

migration, memory and  
hong kong as a 'space of  
transit' in clara law's  
**autumn moon**

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— CLARA LAW'S FILMS OF MIGRATION

Macau-born and Melbourne-based film maker Clara Law and her screenwriter-producer-director husband Eddie Fong have produced a transnational output of films which are beginning to receive critical recognition as major contributions to contemporary cinema. These 'films of migration' explore what Gina Marchetti has encapsulated as 'the Chinese experience of dislocation, relocation, emigration, immigration, cultural hybridity, migrancy, exile, and nomadism—together termed the "Chinese diaspora"'.<sup>1</sup> The self-imposed 'relocation' of Law and Fong to Australia in 1994 was the result of increasing frustration with the rampantly commercial imperatives of Hong Kong cinema and its lack of appreciation for the auteur cinema they wanted to pursue. As David Bordwell noted of the Hong Kong cinema scene in the 1990s in his book *Planet Hong Kong*:

Until very recently ... local moviemaking has been unsubsidised, so internationally prestigious directors like Clara Law, Ann Hui and Stanley Kwan depend on mainstream styles, stars and genres. In comparison to their contemporaries—say, the austere Taiwanese directors Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Edward Yang—Hong Kong's 'festival' filmmakers look decidedly pop.<sup>2</sup>

Law and Fong identify strongly with Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Edward Yang as Taiwanese directors who use 'film to explore their own culture', in a more meaningful way than the entertainment-based films of Hong Kong film industry, 'where we don't feel like we belong'.<sup>3</sup> Law's contribution to Hong Kong 'pop' cinema is largely confined to two films, her debut *The Other Half and the Other Half* (1989), a romantic comedy set in Hong Kong about the

relationship which develops between two young people whose respective partners are living in Canada, and the Leon Lai star vehicle *Fruit Punch* (1992), a madcap comedy about a group of young men trying out a business venture and eventually deciding to emigrate to Australia. Both these films nonetheless manage to work in themes of migration, with the former exploring the *taikongren* ('flying immigrant' or 'astronaut') phenomenon, in which wealthy Hong Kong Chinese professional people emigrate 'temporarily' to other countries such as Canada, Australia and the USA.

Law's oeuvre to date is highly eclectic, ranging from historically based films like *The Reincarnation of Golden Lotus* (1989) and *Temptations of a Monk* (1993) to studies of migration, relocation, exile and the search for home in contemporary London, Hong Kong, Sydney or Munich. *They Say the Moon is Fuller Here* (1985), her graduation film from the National Film School in London, dealt with political aspects of Chinese migration, charting the relationship between a Hong Kong fine arts student (played by Law) living in London who is choreographing a ballet based on a Chinese legend, and an engineering student from the People's Republic of China (PRC) who is also a dancer, but who is kidnapped by Chinese embassy officials and sent back to China. *Farewell China* (1990) continues her interest in migration, this time in the form of a powerful melodrama about a young Chinese woman (played by Maggie Cheung) who emigrates from the PRC to the USA—leaving her husband (Tony Leung Kar-fai) and baby behind in China—and subsequently disappears. Her husband enters the USA as an illegal immigrant to search for her in a fruitless and tragic quest through the depths of New York destitution.<sup>4</sup> Law was later banned from making films in the PRC as a result of *Temptations of a Monk*, which, as Zhang Jin-Zhong has pointed out, also evokes themes of migration relating to the 1997 Handover of Hong Kong to China: 'though based in the ancient Chinese Tang dynasty, the central story is still about someone being sent into exile, forced to leave their homeland after a handover of political power'.<sup>5</sup> *Floating Life* (1996), made in Cantonese, English and German, has been widely discussed as her first 'Australian' film, alternating in its focus between Hong Kong, Sydney and Germany in its pursuit of the fortunes of different members of a Hong Kong Chinese family who emigrate to Sydney as a result of their anxieties about the Handover and their struggles to settle harmoniously in their adopted countries. Law's most recent film, *The Goddess of 1967* (2000), while not dealing directly with migration, is set in the Australian outback, with some flashback scenes set in Tokyo. It follows a young Japanese man's quest for a 1967 Citroen DS (Déesse = Goddess) car, which he drives across the Australian outback with a young blind woman, and shares important aspects of its central 'nomadic' intercultural encounter with the subject of this study, *Autumn Moon* (*Qiuyue*, 1992).

Law has been identified by Stephen Teo as part of a 'second wave' of Hong Kong directors, which 'ushered in a more mature kind of experimentation' and gained more international

recognition than the 'new wave' of Ann Hui, Tsui Hark and others.<sup>6</sup> The 'second wave', which also included Stanley Kwan and Wong Kar-wai, emerged from international film schools with strongly transnational and intercultural perspectives. Like Ann Hui and other emerging directors of the 1980s, Law began her career making television films for the government-funded Radio and Television Hong Kong (RTHK), most notably a 45-minute feature in the 1981 series 'Faces and Places' entitled *Floating Clouds*, about a rich woman (Cherie Cheng) and her Maoist photographer boyfriend, which was revived at the twenty-third Hong Kong film festival in 1999. In an essay on Hui, Elaine Yee Lin Ho notes that from the 1970s, RTHK had attempted 'to present itself as critical and pluralistic ... [i]n its conscious, if not overt, inculcation of civic values and the concept of a Hong Kong identity and community' and as a result presented 'the simulacrum of a diversified public sphere'.<sup>7</sup> As Ho indicates, Hui managed to build on her television documentary work and establish herself as a pioneering woman auteur in Hong Kong cinema, dealing with female-centred subjects while drawing on the European avant-garde film making tradition she had been exposed to at the London Film School in the early 1970s, as well as making popular entertainment genre films such as ghost stories and gangster movies. But despite some of her films' engagement with Chinese history, Vietnamese boat people and the role of women in stories of transmigration such as *Song of Exile* (1990), and her 'optic on women's continuous struggle to unsettle and disrupt the orthodoxies that prescribe relations within the Chinese family as an inherited social institution',<sup>8</sup> she has rejected the label feminist film maker, possibly for tactical reasons.

