interstate laws directed against the telegraph, the telephone, and the railway, see Ferguson and McHenry, *American Federal Government*, 364, and Harrison, "'Weakened Spring,'" 70.

127. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality*.
128. Goldberg, *Racist Culture*. Much of the concern over the Johnson fight films was directed at the effects they would have on race relations (e.g., the possibility of black people becoming filled with "race pride" at the sight of Johnson's victories). This imperialistic notion of reform effectively positioned black audiences as needing moral direction.
129. Orrin Cocks, "Motion Pictures," *Studies in Social Christianity* (March 1916): 34.

Questions of Chinese Aesthetics: Film Form and Narrative Space in the Cinema of King Hu

by Héctor Rodríguez

In memory of King Hu (1931–1997)

The concept of Chinese aesthetics, when carefully defined and circumscribed, illuminates the relationship between narrative space and cultural tradition in the films of King Hu. Chinese aesthetics is largely based on three ethical concerns that may be termed nonattachment, antirationalism, and perspectivism.

This essay addresses the representation of "Chineseness" in the films of King Hu, a director based in Hong Kong and Taiwan whose cinema draws on themes and norms derived from Chinese painting, theater, and literature. Critical discussions of his work have often addressed the question of the ability of the cinema, a foreign medium rooted in a mechanical age, to express the salient traits of China's longstanding artistic traditions. At stake is the relationship between film form and the national culture, embodied in the concept of a Chinese aesthetic.

Film scholars tend to define the main features of Chinese aesthetics selectively, emphasizing a few stylistic norms out of a broad repertoire of available histories and traditions, and the main criterion for this selection is the sharp difference between those norms and the presumed realism of European art before modernism. The definition of "Chineseness" in art is thus given in opposition to an idea of the "West." The preferred objects of analysis, then, are almost invariably those Chinese traditions that differ overtly from those of "Western realism," particularly the stylized codes of Beijing opera performance and the formal methods of landscape painting (*shanshui hua*) that privilege line over color, employ the unpainted surface (*kongbai*) of a painting as an integral element of compositional design, and create multifocal, nonfocal, and discontinuous perspectives.

Chinese writer Hao Dazheng has suggested, for instance, that "the perspective system of Chinese painting must be understood as a conceptual one, not dependent on the biological mechanisms of the naked eye, as was the Renaissance system."[1] Jean-Louis Baudry has also observed that Chinese and Japanese painters do not value the "centered space" organized around the "monocular vision" that distinguishes Renaissance art.[2] Under the influence of modernist aesthetics, the nonrealist or even antirealist experience of space embodied in some indigenous traditions—their distinct "spatial consciousness" (*kongjian yishi*)—often becomes a criterion of the Chineseness of Chinese art. This framework has often

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led scholars to ask themselves how cinematic technique can reproduce or approximate the experience of space that undergirds the idea of Chinese art.

This paradigm has a particularly strong appeal for film theorists. The discipline of cinema studies has often defined its specific domain as the study of editing, mise-en-scène, and other dimensions of film style, insofar as those elements are potentially expressive of thematic contents or constitutive of viewing positions. Chinese scholars influenced by the auteur theory and semiotics have sometimes asked themselves how cinematic technique can effectively embody a distinctly national method of representing space. This agenda redeems and celebrates the idea of "China" from a perspective partly shaped by the assumptions and protocols of the institution of cinema scholarship. Studies of "spatial consciousness" by the former Hong Kong Baptist College lecturer Lin Niantong and other scholars has worked to define a national aesthetic on a par with the most self-conscious exemplars of European art cinema.[3] The concept of Chinese aesthetics can, however, encourage misleading generalizations. It eternalizes the national culture by treating it as an ahistorical, unitary reality reducible to a few distinctive and pervasive traits. The otherwise outstanding film critic Luo Yijun, for instance, has argued that Chinese painting always privileges "formal expression" rather than "the imitation of reality."[4] But it is simply not true that Chinese painters never struggled to reproduce nature as it is perceived or to convey clear information about the spatial relations between objects. Although the convergence of parallel lines characteristic of Renaissance perspective was obviously not known, rudimentary principles of overlapping planes, tonal variation, foreshortening, and diagonal recession were selectively used as early as the Shang dynasty (1751–1112 B.C.).[5] If we describe realism in painting as the result of a process of trial and error, guided by judgments of adequacy to normal perception, then the history of Chinese painting shows the presence of at least some efforts to create an impression of verisimilitude. After about A.D. 700, painters often employed the so-called method of the three sections to divide the composition into three succeeding layers. By 1050, however, landscapes were already being structured as a tighter succession of multiple overlapping planes arranged from foreground to background, even though the overall spatial construction still comprised an additive series of discontinuous planes. After 1250, however, painters often managed to create a continuous receding ground plane that connected the various objects in the composition into a physically unified, perceptually consistent environment.[6] Chinese painting shows the presence of persistent efforts to enhance the impression of depth and volume on a two-dimensional surface. Even those painters who regarded the depiction of a single observer's standpoint as an arbitrary limitation nonetheless often relied on principles of, for instance, aerial perspective to project a certain sense of depth and to convey spatial relations among depicted objects.

The idea of Chinese aesthetics has often fostered an inaccurately ahistorical understanding of China's representational methods. Both realism and antirealism can function in different ways in different situations as markers of Chineseness. It is therefore not very informative to describe a film as a traditional or antirealist text without specifying clearly and precisely what features of that film function as criteria of its traditionalism. Rather than trying to reconstruct the putative essence of Chinese culture, then, I propose to approach the problem in a more modest and ad hoc manner by attending to the work of a single filmmaker whose interest in expressing Chineseness by means of narrative space is documented extensively.

Describing his own cinematic methods, King Hu has made a typically totalizing claim: "Unlike Western painting, there is no realistic depiction of natural phenomena in Chinese painting."[7] This monolithic definition of China's culture need not, however, enter into our assessment of the director's actual films, which are better thought of as keeping faith with a few important strands of Chinese painting, drama, history, philosophy, and literature. To argue that tradition is not homogeneous is not to reject any efforts at constructing a traditional practice as unreasonable or meaningless. It simply means that any "traditionalism" has to be understood as a selective version of the past filtered through the aspirations, experiences, and concerns of the present.[8] In this less ambitious sense, it is not arrogant or misleading or anachronistic for individual filmmakers to position themselves as heirs of certain broad cultural norms, a project that can give rise to perceptually vivid and philosophically provocative artistic practices.[9] This essay not only interprets the main concerns of King Hu's work but also defends his approach as a legitimate heir of selective aspects of Chinese art.

My argument notes that although King Hu's cinema abounds in literal citations of his nation's painting, philosophy, history, and theater, he does not always mechanically incorporate "traditional" images, beliefs, and conventions but rather strives to realize similar functions and concerns through distinctly cinematic devices. Recognizing that the present differs from the past in its social organization, technological capabilities, and practical problems, the filmmaker sometimes adapts the spirit of tradition to new circumstances without necessarily following it to the letter. (A useful analogy may be that of a musical composition that sets out to capture the emotional tone of a poem without literally reproducing its words.) The question is not only whether his films accurately follow or directly cite Chinese artistic practices but also whether they are legitimate, albeit indirect, heirs of premodern cultural norms and values. King Hu's version of Chinese aesthetics appropriates, elaborates, modifies, and filters the past through a contemporary confrontation with the culture of the "West" and an awareness of the possibilities and constraints of the film medium.

Authorship, History, and National Culture. More specifically, King Hu's relationship to the idea of China is mediated by a complicated historical background of interlocking cultural, economic, and biographical factors that have helped foster and characterize his interest in the national culture. I reconstruct these mediations by summarizing a few key biographical facts. First, King Hu's own experience of exile and cultural rootlessness has, in the filmmaker's own words, encouraged a nostalgic "craving for China": "I envy those who have their own land. That feeling has been almost completely absent throughout my life, which has always been that of a passerby [*guoke*]."[10] In thus describing his predicament, Hu is obviously tapping into the image of the solitary traveler and homesick exile

familiar from Chinese folklore and literature. The figure of the wanderer has acquired a range of ambivalent connotations that include not only the nostalgic desire to return home but also the cultivation of an unencumbered or unbound self, both of which are explicitly thematized throughout King Hu's films.[11] The director's own biography exemplifies the predicament of an entire generation of northerners exiled in Hong Kong and Taiwan who have insistently idealized the concept of Chinese culture.

