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Crime and History Intersect: Films of Murder in Contemporary Chinese Wenyi Cinema

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Crime and History Intersect: Films of Murder in Contemporary Chinese Wenyi Cinema

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B.A., Trinity College, 2015

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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By Tianyi Yao

Around the year 2006, both Mainland China's and Hong Kong SAR's film industries had undergone significant transformations following unprecedented economic liberalization and volumes of capital flow as well as shifts in the political environments. The restructured film landscapes as a result facilitated a new mode of filmmaking that nonetheless inherited a historical concept from Chinese cinema: the wenyi (literary arts) film. Within this particular category of films, there emerged several key works that ventured into the dark realm of murder, possibly the most provocative subject matter accessible to wenyi cinema. Borrowing from a wide array of social theorists such as Michel Foucault, Crime and History Intersect: Films of Murder in Contemporary Chinese Wenyi Cinema dissects a series of Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong films produced after 2006, especially focusing on their formally distinct interrogations of the act of killing. The project thus reveals a complex web of genre subversions, social commentaries, philosophical contemplation, and homicidal violence woven across a group of notable films, two discrete film cultures, and a mix of Chinese and Western art histories. Through the analyses of five representative wenyi films featuring murder, this project explores the three key tenants that define contemporary wenyi cinema, namely tragedy, subtlety, and humanism.

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Introduction

Around 1994, American film scholar Nick Browne noticed that in the new capitalist era of the People's Republic of China, a specific kind of film stood out for its critical perspective towards both the socialist realism tradition which has dominated Chinese cinema for decades since 1949 and the Confucian cultural politics that has dominated the Chinese lifeworld for centuries. However, Browne used Western concepts, vocabulary and methodology to identify this group of films: "the most complex and compelling popular film form that embodies the negotiation between the traditional ethical system and the new state ideology, one that articulates the range and force of the emotional contradictions between them, is what is known in the West as 'melodrama.'"[1] Unfortunately, while Browne has described a kind of Chinese cinema very unique in its presentation and reception, his overly simplistic decision to equate it with melodrama overshadowed that specific combination of qualities—being complex, compelling, popular, and able to articulate a wide variety of emotional contradictions etc.

24 years later, Chinese cinema has undergone revolutionary shifts with private film companies competing with state film studios on an equal footing while the influx of foreign films increases with each year. Even in this entirely renovated film landscape, however, the distinct group of films similar to Nick Browne's Chinese 'melodramas' never went away. In 2018, another film scholar Elena Pollacchi writes in her article that "a set of films has managed to circulate in domestic theaters without conforming to the normative state narrative. Rather, by

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[1] Nick Browne, "Society and Subjectivity: On the Political Economy of Chinese Melodrama," in *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*, ed. Nick Browne et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 40.

means of *inclusion and multiplicity*, they have unpacked, subtly undermined, and thus challenged the normative narrative of the China dream."[2] Pollacchi chooses three films as representative of this different trend of Chinese "art" cinema: Jia Zhangke's *Mountains May Depart* (2015), Diao Yinan's *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (2014), and Ann Hui's *The Golden Era* (2014). Although she does not categorize these films under a genre such as melodrama, Pollacchi instead examines them in opposition to the new China Dream campaign launched by the Chinese Communist Party. Both Browne and Pollacchi are able to recognize a special variety of the Chinese cinema that deviates from other films on the market, but neither seems to be able to grasp the exact qualities of those irregular films without either uncritically drawing a connection to the Western melodrama or positioning them against particular political events. Therefore, in this project I would like to take up Browne and Pollacchi's threads of the unique and often inconspicuous group of films in China which defy normative discourses, enjoy a small but vocal following, and partake of genre conventions both domestic and foreign. And I will explore this particular group of films not with a Western concept, but a Chinese vernacular from the early 20th century—"wenyi," a concept that I will elaborate on in the following sections.

Wenyi, as I will point out, as a Chinese mode of filmmaking, encompasses a wide range of different themes and topics as exemplified by Pollacchi's selections: *Mountains May Depart* deals with the rapidly changing China in the past and the future; *Black Coal, Thin Ice* explores the intricacies of a series of unsolved murders; *The Golden Era* is a period drama that pays respect to China's intellectuals during the Sino-Japanese War. In order to narrow my research scope, I am then selecting films that broach one particular subject matter as the through-line to

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[2] Elena Pollacchi, "Jia Zhangke's *Mountains May Depart* (2015) and the China Dream, or How Chinese Art Cinema Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Chinese Soft Power," in *Screening China's Soft Power*, ed. Paola Voci and Luo Hui (New York: Routledge, 2018), 213.

analyze the new wenyi films made in Mainland China and Hong Kong since 2006; and that subject matter is murder which, I will elaborate below, is the most extreme form of physical violence compatible with the wenyi mode of filmmaking. I will also identify three themes as the most prominent components that define a contemporary Chinese wenyi film, namely tragedy, subtlety, and humanism. In this introductory chapter, I will briefly review the political and economic background from which the new wenyi films emerged, the history of wenyi, the qualities of wenyi cinema, and the significance of murder as a dramatic device in this particular study.

The Evolving Chinese Film Industry

The advent in the late 1980s and 1990s of the Sixth Generation of directors in Mainland China saw a massive growth in Chinese independent and underground cinema, with filmmakers such as Wang Xiaoshuai and Jia Zhangke garnering wide international acclaim with their refreshing aesthetics and daring choices of cinematic themes.[3] Yet this growth was very much an undercurrent eclipsed by the simultaneously rising commercial appeals of the Fifth-Generation filmmakers, marked by the global success of Zhang Yimou's epic *Hero* (2002). The Sixth Generation had a tremendously difficult time carving out a market of its own due to severe lack of channels to exhibit the films by younger, unaffiliated filmmakers. In director Jia Zhangke's 2002 film *Unknown Pleasures*, one character asks a pirate VCD seller for *Xiao Wu* (1997) and *Platform* (2000), Jia's first two underground features. This self-referential gag from *Unknown Pleasures* actually demonstrates one of the most serious obstacles facing Chinese independent and underground filmmakers—most of the distribution of their independent and

[3] Xiaoping Lin, *Children of Marx and Coca-Cola: Chinese Avant-Garde Art and Independent Cinema* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), 91-4.

underground films was through bootleg VCDs and DVDs. Piracy aside, the few occasions when independent or underground films were screened publicly took place in far from desirable venues.[4] Adding to the precarious economic situation is the draconian state censorship which banned or threatened to ban these films because they failed to comply with state regulations in public distribution procedure or permissible contents. Wang Xiaoshuai's *The Days* (1993), *Frozen* (1996), *Beijing Bicycle* (2000), Zhang Yuan's *Beijing Bastards* (1993), *Sons* (1996), *East Palace, West Palace* (1996), Jia Zhangke's *Xiao Wu* (1997), *Platform* (2000), and Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* (2000) were all forbidden to be screened in commercial theaters or distributed legally through physical media.

Although effectively forced to the underground, the young generation of filmmakers proved their success in the international stage, winning many awards at foreign film festivals. Their growing prestige and consistent plea to the state censors yielded significant progress in the negotiation between the opposing cultural forces. In November 2003, the State Administration of Film and Television contacted its "repeating offender" Wang Xiaoshuai for a panel discussion between the state department and almost all the representatives of Chinese independent filmmakers. This panel, later called the "11.13 meeting," opened up new communications between the artists and government administrators. In the meeting, the state representatives considered the filmmakers' demand that the latter's past works be rehabilitated. While the government representatives did not openly endorse those films, they lifted the de facto ban of many directors present, including Jia Zhangke, Wang Xiaoshuai and Lou Ye.[5] This initial

[4] Jia Zhangke recounted a story in *Jia Zhangke, A Guy from Fenyang* (2014) in which he was invited to screen *Platform* at a café in Beijing during the day. Since the café had glass ceilings, the owners and patrons had to string a tarp over the roof for the film to be shown. Coupled with the poor quality of the bootleg copy, this incident deeply saddened Jia.

[5] Rui Feng, "贾樟柯娄烨王小帅等联名上书电影局(附全文) (Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye, Wang Xiaoshuai etc. Appeal to the Film Bureau (Full Document Attached))," Sina, Entertainment Channel, December 3, 2003, http://ent.sina.com.cn/2003-12-04/1024246016.html.

approval improved the situation for independent filmmakers as they were allowed to slowly re-integrate their work into mainstream distribution and to be promoted as Chinese filmmakers with unique visions and international acclaim.

Meanwhile, a visible shift occurred in the mainstream market as well: many of the Fifth-Generation directors began to favor financially successful films that contrasted dramatically with their earlier works which were more artistic but comparatively less profitable. Director Zhang Yimou epitomized this shift to commercial films from artistic films as his passion project *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* (2005) received very mild attention while his other two high-profile ventures—*House of Flying Daggers* (2004) and *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006)—gained huge traction both domestically and internationally. However, instead of resorting to commercial access as Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Feng Xiaogang did, the younger generation of newly "rehabilitated" directors chose the state-approved opportunities and channels in the 2000s to resume the development of their artistic visions despite all the obstacles posed by the remaining censorship apparatus and the profit-driven market.[6] In general, nevertheless, the new generation managed to secure a small space in the market to accommodate their works, specifically the new wenyi market of Chinese cinema.

What Is Wenyi Film?

What is wenyi—this "enigmatic nomenclature even to the Chinese"?[7] Critic Stephen Teo argues that it is a uniquely Chinese genre that shares considerable commonalities with the

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[6] For example, director Lou Ye was banned from film production based in Mainland China for five years after his controversial *Summer Palace* (2006). During this ban, however, he was able to secure investment from France and complete *Spring Fever* (2009), although the film was never legally released in China.

[7] Stephen Teo, "Chinese Melodrama," in *Traditions in World Cinema*, ed. Linda Badley, R. Barton Palmer, and Steven Jay Schneider (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2006), 203.

Western genre of melodrama.[8] *Wenyi* (文艺), short for "literature-art"—its modern usage in the Chinese language was originally borrowed from the Japanese word *bungei* (文芸) that denotes "the art of the language" — traditionally exclusively referred to written texts, thus tying wenyi to the art of literature.[9] Interestingly, this seemingly narrow definition led to semantic confusion about the word's meaning in Japanese and Chinese. For example, the historical concept of the Renaissance was first translated in Japanese as *bungei fukkō* (文芸復興), but while contemporary Japanese generally uses the phonetic translation of Renaissance, *bungei fukkō*'s Chinese counterpart, *wenyi fuxing* (文艺复兴), still remains the only term for the Renaissance, encompassing not just literature but also an array of visual arts. It is no coincidence then that when wenyi appears in tandem with other phrases, such as *wenyi qingnian*/*youth* (文艺青年), it bears connotations beyond mere literary qualities. The same should and does apply to *wenyi pian/film* (文艺片).

The earliest development of wenyi cinema started in the 1920s when wenyi pictures specifically referred to films adapted from wenyi fictions which, in accordance with the Japanese origin of "wenyi," were essentially works of fine literature e.g. Tolstoy's *Resurrection*.[10] Soon after, wenyi cinema was incorporated into the Chinese nation-building enterprise which led to the production of films that deal with socio-political issues which, at the time, often relate to patriotic and left-wing causes against a variety of oppressors ranging from evil bureaucrats to foreign invaders.[11] However, a divergence in wenyi's definition occurred towards the end of

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[8] Stephen Teo, "Film Genre and Chinese Cinema: A Discourse of Film and Nation," in *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 290n2.
[9] Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, "Pitfalls of Cross-cultural Analysis: Chinese Wenyi Film and Melodrama," *Asian Journal of Communication* 19, no. 4 (December 2009): 445.
[10] Ibid., 447.
[11] Teo, "Chinese Melodrama," 204-5.

WWII as the communist regime under Mao Zedong in Mainland China, Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist regime in Taiwan, and the British colony of Hong Kong offered three different interpretations of the term. Wenyi under both Mainland and Taiwan's respective dictatorships became propaganda vehicles that helped convey the two regimes' disparate political ideals with the former especially emphasizing socialist realism aesthetics through wenyi.[12] Many Chinese intellectuals escaped or exiled to Hong Kong during the war years and after the communist victory in 1949 maintained their wenyi sensibilities of the pre-war years, but this time imbued with much more sentimentality.[13] As Mainland China's political oppression gradually intensified in the late 1950s, film production in general became entirely subsumed under state politics before reformist policies started in 1978. The rise of Hong Kong's genre films gradually took over the market in the late 1960s, creating two of the most recognizable Asian film genres: wuxia films and kung-fu films; the two are often categorized under the martial arts genre. The growing genre distinctions in Hong Kong then narrowed wenyi's definition to mostly melodramatic and sentimental romances.[14] For scholars such as Nick Browne, Emilie Yeh, or Stephen Teo, wenyi is such a multifaceted concept precisely because of its divergent development under different political and economic situations. The modern audience entering the 21st century also faced a film category that could describe a variety of narratives from progressive social dramas to meandering romantic tales to fine literary adaptations.

Before delving deeper into the nuances of today's wenyi cinema, it is worth discussing a 2006 event that signified not only a major shift in China's film landscape, but also the shift in the colloquial definition of wenyi. By 2006, wenyi cinema no longer carried the same meaning as it

[12] Yeh, "Pitfalls of Cross-cultural Analysis," 448.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 449.

did in the 1920s, 30s or even the 80s; the general public, popular criticism, and the state-owned media in China had all responded to the drastic market shift in the new millennium and redefined film categorizations. In 2006, two Chinese films caused quite a media stir by sharing the same domestic premiere date—Zhang Yimou's *Curse of the Golden Flower* and Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* (2006) both premiered on December 14th 2006. Thanks to *Still Life*'s unexpected success at the Venice Film Festival with Jia Zhangke taking home the Golden Lion Award, a number of Chinese intellectuals voiced their dissatisfaction with commercial Chinese films' increasing emphases on commercial gains, exemplified by the "soulless" blockbusters, instead of artistic merit, leading to widespread debate about the prevailing conditions of the film industry and market in China.[15] While *Curse of the Golden Flower* garnered $78.5 million in global box office with a budget of $47 million, *Still Life* claimed only a tiny fraction of the whole market with $2.5 million in box office earnings on a $1.05 million budget. Following this debate, popular accusations of monopoly aimed at the much richer and more powerful New Pictures behind *Curse of the Golden Flower* rose to the fore, so a new public discourse emerged in order to rationalize this imbalance of power clearly determined by market economy yet also in a self-proclaimed socialist country, deflecting a matter of economics to a matter of taste : *Curse of the Golden Flower*, being the blockbuster that sought to recreate the success of *Hero*, naturally drew the audience's attention with its elaborate set-pieces and unparalleled star-power; *Still Life*, although a Golden Lion winner at the Venice International Film Festival, naturally attracted much less audience due to its lack of stars or a sensational story.[16]

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[15] Liping Sun, "贾樟柯抵抗《黄金甲》 中国电影走向何处 (Jia Zhangke Against *Golden Flower*, Where Does Chinese to Go)," People.cn, Culture, December 15, 2006, http://culture.people.com.cn/GB/22219/5172491.html.
[16] A discussion panel of several industrial professionals, including Wang Xiaoshuai, appears on a TV show on the channel CCTV 12. The debate demonstrated this shift in narrative regarding wenyi films' market value very clearly as industry defenders deferred to the "audience's choice." See "央视《大家看法》：黄金甲引发的争议(上) (CCTV's *Dajia Kanfa*: Controversies Sparked by *Golden Flower* (Pt. 1))," Sohu, News, February 4, 2007,

If we follow an older description of wenyi, for instance— "rooted in the industry's practice of sourcing stories from literature… [w]enyi film centers on the depiction of emotion and more important, it takes on a form of 'excessive expression'"[17]–then Zhang Yimou's melodramatic blockbuster would fit the classification much better than would Jia Zhangke's arthouse venture. Nevertheless, the new mode of wenyi cinema includes much more than just the narrative contents within the texts; the production, distribution, exhibition, and reception of the texts are all factored into the updated concept. Emilie Yeh, in her critique of past interpretations of wenyi, points towards several defining characteristics that do not correspond to Western terminologies such as melodrama. Here I would like to argue that among Yeh's examples, three of them can be combined to form what is closest to the contemporary understanding of wenyi among the general public, popular critics, and the state apparatuses in China. Firstly, Yeh describes how Fei Mu's renowned *Spring in a Small Town* (1948) transcended literature-based melodrama and became a wenyi classic due to the film's "profound, understated depiction of emotion and pursuit of cinematic refinement."[18] Later, Yeh quotes Hong Kong director Lee Sun-fung who identified wenyi as "a cinema of humanity… rooted in the pathos of tragedy."[19] Lastly, further elaborating Lee's stance on wenyi, Yeh recognizes that wenyi cinema "is not merely an entertainment commodity but embodied with a proclivity to 'quality' art cinema."[20] If I synthesize the three aforementioned claims examining the development of Chinese cinema in the last 15 years, the new wenyi cinema can thus be defined as a *humanist* cinema that, in stark

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http://news.sohu.com/20070204/n248035286.shtml; "央视《大家看法》：黄金甲引发的争议(下) (CCTV's *Dajia Kanfa*: Controversies Sparked by *Golden Flower* (Pt. 2))," Sohu, News, February 5, 2007, http://news.sohu.com/20070205/n248042252.shtml.

[17] This is supported by Chinese writer-critic Cai Guorong. Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, "The Road Home: Stylistic Renovations of Chinese Mandarin Classics," in *Cinema Taiwan: Politics, Popularity, and State of the Arts*, ed. Darrell William Davis and Ru-shou Robert Chen (NY: Routledge, 2007), 205.

[18] Yeh, "Pitfalls of Cross-cultural Analysis." 448.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

contrast to purely commercial entertainment, relies on profound *subtlety* with a strong proclivity towards *tragedy*. And as the Chinese film market grew exponentially in the past decade, new wenyi films' distinction from commercial entertainment is what simultaneously differentiated the genre's definition from historical ones.

Therefore, after the early 2000s and certainly by 2006, on a discursive level, wenyi films such as *Still Life* began to exist in opposition to commercial films (*shangye pian*/商业片) such as *Curse of the Golden Flower*. With this division came a more stable industrial process for Chinese directors to pursue projects that are not necessarily profitable but sometimes garner critical acclaim, especially from the West. The independent production companies or artists could now rely on domestic investments from state-owned enterprises and their subsidiaries instead of only foreign investors. A steady trend can be seen among the Chinese entries to the three major European prestige film festivals beginning from 2006 to 2017. In 12 years, the Cannes Film Festival, Berlin International Festival and Venice International Festival featured 55 Chinese films, 26 of which entered the main competitions and 10 of which won major awards (fig.1). In comparison, between 1988, the year Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (1987) won the Golden Bear in Berlin, and 2005, there were 37 movies included in main competition with 13 winning the top awards. A similar form can be completed for Hong Kong films as well, but while Hong Kong scored many entries as nominees, there were relatively fewer winners.

	Cannes	Venice	Berlin
2006	***Summer Palace***	***Still Life***	
2007	*Blind Mountain* *Night Train* *Fengming, a Chinese Memoir* (doc)	***The Sun Also Rises*** *Umbrella* (doc) *Wuyong* (doc)	***Lost in Beijing*** ***Tuya's Marriage***
2008	***24 City*** *Knitting*	*Cucumber* *Wo men*	***In Love We Trust***
2009	***Spring Fever*** *Petition* (doc)	***The Ditch*** (doc)	***Forever Enthralled***

2010	***Chongqing Blues*** *I Wish I Knew* (doc)	***People Mountain People Sea*** *The Sword Identity*	***Apart Together*** ***A Simple Noodle Story***
2011	*Sauna on the Moon*	*Lotus*	
2012	*Mystery*		***White Deer Plain***
2013	***A Touch of Sin***	***Red Amnesia*** *The Coffin in the Mountain*	*Forgetting to Know You*
2014	*Fantasia*	***Behemoth*** (doc) *Tharlo*	***Black Coal, Thin Ice*** ***Blind Massage*** ***No Man's Land*** *The Night*
2015	***Mountains May Depart***		***Gone with the Bullets***
2016		*Bitter Money*	***Crosscurrent*** *My Land* (doc)
2017	*Walking Past the Future*	***Angels Wear White*** *The Taste of Rice Flower*	***Have a Nice Day*** *Ciao Ciao* *Ghost in the Mountains* *The Taste of Betel Nut*

Fig. 1: Bold titles suggest in main competition. *Spring Fever* and *A Touch of Sin* won Best Screenplay at Cannes; *Still Life* won Golden Lion at Venice, *People Mountain People Sea* won Silver Lion at Venice; *Tuya's Marriage* and *Black Coal, Thin Ice* won the Golden Bear at Berlin; *In Love We Trust* and *Apart Together* won Silver Bear for Best Screenplay at Berlin; *White Deer Plain*, *Blind Massage*, and *Crosscurrent* won Silver Bear for Cinematography at Berlin. All of them are wenyi films with *White Deer Plain* claiming the highest budget of 100 million RMB ($16 million in 2012) while making only 133 million in return ($21 million).

Coinciding with the formulation of the new wenyi in the Mainland, a different kind of wenyi also emerged in Hong Kong through the early to mid-2000s. In 2003, Hong Kong's Special Administrative Region and the Mainland government signed the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) which removed the import limitation of 40 Hong Kong films per year to the Mainland, also facilitating further co-productions through economic benefits.[21] Unlike Mainland China, which can pour enormous capital into making blockbusters, Hong Kong

[21] Wendy Su, *China's Encounter with Global Hollywood: Cultural Policy and the Film Industry, 1994-2013* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 34.

lacks both the resources and the local market to support this level of investment.[22] The limited budgets and domestic market of Hong Kong precluded the extreme earning discrepancy seen in the case of *Still Life* vs. *Golden Flower*. As a result, in Hong Kong the opposition is no longer situated between wenyi and commercial films but between *wenyi* and other straight genre films e.g. action, comedy, horror etc.[23]

The wenyi tradition thus manifests in Hong Kong as a negotiation with genre elements, as exemplified by auteurs such as Johnnie To and Pang Ho-cheung. Johnnie To developed a double life as both an artistic director and the head of his own company, Milkyway Productions. With Milkyway's creative independence, To crafted impeccable and stylistic crime films such as *PTU* (2003), *Election* (2005) and *Mad Detective* (2007), but he had to produce a large number of uneven comedies in-between in order to finance his more personal projects. Pang Ho-cheung's career started with *You Shoot, I Shoot* (2001), an irreverent black comedy, a genre that has since become his trademark. However, Pang's later films, which are more serious in tone and more intent on character studies, faced only lukewarm reception due to the public's expectation of him as a director of dark comedies.

In addition to the filmmakers who have extended backgrounds in certain genres, there are other Hong Kong auteurs who have maintained more strictly wenyi approaches throughout their careers, and Ann Hui is the prime figure among them, as demonstrated through *Summer Snow* (1995), *Ordinary Heroes* (1999) and *July Rhapsody* (2002). Ever since the beginning of the Hong Kong New Wave in 1978,[24] Hui's style and focus have always concentrated on the

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[22] Esther C. M. Yau and Tony Williams, "Introduction: Hong Kong Neo-Noir," in *Hong Kong Neo-Noir*, ed. Esther C. M. Yau and Tony Williams (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2017), 1–9.
[23] Vivian P. Y. Lee, *Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997: The Post-Nostalgic Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 6.
[24] Here I use the periodization from Cheuk Pak-tong's *Hong Kong New Wave Cinema (1978-2000)*.

common people and their life struggles, very much akin to the humanist core within the new (and old) wenyi mode. As many film talents from Hong Kong integrated into the Mainland industry after the latter's meteoric rise in the early 2000s, the debate of retaining the Hong Kong-ness in its own cinema has become increasingly significant. Co-productions can provide unprecedentedly spectacular Chinese-language entertainment headed by Hong Kong stars and directors, occupying a large percentage of Hong Kong's general box office.[25] Surely many cultivate a unique local style through conventional genre tropes in Hong Kong cinema, but other than the fantastic urban glamor of comedies and the fetishized style of gangster films which seem to crowd the local theaters, it is the earnest presentation of ordinary lives in Hong Kong that becomes a backbone of asserting the city's cultural identity.[26] Therefore, slice-of-life dramas such as *Echoes of the Rainbow* (2010) directed by Alex Law and *A Simple Life* (2011) by Ann Hui can still hold a firm position in Hong Kong's cinematic milieu with much less publicity and sensation attached. And it is within these movies that the new wenyi persists in Hong Kong. Like their counterparts in the Mainland, they are subtle and humanist at their core with a strong proclivity towards the common people and firmly in contrast to the profitable commercial films.

Nevertheless, my above-mentioned emphases on wenyi films' merits and their stance apart from commercial movies do not represent any kind of qualitative judgment. The Chinese commercial cinema has come very far from the market's early 2000s' landscape, and many purely commercial films are no less interesting than those lesser known projects, but I do consider the blockbusters and genre hits to mostly rely on tropes of popular cinema such as narrative conventions, character clichés, and undistinguished camerawork and editing. Working

[25] Joseph M. Chan and Anthony Y.-H. Fung, "Structural Hybridization in Film and Television Production in Hong Kong," in *Hybrid Hong Kong*, ed. Kwok-bun Chan (New York: Routledge, 2012), 113.
[26] Sebastian Veg, "Anatomy of the Ordinary: New Perspectives in Hong Kong Independent Cinema," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 8, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 74.

within certain sets of familiar structures and character types, these films rarely push the boundaries of conventional narrative cinema either through formal experiments or through substantial nuances. Admittedly, they are not obliged to challenge preconceptions or complicate normative patterns, since the overwhelming majority of audiences derive pleasure and entertainment from other aspects of cinema, but the pool of commercially successful films remains a large collection of production companies' safe bets with few innovations. And often times, innovations would soon be turned into gimmicks for profit as in the cases of *Hero*, *Infernal Affairs* (2002) and their subsequent imitators and rip-offs.[27]

Certainly, I would not argue that wenyi cinema somehow transcends tropes and norms; in fact, there are similarly tired conventions that appear in many wenyi films such as drawn-out silences, static long takes, sparse dialogue, rural settings etc., but in their particular mode of conception and production—lower-budget films that are about more realistic scenarios and aimed at critical acclaim—wenyi films mostly try to foreground formal and narrative variations, or even just demonstrate a semblance of that effort. The new wenyi films, as described earlier, thus emphasize its characteristics—subtlety, humanism, inclinations to tragedy, and artistic refinement—often through much more unconventional means.

