International Journal of Education and Social Science; Vol. 9 No. 4; August 2022
ISSN 2410-5171 (Online), 2415-1246 (Print)
Published by Research Institute for Progression of Knowledge

# Symbiosis under Conflict: On the Convergence and Symbiosis of Left-wing and Right-wing Films in Hong Kong from 1950s to 1970s

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**Abstract**

*The left-wing and right-wing films in Hong Kong from 1950s to 1970s do not demonstrate strong antagonism in the capital and image noumenon. Therefore, the ideological conflict should have been resolved indirectly under the unique industrial structure and media attribute of Hong Kong films at that time. Based on this resolution, the left-wing and right-wing films have entered an era of complementary market and active new generation directors. Under this background, the left-wing and right-wing films began to converge, and finally reached a symbiosis in many aspects: 1) the symbiosis of left-wing and right-wing films capital driven by film industry and commercial attributes; 2) the symbiosis of film's commercial and artistic attributes; and 3) the authenticity illusion and symbiotic cognition of image ontology, namely, the image symbiosis under the process of symbol deconstruction and reconstruction.*

**Keywords:** Hong Kong films from1950s to1970s; Left-wing film; Right-wing film; Market; Image; Symbiosis

## 1. Introduction

Due to the multiple input of ideology, Hong Kong films during the Cold War had a certain cultural complexity. For the film itself, perhaps it is based on the complexity of this culture that the film art can develop rapidly in Hong Kong at that time. On the one hand, film has effectively replaced the written medium and become a powerful communication tool of ideology, bringing good publicity to the left and right camps. On the other hand, while interdependent and competitive, left-wing and right-wing films have implicitly accelerated the development process of films in Hong Kong from1950s to1970s. At that time, taking the production of good films as the ultimate goal and winning the favor of the people became the common purpose of left-wing films and right-wing films. However, during those days, due to the fluctuation of politics, market, culture and other factors, there are still some deformations in the unstable cultural context of Hong Kong. It can be summarized into five stages: 1) The concrete manifestation of ideological collision under the influence of the Cold War---the sale of leftist newspapers and periodicals, and the change of ideological communication means brought by the transformation of USIA (United States Information Agency) to Asia Foundation (from slogan education to metaphorical education); 2) The dispersion of identity caused by refugee migration making it possible for the emergence of composite identity (the coexistence of mainland identity and Hong Kong identity, vague and vacillating from time to time); 3) Symbiosis of culture and capital after market intervention (interaction period between left-wing and right-wing camps); 4) The social phenomenon of population youth and the rise of new star directors bringing about the convergence of cultural context; and 5) The exit of Hong Kong leftist films as a finalization of Hong Kong films. As a matter of fact, the easing of the ideological conflict between the left and the right wings is the inevitable result that can be achieved under the accumulation of time, but compared with the traditional paper media or radio, the film undoubtedly accelerates the phased generation of balance and plays a role of reconciliation between ideologies---compared with the direct confrontation between the Warsaw Pact and NATO on the European Plain, Hong Kong at that time was more peaceful.

It is certain that the ideological opposition between the left-wing and right-wing films does not lead to the difference of the noumenon attribute of the film. The initiative of Hong Kong films in the theme core, formal expression and narrative means also directly affects the assimilation tendency of Hong Kong left-wing and right-wing films. We believe that this convergence can be explained from the perspective of the symbiosis of capital in three aspects: 1) The complementarity of left-wing and right-wing film markets; 2) Attribute symbiosis: art and commerce; and 3) Image symbiosis: "Reality of illusion" and "Symbiotic cognition".

## 2. The symbiosis of capital: The Complementarity of left-wing and right-wing film markets

The success of film in the market is a key factor in the establishment of symbiosis, which can also be said to be the basic of film generation. Without sufficient capital, there can be no new film or commercial film. Since the establishment of Yong Hwa Film Co. company, Zuyong Li has imitated Hollywood films, which has been loved by the public. Moreover, through high-quality production technology, Yong Hwa Film Co. company has created two popular works *Sorrows of the Forbidden City* and *The Soul of China*. The mainland, Hong Kong and Southeast Asian markets have highly praised the two works. Among them, the international award of *Sorrows of the Forbidden City* has made Hong Kong right-wing films famous (Su & Fu, 2020). Subsequently, with the rise and commercial operation of Cathay Organisation (Hong Kong) Limited and Shaw Brothers Pictures International Limited, right-wing films have made outstanding achievements in the exploration of entertaining and open style, and produced excellent works frequently, making the Hong Kong film market prosperous. However, compared with the right-wing films, the living situation of left-wing films is slightly difficult. This difficulty does not stem from the quality of the film itself, but is caused by the dual constraints of cultural context and ideology.