Law, a decade later, has similarly defined herself as an auteur in the European tradition, citing the influence of Tarkovsky and Ozu on her work.<sup>9</sup> In answer to a question as to whether she felt any affinity with Hui, Law stated 'I don't feel I have to be bound by territory, or sex ... To say because you are a woman you have to feel affinity with certain women directors ... is limiting yourself'.<sup>10</sup> It was to escape territorial limitations and the restrictions encountered by women directors in Hong Kong that she migrated to Australia, a decision abetted by the fact that *Autumn Moon* was very well received at the 1993 Sydney and Melbourne film festivals, 'winning rave reviews from critics and a theatrical release'.<sup>11</sup>

Like Hui, Law is concerned in her work with the role of Chinese migrant women as bearers of homeland culture and identity, and this emerges strongly in the character of the Cantonese grandmother in *Autumn Moon*, who attempts to school her adolescent granddaughter Pui Wai in Chinese traditions of ancestor worship. Law's own grandmother's family left China for Macao in 1948. Her family subsequently moved from Macao to Hong Kong in 1967 after the riots relating to the Cultural Revolution, and then migrated to Australia in 1994.<sup>12</sup> Law's filmic concern with migration, transnationalism, and the search for home and identity also relates to Teo's description of her as 'belonging to the generation that probably has the most to lose in terms of a bona-fide "Hong Kong identity" as a result of the Chinese take-over in 1997'.<sup>13</sup>

In Ackbar Abbas's view, 'almost every [Hong Kong] film made since the mid-eighties, regardless of quality or seriousness of intention', can sustain an allegorical reading of the anxieties of pre-1997 Hong Kong as a principal narrative impetus.<sup>14</sup> But unlike most Hong Kong films made before 1997, *Autumn Moon* chooses to deal directly with the anxieties of migration, alienation and intercultural understanding prior to 1997 in a more character-based way, portraying a city of migrants that is metaphorically emptied of people. Stephen Rowley has suggested that Law's film focuses on barren, monolithic and featureless modernist architecture in order to represent the alienating aspects of contemporary Hong Kong in terms of a 'widespread emotional malaise'. In contrast, Wong Kar-wai celebrates the seductive surfaces of a postmodern Hong Kong 'through manipulation of camera speed, editing rhythms and other special effects that alter our perception of the rapidity of events: this is extremely successful at conveying the frenzied nature of life in Hong Kong'.<sup>15</sup> The difference in pace between the two film makers could not be more marked, and Law has stated in relation to Wong Kar-wai, 'I hate the busy and colourful and messy Hong Kong'. Fong added that in *Autumn Moon* they wanted to make a film 'that is something personal to us and close to us [and where] we want to deal with problems of alienation and the search for home'.<sup>16</sup> The film can be read as a fictocritical essay on migration to and from Hong Kong, and the disappearance of stable roots and traditional identity represented by Pui Wai's grandmother. The deracinated, bleak and impersonal transitional urban spaces and the characters in transit which the film portrays offer a critical embodiment Abbas's characterisation of Hong Kong as:

a city of transients. Much of the population was made up of refugees or expatriates who thought of Hong Kong as a temporary stop, no matter how long they stayed ... The city is not so much a place as a space of transit ... a port in the most literal sense—a doorway, a point in between.<sup>17</sup>

Many of Abbas's often-quoted reflections on the architecture and urban space of Hong Kong as an expression of what he refers to as 'a problematic of disappearance ... a sense of the elusiveness, the slipperiness, the ambivalences of Hong Kong's cultural space'<sup>18</sup> are eminently applicable to *Autumn Moon*, which can virtually be read as a direct embodiment of his central thesis of the '*déjà disparu*'. In their book about the architecture of Hong Kong, Juanita Cheung and Andres Yeoh argue that 'the special relationship that exists here between people and buildings arises from the lack of natural landmarks and the desperate need to find a sense of identity'.<sup>19</sup> Law's film primarily explores its characters' search for a sense of identity, but its scrutiny of a transient, depopulated built environment is closer to Cheung and Yeoh's hypothetical suggestion that 'if the many people who continue to apply for foreign passports ... were to leave, they would leave behind those true "citizens" of Hong Kong who cannot leave—the buildings'.<sup>20</sup>

*Autumn Moon* deals with the friendship between Tokio, a young Japanese tourist in Hong Kong, and Pui Wai, a fifteen-year-old Hong Kong Chinese girl about to join the rest of her family who have migrated to Canada. Law has referred to both characters as 'modern nomads', but this tends to reduce the significant differences that exist between them.<sup>21</sup> Ien Ang has cautioned against the 'formalist, post-structuralist tendency to overgeneralise the global currency of so-called nomadic, fragmented and deterritorialised subjectivity', suggesting that what Clifford has identified as 'nomadology' 'only serves to decontextualise and flatten out "difference", as if "we" were all in fundamentally similar ways always-already travellers in the same postmodern universe'.<sup>22</sup> What I want to argue here is that there is a considerably simpler, more modernist way of reading the migrant and travelling characters and the Hong Kong topography of *Autumn Moon* than Yue's overly theorised, postmodern lenses of a 'pre-post 1997' Hong Kong 'heterotopia', while still drawing on Abbas's observations about the emergence of a Hong Kong identity at a juncture of disappearance. This is also in keeping with Law's own distinctly modernist conception of her film making as an auteurist, arthouse cinema of opposition to the prevalent commercial ethos of Hong Kong cinema, which in the case of Wong Kar-wai and others includes more obviously the possibility of postmodern readings. As self-imposed exiles from the Hong Kong film industry, Law and Fong could not be further from the 'travel of post-declaration Hong Kong cinema to Hollywood' which Yue invokes as evidence of her reading of *Autumn Moon*'s account of 'the mediation of displacement, the disruption of ontologies and the constitution of transnational diasporic identity'.<sup>23</sup>

