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# Film Posters as an Alterative/Alternative Archive for Chinese Film History

Zhang Yingjin

**Abstract**: The film poster generates public desire for watching the film, but its pictorial cues often exceed its intended ideological or thematic message. The excess information contained in graphic composition, star texts, and visual citations (e.g., to current fashions and other intertexts) makes the film poster an alterative para-text in the sense that it sets in motion a dynamic of circulating multilayered meanings in a medium that resonates with other media and genres of art (e.g., drawing, painting, calligraphy, photography, design, literature, drama, opera, and music). Film posters are therefore enmeshed in intermediality or crossmediality and inevitably gesture toward something outside themselves — something shadowy, alterative, alternative, something out of sync with itself in place and time. This article cites Paul Fonoroff's *Silver Light: A Pictorial History of Hong Kong Cinema, 1920-1970* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1997) as example and argues that film posters constitute a largely unexplored, underutilized archive for Chinese film historiography. Fonoroff's pictorial history offers an alternative way of approaching the history of Hong Kong cinema, one that resembles postmodern literary historiography in its emphasis on discontinuity, fragmentation, juxtaposition, and heterogeneity. The article goes on to examine film posters in Hong Kong, the mainland, and Taiwan in the 1950-1970s and illustrates the ways film posters constitute an alterative/alternative archive for Chinese film history and visual culture, an archive that calls for speculative reading to construct an open, multivalent system of visual signification.

**Keywords**: film poster; alternative archive; alteration; postmodern historiography; speculative reading

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**标　题**：作为华语电影史中变异/另类档案的电影海报

**摘　要**：电影海报旨在引起公众观看电影的欲望，但其图文的暗示经常超越意在的意识形态或主题信息。构图、明星与视觉指涉(如时装和其他互文)中的多余信息让电影海报成为变异的对位文本，因为海报催生了多层意义流通的一个动态机制，其媒介跨越多种艺术媒体和类型(如绘画、书法、摄影、设计、文学、戏剧和音乐)。电影海报因此介入媒体间性或跨媒体性，不可避免地指涉某种身外之物，某种隐蔽、变异或另类之物，某种与时空措置之物。本文以方保罗的《银光：1920—1970 香港电影图说历史》(香港三联，1997 年)为例，论证电影海报乃是华语电影史学领域中尚待开发的档案。方保罗的图说历史尝试了研究香港电影史的另类途径，其中对断裂、碎片、并置和差异的强调与后现代文学史类似。本文继而分析 20 世纪 50—70 年代香港、台湾和内地(祖国大陆)的华语电影海报，以论证电影海报乃是华语电影史与视觉文化中一种变异、另类的档案，期待一种猜测性阅读，以建构开放、多元的视觉意义体系。

**关键词**：电影海报；　另类档案；　变异；　后现代文学史；　猜测性阅读

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## Film Posters

Film posters have long been a main promotion vehicle for film distribution and exhibition as they are regularly featured in prominent spaces in cinemas, newspapers, and magazines. Even in the digital age now, film posters are still visible across the cyber space. However, insofar as film historiography is concerned, film posters have remained largely an unexplored, underutilized archive, in China as well as elsewhere. This article seeks to address the contradiction between the all too obvious presence of film posters in visual culture since the early twentieth century and the peculiar absence of scholarly attention to its significance to film historiography. It is my contention that the peculiarity in question is derived from the film poster as a particular type of para-text that exhibits itself always in an altered relation to itself and others, and this self-altering peculiarity points to an alternative way of approaching film historiography.

As a para-text, the film poster stimulates the viewer's desire to watch an advertised film, but its pictorial cues often exceed its intended ideological or thematic message. The excess information contained in a film poster's graphic composition, star images, and visual citations (e. g., to current fashions and other intertexts) and generated in its reception contexts tends to make it alterative in the sense that it sets in motion a dynamic of circulating multilayered meanings in a medium that resonates with other media and genres of arts. Film posters are therefore enmeshed in intermediality or crossmediality and inevitably gesture toward something outside themselves — something shadowy, alternative, alterative, something perpetually out of sync with itself in place and time.

I have explored the significance of the concepts of "alterative" or "alteration" in modern Chinese culture through the insights from postmodern theories of thirdspace and literary evaluation (Zhang, "Thirdspace" 324 – 26). Thirdspace draws on Henri Lefebvre's elaboration of a third term to counterbalance the persistence of either/or binary thinking in Western philosophy: "The third term is the other, with all that this term implies (*alterity*, the relation between the present/absent other, *alteration-alienation*)" (qtd. in Soja 53; emphases original). In expounding Lefebvre's concept, Edward Soja anticipates Thirdspace "to capture what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances, and meanings," a milieu that tends to produce something that is "disorderly, unruly, constantly evolving, unfixed, never presentable in permanent constructions" (Soja 70).

