

THE SHAW BROTHERS' *WUXIA PIAN*: AN EARLY IDENTITY AND BUSINESS-CULTURAL CONNECTION FOR THE CHINESE IN MALAYA

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Cinema, as one of the early mass communications, is an important site from which scholars can pursue the question of how to understand history, society and the construction of cultural identity. The Shaw Organization is one of the oldest establishments of the Chinese cinema in Southeast Asia and serves as an ideal vantage point from which to assess the cultural connection between the early Chinese cinema and the early migration of Chinese to British Malaya. This article investigates one of the most popular genres of the time, namely the Wuxia pian or Martial arts film, in early 20th century Shanghai along with its contemporary marketing networks in then Malaya and Singapore. This article demonstrates that the cultural vacuum purposely ignored by the British rulers in Malaya gave the Chinese entrepreneurs not only great economic opportunities but also the ability to exert a greater cultural influence over the public through negotiating, defining and formatting the fluidity of the Chinese identity in Malaya and subsequently Malaysia. The symbolism of 'Chineseness' and the notion of justice within the genre of the Wuxia pian are each based on a veneration of shared symbols and historical myths; together they have, to a certain extent, re-energised the study of the construction of Chinese identity and popular cinema.

Keywords: *Wuxia pian*, Shaw Brothers, early cinema history, British Malaya, Chinese identity

INTRODUCTION

The term *Wuxia* is the Mandarin phonetic translation of two Chinese characters: *wu* and *xia*. *Wu* means martial arts, and *xia* refers to "a person adept in martial arts and given to chivalrous conduct in olden times" (Wu, 1979). The long history of *xia* in Chinese literary texts, such as poetry, prose, drama and fiction, concludes with the eight ideal characteristics that define it: altruism, justice, individual freedom, personal loyalty, courage, truthfulness and mutual faith, honour and fame, and generosity and contempt for wealth (Liu, 1967). These ideals have become the most popular meanings associated with *xia*, especially those widely portrayed in Chinese martial arts films. The compound word *Wuxia* combined with *pian*, which means movie or film, encompasses any film that involves martial arts with the spirit of chivalry in the broadest sense of the word.

The historically specific *Wuxia pian* genre has always been seen as a form of cultural resistance used to reinforce the traditional imagery of Chinese patriarchal supremacy to sustain the dignity and pride of Chinese subjectivity in the area of popular culture. The very presence of *Wuxia pian* has long been associated with the social memory of the Chinese overseas: the Chinese diaspora share a strong sense of traditional Chinese history and philosophy and their experiences of political marginality and crisis around ethnic identity; and they enable dynamism and mobility, which are interwoven with syncretising and juggling the construction of new identities through the use of fantastic and imaginary elements within the genre. In this article, the question at hand is how and why Malaysian Chinese audiences, many of whom were Malaysian born and had never been to China, had such a fondness for and felt a resonance with films that told stories set in an unknown landscape and in times long past.

To answer the above question, this article intends to outline the cultural connection between the early Chinese cinema and the early migration of the Chinese to Malaya. It investigates the Shaw Brothers' production and distribution of *Wuxia pian* in the last century in British Malaya and subsequently Malaysia, and it serves as fertile ground for deepening the understanding of cinema's role in constricting and disputing modern subjectivity and mutating Chinese identity in a specific historical time. Investigating the industrial marketing network of these films in Malaya and Singapore will shed light on the long-term business-cultural effects of Shaw Brothers' films on the Malaysian Chinese and hence the process of constructing such an ethnic-cultural identity. After the independence of Malaysia, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, the localised socio-political context complicated the notion of being ethnically Chinese in Malaysia. Central to this complication was the formation of the early stages of a localised, geopolitical, yet culturally based, 'Chinese' identity. In this sense, ethnic identity is particularly fluid and hence unstable on its own. Bearing this in mind, this article argues that the commercially popular *Wuxia pian* genre can serve as a cultural artefact for these subjectivities and identities being negotiated, defined and formatted in the context of British Malaya and subsequently Malaysia. On the other hand, these films can also be understood and interpreted within a broader, socio-cultural context that focuses around the ever-changing political, ethnic, class, gender and modern identities.

