

Study on the Image of Vietnamese Women in Hong Kong Films and Hong Kongness

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Abstract. As an immigrant city, many immigrant films have been created in Hong Kong. This article focuses on Hong Kong in the 1980s, when large-scale marches and unique images accompanied the release of the Sino-British Joint Declaration. This paper focuses on the images of treacherous female Vietnamese in Hong Kong films of the 1980s and analyzes two films, *Stars and Roses* and *The Story of Woo Viet*, through textual analysis. It also explains how the bodies, travels and deaths of treacherous female Vietnamese are used by the director to demonstrate the fluid nature of Hong Kongness and to respond to the culture of mobility created by the unique position of Hong Kong in the 1980s and 1990s.

Keywords: Hong Kong film; Treacherous female Vietnamese; Hong Kongness.

1. Introduction

The British Nationality Act of 1981, which formally excludes children born in Hong Kong from being British citizens, has increased the emigration rate in Hong Kong [1]. Government figures show that between 1987 and 1997, before Hong Kong's reunification with the mainland, more than 40,000 Hong Kong immigrants emigrated to other countries each year, more than double the number of immigrants before that [2]. While Hong Kong was facing the loss of its native population, there were still a large number of immigrants from Southeast Asia, such as Vietnam and the Philippines. These Southeast Asian immigrants entered and became part of Hong Kong society and began to appear in Hong Kong films. After the Sino-Vietnamese border crisis in 1975 and 1979, large numbers of Vietnamese refugees migrated to Hong Kong. In 1967, the British government formally prohibited in the Public Order Ordinance any behavior that was likely to be offensive to the Chinese or the British government [2]. This measure also strengthened the regulation of film content by the government. Along with the wave of emigration from Hong Kong and the anxieties of the 1997 reunification, there was a large number of images of female Vietnamese immigrants in film texts during the Hong Kong New Wave.

In studies of the image of female Vietnamese immigrants in Hong Kong during the New Wave period, some scholars have found a commonality in that these female immigrants are often portrayed as treacherous subjects. Duong, Lan P argues that Vietnamese women connected to overseas countries are often depicted as renegades who are deviating from traditional Confucian culture on one hand and connected to capitalism and globalism on the other [3]. As Vietnam began to marketize in 1987 and started to introduce the concept of capital management, the physical depiction of Vietnamese women shifted from the wimpy, feminized terms describing the South Vietnamese government to ambiguous and collaborative. That is, when the capital culture came into contact with the communist system, the image of the native Vietnamese female renegade underwent a subtle transformation. It was not until the 1970s that Hong Kong gradually evolved into a fully established city and began to trace its own cultural identity, as well as global culture [4].

Focusing on the commonalities and narrative features of the images of treacherous female Vietnamese that emerged during the Hong Kong New Wave period (1978-1997), this paper examines two films, *Stars and Roses* and *The Story of Woo Viet*, through textual analysis. By analyzing the images of Vietnamese female traitors appearing in the two films, the narratives, and audiovisual language, it is found that during the Hong Kong New Wave, Hong Kong directors relied on treacherous female Vietnamese to reflect Hong Kong's cultural syndrome, i.e., the treacherous bodies

of Vietnamese women reflected the ambiguity and absence of Hong Kongness. The distorted history of Hong Kong is situated in the gap between colonial and mainland cultures, and the uncertainty of Hong Kongness cannot be traced back to its cultural symptoms, thus the image of Vietnamese women is the manifestation of Hong Kongness.

The Story of Woo Viet tells us that after the defeat of South Vietnam, failed soldier Woo Viet absconds to Hong Kong and meets Shen Qing, a Vietnamese dancer who is also a refugee. Both of them expect to escape from Vietnam to Hong Kong, but they are involved in an accidental scam, and in the end, Shen Qing dies and Woo Viet embarks on his journey in a small canoe. Stars and Roses depicts the story of a Hong Kong journalist who, during a trip to North Vietnam to cover a story, is detained by the violent local government and escapes with the help of Ruan Hong, a local woman in Vietnam. But in the finale, Ruan Hong gives up her chance to go to Hong Kong as a refugee and chooses to return to Vietnam to await her execution. Both films feature the image of treacherous female Vietnamese, both are in pursuit of freedom, and both end in death. The image of treacherous female Vietnamese is the very embodiment of Hong Kong which is constantly straining between mainland China and the colonial culture, constantly on a journey in pursuit of freedom, but the road forward is still foggy.

