Romantic comedies of Cathay-MP&GI in the 1950s and 60s: language, locality, and urban character

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In *The Greatest Wedding on Earth* [Nanbei yijiaqin] (Wang Tianlin, 1962), a Cantonese-speaking young man is in love with a Mandarin-speaking woman. The comedy depicts the cultural conflicts between the Mandarin-speaking “Northerners” (*Beifang ren*) and the Cantonese-speaking “Southerners” (*Nanfang ren*), whose spoken languages and living habits are diametrically opposed. In postwar Hong Kong, the “Northerner” was a collective term referring to the mainland immigrants, with a majority of whom originating from Shanghai, whereas the “Southerner” meant the majoring of local residents in the South China and Guangdong regions. In the film, as the young lovers develop affections with each other, which cross ethnic and dialectal boundaries between their families, they find their romance in bitter conflict with their own fathers, who hold ingrained prejudices against each other’s dialects and cultures.
In one of the comic scenes in *The Greatest Wedding*, the Cantonese-speaking man pretends that he is of Northern origin in Shandong in the hope of pleasing his prospective father-in-law. When he speaks up in Mandarin, he talks gibberish to ears of the outsiders as he cannot hide his Cantonese accent. His cheating clearly infuriates the father, who threatens to throw him out of his house. The hilarious episode creates clashes and comic effects by virtue of mispronunciations, misunderstandings, and mistakes with linguistic accents. For non-Chinese speakers, the English subtitles (that parallel the Chinese ones) in the movie have done a good job in capturing the puns and wordplays — the “ton” (tongue) in the mouth, the “son” (sun) in the sky, the “lock” (rock) on the ground — but the joke works quite differently than its Chinese dialectal counterparts. When the young man says in Mandarin, “I always lose my ‘tongue,’” he awkwardly utters the word “tongue” like “shoe.” In the Chinese dialogues, what the man really means is “I cannot twist my ‘tongue’ (she),” but he sounds like “I cannot twist my ‘shoe’ (xie).”[1]

Interestingly, to articulate “she” and “xie” properly in Mandarin, the speaker has to twist the tongue in a proper way in order to make the right utterance and so convey the right meaning. (Indeed, the Mandarin language, based on the Beijing dialect, involves a great deal of tongue-twisting in actual pronunciation, which could be very tough for many Cantonese speakers.) Here the multiple implications of the “tongue-twister” — the man’s physical incompetence to manipulate and curl his tongue, his failure to utter the word “tongue” in Mandarin, and a difficult expression to speak out correctly — amusingly reveal the natural linguistic barrier for effective communications between different dialect-speaking people. Linguistic utterances become immediate markers of group affiliations and identities, of the distinction between the self and other, which continue to engender communicational tensions and confusions in the story.

For present-day local Hong Kong viewers, even if they are watching this film today for the first time on home video as one of the classics that Cathay/MP&GI has recently released,[2] this group of “North versus South” comedies dated back to the early 1960s remains interesting to watch because of their pioneering efforts to “break the barrier between Mandarin and Cantonese films,” as well as to look at the city as a melting-pot of pluralistic languages and cultures, and its fellow citizens as “travelers on the same boat.”[3] In retrospect, these urban comedies have never lost their comical touch and realistic resonance on the cultural encounters between different Chinese communities in Hong Kong, a quintessentially immigrant city of the Chinese diaspora. As one veteran local critic has put it, “once again, the people of Hong Kong have to face Mainlanders and the paradoxical relationship of mutual attraction and resentment that exists between the Cantonese and Mandarin (Putonghua) cultures.”[4]

Dramatic dialogue and precisely language itself play a pivotal role in the comedy. The film uses mixed dialect jokes and colloquial humor to symbolize the antagonism in the urban setting between the native Cantonese residents and the large inflow of Mandarin-speaking people. Such dialect fusions indeed reflect the phenomenon of a dual language cinema booming in postwar Hong Kong. From the 1950s to the 70s the Hong Kong cinema industry was divided along linguistic lines, one making films in the mainland Mandarin language and the other in the local Cantonese dialect. No doubt Hong Kong was the home city of Cantonese cinema, with the majority of its citizens speaking the Cantonese dialect. Being the lingua franca in the territory, hearing the Cantonese dialect for non-native viewers had the effect of boosting assimilation and acculturation in both economic and cultural terms.

Alongside the native language cinema was the Mandarin-language industry, which took root when film talent from Shanghai fled the mainland and settled in Hong Kong. The southbound migrations of Chinese filmmakers had come during several phases of political instability since the 1930s. The civil war of 1946-9 and soon the Communist takeover of
China saw a massive migratory wave of filmmakers, entrepreneurs, cultural elites, and political exiles from China to Hong Kong. The influx of the southbound filmmakers evidently contributed to the development of a full-grown Mandarin cinema in Hong Kong. The Cantonese and Mandarin cinemas remained parallel film cultures, acquiring distinct characteristics and audience appeals, but also competing with and complementing each other under the capitalist lifestyle in the British colonial city. [5]

Viewed from the perspective of the multiplicity of Chinese-language cinemas, the coexistence of Cantonese and Mandarin cinemas in colonial Hong Kong was a unique cultural and historical phenomenon. It has posed intriguing questions for film historians and critics. Insofar as studies of Chinese cinema have engaged with issues of nationhood, locality, and identity through examining functions of images, narratives, and performance, the issues of languages and sound in film as significantly analytical prisms have been little addressed. Recent scholarship begins to pay critical attention to the diversified alternatives of “Chinese-language cinema,” which cover a great variety of languages and regional cultures in a vast geographical and cultural terrain in Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and the Chinese diaspora. [6] In short, the multiplicity of Chinese-language cinema is not restricted to the exclusive notion of national cinema, when the inherent complexity of languages in film defies the boundary of the nation state.

