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Characters in the film try to survive by adjusting to the ‘chi [qi] of New York City’ without losing their identities or sanity. The film offers a way to think about difference in diasporic identities and experiences, but is particularly critical of (as are most of the Hong Kong films I’ve studied) American Born Chinese characters – particularly men – who are essentialised as lacking something – in this case a ‘real’ sense of historical identity. As Chu Yingchi notes, Thomas, a Chinese American Chinese husband married to a Mainland woman, does not understand his wife’s wish to bring her mother to New York because he lacks a deep understanding of how history has wounded both mother and daughter. (As movie critic Paul Fonoroff notes, this is particularly incongruous because Thomas actually speaks fluent Mandarin.)

Another critique of American men generally is, as Chu observes, present in the subplot between Huang (Taiwanese actress Sylvia Chang) and the men in her New York City existence. Chu notes, ‘[W]ith her American boyfriend, Huang’s conversation is about who owns what (earrings and a few books). With the Taiwanese man, her conversation revolves around family members, their past in Taiwan, their present in New York, and their passion for Chinese culture.’

A distinct impression left by several of these films is that the immigrant existence in New York brings with it the danger of mental instability or psychosis. Full Moon in New York, Comrades, and An Autumn’s Tale are more hopeful narratives than Farewell China and Crossings. Audrey Yue has written about Farewell China as a psychodrama not only showing the dark side of New York but exposing how national crisis in both the United States and China take a toll on children of the diaspora. Yue sees the film as portraying ‘the unspoken reality of mental illness which afflicts many Chinese students struggling overseas.’

Conclusion

I have offered a few ideas about how to read Hong Kong films as they connect with US history, culture, and identity. Flipping the script on Hollywood paves the way for a consideration of how the United States (and its people and culture) appear from the perspective of other national and quasi-national cinemas. Hong Kong films exercise a form of ‘soft power’, to use Joseph Nye’s term, in their ability to cajole movie-going Americans into taking a look at themselves in a different light. As these films address American people, places, modes of exceptionalism, culture, and history, they offer important albeit often marginalised perspectives that merit closer and more sustained consideration.

4 Hong Kong television in Chinatown

Translocal context(s) and transnational social formations

Amy Lee

Chinatown and racialisation

Chinatown has long been a complex and prototypical site for the study of Asian American racialisation in Asian American Studies. In literary and cultural studies, the racialised character of Chinatown manifests itself most poignantly in representations of Chinatown as Orientalist spectacles, and in the form of stereotypical images of the Chinese, as figures of the mysterious and unknown. In her study on Vancouver’s Chinatown, Kay Anderson argues quite forcefully that Chinatown is a discursive construction, an idea of place that is coterminous with ideas of race. The idea of Chinatown, like ideas of race, relies on representations, cultural assumptions and institutions (as well as the complicity of the community) that give these ideas legitimacy. Moreover, these ideas are for the most part a ‘European creation’; ‘Chinatown is a social construction with a cultural history and a tradition of imagery and institutional practice that has given it a cognitive and material reality in and for the West.’ White Europeans used Chinatown to produce, reproduce and manage popular notions of the Chinese. And because racialisation (the making of racial categories) and place formation are mutually constitutive and enforcing acts, ‘Chinese’ and ‘Chinatown’ became interchangeable terms in the popular imaginary.

Of particular interest to scholars is to explain the reasons for and stakes in the production of these racialised images. Lisa Lowe offers a compelling explication of the project of Asian American racialisation. She argues that Asian American racialisation allows the US to work through the contradictions between its desire for a homogenous and abstract citizenry and its needs for cheap, exploitable labour. The racialisation of the Chinese, along with other groups, serves as the basis for the consolidation of US national culture through the apparatus of exclusion. At the same time, racialisation allows for the maximisation of capitalist accumulation through the exploitation of racialised labour. Hence, ‘Asian immigrants and Asian Americans have been neither “abstract labour” nor “abstract citizens,” but have been historically formed in contradiction to both the economic and the political
spheres. By extension, Chinatown, as a racialised spatial category, can be posited in contradiction to the US national and economic spheres through its abjection from national space and as the location where exploited labour takes place. Studies on racialisation, in effect, define Chinatown primarily in relation to the national sphere in which it is located and to the Western imaginary.