I suggest that the film poster functions as a thirdspace and is forever caught in a dynamic of alterity and alteration. As a vehicle of advertising a film, the film poster always references something outside and other than itself. It exists as the film's uncanny other — both familiar and yet unfamiliar at the same time — and as such it must perpetually other or alter itself, asserting a non-self that consists of the recognizable traces of others, be they a film, a director, a star, a studio, a genre, or a combination of them. Indeed, as a visual text, a film poster lacks its proper site. It is a para-site in that it not only depends on other physical or virtual sites to exhibit itself — movie theaters, public walls, and nowadays digital platforms — but also draws on other established artistic media (e. g., drawing, painting, calligraphy, photography, design, literature, drama, opera, and music). The information contained and transmitted by a film poster is always already altered (as in its necessarily fragmented images and truncated texts) and alienated (as the majority of poster designers are relegated to anonymity).[①] Any resulting meanings in a film poster are therefore multilayered and multivalent.

The inherent multivalence of a film poster means that its interpretation approximates what Barbara Herrnstein Smith conceives of literary evaluation over time: "always compromised,

impure, contingent; *altering* when it alteration finds" (1; emphases added). Indeed, the word "contingent" characterizes not only the interpretation but oftentimes the production of film posters. As in the case of Chen Zi Fu, who designed over 5,000 film posters in Taiwan from 1946 to 1978, a poster designer worked with limited information before a film was completed and must speculate on what might appeal to the audience on the basis of the chosen cast, genre, and storyline (Xue and Yao 151). Such contingency in design and production would necessitate ambiguity and leave room for alteration when altering is needed. Indeed, it is quite common that a given film is accompanied by two to three different (i. e., altered and alternative) posters. Still, the film poster's dynamic of alteration-alienation might exert a measurable impact on a film's reception and a star's popularity. As Chen Zi Fu recalls, sometimes film actors came to his house and fought over whose names should get a more prominent placement in the poster under design (ibid. 153).

For scholars, film posters represent an underutilized archive because they are everywhere and nowhere at the same time — everywhere due to its prominent visual presence before film screenings, but nowhere because their meanings are ambiguous, barely supportive of definitive interpretations, and therefore overlooked in scholarship. Nonetheless, I would argue that, if we suspend our firm belief in the linear model of historiography and the depth model of interpretation, then film posters may open a new avenue to explore film history and visual culture, an avenue that may lead to unexpected ideological implications, historical contingencies, and artistic variations. Contrary to a moviegoer's pragmatic use of a film poster, a scholar's reading of film posters can be circular, digressive, and recurrent. Furthermore, film posters call for a reading that is speculative with regard to elements that may be absent, altered, and alternative.

In the following sections, I will first discuss Paul Fonoroff's model of pictorial history as an illuminating case of turning film posters and magazine covers into an alternative/alterative view of film history. I will then venture into a speculative reading of select film posters from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the mainland from the 1950s to the 1970s and offer closing remarks.

## Pictorial History

In my opinion, Paul Fonoroff's *Silver Light: A Pictorial History of Hong Kong Cinema, 1920-1970* (1997) represents an alternative way of approaching the history of Hong Kong cinema. Based largely on his impressive private collection of film materials, "the book presents an entertaining and informative overview of the formative years of Hong Kong cinema," but significantly, it does not aim at "being all-inclusive" (Fonoroff, *Silver* xxi). Fonoroff recognized the challenging task of organizing his history at a time when a book-length narrative history of Hong Kong cinema in English was yet to come (e. g., Teo), so Fonoroff decided to take the combination of a "more or less chronological approach" for "the less prolific pre-war era" (i. e., pre-1945) and a "genre approach" for 1946-1970 (Fonoroff, *Silver* xxi). The genres Fonoroff featured include dramas, war films, adaptations, mystery, thrillers, comedies, opera movies, martial arts movies, and musicals. A ten-page introduction leads the reader from the silent era, Cantonese talkies, Sino-Japanese War, victory against the Japanese to the beginning of a golden age, the rise of Mandarin movies, and the decline of Cantonese cinema and the Taiwanese invasion (all these terms taken from his introduction's section titles).[②] Yet, his written introduction aside, Fonoroff's rare treats in this pictorial history are a dazzling array of pictures reproduced from his collection of film magazines, photographs, advertisements, booklets, playbills, and posters. These pictures are organized in thematic clusters pointing to translocal flows between Hong Kong, Shanghai, Hollywood, and Japan, and they are all

accompanied by captions that contain Fonoroff's keen observations, intriguing cross-references, and sometimes hard-to-find production information.

