

**University of Alberta**

**Inner World of Drifting Chinese People:  
Narrative Functions of Motifs in Peter Ho-sun Chan's Love Trilogy**

by

**Yishuang Zhang**

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts**

in

**East Asian Interdisciplinary Studies**

**Department of East Asian Studies**

© Yishuang Zhang

Fall 2013

Edmonton, Alberta

Permission is hereby granted to the University of Alberta Libraries to reproduce single copies of this thesis and to lend or sell such copies for private, scholarly or scientific research purposes only. Where the thesis is converted to, or otherwise made available in digital form, the University of Alberta will advise potential users of the thesis of these terms.

The author reserves all other publication and other rights in association with the copyright in the thesis and, except as herein before provided, neither the thesis nor any substantial portion thereof may be printed or otherwise reproduced in any material form whatsoever without the author's prior written permission.

## **Abstract**

This thesis focuses on the narrative functions of motifs in Peter Ho-sun Chan's love trilogy films on drifting Chinese people since the 1980s. The examination of object/setting motifs in Chapter One contributes to the understanding of character-traits. Chapter Two especially discusses the use of popular songs in Chan's love trilogy by analyzing their explicit meaning conveyed by the lyrics, which is consistent with episodes of the plot, and the implicit and symptomatic meanings behind these songs, which actually arouse the collective memories among the audiences. In Chapter Three the study on the commonly used motifs throughout the films reflects upon the emotional life of various drifting Chinese people as a whole. By virtue of ideological film studies, this close analysis of the motifs discovers the idealism vs. pragmatism binary opposition constructed by Peter Chan and his consistent concern about the humanism when portraying drifting Chinese people.

# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Peter Ho-sun Chan and His Love Trilogy.....	1
Literature Review .....	6
Significance and Focus of This Thesis .....	14
Redefining “Motif” .....	17
Plot Summary .....	19
Chapter Overview .....	23
<b>1. Respective Motifs in Chan’s Love Trilogy and Character-traits .....</b>	<b>25</b>
1.1 <i>Alan and Eric: Between Hello and Goodbye</i> .....	26
1.1.1 Ships: Reflection of Eric’s Whole Life.....	26
1.2 <i>Comrades: Almost a Love Story</i> .....	29
1.2.1 ATM and the Opportunity Furniture Store: Xiaojun and Qiao’s Ups and Downs .....	29
1.2.2 Mickey Mouse: Qiao’s Hope for Wealth and Pao’s Love for Her .....	32
1.2.3 Bicycle: Xiaojun’s Changes in Life .....	36
1.3 <i>Perhaps Love</i> .....	43
1.3.1 Lin and Sun’s Hug on the Ice: Fragile “Love” .....	43
1.3.2 Sun’s Grinding Teeth: Trauma Caused by Poverty .....	50
1.3.3 The Swimming Pool: Overwhelming Emotions .....	53
<b>2. Common Use of Popular Songs: Interactions between Characters .....</b>	<b>57</b>
2.1 <i>Moon River</i> : Dream of Drifters (from <i>Alan and Eric: Between Hello and Goodbye</i> ) .....	58
2.2 Teresa Teng’s Songs: Best Healing for Floating Hearts (from <i>Comrades: Almost a         Love Story</i> ).....	62
2.2.1 <i>Honey Sweetie (Tian mimi)</i> : the Destined Connection between Xiaojun and Qiao.....	63

2.2.2 <i>The Moon Represents My Heart</i> : Expression of Pure Feelings .....	65
2.2.3 <i>Goodbye My Love</i> : Qiao's Deep Feelings for Xiaojun .....	69
2.3 <i>The Outside World</i> : Lin and Sun's Rough but Happy Days in the Past (from <i>Perhaps Love</i> ).....	70
<b>3. Common Motifs in Peter Chan's Love Trilogy: Living State of Drifting Chinese People as a Whole .....</b>	<b>75</b>
3.1 Cage: Restrictions on the Characters' Relations.....	75
3.1.1 Cages in <i>Alan and Eric</i> : Eric's Repressed Feelings and Olive's Loneliness.....	76
3.1.2 Cage in <i>Comrades</i> : Xiaojun and Qiao's Morally Forbidden Love .....	79
3.1.3 Cages in <i>Perhaps Love</i> : Pseudo-love That Traps Lin and Binds Sun with Nie .....	81
3.2 Voice-over: an Implicit Way to Reveal the Thoughts of Characters .....	85
3.2.1 Alan's Interior Monologue in <i>Alan and Eric</i> : Alan's Thoughts on His Relations with Eric and Olive .....	85
3.2.2 Xiaojun's Letters in <i>Comrades</i> : The Bitterness of "Small Potatoes" in a Metropolis.....	89
3.2.3 Lin's Last Recording in <i>Perhaps Love</i> : The Emotional Trauma Left by Sun .....	95
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>105</b>

# Introduction

## Peter Ho-sun Chan and His Love Trilogy

Peter Ho-sun Chan [陈可辛] is one of the most prestigious film directors in Mainland China and Hong Kong because of his box-office success and numerous awards. Born in Hong Kong in 1962, he grew up during the golden age of local film industry. Under the influence of his father, who was a filmmaker, Chan was exposed to an incredible variety of cinema in childhood before moving to Thailand with his family at the age of eleven. From ages eighteen to twenty-one, he studied film at Glendale College in Los Angeles, which offered him a precious opportunity to experience the prosperity of Hollywood films. With an unexpected interpreter job to work with the notable action director John Woo [吴宇森] in the early 1980s, Chan took the first step of his own career in the Hong Kong film industry, and expanded it into Mainland China later on. His transnational background endowed him with special talent in filmmaking and earned him a rank among the most promising young Chinese directors through a series of successful films so far. These excellent works include *Alan and Eric: Between Hello and Goodbye* (1991) [双城故事], *He Ain't Heavy, He's My Father* (1993) [新难兄难弟], *He's the Woman, She's the Man I*

(1994) [金枝玉叶 1] and *II* (1996), *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (1996) [甜蜜蜜], *Going Home in Three* (2001) [三更之回家], *Perhaps Love* (2005) [如果爱], *The Warlords* (2007) [投名状] and *Swordsmen* (2011) [武侠]. It is no exaggeration at all to say that the label “made by Peter Chan” gives a guarantee of good box office and wide recognition among Chinese domestic viewers.

Not only does Peter Chan stand out among Hong Kong directors, but he also extends his career to be a producer. In the early 1990s, Chan co-founded the United Filmmakers Organization (UFO). After merging UFO with Hong Kong studio giant Golden Harvest, Chan launched his second production company, Applause Pictures, which carries a Pan-Asian vision, engages in connecting different centers of film production within Asia and strives to make use of the “Asian” (more commonly “Chinese”) features to reach out to audiences worldwide.

Thanks to his life experience and the platform created by Pan-Asian cooperation, Chan has exhibited his eminent insights of the rootlessness of many Chinese people faced with the challenges of modernity in Hong Kong and Mainland China since his directorial debut *Alan and Eric: Between Hello and Goodbye* (1991),<sup>1</sup> which tells a mixed story of an immigrant in San Francisco who returns to Hong Kong to renew his friendship with his childhood friend and then faces a conflict between friendship and love when they both fall in love

with the same girl. Chan's maiden work won Chi-Wai Tsang [曾志伟] (the actor who played Eric) Best Actor, and got nominations for Best Screenplay and Best Art Direction in the 11th Hong Kong Film Awards (1992). It was the first time that Chan's directorial philosophy was publicly appreciated.

Similarly, *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* (1996)<sup>2</sup> unfolds the efforts of Mainland immigrants in Hong Kong at the end of the twentieth century (from the 1980s to 1990s), in which Chan's camera focuses on one young man and one young woman, digging into their love naturally stemming from mutual support and understanding. Chan demonstrates their dilemma of choosing between ration and emotion, and between a high standard of living and pursuit of true love. This film became a big winner and received nine awards in the sixteenth Hong Kong Film Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actress and Best Screenplay.

Nine years later, he filled in *Perhaps Love* (2005) with another complicated love story of the drifters of Beijing, whose main characters struggle to improve their careers. This film is said to be the first Hollywood-style "Chinese" musical.<sup>3</sup> Having attracted several popular idols from Hong Kong (Jacky Cheung [张学友]), Mainland China (Zhou Xun [周迅]), Japan (Takeshi Kaneshiro [金城

---

<sup>1</sup> *Alan and Eric* in later paragraphs for short.

<sup>2</sup> *Comrades* in later paragraphs for short.

<sup>3</sup> Vivian P. Y. Lee, *Hong Kong Cinema since 1997: the Post-nostalgic Imagination* (New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 184.

武]), and South Korea (Ji Jun-hee), *Perhaps Love* was a big hit in Asia in 2005, which brought the audiences a huge feast for the eye with fantasy, glitter costume, gorgeous set design and various styles of music. It is no wonder that this film was a competitive award winner in the significant film festivals all over Asia soon after it was released: it stood out in the Asia-Pacific Film Festival, Golden Horse Film Festival (Taiwan), Hong Kong Film Awards and Beijing Student Film Festival, winning numerous awards in 2006. The 62th Venice International Film Festival even closed with this film.

The above three films raise one intriguing issue: the rootlessness of Chinese people. The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw great upheavals in Chinese society. In 1978, the Chinese central government carried out the “reform and opening up” (*gaige kaifang*[改革开放]) policies, which led to an extraordinary growth for more than 30 years as well as high mobility of the population. Spurred by economic incentives stemming from globalization and modernization, a considerable number of the mainlanders commenced immigrating to the economically booming places, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas, or between different regions within Mainland China. Moreover, the handover of sovereignty of Hong Kong in 1997 was a huge event within Greater China. The uncertainty about the political, economic and even cultural changes after the handover not only caused the pre-1997 anxiety among Hong Kongers, but also



contributed to the immigration of some Hong Kongers to North America and Australia before this “deadline.” It is reasonable to assert that “rootlessness” or “drifting”<sup>4</sup> has been the key word for the majority of Chinese people in the past 30 years or so, since it is impossible for one to stay in the same place when various resources are transported and attracted to the metropolises. This theme has been discussed by many contemporary artists and I would like to examine Peter Chan’s works on drifting Chinese people for their high recognition among Chinese viewers.

Why have I selected *Alan and Eric*, *Comrades*, and *Perhaps Love* for my thesis? That is because these films have much in common, albeit shot in different years/decades: first and foremost, “drifting Chinese people” (whether from Hong Kong and mainland China) remain the main focus in these films; second, they all develop the stories with regard to multi-angular love; last but not least, all the stories are set between two cities. Hence they could be viewed together as a love trilogy composed by Peter Chan. And this thesis aims to provide a relatively comprehensive analysis of Chan’s love trilogy as special narratives, which contain a consistent style of telling the stories (through motifs), as well as search

---

<sup>4</sup> The use of “drifting” comes from a Chinese expression called *beipiao* [北漂] (drifting or floating to the north/Beijing), which is used to describe people from different regions who dream to make a fortune in Beijing. Most of them have to put up with poor living conditions and low income. Those people rarely enjoy the same rights that local citizens have in terms of housing, education, social insurance and so on. This social phenomenon partially reflects the living state of China’s floating population as well as Chinese immigrants overseas. Therefore I would like to utilize this expression to call the Chinese people in Peter Chan’s love trilogy.

for more persuasive comprehension of the society/culture that Chan endeavors to portray.

## Literature Review

The relevance of the above three films of Peter Chan does not draw much attention from scholars, except for Gong Lihong [龚莉红], who discussed the characteristics of love relations in these films and put forward the viewpoint of “Peter Chan’s love trilogy” for the very first time.<sup>5</sup> Despite the new perspective to analyze some of Chan’s films, the limitation of Gong’s study lies in that it merely concentrates on the plots of the films separately without any in-depth insight of the film style or cultural and social interpretation on his love trilogy, which is far from adequate in the realm of films studies.

The one and only book specially studying Peter Chan’s works is *Peter Ho-sun Chan: My Way*, which was published with the collaboration of the 36<sup>th</sup> Hong Kong International Film Festival (2012). Chan was selected as the director in focus of that year and this book is a thorough collection of originally scattered interviews, essays and film notes on Chan or his works, which provides the readers with a considerable amount of materials to have an overview of Chan’s films. As for his love trilogy, *nomadism vs. stability*, *drifters* and *nostalgia*

---

<sup>5</sup> Gong Lihong 龚莉红, “Caogen jieji de piaobo aiqing- daoyan Chen Kexin de aiqing sanbuqu” 草根阶级的“漂泊爱情”——导演陈可辛的爱情三部曲 [“Floating Love” of the Grass Roots: Peter Chan’s Love Trilogy], *dianying wenxue* 电影文学, 2006 (01): 13-14.

become the key words to understand these films. The authors suggest some thought-provoking ideas on Chan's love trilogy: Thomas Shin asserts that *Alan and Eric: Between Hello and Goodbye* embodies its creator's mixed feelings towards circumstances and destiny, with a type of self-pity that is typical among Hong Kongers;<sup>6</sup> Matthew Cheng regards *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* as a reminder of the milestones of Hong Kong's colonial history and portrays the transitory feeling of both immigrants and Hong Kongers by characterizing Li Xiaojun and Li Qiao;<sup>7</sup> Tong Ching-siu attends to every individual character and argues that all the three main characters in *Perhaps Love* "are revising the present through the filter of the past," and that the film's text shows Chan's efforts for a renewal in his own directorial career.<sup>8</sup> Despite the depth of thinking in these articles, they elaborate mainly the themes of the films with little artistic assessment. But apart from this, the comments from Peter Chan, actors and other relevant staff on his films give researchers a unique opportunity to probe the creation of Chan's films, so as to interpret them more appropriately. This edited volume offers substantial information on Chan's production, yet leaves the artistic aspects to be discovered for solid support for the arguments in many authors' articles.

