

Hong Kong popular culture as an interpretive arena: the Huang Feihong film series

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Although the real Huang Feihong (1847–1924) was a celebrated street performer, physician and martial arts instructor in the Fifth Regiment of the Guangdong Army and the local civilian militia, reliable information about his life remains scarce. Fictional accounts of his martial skill and unflinching moral rectitude have nonetheless been frequently serialized in newspapers and popular films. In the winter of 1949, director Hu Peng completed *Huang Feihong Zhuan: Bianfeng Mie Zhu*/*The True Story of Huang Feihong: Whiplash Snuffs the Candle Flame*, the first of a series of films produced throughout the 1950s and 1960s that mostly revolved around the hero's later years, after he had taken over his father's pharmacy and martial arts academy, the Baozhilin. The films therefore depict Huang Feihong as a living legend whose fame and ability are widely recognized and respected throughout the city of Guangzhou.

Although films and television shows about Master Huang have continued to be made, this essay principally focuses on the films of the 1950s, often directed by Hu Peng, scripted by Wang Feng and starring Kwan Tak-hing.¹ To borrow an expression from cultural historian Prasenjit Duara, I describe the series as an 'interpretive arena'. The films provided a forum whereby their historical protagonists gradually accrued a complex network of more or less heterogeneous uses and interpretations, some congenial to the interests of state authorities or community elites, others indifferent, ambivalent

¹ Throughout this paper, I have transcribed Chinese names, phrases, and film titles in accordance with the standard *pinyin* romanization system. Unfortunately, this system is based on the Mandarin pronunciation of Chinese characters rather than the Cantonese dialect widely used in Hong Kong, but since most English-language sources tend to employ the *pinyin*, I have reluctantly followed suit. In some instances, however, I have retained Cantonese spellings when these are in common use; thus I refer to Kwan Tak-hing rather than Guan Dexing, and to the Tung Wah, rather than Dong Hua, Hospital.

- 2 Prasenjit Duara, 'Superscribing symbols: the myth of Guandi, Chinese god of war', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 4 (1988), pp. 779-80.

or even opposed to those powers.² Huang Feihong sustained manifold interests, experiences and moral outlooks. He was at once a dazzling martial artist and lion dancer, a proud exemplar of both China's national traditions and Guangdong's provincial culture, a friend of local merchants and government officials, a paternalistic protector of the underdog against corrupt landlords and criminals, a conservative champion of Confucian morality and a progressive fighter against feudal superstitions.

Huang's evolution as a cinematic hero was rooted in the convictions and preferences of the groups and individuals producing and consuming the films, as well as in the institutional context and historical circumstances of their creation and dissemination. The films stood at the intersection of at least three factors: the requirements of a commercial motion picture industry largely sustained by overseas capital, the cultural customs of Cantonese emigrants seeking to reaffirm their ethnic identity, and the filmmakers' self-proclaimed goal of promoting patriotism, social responsibility and a sense of ethnic identity. The Huang Feihong films were at once commodities, collective sites of popular assembly and vehicles of civic education. But even the goals of this civic agenda were by no means simple or unitary, including instead a complicated repertoire of moral and political ideals (Confucian, populist, and progressive). This essay reconstructs the rich tissue of concerns embodied in the film series, as well as the cultural, political and economic factors that undergird this interpretive arena.

- 3 Li Cheuk-to, 'A director speaks: Li Tie on opera films', in Li Cheuk-to (ed.), *Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective* (Hong Kong: The Urban Council, 1987), p. 70.
- 4 Hu Peng, *Wo yu Huang Feihong: Wushinian Dianying Daoyan Shengye Huiyi Lu/Huang Feihong and I: Memoirs of a Film Director's Fifty-year Career* (Hong Kong, 1995), p. 17.



Kwan Tak-hing, leading actor of the Huang Feihong series. Picture courtesy: The Hong Kong Film Archive.

It is illuminating to begin by examining the economic circumstances that have partly shaped the practice of filmmaking in Hong Kong. There is a very close connection between, on the one hand, the production and distribution context of the Huang Feihong series and, on the other, some of the key formal characteristics of individual films. The films' target audience not only consisted of local Hong Kong residents but also, and perhaps more importantly, of the Cantonese Diaspora that had settled in the various Chinatowns of South East Asia. Capital for film production in Hong Kong was often raised abroad, from pre-sales to Chinese exhibitors in, say, Singapore or Malaysia, who retained a very high degree of control over the actual production of the films.³ Yong Yao, the company which financed the first Huang Feihong instalment, had been formed by Wen Boling, a Chinese exhibitor in Singapore who retained final control over casting. He agreed to give Cao Dahua the key role of Liang Kuan, Huang Feihong's best-known disciple, because of the actor's popularity throughout South East Asia. It was the same commercial reasoning that prompted the choice of Li Lan, the first Miss Hong Kong, for the female lead.⁴ These economic pressures functioned as powerful constraints on the filmmakers, who could only inject political

or social elements into the series so long as they would not interfere with the bottom-line goal of accumulating profit.

A salient feature of the Huang Feihong films and the Hong Kong industry throughout the 1950s was, therefore, the intimate relationship between production and exhibition. The main goal of South East Asian exhibitors was to secure a regular supply of inexpensive films to fill their screens, thus fostering a prolific output.⁵ The commercial success of the first Huang Feihong film generated a feverish pace of production that brought out twenty-five films in 1956 alone (approximately twelve per cent of that year's total Hong Kong cinema output), financed by various relatively small film companies who vigorously competed against each other to secure contracts with the main stars.⁶ Release dates roughly convey the speed of production: the first Huang Feihong installment completed in 1956, *Huang Feihong Letai Bi Wu/Huang Feihong at a Boxing Match* (Hu Peng, 1956), was released on 6 January, followed by *Huang Feihong Da Nao Foshan/Huang Feihong's Fight at Foshan* (Hu Peng, 1956) on 14 January, and then by *Huang Feihong Huo Shao Dashatou/How Huang Feihong Set Fire to Dai-Sha-Tou* (Hu Peng, 1956) only two weeks later. This output was considerably reduced the following year, when a mere eight instalments were released, all directed by the prolific Hu Peng and scripted by Wang Feng.

Commercial imperatives encouraged filmmakers to employ the conventions of the Chinese mass culture market that had found a home in Hong Kong and Taiwan after the Communist victory in the mainland. The plots for the series were either invented for the screen or borrowed from popular novels, folk stories and current sensational articles, rather than adapted from actual historical documents. Some situations even incorporated narrative norms and situations from popular Hollywood films, especially the Saloon fight characteristic of countless Westerns, transplanted in various Huang Feihong instalments to the more indigenous setting of a dim sum restaurant. The filmmakers generally mobilized a broad range of popular narrative strategies that included visual slapstick, manichean character types, grotesque and hyperbolic villains, simple moral lessons, secret trapdoors in mysterious buildings, and spectacular climactic fights. Exhibitors generally expected a fairly standardized product based on tried-and-true formulae. Casting was, again, a typical example of this drive towards standardization. A handful of performers dominated the series, playing the same roles, or at least the same kinds of roles: Kwan Tak-hing was invariably Huang Feihong, and Cao Dahua played his main disciple Liang Kuan, while Shi Jian was always the boisterous villain. The series mobilized a narrow storehouse of types and situations that made for a fairly predictable narration. The basic narrative structure, about which more will be said below, usually featured a petty gangster, malicious martial arts instructor, lascivious merchant or corrupt government official who confronted Huang

5 C. Jarvie, *Window on Hong Kong: a Sociological Study of the Hong Kong Film Industry and its Audience* (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1977), pp. 129, 21.

6 Data based on *ibid.*, p. 129 and Lau Shing-hon (ed.), *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film* (Hong Kong: The Urban Council, 1980), pp. 232-3.