Reading *Silver Light* is like wandering in an art museum: one can browse quickly through pictures to take in a general impression of colors and compositions, or can take time comparing a few related pictures on side-by-side display (e. g. , fated lovers in *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* or in *Dream of the Red Chamber*). Occasionally, one stumbles on some surprising tip bids (e. g. , early Bruce Lee) and discovers precedents or similarities one did not expect before (e. g. , Hong Kong adaptations of Lu Xun and Ba Jin years before similar mainland productions came out). Furthermore, oftentimes one feels to be time-traveling back and forth and is puzzled by uncanny motifs and resonances across time, space, genres, and industries (i. e. , Cantonese cinema, Mandarin cinema). In brief, Fonoroff's pictorial history encourages one to indulge in viewing and reviewing at a leisure pace, to satisfy one's urges of scopophilia and epistephilia simultaneously, and to reaffirm cinephilia as a vibrant cultural phenomenon in modern societies. ③

Interestingly, Fonoroff's pictorial history resembles postmodern literary historiography in their shared conceptual emphasis on discontinuity, fragmentation, juxtaposition, and heterogeneity. Fonoroff's kaleidoscopic vignettes disrupt the linear, teleological model of narrative history (e. g. , from cradle to tomb, or from budding through flowering to decaying) and, instead, embrace the model of postmodern historiography whereby "the idea of totality seems to be left aside, substituted by the ideas of plurality, fragmentation, and absence of center" (Talens and Zunzunegui 29). Rather than presenting a coherent ideological or theoretical interpretation of Hong Kong cinema progressing steadfastly to certain goals or destinies, such as a culture of disappearance (Abbas) or an emergent Hong Kong identity (Fu), Fonoroff in a sense has adopted what Emory Elliott envisions for a new approach to literary historiography in the late 1980s, which is described as "modestly postmodern: it acknowledges diversity, complexity, and contradiction by making them structural principles, and it forgoes closure as well as consensus" (Elliott xiii). The structural presentation of stars, genres, and other subjects in *Sliver Light* resembles the architectural idea of a postmodern history book as "an art gallery ... to be entered through many portals intended to give the reader the paradoxical experience of seeing both the harmony and the discontinuity of materials" (ibid).

For example, in Fonoroff's history, a section on the devastating Sino-Japanese War of the late 1930s to the early 1940s is followed immediately by a section on the Japanese glamor during the 1950s – 1960s, thus forming a striking contrast between Chinese wartime patriotism and a Cold War Hong Kong musical fashion imported from Japan, in two historical periods barely twenty years apart. By downplaying the conventional narrative logic of causality, coherence, and progression in favor of the juxtaposition and contrasts of disparate and sometimes contradictory pictures as various entry points into film history, Fonoroff forsakes the privileged dominant classification schemes of directors, periods, and movements in film history and instead has "focused on nodal points, coincidences, returns, resurgences," all key concepts Denis Hollier similarly intended for a new form of literary historiography in the late 1980s (xx). Hollier's history of French literature subsequently initiated a much-celebrated Harvard model of event-based micronarratives and to date has seen fruition in other national literatures, such as German, American, and modern Chinese (Wellbery; Marcus and Sollors; Wang). ④

Admittedly, Fonoroff may not have taken his inspiration directly from postmodern literary historiography or similar theoretical models, but his *Silver Light* represents a similar endeavor to "construct a history without closure, one that can be entered through many points and can unfold through many coherent, informed, and focused narrative

lines" (Hutcheon, Kadir, and Valdés 5). Interestingly, in contrast to his literary counterparts, Fonoroff relies more on visual than verbal materials, and his pictorial history is therefore even more heterogeneous and multivalent, perpetually open to alternative interpretations that otherwise may have been glossed over or foreclosed by a rigid ideological, theoretical, or teleological model of film historiography.

To illustrate such intentional open-endedness, we may turn to Fonoroff's caption for the last picture (#398) in his book:

> The Cantonese movie industry plummeted further in 1970, with just 35 movies; between February 1971 and September 1973, Cantonese-dialect film would disappear altogether. And it was easy to see why with *The Wedding Gown* [Jia Yi] (1970), a contrived romance about three couples and the lengths they go to get married. The heart at upper left contains Chan Po-chu [Connie Chan] and Tsang Kong (Ken Tsang, brother of Mandarin star Lin Cui [Jeannette Lin Tsui]). Though the film had musical numbers, by 1970 the market for Cantonese pop was virtually nonexistent, the Hong Kong public preferring Mandarin or English songs. (Fonoroff, *Silver* 199)

This caption demonstrates Fonoroff's intimate knowledge of Hong Kong film history, genres, and stars. The decline of Cantonese-dialect films in the late 1960s is attributed here mainly to the local audience's preference for Mandarin or English songs to Cantonese pop at a given juncture, but the hiatus is stated as temporary because by the end of the 1970s Cantonese-dialect films would dominate Hong Kong again and eventually merge the Mandarin film industry by the late 1980s. This caption also shows Fonoroff's attention to film stars as a nodal point that links Cantonese and Mandarin film worlds, such as Chan Po-chu (Chen Baozhu) for Cantonese cinema and Lin Cui for Mandarin cinema. The heart shape at upper left of the picture alludes to both the film's romance genre and the graphic design of the advertisement, which contains other visual and verbal information which Fonoroff does not have enough space to elaborate on in a caption. Fonoroff's choice of ending his book with picture #398 thus marks a juncture of a temporary decline and a future revival in film history, and the picture itself stands as an open invitation to the reader to explore other factors that may have contributed to such a decline and a revival, to appreciate the information on graphical display, including plot clues, genre designation, and stars lineup. Moreover, as in the case of numerous other pictures in *Silver Light*, the sheer possibility that the original films may no longer be extant further enhances the value of Fonoroff's materials as an alternative archive for future research.