More and more, recent studies on Chinatown situate it in relation to transnational processes and global structures. In Jan Lin’s study on New York’s Chinatown, he observes how the informal sector (i.e. vending) and advanced transnational sector (i.e. banking) sit in ‘direct juxtaposition’. This has led Laguerre to call Chinatown an ‘informal capital city’, a centre built on informal institutions, linked to satellite clusters, ‘reinforced by its global relations’ and the institutions and global relations of the formal city (i.e. New York, San Francisco). In Asia, a number of factors such as the accumulation of trade surpluses, political uncertainty and favourable trading provisions have caused many investors to divert their investments to the US. Because most of the overseas Chinese investments follow Chinese settlements in the US, many of these investments are funnelled through Chinatowns. Many cities in the US, like New York City, also actively woo these overseas investors in order to finance urban development projects. As a result, the influx of foreign investment from Asia has played a significant role in redeveloping Chinatown and at the same time exacerbating its class contradictions. In these studies, the issue of racialisation is no longer the primary concern in understanding constructions of Chinatown.

In light of these recent discussions on Chinatown and its imbrication in global capitalist structures, how might we understand the ways in which the racial character of this spatial category has not been elided but re-constituted? This is an important question given the ‘denationalising’ trends in recent formulations of Asian American Studies. Denationalisation has paved the way for us to conceptualise Chinatown’s horizontal relationship with a wider Chinese diaspora and Asia, specifically Hong Kong. This is revising long-standing understandings of Chinatown as situated primarily in a hierarchical relationship with the US nation-state. Ensuring these globalising trends are a seeming diffusion of the centrality of race in the constitution of Chinatown. For instance, Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini understand race, or rather cultural identity, as a strategic tool that can be manipulated by racialised subjects in the interests of capitalist accumulation. They describe Chinese cultural identity as a flexible relation of persons and groups to forces and processes associated with global capitalism and its modernities. Transnational Chinese publics develop flexible strategies of accumulating capital by colluding with state structures at times and transgressing them at others. In a similar vein, Kwai-Cheung Lo argues that in contemporary Hong Kong diasporic cinema, the diaspora is no longer based on a hierarchical relationship between the Chinese cultural core and the peripheral status of the dispersed Chinese communities’ (Lo calls this the ‘Middle Kingdom complex’), or for that matter on any essentialist notion of ‘Chineseness’. These films aim instead to transnationalise the local, in other words to ‘remake or dislocate a given space’ in order to better facilitate cultural and economic flows. Hence, he observes: ‘the local stands for the transnational Chinese’. For example, in Hong Kong films, Chinatown is a popular shooting location for films about migration and the Chinese diaspora but other than serving as a disengaged backdrop, Chinatown receives little in-depth exploration. Rather, it seems that by de-localising Hong Kong, it is possible to replicate it everywhere. At the same time, other diasporic spaces such as Chinatown are made porous for transnational flows. I am interested in how racialisation, which appears to be placed under erasure in a global world more interested in economic and cultural flows than race or ethnicity, take place. Just like diasporic forms, racial forms also change according to cultural and capitalist needs, which are more and more informed by the transnational. The goal of this essay is to elucidate an understanding of racial formation in Chinatown, as it intersects with gender and class formations, that takes into consideration the relationship between transnationalising forces and the persistent claims of US racism, which far from being alleviated are further exacerbated by transnational processes. The transnational processes I am interested in exploring are those associated with diasporic movements, colonialism and late capital.

Chinatown serves as a buffer zone, enabling the entry of much-needed capital while containing its excesses through its abjection from the nation-state. Likewise, Asia is able to prevent its own excesses from undoing its capitalist success story by channelling them through Chinatown both formally and informally (i.e. as in the case of money laundering). Whereas Asia alleges cultural proximity to Chinatown, the US alleges cultural distance: these dual processes in Chinatown expose the collusion of Asian and American capitalist interests. Peter Kwong specifically explores the relationship between Hong Kong and Chinatown in his article, ‘New York is Not Chinatown’, in which he argues that the influx of Hong Kong migrants, capital and industrial know-how to the US and the concomitant economic boom in New York City’s Chinatown paved the way for Chinatown to develop into a replica of Hong Kong. However, capitalist speculation, US Dickensian business practices and racism created instead a backwards ethnic ghetto, thus eliminating all possibilities for modernisation. Hong Kong, therefore, may be culturally similar but in the end, proves superior, thus rationalising its speculative actions in Chinatown. The figure of Chinatown as backwards and ghettoised is effected through Chinatown’s disjunctive relationship with Asia and America, a figure that alleviates as much as it threatens to expose the contradictions of US and Asian capital.
Hong Kong television and the mediation of transnational racial formations

