

## CHAPTER 5

# Film and TV

### 5.1 Visualising Homelessness in Sinophone Hong Kong: On Jun Li's *Drifting* (2021)

*Alvin K. Wong*

Hong Kong cinema has often been equated with speed, mobility, and globalisation. Hong Kong film scholar Esther Yau's classic description of Hong Kong movies as 'small speedboats breaking the waves alongside a daunting fleet of Hollywood *Titanics*' comes to mind (Yau 2001: 2). Ackbar Abbas similarly emphasises the cultural politics of disappearance and the feeling of déjà disparu, namely, what is new and unique about the cultural space of Hong Kong is always at the brink of disappearance due to the speed of globalisation and the 'love at last sight' mentality that characterised the 1997 handover (Abbas 1997). Fast forward to the year of 2021 and halfway into the fifty-year promise of economic prosperity and political stability stipulated under the One Country, Two Systems doctrine, are speed and cultural disappearance still the most salient markers of Sinophone Hong Kong cinema? I follow Shu-mei Shih's definition of the Sinophone as 'a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness' (Shih 2007: 4), with the disclaimer that Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region that has been part of the PRC since 1 July 1997 but whose Sinophone cultures might express alternative forms of cultural identities not always in sync with the dominant logics of nationalism, global capitalism, and Sinocentrism.

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A recent film by the award-winning director Jun Li showcases the protean force of Sinophone visuality through cinematic representations of homelessness and economic precarity in a post-2019 Hong Kong that is still wrestling with the aftermath of social upheavals, political uncertainty, and the global pandemic. Li's 2021 film *Drifting* (*Zhuoshui piaoliu* 濁水漂流) recently won the award for Best Adapted Screenplay at the 58th Golden Horse Awards in Taiwan. The film centres on the story of the protagonist Ho Kei-fai, played by veteran actor Francis Ng. In the film, Ho is often referred to as Brother Fai as he is a well-known homeless man who lives on Tung Chau Street in Sham Shui Po, one of the most densely populated working-class neighbourhoods on the Kowloon side of Hong Kong. Just when Brother Fai is released from prison, his belongings, including a much-treasured photograph of his dead son, are suddenly confiscated by the police and cleaners from the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD). His fellow rough sleepers Master (one of the most respected Vietnamese refugee homeless men in the area), Chan Mui (a former female club dancer and sex worker), Dai Shing, and others decide to file a lawsuit with the help of the social worker Miss Ho (Cecilia Choi). When the government and FEHD agree to settle the case with an individual payment of HK\$2000 to each plaintiff, Brother Fai refuses to accept the payment and demands a formal apology from the government. Throughout the course of the film, Brother Fai also befriends a young man named Muk. Muk seems to have a speech disorder and mental health issues, both of which the film suggests are linked to the years he spent separated from his mother. Fai forms a genuine bond with Muk and treats the young boy almost like his own son. By the end of the film, Fai's temporary home is set on fire during a particularly cold and dry winter.

While some initial film criticism and journalistic commentaries praise Jun Li's film for its simplicity and cinematic realism in portraying poverty, gentrification, and homelessness in a matter-of-fact manner, I prefer to take a slightly different approach by pointing to the ways that the filmmaker visualises homelessness through a cinematic appraisal of the dehumanising effects of neoliberal capitalism and gentrification. The film debunks the myth of individualism and the dominant Hong Kong economic ideology of hard work and self-sufficiency (otherwise known as the Lion Rock spirit) by showing how gentrification and 'urban redevelopment' in Sham Shui Po also lead to the further marginalisation of homeless people, beggars, drug addicts, and sex workers, all of whom are considered a surplus population destined for necropolitical expulsion. The visualisation of gentrification emerges early in the film narrative. In the establishing shot, the camera pans from the cityscape of Kowloon through a kaleidoscopic scanning of the newly built high-rise residential buildings. Immediately following this shot, the camera adjusts to a low-angle shot that positions the protagonist Brother Fai and the older Vietnamese man Master at the centre of the frame. Master offers to 'treat' Fai with a needle drug injection after Fai has just been released from the prison. The next scene shows the police and FEHD