## Alterative Archive

Twenty years have passed since the publication of Fonoroff's *Silver Light*, and finally the value of his rare collection of Chinese film materials as an alternative archive was confirmed in 2017 by its official acquisition by the C. V. Starr East Asian Library at the University of California, Berkeley (http://exhibits.lib.berkeley.edu/spotlight/fonoroff-collection). In film studies, research on films as archive is relatively underdeveloped, and current studies in this area have focused mostly on preservation (Houston), digitization (Fossati), and programming (Bosma), all on the side of public service. Although recent English scholarship of Chinese cinema has explored film archives, especially in relation to early cinema studies (Bao; Huang; Z. Zhang), the full impact of film archives on film historiography awaits further investigation.

Here, we may be reminded that the archive is one key topic at a conference on Chinese cinema held at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, in

August 2015. As the conference's organizer, Jason McGrath enumerates the archive as number four of what he calls seven "new angles" on Chinese film scholarship:

> Fourth, new research into the historical archives of film culture, including industry and popular audience, rather than simply fitting cinema into the already well-known debates among leading intellectuals and literary figures. The Chinese film industry has always had ties of various sorts to the literary scene, but it also has functioned separately, whether in terms of its capitalisation and industrial organisation or in terms of its mass audience. Detailed film historiography must, therefore, explore different archives than the more general field of modern Chinese literary and cultural studies. (Berry et al. 69)

McGrath's emphasis on the archive is meant to encourage film scholars to explore resources outside the literary field and to rethink dominant disciplinary paradigms and approaches. Like McGrath, I previously explored the multivalent status of the archive and its untapped potentiality in urban culture in Shanghai (Zhang, *Cinema*). As I stated at the 2015 conference: "An archive by definition is the material that has not been built into a larger project, in other words that we need to be negotiating the difference between the archive and historiography. An archive by definition does not include methodology yet" (Berry et al. 85). What I wanted to highlight is that the archive is not restricted to only one type of ideological or methodological interpretation and should be conceptualized as open-ended and required of varied interpretations in the future.

Obviously Fonoroff's collection is precisely such an archive, one that is not limited or amendable to a single methodology and instead is open to multiple uses. Fonoroff's first attempt in using his own archive is *Silver Light*, which has developed a methodology akin to the core ideas of postmodern literary historiography. However, other than a pure coincidence that *Silver Light* came out at the height of postmodern theories, Fonoroff may be postmodern by accident at best. Contrary to Ackbar Abbas (1997), Fonoroff has shown little interest in theory and would rather let his pictures speak for themselves in a polyphonic — if not exactly symphonic — manner. The peculiarity of Fonoroff's archive, which demands attention to visual display more than verbal narration, may account for his distinctive methodology of fragmentation, juxtaposition, and resurgences in an alternative history of Hong Kong cinema. What makes his archive peculiar is that over time he has collected rare print materials related to films — especially film magazines and posters — that usually escape scholarly scrutiny, exceed singular interpretations, or predate critical consensuses.

Despite its peculiarity, Fonoroff's archive, along with his alterative approach, has proven both attractive and productive. In addition to an academic conference in his honor at the University of California, Berkeley, in October 2017, the continued interest in his archive is evident in his latest pictorial history, *Chinese Movie Magazines, From Charlie Chaplin to Chairman Mao, 1921 – 1951* (2018). The title reference to Chaplin indicates the dominance of film stars in Fonoroff's new book, but here early Hollywood stars are prominently featured, including Lillian Gish, Clara Bow, Anna May Wong, and Harold Lloyd, juxtaposed with Chinese film stars such as Butterfly Wu (Hu Die), Ruan Lingyu, and Nancy Chan (Chen Yunshang). Pictures of Li Xianglan (Ri Koran or Yamaguchi Yoshiko), an ethnic Japanese wartime popular star masquerading as Chinese, reminds the reader of issues of ambiguity and uncertainty of visual representation. A distinct feature of Fonoroff's new book is his highlights of art deco magazine covers as a graphic art design that

would become less common in the 1930s. Design, therefore, deserves our attention when we purse a speculative reading of film posters and magazine covers, as I intend to do below.

