

Colonial and Postcolonial: Trans-temporal Narrative in *Rouge*

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Abstract: *This paper explores the trans-temporal narrative in the film Rouge, which examines the love story across two pivotal time periods: colonial Hong Kong in the 1930s and postcolonial Hong Kong in the 1980s, and analysed the cultural characteristics of Hong Kong during these two specific historical periods as reflected in the plot. Using insights from Bhabha's "third space" theory, Hall's identity theory, and Butler's theory of gender performativity, this paper examines the character of Fleur and her journey towards enhanced subjectivity across these distinct eras and illustrates how Rouge reflects the increased subjectivity of Hong Kong's people during the fifty years between 1930s to 1980s.*

Keywords: Hong Kong; Trans-temporal narrative; Colonial; Postcolonial; Subjectivity; Third space.

1. INTRODUCTION

The film *Rouge* explores the tragic love story spanning two time periods, showing the 1930s colonial Hong Kong and the 1980s postcolonial Hong Kong. By trans-temporal narrative, the film reveals the search for and awakening of Hong Kong people's self-identity against the backdrop of Hong Kong's transition from colonial to modern through the love story between Fleur (Anita Mui) and Chan Chen-Pang (Leslie Cheung).

Academic discussions of the film *Rouge* have focused on gender inequality, exploring the restricted position of women in society, especially their vulnerable position in issues such as marriage and sex work (Cheng, 1996; Lee, 2002). Regarding Hong Kong's post-colonial identity issues, for example, Bhabha's (1994) theory of the "third space" provides an important framework for interpreting the cultural hybridity in the film. Research on Hong Kong has also focused on the identity crisis in the post-colonial period, especially on cultural hybridity and identity anxiety in the context of Hong Kong's gradual transition to sovereignty in the 1980s (Abbas, 1997; Yeh, 2005). Although there has been a lot of research on the identity and cultural issues of *Rouge*, there are still some research gaps, such as the lack of research focusing on the film's cross-time narrative and the progressive reflection of Hong Kong people's subjectivity.

This paper analyses the changes in Hong Kong's social environment during the colonial and post-colonial periods and the increasing sense of subjectivity among Hong Kong people, especially women, by examining the social background of the 1930s and 1980s as presented in the film *Rouge*. This paper combines the research of Cheng (1996) and Lee (2002) to analyse the situation of women in Hong Kong in the 1930s from the perspective of economic pressure and gender inequality. Fleur has achieved a certain degree of economic independence through sex work, but at the social level she has never been able to escape the fate of being objectified. In the colonial and post-colonial sections, this paper combines Bhabha's (1994) theory of the "third space" with Hall's (1990) identity theory to analyse the evolution of Hong Kong's social environment over a period of 50 years. Finally, this paper uses Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performance in the reconstruction of gender roles and subjectivity to analyse how Fleur achieved the enhancement of self-subjectivity across time and space in the 1930s and 1980s.

2. THE 1930S: HONG KONG'S COLONIAL CONTEXT

The love story between Fleur and Chan Chen-Pang in the film *Rouge* takes place in the 1930s. In 1842, the Qing government signed the Treaty of Nanjing, formally ceding Hong Kong Island to Britain. This marked the beginning of the period of British colonial rule in Hong Kong. Hong Kong in the 1930s had experienced nearly a century of British colonial rule and presented a unique historical background. In the film, set in the 1930s, Fleur is a celebrated courtesan in Shek Tong Tsui, Hong Kong. Fleur encounters Chan Chen-Pang at the brothel, where he has come for pleasure, and falls in love with him. However, due to the disparity in status, the marriage is opposed by the Chan family. Chan Chen-Pang leaves his family and moves in with Fleur, and the two express their love with a *Rouge* box. After moving in together, the two became addicted to opium. Chan Chen-Pang, as a playboy, did not have the skills to support a family. In order to make a living, he overcame his inner obstacles and went to

work in a theatre troupe. However, due to the pressure from his parents and fiancée, Chan Chen-Pang quit his job and relied on Fleur's income from being a prostitute. The two were in a difficult situation. Fleur gradually realised that in the social context of the time, her and Chan Chen-Pang's love would not be happy for long. Fleur then had the idea of committing suicide with Chan Chen-Pang by consuming opium together. Fleur died as a result, while Chan Chen-Pang was saved.

