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“The Emperor is a Woman!” Changing Representations of Empress Wu in Chinese Popular Culture, 1939–2010

Keywords: Empress Wu, Chinese Popular Culture, Chinese Cinema Studies, Fang Peilin, Guo Moruo, Tsui Hark

ABSTRACT

Claiming the throne at the age of sixty-seven, Wu Zetian, commonly known as Empress Wu, is a controversial figure in imperial China’s historiography. In becoming the only female ruler in Chinese history, Empress Wu is often depicted in the popular imagination as either an enforcer of the patriarchal order or a rebellious heroine against it.

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The cultural representation of Empress Wu has thus undergone a series of rewrites, reformulations, and certainly reimagination in cinema and theater, where her depictions were shaped by landmark periods in Chinese history. Despite the empress' iconic presence across a variety of Chinese cultural formats, there has rarely been any scholarly discussion about her cultural and political significance from the perspective of cinema studies. This article examines three important cinematic and theatrical works by Fang Peilin, Guo Moruo, and Tsui Hark in order to explore the ways in which the cultural imagination of Empress Wu has been radically shaped over a span of some seventy years by contemporary discourses on gender, sexuality, and nationalism. The article argues that such a cultural representation has become a convenient confluence of a wide array of ideological connotations. By offering an interdisciplinary interrogation into this multi-layered historical figure, my analysis sheds some light on the study of the discursive relationship between Chinese popular culture and the historical development of state politics, and the ways in which the empress has been employed by various ideologies.

On the ninth day of the ninth month of 690 CE, after an extravagant enthronement held on the Zetian tower in the city of Luoyang, Wu Zetian became the first and only female Emperor throughout the entire history of imperial China, commonly referred to by the Chinese people as Empress Wu. Ruling the great Tang dynasty for over forty-six years, Empress Wu had left the Chinese-speaking world with endless controversies among scholars, artists, and historians. Given the divergent responses such an iconic figure often evokes in the people's popular imagination, the cultural representation of Empress Wu has thus undergone a series of rewrites, reformulation, and certainly reimagination.



Over the past seventy years, Empress Wu has returned to the public sight through the proliferation of a market-driven popular culture in the Chinese-speaking world, and thus become further contested as different representations of this iconic figure have emerged in films, theatrical works, and serialized television shows. From the 1939 film, *Empress Wu*, to the 1962 modern play also titled *Empress Wu*, and the 2010 Chinese blockbuster, *Detective Dee*, portrayals of the empress have inevitably been stamped with a distinct ideological imprint of its designated historical period, namely the Republican era (1912-1949), the Socialist era (1949-1978), and the period of “Reform and Opening” (1978-present). Despite its wide popularity among Chinese audiences since the early twentieth century, there has hardly been any discussion in the field of Film and Cultural Studies, regarding the ways in which the cultural representation of Empress Wu is shaped by both the people’s popular imagination and its surrounding socioeconomic environment. That said, in an attempt to understand the various factors that were at work in constructing such a distinct historical figure, I will, in this essay, attend to the aforementioned three texts, and articulate how their sometimes conflicting depictions of this female ruler are informed by their historical conditions. Through a close visual analysis of the texts, this essay investigates the ways in which the popular imagination of Empress Wu is shaped by contemporary discourses on gender, sexuality, and nationalism, and argues that such a cultural representation has become a convenient confluence of a wide array of ideological connotations during times of drastic political change.

Reception of Empress Wu from a Historical Perspective

The literary depiction of Empress Wu underwent a series of reformulations throughout the history of imperial China. After her death, the empress enjoyed a relatively generous assessment during the later years of the Tang dynasty. According to *The Notes of the Year Twenty-two*, Empress Wu was often regarded by bureaucrats and politicians like Lu Zhi and Li Jiang as a fair ruler.¹ Though people at the time often praised the swift effects of her policymaking, there was a complete absence of discussion of the controversial issues in respect to the legitimacy of her enthronement and the cruel penalty she imposed upon the ministers. Following the collapse of the Tang dynasty, such a generous assessment was soon overturned by the Five Dynasties period (907–979 CE). Liu Xu, who was once a minister during the Tang dynasty, believed that Empress Wu killed her daughter to impute Queen Wang, and thus earned the emperor's liking through such an immoral method.² Certainly, Wu's alleged act was considered disloyal and unethical among Confucius intellectuals at the time. Later, Empress Wu's questionable path to enthronement became an increasingly disputed topic during the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE). The author of *The Book of Great Song* argued that Empress Wu "lacks the legitimacy as an emperor and doesn't deserve to be remembered by her fellow statesmen."³

¹ Zhao Yi, *The Notes of the Year Twenty-two* (Shanghai: Zhonghua Book Company, 1975).

