

# Shanghai gangster films and the politics of change: a study of *Lord of the East China Sea* (1993) and *The Last Tycoon* (2012)

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**Abstract:** In this paper through a very close textual reading I will show the ideological differences between two films based on the life of Shanghai gangster Du Yuesheng (1888, Pudong – 1951, Hong Kong) through close formal and narrative analysis. Du was already a celebrity in his day in the Republican era and is still a controversial figure in Greater China. However, there are only two films based on the life of the French Con-cession opium kingpin, the recent Hong Kong/PRC co-production *The Last Tycoon* (*Da Shang Hai*, Wong Jing, 2012) and the epic two part *Lord of the East China Sea I & II* (*Shang Hai huang di zhi: Sui yue feng yun & Shang Hai huang di zhi: Xiong ba tia xia*, Hong Kong, Poon Man-kit 1993). I show how these films reflect HK's and China's politico-economic changes focusing on the representation of social class and the subject, depiction of internal migration and immigration, and nationalism. The films will be discussed in their relation to changes in the Hong Kong film industry, Chinese and world cinema and the transnational gangster genre, showing how local and global cinemas have affected these films.

**Keywords:** Gangster film; Hong Kong Film Industry; Globalization; Shanghai; Du Yuesheng.

## Filmes de gângsteres e a política da mudança: um estudo de *Senhor do Mar da China Oriental* (1993) *The Last Tycoon* (2012)

**Resumo:** Neste artigo, por meio de uma leitura textual muito aproximada, mostrarei as diferenças ideológicas entre dois filmes baseados na vida do gangster de Xangai Du Yuesheng (1888, Pudong - 1951, Hong Kong) através de uma análise formal e narrativa. Du já era uma celebridade em sua época na era republicana e ainda é uma figura controversa na Grande China. No entanto, existem apenas dois filmes baseados na vida do chefe do ópio da Confissão Francesa, a recente coprodução de Hong Kong/RPC *The Last Tycoon* (*Da Shang Hai*, Wong Jing, 2012) e as épicas duas partes *Senhor do Mar da China Oriental I e II* (*Shang Hai huang di zhi: Sui yue feng yun e Shang Hai huang di zhi: Xiong ba tia xia*, Hong Kong, Poon Man-kit 1993). Mostro como esses filmes refletem as mudanças político-econômicas de Hong Kong e da China, concentrando-se na representação da classe social e do sujeito, na representação da migração e imigração interna e no nacionalismo. Os filmes serão discutidos em relação às mudanças na indústria cinematográfica de Hong Kong, no cinema chinês e mundial e no gênero de gângsteres transnacionais, mostrando como os cinemas locais e globais afetaram esses filmes.

**Palavras-chave:** Filme de Gângster; Indústria Cinematográfica de Hong Kong; Globalização; Xangai; Du Yuesheng.

In this paper I will show the ideological differences between two films based on the life of Shanghai gangster Du Yuesheng (1888, Pudong –1951, Hong Kong [HK from now on]) through close formal and narrative analysis. Du was already a celebrity in his day in the Republican era and is still a controversial figure in Greater China. However, there are only two films based on the life of the French Concession opium kingpin, the recent Hong Kong / PRC co-production *The Last Tycoon / Da Shang Hai* (Wong Jing, 2012) and the epic two part, five-hour *Lord of the East China Sea I & II / Shang Hai huang di zhi: Sui yue feng yun & Shang Hai huang di zhi: Xiong ba tia xia* (Hong Kong, Poon Man-kit 1993)[Lord from now on]. I show how these films reflect HK's and China's politico-economic changes focusing on the representation of social class and the subject, depiction of internal migration and immigration, and nationalism. The films will be discussed in their relation to Chinese and world cinema and in particular to the transnational gangster genre, showing how local and global cinemas have affected these films.

I will argue that the rise of a new paradoxical 'cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics' a concept put into circulation by Lisa Rofel, is represented in the figure of businessman/nationalist Du in the *Last Tycoon*. *Lord* will be reflected upon as a pre-handover Hong Kong production, tying the film to anxieties about the 1997 move back to Chinese sovereignty. Even though as critics have noted (TEO, 2002: 237-238; see also WILLIAMS, 2007: 369). Both films are controversial and incorrect hagiographies of this arch-criminal, the aim of this paper is not so much to criticize the historical accuracy of the films but rather to look at how the films reflect the society and institutions that produced them and why Du is represented the way he is. In these films the figure of Du, relations to the 'other', (the KMT, the Communists, the Japanese, the French, local warlords), class, and illegality are depicted totally differently, allowing us to detect shifts in the Greater Chinese ideological constellation and the representation of Chineseness. HK cinema has always had a special relationship with Shanghai, this relationship starting before the move of filmmakers to HK from Shanghai after the formation of the PRC making it the new "Hollywood of the East." This paper will for its part shed light on this long established, and as these two films also attest, undissolvable twins relationship.

### Different times and markets

If one would want to seek an *auteur* for the *Lord* it would be producer Johnny Mak. Mak is a 'creative producer' similar to the more famous Tsui Hark; a producer whose style can be seen in the end product. Before *Lord* he produced the successful *Scarface* remake *To Be Number One* (1991) [*TBNO*], which was also loosely based on the life of a real gangster, "Limpy" Ng Sik-ho, a refugee from the PRC who became a notorious drug dealer in Hong Kong. Riding the wave of success of *TBNO* Mak collaborated with studio boss Raymond Chow from Golden Harvest Studios on *Lord* securing a large budget for the film that is reflected in the production values of the epic period piece. Originally Mak and partner Stephen Shiu intended to make a film about Yuan Shikai, the first President of the Republic of China, but they could only get financing for a gangster genre film and Yuan was changed to contemporary Du Yuesheng. At that time HK still dominated the market of Chinese-speaking cinemas in the Asia-Pacific region in addition to Hong Kong's small but (still) reliable market. Taiwan, where Du Yuesheng is something of a folk hero, accounted for a considerable part of HK film's revenues and Tony Williams speculated that the edification of Du in *Lord* was due to HK's dependence of Taiwan as a overseas Market (WILLIAMS, 2007: 369).