Feihong and/or his students for various reasons: he may abuse poor peasants, threaten the virtue of young women or directly challenge the protagonist to a duel. Although Master Huang would at first try to resolve matters by peaceful means, stoically bearing his antagonist's insults with a composed self-control, he would eventually be forced to fight his opponent. A minor clash roughly half way through the plot would be later followed by a spectacular climactic combat, often during a religious festival, street fair or lion dance.

Within this format there was, of course, some latitude for variation. Films like *Huang Feihong Heng Sao Xiaobeijiang/Huang Feihong's Victory at Xiaobeijiang* (Hu Peng, 1956) included extended subplots about love triangles or household intrigues, subordinating the martial arts component to the generic demands of the family melodrama. The contents of some stories were individually tailored for particular holidays: those designed for a Chinese New Year audience usually had a more festive and humorous tone. Filmmakers generally hoped to continue attracting audiences by introducing at least one highly publicized novel feature in each film. *Huang Feihong Dazhan Shuangmendi/Huang Feihong's Battle Under the Double Gate* (Hu Peng, 1956), for instance, contained a vampire plot, while *Huang Feihong Shuidi Sanqing Su Shulian/How Huang Feihong Thrice Captured Su Shulian in the Water* (Hu Peng, 1956) included underwater cinematography, and other films fetishistically displayed the bodies of women in traditional Chinese underwear. Some films incorporated rare folk customs, like Unicorn dancing, a practice characteristic of Hakka communities in Hong Kong's New Territories and elsewhere in the Chinese mainland. Thus, despite the push towards standardization, every story also tended to contain a marker of differentiation, an element that would set it apart from previous films in the series and from other Hong Kong films in the market. The promotion of such innovations within an otherwise standardized framework was, of course, an important competitive strategy. Some plots were, for instance, devised to showcase popular singers, comedians and media personalities, including such Cantonese opera celebrities as Zhou Feifei in *The True Story of Huang Feihong*, Ren Jianhui in *Huang Feihong Gusi Jiu Qingzhen/How Huang Feihong Saved the Lovelorn Monk from the Ancient Monastery* (Hu Peng, 1956), and Deng Biyun in *Huang Feihong San Dou Yan Zhi Ma/Huang Feihong's Three Battles with the Unruly Girl* (Hu Peng, 1957).

This close relationship between the film series and the Cantonese opera was, of course, partly determined by the nature of its intended audience. The Cantonese emigrants who supported this cinematic culture maintained native-place guilds and other locality-based associations in Hong Kong and throughout South East Asia. Guilds not only functioned as employment and welfare agencies, but also ran temples devoted to distinctive deities and organized festivals and opera performances, thus helping emigrants to maintain regional and

7 Elizabeth Perry, *Shanghai on Strike: the Politics of Chinese Labor* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 19–21, 26–31.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

9 Emily Honig, *Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919–1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), pp. 69–78.

10 Yu Mo-Wan, 'The prodigious cinema of Huang Fei-Hong', in Lau (ed.), *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film*, p. 81.

11 The martial artist Shi Jian, memorable for his villainous roles, was among the few native Hong Kong performers.

subregional native-place bonds.⁷ According to Elizabeth Perry, they 'afforded displaced workers a sense of belonging' that helped to reaffirm their Cantonese identity in the midst of a strange environment.⁸ Locality-based collective solidarities were intimately linked to many routine everyday practices in that, for instance, workers often tended to gravitate to certain occupations characteristic of their native place and attended performances of operatic dramas in their native dialect.⁹ The Huang Feihong films were contiguous with such practical affirmations of regional solidarity, reasserting a broad range of distinctly Cantonese cultural activities that furnished a source of community and interpersonal networks for a diasporic audience. It is worth remembering that throughout the 1950s, Chinese audiences in Hong Kong and South East Asia often gravitated towards films shown in their native dialects. There was, for instance, a Hong Kong-based Mandarin-dialect film industry which often appealed primarily to exiled Northerners, although for various reasons it managed to win over Cantonese speakers in the 1960s and early 1970s. But, throughout the period under discussion, film spectatorship was nonetheless largely stratified along dialect lines. The cinema therefore functioned as a public site where viewers could come together as members of a shared regional culture. In an excellent study of the series, Hong Kong historian Yu Mo-Wan has reminded us that the films 'strongly reflect the Cantonese culture and dialect of the majority of Hong Kong's population, and the traditions of the surrounding hinterland of Guangdong province'.¹⁰ Set in the provincial capital of Guangzhou rather than Hong Kong, the films invoked a broad culture that extends beyond, and seldom explicitly refers to, places and activities specific to the British colony. Its ethos was, more broadly, regional, and it arose out of two interlocking factors: the commercial structure of a film industry partly sustained by pre-sales to overseas Cantonese exhibitors, and the regional bonds and practices of its intended audience.

In addition to this reception context, the biographical backgrounds of the people who actually made the films also fostered the expression of a distinctly regional consciousness. The filmmakers had themselves emigrated to Hong Kong from other localities in the Guangdong region and, less frequently, from Northern China. Director Hu Peng had been born in Shanghai to a Cantonese family, while both actor Kwan Tak-hing and screenwriter Wang Feng were natives of Guangzhou, the regional capital.¹¹ These exiles made films that expressed an experience of belonging to a broadly regional context rather than to the city of Hong Kong. Characters often engaged in specifically coastal activities like fishing in *Huang Feihong Die Xue Longwu Miao/How Huang Feihong Saved the Dragon's Mother's Temple* (Hu Peng, 1956) or piracy in *Huang Feihong Xue Zhan Gu Po*

¹² Lau (ed.), *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film*, p. 81.

¹³ Ng Ho, 'Exile: a story of love and hate', in Li Cheuk-to (ed.), *The China Factor in Hong Kong Cinema* (Hong Kong: The Urban Council, 1990), pp. 32–3.

**Huang Feihong Dapo Maja
Zhong/Huang Feihong's
Victory at Ma village
(Hu Peng, 1958).
Picture courtesy: The Hong
Kong Film Archive.**

Wu/How Huang Feihong Fought a Bloody Battle in the Bachelor Girls' Home (Hu Peng, 1957), and the music sometimes included such Cantonese opera tunes and folk melodies as the familiar tune *Zhang junling/Under the General's Orders*, adding to the films' overall 'regional flavor'.¹² The influence of Cantonese opera was, of course, pervasive throughout the series, not only because the cast often had extensive stage training and experience but also because the first four installments were written by the well-known opera lyricist Wu Yixiao. He was later replaced as a writer by Wang Feng, who would himself direct several Huang Feihong episodes in the late 1960s before moving on to Shaw Brothers in 1975 to make films with a distinctly Cantonese setting. The series was therefore the product of a group of filmmakers with a distinct sensitivity for Southern Chinese culture. One of director Hu Peng's own early films had depicted the lives of Cantonese opera performers, *Xueyan Nichang/The Blood-Stained Costume* (1948), starring two actors who would later become a staple of the Huang Feihong films, Kwan Tak-hing and Shi Jian. The filmmakers' cultural identity was therefore rooted in the traditions of Guangdong and China rather than any sense of belonging to Hong Kong.

The production context of the series was of course underlain by the evolution of colonial Hong Kong as a city of immigrants and exiles, a development intensified by the influx of refugees, emigrants and industrialists from the Chinese mainland during the Japanese invasion and the 1949 Communist victory. Between May of 1949 and April of the following year, for instance, the local population nearly doubled from one million, six hundred thousand inhabitants to two million, six hundred thousand, many of whom were confined to government-built refugee camps.¹³ Ethnic strife understandably became an important theme of such films as the so-called 'North-South' comedies, which



14 An outstanding example is A *Happy Union of North and South* (Shou Shilu, 1964).

15 Yu, *The Prodigious Cinema*, pp. 81–2.

16 Hu, *Wo yu Huang Feihong*, pp. 39–40.

17 Chang-tai Hung, *Going to the People: Chinese Intellectuals and Folk Literature, 1918–1937* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 30; W. L. Idema, *Chinese Vernacular Fiction: The Formative Period* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), p. 33.