For example, Jia Zhangke often offsets his seemingly crude digital photography with meticulously designed mise-en-scene and long takes; Wang Xiaoshuai thrives on extremely understated set-ups of character conflicts yet refuses definite closures; Lou Ye is known for his

[27] *Hero* developed an aesthetic that blends shocking spectacles with contemplative atmospheres, emphasizing the tactility of objects, costumes and physical impacts in its period setting. These characteristics were immediately borrowed in a cycle of period/fantasy dramas that are often criticized for being pretentious and over-the-top, for example, *House of Flying Daggers*, *The Promise* (2005), and *The Banquet* (2006). *Infernal Affairs* revolutionized the undercover narrative by paralleling a police undercover hero with a mob undercover antagonist, focusing on the characters' complex and conflicted motivations. However, it was followed by a series of crime films that mimicked the dialogue patterns, restrained action sequences yet without the support of a solid script, resulting in stiff characters and forced emotions as shown in *Infernal Affairs 3* (2003), *Mob Sister* (2005), and *Wo Hu: Operation Undercover* (2006).

relentlessly somber and intimate presentation of the intractable struggles of urban lives. The prevalent motifs of ambiguity, conundrums and uncertainty correspond to and inform new wenyi's consistent exploration of the complex human condition in modern China.

Wenyi and Murder

Among all these exploratory and formative attempts, criminal activities are the most challenging topics as they immediately put the films on the censors' radar, especially in Mainland China. The liberalized market does not preclude conservatism in censorship policies. Even Hong Kong films, in order to be exported to the Mainland, have to pass Mainland censorship under the same requirements as indigenous films.[28] And among all the criminal activities in film, the subject of murder is decidedly the most violent and extreme that any wenyi film can engage with. Historically, the representation of murder in films has always been a fascinating subject, as exemplified by Dr. Karla Oeler's observation in her book *A Grammar of Murder*:

> Murder can exert two diametrically opposed forces: it can convincingly reduce the significance of a life and, conversely, it can suggest a life's incomprehensible importance. This forking path presented by murder crystallizes a central problematic of characterization. It also renders the murder scene, like other cinematic objects par excellence such as the racing train and the romantic kiss, a site where cinema imagines and transforms itself.[29]

In the context of this project, murder's significance lies in the dialectical forces described by Oeler due to wenyi's humanist preoccupations.

[28] Mirana M. Szeto and Yun-chung Chen, "Mainlandization or Sinophone Translocality? Challenges for Hong Kong SAR New Wave Cinema," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 6, no. 2 (July 31, 2012): 120.
[29] Karla Oeler, *A Grammar of Murder: Violent Scenes and Film Form* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 6.

As a mode of film that holds understatement and subtlety at its heart, wenyi represents murders almost always as overdetermined events characterized by ambiguities and contradictions instead of plot points with fixed meanings and the often pedestrian visual presentation that goes along with those plot points. Also due to its production limitations, wenyi does not and often cannot present violence as spectacles. Moreover, including murder in a wenyi film easily turns the film into a limit case against censorship, reception and moral judgments. Hence if a wenyi film in a contemporary setting decides to present murder, the film is bound to feature an extended deliberation on it before the act and/or an exploration of the inescapable consequences after the murder. This lends significant weight to the act of killing itself and what it means for characters to either inflict it or suffer from it.

Nevertheless, murder is not a new subject for Chinese cinema: the Mainland has told war stories, historical dramas and wuxia tales filled with killings and death; Hong Kong's boom in genre films following its New Wave included a continuation of its prolific output of homicidal violence in crime films and thrillers besides the visceral martial arts films. However, for Mainland cinema, acts of killing in the genres of war, history and wuxia lose their singularity very quickly as the deaths are subsumed by their extremely perilous diegetic environments. When the Chinese peasants threw incendiary pots filled with alcohol at the Japanese soldiers in *Red Sorghum*, discourses of nationalism, patriotism beyond individuals palpably dominated the narrative. Similarly, when the assassin Jing Ke attempted to take the life of the Qin Emperor in *The Emperor and the Assassin* (1999), historical narratives transcend the assassination of one man against another man. By the time of *Hero*, even though the Qin Emperor once again became the target of assassination, the wuxia traditions transformed killings into dazzling choreography and grand spectacles.

It is not until the overshadowed independent directors finally surfaced in the early 2000s that social dramas started to gain prominence. And it is from these social dramas, most of which can be defined as wenyi films, that murder is detached from the grandeur of war films or period dramas and set within the ordinary, i.e. the intricate interpersonal confrontations found in modern society. In this regard, Hong Kong cinema to a large extent pioneered the study of homicide in contemporary settings. From the late 1970s, numerous esoteric films were made by up-and-coming directors who were eager to develop a standout Hong Kong voice, one that is grounded on the street-level. As mentioned earlier, Ann Hui mastered this cinema of ordinary Hong Kong—even in her first films *The Secret* (1979) and *God of Killers* (1981), she already treated killing as something much more disturbing to the people directly affected. But, as profitable genre films took up the majority of the Hong Kong market, murder again was either trivialized or turned into spectacles in generic thrillers and action films.[30] As the economic downturn and shift in geopolitics in the late 1990s sent Hong Kong's film industry into crisis, the old genre models collapsed as well, bringing in a new era of cinematic experiments in which the new wenyi film could finally thrive and new cinematic discourses open up on the act of killing.

All of the above observations thus point to a logical move that seeks to tie this newly developed sub-section of wenyi films together. Many scholars have been inclined to interpret these Chinese films with homicidal violence as reflections of social maladies or political dissatisfaction, and their interpretations sometimes are highly valuable. However, for this project, I do not intend to incorporate film analysis of the on-screen killings in service of generalized social criticisms about modern China, partly because wenyi films' consistent ambiguity renders them open to interpretations. However, my aversion to China-based social-

[30] David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong*, 2nd ed. (Madison: Irvington Way Institute Press, 2011), 55-6.

political commentaries in this project is mostly based on my arguments that the tragic, subtle, and humanistic aspects of the wenyi films all function on a certain level of universality as they challenge normative ideologies regarding genre tropes, formal conventions, and cultural discourses. The new wenyi's orientation towards a more international audience also allows the contradictions and conundrums explored in these films to be engaged with the more abstract concepts surrounding human relationship, state intervention, and even film ontology. In order to effectively reflect the aforementioned multiplicity and complexity of wenyi cinema, I am turning to a wide range of scholars and theorists whose works include contemporary social theory, metaphysics, aesthetics, literary theory, and film theory. This project will also be in conversation with a good deal of contemporary scholarship on the films analyzed as I seek to challenge and/or complement their interpretations and conclusions.

In conclusion, I will use an analogy based on Michel Foucault's writing in order to formulate a topography of the wenyi films of murder which occupy distinct cultural positions in China's film industry and market. In 1973, Foucault edited and published a study named *I, Pierre Riviére, Having Slaughtered My Mother, My Sister, and My Brother: A Case of Parricide in the 19th Century*. The book's subject is an 1835 parricide committed in rural France by a young peasant named Pierre Riviére. While the details of the case beg psychological or psychoanalytic profiles of the murder, Foucault and his colleagues embarked on a unique mission, not to dissect the murderer's psyche or interpret his memoir of crime, but to uncover the intricacies within the interactions between various discourses this event generated; those discourses exist through texts such as the killer's own memoir, the witnesses' testimonies, court processions, medical diagnoses, media reports, etc.

Much of the scholarly research is dedicated to the analysis of discursive dynamics embodied by a variety of institutions and individuals. In his chapter "Tales of Murder" Foucault, however, brings forth a specific socio-cultural phenomenon in 19th century France: "Fly sheet and infernal machine, Riviére's narrative is subsumed—at least so far as its form is concerned—under a vast number of narratives which at that period formed a kind of popular memoir of crimes."[31] Here Foucault no longer delves into the interplay between the actual murder and Riviére's confessions as he has done in the previous pages. Instead, he turns to the re-imagined crimes in publicly hung newspaper broadsheets; "their purpose was to alter the scale, to enlarge the proportions, to bring out the microscopic seed of the story, and make narrative accessible to the everyday."[32] Coincidentally, Foucault's framing of the broadsheets of crime tales from 19th century France draws an unexpected connection to the series of wenyi films that feature the act of murder. Like the broadsheets, the films can be analyzed without much reference to the actual crimes on which many of those films are based on, and purely based on themselves as representations of a convergence of languages. From cultural signs, historical symbols, to even formal routines, they all form in conjunction with each other a unique artifact of the time.

In an almost uncanny way, Foucault emphasizes that the crime tales were presented alongside extraordinary events of revolution and war, which mirrors the current status of murder in Chinese cinema—the genre blockbusters kill with impunity while the wenyi films strive to explore the very details and conditions that lead to homicides.[33] From this perspective, the subject of murder both informs the dynamic among different wenyi films and contrasts *wenyi*'s

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[31] Michel Foucault, "Tales of Murder," in *I, Pierre Rivière, Having Slaughtered My Mother, My Sister, and My Brother...: A Case of Parricide in the 19th Century*, ed. Michel Foucault (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 199–212.
[32] Ibid., 204.
[33] Ibid., 206.

nuanced approach with mainstream cinema's bluntness. Wenyi and the normative culture share a close proximity thanks to their engagements with the subject of murder while at the same time being distanced from each other because of their disparate production conditions and receptions. In this paradoxically distanced proximity, murder becomes the breakthrough that leads to the deconstruction of both wenyi and the dominant ideological texts. As Foucault wrote:

> When all is said and done, battles simply stamp the mark of history on nameless slaughter, while narrative makes the stuff of history from mere street brawls. The frontier between the two is perpetually crossed. It is crossed in the case of an event of prime interest—murder. *Murder is where history and crime intersect*. Murder it is that makes for the warrior's immortality… murder it is that ensures criminals their dark renown… Murder establishes the ambiguity of the lawful and the unlawful.[34]

The murder in wenyi then establishes an ambiguity between the stable, normative discourses (as established by popular mainstream cinema) and the disruptive, contingent ones (as established by wenyi cinema).

The Trinity of Wenyi

The following chapters of my project will analyze a selected set of Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong films. These films belong to the freshly matured wenyi film category that has developed since the mid-2000s, and all of them have contemporary settings—the narratives of each film takes place within 10 years of its release. Among the films examined, 15 contain clear scenes of murder,[35] and 5 of these are selected for detailed analyses. Although I will group them under one of the three different wenyi qualities of tragedy, subtlety, and humanism, all of the discussed movies possess those qualities. My grouping is based mostly on each film's most outstanding characteristic and how the pairings can complement each other.

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[34] Emphasis added. Ibid., 205-6.

[35] I exclude accidental deaths or manslaughters such as in the film *The Coffin in the Mountain* (2013).

In the first chapter I have chosen Ann Hui's *Night and Fog* (*Tin shui wai dik ye yu mo*, 2009) and Phillip Yung's *Port of Call* (*Dap huet cam mui*, 2015) to engage the feature of tragedy in the new wenyi films. Both were made in Hong Kong, and both begin with the murder of a woman who recently emigrated from the Mainland. This chapter delves into the troubling tensions between different spatio-temporal irregularities created by both films' non-linear structures. Stylistically the two films differ from each other significantly: Ann Hui employs her trademark sensibilities on the quotidian that harkens back to neo-realist cinema, while the young filmmaker Yung uses highly stylized lighting, color palette, and non-diegetic music in addition to its allusions to the Hong Kong exploitation films and television.

The second chapter will center on Pang Ho-cheung's *Exodus* (*Cheut ai kup gei*, 2007) and Diao Yinan's *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (*Bai ri yan huo*) in the context of wenyi's subtlety. The two films are relatively distant from each other in both time and space, but they share commonalities on several levels: firstly, both contain pronounced elements of dark comedy and film noir; secondly, the male protagonists of both films are marginalized policemen; lastly, both films present women as killers. Both female protagonists have committed murders as acts of retaliation against men's crimes. The chapter juxtaposes the two films' ways of implementing cinematic subtlety.

The last chapter is structured differently as it focuses on only one particular movie—Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* (*Tian zhu ding*). Since Jia's film is actually composed of four different narratives on four different violent incidents, they each present a specific dilemma regarding resistance and violence. Within the film, Jia makes reference extensively to Chinese literary traditions and theatrical traditions, and these references help facilitate my discussions of the humanistic aspects despite the film's seemingly bleak outlook.

Ultimately, this project strives to validate the contemporary Chinese wenyi cinema as one that initiates highly complex conversations with traditional Chinese film genres and conventions as well as other discourses in literature and media. Moreover, their nuanced representations of murders are testament to the filmmakers' serious attempts to reflect on the implicit ideological dangers within those established discourses and their disastrous outcomes.

Chapter 1: Tragedy
Night and Fog and *Port of Call*

In this chapter, I will explore the wenyi quality of tragedy in *Night and Fog* and *Port of Call*. Regarding the former film, the tragedy is embedded in the film's unusual formal representation of the murder, its use of flashbacks, and its skeptical confrontation with the social construct of "family." For *Port of Call*, my emphasis is on the film's re-interpretation of Hong Kong's Category III films, its manipulation of time and space during the killing scene, and its attempt to humanize a most abject crime.

Night and Fog Background

Night and Fog is Hong Kong New Wave veteran Ann Hui's second, following *The Way We Are* (2008), about the people living in Tin Shui Wai, New Territories. Tin Shui Wai is a residential district constructed relatively recently in order to deal with the population growth in Hong Kong's metropolitan area. Tin Shui Wai is located to the northeast of New Territories – the hilly district that occupies over 85% of Hong Kong's land area but with only around 50% of its population. New Territories is located between the Mainland border and metropolitan Hong Kong, and Tin Shui Wai is one of the closest Hong Kong neighborhoods to the city of Shenzhen. Tin Shui Wai's geographical location and relatively cheap real estate made it very accessible to the "New Immigrants" from Mainland after 1997, but its underdevelopment also led to significant poverty and social unrest.[36]

[36] For further details on the political and economic issues of Tin Shui Wai, see Joseph Cho Yam Lau, "The Influence of Suburbanization on the Access to Employment of Workers in the New Towns: A Case Study of Tin Shui Wai, Hong Kong," *Habitat International* 34, no. 1 (January 2010): 38–45. and "Colonial Deal Built 'City of Sadness,'"

In 2004, Jin Shuying, a 31-year-old Mainland immigrant to Hong Kong, and her twin daughters were brutally murdered by Jin's husband Lee Pak-sam in their Tin Shui Wai home. The case received much publicity due to the fact that Jin's multiple prior reports of domestic abuse were not sufficiently answered by the local police, social services or local politicians. Following *The Way We Are*, Ann Hui decided to bring the 2004 familicide onto the big screen as *Night and Fog*. While the heartwarming *The Way We Are* won four major awards including Best Director at 2008's Hong Kong Film Awards, the bone-chilling tale of domestic abuse from *Night and Fog* performed much less prominently in either box office or major awards. The story of *The Way We Are* takes place almost entirely in Tin Shui Wai's vicinity, but *Night and Fog* takes on a much broader perspective with substantial screen time dedicated to Shenzhen and rural Sichuan. Similarly, *The Way We Are*'s native Hong Kong cast led by Paw Hee-ching is succeeded by *Night and Fog*'s mixed cast of Hong Kong and Mainland actors. The Chinese title for *The Way We Are* is translated as "Tin Shui Wai's Day and Night" while the Chinese title for *Night and Fog* is "Tin Shui Wai's Night and Fog." According to the director Hui, she chose "Night and Fog" specifically in reference to Alain Resnais' eponymous documentary on the Holocaust, conveying the idea that the senselessness of violence is also occurring today in the margins of Hong Kong.[37]

***Night and Fog* Synopsis**

South China Morning Post, December 6, 2010, http://www.scmp.com/article/732536/colonial-deal-built-city-sadness.

[37] Gina Marchetti, "Feminism, Postfeminism, and Hong Kong Women Filmmakers," in *A Companion to Hong Kong Cinema*, ed. Esther M. K. Cheung, Gina Marchetti, and Ching-Mei Esther Yau (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 250-1.

Wang Xiaoling (Zhang Jingchu) was born in a peasant family in the inland province of Sichuan. As the eldest among the family's three daughters, Xiaoling has left home at the age around 12 to work in the cities. After growing older and working in the coastal city of Shenzhen, she develops a relationship with a house decorator from Hong Kong. The man, Lee Sam (Simon Yam), has a wife and son in Hong Kong, but decides to commit to the relationship with Xiaoling after she gets pregnant. Unbeknownst to Xiaoling, Lee Sam is also lusting after her two younger sisters. Following Lee Sam's unsuccessful attempts to court Xiaoling's younger sister and the family's increasing economic misfortunes, Lee and Wang move to Hong Kong with their twin daughters to the neighborhood of Tin Shui Wai. Lee lives on government welfare instead of working while Xiaoling serves as a waitress at a local restaurant. The financial troubles often enrage Lee Sam who then turns to abusing Xiaoling through beating, rape, and threats of murder.

After a neighbor finds out about the abuse, she helps Xiaoling and her children move to a battered women's shelter. Xiaoling makes some friends with the other women at the safe house, but as a new immigrant to Hong Kong, she cannot receive sufficient state care such as a separate public housing for her and her children. The social services encourage Xiaoling and Lee to get back together as a family. Out of desperation, Xiaoling claims that Lee has sexually assaulted their daughters. As social workers conduct investigations, Xiaoling takes the children to Shenzhen and stays at her younger sister's place. Lee Sam eventually tracks them down and causes a big scene by slashing his own abdomen with a knife in order to convince Xiaoling of his remorse. Fearful of Mainland police intervention, Xiaoling decides to take the children back to her Hong Kong home, but she is immediately hospitalized at the very night of her return due to Lee Sam's habitual violent ways.

At the women's shelter, Xiaoling's good friend Lily has managed to find herself independent housing, which inspires Xiaoling to follow the latter's advice. Xiaoling is now determined to leave Lee Sam for good. But before she can collect her things at their apartment, Lee stabs Xiaoling to death, kills their two daughters, and tries to stage a self-defense scene by also stabbing himself, accidentally resulting in his own death.

Port of Call Background

Port of Call is writer-director Philip Yung's third feature film after his other two moderately successful independent films. Although heavily influenced by Ann Hui, Yung's interest in the more provocative subjects of sex and violence was established very early on in his career, but Yung did share Hui's interest in exploring of Mainland-Hong Kong dynamic in his works. According to Sebastian Veg: "Philip Yung's first feature, *Glamorous Youth* (2009), mentored by Ann Hui, is… a rare independent reflection on the double-bind relationship between Hong Kong and the mainland, unfortunately prevented from circulating more widely by its category III rating."[38] In 2011, with the support of Hong Kong superstar Aaron Kwok who plays the detective in *Port of Call*, Yung was able to acquire enough funding from the Hong Kong – Asian Film Financing Forum, among other sources, to complete the film. Following its release, *Port of Call* became a critical hit and was nominated for major awards in both Hong Kong and Taiwan. At the 2015 Hong Kong Film Awards, the film won 7 major awards including Best Screenplay, Best Cinematography, Best Actor, and Best Actress. Although the film's wide release version was 98 minutes long, most of its award screenings and home media releases use the 120-minute director's cut.

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[38] Category III is the rating for films that are suitable only for people of 18 or above. I will further explore the implications of this rating in a later section. Veg, "Anatomy of the Ordinary," 81.

Set in 2009 and 2010, *Port of Call* is based on the real-life story of a young Mainland girl Wang Jiamei who immigrated to Hong Kong in 2005. After Jiamei dropped out of high school in 2008, she started frequenting the adult online forum New-3Lunch where she advertised her escort service. Around May 2008, the 17-year-old Jiamei went missing and was later found to be murdered and dismembered. The 24-year-old murderer Ting Kai-tai claimed that he strangled Jiamei under the influence of narcotics, and was sentenced to life in prison in 2009.[39]

***Port of Call* Synopsis**

In 2010, Detective Chong (Aaron Kwok) from the Criminal Investigation Division is tasked with resolving a gruesome murder case in Kowloon, Hong Kong. The victim Wang Jiamei (Jessie Li) immigrated to Hong Kong in 2009, and briefly studied in a local Catholic high school. Living with her mother, step-father, and her older sister in a cramped apartment, Jiamei aspired to become a film star or famous model. She dropped out of her school to work in a small modeling agency while also taking a part-time job at McDonald's. The two jobs offered very little pay while some of Jiamei's friends had earned much more money working as escorts. Jiamei, then 16, decides to pursue the more profitable career option.

Among her clients, Jiamei became involved with a handsome young man Ji (Li Yat-long) who no longer paid for Jiamei's services. Jiamei's attachment to Ji was later brutally severed as Ji humiliated Jiamei in front of his actual girlfriend in order to convince the latter of his fidelity. Jiamei, hurt by Ji and a year of suffering, became more and more nihilistic.

[39] For more details on the case, see "肢解案兇手囚終身　兇手變態　碎屍同日再嫖援交女 (Dismemberment Case Perpetrator to Spend Life in Prison; The Killer Is Abnormal; Seeking Prostitute on the Same Day of Dismemberment)," Apple Daily News, July 28, 2009.

In the meantime, a low-level triad member and delivery driver Ting Tzs-chung (Michael Ning) met a girl named Mo-yung (Jacky Cai). In a life full of rage and loneliness, Ting found a bit of solace in Mo-yung's comfort, but the latter was not interested in a serious relationship and ultimately left for America. Lonely again, Ting contacted Jiamei online for sexual services, but the two conversed the entire night, establishing a rare connection with each other. When they met in-person, Ting and Jiamei had another extended conversation and both took some ketamine. As they were having sex, Jiamei expressed her suicidal wish and Ting chose to help and eventually strangling her to death.

In order to dispose of Jiamei's body, Ting dismembered the corpse, dumped chopped up pieces in the toilet, carved and sold the bones to the meat market, and threw the head into the sea. Afterwards, Ting turned himself in to the police, and recounted the case with Detective Chong.

Tragic Death at Home

Tragedy as a literary tradition entered the Chinese lexicon along with the revitalized use of wenyi in the early 20th century. Just as Yun-tong Luk describes:

> Ever since Wang Kuo-wei's categorizing of *Tou O Yuan* or *The Injustice of Tou O* 竇娥冤 and *The Orphan of Chao* 趙氏孤兒 as tragedies on grounds of the assertion of will by the characters, and his seeing them as comparable to the great tragedies in the West, scholars and critics have jumped on this terminological bandwagon to apply the term to Chinese plays, some trying to defend the presence of tragedy in Chinese drama, others deploring its absence.[40]

Luk is referring to Chinese scholar Wang Guowei's study of Song and Yuan Dynasty dramas, which was published around 1915. Wang's assertion was later critiqued by a new generation of Republican Chinese scholars such as Qian Zhongshu who instead insists that

[40] Yun-tong Luk, "The Concept of Tragedy as Genre and Its Applicability to Classical Chinese Drama," in *The Chinese Text: Studies in Comparative Literature*, ed. Ying-hsiung Chou (Shatin, N.T., Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1986), 22.

> [t]hese Chinese plays leave the reader yearning for a better scheme of things instead of that feeling of having come to the bitter end of everything. This impression is heightened by the structure of the plays. The curtain does not fall on the main tragic event, but on the aftermath of that event. The tragic moment with passion at its highest and pain at its deepest seems to ebb out in a long falling close. This gives the peculiar effect of lengthening-out as of a trill or a sigh.[41]

To other critics, these supposed failings of Chinese drama also echo a lack of social consciousness in the general Chinese society in the early 20th century. Lu Xun, one of the most important modern Chinese writers, comments in his 1925 article "More Thoughts on the Collapse of Leifeng Pagoda" that

> All the world is a stage: tragedy shows how what is worthwhile in life is shattered, comedy shows how what is worthless is torn to pieces, and satire is a simplified form of comedy. Yet passion and humour alike are foes of this ten-sight disease, we shall have no madmen like Rousseau, and not a single great dramatist or satiric poet either. All China will have will be characters in a comedy, or in something which is neither comedy or tragedy, a life spent among the ten sights which are modelled each on the other, in which everyone suffers from the ten-sight disease.[42]

For both Lu Xun and Qian Zhongshu, both wholesomeness of narrative content and wholesomeness of narrative structure are inimical to truly impactful tragedy. In Lu Xun's critique, however, the author claims that both tragedy and comedy are destructive to the "ten-sight disease," an illusory vision of life that conforms to a mythical integrity.[43] Lu Xun's

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[41] Zhongshu Qian, *A Collection of Qian Zhongshu's English Essays* (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2005), 55-6.
[42] Xun Lu, *Lu Xun: Selected Works*, trans. Xianyi Yang and Gladys Yang, 3rd ed., vol. 2 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1980), 116.
[43] Lu Xun describes the sickness as following: "Many of us in China... have a sort of 'ten-sight disease' or at least an 'eight-sight disease,' which reached epidemic proportions in the Qing Dynasty, I should say. Look through any county annals, and you will find the district has ten sights, if not eight, such as 'Moonlight on a Distant Village, 'Quiet Monastery and Clear Bell,' 'Ancient Pool and Crystal Water.' And this '十' [i.e. 'ten' in Chinese] shaped germ seems to have got into the blood and spread throughout the body, no less virulent than the '!' shaped germs which herald a country's decline. There are ten sorts of sweetmeats, ten different dishes, ten movements in music, ten courts for the king of hell, ten cures in medicine, ten guesses for the drinking game; even items, as if no one would stop at nine. Now one of the ten sights of the West Lake is missing [i.e. the Leifeng Pagoda] … The fact is, this type of inevitable destruction serves no purpose. To delight in it is pointless self-deception. The cultured *élite*, the devout and the traditionalists with their glib tongues will try by hook or by crook to make up the ten sights again, and will not rest content till they have done so." Ibid., 113-4.

description of this compulsion for wholeness shares a distinct affinity with Nietzsche's Apollonian spirit which is symbolic to "[t]he higher truth, the perfection of these dream-states in contrast to the only partially intelligible reality of the daylight world."[44] Underlying both men's theories of tragedy is a much more nuanced vision of tragedy not simply as its colloquial meaning of "sad drama,"[45] or even as mere subversion of beauty, but as a rejection of a fantasized transcendence which people conjure up to offset the reality that is only partially intelligible.