² Liu Xu, *The Old Book of Tang* (Jiangsu province: Phoenix Publishing House, 2018).

³ Han Lin, "The Figure of Empress Wu in Different Dynasties," *Wenzhai News*, Vol. 7, June 29, 2019.



The evaluation of Empress Wu again changed drastically during the Ming (1368–1644 CE) and the Qing (1636–1912 CE) dynasties. Li Zhi, one of the most renowned thinkers during the Ming dynasty, had opined that “throughout the entire dynastic history, is there any emperor good at knowing ministers as Empress Wu? Is there any emperor cherishing talented people and valuing citizens as Empress Wu?”⁴ Li’s remark undoubtedly underscores generations of feudal scholars’ appreciation for the empress as an outstanding ruler.

Interestingly, it must be noted here that Empress Wu was not the only woman to have exercised effective control over China proper during its imperial history. From 1861 to 1908, China was under the control of the Empress Dowager Cixi, who was the supreme ruler of the Qing dynasty for forty-seven years. However, the way Cixi practiced her power was quite different from that of Empress Wu. Throughout Cixi’s life, she was only titled empress dowager since she never formally claimed the throne. Moreover, due to her cultural identity as a Manchu elite, Cixi was often depicted in the Han-Chinese people’s popular imagination as a treacherous villain.

***Empress Wu* and Early Chinese Cinema: Hard Films vs Soft Films**

In 1912, the Republic of China (ROC) was founded amid times of political turmoil and social unrest. In the wake of the proliferation of cinema and other popular cultural formats in Shanghai and other major Chinese cities, by the early twentieth century representations of Empress Wu once again reemerged on the cultural scene. However, during this period, fanciful stories about a royal woman had constantly

⁴ Li Zhi, *The Book of Collections* (Shanghai: Zhonghua Book Company, 1959).

faced the danger of being deemed as culturally backward amid the Nationalist government's unwavering promotion of a modernization discourse. According to the *Guangzhou Annual*, a contemporary publication that focused on the social changes reflected in their use of statistics and graphs, two scenes featuring flirtatious dialogues from traditional plays of Empress Wu were deleted under the instructions of the Play Review Board before they were allowed to be performed publicly.⁵ In addition to the Nationalist government's strict film censorship, stories about Empress Wu were also more likely to trigger dissatisfaction and denouncement among patriotic Chinese audiences in the wake of the Republic of China's failed attempt at national salvation by the early twentieth century.

Following the Japanese Empire's takeover of Manchuria in 1931, the rise of leftist filmmakers was commonly recognized as "a response to a nationalist call to bring patriotism and social justice to the silver screen."⁶ After the founding of the Chinese Left-wing Dramatists' League in the same year, left-wing filmmakers like Tian Han and Xia Yan organized drama performances to propagate progressive leftist ideals among the working class as a way to prepare them for the future fight against the Nationalist Party, the single most influential political party in the ROC.⁷ In addition to theatrical works, leftist filmmakers also sought this opportunity to rapidly expand their influence among

⁵ Guo Daxiang, "The discussion of Wu Qingshi's Fangzhi ideal," *Shanghai Chronicles* 1, No.1 (2017).

⁶ Donna Org, "Liu Na'ou and the 1930s Soft Film Movement: A New Approach in Revisionist Chinese Film Historiography," *CINEJ Cinema Journal* 2, No. 2 (October 2013).