We know that due to the colonial nature of Hong Kong at that time, Britain would hinder the spread of left-wing films to a certain extent. Although the British authorities regarded the protection of interests as the primary purpose and emphasized the secondary nature of political control, if the overall social order and public security of Hong Kong are threatened and affected, the British authorities will take corresponding measures to intervene and stabilize. Of course, due to the "suggestive" attribute of the film itself, the content scale produced by the film is difficult to measure, and the British authorities can set it subjectively. "In 1953, the British Hong Kong authorities promulgated the Hong Kong e-Legislation, which stipulates that all films intended to be shown in Hong Kong, whether made locally or overseas, must be submitted to the film review committee for trial... Leaders, political gatherings or flags including the Communist Party of China and the Kuomintang are prohibited from appearing in the films."(Su & Fu, 2020, p. 80) However, this kind of censorship will have a certain censorship bias based on the background of the Cold War. For example, "almost all the films banned in the film censorship in 1950 were mainland films and Soviet films, including *Chairman Mao in Moscow*, but the *Counterattack Against the Mainland* produced in Taiwan was easily licensed" (Su & Fu, 2020, p. 40). In addition, in 1952, the Great Wall Movie Enterprises Itd was reported by the media that Hong Kong producers, almost without exception, were under the operation of the Communist Party. The Hong Kong government asked these producers to stop infiltrating Communist propaganda and not let Hong Kong become red. In this regard, the British authorities did not give any substantive reasons. They only dealt with the matter with the sentence that "the Hong Kong government does not welcome you" (Zhang, 2010, p. 63), and immediately expelled him ruthlessly, not even packing.

Under the unfair system restriction, the left-wing film company suffered a huge blow, which pushes the left-wing film company to seek a way out. Fortunately, in the end, the left-wing film companies helped the left-wing films out of the dilemma by obtaining the right-wing films and television talents and jointly distributing the market business. From the creative level, the way of digging right-wing filmmakers, actors and directors directly cuts into the context of the theme of right-wing films. Even though the core theme of these films still retains the original progressive attribute, the whole narrative mode and style must be inclined to the right, which makes the left-wing films sell well and gradually win the joy of the people. However, the left-wing is still relatively conservative about the content of the right-wing, and even has a certain wariness of filmmakers with hidden dangers of the right-wing, so it will eventually cause some unnecessary brain drain. For example, the famous actor Linda Lin Dai decided to leave the left-wing film company because her father was a famous politician of the national name Party, which led to her not being reused in the Great Wall Movie Enterprises Itd, forcing Linda Lin Dai to change to the right-wing film company Yong Hwa Film Co.. After the fall of Yong Hwa Film Co., Linda Lin Dai still chose to join the right-wing film company and made a large number of films for Cathay Organisation (Hong Kong) Limited and Shaw Brothers Pictures International Limited. Finally, he achieved outstanding achievements through the film *The Blue and the Black*.

It can be seen that for left-wing films, the impact of brain drain caused by distrust is fatal, which not only makes the film style unable to be derived, but also brings some obstacles to the shaping of their own business strategy.

