An Amorous Prehistory of Hong Kong Queer Cinema

Manjun Zhao

Faculty Advisor: Guo-juin Hong

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## Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................................... III

List of Figures ........................................................................................................................................ IV

Acknowledgement ................................................................................................................................... V

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1: Cinematic Construction of Lesbian Images in *Intimate Confessions of A Chinese Courtesan* (1972) ............................................................................................................................... 7
  **EXTRA-FILMIC ELEMENTS** ............................................................................................................ 7
  **STARDOM AND PROMOTION: A PROCESS OF ENGAGING THE AUDIENCE** ................................................. 21
  **TEXT ANALYSIS - HETERONORMATIVE IDEOLOGY** ........................................................................... 29
  **CHAPTER CONCLUSION** .............................................................................................................. 34

  **CONTEMPORIZING THE HISTORIOSITY OF AN IMAGINED FIGURE** .................................................. 36
  **GENDER POWER DYNAMIC, TRADITIONAL LITERATURE AND EROTIC CAPACITY IN LESBIAN SEX** ............ 47
  **A FORMAL CRITICISM OF THE LOSS OF STRUCTURE** ......................................................................... 57
  **CHAPTER CONCLUSION** .............................................................................................................. 62
Abstract

Depiction of homoerotic relationships among women in commercial costumed films was a unique phenomenon in 1970s - 1980s Hong Kong cinema. What are the possible cinematic meanings of lesbian images that we can perceive in these films? How should we evaluate the exact representation of a sexuality that had been perceived as deviant in that society? In this essay, I close-read homoerotic scenes and trace through the trajectories of cultural and industrial changes enabling the emergence of two representative films: *Intimate Confessions of A Chinese Courtesan* (1972) and *An Amorous Woman of Tang Dynasty* (1984). I do this with a continuous concern for historical context in order to provide an in-depth understanding of how lesbian images are constructed in cinema.

Keywords
Hong Kong, Lesbianism, Cinematic Representation, Cultural Identity, Prehistory
## List of Figures

4. Madam Chun’s lesbian interest is revealed through a failed flirtation 32
5. A lens-framed enclosed space defines the first homoerotic scene 51
6. The first homoerotic scene begins with the mask probing 51
7. The first homoerotic scene continues 53
8. Two protagonists in a scissoring position discovered by a group of nuns on vigil 54
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Introduction

The depiction of a romantic friendship between females is by no means an unusual case in many forms of literary texts in Chinese culture, ranging from folk literature to traditional operas to photography. While some of these cultural forms may experiment with outlying implicit homoerotic meaning in instances of female intimacies, the first instance of graphically explicit representation of sexual desire between females is a commercial film in 1972s Hong Kong called *Intimate Confessions of A Chinese Courtesan* (愛奴, Abbr. Intimate Confessions, a.k.a. *Ainu*). The second film with a similar historical and costumed feature was produced and screened 12 years later in 1984 - - *An Amorous Woman Of Tang Dynasty* (唐朝豪放女, Abbr. *An Amorous Woman*).

*Intimate Confessions* (1972), as the forerunner of using close-ups for implicit lesbian sex in semi-sexploitation films, indicated the capacity of the film industry to produce and stimulate voyeuristic curiosity in order to secure commercial success. Therefore, it opened a new era of frequent adaptation of lesbianism into the new genre, which became an indispensable relationship.

My initial interest in these two subjects derives from an attempt to write a comparative genealogy of lesbian elements and queer thinking in Mainland Chinese cinema and overseas cinemas in other Chinese-speaking regions. I started by identifying direct lesbian characters and themes in private and commercial productions in China, but was unable to find a

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1 For female same-sex intimacy in late-imperial folk literature, see Tze-lan Sang 66-95; In opera and opera films, see Fran Martin’s 1-3; for romantic friendship in photography and advertisement of early Republic era, see Sang, Introduction.
single film in this regard except for those produced in the 21st century. What I had found instead was a series of films started in 1970s Hong Kong embedding lesbian elements into erotica and soft pornography, where exploitation itself functioned as the selling point. Along with these were the later emergence of deeper discussion and questioning of not only sexual but national and cultural identity in films dealing with queer elements in the late-1980s and 1990s. Instead of pondering on what was not there, I decided to switch away from a vague focus on lesbian films in China to take a second look at this phenomenon in Hong Kong cinema in terms of its historiiosity. I am interested in a series of questions regarding this almost forgotten, and therefore under-explored, cinematic phenomenon during that time: Why did lesbian elements become available in the deeply traditional region in the early 1970s? How did the temporal discrepancies between different ways of representation come into being and why did the transition from heteronormativism to a more serious discussion of identities occur in the mid-1980s? In the following chapters, by selecting these two films for detailed analysis, I will delineate the way each one produces the idea of cinematic representation of lesbianism in a different time as well as how they together reflect the contested relationship between creative adaptation and the established mode of production during decades of continued genre transition.

I will further explore interrelated questions about the way that we read the representation of female sexuality in Hong Kong cinema from the 1970s to 1980s. Could hetero-erotic depictions of ancient female rivalry, sadomasochism, fetishism and promiscuity

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ever be queer or feminist in (stock martial art) genre films? Were erotic films in the 1970s and soft-porns in the 1980s in fact implanted with similar ideas or were these elements superficial symptoms of something else?

Early scholarship of Hong Kong cinema has answered yes to the first question but not the second one,3 which I will argue renders the meaning of queerness or feminism to these films too easily and neglects the close relationship between Hong Kong’s constant crisis of cultural identities and its contemporary established economic prosperity. As a crucial part of cultural representations, Hong Kong cinema largely emerged from and is still based in Hong Kong’s economic and geopolitical position as a colonial “free” trading port not only for goods but also for people and ideas. Being neither completely “Western” nor identical to the nationalist Taiwan or mainland China during that time while for decades struggling among them, economic self-interest is the culture of Hong Kong. Their film industry reflects this aspect through self-repetitive genre films in which innovation served to maximize profit. One reason for scholars paying attention to commercial films before the occurrence of the new cinema called Hong Kong New Wave in the early 1980s and queer cinema in the 1990s is that the representation of sexuality and desire in those earlier films offers productive reference points for the understanding of Hong Kong cinema. However, they, in fact, serve more as ideal examples of how lesbian figures as the superficial incarnation of feminism can be produced to cater to its targeted audiences and later reworked as a way to integrate hetero-normative imagination into the questioning of a generation’s cultural identity. Therefore, in this essay, I

3 For analysis queering martial art films, see Stephen Teo’s “Shaws’ Wuxia Films: The Macho Self-Fashioning of Chang Cheh.” For feminist readings of female images, see Tao Tu, Fu Cheng Bei Wang : Chong Hui Zhan Hou Xianggang Dian Ying, 170-186; Kuai-Cheung Lo, “Fighting Female Masculinity: Women Warriors and Their Foreignness in Hong Kong Action Cinema,” 105-112
aim to reassess the past to write the pre-history of queer cinema, in which its predecessors’ depiction of alternative sexuality of women was far from being similar to later forms but was by no means unrelated to its emergence in later decades. Moreover, the commercial potential of lesbian sex in films can be viewed as signals of changing strategies in studio production as well as contestation and negotiation between traditional values and new ideas.

The cinematic construction of same-sex intimacy can only be understood within the historical context of its production and screening, which demonstrates that the causes of the representation of sexuality in these images in the two films are different. Though a close reading of the sexual depiction in the second film is enabled by its advancing apparatus and diegesis in contrast to the first one, the sexual element is not so much about sexuality itself nor could it even be perceived as being in resonance with the eloquent feminist remarks of the character. Rather, the frequent feminist manifestos and the promiscuous lifestyle of the protagonist are intentionally used as a way to challenge the industrial status quo and, unlike the previous oversimplification, to render the self-contradicting characters, together with spontaneity in diegesis construction, as the vehicle of searching for a lost identity. Specifically, sexuality is an outlet to express, first, the ongoing questioning of cultural anxiety among a generation of filmmakers who grew up on the border of two politically polarized worlds. Second, the protagonists, with their uncertain fate and sudden encounters, are the incarnation of Hong Kong and its near future: its in-between political status, the inability of complete autonomy and concern that Hong Kong’s newly acquired cultural prosperity would end soon. Moreover, this kind of self-examining, questioning, and naming of in-between status can smoothly transit into the expression of queerness in later films in the early to mid-1990s with a
tendency to defy any clear-cut coming out. On the industrial level, we also see the complete breaking down of a place-based studio-branching system and the surfacing of complicated cross-border collaboration in unprecedented scales.

More than a decade after *Intimate Confessions* (1972), along with the worldwide emergence of sexploitation in cultural products, commercial films in Hong Kong with homoerotic scenes had continued to be screened in public. Continuing the legacy of this genre, the sexual depiction in *An Amorous Woman* (1984) becomes more graphic and frequent, which not only renders the possibility of engaging in a close reading but also justifies an attempt to do so. In this film, the cinematic construction of sexuality in sensational audiovisual form is much more obvious compared to those in the previous films. Homoerotic scenes, in particular, function as testers of social norms and the mainstream and were intentionally used by filmmakers to push against the rigid genre categorizations in commercial films. However, newly emerged filmmakers’ challenge to the standard narrative formation of certain genres did not build upon a complete breaking-up with established ways of production. Forming alongside the established artistic and commercial success of the New Wave movement, *An Amorous Woman* (1984) represents a contested relationship between the studio and the creative members, with each side’s particular interest towards representation of alternative sexualities being reflected in the continuous changing landscape of social values and culture concerns. As for the filmmakers in particular, the graphic representation of sexual desire, unlike those in *Intimate Confessions* (1972), is not so much about lesbianism per se, but functions as a tool to express various meanings beyond the image. These meanings sometimes compete against or contradict each other so that they produce ideological sutures enabling a deeper understanding of
homoerotism. Thematic discrepancies within the text produce a starting point to unveil a
phenomenon – the simultaneous questioning of and seeking for identities that prevailed in New
Wave films. Moreover, An Amorous Woman (1982) immediately signaled the flourishing of
queer cinema in 1990s even though it could not be strictly counted as such itself. Nevertheless,
by understanding the meaning within and beyond the image of lesbianism and other marginal
sexualities in this film, we may be better prepared to understand the historicity of both events
and to reconsider their cultural legacies for contemporary filmmaking.
Chapter 1: Cinematic Construction of Lesbian Images in *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan* (1972)

Extra-filmic Elements

During the early 1970s, the then-largest Hong Kong entertainment conglomerate, Shaw Brothers film studio, started to produce a series of films with explicit depiction of female nudity and physical violence for sexual and sensational purposes. Among these erotic films, *Intimate Confessions* (1972) stood out during the 1970s. It is the second film produced in Hong Kong with detailed soft-pornographic elements and the first one directly focusing on a homoerotic story.

The production of this film not only reflects changes in this commercial studio’s business strategies and ideological guidelines, but also the remapping of the Hong Kong film industry as a whole. Shaw Brothers’ shift in attention from the production of Huangmei opera films to the more erotic costumed films is closely connected to the altered demographical and cultural landscape of 1970s Hong Kong and the outer socio-political atmosphere in its largest overseas market – the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia.

With the generation born in the aftermath of WWII growing into adulthood, the majority proportion of the local population in Hong Kong were local-born youth, and their

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4 the genre name for films featuring nudity for sexual arousal ranges from Yanqing (艳情) to Fengyue (风月) to Qingse (情色) throughout Hong Kong film history, whereas ??categorical translated?? ranges from soft-porn to erotica to sexploitation.