⁷ For more on the left-wing dramatists' league, read "The Introduction of the Chinese Left-wing Dramatists' League," *Hebei Xuekan*, Vol. 40, No.6 (June 2020).



the masses through films that often featured revolutionary narratives about fighting against imperialism and feudalism. “Many excellent left-wing films like *Raging Waves*, *Spring Silkworms*, and *Love and Tears of Tenant* were warmly received at this time, and created unprecedented social influence with the help of celebratory film reviews.”⁸

In stark contrast to the leftist artists, another group of profit-seeking filmmakers such as Liu Na’ou and Huang Jiamo, who were deeply influenced by American and European films at the time, focused more on the pure entertainment function of cinema, and publicly fought against the belief that cinema was a tool of political mobilization.⁹ In December 1933, Huang first proposed the idea of “soft film.” In an attempt to emphasize the entertainment aspect of cinema, soft filmmakers believed that “films should be the ice cream feeding the eyes and the souls of the tired viewers.”¹⁰ Consequently, Huang’s proclamation served as a curtain-raiser of the “Hard and Soft Film” debate between 1933 and 1935, fighting over cinema’s definition—whether it was a cultural commodity or a political vehicle. Despite the preemptive opportunity taken by left-wing filmmakers, soft-filmmakers soon obtained more initiatives within the rapidly growing Chinese film industry by 1933 when the Nationalist Party gradually strengthened its control over the left-wing filmmakers. According to the journal, *Evening News*, on November 12, 1933, the studio of Yihua film production company on Kangnaotuo Road in Shanghai was

⁸ Qin Yi, “The Re-understanding of the Argument Between Soft Films and Hard Films,” *Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute*, 1008-9667 (2013) 03-0165-06.

⁹ Yang Liuqing, “Debate on Differentiation of “Soft and Hard”—A Unique Landscape of Chinese Film Culture History,” Postgraduate Program, Film, Chinese National Academy of Arts, June 2015, Page 17.

¹⁰ Huang Jiamo, “The Hard Films and Soft Films,” *Modern Films Journal* 1, No. 6 (1933).

damaged by several people who were proved to be the spies of the Nationalist Party. Soon many left-wing filmmakers such as Tian Han and Xia Yan were arrested by the Nationalist Party.

From there on, many film companies began to attract more soft-film filmmakers. In 1936, the release of a typical soft film, *Turnabout Girl*, achieved huge instant success among the masses. Though such a melodrama had provoked harsh criticism by the left-wing filmmakers, its director Fang Peilin was particularly welcomed within his own circle. Directed by Fang in 1939, *Empress Wu* was therefore a vivid reflection of the "Hard and Soft Films" debate that emerged through the late 1930s.

Often faced with the danger of being regarded by contemporary critics as a typical soft film, Fang's *Empress Wu*, however, also makes visible other controversial issues covered in this debate: under what circumstances could its contemporary audience recognize *Empress Wu* as a soft film? Does the film resemble any thematic or aesthetic interventions of a typical 1930s soft film? Was there an unbridgeable gap between hard-cinema and soft-cinema as the left-wing filmmakers advocated? Based on my close analysis of *Empress Wu*, the answer is probably not. Even though there were certain scenes regarded by left-wing filmmakers as typical soft scenes for their obscenity and seemingly vulgar content, the 1939 production of the film, *Empress Wu*, still embodied progressive ideals that were consistent with the political demands advocated by the left-wing filmmakers at the time, as presented in characters like Xue Huaiyi, the pet-like lover of Empress Wu who often acts like a buffoon after getting drunk. At the beginning of the film, there is a short paragraph on the title page that declared the central idea of the story: "this is a recollection of the romance of a woman struggling for the breath of a new life during a time when



China was under the full sway of old ceremonies between the era 624 AD-705 AD.”



Portrait of Empress Wu Zetian is taken from an eighteenth century album of portraits of eighty-six emperors of China, originally produced and published in China, and used by the courtesy of the British Library. Portrait is in the public domain.

Though Empress Wu was a member of the Tang ruling class, she is depicted in the film as a figure oppressed by the old society and she eventually revolts against the feudal order. By uncovering the pain such a feudal society had exerted on the people, the cultural representation of Empress Wu, by the late 1930s, aimed to mobilize the audience to rebel against suppression and class discrimination. Coinciding with the

view of left-wing filmmakers, the title page is an example of how soft-filmmakers used this particular visual medium of storytelling to serve a pedagogical purpose.

Another example is a scene in the film where Empress Wu proposes "The Twelve Reforms." According to the empress, the emperor should allow the common people to participate in matters of state. Interestingly, such a policy reform was not taken into account by any historical account, and it is obviously a new concept that is purposefully invented by the filmmakers. In other words, Wu's vision of reform, in *Empress Wu*, is clearly a filmmaker-orchestrated resonance with leftist intellectuals' call for political reform that permeated Chinese society through the 1930s.