This essay explores the transnational racial, class and gender formations constituting Chinatown with particular reference to its relationship with Hong Kong, as mediated through the circulation of Hong Kong television serials. While political, economic and social structures all play a crucial role in racialising Chinatown, the racial character of Chinatown comes through most forcefully in cultural representation, probably because culture plays the most important role in producing and reproducing our ideas of Chinatown. It is for this reason that I choose a cultural site, i.e., television, as the object of my study. Yet, exploring the racial character of Chinatown simply through representations of Chinatown says little about the transnational nature of racial formations. This is because representations of Chinatown, for the most part, do not address the complexity of its transnational relationships. The task at hand is to find a new way of thinking about Chinatown – not as a stable define-able object, which then appears in representation – as a location that is, in Appadurai’s terms, ‘primarily relational and contextual rather than as scalar or spatial’. How does this concept of locality relate to the ‘actual’ and ‘reproducible’ forms of locality such as the ‘neighbourhood’? Neighbourhoods, according to Appadurai, emerge out of specific historical circumstances, out of certain contexts. Yet, in a world where different contexts and localities inform people’s allegiances, the neighbourhood risks the dangers of ‘corrosion’. In other words, our sense of locality as being in a neighbourhood has been complicated by a sense of locality that crosses multiple sites. Furthermore, what is distinctive about our changing sense of locality in today’s world is the impact of ‘mass mediated discourses and practices’. Our sense of locality in Chinatown is one that has been eroded and mediated by mass media, i.e., the global circulation of Hong Kong television serials. Might this cultural imaginary constituted by transnational media relations say something about race in a transnational framework that Chinatown as a representative object does not?

Such an inquiry would require that we consider the ways in which circulation (i.e., the circulation of Hong Kong TV) is in itself a ‘cultural pheno-

menon’. The circulation and consumption of mass media in Chinatown may constitute meanings in ways that differ from those that have been produced within Asian American culture traditionally. If, as Lee and LiPuma posit, ‘the (post)modern transformation of social imaginaries is being accompanied by the emergence of inter-translatable transnational forms’, then we need to examine how these forms translate in and transform the Chinatown social imaginary. Of course, this is not to say that representations do not matter; in fact, this essay is for the most part an analysis of TV representations, but that context(s) (i.e., the manner of circulation) delimit and inform the ways in which we read these representations. Hong Kong TV’s circulation to US Chinatowns provides a context for analyzing these televisual representations as constitutive of Chinese American subjectivities and for asking how these representations speak to Chinatown, a relationship that cannot be founded in representation alone. Although Hong Kong TV may be an alternative site of culture (i.e., alternative to the US), whether or not it functions as a ‘counter-culture’ in a subversive way is an open question. After all, global mass media has often been associated with hegemonising and homogenising strategies. Perhaps we should think of TV as a site for witnessing and elucidating different cultures of modernity, giving rise to what Grewal and Kaplan call ‘scattered hegemonies.’

In recent Hong Kong diasporic films, the transnationalised space of Hong Kong is easily mapped onto the space of Chinatown like a spatial palimpsest, which invites us to consider how each of these spaces are constructed through the other. Though Hong Kong TV representations do not re-create this spatial palimpsest, I argue that they nonetheless perform an allegorical function that mediates the relationship between Hong Kong and Chinatown, similar to the work of the palimpsest. My understanding of allegory is borrowed from Lisa Lowe, who argues: [T]he concept of allegory presumes that social and historical processes are not transparent, taking place through what Benjamin calls “correspondences” rather than through figures that represent or reflect a given totality. By employing the use of allegory, I understand the relationship between Hong Kong and Chinatown as one that is not based on analogy or resemblance but on ‘displaced, mediated connections’. The figurations of colonialism, postcoloniality, globalism and modernity within Hong Kong TV do not reflect the processes of racialisation and globalisation in Chinatown per se, but in pointing out their contradictions and excesses, I show how they illuminate a different sense of globalism and racialisation in Chinatown from the stereotypical one. Furthermore, the circulation of HK TV elucidates the disjunctures between Asian identity and Asian American identity, postcolonial and multicultural discourses, Asian modernity and American capitalism and melodramatic excess and working class politics. What is not shown in the figures of American and Asian American representations of Chinatown may in a paradoxical way show up in the figures of Hong Kong television. My concern in this essay, therefore, is not in how Chinatown is represented on Hong Kong TV but how its absence from the text directs us to other ways it may be figured, through abstract social relations in a globalising economy, into the televisual text. From seeing Chinatown as an isolated ghetto, this essay attempts to situate it in a global network, vis-à-vis Hong Kong and its television culture.

