

CRITICAL ASIAN CINEMAS



Edited by Sangjoon Lee and Darlene Machell Espeña

# Remapping the Cold War in Asian Cinemas

Amsterdam  
University  
Press

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# Critical Asian Cinemas

Critical Asian Cinemas features book-length manuscripts that engage with films produced in Asia and by Asian auteurs. "Asia" refers here to the geographic and discursive sites located in East and Central Asia, as well as South and Southeast Asia. The books in this series emphasize the capacity of film to interrogate the cultures, politics, aesthetics, and histories of Asia by thinking cinema as an art capable of critique. Open to a wide variety of approaches and methods, the series features studies that utilize novel theoretical models toward the analysis of all genres and styles of Asian moving image practices, encompassing experimental film and video, the moving image in contemporary art, documentary, as well as popular genre cinemas. We welcome rigorous, original analyses from scholars working in any discipline.

This timely series includes studies that critique the aesthetics and ontology of the cinema, but also the concept of Asia itself. They attempt to negotiate the place of Asian cinema in the world by tracing the distribution of films as cultural products but also as aesthetic objects that critically address the ostensible particularity of Asianness as a discursive formation.

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# 1. Introduction: Locating “Asia” in the Cinematic Cold War

*Sangjoon Lee and Darlene Machell Espeña*

This book is about cinema and the cultural Cold War in Asia, set against the larger history of the cultural, political, and institutional linkages between the US, Europe, and Asia at the height of the Cold War. From the popularity of CIA-sponsored espionage films in Hong Kong and South Korea to the enduring Cold War rhetoric of brotherly relations in contemporary Sino–Indian co-production, cinema has always been a focal point of the cultural Cold War in Asia. Historically, the United States and the Soviet Union viewed cinema as a powerful weapon in the battle to win hearts and minds—not just in Europe but also Asia. The Cold War in Asia was, properly speaking, a hot war, with proxy military confrontations between the United States on one side, and the Soviet Union and China on the other. Amid this political and military turbulence, cataclysmic shifts occurred in the culture and history of Asian cinemas as well as in the latitude of US cultural diplomacy in Asia. The collection of essays in this volume sheds light on the often-forgotten history of the cultural Cold War in Asia. Taken together, the volume’s 15 chapters examine film cultures and industries in Asia to showcase the magnitude and depth of the Cold War’s impact on Asian cinemas, societies, and politics. By shifting the lens to Asia, the contributors to this volume re-examine the dominant narratives about the global Cold War and highlight the complex and unique ways in which Asian societies negotiated, contested, and adapted to the politics and cultural manifestations of the Cold War.

In this introductory chapter, we present the prevailing intellectual debates surrounding the history, ideas, and experiences of the Cold War in Asia and the academic landscape in which the chapters in this book were written. First, we discuss the dominant narratives about the Cold War and identify limitations in the scholarship on the Cold War in Asia, highlighting gaps in works that examine the cultural dimension of the Cold War in Asia. Next,

we examine the recent scholarship on cinematic studies of the Cold War in Asia and invite our readers to rethink the place of cinematic networks, national cinemas, and film genres during the Cold War. Finally, we provide an overview of this book's chapters and show how each contributes to the development of cinema studies and cultural Cold War scholarship in Asia and beyond.

## Rethinking the “Cold War” in Asia

Much has been written about the Cold War in the past two decades, including about the Cold War in Asia. Scholars have explored the origins of the Cold War in the region, the reasons the ideological fight shifted from Europe to Asia, the diverse factors that shaped Washington's key policies, and the legacies of the conflict in the region.<sup>1</sup> While this rich body of work has generated valuable insights into the Cold War and Asian history, it suffers from certain limitations. First, most of the publications focus on the Vietnam War and offer Western (that is, American) perspectives. Much less has been published about other Asian states such as Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, Burma/Myanmar, the Philippines, and Malaya/Malaysia.<sup>2</sup> Second, because scholars generally focus on Western concerns, they invariably depict Asia as essentially an arena for the contest between the great powers. Less emphasis is placed on the roles that local Asian actors played in the conflict. Asian narratives and perspectives consequently remain under-studied, left at the margins of Cold War scholarship. Some scholars, for example, argue that the great powers' intervention in Asia, and specifically Vietnam, was the inevitable outcome of American and communist Cold War concerns.<sup>3</sup> Others who focus on US policy contend that Washington sought to dominate the regional economies and link them to a US-led international capitalist economy.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the US government regarded Asia—both East and Southeast—as being of such economic and military importance to the United

1 See, for example, Foley (2010); Tyner (2007); Tarling (1998); McMahon (1999); Moyer (2006); Fineman (1997); Rotter (1989); Wehrle (2005); Schaller (1987); Lee (1996); Aldrich, Rawnsley, and Rawnsley (2005); Vu and Wongsurawat (2009); Goscha and Ostermann (2009); Kwon (2010); Zheng, Hong, and Szonyi (2010); Murfett (2012); McGarr (2013); Friedman (2015); Koikari (2015); Hajimu (2015); Phillips (2015); Oh (2015); Roberts and Carroll (2016); Ang (2018); Kim (2017); Li (2018); Mizuno, Moore, and DiMoia (2018); Miller (2019); and Ngoei (2019).

2 Albert Lau, *Southeast Asia and the Cold War* (2012), 1.

3 George Herring, *America's Longest War*.

4 See, for example, Kolko (1972) and Williams (2009).

States and its anti-communist allies that Washington would countenance no communist challenge to the Western dominance of the region.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the perspective, Asian voices remain comparatively muted in these studies.

In recent publications, however, scholars have offered more complex narratives of the Cold War in Asia, demonstrating that the Cold War in the region took a different route compared to Europe and the United States precisely because of the unique "regional dynamics it interfaced with."<sup>6</sup> Together, these publications critically investigate the perspectives of Asian states and societies. Odd Arne Westad, Karl Hack, and Geoff Wade contend that Asian political leaders played important roles in the global and regional Cold War and did not act as passive actors or puppets of the Americans or the Soviets.<sup>7</sup> This argument was reinforced in an important collection of essays by Zheng Yangwen, Hong Liu, and Michael Szonyi, which shows that Asian political leaders entertained communist ideas long before the outbreak of World War II and found communism both appealing and appropriate as an ideology that underpinned their anti-colonial and nationalist struggles against the imperial powers.<sup>8</sup> Taking into account local objectives, perceptions, and initiatives puts Asians at the center of the political and cultural transformations that were taking place in the region during the Cold War.

Even the applicability of the term *Cold War* in Asia has been called into question by Heonik Kwon, whose work, informed by cultural and social history, accentuates the diverse sociocultural experiences in Cold War Asia. He notes, "There has never been a conflict called *the Cold War*" because the political bipolarity was experienced "in radically different ways across societies."<sup>9</sup> In other words, the multiplicity and complexity of the experiences of different societies during this period cannot be captured by such a general conceptual term as the "Cold War." In *Cold War Crucible* (2015), Hajimu Masuda contends that the Cold War existed only because people thought it existed. He examines how the Cold War was constructed and imagined, particularly during the Korean War, and why such a construction was necessary in the first place.<sup>10</sup> As we rethink the place of Asia in Cold War studies, a critical appraisal of the term "Cold War" offers an opportunity to explore how Cold War politics permeated the everyday lives and experiences of ordinary people in Asia, particularly on the cultural front.

5 See, for example, Leffler (1992) and Gaddis (2005).

6 Lau, *Southeast Asia and the Cold War*, 2.

7 See, for example, Westad (2007); Hack (2001); Wade (2009).

8 Zheng, Hong, and Szonyi, eds. *The Cold War in Asia* (2010).

9 Kwon, *The Other Cold War*, 6.

10 Masuda, *Cold War Crucible*, 2.

The scholarship on the Cold War in Asia has become more nuanced and sophisticated with the emergence of new publications that explore the cultural front of the Cold War in Asia. Among the few publications to embrace a cultural approach to the study of Southeast Asian foreign relations is a volume edited by Tuong Vu and Wasana Wongsurawat. Vu, in particular, argues that Asian political leaders established a complex cultural network that helped ideas cross boundaries and shaped Southeast Asian policymakers' perception of international politics.<sup>11</sup> Another collection, edited by Tony Day and Maya Liem, furnishes insights into how Southeast Asian novels, theater, arts, literature, festivals, and the popular press molded local identities and local perceptions of the Cold War.<sup>12</sup> Building on these works, the essays in the present volume undertake sustained and systematic investigations of Asia's film cultures and industries during the Cold War.

### Locating "Asia" in the Cinematic/Cultural Cold War<sup>13</sup>

Frances Stonor Saunders' pivotal work *The Cultural Cold War* (2000) has exerted a significant influence on subsequent scholarly research on the subject. The book explores the covert psychological initiatives and cultural diplomacy strategies implemented by the US to win the battle for hearts and minds during the Cold War.<sup>14</sup> Saunders examined the use of financial resources by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to support intellectual periodicals, musical performances, films, art exhibitions, and similar cultural endeavors with the intention of employing them as strategic tools in countering the influence of the Soviet Union and its affiliated nations. Subsequently, a closely interconnected corpus of literature has examined the cultural conflict that ensued between the Soviet Union and the Western democracies.

During the Eisenhower administration (1953–1961), the President's Emergency Fund for International Affairs was used to subsidize trade fair presentations conducted by private industry, organize US national exhibitions in Europe and the Soviet Union, support publications, and facilitate travel overseas by musical ensembles, among other initiatives. The Cultural

11 Vu and Wongsurawat, *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia*. See also Goscha and Ostermann, *Connecting Histories*.

12 Day and Liem, *Cultures at War*. See in particular the essays by Francisco Benitez, Rachel Harrison, and Barbara Hatley.

13 This section contains revised portions from a previous version that was published in Lee (2020), 7-9.

14 Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*.

Presentations program of the US State Department also dispatched some of the nation's most talented artists in the fields of modern dance, ballet, classical music, rock 'n' roll, folk, blues, and jazz to regions including Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and the Soviet Union. The objective was to captivate audiences and challenge prevailing perceptions of American prejudice. In a similar vein, scholars such as Prevots (1999), Caute (2003), Klein (2003), Eschen (2006), Davenport (2009), Castillo (2010), Fosler-Lussier (2015), and Kodat (2015) carried out research on the roles played by "American arts" and the "American way of life" in the cultural Cold War. In recent scholarship, the effect of sports on Cold War politics has been emphasized by Witherspoon (2014), Rider (2016), Rider and Witherspoon (2018), Parks (2017), and Redihan (2017), among others.

In the field of cinema and media studies, Urban (1997), Krugler (2000), Puddington (2000), Johnson (2010), Cummings (2010), Machcewicz (2014), and others have contributed valuable perspectives on US radio propaganda during the Truman-Eisenhower era. Their research endeavors involve examining the intricate narratives surrounding the Voice of America (VOA) and the covert support provided by the CIA to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Through their work, these scholars have shed light on previously unexplored aspects of this historical period. Cinema emerged as a prominent weapon in the cultural Cold War. Tony Shaw, one of the most prolific scholars in this field, delves into the complex relations among filmmakers, censors, politicians, and government propagandists within the context of Hollywood's Cold War era, and he examines the role of British cinema in shaping Cold War propaganda.<sup>15</sup> Film historians, for their part, have revealed that the CIA worked covertly with Hollywood during the Cold War. In highlighting how the US film industry functioned as one of the cultural sectors of the state-corporate network during the Cold War, a significant number of studies have scrutinized the Motion Picture Export Association of America (MPEAA), formerly the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), and its global businesses in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Turkey, Germany, and Spain, along with the distribution of Soviet films in the US during this period.<sup>16</sup>

Little is known, however, about American involvement in Asian cinemas during the cultural Cold War. Although the Cold War was, by definition, a global conflict and the United States faced both the Soviet Union and China

15 Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War*, and Shaw, *British Cinema, and the Cold War*.

16 See Wagnleitner (1994); Erdogan and Kaya (2002); Aguinaga (2009); and Blahova (2010). Regarding Hollywood vs. the Soviet Union during the Cold War, see Krukones (2009) and Zhuk (2014).



on the Asian periphery, Asia has often been glossed over in the cultural Cold War literature, which concentrates primarily on US cultural policy and “the European theater.” The recent publication of Christina Klein’s *Cold War Cosmopolitanism: Period Style in 1950s Korean Cinema* (2020), Sangjoon Lee’s *Cinema and the Cultural Cold War: US Diplomacy and the Origins of the Asian Cinema Network* (2020), Hee Wai Siam’s *Remapping the Sinophone: The Cultural Production of Chinese-Language Film in Singapore and Malaya prior to and during the Cold War* (2019), Jing Jing Chang’s *Screening Communities: Negotiating Narratives of Empire, Nation, and the Cold War in Hong Kong Cinema* (2019), Poshek Fu’s *Hong Kong Media and Asia’s Cold War* (2023), Hieyoon Kim’s *Celluloid Democracy: Cinema and Politics in Cold War South Korea* (2023), and the new collection *The Cold War and Asian Cinemas* (2021), edited by Man-Fung Yip and Poshek Fu, made significant contributions to the dynamic realm of scholarship in this area.

Given the violent turn and the lasting legacies of the Cold War in Asia, much more remains to be studied. During this period, cinema played an exceptional role in the battle for the hearts and minds of people across the world. Films are not, of course, mere entertainment; indeed, they are often used as a political tool to wage psychological warfare, and they serve as cultural spaces where Asian perceptions and experiences of the Cold War were articulated, negotiated, and challenged. This volume pushes the boundaries of Cold War scholarship by attending to the ontology of Asian societies’ efforts to navigate decolonization and nation-building, Cold War politics, and the intensified cultural influences that shaped their everyday lives. Foregrounding Asia, these essays re-examine the global Cold War and open the field to the unique agencies and forms of resistance and negotiation that Asian societies deployed during the Cold War through their cinematic productions and cultural exchanges. *Remapping the Cold War in Asian Cinemas* illuminates how the Cold War’s long shadow can be traced from the entangled cinematic histories in Asia to the contemporary forms of memory, reconciliation, and remembering of the Cold War in Asian film productions. Rather than treating the cultural Cold War as a transient temporal period, we examine the ambivalent, overlapping, and enduring marks the Cold War framework has left on Asian cinemas and societies.

## Organization of the Volume

*Remapping the Cold War in Asian Cinemas* includes fifteen essays from a mix of prominent senior academics and emerging scholars working with

various archives and contemporary sources related to the history and culture of post-war Asian cinema, decolonization, international politics, and US hegemony and cultural policies in the Cold War period. The themes addressed in these essays cover a wide range of film genres, historical periods, and methodological approaches that reflect the various frontiers of inquiry on the Cold War and cinema in Asia at present. Broadly, the essays can be grouped into four overarching themes that are helpful for decoding the intersections between cinema and the Cold War in Asia.

### **Cinematic Constructions of the Cold War in Asia**

The first theme includes four chapters that investigate the cinematic representations and constructions of Asian nations, identities, and cultures during the Cold War era. Amid the complex political and socio-cultural transformations in the region, cinema afforded Asians a platform for imagining, constructing, and performing identities that drew on everything from ethnic to local and national affiliations. Local filmmakers working with either commercial enterprises or state-led studios tapped into the cultural and political work of cinema in their quest for identity and belonging, with Cold War politics and policies as the backdrop. In Chapter 2, Chris Berry sheds light on Taiwanese-language films (*taiyupian*), a term referring to a cycle of dramatic features between the late 1950s and the early 1970s in the Minnanhua Sinitic language. Although most scholarship on *taiyupian* interprets them within a domestic Taiwanese framework, Berry shows why they can be understood as Cold War cinema and why Taiwanese-language cinema, as a whole, should be treated as part of transnational cinema culture and, more specifically, as a Cold War cinema. His chapter examines how Taiwanese-language cinema was shaped by the Cold War in two primary ways. First, the Cold War influenced the production, distribution, and exhibition of *taiyupian* by dividing the natural market and making the industry both a beneficiary and a victim of Cold War cultural policies. Second, the films were not just part of a generalized post-war cosmopolitanism but also part of Taiwan's cosmopolitan popular culture among the Minnanhua-speaking population.

Moving to the other side of the Cold War, Man-Fung Yip (Chapter 3) examines the revolutionary cinema of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DPR), or North Vietnam, which has received little attention in English-language scholarship. He focuses on a central defining element of Vietnamese revolutionary cinema: its highly expressive use of nature and rural landscapes. This propensity for expressive natural and pastoral imagery, which shows strong

affinities with contemporaneous Vietnamese poetry and art and with the poetic cinema of Alexander Dovzhenko, not only evokes an intense lyricism but also serves as an affective site for articulating an “authentic” Vietnamese identity available for political mobilization. Through close analysis of a few representative films, Yip illuminates the essential role of landscapes, both aesthetic and ideological, in Vietnamese revolutionary cinema.

By looking at films by Norodom Sihanouk and Rithy Panh, two of the most influential Cambodian filmmakers, Darlene Machell Espeña (Chapter 4) probes into the myriad narratives in Cambodia’s entangled history of Cold War politics, decolonization, and nation-building. Taking a comparative approach to the cinematic milieu of Cambodia, Espeña identifies the role of these two prominent filmmakers in (re)constructing and (re)imagining the Cambodian nation as well as in piecing together Cambodia’s troubled and displaced past. Espeña argues that in Sihanouk’s films, Cambodia’s Cold War foreign policy of neutrality takes form and substance, anchored in cinematic imaginations of a modern and inclusive nation with rich traditions and a glorious history. In Rithy Panh’s films, the specter of the Cold War remains; the ghost of the Cold War is remembered, deconstructed, and narrativized not just through ordinary people’s accounts and the materiality of the war in and on their bodies and minds but also in the altered landscapes that bear silent witnesses to the past. Taken together, their films capture the long shadow of the Cold War in Cambodia’s past, present, and future.

In the last chapter of this section, Eric Sassono argues that Islam played a dynamic role in the cultural Cold War in the 1960s. Islam has been acknowledged as a political force in Indonesia during this period, especially in the land conflict in Java and the involvement in the 1965–1966 massacre of members and sympathizers of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), and its discourse is deemed to have justified the killings. Sassono illustrates how Islam also functioned as a cultural force through an examination of *Tauhid* (directed by Asrul Sani), a film that was written and produced in 1960–1964 as part of a direct ideological confrontation with the Indonesian Communist Party, which was the dominant political and ideological force in Indonesia during that period. Each of these chapters demonstrates the place of cinema in the evolution and development of Asian political and social consciousness as a site for articulating, contesting, and negotiating Cold War frameworks.

### Cold War Geopolitics in Asian Cinemas

The second cluster of chapters examines the Cold War’s geopolitical processes and their implications for Asian cinemas. Specifically, these chapters

locate cinema as the nexus where global and regional geopolitical strategies permeate and intervene in Asian cinema and politics. Key developments in Asian cinematic networks and industries were determined by both direct and indirect policies shaped by Cold War concerns, and an in-depth exploration of these transformations provides a glimpse into the process in which the Cold War and its policies and politics generated crucial changes in the cinematic landscape in Asia. Beyond serving as a space for Asian imaginations and narrations of the Cold War and related local political concerns, Asian cinema was irreversibly altered by Cold War strategic actions.

In Chapter 6, Hiroshi Kitamura explores Ishihara Yūjirō's engagement with Cold War geopolitics. By looking at such films as *Alone on the Pacific*, *Safari 5000*, and *The Walking Major*, Kitamura shows how Ishihara, the most iconic male star of 1950s and 1960s Japanese cinema, exemplified a broader desire to break out from the confines of nationhood, reconcile the problematics of war with the United States, establish economic and cultural partnerships with Western Europe, and reify African colonial/postcolonial subordination.

In Chapter 7, Kenny Ng traces the 1950s media project that Chang Kuo-sin carried out with the support of the CIA-backed the Asia Foundation. As Lee (2020) has demonstrated in his study of the early history of the organization, the Asia Foundation was originally a creation of the US executive branch intended to propagate US foreign policy interests in Asia. The Asia Foundation supported Japan's Nagata Masaichi, Hong Kong's Chang Kuo-sin, and South Korea's Korean Motion Picture Cultural Association. Ng focuses on Chang Kuo-sin and his Asia Pictures by examining the production of *The Heroine* (1955), a historical drama about a female assassin during the transition from the Ming to the Qing Dynasty in 1664. Despite Chang's failure to operate Asia Pictures as an established enterprise, his studio achieved a handful of good-quality Chinese pictures. *The Heroine* was a pioneering "woman's picture" in martial arts storytelling. Ng's study assesses the contributions of Asia Pictures to Sinophone cinemas and diasporic Chinese experiences amid cultural power struggles between leftists and rightists.

In Chapter 8, Elmo Gonzaga traces the iconic Filipino actor, director, and producer Fernando Poe Jr. (or FPJ), commonly known as "The King of Philippine Movies" or "Da King." Gonzaga examines how the changing aesthetics and politics of FPJ's 1960s and 1970s films were shaped by the bipolar imaginary of Cold War culture based on integration and containment. Patterned after the genre of the Western, FPJ's 1960s narratives featured a solitary, laconic, and altruistic outsider who, after breaking with his violent past to adopt an anonymous identity suspected of being a threat, saves a

marginalized community from being victimized by landlords, politicians, and bandits. Looking at FPJ's early artistic collaborations with the auteurs Eddie Romero, Lino Brocka, and Celso Ad. Castillo, the chapter analyzes how their tropes of heroism and suspicion are reworked around the period of the proclamation of Ferdinand Marcos' Martial Law dictatorship, which persecuted opposition politicians, activists, and publications as communist fronts.

The next two chapters, written by Wen-Qing Ngoei and Adam Knee, shift our attention to Hollywood. In Chapter 9, Ngoei argues that as US involvement in Vietnam deepened, films such as *The 7th Dawn* (1964) and *King Rat* (1965) served as cultural spaces in which an American victory over Asian communism was envisioned, performed, and contested. These films indulged fantasies that Americans might appropriate and/or supersede British experiences in Southeast Asia. Indeed, they articulated a palpable optimism about US involvement in Southeast Asia while wrestling with the fatalism of President Eisenhower's "domino theory," according to which communism would topple the Southeast Asian countries one by one. Through a study of these films, Ngoei's chapter reveals the dynamic mingling of promise and peril in the conflicted American vision of the United States' Cold War encounter with Southeast Asia in the 1960s.

Lastly, in Chapter 10, Knee explores a peculiar phenomenon observed in a handful of US-produced (or co-produced) Cold War feature films with Southeast Asian settings: the disguising (or rendering ambiguous) of the specific national and geographical coordinates of those settings. Although this is not a particularly widespread phenomenon, Knee's analysis illuminates the dynamics of the Cold War cinematic relationship (representational, industrial, geopolitical) between the US and Southeast Asia and some of the logics of US cinematic engagements with the region. More specifically, the chapter examines three American (or partly American) film productions released in a relatively short span of time that are set in an Asia that is in some way undefined: the low-budget Filipino horror co-production *Terror Is a Man* (1959), the major studio literary adaptation *The Ugly American* (1963), and the low-budget espionage adventure *Operation CIA* (1965). Taken together, what these chapters reveal is the critical role that Asian cinemas played as political tools in the psychological front of the Cold War.

### Cold War Film Genres

The four chapters in the third part of the book interrogate Cold War film genres, stars, and movie magazines to show how the Cold War manifested

in various genres that were popular at the time. Musicals, espionage films, and pulp cinemas, despite their divergences, converge in many ways into a discussion and interrogation of Cold War memories, feelings, and concerns. In Chapter 11, Evelyn Shih analyzes musical numbers in films from the 1960s in Taiwan and South Korea, discussing their representation of the entertainment space and their fashioning of cinematic attraction as a mode of vernacularizing popular music. In the 1960s, an American form of live entertainment emerged on the local music scene in East Asia. This emergence can be attributed not merely to the cultural power of the United States among its client states but also to the actual presence of Americans on US military bases. Entertaining Americans became a significant industry in countries like Taiwan and South Korea, and the US presence expanded into spaces of entertainment such as bars, hotels, and dance clubs. The rise of American music and dance as a popular form in Taiwan and South Korea, however, was due not to the disappearance of anti-Americanism but to the ingenuity of local performers, who claimed the attractive new forms as their own. These films, Shih argues, not only brought an exclusive experience of American base-adjacent entertainment into the mass consciousness but also staged their own counter-occupation of these spaces with charismatic performances.

Sangjoon Lee (Chapter 12) casts a critical eye on the South Korea–initiated inter-Asian coproduction of espionage films produced during the 1960s, with particular reference to the South Korea–Hong Kong coproduction of *SOS Hong Kong* and *Special Agent X-7*, both produced and released in 1966. As the apparent progeny of Cold War politics in the West, espionage films witnessed unprecedented popularity around the globe in the 1960s. With the success of *Dr. No* (1962) and *Goldfinger* (1964) in Asia, film industries in Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea recognized the market potential of such films. In the late 1960s, they began to churn out their own James Bond–mimetic espionage films. In the US-driven Cold War political, ideological, and economic sphere, developmental states in the region—particularly South Korea and Taiwan—vigorously adopted anticommunist doctrine to guard and uphold their militant dictatorships. In this political atmosphere in the regional sphere, cultural sectors in each nation-state—including cinema—voluntarily or compulsorily served as an apparatus to strengthen the state's ideological principles. While the Cold War politics that drives the narrative in the American and European films is conspicuously absent in Hong Kong espionage films, South Korea and Taiwan explicitly criticized the ideological principles of their apparent enemies—North Korea and the People's Republic of China (PRC)—in their representative espionage films.

In Chapter 13, Christina Klein focuses on the Korean War film *Swing Kids* (2018) as a work of historical memory. Unlike recent South Korean films that treat the war primarily as a conflict between North and South Koreans and create fantasies of reunification, *Swing Kids* emphasizes the war's multinational nature. Set within the Kōjedo POW camp, it constructs an alternate history of the war in which relations among a group of South Korean, North Korean, Chinese, and African American characters play out in unexpected ways via dance. Combining the generic conventions of the Korean War film with those of the backstage musical, it tells the story of a group of tap dancers as they prepare to put on a show. Klein reads the film as performing two kinds of cultural work. First, it imagines liberation from the Cold War division system through the creation of a cosmopolitan community that transcends the boundaries of race, nation, ideology, and culture. Second, it supports South Korea's contemporary global ambitions by offering a mythic origin story for K-pop, one of the country's most successful exports.

The last chapter in this section examines 1970s and 1980s Taiwan pulp films, also known as Taiwan "social-realist films," which are hybrid films produced from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s that exploit elements ranging from crime, violence, and sex to anticommunism. In this chapter, Ting-Wu Cho examines a series of Taiwan pulp films that depict men torn between the rural and urban experience, between their past crimes and their capitalist aspirations. The tragic masculinity in these films embodies perpetual desire, violence, and nostalgia. This crime-centric genre, Cho argues, articulates the conflicting post-war ideologies in Taiwan as a structure of feeling through its narrative strategy and visual excess. The repeating narrative of a man's degeneration into a life of crime, enhanced by the stylized violent scenes, is an anxious cinematic representation of the entanglement of the island's colonial trauma, the nationalist crisis, and the neoliberal turn in state policies.

### **The Long Shadow of the Cold War in Contemporary Asian Cinemas**

The volume's fourth and last theme covers contributions that cast a critical eye on the long shadow of the Cold War in contemporary Asian cinemas and, in part, demonstrates that the Cold War in Asia is not a thing of the past, a period in history that is finished. The two chapters in this section regard the Cold War as a past that can be found in the present. In Asian cinema, as well as in bodies and memories, the Cold War remains legible and distinguishable. Taking up Susan Buck-Morss' provocative claim

that the 1969 moon landing opened an era of visibility marked by "seeing global," Elizabeth Wijaya (Chapter 15) considers filmmakers' aesthetic strategies for probing what remains as well as what remains obscure but returns periodically to haunt independent Southeast Asian cinema. Wijaya focuses on how Cold War–framed imbrications of visibility and reality persist via interrogations of memory, forgetting, and media complicity in two contemporary Southeast Asian feature films—*The Science of Fictions* (2019) by the Indonesian filmmaker Yosep Anggi Noen and *Snakeskin* (2014) by the Singaporean filmmaker Daniel Hui.

In the final chapter, Nitin Govil focuses on co-production initiatives between India and China that are designed to create a regional cultural market. Taking the 2017 film *Kung Fu Yoga* as emblematic of the historical contradictions of the Sino-Indian encounter, Govil argues that the film and the discourse around it prioritize the ancient past rather than more proximate—and more problematic—Cold War histories. In a critical engagement with *Kung Fu Yoga's* temporal and territorial imagination, Govil shows how the film presents a historical knowledge predicated on forgetting the Cold War. Despite the film's interest in the archaeological excavation of historical exchange, it buries—rather than disinters—the contentious legacies of the Cold War encounter. In this way, the film circulates as part of the state-led management of cultural remembrance.

As a whole, *Remapping the Cold War in Asian Cinemas* exposes the magnitude and depth of the Cold War's impact on Asian cinemas, societies, and socio-political policies. It is our hope to contribute to the emerging scholarship on the cultural dimension of the Cold War in Asia, foregrounding the multiplicity and dynamism of Asian narratives and perspectives. This collection is a small but nevertheless necessary step towards restoring the forgotten history of Asia's place in the global Cold War.

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# Part One

Cinematic Constructions of the Cold War in Asia





## 2. Taiwanese-Language Cinema as Cold War Industry and Culture: Compliance without Commitment

*Chris Berry*

### Abstract

The Taiwanese-language films (*taiyupian*) of the 1950s to the 1970s have excited renewed interest, often focused on the differences between the local Taiwanese-speaking islanders and the Mandarin-favoring forces that took over from the Japanese in 1945. This chapter asks how we understand *taiyupian* as a Cold War cinema. First, it considers the impact of the Cold War on the production, distribution, and exhibition of *taiyupian* when the natural market was divided by the Bamboo Curtain. Second, how can we consider the films themselves as shaped by and contributing to the culture of the Cold War? Finally, in East Asia, the Cold War is not over. So, how does the revival of interest in *taiyupian* participate in the ongoing Cold War?

**Keywords:** *taiyupian*; transnational cinema; Cold War cosmopolitanism; cultural policy

### Introduction

The term *taiyupian* (Taiwanese-language films) refers to a cycle of dramatic features made between the late 1950s and the early 1970s in the Minnanhua Sinitic language. Minnanhua was the first spoken language of the vast majority of the Han Chinese inhabitants of the island when 50 years of Japanese colonization ended in 1945. The KMT (*Guomindang*, also known as GMD)—the Nationalist Party of China that took over—promoted Mandarin as the “national language” (*guoyu*), which few spoke. While the government supported Mandarin cinema

production in state-owned studios, a host of under-capitalized and often short-lived private companies made over 1,500 *taiyupian* until various factors killed the industry, including the rise of television. There was no film archive at the time, and only about 20 percent of these films have survived, thanks to the more recent efforts of the Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute.<sup>1</sup>

Existing scholarship on *taiyupian* understands them largely within a domestic Taiwanese framework. This chapter argues that Taiwanese-language cinema also needs to be understood both as part of transnational cinema culture and, more specifically, as a Cold War cinema. After further analysis of why the connection between *taiyupian* and the Cold War has been a scholarly blindspot, the chapter examines how Taiwanese-language cinema was shaped by the Cold War in two primary ways. First, it shaped the production, distribution, and exhibition of *taiyupian* by dividing the natural market and making the industry both a beneficiary and a victim of Cold War cultural policies. Second, the chapter demonstrates that the films themselves are not just part of generalized post-war cosmopolitanism but more specifically part of the Taiwan cosmopolitan popular culture of the Minnanhua-speaking population.

The ideology of the Cold War operates according to a binary and totalizing logic that allows no third space or abstention and demands that everyone take one side or the other. The Taiwanese-language cinema is no exception, and it is securely located on the capitalist side of the so-called Bamboo Curtain. Yet it is characterized by compliance without commitment. De Certeau distinguishes between the strategies of the economically and politically dominant and the tactics of those who are subjected to their strategies.<sup>2</sup> The Taiwanese-language cinema emerges in this perspective as a tactical culture that carved out ways to survive and thrive in a Cold War environment largely beyond its control. In an era when that binary and totalizing logic is being reasserted in the name of a “Second Cold War,” understanding such tactical cultures may have new relevance.

## Seeing the Blindspot

The scholarly blindspot concerning *taiyupian* and the Cold War can be traced back to the division between *waishengren* and *benshengren*. The

1 Teresa Huang, “The Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute’s Taiwanese-Language Cinema Restoration Project,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 14, no. 2 (2020): 150–55.

2 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

people who retreated with KMT leader Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) to Taiwan following their defeat in the Chinese Civil War in 1949 were known as *waishengren* or literally “out-of-province people,” as opposed to the locals, or *benshengren*. The Cold War in Taiwan was generated by the stand-off between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in mainland China and Chiang’s KMT that followed this retreat. Both sides claimed to be the legitimate rulers of all of China, including Taiwan. The Cold War tends to be seen as an international relations dispute between *waishengren* and the Communists on the mainland. *Taiyupian* were the culture of the *benshengren* locals, and they have been understood mostly in the framework of domestic tensions between *benshengren* and the KMT *waishengren* government, which imposed four decades of martial law on the island after a *benshengren* uprising in 1947. Therefore, connections between *taiyupian* and the Cold War largely remain a scholarly blindspot.

The disassociation of the Cold War from *benshengren* locals can even be seen in Chen Kuan-Hsing’s seminal essay, “De-Cold War: The Im/possibility of ‘Great Reconciliation.’”<sup>3</sup> One of Chen’s important insights here is that the Cold War era was a melancholy one for both *waishengren* and *benshengren*, but in different ways. To illustrate his argument, he turns to two films depicting the era but made as part of the Taiwan New Cinema movement of the 1980s and 1990s. For the *waishengren* incomers, he selects *Banana Paradise* (Xiangjiao Tiantang, 1989) by Wang Toon (Wang Tong), which looks at the sad fates of ordinary soldiers who came to Taiwan with Chiang Kai-shek and were cut off from their homes on the mainland when the “Bamboo Curtain” came down. But for the *benshengren* local Taiwanese, he turns to *A Borrowed Life* (Duosang, 1994) by Wu Nien-Jen (Wu Nianzhen), which he proclaims as “the first film to address the effects of colonialism in Taiwan after the Second World War.”<sup>4</sup> The film focuses on the father character’s conviction that everything Japanese is superior, which frustrates his son. Chen’s focus overlooks the possibility that *benshengren* melancholy is rooted in their experience of the Cold War as well as Japanese colonialism, or that it could be traced in *taiyupian*, which were produced at the height of the Cold War.

Turning to scholarship on *taiyupian*, the Cold War is equally overlooked, but in a different way. Scholars tend to frame the films domestically as part of the different martial law–era experiences of *waishengren* incomers and *benshengren* locals, leaving the Cold War as an international issue. Scholarly

3 In *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 115–59.

4 *Ibid.*, 125.

interest in *taiyupian* took off after the end of martial law in 1987. In 1994, Huang Ren published a book whose title can be translated as *Lamenting Taiwanese-Language Films*.<sup>5</sup> The original title is *Beiqing Taiyupian*. The “*Beiqing*” in the title echoes the name of the classic Hou Hsiao-Hsien (Hou Xiaoxian) 1989 film about the aftermath of the 1947 uprising, *Beiqing Chengshi*, or, in English, *City of Sadness*. The linking of *taiyupian* to the melancholy associated with the domestic experience of the martial law era rather than the supposedly international experience of the Cold War also appears clearly in the melancholy titles of other Chinese-language books on *taiyupian*.<sup>6</sup> This “sadness” paradigm has also found its way into the more recent English-language writing on *taiyupian*.<sup>7</sup> More recent titles reflect a desire to move beyond the *benshengren* and *waishengren* framing. For example, the English-language title of the 2017 anthology by Wang Chun-chi (Wang Junqi) is given on the cover as: *Taiwanese-Language Cinema: History, Discovery, Transculturalization, Boundary Crossing, Transnationalism, Creolization*.<sup>8</sup> The emphasis on the transnational is welcome, but the Cold War remains largely unexamined. In this essay, I argue that Taiwanese-language cinema is indeed transnational both as an industry and as a culture, but transnational in a way that is distinctively and recognizably part of the Cold War phenomenon.

## Cold War Industry

As an industry, the Taiwanese-language cinema was both the accidental beneficiary and victim of the Cold War and various government policies

5 Huang Ren, *Beiqing Taiyupian [Lamenting Taiwanese-Language Films]* (Taipei: Wanxiang, 1994).

6 Ye Longyan, *Chunhua Menglu: Zhengzong Taiyu Dianying Xingshuai Lu [Spring Blossom Dew Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Classic Taiwanese-Language Cinema]* (Taipei: Boyang, 1999); Liao Gene-fon (Liao Jinfeng), *Xiaoshi de Yingxiang: Taiyupian de Dianying Zaixian yu Rentong [Faded Images: Cinematic Representation and Identity in Taiwanese-Language Films]* (Taipei: Yuanliu, 2001).

7 Zhang Yingjin, “Articulating Sadness, Gendering Space: The Politics and Poetics of Taiyu Films from 1960s Taiwan,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 24, no. 1 (2013): 1–46. For further discussion of the initial neglect of *taiyupian* and the development of scholarly interest, see Chris Berry, “An Alternative Cinema of Poverty: Understanding the Taiwanese-Language Film Industry,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* (2020) 14, no. 2: 140–49.

8 Wang Chun-chi (Wang Junqi), ed., *Baibian qianhuan busiyi: taiyupian de hunxie yu zhuanhua [Taiwanese-Language Cinema: History, Discovery, Transculturalization, Boundary Crossing, Transnationalism, Creolization]* (Taipei: Lianjing, 2017).

associated with it, responding tactically to the possibilities and pitfalls opened up by national strategy. Most fundamentally, the “Bamboo Curtain” divided the Minnanhua-speaking population and therefore also the market for Minnanhua cinema. What is colloquially referred to as “*taiyu*” or “Taiwanese language” is simply the version of Minnanhua spoken on the island. Minnanhua is dominant in the southern coastal regions of Fujian Province in mainland China, across the strait from Taiwan and where most *benshengren* Taiwanese trace their origins to. It is also spoken in eastern Guangdong Province and on Hainan Island, as well as among ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia and throughout the world.<sup>9</sup> Communication between the populations on the mainland and in Taiwan ceased almost completely under the conditions of the Cold War.

On one hand, this Cold War division limited the potential export market for *taiyupian*. On the other hand, it meant that Taiwan had the largest Minnanhua-speaking population on the capitalist side of the divide. This population was catered to in the early 1950s by films made in Hong Kong in the variant of the Minnanhua spoken language traced back to the area around the city of Xiamen by what was known as the Amoy (or *Xiayu*) film industry.<sup>10</sup> The success of the Hong Kong imports prompted local stage producers to try their hand at filming *taiyu* stage dramas in the mid-1950s. They started out with recordings of local *koa-á-hì* (*gezaixi*) operas on the correct assumption that these would appeal to Taiwanese audiences.<sup>11</sup> With a natural market advantage, Taiwan gradually eclipsed Hong Kong as the dominant producer of Minnanhua films, known as *taiyupian*, but still without access to the even larger population on the mainland.<sup>12</sup>

Once established, the Taiwanese-language film industry experienced a series of ups and downs before its eventual demise in the 1970s. The precise reasons for these shifting fortunes are much debated among scholars. The KMT government certainly did not offer anything like the consistent support it offered to the Mandarin-language cinema, for example through the KMT-owned Central Motion Picture Corporation.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, many of the

9 Hilary Chappell, “A Sketch of Southern Min Grammar.” In *The Mainland Southeast Asia Linguistic Area*, edited by Alice Vittrant and Justin Watkins (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2019), 176.

10 Jeremy E. Taylor, *Rethinking Transnational Chinese Cinemas: The Amoy-Dialect Film Industry in Cold War Asia* (London: Routledge, 2011).

11 Shi Rufang, “*Gezaixi Dianying Suoyou Chansheng de Shehui Lishi*” [The Production of Taiwanese Opera Films by Social History] in Wang Chun-chi, ed., 17–35.

12 Taylor, *Rethinking Transnational Chinese Cinemas*, 23–27.

13 Lu Feiyi, *Taiwan Dianying: Zhengzhi, Jingji, Meixue 1949–1994* [Taiwan Cinema: Politics, Economics, Aesthetics] (Taipei: Yuanliu, 1998), 60–62.

policies that created either obstacles for *taiyupian* producers or opportunities that they sought to exploit were the result of Cold War priorities driving KMT government decisions.

For example, although the KMT government was in alliance with Japan because of the Cold War, for most of its history on the mainland, they had been deadly enemies. Committed to re-Sinicizing and de-Japanizing the island, which it saw as simply another Chinese province, the KMT government blew hot and cold in its attitude toward cultural imports from its Japanese ally, sometimes allowing ready access to the Taiwan market, and sometimes imposing quotas and import taxes. The main local market for Japanese films was the *benshengren* population, who had been educated in Japanese growing up in the colonial era. They found films in Japanese easier to understand than government-sponsored Mandarin-language films. There were two waves of Taiwanese-language cinema, the first in the late fifties, and the second taking off in 1962.<sup>14</sup> This pattern has widely been correlated to Japanese imports. Ironically, “the box office performance of *taiyu pian* was in inverse proportion to the availability of Japanese films.”<sup>15</sup>

Some scholars have offered an explanation for the first Taiwanese-language cinema boom from 1957 to 1959 that has nothing to do with Japanese imports or the lack of them. But it is also an accidental result of Cold War policy. Film stock was subject to high import taxes. However, at the end of 1956, a regulation was implemented to exempt “Free filmmakers” in an effort to support right-wing Hong Kong film companies and assist them to shoot in Taiwan. The local Taiwanese-language film producers responded tactically by teaming up with Hong Kong partners, allowing them also to access tax-free film stock, until the government intervened to block these inappropriate uses of its policy.<sup>16</sup>

When it comes to the second wave, Chih-heng Su emphasizes the transition from a planned to a market economy, which lifted limits on imports of film stocks generally and allowed the industry to thrive at first. However, he goes on to detail a battery of policies that were designed to support “national films” (*guochan pian*).<sup>17</sup> These policies worked to the disadvantage

14 Chih-Heng Su, “Colour Glass Ceiling: The Life and Death of Taiwanese-Language Cinema,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 14, no. 2 (2020) gives the numbers in the graph on p. 78.

15 Chun-chi Wang, “Affinity and Difference between Japanese Cinema and *Taiyu pian* through a Comparative Study of Japanese and *Taiyu pian* Melodramas,” *Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture*, 6 no. 1 (2012), 75.

16 Su, 78–79; Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley, “Taiwanese-Language Cinema: State versus Market, National versus Transnational,” *Oriental Archive* 81, no. 3 (2013): 445; Lu Feiyi, 79–81.

17 Su, 79–84.

of Taiwanese-language films because, following a debate in the late fifties, only films in Mandarin were accepted as “national films.”<sup>18</sup> The policies therefore continued to benefit the “Free filmmakers” in Hong Kong producing films in Mandarin as well as the nascent Mandarin-language cinema in Taiwan. This designation of Mandarin-language films as “national” was also a ramification of the Cold War and the KMT’s claim to rule all of China. From this perspective, Minnanhua was only a local dialect and not the national language. Therefore, *taiyupian* producers struggled to overcome the privileges accorded Mandarin-language filmmakers by the KMT’s Cold War priorities.

### Cold War Film Culture

The films produced by the Taiwanese-language cinema also show the characteristics of the islander population’s complex relationship with the logic of the Cold War, which was one of compliance without commitment. First, whereas the Mandarin-language cinema is ideologically committed to the Cold War, the Taiwanese-language cinema is generally silent on national and international Cold War issues. Second, where the Cold War does appear in Taiwanese-language films, it is in the form of a particular Taiwanese version of what Christina Klein has called “Cold War Cosmopolitanism.”<sup>19</sup>

To take the contrast between Mandarin and Taiwanese-language films first, for the KMT government, the Cold War was primarily a standoff with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), with each side threatening to invade the other in the name of reuniting China. James Wicks reports that “The early films made by the KMT regime on the island were anti-Communist in nature, but as Huang Ren has written as well, anti-Communist films comprise only 30 percent of the total output of films made in Mandarin and produced in Taiwan between 1950 and 1970.”<sup>20</sup> It is striking that Wicks considers almost a third of entertainment feature films being focused on Cold War confrontation as a *low* number, especially when we consider that the large majority of the islander population who were the primary market

18 Pi-ju Liang, “From Provincial to International: Competing Imaginings and Representations of *Taiyupian* in News Reports between 1956 and 1958,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 14, no. 2 (2020): 88–100.

19 Christina Klein, *Cold War Cosmopolitanism: Period Style in 1950s Korean Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020).

20 James Wicks, *Transnational Representations: The State of Taiwan Film in the 1960s and 1970s* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2014), 13.



for films made in Taiwan had never had any direct contact or conflict with the Chinese Communist Party and also had little direct stake in what happened on the mainland. However, Mandarin-language films were heavily government supported, and commercial considerations were not paramount.

The market was paramount for *taiyupian* producers, so it is difficult to find anticommunist content in their films. One possible exception is *Fantasy of the Deer Warrior* (*Daxia Meihua Lu*, dir. Zhang Ying, 1961). This film is unusual in various ways. Set amongst the forest animals, it seems to contemporary sensibilities like a proto-cosplay film performed by actors in furry costumes. Even understood as an *Aesop's Fables*-style children's film, there is no other film like it. While the sika deer and elk—the young males amongst the forest animals—are fighting over a doe, a pack of marauding wolves carries off the little lambs, played by children. Although the animals regroup to defend themselves against future attacks, the fox betrays them and undermines their new unity. One way of understanding the film is as a parable warning the people of Taiwan against internal dissent and traitors in the face of the threat of Communist invasion. However, when the restored version was shown in Taiwan recently, at least one young cinephile saw things differently, writing under the pseudonym of Huai Peizi (Bad Embryo): “this film obviously satirizes the KMT government [...] the father and brother of the hero sika deer represented brave Taiwanese who died to resist the evil KMT and the wild wolves certainly refer to the KMT and their government.”<sup>21</sup>

Apart from *Fantasy of the Deer Warrior*, even Taiwanese-language films inspired by other Cold War cinema rarely allude to it directly. For example, the comedians Zhang Fucai and Li Guanzhang made a series of popular comedies as buddies called Brother Wang and Brother Liu. Zhang was small and skinny, whereas Li was tall and fat, invoking not only the Hollywood pair of Laurel and Hardy but also earlier Chinese comedy duos inspired by them, such as Han Lan'gen and Yin Xiucen in the 1930s. In 1966, Zhang and Li starred in *True and False 007* (*Wangge Liuge 007*, dir. Wu Feijian), spinning off the global success of the Bond films on the capitalist side of the Cold War divide. But although the film is set in a Hong Kong Cold War environment of agents, double-agents, villainous plots, and amazing gadgets, nothing alludes to communism or the ideological differences underlying the Cold

21 Huai Peizi, “*Taiwan Chengren Tonghua Dongwu Ju: Daxia Meihua Lu* (1961) *Guanhougan*” [Thoughts After Watching the Taiwanese Adult Children's Animal Tale, *Fantasy of the Deer Warrior* (1961)], uploaded October 16, 2009, <http://shawn1277.blogspot.com/2009/10/fantasy-of-deer-warrior1961.html>, accessed August 19, 2021. (My translation.)

War. Instead, Wang and Liu are innocents abroad who get confused for real secret agents 008 and 009. Wang is a toy manufacturer's salesman asked to carry blueprints for new products and a possible new factory to Hong Kong, and Liu is a cook, but the blueprints cause them to fall under the suspicion of being on the way to meet 007. Being ordinary people trying to make a living who get caught up in a lethal conflict that they do not understand echoes the third position of the islander population—on the KMT side of the Cold War binary but not actively engaging with it. Indeed, the main focus of the film is on the comedy of misunderstandings and narrow escapes in the imagined Hong Kong of the film, and Cold War allusions only constitute the larger context.<sup>22</sup>

### Islander Cold War Cosmopolitanism

This 007 movie leads to my second point. Although directly anticommunist films are absent from Taiwanese-language cinema and there is silence on ideology, Taiwanese-language films are not completely free from Cold War influence. Indeed, I argue that they exhibit a distinctly Taiwanese form of Cold War cosmopolitanism, of which *True and False 007's* narrative of bumbling but goodhearted Taiwanese carving out business opportunities in Southeast Asia is a good example. Writing about Taiwan as a postcolonial culture characterized by borrowing and hybridity, I have argued that the identity of a postcolonial culture lies in the particular combination of elements that are hybridized together.<sup>23</sup> For example, it is well-known that South Korea's negative attitude towards its former colonizer, Japan, contrasts with Taiwan's fondness for Japanese culture. Just as there are different postcolonial combinations of the hybrid and the local characterizing different places, so there are different Cold War cosmopolitanisms. Most evidently, films on both sides of the Cold War divide invoke international consciousness and aspirations, but completely different ones on each side. The entire socialist bloc is simply absent from Taiwanese-language cinema; there is no sign in these films that Communist China even exists, never

22 There were a number of female "Bond"-style secret agent *taiyupian*. Evelyn Shih notes that these also had little resonance with international Cold War ideology and instead are shot through with the anxieties of the islander population and their efforts to overcome them. See: Evelyn Shih, "No Longer Bond's Girl: Historical Displacements of the Top Female Spy in 1960s *Taiyupian*," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 14, no. 2 (2020): 115–26.

23 "These Nations Which Are Not One: History, Identity and Postcoloniality in Recent Hong Kong and Taiwan Cinema," *Span* nos. 34–35 (1992/93): 37–49.

mind the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, Taiwanese-language cinema does manifest a distinctively Taiwanese form of Cold War cosmopolitanism in its narrative sources; the borrowings of non-diegetic music; the sources of the settings, costumes, and general *mise-en-scène* of the films; and the dramatic tensions generated by changing values within this cosmopolitan environment.

## Cold War Cosmopolitan Sources

Considering sources first, as the film *True and False 007*'s appropriation of both Bond and Laurel and Hardy demonstrates, Hollywood was certainly important. Another example is *Tarzan and the Treasure* (*Taishan Baozang*, dir. Liang Zhefu, 1965), featuring a Taiwanese Tarzan, Jane, and Boy in Malaysia. Other more exotic Western sources were also used. For example, *The Bride Who Has Returned from Hell* (*Diyu Xinniàng*, dir. Xin Qi, 1965) was based on the gothic romance *Mistress of Mellyn* by the British author Victoria Holt.<sup>24</sup> Originally published in English only five years before the film was made, the rapid process of not only translation into Chinese but also transposition into a Taiwanese context is evidence of Taiwan's participation in the profit-driven circulation of popular culture in the capitalist world.<sup>25</sup>

Although Western sources were drawn on, used materials were more frequently closer to home. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Hong Kong became the new center of the Chinese film world on the capitalist side of the Bamboo Curtain. Chun-chi Wang has written about the aspirations and experiences of Taiwanese-language film stars who tried to break into the Hong Kong industry.<sup>26</sup> Filmmakers also worked in Hong Kong when the opportunity came, and it shaped their filmmaking practices back in Taiwan. Chen Hongmin, the director of *Vengeance of the Phoenix Sisters* (*Sanfeng Zhen Wulin*, 1968), had edited the King Hu (Hu Jinquan) classic *Dragon Inn* (*Longmen Kezhan*, 1967) the year before. Born in mainland China, King Hu had fled to Hong Kong to avoid the Communists. He became one of the "Free filmmakers" working with Taiwan, where he

24 Victoria Holt, *Mistress of Mellyn* (London: Collins, 1960).

25 For an analysis of the adaptation, see Lin Fangmei and Wang Liru, "Cong Yingwen Luomanshi dao Taiyu Dianying: Diyu Xinniàng de Gede Leixing ji Qi Wenhua Fanyi" [From English Romance to Taiwanese Film: *The Bride Who Has Returned from Hell*'s Gothic Genre and Its Cultural Translation], in Wang Chun-chi, ed., 351–73.

26 Chun-Chi Wang, "A Lurking Ambivalence: The Discourse on Female *Taiyupian* Stars' Experiences in Hong Kong," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 14, no. 2 (2020): 101–14.

shot and co-produced several of his later films. Many of King Hu's martial arts film innovations appear also in Chen's film, making it a very up-to-date and marketable iteration of the genre. King Hu had made women warriors popular again, and Chen's film features three formidable sisters. King Hu's use of Chinese opera percussion instruments on the soundtrack to create dramatic tension and match the fighting moves is also heard in *Vengeance of the Phoenix Sisters*, and more rapid editing is favored over an older style that kept the camera back to observe the full figures of the characters as they fought. The older style emphasized authentic martial arts, whereas King Hu favored cinematic dynamism that went beyond realism, having his performers execute superhuman leaps aided by off-camera trampolines and wires. This style of action also characterizes *Vengeance of the Phoenix Sisters*.<sup>27</sup>

Even more important as a source of material than either Hong Kong or Hollywood was Japan. Some of the most prominent Taiwanese-language cinema directors, including both Xin Qi and Lin Tuanqiu, had studied in theater and/or film in Japan during the colonial era.<sup>28</sup> Chen Hongmin and others also trained there after the war.<sup>29</sup> A considerable proportion of the audience for Taiwanese-language cinema was educated during the colonial era, when they learnt Japanese and grew up surrounded by Japanese popular culture. Therefore, it is not surprising that many Taiwanese-language films resembled Japanese popular films in many ways and were sometimes remakes. For example, Lin Tuanqiu's noirish detective film, *Six Suspects* (*Liuge Xianyifan*, 1965) is a remake of Umetsugu Inoue's 1961 film of the same name (*Dairoku no Yogisha*) but transposed to Taipei. Chun-Chi Wang notes that similarities between *taiyupian* and contemporary Japanese cinema have been decried by many scholars as shoddy copycatting. In response, Wang compares specific *taiyupian* and their Japanese "originals" to argue that they adapt, localize, and hybridize, concluding that "The idea of cultural

27 Chen Ruxiu (Robert Ru-shou Chen), "Cong Sanfeng Zhen Wulin Tansuo Taiyu Wuxiapian de Leixinghua" [Exploring Genre in Taiwanese-Language Martial Arts Film Using *Vengeance of the Phoenix Sisters*] in *Chuanyue Youan Jingjie: Taiwan Dianying Bainian Sikao* [Through a Screen, Darkly: Reflections on One Hundred Years of Taiwan Cinema], Taipei: Shulin, 2013, 29–36.

28 Wu Junhui, "Cha Yu Fengmi: Ji Yu Xin Qi Xiangchu de Shiguang" [Tea and Honey: Remembering Time Together with Xin Qi] in *Dianying Ziliaoguan Koushu Dianyingshi Xiaozu* [Film Archive Film Oral History Group], ed., *Taiyupian Shidai 1* [Taiwanese-Language Films 1, Taipei: Taipei Film Archive, 1994], 158–63; Shi Wanshun (2017) "Yufeng Jingsheng: Lin Tuanqiu de Dianying Zhiye yu Hushan Zhipianchang (Fu Lin Tuanqiu Fangtanlu)" [Yufeng Spirit: Lin Tuanqiu's Film Career and Hushan Motion Pictures (including an interview with Lin Tuanqiu)] in Wang Chun-chi, ed., 471–73.

29 Chen, "Cong Sanfeng Zhen Wulin Tansuo Taiyu Wuxiapian de Leixinghua," 31.

cannibalism, however, does imply a process of identity formation [...] *Taiyupian* takes a bit of everything, mixes it, and creates something unique.”<sup>30</sup>

Although I agree with Wang about the uniqueness of *taiyupian*, for the purposes of this essay it remains important to note that the “everything” it takes was not only drawn from the capitalist side of the Bamboo Curtain but also only from those countries and cultures perceived in Taiwan as “advanced” and to which it therefore aspired. Borrowings came from Japan, the United States, and Europe, but not Korea, Southeast Asia, or Latin America.

### Non-Diegetic Music

So promiscuous and complex are its borrowings and hybridizations that the deployment of music in Taiwanese-language cinema is worth separate analysis. Clearly, the *gezaxi* operas recorded in the early years were marked as specifically Taiwanese. But music from other sources also appears. Like the scripts themselves, although the range is impressive, it is limited to musical cultures from countries on the capitalist side of the Cold War divide that Taiwan aspired to follow.

Sometimes, these borrowings are direct and unhybridized. When the wolves attack in *Fantasy of the Deer Warrior*, “Mars, the Bringer of War” from Gustav Holst’s *The Planets Suite* suddenly looms on the soundtrack. When the little lambs are playing, the jaunty American Christmas tune “Jingle Bells” is heard. Taiwanese-language films were made on notoriously low budgets and at high speed. Therefore, we can speculate that this was opportunistic “gabbism,” to use the term coined by Lu Xun.<sup>31</sup> In *The Bride Who Has Returned from Hell*, when one of the characters is lost at night and everyone rushes to search for her, the Bond theme first used in *Dr. No* (dir. Terence Young, 1962) is heard, to add suspense. Although this may seem jarring to us today, Ming-Yeh Rawnsley has pointed that “The filmmakers appeared oblivious about any cultural connotations associated with such an iconic theme tune (for example, the character James Bond, international branding, spy thriller, etc.).”<sup>32</sup>

Less easily noticed and perhaps more common than these striking appropriations from Western music are *enka* stylings or translations and

30 Ibid., 98.

31 I have discussed this as part of what I call the “cinema of poverty” characteristics of *taiyupian*: Chris Berry, “An Alternative Cinema of Poverty: Understanding the Taiwanese-Language Film Industry,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 14, no. 2 (2020): 140–9.

32 Rawnsley, 453.

adaptations of Japanese popular music in general. Latin beats are not uncommon, especially for scenes of the city at night. What appears local often has complex roots. As Guo-Juin Hong argues, “many of the songs were truly hybrid, absorbing traditional opera, Japanese and Mainland Chinese influences, as well as assimilating Western classical music, rock and roll, and jazz.”<sup>33</sup>

### Cold War Cosmopolitan Mise-en-Scène

One of the settings that Lin Tuanqiu's *Six Suspects* returns to frequently is a small restaurant. With its *sushi* bar, *noren* door curtain, *sake*-style liquor-serving bottles and more, it could be straight out of a Japanese film. Furthermore, when the local gangsters turn up and reveal their back tattoos, they resemble *yakuza*. Even when transposed to Taipei, this remake still looks Japanese in many ways. Fifty years of colonialism left traces all over Taiwan. *Six Suspects* has the look of a relatively high budget Taiwanese-language film, mostly shot on sets in a studio. But low budgets made location shooting at least as frequent. As a result, the architectural impact of the colonial period is naturally evident in many of the films, from sliding doors and tatami mats to Japanese Deco. Furthermore, the Japanese connotations extended beyond the décor and settings alone. Wang Chun-chi notes that in his earlier melodrama, *The Husband's Secret* (*Zhangfu de Mimi*, 1960), also based on Japanese sources, “the camera placement ... is relatively low, sometimes close to the ground, especially in scenes with a Japanese-styled room setting, and the viewer is immediately reminded of the films directed by Yasujiro Ozu and Mikio Naruse.”<sup>34</sup>

Low budgets confined most shoots to Taiwan, but that did not prevent many filmmakers from depicting the capitalist “Free World” beyond. The young woman protagonist in *The Bride Who Has Returned from Hell* returns from teaching in Singapore to investigate her sister's disappearance. *Back to Anping Harbor* (*Huilai Anping Gang*, dir. Wu Feijian, 1972) is a melodrama that allows Yang Lihua to play both mother and daughter roles. The former falls for a Dutch ship's doctor, and the latter—assisted by a blonde wig—falls for a young medical student about to go study in the United States. Surely, it is no accident that the Netherlands is one of Taiwan's various former

33 Guo-Juin Hong, *Taiwan Cinema: A Contested Nation on Screen* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 62.

34 Wang, “Affinity and Difference”: 97.



Fig. 2.1. The Japanese-style restaurant in *The Six Suspects*, complete with sake bottles and noren door curtain. Courtesy of the Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute.

colonizers and the United States was its imagined contemporary protector? The film stretches credulity by having a local actor in another blonde wig plus bushy beard play the Dutch medical doctor, but it does not attempt to set any scenes in Holland, and its American settings are confined to generic indoor spaces.

Taiwanese-language filmmakers did not completely avoid setting their films in locations supposedly off the island. However, they only chose places on the capitalist side of the Cold War divide that Taiwanese locations could pass for. It would be difficult to make Taiwan look like Europe or even Japan or South Korea. But the back streets of Taipei passed easily for Hong Kong in *True and False 007* or anywhere else where the Chinese live through the Southeast Asian region. *Dangerous Youth* (*Weixian de Qingchun*, dir. Xin Qi, 1969) is also supposedly set in Hong Kong, mostly signified by references in the dialogue to landmarks like the Peninsula Hotel or Causeway Bay. Stock footage of the iconic Star Ferry on Victoria Harbor helps to make up for the absence of actual footage of the characters in the Peninsula Hotel or Causeway Bay. The hills outside Taipei function as the uplands of Malaysia in *Tarzan and the Treasure*, which also includes a side trip to some generic Taipei back streets passing for Macau.

Western material culture also appears in the films as part of a newly emergent capitalist Cold War cosmopolitanism. Whereas socialist Cold War cosmopolitanism developed an aspirational vision of modernity focused on self-sacrifice and the development of production, on the capitalist side of the divide, individual wealth and Western consumer culture were more emphasized in *taiyupian*. For example, although *The Bride Who Returned from Hell* is transposed to Taiwan, its setting amongst the upper middle classes legitimates a large Western-style house with servants, including a

chauffeur who drives a massive American car. All the younger characters dress in expensive Western-style 1960s fashions—the men in suits and the women in pencil skirts. The protagonists of *Dangerous Youth* are equally into Western youth culture, but they are disaffected and poorer, so the young man rides a moped and wears a Hawaiian shirt.

A location that we see in many films is the nightclub. The cocktails, cigars, jazz music, dancing, and fashions displayed all connote Western and, perhaps more specifically, American modernity. In Lin Tuanqiu's *May 13<sup>th</sup> Night of Sorrow* (*Wuyue Shisan Shangxin Ye*, 1965), the opening credits appear over a nightclub scene in which a woman dances to jazz and Latin rhythms for the camera, wearing a see-through tulle mini-dress over a bikini, white gloves, high heels, and a beehive hairdo, all marked as Western. The protagonists of the film are two sisters. The older one appears in the first scene, dressed in a sleeveless evening gown, but also with beehive and white gloves, singing Paul Anka's 1958 torch song, "Crazy Love," in English.

### Culture Clash, Clash of Values

Nightclub scenes such as those in *May 13<sup>th</sup> Night of Sorrow* appear frequently in *taiyupian*. They condense the complex, varied, and even ambivalent feelings that audiences had about modernity and rapid social change, marked as Cold War cosmopolitan imports. On one hand, the nightclub is the site of danger and corruption, where young women who have come to the city to make their fortunes risk being ruined. Indeed, in many tragic melodramas of development, this is exactly what happens. In *Early Train from Taipei* (*Taipei Fa de Zaoche*, dir. Liang Zhefu, 1964), the film opens with bucolic scenes featuring young but poor lovers. The girl goes to Taipei on the promise of a good job, but this turns out to be working as a taxi dancer in a nightclub. The film details her transformation in the latest Western fashions, learning how to walk in high heels, and it also revels in wild and energetic scenes of dancing in the nightclub. But she discovers that she cannot quit her job, and when she tries to, the owner gets her drunk, rapes her, and installs her as his mistress. This is just the beginning of a relentless downward spiral that includes murder, blindness, acid attacks, and more.

On the other hand, the culture that the night club symbolizes is also appealing, not least to moviegoers, as is suggested by the repeated appearance of nightclubs in *taiyupian*. In both the scenes from *May 13<sup>th</sup> Night of Sorrow* detailed above, the camera positions the cinema audience with the nightclub





Fig. 2.2. The American-style nightclub in *May 13th Night of Sorrow*. Courtesy of the Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute.

audience who the dancer and singer perform for. This move endorses a full range of sensationalist responses from outrage to leering titillation, and possibly the latter quickly corrected by the former.

Furthermore, not all the narratives are tragic indictments of the dangers of the Westernized consumer culture brought by the Cold War. *May 13<sup>th</sup> Night of Sorrow* and many other films find ways to reconcile the contradictions that Cold War modernity generates. The nightclub in *May 13<sup>th</sup> Night of Sorrow* is where the elder sister meets her Mr. Right, a young man with good career prospects. Little does she know that he is the colleague of her younger sister, who also has a crush on him. Disaster looms when the truth comes out, but in the end, the day is saved, and the younger sister is reconciled to her older sibling's good fortune.

In *May 13<sup>th</sup> Night of Sorrow*, a running joke is made out of the old-fashioned and extremely conservative attitudes of older folks, who frown upon the slightest infraction, such as unmarried men and women spending any time together, never mind dating. Such values are very much taken for granted in films from the late 1950s and beginning of the 1960s like *Early Train from Taipei*. But by the middle of the decade, just as the generation gap and youth culture were challenging established values in other parts of the capitalist Cold War world, so too change was afoot in Taiwan. This appears perhaps most clearly in *Foolish Bride, Naïve Bridegroom* (*Sanba Xinniàng Han Zixu*, dir. Xin Qi, 1967), which could be characterized as a sex farce without any actual sex. Gender roles are reversed. The young male protagonist is shy but hotly pursued by all the young women in town. His girlfriend is the one who constantly breaks the rules to visit him and lure him away from the safety of the family home. His father is protective because he feels he was abandoned by a

woman who turns out to be the mother of the son's girlfriend. In the end, not only boyfriend and girlfriend but also her mother and his father get married, with the father carried to the mother's house in a bridal sedan. Traditional values are mocked, but conventional marital bliss is affirmed, averting tragedy and promising a new, more egalitarian and relaxed future.

## Conclusion

It is worth noting that although the nightclub is connoted as a bridgehead of racy, exciting, and dangerous American modernity in Taiwan, no Americans appear in them in *taiyupian*. This is despite the presence of US military bases on the island throughout the Cold War, with a peak of 19,000 American soldiers based in Taiwan in 1958.<sup>35</sup> It could be argued that *taiyupian* producers could not afford American actors. But as the use of wigs to disguise a regular Taiwanese actor as a Dutch ship's doctor in *Back to Anping Harbor* shows, *taiyupian* producers had ways to get around cost problems. Throughout their existence, they responded to the obstacles thrown in their path—including those that resulted from the KMT government's Cold War priorities—with ingenuity, seizing all opportunities.

The absence of any critical reference to the existence of GIs and American bases on Taiwan is part of the wider pattern of tactical compliance without commitment that characterizes the response of *taiyupian* producers to the Cold War situation they found themselves in. The binary logic of the Cold War made opposition not only dangerous but even unthinkable. Therefore, the way to deal with this situation as filmmakers was to entirely omit the geopolitical and ideological underpinnings of the Cold War. However, while *taiyupian* avoided these larger issues, they enthusiastically took on the cosmopolitan and materialistic aspects of capitalist Cold War culture, turning to countries and cultures they regarded as advanced and which they aspired to match in terms of plots, music, costumes, settings, and more. Combining these elements, *taiyupian* built an inventive Taiwanese Cold War cosmopolitan film culture that is both specific to Taiwan and at the same time shaped by and a response to larger regional and global patterns.

35 Seth Robson, "US Military History on Taiwan Rooted in Confrontation with China," *Stars and Stripes* December 18, 2016, <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/us-military-history-on-taiwan-rooted-in-confrontation-with-china-1.445146>, accessed August 30, 2021.

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### 3. Landscape, Identity, and War: The Poetic Revolutionary Cinema of North Vietnam

*Man-Fung Yip*

#### Abstract

A central defining feature of the revolutionary cinema of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV)—or North Vietnam—is its highly expressive use of nature and rural landscape. The expressive natural and pastoral imagery, which shows strong affinities to contemporaneous Vietnamese poetry, not only evokes an intense lyricism but also functions as an affective site/sight for articulating an “authentic” Vietnamese identity for political mobilization. Through close analysis of a few representative films (including *The Passerine Bird* [*Con chim vành khuyên*, 1962] and *Miss Tham’s Forest* [*Rừng O Thắm*, 1967]), this chapter seeks to illuminate the essential role of landscape, both aesthetic and ideological, in Vietnamese revolutionary cinema.

**Keywords:** Vietnamese revolutionary cinema; poetic cinema; Vietnam War; national identity

Vietnam was at the center of the Cold War conflict in Southeast Asia. In 1954, following the defeat of French troops at Điện Biên Phủ by the Việt Minh (a nationalist army led by communists), delegates from the warring parties as well as from the United States, the Soviet Union, and China met at the Geneva Conference and signed an agreement that would temporarily split Vietnam into two zones: the communist-led Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the north and the US-backed Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in the south. However, a promised general election to be held in 1956 to create a unified Vietnamese state never happened, and this led to a

growing communist insurgency in the south, which in turn prompted the US to increase its involvement in Vietnam in an effort to contain the spread of communism in the region. Military conflicts escalated throughout the 1960s and especially after the arrival of US combat troops in 1965; it was not until the ceasefire and eventual withdrawal of US forces in 1973 as well as the communist takeover of Saigon in 1975 that the struggle for control over South Vietnam came to a close.