THE SHAW BROTHERS VENTURE TO NANYANG

The success of the Shaw Brothers film business, especially the *Wuxia pian* genre¹, is generally believed to be strongly associated with the Chinese diaspora as well as the broader Southeast Asian regional development, particularly in relation to politics. The association may be expressed by the colloquial statement:

"Where the Chinese go, there *Wuxia* fiction goes." However, a combination of factors compelled the Shaw Brothers to venture into business outside of China. Political instability and intra-industry rivalry were the major factors that 'pushed' the Shaw Brothers to establish their business outside mainland China. In the 1920s, competition between Shanghai filmmakers was fierce. In 1925, Runje Shaw, the eldest of the Shaw Brothers, and his brothers Runde (a.k.a Cunren) and Runme (a.k.a Renmei) founded Unique Film Productions/*Tianyi*² in Shanghai. This forerunner to the later-named Shaw Brothers' film company produced many commercially successful, ancient-costumed *Wuxia pian*. But local scholars and critics perceived this mass-produced, ancient-costumed *Wuxia pian* as low-brow or popular films that continued to perpetuate outmoded conventions and customs as well as kept the public in an unenlightened state. As a result, six major Shanghai film companies united in 1928 to stop this deluge of lowbrow films; they accomplished this by not distributing the films. In effect, Unique Film Productions became their main target, and the Shaw Brothers soon found that their films were shut out from the exhibition circuit belonging to the established players of the day both at home and abroad (The Shaw Organization, 2001a; Chung, 2003; Zhou, 2003).

To break the siege, the Shaw Brothers began to explore the increasingly prosperous Nanyang region that was populated with masses of Chinese immigrants ever since the tin mining industry was established in the late 19th century (Lee, 2005). 'Nanyang' literally means the 'Southern Ocean' and refers to territories that had been reached by earlier Chinese migrants via the South China Sea. In general, this word is used as an equivalent to 'Southeast Asia' (Wang, 1992; Chung, 2003). It is worth mentioning that in Southeast Asia, the silent *Wuxia pian* was most popular with illiterate Chinese audiences, many of whom spoke different dialects (Cheng, Li and Xing, 1963). The cinematic characteristics of *Wuxia pian*, which gave priority to visual effects and action, added to the popularity of these early films. This popularity also explains why approximately 60% of films produced in China between 1928 to 1931, which is approximately 250 films, can be categorised as *Wuxia pian* (Cheng, Li and Xing, 1963).

Interestingly, this group of films was particularly appealing to overseas Chinese who worked as unskilled labourers in tin mines and construction sites. Poor living conditions in China combined with the huge labour demand in British Malaya, especially after the discovery of rich tin fields in the early 1880s, are believed to have encouraged even more Chinese migration (Loh, 1988; Collin, 1997). Another reason for the early migration of Chinese people to the Southeast Asian region was due to economic difficulties in China resulting from the turbulent era of civil war between the China Nationalist Party (the Kuomintang) and the Communist Party of China (Yeoh, 2007). The majority of Chinese

immigrants were engaged in tin-mining and rubber industries or worked as coolies in Malaya. The Chinese in Nanyang rapidly became wealthier, their prosperity rising in tandem with the economic development of Malaya and employment in the 'urban' sector. Concurrently, as new opportunities arose within this urban economy, many Chinese invested in small-to-medium-scale businesses and trading (Voon, 2007). However, only a very small minority of early Chinese immigrants brought in capital from China, and by continuing to do business in the region, they became the dominant economic players (Beh, 2007). The Shaw Brothers, with their family entrepreneurship, were a part of this transferred Chinese capitalism.

All these growing commercial activities formed the fundamental backbone of early Chinese film production in Malaya. The market potential in Nanyang was so vast that local buyers were hotly bidding for the distribution rights of nearly every film made in Shanghai (Zhou, 2003). Because of their bidding power, the Nanyang buyers were able to exert their influence over, if not entirely dictate, filmmaking in Shanghai and later in Hong Kong (Zhou, 2003). As the film historian Zhou Jianyun explains:

The domestic (Chinese) film companies attach great importance to the tastes of Chinese migrants in Southeast Asia and use their responses to guide the choice of subject matter for future films ... The film distributors in Southeast Asia even specialize in historical films only, and the Chinese migrants continue to cherish them (Hu, 2003).

In other words, the Chinese of Nanyang, although geographically distanced from China, became the central actors who helped to shape Chinese films produced in China. From the 1920s to the 1970s, Nanyang was indeed a land of opportunity for both Chinese businessmen and the poor, with a relatively large number of each providing a very rich, potential market for Chinese film. Lured by this potential, the Shaw Brothers settled in Nanyang at the end of the 1920s.