Born in Beijing in 1931, King Hu attended the National Art Institute in China's capital before moving to Hong Kong in 1949, where he worked in the capacities of graphic draftsman, set decorator, actor, and assistant director for various film studios, as well as writer and producer for *The Voice of America*. His cinema would eventually reflect the self-understanding of a displaced Beijing person striving to retain a connection with his national culture in an alien place. It is no accident that the director's major scholarly work remains his biographical study of another wandering northerner, Lao She, a contemporary novelist who consistently employed a distinctively Beijing-based idiom while also acknowledging the influence of European literature, particularly Charles Dickens, during a five-year exile in England.[12]

Second, King Hu's obsession with China functioned as a directorial signature at a time when the rise of postwar auteurs in international festivals and art houses encouraged an interest in filmmaking as self-expression. His professional career in Hong Kong can be reconstructed as a struggle to preserve his creative autonomy in the midst of a highly rationalized industrial mode of production. Shortly after his arrival in the British colony, Hu met fellow northerner Li Hanxiang while both were employed as assistant directors at the Yonghua Film Company, and from the early 1950s to the late 1960s their careers were closely linked. Having signed a contract with Runme Shaw in 1954, Li persuaded Hu to join the Shaws as an actor and scriptwriter, after which he played supporting roles in several operatic musicals and melodramas directed by his mentor, including *The Beauty and the Kingdom* (1959), serving as assistant director on the immensely popular *The Love Eterne* (1963). He directed *The Story of Sue San* (1962) under Li's supervision, as well as the anti-Japanese patriotic epic about World War II guerrilla activities, *Sons of the Good Earth* (a.k.a. *Sons and Daughters of the Good Earth*, 1964), in which he also played a supporting role. The latter film's box-office performance reportedly suffered from the enactment of strict laws against the depiction of racial conflict in Malaysia and Singapore, two of Hong Kong cinema's key markets. Shaw Brothers' decision to cut the film by about an hour may have contributed to King Hu's ongoing preference for historical plots set in the Ming or late Yuan dynasties and containing only indirect and allegorical allusions to contemporary politics.[13] The decision may also have created friction between the filmmaker and the Shaw studios, which he was to abandon after the success of his superior swordplay film *Come Drink with Me* (1965). Following the example of Li Hanxiang, who had set up his own independent studio, Grand Motion Pictures in Taiwan, Hu also left both Shaw Brothers and Hong Kong.

An additional reason for this transition may have been the scheduling pressures of the Shaw empire and its industrial mode of production modeled after the Hollywood system: the studio retained its own laboratories, sets, costumes, and contract actors and directors, all of which enabled the efficient and inexpensive production of colorful period musicals throughout the early 1960s and swordplay films in the later years of that same decade for distribution in the exhibition venues also controlled by Shaw Brothers itself.[14] More crucially, directors were often forced by contract to work at a relentless pace, usually a minimum of about four films every year, to ensure the profitability of their product. King Hu's departure from the company marked a rebellion against an alienated organization of industrial labor and an assertion of authorial autonomy.

Having signed with Ma Rongfeng's Taiwan-based Union Film Company as director and production manager, Hu went on to make that year's highest-grossing Taiwanese film, *Dragon Gate Inn* (1967), seen by more than 320,000 spectators on the island alone. It also brought in huge profits throughout Southeast Asia.[15] Far from the scheduling pressures of the Shaw industrial empire, the success of *Dragon Gate* granted King Hu the luxury to spend more than two years working on the monumental three-hour epic *A Touch of Zen* (1971), which would eventually secure the director's international reputation by winning the Grand Prix de Technique Supérieur at the 1975 Cannes Film Festival. But Ma Rongfeng deleted over an hour of footage for its theatrical release, a decision that encouraged the director to form his own production company, King Hu Film Productions.[16] Hu often also worked as his own art director, scriptwriter, and editor, thus ensuring a high degree of authorial control over the total visual design of each film while indulging a calculated display of cultural and historical erudition.[17]

This practice, of course, met with a receptive response from a young generation of Hong Kong film critics and future filmmakers such as Shu Kei and Lau Shing-hon, who had been deeply influenced by the European New Waves and auteur criticism.[18] King Hu's film practice corresponded to a broader network of art-cinema institutions in which distinctiveness, consistency, and assertiveness of technique were celebrated as markers of authorial style. King Hu carefully and self-consciously projected an image of artistic seriousness that reflected this institutional background. Although he did shoot two films, *Legend of the Mountain* and *Raining in the Mountain* (both 1979), back to back in Korea to take advantage of the same cast and locations, he sustained a slower pace of production than mainstream studio filmmakers back in Hong Kong, while commanding substantially larger budgets.[19] Between 1973 and 1981, he released only four films, whereas, for instance, Shaw Brothers' director Zhang Che completed forty-six. At the same time, King Hu's work increasingly lost commercial appeal since at least *Raining in the Mountain*, a situation that would lead to increasing difficulties in securing funding. As a result, he was unable to complete two films he had planned to make on Matteo Ricci and on Chinese emigrants in California before his death in Taiwan.

The third historical factor behind Hu's interest in the national culture is the impact of postwar Japanese cinema. The popularity of the Zatoichi samurai series in Hong Kong and the success of auteurs such as Kurosawa and Mizoguchi in international film festivals encouraged Hong Kong directors of the late 1960s to improve the plastic quality of swordplay choreography and the overall visual

design of the films. A new generation of Hong Kong martial arts directors, such as Zhang Che, approached action sequences as occasions for an elaborate display of balletic bodily movement, decorative or vigorous camera work, a dense mise-en-scène, and an attention to the expressive uses of film style. An additional Japanese influence on Hong Kong directors was the frequent citation of national artistic forms, particularly poetry, theater, and painting, which had continued throughout Japan's postwar cinema after the U.S. Occupation forces eased their restrictions on the depiction of "feudalistic" subject matter. Mizoguchi, Kurosawa, Inagaki, Ichikawa, and Kinugasa, among others, routinely resorted to *samisen* music, inserts of scroll paintings, a painterly mise-en-scène, Noh or Kabuki performances, and Buddhist references, all of which projected an image of Japanese exoticism for Western consumption. King Hu's own preoccupation with Chinese culture partly arose out of a confrontation with the growing popularity of Japan's cultural assertiveness.[20]

The search for a distinctly national culture had, of course, also been a preoccupation of Chinese intellectuals since (at least) the late Qing confrontation with the West, intensified by the Confucian conservatism of Taiwan's ruling Nationalist Party (Guomindang) under Chiang Kai-shek. Although there is no evidence that King Hu's own work actively endorsed a right-wing political agenda, Taiwan offered a receptive soil for King Hu's obsession with the idea of China, not only because exiled mainlanders such as Li Xing were also beginning to cultivate a self-consciously Chinese aesthetic in the Taiwanese film industry but also because the preservation of traditional culture was an explicit goal of the ruling party. The Guomindang government would, of course, eventually produce King Hu's excellent Tang dynasty story, *All the King's Men* (1982), through its major studio, Central Motion Pictures Corporation.

Rather than interpreting the films as expressions of a conservative outlook, however, I believe they reflect a widespread political preoccupation with the national and cultural identity of China in the modern age that cuts across political lines. In C. T. Hsia's famous expression, the "moral burden" of an "obsession with China," a prevalent phenomenon among modern Chinese intellectuals, was the fourth factor that helped shape King Hu's approach to the cinema.[21] The intensity of his concern with preserving a northern culture during his southern exile was shared with other filmmakers uprooted in Hong Kong and Taiwan, including Li Xing, Li Hanxiang, and, to a lesser extent, Song Cunshou.[22] These filmmakers turned to Chinese tradition not only as an alternative to progressive or left-wing cinema but also to cement their shared identity as serious intellectuals with a genuine concern for the national identity and traditional culture. In this sense, they were the heirs of a more progressive director, Fei Mu, who had expressed a deep love for the specificity of Chinese culture, particularly the Beijing opera, in such films as *Murder in the Oratory*, *On Stage and Backstage* (both 1937), and *Happiness neither in Life nor in Death* (1947). Fei Mu's stage productions also integrated Beijing opera numbers within "Westernized" realistic plots. The nationalistic implications of the Beijing opera can be shown by considering one of the various names that designate this art form in Chinese: in addition to the *jingju* or *jingxi*, both of which mean "drama of the capital," the opera is also called *guoju*, or "national theater."[23] A characteristically northern art form becomes a signifier of Chineseness.