As part of the state's unified cultural front, the revolutionary films of the DRV are marked by a clear ideological purpose and content, but from an aesthetic perspective, they are more interesting and diverse than is generally assumed. For this reason alone, Vietnamese revolutionary cinema deserves more attention and analysis. In an earlier essay, I offer a preliminary study of this unjustly ignored filmmaking tradition and try to make a case for its historical and aesthetic significance. Vietnamese revolutionary films, I argue, were not mere state-sponsored propaganda works devoid of artistic interests. Rather, they developed novel techniques of communication and engagement as filmmakers drew on their national cultures and various cinematic traditions, and creatively used narratives, styles, and genres to assert their ideological views. Specifically, the films can be approached from three stylistic norms—socialist realism, Soviet montage, and a propensity for what may be called cinematic poeticism.<sup>1</sup>

Embraced by the Soviet Union and other socialist countries throughout the world, socialist realism is an aesthetic doctrine that rejects formalism and modernism and their attendant philosophy of individualism in favor of a politicized, mass-based conception of literature and art. It affirms socialism or communism as the only progressive social order; utilizes a simple, unembellished style; and exhibits a strong propensity for motivational optimism and didacticism. Soviet montage, as I conceive it, refers broadly to an approach to filmmaking that, first developed by Sergei Eisenstein and others associated with the Soviet avant-garde cinema of the 1920s, seeks to heighten tension and intensify emotion through a highly expressive use of film techniques emphasizing conflict. At stake here is not just editing but shot composition, framing, lighting, cinematography, and sound—in short, all aspects of the cinematic medium.

Given its emphasis on formal experimentation, Soviet montage is not readily compatible with the kind of transparent, easily accessible style

1 Man-Fung Yip, "Art in Propaganda: The Poetics and Politics of Vietnamese Revolutionary Cinema." In *The Cold War and Asian Cinemas*, eds. Poshek Fu and Man-Fung Yip (New York: Routledge, 2020), 9–34.

avored by socialist realism. In fact, the coexistence of the two styles in Vietnamese films of the 1960s and 1970s was something of an anomaly in socialist cinema at the time, and the addition of a third stylistic current—viz. an intense poetic impulse, especially as it is manifested through a lyrical use of nature and rural landscape—rendered the Vietnamese films even more unique. In my previous essay, I made some initial observations about this poetic proclivity in Vietnamese revolutionary films, and it is my goal to refine and elaborate on them in this paper. What is poetic cinema, and in what ways can Vietnamese revolutionary films be thought of as poetic? How is landscape used as a poetic element in the films, and where may the sources of influence be located? What are the ideological functions of such poeticized representations of landscape? These are but some of the questions that frame and inform my analysis below.

### The Question of Poetic Cinema

The criteria for a poetic film are, to a large extent, indeterminable. It may be said that poetic cinema refers to poetry, simply, in its difference to prose. According to conventional thinking, prose is typically characterized by a plain, ordinary use of language and by a more or less consistent temporal and spatial topography, whereas poetry—especially lyric poetry—sacrifices this consistency and clarity in favor of a formal display of an artistic use of language as well as the expression of complex emotions and experiences. In this sense, a poetic film can be conceived as a work that, with a strong propensity to direct attention to the formal characteristics of the cinematic medium and to probe elusive emotions and experiences, forgoes—or at least puts a break on—the logical spatio-temporal progression of the story.

Such an understanding of poetic cinema is in line with the brief but compelling comments made by Maya Deren, a renowned American experimental filmmaker, on the subject. Deren makes a distinction between what she calls the “horizontal attack” of narrative—the logic of successive action following a causal chain and entailing a strong sense of temporal order—and the “vertical approach” of poetic images, which are “held together by either an emotion or a meaning they have in common, rather than the logical action.”<sup>2</sup> According to her, the poetic image interrupts narrative action by suspending or slowing its temporal progression, probing instead

2 “Poetry and the Film: A Symposium.” In *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Stiney (New York: Praeger, 1970), 178.



“the ramification of a moment, its qualities and its depth.”<sup>3</sup> Underlying Deren’s ideas, then, is a central opposition between poetic images and narrative action/time. As Tom Gunning puts it, Deren “offers a theory of the lyrical film, a poetic cinema composed of highly evocative and resonant images, linked together by associations rather than progressive action and the unfolding of a story.”<sup>4</sup>

Due to their propensity to challenge the narrative and its causal and temporal logic and their characteristically lyrical and contemplative tone, poetic films are not generally associated with the war film, which, as a genre, tends to revolve around stories packed with dramatic, fast-paced action. The noncongruence between war films and poetic cinema is precisely what makes the lyrical poeticism of Vietnamese revolutionary films, many of which take as their subject the country’s struggles against the French and the Americans, so remarkable and distinct. This is not to say that the Vietnamese films are experimental works rejecting plot altogether in favor of abstract stylistic patterning or poetic flourishes; they are still dramatic constructs with well-defined narrative lines, albeit ones that digress frequently to poetic sequences that interrupt the forward progression of the plot. This coexistence of film poetry and narrative is already alluded to in Deren’s understanding of poetic cinema, which allows for the possibility of films shifting between the “horizontal” and “vertical” poles, narrative and lyrical registers.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Vietnamese revolutionary cinema, as we will see, the “vertical” dimension often takes the form of landscape—expressive images of nature and rural life that, through their pure visual lyricism and quotidian poetry, are able to go beyond the exigencies of eventhood and narrative and become sights/sites for affective identification.

That landscape can imply a certain freedom or autonomy from narrative and be used to evoke emotional experiences poetically was first broached by the great Russian film director and theorist Sergei Eisenstein. In *Nonindifferent Nature*, Eisenstein provocatively likens film landscape to film music and argues that both are capable of emotionally expressing what is otherwise inexpressible. In his words, “landscape is a complex bearer of the possibilities of a plastic interpretation of emotions,” and it is able to fulfill this function because—like music—it is “the freest element of film, the least burdened

3 “Poetry and the Film,” 174.

4 Tom Gunning, “The Question of Poetic Cinema.” In *The Palgrave Handbook of the Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures*, eds. Noel Carroll, Laura T. Di Summa, and Shawn Loht (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 557.

5 Gunning, “The Question of Poetic Cinema,” 558.

with servile, narrative tasks, and the most flexible in conveying moods, emotional states, and spiritual experiences.”<sup>6</sup> Underlying Eisenstein’s ideas, then, as Martin Lefebvre notes, is a conception of landscape not merely as “background space or subservient background where action and events take place” but as an (affective) object that lies in excess of its narrative function as setting.<sup>7</sup> Yet this tension with narrative and the opening up of affective connections between film and audience are something that landscape shares not only with music but also with the poetic image (as conceived above); what Eisenstein calls the “musicality” of the emotional landscape can thus be called its “poeticity” as well. A good example is the fog sequence from *Battleship Potemkin* (1924): set at the Odessa harbor following the battleship mutiny and the death of sailor Vakulinchuk, the scene comprises a series of landscape shots—the slowly swirling mist; the seagulls landing slowly on the water; the sun’s rays penetrating the shroud of mist at the break of dawn—that evoke a sense of stillness and gloom but also, near the end, expectation and hope. Yet it is important to point out that this complex emotional effect is achieved not simply through the representational elements of nature (the mist, the sun’s rays, etc.) within the shots but by means of the musical—and poetic—development and composition of what is represented. In particular, through what Eisenstein calls “tonal montage,” shot composition, light values, degree of focus, movement within the frame (or lack thereof), and other elements each serve as a contrapuntal line and interweave together to bring about the primary expressive qualities (“tonal dominants”) that pervade the scene. In this process, the film’s story is no longer the center of attention, and the viewer’s experience is shaped not so much by the logic of action as by the emotional resonance of the musical/poetic landscape.

## The Poeticism of Vietnamese Revolutionary Cinema

Critics have long spoken of a poetic sensibility in Vietnamese cinema. “Poetry,” John Charlot alleges, “is at the center of Vietnamese culture and sensibilities, and cinema cannot be divorced from it. This poetic sense

6 Sergei Eisenstein, *Nonindifferent Nature*, trans. Herbert Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 355; 217.

7 Martin Lefebvre, “Introduction.” In *Landscape and Film*, ed. Martin Lefebvre (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), xii.

separates their creations clearly from conventional socialist realism.”<sup>8</sup> Irina Miakova agrees, arguing that the passion for poetry goes deep into the minds of the Vietnamese people at all levels of society, not only writers and intellectuals but also politicians, soldiers, and even peasants who are illiterate and cannot read or write (as attested to by the folk poetry known as *ca dao*). From this, she concludes that “[t]he popularity, long development, and broad functions of poetry in Vietnamese society have greatly influenced the Vietnamese people’s perceptions and personalities as well as other forms of art, including the cinema.”<sup>9</sup>

As is evident from the above, critics often take the long and rich poetic tradition of Vietnam as well as its privileged position in the hearts of its people as the source for the expressive poeticism in Vietnamese cinema. While true as far as it goes, this kind of culturalist argument can be vague and would no doubt benefit from more analysis and context. For one thing, while it is true that poetry has always been favored by Vietnamese writers and embraced by the people, it took on special significance during the military conflicts with the US. As Dana Healy explains, the poetic genre, a more compact and easier to distribute form of literature, was much more “suited to the instability and hectic pace of the wartime period; only a scrap of paper on which to scribble a poem was needed, and just a few moments to read the lines. It was easy to copy or memorize a poem, and spontaneous poetry readings were organized for troops using often freshly written poems.”<sup>10</sup>

More importantly, a deeper probing into the shared poetic themes and elements is needed to get a better sense of the specific relationships between Vietnamese poetry and cinema. In the DRV, poetry constituted part of a national cultural front that sought to mobilize all art forms in the service of the socialist state. It is hardly a surprise, then, that many of the poems written during the period of anti-American resistance, as Healy points out, were “morale-building, inspirational mobilization verse[s]” filled with “images of heroism, courage, dedication, sacrifice and endurance,” even though she is quick to note that there was also more sober and compassionate poetry, one that captured the “human struggle in the face of extremity” and articulated

8 John Charlot, “Vietnamese Cinema: First Views,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 22, no. 1 (1991): 46.

9 Irina Miakova, “Vietnamese Cinema: Characteristics of Realism.” In *Vietnamese Cinematography: A Research Journey* (Hà Nội: Thế Giới Publishers, 2007), 478.

10 Dana Healy, “Poetry, Politics, and War: Representations of the American War in Vietnamese Poetry.” In *Cold War Literature: Writing the Global Conflict*, ed. Andrew Hammond (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 119.

“basic human concerns and, ultimately, the desire for peace.”<sup>11</sup> But whatever the focus, a recurrent feature in Vietnamese war poetry was the emphasis placed on nature and the bucolic landscape and life of the countryside. From the swaying paddies and the fire of *phuong*-tree leaves to the wide mountain, long river, and the bends and twists of the forest, and from a flock of storks stretching their wings across an endless sky to buffaloes with crescent-moon-shaped horns slowly passing the gate, images of the natural and rural world permeate the wartime poems and give them a deeply pictorial expressivity. Speaking specifically of Nguyễn Duy, one of Vietnam’s foremost contemporary poets, Nguyen Ba Chung makes clear the natural and rural imagery that imbues his poetic imagination: “The cadence of a few carefully and felicitously chosen images—‘*o rom*,’ the bed of straw used in rural areas in place of a mattress or blanket to keep warm; ‘*huong bo ket*,’ the rustic scent of soapberry; ‘*con co trang tren dong lua vang*,’ the wings of a white stork silhouetting against the vast amber rice field—can bring any Vietnamese back to his or her childhood with a palpable sense of home and unrelenting bucolic longing.”<sup>12</sup>

This emphasis on the natural and rural landscape, which gives Vietnamese poetry a distinct sense of place and turns it into some kind of word-pictures, can clearly be seen in Nguyễn Duy’s “Longing” (1970):

Climbing the high passes, I long for you,  
I hear the winds rustle through the forest leaves.

Crossing rivers, I think of you,  
I feel the waves in the current lap my feet.

Holding fast to the trench, I think of you,  
I listen to the whispers of the shattered earth.

I long for you, my love,  
and a thousand paths break free inside me.<sup>13</sup>

It should be noted that the natural elements in the poem are not simply described but imbued with powerful emotions. Similarly, affective landscape

11 Healey, “Poetry, Politics, and War,” 119.

12 Nguyen Ba Chung, “Between Banks of Truth and Untruth...” In *Distant Road: Selected Poems of Nguyễn Duy*, trans. Kevin Bowen and Nguyen Ba Chung (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1999), xx.

13 Nguyễn Duy, “Longing.” In *Distant Road*, 3.

is also used in Nguyễn Khoa Điềm's "A Piece of Loving Sky" (1970), where the wind, the dew, and other elements of nature become a poetic vehicle through which the poet expresses his profound longing for his loved one:

Loving you is like loving the endless sky,  
 the dew of morning, the dusk of night,  
 the first wind foretelling April storm,  
 the rain's enveloping warmth, the distance that calls us.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, natural and rural imagery also features prominently in poems dealing more directly with the theme of war and is linked to patriotic calls-to-arms in defense of the nation. Take, for instance, Xuân Quỳnh's "Laotian Wind, White Sand" (1969); in this poem, elements of nature—i.e., the eponymous wind and sand from the central region of Vietnam—are depicted as offering protection for the poet against enemy attacks:

Under the rain of bombs and shells, the Laotian wind blew,  
 and new dunes appeared in the old sands.  
 The sun-grass spun around like wheels,  
 and the sands protected me  
 in battle, the sands barricaded me.<sup>15</sup>

In return, the poet vows to defend this land of white sand and hot wind—and by extension, the country—against foreign invaders (i.e., the Americans):

There are times, however, when I am not happy,  
 with this sand that spreads fire underfoot,  
 with this wind that turns a face bright red,  
 with this land that doesn't even grow potatoes or manioc.  
 Yet I would stake my life for this place,  
 For white sand, for fire-blown Laotian wind.

(lines 29–34)

Given the isomorphism between nation and people, it is only a small step to broaden the symbolic resonance of nature, seeing it as signifying not

14 Nguyễn Khoa Điềm, "A Piece of Loving Sky." In *Six Vietnamese Poets*, eds. Nguyen Ba Chung and Kevin Bowen, trans. Martha Collins, Carolyn Forche, Linh Green, et al. (Williamitc, CT: Curbstone Press, 2002), 43, lines 9–12.

15 Xuân Quỳnh, "Laotian Wind, White Sand." In *Six Vietnamese Poets*, 161, lines 6–10.

only the Vietnamese nation but also its people. For instance, in the poem “The Grave and the Sandalwood Tree” (1969), Nguyễn Đức Mậu uses the eponymous tree, with its simplicity and sweet smell, as a symbol of the sacrifice of a fallen soldier:

The wind carries the sandalwood’s fragrance far.  
 The sandalwood tree, beautiful as a soldier’s life.  
 It lives by simple faith. Its body grows and dies  
 to perfume the earth, to perfume the earth and sky.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, in Nguyen Duy’s “The Bamboo of Viet Nam” (1970–1972), the strength and resilience of bamboos is used as a metaphor of the Vietnamese people and their tenacious spirit. Despite their “frail leaves and slender trunks,” the poet observes, the bamboos are evergreen, “even as soil and rock turn white,” and they “don’t seek cover in the shade” but rather “grow more roots, toil harder” amid poor soil.<sup>17</sup> Then the poet goes on to heap praise on the plant—and by extension, the Vietnamese people—to stand in unity and mutual support:

In a storm one trunk will shield another,  
 one branch pull, another push—so bind together,  
 because they love each other they do not stand alone,  
 from that, dear friends, come forts and citadels.

(lines 17–20)

Yet the poem’s most powerful moment comes toward its end, when the regenerative power of nature is foregrounded: “Years pass, months pass, when old bamboos die, young ones rise right up” (lines 29–30). There is no doubt about what this power of regeneration alludes to; it serves as a profound affirmation of the ability of the Vietnamese people to persist and rise again amid hardship and war.

I will return to this notion of nature as a metaphor—or metonymic representation, rather—of the country, the people, and their spirit to further investigate the ideological function of landscape in Vietnamese revolutionary films. For now, it suffices to point out that such poetic evocations of nature

16 Nguyễn Đức Mậu, “The Grave and the Sandalwood Tree.” In *Six Vietnamese Poets*, 135, lines 56–9.

17 Nguyễn Duy, “The Bamboo of Viet Nam.” In *Distant Road*, lines 4, 7, 15, 11.

and rural landscape are not confined to Vietnam's war poetry but can be observed in many Vietnamese films of the period.

As in Vietnamese war poetry, revolutionary films of Vietnam of the 1960s and 1970s are rife with lyrical images and sequences of natural/rural landscape: a clouded sky broken by sun rays (Hoàng Thái's *Stories of my Homeland* [*Câu chuyện quê hương*, 1963]; Trần Vũ and Nguyễn Thụ's *Smoke* [*Khói*, 1967]); solar glare through tree foliage (Nguyễn Văn Thông and Trần Vũ's *The Passerine Bird* [*Con chim vành khuyên*, 1962]); peasants laboring in a wind-blown rice field (Nguyễn Hồng Nghi and Phạm Hiếu Dân's *The Memento* [*Vật kỷ niệm*, 1960]); a small boat gliding across a marsh full of lotuses/water lilies (Nguyễn Thụ's *Portrait Left Behind* [*Bức tranh để lại*, 1970]; Hồng Sến's *The Wild Field* [*Cánh Đồng Hoang*, 1979]); and so forth. There are also films—Hải Ninh's *Miss Tham's Forest* (*Rừng O Thắm*, 1967) and Nguyễn Tiến Lợi and Nguyễn Ngọc Trung's *Call of the Sea* (*Biển gọi*, 1967) are two cases in point—whose titles allude directly to elements of the natural landscape and prefigure their prominent presence and symbolic significance in the films. For many, this propensity for natural and pastoral imagery is what gives the Vietnamese films an expressive richness and suggestiveness comparable to lyric poetry. Speaking of *The Passerine Bird*—another film with direct reference to the natural world in its title—Ngo Phuong Lan contends that “poeticism” is a central and defining feature of the film and that the film’s “[p]oetic inspiration often takes its source in nature,” which is “omnipresent in every scene and sequence.”<sup>18</sup>

Given the weak economic base established under colonialism and made worse by long years of war, the processes of urbanization had been slow, and Vietnam remained a primarily agricultural country throughout the 1960s and 1970s. For this reason, trees, rivers, marshes, paddy fields, etc. were among the most typical forms of landscape, and it is hardly surprising that they would frequently appear and become the predominant poetic elements in the country's cinema (and culture). But as my earlier discussion of poetic cinema indicates, for these natural and rural landscapes to become poetic vehicles, they cannot be mere spatial background that provides realism or accompanies the depiction of actions but rather need to be established as a partially autonomous aesthetic and/or symbolic object. And this is exactly what can be observed in many Vietnamese revolutionary films, which take a distinctly pictorial approach wherein the landscape shots or sequences, often lingered on for a longer time than is narratively necessary, are conceived as

18 Ngo Phuong Lan, *Modernity and Nationality in Vietnamese Cinema*, eds. Aruna Vasudev and Philip Cheah (Yogyakarta: NETPAC, 2007), 55.

rich and expressive visual designs meant to be contemplated for their own intrinsic sake and understood as much in aesthetic and poetic contexts as in narrative ones. To be sure, the films still have clearly defined (and ideologically motivated) stories, but the progression of the narrative would often be interrupted by extended landscape shots/sequences of intense lyricism and poetic expressivity.

Consider, for instance, *The Passerine Bird*: the film opens with a series of ten landscape shots—among them a calm, peaceful river bathed in morning sunlight, reflections of trees on glittering waters, a tiny kite flying in a bright cloudy sky, and a bird hopping on a branch against billowing clouds—before the little girl Nga and later her father, the main protagonists of the film, are introduced. While it is not uncommon for a film to use the opening shots to establish the setting, the duration of the sequence (slightly over a minute) is longer than what is typically required for setting up the story space, especially considering that *The Passerine Bird* is a short film of only 43 minutes. Besides, the care given to the visual composition of the shots, coupled with the lyrical flute music that accompanies them, also gives the landscapes a heightened poetic quality and elevates them from mere background space to some quasi-autonomous aesthetic objects capable of eliciting powerful emotions—of home, of a peaceful time and wholesome natural order—from viewers.

Similarly, in *The Wild Field*, which tells the story of a guerrilla family serving as a communication line for the Việt Cộng in the Mekong Delta region, scenes of American helicopters raiding the floodplain are interwoven with those depicting the family's daily life in total harmony with nature. In one sequence, the young mother is shown rowing a boat in the marshy land through the morning fog, plucking water lilies and arranging them to hide her boat, and removing fish from the trap. These moments of serenity and peace, which seem to suspend time and put a break on the narrative flow, are then shattered by the harsh roar of a helicopter and the subsequent gunfire. Shortly after the raid, another lyrical (and more extended) scene shows the reunited family at their home—a small shack in the middle of the water. The father is playing guitar and having fun with the baby boy, while the mother is combing her hair, cooking sweet potatoes, and helping her husband pull out grey hairs. Interspersed among these blissful images are shots of natural landscape—water lilies and other kinds of flowers, rows of trees standing in the river, a flock of birds flying across the sky—that are imbued with a strong lyricism (figures 3.1a–c). The emphasis on the family's simple everyday life destabilizes traditional war film rhetoric, while poetic portrayals of landscape and objects of nature, as in *The Passerine Bird*, do



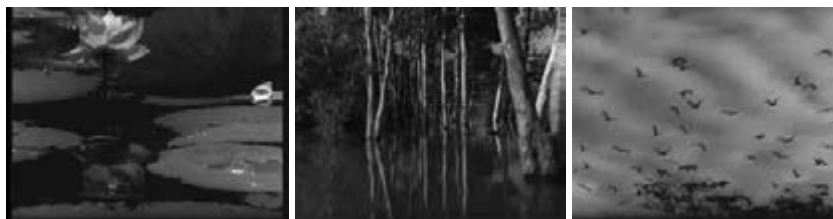


Fig. 3.1. Poetic Landscapes in *The Wild Field* (1979)

not simply serve as setting or plot devices but are aestheticized views that create strong emotional resonance.

As is evident from the above, one can find in Vietnamese revolutionary films of the 1960s and 1970s an abundance of lyrical and painterly images of natural and rural landscape that induce powerful emotions from audiences.<sup>19</sup> Yet such landscape representations do not simply serve an aesthetic or poetic purpose but contain an essential ideological imperative as well. It is this ideological aspect, especially as it is manifested in the way landscapes in Vietnamese cinema function as an affective site for articulating an “authentic” national identity for political mobilization—that I will explore in the next section.

### Affective and Allegorical Landscape

The idea of cinematic landscape as an ideological construct is not new and has been raised by many scholars. According to Antonio Costa, “landscape shown in the cinema is never a pure or simple *reproduction*. Rather, it is a technical, economic, cultural, and semiotic (discursive) production.”<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Martin Lefebvre argues that “The form of landscape is [...] first of all the form of a view, of a particular gaze that requires a frame. With that frame nature turns into culture, land into landscape.” He goes on to say that this view “cannot be divorced from other experiential aspects that accompany it” and that “the form of a landscape also corresponds to

19 As distinctive as it was among socialist filmmaking during the 1960s and 1970s, the poeticism of Vietnamese revolutionary films shows a close affinity with the lyrical films of Alexander Dovzhenko, which constituted an important part of the revolutionary cinema of the Soviet Union in the 1920s. For more discussion on the affinity between Vietnamese revolutionary cinema and Dovzhenko’s films (and Soviet montage aesthetic in general), see Yip, “Art in Propaganda,” 18–22.

20 Antonio Costa, “Landscape and Archive: Trips around the World as Early Film Topic (1896–1914).” In *Landscape and Film*, 246–47.

the form of our experience of it, with the latter including representations of the different personal, cultural, and social functions it can associate to or serve.”<sup>21</sup> In the case of Vietnamese cinema, the ideological dimension of landscape has been noted by Lan Duong, who proposes that landscape in Vietnamese films “serves as an affective site for a gendered construction of nationalism within key moments in Vietnamese history.” This tendency, she adds, was particularly evident during the era of revolutionary filmmaking.<sup>22</sup>

A good example illustrating the ideas above is *Remarriage*. In an early scene from the film, which follows the story of a peasant woman’s struggle to defy traditional feudal thinking and get remarried, the heroine is shown walking back home from work. She stops and looks back, and the next shot shows what she sees: an idyllic image of a tree-lined river with a small boat in the background. The film then returns to the heroine, who smiles, turns around, and walks away. Another cut takes the viewer back to the river, now in much closer range, and the boat can be seen gliding through the water along the upper part of the frame. The camera pans with the boat for a while, then stops, and the boat eventually goes out of frame. Lasting almost two minutes but seemingly unrelated to the film’s story, this sequence is nonetheless important in forging a link between the lyrical landscape and the heroine. To be specific, the link is first established (in the first shot of the river) by the latter’s optical point of view. The connection, however, is not simply visual; the ensuing half-smile of the heroine, and her apparent sense of peace and calm, indicate a deep emotional identification. And once this emotional or affective relationship is formed, the point-of-view structure can become more flexible. The second (and more extended) shot of the river, for instance, is not from the heroine’s optical perspective, but it is still imbued with her subjectivity—the subjectivity of a new socialist woman, of a new socialist Vietnamese nation indeed—which is in total harmony with the serene, wholesome natural world.

Similar to what Costa and Lefebvre say about cinematic landscape, then, the views of an idyllic river in the scene are not an unmediated depiction of nature but rather framed by a gaze—one shared by the directors, the film’s main character, and the viewers—that gives form to the landscape. And this form, characterized by a lyrically poetic tone and permeated with a sense of tranquility, harmony, and wholeness, is politically and ideologically oriented and signifies a vision that underlines the unity of the Vietnamese

21 Lefebvre, “Introduction,” xv.

22 Lan Duong, “Gender, Affect, and Landscape: Wartime Films from Northern and Southern Vietnam,” *Inter-Asian Cultural Studies* 15, no. 2 (2014): 258.

people/nation and the natural order. On the other hand, the scene is also consistent with Lan Duong's gendered perspective, as it is through the female protagonist—through her gaze that focalizes the landscape—that the process of national identity construction is effected.

Another example is the opening of *The Passerine Bird*, which, as was discussed earlier, consists of an extended sequence of landscape shots whose function is not simply to establish a setting but to create a poetically discursive space. Despite not being framed by a diegetic gaze as in *Remarriage*, this poetic space still manifests a deep affinity with the film's central characters, particularly the little girl Nga. Not only is Nga living a peaceful, harmonious life with her father in their small riverside hut, but her childish innocence and simplicity—she enjoys jumping rope and playing with her pet passerine bird—as well as the love and dedication she has for her father and the Việt Minh revolutionaries he is assisting, reveal a naturally pure and wholesome personality that parallels the simple yet lyrical and vibrant landscape. But while this profound connection between Nga and the rural natural world can be intuited from the start, it becomes fully discernible only at the film's conclusion: in a courageous act of defiance, Nga dashes to the riverbank to warn a group of revolutionaries of a planned ambush by the French and is fatally shot. As Nga lies on the water's edge breathing her last, she pulls her pet bird out from her pocket and releases it to the sky. The film then cuts to a shot of Nga's head floating on the river's rippling waters. The image gradually brightens, causing, in the process, a "merging" of Nga and the river before it dissolves into an open sky where a bird—presumably the one let loose by Nga—is seen flying in the distance. And all this while, we hear not only a stirring song chanted by a women's chorus but also the chirping sound of the freed passerine. With this ending, the death of Nga no longer signifies defeat. Rather, it is marked by a sense of transcendence through the girl's "reincarnation" into the little bird that she herself sets free, while her total identification and fusion with the poetic natural landscape (the waters of the river; the vast open sky), which will endure longer than Nga or any mortal being, also expresses a higher spiritual perspective. The ideological meaning here is clear: Nga may have sacrificed her life, but the image of the immense sky with a free-flying bird conjures up freedom and hope—a symbol of rebirth and continuity not merely for Nga but for the entire nation she epitomizes.

The transcendence of death through identification with the rural natural landscape, with nature's constancy and continuity, is a trope that can be observed not only in *The Passerine Bird* but also in many Vietnamese war poems. We have already seen a good example in "The Grave and the

Sandalwood Tree,” where the sweet fragrance of the eponymous tree, which is said to “perfume the earth and sky,” signifies the continuation of the fallen soldier’s spirit and somewhat lessens the pain of his sacrifice. Similarly, in Lâm Thị Mỹ Dạ’s “Bomb-Crater Sky,” an altruistic road builder who saved the troops by waving her torch to call the bombs down on herself is immortalized through her symbolic transmigration into mother nature—a fragment of sky reflected in the rainwater filling the bomb crater where she was blown apart; a piece of heaven where her soul “sheds light like the dazzling stars,” her soft skin becomes a “bank of white clouds,” and her heart is the searing sun that lights the way as the poet “walk[s] down the long road.”<sup>23</sup> Like the ubiquitous and interminable natural world she is now part of, the young martyr will live on forever, even in the minds of those who never saw her and who each have a “different image of her face” (line 30).

However, for fear of undermining morale and fostering defeatism, the representation of death and loss was a sensitive issue in wartime Vietnam. In fact, despite the poetic ways in which Nga’s sacrifice is depicted, the ending of *The Passerine Bird* was purportedly much criticized at the film’s premiere.<sup>24</sup> To avoid direct references to war casualties while still emphasizing the brutality of the enemy and using it to stir up patriotic fervor, Vietnamese filmmakers would play up the devastation of the land rather than the loss of human lives—an effective strategy in part because of the profound affinity between landscape (nature) and the Vietnamese nation/people discussed earlier. To be sure, the destructive impact of the war on the land was not fabricated but firmly based in reality; the US military is widely known for its herbicidal warfare campaign in which Agent Orange, a powerful defoliant chemical, was extensively used and brought about widespread environmental damages (and major health problems for people who were exposed), while artilleries, bombs, and other conventional weapons also caused ruinous destruction, shattering trees into pieces and razing forests and other natural habitats to the ground. The perils were thus real, and the obliteration of the land, of the hitherto serene, wholesome natural world with which the Vietnamese were—and still are—closely identified, became a symbolic expression of the sacrifice of the entire people and nation.

A good example of this strategy is *Miss Tham’s Forest*, which follows the titular heroine’s efforts to guard a supply trail for the Việt Cộng insurgents and to organize the building of a makeshift bridge when the trail is blocked by a bomb crater. Throughout the film, the forest is given a heightened

23 Lâm Thị Mỹ Dạ, “Bomb-Crater Sky.” In *Six Vietnamese Poets*, 99, lines 16–17, 19, 25.

24 Lan, *Modernity and Nationality in Vietnamese Cinema*, 57.



Fig. 3.2. Forest as poetic space in *Miss Tam's Forest* (1967)

significance—both visual and symbolic—that makes it much more than mere spatial background. This is already evident from the opening credit sequence: a lengthy tracking shot, accompanied by a radiant female voice singing a wordless folk song, steadily moves across rows of pine trees in the forest, and Thắm, in the far background and near the top of the frame, is seen dragging tree branches with a rope on a hillside (figure 3.2). The expressive landscape (e.g., the cast shadows of the trees, with their swaying branches and leaves, on the bright hill slope), the leisurely pace, the soothing yet majestic music—all this establishes a powerfully lyrical tone and turns the forest into a quasi-autonomous poetic space. Yet this space, with its unspoiled beauty and sense of serenity and wholeness, will soon be under heavy assault by American warplanes. Symptomatically, the airstrikes do not cause any deaths, but the destruction they bring to the land—above all, the trees of the forest—is highlighted and vividly shown. In the aftermath of the bombings, Thắm and her father look on with anguish at the burns on two giant pine trees near their home; as it turns out, the trees have special significance for them, attesting not only to their profound bonding (the father plans to use the trees to build a house for Thắm when she gets married) but also, on a broader symbolic level, to the rejuvenation of the family and the nation at large. This latter point is made clear in a lyrical flashback sequence about



Fig. 3.3. The growing saplings as a symbol of a rejuvenating family/nation in *Miss Thám's Forest* (1967)

halfway into the film: the father, destitute and alone, is shown arriving in what appears to be a barren land and planting two pine tree saplings into the ground. The scene then cuts to a highly poetic image where the shadows of a couple—presumably the father and the mother—sharing a pitcher of water are cast over the saplings (figure 3.3). In many ways, the slender young trees serve to signal a new beginning, both personally for the father (the restoration of the family, though the mother is conspicuously absent in the film) and collectively for the nation (the birth of postcolonial Vietnam). As the saplings grow, so does the family, and the sequence concludes with a gradually zoomed-out shot of Thám (as a kid) sleeping peacefully on a hammock strung up between two maturing pine trees.

Given the symbolic meanings associated with the two pine trees—and, by extension, the forest—the ravages caused to them signify more than an environmental catastrophe and allude to the devastation brought upon millions of families (such as Thám's) that form the fabric of the Vietnamese nation. Yet it is also through the same (damaged) trees that the resilience of the Vietnamese people is made manifest: when a bomb crater prevents Việt Cộng supply trucks from passing through a hillside roadway, Thám's father has to decide whether to follow his daughter's plea and sacrifice the two pine trees that mean so much to him, so that they can be used to make

a makeshift bridge. Hesitant at first, he agrees to hack down the trees in the end, which signals his total devotion to the anti-American resistance for national reunification. Ultimately, however, it is Thắm who embodies most completely the revolutionary spirit of the movement—she is not only the one who comes up with the idea of a makeshift bridge, but when an unexploded bomb is found near the crater and could go off at any moment, she risks her life in checking on the bomb while the supply trucks go by. The bomb eventually explodes after the last truck has passed, but Thắm manages to escape at the last minute. The film closes, in a brief epilogue, with another tracking shot through the trees of the forest, which parallels the opening credit sequence and thus gives the perception of a symbolic circularity. A voiceover informs the viewers that the forest is named after Thắm in honor of her courage and commitment to the revolutionary cause. The identification between landscape (the forest) and character (Thắm) is complete, and despite the American bombings and other adversities, the idyllic natural world, which serves as a metonymic symbol for the heroine and the people of Vietnam at large, will persist and triumph in the end.

Similarly, as I briefly discussed earlier, *The Wild Field* also makes ample use of poetic landscape and juxtaposes it with scenes of destructive war activity. As a war film, *The Wild Field* has its moments of spectacular action, but it also spends a good deal of time focusing on the bucolic nature where the mundane daily life of the protagonists takes place. These lyrical interludes, however, are not meant to simply poeticize the film, create a sense of rhythm, or add realism to the representation of wartime life. All this is true, but also important are the larger ideological meanings they convey: in stressing the proximity and connectedness of the Vietnamese characters—and the Vietnamese people in general—to the natural world, the scenes make manifest the profound unity between the two. The rural natural landscape becomes an allegorical signifier for Vietnameseness, and the use of folk music from Southern Vietnam (where the film is set) further reinforces the association. The opening credit sequence is a good case in point: we see at the outset the film's male protagonist, Ba Đô, rowing a boat in the flooded fields and calling out to his wife, Sáu Xoa, who is on a separate boat nearby. Then the film cuts to Ba Đô who, now up on a tree, breaks into a song about love and courting. The wife, still in her boat plucking flowers from trees, sings in return. Resounding with the song, which, sung in the southern *quan họ* (alternate singing) style known as *hò*, exemplifies the rich and diverse folk culture of Vietnam, the scene glows with a dreamy beauty and establishes a poetic bucolic space—one permeated with a distinctly Vietnamese sensibility—with which the characters are in complete harmony. As in *Miss Tham's Forest*, the violence of the American

raids resides not so much in the number of casualties—of which there are not many, though Ba Đô is shot dead at the end of the film—as in the wide destruction caused to the ideologically overdetermined natural environment. But unlike the earlier film, the ending of *The Wild Field* has a decidedly more somber tone: after Ba Đô is killed, Sáu Xoa takes a rifle and shoots down the helicopter responsible for her husband's death. The film concludes with Sáu Xoa, her baby son in one arm and the rifle on her shoulder, walking off from the burning helicopter in the wide marshy fields. Despite the successful revenge attack, this powerfully haunting last image, with its clashing of diverse and often incompatible elements (the baby and the rifle; the helicopter in flames and smoke amid the serene natural world), is a stark reminder of the contradictory reality in wartime Vietnam.

Attesting to the affinity between wartime Vietnamese cinema and poetry again, the juxtaposition of war destruction and the wholesome rural/natural environment in *Miss Tham's Forest*, *The Wild Field*, and other Vietnamese revolutionary films can be observed in many of the country's war poems as well. In Lâm Thị Mỹ Dạ's "Garden Fragrance," for instance, the explosion of a bomb is strikingly mingled with poetic images of singing birds, scented trees, and seasoned guavas:

Last night a bomb exploded on the veranda  
 But sounds of birds sweeten the air this morning.  
 I hear the fragrant trees, look in the garden.  
 Find two silent clusters of ripe guavas.<sup>25</sup>

The implication of this juxtaposition is not hard to see: despite the American military invasion, the idyllic natural world—and the Vietnamese people and nation it epitomizes—are never dead and will go on to thrive. But for all its symbolic resonance, this emphasis on a resilient natural realm, one where ordinary folks are able to continue with a mundane everyday existence, also points to the practical importance of carrying on a normal life in a lengthy war. This insistence on continuing one's life routines and activities is clearly reflected in Lâm Thị Mỹ Dạ's "Night Harvest" (1971), a poem that shows the determination of the poet and her female compatriots in harvesting rice amid enemy attacks:

The golds of rice and cluster-bombs blend together.  
 Even delayed-fuse bombs bring no fear:

25 Lâm Thị Mỹ Dạ, "Garden Fragrance." In *Six Vietnamese Poets*, 95.



Our spirits have known many years of war.  
Come, sisters, let us gather the harvest.<sup>26</sup>

The poet goes on to say that “we”—the female cadres at the rear front—“are not frightened by bullets and bombs in the air” but “only by dew wetting lime-scented hair” (lines 13–14). For a people who had been at war for decades, the Vietnamese had come to learn to live a normal life amid all the bombing and fighting, and this is precisely what was captured so poignantly in the poem (and in many revolutionary Vietnamese films of the 1960s and 1970s).

## Postlude

As one of its most distinctive features, the poetic impulse of Vietnamese revolutionary cinema is manifested primarily through a lyrical use of natural and rural landscape. Showing a strong affinity with Vietnamese war poetry, poeticized images of the rural natural world in Vietnamese films of the 1960s and 1970s are not mere aestheticized objects or limited to their narrative function as setting. Rather, they are symbolic constructs that offer an affective site/sight for the articulation and construction of national identity and belonging. For the majority peasantry population in Vietnam of the period, the imagined relationships with the natural world—pretty much the only place known to them—spoke to the deepest part of their souls and played a major role in sustaining morale and political will in the struggle for freedom and unification against American invasion.

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26 Lâm Thị Mỹ Dạ, “Night Harvest.” In *Six Vietnamese Poets*, 103, lines 4–8.

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## 4. Screening the Cold War in Cambodia: The Films of Norodom Sihanouk and Rithy Panh

*Darlene Machell Espeña*

### Abstract

This chapter explores the films of Norodom Sihanouk and Rithy Panh and examines how they render Cambodia's complex and tumultuous history intensified by Cold War geopolitics. How do their films articulate, negotiate, and contest the uncertainties and aspirations of the Cambodian people? What kind of future, or futures, do their films project for Cambodia? To what extent did—or does—the Cold War shape or determine the two filmmakers' works, and in what ways do they differ? Ultimately, this chapter provides a comparative approach to understanding the post-colonial cinematic milieu of Cambodia and the role of these two prominent filmmakers in constructing, performing, and interrogating the Cambodian nation and re-imagining the Cold War in Cambodian past, present, and future.

**Keywords:** Cambodian cinema, Khmer Rouge, Cambodian nation-building, national cinema, Southeast Asian cinema, trauma

### Introduction

The Royal Cambodian Army Forces discovers a high-ranking official colluding with the CIA and the South Vietnamese forces in a plot to overthrow the monarchy and replace the government with pro-American leaders. Determined to safeguard Cambodia from its internal and external enemies, Prince Dhanari employs effective counter-espionage strategies, and the malevolent plan is thwarted. Cambodia is once again safe

and secure. This story, reminiscent of Cold War espionage stories, is the plot straight out of *Shadow over Angkor* (1968), a film made by Norodom Sihanouk that conveyed his ideological message and critical reflection of the geopolitical environment that Cambodia faced at the height of the Cold War.

Based on the real-life Dap Chhuon affair uncovered in February 1959, the film, screened for public viewing during the National Day celebrations in 1968, depicts the intertwining of domestic and foreign perils and their sinister efforts to subvert Cambodia's policy of non-alignment by installing a pro-US and strictly anticommunist regime. In the film, Sihanouk casts a negative light not just on hostile foreign states interfering with Cambodia's domestic affairs but more critically on local actors supposedly driven by personal political ambitions. The film serves as a warning to the audience, projecting a "shadow" that looms over Cambodia of the manifold inscriptions of Cold War fears and concerns. This "shadow" threatens Cambodia's independence and security and places its domestic policies inevitably linked to its foreign policy concerns. Evidently, the film resonates with the regional dynamics of the end of the Second World War, which witnessed an era of radical changes across Southeast Asia. Cold warriors, anti-colonialists, and nationalists operated to advance their interests as newly independent states strove to establish stable political and economic institutions capable of enabling them to survive and stave off foreign interventions in their domestic affairs. Sihanouk, like other Southeast Asian leaders at that time, articulated ideas championing unity, vigilance, and the need to protect the country's autonomy and sovereignty.

Indeed, the Cold War in Cambodia cast its dark and long shadow beyond politics and onto the silver screen, the cultural milieu. As Frances Stonor Saunders wrote, "the Cold War—the tension, fears, and anxieties—manifested not only in great power competition, geopolitics, arms race, and the rise of military industries but also in the realm of culture."<sup>1</sup> These cultural productions offer insight into the spirit of the age and the mindsets of the societies that produced them.<sup>2</sup> Taking the case of Cambodia, this chapter probes into the films of Norodom Sihanouk and Rithy Panh in order to grasp how the Cold War was translated, mediated, and interrogated in Cambodia. Contextualized within the country's decolonization experience, their films

1 Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 2000).

2 See Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London: Penguin Classics, [1860] 1990).

offer vignettes of Cambodia's nationalist project, the processes that shaped its Cold War foreign policy approach, and the legacy of the violence of the Khmer Rouge. This chapter provides not only an examination of the cultural dimension of the Cold War and the nation-building process in post-colonial Cambodia but also an analysis of how Cambodian cinema (re)constructed the country's nascent ideas of and search for national identity, modernity, and autonomy.

## Setting the Context

In the last two to three decades, we have seen more and more works about the Cold War that go beyond the state narratives and place the focus instead on people, ideas, cultures, and mobilities.<sup>3</sup> In this vibrant part of Cold War scholarship, there is a growing body of works about cinema: developments and transformations in the style, genre, and method of filmmaking, the filmic networks, cosmopolitanisms, and film festivals that formed during the Cold War; and cinema as propaganda/an ideological tool in winning the battle of hearts and minds.<sup>4</sup> The fact that there have been very few studies on Cambodian cinema during the Cold War is, in fact, quite surprising for a number of reasons. First, Cambodia has Norodom Sihanouk, who was not only one of the leading Southeast Asian political figures in the post-colonial and Cold War period, playing a key role in Cambodia's independence movement as well as in regional politics, but who also had such affinity towards films and filmmaking that he made some fifty fictional films and documentaries himself. He was often described as more suited to the arts than politics, however. As a politician and filmmaker, his films mirror his political concerns and ambitions and therefore offer critical spaces to analyze his political maneuvering and interpretations of domestic and international affairs. To consider his films as the frivolous pastimes or mediocre efforts of

3 See Zheng Yangwen, Hong Liu, and Michael Szonyi, eds. *The Cold War in Asia: The Battle for Hearts and Minds* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Heonik Kwon, *The Other Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Tony Day and Maya H. T. Liem. *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia*, vol. 51 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Catherine Gunther Kodat. *Don't Act, Just Dance: The Metapolitics of Cold War Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014).

4 See Theodore Hughes, *Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea: Freedom's Frontier* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Poshek Fu and Man-Fung Yip, eds. *The Cold War and Asian Cinemas* (New York: Routledge, 2020); and Sangjoon Lee, *Cinema and the Cultural Cold War: US Diplomacy and the Origins of the Asian Cinema Network* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

an amateur filmmaker is to fail to understand the underlying motivations and conditions that shape Sihanouk's cultural ventures.

Second, Cambodia had, in fact, a vibrant industry before the Khmer Rouge. Cambodia was among those newly independent nations that experienced the golden age in national cinemas from the 1960s to the 1970s, producing about 350 films per year, with screenings in cinema houses all over the country.<sup>5</sup> Whereas a number of Cambodian filmmakers studied in France, some were self-taught, and many produced films based on traditional legends and folktales, which were very appealing to the audience. Cambodia was also at that time a destination for movies from different countries such as India, France, Thailand, the United States, Hong Kong, and even the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> It was only when the civil war broke out and the Khmer Rouge rose to power that the local film industry collapsed and many actors and directors were either forced to flee or were killed during the revolution.

Finally, the Cold War turned hot in Cambodia. Cambodia's experience of the Cold War, particularly under Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, was among the most violent we have seen in the region. According to David Chandler, the revolution in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979, which was based on models of the French Revolution and the collectivization of agriculture and China's Great Leap Forward, resulted in about 500,000 refugees and about one million dead.<sup>7</sup> We cannot ascertain the correct number here, but what cannot be denied is the violent turn the Cold War took in Cambodia, and yet there is no comprehensive study on the Cold War proclivities embedded in the cultural and cinematic dynamics in Cambodia.

This chapter therefore attempts to contribute to the growing field of Cold War cinema studies by probing into the place of cinema in Cambodian history and politics during the Cold War and beyond. It ventures into the myriad narratives in Cambodia's entangled history of Cold War politics, decolonization, and nation-building. More specifically, to determine the arc of Cambodian cinema, this chapter focuses on the two most prominent filmmakers of the country. Norodom Sihanouk and Rithy Panh—the prince and the refugee—both lived through the turbulent and violent period in Cambodia's Cold War history. Both come from a strong political background and share an experience of being/living in exile. Both produced films

5 Department of Media and Communication, Royal University of Phnom Penh. *Kon: The Cinema of Cambodia* (2010), 6–7.

6 *Ibid.*

7 David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War, and Revolution since 1945* (Bangkok: Silkorm Books, 1993).

that capture the complex and multifaceted narratives of hopes, anxieties, dreams, and memories of Cambodian society from its colonial past to independence. In this chapter, I argue that Norodom Sihanouk and Rithy Panh produced films that served as a platform for discourses on the nation, modernity, and the Cold War to be imagined, interpreted, and ultimately interrogated. In Sihanouk's films, Cambodia's Cold War foreign policy of neutrality takes form and substance, anchored in cinematic imaginations of a modern and inclusive nation with rich traditions and a glorious history. In Rithy Panh's films, the specter of the Cold War remains; the ghost of the Cold War is remembered, deconstructed, and narrativized not just through ordinary people's accounts and the materiality of the war in and on their bodies and minds but also in the altered landscapes that bear silent witness to the past. Taken together, their films capture the complex and multifaceted narratives of hopes, anxieties, and the efforts of Cambodians as they move away from their colonial (and violent) past and into the free and modern world, casting a long shadow of the Cold War onto Cambodia's past, present, and future.

### Cold War Cambodia Through Sihanouk's Eyes

Norodom Sihanouk rose to power in Cambodia as a king in 1941 during French colonial rule. In the 1950s and 1960s, Sihanouk dominated the Cambodian political stage as the foremost figure steering Cambodia's route to independence and autonomy. In 1970, he was ousted by his right-wing opponents and was forced to lead a government-in-exile. He returned in 1975, only to be exiled again in 1979 when Vietnamese forces toppled the Khmer Rouge. However, long before he stepped into the political spotlight, young Sihanouk was an avid fan of the creative industries, specifically filmmaking. He started making short films with his 16mm camera at the age of 19, but it was in 1965 that he made his first feature-length film. Eliza Romey asserts that Sihanouk viewed his films as a way for him to reach the Khmer people.<sup>8</sup> So already, we see a political leader who used his interest in films as a political tool to breach the divide between his government—the monarchy itself—and the masses.

Furthermore, Sihanouk was not pleased with how Richard Brooke's 1965 film *Lord Jim* portrayed Cambodia as a primitive state. Later, the star of the

8 Eliza Romey, "King, Politician, Artist: The Films of Norodom Sihanouk." Master's Thesis, La Trobe University, 1998.



film, Peter O'Toole, made some negative remarks about Cambodia, noting that "The three months we spent in Cambodia were dreadful. Sheer hell. A nightmare. There we were, all of us, knee-deep in lizards and all kinds of horrible insects. And everyone hating us. Awful." Understanding that it was not good for Cambodia's international reputation, Sihanouk made a deliberate decision to shape the film industry in the country.<sup>9</sup> Sihanouk's films produced before the rise of the Khmer Rouge brought the political challenges and opportunities confronting Cambodia to the forefront of the people's imaginations. His films reflected and constructed the nation-state's strategic culture and served to shape Cambodia's national identity. Indeed, these post-war cinematic productions would serve to systematically generate and articulate the notion of Cambodian national identity and solidify its policy of neutrality against Cold War logic.

A critical reading of Sihanouk's films reveals a cultural narrative of Cambodia's effort to portray, promote, and perform its policy of neutrality. Cambodia's policy of non-alignment paralleled the principles of peaceful coexistence as established at the 1955 Bandung Conference. Based on Sihanouk's geopolitical calculations, given Cambodia's proximity to mainland China, where communists had been ruling since 1948, and the political upheavals and alliances in neighboring Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand, Cambodia's only path to survival was to remain a neutral country and uphold its constitution. According to Sihanouk,

Our Neutrality has been imposed on us by necessity. A glance at a map of our part of the world will show that we are wedged between two medium-sized nations of the Western bloc and only thinly screened by Laos from the scrutiny of the two countries of the Eastern bloc, North Vietnam, and the vast People's Republic of China. What choice do we have but to try to maintain an equal balance between blocs?<sup>10</sup>

In 1954, Sihanouk's *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* (Popular Socialist Community) was established as an alliance between the Khmer Revolution Party, Sam Sary's rightist party, and the Victorious Northeast Party and Sihanouk's government. The *Sangkum* was premised on two key principles: Cambodian

9 In order to develop Cambodia's filmmaking industry, Sihanouk sent local filmmakers to France to study; he lowered the tax for Khmer films; and, through Khemara Pictures, produced several films during the aptly called "Golden Age of Cambodian Cinema."

10 Cited in Michael Leifer, "Sihanouk: A Prince Among Neutrals," *The Australian Quarterly* December 1962, vol. 34, no. 4, 44.

neutrality and Khmer Socialism. On the one hand, Cambodia's neutrality can be traced back to the Bandung Conference, where Cambodia affirmed that it would follow a "Third Way" amidst the apparent bipolarity of the Cold War. On the other hand, the second principle of Khmer Socialism envisioned for Cambodia a "system in which the state takes over the direction of the national economy and protects man from the exploitation of his labor by a privileged class, safeguards his livelihood and his dignity and strives to give him the material means of finding happiness."<sup>11</sup> This is crucial as the two principles are, in fact, deeply intertwined. Cambodia's non-alignment—which is perhaps better framed as *flexible (non)alignment* where Sihanouk shifted his attention and alignment quite flexibly and conveniently across and among the US, the Soviet Union and China—was predicated on its economic objectives and aspirations as a modern and independent state.

These political principles are inscribed in Sihanouk's films, reinforcing an assertion of Cambodia's sovereignty and autonomy amidst the bipolarity of the Cold War. The film *Little Prince* (*Preah Komar*, 1966), directed by Sihanouk and Thun Hak Hang, conjures an image of the enemy from within attempting to destabilize Cambodia. Set in the eighteenth century, the film concerns a young prince, played by Sihanouk's son, Prince Sihamoni, who rules over Angkor with enlightened justice and wisdom until his aunt decides to have him kidnapped and killed so her husband can take over the throne. When the prince is gone, she presides over the villagers and governs like a tyrant oppressing her subjects. The people, who loved the prince and were loyal to him, responded by refusing to celebrate the coronation of her husband and by waging a rebellion. The movie ends when the prince comes back (he was not dead after all) and, with the help of the villagers, kills his aunt and restores peace across the land. By conjuring up a threat to Cambodia's internal peace, Sihanouk reminds the audience of their political obligation to resist and subvert any individual or campaign that threatens Cambodia's peace and neutrality under his authority.

This defense of Cambodia's neutrality is strongly manifested in *Shadow Over Angkor* (1967), where an American plot to oust Cambodia's government is not only discovered but is precluded by the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces. Echoing Cold War anxieties, Sihanouk places Cambodia amid global competition, vulnerable to foreign intervention and manipulation, and in the process legitimizes the need for Cambodia to continue to steer a neutral position while reinforcing its autonomy and sovereignty. In the film *Apsara* (1966), Sihanouk's first feature-length, General Rithi's speech

11 Buchanan, 1962, 5.

evokes a staunch commitment to protecting and defending Cambodia's sovereignty. He states:

Attention, comrades. Currently, our country, which matters more than our lives, is at risk of aggression and invasion. Our independence, sovereignty and peace are being threatened. They are invading the land that they want to steal from us, specifically Battambang, Odormeanchey, and Preah Vihear province. Our military based in those provinces, no matter how brave, cannot fight against them as the enemy is using certain military weapons. As such, we have to send our troops from here to help them. We have to defend our peace, independence, and sovereignty. I believe in you and our military in defending our country's independence. Hurray, Cambodia! Hurray, our military forces!

The character of General Rithi was played by Nhiek Tioulong, who was a member of the Cambodian army and served in different government positions during Sihanouk's rule, and that certainly reinforces the *gravitas* of the character and the message of the film. Maintaining an independent course would, from Sihanouk's point of view, give Cambodia the best possible chance to survive the tumultuous years of the Cold War and protect its sovereignty and independence. Indeed, a crucial component of this strategy includes his efforts to promote modernization and the incorporation of Western technologies, ideas, and infrastructure in the country. In an early documentary that was simply called *Cambodia, 1965*, Sihanouk produces a vision of Cambodia that is progressive and modern. In the opening scene, one can see the tall buildings, cars, and paved streets, suggesting an image of the urban or cosmopolitanism as opposed to simply jungles or "backward" villages. The documentary also boasts new advancements in medicine, manufacturing, construction, and the modern lifestyle of the new Cambodian society. However, what is not apparent is that Cambodia's infrastructure and economic development were largely supported by foreign aid from the United States, the Soviet Union, and China.

Similarly, in the film *Apsara*, shots of the modern are evident from the display of paved streets and shiny cars, the Western fashion worn by the actors, the modern planes, and the safe and beautiful parks that convey the hallmarks of modern life. In *Twilight* (1968), the country's infrastructure, like the sports stadium and modern cities, feature prominently, rendering an image of a thriving economy and bustling commerce. By 1965, Cambodia had constructed 1,545 miles of paved roads and 230 miles of railroad and boasted an international airport that connected Phnom Penh to key cities around

the world. Sihanouk was very focused on depicting these new engineering and architectural developments and was very proud of them. He wanted the Cambodian people to appreciate his efforts to modernize the country, but he clearly also wanted the rest of the world to see the modern side of Cambodia.

What is key to note is that this economic vibrancy was also critically intertwined with Cambodia's Cold War policy. According to Kenton Clymer, by the 1950s, the United States perceived Cambodia as an integral component in its fight against communist expansion in Southeast Asia and for this reason allocated a significant amount of military and economic aid to the country.<sup>12</sup> Several examples include the Khmer-American Friendship Road opened in 1959, which was built using American aid; the establishment of the American Military Assistance Advisory Group in the country; and US financing of about 30% of Cambodia's military budget by the 1960s.<sup>13</sup> In the film *Apsara* as well as in reality, a dance performance was put on in order to raise funds for the military, affirming an economic rationale for Cambodia's neutrality.

Sihanouk's films reinforced that while progress and development for Cambodia were key objectives in navigating the Cold War, juxtaposed with ensuring the country's territorial sovereignty and autonomy, it did not mean the decay of Khmer tradition. In fact, most of Sihanouk's films accentuate the rich culture and long tradition of the country, dating back to the ninth-century Empire of Angkor. This can be clearly seen from the inclusion of classical dance performances in his films such as *Apsara*, *Twilight* (1969), and *Enchanted Forest* (1966). Now this is crucial because these dance performances are synonymous with Khmer culture, referred to as the spirit or the soul of Khmer. Thus, having these performances on film was significant, since previously, dance performances of the royal ballet corps took place in courts for the royal family and other foreign dignitaries. To have these performances on film made this important tradition accessible to Khmer society. In Sihanouk's films, dance had a preeminent place—he made films specifically to construct a modern and cosmopolitan image of Cambodia that foregrounds its traditions, heritage, and culture such as dance.<sup>14</sup> As Malcolm MacDonald notes, Sihanouk staunchly promoted

12 Kenton Clymer, "The Perils of Neutrality: The Break in US- Cambodia Relations, 1965," *Diplomatic History* vol. 23, no. 4, Fall 1999: 609–31.

13 *Ibid.*

14 For in-depth discussion, see: Darlene Machell Espeña, "Choreographing Neutrality: Dance in Cambodia's Cold War Diplomacy," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* vol. 23 no. 4, 493–508.

traditional culture and heritage and “wished them to be living, creative expressions of the national being.”<sup>15</sup>

In *Apsara*, the film opens with a scene of the city in flux, the frame beginning with the independence monument and then moving on to busy and wide streets and a big mansion-like house. An entire section is dedicated to an *apsara* performance (this was a new choreography developed by Queen Kossamak). In *Enchanted Forest*, a group of hunters is welcomed into a magical kingdom inside the forest ruled by a king played by Sihanouk, with three classical dance performances. In this scene, as well as in political reality, Sihanouk establishes himself as a powerful king and a gracious host. The following morning, the hunters are given a tour of the village, and they are once again greeted by dance performances, this time by an ensemble of folk-dance choreographies that portray an idyllic rural life and how his people very much love the king. A critical reading of these films reveals that in this new Cambodian nation, a crucial part of tradition and culture emanates from the role of the royal family, which remained evident. Ultimately, his films afford a cultural space in which to see Cambodia's effort to navigate the Cold War with a renewed self-confidence and identity rooted in the rich historical and cultural past of Angkor—inclusive, modern, and national.

### The Curtain Closes: The Khmer Rouge Interregnum

Between the years 1975 and 1979, known as the Khmer Rouge era, the film industry in Cambodia was essentially crippled. Local actors and directors were killed, and mostly only propaganda films were able to circulate. Some films came from China and the Soviet Union. The Khmer Rouge was “systematic and brutal” in destroying cultural institutions that were perceived to be opposed to communism, and this included the destruction of cinema houses.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, many other cinemas were made to adopt the values of the Khmer Rouge in order to sway the mindset of Cambodian citizens and to further the regime's revolutionary ideas and practices.<sup>17</sup> Notably, the Ministry of Information and Propaganda under the Khmer Rouge bureaucracy (known as the K-33) was instrumental in creating

15 Malcolm MacDonald, *Angkor* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1958), 133.

16 James Tyner, *The Nature of Revolution: Art and Politics under the Khmer Rouge* (University of Georgia Press, 2019), 92.

17 *Ibid.*

propaganda material in the battle to win the hearts and minds of the people.<sup>18</sup> Managed by Comrade Khheoun, the K-33 produced many documentary and propaganda films while simultaneously destroying cultural and cinematic products reminiscent of the old society. In 1979, following the collapse of the Khmer Rouge, its impact could be seen in Cambodia's film industry. Many films produced in the 1950s and the 1960s were lost; among those that survived, some were restored, and some were beyond repair. Today, the Cambodian filmmaking industry is slowly bouncing back, still with comparatively limited funding and technical skills, but we see a gradual emergence of films concerning the Khmer Rouge and the genocide and other crimes that the regime perpetrated. What we see in these new films are essentially the legacies, memories, and reflections of the personal and collective trauma that the country experienced under communist rule in Cambodia.

### Rithy Panh and Cambodia's Cinema of Survival: From Memories to Justice

Of course, the most famous filmmaker in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia is Rithy Panh. Born in 1964 amidst Cambodia's volatile political landscape, he came from an educated, middle class family. His father had served as an official at the Ministry of Education, but when Pol Pot took the reins of the government, Rithy's family was forced to leave Phnom Penh and work in a farm collective. At the age of 14, Rithy successfully escaped from Cambodia to Thailand and eventually settled in France and studied cinematography.<sup>19</sup> He is known for his earlier films such as *Site 2* (1989), *Cambodia: Between War and Peace* (1991), and the critically acclaimed *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Fields* (2003) as well as his most recent works such as *Irradiated* (2020), *Graves Without a Name* (2018), and *Exile* (2016). While Rithy's films are primarily about the genocide and deal with themes such as justice and reconciliation, they are also his personal reflections of his very own memories and experiences set within the larger context of Cambodia's history under the Khmer Rouge.<sup>20</sup> In an effort to find answers to his questions—to piece together

18 Andrew Mertha, *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2014).

19 Deirdre Boyle, "Finding the Missing Picture: The Films of Rithy Panh," *Cineaste* Summer (2014), 28–32.

20 Didem Alkan, "Refiguring the perpetrator in Rithy Panh's documentary films: *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* and *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell*," *Continuum* 34(2) (2020): 271–85.

the stories of a past and the underpinning processes that the Khmer Rouge utilized to create havoc across the country—Rithy returned to Cambodia in 1989 and has dedicated his life and mission ever since to unearth the truth—or truths—about the Khmer Rouge through his films.

To evaluate Rithy's films, it is important to contextualize him and his works within the post–Cold War and post–Khmer Rouge effort to examine the contours and manifestations of Cold War rhetoric beyond traditional centers like Vietnam and Korea. A closer look at Rithy's films sheds light on the long shadow of the Cold War pervading Cambodian society's past, present, and future. Through his masterful use of the camera, Rithy implores history and cinematic narrativization to construct a labyrinth of memories as a way to ascribe meanings and significances to this otherwise obscure fragment of Cambodian history. Compared to Sihanouk's films that predominantly featured political leaders, princes and princesses, and kings and queens, Rithy offers a way to remember the legacies of the Cold War through the narratives and stories of ordinary people.

Notably, Rithy provides agency to the people represented in his films, allowing them to speak, remember, cry, and tell their truths, even their confusions. He focuses on the previously undermined and victimized people during the Khmer Rouge and who carry in themselves the specter of the war. For example, in *Site 2*, Rithy allows a refugee named Yim Om to simply tell her story about her life in a refugee camp. In *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, Rithy brings former prisoners and their prison guards to face each other, compelling each to confront their experiences and the decisions that led them to play a pivotal role in the machinations of the Khmer Rouge genocide, imploring film as a medium to deconstruct the role of ordinary people in perpetrating extreme violence. In *Graves Without a Name* (2018), Rithy affords both the living and the dead the same platform to search for answers in coming to terms with the violence and crimes that tore families apart and altered the lives of millions. Here, the stories of dead people are inevitably linked with Cambodia's rituals, religion, and the present. The film confronts its audience with the bitter reality that grief is not possible without first understanding the severity of the crime, the incident, and the trauma. Recounting their experiences during the Khmer Rouge era, the villagers share how people from Phnom Penh arrived in the countryside and were forced to work in the fields. They knew nothing about growing rice, yet they had no choice but to work. Their possessions were taken, and all they had left was a spoon. Their stories were of hunger, hard work, and survival.

Rithy reframes the entangled history of the Khmer Rouge and the Cold War by privileging ordinary people's personal reflections and questions

about their experiences. In *Graves Without a Name*, one of the characters laments, “The separation of our families tormented us. The pain remains imprinted in our hearts [...] So, all those souls, wandering on these plains are tormented and worried. They go aimlessly. The heart isn’t confident. It can’t decide between moving forward or backward. The soul is tormented, just as the heart is.” So too, are the struggles that ordinary people continue to face even after the Khmer Rouge. He captures ordinary people’s stories and perspectives—no matter how painful, incomplete, or incoherent those memories and stories are. Ultimately, these films open a path for Cambodia to imagine the future. As remembering ventures into the realm of introspection, collapsing reality and reverie, the audience, too, is taken to an imagined future where the past lingers in the form of memories. The narratives and the myths in cinema, as in history, and certainly in Rithy’s films, are always in flux, in constant dialogue with the search for the identity and memory of the nation. The Cold War leaves the realm of political abstraction or rhetoric; instead, it manifests in the intimate stories of ordinary people. It is framed in people’s minds as a past that remains persistent and evident in their present moment. Suspended in time, the Cold War remains a frame through which Cambodians envision their futures.

Conjuring up a landscape of trauma—not just in terms of the memories and scars left by the communist rule in Cambodia but the places that embody these traumas or where the trauma occurred—is a focal point in many of Rithy’s films, which are pointedly filmed at a refugee camp or at a school turned into a prison. The banality of the violence is projected alongside the ambiguity and simplicity of nature, where the search for graves and dead bodies brings people to unremarkable sites—of dry plains and rice fields, or a tree. The wandering souls, their memories fade in the landscape. Rithy pushes the audience to recognize the Cold War narratives can be unearthed by digging the soil, literally and figuratively. Cambodia’s landscape was transformed by the war, and the remnants of the war are visible in the landscape. Indeed, to search for the truth is to examine the land, to look for “little pieces of ploughed bones, pieces of burnt cloth in the woods, buried in the clay.” From the landscape, truth emerges.

In the film *Shiiku, the Catch* (2011), Rithy takes Kenzaburo Oe’s short story “*Shiiku*” and transforms its plot into the cultural and historical milieu of Cambodia amidst the civil war and the American carpet bombing justified by Cold War rationale. Set in 1972, at the height of the conflict between the communist Khmer Rouge soldiers and the US-backed Lon Nol government, the film follows the story of a black American pilot captured as a prisoner of war by a group of children in a small village in Cambodia. The geopolitical



realities of the Cold War and the presence of a foreign character within the domestic realm conflates and extends Cambodia's history into the global Cold War discourse. Writing about the film, Cathy Schlund-Vials contends that the film's "panoramic treatment of Cambodian civil war and U.S. foreign conflict [...] serves as the basis for an expansive anti-war critique that takes centrally the nuanced polemics of in-country war and the binaried machinations of international Cold War conflict."<sup>21</sup> Following the terms of the Operation Freedom Deal, Cambodia became a free-fire zone, resulting in the killing of many innocent civilians and significant damage to the landscape and infrastructure of the country. When the campaign ended in August 1973, it was estimated that half a million tons of bombs had been dropped on Cambodian soil, far greater than was used in Japan during the Second World War.<sup>22</sup>

In *The Missing Picture* (2013), Rithy extends the Cambodian experience and connects it once again to global Cold War politics, weaving the policies of the Khmer Rouge into its foreign affairs. The communist utopia that Pol Pot envisioned centered on the villages, as a result of which the cities were emptied, and working units were assembled. In that model society, there were no rich or poor; they were stripped of their names, of their humanity, and were given only numbers. On one hand, in the film, Rithy questions the visit of two Chinese officials during the Khmer Rouge. What was it for? Perhaps it was meant for Cambodia to teach China a lesson. On the other hand, the Americans are viewed with suspicion; for how is it that they can walk on the moon? Surely, the great leap forward cannot be achieved in capitalist propaganda. Rithy circumvents the lack of credible historical evidence and archival footage about the Khmer Rouge by incorporating clay figures to recreate and reimagine Cold War narratives based on the work of memory. As the Khmer Rouge employed propaganda films to represent their own version of the past, Rithy asserts (in a voiceover in the film): "A political film should unearth what it invented. And so, I make this picture. I look at it. I cherish it. I hold it in my hand like a beloved face. The missing picture, I now hand over to you so that it never ceases to seek us out." As such, Rithy advances the importance of films in reframing and reimaging Cold War narratives.

21 Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, "Aerial Aftermaths and Reckonings from Below: Reseeing Rithy Panh's *Shiiku, the Catch*." In *The Cinema of Rithy Panh: Everything Has a Soul*, edited by Leslie Barnes and Joseph Mai (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 89.

22 Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, 225.

## Cold War Constructions: The Cambodian Nation in the Process of Becoming

While Sihanouk's films from the 1960s captured the optimism of a newly independent nation navigating the Cold War and asserting its autonomy, what Rithy Panh's films offer is a study of the complexities and the problematic specter and legacies that continue to affect Cambodia and its people in their everyday and personal lives. At the end of the day, we see how their films provide a glimpse into the struggles of the Cambodian nation and its long-protracted history of articulating aspirations. Heralding that nation-building and Cold War history are, in essence, a work in progress, the films by Norodom Sihanouk and Rithy Panh accentuate the significance of cultural productions in reframing and co-producing perspectives, spatial and temporal imaginations about the nation, the past, and the Cold War. Filmmaking becomes an embodiment of freedom of expression, a collective and communal effort to depict reality through their lens. In their films, thoughts of the past and the imperatives of the present are imbricated with the desire to open a representational arena where the cultural and ideological nexus of the nation can be scrutinized and the Cold War rhetoric accentuated. Their films reflect and intervene in the critical examination of what constitutes Cambodian cinema, society, and politics. In the end, what they present are not fragmented or illegible narratives or memories or Cold War political imaginations. These are, in fact, stories that reveal the dynamism, diversity, and complexity of the Cold War in Cambodia. They are an acknowledgement that the work of cinema, history, and memory is a work in progress and that Cambodia is in the process of becoming.

