Chapter 2
HUANGMEI OPERA AS A FILM GENRE

1. The Definition of the Huangmei Opera Film Genre

Film scholars Tim Bywater and Thomas Sobchack (1989, p. 80) define film genre as “a number of popular film types similar in form, style, imagery and subject matter”. About 50 films, based on the combination of Chinese folk stories and Huangmei folk music, were very popular with audiences in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asia from the 1950s to 1960s. Huangmei Opera films can thereby be described as a typical film genre. Yet in order to distinguish the Huangmei Opera film genre from others, it is necessary first to examine its formal characteristics. These include not only the films’ visual qualities but also aural aspects, such as dialogue and music.

The most distinctive characteristic of the Huangmei Opera film genre is its aural component, the Huangmei music with its characteristic melody. As music is the most important governing principle in the style of the Hollywood musical, so the definition of a Huangmei Opera film is Huangmei music itself. We can distinguish a Huangmei Opera film from others by the fact that it contains Huangmei music. For example, Li Han Hsiang directed two films in 1962, Beyond the Great Wall and The Beauty of Beauties. Both movies were historic musical epics about Chinese beauties, however, while Beyond the Great Wall was a Huangmei Opera film because Huangmei music was used in part of the movie, The Beauty of Beauties was not a Huangmei Opera film because no Huangmei music
was used in the movie. Accordingly, the Huangmei music is the most distinguishing element of the Huangmei Opera film genre.

Just as the Hollywood musical is predicated on the concept that singing and dancing are used to tell part of the story, the incorporation by Huangmei music of the traditions of narrative song and gesture mean that singing and gesture are used in the same manner in the Huangmei Opera film genre. There is a traditional Chinese phrase, “Singing is better than saying”. The long history of the development of Huangmei Opera means that there are many ways in which the music itself had already become part of storytelling. A good example is contained in the farewell scene of the movie *The Love Eterne*. It is a sequence in which Lian Shan Bo sees off Zhu Ying Tai, who is wanting to reveal the secret that she is a woman. Zhu is singing during the trip, comparing a pair of mandarin ducks to a husband and wife to drop the hint about her gender. With Huangmei music and lyrics, this singing sequence coordinates with the visual environments, provides the character’s inner feeling and intentions, and carries the story line forward (Figure 2.1).

![The Love Eterne](image-url)
2. Genre Analysis Approaches to Huangmei Opera Films

Its musical elements aside, the Huangmei Opera film genre, with its other distinguishing characteristics, can be fruitfully examined in terms of narrative conventions and subject matter by applying genre theories and studies. The genre theorist Thomas Schatz has investigated the relationship between the Hollywood film industry and genres in his book, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*. His analytical method for exploring genres may be useful for examining the Huangmei Opera film genre, which had a similar relationship with the Hong Kong studio system. Furthermore, his theory not only places the main responsibility for genre success on the studio system but also emphasises the interrelationships between the studio system, film artists and audiences. He argues that this reflexive relationship, which is a process of production, feedback and conventionalisation, contributes to the development of a film genre. Finally he develops methods of analysis that incorporate the sociological and mythical dimensions of genre to examine the cultural and ideological milieu that produced these films. From the above, it can be seen that Schatz’s methods are useful and trenchant as a means of analysing the Huangmei Opera film genre, and so have been used to understand these films.

In analysing Hollywood film genres, Schatz places the main responsibility for genre success on production practices of the studio system. He notes, “Hollywood had read the pulse of its popular audience in developing an engaging and profitable means of narrative cinematic expression – the conventions of feature filmmaking were firmly established” (Schatz 1981, p. 5). The Huangmei Opera film genre had a similar relationship with Hong Kong’s studio system, which contributed to the success of many Chinese film genres from the 1950s to 1970s. From the 1950s, Hong Kong became the biggest source of Chinese films supplied to Chinese communities outside mainland China. They were mostly produced by two major studios, Shaw Brothers and Cathay Studio. Before these two major studios appeared, the Hong Kong film industry was undeveloped and less cosmopolitan in this tiny colonial film market.
Both major studios played key roles in establishing the Hong Kong film industry but at the same time competed ferociously with one another for the film markets in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asia in the 1960s.