2. Literature review

Since the release of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, Hong Kong is about to leave the rule of the British Government and reunite with mainland China. In such a special period, Hong Kong was influenced by both colonial and mainland cultures, and studies on Hong Kong's own identity-i.e., Hong Kongness-continue to emerge. As Ackbar Abbas states the Hong Kong way of life, which mixes colonial and democratic characteristics, is in danger of disappearing, and it is precisely the imminent disappearance of this particular culture that has triggered a strong interest in Hong Kong culture [5].

2.1. Hong Kong Cultural Space

In Culture and the Politics of Disappearance, Ackbar Abbas focuses on Hong Kong's cultural characteristics and cultural identity [5]. From the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984 to the reunification with China in 1997, Hong Kong has been subjected to the pull between the old traditional culture and the new international culture, a paradoxical characterization that is reflected in the mobile space and population of the city. Hong Kong has always enjoyed a mobile population, the majority of which are refugees or expatriates, and this constant space of mobility has brought about instability, thus creating temporary values and interpersonal relationships. The cultural identity of Hong Kong, as described by a bar abbas, cannot be found in a city that lacks a specific definition, but is hidden in film and writing. Therefore, to further explore the characteristics of Hong Kongness, it is necessary to examine cultural identity in Hong Kong films.

2.2. Hong Kongness and Hong Kong Films

In HONG KONG CINEMA 1982-2002, THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY DURING TRANSITION, Wai Yee Ruby Cheung explores the relationship between Hong Kongness and Hong Kong films [6]. Hong Kong is fluid and ever-changing, and the alienation from traditional Chinese culture, as well as the incomplete identification with colonial culture, creates a constantly traveling subject. In specific film analyses, it was found that a large number of cinematic images of foreign immigrants emerged during the New Wave period. In the analysis of Boat People by Xu An'hua, director Xu An'hua draws on the characterization of Vietnamese women to reflect the ambiguity of Hong Kong's own identity and its confusion about the future, mapping Hong Kong's identity problem through the sense of rootlessness of the Vietnamese immigrants.

2.3. Images of Treacherous Female Vietnamese

In the process of further research, it is summarized and found that there is a certain correlation between the image of Vietnamese women in Hong Kong films and the local history of Vietnam as well as the image of women in the local literature and films related to Vietnam, so this paper understands and summarizes the study of women's image in some Vietnamese films.

In Treacherous subjects_ gender, culture, and trans-Vietnamese, Duong, Lan P. extracts the “treacherous women” as the commonality of Vietnamese women and relates it to the history of Vietnam as well as to the creation of Vietnamese women in the diaspora [3]. The article describes the famous Vietnamese group of collaborators, the Constitutionalist Party, in which Vietnamese intellectual males chose to betray their country to immigrate to France during the French colonial period. The concept of treachery is deeply embedded in Vietnamese history through the history of colonization. During the Vietnam War, cooperation between the Republic of South Vietnam and the United States and France in the 1960s and 1970s, however, allowed it to gain a name for itself as a corrupt government. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, North Vietnam described South Vietnam as feminine, cowardly, and decadent. By combing through history and relevant literary images as well as cinematic images, since Vietnam's reform of the market economy in 1986, the condemnation of South Vietnam and capitalism has gradually ceased in favor of employing the image of a treacherous female, an image that stems from treachery in the national imagination.

Meanwhile, the image of Vietnamese immigrant women recurs in the films during the Hong Kong New Wave period, and these Vietnamese women are presented as rebellious behavior against their own country. Up to now, related literature has focused more on exploring the cultural identity of Hong Kong and ignored the unique symbolism of treacherous female Vietnamese. Therefore, this paper attempts to find a unique connection between the treacherous female Vietnamese image and the cultural development of Hong Kong.

3. Image of Vietnamese Women in Hong Kong Films and Hong Kongness

3.1. Treachery of female Vietnamese body: fleeing from the communist country

In both films, *The Story of Woo Viet* and *Stars and Roses*, the two native Vietnamese women share certain commonalities, employing the sex trade to help themselves break away from Vietnamese society on the one hand, and on the other hand, embodying their betrayal of Vietnamese society in the films by attempting to cross the border to other territories. The treachery and flight of Vietnamese women is a kind of mapping of Hong Kong itself. In the images and narratives, the Vietnamese female figure betrays the communist regime in Vietnam and at the same time aspires to flee to America, and the hesitant and contradictory image of instability under these two regimes is a refraction of the problems of Hong Kong itself. In the films, the first thing Vietnamese women sell is their bodies, by which they express their purpose, i.e., to escape from the communist country.