5 For a population pyramid in 1971 and a comparative population pyramid comparing 1931 and 1961, see I.C. Jarvie 161-162
affinity to the place is much stronger than that of their parents’ generation. However, the localization of the population was never spontaneous and smooth in progress. Throughout the 1950s and 1980s, Hong Kong continued to be the destination of immigrants from other Southeast Asian colonies/countries and refugees from Mainland China. Surrounded and affected by the polarized cold-war ideologies and policies, the colonial government carefully monitored the local political atmosphere and later dampened the residents’ complaints by growing the local economy, in order to settle down the incoming laborers and offer employment to the unstoppable flow of refugees. However, the feeling of stability could only become prevalent for the newcomers if they were able to transition into a local household. The growing population constantly exposed the limitations of residential space in Hong Kong. Refugees and the poor gathered and lived in the self-built squatter settlements that eventually became ghettos in the surrounding suburbs. The cramped wood-structured houses resulted in several devastating fires and epidemics, and residents lost their homes. The establishment of the resettlement areas with bungalows to rehouse the fire victims could not meet the expanding population and its rocketing needs for a decent living space.

The causes and aftermath of the 1966 Hong Kong riots announced the failure of tight political control and the severity of corruption within the colonial government. In the 1960s, the Police Department represented the worst case of corruption and bureaucratic dysfunction, which coincided with a “violent-turn,”⁶ as Chang Cheh put it in his memoir, of popular martial art films that heightened the success of a sort of “frontier justice” outside of the juridical system. In these films, swordsmen and swordswomen’s personal heroic acts of

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⁶ For Chang Cheh’s notion of “violent-turn,” see Zhang Che Tan Xianggang Dian Ying, 53, 60.
violence were narrated in the twisting plot of killing evil and revenging the oppressed. The upcoming “youth power”\(^7\) was not only evident in the new martial art films with their branded realistic choreography of bloodshed, but also in the Mandarin “Youth Films” (青春片)\(^8\) genre with melodramatic themes and luxurious musicals. Along with the emergence of youth-oriented films, the mid-1960s saw the decline of Cantonese opera and Huangmei opera films featuring folk songs and traditional dances.

Baby boomers born in the 1950s now coming into their adulthood were more adapted to the local language than their parents, and had been fully exposed to Western pop culture, which to a large extent took the form of rock music and Hollywood films – the same situation as in Taiwan. In Hong Kong, the local youth, along with the immigrants, also contributed to the transition in Hong Kong’s economy from a trading port to a labor-intensive manufacturing hub.

The riot in 1966 also forced the governors to launch a series of welfare policies. In 1972, with 35,000 people still lived in the squatter camps, the new Governor MacLehose announced the Ten-year Housing Programme to settle the housing problem for 1.8 million inhabitants by providing self-attained public apartments. The next year witnessed the establishment of a Housing Department that fulfilled the plan. Three decades following WWII, the incoming immigrants and correspondent disasters pushed the colonial government to shift their major attention from profiting from Hong Kong, a transshipment port, to servicing the local population. The public apartments in which newly employed baby boomers and the incoming immigrants moved into were still in cramped conditions, and were facilitated only

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\(^7\) See Chang, 80  
\(^8\) See Zhuo, 42
with public kitchens and bathrooms on every other floor. Still, the concept of private space became more familiar to the new type of residents than to those who lived together cross-generationally in the squatter areas. As a consequence of this stability, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw a radical increase in the household ownership of televisions, and heated competition among new commercial TV stations.

The emergence of TV unprecedentedly altered the Hong Kong film industry. For the first time, the gender difference appears in the forms of entertainment: local audiences saw growing domestic, melodramatic, modern – and thus supposedly more feminine – themes in TV dramas and more exploitative, violent and historicized – and thus masculine – themes in films. However, some female-targeted programs, for example, *Seven Women* (七女性, 1976) from TVB station, were more oriented to the emerging working females who were not domestic and traditional. The realistic depiction of urban women’s daily concerns was popular and commercially successful in the mid-1970s. These programs with shared local interests were produced by intern broadcasting directors who later became representatives of Hong Kong New Wave after their debuts.\(^9\)

Going to the screenings was the dominant form of entertainment for Hong Kong residents during the 1960s. During that time, films produced in Hong Kong were primarily dubbed in Mandarin, which catered to the needs of the many Taiwanese and overseas diasporas, even though Cantonese was the first spoken language in Hong Kong. From 1974 on, more than half of the popular ones (most were comedies) were dubbed in Cantonese because of a growing middle-class built on Hong Kong’s economy prosperity. For two decades, before

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new ways of media entertainment became domesticated through the popularity of TV, the box office revenue for major production companies remained profitable.\textsuperscript{10} For Shaw Brothers in particular, the following multiregional factors continued to guarantee it a significant margin of profit and its ambitious expansion: capital from Singapore, specialties from Shanghai and Taiwan, technologies and creative influence from Japan, the cheap cost of local labor, the markets in the Southeast Asian countries and Taiwan.\textsuperscript{11} However, in the late 1960s, Shaw Brothers were pressured to transform. A shrinking import ratio under the protective policy of national film industries in neighboring countries\textsuperscript{12} forced the studio to reconsider its investment in southeast Asia. The alienation of the second-generation Chinese diaspora in Hong Kong from traditional Chinese culture witnessed the decline of profit in producing opera films. The emergence of Taiwan-based companies\textsuperscript{13} and their distinctive realist concerns continued to draw Taiwan audiences’ attention away from self-repetitive marital art films imported from Hong Kong.

These constantly changing trans-regional factors also prove the notion of “Hong Kong cinema” to be a hybrid configuration and, even more, the difficulty in defining an idea as such. Yet its meaning nevertheless reached the most clarified moment in 1970, from a

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item For big studios’ revenues, see: Zhuo 41-48, Bordwell 122
\item The creative production of Mainland China during the 1960s was more evident in the productions of leftist studios. The emergence of the Huangmei Opera genre in the 1950s was also inspired by Mainland films.
\item For changes in the overseas market in late 1960s, see Poshek Fu [傅葆石] 想像中國: 邵氏電影 21 & footnote 26.
\item For the increasing emergence of Taiwanese film studios, see Li Han-hisang: 香港電影資料館 - 邵氏電影初探 - 邵氏大事記, 整理 : 吳詠思 June 21, 2014
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Western\textsuperscript{14} perspective, when Bruce Lee gained international fame and directly brought hard-core martial art films into the world, thus beginning Hong Kong films as a global presence, and later, a cultural phenomenon. However, martial art films, as a genre, were deeply place-based in terms of mode of representation. Incorporating masculine upper-body nudity into bloodshed violence is only a new aspect of many innovations in the mid 1960s, before which we can also trace the thematic and stylistic influence of martial art films to popular literature\textsuperscript{15} in China as well as foreign films imported to Hong Kong. For the latter aspect, elements of the detective, suspense, and thriller genres borrowed from American pop fiction, Italian mafia films, and UK’s 007 series were discovered as sensational selling points.

The newest theme incorporated into martial art genre story-telling, evident in many films starring Bruce Lee in the years of 1971 and 1972, was a nationalist mentality and ethnic awareness. This risky attempt of Golden Harvest studio, however, was later proved to be immensely successful in screenings in that these ideas gave voice to the suppressed sentiment against the colonial government and stirred the blood of hatred that had remained in the veins of previous generations who had suffered under the terror of the Japanese army. In contrast to the lingering anti-Japanese sentiments, Japanese influence in the Hong Kong film industry had grown steadily after the war ended. In the case of Shaw Brothers, which had been identified as “the rightist” studio in terms of its possible ideological guidance, Japanese elements were not only revealed in the production, representation and distribution of costumed martial art films,

\textsuperscript{14} The Western perspective, as a general notion, includes but is not limited to “WASP” American and European viewers’ points of interest in Bruce Lee’s image. However, given the nationalist agenda and anticolonial sensation represented in these 1970s martial art films, they resonate even more among audiences in previous colonies.

\textsuperscript{15} I am not going to elaborate on the nuanced difference between modern popular fiction and traditional follores/folk songs and their respective influences on the martial art genre, or vice versa, because in late 20th century Hong Kong the two concepts could not possibly be strictly divided without a thoroughly genealogical study. In this particular context, “popular literature” includes roughly both of them.
but also in the application of various apparatus that together tried to capture an imaginary collective past that could be called the old China, which had been articulated in Run Run Shaw’s own words as “Chinese dream.” Recruiting Japanese specialties and importing technologies, however, did not put Shaw Brothers under pressure to transition their workshop mode of production; rather, by outsourcing that part of the process to Japanese that the local staff was unable to handle, the studio put huge emphasis on lowering costs and boosting overall quantities rather than the quality of a single film. The primacy of efficiency is also reflected in the massive screen adaptations of Japanese scripts.

Film production in late 1960s involved multiple resources and efforts that transcended the category of nation, nationality and ethnicity. Paradoxically, in the case of the Hong Kong film industry, cooperation during the production process per se reflected subtle cultural boundaries both between the historical and the modern and between ethnicity and gender. An interesting example of this notion is that a large population of Japanese film expertise recruited to work for Shaw Brothers used Chinese pseudonyms during their stays in Hong Kong. Through these names, they willingly presented themselves as Chinese – sometimes in reality but always in films, which paradoxically soothed the cultural worries of the studio’s managerial members who tried to hide the Japanese elements. On the one hand, the use of Chinese pseudonyms by Japanese filmmakers staying in Hong Kong met several needs: first, to protect themselves from the still prevalent national and ethnical enmity against Japanese in

16 For research on Shaw Brothers’ “Chinese dream” as an ideology, see Kei, Sek S “haw Movie Town’s ‘China Dream’ and ‘Hong Kong Sentiments’”, The Shaw Screen: A Preliminary Study, Hong Kong Film Archive, 2003
17 The story of An Amorous Woman(1972) is inspired by its Japanese version - a film called Gaben No Tsubaki (1964), which was scripted from a popular short story of Shugoro Yamamoto with a detective/revenge theme. In the original Japanese film adaptation, the female character was a criminal sentenced to death who yet survived by an appeal based on her moral deeds – killing the lovers of her mother for the honor of her father.
Hong Kong society; second, to avoid Japanese peers’ possible contempt of their professional competence as they chose to work for “inferior” studios in the developing Hong Kong. On the other hand, Shaw Brother was also willing to reduce any possible controversy that could harm the company’s profit. In fact, Japanese filmmakers, technologies, and even capital played a large part in early stages of studio filmmaking regardless of themes and genres. Their presence was crucial to various types of innovations in Hong Kong cinema before the 1980s. It could be sensible to say that ethnicity and nationality as forms of identities would gradually fade away in the face of transnational industrial communication in the 1970s. However, although many martial art films’ core themes diverged from the overarching imagination of an ancient/modern China, this imagination per se was technically enabled by transnational communication. The regional modernity or historical mentality produced and promoted in these films, were in turn, incarnating themselves in the configuration, performance, and representation of gender types, which constantly changes the meaning of fulfillment. Particularly, what could be conceived as “amorous” or “erotic” in the subject of lesbian(s) is the result of a process of construction and representation. The meaning of erotism neither transcends the changing history nor can be judged, in ways of its representation, as merely real or fictional; rather it relies on the limitation of each form of cultural production and the social context enabling the articulation of the “erotic” as such. In terms of romantic friendship in ancient emperors’ inner chambers, lesbianism did not exist in written records, in the late imperial Chinese society; it was an ideal subject of fantasies in the literati’s vernacular fictions. In an era of social regulation, lesbianism was criminalized because of a general pathological definition of homosexuality.
The emergence of erotic films, on the production level, was Shaw Brothers’ strategic reaction to the vast commercial success of the newly established studio Golden Harvest. In 1971, Raymond Chow, the former CEO of Shaw Brothers left the company and founded his own, which brought about unprecedented commercial success to the local film industry by funding Bruce Lee to launch his own company and innovating cinematic Kung Fu choreography with the masculine upper-body nudity and a hint of nationalist value. Two low-budget debuts starring Bruce Lee, *The Big Boss* (1971) and *The Fist of Fury* (1972), became the top box-office hits in their respective years of release. The management of Golden Harvest was more horizontal, and thus flexible. The newly founded company enabled some of their contracted stars to launch their branch-studio and to enjoy larger autonomy in production and profit-sharing in distribution revenue.\(^\text{18}\) Therefore, the funding of Golden Harvest was an experiment on abandoning the top-down controlling managerial style in big family-owned studios and creating an independent producer system. In contrast, Shaw Brothers Studio functioned more similarly to a private-owned factory than to a modern studio. For example, the finance of major productions relied on preselling copies to overseas markets and funding from the Shaw family business in Singapore instead of investment from external sources such as investors or share-holders. Buyouts of performers’ contracts were common practice, and employees multitasked across different settings but were underpaid. Last but not the least among these in factors stifling creativity was Run Run Shaw’s decisive role in adjusting creative details of screenplay and monitoring over directors in major productions.