---

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Shin, "Nomadism vs. Stability," in *Peter Ho-sun Chan: My Way* ed. Li Cheuk-to, 200-203 (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing co., Ltd., 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Cheng, "The Drifters," in *Peter Ho-sun Chan: My Way* ed. Li Cheuk-to, 216-219 (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing co., Ltd., 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Tong Ching-siu, "Nostalgia in *Perhaps Love*," in *Peter Ho-sun Chan: My Way* ed. Li

*Comrades: Almost a Love Story* draws more attention from the Chinese scholars than the other two films in Chan's love trilogy. Among all the studies on Chan's films in Chinese, the book *80 Years of Hong Kong Film (Xianggang dianying 80 nian* [香港电影 80 年]) stands out with its relatively detailed analysis of this film. In the collection "Short Essays on *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (*Tian mimi duanping* [甜蜜蜜短评])," the Chinese scholars combine the analysis of audio-visual languages with the discussion of issues on love, life and identity.<sup>9</sup> This collection may inspire researchers in that it takes the film techniques into account, which arouses their interest to delve into the Chan's filmic style and illuminate the issues embedded in Chan's works. The methodology developed by these scholars sets an example for close analysis of Chan's love trilogy but their mere focus on one single film calls for a wider scope of the research concerning film art appreciation and film theme interpretation of all these three films.

There is a limited amount of English literature on Chan's works. However, several valuable academic studies are still worth noticing:

In *Speaking Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers*

---

Cheuk-to, 236-239 (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing co., Ltd., 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Wang Fanghua 汪方华, He Jianping 何建平, Tang Ke 唐科 and Deng Guanghui 邓光辉, "Tian mimi duanping" 甜蜜蜜短评 [Short Essays on *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*], in *Xianggang dianying 80 nian* 香港电影八十年 eds. Cai Hongsheng 蔡洪声, Song Jialing 宋家玲, and Liu Guiqing 刘桂清, 241-257 (Beijing: Beijing Broadcasting Institute Press, 2000).

(2005), Michael Berry's interview of Chan serves as a general guide to introduce Chan's significant works from 1991 to 2005: the transnational environment in which Chan was raised, different stages of Chan's directorial career and details of the production of his several films are revealed. As for Chan's love trilogy, Berry was curious about the personal feelings of Chan and his comments on and interaction with the actors when he shot *Alan and Eric*, *between Hello and Goodbye*, and *Comrades: almost a Love Story*, as well as what Chan thinks about how both personal (the Opportunity Furniture Store) and collective memories (popular songs of Teresa Teng [邓丽君]) are embedded in *Comrades*. Due to the fact that the book was published before *Perhaps Love* was released, the interview does not contain any content related to this film. Berry offers a great deal of first-hand information on the production of Chan's films, but he does not analyze them from the perspectives of film studies or social studies because of the limitations of an interview.

In contrast to Berry's interview, some social or historic insights are provided in other books or journals. Yingjin Zhang brings up the 1997 anxiety with questions of identity and ethnicity in his article "Old and New Ethnicities in *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*." By analyzing the functions of the three regions (mainland China, Hong Kong and New York) that are mentioned in the film *Comrades* and referring to the concept "the Other," he claims that "by treating

New York merely a setting, Hong Kong as a port of transit, and mainland China as a singular point of reference,” *Comrades* does not adequately explore the conflicts between old and new identities, or old and new ethnicities.<sup>10</sup> Zhang especially argues that the film *Comrades* is highly ambivalent in its treatment of the immigration theme.<sup>11</sup> Besides *Comrades*, Zhang points out that *Alan and Eric* tackles the diaspora issues as well.<sup>12</sup> However, the analysis of this film is nothing but a one-sentenced general introduction to its plot. Zhang’s article raises the questions of identity and ethnicity as an entrance to further dig into the themes of Chan’s films, which attempts to discuss the relations between the settings. His work introduces a practical perspective to view the social factors lying behind Chan’s films.

Another article that concentrates on *Comrades* is Tsung-yi Michelle Huang’s “Cinematic Imagination of Border-Crossing in Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta: *Comrades*, *Almost a Love Story* and *Durian, Durian*.” In this article, Huang explains how the representation of the female protagonist Li Qiao (who comes from Guangzhou as a “fake Hong Kong girl”) and the lack of representation of her hometown Guangzhou echo the Hong Kong-PRD

---

<sup>10</sup> Yingjin Zhang, *Screening China: Critical Interventions, Cinematic Reconfigurations, and the Transnational Imaginary in Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press: 2002), 271-276.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 272.

relationship as “the ‘front shop, back factory’ economic partnership.”<sup>13</sup> By giving the readers a couple of examples about the affinity of Li Qiao’s hometown with Hong Kong, and her various kinds of endeavors and achievements in Hong Kong, Huang thinks that the heroine’s ambiguous identity not only emphasizes on the Hong Kong-centered ideology, but also “serves to reflect the significance of recognizing a newly emerging [immigrants’] community in Hong Kong.”<sup>14</sup> This article offers a relatively detailed way to analyze the characters in this film, but it is inadequate when it comes to the inter-relation between the hero and heroine with other characters in that film.

Regarding the most recent film in Chan’s love trilogy, *Perhaps Love*, two scholars, Vivian P. Y. Lee and Stephen Teo mention an interesting concept called “Pan-Asian film” in their research. Because of his transnational background, Chan possesses an incomparable advantage over other directors when producing films with both pan-Asian contents and pan-Asian style. Therefore his success is worth discussing since it involves wide utilization of material and spiritual resources across Asia, such as advanced film technology, large markets, skilled film crew, especially dynamic *cultures*. By virtue of Wang and Yeh’s mechanism of “deculturalization (toning down or eliminating ‘difficult’ or ‘unpopular’ local

---

<sup>13</sup> That refers to the fact that quite a lot of products from PRD are sold in Hong Kong.

<sup>14</sup> Tsung-yi Michelle Huang, “Cinematic Imagination of Border-Crossing in Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta: *Comrades*, *Almost a Love Story* and *Durian, Durian*,” in *East Asian Cinemas: Regional Flows and Global Transformations* ed. Vivian P. Y. Lee, 170-188 (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York, NY : Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

elements), aculturalization (foregrounding ‘universal’ themes and images) and resulturalization (re-introducing culturally specific messages)” in transnational filmmaking,<sup>15</sup> Vivian P. Y. Lee concerns two important facets of Applause Pictures’ productions, namely the use of *nostalgia* and *memory*, as well as the changing form and content of the China factor<sup>16</sup> in the cinematic imagination, in her article *Outside the Nation: the Pan-Asian Trajectory of Applause Pictures*. After taking a glance at the film’s self-referential narrative, triangular relationship among the protagonists and use of Indian dance, she defines *Perhaps Love* as an “Asian” version of the Western musical, and draws the conclusion that this film bespeaks “a desire to ‘deculturalize’ not a specific text,” and “‘reculturalize’ it through a ‘local’ love story spanning the years of China’s own romance with the market economy.”<sup>17</sup> She thus explores the reasons why *Perhaps Love* gained high reputation in China and Hong Kong but did not in the West. Lee’s insight is inspiring, for the issues of *modernity* and *nostalgia* in *Perhaps Love* are also discussed the other two films. This perspective would help to achieve a more thorough interpretation of the social background that these three films try to present.

---

<sup>15</sup> Georgette Wang and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, “Globalization and Hybridization in Cultural Products: the Cases of *Mulan* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, June 2005, Vol. 8 No. 2, 175-193.

<sup>16</sup> This refers to typical features that can represent China, such as Chinese-style costumes, settings, cultural symbols and so forth.

<sup>17</sup> Vivian P. Y. Lee, *Hong Kong Cinema since 1997: the Post-nostalgic Imagination* (New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 184-210.



Similar to Lee, Stephen Teo treats *Perhaps Love* as an examination of Pan-Asian identity in his paper “*Promise and Perhaps Love: Pan-Asian Production and the Hong Kong-China Interrelationship.*” (2008) He asserts that in this film, identity is expressed through the genre of the musical blending Bollywood-style choreography with Mandarin-pop in a Chinese setting. In addition, according to Teo, the bind of *memory* and *amnesia* acts as “a necessary condition towards seeking and acquiring a new identity,” which reinforces the metaphor of renewal.<sup>18</sup> Since this paper is an attempt to deal with the question “how Chinese cinema reacts to Pan-Asian production,” it avoids citing abundant detailed examples with regard to the film’s form and style. Yet Teo again stresses the issue of “identity,” just as Zhang does in his study on *Comrades*. It is totally reasonable to speculate that *Perhaps Love* might be an extension of the discussion aroused by *Comrades*, for both films quest for a method to reflect the “rootless status” of Chinese people.

As much as the success of *Alan and Eric* brought Chan into the spotlight as a director, scholars have not paid much attention to this film, probably because of its “immaturity” in terms of filmic techniques, and limited publicity. Indeed, my review of the literature relevant to Chan’s love trilogy shows a lack of systematic penetration which treats these three films together as a continuum. In

---

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Teo, “*Promise and Perhaps Love: Pan-Asian Production and the Hong Kong-China Interrelationship,*” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2008, 341-358.

spite of the distinct attributes they have, they bespeak a consistent way of design: all these films convey the theme of “drifting,” namely leaving one’s hometown and settling down in a flourishing but unfamiliar place. Chan devotes himself to constructing triangular (or even rectangular) love relations in his love trilogy, reflecting upon the trade-off between creature comfort and spiritual demand under the circumstance of modernity.

Additionally, the filmmaker’s artistic and commercial successes can be attributed to the trans-regional themes implicated in the films, as well as to more and more sophisticated cinematic forms with style, something that has been neglected by western scholars due to the unfamiliarity with the cultural contexts in mainland China and Hong Kong. Accordingly, this thesis is an attempt not only to integrate the results gained through the studies of previous scholars, but also to add an extensive analysis of Chan’s choice between individuals’ emotional experiences and social/historical facts.

## **Significance and Focus of This Thesis**

Peter Chan is widely acknowledged across Greater China: as mentioned, films labeled “made by Peter Ho-sun Chan” have great appeal for Chinese audiences. He is highly praised for his commercial and artistic achievement. Li Cheuk-to, Artistic Director of Hong Kong International Film Festival, comments that “very few can match Chan’s seemingly endless creativity and versatility, sustained

throughout his decades-long filmmaking career.”<sup>19</sup> Instead of organizing a huge narrative structure of the development in society, Chan as a social elite, expresses his concerns for the individuals who are influenced by the social changes. He is so proficient in projecting his personal drifting experiences on his works that they often arouse affective resonance among the viewers who have been through the corresponding period. All the above achievements of his intrigue me and will be discussed in detail in this thesis.

Furthermore, this thesis would serve as a complement to previous studies on Chan’s films. The purpose of my study is to come up with an original interpretation from the perspectives of narratology and film studies, and provide an alternative comprehension of Peter Chan’s accentuation in his works. Although it is not unusual that Chinese cinema is put under the spotlight, most analyses focus exclusively on the themes or plots of the films. There remains a lack of insight on the artistic style of Chinese films. On account of the different cultures in which art is rooted, means of artistic expression may vary between Chinese films and films from other regions. Thus, it is biased for some scholars view Chinese films without understanding Chinese culture and society, or to take them simply for plots that display what happened in China. WHAT stories the directors tell matters for sure, but this does not mean that HOW the directors tell

---

<sup>19</sup> Li Cheuk-to, *Peter Ho-sun Chan: My Way* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing co., Ltd., 2012), 6-7.

their stories should be ignored. Ideological analyses in film studies conduct a process of active reading, making the films “say” what they have to say within what they leave unsaid and to reveal their constituent lacks which are neither faults nor the deception on the part of the director.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the omission and selection of the film are crucial for us if we hope to discover Chan’s directorial philosophy hidden behind the film through a close analysis. Supported by this critical opinion, my thesis would intensively study the motifs of Chan’s love trilogy, combining the in-depth analysis of elements related to film style (mise-en-scene, editing, framing, camera movement, sound, etc.) with cultural and social interpretation, in order to achieve comprehensive understanding of the narrative functions of the motifs that appear in these films, and Chan’s accentuation when depicting drifting Chinese people.

In their discussion on the relation between film form and meaning, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson divide the meanings of films into four categories: referential meaning, explicit meaning, implicit meaning and symptomatic meaning. Referential meaning is very concrete and close to a bare-bones plot summary. Explicit meaning is a sort of *openly* asserted meaning, arising from the whole film and is set in dynamic formal relation to one another. Compared to the previous two meanings, implicit meaning is more abstract and

---

<sup>20</sup> Philip Rosen, ed., *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: a Film Theory Reader* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1986), 447.

should be *suggested* by interpretation. Last but not least, symptomatic is based on explicit and implicit meanings and manifests a wider set of values characteristic of a whole society, i.e. social ideology.<sup>21</sup>

Since my thesis will focus on the implicit and symptomatic meanings embodied in Chan's love trilogy, the analysis of the narrative strategies will not only reveal what the films try to emphasize formally, but also connect the film narratives with social development in general. By virtue of an interpretation based on a social and cultural background, we can delve more deeply into the social symptoms conveyed by the films and conjecture the director's concerns and solutions, if there is any. In view of the discussion of the motifs, this thesis is also going to continue to reflect on the omission and selection of Chan's love trilogy for a conclusion on what on earth Peter Chan plans to express through his works on multifarious rootless Chinese people.