THE EARLY CHINESE IMMIGRANT IN MALAYA

Chinese pilgrims, travellers and missionaries have arguably frequented Malaya since the 4th century, long before Europeans set foot in the region. While evidence suggests that it was only in the mid-14th century that Chinese settled in the Southeast Asia region (Saw, 2007), massive migration of Chinese to this region did not occur until after the late 16th century expansion of British imperial power. It was British colonisation that increased trade activities and created the huge labour demand in Malaya, providing a huge incentive for mainland Chinese to seek opportunities in the region. After the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing between

Britain and China eased migration restrictions imposed by the Qing dynasty, many Chinese men from Fujian and Guangdong left China. However, it was only from 1911 to 1941 that the British encouraged women from China to join their male counterparts in Southeast Asia. This dramatically changed local demographic patterns and allowed Chinese families to flourish in Nanyang (Wang, 1992). An Immigration Restriction Ordinance was imposed on the Chinese in 1928. Then, due to the economic depression of 1929–1932, and to further restrict migration, the Aliens Ordinance was introduced in April 1933. While the ordinances and their enactment may simply have been intended to control immigration during an economic depression, the Chinese viewed it as a hostile gesture directed toward them (Collin, 1997). Despite this perceived hostility, the Aliens Ordinance prohibited only male migrants, thus leading to a large number of Chinese females migrating to Malaya up until 1938 when the loophole was closed (Freedman, 1955).

Accordingly, from 1929 to 1941, the involvement of Chinese women in the labour force contributed immensely to the development of the colonial economy of Malaya (Fan, 2005). Seeking to illustrate their working conditions, Fan Ruolan's analysis provides statistics that demonstrate the significance of this contribution and incorporates Chinese newspaper reports and oral histories to reveal a wide range of work roles for women in Malaya during that time. This study builds on the earlier research of Leslie N. O'Brien (O'Brien, 1983) who reported that a large number of women in British Malaya were still involved in occupations considered unsuitable for Western women, by working as miners and foundry workers, blacksmiths, machine-tool operators, tool makers, electrical wire-women, welders, carpenters, mechanics and bricklayers.

The influx of these Chinese women also changed the demographic pattern of the Chinese population in Malaya from 1000 men and 247 women in 1911, to approximately equal numbers by 1947 (Wang, 1992; Cartier, 2003). More importantly, this influx allowed many Chinese families to settle in Malaya (Collin, 1997; Means, 1970). In the 1930s, the number of Chinese born in Malaya grew, and this part of the population increasingly regarded Malaya as their homeland (Kennedy, 1962). The Chinese populations in Penang and Melaka increased from 16595 in 1860 to 46261 in 1942, which is an increase of 179%. By 1921, the Chinese population in Peninsular Malaya alone was 855863 (Zhong, 1998).

Earlier in Malayan history, most Chinese viewed themselves as transient sojourners wishing to return to China. However, after 1900, they were increasingly settled, and by the mid 1940s, they had become an established population (Wang, 2001; Means, 1970). Some stayed in Malaya reluctantly due to debt, war, famine and the political situation in China; others grew fond of

Malaya or were attracted by economic interests and possibilities (Heng, 1998). For most, foreign soil never felt like 'home'; however, the option of returning to China became unrealistic, particularly after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. As permanent settlement in Malaya became a reality, the Chinese had to establish their localised presence in terms of language, cultural orientation and mode of education. At the same time, they confronted a future full of profound political, economic and cultural uncertainty.

The welfare of the Chinese people, however, was often neglected by the British colonial authorities. The colonial government left the Chinese largely to themselves, forcing them to form a self-help system that helped to promote and protect their own interests (Collin, 1997). To survive in this environment, the Chinese organised clan and guild associations to protect their rights. It can also be argued that this development led to a political structure in which the Chinese community was only seemingly supervised by such clan and guild associations and actually governed and dominated by secret societies. The gradual emergence of a Chinese political consciousness and the articulation of a self-help system were consolidated largely due to the strong financial position of the Chinese. Despite their political disadvantage, Chinese capital investment was high; for example, in 1937 it was estimated to be approximately US\$ 200 million, with a total of other foreign investments amounting to US\$ 454.5 million (Collin, 1997). Many self-help or commercial organisations provided protection, welfare, public services, entertainment and schooling for the Chinese community. One of them was the Shaw Brothers cinema enterprise.

THE EARLY HISTORY OF CHINESE CINEMA IN MALAYA

The expansion of the Shaw Brothers cinema enterprise from Shanghai to Hong Kong and other Southeast Asian countries corresponded with the migration of the Nanyang Chinese. Runme Shaw, the third child in a family of seven, and Run Run Shaw, the fifth child, arrived in Singapore in 1924 and 1926, respectively (The Shaw Organization, 2001b; Chen, 2003). By then, Nanyang was home to many Chinese immigrants. Singapore, one of the British Straits Settlements in Malaya, replaced Malacca as the centre of commerce in the region. It proved to be an excellent location for the Shaw Brothers to rebuild their film business despite initial difficulties. As Shanghainese, the brothers found themselves locked out of the market controlled by the dominant dialect factions--Cantonese, Hokkien and Teochew (The Shaw Organization, 2001a). To break through, the brothers were forced to operate open-air mobile cinemas throughout small towns in Malaya. According to Runme Shaw, most small towns had no cinema and they were the pioneer exhibitor in the region (The Shaw Organization, 2003b).

