Next to soccer and swimming are cricket and tennis. The popularity of cricket in Hong Kong has spread to Guangzhou and Shanghai.

“The recent installation of a basketball court in government or private schools naturally encouraged basketball.

“By comparison, Hong Kong is weak in track and field events due to three main reasons: the lack of systematic training due to the rarity of boarding schools; the lack of space to train people on actual fields and tracks; and HKU alone, the only university in the colony, could not provide enough space to absorb those outstanding track and field athletes from secondary schools.”

The essay does not only provide a handy summary of the dominant discourse to tie sports to healthy citizenship. It moves on to assess Hong Kong’s prospects in sports, almost turning it into a practical project with action plans.

13 Hong Kong Year Book 1934, section on sports, p. 1-5.
Example 2: Problems After Marriage

**Example 2: Problems After Marriage**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>modernity</th>
<th>TRANSLATION (right)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>techniques of self for open discussion &amp; public circulation (positive models):</em></td>
<td>- Today we’re screening a Chinese film that has special contribution to our times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>multiple roles and moral obligation in a romantic relation</em></td>
<td>- Huayi Company’s astounding production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>how to fall in love; how to sustain healthy romance</em></td>
<td>- BEFORE marriage: she was misled by the pursuit of pleasure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>love has the power to cure</em></td>
<td>- AFTER marriage: she succeeds due to perseverance and hard work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>educated Catholic as conscientious filmmaker</em></td>
<td>- There is entertainment girls attempting to exploit the rich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>university student as romantic imaginary</em></td>
<td>- There is a pursuer of romance pursuing a married person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[crisis model] <em>virtuous mother and wives</em></td>
<td>- dramatic plot: meandering, saddening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[local culture] <em>Creative commitment and solution to social problems</em></td>
<td>- performance: refined and full of details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[film culture]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(what is good film):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Strive for social commitment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*quest for home-bred talent</td>
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**TRANSLATION**

- national premiere
- a torch lighting the future life of men and women who haven’t got married!
- a bright light illumining the way of love for married couples!

- BEFORE marriage: she thought she would live in self-respect, but fell to the demonic power of money, as a result, the pursuit of vanity turned into destruction by vanity
- AFTER marriage: she was only expecting her husband would turn back to her, but worsening circumstances drove her to pay her cost to final victory

- Here, you find: the smile of the dancer of life; the awakening of those who lost their romantic relationship; the repentance of those who led others into paths of misdemeanor

- Here, you find:
the extravagance of a husband, wasteful, loose, arrogance, lost in alcohol and women;
the suffering of a wife bearing the pain of separation, sorrowful, tortured by reality

…….

- This is a mirror showing how to temper our selves and family! This is the exemplary model of a virtuous mother and fine wife! This is a loud warning for those who are taking advantages of others!

- male or female, old or young, should all watch this film

↑↑↑ TRANSLATION

- BEFORE marriage: she was misled by the pursuit of pleasure
- AFTER marriage: she succeeds due to perseverance and hard work
- There is entertainment girls attempting to exploit the rich
- There is a pursuer of romance pursuing a married person
- dramatic plot: meandering, saddening
- performance: refined and full of details
Story? or Narrative?
The film’s narrative evolution, as it was claimed, culminated in the assertion of the genuine, pure romantic love relationship capable of surviving all kinds of hardships, unshaken by material trials and temptation.14 Publicity literature presented the film’s story as carrying a deliberate sampling of intellectuals as its basic characters with the university campus as the initial setting. Two male university students fall in love with the same woman. One of them is from a rich family. To him, money is almighty and love can be bought. The woman falls into his trap: “fooled by money,” she marries the rich guy. After marriage, she begins to feel dismayed with her husband’s “problematic behavior.” But every small complaint on her part only results in his outburst of rage. As a result, she is driven out of the house and becomes homeless. Later on, she hears that her husband is the victim of a fraud, loses his entire family fortune, hangs out with triad gangsters, gets involved in a robbery and is sent to prison. She makes up her mind: she will do everything she can to save her husband from jail and be reconciled with him to “repair their broken love.” [WKYP August 6, 1934; 4:2] In the end, she “waits patiently for her husband to come out of jail,” longing for “the day when they will be reunited.”15

The above is probably only good enough for a general story idea, but gives little hints as to the actual film narrative. For almost all publicity materials and reviews heralded the film’s sampling of typical social roles. Information available on the more filmic aspects is scanty – except in one citation when a reviewer praised the film for its use of beautiful outdoor locations, refined performances, tight structure and a plot line with twists and turns.16

One still photo repeatedly printed in various ads gives us one of the few hints of the film’s visual look – or the preferred visual representation of the story. The photo is a medium shot of a couple cuddling and kissing each other.17 An inverted triangle arrangement suggests the relation between two men and one woman: the two men, on leveled ground facing the reader, stoop over the woman who stands one step below, one on each side, while the woman mildly turns her head back to the man on the left, receiving the kiss and cuddle from behind and above. The photo has a line-sketch version, presenting similar visual content, except that the three characters are cut into two pictures with their heads only, assembled on the printed page to form an inverted triangle. [I&C Daily August 5, 1934]. In the photo version, all three persons wear tennis outfits or hold a racket. The man on the left is leaning close to and looking down on the woman. The one on the right recedes slightly into the background, looks smaller in size and is dominated by the couple. [WKYP August 6] In the sketch version, the woman in the lower tip of the inverted triangle has a plate above and behind her head saying “problems after marriage” (title of film). The two men above her are in stark contrast: the one on the right looks unshaved behind (prison) bars whereas the one on the left is clean-shave and looks calm and contemplative. Composition in both places the woman in the center: she is the subject of dilemma, facing choices and decision; and she is the center of attention, the central problem

14 See the section titled “city voices” (shi sheng), in WKYP July 14, 1934; 2:4. See also similar briefs in the same section on May 5; 2:3.
15 See synopsis in Hong Kong Filmography vol. 1, 1913-1941, p. 32.
16 See the section “short news” in WKYP November 15, 1934; 2:3.
17 The photo appeared in a newspaper ad dated August 4, 1934 (source not specified) in the Hong Kong Film Archive’s folder for the film.
herself, and the contested object of desire of the two men.

**Techniques of the Self: Open Circulation, Divergent Articulation**

One of the film’s key selling points was the background of its producer Shek Chung-shan, who, as Huayi Film Company’s Director/Manager, was also Chairman of the Catholic Youth Association, Treasurer and Manager for the Cricket Association, and headmaster of Sacred Heart Secondary School where he had served and taught for over ten years. *WKYP* July 4, 1934; 2:4. The fact of his turning personal experience as counselor and educator into scriptwriting was always brought up in connection with his Catholic background. Taking a broad view, Shek’s insightful counseling on young people’s love relations was only one addition to the bulk of expositions on boy-girl relationships extensively present in Chinese-language newspaper writings.