## **Redefining “Motif”**

Bordwell and Thompson define “motif” in *Film Art: an Introduction*, as “an element in a film that is repeated in a significant way.”<sup>22</sup> This definition lays the foundation for the analysis of the style of a single film, for it opens the door to take the pervasive presence of similarity and repetition as formal principles.

---

<sup>21</sup> David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: an Introduction*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 49-52.

<sup>22</sup> David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: an Introduction*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 57.

Objects, colors, places and even sound can be brought into discussion. When it comes to the question of summarizing the filmic style of a certain director through his/her several works, the concept “motif” explained by Bordwell and Thompson seems incomprehensive. For example, Alfred Hitchcock’s distinctive directorial style can be established via the use of a camera imitating a person’s gaze, leading viewers to engage in a form of voyeurism. With this in mind, it is not difficult for us to find clues of similar camera movement when researchers study Hitchcock’s films. Yet this feature cannot be extracted unless there is a critical mass of his works available.

Therefore, in this thesis I would like to re-define the concept of “motif” in a broader way: an element that is repeated in a significant way in a single film, or *in a series of relevant or connected films* (e.g. directed by the same person, possess similar themes, etc.). Hopefully this new definition can be applied more widely to close analyses of individual films, especially to comparative film studies. With the help of this concept, we may discover the style of a single film as well as a series of films. Not only does Peter Chan have a keen eye to pick skillful actors, but he is also very good at exploiting certain elements and emphasizing them repeatedly in his love trilogy. He is a very detail-oriented director and does a fascinating job in setting off an atmosphere by meanings of objects/setting and popular songs as motifs. Both these two sorts of motifs tempt

the audiences into identifying themselves with the characters. What is worth mentioning is that Chan (perhaps) unconsciously exhibits an inclination to exploit similar object and filmic technique when discussing similar kinds of relationships. Therefore, the generalized concept of “motif” will be of great help to the interpretation of his filmic style and propositions.

## **Plot Summary**

Below is a general introduction to the plots of all the films that I am going to discuss in the following chapters:

*Alan and Eric: Between Hello and Goodbye* is a tearjerker about two close friends, Alan Tam and Eric Tsang. Eric is a selfless, considerate and generous man who would love to give up everything for those he cares about: he gave the precious opportunity to perform a song in front of the whole school to his best friend Alan and he invited Alan to play on his father’s ship. Due to his father’s huge debts, Eric had to seek refuge in San Francisco with his father. He went through a miserable time overseas and lost his father there. As these young friends turned adult, Eric returned to his hometown, Hong Kong and encounters his long-lost friend Alan, who is doing a part time job at a local pub. They are so excited to see one another again that they decide to establish their collaborative career by opening a chicken farm. Soon after coming back to Hong Kong, Eric meets a beautiful and kind-hearted girl called Olive. Eric’s unrequited love for

Olive grows gradually but he chooses to conceal his love when he finds out that Olive and Alan have a mutual crush. With Eric's help, Alan makes great progress in his own career as a singer while his love affair with Olive progresses. However, one stormy night destroys Eric's chicken farm. He can do nothing but fish on the sea for a living. Meanwhile, in the full flush of success, Alan grows in popularity and gets unable to stay with his girlfriend Olive, which makes her feel more and more lonely. Eric tries his best to accompany Olive whenever he comes back from the sea and his deeds touch Olive, and the relationship between the three become awkward until one day both Eric and Olive leave Alan since they cannot handle this relationship. Alan loses contact with them. A couple of years later, when he is having a concert in San Francisco, he finds with great surprise that Olive is in the same city, looking after Eric. At that time, Eric gets severely sick with incurable diabetes. They determine to go sailing together, so as to realize Eric and Alan's childhood dream in Eric's last few days of life. Finally, Eric dies without any regret on the ship. Alan and Olive start a new life as a couple again and with Eric's blessing, they never feel guilty.

*Comrades: Almost a Love Story* centers on two Chinese mainlanders who migrate to Hong Kong to make a living. Li Xiaojun is an inexperienced young man who comes from Tianjin (North China). The heroine Li Qiao, is an aggressive Cantonese woman who spares no efforts to make a fortune in Hong



Kong. As aliens of this global city, they are often isolated from the social mainstream. The loneliness of living in the big city gradually brings them into a passionate love affair. But different life ambitions disperse them, when Li Xiaojun marries his fiancée, and Li Qiao winds up in a relationship with a mob boss named Pao, ascending among the upper class of the local society and achieving her “Hong Kong dream.” Despite their seemingly separate lives, there is still chemistry between them secretly. Burdened by guilt, Xiaojun confesses to his wife about his love for Qiao and hopes to live together with Qiao. Unfortunately, Qiao intends to confess the same thing to Pao, only to find that he is being chased by the Hong Kong police and has to escape to the US as an illegal immigrant. Qiao moves there with Pao out of sympathy and Xiaojun leaves Hong Kong with disappointment, and becomes a cook in the United States. Almost 10 years later, Xiaojun and Qiao meet again as two lonely outsiders in another metropolis, New York. By then, both of them have already been freed from their previous partners – Xiaojun gets divorced, and Pao is killed in a robbery. After having gone through so much, they fatefully see each other in front of one shop, smiling with tears.

The story of *Perhaps Love* is structured around a love triangle between Mainland actress Sun Na and her two lovers, mainland director Nie Wen (current) and Hong Kong pop star Lin Jiandong (previous). Nie is making a musical

starring Sun and Lin, without knowing that Sun has met Lin ten years ago when she was a cabaret singer and Lin was a film student in Beijing. At that time, Sun wanted to become a famous actress and act in Hollywood films, while Lin's dream was to direct his own films. They helped each other during the hardest time of their life and fell in love until one day Sun abandoned Lin for a "brighter" future since she could trade sex for roles in the films with directors. Lin was greatly shocked and quit his study, but ironically became a famous actor. Every day of these ten years is full of Lin's deep hatred for Sun. When he finally gets a chance to meet Sun again, he feels astonished that she refuses to acknowledge any detail of their past.

By coincidence, the reality overlaps with the musical planned by Nie, in which a girl called Xiaoyu loses her memory and comes to live with a circus. Sun plays the amnesiac girl and Lin her former boyfriend who tries to revive her memories. The reality and the play are tightly interwoven. Lin tries desperately to win back Sun's lost love, for he can never reconcile himself to the fact that the girl he used to love turns out to be so snobbish. As the shooting process goes on, Nie himself plays the role of the obsessive circus owner in the musical and discovers Sun and Lin's past romance. He is tortured by his jealousy and wants to escape from the studio. In the meantime, Lin takes Sun back to Beijing, reminding her of their love in the past. Sun gets moved but cannot give up what

she earns now. So she convinces Lin to return to the studio with her and finds Nie grieving over the loss of true love. Eventually, the circus owner played by him commits suicide in the play. On the one hand, Nie also chooses to end his relationship with Sun, pursuing the dream of shooting a simple love story, which he has had since he was an unknown director. On the other hand, Sun and Lin do not end up together, probably because their original love (if there was any) has decayed in front of the materialistic world.

## **Chapter Overview**

Focusing on the narrative functions of motifs in Chan's love trilogy, my thesis consists of three chapters.

Chapter One examines the object/setting motifs in each of Chan's love trilogy, combining a close analysis of the use of audio-visual languages related to the motifs, so as to delve into the traits of the main characters, such as their characteristics, experiences, feelings and so on. By taking the implicit and symptomatic meanings into consideration, this chapter attempts to provide a thorough understanding of the emotional life of drifting Chinese people.

The discussion in Chapter Two is set around a crucial cultural symbol that appears frequently throughout Chan's love trilogy- popular songs. It concentrates mainly on two aspects of the popular songs played repeatedly in these three films: first, the lyrics with their explicit meanings and second,

collective culture or memories behind them, which convey the implicit and even symptomatic meaning that the director hopes to express. Besides, film techniques and plots involved with the popular songs will be brought into discussion as well. All the aforementioned elements on popular songs would contribute to the interpretation of the interactions between characters.

After a detailed review of the motifs in each individual film, Chapter Three switches its attention to the motifs that have been used *commonly* in all these three films: one object/setting (cage) and one technique (voice-over). Since the three films are regarded as a continuum in this thesis, there is supposed to be something in common among them in terms of film form and meaning. With the help of these two motifs in Chan's love trilogy, the emotional dissatisfaction and struggle of drifting Chinese people are clearly depicted, which reflect their living state in society.

# 1. Respective Motifs in Chan's Love Trilogy and Character-traits

In Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's narrative theory, character, as on construct within the abstracted story, can be described in terms of a network of character-traits.<sup>23</sup> Traits are defined as relatively stable or abiding personal quality and are known through evidence of repeated actions.<sup>24</sup> In addition, Seymour Chatman views setting as something that "sets the character off" in the usual figurative sense of expression. It is the place and collection of objects against which the characters' actions and passions appropriately emerge.<sup>25</sup> Analyzing the motifs (objects, setting, music, etc.) with respect to the characters' actions is extremely helpful for the comprehension of characters and it orients us to discern their inner world. It is no exaggeration to say that some objects/setting that have been repeated again and again provide hints related to characters in the films. Hence the motifs as objects are worth paying attention to when we try to understand the characters.

---

<sup>23</sup> Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 59.

<sup>24</sup> Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 122-126.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 138-139.

## **1.1 *Alan and Eric: Between Hello and Goodbye***

### **1.1.1 Ships: Reflection of Eric's Whole Life**

“Ship” is the key word through Eric’s whole life. Everything that he has encountered is shown by the motif “ship.” At the very beginning of the film, the viewers are impressed by the close friendship between little Eric and little Alan. It is Eric who generously invites Alan to his father’s ship and tells him that the most important thing in life is to be a “good sport,” which indicates that he would love to sacrifice him for the sake of his friend. Holding a ship model together in the foreground, the two children talk about their dream of exploring the “treasure island,” with a real ship in the background. This shot symbolizes their inspiration and ambition, and makes Eric’s departure especially sad. When Eric moves to San Francisco with his father, he gives the ship model to Alan as a gift and asks him take care of it while waiting for him to come back. Years have passed and when the camera pans to watch around the decoration of adult Alan’s bedroom, the ship model, which is still in good shape, appears in the frame again. Obviously, Alan cherishes it and tries his best to preserve the only thing left by his friend. When picking up the photo frame, Alan cannot help but think of his closet childhood friend again. As Eric surprisingly comes back to their hometown and shares the house with Alan, he stares at the ship model with a

meaningful look. It seems that his days in the US were tough, but somehow he does not feel like talking about it. He did travel across the ocean to the other side, yet this might not be the voyage he desires to have. So far the film presents for the first time the conflict between Eric's expedition as a sailor and reality of being inconspicuous.

Furthermore, the ship is also utilized as a way to stand for the relation between Eric and the girl he loves, Olive. Eric takes a delicate chocolate ship to his first date with Olive and describes Olive as his "girlfriend" to the waitress. Needless to say, what he prepares is a gift that combines romance and dream. This scene is intentionally cross-cut by the scene where Olive is working in a painting production factory. Unlike other workers, she pays attention to the details of each work despite the longer time it takes and draws a little boat on the canvas even though it is not required. The chocolate ship and the tiny boat forms a parallel between Eric and Olive in that facing the difficulties in life, they both hold an optimistic attitude and never give up their dreams. Yet Olive's cute boat is erased by her boss, for speed is everything in mass production. Knowing that Olive cannot make this appointment on account of the conflict of opinions, Eric gets so disappointed that when he returns to his place, he eats the chocolate ship himself and even smashes the ship into pieces with great anger later. Both the erased boat and the broken "ship" imply that Eric and Olive will not end up as

lovers although they are both idealists and additionally, they may even have to either sacrifice their creativity or repress their feelings, without realizing their dreams freely as they expected.

After the failure with his chicken farm, Eric becomes a fisherman of no fixed abode. By this means he sees real ships again but this seems to drag him further from his original dream. He loses contact with Alan for years until one day Alan finds him severely sick in San Francisco. Alan decides to make their promise come true and discovers a real place called “Treasure Island” near San Francisco. There, they are surrounded by ships of all sizes and Eric finally becomes a real sailor with the help of Alan and Olive. At the end of his life, he summarizes that the biggest failure in his life, is the fact that he loves the sea, which prevents him from being down-to-earth. His last words are a pun: on the one hand, it is such a pity that his dream of being a sailor is out of reach with his frustrating childhood and marginalized identity in the strange land; on the other hand, his pursuit of true love with a pretty girl can never be finished owing to his below-average appearance. The ships in *Alan and Eric* serve as a clue to string the segments of Eric’s life, revealing his misery and vitalizing this character.



