7. Right Screen in Hong Kong: Chang Kuo-sin’s Asia Pictures and The Heroine*

Kenny K. K. Ng

Abstract
This chapter traces Chang Kuo-sin’s 1950s media project with the support of the CIA-backed Asia Foundation. Chang launched Asia Pictures in Hong Kong to produce Chinese movies intended to present non-communist and anti-communist worldviews to diasporic Chinese audiences. Chang attempted to vie with the left-wing Great Wall Pictures by producing commercially friendly pictures. The chapter examines the production of The Heroine (1955), a historical psycho-drama about a female assassin during the transition of the Ming to Qing Dynasty in 1664. The Heroine pioneered as a “woman’s picture” by figuring a female assassin in martial arts storytelling. The study assesses the contributions of Asia Pictures to Sinophone cinema and diasporic Chinese experiences amidst the leftist and rightist cultural contentions.

Keywords: anti-communist film; Asia Foundation; Cold War; Great Wall Pictures; martial arts; Sinophone cinema

On May 26, 1952, Chang Kuo-sin (1916–2006) submitted to the Committee for a Free Asia (CFA) an extensive plan for nurturing anti-communist filmmakers and writers in Hong Kong, taking the former British colonial city as a strategic Cold War locale in Asia. Labelling his media projects

*I am thankful to the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong for supporting my research project “Cold War Cosmopolitanism: Chang Kuo-sin’s Asia Enterprises and Cultural Legacies” (12613818), 2019–2021. This paper is an outcome of the research project.

Lee, S. and D. M. Espeña (eds.), Remapping the Cold War in Asian Cinemas. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024
DOI 10.5117/9789463727273_CH07
as “Fiction Enterprises,” Chang would establish Asia Press to publish the works of émigré Chinese scholars and exiled writers from mainland China. In the wake of the Korean War, he launched Asia Pictures, which was to compete against Hong Kong’s well-established left-oriented Great Wall (Changcheng) film company. Chang succeeded in attracting support for his first two endeavors in his “Tri-Dimensional Project”: the film studio and the writers’ organization would function as a well-coordinated band of ideological crack troops to counteract communist propaganda through Hong Kong’s central position within a wider diasporic community.

Chang himself adopted the alias “Fiction” in his clandestine correspondences with the American agencies. CFA was established in San Francisco in 1951 and was renamed The Asia Foundation (TAF) in 1954. Robert Blum, TAF’s first president, emphasized TAF as a non-governmental American organization focused on Asia. It functioned to facilitate Asians to “resist Communism on their own soil.” With its declared philanthropic missions, TAF was operating under a camouflaged association with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Washington’s networks for receiving considerable financial assistance from the US government. Through covert activities, TAF intervened in the motion picture industries in Asian countries like Hong Kong, Japan, Burma, Korea, Malaysia, and Thailand to surreptitiously advocate anti-communist movie business and culture.

Chang was himself a product of the Chinese diaspora. Born in Hainan Island, he was educated in Kuching, North Borneo (East Malaysia) in his teens. He later went to China to study law at the National Southwest

---

2 American agencies, however, did not grant support for Chang’s proposal of an informal network of Chinese intellectuals, writers, artists, and journalists organized for “public agitation” and “coordinated propaganda against the Communists.” See Chang, “A Tri-Dimensional Project for Battle for People’s Minds.”
Associated University in Kunming during the Sino-Japanese War, graduating in 1945, when he joined the Guomindang’s Central News Agency in Nanjing as a journalist and translator, later switching to American United Press (International). After leaving China in December 1949, he published a book about the first few months in Nanjing after the Communist take-over, in which he coined the phrase “behind the Bamboo Curtain.”

The belief in “truth is virtue” underlined Chang’s diehard anti-communist ideology. He believed that “Communist rule in China is a political swindle,” which “is fronted by an attractive camouflage”; henceforth, “we need chiefly just to tell the people the simple and honest truth of Communism in practice in China.” Chang perceived the function of cinema as telling the “truth” of communism to Asian people, but this could be achieved with art that was “purely entertainment in nature” buttressed by commercial investments. A successful film had to be equipped with “subtly injected slants against Communism” so that “the audience feels subconsciously, but will not be able to recognize outwardly.” Chang took Hong Kong as the most important frontline for this psychological warfare in Asia. “The projects must be started and based in Hong Kong, because the talents are here and because of Hong Kong’s accessibility to the Bamboo Curtain, which makes it easier to get the necessary materials for the psychological blast against the Communists.”