In artistic expression, the aforementioned transcendence then translates into a myriad of elements: for Qian Zhongshu, it is the overly extended denouement that explains too much; in Lu Xun's piece, it is the pathological need for the symbolism of mythical harmony. The two films discussed in this chapter present themselves as tragedies in a similar but also different way. Both *Night and Fog* and *Port of Call* employ highly non-linear narrative structures through their extensive use of flashbacks, flash-forwards, and dream sequences. The intermingling of past and present, reality and unreality then undercuts a total understanding of character motivations with the spatio-temporal instability accompanying each character death. In other words, the narratives of both films offer complexes of motivations and reactions which in turn render attempts to pinpoint specific causes and effects of each killing impossible. As Jing Jing Chang summarizes in her analysis: "*Night and Fog*… is shot using an intricate narrative that alternates between motivated and unmotivated flashbacks and dreamscapes; that is, moving back and forth from a present that both validates and undermines the intentions of those recounting the past."[46] *Port of*

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[44] Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 16.
[45] The Chinese word of tragedy "悲剧" can be literally translated to "sad/morose/sorrowful drama/play."
[46] Jing Jing Chang, "Ann Hui's Tin Shui Wai Diptych: The Flashback and Feminist Perception in Post-Handover Hong Kong," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 33, no. 8 (November 16, 2016): 736.

Call functions very much in the exact same way while retaining a much more significant frame story which focuses on its lead detective.

The disruptions of motivations, causalities, and linear narratives thus go on to complicate the murders consistently even with the acknowledgment of the fact of character death at each film's very beginning. *Night and Fog* opens with Xiaoling's friends in the women's shelter gathering around the TV to catch the breaking news of Xiaoling's death. The police soon arrive at the shelter and request the women to come in and provide testimonies. The audience only sees an obstructed view of the crime scene before the film's title and the ensuing flashbacks. *Port of Call* has a more extended opening scene showing Jiamei living in the Mainland coastal city of Dongguan and her immigration to Hong Kong in 2009. The film then briefly turns to a vignette at Jiamei's Hong Kong high school where a social worker counsels Jiamei about her reactions towards a classmate's self-mutilation. Answering Jiamei's question as to why the other girl would cut her wrist with a knife, the social worker says: "Many things are difficult to explain." This sentence concludes the pre-credits section as the film follows Detective Chong as he reaches the crime scene of Jiamei's murder.

Whether it is *Night and Fog*'s modern neo-realist approach or *Port of Call*'s more elaborate set-up, both films reveal the fates of the victims as preludes to further investigations. The chronological reversal of "cause" and "effect" in films is hardly a rare occurrence since films such as *Citizen Kane* (1941) have all mastered this "investigative and confessional" narrative structure.[47] But both *Night and Fog* and *Port of Call* foreground the breaking-news moment partly in reaction to their respective real-life base story's media representation. The Mainland "new immigrants" who immigrated to Hong Kong in the 1980s (especially after the

[47] Maureen Cheryn Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory & History* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 172-4.

1984 signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration that confirmed the 1997 Handover) have long been easy targets for sensationalist local media. The women among these new immigrants were especially suspect as they often associate with unfaithful Hong Kong men in the popular imagination. In her article on Hong Kong and Taiwan media's representation of mainland women, Shu-mei Shih observes that

> The *dalumei* [Mainland (younger) sister/lady] in newspaper and magazine representations is most often a flat character, whose singular obsession of "searching for gold" seems to lead her to any activity that will fulfill that goal. Newspapers sometimes carry sensational stories of her sexual abuse, which curiously make her even more seductive. The paradox is due to a kind of performative contradiction: newspaper coverage that is meant to arouse people's concern over the problem ends up turning the reports of *dalumei* into tantalizing tales of sex and money.[48]

In *Night and Fog*, Xiaoling and her family express concerns about Lee Sam's family in Hong Kong on multiple occasions. Lee Sam's son from his previous marriage comments on Lee's marriage with Xiaoling in three words "cyun ziu gai / chuen chiu kei," which literally translates into "Szechuan pepper chicken," a derogatory term that refers to Xiaoling's home province Sichuan while calling her a prostitute (a colloquial double meaning of "chicken"). In *Port of Call*, Jiamei's case became a tabloid sensation. During the earlier scenes of police investigation, Detective Chong's dialogue basically consists of paragraphs from tabloid articles in which Jiamei's young age, her Mainland background, her escort identity, and her brutal mutilation were all front and center. Therefore, with the killings announced in the first five minutes, both films purposefully elicit the knowledgeable viewers' associations from past news and its related preconceptions about Mainland women and their misfortune. The rest of the film then gradually

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[48] Shu-mei Shih, "Gender and a New Geopolitics of Desire: The Seduction of Mainland Women in Taiwan and Hong Kong Media," *Signs* 23, no. 2 (1998): 298.

disrupts these media narratives with the intervention of significantly more nuance and complexity, ultimately emphasizing both events' partial unintelligibility.

Such disruption is highly visible in the films' portrayal of the climax scenes of murders. Despite having many qualities of social realism in their subject matter, both *Night and Fog* and *Port of Call* represent murders with heightened stylization through distinct editing choices. Towards the end of *Night and Fog*, Xiaoling confronts Lee Sam for the very last time in order to leave with her daughters once and for all. The camera follows the family back to the apartment, and after Lee Sam opens their front door, the film cuts back to present time as Xiaoling's neighbor Mrs. Au cannot bear the guilt of her not being helpful enough. The audience witnesses Mrs. Au's breakdown during the police questioning, but is soon transported to inside Xiaoling's home where one of her daughters runs into the kitchen. From this shot onwards, everything is shot in ominous slow-motion. At this point, there is no longer diegetic sound; instead, a droning low-pitched ambient sound takes over. In the next shot, Xiaoling and Lee Sam seem to be embracing each other. However, as Lee Sam jerks Xiaoling back and forth with his tight grip on her neck, the audience sees Xiaoling's painful expression. Suddenly, Lee Sam pulls back his head away from Xiaoling's neck with his mouth open. The two then maintain that pose as if time has stopped. The camera slowly travels to behind Xiaoling, revealing a bloody knife through her body.

In the following shot, the mentally challenged younger daughter is sitting against a closed door, covering her eyes with her hands with her mouth wide open. Out-of-focus, Xiaoling's body drops on the floor in front of her daughter. In mere seconds, the film shows Lee Sam advancing towards the camera from a low-angle. Without hesitation, Lee raises his knife toward his younger daughter, but before he makes the cut, the older sister jumps between them and is cut on

the forearm. The camera then cuts away, refraining from showing the moments of deaths of the two children; instead, the audience sees Xiaoling's heartbreaking final struggle as she sees her daughters butchered right in front of her. A somber piano piece, the main musical motif used throughout the film, replays during Xiaoling's final moments, but its volume barely matches the ambient sound, creating a discordant soundscape.

Although the camera lingers on Xiaoling's helpless writhing body for quite a while, the audience does not see her moment of death either. The film cuts to a shot of the dark bamboo forest near Xiaoling's rural Sichuan home, and slowly a thumping sound can be heard. The next shot then calls back to an earlier moment in the film when Lee Sam killed Xiaoling's family dog because he feels slighted by Xiaoling's family. In slow-motion, the audience sees Lee Sam emotionlessly bashing the bagged dog with a wooden stick. As the hitting continues, the camera speed returns to normal. The peculiar use of slow-motion in this murder scene defies the aestheticized slow-motion violence popular in genre films. In Stephen Prince's analysis of Sam Peckinpah's films, he concludes:

> The simplest of these cinematic possibilities lies in the momentary disruption of time by the brief, slow-motion insert placed to accentuate the lyrical appearance of the human body acted upon by violent physical forces that have extinguished its ability to respond in an intentional manner… Brevity accentuates the poetic effects of slow motion. Too much slow motion, or for too extended a period, would rob the scenes of their kinetic charge and their physical edge by making the action seem like it is occurring underwater or in a strange condition of weightlessness… Too much slow motion would become ludicrous because it would bog down the violent outburst and remove all sense of its physical consequences. Slow motion, therefore, had to exist in a state of tension with the normal-tempo soundtrack and body proper of the sequence. Extended slow-motion imagery would not create this requisite tension.[49]

[49] Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 63-4.

What Ann Hui chooses to present in her movie, therefore, is exactly the removal of the kinetic charge and the disorienting weightlessness. The "physical consequences" that Prince speaks of refer to the visceral bloodletting and the contorting bodies under fire, but Ann Hui does not want to transform Xiaoling and her children's deaths into hyper-realistic spectacles. The supposed tension created by intercutting soundtracks is also replaced by *Night and Fog*'s monotonous ambient drone. Submerging this murder scene "under water" thus removes the generic aesthetic effects related to works by Peckinpah or John Woo. The "balletic beauty" that Prince uses to describe Peckinpah and the "heroic bloodshed" in Hong Kong action films are not needed here. *Night and Fog* alternatively represents the murder as a dull instrument, bruising the audience without any of the usual rush associated with aestheticized slow-motion violence.

Other than a distinctive approach to slow motion, *Night and Fog* further accentuates its ethos of destabilizing tragedy through its flashback sequence and metonymy within the film's mise-en-scène. Firstly, the film transports the audience from one carnage to another – one that had taken place years in the past and thousands of miles away from Hong Kong. This interrupting flashback seems to be pointing at an originary moment in the past that leads to Xiaoling's eventual fate. This moment encompasses both the scenery of the home that Xiaoling chose to leave behind and the dog killing in which Lee Sam first exhibited his sociopathic violence. What fundamentally challenges this reading, however, is that these visions are in fact tied more closely to Xiaoling's younger sister Xiaoying than to Xiaoling herself. As Lee Sam stayed at Xiaoling's rural family home following her pregnancy, he started to stalk Xiaoying. Besides Xiaoling's dying vision, the bamboo forest only appears one other time in the film, when Lee Sam secretly accosted Xiaoying who was picking herbs alone in the forest. Later, Xiaoying

could no longer tolerate Lee Sam's advances and moved to Shenzhen. Triggered by this particular frustration, Lee went and killed the Wangs' family dog.

This specific detail complicates the reading, exemplilfied in Jin Jin Chang's essay, that simply connects Xiaoling with the visions of Sichuan:

> Hui moves her lens away from the tragic deaths of Hui-ling [i.e. Xiaoling] and her daughters, back to a dreamlike moment in the past when Hui-ling as a young girl leaves her rural home for the first time to find work in the city. This final scene may be read as the dying woman's memory of her innocent younger self in Sichuan. Or this final denouement can be seen as Ann Hui's poignant commentary on the loss of childhood innocence that the handover of Hong Kong fails to remedy—a childhood that is reduced to a series of pictorial representations of happiness and tragedy in the final credits sequence.[50]

Chang makes a conspicuous mistake by conflating the ending of Xiaoling's murder scene with the ending of the film itself, where another flashback shows a teenage Xiaoling leaving her home. Her reading in relation to the Hong Kong handover aside, Chang is intent on formulating an argument that places Xiaoling at the scene of the flashback; the argument in turn consists of a distinct narrative of lost innocence or that of Hong Kong's loss of independence. Ann Hui's choice of flashback, however, curiously renders this kind of reading inert. Instead of allegorical political statements, the bamboo forest and the animal cruelty are firmly grounded on the level of tangible violence between an aggressor and a victim. Indeed there must be an element of the social within this particular segment of the film, but it is one that never escapes the specific persons involved. As Xiaoling lies mortally wounded, the audience witnesses the immediate danger Lee Sam represents to her children, his past crimes committed against her family, and the grim possibility that Lee Sam would catch up to Xiaoying.

The coalescing of multiple temporalities is also present within the setting of Xiaoling's home. Throughout the film, the audience witnesses brief moments of a happy family life as both

[50] Chang, "Ann Hui's Tin Shui Wai Diptych," 733.

Xiaoling and Lee Sam show tenderness to their children. Due to the tight apartment layout, the girls have to play “outside” of their exclusive personal spaces, gradually transforming the home into a more colorful and even hopeful place. The children’s presence through their drawings marks Xiaoling and Lee Sam’s small apartment as a seemingly true home where, in Doreen Massey’s words, “there is imagined to be the security of a (false, as we have seen) stability and an apparently reassuring boundedness.”[51] In the film, the children serve as the most crucial anchor for Xiaoling and as the objects of greatest control for Lee Sam. Right before the murder, Lee Sam accused Xiaoling of first having cheated him away from her sister Xiaoying, and then cheating him away from his daughters. Lee Sam accuses Xiaoling of caring “most of all” for the children. So when the killings took place, the mise-en-scène prominently features the children’s cartoon stickers, colorful stationery, and their drawings, taking the home apart as Lee Sam’s regime of terroristic control destroys both itself and the imagined reassurance embodied by the children along with their “innocent” objects. It is extremely poignant to think back to a social worker’s comments on the subject of Lee’s threat of murder during one of Xiaoling’s family reconciliation session: “[I] hope you can maintain the integrity of the family… How could we allow Mr. Lee to buy a knife and kill you with it? If he killed you, then the family would no longer be integral, wouldn’t it?” It is this preoccupation with hypostatized notions of the harmonious family home that ultimately facilitates the latter’s disintegration in violence against its most vulnerable members.

In the end, the tragedy of the Lee-Wang family is the dislocation of a multitude of stable continuities in terms of both the story and formal conventions: the established tropes that often associate aestheticized violence with slow motion in action films, the socio-political causality

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[51] Doreen B. Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 169.

related to migration, and the integrity of the home and, by extension, the family. What the audience is left with is then a grotesque and alienating stabbing, an immediate fear over future violence, and the home space that collapses on itself.

The Butcher by the Cliff

Although *Port of Call* has many striking differences in visual style (e.g. camerawork, color palette, pace in editing) from *Night and Fog*, it also explores the issues of family, socio-political discourse surrounding the "new immigrants," and the exploitation of physical violence on screen. Nevertheless, *Port of Call*'s treatment of violence is much more extensive and gruesome, so unlike *Night and Fog*'s dialogue with *The Way We Are*, Philip Yung's re-imagination of Wang Jiamei's death connects it with a much more specific set of genre traditions in Hong Kong cinema – Category III films and exposé television series that focus on violent crimes.

Port of Call's candidness towards violence and sex is apparent in the opening minutes – Jiamei's classmate slashes her wrist in the classroom, Jiamei's own blood floods the apartment floor as Ting dismembers her, and Ting encounters one of his clients having sex with a prostitute. The visual shock reaches its peak when flashbacks during Ting's confession show the gory details of his mutilation of Jiamei's dead body. As for the actual act of killing, it takes place during Ting and Jiamei's sexual intercourse which is also explicitly presented. But as much as these scenes resemble those in the exploitation features of Hong Kong cinema in the 1990s e.g. the serial killer films such as *Dr. Lamb* (1992) and *The Untold Story* (1993), I contend that through *Port of Call*'s distinct manipulation of time and space, the film successfully confronts the phenomenon of extreme violence on screen and re-contextualizes it in tragedy.

Following Hong Kong's establishment of a ratings system in 1988, four major ratings are given to films shown in mainstream theaters: Category I, suitable for "persons of any age;" Category IIA, "not suitable for children;" Category IIB, "not suitable for young persons and children;" and Category III:

> For exhibition only to persons who have attained the age of 18 years subject to the condition that any advertising material that relates to the film shall display the appropriate classification symbol and contain the following notice, or a notice to the like effect, next to or adjacent to the symbol, in block letters and Chinese character prominently and legibly displayed "APPROVED FOR EXHIBITION ONLY TO PERSONS WHO HAVE ATTAINED THE AGE OF 18 YEARS."[52]

Unlike the dreaded NC-17 rating in the US, Category III films became a significant component of Hong Kong cinema in the 1990s: "In 1998… 450 films out of a total production of 963 (47 percent) fell into this category. In addition to the expected sex and violence, the films tend to feature murder and mutilation, large breasts and lesbianism, gender-bending, rule-breaking and hybridity."[53] David Bordwell explains that such exploitative tendencies exist since "ordinary Hong Kong films have a high quota of blood, sex, defecation, and vomit, a film has to go far to earn a Category III rating."[54] What stands out in Category III films is then this extreme fascination with the human body and its refuse. From the grotesque violence and sex, scholars have gleaned subversive messages against a capitalist dystopia or repressive messages that ultimately reinforce violent ideologies against women.[55] Regardless of the particular interpretations, what every scholar accepts implicitly is that these films are too preoccupied with

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[52] Lisa Odham Stokes, *Historical Dictionary of Hong Kong Cinema* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007), 365.
[53] Patricia Brett Erens, "*The Mistress* and Female Sexuality," in *Hong Kong Screenscapes: From the New Wave to the Digital Frontier*, ed. Esther M. K. Cheung, Gina Marchetti, and Tan See Kam (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 239.
[54] Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong*, 96.
[55] See Andrew Grossman, "Random Acts of Sensible Violence: Horror, Hong Kong Censorship, and the Brief Ascent of 'Category III,'" in *Transnational Chinese Cinema: Corporeality, Desire, and the Ethics of Failure*, ed. Brian Bergen-Aurand, Mary Mazzilli, and Wai-Siam Hee (Los Angeles, CA: Bridge21 Publications, 2014), 201–24; Tony Williams, "Hong Kong Social Horror: Tragedy and Farce in Category 3," *Post Script* 21, no. 3 (June 22, 2002): 61+; Darrell W. Davis and Yueh-yu Yeh, "Warning! Category III: The Other Hong Kong Cinema," *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (June 2001): 12–26.

the body and affective spectacles to actually treat the humans to which the bodies belong to as human characters. Responding to consistent coupled presence of sex and violence and their exaggeration in Category III films, film scholars sometimes neglect the role that local genre plays in these films.[56] Within both Category III cinema and popular media in general, there exists a niche sub-genre of film or television contents that are defined by their subject matter – "kei on/qi'an," which literally translates to "strange/mysterious case."[57]

In 1975, the oldest and largest TV production company Rediffusion (RTV) produced a 12-episode miniseries titled "See dai kei on" ("Ten Great/Major Strange Cases"). With a strong hint of the "ten-sight disease," this series dramatized several sensational murders that took place in Hong Kong during the 1950s and 60s.[58] The immense popularity of the TV series was quickly monetized by the film industry as well, and the company behind this trend in cinema was none other than the famous Shaw Brothers Studio. Between 1976 and 1977, five movies were produced under the name "Heung kong kei on" ("Hong Kong Strange Case") while their English franchise name was simply known as "Criminals." These films were also sensationalized versions of real criminal cases, but the creators' pursuit of dramatic effect essentially turned those incidents into urban legends. But as RTV moved to produce the second series of the "strange cases," the Hong Kong audience quickly grew weary of the oversaturation of similar

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[56] See Julian Stringer, "Category 3: Sex and Violence in Postmodern Hong Kong," in *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*, ed. Christopher Sharrett (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), 361–79; Davis and Yeh, "Warning! Category III."

[57] Very few scholars have made this distinction. One rare example can be found here: Leung Wai-yee, "香港三級奇案片與意識形態國家機器：從傅柯的觀視談起 (Category III Mysterious Murdering Case Films and Ideological State Apparatus: Reading from Foucault's 'Gaze')," *Chung Wai Literary Quarterly* 28, no. 11 (April 2000): 79–96.

[58] In 2003, a public survey in Hong Kong gathered 10 criminal cases in a top ten list. The "top ten" cases became a selling point for a lot of the films based on the selected real events. See "十大哄動案件選舉結果 (Ten Sensational Cases Vote Result)," Apple Daily News, November 27, 2003, https://hk.news.appledaily.com/local/daily/article/20031127/3689981.

contents, especially considering that the TV creators ran out of real-life crimes and turned to hackneyed genre fictions that sometimes even featured supernatural elements.

Although the "strange case" fad died down after 1977, it became a sub-genre that film and television producers frequently returned to. For example, Ann Hui's 1979 cinematic debut *The Secret* was a murder case drama with visible traces of exploitation aesthetics. While Hong Kong New Wave directors revolutionized the action genre with films such as John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* (1984) and Ringo Lam's *City on Fire* (1987), and a new generation of martial arts superstars took over the screen such as Jackie Chan in *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* (1978) and Jet Li in *The Shaolin Temple* (1982), the strange cases in real life started to accumulate once again. Following the creation of the 1988 ratings system, film producers turned to the "strange case" genre as a perfect vehicle for exploitative crime films with improved special effects capabilities: between 1991 and 1994, at least four movies took the name "Heung kong kei an" for marketing purposes, with many others featuring similar content both on screen and on TV. The Category III platform then encouraged filmmakers to seek out the most extreme violence, and much of it was inflicted on young women.[59] Again, the glut of such films brought the Category III obsession to a halt; moreover, the handover of Hong Kong and the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis seriously affected Hong Kong's local film industry.[60]

However, just like during the last crisis in the late 70s, Hong Kong film and TV producers did not give up on the "strange case" genre. The rebranded RTV – ATV broadcast the series *Danger Encounter* in 2005, adapting some of the same cases used by filmmakers in the

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[59] Tony Williams, "Hong Kong Social Horror," 61+; Davis and Yeh have also locate the sub-category of "pornoviolence" in these films that sexualize violence to an even higher degree, see "Warning! Category III," 17-20.
[60] As Vivian Lee points out, this series of economic and political shifts rendered the Hong Kong "success story" impotent, effectively causing a general disillusionment in the old Hong Kong cinema and its often celebratory ethos of Hong Kong's identity and prosperity. See Vivian P. Y Lee, *Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997: The Post-Nostalgic Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 11-2.

early 90s. In 2006, a similar show *Hong Kong Criminal Files* followed. Therefore, when Philip Yung wrote the screenplay for *Port of Call* in 2011, he did so mindful of an ongoing historical legacy of Hong Kong cinema. What is then truly impressive about the film is that it took a much more reflective stance towards the genre traditions that connected to its subject matter. The real-life Jiamei died a teenage escort, her body dismembered – and all of these are generic elements that Category-III strange-case films dwelled on – yet as I will demonstrate below, *Port of Call*'s representation of the extreme violence manages to foreground the characters as human beings despite all the gore, the cruelty, and the potential sensationalism.

A central segment in *Port of Call* is the courtroom recounting of the details of Jiamei's dismemberment. Curiously, however, the film has already provided another similar confession from Detective Chong's earlier career. In Chong's first case in the investigations department, he encountered three young men in their late teens who had tortured a woman and her small daughter for days before killing and dismembering the woman. Chong was profoundly disturbed by the attitudes of the perpetrators as he described them as completely remorseless on the stand: "I remember in court, one criminal described how he tortured the victim, forced her to drink urine and eat feces, beat her, burned her, dismembered her body and cooked it. While he talked the other two laughed." When the grizzled Chong tells this story, it is hard to distance this moment from the trope of a veteran questioning the goodness of humanity. Indeed, Chong soon comments that he tried really hard to regard those criminals as people instead of demons. Nevertheless, the gruesome fate of the female victim is not just a cop's personal horror story – it is a close retelling of a real-life murder case that took place in 1999.[61] Chong previously described the condition of the female victim's corpse, which was identical to that of the real-life

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[61] Expectedly, this case was also adapted into a Cateogry-III "strange case" film – *There Is Secret in My Soup* (2001).

victim. Although this whole sequence plays like a re-staging of the Category III tropes, its stark differences from her murderer Ting's confession troubles the habit of connecting outrageous criminal behaviors with tabloid/cult entertainment.

To begin with, Ting's confession is staged very differently.[62] Instead of letting Ting recall the dismemberment process on the stand, the court plays the tape of his confession in police custody. The recorded confession is framed in a medium-long shot with Ting sitting across a long table in a dark interrogation room. The film then cuts back and forth from the courtroom to the interrogation room and to the heavily desaturated flashbacks to the crime scene. As Ting described each step in his dismemberment, the flashback shows the graphic process, not in detail, but filtered through dirty glass panes installed in front of the camera lens. Traditionally, mutilation of the corpse is one of Category III cinema's chief fetishizations. Davis and Yeh are able to point to a key problem in such representations:

> If pornography, broadly speaking, is based on the "frenzy of the visible," Category III case studies like *The Untold Story* investigate processes of mutilation and dismemberment at their most *surgical*. These stories, unlike porn, are *literally* about objectification, the stages by which living human bodies are turned into something else: inanimate things that are sectioned into small pieces, consumed by acid, or slowly roasted over an open fire. Murder, the climax of narrative structure in crime thrillers or detective fiction, is just the beginning. The real fascination here is less with killing, which is merely a pretext, than with how human bodies are disposed of.[63]

Interestingly, unlike many Category III films, *Port of Call* reveals its actual murder scene at the very end of the film. Structurally, the death itself instead of its gruesome aftermath becomes the most significant portion. The murder is also bookended with scenes of positive encounters: whether it is the personal connection between Ting and Wang or Wang's reunion with her

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[62] The confession scene also opens the third of four episodes in the film, "Painful Steps." The episode's Chinese name – "Dap huet/ta xue" – is the same as the first two characters of the film's four-character title "Dap huet cam mui." Literally translated, it means "stepping on/across blood."
[63] Davis and Yeh, "Warning! Category III," 19.

family, both in themselves offer the potentials for a different ending from the bleak and cruel real event.

Port of Call also overturns the trope of the calm murderer during dismemberment, as the audience sees three different sets of reactions from Ting to his crime, and every one of them shows a distinct side of Ting's inner conflict. At the crime scene, Ting is constantly disturbed by the physical qualities of the corpse – he cannot tell the organs apart, he is shocked at the amount of body fat despite Jiamei's small figure, he spends hours trying to dismantle the bones. Even before he starts the dismemberment, the audience sees Ting trying cope with Jiamei's death: he stuffs himself with canned food, he plays Jiamei's NDS-esque handheld console and bangs his head against a metal shelf. In his testimony, Ting simply said that he had to "deal with her body." Undeniably there is a profound heartlessness in Ting's decision to carry out his actions, but in his attempt to take the body apart, the body is resisting him every step of the way. Without the killing scene, the audience does not see how "living human bodies are turned into something else;" instead, the film focuses on how this "something else" relentlessly retains its qualities of a human body through its physical resilience. For Ting to continue his cuts and chops, he had to continuously deny those bodily features of Jiamei, which leads to another confrontation beyond the courtroom scene. It is revealed later during Detective Chong's jail visit that Ting found out in the worst way that Jiamei was actually pregnant – a piece of knowledge that Ting apparently found unbearable as he head-butts the visiting room window again and again, implores Chong to stop asking questions.