In this essay, I analyse the treatment of domesticity and its excesses in a popular Hong Kong TV serial, Looking Back in Anger (1987). I argue that its representation of domesticity and its excesses allegorises and critiques the racialised and gendered logic of modernity. Most importantly, I consider the ways in which Chinatown is implicated in
the complex race, class and gender relations that layer this narrative. By exploring the nature of the Hong Kong – Chinatown relationship produced through the circulation of this TV text, this essay seeks to contribute to our understandings of race, gender and class in a transnational framework.

Looking Back in Anger tells the story of two brothers over a period of 30 to 40 years. The narrative begins with the execution of their mother for a murder she did not commit. They are both adopted into a family of orphans, who are all raised by a surrogate mother, Wan Yi. The bulk of the narrative takes place in the 1980s amidst talks of Hong Kong’s return to China. While Hong Kong aims to become rich and powerful by all means necessary, including murder, his older brother Geen is much more concerned with keeping his promise to this mother to take care of the family. For Geen, being a good son, brother and friend is far more important than acquiring social status or material wealth.

Colonial inequalities and the birth of the Hong Kong family empire

Looking Back in Anger begins by foregrounding the gendered nature and class biases of the colonial government, as embodied in its legal system. The year is 1961 and Geen’s mother, married to a hopeless and penniless husband, steals a wallet in a fit of desperation. It turns out the wallet was originally stolen from a man who had been murdered. She is caught by the police but instead of charging her with theft, they charge her with the murder she did not commit based on faulty evidence and presumption. The key witness in the case, himself facing rape charges, never saw the actual crime but lies in order to convict the woman. In exchange, he wants the court to lift the rape charges against him. The court, obviously more interested in prosecuting a murder case than a rape case, compiles. The colonial court system, therefore, actively reproduces gender norms and practices that make it easy to both criminalise women and belie the crimes against them.

While inequalities are staged in the courtroom, colonial institutions nonetheless offer sites where these inequalities are actively contested, such as universities. The prosecutor repeats Geen’s mother’s case in a university lecture at Hong Kong University (Hong Kong’s oldest tertiary institution) many years later, which Geen happens to overhear. He challenges him, asserting his mother’s innocence. He tells the lecturer that they were hiding at home at the time of the murder because they did not have any red envelopes to give out on Chinese New Year. The lecturer laughs and calls the excuse preposterous; he claims that anyone, no matter how poor, could surely afford to pack some red envelopes. Geen responds, ‘When you’re poor, you’re poor. You have nothing.’ Geen intervenes at this very important site of knowledge production in colonial history and reverses the erasure of class and gender politics that made it possible to wrongfully execute a poor Chinese woman. Though colonial structures, as exemplified by the

legal system and university, produce inequalities through difference, their presumed ‘democratic’ practices also provide a site that encourages contestation. This dramatisation of contention, in turn, accentuates colonialism’s reliance on patriarchy, capitalism and racism and their material consequences. Yet in the end, Geen’s intervention has no actual material consequences. Geen resorts to his family as a site where he can make change by loyally providing support and improving their circumstances. Even Hong, whose dream is to become a lawyer, gives up for fear that the handover would overturn the Commonwealth legal system, dashed his hopes of ever practising. He turns to the market instead, determined to come out successful and rich. The dual structures of the family and the market, in short, eclipse the significance of the colonial regime in the Hong Kong imaginary.

If the colonial administration forms the central structures of dominance in Hong Kong in the 1960s, it is quickly superseded by the family empire, built on family-run corporations, in the 1980s. The family empire is typically run by the patriarch of the family, who is also the CEO of his family’s corporation which wields its power through capitalist accumulation. In fact, the family empires stand in for the colonial structures, and the predominance of their patriarchal rule over the household and the corporation eclipses the signs of British colonialism. On the surface level, their rule is of a more innocuous kind, one that relies on familial love and loyalty. When one of the family corporations in Looking Back in Anger, Ngai Si, is in danger of getting bought out by a rival corporation, the CEO breaks down in tears over the prospect of losing a business built up by four generations of his family. He sees the corporation as an object of affection to be absorbed into the family structure. Running the corporation becomes naturalised as familial duty and rite of passage for men. The corporate fantasy merges with the patriarchal family romance, which together supersedes colonial narratives of self and ‘other’.