Despite the fact that film critics still neglect the political significance of those so-called soft films, soft-filmmakers of the 1930s indeed sought to propagate certain progressive ideals. To be sure, those politically charged implications are not only suggested in soft films like *Empress Wu*, but were also proposed as early as 1934 when the filmmaker Huang Jia'mo publicly acknowledged the necessity of mobilizing the masses to fight against imperialism and feudalism. Commenting on "Soft Movies and Moralistic Movies," Huang said: "It is true that fighting against imperialism and feudalism is the keen desire of the general filmmakers, but we should advocate them to do so less or more according to their ability. But the filmmakers should advocate the ideologies in a more appropriate way."¹¹ Huang's remark has proven that the existence of soft cinema was not at all in conflict with leftist ideals propagated by their alleged political counterpart within the 1930s Chinese film industry.

¹¹ Huang Jia'mo, "Soft Movies and Moralistic Movies," *Morning Newspaper Daily Movies* (June 1934).



Empress Wu proposes the famous “Twelve Reforms” to Emperor Gaozong in Fang Peilin’s film, *Empress Wu*.

Labeled a typical soft-filmmaker and a mouthpiece of the Nationalist Party, Fang Peilin was certainly not welcomed by left-wing filmmakers following the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Flying to Hong Kong and dying in a plane crash only one year later, he never had the opportunity to come back to the mainland where he had once reached the peak of his career. Unfortunately, Fang was not able to shoot a complete ending for *Empress Wu* and the film quickly ends after the title character is forced to give up her power. In an ironic way, the incomplete story of Empress Wu echoed the untimely end of Fang’s career as a soft filmmaker within this battle between soft and hard films in 1930s China.

“History is a Little Girl Waiting to Be Dressed Up”: The 1962 Modern Play, *Empress Wu*

Following the defeat of the Nationalist Party and the establishment of the PRC in 1949, discussions of Empress Wu soon became a heated topic among leftist historians and intellectuals as the state-led academia attempted to reinstate her historical status from the perspective of orthodox Marxism.¹² Under the leadership of the supreme leader of the PRC, Mao Zedong, contemporary discourses in regard to gender equality were also completely rebuilt. Mao's famous saying, “woman can hold up half the sky,” was widely regarded as one of the defining ideological doctrines that had laid the discursive foundation for future implementation of gender-related policies throughout the high socialist period of the 1950s, the 1960s, and the 1970s. To further stress his point, Mao elaborated on his stance in a 1965 speech that “man and woman are all the same, and what man can accomplish could also be done by woman.”¹³ In line with Mao's advocacy, women during the socialist era enjoyed a relatively equal social status, as a variety of cases have shown that women were encouraged and mobilized to participate in numerous rural and urban construction. Whereas representations of a strong revolutionary woman started to appear in the mass media, the people's popular imagination of Empress Wu was simultaneously reshaped into a tough female leader.¹⁴

¹² Duan Guiying, “The Research on Empress Wu since the Founding of New China, 1994-2020” (Master's Thesis, Henan University, Henan province, 2012), 7.

¹³ “Chairman Mao and Chairman Liu talking freely about the Ming Tombs' Reservoir,” *People's Daily*, May 1965.



A political poster of the Chinese Communist Party declares, “Woman holds up half the sky,” 1974.

¹⁴ “‘Woman holds up half the sky’ is popular in America, but who really said it?”, *Sohu News*, January 2017.

Meanwhile, after the death of long-time Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in 1953, a series of political reforms took place in the Soviet Union. On February 25, 1956, the new leader of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, made his "Secret Speech," charging Stalin with having fostered a cult of personality.¹⁵ The speech, also referred to as "On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences," made huge waves within the Communist countries and was considered as one of the major causes of the Sino-Soviet split in 1956. Mao soon responded to those reform policies implemented by the Soviets: in his speech, "On Ten Major Relationships," Mao publicly opposed Soviet leaders who "spoke highly of Stalin in clouds in the past yet belittled him low in dust in the present."¹⁶ One night in November 1958, Mao called for an important conversation with Tian Jiaying, one of Mao's main secretaries, and Wu Lengxi, the Secretary of a Provincial Party Committee. During their conversation, Mao pointed out that "there is a terrible climate which doesn't allow the people to speak openly about the disadvantages. Everything has two sides."¹⁷ Soon afterwards, Mao proposed that the Chinese should reevaluate Cao Cao, one of the rash and adventurous warlords during the Three Kingdoms Period, who was often conceived as a villain in Chinese historical narratives, as well as other historical