## **1.2 *Comrades: Almost a Love Story***

### **1.2.1 ATM and the Opportunity Furniture Store: Xiaojun and Qiao's Ups and Downs**

As two young people who strive for a better life in a metropolis like Hong Kong, Li Xiaojun and Li Qiao inevitably care most about how much they have earned, hence they like to check their accounts on the ATM every now and then. The number displayed on the machine not only reveals the result of their efforts in a certain phase, but also determines what they are inclined to do in the next phase.

In *Comrades*, the first time Qiao and Xiaojun stand in front of an ATM, we see Xiaojun experiencing one of these novelties. In 1986 the ATM was still unknown to Mainlanders. Qiao gets excited with a smile on her face, seeing an unprecedentedly huge amount (HKD 12639.91) on her bank account. Behind her, Xiaojun is fairly curious and cannot help stretching forward his neck, only to get “scolded” by Qiao. Although she sounds angry, she is in fact ecstatic, as all her hard work at McDonald’s and the English continuation class has paid off. The shot is followed by a static shot of the Opportunity Furniture Store, which is located in Tsim Sha Tsui [尖沙咀],<sup>26</sup> Chan’s most impressive place in his

---

<sup>26</sup> The most prosperous entertainment and shopping area in Hong Kong.

childhood.<sup>27</sup> Such a shabby place forms a clear-cut contrast with the McDonald's bright red uniform worn by Qiao, indicating that in order to benefit from the swiftly developing economy in Asia, one has to adapt himself/herself to the modernity of the global city as quickly as possible. In this scene Chan plays a kind of hilarious music that is consistent with the relaxing atmosphere.

Xiaojun envies Qiao for her benefits so much that he would love to be her apprentice and begs Qiao to teach him how to "make big money" in Hong Kong. Afterwards they cooperate to sell Teresa Teng's cassette tapes in the night market but remain ignored by local people. In their disappointment they find solace in a one-night stand. However, their relationship turns closer and closer and they spend the happiest time together. Then it comes to the second time when the two young people go to the ATM. This time Xiaojun also gets his own account to check but he keeps dialing the wrong password. As a consequence, the bank locks his account. The confusing look on Xiaojun's face hints that he still has great difficulty integrating himself into the local community but this also renders this character amiable. Qiao checks her account again and comforts Xiaojun at the same time. When the screen of the cash machine shows "32639.91," Qiao feels crazy about her saving and suggests Xiaojun to invest his money in the stock market in Hong Kong. Yet Xiaojun has a hard time

---

<sup>27</sup> Michael Berry, *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 500.

understanding the market, since he has no idea what a German Mark is when Qiao mentions it. When they pass by the Opportunity Furniture Store again in the following shot, Qiao explains to Xiaojun that stock and foreign currency are two effective ways to make a lot of money, and stock market is to Hong Kong what petroleum is to Saudi Arabia and durians are to Thailand. What is interesting in this scene is that while walking with Qiao, Xiaojun stops to tie his shoe and falls behind Qiao. This reflects the fact that he still has a lot to catch up with the local people no matter how hard he tries. The music utilized is still a cheerful melody played by the piano and at last, Xiaojun asks Qiao again to help him to make his fortune in the stock market.

Nevertheless, profiting from the stock market is not as easy as they thought. The bass piano at the end of the scene of the stock market (between the second and third ATM scenes) more or less foretells a depressing result of their decision. Through the screen of the ATM, the audiences can see their uneasy faces during the last time they show up together in front of the machine. They have experienced a big loss because of the uncertainty of the capitalist stock market. It can be inferred from Qiao's casual way of dressing that she has quit her job at McDonald's so that she can concentrate on her investment. Her passion for the stock turns out to be a bitter disappointment since she has to start all over when there is only 89 HKD in her account. Then as they pass the

Opportunity Furniture Store for the third time, the speed of their movement has slowed down. The saxophone plays a piece of very sorrowful music. And the door of that store becomes closed, just like Qiao and Xiaojun, who get severely hurt in their hearts and feel hopeless. The big loss is the exact reason why Qiao has to work as a masseuse, which also involves prostitution.

After analyzing the ATM and the Opportunity Furniture Store as motifs, we can figure that Chan takes advantage of these three times relevant to the ATM to display the characters' fate. And the Opportunity Furniture Store is used every time after they go to the ATM as a follow-up shot. Chan chooses to shoot the storefront in different speeds to capture a variety of moods and feelings of the hero and heroine.

### **1.2.2 Mickey Mouse: Qiao's Hope for Wealth and Pao's Love for Her**

Qiao's broken dream of being rich is succeeded by her running into another man, Pao, who is the second important man in her life or more accurately, the one who completely changes her life. In this part of the film clearly emerges a new motif transiting from Qiao's "pure love" with Xiaojun to "win-win love" with Pao.

When Qiao finds that she has lost almost all the money she has earned near the ATM, she wears a causal T-shirt with a Mickey Mouse on it. And this is also the exact shirt she wears when she first steps into the massage parlor. With this

T-shirt on, Qiao receives nothing but frustration. However, she particularly pins a Mickey Mouse to the “uniform” she wears at work. Clearly, it is no coincidence that the Mickey Mouse appears twice without any reason.

As a matter of fact, the Mickey Mouse pin acts as a guide introducing Pao to Qiao. When Qiao enters the room where she is going to massage Pao, she fails to see the face of him. Instead, Pao is ready for the massages with his back naked and exposed to her. It is quite a creepy back with dense tattoos. During the massage, his gang members come to report to him and he ruthlessly commands them to kill someone who owes him money. Surprisingly, Qiao does not feel frightened by his cruelty. She chats with Pao calmly and says quietly that the only thing that scares her is mice. From this line, we may speculate that mice signify her fear of the hardship she is going to suffer in the unpredictable future and she would utilize Mickey Mouse, the special symbol of happiness and prosperity, to pray for better luck. In fact, this is not the first time that Mickey Mouse comes out on screen: as Qiao takes Xiaojun to register for an English class, she is carrying a bag with Mickey Mouse on the surface. And when she spends the hot night with Xiaojun waiting outside the stock market, she wears a Mickey Mouse watch. If we take a look back at this specially designed prop, we may notice that Qiao has stuff with Mickey Mouse with her everytime she deals with money, and conclude that Qiao is a girl who would love to try every

possible way out of the great fear of poverty, as long as it helps her out.

Qiao's courage impresses Pao so much that next time when Qiao comes to massage him, Pao tells him that he brings a new friend whom Qiao might feel uncomfortable with. Qiao's eye-line shot tells that the "friend" is actually a Mickey Mouse tattoo right in the center of his back. The appearance of Mickey Mouse on Pao's back implies the wealth he can bring to Qiao. Pao cares about Qiao's mood by asking why she does not smile at all. A mutual crush grows between them, when Xiaojun stays at his place, watching a couple break up in the TV drama and calls Qiao's beeper. Qiao gets distracted and Pao asks whether she wants to earn some "extra" money or not. Her hesitation is exhibited through several dissolves<sup>28</sup> between the close-ups of Qiao's face and her beeper. The hesitation ends up with a freeze frame of Qiao turning off the beeper, with the voice-over of Xiaojun's last message "Byebye" left for her. From then on, these lovers chase their own dreams separately.

"Getting rid" of one another, they seem both able to achieve what they once dreamed of: Xiaojun gets married with his fiancée Xiaoting in Hong Kong and on their wedding day, Qiao shows up as a successful business woman who can afford to stay in luxurious hotels, squander money shopping and speak fluent

---

<sup>28</sup> "A transition between two shots during which the first image gradually disappears while the second image gradually appears; for a moment the two images blend in superimposition." See David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: an Introduction*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 493.

English. However, this does not equal the content with their current lives: Xiaojun sighs as he recalls the hard time he had when he first arrived in Hong Kong and laments if only Xiaoting was there attending him through the toughest time, while Qiao cannot fall asleep at all at Pao's home since she misses Xiaojun so much. The Mickey Mouse doll put near the edge of the frame illustrates that Pao's wealth does not bring an end to her feelings for Xiaojun. Her remaining feelings for Xiaojun impels her to help him and his wife as much as she can, but morality restrains her from pouring out her feelings to Xiaojun. Then one day, when they are alone in Qiao's car, there is an awkward silence. Here Mickey Mouse appears again as a hanging decoration. Mickey Mouse is the pivotal stuff that expands the story between Qiao and Pao, hence it represents Pao in a way throughout the film. Peter Chan intentionally locates it between the two characters, referring to the fact that Pao has already changed their love. This concealed love will not work until the death of Pao. Having fled to New York as a hobo, Pao has nothing to offer Qiao except his love. The rootlessness in the US deprives his power and makes him helpless. It is pathetic to see that a lordly mob boss is bullied by a bunch of teenage gangsters and gets shot to death during conflict. The Mickey Mouse tattoo is the last thing that Qiao can use to convince herself of his death, for she does not want to believe that she loses another important life partner. At this moment, Mickey Mouse accentuates Pao's love for

Qiao, as well as arouses sympathy for Pao's rootlessness among the audiences.

In short, Mickey Mouse functions as a sign to show Qiao's hope for wealth and it is emphasized more and more as her life is getting tougher and tougher. After she meets Pao, Mickey Mouse turns to be a symbol of Pao's love and protection for Qiao, which once gave her firm shelter but can never replace her love to Xiaojun while the man behind the symbol, Pao, passes away.

### **1.2.3 Bicycle: Xiaojun's Changes in Life**

Xiaojun takes an old-fashioned bicycle to Hong Kong. The bicycle was once one of the most crucial objects to Chinese families in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, automobiles were still unusual among ordinary people, and bicycles prevailed and evolved as the major means of transportation. This had a significant impact on a whole generation, thus as a young man from the mainland in the 1980s, Xiaojun cherishes his own bicycle and he regards it as his best companion who stays by his side, experiencing life with him together.

Xiaojun utilizes his bicycle to find his first job: according to his narration in the voice-over, it is a job related to a "transportation business," which offers him considerable benefits with very little work. But the following shot that accompanies his voice-over shows Xiaojun riding the bike with several chickens in the basket. Obviously, his real job is not as ideal as he pictures it, since it is merely delivery. The contrast between his old bike and the numerous cars on the



road makes him fairly humble. The effects of low key lighting are enhanced by Xiaojun's dark blue coat and the slightly foggy street, indicating that Xiaojun has to start working early in morning, and he feels blue at the beginning of his life in Hong Kong.

As he familiarizes himself with Tsim Sha Tsui, one of the liveliest districts in Hong Kong, Xiaojun begins to enjoy the novel life. Peter Chan employs a series of shots to capture Xiaojun's curiosity about life: a close-up of his footsteps and a high angle shot to blend him into the crowd; a close-up of the chicken hung on his bike when he delivers goods to the clients; a low angle shot of a chicken store with the camera quickly tilting to shoot Xiaojun eating by his bike, singing "I am a soldier. I come from common people. I ejected the Japanese invaders..."<sup>29</sup> When riding his bike, he sings another song called *Dongfang hong* [东方红] (*The East is Red*).<sup>30</sup> There is even one time when he whips his bike with a belt as if it was a real dashing horse. With the exhilarating national anthem of the People's Republic of China played as nondiegetic sound,<sup>31</sup> Peter Chan portrays Xiaojun's wild excitement in the midst of the modern city. The Chinese national anthem might be considered a reflection of

---

<sup>29</sup> This is a Chinese song called *Wo shi yi ge bing* [我是一个兵] (I am a Soldier) and composed in the infancy of the People's Republic of China, which expresses a young soldier's contribution to the country and his determination to guard his motherland.

<sup>30</sup> A song that extols the feats of Mao Zedong [毛泽东], the first chairman of the People's Republic of China.

<sup>31</sup> "Sound, such as mood music or a narrator's commentary, represented as coming from a source outside the space of the narrative." See David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: an Introduction*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 495.

Xiaojun's interior feelings: on the one hand, he marvels at the vitality, convenience and technology commonly seen in Hong Kong; on the other hand, he has been educated with a totally different ideology in the mainland that "revolution" is the core in life, which foreshows that his values will definitely be questioned and subverted.

After Xiaojun's first English class, he runs into Qiao cleaning the classroom since she also does a part time job there. Out of gratitude Xiaojun would like to offer Qiao a ride by telling her that he has a "car" (*che* [车] in Chinese, which is the abbreviation for both bicycles and automobiles). Qiao misunderstands his offer and agrees to let Xiaojun "drive" her home. Through the close-up of the wheel of the bike and Qiao's feet near it, we figure that Qiao gets on Xiaojun's battered bike anyway. She unwillingly corrects Xiaojun's wording for "bicycle" and emphasizes the different expressions between Hong Kong and mainland China, while Xiaojun shows no interest in this "useful" knowledge, just saying that this feels exactly like Tianjin and cannot help comparing Qiao with his fiancée Xiaoting, who used to sit behind him on the bike. Xiaojun's bike is a medium to connect him with the past, reminding him of the delightful days spent together with his fiancée and the culture in which he has been cultivated. There seems to be a huge gap between the "purebred"

mainlander Xiaojun and the fake Hong Kong girl Qiao.<sup>32</sup> After a while of silence, Qiao somehow thinks of the popular song *Tian mimi* (*Honey Sweetie*) and sings it aloud. On hearing her voice, Xiaojun turns overjoyed that Qiao can sing this well-known song in Mandarin, as she likes to speak Cantonese with Xiaojun a lot whether he understands it or not. They delightedly sing this song together and the film for the first time offers a possibility that Xiaojun and Qiao culturally have something in common, and their relation will be reinforced by ending this scene with an excerpt of this song played by a flute and a close-up of Qiao's swinging feet.