\(^\text{18}\) After Bruce Lee’s acceded to contract with Golden Harvest, he co-founded a branch production studio in 1971 under Raymond Chow’s assistance. The studio focused solely on his own films.
Shaw Brothers established its production mode in the late 1960s and early 1970s with a strict process of discovering and training competent performers. The studio’s actors and actresses enjoyed popularity and loyalty from audiences just like current celebrities do; however, the former’s financial relationship with the studio was much simpler. What were lacking among these studio-based contracted performers were talent agencies and dividends in their contracted labor that could mediate their interests and that of their employers. Moreover, major characters, as well as other staff members who signed yearly contracts with the studio, lived in single or family dormitories provided by the Shaw Brothers. These residential places were encompassed in the studio, accompanied by canteens, clinics, and other facilities. The studio was located in a suburb for budget concerns but also to prevent workers from commuting between downtown Hong Kong and the studio so as to maximize the overall efficiency of production. Since production quantity was of the utmost importance for a yearly gross profit, the contracted directors had to multitask around several films at the same time. Even though they might favor one film over the other, they still needed to compensate it to secure the overall yielding. Shaw Brothers studio was sufficiently funded comparing to other small local studios. In the context of contemporary Hollywood production, the biggest studio still relied on a labor-intensive mode of production. Elaborated and refined film scripts, though still desirable, were considered secondary to the need of boosting product quantity in a daily expanding market. Thus, the studio produced numerous copycat stories and characters after each time a minor innovation was proved to be commercially successful.

Chor Yuen recalled a nuance during his directing of Intimate Confessions (1972) in his only memoir, which could be sufficient to demonstrate these points. As the director of
this film, he edited Chiu's script based on building a logical subplot illuminating the changing emotional bonding between female characters. However, Run Run Shaw, the owner and CEO of Shaw Brothers, insisted in applying martial art elements to the major characters even though Chor Yuen illustrated that it would not be compatible with the image of the sex slave. Fighting scenes were regarded as the guarantee of box office that every single costume films could not be exempt from. The plot construction turned out to be what Run Run Shaw intended. The studio’s emphasis on revenue was also evident in its attentive attention to the visual apparatus that facilitated storytelling. This approach produced sensual effects that were not only rich in detail but also accumulated to produce a vivid feeling of "China" as a form of cultural imagination. Designer costumes, ancient settings, and martial art choreography were meticulously placed together to cover the weakness of the story. There was nothing particular about the concept of Hong Kong than this location's capability to copy, annotate and present their versions of a cultural China. In an interview, Chor Yuen, the director of *Intimate Confessions* (1972), had confessed: “Rural environment and urban landscape in Hong Kong do not evoke the feelings of a traditional China -- the aura of the authentic. Therefore, the studio produced what we needed as Chinese scenery by making up rockwork and carved stones even though this resulted in lots of goofs and anachronisms.”\(^{19}\)

In general, this aspect of film production resonates with the post-war Hong Kong economy in transition: from a trading port of industrial commodities to a hub of time and labor intensive industries. Later, as a reaction to the success of Golden Harvest, Shaw Brothers’ gradually transitioned from preserving a more conservative version of traditional value to the

\(^{19}\) Chu Yuan, 39
inventor of a sexually explicit genre. Particularly, the production of *Intimate Confessions* (1972) was situated in the background of Run Run Shaw’s emphasis on turning to the TV industry, on the lack of grading system, on the studio’s previous ample experience in marketing hybrid genres, and most importantly, on the rising of the local market. With over a million Hong Kong dollars in box office revenue, *Intimate Confessions* (1972) was commercially successful, and it marked the starting point of numerous erotic/exotic films in the mid-1970s.

* Grounding the analysis of *Intimate Confessions*’s (1972) unprecedented cinematic representation of lesbianism within its specific cultural and historical context enables better understanding of larger issues such as how dominant ideologies in society could affect the representation of gender and sexuality in cultural products and how desire for spectatorship was created and transformed into a voyeuristic moment in cinematic space.

The dominant ideology in the representation of sexuality in cinema is closely related to the criminalization of male sexual behavior in the colonial legal system. Moreover, the illegal status of gay sexuality not only reflected how political power informed the representation of the personal body but also mirrored the inscrutable and invisible status of real female same-sex desire. The translated notion of homosexuality -- “Tong Xing Lian/ai” (同性戀/愛) indicates that the existing lesbians lacked agency to directly express themselves in a local language, let alone the meager opportunities for female individuals within marriage to

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20 For sexology usage and Chinese translation from Japanese translation (同性愛) of homosexuality as an imported concept, see Martin 32-33; Tse-lan Sang 99-126; Other more recent terms such as “Tongzhi” (originally meaning comrade) and “Zhiren” (straight people) indicating homosexual behavior and LGBT identities are not common until the 1989 when it was firstly refer to LGBTQ by Edward Lam on the first Hong Kong Lesbian & Gay Film Festival.
be aware of the existence of sexuality or to negotiate their alternative desire with the dominant patriarchal social structure.

The formation and changes of the term “Tong Xing Lian/ai” in a larger cultural context can be traced back not only to the neologism “Tongxing” (同性) and “Lian’ai” (戀愛) in early Republican China but also the romantic capability in the depiction of female intimate friendship or homoeroticism in the “May-forth” literature of New Culture Movement (五四/新文化運動). “Tongxing” and “Liana,” as Tze-Lan Sang puts it, was a combination of two novel ideas, which were intriguing and inspiring for the 1920s youth in searching for breaking the existing power structure in families and stifling Confucian values.²¹

Considering the intellectual exchanges between Hong Kong and mainland before 1949, the notion “Tongxing Lian/ai” was not found in the Hong Kong of that period,²² but alternative notions and descriptions were probably not uncommon in private discourses. At the same time, male homosexuality was illegal in Hong Kong before 1991 under the criminal law. From 1865-1901, Offenses Against The Person Ordnance stipulated that buggery (including actual and attempted anal intercourse between males) could be sentenced to a life imprisonment. In addition to that, from 1901 to July 11th, 1991, any other kind of “indecent act” between males was also a criminal offense. The notion of “Ji-jian” (雞姦), which means anal intercourse for sexual pleasure, was different from that of the Western umbrella term “sodomy.” Even so, the criminalization of male same-sex behavior in the pre-1999 colonial legal

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²¹ For “Tongxing” and “Lian’ai”, see Tze-Lan Sang, 127-133

²² For pre-1949 Hong Kong Literature of LGBT interest, see Pink Alliance: http://pinkalliance.hk/hongkong/literature/
system, with its application of the Chinese term to indicate even mutually consented sexual intimacy, was by no means different from the nature of Western sodomy law. Alternative opinions\textsuperscript{23} were visible in Hong Kong after the legalization of homosexuality in the UK during the end of the 1960s, yet in the 1970s the majority of population in Hong Kong had little chance for introspection on the concept of sexuality, let alone homosexuality, except for the connotation of perversion in the term “Ji-jian” and its criminalized status. Compared to male same-sex desire in any circumstance before its conditional legalization, female same-sex behavior was not only comparatively safer in term of legal punishment but also in general less visible.

The dominant sexuality, with its cultural pressure and political regulation of individual bodies, suppressed any existence of desire between same-sex adults, which further suppressed the sexual identity formation and its corresponding speech-act. In specific cases, for example, the lack of expression produces difficulty for researchers to evaluate the meaning of “outrageous” and “unusual” in the subtitles of Intimate Confessions (1972) posters. Except for the typical eye-catching nature of the marketing rhetoric during that period, the process of knowledge formation categorizing “sexual deviancy” and possible discussion of non-dichotomous sexuality are hard to find. If the concept of alternative sexualities cannot be formed because of the two-fold orthodoxies grounded in the culture locale, then how the appearance of the notion “Tongxing Lian,” for example, in studio promo magazines opens new ways of imaging sexuality would need further investigation. In the same vein, the graphic image

\textsuperscript{23} For those alternative opinions, see “Official Report of Proceeding” (Legislative Council of Hong Kong, 1972)
of female cuddling in the posters provides a possible epistemological explanation of how same-
sex desire and relationship were conceptualized.

**Stardom and Promotion: A Process of Engaging the Audience**

Before analyzing the patriarchal and hetero-normative mentality around the
text, I will illustrate how the desirability of the imaged lesbianism is constructed, maintained
and transformed as a cinematic phenomenon not only in its constructed visibility on screen but
in the multimedia event beyond the enclosed space of cinema.

Specifically, in the following sections I will elaborate on role of stardom, posters
and promotional magazines in cultivating the potential subjectivity of audiences and cinematic
spectatorship. The cinematic meaning of lesbianism and its according imagined function as an
object of desire would both remain abstract unless it could be perceived in advance outside of
the cinema. This process of concept-illustrating and attention-craving involves several aspects:
implant the desirable image of female stars into the most sexually sensational detail in the film
-- namely the kiss; foreground and highlight this climatic moment beyond the film medium by
printing it in full-color posters and exhibiting the enlarged version on plastic billboard in the
urban space.

One thing worth mentioning here is that the various forms of desire in any
occasion of seeing and watching may well coexist and show no clear-cut categorical boundary.
However, the substantial difference between photography and moving image affects viewers’
formation of subjectivity in different ways. It is highly possible that the coupling figures on
posters have already produced subject positions before the cinematic spectatorship occurs.
This position is then further transformed into an observational and voyeuristic one in the cinema, which is framed by the highly subjective promotion articles, and internalized by the illusion of enclosed cinematic space. Another important point is that the patriarchal and heteronormative presumptions behind the text do not become inscrutable or disappear from the voyeuristic position. Instead, it is exactly because of the realization of this presumption that different forms of desire, which were projected onto the lesbian image on screen, could possibly maintain.

**Beyond the Cinematic Space: Subject Formation as a Multimedia Event**

In an essay titled “Lily Ho of Hong Kong,” screen-writer Edward Lam listed each sensational screen or promotional moment of his best-loved actress ever, Lily Ho. In his chronological and well-annotated errand of Lily Ho’s glamour shots, newspaper interviews, Shaw Brothers’ promotional articles, posters and stage photos, Lily Ho appears as a new star and fashion icon coming into being. Being chic in every way, as he says, is the standard distinguishing stars from the ordinary people (241). It could be seen that in the early 1970s, when Hong Kong was still a world outsourcing manufacturing center with millions of blue-collar workers, the modern outfit of film stars and their newest hairstyles were ideal topics for the dinner talk of the working class.  