For many Chinese, leaving their home might have been sorrowful, yet they hoped to make a fortune and eventually return to China (Means, 1970). Their ties with China were loosely maintained in one way or another. While many of them were indeed too poor to travel, their family ties were primarily maintained via letters and messages brought by newly arrived relatives and friends. For events happening in China, they had access to many Chinese newspapers. The publications of Chinese dailies in Malaya had grown from 6 in 1919 to 22 in 1941 (Wang, 1998), reflecting the influx of Chinese immigrants and increased literacy rates. However, these rates were still so low that the majority of the population was virtually illiterate. For poor Chinese immigrants desperate to cling to their motherland, the cinema offered a fantastic source of comfort and tradition (Zhou, 2003) and a cultural identity.

The Shaw Brothers brought their own productions of the early Shanghai-made, ancient-costumed *Wuxia pian* and showed them to the many Chinese who were still struggling to make a living in Malaya. They incorporated the Hai Seng Co (later Shaw Brothers Pty. Ltd.) to facilitate the distribution and exhibition of their movies (The Shaw Organization, 2001a). They initiated their business enterprise by establishing their first cinema in Singapore in 1927 (The Shaw Organization, 2001a). Fortuitously, the resulting accessibility of the *Wuxia pian* to overseas Chinese in Malaya seemed to function as an imaginary tie between them and their homeland. Moreover, as noted previously, the earliest films were silent. It is important to note that the Chinese community at that time was deeply divided along the lines of their dialects: Hokkien (28%), Hakka (23%), Cantonese (25%), Teochew (10%) and other dialect groups coming from different parts of China (Zhong, 1998). Communication among different dialect groups was difficult, and their relations were often not good. Furthermore, dialect divisions were deepened by the existence of secret societies and clan and guild organisations that claimed to represent, if not to govern, their respective dialect groups (Wilfred, 1969). Early experiences viewing films as a group inevitably brought the fragmented Chinese into a certain kind of perceived unity, however fleeting (The Shaw Organization, 2001a). Silent films continued to be popular in some of the smaller towns in Malaya throughout the late 30s and early 40s (The Shaw Organization, 2003a).

Silent films perhaps brought the Chinese en masse a tacitly identifiable medium through which to experience, imagine and identify. The medium served as a source of identity for the Chinese living on foreign soil, supplying them with a set of familiar images of the motherland. Most importantly, these multi-faceted images allowed distant, unreachable China to become vividly visible in their imagination. Interestingly, newsreels documenting China (and other countries) were shown before each film, thus combining the mediated 'real' images of China, with the 'invented' ones of the ancient-costumed *Wuxia pian*. Some of the

newsreels were produced by the Shaw Newsreel Film Unit, a division of Shaw's Unique Film Productions Studio (The Shaw Organization, 2003b). These newsreels were further enhanced by a range of Shaw Brothers' entertainment businesses, including the publishing of promotional entertainment magazines (such as *Screen Voices*); requests to stars from China and Hong Kong for stage performances in Nanyang; and the operation of amusement parks with theatres showing films, plays, musical performances and operas (Law and Bren, 2004).

WUXIA PIAN AND ITS RELATION TO TRADITIONAL CHINESE PATRIARCHAL VALUES AND MORALITY

In comparison to printed media, the early, ancient-costumed *Wuxia pian* were enthusiastically embraced by the majority of Chinese in Malaya. They were mainly adapted from popular folktales, legends, operas, *Wuxia* fantasies and the classic literature. It is commonly acknowledged that the early migrant Chinese workers in Southeast Asia loved traditional Chinese stories because they usually promoted patriarchal values and showed traditional locations, such as villages and clan temples, that were familiar to the Chinese (Sek, 2003). Allegedly, the first ancient-costumed *Wuxia pian* in the history of Chinese cinema—*Heroine Li Feifei/Nüxia Li Feifei* (1925)—was produced by Unique Film Production (former Shaw Brothers). The film script was written by the eldest Shaw brother (Runje) and starred the famous Beijing opera diva, Fen Juhua, also the founder of The Spring and Autumn Drama School (*Chunqiu Xiju Xuexiao*) martial arts school (Li, 2006). *Heroine Li Feifei* is a story about a lady knight, Li Feifei, who helps a young couple to overcome obstacles and marry. The marriage broker disapproves of the love between the couple, as do the parents. However, with the help of the lady knight Li Feifei, they are finally married (Teo, 2002). This film premiered in Shanghai on 16 December 1925. The commercial advertisement for it reads:

Historical legends and anecdotes chronicle stories of knight-errants climbing walls and leaping over roofs, but now you can see for yourself this incomparable skill on the big screen ... the film pays homage to chivalrous virtues and chastity, wiping away the prevailing lewd and blatant practices (Zhou, 2003).