How effectively or ineffectively does the spoken language project the idea of a collective Chinese identity on screen? I argue that the presence of dialects and accents in film disputes the uniformity and commonality of identity. Indeed, dialectal disparity points to the existence of multiple linguistic communities and their cultural variance, a lively state of cultural heterogeneity characteristic of urban Hong Kong. In order to discuss the contesting visions of nationhood, locality, and linguistic difference in dialect film, first I have to return to a brief review of the relationships between vernacular language and Chinese cinemas.

To begin with, the promotion and institutionalization of the modern vernacular (Mandarin based on the Beijing dialect) as Guoyu — the “national language” — was a crucial part of the cultural politics to unify the country linguistically and hence strengthen China as a modern nation. The process culminated during the May Fourth period of the late 1910s, and it prevailed well into the 1920s with the establishment of Guoyu as the official language in school curriculums and textbooks. Nonetheless, the cultural politics of the vernacular movement and the rise of dialect film — this case, Cantonese cinema — have received little critical attention. With the advent of sound technology in the movie industries, Hong Kong emerged as the largest Cantonese film production center in the 1930s, exporting its product not only to Cantonese-speaking communities in South China, but also to the Chinese diaspora in South East Asia and North America. Hong Kong’s cultural base in the local language proved to be its greatest strength, allowing it to promote a “dialect cinema,” thanks to its traditional art of local opera as well as to its vibrant music industry imported from the West.

The tremendous market of Cantonese-speaking audiences had made even such major Shanghai studios as Lianhua and Tianyi set their branches in Hong Kong. Ironically, it was the Tianyi studio in Shanghai (run by the brothers Shaw) that produced the first Cantonese talkie, White Golden Dragon [Baijing long] (Tang Xiaodan, 1933). The film was a Cantonese opera movie starring the great opera star Sit Gok-sin (Xie Juexian). It became an instant hit on its release in Canton, Hong Kong, Macau, and Southeast Asia. Soon after that, Cantonese talkies began to take the market by storm, and rumor had it that Ruan Lingyu, a famous silent movie star and a native Cantonese actress, was almost set to move from Lianhua to Tianyi to shoot her first sound and Cantonese picture. [7]

Naturally, when Chinese cinema changed from silent to sound film in the early 1930s, the
question of spoken dialects on screen turned into a controversial political matter. The transition to talkies transformed the cinemas of Shanghai and Hong Kong/Guangzhou into the main filmmaking hubs of north and south. As Shanghai became the production center of Mandarin films, Hong Kong was host to Cantonese filmmaking, each vying for a share of the overseas market. The keen market competition between Mandarin and Cantonese film industries intensified with the Chinese government’s policy forbidding production of dialect movies across the country. During the 1930s, the cultural authority of the Nationalist government was ready to impose measures to unify the spoken language (Mandarin) in film as a way to enhance the country’s political unity.[8]

Strong opposition in Guangdong arose in the face of a proposed ban on the Cantonese cinema. The representatives of the Cantonese film industry argued that because Mandarin was far from popular in South China regions, language unification should be implemented in phases. More importantly, they claimed that making Cantonese films helped to promote the cause of nationalism by enlightening the masses, promulgating scientific knowledge, and stimulating the people’s noble emotions, as Cantonese films were popular among the local populace.[9] The central government, however, imposed censorship on dialect films in order to reinforce political and cultural controls. Beneath the agenda of unification with Guoyu, however, lies an attendant cultural nationalism that viewed all other local vernaculars as inferior and hence detrimental to the nation’s progress and modernity. No wonder that under the Nationalist censorship scheme, the Cantonese dialect was on the top of the list along with superstition and sexual morality as undesirable elements in Chinese film culture — things deemed frivolous, vulgar, and provocative.[10]

The cultural politics of dialect film vis-à-vis dominant Mandarin culture reveals uneasy negotiations in Chinese cinemas as a locus of a multitude of different cultures, languages, and identities. If linguistic commonality greatly enhances laying the bases for national consciousness by creating shared communities and languages-of-power,[11] then the linguistic situation in colonial Hong Kong was rather paradoxical. Hong Kong is the biggest Cantonese-speaking city, one where the local people have never accepted Guoyu as a spoken language. Significantly, the status of the English language further complicates questions of language and identity in a city under British sovereignty. English was the official language that supported the city’s economic development and maintained its colonial governance. The Hong Kong-British government promoted the teaching of English to train local elites and absorb them into the civil servant system. Since English was functional for effective governance and essential in the fields of aviation, business, finance, legal matters, science and technology, mastery of this foreign, colonial language was a vehicle for economic mobility for the citizens. To be sure, the British government had never attempted to strive for linguistic (English) colonization as the foundation for long-term rule and expansion, since the British policy toward Hong Kong was one of reaping economic benefits through so-called “free trade.” This indifference of the British regime toward Chinese culture, paradoxically, allowed the cultural sphere to be occupied by the Chinese language, and Chinese-language culture continued to survive and prosper in a relatively free environment. [12]

In other words, the colonial government had a practical as well as indifferent attitude toward the Chinese language. Official recognition of the Chinese language’s status had come rather late in Hong Kong. It was not until 1972 that the government established the Official Languages Ordinance to legalize Chinese so that it enjoyed the same status as English in law and public administration (in response to the civil social movement demanding the legalization of Chinese earlier in 1970). The new law recognized English and Chinese as of equal status for communications between the government officials and members of the
public. In the eyes of the colonial law, however, the practice of bilingualism in the official speech referred to English and Cantonese. The government excluded Mandarin as an official spoken language, since the majority of the population spoke Cantonese, which would have “more relevance and reality for the population as a whole.”[13] Realistically speaking, the government shifted toward greater awareness of Chinese so as to facilitate communications with its Cantonese-speaking citizens and thus stabilize the government’s rule over the colony. Chinese served a supplementary function to English. This pragmatic policy rendered spoken Mandarin as a nonessential “third language” unrecognized by the ruling regime.