Bestowed by Shaw Brothers’ star system that Run Run Show established from the prototypical Hollywood mode, the company recruited young actors who were scouted to be

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24 The notion of “chic” and Hong Kong’s working class, see Edward Lam, “Lily Ho of Hong Kong”, 237-251, in The Shaw Screen: A Preliminary Study, ed. Wong Ain-ling (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2003)
talented enough for leading roles. The production cost could be further cut if these future stars signed a form of exclusivity agreement contract with the media conglomerate who has the right to decide for them on the roles, the crews, and their persona. A life in stardom follows the rules of commercial interests. Lily Ho was one of these exclusive-contracted actresses who regularly appeared in numerous films during late 60s and early 70s. As one of the box-office queens of the Shaw Brothers studios, she was trained and cast in the leading role in diverse films ranging from sword-play assassin to lustful mistress. Lily Ho’s chubby face, flashing eyes and deft martial art performance are the cornerstone of, if not gross earnings, at least first-round revenue.

The physicality of young actresses in their early twenties are the ideal sites for cultivating voyeuristic desire, even though commercial production and promotion might as well banalize the beauty. The contracted actresses on the one hand help to secure revenue for new productions; on the other hand, because of their frequent appearances in the cinema, magazines and urban space, they face the danger of being overexposed on media. In this case, their existence is not so much a sensation but the equivalence to banality. Thus the invention of a new genre that was about to emphasize physical attractiveness become important for the highly homogenous images of the actress. The curious case of the sexual aspect of lesbianism and its indispensable narrative of the cause of becoming a lesbian together provide an ideal concept for saving the banal heterosexual image for the stardom system. Thus, in the pursuit of nurturing a new vessel of sensation, the money-driven industry could continue to survive.

The exploitative mode of commercial production and its eagerness to appropriate the everyday interpersonal attraction stimulated by visual information contributed
to the invention of stardom. Again, it made *Intimate Confessions* (1972) a film not so much about the idea of “objectively” or “scientifically” representing lesbianism, but once again to attract audiences with the sensational possibility of the characters’ ideal image, not so much the static physical beauty but the subtle facial expression and the hyper-feminine flow of gesture flow in the exact filmic value that triggers the creation of male hetero-sexual voyeurism towards the imaginary lesbian, thus fulfilling the invention of a sensational meaning upon the still indefinable concept of sexuality through the desirability of a lesbian image.

**Posters**

![Figure 1 A Thai Poster of Intimate Confessions Of A Chinese Courtesan (1972) Copyright by Celestial Pictures](image1)

![Figure 2 A Chinese Poster of Intimate Confessions Of A Chinese Courtesan (1972) Copyright by Celestial Pictures](image2)

![Figure 3 An English Poster of Intimate Confessions Of A Chinese Courtesan (1972) Copyright by Celestial Pictures](image3)

The center of *Intimate Confessions’* (1972) poster shows two young women, Lily Ho and Betty Pei Ti, facing each other closely as if they are about to cuddle or kiss. Or maybe they have just finished. It seems to be a still pose paused in the middle. They are both in translucent costumed gowns with faces half lightened, wearing an inscrutable expression. The bottom one’s left hand rests on the waist of the upper one, and in a curve shadow at the edge
of her face, her mouth slightly opens. The woman on top props her upper body on her arms, while her downcast eyes seem to be looking at the other’s lips. They are posing in a private space that looks like a bedchamber with silky drapery as the backdrop, as if they do not know they have been watched. They are also fully dressed and neatly groomed. Their profiles form a perfect symmetry but does not fully reveal as were in an erotic position. The viewer of this poster did or did not know which one is who, otherwise, they look like twins. Above this iconography is an array of six production stills depicting different decisive instants in the movie, which provide enough information to indicate the theme and genre of this film: ancient interior, place lanterns, luxurious-looking period costume, nudity, blood, same-sex kissing and a man looking askew to the left. Below the two women is a midnight sword-fight between a man and a woman, with a third person standing behind on the bridge. A promotional line on top of the poster says: “The most audacious theme, the most audacious depiction!”

If it is not for the “audacious” reminder and another kiss between two women in the array of stills, the viewers of this poster may not be about to recognize that the two women in the iconography express sexual intimacy. The film title “Ainu” (愛奴), with its literal meaning as either “love the slave” or “a slave of love” is out of context and remains ambiguous to first-time audiences. However, the other inter-referencing elements of this poster have provided enough information to stimulate the curiosity of viewers. The promotional word “audacious” explains the lip-to-lip kiss in the small still shot and grants it an erotic connotation. Therefore, the photographic syntax between the arranged elements within the medium enables the predicable effect on a certain group of audiences, even though there is no available notion yet to pinpoint what exactly the image refers to. Also, considering its exhibition in 1970s Hong
Kong, the image of famous actresses could fundamentally encourage viewers to see the film about Lily Ho’s kissing of another woman. It could be seen from the above that *Intimate Confessions*’ (1972) guarantee of cinematic enjoyment for audiences in its poster reveals a fact that the erotic characteristics were the direct result of actresses who can act out their beauty in various ways. On one hand, though the good-looking standard is largely subjective even within the analysis framework of a single film, the image of lesbian sexual position and its connoted meaning of desire are often staged as genteel, indirect and partial, just like the licking of blood and the touch of lips, thus mysterious, symbolic and desirable. In other words, along with the necessary suspense in cinematic diegesis, the real object of desire is the gesture and filmic beauty of the two female characters, Lily Ho and Betty Pei Ti, with their heavy makeup and luxurious-looking costumes set in the backlots of a small landscape of ancient China. The film with its screening in the enclosed space, legitimatized a particular voyeuristic desire that was not suitable in the public. Situated in the cinema, spectators were eased off the slightest possibility of the moral burden thereby enjoy the torture of violent or sexual acts that might be disturbing or illegal outside the walls of cinema.

*Film Magazines*

The majority of film magazines in 1960s Hong Kong were studio-based, for which the focus was more on the coverage of future productions and reviews of recent films produced by their parent-companies. Rather than the textual content, full-color glamour photography or portrait shots of female celebrities on covers were their major selling points. The following is a promotional comment of *Intimate Confessions* (1972) from an issue of
Xianggang Yinghua (香港影畫) published in June 1972, which was of the two major Shaw Brothers’ official film magazines. The wording such as “admirable,” “unique” and “wrecked his brain” demonstrates that the review aims to attract readers with a equally sensational depiction coincidental to the heading of the film posters, so as to alter them into profitable audiences.

“[Sexual] perversion is a subject of interest to psychologists. The general emergence of homosexuality in modern Western societies is a typical case, which has become a well-known aspect of sexual perversion. [Homosexuality], as a common phenomenon, has become a social issue, which is why it has been legalized in some countries.

People would ask: ‘Is homosexuality a unique thing in the modern society?’ Not exactly, it also exists in the past. The only difference is that it is more common in the modern world. Chor Yuen’s [Chu Yuan’s] new film Ainu is a costumed sensational martial art film. With novel and unique technique, it reveals the issue of homosexuality. What is more admirable is that the film not only depicts the phenomenon but also thoroughly illustrates the causes of the happening of homosexuality to two women, which is both entertaining and thought provoking.

Chor Yuen has wrecked his brain in building up the homosexual relationship between Lily Ho and Betty Pei Ti on volumes of achievements in perversion studies conducted by psychologists, which not only enables a fair, reasonable and persuasive depiction but also enhances the entertaining effect of this creative production.

Selected from ‘Xianggang ying hua’ issue 78. June, 1972: 30-35.” (qtd. in Wu 89)

This review contemporary to the screening of Intimate Confessions (1972) unfolds several details to provide a certain context in understanding the exact filmic value in female sexuality.

First, the “homosexuality” is framed under the notion of perversion as a phenomenon

\[25\] Qtd. in Wu 89
demanding a thorough psychological study. However, the writer did not elaborate on the question of how scientific investigation of the causes of homosexuality in the early 1970s academia has anything to do with enhancing the entertaining effect of two ancient lesbians in a period drama. Yet, the emphasis on the objectifying power of scientific evidence over the fictional depiction of sexuality is also evident in other reviews of *Intimate Confessions* (1972) published approximately around the same time of its screening.

Secondly, the notion of homosexuality as a typical perversion in “modern Western societies” reflects that the awareness of spatial and temporal discrepancy of modernity between Hong Kong and the West can be identified in the issue of culture and sexuality. By categorizing homosexuality as a perverse phenomena reviving in recent Western societies, the review tends to strengthen Hong Kong’s subjectivity in that apparently homosexuality has not yet become a social issue large enough for serious attention, but satisfying casual curiosity.

A sense of detachment from Western societies on sexuality issues can also be perceived. The legalization of homosexuality in the West results from its commonality. Rather than attribute this larger visibility as a progress, the review treats it more as a social pathology that can be overcome by legalization. Another review mentioning Ainu also takes the Western influence into account in terms of the increasing popularity of Euro-American exploitation films in Hong Kong. Third, the liberal meaning in Chinese of either “Tong Xing Lian” (同性戀) or “Nv Tong Xing Lian” (女同性戀) could be understood at a glance. When this notion appeared in film reviews, it inter-referenced the kiss on poster. For those spectators who had never seen a lip-on-lip kiss between two women, “Tong Xing Lian” neatly provided graphic illustration.
Text Analysis - Heteronormative Ideology

Multiple previous analyses of Intimate Confessions (1972) discovered orthodox queer existences, for example, either from the idealization of an ahistorical brothel as the site of female same-sex desire, or from the progressive image of a self-recognized lesbian Madam and her ownership and management of the brothel. Looking into the “queering” substance of a transforming “Chinese dream” in the Ainu franchise, Lily Wong views the enclosed brothel function as an ideal queer space unconcerned with the outside patriarchy. Similarly in the reading of Qiqin (奇情) films, Tan See Kim values the lesbian figure of Madam Chun as the vehicle to break the sexual and gender dichotomy. Specifically, compared to the mood of violence and revenge in heterosexual males, Chun’s love towards Ainu is depicted with a touch of gentle and intimacy. Furthermore, Kim states that Madam Chun’s supernatural Kung Fu ability incarnated in her Yinyan ghost hand (阴阳鬼手) enables her superior position over the patriarchy structure in feudalism, which is evident in the final fight where Bao Hu’s symbolic patriarchal Hanguang knife (寒光⼑刀) is defeated by the Madam Chun’s symbolic feminist Yinyang ghost hand.

Admittedly, in the final battle fighting against her admirer/co-owner Bao Hu, it may be that Chun’s “ghost hands” represent a pair of feminist-charged phalluses that enjoy a


28 See Kim & Cheung 79
clear advantage in combat with Gao Hu’s extended and plastic one. However, the reading of “feminist” in her weaponless fighting disregards Madam Chun’s ruthless exploitation of those trafficked women as a brothel owner. Such an interpretation, in general, neglects the fact that the social and cultural function of the brothel is deeply grounded in its lowest position in the power structure of patriarchy, but also that the heterosexual male as patron is vital to its maintenance. Even the realization of Madam Chun’s lesbian desire is built upon her brutal dictatorship and continuous exploitation of the forced prostitutes. Moreover, fighting scenes are contextual to the two levels of exploitation. Slow-motion choreography, clothes torn apart during combat, and blood splashed on the female protagonists’ faces all function as a necessary touch of eroticism incarnated in the fighting physicality of Ainu. This detailed elaboration of a feminine body in a historicized backdrop also represents the coloniality and regional aspect of Hong Kong: when male nudity represents a sense of asexual toughness, female nudity is designated as unprecedented erotic capacity available to an outsiders’ gaze.