The second perspective on Jiamei's dismemberment occurs during Ting's interrogation. While Ting's emotional outbursts at the crime scene are intermittent, his retelling in the face of the video camera is a steady buildup of his increasing distress. From the very beginning, Ting

rolls his eyeballs upwards, trying to hold back tears, but as the confession continues, he is losing control bit by bit. By the time he recalls his difficulty in cutting up bones, Ting has to take a pause, wiping tears off his face and pulling back his arms from the table. Inside the interrogation room, Ting is the only one talking, but the audience can see that at moments of distress, he looks towards screen left, presumably at the police officer in the room. Yet, confronted with the memory of his horrific actions, Ting resorts to a gesture of resignation and pleas for help. Lastly, in the courtroom, Ting, along with Jiamei's mother and sister, is forced to watch his confession tape. Ting's relatively subdued demeanor is immediately lost as soon as he realizes he had to face Jiamei's family. As the tape plays, Jiamei's mother cries and tries to cover her ears. Watching her reactions, Ting is restless during the entire procession, sometimes avoiding looking at Jiamei's mother, while other times trying to say something but cannot. At this point, the film emphatically dismantles Ting's image of the cruel murderer we have believed him to be. Ting's three different reactions in three different settings to the killing and dismemberment directly preclude any possibility that the viewer might relegate him to the status of a tabloid criminal or a part of the urban legend of perverted killers.

Somewhat prophetically, Julian Stringer expresses his frustration with the Category III crime films: "Such fear and revulsion toward the female body call for any expository critical framework, but as with *Untold Story*, there is no attempt to psychoanalyze or understand the villain's actions through the confessional flashback structure the film unravels."[64] Philip Yung, on the other hand, actualizes the "expository critical framework" in the form of not one but two mediated commentaries on the scene of the crime. Ting Tsz-chung, the perverse murderer from the tabloid media, is being broken down as the audience witnesses his complexity as a damaged

[64] Stringer, "Category 3," 376.

individual, his inability to properly explain his motivations, and the physical and emotional toll of his horrendous crimes. But the film is not simply a redemptive narrative about Ting's "real" humanity, and Stringer's priority of understanding the "villain's" actions risks bringing the film into the realm of classical Tragedy that thrives on formulas, rules, and catharsis.[65] Again, I would like to return to the confessional moment beyond the courtroom segment – Chong's prison visit. Before seeing Ting, Chong manages to track down the former's ailing father and learns about Ting's childhood misfortunes. Chong brings Ting's father's photograph to prison, and intends to learn more about Ting's psychology during the mutilation. As previously mentioned, Ting quickly and unilaterally terminates the questioning when the topic of the unborn child came up, and this leaves a significant blank space if one seeks a comprehensive explanation of Ting's motivations, the blank space being the mystery that whether Ting truly regretted his actions.

After the final interview with Ting, Chong can no longer approach the case through either the killer or his victim. Even though he manages to access Jiamei's chat records, he gains some more knowledge of the lives of Ting and Jiamei but not really the circumstances surrounding the killing itself. The audience, on the other hand, is allowed to proceed without Chong's perspective as the film shows the fateful meeting and its immediate lead-up. Right before the murder scene, the victim Jiamei had been talking with her soon-to-be killer Ting Tsz-chung both online and in-person. They have exchanged thoughts on their loneliness, isolation and suicidal thoughts. The two grew more intimate, and the film lingers on a moment when Ting shaves Jiamei's armpit. Over this shot, a line of subtitles appears at the center of the image, coinciding with Jiamei's voiceover that reads those words which are taken from the First Epistle of Timothy: "For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it be received with thanksgiving."

[65] For a succinct and clear summary of the essentialist and traditional formulations of Tragedy, see: Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 3-4.

Jiamei's quote from the Bible is incredibly ironic since during the sexual intercourse that follows, Jiamei whispers by Ting's ear that she really wants to die – a rejection of God's supposedly good creation. Ting agreed to help Jiamei by strangling her, but gave up as she began to choke. Jiamei then picked up Ting's arms and placed them near her neck, asking why he stopped. As she started humping on top of Ting, the latter resumed the choking while Jiamei's painful tears rolled down her smiling face.

In this scene, the spatio-temporal continuity is disrupted towards the latter-half as the camera pans away from a position outside Ting's apartment window and cuts to a shot of Jiamei singing, which is also conspicuously seen through a window. Near the end, we see a series of images from Jiamei's past before the film cuts to her initial arrival at Hong Kong. Like a prelude from the Book of Timothy, this sequence continues on juxtaposing the killing with visions of innocence, namely Jiamei's carefree singing. In her analysis of *Night and Fog*'s ending in which the media gets a glimpse of the crime scene, Bidisha Banerjee concludes that "[t]he taut binary between inside and outside spaces and all that they respectively represent, collapses in the final sequence of the film when the Lees' flat is laid bare."[66] Curiously, a similar effect is achieved in *Port of Call* as it positions the temporal difference between Jiamei's song and her death as a geographical one. More interestingly, the innocent Jiamei "outside the window" is actually located in the Mainland, probably Dongguan. The song that Jiamei sings – Hong Kong popstar Sami Cheng's "Wawa kan tianxia" ("A child sees the world") is a callback to the film's very beginning when Jiamei is shown learning the song at her Dongguan home.

In the midst of the parallel editing between the murder and the singing of the song, there are several shots that belong to neither scenario: a profile shot of Jiamei as she is holding Ting

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[66] Bidisha Banerjee, "What Lies Within: Misrecognition and the Uncanny in Hong Kong's Cityscape," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 14, no. 4 (December 2013): 535.

Tsz-chung in her arms, two close-ups of Jiamei and Tsz-chung respectively in that silent embrace, and another close-up of the two passionately kissing. These moments of intimacy adjacent to the murderous violence can easily be attributed to the "pornoviolence" endemic in a lot of Category III films, but if compared to other scholars' observations of Category III tropes, this fragmented love scene stands in clear contradiction to the modus operandi of the 90s exploitation movies – while the 90s films always incorporate sex as a component of the murder, as in the initial choking of Jiamei from *Port of Call*, the love scene here is peaceful and passionate and separate from the sexualized violence that ultimately results in Jiamei's death.[67]

Ting Tsz-chung and Wang Jiamei's relationship is presented as a sympathetic one. Around the middle point of the film, Jiamei and Ting each experiences a failed relationship in close succession. Jiamei's humiliation by her customer shattered her idealized romance with the customer whose tenderness is nothing other than a pretense for free sexual services. Ting, on the other hand, had a frustrating encounter with his female friend Mo-yung who was willing to be intimate with Ting but often expressed dislike of his appearance and refused to look at his face. When Jiamei and Ting talked online, the latter's first question to Jiamei was about her online profile in which showed a line lyrics from the Sami Cheng song. Jiamei answered that she listened to the song in order to learn Cantonese, and that she was also envious of Sami's star status, because "[i]t's sad when no one sees you." To this, Ting replied: "I'd rather not be seen because I'm very ugly." In this anxiety towards un-recognition, Jiamei then connected with Ting.

But this connection arrives too late for Jiamei as she is determined to end her suffering once and for all despite the memories of her aspirations and the possibilities of a new friendship. Interjecting Jiamei's murder, the moments of her singing and of her intimacy with Ting visualize

[67] Some examples of the sexualized violence in traditional Category III films can be found in Davis and Yeh, "Warning! Category III," 18.

this conflict of three distinct events in which each of them is almost competing for its own dominance in determining the outcome of this fateful encounter. Nevertheless, the result of this competition is already known in the opening minutes of the film, so the images of death in the flashback's "present" manage to collapse both the more innocent past and a more promising future.

Room Without a View

For both Xiaoling and Jiamei, when the sounds and images from different timeframes confront the present of their death scenes, they are not offering salvation or explanations of the on-going murders. Instead, such confrontations of temporalities are hopeless battles that both bear and crush the viewers' expectations of solace from either an integral narrative or a certainty of meanings. Raymond Williams writes

> What we encounter again and again in the modern distinction between tragedy and accident, and in the related distinction between tragedy and suffering, is a particular view of the world which gains much of its strength from being unconscious and habitual... The events which are not seen as tragic are deep in the pattern of our own culture: war, famine, work, traffic, politics. To see no ethical content or human agency in such events, or to say that we cannot connect them with general meanings, and especially with permanent and universal meanings, is to admit a strange and particular bankruptcy, which no rhetoric of tragedy can finally hide.[68]

In other words, the confusion caused by *Night and Fog*'s slow-motion, flashbacks, and the children's objects, along with *Port of Call*'s deconstruction of genre conventions and flashbacks, denies the audience of the habitual and bankrupt view of deadly events. Both Jiamei and Xiaoling, prior to the films, are pieces of tabloid news that conform to people's familiarity with the "social phenomenon" of the "strange cases." The "ten-sight disease" discussed by Lu Xun

[68] Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2006), 72-3.

has already plagued our perception of a variety of events, and the films in this chapter are tearing down the fabricated narratives, causalities, and conventions to explain away, ultimately, our own responsibilities.

Furthermore, disrupting the murder scenes not only challenges them as possible spectacles belonging to different metanarratives, it also "contaminates" the good memories and hopeful futures by ways of mutual interpellation and montage. When Jiamei concludes her song with the lyrics: "Let those lost feelings enter my body again / Have another drink before we search for Neverland," instead of the hopeful Neverland i.e. what could have been, the audience sees the abjection of her death, a punctuation after the announcement that the "goodness" of the world cannot escape its bloodthirsty shadows whether in the future or in the past. Here I want to borrow Paul Ricœr's summary of Greek tragedy's essence:

> Without the dialectics of fate and freedom there would be no tragedy. Tragedy requires, on the one hand, transcendence and more precisely, hostile transcendence… and, on the other hand, the upsurge of a freedom that *delays* the fulfillment of fate, causes it to hesitate and to appear contingent at the height of the crisis, in order finally to make it break out in a "dénouement," where its fatal character is ultimately revealed…Thus delayed by the hero, fate, implacable in itself, deploys itself in a venture that seems contingent to us… the unstable mixture of certainty and surprise is turned to terror by the drop of transcendent perfidy that tragic theology lets fall on it.[69]

As I have argued earlier, the two films prominently reject the transcendent, but since Ricœr is describing the plot devices of Greek tragic tradition e.g. the god and the hero, I will switch them out in exchange for the initial confirmation of death and the ensuing narrative of the films. So instead of transcendent fate and the tragic hero, I have the absolute fact of deaths and the characters' struggle in the rest of the films as two components of Ricœr's dialectic of tragedy. As the tragic hero's freedom is but the delaying of the transcendent, the experiences of Jiamei and

[69] Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 220-1.

Xiaoling are but the lead-up to the unchangeable ending. While the revelation of death's "fatal character" cannot exist without the plot progressions of Jiamei and Xiaoling, is it not also true that Jiamei and Xiaoling's lives before death only become significant because of their impending doom? When their past lives intertwine with their death scenes, what the audience sees is exactly a condensation of this dialectic of tragedy.

Catherine Silverstone, in her analysis of modern tragedy comments that: "[Tragedy] works to confound conventional structures of representation, exposing something of the Nietzschean Dionysian underbelly of the world, driving toward 'the fragmentation of the individual and his unification with primal being.'"[70] What these two films demonstrate is that this exposition is not an excavation project to investigate what is hidden beneath; in fact, both films' investigative framing narratives end up inconclusive since the detectives can only close the cases but not fully explain why the cases took place in the first place. Tragedies lie instead on the temporal horizon extending both ways, and as the films have shown, the safety and hopefulness today are only as meaningful as they are because of their nascent destruction.

[70] Catherine Silverstone, "Afterword: Ending Tragedy," in *Tragedy in Transition*, ed. Sarah Annes Brown and Catherine Silverstone (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2007), 279.

Chapter 2: Subtlety
Exodus and *Black Coal, Thin Ice*

Both *Exodus* and *Black Coal, Thin Ice* contemplate violence and murder with the utmost subtlety which as a concept is nebulous but legible at the same time. In *Exodus*, the film utilizes subtlety through a combination of hiding the shocking, affective moments of death and displaying the symbols surrounding those moments in order to highlight the conceptual violence hidden in the sequence. *Black Coal, Thin Ice* contrasts subtlety by its calculated staging and blocking of scenes, echoing the stifling atmosphere created by the authorities within the film. As the film encounters the explosion of spontaneous contingencies, its own calculation along with the stable power structure are caught in a whirlwind of obscured meanings and symbolisms.

***Exodus* Background**

Exodus is Hong Kong director Pang Ho-cheung's sixth feature film. Pang belongs to the newest generation of filmmakers that emerged after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis severely weakened the Hong Kong film industry. In 2001, Hong Kong comedy superstar Stephen Chow's long-time collaborator Vincent Kok helped produce, both creatively and financially, Pang's debut independent feature *You Shoot, I Shoot*. This genre-blending black comedy gained Pang much acclaim from both Hong Kong and abroad. Pang's 2003 film *Men Suddenly in Black* further improved on his distinctive comedy formula. However, by 2004 when he released *Beyond Our Ken*, he entered a phase of "Dialogues between Arthouse and Mainstream" which ventured beyond the dominating genre of comedy.[71]

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[71] Vivian P. Y. Lee, "Pang Ho-Cheung," in *Directory of World Cinema: China 2*, ed. Gary Bettinson (Chicago: Intellect, 2015), 106.

After receiving critical acclaim at the Berlin Film Festival with the drama film *Isabella* (2006), Pang proved his capacity to produce more dramatic material despite his reputation as a comedy auteur. *Exodus* then marked the transition between the peak of his wenyi experimentation and his subsequent return to comedies. Despite the film's high concept and dark comedy elements, *Exodus* was probably Pang's the most somber and disturbing film. Even though his 2010 horror film *Dream Home* featured an elevated level of violence and gore, *Exodus*' general seriousness and ambivalent ending created a much heavier atmosphere. The film received a rating of IIB in Hong Kong for profanities and sexual content, and was not imported to the Mainland very likely for the same reasons (by contrast, the much tamer *Isabella* was able to premiere in Mainland China).

According to director Pang Ho-cheung, the main premise behind *Exodus* originated from his childhood paranoia after reading tabloid conspiracies about women plotting to murder men. For him, girls always leaving for the bathroom together became unusually suspect, which evolved into a key plot point in his film. The English title *Exodus* corresponds to its Chinese title, literally meant *Chronicle of the Exodus from Egypt*, which is the commonly used Chinese translation of the Bible chapter. As for the reason for choosing this title, Pang explains that

> [i]t was Fredrich Torberg who said it is our belief that we all carry with us a great mission, we are meant to do one important thing in our lives. But of course we know this mission is seldom fulfilled. Alas, not too many of us are Moses, although among those who journey on the great Exodus, there were many who thought they were leaders of the Jews.[72]

[72] Cited from the DVD slipcover from Ho-cheung Pang, *Exodus (Chu Aiji Ji)*, DVD (Hong Kong: Deltamac (Taiwan) Co., Ltd., 2007). The quote can also be found the director's personal website. See: Ho-cheung Pang, "Exodus," Pang Ho-cheung, accessed March 1, 2018, http://www.panghocheung.com/en/films/exodus/.

The “man-on-a-mission” is then very much an analogy to the film’s male protagonist Tsim Kim-yip played by Simon Yam as he seeks to uncover the women’s conspiracy against all men, ultimately destroying his family and losing his life.

Exodus Synopsis

Exodus tells the story of Sergeant Tsim Kin-yip’s (Simon Yam) investigation into a bizarre conspiracy and his troubled married life. Once a righteous young officer, Tsim reported his colleagues’ violent abuse of suspects to superiors 20 years ago, causing his career to stagnate thereafter. His mundane work life changes during a routine interrogation of the peeping tom Kwan Ping-man (Nick Cheung) who adamantly insists that he crept around women’s bathrooms not out of salaciousness but to uncover an organization of female man-killers. Tsim dismisses Kwan’s claims quite easily until the interrogation record is mysteriously lost and Kwan nervously confesses to being a pervert in his second interview with Tsim. The only other person who visited Kwan between the two interrogations was Madam Fong (Maggie Siu), the chief in charge of the evidence department. Tsim’s curiosity then gradually becomes an obsession as he stalks Kwan after the latter has been released, follows Madam Fong and starts lying to his wife Cheung Fong (Annie Liu) about his personal investigation. Soon after Tsim confronts Kwan for his drastically different testimony, Kwan’s trailer home is burglarized and Kwan is missing. Kwan’s ex-wife Pun Siu-yuen (Irene Wan) is called in and becomes acquainted with officer Tsim who begins to secretly observe her life as well. Tsim finds out that Pun also lives a lonely and alienated life and sympathizes with her.

In the meantime, the film reveals that Cheung and Madam Fong know each other and indeed conspire in a women’s room, discussing Tsim’s investigation and his potential threat to

their man-killing organization. Cheung is convinced that her husband has been a good man and decides to leave the organization. Kwan's drowned body is found one day—a discovery that pushes Tsim and Pun closer, and the two subsequently start an affair, which drives Cheung, upon discovering her husband's infidelity, back to Madam Fong. A flashback follows as the film shows a teenage Cheung in a fierce fight against her abusive father. In order to protect her mother, Cheung joined a man-killing cabal of women, learning various assassination techniques that disguise deaths as accidents. A quick montage then chronicles Cheung's revenge against her father and a series of other killings, eventually ending with her first encounter with Tsim who is at that moment on motor patrol. In the final scene of the film, Tsim finally gets a chance to interview for a promotion. As the interview begins, Tsim starts to hiccup uncontrollably, a sign of imminent death according to Kwan's first testimony.

Black Coal, Thin Ice Background

Black Coal, Thin Ice was Mainland director Diao Yinan's third feature film and his first commercially funded film. In 2003, Diao's directorial debut *Uniform* featured a young tailor posing as a policeman. Diao's second feature *Night Train* (2007) opened with a court trial of a woman who was charged with the murder of her rapist. Both films were previously shown at the China Independent Film Festival, but did not receive wide release. In 2014, *Black Coal, Thin Ice* took up the character threads from Diao's previous works, by focusing on an undercover ex-cop and a woman who killed her rapist. The film garnered moderate popularity in China after winning the Golden Bear at Berlin. While a more vocal critic comments that the film was nothing more than a "run-of-the-mill neo-noir with embarrassingly tacky stylization,"[73] for some

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[73] Olaf Möller, "As Time Goes By The Berlinale's Standouts Looked Back into the Past and Watched the Years Pass," *Film Comment* 50, no. 3 (June 2014): 62.

scholars, the film is "[v]isually arresting and narratively engrossing," and it "departs from the traditional scheme of the Chinese arthouse, socially concerned dramas and rather develops as an elegantly classic *film noir*."[74]

Although the film's male protagonist has an intimate relationship with the female protagonist, the relationship is highly questionable since the male protagonist forces her to have sex with him. However, in order to promote the film, the production team marketed the relationship as a forbidden romance, confusing many audiences. Mainland censors demanded four minutes be cut from the international version of the film, significantly altering a sex scene and the film's ending.

The film's Chinese title literally translates to "Daylight Fireworks," but the director Diao Yinan also consented to its English title, stating that

> The difference between the two titles reflects the difference between reality and dreams. Coal and ice are real; fireworks in daylight are surreal. They're two sides of the same coin. Black coal is where the dismembered body parts are found, and white ice is where a homicide took place; taken together, they establish the facts of the murder case… [T]he English title proposes a sharp contrast, but that sharpness ferments into something else as you watch the film and see how the facts of the case fit together. All of that helps to strengthen the film's realistic aspects. "Fireworks in Daylight" is a kind of fantasy; it's the kind of catharsis which people use to shield themselves from the harsher aspects of the world around them.[75]

Therefore the filmmaker intends for the two titles to form a synthetic name for the film that addresses both the narrative's realism and surrealism. Diao's full awareness of the discrepancy

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[74] Eddie Bertozzi, "The Uncertainty Principle: Reframing Independent Film in Twenty-First Century Chinese Cinema," in *Chinese Cinemas: International Perspectives*, ed. Felicia Chan and Andrew Willis (New York: Routledge, 2016), 77.

[75] Diao Yinan, quoted in "Living in a World of Their Own: Q&A with Writer-director Diao Yinan" from "*Black Coal, Thin Ice* International Press DDA PR (64th Berlin International Festival)" (Fortissimo Films, January 2014).

between the film's different titles suggests that he intends at the beginning for this film to face an international audience.

Black Coal, Thin Ice Synopsis

Black Coal, Thin Ice's central character is Zhang Zili (Liao Fan), a police officer in 1999 who investigates a case of gruesome murder and mutilation. The dead man is identified as a coal-truck weighing station operator named Liang Zhijun (Wang Xuebing), whose wife Wu Zhizhen (Gwei Lun-mei) works at a local laundry shop. Zhang's misjudgment during an arrest costs the lives of two of his comrades. By 2004, Zhang, full of guilt, is no longer in the police force and works as a factory security guard. His frustrated life as an aimless drunkard is interrupted by a meeting with a former colleague, captain Wang (Yu Ailei) who is in charge of two new murder cases that share the same M.O. as that of the 1999 case. The deceased in the new cases were both in relationships with the widow Wu who has become the main suspect. Zhang volunteers to help Wang and the police, approaching Wu for information. As Zhang and Wang follow Wu around, the real but as yet unidentified murderer begins shadowing the detectives, too. Wang, aware of the situation, manages to confront the suspect who is revealed to be Liang Zhijun, the supposed first victim in 1999. However, before he can arrest Liang and report his identity, Wang is caught off-guard and killed by Liang. Using the clues that Wang left behind, Zhang witnesses Liang dumping Wang's mutilated body, confirming the murderer's identity.

The police immediately contact Wu, who accepts a deal negotiated by Zhang, confessing to knowledge of Liang's crimes. According to Wu, Liang committed his first murder in a botched robbery, forcing him to subsequently fake his death and live in the shadows. Liang could

not let go of his wife, thus killing two other men who became involved with Wu. Wu's confession is followed by a police sting in which she leads them to Liang, who is then shot and killed. But Zhang, still suspicious of Wu, pursues some loose ends to a night club named Daylight Fireworks (the literal translation of the film's Chinese title). There Zhang meets with another widow whose husband went missing after his argument with a woman from a laundry shop. With a hidden crime uncovered, Zhang asks Wu out to an amusement park, telling her that he knows things about her past. Zhang then forces the reluctant Wu to have sex with him in a ferris wheel.

The next morning, the two separate and the police turn up at the laundry shop for Wu's arrest. She now reveals that in 1999, she accidently ruined a male customer's expensive jacket. After asking Wu for compensation which she could not afford, the man coerced Wu into having sex with him. Wu could not bear the suffering and murdered the man whose body was later discarded by Liang. Following the arrest, Wu shows the police around the original crime scene. Meanwhile, Zhang, who has not been onscreen since the ferris wheel scene is implied to have fallen back to his mundane and meaningless life. When Wu is leaving the old crime scene with the police, someone lights up many fireworks at the top of a nearby building, disturbing the residents and police during the day. The film ends with the firefighters going after the source of the fireworks without revealing who is setting them off.

Killing Softly

What is cinematic subtlety? In John Fiske's study on the phenomenon of fandom, he observes that fans "frequently used official cultural criteria such as 'complexity' or 'subtlety' to argue that their preferred texts were as 'good' as the canonized ones, and constantly evoked

legitimate culture – novels, plays, art films – as points of comparison."[76] In other words, "subtlety" is a fluid quality that is both an official criterion of art and one that groups with niche tastes cling to.[77] Jonathan Dancy considers "subtle" to be a "thick concept" applied in evaluations. For Dancy, the proper response to something subtle is none other than the recognition of that subtlety.[78] In more rigorous examination of this concept, however, "subtlety" can be equated to more specific definitions. Polish philosopher Władysław Tatarkiewicz locates a crucial conception of subtlety articulated by the 17th-century Italian dramatist Emanuele Tesauro:

> Some [uses of metaphorical language] please the ear by their sound (*figura harmonica*), others (*figura pathetica*) rouse the passions, and others again (*figura ingegnosa*) gladden the mind by their ingenuity of content. The *figure harmoniche* aspire to *beauty*, whereas the aim of *figure ingegnose* is subtlety.[79]

Tatarkiewicz then continues on the same page, expanding beyond the literary roots of metaphors or figurative speech:

> [Subtleties] might appear also in things, if the latter were conceived as signs (*segni*), or symbols… It may be seen in painting, sculpture, emblems, architectonic ornament, pantomime, theatrical presentations, masquerades and dancing. All use signs other than words or in addition to them; subtle concepts are conveyed not by words but by bodies (*corpi*). These bodies may either belong to nature or have been created by art; some may even be invisible, abstract, fabulous or chimerical.[80]

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[76] John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (New York: Routledge, 1992), 35.
[77] Interestingly, scholar Sidney Gottlieb, a "Hitchcock fan," writes in his introduction to Hitchcock's essay collection that "… [Hitchcock's] understanding of the audiences' relation to cinematic heroes, heroines, and villains gains *subtlety* and *complexity* as he returns to these subjects repeatedly in his writings." Emphasis added. See Sidney Gottlieb, "Introduction," in *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. Sidney Gottlieb (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1997), xx.
[78] Jonathan Dancy, "Practical Concepts," in *Thick Concepts*, ed. Simon Kirchin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 53.
[79] Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, ed. D. Petsch, trans. Adam Czerniawski and Ann Czerniawski, vol. 3, 3 vols. (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 390.
[80] Ibid.