Four different versions of the film’s ads produced a typification framework for four kinds of generic role situations. First is the Husband, described as extravagant (in spending), unrestrained, arrogant, and lustful (indulging in drinking and women). Second is the Wife, “sad and miserable,” “grieving at heart,” who has to put up with “separation from husband” and being tossed about in a life that lacks stability and security. Third is the Dancing Hostess, who plays tricks on big spenders and tycoons and as a result turns her lover into her enemy. The fourth is the story’s Romance-pursuer. He is pursuing a married woman, but in the end gives up and “turns battle into peace.” The third and fourth characters, in a way doubles of the second and first, are explicitly in accordance with gender stereotyping: the male “repents” whereas female is “lost in enmity.” The film was recommended in general as a due social critique for contemporary young men and women in love, a proclamation of the necessity of mutual respect and fidelity in love relations. The ads also claimed the film to be addressing those who were married, as its story would be a good reminder of the happiness they deserve.

A closer look, however, finds an obvious gender bias in the film’s interpellation. The sets of binary opposition presented in the ads mainly addressed female viewers as the problematic subjects of ethical incompleteness: before marriage versus after marriage, self-respect versus helplessness (with the husband’s returning home being the only way out), loss to greed and vanity versus struggle for propriety and well-being, old morality versus new ways of thinking. Such gender-biased address was particularly obvious in an elaborate ad on the day before the release of the film, which hailed the film for presenting “the paradigm of virtuous mothers and fine wives [shan mu liang qi de dian xing], and “the exemplary model for perfecting the family and tempering one’s self” (xiu shen qi jia de bangyang). An additional line was added to these two in the coming days, claiming the film to be “a big strike on the head of those who get married mindlessly” [moawei chenghun de dangtou pan]. In general, the so-called paradigm of roles and model behavior underlined the woman as both the victim and the victimizer. The burden of morality in contemporary life was represented as a gender tug-of-war.

The ads also clearly marked the space for those viewers who did not fit one of the

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18 The various versions of the film’s ad were from *Tien Kwong Po, Industrial and Commercial Daily News, Industrial and Commercial Evening News* and *WKYP*.

19 See the section titled “city voices” (shi sheng), in *WKYP* July 14, 1934; 2:4. See also similar briefs in the same section on May 5; 2:3.
four role categories but potentially could. Thus some ads selectively addressed them, claiming the film to be “the torch of life for unmarried men and women” [wei hun nannv shengming qiantu de huoba], next to being the “bright light for the prospect of love relationships for married couples” [yi hun fufu aiqing qianlu de mingdeng]. A brief news piece had different wordings, but similar emphasis: “a compass for love relation” and “an antidote for family reform” [WKYP November 15, 1934; 2:3].

In general, most ads for this film were extremely wordy. The effective summary of a film’s moral themes and lessons in a menu form was far more vigorous than for any of the films I have discussed so far. Each ad carried a slightly different “menu” that listed all the issues, problems and dramatic themes covered, providing the viewers with a conceptual framework for what to expect. The menus mapped out categories of fictional characters and implied viewers so the audience would know which role model to identify themselves with. The menus also summarized the dramatic aspect of the film in terms of typical phases of life or generic pathos in widely known dramatic formulae.

The bold assumptions of a film’s moral rigor and healthy message as valid selling points spoke of a specific moment in history in which the demand for explicitly shared and broadly applicable self-techniques was projected onto, and co-opted in, the production of cultural texts in the popular media. The menu-style movie ads would have to be read and understood imaginatively as if they carried a voice to address all, which needed to be heard in public. The points in the menu communicated standards of normality as they were understood, digested and absorbed by cultural practitioners who also occupied the role of the intermediate élite, defenders and debaters of moral propriety. In Foucauldian terms, the menu expressed (moral) control in the form of an open invitation for self-initiated personal ethics, marking the space for human agencies.

A viewer’s response offered me a glimpse of how the need for practical self techniques via role models was mapped onto the broader everyday terrain. A reader/writer with a “feminine” name, Kit-bing [Jiebing, meaning clean ice] wrote an article titled, “Hun hou de wenti” [problems after marriage] published in WKYP [November 1, 1934; 4:2], which made explicit allusion to the film’s title. Framing marriage as a story form, the essay opens, “Marriage is a necessary phase of life. To organize a small family may produce jolly stories or tragedies. The problem after marriage is a serious question to tackle.”

The explicit verbalization of commonsense everyday life ethics may appear to be obsessive to a contemporary reader. But exposition like the above found its ways into many articles that filled up the column pages of Chinese-language daily news in 1934, complementing the elaborate moral interpellation carried in the menu-style movie ads of ethical dramas.

The power relation between a man and woman in a romantic relationship was a widely “studied” issue in the public space, in literary and journalist writing as well as in cinema. A most light-hearted response I found was in an article titled “nu zi zui nan liaojie ’zhi miao wen” [the wonderful essay of ’women are most difficult to understand’], which included a Chinese translation of an Indian folk tale about a god who created women because he felt tired of the qualities of men.
University Students: the romantic imaginary

There is a perhaps minor and yet recurrent point in local films in 1934 I have studied: the category of “university students” was more than once turned into the typical model adult in the form of the dramatic protagonist. As a social group, university students were practically the minority, a supposedly rather hidden and inaccessible species in the everyday life setting of Hong Kong in 1934, considering how few places there were in the university place and how costly education was. In any case, precisely because their life-style was almost unknown, my attention has been drawn to the wild imagination they incited among makers of popular culture. In fact, more than one film discussed from this year imagined university students as the protagonists of their moral/ethical drama. Readers may recall two films discussed earlier on in this chapter, Breaking Waves and Brothers (both by Overseas Lianhua), which, through the protagonist-“university student,” upheld the intellectual young person as an ideal audience to address.

There are few facts about the actual university students, but the issue at hand has nothing to do with documentary truth or fairness of coverage. It is about how the subject of ethical discipline was inscribed. The location of the imaginary ideal youth -- and at the same time subject of interpellation for imperfection -- was not elsewhere but within a group of enigmatic, almost absent subjects. From another angle, the obsession with the representation of university students’ life-style was underlined by the need to care for them as a since they were the social élite in the making. University students, ideally the noblest group, were also the best subjects to uphold for the general admonition against misguided “modern” life.