In the film, Hong Kong society in the 1930s represents an era of repressed nature. Hong Kong society in the 1930s was deeply influenced by Confucian culture, and Confucian ethics dominated people's daily lives, especially family structure, social hierarchy and moral norms. According to Louie (2002), Confucian values are deeply rooted in Hong Kong society, creating a highly traditional cultural atmosphere in which individual identity is closely linked to family and community. This reliance on tradition is often expressed in the film as a theme of family loyalty and the maintenance of interpersonal relationships (Louie, 2002). In the film, Chan Chen-Pang's parents are from a traditional wealthy merchant family, and they are extremely unhappy about Chan Chen-Pang's relationship with the prostitute Fleur, believing that Fleur's status will tarnish the family's reputation. The family exerts pressure, trying to convince Chan Chen-Pang to give up Fleur, and demands that he marry Shu-Hsien (Irene Wan), a woman from a prestigious family, to continue to safeguard the family's reputation and interests. Fiancée Shu-Hsien also suppresses her emotions out of loyalty to the family structure and chooses to agree to marry Chan Chen-Pang. Chan Chen-Pang, on the other hand, experiences great conflict and suffering due to the conflict between his own nature and the family. The situation of these two characters in 1930s Hong Kong reflects the Confucian ethics of the period shackling the nature of young people in the form of family pressure.

The heroine Fleur epitomises the culture of prostitutes in Hong Kong in the 1930s. At sixteen, Fleur became a pipa musician and rose to prominence as a celebrated courtesan in Shek Tong Tsui, Hong Kong. In the film, a customer would have to pay 200 silver dollars to touch her calf and 500 silver dollars to touch her neck. Due to Hong Kong's position as a free port and a place where Chinese and Western cultures meet, brothels developed rapidly in the early days, becoming a place where some Chinese and foreign workers could find entertainment and relaxation. By the late 19th century, the colonial government was aware of the existence of the brothel industry and began to regulate and tax it. In 1887, the government enacted the Contagious Diseases Ordinance, marking the first attempt to regulate brothels. This gave brothel culture semi-public legitimacy at the time, forming a form of entertainment industry that was regulated and standardized. The reasons for prostitutes to engage in prostitution were complex, but generally they were forced to do so. Hong Kong in the 1930s was in a period of economic turmoil, and many families were under great financial pressure. Poverty became one of the primary reasons for women to work in brothels, especially those from poor family backgrounds (Cheng, 1996). In poor families, women were often forced to engage in sex work to make a living and help their families get through difficult financial times (Lee, 2002). In addition, in the 1930s, women generally had a lower level of education, and educational resources were biased towards men, which made women less competitive in the job market. The lack of legitimate employment opportunities made some women have to choose the higher-paying sex work to gain financial independence (Ng, 1999). In the traditional social attitudes of that time, women were regarded as a subordinate group with a low status attached to the family and men. This gender inequality exacerbated the pressure on women to survive. The oppression of women in mainstream society has deprived them of other means of livelihood, forcing them to enter the sex industry (Chan, 2008). In traditional families, women often have no power to decide their own fate, especially those from poor families. They may be forced into brothels to contribute to the family's financial resources due to the family's economic needs or the oppression of the patriarchal system (Ho, 2001). In patriarchal societies, women's bodies are regarded as resources that can be exchanged (Tam, 1994). Fleur's situation and thoughts reflect the social background of Hong Kong in the 1930s and the specific culture of prostitutes, providing a sample for studying the phenomenon of this period.

The identity of the male protagonist Chan Chen-Pang reflects the situation and thinking of a merchant family in Hong Kong in the 1930s. At the beginning of the film, it is introduced that the Chan family is in the Nam Pak Hong business, operating three shops specializing in Chinese herbal medicine and dried seafood. Nam Pak Hong refers to trade dealing in goods from both the southern and northern routes: the southern route primarily focuses on local products and foods from Southeast Asia, while the northern route mainly deals in export goods from mainland China. At that time, it connected the north-south trade, and gradually developed throughout the world. The entire industry is collectively referred to as Nam Pak Hong. This long-established Nam Pak Hong in Hong Kong already existed before the Xianfeng reign of the Qing Dynasty (1851). It was the earliest Chinese-owned entrepot trade industry in Hong Kong and was quite active in the early days of the port. The prosperity of the Nam Pak Hong business in Hong Kong in the 1930s allowed Chan Chen-Pang's family to have a lot of money at the beginning of the film.