Strictly speaking, neither Pui Wai nor Tokio are 'nomads': in the course of *Autumn Moon*, Tokio crosses the threshold between tourism (which, Clifford notes, is 'a practice defined as incapable of producing serious knowledge') and travel (in Clifford's sense of 'a figure for routes through a heterogeneous modernity').<sup>24</sup> Pui Wai is in the transitional state of being about to join her family in Canada as a migrant, in Rey Chow's reading of the term as 'the involuntary passenger-in-transit between cultures, for whom homelessness is the only home "state"'.<sup>25</sup> Abbas has invoked Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between the nomad and the migrant as 'two very different forms of disappearance' in which the migrant 'leaves behind a milieu that has become amorphous or hostile', which is an apt characterisation of the Hong Kong Pui Wai still inhabits in the film. The nomad, on the other hand, '*does not move ... does not depart, does not want to depart*'—a curious description which also fits Pui Wai, in her limbo-like state, wishing she could stay in Hong Kong with her friends, most of whom are, however, also migrating. Tokio as a traveller represents 'the hope of ... entering the world in full cultural equality'<sup>26</sup> in his dissatisfaction with what Urry has called the 'tourist gaze', based on the desire 'to experience "in reality" the pleasurable dramas they have already experienced in their

imagination'.<sup>27</sup> This accounts for the rather stark and brutal bathroom sex scene which takes place after his chance encounter with the aging Japanese emigrant Miki, the elder sister of his first girlfriend, who is working as a journalist in Hong Kong. After his encounter with Pui Wai and her grandmother, Tokio's rapport with Miki becomes more tender and communicative, as he becomes more aware of his need to make connections with other people. Miki and the grandmother are more stable, 'rooted' characters, from whom Tokio is able to gain a deeper sense of 'heterogenous modernity', while Pui Wai gains an incipient sense of self-ethnography from her encounter with Tokio and his fascination with her grandmother; as Clifford has noted, 'Ethnographers, typically, are travellers who like to stay and dig in (for a time)'.<sup>28</sup>

The topography that emerges from *Autumn Moon* is an austere, lugubriously and predominantly flatly filmed wasteland of both opaque and reflective surfaces. These are sometimes startling in effect, consisting of empty, sometimes characterless facades of buildings, streets and a polluted harbour which arguably achieve considerable resonance through their affective and metaphorical overtones of a transitional zone of migration. In its avoidance of any depth of focus or colour, the film's style offers a striking representation of what Abbas has called 'non-descript space as that strange thing: an ordinary, everyday space that has somehow lost its usual systems of interconnectedness, a deregulated space'.<sup>29</sup> The film's art director, Timmy Yip, specialises in transnational Chinese–American productions, having previously worked on Wayne Wang's 1989 Chinese–American feature *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, and subsequently working as production designer and costume designer on Ang Lee's US-financed Chinese epic *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), but in *Autumn Moon* he showcases a stark, minimalist and sparse Hong Kong which is almost bereft of people. Empty architectural surfaces are frequently lingered over in what Lizzie Francke described in *Sight and Sound* as an 'exquisitely elliptical film',<sup>30</sup> while the interiors of rooms and even the contents of Pui Wai's grandmother's refrigerator are mechanically recorded, by both the black and white video camcorder which Tokio uses to chronicle and catalogue his tourist adventures and by cinematographer Tony Leung Siu Hung's predominantly blue, grey and monochrome representations of the city.

*Autumn Moon* provides a peripheral, detached, and often misty and obscure view of an anonymous Hong Kong in which there are few if any familiar or recognisable landmarks. As Yan Zhong Xian has pointed out, 'from the beginning of the film the director refuses any stereotypical images of Hong Kong, avoiding the well-known views of the "pearl of the orient"'s sparkling new skyscrapers (including the Bank of China and the Hang Seng bank with their progressive high-tech look)'.<sup>31</sup> The cityscape of Central, which Cheung and Yeoh describe as 'the real backdrop of desire' to the Hong Kong Cultural Centre,<sup>32</sup> is glimpsed only incidentally in the hazy distance from the waterfront promenade of Tsim Sha Tsui or from Kowloon, and we see high-rise apartment blocks from an aerial perspective which flattens them out and

homogenises them. Most of these aerial shots show the surfaces of some of the million or so apartments built in high-rise blocks by the Housing Department Construction Branch before 2000.<sup>33</sup> The locations chosen in what Stephen Fore has called ‘the least densely populated Hong Kong ever captured on film’—he identifies the apartment where Pui Wai and her grandmother live as being in the City One complex in Sha Tin in the New Territories<sup>34</sup>—are plain, empty and devoid of people; as Rowley has commented, ‘a city with an average density of forty thousand people per square mile is portrayed as a virtual ghost town’. Rowley has also argued that the use of the Hong Kong architecture and environment in the film functions ‘as a creative technique, as a vehicle for analytical observation and as a thematic subject in itself’ as well as being ‘implicated in creating the characters’ disaffected positions’—notably Tokio’s sense of boredom and displacement and Pui Wai’s ‘dislocation from her home, family and friends’.<sup>35</sup> This metaphorically deserted Hong Kong of alienation and disconnectedness, in which everyone seems either to have migrated or be about to migrate, represents what Zhang Jin-Zhong has described as a city traditionally ‘synonymous with migration’, and a ‘borrowed land’ for diasporic Chinese from Taiwan, Malaysia and Indonesia; a ‘motherland’ which has become the ‘other land’.<sup>36</sup>

