Hong Kong in the Cultural Cold War and the Colonial Southeast Asia: Review of Geopolitics and Film Censorship in Cold War Hong Kong (Book Review)

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This article is a review of Zardas Shuk-man Lee's recently published book *Geopolitics and Film Censorship in Cold War Hong Kong* (2019), an extensive historical research regarding the institution of film censorship in Hong Kong during the 1940s-1970s. From the perspective of film censorship studies, Lee's ambitious work questions the Cold War geopolitics and further contributes to cultural Cold War studies, Hong Kong colonial studies and Sinophone studies.

Keywords: Cold War, Hong Kong, Sinophone, Colonial studies, Film censorship

Over the past two decades, Cold War studies have been faced with a cultural turn. In lieu of the emphasis on political economy or diplomacy of the superpowers, researchers have begun to underscore the localized dimension of state propaganda and cultural production as well. Hong Kong has been commonly regarded as "Berlin of the East" during the Cold War era, an ideological battlefield highly contested by the Chinese Communist Party and the Taiwan Kuomintang – namely "the Left" and "the Right". While extensive research regarding Hong Kong media and film production has been conducted, rarely has scholarly literature investigated Hong Kong film censorship. As one of the pioneering published research projects, historian Zardas Shuk-man Lee's new book – translated from her previous thesis – *Geopolitics and Film Censorship in Cold War Hong Kong*（Chinese title:《冷戰光影：地緣政治下的香港電影審查史》） offers crucial insights about film censorship studies, the cultural Cold War, Hong Kong colonial studies and Sinophone studies.

Echoing the fundamental standpoint of Sinophone studies and hence eschewing the hegemonic "Chineseness" represented by the People Republic of China or Taiwan, Lee addresses Hong Kong's colonial history not only in relation to China and Britain, but also in a wider context of the British colonial policies in Asia, particularly Malaysia and Singapore. According to Lee, since 1882, Hong Kong, British Ceylon, Malacca, Penang and Singapore had been under the management of the same British colonial system – the Eastern Cadetship Scheme of the Colonial Service. The British students, who later became the high-rank officials in the British colonies, had undergone the similar examination, language training and work experience, best exemplified by William Pickering and Cecil Clementi. Pickering had undertaken the work of Chinese Maritime Customs Service in Hong Kong for ten years before his inauguration of Protector of Chinese in Singapore. Clementi, the Governor of Hong Kong in 1925-1930, acceded to his post as Commander-in-Chief of the Straits Settlements in 1930-1934 and found the impediments caused by the Chinese in Malaysia

comparable with that of Hong Kong. Notably, during the early Cold War period, the Hong Kong government and Singapore government often consulted each other for film censorship regulations. In 1951, the Public Relations Officers of Singapore and Hong Kong conferred about the operation, including the purpose of censorship, the process from film import to permits issued to cinemas, and censors' scope of authority. The deliberation formed its shape in the Film Censorship Regulations in 1953. While affirming the intercolonial relations, Lee still accentuates the underlying dynamics and distinctions within the colonies and the autonomy of Hong Kong government from British Colonial Office. Alexander Grantham, the Governor of Hong Kong in 1947-1957, gave prominence to Foreign and Commonwealth Office rather than Colonial Office and underscored the policy of Hong Kong should be diplomacy-oriented.

Geopolitics and Film Censorship in Cold War Hong Kong interrogates the operation of the Panel of Film Censors and the Board of Review, constitutive of the heads from different government departments of great significance, for instance, the Secretary for Chinese Affairs, Inspector General of Police and Director of Education. While adopting a political institution's perspective and deeming it as the major actor in the field of film censorship, Lee is not unaware of the possible limit imposed by "prohibitive/institutional model" termed by notable film academics Annette Kuhn. As Kuhn contended, such a model implies the lacuna of the broader historical and social contexts, a presupposed static and deterministic institution-based power and the absence of how censorship has shaped mainstream film creation and production. However, the ambition of Lee does not merely lie in cultural production. For Lee, stated in her previous thesis, "film censorship in Hong Kong functions here as a vehicle for understanding the effect of the Cold War on making local policy from the late 1940s to 1970s". (Lee, 2013:4)

As for the historical periodization, Lee divides it into three stages – the emergence of political censorship in the 1940s-1950s, double imperatives of politics and morality in the 1960s and the rise of domestic concern in the 1970s. The emergent film censors mainly scrutinized three types of films – propaganda films promoting ideology of either Chinese Communist or Kuomintang, official films produced by foreign governments for cultural and psychological warfare and films associated with the domestic political sphere. Among the films imported from communist countries, there was a significant proportion of the Soviet Union films and Chinese communist films. Distribution of these films was enabled by *Sovexportfilm*, a dominant distributor in the Soviet Union. More importantly, concerns of race, nations and realpolitik far outweighed the "communist versus capitalist" ideological framework. The Hong Kong government laid more emphasis on the subversive effect of Chinese films as they estimated that the spectators were more likely to identify with Chinese characters. However, rather than imposing a complete ban on Chinese communist films, the Hong Kong government remained "politically neutral" and tactfully limited the types and numbers of Chinese communist films.