In spite of colonial status, Hong Kong had maintained various close ties with the mother country, particularly the South China regions. The cultural link with the motherland and with Chinese tradition had never been suppressed or delinked from the colonial subjects and ethnic Chinese residents migrating from China. On the other hand, the majority of the Chinese population, made up of refugees or descendents of refugees, maintained a strong “sojourner mentality.” Local Chinese inhabitants treated the situation of Cantonese vis-à-vis Mandarin as comparable to the coexistence of two major regional vernaculars. While mostly economic and intellectual elites had linguistic competence in English, Mandarin became the minority language, the linguistic register of the Chinese diaspora with its ambivalent attitude toward cultural China.

II

Understanding this particular linguistic and socio-cultural context helps in analyzing the social milieus in the North-South urban film series, which humorously engage social, regional, ethnic, linguistic, and ideological conflicts. MP&GI produced The Greatest Wedding on Earth as the second film of the popular trilogy that included The Greatest Civil War on Earth [Nanbei he] (1961) and The Greatest Love Affair on Earth [Nanbei xixiangfeng] (1964). Directed by Wang Tianlin (Wong Tim Lam), the trilogy was a huge box-office success at the time. These romantic comedies successfully turned cultural disputes into humorous dramas about mutual love and hatred between the characters. The Greatest Civil War centers on the bitter feud between a Cantonese and a Shanghainese tailor, who happen to have their shops next to each other and coincidentally share the same flat. The two follow-ups to The Greatest Civil War employ parallel dramatic plots. The Greatest Wedding focuses on two rival restauranteurs, who specializing respectively in Cantonese and northern cuisines. Again, their younger siblings fall in love, irrespective of the differences in their family backgrounds. In The Greatest Love Affair, a northern father opposes his daughter’s wish to marry a poor Cantonese suitor. These North-South comic dramas each revolve around two feuding families so as to satirize how new Chinese urban dwellers from different regional backgrounds clash, and the films end with mixed marriages of young couples that eventually resolved the strife between their fathers.

The Greatest Civil War premiered on the eve of the Lunar New Year in February 1961.[14] The film’s tremendous popularity spawned two MP&GI sequels as well as other imitations in Hong Kong and Taiwan.[15] According to director Wang Tianlin, Stephen Soong (Song Qi) originally wrote The Greatest Civil War as a one-act play for charity fundraising; he was inspired by a Mainland film which used two different dialects.[16] A prolific director at the peak of his directorial career, Wang was able to work in both the Mandarin and Cantonese film industries. He had directed various dialect films in Chaozhou and Amoy across a wide range of genres from slapstick comedies to swordplays and musicals.[17] Because of his versatile experience working in both language cinemas, Wang was good at eliciting terrific performances from the Mandarin comedian Liu Enjia and the talented Cantonese actor Liang Xingbo (known as Leung Sing-bo in Cantonese, a distinguished Cantonese opera artist and an impressive comedian in film, hailed as the “King of Comedians”). In the film, the two comedians play the fathers/opponents and they always steal the show and provide much of
Irrespective of the North-South comedies' popular appeal and the film company's market strategy, the films were emblematic of problems of urban immigration, overcrowding, and clashes of cultures, brought about by a wave of Mainland migrants and refugees flooding the city. The studio's publicity materials highlighted these social implications of the films:

"The population of Hong Kong has increased drastically in the past decade. Chinese and foreigners live together, while people from the north and south intermingle with each other. This tiny place houses people of diverse dialects and languages of the world, with mixed varieties of local customs and living habits. Such a situation would easily cause confrontations and worthless squabbles between people."[18]

"Many families in Hong Kong are living in cramped conditions as they have to share very limited space on one single floor. But it's hard for people of different native tongues to get along together. Some southerners may mistake the speech of northerners for French, while some northerners may find the speech of their southern neighbors as alien as the talk of 'Greek legends.'"[19]

These promotional statements were as much hyperbole as genuinely addressing the colony's postwar social reality. The Hong Kong population had increased fivefold from 600,000 in 1945 (once the war with Japan ended) to 3 million in 1960. The figure further rose to 4 million in 1970.[20] For a colonial government to deal with, Hong Kong in the 1950s was the decade of refugees, squatters, and tenement buildings. The squatter population increased at the rate of 100,000 a year in the early 1960s. The practical mission of providing sufficient housing stock for the mass influx of population was formidable.[21] Since the colonial government had not come up with a well-planned public housing policy until the 1970s, the immediate period after WWII saw a growing social malaise as many of the penniless refugees not only spoke different languages but also had different customs and habits and even political beliefs. In addition, friction between rightwing and leftwing Mainland migrants was rampant.