In a Hong Kong or Taiwan context, the Beijing opera supplied an indigenous repertoire of rich artistic practices that could rise to the challenge of Japan's cinematic craftsmanship and intense cultural assertiveness by celebrating national traditions. Of course, Beijing opera had been an important raw material for Chinese filmmakers from the infancy of the national film industry, which sometimes recorded operatic scenes performed by notable actors; but the Hong Kong cinema since at least the 1950s had largely turned away from northern theater and relied instead on the southern *yueju* (Cantonese opera), which employed the local Cantonese dialect spoken by the majority of Hong Kong's population. Even when such former Beijing opera performers as Yuan Xiaotian appeared in Cantonese martial arts films, the operatic component was generally kept to a minimum and was often subordinated to a comparatively more realistic mise-en-scène.[24] Not even the playful, stylized Shaw Brothers musicals of the 1960s, which were mainly sung in Mandarin rather than Cantonese, incorporated Beijing opera scores; instead, films like *Love Eterne* relied on another regional form, the so-called *huangmeidiao*, or yellow plum tunes. It was in this context that King Hu strove to reinject Beijing opera conventions into the martial arts genre. As early as *Come Drink with Me*, Hu had already enlisted Han Yingjie, a former Beijing opera actor who had choreographed action sequences for Shaw Brothers since 1961; and, as an independent producer, he continued to choose actors with a stage background, such as Samo Hung and Yuan Xiaotian.[25] *A Touch of Zen*, *The Valiant Ones*, and *The Painted Skin* (1992) contain brief Beijing opera scores. The basic story line for his brilliant short film *Anger*, included in the omnibus production *Four Moods*, is also loosely derived from the Beijing drama *The Midnight Confrontation*. As well, *Dragon Gate Inn*, *Anger*, and *Lee Khan* preserve a more or less strict unity of time and place that projects a strongly theatrical impression.

King Hu's own relationship to the idea of Chinese culture is nonetheless characterized by a marked eclecticism. In addition to Beijing opera, he has also invoked a heterogeneous repertoire of traditional forms ranging from history and legend to literature and painting. In *Lee Khan*, Han Yingjie intones a song authored by Guan Hanqing (ca. 1220–1300), a Yuan doctor and playwright famous for his *zaju* operas and his erotic songs about illicit love.[26] *All the King's Men* begins with a Buddhist *bianwen* summarizing the historical background to the film's plot. There are also references to Chinese poetry in *A Touch of Zen*, in which a swordswoman sings Li Bai's well-known poem "Drinking Alone in the Moonlight." While King Hu often includes credit titles written in classical calligraphy, his compositions often overtly imitate painterly models (*Legend of the Mountain*) or are juxtaposed with nondiegetic insert shots of paintings (*Lee Khan*, *The Valiant Ones*). His protagonists tend to be familiar from history, operas, short stories, and novels and are meant to be seen as distinct types rather than rounded psychological personalities. Several films contain nondiegetic as well as diegetic insert shots of animals, mountains, plants, ponds, and other natural objects to create a lyrical flavor that patently recalls

the natural images of Chinese poetry, evoking such traditional themes as the freedom from worldly pursuits, the nostalgia for a lost home, and a Buddhist awareness of the futility and self-destructiveness of human desires. The director therefore assembles a heterogeneous cluster of references to different artistic genres and philosophical traditions to bring about a generalized image of Chineseness. The distinctiveness and richness of Chinese culture is what his cinema is explicitly about.

The fifth and final factor that shaped the director's relationship to Chinese aesthetics is his own relationship to the West, or rather a selective idea of the West, which he has self-consciously elaborated in various essays and interviews. According to King Hu, "Western culture" is underlaid by a deep structure, a system of categories that determines how artists and philosophers have thought about and depicted reality. This structure supplies a basic cultural frame of interpretation, and its principal characteristic is the separation of mind, matter, and God. These three concepts are treated as distinct entities, such that the task of philosophy or art is to describe, reassert, or reconsider the relationship between them. In the domain of painting, for instance, the widespread goal of "imitating nature in an almost scientific manner" has given way to a modern retreat into subjectivism or abstraction.[27] This oscillation between interiority and exteriority putatively exemplifies a cultural standpoint where the relationship between mind and reality remains a central philosophical and aesthetic problem. The dominant aesthetic culture of the West, then, typically celebrates the existence of an anthropomorphic God and the rationalistic values of precision, exactitude, and scientific verisimilitude, or otherwise reacts against those values by retreating either into a romantic cult of interiority or into an abstract quest for pure forms. The conceptual triad of inner subjectivity, objective reality, and God provides the basic fulcrum that makes the project of the "West" possible.

While this description of Western culture undoubtedly appears too grandly totalizing, it undoubtedly underpins the director's own contrasting description of Chinese art as a practice "halfway between the two polar extremes of realism, on the one hand, and either surrealism or abstraction, on the other."[28] More specifically, King Hu's version of Chinese aesthetics can be reconstructed in terms of the following characteristics: (1) Chinese art is not centrally but at best only peripherally or optionally concerned with referentiality. Its goal is not to provide accurate information about actual people and places. (2) A Chinese artwork shifts our attention away from denotative content toward its principles of stylistic construction and, more specifically, toward the spirit or state of mind embodied or "lodged" in its style. King Hu has thus described the formative principle underlying Chinese landscape painting and theater as a purely aesthetic interest in "expressing art in itself."[29] (3) At the same time, artists do not completely abandon all representational content. There are recognizable objects rather than purely abstract configurations of lines and volumes. (4) This decentering of denotation is informed by the ethical concerns of neo-Taoism and Chan Buddhism, which in some versions assert the primacy of experiential immediacy and the relativity of understanding over any objective claims to logical thought and conceptual knowledge. It is, I think, an error to describe Chinese aesthetics in this instance as a purely stylistic "spatial consciousness" without taking into account the ethical framework that inspired King Hu's technique. The rest of this essay elucidates his aesthetic approach by tracing in detail the director's relationship to Beijing opera, landscape painting, and philosophy.

Chinese Opera and Cinematic Representation. In explicating his relationship to Beijing opera, the director has often emphasized the autonomy of art: "I've always taken the action part of my films as dancing rather than fighting. Because I'm very interested in the opera, and particularly its movements and action effects, [I have] always keyed [the action sequences] to the notion of dance [so as] to emphasize the rhythm and tempo, instead of making them more 'authentic' or realistic."[30] King Hu's rejection of realism partly consists in his preference for the stylized motions of the operatic stage over the more accurate techniques of trained martial artists, although the latter would obviously be more effective during actual fighting situations. More generally, the plasticity and rhythm of pure motion are both the material and content of his work. Cinematic technique foregrounds kinetic space by organizing movement (both of, and within, the frame) as a dominant element of spatial design while employing montage to generate complex rhythmic structures that decenter denotation.

Consider the interaction of music, dialogue, and images, which reproduces certain formal norms of the Beijing opera while drawing on distinctly filmic procedures. Nondiegetic music, in particular, tends to play a very different role in King Hu's aesthetic sensibility from its dominant function in classical Hollywood cinema, and it is illuminating in this context to contrast these two approaches. The role of sound in Hollywood has been aptly described by Noël Carroll as one in which the narrative specifies the feeling that is then characterized by the music. Music is a highly expressive medium that endows the images, dialogue, and events with an intensely emotive quality, but the emotions expressed by (nonvocal) music are typically "inexplicit, ambiguous, and broad" because music lacks a definite cognitive content.[31] It is the function of plot, dialogue, and images to secure a precise reference for the otherwise ambiguous expressiveness of the music track. Carroll suggests that the use of music in many Hollywood films is often (although not always and everywhere) built around a complementary relationship between two distinct symbolic systems: "movie" (images, dialogue, and plot) indicates what a given scene is about, while "music" intensifies the emotive quality of that scene.