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## About the Author

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## 5. Islam and the Cultural Cold War: *Tauhid* and the Quest for the Modern Muslim

*Eric Sasono*

### Abstract

Islam as a political force in 1960s Indonesia was known for its involvement in the 1965 massacre of members and sympathizers of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), whereby the discourse was perceived to justify the killings. Through an examination of *Tauhid* (1964), written and directed by writer-director Asrul Sani, this paper examines Sani's position as a quasi-secular artist-activist who had to defend his art in the context of the "revolution" or "anti-imperialism" that dominated 1960s Indonesia. More than answering the "cultural offensives" from leftist artists at that time, *Tauhid* raises concerns on the quest for relevance—if not the insecurity—of Islam in modern Indonesia while pondering the idea of Islam as the foundation for national identity in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Islamic films; Indonesia; Islam and cinema; Indonesian cinema; film and hajj; Islam and modernism

### Introduction

*Tauhid* (1966), directed by Asrul Sani (1927–2004), a versatile filmmaker, scriptwriter, poet, playwright, and political activist, establishes a profound connection with President Sukarno and Lesbumi, an art and culture organization affiliated with Nahdhatul Ulama (NU),<sup>1</sup> one of Indonesia's

<sup>1</sup> Nahdhatul Ulama is no longer a political party now, as it has decided to "return to the original path" (*kembali ke khittah*) as a socio-cultural organization. As a Muslim organization,

prominent Islamic parties during the 1950s and 1960s. The collaborative vision of Sani and his Lesbumi colleague, Misbach Yusa Biran (1933–2012), captured Sukarno's interest with their concept of a film that claimed to authentically embody the spirit of Islam by portraying the transformative journey of the Hajj pilgrimage. Recognizing the political potential of Islam as a mobilizing force for his own ambitions, Sukarno embraced the concept and instructed the Department of Religious Affairs, the Department of Information, and the Home Office to provide financial support for the project. While Sukarno's passion for cinema was widely acknowledged, his endeavor to involve government departments in the production of a film centered around the Hajj was remarkable, given the fierce competition among political factions seeking Sukarno's attention, endorsement, and support. This undertaking held even greater significance in the early 1960s when Sukarno, disillusioned with liberal democracy, boldly proclaimed a return to the revolution.

In 1959, Sukarno articulated his grand geopolitical ambition to lead a “new world order,” positioning Indonesia as the center of those contending against the two dominant political blocs at the time—the United States and the Soviet Bloc. In determining the underlying principle of the “Indonesian Revolution,” Sukarno positioned its characteristics somewhere between the American Declaration of Independence and the Communist Manifesto. He presented the idea of the unity of mankind:

Human beings are the same everywhere. Humanity is one. This is what I say everywhere I go, whether in the West or the East, in the North or the South, in all eight corners of the world. The Virtue of Humanity, the Conscience of Humanity, the Social Conscience of Man, permeates the souls of all human beings across the face of the Earth. And this Social Conscience does not change, it does not want to be amended, it does not want to be modified.<sup>2</sup>

Nahdhatul Ulama is considered the biggest Muslim organization in Indonesia. However, this organization is very loose in nature, without a centralised system, akin to a loose confederation of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*).

<sup>2</sup> Manusia itu di mana-mana sama. Kemanusiaan adalah satu. “Mankind is one”, demikianlah saya katakan di mana-mana pada waktu saya melanglang buana, di Barat atau di Timur, di Utara atau di Selatan, di delapan penjuru daripada dunia. Budi-Kemanusiaan, Hati-Nurani Kemanusiaan, the Social Conscience of Man, menyerapi jiwa semua makhluk-manusia di seluruh muka bumi. Dan Social Conscience ini tak berubah-robah, tak mau diamendir, tak mau dimodulir. For Sukarno's 1959 speech entitled “Rediscovery of Our Revolution,” see: [https://id.wikisource.org/wiki/Penemuan\\_Kembali\\_Revolusi\\_Kita](https://id.wikisource.org/wiki/Penemuan_Kembali_Revolusi_Kita).

To rally domestic support, he espoused his syncretic concept of Nasakom—an amalgamation of nationalism (*Nasionalisme*), religion (*Agama*, with Islam representing the majority religion), and communism (*Komunisme*)—all united under the banner of an unfinished revolution, symbolized by the phrase “*Revolusi Belum Selesai*.” (the revolution is not yet over) Sukarno had long advocated for the convergence of these three ideologies, dating back to 1926 when he expounded on this notion in an article for *Suluh Indonesia* magazine. When declared in 1959, this syncretic ideology triggered intense competition between the military, political parties, and affiliated organizations, which all vied for Sukarno’s favor by seeking his attention and engaging in political actions aligned with his ambitious vision. The realm of filmmaking in the 1960s also became a stage for this competition, as Sukarno’s speeches ignited extensive debates and spurred actions centered around anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, and the notion of film as a potent instrument of revolution.

This chapter discusses *Tauhid* in the above context, starting from Sukarno’s speech in 1959, which were followed by reactions from Islamic political powers to provide footing for Sukarno’s geopolitical ambition. Furthermore, the chapter elaborates on the film’s contribution to the formation of Muslim identity in Indonesia in the context of ideological contestation in the 1960s. In this context, Islam and Muslim identity—including their expression in films—were forced to address issues such as class relations, foreign interference, and anti-imperialism. These topics have garnered significant attention in Indonesian politics, reflecting their widespread significance and relevance. In this way, this article establishes the ways in which the cultural Cold War can be examined through a different concept, namely anti-imperialism.

### Rediscovery of Our Revolution

In his annual speech commemorating Indonesian independence in 1959, Sukarno introduced the concept of the “Rediscovery of Our Revolution” (*Pememuan Kembali Revolusi Kita*), commonly known as the Political Manifesto or Manipol. This informal state ideology served as the foundation for political and economic development in Indonesia. This era, characterized by Guided Democracy (*Demokrasi Terpimpin*) and Guided Economy (*Ekonomi Terpimpin*), saw Sukarno assuming the role of the “Great Leader” providing guidance in both realms. The speech popularized the phrase “*revolusi belum selesai*” which became the central slogan in the ideological contestation in the 1960s.



In the realm of filmmaking, Sukarno's speech resonated with leftist artists who had long been voicing their discontent over the dominance of Hollywood films in Indonesia. This sentiment was first articulated in the National Cultural Congress II (*Kongres Kebudayaan II*) held in Bandung in 1951, where leftist artists and filmmakers decried a perceived "moral crisis" within the country. Throughout the 1950s, there was a surge in attacks against Hollywood films in which they were accused of corrupting Indonesian youth, eroding cultural values, and glorifying the American lifestyle. Notably, films like *The Desert Fox* (1952) faced denunciation in Medan by Lekra (*Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat*, or People's Art Institution), a cultural organization affiliated with the Indonesian Communist Party, due to its perceived "fascist propaganda."<sup>3</sup>

The backlash against American films became so intense that the United States Information Service (USIS) responded by inviting the renowned American movie star Marlon Brando to Southeast Asia to promote American films.<sup>4</sup> During his visit, a widely circulated photograph captured Brando standing alongside the first lady, Fatmawati, and Usmar Ismail, one of Indonesia's most prominent filmmakers at the time who had spent a year studying film at UCLA. This image became a symbol of the tensions and debates surrounding the influence of American cinema in Indonesia.

The idea of anti-imperialism gained momentum following the Bandung decolonization conference in 1955, commonly known as the Afro-Asia Conference (*Konferensi Asia Afrika*). This conference brought together Asian and African nations, uniting them in their shared commitment to opposing colonialism and seeking decolonization. The conference set forth action plans aimed at liberating the world from the dominance of the two prevailing blocs at the time—the capitalist bloc and the communist bloc. In Indonesia, this sentiment of decolonization, encapsulated as the "Bandung Spirit," had a profound impact on cultural movements within the leftist art and film community embodied by organizations such as Lekra, Sarbufis (Film and Theatre Workers Union), and LFI (Indonesian Film Institution). The "Bandung Spirit" was not only ingrained in leftist political movements but also permeated the cultural realm, shaping important policies and

3 NA, "Djuga ODB prinsip tidak setuju film "The Desert Fox" [ODB also reject "The Desert Fox"]", *Harian Rakjat*, September 8, 1952, 2.

4 Douglas Kammen, "Brando in Southeast Asia," in *Blog Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 4, 2020, available online, <https://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/essays/brando-southeast-asia/>, retrieved on January 25, 2022.

events that elevated the advocacy of depicting anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism in Indonesian films to new heights.

The anti-imperialist agenda was expressed in the censorship guidelines of 1961, which explicitly drew inspiration from the “spirit of Asia-Africa solidarity.” These guidelines incorporated provisions aimed at combating imperialism, colonialism, and racism, specifically prohibiting portrayals that could undermine the aspiration of Afro-Asian solidarity. For leftist filmmakers, this censorship code was seen as a political triumph. Newspapers with left-leaning stances, like *Harian Rakjat*, went so far as to publish the complete code while urging the government to take action against films originating from Western imperialistic countries and Asian and local films exhibiting similar characteristics.

The spirit of revolution and anti-imperialism persisted with the Third Afro-Asian Film Festival (FFAA III), which took place in Jakarta in April 1964. Building upon the inaugural festivals held in Tashkent in 1958 and Cairo in 1960, this event was named in homage to the Afro-Asian Conference, emphasizing the collective cultural strength of this newly established political bloc. Simultaneously, the festival served as a direct competitor to the Asia Pacific Film Festival, which celebrated Hollywood films and was sponsored by The Asia Foundation, among others. Within Indonesia, President Sukarno utilized the Afro-Asian Film Festival to promote his vision of a new world order, one that was free of colonialism and the exploitation of human beings. In line with this vision, films showcased at FFAA III were required to eschew portrayals of the entrenched “old established forces” and instead foreground the ideals of anti-colonialism, anti-racism, and the renowned “Bandung Spirit.” The spirit of anti-colonialism resonated in Sukarno’s speech on the festival’s closing night, thereby solidifying the festival’s commitment to advancing these transformative values:

I reckon the Asia-Africa Film Festival contributes to the world, contributes to the understanding that our nations, the Asian-African nations, are in the period of national aspiration. The period of developing our countries. The period of developing our societies. The period of building the world anew, the world without *exploitation del’homme par l’homme*.<sup>5</sup>

5 Sukarno expressed this last phrase in French. Original text: *Saya anggap bahwa terjadinya film festival yang ke-III di Djakarta ini contribute kepada dunia seluruhnya, contribute kepada pengertian bahwa kami, kita bangsa-bangsa Asia dan Afrika sedang dalam periode national aspiration. Periode untuk membangun negara-negara kami. Periode untuk membangun masyarakat kami. Periode untuk membangun satu dunia baru tanpa exploitation del’homme par l’homme.* Sukarno’s speech on the closing night of FFAA III, Jakarta, April 30, 1964.

The success of the Third Afro-Asian Film Festival sparked a spirited debate in the newspapers. Left-leaning publications hailed the festival as a triumph, citing the impressive turnout of approximately 10,000 attendees at the opening ceremony and noting the extensive selection of films being screened. President Sukarno's presence at the opening ceremony and his impassioned speech on closing night were viewed as direct endorsements of the revolutionary and anti-imperialist agenda championed by leftist figures in the film industry. However, other journalists and film critics, including Rosihan Anwar, criticized the festival, highlighting the relatively low attendance figures for the film screenings. Anwar argued that this could be attributed to the failure of leftist organizations and their propaganda machinery to mobilize their members effectively, as well as the perceived lack of appeal of the films to audiences without strong political leanings. Notably, prominent Indonesian filmmakers Usmar Ismail and Djamiludin Malik, co-founders of Lesbumi, did not participate in FFAA III. Instead, they embarked on a journey to Saudi Arabia to witness the filming of *Tauhid* and the Hajj pilgrimage.

On the festival's closing day—April 30, 1964—the anti-imperialist fervor peaked. This day was unilaterally declared as the new “National Film Day,” replacing the previous date of March 30, 1950, which commemorated the first shooting day of Usmar Ismail's film, *Long March*. A few weeks later, on May 9, the festival director, Madame Utami Surjadarma, announced a nationwide movement to boycott American films. The movement, known as PAPFIAS (*Panitia Aksi Pengganyangan Film Imperialis Amerika Serikat*, or Committee for the Eradication of American Imperialist Films), took to the streets to denounce movie theaters that continued to screen American films. The protests persisted for months and spread to various provinces across the country, garnering significant coverage in leftist newspapers such as *Harian Rakjat* and *Bintang Timur*.

The protest reached its climax with a raid on the residence of William Palmer, the president of AMPAI (Association of American Film Producers in Indonesia), amid accusations of his involvement as a CIA intelligence operative. In April 1965, Palmer's villa in the picturesque mountain resort area of Puncak was ransacked. Publicly, Sukarno accused Palmer of being a CIA agent, citing a purported connection between him and a document attributed to British Ambassador Sir Andrew Gilchrist. Then, in May 1965, the AMPAI building was intentionally set on fire, further escalating the tensions accompanying the anti-imperialist sentiments.

## Islam: International Feature

Sukarno's speech ignited a passionate debate within literary and artistic circles about the clash between the concept of universal humanism—often referred to as “art for art's sake”—and the principles of social realism. In response, a group of artists penned a Cultural Manifesto (*Manifesto Kebudayaan*) challenging the notion that art should be subordinate to politics, as implied by Sukarno's address. However, those who signed and supported this manifesto experienced a severe backlash. They were subjected to intense pressure and were branded as counter-revolutionaries in newspapers, while some were even ultimately compelled to resign from their positions in cultural organizations and public offices.

Amidst this hostile environment, several artists sought out political affiliations as a means of protection and resource preservation. Notably, a group of Muslim filmmakers including Djamaludin Malik, Usmar Ismail, Asrul Sani, and Misbach Yusa Biran formed the group Lesbumi in 1962. This organization came under the patronage of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's prominent Islamic political party of the 1960s. Ismail and Malik, who had been an activist in Anshor Youth—an NU-affiliated youth organization—since his youth, had previously attempted to establish a collective of Islamic artists known as Gerakan Film Adabi (Civilization Film Movement) in the early 1950s, although this was not fully materialized.

These co-founders of Lesbumi were esteemed filmmakers who were later hailed as the pioneers of Indonesian cinema. Usmar Ismail gained recognition for his film *Long March* and established Perfini, the first fully Indonesian-owned film company. This paved the way for their inaugural film to be hailed as the “national film” of Indonesia. Djamaludin Malik, on the other hand, owned multiple companies, including Persari. Asrul Sani, a prolific writer, and Misbach Yusa Biran, the first film archivist in Indonesia, played vital roles in the industry. Biran's initiative, Sinematek, founded in 1975, was the first film archive in Asia.

Following the establishment of Lesbumi, these filmmakers actively advocated for Islam as the foundation of art. Ismail went beyond the dichotomy between universal humanism and social realism by proposing “the third way.” He rejected the notion of art for art's sake and the idea of art being engulfed by politics. Instead, he spoke about the wellsprings of inspiration and the ethical spirit that should drive Muslim artists in their creative endeavors. According to Ismail, the defense of the poor is not exclusive to communist artists; Muslim artists embody a similar spirit, which can find expression in their art. In Ismail's own words, “When Muslim artists defend the poor, the oppressed, and the

Marhaens [Sukarno's term for the proletariat] in their works, it is solely for the sake of Allah and as part of their collective obligation (*fardu kifayah*).<sup>6</sup>

Irrespective of their involvement in the cultural realm, Lesbumi was perceived by some as a “mixed bag” of Muslim artists driven primarily by the desire to seek protection amidst the hostile environment within the art and culture sector, which was highly polarized along political lines. Nonetheless, this organization managed to engage in significant discussions concerning the role of Islam in the arts, particularly in the realm of film.

Lesbumi and its leaders did not issue an official response to the FFAA III, opting instead to avoid the event, as Ismail and Malik had done. Nevertheless, the Afro-Asia Conference and the festival did raise concerns among certain Muslim leaders who, as Jennifer Lindsay notes, became “irate” with the conference. These leaders, representing various Islamic tenets (*aliran*), formed HSBI, an alliance of Muslim art and culture organizations. Together with other Islamic organizations, they initiated the Asia-Africa Islamic Conference (KIAA) as a counterforce to the influence of the Asia-Africa Conference and its associated spirit, which had been claimed by the Indonesian Communist Party and its affiliated movements, including in the realms of art, culture, and film. The KIAA aimed to provide a platform for Sukarno to showcase the concept of “pan-Islamism,” serving as a foundation for international solidarity and functioning as a competing force against the global outlook of communism.

Sukarno was profoundly inspired by the concept of equality and international solidarity within Islam, which he believed could serve as the foundation for anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements. During the closing ceremony of KIAA, Sukarno reiterated the pivotal role of Islam in liberating humanity from exploitation and colonial domination.

It is about time for us, as Muslims, to rise again and march forward, freeing ourselves from the oppression and exploitation imposed by the neo-colonialists with ever onward spirit to make Islam the pioneer for humanity.<sup>7</sup>

6 Original text: *Tetapi jika para seniman Muslimin di dalam karya-karyanya berdasarkan atas ajaran-ajaran agamanya membela kepentingan kaum kecil, kaum yang tertindas, kaum Marhaen dan segala sesuatu yang dilakukannya “karena Allah semata-mata”, maka itu adalah fardhu kifayah baginya.* Usmar Ismail. *Usmar Ismail Mengupas Film [Usmar Ismail Dissects Films]*. (Jakarta: Sinar Harapan, 1986), 100–101.

7 Original text: *Kini sudah tiba waktunya, kita sebagai umat Islam bangkit kembali dan maju terus membebaskan diri dari penindasan dan penghisapan kaum neokolim dengan smemangat pantang mundur untuk menjadikan Islam pelopor bagi umat manusia.* *Pikiran Rakjat*, March 8, 1965.

Sukarno viewed Islam as a source of solidarity and equality, serving as the cornerstone for eradicating colonialism. In this regard, he highlighted the significance of the Hajj pilgrimage as a powerful symbol of human equality, one that transcended nationalities, races, and origins.

### ***Tauhid*: The Production**

*Tauhid* did not emerge as a direct response to the prevailing anti-imperialist sentiment in the film industry. Its origins were rather modest, originating from a conversation within the Lesbumi circle about creating a film centered around the Hajj pilgrimage. According to Biran, it was Malik who initially suggested going on Hajj with the ulterior motive of using it as a pretext for making a film. However, both Biran and Asrul Sani took this idea seriously and presented it to Sukarno, who needed to be convinced, as he harbored doubts about how a story about Islam would fit into contemporary life. It was during this discussion that Sukarno proposed drawing inspiration from Muhammad Asad's autobiography, *The Road to Mecca*. Asad's autobiography, published in 1954, detailed his intellectual and spiritual journey and enjoyed widespread popularity, particularly in Indonesia.

Sani enthusiastically embraced the idea and began writing *Tauhid, Panggilan Tanah Sutji* (*Tauhid, The Call of the Holy Land*). Meanwhile, Biran conceived a separate film concept, *Panggilan Nabi Ibrahim* (*The Call of the Prophet Abraham*), which to this day has not been publicly released despite its completion. The production of these films received financial support from both the Department of Religious Affairs and the Department of Information. For Misbach, the involvement of the latter department was significant because the minister, General Ahmadi, never openly revealed his political allegiance. Biran interpreted his support as an endorsement of Islam rather than communism or PKI, or at the very least as a sign of neutrality amid the political competition of that era.

Before embarking on *Tauhid*, Sani had already directed a film with Islamic themes titled *Titian Serambut Dibelah Tudjuh* (*The Passage*, 1959). The film tells the story of an Islamic teacher who faces slander due to his progressive approach to teaching Islam, which challenges the local authority. The film was remade in 1982, employing an allegory from the Quran to illustrate the protagonist's eventual triumph over hardships and adversity. When creating *Tauhid*, Sani recognized the diverse interpretations of Islam in Indonesia and presented his own vision of a progressive Muslim who embraces both piety and modern knowledge. Sani showcased debates and conflicts between

orthodox and progressive Muslims concerning Islamic teachings in *The Passage*. *Tauhid* can be viewed as an extension of this concept, aiming to forge a modern identity for Indonesian Muslims. Notably, the film credits Lesbumi as the producer, while some NU scholars, known for their orthodox Islamic views, are acknowledged as “religious consultants.” By attributing credit to NU scholars and portraying a progressive Muslim as the main character, *Tauhid* highlighted the intricate concept of Muslim identity and, at the same time, posed a challenge to the ideological contestation of the 1960s in Indonesia.

After facing multiple delays, the production of *Tauhid* finally commenced in 1964. The exact reasons for the postponement remain unclear. In his autobiography, Biran alluded to the influence of General Ahmadi, who replaced Roeslan Abdulgani as the head of the Department of Information. Abdulgani was one of the initiators of the 1955 Afro-Asia Conference and had served as Sukarno’s informal spokesperson in interpreting the “Revolution is not yet over” speech. Ultimately, the film was released in 1966 but received limited theatrical screenings. Despite being touted as a “multi-million-rupiah production,” it failed to garner significant attention from audiences and critics alike. Behind the scenes, discussions centered around accusations that Sani’s motivation for going to Mecca was solely to make the film rather than a genuine intention to observe the Hajj pilgrimage. This lukewarm reception and Lesbumi’s diminishing influence following the regime change in 1966 caused *Tauhid* to fade into obscurity.

### ***Tauhid*: A Film Analysis**

The analysis of *Tauhid: Panggilan Tanah Sutji* that follows is based on the collection held by Sinematek. The electronic copy available exhibits a low-quality picture, likely due to an inadequate transfer process. Some parts of the film suffer from low audio levels, particularly towards the end, resulting in indistinct dialogue. Despite these technical limitations, the film can still be adequately analyzed.

The film begins with a small press conference at Hotel Indonesia, the first high-rise building in Indonesia. The central figure at the press conference is Muhammad Amin (M. E. Zainuddin), a writer commissioned by the government to produce a book that portrays the beauty of the Hajj pilgrimage. Accompanying him is a representative from the Department of Information, who greets the audience and introduces Amin as a distinguished writer entrusted with a government mission.

This opening scene holds significance in establishing the concept of the modern Muslim subject in Indonesia. *Tauhid* is one of Indonesia's pioneering films to depict Jakarta's modern face, which underwent a facelift to align with Sukarno's geopolitical ambitions. Hotel Indonesia, opened in 1963, a year prior to the production of *Tauhid*, was seen as a symbol of modernity and cosmopolitanism. Both Muhammad Amin and the government official are dressed in modern clothing, formal jackets with ties, emphasizing that discussions about Islam need not be confined to conventional portrayals. This departs from the conventional portrayal in many other films of Islamic public figures who are often recognized by their traditional garments such as a sarong and headgear like *kopiah*.

Furthermore, this opening scene also establishes Muhammad Amin as a detached observer of the Hajj pilgrimage rather than ardently observing the ritual. As Asrul Sani explains in his article on the making of *Tauhid*:

It is best for viewers to approach this film not as a typical drama with its complications, conflicts, and so on. *Tauhid* was written and created in the form of a journal entry, and, thus should be perceived as news and not story.<sup>8</sup>

What Sani meant by “news and not story” is that this film adopts a documentary style, depicting everyday scenes rather than relying on dramatized mise-en-scène. Sani considered this statement as an artistic choice, emphasizing the ability of Muslim artists to maintain their independence from societal pressures and adopt a detached and impartial perspective on the Hajj, one of the most revered rituals in Islamic tradition.

Back to the film, during the Q&A session, the protagonist Muhammad Amin finds himself cornered by journalists who question his inability to provide simple answers about the specific aspects of the Hajj that captured his attention and the format of his writing. The inquiries reach a climax with a question regarding Amin's accountability: how can he, as a writer and a Muslim, be responsible to the public if he cannot articulate his stance on one of the religion's most cherished rituals? Moreover, as the government has sponsored his journey, using taxpayers' money, Amin is expected to be accountable for his actions.

8 Asrul Sani, “Tjatanan Sutradara Film Tauhid, Bagian X,” *Abad Muslimin* no. 4 tahun II, January 1966. Original text: *Alangkah baiknja djika orang tidak menonton film ini sebagai menonton sebuah drama dengan komplikasi, konflik dan sebagainya, seperti yang bisa kita temui. TAUHID ditulis dan dibuat seperti orang menulis sebuahh harian, dan oleh karena itu djuga harus dibatja sebagai sebuah berita dan bukan sebuah kisah.*



This opening scene sets the tone for Sani's concept of the Indonesian Muslim intellectual. The film begins with ambiguity and the protagonist's self-doubt about his capacity to fulfill his public role, particularly as a representative of the spiritual aspect of Indonesian Muslims. This serves as a foundation for the character's development throughout the film, which can be categorized as a road movie, as the plot revolves around the Hajj pilgrimage, and the character undergoes personal growth or a change in perspective by the film's conclusion. The presence of Hotel Indonesia and its modern architecture symbolizes the starting point of a transition towards modernity for Indonesian Muslims.

The Hajj journey commences at Tandjung Periuk Port in Jakarta. At the port, Amin encounters his old friend Mursjid (Ismed M. Noor), who has risen to the rank of Major in the Indonesian Air Force. Mursjid informs Amin that he has undergone a life-altering experience after surviving a plane crash during a mission in Papua (then known as Irian Jaya). Although he lost his entire team, this incident led him to become a devout Muslim.

During the ship's voyage to Mecca, Amin and Mursjid encounter the film's "antagonist," Halim (Aedy Moward). Halim is a skeptical medical doctor who harbors doubts about religion. He views the Hajj pilgrimage, particularly for the elderly, as pointless and risky, with unclear benefits. Halim openly expresses his opinions to his patients, causing discomfort among most passengers who are pilgrims.

Halim represents a Muslim who lacks faith in his religion, and his role as a medical doctor provides a platform for the film to explore the conflict between religion and science, particularly in discussions about death, fate, and piety. Halim firmly believes in modern science as the determining factor in his life. On the other hand, there are pilgrims, especially a young Muslim teacher (Nurbani Jusuf), who view Halim's views as blasphemous. The teacher, whose father falls ill during the trip, confronts Halim's opinions and expresses her anger at the belittlement of her faith. Amidst these conflicting perspectives, Amin, an intellectual and introspective Muslim, acknowledges human knowledge's limits and accepts death's inevitability, viewing piety as the only path to salvation. Conversations and debates on these themes become the primary conflicts in the film, complemented by recurring visual motifs and Halim's profession as a medical doctor, which lead to several scenes involving older pilgrims who need medical care on their deathbeds.

Sani places significant emphasis on the role of faith in shaping the modern Muslim identity, mainly through Amin's involvement in the debate. At the beginning of the film, Amin is portrayed as an intellectual grappling with a lack of understanding about Hajj and Islam in general. However, his

perspective gradually evolves. Amin finds himself repeatedly defending Islam against Halim's skeptical assertions and engages in arguments against Halim's doubts. Additionally, Amin assumes the role of a peacemaker, calming down the passengers when they express anger towards Halim.

Interestingly, the change in Amin's position is not the film's primary focus, as if the transformation is expected to occur naturally. The film's main attention is directed towards Halim and his spiritual journey, which begins after his elderly patient dies despite Halim's belief that he administered the correct medicine for a cure. Halim struggles to accept this reality, and Sani portrays his inner turmoil through visually striking scenes. A close-up of Halim's bewildered face, partially illuminated, highlights his struggle to cope with his internal thoughts. Another scene depicts Halim climbing seemingly endless staircases, symbolizing the challenging path ahead of him. The sequence concludes with a shot of Halim sitting at a table, holding his face in his hands, confessing to Amin that he feels empty after this experience.

Emptiness also becomes a significant aspect of Sani's spiritual journey as a poet, writer, and filmmaker. He expressed his thoughts on this matter in 1963, one year prior to the production of *Tauhid*: "I have come to realize that I have managed to create emptiness within myself and perceive everything around me as relative. This is the period during which I have written the most."<sup>9</sup> However, this emptiness served as a catalyst for Sani's contemplation of his surroundings and inspired him to draw on Islam for his artistic creations, such as *The Passage*.

Furthermore, this emptiness also becomes a transformative moment (a recurring motif in Sani's later films) for Halim. He realizes that observing the Hajj pilgrimage may hold the key to his salvation. Despite having been to Mecca as part of the Indonesian contingent, Halim decides to embark on the Hajj pilgrimage for the first time. At this point, the film's focus shifts from Amin, who appears at the beginning, to Halim, who embodies the portrayal of a reborn Muslim able to maintain his scientific mindset following his epiphany.

*Tauhid* proceeds to chronicle the journey of the pilgrims in Jeddah and Mecca, providing a detailed depiction of the Hajj rituals. The film highlights the immense crowd surrounding the Kaaba, offering Halim an opportunity to reflect on the magnificence and beauty of Islam. However, the epiphany does not come easily for Halim, as he initially feels lost in the Hajj camp. This feeling of being lost serves as a metaphor for Halim's abandonment of his old beliefs and his gradual discovery of the greatness of his religion—a religion capable of uniting diverse individuals. Halim and Amin encounter

9 Sani, *Surat-Surat Kepercayaan* [Letters of Trusts], 658.

this realization when approached by an anonymous Indonesian immigrant (played by Asrul Sani himself) who has been residing in Saudi Arabia.

Nevertheless, Halim believes that the Hajj pilgrimage is not the final destination but rather the beginning of a righteous life. He shares this perspective with Amin, suggesting that the book Amin intends to write because of this pilgrimage should not be a finished work but the commencement of a new life. Amin treasures Halim's conclusion as if receiving a precious heirloom. Halim states that a person who has completed the Hajj pilgrimage can offer the best to the people, the state, and the religion. Amin responds by affirming that this signifies the attainment of *haji mabrur* (the accepted hajj), or the hajj that isn't mixed with any misdeed—the ultimate objective of one's Hajj pilgrimage. Sani concludes the film with a voiceover from the hidden narrator, emphasizing the book that Amin will write because of this journey. The book will remain open-ended, for Hajj is not an end in itself but, indeed, the beginning of a righteous life.

## Conclusion

Following the regime change in 1966, the activities of Lesbumi significantly declined, and many of its activists, such as Usmar Ismail, Asrul Sani, and Misbach Yusa Biran, did not prioritize the organization in their filmmaking endeavors. However, Sani continued to explore the concept of modern Muslims in his later films, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. He crafted several films centered around Muslims who merge scientific or modern knowledge, spiritual exploration, and critical socio-political roles. These individuals step forward to confront injustice, corruption, and the decadence of life while acknowledging the challenges of living as a Muslim in a modern setting.

Although *Tauhid* was produced by an institution established in direct response to the political hostilities of the 1960s and influenced by international politics, its themes are closely connected to longstanding questions regarding the role of Muslims in Indonesia. This resonates with Tony Day's observations on the cultural Cold War in Southeast Asia, which revolved around the search for national identity, modernity, and, to some extent, independence. Jennifer Lindsay further defines this period as a turbulent time in which culture played a central role in shaping the notion of Indonesian identity. Rather than adopting a confrontational approach towards the hostile political environment of the 1960s, *Tauhid* explores equality and Islam as sources of inspiration for a rational individual who is simultaneously pious and nationalistic.

## Notes

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# Part Two

Cold War Geopolitics in Asian Cinemas



## 6. Third World, First World: Ishihara Yūjirō as a Cold War Star

*Hiroshi Kitamura*

### Abstract

This chapter examines Ishihara Yūjirō, a “national” or *kokuminteki* celebrity, as a Cold War star. Following his debut in 1956, the Kobe-born actor achieved instant fame by portraying a range of manly and masculine characters for Nikkatsu Studio and Ishihara Promotion, Inc. The so-called “Yūjirō films” began by presenting Japan as a developing Third World nation in the mid to late 1950s but over time boasted their rise in status by engaging the United States and Western Europe. By the early 1970s, Ishihara’s Japan was a full-fledged member of the First World. The image and persona of the iconic star did not merely address “domestic” concerns but exemplified a desire for “uplift” within the tense geopolitics of the Cold War.

**Keywords:** Japan, international, transnational, US-Japan relations, Nikkatsu, Ishihara Promotion

Ishihara Yūjirō was a Japanese icon. Following his debut on the big screens in 1956, the Kobe-born actor not only became a leading star in the movie business but also achieved widespread fame as a singer, television actor, and content producer of his own independent talent company. Without a doubt, he was one of the most popular celebrities in post-World War II Japan. In this chapter, I examine how this “national” or *kokuminteki* star engaged Cold War geopolitics. Through a selective study of his big-screen narratives from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s, I specifically explore how Ishihara served to present changing representations of Japan from being a developing Third World nation alongside much of the non-Western world to becoming an industrialized First World country that emulated



the United States and Western Europe.<sup>1</sup> By demonstrating Ishihara's active interplay with international geopolitics (both as a person and as a representation), I wish to show the ways in which his cinematic narratives helped form a Japan that was "uplifted" from Third World to First World.

This chapter will highlight a cultural figure who has surprisingly eluded full scholarly analysis.<sup>2</sup> In treating Ishihara as a "Cold War star," it aims to illustrate the internationality and transnationality of Japanese cinema, and also seeks to recast the narrative of contemporary Japan. Even though much of East and Southeast Asia became quickly embroiled in political, economic, military, and cultural strife after World War II, the Japanese public and Japanese scholars have primarily looked at the past eight decades through the lens of the "postwar" (*senjo*), which emplaces their home country in a world "after" and even "beyond" military conflict.<sup>3</sup> By viewing Ishihara through a Cold War lens, this chapter joins a small but growing number of studies that situates "postwar" Japan in relation to the dangerous global conflict.<sup>4</sup> Through an analysis of how Ishihara's narratives operated between the Third and First Worlds, I will show how the Cold War was not simply imposed on Japan by the outside world but was also shaped by Japan's own agendas and initiatives.

\* Following Japanese convention, the names of Japanese individuals in this chapter will be presented surname first.

1 This chapter relies on Odd Arne Westad's definition of the "Third World" as "former colonial or semicolonial countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America that were subject to European (or rather pan-European, including American and Russian) economic or political domination." See Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3.

2 Notable exceptions include Michael Raine, "Ishihara Yūjirō: Youth, Celebrity, and the Male Body in Late-1950s Japan." In *Word and Image in Japanese Cinema*, eds. Dennis Washburn and Carole Cavanaugh (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 202–25; Watanabe Takenobu, *Nikkatsu akushon no karei na sekai* 3 vols. (Tokyo: Mirai sha, 1982). In Japanese, Satō Toshiaki has written a useful overview of Ishihara's cinematic career, but it is an "official" account (overseen by Ishihara Promotion, Inc.) that is celebratory in tone. Satō Toshiaki, *Ishihara Yūjirō: Shōwa taiyō den* (Tokyo: Alpha Beta Books, 2019).

3 The discrepancy between "postwar" and "Cold War" is stated, for example, in Carol Gluck, "The 'End' of the Postwar: Japan at the Turn of the Millennium," *Public Culture* 10, no. 1: 1–23.

4 See, for example, Michael Baskett, "Japan's Film Festival Diplomacy in Cold War Asia," *The Velvet Light Trap* 73, (Spring 2014): 4–18; Michael Raine, "The Cold War as Media Environment in 1960s Japanese Cinema." In *The Cold War and Asian Cinema*, eds. Poshek Fu and Man-Fung Yip (New York: Routledge, 2020), 119–38; Ann Sherif, *Japan's Cold War: Media, Literature, and the Law* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

## Japan and/as/above the Third World

Although often heralded as a “national” star, Ishihara Yūjirō was a hybrid subject. Born in 1934 in the international port city of Kobe and raised in two other cities by the ocean—Otaru and Hayama—he came of age in a liminal and fluid space in which he observed ships, foreigners, and the global flow of goods from a young age. His father, a shipping company executive, not only taught his son how to swim but also told him “stories about deals and negotiations with foreigners” and the “atmospheres of the harbors overseas.”<sup>5</sup> In the years after World War II, Ishihara became an avid listener of English-language radio broadcasts, aired for US occupationaires.<sup>6</sup> In time, he became an unusually tall young man with a tan obtained at the beach. People at the time commonly regarded him as *Nihonjin banare*, or a person whose looks seemed to transcend a “normal” Japanese person.<sup>7</sup>

For Nikkatsu Studio, which was struggling to secure on-screen stars in the months after resuming its filmmaking in 1954, Ishihara’s “exotic” masculinity was an attraction. When the studio’s executives negotiated with his older brother Shintarō, a budding novelist who would later become known for his right-wing politics as governor of Tokyo, to make the film version of his award-winning novel *Season of the Sun* (*Taiyō no kisetsu*, film released in 1956), they hired the younger brother to play a supporting role. In this controversial film that depicted spoiled, delinquent youths engaging in reckless acts, Ishihara left a strong impression and was enlisted to star in a follow-up film, *Crazed Fruit* (*Kurutta kajitsu*, 1956). These, together with a few other narratives, generated instant notoriety and came to be known as Sun Tribe or *Taiyōzoku* films, which portrayed defiant youths under the heavy influence of American/Western culture, as they hung out in sun-kissed beaches—sometimes dating foreign women—and chiaroscuro-lit nightclubs where Westerners were regularly present. In both *Season of the Sun* and *Crazed Fruit*, Okada Masumi, a half-Danish actor, makes an appearance as a fellow rebel and helps construct an “exotic” feel within the youth community. From his debut, Ishihara is presented as part of a liminal, transnational setting.<sup>8</sup>

These *Taiyōzoku* narratives helped revive Nikkatsu’s fortunes as a top Japanese studio. Ishihara became the centerpiece of the company’s production

5 Ishihara Yūjirō, *Waga seishun monogatari* (Tokyo: Tōzai bunmeisha, 1958), 162.

6 Ishihara Yūjirō, *Kuden waga jinsei no ji* (Tokyo: Shufu to seikatsusha, 2003), 37.

7 Kurahara Koreyoshi, “Jidai o seotta futari no wakamono.” In Masuda Toshio and Uekusa Nobukazu, eds., *Ishihara Yūjirō soshite sono nakama* (Tokyo: Haga shoten, 1983), 141.

8 On the “un-Japanese” look of the Sun Tribe films, see Raine, “Ishihara Yūjirō,” 204–9.

and marketing, as its stock directors including Inoue Umetsugu, Kurihara Koreyoshi, Masuda Toshio, and Ushihara Yōichi took turns to churn out so-called “Yujiro films” (*Yūjirō eiga*) almost every month.<sup>9</sup> Many of these narratives became part of Nikkatsu’s *mukokuseki eiga* or nationality-less films, which jumbled together a kaleidoscope of transnational representations.<sup>10</sup> What is striking about the *mukokuseki* meta-genre is not just the influence of the US and Western Europe—a topic to which I shall return shortly hereafter—but also the prominence of the developing world. Ishihara’s emergence in the entertainment industry coincided with the decolonization of non-Western territories, the drive towards non-alignment, and the quest for global human rights. Interestingly, some of his early narratives present Japan within the rubric of the Third World, which Ishihara referred to as *kōshikoku* or a “backward country.”<sup>11</sup>

*Lunar Eclipse (Gesshoku, 1956)* serves as a case in point. In this noir tale, Ishihara, the boxer, vies for the affection of a nightclub singer (Tsukioka Yumeji), who is also pursued by a rich Filipino, performed once again by the “exotic” Okada. The entanglement provokes the Japanese boxer to beat up the booze-drinking Filipino, but the former later dies after a fatal match on the ring, and the latter ends up shooting her in the end. *I am Waiting (Ore wa matteru ze, 1957)* exemplifies a desire to move across non-Western regions as Ishihara, a former boxer who runs a dingy eatery, expresses his eagerness to head for Brazil, where he believes his older brother lives, though he is ultimately stuck in Kobe’s seamy spaces. In *Sea Bastards (Umi no yarō domo, 1957)*, Ishihara the foreman shepherds a group of dockworkers to collect scrap metal from embarked vessels. The ship they board is of Greek origin and carries black and Middle Eastern workers. In the hands of director Shindō Kaneto, who would actively pursue independent filmmaking throughout his long-lasting career, Ishihara’s men initially clash with the foreign workers but soon cultivate a lasting friendship with them. The non-Japanese crew expresses a spirit of revolutionary independence, which is depicted with grainy newsreel footage. Ishihara and his workers begin to identify with this budding Third World movement.

Yet if these films do present Japan as a “backward” Third World country, Ishihara’s characters strive to situate Japan *above* it. This is specifically done by playing up Ishihara’s manliness and sex appeal over Asian and

9 Nikkatsu Kabushiki Kaisha, *Nikkatsu 50-nen shi* (Tokyo: Nikkatsu Kabushiki Kaisha, 1962), 111.

10 See, for example, Mark Schilling, *No Borders No Limits: Nikkatsu Action Cinema* (Godalming: FAB Press, 2007); Watanabe, *Nikkatsu akushon no karei na sekai*.

11 Ishihara, *Kōden waga jinsei no ji*, 102.

non-Western women. In *Storm over Arabia* (*Arabu no arashi*, 1961), Ishihara's character decides to travel to Egypt, following his dead grandfather's advice to explore the world. Along the way, he helps a nationalist movement that is feminized through the appearance of the Egyptian actress Shadia, whom Ishihara once described off-screen as an "exotic beauty."<sup>12</sup> In the film, Ishihara, upon arriving in Egypt for the first time, opines that Cairo is a "more modern city than expected" before assisting the Egyptian woman's efforts to recover a microfilm concealed in a necklace. Here, Ishihara sympathizes with a subaltern movement that would eventually win its independence. Here we see the adaptation of a gendered Orientalist construction, which has often operated within a binary structure sustained by a masculinized West and feminized East.<sup>13</sup>

A similar gender dynamic could be seen in *Rainbow over Kinmon* (*Kinmon tō ni kakeru hashi*, 1962). Co-produced by Nikkatsu and Taiwan's Central Picture Cooperation, the film is set in the backdrop of the Korean War and the Second Taiwan Straits Crisis. Ishihara, who regards the Korean War as a "blood-smelling war" (*chinamagusai sensō*), is a principled doctor who quits his job at a hospital after it tries to cover up a misdiagnosis that led to the death of a patient. While attending to injured soldiers from Korea, he meets a Taiwanese woman named Li Chun (Hua Xin), whose husband had died in the war. Later, Ishihara becomes a ship doctor who sails the seas for three years before disembarking at Kinmon (Jinmen), an island which the Chinese Communist Party had been shelling for some time. There, he accidentally reunites with Li Chun, and they fall in love even though Ishihara had been pursued by a Japanese lover.

The decision Ishihara makes in choosing Li Chun as his romantic partner helps present Taiwan as a feminine space in need of protection by a manly authority. Unfortunately, Taiwanese men are incapable of serving that role, as they themselves depend on Ishihara for self-preservation. One could see this when the Japanese hero uses his own body to shield Li Chun's younger brother from an explosion, or when he helps treat the injured local villagers. Ishihara even assists Li Chun's father, who severely hurt his leg during World War II thanks to the Japanese. Ishihara extends his leadership to the villagers under the justification that he himself was a victim of the war, having lost his parents in China and in the air raids initiated by the United States. As a "postwar subject" who is not directly culpable for Japan's imperial aggression, Ishihara expresses his country's desired course of leadership

12 "Sabaku ni arashi o yobu otoko," *Heibon*, November 1961, n.p.

13 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Viking, 1978).

against communist China. In the end, when an explosion kills Li Chun, Ishihara caresses her, uttering *yamero yamero* –stop stop! He sympathizes with Taiwan against communist China, not with guns and weapons, but with words and moral leadership.

## Engaging the First World

The Yūjiro films that presented Japan as the Third World and above the Third World emerged alongside a cluster of others that engaged the West. This connection centered around the United States. Although Japan and the United States had already cultivated close cultural ties in the prewar era, their intimacy deepened considerably during the Occupation Era (1945–1952), which increasingly turned anticommunist thanks to the “reverse course.”<sup>14</sup> This shift in Occupation policy prioritized economic reconstruction over earlier attempts to democratize Japan, ushered in a “Red Purge” of communists and their sympathizers, and led to the founding of the National Police Reserve (which would become the Self-Defense Forces in 1954). US-Japan relations strengthened under the Cold War rubric. By the time Ishihara first appeared on the screens, the Occupation had ended but US commodities and norms and values were pouring into the market to the extent that “[t]he middle-class ‘American way of life,’” according to Marilyn Ivy, “became the Utopian goal and the dream of many Japanese.”<sup>15</sup> This trend would continue as the nation sustained “high-speed economic growth”—one marked by 10 percent annual growth between the mid-1950s and the early 1970s.<sup>16</sup>

Nikkatsu reinforced Japan’s intimacy with the United States in part by way of music. Even though Ishihara would become famous for his countless *kayōkyoku* songs or “popular ballads,” some of his early films would utilize the star’s vocal cords in light-hearted musicals that invoked Hollywood’s popular hits (both in Japan and the US), such as *An American in Paris* (1951) and *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952). One example of this was *Three Tomboys: The Dancing Sun* (*Otenba sannin musume: Odoru taiyō*, 1957), a tale of three sisters who, in daydreaming about romance and marriage (one hopes to find a “boyfriend who looks like James Dean”), comically search for a husband

14 John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton and the New Press, 1999).

15 Marilyn Ivy, “Formations of Mass Culture.” In *Postwar Japan as History*, ed. Andrew Gordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 179.

16 Andrew Gordon, *A History of Modern Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present* 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 253–9.

for their widowed mother. As the boy next door, Ishihara, together with two other single buddies, performs a number that gripes about older, gray-haired men who seem to have their way with younger women. In *Birth of Jazz Sister* (*Jazz musume tanjō*, 1957), Ishihara is a member of a musical troupe, sharing the stage with popular singer Eri Chiemi. He appears in a show with a guitar on a set resembling a Western saloon, dances in a pier with a Mexican sombrero, and flirts with Eri wearing a tuxedo in front of an opulent fountain.

In integrating songs and music into plot and narrative, Nikkatsu endeavored to encode Ishihara with “jazz” or *jazu*, which in the early postwar years encompassed a “considerably broad [range of] musical styles” including boogie-woogie, be-bop, and swing.<sup>17</sup> In *The Wonderful Guy* (*Subarashiki dansei*, 1958), a backstage musical that dramatizes the pursuit of marriage partners, Ishihara is a stage director who performs a mellow saxophone number at his sister’s wedding. In the more well-known *Man Who Causes a Storm* (*Arashi o yobu otoko*, 1957), the main instrument is the drums. A rugged man who often gets drawn into fist fights, Ishihara joins a band at a colorfully illuminated nightclub. Unlike the “soft” musicals released earlier, Ishihara, before breaking out into an impromptu song dubbed “I am a Drummer,” showcases his signature masculinity by aggressively pounding the instrument. He instantly gains the reputation as a “tough guy drummer,” beats a reigning rival in a drum competition, and reaches top stardom (before being roughed up by a band of villains). In *Love in Ginza* (*Ginza no koi no monogatari*, 1962), the Kobe-born star is a poor artist who shares a room with a jazz pianist (Jerry Fujio) who would play the film’s main theme. The plot is sandwiched by scenes in which the artist-protagonist spots a man on a balcony practicing the trumpet. One might read the scene as a metaphor of Japan’s “Americanization,” as the US musical genre appears to disseminate across the Japanese cityscape.

In the meantime, Nikkatsu also drew from Hollywood’s melodramatic formulas. One can see this in the company’s so-called “mood action” films, which offered a “blend of melodrama and action” that presents the hero and heroine as “mature adults” whose experiences and memories of the past would often shape the core line of action.<sup>18</sup> A film that inspired the cultural transfer was *Casablanca* (1942), which the Japanese studio adapted to the

17 Mike Molasky, *Sengo Nihon no jazu bunka: eiga bungaku angora* (Tokyo: Seidosha, 2005), 33. Molasky also argues that jazz was seen as “general popular music that entered from the United States.” See p. 51.

18 Watanabe, *Nikkatsu akushon no karei na sekai* vol. 2, 22–23.

point of parody. For example, *Escape into Terror* (*Taiyō e no dasshutsu*, 1963) introduces Ishihara as a nightclub owner who alludes to Humphrey Bogart's looks by donning a white suit with a bottle of Johnny Walker on the side. In *A World for Two* (*Futari no sekai*, 1966), the male protagonist returns to an elegant nightclub after spending five years overseas and rekindles his friendship with an African American pianist—just like Dooley Wilson's "Sam." The influence of the Warner Bros. film is even more blatant in *A Warm Misty Night* (*Yogiri yo konya mo arigatō*, 1967), in which Ishihara runs a nightclub in Yokohama while secretly helping those who wish to flee the country. The hard-boiled hero sips whiskey alone when his former fiancé (Asaoka Ruriko), who mysteriously abandoned him on the day of their wedding, appears in sight. Although now married to a revolutionary leader (Nitani Hideaki), she is still in love with Ishihara. However, the mood action hero, like Bogie at the Moroccan airfield, chooses to assist her escape with her husband. In a moment that invokes Bogart's famous line about reclaiming their happy times in Paris ("we got it back last night"), Ishihara quips: "we recovered the 1,500 days and nights."

The social setting of Yūjirō films widely varies by film, but it often underscores the presence and influence of America in Japan. In *Crimson Wings* (*Kurenai no tsubasa*, 1958), Ishihara, an English-speaking pilot working for a small airline company, mans a Cessna that is hijacked by a mobster seeking to escape abroad. The disappearance of the plane prompts a search by Japanese authorities, who contact the US military's "search and rescue coordination center." In *The Sky is Mine* (*Ten to chi o kakeru otoko*, 1959), a Japanese-American flight instructor is dispatched to Ishihara's flight school and preaches "scientific" methods to Japanese students. Ishihara's birth father, in *That Guy and I* (*Aitsu to watashi*, 1961), runs a successful hotel business in the US and urges his son to join him. In *Fresh Leaves* (*Wakai hito*, 1962), Ishihara is a schoolteacher who works at a Catholic girls' school run by an American principal who expresses sympathy and support towards the teachers and the students. Before running a nightclub, the main character of *A Warm Misty Night* is a captain of an international passenger ship owned by American President Lines. In *Rub Out the Killers* (*Satsujinsha o kese*, 1964), Ishihara is hired to live as a double of a young heir of a shipping company after its president and vice president were lost in an accident. Since the young heir is an archaeologist living in the United States, the Nikkatsu star makes a dramatic entrance by "returning" to Japan on a Pan American jet liner and waxes eloquent about his time in North America.

In addition to the United States, Ishihara is also a bridge figure with Western Europe. In *For This We Fight* (*Machikara machi e tsumujikaze*,

1961), Ishihara's character goes to (West) Germany to receive training in medicine, which he practices once he returns to Japan. France receives its dues by being presented as a center of "high culture." In *The Man Who Rode the Typhoon* (*Fūsoku 40 mētoru*, 1958), Ishihara is a college student who would later become involved in his father's construction business. The sister of his friend is a chanson singer who had returned from Paris. While her elegant lifestyle and training in France were aided by a villainous boyfriend who seeks to take over her father's construction company, she is drawn to Ishihara's pure charm and crosses her lover. Her affiliation with France does not end by symbolizing Western decadence or corruption; instead, she pushes the plot in support of Ishihara's cause. In *The Cleanup* (*Arashi no yūsha tachi*, 1969), three young women who work under a self-indulgent fashion designer (Hama Mie) steal a load of cash from a band of gangster men and leave for France to study fashion design.

### Becoming the First World

Some Yūjirō films exemplified another level of intimacy with the First World. At a time when Japanese studios were beginning to seek entry into the global marketplace, Nikkatsu decided to dispatch Ishihara to American and European sites for its tent-pole productions. In the meantime, Ishihara himself would seek filmmaking both in and with the West by founding his own production company, Ishihara Promotion, Inc. These "First World films" were shot in US and European locations, involved offshore cast and crew, and expressed an urge to "even up" with the West. In other words, Ishihara's image and persona in these films conveyed a desire for "uplift" from Third World to First World.

The first film that directly engaged the West was *Love and Death* (*Sekai o kakeru koi*, 1959). Based on a famous novel by Mushanokōji Saneatsu, this Nikkatsu narrative showcases a tragic romance between a hero (Ishihara) and a heroine (Asaoka Ruriko) throughout the time he spends abroad. Whereas the original story established the main character as a novelist, the film defines the protagonist as a modern international-style architect whose entry was chosen for the competition at the Italian Biennale. The architect's "internationalism" is accentuated by the fact that his mother is the wife of a diplomat and his uncle lives in Sweden.

The internationality of the film is enhanced by location shooting. As the "first Japanese film that truly relied on European locations," *Love and Death* has Ishihara the architect visit a slew of Western European



countries—France, Italy, Sweden, Denmark, West Germany, and Norway.<sup>19</sup> With a 16mm camera in hand, he tours the major landmarks, from a “new” shopping center in Stockholm and Frogner Park in Oslo to the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. The narrative takes the form of a “tourist film” (*kankō eiga*) that introduces the foreign landscape to both the on-screen protagonist and the viewing public. The novelty value of these scenic sites was so great that Nikkatsu, while shooting the film, accumulated footage for a spinoff documentary on the star’s actual trip. That film, *Yūjirō in Europe* (*Yūjirō Ōshū kakearuki*, 1959), “elaborates” on *Love and Death* by having Ishihara rave about an overpass in Stockholm for being orderly or a bike road in Copenhagen for being well-run without chaos. In his first-person narration, Ishihara even wishes that Japan would adopt Denmark’s “public morals” (*kōshū dōtoku*) as his home country prepares for the 1964 Olympics.

Yet while seemingly in awe of Europe’s major landmarks, Ishihara never concedes or submits to Japan’s First-World allies. Rather, he boasts of Japan’s approximation to Western Europe. In *Yūjirō in Europe*, Ishihara is shown strolling down the streets of Paris, as his own voice narration touts his height as being on the “taller side” even among the Parisians alongside him. When showing the Eiffel Tower, the narrator does not fail to note that the French steel structure has become the “second tallest” in the world thanks to the newly erected Tokyo Tower. In the final scene, which captures the Swiss Alps, the film cuts to shots of the Japan Alps as well as Ginza’s cityscape, as the narrator concludes: “Japan is also wonderful.”

Likewise, *Love and Death* stresses the “wonderful”-ness of Japan. In a speech delivered before his friends, Ishihara’s character proclaims that “Japan is at the center of the world” and that he would venture to Europe so that he could “come home.” The architect reiterates this belief in Paris by stating the following: “Even though people who live in Paris for a long time say that they do not want to return to Japan, I want to return.” Unlike the “Third World narratives” in which the masculinized Japanese protagonist wields hegemonic influence over feminized non-Western subjects, Ishihara in *Love and Death* maintains his fidelity to Asaoka and communicates with her through an exchange of letters read in voiceovers. Throughout the film, the romance plot is confined to Japan’s ethno-national sphere, and no boundaries are “violated” with the Western world. As if to respond to his loyalty, Asaoka increasingly “turns Japanese” as she takes *koto* lessons, wears a kimono, watches a *noh* play, and prepares to become a “good wife, wise mother” (*ryōsai kenbo*).

19 Satō, *Ishihara Yūjirō: Shōwa taiyō den*, 133.

The urge to even up with the West also surfaces in *Man at the Bullfight* (*Tōgyū ni kakeru otoko*, 1960). Partly shot in Spain and France, the narrative develops around a *menage a trois* between a newspaper man (Ishihara), a stage actor (Kitahara Mie), and her banker-fiancé (Nitani Hideaki). In addition to actively shaping this romance plot, Ishihara furthers a “work plot” in which he strives to introduce Spanish bullfighting to Japan. Ishihara attempts this by pleading his case to a Spanish promoter (Alfonso Rojas) who had lost faith in the Japanese after an initial arrangement to bring live bullfighting to Japan was abruptly cancelled. Determined and undeterred, Ishihara visits Spain and France to chase down the promoter until finally securing an agreement. In their last encounter at the bull ring, the boss tells Ishihara: “You and only you had made it possible.” In forging the deal, the Japanese subject manages to earn the respect of a European ally.

Other studio films, especially ones made after the mid-1960s, attempt to present Japan explicitly on the side of the First—not Third—World. In *Pearl Necklace* (*Seishun daitōryō*, 1966), a song-and-dance film that was made through a collaboration with the talent agency Johnny’s, Ishihara lands in Australia to shoot on location, playing the character that works for a trade promotion association. Speaking fluent English, the protagonist takes part in an honest business with Australians while aiming to uncover a corruption scheme masterminded by a Japanese pharmaceutical company. Ishihara discovers that the drug company was exploiting a pot of money that was hidden during World War II, and his main mission is to prevent the company from illegally selling unapproved, harmful medicine to an unnamed Southeast Asian country. Ishihara’s mission here is to present Japan’s reciprocity with a First World partner and wield paternalistic “protection” over war-torn Third World subjects, which he refers to as “boys” or *shōnen*.

For Ishihara, working at Nikkatsu was highly rewarding, but he also became increasingly frustrated being on the studio’s “conveyor belt.”<sup>20</sup> In 1962, Ishihara announced the founding of his own independent company, Ishihara Promotion, Inc. While agreeing to remain under the studio’s contract, he vowed to “create attractive new films with our own hands and advance them on a global scale,” particularly by co-producing films with the United States.<sup>21</sup> As a way to begin this new venture, Ishihara chose to produce a film that exemplified his desire to engage the United States: *Alone Across the Pacific* (*Taiheiyo hitori bocchi*, 1963).

20 Makiko Ishihara, *Ishihara Yūjirō Watari Tetsuya: Ishihara Puromōshon Shashi* (Tokyo: Seisha, 2021), 36.

21 Ishihara, *Ishihara Yūjirō Watari Tetsuya*, 43.

*Alone Across the Pacific* is a story about the real-life adventurer Horie Kenichi, who crossed the Pacific Ocean on a yacht named the Mermaid. Dreaming of sailing the seas, and even feeling jealous at “foreigners who cross the sea or ride around the world on a small yacht or raft,”<sup>22</sup> Ishihara travelled to Hawaii and California to film the oceanic adventure. With its press sheet highlighting the “growth of the tough guy Yūjirō,” the film pits a “confining” Japan (which, in the main character’s words, was a “country in chains” or *sakoku*) against the “free” and “open” Pacific Ocean.<sup>23</sup> In the film, the Japanese mainland is represented with long shots of the industrial cityscape oozing with smoke and close-ups of workers and automobiles restlessly moving on the streets. These images help generate a contrast with multiple long shots of a tiny Mermaid floating in a sea of vivid blue.

It merits to note that *Alone Across the Pacific* establishes another dichotomy, one that presents Japan against the United States. The contrast is shown by having Ishihara’s tiny yacht encounter a large American vessel (amassing some 10,000 tons according to the press sheet) on his way to the US mainland.<sup>24</sup> Upon reaching San Francisco, Ishihara crosses the Golden Gate Bridge, whose grandeur is showcased with shots from the top of the bridge overseeing the streaming traffic, in addition to a sea-level shot that captures the red steel structure with a handheld camera. Before landing on shore, the protagonist encounters a white yacht much bigger than his own. The imbalance of power is displayed in the size of the ships, the number of crew members (one versus five) and the camera angle, which positions the family in a higher position than Ishihara. The viewer particularly notices the gaze of a young boy in a striped shirt, jaws dropped, as he stares at the Japanese yachtsman from a higher vertical position.

Following the release of *Alone Across the Pacific*, Ishihara’s company would produce films on diverse topics, including castle-seizing during the Sengoku period (*Taking the Castle/Shiro tori*, 1965) and the construction of a major dam after World War II (*The Sands of Kurobe/Kurobe no taiyō*, 1968). But Ishihara’s desire to engage the First World remained strong. He thus would appear in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox’s *The Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines; Or, How I Flew from London to Paris in 25 hours and 11 Minutes* (1965), for example. In 1971, the company released *The Walking Major (Aru heishi no kake)*. In this narrative, the lead actor is a photographer following a US Army Major (Dale Robertson) who decides to march 1,300 kilometers to raise money for a run-down orphanage.

22 Ishihara, *Waga seishun monogatari*, 165.

23 Nikkatsu Kabushiki Kaisha, *Taiheiyō hitori bocchi* press sheet (Tokyo: Nikkatsu, 1963).

24 Nikkatsu Kabushiki Kaisha, *Taiheiyō hitori bocchi* press sheet.

Ishihara the photographer is skeptical of the Major's "benevolent" intentions, as he recalls witnessing him (accidentally) killing a young Korean couple some years prior. A flashback shows Robertson's battalion firing at a stack of firewood in an unnamed village, not knowing that hiding behind the stack is an innocent family. Ishihara, who arrives at the scene shortly thereafter, witnesses the damage and smacks the Major with his fist.

What triggers Ishihara's actions is not just the death of the two Koreans but the appearance of their little boy, who starts crying aloud when he sees his dead parents. It then becomes clear that Ishihara's rage is directed at the Major's orphaning of an Asian Other, in ways that fiercely condemns this "ugly American." In contrast to the San Francisco scene in *Alone Across the Pacific*, in which Ishihara is stared at from above by a Caucasian child, the civilian massacre scene in *The Walking Major* implicitly presents Japan's elevated cultural status as the taciturn Japanese hero who deploys a paternalistic gaze at an infantilized Third World subject.

Yet while appearing to stand up to US military violence, Ishihara also deepens Japan's alliance with the United States. The narrative reinforces the bilateral relationship by redeeming Robertson's humanism and intentions. This begins with Ishihara's realization that the Caucasian-looking US Major was part Native American. The skeptical photographer also learns that Robertson decided to conduct the charity walk to honor a wish made by a young boy at the orphanage. Over time, Ishihara comes to accept Robertson's brand of paternalism as the latter tries to atone for the mistake he made in Korea and genuinely seeks to build a permanent home for Japanese orphans. After completing his walk, the Major is cheered by children, teachers, and local residents. Though Ishihara, the photographer, does walk away from the celebration, he never elects to expose Robertson's dark past in Korea in spite of threatening to do so early on. The "walking major's" moral restoration is completed in Vietnam, upon which Ishihara offers his congratulations for the rebuilding of the orphanage. When the Major is killed in an ambush, the aggressor now becomes a victim of war. The film ends as Ishihara, following the footsteps of the "walking major," marches forward, as if to carry the burden and responsibilities that the US Major had left for him.

The tense but respectful dynamic between Japan and the United States constitutes a major theme in *Safari 5000* (*Eikō e no 5000 km*, 1970). In this film, Ishihara is a race car driver competing against an American car company that is attempting to penetrate the Japanese automobile market. Ishihara takes on this rivalry by joining Nissan's race team and traveling internationally on Japan Air Lines. Ishihara's character is no longer dependent on US technology but seems to compete with the industrialized world on a level playing field.

Interestingly, the playing field is more than bilateral. The main site of action is the East African Safari Rally, which began in 1953 as the East African Coronation Rally to celebrate the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.<sup>25</sup> Ishihara enters this colonial space as the only non-Western driver and eventually beats his Western rivals, including the United States, thanks to his tenacity and grit. His stoic masculinity also rewards his romantic aspirations. In the film, the race plot dovetails with a romantic subplot that involves Ishihara, his lover (Asaoka Ruriko), and her former boyfriend (Alain Cuny)—a prominent fashion designer in France. Although bothered by Ishihara's obsession with auto racing, Asaoka, drawn to his manliness, chooses to be with the Japanese hero. In the end, the plot resolves with Ishihara's personal and professional victory against the West. If the film begins by portraying Japan as an underdog, it ends by having Japan reach the pinnacle of the First World.

Ishihara's identification with the First World occurs in tandem with an attempt to complete Japan's separation from its Third World counterparts. This process is shown in a telling scene in which Ishihara's car breaks down on the dirt road. As soon as it arrives, the repair crew quickly jacks up the vehicle to replace a car part. In this scene, the camera juxtaposes shots of the engineers fixing the vehicle with extreme close-ups of African children curiously staring at the technological marvel. Here, Japan and Africa are presented in a dichotomy of sorts, from the industrialized former to the primitive latter, from the brightness of the car's silver fender to the darkness of the children's skin color, and of course, Japan as First World versus Africa as Third World. During the shooting in Kenya, Ishihara recalled that one of the biggest challenges concerned the handling of "indigenous locals of undeveloped lands" who would "stare at us from the bushes" with a "single piece of cloth wrapped around their bodies."<sup>26</sup> Just as Ishihara the actor/producer employs an othering gaze towards Kenyan onlookers, the film presents Third World subjects as an exotic Other against Japan, which now seems to have gained bona fide membership in the First World club.

## Conclusion

By the time *The Walking Major* and *Safari 5000* appeared on the screens, Japan was at the tail end of a period of "high growth." Rapid economic and

25 "About Safari," 2019 Safari Rally, <https://safarirally.co.ke/about-safari/> (accessed August 28, 2021).

26 Ishihara Yūjirō, "Genchi jin aite ni miburi teburi no chin kaiwa," *Kindai eiga*, (June 1969): 176.

industrial development had turned the country into one of the wealthiest nations in the world. Ironically, the fortunes of Ishihara Promotion Inc. was heading in the opposite direction. Owing to unkind box office results, the company went into debt and teetered towards bankruptcy.<sup>27</sup> Ishihara strove to revive his company's fortunes by producing police dramas for television. *Bark at the Sun!* (*Taiyo ni hoero!*, 1972–1986), *Big City* (*Daitokai*, 1976–1979), and *Western Police* (*Seibu keisatsu*, 1979–1984) became successful hits that revitalized the company's fortunes. But his health was quietly deteriorating. In 1984, Ishihara was diagnosed with liver cancer; and in 1987 he died at the age of 52.<sup>28</sup>

Ishihara Yūjirō did not exist in a local or national void. He was a transnational and international persona—in this chapter, I argued that he was a Cold War star. As a lead actor for Nikkatsu Studio, he began by appearing in films that identified Japan as a Third World nation and even identified with subaltern communities. But his films would increasingly position his own country above non-aligned states. In the meantime, Ishihara would also engage the First World through Nikkatsu's effort to internationalize filmmaking and by utilizing his own production company. His characters expressed aspiration, engaged in competition, and sought respect and admiration from Western countries. Ishihara's films urged Japan's transformation from the Third World to the First World. They reveal a "quest for status" in a rapidly changing world.

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27 Makiko Ishihara, *Ishihara Yūjirō Watari Tetsuya: Ishihara Puromōshon Shashi*, 130.

28 Satō, *Ishihara Yūjirō: Shōwa taiyō den*, 428.

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## 7. Right Screen in Hong Kong: Chang Kuo-sin's Asia Pictures and *The Heroine*\*

*Kenny K. K. Ng*

### Abstract

This chapter traces Chang Kuo-sin's 1950s media project with the support of the CIA-backed Asia Foundation. Chang launched Asia Pictures in Hong Kong to produce Chinese movies intended to present non-communist and anti-communist worldviews to diasporic Chinese audiences. Chang attempted to vie with the left-wing Great Wall Pictures by producing commercially friendly pictures. The chapter examines the production of *The Heroine* (1955), a historical psycho-drama about a female assassin during the transition of the Ming to Qing Dynasty in 1664. *The Heroine* pioneered as a “woman's picture” by figuring a female assassin in martial arts storytelling. The study assesses the contributions of Asia Pictures to Sinophone cinema and diasporic Chinese experiences amidst the leftist and rightist cultural contentions.

**Keywords:** anti-communist film; Asia Foundation; Cold War; Great Wall Pictures; martial arts; Sinophone cinema

On May 26, 1952, Chang Kuo-sin (1916–2006) submitted to the Committee for a Free Asia (CFA) an extensive plan for nurturing anti-communist filmmakers and writers in Hong Kong, taking the former British colonial city as a strategic Cold War locale in Asia. Labelling his media projects

\* I am thankful to the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong for supporting my research project “Cold War Cosmopolitanism: Chang Kuo-sin's Asia Enterprises and Cultural Legacies” (12613818), 2019–2021. This paper is an outcome of the research project.



as “Fiction Enterprises,” Chang would establish Asia Press to publish the works of émigré Chinese scholars and exiled writers from mainland China. In the wake of the Korean War, he launched Asia Pictures, which was to compete against Hong Kong’s well-established left-oriented Great Wall (*Changcheng*) film company. Chang succeeded in attracting support for his first two endeavors in his “Tri-Dimensional Project”:<sup>1</sup> the film studio and the writers’ organization would function as a well-coordinated band of ideological crack troops to counteract communist propaganda through Hong Kong’s central position within a wider diasporic community.<sup>2</sup>

Chang himself adopted the alias “Fiction” in his clandestine correspondences with the American agencies. CFA was established in San Francisco in 1951 and was renamed The Asia Foundation (TAF) in 1954.<sup>3</sup> Robert Blum, TAF’s first president, emphasized TAF as a non-governmental American organization focused on Asia. It functioned to facilitate Asians to “resist Communism on their own soil.”<sup>4</sup> With its declared philanthropic missions, TAF was operating under a camouflaged association with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Washington’s networks for receiving considerable financial assistance from the US government.<sup>5</sup> Through covert activities, TAF intervened in the motion picture industries in Asian countries like Hong Kong, Japan, Burma, Korea, Malaysia, and Thailand to surreptitiously advocate anti-communist movie business and culture.