On the other hand, the shortage of funds of left-wing film companies makes it impossible to compare with right-wing film companies such as Cathay Organisation (Hong Kong) Limited and Shaw Brothers Pictures International Limited, which are from Southeast Asia that have strong financial strength in film production and output, let alone compete with them. Therefore, in order to achieve the purpose of returning funds, the left-wing film company began to try to cooperate with the right-wing film company---Shaw Brothers Pictures International Limited in market distribution. Of course, such cooperation does not mean that the left-wing film has become an accessory. Shaw Brothers Pictures International Limited's cooperation with the left-wing film company actually made up for the progressive film production that the right-wing film company was not good at, which also filled the thirst of a large number of audiences in Southeast Asia for the left-wing film at that time. Therefore, Shaw Brothers Pictures International Limited has undertaken the Southeast Asian distribution business of many films of the Great Wall Movie Enterprises Itd, which happens to be in line with the development policy of right-wing film companies with capital profit as the core. It can be seen that the left-wing films and right-wing films in Hong Kong from 1950s to 1970s did not operate and create under the absolute conflict, but achieved common achievements on the premise of meeting the capital operation. There is no difference between good and bad. Both of them have watered the sweet spring in the development process of the formation of the paradigm of Hong Kong film.

### 3. Attribute symbiosis: Art and commerce

The second factor of symbiosis is the film itself. We also attempt to analyze the symbiotic relationship between left-wing films and right-wing films at that time from the perspective of film theory. Although the diversity of ideology has brought great swings in cultural attributes (Gaudreault & Philippe, 2018), this phenomenon has not affected the development and promotion of film itself.

From a macro perspective, the film theories in different camps of the Cold War learn from each other, identify and derive from each other, and benefit from the emergence and promotion of Russian Formalism (Eopuc Muxaano, Roman Jacobson), Montage Theory (Eisenstein), Film Eye Theory (Dziga Vertov), French avant-garde (Ricciotto Canudo, Louis Delluc), La Nouvelle Vague, Italian Neorealismo and other theories. They all interact and intertwine on the same development line. Although some films produced by NATO and the Warsaw Pact have different styles and obvious experimental nature, they are all about the exploration of the film noumenon, which lays the foundation for the subsequent theoretical convergence. For example, Eisenstein's love for montage and Andre Bazin's infatuation with the authenticity of time and space are finally dialectically unified in Jean Mitry's Image Symbol Theory. So will these theories have a subtle impact on the creative mode of Hong Kong left-wing films at that time? Does the attribute characteristics of left-wing films exist?

When left-wing films were born in Hong Kong at that time, they carried the identity of others, which has been established in the exploration trend of Hong Kong's progressive films in the 1930s. Until 1949, the establishment of Nanguo Co., Ltd. made the left-wing film well-known. The left-wing films recognized by the audience gradually dispelled the strangeness carried by the original left-wing film's other identity and gradually integrated into the cultural context of Hong Kong. In addition, if we focus on the second wave of progressive film boom on the left-wing, we will find that its purpose and the essence of the boom is to wash the creative ideas of the Hong Kong film world (Zhang, 2010). It can be seen that the second wave of progressive film boom on the left-wing has shifted its vision to the creation of film noumenon, emphasizing the communication function of film as a unique medium and how the Hong Kong film industry can choose between "art" and "commerce" under capital operation. At this time, if we try to think carefully about the way the left-wing filmmakers hope to wash their thoughts through films from Film Ontology theory, we can't avoid the innovation in style and theme of the second wave of left-wing progressive film boom.

Style and theme lay the foundation of communication, that is, for the functional stimulation of instinct level, especially under the institutional premise of market economy, the mass attribute of film is particularly important, which brings the problem of the attribute proportion between "art"and "commerce" of film noumenon. At that time, foreign theories have begun to speculate on the leading problems between "art"and "commerce", and the dialectical thinking between "artistry" and "mass" appeared in the period of film Impressionism in France in the 1920s. The declaration of "the seventh art" put forward by Ricciotto Canudo emphasizes that the commerciality of film is the obstacle that prevents film from becoming art.

Ricciotto Canudo held that if film is to become a real art, it is necessary to determine the absence of businessmen in the film industry. And he believed that film, as the core principle of art, is to first express the essential image of life and clarify the meaning of eternal new life through space and time (Li & Yang, 2006). This essential video shows a special spiritual feature in rendering emotion, and establishes the foundation for film to become art.