In these passages, Tatarkiewicz identifies Tesauro's "subtlety" not so much as a substantial quality but a formal one – a kind of aesthetic vehicle rooted not in spoken or written language, but in an art form's distinct qualities of expressions, i.e. their *corpi*. This is based on Tesauro's broad definition of symbols:

> A *symbol* is a metaphor which expresses an idea with the aid of a visible form. *Gestures* too are metaphors, metaphors which express ideas by means off actions. So is *dancing*, for the movements of dancers express inner emotions or symbolize external actions. So too are *tournaments*, for they contain allusions to warfare. And masquerades, for they express thoughts by means of dress and change of dress. *Painting* and *sculpture* are also forms of metaphor, as are *comedy* and *tragedy* which present various actions by means of costume, voice, gesture and movement. What then need be said of hieroglyphics, emblems or heraldry?[81]

For Tesauro, each art form's subtlety lies in the metaphors of motion, decoration, shape, or overall vision etc. Any art form's specific modality of presentation is incorporated into his aesthetics theory which encompasses all arts thanks to their potential in figurative expression.

Consequently, cinematic subtlety is then very much tied to film's unique formal qualities e.g. mise-en-scène, editing.[82] Meanwhile, the performances of actors inherit their theatrical legacies, also engendering another set of subtleties through physicality, facial expressions etc. Once we pinpoint this particular understanding of "subtlety," it is not difficult to find its applications. In an interview with director Oliver Stone, Stone agrees that

> subtlety is a technique… And there are many things in my movies that I know are there, and have sort of not been seen, *yet*, but they will be seen eventually through time… But as I say, what is subtlety? It's a technique. You're essentially

[81] Ibid., 390-1.

[82] I emphasize editing as part of film's specific metaphors based on the notion that montage is an essential part of film's narrative construction, which connects back to the Soviet montage theorists. But the discussions to follow will mostly be more in line with the montage theory of V. I. Pudovkin instead of that of Sergei Eisenstein since the former engages montage most frequently as a constructive component of film narrative. See V. I. Pudovkin, *Film Technique and Film Acting*, trans. Ivor Montagu (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1958), 66-78.

> communicating something, but you're doing it another way; it's less 'in your face.' It's pulled back.[83]

At the same time, film critics have also adopted the word in a similar approach, exemplified in Roger Ebert's review of *Schindler's List* (1993):

> The relationship between Schindler and Stern is developed by Spielberg with enormous subtlety. At the beginning of the war, Schindler wants only to make money, and at the end he wants only to save "his" Jews. We know that Stern understands this. But there is no moment when Schindler and Stern bluntly state what is happening, perhaps because to say certain things aloud could result in death. This subtlety is Spielberg's strength all through the film. His screenplay… isn't based on contrived melodrama. Instead, Spielberg relies on a series of incidents, seen clearly and without artificial manipulation, and by witnessing those incidents we understand what little can be known about Schindler and his scheme.[84]

Therefore, cinematic subtlety can be defined as a combination of understatements or metaphorical expressions that a film presents through performance, editing, and many more formal techniques. This subtlety is not manipulative, "bluntly stated" or "in your face," but subdued and "pulled back." Sometimes it might resonate with the truism of "show, not tell," but even in showing there are many different levels of intensity and clarity, and subtlety resides in an intricate space that provides both limited intensity and limited clarity without compromising a general legibility. Most importantly, there has to be communication. No matter how understated a film is, the contents are still "stated" – the statement may be opaque, but it is definitely visible enough for interpretive action.

Last but not least, a significant caveat exists in the "show, not tell" doctrine that does not include the contingent occurrences on screen. In 1985, David Bordwell pointed out in his article "Widescreen Aesthetics and Mise en Scene Criticism" that there had been a school of criticism

[83] David Breskin, *Inner Views: Filmmakers in Conversation* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 120-1.
[84] Roger Ebert, "'Schindler's List' Follows a Man's Trek to Heroism - Spielberg Masters Subtlety in Film," *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 15, 1993, sec. 2 Features.

i.e. “mise en scene criticism” that championed subtlety as a key metric to determine the strength of films, but those critics perceive cinematic subtlety as something entirely devised by the auteur whose masterful and near-absolute control of the pro-filmic materials takes precedence:

> All technique becomes subordinated to the staging of the fictional action… [C]olor, sound, camerawork, and editing can all be used unobtrusively to communicate meanings already implicit in the action or to suggest a directorial attitude without imposing one… For the mise en scene critics… ambiguity is not perceptual but interpretive and thematic, reflecting the subtle craft of the author.[85]

While the mise en scene critics pushed forward with their interpretations of Andre Bazin’s film theory, their views of subtlety sidelined the crucial elements of spontaneity in Bazin’s own conception of film ontology, such as “openness to accident, contingency, and the sheer otherness of phenomenal reality.”[86] These uncontrollable instances should not be excluded in the analysis of subtlety since they demarcate the limits of human craft and, thus, differentiate the truly ambiguous (“sheer otherness of phenomenal reality”) from the metaphorical symbols or subtle designs.

The subtlety of both *Exodus* and *Black Coal, Thin Ice* then corresponds to a similar dialectic of vagueness and transparency. Vivian Lee calls *Exodus* “a weird twist of the Hong Kong *policier* marked by Pang’s characteristic black humour and understatement,”[87] while Elena Pollacchi argues that *Black Coal, Thin Ice*’s “naturalistic photography opens up alternative readings to an oversimplistic definition of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* as a *noir* film.”[88] Like Ann Hui in making *Night and Fog* and Philip Yung with *Port of Call*, both Pang and Diao’s uses of cinematic subtlety seem to contribute to their films’ difficult genre description. Neither the

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[85] David Bordwell, “Widescreen Aesthetics and Mise en Scene Critcism,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 21, no. 18 (Summer 1985): 19.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Vivian P. Y. Lee, *Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997: The Post-Nostalgic Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 224n15.
[88] Pollacchi, “Jia Zhangke’s *Mountains May Depart* (2015) and the China Dream,” 221.

“policier” nor the “film noir” could cover the ample amount of subtleties in the respective films, since those genre markers are often associated with recognizable tropes or conventions. Also similar to the two films discussed in the previous chapter, *Exodus* and *Black Coal, Thin Ice* reserve their central confrontations with murders until the films’ very end. However, unlike the exaggerated sequences of violence constructed by Hui or Yung, Pang and Diao engage their characters’ acts of killing with significant indirectness.

Throughout *Exodus*, the central mystery hinges on whether there is a secret society of women who plot to kill all men. Although the film shows intermittent scenes between the male protagonist Tsim Kim-yip’s wife Cheung and his police superior Madam Fong in which the two women discuss their murder plans, it is never clear if those scenes are Tsim’s paranoid fantasies or not until the revelation of Cheung’s past towards the film’s conclusion. In an extended flashback sequence, the audience sees a teenage Cheung, still in high school judging by her costume, having a fierce argument with her father who has apparently hit her mother. Cheung is furious at her father’s domestic abuse, but is also frustrated by her mother’s timidity. In the next scene, Cheung confesses all her pains to a guidance counselor who inducts the former into a man-killing cabal. In the next scenes, Cheung is seen with groups of women studying how a television works and how snakes behave. Cheung’s first murder is then implemented through her newly gained knowledge with a TV. After tampering with her home TV, Cheung successfully tricks her father into trying to fix the television set which causes the man to be electrocuted to death. After this first scene, the film shows a male runner’s death after drinking from a public water fountain, a man’s death following a snake attack, and another’s death due to poisoning. In all three “murder” scenes, Cheung Fong is nearby, seemingly having orchestrated them all. Meanwhile, every time she kills a man, Cheung buys a doll from a local boutique shop. The dolls

have similar mustaches on their faces whereas their costumes all denote martial positions: kings, soldiers, royal guards etc.

With very little dialogue, this flashback sequence manages to construct a clear narrative primarily through editing: Cheung Fong resents her father, joins a man-killing group, and commits a series of murders. However, the steady pace of the editing along with the uninterrupted soundtrack strings together such a narrative without actually showing any of the "killings." Technically, the audience is only allowed incomplete perspectives that witness the peripheries of deaths. Lives were lost by means of ellipsis instead of representation. One can make the argument that the murderous violence is hidden so that Cheung's character remains totally ambiguous in accordance with a quasi-Bazinian stance: "Throughout his career, Bazin praises moments when films obscure and elide precisely that which they make us desire to see, as if in the very act of showing and preserving the camera also threatens to destroy."[89] However, simply preserving the "aura" of Cheung and obscuring deaths would not constitute an aesthetic strategy of subtlety, since that mystification very much falls in line with the threat that Tsim perceives from women.

On the other hand, the excision of the killings can also direct the viewers' attention elsewhere, away from the spectacle of death. Unlike Bazin's emphasis in his commentary on *The Little Foxes* (1941) that "the murdered man's occlusion demonstrates the power of murder to make us care about a character precisely as he vanishes," Pang's decision encourages the discovery of other forms of violence which, in this case, should be more pronounced than the acts of murder. In this flashback sequence, besides the revelation of Cheung Fong's dark past,

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[89] Oeler, *A Grammar of Murder*, 98.

the earlier scenes in which Tsim buys her dolls — indeed the very fact that she buys those dolls on these occasions — also take on another layer of meaning.

The equivalence that Cheung makes between her victims and the dolls demonstrates her extreme alienation. When real people are reduced to wooden or plastic tokens, it is difficult not to invoke Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

> Not only is domination paid for with the estrangement of human beings from the dominated objects, but the relationships of human beings, including the relationship of individuals to themselves, have themselves been bewitched by the objectification of mind. Individuals shrink to the nodal points of conventional reactions and the modes of operation objectively expected of them. Animism had endowed things with souls; industrialism makes souls into things.[90]

So behind the film's outlandish conceit, an insidious ideological twist that dehumanizes everyone involved, which, along with the other symbolisms discussed below, constitutes the film's subtle critiques. Furthermore, Cheung's murderous spree began with her vengeance against her father and her mentor's lesson that men were the source of hatred. Her mission thus evolves into a scientific process of eliminating the hatred's "sources" and exacting justice through indirect, bloodless murders. This dimension of retribution in Cheung's and the women's motivation is also commented on by the German philosophers:

> Hence, for both mythical and enlightened justice, guilt and atonement, happiness and misfortune, are seen as the two sides of an equation. Justice gives way to law. The shaman wards off a danger with its likeness. Equivalence is his instrument; and equivalence regulates punishment and reward within civilization.[91]

As the secret society of women has established their equation of justice—men create hatred, therefore their punishment is death, every man is caught in this equation without nuance or

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[90] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2002), 21.
[91] Ibid., 11-2.

particularity. In their murderous campaign, men are all equalized in their shared gender and crime.

Therefore, while the film chooses to hide the electrocution of Cheung's father, the poisonous water fountain, the snake attack, or the tampering with the sandwich, it turns to a form of flattening violence on the ideological level that facilitates that on the physical level, namely the reduction of humanity to that of pure objects. But in Cheung's choice of dolls, this reduction is, as a result, not unilateral – that men become dolls in Cheung's schemes. Instead, the men and the dolls meet together at the point of "maleness" narrowly defined by certain aspects of men's physical appearance (e.g. beards) and certain vocations (e.g. soldier). In this equivalence with true bourgeois fashion, both objects – the man and the doll – depend on a circulating currency, namely the reified abstraction of maleness.

But the film's subtlety does not stop at this re-direction through ellipsis that leads the audience to contemplate another form of violence. *Exodus* ultimately validates Tsim's fear of the murderous women, but with tremendous irony. Even in Cheung's flashback montage, which focuses mostly on the women's actions, there are many traces of a world that has exacted the same kind of formal violence that reduces women to lifeless abstractions. In a sequence that opens with a heated argument between father and daughter while the bruised mother cries, what more evidence do we need to prove that the male world is cruel towards women? Is it the male policemen who come to settle the "domestic dispute?" Is it Cheung's father's continued disregard of his family as he shoves past his daughter in the kitchen? Or is it the male shop clerk who comments that Cheung's boyfriend should pay for the dolls? Indeed, these could all fit under the pronouncement that all the hatred in the world is the work of men, but that would defeat any intention to create subtlety in the film and invite interpretation from the viewer,

despite the latter's sympathy towards the women's situations. As Tesauro's abovementioned system suggests, subtlety often resides in the indirect statements that transcend spoken language and explicit actions; it exists through signs and symbols.

The first symbol that the flashback hints at is that of the poison. Tsim's first suspect Kwan Ping-man claims that the women use an odorless and tasteless poison to mask their tracks. Two of Cheung's victims die due to poisoning. At the very end of the film, Tsim is implied to have been poisoned as well. All these instances of poison use are then concentrated in the figure of the snake with which Cheung also commits a murder. In the behind-the-scenes documentary accompanying *Exodus*, Annie Liu who plays Cheung Fong directly references a line from the Ming-dynasty novel *Creation of the Gods* (a.k.a. *Investiture of the Gods*): "青竹蛇兒口，黄蜂尾上針，兩般由自可，最毒婦人心！"[92] The line approximately translates to: "The green snake's bite/ the yellow wasp's sting/ both by their nature/ the most venomous is the woman's heart."[93] As time went by, the final clause of this line became so popular that it is now essentially a proverb instead of a literary reference. The "venom" in the woman's heart connotes ruthlessness, cunningness, and, ultimately, the woman as fundamentally untrustworthy.

The second symbol surrounding the women is Madame Fong's ruse of the baby cart. The last murder Cheung commits in this sequence is the poisoning of a man who fishes by a pier. After the man drops dead after eating Cheung's sandwich, Madame Fong rolls a baby stroller into the frame, picking up the unfinished sandwich and throwing it into the cart. In the next scene, the two women meet by their car, and Madame Fong picks up from her stroller what turns

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[92] Zhonglin Xu, "封神演义/卷 018 (Investiture of the Gods/Chapter 18)," 维基文库 (zh.wikisource.org), May 18, 2017, https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hans/%E5%B0%81%E7%A5%9E%E6%BC%94%E7%BE%A9/%E5%8D%B7018.

[93] In the abridged English version, the four-verse line is condensed into one sentence: "The fangs of a snake and the sting of a yellow wasp are nothing when compared to her heart." See Zhizhong Gu, ed., *Creation of the Gods*, trans. Zhizhong Gu, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Beijing: New World Press, 1992), 205.

out to be a toy baby and casually dumps it into the trunk. Their choice of hiding their crimes amidst objects related to childcare is a disruptive action based on and exploiting gender stereotypes. Just as Stuart Hall has summarized in his commentary on the role of women during the Algerian War of Independence:

> The women sometimes involved in the armed struggle appropriated the veil as a way of… taking arms from one place to another, delivering explosives. And that was because they could depend on the reactionary reading by the French… They would say: "a woman in a veil is of course a dependent woman who would never be brave enough to commit that act." So in a sense, they could turn the veil against its meaning… return the look in the opposite way.[94]

While the Algerian women subverted the French view of the veil, Cheung and Madame Fong subverted the common perception of maternity. And the prerequisite conditions for such subversions are thus the reactionary readings that fix the meanings of a woman in a veil and a woman with a stroller.

Both the snake and the performance of motherhood differ from Cheung Fong's murderous reifications of men in their gender-based prejudices. The snake also stands in opposition to motherhood since the former is deceptive, destructive while the second is loving, nurturing. This dialectic of symbols then constitutes the paradoxical image of women in *Exodus*, eventually condensed in Cheung Fong through the flashback montage. Despite her unflinching attitude towards killing and literally objectifying human beings, the film subtly supplements this character evil with an indicting question directed at the audience. For Tsim, this question arises as he encounters a pair of his neighbors: a paralyzed middle-aged man in a wheelchair and a fashionably dressed young woman behind that chair. Was the woman behind the paralysis of the man? Were other women plotting against men this whole time? Tsim through his extramarital

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[94] Isaac Julien, *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask*, Internet Resource (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1996), http://emory.kanopystreaming.com/video/frantz-fanon-black-skin-white-mask.

relationship with the widowed Pun Siu-yuen decides to let go of this suspicion, but for the audience, especially the male audience, the film is just like Pang Ho-cheung's childhood encounter with the tabloids: "Back in high school, I came across a tidbit of news which reports that studies have shown all men on this planet are being slowly murdered by women. This report created in me an unknown fear for the opposite sex."[95] This unknown fear is very much the sublimated fear of the unknown which, for Pang in high school, is the *opposite* sex.

But unlike the unironic "news," the film reflects on this premise through its deliberate choice to not show explicitly the crucial murders. This strategy can redirect the viewer to a web of metaphors and symbolisms sprinkled throughout the film. In the end, Pang's use of subtlety is not just a matter of "understatement," but also an active obscuring so that the audience has to confront the absence of the murder spectacle and the presence of presumed myths. Trinh T. Minh-ha validates this form of textual arrangement in her book *Women, Native, Other*:

> Clarity as a purely rhetorical attribute serves the purpose of a classical feature in language, namely, its instrumentality… at any rate to *mean* and to send out *an unambiguous message*. Writing thus reduced to a mere vehicle of thought may be used to orient toward a goal or to sustain an act, but it does not constitute an act in itself... To use the language well, says the voice of literacy, cherish its classic form. Do not choose the offbeat at the cost of clarity. Obscurity is an imposition on the reader. True, but beware when you cross railroad tracks for one train may hide another train.[96]

What *Exodus* has accomplished through its subtlety and its calculated omissions therefore, is to reveal the lethal train hiding behind another.

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[95] Pang, "Exodus."

[96] T. Minh-ha Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 16.

Long Arm of the Law

In analyzing both *Exodus* and *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, one must consider their depiction of police surveillance. *Exodus* shows extensive sequences of Tsim's surveillance of his suspect Kwan, his superior Madame Fong, and Kwan's ex-wife Pan. In *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, former police officer Zhang Zili stalks a female person of interest Wu Zhizhen for much of the film in order to investigate a series of murders. The two are in turn watched and followed by the police and Wu's husband who was assumed to be dead. In Karen Fang's *Arresting Cinema*, she summarizes Hong Kong films' fascination with the motif of surveillance:

> … [It is] partly because the cinema shows what surveillance means among a population for whom intense social and government oversight are inescapable, but especially because surveillance's centrality within global film culture provides opportunities for Hong Kong cinema to position itself alongside hegemonic powers conventionally privileged in canonical Hollywood and other Western surveillance cinema.[97]

A similar argument such as this could be made to describe features of surveillance in Mainland Chinese films as well. This partly explains *Black Coal, Thin Ice*'s unexpected popularity, especially as critics are constantly debating the aptness of its categorization as a film noir, and using Hollywood noir tropes as benchmark for *Black Coal, Thin Ice*'s success in appropriating the genre.[98] However, Karen Fang's approach mostly situates the films' use of surveillance in different real-world social-economic discourses, and yields broader political conclusions. Such a perspective does not necessarily prioritize the relationships and power dynamics between

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[97] Karen Fang, *Arresting Cinema: Surveillance in Hong Kong Film* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2016).

[98] Critic Anthony Carew sums up the film's mixed reception very well: Yet anyone expecting the investigation to continue apace – and for this neonoir to stick to those old noir beats – will be frustrated by what follows: 106 minutes of odd, arrhythmic storytelling that moves between bursts of absurdist comedy, unexpected explosions of ephemeral violence, and long stretches of art-cinema atmospherics. Whether this choppy tonality is an unintentional failure or an intentional success is in the eye of the beholder." See Anthony Carew, "Technicolor Noir: Diao Yinan's *Black Coal, Thin Ice*," *Metro Magazine: Media & Education Magazine*, 2015, 49-50.

characters since surveillance is one of several means of control and repression, particularly considering the emphasis on the prominence of police work in these films.

For *Black Coal, Thin Ice,* the director Diao Yinan did not simply borrow from film noir or Nathaniel Hawthorne;[99] most of the themes from the film are already present in Diao's earlier work. In his 2003 feature debut *Uniform*, Diao Yinan focuses on a young man who works at a small-town laundry-tailor shop. One day, a police uniform is left at his shop and no one comes to pick it up. Upon learning that the owner was killed in action, the young man starts pretending to be a policeman, using the uniform to extort money and woo girls. In 2007's *Night Train*, the film centers on a policewoman and her reactions to having carried out a death sentence. The convicted woman, like Wu Zhizhen from *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, has also murdered her rapist. By 2014, Diao had already explored the subjects of police identity and its relationship to women for quite some time, so instead of a deconstruction of film noir, *Black Coal, Thin Ice* is more likely a deconstruction of the Chinese "cop film," a distinct subgenre of crime films that emerged with the rise of the Sixth Generation of Chinese directors.

Black Coal, Thin Ice sets its opening in the year of 1999 which coincides with the rising popularity of a distinct wave of police dramas directed by a new generation of Chinese directors at the time. Yaohua Shi has noticed that

> films portraying the People's Police in the 1990s provide unique opportunities to examine a host of issues. No longer odes to socialist utopia, the new tales of the People's Police bring to the fore the potential conflict between ordinary people and the police as agents of the state rather than their harmonious coexistence.[100]

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[99] The original story was inspired by Hawthorne's short story "Wakefield." See Zoe Li, "Noir Thriller May Be a Game Changer for Chinese Cinema," CNN, April 2, 2014, https://edition.cnn.com/2014/04/02/world/asia/china-film-black-coal-thin-ice/.

[100] Yaohua Shi, "Maintaining Law and Order in the City: New Tales of the People's Police," in *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Zhang Zhen (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 323.

Leaving the socialist ideological space thus brought about the opportunity to explore the contradictions between the state and the people often diagnosed with capitalist societies. Within the birth of social theory in the West, generations of theorists have recognized the inherent antagonisms between the powerful police and its ordinary subjects. Max Weber recognized that the state has monopolized and defined legitimate violence – a basis for the power vested in the police.[101] Later, socialist theorists through revolutions and criticisms deepened the understanding of this power dynamic: for instance, Louis Althusser categorized the police as a Repressive State Apparatus, and famously used the scenario of the response to a police hailing an individual to introduce his concept of interpellation.[102] Michel Foucault further complicated this perception, this time with an emphasis on the technology of surveillance involved in the construction of military or police control exerted on the population.

Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish* that

> [w]ith the police, one is in the indefinite world of a supervision that seeks ideally to reach the most elementary particle, the most passing phenomenon of the social body… And, in order to be exercised, this power had to be given the instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible. It had to be like a faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception…[103]

This real-world relationship of control then became the focus of several Mainland Chinese films in the 1990s. As the mechanism of watching, following, and enforcing the law is presented on the screen, it becomes highly visible, enabling a much more critical perspective from both the

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[101] Max Weber, "Politics as Vocation," in *Weber's Rationalism and Modern Society: New Translations on Politics, Bureaucracy, and Social Stratification*, ed. and trans. Tony Waters and Dagmar Waters (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 136.
[102] Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 141-7, 173-5.
[103] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1995), 213-4.

filmmaker and the audience. When Yaohua Shi discusses the "subjective realism" that the director Ning Ying used in her film about a beat cop, he argues that

> [t]he unrelenting focus on the police and on police work constitutes a form of (counter) surveillance. Tracking shots, long takes, and stationary camera work subject the police to close scrutiny. Indeed, *jingcha* [i.e. police in Chinese] (literally "vigilant observation") is not only the subject of the films but also their stylistic modus operandi. The director [i.e. Ning Ying] deliberately and effectively blurs the distinction between her subject and its representation by casting real-life policemen. The hyperrealist emphasis on specific chronotopes—or, to use the term preferred by many of the directors of the New Documentaries and feature films of the 1990s, *xianchangxing* [i.e. present-ness]—has unexpected consequences when the subject is the police. Shot on location, often in real time, the films become analogous to evidence acquired "at the scene" (*xianchang*) by the police.[104]

This new form of engagement with the often unilateral power of the police has then impacted most of the independent filmmakers that started in the 90s and the 2000s. Certainly for Diao Yinan, this counter-surveillance of the police is a key theme in his filmography, but his apparent stylizations deviate from the realist traditions of directors such as Ning Ying or early Jia Zhangke. Diao's consistent interest in the male-female interaction between a police officer and a civilian is also an outstanding element in his films, which relates to the often gendered representation of police violence and the often chauvinist culture that delegates men with legitimized violence.[105]

Black Coal, Thin Ice, like other cop films from the 90s, places enormous emphasis on the "at the scene" element of the genre. The film opens with the journey of a severed arm wrapped in newspapers as it is transported from a coal truck to a dumping ground and finally to a coal refinery where it is spotted by the refinery workers. Police officers arrive at the scene and start

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[104] Shi, "Maintaining Law and Order in the City: New Tales of the People's Police," 324-5.
[105] David H. J. Morgan, "Masculinity and Violence," in *Women, Violence and Social Control*, ed. Jalna Hanmer and Mary Maynard (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), 181.

their search. This sequence contains almost all the technical staples that Shi mentions: "Tracking shots, long takes, and stationary camera work." However, Diao Yinan distinguishes his film significantly through his meticulously designed lighting and the actors' contained performances. While the 90s' films highlight their naturalism, Diao Yinan's (crime) scene is methodical, precise, and even theatrical. But it is exactly within this controlled space that any contingent element becomes extremely engaging and mysterious. At the scene in the coal refinery, Zhang Zili rolls an empty beer bottle down a long flight of stairs. The camera stays with the rolling bottle as it drops and eventually disintegrates by the end. What is so mesmerizing about this seemingly inconsequential moment is then the only uncontrollable element in the entire sequence: the timing of the bottle breaking. And it is only through this entirely random breakage that the police are able to announce that they have found the next clue. Therefore, this is Diao Yinan's brand of subtlety – establishing clarity as much as he can, only it is a clarity almost bound to be broken by the random occurrences and, thus, the obscurities of a capricious world.

The clever use of props aside, Diao Yinan also implements this contradiction between planned clarity and unpredictable obscurity through the actors' physicality under uncontrollable circumstances. For example, the film juxtaposes multiple times Zhang's discordant performances with those surrounding him. Zhang tries to follow Wu on a public skating rink, but his clumsiness is in direct contrast to Wu's incredible grace. After Zhang has solved the case, he goes to a dancing hall to catch up with a dancer friend. When the latter plays the latest disco hit, Zhang begins flailing around with the music, hogging the dance floor which is also occupied by another group of dancers in training whose verbal commands are clear and steps precise.