What may be learnt from this advertisement is that a chivalric story with a female knight-errant may be used to capitalise on traditional Chinese values relating to womanhood and chastity. This typical example of Unique Film Production's adaptation served as one of the forerunners to the many, later Shaw Brothers' *Wuxia pian*. Unique Film Production's emergence as the new Shanghai film company in the 1920s was accompanied with the slogan that their cinema

"focuses on old morality, old ethics, expands on Chinese civilization and assiduously wards off westernization" (Zhou, 2003).

The development of the company was inextricably tied to the growth of ancient-costumed *Wuxia pian*. Because of Runje Shaw's interest in modern drama (*wenming xi*) and Chinese operas, he made many film adaptations of popular Chinese folklore and opera repertoires in the 1920s (Leyda, 1972). They included *Liang Zhu Tong Shi* (The Disheartening Story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai) (1926), *Baishe Zhuan* (Madam White Snake) (1927), *Hua Mulan* (General Hua Mulan) (1927), *Tie Shan Gongzhu* (Princess Iron Fan) (1927), *Nu'er Guo* (The Amazons) (1927) and *Mengjiang Nu* (Lady Mengjiang). For overseas Chinese, film adaptations like these served to sustain Chinese philosophy and traditional values.

The Shaw Brothers enthusiastically promoted the traditional morality and ethics of patriarchal China. Their films created vivid collective imagery and traditional mythic representations of ancient China. In fact, the Shaw Brothers never shied away from attempting to empower the Chinese, however elusively, by warding off the impinging westernisation of the Chinese community (Zhou, 2003). By emphasising and promoting ancient values and morals, the Shaw Brothers claimed that their films were meant to be seen as products with anti-Western sentiment. The background to this stance was rooted in history, as the so-called "five thousand years of glorious Chinese civilization" was undermined through exploitation by Japanese and Western powers. China's humiliating defeat in the Opium War and in the Sino-Japanese Wars in the late 19th and early 20th century had arguably forced the Chinese to explore Western culture for models of modernisation (Bush, 2006).

THE GROWTH OF THE SHAW BROTHERS' CINEMA IN THE RURAL CHINESE COMMUNITIES OF MALAYA

While the *Wuxia pian* genre has always been associated with nationalism in China, the focus here is to address its reception and significance for Chinese communities in Nanyang. The Shaw Brothers' distribution of ancient-costumed *Wuxia pian* helped soothe the overseas Chinese experience of cultural dislocation and displacement from China. The Shaw Brothers' efforts to set up mobile theatres in tin mining settlements, rubber plantations and lumberyards further catered to the Chinese who lived in remote areas of Malaya. Ipoh, an affluent tin mining town with a large concentration of Chinese, was chosen as their first base in Malaya before they expanded to other parts of the country (The Shaw Organization, 2003b). Wherever mobile cinema proved profitable, the Shaw Brothers would build a permanent theatre. By the early 1930s, they briefly

changed their production strategy as Japanese aggression intensified in China. As Zhou observes, the Shaw Brothers shifted their populist film content to one that reflected more leftist, patriotic, and 'progressive' values as well as introduced talent associated with more socialist beliefs, such as Su Yi, Shen Xiling and Situ Huimin (Zhou, 2003). However, due to political threats from the Chinese Nationalist Party, these changes only lasted for a few years. In response, the Shaw Brothers established a studio called Unique in Hong Kong in 1934. This studio was primarily used to make Cantonese sound movies that utilised local Cantonese opera talent as well as benefited from the lower production costs associated with Hong Kong—a free port for the importation of films and film production equipment. When the Japanese invasion in 1937 destroyed the Shaw Brother's studio in Shanghai, the studio in Hong Kong devoted itself wholly to the Nanyang market (Zhou, 2003). The studio was renamed Nanyang in 1937 after Unique (Hong Kong) burnt down, and the business was taken over by Runde Shaw (The Shaw Organization, 2001c). The change of the studio's name to Nanyang undoubtedly demonstrates the Shaw Brothers' ambitions for Southeast Asia.