King Hu sometimes employs Westernized symphonic music in a similar way, particularly during some of the climactic confrontations in *The Valiant Ones* and *Raining in the Mountain*. It would therefore be a serious distortion to mark a radical contrast between Hu's films and Hollywood conventions. But the relationship between "music" and "movie" is sometimes different in one important sense: there is a range of visual and aural parameters that, instead of complementing the music, are employed as musical values in their own right. Many devices that would normally belong to the movie code in classical narration are here drawn into the music code. King Hu treats the human body as a concrete plastic unit to be combined with other stylistic devices, including diegetic sounds,

operatic scores, sweeping tracking shots, and brilliantly jolting zooms. In films such as *Anger* and *The Valiant Ones*, the clash of swords and the characters' nervous sighs or galvanizing screams function as concrete musical elements that punctuate each discrete bodily action or cut, while nervous, rapid music parallels the image of a character furiously running or galloping. These different elements come together to produce a unified result, a startlingly percussive impression. In such instances, many visible and aural devices that would function to particularize the music in a Hollywood context instead work as musical values assembled into a single rhythmic pattern.[32] This approach corresponds to the norms of Beijing opera, which often demand an intimate parallelism between voice, music, and gesture. A movement of the head, for instance, can coincide with a simultaneous percussive sound to produce a single rhythmic effect, a strategy that Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein has in a somewhat different context described as a "monism of ensemble."[33] According to Eisenstein, sound, motion, dialogue, and location "do not *accompany* (nor even parallel) each other, but function as *elements of equal significance*" in the production of a "unified" aesthetic impression.[34]

King Hu therefore employs on-screen movement, variable framing, and mise-en-scène to produce a similarly "unified" visual and aural impression of intense dynamism. In *Lee Khan*, the parallel disposition of the tables inside the small inn where the action takes place, the arrangement of rooms that converge onto the central dining area, and the relationship between the upstairs area and the ground floor all afford opportunities for sweeping action, gliding camera movements, and multilayered compositions, encouraging viewers to attend to the abstract relationship between architecture and the corporeal mobility of the protagonists. The linear placement of tables and rooms also fragments the interior space into a complex topography of geometric compartments that characters swiftly navigate. The director has himself observed that he designs his own sets with the movement of the camera already in mind so as to create the impression that his sinuous tracking shots are emerging spontaneously from the winding, mazelike architecture, which itself seems to exist only in order to make those motions possible.[35]

The graceful reframing, the entrances into and exits from the frame, and the constant motion within the frame all work together to project a stylized experience of kinetic fluidity. The camera movement, the actions of the performers, the theatrical sets, and the operatic scores seem to determine the possibilities of one another.[36] Spatial continuity is preserved through establishing shots, matches on action, eyeline and earline cutting, reaction shots, deep focus, and camera movement. By treating the single location as a field of sheer physical movement, King Hu projects a dynamic, flowing experience of space that never becomes claustrophobic despite its confinement to an interior set. Moreover, the arrival of new characters serves to redefine the topography of the theatrical locale: having entered the inn, Yuan official Lee Khan rearranges the tables and benches to create an empty area in the center of the dining hall. A virtuoso exercise in the transcendence of spatial limitations, *Lee Khan* is the work of a genuine action director with a keen eye for the rhythmic plasticity of movement. At the same time, a similar aestheticization of motion occurs in films that contain significant exterior footage:

The Valiant Ones, for instance, often relies on telephoto lenses to attenuate the impression of perspectival depth and bring out the velocity and agility of the characters, a strategy obviously influenced by Akira Kurosawa's samurai films. This strategy foregrounds and intensifies the physical movement of the bodies onscreen.

In an excellent critical discussion of King Hu's work, Lau Shing-hon has compared the director to cubist painter and filmmaker Fernand Léger, whose cinema similarly emphasizes motion and rhythm.[37] Lau's discussion recalls Siegfried Kracauer's description of a familiar scene in Léger's (and Dudley Murphy's) *Ballet Mécanique* (1924), in which a woman climbs a set of stairs: "By an editing trick, she is . . . made to trudge up and up an endless number of times. . . . Actually, what we are watching is not so much a real-life figure mounting a nightmarish flight of stairs as the movement of climbing itself. The emphasis on its rhythm obliterates the reality of the woman executing it so that she turns from a concrete person into the pale carrier of a specific kind of motion."[38]

In a loosely similar vein, King Hu often constructs rapid, percussive successions of images showing different characters executing similar movements or gestures, even reiterating the same motion over and over in a series of nearly identical images that stylize the denotative material by building "a self-sufficient sequence of rhythmical movements."[39] The dazzling confrontation between Chinese loyalists and Japanese pirates that concludes *The Valiant Ones*, for instance, shows a pirate miraculously leaping in the air and repeatedly kicking Chinese general Yu Dayou in the chest in a furiously operatic segment that detracts from the individuality of the characters and brings out the physical properties of balletic motion—using a characteristically percussive montage to produce patterns of acceleration and deceleration. The result is a sequence in which it is difficult to reconstruct the "real" time of the diegetic action with any degree of precision; instead, cinematic style asserts its status as a sui generis phenomenon that systematically undermines any expectation drawn from quotidian experience.

To be sure, King Hu does not completely replace representation with pure configurations of shapes, volumes, lines, colors, and sounds detached from any representational content. There are obviously concrete protagonists interacting under concrete circumstances, and, as I shall argue below, character and plot play important roles in the cinema of King Hu, but these human figures are, during the course of the narrative, often treated as plastic parameters of film style so that the actions depicted can often be seen simultaneously as narrative events *and* as kinetic or choreographed goings-on. In the cinema of King Hu, our attention is more or less evenly distributed between the dramatic subject matter and the balletic elegance of pure movement, so that the abstract qualities of the human body, as well as the kinetic uses of the film medium, are no longer subordinate or optional but dominant elements of cinematic form. King Hu's kinship to Chinese artists expresses itself in his treatment of the cinema as a medium of balletic motion.

To be sure, terms like "operatic" or "balletic" should be used with caution. Our interest in the spectacle of dance and acrobatics in the actual Beijing opera is normally directed toward a set of movements that are in some sense muscular or corporeal; thus, the performance becomes in part an occasion for a display of skill

to a knowing audience. But King Hu is interested in the kinetic plasticity of physical action—not only in the bodily movement of the performers but also, and more broadly, the movement of the cinematic frame in relation to the geometric values of the mise-en-scène. It is a criterion of this will to abstraction that he does not provide occasions for performers to display their martial skill, supplying instead offscreen trampolines and invisible wires to "fake" some of the more spectacular somersaults and flips, a common practice in Hong Kong and Taiwan martial arts filmmaking. If this is a "dance," it is one that purifies motion from any reference to the performer's bodily skill; it is in this context that the comparison to Léger's "*mechanical* ballet" takes on its full force.

More generally, King Hu's encounter with Chinese operatic materials and conventions is not always literal but filtered through a sense of the constraints and possibilities integral to the medium of film and to the modernist sensibilities of the international art cinema. The result is a self-conscious search for specifically cinematic equivalents for the artistic concerns of Beijing opera. Thus, he has, for instance, observed that the "physical limitations [of the theater] are too great" to do justice to the movements and rhythms of operatic tradition, whose project can in fact be more adequately fulfilled by the more flexible medium of film.[40] There are devices specific to the cinema, such as mobile framing, telephoto and zoom lenses, and montage, that can afford opportunities for a heightened display of the corporeal stylization and balletic dynamism that distinguish Chinese operatic performance. The relationship between his films and the ongoing practices and conventions of Chinese opera will, of course, often be indirect. The director's appropriation of operatic norms is, for instance, selective and inconsistent. While Beijing opera performance calls for an austere, minimal scenography in which individual objects may be used for a variety of figurative purposes (an actor may kneel behind a chair to suggest a jail, or stand on it as if on a mountain), King Hu's films tend to use objects in a more lifelike, rather than in an overtly "symbolic," manner. In addition, his cast does not consistently adhere to the strictly codified rules of stage performance.

These inconsistencies bring out the extent to which the Beijing theater not only furnishes King Hu with a set of raw materials, including actual scores, "action effects," and story lines, but also supplies certain aesthetic functions that can be reproduced but also elaborated, refined, and modified by means of such specifically cinematic devices as editing and variable framing. King Hu's strong awareness of cinematic technique makes his work a legitimate heir, rather than a literal copy, of stage norms and conventions. It is for this reason that his style appears at once overtly operatic and intensely cinematic, both traditional and modernist. This approach sharply differs from a view put forth by some critics and historians in China and the West, who have described the cinema as an intrinsically alien cultural apparatus inherently rooted in the norms and concerns of "Western realism." Luo Yijun, for instance, regards the medium as a "product of modern scientific technology" whose inherent "aesthetic attributes" embody "the imitation theory of Western traditional aesthetics."[41] In contrast, the films of King Hu suggest that the cinematic apparatus retains sufficient resources to completely subvert any interest in reference and to attenuate or decenter any interest in denotation.