Both rivals established their entertainment empire by a supply and demand relationship between overseas Chinese communities and Hong Kong. Economic investments from overseas Chinese communities became a source of supply for film making in Hong Kong. Then, Hong Kong-made films catered to all overseas Chinese communities, including Singapore, Malaysia and Taiwan. They managed their enterprise by a strategy that combined the strong relationship between family members with the flexible modern management methods of the studio system.

When we examine the success of these two major studios, we can find that both of them followed the model of the sophisticated Hollywood studio system that had developed during the classic era of Hollywood.¹ Both Shaw Brothers and Cathay Studio adapted most aspects of the Hollywood studio system, requiring effective production methods and invoking the fantasy of the movie star. This studio system helped both studios and contributed to the popularity of the Huangmei Opera film genre. The sophistication of Huangmei Opera films during this period was due to the excellent technical standard and the professionalism of filmmakers, such as Li Han Hsiang, King Hu, Wang Tian Lin, and others who were in turn supported by the studio system. Moreover, many fans of the Huangmei Opera film genre were attracted by the glamorous movie stars such as Lin Dai, Le Di, Li Li Hua and Ling Po. The fans’ enthusiasm for these movie stars was phenomenal. For example, Ling Po, who played male roles in Huangmei Opera films, was widely popular among this genre’s fans, especially women. Filmmakers and stars who were under contract to either of the two studios were largely responsible for the glossy look and polished styles that became associated in the public mind with films produced by the two majors (Teo 1997, p. 74). Huangmei Opera films which featured these popular stars attracted many loyal fans who provided the bulk of revenue for the studios.

¹ The classic era of Hollywood was from the 1930s to the 1960s (Schatz 1981, p. 4).
The studio system functions to mass produce and mass distribute movies. Shaw Brothers and Cathay Studio engaged in fierce competition not only by making Huangmei Opera movies for a mass market but also by leasing them through their own distribution system to theatres that they controlled themselves. For example, Shaw Brothers owned about 130 theatres across Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asia in the late 1950s (Figure 2.2), and Cathay Studio at its peak operated 75 cinema theatres throughout Singapore and Malaysia (Liao et al. 2003, p. 116).

This “vertical structure”, according to which the two major studios owned both their production studio and distribution system, made it extremely difficult for the other production companies to compete with them. For example, in 1964 Li Han Hsiang established his own production studio, Guolian Studio, in Taiwan but went bankrupt only a few years later. One of the reasons Li failed was that Guolian Studio lacked its own distribution system and could not lease its own motion pictures in theatres that were mostly controlled by Shaw Brothers and Cathay Studio. As a result, both major studios provided most of the Chinese films for Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asia in the 1960s. Shaw Brothers, for example, provided about 40 films for the Taiwanese film market, with a total of 120 films in 1968 (Liao et al. 2003, p. 132).

Because of the mass production and mass distribution of the studio system, these two major studios endeavoured to reach the largest audiences possible. To achieve this purpose, they had to read the pulse and taste of the popular audience. As Schatz (1981, p. 5) describes in relation to the Hollywood studio system, “They must protect their initial investment by relying to some extent upon established conventions that have been proven through previous exposure and repetition.” He adds, “Obviously, costs could be minimised by repeating successful formulas” (Schatz 1981, p. 9). From this perspective, Shaw Brothers and Cathay Studio, for the
purpose of protecting their investment and reaching the mass audience, had to keep making the kinds of movies that had been proven successful and popular in the film market. That was why many Chinese film genres would be developed and many genre films would be produced in the studio era of Hong Kong and Taiwan from the 1950s to 1970s. Huangmei Opera, which had been proven popular among its masses, was the first one to develop into a film genre for both major studios.