Chang was himself a product of the Chinese diaspora. Born in Hainan Island, he was educated in Kuching, North Borneo (East Malaysia) in his teens. He later went to China to study law at the National Southwest

1 Kuo-sin Chang “A Tri-Dimensional Project for Battle for People’s Minds,” May 26, 1952. Asia Foundation Records (AFR), P58, Hoover Institution Archives.

2 American agencies, however, did not grant support for Chang’s proposal of an informal network of Chinese intellectuals, writers, artists, and journalists organized for “public agitation” and “coordinated propaganda against the Communists.” See Chang, “A Tri-Dimensional Project for Battle for People’s Minds.”

3 Recent studies of The Asia Foundation (TAF) and the roles it played in the motion picture industry include Christina Klein, *Cold War Cosmopolitanism: Period Style in 1950s Korean Cinema* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 13–31; Sangjoon Lee, *Cinema and the Cultural Cold War: US Diplomacy and the Origins of the Asian Cinema Network* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), 17–46; Poshek Fu, *Hong Kong Media and Asia’s Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 81–108. For a study of TAF and Chinese print media, see Shuang Shen, “Empire of Information: The Asia Foundation’s Network and Chinese-Language Cultural Production in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia,” *American Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (2017): 589–610.

4 Robert Blum, “The Work of The Asia Foundation,” *Pacific Affairs* 29, no. 1 (March 1956): 46–56.

5 Sangjoon Lee, “Creating an Anti-Communist Motion Picture Producers’ Network in Asia: The Asia Foundation, Asia Pictures, and the Korean Motion Picture Cultural Association,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 37, no. 3 (2017): 517–38.

Associated University in Kunming during the Sino-Japanese War, graduating in 1945, when he joined the Guomindang's Central News Agency in Nanjing as a journalist and translator, later switching to American United Press (International). After leaving China in December 1949, he published a book about the first few months in Nanjing after the Communist take-over, in which he coined the phrase "behind the Bamboo Curtain."<sup>6</sup>

The belief in "truth is virtue"<sup>7</sup> underlined Chang's diehard anti-communist ideology. He believed that "Communist rule in China is a political swindle," which "is fronted by an attractive camouflage"; henceforth, "we need chiefly just to tell the people the simple and honest truth of Communism in practice in China."<sup>8</sup> Chang perceived the function of cinema as telling the "truth" of communism to Asian people, but this could be achieved with art that was "purely entertainment in nature" buttressed by commercial investments. A successful film had to be equipped with "subtly injected slants against Communism" so that "the audience feels subconsciously, but will not be able to recognize outwardly." Chang took Hong Kong as the most important frontline for this psychological warfare in Asia. "The projects must be started and based in Hong Kong, because the talents are here and because of Hong Kong's accessibility to the Bamboo Curtain, which makes it easier to get the necessary materials for the psychological blast against the Communists."<sup>9</sup>

By proposing his "Battle for the People's Minds against the Chinese Communists," Chang (1951) moved to strike an agreement with his American agents. James Stewart, Director of Asian Operations for CFA in San Francisco, expressed his enthusiasm for Chang's plan. He agreed with Chang on the strategic and geographical importance of Hong Kong, acknowledging that "the responsibility of Hong Kong in providing enlightenment for the rest of the area is very great."<sup>10</sup> But he reminded Chang of the great demand for film directors and actors with practical experience in the movie field, and the importance of storytelling, especially that of melodrama:

I have an old-fashioned feeling too that in a movie the story is the thing.  
The theory of subtly injecting slants against Communism has become a

6 Chang Kuo-sin, *Eight Months behind the Bamboo Curtain* (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 2016). The book was first published in 1950.

7 Chang, *Eight Months behind the Bamboo Curtain*, xxiv.

8 A Chinese [Chang Kuo-sin], "Battle for the People's Minds against the Chinese Communists," 11 November 1951, 1–10. AFR, P58, Hoover Institution Archives.

9 Charles Leary, "The Most Careful Arrangements for a Careful Fiction: A Short History of Asia Pictures," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 13, no. 4 (2012): 548–58.

10 James Stewart, Letter to James T. Ivy, June 26, 1952. AFR, P58, Hoover Institution Archives.

sort of sophisticated cliché.... I hope that the movie people will look for plots that in themselves are an indication of the struggle for freedom or an exposé of communist tyranny. I would think melodrama is probably the best vehicle for our purposes.<sup>11</sup>

Chang emphasized that effective propaganda had to be good commercial entertainment. Stewart advocated melodramatic plots as an effective vehicle for Asia Pictures production. Chang and Stewart also agreed to exploit the burgeoning market in Hong Kong, a vibrant center of Chinese-language cinemas including the Cantonese and Mandarin languages, with minor productions in Amoy and related dialects. The complex Hong Kong film scene was divided into anti-communist, non-communist, and pro-communist.<sup>12</sup> Hong Kong was also a center in Southeast Asia of a large language dubbing program, with films both locally made and imported from all over the world being dubbed in languages other than the original Cantonese dialect in the city. Chang and Stewart recognized that movies produced in Hong Kong exerted a tremendous impact on overseas Chinese audiences, particularly in Southeast Asia and among the Chinese diaspora.

Chang officially launched Asia Pictures and its movie production on July 11, 1953, designating himself as an “independent director and manager” of the company to cover up his American association.<sup>13</sup> Embarking on a crusade against communism, Chang nonetheless intended to avoid blatant anti-communist messages in his films, favoring commercial pictures modeled on family melodramas or morality plays with themes of family harmony, generational conflict, social change, and traditional ideas about nationalism, family, and moral values. Law Kar and Frank Bren believe that the films produced by Asia Pictures “contained minimal political doctrine” and that “their anti-Communism lay in opposition to zealous revolutionary ideals and

11 Stewart, Letter to James T. Ivy.

12 The Hong Kong movie industry was ranked as the top fourth filmmaking center in the world after the United States of America, Japan, and India. In 1955, Hong Kong film studios produced 227 films (as against 188 in 1954). Hong Kong was superseded only by the United States of America, Japan, and India as a film-producing country. See “The Hong Kong Annual Report 1955: Film Industry.” In “Media: Audio-Visual Movies, General,” AFR, P58, Hoover Institution Archives.

13 Stewart cautioned that “all possible steps had to be taken” to protect Chang and maintain his identity as an “independent director and manager” as long as Chang was still working for the United Press as a journalist. It was imperative that Chang’s connection with his US agents be “kept a secret” to “insure the effectiveness of the program.” See his “Letter to James T. Ivy,” in “Fiction Enterprise,” June 2, 1952, 1–2. AFR, P58, Hoover Institution Archives.

in espousal of a more tolerant, moderate, and graduate course of reform."<sup>14</sup> The contestation with communism in Chang's productions, it is argued, was to lie in the absence of revolutionary messages, political zealotry, or preachiness. Can politics be achieved in films that are apolitically made? In the following analysis of the production of *The Heroine*, I shall examine how the film's political overtones contradicted the thesis that Chang simply aimed at producing commercially viable, apolitical films that sought to displace the films of the leftist studios in the eyes of diasporic viewers.

### Softcore Anti-Communism, American Networking, and *The Heroine*

Asia Pictures maintained active production during a short period between 1953 and 1958 and created only nine feature films. Chang tried to strike a balance between the artistic and social merits of the films, their espoused commercialism, and his political goals. The small corpus of works covered a wide spectrum of genres and styles ranging from historical drama, the gangster movie, and family melodrama to social realistic story. Four of them were novel-to-screen renditions in his planned media enterprises (see Filmography). For instance, *Tradition*, the studio's first feature film, was a morality tale set amid the conflicts of gangsters in Hangzhou during the Sino-Japanese War. Without any political overtones, the film rather suggested "a nostalgic yearning for the mainland and pre-Communist China," with a focus on "the strength of the family, and its vulnerability to corrupting forces."<sup>15</sup>

In his anti-communist crusade on cultural fronts, Chang took up as his target the Great Wall Pictures Corporation, the leading leftist filmmaking company that had established a firm foothold in the colony. As Chang declared the mission of his movie enterprise, "Our immediate objective in setting up our company is to beat the Great Wall. This is going to be our war cry."<sup>16</sup>

Great Wall inherited 1930s Shanghai commercial left-wing cinema in nurturing movie stars, managing well-written movie scripts, and promoting

14 Law Kar and Frank Bren, *Hong Kong Cinema: A Cross-Cultural View* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004).

15 Charles Leary, "The Most Careful Arrangements for a Careful Fiction: A Short History of Asia Pictures," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 13, no. 4 (2012): 548–58.

16 Chang, "Motion Picture Project." In "Media: Audio-Visual Movies, Asia Pictures, Misc. Papers," January 8, 1953, 1–5. AFR, P58, Hoover Institution Archives.

its motion pictures and stars by launching *Great Wall Pictorial* (*Changcheng huabao*), a glossy popular movie magazine in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, in 1950. Chang attributed Great Wall's success partly to the *Great Wall Pictorial*. He called the publication the studio's "publicity weapon" and "the best-selling one in town and in the Far East." Great Wall managed to discover such new stars as Xia Meng (Hsia Moon, 1933–2016) and Lin Dai (Linda Lin, 1934–1964). To compete with Great Wall, Chang began to publish *Asia Pictorial* (by Asia Press) in 1953.

The success of Great Wall was historically tied to the influx of talents of a large group of Shanghai émigrés. Although pro-communist film activities and personnel were subject to covert monitoring and containment by the colonial government, Great Wall kept a low profile to avoid head-on clashes with the colonial authorities.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Great Wall produced uplifting films and innocuous entertainments with "healthy" themes and "serious" attitudes, and their films were well received by Chinese audiences, with good box office takings in Hong Kong, mainland China, and Southeast Asia.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, Chang observed that Great Wall was "the most successful Chinese company in town" mainly because it was "the best-managed and most strongly financed" by the Communist Chinese government, regardless of the obstacle that communist films had restricted access to or were banned in the Southeast Asian market.<sup>19</sup>

According to the story current here, the Commies put HK\$3,000,000 into the Great Wall when they took it over in 1949, and since then been feeding it with more subsidies, no one knows how much. That accounts for the strong financial position of the Great Wall. In light of this, we should consider our HK\$1,000,000, if we spent it all, just as an initial investment in the effort. Because of its success, the Great Wall has done and is still doing lots of harm to us.<sup>20</sup>

Emphasizing how left-wing film productions were dominating Hong Kong and overseas markets, Chang ventured to ask American agencies for financial

17 Man-fung Yip, "Closely Watched Films: Surveillance and Postwar Hong Kong Leftist Cinema." In *Surveillance in Asian Cinema: Under Eastern Eyes*, ed. Karen Fang (New York: Routledge, 2017), 33–59.

18 Ying Du, "Hong Kong Leftist Cinema in the Cold War Era: In-betweenness, Sensational Success and Censorship," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 13, no. 1 (2019): 95.

19 For an oral history of leftist filmmakers, see Zhu Shunci et al., eds., *An Age of Idealism: Great Wall and Feng Huang Days* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2001).

20 Chang, "Motion Picture Project."

resources to build up his movie enterprise. He submitted a budget of HKD 500,000 to start up Asia Pictures, with three films to churn out at the outset. Chang predicted that the film company would break even when it came to producing the third picture, and in the long run Asia Pictures could operate on a self-sustainable basis. He also optimistically anticipated that the leftist film company would collapse largely because of the closure of some Asian markets where the governments were hostile to communist regimes, and due to their people in the movie business becoming increasingly disappointed with communism. Chang believed that Asia Pictures could “provide an alternative opportunity for the disillusioned stars and others to pursue their arts in a democratic atmosphere” while allowing idle directors and stars to be “herded into a new motion picture company to make anti-Communist pictures.”<sup>21</sup>

Despite Chang’s failure to operate Asia Pictures as an established enterprise, his studio achieved a handful of good-quality Chinese pictures. *The Heroine* (*Yang E*, 1955) pioneered as a “woman’s picture” by figuring a female assassin in martial arts storytelling. This section reveals the production of this early martial arts film amidst the leftist and rightist cultural power contentions. *The Heroine* was Asia Pictures’ second work released in 1955. The film was a historical drama set at the onset of the Qing Dynasty in 1664. Yang E is widowed when her husband, a loyal Ming Dynasty general, dies a heroic death in defense of his Emperor. Her son is hanged by Wu Sangui, the notorious traitor who had surrendered to the Qing army. Wu is hotly pursuing and killing all the Ming loyal followers. Yang E is resolved to take revenge against Wu, offering to serve in the guerrilla force and convince the leader to plot against Wu. The heroine has enlisted the help of Wu’s concubine and succeeded in attracting Wu’s attention. Wu covets Yang’s beauty and summons her to his residence to perform dancing and archery. She answers the call in a bid to kill Wu. Before entering the palace, she has a dream in which she succeeds in taking her revenge. In the palace, however, she is overpowered when Wu, in a fit of rage after discovering her intended assassination, smashes his foot into Yang and instantly kills her.

Before its release in Hong Kong, *The Heroine* was promoted in 1954 as enjoying a wide appeal when it had a long theater run in Taipei’s cinema from October 10 to 29.<sup>22</sup> But it would be difficult to exaggerate the popularity and local reception of *The Heroine* in Hong Kong theaters. Newspaper

21 A Chinese [Chang Kuo-sin], “Battle for the People’s Minds against the Chinese Communists.”

22 “*Yang E zai Tai po jilu*” [*The Heroine* breaks records in Taiwan], *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, October 29, 1954, 12.

advertisements revealed that the film premiered on 17 February 1955,<sup>23</sup> and the show continued on February 23.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the screening was restricted to the New York Cinema in Causeway Bay (Hong Kong Island) and the Great World Theater in Kowloon, which were first-class cinema houses usually reserved for Western films in Hong Kong. The film had a one-day re-release on September 8 at the Star Theater.<sup>25</sup>

*The Heroine* unquestionably had a historical allegory at work in the tragic resistance of a noble Ming-loyalist heroine against the unprincipled, murderous traitor Wu Sangui. A reader's letter published in the leftist *Ta Kung Pao* lambasted the film as a gross distortion and misinterpretation of the "truth." Portraying the allegorical figure of the traitorous Wu, the historical film shifted the moral attack on the communist force that wreaked havoc on the war-stricken country. This reader emphasized that the Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, the Guomindang's military leader, was really the defector who should have taken the blame for losing the country, as Wu did in history. The reader denigrated the film so as to reveal the "subtle methods" used by "the most anti-Communist motion picture company."<sup>26</sup>

The historical film had definite political overtones of Guomindang's loss of the mainland, as Chang noted:

I chose the script [...] for its presentation of Taiwan as a base for organizing resistance for restoration of true China. It's a fact of history that the Ming Loyalists at the time made it a point of escaping to Taiwan to organize and reorganize the resistance and restoration movement. Taiwan to them was the base for organizing the movement for restoring China to her old and true glory. Our worry is that British censorship may compel us to cut out this angle.<sup>27</sup>

In general, the historical genre was more likely to bypass the colonial censors by narrating past events with an obscure connotation of contemporary politics. *The Enchanting Shadow* (*Qiannü youhun*, 1960) by Li Hanxiang (1926–1999) was an outstanding example. Supported by the Shaw Brothers, Li adapted a seventeenth-century Chinese ghost story and changed the timeframe of the original fantastic narrative to be set in the Qing Dynasty

23 Advertisement for *The Heroine*, *South China Morning Post* (SCMP), February 16, 1955, 5.

24 "Synopsis of *Yang E* [The Heroine]," *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, February 23, 1955.

25 Advertisement for *The Heroine*, *South China Morning Post* (SCMP), September 7, 1955, 5.

26 "Jia huazhao yu zhen mianmu" [Fake tricks and true colors], *Ta Kung Pao*, February 20, 1955, 8.

27 Chang, "Motion Picture Project."

right after the demise of the Ming regime.<sup>28</sup> Li injected into his film a sense of end-of-the-dynasty nostalgia of the Ming era, hence echoing the contemporary Cold War Chinese mentality—that is, lamenting the loss of mainland China.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the political allegory, *The Heroine* was a pioneer martial arts tale and a “woman’s picture” with a superb leading actress, Liu Chi (Liu Qi, 1930–), playing a black-garbed female assassin with psychological and emotional nuances. The film begins with Yang E’s voiceover monologue telling us that she is determined to seek revenge against the traitorous general Wu Sangui who had killed her husband and son. Yet she is barred from joining the male-led insurrectionary force. She has to strike a female alliance with her informers (a songstress and a courtesan) in the court in planning her assassination plot. She dies a tragic death at the end. But her perseverance to right the wrong and her unfulfilled undertaking are reminiscent of Sisyphus’s laborious endeavor to achieve a moral but futile mission.

Liu Chi, a fresh face who used to play supporting roles for the Nanyang Studio, delivered superb performances in *Tradition*, *The Heroine*, and *Halfway Down* when she worked for Asia Pictures.<sup>30</sup> Edward Hunter, author of *Brain-Washing in Red China*,<sup>31</sup> praised the leading actress for successfully playing a “dedicated and Joan of Arc-like” heroine, and her screen enactments assured him that Chang “should develop some star or stars of your own.”<sup>32</sup> Delmer Brown, TAF’s representative in Tokyo, was impressed by Liu Chi’s performance in exuding the “extraordinary grace and beauty of Yang Ngo (Yang E),” and was convinced that “she will be recognized as one of the leading stars of Hong Kong.”<sup>33</sup>

28 *The Enchanting Shadow* was drawn from “Nie Xiaoqian” in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai zhiyi*), a seventeenth-century collection of fantastic tales authored by Pu Songling (1640–1715).

29 Kenny K. K. Ng, “Censorship at Work: Cold War Paranoia and Purgation of Chinese Ghost Stories.” In *Hong Kong Culture and Society in the New Millennium: Hong Kong as Method*, ed. Yiu-wai Chu (Singapore: Springer, 2017), 118–20.

30 Asia Pictures paid the actress highly by the standards of the movie industry at the time. A report alleged that Liu Chi “had been customarily getting HK\$5,500 for a picture, but for *Tradition* she received HK\$6,500.” Xu Yu (1908–1980), who penned *Tradition*, was so pleased with Liu Chi’s performance that he had given her HK\$1,000 retainer fees for three additional pictures, as another company had already tried to sign her up at a figure of HK\$12,000. See Delmer Brown, Letter to Robert Blum, April 1, 1954. In “Motion Picture Project,” AFR, P9, Hoover Institution Archives.

31 Edward Hunter, *Brain-Washing in Red China: The Calculated Destruction of Men’s Minds* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1951).

32 Edward Hunter, letter to Chang Kuo-sin, July 11, 1954. In “Media: Audio-Visual Movies, Asia Pictures, ‘Heroine,’” AFR, P9, Hoover Institution Archives.

33 Brown, letter to Robert Blum.



Asia Pictures invested in *The Heroine* with advanced technicality. Besides elaborate mise-en-scène (the palace scene), choreography (courtesans' dancing in the hall of Wu), camerawork, and detailed costumes and props, Yang E's exhibition of fireworks in her attempted assassination of Wu marked the suspenseful moment with visual stunts of flickering lights and shadows. In movie theaters, *The Heroine* was shown on arc screens in surround sound. The dream sequence in which Yang E assassinates Wu Sangui was shot on 35 mm Kodak color film.<sup>34</sup>

Chang sent *The Heroine* to Paramount Studio to seek reviews from directors and critics. The screening was held in a Paramount Studio theater on March 1, 1955 at 8 pm. The invitees included the prominent director Frank Borzage and his wife as well as top-ranking Paramount technicians in the fields of lighting, sound recording, editing, and scriptwriting. For the Hollywood experts, *The Heroine* was the first Chinese picture they had ever seen. But American reviewers' comments focused on the film's technical inadequacies in production. Borzage (1955) observed that "the editing was jerky," and so it "needed more dissolves, fades and wipes to smooth cut transitions between scenes and sequences."<sup>35</sup> Some of the filming techniques were sloppy by Hollywood standards:

In assessing where they went wrong, I believe their major difficulties are (1) laboratory processing (2) editing and (3) a conflicting maneuvering of characters. As the people expert in editing pointed out at the screening, the processing was pretty bad. There were dirt marks and fingerprints scattered through the picture and of course we would not tolerate that here.<sup>36</sup>

John Woodcock, the Head of the Music and Special Effects section, found the technical and audiovisual aspects unsatisfactory—the lighting effects, the music, and the handling of the print—and concluded that they compromised the aesthetic performance of the film.<sup>37</sup> Woodcock pointed out technical deficiencies of the production such as a "careless handling" of the film print in "cutting, developing, and printing," and sound effects that "could stand

34 The extant film copy that I watched at the Hong Kong Film Archive, however, was missing this climatic dream sequence of the heroine.

35 Frank Borzage, letter to Charles M. Tanner, March 3, 1955, 1–2. In "Media: Audio-Visual Movies, Asia Pictures, 'Heroine,'" AFR, P9, Hoover Institution Archives.

36 Ibid.

37 John Woodcock, "Critique on *Heroine*," 1955 (n.d.), 1–2. In "Media: Audio-Visual Movies, Asia Pictures, 'Heroine,'" AFR, P9, Hoover Institution Archives.

improvement.” He also suggested the acquisition of an “optical stop-printer” to improve the “optical effects” of the film.

Importantly, the American experts used Hollywood standards to measure what they found to be industrial incompetency of the Chinese production. As a martial arts film, *The Heroine* failed to build “suspenseful climaxes as we know them in American productions,” as pointed out by Albert Deane of Paramount Pictures:

The only specific climax, with full suspense, now in the picture is the one in which Yang Ngo (Yang E) spins the fireballs, and this actually lacks suspense in that Wu does not have any idea that he is menaced. There were a number of other points in the picture at which suspense could have been built up, but you have the idea that the cutter was intent on getting as many sequences as possible into the finished print, and therefore no thought was given to building tension.<sup>38</sup>

Despite the beauty of its well-performing actress and the political allegory of the film, *The Heroine* was not a box office success, nor did it gain critical acclaim or real support from the Hollywood agents or producers. Nonetheless, Chang took the criticism and made a case for his movie enterprise to seek more American support. Chang emphasized that “our industry here is years behind modern and Western standards in picture-making,” and was “in need of the technical knowhow and of the equipment,” such as “a good editing machine,” “a decent dolly or camera crane” and “a portable magnetic recorder to do sound recording on location.” Besides these cinematic gadgetries, Chang highlighted the dire need of talents like “special effects men” and “good directors.”<sup>39</sup> Chang ostensibly complained about the unsatisfactory financial assistance from Americans and the lack of skilled labor in the local movie industry in support of his studio operations, whereas in reality, leftist studios had refused to hire out their developing facilities to Asia Pictures.

Internationally, neither *Tradition* nor *The Heroine* won any awards at regional Asian film festivals, nor were they taken up by Hollywood for distribution. Asia Pictures submitted *Tradition* to the first Asian Film Festival (AFF) in 1954 in Tokyo (the film was denied entry because of

38 Albert Deane, letter to Charles M. Tanner, March 2, 1955, 1–2. In “Media: Audio-Visual Movies, Asia Pictures, ‘Heroine,’” AFR, P9, Hoover Institution Archives.

39 Chang Kuo-sin, letter to Charles M. Tanner, April 28, 1955, 1–2. In “Media: Audio-Visual Movies, Asia Pictures, ‘Heroine,’” AFR, P9, Hoover Institution Archives.

its negative portrayal of a Japanese general),<sup>40</sup> and *The Heroine* to the second one in 1955 in Singapore. The Asian Film Festival (AFF, aka the Southeast Asian Film Festival) was an annual event of the Federation of Motion Picture Producers Association of Asia (FPA) inaugurated in 1953. The AFF was a regional alliance summit for film executives of “free Asia” and “an offspring of the Cold War.”<sup>41</sup> Japanese cinema attempted to maintain its dominance in Asia by initiating and organizing the AFF.<sup>42</sup> Through the FPA and its AFF, Japan re-entered Southeast Asia after the Pacific War as a major player, as a part of America’s negotiation to redraw the geopolitical map of Asia with cultural and modernization projects in the region.<sup>43</sup>

In order for the Chinese film industry to measure up to modern standards of picture-making, Chang (1955) suggested that Asia Pictures send some of their men to Japan for short observation tours, whereas he was considering the exchange of technicians between Hollywood and Asia Pictures. He appealed to his American agent to provide more financial, technical, and human resources to back up Asia Pictures, hoping to exploit the cinematic links between Hong Kong, Asia (Japan), and the US (Hollywood) within the anti-communist geopolitical camp.

Chang’s ambition to broaden the international market for Asia Pictures was once brought up by his TAF partners:

Chang Kuo Sin (Kuo-sin) has asked me about the possibilities of US art theater distribution for his new picture *The Heroine*. As you know, he is operating in a restricted and highly competitive market, and due to the high costs of production, he believes, and we agree, that it is of vital importance to widen the market for his pictures.<sup>44</sup>

40 *Tradition* was rejected according to the criterion of exclusion in that the film was “likely to hurt the national feeling of another country or territory.” See Lee, *Cinema and the Cultural Cold War*, 73.

41 Sangjoon Lee, “The Emergence of the Asian Film Festival: Cold War Asia and Japan’s Re-entrance to the Regional Film Industry in the 1950s.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Cinema*, ed. Daisuke Miyao (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 224–44.

42 Erica Ka-yan Poon, “Southeast Asian Film Festival: The Site of the Cold War Cultural Struggle,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 13, no. 1 (2019): 76–92.

43 The AFF proved to bring a good deal of economic benefits to Japan, which was eager to get rid of its images as “invader” and “loser” by developing the festival on a par with those in Venice and Cannes. See Kinnia Shuk-ting, *Japanese and Hong Kong Film Industries: Understanding the Origins of East Asian Film Networks* (London: Routledge, 2010), 68.

44 John W. Miller, letter to the President (CFA), July 12, 1954, 1–2. AFR, P58, Hoover Institution Archives.

His American adviser, however, did not see the urgency of bringing *The Heroine* to international festivals or putting Chang in touch with US distributors. John Miller warned against encouraging Chang to “place high hopes in US or European markets in order to amortize somewhat unrealistic high costs of production.”<sup>45</sup> He was not completely convinced that *The Heroine* would have wide-enough appeal to interest art theater American audiences. Miller suggested that the picture would have much to recommend if “it had a love angle.” Instead, he urged Chang to consider “co-production with reputable and creative Japanese producers,” which was increasingly important for Chinese filmmaking to upgrade to international production levels.<sup>46</sup>

In distributing his motion pictures in the Greater China circuit, Chang encountered the problem of the mainland market being closed to Mandarin pictures. Asia Pictures productions had been banned in the mainland for obvious political reasons. In his 1956 address at the Forum of the Third Asian Film Festival in Hong Kong, Chang assessed that there could be 30 to 50 Mandarin pictures made each year.<sup>47</sup> With the closure of the mainland market, Asia Pictures was left with a market made up of the overseas Chinese market and Hong Kong, which together represented only about three to four million people. In Hong Kong, Mandarin pictures were plagued by a limited distribution and exhibition in movie theaters, as they were increasingly denied access to the first-run theaters. Chang perceived that the Hong Kong film industry had run into a crisis after a brief revival in the postwar period. Some top stars were asking extremely high salaries from the producers; in general, the film people lacked the discipline and professional ethics necessary for building and maintaining the industry.

Chang hinted that the predicament of Asia Pictures had to do with declining box office sales for Mandarin cinema and the closing of the mainland market. His American consultants pointed out the importance of establishing a well-organized studio with stable infrastructure and teamwork with careful capital investments. Charles Tanner—an ex-USIS motion picture supervisor and film liaison officer in Hollywood, and crucially a core member of TAF’s motion picture project—said that Chang should build a foundation for his movies in the local context “to develop an organization of people who will stay with the company and who will settle down to work

45 Miller, letter to the President (CFA).

46 John W. Miller, “Fiction Motion Picture Project,” July 13, 1954, 1–9. In “Media: Fiction Enterprise (Tri-Dimensional),” AFR, P58, Hoover Institution Archives.

47 Chang Kou-sin, “Film Industry in Hong Kong,” in *Report on the 3rd Annual Film Festival of Southeast Asia: Hong Kong, June 12<sup>th</sup> –16<sup>th</sup>*, Hong Kong: Executive Committee, 3rd Annual Film Festival, Southeast Asia in cooperation with Marklin Advertising Ltd. (1956): 107–9.

together on a permanent basis.<sup>48</sup> If Chang was serious about raising the standards of his counter-communist movie enterprise, he should follow the Hollywood model by consolidating a well-organized business structure and securing long-term teamwork with a local film crew of his own. Even though Asia Pictures might be losing its competitive edge, the TAF continued to finance and support Chang's movie enterprise to avoid giving up the entire overseas Chinese film market to the communists. But the American support proved to be short-lived, sustaining Chang's filmmaking business only for a short time span between 1953 and 1958.

### CODA: Cultural Legacy in the Cold War Sinosphere

This chapter examined right-wing filmmaking and Asia Pictures to reveal a behind-the-scenes tug-and-pull between the US-backed film studio and its leftist rivals. It looked at the possibility as well as the predicament for Asia Pictures to produce good propaganda as a good commercial investment in transnational film markets while pondering its effects and ramifications in the Sinosphere as Chang ventured to make sense and sensation of the Cold War through Asia Pictures productions.

Should we assess the development and demise of Asia Pictures as a chapter of Chinese cinema under blatant American propaganda and US influence in the pan-Asian anti-communist geopolitics? Commenting on *Tradition* and *The Heroine*, L.Z. Yuan believed that "there is no need for secrecy" for the conspicuous "American aid" in the form of technical assistance for Asia Pictures.<sup>49</sup> "It would greatly enhance the prestige of the Asia Pictures if it became known that some 'Hollywood touch' has been given their pictures." Yet Chang should also remain vigilant, as it would be scandalous if American aid to these Chinese pictures became "public knowledge," and Asia Pictures could be deplored by the leftist opponents as an "American tool" or "American running dog."

Scholars and critics pinpoint the importance of how Chang's cinema could have transformed the ideological and power competitions between the left and the right into local manifestations and expressions of both Chinese sentiments and middle-class aspirations in a new society. Law

48 Charles M Tanner, "Fiction's Film Programs—Suggestions," letter to James Stewart, October 19, 1954, 1–2. In "Fiction's Film Programs—Suggestions," AFR, P58, Hoover Institution Archives.

49 L.Z. Yuan, Letter to James Stewart and Mrs. Pollard, 18 March 1955, 1–2. In "Media: Audio-Visual Movies, Asia Pictures, 'Heroine'," AFR, P9, Hoover Institution Archives.

Kar and Frank Bren have argued that Asia Pictures was not a direct tool of American propaganda, regardless of its American funding. The films expressed not so much “the sentiment of anti-Communism or the advocacy of democracy or individual consciousness” as “the themes of nationalism, self-dignity, reaffirmation of traditional ethics, and alienation in Hong Kong society and culture.”<sup>50</sup> Law also cites *Halfway Down* (1955), which tells the story of exiled intellectuals in Hong Kong’s refugee camp.<sup>51</sup> He notes that the film showcased a collective call for the people to unite and survive in the colonist-capitalist society, which made its social critique not all that different from that expressed in the films produced by the left-wing Great Wall Pictures Corporation. Yung Sai-shing contends that Asia Pictures was a pioneer as a media conglomerate that paved the way for the successful establishments of Motion Picture & General Investment Co (MP & GI) and the Shaw Brothers studios. Such films as *The Story of a Fur Coat* (1956) and *Three Sisters* (1957) exemplified the achievements of the urban melodrama and musical genres in Mandarin pictures as cinematic projections of Hong Kong’s commercialization and urban and economic developments.<sup>52</sup> In short, the cinematic production and consumption of Asia Pictures created sights and sounds of social development in everyday life.

But for all of Chang’s enthusiastic commitment to the movies, and regardless of the fact that the studio produced some high-quality films, Asia Pictures did not fare well in business. Chang’s operation was too fly-by-night—the leftwing Great Wall studio was far better funded and managed as a more established company. Archival evidence shows that in producing *The Heroine*, Chang could not resist the temptation to move beyond melodrama to political allegory, but where he failed was in his lack—and also that of his American backers—of serious commitment to the mission of building up a long-term enterprise. The studio was operated like a start-up company with American money on a single-picture basis and without permanent staff or teamwork. The closure of the mainland market, inadequate financial and human resources, a lack of commercial appeal in its films in competition

50 Law Kar and Frank Bren, *Hong Kong Cinema: A Cross-Cultural View* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004).

51 Law Kar, “The Shadow of Tradition and the Left–Right Struggle: Some Observations on the Yonghua and Asia Film Companies.” In *The China Factor in Hong Kong Cinema* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1990), 15–20.

52 Yung Sai-shing, “Weidu xiehang; zhenghe lianheng: Yazhou chubanshe/Yazhou yingye gongsi chutan” [Antagonistic containment and horizontal integration: Asia Press/Asia Pictures.” In *Lengzhan yu Xianggang dianying* [The Cold War and Hong Kong cinema], eds. Ailing Wong and Puk-tak Lee (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2009), 125–41.

with left-wing Mandarin cinema and commercial Cantonese pictures, and an underdeveloped studio infrastructure and management were the key reasons for the decline of Chang's studio.

Although Chang recognized film's potential to have a major impact on diasporic Chinese audiences, and despite taking advantage of Hong Kong's position outside of China and its predisposition to non-political cinema, his filmic enterprise failed to occupy the cultural space of commercial cinema. Nonetheless, even as its American reviewers judged it a failure, *The Heroine* did function as a pioneer in Chinese-language cinema as a "woman's picture" by figuring a female assassin in martial arts storytelling. By contrast, the martial arts films produced by the Shaw Brothers quickly moved to take up the popular realm in the Cold War Sinosphere. Stephen Teo (2010) highlights the historical significance of the female knight-errant (*nüxia*) in the 1960s, initiated by the director King Hu and featuring female stars like Zheng Peipei, Hsu Feng (Xu Feng), and Shangguan Lingfeng.<sup>53</sup> Man-Fung Yip attributes the martial arts representation of heroines to the rise of the female labor force in postwar Hong Kong society when it was undergoing rapid modernization and Westernization under British rule. King Hu's trans-border success in Hong Kong and Taiwan also reveals how martial arts storytelling captured the imagination of inter-Asian Cold War situations.<sup>54</sup> As James Wicks argues, Hu's *Dragon Inn* (*Longmen kezhan*, 1967) and *Come Drink with Me* (*Dazui xia*, 1966) dramatized an enclave of righteous protagonists in the teahouse scenes surrounded by enemies of an oppressive state apparatus.<sup>55</sup> Both films empowered the female knight-errant to protect the powerless in the chaotic world. They presented a geopoetic image of Hong Kong and Taiwan as an isolated enclave vis-à-vis mainland China to reflect their strategic alliance to the "free world."<sup>56</sup> Hence, by reassessing *The Heroine* as an innovative motion picture bounded by Cold War divisionism and propaganda, this study explores the historical and sociocultural scenarios to assess the legacy of Asia Pictures and Chang's contributions to mid-century Sinophone cinemas and diasporic Chinese experiences amidst the leftist and rightist cultural power contentions.

53 Stephen Teo, "The 'Missing' Female Knight-errant in Hong Kong Action Cinema 1965–1971: Back in Critical Action," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 4, no. 2, (2010): 143–54.

54 Man-Fung Yip, "The Difficulty of Difference: Rethinking the Woman Warrior Figure in Hong Kong Martial Arts Cinema," *Chinese Literature Today* 3, no. 1–2 (2013): 82–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21514399.2013.11834007>. Accessed May 9, 2021.

55 James Wicks, "Hot Wars on Screen during the Cold War: Philosophical Situations in King Hu's Martial Arts Films," *National Central University Journal of Humanities*, no. 64 (October 2017): 131–59.

56 Wicks, "Hot Wars on Screen during the Cold War," 155.

## Filmography of Asia Pictures

- (1955) *The Heroine*, dir. Hung Suk-wan and Yi Wen (Evan Yang)  
 (1955) *Tradition*, dir. Tang Huang (original novel by Xu Yu)  
 (1956) *The Long Lane*, dir. Bu Wancang (original novel by Sha Qianmeng)  
 (1956) *The Story of a Fur Coat*, dir. Tang Huang  
 (1957) *Halfway Down*, dir. Tu Guangqi (original novel by Chao Tzu-fan)  
 (1957) *Love and Crime*, dir. Tang Huang (original novel by Wang Jiexin)  
 (1957) *Life with Grandma*, dir. Tang Huang  
 (1957) *Three Sisters*, dir. Bu Wancang  
 (1959) *The Shoeshine Boy*, dir. Bu Wancang

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## About the Author

Kenny K. K. Ng is an Associate Professor at the Academy of Film, Hong Kong Baptist University. His published books include *The Lost Geopoetic Horizon of Li Jieren: The Crisis of Writing Chengdu in Revolutionary China* (Brill, 2015); *Indiescape Hong Kong: Interviews and Essays*, co-authored with Enoch Tam and Vivian Lee (Typesetter Publishing, 2018) [Chinese]; *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow: Hong Kong Cinema with Sino-links in Politics, Art, and Tradition* (Chunghwa Bookstore, 2021) [Chinese]. His ongoing book projects concern censorship and visual cultural politics in Cold War Hong Kong and Asia, the politics of Cantonese cinema, and left-wing cosmopolitanism.

## 8. Cold War Myth from Elite Democracy to Martial Law in the Genre Cinema of Fernando Poe Jr. in the 1960s and 1970s

*Elmo Gonzaga*

### **Abstract**

With a career spanning six decades, the iconic actor, director, and producer Fernando Poe Jr., or FPJ, derived his immense popularity from his mythic persona as a hero of the oppressed. This chapter examines how the changing aesthetics and politics of his understudied films from the 1960s and 1970s were shaped by a bipolar Cold War imaginary of integration and containment. Patterned after the Western genre, FPJ's 1960s narratives feature a solitary, altruistic stranger who liberates a marginalized community from its victimization by politicians, bandits, and landlords. Looking at FPJ's artistic collaborations with Lino Brocka, Eddie Romero, and Celso Ad. Castillo, this chapter analyzes how tropes of heroism and suspicion are reworked at the onset of Marcos' Martial Law dictatorship, which persecuted its opponents as communist fronts.

**Keywords:** Philippine cinema; stardom; Western genre; myth; Cold War culture

### **Introduction**

Fernando Poe Jr., or FPJ, was one of the most iconic movie stars in Philippine history. Spanning six decades, his career encompassed the post-war economic nationalism of the 1950s and 1960s, the Martial Law dictatorship in the 1970s, the People Power Revolution in the 1980s, and the neoliberalization of the national economy in the 1990s and 2000s. As many of his films were box office hits, he was christened "The King of Philippine Movies," or simply "Da King." Because of his immense popularity, he almost won the Philippine presidency during the 2004 democratic elections, losing by a slim margin to incumbent Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, allegedly due to fraud. This popularity transferred to his daughter Grace Poe, a US-educated teacher who returned to the Philippines after his death to top the senatorial elections of 2013 and 2019.

FPJ directed and produced many of the movies he starred in. Despite his enduring iconic status, few studies exist of his enormous body of work, totaling 259 films. From the 1960s onwards, his films would be produced by his own company, FPJ Productions, most of which under the direction of Efren Reyes, Armando A. Herrera, or Pablo Santiago. Consisting mainly of commercial action movies, Westerns, and period epics, his films found less critical acclaim than that of his peers, which included auteurs Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal, Mario O'Hara, Mike de Leon, and Kidlat Tahimik. As such, the scholarship on Filipino celebrities, such as that by Neferti Tadiar, Rolando Tolentino, and Bliss Cua Lim, tends to focus more on iconic female stars Nora Aunor and Sharon Cuneta.<sup>1</sup> The only book-length study on FPJ, Alfonso Deza's *Mythopoeic Poe*, conducted sociological surveys among fans to identify commonly recognizable tropes in FPJ's films that contributed to his mythic persona as a movie star.<sup>2</sup>

Because of the length of his career, FPJ's work covers several genres, which correspond with global trends at different historical moments. Most of his commercially oriented films during the 1960s were patterned after the genre of the Western, with FPJ playing a solitary, taciturn stranger who flees from his violent past to become a new migrant in a remote town in the countryside. His other prominent 1960s films were Pacific War movies, some of which were written, directed, and produced by Eddie Romero under Romero's Hemisphere Pictures. In these works, FPJ plays a noble guerrilla fighting against merciless Japanese colonizers while protecting helpless Filipino civilians. In the early 1970s, FPJ worked with young auteurs such as Lino Brocka and Celso Ad. Castillo, who reimaged many of these tropes before they went on to create the arthouse films that garnered them international critical acclaim later in the decade. Instead of assuming such tropes to be enduring because of their iconicity, I am interested in how they undergo transformation during important historical moments that coincide with FPJ's career in the 1960s and 1970s amid the changing conditions of Cold War culture in the Philippines and Southeast Asia.

1 Neferti Xina M. Tadiar, *Fantasy-Production: Sexual Economies and Other Philippine Consequences for the New World Order* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004); Rolando B. Tolentino, *Richard Gomez at ang Mito ng Pagkalalake, Sharon Cuneta at ang Perpetwal na Birhen, at Iba Pang Sanaysay Ukol sa Bida sa Pelikula Bilang Kultural na Texto* (Manila: Anvil, 2000); and Bliss Cua Lim, "Sharon's Noranian Turn: Stardom, Embodiment, and Language in Philippine Cinema," *Discourse* 31.3 (2009): 318–58.

2 Alfonso D. Deza, *Mythopoeic Poe: Understanding the Masa as Audience through the Films of Fernando Poe, Jr* (Quezon City: Great Books Publishing, 2006).

The narratives of FPJ's 1960s and 1970s films are centered on a solitary, gun-slinging outsider seeking violent retribution for the lawless oppression of his family or his community by landlords, officials, and bandits. The Philippines in the 1960s and 1970s was beset by escalating class tensions over the limits of industrial development due to its resources having become concentrated and entrenched in economic and political elites. Benedict Anderson explains that social reality in the Philippines has been characterized by "cacique" or "elite" democracy, in which democratic elections merely reproduce the established order of competing factions of elites.<sup>3</sup> To consolidate support in the region for its Cold War fight against communism, the US government sought geopolitical and military alliances with the corrupt ruling elite, a situation that helped to perpetuate the established order. FPJ's films complicated the conventional image of democracy in US Cold War discourse by foregrounding its privileging of the elite. While dramatizing the violence against the underprivileged and their struggle for justice, FPJ's movies nonetheless failed to critique the larger entrenched structures that reinforced this inequality.

Deza uncovers the function of myth in the cinematic persona of FPJ by examining how public perception helps construct the characterization of his heroic sympathy for the underprivileged in his films. However, Deza restricts his scope to FPJ's most popular movies from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, when his iconic status grew. Instead of focusing on the celebrity or stardom of FPJ, I explore the changing aesthetics and politics of his genre cinema during the 1960s and 1970s. Looking at the work of FPJ's fellow Philippine National Artist, the abstract painter HR Ocampo, Jonathan Beller analyzes the evolution in Ocampo's style of representation around the period that Ferdinand Marcos proclaimed Martial Law in 1972.<sup>4</sup> I am likewise concerned with the shift in the narrative, characterization, setting, and iconography of FPJ's genre cinema with the onset of Martial Law amid the Cold War geopolitics of Southeast Asia. While usually considered formulaic and superficial as commercial productions, FPJ's works could be comprehended through tropes of Cold War culture such as heroism, persecution, anxiety, and containment.<sup>5</sup>

3 Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998), 192–226.

4 Jonathan Beller, *Acquiring Eyes: Philippine Visuality, Nationalist Struggle, and the World Media System* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2006).

5 Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); Heonik Kwon, *The Other Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

Heonik Kwon highlights the “diverse, implicit meanings” of Cold War culture, especially in Asia, which found itself caught in the United States’ bipolar, Manichean struggle between democracy and communism.<sup>6</sup> In the introduction to their edited volume about the Cold War in Asia, Michael Szonyi and Hong Liu argue that, while this dichotomous conflict served as the overriding frame through which populations acted, it was infrequently articulated.<sup>7</sup> In Southeast Asia, Cold War culture was more complex and ambivalent as left-wing activist movements composed of students, workers, and peasants negotiated the influence of competing versions of communism not only from the Soviet Union but also from China and Vietnam. I start by examining common tropes in FPJ’s 1960s Westerns in relation to Eddie Romero’s 1960s Pacific War movies with FPJ for their inscription of Cold War culture in narratives about the mistaken identity and altruistic heroism of an outsider suspected of being a threat to the community. I explore how such tropes are reworked in Lino Brocka’s *Santiago!* (1970) and Celso Ad. Castillo’s *Asedillo* (1971) and *Ang Alamat, or The Myth* (1972), produced amid the transition to Marcos’ *Bagong Lipunan* or New Society, which sought to bring about a national rebirth through the oppression and brutality of Martial Law. Backed by the United States, postcolonial governments resorted to anti-communist rhetoric and violence against dissenters in the late 1960s and early 1970s to consolidate their authority and to implement the urgent reforms needed for economic and material development. One significant trope introduced in FPJ’s films during the early 1970s is how the reluctant, misrecognized hero’s violent fight for the underprivileged can lead to the sublimation of a subversive, mythic persona, which, perceived to be threatening to the established order of elite democracy, must be domesticated and contained.

## Cold War Myth

Many of FPJ’s prominent 1960s movies like *Daniel Barrion* (1964), *Ang Mananandata (The Warrior)* (1965), *Dugo sa Buhangin (Blood on the Sand)* (1967), and *Barbaro Cristobal* (1968) feature obvious tropes of the Hollywood Western transplanted to the Philippine countryside, with characters

6 Kwon, *Other Cold War*, 8.

7 Michael Szonyi and Hong Liu, “New Approaches to the Study of the Cold War in Asia,” in *The Cold War in Asia: The Battle for Hearts and Minds*, eds. Zheng Yangwen, Hong Liu, and Michael Szonyi (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 5.

traveling on horseback with cowboy hats and Colt .45 revolvers. Their formulaic narratives were patterned on the Hollywood Western, which was conventionally set in a remote town, fortress, or homestead amid a vast, lawless wilderness. In FPJ's 1960s movies, FPJ would usually play a solitary, taciturn former gunfighter who is an outsider to a remote town, ranch, or settlement in a nameless provincial countryside where residents are terrorized by bandits. Under this Cold War atmosphere of persecution and anxiety,<sup>8</sup> helpless residents must rely for protection on the heroism of a stranger who abides by his own codes of morality and justice. In the typical plotline of FPJ's films, FPJ's protagonist seeks retribution through violence after bandits brutally victimize the people and community close to him.

Shaped by the United States' military and propaganda crusade against the specter of communism, the culture of the Cold War articulated a bipolar world of good and evil, where any individual or group that failed to ally with the United States was labeled an enemy. The cinematic genre of the Western, which flourished at the US box office from the 1940s to the 1960s, was the appropriate vehicle for this bipolar imaginary with its clear distinctions between heroes and villains. FPJ's movies are influenced by the Western's characterization of its protagonist as morally self-contained. Like the hero in Westerns, FPJ's cinematic persona is proud and resolute, and in full control of his emotions. Distinguished by the nobility of his forbearance, he uses violence only when no other resource is possible.<sup>9</sup> If the Western hero is solitary, aloof, and defiant, FPJ's loner is taciturn, earnest, and incorruptible. Personifying goodness and morality, his heroism is perceived to embody socially significant values in Philippine culture such as courage, conviction, unassumingness, respect, helpfulness, and mercifulness.<sup>10</sup> Filtered through Cold War discourses, these heroic values are presented in his films as being altruistic, democratic stances.

As the only formal US colony in Asia, the Philippines was closely entangled in its global and regional geopolitical affairs. The Philippines' various elected national governments were shaped by the anxieties of the United States about the spread of communism in Asia. Echoing these concerns, the local social and economic elite perceived communism to be a foreign, "un-Filipino" influence antagonistic to democracy. Public programs for education, such as the *pensionado* scheme, which funded the study of top

8 Kwon, *Other Cold War*, 140.

9 Matthew Carter, *Myth of the Western: New Perspectives on Hollywood's Frontier Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 37.

10 Deza, *Mythopoeic Poe*, 170–6.



Filipino scholars in universities in the continental US, were designed to import liberal democratic values to the Philippines, emphasizing freedom of speech, assembly, and enterprise within a capitalist market.<sup>11</sup>

The literature on the Western highlights the importance of myth. The cinematic genre of the Hollywood Western rests on the frontier myth of the nobility of civilization triumphing over the savagery of the wilderness.<sup>12</sup> Seminal post-war Western films such as *My Darling Clementine* (1946), *Red River* (1948), *High Noon* (1952), and *Shane* (1953) feature rugged protagonists whose determination and resilience in the wilderness enabled the foundation and flourishing of democratic civilization and capitalist industry. The Western is typically constructed around the climactic gun duel between hero and villain on the empty streets of the town, whose destructive violence elevates its narrative to the level of myth.

The mythic dimension of the Western frontier is presented through long shots of vast landscapes of desert wilderness accompanied by soaring operatic music. Diverging from the conventional Western iconography of a desert landscape, FPJ's *Hanggang May Buhay* (*While There's Life*, 1966) opens with an establishing shot of a river in an idyllic highland jungle. After a villager steals his horse, the film's hero Orlando discovers a remote settlement of nipa huts, where he is compelled to teach the villagers how to read in exchange for his freedom. While the narratives of the Hollywood Western are developed through an exposition of the social and economic milieu of their setting, those of FPJ's 1960s Westerns fail to elaborate on their generalized milieu, causing their narratives to spotlight the personalized struggle of their protagonists.

In FPJ's 1960s movies, the bipolar imaginary between civilization and wilderness is less prominent, as their narratives focus on the personalized struggle between the forgetting of a violent past and the exigency of violent justice. In *Baril sa Aking Kamay* (*Gun in My Hand*, 1966), the execution of his lover Erlinda, whose name he has etched onto his pistol, continues to haunt FPJ's character of Ariel/Abel through flashbacks even after he has abandoned his life as a gunfighter by adopting a new identity. In *Hanggang May Buhay*, a landlord seeking to turn FPJ's settlement into his own property commands bandits to burn his house down and shoot his spouse dead. Moving into town to escape his traumatic past, Orlando finds retribution by killing his spouse's murderer, which is a recurrent, climactic trope that concludes FPJ's

11 Nadal, "Cold War Remittance Economy: US Creative Writing and the Importation of New Criticism into the Philippines," *American Quarterly* 73.3 (2021): 559–60.

12 Carter, *Myth of the Western*, 49.

films. Seeking to flee the trauma of past violence, FPJ's protagonist must resort to a re-embrace of violence to overcome his oppression.

The frontier myth of the Western is defined by the regeneration of violence, through which industrial society is established and liberal democracy is enforced.<sup>13</sup> In the Hollywood Western, the hero must resort to the violence he had struggled to avoid when his personal codes of morality and justice are threatened. This violence functions as a social mechanism that preserves the fragile order of capitalist civilization, which is being instituted in the harsh wilderness. In FPJ's 1960s films, the violence is less political than moral. Here, the protagonist and his companions are brutally victimized until the only possible recourse is for the protagonist to rediscover the violence of his past life by wielding the pistol he had abandoned to seek retribution against their oppressors. While cultivating the social ties of a community to which he is a stranger, this form of justice remains personalized because FPJ's altruistic heroism does not aim to overturn the established order of the economic and political elite who are the source of his victimization.

In contrast to the conventional Hollywood Western, FPJ's 1960s movies feature a Cold War trope of mistaken identity, in which FPJ plays a character who has adopted a new identity or is misrecognized with a different identity. Fleeing from a violent past that continues to haunt him, this hero is an unassuming, taciturn stranger who finds sanctuary amid the anonymity of a remote town or community. Whereas in *Baril sa Aking Kamay*, the law officials hunting FPJ's Ariel/Abel have forgotten about his original crime, in *Dugo sa Buhangin*, the antagonist frames FPJ's Daniel for a crime he never committed. These narratives feature scenes where the protagonist, fleeing from his assailants because of his mistaken identity, watches his gestures and movements for fear of being surveilled and misrecognized. In this Cold War trope common in film noir, a stranger is persecuted for a crime of which he may be innocent. Criminalized as a threatening outsider, this innocent stranger is forced to confront, through the course of the narrative, the consequences of these allegations on his reputation and well-being.

The fear of the unknown outsider is a Cold War trope that conveys anxieties about the sinister external influence of communism. Christina Klein examines how bipolar strategies of persecution and containment enabled the US government to marginalize, subdue, and eliminate potential enemies.<sup>14</sup> In Cold War narratives, strangers in a town are immediately subjected to

13 Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 352.

14 Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*.

suspicion from the community for being a threat to its harmony. This paranoia over the identity of an outsider derives from a bipolar imaginary, which unequivocally and uncompromisingly categorizes people as either allies or enemies without the possibility of any neutral or intermediary position.

In FPJ's 1960s movies, this fear of the unknown outsider is shaped by the anxiety of the community over bandits who frequently visit their town or settlement to terrorize them. With their innocence a trope of rural small-town life in Philippine literary culture, the films highlight the closeness of the members of the community and their helplessness over the inability to overcome their oppression. Situated in a predominantly Catholic setting, such narratives illustrate the bandits' barbarism and amorality by showing them brazenly interrupting religious worship inside a local church, which was a sacred sanctuary for the God-fearing townspeople.

Suddenly transplanted to this community as a stranger from elsewhere, FPJ's protagonist is immediately subjected to suspicion as a possible criminal in flight from the law. With some films opening with his character seeking refuge in an outbuilding, his isolation as an outsider is exemplified by public scenes in a local saloon where he sits alone, subjected to the suspicion of the townspeople. Misrecognizing the outsider as a threat to their community, the townspeople in FPJ's films manage their fear of this threat by exchanging gossip about his suspected identity. In *Baril sa Aking Kamay*, Ariel/Abel finds himself isolated from the townspeople because of their doubts about him, but they end up protecting him from being apprehended by the law after he prevents bandits from further terrorizing the town. Based on their assumption of his nobility, their acceptance of his mistaken identity permits this stranger to become assimilated into the community, restoring the established order by not disrupting it. It is the circulation of gossip about this mistaken identity within and beyond the community that contributes to the elevation of the unknown outsider's mythic persona.

## Cold War Heroism

Building on the mythic dimension of FPJ's heroic persona in his 1960s Westerns, Eddie Romero produced, wrote, and directed two profitable Pacific War movies for the US market starring FPJ: *The Walls of Hell* (or *Intramuros*, 1964) and *The Ravagers* (or *Hanggang May Kalaban* and *Only the Brave Know Hell*, 1965). Although set in the near past amid the devastation of the Pacific War, these 1960s narratives are permeated with Cold War tropes of heroism, bipolarity, and suspicion.

Working in the post-war period, Romero was a prolific filmmaker who crossed different industries and genres. After starting his career as a director of Tagalog romances, he turned to war movies in the 1960s featuring American actors and Anglocentric narratives, which were financed with US capital. Addressing the enormous demand for double-bill and triple-bill movies at theaters,<sup>15</sup> Romero gained international recognition for producing grindhouse horror, sci-fi, and exploitation films in the late 1960s and early 1970s before returning to the Philippines to shoot an award-winning trilogy of nationalistic period epics set during important historical moments, including one with FPJ entitled *Aguila* (1980).

Romero's *The Walls of Hell* is about a desperate plan to save civilians from the siege of the fortress of Intramuros during the Liberation of Manila at the end of the Pacific War. Departing from the vast, idyllic countryside of FPJ's Westerns, the claustrophobic urban setting is marked by ruins and flames with incessant noise, shaking, and debris from artillery barrages and bomb explosions. Its protagonists are Allied soldiers who were left behind in the Philippine Islands during the war to wage a guerrilla struggle against the occupying Japanese army. Weary of war, they remain resolute about the nobility of their struggle despite the sacrifices to their family and well-being they have been compelled to make.

War films from Hollywood during this period tended to be propagandistic and triumphalist in an attempt to uphold the courage and resoluteness of US soldiers and their allies. In portraying the US military as the white savior of its colony under invasion, *The Walls of Hell* reveals how American soldiers must depend on the military and moral support of Filipino guerrillas for victory against the enemy. Klein argues that Cold War rhetoric was shaped not only by the logic of containment but also by that of integration, by which the US government aimed to accommodate and mobilize potential non-communist allies.<sup>16</sup> Heralded as an exemplar of liberal democracy in the Asian region since the early twentieth century, the Philippines, for instance, provided bases and troops for the United States' wars in Korea and Vietnam.<sup>17</sup> Leong Yew explains how this logic of integration was articulated through plotlines of "sympathetic collaboration" between American soldiers or agents and their local informants and partners, which was imperative

15 José B. Capino, *Dream Factories of a Former Colony: American Fantasies, Philippine Cinema* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 4.

16 Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*.

17 Francisco Benitez, "Filming Philippine Modernity during the Cold War: The Case of Lamberto Avellana," in *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia*, eds. Tony Day and Maya H. T. Liem (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Publications, 2010), 21.

for their victory.<sup>18</sup> Depicted in Cold War narratives as loyal, egalitarian, and altruistic,<sup>19</sup> Filipino allies often compensated for the inadequacy or failure of the white savior.

In Romero's Pacific War movies, the heroism of FPJ's protagonist is characterized as being incorruptible and unyielding, concerned less about vanquishing merciless Japanese colonizers than liberating vulnerable Filipino civilians. Although accused at first of being a Japanese collaborator and spy, the dynamic altruism of FPJ's Nardo in *The Walls of Hell* is counterposed with the laconic jadedness of the guerrilla unit commander, Lieutenant Jim Sorensen. Tighter than the shots of Sorensen, which show him brushing his teeth or lying down while shrouded in chiaroscuro, the closeups of Nardo poised for urgent action prompt the audience to identify more with his moral perspective. Whereas Sorensen is driven by blind duty, which obliges him to sacrifice his family for the United States' crusade for liberal democracy, Nardo's altruistic conviction is directed toward the ordinary people who have become helplessly trapped in the violent, uncompromising conflict between enemy combatants. In this way, FPJ's Pacific War films unravel the bipolar imaginary of the Pacific War framed by the conflict between the US and Japan by spotlighting the plight of victims whose lives, caught between two opposing sides, were dislocated and devastated by the war.

Reproducing the Cold War trope of mistaken identity, *The Walls of Hell* depicts FPJ's Nardo as a threatening stranger to the guerrilla unit on the frontlines of the siege. Fearful about being led into a trap, the American officers and Filipino soldiers doubt his identity at first, suspecting him to be a Japanese spy after he suddenly emerges unscathed from a secret tunnel beneath the walls of the besieged fortress during a battle. Debating with his white superiors about the urgency of saving local civilians from the siege, FPJ's heroic outsider must persuade the guerrillas about the nobility of his plan by proving his integrity through tests of his truthfulness and determination. If mistaken identity in FPJ's 1960s Western movies is presented as a threat to the security and well-being of the community, which is resolved through its collective embrace, the correction of the mistaken identity in Romero's Pacific War films introduces a divergent element to the established order that spurs the community to action. In *The Walls of Hell*, the revelation of Nardo's true identity as an ally becomes the staging ground for the violence of heroic altruism among the guerrillas.

18 Leong Yew, "Sympathetic Collaboration and the Made-for-US Philippine Films of the 1950s and 1970s," *Screen* 59.2 (2018): 186.

19 Benitez, "Filming Philippine Modernity," 24.

The triumphalism of Romero's 1960s Pacific War movies could be contrasted with the trauma of Lino Brocka's early war film *Santiago!* (1970), in which FPJ plays a former guerrilla named Gonzalo who escapes the harrowing violence and contradiction of the war by seeking refuge under a new identity in a remote fishing village. Brocka gained international acclaim during the 1970s and 1980s for award-winning noir melodramas set in Manila's gritty informal settlements such as *Maynila sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (1975), *Insiang* (1976), and *Jaguar* (1979). Reproducing the tropes of FPJ's movies, Brocka's social realist films would feature characters who, victimized by an unjust and insurmountable established order, are left with no other recourse but desperate violence.

As a transitional work of FPJ, Brocka's *Santiago!* unsettles the bipolar heroism of Romero's 1960s Pacific War narratives by exploring the moral ambivalence of war. Whereas *Santiago!* emulates the tropes of FPJ's 1960s Western movies with a protagonist who flees his violent past by adopting a new identity, it shows him conflicted with guilt over the consequences of his triumphalist heroism during the war. Tormented by the horror of a young villager who is left disfigured and blind because of the bombing of a suspected Japanese base he authorized, Gonzalo slowly nurses her back to health, finding commonality with other incapacitated survivors of war atrocities. Diverging from other Pacific War narratives, *Santiago!* focuses less on spectacular scenes of battle and more on traumatic stories about murder and rape. Gonzalo's violent past returns to haunt him through melodramatic flashbacks about the brutality perpetrated not only by Japanese soldiers but also by Filipino guerrillas on the helpless villagers.

## Martial Law Myth

FPJ's early 1970s films reproduce the same tropes of an outsider who, misrecognized or persecuted for a mistaken identity, seeks violent retribution for his experience of oppression. Such Cold War tropes of heroism and fear in FPJ's 1960s movies were reimagined by filmmaker Celso Ad. Castillo around the period of Ferdinand Marcos' proclamation of Martial Law in the early 1970s. The evocative FPJ films that Castillo wrote and directed—*Asedillo* (1971), *Ang Alamat* (1972), *Santo Domingo* (1972), and *Esteban* (1973)—were distinguished by their vivid rural settings reminiscent of Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns and Fernando Amorsolo's landscape paintings. Shifting the bipolar Cold War imaginary to focus on class tensions between ordinary people and the entrenched elite, their reworked narratives explore how

the personalized struggle for justice could lead to the collective action of revolution.

To extend his rule, Marcos declared Martial Law against the threat of communism amid the rise in student activism, which threatened the established order. It resembled the New Order regime of Suharto in Indonesia in that it was backed by the United States, which feared the rise of communism in the region and strove to bolster support for its allies. As in Chile and Argentina, the political and social stability enforced by these militaristic dictatorships relied on violence to create the appropriate conditions for the flourishing of neoliberal capitalism and foreign investment.

Rendering a more realized social and historical milieu than FPJ's previous works, Castillo's early 1970s FPJ films visualize the established order of the political and economic elite as corrupt and insurmountable. Their narratives' bipolar imaginary is defined by the conflict of ordinary people against not threatening outsiders but dominant elites. Whereas FPJ's 1960s movies depicted townspeople as fearful of being terrorized by lawless bandits who prowl the countryside, Castillo's 1970s FPJ films portray the peasantry as being oppressed by exploitative landlords who manipulate the law to possess their lands. Revealing a Maoist critique of peasant subjugation, these works visualize the unequal rural conditions by which communist ideas could foment among the Filipino population. While the atmosphere of fear in FPJ's 1960s Western movies compels ordinary people to acquiesce to the terms of the established order, the experience of persecution in Castillo's 1970s FPJ films obliges them to explore possibilities of revolutionary transformation. If FPJ's heroism is distinguished by his reluctance to resort to violence because of a traumatic past, his rediscovery of violence becomes a collective instrument for the community to liberate itself from the unjust, entrenched structures that perpetuate its repeated victimization.

The declaration of Martial Law in the Philippines in 1972 resulted from the Cold War geopolitics in Southeast Asia during the 1960s. Fighting a war in Vietnam against the specter of communism, the US government exerted pressure on its economic and military allies to join its crusade for democratic capitalism. Like Singapore and Indonesia in the early 1960s, the Philippines in the late 1960s and early 1970s was marked by student protests demanding revolutionary transformation in the established order of elite democracy.<sup>20</sup> Influenced by Chinese Maoism, the armed communist insurgency centered on rural areas, where peasants were subjected to

20 Meredith L. Weiss and Edward Aspinall, eds. *Student Activism in Asia: Between Protest and Powerlessness* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

conditions of bondage in exchange for agricultural livelihood. To preserve their position of authority, from which they drew their wealth and power, landlords and politicians relied on the coercion of manipulated laws and the violence of private armies.

Tony Day suggests that bipolar Cold War culture shaped the construction of national identity across Southeast Asia during this historical period.<sup>21</sup> Espousing the Cold War rhetoric of persecution and containment, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos condemned protesters for being communists whose critical mass was supposedly on the verge of overthrowing the elected government. To confront this perceived threat of political revolution, Marcos imposed Martial Law in 1972 on a Philippine republic that had functioned as a liberal democracy since the first decade of the twentieth century. Marcos' Martial Law could be seen as a Cold War genre of tropical authoritarianism modelled after Lee Kuan Yew and Suharto's consolidation of power in Singapore and Indonesia against the specter of communism in the 1960s. Driven by paranoia against infiltration and contagion, these governments jailed opposition politicians and activists and closed critical newspapers and networks that they publicly suspected of being communist fronts and sympathizers. First developed in Southeast Asia, this Cold War genre of tropical authoritarianism was exported to Latin America in the 1970s, where it created a neoliberal market free of state intervention and mass protest that allowed experimental policies of democratic capitalism to flourish. Founding a new established order with a different faction of elites, Marcos' *Bagong Lipunan* or New Society under Martial Law emphasized the use of legality and violence for the sake of attaining modern economic development.

Marcos relied on Martial Law to consolidate all power in his position of authority. Linking these mechanisms to the violence of Martial Law oppression, Gerard Lico argues that Marcos deployed the state's propaganda tools and cultural institutions to create a cult of personality around himself and his spouse Imelda in order to reinforce their rule.<sup>22</sup> According to Lico, Marcos promoted the heroic myth of the *Bagong Lipunan* based on the rebirth of a 'Great Malayan Culture.' In this *Bagong Lipunan*, the national regeneration needed for progress would be achieved through an artistic

21 Tony Day, "Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia: An Introduction," in *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia*, eds. Tony Day and Maya H. T. Liem (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Publications, 2010).

22 Gerard Lico, *Edifice Complex: Power, Myth, and Marcos State Architecture* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2003), 38–40.



rediscovery of native roots. Marcos' Martial Law aesthetics were marked by the exorbitant construction of tropical Brutalist architecture including the Cultural Center of the Philippines, the Philippine Heart Center, the National Arts Theater, and the Coconut Palace, which appropriated local materials and motifs.<sup>23</sup> Although these local elements conventionally meant nipa, rattan, capiz, and coconut, they could alternately point to the labor mobilized to quickly erect Imelda Marcos' succession of monumental structures, whose 'edifice complex' aspired to elevate the mythic quality of their rule. Referring to the Marcos' decision to pour cement over the bodies of construction workers who were killed during the building of the Manila Film Center, Lico suggests its mythic monumentality rests on the exploitation and concealment of dead, oppressed labor. In Martial Law's aesthetics of legality and violence, the concealment, sublimation, or domestication of oppression and death becomes the foundation for myth.

FPJ's movies across his extensive body of work could be seen to derive their mythic dimension from the continuous repetition and variation of the tropes in their formulaic narratives. Castillo's early 1970s FPJ films enhance their mythic quality through the vivid visualization of the rural setting by drawing on folk iconography. Whereas FPJ's 1960s Westerns highlighted the centrality of religious worship among the townspeople through key scenes set in the local church, the landscapes of *Asedillo*, *Ang Alamat*, and *Santo Domingo* are all inscribed with the folk Catholic iconography of remote hilltop monasteries, pagoda-like bell towers, and life-sized wooden crucifixes, which help situate their events and conflicts within the concrete social and economic milieu of the Philippine countryside. In these eschatological representations of agricultural labor conditions, the darkly lit, claustrophobic interiors of peasant domestic spaces open up to vast, colorful landscapes, which, extending into the horizon, signify the promise of an alternate world.

*Ang Alamat* is distinguished by long shots of an idyllic rural setting that reproduce the iconic landscape paintings of the seminal Filipino visual artist Fernando Amorsolo, who repeated the same tropes of happy rural labor throughout his long body of work. Conveying Amorsolo's depiction of the heroism of the peasantry as proud, resilient, and contented, such images feature smiling farmers tilling the field, riding a carabao, and sitting under a tree from works such as *Carabao Cart in Araya* (1946), *Family under the Mango Tree* (1952), and *Harvesting Rice* (1955). Landscapes could be understood to be spatial representations that, in their visualization of a

23 Lico, *Edifice Complex*, 72.

social and economic milieu, freeze the movement of historical events and actors.<sup>24</sup> Seen from this perspective, Castillo's appropriation of Amorsolo's images of happy labor frozen in time contrasts with his reimagining of FPJ's tropes of personal retribution into narratives of collective resistance. If, in Hollywood Westerns, the desert wilderness functions as the setting for articulating the resilience of capitalist civilization, in Castillo's 1970s FPJ films, the rural landscape furnishes the staging ground for revolution against the established order.