By proposing his “Battle for the People’s Minds against the Chinese Communists,” Chang (1951) moved to strike an agreement with his American agents. James Stewart, Director of Asian Operations for CFA in San Francisco, expressed his enthusiasm for Chang’s plan. He agreed with Chang on the strategic and geographical importance of Hong Kong, acknowledging that “the responsibility of Hong Kong in providing enlightenment for the rest of the area is very great.” But he reminded Chang of the great demand for film directors and actors with practical experience in the movie field, and the importance of storytelling, especially that of melodrama:

I have an old-fashioned feeling too that in a movie the story is the thing.
The theory of subtly injecting slants against Communism has become a

---

6 Chang Kuo-sin, *Eight Months behind the Bamboo Curtain* (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 2016). The book was first published in 1950.
7 Chang, *Eight Months behind the Bamboo Curtain*, xxiv.
sort of sophisticated cliché.... I hope that the movie people will look for plots that in themselves are an indication of the struggle for freedom or an exposé of communist tyranny. I would think melodrama is probably the best vehicle for our purposes.  

Chang emphasized that effective propaganda had to be good commercial entertainment. Stewart advocated melodramatic plots as an effective vehicle for Asia Pictures production. Chang and Stewart also agreed to exploit the burgeoning market in Hong Kong, a vibrant center of Chinese-language cinemas including the Cantonese and Mandarin languages, with minor productions in Amoy and related dialects. The complex Hong Kong film scene was divided into anti-communist, non-communist, and pro-communist. Hong Kong was also a center in Southeast Asia of a large language dubbing program, with films both locally made and imported from all over the world being dubbed in languages other than the original Cantonese dialect in the city. Chang and Stewart recognized that movies produced in Hong Kong exerted a tremendous impact on overseas Chinese audiences, particularly in Southeast Asia and among the Chinese diaspora.

Chang officially launched Asia Pictures and its movie production on July 11, 1953, designating himself as an “independent director and manager” of the company to cover up his American association. Embarking on a crusade against communism, Chang nonetheless intended to avoid blatant anti-communist messages in his films, favoring commercial pictures modeled on family melodramas or morality plays with themes of family harmony, generational conflict, social change, and traditional ideas about nationalism, family, and moral values. Law Kar and Frank Bren believe that the films produced by Asia Pictures “contained minimal political doctrine” and that “their anti-Communism lay in opposition to zealous revolutionary ideals and

12 The Hong Kong movie industry was ranked as the top fourth filmmaking center in the world after the United States of America, Japan, and India. In 1955, Hong Kong film studios produced 227 films (as against 188 in 1954). Hong Kong was superseded only by the United States of America, Japan, and India as a film-producing country. See “The Hong Kong Annual Report 1955: Film Industry.” In “Media: Audio-Visual Movies, General,” AFR, P58, Hoover Institution Archives.
13 Stewart cautioned that “all possible steps had to be taken” to protect Chang and maintain his identity as an “independent director and manager” as long as Chang was still working for the United Press as a journalist. It was imperative that Chang’s connection with his US agents be “kept a secret” to “insure the effectiveness of the program.” See his “Letter to James T. Ivy,” in “Fiction Enterprise,” June 2, 1952, 1–2. AFR, P58, Hoover Institution Archives.
in espousal of a more tolerant, moderate, and graduate course of reform.”¹⁴ The contestation with communism in Chang’s productions, it is argued, was to lie in the absence of revolutionary messages, political zealotry, or preachiness. Can politics be achieved in films that are apolitically made? In the following analysis of the production of *The Heroine*, I shall examine how the film’s political overtones contradicted the thesis that Chang simply aimed at producing commercially viable, apolitical films that sought to displace the films of the leftist studios in the eyes of diasporic viewers.

**Softcore Anti-Communism, American Networking, and *The Heroine***

Asia Pictures maintained active production during a short period between 1953 and 1958 and created only nine feature films. Chang tried to strike a balance between the artistic and social merits of the films, their espoused commercialism, and his political goals. The small corpus of works covered a wide spectrum of genres and styles ranging from historical drama, the gangster movie, and family melodrama to social realistic story. Four of them were novel-to-screen renditions in his planned media enterprises (see Filmography). For instance, *Tradition*, the studio’s first feature film, was a morality tale set amid the conflicts of gangsters in Hangzhou during the Sino-Japanese War. Without any political overtones, the film rather suggested “a nostalgic yearning for the mainland and pre-Communist China,” with a focus on “the strength of the family, and its vulnerability to corrupting forces.”¹⁵