*The Last Tycoon* was produced under totally different conditions and the main market was now the PRC. After the mid-nineties the HK film industry went into

decline due to a variety of reasons, such as overexploitative “hyper-production”, the rise of other Asian cinemas (such as the Korean and mainland Chinese industries), and triad involvement that eroded quality (and some say lead to romanticized portrayals of criminals, that the films discussed here arguably are) as well as geopolitical and technical developments like the introduction of VHS, DVD, satellite, and cable TV. HK film industry's overseas revenue experienced a 85 percent decline between 1992 and 1998<sup>1</sup>. HK film production reached its apex in 1993 when both parts of *Lord* came out, with 242 films screened that year, but by 2007 film production had plummeted to 50 releases (SZETO; CHEN, 2011: 239-240). New hope for the HK industry has come in form of the PRC market and co-productions with the mainland. In terms of the film industry, according to Szeto and Chen, the Closer Economic Partnership (CEPA) deal that privileges HK cinema (amongst other HK businesses) in China with its “Neoliberalism with Chinese Characteristics”: selectively liberate the flow of capital and cultural capital but not the flow of labor and critical ideas; selectively liberate the economy but not the grip on culture and politics (ibid: 244)<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> From HK\$1.68 billion in 1992 to HK\$252 million in 1998

<sup>2</sup> Szeto and Chung have published another article of the problems of HK Mainland co-productions: Mirana M. SZETO, M. M.; Chen, Y. To Work or Not to Work: the dilemma of Hong Kong Film Labor in the Age of mainlandization. *Jump Cut*, vol. 55, 2013. Disponível em: <http://ejumpcut.org/archive/jc55.2013/SzetoChenHongKong/>.

This grip on culture and politics is first and foremost conducted with censorship, either by state institutions like the State Administration of Radio Film and Television (SARFT), or as often happens, it is self imposed. Still the draw of the PRC market is strong. After the long regression of HK film, some filmmakers have thought to turn around their fortunes with mainland audiences and collaborations, and several hits have been produced. *The Last Tycoon* is a high-end HK/mainland co-production with money coming both from the mainland and HK. This collaboration does not come without a price though, *The Last Tycoon* is indicative of some of the issues that these collaborations have as this paper will show.

Like Du's life, the stories of the films are set during the Republican era (1912-1949) and the occupation of the Japanese during the second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). In *Lord* Du's character is called Luk Yu-san and in *The Last Tycoon* he goes by the name of Cheng Daqi. In *The Last Tycoon* the story ends with Cheng being killed during the Japanese occupation, but the epic sweep of *Lord* continues to the time of death of the real Du, 1951, covering the Japanese surrender and the advent of the PRC and ROC. The time frame of *The Last Tycoon* fits in with PRC censorship parameters as it ends before 1949. The closer a film, particularly with crime, violence, and corruption, gets to the present and the Communist revolution, the risks of censorship grow substantially (SZETO; CHEN, 2011: 252).

### Imaginary cities, floating populations

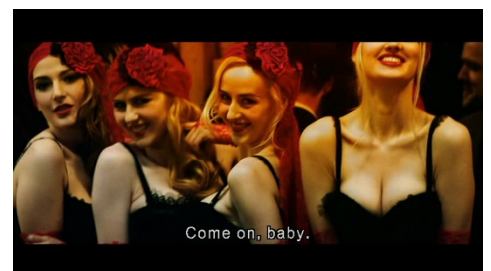
Both *The Last Tycoon* and *Lord* have abundant imagery of transport; train yards, docks, cars (in line with the iconography of the gangster genre) and airplane fields; in addition to the given crowded city streets. A regime change and uncertainty is felt and in both films the main protagonists evacuate to HK in the face of the Japanese invasion. Paul Bowman notes that as a location of martial arts films and greater Chinese cinema in general Shanghai could be seen as an allegory of China itself but especially of a China in danger (BOWMAN, 2014: 28-29). *Lord* follows this trend, but in it the situation of pre-handover HK is reflected on Shanghai.

The figure of Luk, with his transplantation from Shanghai to hospitable HK, could be seen as both a precursor and symbolic of the millionaires who moved from pre-1997 HK that Aihwa Ong described in *Flexible Citizenship* (ONG, 1999). At the time of the making of *Lord*, Hong Kongers, and the capitalist class especially, were feeling the same sentiments as the films protagonists. Many critics have analyzed HK pre-1997 films as allegorical negotiations of HK mainland relations and the

<sup>3</sup> Like *Lord* and *To Be Number One*, also *Long Arm of the Law* is loosely based on real events, the so called “Big Circle” gangs from the main land committed crimes in HK in the early 1980s.

change of sovereignty. Esther Yau termed this “1997 consciousness” and analyzed how Johnny Mak's *Long Arm of the Law / Shenggang qibing* (1984) dealt with anxieties of the handover through a story of former PLA soldiers now turned “big circle”<sup>3</sup> criminals crossing the border to do a heist in HK (YAU, 1994). *Lord*, like so many HK films at the time of its production, has an ambivalent atmosphere in relation to the 1997 handover. Like the martial arts epic *Once Upon a Time in China / Huang Feihong* (Tsui Hark, 1991), *Lord* begins with the historical account of the unfair treaty that the Qing regime made with the colonial powers. The intertitles at the beginning of the film remind the viewer that Qing China had to give away areas such as HK and the French Concession of Shanghai. This unfair treaty undoubtedly bringing to the minds of 1993 HK viewers contemporary sentiments of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration of returning HK to PRC sovereignty. HK and Shanghai are port cities and logistical hubs just as they were in the times of Du, so the mise-en-scène of different means of transport and immigration is logical. However, this foregrounding of motion and departure is also indicative of the instability of the times and identity both in the epoch the films are portraying and of early 1990s HK (when *Lord* was made), as well as of 2012 China (when *The Last Tycoon* was released).