From the moment they begin to sing together, their relation gets closer and closer: Qiao starts to ask Xiaojun to deliver the flowers from the shop she works in every time he delivers the chickens, then the bike changes to a tie bonding them materially and spiritually. It carries Qiao's flowers in the basket and hangs Xiaojun's chickens in the back. Along with the shots of Xiaojun working as a delivery boy, Peter Chan inserts two voice-over dialogues between them two: in the first dialogue Xiaojun does not understand why the local people call him *biao shu* [表叔] (literally an uncle that is the cousin of one's father, which is an offensive name for mainlanders); Qiao thinks this name is ridiculous

---

<sup>32</sup> Qiao comes from Guangzhou, which has common cultural origin and close economic associations with Hong Kong. The natives in Guangzhou speak Cantonese as Hong Kongers do. It belongs to mainland China but Hong Kong has very strong economic and cultural influence on it. Grown up from this background, Qiao becomes a "fake" Hong Kong girl.

since the grandfathers and fathers of many local Hong Kongers also came from the mainland. In the second one Xiaojun admires Qiao for her proficiency in many fields and tells Qiao of his hobby. In reality, Qiao's attitude towards Xiaojun has changed little by little as she begins to mention the origin of Hong Kongers and affirms the inextricably linked relation between Hong Kong and mainland China in terms of blood. This is a turning point from which Qiao becomes less repelled by identifying herself with Xiaojun. Moreover, their relation changes from a mutually beneficial one to one of real friendship. Just as portrayed in a close-up of Xiaojun and Qiao's feet during another talk on the bike, Xiaojun treats Qiao as his only friend in Hong Kong because he is totally new to this city, and Qiao "could have" made quite a few friends if she spent her time on that instead of making money, indicating that Xiaojun is her only friend in turn. Their interdependent relation plays a crucial role in the first half of the film.

Xiaojun's bike witnesses the most joyful time they spend together but this comes to an end when Qiao decides to work as a masseuse owing to the shortage of money. As stated in the previous paragraphs, it is Qiao that terminates their relationship because they are different kinds of people with different dreams. Her determination shocks and frustrates Xiaojun so severely that he chooses not to contact her again. Then his bike remains unused for long.

Peter Chan designs a range of dissolved close-up shots of different parts of the bike, showing the whole process of its rusting until a close-up of the tarnished bell falling down. This is a reflection of Xiaojun's grief: he has to sacrifice his true happiness of living with Qiao, just for the achievement of his hollow dream of getting married in Hong Kong with someone he has few feelings for. He is pursuing a life with no sense at all right now. This sequence is concluded by the camera tracking backward. Again, the low-key lighting parallels Xiaojun's despair and sorrow. The bike is left further and further away from the camera until it disappears into the fade-out, just as Xiaojun is losing more and more joy in the real life until all of it is gone.

Since when did Xiaojun start to base his happiness on his bike? This question is not answered until the arrival of his fiancée Xiaoting. Qiao and Xiaojun's reunion in Xiaojun's wedding starts another chapter in their relation. From then on, Qiao tries to help Xiaojun and Xiaoting through her social network. As Qiao drives Xiaoting to work, Xiaoting recollects the time when Xiaojun and she hung out on his bike at dusk. That memory is unforgettable and somewhat reminds Qiao of the beautiful time with Xiaojun when they had "nothing." According to Xiaoting's words, she is told that the bike is lost. Evidently Xiaojun makes up this lie but that is because his heart gets hurt so badly that he is reluctant to talk about this any longer. Qiao understands this but

she is not supposed to comment on this, since superficially she is merely a friend of Xiaojun and she should not have gotten involved in the great memories relevant to the bike. She can do nothing but respond that there are so many cars in Hong Kong and it is dangerous to ride a bike in the city. Xiaojun's outdated bike represents the underdevelopment of mainland China in those days and it has to fade out no matter how much joy it once brought to Xiaojun when he is faced with the modernity of Hong Kong. Qiao's words have an implicit meaning that in the 1990s, anything from the mainland is looked down upon in Hong Kong. With the inferiority imposed on them, mainlanders have to conceal their identity so as to integrate themselves into the local society, however much they miss the past or their home.

Nevertheless, depriving one's identity will not lead to a colorful life. Medium standard of living with his previous lover (Xiaoting) at the price of losing his true happiness and love (Qiao) fails to cheer Xiaojun up. Tortured by this dilemma, Xiaojun eventually plucks up the courage to end his unhappy marriage and moves to New York for a brand-new life. Peter Chan exhibits Xiaojun's life in the US with an initial shot of Xiaojun riding another old-fashioned bike in the streets of New York. The shot is accompanied with the ring of the bell, whose return hints that Xiaojun realizes the significance of determining his own life style. Xiaojun riding his bike in the foreground forms

an even sharper contrast with the bustling streetscape in the background but the calm look on his face confirms that he does not care about what local people think of him after all that he has been through. His bike sets him free, helping him explore a true self.

As the key item in Xiaojun's life, the bicycle reduces his nostalgia for the old days in his hometown, as well as accompanies him to work and discover the charm of Hong Kong. It conveys his hope for a better life and enhances his relation with his beloved girl Qiao. Behind the bike is Xiaojun's past, and it also serves as an indispensable component in his early life in Hong Kong. Xiaojun gains so much joy through the bike but gives up what he possesses (easy satisfaction with life and love) as the brutal reality of poverty kills it. This does not work for long and he finds himself back in the end by riding a bike in a more developed city (New York) again. In one word, the changes of the bike to some extent mirror Xiaojun's own changes in life, especially in his spiritual world.

### ***1.3 Perhaps Love***

#### **1.3.1 Lin and Sun's Hug on the Ice: Fragile "Love"**

An important element to portray Lin Jiandong and Sun Na's relation is their hug on the ice. When Director Nie Wen gives a brief plot summary of the musical they are going to shoot, his voice is superimposed on the music from the film-within-the-film, which creates a tense atmosphere. Right at the beginning of the

music, a flashback of Lin and a girl in red hugging on the iced river is inserted. This seems irrelevant to what the inner movie is about. However, following the previous close-ups of Lin staring at Sun in an indignant manner while Sun keeps avoiding any eye contact with him, the jump cut of two people hugging drops a hint that behind Lin there is an unforgettable history and Sun was probably an indispensable part of it, even though only Lin's face is displayed by the camera.

Along with the development of the story, Lin and Sun's previous relationship as a couple is revealed and the red coat is exactly the clothes that Sun used to wear when she was a poor girl endeavoring to attain distinction. They had a wonderful time being one another's closest companion in this cold city, Beijing, until one day Sun ends their relationship to be a lover of an American producer who promises to introduce her to Hollywood as long as she marries him. She leaves Lin with no reluctance but fails to go to the USA with the producer. In the next scene Sun lies on the iced river, extremely disappointed with trembling teeth. It turns out that the American producer just wants to play with her and she gets abandoned by him soon. Her experience is enveloped by the guitar-and-violin-accompanied song *World out There* (Waimian [外面]), sang by Zhou Xun, the actress who played Sun Na:

*It's a wonderful world out there.  
Will I fail if I go out there?  
The world out there has so much to share.  
I can survive, if only I dare.  
I can't see the present in my despair;*



*Out there I'll see what my future will bear.  
The choice is not easy, but I've made up my mind.  
Blow out a candle,  
Make a wish that I can leave here.  
It's a wonderful world out there.  
I'll find love and someone to care.  
Out there where there're chances to spare.  
I'll find myself in the world so rare.*

The lyrics function as Sun's interior monologue and explain directly the reason why she cannot stay with Lin: the great fear of being poor and unknown. Her first attempt to attach herself to someone who has the "power" to make her famous fails. It is Lin that still would like to take care of her despite her betrayal, taking off his coat, covering Sun with it, and proposing that they never leave one another. In this hugging scene, the viewers see the close-ups of both faces. It can be clearly surmised that the previous flashback of their hug is a reemergence of this scene from Lin's memory. By comparing the shots of these two scenes, we may find that Sun's close-up is first elliptical and then displayed here on purpose: the indifferent facial expressions of Sun manifest that she just turns to Lin as shelter and plans to devote herself to their relationship far less than Lin does. In Lin's memory, there is no Sun's face in this hug, which misleads him to believe that their love is pure and sincere; he is haunted by this "love" though Sun moved on a long time ago. Succeeding the close-ups, a high angel shot right above them provides the audiences with a special point of view to examine their relationship: they warm each other in the snow, just as they cheer each other up

when the careers of both are down. Yet taking an overall glance of them, the audiences may notice an allegorical setting here: “ice” is what they are sitting on and more precisely the foundation of their relationship; no matter how hard they try to warm each other, they cannot resist the coldness underneath, which signifies that their “love” is quite fragile because it is doomed to be defeated by the utilitarian pursuit of higher social status.

The next scene set in the projection booth transits from the past to the present. The hugging scene turns into a somewhat vague image projected on the screen, while Sun, who has already become a big star, watches it and lowers her head, seemingly contemplating something by herself. Chances are that she is sitting in the booth, hoping to check her performance in the new movie. There might be similar scenes shown on the screen, which remind her of the past days with Lin in Beijing. She for the first time admits this relationship and invites Lin to the booth in person. Then they have a dialogue as follows:

*Lin: What do you want?*

*Sun: Stop bothering me from now on.*

*Lin: Fine. I won't bother you any more if you go back to Beijing with me.*

*Sun: Why Beijing?*

*Lin: You'll get it once you're there.*

*Sun: I already “got” it ten years ago. You're the one that don't get it! Look at you. You studied arts because you couldn't direct, then you dropped out and studied acting instead. And now you're a star! You've moved on, too! So why do you keep pulling me back?*

*Lin: I want you to see Monkey.*

*Sun: I am Monkey!*

*Lin: No, you are not! Monkey LOVED me!*

This dialogue vividly displays a divergence of views between them: Lin sticks to the past and is strongly convinced that what he had with Sun was true love, while Sun hopes to erase her history with Lin and look forward. Lin claims that Sun has changed but Sun denies it. It is possible that both are right based on what they know. The only difference is that Lin regards Monkey (Sun of ten years ago) as a girl who loved a guy with her entire heart, while Sun knows for sure that the fundamental incentive for her to choose whom to “love” is money/fame. The dialogue pauses after this fierce disagreement and the previous hugging scene reappears. The camera first captures the look on Sun’s face, then Lin’s face. Through Lin’s point of view the audiences find that during the hug on the ice, Sun is so moved that she weeps. As Lin proposes to her, she hugs Lin more tightly. When recalling this period, Lin says with tears in his eyes:

*These ten years I’ve been seeing the same scene in my dream every night...every night. But it’s gone as soon as I open my eyes. I’ve been afraid of falling asleep ever since, afraid that in my dream...in my dream...my heart will be broken again. And I’d lose you again and again. Do you know how that feels?*

Lin mentions “dream” when he tells Sun how much she has broken his heart. It is probably just Lin’s imagination that Sun cries for his proposal since she answers neither “yes” nor “no” to this. That is a scene that only happens in his mind and the longer he dreams of it, the more it replaces the truth: this conclusion can be testified by Sun’s reaction to Lin’s words. Instead of kissing Lin because of his deep love for her, she gives him an emotionless hug. Time

and space overlap when the hug of Xiaoyu and Zhang Yang (Xiaoyu's previous lover in the musical) in the snow projected on the screen in the background forms a parallel with Lin and Sun's hug in the foreground. The hug of the characters in the play is a reflection of the actor and actress' real relation: the man is so deeply trapped in his memory that he hides himself in the shadow; while the woman erases the past in her mind and remains unmoved by the man's intense emotions.

The hug in the projection booth is the first time when Nie finds out this concealed relationship. Having been tortured by the truth, Nie has been away from the studio for quite a while, during which time Lin persuades Sun to go back to Beijing with him. They revisit the restaurant where they met ten years ago, and the basement where they used to live together seems to touch Sun a little with Lin's recordings on his Walkman. They spend a night together but when Sun wakes up in the morning, she only finds a message left by Lin, blaming her for being so selfish that he despises her. It seems that Lin takes revenge for his failure in that relationship by taking Sun back to Beijing and reminding her of the old days. But he begins to regret it as soon as he arrives in the airport where he is supposed to fly to Shanghai alone. From the song *What If* (*jiaru*[假如]) sang by Takeshi Kaneshiro (the actor who plays Lin Jiandong) to the guitar we can take a glimpse at what is inside Lin's mind:

*I can hear you crying.*

*Let me take my own path.  
Now that you understand my grief,  
Remember it as long as breathe.  
Loving you was not a mistake.  
Hating you was no salvation.  
I don't care anymore about memories.  
Let's just end all our miseries.  
Perhaps it's love...but it's not blissful.  
I know that better than you.  
I want you to shed your tears.  
And say that perhaps we can start over.  
But I say...  
No.*

The lyrics clarify Lin's desperation and misery caused by this relationship. Yet it is impossible for him to hurt Sun in the same way. The film employs a range of shots with different angles and camera movements to display that Lin runs anxiously in the snow just to search for Sun. A slowed-down shot enlarges the time that has passed and reveals Lin's worry when he finds that Sun is missing. Finally he reaches the iced river where they hugged before and sees Sun squatting on the ice against the dike. Sun looks up at him with a grudge and hits him hard. Lin hugs her and both cry silently. It is again Lin who does not want to let it go and Sun merely accepts his love passively. Lin pursues an eternal love and Sun is only concerned about fame/money. The silence means that they both understand that they cannot give the other what he/she wants but this time, they will not make any unrealistic promise like before. There is no use living in the past.