**The Brothel**

The diegesis of the first half of the film is basically structured upon a series of languid tortures of Ainu – a necessary step in victimization before she submits herself to the desire of Madam Chun. In other words, the film need to emphasize that Ainu’s submission to Chun should be her last resort, and the changing of Ainu’s attitude should also carry the weight of subverting the confined world of what was regarded as perversion, so that the identity of lesbianism is a conditional formation. The melodramatic interaction between the potential hero Yen Shunzi and Ainu is not so much about preparing to avenge Shunzi’s death, but again more

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29 Chang Cheh’s notion of masculinity, femininity and nudity, 54
about producing a moral high ground for her submission to Madam Chun. Within the same logic, by applying the blood fetishism, masochistic punishment and disciplining of newly acquired sex-slave into the figure of Madam Chun, the film aims to demonize the image of the self-identified lesbian figure as mere perversion. In this respect, ending the film in a grotesque double-murder of both lesbians -- be it the inborn one or the contaminated one -- is inevitable, in that it redresses the wrong condition and sets straight the heteronormative order by destroying the soil of lesbianism.

The ironic flip-side of the construction is that, because of the torture and mutual deception between two lesbians, be it self-identified or conditional, the process of viewing reciprocally enables a sadistic subjectivity in its targeted male audiences. Such viewers fall into a dilemma resulting from their inability to either pass moral judgment upon Madam Chun that could distinguish themselves from her perversion or totally submit to desire for becoming a masochistic subject under the torture of Madam Chun, even though they are inherently male and heterosexual.

*The Figure of Madam Chun*

Situating female same-sex intimacy in a brothel reflects the imbedded patriarchal, heteronormative gaze characterized by a limited imagination of homoerotism that is reflected in the coding of hypersexual, situational and man-hating traits onto lesbianism, regardless of how well the lesbian figure confirms to her identity. The figure Madam Chun is an important aspect in this formation.

On the surface the film constructed the figure of Madam Chun, a femme fatale,
around her “love” of Ainu and upon the promiscuity and perversion of same-sex desire and her ruthlessness in running the brothel. However, essentially speaking, it is not the existence of these factors but their interweaving with the visible self-recognizability of lesbianism in Madam Chun’s identity, upon which the gaze and anxiety of patriarchal and heteronormative structure is projected.

Madam Chun’s awareness of her sexuality is evident in an indoor scene at the beginning of the film. After Wu Huatian, the traffickers’ leader, received payment for this patch of “goods,” his interaction with Madam Chun is the first instance when the cinematic meaning of lesbianism comes across.

The scene started with a subjective shot from the perspective of Madam Chun who keeps sitting behind a Chabutai table in her bedchamber. It is a close-up focusing on a tray of silver ingots on the table that then quickly zooms out to a long over-the-shoulder shot of Madam Chun, focusing on Wu Huatian standing in the center of the frame. He is about to take the tray. In the same shot, a young prostitute or mistress in a red gown sits at the bedside.

*Figure 4* The scene where Madam Chun’s lesbian interest is revealed through the characters’ positions within the shallow depth of field and a failed flirtation. Source: *Intimate Confessions Of A Chinese Courtesan (1972)* Copyright 2008 Celestial Picture.
playing with her hair. She is positioned at the left edge of the frame. After receiving the money, Wu Huatian approaches forward with a smile, raises his hand to touch Madam Chun’s face as an act of flirtation. Madam Chun immediately slaps his face and blows him away with such a powerful slap that Wu Huatian ends up cracking a chair before even realizes what has happened. He then gets up saying in a casual tone: “You haven’t changed a bit. You still don’t like men, I mean” (Intimate Confessions, 1972). Then the shot cuts to a medium close-up slightly lower than Madam Chun’s eye level. She smirks, rolls her eye upward, looking at Wu Huatian without saying a word. After Wu Huatian shakes his head and sighs “What a pity,” he leaves the room, and the mistress who appears several time in the back now walks up front to Madam Chun and reaches out her hand. Then scene ends up in a low-angle medium-close-up focusing on Madam Chun watching the man walk away. She takes the mistress’ hand and looks back at her with the same smirk.

In the above scene, Wu Huatian gets the point that Madam Chun still maintains her “old habit,” namely that she “doesn’t like men,” by flirting with her. This scene indicates that the process of the meaning construction of lesbianism cannot escape the central figure of the heterosexual man or of the conventional sexuality of “liking men.” Furthermore, Madam Chun neither admits nor negates Wu Huatian’s judgement that she “still doesn’t like men.” Therefore, the revitalization of Madam Chun’s sexuality is a tacit process, which is built upon the futile action of a heterosexual male. In a sense, one’s sexuality cannot be preconceived until an instance of flirtation is brought out. However, Wu Huatian’s flirtation is insulting because, before he tries to stroke her face, he already knows her abhorrence of men. In terms of the mistress in red, the meaning signified by her interaction with Madam Chun depends on the
syntax of the montages within this scene. When the mistress approaches forward and gives her hand to Madam after Wu Huatian leaves, the latter’s judgment affects the meaning of this hand and Madam’s position. Of course, Madam Chun will become a much more grotesque figure in the latter scenes. However, through the above interaction, viewers fully perceive a self-recognized lesbian figure without her identity being really spoken aloud.

Overall, cinematic representation of same-sex desire is a discursive formation. In the case of Intimate Confessions (1972), it is through the story-telling around a lip-to-lip kiss -- which also needs help from background music to indicate that the filmic meaning of this particular kiss is a sexual one.

Chapter Conclusion

As a commercial production, the overarching ideology behind Intimate Confessions (1972) is not only patriarchal but also homophobic. Because of the introduction of homoerotic images is for the purpose of attracting audiences, the desirability of the imaged lesbianism needs to be constructed, maintained and transformed as a cinematic phenomenon not only in its visibility on screen but in the multimedia event beyond the enclosed space of cinema.

The meaning formation of heterosexual-imagined lesbianism, therefore, relies on the desirable filmic image of popular female stars. Paradoxically, because of its need to pathologize the lesbian image, the narrative focuses on the representation of a series of torturing and suffering. Within this process, the screen inevitably becomes a mirror reflecting the unrealized queerness not only in the male-targeted audience, but that of the female
audience as well.

Because of the application of contrasting sadomasochistic positioning between the self-identified lesbian and the conditional one, the torturing and suffering of the characters projects a sadomasochistic effect on viewers’ experiences. Thus, the constructed dilemma of suffering along with the beauty courtesan, or witnessing the killing of Madam Chun, define the queerness of spectatorship.

Contemporizing the Historiosity of an Imagined Figure

*An Amorous Woman of the Tang Dynasty* (1984) tells the story of a Chinese poet and courtesan Yu Xuanji (魚玄機, approximately 844-868/869) – a historical figure famous for her beauty, literary talent and romantic drama between her and many male poets. Among females who appeared in ancient texts for their literary talents, Yu Xuanji is one of the few whose own work remained accessible to modern readers.

Her writing, instead, was indeed a form of cultural legacy reflecting and defying a male-centered era when most women were illiterate and subjected to the opposite sex in their families. Her poems, some of which are chanted as voice-over in the film, present first-person narrative expressing the meager social status and immobility of women compared to men. While collections of poems titled with Yu Xuanji’s name are still broadly read in modern times, depictions of other talented literate women who lived outside of the chamber of imperial consorts (后宮) did not appear beyond anecdotal records of medley, essays, legends, or folklore, since most of them were of the lowest social classes. By contrast, the personal life of those who served as inner officials (內官) in the royal harem had a chance of being mentioned in dynastic records written by official historiographers (史官). In the Tang dynasty, narration and

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30 Considering the huge bodies of remaining records of Chinese literary texts, those written by women in is minimum. Only a handful of those biographical depiction by male literati mentioned women. For exemplary researches of depiction of women’s life in various forms of literary texts in ancient China, see Grace Fong, Robin Wong and Wilt L. Idema
interpretive comments of women’s deeds outside of the official documents were often written by male literati. In the latter circumstances, individual literacy was the crucial aspect of a woman being allegedly accounted as “talented” (才女), and thus worthy of a mention. That is why, for courtesans, who were strictly stratified into the lowest social class but socially more visible than those from the ordinary class, their fame survived throughout history.

The literary competency of low-born women was often presented outside of traditional managerial roles and particularly in the entertainment business of serving and accompanying male literati not only sexually but aesthetically and intellectually. This kind of official courtesan status for lower class females was far more complex than prostitution. Under the newly reformed literati-officialdom, men from the ordinary classes trained themselves for decades in pursuit of an official consort position through the combination of elite recommendations, a rigorous imperial examination system, and a final oral interview in the imperial court, all of which emphasized the interpretative learning of Confucian classics. Because of the extreme selectivity, candidacy status could last for years, during which literate courtesans were desirable companions. Most of the courtesans were trained to be singers and musicians during their childhood since they were officially registered as musicians – the lowest ranking in the Tang household system. As with Yu Xuanji, some of them were capable enough to become singer-songwriters.

Although not all courtesans provided sexual services, they had to be physically attractive with amiable personalities so as to ensure that the performances were visually enjoyable as well. Therefore, “women’s talent” was connoted with the meaning of sexually “amorous” and could only be more visible among female entertainers and recorded by male
literati. In other words, in a strictly historical account, without leaving their own records, alleged female literary talents cannot be productively interpreted in a discourse originated and circumscribed by the male gaze. Similar to many annotated depictions of women in historical records, the life story of Yu Xuanji is succinct, anecdotal, and sporadically appeared in accessible texts, which function as unbalanced references to her comparatively large body of poems, leaving her existence both acknowledgeable and mythical at the same time. Exactly because of this, she endures adaptation and reimagination in diverse forms of creative production where the meaning of Yu Xuanji as a cultural symbol emerges beyond the sense of a strictly historical figure, evolves and regenerates itself constantly.

In this context, the way An Amorous Woman (1984) represents and re-imagines this figure, as well as how it constructs corresponding characters, is worth a closer look. It mainly focuses on delineating the circumstances of how she “chooses” unconventional lifestyles in and out of several Taoist temples and brothels after running away from her husband’s family in her early 20s. Later I will further explain why the existing “choice(s)” assigned by the film to Yu Xunaji in confronting her contemporary society was problematic in its meaning, regardless of filmmakers’ intention in this deliberate invention. This issue can be related to another obvious ideological paradox which is probably rooted in the newly emerged tension between sexploitative representation in Shaw Brothers’ erotic genre as a business convention and the urge to express artistic and political concerns among a new generation of filmmakers. This technique might also be a way for the creative members to defy the given reason and interpretation of Yu Xuanji’s death in the literary records.
Among a handful of Yu Xuanji’s biographical notes, the most detailed one is from a collection of personal writing called *Little Tablet from the Three Rivers* (三水小牘)\(^3\), by Huangfu Mei (皇甫枚, active 873-910) in which a narration interpreting personal accounts of urban tales and curious sayings represent the majority of the texts. In terms of historicity, this pamphlet could roughly be classified into the genre of short fictional stories called *Chuanqi* (传奇) with its literal meaning as “tales of the strange events” that started to prosper in mid-Tang Dynasty. Female figures in Haungfu Mei’s collection were featured by dramatic details of treacherous romance. Among them, the short story titled as “Yu Xuanji Beats Lvqiao To Death” (鱼玄机笞毙绿翘致戮) presents a succinct depiction of Yu Xuanji’s outrageous “execution” of Lvqiao out of suspicion of her clandestine sexual activities with a male patron who had visited Yu Xuanji regularly.