In 2013 the PRC's National Bureau of Statistics put the number of migrant workers to 262.61 million (GOODMAN, 2014: 37). It has been estimated that in 2011 there were 153 million migrant workers in China's cities and Shanghai as of 2007 having the largest number, where migrants compose 45.7 per cent of the workforce (*ibid.*: 140-141). In *The Last Tycoon* Cheng (played by Huang Xiaoming) is forced to leave his pastorally represented rural village because of an accidental entanglement in a violent incident and go and seek his fortune in Shanghai. Cheng and his sidekick Fatso are overwhelmed by the city, illuminated by fireworks. The arrival is presented as a montage of fireworks, neon lights, facades of businesses and foreigners on the street. The combined international and degenerate side of the city is represented by the foreign showgirls that try to woo the men as well as by its nightclubs, bars and other hallmarks of the urban and cosmopolitanism. Films about Shanghai, like gangster films in general, often feature the arrival of the protagonists in the city. PRC fifth generation crime films more known in the festival circuit made after the initiation of the Deng reforms like *Shanghai Triad / Yao a yao dao waipo qiao* (Zhang Yimou, 1995) and *Temptress Moon / Feng yue* (Chen Kaige, 1996) which both emphasize the rural/urban dichotomy and end tragically for the newcomer, following in this tradition.

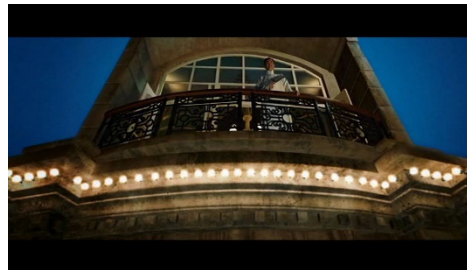


*The alluring and cosmopolitan city in The Last Tycoon: Cheng and Fatso arrive from the province.*

As Cheng (Huang Xiaoming) and Fatso arrive to the Shanghai Grand nightclub and admire its neon lit façade, the camera suddenly tilts upwards and Cheng (now Chow Yun-fat) as an older man is shown on the balcony looking over the club he now owns as a successful businessman. Internal migrants, usually from rural areas, pushed and pulled to China's megacities by economic reforms, form the cheap labor behind much of the 'rise of China', even though often looked down upon by the urban bourgeoisie that depend on their labor. This astounding poverty to wealth story shown in one process shot obscures the labor that one



would usually think that it would take for a poor migrant to make it in an metropolis, and is against the reality that privilege and poverty are often generational in the PRC (GOODMAN, 2014: 187). However, these images and themes resonate in a country with such a huge floating population, especially when one is often tied to the strict residency permit system (*hukou*) that understandably is also a hindrance to social mobility (*ibid.*, 35-44; 187).



*From rags to riches in one shot: Cheng (Huang Xiaoming) looks up from the street – Cheng (now Chow Yun-fat) looks down at the city.*

Fantasies of a life such as Cheng's are quite different from the stories of displaced migrated rural workers and contribute to the mythology of the city. The romanticization of the urban goes hand in hand with the genre though. Gangsters have always been the cinematic men of the city, as Warshow already noted in 1948, film makes criminals into gangsters “like the real city, one might say, produces only criminals; the imaginary [cinematic] city produces the gangster: he is what we want to be and what we are afraid we may become” (WARSHOW, 2007: 13).

### Luk versus Cheng, different times, different mores

As many have noted, even though a Chinese middle class has emerged and the state celebrates this and expresses a discourse confident of its growth, encouraging consumption and proclaiming a rising standard of living (GOODMAN, 2014: 109), the last twenty years have ushered in an unprecedented era of social inequality in China, that critics say is masked by the discourse of the growing middle-class (FENG; SU, 2012: 224; see also GOODMAN, 2014: 37). In *The Last Tycoon* descriptive of social stratification and the “to get rich is glorious” mentality is the aforementioned shot that rises up to show Cheng majestically viewing the city on a balcony, above the commoners that he was one of just a few frames ago. This composition is one of many that centralizes and elevates Cheng, making him the clear driving force of the film. This technique stands out particularly in the scene when he is made the gang leader or “sworn brother” of gang boss Hung (Sammo Hung), when the camera zooms in on him in a triad ritual in another process shot, centralizing him ritually in a roomful of subjects with music resembling Nino Rota's *Godfather* theme on the soundtrack to underscore the aggrandizement. It is notable that in both of these shots the younger Cheng (played by Huang) is turned into the elder Cheng (played by Chow Yun-fat) – a move from a national (PRC) to a transnational (HK) star<sup>4</sup>. This shift again signifies the change of the Chinese subject from being an unsuccessful, rural proletarian to being a successful, urban cosmopolite.

<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, Chow Yun-fat starred in by now legendary TV show about Republican era Shanghai gangsters *The Bund* produced by HK's TVB and Huang Xiaoming in its, also very popular, 2007 mainland remake *Shanghai Bund*.



*Hierarchical architectonics: a shot that goes 360 degrees around Cheng and then retreats to show his subjects in one take. Huang changes to Chow again. The gang ritual symbolic of rising through a corporate structure.*

*Lord* has a greater number of protagonists – it is made clear that Luk is only one of 'The Three Tycoons of Shanghai' and operates with his trusted accomplices such as Shan and Ting. Luk has moments of victory, especially against the established elites such as warlord Lu and the financial bourgeoisie, and of course, rises in the ranks of the crime organization. However, Luk suffers setbacks as well, for example he is manipulated throughout the film by many, especially the KMT (henceforth KMT), who he can never outmaneuver and is finally forced into exile by forces beyond his control. The fact that Luk is illiterate is brought out often in *Lord*, for example, in a lengthy and somewhat isolated scene in which he asks a child to read his girlfriend's goodbye letter to him. Also, later Luk takes great pains to learn to read and write; these efforts inter-cut with his painful attempt to kick his opium habit.



*Luk battles with opium addiction and illiteracy in Lord.*

As magically as in the scenes where the young Cheng turns into the older one, in the *Last Tycoon* Cheng is changed by success from a street urchin into a man of distinction, this shift underscored by the elaborate sets of a bourgeois home and costumes he moves in. In contrast in *Lord*, Luk can never fully shake off his lower class status. In his case the luxurious trappings of his life turn to emphasize Luk's and his cohorts lack of pedigree as they drink, curse, smoke opium, fight, and in

general with their habitus are ill-fitting into the environment of their bourgeois surroundings, a recurring theme in the gangster genre.