In his anti-communist crusade on cultural fronts, Chang took up as his target the Great Wall Pictures Corporation, the leading leftist filmmaking company that had established a firm foothold in the colony. As Chang declared the mission of his movie enterprise, “Our immediate objective in setting up our company is to beat the Great Wall. This is going to be our war cry.”¹⁶

Great Wall inherited 1930s Shanghai commercial left-wing cinema in nurturing movie stars, managing well-written movie scripts, and promoting

---


its motion pictures and stars by launching *Great Wall Pictorial* (*Changcheng huabao*), a glossy popular movie magazine in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, in 1950. Chang attributed Great Wall’s success partly to the *Great Wall Pictorial*. He called the publication the studio’s “publicity weapon” and “the best-selling one in town and in the Far East.” Great Wall managed to discover such new stars as Xia Meng (Hsia Moon, 1933–2016) and Lin Dai (Linda Lin, 1934–1964). To compete with Great Wall, Chang began to publish *Asia Pictorial* (by Asia Press) in 1953.

The success of Great Wall was historically tied to the influx of talents of a large group of Shanghai émigrés. Although pro-communist film activities and personnel were subject to covert monitoring and containment by the colonial government, Great Wall kept a low profile to avoid head-on clashes with the colonial authorities. Indeed, Great Wall produced uplifting films and innocuous entertainments with “healthy” themes and “serious” attitudes, and their films were well received by Chinese audiences, with good box office takings in Hong Kong, mainland China, and Southeast Asia. In this sense, Chang observed that Great Wall was “the most successful Chinese company in town” mainly because it was “the best-managed and most strongly financed” by the Communist Chinese government, regardless of the obstacle that communist films had restricted access to or were banned in the Southeast Asian market.

According to the story current here, the Commies put HK$3,000,000 into the Great Wall when they took it over in 1949, and since then been feeding it with more subsidies, no one knows how much. That accounts for the strong financial position of the Great Wall. In light of this, we should consider our HK$1,000,000, if we spent it all, just as an initial investment in the effort. Because of its success, the Great Wall has done and is still doing lots of harm to us.

Emphasizing how left-wing film productions were dominating Hong Kong and overseas markets, Chang ventured to ask American agencies for financial

---


19 For an oral history of leftist filmmakers, see Zhu Shunci et al., eds., *An Age of Idealism: Great Wall and Feng Huang Days* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2001).

20 Chang, “Motion Picture Project.”
resources to build up his movie enterprise. He submitted a budget of HKD 500,000 to start up Asia Pictures, with three films to churn out at the outset. Chang predicted that the film company would break even even when it came to producing the third picture, and in the long run Asia Pictures could operate on a self-sustainable basis. He also optimistically anticipated that the leftist film company would collapse largely because of the closure of some Asian markets where the governments were hostile to communist regimes, and due to their people in the movie business becoming increasingly disappointed with communism. Chang believed that Asia Pictures could “provide an alternative opportunity for the disillusioned stars and others to pursue their arts in a democratic atmosphere” while allowing idle directors and stars to be “herded into a new motion picture company to make anti-Communist pictures.”\(^{21}\)

Despite Chang’s failure to operate Asia Pictures as an established enterprise, his studio achieved a handful of good-quality Chinese pictures. *The Heroine* (*Yang E*, 1955) pioneered as a “woman’s picture” by figuring a female assassin in martial arts storytelling. This section reveals the production of this early martial arts film amidst the leftist and rightist cultural power contentions. *The Heroine* was Asia Pictures’ second work released in 1955. The film was a historical drama set at the onset of the Qing Dynasty in 1664. Yang E is widowed when her husband, a loyal Ming Dynasty general, dies a heroic death in defense of his Emperor. Her son is hanged by Wu Sangui, the notorious traitor who had surrendered to the Qing army. Wu is hotly pursuing and killing all the Ming loyal followers. Yang E is resolved to take revenge against Wu, offering to serve in the guerrilla force and convince the leader to plot against Wu. The heroine has enlisted the help of Wu’s concubine and succeeded in attracting Wu’s attention. Wu covets Yang’s beauty and summons her to his residence to perform dancing and archery. She answers the call in a bid to kill Wu. Before entering the palace, she has a dream in which she succeeds in taking her revenge. In the palace, however, she is overpowered when Wu, in a fit of rage after discovering her intended assassination, smashes his foot into Yang and instantly kills her.