The Chineseness of Painting. The same emphasis on aesthetic autonomy that, according to King Hu, underpins the practices of the Beijing opera also, and perhaps more overtly, guides certain strands of Chinese painting. Many discussions of aesthetics throughout imperial China had admonished against treating pictorial representation as the factual record of the physical characteristics of a definite place. Yuan painters such as Ni Zan (a.k.a. Ni Yuanzhen, 1301–1374) dismissed consistency of point of view as a limiting assimilation of pictorial space to everyday perception.[42] And, as early as 1071, Shen Gua already cautioned artists against reproducing the world as naturally perceived.[43] In the words of a fifth-century author, landscape ought not to function "to plan the boundaries of cities or differentiate the locale of provinces, to make mountains and plateaus or delineate watercourses. What is found in form is fused with soul, and what activates movements is the mind. If the soul cannot be seen, then that wherein it lodges will not move."[44] Aesthetic appreciation requires a capacity to attend not only to the appearances depicted but also to the spirit (the strength, vivacity, fluidity, and rhythm) underlying those appearances. Thus, painters and calligraphers were often admonished to "paint the bone" (*hua gu*) by using a forceful and dynamic style without the kind of weakness or flabbiness vividly described as "painting the flesh" (*hua rou*). The point is that the stylistic organization of the painting should overtly insist on the primacy of spirit over denotation.

Scholars have often described pictorial representation in China in terms of the familiar but somewhat ambiguous and polysemic concept of *qiyun shengdong*, proposed by Xie He (circa 500) and usually translated as "Energy and Life Movement" or, more elegantly, "rhythmic vitality."[45] The term indicates a spatial consciousness that is not everywhere populated by stable, solid, and measurable volumes. Su Shi (1036–1101) explained the elusive idea of *qiyun shengdong* by distinguishing between those kinds of objects, some having a constant form while others only possess a constant principle. The former was said to include people, birds, buildings, tools, and other physical objects whose representation required a mimetic emphasis on "form-likeness" (*xingsu*). The latter comprised mountains, water, clouds, and mist, which demanded from the artist a paucity of detail, indistinct or incomplete boundaries, and a feel for the rhythm of the brushwork. This class of objects was considered the most difficult to draw but also the most important, because, by calling attention to values of atmosphere, distance, and light, rather than distinct shapes and solid volumes, they could most forcefully embody the *qiyun shengdong* of a work of art.[46] Painter Guo Xi (active from 1060–1075), for instance, advised artists to retrace the outward contours of objects with a mixture of blue and ink washes, so that even the clearest outlines would appear to have emerged out of, and intermittently to fade into, the surrounding, shadowy mist or the blank canvas.[47] Both landscape and figure painting ought to project a derealized environment surrounded by broad areas of unpainted surface, creating an indeterminate, mysterious atmosphere that King Hu's films often strive to recreate.[48] Such atmospheric devices as mist, backlighting, shallow focus, overexposed shots, chiaroscuro, and the glittering reflections of sunlight on water in *A Touch of Zen*, *Raining in the Mountain*, and *Legend of the Mountain* occasionally

create a clouded and magical space populated by the indistinct contours of enigmatic, shadowy figures. Vaguely defined shapes seem to emerge out of, and fade back into, strange and all-enveloping clouds. The term *mi* ("amorphous" or "mysterious") has, of course, often been employed in connection with Chinese landscape painting to evoke an experience of gazing at, roaming about, and being engulfed in a deep, obscure, illimitable, and oneiric space.

In King Hu's work, an entire narrative may be suffused with a subtly derealized tone. The plots characteristically unfold in secluded huts (*Come Drink with Me*, *The Wheel of Life*), Buddhist monasteries (*Raining in the Mountain*), deserted mansions (*Legend of the Mountain*, *A Touch of Zen*), dark and impenetrable forests (*A Touch of Zen*), intricate rock formations (*A Touch of Zen*, *The Wheel of Life*, *The Painted Skin*), clouded mountains (*Legend of the Mountain*), and remote and desolate inns surrounded by an arid, uninhabited wilderness (*Dragon Gate Inn*, *Four Moods*, *Lee Khan*). These are often labyrinthian, fantastic architectural spaces faintly lit by dim candlelight or crisscrossed by winding hallways and secret passages that simultaneously anticipate and postpone potential spaces beyond the frame. By relying on such layered, serpentine sets and exterior locations, King Hu often creates a densely structured mise-en-scène of intersecting geometric lines arranged in multiple planes. The magisterial opening scenes of *Raining in the Mountain*, for instance, define spatial relations by means of matches on action, eyeline cuts, and tracking shots that follow the deliberate, swiftly precise movements of the protagonists as they glide along a Buddhist temple's angular topography searching for a valuable scroll while spying on one another. These multiplanar compositions generate a compartmentalized interior space and supply a serpentine setting for the agitated dynamism of the various characters. Multiple frames within the frame heighten the depth and convolution of receding planes, while lateral tracking movements and the balletic motions of characters constantly disclose new interior compartments or ominous hiding places and bring about new compositional patterns. Both *A Touch of Zen* and *Raining in the Mountain* evoke a tactile experience of perceptual anticipation and unpredictability in which unexpected and potentially threatening characters constantly emerge from behind doors, passageways, street corners, and windows to disrupt the stability of any given composition. This architecture, of course, brings out the primacy of physical action, but it also exemplifies King Hu's preference for an obscure spatial consciousness; he has repeatedly emphasized the "meandering" (*qujie*) and "mysterious" or "ambiguous" (*pusu mili*) quality of these locations.[49]

This combination of anticipation, postponement, surprise, and uncertainty produces a shifting experience of diegetic reality as fluid, fleeting, and unstable. Even exterior spaces, whose angular rock formations can hide dangerous precipices (*Raining in the Mountain*) or enigmatic and potentially threatening strangers (*A Touch of Zen*), project a feeling of cognitive disorientation. King Hu foregrounds the epistemic dimension of corporeal motion in the midst of a shifting, elusive, and immeasurable reality. Drawing on a vividly haptic metaphor, the director has himself described the narrative space of his films as an experience of groping in the dark, "not seeing one's five fingers while holding up one's hand."[50]

Space becomes a field of both human and camera movement, and this space is perpetually tentative, uncertain, and unreliable. The films thus undermine any sense of ontological security through the creation of a fundamentally precarious diegetic reality, projecting an experience of almost childlike insecurity and inconstancy that subverts any sense of sensory-motor control over objective space.

In addition to mise-en-scène, film editing can splinter a single locale or action into multiple views that are not empirically feasible, fragmenting profilmic gestures and motions through accelerated or elliptical cutting, parallel editing, inserts of natural objects or reaction shots, and combinations of slow and normal motion shots. The fragmentation of diegetic locations and movements into multiple views undermines the plausibility of the overall narrative space and enables the creation of impossible spatial actions, while the use of backlighting, disorienting close-ups, and extreme low- and high-angle camera positions obscures the events depicted by giving us only partial and disconcerting views. King Hu's first mature deployment of this "sublime" style was the brilliant bamboo forest swordfight in *A Touch of Zen*, which was mainly constructed in the editing room. Action director Han Yingjie has suggested that remote location shooting in Taiwan posed logistical difficulties that helped foster a montage style: "Since the bamboo trees were three stories high, using wires was out of the question. In the end, we put the camera in the middle of a lake next to a cliff, and took shots of the stuntmen diving into the lake"; these angles were then juxtaposed with shots of the actual forest in a swift montage.[51] Noting that it took twenty-five days to shoot that ten-minute confrontation, King Hu proudly explained the detailed process of trial and error that went into the creative process: "There was a 'golden rule' of cinema which stated that for the human mind to register an image, a strip of film must not be less than eight frames. So I began to experiment. In *A Touch of Zen*, I put together many scenes that run less than eight frames. When I saw that some of these didn't work, I re-edited them. At places, I would . . . sometimes use a less than eight-frame image as if accidentally."[52] In that film, but also throughout *The Valiant Ones*, *Raining in the Mountain*, and *The Painted Skin*, the director's use of elliptical cuts, diegetic insert shots, and other strategies of visual fragmentation allows characters to float magically through the air across long distances, to reach impossibly high altitudes in a single superhuman leap, and to change direction miraculously in midair.