In *Lord* Luk cannot get political power despite his extraordinary efforts, there is always something blocking him, especially his status as a member of the underworld. For all his endeavors and skills he cannot get the recognition or “face” he desires during the whole film. If read allegorically, his futile political attempts could equally be seen as symbolic to the undemocratic position of the people of HK (under British colonialism) or even Greater China at the time it was produced. Luk's position resonates with the tragically ending attempts at social mobility that the gangster genre has dealt with since its Hollywood classic era in the 1930s. If often in gangster films the characters' vices such as vanity and greed prove to be their downfall, this is not the case in *Lord*. In the film it is made clear that Luk's shortcomings and ultimate fate are due to the fact that he is from the underclass and societal forces work against him. The spectator is constantly reminded of Luk's meagre beginnings and the price levied on him because of his disadvantages, be it his illiteracy or lack of etiquette. This is shown well in the scene when he has soup with the duplicitious KMT General Ku and he sips directly from the soup bowl while the general uses a spoon – the difference between the men symbolized by the long table between them. *Lord* is more cynical of society than Luk's person, which makes its social commentary more poignant. Unlike the discontent, sickly (like the real life Du, Luk has asthma) and addiction prone Luk, caught in historical events beyond his control, Cheng is portrayed very much in control of his own fate (even his death, as we shall see) and he cleverly navigates the disorder of the Republican era, immortalized in a finale in which he destroys all his enemies. The individualist aspect of Cheng, that aligns with neoliberal ideas of the subject, is foregrounded by the fact that Cheng is also an action hero, the film having several scenes of him terminating multiple enemies with his .45 automatic, these images connecting back to John Woo's “gun fu” films that Chow starred in and blasted HK film to global screens.

Cheng is the perfect citizen for the PRC regime – an avid businessman with the necessary skills of foresight, negotiation, ruthlessness, capital allocation and cleverness, but at the same time he is loyal (to his master and patron Hung who he calls *sifu* throughout the film and to his wife), conservative, selectively civilized and a suicidal patriot. Like Don Vito Corleone from Coppola's *Godfather*, Cheng is capable of holding onto traditional values – those of community, honor and loyalty – but still thrive in the world of business. In the character of Cheng the regime of the PRC can have their cake and eat it too. Cheng's character embodies capitalism without deterritorialization. He controls his desires (even with lifelong love Zhiqui) contrary to Luk, and most of all, he has no want to enter domestic politics.

### The duality of the nationalist blockbuster

The form and narrative of *The Last Tycoon* are particularly conventional and recycled. The vistas of the architectonics of old Shanghai are in line with past representations. This is no wonder as the film was in part shot at Shanghai Film Park at Songjiang county, where the classic architecture of Nanjing Road has been reconstructed and where a number of films about early 20<sup>th</sup> century Shanghai have been shot<sup>5</sup>. An action scene takes place in a church with doves and an exploding Madonna statue an appropriation of John Woo's *The Killer*. In a more international citation the street fighting scenes of Cheng's youth with its slow motion, editing, and the camera angles of both the opposing gangs are loaned from Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* (2002). Images and concepts from the *Godfather* and *Lord* are also used. Wong Jing and the HK film industry is known for emulation and *The Last Tycoon* does not differ on that regard. The historical

<sup>5</sup> For example Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution / Se, Jie* (2007) and HK director Stanley Kwan's *Everlasting Regret / Changhen Ge* (2005) have been shot in Shanghai Film Park. *Temptress Moon*, (1996) another triad film started the Film Park's boom as a location to recreate 20<sup>th</sup> century Shanghai (INGLE, 2014: 40).

cinematic tradition of tying martial arts to Chinese nationalism is continued with the impaling of the Japanese prefect in the climax at a Peking opera house. Zhiqu, Cheng's love interest, launches the spear whilst performing an opera show. The action scenes follow the general form of the film; that is, they are customary as classic narrative conventions are recycled, with a few jump cuts and digitally colored frames thrown in to adhere to the changing film grammar of the cyberspace generation. The film uses flashbacks and forwards to tell its story, a common feature of the genre of historical epic / blockbuster.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion about Asian and particularly Chinese nationalist blockbusters see Stephen Teo (2013: 52-71). An interesting read of the "Leitmotif" (*zhuxuanlu*) film which could be called "PRC state backed blockbuster" utilizing Lisa Rofel's ideas is done in Ying Xiao (2011).

*The Last Tycoon* could be called a "nationalist blockbuster"<sup>6</sup>. The film encompasses many different genres – another feature of the blockbuster like its ensemble cast of actors from HK and the PRC. *The Last Tycoon* is transnational in genre (gangster, action, and espionage) as well as in its content and form (cosmopolitan Shanghai, consumerism, classical Hollywood style, continuity editing, international star Chow Yun-fat and CGI aesthetic). However it is also local and national; anti-Japanese, Greater Chinese stars, elaborate and particular sets and mise-en-scène, the *jiang hu* brotherhood, Confucian loyalty and quoting HK film history. With this duality, the integration of the local and global to a nationalist blockbuster, and also in the figure of the nationalist tycoon Cheng it is descriptive of the new exclusive cosmopolitanism that Rofel sees arising in post-socialist China, a phenomenon that is tied to the emergence of the bourgeoisie:

This cosmopolitanism consists in two aspects in tension with one another: a self-conscious transcendence of locality, posited as a universal transcendence, accomplished through the formation of a consumer identity; and a domestication of cosmopolitan identity by way of renegotiating China's place in the world. [...] The dizzying economic growth of the late 1990s produced contradictory affective energies. A belief that anything was possible mingled with anxiety about the meanings of such rapid transformations, even as the material environment reflecting the rapid change transformed the senses as it folded past and future into one another. Cosmopolitanism then is a site for the production of knowledge about what it means to be human in this reconfigured world; knowledge that is being embraced, digested, reworked, contested, and resisted in China. These struggles over knowledge of the world and the ability to embody this knowledge are what I refer to, playfully, as "cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics". (ROFEL, 2007: 111-112)