Runme and Run Run were also based in Singapore and Malaya at this time where they both distributed and exhibited a range of productions for the Southeast Asian market. By 1941, the company had at least 1 or more cinemas in 37 locations within Peninsular Malaya (Chen, 2003) including about 69 theatres in the Chinese-majority urban centres, such as Singapore, Penang, Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Taiping, Seremban, Melaka and Johor Bahru (Yung, 2008). After World War II, the Shaw Brothers acted swiftly to expand their chain of cinemas, and more than 100 cinema halls were bought and opened in Singapore, Malaya, North Borneo, Vietnam, Thailand and Java (Yung, 2008). These theatres mainly exhibited films from Shanghai, Hong Kong, Indonesia, India and the West. Both Runme and Run Run also had great success in Singapore and Malaya by importing Chinese-language films to Southeast Asia and by investing in local film production. For instance, the Shaw Brothers Malay Film Productions studio in Singapore and the Merdeka Studio in Malaysia were at one time the most prolific studios producing Malay films in Southeast Asia. They produced approximately 155 films between 1950 and 1967 (Hatta, 1997). However, the closure of the Malay Film Productions in October 1967 and the political uncertainty in post-independent Malaysia persuaded Run Run Shaw to shift their movie factory to Hong Kong.

Because the Shaw Brothers' exhibition circuit throughout Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand and Java was growing rapidly, the aging Nanyang Studio in Hong Kong that served as the chief production centre could not deliver enough Mandarin films to cater to the demand (Chen, 2003). What was worse, Runde Shaw resumed his ownership of Nanyang Studio and reorganised it under a new company named Shaw and Sons Ltd. Problems occurred when this new company

gradually scaled down investments in filmmaking and, encouraged by the fact that Hong Kong's economic rise had led to skyrocketing land values, developed new interests in real estate investment including the investment in theatres.

RELOCATION OF RUN RUN SHAW AND FILM STUDIO TO HONG KONG

At the same time, to meet Nanyang's market demand, Run Run Shaw and Runme Shaw needed to compete with their closest rival company, Motion Pictures & General Investment (MP & GI). MP & GI was established in 1946 by Loke Wan Tho, whose family businesses also included banks, rubber plantations, tin mines, real estate, restaurants, hotels and entertainment (Chung, 2002). By the 1950s, the rivalry between MP & GI and Shaw Brothers involved competition for the best production talents, managerial staff and movie stars (Chung, 2002). To pursue his dream of creating a pan-Chinese diasporic cinema empire and to compete with MP & GI, Run Run Shaw decided to set up a movie studio in Hong Kong in 1958. It was only a year after Malaya gained independence. He began to build the new film studio in Clearwater Bay, Hong Kong, and called it the Shaw Brothers (HK) Ltd. Even though he was stationed in Hong Kong, he often visited Malaya and Singapore to explore the changing tastes of local audiences to ensure that the films he made in Hong Kong incorporated the necessary modifications (Chen, 2003). Many, if not all, of the Shaw Brothers' films diverted to Nanyang were arguably modified to cater to the increasingly localised experience of its audiences. Thus, Runme Shaw, who was still based in Singapore, played an important role in providing input to Run Run who had remained in Hong Kong. Runme's own localised experience of Southeast Asia served as an essential source for Run Run when making decisions in film production at the Hong Kong studio. According to Albert Odell, a former employee of Shaw Brothers in Singapore, Run Run would not make any decisions without Runme's approval (Ghalpanah, 2002).

It is against this robust industrial-historical background that the Shaw Brothers *Wuxia pian* immediately became the readily popular genre films that served as significant cultural artefacts and may be used to decode the construction of Chinese identity among the Malaysian Chinese. In the discussion that follows, I will focus on the more recent and localised context in Malaysia to address the relatively current development of *Wuxia pian* and its relation to the Malaysian Chinese spectatorship.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS OF *WUXIA PIAN* SINCE THE 1960S AND MALAYSIAN CHINESE SPECTATORSHIP

Because the *Wuxia pian* genre is the most enduring as well as distinguished film genre in the history of Chinese cinema, its categorisation as a film genre has always been subjected to mutation and negotiation. As shown through the early history of the Shaw Brothers' business network in Malaya, the genre proved to be interconnected to the local circumstances in Malaya, and later Malaysia. It is the quintessential characteristics of *Wuxia pian*, which are mainly derived from traditional Chinese morality and philosophy, that make it particularly appealing to many Chinese people; owing to the adventurous narrative of the genre and the level of mobility demonstrated by its generic actions, the imagery of *Wuxia pian* can actually serve as a symbolic substitute for others (the non-Chinese) to comprehend (Lo, 2005). For many Malaysian Chinese, the imaginary world of *Wuxia* acted as a perfect site, indeed a trans-geographical cultural framework, in which they could make sense of their daily struggle to preserve their loosely defined roots amidst the challenges and uncertainties embedded in the making of their new national identity. Moreover, the discussion of cinematic representations of *Wuxia pian* in terms of its trans-regional and trans-national symbolism also broaden the meaning of 'Chinese identity' by including experiences of most Chinese diasporas throughout the world (Kim, 2006; Klein, 2004).