Before its release in Hong Kong, *The Heroine* was promoted in 1954 as enjoying a wide appeal when it had a long theater run in Taipei’s cinema from October 10 to 29.\(^{22}\) But it would be difficult to exaggerate the popularity and local reception of *The Heroine* in Hong Kong theaters. Newspaper

\(^{21}\) A Chinese [Chang Kuo-sin], “Battle for the People’s Minds against the Chinese Communists.”

\(^{22}\) “Yang E zai Tai po jilu” [The Heroine breaks records in Taiwan], *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, October 29, 1954. 12.
advertisements revealed that the film premiered on 17 February 1955, and the show continued on February 23. Nevertheless, the screening was restricted to the New York Cinema in Causeway Bay (Hong Kong Island) and the Great World Theater in Kowloon, which were first-class cinema houses usually reserved for Western films in Hong Kong. The film had a one-day re-release on September 8 at the Star Theater.

_The Heroine_ unquestionably had a historical allegory at work in the tragic resistance of a noble Ming-loyalist heroine against the unprincipled, murderous traitor Wu Sangui. A reader’s letter published in the leftist _Ta Kung Pao_ lambasted the film as a gross distortion and misinterpretation of the “truth.” Portraying the allegorical figure of the traitorous Wu, the historical film shifted the moral attack on the communist force that wreaked havoc on the war-stricken country. This reader emphasized that the Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, the Guomindang’s military leader, was really the defector who should have taken the blame for losing the country, as Wu did in history. The reader denigrated the film so as to reveal the “subtle methods” used by “the most anti-Communist motion picture company.”

The historical film had definite political overtones of Guomindang’s loss of the mainland, as Chang noted:

> I chose the script [...] for its presentation of Taiwan as a base for organizing resistance for restoration of true China. It’s a fact of history that the Ming Loyalists at the time made it a point of escaping to Taiwan to organize and reorganize the resistance and restoration movement. Taiwan to them was the base for organizing the movement for restoring China to her old and true glory. Our worry is that British censorship may compel us to cut out this angle.

In general, the historical genre was more likely to bypass the colonial censors by narrating past events with an obscure connotation of contemporary politics. _The Enchanting Shadow_ (Qiannü youhun, 1960) by Li Hanxiang (1926–1999) was an outstanding example. Supported by the Shaw Brothers, Li adapted a seventeenth-century Chinese ghost story and changed the timeframe of the original fantastic narrative to be set in the Qing Dynasty.

---

23 Advertisement for _The Heroine, South China Morning Post_ (SCMP), February 16, 1955, 5.
25 Advertisement for _The Heroine, South China Morning Post_ (SCMP), September 7, 1955, 5.
26 “Jia huazhao yu zhen mianmu” [Fake tricks and true colors], _Ta Kung Pao_, February 20, 1955, 8.
27 Chang, “Motion Picture Project.”
right after the demise of the Ming regime.\textsuperscript{28} Li injected into his film a sense of end-of-the-dynasty nostalgia of the Ming era, hence echoing the contemporary Cold War Chinese mentality—that is, lamenting the loss of mainland China.\textsuperscript{29}

Despite the political allegory, \textit{The Heroine} was a pioneer martial arts tale and a “woman’s picture” with a superb leading actress, Liu Chi (Liu Qi, 1930–), playing a black-garbed female assassin with psychological and emotional nuances. The film begins with Yang E’s voiceover monologue telling us that she is determined to seek revenge against the traitorous general Wu Sangui who had killed her husband and son. Yet she is barred from joining the male-led insurrectionary force. She has to strike a female alliance with her informers (a songstress and a courtesan) in the court in planning her assassination plot. She dies a tragic death at the end. But her perseverance to right the wrong and her unfulfilled undertaking are reminiscent of Sisyphus’s laborious endeavor to achieve a moral but futile mission.

Liu Chi, a fresh face who used to play supporting roles for the Nanyang Studio, delivered superb performances in \textit{Tradition}, \textit{The Heroine}, and \textit{Halfway Down} when she worked for Asia Pictures.\textsuperscript{30} Edward Hunter, author of \textit{Brain-Washing in Red China},\textsuperscript{31} praised the leading actress for successfully playing a “dedicated and Joan of Arc-like” heroine, and her screen enactments assured him that Chang “should develop some star or stars of your own.”\textsuperscript{32} Delmer Brown, TAF’s representative in Tokyo, was impressed by Liu Chi’s performance in exuding the “extraordinary grace and beauty of Yang Ngo (Yang E),” and was convinced that “she will be recognized as one of the leading stars of Hong Kong.”\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{The Enchanting Shadow} was drawn from “Nie Xiaoqian” in \textit{Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio} (\textit{Liaozhai zhiyi}), a seventeenth-century collection of fantastic tales authored by Pu Songling (1640–1715).