Based on the limited bibliographical information and dissatisfied with the definitive tones in the available historical sources, filmmakers enjoyed and intentionally demanded the freedom to create a female figure outside of the archetypal romance, be it comedies or tragedies, between young gifted scholars and beautiful ladies (才子佳人) not only in previous historical films adapted from traditional folk literature but also in mass produced self-repeating youth genres such as beach-party musicals, comedies and teen dramas. The female protagonist, Yu Xuanji, is shown to be unlike her contemporaries at the beginning of the film. By uttering that she “merely wants to be an independent and self-sufficient woman” (An Amorous Woman, Fong), she seems to be incarnated with the modern value of females’ individual autonomy as an essential right. However, very quickly after that statement, her body

\(^3\) also known as *Shanshui Xiaodu* (山水小牘)
is fully exposed several times in graphic representation of sexual activities designed to arouse and feed the audiences’ desire, whether or not the protagonist chooses to engage in them. This not only resonates with the title’s overtly declared theme of presenting Yu Xuanji as “amorous,” but also creates a jarring textual paradox. On the one hand, the film emphasizes the character’s gender awareness and defense of self-autonomy. On the other hand, this statement, if at all meaningful in delivering a value to the audience, is disrupted many times by erotic moments depicting various types of sexual violence, among which two are between the two female protagonists, thus making the statement of self-autonomy a precipitous invention subject to ridicule. To clarify, in this film sexual exploitation was not merely a tacitly applied cinematic trope created to unconsciously and thus comfortably satisfy audiences. On the contrary, the exploitation per se is clearly embedded within the narrative when unexpected sexual encounters, prostitution, and rapes push forward the story.

By framing this textual contradiction as a paradox, I do not mean to criticize filmmakers’ professional competence in constructing cinematic syntax nor do I even assume that every film text should be examined and evaluated for an overarching theme or tidy narrative structure, which are impossible and limited. Instead, I tend to view this paradox as a cinematic phenomenon in which hidden ideological suture(s) could be revealed. Additionally, in the name of a “bold and unconstrained” (Haofang, 豪放) characteristic, Yu Xuanji’s statement championing female self-autonomy and her hyper-sexualized body in hetero- and homoeroticism represent both sides of the same coin, even though within the film text they produce an inevitable effect of incompatible values. The meaning of “bold and unconstrained” can be colored by different contexts. In Cantonese, the word is slightly negative when
describing a female, almost identical to “promiscuous”, which resonates with the erotic scenes.

Meanwhile, considering the filmmakers’ major effort in reimagining a splendid Tang culture, “boldness and unconstrainability” were positive evaluations in that they imply the imperial strength and confidence of the Tang dynasty, with its inclusive attitude towards diverse cultures, and in which women’s openness to having multiple sexual partners is an ideal aspect.

However, I will further clarify that neither of these meanings of “bold and unconstrained” were sufficient to set the tone for the paradoxical representation of sexualities and gender in the coded performances in this film. Instead, I will propose that the statement of self-autonomy as a gender-neutral right is in fact only the name of a psychologically defensive and culturally counteractive mechanism Yu Xuanji undertakes to keep herself sane in a turbulent time. This film starts by representing lawless moments in a religious space produced by a man stepping into a female-only temple to an anarchic raid against the scaffold. Turmoil and social disorder contextualize characters’ choice of “uncontained” existence, in which all people suffer from their unknown and upsetting futures regardless of their gender and class. In the case of women, their purpose for living failed in both war and peace. The filmmakers situate the self-aware protagonist as well as the maid Lvqiao in a constantly changing environment full of existential encounters without giving specific reasons. This is more obvious in the later part of the film, where gender and sexuality itself were the most disguised location of class and social conflicts. Through a close examination of this aspect, I deny the tendency to render the film diegesis as abrupt and illogical and, furthermore, read this film as reflecting the filmmakers’ cultural introspection concerning the contemporary crisis of 1980s Hong Kong --

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especially that of one of the three screenwriters, Chiu Kang-Chien, who frequently embodies female figures as the questioners of meaning in individual existence, which in my opinion reflects a sense of identity crisis in the status of cultural disorientation.

**San Ming Film Cooperation**

As a result of the escalating competition with shrinking profit margins in the Hong Kong film market, Shaw Brothers made a major investment transfer from film to the television industry. In 1983, Run Run Shaw replaced film production business in its studios with broadcasting production for his cable television channel TVB as well as other small film companies via temporary leasing contracts. The annual films produced between 1984 and 1985 plummeted from approximately 40 per year to a handful, accompanied by a layoff of around 1400 staff. In 1985, Shaw Brothers also retreated from film distribution. It leased the majority of its movie theaters in Hong Kong to D&B Films Co. and stopped its decades of contracts with the Grand World movie theater chain in Taiwan. Sam Ming Film Co. was one of many small studios that benefitted from these changes. It was facilitated by Shaw Brothers' investment and enjoyed stylistic freedom due to the latter's declined production control. The studio was launched by three young filmmakers with only one film produced under its name: *An Amorous Woman of the Tang Dynasty* (1984). Shaw Brothers' then-Chief Executive Mona Fong accepted three men's proposal of filming an “erotic film” that would help to prolong this classic genre. She provided Shaw Brothers' filming sets, machines, and technical personnel while the three men at the heart of the project focused on modifying scripts and recruiting creative members.

For the three core members, Chun Tin-Nam, Eddie Fong, Ling-Ching and Chiu Kang-Chien, the idea of launching their studio went back to a successful creative cooperation
during the production of *Nomad* (1982) directed by the renowned filmmaker Patrick Tam. Similar to *An Amorous Woman* (1984), *Nomad* was produced under the name of a small studio, Century Motion Picture & Distribution, which quickly collapsed because of losing money in making that single film. The script, which specifically aimed to interpret Nietzschean idea of the modern nomad in the figure of a Hong Kong youth was a collaborative work led by Patrick Tam among six filmmakers. Aiming to question the social status quo in contemporary Hong Kong and to challenge previous self-censored youth films as a genre, the film focuses on an oblique narration of youth's disaffected and nihilistic state of being. Abounding with 80 minutes of wandering and waiting, graphic sex, colorful visual metaphors and atmospheric noises, it ends in tragic bloodshed by the terrorist group Japanese Red Army in which all the protagonists die. Produced in a time of political censorship when a standardized content rating system was yet applicable, this film was censored immediately after its first screening due to its graphic depiction of sexual encounters among the school-age youth and a fictional depiction of communist terrorist attack in Hong Kong. Although later being renowned as a representative film of New Wave, *Nomad* was a commercial failure due to its costs and its censorship. Eddie Fong and Chiu Kang-Chien together realized that their unique stylistic voices left unheard in this film deserved an encore. Together with Chun Tin-Nam, a historian-turned screenplay writer who specialized in the Tang Dynasty, the three men later became the launchers of Sam Ming Film Co., with the funding of Shaw Brothers.

One of the collective features of Hong Kong New Wave filmmakers is that most of them were strongly influenced by the auteur theory practiced among members of the French New Wave. However, unlike the French movement, the label “New Wave” -- borrowed to
reflect the status of emerging young filmmakers in Hong Kong -- did not represent a clearly planned movement or cooperative efforts. There was no unified declaration of any theoretical, artistic, or political agenda among this group of filmmakers. Rather, the simultaneous flourishing of unprecedented ways of filmmaking, cinematic representation, and subject concerns resulted in similar actions without prior agreements. The concept gains its meaning in contrast to the established studio systems in previous decades in which directors were inculcated in a streamlined mode of production and genres were defined solely by the market.

Unlike previous generations of filmmakers who had acculturated only through studio apprenticeship, New Wave filmmakers studied theater or film production in American or British colleges, and later by entering newly emerging and talent-hunting TV channels, enjoyed a larger freedom to create and practice innovative ways of visual story-telling.

By the end of the 1970s, these TV producers brought their theoretical and practical background into full use by going back to the film industry and combining their new perspectives of subject formation and representation with unique cultural insight. Together, they created a phenomenon called Hong Kong New Wave. Therefore, we could say that New Wave, as a cultural phenomenon, was largely enabled by a business crisis in the film industry while at the same time conveniently functioned as a box office solution. *An Amorous Woman* (1984), produced at the mid-1980s, was an ideal example of how New Wave filmmakers tried to engage in the traditional arena of commercial films without compromising their freedom of creativity. Although financed by the big studio, *An Amorous Woman* (1984) is New Wave filmmakers’ signature questioning of human existence, wrapped up with the name of erotic film, where different creative concerns were contested, compensated and collaborated. The
overall conditions of this collaboration were difficult to reproduce, and therefore, fully understand. However, these aspects of the New Wave can be eloquently traced in the particular trajectories of the artistic and political thinking that provided its context of production.

Namely, through a detailed analysis of the film, we can see a rigorous reimagination of a Tang culture in the object but also the subject formation -- as well as its correlation with the construction of the power dynamic in lesbian relationship than was similar to the discription of gay relationship in traditional literature, a detailed representation of lesbian sex and its erotic possibility and a modern value of “gender awareness” incarnated in the figure of Yu Xuanji. Furthermore, to understand the paradox of a seemingly “liberal” heroine as the perpetrator of sexploitation, I will decipher the meaning of “gender awareness” by contextualizing this idea in a comparative analysis of Kang-Chien Chiu’s previous work. Then through the analysis of male figures and the narrative structure, I will demonstrate how a seeming gender issue performed a certain political identity crisis contextual to the transferring of sovereignty over Hong Kong in the early 1980s.

**Reimagining a Cultural Tang**

In *An Amorous Woman (1984)*, the reimagination of Tang culture works in distinctive yet intersecting aspects, from textual elements such as contemporary historical figures, entertainment district, religions, master-slave relationship, and recorded events to superficial cultural symbols such as poems, ceremonial events, foreign Hu (胡) dancing and music, sport, sitting position, and objects. The object symbols of a late Tang dynasty were meticulously placed within the manifold yet uneven landscapes of the capital city Chang’an,
where Yu Xuanji’s story takes place, while the textual elements were more complicated to perceive. In terms of the visual and audial symbols embedded in scenes focusing on objects and activities, filmmakers put great efforts in researching and exhibiting a historical period. Material objects and cultural events were intentionally placed between the scenes, creating a sense of cinema-verite that unfold multiple images of Tang in which sexuality is one of the most visually arresting dimension. One example of this painstaking effort in encoding cultural reimagination into a modern story-telling is a particularly emphasized shot featuring the male protagonist’s wooden mask in his first sexual encounter with Yu Xuanji. The mask appears several times throughout the film with changing connotation. In its debut, it functions as a warrior’s tactical mask when its owner, Cui Bohou ambushes and kills a military official. Later it is worn as part of the ritual in the warrior dance. After it is left in the hand of Yu Xuanji, it becomes an object of sexual desire.

Among the many forms of cultural reimagination, the most implicit is the application of an autobiographical perspective in film diegesis. Using Yu Xuanji’s way of seeing the world as well as her inner reaction as shown in the sporadic voice-overs, the film neatly reproduces the figure of Yu Xuanji in traditional literature, where she appears not only as an “amorous woman” in the eyes of literati, but as the announcer of her own thinking through the first person narrative of her works. In these poems, she expresses her thought and feeling directly rather than speaking through a persona. This literary aspect can be identified in the many instances of Yu Xuanji’s internal monolog throughout the film. One of them is a poem recitation that happens when Yu Xuanji and her friends stroll along the lake in the twilight after
a night long of partying. Emotionally affected by the scene, we hear Yu Xuanji’s unspoken melancholy through her chanting as a voiceover.