Despite withstanding various objective pressures, the two people with very different statuses fell into an even greater crisis due to drug addiction. They finally decided to consume opium and commit suicide together. This plot reflects the opium culture in Hong Kong in the 1930s. Opium was not uncommon in Hong Kong at that time, and its consumption cut across different social classes. Cochrane (2004) pointed out that although the colonial government gradually strengthened the control of opium, its consumption was still quite common in Hong Kong, especially among the working class and lower social groups, opium became a way for them to cope with the pressures of life (Cochrane, 2004). Fleur, as a prostitute at Yee Hung Building, was under enormous pressure to survive, and opium became a way for her to relieve stress in society at that time. Her marriage to Chan Chen-Pang further increased her stress, which was one of the reasons that led her to commit suicide. For the colonial government of Hong Kong at the time, opium was an important source of revenue. Bickers (2010) points out that the colonial authorities did not completely ban the opium trade, but chose to control the production and circulation of opium through a monopoly system, thereby profiting from it. Opium became an important support for government finances, creating an institutionalised culture of opium consumption (Bickers, 2010). Opium consumption had a profound impact on the social fabric of Hong Kong. Tsang (2007) analysed the negative effects of opium on family and community relationships, pointing out that opium addiction often led to the breakdown of family structures, and many low-income families were in financial difficulties because their members had become addicted to opium. This phenomenon was particularly pronounced in the lower echelons of Hong Kong society, leading to further social division (Tsang, 2007). The tragedy of Fleur and Chan Chen-Pang also reflects to some extent the negative impact of Hong Kong's opium culture on people's lives in the 1930s.

3. THE 1980S: HONG KONG'S POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

The film's other setting is the 1980s, a pivotal transitional period when Hong Kong signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration and began preparing for the 1997 handover of sovereignty. In this time and place, Hong Kong society was rapidly modernising and experiencing identity conflicts and confusion. In the 1980s depicted in the film, Yuen-Ting (Alex Man), who works at a Hong Kong newspaper office, meets a cold-looking woman who comes to place a missing person's advertisement, but she has no money to pay for the advertisement. Yuen-Ting makes an excuse to leave, but the woman follows him. During their idle chat, Yuen-Ting is surprised to discover that the woman is actually a ghost. Fleur has been waiting in the underworld for a long time without seeing Shao Ershao, so she returns to the world of the living to look for him. Yuen-Ting and her girlfriend Ah Chor (Emily Chu) accidentally discover an old copy of *The Star Daily* and discover that Chan Chen-Pang was working as an extra in a film studio. Chan Chen-Pang had long since become destitute through the ravages of time and had long since become indifferent to the past. Fleur, heartbroken, returned the *Rouge* box and returned to the underworld to be reincarnated.

Hong Kong in the 1980s experienced significant modernisation and economic growth, but this process was accompanied by anxiety and unease about identity. Yeh (2005) points out that Hong Kong society faced a conflict between traditional values and Western capitalism during the process of modernisation, leading to cultural confusion and uncertainty (Yeh, 2005). This anxiety reflects the society's vague understanding of its future identity at the time, and this sentiment is often expressed through the conflicted emotions of the characters in the film. In the film there is a plot. On set, a director instructed a female actress: "When you appear, you need the imposing presence of a heroine but also the eerie quality of a ghost." This demand left the actress puzzled about her character, prompting her to ask, "How do I do that? I'm supposed to be both a heroine and a ghost". This plot mirrors the awkward situation Hong Kong was in, which was also confused about its positioning. Hong Kong had the historical experience of the colonial period, but was also full of questions about its future role.