18 Jean-Paul Sartre, 'What is literature', in *What is Literature? and Other Essays*, trans. Steven Ungar (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 88.

revolved around the humorous misunderstandings between Mandarin-speaking northerners and Cantonese-speaking southerners in melting-pot Hong Kong.¹⁴ The Huang Feihong series sometimes selectively borrowed the conventions of this genre by including northern martial artists, often played by the Beijing-born actor Yuan Xiaotian, unable to communicate with the people of Southern China. The films showed a heightened consciousness of ethnic difference. Yu Mo-Wan has aptly described them as an ongoing archive of Cantonese popular culture.¹⁵ The expressions 'archive' and 'collection', which I am here using interchangeably, denote any gathering of items selected and arranged to demonstrate their ongoing value and to preserve them for posterity. The film screenings were partly organized as occasions for the dissemination of cultural knowledge. For instance, viewers who saw *Guandong Shi Fu Tao Long Ji/How the Ten Heroes of Guangdong Slew the Dragon* (Hu Peng, 1950), a film about Huang Feihong's father and other famous Cantonese heroes of the late Qing dynasty, could exchange their ticket stubs for a free pamphlet describing a medicinal recipe for fighting injuries. The pamphlet included a rhyme to help readers memorize the complicated list of ingredients.¹⁶

This intensely regional flavour partook of an artistic movement that also pervaded modern Chinese literature, painting and music. Many intellectuals and artists struggled to preserve and collect folk art. Founded in Beijing in 1920, the Folksong Research Society (*Geyao yanjiujui*), for example, strove to record the cultural practices of peasants and other subordinate social groups rather than the elite culture (*guizu wenhua*) produced and consumed by officials and scholars. The society's stated aim was to illuminate 'the voice of the folk' and 'the true feelings of the people'.¹⁷ Of course, there are some forerunners of this modern movement in late imperial China, the most familiar of which remains Ming scholar and playwright Feng Menglong (1574–?), who published a meticulous collection of Suzhou folksongs, the *Shange* (Mountain Songs), as well as three volumes of vernacular stories, the *San Yan*. But this drive to collect folk culture, which was supposed to furnish a direct expression of the common people's genuine aspirations and experiences, was intensified after the founding of the 1911 Republic of China. The historical situation was characterized by an intense discovery of 'the folk' as an object of artistic representation and celebration. Jean-Paul Sartre has aptly described this kind of predicament:

the writer questions himself about his mission only in ages when it is not clearly defined and when he must invest or reinvent it, that is, when he notices beyond the *elite* who read him, an amorphous mass of possible readers whom he may or may not choose to win, and when he must himself decide, in the event that he has the opportunity to reach them, what his relations with them are to be.¹⁸

The Huang Feihong series provided a site where filmmakers came together to define their relationship with the idea of the common folk. Underlying this cultural agenda was a conception of the cinema as a vehicle of historical documentation. Films should record those precious folk traditions that might not survive China's rapid transition to modernity. The filmmakers' self-imposed mission was to protect the traditional sources of Cantonese cultural identity from the ravages of time and circumstance.

This conception of folk culture as eminently fragile or evanescent, and thus in need of active preservation, underpinned the archival mission of many Hong Kong films of the 1950s: Cantonese opera librettist Tang Disheng, who worked for Hu Peng as actor and screenwriter in the anti-Japanese war drama *Dadi Shenzhong/The Earth's Clockwork* (1940), had reportedly turned to filmmaking in order to ensure the survival and dissemination of distinctly local dramatic forms.¹⁹ Director Hu Peng himself noted that the Huang Feihong films preserved 'precious information about the martial arts traditions of the Guangdong region'.²⁰ In order to fulfil this agenda, he enlisted the assistance of popular novelist and martial artist Zhu Yucai, the author of many Zhuang Feihong books, who collaborated on several early screenplays. Zhu had been trained by Lin Shirong, one of Huang Feihong's disciples. His novel *Lingnan Qi Xia Zhuan/The Extraordinary Martial Hero of Lingnan* was putatively based on

¹⁹ Li, *A Director Speaks*, pp. 72–3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.

*Huang Feihong Xipeng Fu Fu/
How Huang Feihong Defeated
the Tiger on the Opera Stage*
(Hu Peng, 1959).

Picture courtesy: The Hong
Kong Film Archive



oral accounts of Master Huang's life. The films on which Zhu collaborated partook of an important feature of popular martial arts novels, which often included detailed descriptions of complicated fighting techniques, not only to delight the reader with dazzling feats and wondrous adventures but sometimes also to furnish a storehouse of cultural knowledge about Southern martial arts and folk culture. The filmmakers sometimes displayed a pedagogic attitude towards their audience, constructing sequences in order to ensure or reaffirm

the viewers' acquaintance with a wide range of local popular customs. In *The True Story of Huang Feihong*, for instance, the protagonist offers his new disciple Liang Kuan an extended explanation about the moral philosophy of martial arts and the influence of older masters on his own fighting style, evoking an experience of cultural continuity and respect for long-established traditions. Throughout the extended Lady Golden Flower Festival sequences in *Huang Feihong Shiwang Zheng Ba/Huang Feihong's King Lion Wins the Championship* (Hu Peng, 1957), various participants describe to one another the rules and customs that undergird the celebration, clearly in order to enhance the audience's familiarity with the folk activities and cultural values of Guangzhou province. And in *Dragon's Mother's Temple*, the custodian of a temple explains to its visitors, and of course also the film's viewers, the symbolic or legendary meaning of the various objects in the building's main chamber.

In keeping with this archival intent, the series aspired to faithfully preserve and disseminate a range of putatively authentic martial arts postures and movements. An important component of the films was therefore the assistance of skilled martial artists trained in both Southern and Northern fighting styles, such as former Opera instructor Yuan Xiaotian, who appeared in several films directed by Wang Feng during the late 1960s, as well as Shi Jian, a disciple of martial artists Sun Yufeng and Zhao Guilin, familiar with Northern-style schools like the Eagle Claw, Mantis, Luohan, Chaoyuan and Northern Shaolin.²¹ Huang Feihong's actual wife and son supplied additional martial arts information and story ideas, while some of his disciples acted in the films and served as fighting instructors. The stories would often grind to a halt so that a particular fighting stance could be demonstrated: in *The True Story of Huang Feihong* a visitor to the protagonist's academy is introduced to a disciple who obligingly displays his virtuoso techniques, thus subordinating the forward thrust of the ongoing plot to a moment of pure spectacle. An important aspect of the series was its peculiar relationship to narrative, the ways in which ongoing lines of action were routinely suspended in dazzling vignettes that displayed various aspects of Cantonese folk culture. The formal organization of the plot was therefore determined by the goal of producing popular pleasures akin to those of many folk festivities, particularly China's traditional street festivals, which often allowed martial artists, singers, acrobats, dancers and other entertainers to publicly demonstrate their ability.²²

Hu Peng discarded his own initial choice for the role of Huang Feihong, the established Cantonese film star Wu Chufan, because of his lack of extensive martial arts training. Hu's final choice was of course Kwan Tak-hing, already an accomplished fighter, Cantonese opera performer and lion dancer before the beginning of his long film career in the early 1930s. The director recalls being asked whether Kwan Tak-hing's skill was genuine: although actual evidence on

21 Yu, *The Prodigious Cinema*, p. 82.

22 Madeleine Anita Slovenz, 'The year is a wild animal: lion dancing in Chinatown', *The Drama Review*, vol. 31, no. 3 (1987), p. 88.

audience response remains scant, it is plausible to assume that viewers often took an active interest in the authenticity of the performance.²³ And it is in any case certain that filmmakers strove to project an aura of authenticity by interweaving fictional and nonfictional dimensions, simultaneously depicting both fictional stories and the actual skill of the leading performers. But Hu Peng was nonetheless occasionally willing to rely on montage and trick effects to create spectacular feats that the actors had not actually carried out. His emphasis on documentary authenticity sometimes (but only sometimes) became a mythmaking strategy designed to surround Kwan Tak-hing and his co-stars with an overblown appearance of wondrous skill. This idealization of the leading actor was partly rooted in economic concerns, in so far as his martial artistry helped to sell the films to Cantonese audiences throughout Hong Kong and South East Asia. Hu Peng's documentary rhetoric not only fulfilled the aspirations of a group of filmmakers intent on preserving regional culture but also enhanced the market value of the series. The same cinematic strategies therefore fulfilled two distinct purposes: the manufacture of successful filmic commodities and the formation of an ongoing archive of Cantonese popular culture.