\textsuperscript{30} Asia Pictures paid the actress highly by the standards of the movie industry at the time. A report alleged that Liu Chi “had been customarily getting HK$5,500 for a picture, but for \textit{Tradition} she received HK$6,500.” Xu Yu (1908–1980), who penned \textit{Tradition}, was so pleased with Liu Chi’s performance that he had given her HK$1,000 retainer fees for three additional pictures, as another company had already tried to sign her up at a figure of HK$12,000. See Delmer Brown, Letter to Robert Blum, April 1, 1954. In “Motion Picture Project,” AFR, P9, Hoover Institution Archives.


\textsuperscript{33} Brown, letter to Robert Blum.
Asia Pictures invested in *The Heroine* with advanced technicality. Besides elaborate mise-en-scène (the palace scene), choreography (courtesans’ dancing in the hall of Wu), camerawork, and detailed costumes and props, Yang E’s exhibition of fireworks in her attempted assassination of Wu marked the suspenseful moment with visual stunts of flickering lights and shadows. In movie theaters, *The Heroine* was shown on arc screens in surround sound. The dream sequence in which Yang E assassinates Wu Sangui was shot on 35 mm Kodak color film.  

Chang sent *The Heroine* to Paramount Studio to seek reviews from directors and critics. The screening was held in a Paramount Studio theater on March 1, 1955 at 8 pm. The invitees included the prominent director Frank Borzage and his wife as well as top-ranking Paramount technicians in the fields of lighting, sound recording, editing, and scriptwriting. For the Hollywood experts, *The Heroine* was the first Chinese picture they had ever seen. But American reviewers’ comments focused on the film’s technical inadequacies in production. Borzage (1955) observed that “the editing was jerky,” and so it “needed more dissolves, fades and wipes to smooth cut transitions between scenes and sequences.” Some of the filming techniques were sloppy by Hollywood standards:

In assessing where they went wrong, I believe their major difficulties are (1) laboratory processing (2) editing and (3) a conflicting maneuvering of characters. As the people expert in editing pointed out at the screening, the processing was pretty bad. There were dirt marks and fingerprints scattered through the picture and of course we would not tolerate that here.

John Woodcock, the Head of the Music and Special Effects section, found the technical and audiovisual aspects unsatisfactory—the lighting effects, the music, and the handling of the print—and concluded that they compromised the aesthetic performance of the film. Woodcock pointed out technical deficiencies of the production such as a “careless handling” of the film print in “cutting, developing, and printing,” and sound effects that “could stand

---

34 The extant film copy that I watched at the Hong Kong Film Archive, however, was missing this climactic dream sequence of the heroine.
36 Ibid.
improvement.” He also suggested the acquisition of an “optical stop-printer” to improve the “optical effects” of the film.

Importantly, the American experts used Hollywood standards to measure what they found to be industrial incompetency of the Chinese production. As a martial arts film, *The Heroine* failed to build “suspenseful climaxes as we know them in American productions,” as pointed out by Albert Deane of Paramount Pictures:

> The only specific climax, with full suspense, now in the picture is the one in which Yang Ngo (Yang E) spins the fireballs, and this actually lacks suspense in that Wu does not have any idea that he is menaced. There were a number of other points in the picture at which suspense could have been built up, but you have the idea that the cutter was intent on getting as many sequences as possible into the finished print, and therefore no thought was given to building tension. 38

Despite the beauty of its well-performing actress and the political allegory of the film, *The Heroine* was not a box office success, nor did it gain critical acclaim or real support from the Hollywood agents or producers. Nonetheless, Chang took the criticism and made a case for his movie enterprise to seek more American support. Chang emphasized that “our industry here is years behind modern and Western standards in picture-making,” and was “in need of the technical knowhow and of the equipment,” such as “a good editing machine,” “a decent dolly or camera crane” and “a portable magnetic recorder to do sound recording on location.” Besides these cinematic gadgetries, Chang highlighted the dire need of talents like “special effects men” and “good directors.” 39 Chang ostensibly complained about the unsatisfactory financial assistance from Americans and the lack of skilled labor in the local movie industry in support of his studio operations, whereas in reality, leftist studios had refused to hire out their developing facilities to Asia Pictures.

