Yeong-Rury Chen

A Fantasy China:
An Investigation of the Huangmei Opera Film Genre through
the Documentary Film Medium

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A Fantasy China:

An Investigation of the Huangmei Opera Film Genre
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by
Yeong-Rury Chen
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Declaration

I declare that this doctoral research project contains no material previously submitted for a degree at any university or other educational institution. To the best of my knowledge, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the project.

Yeong-Rury Chen
This doctoral research project intends to institute the study of the unique and significant Huangmei Opera film genre by pioneering in making a series of documentaries and writing an academic text. The combination of a documentary series and academic writing not only explores the relationship between the distinctive characteristics of the Huangmei Opera film genre and its enduring popularity for its fans, but also advances a film research mode grounded in practitioner research, where the activity of filmmaking and the study of film theory support and reflect on each other.

The documentary series, which incorporates three interrelated subjects – Classic Beauty: Le Di, Scenic Writing Director: Li Han Hsiang and Brother Lian: Ling Po – explores the remarkable film careers of each figure while discussing the social and cultural context in which they worked. The section on Le Di introduces the subject of melodrama as a Chinese tradition. The section on Li Han Hsiang discusses Li’s film aesthetics and his representation of a utopian Chinese world of the imagination. The final section focuses on the popularity actor Ling Po gained through her roles of male impersonation. All three topics provide an opportunity to rethink our understanding of the social, political and cultural forces that contribute to the genre, and to build an emotional connection between past and present for the viewers. Meanwhile, by interviewing those surviving key figures and assembling materials that have been lost, the documentary series not only fulfils the needs of many fans, but also serves field studies in the area by setting a direction in research and providing a valuable resource for scholars involved in Chinese film and cultural studies. It is both accessible...
to mainstream audiences and academically warranted.

As an adjunct to the documentary series, the written text explores aspects of the same material in more depth through the use of structuralist methodology, and psychoanalytic, auteur and genre theories. The text combines these Western approaches with aspects of Chinese culture, philosophy and aesthetic traditions, proposing links between Chinese aesthetics and Western film theories that contribute new understandings to both Chinese and Western film studies. On the other hand, because these film theories were originally developed to study Western films, the Chinese origins of the Huangmei Opera film genre may challenge existing theoretical paradigms and so provide new interpretations. This doctoral project also includes a complete report of all phases of the documentary production and design process, and a unique, comprehensive filmography of Huangmei Opera films, and as such supplies a research foundation for both documentary filmmakers and academics who are interested in studying the Huangmei Opera film genre further.
My interest in and passion for the Huangmei Opera film genre are derived from my mother, Chen Lin Lan. She used to take me to the theatre to see the movie *The Love Eterne*, which was re-screened in the 1970s. Although I didn’t understand why she always wept during the movies, I was fascinated by the cinematic spectacles, lyrical music and the charming characters of Huangmei Opera films. For years, I wondered why these movies were so popular among Chinese in the 1960s and why a male impersonator, Ling Po, attracted so many fans, especially women. When I started my doctoral project I chose to study the Huangmei Opera film genre and saw it as an opportunity to make a series of documentaries.