Nevertheless, the scene that ties together Diao's innovation with the cop film genre, the surveillance aspect of the police, and Diao's personal style of subtlety is Wu Zhizhen's return to

her old home and former crime scene as ordered by the police. This sequence provides a rare cinematic representation of a fascinating aspect of the justice system in China, namely that the suspect in custody is sometimes required to revisit and narrate the crime scene. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, Ting Tsz-chung in *Port of Call* is also ordered by the police to re-enact his murder and dismemberment of Wang Jiamei. However, unlike Ting's walkthrough, which is mixed with flashbacks and layered with a solemn soundtrack, Wu's revisit to the crime scene stays in the current space-time without any non-diegetic sound. In this sequence, four men, including two cameramen, and a policewoman accompany Wu to a compact apartment in an old building. The police chief then leads the procedure with two questions to Wu: Where did you get the knife? Where did you kill the person? Following Wu's answers, the chief then orders her to point to the "evidence,"[106] i.e. the exact positions of the knife and the killing five years ago. In order for Wu's "pointings" to be optimally recorded and photographed, the cameramen also issue verbal commands so that Wu can adjust her body accordingly.

Disentangling the different layers of this sequence, we have to focus on the most overt elements with which the scene is set – the police. Although Diao's representation of the police is far from the docudramatic mode popular in the 90s, his camera work does "[align] the spectator on the side of the director… [returning] the gaze of the omnipresent, all-seeing 'proletariat dictatorship' and its agent—the police."[107] But Diao's critical gaze is coupled with an unusual sense of humor, one that both humanizes the police as people and troubles the institution of the police. The exemplary moment of such humor is the police chief's questions about Wu's murder. When the group moves to the bedroom where the murder took place, the police chief asks:

[106] The Chinese dialogue for this command is "Zhi zheng yi xia!" Its literal meaning corresponds to a mixture of "acknowledge/point to the proof/evidence" and "acknowledging/pointing as proof/evidence." So the act of the suspect pointing is also a piece of evidence in and of itself.
[107] Shi, "Maintaining Law and Order in the City," 337.

"Where did you kill the person?" In response to this, Wu points at the corner of the room where a wardrobe stands. With a puzzled tone, the police chief follows up with another question: "Inside the wardrobe?" "There used to be a bed," replied Wu. The police chief then orders Wu to stand beside and point at the wardrobe instead. During this "parade," the police chief is quiet, emotionless, and unwavering even in the face of his own meaningless inquiries. This bizarre interaction highlights the ridiculousness of the scenario; the entire procedure of pointing to/as evidence is revealed to be such an extreme exercise in positivism, with every act and gesture taken only at the level of signifier. As the police chief seriously entertains the possibility that Wu would commit the act of killing *inside* a small wardrobe, the film shows that the justice system has become a reified vehicle whose sole commitment is the maintenance of its own procedures and technicalities so that reason and common-sense logic no longer stand in the way.[108]

Following the mechanical language of the police, we should then contemplate how that language works in relationship to their addressee Wu Zhizhen. This relationship is an extension of the regime of surveillance and control utilized by the police and the former police to regulate Wu's body. As Wu walks through her old home, she is ordered into two specific poses so that the police can take photographs of the "reenactment." The series of corrections and commands constitute two crucial steps in the discipline of the body as theorized by Foucault – "the correlation of the body and the gesture" and the "body–object articulation."[109] As the Imperial French soldiers were subjected to "what might be called the instrumental coding of the body," their gestures were broken down "into two parallel series: that of the parts of the body to be used

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[108] Horkheimer and Adorno have voiced their concerns with this kind of phenomenon in which the mechanical operations of societies take precedence over the people of the societies: "Thought is reified as an autonomous, automatic process, aping the machine it has itself produced, so that it can finally be replaced by the machine." Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 19.
[109] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 152.

(right hand, left hand, different fingers of the hand, knee, eye, elbow, etc.) and that of the parts of the object manipulated (barrel, notch, hammer, screw, etc.)"[110] On a less regimented but equally arbitrary scale, Wu's body is broken down to a collection of parts and they are then connected to the objects connected to her murder. Wu's index fingers become the focal point in this articulation, since in their positioning they provide literal indexes for the police as the proof of the long-gone murder weapon and bedroom bed.

While the military in Foucault's book relies on contact between the body and the object, here the police in the film rely on a discursive imagination that connects the criminal's body and her objects. This is where the correlation of the body and the gesture comes in. For the French school administrators, "[a] well-disciplined body forms the operational context of the slightest gesture. Good handwriting, for example, presupposes a gymnastics – a whole routine whose rigorous code invests the body in its entirety, from the points of the feet to the tip of the index finger."[111] When first asked to point at where the knife was, Wu only slightly raised her right hand so that her left hand would not be dragged into the gesture by the handcuff. However, the cameraman unequivocally demands her to "raise [the arm] higher" and "raise straight," which leads to the disciplined gesture: every time Wu points, she has to raise both of her hands; one of them has no function other than to demonstrate the power of the chain.

The submissive gesture that Wu makes with her pointing is not the end of this operation of control. What really complements the whole regime is the photographing of the disciplinary action. After Wu has struck the two poses of pointing in the kitchen and the bedroom, the film camera assumes the perspective of the photo camera, and with two flashes, the audience is brought into the shoes of the cameraman for a brief moment. The photograph records this

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[110] Ibid., 153.
[111] Ibid., 152.

moment of control, or Wu's lack thereof, archives it, and forever inscribes Wu's body with this permanently fixed image that stands in for the acknowledging gesture of her crime. Foucault concludes at the end of his treatise on panopticism:

> The ideal point of penality today would be an indefinite discipline: an interrogation without end, an investigation that would be extended without limit to a meticulous and ever more analytical observation, a judgment that would at the same time be the constitution of a file that was never closed, the calculated leniency of a penalty that would be at the same time the permanent measure of a gap in relation to an inaccessible norm and the asymptotic movement that strives to meet in infinity.[112]

The two photographs are then the final keystones in her indefinite discipline. In the context of legal documents, the photographs are a trial without end and a discipline without end. This is an authoritarian mode of surveillance exceeding in resoluteness the panopticon. Wu's concern is not just that she might be watched by an invisible state agent (as she had been before her arrest), but it is the fact that the state only needs to watch one particular version of her, the version in which she is a criminal since the bodily gestures and the photographs "do not lie." When Foucault wrote that "[t]he body is the inscribed surface of events… the locus of a dissociated self… and a volume in perpetual disintegration," the truly damning photographs have made this process of inscription, dissociation, and disintegration ever more accessible for the state and its law enforcement.[113]

Daylight Fireworks

The deconstruction of the Chines "cop film" and the critique of the regime of police surveillance form the two layers of the filmmakers' intricate staging efforts. The carefully

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[112] Ibid., 227.
[113] Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 83.

monitored exactitude in the lighting and performance also highlights the theatricality of Wu Zhizhen's trip back to the crime scene. However, as in many sequences of *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, this kind of meticulous design falters when uncontrollable events take place in the scene. The tightly controlled indoor space slowly cracks as Wu moves from room to room: when she is holding the pointing pose, the puffing steam of a stew pot is quietly disturbing this static image; when Wu holds another pointing pose towards the wardrobe in the bedroom, her reflection in the mirror on the wardrobe door points back, suddenly creating a ghostly intrusion that accompanies her staged stance. Although these are minute instances, everyone encounters literal explosions of uncontrollable objects when they exit the apartment building: someone starts shooting fireworks into the sky and towards the police.

The initial projectiles seem well calculated when they hit precisely the snow mound between the police and Wu, but when the salvo increases in volume, the fireworks tumble wildly as they bounce on and off walls, windows, and cars. When Wu looks up into the fireworks in the sky, a plane flies by in the background of the exploding sparks. Inexplicably, these seemingly random elements converge on the screen right after one of the film's most oppressive moments.[114] Looking at this surreal view, Wu sheds a few tears and smiles as she is taken away from the scene. For a character who has been imprisoned throughout the film—by her husband, by Zhang Zili, and finally by the justice system—she gets to witness a sudden pandemonium that proves the possibility of a unshackled existence, one that moves freely against the rigidity of abusive relationships and heartless institutions.

After Wu leaves, the film stays in the courtyard that is still being bombarded by fireworks. The police and the firemen are taking measures to stop the mysterious perpetrator of

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[114] Very much like the bird dropping in the middle of its flight at the end of *Barton Fink* (1994), the plane flying by could either be an authentically random occurrence or a clever touch of special effects.

the chaos. When the police are trying to warn the person with their bullhorn, they are unable to maintain steady stances as the fireworks are landing right where they stand. Soon, two firemen are being raised by the fire truck's crane to reach the rooftop. Their elevation stagnates intermittently when sparks descend past the crane. The law and order of the blocking and performance malfunction in the face of those unstoppable fiery projectiles. In the final shot of the film, the camera faces a wall of the building where the perpetrator is on the rooftop, and steadily cranes up. And even in this perfectly mechanical movement, the wild sparks fly past here and there. Towards this final moment, the filmmakers have embraced the contingency and spontaneity that break through every so often. The "subtle craft" so cherished by the orthodox auteurist critics is cultivated to the extreme by Diao Yinan, but as he reveals the limits of that craft, an unexpected dynamic, whether it is the Bazinian ambiguity or the Lyotardian sublime, synthesizes the controlled and the uncontrollable, validating both in a new catharsis.

Chapter 3: Humanism
A Touch of Sin

In the three different segments that represent acts of killing in *A Touch of Sin*, each deals with ethical conundrums related to different sets of cultural-political discourses. They reference the literary traditions of wuxia and gong'an, traditional Chinese opera, and Chinese cinema in order to trouble both the espousal and rejection of humanism within those narratives. The film envisions many of the tropes from those referenced traditions and observes their collapse or danger in the contemporary world.

***A Touch of Sin* Background**

A Touch of Sin is director Jia Zhangke's sixth fictional feature film[115] and was supposed to be his fourth approved release in Mainland theaters. The film's episodic narrative is based on four real life incidents—Dahai is based on Hu Wenhai, a Shanxi peasant disgruntled with the corrupt dealings of the local government and businesses, who killed 14 people (including two girls at the age of 11 and 16) in 2001; Zhou San is based on Zhou Kehua, a Chongqing native who committed 9 robberies between 2004 and 2012, killing 11 people; Xiaoyu is based on Deng Yujiao, a hotel worker from Hubei province, who fought back against three rapists who happened to be local government employees, killing one man and wounding another; Xiaohui is an amalgamation based on as many as 14 Foxconn workers (the youngest was 18, and the oldest was 28) who committed suicide in the year 2010.

[115] This does not take into account his feature film *24 City* (2008), a documentary, the interview portions of which are all performed by actresses.

The gruesome real-life tragedies notwithstanding, Jia presents those incidents through the unexpected lens of wuxia films. Many have pointed out the English title of the film—*A Touch of Sin*—is a clear reference to King Hu's wuxia epic, *A Touch of Zen* (1975).[116] In interviews, Jia explains that he considers the four characters in his film to be imperfect embodiments of the xia (knight-errant/chivalry/vigilante) ideal.[117] Despite the characters' flaws and mistakes, they supposedly still retain certain elements of the xia spirit. Within the film, the frequent evocations of Chinese opera songs and the apparent motifs of weapons all seem to support this directorial intention of portraying the four characters as xia.

Besides Jia Zhangke's own production company Xstream Pictures and the director's long-time financial supporter Office Kitano (created by Japanese director Takeshi Kitano), *A Touch of Sin* is also backed by the state-owned Shanghai Film Group—the production company behind every Jia Zhangke fiction film since *The World* (2004). State-level support, however, did not guarantee a film's release. *A Touch of Sin* was scheduled to premiere in November 2013, but on October 30th, news emerged online about the film's supposed ban. Later Jia clarified that despite not banning the film, state censors still needed further "communications" with the production side prior to its release.[118] Mainstream media outlets were still able to publish relevant news (awards, accolades etc.) concerning the film, albeit without mentioning its indefinitely delayed release. After pirated versions circulated online, the film was openly

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[116] Shenshen Cai, "Jia Zhangke and His *A Touch of Sin*," *Film International* 13, no. 2 (June 1, 2015): 73; Yanjie Wang, "Violence, Wuxia, Migrants: Jia Zhangke's Cinematic Discontent in *A Touch of Sin*," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 9, no. 2 (May 4, 2015): 159; Jiwei Xiao, "China Unraveled: Violence, Sin, and Art in Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin*," *Film Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (June 2015): 30.

[117] Xiao, "China Unraveled." 26.

[118] According to Jia Zhangke, they were still in a process of "communication" and "discussion" with the censors. By the end of 2013, the director was still optimistic that the film would be released soon, citing that another film *No Man's Land* (2013) was eventually released after 4 years of delay due to censorship demands. See Wan Qin, "[独家]贾樟柯谈新片被禁：仍在评估 明年春季海外发碟 ([Exclusive] Jia Zhangke Talks about New Film Being Banned: Still Assessing, Releasing DVD Abroad Next Spring)," Ifeng.com, Entertainment, December 9, 2013, http://ent.ifeng.com/movie/tv/detail_2013_12/09/31911773_0.shtml.

discussed on Chinese forums or blogs (in contrast to Lou Ye's *Summer Palace* which received much less exposure due to more active censorship). As of 2018, the film is neither officially banned nor cleared for release. In the meantime, Jia Zhangke has carried on making films, receiving wide domestic acclaim and his best box office earning to date with his 2015 feature *Mountains May Depart*, and he currently has two films in active production.

***A Touch of Sin* Synopsis**

Dahai (Jiang Wu), a middle-aged man from a coal-mining village in Shanxi Province of northwestern China, often confronts the village's government officials about their dealings with a local businessman Jiao Shengli. Dahai insists that the profits gained from the coal mines should belong to the whole village, but Jiao has monopolized the mining business with the local officials' assistance. When Jiao returns to the village with his brand-new private plane, Dahai again brings up the privatization of the mines. Jiao dismisses Dahai who is later beaten by Jiao's henchman using a shovel. The hospitalized Dahai is given some monetary compensation, but he is also mocked by villagers who come up with the nickname Mr. Golf. Dahai decides to retaliate with his shotgun, killing the village chief, his accountant, boss Jiao and several others.

The film then shifts to Zhou San/San'er (Wang Baoqiang), a young man who wanders around the country armed with a pistol. He returns to his home village in western-China metropolis Chongqing for the New Year and his mother's birthday. Village life remains boring and pointless to Zhou San who clearly shows a fascination with firearms and violence. San'er soon leaves home for the Chongqing metropolitan area where he targets innocent civilians leaving a bank, killing them with his pistol and taking their newly withdrawn money.

Zhou San immediately sets off for another city while the film reorients itself around Xiaoyu (Zhao Tao) and her lover Zhou Youliang (Zhang Jiayi), a married man who cannot or will not divorce his wife while Xiaoyu grows increasingly dissatisfied and impatient with their relationship. The couple separates after a brief meeting, and Xiaoyu goes to visit her mother at a construction site near Yichang, Hubei in central China. Xiaoyu witnesses local thugs violently extracting tolls from passing truck drivers. Later she is also chased down by Zhou Youliang's wife and her goons for seducing Zhou. Xiaoyu manages to get away, but after she goes back to work at a massage parlor, two of the local thugs from earlier demand sexual services from her. The two men take offense at her refusal and go on abusing and humiliating her, chiefly by slapping her across the face with a bundle of cash. Xiaoyu cannot stand the bullying and kills one of the two men in self-defense. She then calls the police and turns herself in.

Afterwards, the film follows Xiaohui (Luo Lanshan), a worker at Zhou Youliang's garment factory in Guangzhou Province. Xiaohui accidentally distracts a fellow worker, causing the latter's hand to be cut by a sewing machine. Boss Zhou then orders Xiaohui to keep on working, while turning in his salary to compensate the injured man. Xiaohui feels unfairly treated and turns to his cousin, who works in another factory, for help. The cousin recommends Xiaohui for work as a waiter in a nightclub in the coastal city of Dongguan north of Hong Kong. At the nightclub, Xiaohui meets Lianrong (Li Meng), a prostitute who comes from Xiaohui's home province Hunan. The two grow closer to each other, and Xiaohui wants to take the relationship further. Yet Lianrong tells him that he cannot support her or her child. The disheartened Xiaohui abandons the waiter position and goes to work with his cousin in the latter's factory. Xiaohui's life grows increasingly depressing as his mother pressures him for money and his injured fellow worker tracks him down. Despite having made peace with the

worker from earlier, Xiaohui finds no prospect in his current life and commits suicide by jumping off his dormitory building.

Humanism and Misanthropy

In the first chapter, I analyzed two films in which the male killers brutalized women and how the representation of the respective murders correlates to the notion of tragedy. Among the four main characters in *A Touch of Sin*, the three male protagonists are all desperate in their own ways, but in this chapter, instead of analyzing their tragic narratives I would like to focus on another crucial component of the new wenyi, namely humanism. What is humanism? Here I would like to refer to social theorist Herbert Marcuse as he defines the basis of any kind of social critique:

> From the beginning, any critical theory of society is thus confronted with the problem of historical objectivity, a problem which arises at the two points where the analysis implies value judgments: 1. the judgment that human life is worth living, or rather can be and ought to be made worth living. This judgment underlies all intellectual effort; it is the *a priori* of social theory, and its rejection (which is perfectly logical) rejects theory itself; 2. the judgment that, in a given society, specific possibilities exist for the amelioration of human life and specific ways and means of realizing these possibilities.[119]

These simple sentences recognize the importance of humanism, or, in Marcuse's words, that human life is, can be, and ought to be worth living, is the basis of any kind of social theory. This particular perspective, however, is a modern and evolved articulation of the Kantian proclamation that: "Act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as end and never merely as means."[120] But I do not hold the Kantian statement in itself as the theoretical foundation of this chapter's analysis since Kant

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[119] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Repr (London: Routledge, 2007), xli.
[120] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Allen W. Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 46-7.

was writing in a very different context of metaphysics. For this humanist statement to work, it has to take into consideration the material conditions and relationships that shape today's social and individual activities. What truly complicates Kant in the works of later theorists, such as Marcuse's, is precisely this parallel observation that substantiates the claims for humanism:

> The capabilities (intellectual and material) of contemporary society are immeasurably greater than ever before—which means that the scope of society's domination over the individual is immeasurably greater than ever before. Our society distinguishes itself by conquering the centrifugal social forces with Technology rather than Terror, on the dual basis of an overwhelming efficiency and an increasing standard of living.[121]

These two fundamentals together – that society today functions with unprecedented repression, and that theory or praxis for humanity's sake is the most basic reaction against repression – inform all the following analyses and, I would conjecture, all the films studied in this project.

With these groundworks in place, I would like to address the most controversial depiction of a killer from the film *A Touch of Sin* – the character of Zhou San. The very first murders in *A Touch of Sin* are Zhou San's executions of three roadside robbers. Zhou's very entrance is marked by a distinct instrumental piece of Shanxi (Jin) Opera announcing his dramatic presence.[122] Riding a motorcycle, Zhou acquires an extra image as a knight-errant on top of a galloping horse—a trope often found in wuxia films. The hatchet-wielding robbers are reminiscent of the bandits roaming everywhere in the wuxia world. Again, these archetypical elements seem to point to a direct equivalence of Zhou San to a modern-day knight-errant/xia. The ruthless way he dispatches the robbers constitutes a highly unusual scene for Jia, who is known as a subtle and social-realist director, but it is not uncommon for a character in a Shaw

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[121] Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, xl.

[122] Some credit the music that appears here to be a part of the opera *Zha Panguan* (*Beheading the Judge*), but there is no confirmation regarding this information. This opera, which I will discuss in more detail below, reappears later in the film.

Brothers film to kill off insignificant characters in spectacularly gruesome fashion. The recognizable references here tempt the audience and the critics to draw an equation between Zhou San, a contemporary criminal, and a knight-errant epitomized in Shaw Brothers' wuxia films. It is almost a subversive gesture to interpret Zhou's actions as, to an extent, righteous. And as the overall narrative of the film does present an ethos of resistance towards oppressive powers, some would indignantly disagree with the director's supposedly sympathetic portrayal of Zhou San as a tragically heroic figure (ironically, despite calling out the film for whitewashing Zhou's murders, the critics usually do not proceed any further than that).[123] I argue, however, that the film's constant utilization of wuxia tropes, whether through narrative or through imagery, points not towards a connection between *A Touch of Sin*'s characters and their xia counterparts, but towards a severe disconnect—a disconnect that contributes to a inhumane (or even misanthropic) environment in which women especially are more frequently victimized both physically and verbally.

Zhou San's first killings function as his conscious re-enactments of wuxia fantasies. Zhou San's vigilantism could be read as an act of violent self-defense, but the scene is soon followed by his callously driving past a truck driver who just died from an accident. According to Y. M. Ma's brief and, in my opinion, still relevant summary of a xia's characteristics,

> [t]he Chinese knight-errant catches our fancy as a man of atypical prowess (regardless of his outward build), fascinatingly skilled in the use of arms and equally adept in hand to hand combat, one who would enlist, rarely with second thoughts, his physical strength, and sometimes his financial resources as well, to right wrongs for the poor or the oppressed with whom he may not have any previous connections at all.[124]

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[123] These comments are made by internet users in China on forums and amateur film review websites. In a more extreme example, a 2016 post on Baidu's forums (the same ones that Xiao Hui and Lianrong post on) accuses the film of empathizing with, thus whitewashing, the real-life criminals. See "《天注定》这是一部为了拿奖而拍的十足的烂片 (*A Touch of Sin*, This Is an Utterly Terrible Film to Win Awards)," Baidu Tieba, May 29, 2016, http://tieba.baidu.com/p/4578516742.

[124] Y. M. Ma, "The Knight-Errant in 'Hua-Pen' Stories," *T'oung Pao*, Second, 61, no. 4/5 (1975): 269.

What Zhou San demonstrates is certainly skillful use of arms, but the character's hardened coldness towards everyone else dispels the possibility that he is going to "right wrongs" or help others in any way. Formally, *A Touch of Sin* realistically portrays deadly violence and its repercussions—Zhou San's victims quickly perish under his gunfire without all the exaggerated tumbling and screaming in wuxia films. As the last robber dies after being shot in the back, the camera lingers on his dead body for about five seconds before returning to Zhou. In contrast to classical wuxia films where violent action is presented in one of two ways: the dramatic slow-motion death spectacles or quick deaths where the extras swiftly fall out of frame,[125] *A Touch of Sin* places more emphasis on the gravity of death. More importantly, this focus on death instead of action is directed not towards the killers, who do not really show remorse or concern, but towards the audience in the contemporary world that expounds the rule of law and human rights. Therefore, Zhou San's disregard of human lives is actually problematized, instead of justified, by the film's reference to wuxia cinema, as the latter in effect also undergoes a deconstruction that reveals the lawlessness and might-is-right philosophy that permeates the wuxia worldview.

Zhou San returns later in the film as the protagonist of its second narrative. He arrives at his home village from which skyscrapers can be seen standing on the other side of a river. The very first shots of the village reveal its geographical closeness and economic distance to the metropolitan Chongqing. While Chongqing is the home to the real-life robber-murderer Zhou Kehua, Jia chose the location also for its distinct city landscape. The special municipality of Chongqing, according to the Chongqing Urban-rural Development Planning (2007-2020), is

> specified as a national test ground for the comprehensive urban-rural reform. Language in this document signifies a policy intention for balancing urban and rural development… Chongqing 's master plan now aims at equaling the role of

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[125] This mode of representation of death is epitomized in many of Chang Cheh's wuxia films e.g. *Vengeance* (1970), which later inspired the "heroic bloodshed" of John Woo.

> urban and rural areas in the city's ongoing development , and encourages the concentration of rural population in major towns and other urbanized areas.[126]

The compactness of the transitional space between the metropolitan area and the townships in Chongqing has created the unusual view seen in the film: the skyscrapers seem to be on the other side of the river from Zhou San's village home. The intense urbanization and population concentration policies have engendered a visible segregated closeness, a surreal scenery that Jia Zhangke once explored in *Still Life*.

As the camera follows Zhou San, however, it leaves this urban-rural contrast aside and stays on a tiny vignette between a little girl and an older man who is presumably her father. The little girl is holding a duck in her arms, looking away from the man while he sits next to them, intently staring at the girl and the animal with a butcher knife in hand. Other than the duck's fidgeting in the girl's arms, there is no other dialogue or movement between the two actors in this shot. This seemingly inconsequential moment is followed by Zhou San attending his mother's 70th birthday with his wife and son. Zhou's very first action after meeting his son is to pinch the child's cheek extremely hard. Before the child can get away from the painful pinch, Zhou drags him in front of Zhou's mother. As Zhou and his wife bow three times to the old lady as a show of filial respect, he holds down his son's neck, forcing the bows from the crying child as well. In the next shot, Zhou San is carrying his son on his shoulders and walking home with his wife. On their way, they pass the older man from the earlier vignette, who is cutting open the neck of the duck and draining its blood in a bowl.

If the unpleasant encounter of Zhou San and his son shows Zhou's disturbing obsession with power and authority, the man-and-duck plot that bookends the sequence adds another

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[126] Xin Yang, Jennifer Day, and Sun Sheng Han, "Urban Peripheries as Growth and Conflict Spaces: The Development of New Towns in China," in *Population Mobility, Urban Planning and Management in China*, ed. Tai-Chee Wong, Sun Sheng Han, and Hongmei Zhang (New York: Springer, 2015), 108.

philosophical layer to Zhou's actions. Like Zhou, the butcher holds the back of the duck's neck and slices it open; as the duck struggles, the butcher turns the animal over with its neck facing downwards so its blood can drain. The parallel movements of the butcher and Zhou's cruel treatment of his son then further suggest Zhou's profound lack of empathy and a link between violent coercion of humans and the killing of animals. To such a connection, Theodor Adorno has provided a concise description of sociopathic behavior and its relationship to violence:

> The mechanism of 'pathic projection' determines that those in power perceive as human only their own reflected image, instead of reflecting back the human as precisely what is different. Murder is thus the repeated attempt, by yet greater madness, to distort the madness of such false perception into reason: what was not seen as human and yet is human, is made a thing, so that its stirrings can no longer refute the manic gaze."[127]

Incidentally, Adorno's passage is immediately preceded by his observation that racial Others are often dehumanized as animals in order to rationalize genocides and pogroms. This passage is an extension of Adorno and Horkheimer's discussions of the increasing instrumentalization of humanity as demonstrated by Cheung Fong and her "trophy" dolls in *Exodus*. What is striking in this set of scenes, therefore, is using the animal slaughter as an intermediary between, and a reflection of, Zhou's violence towards his own son and his cold-blooded robbery-murders. The mundaneness of the butcher's action and its noticeable but fleeting existence in the film becomes a part of the general background marked by normalized cruelty.