Internationally, neither *Tradition* nor *The Heroine* won any awards at regional Asian film festivals, nor were they taken up by Hollywood for distribution. Asia Pictures submitted *Tradition* to the first Asian Film Festival (AFF) in 1954 in Tokyo (the film was denied entry because of


its negative portrayal of a Japanese general,\(^{40}\) and *The Heroine* to the second one in 1955 in Singapore. The Asian Film Festival (AFF, aka the Southeast Asian Film Festival) was an annual event of the Federation of Motion Picture Producers Association of Asia (FPA) inaugurated in 1953. The AFF was a regional alliance summit for film executives of “free Asia” and “an offspring of the Cold War.”\(^{41}\) Japanese cinema attempted to maintain its dominance in Asia by initiating and organizing the AFF.\(^{42}\) Through the FPA and its AFF, Japan re-entered Southeast Asia after the Pacific War as a major player, as a part of America’s negotiation to redraw the geopolitical map of Asia with cultural and modernization projects in the region.\(^{43}\)

In order for the Chinese film industry to measure up to modern standards of picture-making, Chang (1955) suggested that Asia Pictures send some of their men to Japan for short observation tours, whereas he was considering the exchange of technicians between Hollywood and Asia Pictures. He appealed to his American agent to provide more financial, technical, and human resources to back up Asia Pictures, hoping to exploit the cinematic links between Hong Kong, Asia (Japan), and the US (Hollywood) within the anti-communist geopolitical camp.

Chang’s ambition to broaden the international market for Asia Pictures was once brought up by his TAF partners:

Chang Kuo Sin (Kuo-sin) has asked me about the possibilities of US art theater distribution for his new picture *The Heroine*. As you know, he is operating in a restricted and highly competitive market, and due to the high costs of production, he believes, and we agree, that it is of vital importance to widen the market for his pictures.\(^{44}\)

---

\(^{40}\) *Tradition* was rejected according to the criterion of exclusion in that the film was “likely to hurt the national feeling of another country or territory.” See Lee, *Cinema and the Cultural Cold War*, 73.


\(^{43}\) The AFF proved to bring a good deal of economic benefits to Japan, which was eager to get rid of its images as “invader” and “loser” by developing the festival on a par with those in Venice and Cannes. See Kinnia Shuk-ting, *Japanese and Hong Kong Film Industries: Understanding the Origins of East Asian Film Networks* (London: Routledge, 2010), 68.

\(^{44}\) John W. Miller, letter to the President (CFA), July 12, 1954, 1–2. AFR, P58, Hoover Institution Archives.
His American adviser, however, did not see the urgency of bringing *The Heroine* to international festivals or putting Chang in touch with US distributors. John Miller warned against encouraging Chang to “place high hopes in US or European markets in order to amortize somewhat unrealistic high costs of production.” He was not completely convinced that *The Heroine* would have wide-enough appeal to interest art theater American audiences. Miller suggested that the picture would have much to recommend if “it had a love angle.” Instead, he urged Chang to consider “co-production with reputable and creative Japanese producers,” which was increasingly important for Chinese filmmaking to upgrade to international production levels.

In distributing his motion pictures in the Greater China circuit, Chang encountered the problem of the mainland market being closed to Mandarin pictures. Asia Pictures productions had been banned in the mainland for obvious political reasons. In his 1956 address at the Forum of the Third Asian Film Festival in Hong Kong, Chang assessed that there could be 30 to 50 Mandarin pictures made each year. With the closure of the mainland market, Asia Pictures was left with a market made up of the overseas Chinese market and Hong Kong, which together represented only about three to four million people. In Hong Kong, Mandarin pictures were plagued by a limited distribution and exhibition in movie theaters, as they were increasingly denied access to the first-run theaters. Chang perceived that the Hong Kong film industry had run into a crisis after a brief revival in the postwar period. Some top stars were asking extremely high salaries from the producers; in general, the film people lacked the discipline and professional ethics necessary for building and maintaining the industry.