The above would shed light on a persistent discussion on university students in Chinese-language newspapers. The group was indeed constantly highlighted – for misdemeanors or examples of bad conduct that were basically alive among young people at large, such as time out in dancing halls, falling in love with dancing hostesses and so on.20 An article titled “da xuesheng de chulu” [the prospects of a university student], for example, recapitulates once again the core qualities expected of a university student. [WKYP July 18; 4:3] The writer, Chim Chim [Jian Jian], cited a fresh news report about alliance formed among university students in Beijing to plead with the government in Nanjing to ensure university graduates’ employment prospects. His critique was explicit,

“The lack of prospects is only the surface. There are many hidden factors. In China, while we are all yelling for ‘going to the people’ as the only way to save our country and her subjects, [many] are not willing to turn that into practice. Those who become university graduates only think of becoming someone with a status above others. Everyone wants to find a place as a government official, not realizing that the house of the politicians is already over-populated… How would [a university graduate] find any prospect?”

He ended the article listing what he considered the essentials of a university graduate, “Better go amidst the people. No more contempt for physical labor.”

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20 Among other issues, the question of whether university students should be banned from the dancing halls was raised many times in Chinese-language newspapers. Cases cited to substantiate the debate included those in Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou, as well as in Japan.
**Example 3: The Bitter Sea**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 1</td>
<td>Identification with Hollywood genres: the “beast” film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>business formula</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*the “man-eating” sub-humanness in the exotic wilderness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>discourse</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*nudity, a signifier of the modern</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Example 3: *The Bitter Sea*

April 29, 1934

Spectacle or Morality?

Exploiting the company premise’s neighborhood in Kowloon City (in the eastern part of the peninsula of Kowloon), Huayi turned the Diamond Hill area into the location for the “wilderness” in *Bitter Sea*, a place supposed to have escaped the touch of urbanization. The predominant use of outdoor scenes was the main selling point in the newspaper ads. The “story” extractable from available publicity literature is still highly obscure. The following is the synopsis provided in the *Hong Kong Filmography volume I*, which leaves us with just a few clues that barely form any coherent narrative:

“The *Bitter Sea* is a tale of friendship. The plot deals with a young man who flees to the mountains. There he meets ferocious tribesmen with their half-naked women. Later, the young man meets an old hermit and forms a
friendship with him. The old man finally dies of illness. Grief-stricken, the young man buries the old man with his own hands.”

One short news item described the film to be “about a young man who wants to do something to serve his nation, perseveres through all kinds of hardship until success is achieved.” [I&C Daily May 3, 1934; 3:3]

The absence of a clear plot leaves the researcher/historian with two possibilities. Editorial inclined towards the film’s engagement with “grand subject matters,” as reviewer Si Dan called it, on which he further generalized, noting, “Film is the reflective portrayal of society. Since Shek was originally an educator, he manages to see things from this angle. All the films he has participated in so far have, as their objective, the unveiling of social dark, unlike many who are [making films] after fame.”21 From this perspective, the plot details, whatever they were, ultimately contributed to the grand, timeless theme of friendship, thus the positive side of human nature, which was what ultimately counted.

The other direction a researcher may take would be to look at how the movie ads had unanimously represented the film as a string of spectacles, each having its own attraction values, as the many blurbs screamed: “the wild man eating human flesh, shocking and chilling,” “hands separated from the legs [i.e. brothers separated], sad and moving,” “humongous beastly men performing the most violent and cruel fight,” “small-size, monkey-like living creatures showing their most scary and violent faces,” and “naked female beauty from the wilderness showing the beautiful curve lines of nature [their body].”22 It would not be unreasonable for me to assume that the film’s premise could be that of a patriotic young person in pursuit of a good cause but gets into trouble, which sets the backdrop of his exile and exotic encounters in the wilderness, which form the film’s main drama.

Two days before the film opened at Central Theatre, Huayi adopted a publicity strategy they had applied to The Case of the Wedding Night. A news-like coverage appeared among various short news items in the local news page, with the headlines running, “All sectors [of society] take caution: WILD HUMAN DISCOVERED IN HONG KONG.” The report continued:

“They drink blood and eat raw meat. They are nine feet tall. The male is ape-like and extremely violent, female carrying her breasts uncovered. These wild human beings hide in uninhabited mountains. Yesterday, movie star Shek Yau-yu ran into them and was almost killed. For further details, please visit Central Theatre two days from now.” [WKYP May 1, 1934; 2:2 (local news)]

Curious people, if they ever visited Central Theatre, would find a nine-foot tall model of a “wild man” exhibited in the cinema’s lobby open for free visit, described to be “captured by Shek recently” while “doing location shooting in Diamond Hill.” [I&C Daily May 3, 1934; 3:3 (film news)]

When the film repeated in July at Kau U Fong New Theatre, similar emphases were placed in the ad: “wild human” [ye ren], “man-eating” [chi ren], the humongous body of the male and a bathing scene of the female. [WKYP July 8, 1934; 2:4] However,

21 Si Dan [Shi Dan], “Shi Youyu cong deng yintan” [Shek Yau-yu back on the silver screen], WKYP(?) February 9, 1934. The clip was read in the Hong Kong Film Archive’s individual film files.
22 See half-page ad appearing on the upper half of I&C Daily April 29, 1934; 3:1.
one may assume that the hyped subject matter of a young intellectual combating the wild human beings was probably only a small portion of the film, put in for additional selling power. It was said that the beastly violence was “overcome” by Shek’s wisdom, not by force.

**Beast Films: a species of modernity, a Hollywood reference**

“Beast films” was a term coined by local Chinese writers to describe one species of films from Europe and the United States that focused on life and activities in non-urban locations, often characterized by the lurking danger of untamed living animals constantly threatening human lives. According to an article on February 8, the time around 1934 was an extremely flourishing moment for the beast films in the West. Prominent examples cited include MGM’s *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1932), *Tarzan and His Mate* (1934) and *Spectacles of the Human and Beasts* (?), Paramount’s *King of the Jungle* (1933), documentary film *Congorilla*, RKO’s *King Kong* and so on.

The “Beast Film” was a local invention in Hong Kong, and probably used in Shanghai as well. An overview of general accounts of Hollywood films in the 1930s finds no such category. In Tony Balio’s survey of US films in the 1930s, films that had been called “beast films” by Hong Kong writers find membership in a broad range of groupings, from horror, ethnic films, B-movies to non-fiction. Other relative terms for “beast films” include: “exotic travelogue features,” “narrative travelogues” and “African adventure films” (p. 379), “exotic travel features,” “narrative documentary,” “exotic documentaries” and “exotic travel narratives” (p. 380), “jungle pictures” (p. 316), “jungle series” (p. 303), and the “Poverty Row B films” of the Tarzan saga (p. 329). A quick web search finds the term “jungle films” – referring to fictional adventure stories in a jungle background – the closest match for “beast films.” Another relevant match would be “adventure films,” often stories selling unusual experiences of less known exotic locales, very similar to the action film genre. The term embraces traditional swashbucklers, serialized films, and historical spectacles (similar to the epic film genre), searches or expeditions for lost continents, “jungle” and “desert” epics, treasure hunts, disaster films, or searches for the unknown.