officers ordering Fai and the homeless gang to stand aside for regular street cleaning. As the officers indiscriminately clear all of Fai's belongings (including his family photo and Hong Kong identification card), Fai can only put up a fight by verbally cursing the officers. While this scene depicts how the police officers and government workers clear the belongings and home of homeless people in Hong Kong without prior notice, it also symbolically alludes to the very dehumanisation of the personhood of homeless folks like Brother Fai, Master, Chan Mui, and Dai Shing. In fact, the very acts of Fai verbally assaulting the officers and rescuing his only photograph of his son from them both serve as a reminder that he is not simply a piece of rubbish that can be easily discarded.

The film critiques the violence of neoliberalism and gentrification not by re-conferring liberal humanism on Brother Fai and his friends. Alternatively, Jun Li shows the possibility for horizontal solidarity and intimacy among homeless subjects and those who experience mental health issues who are otherwise made invisible by 'normal' Hong Kong citizens and government. This horizontal intimacy is most evident in the father-son like relationship between Brother Fai and Muk, the street kid with a speech disorder. Muk first offers to carry the bed frame with Brother Fai when he sees him dragging the heavy item across the street. The Fai-Muk kinship bond also offers a sarcastic critique of real-estate hegemony and capitalism in contemporary Hong Kong. Specifically, as Brother Fai suffers from chronic foot pain, Miss Ho convinces him to stay hospitalised. One night, Fai escapes the hospital with the help of Muk, and the young boy even secretly infiltrates a construction site, operates the crane, and elevates Fai all the way to see an ariel view of Shum Shui Po at night. From there, Fai pisses onto the ground. When the police officers find out that someone is pissing from above, Muk helps Fai escape by running around and evading the police's chase. This scene visualises what Michel de Certeau calls the power of the weak through tactical intervention by the powerless, who must 'seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment' (de Certeau 1984: 37). If real-estate hegemony is rooted in and powered by a capitalist system that is characterised by verticality and elevation, Brother Fai's momentary elevated vision positions him as a perverse urban parasite that suspends the regime of neoliberal dehumanisation of homeless subjects.

The closing credits of the film state that the screenplay is based on an actual legal dispute between the homeless community in Sham Shui Po and the government in 2012. Tragically, two homeless men died before the government issued any formal apology. The opening sequence also quotes from the feminist philosopher and queer theorist Judith Butler's writing: 'Such bodies both perform the conditions of life in public—sleeping and living there, taking care of the environment and each other—and exemplify relations of equality that are precisely those that are lacking in the economic and political domain' (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 102). In its manifold visualisations of homelessness and the brutal processes of neoliberal dehumanisation in Hong Kong, Li's *Drifting* offers a trenchant cinematic diagnosis of dispossession and Sinophone resistance.

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### 5.2 Shaping Narratives of Anti-Corruption Through Popular Culture: An Analysis of the *Storm* Film Series

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Corruption within government bureaucracy has been a long-standing problem in China. Unsurprisingly, it is also perceived by the ruling CCP to be an immense threat to the stability of its regime. Around 2012, after Chinese leader Xi Jinping rose to power, he pinpointed the balefulness of corrupt ‘tigers’ and pledged to uproot corruption. Popular culture became more important than ever as a tool to make the call on anti-corruption more appealing, shape public perception of corruption, and strengthen ideological control to enhance legitimacy of the regime.

It was under this particular background that the *Storm* film series (*Fantan fengbao* 反貪風暴) was born: a new form of commercialised recreation that strictly adheres to the anti-corruption discourse of the party-state, while overcoming the limitations of the typical ‘main melody’ anti-corruption popular culture which promotes government-sponsored messages but suffers from a lack of entertainment value.