If the butcher is a mere reflection of Zhou San's apathy and violence, then Zhou's brief visit to a local mahjong house illustrates a dimension of misogyny and gynophobia that plague the village. At New Year's Eve, Zhou San drops by the mahjong house in his village when he is strolling outside. He wanders around the room and eventually decides to watch four men play

[127] Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2005), 105.

mahjong. After he settles near their table, one of the men asks about a girl named Qinqin who has not returned to the village for the New Year. Another player reveals that Qinqin cannot stand working in a Taiwanese factory in Dongguan, Guangzhou and has started providing "special services" in hotels in Zhongshan, Guangzhou. The girl has since contracted AIDS through her prostitution work. Before any more light can be shed on Qinqin's situation, the man who asked about Qinqin turns to another man with dyed yellow hair and advises the latter to go check for HIV because "Yellow Hair" and Qinqin had "banged" before. Yellow Hair is upset by this "advice" and rebuts with a question about the asker's wife who is working in Tianjin. Yellow Hair sarcastically comments that the asker should take his own wife to the hospital for a check-up as well. As the two arguing men start threatening each other, another onlooker suggests that they should stop talking and fight it out before New Year arrives. Chaos ensues as four different people get involved in a brawl. Curiously, the only person that ends up actually hurt and beaten to the ground is the mahjong player who is not part of the previous argument. The entire fight with its unexpected victim turns into an absurd demonstration of the men's belligerence. Zhou San snickers at this violent farce before he goes out to join his son watching fireworks.

In the article "Violence, *Wuxia*, Migrants: Jia Zhangke's Cinematic Discontent in *A Touch of Sin*," the author Yanjie Wang analyzes this sequence in the context of "the emaciation of the rural."[128] However, Wang fails to further elaborate on the phenomenon's manifestation in Zhou San's narrative. This "emaciation of the rural" according to Hairong Yan, the social scientist who coined this term, is

> much more deeply articulated in the relationship between peasants and land in many rural areas… Labor migration from the countryside to the cities is termed by scholars and the Chinese government as "the transfer of surplus rural labor power," but the irony is that the migrants, rather than being "surplus" labor, consist mostly of better-educated rural youth, that is, those who are most needed

[128] Wang, "Violence, *Wuxia* , Migrants." 162-3.

> for innovative agricultural production. Those who stay behind to continue farming constitute what is often called the "773861 army": "77" refers to the old (i.e., 77 year olds); "38" refers to women, typically married women ("38" is March 8, International Women's Day); and "61" refers to children (June 1, International Children's Day).[129]

During his homecoming, Zhou San is greeted by this "773861," i.e. his old mother, his wife and his young son, but the young men in the mahjong house do not fit it with any definition within this passage by Yan. Although Yan later characterizes the "process of emaciation" as "a process of violence that appropriates economic, cultural, and ideological value from the countryside, where rural youth can no longer find a path to the future," the rural youths in Jia's film are somewhat nihilistic, but far from being in the total despair that Yan describes.[130]

Prior to the brawl, the discussions of the men are centered on women who have gone to the cities as migrant workers. This is contrary to the implicit ideology behind the "773861 army" designation, namely that working-age women, often married with children, share the same grouping with the elderly and the young as the ones who are bound by maternal or filial responsibilities. Yan's main field research in rural China was conducted between 1998 and 2000, while Jia's film depicts the rural life of 2012 or 2013.[131] The film's different character demographics as compared to those in Yan's studies suggests the destabilization of the "38" part of the "army" who stays behind in rural villages. What the film presents is thus a group of men sharing similar speculations and anxieties about women's migrant status instead of their own "path to the future." Through their dialogue, the underlying concerns are that women are not returning home, they are not faithful, they resort to prostitution, they are diseased and they are dangerous for carrying STDs. Moreover, the unfaithful and/or sick women are used as rhetorical

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[129] Hairong Yan, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2008), 43.
[130] Ibid., 44.
[131] Ibid., vii.

instruments to insult other men who seem to dwell in the fantasy world that their masculinity should be impervious to STDs and extra-marital relationships. The actual dangers that women face as migrant workers only become meaningful for these men when incorporated into discourses of masculinity.

On the other hand, Zhou San's wife stays in the village looking after their son, deferring to her husband despite her knowledge of Zhou's illegal possession of a firearm and how Zhou San acquires his money. Zhou shows no violent tendencies towards his wife nor does he speak of her in terms of his masculine power. Yet when his wife wonders why Zhou would not stay at home, Zhou replies that the village life is boring (*meiyisi*). His wife presses the question, asking what he means by this boredom, to which Zhou replies: it is not boring (*youyisi*) when the gun fires. The language that Zhou uses in this exchange also hearkens back to Hairong Yan's insights:

> Whatever their educational attainments, the young women of Wuwei [village] overwhelmingly cited as their reason for migrating the fact that everyday life at home was *meijin* (inert) and *meiyisi* (meaningless or boring). They usually did not elaborate on this assessment, seeming to imply that rural life was so devoid of content and meaning that it could offer nothing for description. The description "inert and meaningless" was also given to me as a self-evident reality in the discursive context of rural-urban relations—the city is where everything happens, whereas the rural constitutes only a lack.[132]

Again, Yan's observations are complicated by the film as Zhou San, the supposed bread-winner in his small family unit, is the one who migrates out of perceived meaninglessness/boredom. For him, the rural life "so devoid of content and meaning" includes his wife, his son and his other family members. But as Zhou San roams the country "earning" money, his position in the family, in contrast to those of the women talked about at the mahjong table, is still stable and remains unquestioned. What is more ironic is the fact that Zhou's wife voices her disagreement with this

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[132] Ibid., 46.

"earning" by firmly admitting to Zhou that she does not want his money. Zhou's gesture of mailing money home becomes an empty gesture in essence; it exists for the sole purpose of upholding the shell of a sexist myth that only men are providers. So while Zhou San's exodus from the village is accompanied by the voiding of (meanings of) his wife and child, the rural women who seek work in big cities cannot afford this privilege, "constituting a lack" wherever they go. Within the film's presentation of this discursive environment of the village, the women who stay are part and parcel of men's perceived emptiness and the women who leave are the ones who do not come back, do not maintain fidelity and do not possess health (or, with the dangers of AIDS, simply do not possess any future).

For Zhou San, this mentality towards women fits well within all the symbols around him that point ironically to wuxia and heroic fantasies. In his final scene of the film, Zhou travels on a long-distance bus. On the small screen at the bus's front, Johnnie To's action film *Exiled* is playing. This film is a stylized and romanticized tale of brotherhood and crime, filled with beautifully choreographed shootouts (and deaths). The gunfights in that film of course visualize the fantasy of Zhou San's murderous obsession with his pistol, but *Exiled*'s narrative also parallels the emaciation of the women from Zhou's village. *Exiled* has two major female characters, a wife with a newborn child and a prostitute. The wife and her child, who become synonymous to "home" in the husband character's last words, are protected at all cost by the male protagonists; the prostitute is always the object of desire, and at the main characters' final breaths, they all focus on her as a shared site/sight of satisfaction and joy. In this masculine fantasy, the only purpose of the women is to mediate the bond between the men in stereotypical roles; otherwise the two women are almost completely negligible. In Zhou San's enactment of

such a fantasy, he does not even have other men to bond with, so his lone-wolf narrative can comfortably cast out any woman whether through abandonment or through violence.

The flip side of this hostile vision is the bleak and painful experiences of migrant women exemplified by Xiaoling from *Night and* Fog and Jiamei from *Port of Call*. Xiaoling is forbidden to work as a waitress by her husband because he is paranoid that Xiaoling might be seducing other customers. Jiamei cannot find her "path to the future," resorts to prostitution, and ultimately meets her tragic death at Ting's hands. Jiamei's mother, who was also once a migrant woman, has left rural China in hopes for a better life, but was trapped in a meaningless marriage and a menial job at a restaurant. These are the struggles and pains that the men in *A Touch of Sin* do not see or do not understand. Near the end of Zhou's narrative, the audience witnesses his murders of a woman and her husband during a robbery in broad daylight. Zhou San's shooting is in no way as manic as Lee Sam's butchering of his wife and children in *Night and Fog*, or as gruesome as Ting Tsz-chung's dismemberment of Jiamei in *Port of Call*, but in Zhou's narrative as a whole, the murder is preceded by anxieties about women and succeeded by a fantasy that renders women unsubstantial. The film shows Zhou picking up the dead woman's handbag and concealing it in a black plastic bag. For him, the value of that woman's life (or any human life) equals the value of their purses, just as Adorno has written: "what was not seen as human and yet is human, is made a thing." In Zhou's narrative, what "was not seen as human and yet is human" is a person's humanity, especially the woman's humanity.

Serpent of Good and Evil

If Zhou San's story from *A Touch of Sin* creates a dialogue on male power with *Night and Fog* and *Port of Call*, then the third part of Jia's film—the story of Xiaoyu— harkens back to both *Exodus* and *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, two movies in which the female characters kill their male

oppressors. *Exodus* shows how the killing of men operates as a locus of dehumanization that victimize both genders in different ways. *Black Coal, Thin Ice*'s Wu Zhizhen, who kills the man that repeatedly coerces her into sex, examines the extreme control and suppression of a woman trapped in an oppressive legal discourse. In *A Touch of Sin*, Xiaoyu's killing is shown as a clear act of self-defense which in turn renders the murders more heroic and valiant in comparison to those committed by the women from the other two films. Xiaoyu's character is also the most direct reference to King Hu's *A Touch of Zen* in which Hsu Feng plays the legendary female xia character Yang Hui-ching. Jia Zhangke's wife and long-time collaborator Zhao Tao plays Xiaoyu, whom she describes in interviews as a "nǚ xiá" (woman xia).[133] However, this close tie between Xiaoyu and the wuxia world, as it is in Zhou San's case, disrupts the equivalence of Xiaoyu's self-defense to a knight-errant's righteous killings. Instead, the vastly different social orders that form the world of Xiaoyu and the world of wuxia are highlighted and both worlds are put into question.

Xiaoyu's encounters with violence show a shared fantastical lawlessness between the film's contemporary setting and the wuxia world it references. Xiaoyu is chased into the street by Youliang's wife and her goons, yet nothing of legal consequence emerges from this attack. Xiaoyu escapes into the back of a van that serves as a chamber for a "fortune-teller"—a woman that sits amidst several snakes at her feet. Later Xiaoyu witnesses the beating of a truck driver by some local racketeering thugs. The men are fighting on top of a slope of rocks, sliding off as they try to gain a footing. This fight also ends abruptly as the film cuts to Xiaoyu back at the sauna reception desk, watching a television program about animals committing suicide. In both cases,

[133] In this news article, the juxtaposition of Hsu Feng's character and Zhao Tao's Xiaoyu shows a certain level of resemblance. Linlin Sun, "贾樟柯《天注定》闯江湖 女主角赵涛侠女造型曝光 (Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* Roams in *jianghu*, Heroine Zhao Tao's *xianü* Character Revealed)," People.cn, Media, May 9, 2013, http://media.people.com.cn/n/2013/0509/c40606-21416242.html.

the violence is not met with any resistance; the victims all try to run away while law enforcement is mostly non-existent. As the perpetrators of violence go unpunished, the animals or the people equated to animals become sites of refuge, and in Xiaoyu's narrative, snakes play this role of refuge and/or empathy.

Yanjie Wang makes an interesting argument regarding the snakes and their symbolism in this section of the film:

> Jia Zhangke compares Xiaoyu's obstinacy to that of Green Snake (Xiaoqing) from the well-known Chinese folktale *Legend of the White Snake*. Unlike her sister, the gentle and pliant White Snake, Green Snake is particularly unruly, disdaining both human etiquette and social taboos. Interestingly, Jia chooses to not invoke the time-honored folktale, which traditionally centers on White Snake. Instead, he alludes to the 1993 film *Green Snake*, directed by the Hong Kong new waver Tsui Hark. As the film's change of title suggests, Tsui Hark shifts his cinematic focus onto Green Snake, allowing him to subvert the domestic, conformist values White Snake signifies.[134]

Wang is correct in drawing the connection between Xiaoyu and the snakes from *Legend of the White Snake* and Tsui Hark's adaptation. However, the author misses a crucial element within the folklore and Tsui's film—the emphasis on a concept similar to western religious notion of Original Sin (translated into Chinese as "yuan zui"), which coincidentally also ties into the symbolism of an anthropomorphic snake. Furthermore, I would like to specifically identify this sin related to snakes with a word that differs from "zui" which also carries the meaning of regular crimes instead of just mortal sins—namely, the word "nie" which bears the meanings of "evil" and "against nature." In most versions of the *Legend of the White Snake*, the White Snake was once a mere animal, but as it cultivated a millennium of karma, it learns to transform into a beautiful woman who desires to live a human life and a romantic life. This transgression is then punished by a powerful monk Fa Hai who breaks up White Snake and her husband Xu Xian,

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[134] Wang, "Violence, *Wuxia* , Migrants." 167.

imprisoning the Snake under a tower near the West Lake. In the context of Jia's film, this tale is not simply about Xiaoyu being a transgressive woman, but that her desire for a family and safety are in themselves transgressive to the order of the film's world. To borrow Marx's phrase used to describe estranged labor, "in his human functions [Man] no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal."[135] Xiaoyu's "functions" are thus her aspirations, and her persistence eventually leads her to fight back against the forces that seek to punish her for having those aspirations.

The scene of Xiaoyu's murder of the male bully has been discussed by other critics in terms of the unchecked power of money and its debasement of female subjectivity, as seen in the repeated beating down of Xiaoyu with a wad of cash.[136] But I would like to focus on its audio-visual and stylistic presentation as a wuxia killing. When Xiaoyu is beaten on the head, she fiercely turns to stare into the man's eyes multiple times until she reaches her breaking point. The camera then sees her raised fist from which the blade of a fruit knife slips out; the shot is accompanied by the unrealistic and shrieking sound effect of a blade drawing out of its sheath taken from wuxia films. Xiaoyu screams and makes a sharp turn, slicing the chest of her assailer. Her movement becomes exaggerated and theatrical, marked by broad gestures and extended pauses. When the blade cuts through the flesh, another unrealistic sound effect kicks in. When the man charges back at Xiaoyu, she first stabs him in the lower abdomen, then withdraws her knife, twirls it behind her head and finally slashes the man's throat. The killing blow is shot almost from the point-of-view of the male attacker, so when Xiaoyu makes the strike, it is as if she cuts just below the camera where blood spurts out onto her face and clothes. All of the shots in this short killing scene capture every one of Xiaoyu's movements in close-ups or medium

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[135] Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988), 74.
[136] Wang, "Violence, *Wuxia* , Migrants," 163; Xiao, "China Unraveled," 32.

close-ups. These aesthetics heighten this segment's "reality" to perhaps the highest level in this film. This excess of style accentuates Xiaoyu's indignation and dignity, so it is almost fitting to overlap the wuxia exaggeration with the character's justified resistance.

Nevertheless, this fitting overlap gradually collapses as Xiaoyu walks out of the room where she has killed her attacker. She maintains her broad gestures, holding the knife in her hand with her white shirt stained with a copious amount of blood. But in contrast, another worker sees Xiaoyu's ghastly appearance and is paralyzed with fear. As she walks past, the worker sprints for the other end of the corridor, triggering Xiaoyu to turn back in a dramatic pose that seems much more jarring as the camera now frames her in medium long shots. Once her entire body is in the frame, the unnatural stiffness is immediately visible. After Xiaoyu leaves the sauna house, she walks past a man with a monkey on his shoulder, a few cattle cows on the highway and a passing vehicle; she responds to all three encounters with raising knife-wielding hand in the now-awkward gestures. In the end, Xiaoyu slowly switches back to more naturalistic behaviors and calls the police, turning herself in.

This transition provides a fascinating commentary of wuxia in a modern context. In her critique of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragons*, Suzie S. F. Young remarks that Ang Lee's film offers a false empowerment for its female characters:

> But when the price of freedom—whether of speech, action, or desire—is beset by loneliness, interminable deception, and even murder most evil, it is at least equally as compelled (obliged) a state of being as is that of submission and obedience, suggesting not a viable alternative but, rather, a poverty of choice.[137]

I would like to argue that it is exactly this inadequacy with *Crouching Tiger*, and often wuxia films in general, that adds to Xiaoyu's tragic dilemma. Young's contention here sheds light on

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[137] Suzie S. F. Young, "How Positively Levitating! Chinese Heroines of Kung Fu and Wuxia Pian," in *Killing Women: The Visual Culture of Gender and Violence*, ed. Susan Lord and Annette Burfoot (Waterloo, Ont: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2006), 222.

Xiaoyu's circumstances as the latter is also caught in at least two poverties of choice: Xiaoyu cannot freely pursue her relationship with Youliang due to the latter's marriage;[138] Xiaoyu cannot fully legitimize her self-defense without turning herself in to the authorities and containing her violent reaction within a legal discourse. Unlike the lawless worlds of wuxia in which a knight-errant's murders are often condoned, the contemporary China that the film represents compels Xiaoyu to return to a state of being of submission. Again by invoking wuxia stylizations, the film highlights the incongruence between the rules of wuxia and those of modern society. In critic Jonathan Rosenbaum's words:

> the adoption by Zhao Tao [who plays Xiaoyu] of familiar wuxia poses after stabbing a sauna customer… is clearly designed to function as a Brechtian 'baring of the device' at the same time that it functions as an absurd fulfillment of the usual genre expectations. That is, it simultaneously invites our applause and makes us feel ashamed and/or embarrassed for applauding.[139]

Therefore, in similar ways the fantasy of the female xia is destabilized as is that of the male xia, but we have to acknowledge the very different circumstances of their realizations. While Zhou San's embodiment of the xia fantasy is a profoundly misanthropic deprivation of others' freedom (e.g. to life), Xiaoyu is forced into a wuxia reenactment exactly because of such deprivation. In an almost diametrical opposition, Xiaoyu is the empathic female victim in contrast to the ruthless male perpetrator Zhou San. Furthermore, whenever Zhou San faces other people's efforts to communicate, he either rejects or interrupts them: he does not provide a light to a fellow traveler on the ferry home, he fires his pistol in front of his son to celebrate the new year, and decidedly claims, while holding his wife in bed, that village life is meaningless compared to discharging a weapon. On the other hand, Xiaoyu calmly converses with Youliang,

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[138] It is implied that Xiaoyu developed this relationship at Youliang's garment factory as an employee under Youliang. Since Youliang is the boss, Xiaoyu is clearly the disadvantaged party in their relationship's power dynamic, which in turn makes her the victim to both Youliang's hesitance and his wife's anger.

[139] Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Many Touches of Sin," *Jonathan Rosenbaum* (blog), February 3, 2018, https://www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/2018/02/many-touches-of-sin-tk/.

offers help to her laboring mother, and accepts a piece of tissue paper from the "fortune-teller." As Zhou San jumps off the bus at the end of his segment and continues to live his (knight-)errant vision, Xiaoyu realizes that she cannot sustain her acts of defensive violence indefinitely when she meets benign strangers in the middle of the dark night. Contrary to Zhou San's clean exit from his murders that echoes his apathy, Xiaoyu is tainted and weighed down by the blood of the dead, an unceasing reminder that killing, however justified, condemns a good individual.

Arguably, it is precisely because of Xiaoyu's tenaciousness and benevolence that she ends up carrying the burden of the film's final scene, whereas Zhou San's gunplay opens the film with a nihilistic explosion. Towards the end of the film, Xiaoyu is seen released from custody. She left her home province Hubei and her lover in Guangdong to find a new job in Shanxi Province. When she is walking around the outskirts of a Shanxi town where the ancient city walls are still standing, Xiaoyu comes across a large group of people walking towards a make-shift Shanxi Opera stage on which *Yu Tang Chun*/*The Story of Sue San* is performing. This opera piece, unlike the wuxia ones previously featured in this film, connects to a very different literary tradition in China—the gong'an wenxue (court-case literature).[140] It tells the tale of a woman Su San who was brought into prostitution, forced to marry, and framed for a murder.

When Xiaoyu arrives at the opera stage, the verses of Su San's coerced confession are being performed. On the stage, Su San is kneeling in front of a court desk surrounded by bailiffs, and facing the audience. She sings about her tragic life story and breaks into tears, but the magistrate behind her shows no mercy and threatens her with the question: "nǐ kě zhī zuì (Do you understand your sin)?!"[141] This question is then repeated two more times over two different

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[140] I borrowed this translation from Jeffrey C. Kinkley, *Chinese Justice, the Fiction: Law and Literature in Modern China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 3.
[141] Here the question can also be translated to "do you plead guilty," or "do you know your crime."

shots: a close-up of Xiaoyu's apprehensive face, and a wide shot of the opera audiences who look (e)motionlessly at the camera. In Jiwei Xiao's article "China Unraveled: Violence, Sin, and Art in Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin*," the author reads the scene accordingly: "The magistrate's question, lingering in the air unanswered, is thus hurled at the audience both on and off screen. In the imaginary court that Jia installs in his audience, everyone stands trial along with the wronged women in the film: Su San onstage and Xiao Yu offstage."[142]

Jiwei Xiao's interpretation can be complemented by including the context of the opera. To elaborate, there are two levels of irony in this opera sequence. Firstly, in the narrative of *Yu Tang Chun*, the magistrate is a corrupt official who has been paid off by the murderers, so his question in itself is filled with malicious intent. By hurling an unfounded accusation at the innocent Su San onstage, the exonerated Xiaoyu offstage, and eventually the crowd of spectators, the magistrate's question only calls more attention to his own hypocrisy and abuse of power. The second level of irony in this trial scene comes from the opera's own satirical take on courtroom justice in Chinese literary fictions. After the corrupt magistrate agrees to frame Su San for Shen's murder, he claims that the victim visits him in a dream to point out Su as the real murderer. This plot point is a play on the court-case literature's trope that sometimes "Gods tell [the magistrate] the true facts in his dreams."[143] The almost transcendent power bestowed through popular fiction on the magistrate figure is thus being doubly challenged in the opera's narrative and *A Touch of Sin*'s narrative.[144]

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[142] Xiao, "China Unraveled," 31.
[143] Kinkley, *Chinese Justice, the Fiction*, 57.
[144] In King Hu's 1964 film adaptation of the opera, the story even goes further in undermining the magistrate's authority by portraying the savior character Wang Jinlong as equally eager to conceal secrets and muddle facts in a court of law. It makes clear the Wang's intervention is not simply righting the wrong, but also a selfish act to protect Su San and maintain his own authority.

The power of this ending, therefore, lies not in its seemingly accusatory gesture against the common people, but in its encouragement for the common people to question the problematic authority of the officers of justice. Using the fictional magistrate's question about Xiaoyu/Su San's sin (or, more appropriately, crime), both the opera and the film firmly take the traumatized woman's side. Yet as Xiaoyu lowers her head upon hearing the question, it is apparent that she is not given solace through either the wuxia tradition, in which women often fight back, or the gong'an tradition, in which women are often cleared of false accusations. This then leads back to the "poverty of choice" mentioned earlier which emerges again at the film's conclusion. Xiaoyu has fought and retained her freedom, but it is beset by her loneliness and difficult reintegration after experiencing extreme violence. Initially we may see Xiaoyu's unending torment as almost excessive punishment of China's common women, but I maintain that this "torment" is the film's way of conveying a realistic humanism in a flawed world. Xiaoyu has defended herself, but she indeed has killed, which is an experience that most would find impossible to fully reconcile with their conscience. At the other end of the spectrum, there is the cold-blooded Zhou San who shows no qualms in killing multiple people, so who is to say that this burden of killing that Xiaoyu carries is not the testament of her unyielding humanity? This weight that Xiaoyu very much inadvertently shoulders is related to the ethics of Kant, Hegel, and in much of modern philosophy, as evident in Habermas's summary of Hegel's ethics:

> This force [of taking a life] causes the one at fault to suffer until he recognizes in the annihilation of the life of the other the lack in his own self, and in the act of repudiating another's life the estrangement from himself. In this causality of fate the ruptured bond of the ethical totality is brought to consciousness. This dirempted totality can become reconciled only when there arises from the experience of the negativity of divided life a longing for the life that has been lost

> – and when this experience forces those involved to recognize the denial of their own nature in the split-off existence of the other.[145]

When discussing the topic of suicidal animals, Xiaoyu's colleague comments that the animals never know the proverbial wisdom that is "haosi buru lai huozhe" ("A good death is worse than a wretched living").[146] Through her killing, Xiaoyu inhabits the dialectical existence that is both a wretched living (of her damaged self) and a "good death" (i.e. the death of her innocent self). Diverging from the Hegelian tradition, a significant aspect of the "totality/nature" that Xiaoyu eventually reclaims, therefore, is that of freedom. But instead of Hegel's total metaphysical freedom, Xiaoyu reclaims an unreconciled freedom—a freedom eternally haunted by the shadows of un-freedom.

"La lutte sanguinaire ou le neant?"

Towards the conclusion of his *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Karl Marx writes that "Until [the end of class struggle], on the eve of each general reconstruction of society, the last word of social science will ever be:— 'Le combat ou la mort; la lutte sanguinaire ou le neant. C'est ainsi que la quéstion est invinciblement posée.'"[147] The French quote comes from George Sand's 1843 historical novel *Jean Ziska* about the life of legendary Czech general Jan Žižka; it translates as "Combat or death: bloody struggle or extinction. It is thus that the question is inexorably put." For both Marx and Sand, the Europe in the mid-to-late 19th century was a tumultuous era of uncompromisable binary oppositions. The Hegelian Spirit was anticipating a historical moment of synthesis and sublation that overturns the oppression of monarchs and bourgeoisies, and

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[145] Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence, Reprinted (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 28-9.
[146] The literal meaning of the "good death" refers to a natural death without much pain or anguish, but in the context of the proverb, the phrase mostly conveys the message that "any kind of living is better than dying."
[147] Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, trans. H. Quelch (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1920), 190-1.

restores what was formerly alienated human nature its full potential. But that was 1847, the contemporary order of knowledge and power has shifted tremendously, engendering much more nuanced views on this struggle for human emancipation.