The narrative conflict of class oppression is visualized in the background of the *mise-en-scène*, on the wall of the landlord's mansion, in the form of the revolutionary Filipino artist and activist Juan Luna's iconic *Spoliarium* (1884), which famously allegorizes the oppression of the powerless. As a Romanticist representation of the brutal aftermath of a classical gladiator fight, *Spoliarium*, like FPJ's period films set during Spanish, US, or Japanese colonial rule, foregrounds how the historical past is constructed and interpreted through the lens of the present milieu. Furthermore, its metaphorical reworking of the ravaged heroism of dead, persecuted bodies confronted by the spectacle of violence critiques the oppression experienced by peasant labor under the dominion of the entrenched elite.

## Martial Law Containment

If FPJ's 1960s movies are preoccupied with the consequences of persecution from the misrecognition of a mistaken identity, Castillo's early 1970s FPJ films are concerned with possibilities of revolution from the sublimation of a mythic persona. Hollywood Westerns such as John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) and Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) examine how the myth constructed from the use of violence provides the foundation for capitalist civilization. In Castillo's FPJ films, based on the mistaken identity of an outsider, myth becomes the foundation for collective action whose exigency of revolutionary change stays domesticated.

In FPJ's 1960s and 1970s movies, the outsider is presented as the source of change. In 1966's *Hanggang May Buhay*, the possibility of social transformation comes from education, which FPJ's solitary stranger delivers to the remote highland community by teaching its villagers how to read. In contrast, the limits of lawful transformation are explored in 1972's *Ang*

24 Martin Lefebvre, "Between Setting and Landscape in Cinema," in *Landscape and Film*, ed. Martin Lefebvre (New York: Routledge, 2006), 22.

*Alamat* where the unjust and corrupt conditions of the established order are portrayed as being surmountable only through the collective violence of revolution. Departing from the personification of dynamic, unyielding heroism in Eddie Romero's 1960s Pacific War movies, FPJ plays the laconic former guerrilla Daniel who has abandoned violence to return to his child and their land as an ordinary civilian. Exploiting the peasants who lease his land by forcing them to produce a larger share of their agricultural output, the local landlord hires a private army to terrorize a recalcitrant Daniel into selling his cherished property. Daniel's fellow farmers are left powerless without recourse to the protection of the law after the lawyer, whose education they had financed, abandons altruism for profit by allying with the landlord.

In FPJ's 1960s Western movies, the misrecognition of a mistaken identity foments the fear and persecution of an unknown outsider who is suspected of being a threat to the community. In Castillo's 1970s FPJ films, the misrecognition of mistaken identity cultivates the interpersonal bonds of the community, which enable the collective action requisite for revolutionary change. In *Ang Alamat*'s reimagination of the Cold War trope of mistaken identity, FPJ's hero adopts the mythic persona of a dead guerrilla during the Pacific War, whose dying entreaty is for his abandoned child and land to be protected. Despite having no previous connection to his child and land, FPJ's Daniel demonstrates the ethics of responsibility of a stranger to his adopted community by fighting unconditionally for them as if they were his own. Instead of being isolated as a threatening outsider by townspeople, FPJ's heroes in Castillo's 1970s films constantly dialogue with their larger community about the possibilities of action. Although reluctant at first to resort to the violence he had abandoned, *Ang Alamat*'s Daniel agrees to help his fellow farmers protect their lands against the landlord's private army when no legal recourse is possible. Castillo's FPJ narratives are defined by this dialectic between the peasants and the outsider, who prod each other to elevate the exigency of personal retribution to a collective struggle against the oppression of the established order.

This mistaken identity is sublimated into a staging ground for revolutionary action through the death of the misrecognized hero. Reimagining the Cold War trope of mistaken identity from FPJ's 1960s Westerns, 1971's *Asedillo* suggests that bandits are persecuted and criminalized as threatening outsiders under the political and legal structures controlled by politicians and landlords because of their unyielding struggle for the oppressed. Ranajit Guha writes how peasants who rebelled against the colonial government would typically be misrecognized and portrayed in official records and histories as bandits who

endangered the established order to domesticate their threat of revolution.<sup>25</sup> *Asedillo* dramatically concludes with the assassination of FPJ's hero, Dodo, whose dead body is publicly displayed to the townspeople Christ-like on a wooden cross. The film's climactic crowd scene evokes that of 1966's *Baril sa Aking Kamay*, where the previously suspicious townspeople defend the name of their hero against the interrogation of a law official. Punctuated by operatic music, a quick, zooming montage of the horrified faces in the crowd witnessing the spectacle of violence is accompanied by an anonymous voice from the crowd crying out his name "Asedillo!" Despite the death of his physical body, his heroism is elevated to the level of myth as the contagious chanting of his name reverberates across the town and in the mountains, where his spirit continues to inspire the fight against the established order of elite democracy. Instead of being a source of suspicion and persecution, the mythicization of his mistaken identity widens the scope of the struggle for revolutionary transformation beyond the limits of the community.

However, the narrative concludes before the collective violence of revolution can be visualized on screen. Studying the evolution in the work of seminal Filipino visual artist HR Ocampo during the 1960s and 1970s, Beller analyzes his changing aesthetics around the period of Martial Law. According to Beller, Ocampo's shift away from figuration toward greater abstraction suggests the failure and "nonrealization" of utopian aspirations for overcoming the violent contradictions and tensions of his time.<sup>26</sup> This failure in representation could be understood in light of Castillo's appropriation of the classical and folk iconography of Luna and Amorsolo in his aim to render the social and economic milieu as cultural form. Given the anti-communist Cold War policy of the Marcos dictatorship, I would argue that this class struggle could only be depicted in popular cinema as benign, divested of the subversive consequences of revolution.

Produced within the bipolar imaginary of Cold War geopolitics, FPJ's complex tropes of courage, altruism, and mercifulness, which are intrinsic to his iconic cinematic persona, are shaped by suspicion, persecution, and containment against the unknown outsider who threatens to infiltrate and undermine the established order of elite democracy. Despite the shift in aesthetics and politics toward the collective violence of revolution against the corruption and oppression of Martial Law, his heroism remained on the level of myth.

25 Ranajit Guha, *Element Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

26 Beller, *Acquiring Eyes*, 113.

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## 9. Silver Screen Reversals of the Domino Theory: American Cold War Movies and the Re-imagining of Britain's Experience in Southeast Asia\*

*Wen-Qing Ngoei*

### Abstract

This essay argues that, as US involvement in Vietnam deepened, films like *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dawn* (1964) and *King Rat* (1965) served as cultural spaces to envision, perform, and contest an American victory over Asian communism. *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dawn* portrays Britain's anticommunist struggle in 1950s Malaya, wherein a US counterinsurgency expert uses his skills against Malayan communist guerrillas. *King Rat*, set in Japanese-occupied Singapore during World War Two, showcases a lowly American corporal somehow thriving in a POW camp while imprisoned British officers suffer. These films indulged fantasies that Americans might supersede Britain's record in Southeast Asia, exuding optimism about US involvement in the region while wrestling with the fatalism of President Eisenhower's "domino theory" that communism would sweep Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Malayan Emergency; Singapore; Britain; culture; World War Two; anticommunism

\* This chapter adapts material from the author's book, *Arc of Containment: Britain, the United States, and Anticommunism in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019). All rights reserved. Additionally, the author thanks his research assistant, Lee Tat Wei, for his valuable work in support of producing this essay.



## Introduction: Cold War Southeast Asia and the Domino Theory

In early 1954, when Viet Minh garrisons began surrounding French forces at Dien Bien Phu, US officials looked expectantly to President Dwight Eisenhower for signs that he would commit American ground forces to Vietnam. The United States was already responsible for funding much of France's anticommunist campaign in Indochina. Now, with the possibility of a French defeat looming, the moment seemed to call at last for direct US military intervention. Eisenhower himself had enunciated America's stakes in Cold War Southeast Asia in his inaugural address the previous year. The conflict, he had stated, meant "freedom [...] pitted against slavery; lightness against the dark." It was for this freedom and light, he implied, that "the French soldier [...] die[d] in Indochina, the British soldier [was] killed in Malaya, [and] the American life given in Korea."<sup>1</sup> He believed that the insecurity of Southeast Asia's states impinged upon Western power and, importantly, US positions across Asia, their fates interconnected like a row of dominoes.<sup>2</sup> Surely Vietnam, tottering at the head of that row, was where America must now resolve to hold the line? The members of Eisenhower's National Security Council likely thought so. Yet the president told his officials that he simply "could not imagine the United States putting ground troops anywhere in Southeast Asia, except possibly in Malaya."<sup>3</sup>

Why Malaya? Because even as this British colony transitioned toward independence in the 1950s, Britain and its local allies struggled against the guerrilla fighters of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). For the United States, the fact that the MCP was almost entirely ethnic Chinese was especially important—this had fueled US suspicions that Beijing was pulling the MCP's strings, that seizing Malaya was part of China's plan to use its ten-million strong diaspora in Southeast Asia to subvert West-friendly governments throughout the region. US concerns about a Chinese fifth column rising against British power in Southeast Asia were certainly intensified by presumptions that the ethnic Chinese of Malaya, comprising nearly 40 percent of the country's population, instinctively pledged their

1 Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Inaugural Address Online" (1953), in *The American Presidency Project* by Gerhard Peters and John T. Wolley, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/inaugural-address-3>.

2 Eisenhower, "The President's News Conference," April 7, 1954, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-361>.

3 Memorandum of Discussion at the 179<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, January 8, 1954, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1952–1954, vol. 13, pt. 1, Indochina, 1952–1954, ed. Neil H. Petersen (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1982), Document 949.

allegiance to Beijing. For US officials, a similar pall hovered over Singapore to the south of Malaya, a country more than three-quarters ethnic Chinese and the location of Britain's prime military bases in the region. There, the MCP's infiltration of middle schools, trade unions, and cultural organizations at times seemed even more threatening to British and US interests. In the late 1950s, US officials were so concerned that Singapore's "extreme leftists" would triumph that they considered military action to bolster Britain's weakening hold on the country. Put simply, Britain's Cold War efforts in Malaya and Singapore—how it fought the communist insurgency and political subversion and steered decolonization in favor of London—had far-reaching regional consequences in Eisenhower's view.<sup>4</sup> Not only that, the president harbored an enduring pessimism about the future of the declining British Empire and wider Southeast Asia, a pessimism captured in the "falling domino principle" he deployed in 1954 to forecast how just one country toppling to communism meant the region would "go over very quickly" and bring a "disintegration...most profound."<sup>5</sup>

## US Cold War Cinema and Southeast Asia in the 1960s

It is little surprise, then, that elaborations of such pessimism about US involvement in Cold War Southeast Asia permeate US films about the Vietnam conflict. The first two *Rambo* installments (*First Blood*, 1982; *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, 1985), for example, are well known for popularizing themes of American loss and humiliation following the US military debacle in Indochina.<sup>6</sup> However, attending to such movies obscures the more complex reality of US Cold War attitudes toward Southeast Asia as a whole, even as the Vietnam War raged. Indeed, American films of the 1960s that focused on British experiences in Malaya and Singapore—the very countries that once worried Eisenhower more than Vietnam—exuded a qualified (if conflicted)

4 Ngoei, "The Domino Logic of the Darkest Moment: The Fall of Singapore, the Atlantic Echo Chamber, and 'Chinese Penetration' in US Cold War policy toward Southeast Asia," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 21, no. 3 (2014): 215–45; "The United States and the 'Chinese Problem' of Southeast Asia," *Diplomatic History* 45, no. 2 (2021): 240–52.

5 Eisenhower, The President's News Conference, April 7, 1954.

6 For discussions of Vietnam War films along these lines, see examples like Sweeney, "What Mean Expendable?: Myth, Ideology and Meaning in *First Blood* and *Rambo*," *Journal of American Culture* 22, no. 3 (1999): 63–9; D. L. Sutton and J. E. Winn, "'Do We Get to Win this Time?': POW/MIA Rescue Films and the American Monomyth," *Journal of American Culture* 24, no. 1–2 (2001): 25–30.

optimism about US prospects in Southeast Asia. The films analyzed here, United Artists' *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dawn* (1964) and Columbia Pictures' *King Rat* (1965), contrast starkly with the overrepresented themes of US failure in, and despair about, Southeast Asia that have animated most Vietnam War films.<sup>7</sup> After all, Britain and its local allies in Malaya (Malaysia from 1963) and Singapore ultimately succeeded. By the early 1960s, Malaya's indigenous nationalists had routed the MCP with the support of British Commonwealth forces; Singapore's anticommunist politicians, in turn, had used Britain's counterinsurgency tools to overcome their socialist rivals at home, rivals whose politics were born of Beijing's efforts to woo its Southeast Asian diaspora.<sup>8</sup> Malaya and Singapore's heartening trajectories went on to exert a considerable impact upon US strategy toward the region. American leaders commissioned symposia to pick the brains of British and Australian military men who had served in Malaya; sent South Vietnamese soldiers to learn counterinsurgency in Malaya's jungle warfare school; demanded studies of how British, Malayan, and Singaporean efforts won the "hearts and minds" of locals; and courted the leaders of both newly independent Southeast Asian nations.<sup>9</sup>

So much for Washington. How was Hollywood affected by the reversals of the domino theory in Malaya and Singapore that unfolded in the early 1960s alongside Vietnam's mounting crisis? This essay argues that *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dawn* and *King Rat* served as cultural spaces for envisioning, performing, and contesting the possibility that Americans might appropriate and/or supersede Britain's experiences in Malaya and Singapore. *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dawn*, set in 1950s Malaya, appropriates and attempts to Americanize Britain's vaunted counterinsurgency methods in the conflict against the MCP. It is a clear, if crude, gesture at the expansion of US military involvement in Vietnam in the mid-1960s which ponders the potential for American success. *King Rat* is the story of an American prisoner of war (POW) in Japanese-occupied Singapore during World War Two, a lowly corporal who thrives despite the dominance of a hostile Asian power while emaciated British POWs around him suffer pathetically. These films reflected and complicated Washington's burgeoning optimism in their contemporaneous moment. For they mirrored the sentiments of US policymakers, conveying confidence

7 *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dawn*, dir. Lewis Gilbert (1964, Beverly Hills: United Artists; MGM, 2011); *King Rat*, dir. Bryan Forbes (1965, Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures). Both films were adapted from novels: Michael Keon, *The Durian Tree* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960); James Clavell, *King Rat* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1962).

8 Ngoei, "The United States and the 'Chinese Problem' of Southeast Asia."

9 Ngoei, *Arc of Containment*, chapters 3 and 4.

about America's growing presence in Southeast Asia, believing that when US pursuits were intertwined in various ways with British experiences in Malaya and Singapore, America might somehow triumph. By contrast, in the fictional country of Sarkhan—the stand-in for South Vietnam and Thailand in *The Ugly American* (1963)—US elites (one played by Marlon Brando) were portrayed as stupidly and regularly undermining their own anticommunist cause in Southeast Asia.<sup>10</sup> Then again, the streak of confidence in *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dawn* and *King Rat* never escaped the despondency of Americans within and beyond policymaking circles when it came to Vietnam or the sense of crisis inherent in the domino theory. As this essay points out, these two films also communicated deep US anxiety over the imminent collapse of all that their American characters achieved, their personal victories thrown into jeopardy or irretrievably tainted by the unsavory measures employed to achieve them.

Recovering this trajectory in Cold War–era American films set in Southeast Asia is invaluable. It is more characteristic of the geostrategic developments in the region during the 1960s, more reflective of the conflicted American mind with respect to US intervention in Southeast Asia at the time. Scholars of Cold War cinema have, after all, underscored that Hollywood followed rather than dictated the cultural milieu of Cold War America.<sup>11</sup> In that cultural milieu, non-elite support for US commitments to Vietnam was “broad but also shallow,” wary of their nation's escalating involvement.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, middlebrow Americans long interested and invested in their nation's courting of post-1945 East and Southeast Asia were well aware of, and cheered by, the successes of anticommunist nationalists and British policies in Malaya.<sup>13</sup> Also, Malayan Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman had made an impressive splash during his first official visit to the United States in 1960. American journalists described him as a skillful orator (he spoke “excellent English”), a “delightful dinner companion with many Western interests,” and a man of culture who authored plays and movie scripts.<sup>14</sup> When Eisenhower met the Tunku, he emphatically declared the Malayan

10 *The Ugly American*, dir. George Englund (1963, Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures). The film was adapted from the bestselling 1958 novel of the same name by Eugene Burdick and William Lederer, first published by W. W. Norton & Company.

11 Tony Shaw and Denise J. Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 19.

12 Fredrik Logevall, “Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2004): 104.

13 Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); Ngoei, *Arc of Containment*, 103–104.

14 Ngoei, *Arc of Containment*, 121.

leader one of America's "staunchest friends" in the Cold War.<sup>15</sup> Not long after, *Reader's Digest*, widely circulated and read in the United States, spread word of how the "happy land of Malaya" had "brilliantly executed" a war against the MCP guerrillas.<sup>16</sup> By early 1963, Americans learned that President John F. Kennedy thought the creation of Malaysia—uniting Malaya, Singapore and British territories in Borneo—the "best hope of security" in Southeast Asia, for this new federation could offer powerful resistance to regional communism.<sup>17</sup> Both *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dawn* and *King Rat* evince these interwoven strands of American optimism and wariness about US involvement in 1960s Southeast Asia.

However, studies of American cinema have little to say about how these two films performed the American view of US-Southeast Asian relations during the Cold War. This is understandable, to an extent. Historian Tony Shaw explains that in the early twentieth century, Hollywood reflected America's fear of communism as primarily a domestic threat that arose from corrupt elements within the United States, not an international rivalry against the Soviet Union.<sup>18</sup> (The USSR had, in any case, been an ally of the United States during the Second World War.) Even so, scholars note how, during the Cold War, Hollywood began projecting America's older dread of communism onto an external antagonist, demonizing the Soviets or Chinese—and sometimes, malevolent extraterrestrials as in movies such as *The Thing* (1951), *Invaders from Mars* (1953), and *Killers from Outer Space* (1954)—while also touting America's "capitalist-based creativity and [...] the superiority of democracy's freedom of spirit" through extravagant Biblical epics like *The Ten Commandments* (1956).<sup>19</sup> Of course, alongside the pro-US and anticommunist themes of such Hollywood productions, critical American filmmakers of the 1960s crafted films such as *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* and *Fail Safe* (both released in 1964) that questioned long-held truths such as whether the United States truly represented virtue and goodness in the Cold War rivalry.<sup>20</sup>

15 Eisenhower, Toasts of the President and the Prime Minister of Malaya, October 26, 1960, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/toasts-the-president-and-the-prime-minister-malaya>.

16 William J. Lederer, "The Guerrilla War the Reds Lost," *Reader's Digest*, May 1962.

17 John F. Kennedy, The President's News Conference, 14 February 1963, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-159>.

18 Tony Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 2.

19 Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, 21, 26; J. Hoberman, *Army of Phantoms: American Movies and the Making of the Cold War* (New York: New Press, 2011), 166–8, 200.

20 Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, 29.

The scant attention scholars give to Hollywood's depictions of US involvement in Cold War Southeast Asia is unfortunate and ironic. For Washington had poured copious amounts of blood and treasure into Southeast Asia from the 1950s onward, not just into Vietnam but also Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. US development and medical specialists, social scientists, military advisors, Christian missionaries, Peace Corps volunteers, and more entered the region as (willing or unwitting) contributors—or determined impediments—to the United States' attempts to win Southeast Asia to its side of the Cold War divide.<sup>21</sup> Even stubbornly nonaligned Burma remained in a testy relationship with the United States based on US military and economic aid to the Burmese government.<sup>22</sup> This is not to mention how US relations with Malaya and Singapore grew increasingly intimate in this period. In short, elite and non-elite Americans alike were deeply invested and involved in Southeast Asia—and many of them at that. Moreover, as Sangjoon Lee demonstrates, the US government ploughed monies and man hours into nurturing East and Southeast Asian cinema industries during the Cold War, cultivating West-friendly, anticommunist cultural production indigenous to Asia so as to color local worldviews in favor of Washington.<sup>23</sup> Given all these, scholars must broaden the survey of US Cold War films concerned with 1960s Southeast Asia, not least to avoid returning unerringly to *The Green Berets* (1968) starring John Wayne, the “only major direct-combat portrayal” of the Vietnam conflict produced while the US forces warred in Indochina, which most have critically panned and deemed both jingoistic and ultra-violent.<sup>24</sup>

21 Edward G. Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Daniel Fineman, *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947–1958* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1997); Bradley Simpson, *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and US-Indonesian Relations, 1960–1968* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); Nick Cullather, *Illusions of Influence: The Political Economy of United States-Philippines Relations, 1942–1960* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994); Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, *All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

22 Kenton Clymer, *A Delicate Relationship: The United States and Burma/Myanmar since 1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

23 Sangjoon Lee, *Cinema and the Cultural Cold War: US Diplomacy and the Origins of the Asian Cinema Network* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

24 Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, 202; Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War, 200–201*; Paul Rich, *Cinema and Unconventional Warfare in the Twentieth Century: Insurgency, Terrorism and Special Operations* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 45–47.

## *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dawn* and an American Vision of Cold War Victory in Southeast Asia

*The 7<sup>th</sup> Dawn* was released in September 1964, a month following the fateful Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that authorized President Lyndon Johnson to Americanize the Vietnam conflict. In the context of the United States' deepening involvement in Vietnam, it takes little effort to see that when the film's protagonist, an ex-US Army officer named Ferris, overcomes his communist foe in Malaya's jungles, the film awkwardly forecasts and hopes for US success in yet another Southeast Asian jungle to the north. Indeed, the film makes plain that Ferris, played by William Holden, is a formidable jungle warfare expert who fought during the Second World War alongside the local Malayan resistance movement against Japanese occupying forces. (Of course, no US military officer was ever in this situation, which makes this fantasy worth further scrutiny.) When that local Malayan resistance movement evolves by the late 1940s into the guerrilla army of the MCP, the film depicts British authorities seeking Ferris's assistance to flush out his friend and former comrade-in-arms, Colonel Ng, commander of the MCP fighters. Unlike Ferris, the Ng character is based on the actual MCP leader, Chin Peng, who Britain had at first honored at the end of World War Two for his anti-Japanese efforts, only to later designate him an enemy of the state for launching the MCP's anti-British revolt in 1948.

To be sure, *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dawn* has not completely eluded the notice of scholars, owing mostly to the presence of guerrilla warfare in its plot. Paul Rich's study of cinematic portrayals of unconventional warfare (including counterinsurgency, terrorism, and jungle and guerrilla tactics) makes a passing reference to the movie, criticizing its "thin narrative" and, above all, the disappointingly limited screen time it supposedly dedicates to Britain's counterinsurgency strategies and the wider conflict in Malaya.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, how much of *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dawn* features jungle warfare seems to be entirely a matter of opinion. At the time of the film's release in 1964, *The New York Times* complained that the movie contained "a lot of creeping about in the jungles and exploding of dynamite" and so "many episodes of burnings and shootings and jungle crawlings [sic]." However, the *Times* did, like Rich, make sure to emphasize that Holden's star was conspicuously on the wane.<sup>26</sup>

25 Rich, *Cinema and Unconventional Warfare*, 87–89.

26 Bosley Crowther, "Return to Far East Just Isn't the Same," *The New York Times*, September 3, 1964.

Because Rich's particular focus is the filmic portrayal of unconventional warfare, and the *Times*' critic was inordinately fixated with Holden looking "plumper and more cynical," both miss much of what *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dawn* signals about American views of Southeast Asia in the early 1960s.<sup>27</sup> The film's omission of the finer details of Ferris's or Britain's counterinsurgency tactics is less critical than its transparent efforts to reimagine Britain's reversal of the domino theory in Malaya as an American achievement. Indeed, the domino logic of Southeast Asia's "interconnected insecurity," central to US policy toward the region during the Cold War, is discernible in the film's depiction of Britain's struggles against the MCP.<sup>28</sup> The film shows the British military overwhelmed by the MCP's maneuvers and desperately seeking Ferris's support. As underscored by the montage of newspaper headlines and scenes of violent MCP machine-gun and grenade attacks, the Malayan communists had wreaked havoc in the country by 1953, assassinating numerous British colonial officials and rubber planters, striking at will and then disappearing into the thick Malayan jungle. In essence, 1950s Malaya is an unstable, teetering domino within the wider Cold War context. And Ng, the revered leader of the MCP (one of his followers even calls him "a god"), is explicit about this view of the world. He confidently declares to Ferris in one encounter that his fight against British forces "is not a local war in Malaya. It is sweeping all Asia. It will sweep Africa, South America, the world." If a tad graceless in execution, *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dawn* nevertheless foregrounds the interconnected fates of Malaya, wider Asia, and the global South. Defeating the MCP in Malaya, the film implies, can break the chain reaction that Ng anticipates so eagerly. Therefore, British authorities must penetrate the Malayan jungles that have effectively concealed the MCP's bases; they must therefore acquire the help of Ferris, who knows Ng's guerrilla strategies and can locate the MCP's headquarters. True, the historical reality is that British, Commonwealth and Malayan forces did not need US counterinsurgency knowledge to decimate the MCP. However, it is through the fiction of Ferris's jungle warfare expertise that *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dawn* envisions and performs the possibility that US forces entering Vietnam in the months after the film's release might appropriate and/or supersede Britain's experiences in Malaya.

As such, the film dwells heavily on Ferris's familiarity with the Malayan jungle. Though dwarfed by gigantic trees towering far above him and swallowed up by the massive rainforest, he easily locates Ng's headquarters. Ferris accomplishes this twice in the film, once in order to persuade Ng to end

27 Crowther, "Return to Far East Just Isn't the Same."

28 Ngoei, "Domino Logic of the Darkest Moment," 217.



the “bloody war” so that Malaya can stabilize sufficiently to allow Britain to grant it independence; a second time to rescue Candace, the daughter of the British High Commissioner, whom Ng has taken hostage and plans to kill. In contrast, the British military only discovers Ng’s base by accident toward the close of the movie.

However, the film’s optimistic vision of Ferris’s capabilities—and by extension, its fantasy about America’s prospects in Cold War Southeast Asia—is not free of the grim outlook inherent within Eisenhower’s “falling domino principle.” Despite Ferris’s impressive jungle expertise, he fails to achieve many of his goals. He never manages to convince Ng to “put a muzzle on the dragon”—an obvious gesture at the perceived threat of China and the mostly Chinese MCP—and bring the armed revolt to an end. Instead, Ng mocks Ferris’s efforts and indicates that their long friendship is over. And while Ferris does rescue Candace, he strains to get her out of the jungle. A powerful rainstorm destroys the routes that Ferris knows best. He struggles to break new paths through dense walls of leaves and for some time wanders lost (with Candace in tow), pursued by communist troops as well as fighting off Ng. When British troops at last stumble across Ng’s headquarters, it is their superior firepower and numbers, not Ferris’s knowledge of the jungle and guerrilla warfare, that annihilates the communist forces.

Additionally, Ferris fails to bring Candace back to her father, the High Commissioner, within the seven days that he has been given to do so. This is the plot point from which the film derives its name. In a nutshell, Ng both kidnaps Candace and frames Ferris’s lover, a woman named Dhana, as a communist collaborator. British authorities, eager for any minor win against the MCP, detain the innocent Dhana and make plans to execute her, though Ferris manages to talk them into granting him time—just a week—to rescue and return Candace to her father in exchange for Dhana’s life. At dawn on the seventh day, with Ferris and Candace nowhere in sight, Dhana goes to her death, the Prayer of St. Francis on her lips and the sun rising in her eyes.

Still, Ferris’s record is not entirely that of failure. It is during his vigorous hand-to-hand combat with Ng that the MCP leader is finally killed. To be precise, though, Ng had actually gained the advantage in their fight and stood over Ferris with a raised machete when Candace unexpectedly intervenes and fatally shoots Ng in the back. Ferris’s victory is as ham-fisted as it is awkwardly pure because he is innocent of Ng’s death. He has arguably (perhaps unbelievably) emerged from the jungle unsullied by the conflict. After all, his knowledge of the jungle has been deployed only for righteous purposes: to save Dhana, free Candace, and turn Ng from violence.

Furthermore, he has, throughout the film, refused to become a weapon for Britain's violent counterinsurgency campaign, though his bid to rescue Candace certainly placed her in a prime position to kill Ng. In sum, Ferris's considerable talents, dismal failures, and ambiguous innocence in the routing of the MCP represent that dynamic mingling of hope, confidence, and crisis at the core of American perceptions of Southeast Asia. For elite and middlebrow Americans, the region would have been viewed through the heartening, triumphant anticommunism of Britain in Malaya that remained entangled with a fatalism born of the domino theory and Vietnam's ominous slide toward instability.

### ***King Rat* and American Success in the Shadow of the Vietnam War**

In the thirteen months that separated the releases of *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dawn* and *King Rat*, US involvement in Southeast Asia would expand dramatically. The earlier film graced US silver screens in September 1964, when Washington had barely crossed the threshold of Americanizing the Vietnam conflict. By the time *King Rat* hit US theaters in October of the next year, American forces had already been deployed by the tens of thousands to seize the reins of the war effort in South Vietnam, while Operation Rolling Thunder, the bombing campaign directed at North Vietnam, had been underway for months. Of course, it was a coincidence that *King Rat's* narrative placed US soldiers in a prisoner-of-war camp in Japanese-occupied Singapore in 1945, a setting that gestured vaguely at the imagined horrors of American troops trapped in a new Southeast Asian war. Nevertheless, since the America that greeted *King Rat* was at least knee-deep in the so-called Vietnam quagmire and wading further in, the film resonated with whatever inchoate dread of war then stirring within US society.

*King Rat's* setting is notable for another important reason. Britain's humiliating surrender of Singapore to Japan in World War Two had fundamentally shattered the myth of the invincibility of all white empires. Worse, this denouement had come after British leaders' repeated boasts that Singapore's military facilities made the island an "impregnable fortress." When Singapore capitulated to Japan after just a week of fighting, Prime Minister Winston Churchill bemoaned what he called the "darkest moment" of the war. But the loss of Singapore was not only Britain's concern—it also filled the front pages of US broadsheets. For months ahead of the Singapore debacle, the American press, citing US military planners, had described the island as the "keystone" of not only "all Allied plans for the Pacific War" but also "the

strategic arch of the democracies of the Far East” as well as “the defense structure of the United Nations in the Southwestern Pacific.”<sup>29</sup> Since US leaders and journalists had lately witnessed Vichy-ruled Indochina and Siam acquiesce to Japan and the full seizure of Malaya by Japanese forces, they believed that British imperial forces in Singapore would at last halt Japan’s rapid southward advance. In effect, mainland Southeast Asia already resembled a row of dominoes in a vision where Singapore must be the one to stand firm. Such hype and hope turned Singapore into the symbol of the Western powers’ interconnected fates in Southeast and East Asia. In Anglo-American memories, then, the shock of Singapore’s fall after the loss of mainland Southeast Asia, followed swiftly by Japan’s victories in the Dutch East Indies and the US-ruled Philippines, birthed a rudimentary domino logic well before Eisenhower gave it a name.<sup>30</sup> *King Rat* therefore takes place in a fallen domino, speaking profoundly to Americans’ fears about their nation’s involvement in Cold War Southeast Asia.

Yet the film was also released at a time when Southeast Asia had begun tilting decisively toward the United States. Despite Vietnam’s instability, contemporaneous developments in Malaya and Singapore had already contributed to a broader pattern of reversing the pessimistic domino logic across the region. Indeed, US policymakers perceived that the creation of Malaysia in 1963—the merging of West-friendly Malaya, Singapore, and the British territories of Sabah and Sarawak—was a vital link that completed a “wide anti-communist arc” in the region. The new Malaysian federation connected pro-US Thailand on mainland Southeast Asia to the islands of America’s longtime ally, the Philippines, encircling not only the South China Sea but also Vietnam and China. Moreover, the continuous corridor of US-friendly countries running north from Singapore to Malaya and Thailand resembled a strategic beachhead for the United States, pointed directly at Vietnam. Outside of Washington’s decision-making circles, the US press, too, was enthused by the rise of Malaysia, anticipating that the federation would bring a “stabilizing influence” to the region and serve as a “1,600-mile” long “bulwark against communism.”<sup>31</sup> In this light, *King Rat*’s story of an American POW thriving amidst emaciated and suffering British prisoners performs the contradictory currents of this period, the entangled strains of promise and peril in the American imagination of how the United States might fare in the struggle for wider Southeast Asia.

29 Ngoei, *Arc of Containment*, 20.

30 Ngoei, *Arc of Containment*, 18–21.

31 Ngoei, *Arc of Containment*, Chapter 4.

The film's protagonist, an American, is the lowly Corporal King, who instead of simply surviving in the POW camp, enriches himself through the profitable buying and reselling of several officers' prized possessions. Described as a "genius" several times during the film, the corporal manages to procure fresh eggs, cigarettes, and wads of Japanese currency, resources he uses to draw favors from highly ranked British officers and wind his American compatriots around his finger. All these prisoners, reliant on him for more rations or his ability to make deals with the Japanese soldiers, perform all the tasks he asks of them: someone does his laundry, someone fixes a hotplate for him and makes his coffee, a whole team of prisoners assist his scheme to breed rats and sell them to British officers in the camp as the Malayan delicacy of "mouse-deer meat."

The corporal is so dominant that all in the camp call him "the King." His towering presence is established in the film's opening scenes, with his striking appearance and how others watch him. The King is the only one wearing a neatly starched uniform while British colonels putter around the camp in rags, many bare-bodied but for tattered towels around their waists; he is the only one wearing shiny boots while others have makeshift sandals or hobble around barefoot, the only one who appears healthy and well-nourished while others, skin and bone, stand in long lines for soup made from a single catfish. Some minutes after his entrance, the King enjoys a fried egg (while the American internees around him salivate), a scene juxtaposed against that of British officers catching cockroaches from the camp's human waste borehole in order to get their protein. In this Japanese-dominated (and formerly) British space, the American scores an emphatic personal triumph, accomplishing much more for himself than the British that he lives among.

That said, the pessimism of the domino theory is not absent from *King Rat*. In a moment of rare vulnerability, the King shares with British officer Peter Marlowe that should the Allies win the war, Japanese troops will massacre everyone in the camp. He explains that all his wheeling and dealing has been to accumulate enough Japanese currency to buy his life when the war ends. For all he has achieved, he remains convinced that he is in grave danger, that forces beyond his control, beyond Singapore, can destroy him utterly. Thus, when the Japanese officers announce to the POWs their surrender late in the film, the war's end brings only a cloud of depression upon the King even though the Japanese soldiers do not kill any of the prisoners. When a lone British paratrooper arrives to liberate the camp, he turns the King's success—the fact that he is "dressed properly while they [the officers] are all in rags"—into a menacing accusation that the King has committed some crime. In a sinister tone, the paratrooper warns the King: "I won't

forget you, corporal, and I will speak to [your senior officer] at the earliest opportunity," thereby crushing all the influence the King had ever enjoyed. At the close of the film, the King is reminded once again that he is a mere corporal, ordered by a newly arrived sergeant to board an American truck that is about to leave the camp. He is soon swallowed up by the crowd of liberated soldiers who are milling around, all of them overjoyed that the war is over. It becomes increasingly difficult for a viewer to distinguish him from the crowd—the King has lost his crown.

*King Rat* then concludes on another discomfiting note. As the military transport that Corporal King is on vanishes into the dust and distance, it becomes clear that his success was won not merely by the exploitation of others. King's accomplishments were made possible by the war itself. The desperation and demoralization of the POWs, their isolation from the outside world, and the very fact of their capture—evidence of defeat and surrender—combined to produce the fertile environment in which the King's schemes flourished. His most dynamic moment was during the war, a time of suffering. With this, the film offers a troubling perspective on the United States' presence in Southeast Asia, in the throes of the Cold War, amidst a flagging colonial order: American success comes from the suffering of others (including Americans); it will be secured in unsavory and exploitative ways; it will emerge and always remain insecure, teetering like a domino, ever upright yet in danger of collapse.

## Conclusion

Eisenhower's "falling domino principle" was never only about Vietnam. It had always concerned the larger context of Southeast Asia in the Cold War and above all a presumed interconnectedness of the region. Thus, Vietnam's deteriorating situation in the 1960s did not monopolize the imaginations of US policy- and culture makers. Developments in other countries in the region, such as the reversals of the domino theory in Malaya and Singapore, also flashed brightly on the radars of US policymakers and found their way onto American silver screens. Films such as *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dawn* and *King Rat*, to which scholars of cinema have paid little attention, performed the fitful dynamics of the conflicted US mind with respect to America's Cold War goals and their prospects in Southeast Asia. These films were not simply forerunners of the despondent and vicious Vietnam War revenge fantasies that Hollywood cranked out following America's retreat from Indochina, nor boosters of the US military effort in Vietnam like *The Green Berets*, which

sounded hollow acclamations of the righteousness of America's cause. In depicting Americans achieving a measure of uneasy and vexed success in 1950s Malaya and Japanese-occupied Singapore, *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dawn* and *King Rat* grappled tenaciously with optimism about Southeast Asia's anticommunist trajectory while being buffeted by an abiding distress, a fear that the domino theory might still run its dreaded course. Analyzing how these films gestured at the complexities of US attitudes toward Cold War Southeast Asia is valuable not merely because it reveals that Americans were concerned with, and their ideas shaped by, some other domino besides Vietnam. This is not about deciding which Southeast Asian state was more or less critical to Americans within and beyond elite decision-making circles. Rather, this inquiry recovers the vision of interconnectedness at the heart of US approaches to the wider Southeast Asian region: the principle that the fate of one or several dominoes must always impinge on others. It is in adopting this wider, regional view that we may also begin to venture deeper into studying the complicated and troubled American Cold War encounter with Southeast Asia.

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## 10. Ugly Americans and Indeterminate Asians: Strategies/Symptoms of Southeast Asian Representation in Cold War US Film

*Adam Knee*

### Abstract

One facet of the US cultural Cold War strategy in cinematic soft-power terms was to be sensitive in on-screen portrayals of nations whose alignment it wanted to win over or ensure. This paper will make the case that one manifestation of this strategy is in portrayals of Southeast Asia that obfuscate clear national designations, thereby muting or obviating the issues of contention that might arise with respect to specific nations. It will further be argued that such muddling of national designation goes hand-in-hand with a figuration of American characters and/or US influence as partially problematic but also ultimately well-intentioned and potentially beneficial. The examples analyzed are *Terror is a Man* (1959), *The Ugly American* (1963), and *Operation CIA* (1965).

**Keywords:** Southeast Asia, Thailand, soft power, masculinity, location shooting

This chapter is concerned with exploring one particular phenomenon that arises in relation to a handful of US-produced (or co-produced) Cold War feature films with Southeast Asian settings—the rendering ambiguous of the specific national and geographical coordinates of those settings. Although this is not a particularly widespread phenomenon, an analysis of the examples can prove illuminating in terms of the dynamics of the Cold War cinematic relationship (representational, industrial, geopolitical)

between the US and Southeast Asia and some of the logics of US cinematic engagements with the region.

More specifically, I will examine three American (or partly American) film productions released in a relatively short span of time that share this interesting trait of being set in an Asia that is in some way unclearly and/or contradictorily defined: the low-budget Filipino horror co-production *Terror is a Man* (1959), the major studio literary adaptation *The Ugly American* (1963; based upon what is considered one of the key novels of the Cold War),<sup>1</sup> and the low-budget espionage adventure *Operation CIA* (1965). There is a series of interesting parallels across these in many ways disparate films, and while I am certainly not suggesting any causal link between them, these parallels are highly evocative of (and illuminating about) certain shared Cold War determinants and suggest a particular facet to the US desire to negotiate a distinctive position in relation to Southeast Asia in the global order of things. Significantly, all three films not only in some way obfuscate the precise identity of their respective Asian settings, they are also involved in substantial textual machinations to figure key American characters as possessive of a certain virility—a distinctive American machismo—but at the same time as not overbearing in their assertiveness, indeed, in some instances, not completely in control of their circumstances and/or lacking in the qualities needed to demonstrate heroism in situations that would appear to call for it.

Plainly, I am also suggesting here that we can see a correspondence between the blurring of the specific real-world referents of the Southeast Asian setting on the one hand, and a characterization of Americanness as constituted by a compromised masculinity on the other. Both of these traits function to support the ends of a cinematic soft power that constructs the American presence in Southeast Asia as certainly something less than an existential threat and as potentially a benevolent presence—and does so in these films at precisely the time that US involvement in the evolving Vietnam War was becoming more entrenched and legislatively supported and entailing ever more hands-on engagement in combat. All three films do this, first of all, by rendering the Asian setting vague enough to mute any specific threat or offense that might be precipitated by US presence or activity—though the films also all attempt to compensate for this geographical unreality by putting a particular emphasis on the material and topographical details of the (albeit unclearly specified) settings. And the films do this, second of all (and in tandem), by populating these ambiguously Asian

1 William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick, *The Ugly American* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958).

settings with American protagonists and institutions that somehow do not have the drive, deftness, or wherewithal required to make a substantial impact upon those settings or the people who live there, even if they are also represented as largely well-meaning. Furthermore, one can see overlaid across this form of Cold War textual outreach a very directly paralleled production outreach as well, as all three films required, at the very least, a substantial level of support and cooperation between US media-makers and Southeast Asian collaborators.

In arguing that these textual and industrial practice proclivities constitute a kind of Cold War charm offensive, I am in part taking a cue from the important work of Christina Klein in her book *Cold War Orientalism*, wherein she shows how such (slightly earlier) Cold War US films set in Asia and the Pacific as *The King and I* (1956) and *South Pacific* (1958) implicitly offer support to US foreign policy goals in figuring the relationship between the US and Asia as characterized by sentiment and emotion, for example through romantic or familial ties. The representations are thus consonant with US foreign relations strategies of containment on the one hand (keeping communist or Soviet forces from gaining too much Asian influence) and integration on the other (fostering US presence and influence around the globe).<sup>2</sup> The later films discussed in this essay register ramped-up tensions as the supposed Cold War in Asia becomes ever hotter but still attempt to mute concerns and imagine the possibility of positive and sentimental connections, even in a context of greater strife and suspicion.

The first and earliest example of a film embodying such tendencies to be examined here is also a bit of an outlier in a number of ways—yet even in these variations in characteristics, the same broader Cold War thrust is evident (which is to say, it is an exception that nevertheless supports the rationale). First of all, while that film, *Terror is a Man*, is technically a US co-production with the Philippines, a number of writers (drawing in part from remarks made by the producer Eddie Romero himself) would point out that all the key creative input was from the Filipino side, with the filmmakers collaborating with an American producer–distributor to facilitate reaching the US drive-in theater circuit (which this film was largely aiming for).<sup>3</sup> Although we cannot precisely describe this film as being a

2 Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), esp. Chapters 4–5; for a gloss on containment and integration, see pp. 24–28.

3 See, for example, Bliss Cua Lim, “‘American Pictures Made by Filipinos’: Eddie Romero’s Jungle-Horror Exploitation Films,” *Spectator* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 24–26, 29–30; and Andrew

US co-production in the usual sense, it still marked an instance on the industrial level of close US-Southeast Asian cooperation (as with the other films), and it also self-consciously attempts to offer an American perspective or sensibility, even if technically “authored” by a Filipino director and crew (who self-consciously saw their aim as one of making an American-style film, in order to be able to exploit a US market).

*Terror is a Man* is also an outlier among the trio of films discussed here in that, though shot in Southeast Asia, it not only fictionalizes/anonymizes that Southeast Asian location, it goes a step further in giving multiple indications that the diegesis does not occur in Southeast Asia at all but rather in another region. However, it still (like both of the other films) puts the matter of designation of place front and center at its opening. Its first image is that of a map that encompasses a group of islands as the camera moves in on the area marked “*Isla de Sangre*” (that is, Island of Blood). The wrinkle here is that this is a fictive setting, with no country clearly alluded to as the plot (about an American shipwreck survivor washing up on the shores of the *Isla de Sangre*) unfolds, though we do hear the place referred to as a “South Seas Island,” and that it is 1,000 miles from Peru. Further cues that arise include the fact that the American, Fitzgerald, met his accident en route from South America (where he had been employed for some years) to his hometown of San Francisco, and that a helper employed by a US doctor who is doing some work on the island hails from Guatemala—all of which, combined with the lush tropical vegetation and regular and heavy rainfall on the island—would suggest a location somewhere in the Eastern part of the South Seas, more toward South America than towards the actual shooting location of the Philippines.

But again, while the narration explicitly positions the plot as not unfolding in the Philippines, or even in Southeast Asia, there is a wealth of cues present to enable the informed reader who is so inclined to derive a clear allegory about the Philippines—allegories that have been explored in detail in the work of Bliss Cua Lim, Jose Capino, Leong Yew, and others (and so will not receive extended focus here).<sup>4</sup> Even if the narrative denies it, the Filipino setting and secondary actors, the snippets of Filipino dialect that can be heard, and the extra-textual knowledge of a director and producer very

Leavold, “Bamboo Gods and Bionic Boys: A Brief History of the Philippines’ B Film,” *Plaridel* 11, no. 1 (February 2014): 131–43.

4 Lim, “American Pictures,” 23–45; José Capino, *Dream Factories of a Former Colony: American Fantasies, Philippine Cinema* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), esp. 9–18; Leong Yew, “Sympathetic Collaboration and the Made-for-US Philippine Films of the 1950s to 1970s,” *Screen* 59, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 176–96.

engaged elsewhere in their work with issues of Filipino politics and identity all directly invite a reading in terms of colonial and political allegory, in particular about the relationship of the US with the Philippines.

Most readings of the film along these lines would point to the plain allegorical resonances of the *Island of Dr Moreau*-inspired plot about a medical doctor from New York who has come to Blood Island to conduct ethically questionable experiments to turn a panther into a human—with American scientific arrogance showing its usual disregard for the Southeast Asian resources and personnel under America's sway. As Lim and Yew point out, the anonymization (and, I would add, displacement) of the setting supports a broader allegory of US presence in Southeast Asia by allowing it to stand in as a generic, symbolic locale rather than a specific site.<sup>5</sup> I am adding the point here that, in a Cold War context, this anonymization also makes the presence of the allegory more tolerable and less harsh and disruptive (because it is no longer specific to a place).

What is softened here, I would argue, is not only the specific receiver of mistreatment or exploitation but also the national perpetrator of such mistreatment. Yes, the exploitative doctor in question comes from the US, but he is portrayed by an actor (Francis Lederer) who was born and grew up in what was then Austria-Hungary and whose speech thus bears traces of a European accent. The literary and cinematic associations given the nature of the experiments he is carrying out is in line with the old-world European mad scientist. There is also a further contemporary resonance, given the references to the scientist's desire to create a "perfect race" and the clear racialization of the (black) panther as a "black beast," with Nazi racial ideology and eugenics. The shipwrecked protagonist Fitzgerald is thus positioned as the recognizably more American man in this drama and potentially an American savior for others. The American once more leads the allegorical battle against the Nazi scourge.<sup>6</sup>

5 Lim, "American Pictures," 34–36; Yew, "Sympathetic Collaboration," 190–91.

6 Plainly, the broadly allegorical valence of this scenario invites parallels to be made with not only the US's global Cold War struggles but its internal racial tensions as well, conflicts between the narrative's white, brown, and black dramatis personae opening themselves up to readings in multiple ways. In point of fact, these two sets of struggles were widely understood at the time as directly related: American policymakers were well aware of the evident contradictions of projecting an image of democratic benevolence to global neighbors while still dealing with the problems of racial discrimination at home. See, for example, Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2000), esp. Chapter 2. Again, however, the point here is that the distinctive textual dynamics work to displace the sense of US culpability for racial discrimination, just as it does for international exploitation more broadly.

But while this framework defuses allegorical American culpability in the Pacific or Southeast Asia, these films also show a tendency to mute American virility or heroism at the same time—to render the US as lacking the force to be *either* a major threat *or* a substantive support. Thus, while the film goes out of its way to set Fitzgerald up as the potential “white savior” (e.g., the actor Richard Derr’s bloneness in contrast to Francis Lederer’s coloring)—the man making assurances to a pair of native siblings to rescue them from the island and making romantic overtures to the doctor’s admittedly love-starved (also blonde) wife, and also standing in to cast a critical eye on the doctor’s experiments—the film also consistently goes out of its way to undermine these expectations, an undermining that Leong Yew has posited as recurring across Filipino export cinema.<sup>7</sup> For example, Fitzgerald repeatedly seems to withhold judgment on the scientist’s experiments, appearing more curious than revolted by them; he fails in adulterously wooing the lonely wife beyond an initial tryst or two; and the native woman is killed by the creature before she can be rescued. At the close of the film, her younger brother—like her, a servant to the white settlers—has demonstrated his own solidarity with the creature by helping it to flee by boat (as Yew describes it, a “moment in which the native and the synthetically created native can form a brief but meaningful connection”),<sup>8</sup> while the doctor’s wife too continues to have some sympathy for it and in the final scene wanders along the beach oblivious to and uninterested in Fitzgerald tagging along a few steps behind her. Again, the point being made here in the context of the particular argument is that the undermining of American “manhood” and agency in these films functions in tandem with their effacement of setting to ultimately mute the sense of threat brought on by US incursion into Southeast Asia in the Cold War era.

### Masquerades Multiplied

The 1963 Universal Pictures adaptation of the widely read novel *The Ugly American* is at the other end of the budget spectrum from *Terror is a Man*. It is a glossy studio production, and one that much more directly and overtly deals with issues of US Cold War engagement in Southeast Asia than the earlier film—the plot being concerned with the efforts of a newly minted US ambassador to a Southeast Asian nation to keep that nation from falling

7 Yew, “Sympathetic Collaboration.”

8 Yew, “Sympathetic Collaboration,” 195.

under the sway of communism. To speak to the pattern being traced out, we again have an opening image that directs us now even more explicitly to a qualified depiction of a Southeast Asian locale—a high-angle image of Thai countryside over which there is a text informing us that while “much of this picture was filmed” in Thailand, nevertheless “the events portrayed, while drawn from recent history, do not reflect the politics or history of Thailand.”

It might be noted that, technically, this disclaimer does *not* directly deny that the film *might* be set in Thailand. In point of fact, however, the film refers to its Southeast Asian setting with the fictive country name of Sarkhan, and broader plot details include a contemporary political context really only applicable to South Vietnam. And yet in keeping with the kind of geographical equivocations being symptomatically demonstrated across these films, at the same time, the visual cues, the renowned landmarks, and the use of Thai language in snippets (though it is called Sarkhanese) all mark a continuing return of Thailand masquerading as Sarkhan masquerading as South Vietnam. Of a piece with all of these substitutions of like-for-like and fictionalized real-for-real is also the brown-faced casting of the key Southeast Asian character in the film, the popular Sarkhanese leader Deong being portrayed by Japanese actor Eiji Okada (who would have been familiar to international viewers from his recent turn in the French New Wave film *Hiroshima mon amour* from 1959) under a heavy coat of make-up. Yes, this is Thailand in an acknowledged masquerade, with Thais playing a large proportion of the Sarkhanese characters (most notably the Thai author and scholar Kukrit Pramoj playing the local prime minister—a role he later took on in real life).<sup>9</sup> But the unreal framework (along with 1963 Hollywood’s usual disregard for verisimilitude in things Asian) also permits this cross-Asian casting for a central role—a fact that produces striking irony in a scene in which Deong and his American foil (an ambassador with the all too apt name MacWhite, portrayed by Marlon Brando) bitterly accuse one another of being two-faced.

Here we have a film that purports to directly engage with issues of Cold War American exploitation and self-interest and American imperialism in Southeast Asia but at the same time literally displaces and thus mutes, if not disavows, such real-world self-interest by obscuring the actual geographical and national contexts of such. This equivocation about

9 An interview with Kukrit regarding his celebrated turn as the cinematic prime minister, where he notes he was requested to play the role after auditions of Chinese and Filipino actors were judged to be unsatisfactory, can be found in Steve Van Beek, ed., *Kukrit Pramoj: His Wit and Wisdom* (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1983), 216–22.



place (though offset by location shooting and authentic local details) allows for a softening—a making more acceptable—of images of US Cold War involvement in Southeast Asia, a messaging of such involvement as being fundamentally benevolent and respectful, despite difficulties it might engender.

Along these lines, the film concerns MacWhite's efforts to facilitate the acceptance of various kinds of American aid, and the acceptance of Americans as genuine allies, and thus, in turn, to stave off the influence of communist forces, which evidently have a great deal of support locally and which are determined to wrest control of Sarkhan. MacWhite hopes to accomplish this not only through the capable management of US projects but also through cooperation with Deong, who happens to be an old wartime friend and is now the popular leader of a local revolutionary movement. Key hindrances that the ambassador encounters are the continued violent protests against his presence, assaults upon his projects, and a new falling out with his old friend, whom the ambassador thinks is wrongly suspicious of American intentions and thus not acting in the best interests of his people.

As the title suggests, the ambassador does indeed start to come across as a bit of the "Ugly American" at times owing to his assertiveness, if not bossiness, not only with the embassy staff and sometimes his wife but also with Deong and other Sarkhanese, whose best interests he insists he understands better than they do themselves. On balance, however, the ambassador is presented as a largely positive Western protagonist, as one would expect for what is a star vehicle for Marlon Brando. The cues that we are to understand him positively as the "hero" of this piece include the fact that he himself appears to have genuine integrity in his actions (even if they upset others) and a consistent motivation to ensure the efficient completion of his initiatives with the aim of helping the Sarkhanese people, even if this means personal difficulty for him.

MacWhite's forcefulness and integrity, his masculine "straightness" in multiple senses of the term, extends as well to his relationship with his wife, whom he appears to be controlling of but also concerned about and faithful toward, staying within the assigned and accepted boundaries of Cold War gender roles. A number of cultural historians of the Cold War have analyzed at length the era's discursive links between the performance of normative gender roles (*viz.*, a biologically and economically productive heterosexual marriage) and the adherence to the American state's ideological and foreign policy positions; that is to say, remaining within the domestic social norms was understood as crucial to supporting the goal of "containment" of a

range of anti-American currents both at home and in the world at large.<sup>10</sup> Significantly, all three films' main male protagonists, while largely keeping to accepted expectations of virile and able masculinity, also stray from it to a certain degree, in keeping with the softening tendency I am teasing out here, the rendering less imposing of machismo figures. At the same time, however, it is pertinent in this regard that *The Ugly American* repeatedly goes out of its way to detail not only MacWhite's largely robust performance of his Cold War husbandly role but Deong's as well, and this ultimately makes sense in terms of the film's Cold War political logic: although Deong shows antipathy towards MacWhite and the American imposition he represents, the film makes clear that he is far more opposed to the covert undermining of the Sarkhanese people's desires and needs by foreign-backed communist fighters and *agents provocateurs*. The two men's shared performance of ideals of Cold War heterosexual marriage telegraphs to us in advance (as is eventually confirmed) that "deep down," they are both more towards the side of US ideology than of the political threat that must be contained.

At the same time, however, and in common with the other cinematic cases being discussed here, there are certain elements introduced into the portrayal of MacWhite and into the narrative situation that mitigate against this being too forceful or threatening an image of American Cold War masculinity. Chief amongst these is simply that, despite his cocksureness, MacWhite proves to be in error in his key understandings about the Sarkhan situation. He ignores the advice of an American manager of a highway project regarding pushing forward too quickly, and as a result there is carnage (largely among local bystanders) when anti-US fighters attack an opening ceremony for the project. And more importantly, he is completely in the dark about foreign communist forces actively working to foment a popular local revolution in the country so that they can then step in, assassinate Deong as leader of that revolution, and seize power. He is utterly shocked and caught off guard when this is revealed to him (as his facial expression betrays), as so too, subsequently, is Deong (who alas is disbelieving of his erstwhile friend's warnings about the plot until the moment he is shot).

Nor does the film even do MacWhite the favor of showing him regaining control of the situation after the assassination or coming to a new understanding as a result of the revelations, although he tries to claim such to a chaotic crowd of reporters; and the film utterly undermines his explanation

10 Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), Chapters 1 and 5.

of the situation by closing with a suburban television viewer shutting off his statement mid-sentence, so that neither the televisual viewer nor we as his cinematic counterpart know what he was going to explain. Another dimension of irresolution at the film's conclusion is that it is not spelled out whether MacWhite follows through on his commitment to bring in US forces to assist the sitting government should they be able to prove there were incursions by foreign communist forces on their soil (which they do prove). This again circumvents presenting the specter of US military activity in Southeast Asia or of directly grappling with the utility and ideological problematics of such.

### Locational Contrivances

Similar kinds of fancy ideological footwork occur in *Operation CIA* (Allied Artists, 1965), which is in some ways the most bizarre case of an obfuscated or confused Southeast Asian setting (and thus calls for a more extended analysis here). As with *The Ugly American*, the narrative is overtly about US efforts to contain threats of communist influence in the Southeast Asian region, though in this case in the form of an action/espionage narrative regarding a CIA agent (Mark Andrews, played by Burt Reynolds) sent undercover as a visiting professor (of agricultural biochemistry) to look into the assassination of another CIA agent in Saigon and subsequently discovering that the death was linked to a communist plot to assassinate the US ambassador to the country. The film's poster promises, "Actually filmed on location against the background of intrigue...mystery...terrorism and murder!" but the irony here is that while the film is explicitly designated as being set for the most part in Saigon, and Saigon is referred to several times over the course of the film, the film is shot entirely in Bangkok, Thailand. Nor are there any particular efforts made to disguise the image of Bangkok or to make it appear like Vietnam. Famous local Bangkok landmarks are used for the location shooting, the bits of dialogue among locals is done in the Thai language, Thai writing can be seen on buildings and on vehicles, and one character's suitcase even has a clearly visible BKK airport luggage tag. In other words, the filmmakers chose to make no effort to disguise the real-world location of the filming, all the while designating it (in terms of surface narration) as being in a different Southeast Asian country. Indeed, the fact of real-world location shooting is highlighted as one of the few "hooks" this low-budget B-film can deliver on; and in part for this commercial reason, location is formally emphasized throughout (as we find has been the case for the other

films examined here as well). Thus, the opening shot of the film is a slow touristic panoramic shot of the Bangkok skyline from near the Chao Phraya River but with the place designation “Saigon” superimposed on the image.

The film is dependent on its geographical and cultural authenticity as key selling points, but for practical reasons (described in more detail below), this must be a false—or at the least mislabeled—authenticity. Bangkok may not be named as such, but a key attraction of a film at the time—and certainly the interest it holds in retrospect for anyone with an interest in Thai studies—is its exceptional visual record of the historic Phra Nakhon area of Bangkok in 1965—at that time more of a central business hub than it is today and home to many of the city’s internationally oriented hotels as well as to some of its embassies. This false/authentic record is constructed both through sparkling on-location cinematography and a geographically verisimilitudinous construction of space via narrative and editing. A good deal of the action is centered around that district’s popular Thai Hotel, where most of the film’s Westerners reside, while the hide-out of the film’s villains is a few blocks away along the bank of the Chao Phraya, directly across from the famed Wat Arun—and all of this is clearly laid out shot by shot, with relative locations established and re-established, for example in a sequence where an explosive device is readied at the hide-out, then driven via motorbike on the very streets that in actual physical reality did lead to the hotel. And a final chase sequence leading from the hotel is able to integrate the spectacular local scenery quite cannily, which is actually in that district (most notably the Temple of the Golden Mount), without resorting to the usual (falsifying) creative geography. So a falsely designated city and national setting, then, but paradoxically presented with exceptional fidelity.

Such national substitutions become a bit more problematic still when it comes to the film’s character portrayals. Most of the supposedly Vietnamese secondary roles are played by Thais, who can be heard speaking Thai—which at least is consistent with the space of the on-location shooting and the broader conceit of Thailand substituting for Vietnam. The film does, however, have one Vietnamese actress (Kieu Chinh) in a main role, that of Kim-Chinh, a local contact and developing love interest of Agent Andrews; and, quite interestingly, we do catch a few snippets of the actress speaking serviceable Thai to Thai actors portraying secondary characters—so in effect, she manages to be authentic to both referenced Asian identities. On the other hand, the utilization of the Filipino character actor Vic Diaz as one of the local (Thai as Vietnamese) villains of the piece, aside from playing into the tritest of Hollywood stereotypes (effeminate and underhanded

male Asian villain who punctuates his comments with a peculiar and ominous high-pitched laugh), throws into bald relief the absurdity of the text's transnational cross-dressing. In one bizarre scene, the Filipino actor speaks in a not readily identifiable tongue (possibly gibberish) to a classroom of Thai students (in order to act the part of translating an English-language lecture given by Andrews), on the evident assumption that contemporary American film audiences would not know that what he is speaking is not Thai on top of not knowing Thai is not Vietnamese.

Just as in the other two films discussed here, in conjunction with this blurring of the film's geographical specificity, one finds an undermining and/or softening of the Cold Warrior–protagonist's masculinity and virility. *Operation CIA* arrives early on in a global wave of espionage films inspired by the phenomenal popular successes of the nascent James Bond cycle (starting with *Dr. No* [1962], *From Russia with Love* [1963], and *Goldfinger* [1964]), and while it does not share the Bond films' penchant for gadgetry, it does share their emphasis on a (seemingly) sexualized spy protagonist and sexually oriented narrative situations.<sup>11</sup> Significantly for the focus of this discussion, Bond's sexually active nature and his concurrent ability to control and regulate his sexual activity are a constituent element of his nationalist Cold War project; as Alan Nadel has described, the 1960s Bond's own emotion and desire are subsumed within—and his sexual activity deployed for—the aims of the state he serves above all else.<sup>12</sup>

On the surface, and initially, Mark Andrews is narratively and generically in the same mold as Bond, and the contemporary spectator is clearly invited to initially read him in terms of this lineage: Andrews' briefing from his CIA boss directly after the assassination that opens the film makes repeated reference to the agent's reputed promiscuity in the course of his work, the boss judgmentally telling him “Oh I know what you're an expert on” and “Let's keep our mind on our work.” A young French female fellow spy (Denise) indicates she has been briefed not to take a taxi with him or to go to his apartment unless chaperoned. But the subsequent course of the narrative reveals that either such perceptions are false or exaggerated, or Andrews achieves a certain personal maturation and enlightenment over the course of the film, or (most plausibly) some of both. He flirts ceaselessly with Denise as

11 The film is also part of a first (if much smaller) wave of explicit Hollywood representations of the CIA, which up until then had largely been absent from the screen for a number of reasons. Simon Willmetts, “Quiet Americans: The CIA and Early Cold War Hollywood Cinema,” *Journal of American Studies* 47, no. 1 (February 2013): 138.

12 Nadel, *Containment Culture*, Chapter 5.

she briefs him about Vietnam during the initial leg of his flight itinerary from Washington, but things do not go beyond flirtation, and he does evidently remember what he is being taught. Once in "Saigon," Andrews immediately manages to get caught up in a partially unclothed encounter in a massage parlor of dubious nature, but this is not an expression of the Bond-like sexual prowess and control. On the contrary, it is an incident that deflates both the Western protagonist's masculinity and his capabilities and judgment as an agent (much along the lines of how we see such protagonists represented in the other two films), highlighting his naivete in the Southeast Asian field of operations. Having been informed that his contact in Saigon goes by the code name "Credit," Andrews assumes that the massage parlor flyer he receives while checking in to his Saigon lodgings that pointedly advertises "Cash or Credit" is to be taken as a means of signaling from his network, and he therefore heads over to the establishment immediately (paying no mind to the knowing looks and giggles he gets from the hotel porter and taxi driver alike). Once Andrews arrives to inquire after Credit, the two young masseuses who are assigned to this supposedly worldly international spy manage to quickly remove his shirt and pants, knock him out cold, and make off with all the cash in his wallet. What might on one level seem like merely a throwaway (if also deflating) narrative gag is moreover repeatedly harkened to by the film, re-emphasizing as it were Andrews' gullibility and softness. Fellow Westerners he meets at a café afterwards inform him such places are tourist traps; a professor who later spots the flyer as it drops from his papers cannot stop laughing; and later still, Andrews alludes to it when he complains "I've been here two days, double-crossed by three dames." This is hardly the smoothness and cocksureness of a Bond-like secret agent.

But Andrews is eventually largely redeemed by the narrative, his effectiveness as a Cold Warrior achieved in part by this "softness." In a subsequent encounter with Denise, who shows up in the shower in his Saigon hotel room, he shows significantly more restraint over his carnal desires and thereby picks up on clues as to her own duplicity in the plot he is investigating (and is thus also prepared to protect himself, as he had not been able to earlier). But more important still to what I have argued is the Cold War project of these films to take the edge off the Western presence, to avoid the appearance of American aggression and imposition. Thus, Andrews shows not only measured restraint in his interactions with local collaborator Kim-Chinh—even with signs of developing romantic interest on her part and even in the "heat of battle"—but also an evolving care and tenderness (to the extent a pulp spy film like *Operation CIA* can take the time to articulate it). The film closes with the pair sharing a brief kiss and Andrews professing his desire

not to “say goodbye” to Kim-Chinh as he steps away to his US-bound plane, thus leaving vaguely open the possibility of a future romantic relationship but also avoiding any explicit image of interaction beyond that of benevolent concern for his Vietnamese counterpart.

While this is a bit of an extreme reversal from the hypersexual CIA agent we meet at the film’s opening, the shift is at the least prefigured by sequences where Andrews is shown experiencing shock and remorse at the carnage that occurs in relation to his presence in Saigon. In one such sequence, he is shown interacting in a friendly avuncular fashion with some impoverished children selling wilted flowers on a roadside. No sooner does he buy some of the flowers (enabling the children to buy snacks in turn) than a grenade is tossed from a passing vehicle, presumably intended for the agent, but killing the children instead. Interestingly, two American servicemen themselves happen to be passing by and are able to give some aid to the survivors, though they had not been able to prevent the sudden attack. The overall image given is not one of Andrews and his fellow American servicemen as deleterious intruders but rather as those whose wish is to deliver aid—but who may not even have the force and wherewithal (as in this instance) to do that very effectively.

One can see here that this film and the others I have discussed here attempt to carry out a very delicate balancing act, perhaps doomed to fail to some extent in each case owing to a priori contradictions. While these films on the one hand begin to position themselves as Cold War narratives of containment, they are driven at the same time to blur any sense of threat emanating from the West, obfuscating a context of Western colonial exploitation—but also attempt to do so without completely negating the potential force and effectivity of the West. The result (to varying degrees) in all cases here is strange and inconsistent texts. But the point I want to continue to emphasize (in tying all these films together) is that this very strangeness is a function of the unease of certain kinds of Cold War ideological negotiation, of the impossibility of achieving certain kinds of desired compromises and outcomes given the actual geopolitical (and cultural industry) facts on the ground—with the US wanting to be perceived as non-interfering and supportive of its overseas partners (in the face of post-colonial struggles over ideological influence), at the same time as feeling the need to assert its own (increasingly military) interventions as well. These films evince an impulse to represent coherent and integral forms of national and regional identity and international relations within a Cold War and late or post or quasi-colonial context that makes it, for most intents and purposes, impossible to do so; and nowhere do these contradictions cinematically

manifest themselves in as quite as bizarre a manner as they do in *Operation CIA*'s locational cross-dressing.

One might well wonder what the filmmakers were thinking when they chose to blur the film's national designations in this way. In point of fact, the key reason was one of plain exigency rather than a pre-meditated creative choice. When the project was still being developed under the title of *Last Message from Saigon*, the plan had indeed been to shoot on location in Vietnam. Despite the challenges this posed, shooting in Vietnam itself could also make for profitable product differentiation (an action film on a topic of rising current interest in authentic locales) and had already been demonstrated to be feasible in a release the previous year from the same distributor, Allied Artists' *A Yank in Viet-Nam* (1964) featuring the Vietnamese actress who was also going to act in the new film, Kieu Chinh.<sup>13</sup>

So such location shooting might have seemed a reasonable risk for a low-budget venture such as *Last Message from Saigon* and on a highly exploitable topic. But the real-world lack of stability made it so that this production was not so simply or coherently containable. What happened, rather, is that all non-military personnel were suddenly ordered out of the area, and the filmmakers had to come up with a new plan of action, which in this case comprised retaining the intended Vietnam setting (the crux, after all, of what was being exploited here and the central premise of the narrative) but doing location filming in another country.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, though the point is debatable, given the relative dearth of any real-world awareness of or interaction with Asia overall or Southeast Asia more specifically on the part of most Americans as of 1965, such a substitution might not have been such a risk or have registered as so outlandish (if at all) at the time—this despite the fact that Thailand would have remained on the popular cinematic radar as a result of the overwhelming success of *The King and I*. Reviewers at the time did not make mention of the obvious incongruities of place, language, and culture, nor indeed do later analyses of the film take much heed of these, some even suggesting (incorrectly) that some of the shooting was done in Saigon.<sup>15</sup> On another level, the odd phenomenon of this film's flagrantly misidentified shooting location is an index not only to the instability of the production context but also to the lack of Western knowledge of the region with which it is about to be intimately and violently bound up.