In the 1980s setting of the film, the press becomes a key element. Two key characters, Yuen-Ting and Ah Chor, are journalists. In addition, Fleur learns about Chan Chen-Pang's experiences over the next 50 years by reading the newspaper and proposes to place an ad in the paper to find Chan Chen-Pang. The newspaper becomes a bridge connecting the 1930s and 1980s in the film. The development of newspapers in Hong Kong has gone from serving colonial officials and businessmen in the early stages, when the main language was English, to gradually serving the local Chinese population. This process reflects the changes in Hong Kong's social structure and culture. In 1841, Britain colonised Hong Kong, and English newspapers became the mainstream of the local press. These newspapers were mainly aimed at colonial officials, businessmen and foreign residents, reflecting their interests and needs, and basically not focusing on the needs of local Chinese people. Early English-language newspapers included *The Hong Kong Gazette*, which was the earliest official publication used to publish government notices and announcements. By the early 20th century, more Chinese-language newspapers had been established, gradually expanding their influence, for example, Wah Tsz Yat Po, *Kung Sheung Daily News*. Most of these

newspapers focused on news from the Chinese community and gradually developed the function of commenting on social events. The newspaper seen in the movie, *Gu Zi Bao*, is representative of newspapers from this period.

In the 1980s depicted in the film, traditional things are gradually disappearing. For example, Chan Chen-Pang played a small role in a Cantonese opera troupe in the 1930s. By the 1980s, he was working as a film extra in a film studio. Chan Chen-Pang's different identities reflect Hong Kong's transition from traditional art performances to modern mass media. This transformation not only reveals the changes in Chan Chen-Pang's personal situation, but also symbolises the cultural evolution and industrial changes in Hong Kong during the process of globalisation and modernisation. Homi K. Bhabha believes that in the cultural contact between colonial and post-colonial cultures, local and foreign cultures often interact to form a "third space". This space is not only a fusion of the two cultures, but also a dynamic process that generates new cultural expressions and identities (Bhabha, 1994). In the context of Hong Kong, this cultural hybridity is reflected in the fusion of local and Western influences seen in Cantonese opera, film, advertising, and more. Chan Chen-Pang's transition from Cantonese opera to film embodies this "third space": the decline of traditional opera troupes and the rise of Western cinema signify the gradual replacement of traditional culture by the emerging globalized forms. Stuart Hall pointed out that identity is not fixed, but is constantly being formed in the flow of history and culture (Hall, 1990). Chan Chen-Pang's identity transformation and changes in his artistic career show the identity struggles of Hong Kong people in the face of the wave of modernisation. The decline of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong symbolises the weakening of the status of traditional culture, while Chan Chen-Pang's personal role change from a troupe actor to a film studio extra precisely reflects the continuous reconstruction and adaptation of Hong Kong people's identity in the process of modernisation (Hall, 1990). In *Rouge*, Cantonese opera gradually loses its mainstream status and is replaced by film. This change is not only an industrial transformation, but also a metaphor for the disappearance of Hong Kong culture in the post-colonial era.

In the 1980s, Fleur saw that Hong Kong's architecture had undergone tremendous changes. In particular, she saw that the place where the brothel once stood had become a kindergarten. She smiled as she leaned against Yuen-Ting, and the memory of Yi Hung Lau Brothel came back to life. While laughing, she said, "Look! Yi Hung Lau Brothel has become a kindergarten." But then she suddenly realised that she was dead, or perhaps she felt that leaning on Yuen-Ting was inappropriate, so she awkwardly let go of him. In this scene, the transformation of the building's function reflects the modernisation and transformation of Hong Kong society. In his theory of "places of memory", Pierre Nora pointed out that memory and space are inseparable, that space carries collective memory and embodies people's emotional connection to the past (Nora, 1989). The transformation of the former brothel into a kindergarten is a symbolic transformation of a place of memory – the function of the place in the past has been replaced, but Fleur's memories are still deeply rooted there. This transformation brings her a sense of strangeness, and also reveals the loss of traditional memories in the process of social modernisation.