The film series currently comprises five films, *Z Storm* (2014), *S Storm* (2016), *L Storm* (2018), *P Storm* (2019), and *G Storm* (2021). While produced by filmmakers from Hong Kong, the films are primarily directed at the Chinese market, and have been largely adapted to the preferences and realities of Chinese audiences.

Classic Hong Kong crime films often question the distinctions between good and evil. But the *Storm* films, having moved away from Hong Kong’s crime film tradition, cast justice-oriented law enforcement officers as protagonists and feature straightforward detective-style stories. By depicting how law enforcement officers, in the name of the law, crush corruptors’ evil plots, the *Storm* films instead represent a perfect fit with China’s ‘main melody’ ideological trend, in

which cinematic images are used to transform people's legal consciousness and educate them about the dangers of corruption.

The protagonist of the films is William Luk (portrayed by Louis Koo), an investigator of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) of Hong Kong. Each film has very similar plot lines. William leads his team to investigate different forms of corruption, ranging from charity fraud to football bribery, money laundering, and prison corruption. After overcoming tremendous hurdles, William and his team, sometimes with the cooperation of Chinese anti-corruption authorities, succeed in destroying the corruptors' plans and bringing them to justice. Before the ending credits, the films show the offenders convicted and the sentences received by corruptors to inform audiences of the serious consequences of the crime.

In the films, the image of anti-corruption law enforcement officers, in particular William, is portrayed in an idealised manner. They are seen as smart, brilliant, brave, motivated by passion for safeguarding justice, and prepared to sacrifice their lives in their fight against corruption. At times, their ethos is infused with the Chinese government's anti-corruption discourse. For example, when the ICAC Director of Investigation answers a question raised by William, he quotes the phrase 'lock power in a cage,' which is a popularised figure of speech first used by Xi Jinping in 2013 (China Daily 2013). Throughout the films, there is an emphasis on the indispensable role of law enforcement officers in anti-corruption endeavours, as they are shown to be highly professional and competent protectors of justice and the rule of law.

Amidst the positive portrayal of law enforcement officers, though, the films never question the conceptions of law and justice. Quite the contrary: the films promote an ideology based on a complete respect for legal authority and an attempt to instil a belief that the law is always fair and just, such that with the strenuous effort of law enforcement officers, the law can function as an effective and trustworthy mechanism to promote justice. The films feature minor characters who proactively report corruption to the legal authorities. Even in the face of immense threat from corruptors, these informants still wholeheartedly trust the law and hold firm the belief that it is their moral responsibility to comply with the law and cooperate with law enforcement officers.

Ideological persuasion becomes more apparent in the later films of the series, when China's Anti-corruption and Anti-bribery Bureau officers appear as minor characters. Depicted as determined individuals driven by a strong sense of justice who vow to protect the rule of law and eradicate corruption, they are often shown working in an office decorated with CCP flags, which serves to emphasise the leading role of the Party in the ongoing anti-corruption campaign.

In one scene, the Anti-corruption Bureau officer confronts a corrupt government official, and the corruptor challenges him, 'On what basis can a petty level officer like you order a ministerial level leader like me around? Do you even dare to launch investigation against me?' The officer, unintimidated by this threat, shows the arrest warrant and swiftly brings the corruptor back to

the Bureau for investigation. Chinese viewers are thus encouraged to believe in not only anti-corruption officers' determination to arrest corruptors, but also the law's ability in curbing corruption. It appears from this scene that no one, not even senior government officials, is above the law, and all corruptors will eventually be caught and rightfully sanctioned by the law.

As the Chinese government launches an ideological battle against corruption, the ways in which corruption as a phenomenon are constructed, law and justice are portrayed, and law enforcement officers are glorified in the *Storm* films can be conceived as part of the campaign to educate the Chinese public about the importance of the law and its enforcement officers in the fight against corruption and the fostering of social justice. This film series is a prime example of how Hong Kong cinema, better known for its commercial nature, has accommodated to the needs of China and has become a tactical tool to make Chinese audiences empathetically engage with the anti-corruption campaign.