Films called beast films in movie ads in 1934 included the following: *The Devil Tiger* (Fox, 1934), shot in Malaya with a cast list; *Congorilla* (Fox, 1932, aka. *Adventures among the Big Apes and Little People of Central Africa*), a documentary shot in Africa; *Eskimo* (MGM, 1933, dir. Van Dyke), shot in the North Pole; *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1932), fiction film; *Tarzan and His Mate* (MGM, 1934), fiction film; *Island of the Lost Souls* (Paramount), horror, highlighting beast turned man and featuring Bella Lugosi; *King of the Jungle* (Paramount, 1933), fiction; *Bring 'Em Back Alive* (RKO, 1933), documentary; *Kongo* (RKO, 1932), shot in Africa, with a cast list; *King Kong* (RKO, 1933), fiction; *Son of Kong* (RKO, 1933), fiction; *Wild Cargo* (RKO, 1934), a documentary film made by Van Beuen Company, one of their

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23 Chi Ping Siu-nin [Shi ping shaonian], “tan guo chan shou pian” (on Chinese-made beast films), *WKYP* February 8, 1934; 4:3

24 The actual title of the film is not clear in the movie ads. The Chinese translation was “ren shou qiguan” about an expedition in Africa.


26 Quite a few examples look more like documentary films, but have a list of performers. This requires more research to see if these films were made with heavy re-enactment.
regular supplies to RKO; Samarang (United Artists), shot in Malaya, with a cast list; Jungle Mystery (Universal Pictures, 1932); and Stark Nature, a documentary on the life of the natives in Africa. Films clearly marked “beast film” but without any original English title include: a bloody battle of the wild beasts(?) (Universal Pictures), the barbaric world(?) (Universal Pictures), king of all beasts(?) (Paramount), spectacles of the human and beasts (?) (on an expedition to Africa), the story of an expedition to conquer the bear in the North Pole(?) (Universal Pictures), shot in the Arctic Ocean, and Robinson (Crusoe) of the south seas(?) (United Artists). About half of the above titles were nonfiction films. It seems what we have now normalized as “documentary” was not a significant category – or at least the reference to beastly attacks on humans was more important. Stock-taking the usage of the term “documentary” finds that the term was more or less equated to newsreels: for it was not uncommon that a feature in a movie theater often opened after a “news” section, mainly on sports events, billed as documentary shorts. Perhaps exotic locales and untamed human species were too titillating to be confined to the plain terms of news-style documentary.

The essay by Chi Ping Siu-nin cited above had a unique concern: to look at the “beast film” as a special category of filmmaking that required extra technical resources. The ultimate question then was whether Hong Kong and Chinese cinema in general managed to catch up with the “latest” moves in Hollywood cinema. An “alarming” situation was detected as the writer phrased it, “The trend to compete in making beast films is likely to persist [in Hollywood]…but Chinese-made beast films are still scanty in the past few years.” Detailed analysis was given of the many reasons why the genre had not taken firm root in Chinese cinema: for guo pian (films made by Chinese) was still in such a stage of infancy that a standard production budget and the size of crew in China could barely accommodate any thought of a beast film; Chinese cinema remained elementary in its incorporation of technology; wild animals such as tigers, elephants, lions and leopards were mainly found in Africa; there was a lack of realistic location for jungles where beast stories took place; and so on. The writer provided one additional angle to the newspaper ads’ hyping of exotic values and visual pleasures alone: beast films were founded on advanced techniques and abundance of resources, and only affordable by mature film institutions.

Were there no citable examples of beast films in guo pian at all? In the year 1934, one “beast film” made in 1927 returned to different cinemas. Modeng nvzi lixian ji [A Modern Girl Runs into Danger, literally meaning “the story of a modern woman’s dangerous adventure,” dir. Min Dezhang], produced by Shanghai’s Jinxing [Gold Star] Company, opened at New World Theatre on February 7. This film was cited by writer Chi Ping together with another one called Kuang dao yeren ji [the story of the wild man on a deserted island]. Chi Ping’s description of Modern provided researchers with precious information on the points of interest of the genre and its visual appearance. The film’s story line builds on the basic situation of a certain young woman falling out of love in search of a quiet life – she chooses union with nature and living by hunting. Adoption of footage from various “beast films” formed the film’s compilation structure. As the writer said, the plot line was plain and uninteresting, and many scenes were blurry due to lighting problems. The compilation method, too, was primitive, full of defects, unable to convince the
audience that the setting, borrowing from different films, was consistent. One scene in the film showed the woman being chased by a lion threatening to devour her. The writer complained that the woman’s body was hidden behind a huge ring of rays, suggesting that it was the work of collage – not the woman herself acting in the scene. Another scene commented on featured a young man pulling out an arrow to kill a lion. When the camera showed the lion struck by the arrow making its final struggle, one noticed the lion was actually made of paper. “Such examples were innumerable,” the writer complained.

The above comments suggest that the value of a “beast film” lies precisely in the crew’s “having been there” on real locations of exotic territories. Much of what was said also implied a basic demand for cinematic realism – on the one hand, what appears on screen should refer to what appeared in front of the camera when the scene was made and, on the other, an invisible editing style should seal the gaps between fragmented moments of shooting to create the impression of continuity and coherence in space, time and action. To such assumed expectation for the medium and the apparatus, writer Chi Ping added an ethical dimension, concluding, “The biggest mission of cinema is to improve social morality. One should pay extra attention to films that portray social conditions, whereas films like beast films are not of urgent need.” His final appeal was directed towards filmmakers: do not imitate [Hollywood] when the situation is not mature enough, for following the trend for the sake of it would result in ridicule.

*Bitter Sea* did not claim itself to be a beast film, but its publicity and visual hype suggest the association on many levels. “Bitter Sea” is an obscure title when compared to the explicit *Tarzan the Ape Man* or Shanghai’s *Modern Girl*. It seems to call attention to the humanist aspect of the film. If Chi Ping the writer had been writing a few months later, would he have found *Bitter Sea* a good compromise? For the filmmaker’s reputation and the film’s story line together with Huayi’s publicity plans seemed to have embraced both exotic interest and social responsibility.