Yet it would also be mistaken to suggest that the Hong Kong government unconditionally welcomed foreign films produced by the "Free World" due to ideological reasons. Lee unveils the realpolitik. Since the 1950s, certain tensions have heightened between the Hong Kong government and the Information Service of the United States(USIS). The seemingly ubiquitous anti-communist propaganda of the USIS irritated Grantham, who was worried about triggering wars between China and Hong Kong. *Voice of America*, a radio programme broadcast on Radio Television Hong Kong, was forbidden as a consequence of condemning China. In 1956, the United States Department of State exerted pressure on the Hong Kong government to abolish censorship on Free World official

films as the way British government did. To avoid the diplomacy crisis between British government and the United States, the Murray administration terminated film censorship on the USIS films. It is even more intriguing to examine the third case – films associated with local political events. The Hollywood classics, *On the Waterfront*, was prohibited from screening in 1954 as the filmic representation of workers' insurgency unnerved the Hong Kong government. Lee further contextualizes the concern in the late 1940s to make it more comprehensible. The workers' struggles, such as the ferry strike in 1946 and the China Motor Bus Company workers' strike from 1947 to 1948, were associated to communist ideologies. While Lee asserts that diplomacy was the prior concern in the early period of Hong Kong film censorship, what remains mute in the book is that the case of *On the Waterfront* palpably embodies that the undercurrent of local political issues still mattered.

Lee elucidates the sheer institutional complexity of film censorship in the 1960s by tracing both the governmental institution and the two waves of movement in 1965 and 1975 initiated by the significant actor, the Hong Kong communist opponents, and its dynamics with the Hong Kong government. Lee first outlines ambiguities in General Principles of 1963, which was first proposed for reaching consensus among the Panel of Film Censors and the Board of Review as the latter could overrule the former's decision. The Principles of 1963 only vaguely depicted the direction for censoring national and racial themes – any films mistakenly portraying the relations between Hong Kong and the neighboring nations, inciting racial and national hatred, or ruining the peace of Hong Kong should be banned. While the Principles stated that anti-Chinese Communists films should be avoided, contradictory decisions were announced – two patriotic Chinese films, The Red Detachment of Women（《紅色娘子軍》） and A Glorious Festival（《光輝的節日》）, yielded different results. The former was banned whereas the edited version of the latter was permitted. In light of the variation, General Principles of 1965 was amended to ensure that the ban would only be valid to the films which attacked other nations but not to those promulgating their own patriotism. The new Principles underscored that "Two Chinas" should be treated prudently and adopted the stance of pro-United States and pro-China as the tension between the two nations was defused. Lee further evaluates Communists' opposition campaign as social movement, bridging their actions with the 1967 riot background. Pro-communist media like Ta Kung Pao（《大公報》） and Wen Wei Po（《文匯報》 played a key role in broadcasting that Hong Kong government discriminated against Chinese films, no matter what the contents were. Comparing the two events, Lee ascribes the failure of the 1967 campaign action to their strategy, yearning for infeasible goals. To me, what is intriguing is the way Lee associates the campaign with the 1967 Riot, one of the watersheds in Hong Kong history. While Foreign and Commonwealth Office did not regard the communist campaign as PRC-backed, the Colonial Office pessimistically anticipated the opposite. Lee argues that both these campaign activists and the communists in the 1967 Riot were PRC-backed.

Despite explicit political censorship, Lee uses moral censorship as the central thread to explore the significant issues on colonial governmentality and negotiation between the government and other parties in society. As a background, since the 1940s, implicit and explicit sex and violence scenes in both local and foreign films were prohibited. In the 1960s, the surge in demand for pornographic films and the prevalence of sex crimes and drug addicts further engendered controversy among social elites including religious, educational and female-oriented organizations and their request for a stricter moral censorship. Lee argues that although Secretary for Chinese Affairs John McDouall seemingly endeavoured to exchange ideas with various parties in civil society, Hong Kong government did not thoroughly discuss the notion of "Chinese moral standards", which were

ambiguous to the government officials during the heated debates on film classification system, with the local Chinese in Hong Kong. Lee asserts that after the 1967 Riot and the intense period of the Cold War, film censorship in the 1970s engaged more with local Hong Kong people and enhanced its transparency, thereby fostering the legitimacy of the Hong Kong government.

Albeit without covering the contemporary issues, the book allows us to further extend the research and raise the following questions: Adopting the framework of Sinophone or regional studies, what can be told in the film censorship from the perspectives of Singapore and Malaysia during the Cold War? In response to the social and cultural issues in contemporary Hong Kong, censorship may not only come from the state apparatus, but also from different commercial organizations. While Haruki Murakami's *Killing Commendatore* has been classified as "indecent", we may further investigate the history and manoeuvre of The Obscene Articles Tribunal, a judicial institution classifying indecent or obscene publications. Censorship-related topics, which have been shifted from mere prohibition to commercial or governmental preferences, are of equal significance today. Take Hong Kong International Film Festival as an example, the screening of *Vanished Archives*, a documentary uncovering archives regarding the 1967 Riots, was rejected during the film festival. While the decision might involve complicated commercial and political considerations, it would be one-sided only to consider the political aspect. These examples require further research.

Lee unearths the archival materials in Hong Kong, Britain and Singapore to demonstrate the considerations of Hong Kong film censorship during the Cold War in detail. It is noteworthy that the book deliberately demonstrates the concurrent forces of postwar colonization and the Cold War in Hong Kong. Moreover, apart from the Cold War geopolitics, it also revitalises the intellectual resources from sinophone studies and opens up the transnational perspective on colonial cultural governance. Last but not least, Lee offers an insight that the cultural Cold War is not merely about "ideologies", in other words, the issue of hearts and minds, but also closely related to infrastructure and regulations.

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