Chang hinted that the predicament of Asia Pictures had to do with declining box office sales for Mandarin cinema and the closing of the mainland market. His American consultants pointed out the importance of establishing a well-organized studio with stable infrastructure and teamwork with careful capital investments. Charles Tanner—an ex-USIS motion picture supervisor and film liaison officer in Hollywood, and crucially a core member of TAF’s motion picture project—said that Chang should build a foundation for his movies in the local context “to develop an organization of people who will stay with the company and who will settle down to work

45 Miller, letter to the President (CFA).
47 Chang Kou-sin, “Film Industry in Hong Kong,” in *Report on the 3rd Annual Film Festival of Southeast Asia: Hong Kong, June 12th –16th*, Hong Kong: Executive Committee, 3rd Annual Film Festival, Southeast Asia in cooperation with Marklin Advertising Ltd. (1956): 107–9.
together on a permanent basis.” If Chang was serious about raising the standards of his counter-communist movie enterprise, he should follow the Hollywood model by consolidating a well-organized business structure and securing long-term teamwork with a local film crew of his own. Even though Asia Pictures might be losing its competitive edge, the TAF continued to finance and support Chang's movie enterprise to avoid giving up the entire overseas Chinese film market to the communists. But the American support proved to be short-lived, sustaining Chang's filmmaking business only for a short time span between 1953 and 1958.

CODA: Cultural Legacy in the Cold War Sinosphere

This chapter examined right-wing filmmaking and Asia Pictures to reveal a behind-the-scenes tug-and-pull between the US-backed film studio and its leftist rivals. It looked at the possibility as well as the predicament for Asia Pictures to produce good propaganda as a good commercial investment in transnational film markets while pondering its effects and ramifications in the Sinosphere as Chang ventured to make sense and sensation of the Cold War through Asia Pictures productions.

Should we assess the development and demise of Asia Pictures as a chapter of Chinese cinema under blatant American propaganda and US influence in the pan-Asian anti-communist geopolitics? Commenting on *Tradition* and *The Heroine*, L.Z. Yuan believed that “there is no need for secrecy” for the conspicuous “American aid” in the form of technical assistance for Asia Pictures. “It would greatly enhance the prestige of the Asia Pictures if it became known that some ‘Hollywood touch’ has been given their pictures.” Yet Chang should also remain vigilant, as it would be scandalous if American aid to these Chinese pictures became “public knowledge,” and Asia Pictures could be deplored by the leftist opponents as an “American tool” or “American running dog.”

Scholars and critics pinpoint the importance of how Chang’s cinema could have transformed the ideological and power competitions between the left and the right into local manifestations and expressions of both Chinese sentiments and middle-class aspirations in a new society. Law

Kar and Frank Bren have argued that Asia Pictures was not a direct tool of American propaganda, regardless of its American funding. The films expressed not so much “the sentiment of anti-Communism or the advocacy of democracy or individual consciousness” as “the themes of nationalism, self-dignity, reaffirmation of traditional ethics, and alienation in Hong Kong society and culture.”\(^5^0\) Law also cites *Halfway Down* (1955), which tells the story of exiled intellectuals in Hong Kong’s refugee camp.\(^5^1\) He notes that the film showcased a collective call for the people to unite and survive in the colonist-capitalist society, which made its social critique not all that different from that expressed in the films produced by the left-wing Great Wall Pictures Corporation. Yung Sai-shing contends that Asia Pictures was a pioneer as a media conglomerate that paved the way for the successful establishments of Motion Picture & General Investment Co (MP & GI) and the Shaw Brothers studios. Such films as *The Story of a Fur Coat* (1956) and *Three Sisters* (1957) exemplified the achievements of the urban melodrama and musical genres in Mandarin pictures as cinematic projections of Hong Kong’s commercialization and urban and economic developments.\(^5^2\) In short, the cinematic production and consumption of Asia Pictures created sights and sounds of social development in everyday life.

But for all of Chang’s enthusiastic commitment to the movies, and regardless of the fact that the studio produced some high-quality films, Asia Pictures did not fare well in business. Chang’s operation was too fly-by-night—the leftwing Great Wall studio was far better funded and managed as a more established company. Archival evidence shows that in producing *The Heroine*, Chang could not resist the temptation to move beyond melodrama to political allegory, but where he failed was in his lack—and also that of his American backers—of serious commitment to the mission of building up a long-term enterprise. The studio was operated like a start-up company with American money on a single-picture basis and without permanent staff or teamwork. The closure of the mainland market, inadequate financial and human resources, a lack of commercial appeal in its films in competition


52 Yung Sai-shing, “Weidu xiehang; zhenghe lianheng: Yazhou chubanshe/Yazhou yingye gongsi chutan” [Antagonistic containment and horizontal integration: Asia Press/Asia Pictures.” In *Lengzhan yu Xianggang dianying* [The Cold War and Hong Kong cinema], eds. Ailing Wong and Puk-tak Lee (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2009), 125–41.
with left-wing Mandarin cinema and commercial Cantonese pictures, and an underdeveloped studio infrastructure and management were the key reasons for the decline of Chang's studio.