The hug on the ice, as an important scene in which the hero and heroine

express their feelings again and again, metaphorically points out the impossibility for their relationship to endure. The guitar is the perfect instrument for drifters. With the help of songs that reflect the experiences and moods of the characters, the essential weakness of this relationship is disclosed: love has different weights in their value systems. Lin's imaginary beautiful memories do not exist in Sun's mind. His one-sided enthusiasm and determination collapse at the blow of reality, no matter how hard he tries to save their relationship. True love cannot be built upon an icy and fragile basis. The hugging motif raises doubts about the judgment of "love" throughout the film and corresponds with the title of the film "*perhaps* love."

### **1.3.2 Sun's Grinding Teeth: Trauma Caused by Poverty**

As she introduces herself in the beginning of the film, Sun Na comes from the countryside and she desires a rich life in the city. Years have passed and she has been trying hard to hide her humble origins. But there is still something that remains the same: she tends to grind her teeth when she sleeps. This phenomenon may remind the Chinese audiences of a saying called *yaojin yaguan* [咬紧牙关] (literally "clenching one's teeth"), which means to endure hardship with dogged will. It is quite possible that the poor living conditions in the rural area have left a terrible impression on Sun's childhood memories. This trauma urges her to do all that she can to change her destiny throughout her life,

even if she has to sell her soul.

Lin first meets Sun in a small restaurant when he pays his bill and Sun sneaks in and wolfs down what has been left in Lin's bowl. She asks Lin with embarrassment whether he could offer her a place to take a simple bath and Lin agrees to help her. There is not much interaction between them and she seems so exhausted that she has already fallen asleep in Lin's dormitory by the time Lin returns. The noise made from her grinding teeth for the first time draws Lin's attention. Their first encounter ends with a note left by Sun the next morning, saying that "Sorry for taking away a box of instant noodles." Lin might not have known Sun's name if there is no signature at the end of the message: Monkey (*Lao Sun* [老孙], which is the name of the brave monkey in *Journey to the West* [西游记]). Although they have not talked too much to each other, it is likely that there were once miserable experiences behind Sun and she is still suffering from the tribulations at that time.

"Who is willing to listen to you when you sing in the countryside?" As they meet again in a bar where Sun sings and dances in a troupe, they get to know each other. Sun's strong ambition to gain distinction impels her to resolve all kinds of problems, no matter what she needs to exchange. When Lin finds difficulty continuing his study at the film academy, Sun takes him in and they spend a wonderful time in Sun's dim basement. Lin appreciates Sun's generous

help and falls in love with her, while the basement never locks Sun's heart to fly away. On the last night before she moves to the American producer's place, she has sex with Lin (probably out of guilt). This means a lot to Lin and he cannot fall asleep afterwards. Again he finds that Sun grinds her teeth and he puts his finger between her upper and lower teeth to stop it. Grinding teeth, representing Sun's painful past, looks like a shadow covering all over Sun. She would sacrifice whatever it takes as long as she can get rid of poverty. What Lin can do is far from enough, just as he cannot hold his finger in her mouth all the way.

This problem of Sun has not gotten any better even when she becomes a popular film star. Having the talented director Nie Wen back her up, she still has a hard time filling the void deep in her heart: people who know about her obscure past keep emerging in front of her and remind her of what she refuses to recall. Just as she tells the journalist who intends to write a memoir of her, "If the youngsters were as poor as I was as a child, then they would work hard naturally," Sun's pathetic childhood forces her to strive for a better life. Although the film never depicts what her childhood is like, it must be such a disaster for her that she can barely admit any slight connection with the past. The trauma of being poor is deeply rooted in her mind and the best method for her to deal with it is never mentioning it when she is sober. But when she is asleep and loses control of her consciousness, her trauma steals out of her body and disguises



itself as teeth-grinding. Like Lin, Nie hopes to help her out by putting his finger in, but he cannot always protect her as her career advances (going to Hollywood perhaps). Sun might think that she can get recovered from the trauma only if she conceals it. But this stubborn trauma compels her to endlessly cling to more and more prominent people in society, forgetting what really matters in her life.

### **1.3.3 The Swimming Pool: Overwhelming Emotions**

Lin Jiandong has been tortured by his unfinished feelings for Sun Na ever since she left him. Peter Chan manages to exhibit Lin's feelings by virtue of the swimming pool every time Lin is on the edge of mental breakdown. It is reasonable to interpret the swimming pool as the matrix where the fetus stays comfortably and absorbs nutrition that it needs. Bearing the past in mind and not letting it go connotes Lin's wish to go back to the past like the carefree fetus when he was concerned with and encouraged. Every attempt to immerse himself into the water equals an action to give the past a second chance.

Having been ignored by Sun at the studio as they shot the musical, Lin feels extremely dejected and cannot fall asleep though he takes sleeping pills frequently. This film shows how he turns the lamp on and off, and the director exaggerates the sound of the clock to show his torment. "Who are you? Who are you? You forgot you've ever loved me..." he sings the lines to himself in the hotel room, typing crazily "I hate you" on his computer. This feeling is too hard

for him to put up with. Hence he goes to the swimming pool in the hotel for abreaction. He steps into the pool, kicks the water and roars desperately, then submerges his head into the water. Through his eyes in the water, a montage of some vague segments of the past appears: a small restaurant, the basement window, a young couple hugging on the ice, all of which take place in the snow. When a momentary shot of Sun crying emerges, Lin's head quickly gets out of the water. As he puts it back, he sees a blurred shadow projected on the white cloth, which induces him to touch it. The swimming pool opens a door to his memory and informs the audience of what has happened between Lin and Sun before they star in the current film.

The second time when Peter Chan chooses the scene of the swimming pool is when Sun jumps into it and swims. Lin suddenly catches her under the water and kisses her against her will. Their past has been concealed so much that he can only express his feelings explicitly where nobody sees them. However, Lin leaves her in the water soon after the kiss and walks away without looking back at her, as if nothing ever happened. Then comes the section of Sun's previous betrayal, which indicates that Lin's ruthless deeds are more like revenge on Sun. Meanwhile he believes that he can wake up "Monkey" and again he insanely types "Go away with me" on the computer. He lets himself fall freely downward in the water until he lies on the bottom of the pool, as if he was drowning. This is

succeeded by the scene where the two characters in the interior film decide to run away from the circus, the shooting of which reminds Lin of Sun's utilitarian behavior before their marriage.

All the above scenes of the swimming pool introduce Lin and Sun's previous history to the audiences and connect the present with the past. On the one hand, Lin goes to the swimming pool every time his mental pressure is out of control. On the other hand, it is this huge pressure that paves the ways for the memories to revive.

The biggest shock for Lin is probably the news that Sun becomes the lover of his classmate, who has become an assistant director. The camera swirls downwards to Lin lying on the ice, like a rock that hits his chest. The subsequent shot adopts darkness and thunder to analogize his desperation. Again, he figuratively falls into the water. The black-and-white color signifies that happiness has vanished from his mind.

Lin's transient happiness with Sun is unforgettable to him. That experience gave him shelter and cheered him up. That is the reason why he cannot say goodbye to it. When he encounters Sun again and finds that she keeps denying that experience, his nostalgia for the past gets stronger and stronger. Therefore he turns to the swimming pool for help and metaphorically goes back to the matrix, where the past is still alive and he felt grateful for life. He indulges

himself in the memory over and over but it will suffocate him sooner or later, because he is obliged to move on.

My examination of the motifs as objects/settings in Chan's love trilogy, together with the cultural and social significance embedded in them, has yielded a detailed account of some of the main characters' traits: Eric in *Alan and Eric* owns great ambition to explore the sea and treasures friendship as much as love; in *Comrades*, Qiao is shrewd enough to discover chances to make money out of the fear of poverty, while Xiaojun is very good-tempered and yearns for a carefree life, and Pao shows his tenderness and concern for the woman he loves, despite his cruelty as a ringleader; in *Perhaps Love*, Sun bears the anxiety of staying poor forever, therefore she does not have faith in her relationship with Lin, but Lin devotes himself to their relationship and keeps being haunted by the trauma caused by Sun's betrayal. These insights, generated by generalizing the characters' critical traits, are necessary to understand their emotional life. With the character-traits we have summed up via the object/setting motifs, we equip ourselves with the background knowledge to move on and view the interactions among them by means of the popular songs utilized in Chan's love trilogy.

## **2. Common Use of Popular Songs: Interactions between Characters**

Peter Chan distinguishes his directorial style by taking advantage of music in his films, which reflects the interactions between characters. As a matter of fact, sound or music has been perhaps the hardest film technique to study but it appears to be more and more powerful for, as Bordwell and Thompson put it, a) it engages a distinct sense mode, and b) it can actively shape how we perceive and interpret the image.<sup>33</sup> Although people are already accustomed to living in a world surrounded by various kinds of sound and may not notice the use of sound in films, Chinese viewers cannot distract their attention from the music, especially popular songs in Chan's love trilogy. The magic of the popular songs that Chan selects for his films lies in not only the lyrics with the explicit meanings they contain, but also the collective culture or memories behind them, which convey the implicit and even symptomatic meaning that the director hopes to express. Based on this premise, the following section will primarily discuss the above two aspects of the pop songs played repeatedly in these three films, combining the analysis of other film techniques that help the popular songs narrate the stories.

---

<sup>33</sup> David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: an Introduction*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: 57

## **2.1 *Moon River*: Dream of Drifters (from *Alan and Eric: Between Hello and Goodbye*)**

### ***Moon River***

*Moon river,  
Wider than a mile,  
I'm crossing you in style someday.  
You dream maker, you heartbreaker,  
Wherever you're going I'm going your way.*

*Two drifters off to see the world,  
There's such a lot of world to see.  
We're after the same rainbow's end,  
Waiting 'round the bend,  
My huckleberry friend, moon river and me.*

In *Alan and Eric*, men's dreams, love and friendship are depicted by the portrayal of two best friends falling in love with the same woman. Peter Chan strings all the complex relations by means of *Moon River*, which describes the dream of drifters, perhaps a little bit of love as well.

Eric and Alan's story starts in a talent show held by their elementary school. Eric gives up his chance of singing in front of the parents to Alan because of his sore throat. He gives Alan the thumb up to encourage him. The audience warmly applauds Alan's song *Moon River*, while Eric gets kind of upset backstage since he himself should have been praised by the parents. This scene implies that in their friendship, it is likely that Eric is the one who keeps compromising if there is any conflict of benefits between them. In their

childhood blueprint for the future of treasure hunting, they dream of travelling to the other side of the Pacific Ocean, which carries a foreshadowing for their adult identities as “drifters.” Heavily influenced by his father’s philosophy that “the most important thing in life is to be a ‘good sport’,” Eric lets Alan be the hero in their game of *Sinbad and the Pirate*, explaining that the pirate is in reality the one who possesses the treasure and he just lets Sinbad have it so that he can look for other treasures again. This is actually a form of escapism. Inside his heart Eric longs for fame or success, but the deep-rooted feeling of inferiority hinders him from pursuing his dream. This is also the reason why he recommends Alan to sing *Moon Rivers* again when he becomes a singer at a local bar. This song represents their dream of exploring the unknown but beautiful outside world.

Ironically, Eric loses his love more or less due to this recommendation. When he first introduces this girl he has a crush on, Olive, to Alan, Alan seems to be capable of reading Olive’s mind to sing *Moon River*. Olive used to be a “drifter” in South America as a little girl. And Eric is actually the man who has a spiritual connection with her since they both have the drifting experiences. But it is Alan who magnetizes Olive with his attractive voice in the song. The shot accompanies the song and demonstrates that the relation among the three changes all of a sudden: as they are listening to Alan’s song, Eric gradually notices that Olive’s full attention is on Alan and her concentration lets him down.

The film juxtaposes the close-up of Alan singing the song soulfully and that of Olive singing along attentively, with Eric out of the frame, indicating that he has already become an outsider in the love relationship. It continues to dissolve Olive's close-up back to Alan's close-up, then the close-up of Eric's upset face. In the song *Moon River*, Eric's conflict between love and friendship has been elaborated for the first time.

When Alan's career as a professional singer takes off, he ignores Olive more and more. In the meantime, Eric's subtle feelings for Olive somehow have an impact on the two men's friendship. Both Eric and Olive choose to leave Alan, since they are at a loss how to deal with their relationships. Things do not get any better until Eric's severe sickness brings the three together in the overseas city of San Francisco. At that very moment, all the misunderstandings are neglected because of Eric's impending death, though Alan and Olive keep denying it. If it were not for Eric's sickness, they might not have explored the real Treasure Island together, left their work aside and sailed on the sea. Outside Olive's apartment, Alan finds with great surprise that the music of her doorbell is *Moon River* and this song remains her favorite for so many years. And when Alan lulls Eric into sleep by re-telling him the story of *Sinbad and the Pirate*, as if Eric was a little boy, Alan names both characters "heroes" and Eric regrets that he has never really taken Alan out to the sea as he promised in childhood.