#### — JAPANESE INTERSECTIONS

*Autumn Moon* bears the traces of Fong’s interest in the impact of Japanese popular culture in Hong Kong, which was expressed in his film *Cherry Blossom* (1987), about the relationship between Chinese writer Yu Dafu studying in Japan between 1910–1920, and a Chinese girl forced by her father to assimilate into Japanese culture. In *The Last Princess of Manchuria* (1990), he portrayed Kam Bik-fai (aka Kawashima Yoshiko), a Chinese Mata Hari who grew up in Japan, and who becomes part of a Japanese scheme to establish Mongolia and Manchuria as independent states before being executed in 1945 as a spy.<sup>37</sup> *Autumn Moon* originated as a commission from a Japanese film production company as part of a project entitled ‘Asian Beat’ comprising six one-hour ‘home videos’ by different Asian directors, all featuring Japanese actor Masatoshe Nagase, who had previously come to international attention in Jim Jarmusch’s *Mystery Train* (1989). Nagase was cast to play a private detective who travels to six different Asian countries in order to solve a different crime. Law was sceptical of this project, as she thought the different directors with their different cultural backgrounds would make Nagase’s character ‘inconsistent and unbelievable’. In an interview with Miles Wood, she states that the other ‘Asian Beat’ episodes filmed with Nagase in Japan, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Taiwan were made but ‘have disappeared’.<sup>38</sup> Law and Fong calculated that they could use the production money (about \$US200,000) to make a 90-minute feature film on 35mm as well as the 60-minute ‘home video’ the producers wanted. They negotiated the right to make the feature they wanted, edited and produced it themselves as well as directing it, and took



it to international film festivals, something they had previously been denied them by Hong Kong commercial producers, who took little interest in film festivals, preferring to concentrate on commercial releases and video and DVD sales. According to the Hong Kong Movie database, *Autumn Moon*'s box office return was \$HK209,679 for its theatrical run in Hong Kong 10–31 December 1992. In contrast, the highly successful 1996 popular youth gangster film *Young and Dangerous* took almost one hundred times more (\$HK21,115,357).

Law and Fong had much more creative freedom on *Autumn Moon* than they had previously been given, and as Chris Berry has pointed out: 'The result is a slow, dreamy, meditative piece ... With little plot or action, *Autumn Moon* is about as far from the commercial Hong Kong mainstream as one can get.'<sup>39</sup> Nagase's character was the only 'given' they started from, and video footage from his camcorder was evidently incorporated into the film partly to provide the 'home video' component. The film is a Japanese–Hong Kong–Dutch co-production by Eizo Tanteisha, Right Staff Office Company and Trix Films, with Law and Fong also credited as producers. Yan Zhong Xian has described it as 'an oddity in a crevice of the film industry'—a status it shares with the liminal, Australian-made *Floating Life*.<sup>40</sup>

The 'Asian Beat' project captured and to some extent anticipated what Koichi Iwabuchi has identified as a growing, quasi-nostalgic and 'oriental Orientalist' fascination in Japan in the mid-1990s with the rest of Asia as 'premodern', and with pre-handover Hong Kong in particular, as a source of cultural capital and distinction, especially in relation to popular culture.<sup>41</sup> This accounts for the phenomenal success of Wong Kar-wai's film *Chungking Express* in Japan in 1995 and a growing interest in Hong Kong Cantopop music in Japan. Other examples of this apparent fetishising of Hong Kong before its 'cosmopolitan attraction' became diminished by the Chinese handover, include the use of Hong Kong instead of Tokyo as a setting for films like Oshii Mamoru's cult cyberpunk *anime* feature *The Ghost in the Shell* (1995), which includes a sequence with little or no narrative purpose that takes the spectator on an animated guided tour of prominent Hong Kong topography, and Ho Yim's 1997 film of Banana Yoshimoto's cult novel *Kitchen*, which transposes the book's Japanese characters to Hong Kong. Iwabuchi has described this Japanese yearning for Hong Kong in terms of 'Hong Kong's synchronous temporality with Japan'—something Tokyo is immediately struck by—which has displaced Japan's sense of cultural superiority to other Asian nations:

facilitating a more dialogic engagement with other Asian cultural modernities; dialogic in the sense that it involves self-transformation and a re-definition of one's own culture through self-critical insights into Japanese modernity and the dominant conception of a Japan/Asia binary.<sup>42</sup>

But what Law presents in *Autumn Moon* is much more a portrayal of Hong Kong as a site of transience, *anomie* and apparent cultural homogeneity which offers little attraction to the



Japanese *flâneur* seeking consumer pop-cult stimuli. Tokio's trip to Hong Kong seems largely motivated by boredom, and although he is clearly hoping to experience encounters that generate a 'dialogic engagement', on his arrival there he records a number of synchronous features with Tokyo—the same date (31 August), time, temperature and facades of buildings—and Hong Kong girls, one of whom he engages as a prostitute, seem to him to be just like Japanese girls. In keeping with this synchronicity with Japan, one of our earliest encounters with Pui Wai in the film—after the opening scene in which her parents and brother leave for Canada—is her singing a Japanese pop song on a lounge-room karaoke machine with two of her friends, one of whom is about to migrate to Australia (which occasions Pui Wai's voice-over 'By the time I'm twenty maybe we could all be married to foreigners').

At the same time Nagase's presence as protagonist of *Autumn Moon* gives the film a transnational, cosmopolitan orientation. Nagase frequently appears in *Autumn Moon* with a cigarette hanging languidly from his mouth, as he did in *Mystery Train*, and the tracking shots of Hong Kong from trains and taxis in Law's film have affinities with those used in more than one Jarmusch film. In a cursory mention of the screening of *Autumn Moon* at the 1992 Toronto film festival in *Film Comment*, Jonathan Rosenbaum lumps it together with *In the Soup* and *Zebrahead* as 'English language independent features' displaying 'quaint cultural-ethnic interfacing à la Jarmusch'.<sup>43</sup> In a similar vein, a reviewer of the 1992 Locarno festival (where *Autumn Moon* was awarded the Golden Leopard, the main prize, along with two other awards), claimed rather deprecatingly in *Cinemaya* that in its evocation of European road movies the film 'tries to imitate Wenders'.<sup>44</sup> Chinese critic Yan Zhong Xian made a more constructive comparison with Wenders' *Paris Texas* in the Taiwan film journal *Image Keeper*, suggesting that both directors share a use of 'different quality images to differentiate modes of narrative expression'.<sup>45</sup> Both Wenders and Jarmusch, of course, specialise in often loosely and fragmentedly narrated road movies featuring displaced male protagonists who are often drifters and 'nomads', if not foreigners or migrants, and Law's use of tracking shots in *Autumn Moon*, together with its lack of any strong narrative drive, may have some stylistic similarities to both these directors.