It is not surprising that the family-corporate drama would be such a popular TV genre given that the colonial government’s strategy of economic development and governance had aimed to promote laissez-faire economic policies, while at the same time avoiding the creation of mechanisms for civic and political participation and the provision of social services. This resulted in a society structured around familialism and individualism. According to Eliza Lee, the ideology of utilitarian familialism and economic individualism fostered an instrumental view toward society and the state: society and the state exist merely to advance the material interest of individuals and their family members, and the belief that ‘their life chances are largely determined by their individual efforts’. It is for these reasons that the familial and the corporate would come to represent both the private and public/political lives of Hong Kong people on Hong Kong TV dramas, while thwarting any possibility for national consciousness.
The narrative trajectory of Looking Back in Anger is for the most part an account of a family’s progression from rags to riches. By virtue of the narrative’s investment in the notion of ‘starting from scratch’, it ensures a wide audience across a Chinese diaspora familiar with experiences of displacement and relocation. It appeals to Chinese immigrants in US Chinatowns not necessarily because it helps to forge a discursive identification with a prior homeland but because narratives of immigration, building a home and Asian modernity lend themselves easily to transnationalisation. How Chinatown understands its relationship to building a home in the United States is largely informed through its encounter with fantasies of modernisation brought there through Hong Kong TV. In other words, Hong Kong TV narratives are not necessarily rooted in a diasporic culture which invokes Chinatown viewers to articulate a relationship with Chineseness as an essentialist identity but are instead rooted in a form of immigrant culture which by transnationalising the local through the trope of immigration and assimilation, produces an image of migration and settlement thoroughly mediated by global changes brought on by Asian modernity.

By forging a sense of intimacy between viewers and the grandiose families of TV melodramas, TV also forges a sense of intimacy between viewers and the histories that interpenetrate the familial. The family feud in Looking Back in Anger is intricately embedded in colonial politics (a legal injustice that one lawyer helps to perpetuate is remembered and invoked by the family of the victim years later), thus illuminating the ways in which colonial modernity has through and through intervened in traditional forms of intimacy. As the case of Looking Back in Anger reveals, sites of intimacy very often mediate what we understand to be diasporic, political, economic and historical.

There is another sense of the historical that I want to invoke here – though a tentative formulation at the moment – that surfaces from the nature of TV’s circulation. For the Chinatown that took part in Hong Kong history but never became Hong Kong, Hong Kong popular culture is also perhaps a signifier of its lack of modernisation and its time-lag vis-à-vis Hong Kong. Indeed, what is popular in Chinatown is almost always guaranteed by its popularity in Hong Kong, a trace of Chinatown’s enduring relationship with Hong Kong rather than an independent cultural phenomenon. In other words, Chinatown is always on the receiving end of Hong Kong culture. The popular becomes a marker of temporal (and I would also say class) difference and it is this difference along with the lack of Chinatown representations on TV dramas that signifies the historical processes of uneven development in modernity and solidifies Chinatown’s allergy to US and Asian modernities.

The crisis of capital: contradictions of class, race and gender

Although the family romance obscures the significance of colonialism in Hong Kong in the 1980s, the impending crisis of 1997 unleashes middle-class
anxieties about the end of capitalism and family empires. Hong, like many others, tries to profit from the Sino-British talks by capitalising on the talks’ colonial discourse becomes merely another excuse to play it big. The crisis of capitalist activity in *Looking Back in Anger*.

This fervour is probably no better exemplified than by Hong. Not only does he play the market rigorously, he schemes to marry the daughter of the CEO of one of Hong Kong’s most prominent corporations in order to pave his road to the top. He sees his marriage as purely an economic transaction and while this is a defining characteristic of the family empire, Hong makes no pretences about the romance of family and love. As such, Hong unmistakably exposes the contradictions of the family romance and its function in naturalising and depoliticising the ideology of capitalism.

In *Looking Back in Anger*, Hong’s turn towards evil comes full circle not in Hong Kong but in Malaysia. He kills both his ex-girlfriend and foster mother there and freely returns to Hong Kong. Malaysia is represented as a place where murder is possible, where the police lack the resources to investigate a crime. This is a metaphor for the lack of resources in Malaysia. Colonial biases and hierarchies are further revealed when efforts to extradite Hong to Malaysia, where he killed both his ex-girlfriend and foster mother, fail because the Malaysian police could not guarantee that the translations into English of key witness accounts would be accurate. Although the court trial was conducted in Cantonese, English was still centralised as the official medium of communication, which works to marginalise non-English speakers and non-English speaking nations.

This much-used trope of using other places, usually in Southeast Asia, to extend the reach of Hong Kong modernity is a way to map the geopolitics of the region. Hong Kong must be able to envision and position itself in the identity of its identity. Furthermore, these places are needed to absorb the excesses of capitalism in order to prevent the system from collapsing on itself when the excesses become too much to handle. The ‘popular’s’ role in Chinatown, Asian regions in the West, Hong Kong is a super-modern city that produces cultural meanings whereas those in Chinatown merely absorb these meanings, and always with a temporal delay. The role of Hong Kong in Asia is often centralised in relation to the marginalisation of poorer nation states such as Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines and the racialised peoples who live there. In this sense, the deployment of race in Hong Kong TV family melodramas not only positions Chinese immigrants in the United States in relation to their Hong Kong compatriots, it also shapes the way Chinese Americans imagine themselves in relation to other racialised groups in the United States and beyond. Global geopolitical relationships, therefore, also inform domestic racial relations.