Given China's sociopolitical environment, it is likely that Hong Kong-produced films, with their tremendous popularity in China, will continue to assume their subtle, implicit, yet important role of promoting and legitimising political campaigns in China.

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### 5.3 The Cinematic Cult of Mao<sup>1</sup>

*Jie Li*

In what ways did cinema contribute to Mao's personality cult? In their professional magazine *Film Projection* (*Dianying fangying* 電影放映), mobile projectionists often mention Mao's appearance in newsreels as the greatest attraction for grassroots audiences. As a 1953 profile of a movie team from Guizhou put it:

When the masses learned that a film had Chairman Mao's image, they were so excited they began dancing to celebrate the joyous event. A seventy-something-year-old man of Dong ethnicity ran with a torch to shout out the news to nearby villages: 'Chairman Mao is coming! Everyone go look!' The glad tidings of 'Chairman Mao is coming' soon spread so that thousands of people hurried over ... A blind old man who heard the news asked his son to carry him through the mountains. He said: 'I cannot see Chairman Mao, but I want to hear his voice.'

When Chairman Mao appeared in *The Great Unity of Chinese Ethnicities*, the site was filled with the sound of applause and shouting of 'Long live!' The masses lit firecrackers to welcome Chairman Mao, such that smoke blurred their vision. Women shed tears of joy. When Chairman Mao's image passed, the masses anxiously shouted: 'Comrade! Show slowly! We haven't gotten a clear look yet!' So our comrade had to rewind the reel and replay the film to please the audience. When the audience saw how their representatives shook hands with Mao and received with welcome everywhere [in Beijing], they understood: their disunity with the Han before Liberation resulted entirely from the discord of Chiang Kai-shek's bandits. They felt that Chairman Mao illuminated them like the sun.

This is one of many patronising reports celebrating the cinematic enlightenment of backward and benighted audiences – highlighting the women, the elderly and the disabled – and the cinematic governance of a formerly ungovernable, fragmented and hostile populace, now rendered benign as singing and dancing ethnic minorities under Mao's radiance. We might treat such reports less as reliable accounts of audience reaction than as literary performances by projectionists to testify to cinema's ritual efficacy. Such texts also served as model scripts for other projectionists to ventriloquise the rural masses as Communist converts through leader worship. The conceit of 'Mao as the sun' permeated cultural production from the 1940s to the 1970s and finds a synthesis in the song 'East is Red' illustrated with posters and choreographies that feature the people as sunflowers. Besides symbolism, Mao's cinematic image literally illuminated the dark night of the countryside off the power grid. This compels us to consider the mediation of the Mao cult and the cult value of mass media.

Studies of Mao's personality cult, such as Daniel Leese's *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual in China's Cultural Revolution*, have focused on the CCP's symbolic production, but little has been said of its dissemination and amplification through audiovisual media. Cinema not only mass-reproduced Mao's image and voice, but also congregated the masses for rituals of worship. Responding to projectionist reports, the Film Bureau issued directives to make additional copies of newsreels that included shots of Mao as early as 1956. Whereas cultural theorist Walter Benjamin famously polarised an artwork's cult value and exhibition value, proposing that technological reproducibility led to the withering of the aura, cinema enhanced Mao's sacred aura and multiplied the altar of his personality cult: every screening of his moving image enabled a divine political figure to come down from his heavenly court onto the earth to meet with the people. In 1958, according to *Film Projection* magazine, the newsreel documentary *Our Leaders Work with Us* showed Mao digging at the Ming Tombs Reservoir and was met with an enthusiastic reception: 'Chairman Mao took time out of his busy schedule to participate in labour - we must make

more iron!' Or 'Even Chairman Mao is labouring - the idlers among us ought to be ashamed!' As a quasi-labour model, Mao's cinematic image aligned him with the peasants, workers, and soldiers, while the occasion of film screenings connected the masses with the leader, peripheries with the centre.