Another important, if less obvious, Japanese inflection in *Autumn Moon* is its stylistic use of what Noël Burch has referred to as decentring 'pillow shots' in the films of Yasujiro Ozu, who is one of the principal cinematic influences Law has acknowledged.<sup>46</sup> Ozu was, of course, also a strong influence on Wenders and his peers after his recuperation by Western cineastes in the 1970s, and Chinese-American director Wayne Wang has acknowledged his own debt to Ozu's 'pillow shots' which he defines as 'shots (usually accompanied by music) that appear between sequences, with no obvious narrative connection with what went before or what comes after ... they signify the passing of time, and they establish the environment as a "character" in its own right'.<sup>47</sup> This is a particularly apt description of the intermittent aerial

tracking shots over the surfaces and tops of high rise buildings which punctuate *Autumn Moon*, as Fore states, 'visualising them as abstracted geometric patterns rather than as homes that people live in ... elements of Hong Kong's built and natural environment are introduced as part of a desire to construct a (partial) catalogue of disappearance, an image of the receding of the city's identity just as it is being formed'.<sup>48</sup> In this way, Hong Kong is constructed emphatically as a central character (albeit somewhat inscrutable) in *Autumn Moon*, and Ozu's deployment of a formalist 'parametric' cinema, which disrupts and disregards the cause and effect linkages of conventional narrative flow by interpolating 'intermediate spaces'<sup>49</sup> into various scenes, exerts an important stylistic influence on *Autumn Moon*. It also lends considerable stylistic weight to the film's primary focus on characters and environment and its portrayal of a Japanese tourist's view of Hong Kong, as marked particularly by the use of sequences from Tokio's camcorder, which amounts to a highly reductive, metaphorical and flattened-out portrayal of its topography which is high on the scrutiny of surfaces but low on narrative connections.

— ENGLISH DIALOGUE AS A 'THIRD SPACE'

Nagase brings a Westernised, cosmopolitan outsider's perspective to *Autumn Moon* which also serves to highlight some of the more syncretically Western features of Hong Kong. The fact that the dialogue between Tokio and Pui Wai is in halting English, their only common language (with occasional uncomplimentary asides from each in Japanese and Cantonese), contributes to the sense of displacement experienced by both characters, as well as serving as a reminder that English is the language spoken in most of the countries Pui Wai's friends and family are emigrating to, as well as being the cosmopolitan tourist's lingua franca. Law has expressed her fascination with language and dialect, and described the film as 'multilingual' (like *Floating Life*, which is in English, Cantonese and German), reflecting her own bilingual upbringing which involved attending an Anglo-Chinese school, but speaking Cantonese at home.<sup>50</sup> Yue has extrapolated on the postcolonial implications of this:

*Autumn Moon* is multilingual, sliding easily from one lexicon to another. The film ... is in Cantonese, Japanese and English. English bears the pidgin traces of Japanese; Cantonese is infused with the syntaxes of Mandarin, and in some instances, the dialogue shifts from one language to another in one sentence. This linguistic device reflects not only the ambiguity of origins and belongings (of language and culture); its creolisation is characteristic of the legacy of Hong Kong's postcoloniality. Here, the subversive force of hybridity disarticulates and re-enunciates its symbolic meaning through the destabilisation and carnivalisation of the linguistic dominion of 'English' with different semantic and lexical codes. This linguistic device reveals Hong Kong as a paradox of cultural memories caught between the empires

of Britain and China. It indicates a hybrid cinema and a place that is global, local, transnational and diasporic.<sup>51</sup>

Fore has invoked Homi Bhabha in suggesting that Tokio and Pui Wai's friendship takes place in 'a "third space" in which barely articulate English is the lingua franca and the inevitable gaps in communication are filled in with gestures, body languages and silences'.<sup>52</sup> In a film which Law has stated is about the absence of 'linkages and connections',<sup>53</sup> English nonetheless becomes an important common currency in which Tokio and Pui Wai are able to communicate some important existential and emotional truths to each other in a reasonably succinct and economical manner. They are forced to speak frankly and simply, and in the process establish a brother-sister-like relationship. In their first encounter, Pui Wai cautions Tokio about the fish in the polluted harbour he is fishing in, in what is possibly an ironic reference to Hong Kong's history, in Abbas's words, 'from fishing village to British colony to global city to one of China's Special Administrative Regions'.<sup>54</sup> Tokio mimics Pui Wai's sing-song question 'Why aren't you at work?' with his childlike rejoinder 'Why aren't you at school?' emphasising that they both appear to be killing time and at something of a loose end. Communicating in English also enables Tokio to establish an uncertain conduit, via Pui Wai's translations, to Pui Wai's grandmother, who speaks only Cantonese, but who represents a vital link with the traditional Chinese culture, traditions and customs he is seeking, as well as a reminder of the importance of memory and the past.

But the occasional alienness of English as a 'linguistic dominion' to both protagonists is underscored in one crucial, 'ice breaking' exchange in the film, during Tokio and Pui Wai's first encounter, which illustrates that the two also have deeper linguistic links which relate to traditional Chinese culture. Pui Wai is unable to understand when Tokio says he is 'bored', so he writes the word down for her as the *kanji* for 'agony', or the Chinese character *men*, the literal meaning of which, as he explains, is 'My heart is trapped ... inside the door'. Pui Wai understands immediately, and replies in English, 'You better open your heart' to which Tokio responds, grimacing, hand on heart, 'Too painful!' This process encapsulates graphically through its use of the Chinese character what gradually happens between the two characters in the remainder of the film. It also spells out Tokio's embodiment of one of the film's principal themes—the absence of the desire for any real affective connections in an environment dominated by business, technology, tourism, anomie and electronic gadgetry.