According to Ricciotto Canudo, the role of art in the film is to stimulate emotion rather than narration. If you rely on photographic records to express "lifelike and incorruptible" pictures, but ignore the feelings of deep and real beauty for the audience, this "reality" should be labeled with a rough and superficial label, and "realistic reality" is not the same as "artistic realism". Inheriting Ricciotto Canudo's view of "elite art", Louis Delluc took this opportunity to "popularize" the film. "The film is a mass art, and the audience of the film knows no borders or classes." (Wang, 2021, p. 114) He emphasized the mass nature of film art, believed that the film must "have something to say", and put forward the core concept of "photography"---the appreciation ability of the director, which is the art of observing and expressing things. His theory provides an important theoretical basis and reference for the development of the follow-up avant-garde film theory. "Mass" oriented films tend to be more "commercial" than art. Interestingly, more concerned with what film could be than with what it was or what it had been, Delluc, with the enthusiasm of the convert, tried to whip, implore, cajole a truly French cinema into being (McCreary, 1976), which is the same as Li Pingqian, an important director of The Great Wall Film Production Co., Ltd. in the specific implementation method of the creative concept of teaching in fun. Li Pingqian emphasized the following three points. First, the intention of the editor and director should be connected with the audience. Don't think too much of yourself and ignore the audience; make films loved by the audience and make the audience better in entertainment. Second, you can refer to foreign films, but there must be Chinese national forms. Foreign customs and living habits are different from those in China and can't be copied. The Chinese people have the spiritual outlook of the Chinese conventions and have their own habits, traditions and life foundation---adaptation to the famous works of the world should possess this spirit, otherwise they will be "plagiarism", not "creation". Third, it necessitates fresh and flexible expression. Fresh and flexible techniques derive from life. Therefore, editors, directors and actors should go deep into life. They can't imagine and make up stories with their own brains. They don't really explore into life and are not familiar with the thoughts and feelings of the film owner. The films they make are not flesh and blood films, but are not full of spirit, deep and touching (Cen, 1967). In the films directed by Li Pingqian, ethical films are the main creative type. His emphasis on "tragedy likes to do" is first based on the pursuit of noble poetry of Tragedy --- "tragedy is the highest form of poetry, which must show beautiful poetry and moving stories in order to make great achievements (Huang, Zha, & Hu, 2000, p. 170)". This can also match the "poetic"expressions emphasized by Louis Drucker, which means a kind of "I don't know why", a kind of "poetic spirit" shrouded in the film but remaining in the form of the film and its images (Nike, 1994). Additionally, it comes from the original intention of "saying something". In other words, the ethical film closely follows Li Pingqian's own growth experience. His mother died in childbirth when he was born, his grandfather died when he was 12, and then his father died of illness when he was 16. It can be said that he has never had a complete family love in the process of youth growth, which has left a deep shadow on his psychology. Therefore, the creation of ethical films actually hides his ardent desire for family affection and parental love, and also sutures the deep wounds in his heart to some extent (Zhang, 2010).

Continuing the views of Ricciotto Canudo, Louis Delluc and Li Pingqian, film, as an industrial product, cannot abandon the "masses". Similarly, Russian director Vsevolod Illarionovich Pudovkin also described the collective nature of the film in film technology, "only when we work together like the homework class, can each task, even the most insignificant task, be included in the overall task of the whole project and occupy a place in the whole project (Li &Yang, 2006, p. 311)." When thinking about the relationship between the film and the audience in *From Caligari to Hitler*, Siegfried Kracauer cited the case of Hollywood films, and also believed that the film should be oriented to the public and enjoyed by the public. "If a Hollywood film is generally unpopular, this dissatisfaction will be reflected by the decline in box office revenue. The film industry, which is inseparable from theory and concept, has to try to make its products conform to a certain spiritual atmosphere. No doubt, American audiences accept what Hollywood gives them, but in the long run, it is the wishes of the audience that determine the nature of Hollywood production." (Li &Yang, 2006, p. 312) According to the quantitative (box office) performance of Kracauer's data, the left-wing film boom in Hong Kong and the outstanding achievements of the entrepreneurial work *Dawn must come* in Nanguo Flim Company have won great market recognition and social response, which is in line with a certain spiritual atmosphere in the social context of Hong Kong at that time.

This represents the value and significance of the film theme from the perspective of realism at that time and highlights the current disadvantages of the progressive perspective of left-wing films in the cultural context of Hong Kong.

