

## DOCTORAL THESIS

### Yin as the specificity of Hong Kong cinema: mediated tradition and critical potential

Freudenberg, Benjamin

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## Abstract

In the analysis of Hong Kong cinema side notes on the relationship between particular motifs or stylistic features and Chinese intellectual history are relatively common. Fleshing out this relationship, however, is problematic due to the intricacies of Chinese thought as well as pace and volume of popular culture. In spite of this difficult relation, the thesis reconstructs the narrative and stylistic development of post-war Hong Kong cinema against relevant aspects of pre-modern Chinese thought, demonstrating how the latter provides an effective framework in which to explicate prominent motifs and visual architecture. Yin, or 'concealment', furnishes the conceptual space for the encounter, isolating relevant elements in the Legalist, Confucian, Daoist, and aesthetic canon and informing the analysis of select Hong Kong films.

The body of the dissertation is comprised of four chapters; each juxtaposes an aspect of pre-modern thought with cinematic texts chosen to illustrate distinct discursive movements around themes essential to an understanding of post-/colonial Hong Kong modernity. Beginning with the depiction of the legal order, the first chapter details the narrative characterization of modern law and its subversion in the extra-legal space of the *jianghu*. The debate between Legalism and Confucian natural law thus 'grounds' a pop-cultural suspicion regarding the efficacy of positive law as such. The following chapter tackles the issue of identity: recounting early attempts to stabilize a traditional culturalist version of belonging, narrative criticism of traditional patriarchy and Western hegemony, and recent fears of re-colonization by the motherland, Chineseness is shown to denote an event eluding popular culture. A third chapter interrogates the construction of fate and, implicit in it, narrativity as such. A discussion of Daoism - expressing both a faith in ontologically guaranteed restoration and a critical insight into virtual potential concealed in acculturation - connects pre-modern thought to Hong Kong cinema which first embraces restoration in popular formula and later attempts to escape its circularity. The fourth chapter focuses on stylistic evolution; an influential pre-modern treatise on the aesthetics of landscape painting provides the framework for an account of the characteristic sinicization of visual architecture subjecting space and time to momentum in careful framing and editing. While this style is characteristic of action-oriented plots, it also conditions aesthetic refutations and recent returns to more realist approaches.

Conceptually explicating Hong Kong cinema through Chinese intellectual tradition runs the risk of merely subsuming the former to the latter. This would miss the characteristic mediation of tradition as it is 'resuscitated' in popular culture, its imbrication in the contemporary situation. As such, the thesis cannot evade addressing the meaning of this mediation, a task requiring additional conceptual tools. Critical theory fulfills this purpose throughout the main body of the thesis supporting arguments regarding the critical potential of mediated tradition within post-/colonial modernity. A concluding chapter summarizes the thesis' findings, reflects on the aesthetic impasses of mass culture even where it expresses discontent with modernity, and reiterates the persisting relevance of Adorno's critique of the culture industry, especially for the analysis of popular culture.

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