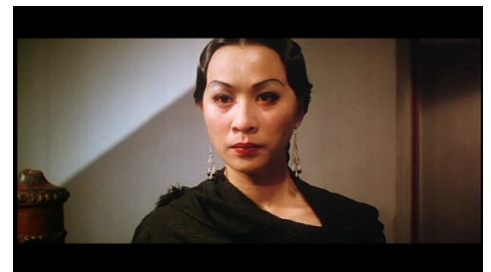
If the nationalist blockbuster as Teo (2013: 54-55) notes is a contradictory term as it houses the local (nationalist) and global (blockbuster) so of course is Rofel's "cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics." (ROFEL, 2007: 111-112). *The Last Tycoon* is an example of the reworking of what it means to be Chinese under the accelerated social change and accompanying ideological and moral uncertainty. The 1949 Revolution had two main components – the nationalist / anti-colonial aspect and the second initiative of overthrowing existing class relations. *The Last Tycoon's* project of producing a Chinese cosmopolitanism rejects the class aspect of the Maoist project but selectively holds on to its nationalism adding on a component of free market ideology of the neoliberal *homo economicus* in the figure of tycoon Cheng.

### The framing of antagonists

There are significant differences in the films antagonists and their portrayal. In *Lord* the Japanese enter Shanghai and their atrocities are shown in gory detail – there are scenes of Chinese people being buried alive, beheaded and raped. These brutal scenes are cross cut with Luk having desperate sex with Donna (Cecilia Yip), tying the invasion to sexuality. Connected to this sequence and the whole film is the idea of Shanghai as the "Whore of the Orient". The most striking example of this is the scene in which former prostitute Ms. Liu (HK star Carina



Lau) is given in exchange to a perverted warlord for Luk's abducted partner Wang. This sequence, that involves a bondage device, could be seen as both representing Shanghai's historical situation as well as that of pre-handover HK. Indeed one can think of *Lord* as a film that depicts the usage of Shanghai and its peoples by capitalists, gangsters, warlords and colonizers. Unlike *The Last Tycoon* which focuses on foreign (Japanese) aggression and selectively leaves western colonialism out of the picture, making Cheng and company seem like a private pacifying service whose businesses are actually good for society. Descriptive of this is that the abduction that in *Lord* was settled with the sacrifice of Ms. Liu and letting the warlord in on the opium business, in *The Last Tycoon* Cheng is able to negotiate it so that the warlord is happy with shares in Cheng and Co.'s bank.



*Into bondage: Miss Li is sacrificed in Lord, an allegory of the situation of HK prior to 1997*

*Lord* and *The Last Tycoon* deal with colonialism very differently. In Shanghai at that time the colonizers used corrupting divide and conquer tactics in controlling the Chinese populations of their concessions. Instrumentalizing the tactic of using a thief to catch a thief, the colonizers recruited established gangsters into the police force. These “compradors of violence” controlled the Chinese populations and went on with their own businesses with impunity (MARTIN, 1996: 31-33). Huang Jinrong who at first was Du's boss, the real life model of Hung (Sammo Hung) in *The Last Tycoon* and Kent Cheng's Wang in *Lord*, was such a man. In *The Last Tycoon* Hung's character is neither seen as being under imperialist control nor cracking down on his own people, rather he acts as a peacemaker, this sort of depiction understandable as PRC censors particularly crack down on representations of police corruption. In *Lord* Wang is less heroized: he deals and uses opium, he is corrupt (his enforcement of his countrymen is shown), and he frequents brothels and so on.

In *Lord* the gang deal with and scheme against the corrupt French Consul extensively and do a deal to distribute opium with him. In Hong Kong, as in Shanghai, opium has added symbolic weight due to the the cities significant role in its trade and the Opium Wars. As discussed above, in *Lord* Luk is shown to be in the opium business and to be an addict getting high on his own supply, as was Tony Montana in de Palma's remake of *Scarface* a decade earlier. Even though in the film - unlike his real-life counterpart - Luk is able to kick the habit (and also moves from trading opium into other businesses at the end.) In *The Last Tycoon* it is highlighted that Cheng does not deal or use drugs which in real life was Du's Green Gang's core business. A disclaimer is even made as Cheng takes his triad vows. He has to cite the organization rules which include not to participate in the opium trade, doing business in prostitution and gambling. In *Lord* Luk frequents

brothels and his outfit controls them, in *The Last Tycoon* we have nothing of the sort, this depiction understandable as prostitution like drugs are liable to get a film censored in the PRC.

War and combat are portrayed differently in the films. In *Lord* the gangsters provide a militia to counter the Japanese that proudly march to the front. The men come back in a different disposition, burly Ting of Luk's gang crying: "The bombs dropped like rain. I can't face the people of Shanghai; I did not kill one single Japanese, I did not see them". Several of the gang members are killed on the front, their maimed corpses shown to the viewer and a weeping Luk as they are hauled back to Shanghai. Actual combat itself is not shown in *Lord*, unlike in *The Last Tycoon* where the war is shown as a digital nationalist spectacle of computer generated action scenes. A bloodied, crying little girl thrown into the mix, a quotation of H. S. Wong's photograph *Bloody Saturday*, one of the most famous images of war that was distributed around the world after it was taken on August 28, 1937 during the Japanese air attack on Shanghai. In terms of their representation of war, and arguably the whole life of the main characters, *Lord* is a story of victimization and *The Last Tycoon* a heroization. Luk does not participate in the actual fighting and evacuates to HK, in *The Last Tycoon* Cheng even though going to HK cannot stay away, and returns to kill Japanese agents and soldiers by the dozen.