The language of Hong Kong people in the 1980s also shows a mixture of Chinese and Western cultures due to the exchange between the two cultures. For example, Yuen-Ting calls Coca-Cola "the foreign devil's herbal tea". Fleur also called Chan Chen-Pang "warm old Kai". Yuen-Ting didn't understand, so Fleur explained in English that it meant "darling". Mary Louise Pratt's "contact zones" theory points out that the mixing of languages and cultures in a colony is a process of cultural contact influenced by power relations, which forms a mixed language system. This mixing is both adaptation and a subtle response to the mainstream culture (Pratt, 1991). The mixed Chinese-English style of Hong Kong is a product of the contact zone. This linguistic fusion not only allowed Hong Kong people to adapt to the colonial environment, but also created a new way of cultural identity. By calling "Coca-Cola" and "foreign herbal tea", Hong Kong people localised Western culture in a humorous way, thus maintaining a sense of local identity in the language.

4. THE PROGRESS OF HONG KONG IDENTITY AND SUBJECTIVITY OVER 50 YEARS

Rouge focuses on two representative female characters, Fleur from the 1930s and Ah Chor from the 1980s. Fleur believes in love. In the film, she saves money to buy Chan Chen-Pang a suit, looks for work, and even goes to a brothel to earn money to support the two of them when Chan Chen-Pang refuses to work and takes opium. But in 1930s Hong Kong, Fleur could only earn a living by working in a brothel. Although she achieved financial independence, she could not gain respect and social support. Her predicament was insoluble in the social environment of the time, so she chose to commit suicide. Ah Chor is a new-age woman in 1980s Hong Kong. Ah Chor understands Fleur from the 1930s, and she understands Fleur's infatuation. But Ah Chor not only achieved financial independence through her own abilities, she also has spiritual autonomy. This is thanks to the

development of the social environment and the progress of women's awareness of their own subjectivity.

In *Rouge*, Fleur's search for her old love Chen Chen-Pang in the 1980s is not only a recollection of a lost love, but also a gradual reconstruction of self-awareness. Homi K. Bhabha's theory of "Othering" points out that colonial discourse defines the colonized by constructing the Other to define the colonised, placing them in a position of inferiority and marginalisation (Bhabha, 1994). Fleur was subordinate both socially and emotionally during her lifetime. Her value was defined as following Chan Chen-Pang, and her identity was completely attributed to and dependent on the other party. However, in the modern society of the 1980s, she witnessed the changes in Hong Kong and the differences in lifestyles. Judith Butler's gender theory can also support Fleur's awakening of identity. Butler believes that gender is a "performative construction", and individuals constantly reaffirm and challenge social gender norms through their actions and words (Butler, 1990). Fleur's transformation process is a rebellion against and transcendence of this "performative" gender role. She eventually stopped trying to prove herself through "love martyrdom" and instead redefined her own value and identity through the process of letting go of Chen. This reconstruction of self-awareness has enabled her to become a true subject, free from the shackles of traditional gender roles.

In addition to the heroine Fleur's display of the construction of subjectivity, the two main couples in *Rouge* also represent the transformation of the concepts of two generations of Hong Kong people growing up during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Fleur and Chen Chen-Pang, who grew up in the 1930s, were greatly suppressed in terms of career, marriage and self-realisation, and had to rebel through drastic behaviour and even suicide. Yuen-Ting and her girlfriend Ah Chor, who grew up in the 1980s, have a freer and more relaxed attitude towards life, and are also freer in their choice of career. The portrayal of these two couples across time in *Rouge* reflects the enhancement of Hong Kong people's subjectivity in various dimensions over the past 50 years.

5. CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of the two historical time periods of the 1930s and 1980s in *Rouge*, this article reveals the development of culture and gender consciousness in colonial Hong Kong during these two historical periods. Fleur and Chan Chen-Pang's love story reflects the oppression of individual destiny by the social environment in colonial Hong Kong in the 1930s. In 1980s Hong Kong, the film shows Fleur's self-loss through her journey of searching for love across time. As Fleur grows up, she gradually breaks free from her role of relying on others, achieving an enhancement of her own subjectivity and a self-reconstruction of her post-colonial identity.

This paper shows how the film uses a trans-temporal narrative to examine Hong Kong's unique colonial history and cultural transformation, as well as the enhancement of female subjectivity. However, this paper has certain limitations. The study takes a single film as the object of analysis, which fails to cover the experiences of a wider range of Hong Kong social groups. Future research can expand the perspective to provide a more comprehensive research sample.

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