¹⁵ Nikita Khrushchev, "On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences," in *The Stalin Dictatorship: Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' and Other Documents*, ed. Thomas Henry Rigby (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1968), 25; and "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences," also popularly known as the "Secret Speech," the report presented by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev on February 25, 1956, published by *New York Times* on June 4, 1956.

¹⁶ "On Ten Major Relationships," Mao's speech at the meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the CCP, first published by the *People's Daily* on April 25, 1956, and later by the Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1977.

¹⁷ Li Junru, *Analyze Mao Zedong in Detail* (Henan province: Henan People's Publishing House, 2001), 698.



controversial figures on the ideological basis of orthodox Marxism. Mao's remark later triggered a nationwide campaign for the reevaluation of historical figures among historians, scholars and writers, and Guo Moruo, who was a prominent historian and scholar within the PRC's academic field, was particularly drawn to this movement. A Chinese text, *The Great Leader: Mao Zedong's Stories in Hubei*, states: "Now we should re-evaluate Cao Cao. Our Party seeks for truth.' . . . Mao Zedong's assessment of Cao Cao was well accepted in the academic field. In Chinese history and literary field, a popular trend of reevaluating Cao Cao was founded."¹⁸ In resonance with Mao's call for the reevaluation of historical figures, Guo decided to work on a play about Empress Wu, a character of not only historical complexity, but also political ambiguity.

In his 1948 article, "The Current Problems Regarding the Art," Guo proposed that "arts should serve politics, and art criticism should help art serve politics."¹⁹ As a towering historian and scriptwriter, however, Guo's reevaluation and artistic reconfiguration of Empress Wu in the modern play *Empress Wu* was consistent with the political goals of Mao and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). To serve the political goals of reflecting the discursive values of socialism, Guo depicts Empress Wu as a great emperor who exhibits the charisma of a proletarian leader during revolutionary times. As a famous modern play that reflects upon socialist China's tension-ridden political landscape, Guo's portrayal of Empress Wu was in line with assessments given by chairman Mao who praised the empress for her talent of ruling the

¹⁸ *The Great Leader: Mao Zedong's Stories in Hubei* (Hubei province: Hubei People's Publishing House, Ramboro Books, 2016).

¹⁹ Guo Moruo, "The Current Problems Regarding the Art," *Literary Life*, Vol.1 (1948): 52.

country. As the scholar Wang Xiaoqiang explains: "Guo first praises Empress Wu based on her political achievements, and then makes appropriate comments in regard to her historical status."²⁰

In the modern play, *Empress Wu*, Guo has two major tasks: first, he aims to deliver a re-assessment of Empress Wu's reputation in terms of being dissolute and cruel; secondly, he attempts to turn Wu into an historical embodiment of socialist ideals and revolutionary beliefs. For instance, the ways in which Empress Wu gained the throne have always been a disputed issue in Chinese academia. In the play, Guo shows that Wu gained legitimacy due to her talent and the trust of her husband, Emperor Gaozong. When Prince Li Xian queried Empress Wu about the issues regarding the death of Prince Li Hong and the Madam of Han state, Guo employs Emperor Gaozong to explain that both of their deaths had nothing to do with her. Even the death of Shanguan Yi, the minister who was once called by Gaozong to help strip Empress Wu's title as empress, is later described by Gaozong himself as a villain betraying the royal court. In the play, Emperor Gaozong says: "You [Prince Xian] are calling for justice for Zhangsun Wuji and Shang Guanyi who plotted to betray the royal court."²¹ If all these narrative interventions done by Guo can be considered as the reevaluation of Empress Wu's reputation in history, her later words in the play are clear signals of the political connotations such a controversial character inherently entails: after the explanation, Empress Wu further reprimands Prince Li Xian who wants to assassinate her, declaring that "you are not instigated by your conscience but the nobilitas. They are always instigating you to oppose

²⁰ For more on Guo's evaluation of Empress Wu, see Wang Xiaoqiang, *Redemption Facing the History: the Research on Guo's Historical Plays* (Beijing: China Social Science Press, 2014).