This archive was not, however, simply a neutral mirror of a pre-given set of folk customs. The filmmakers selected, reconstructed and arranged their materials in ways that actively produced a particular conception of the 'people', their duties and their entitlements. The films were pedagogic texts whereby a group of film directors, playwrights and novelists worked to disseminate a certain picture of folk traditions in coastal China. They were paradigms of a way of seeing popular culture. Throughout this essay, I will employ the term 'culture' in an extended sense to designate everyday practices and beliefs in addition to rituals, music and literature. Popular culture, then, includes various forms of quotidian conversation and interaction – turns of phrase, fables, tongue twisters, ways of eating and drinking, forms of dress and etiquette – as well as religious festivals and opera performances that are not exclusively produced for, or enjoyed by, a dominant elite, whether it comprises capitalists, landowners, government officials, academic experts or Confucian scholars.²⁴

This broad definition of the popular to my mind captures a key formal strategy of the Huang Feihong series. The films depicted a wide range of everyday patterns of conversation and interaction, including jokes, proverbs, riddles, nicknames, customs, moral rules and values, and collective celebrations, thus erecting an ongoing fictional world whose texture and density rests on the accumulation of inter- and extra-textual references to practices and concerns clearly marked as popular. These practices constitute a constant background

24 My definition of popular culture loosely follows that of Raymond Williams. See Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow, 'An interview with Raymond Williams', in Tania Modleski (ed.), *Studies in Entertainment* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 4–7.

²⁵ Durkheim's observation about religious practices is applicable to these broader popular activities: that they are not simply systems of signs whereby a purely interior experience of commitment is outwardly communicated; rather, they are themselves the forms wherein that commitment is periodically created and reaffirmed. It is the exterior forms of communal membership, the texture of characteristic patterns of human conduct, that the films invoke and celebrate. I am using the term 'experience' to denote precisely these external forms of more or less ritualized conduct. See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: The Free Press, 1915), p. 464.

²⁶ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 285.

for the narrative action and define the main traits of the protagonists and their foes. Characters would typically frequent teahouses and dim-sum restaurants, keep pet birds, organize cricket tournaments, play with firecrackers, express folk religious beliefs, or struggle for domination in popular activities. In *Huang Feihong Danao Hua Den/Huang Feihong and the Lantern Festival Disturbance* (Hu Peng, 1956), the members of a secret society unsuccessfully try to wrest control of the organization of a popular festival from a prominent merchant. The customs and goals of the cinematic characters therefore largely derive from, or connect to, broader contexts of popular activities (including Dragon Boat Races, Lantern Festivals, and street fairs) that mark them as members of a larger Cantonese community.²⁵ By showing individual characters as members of a broader social fabric, a whole way of popular life, the stories depict the common people, their everyday beliefs and activities and concerns, as intrinsically valuable objects of aesthetic representation and archival preservation.

The Huang Feihong series expressed an attitude which may, in Charles Taylor's felicitous expression, be described as an 'affirmation of ordinary life'.²⁶ This attitude regards the everyday activities and ritual practices of humble people as significant in their own right. The films embodied a way of seeing popular culture – its cordiality, vivacity, and honesty – with an attitude of warmly sympathetic concern, inviting viewers to carefully and admiringly attend to the fabric of ordinary life. In both *The Lantern Festival Disturbance* and *King Lion Wins the Championship*, director Hu Peng deployed tracking camera movements and long shots to lovingly detail the texture of teahouses, street fairs and religious festivities, revelling in the busy comings and goings, the nervous gestures and quiet strolls, the moments of popular participation and communal interaction. These shots foregrounded certain locales and activities as an everyday context of readily recognizable communal practices, as distinctly popular occasions of general participation in shared activities and symbols. They projected an image of the folk as an anonymous background whose members would occasionally provide information for the viewer, comment on the action, react to the words and deeds of the protagonists, and endow the mise-en-scene with its characteristically dense texture. The films were actively engaged in defining the domain of the popular, its characteristics and its value, by presenting an idealized picture of ordinary life in the Guangdong region.

Filmmakers would occasionally enhance this impression of ordinariness by inserting footage of actual celebrations in contemporary Hong Kong, thereby incorporating nonfictional elements into an otherwise fictional plot. In *Huang Feihong Tianhou Miao Jing Xiang/Huang Feihong Attends the Joss-stick Festival at Heavenly Goddess Temple* (Hu Peng, 1956), for instance, the protagonist, his

27 Robert P. Weller, *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987), p. 64. See also Weller, *Resistance, Chaos and Control in China: Taiping Rebels, Taiwanese Ghosts and Tiananmen* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), p. 169.

28 This is probably the most frequently stressed aspect of the Huang Feihong films. See: Sek Kei, 'The development of 'martial arts' in Hong Kong Cinema', in Lau, *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film*, pp. 28–9; Yu, *The Prodigious Cinema*, p. 82.

Huang Feihong Leitai Dou Wu/*Huang Feihong's Battle with the Bullies in the Boxing Ring* (Hu Peng, 1968).
Picture courtesy: The Hong Kong Film Archive.

disciples, and their foes walk into a real festival devoted to the Heavenly Goddess Tin Hau (known in Mandarin as Tianhou or Mazu), a divinity often worshipped by fishing communities along the coast of the South China Sea. Such sequences would characteristically last longer than necessary to further narrative lines of action or to provide information about characters. Our interest in the progression of the imaginary plot would be temporarily displaced by an interest in the shifting, vivid textures of these popular practices. What is affirmed is their 'heat and noise' (*renao*), a widely used expression that denotes the presence of large crowds, the constant movement of persons, the succession of rituals and operas, and the intoxicating display of heterogeneous sights and sounds characteristic of religious festivals, village fairs and other collective celebrations.²⁷

What is particularly striking about this celebration of ordinary life is of course the claim to realism or verisimilitude embodied in the films. To be sure, the presence throughout the series of exaggerated or manichean characters, melodramatic situations and crudely painted backdrops may appear to violate certain codes of realistic verisimilitude. But it is worth remembering that realism is a historical concept that frequently arises and develops in contrast to, or even revolt against, previous artistic norms. The claim to realism embodied in a work of narrative fiction has to be examined in relation to the aesthetic practices and traditions against which its authors are reacting. More specifically, the Huang Feihong films express a realist aspiration by departing from certain strands of the Hong Kong action cinema, particularly the use of supernatural plot devices and Beijing opera styles of performance.²⁸ Having noted that most swordplay films of the 1940s and 1950s borrowed the stylized conventions of Northern theatre, Hu Peng dismissed them as 'fake' and tedious, calling instead for a cinema that would refuse to depict ghosts or fairies, minimize



29 Hu, *Wo yu Huang Feihong*, p. 6.

the presence of artificial or theatrical gestures and use actual fighting techniques.²⁹ Only those theatrical elements were preserved that would not interfere with this all-pervasive reality-effect; opera songs, for instance, tended to be realistically motivated as performances within the diegesis. The well-advertised presence of genuine martial artists and lion dancers, as well as the aura of authenticity evoked by the lovingly detailed vignettes of popular festivals and street fairs, also enhanced the series' realist agenda. While I do not argue that the Huang Feihong films always and everywhere partook of a realist impulse, it is important to realize that certain aspects of the series were designed in deliberate opposition to the putative artificiality of dominant Hong Kong cinema strategies.