For their cooperation during the process of making *An Investigation of the Huangmei Opera Film Genre*, my heartfelt thanks go to my interviewees, Chiao Hsiung Pieng, Cheng Yu Ching, Ha E. Peng, Iv Bei Bei, Kao Chung Chi, Lau Shang Cheng, Li Kuwn, Lin Lang Shing, Ling Po, Sung Chuen Sau, Wang An Gi, Wu Melon, Zhang Ai Zhu and fans of Huangmei Opera films. Without their enthusiastic responses during my interviews, I couldn’t have completed the documentary series. My thanks also go to my production crew, most of whom are my students in the Department of Communication Arts at Chaoyang University of Technology (CYUT) in Taiwan. Meanwhile, my appreciation goes to the research grants from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at CYUT for supporting my production and travelling expenses in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and China.
For assistance during the production and writing process of my doctoral project, I thank my academic advisors, Nanette Carter, Stephen Huxley and Professor Allan Whitfield, of the National Institute for Design Research at Swinburne University of Technology, for their input. My doctoral project could not have been completed without their help, support and thoughtful responses. I also want to thank Carolyn Barnes, Coordinator of Postgraduate Studies at NID, who helped refine my proposal at the beginning, and Zuo Gui Fan, Counselor of the Chinese Taipei Film Archive, who provided information during my production process. In addition, Patty Keung, Group Marketing Director of Celestial Pictures Ltd., and Oi Leng Lui, Distribution Manager of Cathay-Keris Films Pte. Ltd., provided me with permission to access the Huangmei Opera film footage and materials of Shaw Brothers and Cathay Studio. They have my great appreciation.

Finally, I want to dedicate my doctoral project to the three most important women in my life, my mother, my wife, Li Lu, and my daughter, Vivian. Thanks for supporting me and understanding my need to spend time away from home in pursuing my research in Australia and overseas.
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1. A Unique and Popular Chinese Film Genre Neglected by Cinema Studies

This doctoral research project incorporates a set of three documentary films and complementary text that explore the relationship between the distinctive characteristics of the Huangmei Opera film genre and its enduring popularity for its fans.¹ The combination of a documentary series and academic writing advances a film research mode grounded in practitioner research, where the activity of filmmaking and the study of film theory support and reflect on each other. By pioneering in making a series of documentaries and writing an academic text about Huangmei Opera films, this doctoral project intends to institute the study of this significant and unique Chinese film genre.

Huangmei Opera was originally a body of tea-collecting songs that developed in the Chinese region of Huangmei around 200 years ago.² In the 1960s a number of these songs were incorporated into many movies that were extremely popular in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asia. Numerous people went to see these movies, and the contemporary press

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¹ In mainland China this genre is called ‘Huangmei Opera’ (Huangmei Xi), while people in Taiwan call it ‘Huangmei Melody’ (Huangmei Diao). This text uses the term ‘Huangmei Opera’ because it was originally derived from China and accepted widely.

² There are two types of romanized spelling for Chinese personal and place names, Hanyipinyin and Wade-Giles. In mainland China, Hanyipinyin is used while in Taiwan people use Wade-Giles phonetics spelling. The text mainly uses Wade-Giles for personal names with Hanyipinyin used for place names, since most of the places mentioned in this text are located in mainland China.
called Taipei “a crazy city” because of the fervour generated by this film genre (Huang 1997, p. 15). The most popular Huangmei Opera film, *The Love Eterne* (1963), held the box office record for two decades until the record was broken by Jackie Chan’s *Project A* in the 1980s (Lau 1994, p. 69). About 50 films, based on a combination of ancient stories and Huangmei folk music, established a film genre that enjoyed strong cult popularity and lasted into the 1970s. However, because of its lyrical music and Chinese literary traditions, the Huangmei Opera film genre was considered slow-paced by the next generation and was finally replaced by *wuxia* (swordfighting) and *kung fu* movies, which were full of rapid action scenes and poeticised violence. The Huangmei Opera film genre faded from the audience’s memory.

Recently, following the international box office success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), the *wuxia* and *kung fu* movies drew the attention of international audiences, and Chinese popular cinema of the 1970s became a topic of interest for Western film scholars. Yet before martial arts movies appeared, the Huangmei Opera film genre played a significant role in the development of Chinese cinema. Many renowned martial arts film directors, such as King Wu and Zhang Che, began their directorial debut with Huangmei Opera films, and two major Hong Kong studios, Shaw Brothers and Cathy Studio, consolidated their empires by producing Huangmei Opera films in the genre. However, because neither major film studio released Huangmei Opera films since the 1970s, Western audiences have had no opportunity to see these films through the mass media, and the Huangmei Opera film genre has not been studied by either Chinese or Western film scholars despite its popularity and significance among Chinese communities in the 1960s. It was not until 2002, when Celestial Pictures bought the Huangmei Opera films of Shaw Brothers and started to redistribute them through DVD outlets, that audiences began to recall the heyday of the Huangmei Opera film genre. The Huangmei Opera film genre remained neglected and unknown by younger Chinese people and the Western world for a long time.
2. The Values of Nostalgia