²¹ Guo Moruo, *Empress Wu* (Beijing: People's Literature Press, 1979).



me.” This dialogue soon transforms a typical political struggle within the court into conflict between Empress Wu and the nobilitas as Empress Wu represents the interests of the masses while Prince Li Xian represents the interests of the feudal powers. Even though Guo admitted that his portrayal of the title character as such a proletarian figure “was not evident,” Empress Wu in this play still embodies the political ideals, reiterating the self-contradictory belief that “the country is the people’s country.” Guo states in *How Did I Write Empress Wu*: “Empress Wu was once the Empress of a feudal dynasty. It is not reasonable to say that she stands on the people’s side.”²²

Near the end of the play, Empress Wu makes a final speech, declaring that people have abilities and can certainly defeat nature: “as long as objects are beneficial to human beings, we can take advantage of it, cultivate it, and spread it; in return, as long as they are harmful to human beings, we can control it, change it, kill it. It is how we can always defeat nature.” Guo proposed this ideal through the voice of Empress Wu, which implies his enthusiasm for the nationwide movement of the Great Leap Forward that was happening simultaneously. Ironically, Guo wrote *Empress Wu* amid the political movement of the Great Leap Forward when the CCP ignored the objective laws of nature and chased after unreasonable targets in agricultural production.

As a prominent scholar and playwright, Guo gained high reputation during the socialist era. Even though he was also criticized during the Cultural Revolution, he was quickly placed under “special protection” by top CCP leaders. By placing Guo under the so-called

²² Guo Moruo, *How Did I Write Empress Wu* (Beijing: People’s Literature Press, 1979).

“special protection,” the party’s leaders exempted him from being publicly criticized and humiliated during the Cultural Revolution.²³



Guo Moruo’s play *Empress Wu* gained the approval of the leaders of the CCP. Zhou Enlai, the first Prime Minister of the PRC, is seen in this photo (standing on the left of Guo Moruo, who is seated) after the one hundredth performance of the play. They are surrounded by the cast of actors. Image sourced from Moruo’s book, *Empress Wu*, is in the public domain.

²³ Zhou Enlai, “The list of cadres who should be under protection,” August 30, 1966, in the *Selected Works of Zhou Enlai* (Shanghai: People’s Publishing House, July 1997).



Receiving a controversial evaluation after his death, Guo left the Chinese-speaking world with endless inquiries and discussions. To a large extent, like his theatrical reimagination of Empress Wu, Guo exemplifies the old Chinese saying that “history is a little girl waiting to be dressed up.”

“New Wave” in the New Age: Empress Wu in *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame* (2010)

In the wake of Mao Zedong’s death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping reclaimed power in the central government and swiftly began to launch a series of reform policies. Following the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee held by the CCP on December 22, 1978, post-Mao China decided to slowly disengage from its predominant model of a planned economy and move towards a semi-market economy. In a broad stroke, Deng’s reform policy marked the end of the ten-year Cultural Revolution and the beginning of a period called “Reform and Opening” (1978–present). During the vibrant years of the 1980s, cultural exchanges between China and colonial Hong Kong began to thrive: on the one hand, the emergence of the Fifth Generation art house filmmakers in the PRC started to work on films that reflected upon the trauma and psychological turbulence that was caused by socialist China’s continuous campaigns of purge and social mobilization through the 1960s; on the other hand, Hong Kong cinema, while being distant from the PRC’s political struggles, embraced the New Wave period (1979–1983). Young directors such as Ann Hui, Wong Kar-wai and Tsui Hark, many of whom had received their education abroad, hoped to cultivate a new film culture within the floundering

Hong Kong film industry then.²⁴ They did not go to the extreme of experimental films, though. Instead, as Zhuo Botang has argued in *The Hong Kong New Waves*, “they skillfully combined the artistry and the commercial attribute as to give consideration to both commercial factors of films and the entertainment requirements of the audience.”²⁵