This realist strand was partly underlain by the historical experience of Chinese modernity and its ambivalent confrontation with western film and literature. As is well known, China's modernization was rooted in a situation of colonial or, at best, semi-colonial exploitation, institutionalized through a series of unequal treaties that gave European and North American powers extraterritorial rights in several Chinese regions, but particularly in the major port cities. It was precisely the encounter with foreign culture in one of China's most cosmopolitan cities that shaped director Hu Peng's approach to filmmaking. It was in Shanghai that he had grown to see the cinema of his nation in relation to the institutions and experiences of modernity. Throughout the early 1930s, he had been employed in one of Shanghai's movie palaces, the Beijing Theatre, as a projection worker in charge of the subtitles (which were actually slides projected below the screen). Although he was eventually promoted to assistant manager of the theatre's advertising department, he remained a humble figure within the overall structure of China's film industry until a former employer, the radio engineer Kuang Zhang, founded the Kwok Ka film studio in Hong Kong's Causeway Bay and financed Hu's directorial debut, *Yesong Hanyi/Sending Clothes in the Cold Winter Evening* (Hu Peng, 1938).³⁰ Like many other filmmakers who emigrated from the cosmopolitan Shanghai film industry to its expanding Hong Kong counterpart, Hu Peng brought with him a patriotic commitment to the fate of modern China, and a keen awareness of the need to absorb selective strands of western culture. As he has noted in his recent autobiography, he had sampled a wide range of both local and imported films at the Beijing Theatre, an experience which firmly persuaded him of the relative backwardness of his own national cinema: 'local films were not comparable to foreign ones; there was a huge gap in every respect'.³¹ The superiority of US and European films was for him rooted in their skilful blend of realistic details, rounded characters and powerful moral themes. Hu's disparagement of Chinese cinema recalls the feelings of inferiority and inadequacy that sometimes plague the citizens of other peripheral nations faced with the powerful presence of aggressive imperial states.

30 Yu, *Xianggang Dianying Bashi Nian/Eighty Years of Hong Kong Cinema* (Hong Kong: Regional Council, 1994), p. 79.

31 Hu, *Wo yu Huang Feihong*, p. 55.

In this context, he considered realism to be a fundamental criterion of the superiority of western film culture over its Chinese counterpart. The historical problem which confronted Hu Peng can be reconstructed as follows: how to improve the quality of local films in line with certain realist standards without renouncing all that was distinctive and valuable, all that was a compelling source of cultural and national identity, in the Cantonese tradition. The filmmaker wanted to restore a sense of pride in local culture by depicting regional customs and stories with the same conscientious realism that distinguished the best foreign productions. His film series was to be a synthesis of traditional culture, or at least a selective version of it, with the demands of cultural modernization.

The Huang Feihong films were thus partly a response to the peripheral predicament of modern China in an international arena. In keeping an archive of popular culture, the aim was to recreate and demonstrate the vitality of the 'common people' and their culture in order to assert the symbolic sources of a renewed national identity and an intense patriotic sentiment. The cinematic recreation of a regional popular culture was therefore not antithetical to the assertion of a patriotic Chinese consciousness. The richness and diversity of China's regional cultures can in fact sustain a sense of pride in, and solidarity with, the national heritage.³² The first film of the series was, after all, released only four years after the Japanese invasion of China, an event which deeply marked the entire generation. Actor Kwan Tak-hing had toured South China throughout World War II in order to entertain the troops. Because of his wartime activities, which included a journey to the USA to raise money for China's war effort, he had become known by the nickname 'Patriotic Entertainer' (*aiguo yiren*), defining his screen persona around a patriotic ethos.³³ Hu Peng has noted that he chose Kwan as a star partly because of this nationalistic aura.³⁴ A similar opposition to Japan's presence in China marked the cinematic representation of, for instance, a villainous samurai in a late addition of the series, *Huang Feihong Shen Wei Fu San Sha/Huang Feihong: The Conqueror of the 'Sam-Hong' Gang* (Wang Feng, 1969). Although such Japanese enemies were largely absent from other films, the series often displayed a moderate sympathy towards the central government, qualified by a certain suspicion of corrupt officials. In *Huang Feihong Xin Shi Hui Qiluan/How Huang Feihong Pitted a Lion Against the Unicorn* (Hu Peng, 1956) the protagonist struggles against Elder White Brow, the head of a secret society mobilized to overthrow the Qing authorities. And, in *Dragon's Mother's Temple*, Wong cooperates with a Qing government official to train extra-governmental, civilian militia (*mintuan*). The series, in sum, arose from two very different sources: a regional consciousness rooted in the distinctive culture of Guangdong, and a patriotic sentiment

³² For a succinct discussion of the intricate relationship between national identity and cultural solidarity, see John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 68–78.

³³ Lau, *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film*, p. 175.

³⁴ Hu, *Wo yu Huang Feihong*, p. 91.

directed to the fate of China and inspired by the more nationalistic circles of Shanghai's cosmopolitan film industry.

It is relevant in this context that Huang Feihong should be a practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine, the principles of which he briefly discusses with his patients and disciples in various films. The contrast between Chinese and western science was particularly central to everyday life in Hong Kong because the local population sometimes displayed a marked aversion to such foreign practices as surgical operations, preferring instead indigenous forms of medical treatment.³⁵ More crucially, medicine had come to play a key role in the struggle over cultural and national identity in modern China. While Lu Xun and many other twentieth-century progressives had denounced Chinese medical remedies as feudal, unscientific and deeply harmful to the people, cultural conservatives like the Nationalist Party (*Guomindang*) member Zhang Bingling regarded traditional science as a fundamental, ineradicable component of the national identity.³⁶ The expression 'national medicine' (*guoyi*) had become an important component of the cultural conservatives' vocabulary by the late 1920s, enshrined in such official institutions as the Shanghai Academy of National Medicine, of which Zhang was Honorary President. Huang Feihong exemplified the value of China's traditional culture, embodied in the national medicine. Despite Hu Peng's selective incorporation of realist norms associated with progressive literature, the series upheld a conservative version of the national identity.

To borrow an expression from Hong Kong historian Tsai Jung-fang, I would describe the films as 'Confucian cultural nationalist' texts that regarded the dissemination and preservation of Confucian morality as a foundation for the cultural unification and political stability of China.³⁷ The aim of the Huang Feihong series was not only to rejuvenate Chinese cinema by combining a heightened realism with a renewed respect for national traditions, but also to disseminate messages that would enhance the moral stature of cinema audiences along Confucian lines. The films simultaneously presupposed and reasserted such familiar standards of personal virtue and mutual obligation as filial piety (*xiao*), humanness (*ren*), sincerity (*xin*), and reciprocity (*bao*). In a Confucian context, the source of these virtues is human feeling (*renqing*), which denotes the capacity to experience intense concern, affection and gratitude towards others. The concept of *renqing* establishes a connection between morality and affect. Hierarchical relations between father and son, elder brother and younger brother, or ruler and subject, as well as egalitarian bonds between friends, are in this view underlain by emotional bonds that give the point to those social distinctions. An important task of moral cultivation is self-containment (*keji*), the capacity to incorporate a concern for the interests of others into the motivational structure of one's conduct.³⁸ The aim is to acquire the capacity to pursue one's

³⁵ Jung-Fang Tsai, *Hong Kong in Chinese History: Community and Social Unrest in the British Colony, 1842–1913* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 66.