In the filmic world, various filmmakers and companies of opposite political leanings, Cantonese and Mandarin productions included, took up the theme of the refugee problem and primitive, dreadful housing conditions. In Cantonese filmmaking, one of the prominent works that centered on the urban underclass in crammed tenement houses was *In the Face of Demolition* [Weilou chunxiao, the Chinese title literary meaning “the perilous building at dawn”] (Li Tie, 1953). This topical film was produced by Union Films [Zhonglian], a collectively-run studio founded in 1952 by a group of progressive leftwing Cantonese filmmakers and artists. Union Films disapproved of the shortsightedness and kind of malpractice prevailing in the Cantonese movie industry, which primarily produced low-quality opera and martial arts films as cheap entertainment. The Union Films workers emphasized the need for mass enlightenment by making realistic and socially-conscious movies that addressed social and family problems. In ways that echo the May Fourth spirit of social criticism and self-strengthening, *In the Face of Demolition* shows the lives of lower class residents of an apartment building who have to struggle through stormy times by means of mutual help and understanding. A realistic film, it features a gallery of character-types that include a second landlord, unemployed young teacher, righteous chauffer, old technician, faded dance hostess, and ugly capitalist. Screenplay structure and motif resemble *The Lower Depths* by Maxim Gorky.[22]

On the other side of the political spectrum was the Mandarin production, *Half Way Down* [Ban xialiu shehui, literary meaning “the semi-low class society”] (Tu Guangqi, 1955),
produced by the rightwing Asia Pictures. The film was an adaptation of Zhao Zifan’s novel of the same name published by the U.S.-supported Asia Publishing Company in 1955. *Half Way Down* depicts a group of middle-class exiled Mainlanders — university graduates, intellectuals, entrepreneurs and the like — who are explicitly victims of Communist China, brought down to the level of subhuman existence in the refugee slums of Hong Kong.[23] The film is obviously a work of anti-Communist propaganda suffused with the nationalist message of “Recovering the Mainland.” However, its portrayal of the urban lower class, sociopolitical indictment of the capitalist-cum-colonial culture of the city, and affirmation of communal solidarity of the downtrodden subjects make the film thematically affiliated with its leftist counterparts.

As scholars have also pointed out, while this “lower depths” genre reveals the legacy of Gorky’s stage play,[24] it also constitutes a “chronotope” of urban crowding. It presents a social microcosm that has fueled the imagination and critical attitude of Chinese filmmaking for decades. Another example of this kind of tenement drama is the varied popular production of *The House of 72 Tenants*, which underwent many revisions and adaptations from the stage to the screen, moving from the prewar Shanghai stage play to cinematic versions in postwar Guangzhou and Hong Kong.[25]

In the early 1960s, the North-South urban film comedies must have evoked a cinematic memory of a whole genre of film works from the past decade dealing with urban overcrowding and social and economic disparity. While the comedies satirize ethnic and linguistic conflicts among urban migrants, they engage a diametrically different vision of societal development in new urban spaces than the kind of ideological outlook these films’ cinematic predecessors adopted toward the refugee ghetto. There is a shift of cinematic settings (though a great deal of them are staged in studio sets) that is also remarkable. The North-South comedy series deal with the changing cityscape and the modern lifestyles of bourgeois inhabitants. In terms of characterization, the comedies delineate “petty urbanites” from different walks of life and professions:

> “the restaurant bosses, foreman, cooks, waiters, health inspectors, broadcasters, real estate company manager, office staff, teachers, debt collectors, poor bachelors, family housewives, female attendants in airports, customers, returned Overseas Chinese, tourists, etc.”[26]

Central to the film's new spatial representations of urban daily life is the way they depict neighborhoods of commercial shops and restaurants. In *The Greatest Wedding*, northerner Liu Enjia opens a Peking cuisine restaurant in the vicinity of a Cantonese-style restaurant run by the local proprietor Leung Sing-bo. The locational juxtaposition and opposition of the two restaurants mirror the regional conflicts of northern and southern cultures. It is because of the physical proximity and spatial contiguity between the neighboring shops that the two owners strive to undercut each other’s business in cutthroat competition. Liu seizes a big deal with Leung’s longtime patron by promoting his banquet with slashed prices, while Leung in revenge lures away Liu’s headwaiter. Meanwhile Liu gives out free beer to his customers and Leung quickly responds by hiring a crowd of fellow neighbors to partake of the free drink in Liu’s restaurant so as to upset his big offer.

In *The Greatest Civil War*, the character of Liu opens a swanky tailor shop next to an old fashioned one run by southerner Leung. Liu starts his business with a bang by launching a lavish cocktail party much to the displeasure of his Cantonese counterpart. Leung’s loathing of the northerner deepens as Liu goes to great lengths to offer fat commissions to tourist guides, henceforth crippling the business of his rival.

In spatial terms, the comedies portray emerging urban locales of commercial activities. The
competing tailor shops and restaurants embody a microscopic urban corner of the merchant class, whose members have to face each other with enmity in cutthroat competition. In The Greatest Civil War, the two rivals not only have their business establishments in the same neighborhood, but they also find themselves coincidentally renting a room next to each other in the same apartment building; thus the two families share the same flat. The men’s antagonism in business persists as well in their domestic life when the living room becomes a contentious space between the two. A very funny moment has the characters of Liu and Leung pitted against each other, when they each try to tune the radio to their preferred dialect channels. The battle of the airwaves winds up with the two contenders singing their favorite operatic numbers (of course, in their respective dialects) in a falsetto voice in order to drown the opponent out. To reiterate, the dramatic element of sound (singing and talking) features prominently in these comedies. The spatial metaphor of high urban density (two families to a flat) complements the acoustic representations of chaos, conflict, and excommunication (between different dialects and meanings) among people.