Among them, Tsui Hark proves to be an interesting case study. As a commercial filmmaker, Tsui presented his great talent of filmmaking and profound understanding of Chinese aesthetics through the production of several widely popular box-office smashes. While Hong Kong popular cinema witnessed its peak during the New Wave period of the 1980s, hidden dangers began to surface: by the early 1990s, because of the influx of Hollywood blockbusters, Hong Kong films were on the verge of rapid industrialization.²⁶ In 2003, due to the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), the Hong Kong film industry was forced to stop production for four months. Hong Kong films went into decline and the industry needed urgent help.²⁷ Meanwhile, the economy of mainland China was rapidly expanding as a huge market for cultural consumption. In this light, cultural as well as economic interactions between the mainland and Hong Kong became more exclusively institutionalized when Hong Kong returned to mainland China in 1997. In observance of increasingly consolidated ties

²⁴ Pan Bingtao, “The Hong Kong New Wave Films From 1979 to 1983” Sina Blog (blog), March 2011.

²⁵ Zhuo Botang, *The Hong Kong New Waves* (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, January 2011).

²⁶ Zhao Hongtao, “‘The Death of Hong Kong Films’: The incompatibility of localization and the prosperity of coproduction,” Jilin province, *Journal of Changchun University of Technology*, No.2 (2014): 138-141.

²⁷ Chen Chang, “Where’s its way out once the glory is gone—Have Hong Kong Films walked to a dead end,” *Voice & Screen World*, Vol. 14 (2020): 56-58.



between the PRC and Hong Kong across every front, the latter's film culture consequently cast a huge influence upon the recently revitalized mainland film industry.

In 2003, the PRC's central government launched the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) which placed much emphasis on the regulation of Hong Kong-China co-productions. With regard to a closer economic relationship between the mainland and Hong Kong, Hong Kong productions would no longer be considered imports as they would exhibit in the mainland with these stipulations: (a) no fewer than one-third of the film's major actors and actresses would be from the mainland; and (b) the story does not have to take place in the mainland, but major characters or plotlines should relate to the mainland. Despite other requirements institutionalized by the mainland government, this arrangement definitely directed many Hong Kong filmmakers' gaze to the market of mainland China. As the director of the Hong Kong Film Association, Hong Zuxing, explained in 2006: "the co-production of Hong Kong and mainland is the main trend."²⁸

As a commercial filmmaker who was deeply invested in the cinematic exploration of classical Chinese aesthetics as well as mythologies, Tsui Hark became one of the first Hong Kong filmmakers to migrate to the mainland in the early 2000s. Tsui's film, *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame*, in 2010 is a perfect example of co-production which successfully combined the technology-driven visual spectacles of Hong Kong martial arts cinema with mainland China's underlying political demands. In *Detective Dee*, Empress Wu is about to

²⁸ Qiu Shuting, *The History, Society, Culture of Chinese, Korean, Japanese Films* (Hong Kong University Press, 2010).

accede to the throne after the death of Emperor Gaozong, her husband and the previous Emperor of the Tang dynasty. Dee Renjie, the old minister who serves under the Gaozong administration, objects to her enthronement and is consequently imprisoned. Despite his imprisonment under Empress Wu's will, Dee is later released by her to investigate a series of bizarre murders happening within the Tang royal court. In *Detective Dee*, Wu is depicted as an aging woman who has already gained support from many officials, including the prince. Nevertheless, she still values Dee's cooperation immensely: as the story has it, Dee's weapon is a sword breaker, a type of Chinese straight mace, given by the previous ruler, representing the absolute legitimacy of justice and fairness in the Tang court. Therefore, to respect Dee is to respect the patriarchal order of the Tang dynasty: even Empress Wu needs to kneel in front of the person who holds the sword breaker. The name of the sword breaker is Kanglong whose literal translation is "proud dragon." In reference to the I'Ching, one of the oldest Chinese books on ritual craft, Kanglong, the sword breaker implies that leaders need to be modest.

As someone who openly opposed Wu's regime at the beginning of the film, Dee disagrees with Empress Wu on a number of issues, and even dresses as a beggar on one occasion just to express his disapproval of her reign.