*Digital nationalist spectacle/blockbuster: planes over Shanghai in The Last Tycoon and the bloodied Ting returning from the front in Lord.*

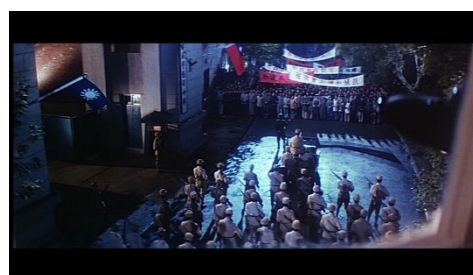
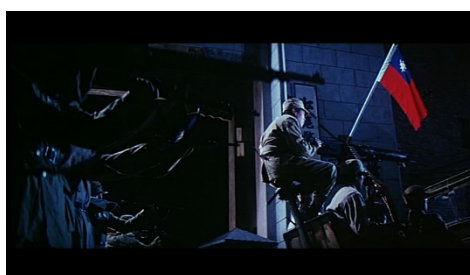
Even though the Japanese are demonized in *Lord*, the pre-invasion atrocities of the KMT are shown in similar fashion. They kill and torture leftists; the scenes shot with much the same lighting (the often-used day for night filter) and sets that are utilized in the scenes of the Japanese atrocities. When the KMT kill the leftists the camera angle is the POV shot of those who are buried alive, aligning the spectator with them.

In Luk's political dealings with the nationalists in *Lord*, the KMT's use of thug tactics is made clear. The KMT hold a mock council where they supposedly ask for the co-operation of the city elite and ask Luk to head an aggressive union against the Communists. A few of the invited disagree quoting Sun Yat-sen's position that all Chinese should work together. The KMT take the dissidents who shout "long live Sun Yat-sen!" out and execute them. At the same time, a demonstration of Shanghai citizens gather outside to protest, demanding the release of the (already dead) labor leaders and are mowed down by the KMT. In the massacre the shot composition and editing have the tension and antagonism of *Battleship Potemkin* or third cinema aesthetics, pitting the KMT soldiers, armed and in regimented formation, against unarmed workers who march towards them singing and holding hands. The three tycoons watch the slaughter helplessly from a window. Luk is then forced to give a speech in honor of his hosts, after which he has an asthma fit and coughs up blood, symbolic of the pain he feels inside. For the films HK viewers the massacre of the workers bringing back memories of the violent suppression of the June 4<sup>th</sup> movement in 1989, fresh in the memory as they approached the handover. The massacre of the communists in Shanghai that the

real life Du was instrumental in, is at least depicted in *Lord* even though Luk supposedly thinks that the communists would only go to jail when he betrays them to the KMT. In *The Last Tycoon* the whole event is not even mentioned, which is understandable for a co-production with the PRC, it would take quite a stretch of the imagination to somehow fit it into the story with Cheng remaining the hero.



*Lord*: Uncle Head is in the middle of the protesting workers, a metonym of the working class that reminds Luk of his alienation as he watches the massacre with Shanghai's elites.



*Antagonistic compositions*: The KMT massacre the workers demanding the release of the labor leaders, as the three tycoons helplessly watch on.

### Class, consumerism and cosmopolitanism

In terms of an analysis of the representation of class, in *Lord* there is a conscious proletariat, and the differences and sometimes even antagonisms of social classes are foregrounded, contrary to *The Last Tycoon*. Cheng has a slew henchmen and servants but no class friction is registered or even hinted at. On the contrary, as Cheng is loyal to Hung so are his lieutenants to him, literally to the death. This erasure of socialist or class politics that *The Last Tycoon* exemplifies is seen to be a process going on in the PRC by Lisa Rofel. Following Foucault, she sees consumption and the supposed freedom that goes with it as a 'technology of self' that is not only done for sustenance and pleasure but is key in forming a new identity that transcends the Chinese nation. To Rofel the desire to consume is about creating a new subjectivity, especially in contrast to the 'unfree' and repressed socialist self. In this remaking of the subject, history, in particular the epoch of the supposedly isolated and closed Socialist China, has to be buried in an act of historical forgetting. According to Rofel this process of 'reification of the subject':

enables the assignment of very specific value to discrete desires. It also subsumes desires under interests, defined in the narrow terms of possession and acquisition. An embrace of variegated desires in postsocialist China has

been accompanied by a rejection of what have become portrayed as the dangerous political passions of socialism. This view of socialist passions as dangerous has further slid into an evaluation of all political passions as dangerous. By contrast desires interpreted as nonpolitical are viewed as benign interests.

The benign interests have the added attraction of making China appear cosmopolitan. In revisionist history, China is portrayed as isolated and closed during the socialist period, thus accomplishing the historical forgetting of a world that no longer exists – the world of international socialism. This historical forgetting produces the felt need for China to become cosmopolitan. But there is also a felt need to find that what is distinctively Chinese. (ROFEL, 2007: 118-119)

This participating in consumerism that as Susan Buck-Morss notes after its penetration of mainland China “could be arguably called the first global ideological form” (BUCK-MORSS, 2000: IX), make China seem cosmopolitan. But this cosmopolitanism is reined in or is domesticated by the reterritorializing power of capital and neoliberalism as well as nationalism (ROFEL, 2007: 120). *The Last Tycoon* aligns with the ideology defined by Rofel closely. Cheng has no interest in politics except nationalism or rather perhaps loyalty, as his attack on the Japanese is prompted to save Hung's imprisoned wife. The character of Cheng is defined by both loyalty, acquisition, sexual desire (even though in the film represented rather prudely) and consumption. Of Rofel's list of benign desires even arguably transnational cultural production is there. Like often the protagonists in gangster film Cheng has a penchant for popular culture and goes to Peking opera shows, listens to the gramophone and has surrounded himself with photographs and books. Following Rofel, perhaps the attraction to the cornucopia like colonial Shanghai with its mythical status as a temple of consumption is something that people in consumerist China can relate to, and filmmakers use to describe this new order. Also what city and period would be more antithetical to the idea of the supposedly closed socialist China that needs to be forgotten according to Rofel than early 20<sup>th</sup> century Shanghai? Republican era Shanghai in the case of *The Last Tycoon* is presented as both cosmopolitan and Chinese at the same time. This possibility of this dual reconstruction of the city gives us clues on why the Chinese filmmakers, trying to negotiate Chineseness in the time of globalization are obsessed with this time and place and return to it again and again, even if it takes the resurrection of one of the arch-criminals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a hero.