In the film *The Story of Woo Viet*, Shen Qing first expresses her desire to escape the Vietnamese government and travel to America through a scene of deep confession with Woo Viet at the airport, in which Shen Qing informs Woo Viet that she used to work as a dancer, and that she got the chance to smuggle herself across the border by using the money of a middle-aged white American man, and that her body had become a bargaining chip. In this audiovisual language, the camera changes from a panoramic double shot to a personal close-up of Shen Qing, with all the surrounding scenery blurred. In the Hong Kong airport, Shen Qing lowers her voice in the close-up shot and expresses her willingness to give up everything she will get to America to marry Hu Yue, and it is not until Hu Yue agrees that there is the beginning of a close-up of the double shot. Shen Qing and the middle-aged white man, the symbol of capital culture, are acting voluntarily, but their purpose is to arrive in America and become American citizens. This behavior indirectly reflects Hong Kong's status as a “transit station” in the minds of the people of Southeast Asian countries. In other words, Hong Kong

is not the real destination of the Vietnamese people, who use it as a stepping stone to the Western developed countries.

In the film *Stars and Roses*, this undertaking is even more ingenious. To help her brother escape from the prison of the Vietnamese government, Ruan Hong finds a Vietnamese official as her boyfriend. When her boyfriend is about to open the closet where the Hong Kong journalist Liu Jizu is hiding, the film adopts Ruan Hong's subjective point of view and a distant perspective, which not only shows the tense moment when the Vietnamese official is about to discover the hidden journalist, but also highlights the alienation between Ruan Hong, who is a Vietnamese woman, and her Vietnamese boyfriend. Upon realizing that the Hong Kong journalist has left, Ruan Hong goes to look for the Hong Kong journalist, a subjective shot with close-ups is used to show the interlude. By using the Hong Kong journalist's hand and the suddenly closed door of the room, Nguyen Hong and the Hong Kong journalist are locked within a space, and a large number of medium and close-ups are used to show the emotional interaction between the two, with Ruan Hong sharing a natural closeness with the Hong Kong male journalist while alienating herself from the local Vietnamese male characters. Since the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, anxiety about reunification has been pervasive in Hong Kong, where more than one million Hong Kong people marched, and as many as 31% of the Hong Kong public stood on the side of Hong Kong in the relevant survey [7]. At the same time, this anxiety began to manifest in "the behavior of fleeing Hong Kong". Since the 1980s, Hong Kong has experienced a massive wave of emigration, with an average of more than 1% of the population moving to Canada and America every year [8]. On the one hand, the handover is imminent, while on the other hand, there is the influence of the colonial system and the capitalist culture that cannot be separated from it. Under strict political censorship, it is difficult to express the cleavage between communism and capitalism in Hong Kong directly by telling the story of the Hong Kong people themselves, and instead, they borrowed the story of the Vietnamese immigrants as a metaphor.

3.2. The Inaccessible Ideal Country The Identity Crisis of Hong Kong

Unlike the refugees from Guangdong who made up the majority of the population fleeing to Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s, the native-born population of Hong Kong has made up a much larger number since the late 1960s [9]. At the same time, they are trying to find their own identity and culture. However, they are unable to completely sever the connection with their ancestors, which echoes the plight of Vietnamese women. Vietnam is deeply imbued with Confucianism, and in *Identity in Vietnamese Diasporic Cinema*, the male-dominated society's disciplining of Vietnamese women in the movie is detailed, where women are submissive to men and are disciplined objects who abide by the four Confucian virtues [10]. In the film, treacherous female Vietnamese would use their body and beauty to gain access across the border, a move that undoubtedly rebelled against the dictates of the Confucian culture in both Vietnam and mainland China. As a result, it is impossible to find their own identity.

The flight of Vietnamese women from their own country is often accompanied by persecution and threats from people in power. Whether it's Shen Qing being coerced into prostitution by a gangster in *The Story of Woo Viet* or Ruan Hong having to prostitute her beauty to drink with a high-ranking Vietnamese official to gain time for the Hong Kong journalist to escape in *Stars and Roses*, this oppressiveness by the powerful is deeply engraved into the image of Vietnamese women in the Hong Kong New Wave. They tried to sell their bodies to call for a new life, but what they waited for was more oppression from other powers and regimes.

In the film, *The Story of Woo Viet*, Shen Qing assumes the threat of a smuggler boss and begins a deal to sell her body to start saving money to go to America with Woo Viet. For this part, a low-angle shot is used, with Shen Qing on top and the boss on the bottom, caressing Shen Qing's feet. This forced acceptance represents obedience, which Shen Qing voluntarily accepts after being coerced by the boss because she agreed to go to America with Woo Viet when she was in Hong Kong. The same technique can be seen in *Stars and Roses*, where Ruan Hong sells her body to help her brother and the Hong Kong journalist escape the brutal prison by accompanying a Vietnamese prison officer to

drink. This scene is also captured by a low-angle shot, through the perspective of the Hong Kong journalist creeping along the ground, with a panoramic view of Ruan Hong sipping a drink underneath a fence. In the previous scene, Ruan Hong expects his brother to escape to Hong Kong.