Xiaoyu's narrative ends with her reintegration into China's capitalist development, which adds even more uncertainty to her individual freedom in the future. This freedom always threatened by un-freedom differs significantly from the utopian promise of class struggle. For Xiaoyu, the "bloody struggle" is not the opposite of "extinction," but the other side of the same coin. In the mid-to-late 20th century, philosophers, most prominently Foucault, already recognized this "impasse:"

> Thus from Hegel to Marx and Spengler we find the developing theme of a thought which, by the movement in which it is accomplished – totality attained, violent recovery at the extreme point of poverty, solar decline – curves over upon itself, illuminates its own plenitude, brings its circle to completion, recognizes itself in all the strange figures of its odyssey, and accepts its disappearance into that same ocean from which it sprang; in opposition to this return, which, even though it is not happy, is perfect, we find the experience of Hölderlin, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, in which the return is posited only in the extreme recession of the origin – in that region where the gods have turned away, where the desert is increasing, where the *τεχνή* [i.e. techne] has established the dominion of its will; so that what we are concerned with here is neither a completion nor a curve, but rather that ceaseless rending open which frees the origin in exactly that degree to which it recedes; the extreme is therefore what is nearest.[148]

Foucault outlines the "not happy" but "perfect" model of comprehending human existence which is caught in the tug-of-war between historicity (un-freedom) and ahistoricity (freedom).[149] The harrowing question of understanding one's sin then, however briefly, reminds Xiaoyu, the crowd, and the other audiences of a both ontological and ontic skepticism towards each individual's or group's innocence and freedom. For Foucault, this kind of skepticism is

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[148] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Repr (New York: Routledge, 2006), 364.

[149] The opposition in the parentheses is only one particular aspect of the larger concept of a human being's history. I highlight the idea of "freedom" so that Foucault's words connect more closely to the film's narrative.

inseparable from our being, and Xiaoyu's fate might be as "perfect" as it could ever be. But what if this ambivalence is rejected? What if one chooses to live by an authoritarian understanding of Hegelianism? What if one believes that the only possibilities are "bloody struggle or extinction," "good death" or "wretched living?"

The protagonist of *A Touch of Sin*'s first narrative, Dahai, is a unique occurrence in Chinese cinema. Ironically, the character archetype of Dahai is perhaps one of the most popular in Chinese literary history. From Chen Sheng and Wu Guang, who led the rebellion against the Qin Emperor in 209 BCE to the communist revolution in the early-to-mid 20th century, the heroic underdog's violent revolt has become a central motif in Chinese history and literature. In the film narrative of Dahai, this literary tradition is also represented through theater, namely a Shanxi Opera rendition of the folk hero Lin Chong's "bloody struggle." A character from the Great Classical novel *Water Margin*,[150] Lin Chong once was an imperial army instructor, but his position and martial abilities did not intimidate a lascivious official from harassing his wife. Lin's confrontation with the official led to his false imprisonment, which ultimately forced Lin to join the rebels who fought against the corrupt government. The opera piece featured in the film, *Nocturnal Escape*, details how Lin Chong joins the rebels and fights against government agents chasing after him. Moreover, the larger story arc of Lin Chong involves a government official's relentless persecution of the good man. Lin is tricked into committing a small offense (carrying a weapon in a court of law) and sentenced to exile. He sees his trial as a travesty, but he decides to respect the law and endures the punishment. Yet, this act of submission does not stop the lackeys of the corrupt officials from attacking Lin. This plotline thus specifically dramatizes an incessant

[150] *Water Margin*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Journey to the West*, and *Dream of the Red Chamber* are the canonical Four Great Classical Novels of China. *Water Margin* was written by Shi Nai'an in the early Ming Dynasty (1368-1448), but the novel is set during several peasant rebellions in the Song Dynasty around the 1120s.

government malfeasance, and emphasizes that even a tolerant individual like Lin Chong can no longer endure the authorities' wrongdoings.

This "last-straw" situation contributes to the ethos of Lin Chong and, through operatic reference, the ethos of Dahai. To a large extent, Dahai is a sympathetic character. People around him find him to be a persistent nuisance, but his quest for equity is clearly justified. Through Dahai's dialogue, the audience is able to retrace the man's grievance against the local entrepreneur Jiao Shengli to a specific historical moment. After 1992, the market reform in China was in full force, prompting an entrepreneurial explosion in rural China, but this economic explosion was not regulated by effective legal measures. Many village enterprises (included in the category of Township and Village Enterprises, "TVEs") were nominally controlled by the villagers while a management apparatus ran the businesses. However, Dahai has mentioned that the villagers were swindled out of their ownership of the local coal mine by the coalition of the management (i.e. boss Jiao and his Shengli Group) and the local government. As Yasheng Huang observes in his book *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics*,

> [t]he Chinese state, unconstrained by any institutional checks and balances, may expropriate private assets at will. TVEs thus command a substantial advantage in such a hostile political environment. They are owned by the local governments and, because of the incentive alignment between the central government and local governments, they are not subject to the expropriation risks that afflict private entrepreneurs.[151]

This "incentive alignment" then transformed, through bureaucratic and legal power, public ownership of properties into the kleptocratic local government's ownership of properties. In *A Touch of Sin*, the government is further insulated from this practice by supporting the entirely

[151] Yasheng Huang, *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: Entrepreneurship and the State* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 28.

private corporation of Shengli Group which takes advantage of the villagers while paying off the local officials.

With this background in mind, Dahai's accusations are both realistic and legitimate. He tries to appeal to the authority of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, the Chinese Communist Party's internal disciplinary institution,[152] so that the government officials responsible for privatizing the coal mine can be brought to justice. Yet Dahai never manages to reach the CCDI since he does not know exactly where to mail his formal complaint. His naiveté leads to further suspicions of other low-level functionaries in the local government and their involvement in the corruption. When Dahai angrily accuses the post office worker of being "in on it," the character shows his potential anger that later opens the floodgate for indiscriminate violence. Dahai's verbal insistence finally comes into conflict with the rich and the powerful when the goons of boss Jiao beat him down in broad daylight. The attackers later try to pay off Dahai in the hospital by throwing at him a bundle of cash, foreshadowing Xiaoyu's misfortune in the massage parlor. And Dahai, like Lin Chong, chooses to endure this initial humiliation.

The boiling point does not come until Dahai goes to check out an opera, *Nocturnal Escape*, being staged in the village. Some cruel villagers start calling Dahai "Mr. Golf," a nickname that comes from one of the attackers who jokingly compared beating Dahai to playing golf. When others hear the nickname, everyone turns away from the stage and stares at the bandaged Dahai. Immediately after Dahai leaves the scene in silence, the film stays with the opera performer playing Lin Chong, who starts singing a new verse. In this verse, Lin Chong relates how he killed two of the corrupt official's lackeys in anger, and that he is going to join the

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[152] The CCDI operates parallel to the justice departments such as the Supreme Court or Supreme Procuratorate (i.e. prosecutions office). The CCDI conducts its disciplinary actions based on the authority of the Constitution of the Communist Party of China. This system is often criticized for CCDI's de facto supremacy over the justice system, putting the party's laws over the state's laws.

rebels. The camera then returns to Dahai unwrapping his bandages while one more line from the opera is sung in the background: Lin Chong draws the knife to redress his hatred (for the corrupt officials). Subsequently, the music stops, Dahai takes out a double-barrel hunting rifle and points the gun to a wardrobe mirror where there is a reflection of a piece of cloth with the pattern of a fierce tiger. The tiger image is accompanied by a jarring non-diegetic roar, which is another reference to historical rebellion: "In looks and stature, [Dahai] resembles 'Wu Song the Pilgrim,' who famously beats a tiger to death with his bare hands in the Chinese vernacular classic, *The Water Margin*."[153]

At this turning point, Dahai is connected with the Chinese folk heroes who can no longer stand tyranny and rise up to combat injustice. Dahai is at the verge of the "extinction" of his dignity as a human being, and there is only one alternative—bloody struggle. Philosophy aside, then, why is this meticulously built-up heroic moment followed by the killings of not only the perceived criminals, but innocent people as well? As Dahai carries his gun wrapped in the tiger cloth and marches to enact his "justice," the operatic music resumes, almost as if continuing the unfinished *Nocturnal Escape*, yet the new music comes from a very different story which foreshadows Dahai's unscrupulous murders. In the previous section, I brought up gong'an (court-case) literature as a key reference in the film's ending, and this piece of music following Dahai's vendetta is another interpretation of the gong'an stories.

The new opera playing in the background is not a story of the persecution or redemption of a wronged victim (e.g. Su San), but that of Judge Bao Zheng. Previously I have mentioned that *The Story of Sue San* satirizes the Chinese gong'an/court-case literature. Its object of satire is exactly a character such as the mighty Judge Bao who often relies on supernatural plot points to

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[153] Xiao, "China Unraveled." 27.

resolve his cases, such as talking to the dead in dreams. "He (the character [of Bao], not the Bao Zheng of history) has an imperially bestowed sword and gold badge giving him license to execute any criminal of any social or political class on his own authority. Truly he is a figure of wish fulfillment."[154] Not only does Bao's quasi-divine power contrast with the bureaucratic maneuvering of the magistrate Wang Jinglong from Su San's story, but the opera piece being played contains a much more populist and authoritarian vision of justice. The opera's name *Zha Panguan* literally translates as "beheading the judge." It also tells of a forced confession by a local magistrate, but goes way beyond simply punishing the corrupt officials. Although there are the misjudged innocent, a murderer who escaped justice, and a magistrate who miscarried justice, *Zha Panguan* relies much more on the supernatural. In this fantastic storyline, Judge Bao visits the underworld/hell, discovers that a judge serving the Ten Kings of Hell altered the book of fates to protect the real murderer, and encounters the murder victim who tells the actual truth. Judge Bao then presents his findings to the Fifth King of Hell who is known for releasing the wronged ghosts from hell to allow them retribution. The King accepts Judge Bao's case, and the latter then beheads the infernal judge who altered the records, capturing the true perpetrator and returning the murder victim to life.

The magnitude of justice that Judge Bao is able to exact is quite astonishing as he skillfully navigates across both the human and the supernatural realms. No one is more fitting to embody almighty rectifications than Judge Bao. As Jeffrey Kinkley observes, Judge Bao is the "figure of wish fulfillment," and this wish corresponds to the desire for "true" justice beyond the reach of the law, especially when the judicial system wrongs the innocent. As heavenly ordained, this "true" justice transcends due process or even common morality. Therefore, when the

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[154] Kinkley, *Chinese Justice, the Fiction*, 59.

soundtrack in Dahai's narrative shifts from heroic rebellion to divine judgment, the film takes a much darker turn. First Dahai drops by the home of the village accountant, demanding a written confession of the exact amount of the village chief's bribery and embezzlement. The situation quickly escalates when the accountant refuses to do so and Dahai holds him at gunpoint. The threatened man hesitates for a moment, but upon hearing police cars passing through the neighborhood, he taunts Dahai, convinced that the latter would not dare to shoot. In turn, Dahai also hesitates, lowering his weapon and blinking rapidly as if trying to recompose himself. As soon as this brief self-doubt ends, however, Dahai abruptly opens fire, blowing away half of the accountant's face and killing him instantly. The accountant's wife hears the shot and comes in only to be fatally shot in the torso.

Dahai's rampage then takes him to the local government building where he shoots and kills a front desk employee who keeps calling Dahai Mr. Golf. On his way to finding the village chief, a fellow villager curiously asks Dahai if the latter is going hunting. Dahai's reply that he is going to kill the "animals" also foreshadows the sociopathy of Zhou San. At this point, Dahai's mentality has shifted from simply protecting his proper rights to punishing the guilty with extreme prejudice. In the ensuing killings, Dahai no longer hesitates, shooting both the village chief and boss Jiao before the two can even finish their pleas. Dahai also encounters a cart driver who was seen earlier whipping his stubborn horse which does not budge. As this driver is whipping the horse again, Dahai kills the man and leaves the scene with a profanity – "Jian huo (bastard)!"[155] If the murders of the accountant, the village chief, and boss Jiao can be rationalized with Dahai's righteous rage, the deaths of the accountant's wife, the clerk, and the cart driver seem much less reasonable. Here we come to the inevitable side-effects of the "bloody struggle,"

[155] Colloquially this swear word is closer to the meaning of "bitch" as a swear word in English. The first character "jian" is often used to debase women, connoting weakness and a lack of self-respect.

which in Dahai's case take on an added significance of transcendent justice. In effect, Jia Zhangke has transported the ancient history of peasant rebellion to the contemporary Shanxi, but unlike the perversion or disintegration of the wuxia fantasies in the cases of Zhou San and Xiaoyu, the relationship between Dahai's vengeance and literary histories seems much more ambiguous.

As mentioned above, Dahai's acts of violence are superscripted with the musical themes of two populist legends. Nevertheless, we must take note that the music pieces only take up very limited time in Dahai's story as a whole. What the film shows most of all is the human who is anxious, bold, insistent, stubborn, paranoid, and lonely. Despite the inscriptions of Lin and Bao made at the plot's major turn, it is reductive to ignore the fact that Dahai's murders are committed with no background music other than a quick ambient passage following the first two killings. In contrast to Zhou San and Xiaoyu's killings, Dahai's human action does not deconstruct the tropes of the folk rebel or the divine judge; instead, his human violence re-enacts these two tropes very faithfully. But it is precisely this realistic re-enactment on film that succeeds in diverging from the established narratives.

Whether in the forms of the written text or the theatrical performance, the violent actions of Lin Chong and Bao Zhong are highly symbolic. The visuality of texts themselves is not visceral at all, and the traditional operas are performed with pronounced alienation effects.[156] *A Touch of Sin*, on the other hand, shows, and then stays on, the face of the accountant blown open; the film shows the blood flowing from the dead bodies, spraying on walls, and dripping off surfaces. The loss of life is visible, visceral, and brutal. By presenting such gruesomeness, the film closes the distance between theater/text and reality. And in their most realistic re-

[156] See Bertolt Brecht, "On Chinese Acting," *The Tulane Drama Review* 6, no. 1 (1961): 130–6.

enactments, the murders lose their symbolism. In philosophical terms, by its honest depiction of violence, the film negates its connection to the referenced narratives. This then sets up the concept of "divine violence" according to Walter Benjamin. Benjamin writes in "Critique of Violence" that

> Just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythical violence is confronted by the divine. And the latter constitutes its antithesis in all respects. If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood.[157]

In Benjamin's essay, mythical violence points to the narrativized vision of violence, one that establishes laws and rules, and in the film's case, Lin Chong's violence celebrates the rule of the common people and Bao Zheng's violence affirms the law of godly justice. Formally, therefore, Dahai's killing is homologous to the Benjamian divine violence that opposes and purges the mythic violence, i.e. the rebel narrative and the gong'an wish fulfillment. Indeed, the abject blood-shedding in *A Touch of Sin* supports the notion of destroying established ideologies or cultural-historical narratives, but how do we understand the film's direct conflict with Benjamin's last sentence that claims that divine power "is lethal without spilling blood?"

Slavoj Žižek offers his interpretation in the following:

> Divine violence should thus be conceived as divine in the precise sense .of the old Latin motto *vox populi, vox dei*: not in the perverse sense of "we are doing it as mere instruments of the People's Will," but as the heroic assumption of the solitude of sovereign decision. It is a decision (to kill, to risk or lose one's own life) made in absolute solitude, with no cover in the big Other [i.e. the discursive realm other than the subject itself]. If it is extra-moral, it is not "immoral," it does not give the agent licence just to kill with some kind of angelic innocence. When those outside the structured social field strike "blindly," demanding and enacting immediate justice/vengeance, this is divine violence.[158]

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[157] Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 297.
[158] Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 202.

In this paragraph, Žižek clarifies a key factor in distinguishing divine violence—it is void of instrumentality. Thus to slightly alter Benjamin's words, "to be bloody" is an end of mythical violence whereas "spilling blood" is not an end of divine violence. If we read Dahai's segment in this theoretical model, then his true "divinity" does not come from the mythical heroes who kill with justification of populist justice, but from his "absolute solitude" as a human, abjecting others of all relations. Is it not curious that the humanness of the victims becomes most pronounced when they are murdered? It is at that exact moment that we so urgently ascribe humanity to the dead, so that the murderer can be constrained by the mythical violence of law, and we can be at peace with our consciousness of morality.

Such an extremely Nietzschean vision is challenging to say the least, and at worst, it might be indistinguishable from Zhou San's misanthropy. It should be noted that according to the Benjamin-Žižekian definitions of divine violence, to truly recognize, thus recreate, this kind of violence is impossible. Žižek's comment that "[w]hen those outside the structured social field strike 'blindly,' demanding and enacting immediate justice/vengeance, this is divine violence" is dangerously close to a prescription for ruthless revolutionary praxis. It is the quotation marks around "blindly" that save him from being a likely apologist for murderous terrorism, because divine violence is theorized to be so blind that it escapes the definition of blindness and Žižek acknowledges this impossibility in his own language. In contrast, George Sand and Marx's proclamation of "bloody struggle" is clearly falling into the traps of mythical violence that affixes "bloody" with "struggle." The bloody-ness becomes an end in itself, which is in direct conflict with Marcuse's primary principle of social science. Therefore, an easier way to grasp divine violence would be through its impact, as Žižek describes here: "divine violence serves no means, not even that of punishing the culprits and thus re-establishing the equilibrium of justice.

It is just the sign of the injustice of the world, of the world being ethically 'out of joint.'"[159] Dahai's murders can be seen as being as amoral as defiant to fixed interpretations. Through their realistic representations and the absence of operatic soundtrack, the killings escape the hypostatized narratives of populist rebellion or mythical judgment. What we can be certain after witnessing this outburst is that the world is unjust and its ethics is "out of joint."

[159] Ibid., 199-200.

Conclusion

Engaging five different films from three different perspectives is not necessarily the most efficient approach to understand how new wenyi cinema works in Mainland China and Hong Kong. As I have announced at the end of my introduction chapter, all five films apply different combinations of tragedy, subtlety, and humanism while each film emphasizes one among those three wenyi characteristics. In the first chapter, I have argued that *Night and Fog* and *Port of Call* present tragedies through space-time manipulation, juxtaposing deaths with visions of the past. While *Night and Fog* focuses on the collapse of the nuclear family at the hands of its murderous patriarch and reified notions of family integrity, *Port of Call* turns to the sensationalizations of gruesome murders and their deconstructions through the film's relentless look at the traumas suffered by both the killer and his victim. In the second chapter, I identify two different formal strategies that *Exodus* and *Black Coal, Thin Ice* respectively use to demonstrate subtlety. The former edits the scenes of murder to eliminate the spectacle of death so that latent forms of ideological violence can surface instead. The latter film stages its scenes in the most meticulous manner, but accepts the limits of authoritative control, allowing contingent elements to disrupt the order and discipline of both the film and the police regime within it. The final chapter on *A Touch of Sin* then examines the three killers in the film and their negotiations with humanism. Dahai, the peasant in revolt, leaves behind a series of dead bodies in his vengeful quest for justice, but it is a troubling justice that inflicts collateral casualties among the innocent. Zhou San, the roaming robber, kills solely to maintain a fantasy lifestyle residing both in the Chinese wuxia tradition and rural masculine ideals. Xiaoyu, the woman who kills in self-defense, must come to terms with her violence and pounder where the future leads. Together, the three characters' disparate attitudes towards killing point to a humanism that is

irrevocably damaged by a cruel society, resulting in extreme confrontations that either consume people entirely or will haunt them forever.

With their unorthodox representations of murder, the five films analyzed in this project are not simply critical statements, veiled or otherwise, against the Chinese government or Hong Kong's administration. The most noticeable and consistent dialogue between these films and the specifically Chinese issues is in fact that of genre conventions. *Night and Fog* continues *The Way We Are*'s realist filmmaking, yet decides to take the film to a much darker corner of the neighborhood of Tin Shui Wai; *Port of Call* calls into question the Category III films' unhinged exaggeration of sex and violence; *Black Coal, Thin Ice* is a highly stylized re-imagining of the Chinese cop films in the 1990s; *A Touch of Sin* dissects wuxia cinema by transporting its violence to the contemporary world; even *Exodus* is an unusual continuation of Hong Kong's neo-noir and utilizes Hong Kong cinema's prevalent surveillance motifs.[160] Embedded in those challenged and deconstructed genre tropes then is a sophisticated convolution of unethical cultural practices (Category III and mass media's spectacularization of shocking murders), repressive state power (the asphyxiating control of the police), and authoritarian social ideals (the unchecked power of the knight-errant coupled with the justification of transcendent justice). These problematics, though manifested through uniquely Chinese media forms, are transnational and intelligible to a much larger audience due to a growing number of shared concerns regarding power imbalance, economic inequality, and media oversaturation under unprecedented levels of international commerce and communication.

Although both Nick Browne and Elena Pollacchi have come very close in identifying wenyi as a new mode of filmmaking in their respective works, they fail to address the more

[160] Yau and Williams, "Introduction," 5; Fang, *Arresting Cinema*, 20-3.

powerful potential that wenyi has to not only Chinese cinema but also world cinema. Calling the new wenyi films melodramas or art films is a slightly imprecise interpretive gesture compared to the serious neglect of engaging these films beyond social, political, and cultural concepts beyond China's borders. In Nick Browne's analysis of a distinct strand of Chinese "melodramas" in the late 1980s, he concludes that Xie Jin, one of the leading creators behind these films and the most prominent Third-Generation director in China, through his film *Hibiscus Town* (1986) "explores the scope and content of the 'space' of human rights through an analysis of complicating relations between the two large systems of ethical/political thought, Confucianism and socialism, that operate in some composite forms in contemporary [i.e. late 1980s to early 1990s] Chinese society."[161] Elena Pollacchi's article on the recent films by Jia Zhangke, Diao Yinan, and Ann Hui updates Browne's line of interrogation, foregrounding a new conflict within Chinese society: "While [the films discussed here] are bound up in the dynamics of Chinese soft power, the pressure of the domestic market, and the international scene, they also articulate alternative narratives that undermine Xi Jinping's China dream."[162]

Browne and Pollacchi's conclusions are a perfect example of the habitually ambivalent approach of Western scholars towards Chinese as identified by Emilie Yeh:

> Taking cues from Chinese intellectuals' ambivalence toward Western theories during the reforms of the 1980s, scholars in the West examined the presumed 'universality' of authoritative theories such as semiotics, psychoanalysis, feminism and the Frankfurt School. Whether theories are capable of interpreting texts of non-Western source properly and accurately brought a methodological dilemma and theoretical predicament.[163]

To some extent, this hesitation is not unjustified as forceful parallels between Chinese and Western phenomena or texts inevitably disregard much of the nuance in both the Chinese and the

[161] Browne, "Society and Subjectivity," 53
[162] Pollacchi, "Jia Zhangke's *Mountains May Depart* (2015) and the China Dream," 224.
[163] Yeh, "Pitfalls of Cross-cultural Analysis," 440

Western object of study. However, the necessary caution has become increasingly more apprehensive, engendering an almost compulsory need to frame analytic discourses with Chinese signifiers. Therefore, the Chinese films suddenly are not just dealing with historically constructed concepts, practices of politics and culture within a complex but legible political economy, but they must also be engaging with Confucianism, Chinese socialism, and the China Dream etc. These certainly are legitimate questions for research, but, as demonstrated in my project, these concepts can be, and should be, further deconstructed as they have already been by the state, the media, the corporations, and the Chinese people in general.

The new wenyi is not just deviations from state narratives, but also from many other narratives, created domestically or internationally, which often define “Chinese culture” or “Chinese society” as reified institutions. Matters of ethnicity, social heuristics, and political particularities that bear the supplementary descriptor of “Chinese” can be analyzed as they have been in different nations or cultures. As long as we recognize that cultural formations are results of changes in material conditions, the analyses relating to China as a nation state can inform and benefit from similar researches around the world. On the other hand, if China remains a differentialist myth that holds impenetrable secrets to other peoples, then not only would theories be held at bay by this arbitrary barrier of nationality, but also China’s self-mythologizing could rely on this “respect” for difference, leading to nationalist rhetorics that reject critique altogether as described by Rey Chow:

> The historically conditioned paranoid reaction to the West, then, easily flips over and turns into a narcissistic, megalomanic affirmation of China; past victimization under Western imperialism and the need for national “self-strengthening” in an earlier era, likewise, flip over and turn into fascistic arrogance and self-aggrandizement. Among the young generations of Chinese intellectuals in the People’s Republic, the mobilization of an unabashedly chauvinistic

> sinocentrism—or what I would call, simply, sinochauvinism—has already taken sensationally propagandist forms, typified by the slogan "China Can Say No."[164]

In its incorporation of both traditionally Chinese and Western discourses, the wenyi cinema in China today demonstrates that it is decidedly willing to de-mystify them both. Wenyi, through its play and reference of different cultural discourses, recognizes history and, most importantly, its discontinuities.[165] It is absolutely imperative that this dual recognition is preserved in the interpretation of wenyi and, hopefully, the production of wenyi, so that stories can always be told about people's mistakes and amendments, their conformism and rebellion, their oppression and their freedom.

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[164] "China Can Say No" refers to a widely popular and topical book titled *China Can Say No* published in 1996, in which the authors fiercely advocate nationalist political strategies in reaction to the US's post-Cold War interventions in East Asian geopolitics. Rey Chow, "Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem," in *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory: Reimagining a Field*, ed. Rey Chow (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2000), 5.

[165] As Foucault eloquently puts in his work, history's openness is a crucial contesting point for reactionaries who uphold totalizing historical views: "If one is to assert this theme, which, to the 'immobility' of structures, to their 'closed' system, to their necessary 'synchrony', opposes the living openness of history, one must obviously deny in the historical analyses themselves the use of discontinuity, the definition of levels and limits, the description of specific series, the uncovering of the whole interplay of differences." Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002), 15.

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