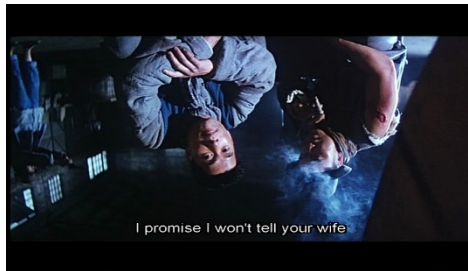
Class difference, as already pointed to in relation to the 1927 massacre sequence, is foregrounded in *Lord*. In a scene Luk's crew go after the bounty to find out who the Minister of Railways hired to kill a politician by kidnapping the minister and making him talk. Luk and his men follow the minister and look through a window into the fancy restaurant he goes to. The opulent restaurant is lit with bright and warm hues and has an air of luxury in stark contrast to the barren, dark street outside with cold blue colors. While peeping at the opulence Luk and his men watch the lecherous minister feeding chicken to his mistress, the men expressing desire for the ministers money, food and date. The manicheism of outsider and insider, or proletariat/lumpen and the bourgeois, is established both in the narrative and mise-en-scène (like the costuming and lighting) and camerawork. The men follow the minister's car, feigning that they are rickshaw drivers, a distinction of class through transport vehicles, the underclass here performing itself in order to trick the opponent. After a brutal ambush, Luk and company seize the minister after killing his bodyguards and tie him to a big wheel for interrogation in a warehouse. We see the world upside-down from the minister's point of view as the wheel is turned. Power relations are reversed, a recurring theme in the film. The lowbrow nature of the film is



manifest when the minister, under duress, urinates on himself. The scene in its scatology, humor, and bringing the high low bringing to mind Bakhtin's ideas of carnival.



*Representative of the elite: the Minister of Railways in Lord. On the outside looking in: Luk and company desire the minister's belongings.*



*The tables are turned on the Minister of Railways.*

In a refinement of the films' depiction of class, Luk, the social climber, is shown to be estranged from his modest roots. Uncle Head, an old food stall keeper that Luk befriended during his street days, symbolizes Luk's alienation from his class and acts as a metonymy for the working class or 'grassroots' in HK parlance. In the beginning Luk does his deals out of Uncle Head's stall on the street and the men celebrate Luk's success together. As Luk's stature grows, the men grow apart. Later in the film Uncle Head walks past Luk's house during New Year's Eve celebrations but refuses to go inside to kowtow to Luk for money. Finally Luk is devastated as he watches the KMT, with which he now is in business, massacre the leftist demonstrators and recognizes Uncle Head dying amongst them.

Critics have connected the Western gangster film with grand tragedy. Stuart Kaminsky notes in his analysis of *Little Caesar*:

Both *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*, for example, can be seen as elevated gangster films. [--] Shakespeare's Caesar is presented on a consciously grand scale of man's view of himself. Mervyn Le Roy's *Caesar* is on an intentionally reduced scale of a man's view of himself and his tragedy. Le Roy's film, in contrast to Shakespeare's play, was aimed at lower-class and solidly middle-class audiences and designed as a work of popular entertainment built on broad touchstones of vulgar behavior and images which would bring a response of social recognition in the viewer. Part of the irony of the situation in a gangster film is that the gangster feels he is operating on a grand scale[...]

The tie in to the irony of grand tragedy can be seen in the regal titles of the many gangster films which followed *Little Caesar* (*Queen of the Mob*, *King of the Underworld*, *King of the Roaring Twenties*, *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond*). To carry the ironic grandeur of the title to, perhaps, its most ambitious conclusion, we have the gangster as God and father in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*. (KAMINSKY, 2007: 48)

*Lord* and *The Last Tycoon* could well be added to this list of grandiose and tragedy implying gangster film titles. Actually, in terms of content these two films with their scale and (geo)political components are closer to grand tragedy than the films listed by Kaminsky above, or most other American gangster films for that

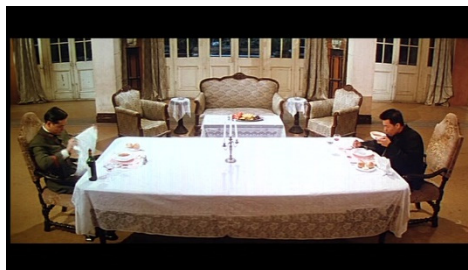
matter. But what is interesting for this paper is the class aspect of Kaminsky's argument in terms of gangster films being aimed at lower and middle class audiences; in other words, that they are 'low culture'.

It is safe to say that Johnny Mak's gangster films have a low culture sentiment and that the targeted audience were the popular classes, which in part explains the presentation of class described above. I doubt there is a film done in such an epic style that has that amount of scatological hilarity as *Lord*. *Lord* also has plenty of lowbrow jokes about sexuality and the dialogue is vernacular and profane. However, the working class or lumpen are not the only vulgar ones in the films. The bourgeoisie do not have any discreet charm either; rather, they are portrayed as even more lecherous and greedy. The vices and wants of the caricatured characters are straightforward and simple, as if directly taken from the base of Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Derek Lam discusses the lowbrow aspects of *To Be Number One [TBNO]* and finds in this crudeness and vulgarity that Stephen Teo (2002: 236-237) criticizes an appeal, coming out of its transgression of middle-class norms of respectability (LAM, 2013: 91-92). This same celebration of low culture continues in *Lord*, which Teo criticizes in a same way as "trashy and camp" (TEO, 2002: 237). Even though *Lord*, perhaps in an effort to be a respectable historical epic, is not as direct in its lowbrow aspects as *TBNO*, they are evident from the beginning. The film's first scene is of a French Concession market where many of the key players are presented. Luk is shown selling fruit but the men who will become his trusted lieutenants are shown indulging in the drives that will define their characters. Ting plays with a toy that hides and exposes a doll's breasts, while Shan is introduced passed out in the middle of a busy road, bottle in hand. It is made clear that this film does not deal with high society. This often lowbrow comedy in *Lord* is neither an exception in Mak's oeuvre nor the Hong Kong gangster film genre in general that often lends and mixes freely with comedy as well as a number of other genres like martial arts, horror, romance, spy films and the historical epic.