**The Quest for Home-made Talent: did Shek Yau-yu qualify?**

The diverse publicity of *Bitter Sea* illustrated its makers’ intention to embrace the broadest possible range of viewers. Reviewer Si Dan had made a good case for the film’s worth to those not so drawn to exotic subject matters. He was enthusiastic about the film’s being another fine performance by Shek Yau-yu. He praised him for being a talented actor and learned film personnel, competent in script-writing, acting as well as directing. The writer also claimed his faith in Shek’s ability to make a movie that is a close portrait of society, especially a critique of the social dark, with his background as an educator, a point that needed to be rehearsed again and again every time Shek’s name was pronounced. [February 9, 1934] He was also compared to two top male stars in Shanghai, Jin Yan and Gao Jianfei. Although the two stars’ fine performances were indisputable, the writer claimed, Shek excelled over them with his multiple talents. [WKYP May 3, 1934; 4:3]

Si Dan’s review was one of the few that demanded “an educated, learned person” as the basic quality of a filmmaker, and Shek Yau-yu’s emerging significance in 1934 was very much a result of that view. We know, though, that such an ideal picture of a filmmaker did not result in a sustained career for Shek. For after the three films he made in 1934, it took him five years to direct his next film, although he did play the
lead in *Fresh Troops* [Shenglijun], a national defense film released in 1936, and Grandview’s *Felicity and Luck* [Ruyi jixiang] in 1938. From 1939 to 1941, he made a total of five films: *The Jade Pear* [Yuli hun] (1939), a romantic tragedy set in the early days of the Chinese Republic adapted from a novel of the same name, produced by Grandview Film Company Limited; *Vixen with a Human Face* [Roumian huli] (1940, Grandview), a romance thriller based on a real crime story and *The Prince Who Loves a Slave* [Lengmian huangfu] (1940, Grandview), a Cantonese opera film; *Goddess of the Streets* [Huajie shennv] (1941, Grandview), a social ethics film with a romance story and Cantonese singing; and family melodrama *The Good Father* [Tianya cifu] (1941, Shehui Film Company). After *The Good Father*, Shek’s name basically disappeared from the filmmaking arena. Shek began his film career as a fine artist churned out by Lianhua’s training program. While social ethics seems to be a persistent concern in his brief repertoire, it is also evident that he had attempted the more popular elements such as Cantonese singing, opera, and national defense to incorporate them into his film projects.

**Naked Bodies…**

The viewing pleasure embodied in *Bitter Sea* was not just about beasts and jungles, but as much about naked bodies in representation. Naked bodies articulated as part of the exotic, uncivilized landscape in films have a contradictory counter-part, the autonomous human subjects in full control of their choice of life-styles, the mark of a truly modern, enlightened mind. In May 1934, the same month when *Bitter Sea* was released, the local newspaper reported a series of appeals for the public release of the film *Natur und Liebe* (Nature and Love, Chinese translation, *hui dao ziran*, meaning “back to nature”), made in the late 1920s by Ufa Kulturfilm. The film, originally a novel, "combines with its scenes of sex life monumental visions of mankind's birth and rise." The campaign was led by the head of the nudity club in Hong Kong, Lambert, which demanded the Hong Kong Government to lift the ban on the film for release. The main argument was as follows: since screening of the film had finally been approved in Shanghai and Nanjing by the respective authorities, it should also be allowed to line up for public release in Hong Kong. [WKYP May 11, 1934; 2:2] Five days later on May 16, the local news section [WKYP 2:2] featured the headline, “drama film on nudity ‘*hui dao ziran*’ has problems showing in Hong Kong: will be discussed at the Legislative Council,” followed by the background story to the dispute and the subsequent treatment. It was argued that once released in Nanjing, the film attracted huge crowds, but the Hongkong-British government’s consideration had been slow and negative. There was concern about the film’s subject matter, suspected to conflict with prohibitions cited in the law, and the public was divided half and half between support and opposition. The issue was scheduled for a thorough Legco discussion on May 16 in three procedural aspects, proposed by Brocker(?): (1) Had the Police Head Office received proper application for the film to be shown? (2) If it had, what were the views of the Police office and the Censorship office? (3) Had the chief of Police ever issued any ban on the film? The meeting together with the subsequent decision was reported on May 18 [WKYP 2:2]. The reply from the Police Superintendent stated the following in response to the three questions: (1) no application was ever received; (2) there was no application on record, therefore no need to answer the second question, i.e. the Police Office’s views on the film’s exhibition; and (3) in case any request for the film to be shown should be received, the police would definitely do everything it could to stop the film from public screening unless it had been approved by the censorship personnel based on article no.
57 of the 1919 Entertainment ordinances. Local news on June 14 [WKYP 2:2] reported the film had arrived in the colony and had been sent for inspection the previous day at the Gloucester House, with the presence of the Inspector General of Police, Hong Kong’s Colonial Secretary Southorn, and Secretary of Chinese Affairs. Disappointing news came on June 15 in the newspaper that the film was not approved. The print was said to belong to the manager of Shanghai Independent Film Company [Shanghai duli dianying gongsi], and should be returned immediately.

In the provocative section titled “fang yan” [meaning “letting out the words”] in the Chinese-language daily Renaisssance, the second of a two-part essay on nudity was translated from English into Chinese, re-edited into many parts. The original essay was titled “Nudism Indoor” by Frederick Albert, published next to another essay with the same title by John Lowell in United States’ Real Detective (January issue, 1934). The translator’s introduction explained the need of the translation as a due address to the confusion arising from the noise of the “nudity movement” in Hong Kong.28 Almost writing like a researcher in a participant observation study, Albert produces rich descriptive details of the norms and behavior of the members on the one hand and, on the other, his own anxieties such as the imperfect shape of his body and the desire to see female naked bodies. Albert’s tone changes from explicit skepticism for the organization’s actual functions to the relaxation of his struggles, and to his final conversion to a devout nudist. His self-owned rationalization for nudism was, as he wrote to a female friend: to enhance deep understanding of the two sexes through thorough understanding of each sex’s physique, and to reduce unnecessary perverted thoughts for the opposite sex by tearing down the hypocritical mask of moral propriety; whereas for single males and females, nudity provides the most open opportunity to observe one another to achieve the best possible choice [of partner].”29

Immediately after Mui Kwan’s series of translation was an article in two parts by Yat Ming [Ri Ming], titled “luoti yundong zai mei guo” [the nudity movement in the United States]. [Renaissance August 31 and September 1, 1934; 2:1] The report was neither a support for the nudity movement, nor an attempt to contextualize the issues for the local society. It read as an ordinary update on a wide-spread trend worldwide, as if nudity activism was just part of one’s common sense. Readers would learn of what nudity groups were active, in which cities in the United States, as well as receiving news on the temporary close of activities in the winter season.

