Society

Tales from the “Floating City”

“It requires courage to lead a life without roots.”

BY LEO OU-FAN LEE

The famous woman writer Xi Xi wrote a story entitled “Chronicles from the Floating City,” which obviously refers to Hong Kong. As an artist inspired by the Latin American fiction of “Magic Realism,” Xi Xi has chosen to tell her story in the mode of fantasy: “Many years ago, on a bright, sunny day, in the glare of the public eye, the Floating City emerges like a balloon in mid air. Above the City are capricious clouds; below its ground, the roaring sea. The Floating City, hanging in midair, neither rises nor descends. When a breeze blows, it only swings a little and they stay still. How does it happen?”

Throughout the year 1997, especially when the day of China’s reclamation of Hong Kong occurs on July 1, people all over the world will be pondering the same question: What will happen to Hong Kong after 1997? And how does it happen? History provides one easy answer: the legacy of the Opium War of 1839-1842, which resulted in China’s defeat and the ceding of Hong Kong as a British colony. But I think the question in Xi Xi’s fantasy-allegory is less historical than existential: What does it require to lead a life without roots? Not only courage but also will-power and faith: the residents of the City have been quietly pondering the choices of how to remain “afloat,” and this “existential crisis” ironically becomes a source of inspiration, a spiritual engine that fuels a soaring artistic imagination, of which Xi Xi’s works stand as a testimony.

Not all Hong Kong writers choose to write like Xi Xi, who after all publishes her novels mainly in Taiwan. Fiction in Hong Kong is not reaching a “fin-de-siècle splendor” that we find in Taiwan and on Mainland China. Rather, I think Xi Xi remains an exception to the rule: the novel is too realistic a form to give free rein to the kind of soaring imagination that befits the mental state of this “Floating City.” There is some fine poetry, notably by the scholarly poet Ye Si, who likewise wrote a series of poems about Hong Kong under the heading, “Images of the City.” And the theater movement in Hong Kong, both mainstream performances and alterna-

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tive theater, is drawing a crowd. For me, however, the true indicator of Hong Kong’s cultural energy and imagination are found in two areas: films and newspapers, the former bringing an ebullient imagination on a form invented in Hollywood, the latter providing an open forum for all the news that leaders in China consider not fit to print. This combination of print and visual media has given enough boost to Hong Kong’s “cultural balloon” to allow it to remain precariously (as of this writing) afloat in midair, sometimes even casting a few defying glances at the Central Kingdom to its north. So far, only the market-conscious Hollywood has beckoned to this floating city—to attract its film talent, whereas most Western journalists in the blythe ignorance can think only of Hong Kong’s political uncertainty and financial power.

There is no tradition of the “art film” in Hong Kong. Even the most style-conscious auteur directors such as Stanley Kwan (Guan Jinpeng) and Wong Kar-wai make movies that are commercially successful. Nor is artistic originality a cherished value; rather, Hong Kong movie directors have made a fine commercial product out of the fine art of derivation. They shamelessly copy Hollywood movies but manage to surpass them in style. John Woo (Wu Yusen), director of a string of successful cops-and-robbers thrillers and now a darling of Hollywood (Hard Target, Broken Arrow), has been an avid admirer of the American veteran director Sam Peckinpah, who first established a stylistic tradition of film violence. But in his pre-Hollywood film-making Woo has brought a romantic flair to his violent characters and a baroque opulence to his Hong Kong setting. The plots of his films seem to tell the same story about male bondage (without homosexual overtones) in which the two protagonists—brothers or old friends—find themselves on opposite sides of the law. The formula itself is nothing new: Peckinpah and Howard Hawks have done the same in American Westerns.