As masculinity takes a destructive turn, women are also almost invariably sacrificed in its path of rampage. The anxieties of masculinity are projected onto the bodies of women, and more specifically maternal bodies. In *Looking Back in Anger*, when Hong’s ex-girlfriend finds out she is pregnant and wants Hong to marry her, he decides to kill her instead. Hong is threatening his boss’s daughter and does not want anything or anyone to get in his way. When his ex-girlfriend persists, he decides the best solution is to get rid of her permanently. Her desire to have a family becomes a threat to him. He also kills his foster mother when she finds out what he has done. Mothers threaten male subjectivity and must be destroyed in order to privilege male subject formation. Whereas abject masculinity in *Looking Back in Anger* offers a mirror into the society that has created these monstrous men, women offer another kind of critique, one that shows how masculinity makes its claims on and through women’s bodies.

In *Looking Back in Anger*, although Hong is executed in the end, we are left wondering if there will indeed be a peaceful and desirable society. The abject figure is rejected and presumably social order is restored. Geen is left as the heroic figure, a romanticised father-figure, who loves his brother and does everything he can for him but in the end finds out that it was Hong who killed his son. Geen finally realises that his younger brother is irredeemable and colludes with the Malaysian state to capture and execute Hong. Geen plays the father-figure here, always offering love but sometimes dispensing punishment. He holds on to the old-world logic of the importance of fraternal loyalty. In fact, his fraternal loyalties to his ex-prison mate offer an alternative rags-to-riches narrative to the one Hong tells. He is only able to succeed as a businessman because of his reliance on this fraternal network. At face value, it seems that Geen is the ideal masculine subject to be emulated.

However, his wife, Guan, offers a very significant critique of his paternal role, which problematises notions of ‘good’ patriarchy. She refuses to forgive Geen for the death of their son and believes that Hong is really a product of her husband’s doing, who out of family loyalty, Geen has always helped Hong out, including helping him escape punishment for his wrongdoings (until Hong pulls the last straw when he kills Geen’s son). She critiques the romanticisation of the good father as remedy for the violence of masculinity. For the figure of the good father continues to perpetuate the logic of patriarchy, which depends on violence against women. By questioning patriarchy, his wife destabilises his sense of himself. When she leaves him, Geen refuses to believe her and promises to wait for her, believing that fate will bring
Looking Back in Anger ends with Geen expressing his willingness to give up his paternal and filial loyalties and successful business to be with the love of his life. He wants only to live a simple, happy life with his lover. As such, Guan represents a kind of bourgeois, middle-class lifestyle unburdened by the whims of the economy and the demands of politics. What is aimed for, in other words, is the wilful forgetting and occlusion of the politics of colonialism, postcolonialism and Asian modernity. Yet, Guan never returns; this haunts the text by disallowing the fulfilment of a fantasy of romance, family and reunion. Perhaps, the uncertainty that Guan inscribes at the end of the serial opens up room for imagining new, as yet unarticulated possibilities, in faraway places. 

For the Chinatown viewer, this serial offers the fantasy of class mobility, and hence a way to escape the poverty and racial abjection that inscribe their experiences. Yet, the presence of the wounded woman and the uncertain ending buffer, in a sense, identification with either the protagonist (the hero) or the antagonist (the abject) and lead us to identify with a different, yet unnamed, future (the female figure). The fantasy of class mobility that the serial builds up collapses in the end, thus inculcating a sense of despair in the face of bourgeois wealth. What we desire is the return of the fleeting woman, which will resolve the contradictions and excesses of capital and fulfill the serial’s dream for a future bourgeois existence devoid of politics. Yet she never returns and becomes instead the abject of this fantasy. And in the desire to ‘look’ for her, we may end up with a new vision, one that must exceed the limits of our location.