To add humor and complication to the two characters’ domestic rivalry, a modernized and luxurious commodity called the refrigerator had come into the house in the beginning of the story. In Hong Kong of the early 1960s, buying a refrigerator was surely a sumptuous consumption that few households could afford. First, northerner Liu has brought it on “time payments” (a new way of commercial transaction). It later turns out that Liu has extravagantly spent more than he can pay for it. The appliance soon changed hands. Then Leung bought it back at a secondhand price. The domestic electric device becomes an eye-catching object of affluence and prestige and thus rivalry between the two men. (The camera repeatedly captures the towering presence of the electric appliance in the living room.)

Both Liu’s vanity in displaying his wealth and Leung’s opportunism in fighting for a luxurious object can be aptly described as “conspicuous consumption” (as Thorstein Veblen calls it in The Theory of the Leisure Class, 1899, a classic study of the U.S. middle class and their consumption predispositions in the modern industrial society). In other words, the men’s longing for possession reflects middle class aspirations for wealth and the good life. While their territorial fight over domestic space echoes the themes of congested urban living and conflicts of regional dialects and cultures, more significantly it is bourgeois lifestyle and aspiration that constitute the comedy’s narrative logic.

It is their lust for economic power and urge for business success that initiate these confrontations between northerner and southerner. The Greatest Civil War touches on the latest consumption pattern of the middle class and fierce market competition in the restaurant business. It also treats the two tailor-shop owners as aggressive entrepreneurs who try to edge each other out of the market. The film gives a glimpse of the early phase of finance capitalism, however, when toward the end we see the Cantonese tailor acts as a moneylender. He tries to make the best of his capital when his tailoring business has declined. By a comic twist of fate, then, his neighbor Liu begs to borrow money from him when the northerner’s firm is driven to near bankruptcy. It comes as no surprise that Leung will turn down Liu’s appeal. Liu soon retaliates by badmouthing Leung in the face of Leung’s company partner who is convinced to break up their association later.

The bourgeois wish to acquire affluence and comfort, and the domestic conflict which that striving creates are recurrent themes in many studio productions. Among them, Our Dream Car [Xiangju meiren] (Yi Wen, 1959) stands out as an obvious example. The film exposes how a newlywed couple struggles to buy a motorcar. Eventually that experience turns out to affect their domestic lives and even put their marriage at risk. In the film, the husband and wife are white-collar workers who rent a room in a shared flat. With very little extra money to afford a new car, they skimp on their own needs and work hard to save some money for the down payment on the car. The film shows the bourgeois thrill of buying and owning this
modern vehicle by providing details about taking driving lessons and the daily routines of operating a car. It presents the dilemma of how the Chinese middle class might fit into the new social system while maintaining the integrity of the family. Like other MP&GI urban films, Our Dream Car responds to the process of a city growing up by introducing the audience to the logistics of car mortgage, insurance, salesmanship, and the banking system, practices that are characteristic of a large city's commercial development and modernization.

The Cathay film world forged a modern outlook in its productions by utilizing modern technology, initiating a studio management and star system, and assimilating popular genres (romantic comedy, musical, and melodramas). It did so in the Hollywood fashion. Expressions of urbanity and embrace of capitalist modernity were themes in a great many urban film dramas and comedies in this period. The studio produced popular films showing urbanites' modern daily lives. As critics have noted, the films often

> “present the Western lifestyle of a number of young and attractive female protagonists, listening to Italian operas, attending or hosting Western-style birthday parties, engaged in Western swordplay, tennis, picnicking, and dancing the cha-cha, tango and mambo in Western dress.”[29]

Yet the films also stage clashes between traditional and modern morality, between individualism and valuing the family. As a film scholar suggests,

> “Hollywood cinema was perceived, not just in the United States but in modernizing capitals all over the world, as an incarnation of the modern (original italics).”[30]

For a film industry that mostly consisted of Chinese émigrés and a cultural elite supported by overseas Chinese capital, the Hollywood mode of filmmaking promised up-to-date systems of industrial production, mass reproduction, and consumption for a modernizing city. This aesthetic appropriation of Hollywood styles could aptly express and foresee the modern lifestyle and culture of an emerging middle class. For the filmmakers of the Chinese diaspora, more intriguingly, their image of the West was less inspired by colonialism than by the Hollywood modern.

As regards the North-South film comedies, Zhang Ailing, the screenwriter, was responsible for their sensibility in regards to cultural collisions and urban touches. Zhang, a renowned Shanghai-born writer, left China a few years after the establishment of the Communist regime. She wrote a number of screenplays for MP&GI after she settled in the United States. [31] An inveterate movie fan, film critic, and creative writer from the sophisticated cosmopolitan background of Shanghai, Zhang was an admirer of Hollywood movies and well-versed in melodrama, urban dramas, and especially screwball comedies of the 1930s and 40s. Scholars point out that Zhang’s screenplays — these include The Battle of Love [Qingchang ru zhangchang] (1957), A Tale of Two Wives [Rencai liangde] (1958), The Wayward Husband [Taohua yun] (1959), June Bride [Liuyue xinniang] (1960) — mostly deal with urban romances and sexual battles reminiscent of the Hollywood screwball comedy.