What is peculiarly poignant about John Woo’s most successful Hong Kong films (A Better Tomorrow, The Killer, Hard-boiled) is that, as any local Hong Kong film-goer readily sees, his buddy-buddy heroes are endowed with an ethos of unwavering loyalty and brotherhood that stems from the value system of traditional Chinese chivalric novels. But Woo purposefully plants this “premodern” ethos in a modern setting: the distance in time has added both a romantic halo and an ironic edge to the film’s contemporary reality. While audiences may be carried away by an overdose of romanticism in the hero’s “macho” behavior and sentiment—not to mention the well-choreographed shoot-it-out scenes in which such behavior is manifested—the irony is not lost on the more discerning spectators. One scene in A Better Tomorrow has the two
at night, and one hero makes a sudden comment: “How long can such scenic beauty last?” It is a comment about “time” and, not so obliquely, about Hong Kong’s “tomorrow.” Whoever translated the original title Yingshiong bense or, literally, The True Essence of Heroes into a temporal metaphor must have the terminal date of 1997 in mind.

What will happen to the plots of Hong Kong’s movies after 1997? Or will there be movies made at all in Hong Kong since most of its talented stars and directors, following John Woo, will have moved to Hollywood? Will we find on the local screen a succession of Chinese “Terminators” or “People’s Supercops”? In fact, the latter has already appeared as a “superwoman” in a sequence of cops-and-robbers comedies. The increasing seriousness—and lack of satire—in the portrait of this positive heroine betrays a changing attitude of Hong Kong’s reception of the impending Chinese takeover.

On the other hand, we can regard John Woo’s heroes to be all “terminators” of a different kind from the Arnold Schwarzenegger prototype. They are not mythical heroes from a technologized future world in which morality makes no sense. Instead they are caught in a contemporary predicament over which they have no control—a predicament caused by Hong Kong’s colonial history that is coming to haunt its present. Thus John Woo’s hero, often played by Chow Yuen-fat (Zhou Runfa), is both ordinary and extraordinary, a cop or a hired killer whose insouciant demeanor conceals a tragic sense of inevitability; his fate is already predetermined, and when the time comes, he must “terminate” everything—his enemies, his world, himself. The excessively violent deaths in the ending of most John Woo films (one even takes place in a church) thus endows them with the “philosophical” meaning of a doomed, “no exit” existence. This may have been a lesson Woo has learned from Peckinpah’s The Wild Bunch in which the hero played by William Holden carries a similar “existential weight” on his shoulders; we know that he is doomed to die. But there is no historical dimension to Peckinpah’s films—certainly not the kind of temporal exigency and contemporary relevance found in Woo’s Hong Kong movies. Predictably, this existential aura is lost in Woo’s more recent movies made in Hollywood, and his stylistic flair is now burdened with million-dollar atomic bombs and other technological gadgets.

What will happen to John Woo’s colleagues when they migrate to Hollywood—Chow Yuen-fat, Jackie Chan, and reportedly the director Tsui Hak (Xu Ke)—is anyone’s guess. I am sure that once the language barrier is overcome they will do well commer-
cially in a market already infused with immigrants from Asia. But will they retain their artistic identity or develop a new style? American audiences who form long lines at showings of Hong Kong movies regard Woo, Chow, and Chan as cult figures of pop culture and know almost nothing about their “other” side. They do not know, for instance, that the director Tsui Hak was once a Chinese émigré from Vietnam who years later made a personal homage to the last days of the Vietnam War in a pre-sequel to *A Better Tomorrow*, complete with a last scene of the helicopter airlift from the rooftop of the American embassy—an extremely realistic reenactment save for two new passengers, Chow Yuen-fat and Anita Mui. This symbolic link between present-day Hong Kong and the land of the past memory Vietnam, adds a layer of allegorical meaning to an otherwise silly adventure story. The Hong Kong Chinese were not the arch enemies of the Vietnamese during the War, like the Americans. When they find themselves trapped and tortured by the Vietnamese soldiers, as in another film directed by Woo, the moral issues involved are less clear-cut. Unlike *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon* and *The Killing Fields*, or even the Rambo films, the Hong Kong heroes do not return there to atone for past guilt or to redress past humiliations. In fact, one of the Hong Kong prisoners in the Woo film keeps yelling to his Vietnamese captors: “I am Chinese, not American!” Still, they find themselves implicated in a morass of evil and death. We can well imagine a more relevant plea to their overlords: “We are Chinese, not English!”