This visual experience once again echoes Sergei Eisenstein's work, particularly his appeal for a "liberation of the whole action from the definition of time and space."[53] What interested Eisenstein, and also Lev Kuleshov, was the creation of objects, actions, and environments that did not, and in many instances could not, exist outside the cinema. At the same time, eyeline cutting, continuity editing, and other spatial markers could sustain a sense of narrative flow across an otherwise discontinuous chain of images.[54] This spatial consciousness therefore exhibits a combination of discontinuity and continuity, of fragmentation and flow, that also underpins the cinema of King Hu as it asserts the autonomy of cinematic creation. Such an approach constructs syntactical relations indifferent to the demands of narrative verisimilitude while simultaneously employing eyeline cutting, matches

on action, sound cues, and shot/reverse shot alternations to maintain a sense of graphic continuity.

This uncanny or mysterious use of montage is, I think, meant to recall the concerns of some strands of Chinese landscape painting. The connection between montage and pictorial representation lies in the creation of an imaginary space that defies the physiological limitations of everyday perception. Describing the use of multiple perspectives and broad views in many instances of landscape painting, William Willets has observed:

> The eye position is not thought of as fixed . . . By disregarding the inexorable geometry that decides how objects shall appear to the beholder when seen in their respective positions in space, the painter is free to distort their appearances so as to achieve a different sort of unity—the structural unity of a surface pattern. It is as a pattern that the beholder is meant to see it.[55]

This approach has not, of course, pervaded all aesthetic discussions in or about Chinese art. Painting has often been used to convey information about the external appearances of people and places. King Hu's cinema only invokes one specific, although extremely influential, strand of Chinese aesthetics. The aim was to create a work of art expressive of a purely aesthetic interest incommensurable with everyday perception. I contend that King Hu's use of montage to create "impossible" spatial movements performs a similar aesthetic function by purely cinematic means, thus establishing a (highly indirect) continuity of concern between film editing and certain forms of premodern Chinese aesthetics.[56] As in the case of Beijing opera, King Hu's relationship to painting is filtered through an awareness of the distinctiveness of film form.

Film as an Antirationalist Practice. Explaining this interest in what is mysterious and indescribable, King Hu has repeatedly referred to Buddhism as a philosophical approach subversive of logical ratiocination: "I'm not a Buddhist myself, but I was fascinated by the challenge of showing something that cannot be explained by the logical processes of Western philosophy. It's like trying to explain to someone what 'sweet' is and finding it hard, but then giving them a lump of sugar to taste."[57] To understand the motives behind King Hu's formal choices, it is important briefly to recall a few well-known facts about Chan Buddhism.

This philosophical movement is undergirded by a therapeutic interest. The point is not that, as a contingent matter, this philosophy has therapeutic consequences for the people who uphold it but that its basic concerns principally arise out of a therapeutic interest in alleviating distress. To call Chan a therapeutic approach is to describe it as a guide to the improvement of the overall quality of one's life by overcoming certain ingrained ways of thinking and acting that bring about suffering or sorrow. But Buddhism does not only aspire to remedy this or that particular cause of sorrow but to uproot sorrow as a whole. This can be done only by means of radical change in the way the mind relates to objects in the world. The fundamental project of Chan, famously described as an "extirpation of human desires" (*qu renyu*), is to eliminate those passions that underpin our obsessive tendency to cling to objects.[58] This observation suggests an important way in which King Hu's rejection of realism is expressed by his attraction to Buddhism.

James Cahill has persuasively shown how this "problem of nonattachment" sometimes undergirds even the Buddhist-influenced aesthetics of neo-Confucianist scholars. Since "expressing emotion through the portrayal of whatever had inspired that emotion implied a dwelling on that thing, and on the state of mind it had evoked," Chinese scholars often fostered a "shifting of emphasis from the subject of the picture to its formal elements."[59] Thus, the mitigation of attachment is an important philosophical background to King Hu's preference for a derealized, elusive, and uncertain diegetic world.

A second philosophical implication of King Hu's work has to do with the Chan suspicion of intellectual argumentation and conceptual comprehension (*zhijie*). What is at stake in the ethical life is not the acquisition of information but a complete change in one's way of living. The goal is to foster a complete realignment of experience: the bewildering dawning of a new and unexpected point of view popularly known as *wu* or enlightenment.[60] King Hu has himself invoked the more specific concept of *tunwu*, or "sudden enlightenment," which denotes an instantaneous and unexpected event, something that happens "at one stroke" or "all at once," rather than a cumulative process with a definite duration.[61] A somewhat imperfect and limited analogy is the abrupt discovery of a new aspect of, say, a painting or a piece of music or even the facial expression of a friend—an aspect that we had never noticed before but that compels us to apprehend the work of art or the face, and the internal unity of its various elements, from a completely different perspective. Sudden enlightenment is an intuition in the rigorous sense of "a direct grasp or comprehension" underlaid by a commitment to noninterference or spontaneity (*ziran*); it cannot be produced at will, through strategic or rational calculation.[62]

The term "sudden," then, also suggests "something that occurs without intermediary," thus upholding the overwhelming immediacy of our relationship to the world. Nothing stands, or at least nothing has to stand, between ourselves and what is real. This philosophical approach points to the "groundlessness" of action.[63] Rational considerations or conceptual thoughts cannot establish the correctness of the way we act: they cannot give us final, unshakable criteria to choose one path rather than another. In his own films, King Hu clearly wants to undermine the presumption that decisions ought to follow a rational assessment of factual evidence according to principles of clarity, precision, and consistency. Describing the intended impact of his disorienting (and sometimes barely perceptible) montage strategies, King Hu has emphasized his struggle to produce "a very particular effect . . . beyond description."[64] In other words, his style aims to depict and arouse an immediate experience of astonishment that does not require, and is also meant to resist, any verbal aids. The function of montage is in part given by a concern with pure immediacy. Following A. C. Graham, I prefer to describe this approach as a form of "antirationalism" rather than "irrationality," because the romantic connotations of the latter term often imply a celebration of intense passion that is conspicuously

absent from King Hu's cinema.[65] The director's employment of montage structures and a mysterious mise-en-scène comprises an antirationalist project that undermines the role of rational calculation and logical reasoning. This conclusion of course highlights an important difference between King Hu and Eisenstein: the preverbal immediacy of Hu's visceral rhythmic patterns is obviously inimical to anything like the intellectual montage that Eisenstein regarded as the culmination of his own cinematic project.

In addition to nonattachment and immediacy, the cinema of King Hu is rooted in a third dimension of Buddhism that may be termed "perspectivism." Many strands of Chinese aesthetics were influenced by the Buddhist and neo-Taoist conviction that there is no access to a mind-independent physical world. Artistic representation can literalize this insight by depicting physical objects in a way that overtly arises out of, and is expressive of, the artist's mind. A painting is meant to foreground the fact that the reality of matter is only given in experience. The sixth-century *Long Scroll* vividly illustrates this perspectivism:

> It is as if there were a great rock in the front of the courtyard of your house on which you had the habit of sitting or snoozing. You have no fear of it. Suddenly the idea comes into your mind to make it into a statue. So you employ a sculptor to carve it into a statue of the Buddha. Your mind interprets it as being a Buddha, and you no longer dare to sit on it. . . . How can there be anything that is not constructed in your imagination?[66]

What I want to emphasize is that, in some widespread accounts, the ambiguous, dynamic, and fluid pictorial style of Chinese landscape painting arises out of the conviction that the reality of physical objects is given by our interpretation of those objects relative to our passions and interests. King Hu's cinema upholds a similar perspectivism, using narrative form to foreground the intimate entwinement of mind and objective world. His methods of emplotment function to assert the relativity of human interests in terms that can be outlined as follows: different people want the same object for different, and radically incommensurable, reasons. Human passions are therefore not justified by reference to any features of the objects of those passions.[67]

Perspectivism pervades the director's work, particularly *Raining in the Mountain*, as even a brief (and necessarily incomplete) summary of the plot can demonstrate. The aging abbot of the Sanbao Buddhist temple invites several prominent lay figures, including General Wang and Esquire Wen, to help settle the problem of his succession. But the two guests also harbor the secret hope of stealing a precious seventh-century handwritten scroll of the Nahayana Sutra locked in a small temple chamber; therefore, Esquire Wen brings two assistants with him, White Fox and Golden Lock, who are well-known thieves, while General Wang arrives with a scheming constable, Lieutenant Zhang Cheng. The narrative partly functions to bring out how different individual passions invest the same object, the Nahayana Sutra, with a range of meanings and evaluations: while White Fox treasures it mainly for its economic value, Esquire Wen admires its antiquity and the fame of its author. The value acquired by the handwritten scroll in the eyes of these characters lies in features that individuate it as a physical object. By juxtaposing a heterogeneity of perspectives on the same scroll, the narrative illustrates how a single material object acquires meaning only in relation to the desires and concerns of those who pursue it. King Hu relativizes those passions: the desires and goals of the characters are obviously not justified by any actual characteristics of the object they pursue. The object becomes a fetish obsessively charged with an imaginary value it does not intrinsically possess.