In the later stage, the commonness of art and commerce is more obvious in the film with the convergence of left-wing and right-wing films. In the film *Oh, the Spring Is Here*, Sun Dewei tried every means to flatter Huang Shiming and his wife in order to get a better life, and even sacrificed her relatives to win the favor of Huang Shiming and his wife. For example, Raben's poor cousin played mahjong with Mrs. Huang, and then Mrs. Huang increased her weight, so that she had to borrow usury to make a living. Subsequently, Huang Shiming's mistress was discovered by his wife. Mrs. Huang's quarrel in the company was finally bought off by Huang Shiming's capital conditions. On the other hand, Sun Dewei realized the harm brought by capital, resolutely broke off the relationship with Huang and his wife, returned to the family, and began to work and behave in a down-to-earth manner. At this time, the progressive attribute of the film is highlighted by comparing the extravagant attribute embodied in the capital world, but on the other hand, the elements of money and freedom in the capital world also exist in the image, resulting in a visual spectacle that little people can't experience at ordinary times. For the audience, although the film finally emphasizes the evil consequences brought by capital and the gospel brought by doing things in a down-to-earth manner, the film is always full of left-wing and right-wing attributes. Especially in the film, the right-wing attribute can better highlight the visual nature of the film, enhance the attraction to the audience and improve the commercial value of the film itself, while the left-wing attribute can better improve the speculative nature of the film and emphasize the truth, goodness and beauty of art. Compared with the early bias of left-wing and right-wing attributes, the proportion of left-wing and right-wing content in the film would be more balanced, and the phenomenon of symbiosis between "business" and "art" attributes is more intuitive in the film.

**4. Image Symbiosis: "Reality of illusion" and "Symbiotic cognition"**

When we explain the success of left-wing and right-wing films, we will attribute the credit to the victory of ideological content, but in fact, we should think about why films have brought such achievements? The author believes that the development of film is not promoted by the need of film for ideology. Although it gives a purpose and goal of film production, the development of left-wing and right-wing films themselves should be understood from the perspective of image ontology.

This is mainly related to two attributes, namely "the reality of illusion" and "symbiotic cognition". In the film, the manifestation of authenticity is a direct presentation that directly gets rid of the medium of "human". Andre Bazin, the representative of the new wave of France, when talking about the ontology of film image, argued that the image is the same as the subject in the objective reality, and compares it with painting. "After all, the reproduction in the art of painting is the result of 'manual intervention'. No matter how skillful a painter is, his works will always be marked with an inevitable subjective mark... But only in photography, we have the privilege of not letting people intervene... The psychological basis of film invention is the illusion of reproducing the complete reality. (Li & Yang, 2006, p. 276)" However, this illusion often damages the "integrity" under the limitation of technology, such as the limitation of picture frame. Bazin believed that picture frame can cause the introversion of space when explaining the spatial characteristics of film. On the contrary, the scene shown by the screen seems to extend infinitely to the external world. In order to obtain this characteristic, the film must pay attention to the unity of space, so as to create a sense of reality of space and can not be cut at will. But we know that the occurrence of extended fantasy gives the possibility of "artificial intervention" resurrection in a sense. Even if there is a supreme unity in the film space, there is also a probability of "reality" breaking.

So how is "authenticity" expressed in the film? And what is the "reality" of the film? John Grierson, the founder of British documentary film school, answered from two perspectives of documentary: 1) Documentary should not be a mechanical record of reality, but should depict the artistic conception of poetry from the aspects of reality that ordinary people are not easy to observe; and 2) Truth does not mean the existence of the essence of realism. Although he mentioned in his criticism of feature films that the contingency created by the dramatic plot of structured feature films is not the real performance --- this kind of disguise can not change the inherent essence of the reality, he still recognizes the necessity of dramatic elements in documentary films---it needs to be polished by different aesthetic means of selecting image materials. In a sense, this is in line with the reality of the right-wing films in the illusion of capital and romance. For example, *Air Hostess* catered to the audience's brilliant fantasy of the emerging career of stewardess through a large number of location shooting and special colors.