## Speculative Reading

We may revisit Fonoroff's picture #398 in *Silver Light* here: the spotlight on Chan Pochu reaffirms her stature as the leading star in Cantonese movies of the 1960s. As Fonoroff (*Silver* 75) states elsewhere in his first pictorial history, Chan played in fifty-plus films in 1967 – 1968 alone, such as *First Love* (*Qingdou chukai*, dir. Mo Kangshi, 1967) and *Give Me a Kiss* (*Gei wo yige wen*, dir. Huang Yao, 1968). Apart from romantic roles, Chan also appeared as an iron lady and a Bond girl, as well as in opera movies, martial arts pictures, and musicals in the same period (108 – 109, 132, 158, 173 – 75, 197, 199). *The Wedding Gown* (dir. Liu Da, 1970) may appear as one of Chan's swansong performances, but the structure of *Silver Light* compels the reader to go back and forth in star gazing and thus produces a multilayered speculative reading.

Curiously, the parenthetical reference to Lin Cui in Fonoroff's caption #398 points to the parallel Mandarin film industry, in which Lin Cui's star status is confirmed by her appearance in *A Story of Three Loves* (*Tixiao yinyuan*, dir. Wang Tianlin, 1964), an MP&GI version shot and released in the same year as its rival Shaws' *Tears and Laughter* (*Tixiao yinyuan*, 1964). Prior to these two competing Mandarin versions, two Cantonese adaptations of this popular 1929 Beijing novel of the same title by Zhang Henshui came out in 1952 (dir. Yang Gongliang, Yin Haiqing) and 1957 (dir. Li Chenfeng), respectively (Fonoroff, *Silver* 68 – 69).[⑤] Nicknamed "the students' sweetheart," Lin Cui was one of MP&GI's top stars and plays the mischievous third sister in *Our Sister Hedy* (*Si qianjin*, dir. Tao Qin, 1957). Fonoroff's caption cites two other films bearing the same Chinese title Si qianjin (four daughters), a 1937 Shanghai Mandarin movie and a 1989 Cantonese production (*Silver* 128). Clearly, just as apparent digressions are needed to pack maximum information into a film poster, Fonoroff's captions are intended in a similar circular fashion to build an intricate network of references and resonances, most frequently enabled and embodied by film stars as an endearing and enduring nodal point in film history.

Since Fonoroff's captions rarely comment on the visual design of film posters and advertisements, we may take another look atpicture # 398. The advertisement is apparently taken from a film magazine, and as such it is more intricate than a film poster in textual insertion. The large print of two Chinese characters of the film title occupies center stage and divides the picture into two halves: a photograph of three couples in "wedding gowns" (the English title) on lower right, with upper right taken by printed names of six actors and the director, and a heart enclosing Chan Po-chu at upper left. Other texts in even smaller prints emphasize the monetary value of the wedding gown (HK $5, 000), plot intrigues (misunderstandings between couples), popsongs, and hybrid genres (romance, comedy).

In comparison, the poster for *Our Sister Hedy* reduces distracting texts and highlights the headshots of four sisters, each framed in a square lined up vertically at the center, with the Chinese title in a relatively small print against a red rectangle and the English title in an even smaller print against a black rectangle. A large oval shape of yellow pushes the four central images to the foreground, and the poster thus shows confidence that film stars themselves are sufficient to attract the viewer's attention (Fonoroff, *Silver* 128). The prominence of colors yellow and redin this poster confirms Esther Liu's observation that usually three cardinal colors (red, yellow, and blue) form a background for highlighting the stars' headshots and Chinese film titles, which is identified as a 1960s continuation of the typical 1950s poster style. According to Liu, a new style to emerge in the

1960s is color painting, most often adopted for martial arts pictures and contemporary dramas. By the 1970s, a cartoon style was attached to comedies, and images would take precedent over texts in poster design from then on (Lo 23 – 25).

A stylish poster for *The Contract* (*Maishen qi*, dir. Michael Hui, 1978) by Yuan Dayong (Ruan Dayong) confirms Liu's observation. Three large Chinese characters in red are given three-dimensionality by their yellow shadows. Above this textual lower bottom, which includes production and cast information, cartoon paintings of three Hui brothers — Michael, Ricky, and Samuel — dominate the entire poster against a light blue background. The stars' big heads and facial expressions dwarf their shrunk bodies, which creates a humorous effect appropriate to the comedy in question (ibid. 83). A similar humorous design is found in the poster for *City Fantasy* (*Dushi kuangxiangqu*, dir. Wu Jiaxiang, 1964): four actors' photographed big heads are conjoined with their hand-drawn small bodies, and they fly above five Chinese characters of the film title, which are shaped and decorated as high-rise buildings and printed in various colors. A viewer needs to look hard to decipher texts in tiny prints listing the cast and production information at the narrow top portion (Fonoroff, *Silver* 121).

In addition to the cartoon style, Hong Kong film posters also applied traditional styles of Chinese New Year painting (*nianhua*), as for *Princess Chang Ping* (*Di nü hua*, dir. John Woo, 1976), and of illustrated fiction (xiuxiang xiaoshuo), as for *Story of the Sword* (*Jianying enchou* lu, dir. Hu Peng, Jiang Yang, 1962). The poster for *Story of the Sword* uses bright yellow as background and foregrounds the film title's five Chinese characters in red, arranged diagonally from top right to bottom left, thus forming a contrast between two actors wearing red clothing at upper left and five actors in black and white at lower right. This contrasted composition conveys a sense of theatricality heightened by several actors' martial arts poses (Lo 54). In addition to verticality and horizontality, the diagonal arrangement of Chinese characters (usually in red or yellow) appear to be a distinct film poster design in Hong Kong.