3. The Narrative Conventions of the Huangmei Opera Film Genre

The Huangmei Opera film genre is a kind of musical film that is full of Chinese lyrical music, folk culture and literary traditions. These Chinese opera music, folk cultural and literary traditions have their own cultural milieu and ideological system. However, most useful genre studies and theories were developed to examine American film genres, and even more specifically, Hollywood film genres. These genre studies and theories analysed film genres by referring to American culture and its society, and seldom examined the other film genres that were developed outside America. Schatz (1981, p. 6) even argues that, “Italy’s spaghetti Westerns, Japan’s samurai films, or the French New Wave’s hardboiled detective films owe to genres developed by the Hollywood studio system.” While it is true that some film genres outside America were inspired by the Hollywood studio system and Hollywood films, if we apply these genre studies and theories to examine many other film genres all over the world, it is necessary to refer to their particular cultural and social context in order to avoid misinterpretation and inaccuracy.

For example, in examining Hollywood film genres, Schatz argues that the audience’s familiarity with the film’s generic pattern is based on repeated viewing. He notes:

Any viewer’s familiarity with a genre is the result of a cumulative process, of course. The first viewing of a Western or musical actually might be more difficult and demanding than the viewing
of a non-genre film, due to the peculiar logic and narrative conventions of the genre. With repeated viewings, however, the genre’s narrative pattern comes into focus and the viewer’s expectations take shape (Schatz 1981, p. 11).

Based on his assumption, generic elements are repeated and help audiences to generate knowledge of generic patterns. The generic formula is thus established by repetition on viewing cinema. However, the Chinese audience’s generic knowledge regarding Huangmei Opera films was different from Schatz’s assumption. Although the Huangmei Opera film genre’s audience in the 1960s was familiar with its conventions as the result of prior experiences, most of these prior experiences were not based on repeated viewing in the cinema but were due to knowledge from other sources, such as religious, literary, theatrical and popular stories. As mentioned earlier, most of the Huangmei Opera films were adapted from Chinese folktales about popular myths and legends. Chinese of all classes were familiar with these stories, and the music and conventions of the dramas, from their earliest childhood. Before they stepped into the cinema, they were all familiar with the plot, characters and music. The idea of going into the theatre for a new story that was full of suspense was quite foreign to the Huangmei Opera film audience. The Huangmei Opera film genre audience’s identification with certain plots and characters was based on their prior experiences with Chinese traditional folk drama and other cultural sources.

Of course, the cinematic experience was still important in audience understanding and reception. The novel techniques of cinema, such as Cinemascope and studio effects, involved these audiences more directly than any traditional art form had ever done before. However, the fundamental element that attracted and impressed the audience of Huangmei Opera films was the story. The film semiotic theorist Christian Metz (1974, p. 45) notes, “The rule of the ‘story’ is so powerful that the image, which is said to be the major constituent of film, vanished behind the plot it has woven.” In other words, seeing the movie is not seeing the shots but the story.
Although the Chinese audience’s knowledge about the Huangmei Opera film genre pattern was not mainly based on repeated viewing in the cinema but on knowledge from popular myths and legends, formulas still exist in Chinese folktales or dramas. In the long history of development, many legends and historic epics kept evolving into Chinese folktales and resulted in Chinese drama that is bountiful and various. In the process of development, the artists and creators selected and polished these dramas based on the tastes and interests of the popular audience. Gradually, elements of Chinese drama became formalised and systematised through the process of selection and polishing. Thus, before it was adapted into the Huangmei Opera films, Chinese drama was an independent and complete system with its own narrative conventions.

4. The Themes of the Huangmei Opera Film Genre

Conceptually, the story of Chinese drama includes two interrelated elements, plot and character. If we analyse the plots of most Huangmei Opera films, there are three main themes represented in them: heroism, moralism and the love-match.

**Heroism**

Stories of heroism are stories about patriotic heroes and heroines who either resist foreign aggression or sacrifice themselves in some way for the sake of their nation. Many Chinese people were in long-term exile and suffering as a result of foreign aggression or political coups. Therefore, heroic stories about expelling foreign aggression or quelling coups were embraced by Chinese audiences. The best-known heroic story was probably the movie *Lady General Hua Mulan* (1964). It tells how the heroine, Mulan, replaced her father to resist a foreign invasion and save the nation (Figure 2.3). However, due to the fact that battle scenes didn’t really fit well with the lyrical style of the Huangmei Opera film genre, there were only a few...
subsequent Huangmei Opera films that represented a similar theme, such as *Diao Chan* (1958) and *Beyond the Great Wall* (1962).