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28 Mui Kwan [Mei Jun], “luoti yundong sumiao” [sketches on the nudity movement] 1-6, Renaissance August 24-30, 1934; 2:1 (“fang yan” section). There should be more than six parts.
29 The quote is my translation from the Chinese translation -- may vary from the original English text.
Example 4: Modern Tears

Five movie ads I have collected from WKYP and Renaissance direct the readers’ attention to three aspects: Cantonese dialogs and singing, the ensemble of performers from a few closely related entertainment circles, and the visual representation of modern life in a hand-drawn sketch placed in the centre of the ads.

The explanatory texts in the movie ads were unanimously didactic for Modern Tears. An ad on January 5, 1934 in the upper right area of the front page in Renaissance stipulated, “a history of the fall of `modern’ men and women; a map-work unveiling the true faces of `modern’ men and women.” The same ad with the same lines appeared on WKYP’s front page the same day. On January 6, the day before the film opened, WKYP’s front page again featured a big ad for the film, this time in the upper left corner. The highlights this time were given to the “romantic performance,” “admonishing plot line,” “humorous songs” and “tasteful dialogs.” Still, the minor text in the lower right corner of the ad preached, “`the modern’ turns one into a heartless rascal: this film offers forceful warning to young men and women who have misunderstood the meaning of `the modern’.” On the day the film opened, the ad in WKYP was moved to the second page, while the message on `the modern’ was given equal emphasis and lumped together with other selling points, but nonetheless claiming the film’s devotion to “a full-fledged portrayal of the shameful ways of young men and women who misunderstand the meaning of `the modern’.”

30 “Modern Tears” is my own translation of the film Mo deng lei 摩登淚. The film was heavily publicized for its Cantonese song numbers and its male lead, Yip Fut-yeuk [Ye Furuo], a local Hongkong actor. The film is not included in the Film Archive’s first volume of Hong Kong Filmography. My suspicion is that the film was either produced in Guangzhou, or was a Hongkong-Guangzhou co-production. However, the production company Ya zhou gongsi [Asia Company], billed in all movie ads, cannot be located so far in all the Mainland or Hongkong publications available to me.

31 WKYP is the abbreviation for Wah Kiu Yat Po 華僑日報, a Chinese-language daily newspaper. Renaissance (Zhong Xing Pao 中興報) is also a Chinese-language daily.
message took on a poetic license in the ad on January 9 on WKYP’s front page: “the midnight mourning bells for those who misunderstand the meaning of the modern – a screaming strike on their heads!”

The sketch in the movie ads was a convenient symbolic summary representation of the so-called “perversities” of modern life. One sees a woman sitting by a round table full of wine bottles, surrounded by five men (two standing and three sitting), with a background unmistakably showing a nightclub with a band and female performers. The woman in the night club was an obvious signifier of a “social butterfly,” a special category identified in the metropolis of modern Shanghai to refer to women who maintained a relatively well-kept life-style by hanging out with men in entertainment institutions. And the sketch could easily be a convenient portrait of the personal life of Suen Nei-ah, the film’s female lead, who was known for being an active social butterfly in Shanghai. WKYP’s column page writer Mao Dan devoted a short article to Suen’s marriage and divorce with musician Lui Man-shing [Lv Wencheng]. In this context, the moral tale of the “modern tears” seems to demand a double take: it is a story centered around the woman played by Suen Nei-ah in the film; yet it is also about Suen’s own personal life.

[CONNECTIVITY]
The theme of “modern life” being misunderstood recurs in local Chinese newspapers that year, and is discussed from many different angles. The image of the woman in a nightclub in the ad reminds me of a news item on a case of attempted suicide with the headline: “Cecil Hotel: Modern Female Swallowed Poison.” A 28-year-old “modern female” [sic] was found unconscious after swallowing opium given to her by her boyfriend in Room 56 on the fifth floor of Cecil Hotel at around 3:00pm on December 3. She was rushed to hospital and seemed to have survived. Other than the above facts, there were no further details in the article that provided further reasons for the use of the term “modern.” [WKYP December 4; 2:3]

What is to be modern? A two-part article appearing on two consecutive days in Renaissance listed three “prerequisites” all “modern” women had to fulfill: eyebrow-drawing, lip-painting, and nail-painting. The piece clearly declared physical appearance as the top priority for women in both the West and the East, if they ever wanted to stand out and be desired. The instructions on lip-painting appealed to romance in movies as the evidence of the lips’ importance, linking attractive lips to irresistible kisses. The advice on nail-painting emphasized instead the danger of infection and solutions for such problems.

In most cases, the “modern” is a mind-boggling category since its meanings basically remained unsaid in most of the accounts or, if given a voice, only negatively in terms of what it destroyed and what undesirable consequences it could have. A short humor piece would perhaps give us some images of what “modern” means or how the term

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32 Mao Dan [Mu Dan], “Lv Wencheng juannian Sun Niya” [Lui Man-shing misses Suen Nei-ah], WKYP May 10, 1934; 4:3.
33 Bing Yuk [Bing Yu], “modeng funv de bi xiu ke (shang)” [must-have subjects for modern women – part I], “nanguo zhi feng” [wind of the southern country] section no. 437, Renaissance August 31, 1934; 1:4. Wing Si [yong shi], “modeng funv de bi xiu ke (xia)” [must-have subjects for modern women – part II], “nanguo zhi feng” [wind of the southern country] section no. 438, Renaissance September 1, 1934; 1:4.
was used – but again – negatively.34 Below is what the writer Man Yee thought a modern person would do in contrast to an archaic person:

“… When a modern person meets his bride, he checks to see if she is pregnant. … A modern person marries a wife like he is purchasing a clothes-hanger in a boutique. … A modern person gets married because his child is coming and can wait no more. … When a modern person is expecting a child, the most mind-boggling thing is to count the number of months of pregnancy. … A modern bride comes in a motor car: she comes fast and leaves soon. … A modern person’s wife is like an America sofa, pleasant-looking and comfortable, but its cover needs changing all the time, therefore it is neither economical nor durable. … When it breaks, it means a major project: there’s no way but to change the entire sofa. … A newly-wed modern person usually gains three children within two years.”

The subtext of the above was obviously about marital fidelity, suggesting pre-marital sex and divorce to be the sign of the. A month earlier, the same writer contributed to the same page of the daily WKYP a playful glossary for the modern woman.35

III.

The Lifeworld of Hong Kong around 1934: competing or complying discourses?

In the history of the British colony of Hong Kong, the year 1934 falls into a time, roughly between 1929-36, that I have described as the period of pacification strategies. It was a brief period of peace – after the 3-year-long Great Strike, and before Japanese aggression affected the general landscape of everyday life in the colony around 1937. Cultural anecdotists often call the first half of 1930s in Hong Kong the “golden age of leisure,” whereby tea houses and Cantonese songs forums flourished to nourish new yearnings for the Cantonese dialect as a vehicle to forge a sense of local Hongkong-ness that is neither just Chinese nor British.