It should be noted that Chinese characters in film titles represent a unique opportunity for Chinese poster designers to alter colors and shapes, something difficult to do with letters in English titles. Sometimes, a Chinese film title would become a major attraction itself. For instance, in the poster for *Back Door* (*Houmen*, dir. Li Hanxiang, 1960), two Chinese characters in light blue are blown up to occupy almost half of the frame, with its long dark blue shadows looming like a huge concrete wall, against an all-red background, and five actors — two of them mega-stars, Hu Die (the elected movie queen of 1930s Shanghai) and Wang Yin (a famous Hong Kong actor and director from 1929 to 1977) — are dwarfed to an insignificant proportion, as if inserted here as an afterthought. The poster's celebratory ambience is literally topped with a line of prize trophies, which remind viewers of numerous awards the film won at the Asia Film Festival, including the Best Picture (ibid. 48).

Back in the 1950s, film titles often occupied prominent center stage in posters, and Chinese characters are arranged stylistically in large prints and attractive colors (red, yellow). *No Time for Love* (*Youlong xifeng*, dir. Yan Jun, 1957) features in a large print the film's title in the center row while relegating Yan Jun and Li Lihua, an eminent Hong Kong couple on and off screen, mostly to the bottom, with another picture of Li Lihua (whose career stretches from 1940 in Shanghai through a peak in Hong Kong to 1978 in Taiwan) in a wedding gown poking her head out at the upper left. Three horizontal rows of red (top), white (middle), and blue (bottom) provide a striking background for four Chinese characters (yellow with black contours, tilting slightly right or left) to "play" with, an ideal suggested by you and xi in the Chinese title, literally "a swimming dragon playing with a phoenix" (ibid. 36 – 37). Similarly, in the poster for *The Lady of Mystery* (*Shenmimeiren*, dir. Hua Keyi, 1957),

super-star Li Xianglan, whose film career traversed from Manchuria, Shanghai, Taiwan to Japan and Hollywood in the 1940s – 1950s, appears inconspicuously in black and white against a background of white (lower three fifths) and orange (upper two fifths), superimposed by four large characters in the Chinese title. Arranged vertically in red and altered with crooked edges to enhance the sense of mystery, the Chinese characters take up almost one third of the entire space to command attention (ibid. 38), thereby exemplifying a distinct Hong Kong poster design style that privileges written words to star images.

## Comparative Perspective

Why did Hong Kong designers apparently prefer words to stars? Where did this poster design style come from? Shiu Hou and Lo Che-ying have provided one explanation in a specific Hong Kong local context. The "Golden Age" of Hong Kong cinema in the 1950s – 1960s coincided with the boom years of building construction and renovation in the city, and many wooden fences originally set up around construction sites to protect pedestrians soon became ideal sites (or para-sites) for advertising film posters and playbills. While most film posters used the regular size of 22 x 30 inches, Shiu and Lo noted glaring exceptions: "Some of them were posted in separate pieces of paper, each carrying one character of the title, with a size of 30 x 40 inches. Sometimes, the film title ran for four to five big posters in a straight line, which was really impressive" (ibid. 14). The necessity of catching the attention of passers-by from near and far in busy streets might account for the domination of large film titles in Hong Kong poster design of 1950s – 1060s.

A quick browse through 1950s posters from the mainland indicates that the majority shows relatively smaller — albeit no less stylish and striking — film titles than their Hong Kong counterparts. One exception is the poster for *The Family* (*Jia*, dir. Chen Xihe, Ye Ming, 1956), in which the title's single character in white is set in a red square in lower right, against the background of a dilapidated house caught in a storm, and the entire poster is done in traditional ink-and-wash (*shuimo*) painting (Guangzhou Association 46). Similarly, Chen Zi Fu's posters from 1950s Taiwan feature eye-catching and stylishly calligraphed titles, but their sizes rarely dwarf star images. On the contrary, star images, especially their facial expressions, constitute Chen's focal points. For instance, *Song on a Rainy Night* (*Yuye gesheng*, dir. Li Hanxiang, 1950), a Mandarin singing picture (*gechang pian*), foregrounds Bai Guang's femme fatale beauty, and *Love Never Ceases* (*Jiuqing mianmian*, dir. Shao Luohui, 1962), a Taiwanese-dialect film billed as "the province's first musical," emphasizes the separated couple's sadness (Xue and Yao 15,38). By contrast, *The Oyster Girl* (*Kenü*, dir. Li Xing, 1964) looks more optimistic, with Wang Muochou smiling and waving her hand to the viewer against a broad view of beachside oyster farming, which resembles the visual effect of the advertised new cinemascope in Eastman color(ibid. 62).