**Moralism**

Chinese people tended to view the opera stage as a courtroom of morality. Most of the Chinese folktales, which depict sympathetic virtuous characters and unsympathetic villains and wrongdoers, became the projection of people’s sense of justice. Interestingly, in these stories most of the characters with lower social status are virtuous, while wealthy bigwigs, senior officials or governors are villainous. At the end, virtuous characters will be rewarded and villains penalised (Figure 2.4). Since most Chinese people had suffered from financial hardship or poverty and had been ruled by corrupt bureaucracies, they enjoyed stories that reflected the triumph of the humble and good over the proud and evil. Such themes are evident in many Huangmei Opera films, such as *Female Son-in-law* (1959), *The Story of Sue San* (1963), *Adulteress* (1963), *The Crimson Palm* (1964), *The Female Prince* (1964), *Inside the Forbidden City* (1965), *The Great Substitution* (1965), *The Lotus Lamp* (1965), *A Beggar’s Daughter* (1965), *The Lucky Purse* (1966), *The Dawn Will Come* (1966), *The Midnight Murder* (1967), *The Pearl Phoenix* (1967) and *Red Plum Pavilion* (1968).

**The Love-match**

The most famous and treasured of Chinese folktales are about love. As mentioned in Chapter 1, China was a patriarchal society in which most people were fettered by different economic and class barriers. However,
many folktales suggested that love could cross the differences of those barriers. Famous stories, such as *The Kingdom and the Beauty* (1960), *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (1962), *The Love Eterne* (1963), *West Chamber* (1965), *The Perfumed Arrow* (1966), *Forever and Ever* (1967) and *Three Smiles* (1968), suggest love that has a transcendental power. They even imply that the barriers between heaven and earth can be broken because of the power of love (Figure 2.5). Thus there are many legends about the love between a heavenly being and a mortal, such as *The Heavenly Match* (1955), *The Cowboy and Spinning Maid* (1963), *Madam White Snake* (1962), *A Maid from Heaven* (1963) and *The Mermaid* (1965).

**5. The Role Types of the Huangmei Opera Film Genre**

Many Chinese operas, including Huangmei Opera, represent not only similar themes but also formularised characters such as autocratic parents or authorities, effete young scholars and young women who are suffering through love or oppression. Traditionally, there are four role categories in Chinese opera: Sheng, Dan, Jing, Chou (Dolby 1976, pp. 180–181).
Each one has its own sub-categories. Basically, Sheng (Xiaosheng) refers to young scholars, Dan refers to young women, Jing refers to vigorous, powerful men and Chou is the clown character. As a genre’s iconography involves visual coding and allows us to identify characters, these role prototypes characterise roles by their props, costumes, gestures and movements (Figure 2.6).

The Huangmei Opera film genre simplified these concepts of role prototypes and adapted them into films. For example, in the most popular Huangmei Opera film, *The Love Eterne*, when Lian Shan Bo appears in the “pleasant hill” scene, the character indicates that he is a Sheng or young scholar by manipulating the fan, and wearing a gown and a hat that has two strands attached to the back. This character’s servant, acting comically by carrying a shoulder pole with a small bookcase, indicates that he is a Chou, or the clown in the story. Zhu Ying Tai appears as a Dan, a young, refined and unmarried woman who has graceful and delicate movements and wears an elaborate coiffure, adorned with a jewelled hairpiece. Zhu’s autocratic father suggests a Jing, a vigorous and powerful character, who struts and wears a long black beard and an imposing robe.

By these symbolised visual appearances of the roles, the audience can not only identify these character types instantly but also grasp the characters’ attitudes and values, and anticipate their actions. These familiar features in the Huangmei Opera film genre help audiences to become oriented, and guide their experience of the film.
Classic Beauty: Le Di and the Subject of Melodrama

One supremely popular actress who performed Dan characters in Huangmei opera films was Le Di (Figure 2.4). She was awarded the title of “Classic Beauty” because of her incomparable beauty in ancient costume when she starred in The Dream of the Red Chamber (1962). In this film she played the character Lin Dai Yu, a famous ancient beauty who suffered an arranged marriage and died in this tragic love story. After playing that role, 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.