**Gender power dynamic, traditional literature and erotic capacity in lesbian sex**

If first-person narrative resonates with Yu Xuanji’s image in the historical archive as an active subject who talks directly to her readers, the homoerotic relationship depicted in the film is even more similar to the depiction of gay relationships and homoerotism in traditional literature. One thing to make clear is that modern identities such as “gay” and “lesbian” designating individuals or a group of people did not exist in the ancient world. Rather, we see metaphorical words such as “leaves-cutting” between men and “mirror-rubbing” among women in historical records indicating same-sex relationships, as well as erotic “Spring Chamber” pictures delineating a broad spectrum of sexual activities. In An Amorous Woman (1984), Lvqiao’s subordinate “maid” role in contrast to Yu Xuanji’s master’s position as “the Mistress” presented at the beginning of the film continues until Lvqiao’s death. Yu Xuanji coerces her maid into lesbian sex twice under different circumstances, both depicted in erotic ways where Yu Xuanji plays the “dominant” role during sexual activities. Historically, daily intimate interactions between the Miss and the maid were ambiguously displayed as holding the possibility of both outright oppression and pure friendship, since romantic instances were much less visible and impossible to be recorded and defined when it comes to social status, literacy and power structure within families. Wife and concubines serve the same husband and courtesans entertain well-off customers behind the public space. Contemporary available records of female homoerotism were written much later in history than those depicted in this
film, and in most of them, the male author imagines a harmonious sexual relationship among three parties.

Comparably, stereotypical images of a romance between a male elder master and a younger boy servant were fully evident in historical documents of various genres. Regardless of gender, servants in Tang dynasty in particular were ranked as slaves, so those who were subject to a master’s sexual desire as boytoys could be counted as sexual slaves. Masters’ passionate killing of subordinate lovers as well as lovers’/slaves’ suicides as results of fulfilling the commitment to loyalty are also frequent topics of interest in historical documents. In accordance with both ambiguous and direct homoerotic depictions of master-slave relationships between men, An Amorous Woman (1984) constructed a Miss and maid relationship in which the dynamic of power was more emphasized in distinctive class status rather than gender roles, which climax at a dispute over Lvqiao’s social status between the duo and Yu Xunji’s killing of the maid out of passion. Although the film constructs Lvqiao’s death in the master-slave mode, it is an obvious innovation in terms of what motivates Yu Xuanji to kill. The maid risks her life and possibly intentionally uses her death to prove her Miss/master’s notion of female self-autonomy as impossible. Lvqiao’s action is an ironic revolt against the stereotypical depiction of non-heterosexual images in traditional literature.

Two particular instances of homoerotic depiction of female master-slave relationships precede and contextualize the killing. As mentioned before, each of them features Yu Xuanji taking initiative to coerce or persuade her maid into having sex with her, which in its nature is outright exploitative behaviors. However, the sex scenes were also depicted in various ways that not only explore homoerotic capacity in lesbianism but also experiment with
challenging audiences’ position in facing these actions by contextualizing them with a sense of the tragic. Through a close reading of the only two lesbian sex scenes, I will now attempt to illustrate how visual meaning of homoerotism and the syntax of sexual practices are constructed through cinematic apparatus. In this film the representation of lesbian sexual practices produces its erotic essence in a careful combination of shot types. With consistent steady shots used throughout the scene, the most obvious level of perceivable erotic information is constructed not through the active engagement of voyeuristic targets exemplified in rapid camera movements or frequent cutting with realistic performance, but the gradual engagement of the audience in a series of shots from general (1) to specific, (2, 3, and 4) and back to general (5.) The details are as follow:

1. The establishing shot of an enclosed space, where Lvqiao was drugged
2. Several close-ups cut between Lvqiao and Yu Xuanji’s face, with the latter using the mask to probe the maid’s face.
3. A quick birds-eye view shot of Yuxuanji stroking along Lvqiao’s back with the latter facing down the ground and unable to act against her Mistress. The unusual camera perspective engage audience with the two’s interaction (See Figure 7.)
4. Several close-ups of specific physical movements – a medium shot features their position
5. The establishing shot with the same environment surrounding the final coupling of the duo in the end.

33 In the given context, “Lesbian sexual practices” is an economical term that identifies sexual activities between or among women, regardless of their sexual orientation and identities.
The first lesbian scene starts with a general depiction of the environment in which the actions of drugging and seducing take place. Via two establishing wide shots, we see Yu Xuanji’s dominant and aggressive role over her maid who dares not to break the virtual boundaries of the space enclosed by the camera frame.

![Figure 5](image)

*Figure 5 A lens-framed enclosed space of the first homoerotic scene, featuring a drug rape of Lvqiao and her inability to defend herself on the floor. Source: *Amorous Courtesan Of Tang Dynasty* (1984) Copyright 2003 Celestial Pictures.*

The scene then continues with four sets of steady close-ups emphasizing Lvqiao’s physical reaction according to her master’s touches. Under the steady shots and the close-ups, the characters’ minimum performance in static body positions becomes visually significant. The details of a cropped nude body, specifically the waist and half of the bottom, imitating a realistic physical reaction to sexual stimulation function as the internal movement that are different from implicit visual tropes in classic genre films.³⁴

![Figure 6](image)

*Figure 6 The first homoerotic scene begins with Lvqiao’s reluctance to look at her master and refuse to obey the latter’s coercion, until Yu Xuanji uses the nose tip of the mask, a symbolic phallus, to probe Lvqiao’s face. Source: *Amorous Courtesan Of Tang Dynasty* (1984) Copyright 2003 Celestial Pictures.*

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³⁴ During Hollywood 1930-60s Production Code, Hitchcock’s films are iconic examples in using visual symbols as subtexts to circumvent the restriction of sexual content. See in particular *Rear Window* (1954), *North by Northwest* (1957).
Meanwhile the close-ups to the stimulating object as well as a partially presented flirting hand narrows the visual distance between audiences and the screen, producing a strong sense of intimacy and unconsciousness of watching. If the general-specific-general structure smoothly transits the audience from narration to physical nudity, close-ups of stimulating actions are also presented arranged in a way to build up the erotic meaning in watching the sexual part: namely, mask probing cheek, mask stroking along back torso, hand stroking along back torso and kissing down from chin to the abdomen. The mask in the first two close-ups are the extension of Yu Xuanji's out-of-frame existence but also substitute the latter's female position with masculinity. It functions not only as a phallic symbol but also a real dildo within the text, imitating a man's angry face, which is easier for audiences who identified as the same gender to subjectively situate within the performance. Up to this moment, except for the first shot, no real physical contacts between two characters are shown, but yet because of the syntax, audiences would easily arrive at the idea that the sex was between two women, even
though the extended meaning of the mask indicates that Yu Xuanji’s warrior lover Cui Bohou was still remembered, loved and symbolically presented throughout this scene. These are increasing levels of exploitation, from symbolic sexual movement focusing on an object’s contact with ordinary body parts (such as the back), to the unmediated ones when Lvqiao turns up to face Yu Xuanji’s kissing of her front torso.

After sets of close-ups, the scene is cut back to showing the overall physical interaction between two women in the environment when Lvqiao sits up with her naked back facing the screen and embracing Yu Xuanji in a pose indicating “scissoring” tribadism. At this point more obvious is the external cultural context preconditioning the sexual meaning of the action, in that not only is lesbian sex presented as an imagination of “scissoring” or in Chinese “mirror rubbing,” but it is immediately followed by a scene depicting a professional mirror polisher sitting in front of Yu Xuanji’s yard in the courtesans’ neighborhood touting for business.

Therefore, through directly exhibiting a static coupling position of lesbian sex that hardly exists
in reality, the meticulous visual arrangement is both realistic and imaginary. Later I will discuss that the sex scene *per se* is narratively self-contained and the causes of sex drives for both characters, compared to the depiction of sex between the warrior and Yu Xuanji, weaken the emotional capacity of lesbianism, reducing it to a conditional infringement doomed to be punished. In terms of lesbian sex practices, this scene functions more as an attempt to bring out realistic images, even though the erotic meaning in lesbian images only emerges when female bodies are partly covered, direct contacts between two characters are hindered and physical movements are limited.

The second homoerotic scene shows much more nudity and physical movements. However, eroticism is much less highlighted in this scene compared to that of the first one. In fact, as it’s positioned near the film’s ending, the scene focuses more on the narrative tension and tragic figure of both characters in terms of the overarching statement of female self-autonomy.

**Gender Awareness in the Film**

Scholars and film reviews grant Chiu with “gender awareness” but what that means is not clearly stated.\(^\text{35}\) It is true that, at many times in the film, Yu Xuanji is portrayed

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as talking and acting according to “feminist” values. However, the Miss’s way of treating her maid constantly contradicts the former’s frequent utterance of females' self-autonomy in general. The most obvious cases are the lesbian sex scenes between them, in which the archetypical dominating Miss and subordinate maid continuing as a trope of sexual practice.

The first instance of Yu Xuanji’s sexual exploitation of Lvqiao happens after the former's warrior lover Cui Bohou takes a French leave. Yu Xuanji soon reconverts to Taoism and agrees again to become a well behaved disciple, including taking a Taoist alchemist drug. The Miss-turned master now forces Lvqiao to drink the psychoactive cold food powder which has an aphrodisiac side effect. She then takes advantage of her.

In the second sex scene, a group of bandits break into their mansion and try to force the duo into performing lesbian coupling in public. Yu comforts Lvqiao by embracing her and singing to her. Although Yu Xuanji tries to declare their autonomy by “helping themselves,” to Lvqiao it was yet another forced rape. Obviously, Lvqiao’s consents to couple with Yu Xuanji not only because she's a sex slave but also, in facing the bandit, her master has no "choices" either (An Amorous Woman, 1984).

The film presents Lvqiao at the beginning of the story as the maid of Yu Xuanji. This position lasts throughout the major part of the film until Lvqiao declares that she has saved enough money to redeem her freedom (An Amorous Woman, 1984).

As mentioned earlier, the master-slave relationship in the Tang dynasty and its indispensable presumption of class division are embodied in the figure of the two female protagonists.
If we solely focus on Yu Xuanji’s figure and her announcements of one’s gendered position in the society, scenes of how Lvqiao, a maid from the rural area, tries to serve daily and conform her value system to her master Yu Xuanji’s need cannot be critically observed and explained.

While Yu Xuanji’s words and thoughts render in the film a possibility of expressing feminist concerns, I find this aspect questionable. If we temporarily put the 15th century’s idea of maids/slaves’ personal obedience and sexual subservience aside so as to judge Yu Xuanji’s behavior towards her maid on a modern standard, we could easily conclude that in this film, instances of direct abuse and hidden control of Lvqiao are numerous. Among them, the four cases of sexual abuse conducted by Yu Xuanji offer counterarguments to that Yu Xuanji’s supposed advocacy of female personal autonomy. In the final murder scene, Yu Xuanji vocally declares that Lvqiao, who had long been her maid, belongs to nobody but herself (Lvqiao), but her maid fiercely denies Yu Xuanji’s definition of her identity and uses her own life to prove that she can only be a slave.