Unlike many contemporary Hong Kong posters, Chen Zi Fu's did not like inserting photographs; instead, he preferred painting and exceled in facial expressions, believing that the viewer would stay longer in front of a painting than a photograph (ibid. 153). Compared with his Hong Kong and mainland counterparts, Chen's visual style is more realistic, and he emphasizes creating an appropriate atmosphere with composition, colors, shapes, and human gestures, especially for horror films and martial arts pictures. His poster for *A Touch of Zen* (*Xianü*, dir. King Hu, 1970) contrasts black and white, with a tint of red, to highlight the breathtaking fight in darkness(ibid. 140), while his poster for *The God of Arrows* (*Wuhua jianshen*, 1978) mixes red (the sky background), yellow (the moon at the center), and black (the disproportionately large head of an eagle at bottom) to convey a mythic ambience (ibid. 143). In its color scheme, Chen's poster for *The God of Arrows*

prefigures the Hong Kong poster for *Once Upon a Time in China* (*Huang Feihong*, dir. Tsui Hark, 1991), a simple, yet enticing design of a tiny black silhouette of Jet Li (Li Lianjie) facing stormy clouds rendered in red and black (Lo 111).

In comparison to their counterpartsin Taiwan and Hong Kong, posters from the mainland exhibit a wider range of traditional visual styles and artistic formats, from ink-and-wash painting, as in *Lin Zexu* (dir. Zheng Junli, 1959), a historical drama, to refined figure painting (*gongbi xiaoxiang*), as in *Third Sister Liu* (*Liu sanjie*, dir. Su Li, 1960), a regional musical, and New Year painting, as in *Monkey Subdues the White-Bone Demon* (*Sun Wukong sanda Baigu Jing*, dir. Yang Xiaozhong, 1960), an animation feature (Guangzhou Association 58, 60, 63). A unique style from the mainland is woodblock prints, which date back to leftist visual culture of the 1930s and find a rendition in *The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzi jun*, dir. Xie Jin, 1961), a war film (Guangzhou Association 64). Although a revolutionary aesthetics is still visible and consistent in design, in general traditional styles dominated mainland posters of the 1950s – 1960s, especially for opera movies and ethnic minority films.

In a striking difference from Hong Kong and Taiwan, mainland posters place much less emphasis on stars and texts. The poster for *New Year's Sacrifice* (*Zhufu*, dir. Sang Hu, 1956) leaves ample empty space at the center (akin to liubai in traditional Chinese painting), with the title framed by a lantern on the top, and Sister Xianglin carrying a plate of fish entering from the right. The fact that Bai Yang, a star from 1930s leftist cinema, plays Sister Xianglin is hardly visible because her face is altered by a generic style of New Year painting, and her name is printed in light green against a grey background, hardly discernible along with the names of the director Sang Hu, the screenwriter Xia Yan, and the original author Lu Xun, all of them luminary figures in Chinese film and literary history (ibid. 47). The reduced emphasis on stars' appeal is consistent with the practice of remolding film stars as film workers and rendering them as revolutionary models for off-screen emulation in socialist China (Farquhar and Zhang 97 – 118), and the absence of stars as object of desire tends to direct attention to the roles they play in film posters. Consequently, viewers might remember the melodious mountain songs Third Sister Liu sings but forgets that the role is played by Huang Wanqiu; or they might be touched by the late Qing national hero Lin Zexu but overlook the impressive performance by Zhao Dan, another star from 1930s leftist films (ibid. 86 – 96). Clearly, even though their visual traditions are similar, mainland posters have functioned differently in its manipulation of desires and intentions than their Hong Kong and Taiwan counterparts, the former more ideologically coded and restricted, whereas the latter more commercially and visually driven.

## Closing Remarks

In keeping with the effort of foregoing premature closure and consensus characteristic of postmodern literary historiography mentioned earlier in this article, I would sidestep drawing a conclusion in my speculative reading of film posters as an alterative/alternative archive for Chinese film history. Given the understudied status of Chinese film posters, my reading here is necessarily preliminary, incomplete, and subject to alteration. As closing remarks, I offer three general observations for further contemplation.

First, film posters seem peculiarly out of sync at once with themselves and with film history, and therefore may not adequately convey the dominant ideology at a given time as they are intended to. The majority of mainland posters of the 1950s – 1960s, for example, hardly evoke realism that was all the rage in artistic and theoretical realms in socialist China. Ideologically, socialist film posters were expected to function like socialist propaganda posters, especially those from the Cultural Revolution period (Landsberger; Evans and Donald;

Mittler), by generating immediate passions in the viewer for revolutionary activities. Yet, precisely because they are always self-altered and alterative in multiple references and resonances, film posters always point to things outside themselves. In socialist China, they seemed aligned more with Chinese visual traditions such as ink-and-wash or refined figure paintings than with the mandated ideological purposes, which were better served by propaganda posters of the same period. [6] The poster for *New Year's Sacrifice*, for instance, looks like an ordinary New Year painting, soft in tones and mild in connotations, and does not seem to excite a viewer's desire to watch a film adaptation of Lu Xun's famous story and participate in socialist nation-building. In comparison, perhaps even counter-intuitively, Chen Zi Fu's posters suggest that Taiwan film posters may be more realistic than their mainland counterparts, at least inasmuch as rendering of human figures is concerned. Chen's visual realism further contradicts a general dismissal of Taiwan cinema of the 1960s as merely entertaining or even escapist, a dismissal that has been interrogated in recent scholarship (Zhang, "Articulating").