In addition, the second concept of establishing "reality" proposed by John Grierson is "primitiveness"---natural actors, natural scenes, raw materials and stories. The premise of ensuring the originality is the natural attribute of the material. Does this natural attribute exist in the feature film? When the scripts created by left-wing films are based on reality, how to establish this "natural attribute"? John Grierson emphasized the nature of the material in the production of the documentary. However, what if this nature may not exist in the object (shooting subject), but is established in an abstract symbol? Andre Bazin seeks the concept of "objectivity" from the French text, and "objectivit'e" and "Objectif" have completed a pun to a certain extent. This meaning coincides with the film eye emphasized by Dziga Vertov, that is, the film eye replaces the human eye. Bazin believed that "between the original object and its reproduction, only the instrumentality of an inanimate object is working... Photos act on our senses as "natural phenomena (Li &Yang, 2006, p. 287)." Therefore, this "reality" is not aimed at the reproduction of the identity of an object, but the object appears in our mind in the form of a reference. Although, the progressive attribute in the left-wing films is different from the freedom and capital rendered by the current politics of Hong Kong at that time, the content referred to by the object can still be easily accepted by the audience.

Looking back, what is the function of the reality of the film screen, apart from the artistic independence established by other arts? When analyzing the image as a symbol, Jean Mitry quoted Paul Claudel's commonly used term "symbiotic cognition" to interpret the relationship between the audience and the film. He believed that "symbiotic cognition" emphasizes a kind of perception, which is rarely similar to rational cognition. This perception seems to be based on the abstract reality. The identity between the "representation" and the surface object in the film, and the consistency between the reproduction form and the noumenon of the surface object establish the connection point of audience perception from a certain level, that is, the perception of the reproduction object is similar to the perception of the original object (Li & Yang, 2006). But, this perception is not based on the power system between subject and object --- the perception of subject to object, which is summarized as an implied relationship by Jean Mitry --- the meaning of film never depends (or rarely depends) on an isolated image, it depends on the relationship between images. For example, in the leftist black-and-white films of the 1950s, the "lamp" in the *A Widow's Tears* became a kind of ideograph. This kind of ideograph not only implies a temporal change (the transformation of night and day), but also implies the atmosphere of a field and renders the emotion of the character. As the representation of the objective entity, the "lamp" has transformed from the props arranged in the scene to an object of empathy, which represents the emotion of "people".

The implication relationship put forward by Jean Mitry deconstructs the consistency between the signifier and the signified in the symbol on a certain level. The symbols in the film began to undergo a transformation from "representing something" to "replacing something". From the perspective of audience acceptance, this transformation seems to return to the early stage of film theory. Hugo Munsterberg put forward the film "hint" --- the existence of the film does not lie in the film itself (the original is the screen), but it only exists in the minds of the audience---, and believed that the film director only provides the activity materials of thinking, and the main body completes the film itself. But this kind of substitution is different from the view of Hugo Munsterberg. The subject of "hint" occurs at the audience level, while Jean Mitry's emphasis on the substitution subject is image symbols, that is, the freedom and variability of symbols. Text symbols are usually established at the reference level, but image symbols can only show their "natural reality" to a certain extent, or replace the meaning of the text symbols. Meanwhile, they can go beyond the text symbols to show more changeable posture and "ideographic power", and complement the image to generate new meaning. Such image symbiosis state may be the core of the process of convergence to symbiosis of left and right-wing films. If it were not for the role of film image ontology, this convergence and symbiosis might be immediately ruled by the powerful ideology contained in the left-wing and right-wing films, and the left-wing and right-wing films may not achieve such achievements.

## 5. Conclusion

From a certain point of view, the birth of Hong Kong left-wing films is not spontaneous, but a product driven by political ideology. In Hong Kong, where the "slogan of freedom" has been immersed for a long time, the breakthrough of the dilemma of progressive film has been greatly helped by the media of film to a certain extent. The interaction between signifier, signified and image imperceptibly gave Hong Kong left-wing films the possibility to obtain life under the background of the identity of the other at that time. The birth of this life form is equivalent to the popular Hollywood films or right-wing films at that time, that is, the identity of film noumenon. From the perspective of audience acceptance, the posture diversity of visual symbols improves the probability of cognitive ambiguity, and makes the film derive a variety of hints. This swing meets the emotional needs of the audience, goes beyond the political appeal of ideology, and makes Hong Kong left-wing and right-wing films achieve symbiosis to a certain extent.

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