Conclusion

In this essay, I treat Hong Kong TV as a kind of chronotope, a concept that Ong and Nonini borrow from Bakhtin to describe ‘time-bound, irreversible paths or itineraries of connection between places that are spanned by imagined and remembered narratives of Chinese transnational practices and discourses’. Hong Kong TV permeates the path between Hong Kong and Chinatown and upon reaching Chinatown becomes a part of Asian American culture. On the one hand, I am interested in a critical reading and analysis of Hong Kong TV representations of domesticity, race, class and gender. On the other hand, because of the circulatory nature of these TV texts, it is impossible to analyse these representations as self-contained within the text. In this essay, I have employed critical and cultural theories to explore the ways in which televisual content intermingle with different cultural concerns and contexts (i.e. Hong Kong and Chinatown). In other words, televisual meanings are not constructed out of individual encounters with the televisual text but rather gain legibility through the cultural milieu they travel through and in a sense, emblematise. The disjunctures that arise between reception context(s) in the different ways that televisual texts are given meaning provide a point of departure for understanding transnational
social formations as 'displaced connections'. Popular culture, specifically television, offers specific strategies of forming a transnational diasporic imaginary, strategies that complement and problematise the institutional and human networks that traverse the path between Hong Kong and Chinatown. I choose to explore the specific relationship between Hong Kong and Chinatown because I see it as a kind of spatial palimpsest paradigmatic of changing forms of globalism and diaspora. It is also my hope that this study provides new ways of thinking about Asian American studies in a transnational framework, which does not take America and Asia as separate categories. Furthermore, this essay asks that we destabilise the notion of Chinatown as an (Orientalist) object and isolated ghetto and to see Chinatown as figured in other ways through its lived relations (and globalised social formations) and popular practices (i.e. TV-viewing). A fruitful extension of this project might be to pursue some of the more sociological and anthropological issues involved in a transnational study of race, gender and class in the particular contexts of Hong Kong and Chinatown.

5 Thailand in the Hong Kong cinematic imagination

Adam Knee

In the effort to more fully understand Hong Kong cinema’s global context—and to avoid an over-reliance on sometimes problematic East/West oppositions in doing so—it is particularly productive to examine that cinema’s connections to Thailand. Thailand’s relationship is especially strong in that the country has long been a significant market for Hong Kong film, in that numerous Hong Kong-Thailand co-productions have been mounted over the years, in that Hong Kong has wielded a strong stylistic influence over Thai cinema, and, perhaps most strikingly, in that Thailand has long been a favourite location for the filming of Hong Kong productions. The importance of Thailand as an overseas market is not surprising considering both its proximity and its substantial population of Chinese descent, a largely urban population responsible, as in other Southeast Asian countries, for a disproportionate amount of the country’s economic activity. Indeed, the Hong Kong-Thailand cinematic connection, both in terms of film distribution and co-production, is fostered in part by Sino-Thai involvement in the film business; for example, Sahamongkol Film, one of Thailand’s most important distribution and production companies, and the main distributor of Hong Kong films in Thailand, is run by a Sino-Thai family. A number of filmmakers have in fact significantly blurred Hong Kong-Thailand cinematic boundaries with lives and films which straddle both places: Hong Kong-based producer-director Peter Chan, who lived in Thailand as a child, has been involved with a number of high-profile Thai-Hong Kong co-productions through his Applause Pictures, while the Hong Kong-born twins Danny and Oxide Pang are filmmakers whose careers have likewise moved fluidly between Hong Kong and Thailand, as they work on a range of films from each industry, as well as co-productions.

The existence of a strong Sino-Thai community and the ease of movement for film professionals between Hong Kong and Thailand do not, however, go very far toward explaining the prevalence of Thailand location shooting for Hong Kong films. Law Kar and Frank Bren report such location shoots (along with co-production) picking up steam during the 1950s. Indeed, in Cathay’s 1959 film Air Hostess, an incidental dialogue exchange suggests that Thai locations are by that point already commonplace (an actress en

26 Ibid.

27 Stokes and Hoover, City on Fire, p. 154.

28 Chu, Hong Kong Cinema, p. 106.

29 P. Fonoroff, At the Hong Kong Movies: 600 Reviews from 1988 till the Handover, Hong Kong, Film Biweekly, 1998, p. 73.

30 Chu, Hong Kong Cinema, p. 108.


4 Hong Kong television in Chinatown: translocal context(s) and transnational social formations

1 Classic examples include Roman Polanski’s Chinatown (1974), where Chinatown figures most prominently in the film’s famous last words, ‘Forget it, Jake, it’s Chinatown’, uttered in the face of an unsolvable mystery. Another example is Michael Ciminno’s Year of the Dragon (1985), which depicts Chinatown as a world of crime and vice. See Ford’s essay, Chapter 3, this volume.


7 Lin, Reconstructing Chinatown, p. 17.

8 Ibid., p. 86.


11 Hong Kong has long been a privileged site in the Chinese diaspora as a cultural centre responsible for disseminating information and ‘Chinese’ culture (i.e. news, films, television serials, magazines, etc.) to Chinese communities throughout the world. Hong Kong culture mediates, in a sense, our notions of the Chinese diaspora or what is otherwise known as Greater China.