As the story progresses, Dee begins to think otherwise. On the one hand, under Empress Wu's administration, the country thrives well. Though he disagrees with the harsh penalties Wu imposes upon the old officials, Dee still affirms her achievements as a ruler: "from the memorials of these years, it seems people live peacefully together." On the other hand, Wu's promise to give back the throne to her son, the original legal successor of Tang dynasty, is also a key factor in Dee's



eventual acceptance of Wu as the ruler of Tang. Towards the end of the film, by presenting his sword breaker in front of Empress Wu, Dee acknowledges Wu's political power, accepting her as an indispensable component to the wellbeing of the Tang court. In becoming incorporated into the male-dominated ruling class, Empress Wu, as the film illustrates, is consequently compelled to submit to the patriarchal order. In front of the sword breaker, Dee finally calls Empress Wu the "emperor," and urges her to return the throne to the prince. By submitting to the patriarchal order of the Tang court, Empress Wu eventually steps down as the ruler and gives the country back to one of the previous emperor's sons.



The Empress eventually persuades Dee to submit to her enthronement while they are watching the military parade in Tsui Hark's film *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame* (2010).

By the end of *Detective Dee*, as the title page makes it clear, Empress Wu helps restore the order of the Tang ruling class—a clear

demonstration of the ways in which China's long-lasting sentiment for patriarchal legitimacy coincides with the people's hope of national unity and domestic harmony.



Dee acknowledges the legitimacy of Wu's enthronement in front of the sword breaker after the villain's conspiracy is resolved in Tsui Hark's film *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame* (2010).

As a Hong Kong New Wave director who successfully made the transition to the mainland film industry, Tsui's cultural identity has become greatly aligned with his political identity, or in his own words, being "Chinese is not a political stance; rather, it is our culture [...] I feel proud of being a Chinese." As Tsui aligns his appreciation for Chinese culture with the popular imagination of a Chinese nation, such a hybrid form of political identification not only provides him with a huge advantage in the wake of Hong Kong-China co-productions since



the early 2000s, but also guarantees his future prospects in the mainland as a prominent commercial filmmaker.²⁹

Concluding Thoughts

From 1939 to 2010, the cultural representation of Empress Wu has been depicted in many different ways, but all of these portrayals have clearly reflected the social and political circumstances under which their creators reimagined this ruthless ruler of the great Tang dynasty. In 1939, whereas the Nationalist Party remained the dominant political entity in Republican China, cultural productions of left-wing ideals and political agendas had already proliferated across major Chinese cities. After years of conflict with the Nationalist Party, the PRC was established in 1949 and the CCP eventually took full control over the nation's mass media outlets, cementing its power through the 1960s and 1970s. Soon, with the arrest of the "Gang of Four," socialist China's political framework was reconfigured again. Prime Minister Deng Xiaoping finally gained power over the nation's government, and started the "Reforms and Opening," which revitalized the then floundering Chinese film industry. In the eyes of many contemporary Chinese filmmakers and critics, market profitability is as important as the preservation of political integrity. Put differently, in today's China, political connotations often are subtly as well as harmoniously expressed within the free market economy, giving rise to the commercial prospect of co-productions between Hong Kong and the mainland.

²⁹ He Siying, He Hui, *Jianghu: Tsui Hark and Hong Kong Films* (Hong Kong Film Archive Press, 2010).

Today, in the wake of post-Mao China's rapid process of modernization across every front, the cultural representation of womanhood has been accordingly redefined and, to a larger extent, politicized by the Xi Jinping administration. In his speech delivered on October 1, 2010, Xi applauded the great effort made by female medical workers as they participated in a nationwide fight against COVID-19. More importantly, Xi recalled Mao's famous saying that "women can hold up half the sky," emphasizing the state's determination in the betterment of gender equality. Xi disclosed that among the 40,000 medical workers working in Wuhan during the pandemic, over two-thirds were women. In an attempt to preserve Mao's political heritage in regard to gender equality, today's Chinese government has recognized women as an essential component of industrial productivity, and has launched a series of government policies to improve the social status of women so as to further vitalize the much needed labor force.³⁰

As one of the largest economies in the world, the expansion of Chinese influence certainly is not restricted to the proliferation of Chinese commercial cinema. Nevertheless, by penetrating into the very conditions through which those cultural representations of China's most controversial historical figure, Empress Wu, are constructed, we may to some degree conceive a glimpse into this post-socialist country's future.

³⁰ Xi Jinping's Statement at the High-level Meeting on the 25th Anniversary of the 4th World Conference on Women on October 1, 2020. Published in *People's Daily*, December 2016.



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