Unlike western tragedies, such as Hamlet and Othello, in which the main male protagonists are the tragic heroes, many of the Chinese folktales that provided the stories for Chinese Opera and Huangmei Opera films are tragic stories about women. Traditional female roles in Chinese folktales are often depicted as tender, vulnerable and enduring sacrifice for the sake of love. They are often persecuted by villains or suffer the injustice of arranged marriages and ungrateful husbands.

Socially and economically, most Chinese women have had a lower status than men and yet they make up the larger proportion of the popular audience. As mentioned earlier, Chinese dramas are based on the tastes and interests of the popular audience. Hence, many Chinese dramas are woman-centered. In addition, most artists and creators of Chinese dramas were scholars who often suffered as a result of protracted wars or political coups. They were often exiled and frustrated in their ambitions which is likely to have led them to experience compassion for women who were marginalized as they were. Therefore, many Chinese folktales that scholars developed into theatrical and cinema forms are melodramas related to women.

This kind of melodrama in Huangmei Opera films are popularly referred to as “weepies” or “tearjerkers” since they engender sympathy with the protagonists and are intended to make the audience cry. Tears can release emotional pain, thus watching sad Huangmei Opera movies in which the protagonists suffer hardship and calamities and being able to cry in the...
public space of the movie theater were cathartic for Chinese audiences. They could quarantine their real feelings of sadness and not ‘take them home’. These melodramas became a significant emotional outlet for Chinese audiences who were suffering oppressive situations in the 1960s. On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, in Huangmei Opera films, although the protagonists endure many hardships, at the end virtuous characters were rewarded and villains penalized. This kind of drama structure also represents a mythic ideology that the Chinese community subscribed to in the period.

7. Huangmei Opera Films and Mythology

Huangmei Opera films were often set in ancient dynasties within a world of myth and legend. This world, as Schatz (1981, p. 21) mentions in relation to Hollywood genres, is “a familiar social community that is a cultural milieu where inherent thematic conflicts are animated, intensified and resolved by familiar characters and patterns of action.” Schatz (1981, p. 21) assumes that genre films are like myths in that they embody important and conflicting attitudes about culture and how individual relationships to it are rehearsed and repeated in a familiar social community. Schatz’s analysis of Hollywood genres is informed by Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist methodology which refers to myths as a “binary structure”. Lévi-Strauss (1972, pp.16–17) notes, “When two characters are opposed in a binary structure, their symbolic meaning is virtually forced to be both general and easily accessible because of the simplicity of differences between them.” From this perspective, we can use Lévi-Strauss’s “binary structure” method to analyse the Huangmei Opera film genre and to find out the social and cultural values embedded in Chinese society (Table 2.1).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Social Status Quo</th>
<th>Characters (Role Types)</th>
<th>Conflicting</th>
<th>Resolution</th>
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<td>Invaders / Heroes</td>
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<td>Expelled / Glory or sacrifice</td>
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<td>Officials / Citizens</td>
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**TABLE 2.1**

A Binary Structure of Themes for the Huangmei Opera Film Genre
In examining the structure of the Huangmei Opera film genre, various themes are represented and employ different means of resolution. For example, in films with heroic themes, the resolutions of the conflict are that the invaders are expelled and the heroes (or heroines) return home in glory or are sacrificed for the sake of their nation. In films with moral themes, the result is that villains are punished and the virtuous are well rewarded. In films with love-match themes, the lovers end in death or separation and the patriarchy is strengthened. Sometimes, the patriarch compromises, accepting a change in the class status of a character. As Schatz (1981, p. 29) notes, “In its animation and resolution of basic cultural conflicts, the genre film celebrates our collective sensibilities, providing an array of ideological strategies for negotiating social conflicts.” Most of these themes, conflicts and resolutions in Huangmei Opera films represent the emotional life and naturalised ideologies held by the Chinese community.