Under the subtle supine angle, in these two Hong Kong movies, Vietnamese women sell their bodies to be given the chance to become citizens of another country. Such selling is exchanged for a chance to be reborn out of the Vietnamese environment, but it must be accompanied by the molestation of the powerful around them, which dooms the image of Vietnamese women to be ripped apart, on the one hand trying to integrate into the advanced world culture, while on the other hand they loathe themselves for deviating from the traditional culture.

Interesting geographic relationships have developed in which people want to cross the border from Vietnam to Hong Kong, and from Hong Kong, they want to fly to America.

In Wai Yee Ruby Cheung's analysis, in the 1980s, they felt superior by having access to more advanced international education but were unable to fully integrate into European countries [6]. Crossing over has always been what Hong Kong has been trying to do, aspiring to integrate into the world culture represented by the developed countries represented by Europe and America. However, at the same time, they are missing the concepts of home and self, and have gradually severed the connection between Hong Kong and the mainland during their history as a colony, losing the imagination of home and failing to find their own identity.

3.3. Drifting Hong Kong culture and death of female renegade

During the Hong Kong New Wave period, the rebellious Vietnamese female characters were always embodied through journeys, not only geographically mobile, but also accompanied by crossing borders and mental crossings, and this constant mobility suggests a social culture. As Ackbar Abbas says, everything in Hong Kong is fluid, the currency, the financial and cultural system, and mainland China are about to impose an identity, and at this last minute, Hong Kong is trying to find its cultural attributes - i.e., Hong Kongness. In *The Story of Woo Viet* and *Stars and Roses*, two films made under the Hong Kong New Wave, the death of the Vietnamese female rebels is an allegory for the death of this wandering Hong Kong culture by the New Wave directors. The Hong Kong New Wave was initiated in 1978 by a group of creators who were born entirely in Hong Kong and were influenced by European art cinema through their education in British and American cinema [11]. They attempted to create the subjective cultural imagination of Hong Kong through their narrative expression. Since the *1984 Joint Declaration*, however, Hong Kong people have come to realize that they have no say in their future, a situation which, in film, becomes a tribute by these young directors to this Hong Kong culture laced with colonial culture and mobility.

In films, Vietnamese women are often directed with ritualized deaths. In the film *The Story of Woo Viet*, where Shen Qing helps Woo Viet to block a fatal death, the director uses a very poetic style to deal with it. In a long shot, the panorama covers Woo Viet, Shen Qing, and the boat, accompanied by an off-screen voiceover of Woo Viet reading a letter to a pen pal in Hong Kong, as Woo Viet slowly lowers Shen Qing's body into the water. In *Stars and Roses*, the subject is reflected upon more profoundly, with a panorama at the moment when Ruan Hong and Liu Jizu finally escape the Vietnamese border, and a change of scene back to a distant view after Ruan Hong says, "I don't want to go to Hong Kong to be a refugee," as Ruan Hong willingly returns to Vietnam to die, with a long shot and a distant view incorporating Ruan Hong and Vietnamese flag, as well as Chinese flag. In this scene, the director parses the concerns about Hong Kong's sovereignty, but also the anxiety about the aftermath of reunification and the journey to find oneself free from colonial rule. In a survey of Hong Kong journalists in the 80th century, most of them agreed that the Hong Kong media should strive to give Hong Kong the greatest degree of autonomy after 1997. The director during Hong Kong New Wave alludes to the future of Hong Kong's cultural development through the death of Vietnamese women, but also through the death of female renegades, who are trying to find their cultural connection with the mainland.

4. Conclusion

This paper employs textual analysis to analyze two films that were produced in Hong Kong in the 1980s, *Stars and Roses* and *The Story of Woo Viet*. The paper is divided into three chapters, the first of which summarizes the relationship between the Vietnamese women's physical treachery and Hong Kong's anxieties about reunification. The second chapter focuses on the cultural dilemma of treacherous female Vietnamese, that is, the awkward relationship between Hong Kong's traditional cultures and colonial cultures. The third chapter focuses on the impending end of Hong Kong and its peculiar mobile culture, which the Hong Kong New Wave director reacts to through the death of a treacherous female Vietnamese. Through the textual analysis of the two films, Hong Kong in pursuit of its ontological status is represented through the image of treacherous female Vietnamese. Focusing on the Hong Kong New Wave period, this paper explores the mapping of the image of treacherous female Vietnamese in Hong Kong culture, which as of this writing has undergone further differentiation in film and requires more film texts to explore.

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