The redistribution of Huangmei Opera films through DVD outlets reflects one of the contemporary fashions in both academic studies and consumer commodities — nostalgia. Academically, nostalgia is perceived as a reassessment of the past that stands in the way of historical analysis (Cook 2005, p. xii). The documentary series comprises three nostalgic topics, Classic Beauty: Le Di, Scenic Writing Director: Li Han Hsiang, and Brother Lian: Ling Po. The section on Le Di introduces the subject of melodrama as a tradition in the Huangmei Opera films, and the representation of the actor as celebrity. The documentary about Li Han Hsiang examines his film aesthetics, the production system and the representation of a utopian Chinese world of the imagination. The section on Ling Po discusses the popularity of the Huangmei Opera film genre, the role of the male impersonator and the issue of gender identification. All three topics provide an opportunity to rethink our understanding of social, political and cultural forces in the past and take stock of our circumstances in the present. Since many Huangmei Opera filmmakers are very old and much property has been lost, the documentary series provides a service for fans by interviewing those surviving key figures who worked in this genre, and assembling materials that have been lost. Furthermore, through interviews with filmmakers, experts and fans, the documentary series can not only vividly convey human behaviour in a way that no written thesis can do, but may also serve field studies in the area by setting a direction in research and providing a valuable resource for scholars involved in Chinese film and cultural studies. It is both accessible to mainstream audiences and academically warranted.

Nostalgia also refers to a state of yearning for something idealised that has disappeared from the present. This could be seen when the most famous Huangmei Opera film actress, Ling Po, held her concerts in 2003 and the audience began to collect items and paraphernalia from the past. An emotional renaissance of memories from the Huangmei Opera film genre has been widespread. The internationally renowned Taiwanese director, Ang Lee, attested that the Huangmei Opera film genre reminded him of the feelings of purity and innocence that he experienced when he
saw the Huangmei Opera movie *The Love Eterne* at the age of nine (Lyman 2001). Nostalgia can function as an evocation of something idealised that has been lost. Thus, by making a series of documentaries which quotes movie footage, posters and photos, and simulates the lyrical styles of Huangmei Opera films, one of the purposes of this doctoral project is to offer a site of pleasurable contemplation and yearning by reconstructing an idealised past derived from the Huangmei Opera film genre. Especially in the electronic era, with the advantages of new digital technologies, the nostalgic celebration of the Huangmei Opera film genre and its materials enables the Chinese audience to view the documentary series as a reflection of memories, like family photos, through an accessible media form. This encourages the audience to become more involved in this representation of the past, and builds an emotional connection between past and present for the viewers.

### 3. Cross-cultural Readings

The spirit and value behind this doctoral project are to look back at the unique and popular Huangmei Opera film genre from the perspective of cross-cultural readings that contribute new understandings for both Chinese and Western film studies. In analysing the social and cultural background – the community, aesthetics, gender identity and other issues within the Huangmei Opera film genre – the written text employs Western film theories, such as structuralist methodology, and psychoanalytic, auteur and genre theories, to examine issues presented in the documentary series and discuss the influence of gender on spectatorship in relation to the Huangmei Opera film genre. Taking its perspectives from Chinese philosophies, cultural milieu and aesthetic traditions, this doctoral project intends to propose links between Chinese aesthetics and Western film theories to present new ideas and new findings.