Instead of complaining, Alan continues telling this story and imagines that both characters indeed take a long voyage together, which means both Alan and Eric attach much importance to the maintenance of friendship rather than anything else when death is drawing near. The re-emergence of this song from the music box alludes to the possibility to resume the love relationship between Alan and Olive, as well as the friendship between Alan and Eric while they are realizing their childhood dream finally.

In sum, the beautiful song, *Moon River* motivates young Alan and Eric to dream of the outside world and enhance their friendship, through which Eric has shown tolerance towards the unfairness in his life (physical discomfort before a significant event, early immigration to an unfamiliar place, loss of lover to his best friend, lethal illness, etc.). Just as the lyrics in this song go, Alan and Olive, are also “dream makers” and “heartbreakers” to Eric, but anyway he will go wherever they go so much that he would even love to bless them. In the end the three turn to be “drifters” and set “off to see the world,” making “my huckleberry friend” (friendship), “moon river” (dream) and “me” (Eric) coexist in harmony, with all the emotional issues solved. Thomas Shin provides a sophisticated explanation of the social phenomenon behind the film by arguing that “the lack of opportunity, the imminent and inevitable end and terminal

diseases are all symbolic of Hong Kong's pre-handover transition.”<sup>34</sup> And the western song *Moon River*, familiar to Hong Kong viewers who have been cultivated with Hollywood culture, is a dramatic device aiming at emotionally engaging the audiences. Peter Chan perfectly interprets this song with a romantic fiction in an ideal but sad way.

## **2.2 Teresa Teng's Songs: Best Healing for Floating Hearts (from *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*)**

The film *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* cites one sentence in the news report at the end: wherever there are Chinese people, there are Teresa Teng's songs. It is reasonable to attribute the huge success of this film to the wide popularity of her songs in Chinese communities throughout the world. Teresa Teng, a Taiwanese female singer, impresses numerous Chinese people with not only her outstanding talent in singing, but also the wide-ranging contents that contain various aspects of life in her songs. Similar to Peter Chan, Teresa Teng comes from a diasporic background: she was born in 1953 in Taiwan to a mainland Chinese family from Hebei, then expanded her career across Asia in the 1970s and 1980s with her songs in Mandarin, Cantonese, Japanese, Indonesian and English. Despite different ideologies in different regions (mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas) where Chinese ethnics reside in, Teresa Teng once acted as a

---

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Shin, “Nomadism vs. Stability,” in *Peter Ho-sun Chan: My Way* ed. Li Cheuk-to, 203 (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing co., Ltd., 2012).

significant cultural icon that created a common foundation for many Chinese people regardless of where they lived, and contributed to what they were in those decades. Hence it is a wise choice to utilize her songs to depict the characters' states of mind and emotional interactions in *Comrades* during their long period of diaspora and nostalgia.

### **2.2.1 *Honey Sweetie (Tian mimi)*: the Destined Connection between Xiaojun and Qiao**

#### ***Honey Sweetie (Tian mimi)*[甜蜜蜜]**

*Sweetly, you smile sweetly.*

*It looks like flowers blossoming in the spring wind,*

*Blossoming in the spring wind.*

*Where, where did I see you?*

*Your smile is so familiar,*

*But I can't recall at this moment.*

*Ah! In my dreams...*

*In my dreams, in my dreams I've seen you.*

*Sweetly, you smile so sweetly.*

*It was you, it was you, it was you that I dreamed of.*

The Chinese name (*Tian mimi*) for the film *Comrades* stems from this well-known song of Teresa Teng, which confirms the unification of the thematic and musical frames. Functioning as the key spiritual connection between the hero and the heroine, this song creates the potential to reunite them no matter how far away they are.

As analyzed in the narrative functions of Xiaojun's bicycle, *Tian mimi*

offers Xiaojun and Qiao an opportunity to identify with each other in the first place and via this song they begin to communicate spiritually. The song is sung for the second time when Qiao gets exhausted from the massage work in the day. The scene is set in the hotel room where they used to date covertly and is sort of provocative as the camera follows Xiaojun running his fingers over Qiao's body and singing *Tian mimi*. Needless to say, this song accomplishes the cultural affinity between them initially, and their mental needs to be loved are also met by this song. It plays a vital role in enhancing their love and mutual dependence as a result.

*Tian mimi* is not played once both of them choose to pursue their dreams separately, when they conceal their love and spare no efforts to forget this relationship. However, they cannot help but meet at Xiaojun's wedding, as well as in the opening ceremony of Qiao's company. They cannot let their love go, so they continue to date secretly but they fail to escape from their feelings of guilt over their meetings. Unfortunately, as they decide to end the relationships with their partners, Qiao flees to the USA with Pao out of sympathy. And Xiaojun also moves to the USA, following the immigration wave in the 1990s. Fate leads Qiao to Xiaojun dramatically in the crowded street of New York, but again she fails to catch up with him on his bike. Their missing each other over and over comes to an end when *Tian mimi* is played eventually and both are standing in

front of an electric appliance store. Their response to seeing each other again visualizes the lyrics of this song: both are smiling so sweetly and they must have dreamed of each other countless times before this moment does come true.

At the very end of the film, the black-and-white scene of Xiaojun's arrival in Hong Kong reappears with this song. It turns out that Qiao is exactly the one who sits back to back with Xiaojun. Perhaps their fates have been tied up together as early as the moment they set foot on Hong Kong. It is this song that magically brings them together to this wonderful island, and bonds them through thick and thin as well.

### **2.2.2 The Moon Represents My Heart: Expression of Pure Feelings**

***The Moon Represents My Heart (Yueliang daibiao wode xin)***[月亮代表我的心]

*You ask me how deep I love you,  
And how much I love you.  
My feeling is true.  
And my love for you is real.  
The moon represents my heart.*

*You ask me how deep I love you,  
And how much I love you.  
My feeling will never change,  
And neither will my love.  
The moon represents my heart.*

*A peck on the cheek  
Has already melted my heart.  
A deep romance  
That I still remember.*

*You ask how deep I love you,  
And how much I love you.  
Think about it,  
And take a look.  
The moon represents my heart.*

In the song above, the singer does not directly answer the questions from his/her lover. Instead what the singer suggests his/her lover to do is just have a look at the moon and everything about their love will be evident naturally. The philosophy of romance is to express their feelings metaphorically, so that the romance will not be ruined. By means of the recognition and familiarity of this song, *Comrades* arouse spiritual resonance with the characters among audiences that come from a Chinese cultural background. Meanwhile, Peter Chan applies a similar philosophy to display the characters' emotions in this film in a covert manner.

Qiao first realizes Pao's crush on her when Pao gets a new Mickey Mouse tattoo on his back. That little tattoo stands out among all the other scary ones with its bright colors and cute shape. The sharp contrast between his new tattoo and the old ones implies Pao's gentleness under his mighty appearance. Even a tough man like him chooses to express his love in an indirect way: instead of telling Qiao that he admires her, he refers to the Mickey Mouse merely as "a friend." He must have taken a lot of efforts so as to make Qiao smile, but he is never eager to let her know his intention. The melody of *The*

*Moon Represents My Heart* accompanies the close-up of Pao's Mickey Mouse tattoo. His love is symbolized by the tattoo and communicated via the music. Although there is no words such as "like" and "love" in their dialogue and what Pao cares about Qiao is just whether she smiles or not, the film has already demonstrated his feelings for Qiao accurately through the melody that is commonly-heard by the audiences.

However, this philosophy can be applied to love not only between the two sexes, but also between family members. When they meet again in Hong Kong after several years of separation, Xiaojun has already realized the dream of marrying his fiancée, and Qiao has become a "successful" businesswoman as she once expected. But she seems not so content with what she has achieved, though she has gotten rid of the identity as an inferior mainlander and disguised herself as a "real" Hong Konger: people speak English with her in those five-star hotels; salesclerks never despise her when she goes shopping; even her folks cannot recognize her as she goes back to her hometown to build a house. She says with pride that she can finally tell her mother that she has become a superior Hong Konger now, except that her mother has passed away and can never see the house she builds. There are no tears on Qiao's face as she talks about her mother's death, but she keeps filling her mouth with food in order to suppress her sadness and regret. As the old Chinese saying goes, *zi yu yang er qin bu dai*

[子欲养而亲不待](“children regret in the later days being unable to regurgitate parents' love before they pass away”), being incapable of supporting parents is regarded as one of the biggest regrets in one's life. The melody of *The Moon Represents My Heart* says what is not said in their dialogue: Qiao considered a higher living standard as her ultimate goal before leaving home and the house she plans to build for her family is a symbol of her love for them. But only when she loses her mother does she realize that there might be something else that is more important- the love from her family. She used to possess it, but she did not attach too much importance to it. Likewise, the song emphasizes the expression of love through a certain object. Nevertheless, the person who can perceive Qiao's love, has left her forever.

The lyrics of this song are never mentioned throughout the entire film, but the emotional connotations are vividly communicated to Chinese audiences. Pao's Mickey Mouse tattoo and Qiao's house, are both objects that prove their love for whether their lover or families. In a society where things keep changing, the most effective way to express love is to objectify feelings. The choice is determined by both the philosophy of Chinese people and the social development of the Greater China area.



### 2.2.3 Goodbye My Love: Qiao's Deep Feelings for Xiaojun

*Goodbye My Love (Zaijian, wode airen [Excerpt])[再见，我的爱人]*

*Goodbye, my love.  
I don't when we'll meet again.  
I've given you all that I have,  
Which you should cherish,  
And shouldn't waste.*

*Goodbye, my love.  
We'll be apart from now on.  
I'll love you forever in my heart.  
Hope you won't forget me.  
I'll always miss you and your tender embrace,  
With my whole heart missing you and your sweet kisses.  
The bewitching song reminds me of our love.*

*Goodbye, my love!  
I don't know when we'll meet again.*

As I mentioned in the analysis on Mickey Mouse as a motif, there is an awkward silence between Xiaojun and Qiao in the car with the Mickey Mouse decoration, as it represents Pao's love for Qiao. The silence is not broken until Xiaojun suddenly catches sight of Teresa Teng surrounded by a group of fans on the roadside. Xiaojun cannot wait to get out of the car as soon as he finds Teresa Teng. The POV (point-of-view) shot of Qiao through the window of the car shows her observation of Teresa Teng and her big fan, Xiaojun. The use of the song *Goodbye My Love* has double functions: on the one hand, the appearance of Teresa Teng reminds Qiao of the days when she was crazy about her music, but she cannot chase her like an ordinary fan as she has become a “real” Hong

Konger and she has to distinguish herself from mainlanders; on the other hand, social morals never allow her to remain Xiaojun's lover and she has to watch him leave her further and further away. Qiao finally excels in the fast-paced environment at the price of concealing her own identity, both culturally and emotionally. However, this is by no means easy for her as she watches Xiaojun walk away. The movement of Xiaojun with Teresa Teng's signature on his back is intentionally slowed down so as to reveal Qiao's reluctance to say goodbye to both her love and her idol. Together with the camera shooting, this song is actually the reflection of Qiao's mixed emotions, all of which come to an end when she lowers her head in despair and blows her horn by accident. Xiaojun turns around, comes back to her and kisses her. The high angle shot keeps spinning as it goes up. It seems like the two are kissing in the middle of a swirl and they do not care at all that they will drown, just as they eventually do not care at all that this love is forbidden by morals.

### **2.3 *The Outside World: Lin and Sun's Rough but Happy Days in the Past (from *Perhaps Love*)***

#### ***The Outside World (Waimian de shijie) [外面的世界]***

*It was a long, long time ago.  
You had me, and I had you.  
It was a long, long time ago.  
You left me to explore the outside world.  
The world out there is so spectacular.  
But the world out there is so forlorn.*

*If you think the world is so wonderful,  
Then I'll be here wishing you the best.  
Every day at the sunset,  
I am here waiting for you.  
It is raining now,  
But I still look forward to seeing you back.*

If we take a glance at the lyrics of this song, we may find that it tells a rough story about one missing the old days with his lover, wishing her all the best and waiting for her. In *Perhaps Love*, this song is at first sung by Sun Na when she takes a bath at Lin's dormitory. At that time she looks totally like a homeless girl who even does not mind eating the leftovers on other people's plates. Despite that, she still dreams of the outside world. Meanwhile, Lin's glimpse at her back through the door perhaps accounts for his initial crush on her.