#### — McDONALD'S AS A SITE OF MEMORY

After he establishes contact with Pui Wai, Tokio symbolically throws away his tourist restaurant guide, renouncing his role as tourist, and asks Pui Wai to take him to her 'favourite restaurant ... Traditional'. This turns out, equally symbolically, to be an empty McDonald's, which she

defensively explains has 'a long, long history in America', but goes on to reveal is a key emotional site for her, as her most important memories reside there. All her birthdays from the age of one to ten were celebrated there with her extended family and friends, while in the past five years it has provided a place 'to cry' with her classmates (at least until they all emigrate). As Yue extrapolates:

For Tokio, McDonald's is just a global sign of American imperialism: from Toronto to Singapore to Taipei to London, it is, as his travels have attested to, the same all over the world. For Pui Wai, this particular McDonald's is different. In the quintessential little corner set aside for children's parties is the place of an adolescent's cultural memory of belonging and loss ... In this scene, the place of McDonald's, as the site that constitutes the friendship, serves as a point of intersection and transition. As a place that demythologises Tokio's search for the imaginary and authentic traditional 'Chinese' culture and a place where Pui Wai can localise, domesticate and indigenise, it functions as a shared discursive space for Pui Wai and Tokio's friendship. In Pui Wai's pre-post 1997 memories, McDonald's is like Hong Kong: transnational and diasporic. From the 'nowhere and 'everywhere' global sign of the big 'M' lies the floating place of a heterotopic Hong Kong where imagined geographies are demystified and transnational cultures are negotiated.<sup>55</sup>

Certainly the scene demonstrates how a McDonald's restaurant can be indigenised and imbued with local and personal significance, and is not necessarily always the encoded symbol of globalised US homogeneity it is often regarded as. As such, Pui Wei's valorisation of McDonald's corroborates US anthropologist James Watson's rather partisan gastronomic claims about the impact of McDonald's in Hong Kong over a thirty-year period: 'Since the 1970s, an entire generation of Japanese and Hong Kong children have grown up with McDonald's; to these people the Big Mac, fries, and Coke do not represent something foreign. McDonald's is, quite simply, "local" cuisine.' Watson also observes more usefully that branches of McDonald's have been appropriated by middle-school students in Hong Kong as 'hangouts for studying, gossiping, picking over snacks; for them, the restaurants are the equivalent of youth clubs'. He goes on to make the rather exaggerated claim that this illustrates how for many young people in Hong Kong 'the transnational is the local' and McDonald's is part of a 'lifestyle ... emerging in Hong Kong that can best be described as postmodern, postnationalist, and flamboyantly transnational'. With its organised children's birthday parties and its use by Hong Kong teenagers as a 'substitute home', he argues that McDonald's 'is not perceived as an exotic or alien institution: the children of Hong Kong have made it their own ... [it] has become such a routine feature of Hong Kong's urban environment that most young people cannot imagine life without it'.<sup>56</sup> But in the present tense of Law's film, the empty McDonald's also becomes the site of an exodus, a social and cultural vacuum, and a rather impoverished substitute for a lack of any distinctively

localised sense of identity, home, heritage or ‘independent thinking or inquisitiveness’ which Law sees in the younger generation in Hong Kong.<sup>57</sup> But Tokio’s indignation at his McDonald’s experience does have a positive outcome—it prompts Pui Wai to invite him home to sample her grandmother’s impressive traditional Cantonese cooking, which is something else she takes for granted along with frequenting McDonald’s, and provides Tokio with an opportunity to sample non-touristic traditional Chinese food and experience the Chinese traditions Pui Wai’s grandmother embodies. Pui Wai’s own lack of familiarity with some of these traditions is immediately illustrated by her grandmother reprimanding her for trying to light incense sticks for the family shrine on the gas cooker. Consequently both characters enter a realm of Chinese ancestral tradition which enables them to develop a stronger sense of belonging and access sites of cultural memory.

The McDonald’s scene, which Yan Zhong Xian has described as ‘a wonderful portrait of the loss of a sense of history’ also serves to illustrate the importance of memory and history as fundamental to a sense of identity.<sup>58</sup> Abbas has claimed that due to their traumatic history of colonisation, ‘Hong Kong people have little memory and no sentiment for the past’, but Pui Wai is aware of the need for memories, in contrast to Tokio, who although only in his mid-twenties, seems to be something of an amnesiac.<sup>59</sup> He cannot remember if the temperature in Tokyo is measured in Celsius or Fahrenheit, or whether his first girlfriend’s sister is married, or his first kiss, and the ‘measuring gaze’ of his camcorder seems to function as a recorder of facts, statistics, locations, prices and purchases in Hong Kong that he would otherwise forget.<sup>60</sup> This reliance on Japanese technological means of memorialising things is echoed by Pui Wai’s comment that she has ‘become a recording machine’ as her family in Canada have asked her to videotape Cantonese-language television programs for them. The loss of memory has wider resonances in the totally modern, functional urban landscape of Hong Kong which the film portrays, where little sense of history has been able to survive. Abbas has suggested that one of the main features of the new Hong Kong cinema is its ‘sensitivity to spatial issues, in other words, to dislocations and discontinuities and its adoption of spatial narratives both to underline and come to terms with ... historical anachronism and achronisms: space as a means for reading the elusiveness of history’.<sup>61</sup> Abbas links this with problems of affectivity, and *Autumn Moon*’s scrutiny of the surfaces of buildings and streetscapes, and its characters’ searches for mementos and connections with their history, underlines this loss of history which could be read as an endemic feature of the postmodern condition that they are resisting. In an article which reads the film in terms of a portrayal of fragmentation, disjunction and simulation, and the loss of subjectivity, history and a sense of reality, Yan Zhong Xian notes:

Hong Kong, although it is a city of 6 million people, has no important buildings of a ‘commemorative nature’ and possesses no dominating metropolitan open spaces of a

commemorative nature. Government departments were established in completely average looking office buildings, and the classical style buildings that remained from the early period of English colonisation have completely disappeared in the process of metropolitan development. This so-called super-modernist city has come about as a result of its need for the development of a relatively high degree of functionality (public transport, economy, housing) and even more as a result of its attitude of regarding its pursuit of a cosmopolitan look as progress and of opposing the classical historical aspect. *Autumn Moon* makes news of this abundantly clear to its audience.<sup>62</sup>