Some believe that Zhang’s cinematic models could have been taken from such sophisticated Hollywood comedies as Bringing up Baby (1938), The Philadelphia Story (1940), and The Lady Eve (1941), while they were localized versions with Chinese ethics and family values. [32] Zhang’s screenwriting certainly gave an added eclecticism to the MP&GI output, as seen in her renditions of foreign dramatic texts within local Chinese settings. The Battle of Love was an adaptation of The Tender Trap by Max Shulman. The Greatest Love Affair on Earth, the third and last film of the North-South series, goes beyond the formula of linguistic
conflict. It takes its main plot of gender mix-ups and transvestism from Brandon Thomas's play *Charley's Aunt*. [33] Zhang's adaptation turns the farce into a social satire of money-grabbing society; it also mocks the Chinese tendency to worship things foreign and from the West. [34]

In light of the common thematic trope of courtship and marriage in both Chinese and Hollywood film traditions, however, the MP&GI urban comedies have striking variations and differences from their Western parallels, which illuminate the local flavors of the Chinese films in their own context. A scholar even put the North-South films under the rubric of the "realistic comedy" since they cope with the realities of social and ethnic integration and acculturation. [35]

Crucial to the refined screwball drama is the presence of fast-paced, precisely timed, witty, sarcastic dialogue between the characters. (The screwball genre became popularized during the early sound era and had much to do with the advent of sound technology in Hollywood filmmaking.) The fast exchange of clever repartee between the fictional characters, often courting couples, indicates the sophisticated maturity of the cosmopolitan urbanites in this Hollywood genre. In the North-South series, however, we find more lively slang expressions and homegrown speeches that appeal to an indigenous audience. In the Chinese genre, cross-dialect nuances play an important function as the characters make daily conversation laced with folk humor. Colloquial expressions and puns effectively structure the dramatic gags and punch lines, leading to comical actions and even physical fights in the films. In fact, as Wang Tianlin recalled, because Zhang Ailing was not familiar with the Cantonese dialect and the local Hong Kong situation, his team had to improvise the gags and comic moments during shooting. [37] The Cantonese actor Leung Sing-bo had a great deal of creative input, with his improvised acting and colloquial slang generated on the spot. Stephen Soong also revised and enriched the Cantonese parts in Zhang's original scripts. [38]

The successful MP&GI comedies demonstrate the importance of the elements of linguistic utterance and performance as the films humorously dwell upon the details of local daily life. Unlike the elegant Hollywood screwball genre, the North-South series mixes high and low vernacular with a narrative interest in the quotidian and everyday. Besides language sensitivity, the films also use food cultures and eating habits to highlight and even parody certain cultural clichés among the common folk. While Chinese restaurants and domestic space are contested war zones for the fathers' generation, the young lovers have romantic encounters in Western-style eateries and coffee houses. The urban locale of the Westernized restaurant stands for "modern space" —

"it is the place between the north and the south, the place for civilized discussions and falling in love." [39]

Finally, a Western-style teahouse is where the fathers come to negotiate terms of a marriage alliance. In a riotous "fight scene," however, the two old men cause havoc in the teahouse with frantic punches, fighting in their respective regional schools of *kung-fu*. As the comedy balances verbal accusations with slapstick actions, it combines lowbrow and middlebrow taste and playful and anarchic actions to please local moviegoers.

Food provides both a backdrop (the restaurants) and a recurring symbol of cultural prejudice vs. openness. Culinary taste becomes an indication of cultural tolerance that makes for good martial relationships. In *The Greatest Civil War*, the Mandarin-speaking girlfriend (Ding Hao) tries to appease her future Cantonese husband by claiming that "Northern dishes are salty and greasy." They will have Cantonese cuisines at home after their marriage. The Cantonese daughter (Bai Luming) says to her Mandarin-speaking suitor that they will stick with Northern food in the future. In *The Greatest Wedding*, the character of
Ding Ho passes an instant cooking demonstration to prepare a delicious dish of Cantonese turnip cake in her virgin visit to her prospective in-laws. The food joke illustrates the truth that claims about a distinct local flavor or about the fixed identity of a regional culture are untenable. We see in the film this can simply be produced and transported — in this episode, the heroine can make a good turnip cake with just a cooking menu in hand! By implication, the boundaries of regional and local that defined many previous social relationships are no longer meaningful as these kinds of boundaries become dissolved in a metropolitan setting.

Significantly, the northerner daughter in *The Greatest Wedding* can also speak fluent Cantonese and she hosts Cantonese radio programs in the city. Radio broadcasts as a form of popular culture in the 1950s and 60s signified the newest urban entertainment, and in fact they helped shape a common culture among people with different tastes, preferences, and mother tongues. This kind of "mixture" in the films' plots and characterizations clearly shows that even dialects or food tastes do not sufficiently define the localities and identities of a people involved in the process of assimilation that comes with urbanization. Language and cultural differences, it seems the films are saying, will not pose the same problems for a new generation of urbanites.

Writers on the Hollywood screwball comedy have often discussed its socioeconomic implications. Critics have generally criticized the genre, which dominated the Depression-era U.S. screen, as escapist entertainment or a fairy tale for its portrayal of middle-to-upper-class society. But some argue that this kind of comedy was also scripted around engaging social commentary. For instance, the sexual confrontation and courtship between the screwball couple are often emblematic of differences in social class and ideology.[40] One classic example, *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934), brings out the romantic antagonism between an heiress and a middleclass journalist. Working out these antagonisms through courtship and marriage, therefore, emerges as the film's central theme.

Once we translate this utopian fantasy of classless society into a Chinese social context, we observe that the opposition in these Chinese comedies deals less with antagonistic lovers or the battle between the sexes than with disputes between family patriarchs. The narrative revolves around young lovers’ efforts to gain the father’s consent to their marriage. In *The Greatest Wedding*, the young couple hoodwinks their parents and feigns elopement so that the fathers have to give up their opposition. In the finale, the wedding ceremony takes place first in a church and then in traditional Chinese style, showing the blending of Western and Chinese cultures in the colonial Chinese-speaking city. The thematic undercurrent of the film shows

"a young pair overcoming individual and social obstacles to their happiness, figured as a concluding marriage that achieves individual and social reconciliations."[41]

Marriage, then, takes on great importance as a way of legitimizing people’s need for social assimilation and harmony. The young people assert their conjugal rights when they disregard the patriarch’s restrictions and establish a Western-style nuclear family for their own future. The bonds of matrimony embody at once youth's social aspirations and hopes of upward mobility as they venture to dismantle the older generation's social and cultural prejudices.