The cultural synthesis for many Chinese origins across borders has long existed in Malaysia; an example is the existence of the Peranakan culture in Malacca. Throughout the 20th century, the Chinese identity has become a fluid, cultural entity instead of a rigid, political ethnicity for many Chinese overseas. An examination of the Shaw Brothers' business network and cultural ambition in relation to the early migration of the Chinese to British Malaya will help to illuminate this perspective. According to Chua (2006), being ethnically Chinese in Southeast Asia, was equivalent to being a 'cultural' Chinese rather than a 'nationalist' Chinese. This is primarily because the 1949 political split within China (into the Nationalist Kuomintang government, which fled to Taiwan after its defeat in mainland China, and the Chinese Communist Party) led to the fragmentation of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia in terms of their political allegiances. Chua (2006) further illustrates that, in Indonesia in 1955, the then Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Zhou Enlai, announced that "an ethnic Chinese outside the PRC should obtain citizenship and develop allegiance to the country of adoption". Since then, in Chua's words, "the ethnic Chinese population outside the 'Chinese nation' has undoubtedly become a 'cultural' community without any presumption of a 'homeland'". These cultural definitions, however, are invariably marked by local politics.

In light of Chua's argument, a possible explanation for the widespread popularity of the *Wuxia pian* among Malaysian Chinese was the pervasive strategy of filmmakers to remove overt localism on the one hand and to conjure up an ambiguous pan-Chinese subject position on the other. The idea of conjuring up a pan-Chinese subject, rather than appealing to political China, arguably maintains the possibility of cultural attachment without overtly challenging nationalist loyalties; this idea has characterised debates relating to Chinese identity in non-Chinese majority countries. The Malaysian Chinese were compelled to distance themselves from any overt expression of support for Chinese nationalism and were required to be naturalised and localised as citizens of Malaysia. Under these circumstances, the popular film genre of *Wuxia pian* served as a safe zone that allowed various social, cultural and political imaginations to occur and hence form the identities based on the interest of respective groups or communities.

More interestingly, in the early 1970s, a national cultural policy was imposed to promote national culture and national unity in Malaysia. According to this policy the three main tenets were as follows: "(1) The national culture of Malaysia must be based on the cultures of the people indigenous to the region; (2) Elements from other cultures, which are suitable and reasonable, may be incorporated into the national culture; and (3) Islam will be an important element in the national culture" (Tan, 1992). It is under such circumstances that many Chinese saw this cultural policy as a governmental assimilation project and hence responded pessimistically about the prospects of their culture. Amid the perceived external threat to eliminate the culturally 'Chinese', cinema served as one of the most important media in Malaysia, connecting Chinese-ethnic citizens to their cultural roots. Incidentally, the Shaw Brothers' *Wuxia pian* reached its peak during this period; the Malaysian Chinese seemed to indulge their senses in 'foreign films' from Hong Kong. It is also worth noting that there was no local Chinese film production in Malaysia at that time. According to a survey of the role and impact of mass media in Malaysia, cinema, especially from the late 1950s to the 1970s, was a freer medium in terms of governmental control (Grenfell, 1979). This finding means that the government had little industrial stake in film production, leaving the private sector to invest in cinema and other popular forms of entertainment. However, about 95% of the feature films shown in Malaysia were imported. The 1975 *Media Index* survey shows that the majority of feature films reviewed by the Censorship Board were in Chinese and two-thirds of them were from Hong Kong (Grenfell, 1979). The same survey also indicates that, "the cinema audience in Malaysia did not appear to have declined as the television audience has grown". This finding is because most Chinese audiences found little interest in the government-controlled television network and programs, which were designed predominantly for Malays. Even though the Chinese in Malaysia represented only about 30% of the population, 70% of cinemagoers were of Chinese origin (Zain, Shahaban and Siru, 1990). This statistics also explain in

part the significance of the Shaw Brothers' films among the Malaysian Chinese. As core entertainment for this single ethnic group, Chinese films served as a visual medium that validated their sense of culture and identity.

In addition, the major players of the Shaw Brothers admitted that the making and creation of *Wuxia pian* purposely incorporated and promoted 'Chinese-Asian values' within the broader context of imagined cultural needs for many Chinese overseas, including Chinese communities in Malaysia. By making Mandarin the official language of all films made at the Shaw Brothers (HK) Ltd., Poshek Fu (Fu, 2008) argues that Run Run revealed his own dream about creating a pan-Chinese film culture. As quoted in an interview with Run Run in 1967:

I make movies to satisfy the desires and hopes of my audiences; and the core of my audience is Chinese. What they desire to see on the screen are folklore, romances and popular subjects in Chinese history with which they are already familiar. ... They miss the homeland they have left behind and the cultural tradition they are still cherishing.