While 1934 is mid-way through the 3-year grace period whereby the government ordained all brothels to close down before deemed illegal, the Legislative Council meetings were filled with agenda items to complete new roads that linked distant areas to the urban core. In relation to that, Legco Members also discussed plans and strategies to promote internal tourism, that is, to encourage citizens to go to peripheral areas beyond the urban areas for picnic, and to the seaside for bathing. (Lai, 2006; chapter 2 & 3) The government’s active production of space, using Henri Lefèbvre’s term, had impact on multiple realities. It encouraged the local people to focus on everyday life especially to learn how to relax and secure good health via leisure. Physically, the production of space facilitated the urban development. Territories of no practical purpose were transformed into land that would generate usage and benefits. The promotion of leisure and pleasure premised on the production of more land, that is, turning measurable ‘space’ into accessible ‘place’, was, taking a high angle, a strategic step of population management, at least in regulating the spatial mobility of

34 Man Yee [Man Er], “gulao yu modeng” [the archaic and the modern], WKYP October 20, 1934; 4:2.
35 Man Yee [Man Yi], “modeng guniang cidian” [glossary for the modern women], WKYP Sep 2, 1934; 4:2.
the colony’s inhabitants, making marked territories on the map signifiable.

A few pictures of modernity emerge as I proceed from the nexus of one film to the next. Some of these scenarios or ideational clusters make questionable many widely accepted but simplified historical characterizations.

The first scenario breaks down the discourse of 1930s as a golden age of leisure, with the boom of song forums in tea houses and restaurants and reforms in Cantonese opera itself. The space I have studied was a highly gendered space. Gendered hierarchies cut along class-based division of labor in the entertainment industry. Female opera performers were denied guild membership, excluded from top-class performing venues saved for male performers only, and they barely managed the luck of performing with male artists by 1934. Evening song forums provided prostitutes with an “after life” in the final phase of the abolition of brothels, where they found their former training in singing as an intern-prostitute turning into a new form of cultural capital. At the same time, gender segregation gradually endowed female performers with a special commercial value: their gendered charm became a profitable asset to their owners exploitable for the male audience.

Women’s roles, public and domestic, were heavily interpellated categories, torn between the subject and object of victimization that put social well-being at stake. Women were the source of men’s suffering and at the same time the safeguard of propriety protecting the nation from falling.

Second, the term “the modern” was not only a trendy catchword in the everyday usage of contemporary vernacular Chinese, but also a heavy discursive object, holding together a broad range of concerns, from fashion sense to daily habits to moral bankruptcy. The verbose exposition on the question of the “modern” and the frequent but eclectic use of the term itself stood by the project of the preservation of social well-being by which moral virtues were not assumed or implied, but became explicit categories of open civic education. “The modern” surely found its way into movie titles as well, giving didactic moral exegesis the additional appeal of the texture of human emotions via melodramatic treatment. As far as the year 1934 is concerned, ‘the modern’ remains an open debate still in search of good and bad role models. In the midst of conflicting positions, women once again became the object of discipline.

Third, sports, broadly upheld for its nation-building capabilities, was also a highly gendered project for the females whose will -- and not their body -- was the ultimate location for reform. Sports activities were also treated as a self-care project, subsequently turned into a micro-process of self-techniques and effective government through ethical practice. The explicit call to modernize the “Chinese” females, for example, promoted stronger will, better health and stronger physique through walking exercises and other sports activities. The so-called proper “athletic spirit” and the personal ethics of an athlete, thus the “social meanings of sports,” appealed to standards of sports in western culture imagined at the same time as standards of strong nation. At least one of the films discussed in this chapter fully embraced all of the above.

Fourth, the newspaper column pages formed a unique space for the articulation of individuality and the display of private selves. In contrast, local cinema tended to
perpetuate moral paradigms as formulaic stories: the individual was necessarily viewed against an ideal paradigm of collective selves whose well-beings were predicated upon set inter-relational norms. A high proportion of local films studied from this year were described as the illustration of the horrible consequences of some of these norms being violated. Film publicity, however, took on a unique fashion via menu-style movie ads that filled up the classified ad space day after day. These “menus” were elaborate lists of all kinds of subject positions tied to moral roles, errors and obligations, offering everyone a possible example for role identification. Romantic love, friendship, and motherhood were repeated themes, whereas embedded in the three sets of human relation, the notion of the vulnerable wounded male was explicitly symptomatic.

Fifth, higher education was a key locus of change. The imaginary indulgence in “the university student” can be extended to that in the educated, civilized young citizen in general. The discourse surrounding the type and the group was no abstract, philosophical exegesis, but again, concrete instructional input on manner and self-stylization. In a sense, cinema was one of the key platforms where the (un)desirable performances of the group were spotlighted.

Sixth, a new breed of intermediate elite emerged as talking and writing in the media. The moment I have explored falls within the monumental history of the great impact of the May Fourth Movement. To me, the desired “progressive-ness” resided in everyday usage of words, especially the conscious resistance against moralistic “prohibition,” the demand for ideational freedom. The notion of combating against “prohibitions” was often used to deploy Hong Kong’s modern and progressive sentiments. Banned films in other countries were often exploited in local film publicity – to generate the impression of Hong Kong as a very open-minded city. One example was Fox’s *Walls of Gold*, featuring Kathleen Norris, Sally Eilers, Norman Foster and Ralph Morgan. The film’s ban in Guangzhou was turned into the main publicity blurb in King’s Theatre’s movie ad, given the same weight as the outline of the film’s romantic triangle within a family. [WKYP March 1, 1934; 1:1] Many newspaper articles discussing equality of the two sexes often framed the discussion as a problem of “prohibition,” screaming the catchword “jin” [meaning prohibition in Chinese] in the headline of the writing.

The quest for textual practices to actively address the modern subject’s ethical incompleteness was much alive among young literary writers at the time, but was expressed in the works of filmmakers Shek Chung-shan and Shek Yau-yu, who founded Huayi Film Company in 1934 to materialize their quest for new morality. A closer look finds that only one of the three films they produced in 1934, *Problems After Marriage* (released in August), concerned everyday ethics threatened by the “modern” way of life although they claimed all three films were doing so. In my view, both *The Case of the Wedding Night Twin-Corpse* (released in March) and *Bitter Sea* are like ‘words in exile’, that is, a sudden linguistic fall out of a clearly defined context. The former was mysteriously set in the beginning of Hong Kong’s colonial experience in 1842 even though the wardrobe and set were contemporary, whereas the latter (released in May), was even more mystical with its story set in the contemporary time but with a location somewhat like wilderness remote from urban cities. Just as exiled words need to be brought back to everyday in order to make send of them, these two films point directly to one kind of Hongkong-ness expressed as a
strong yearning to be Western – and in these two films, to emulate Hollywood cinema. Detective thriller and beast films were significant genres in the US, obviously not in Shanghai.