Tsui Hak is a most enigmatic and contradictory director and, second to Jackie Chan, the most commercially successful film-maker in Hong Kong. A former overseas Chinese from Vietnam, he is absorbed in both Chinese cultural tradition and American film technology. The dozens of films he has produced and directed—kung-fu movies, fantasies, ghost stories—are mostly based on traditional Chinese folk-tales, popular literature, and history. In his most recent series of movies based on the legend of the Cantonese hero Wong Fai-hung (Huang Feihong) translated as *Once Upon a Time in China*, the relevance of modern Chinese history is obvious: even Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Republic, made a crucial appearance. But the “historical” world of Tsui Hak is murky and deeply ambiguous. He plays with such grand themes as nationalism, colonialism, and modernity from the present and peripheral angle of Hong Kong and poses ambivalent questions: after a century of checkered history, who after all are the real heroes and real villains? Republican revolutionaries or late Qing reformers? Racially chauvinistic Boxer rebels or equally chauvinistic British colonialists? (In a Hollywood movie, no such ambiguity exists: we know that Charlton Heston, who once played Moses, must be the good guy in the film *Fifty-Five Days in Peking*, who leads the fight to break theBoxers’ siege of the legation quarters. In fact, history here is utterly irrelevant.)

At the end of *Once Upon a Time in China*, the native hero, having defeated all the “foreign devils,” willingly lets himself be photo-
graphed by his aunt’s modern camera—as if surrendering himself to the inevitable triumph of modern Western technology. Tsui Hak himself is said to be most intrigued by computer-assisted special effects, with which he hopes to make old Chinese legends come alive—such as *The Story of the White Snake* and *Monkey*. At a dinner party a few years ago, he regaled the present writer with an original interpretation of a well-known episode from the classic novel, *Monkey*—about how the Monkey King, for all his power and *hubris*, is unable to leap over the palm of Buddha. Yes, we all know from the novel that the Monkey cannot succeed, even with his super-somersaults, but Tsui is more intrigued by a technical and “metaphysical” problem: how does Buddha extend his/her hand? Horizontally, vertically, all or none of the above? Tsui is fully aware, however, that only computer technology can allow him to achieve this special effect. During that informal interview, he also told me that the only culture with an inexhaustible fund of mystery, allure, and wisdom is to be found in China—not Hong Kong or Taiwan—and he is (perhaps half in jest) ready to move to Beijing and buy a house there.

Indeed the most astute and profound manifestations of a cultural obsession with China is to be found in Hong Kong movies. Whereas the so-called “fifth-generation” directors from the People’s Republic create new mythologies of the rural Chinese countryside—*Yellow Earth, Red Sorghum, Ju Dou* et al—they fall flat on their faces whenever they wish to recreate the past glory of the cities. Urban Shanghai in the 1930’s is evoked with all the fake pageantry in Zhang Yimou’s *Shanghai Triad*, and the otherwise talented director has to insert several irrelevant episodes set on a rural island in order to add some “psychological depth” to his heroine. For all the supercilious praise from American film critics, the film is simply incapable of recreating the sight and sound of the old treaty-port of Shanghai under foreign domination. If we compare the cabaret scenes in *Shanghai Triad* with the same scenes in Stanley Kwan’s *Red Rose and White Rose*, we see the difference between crass fabrication and lyrical, nostalgic evocation. For one of the most obvious—yet totally ignored—facts of modern Chinese history is that modernity was first created in the cities, not the countryside. History has dealt its most ironic coup de grace by making the cities important once again as cultural and commercial centers after half a century of rural revolution that has led the countryside to triumph over the cities.