13 Wayne Byrne, *Burt Reynolds on Screen* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2020), 21.

14 Byrne, *Burt Reynolds*, 21.

15 For example, Jeremy M. Devine, *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1995), 21–22.



With regard to the film's theme of a Cold War protagonist who achieves success through developing a measure of self-restraint, a relevant footnote here—one that might help to account for the mix of impulses evident in *Operation CIA*—is that the film's director had earlier directed another Cold War narrative (indeed an archetypal narrative of containment) with a protagonist experiencing very much the same kind of development as Andrews. Christian Nyby, though a highly prolific television director in the Cold War era, only directed a handful of feature films, the first and far away the best known being *The Thing from Another World* (1951)—now considered a classic allegory about foreign threats to the American social, political, and cultural way of life. In that film too, an agent of the American state (Air Force Captain Patrick Hendry played by Kenneth Tobey) develops from a position of relative immaturity in both his misunderstanding of alien threats and his lack of self-control regarding women, to an improved apprehension of a malevolent invader (an extra-terrestrial wanting to start a colony of its own) and in tandem a better understanding of the need for self-restraint regarding the woman he desires.

Given *Operation CIA*'s highly distinctive, if also disguised, embeddedness in the real physical space of 1960s Thailand, an appropriate additional closing footnote regarding authorship and influences might be one regarding an assistant director on the film, the only Thai crew member with a screen credit and (one could readily surmise) quite likely one of the reasons for the film's attention to location detail and effective use of location shooting. That crew member, Santa Pestonji, is the son of one of the most celebrated Thai film directors, the late Ratana Pestonji, and (subsequent to *Operation CIA*) has had a life-long career with his family's production services company (now known as Santa International Film Productions Company). He himself served as production supervisor for such shot-in-Thailand Hollywood productions as *Cutthroat Island* (1995), *The Beach* (2000), and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004). More to the historical point in this discussion, however, is that Americans were, in this case, dependent upon the work of Thai production personnel (even if effaced) to enable them an entrée into Southeast Asian filming locations in order to produce their narrative of benevolent Cold War presence in the region—just as Thai assistance would also be important for facilitating Americans' entrée into a Southeast Asian theater of operations as the Cold War turned increasingly hot in the months immediately following.<sup>16</sup>

16 On the rise of Thai assistance to the US at that historical juncture, see, for example, Nongnuth Kimanonth, "The U.S. Foreign Aid Factor in Thai Development, 1950–1975." In *Thai-American*

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*Relations in Contemporary Affairs*, ed. Hans H. Indorf (Singapore: Executive Publications, 1982), esp. 141–42.

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# Part Three

Cold War Film Genres



# 11. Counter-Occupying Americanism in South Korea and Taiwan: Taking Back the Spaces of US Base Culture in the Cold War Musical Number

*Evelyn Shih*

## Abstract

In the 1960s, an American form of live entertainment emerged on the local music scene in East Asia, due to both the cultural power of America and the actual presence of Americans on US military bases. Entertaining Americans became a significant industry in countries like Taiwan and South Korea, and the US presence expanded into spaces of entertainment such as bars, hotels, and dance clubs. This paper analyzes musical numbers in films from that era, discussing their representation of the entertainment space and their fashioning of cinematic attraction as a mode of vernacularizing popular music. These films not only bring the experience of American base-adjacent entertainment into mass consciousness, but also stage their own counter-occupation of these spaces with charismatic performance.

**Keywords:** *taiyupian*; Korean film; vernacularization; pop song; performance circuit; attraction

In late 1966, the nightclub scene in Taipei suffered a great shock: the arrival of a Korean song-and-dance troupe whose performance at the First Hotel's dinner show theater completely outdid all the top-line local performers. The club owners and bookers were humiliated to such an extent that they did not dare send a reciprocal troupe to perform in South Korea at the guests' home stage, the Walker Hill Resort in Seoul, capital of South Korea. Both First Hotel and Walker Hill were frequented by American military

personnel, and the discrepancy in quality was nothing short of a national humiliation. To quote a *United Daily News* reporter, Taiwanese club owners felt that they should aspire to a “global standard” to “whet the appetites of international investors,” thereby attracting “international individuals” to appreciate “Chinese performances.”<sup>1</sup> In this, they were completely outdone by their Korean counterparts.

The unspoken standard and ideal consumer, of course, came from the network of American military bases and American military base culture that had sprung up in the years of the Cold War. Americans had been a presence in Korea since the establishment of the US Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) after WWII, with bases to the present day, and the US military base show became a privileged form of stage show amongst local performers beginning in the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> Walker Hill Resort itself had been established in 1963 as a tribute by the Park Chung Hee regime to the US military commitment; it was the namesake of General Walton Walker, who had perished during the Korean War.<sup>3</sup> In Taiwan, the US Taiwan Defense Force was active from 1955 to 1979, with a spike of military visitors passing through Taiwan for “Rest and Recreation” in the 1960s due to the escalation of the Vietnam War.<sup>4</sup> Both Taiwan and South Korea were stops for musical acts traveling the US military base circuit, an itinerary that also included Guam, Okinawa, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Japanese mainland. Regionally famous acts such as Taiwan’s Yuan Sisters went on several tours of Japan and Southeast Asia, riding on their mastery of the American pop style.<sup>5</sup> Some exceptional acts even made a splash in America, such as the renowned Kim Sisters, who came out of the 1950s Korean US military base circuit.<sup>6</sup>

The 1966 South Korean film *Let’s Meet at Walker Hill* (*Wök’öshiresö man-napshida*) demonstrates how one might rise within the local networks to

1 “Tigao Zhonghua jiyi: jiemu tui xiang guoji, yezhe biaooshi you ci chengyi,” *Lian He Bao* (United Daily News), December 17, 1966, sec. Weekly Supplement.

2 See Hyunjoon Shin, “The Stage Show and the Dance Floor: A History of ‘Live Music’ in Korea.” In *Made in Korea: Studies in Popular Music*, eds. Hyunjoon Shin and Seung-Ah Lee (New York: Routledge, 2016), 15–22.

3 Roald Maliangkay, “Not a Habitus for the Have-Nots: The Walker Hill Shows, 1962–2012.” In *Presence Through Sound* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

4 See: Sydney Gruson, “R and R’ Tours in Taiwan: American Servicemen Bring a Mixed Blessing to the Island,” *New York Times*, February 14, 1968.

5 Chang-hua Chen, “Yuan Shi Jiemei Hechangtuan Jintian Chuguo Yanchang [The Yuan Sisters Band Goes Abroad to Perform Today],” *Lian He Bao* (United Daily News), March 3, 1971.

6 Roald Maliangkay, “Koreans Got Talent: Auditioning for U.S. Army Gigs in Korea,” *Situations* 11, no. 1 (2018): 59–79. See also: Benjamin M. Han, “Transpacific Talent: The Kim Sisters in Cold War America,” *Pacific Historical Review* 87, no. 3 (2018): 473–98.

become a star of “international” quality: the protagonist Nam Mira (played by Nam Chŏng-im) is a talented young songstress who performs in all sorts of venues in Seoul, moving up the ladder from clubs populated by a Korean audience to more exclusive establishments with English-language menus, until at last she performs in the titular Walker Hill Resort’s Pacific Nightclub theater. From there, her music producer assures her, she will be headed out for a tour of Southeast Asia and international stardom. Walker Hill was the unquestioned pinnacle of the US military show *within* Korea, but the next step would be to represent Korean pop music abroad—perhaps even, we might imagine, in Taiwan.

*Let’s Meet at Walker Hill* was not the first film with musical numbers by director Han Hyŏng-mo; in fact, beginning in the mid-1950s, Han became an innovator in entertainment cinema by showcasing musical numbers in many of his films.<sup>7</sup> This was quite a feat in an era when film sound practices were still fairly rudimentary in South Korea following the Korean War, and such films as *Madame Freedom* (1956), *Hyperbolae of Youth* (1956), and *I Am Alone* (1958) demonstrate Han’s idiosyncratic interest in—and strong dedication to—the embedding of musical spectacle within various genres. However, as one of Han’s last works as a director, *Let’s Meet at Walker Hill* distinguishes itself as the only project in his oeuvre to offer such a complete portrait of the media networks within which Americanist styles of music—called *sŭt’aendŏdŭ p’ap* (standard pop)—circulated.<sup>8</sup> Besides Nam Mira’s performances, the film featured strings of performances by the top stars of the US military base circuit, such as Wicky Lee, Lee Kŭm-hee, the Key Boys, and the Arirang Sisters, at venues such as nightclubs, KBS radio and TV stations, the Seoul Citizen’s Hall, and Walker Hill. As a culmination of Han’s interest in popular music, the film is a triumphalist narrative of aspiration and success: today Seoul, tomorrow the Free World.

7 Christina Klein, *Cold War Cosmopolitanism: Period Style in 1950s Korean Cinema* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2020), 135. Klein helpfully lists many of Han Hyeong-mo’s musical films, including *Breaking the Wall* (1949), which included a special appearance by the popular singer Hyeon In; *Madame Freedom* (1956), *Hyperbolae of Youth* (1956), *I Am Alone* (1958), *Because I Love You* (1958), *The Heaven and the Hell* (1963), *Let’s Meet at Walker Hill* (1966), and *The Queen of Elegy* (1967).

8 Jo, Jun-hyoung. 2008. “Han Hyŏng-mo: Hanguk taejung yŏnghwa ūi kaechŏkja [Han Hyŏng-mo: Korea’s Innovator in Mass Movie-making],” *Yŏnghwa Ch’ŏnguk*, August 26, 2008. Han was an elder statesman of the Korean film scene by the mid-1960s, having begun his career as a Japanese-trained cinematographer in the 1940s. He is primarily known for his prolific output in the 1950s, and in particular 1956’s *Madam Freedom*. As Jo’s article shows, *Walker Hill* is not generally seen as a work of great “artistic achievement.” As a culmination of Han’s interest in musicals, however, I would argue it is a crown jewel.



By contrast, Taiwanese cinema offers a much darker vision of the venues geared towards American military clientele. The film *May 13, Night of Sorrow* (1965) opens after the credits with its protagonist, Siok-hūi (played by Chang Ching Ching), performing a cover of Paul Anka's "Crazy Love" as she descends the stairs of a dinner show stage. The camera, following her in her descent, reveals a self-orientalizing stage set piece, complete with an ornate tile-roof pavilion hiding the modern jazz band. She attracts the unwanted attention of a lustful local businessman, who immediately demands her services as an escort. The establishment is later revealed to be a fictional bar called "Bagio," a place where Siok-hūi goes by the anglicized name "Lena." When she escapes *Bagio* in the company of her love interest Bùn-pin, they walk out of the bar and onto a street lit up with other signs in English: "SOUVENIRS," "GIFT EMPORIUM," and the neon lights of the infamous American clubs "Suzie Wong" and "OK Bar."<sup>9</sup>

For Siok-hūi, performing in the bar is a dead end, earning her only societal disdain and physical endangerment. Her facility at singing the American ballad does not bring her mobility or a chance at stardom. This was in contrast to the rising popularity of "hit music" (*remen yinyue*) bands, which were flourishing in the nightclub scene of the mid-1960s. The influx of American soldiers taking Rest and Recreation days from the Vietnam War frontlines had brought about a bumper crop of new American-style bars and clubs, which in turn fed the Americanist music scene.<sup>10</sup> The depiction of Siok-hūi is, perhaps, cleaving to melodramatic archetypes of the misunderstood and victimized songstress in Taiyu cinema; but in showing her as a victim of exploitative labor practices in an Americanist space, it also gives us a glimpse of popular anti-Americanism in this period.<sup>11</sup>

Korean cinema did not lack in negative portrayals of American base culture, beginning with the *yangkongju* (Western princess) films of the 1950s, such as *Flowers in Hell* (1958, dir. Shin Sangok). However, in the musical world of *Let's Meet at Walker Hill*, the implication of sexual and labor exploitation is eschewed in favor of what I argue is an idealist move, an attempt to find

9 See maps in Meng Tze Chu, "Rock and Roll from Rest and Recreation (R&R)," in *Made in Taiwan: Studies in Popular Music*, eds. Eva Tsai, Tung-Hung Ho, and Miaojun Jian (New York: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 105–17.

10 Xin-yuan Xiong, "Remen, Yaogun Dao Min'ge--Taiwan Qingniande Yinyue Shijie (1950–1970)" (MA thesis, National Taiwan University, 2017), 35–41.

11 See also Jean Ma, *Sounding the Modern Woman: The Songstress in Chinese Cinema* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press Books, 2015).

utopia through entertainment forms, as Richard Dyer suggested.<sup>12</sup> That is, the film stages musical numbers that act against the occupying force of America and American culture by *counter-occupying* the performance spaces and musical styles catering to Americans. If Americans occupied urban spaces of performance in Taipei and Seoul, the musical cinema offers a filmic speculation: what if the Americans were to vanish, and these spaces, this music, was wholly ours?

This paper will discuss the musical genre as it was manifested in 1960s Taiwan and South Korea, arguing that it was uniquely placed to execute counter-occupation through entertainment spectacle. Looking more closely at the two-sided coin of Americanism and anti-Americanism in the popular culture in this period, I find filmic evidence for the idea that social class often determined one's relationship to entertainment spaces within the US military base network. Subsequently, I offer examples of musical counter-occupation occurring in both Taiwanese and South Korean films, demonstrating narrative, visual, and extra-filmic modes of this performative act. Finally, I return to the idea that the ultimate stage of counter-occupation would be the banishment of the American spectator and the Americanized entertainment space from cinema altogether. We hear, instead, new, hybrid forms of music that erase the visual signs of Americanism and organically fuse its dynamic musical signatures with local idioms.

## The Musical Cinema

Was the musical a strong film genre in Taiwanese and South Korean cinemas of the 1960s? The answer to this question depends, of course, on one's definition of "the musical." Studies of the musical based on the "classical" Hollywood musicals from the 1930s to the 1960s, focalized on the lavish MGM studio production, emphasize qualities such as dual-focus, integration, or even Camp.<sup>13</sup> In the context of more low-budget productions and different audience expectations, Taiwanese and South Korean musical cinema seems to flout most of these rules, in most cases delivering neither a strict

12 Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia." In *Genre, the Musical: A Reader*, ed. Rick Altman (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul in association with the British Film Institute, 1981).

13 See: Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). Geoffrey Block, "Integration." In *Oxford Handbook of the American Musical* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 97–110. Steven Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value, and the MGM Musical* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

dual-focus nor a strong diegetic foundation for the musical number. They were more *integrated*, as it were, with the aesthetic of the variety show and other vernacular forms of live performance. Regionally, high production budget films from Hong Kong coming out of Cathay MP & GI and Shaw Brothers studios such as *Wild, Wild Rose* (1960) and *Love Parade* (1961) also tended to present musicals in this mode, bolstering the attraction of their numbers with more lavish set pieces.

In Korea, early post-Korean War films often featured talent from *ak-kŭk* (literally “music drama”) troupes, including directors, scriptwriters, and performers who could pull off both comedy and musical performance. As that kind of variety show live performance style faded in the 1960s, the “syodan” (a transliteration of the English word “show” and the Korean word *dan* for “troupe”) produced more film and TV stars.<sup>14</sup> In Taiwan, popular performance institutions that fed into musical film performance included *koa-á-hì* opera and stage actors from *sin-kiók* (the “new style theater”), both of which rose in eminence during the Japanese colonial period. Such live performance stars were particularly prominent in the *taiyupian*, or films in Taiwanese Hokkien.<sup>15</sup> It was also common for musical and comedic talent from a film to be invited to perform on stage at screenings, a practice called “taking the stage along with the film” (*sui piandengtai*).

In both Korean and Taiwanese popular cinemas, musical numbers often appeared in films that were not predominantly musical; and when films did have five or more musical numbers, they often did not conform to expectations of musical performances by a male and female lead on screen. In *May 13, Night of Sorrow*, for example, Siok-hŭi is only shown twice singing in the nightclub. Four other numbers are delivered as non-diegetic music, in which Siok-hŭi’s singing voice (provided by Cheng Hsiu-mei) serves as a kind of voiceover. Instead of the numbers structuring the narrative, as in the American or MGM musical, they were often placed within the narrative incidentally, as one attraction among many. In short, films with musical numbers in these cinemas engaged loosely with the musical genre.

Even so, *Let’s Meet at Walker Hill* is an unusual film of the period in that it includes an unusually large count of musical numbers—to such an extent that the numbers often have nothing to do with named characters

14 See Shin, “The Stage Show and the Dance Floor: A History of ‘Live Music’ in Korea,” 17. See also Park Sun-young, *K’omidiŏn chŏnsŏng sidae* (Seoul: Somyŏng Ch’ulp’an, 2018).

15 Chih-heng Su, *Wu ganyuan de dianying shi: cengjing, Taiwan you ge Haolaiwu* (Taipei Shi: Chun shan chu ban, 2020).

who are active in the narrative.<sup>16</sup> Performances by stars like Wicky Lee and Lee Küm-hee simply come before or after Nam Mira's performance, and the singers do not interact with any named characters. At the same time, the musical numbers take up a lot of play time within the length of the film. This indicates that one of the film's main goals is to showcase top talent in Korea, including singers and dancers, who have perfected an American accent and style. In contrast to *taiyupian*, which often feature American-style songs sung in Chinese (as in *Chang Ti Seeks Ah-Chu*, discussed later) or adapted into a minor pentatonic mode reminiscent of *enka* (as in *May 13*), *Let's Meet at Walker Hill* reveals an orientation of the Korean standard pop music scene towards a virtuosic mimesis of American music.

There are structural reasons for this difference: Korean entertainers who aspired to perform on the US military base circuit, both within and outside of Korean borders, auditioned for a centralized booking office, where they were given a ranked rating that would determine their pay level.<sup>17</sup> This heightened the level of standardization found in Korean "standard pop." Taiwanese "hit music" musicians, by contrast, were hired by individual club owners, and the standardization was much less pronounced. This was especially true after 1966, when the government began to tax foreign performers, and the clubs had to turn to local talent.<sup>18</sup> The mid-to-late 1960s became a new era of florescence for the small group of musicians that formed the nascent pop-rock scene.<sup>19</sup> Many were self-taught and learned the new style by listening to AFTN radio.

In short, Americanist musicians in Taiwan did not come out of a centralized system of selection; it was more a game of "telephone." Further complicating the matter was the fact that they often played a repertoire of Mandopop alongside their American fare of "Western songs" (*xiyangge*); this difference in style became one of their strengths when they hit local markets in Japan, where it played as a kind of *chinoiserie*. Little wonder, then, that the club owners in Taipei were shocked at the skill and American-style professionalization of Korean performers from Walker Hill in 1966 and felt

16 In terms of its interest in showing the audience brightly colored, staged musical numbers, *Walker Hill* is more similar to *Love Parade* (1961) from Hong Kong than other South Korean films. A great deal of care is taken in the cinematography to make stage effects such as lighting and moving set pieces into exciting cinematic attractions. And like *Love Parade*, *Walker Hill*'s numbers take place on stage within the filmic diegesis.

17 See Maliangkay, "Koreans Got Talent: Auditioning for U.S. Army Gigs in Korea," 69–71.

18 "Waiguo Yiren Lai Tai Biaoyan, Caizhengbu Ni Shoushui Banfa; Jiang Cai Shixian Dengji Fangshi," *Lian He Bao* (United Daily News), May 30, 1966.

19 Xiong, "Remen, Yaogun Dao Min'ge--Taiwan Qingniande Yinyue Shijie (1950–1970)."

too ashamed to send Taiwanese performers in exchange. If Americanism included an ever closer approximation to the American original, then Korean performers certainly had a leg up.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the majority of Korean and Taiwanese pop culture consumers during this time, especially those residing outside of Seoul and Taipei, did not have easy access to the live performance of American-style music. At the same time, provincial populations outside of the capitals formed the primary audience for *taiyupian* and Korean genre comedies such as *Let's Meet at Walker Hill*. In Korea, provincial audiences constituted a great source of revenue, and their consumption of the “B movie” often supported more prestigious theatrical releases.<sup>20</sup> In Taiwan, the prestige cinema released in Mandarin was mainly funded through the state-controlled Central Motion Picture Company in the 1950s and 1960s, with more privatized companies competing in this arena thereafter. Mandarin films produced by large Hong Kong studios were also increasingly popular during this time. However, the majority of the provincial audience still actively consumed the *taiyupian*, which as a whole were viewed as occupying a low culture position.<sup>21</sup>

The musicals that counter-occupy American spaces, I would argue, do this in two senses: first, by transforming the exclusive bars and clubs into cinematic experiences that could be consumed outside of the capitals; and second, by presenting the Americanist musical style—and even the *US military base circuit* itself—as something that rightfully belongs to the local audience, especially those who were non-urban, non-English speaking, and usually excluded from the cosmopolitan pleasure of Americanist culture. This counter-occupation proceeded apace with the vernacularization of the music itself, and along with broadcast TV and radio, promoted a localist music for localist demands by side-stepping the audience of Americans. Musical numbers in these films also produced an indirect censure of Americanist music scenes as sites of labor exploitation through the lens of vernacularized music experiences.

### Americanism/Anti-Americanism

In the 1960s, there was a duality inherent to informal spaces of American occupation, that is, the American-style bar and dinner show space in

20 Steven Chung, *Split Screen Korea: Shin Sang-Ok and Postwar Cinema* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

21 Feiyi Lu, *Tai wan dian ying: zheng zhi, jing ji, mei xue, 1949–1994* (Tai bei shi: Yuan liu, 1998).

South Korea and Taiwan. The entertainment establishment that caters to Americans is at once a space of thrilling escape—or hedonistic youth culture—and a space of labor exploitation, sexual and otherwise. It was under these terms, and in these spaces, that the vernacularization of musical styles associated with American consumption progressed over the course of a decade.

In Korea, the more pronounced standardization that emerged from the practice of centralized booking suggests a stronger cultural hegemony. Subsequently, the performance circuit and the resulting musical scene took on the appearance of a meritocracy. The birth of a star like Nam Mira means an incremental rise through the system, based on her musical talent and not her sexual availability to powerful men. At the same time, her father (played by Sō Yōngch'un) and lover Samnyōng (played by Twist Kim) are marked as the outcasts of this system: country bumpkins who do not understand Seoul's urban culture, not to mention the English language or club culture, and who are excluded from formal theater performances because they cannot afford to pay. In other words, the Americanist occupation of culture and public space *accentuates a class division*.

In one early scene, the two rubes enter a bar where young people are shown dancing to a rousing rendition of “Woolly Bully” (1965, Sam the Sham and the Pharoahs) still gripping their dried fish and fresh-pressed sesame oil from the countryside. When the waitress offers them orange juice, using the transliteration “orenji jjusū,” they misapprehend the first part of the word (“ore”) to mean “takes a long time,” and ask for something that can be served quickly instead. When the juice does arrive, they attempt to use the straws from their two glasses as one set of chopsticks to eat the ice cubes, arousing peals of laughter from the waitresses. Their sesame oil spills when the Queen Bee band takes the stage to sing a rendition of “Come See About Me” (1964, The Supremes), causing all the young dancers to slip and fall on the dance floor in a new take on the banana peel gag. In short, the genre of their narrative is established as a kind of *sanggyōnggi*—the encounter of the backwards, rural, fish-out-of-water comedian with the sophisticated cultural nuances of urban life. At the same time, the film sandwiches the comic relief between two musical numbers and shows the “correct” response to Americanist music in the gyrating dance moves of the well-dressed young men and women. Provincial audiences watching the film are invited to the table and taught how one should act within these spaces at the same time that they are entertained.

What is happening here is not strictly a top-down pedagogical moment in which the provincial figures are humiliated. Instead, the film depicts a

space of vernacularization in which the urban folk are also used for comic spectacle. Yet audiences who identify with the two rural characters are invited to affirm a kind of social aspiration through the assertion of superiority: I may have been like these two fools once, but now I know better.<sup>22</sup> Part of the superior social status to which the film suggests its audience should aspire is, of course, the Americanist style of music.

By contrast, a later scene in the film provides a clearer indication of anti-Americanism. Entering a bar right after Nam Mira performs, the father and Samnyŏng are asked to order from a menu in English and are comically incapable of reading from it. The biggest challenge, however, is not linguistic occupation but sexual occupation: the announcer proclaims that the next act is a “pink” (erotic) dance in the style of “American flappers.” The film does not show the erotic dance; all that is shown is the disapproval of the father, who demands that the (Korean) girls put on more clothing. Sŏ Yŏngch’un explodes with the indignation of his wounded patriarchal and nationalist sensibilities, instigating a food fight that ultimately ends with his removal from the premises.

In this second sequence, it is made clear that this space serves the American consumer more than the provincial figures, who voice their protest against the sight of their countrywomen exposed for American pleasure. The space has been occupied: Koreans are not welcome unless they play by the preset rules. Certainly, this is a rhetorical position that prioritizes the male gaze and the right of the patriarch to act as guardian of all Korean women. The trope of using female sex work as a stand-in for national victimization was common in leftist literature of this era, according to Jin-kyung Lee.<sup>23</sup> I would argue that here, in a brief moment that sits on the edge between comedy and critique, *Let’s Meet at Walker Hill* engages in this same rhetoric, and what is at stake is the exploitation of female labor that is present within the entertainment spaces of the American military circuit.

If anything, Taiwanese cinema is even more explicit in using the metaphor of female sex work and in the articulation of the American-facing club and bar space as a duality of hedonistic pleasure (for the wealthy) and exploitation (for the working class). In *The Early Train from Taipei* (1964), the female protagonist Siù-lân travels to Taipei from the countryside to work as a dance

22 This argument is inspired by Rob King, who describes immigrant communities consuming comedies based on ethnic caricature in the early days of Hollywood film comedy. King, *The Fun Factory: The Keystone Film Company and the Emergence of Mass Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

23 Jin-kyung Lee, *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in South Korea* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 130–1.

escort because she and her mother are in debt. Her place of work is the “Night Paris” club, and it is suggested through exterior shots that the club is housed in First Hotel. In one central sequence, Siù-lân drinks too much while with a customer and is taken to a room. The film cuts from a scene where the predator approaches her still form on the bed to a montage of the dance floor: close-up shots of men and women’s feet dancing “The Twist,” intercut with medium shot-reverse shots of young men and women dancing in pairs, close-ups of musical instruments, a disco ball, full shots of the bustling dance floor, and shots of flowers being pummeled by the pouring rain outside.<sup>24</sup> As if to echo the lightning of the thunderstorm, the club scene flashes again and again with bright light, creating dynamic shadows. At the end of the sequence, the film cuts back to the scene in the hotel room, where Siù-lân is weeping and fixing her clothing. The fast pace and dynamism of the montage, in other words, take the place of Siù-lân’s rape in filmic representation. The two sides of the American-style club space, as brought together through editing, are the hedonistic pleasure of youth and Americanist dance forms on the one hand and sexual exploitation on the other.

The dangers of the Americanist entertainment space were certainly gendered. But it was not just young women who were exploited for their labor in these spaces: provincial men of lower classes were also denied entry by the simple fact of their social status. *Chang Ti Seeks Ah-Chu* (1968, dir. Wu Fei-ch’ien), for example, directly addresses the status of working-class males when it comes to American-style bars and clubs. The eponymous Chang Ti was, at the time, a well-known performer on the nightclub scene as a Mandarin song singer and comic performer. In his film role, however, Chang Ti is transformed into a provincial young man who has come to Taipei in search of his love interest, Ah-Chu (played by *koa-á-hì* star Yang Lihua), and he finds employment as a lowly server at the Hong Kong Restaurant. Chang Ti and his friend Songyi are shown walking in the front door of the establishment in answer of a “Help Wanted” ad before the camera tilts up to the nightclub’s English-language neon sign. Soon after, Chang Ti is shown watching a performance by the “Hong Ling Sisters Three,” who in real life often accompanied Chang Di in his stage shows on the Americanist circuit. The Sisters are performing a Mandarin version of “Historia de un Amor,” a song that rose to fame as the theme song for a 1956 Mexican film of the same name and was made popular in Mandarin by the Hong Kong

24 The “Flowers on a Rainy Night” is a common metaphor in Taiwanese popular culture for a female sex worker, dating from a popular song of the same name from the Japanese colonial era, “Ü-iā-hoe.”



songstress Tsin Ting in 1960.<sup>25</sup> While not American in nature, the music is emblematic of what would have been popular in an Americanist space at that time: a Mandopop cover of an international hit.

The film takes care to thematize Chang Ti's spectatorship in this scene. In effect, there is cross-cutting between a long shot, showing Chang Ti and Songyi as servers; and medium to close-up shots, in which we see Chang Ti and Songyi's immersion within the musical experience. We begin with a straight frontal shot showing the stage from the back of the nightclub and the two bumbling waiters in the middle of the tables, but soon cut to a shot over the shoulders of the dancing Sisters, which shows the two servers stopping to stare. In a further close-up, we see their faces smiling with unbounded pleasure. A brief long shot reveals that they have stopped serving food; we turn back to their view of the stage, with a medium-length shot panning from the Sisters all the way down the glittering stage to the brass section, the drum set, and the piano. Back in the long shot, Chang Ti realizes the nightclub manager is coming and drops his serving tray in his rush to look busy. Both servers are chased out of the room with a sound scolding. The camera does not follow them but remains in place until the Hong Ling sisters finish their song and bow to a round of applause. Unlike Chang Ti, the film viewer is given the privilege of listening to the end; but she is also permitted to have sympathy for his exclusion.

In all of these films, the American-style performance space, whether it is a bar, a nightclub, or a theater, is depicted as an exclusionary space geared towards the tastes of American servicemen. The exclusionary act, however, is not meted out by Americans; instead, it is the job of Koreans and Taiwanese who have been hired to maintain the decorum of establishments on behalf of Americans and the elite few who have not only learned the rules, thanks to social privilege, but have also bought into the hegemony of American culture. The film viewers are invited to sympathize not with the nameless young dancers but with the provincial, working-class characters who are excluded or exploited in these spaces. They are primed for the arrival of the next narrative movement: the counter-occupation.

## Counter-Occupying Americanist Spaces

Chang Ti never becomes a star in Taipei, let alone the American military base circuit abroad, in *Chang Ti Seeks A-Chu*. However, he does counter-occupy

25 The Mandarin title is "Wo de xinli meiyou ta" ("He is not in my heart"). Teresa Teng, a rising star in this era who would go on to international fame, sang an up-tempo cover of this song in 1967.

the space from which he is banished in a key dream sequence. The exhausted Chang Ti is seen sweeping the nightclub after hours, then sitting on the side of the stage and dozing off while leaning on his broom. Almost immediately, a superimposed double of Chang appears, crouched in the same position. He rises up in a dapper, fitted suit with microphone in hand and solidifies in shape, then breaks into song: an early version of “My Lena,” a Mandopop tune, with lyrics by a star of the US military base circuit, Ni Bin.<sup>26</sup> The song makes a nod to Americanist origins with both its doo wop style arrangement and a phrase in English anchoring the chorus, “I love you.” Chang Ti inhabits the American pop style with a light swagger, completely shedding his country yokel persona for a polished musical delivery as he takes center stage.

When he hits the first verse, Chang steps back towards the bandstand, and in waltzes his friend Songyi, dressed in a flamboyant sombrero and the layered ruffle sleeves of a Cuban rumba costume. He, in turn, leads in A-Chu, wearing a sleeveless tunic and slacks. The dream sequence seems to suggest the fulfillment of Chang Ti’s desire for the lost A-Chu, as well as his incorporation of trendy references to the craze for mambo, which was introduced to East Asia through the American military entertainment circuit.<sup>27</sup> A panning shot of the musicians during a musical break cuts to a close-up of Chang Ti, who bobs from one side of the frame to the other. This number, in contrast to the last, is not about offering the full musical number so much as it is about centering Chang Ti’s enjoyment of this moment in the spotlight. But Chang’s reverie is rudely interrupted by the nightclub manager’s angry voice, and the film cuts back to a long shot of the empty nightclub with the two workers sleeping on the job. They are promptly fired; and with that, Chang Ti is banished from the nightclub scene for the rest of the film.

Despite the fact that it ends in the full exclusion of Chang Ti and Songyi from the Americanist space, I propose that this sequence be read as a counter-occupation. As a follow-up to the previous scene, in which Chang Ti and Songyi are denied the right to consume the entertainment being offered in the Hong Kong Restaurant, this sequence bypasses the question of consumption, moving straight to the space of performance. Chang Ti’s

26 Ni Bin was recruited to go on tour with the ROC representative performance troupe to US military bases right out of performance school. “Gesheng hunhou de Ni Bin,” *Economic Daily News (Jingji Ribao)*, January 4, 1969.

27 Klein discusses the “mambo craze” that hit Korea at this time as “part of a curriculum in cosmopolitan modernity that the US military inadvertently introduced into Korea as it entertained its own troops.” The same might be said of the style’s popularity in Taiwan. Klein, *Cold War Cosmopolitanism*, 188–90.

dream is not to become a *customer* but to *control* the images and musical content displayed on stage. While evoking the charisma and youthful appeal of the Americanist style, the song was locally written, created to realize the fantasies of Chang Ti the country boy. His own pleasure in the music is given the pride of place over the response of audience members, whose faces are never shown. Americanism remains only as a line of English in the chorus, kept for the purposes of signifying Chang Ti's arrival as a cosmopolitan talent in his fantasy. With this musical number, Chang Ti closes the class-based gap between those excluded and those conditionally welcomed in the Americanist space, and claims that space for his own.

Nam Mira's climactic performance at the Walker Hill dinner theater is also designed to close a gap: thanks to Mira's invitation, Samnyöng and her father enter the Walker Hill resort as guests. The duo finally have a seat at the table and are shown viewing a long string of song and dance performances leading up to Mira's performance, applauding and taking in the show. Two white men are visible at the table next to theirs, as if to underscore their proximity to American military spectators; but the country bumpkins are neither shamed for their attire nor asked to eat unfamiliar foods. Instead, the film suppresses the comedic element and builds towards a melodramatic climax in this sequence. Sö Yongch'un and Twist Kim do not enact the counter-occupation, but they are to be key emotional witnesses.

The counter-occupational event is Nam Mira's signature song "The Feeling of Missing You" (*Pogo sip'ün maum*), performed visually by the actress Nam Chöng-Im in a purple evening gown and on the soundtrack by singer Söng T'aemi. Significantly, it is a fully Korean-language ballad set against a gentle bolero rhythm. Like Chang Ti's "My Lena," the song straddles the line between the formal traits of Americanism (via the mambo craze) and local identity. In this case, the song is also distinguished from Nam's other number in the film, "Dark Words of Farewell" (*Kömün yibyöl üi külssi*), which adopts the classic minor pentatonic modality of "trot" music.<sup>28</sup> If "trot" is the most successful strain of "local color" to come into the US military circuit in Korea, just as Mandopop was the "local color" of choice in Taiwan, "The Feeling of Missing You" leaves it behind in favor of a minor Americanism. Instead of mainstream American pop-rock, it adopts a Latin rhythm along with the open major tonality of a folk song. In contrast with the performers singing in perfect English, Nam Mira sings only in Korean; and if the editing

28 "Trot" has the same minor pentatonic melodic characteristics as *enka* and the Japanese-style or "hybrid" songs in Taiwan. See Seung-Ah Lee, "Decolonizing Korean Popular Music: The 'Japanese Color' Dispute over Trot," *Popular Music and Society* 40, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 102–10.

of the film is to be believed, she sings only to Samnyŏng. The camera zooms in to a medium full length, focusing on Nam's delivery, until it cuts directly to an eyeline match with Sŏ Yŏngch'un and Twist Kim in the audience, in medium close-up shots that emphasize the intensity of their emotion as they look on. In Mira's number, which precipitates her reunion with her father, the Americans have all but vanished from sight.

A counter-occupation of mise-en-scene accompanies Mira's performance, which transforms the Walker Hill stage into a resonance chamber for her declaration of love for Samnyŏng and her underlying desire to see her long-lost father. The stage set behind her is adorned with geometric shapes in a 1960s mod, abstract style; and more curiously, a rocket labeled "ROK" (Republic of Korea) shooting up just off center. This monumental element on the set claims the stage as Korean while claiming Korea's place within the technological modernity of the 1960s space race. What does the rocket have to do with Mira's love ballad? In fact, it is the excessive nationalist performativity of the ROK projectile that indicates the ultimate function of the sequence as a counter-occupation. Walker Hill was founded as a space to entertain foreign dignitaries, especially those affiliated with the US military. Mira's number, by contrast, is dedicated to Korea: an essentialized version of Korea—as represented by her provincial father and Samnyŏng—and the state of South Korea, which was rising in economic and military strength itself in the developmental period of the 1960s. Like Chang Ti's performance, this was a fantasy, a projection of future national strength, which was further embodied in Nam Mira's meteoric rise through the Americanist musical network.

## Disappearing Americans

Thus far, I have alluded to the representation of Americanist entertainment spaces in Taipei and Seoul and to the performance of Americanist music in Taiwanese and South Korean cinema. In my conclusion to this chapter, however, I would like to suggest that the ultimate disappearance of Americans was instituted in one film titled *The Young Girl Goes to Town* (1966, dir. Wu Feijian). In this film, the pre-teen Bi-ying has left her provincial home in search of her missing father. She sees a group of medicine sellers in front of a temple who are performing to get some crowd interest in their wares: a handsome man, a woman, and a second man dressed as a clown. They are failing terribly at getting the crowd on their side, leaning only on the strength of one trumpet, two marching band drums, and the clown's strange,

gyrating dance. Out of kindness, Bi-ying volunteers to help the struggling performers by singing a tune herself. The handsome man, who happens to be her long lost father, enthusiastically invites her to their makeshift stage.

As the first bars of the girl's song "Wandering the Jianghu" begin to play, an astounding mismatch occurs: a total divergence between the musical instruments represented visually—a lone trumpet and a marching band drum—and the sound of the music, which appears to be a basic eight bar blues progression played on bass, guitar, and drum kit. The most overt flouting of the sound-image synchronization occurs during the musical break, in which the father dutifully pretends to play a trumpet solo against the twanging of a blues guitar. The Americanist entertainment space has disappeared; does its acousmètre continue to haunt the screen?

I would argue that this transposition of the blues sound is not just a technical mistake. The sound designer seems perfectly capable, as the previous sequence of the medicine sellers' performance is accompanied by convincing post-synchronized sound, with the identifiable audio-visual matches for the trumpet and single drum. Instead, I would suggest that the sound editing offers a mode of escaping the Americanist space, of counter-occupying its associated musical style with another, almost completely opposite type of space.

Gone are the bandstand, the stage, and the dining tables of the nightclub. No invitation or entrance fee is required. This is a true temple performance, one that uses the open space in front of a Daoist/Buddhist temple as a public space of gathering, at once sacred and secular. Such a space was traditionally used to stage outdoor opera or puppet theater, for the benefit of the community as much as in honor of the gods and ancestors. The viewers are men and women, children and their parents, suited men and housewives in plain dresses. Instead of American men and rich local businessmen consuming this music as an exclusive right, the music is offered, seemingly, to all of the *taiyu* audience.

The trappings of Americanist musical style are fully absorbed into the *taiyu* idiom of "wandering the lakes and river," which refers to both the world of martial arts and the world of entertainment. The musical number here defies definition as Americanist, *enka* style, Mandopop, or even *taiyu* popular song but stands at their intersection in a moment of exuberant vernacularization. In this final disappearance of the Americanist entertainment space, the counter-occupation of American style is complete. As in *Let's Meet at Walker Hill*, the music is ultimately the medium that brings separated families together, an intuitive mode of connection and communal solidarity working against exclusion and exploitation.

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## 12. SOS Hong Kong: Coproducing Espionage Films in Cold War Asia\*

*Sangjoon Lee*

### Abstract

With the success of *Dr. No* and *Goldfinger* in Asia, film industries in Asia recognized the market potential of spy movies and began churning out their own James Bond–mimetic espionage films in the late 1960s. In the US-driven Cold War sphere, developmental states in the region, particularly South Korea and Taiwan, adopted an anti-communist doctrine to guard and uphold their militant dictatorships. Under this political atmosphere in the regional sphere, cultural sectors in each nation-state—including cinema—voluntarily or compulsorily served as an apparatus to strengthen the state’s ideological principles. This chapter casts a critical eye on the South Korea–initiated inter-Asian coproduction of espionage films produced in this period, with particular reference to *SOS Hong Kong* (1966) and *Special Agent X-7* (1966).

**Keywords:** postwar South Korean cinema; Hong Kong cinema; spy movies; Cold War; inter-Asian film

As many have already argued, the James Bond film series has been extremely popular not only in English-language territories but also in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. It is roughly estimated that half the earth’s population has seen at least one James Bond film.<sup>1</sup> First appearing with the publication of Ian Fleming’s *Casino Royale* in 1953 and crossing over to the big screen

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1 Jaap van Ginneken, *Screening Difference*, 154



with the screen adaptation of *Dr. No* in 1962, James Bond emerged at a turning point in British postwar history. The James Bond series is certainly a perfectly tailored global product. Renowned James Bond historian James Chapman claims that *Goldfinger* (1964) marked the beginning of Bondmania as a truly international phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the first two films, *Dr. No* (1962) and *From Russia with Love* (1963), *Goldfinger* penetrated the world's popular culture not only in "more advanced" Western countries but also in Asia, including Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and—finally—South Korea. It was *From Russia with Love* that ignited Bondmania in South Korea. Instead of the first Bond film, *Dr. No*, it was *From Russia with Love* that first arrived in South Korea and was officially distributed at the Paramount theater in Seoul on April 25, 1965, under the Korean title of *007 wigi ilbal*. It instantaneously became the number-one foreign film of the year, drawing a record-breaking 300,000 patrons in Seoul alone. Following the rave reception of *From Russia with Love*, *Dr. No* (Korean title: *007 sarin pönho*) opened just four months later. By the end of the year, the two Bond movies brought a whopping 500,000 moviegoers to the theaters in Seoul, whose population was only 3 million at the time.

With the unparalleled success of *From Russia with Love* and *Dr. No*, the South Korean cultural sphere faced a sudden explosion of James Bond-style espionage (*ch'öppo*) films and literature, which I have named the "espionage craze", in South Korea. Most major newspapers and publishing outlets in South Korea competitively embarked on serializing "Korean Bond" stories and comics, along with translations of the original novels. Only eight months after the introduction of *From Russia with Love*, thirteen James Bond novels by Ian Fleming were translated under the title *The Complete 007 Collection* (*007 chönjip*) in December 1965.<sup>3</sup> Even radio stations joined the craze by airing copious dramatized daily shows based on the espionage novels on the market. The espionage craze reached its zenith in 1966. KBS (Korean Broadcasting System) TV, the nation's government-owned major network television station, aired a special program called *The World of James Bond* instead of the station's hugely popular *KBS Grand Show* (KBS *küraendü syo*).<sup>4</sup> In December 1966, the third James Bond film, *Goldfinger* (Korean title: *007 koldü p'inggö*), was released.

Film distributors were eager to import anything related to espionage, and over twenty James Bond copycats from Italy, the United Kingdom, the United States, and France were released in the market almost simultaneously.

2 Chapman, *Licence to Thrill*.

3 *Sina ilbo* [Shina daily news], December 4, 1965, 4.

4 *Kyöngnyang sinmun* [Kyöngnyang daily news], May 4, 1966, 6.

Among them, *To Trap a Spy* (Korean title: *oon nap'olleong sollo*, 1964), a feature-film version of *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, and the France-Italy co-production of the OSS 117 series, both films and literature, were the most successful. Local film producers noticed the trend after they witnessed the audiences' ardent reception of the espionage films and actively adapted this Bond-style espionage film to their local audiences. Fourteen locally produced South Korean espionage films were released in 1966 alone—compared with one in 1964 and two in 1965—including *A Female Spy, Elisa* (*Yögançh'öp Erisya*), *Shanghai 55 Street* (*Sanghae 55-pönji*), *Spy Operation* (*Kanch'öp chakchön*), *Starberry Kim* (*Süt'aberi Kim*), *Tokyo Correspondent* (*Tonggyöng t'ükp'awön*), *Secret Agency* (*Pimil ch'öppodae*), *Red Line* (*Chöksön chidae*), *The International Spy* (*Kukche kanch'öp*), *Special Agent X-7* (*Sun'gan ün yöngwönhi*), and *SOS Hong Kong* (*SOS Hongk'ong*).

As shown above, from the mid-to-late 1960s, the espionage craze was so vibrant that every cultural sector was obsessed with this particular film cycle. And yet the cultural, economic, and political logic(s) that gave rise to and modified the sudden popularity of espionage films in South Korea has long been neglected and forgotten in history. I argue that the espionage craze in the 1960s was shaped by Cold War cultural politics; the first intensive postwar interregional cultural network; the rise of popular culture boosted by the advent of radio, television, popular magazines, and genre novels; and the nation's vigorous involvement in and holistic attitudes toward the Vietnam War.

Throughout the chapter, it is my aim to show that South Korean espionage films are more complicated than just the “good” and “bad” spy confrontations in American and European ones. In contrast to the plot structures in the James Bond films in the West, which pit a single “free” Western individual spy against a whole evil empire of terrorists, subversives, and megalomaniacs under the leadership of a tyrant-dictator or communist regime (in many cases the USSR), South Korean espionage films are telling, quintessentially Korean experiences. They are transnational in the modes of production, set in exotic locales such as Hong Kong, Macau, Taipei, and Tokyo, but as South Korean espionage films primarily targeted the South Korean film market, they passionately waved a national flag. Put differently, the North-South division system and its aftermath—separated families, war orphans, and traumatic memories of the colonial past and the Korean Civil War—functioned as major plot drivers in many South Korea-initiated espionage film productions in the 1960s.

That said, this chapter primarily focuses on two South Korea–Hong Kong coproduced espionage films—*SOS Hong Kong* (*SOS Hongk'ong*) and

*Special Agent X-7* (*Sun'gan ūn yōngwōnhi*), both produced and released in 1966—along with several more examples and will scrutinize the sudden explosion of the espionage craze in South Korea. I will first examine the phenomenon by tracing the history of espionage films and literature from the colonial period to the Cold War cultural sphere in the 1960s. Then, I will explore the ways in which Cold War South Korean espionage films reflected the transformation of the geopolitical imaginaries of the United States—led “free Asia,” anticommunism and the nation’s involvement in the Vietnam War, the sorrow of the Civil War, and the North-South division system.

### Cold War Politics, Popular Culture, and South Korean Espionage Films

The public’s sudden obsession with espionage films should be deciphered from manifold perspectives. First, espionage literature or detective novels, if not films, had a long history of enthusiastic reception in the local cultural sphere. In the early twentieth century, detective novels, particularly the Sherlock Holmes series, influenced the intellectuals and mass public in what was then a Japanese colony. Ohio State University graduate Kim Tong-sōng first translated and introduced Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *A Study in Scarlet* (*Pulgūn sil*) in 1923, which was followed by a series of translated and locally created detective and spy stories in the 1920s and 1930s. As many literary historians have argued, the beginning of the genre—espionage/detective—was attributed to Kim Nae-sōng. His *White Mask* (*Paekkamyōn*) was serialized in *The Boy* (*Sonyōn*), a children’s magazine, from June 1937 to May 1938. *White Mask* was categorized as children’s literature and was labeled a “detective novel” (*t’amjōng sosōl*).<sup>5</sup> *White Mask* tells the story of child detective Yu Pullan (homage to Maurice Leblanc, a French novelist who created Arsène Lupin) who fights against the thief White Mask and international spies whose purpose is to steal the confidential documents of a Korean scientist. Kim serialized and published more detective novels that were set beyond the boundaries of colonial Chosŏn: in Marseilles, Liverpool,

5 Ch’oe Aesun, “Iron kwa ch’angjak ūi choūng, t’amjōng sosōlga Kim Naesōng ūi kaltūng—ponkyōk changp’yōn t’amjōng sosōl ‘Main’ i hyōngsōng toegi kkaji” [Kim Naesōng’s complication between the theory and the creation of the detective novels—the formation process of *Ma-in*],” 51–86.

Delhi, Colombo, and Shanghai, where the detective was working on behalf of the Japanese colonial power, including *Main* (1938) and *Typhoon* (*T'aep'ung*, 1943).<sup>6</sup>

After Korea was liberated from Japan in August 1945, however, the geopolitical boundaries of the new nation left no room for Kim's transnational imagination. The world around the writer had changed completely. Japan had surrendered to the West. Korea was divided into two states—North and South. Moreover, the “evil forces” of the West were now the nation's new mentors. Kim's new country, the Republic of Korea, resided in the United States, the seat of the world order that had drawn the new map of “free Asia.” This anticommunist bloc was controlled by the new hegemonic regime, the United States, by way of financial aid, cultural domination that disseminated the American way of life, and military base camps in various cities in Asia, particularly in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, which Bruce Cumings pertinently terms the “Archipelago of Empire” that in fact established a “territorial empire.”<sup>7</sup>

Developmental states in the region, particularly South Korea, vigorously adopted an anticommunist doctrine to guard and uphold their militant dictatorships. In this regional political atmosphere, cultural areas—including cinema—voluntarily or compulsorily served as an apparatus to strengthen the state's ideological principles. Following this logic, South Korean special agents—such as the Korean “Bond” in *SOS Hong Kong* and *Special Agent X-7*—act passionately against the communists of North Korea and the People's Republic of China (PRC) to protect the country's allies: Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Remarkably, it had taken only two decades for the fear of Japan's remilitarization in South Korea to be fully converted into the logic of anticommunism. Consequently, the animosity toward the Japanese empire during the occupation period turned into a fear of communism, and under this consensus—the anti-Red matrix—Japan emerged as an adopted “reeducated” son of the United States and the financially self-sufficient “big brother” in the metastable regional entity, at least in the realm of the film industry.

Second, the rise of the middle class in 1960s South Korean society ignited popular cultures that were different from the intellectuals' highly selective cultural tastes. The number of city residents spiked, and accordingly, these

6 Chŏng Chonghyŏn, “Taedonga' wa sŭp'ai—Kim Naesŏng changp'yŏn sosŏl '*T'aep'ung*' ŭl t'onghae pon 'Taedonga' ŭi simsang chiri wa 'Chosŏn'” [The Greater East Asia and spy-imaginative geography of 'the Greater East Asia' and 'Joseon' from the Viewpoint of *Typhoon*], 211–47.

7 See Bruce Cumings, *Dominion from Sea to Sea*, 393.

new patrons boosted the film industry. Along with the inflow of migrant workers to the metropolis, South Korea faced a rapid influx of American culture, that is, “core” modernism. Unlike prewar intellectuals who had been educated by the Japanese school system, this “new” generation—called the “4.19 generation”<sup>8</sup>—was eagerly consuming Western, predominantly American, cinema and music. The 4.19 generation had reached approximately 100,000 in number in 1960, and they became the dominant consuming power in postwar South Korean society.<sup>9</sup> Contemporary Western ideas and literature were imported to university campuses, along with the Beatles, Cliff Richard, and Elvis Presley. Hollywood cinema became the norm, and Hollywood’s young rebels James Dean and Marlon Brando and their French counterpart Alain Delon became the icons of the young generation. Radio, television networks, and the motion-picture industry, in tandem with the growing number of college students, all contributed to the spread of popular genre films such as Spaghetti Westerns, martial arts, and espionage.<sup>10</sup>

Third, most South Koreans were fascinated by James Bond’s cosmopolitan lifestyle, adventures, and dangerous missions, which took him to places very few would have been able to visit. To contemporary Korean viewers, Jamaica, Turkey, Italy, Switzerland, the Bahamas, and Yugoslavia were their “imaginary” spaces of desire. In contrast to phantasmagoric images displayed in Western Bond movies, South Korean counterparts could only exhibit the nation’s strategic and ideological allies—Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan. Cold War politics enabled 1960s South Korean cinema to create a new type of detective—a cosmopolitan Korean “Bond”—who could travel beyond the boundaries of the peninsula. The South Korean “Bond” fought for South Korea’s “free Asia” allies. He visited such cities as Hong Kong, Macau, Taipei, and Tokyo, places that most South Korean viewers could not visit. Thus, as they watched “Bond” films, they could take pleasure in witnessing their secret agent triumph against North Korea and Communist China. Indeed, South Korea’s aviation industry seriously lagged behind its Asian competitors. Korean National Airlines (KNA), the nation’s first national flag carrier and only airline company at the time, only operated between Seoul and Hong Kong every Thursday until the early 1960s and

8 This term was created after the April 19 revolution in 1960 when students and laborers united and fought together against Park’s regime. See Eui Hang Shin, “Political Demography of Korea,” 171–204.

9 *Ibid.*, 126.

10 For more about the martial arts film and literature phenomenon in South Korea, see Lee, “Martial Arts Craze,” 173–95.

then gradually extended to Japan and Taiwan by the end of the decade.<sup>11</sup> Visiting foreign countries, even an adjacent country, was reserved only for a few privileged people.

Lastly, as literary scholar Kim Hyön noted in 1969, the psychological need to find diversion from the gloomy political and economic situation at the time, marked by the South Korean military's dispatch to Vietnam and the brutally oppressive public domain, helped promote the espionage craze in the latter half of the 1960s.<sup>12</sup> The nation's involvement with the Vietnam War in 1964 and the massive dispatch of troops in 1966 mobilized the sense of "ongoing war" among civilians in this divided nation-state that ignited the public's interest in international politics and the "holy" war against the communists. The public response was that the Vietnam War was an extension of global communist expansionism, and as such, people believed, it had to be resisted. However, the more serious question was about the nation's security itself. According to Se Jin Kim in his 1970 article, there were three groups of opinions. First, it was argued that the pulling out of 49,000 elite troops would jeopardize the security of the country. Second, the opposition raised the question of the cost of military involvement in terms of both human lives and the budgetary burden. Third, the policy to expand military participation was alleged to be an insidious plot between the government and big business interests.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, in 1966, the Park government needed to persuade both the opposing party and the public of the need for South Korea to participate in the Vietnam War. Indeed, 1966 was the zenith of the espionage craze in the nation's cultural sphere. Accordingly, *SOS Hong Kong* reflects the political and social atmosphere of the time. The film certainly glorifies South Korean troops, the Brave Tiger Division (*Yongho pudae*), and the nation's involvement in the war.

## Coproducing Espionage Films

*SOS Hong Kong* is a film that was coproduced by South Korea (Shin Films) and Hong Kong (Lan Kwang Pictures). Shin Films was the largest motion-picture studio of its time, having produced and released 224 films during its

11 In 1969, the publicly owned monopoly airline Korean National Airline (KNA) was privatized, and Korean Air (KAL), a private company, was formed.

12 Kim Hyön. "Muhyöp sosöl ün wae ilk'inün'ga [Why we read martial arts novels]," 294–303.

13 Se Jin Kim, "South Korea's Involvement," 524–25.

operation between 1952 and 1975.<sup>14</sup> Shin Sang-ok, the de facto owner of the studio, was a director, producer, and studio executive who had been one of the industry's most powerful men during the 1960s. Shin was deeply involved with the militant government's film policies through his wife, Ch'oe Ūn-hŭi, who had a long-term amicable relationship with President Park Chung Hee (1963–1979) and the state's second authority, Kim Chong-p'il. Shin was, for the Park regime, a model entrepreneur. The Park regime supported Shin in establishing a modern and profitable motion-picture business that could export its output to foreign markets. During the 1960s, Shin actively engaged in multiple coproductions with Hong Kong and Taiwan and tried to export Shin Films' output overseas using his formal and informal network with Shaw Brothers of Hong Kong and other small-scale regional productions.<sup>15</sup> Shin had a keen eye for the latest trends. Shin Films imported three espionage films in 1966: the France-Italy coproduction espionage films *Secret Agent Fireball* (1965), *Fantomas Strikes Back* (1965), and *That Man in Istanbul* (1965). With the success of the imported European espionage thrillers, Shin Films decided to produce its own espionage films. This time, it was with Hong Kong's Lan Kwang Pictures.<sup>16</sup>

Hong Kong was indeed the perfect country to co-produce espionage films. Hong Kong film producers and audiences saw *Dr. No* earlier than Koreans did. The craze started in Hong Kong immediately after *Dr. No's* public release on May 9, 1963. In the Cantonese cinema world, a female version of James Bond, the protagonist in the Jane Bond cycle, came into being in the latter half of the 1960s. *Black Rose* (1965) was the initiating force of this cycle, followed by its sequel *Spy with My Face* (1966) and other commercially successful ones, including *The Dark Heroine Muk Lan-fa* (1966) and *The Precious Mirror* (1967). This cycle, predominantly done in Cantonese, was, according to the Hong Kong Film Archive's press releases, "likely the only one in the history of world cinema in which women are the primary dispensers of violence and where the violence is readily embraced by a predominantly female audience."<sup>17</sup> South Korean film director Chŏng Ch'ang-hwa's first Hong Kong film for

14 Cho Chunhyŏng. *Yŏnghwa cheguk Sin P'illŭm* [Shin Films: The Movie Empire], 30.

15 For example, see Ae-Gyung Shim and Brian Yecies, "Asian Interchange," 15–28.

16 Wong Cheuk Hon, president of Lan Kwang Pictures, was one of the most frequently appearing Hong Kong producers in the 1950s and 1960s South Korean cinema. He coproduced, with a number of Korean companies, *Because I Love You* (*Sarang hanŭn kkadak e*, 1958), *Deep in My Heart* (*Choyonghan ibyŏl*, 1967), 509 *Tank Forces* (*Changnyŏl 509 taejŏnch'adae*, 1967), and *SOS Hong Kong*. See Huang Zhuohan, *Dian ying ren sheng: Huang zhuo han hui yi lu* [A Life in Film: Memoirs of Wong Cheuk Hon], 103–105.

17 "Film Archive."

Shaw Brothers, *Temptress of a Thousand Faces* (*Qian mian mo nu*, 1968), can also be included in this cycle. Hong Kong film producers introduced their first big-budget Hong Kong “Bond” films in 1966. Shaw Brothers’ Hong Kong studio director Lo Wei, who later became famous for his work with Bruce Lee, embarked on his first James Bond–inspired espionage thriller, *The Golden Buddha* (*Jin pu sa*, 1966) with Paul Chang Chung and Jeanette Lin Tsui, which was shot entirely in Bangkok.<sup>18</sup> To produce more espionage films, however, Shaw turned its attention to Japan. Inoue Umetsugu, a veteran genre film director, came to Hong Kong in April 1966, and two films were already simultaneously under production. Inoue made *Operation Lipstick* (*Die wang jiao wa*, 1967) as his first Shaw movie.<sup>19</sup> It was a Hong Kong-style espionage film.<sup>20</sup> In November, Nakahira Kō produced another espionage film, *Interpol* (*Te jing 009*, 1967). The trend yielded the first Shaw-Nikkatsu espionage film, *Asiapol Secret Service* (1966), which was produced in two versions: starring Wang Yu for Hong Kong and Hideaki Nitani for Japan, under the direction of Akinori Matsuo.<sup>21</sup>

### Vietnam War, Family Reunion, and the Birth of a (New) Country

*SOS Hong Kong* begins and ends with newsreel footages that display the South Korean navy’s heroic battles in Vietnam. After the combat footage and Park Chung Hee’s speech to the soldiers, our hero—a South Korean special agent named Paek Min (played by Pak No-sik)—arrives at the Korean Intelligence Agency. The chief of the department issues an order: “According to the report of the agent ‘A’ in Hong Kong, two North Korean spies are going to sell information [of our troops] to China. And this information is possibly harmful to us. I hope you leave for Hong Kong at once to see the info.” The film then follows Paek Min’s journey in Hong Kong. *SOS Hong Kong*, helmed by Shin Sang-ok’s right-hand man Ch’oe Kyōng-ok, aimlessly exhibits Hong Kong’s famous Star Ferry, Tsim Sha Tsui’s dark and narrow alleys, and dazzling skyscrapers. Paek indeed possesses all the James Bond-club qualities: he is a somewhat flamboyant, elegantly dressed, womanizing gentleman and a ‘Mr. Know-It-All’ who is equipped with various high-tech gadgets.

18 “Hong Kong’s Bond,” 32–33.

19 “Spycatcher Pei-peï’s Deadly Mission,” 4–5.

20 “Japanese Directs Society Exposé,” 28–31.

21 “*Asiapol*.”



Soon afterward, Paek reaches the Hong Kong-based arms dealer Sha Lao-te through the courtesan Xianglan (played by Helen Li Mei), a queen of Hong Kong's nightclub scene who works for North Korea, and her vast network of social connections. Xianglan falls in love with Paek, her enemy, who in turn is falling for Taiwan's "Double Horse" agent, Maria (played by Ting Ying). Already consumed with jealousy and now perturbed by increasing pressure from her boss (played by Yi Min), Xianglan lures Paek and Maria to the nightclub, where their adversaries lie in wait. But she gets cold feet and puts her life at stake to pull Paek out of danger. Xianglan's boss, secretly in love with her, had proposed that they live together in Pyongyang, North Korea. Now deeply saddened, he asks Xianglan if she knows the consequences of betraying her country. She shouts with confidence, "Of course I know. But I realize it's meaningless to live without freedom!" Xianglan is shot by her boss and eventually dies. After her death, Paek returns to save Maria, and they seize the microfilm from the North Korean villains. Having accomplished his task, Agent Paek returns to South Korea. Interestingly, Paek, once a humorous and womanizing Korean "Bond," suddenly loses all his interest in Maria, who conveniently disappears in the final sequence. Maybe there was no time to develop a romantic relationship. Indeed, the nation was in danger.

Notably, in most South Korean espionage films, South Korean agents are almost always dispatched to Hong Kong. In many cases, as seen in *SOS Hong Kong*, they team up with Taiwanese female agents or Hong Kong counterparts. In other words, Hong Kong was the place where the communist forces of North Korea and China set up their secret units and operated covertly in underground bunkers to dismantle the capitalist societies in South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. For postwar South Koreans, Hong Kong was a place of wealth, fortune, and exotic beauties. Consequently, South Korean audiences saw Hong Kong's highly modernized cityscape and exotic tropical landscape through the coproduced films.<sup>22</sup> Hong Kong film scholar Stephen Teo argues that many of these Asian James Bond films are mostly "cheap and crude imitations of not only the character of James Bond but also the plot structures in the Bond films." These films, Teo continues, reflect the Cold War in Asia and depict "the Cold War confrontation of the free world and communist world in simplistic, Manichean terms portraying 'good' and 'bad' secret agents who are licensed to kill."<sup>23</sup> On the surface, and particularly in the context of Hong Kong cinema, Teo locates an appropriate argument.

22 Kim Soyoung, "Genre as Contact Zone," 97–110.

23 Stephen Teo, "The Liaozhai-Fantastic."

But not all Hong Kong secret agents fight against evil communists. Tan See Kam, aptly calling this Bond-style crime thriller film cycle *bangpian*,<sup>24</sup> argues that Hong Kong espionage films targeted the Chinese diasporic film market, “having a particular appeal for young cosmopolitans in the Chinese diaspora who sought and embraced the fun of ‘trans-ness’ that cosmo-localized pastiche, fluidity and hybridity afforded,”<sup>25</sup> and that they are therefore “apolitical” and “denationalized.”<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, a coproduction partner’s geopolitical considerations also played out to become ideologically neutral. For example, in the espionage film *Asiapol Secret Service*, coproduced by Shaw Brothers in Hong Kong and Nikkatsu in Japan, our hero Yang Mingxuan (played by Jimmy Wang Yu) is a top-secret agent in the Japanese branch of Asiapol (Asia Police Secret Service: APSS). Asiapol is a fictional pan-Asian police organization so secret that its doings are apparently unknown even to the governments and law enforcement of the countries in which they operate. The headquarters of Asiapol is located in Hong Kong. Asiapol has five member countries: Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand. Intriguingly, Asiapol’s geopolitical considerations exclude two United States-influenced developmental states: South Korea and Taiwan. Thus, in this film, Mingxuan does not dismantle the communist activities in Asia. Instead of North Korean and Chinese agents, there is a megalomaniac, George (played by Nikkatsu’s top asset Jo Shishido), who is the leader of a criminal organization, ADU, based in Bangkok. He is planning to smuggle humongous quantities of gold into Japan in order to break down its capitalist economy. However, George is actually driven by personal revenge on Japan, where his mother had been abandoned and died miserably.

South Korean espionage films should be distinguished from Hong Kong’s *bangpian*, which can be characterized by their politically neutral content. South Korean espionage films, regardless of the production’s transnational nature, were aimed exclusively at the local market and addressed local memories of the colonial past and the civil war. The climaxes of these films, in contrast to other global Bond (or Bond-influenced) films, have almost always been dramatic/tear-jerking encounters of “long-lost” families, particularly South Korean agents/fathers/brothers

24 “In Hong Kong, *bangpian* is industrial parlance for contemporary actioners inspired by James Bond movies: *bang* (which sounds like Bond in both Mandarin and Cantonese) signifies both Bond movies and global Bondmania, while *pian* refers literally to films.” Tan, “Shaw Brothers’ *Bangpian*,” 196.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 198.

and North Korean/Korean-Japanese/Korean-Chinese agents/daughters/sisters. For example, in Kim Suyong's *Tokyo Correspondent* (1968), a North Korean secret agent whose mission is to kidnap a South Korean scientist in Tokyo finds out, in the final sequence, that the South Korean scientist is his long-lost father. They were separated during the Korean Civil War. An "evil" leader of the North Korean organization already knew of their relationship. Having converted to the world of liberal democracy (*chayu minjujuŭi*), the North Korean agent turns his gun away from his father and instead shoots the North Korean scoundrels, his former colleagues. Jang Irho's local box-office success *The International Spy* tells a comparable story. A North Korean undercover agent Chebi (played by Yi Tae-yŏp) is South Korea's number one enemy who is based in Hong Kong. Chebi is dispatched to Seoul to carry out a mission to assassinate a leading political figure in South Korea. He is performing this mission in order to meet his missing father. Again, the two were separated during the war. It is revealed that the South Korean politician is indeed Chebi's long-lost father. Chebi turns his gun toward the other spies and shoots them but is killed by the North Korean spies.

*Special Agent X-7*, a coproduction of Asia Pictures (South Korea) and Yuk Lun (Hong Kong), is certainly one of the most well-crafted and representative examples.<sup>27</sup> *Special Agent X-7* was distributed at the Shaw Brothers' theater chains in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore in September 1967. The plot concerns a South Korean "Bond," Myŏng-nyŏl, known as X-7 (played by Namgung Wŏn), whose mission is to retrieve a secret document stolen by a beautiful double agent, Huang Lin (played by Diana Zhang Zhongwen). North Korean spies and a Chinese-Portuguese triad boss, Wang Tai Tu, provide the convoluted intrigue, which involves gun and bullion smuggling. North Korea's primary purpose is to smuggle a significant amount of gold first to Japan and then to South Korea to help North Korean agents conduct covert activities there.

Huang Lin is the hero's sex interest, but X-7 cannot forget his ex-girlfriend Yun-hŭi (played by Kim Hye-jŏng) a *Zaninichi* (Korean in Japan). X-7 first met Yun-hŭi in Tokyo, and they loved each other deeply. They were separated when her father and brother, Chungsŏp (played by Ch'oe Sŏng-ho), an old friend of X-7, decided to leave Japan for North Korea. Her father and brother were indeed active members of Choch'ŏngnyŏn (the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan; Chaeilbon Chosŏnin Ch'ongyŏphaphoe). She

27 It was released on August 26, 1967, under a different title, *International Secret Agent* (國際女間諜). Oddly enough, Shin Sang-ok was credited as the film's director.

wanted to remain in Japan, but her patriarchal father shouted, “You mean you wish to be Japanese forever?” In the end, Myōng-nyōl (X-7) and Yun-hŭi were separated. Many years pass. Yun-hŭi confronts X-7 in Hong Kong, but she has become a North Korean spy. Meanwhile, Lin falls helplessly in love with X-7. Interestingly, she voluntarily reveals her past to X-7, now a father/brother figure whom she trusts the most, in the middle of the film. Lin and her brother had lost their father during the Pacific War, and they were adopted by a Chinese family and then trained as communists. Lin’s brother is severely ill and has been hospitalized in Tokyo. Lin needs money. A shrewd North Korean agent (played by Hō Chang-gang) promises to cover the cost of her brother’s hefty hospital bills. Toward the end of the film, similar to *Tokyo Correspondent*, Wang Tai Tu turns out to be Huang Lin’s long-lost father after she has become his mistress. Wang, to save his daughter, betrays his team and is killed by a brutal North Korean agent. Interestingly, there is a second layer of the “father” story here. At the end of the film, Yun-hŭi realizes that her father is now in Seoul, not in P’yōngyang. X-7 hands her a letter from her father. He explains:

X-7: I know that you’re forced to do the things you’re doing by your brother. If you know what is hypocrisy, then you should know what is truth ... this is your father’s letter.

YUN-HŬI: But isn’t he in North Korea?

X-7: No. He’s now in Seoul.

YUN-HŬI: Seoul? Is that true?

X-7: Eight years ago, your father was deceived by the enemy and went back to North Korea. Later, he found out that it was a trick, and for freedom, he risked his life and ran away back to Seoul. He’s now being protected by our secret services. He’s very well right now.