³⁶ For a comprehensive discussion of the relationship between national identity and science, see Ralph Crozier, *Traditional Medicine in Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), especially pp. 59–69, 81–104. This section of my essay has drawn considerable ideas and information from Crozier's illuminating work.



Xingxingwang Dazhan Huang Feihong/Huang Feihong's Battle with the Gorilla (Hu Peng, 1980).
Picture courtesy: The Hong Kong Film Archive.

³⁷ Tsai, *Hong Kong in Chinese History*, p. 150.

³⁸ David Hall and Roger Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 122.

³⁹ Ambrose Yao-chi King, 'Kuan-hsi and network building: a sociological interpretation', in Tu Wei-ming (ed.), *The Living Tree: the Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 119–20.

goals without clashing with the goals of others, and to do so out of sincere human concern.³⁹

The films are pedagogic texts designed to furnish viewers with exemplary models of Confucian moral conduct. An exemplary model is anyone whose virtuous behaviour encourages corresponding virtues in others. The moral use of fiction here depends, first of all, on the choice of virtuous protagonists and, secondly, on the construction of narrative situations that provide those protagonists with abundant opportunities to display their virtue. The Huang Feihong series closely adheres to this moralistic understanding of narrative. Its protagonist is characteristically introduced while explaining Chinese medical practices and traditional ethical principles to his students and friends, or fulfilling ritual obligations that bring out his ethical cultivation, respect for cultural traditions and pedagogic vocation. He often donates money to the poor, charges low fees for his medical services, worships his ancestors, respects the elderly, explicitly reaffirms his commitment to the values of 'peace and harmony', endures verbal insult and bodily harm without losing his composed self-restraint, and insistently conveys his ethical ideals in the form of maxims and rules that frame every narrative situation in terms of a lesson to be learnt.

Master Huang's character traits are designed to mark him as an exemplar of civic conduct who seeks out conciliatory rather than violent solutions to social conflicts.⁴⁰ He is, moreover, an ideal paternal figure almost entirely lacking in sexual desire: although married and with children, he never seems to display visible sexual desires even towards his wife. She seems barely a part of her husband's life, at times greeting him at the door only to promptly vanish into the depths of her invisible domestic space. Huang embodies a patriarchal moral order that is seldom disturbed from within. In *The True Story of Huang Feihong*, the filmmakers do confront their hero with a sexual threat, a woman whose frankly provocative behaviour openly challenges his sense of restraint, but he merely reacts with embarrassment, even fear, pacing nervously and finally fleeing the room. This scene is one of those rare moments in which the protagonist seems to lose his bearings, but the tension is resolved when he simply agrees to accept the woman as his own adopted daughter(!), thus assimilating an unruly desire into a patriarchal domestic order. This sequence perhaps shows Huang Feihong's veneer of paternalistic benevolence and Confucian self-control to be a psychic defence against the obvious anxiety evoked by feminine sexuality. But, throughout the series, the protagonist otherwise consistently retains a spontaneous desire to do what is right. His ethical stature is readily and widely recognized by his students and friends as an example to be followed. Whenever the academy's students fail to live up to their master's moral ideals, they themselves openly acknowledge their own shortcomings to one another, bringing out the intrinsic connection between morality and

⁴⁰ I owe this definition of civility to William Rowe, 'The problem of 'civil society' in late imperial China', *Modern China*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1993), pp. 151–2.

⁴¹ See David Hall and Roger Ames, *Anticipating China: Thinking Through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Cultures* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 183–4.

⁴² In an influential formulation, Mencius emphasized the intrinsic link between shame and ethical self-cultivation: 'If a man is not ashamed of being inferior to other men, how will he ever become their equal?'. *Mencius*, trans. D. C. Lau (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 183.

⁴³ I have loosely borrowed the concept of *typage* from Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form*, trans. Jay Leyda (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949), pp. 8–9, 127.

shame in the Confucian tradition. To acquire a sense of shame (*qi*) here means to regard one's actions and attitudes as morally deficient in relation to one or more exemplary teachers or historical models.⁴¹ The concept of shame indicates the internalization of a public attitude towards the self.⁴²

In this moral framework, what is required is an orientation towards the public good over and above any purely personal desires or goals. To pursue what is personally advantageous is to potentially bring about competition and struggle. Extreme self-interest (*li*) tends to diminish social 'harmony' (*he*) and bring about 'chaos' (*luan*), an outlook once again echoed by the Huang Feihong series. The presence of blustering, petulant villains with a penchant for such disreputable activities as gambling, extorting the poor, molesting women, plotting against the State and picking fights in restaurants and teahouses, invariably exemplified the chaos brought about by the egotistical pursuit of unrestrained self-interest. These villains were furthermore played by stock actors like Shi Jian, Liu Jialiang, and later Yuan Xiaotian, whose unusual facial features, loud laughter, arrogant attitudes and exaggerated grimaces immediately expressed a boorish and boisterous character markedly lacking in ethical cultivation. An important element of the Huang Feihong films was therefore their reliance on *typage*, the use of performers whose facial features and outward behaviour immediately and unequivocally conveyed their moral stature and social station.⁴³ These boldly delineated, manichean characters render the threat of social disorder vividly and quickly recognizable.

The protagonist's main goal throughout the series was not, however, to punish those who create chaos but to reform their moral attitudes. In such films as *How Huang Feihong Pitted a Lion Against the Unicorn*, Master Huang would bring criminals to see the ethical impropriety of their aspirations and to willingly harmonize their interests with the demands of social order. To be sure, the villains who do fail to acknowledge their moral obligations are invariably sent to local magistrates for prompt sentencing and imprisonment, after a requisite climactic fight with Huang Feihong himself. But violent punishment was never more than a strategy of last resort in a film series that systematically affirmed the priority of moral cultivation over legal coercion. The protagonist's primary aim was not to force citizens to do what is right, but to bring them to desire it in a spontaneous way. Social harmony invariably depended on Huang Feihong's capacity to thus educate those around him through the sheer exemplary force of his upright behaviour. By illustrating the power of virtue, the plots reaffirmed Confucian conceptions of harmony, civility and self-containment that marked the protagonist as a civic-minded guardian of the Chinese nation's moral stature and an instrument of social reform.

An important, though frequently overlooked, feature of the films was their heightened consciousness of class and status differences. Their Confucian traditionalism was as a cultural framework mobilized to define the 'proper' relationships between commoners and elites. Recent historical scholarship on late imperial and early modern China defines the term 'elite' in broad terms, an approach which corresponds to the general social outlook of the Huang Feihong series. Elites in this view comprise those persons who command social authority in local, regional and national contexts on the basis of a range of heterogeneous sources, including official degrees and civil service appointments, private control over land or troops, lineage networks, commercial relationships and/or putative religious powers.⁴⁴ Community elites therefore exercised local authority by many different means, depending sometimes on the traditions and practices of particular localities and constituencies, as well as on changing historical circumstances.⁴⁵ Members of Chinese elites traditionally brokered daily transactions, helped to settle minor disputes, mediated between commoners' demands and governmental institutions, subsidized infrastructure projects (irrigation works, roads, dykes, bridges) and religious festivals, managed schools and academies, donated money to local temples, organized popular militia and established other kinds of charity and welfare activities. In this kind of social arrangement, government officials delegated control over everyday popular affairs to, or worked jointly with, autonomous or semi-autonomous professional associations (*fatuan*) like chambers of commerce, lawyers' guilds, bankers' groups, local armies and other societies. These elite activities comprise what may be called managerial public spheres. I am here following Mary Backus Rankin's important historical research on Zhejiang province during the late Qing, as well as that of William T. Rowe on Hankow, which principally focus on the extra-bureaucratic management of general community affairs by various powerholders in rural communities, urban neighbourhoods and other local contexts.⁴⁶ Elite activism in Hong Kong included the sponsorship of the Tungwah Hospital and Confucius festivals by merchants and industrial capitalists. The Huang Feihong films explicitly addressed themselves to the moral underpinnings of these diverse elite activities. They fictionally depicted and upheld a local micro-politics of reputation embedded in nongovernmental associations like the protagonist's own pharmacy, in the business and friendship ties between Huang and prominent merchants (*The Lantern Festival Disturbance*), in the charity acts performed throughout *Huang Feihong Diexue Maanshan/Huang Feihong and the Battle of Saddle Hill* (Hu Peng, 1957), in the elite neighbourhood associations (*kaifong*) that would often coordinate and subsidize public festivals (*King Lion Wins the Championship*), and in the formation of *mintuan* (people's militia) managed by

⁴⁴ Tsai, *Hong Kong in Chinese History*, pp. 87–9. For a related description, see also Lynda S. Bell, 'From comprador to county magnate: bourgeois practice in the Wuxi silk industry', in Joseph W. Esherick and Mary Backus Rankin (eds), *Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 113–39.