In one of the voice-over monologues that Law and Fong give each of the three main characters in the film, Tokio, perhaps influenced by his use of his camcorder as a 'recording machine', expresses a desire to be interviewed. He lists the subjects that no one has asked him about for a very long time: his home town, brothers and sisters, favourite colour, horoscope, the year he stopped growing up, his shoe size, father's occupation, grandparents' teeth, first interest in girls' breasts, first lovemaking, the happiest and most painful moments of his life, what he is most afraid of, and what makes life worth living. This monologue, which is addressed to Miki, whom he encounters by chance in an empty square (and first sees through the lens of his camcorder), occasions tears, and expresses his lack of any enduring sense of important memories. Law has justified his series of frenetic sexual encounters with Miki, a journalist working for a Japanese news agency in Hong Kong, in terms of expressing the idea of the body reliving memories, but they also represent a link to home, Tokio's past and memories of his first love affair.<sup>63</sup> The latter is also invoked by Pui Wai's conversation with Tokio about her first boyfriend: 'This is a girl in love', Tokio comments in Japanese. Pui Wai tells him of her (seemingly unrequited) feelings for her boyfriend, who is more concerned with emigrating to the USA and studying nuclear physics at university, but Tokio can only tell her of the diminishing of his heartbeat after hundreds of kisses with hundreds of girls (and even with the same girl). Pui Wai runs away when he tells her 'now I can't even remember my first love's face'. But her overnight trip with her boyfriend to Lantau island—the site of the new Chek Lap Kok international airport completed in 1998, which according to Abbas is 'a kind of city within a city, but a city without citizens, a semiotic or informational city populated by travellers and service personnel'—only reaffirms the transience of their relationship.<sup>64</sup>

Pui Wai's recollections of her grandfather while her grandmother is in hospital provide an opportunity for Tokio to participate in a sense of her personal history in Hong Kong. This is represented symbolically by his holding up an old Chinese suit from an old photograph of Pui Wai's grandfather at about his age, and by the old cigarette tin, writing materials and one of the grandfather's landscape painting—the only one that remains since all the others were thrown away when Pui Wai's grandmother moved to her parents' house. These old family

memories contrast with the present, in which Pui Wai's parents have declared her grandmother to be dead on their immigration papers, a common ploy resorted to in Hong Kong in order to expedite the immigration process. Consequently the identity of the grandmother (who is never named in the film) has been negated along with the traditional Cantonese culture, history and cuisine she embodies, and her monologue, which Tokio dutifully records on his camcorder at her hospital bed, is about her preparations for death. She expresses her desire for a big, comfortable coffin, and to be buried in the Buddhist cemetery. Her main desire is that her children have a long, prosperous and safe life, and she does not want them to return from Canada to see her unless they are 'free'. This selfless concern for her family is made more tragic by our awareness that it is completely unreciprocated, and the grandmother, together with her cat which Pui Wai and Tokio must take responsibility for feeding when she goes into hospital, and the Cantonese opera she falls asleep watching on television, becomes an acute reminder of the callous loss of history, memory and tradition the transient Hong Kong migrant is prepared to experience.

Inspired by the grandmother and her memorabilia, a sense of their own loss of history and memory and the sense of identity they engender motivate Pui Wai and Tokio to celebrate the Autumn Moon festival in a deserted fishing village, where the old people have all died, and the young people have all disappeared, in the final sequence of the film. Shots of the desolate remains of the village almost evoke the wasteland of Tarkovsky's *Stalker*. The Chinese mid-autumn festival has similarities with the Bon festival in Japan, which Tokio invokes, in which the full moon represents reunion, and the ancestors are welcomed and then dispatched on a boat. The full moon in Chinese tradition is synonymous with a sense of home, family and love, while autumn also obviously represents transition between summer and winter which is a key theme in the film. Hence the festival which gives the film its title represents a ritual celebration and consolidation of time, place and identity which amounts to a final coming to terms with transition and transience, and in Pui Wai's case, the inevitability of migration. The final festival scene begins with Tokio and Pui Wai fishing from a rock, echoing their first encounter, as well as Hong Kong's origins as a fishing village. Tokio's voice-over recalls what Pui Wai has told him about her parents bringing her to this spot to catch 'delicious' fish when she was small, a family ritual that was discontinued once her father had to earn extra money for migration. This spot by the sea also echoes the news that Pui Wai has received on the phone, that her family have just bought a house by the sea in Canada. Tokio goes on to relate that Pui Wai has told him she has forgotten about her boyfriend, and he has urged her not to, since he has 'forgotten too much', and this sequence also underlines the importance of preserving memories. They light lanterns along the main street of the deserted ghost town, and make little boats, he from paper, following Japanese tradition, she from a papaya skin, in which they float lanterns on the water. They then set off fireworks as Pui Wai's voice-over



records that this will be her last mid-autumn festival in Hong Kong, and she recites all she can remember of a poem her grandfather taught her: 'Faded spring flower, autumn moon / The past, what do we know of you? / At my home last night the east wind blew—can't remember the rest.'<sup>65</sup>

The film ends with a long close-up of their faces looking upwards, illuminated by fireworks, followed by aerial shots of a deserted part of Hong Kong by night. This ritualised conclusion, which has affinities with the similarly ritualistic conclusions of *Farewell China* and *Floating Life*, represents an attempt to re-invoke a sense of history and memory, lay to rest anxieties about future uncertainties and express a sense of both belonging and loss which unites the two characters in a cross-cultural ceremony of expiation. Pui Wai's rite of passage through first love and leave-taking is counterbalanced by Tokio's overcoming his boredom and sense of familiarity through immersion into aspects of traditional Chinese culture (mainly through Pui Wai's grandmother) and evocations of his own cultural traditions. His journey in the film corresponds to a progression through tourist stereotypes and superficial classifications and quantifications to a state of understanding and friendship which enables him to gain insights into the transitional state of Hong Kong and the importance of tradition in discovering the routes to a sense of identity that has a connection to personal and historical 'roots'.