The source of the emotional life and naturalised ideologies of the Chinese community can be traced back to the time of Confucius. Most Chinese attitudes and acts accorded with the compulsory morality of legalised Confucianism that stringently upholds loyalty and nationalism, justice and morality, and filial piety and propriety. Resisting foreign invasion, condemning villainy and praising virtue, and complying with familism and decorum were the governing principles for Chinese communities. This was particularly strong among the masses of ordinary Chinese people. In addition, for centuries China had also been a feudal country in which the ruling classes classified people according to their different economic and social status. Hierarchical ideology deeply penetrated all classes of Chinese society for centuries. Combined with the familism of Confucianism, China became a patriarchal society that valued arranged marriage between families of equal standing. Conflicts were often generated when a pair of lovers crossed class boundaries.

Many Huangmei Opera films involve a romantic couple and the conflicts they experience in their struggle to bring their views in line with the values of the patriarchal society. However, unlike the Hollywood musical in which the kiss or embrace signals the integration of the couple into the larger cultural community, many of the Huangmei Opera films end with the death or separation of the lovers, to strengthen the values of
the patriarchal society. Even in the later period of the Huangmei Opera film genre, the union of the couple is not effected because the values of the patriarchal society have changed, but because the class status of the couple has somehow equalised. The intention of the Huangmei Opera film genre is responsive rather than revolutionary to the patriarchal society. The process possibly constitutes resistance to the traditional ideology, but eventually it still results in compromise and reinforcement of the status quo.

However, this compromise sometimes becomes another abstract form to sublimate audiences’ anxiety and repression. For example, in *The Love Eterne*, after the death of Lian Sheng Bo and Zhu Ying Tai, the couple transforms into a pair of butterflies that fly together in heaven. And in *The Cowboy and Spinning Maid*, the romance between the fairy maiden and the mortal is forbidden, and they are forced to separate by the two banks of a heavenly river. Their loyal love moves the cranes and they fly together to build a crane bridge which permits the couple to see each other once a year. This kind of compromise ending was also influenced by the Confucianist doctrine of the Golden Mean.

The Golden Mean of Confucianism teaches the Chinese that the “middle way” is beauty and that balance generates perspective. According to Confucius, excess and deficiency are equally at fault (Ware 1955, p. 72). The Golden Mean values harmony between ritual and desire, avoiding the deficiency of indulgence and mortification. It is similar to the Greek philosopher Aristotle’s idea of moderation. Aristotle (1975, p. 28) thought, “Now an ethical virtue is concerned with feelings and actions, in which excess and deficiency are errors and are blamed, while moderation is a success and is praised; and both success and praise belong to virtue.” The Golden Mean of the Confucian values balance and well-roundedness to achieve harmony. For example, in the theme of heroism and moralism, most of the time the invaders and villains are either expelled or punished, rarely resulting in death if they show their regrets. Mercy and forgiveness are considered well-rounded virtues derived from the doctrine of the Golden Mean. In the earlier example of *The Love Eterne*, where the lovers transform into a pair of butterflies flying in the heavens, it’s no surprise to see fans stepping out from the theatre in tears yet with a gratified feeling. This kind of well-rounded ending transforms the defeat into another form of victory, provides hope for the audience, and secures the traditional values of the patriarchal society they are part of.
8. Conclusion

The Huangmei Opera film genre is a unique film genre not only because of its special music, style and form but also because of the ideology and cultural context that underpin it. Its unique style developed from Chinese cultural traditions that were adapted into a popular film genre by Hong Kong’s emerging studio system. This studio system established the Hong Kong film industry and, at the same time, provided mass Huangmei Opera films for Chinese communities in the 1960s. Meanwhile, the ideology of the Confucian permeates every aspect of the Huangmei Opera film genre. The doctrine of patriarchal society also influences this genre’s elements of narration. By analysing the genre elements of Huangmei Opera films, we can reveal its distinguishing characteristics as well as the way it has been formed by its cultural context. Thus, genre study is a useful methodology for understanding Huangmei Opera films and the continued influence of Confucianism in Chinese society.