13 Ibid., p. 20.

32 E. Lee, Gender and Change in Hong Kong: Globalization, Postcolonialism, and Chinese Patriarchy, Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 2003.
33 Ibid., p. 7.
34 It is also important to note that Hong Kong was never and could never aspire to be a nation. Therefore, national consciousness was never a constitutive part of Hong Kong imaginary despite the fact that many have expressed patriotic feelings towards China.
35 Here, I am drawing an analogy between the colonial apparatuses used in governing Hong Kong and the state apparatuses at work in Chinatown.
36 Cf., Lo, op. cit.
37 That is, the relationship between Hong Kong and Chinatown is grounded in their different relationship to modernity, as understood teleologically. Hong Kong's successful modernization becomes the standard against which Chinatown's is measured. Certainly, while a popular sentiment, to frame modernity in terms of progress and teleology obscures the other ways in which Hong Kong and Chinatown might interpret their relationship (i.e. as transnational public sphere, etc.). Furthermore, whether or not this temporal gap actually exists is highly disputable. Nevertheless, the Hong Kong and Chinatown's distinctive modernities (though the diaspora is not a unified whole as it is often represented) but always internally fractured. This calls for more comparative work to be done within the diaspora locations. Since the diaspora is often located within the laps of the national and of their relationship.
38 Geen's ex-girlfriend is Wan Yi's niece who lived with them for a period. They date for a short time before he gets together with Guan. They break up after Guan gets to jail for a crime his brother commits. As a dutiful brother, he bails during a trip to Malaysia. Geen goes looking for her and finds his ex-girlfriend's help. This scene occurs as she goes looking for him at the train station.
39 He could not simply break her heart and leave her because he wants to maintain his appearance as a gentleman.
40 Guan and Geen finally marry and have a baby son together. Guen runs a very successful restaurant business and later inherits Guan's family business after her father passed away. For a period, they lead a very happy and comfortable life together.
41 Geen goes to jail for a crime his brothers commit (running a man over with a car). After he is released, he gets together with his ex-prison-mates and opens up a very successful restaurant, which he later expands.
42 R. Chow, 'The Secrets of a Chinese Abjection', in M. Morris and B. de Bary (eds.), Race, Panic and the Memory of Migration, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2001, pp. 53-77.
45 However, it is important to not romanticise the ghastliness of the women for the text also gestures towards the material conditions that render women invisible in the first place. As such, we must always think about the ephemeral dimensions as well as the materiality of the ghost and of the work it does.
46 Ong and Nonini, op. cit., p. 17.
Notes

47 This is not to minimise the complexity of the ways in which individuals receive and interpret televised representations. Reception contexts are never homogeneous and individual accounts will certainly complicate and nuance any of the generalisations put forth in this essay. I leave this aside as my focus is not about the ethnographic but the textual.

5 Thailand in the Hong Kong cinematic imagination
5 The Hong Kong Happy Man, another Hong Kong Movie Page: www.kowloonside.com/movies/thehongkonghappyman.html (accessed 31 March 2004).
7 While the majority of films to be discussed here are purely Hong Kong-financed productions, several Hong Kong co-productions in which there is clearly substantial creative and administrative input from Hong Kong personnel will be discussed as well.
8 In a sequel, The Angry Guest (1972), this Bangkok-Hong Kong opposition still obtains, but with Tokyo added as a third city, figured as more modern still than Hong Kong.
10 These two surprisingly crowd-friendly 2004 films have quite a number of striking similarities, which space precludes from exploring more fully here. In both films, familial obligations and mistaken identities precipitate parallelled negotiations and redefinitions across boundaries of nation, gender, and sexuality.
11 To extend this allegory further: if there are ‘real’ Thai ghosts here, they are the ghosts of unseen Thai personnel (along with unseen settings and equipment), invisible figures the traces of whom may hardly be detectable in the completed films. This is perhaps most strongly the case for those Hong Kong films that are shot in part in Thailand with Thai labour, but which include no character or space recognisable as Thai within their narrative discourse: for example, the recent Hong Kong-Hollywood co-production The Medallion (2003). In the instance of that film, these Thai people (and settings) interestingly make their spectral return on the DVD, where, in 40 minutes of behind-the-scenes footage, they can be seen meeting the needs of their Hong Kong employers.

6 Hong Kong-Australian Imaginaries: Three Australian films by Clara Law
26 In Wang and Mitchell, ‘Interview with Clara Law and Eddie Fong’.