⁴⁵ Mary Backus Rankin, 'Some observations on a Chinese public sphere', *Modern China*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1993), p. 160.

⁴⁶ See, for instance, Mary Backus Rankin, *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), pp. 15–6; William Rowe, *Hankow: Commerce and Society in a Chinese City and Hankow: Conflict and Community in a Chinese City* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

local notables. The plots would almost invariably highlight, and often celebrate, elite intervention in everyday life.

There is an important sense in which the films can be described as the embodiment of an elite attitude towards popular culture. The stories depicted folk festivities (dragon dances, street fairs, religious holidays) in intensely ambivalent terms, not only as a network of shared traditions binding the community together, but also as potential sources of social disintegration populated by pirates and petty criminals, whose illegal or subversive activities would frequently erupt in calculated acts of maliciously disruptive violence. The films would often warn that popular culture may degenerate into chaotic conflict unless carefully monitored by the strict, benevolent and paternalistic protagonist. This mistrust of the popular recalls the occasional complaints directed against the periodic festivals and celebrations of small market towns and villages by imperial officials, large landowning families and merchants throughout late imperial China. Popular events were often denounced for encouraging intense feelings of pleasurable self-abandonment that would induce the uneducated common folk to transgress moral propriety, releasing dangerous collective energies that would constantly threaten to evade and undermine social obligations and patterns of institutionalized authority.⁴⁷ By offering an intoxicating succession of heterogeneous spectacles, popular indulgence in collective festivities putatively challenged the harmonious Confucian vision of self-containment, frugality and temperance. Operas and festivals were said to distract persons from proper activities, like the pursuit of career, the care of the family and the production of agricultural goods, leading to a waste of energy in frivolous pursuits that undermined the cult of labour and productivity required from the general population. Community elites and government officials often described popular celebrations as a potential threat to social order and traditional morality. To contain this danger, local notables and bureaucrats frequently campaigned to educate grass-roots communities in Confucian moral concepts, rules and attitudes. This aim was executed through a cluster of interlocking strategies that included the founding of local academies and schools, the erection of memorials for virtuous officials and commoners, the organization of public lectures, the establishment of rewards for diligent students, the publication of popular manuals of moral instruction, the standardization of an examination system based on the Confucian classics, the rewriting of well-known novels, and the promotion of particular operas presumably conducive to the stabilization of social authority.⁴⁸ In line with this conservative outlook, Huang Feihong often asserted the value of productive work over wastefulness while allowing some room for popular enjoyment under his own watchful guidance. The master would intervene in folk festivals by taking control of potentially subversive activities like dragon dancing, bringing these centrifugal pleasures under elite

⁴⁷ See, for example, William Dolby, *A History of Chinese Drama* (London: Paul Elek), p. 69.

⁴⁸ Arthur C. Wright (ed.), *The Confucian Persuasion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960), pp. 8–9.

management. The films struggled to render grass-root public enjoyment compatible with the moral imperatives of social order. This aim is consistent with the Hong Kong government's education policy, which promoted Confucian values and, more generally, an apolitical public culture.

It would nonetheless be a serious distortion to simply describe the films as top-down instruments for the dissemination of a dominant elite culture. The Confucian tradition often defined elite power as a public display of virtue, in accordance with normative standards that emphasize the moral leadership and public accountability of government officials. State authority was in this paradigm bound by the same patterns of reciprocal obligation as other everyday hierarchies, such as those between parent and child or teacher and disciple. Political power was in other words an extension of long-established moral norms that pervaded quotidian interactions throughout the society.⁴⁹

This activist strand of Confucian culture has often been vigorously reaffirmed by popular literature and drama in Hong Kong and throughout late imperial and modern China. Many stories and operas upheld reciprocal moral duties between ruling and subordinate groups, expressing an intense moral outrage against corrupt or abusive landlords and men of letters. Oral stories, vernacular novels and operas frequently asserted a range of moral concerns, a sense of what is appropriate and just, or unfair and outrageous, that not only defined normative standards of public accountability for high officials and local powerholders, but also justified popular rebellions born of righteous indignation.⁵⁰ Perhaps the most familiar example remains *The Water Margin*, a vernacular novel depicting a band of righteous outlaws during the Northern Song dynasty, which exerted a considerable influence on the formation of secret societies throughout Qing China. The rebels followed moral codes independent of normal institutions like the family, the village, the guild and the legal system, thus inverting orthodox assumptions about the social sources of morality.⁵¹ As Robert Ruhlmann has aptly noted, 'the novel [assumes] that the society of the outlaws is more authentically Confucian than orthodox society'.⁵² In a different context, Joseph Esherick has also highlighted the connection between popular culture and political protest. According to his vivid account of the Boxer uprising, the rebels drew their political inspiration from such forms of popular culture as folk religion, shamanistic possession, mythological narratives, vernacular novels, oral stories, and operas about knight-errants.⁵³

The Huang Feihong series drew on this critical vernacular tradition to illustrate the reciprocal moral obligations constitutive of social authority. In *Dragon's Mother's Temple*, for instance, the protagonist

49 Anthropologist Mayfair Mei-hui Yang has noted that this strand of Confucian philosophy envisions 'a society in which power is contained in the reproduction and conduct of social relations and not objectified and externalized in a universal state opposed to society'. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: the Art of Social Relationships in China* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 229.

50 David Strand, 'Mediation, representation, and repression: local elites in 1920s Beijing', in Esherick and Rankin (eds), *Chinese Local Elites*, p. 328.

51 Cf. E. Perry Link, Jr, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth Century Chinese Cities* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1981), p. 38.

52 Robert Ruhlmann, 'Traditional heroes in Chinese popular fiction', in Wright (ed.), *The Confucian Persuasion*, pp. 169–70.

53 Joseph W. Esherick, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 59–67.

explains to a Qing official that to govern an empire means to 'win everyone's heart' by being benevolent, impartial and fair, thus underscoring the responsibility of government officials to behave as ethical exemplars for the common people, in line with the responsibilities of their social position. Huang Feihong himself sometimes uses his martial skills to defend government officials and merchants against secret societies and pirates, but on other occasions protects peasants and fishermen from abuses by incompetent officials and wealthy elites, as in *Huang Feihong Longzhou Duo Jin/Huang Feihong Wins the Dragon Boat Race* (Hu Peng, 1956). He even becomes an outlaw in *Victory at Xiaobeijian*, where a corrupt official forces him to flee his residence in Guangzhou and take refuge in a rural shelter.