Although Chang recognized film's potential to have a major impact on diasporic Chinese audiences, and despite taking advantage of Hong Kong's position outside of China and its predisposition to non-political cinema, his filmic enterprise failed to occupy the cultural space of commercial cinema. Nonetheless, even as its American reviewers judged it a failure, *The Heroine* did function as a pioneer in Chinese-language cinema as a “woman's picture” by figuring a female assassin in martial arts storytelling. By contrast, the martial arts films produced by the Shaw Brothers quickly moved to take up the popular realm in the Cold War Sinosphere. Stephen Teo (2010) highlights the historical significance of the female knight-errant (nüxia) in the 1960s, initiated by the director King Hu and featuring female stars like Zheng Peipei, Hsu Feng (Xu Feng), and Shangguan Lingfeng. Man-Fung Yip attributes the martial arts representation of heroines to the rise of the female labor force in postwar Hong Kong society when it was undergoing rapid modernization and Westernization under British rule. King Hu's trans-border success in Hong Kong and Taiwan also reveals how martial arts storytelling captured the imagination of inter-Asian Cold War situations. As James Wicks argues, Hu's *Dragon Inn* (*Longmen kezhan*, 1967) and *Come Drink with Me* (*Dazui xia*, 1966) dramatized an enclave of righteous protagonists in the teahouse scenes surrounded by enemies of an oppressive state apparatus. Both films empowered the female knight-errant to protect the powerless in the chaotic world. They presented a geopoetic image of Hong Kong and Taiwan as an isolated enclave vis-à-vis mainland China to reflect their strategic alliance to the “free world.” Hence, by reassessing *The Heroine* as an innovative motion picture bounded by Cold War divisionism and propaganda, this study explores the historical and sociocultural scenarios to assess the legacy of Asia Pictures and Chang's contributions to mid-century Sinophone cinemas and diasporic Chinese experiences amidst the leftist and rightist cultural power contentions.

55 James Wicks, “Hot Wars on Screen during the Cold War: Philosophical Situations in King Hu's Martial Arts Films,” *National Central University Journal of Humanities*, no. 64 (October 2017): 131–59.
56 Wicks, “Hot Wars on Screen during the Cold War,” 155.
Filmography of Asia Pictures

(1955)  *The Heroine*, dir. Hung Suk-wan and Yi Wen (Evan Yang)
(1955)  *Tradition*, dir. Tang Huang (original novel by Xu Yu)
(1956)  *The Long Lane*, dir. Bu Wancang (original novel by Sha Qianmeng)
(1956)  *The Story of a Fur Coat*, dir. Tang Huang
(1957)  *Halfway Down*, dir. Tu Guangqi (original novel by Chao Tzu-fan)
(1957)  *Life with Grandma*, dir. Tang Huang
(1957)  *Three Sisters*, dir. Bu Wancang
(1959)  *The Shoeshine Boy*, dir. Bu Wancang

Bibliography


———. 1956. “Film Industry in Hong Kong.” In *Report on the 3rd Annual Film Festival of Southeast Asia: Hong Kong, June 12th –16th*, 107–9. Hong Kong: Executive Committee, 3rd Annual Film Festival, Southeast Asia in cooperation with Marklin Advertising Ltd.
———. 2016. *Eight Months Behind the Bamboo Curtain*. Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press.


Zhu Shunci et al., eds. 2001. An Age of Idealism: Great Wall and Feng Huang Days. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive.
About the Author

Kenny K. K. Ng is an Associate Professor at the Academy of Film, Hong Kong Baptist University. His published books include *The Lost Geopoetic Horizon of Li Jieren: The Crisis of Writing Chengdu in Revolutionary China* (Brill, 2015); *Indiescape Hong Kong: Interviews and Essays*, co-authored with Enoch Tam and Vivian Lee (Typesetter Publishing, 2018) [Chinese]; *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow: Hong Kong Cinema with Sino-links in Politics, Art, and Tradition* (Chunghwa Bookstore, 2021) [Chinese]. His ongoing book projects concern censorship and visual cultural politics in Cold War Hong Kong and Asia, the politics of Cantonese cinema, and left-wing cosmopolitanism.