— AMBIENT DRIFTING: AUTUMN MOON'S SOUNDSCAPES

In an interview about *The Goddess of 1967*, Law uses the Chinese word *hei-fen* to invoke the way in which atmosphere and tone in a film combine to generate an understanding of the totality of the situation, events and characters of a film. Music, she argues, plays an important role in this process, and 'film music should be able to work as independently as dialogue in a film ... to bring out a lot of things you don't say in the dialogue, which is maybe the subtext, or is just something unsaid'. Film music functions for Law as a way of 'saying something of the inner world of [a] character or ... a yearning for a world they do not have', an observation which is particularly appropriate to the use of music in *Autumn Moon*.<sup>66</sup> Film music remains a comparatively neglected area in cinema studies,<sup>67</sup> despite Schopenhauer's statement that 'suitable music played to any scene, action, event, or surrounding seems to disclose to us its most secret meaning, and appears as the most accurate and distinct commentary upon it', which is an appropriate evocation of the role film music can play in providing suture and a 'third dimension' to cinematic narrative, situations and characterisation.<sup>68</sup>

The music in *Autumn Moon* is by Tats Lau, who subsequently wrote the award-winning music for Law's *Temptation of a Monk* and her 'Wonton Soup' segment of *Erotique* (1994), and has been referred to as the 'godfather' of Hong Kong's tiny alternative avant-garde music scene, as well as being part of the highly politicised Cantopop duo Tat Ming Pair. Composed and performed by Lau in collaboration with Tommy Wai, it embodies important underscoring

features of film music. The term ‘ambient music’, as defined by British composer Brian Eno, is an apt description of the highly modal, drone-like, minimalist score that Lau and Wai constructed and performed for the film. Eno invented the term in 1978 as ‘music designed specifically as a background feature in the environment’, retaining a ‘sense of doubt and uncertainty’, and inducing ‘calm and a space to think’ rather than aiming to be cheerful. Its principal features are ‘stillness, homogeneity, lack of surprises, and, most of all, lack of variety ... we wanted it to be continuous, a surrounding’.<sup>69</sup> This is very much the function of the music in *Autumn Moon*, which consists of predominantly slow, repetitive patterns of instrumental music for electric guitar, acoustic guitar, piano and fretless bass, augmented with Chinese stringed instruments: the *erhu* (2 strings), *saxian* (3 strings) and *ruan*. Its reliance on extended amplified notes (which are frequently ‘bent’ through distortion and feedback) with little rhythmic pulse (no drums) gives it a laconic, floating quality which complements sonically the drifting state of the film’s principal characters as well as the ‘parametric’ function of the film’s scrutiny of architectural surfaces. The subtle use of Chinese instruments as tonal colouring also evokes the themes of Chinese identity which are important to the journey undergone by the three principal characters in the film, without being self-conscious, essentialist or obvious about their sonic associations. Yan Zhong Xian considered the music in the film to be an important indicator of the film’s changing moods, describing it as alternating between a ‘lustreless melancholic soundtrack’ at the beginning, and a ‘benedictory, celebratory feeling’ in the first sequence of aerial shots over the city. During the film’s final aerial sequence, he notes, there is a return to ‘the heavy depressive music of the film’s beginning, expressing the feeling of sadness of the city and its role. It seems to be giving a sincere, yet helpless description of a kind of “fragmented” spatial image’.<sup>70</sup> This indicates the music’s role in expressing a sense of deracination and alienation in its lack of any cohesive, narrative melodies, which reflects the film’s own minimal narrative. Lau and Wai’s music is used non-diegetically throughout the film, as opposed to the highly diegetic karaoke scene, where Pui Wai and her friends sing a Japanese pop song, credited as ‘Without Love’ by Pink Cloud. Usually accompanying tracking shots—from the taxi Tokio takes from the airport, for example, or in the aerial sequences—the music combines, road-movie style, with the film’s architectural facades to establish an often lugubrious sense of desertion and emptiness. It is a key atmospheric element in the film’s enunciation of themes of migration, transition and loss of identity.

Given Lau and Fong’s subsequent migration to Australia, *Autumn Moon* and its soundtrack, released more than a year after the film with restructured versions of the three main characters’ central monologues set to music, and at least two additional songs not included in the film, can be read as their own rather lugubrious personal swan song to pre-handover Hong Kong. *Autumn Moon* expresses an even stronger sense of the postcolonial melancholy and loss which David Eng finds in *Floating Life* (1999), but its final scene can be read as a highly modernist

reconciliation of a fragmented, transient and rootless present with a sense of the importance of memory, tradition and the past. As Fore has pointed out, the film deals with ‘fundamentally humanistic notions’ and ultimately demonstrates that ‘the attempt, individually and collectively, to understand the significance of 1997 is not easily distinguishable from the ongoing, quotidian search for emotional fulfillment, which in turn is not usefully separable from the quest for identity within a culture in a state of crisis’.<sup>71</sup> Pui Wai and Tokio’s final quiet celebration of the Autumn Moon festival—traditionally an expression of family unity—is a ritual marking their transition from a state of transient *anomie* to a sense of connectedness to the past and history (with autumn as a transition between summer and winter), and even a sense of home and belonging in not-quite-lost origins. The film’s predominantly melancholic tenor and elliptical narrative progression nonetheless leave a poignant residual sense of loss and disappearance—of history, tradition, family unity, memory—which Pui Wai and Tokio succeed at least in partially identifying and reconciling through their connection with the grandmother. As such, it stands as an important cinematic testament to Hong Kong’s uneasy emergence from its postcolonial anxieties in its emphasis on the importance of maintaining and reinvigorating the Chinese ‘roots’ embodied by Pui Wai’s grandmother, in order to enable the ‘routes’ of Pui Wai’s and Tokio’s migration and travel to be fruitful. It is a similar value of ‘roots’ to that which Paul Gilroy has emphasised in his reading of Jameson’s view of post-modernity as ‘another equally Eurocentric master narrative’ which emphasises ‘the new depthlessness, the weakening of historicity, the waning of affect’ at the expense of non-European, modernist cultural forms which use the ‘technological means at their disposal not to flee from depth but to revel in it, not to abjure public history but to proclaim it!’<sup>72</sup> *Autumn Moon*, in its emphasis on history, memory and affective links between generations, aligns itself with this modernist ethos.

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