After Yun-hŭi agrees to go back to South Korea with him, X-7 says, “Welcome to your mother country!” This repetitive theme of family reunions became South Korean espionage films’ structural archetype in the 1960s and 1970s, distinguishing the South Korean espionage cycle from its Western counterparts. But why have Korean “Bond” films been so obsessed with the themes of family reunions, war orphans, and the traumas of the colonial past? Certainly, the South Korean espionage films mobilized Confucian values to enunciate the North Korean communist forces’ vicious state of mind. Indeed, the North Korean organization lets people commit incest among families, plots a father’s murder at the hands of his son, manipulates innocent civilians in the “free” world, and kidnaps South Korean tourists,

as seen in *Tokyo Correspondent*, *The International Spy*, and *Special Agent X-7*. Therefore, North Korean communists—the “evil” forces—should be exterminated. Accordingly, South Korean secret agents are fighting against the communists. In the last scene of *Special Agent X-7*, Yun-hŭi, X-7, and Huang Lin are all at the airport. Huang Lin, wearing an elegant Chinese *cheongsam*, gets on the plane to return to Hong Kong. X-7 and Yun-hŭi, as a couple, are waving. Now, X-7 is dressed in a conservative black suit and a tie, while Yun-hŭi has her long hair back in a braid and is wearing a *hanbok*, as if the future of the country—indeed, the birth of a (united) nation—lies with them.

Likewise, in a final scene of *Golden Operation '70 in Hong Kong* (*Hwanggŭm 70 Hongk'ong chakchŏn*), produced in 1970, South Korean special agent Pak Yŏng-il (played by Sin Sŏng-il) and Korean-American CIA agent Richard Han (played by Ch'oe Mu-ryong) are taking renowned South Korean scientist Dr. Ko to the Kai Tak airport in Hong Kong. These two agents have worked together to break down the North Korean spies' operation to mass produce counterfeit money and rescue Dr. Ko, who is a specialist of printing technology. Han and Pak ask, “Dr. Ko, how long have you been abroad?” “It's been 17 years,” Dr. Ko responds with a feeling of deep regret. He continues, “Seoul may look different, right?” Pak responds proudly, “You will be very surprised. Seoul is now a world city.” Pak then emphasizes, “Now it is time to serve the country!”

## Conclusion

*Golden Operation '70 in Hong Kong* was one of the genre's last entries. Indeed, South Korea's espionage craze lasted only a few years before its quick decline. After its peak in 1966, the espionage craze was precipitously replaced by a new obsession—martial arts cinema (*muhyŏp yŏnghwa*). In 1966, the thirteenth Asian Film Festival was held in Seoul.<sup>28</sup> It was there that Shin Sang-ok, the director of the festival committee, encountered King Hu's hugely successful martial arts film *Come Drink with Me* (*Da zui xia*, 1966) and instantly recognized the film's commercial value. *Come Drink with Me* was officially distributed at the Paramount theater in Seoul in April 1967, under the title of *Pangnang ūi kyŏlt'u* (*Duel of the Drifters*), and instantaneously became the number-one foreign film of the year. A business-savvy film producer, Shin soon imported a series of Shaw Brothers *wuxia* (martial

28 For more about the Asian Film Festival, see Lee (2020).

arts) films. All the *muhyŏp yŏnghwa* (martial arts films) imported by Shin Films performed extremely well in the Korean market. There were virtually no *muhyŏp yŏnghwa* produced in South Korea between 1960 and 1967, but suddenly, nine martial arts films were produced and released in 1968 alone. Astoundingly, eighteen South Korean martial-arts films came out in 1970. In contrast, only two espionage films—*Operation Tokyo Expo '70* (*Expo 70 Tonggyŏng chakchŏn*) and *Golden Operation '70 in Hong Kong*—were released in 1970. Apparently, the espionage craze in South Korea was over. Maybe Korean audiences lost their interest in the espionage genre, as there were too many domestic films that were cheaply produced, heavily edited to meet the distributors' needs, and hastily released.

As the apparent progeny of Cold War politics in the West, espionage films witnessed unprecedented popularity around the globe in the 1960s. With the success of *Dr. No* (1962) and *Goldfinger* (1964)—along with French, Italian, and German copycats—in Asia, film industries in Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea recognized the market potential and embarked on churning out their own James Bond–mimetic espionage films in the late 1960s. Since the regional political sphere has always been multifaceted, however, each country approached genre conventions with their own interpretations. Certainly, South Korean espionage films copied the various devices of their Hollywood counterparts, such as “the oversexed and virtually invincible super (heroic) spy, the egregious use of women as sexual objects, the pervasiveness of Western technology (through gadgetry), and the role of the megalomaniacal and ruthless villain.”<sup>29</sup> At the same time, however, these films also possess a significant amount of local interpretation with local languages (Korean), geopolitical themes (North-South Division), ideology (anticommunism), and social/historical issues (separated families, war orphans, and traumatic memories of the colonial past and the Korean Civil War). In other words, South Korean producers borrowed genre conventions to produce quintessentially local products that could only appeal to local audiences, regardless of how transnational their mode of production was.

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29 Leong Yew, “Traveling Spies,” 290.

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### 13. **Cosmopolitan Kōjedo: *Swing Kids* (2018) and Historical Memories of the Korean War**

*Christina Klein*

#### **Abstract**

Kang Hyeong-cheol's *Swing Kids* (*Sūwingk'ijū*, 2018) is a work of historical memory that emphasizes the Korean War's multinational nature. Set within the Kōjedo POW camp and merging the generic conventions of the musical with those of the Korean War film, it constructs an alternate history in which relations between a group of South Korean, North Korean, Chinese, and American characters play out in unexpected ways via dance. *Swing Kids* imagines liberation from the Cold War division system through the creation of a cosmopolitan community that transcends the boundaries of race, nation, ideology, and culture. It also offers a mythic origin story for K-pop, one of post-war Korea's most successful exports.

**Keywords:** Kang Hyeong-cheol; Korean War; K-pop; POW camp; musical

The climactic scene of Kang Hyeong-cheol's film *Swing Kids* (*Sūwingk'ijū*, 2018) depicts a group of five dancers furiously tap dancing on a stage ablaze with lights while a big band plays a hot version of Louis Prima's "Sing, Sing, Sing." The dancers, unified by their matching costumes and synchronized movements, toss canes in the air vaudeville-style as they dance their hearts out. The year is 1951, the occasion is the Christmas show at the Kōjedo POW camp, and the audience, composed of POWs, American soldiers, and members of the international press corps, goes wild. Sergeant Jackson (Jared Grimes), the lead dancer, had introduced the performance moments before with a short speech:

We're made up of a Chinese prisoner who would've been a brilliant choreographer if it wasn't for the war; a bright, confident, strong-willed young woman who's forced to provide for her family after losing both her parents; a civilian who became a prisoner only because he was wrongfully accused of being a communist; a communist dancer who could've stood

on the stages of Carnegie Hall if it wasn't for political ideology; and a humble black man who has found his only friends in life in these four individuals. Ladies and gentlemen, we are the Swing Kids and the title of this performance is... 'Fuck Ideology.'

Jackson's introduction highlights the diversity of the dance team, which is composed of one Chinese, two South Koreans, a North Korean, and himself, a self-described "humble black man" who has just now "found his only friends in life." "Fuck Ideology," the title that Jackson gives the performance, sums up the film's central theme; it also frames the dance team as a utopian third space between capitalism and communism—a community bound together by friendship and a love of dance rather than by national identity or political ideology.

*Swing Kids*, the highly anticipated fourth film by Kang Hyeong-cheol, director of the blockbusters *Scandal Maker* (*Kwasok Sŭk'aendŭl*, 2008) and *Sunny* (*Ssŏni*, 2011), is a work of historical memory. Like all such works of public remembering, it links the past to the present and invites an interrogation of the nature of the relationship between them. What does it mean to remember the Korean War through the lens of tap dance in 2018?

The South Korean film industry, like other sectors of Korean society, has been deeply engaged in the process of remembering and resignifying the Korean War, and since 1998 it has made over a dozen films set during the conflict.<sup>1</sup> *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (*Welk'ŏm t'u tongmakkol*, 2005) is among the most popular and well-studied of these "division blockbusters."<sup>2</sup> Park Kwang-hyun's film uses a magical realist style to tell a story about a small group of North Korean, South Korean, and American soldiers who converge on an isolated village whose inhabitants are miraculously unaware of the war. Over time, their mutual hostility fades and the village becomes a utopian community from which the war has seemingly been banished. Kristen Sun has explored how the film offers an alternate history of the war that bypasses the Cold War division system, which since 1945 has maintained the rupture of the singular Korean nation into two hostile states. *Welcome to Dongmakgol* "reimagine[s] a world beyond division" by constructing "affective spaces of imagined community between North Koreans and South Koreans": as the soldiers laugh, sleep, eat, and even defecate together, they

1 Youngmin Choe, "Postmemory DMZ in South Korean Cinema, 1999-2003," *Journal of Korean Studies* 18.2 (Fall 2013): 318.

2 Hyangjin Lee, "The 'Division Blockbuster' in South Korea." In *Divided Lenses*, eds., Michael Berry and Chiho Sawada (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016).

develop profound bonds of friendship. The film culminates in a scene of “affective intensity”—a mix of ecstasy and despair—as the soldiers, now fighting side by side in a “North-South Joint Force,” defend the village from UN attack. The film offers a “utopian fantasy” of peninsular reunification, one that echoes South Korean president Kim Daejung’s Sunshine Policy of rapprochement with the North.<sup>3</sup>

*Welcome to Dongmakgol* is an ethno-nationalist work of historical memory. It depicts the soldiers’ and villagers’ shared Korean-ness as the ground on which reunification can be achieved. It recasts the United States as Korea’s enemy and depicts the American soldier as a foreign body that must be expelled in order to restore the “prelapsarian” community of ethnic Koreans.<sup>4</sup> The film thus offers a vision of cultural purity, uncontaminated by foreign influence, as the means through which division can magically be healed.

*Swing Kids*, released 13 years after *Dongmakgol*, is set within the volatile Kŏjedo POW camp. It follows the efforts of Sergeant Jackson, an African American Broadway dancer who has been tasked by the camp’s commanding officer, General Roberts (Ross Kettle), with putting together a POW dance group. Roberts envisions the performance at the Christmas show as a publicity stunt that will put communist submission on display and offset Chinese propaganda that has painted the camp as a hotbed of US military abuse: “Communist POWs dancing the dance of the free world. Makes one hell of a punchline, eh?” The film charts the progress of the dance group from its inception through to its demise, against a backstory of communist and anti-communist POWs waging an internal war against each other. *Swing Kids* was inspired by the theatrical musical *Ro Ki-su* (2015), which Kang saw while mulling the question of why Korea was still suffering the consequences of the Korean War when the more powerful nations involved in it were not. Despite the film’s strong script, appealing cast, and high production values, *Swing Kids* performed poorly at the box office, due, perhaps, to the jarring juxtapositions of music, dance, and violence. Unlike *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, it has failed to attract significant attention from scholars.

*Swing Kids* overlaps with and diverges from *Welcome to Dongmakgol* in illuminating ways. It shares with that film a quasi-magical realist style, which it, too, uses to imagine an alternate history of the Korean War. And

3 Kristen Sun, “Breaking the Dam to Reunify our Country,” *International Journal of Korean History* 20.2 (August 2015): 95, 89, 111.

4 Tony Rayns, “Welcome to Dongmakgol,” [review] *Sight and Sound*, London 17.3, (March 2007): 76.

like the earlier film, it also reimagines a world beyond division by staging moments of affective intensity among enemy soldiers who come together in an isolated community. Yet the cultural work performed by these two pieces of historical memory-making is profoundly different. Rather than focusing on the intra-Korean conflict, *Swing Kids* highlights the war's multinational dimension. It explores the war as an event that brings together people from four countries and shows what might have happened if enemies and allies had come together around a shared creative endeavor. *Swing Kids* offers a specifically cosmopolitan alternate history of the war, in which the experience of cross-cultural contact plays out in unexpected ways.

*Swing Kids* enacts this principle of cosmopolitan creativity within itself as it combines the conventions of the Korean War film with those of the American musical, a genre that has only a limited presence in Korea (another reason, perhaps, for its lukewarm reception). As a work of historical memory, *Swing Kids* uses the musical to imagine liberation from the strangling constraints of the Cold War division system via the creation of a community that dissolves the boundaries of nation, ideology, culture, and race. Koreans can best escape the unending Korean War, the film suggests, not through the restoration of some ethno-national purity but through engagement with non-Korean people and culture. In doing so, *Swing Kids* offers a mythic origin story for K-pop by tracing its roots to the intimate bonds forged within the enclosures of the POW camp. If *Welcome to Dongmakgol* is a Sunshine Policy film, *Swing Kid* is a historical memory for today's *hallyu* era, when the ability to indigenize and re-export foreign culture serves as an essential component of South Korea's global soft power.

### Genre and the Creation of a Cosmopolitan Community

*Swing Kids*' generic hybridity allowed Kang to combine the tragedies of war with the joyfulness of the musical, a tonal complexity that he was eager to realize. While *Swing Kids* lacks the combat scenes common to many Korean War films, it does exhibit a fidelity to the historical record that is one of the genre's signal conventions. The film is set almost entirely within the Kōjedo POW camp. Located on a small island southwest of Busan, the historical camp was built in January 1951 to house the large number of prisoners captured in the wake of the Inch'ŏn landing. The prisoners, who numbered 170,000 by 1952, were an ideologically and nationally diverse population. They included regular soldiers from the North Korean People's Army and Chinese People's Volunteer Army (PVA), anti-communist Chinese soldiers in the PVA

who had fought on the Nationalist side in the recently concluded Chinese civil war, and South Korean soldiers and civilians who had been impressed by the communists during their southward sweep following the war's outbreak. These Cold War divisions were built into the camp's physical structure. In adherence to the recently drafted Geneva Conventions, which required prisoners to be housed in their military units, and seeking to limit eruptions of violence between antagonistic populations, the United Nations Command housed the POWs in about three dozen separate barbed-wire compounds (all of which were overcrowded as much as five times beyond their intended capacity) according to their national and ideological affiliations.

Director Kang drew heavily on visual and written records to reconstruct the camp. Echoing a series of photographs taken by Swiss photojournalist Werner Bischof, the film includes such historically accurate details as wooden guard towers, a reproduction of the Statue of Liberty, and a performance by masked dancers in an open recreation space. The film incorporates archival film to introduce the social and political dynamics that roiled the camp. The film opens with actual newsreel footage that delivers historically accurate exposition: violence has erupted between pro- and anti-communist POWs over the American policy of voluntary repatriation, and while restoring order, American guards killed a number of POWs, which has led to world-wide condemnation. The film presents the communist North Korean compounds as self-governing and outside the control of the American guards, as they were in fact. It includes scenes of violent bloodshed between ideologically opposed compounds, echoing those that erupted regularly in the historical camp, where prisoners had access to a range of hand-made weapons including knives, guns, and Molotov cocktails—all of which appear in the film.

The character of Jackson, in turn, gestures towards the twinned history of the US civil rights movement and the Hollywood Korean War film. Korea saw the first deployment of a racially integrated US Army, a development that is highlighted in one of the most famous Korean War films, Sam Fuller's *Steel Helmet* (1951), which also features a major black character and foregrounds the issue of racism.

Although Kang did not envision *Swing Kids* as a traditional musical, given the absence of characters spontaneously breaking out into song, the film follows the conventions of the backstage musical, a subgenre that narrates the progress of a group of performers as they prepare to put on a show. Classics include Busby Berkeley's *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* (1933) and *Gold Digger* series (1933, 1935, 1937); *A Star is Born* (2018) is a more recent entry. *Swing Kids'* plot follows this subgenre's basic skeleton: after Jackson receives his

orders from General Roberts, he hosts auditions and creates a team of five dancers; the team practices; conflicts arise and are resolved; and in the end the dancers put on a spectacular performance. The film interweaves about a dozen dance numbers into this story, most of which are narratively motivated as auditions, lessons, practices, and performances. Like the camp itself, the Swing Kids dance group is also rooted in the historical record: Korean singers, dancers, and other entertainers regularly performed on US military bases to entertain the troops. In these “8<sup>th</sup> Army Shows,” as they were locally known, Korean performers emulated a wide variety of American musical and performance styles including country, rock, and R&B. These shows served as talent incubators and laid the foundation for South Korea’s pop music of the 1960s and beyond.

The dance group that Jackson assembles is a cosmopolitan community that challenges the division system that is embedded in the camp’s physical structure and within the psychology of its inhabitants. It is a politically, nationally, racially, and sexually heterogeneous group. It includes, in addition to Jackson, a South Korean civilian man with a background in traditional dance, Kang Pyŏngsam (Oh Jung-se); a multilingual South Korean civilian woman, Yang P’anrae (Park Hye-soo), who in the first number belts out a fine rendition of Eileen Barton’s “If I Knew You Were Coming’ I’d’ve Baked a Cake”; a Chinese soldier with heart troubles, Xiao Fang (Kim Min-ho), who holds iconoclastic ideas about choreography; and Ro Gisu (Do Kyung-soo), a handsome young man and ideologically loyal member of the North Korean national dance company. The team thus includes dancers affiliated with each of the war’s major combatants, which allowed director Kang to dramatize what he called the “melting pot” situation inside the historical camp.<sup>5</sup>

The dance team constitutes the heart of the film’s alternate history—what might have happened at Kōjedo but didn’t. The film offers the fantasy that the convergence of so many different nationalities, races, and ideologies within the camp might have led not to violence but to art. The dancers, fueled by a passion inexplicable even to themselves, create a beauty- and pleasure-centered community that exists nowhere else in the camp. Its utopian nature is indicated by the space in which they practice: “Freedom Hall,” a colorful blue and orange building and the only place amidst the grim barbed-wire enclosures where such a diverse group can gather. The film emphasizes the thrill of their cosmopolitan bonding via bits of magical-realism, as when

5 Pyŏn Chinhŭi, ‘Sūwingk’ijū kanghyŏngch’ŏl kamdogi saranghan paeu, togyŏngsu put’ŏ igyusŏng kkaji,” *Zenith News*, December 6, 2018, <http://www.zenithnews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=122406>. Accessed August 15, 2023.

the dancers find themselves able to understand each other's speech despite their language differences: "It's strange," Gisu asks himself perplexedly after his first rehearsal with Jackson, "Why can I understand this black man?"

The dancers' growing openness to each other stands in stark contrast to the hostility to difference that suffuses the camp and undergirds the frequent eruptions of violence. Ideologically motivated hostility is pervasive. Jamie (A.J. Simmons), a white American guard, calls Gisu a "commie boy" before trying to break his legs, and a gang of South Korean prostitutes hurl the same epithet at one of their own, prompting a group of villagers to stone her. The film presents the North Korean POWs as even more ideologically vicious: acting under orders from Pyongyang, they poison scores of South Korean POWs, slit the throats of American guards, and provoke a frenzy of violence that sets the camp aflame. They are also hostile to cultural difference. When a new political operative arrives, he stokes the prisoners' revolutionary fervor with exhortations to expunge any trace of American culture: "If Yankee ideas get into your head, cut off your head!" *Swing Kids* likewise highlights the racism of white Americans. Jackson is called a "nigger" multiple times by his fellow Americans, and one of the film's last lines of dialogue is General Roberts' order to "Kill all them fucking yellow gooks." Like the North Koreans who can't tolerate any traces of "Yankee" ideas, the Americans can barely tolerate the presence of non-whites. Both sides are committed to ideals of purity.

## Musical Numbers

*Swing Kids*, like any musical, includes quite a few "numbers": distinct, self-contained episodes that use music and dance as the primary modes of expression. While they are largely integrated into the narrative and work to advance the story, develop characters, and express themes, they also exist at one remove from the narrative's harsh realism: they create an "ideal" that illuminates what is lacking in ordinary life. According to Rick Altman, musical numbers create a "space which is marked off, separated from the normal world, and reserved for an idealized, artistic presentation." Within them, "the characters break out of the normal world into a realm of performance and art, a world where stylization and rhythm provide a sense of community and beauty absent from the real world."<sup>6</sup> In the marked-off space of the dance numbers, the laws of physics and the Cold War can be

6 Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 61.



miraculously—albeit temporarily—suspended. Characters dance to music only they can hear; time expands and contracts; and aggressive gestures morph into dance movements and then back again. Most importantly, the dance numbers serve as privileged spaces of affective intensity and emotional intimacy that offset the brutality of the camp. Within the numbers, things can happen that are impossible outside of them. As a result, *Swing Kids*, unlike most Korean War films, is saturated with an intensely joyous feel. Dance allows for the externalization of that which is inside—the feelings, dreams, and aspirations that cannot be spoken of outside of Freedom Hall. The numbers show how the Cold War division system, with its rigid insistence on separation and difference, might be transcended.

Stylized bodily movements enable enhanced communication between communists and anti-communists, which brings the cosmopolitan community into being and infuses it with emotional warmth. This can be seen in a simple, dialogue-less number that begins with the Chinese Xiao Fang and the South Korean Kang Pyŏngsam together in the same space but separated by barbed-wire fencing. Altman's "ideal" emerges as these two POWs, who lack a common language, use their bodies to speak with each other. (Subtitles translate their movements into words.) Kang wiggles his shoulders to ask about Xiao Fang's health; Xiao Fang wiggles his own shoulders with his arms upraised to say he is fine. He then performs some tap steps to ask after Jackson, who has been put in the stockade; Kang mimes walking slowly to indicate that he won't be out for a while. Their "conversation" flows seamlessly—and comically—for several minutes. Dance serves here as a means to communicate across physical, ideological, and linguistic barriers. Their improvised modern dance creates a "realm of performance and art" that allows the dancers to express their affection for each other and for Jackson—a feeling that is otherwise inarticulable in the camp. The number offers a utopian glimpse of how the multinational encounters of the Korean War might have played out differently, generating new forms of creative expression rather than violence.

In another number, dance enables a temporary escape from the constraints of ideology. This one begins in the village outside the camp, as Jackson and P'anrae talk about an outbreak of violence instigated by the North Koreans. As they ponder whether Gisu is participating in it, the scene cuts to a shot of him standing alone in Freedom Hall holding a bloody knife, suggesting that his political obligations are pushing him towards actions he doesn't want to commit. "Communism, capitalism," says P'anrae bitterly. "If nobody knew what they were, no one would kill or be killed." She spits out a pithy phrase—"Fucking ideology"—which Jackson repeats with

admiration. The transition from narrative to number—and from ideology to “ideal”—begins when P’anrae holds up the tap shoes that Jackson has given her: these are “magic shoes,” she says, that can make “war, food, miserable things ... just disappear.” As she begins to dance, David Bowie’s “Modern Love,” an upbeat pop song released in 1983, erupts on the soundtrack, an anachronism that helps the dancers take flight out of the camp’s mundane cruelties. A split duet, the number cross-cuts between P’anrae tap-dancing with abandon in the village’s dirt streets and Gisu, also wearing tap shoes from Jackson, dancing with equal abandon in Freedom Hall. Using parallel movements, they each crash through the barriers that constrain them: P’anrae bursts through a crowd of anti-communist protesters shouting “Annihilate the commies!” as Gisu kicks through the doors of Freedom Hall and a series of chained gates. Both dancers tap ecstatically on makeshift stages, run with their arms upraised, leap in the air, and splash through puddles, with each shot conveying a sense of unrestrained joy. For both dancers, the tap shoes function as talismans that enable them to express bodily what they can’t say in words: an intense desire for liberation from the “fucking ideologies” that constrain their lives. The number is a joyful celebration of individual freedom, one that is enabled by American tap shoes and British pop music. In contrast to *Welcome to Dongmakgol*’s vision of ethnocultural purity, this number depicts Western music and dance as instruments that allow for the authentic expression of a desire shared by a North and South Korean alike.

The number ends abruptly mid-song, however, and the joyful tone evaporates. Gisu stands motionless inside a closed-up Freedom Hall and P’anrae sprawls gracelessly in the dirt road: they haven’t escaped at all. The number ends on a pessimistic note that foreshadows the film’s tragic ending, as Gisu puts his tap shoes down and walks away from them. The magic of the shoes and the space of the musical number allows the dancers to express their desire for liberation but not actually achieve it.

For all the film’s explicit disavowal of ideologies, however, one could argue that the cosmopolitan community that comes to life in the dance numbers is largely organized according to the liberal values that the US promoted during and after the Korean War. The commitment to individual freedom, the belief in art as a cultural space outside of ideology, the promotion of creative expression as a form of democratic freedom—all of these ideals figured prominently in the cultural Cold War that the US waged in Korea and across Asia through agencies such as the United States Information Agency (USIA) and the Asia Foundation. And yet ... the form of dance that the film uses to animate these ideals complicates that reading.

## Cosmopolitan Couple Formation

Tap dance is a uniquely American cultural form; it is not, however, American in any simple way. Tap dance developed out of the convergence of West African and Irish dance traditions, beginning in the Caribbean in the 1600s and continuing in the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to Constance Hill, it is a product of a “three-hundred-year musical and social exchange” between black and white people brought together by colonialism, slavery, indentured servitude, and migration.<sup>7</sup> By the 1930s, tap had become an established feature of Hollywood musicals, where it was made famous by black dancers like Bill “Bojangles” Robinson and white dancers like Fred Astaire. After a mid-century lull, tap was revitalized in the late twentieth century by Savion Glover and has since been largely identified as a black cultural form. *Swing Kids* recognizes tap as an African American style of dance by making Jackson its sole purveyor, while also foregrounding its transmission across racial lines to Gisu.

Although the backstage musical subgenre emphasizes the formation of the performance group, it also orchestrates the formation of a couple. Rick Altman characterizes the Hollywood musical as having a “dual-focus” narrative structure that brings together two characters who represent different qualities. Typically, the couple is a heterosexual romantic one, but not always. *Swing Kids* places Gisu, the most skilled dancer and emotionally complex character, at the center of this process of couple formation. While the film hints at a romantic partnership with P’anrae, it gradually becomes clear that Jackson and Gisu constitute the film’s central couple. While there is no overt suggestion of sexual desire, they develop a level of emotional intimacy beyond what the other characters share.<sup>8</sup>

*Swing Kids* introduces Jackson and Gisu as potential partners through a pair of scenes in which they watch each other dance for the first time. Jackson is introduced first. Gisu has snuck into a storeroom and, surrounded by American foodstuffs like Coca-Cola and Spam, has begun drinking Budweiser beer. Peering through a crack in a door that leads into Freedom Hall, he sees Jackson tap dancing. The scene cuts back and forth between close-ups of Jackson’s feet and tracking shots moving ever closer to Gisu’s single eye, the accelerating pace mimicking the rhythm of Jackson’s tapping and suggesting Gisu’s intensifying

7 Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2.

8 On the role of intimacy in representations of the Korean War, see Daniel Y. Kim, *The Intimacies of Conflict* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

fascination. Jackson is associated here with novelty (of this new dance form) and abundance (of American foodstuffs). Gisu's introduction follows soon after when he crashes drunkenly into a dance party and performs a Russian kalinka folk dance, which associates him with the communist bloc. Now the gaze is reversed, as Jackson looks admiringly at Gisu squatting and kicking his legs out at an impossibly fast speed (another magical realist moment). Taken together, the two scenes establish that Jackson and Gisu are well-matched in terms of skill, are attracted to each other, and are associated with the ideological polarities of communism and capitalism. The foregrounding of each man's voyeuristic gaze at the other electrifies the scenes with a hint of erotic charge.

Their relationship launches when they begin to dance together. Despite his immediate attraction to tap, Gisu resists being drawn into the dance troupe: as a loyal North Korean he must avoid contamination by "Yankee" culture. During his first lesson, he initially refuses Jackson's instruction, performing some "communist" footwork instead, but as the lesson progresses, he allows himself to emulate Jackson's movements. As he does, their identities transform from soldiers in hostile armies to teacher and student. Their relationship deepens during an idyllic quasi-number set on a bluff overlooking the camp. As they relax in a pair of chairs under a bright blue sky, they reveal their private feelings and allow themselves to envision a future beyond the war. They speak different languages, yet seem to understand each other perfectly. "Tap dance is driving me crazy," admits Gisu as his face opens up into a rare, dreamy smile. "The sound of it makes my heart race. I know I shouldn't, but it even makes me want to go to America someday. Then I will have the chance to tap dance with other Yankees like you. Just the thought of it gives me chills." This is a big admission and marks the moment when Gisu's love of tap overwhelms his loyalty to North Korea's anti-American ideology. Jackson responds by giving him a photograph of the interior of a concert hall, seen from the stage. "Carnegie Hall," Jackson explains. "We'll all be up on that stage. That means you, too, kid. The grand stage of Carnegie Hall. Just picture it. A stage ten times as big as the one that we have here. With a big band of close to one hundred down in the pit. Thousands of seats, packed full of people just waiting to see us dance. Can you hear it? Thousands spring to their feet in a standing ovation!" Jackson starts to dance, as if living out this fantasy, and when he gets too close to the edge of the bluff, Gisu pulls him back to safety—an expression of care he hasn't previously allowed himself. The scene cuts to a long shot as they dance together, laughing and acting out a shared fantasy of being together in a peaceful postwar future. It is an intimate moment of connection as they step out of their roles as teacher and student and into new roles as friends and peers.

They achieve a deeper level of intimacy near the end of the film, in the moments before the Christmas show performance, when they share a wordless encounter backstage. Gisu is standing alone, anxiously contemplating the hidden gun that he, having been blackmailed by the North Korean leadership, is supposed to use at the end of the show to shoot General Roberts. Jackson approaches and, noticing Gisu's nervously twitching arm, takes Gisu's hand in his own and holds it for a long moment. They gaze at each other, their faces uncharacteristically open and emotionally vulnerable. It is a moment of intimate connection but also shared sadness, as each one knows that this will be their last dance together: Jackson knows the group will be disbanded after this one performance, and Gisu knows he is about to sacrifice his life for the sake of an ideology he has come to doubt. Their relationship deepens still further after the group's big dance number, when Gisu steps onstage for an unplanned solo. Knowing it will be the last time he will ever dance, he gives a fabulous tap performance, demonstrating his mastery of this "Yankee" dance and signaling a small act of resistance to the North Korean leadership in the audience. The audience remains silent and unmoved, but as Gisu begins tapping in a circle, the interior of Freedom Hall fades away and is replaced by the interior of Carnegie Hall, filled with the lights and cheering audience that Jackson had described to him on the bluff. Gisu's dancing brings Carnegie Hall into existence—and Jackson, in yet another magical realist moment, sees it, too. Another exchange of intimate gazes follows. Gisu looks at Jackson as if to say, "See what I have created," and Jackson looks back at him with awe for bringing their shared fantasy to life. It is a quintessential musical number, when the harshness of reality falls away and, in its place, arises a vision of what is most fervently desired by two people who share an intense and exclusive emotional bond.

This vision of Carnegie Hall fades, however, and the camp's dark reality returns. Gisu runs off stage to get the gun, only to be stopped by his brother, who takes the gun and begins shooting. A spasm of violence erupts in which the brother is killed, and in the lull that follows General Roberts looks towards the dancers and issues an order rooted in American racial ideology and its hatred of difference: "Kill all them fucking yellow gooks." As a group of MPs approach the stage, Jackson tries to protect Gisu by standing in front of him and shouting "He's with me!" asserting the primacy of their cosmopolitan partnership over the general's race-based notion of Americanness. The MPs turn their guns on Xiao Fang, P'anrae, and Kang, shooting them down as they embrace each other for protection. Gisu kneels over the dead bodies, distraught and pleading for them to get up, and as Jackson calls his name, an MP shoots Gisu. The

scene ends with paired close-ups of Jackson and Gisu, identically dressed and in the same kneeling position, as they gaze at each other in horror and despair, until Gisu's face collapses into crying. And with that the cosmopolitan community, and the alternate history of the Korean War that it represented, is destroyed.

The slaughter of the Swing Kids is similar to the ending of *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, in which American bombers annihilate the joint North-South Security Force at the very moment when the soldiers' feelings for and commitment to each other are most intense. For all their utopian sentiment and magical realist style, both films in the end acknowledge the persistence of the Cold War division system and the seeming impossibility of overcoming it. But where *Dongmakgol* blamed the US exclusively for the destruction of its unified ethno-national community, *Swing Kids* blames both the North Koreans' ideological fervor and the Americans' racism for the slaughter of its cosmopolitan community.

## Origins of K-Pop

The film does not end on this scene of murder, however. Instead, the final scene takes place in 2018 and depicts the return of a now-elderly Jackson to the Historic Park of Kŏje POW Camp—South Korea's official historical memory site of the camp. While Jackson walks through the visitor center, the South Korean tour guide narrates the night of the dance performance as a terrorist attack on the camp commander. Jackson turns away from this version of historical memory, which reaffirms the division system by recasting the cosmopolitan community as agents of partisan violence, and walks into the still-standing Freedom Hall. As he touches the stage, he hears an amused voice call out "Hey, Jackson!", and as he turns around the young Gisu rises up into the frame. A reverse shot reveals the young Jackson and the scene becomes a flashback in which he re-lives his experience of dancing alone with Gisu during one of their lessons.

This last musical number is a challenge dance, a key component of the tap repertoire that embodies the dynamics of exchange. Jackson and Gisu initially dance solo, facing off against each other from opposite sides of the frame, each one showing off his moves and challenging the other to best them. As the scene progresses, their rivalry turns into an embodied conversation, as they dance their different moves together. By the end of the number, as the camera circles fluidly around them, they are dancing in unison, their bodies perfectly synchronized as they tap their feet and clap

their hands, creating music and dance simultaneously. They smile at each other in paired close-ups as they delight in the complex beauty of what they are making together. As their rapid-fire tapping builds to a crescendo, the camera pulls back to a long shot and they raise their arms and leap into the air, expressing a shared feeling of aesthetic and embodied ecstasy. An abrupt cut to the title credit brings the film to an end.

This number stands as the film's most complete expression of Jackson and Gisu's couple-ness. It is the only scene that depicts them dancing together at their best: they are not student and teacher, friends goofing around, or members of a larger team. Here they are a perfectly matched pair, an African American and a North Korean sharing an experience of unalloyed creative joyfulness. The form of the dance expresses the film's utopian, alternate history of what might have happened in the Kōjedo camp: a confrontational situation that turns into a harmonious encounter, out of which something new is created.

What exactly is that new thing? The film's casting can help answer that question: Do Kyung-soo, the actor who plays Gisu, is better known as D.O., who is a member of EXO, one of the biggest K-pop idol groups. EXO exemplifies the cosmopolitan capitalist dimension of K-pop, which seeks to move profitably beyond the historical animosities of the Cold War. SM Entertainment created EXO as a multinational group with South Korean and Chinese members, and debuted them in 2012 as a single band composed of two sub-groups, each of which targeted a different national market. EXO-K sang in Korean and toured capitalist South Korea, while EXO-M sang in Mandarin and toured communist China. They have targeted the Japanese market as well, with Japanese-language recordings and performances, and nurtured a global fanbase by touring across Southeast Asia and North America. Beyond their profit-seeking ambitions, EXO, like other K-pop groups, are an outgrowth of the South Korean government's efforts to export their cultural products globally as a form of soft power in the service of its sub-imperial ambitions.<sup>9</sup> One country that has not welcomed K-pop cosmopolitanism is North Korea, whose leadership has attacked it as a form of cultural pollution. Kim Jong-un, recognizing the soft-power dimension of K-pop and fearful of losing ideological control over a younger generation enamored of foreign culture, has condemned K-pop as a "vicious cancer" that could cause the communist state to "crumble."<sup>10</sup>

9 Jin-kyung Lee, "Visualizing and Invisibilizing the Subempire," *Journal of Korean Studies* 23.1 (2018): 95–109.

10 Choe Sang-Hun, "Kim Jong-un Calls K-Pop a 'Vicious Cancer' in the New Culture War," *The New York Times*, June 10, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/11/world/asia/kim-jong-un-k-pop.html>. Accessed July 15, 2021.

EXO's cosmopolitanism extends into the culturally hybrid style of its music and dance, which, like that of other K-pop performers, draws heavily on black American culture. K-pop's creators have acknowledged these borrowings: Lee Soo-man, founder of SM Entertainment, EXO's agency, has admitted that "we made K-pop based on black music."<sup>11</sup> While some fans and scholars have characterized this relationship as a respectful and respectable "citational practice," others have charged K-pop stars with cultural appropriation and outright racism.<sup>12</sup> K-pop's relationship with black American culture is fraught.

*Swing Kids*, by narrating the Korean War through the framework of tap dance, crafts an alternate history of K-pop's relationship to black American culture. The film traces K-pop's origins back to the institutional practices of the US military and the 8<sup>th</sup> Army Shows it created during and after the Korean War, and to a process of teaching and learning within a multiracial, multinational community. The coupling of Gisu and Jackson can be seen as an allegory of the origins of K-pop, by showing how tap dance, as a metonym for black music and dance more generally, became Korean. In this telling, Koreans didn't steal black culture—it was gifted to them by a black American soldier. K-pop, refigured as a symbolic heir to tap, can now be seen as a product of the cosmopolitan emotional intimacy that the Korean War fostered.

With its final flashback dance number, *Swing Kids* rejects the official historical memory of the Kŏjedo camp and substitutes in its place a cosmopolitan K-pop genealogical narrative. Kŏjedo, and by extension the Korean War, is re-signified as a site where Koreans encountered and embraced black culture. The film reimagines the Korean War not as an unnatural severing of a unified nation but as an incubator of South Korea's cultural power. This reading softens the film's tragic ending. The cosmopolitanism cut short by the murder of the Swing Kids has been achieved today by K-pop bands like EXO, which embody South Korea's new role as a global cultural powerhouse that indigenizes foreign culture and re-exports it across the world. While Gisu couldn't tour America and perform before thousands of cheering admirers, D.O. certainly did.

11 Quoted in Crystal S. Anderson, *Soul in Seoul* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2020), 26.

12 Anderson, *Soul in Seoul*, xi. Elizabeth de Luna, "They Use Our Culture," *The Guardian*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/jul/20/k-pop-black-fans-creatives-industry-accountable-race>. Accessed July 15, 2021.



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# 14. Spectacle of Violence and the *Beiqing* Masculine: Post-War Structure of Feeling in Taiwan Pulp

*Ting-Wu Cho*

## Abstract

Taiwan Pulp, also known as the Taiwan “Social Realist film,” is a group of crime-related exploitation films produced from the late 1970s to mid-1980s in Taiwan that capitalizes on the growing consumerism, the global exploitation film mania, and social unrest that arose towards the end of the country’s martial law period. This article examines *The First Error Step, aka Never Too Late to Repent*, which detonated the Taiwan Pulp frenzy, and how it cinematized the multi-layered power relations in Cold War Taiwan—the legacy of Japanese colonial rule, the KMT’s authoritarian regime, and the nativist history of Taiwan’s islanders—by reinventing a place-based masculinity rooted in the pathos of sadness (*beiqing*) adopted from the *taiyupian* tradition.

**Keywords:** Taiwan cinema, film genre, exploitation film, postcolonialism, masculinity

Towards the end of the Cold War, the normalization of relations between the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) gradually shifted the geopolitical environment in the Asia-Pacific. Under pressure, the Kuomintang (KMT) government in Taiwan sought legitimization through both political and economic liberalization. Furthermore, a combination of the KMT government’s urgent need to promote its nationalist ideology and the Taiwan film industry’s desire to produce more sensational content led to a period of negotiation between filmmakers and the state. In March 1979, at a time when there was still

strict film censorship in martial law Taiwan, a crime film based on the real story of an ex-convict, *The First Error Step, aka Never Too Late to Repent* (*cuowu de diyi bu*, 1979), received permission from the Movie Inspection Bureau for its release in movie theaters, which kick-started the infamous Taiwan Pulp or Social Realist Films (*shehui xieshi pian*) as a commercial label in Taiwan. In most of the literature on Taiwan's film history, the commercial success of *The First Error Step* is the culprit of countless low-quality mock-ups cashing in on an untapped terrain in Taiwan cinema.<sup>1</sup>

In reality, Taiwan Pulp was a period of exploitation filmmaking composed of a mongrel of several interchangeable genres and sub-genres. For example, *On the Society File of Shanghai* (*Shanghai shehui dangan*, 1981) was an anti-communist film adapted from the Chinese "Scar literature" denouncing the brutality of the Cultural Revolution. It became notorious for its female-exploitation scenes, leading to a local variation of the Western rape-revenge film, called the "woman's revenge film." Another popular Taiwan Pulp sub-genre was the gambling film. Following the success of the Shaw Brothers' gambling movies, private film companies in Taiwan invited Cheng Kang, the director of Shaw Brothers' *King Gambler* (*Duwang da pianju*, 1976), to make gambling films in Taiwan. In 1981, some of the top-grossing films in Taiwan were local gambling films such as *The King of Gambler* (*Duwang dou qianwan*, 1981) and *The Great Cheat* (*Wang pai da laoqian*, 1981).<sup>2</sup> Besides the woman's revenge film and the gambling film, there was also a strain of male-dominant crime films that depict criminal activities and gangster violence such as *The First Error Step*, *Shooting in the Morning* (*Lingchen liu dian de qiang sheng*, 1979) and *Handsome Vagabond* (*Piaopie qitaolang*, 1983). Heavily influenced by the popular martial arts films and kung fu films, these local gangster films transported the clash of flesh and blood from a fantasy world to the modern street corners and prison cells. Yet instead of flourishing as an international commercial genre, they grew more localized by reinvoking "sadness" (*beiqing*), a dominant pathos that runs through Taiwan's colonial history and cultural traditions.<sup>3</sup> It is also a sentiment commonly solicited in Taiwanese nativist literature, Taiyu ballads, and, more importantly,

1 Fei-I Lu, *Taiwan dianying: zhengzhi, jingji, meixue, 1949–1994* [Taiwanese Cinema: Politics, Economics and Aesthetics (1949–1994)] (Taipei: Yuan Liou Publishing, 1998), 230–31.

2 See Suling Tsao, "Duwang dou qianwan vs. Quanyang dou qian ba [The King of Gambler vs. Challenge of the Gamesters], Bici buyao xianmu [Don't Envy Each Other]" (blog), July 15, 2022, [http://suling213.blogspot.com/2013/03/vs\\_12.html](http://suling213.blogspot.com/2013/03/vs_12.html).

3 Zhang, "Articulating Sadness, Gendering Space," 2–5.

a film industry based on a fallen dialect—Taiwanese-language film (*taiyupian*).<sup>4</sup>

Yingjin Zhang considers *beiqing* in *taiyupian* as a structure of feeling, a narrative strategy, and a geopolitical vision arising from Taiwan's modernization process, migration and colonial history, and post-war conditions.<sup>5</sup> Drawing inspiration from Taiwanese opera (*gezaxi* or *koa-a-hi*) and *Taiyu* ballads, which are in turn highly influenced by Japanese traditional ballads (*enka*), the pathos of *beiqing* is also a political consequence of Taiwan's colonial history and the KMT government's military oppression and strict cultural policy.<sup>6</sup> All of these characteristics can be found in Taiwan Pulp films.

This chapter focuses on *The First Error Step*, the film that initiated the Taiwan Pulp frenzy, and examines how it translates the local cultural pathos into unprecedented violent masculinity as a post-war structure of feeling under the distinctive circumstances that Taiwan was facing towards the end of the Cold War.

## Post-War Masculinity in Taiwanese Literature and Film

As pointed out by Elliott Shr-Tzung Shie, due to the dominance of male authors and scholars in Taiwan's feminist approach to literary and cultural studies, masculinity and male characters were usually not the focus of discussion for fear of reproducing the gender hegemony in a progressive political space created by feminist scholars.<sup>7</sup> However, efforts have been made by scholars such as Kuei-fen Chiu and Elliott Shr-Tzung Shie to initiate discussions on masculinity in Taiwan's post-colonial context. As Chiu and Shie argue, the appearance of impotent men is a recurring and significant characteristic in the works of Taiwanese nativist literature in the 1970s and Taiwanese women's fiction in the 1980s—a product of Taiwan's complex

4 *Taiyu*, also known as *Minnanyu*, is a dialect derived from southern Fujian (*Minnan* means southern Fujian, or southern *Hokkien* in the native pronunciation). As Yingjin Zhang points out, since Taiwan is a multi-ethnic society, *Minnanyu* does not represent the entirety of languages used in Taiwan as the English term "Taiwanese" would suggest. See Zhang, "Articulating Sadness, Gendering Space," 1–2, n.1.

5 *Ibid.*, 4–5.

6 *Ibid.*, 4–5.

7 Shie, "Nanxing qizhi yu taiwan houzhimin xiaoshuo zhong de yuwang jingjixue [Masculinity and the Economy of Desire in Some Postcolonial Fiction from Taiwan]," 40.

colonial history and post-war condition.<sup>8</sup> For example, as Chiu observes, in the Taiwanese nativist novels created by male authors, men “unconsciously play the role of women in front of the colonizers; they become the Taiwanese slaves, being patronized and exploited. In the colonial economic structure, men are objectified as merchandises like traditional women.”<sup>9</sup> Recent studies have also pointed out the prevalence of “weak men” and male anxiety in *taiyupian* as a catalyst for the *beiqing* pathos that speaks to working class men.<sup>10</sup> Due to the hype of foreign action genres, *taiyupian* have attempted to create heroic male characters imitating the popular Tarzan films, James Bond films, and Nikkatsu’s wanderer (*wataridori*) series. However, the mainstream *taiyupian* were still urban melodramas that appealed to the structure of feeling of *beiqing*, making it awkward to insert the male action heroes into the narrative structure that the audience were familiar with.<sup>11</sup>

A similar situation in Hong Kong cinema before the mid-1960s—the prevalence of heroines and cross-dressing female stars—came to an abrupt end with the Shaw Brothers’ new-style martial arts films led by Chang Cheh and the subsequent international Bruce Lee mania. Thus began the era of the male “hard” body on which the “macho Chinese nationalism” was inscribed as a force of resistance against colonial oppression.<sup>12</sup> Taiwan Pulp, particularly the gangster genre, absorbed and appropriated this trend, injecting it into the *taiyupian* cultural tradition. The emphasis on the Taiwan Pulp protagonist’s woeful fate differs from the sublime heroism in most of the martial arts films. On the one hand, the male body of action and the localized production allow the local audience—especially those from the lower or working class—to identify with the male protagonist. On the other, the extreme violence, tragic narrative, and lyrical interludes not

8 See Chiu, “Xingbie/quanli, zhimin lunshu: xiangtuwenxue zhong de qushi nanren [Gender/Power/Postcolonial Discourse: Effeminate Men in Hsiang-t’u Literature].” In *Zhongjie Taiwan Nuren: houzhimin nuxing guandian de Taiwan yuedu* [Intermediating Taiwanese Women: Reading Taiwan from a Postcolonial Female Perspective], 178–181. See also Shie, “Nanxing qizhiyu taiwan houzhimin xiaoshuo zhong de yuwang jingjixue [Masculinity and the Economy of Desire in Some Postcolonial Fiction from Taiwan],” 37–40.

9 Chiu, “Xingbie/quanli, zhimin lunshu: xiangtuwenxue zhong de qushi nanren [Gender/Power/Postcolonial Discourse: Effeminate Men in Hsiang-t’u Literature],” 180–1, translated from Chinese by author.

10 Shen, 2017. “Cuolian taibei qingchun: cong 1990 niandai sanbu taiyupian de wunengnan tanqi [Misplaced Taipei Youth: A Look at Weak Men in Three Taiyupian of the 1960s],” 28–31.

11 Pu, “Tanhu Yixian de taiyu taishan [The Short-Lived Taiyu Tarzan],” 78. See also Zhang, “Articulating Sadness, Gendering Space,” 4.

12 Tasker, *Fists of Fury*, 316–34.

only address Taiwan's complicated colonial history but also demonstrate a process of negotiation between the local cultural pathos, commercialism, and Taiwan's post-war political reality.

### The First Step of Taiwan Pulp: Reconnecting with the Grassroots Culture in Taiwan Cinema

The years immediately before and after the KMT's post-war retreat to Taiwan in 1949 formed a chaotic transitional period in which the infrastructure put in place by the Japanese Government-General of Taiwan was taken over and new institutions were established in order to "de-colonize" Taiwanese people. To pursue its goal of rooting out communism and reclaiming mainland China, the KMT government first had to deal with the deep-rooted ethnic conflicts between the mainlanders (*waishengren*)—the mainland Chinese who had relocated to Taiwan after the Second Sino-Japanese War—and the islanders (*benshengren*), the Han migrants who had lived in Taiwan since the Qing dynasty and who had experienced Japanese colonial rule.

*Taiyupian*, as Chris Berry notes in his chapter in this volume, was "a cycle of dramatic features made between the late 1950s and the early 1970s in the Minnanhua Sinitic language." These local film productions were inspired by the success of the Amoy-dialect films (*Xiyayupian*) made in Hong Kong and distributed to Hokkien-speaking communities in Southeast Asia and in Taiwan. The *taiyupian* industry is rooted in the collective cultural experience of Taiwan and thrived on private production and distribution companies. In the 1950s and 1960s, *taiyupian* enjoyed wide popularity among *Taiyu*-speaking islanders. Before the KMT established a strong Mandarin film industry in Taiwan, *taiyupian* were urged to shape a collective Chinese identity. But the government's concerns about divisions between different ethnic groups in Taiwan, together with the unequal social status between the mainlanders and the islanders, led to systematic discrimination against the islander culture and *taiyupian* and the eventual downfall of *taiyupian* in the late 1960s.<sup>13</sup>

The dearth of research on the culture of Taiwan Pulp has meant that most scholars consider the disappearance of *taiyupian* to be an

13 Hong, *Taiwan Cinema: A Contested Nation on Screen*, 42–43. For more on the demise of *taiyupian*, see Chris Berry's article, "Taiwanese-Language Cinema as Cold War Industry and Culture: Compliance without Commitment" in this volume.

indicator of the effacement of the local culture and lived experience of the islanders' *Minnan* culture that would only be revived in the New Taiwan Cinema in the mid-1980s.<sup>14</sup> However, the cultural pathos of *taiyupian* continued to evolve in the marginalized film culture of Taiwan Pulp in the 1970s and 1980s. After the drastic decline of *taiyupian* productions, there was an explosion of *Taiyu* erotic films and cheap Mandarin kung fu films, many of which were produced by *taiyupian* directors, technicians, and actors. Taiwan Pulp, particularly the gangster film genre, was also led by filmmakers who had experience in *taiyupian* and were adept at depicting the lives of the working class and the grassroots culture. Therefore, although produced as Mandarin films, Taiwan Pulp has deep connections with the *taiyupian* culture, including the pathos of *beiqing*; the associations with local sceneries, stories, and popular *Taiyu* music; and the use of *Taiyu* in the dialogues—the lingua franca of Taiwan's working class. The director of *The First Error Step*, Tsai Yang-Ming, was one of the most renowned *taiyupian* stars who starred in over 200 *taiyupian* before transitioning to directing *taiyupian* in the late 1960s. After *taiyupian*'s demise, he started directing Mandarin films in Taiwan and Hong Kong, most of them kung fu films or contemporary action films with box office success.<sup>15</sup>

From the 1970s to early 1980s, Taiwan underwent a period of diplomatic crisis and economic transition that left the Taiwanese feeling abandoned and “orphaned” on the international scene, forcing the KMT government to take a neo-liberal turn in its economic and cultural policies. Under pressure from the film and theater industry to relax its censorship, the government was also under attack by the *tang-wai* activists—non-KMT political activists leading Taiwan's democratization movements—and realized it had to revamp its image. This set the stage for the production of *The First Error Step*, an inspirational story about one man's repentance after receiving discipline and care from the state.<sup>16</sup> However, *The First Error Step* is also a crime story intended to give a realistic account of the life of working class Taiwanese rooted in the *Minnan* islander culture.

14 Zhang, “Articulating Sadness, Gendering Space,” 7.

15 Due to a contractual dispute with Shaw Brothers, Yang-Ming Tsai directed many of his films, including *The First Error Step*, under the alias Ouyang Chun.

16 After the film was released, it was revealed that the autobiography of Masa was mostly fictional. See Jen-Chien Kuan, “*Cong cuowu de diyi bu dao cuowu de diyi pao* [From The First Error Step To The First Error Bang], *Ni buzhidao de taiwan—yingshi mixin* [The Taiwan You Don't Know: Secret News in Film and Media Industry],” 120.

## Orphan Boy in Baodouli: Heterogeneous Place and Problematic Identity

As Zhen Zhang points out in her continuing research on the orphan figure in post-war Sinophone cinema, the orphan imagination is not only a “global vernacular” for the socially and culturally deracinated but also an opening up of the possibility to obtain geographical and social mobility as well as freedom from the familial bondage in the traditional social structure.<sup>17</sup>

The trope of orphanhood is also common in *taiyupian* and Taiwanese nativist literatures as one of the narrative strategies to arouse the post-war structure of feeling of *beiqing*. In *The First Error Step*, the orphan story is also presented to display a uniquely Taiwanese experience and grassroots tradition. Adapted from the autobiography of the same title, *The First Error Step* tells the story of Masa, an ex-convict and orphan who grows up in Baodouli, the oldest red-light district in Taipei. His mother is a prostitute and leaves him to be raised by his grandmother. Growing up in the ghetto of Baodouli, Masa befriends members of the local gang and becomes the manager of a local brothel, where he gets into a fight with a drunk customer from another local clique. In self-defense, he accidentally kills the man and is sentenced to 15 years in prison, thus embarking on his obstacle-ridden journey of repentance and reformation.

*Location* and *place* play significant roles in shaping the protagonist's orphan identity in *The First Error Step*. The first two chapters of the autobiography *The First Error Step*—“Monga Baodouli” and “The First Step of the Orphan”—depict with a sense of nostalgia the thriving commerce and sex industry in the Monga area from the Japanese colonial era to the early post-war years, the root of Masa's fated orphanhood. Since the Qing dynasty, Monga had been a highly developed district connected to Tamsui, an important treaty port in northern Taiwan. Baodouli, the part closest to the Tamsui River, was famous particularly for its sex industry. During the Japanese colonial period, the Japanese government made it the first legal red-light district in Taiwan—*Monga Yukaku*—in order to contain the overflowing brothels in the area.<sup>18</sup> Even after the KMT government took over, Baodouli remained notorious for its sex industry. The profits earned by local business such as brothels, strip clubs, adult cinemas, exotic

17 Zhang, *Transnational Melodrama, Wenyi, and the Orphan Imagination*, 96.

18 Liu, “Aobizai, wanhua youkuo, baodouli—mengxia diqu xiangguan wenti tantao zhi er [A General View of Meng-Chia Area, Part II],” 133–148.



restaurants, and gambling houses also made Baodouli a contested territory for local gangsters.

In the film, the scenes in Baodouli were shot on location to capture the borough's space and atmosphere. The boisterous alleyways, the squatter settlements for prostitution, and the *koa-a-hi* playing in the background are reminiscent of the vitality of the grassroots in *taiyupian*. Even the annual Monga Temple Festival, one of the most significant religious activities for the local communities, was documented, and it was the first time that a large portion of *Taiyu* was spoken in a Mandarin film by a mixed cast of *taiyupian* actors, Mandarin film actors, and one non-actor—the protagonist in the film was played by the ex-convict himself.

Another indication of the colonial history and the hybrid culture that inhabits Baodouli is the name of the protagonist, Masa. While the protagonist's Chinese name is Liu Jin-Zun, after he starts working at the brothels and begins hanging around Baodouli, he goes by the name of Masa, a common Japanese nickname used by Taiwanese islanders.<sup>19</sup> The name is an incantation of the colonial experience and the *Minnan* culture shared by the majority of working class Taiwanese. Masa the orphan represents the deprived islanders who are susceptible to delinquent behavior, resulting in cycles of self-pity and misfortune. Years later, when Masa is reformed and given an award as an outstanding member of society, he uses his Chinese name, Liu Jin-Zun—a pragmatic and symbolic act to distance himself from his old, problematic cultural identity.

## Masculine Violence and Taiwan's Postcolonial Condition

In post-war Taiwan nativist literature and films, the story of the orphan boy follows a similar pattern: a man who grew up without the support of a good family or a strong father figure tends to become the archetypical "impotent man" who depends on women economically or socially, as in *Dangerous Youth* (*Weixian de qingchun*, 1969) and *Wrong Love* (*Cuolian*, 1960). Another form of the impotent man is the irresponsible "wanderer" (*Langzhi*)—a street hooligan with no stable job, as represented in *The First Error Step*.

As Chiu argues, Taiwan's history of colonial oppression and violent political transitions had led to "the disappearance of men and a survival instinct to be submissive and silent." The crumbling of the traditional role of men as the safeguard of the family is represented in post-war literature and

19 The name "Masa" is short for *Masao* in Japanese.



Fig. 14.1. The brutal scene of Masa stabbing a man in the brothel, in the promotional film still of *The First Error Step*, aka *Never Too Late to Repent*.

film as men who are “physically or symbolically castrated.”<sup>20</sup> Shie further explains that the symbolic castration can be represented not only as the effeminization of men but as the duplication of the violence of colonial masculinity.<sup>21</sup>

The demonstration of physical power is often seen in martial arts films and kung fu films as a statement of decolonization and national strengthening in the post-war context. Since Chinese martial arts are rooted in the Sinophone culture and philosophy, the choreographed action scenes combined with the narrative of resistance in the martial arts films can easily be translated into national unification through violence. In *The First Error Step*, however, the protagonist’s cultural identification is ambiguous in his actions of violence. The first and the most grotesque scene of violence in the film, the symbolic “first error step” of the protagonist, happens in the confrontation between the young Masa and a street thug. Masa, working as the brothel manager, is trying to placate the impatient customer, who is a thug from another local gang. The customer insults Masa and starts

20 Kuei-fen Chiu, *Dangdai taiwan xiaoshuo li de gunu xianxiang* [The Orphan Girl Phenomenon in Contemporary Taiwan Novels], 111.

21 Shie, 38.

punching him. Seeing the customer making a scene, the madam of the brothel berates Masa for being useless. Filled with rage, Masa rushes toward the thug and pierces his chest with a wooden spear. This scene, which is shockingly brutal and realistic, is the main violent scene in the film and creates a stronger visual impact than a gunfight.

In the latter years of Japanese colonization, with the approach of the Second Sino-Japanese War and the expansion of the Japanese empire, Taiwanese people were forced to support or take part in the “all-out war.”<sup>22</sup> To prepare and strengthen the physicality of Taiwanese bodies for wartime mobilization, the Japanese introduced a series of exercises and education for “physique improvement,” including the “training of the body and spirit” through gymnastics, hiking, and Japanese martial arts.<sup>23</sup> Instead of Western-style sports competition, militarized group training and military-related labor were emphasized.<sup>24</sup> As Ching Yau points out, such activities were intended to “martialize” and “imperialize” (*kominka*) Taiwanese male bodies.<sup>25</sup> The arrival of the KMT government in 1945 and the subsequent military suppression as well as rapid de-Japanization forced the martialized Taiwanese men with imperialized masculinity into silence. Meanwhile, about half of the mainlander Chinese who had relocated to Taiwan from 1945 to 1949 were military personnel.<sup>26</sup> The second-generation mainlanders who grew up in military families started to form juvenile gangs—replicating the Chinese empirical imagination, warring strategies, and military divisions—to defend themselves against the local islander gangs and to participate in territorial warfare.<sup>27</sup> As represented in *The First Error Step*, under the authoritarian rule of the KMT government, the remnants of the Second Sino-Japanese War took root in post-war Taiwan, and the colonial violence and martialized

22 All-out war indicates the mobilization of all national resources from the government and the economy, including that of the colonies. See Yi-Jung Chen, *Tiweixiangshang: zhimindi taiwan (1937–1945) chonghou de shenti zhili yu Shijian* [Taii-Koujou (Physique Improvement): Body Practice and Governance of Taiwan during Late Japanese Colonial Period (1937–1945)], (PhD diss., National Taiwan Normal University, 2017), 41.

23 Yi-Jung Chen, *Tiweixiangshang*, 76–78.

24 *Ibid.*, 127.

25 Ching Yau, “(C)Old Bodies In A New War: A Biopolitical Reading of *Taiyupian*,” (Academic Seminars for Global Chinese Studies, National Central Library’s Center for Chinese Studies, Taipei, April 29, 2021).

26 Tung-Fa Lin, *Zhanhou chuqi dao 1950 niandai Taiwan renkou de yichu yu yiru* [The Immigration and Emigration of Taiwan from Early Post-War Period to the 1950s], 6–7.

27 Fuca, “*Taiwan heidao liandang zhi: zhulian bang yu tiandao meng qishi shi ling yi zhong xingtai de guomindang yu minjindang*” [The Two-Party System of the Taiwan Gangsters: The Bamboo Union and The Celestial Way are Another Form of the DPP and KMT], *The News Lens*, August 11, 2020. <https://www.thenewslens.com/article/138992>.

masculinity were replicated and intensified not in international armed conflicts or proxy wars but in the male-dominant underworld.

### Male Bonding: Return to the Right Path

To stabilize and justify its regime on the island, the KMT government declared martial law and made Mandarin the official language. Censorship and publication controls were established to prevent intellectuals and artists from voicing their dissent towards the government. The Cultural Sanitation Campaign introduced in the mid-1950s, for example, followed the discourse of KMT's cultural policy and ideology—in place since the early years of the Republic of China—which strongly condemned and undermined arts and literature that contained any hints of the Red—communist ideology, the Yellow—titillating imageries, and the Black—criminal activities, political conspiracy, or the revelation of social sufferings..<sup>28</sup> These guidelines were also applied in film censorship and as production codes. Locally produced films therefore lacked portrayals of extreme violence and contemporary organised crimes.

*The First Error Step* broke many taboos with its realistic depictions of Taiwan's famous red-light district and a gang member's violent and libertine impulses. To strike a delicate balance between the state's objective to stabilize the country and local filmmakers' desire to sensationalize and compete with Hollywood and Hong Kong films, director Tsai Yang-Ming emphasized the cautionary messages of the film. Instead of explicitly exhorting its viewers to be obedient citizens, the film provides a cathartic experience for the audience through its violent scenes while serving its purpose of social education in the ending, which channels male violence towards productive labor. The protagonist's transition from a man of violence to a useful member of the society, which is marked by the different ways his body is represented in action, also indicates his inclusion in and identification with different types of male bonding in a patriarchal society.

As Susan Mann notes in "The Male Bond in Chinese History and Culture," male homosocial bonds were "key to success and survival for rich and poor, elite and commoner, in Chinese history."<sup>29</sup> She further suggests three

28 I-Ling Hsiao, *Wenhua qingjie yundong yu wulin ninandai guanfang wenyi lunshu xia de zhuti jiangou* [The Cultural Sanitation Campaign and the Subjective Practice for Discourse of Arts and Literature during the 1950s in Taiwan—The Introspection of Interpretative Schema], 140–42.

29 Susan Mann, "The Male Bond in Chinese History and Culture," *American Historical Review* 105, no. 5 (2000): 1601.

venues of male bonding deriving from structures that framed human action in late imperial China: family, sworn brotherhoods or secret societies, and male friendship in the elite circle, bound by a “common high purpose (*tong zhi*).”<sup>30</sup> In *The First Error Step*, Masa is an underprivileged orphan without the support of a family. As a survival strategy, he joins one of the secret societies, the fraternal organizations consisting mostly of marginalized single males who migrate to large cities looking for work and who are without the support of a family (and without the prospect of a bride with which they could establish their own family). In such secret societies, working class culture and violence play a central role, which often lead to these men associating with criminal activities.<sup>31</sup>

As Lee McIsaac observes in his studies of the sworn brotherhoods of the working class in Chongqing during World War II, the fraternal organizations or sworn brotherhoods are bound by symbolic rituals such as blood oaths—a bond that is solidified in the act of violence, which is already a part of working class life.<sup>32</sup> In *The First Error Step*, Masa’s “first error step” was to befriend the gangsters in the red-light district. When he is put behind bars, he socializes with other inmates and enters the male bonding of the underworld. The male homosocial relation is demonstrated through the film’s detailed depictions of violence in the prison—disorganized group fighting, attacks on the male genital, humiliation with urine—and the tattoo scene with close-ups of the needle driving the ink into the surface of skin. The process of tattooing, which involves the shedding of blood and a permanent branding on the body, has a symbolic meaning similar to the blood oath that forms the sworn brotherhood. The link between tattooed bodies and the working class and criminals in Taiwan dates back to the Japanese colonial period when modern, Westernized prisons were constructed for the first time to hold large numbers of political prisoners and rebels against Japan’s military oppression.<sup>33</sup> These prisons became the place where tattoo culture thrived because the prisoners tended to fall into factions and they needed to martialize and identify themselves. Moreover,

30 The second and third venues of male bonding have overlapping qualities in that both are bound by loyalty. However, the secret societies are usually developed through underground activities that glorify reckless violence. See Mann, “The Male Bond in Chinese History and Culture,” 1603–8. And Lee McIsaac, “Righteous Fraternities and Honorable Men: Sworn Brotherhoods in Wartime Chongqing,” *American Historical Review* 105, no. 5 (2000): 1654–5.

31 Susan Mann, 1603–5. And Lee McIsaac, 1646–7.

32 Lee McIsaac, 1649–50.

33 Josephine Ho, “*Wenqing yu jinghai: dandai Taiwan ciqing xingbie yu jieji de weiyi*” [Sentimentalism and Fright: Gender and Class Shifts in Contemporary Taiwanese Tattoo Culture], 67–69.

prisoners have endless time and human skin for experimentation and creation.<sup>34</sup> These “military prison style” (*jungianpai*) tattoos use traditional images such as dragons, tigers, or koi in a ukiyo-e style, usually covering a large portion of the body.<sup>35</sup>

For the Taiwanese audience at the time, it was shocking to see a Taiwanese gangster reveal his body covered with such outrageous tattoos. The picture of Masa’s tattooed body was on both the cover of his autobiography and the movie poster, turning his body into a spectacle of the oppressed subculture. In the film, however, Masa’s tattooed body is also a stigma rather than a source of pride and belonging. Unlike the kung fu heroes that proudly expose their well-trained bodies, Masa’s tattooed body, a spectacle of crime and violence, is always under a shadow or being shackled, invoking the pathos of *beiqing* while selling the state’s pedagogical message against wrongdoings.

Since the extreme violence of the fraternal associations of marginalized men is shown to be irrational and destructive, the journey of Masa’s repentance requires that he be removed from the fraternal associations and returned to a stabilized social structure, which is achieved when Masa is sent to a prison on an outlying island of Taiwan, the Orchid Island, or Lanyu. Inhabited by the indigenous *Tao* people, access to Lanyu was restricted during the Japanese colonial period to those conducting ethnological research. After the post-war takeover of Taiwan, the KMT government gained military control over Lanyu. It chose to redistribute the land and resources and set up farms and disciplinary barracks (*guanxundui*) where soldiers and convicted felons worked.<sup>36</sup> From the 1950s to 1970s, these men were the main supply of labor for the public infrastructure projects on the island.<sup>37</sup> Sent to the distant Lanyu, Masa is not only separated from his previous homosocial circle but also brought under the disciplinary control and reformatory education of the military system. During Masa’s time on the island, he meets his old classmate, Huang Kun-Huang, now a military officer and his captain. Huang is characterized as a resolute and benevolent military official determined

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., 67.

36 Li-Ming Hsia et al., *Fangzhu gudao de tazhe: lanyu, nongchang, guanxundui yu waishenglaobing de shengming shi* [The Exiled Other: Lanyu, Farm, Disciplinary Barracks, and the Life History of Mainlander Veterans], 9–22. See also Su-Kan Lin and Tzu-Hsun Kao, *Shui zai shuxie lanyu, jiangou lanyu zhishi: lanyu zhuan ti tushu zhi fenxi* [Who Writes and Constructs Lanyu’s Local Knowledge? An Analysis of Lanyu-Related Books], 1–4.

37 Yu and Tung, *Taiwan yuanzhumin shi: yamei zushi pien* [The History of Formosan Aborigines: The Yami], 166.

to transform the criminals into “someone of value to society.”<sup>38</sup> To free Masa from his cycle of violence, he challenges Masa mano a mano. Compared to the grotesque violence in the confrontation scenes at the brothel and prison, where slow motion and close-ups were used to exaggerate the impact of the brutal punches and fatal penetration, the fight between Huang and Masa is carefully choreographed and shot in medium and long shots. At one point, the camera is fixed from afar, demonstrating Huang’s disciplined combat skills and his composure. After defeating Masa, Huang gives Masa a pat on the shoulder and wipes the blood off of his mouth, establishing a new brotherhood that exists within the elite circle, where one is bound by a common high purpose—the common good of the society—rather than by reckless violence. By performing labor on Lanyu to serve out his sentence, Masa participates in the construction of the nation’s infrastructure, as a result of which his body is transformed from that of masculine violence to productive labor used for nation-building. Because of his contribution, he is given a commutation and is allowed to return to Taipei, where he finally establishes a family with a Hakka woman—a happy union of diverse ethnic groups in Taiwan and a rewarding return to the traditional family value.

## Conclusion

The entangled bond between masculinity and nationalism—a result of the Japanese colonial government’s wartime mobilization and further reinforced as a response to the KMT government’s post-war oppression—is the undercurrent in male-dominant genres such as martial arts films, kung fu films, and gangster films. As secondary citizens under Japanese colonialization, Taiwanese men were initially effeminized and humiliated, but as Japan’s war efforts expanded, the Japanese shifted to physically training the men for wartime mobilization. As Shie notes, while the decolonization process often involved retaliatory violence, which the colonized men learned from their colonists,<sup>39</sup> Taiwanese men did not participate in expelling their Japanese colonizers. Thus, after the arrival of the KMT government, it was the already martialized, violent masculinity of the Taiwanese that had to be “decolonized” and erased. Through its narrative strategy and visual excess, *The First Error Step* articulates a multi-layered

38 *The First Error Step*, directed by Yang-Ming Tsai, Hon Yang Film, 1979.