Whereas the MP&GI comedies poke fun at regional divisions, life style differences, and linguistic confusion between southerners and northerners, the films' narratives provide an important symbolic integrative force to "unite" ethnic groups and families into modern citizens who have common values and orientations. In the ending of *The Greatest Civil War*, both the Shanghai and Cantonese tailor-fathers run into serious debt. The upcoming
marriage also leads to the timely clearing of all their debts, as the two warring family heads decide to arrange a merger of the two shops into “The United Tailors” (Nanbei he). The film ends with the unification of the two rival tailor businesses and the patriarchs’ common commercial goal to upgrade their products so as to target at the European and U.S. markets. The battle of words and wits between the two tailors finally dissolves into a mutual understanding of each other.

Obviously the romantic interplay between the young siblings leads to the psychological change in the father figures and so to the business merger. Ultimately the film’s “marriage” of the two business ventures, the north and south, which provides its subtle statement on Chinese communities in diaspora, for whom aspirations of social and economic affluence override ethnic divisions. The film’s ending serves as a social allegory of Hong Kong’s gradual urbanization and industrialization. The city underwent a transition from a poor shelter for Mainland Chinese refugees and immigrants to an industrial town and a modern metropolitan city, supported by the Western forms of civil governance, industrial capitalism, and the free enterprise system.

These urban comedies reflect the mentality of Cathay cinema — well remembered for its projection of bourgeois Chinese families and communities in social modernization. Some have considered the Cathay pictures as providing “escapist” amusement and as popular genre films with no realistic connection with the times — since Hong Kong in the 1950s and 60s saw a series of events of political turmoil, social unrest, and the continuing influx of refugees. Yet, in churning out mass-reproduced entertainment and in turning to popular Hollywood genres for inspiration, Cathay cinema catered to an emerging urban public. In lieu of shying away from the center of the motherland and the national politics of the time, Cathay films responded to societal changes and the pressures of modernity in a positive way. They provide new images of city life as increasingly commercialized, modernized, and urbanized. The North-South comedies have a localized focus on changing familial relationships and urban lifestyles, are invested with a new imaginary of the Chinese modern, and offer a timely metaphor for a society set for its economic miracle and metropolitan development.

Notes

1. In Mandarin the pronunciation of “sun” is “ritou” (the man says “yitou”). “Rock” is “shitou” (the man says “xitou”). The Chinese title for the film, as in the series, begins with “Nanbei” and it means “North and South.”

2. Dato Loke Wan Tho (1915-1964) founded the Cathay Organization in Singapore in 1947. In 1956, Cathay established MP&GI (Motion Picture & General Investment) as its Chinese-language production branch in Hong Kong. In 1965, after Loke’s death, MP&GI was reorganized into Cathay (Hong Kong). Cathay (HK) closed down its production units in 1971, and only dealt with film distribution and release since. For an institutional history of the film organization, see the essays by Stephanie Chung Po-yin, Yu Mo-wan, Poshek Fu in Sam Ho and Ain-ling Wong (eds.), The Cathay Story (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2002), 36-51, 52-9, 60-75. In this article, I will use Cathay and MP&GI interchangeably wherever it is appropriate.


5. The coexistence and mutual development of the Mandarin and Cantonese cinemas in
postwar Hong Kong are themselves complex issues in need of a systematic study. For a brief review, see Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: the Extra Dimensions* (London: BFI, 1997), 3-60.


7. Ling Sing (Guangzhou), no. 31 (Apr. 13, 1932). Quoted from Ainline Wong, “Preface,” in Wong (ed.), *The Hong Kong-Guangdong Film Connection* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2005), 9.

8. The law to forbid Cantonese films was ineffective because of the strong resistance of the southern filmmakers and the Sino-Japanese war that disrupted its implementation. Also significant was the fact that the British regime in Hong Kong made it practically difficult for the Chinese government to execute its policy. For the censorship on Cantonese film in the 1930s, see Lee Pui-tak, “To Ban and Counter Ban: Cantonese Cinema Caught between Shanghai and Hong Kong in the 1930s,” in Wong, *The Hong Kong-Guangdong Film Connection*, 30-49; Stephanie Chung Po-yin, “A tale of Two Cinemas: Prewar Tug-of-War between North and South,” 50-67.

9. The counter arguments made by the Cantonese film workers were documented in a Nationalist émigré magazine, *Yilin* [Art Land], in the issues between 1937 and 39. See, for example, Ji Chen [Jackson], “On the Ban on Cantonese Films” [Guanyu jinying yueyupian zhi mianmianguan], *Art Land*, no. 3 (Apr. 1, 1937).


12. As far as linguistic colonization is concerned, Hong Kong differs from the once British-colonized places in Africa, India, and the Caribbean in that it does not have a tradition of literary writing in English. See William Tay, “Colonialism, the Cold War Era, and Marginal Space: The Existential Condition of Five Decades of Hong Kong Literature,” in Pang-yuan Chi and David Der-wei Wang (eds.), *Chinese Literature in the Second Half of a Modern Century* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2000), 31-38.