Perspectivism is not an explicit message of King Hu's films but a principle of narrative construction that involves the juxtaposition of multiple ways of relating to the same object. King Hu employs a "polyphonic" plot pattern that weaves the heterogeneous, overlapping, and/or conflicting passions of different characters into a complex narrative architecture.[68] The director's typical choice of locale, often a confined theatrical space, facilitates the realization of a polyphonic plot structure. It enables a group of individuals to come together in a single location where their particular desires, goals, and actions gradually interact, complement, or enter into conflict with one another, generating the temporary alliances and confrontations that propel the action forward. The setting functions to sustain a pattern of "strategic interaction," defined as "a well-structured situation of *mutual impingement*" between different agents such that "each party must make a move [and] each move carries fateful implications for all parties."[69] Throughout *Dragon Gate Inn*, *Anger*, *Lee Khan*, and *Raining in the Mountain*, various government officials, righteous rebels, and dexterous thieves desperately struggle for power, concealing their motives and identities and dividing the confined theatrical space into different zones of strategic control.

King Hu uses film style to show the kinds of feeling that inhere in strategic interaction. The films sometimes (but not always and everywhere) construct rhythmic structures that represent emotions. Whereas the body of the performer is often the primary medium for the representation of feeling in dramatic art, the director also employs editing, camera movement, and other parameters of cinematic style to achieve an expressive function. Rapid editing can be used, for instance, to cross-cut between two figures in contiguous locations or to repeat a pounding shot/reverse shot dyad, shortening or lengthening individual images to heighten or attenuate the mounting tension, while occasionally inserting establishing shots that facilitate a careful rhythmic modulation of excitation and release. In some cases, King Hu abruptly cuts from a close-up or medium shot to an extreme long shot or employs frontal shots that increase the graphic tension and violence of the scene. Shocking cuts occur when characters unexpectedly appear behind trees in the forest chase in *Raining in the Mountain*. The juxtaposition of a fast, jagged, and elliptical montage with furiously spastic on-screen actions throughout the concluding sequences of *The Valiant Ones* not only dehumanizes the figures by creating rhythmic sequences but depicts an enervatingly tense mood of feverish agitation. A similar experience of spastic frenzy inheres in the sheer velocity and agility of the characters as they nervously move inside enclosed theatrical settings or continually enter and exit the frame with disorienting rapidity during dazzling fights. Instead of simply showing the emotions of particular characters,

then, King Hu employs film style to create a generalized and impersonal representation of emotion. This dissociated depiction of feeling requires the viewer to recognize a certain "expressive contour" in a particular use of film technique and not only in the subject matter of his stories.[70]

The expressive use of style interacts with the director's methods of narrative construction. The polyphonic method of emplotment provides an interpretation of the feelings of furious agitation represented by King Hu's cinema; the mood of anger, exasperation, and violence is shown to inhere in the characters' strategic calculations and power struggles. Narrative form particularizes the emotions embodied in King Hu's furious use of technique, inviting us to understand the mad agitation as an expression of the mind's obsessive attachment to external objects and material goals. The organization of plot therefore functions to specify and individuate the emotions being represented by the director's technique, in the sense that the structure of conflicts and interests constitutive of the narrative brings out what the feelings are about.

At the same time, the "meandering" and "obscure" quality of King Hu's mise-en-scène, as well as his disorienting and "sublime" montage structures, deflate those passions by creating a derealized diegetic world that confronts the viewer with the limits of human mastery. King Hu's locations not only furnish territories over which strategic struggles and calculations can unfold but also extend into an illimitable, elusive, unpredictable, and indeterminate domain irreducible to those struggles and calculations. The director uses film style to represent emotions of furious agitation as well as to arouse a sense of sublime astonishment, dissolving the fetishistic passions of the various characters. The alternation between the strategic and the sublime is the ethical underpinning of King Hu's formal technique.

A Concluding Qualification. I do not want to overemphasize the Buddhist component of King Hu's cinema, for at least two reasons. First, King Hu's threefold interest in antirationalism, nonattachment, and perspectivism is not exclusive to Buddhism but also pervades various traditions of Taoism and even neo-Confucianism. His approach may be more accurately described as continuous with a broad network of concerns that cut across doctrinal differences. Second, the director's perspectivism intersects with the problematization of subjectivity that underpins many instances of international art cinema, ranging from *Rashomon* to *8½*. King Hu has, of course, often invoked Kurosawa as a direct influence. More generally, although his aesthetic technique asserts a Chinese aesthetic, it also fulfills the expectations set by self-conscious, modernist filmmakers. It compellingly projects a bewildering, unexpected world meant to challenge the stability of our shared cognitive and moral certainties and bring us out of the naive, commonsense complacency of our everyday attitudes. King Hu calls attention to the uncertainty of what is real and its irreducibility to secular standards of measurement and control, foregrounding the role of the human body as an agent of cognition in the midst of an elusive and boundless space.[71]

Notes

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1. Hao Dazheng, "Chinese Visual Representation: Painting and Cinema," in Linda C. Ehrlich and David Desser, eds., *Cinematic Landscapes: Observations on the Visual Arts and Cinema of China and Japan* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 46.
2. Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," in Philip Rosen, ed., *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 289.
3. Lin Niantong, *The Spatial Consciousness of Chinese Cinema* (in Chinese) (Hong Kong: Zhongguo Dianying Xuehui, 1984).
4. Luo Yijun, "A Review of Shao Mujun's Article 'Summary of Casual Thinking on Film Aesthetics,'" in George Simmel, Xia Hong, and Hou Jianping, eds., *Chinese Film Theory: A Guide to the New Era* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 122. See also Luo, "A Discussion of the National Style of Film," in Luo, Li Jinshen, and Xu Hong, eds., *Chinese Film Theory: An Anthology* (in Chinese) (Beijing: Wenhua Yishu Chubenshe, 1992), 262–88.
5. Jerome Silbergeld, *Chinese Painting Style* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 32–35. See also Youn-Jeong Chae, "Film Space and Chinese Visual Tradition" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1997).
6. Wen C. Fong et al., *Images of the Mind* (Princeton, N.J.: Art Museum and Princeton University Press, 1984), 20.
7. Stephen Teo, "The Dao of King Hu," in Li Cheuk-to, ed., *A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1984), 36.
8. See David Bordwell, *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 26–30; Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 115.
9. My analysis does not, however, carry normative implications for the work of other filmmakers in China or elsewhere. I do not argue that all films (even all Chinese films) ought to be expressive of their national culture.
10. Hou Xiaoxian, "King Hu's *Dust in the Wind*" (in Chinese), *City Magazine* (April 1990): 86.
11. Pai Hsien-yung has described exile in Taiwanese literature in his "The Wandering Chinese: The Theme of Exile in Taiwan Fiction," *Iowa Review* 7 (spring–summer 1976): 205–12.
12. King Hu, *Lao She and His Works* (in Chinese) (Hong Kong: Chinese Culture Press, 1977).
13. King Hu has noted that "the previews went well, but at about that time Singapore and Malaysia passed a new law forbidding any depiction of racial conflict and chose to apply it to the film. It was cut by about an hour and the resulting film was meaningless." Tony Rayns, "Director: King Hu," *Sight and Sound* 45, no. 1 (winter 1975–76): 9.