Second, we can discern similarities in poster designs across the mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan during the 1950s – 1960s, despite their geopolitical differences. Chinese visual traditions dominated poster designs, and Chinese characters provided a unique opportunity for designers to highlight film titles and contrast them with film stars. In the mainland and Taiwan, film posters tended to downplay photography (a modern Western technology) and privilege drawing and painting in a traditional style familiar to the Chinese audience. Whether this tendency, along with the preference for cardinal color schemes, was derived in part from available printing technologies at the time is a question in need of further exploration. In contrast to socialist film posters that routinely altered or defamiliarized a film stars' facial features so as to redirect, at least theoretically, the viewer's desire elsewhere to the film's revolutionary narrative, Hong Kong film posters often foregrounded the corporeality of film stars, in part because they incorporated photographs of the stars' faces and unabashedly indulged in scopophilic and cinephilic pleasures.

Third, film posters encourage circular, digressive, recurrent, and parallel readings, and in peculiarly subtle ways they question or even resist linear narrative and causal exegesis. In comparison with the 1956 mainland poster for *The Family*, which is deprived of any human presence and alludes to the symbolic crumbling "feudal" system its rendition of a house caught in a storm, the Hong Kong poster for *Garden of Repose* (*Guyuan chunmeng*, dir. Zhu Shilin, 1964), an adaptation of another novel by Ba Jin, spotlights the star Xia Meng in a large oval insert of her face painted realistically, against the background setting of a house with five actors choreographed in theatric poses (Lo 62). Produced by the left-wing studio Phoenix with close ideological and financial ties to the mainland, *Garden of Repose* reveals subtle differences in Hong Kong engendered by pressures of competing geopolitics, markets, and audience expectations. Produced eight years apart, these two posters for film adaptations of Ba Jin's novels are ideologically connected but artistically altered and alterative, and they do not support any reading of historical progress or artistic advancement. Instead, they simply yoke together disparate references to Chinese ink-and-wash painting, theatrical posture, and star appeal (or its conspicuous absence). As they demonstrate, film posters are para-texts enmeshed in the crossmediality of artistic platforms and embodied performance, and their inherent alterating/alternating tendency therefore suspends or disables the depth model of interpretation.

As my speculative reading of select Chinese film posters and my elaboration of Fonoroff's alternative pictorial history illustrate, film posters play a highly visible role in complicating and preserving dynamics of Chinese film cultures across historical and geopolitical divides. Precisely because

they have been relegated to a space of invisibility in scholarship, they constitute a largely underutilized archive and await the efforts of film scholars to retrieve information, reinterpret differences, and reconstruct alterative and alternative narratives of Chinese film history and visual culture.

## 注释[Notes]

① Only one poster designer is identified by name — Yuan Dayong — in a collection of Hong Kong film posters (Lo 1992: 82－83,107). Another exception is Chen Zi Fu, who is graced with a collection of his film posters in Taiwan (Xu and Yao).

② Fonoroff would expand this coverage in more substantial detail and include new sections on the 1970s, the 1980s, and the 1990s in his chapter on Hong Kong cinema (Zhang and Xiao 31－46), which was one of the earliest such historical overview in English.

③ Scopophilia has been widely theorized in cinema studies, especially the gaze theory. Epistephilia is coined by Bill Nichols to distinguish the viewer's desire for knowledge in documentary film from the desire for pleasure in fiction film (178). For cinephilia and history, see de Valck and Hagener; Keathley; Braester.

④ For a further discussion of the Harvard model of literary historiography, see Y. Zhang 2016.

⑤ Two much earlier adaptions of Zhang Henshui's novel came from Shanghai's Mingxing in six parts (dir. Zhang Shichuan, 1932) and Yihua (dir. Sun Jing, 1940). The Shaws also produced a Cantonese remake, *Lover's Destiny* (*Xin tixiao yinyuan*, dir. Chu Yuan, 1975).

⑥ Similarly, in her analysis of a film poster for *24 City* (*24 chengji*, dir. Jia Zhangke, 2008) that both references and subverts socialist symbols, Corey Schultz touches on the poster's alterative function in postsocialist China: "both the film and the poster are not nostalgic *recreations* of the past, but are *alterations* of it in order to fit the needs of the present" (57; original emphasis).

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