Even when Mao did not appear on film, villagers sent out gong-and-drum processions to welcome 'Chairman Mao's movie team' or 'honoured guests dispatched by Chairman Mao'. Besides staging a vicarious encounter with the great leader, cinema became the culmination of technological wonders that inspired sublime feelings of awe for Mao and the Communist Party. Treating cinema as the oracle and fulfilment of socialist modernity, projectionist reports often quoted elderly villagers: 'Chairman Mao keeps his word: he said the countryside will have electrical light, telephones, and loudspeakers.' A 1964 report considered the very arrival of a movie team in the countryside a form of political influence, since 'the rural masses naturally associate cinema with the benevolence of the Party and Chairman Mao', regardless of what films they showed.

The cinematic cult of Mao reached its climax with newsreel documentaries of Mao's 1966 meetings with millions of Red Guards on Tiananmen Square, films that came to be dubbed 'red treasure films' (*hongbaopian* 紅寶片). Projectionists I interviewed in Zhejiang and Hubei recall having to screen these newsreels in every village on their circuit. Reinventing ritual processions for local cult deities, many village chiefs personally carried the film print with red ribbons and a Mao portrait from its last projection site. While landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries, bad elements, and Rightists were banned from these screenings, according to a film history from Guangxi province, the revolutionary masses brought their 'loyal, boundless, proletariat feelings.' Indeed, the nationwide screenings recreated the mass rallies myriad times, and local organisations of reception parades in honour of Mao's cinematic image add a new dimension to our understanding of film *reception*.

Retrospective accounts suggest highly varied reception of these Tiananmen rally films. Former Red Guards I interviewed in Shanghai recalled attending school-organised screenings of those films and clapping every time Mao appeared. Some were inspired by the first rally film to travel to Beijing to participate in a later rally. As workers in a Shanghai factory, my grandparents received free cinema tickets but had no time to go, so they gave a ticket to my great-grandmother, an illiterate peasant woman who happened to be visiting Shanghai. After seeing the documentary, she commented on Mao's nonchalant greeting of the young people's enthusiasm, which my mother found 'counter-revolutionary'. Villager interviewees enjoyed those newsreels as vicarious travel to the capital and often puzzled over who was who on the Tiananmen rostrum. In rural Hubei, a female villager best remembered 'Chairman Mao's pretty wife', Jiang Qing. In Ningxia, a villager recalled always seeing Lin Biao shoulder to shoulder next to Mao:

He had on a bright green uniform, bright red insignia, and a big smile. When Mao clapped Lin would also clap, and we audiences clapped too. A villager once said Lin Biao was a 'smiling tiger' who looked like a traitor. Someone reported his comments, which got him executed as a counterrevolutionary. After Lin Biao really turned out to be a traitor, the villager was rehabilitated and his family received 10,000 yuan in compensation.

These stories of reception reveal audiences as cinematic guerrillas, but in different senses: while many young people were inspired to mobility as revolutionary pilgrims to meet Mao in person, others were less enchanted and harboured critical, even subversive thoughts. If the latter failed to keep these thoughts to themselves and got denounced, state-sponsored terror awaited them. While Lin Biao supported the Mao cult yet turned against the Chairman a few years later, the audiences learned from his costumes and expressions to play their parts as a devout congregation before Mao's cinematic altar, regardless of the truth of their feelings. After all, the failure to perform a correct response had grave and violent consequences.

### Note

- <sup>1</sup> This chapter is an extract from the author's forthcoming book, *Cinematic Guerrillas: Maoist Propaganda as Spirit Mediumship*, due to publish in January 2023. Reprinted with permission of Columbia University Press.