Throughout the series, Huang Feihong and his disciples would sometimes justify their actions on behalf of the poor or the disenfranchised by invoking the value of humanity (*rendao*). Their actions are underlain by a sense of the absolute value of humankind. The plot of *The Battle of Saddle Hill*, for instance, depicts a particularly brutal custom, the stoning of thieves and other petty criminals by an entire mountain village under the guidance and encouragement of a local landlord's corrupt son. Horrified by this practice, Huang Feihong's leading disciple, Liang Kuan, tells a gathering of local peasants that moral respect for basic humanity (*rendao*), including compassion for the plight of the poor, is more important than any rigid adherence to established norms of conduct. In thus suggesting that moral sentiments take precedence over arbitrary social conventions, the filmmakers are clearly struggling to accommodate certain progressive, even left-wing, strands of Chinese cinema. This progressive tradition is best exemplified by the Cantonese filmmaker Cai Chusheng, who worked in the Shanghai and Hong Kong film industries throughout the 1930s and 1940s before his appointment as Chairman of the Chinese Film Workers' Association in the People's Republic of China. Having frequently denounced the poor artistic quality and escapist content of contemporary Chinese films, Cai demanded a cinema that would aid in the struggle against feudal superstition, economic exploitation, patriarchal abuse and foreign imperialism. In contrast to cynically commercial products, films ought to retain a seriousness of purpose, realistically diagnosing contemporary social problems while proposing concrete solutions in order to encourage a widespread cultural and economic transformation.⁵⁴ While working in Shanghai's Beijing Theatre, Hu Peng already admired Cai's meticulous perfectionism, his commitment to realist aesthetics and social change, and his intense patriotism. Inspired by Cai Chusheng's acclaimed *Yu Guang Qu/Song of the Fishermen* (1934), Hu had made a film about the oppression of poor fishermen and their families by a ruthless landlord, *Fenghuo Yucuan/Fishing Village at War* (1948), starring Kwan Tak-hing, Shi Jian and

⁵⁴ Tan Chunfa, 'The influx of Shanghai filmmakers into Hong Kong and Hong Kong cinema', in Law Kar (ed.), *Cinema of Two Cities: Hong Kong Shanghai* (Hong Kong: The Urban Council, 1994), pp. 76–7.

Bai Yan, a popular actress in Shanghai and Hong Kong. This sort of progressive populism also found its way into the Huang Feihong films, shaping their love of popular culture and their denunciation of feudal customs (such as the stoning of thieves). The protagonist therefore incorporated both a progressive commitment to popular enfranchisement and a traditionalist vision of benevolent elite paternalism.

The Huang Feihong series embodied a complex moral picture that not only upheld the Confucian values promoted by Hong Kong's ruling elites but also – and in sharp contrast to the apolitical culture forged by the colonial government – affirmed the public accountability of political power. The Huang Feihong films highlighted the normative expectations and duties binding elites and common people together around a shared social ethic, thus projecting a sense of moral community which recognized the common people as political agents capable of raising and defending legitimate claims in public arenas. In this context, it is important to see that the cultural authority of Hong Kong's Chinese and British elites contained an intrinsic tension between, on the one hand, an interest in depoliticizing public life by excluding administrative decisions from grass-root contestation and, on the other, an active promotion of Confucian norms and values which sanctioned popular activism and emphasized the moral accountability of rulers. This tension has been enhanced by the visible presence of Communist Party and Guomindang activists in the colony, whose overtly political activities have been grudgingly tolerated by the colonial authorities within certain narrow limits. These modern activists strove to mobilize the general population around political mass movements rather than encouraging their passive submission to a colonial system of technocratic administration. One of the main proponents of mass mobilization was Cai Chusheng, whose call for a progressive and patriotic cinema had a certain influence on the Huang Feihong series. But it is also noteworthy that various strikes and protests throughout Hong Kong's recent history do testify to the existence of an active political culture in the colony. Hong Kong was not a thoroughly depoliticized society: not only because disgruntled members of the financial elites have themselves sometimes supported anti-colonial or patriotic mass movements, or because of active Communist and Guomindang agitation, but also because sectors of the general population have often mobilized their collective efforts for political and economic ends. Consider, for instance, the 1925–6 General Strike against the British government following the May Thirtieth Incident in Shanghai, and the well-known 1966 riots provoked by the Star Ferry Company's decision to increase the fare by five cents.⁵⁵

By upholding normative standards of elite responsibility, the Huang Feihong films have also helped to nourish the moral frameworks that give the point to such activist attitudes. This richly textured cinema

55 John D. Young, 'The building years: maintaining a China–Hong Kong–Britain equilibrium 1950–71', in Ming K. Chan (ed.), *Precarious Balance: Hong Kong Between China and Britain, 1842–1992* (Armonk and London: M. E. Sharpe, 1994), p. 135; Aline K. Wong, *The Kaitong Associations and the Society of Hong Kong* (Taipei: The Orient Cultural Service, 1972), p. 198. In juxtaposing these heterogeneous examples of social activism, I do not of course want to deny the differences between them. My aim is to illustrate some of the manifold patterns of activist protest in conflict with the dominant goal of depoliticizing public life.

expressed attitudes of respect and love towards humble everyday lives, marking ordinary popular culture as a source of intense enjoyment, communal bonds, and normative values for disenfranchised social groups. The films were clearly receptive to the modern political emphasis on mass mobilization. But rather than struggling to overthrow elite power *tout court*, Master Huang would characteristically strive only to correct the violation of a specific moral norm by punishing a corrupt martial arts instructor, landlord or government official. As depicted in the films, social problems were caused by the actions of morally corrupt individuals; they were in no way to be seen as systematic products of the institutional structure of elite power. The Huang Feihong series therefore circumscribed the boundaries of righteous popular protest and legitimated traditional patterns of elite authority. But there are nonetheless instances where the organization of narrative material did not incorporate its more progressive elements into a traditionalist framework. In *The Lantern Festival Disturbance* a young woman not only disobeys her father's prohibition against learning martial arts by studying with a left-handed woman bandit, but also dons a masculine disguise in order to freely participate in a street fair. She repeatedly rebels against a familial and social structure that imposes roles and duties against her will, and even conceals her rebellious activities from Huang Feihong himself, who of course functions as a symbolic father figure. Instead of passively accepting the will of her biological father or relying on the assistance of the paternalistic hero, she takes justice into her own hands and demands her right to self-determination. What is particularly striking is the extent to which the film never denounces her insubordination; rather, the casting of well-known martial artist and actress Ren Yan helps to draw sympathy towards the character's righteous resistance. At the same time, however, the film sympathetically shows a young couple's desperate efforts to bear a male heir for their family, thus celebrating patrilinear arrangements and traditional versions of feminine domesticity. The plot combines both progressive and traditionalist concerns without struggling to reconcile them. In general, the communication of a systematic body of contents was not always and everywhere a consistent goal of the filmmakers.

The Huang Feihong series was therefore an interpretive arena which incorporated and negotiated different moral and political frameworks available in the larger society. It is often difficult to separate one strand from another. Instead of seeing the films as systematic expressions of a coherent set of values and attitudes, it is therefore best to think of them as a multi-layered assemblage of overlapping and criss-crossing concerns that may, but need not, neatly fit together: a capitalist emphasis on producing profitable films that would seduce audiences with spectacular dances and fights, formulaic stories and recognizable stars; a search for cultural identity through the collection

and display of Cantonese regional traditions; a nationalist expression of love for China's Confucian culture; a realist celebration of popular culture and ordinary life; a conservative adherence to the values of law and order; a moral humanism that defines the norms and values governing relations between elites and commoners; and a progressive interest in the enfranchisement of peasants, women and the urban poor. This cultural collage is rooted in the social and cultural conditions of postwar Hong Kong, where a paternalistic practice of colonial government restricted to civil servants, capitalists, community notables and other putative experts uneasily coexisted with both a Confucian vision of subaltern justice and modern political ideals of mass mobilization, both of which upheld the right to grass-roots participation in general affairs. The Huang Feihong films embodied these social tensions. While not all Hong Kong films of the period necessarily reflected this broad range of factors in a similarly overt way, the production history and distribution context of the Huang Feihong series rendered it particularly receptive to the uneasy network of political and economic forces, the complex social arena, of postwar Hong Kong.

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