Furthermore, the mastermind behind most of the Shaw Brothers *Wuxia pian*, director Zhang Che (Zhang, 1968), also rightly assessed the popularity of this genre to its overseas Chinese audiences by saying:

Many young overseas Chinese have no idea about their motherland of China nowadays... What is worse is that China has closed its door to them since the Cultural Revolution... now that they have shown some interests in *Wuxia pian*, we (the producer of Chinese films) must grasp this opportunity to exert our influence through the Chinese moral and ethical values within this genre, and hopefully this will preserve their self-assurance of being 'Chinese'.

We can readily interpret from this passage that *Wuxia pian* can be seen as a tool that preserved the connection of overseas Chinese with their ancestral past, functioning to capture the sense of being culturally 'Chinese'. For Malaysian-Chinese too, the visually prominent action choreography of the *Wuxia pian* presents itself through different levels of cultural meaning.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this article has shown that there has been a strong connection between the Chinese popular genre film and the reception of these films amongst the Chinese living in Malaysia since the early part of the 20th century. The cultural significance of *Wuxia pian* is more than a source of entertainment; it may

also provide a link for contemporary society as an imaginary space for nostalgia. In this article, I have added another dimension to the discussion of cinematic representations of *Wuxia pian* in terms of its trans-regional as well as trans-national symbolism. *Wuxia pian* personifies the broader notion of a "Chinese identity" by emphasising the collective memory of this identity as historically bound. For most Malaysian Chinese, the very notion of *Wuxia pian* acted as a perfect site – a trans-geographical cultural framework – in which they could make sense of their daily struggle to preserve their loosely defined roots. To a certain extent, the cinematography specific to the genre and the realist action choreography make the world portrayed in *Wuxia pian* beyond pure imagination, but yet they capture a sense of reality, and hence empower many of those in marginal positions. However, this particular genre focuses on certain codes of Chinese philosophy and tradition, hence making it conveniently normalised for Chinese spectators to facilitate the speakable and unspeakable historical moments and socio-cultural imagination for the construction of trans-geopolitical Chinese identities.

Moreover, the imaginative world of *Wuxia* and the classical meaning of *xia* has always been associated with a 'cultural China' that allows different sets of meaning to be produced in highly metaphorical ways, amidst political stress. For instance, since the 1969 racial riots in Malaysia, many Malaysian Chinese have been living a physically, intellectually or emotionally restricted and frustrating life. If they could not construct their cultural identity by reconnecting with the intellectual, emotional and spiritual roots of their past, they could at least sense it by viewing, listening and generally consuming it. The symbolism of 'Chineseness' and the notion of justice within the genre re-energised, to a certain extent, the study of the construction of Chinese identity and popular cinema based on a veneration of shared symbols and historical myths. It is certainly worth noting that from 1965 to 1980, the Shaw Brothers (Hong Kong) Ltd. produced more than 200 *Wuxia pian*. Notably, films such as *Da Zui Xia* (Come Drink with Me) (1966), *Du Bidao* (The One-armed Swordsman) (1967), *Jin Yanzi* (Golden Swallow) (1968), *Du Bidao Wang* (Return of the One-armed Swordsman) (1969) and *Xin Du Bidao* (The New One-armed Swordsman) (1971) were all well received in both Malaysia and Singapore of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Though it may be important to explore the dimensions of film analysis on Malaysian Chinese spectatorship and the Shaw Brothers' *Wuxia pian* during the vital period from 1960s to the 1980s, these subjects are better left to further research. For now, this article has hopefully provided the historical framework to facilitate such future works.

NOTES

1. Since 2001, owing to the commercial success of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, a new wave of so-called Chinese-style blockbuster *Wuxia pian* epics has also surfaced in the People's Republic of China as well as in the international market. This group of films appropriately revives a new popular interest in the genre. Because of the international appeal of this particular kind of film, English-language scholarship began showing interest in the definition and redefinition of *Wuxia pian* after Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and began to substantiate and comprehend *Wuxia pian* as a genre within Chinese film scholarship.
2. There is no uniform translation of 'Tianyi', the former Shaw Brothers film company. However, according to Jay Leyda (Leyda, 1972), 'Tianyi' is the pinyin translation from the Chinese name, which literally means 'First Under Heaven'. I will use Unique Film Production according to the translation from Wong (2003).

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