The notion of the modern subject had been approached as individual, personal rather than social problems in local literature, such as in the novels of young novelist and journalist Lui Lun. In filmed melodrama, too, social and national issues are by definition translated into personal moral dilemma, around which a range of persona typifying choices and conduct were arranged along the logic of conflict and resolution. In my observation, the movie ads played a subtle role of translating the personal back to social via exegesis with words. Recall the noise of publicity of *Modern Tears*, which screamed for attention to the problems of an erroneous “modern” attitude, broadly echoed in Chinese-language newspaper writing, or in *Spoondrift Village*, whose female protagonist was the exemplar of a confused and misled contemporary female, or yet the “good” woman in *Breaking Waves* whose main actress and the real-life athlete she represents collapsed the fictional and the real.

Compared to the urgent call for making films to save the country within the film industry of Shanghai, local film reviewers of Hong Kong are relatively burden-free in their discussion. Almost none of the serious writings that I have quoted demonstrate a degree of obligation that would emulate critical trends in Shanghai. There was little pretension to upholding issues of national importance or revolutionary sentiments. Rather, the writers collected in this chapter were in the process of looking for the right language and workable approaches to make sense of a film.

A somewhat perverse “global” vision manifested in the obsession with animal and jungle films such as *King Kong* and *Tarzan the Ape Man*, and echoed in Huayi’s *Bitter Sea*, was paralleled by the pursuit for high/elite culture via the film adaptation of Western literary classics to a Chinese setting. The beast/animal/jungle films compromised ethnographic value with an excitement in exotic bodies, at the same time underlined by a subscription to the grand discourse of Western civilization. As for local film company Quanqiu, its debut, *The Setting Sun*, found its literary sources in a mixture of Spanish Blasco-Ibañez’s *Puesta de sol*, German Storm’s *Immensee* and Goethe’s young Werther. The enthusiasm for Western literary classics was no pure pursuit of artistic creation, but high culture was deliberately united with national well-being, by which the tragic-romantic pathos of such films was turned into motors for the persuasion for patriotic commitment.

Seven, the construction of women was full of contradictions: they were talked of as the object of care, discipline and exasperation. Film was a key agent in (re-)defining the decade’s construction of femininity, but far from the only agent. The plentiful writings on/for/about/to the female gender I have extensively quoted in this chapter culminate in a multiple personae of women in the everyday life dramaturgy via the fusion of social, civic and fictional discourses: the songstress, the murderess, the frivolous female, the maid, the prostitute, the mother, the consumer, the intellectual, the athlete and so on. Unlike the 1930s in the United States, where the shifts in the definition of femininity drew upon symbolic power (such as from a heightened interest in fashion) over real status, the females in Hong Kong were locked up in the

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36 See Sarah Berry’s *Screen Style: fashion and femininity in 1930s Hollywood* (Minneapolis &
project of the presentation of their selves and execution of their roles in everyday life, and their life process was turned into a series of rational/irrational decision-making based on a central-conflict model.

The heavy discursive construction of woman as a cultural sign begs the following questions to be further addressed: what conditions encouraged the “talk” about women, what kind of talk and who did the talking? What was the broader ideological vision in society at large? Where did the thin line lie between women as the object of benevolence (charity work, anti-mui-tzai campaign, de-legalization of prostitution), the target of health care and medical consumer products, and the object of disciplinary persuasion in movies and column writings? Across the combinatorial match of the new/old/good/bad woman, how did each member of the matrix take form via narrative devices? Through my use of the numerous film texts in this chapter, I have provided a broad view of the many contradicting answers offered to these questions. Perhaps an article titled “family education and women” provided the most concise compound profile of the most wanted woman: strong educational background, good common sense in matters of health, sanitation, and use of medicine. And perhaps to add to these qualities, a woman must demonstrate her virtues by taking care in exercising her body. Thus the writer concludes, “A woman who doesn’t realize the educational responsibility she bears after having children does not qualify for a mother, and thus her due social status. The good or bad of a woman affects the well being of a nation.” Perhaps the discursive construction of woman at hand is more that of social roles than mere cultural signs. And never have I come across a period in Hong Kong’s film history when actual roles and symbolic representation were so closely tied that they almost merged into one.

**Spatially Travelling Texts: Film as a Site of Divergent Performance**

Taking a film work as a nexus cut through by many histories of fictional and factual discourses is to regard a work as a location of multiple interpolations and concrete moments of articulation. With what I call a de-centering model, signification or the representation of the social world would be looked at as the constituting activities of social reality as much as those that do not concern themselves directly with meaning-making. The way newspaper writers in 1934 injected meanings and meaningfulness into their writing object is in my view excessive; even when we simply consider the content as marketing strategies, the scope they covered is multiple. The very act of negotiating what was worth discussing about a film was also the act of validating the legitimacy of certain formal categories. The writings of the intermediate élite, as I call these people in purposeful articulations, were not just the practice of criticism – but they were about criticism, interpretation, and the realization of hermeneutics. Their utterances were equivocal: in one instance they were promoters of local cinema, in another moments, they turned every film into a case of re-definition of humanness, or a test for the incorporation of modernity of the West.

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London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), which points out “the significance of popular fashion as an aspect of women’s negotiation of modernity and post-traditional identity.” Berry’s account discusses the relation between cinema, consumer fashion, advertising, and discourses of class and social status, followed by the two-way traffic of how Hollywood used fashion to enhance the popularity of films and the subsequent popularization of cosmetics. The book ends with the representation of working women and the popularization of menswear.
To highlight the above recurrent themes in a project of film history is not to fall back on thematic studies. The micro-level analysis of each film as a nexus should lead to further analysis of the very different shape of connectivity each nexus generates: the ideational vectors of each film, as the few examples have illustrated, suggest caution about generalization, as well as invite us to see how different individuals within the same milieu and spatial-temporal coordinates are making very different experiences by occupying subject positions. Film, then, is – in Deleuze and Guattari’s words – a component of urban materiality as a rhizome, and an assemblage in itself.

Bibliography:
I&C Daily = Industrial & Commercial Daily (Kung Sheung Jih Po 工商日報), a Chinese-language daily published in Hong Kong

WKYP = Wah Kiu Yat Po 華僑日報, a Chinese-language daily published in Hong Kong

Renaissance = Zhong Xing Bao 中興報, a Chinese-language daily published in Hong Kong