39 Shie, “*Nanxing qizhi yu taiwan houzhimin xiaoshuo zhong de yuwang jingjixue*” [Masculinity and the Economy of Desire in Some Postcolonial Fiction from Taiwan], 64

power relation in Cold War Taiwan—the legacy of Japanese colonial rule, of the KMT's authoritarian regime, and of the nativist history of Taiwan's islanders—by reinventing a place-based masculinity rooted in the pathos of sadness (*beiqing*) adopted from the *taiyupian* tradition. In this sense, *The First Error Step* is not so much a repentance story as a Cold War story. Contrary to the common understanding of the Cold War as a bipolar, static stand-off between two superpowers, *The First Error Step*—while still imbued with a moral pedagogical message and nationalist imagination—captures the nuances of Taiwan's paradoxical post-war condition by representing a problematic masculinity as the battlefield of ideologies contesting and negotiating with one another.

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## About the Author

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# **Part Four**

The Long Shadow of the Cold War in  
Contemporary Asian Cinemas



# 15. Memories of the Future: Speculative Cold War Histories in Yosep Anggi Noen's *The Science of Fictions* and Daniel Hui's *Snakeskin*

*Elizabeth Wijaya*

## Abstract

In 1965 Indonesia, the CIA helped Suharto spread false reports on a coup plot by the PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia), contributing to an anti-communist purge; that same year, a farmer chances upon a film shoot by a foreign crew of a fake moon landing and has his tongue cut off. The latter is a speculative invention of Yosep Anggi Noen's fiction film, *The Science of Fictions* (2019). In Daniel Hui's hybrid speculative fiction / documentary *Snakeskin* (2014), set in the year 2066 in Singapore, references to the 1950s Chinese leftist movements form part of the film's excavation of national myths and half-forgotten memories. Noen's imagined past and Hui's speculative future meet in Cold War secrecies that periodically haunt the cinema of the region.

**Keywords:** post–New Order Indonesia; Chinese leftist movements; Southeast Asian cinema

Diplomacy is something secret. There is no way of controlling it.  
Diplomacy has to do with the whole life of the citizens.  
So an irresponsible state apparatus controls the life  
of the citizens without their knowing it.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, 160.

Pivotal, visible events from the late 1980s to early 1990s mapped a historical end to one image of the Cold War, but in the shadow of the concrete manifestations of this end lie the persisting legacies of the Cold War, its proxy wars, and the wars that were never fought in the open as wars but as political machinations, tensions of thought, and ideological struggles intertwined with histories of colonialism, imperialism, and local post-independence power struggles and authoritarian rule. The friend/foe logic of the Cold War manifested as oppositions of communism/capitalism not only between but also within nation-states, the championing of markers of progress in the name of the nation-state, and the resulting unequal global distribution of power. Affective and psychical legacies from the turmoil of this period can be discernible in certain narrative and affective structures of contemporary Southeast Asian cinema. In the past decade, a new generation of independent filmmakers across Southeast Asia has found inventive aesthetic strategies that reveal the palimpsestic relations of buried histories, foreclosed futures, and the disappearing present framed by percolating, unending Cold War tensions. Taking up Susan Buck-Morss' provocation that the 1969 moon landing marks an era of visibility that compels attention to "seeing global," this paper considers the filmmakers' aesthetic strategies of probing what remains and what remains obscure yet returns periodically to haunt independent Southeast Asian cinema.<sup>2</sup> My chapter focuses on how Cold War–framed imbrications of visibility and reality persist via interrogations of memory, forgetting, and media complicity in two contemporary Southeast Asian feature films—*The Science of Fictions* (Hiruk-Pikuk Si Al-Kisah, 2019) by Indonesian filmmaker Yosep Anggi Noen, and *Snakeskin* (2014) by Singaporean filmmaker Daniel Hui. If secrecy, propaganda, and Schmittian friend/enemy divides were defining tropes of the so-called Cold War era, the speculative modes of these works surface durational and ideological entanglements and fragmentation that extend beyond the illusion of the unitary nation form. In so doing, they reveal the phenomenal traces of messy "structures of feelings", to borrow from Raymond Williams, that result from the gap between official histories and popular discourses—or an inchoate sense of something latent that is still not yet fully articulated.<sup>3</sup>

*The Science of Fictions* imagines that in 1960s Indonesia, Siman, a farmer, witnesses a foreign crew filming a fake moon landing in the Parangkusumo sand dunes in Bantul, Yogyakarta. In the scene, the flies dancing around the

2 Buck-Morss, "Seeing Global."

3 Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 128–35.

actor-astronaut offer hints of the earthly location of this film-within-a-film. For this intrusion behind the scenes, Siman is captured by the army and has his tongue cut out. What he cannot speak of, his body performs. Noen's film follows the farmer's gradual loss of control of his body as, unable to verbally articulate what he witnessed, Siman acts as if he is an astronaut on the Moon, and with his performative spacewalk, inscribes upon the surface of the Earth the rhythmic truth of a mediatized, performative lie. Nobody in Siman's milieu deciphers the significance of his floating steps, and he is tolerated as an amusement in an improvised spacesuit, which he wears to perform at events. In one scene, the ritualistic Jathilan dance evokes a comparison to Siman's bodily obsession with the terrestrial filming of the moon landing. In a perversion of the twinned dreams of modern achievement represented by the extra-territorial excursion into space and the provision of technologically aided domestic comforts for the masses, Siman lives in a makeshift, grimy space shuttle made up of salvaged parts, noticeably those of an air conditioner, a fridge, and a washing machine. Siman's bodily movements make apparent the disjunctive rhythms and disorientations of late modernity: in the reality of his world in Yogyakarta, he appears like an impoverished madman who is out of sync with the rest of life, but his walk, with the repetitive mimicry of life in lunar microgravity, suggests the contours of an inner reality shadowing his grounded existence. Siman's behavior reveals both the trauma and the seduction of the mediatization of the space race in its reframing of earthly existence.

The Cold War's geopolitical consequences were not only global but, with the space race and competition for technological prowess, extended to the moon and back. The moon landing's transformative effect on consciousness was captured in the semi-autobiographical independent film, *Perfumed Nightmare* (*Mababangong Bangungot*, 1977) by the Filipino filmmaker Kidlat Tahimik, who grew up in a resort community with American military bases. In the film, he recounts his childhood idolization of America's space program. Susan Buck-Morss uses *Perfumed Nightmare* as an example as she argues, via Hans Blumenberg, that the American moon landing was a "triumph of modernity as the technological dream of human progress. It was the apogee of American power. But in a real sense, this culmination was also an ending."<sup>4</sup> Before the moon landing in 1969, the first lunar pictures of Earth were transmitted via the US moon satellite, Lunar Orbiter II in 1966. Buck-Morss sees the "lunar vision of Earth" as the inauguration of a new "Era of Globalization." However, the captured image of the Earth is itself a

4 Buck-Morss, "Seeing Global."



visual fiction of cosmopolitan possibility and shared globality that belies the widening gulfs of inequality exacerbated by the intensification of Cold War politics that made the images possible in the first place. The new era of simulacrum and mediatization that the images launched also launched an era of the increasing intrusion of hyper-visibility into everyday experience. That is to say, the extra-terrestrial pictures of Earth and the moon that created a mediatic reality that at once gave hope for a more connected world also shattered that hope as the Space Race that made the mediatic images possible also contributed to an increasingly unbalanced world in the grip of Cold War politics. In *The Science of Fictions*, it is not the image of Earth but the earthbound imagination of the landing on the moon that ties together the era of globalized mediatization and the power of state-sponsored media propaganda. As its title hints, *The Science of Fictions* is a cinematic experiment that investigates and subverts the technological-scientific worldview that privileges the givenness of the empirical as objective reality by positing the multi-layered possibilities of fictionality that intrudes upon how reality is created, perceived, and remembered.

*The Science of Fictions* begins with a wash of blue. We see through a convex spherical glass window, as if through a space shuttle, and observe the slow, rhythmically moving body of Siman. The scene is layered with a voiceover reporting Nixon's agreement with Suharto to send over moon rocks collected by Apollo 11. The producer of the film, Yulia Evina Bhara, confirms that the voiceover used is a fictional recording based upon Nixon's historical visit to Indonesia on July 27, 1969. She sent me a copy of a *New York Times* article which reported that Nixon told Suharto, "I'm going to send you a piece of the moon as a souvenir."<sup>5</sup> A July 18, 1969 declassified memo that briefed Nixon on his visit to Indonesia reveals that behind this quirky gesture of lunar diplomacy lies Nixon's anti-communist agenda. The memo confirms that "the Communist party, which almost took over Indonesia four years ago, is no threat at the moment", and Nixon is tasked to reassure President Suharto and gain his support with regard to the ongoing Vietnam War and to assert that after Vietnam, "The US will continue to play a role in the area as an external counterweight to Communist military power and subversion."<sup>6</sup> The promised gift of the moon rocks marks the continuing US support for the anti-communist massacre of an estimated half a million to a million people accused of leftist

5 "World Leaders to get a Piece of the Moon," *The New York Times*, July 28, 1969, <https://www.nytimes.com/1969/07/28/archives/world-leaders-to-get-a-piece-of-the-moon.html>.

6 National Security Archive, "Subject: Djarkata Visit."

sympathies or affiliated with the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia or PKI), then the largest communist party outside China and the Soviet Union. Secretly aided by the CIA, the 1965 massacres led to Suharto's coup d'état against Sukarno in 1967 and to 31 years of military dictatorship in Indonesia. They also accelerated American goals of curtailing communism in the region as well as widening the American sphere of influence.<sup>7</sup> By embedding this fleeting line of the Nixon-Suharto lunar connection, Noen establishes that the trauma of that period remains pertinent to the speculative reality of his film. Throughout the film, we see moments of Siman watching a film as well as moments from a film in production featuring an actor who is styled to resemble Sukarno. The timeline is unclear as to whether the film Siman watches and the film being shot is related to the film of the moon landing that he was caught watching as it was being filmed. Floating between the film-within-a-film and Siman's reality are lines such as "They said the communist party is behind the coup—now they kill anyone suspected of being a communist," acting as grim reminders of the actual lives lost in the instantiations of the Cold War in Asia.

From Noen's debut feature-length film *Peculiar Vacation and Other Illnesses* (*Vakansi yang Janggal dan Penyakit Lainnya*, 2012) to his sophomore work, *Solo, Solitude* (*Istirahatlah Kata-Kata*, 2016) and his third feature film, *The Science of Fictions*, he shows an abiding interest in daily routines. While the grand event of the moon landing forms an inciting incident and the film alludes to the large-scale killing of communists, the film is filled with scenes and tempos of daily life as sites of absurdity, critique, and potential transformation. At the market, Siman walks with exaggeratedly slow steps, mimicking the weightlessness of zero-gravity in outer space while his back is bent under the weight of a heavy bag of vegetables that he is carrying as an odd-job laborer. The scene is accompanied by a satirical song by electronic duo Libertaria from Yogyakarta, "The Poor Are Prohibited From Getting Drunk," (*Orang miskin Dilarang mabok*, 2016), which critiques "Politisi busuk mabuk kekuasaan/Bangsa munafik, koruptor jancuk" (Rotten politicians drunk on power / Hypocrite nation, corrupt criminals) while "the poor are prohibited from getting drunk." By layering this contemporary song onto an image of a laborer attempting to be weightless while weighed down by poverty and unspoken trauma, the political critique of unnamed "rotten politicians" extends from the Suharto era to the present divides in Indonesian society.

7 Simpson, *Suharto: A Declassified Documentary Obit*.



Fig. 15.1. Siman in *The Science of Fictions*. KawanKawan Media.

In *The Science of Fictions*, time is compressed. While Siman's witnessing of the fake moon landing shoot and the talk of the attempted coup is set in the 1960s, the filmmakers make no effort to age Siman or to explain the timeline of the coda of the film, where the now-ubiquitous mobile phone features prominently. In the film's coda, the actors of the film-within-a-film, including the Sukarno look-alike in a military uniform, are having a meal break on a film set. A song titled *Walker's Song* (*Lagu pejalan*, 2017)—composed and sung by the Yogyakarta acoustic folk act Sisir Tanah, by Bagus Dwi Danto—is finally accompanied by a wide shot of ordinary-looking people getting down from a tram and holding up their handphones. The lyrics of *Walker's Song* allude to a pedestrian open secret, one that is so obvious that it is not necessary to speak of: "There is a secret everyone knows / It's here and there / shuffled by time / We still walk, always walking / Even though we don't know how far." We do not see what the people are filming as their phones are raised and pointing towards the screen, creating a counter-gaze toward the lens through which the audience sees the film. A sound cue that mimics the digital "click" of a phone camera signals the end of the film. More than anachronisms in the timeline of the film, the phones here link the 1960s to the present with immediacy. Perhaps it is not the phones that are out-of-place objects but the traumatic time that stands still such that the unresolved events of the 1960s overlap with the present. Still, something has changed. There is a shift in the dynamics of media power and political power between the imagined large-scale orchestration of deception of the fake moon landing that the film begins with and the multiplication of phone cameras in its ending, which gestures at the widening availability of

digital technology and the multiple channels for dissemination of images captured by the people.

Kelly Oliver argues that, with the 1968 and 1972 Apollo missions, “The reactions to seeing the Earth from space make manifest tensions between nationalism and cosmopolitanism and between humanism [...] and post-humanism [...]”<sup>8</sup> Seeing the lunar images of the Earth calls into question the arrangement of socio-political demarcations and what Jacques Rancière calls “the distribution of the sensible,” the condition of possibility for thought and activity that determines what can be seen and said and by whom. The political is thus aesthetic insofar as it must be realized in the sensible. While the sensible can be related to the visualizable, it is also conditioned by that which is invisible but still leaves traces.<sup>9</sup> By calling the image itself into question, the shadows of the Cold War loom closer in the lunar imitation of *The Science of Fictions* than the decontextualized images of the Earth as a blue marble.

The relation between the profilmic space and reality can be analogized to the relation between Earth and the moon: if the world of everyday life where the director and the audience reside is taken as reality, then the profilmic space is the space of reality augmented by capture, creation, and exploration, similar to how the Earth is assumed to be the ground and the moon is the desired destination of fantasies and fantasies about capture. This meta-cinematic image of phone cameras turned towards the audience is thus a turning away from the profilmic space to that of the reality that lies outside the film world, itself formed by multiple realities that remain unseen and uncaptured. It is significant that we are not shown the handphone cameras’ subject in the final image. This image of a camera counter-gazing into the unseen lens of the film echoes Blumenberg’s sense that images of the moon landing were a visual disappointment, and it was the lunar images of Earth that were notable since “It is more than a triviality that the experience of returning to the Earth could not have been had except by leaving it.”<sup>10</sup> Blumenberg further observes that it was the very technology that made the moon landing possible that caused doubts over its reality.<sup>11</sup> The moon, once arrived at, was never allowed to be the moon in itself but—captured with national flags—had its visuality appropriated for Earthly matters. What we see of the moon in the moon landings thus masks what we did not see of the

8 Oliver, *Earth and World*, 14.

9 Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*.

10 Blumenberg, *The Genesis of the Copernican World*, 685.

11 *Ibid.*, 677.

Cold War: the occurrence of the moon landings, in reality, created a reality that perpetrated fictions of national sovereignty. The speculative mode of *The Science of Fictions* thus draws attention to the unseen machinations and implications behind the historical moon landing.

What, then, was the culpability or responsibility of those who viewed and disseminated these lunar images with their symbolic unfettered nationalism? The turning of the camera in *The Science of Fictions* raises the specter of the relational implication of the spectator-of-the-film-turned-unseen-subject. Siman, who is a spectator-turned-victim of violence becomes a perpetrator of gendered violence. Following Michael Rothberg's work on the implicated subject as a participant in histories and social formations that cannot be contained by the categories of victim and perpetrator, how could we consider the implicated spectator for whom the media is addressed?<sup>12</sup> More broadly, what are the responsibilities that rest upon the spectator of a visual artefact? The open secret alluded to in the coda of *The Science of Fictions* is the space that remains for the people's memories and for media held in the hands of the masses, as neither have been fully erased nor occupied by histories constructed via state-led propaganda.

The traumatic reverberations on the observer of the fake moon landing in *The Science of Fictions* warn against the coercive possibility of media. The management of remembering and forgetting on multiple scales as a technique of power and media control is one way in which authoritarian rule wields power over the politics and intimacies of memory. Katinka van Heeren notes that the anti-communist stance of the New Order extended into its media policy, with Indonesia in that period exhibiting films promoted by the United States Information Agency (USIA).<sup>13</sup> Academics have argued persuasively on the impact of the propaganda film *Penumpasan Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* on the media culture of Suharto's New Order regime and beyond, with Michael G. Vann noting that the film became part of Indonesia's "collective memory."<sup>14</sup> With mandatory annual televised and theatrical screenings during Suharto's reign, *G30S/PKI* is a reminder of how cinema can be a technology of legitimation for a brutal regime. It remains to be seen if Indonesian President Joko Widodo's January 2023 belated and limited acknowledgement of regret over the anti-communist purge will lead to concrete measures of accountability.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, for

12 Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*.

13 van Heeren, *Contemporary Indonesia Film*, 104.

14 Vann, "Tropical Cold War Horror," 211.

15 Teresia and Widiyanto, "Jokowi regrets Indonesia's bloody past, victims want accountability."

decades now, independent filmmakers in post-New Order Indonesia have produced cinematic counter-memories that challenge the reluctance of state narratives to account for lost pasts and futures. A pioneering example is Garin Nugroho's *A Poet: Unconcealed Poetry* (*Puisi Tak Terkuburkan*, 2000) on the memories of the poet Ibrahim Kadir who acted as himself. Kadir was an eyewitness to the 1965 massacres who was arrested and imprisoned. Anne Rutherford calls *A Poet* "a work of mourning."<sup>16</sup> Other examples include Riri Riza's *Gie* (2005), a biopic on the Chinese/Indonesian writer and journalist Soe Hok Gie (1942–1969); Ifa Isfanyah's *The Dancer* (*Sang Penari*, 2011), which fleshed out the context of the 30 September Movement and anti-communist repercussions in its adaptation of Ahmad Tohari's Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk trilogy; and Jason Iskandar's short film *The Day The Sky Roared* (*Langit Masih Gemuruh*, 2015) on the 1998 anti-Chinese riot in Jakarta.

KawanKawan Media, the production house for *The Science of Fictions* led by Yulia Evina Bhara, has been a significant force in creating space for memory and experience in what Annie Pohlman calls "a country where there is no place to remember."<sup>17</sup> KawanKawan Media produced the short film *On the Origin of Fear*, a debut film by the cinematographer Bayu Prihantoro Filemon, which premiered at the Venice Film Festival in 2016. The 12-minute short film set in one location visually and thematically centers on Darto, a film dubber. The film being dubbed is alluded to be *G30S/PKI*. The offscreen instructions Darto is given as he voices the cries of victims and the shouts of the perpetrators hint at the violence depicted in the unseen film and the violence filmmaking. *On the Origin of Fear* connects the trauma of living under the New Order regime to the regime's mediatic techniques of power. Filemon is the cinematographer for Noen's second feature film *Solo, Solitude*, also produced by Bhara. *Solo, Solitude*, which premiered at the Locarno Film Festival, is a lyrical biopic of the poet Wiji Thukul (born 1963). The film imagines the mundane realities and personal sacrifices of the poet who organized workers' protests, was persecuted for alleged ties to communism, and has been missing since 1998. In 2020, Bhara produced the documentary *You and I*, directed by Fanny Chotimah, which premiered at South Korea's DMZ Docs Festival and won the Asian Perspective Award. The film focuses on the friendship between Kaminah and Kusdalini, two women who met as political prisoners in

16 Rutherford, "Poetics and Politics."

17 Annie Pohlman, "No Place to Remember," 61.

1965 and lived together in Central Java for more than half a century after their release.

In Singapore, since 2010, more films have addressed hushed histories of people and institutions accused of being communist, communist sympathizers, or communist front organizations. A new generation of independent filmmakers has shown a sophisticated navigation of the possibilities of international film festivals and visual art exhibitions, which enables them to strategically reduce the impact of censorship while broadening their target audience and addressees. These works include Boo Junfeng's *Sandcastle* (2010), about a young man who investigates his late father's political exile from Singapore to Malaysia as a result of his father's involvement in the 1956 Chinese Middle School riots; and Tan Pin Pin's documentary *To Singapore with Love* (2013), which shows the lives and testimonies of political exiles in the United Kingdom, Malaysia, and Thailand. In 2015, the sole independent cinema in Singapore, The Projector, had concurrent screenings of Eva Tang's documentary *The Songs We Sang* (2015) and Jason Soo's documentary *1987: Untracing the Conspiracy* (2015). *The Songs We Sang* touches on the final phasing out of Chinese-medium education in Singapore with the closure of Nanyang University in 1980, while *1987* investigates the last period of mass detention without trial in Singapore. In 2017, the Asian Film Archive Reframe Series, "Poetic Justice: Personalizing Poetics on Screen," included the multidisciplinary artist Green Zeng's *The Return* (2015) in its selection. Zeng's film alludes to the 1963 Operation Coldstore, a security operation that resulted in the arrest of 113 people with the official aim of wiping out communist open front organizations.<sup>18</sup> Ho Tzu Nyen's existential short film *The Nameless* (2015) uses found footage of the Hong Kong actor Tony Leung Chiu Wai's cinematic appearances to probe the mutable identities of the historical Lai Teck, who was the Secretary-General of the Malayan Communist Party from 1939 to 1947. *The Nameless* has a companion piece, *The Name* (2015), which is based on an imaginative revisioning of the history of the Malayan Communist Party. Both films form the seed for Ho's 2019 multimedia theatrical work, *The Mysterious Lai Teck*, which is part of Ho's long-term artistic investigation, *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia*. The sustained interest in Singapore independent cinema in reviewing the suppressed histories and affective resonances of the Cold War and the once-unutterable name of

18 Philip Holden comments on the historical contestation of Coldstore and its increasingly visible return to the "public imaginary" 50 years after the operation. See "Tears and Garlands," 196.

“communism” is shared in works by Malaysian independent filmmakers Amir Muhammad with *The Last Communist* (*Lelaki Komunis Terakhir*, 2006) and *Village People Radio Show* (*Apa Khabar Orang Kampung*, 2007), and Lau Kek Huat with *Absent Without Leave* (2016).

Of the films that intervene in Singapore’s historical discomfort with narratives of communism, Daniel Hui’s *Snakeskin* stands out as the most esoteric, inventive, and intriguing feature-length work with intricate layers like a snake molting its patterned skin. Shot on 16mm film in Academy ratio, the film speculatively connects Singapore’s post-1965 nation-building project to its British and Japanese colonial histories and communist possibilities, with imagined and almost-forgotten histories of Singapore cinema, particularly the Malay film industry. *Snakeskin* is Hui’s second feature-length film, succeeding *Eclipses* (2011) and preceding *Demons* (2018). *Snakeskin* was awarded the Special Jury Prize of the Torino Film Festival in 2014 and the Award of Excellence in New Asian Currents at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival in 2015. Hui is a founding member of the film collective 13 Little Pictures. All his feature-length films so far have been produced in some capacity by 13 Little Pictures’ co-founder, Tan Bee Thiam. Trained at the California Institute for the Arts, Hui is one of the rare filmmakers in Singapore who have shot all his feature-length works on 16mm while maintaining a low-budget, artisanal approach, frequently writing, directing, editing, producing, filming, and sometimes also acting in his works. For *Snakeskin*, Hui wrote, directed, filmed, and edited the film and also provided the narrator’s voice, worked on sound in collaboration with Tiago Matos, and was one of the producers. When he was interviewed after the 69<sup>th</sup> Berlinale premiere of *Demons* on whether *Snakeskin* and *Demons* could be considered a sort of Singapore mythology, Hui responded, “What I was trying to do is to depict the emotion I feel while I’m in Singapore. I think this emotion is usually very hard to put into words [...] To me, it represents some kind of madness which gets under everyone’s skin, so people feel very angry, but they don’t know where to direct this anger.”<sup>19</sup> While Hui was referring to *Demons*, the sense of something amiss in the everyday is also palpable in *Snakeskin*. His directorial statement on *Snakeskin* alludes to the pre-independence political possibilities of the 1950s that were intertwined with post-war reconstruction, anti-colonialist movements, and student activism:

19 Hui, “So this my big fear.”





Fig. 15.2. Reincarnated soldier in *Snakeskin*. 13 Little Pictures.

Singapore has had a long history of civil disobedience, culminating in the 1950s. This history has been buried by the ruling party in Singapore because it still reflects negatively on them. [...] I was particularly interested in the cinema of this period because I found many parallels between its ideals and the ideals of activists and politicians at that time. Both wanted a racially integrated society that is independent and no longer colonized. Unfortunately, Singapore's history has only proven to be the opposite. Researching this history has been really saddening because of all the lost opportunities and abandoned paths my country could have taken.<sup>20</sup>

Fragments of searches for lost pasts and foreclosed futures—whether fictional or biographical—intersect in *Snakeskin*, which is set in an imagined Singapore in the year 2066. In this meta-cinematic, non-realist experimental film, fiction and reality collide. The question of media complicity is foregrounded in a deceased cult leader's proclamation that the surviving footage of Singapore shot in 2014 is evil. Against the backdrop of a burning copy of *A Modern History of Singapore* by C. M. Turnbull alongside film strips, we hear the narrator's recollections that the cult leader

20 Hui, "Director's Statement."

proclaimed himself Stamford Raffles' descendant, the colonial founder of Singapore and the Straits Settlement whom the cult leader considered the first prophet who had saved the people from the dangers of "communism and tigers." The cult leader tasked himself with continuing Raffles' civilizing mission of disciplining, dividing, and ruling the races through threats to their existence. This fiery interlude is succeeded by images of the statue of Stamford Raffles, a man whose image and name retains the allure of superiority in Singapore. The narrator (voiced by Hui) leads us back to 2014, the then-present of the film that is already defamiliarized through memory/mythology/mediatization.

In the strange world of *Snakeskin*, there is always some unburied history beneath its fictional layers: a screenwriter and lyricist, Yusnof Ef recalls his start in the Malay film industry and how his stage name was given by P. Ramlee; Salmah, a film programmer (played by Nooraishah Abu Bakar who is an actual film programmer), searches for footage of her mother as a young actress in old Cathay films that her mother had condemned as "evil"; a man sings "Solidarity is Strength" and recalls his time in Chung Cheng High School where student leaders were arrested and disappeared; a fugitive ghost obsessed with a dancer in Malay films recounts hiding in the cinema to avoid arrest; a young woman seeks advice on time travel to find a Miss Salmah from her childhood; a cat possessed by the ghost of a Japanese soldier from the Pacific War remembers the 1950s Chinese leftist movements; and an unnamed narrator who is the sole survivor of a cult speaks of a cult leader who left behind rolls of film that purportedly contained "evil." These fleeting narratives are not connected by causality but by the vague sinister sense of a past that is neither present nor gone.

While Noen's film shows the far-flung visuality of space travel rhythmically displaced onto the streets of Yogyakarta, Daniel Hui's film uses time travel as a conceit to re-vision the mundane scenes of Singapore and its concealed histories. A time traveler named Chris Yeo is played by Chris Yeo (a fellow co-founder of 13 Little Pictures, Yeo would go on to direct the Golden-Leopard winning *A Land Imagined* [2018], edited by Daniel Hui). In *Snakeskin*, Yeo has a scene where Vicki (played by Vicki Yang) is in search of Miss Salmah from her childhood. In a laidback manner, Yeo explains how he travelled through time and changed the course of history by using a motorcycle helmet bought off eBay and reciting a "Snakeskin" mantra scribbled on a piece of note paper. Staring at the nondescript motorcycle helmet, is Vicki or the audience meant to believe Yeo, or is he a half-hearted charlatan? What is the role of visuality in the fictionality of cinema, or what

should the technology of time travel resemble? Indeed, cinema has always been the art of time travel, and in *Snakeskin*'s case, the normalcy of time travel is indicated by the film's lo-fi approach, which is not caught up in the spectacle of representational aesthetics. In other words, in Noen's film, state powers conspire to fake a moon landing, but in Hui's film, no such chicanery is needed to establish an alternate reality as *Snakeskin* foregoes spectacles of the extraordinary and relies on the disjunctive montage between narration and footage to convey the disjunction of time and space and the elisions of history.

Time travel, whether to the past as Chris Yeo promises or through reincarnation in the body of a cat, links vestiges of the past to the unremarkable scenes of the present. While stray dogs are rare in Singapore, stray cats remain a familiar sight in the housing estates, as they are often fed by residents who are not permitted to house them. The majority of Singapore's population are housed in public flats managed by the Housing and Development Board (HDB), which has a decades-long ban on cats as they "are generally difficult to contain within the flat" and they "make caterwauling sounds, which can inconvenience your neighbors."<sup>21</sup> Stray cats are then lurking reminders of the uncontainable and unsilenceable witnesses of history that reside in the open spaces of everyday life. In one montage sequence, silent subtitles are layered on a montage of images to retell the colonial history of Singapore from the anthropomorphized perspective of a cat possessed by the spirit of a Japanese soldier from the Pacific War. The cat/spirit/reincarnated soldier witnesses the still-contentious 1950s period of student-led Chinese leftist movements that occurred in the aftermath of the deregistering of the Singapore Chinese Middle School Students' Union as a suspected communist front organization. The cat reminds us that "Ghosts are tied to places, sometimes to people, sometimes to images / And now I'm stuck in this ugly island. In this terrible heat, in this Chinese high school."

The pasts and their memories are multiple, conflictual, and re-activable. In *Snakeskin*, dust settles on a sign that says "Silence," which remains on the location of the former Shaw Film Studio at 8 Jalan Ampas. This "Silence" sign, remaining past the closure of the film studio, is now an artefact of a bygone era of Singapore cinema as well as a reminder of the silences of history. Likewise, quotidian scenes in *Snakeskin* are matched with intertitles to fill in pieces of a disappearing history. For example, wide-shot idyllic scenes

21 HDB, Types of Pets Allowed, May 25, 2023, <https://www.hdb.gov.sg/cs/infoweb/community/caring-for-your-neighbours/being-a-good-neighbour/tips-on-neighbourliness/keeping-pets>.

of youths playing guitars, a couple taking photographs, and Vicki walking through Fort Canning Park are punctuated by an intertitle that recalls the historical significance of the site:

Fort Canning Park, 13 May 1954  
 Site of colonial police brutality towards students  
 Birth of anti-colonial Chinese leftist movements

The intertitles are also followed by a mock interview with Daniel Khor, “student activist and historian” (played by film producer/writer Dan Koh), who gives an explanation of the importance of the Chinese leftist movements. By working with layers of fiction that resemble the truth and characters that play fictionalized versions of themselves with invented backstories, *Snakeskin* uses alternate reality to repurpose conventional techniques of documentary such as intertitles and interviews in order to transmit the subjectivity and remnants of historical experience.

In a post-screening discussion, Hui revealed that he was unable to locate moving images of the 1950s political protests at the National Archives of Singapore so he decided to film the present-day sites.<sup>22</sup> Dora Apel notes that “we want to see what can no longer be seen [...] Place is like a palimpsest, written upon and erased, yet we still sense vestiges of the past. Though the structural nature of place may be altered, the symbolic value remains.”<sup>23</sup> Margaret Hillenbrand argues in the context of China that public secrecy is part of a structuring force of strategic disavowal on a national scale, which she terms “knowing what not to know.”<sup>24</sup> In the context of Singapore, this desire to “see what can no longer be seen” is enmeshed with a form of “knowing what not to know.” In cinema, this produces the effect of a flickering palimpsest, seen through the fragmentary openness of the speculative, where the symbolic fire momentarily illuminates what lies beneath in the buried past linked to imagined futures. The poet James Fenton writes: “It is not the streets that exist. It is the streets that no longer exist / It is not your memories which haunt you / It is not what you have written down. / It is what you have forgotten, what you must forget. / What you must go on forgetting all your life.”<sup>25</sup> Dudley Andrew asks “What kind of cartography will lead modern cinema to the history it should expose? Or rather, what

22 Hui, “Stories that Matter: Snakeskin.”

23 Apel, *Calling Memory into Place*, 119.

24 Hillenbrand, *Negative Exposures*.

25 Fenton, *A German Requiem*, 1.

kind of cinema will become the cartography of our future?"<sup>26</sup> As mediatic examples of the refusal to go on forgetting, *The Science of Fictions* and *Snakeskin* never forget that cinema itself has culpability and capability in shaping memories of the past and possible or foregone futures. Both films harness the speculative in order to remember the futures that have been foreclosed and the futures that are still possible. Yet these films that preserve memories of futures past and past futures are themselves in need of public memory. While both films have won awards at major international film festivals, *Snakeskin* has faced more difficulty in gaining recognition in its country of production. The nominations and wins by *The Science of Fictions* at the 2020 Indonesian Film Festival (presented by the Indonesian Film Board and Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology) and the 9<sup>th</sup> Maya Awards (initiated by film enthusiasts and the FILM\_Indonesia Twitter account) attest to the critical reception of the film in Indonesia. *Snakeskin* premiered in Singapore in 2015 as part of the Southeast Asian Film Festival organized by the Singapore Art Museum and only received a rating the day before the scheduled screening.<sup>27</sup> Rather unusually, *Snakeskin* must be resubmitted for classification with each proposed screening. *Snakeskin* has only been shown five times in Singapore, and not without atmospheres of pressure. While *The Science of Fictions* is represented by a sales agent (Rediance), *Snakeskin* is now out of circulation and available only via private streaming links.<sup>28</sup> *Snakeskin* has already become a haunting presence in the Singapore film scene, rarely seen but unforgotten, perhaps sheltering in reserve for an unforeclosed future.

Recall *The Science of Fictions*' inciting image of the earthbound vision of the moon relocated to Indonesia. In *Snakeskin*, the announcement of the speculative is earthbound and primal: the flickering light of a campfire against a background of darkness and glimpses of a field is all we see of the year 2066. The film begins with the close-up of a campfire that is layered with the narration that "We can see time / All the years that have gone by / All the memories that we have forgotten." The end of the film involves a transition from close-ups of leaves in the daylight at an unspecified time and place to the image of a burning history book in the fire to a torch being lit and glimpses of a woman wearing a motorcycle helmet while carrying a burning torch. The woman resembles Vicki. Has she taken advice

26 Andrew, "Beyond and Beneath the Map of World Cinema," 35.

27 One of the film's actresses, Vicki Yang, gives an account of the 2015 screening of *Snakeskin* and the struggle against erasure. See "How to Fight Crocodiles."

28 Daniel Hui, e-mail, June 2023. As of 2024, *Snakeskin* is available on [dafilms.com](http://dafilms.com).

from the time-traveling Chris Yeo to change the course of history? The narration references a police raid, a poem left behind by the cult leader, and the narrator's current abode in San Francisco, which coincides with Daniel Hui's own diasporic dwelling at the time. In this ambivalent frame narrative, nothing is resolved. In the mystery of the fire, we are left with the motifs of passing on the torch, time travel as the condition of possibility for change, escape, and exile. The focus on the image of the wood-burning fire invokes Georges Didi-Huberman's fascination with the minor, fugitive light of what he calls "firefly-images" that are "on the brink of disappearance, always altered by the urgency of their flight" and a counter-power of hope, desire, and survival in contrast to the glare of the spotlights that are on the side of power.<sup>29</sup> Despite certain pressures against Cold War memories linked to the continuing taboo of communism and the complicity of the cinematic apparatus in manipulations of time, memory, and reality, in these films, something remains like a memory of futures past and futures not yet extinguished, which is to say that there is still time for another history of these Cold War inheritances in the palimpsestic everyday.

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29 Didi-Huberman, *Survival of the Fireflies*, 84.

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## 16. A Frozen Fraternity: *Kung Fu Yoga* and Cold War Archaeologies

*Nitin Govil*

### Abstract

India-China border conflicts have played a major role in the history of the Cold War in Asia, threatening the stabilizing fantasy of inter-Asian solidarities tied to inter-civilizational pasts. Recently, even as border tensions linger, both countries have established closer economic and cultural ties. This chapter examines these proliferating exchanges, focusing on film co-production initiatives designed to create a regional cultural market. Taking the 2017 film *Kung Fu Yoga* to be emblematic of the historical contradictions of Sino-Indian encounter, I argue that the film and the discourse around it prioritize the ancient past rather than more proximate and problematic Cold War histories as part of a wider, state-led management of cultural remembrance between India and China.

**Keywords:** Inter-Asia; historiography; film co-productions; region; futurity

### Introduction: Respect History!

At a pivotal moment in *Kung Fu Yoga* (2017), the film's hero, a Chinese archaeology professor played by Jackie Chan, faces an Indian fortune hunter's skepticism about the contemporary relevance of ancient intercultural ties between their two nations. The mercenary warns the academic: "Don't get into history." While they are at odds for much of the film, both hero and villain are united by the spirit of adventurism. They are also united in their quest: both the Chinese archaeologist and the Indian treasure-seeker seek the same buried treasure, long-lost artefacts of the seventh-century Magadha era, which also saw the historical proliferation of regional Asian exchange. Both hero and villain are driven to recovering the same artefact

of cultural patrimony, but the fortune hunter is motivated by personal, dynastic ambitions while the archaeologist is driven by a commitment to the long history of inter-Asian camaraderie. Rejecting the contemporary value of a shared cultural heritage in favor of more avaricious transactions and attachments, the villain expresses disdain for bothersome, overly intellectualized engagements with the past. Professor Jack responds with his own proclamation, insisting that they “respect history.”

This mandate of respect turns out to have been crucial to the film’s narration of intercultural encounter as well as the broader political messaging surrounding the production. This was clarified at a March 2017 screening of *Kung Fu Yoga* at Delhi’s Siri Fort Auditorium, part of a larger Indian government facility that houses the headquarters of the Directorate of Film Festivals. In his introduction to the film, the Chinese ambassador to India, Luo Zhaohui, who holds a graduate degree in history, testified to the enduring respect between China and India. His remarks centered on the relevance of the film’s title, which he described as “a perfect combination of two unique cultural symbols.” His speech is worth quoting at some length:

As we all know, Yoga is not only a physical practice, but a way to purify our soul. It is an Indian cultural heritage with global influence. Today, Yoga is so popular in China, many people, especially young people, practice it and many Yoga institutes and associations [have been] established. This is one example of people-to-people interaction between our two countries. In China, there are many schools of Kung Fu. The most famous school named Shaolin Kung Fu is believed to be originated from India. The Indian Great Monk Bodhidharma travelled to China in the early 6<sup>th</sup> Century, just 200 years before the Chinese monk Xuanzang [traveled] to India. Bodhidharma meditated for 9 years at Shaolin Temple and created Shaolin Kung Fu. This is another example for people-to-people interaction between our two [countries ... ] Both India and China are countries with a long history of civilization. Our cultures not only developed independently but also interacted very closely for centuries. We have learned a lot from each other. Along with the spread of Buddhism, the exchanges in religion, culture, trade, and education flourished along the Silk Road and through land and oceans. A few months ago, I visited the Ajanta caves. The architecture, fresco, and sculptures reminded me of the Dunhuang Caves in China. We should not forget the many people, including Bodhidharma and Xuanzang, for their historic contribution to the development of cultural exchanges. We should build on their legacy. More than 1 million people traveled across the two countries last year.

They are the friendly envoys of our times. We welcome more and more people to visit each other's countries.<sup>1</sup>

In these public remarks, the Chinese ambassador emphasizes a selective and somewhat inaccurate history, articulated through a series of slipshod associations rather than an artful curation that focuses on ancient, immediate, and future cultural alignments. Touting a proliferation of affinities and shared histories that emerge from the wellspring of ancient encounters, his comments resonate with *Kung Fu Yoga's* focus on the deep past of intercivilizational Sino-Indian admiration. Why do the film and the discourse around it prioritize the ancient past rather than more proximate postwar histories? That is the broad subject of this paper. In other words, how can a critical engagement with *Kung Fu Yoga's* temporal and territorial imagination reveal a historical knowledge predicated on forgetting? How does the film's representation of archaeological practice serve to bury rather than disinter contentious legacies of encounter?

### Archaeology and the Cultural Logic of the Past

Strikingly absent in the ambassador's diplomatic refrain of "people-to-people" contact are more recent, complex geopolitical alignments. Neglected in both the film and the political discourse surrounding it is the fraught history of postwar contact between China and India, which begins with friendly exchanges of socialist internationalism between two newly energized nations in the 1950s, followed by a rapid degradation of political relations, military conflict in 1962, and decades of frosty relations in the aftermath of war. Cinematic and diplomatic desires to recover an ancient fraternal past decenter more historically proximate venues of postwar friendship like Asian cosmopolitanism, non-alignment, anti-imperial nationalism, and Third-Worldism.

Furthermore, as a story of Sino-Indian encounter, *Kung Fu Yoga* has nothing to say about the time during which the two nations went to war in one of the defining "hot" escalations of the Cold War conflict in Asia. The film's representation of a territory undefined by the political geography of state borders—a subterranean space beneath the ice of the Tibetan Plateau

1 Zhaohui Luo, "Remarks on Remarks by H.E. Ambassador Luo Zhaohui on the Screening of *Kung Fu Yoga*." March 17, 2017, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/zwjg\\_665342/zwbd\\_665378/t1446541.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbd_665378/t1446541.shtml).

where the Magadha treasure is buried—obscures the contested regionality of the India-China border, a central arena of the Cold War in Asia. *Kung Fu Yoga* attests to cinema's alignment with contemporary statecraft, prioritizing the hospitality of ancient encounters, while the space of conflict in the aftermath of the Cold War remains inhospitable representational terrain.

This chapter is placed against this soft power(ed) activation of ancient positivity, focusing instead on the production of silence around the Cold War conflict. While I pursue several lines of inquiry suggested by this absence, my primary imperative is to understand silence as a form of Cold War historicization. *Kung Fu Yoga's* rediscovery of once and future inter-Asian solidarities is predicated on a structuring repression of recent political memory. Instead of an explicit engagement with the Cold War, the film resorts to the representation of territory, particularly the frozen border wasteland where the treasure is first located, to signify the cultural imagination of the Sino-Indian conflict. This chapter thinks through this absent/present space of Cold War conflict and the visualization and narration of disappearance, while considering the political-aesthetic function of a constitutive invisibility. What follows, then, is an archaeology of Cold War silence.

*Kung Fu Yoga* is an action-comedy film that tells the story of bilateral cooperation, as Chinese archaeologists aid an Indian royal family in the recovery of lost artefacts integral to their heritage. Following a series of clues, the team locates the Magadha treasure buried beneath glacial ice in the Tibetan Plateau, described in the film as “near the border of India and China.” Just as the treasure is about to be secured, they are intercepted by mercenaries interested in selling the treasure on the black market. With competing claims to the treasure, the heroes and villains chase each other around various international locations in a *Raiders of the Lost Ark*-inspired caper. Eventually, they collectively realise that the real treasure is a clue to another hidden destination, an underground Hindu temple where they discover a font of ancient wisdom that can benefit the world.

Articulating the contemporary reimagination of bilateral politics to the recovery of ancient cultural heritage, *Kung Fu Yoga* is aligned with present-day nation branding strategies in the region. Foremost among these is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is seen as the linchpin of cooperation between the Indian and Chinese parties in the film. The BRI serves as the backdrop of the film's ‘soft power romance’ of bilateral political cooperation.<sup>2</sup>

2 Antonina Luszczkiewicz and Krzysztof Iwanek, “Kung Fu Yoga: A Chinese-Indian Soft Power Romance,” *The Diplomat*, June 1, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/kung-fu-yoga-a-chinese-indian-soft-power-romance/>.

This massive Chinese infrastructural project, originally announced in 2013 by President Xi Jinping as the “Silk Road Economic Belt,” is designed to facilitate trade through global circumnavigation, part of a “reorientation” of the global economy.

The BRI has clear connections to the heyday of Asian antiquity. As Bhoothalingam notes, the Silk Road connotes not only ancient trade connections but adventure and exploration, and its association with the BRI helps to “invoke the romance and memory of the old Silk Road but ... also add[s] its vision of a new modernity.”<sup>3</sup> This play of past and present is constitutive of “remixed” histories, which Kaur (2020) describes as part of the cultural production of “ancient-modern” identities designed to stabilize nation branding in a time of accelerating change. The three “remixed” forms of *Kung Fu Yoga*—the BRI, kung fu, and yoga—can be taken as political-aesthetic iterations of the ancient modern, which Kaur describes as a claim on civilizational timelessness and cultural resilience.

The film’s historical schema, with its focus on monumental structures and embodied practices with deep cultural roots, depicts a martial national body ready to be deployed in the service of the present. It is important to make clear that these “ancient-modern” forms do not simply evoke a nostalgic desire for the past; they are, in fact, retrospective projections of China and India’s contemporary economic and political aspirations. The ruling parties of both nations have substantiated their authority through a governing practice of rewriting history in favor of ethnic and religious majoritarianism.<sup>4</sup> In this political climate of reinvention, the heroic figure of the archaeologist—historian, adventurer, and extractivist in equal measure—can be deployed in support of national legitimacy. In the past few years, the findings of Chinese archaeologists have been used to substantiate Han and Hindu primordialism in both countries. This has helped to justify the cultural majoritarianism holding sway over identity politics in both nations, stabilizing cultural shifts since the Cold War as their respective national economies have moved from socialist and quasi-socialist regimes to engines of regional and global capitalist growth.

*Kung Fu Yoga*’s erasure of explicit references to Cold War conflict serves to reconcile ancient-modern temporalities at the expense of others. Dai Jinhua has convincingly shown that the ideological commitment to expendable histories is especially prominent in the Chinese case. In *After the Post-Cold War* (2018), Dai argues that the Cold War has been “readily forgotten” in

3 Ravi Bhoothalingam, ‘The Silk Road as a Global Brand,’ *China Report* 52, no. 1: 45–52.

4 See Jaffrelot (2021) and Carrai (2021).

China's recent past.<sup>5</sup> This logic of forgetting can also be situated in the historical forms of erasure and historical secrecy around disowned pasts like the Nanjing Massacre and the Tiananmen Square protests, which, as Hillenbrand argues, frame a constitutive collective disavowal and “public secrecy” revealing itself in “knowing what not to know.”<sup>6</sup> While the Cold War is not part of Hillenbrand's study, her work helps to demonstrate the constitutive role of secrecy in Chinese governmentality.

In China's cultural and political efforts to forget the immediate past, the Cold War, Dai suggests, “seems to have vanished without a trace, as if it were a short-lived illusion far beyond reach, like a nightmare in an ancient, hard-to-recall, and somewhat scary fairy tale.”<sup>7</sup> Dai focuses on the strategic dislocation of socialist memory in favor of a nationalism oriented towards achieving supremacy in global capitalism by “skipping particular years to become some sort of premise for the grounding of the past as history.”<sup>8</sup>

Dai's work on historical disappearance and its consequences for the imagination of the future helps to cast light on *Kung Fu Yoga's* narrative choice to depoliticize contemporary history in favor of a mythologized past. This effacing informs an uncomfortable coincidence between the represented and actual past of border conflict, territorial hostility, trans-border friendship, and regional fantasy. The film's journey traverses Asian regionality as a space of historical theater, marshalling an impressive range of temporal knowledges from geology, geography, and religion to diplomacy and politics. However, its territorial imagination is based on a constitutive historical dislocation. How might we read the silence at the heart of the film's rhetorical address? In what follows, I read the archaeology of submerged knowledge as a kind of political sublimation. Sometimes, ideological projects of excavation only bury things further.

## The Co-Production of Contested Territory

In June 2013, soon after newly installed Chinese premier Li Qiang visited India to discuss bilateral relations during a period of heightened political tensions and skirmishes along the Sino-Indian border, plans for a possible

5 Dai Jinhua, *After the Post Cold War: The Future of Chinese History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), xv.

6 Margaret Hillenbrand, *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), xviii.

7 Dai, *After the Post Cold War*, 2.

8 Dai, *After the Post Cold War*, 5.

film co-production treaty and a relaxation of the import quota were outlined at a Chinese film festival in Delhi. Around the same time in 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the Silk Road Economic Belt 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Initiative, which later morphed into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a massive trade and economic infrastructure project designed to promote and implement an alternative China-centered global trade network across Europe, Asia, Oceania, and East Africa. The reference to the ancient trade route of the Silk Road represented a return to medieval global dominance, linking it to the world recovered in *Kung Fu Yoga*, which also intimates India's fictional support of the BRI.

In fact, India was a prominent objector to the BRI, particularly its proposed construction of a China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, its proximity to contested territory in Kashmir, and the deployment of Chinese armed forces to secure the corridor. India also strenuously objected to the BRI's focus on developing China's strategic presence in the Indian Ocean. China has dismissed these territorial concerns from India and others by claiming that "we must get rid of the Cold War mentality [...] there is no hidden strategic agenda to use this initiative as a means to gain sphere of influence, still less to violate [each] other's sovereignty."<sup>9</sup> On the eve of the signing of the 2014 Indo-Chinese film co-production agreement, then, we can see the disjuncture between the treaty's framing of a collaborative regionality and the BRI's production of geostrategic space through contested territory, explicitly referenced through Cold War anxieties.

Any reference to these complex territorial anxieties was absent in the "Agreement on Audio-visual Co-production Between the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting of the Republic of India and The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People's Republic of China" signed on September 18, 2014 in Delhi. The treaty enacted a three-year, renewable commitment to the mutual expansion of national media markets, the development of cultural and economic exchange, and "the enhancement of relations between the two countries in the audio-visual field." The 2014 Sino-Indian treaty's specific mention of state ministries in its title is a departure from the practice of similar film co-production treaties—between India and South Korea, Poland, and Spain, for example—which are framed as contracts between nations

9 See Li, Zhaoxing. "Building the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st Century With Open Mind and Bold Courage." Address delivered at the International Symposium on the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st Century, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 12, 2015. [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1237173.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1237173.shtml).



rather than state administrative agencies. This suggests the prioritization of bureaucratic rationality in the administration of a financial instrument, oriented towards the speculative possibility of economic futurity rather than a renewal of a shared cultural past.<sup>10</sup> The treaty serves as a collaborative assertion of cultural power, enabled by the critical role of the state in defining the economic geography of co-production. The focus here is on expanding the visibility of Chinese and Indian media in one another's markets by facilitating the terms of entry into each other's exhibition and distribution territories and locating film within a broader remit of bilateral trade. The treaty is also an implicit attempt to create a powerful pan-Asian regional film market as a means of decentering Hollywood, serving as a launching pad for global film distribution.

Given these high industrial stakes, the production of bilateral fraternal sentiment could not be left to administrative rationality alone. The political horizon imagined by the co-production treaty aligned culture, economy, and statecraft with similar pronouncements at the time. Two examples stand out as especially illustrative of this interrelationship between culture and governance. In 2014, the same year as the Indo-Chinese audiovisual treaty, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs published a two-volume *Encyclopedia of India-China Cultural Contacts*, which notes in its preface that:

One the one hand, culture has the ability to go beyond the restraining framework of state-state relations by focusing on more broad-based people-to-people relations, and on the other, it can help to establish and develop a dialogue irrespective of and parallel to the political relationship [...] It was felt that the compilation of this Encyclopedia would be a giant effort towards "revitalizing cultural ties" by revisiting, reliving, and reemphasizing our shared cultural experience.<sup>11</sup>

While the encyclopedia invoked the idea of culture being unconstrained by politics, the state remained an important player in bilateral alignments. That is perhaps why, also in 2014, the Indian prime minister announced the "Act East" policy, a reframing of the existing "Look East" policy first enacted under the Narasimha Rao administration in 1991. The new policy was designed

<sup>10</sup> See Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as a Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (New York: Verso, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> *Encyclopedia of India-China Cultural Contacts* (2 Volumes), 2014, Public Diplomacy Division, Ministry of External Affairs (Delhi: MaXposure Media Group), xi.

to bolster India's regional power in Asia by acting as a counterweight to Chinese influence and by continuing to strengthen bilateral trade.

In this politico-cultural climate, the 2014 Indo-Chinese co-production treaty served as a way of approaching national sovereignty and regional reconciliation as co-constitutive rather than antithetical. This, as DeBoer notes, is part of the project of film co-production, which imagines "ways of regional knowing and becoming."<sup>12</sup> In the Asian context, DeBoer argues, film co-productions have emerged as powerful cultural mechanisms for the reimagining of Cold War relations, "mediating regional legacies" by reconfiguring the meanings of "Asia." In this fashion, "region" functions as an "arena of co-produced knowledge."<sup>13</sup>

As the announced first feature of the 2014 Indo-Chinese co-production treaty, *Kung Fu Yoga* explicitly engages the region as a form of spatial knowledge. Its opening sequence is particularly noteworthy in this regard. In the digitally animated opening prologue, the Tang-era journeys of the Buddhist monk Xuanzang, travelling westward to India in search of religious scriptures, are described as initiating "close ties between the two kingdoms." In addition, the Tang envoy Wang Xuance's diplomatic missions are described as "remarkable contributions to the development of relations between China and India." While Xuanzang's seventeen-year journey to India defied an official Tang-era ban on foreign travel, the film narrative focuses on bilateral cooperation, mirroring the purposes of the co-production treaty itself. The film's voiceover narrates these descriptions over a digitally animated map of the seventh-century encounter.

The digitally animated map (figure 16.1), with its lightly bordered and undifferentiated cartography, focuses on the fluidity of ancient territorial encounters. It serves, therefore, not only as a self-conscious imagination of regional cooperation in the narrative world of the film but as a reflexive representation that parallels the space of co-production: an exceptionally open environment for borderless exchange, trade, and commerce unencumbered by the contentious geography of political conflict. In its figuration of a virtual, panoramic Asian expanse, *Kung Fu Yoga* presents the region as a fantasy space separated from the more conventional geographic representation of state power. Hence, the borders of nation-states are largely absent. In this way, the cinematic spatialization is rescued from a Cold War jurisdiction, with a deterritorialized imaginary that refuses to be impeded by recent history. The political geography of the

12 Stephanie DeBoer, *Coproducing Asia: Locating Japanese-Chinese Regional Film and Media* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 11.

13 DeBoer, *Coproducing Asia*, 16.



Fig. 16.1, *Kung Fu Yoga*.

Asian Cold War conflict, with its battle over state boundaries and contested territories, serves only as an imaginative restraint. Clearly, the film prefers the representation of mythological rather than geopolitical space.

Despite *Kung Fu Yoga's* mapping preference of physiography over the illustration of state governance, the 2014 Sino-Indian co-production treaty was an avowedly political initiative, with Indian media interested in accessing the Chinese market and China committed to promoting national culture beyond its borders or the diaspora into the wider global image economy. As a “de facto collaboration with the state,”<sup>14</sup> recent film co-production treaties have been part of China’s broader nation branding strategy, designed to leverage historical and cultural heritage towards the enhancement of a Pan-Asian vision with China at the center. *Kung Fu Yoga's* many pronouncements of the achievements of Chinese archaeology can be taken as part of the reassertion of “cultural self-confidence” that is part and parcel of these cultural projects of co-production. In the film, archeology and religion are the primary means of historical inquiry, but these modes are used to bridge the cultural and geographic distance between India and China, bringing both into proximity while gesturing to the imperial majesty of the past and the friendship between the two nations in the future. Yang (2020) has argued that the 2014 co-production initiative is part of a diplomatic strategy designed to align film culture with bilateral statecraft, a fact not lost on *Kung Fu Yoga's* Indian critics, who saw the film as Chinese state propaganda, particularly around its infrastructure ambitions.<sup>15</sup>

14 Weiying Peng and Michael Keane, “China’s Soft Power Conundrum, Film Co-production, and Visions of Shared Prosperity,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 25, no. 7: 908.

15 See Andrew Pulver, “Jackie Chan Blockbuster Blasted for Indian Stereotypes,” *The Guardian*, February 6, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/06/jackie-chan-indian-chinese-co-production-kung-fu-yoga-criticised>.

While the film is deliberately placed as a public relations vehicle for the BRI as well as a defining form of epochal “worlding” and a planetary claim on China’s place in the Asian Century, it also promotes the speculative future of further bicultural collaborations. Testifying to this sense of mutual benefit, the chief executive of Eros International’s Trinity Pictures, one of the key Indian partners hoping to reap the benefits of co-productions following the signing of the 2014 treaty, put it succinctly: “we hope to present compelling film content, weaving in the socio-cultural worlds of both countries, which should appeal to the massive Sino-Indian market.”<sup>16</sup> The undifferentiated terrain of *Kung Fu Yoga*’s animated map sketches this regionalized fantasy marketspace, rejecting the border and all the Cold War conflicts associated with it, as a feature of a political cartography incapable of expressing the speculative possibilities of cultural collaboration. The visualization of this Sino-Indian regional marketspace is emptied out of any signifiers of border conflict, as if any claims on national territory are outmoded in the new global/regional order.

The national is not so easily thwarted, however.

*Kung Fu Yoga* was designed to be the much-celebrated opening feature of a slate of films announced in the wake of the 2014 Sino-Indian co-production treaty. However, the Indian producing partner Viacom 18 dropped out, unable to sign a major Bollywood star and critical of a clearly China-centered script. As a result, the film was no longer eligible for consideration under the auspices of the co-production agreement, and it therefore reverted to a Chinese production. The Indian Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, one of the original architects of the co-production agreement, might have augured this failure in its 2014-2015 Annual Report, issued the same year as the treaty itself. The cover image (figure 16.2) is a remarkable counter-representation of a regional fantasy space.

In the image, the political cartography remains invisible, but India is clearly at the center, with the national leader haloed by radiating rings of force that reverberate through undifferentiated regional terrain. The coloring of this map, with a “hot” thermal center “cooling” as the rings radiate outward, suggests an explosive power unleashed with the detonating force of nationalism (the colors match the colors of the Indian flag). This testifies to the fact that, despite *Kung Fu Yoga*’s attempts to suggest otherwise, Asia remains a contested geography, fraught with the persistence of Cold War tensions and competing national claims for regional supremacy.

16 Quoted in Nyay Bhushan, “India-China Film Co-Productions Unveiled by Eros’ Trinity Pictures,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 15, 2016. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/india-china-film-productions-unveiled-911564/>.



Fig. 16.2. Indian Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Annual Report 2014-2015 (cover detail).

When Professor Jack is first greeted by his Indian ally and counterpart in *Kung Fu Yoga*, the latter admiringly notes that his Magadha research has “filled a gap between China and India.” The figurative play of “the gap” suggests several overlapping territorial imaginations: a geographic boundary, a border, or a geopolitical space between nations; a cultural divide and a lack of understanding; and a geological cavity or formation that prevents easy passage. Ultimately, the gap’s framing of knowledge and territory reveals the presence of an unacknowledged historical interval, the Cold War itself, which is the critical lacuna that must be covered—or “skipped over,” in Dai Jinhua’s brilliant formulation<sup>17</sup>—to ensure safe transit between the ancient and the modern.

### How to Read the Cold

Following clues on a seventh-century map, *Kung Fu Yoga*’s archaeological team locates the site of the buried Magadha treasure, assisted by imaging equipment, drones, oil-digging drills, and maritime surveillance tools.

17 Dai, *After the Post Cold War*, 145.

Armed with both ancient knowledge and modern mapping and extraction technology, the team finds the treasure in a subterranean ice cavern buried under a frozen lake in the Kunlun Mountains at a site described as “near the border of China and India,” presumably somewhere on the Tibetan Plateau, at the very limits of human habitation.<sup>18</sup>

The Tibetan Plateau is an intriguing site for a film that conveniently “skips over” Cold War history, given that Tibet was the key issue and site of the Sino-Indian conflict during the period. In addition to its political and geostrategic significance, the Tibetan location also offers a vantage point from which to consider *Kung Fu Yoga*'s orchestration of geologic and geographic space. Located at the site of a geological collision between the Indian and Eurasian tectonic plates, Tibet's regional mountains map a physical space molded by Earthly action over vast spans of time. These mountains are in a location adjacent to the Indian subcontinent and the Himalayan range, which India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, prized as a location of untapped national potential shortly after India's independence in 1947. Remarking on the “vast power concentrated there which is not being used,”<sup>19</sup> Nehru signaled the possibilities of developing the Indian boundary region to extract its vast mineral and resource reserves in order to empower the nation.

Mainstream international relations theory commonly conceives of Tibet as a kind of “natural buffer” that has kept Chinese and Indian empires at relative peace for millennia.<sup>20</sup> This apparent tranquility was breached by Chinese occupation in 1950, which ran afoul of India's strategic preference for Tibetan independence and China's withdrawal. Despite efforts at de-escalation, tensions mounted in the decade that followed, with India providing refuge for the exiled Dalai Lama and China blaming its neighbor for supporting the Tibetan rebellion. Border clashes, incursions, and occupations served as a prelude to the declaration of war in 1962. India suffered a “humiliating” defeat at the hands of the Chinese military, but the war was seen in wider terms as “a defeat of democracy by Communism, a defeat of one large new nation by another, and a defeat of one ancient civilization at

18 The film's producers shot the outdoor Tibetan sequences in Skaftafell, Iceland, a location famous for its varied frozen terrain, which includes valleys, glaciers, rivers, and mountains. This same location was also used to shoot ice and mountain sequences featured in the television series *Game of Thrones* and the film *Batman Begins*.

19 Quoted in Chakrabarty 2021, 107.

20 See Rajiv Sikri, “The Tibet Factor in India-China Relations,” *Journal of International Affairs* 64, no. 2 (2011): 55–71.

the hands of another.”<sup>21</sup> Sikri describes the aftermath of the 1962 conflict as a time when “India-China relations went into a freeze,” followed by a “gradual thaw” beginning in the mid-1970s.<sup>22</sup>

In *Kung Fu Yoga*'s fantasy of civilizational reconciliation, the treasure of ancient fraternity is placed on the Tibetan Plateau, which, as I noted above, is a symbolically rich site of encounter between natural and political space. Drilling down into this space with the tools of territorial mapping, resource mining, and archaeological excavation—notably, the same planetary transformation and realignment tools of the BRI—*Kung Fu Yoga* proposes a historical thinking enabled by technological extraction. In other words, instead of obtaining natural resources, the tools of mining are engaged in the recovery of history itself. By excavating an archive of forgotten fraternity from the deep depths of the past, *Kung Fu Yoga*'s subterranean ice cavern represents the filmed space “where histories reside,” to borrow Jaikumar's felicitous phrasing.<sup>23</sup>

In the film, historical treasures dwell in an otherwise uninhabitable space: buried histories re-emerge only through acts of salvage. However, the film goes beyond evoking the historical simply through the repossession of long-lost artefacts. The environment of the frozen landscape itself inscribes a historiography that renders the Sino-Indian Cold War conflict absent in the film. Despite its spatial symmetry with the site of Cold War border conflict, the Tibetan geological formations of the film represent the geologic time of “deep history,”<sup>24</sup> dwarfing the perception of human agency. Bush's conception of “cold storage,” which describes the “glacier as an archive of natural history,” partially aligns with *Kung Fu Yoga*'s historical imagination.<sup>25</sup> Given the unbounded histories associated with geological formations of ice, the political temporalities of the recent Sino-Indian conflict are apparently lost to the immensity of time.<sup>26</sup> After all, ancient human fraternity is only made visible through a history that moves at a *glacial* pace. These geological formations simply cannot register, or “see,” the frenetic pace of more recent Cold War conflict. Starosielski calls these forms of territorial naturalization

21 Ramchandra Guha, “Jawaharlal Nehru and China: A Study in Failure?” *Harvard-Yenching Institute Working Paper Series* (2011), 1.

22 Sikri, “The Tibet Factor in India-China Relations,” 62.

23 Priya Jaikumar, *Where Histories Reside: India as Filmed Space* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

24 Chakrabarty 2021, 15.

25 Alexandra Bush, “Cold Storage: A Media History of the Glacier” (PhD. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2019).

26 See Eric Wilson, *The Spiritual History of Ice: Romanticism, Science, and the Imagination* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

“thermal sovereignty,” referring to “a means of exercising power such that the environment, rather than the state or its people, appears to be exerting force.”<sup>27</sup>

If the ice contains the possibility of salvaging certain histories, it also marks a space where other histories go to die. *Kung Fu Yoga*'s ice is a pristine storage medium for the preservation of historical artefacts, yet a precarious one for human bodies: the former can endure in history while the latter withers away. In the film, ice functions as a kind of elemental media, figuring the past as a frozen history. At this late stage, I should be more precise about my engagement with the metaphor of the cold, given that this thermal rhetoric unfolds across multiple cultural logics. “Cold” refers both to the intensity of the frozen Tibetan environment, the metaphorical “temperature” of post-war conflict, and Sino-Indian relations after the “hot” war of 1962. These multiple registers of the cold conjoin environmental, political, and historical lifeworlds. Conjoining past and present, the ice of *Kung Fu Yoga* functions as a medium through which forms of historical forgetting are inscribed.

Given its association with entropy, cold is sometimes described as a form of “nonconductive communication.”<sup>28</sup> Yet despite being a noncommunicative medium, the ice serves a powerful signifying function in the film. Not only does it preserve a particular historical order as a recoverable gift to the present—a practice of remembering enabled by technologies of planetary realignment—it also facilitates a splitting of history into convenient and inconvenient pasts based on their potential for speculative visions of new global arrangements. Such forms of forgetting cast the ancient and the immediate into a kind of asynchrony, which Dai describes as the “disjoining” of “China Time from world historical time,”<sup>29</sup> a “dissipation of the depth of Cold War history.”<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion: Digging Deeper

At a 2019 conference celebrating the recent achievements of Indian and Chinese film co-productions, Hindi film star Shah Rukh Khan noted that “we have to dig deeper and uncover more commonalities in our cultures.”<sup>31</sup> Khan’s

27 Nicole Starosielski, “Infrared,” *Society + Space*, April 1, 2019, <https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/infrared>.

28 Nicole Starosielski, “The Materiality of Media Heat,” *International Journal of Communication* 8 (2014): 2504–2508, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3298/1268>.

29 Dai, *After the Post Cold War*, 4.

30 Dai, *After the Post Cold War*, 150.

31 Quoted in Yanling Yang, “The Emergence of China-India Film Co-production: Policy and Practice,” *Transnational Screens* 11, no. 3 (2020): 212.



proclamation suggests the preeminence of archaeology as a speculative industry vernacular, aligning with *Kung Fu Yoga's* project to excavate and reveal intercultural affinity in the service of new, proliferating alignments.

Such archaeological projects can be quite shallow in effect, given that the cultural project of remembering necessitates a constitutive forgetting, even when convenient and inconvenient pasts occupy the same territory. *Kung Fu Yoga's* allegorical intention, accompanied by the diplomatic aegis of co-production as a joint project of statecraft and cinema, is to excavate and make visible a sense of *deep* regionality that nevertheless obscures the contested territory of Cold War conflict. Not only does the film engage in a remediation of the ancient and the modern, but in its circumvention of Cold War dynamics, it also maps a fantasy space of Sino-Indian regionality *outside* history.

These circumventions suit state projects and nationalist agendas in both the Xi and Modi administrations, especially given China and India's close trading partnerships and expanding economic ties. Nevertheless, military tensions, security concerns, and suspicions continue to dominate bilateral relations. *Kung Fu Yoga* may have envisioned the rediscovery of Sino-Indian friendship in the icy wasteland of an "inhospitable world,"<sup>32</sup> but its narrative strategies are equally focused on a form of temporal detachment, a historiography of Cold War forgetting. This convenient amnesia is oriented to the speculative promise of national and regional futures. After all, China's rise, as Dai suggests, "means the sinking of Cold War echoes."<sup>33</sup> Despite *Kung Fu Yoga's* archaeological premise and the avowed diplomatic embrace of digging deeper, some histories clearly remain buried in place. In the end, it is the Cold War itself that is frozen in time—yet to be discovered in the borderlands, somewhere in the vast, open temporalities of ice.

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32 Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

33 Dai, *After the Post Cold War*, 16.

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This book is about cinema and the cultural Cold War in Asia, set against the larger history of the cultural, political, and institutional linkages between the US, Europe, and Asia at the height of the Cold War. From the popularity of CIA-sponsored espionage films in Hong Kong and South Korea to the enduring Cold War rhetoric of brotherly relations in contemporary Sino-Indian co-production, cinema has always been a focal point of the cultural Cold War in Asia. Historically, both the United States and the Soviet Union viewed cinema as a powerful weapon in the battle to win hearts and minds—not just in Europe, but also in Asia. The Cold War in Asia was, properly speaking, a hot war, with proxy military confrontations between the United States on one side, and the Soviet Union and China on the other. Amid this political and military turbulence, cataclysmic shifts occurred in the culture and history of Asian cinemas as well as in the latitude of US cultural diplomacy in Asia. The collection of essays in this volume sheds light on the often-forgotten history of the cultural Cold War in Asia. Taken together, the volume's fifteen chapters examine film cultures and industries in Asia to showcase the magnitude and depth of the Cold War's impact on Asian cinemas, societies, and politics. By shifting the lens to Asia, the contributors to this volume re-examine the dominant narratives about the global Cold War and highlight the complex and unique ways in which Asian societies negotiated, contested, and adapted to the politics and cultural manifestations of the Cold War.

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