In the film, the fatal dispute between the Miss and her maid around “redeeming oneself” highlights the incompatible class gap between the two, in which Yu Xuanji’s fancy notion of self-autonomy is confronted and ridiculed. After becoming completely disillusioned with Lvqiao, Yu Xuanji killed the only company she had. The killing scene was the most obvious creative rearrangement of the original story, in which Lvqiao had been flogged to death in Yu Xuanji’s jealous inquisition of her secret love affair. In the film, however, the impetus is different. In this scene Yu Xuanji urges Lvqiao to get an abortion since she is unable to tell her

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36 For original story, see 魚玄機笞斃綠翹致戮 in San Shuei Xiao Du,山水小牘 by Mei Huangfu, Project Gutenberg Ebook.
Miss who the father is. Lvqiao immediately refuses to obey and speaks of her true intention:

"No Miss, I won’t, I want to return to my hometown[countryside]. After giving birth, I’ll marry.

...Miss, presently I’m saving money. [enough money.] ... to redeem myself." Deeply disappointed, Yu Xuanji feels resentful towards Lvqiao’s failing to meet her expectations and to live up to her philosophy: "Redeem yourself? [Lvqiao,] if you want to go, I can let you go any time.... I have treated you like my baby sister. Why do you speak of redeeming...and regard yourself so lowly? ... Actually one can live freely without having to marry or bear children and solely depending on a man! " Instead Lvqiao replies: "No, I’ve been born as a girl slave, not so carefree and elegant as you...." Extremely furious, Yu Xuanji slaps her and forces the maid to take the abortive potion: “You are a GIRL, not a maid. Who has made you like this!?" After the latter still refuses to obey, Yu Xuanji holds her sword against the Lvqiao’s neck and threatens:

“You have followed me for a long time. I don’t want to see you ruin yourself nor see you leave. If you leave, I’ll kill you." In the following scene, the irony of Yu Xuanji’s notion of gender equality is fully revealed and escalated into a dramatic tension:

Lvqiao looks into her master: "I know you can kill me. You are the Lady, I’m a maid..."

Yu Xuanji: "No, you are not a maid" ("I am.") "You are a girl; I have never treated you like a maid." ("I am.") "You are not a maid! " ("I am!"). You’re not!!”

Yu Xuanji stabs Lvqiao in the abdomen. Seeing the latter die, Yu Xuanji falls in agony and desperately kisses the body (An Amorous Woman, 1984).

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37 In the above section, the dialogue is directly retrieved from the film’s original English subtitle except for the part in brackets, which are my additional editing of the English translation based on the film’s Cantonese dubbing.
A Formal Criticism of the Loss of Structure

How do we understand the construction of sex in a historical figure promoting female self-autonomy? In my opinion, the calling for an independent life and refusing to fit in the existed social position designated to women are reactions to a turbulent time, which is embedded in the narrative structure and the enabling apparatus. In fact, the film is similar to those of 1970s New Hollywood Cinema in that conflicts are isolated for a more detailed depiction of situational encounters per se rather than a continuing context in which events are constructed as interrelated. In terms of An Amorous Woman (1984), this aspect is evident in a chaotic social order, where a series of male figures surrounding our female protagonists were set in a position unable to properly to perform in traditional social roles. The abandonment of the social roles pertaining to established value is a phenomenon beyond gender and class.

Lvqiao and Yu Xuanji constitute the majority of overt pornographic elements in various relationship presented in the film. Although the storyline focuses on the biographical image of a female protagonist, her existence in fact constantly relies on the voyeuristic gaze, devotion, and chivalry of male figures that form a major target of both her contempt and emulation. An aspect of this construction is that these male figures are all from the upper class and later turn to counterculture social roles for various reasons. In the film, both Wen Tingyun and Priest Yong Huaisu came from upper class families but are unable to fit into the imperial political system, where men in upper class families are educated to serve. The film portrays their unconventional lifestyle as a reluctant choice out of disappointment with the existing social order. Yong Huaisu commits suicide after Lvqiao’s death being discovered.
At that time in the history, the established social order carefully maintained by the empire founders was on the brink of a constitutional crisis, and the upper class -- who still enjoyed privileged ways of living -- had no say in politics. The film, in particular, depicted three men, both through the eyes of a female protagonist and from an omniscient perspective. Cui is a swordsman, Wen is a poet, and Yong is a Taoist priest (居士). Each man functions as the outlier living in the peripheral space of the imperial arena, which is reflected in their divergence from the established political orthodoxy and collective choices to live by alternative values. However, in the eyes of Yu, when compared to her lack of choices as a woman, these imperial outliers were still in the center of a gender politic. This awareness adversely stimulates her constant changing of choices as a reaction to deny the existed yet limited possibility of life styles in her gender role.

Among these male figures, Yu Xuanji’s most important encounter depicted in the film was with Cui Bohou, the third debuted but most important major male character in the film -- a wandering swordsman who is presented in the film as visually close to the modern depiction of Japanese Ronin but in his code of assassination – a typical countercultural hero in martial art literature. Compared to the story of Yu Xuanji and Wen Feiqing (Wen Tingyun 812-870) in history, Cui Boho is an entirely invented character. His existence was not backed up by any archival information about him while he is assigned with three functions in the film. His

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38 Wen's remark after the banquet: "I know I’m bad but never try to straighten up myself." (An Amorous Woman, 1984)
39 Yu Xuanji’s remark of her choice of lifestyle frequents at the first part of the film, such as “What else could an erudite girl do? [I] didn’t want to be some rich merchant’s wife, nor wish to be a concubine. [I] don’t prefer being a courtesan, nor liked being a Buddhist nun – I was reluctant to give up my hair. Only choice left is to be a Taoist priestess.” ...Being a man is lucky, I think. Once can enjoy benefits of being a senior official or at worse become a wondering swordman.” (An Amorous Woman, 1984)
multiple encounters with Yu Xuanji, together with other happenings, are constructed in chronological order. Moreover, these roles are connected in a certain way, ranging from being a sexual partner of Yu Xuanji, being an anti-hero in a sense of rectifying the unfulfilled social justice, and being a chivalric knight who failed to save Yu Xuanji's life but succeeds concerning romance. Alternatively, we may relate these discrepancies first to the comprised interests of both sides, then to the ongoing questioning of identities as a reaction to the changing geopolitical atmosphere in the Chinese-speaking world. The film is produced in a time when British and Chinese governments negotiated over the future of Hong Kong’s sovereignty. Hong Kong had no saying in the process deciding its own future. The concern of an uncertain future and political insecurity is reflected in the immigration trend in the mid 1980s -- a time that witnessed not only the commercial success of New Wave filmmakers but also the emergence of a series of films focusing on women’s fate and daily existence in the changing history.

The film acquaints audiences with the two major female characters at the very beginning, just before the case of a man stepping into the temple causes confusion and disrupts all the people, including our protagonists, in that seemingly male-exclusive space. It is morning, and a woman and her maid quietly walk into and settle a hall of chattering women of their own age. Although at this point it is unknown that the one in white dress who took the lead in walking is the female protagonist Yu Xuanji, viewers immediately grasp the power dynamic between the two major characters and a satirical undertone of the film through their short conversation talking about becoming the acclaimed romantic "immortal poet" Li Bai because of his unconstrained (豪放) life style and unworldly attitudes. The lively yet tranquil atmosphere is soon broken by a well dressed man who runs into the hall. The following shaky
hand-held shot features the chaotic status caused by this wealthy merchant searching for his concubine in a temple exclusively for female practitioners. The woman who settled in the hall was his concubine who came to the refuge without his permission. Shortly after sending her husband away, she converted to Taoism. Just as audiences thought the temple was a place of doctrine and discipline when the elder chemists and priestess banished the merchant and a track shot features group chant of scriptures, the film immediately presents a series corrupted events from Yu Xuanji's perspective. When the wealthy disciple interrupted the rites and gives off a scroll of embroider silk art as the gift for the priestess, Yu Xuanji rides horses into the hall and tears off the silk and shields – the symbol of corrupted material greed in the religious place -- and stirs the place into complete chaos.

The loss of the existing social order is also evident in Cui Bohou’s killings of unlawful military leaders, corrupted officials and the bandits who faked a peasants’ revolt and invaded the capital. These all happened in contrast to Yu Xuanji’s attempt to control her own fate in a time, though seemingly prosperous in its cultural diversity, that in fact operated under jungle law. If Cui Bohou represents a frontier hero who acts and performs according to his own judgment, the film constructs him as a failed antihero when he is unable to protect the lives of the people he’d valued. But that does not mean Yu Xuanji wins, because she was already in a state of spiritual collapse when her notions of independence are proved to be impossible through her unexpected killing of the maid Lvqiao. We are not given the reason whether she want to live or not in the final scene of execution. Instead, the film represents her in denial of her status as damsel-in-distress when she intentionally evades Cui Bohou who comes to save her life. In the original story, Yu Xuanji was beheaded by officials upon criminal law. However, in
this film, three unexpected happenings culminate in the end, where none of the order wins and all the major characters end up in death, which is unable to be defined as a clear-cut standard of the tragic or the lucky.
Chapter Conclusion

In this film, articulation of self-autonomy does not stand opposed to Yu Xuanji’s killing of Lvqiao. None of the characters manages to be self-contained, even though one of them tries really hard to attain that state. The desire to take control of one’s life in an age when it is impossible to do so makes Yu Xuanji go crazy when the last being in her life – the life she had taken control of – is dead. The psychological effects on them when confronted with chaos is constructed within a political arena in which there is an absence of any official order.

As an example of commercial erotica that connects the story and visual representation of homoerotism to the larger cultural context, *An Amorous Woman* (1982) represents an unintentional but exemplary connection between works by New Wave filmmakers and Queer Cinema in the following decade.

Unlike previous commercial films which promoted a middle-class lifestyle and ideology through an “official hero” or well-off gentlemen and ladies, New Wave cinema focuses more on counterculture, anti-traditionalism and nihilistic youth, similar to the Beat Generation, of the early 60s and approaches controversy and the dark side of the reality with critical insight. Established laws, orders or morals, no longer being the solution of the conflicts, now become the target of criticism and sarcasm. These films portray rebellious individuals who fight against the established order in any way possible without producing clear-cut judgments. These individual actions are reactions against the existing chaos.

Neither do such films focus on narrating stories scripted with a clear beginning and end. Instead, they emphasize the construction of a particular type of character. With increasingly essayistic structures, and personalized, life-oriented narratives, characters are free
from an encompassing design of plot. Meanwhile, instead of approaching traditional genres with specific yet partial innovation, they expand, redefine and even subvert the existing boundaries of commercial categories. Expressive and spontaneous narration became a frequent phenomenon. Specifically, in *An Amorous Woman* (1984), the characteristic of modern concerns in subject configuration is evident in an existentialist attitude in protagonists’ questioning the meaning their own life and rejection of assigned social role. The obvious phallic symbols such as swords and battle masks represent creativity on a formal level. In terms of criticism of definitions in sexuality and gender, the representation of lesbianism is still built upon the imaginary figures and visual similes of traditional literature. Lesbian sex, in this particular case, is a convenient tool against the cultural convention and established mode of representation. However, by situating this unconventional sexuality in a prosperous ancient time period that was on the verge of social crisis, namely in the late Tang dynasty, the anti-establishment position is decontextualized, and therefore becomes implicit, while the sex tropes became affective visual exhibitions. Yet, presenting homoerotism in audio-visual forms marks the difference between this film and previous films of the mass-produced commercial sexploitation genre. Unlike those represented in *Intimate Confessions*, unconventional sexualities are no longer perversions. Instead, the capacity of visual aesthetics within which these sexualities were fully explored and the marginal social images implied in them were for the first time reinforced and valued, which is a frequent trait of subject positioning in queer cinema.
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