13. Hong Kong Chinese Language Committee, *The First Report of the Chinese Language Committee* (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1971), 4. According to the Report of the Census, 1961, Cantonese was the usual language of 79% of the Hong Kong population and it was understood by 95% of the population.


15. One of the films was Shaws’ production, *When the Poles Meet* [Nanbei yinyuan], made soon after *The Greatest Civil War on Earth* in the same year. Directed by Chow See-luk, *When the Poles Meet* had a similar theme as its MP&GI counterpart, and a cast evenly split between Mandarin and Cantonese speakers. In Taiwan, there was a film titled *Two of a Kind* [Liang xiang hao] (Li Xing [Lee Hsing], 1962) with a similar dramatic plot of linguistic and ethnic conflicts. The story is about two doctors, one of Western medicine, one Chinese medicine (in this case, the clash is between the Taiwanese dialect and Mandarin, Taiwan vs. the mainland). I am indebted to Robert Chi for this Taiwanese source.

17. Interview with Wang Tianlin, Hong Kong Film Archive, April 11, 1997 and October 23, 2001.

18. Publicity materials for The Greatest Wedding on Earth, Hong Kong Film Archive, PR2155.

19. Publicity materials for The Greatest Civil War on Earth, Hong Kong Film Archive, PR2136.


21. James Hayes, Friends and Teachers: Hong Kong and its People, 1953-87 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 1996), 58, quoted from Thomas W.P. Wong, “Colonial Governance and the Hong Kong Story,” in Pun Ngai and Yee Lai-man (eds.), Narrating Hong Kong Culture and Identity (Hong Kong: Oxford UP, 2003), 231. For the housing problem and corruption in Hong Kong during the 1950s and 60s, see Elliot Elsie, Colonial Hong Kong in the Eyes of Elsie Tu (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2003), 43-56.


24. Maxim Gorky’s original play, The Lower Depths [Na dne], was adapted on the stage (Ke Ling and Shi Tuo, 1946) and on the screen (Huang Zuolin, 1948) in Shanghai, entitled Ye dian [Night Inn] in Chinese. See Paul G. Pickowicz, “Sinifying and Popularizing Foreign Culture: From Maxim Gorky’s The Lower Depths to Huang Zuolin’s Ye dian,” Modern Chinese Literature 7.2 (Fall 1993): 7-31.

25. There are two extant Cantonese film versions of The House of 72 Tenants, one directed by Wang Weiyi in 1963 as a co-production by the Zhujiang and Hongtu studios. The later one was directed by Chu Yuan [Chor Yuen] in 1973 and produced by Shaw Brothers. Chu Yuan’s film was so popular that it broke even Bruce Lee’s box office records upon its release in 1973, and helped to revive the Cantonese movie industry in Hong Kong.


27. According to Wang Tianlin, there was initially a scene of mixed singings that they could
not achieve in shooting (however, Wang did not clearly specific whether it was in *The Greatest Civil War on Earth* or *The Greatest Wedding on Earth*). Leung Sing-bo and Pak Lo-ming [Bai Luming] (who plays Leung’s daughters in both films) would sing the song together with mixed dialects, half sung in Cantonese and the other half in Mandarin. See “Interview with Wang Tianlin,” in *Transcending the Times*, 160-1.


31. See *International Screen*, no. 3 (Dec. 1955): 6. Before she left for the U.S. in the fall of 1955 after a temporary stay in Hong Kong, Zhang agreed to join the script committee of the film company in 1955, with other Shanghai-originated members like Yao Xinnong (Yao Ke), Sun Jinsan, and Stephen Soong (Song Qi).


33. *The Tender Trap* had a movie version (Charles Walters, 1955), co-written by Max Shulman and Robert Paul Smith. *Charley’s Aunt* had been adapted for the screen (Archie Mayo, 1941), co-written by Brandon Thomas and George Seaton. I am not sure whether Zhang’s script models were based on the films or the original plays in the two adaptations. *Charley’s Aunt* is a satirical play about upper-class English society. Two college students wish to entertain their lady friends. They browbeat their male classmate into posing as a rich widowed aunt from Brazil so that the girls will have a proper chaperone to go for their invited gathering. In *The Greatest Love Affair on Earth*, two poor young teachers are in love with two girls who are cousins. Liu Enjia, who plays a stubborn northerner and guardian of the girls, opposes their love affairs. The plot obviously involves the theme of class antagonism because both the Cantonese- and Mandarin-speaking suitors are rejected. Leung Sing-bo performs in drag and impersonates the rich aunt of the Cantonese teacher in order to deceive the supercilious guardian.

34. To the best of my knowledge, there is no extant film copy of *The Greatest Love Affair on Earth*. Since I have not seen *The Greatest Love Affair on Earth*, I will not have detailed analysis of it in this article. Zhang Ailing’s original film script, though, has just been published. See *Ink* 2.1 (Sep. 2005): 156-90.


36. Names and colloquial expressions are constantly teased by the opposite party and the jokes are based on their suble tonal differences in pronunciation. For example, in *The Greatest Civil War on Earth*, the Cantonese tailor’s name is pronounced in Mandarin as “shen jingbing” (which sounds like “insanity”). The northerner’s name (“Li Shipu”) in Cantonese sounds like “lei sai po” (meaning “nonsense”). In a scene, the two have a row over their business. The Cantonese tailor accuses his rival for underselling and calls him “daai fa tung” (literally referring to an “overadorned vessel,” meaning a “good-for-wasting” in Cantonese). The Mandarin speaker mistakes it for “da fan tong” (literally referring to a “big
rice barrel,” meaning a “good-for-nothing” in both dialects).