And which two cities can be more alike—as if they were historical twins—than Shanghai and Hong Kong? They were the first showcase cities of Western culture when China was forced to modernize.
It is, in a way, “historical justice” that the urban skyline in Shanghai today, especially in the Pudong area, looks more and more like Hong Kong. Hong Kong filmmakers, artists, and writers are currently swept away by a wave of nostalgia for old Shanghai—so much so that Tsui Hark and Stanley Kwan have made several films in homage to its twin. *Red Rose and White Rose* is adapted from an original story by writer Eileen Chang, Shanghai’s most talented woman writer from the 1940s, who recently died in her small apartment in Los Angeles (a reclusive figure like Greta Garbo). Nobody knows why Stanley Kwan is so obsessed with Shanghai; he reinvents the glamor of the city through its most famous female artists—the writer Eileen Chang and the actress Ruan Lingyu, who committed suicide in Shanghai in 1935. In making a film about this famed movie star, Kwan uses the self-reflexive form of film-making: his film documents the experience of making a film about Ruan Lingyu, in which the Hong Kong actress playing the role of Ruan Lingyu has to talk about her own feelings for the legendary Shanghai film star. In short, the Hong Kong film is constantly in search of old Shanghai but never quite finds it, since it must negotiate the tricky terrain between past and present, truth and fantasy, authenticity and make-believe. However, Kwan has succeeded in capturing an allegorical romance, “a tale of two cities”—like Marguerite Duras’ *Hiroshima Mon Amour* although this love affair is less sexual and mythical but more cultural and historical.

It remains for me to bring this historical tale to the present by commenting briefly on the films of Wong Kar-wai, a director with a unique sensibility nurtured by the very mixed-up culture of Hong Kong itself. In two recent films—*Chungking Express* and *Fallen Angel* (the latter can be deemed a sequel to the former)—Wong turns the chaos and vitality of this very human “jungle” into a reflection on the meaning of contemporary culture itself. Wong seems fascinated by the image and metaphor of jungle. In a previous film an entire fantasy sequence takes place in a jungle in the Philippines, and the Chinese title of *Chungking Express*, is in fact “Chungking jungle” as it refers to a crowded mansion in Kowloon called “Chungking.” It is a veritable multiracial and multicultural place inhabited by whites, Indians, and Chinese from different regions, including a Taiwanese young man who speaks Mandarin and Cantonese at the same time and a mysterious young woman wearing a blonde wig who kills her white lover. Yet romance takes place between odd couples in odd places and at odd times—and mixed in with odd ethical values. As the old saying goes, it can only happen in Hong Kong!

Unlike futuristic Los Angeles in *Blade Runner* (which was inspired by the director’s visit to Hong Kong), Wong Kar-wai makes us believe that the impossible can also be real, that genuine human sen-
timent and love, can still survive in this jungle of competition. The “feel” of a Wong Kar-wai film is very “post-modern”—cast in a “simulacrum” mode with constant references to the other media, especially videos and television. The visual look of Fallen Angel resembles a series of pop song videos, and the actress who plays a waitress in Chungking Express listens to her CD player with the volume turned extra loud all the time. (The actress is herself a famous popular singer.) By assuming the mirror image of video and television, the film thus presents a critical reflection on the role of media in people’s lives.

In this crowded space—Wong’s vision of Hong Kong—he has inserted some ironic time-markers: the young man from Taiwan constantly thinks about the date of April 30, when he first met his girlfriend who has since left him; the waitress leaves a plane ticket for her policeman boyfriend, but the flight number and date is blotted out by rain. However, these dates are what sustains a human relationship, a memory or a sentiment. Since dates mark time, both past and future, the film thus brings forth an obsessive time-consciousness that is particularly applicable to Hong Kong. Of all the places in the world, there is only one place on which a “deadline” has been imposed: on the other side of the border with China, a clock tower has been erected by China for a day-by-day countdown toward 1997.

Time also figures significantly in Xi Xi’s story: there are references to countdowns as if a rocket is about to be fired into outer space—or is it targeted at this floating city? All predictions, including one from an authoritative soothsayer, assure us that the economic future of Hong Kong after the takeover will remain bright, at least until the end of this century, and this floating city will continue to display its fin-de-siècle splendor in mid-air.

Will there indeed be “a better tomorrow” for Hong Kong? No one really knows. A character in a John Woo or Wong Kar-wai movie would perhaps answer by mimicking the memorable line from another Hollywood movie: as Scarlet O’Hara says to herself at the end of Gone with the Wind, “tomorrow is just another day!” But as a concerned outsider I cannot but hope that the wind from the north will keep the city afloat, and not blow it away.