View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by Lancaster E-Prints

***Screening Communities: Negotiating Narratives of Empire, Nation, and the Cold War in Hong Kong Cinema*. By Jing Jing Chang.**

Screening Communities presents a revisionist history of Hong Kong cinema from the 1950s and 1960s, an epoch riven by Cold War politics and a cluster of internecine tensions. As pro-Beijing Communists jostled with pro-Taiwan Nationalists, the colonial government struggled for stability, buffeted by mass civic uprisings and the looming specters of decolonization and industrial modernization. From this roiling milieu, incredibly, sprang "the true golden age of Hong Kong cinema" (p. 28). Buoyed by an influx of talent from the north, the Hong Kong film industry – masticated during the Second World War – revived spectacularly in the 1950s. Local audiences jammed the theatres; production output soared. But more pertinent to Jing Jing Chang's enterprise is this: The region's cinema of the 1950s and 1960s became a prime site in which to articulate Hong Kong identity and community (p. 13). From jaunty youthpics to "official" documentaries, Hong Kong cinema tacitly performed the cultural function of collective identity formation. In Chang's useful formulation, Hong Kong's postwar cinema "screened" community, at once promulgating an imagined (imperial) community and masking the colonial regime's political anxieties. Yet, Chang insists, the construction of community was not wholly top-down; rather it arose from a confluence of colonial intervention, left-wing filmmaking, and critically engaged audiences.

Screening Communities organizes its three main sections around each of these phenomena. In Part 1, Chang delineates the colonial government's regulation of film content. Skittish censors prohibited films deifying Mao or peddling communism; expressing right-wing sentiments; or pushing anti-American and anti-Western rhetoric. No matter their provenance, films that overtly critiqued imperialist rule were banned. Chang deftly argues that such proscriptions betray the colonial regime's political, not to say existential, insecurities. As 1950s Hong Kong played host to rival political cadres – chiefly, pro-Communist, pro-Nationalist, and pro-American groups – the colonial censors took care not to exacerbate tensions, purging films of overt political expression. At the same period, the government embarked on nonfiction film production. A steady churn of newsreels, documentaries, and docudramas *screened* Hong Kong in the dual sense theorized by Chang: just as these prestige and propaganda films flaunted the region's progress toward modernization, so they disguised the government's growing insecurity as a colonial power.

Chang limns a dominant hegemony burned clean of overt political opinion, much less of open political dissent.

Against this straitened, apolitical milieu, Hong Kong's leftist filmmakers stood out in bold relief. As Part 2 of *Screening Communities* recounts, left-wing studios such as Union Film filtered social critique through the subtly iconoclastic *lunlipian* genre – a didactic and moralistic narrative mode, centering on familial relationships, and mounting a moderate rebuke to démodé social conventions. Chang shows how "progressive" Cantonese filmmakers took inspiration from – and repurposed – May Fourth ideals, sprinkling their stories with swipes at the feudalistic family and gender inequality. Though hobbled by censorship, these leftist filmmakers advocated an alternative brand of Chinese community tethered to the Chinese nation.

Even more subversive of social tradition are the Cantonese films examined in Part 3. If the *lunlipian* of the 1950s remained paternalistic and nationalistic at heart, its 1960s counterpart furnished narratives of female empowerment and localized youth culture. Cantonese youthpics such as *Her Tender Love* (1969) and *Teddy Girls* (1969) activated potent female archetypes, and subjected patriarchal structures and archaic gender norms to staunch criticism. Lest *Screening Communities*' historical "narrative" appear teleological – i.e. postwar Cantonese cinema evolved smoothly toward liberalization – Chang stresses that Hong Kong cinema, its identity formation, and its screening of local community, is properly understood "as always being in process, not as an endpoint" (p. 19).

Chang's splendid account of the vicissitudes of postwar Hong Kong cinema is all the more remarkable for not depending on standard frameworks. The prisms of auteurism, genre taxonomies, national cinemas, film canons, and the like give way to an approach that blends culturalism and historiography with "poetics and politics" (p. 173). Yet Chang conceives poetics quite narrowly, scanting film style. Sometimes stylistic detail goes begging, as when Chang implies that "prestige documentaries" displayed the "stylistic flare [sic] of the director" (p. 63) while elucidating neither the specific qualities of this authorial panache nor the rhetorical ends it served. Chang's stylistic analysis can seem facile ("The use of shadows…suggests darkness" [p. 90]) or laboriously overdetermined (a heap of connotations is later attributed to this shadow motif [p.94]). Indeed, the functions Chang ascribes to stylistic devices can appear tenuous or counterintuitive. Why, as Chan contends, did colonial

filmmakers embrace the long take – a device traditionally perceived to be cognitively demanding – as the surest means to communicate with "unsophisticated" audiences (p. 48)?

Other stylistic matters remain unresolved. In what ways did 1950s prestige films "experiment…with style" (p. 68)? How does the assertion that 1960s Hong Kong filmmakers "experimented with new styles and techniques to challenge incredibly popular world cinema trends of the day" (p. 155) square with the claim that these "filmmakers had no choice but to appropriate the style…of prevailing global trends" (p. 156)? By what aesthetic criteria does *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004) constitute an "art film" (p. 181)? At a broader level of analysis, how did stylistic narration help to shape cultural identity during the Cold War? What role did film style play in the screening of community? Did cinematic techniques conceal, or even betray, postwar political agendas? Though *Screening Communities* teems with vibrant textual analysis, one laments its neglect of film style.

Notwithstanding this omission, the book boasts many virtues. Not least, *Screening Communities* corrects a striking lacuna in the literature. Copious are the English-language studies of Hong Kong's *yanggang* (masculinist) cinema, right-leaning studios (e.g. Shaw Brothers), action-centered genres such as *wuxia* (swordplay) and kung fu, and predominantly male audiences ("fanboys"). Chang throws a long-overdue attention on the era's left-wing film studios, women-oriented genres, and female audiences. As a work of revisionist history, moreover, *Screening Communities* debunks orthodox accounts of postwar Hong Kong cinema, cogently mapping a filmmaking milieu marked by continuity rather than rupture, agency rather than subjection. *Screening Communities* is an outstanding work of scholarship.

Gary Bettinson

Lancaster University