Furthermore, given a series of connections with film theories that were originally developed to study Western movies, the Huangmei Opera film genre is interesting to work with because its Chinese origins may challenge existing theoretical paradigms. The Huangmei Opera film genre
is a kind of musical film that is full of Chinese lyrical music, folk culture and literary traditions which have their own cultural milieu and ideological system. In Western film studies, most useful theories were developed to examine their original films by referring to their own culture and society. Other film genres developed outside the West have seldom been examined. Hence, comparing the differences in drama, visual aesthetics, gender identity and sexuality between Western and Chinese can help us not only to understand the two textual ideologies, but also to participate in broader debates that cut across individual cultures. The understanding of cultural differences leads us to an ability to communicate across differences, to become better informed and more experienced in interpreting differences, and to keep adjusting film theories as we learn more and more from those differences.

4. A Summary of the Text

This doctoral project involves producing a documentary series that explores the social, cultural, aesthetic and spectatorship issues in the Huangmei Opera film genre of the 1960s. In addition, because some issues could not be discussed in detail in the documentary format, a complementary text is provided, in which these issues are covered in greater depth and thoroughness.

The work of Chapter 1 in this text focuses on the history and social background of Huangmei Opera films from the 1950s to 1960s. It was a period when Taiwan, Hong Kong and China were in a volatile state in terms of their political and social environment, as well as in economic and demographic structure. The Huangmei Opera film genre appeared at this time and reflected the state of mind and experience of Chinese communities in this period.

Chapter 2 employs Thomas Schatz’s genre theory to examine the Huangmei Opera film genre. Schatz places the main responsibility for genre success on production practices of the Hollywood studio system. The Huangmei Opera film genre had a similar relationship with Hong Kong’s studio system. However, arguing with Schatz’s generic theory
about repetition on viewing cinema to help the audience to generate knowledge of generic patterns, the essay considers that the Chinese audience’s identification to certain plots and characters of the Huangmei Opera film genre was based on their prior experiences in Chinese traditional folk drama and other cultural sources. Meanwhile, within this genre and according to its tropes, Le Di’s public image as the “Classic Beauty” constituted an archetype of the ancient female role, representing a young woman who suffers for love or because of an oppressive situation. This essay uses Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist methodology to analyse the mythical dimensions of the Huangmei Opera film genre as a means of understanding the cultural and ideological context that produced these films.

Chapter 3 applies the auteur approach to analyse the cinematic aesthetics of Huangmei Opera films of Li Han Hsiang, the most important director of the Huangmei Opera film genre. Li’s cinematic spectacles simulate the visual spirit of Chinese landscape painting, which is derived from Taoist ideology about space and time. The philosophy of Taoism has not only influenced the visual representation of Chinese landscape painting but also reflects the Chinese people’s way of life that embodies their yearning to be in harmony with nature. Li adapted these visual concepts and ideology to create a utopian ancient Chinese world in his Huangmei Opera films.

The work of Chapter 4 focuses on the spectatorship in Huangmei Opera films, especially on the issues related to audience perception of Ling Po’s practice of male impersonation. The essay employs Laura Mulvey’s psychoanalytic theory from her famous essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” to discuss the unconscious pleasure experience of the spectators of Huangmei Opera films. However, it challenges Mulvey’s theory about male gaze and identification in cinematic apparatus with the case of Ling Po’s male impersonation, while men perceive him as a woman and women perceive her as a man. The essay considers that the spectator’s identifications of Ling Po’s impersonation rely on the fantasy proposing links among cultural, societal and psychological modes. It suggests that Ling Po’s images on and off screen represent a sexual ambivalence and enable polymorphous identification.
Chapter 5 comprises a project report, which describes the Griersonian production strategy, the production process and the concept of editing design, to supply a research foundation for the documentary filmmaker. The advantages of the new digital video technology and the sophistication of the nonlinear editing system that benefited the documentary series are also covered in this chapter. At the end of this text is an appendix of the filmography of Huangmei Opera films, to provide information for anyone