*Kent Cheng in action as Inspector Wang in Lord: abundant scatology and bare skin.*



*Worlds apart: Luk and Kuomingtang general Ku.*

Wong Jing is also seen as a filmmaker whose work often is seen as vulgar, having abundant sex, violence, profanity, and scatology. *The Last Tycoon* however has little of this lowbrow substance (except of course violence) and, in terms of Wong's oeuvre, it is actually sanitized of "vulgar" content. *The Last Tycoon's* cleansing is indicative of the elimination of subject matter that could cause cultural friction in HK / China co-productions. Often these culturally deodorized

films that might do well on the mainland are not popular with more liberal HK audiences, and indeed *The Last Tycoon* failed at the HK box office. The middle-class multiplex theater goer in the PRC was the main market of *The Last Tycoon* and this is manifested both in the narrative of success and sterile style of the film.

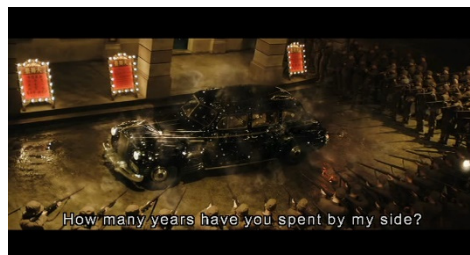
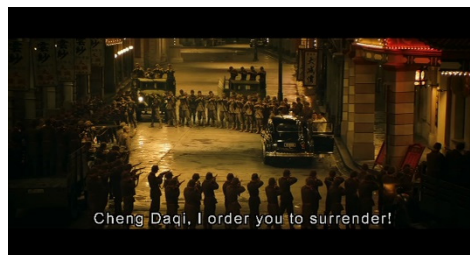
### The two deaths of Big Eared Du

Gangster film and its men with their fatalistic drives, are premier terrain in popular culture to deal with death, and although the protagonist often dies, cinematic techniques are used to aestheticize the end and immortalize him. Luk's death of old age goes against this tradition. Even though surrounded by his loved ones (most notably his lifelong love Donna, who he finally gets to marry in a wheelchair in the preceding scene) Luk's death is tragic. He is broken by the asthma that escalates during the film, he is in exile in HK, and considers himself a failure. Lamenting that he did everything for money making "mountains of gold, oceans of silver" but still failed to leave wealth to his family and dies waiting for recognition from Taipei that never comes.



*The banal end of Luk.*

In *The Last Tycoon* Cheng's death is glamorized to the hilt. At the end of the film Cheng and his underlings destroy a host of Japanese occupiers and their military installation after which he kills arch-enemy General Mao. After the carnage he carries wife Bao, who died in the battle, into a limousine where trusted lieutenant Fatso waits in the driver's seat. The car is surrounded by Japanese soldiers who order them to surrender. Cheng calmly orders "Let's go", and Fatso starts the car. Cheng and Fatso die with a content smile on their faces as the car is riddled by Japanese bullets. The film's theme song with its chorus 'an accomplished life in great Shanghai' comes on and a black and white montage of Cheng's life begins.



*Immortalized – Cheng's death in The Last Tycoon, Chinese nationalism with Hollywood conventions. The last shot: Cheng's frozen face fades to white as the theme song plays on.*

The scene reminds one of *Bonnie and Clyde's* (Arthur Penn, 1967) final scene where the couple is machine-gunned to death by government marshals. Bonnie

and Clyde's death, like Cheng's, is aestheticized with multi-angle and slow motion shots but the politics of death in these scenes are very different. Cheng becomes a martyr of the nation against Japanese invaders. It should also be noted that for an otherwise graphically violent film we do not see any of the bullets striking the protagonists – something that was key in *Bonnie and Clyde*, as well as the fact that the couple was killed effectively by state operatives. If some of the effect of Bonnie and Clyde's death scene came from the fact that it went against the genre conventions of its time, *The Last Tycoon* now follows them slavishly. The film's twisted representation of class foregrounded by Fatso's happily perishing along with his boss.

### Conclusion

This paper has shown how and why these two films about Du Yuesheng and Republican era Shanghai present their subjects in a differing way. Both films come out of particular modes of neoliberal politics and present a revisionist history of a man in the “left handed side of business”. Both these hagiographies present a rocket like rise from the bottom rung to become wealthy beyond imagination, however narrative and formal analysis has shown that the films politics are alternate. As shown, the films politics are molded by the politico-economic matrix and more specifically by their expected markets and their social composition, censorship parameters as well as genre expectations and conventions. By doing this the article has also brought out some of the politics change that have occurred in the transformation of the HK film industry.

*Lord* was made in HK during a time of great anxiety about the 1997 handover that are reflected in it. It has its moments of social critique in its depiction of class and aesthetics and in it the world of business, crime, the police, politicians and colonial powers are conflated to be basically indistinguishable entities, except of course that criminals are crooks openly. *Lord* in this continues in the tradition of filmmakers being able to make poignant social commentaries even though operating in the lucrative gangster genre. The ambitious *Lord* got the recognition it deserved when it was shown in the 2014 HK Film Archive retrospective of the HK gangster genre, but the programme did recognize: “Made prior to 1997, the political portrayal in the film would be unimaginable in the joint venture production environment of today.”<sup>7</sup>

*The Last Tycoon* is an example of the cultural neutralization of a HK / mainland co-production. But more importantly as is seen, the film attests the ideology of the particular mode of postsocialist neoliberalism in the PRC, a film that is done in conjunction to the state, the market, and transnational cinematic and capital flows. The erasure of class, foregrounded nationalism, and selective historicism in the film reflect value systems that have taken rise in the PRC since the opening of the economy. *The Last Tycoon* is a reflection of and buttress of “Neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics” or, to put it other terms, it reflects and supports the ideology of an authoritarian corporate state.

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