14. John A. Lent, *The Asian Film Industry* (London: Christopher Helm, 1990), 98–99.
15. He also contributed the magisterial episode *Anger* to the omnibus film *Four Moods* (codirected by Bai Jingrui, Li Xing, and Li Hanxiang, 1969). *Four Moods* was produced by Grand Motion Pictures under mounting financial pressures that would force Li Hanxiang to close down the studio that same year.
16. His company produced, among others, *The Fate of Lee Kahn* (1973), *The Valiant Ones* (1974), and two films shot in Korea, *Legend of the Mountain* and *Raining in the Mountain* (both 1979). He briefly returned to Taiwan to direct *All the King's Men* (1982) and to contribute an excellent short film to the otherwise mediocre omnibus feature, *The Wheel of Life* (1983).
17. This biographical account was based on the following sources: Charles Tesson, "Calligraphie et simulacres: Entretien avec King Hu," *Cahiers du Cinéma*, nos. 360–61 (September 1984): 20–24; Rayns, "Director," 8–13; Cai Guorong, "All-Enveloping Fog; Exploding Thunder" (in Chinese), in *Celebrated National Directors of the 1960s* (Taipei: Republic of China Film Development Foundation, 1982), 119–23; and Lau Shing-hon, *A Study of the Hong Kong Swordplay Film (1945–1980)* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1981), 242.
18. Lau, "Auteurism and King Hu," *Film Appreciation* 3, no. 2 (March 1985): 2–7; Sek Kei, "The Itinerary of a Traveller: Notes on the Cinema of King Hu" (in Chinese), *Film Biweekly*, July 5, 1979, 46–50.
19. In King Hu's own words: "*A Touch of Zen* and *Raining in the Mountain* were both very expensive films by Hong Kong standards . . . *A Touch of Zen* because of its length, and *Raining in the Mountain* because of the expense of transporting a crew of thirty people to Korea. . . . *A Touch of Zen* was a commercial failure because of its length. The complete version has never been shown in Hong Kong." Tesson, "Calligraphie," 23.
20. Actor and martial arts director Han Yingjie, who has often collaborated with King Hu, notes, "The *Zatoichi* films were of higher standard and naturally exerted some influence on local martial arts." Lau, *Study of the Hong Kong Swordplay Film*, 214.
21. C. T. Hsia, "Obsession with China: The Moral Burden of Modern Chinese Fiction," in his *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 2d ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 533–34.
22. In a different context, Paul Clark has spoken of a "sinification" of film designed to strengthen "the connections between film art and the rest of Chinese culture, and between film and the Chinese society." Clark, "The Sinification of Cinema: The Foreignness of Film in China," in Wimal Dissanayake, ed., *Cinema and Cultural Identity* (Lanham, N.Y.: University Press of America, 1988), 175–84.
23. It is also worth noting that, before working for Shaw Brothers, King Hu had worked with Fei Mu's Long Ma Company. King Hu has often acknowledged his predilection for Fei Mu's cinema. See, for instance, Tesson, "Calligraphie," 24.
24. See my essay, "Hong Kong Popular Culture as an Interpretive Arena: The Huang Feihong Film Series," *Screen* 38, no. 1 (spring 1997): 1–24.
25. Tesson, "Calligraphie," 22.
26. William Dolby, *A History of Chinese Drama* (London: Paul Elek, 1976), 45.
27. Tesson, "Calligraphie," 21.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Teo, "The *Dao* of King Hu," 11.
31. Noël Carroll, *Mystifying Movies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 220.
32. Elizabeth Wichmann, *Listening to Theatre: The Aural Dimension of Beijing Opera* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 258.
33. Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949), 20.
34. Ibid. King Hu clearly shows a preference for montage. Montage here means the production of a unified impression through the combination of different stylistic parameters, including not only discrete shots and sounds but the contrasting volumes, shapes, and sizes of objects and planes within an individual shot. Approaching every individual sequence as a dynamic assemblage of heterogeneous formal components, King Hu breaks down the action into parametric units (concrete images and sounds) that are then joined together into highly choreographed formal structures, thus establishing a certain stylistic continuity with the Soviet directors, whose own aesthetic sensibilities were also partly shaped by an encounter with Asian culture.
35. Tesson, "Calligraphie," 21.
36. My point has been inspired by Noël Burch's extremely illuminating discussion of camera movement in his *Theory of Film Practice*, trans. Helen R. Lane (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 77.
37. Lau, "Auteurism and King Hu," 6–7.
38. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 184–85.
39. Ibid., 184.
40. Rayns, "Director," 11.
41. Luo, "A Review," 116. Western cinema has also often challenged the value of verisimilitude.
42. Fong et al., *Images of the Mind*, 37.
43. Ibid., 45–47.
44. The quotation is from *A Discussion of Painting* by the fifth-century author Wang Wei, not to be confused with the well-known painter of the same English spelling. See S. Bush and H. Y. Shin, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 38. See also Wu Hung, *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996), 138.
45. The key concept here is *qi*, generally described as primal stuff that undergoes a ceaseless process of transformation (*bianhua*); it resonates (*yun*) around a cluster of polarities that spontaneously grow out of the fundamental tension and complementarity of *yin* and *yang*. John Hay, "The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?" in Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow, eds., *Body, Subject and Power in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 66. See also Osvald Sirén, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting* (New York: Schocken Books; Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1963), 21.
46. Sirén, *Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 62–63.
47. Fong et al., *Images of the Mind*, 48.
48. The Czech sinologist Jaroslav Prusek has described Chinese landscape painting in terms of a "marked simplification of detail" and its reduction to "a few essential elements" with an emphasis on "basic shape and rhythm" that evoke a "certain poetic vision and mood" through atmospheric effects. Prusek, *Chinese History and Literature* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1970), 14.
49. Chiao Hsiung-ping, *Authors and Genres in Hong Kong and Taiwan Film* (in Chinese) (Taipei: Yuanlin, 1991), 15.
50. Ibid., 15–16.
51. Lau, *Study of the Hong Kong Swordplay Film*, 216.
52. Teo, "The *Dao* of King Hu," 34.

53. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 57.
54. David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 243.
55. William Willetts, *Chinese Art* (New York: Brazilier, 1958), 1: 615.
56. Note as well that the same stylistic strategies that I have previously described as operatic forms can also convey a painterly approach. This overdetermination of aesthetic methods would be impossible if the director had merely worked to locate literal equivalents for the aesthetic practices of opera and painting instead of thinking through the specific properties of the film medium. That King Hu's sense of Chinese aesthetics is not direct enables some of the same devices and strategies, particularly montage, to function in ways simultaneously suggestive of more than one aesthetic medium.
57. Rayns, "Director," 10. For an insightful discussion of the Buddhist motifs of King Hu's films, see Chiao, *Authors and Genres*, 20–22.
58. I have profited from Tu Wei-ming's lucid discussion of the influence of Chan Buddhism on neo-Confucianism in his *Humanity and Self-Cultivation: Essays in Confucian Thought* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1979), esp. 153.
59. See James Cahill, "Confucian Elements in the Theory of Painting," in Arthur Wright, ed., *The Confucian Persuasion* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1960), 128. See also Li Zehou, *The Path of Beauty*, trans. Song Lizeng (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1994), 185.
60. A well-known discussion of the concept of Enlightenment in Chan Buddhism is D. T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*, ed. William Barrett (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), 83–108.
61. Paul Demiéville, "The Mirror of the Mind," in Peter N. Gregory, ed., *Sudden and Gradual: Enlightenment in Chinese Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 15.
62. R. A. Stein, "Sudden Illumination or Simultaneous Comprehension: Remarks on Chinese and Tibetan Terminology," in Gregory, ed., *Sudden and Gradual*, 54.
63. I have drawn the expression "ungrounded" or "groundless" action from a study of the analytical philosophy of Wittgenstein that includes a brief comparison between Wittgenstein and Buddhism. Henry Le Roy Finch, *Wittgenstein: The Later Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1977), 199, 265–67.
64. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 34.
65. Graham uses the term in connection to Taoism, but I think it can be profitably applied to Chan Buddhism as well. See A. C. Graham, *Chuang-tzu: The Seven Inner Chapters and Other Writings from the Book* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 9–14.
66. Quoted in Mark Elvin, "Conceptions of the Self in China," in Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes, eds., *The Category of the Person* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 171.
67. For a defense of moral relativism informed by both Taoism and analytical philosophy, see David B. Wong, *Moral Relativity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 206–7.
68. I am loosely adapting the concept of narrative polyphony from the literary criticism of Mikhail Bakhtin. See his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 5–46. My own work is not, however, a systematic application of Bakhtinian categories.
69. Erving Goffman, *Strategic Interaction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969), 100.
70. The term "expressive contour" is from Peter Kivy, *The Corded Shell* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980).
71. I conclude by noting some important points that I have not adequately discussed: first, the systematic cultivation of thematic ambiguity in King Hu's cinema; second, the political and allegorical implications of his work.