As a film student, Lin Jiandong once planned to quit his study and go back to Hong Kong. He ran into Sun Na on the bus on his way to school. It is Sun that prevented him from getting off the bus to submit his resignation letter to his university. The song *The Outside World* is utilized as diegetic sound<sup>35</sup> (broadcast) with the close-up of Sun's hands holding Lin's arm. *The Outside World* was widely popular in the 1990s in mainland China and it complies with the tone of nostalgia in front of the swift flow of population during that period. Later on the long shot of the inside of the bus locates Lin and Sun sitting in the background, with their dialogue in the voice-over:

---

<sup>35</sup> "Any voice, music passage, or sound effect presented as originating from a source within the film's world." See David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: an Introduction* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), p 493

*Lin: I'm not like you, Monkey... I'm not invincible.*

*Sun: I'm not invincible all the time. You just don't see it! There is no fun if everything comes so easily.*

*Lin: I've already spent my tuition for next year on my movies!*

*Sun: Then just stay at my place! I'm getting by! I can take care of you! It's better that you owe me!...The troupe has been disbanded.*

*Lin: Disbanded?!*

*Sun: Yup, c'est la vie....The next time you bump into me, I might be a movie star already!*

*Lin: You want to be a movie star?*

*Sun: A pub can only fit 100 people at most. But one single movie theatre can sit a few hundreds! Of course it's better to be a movie star!*

From both the shot and the dialogue, we can see that in the first days after they met, they were the shelter for each other. The shot of the empty bus highlights their loneliness and interdependence: when Sun hoped to find a place to take a bath, Lin offered his dormitory and cooked instant noodles for her; when Lin told Sun about his penury, Sun offered to let him share her basement. Peter Chan uses an extreme long shot to figuratively illustrate what Lin has to face before he steps into Sun's place: the darks takes up most of the screen, it seems to swallows Lin in the very background of the frame. Just as the lyrics go, "the world out there is so spectacular, but the world out there is so forlorn," both Lin and Sun dream of the fantastic outside world and expect to get acknowledged there. But in order to achieve that goal, they have to put up with plenty of difficulties. The darkness in this shot implies Lin's potential hardship of living in the basement, as well as his probable torture caused by Sun's ambition and betrayal of their love. The transition from high-key lighting

(natural light enhanced by the snow) to low-key lighting (dim basement passage) prefigures that Lin is likely to be trapped in this relationship and can hardly move on.

During the welcome “dinner” which is actually a hotpot meal Sun prepares for Lin, Sun shows pity on Lin’s resignation to be a film student, and Lin acknowledges Sun’s talent to become a big star. The crane shot with the replay of the song as nondiegetic sound displays a sharp contrast between the warmth and pleasant talk in the dark basement and the coldness and continuing snow outside. Accompanied by this song, they have a wonderful time together by skating and transporting goods on the iced river. This scene ends with Sun singing this song, turning it into diegetic sound again, which is both a manifestation of her good mood, and her desire to explore the outside world all the time.

*The Outside World* partly reminds the audiences of the popular culture in the 1990s in mainland China and underlines the theme of “drifting” in that period. Lin and Sun’s experience exactly corresponds with what is conveyed in this song: they used to rely on each other, but never can the joyful time together prevents Sun from chasing her dream at any cost. *The Outside World* stands for Lin’s memory of the beautiful days spent with Sun in Beijing, and indicates Sun’s future betrayal and Lin’s desperate wait.

To summarize, Peter Chan ingeniously selects popular songs to evoke association of the features of certain regions in certain decades. Tremendously influenced by the reign of the UK, English songs played a prevalent and dominant role in Hong Kong before the handover of sovereignty back to China in 1997. Therefore, the familiarity with cultures related to English (like Hollywood) enables the audience to comprehend the concepts of friendship and dream transmitted by the song *Moon River*. The 1980s and 1990s saw a huge wave of migration movement between mainland China and Hong Kong, as well as within mainland China itself. The socialist country for the first time permitted the import of other cultures (including that from Taiwan, given the lack of communication, and the antagonism between mainland China and Taiwan). The Taiwanese songs such as *Honey Sweetie*, *Goodbye My Love*, *The Moon Represents My Heart* and *The Outside World* reached their peak in terms of popularity in the mainland with their diversified contents and themes (romance, success, campus life, love among families, etc.). Hence the expression of the feelings of the drifters with regard to love and struggle is powerful and effective. The audiences who have gone through that period are more likely to think of what these songs have brought them and apply their own feelings to the understanding of the interactions between characters in Chan's film. The use of popular songs makes an essential contribution to his success.

### **3. Common Motifs in Peter Chan's Love Trilogy: Living State of Drifting Chinese People as a Whole**

With the help of the broadened concept of motif- an element that is repeated in a significant way in a single film, or *in a series of relevant or connected films* (e.g. directed by the same person, possess similar themes, etc), I would here like to concentrate on two interesting elements that have been employed in Peter Chan's love trilogy: the object "cage" and voice-over. Based on the traits and interactions between characters analyzed in the previous two chapters, this chapter is further going to reflect upon the living state of the drifting Chinese people portrayed in Chan's love trilogy through the above motifs.

#### **3.1 Cage: Restrictions on the Characters' Relations**

The schema for the love relations in Chan's love trilogy is consistently multi-angular: triangular in *Alan and Eric* and *Perhaps Love*, and rectangular in *Comrades*. This kind of relations usually places the characters in a dilemma of choosing, which is also affected by some other social factors, such as wealth, career, morals and so forth. When depicting such relations, Peter Chan tends to set certain scenes surrounded by the net or in a room with closed windows, making the scenes seem to take place in metaphorical "cages." And those cages resemble the restrictions in their relationships.

### **3.1.1 Cages in *Alan and Eric*: Eric's Repressed Feelings and Olive's Loneliness**

Eric remains subordinate in the love triangle with Alan and Olive. He is the one who first met Olive and if it were not for him, Olive and Alan might not have met. Strongly influenced by the misfortune in childhood and rootless experience in the US, Eric learns to accept the unfairness in his life and represses his feelings so that others will not worry about him. As Alan and Olive fall in love, Eric has to constrain his love for Olive and give up the opportunity to declare his feelings, since he treasures his friendship with Alan more than anything else. Alan keeps asking him to create chances for him to date Olive, without knowing how much his best friend gets hurt because of his numbness. He even prepares a fake birthday party for Eric in order to ask Olive to have dinner with them and Eric ironically has to buy a birthday cake for himself. The scene following that of Eric buying his own "birthday" cake in a bakery locates Eric in the kitchen behind the net like a servant staring at the cake, while his POV shot captures that his best friend is tasting wine and playing cards with the girl that Eric loves, as if he did not exist. Eric is distracted by their lovely date and drops the dishes by accident. However neither Alan nor Olive notices that. Disappointed by this, Eric drops another dish on purpose near Alan, while he still does not care at all. Eric gets so furious but he can only let his dog know about it. Even when Eric sits at



their table with a bowl and a plate in his hands, they do not express any gratitude to him but wonder why he is holding them. The frame places Eric under the bulb on the screen, indicating that his status in this love relationship is redundant, since “the bulb” (*diandengpao* [电灯泡]) in Chinese equals the third wheel in English. It is completely unreasonable for Alan to ask Eric to do the housework since it is said to be “his birthday.” From this perspective, Alan prefers love over friendship, for he seems to think that it is more important to please Olive than Eric. Eric cannot complain though he is not treated fairly, since he loves both of them in different ways (as his best friend and dream girl). He is incapable of getting rid of either of these two relations and consequently, what has been left for Eric is only self-torture in the “cage” created by his contradictory feelings. What is worse, Alan and Olive choose to leave Eric alone to take care of the chicken farm and spend a night together in Olive’s cabin by the sea after their first date, only to find that the thunderstorm has brought great loss to the farm. When they realize that they have ignored Eric, the camera discovers Eric sitting at the corner of the chicken cage with the roar of the thunder and pouring rain outside and huge shadow on his face, which parallel his mood at that time: the isolation from the two people that he loves most in the world is a merciless blow to him. Back in his hometown, Eric still has to strive to make a living and leave his dream aside. This incidence comes to the boundary of his tolerance. He has

to escape from the “cage” (strange relation with Alan and Olive, and the repression of feelings and dream) by working on the sea again.

A very similar torture is imposed on Olive, too. As Alan pursue his professional career in singing, Olive feels more and more estranged and lonely. On the one side, there is Alan whom she admires but seldom communicates with her spiritually. On her other side, there is Eric who understands her heart thoroughly but fails to attract her physically. Hunting for a soul mate is the dream for most people like Olive, but they often have to take some pragmatic factors into consideration as well, such as appearance, wealth and social status. That is probably why Olive chooses Alan instead of Eric. Peter Chan uses a shot of Olive sitting by the window and watching the rain to reveal her dilemma of choosing between reality and dream. She says to Eric on Christmas when she gets drunk, “If only you two were the same person.” And Eric responds sadly that if only Olive did not meet Alan. In fact, what Olive has suffered is quite usual in a commercial society. People sacrifice the time to spend with families and friends to ensure a promotion in their careers. It is a trade-off between material and spiritual needs. Other than Alan, the other two people have a difficult time coping with the love triangle. Hence the strange relation will not work as long as all of the three points of the triangle exist.

### **3.1.2 Cage in *Comrades*: Xiaojun and Qiao's Morally Forbidden Love**

To Xiaojun, the fake Hong Konger Qiao is the mouthpiece of local culture with her fluency in Cantonese and eagerness for the most updated information on making money. Qiao's superiority decreases a little as she partially identifies herself with Xiaojun via Teresa Teng's songs. From then on, their relation turns to an interdependent one. Qiao gives Xiaojun advice on how to get rich and Xiaojun offers her convenience in all aspects of life. And their love begins to sprout during this period. Following Qiao's suggestion, Xiaojun accompanies her to line up outside the stock exchange on a hot summer night with plenty of mainlanders who wish to make a fortune in the stock market. The wire fence around the stock exchange actually isolates the mainlanders from the inside, and the film provides the audiences with a special point of view to watch the characters through the wire. Peter Chan portrays Xiaojun and Qiao's relation with the help of mise-en-scene: the fighting couple behind them contrasts with Xiaojun bringing Qiao iced water and talking in the foreground, which indicates that they approximately function like a couple. The wire creates an atmosphere similar to a cage, in which people have to endure the hot weather as well as financial uncertainty, implying that many mainland immigrants have to struggle for survival under the constraints imposed by the local society. Qiao watches

with disdain the couple who fights over 2,000 HKD and asserts that a couple like this must be “stuck in a tiny apartment and fight over bread and butter for the rest of their lives.” She despises people who get trapped in useless tiny things, when she forces herself to try every possible method to make money. Otherwise, she will not have bothered to wait with so many people. From Xiaojun and Qiao we can see the status of mainlanders in Hong Kong then: they did the hardest work, tried every possible way to become rich, adapted themselves to a fast-paced environment, and bore the worst living conditions and even discrimination from local people. The two for the first time formally talk about their dreams: Qiao’s dream of improving the living standard for her family and Xiaojun’s dream of marrying his fiancée in Hong Kong. During their conversation, Qiao’s rejection of a marriage with a mainlander disappoints Xiaojun to some degree. And just then Qiao finds the melted chocolate on Xiaojun’s pants, which is supposed to be a tasty snack but turns to be very disgusting. Qiao asks unconsciously why Xiaojun is so nice to her. Xiaojun does not explain too much but it is obvious that he wants to take care of Qiao, although he himself does not really know what this means. A sharp contrast is achieved from the cross-cutting between Xiaojun’s consideration about Qiao and the mainland couple’s fight.

Xiaojun and Qiao function like a couple and live in harmony together, but their relationship is fraught with problems. On the one hand, the

disagreement on the final goal in life will separate them. On the other hand, their relationship is not morally permitted since Xiaojun has a girlfriend. The pressure of life captures them like a cage but they stay with each other through thick and thin. The melted chocolate stands for Xiaojun's love for Qiao. No matter how deeply he loves Qiao, she is going to leave him for pragmatic reasons anyway. And his love, as a consequence, will seem as useless as the melted chocolate. This metaphorical scene in *Comrades* depicts Xiaojun's and Qiao's morally forbidden love: the reality constructs a cage where they meet, and hinders them from running out of the cage to pursue their true love freely.

### **3.1.3 Cages in *Perhaps Love*: Pseudo-love That Traps Lin and Binds Sun with Nie**

The love triangle in *Perhaps Love* generates complicated feelings among the three main characters. As Nie Wen interprets the love triangle in the film-within-film at the very beginning, "the romance amongst the three leads is too weak. Xiaoyu (Sun Na) doesn't really love Zhang Yang (Lin Jiandong). And Zhang Yang didn't come back to find Xiaoyu out of love. Whatever is between the circus master (Nie Wen) and Xiaoyu can hardly be called love." In reality, Sun Na inclines to build relationships with anyone who can benefit her. Hence her love relationships with either Lin or Nie cannot be counted as true love, except that Lin did devote himself once to a relationship with Sun and Nie understands

the mutually beneficial nature of his alliance with Sun.

To Sun Na, the basement she used to rent is temporary shelter that reflects her poverty. It is poverty that brings her and Lin together and this is the only reason why she is trapped there. She would choose to leave Lin with no hesitation as long as she seizes any chance to get rid of the bad living condition. Lin does appreciate the inspiring encouragement and generous help from Sun. In their value systems, Lin and Sun give different weights to “love”: Lin believes that love cannot be beaten by the realistic world, while Sun considers that love can be sacrificed for materialistic benefits. That divergence explains why Lin remains engaged in the old relationship with Sun, while Sun keeps changing her life partners on her road to fame. When Sun stands at the door to the basement on the day she leaves, the light outside shines on her, as if she was going to chase a brighter future as she expected, which contrasts sharply Lin sitting helplessly inside the shabby tiny room, as if the departure of Sun had cast him away to endless darkness. He recognizes Sun’s feet through the wire-covered tiny window, only to find that she kicks snow to the window and runs away immediately. The close-up of Lin’s face manifests his situation of being trapped in a cage, which is made from his nostalgia for the past days he spent with Sun. Although he formally steps out of that basement and becomes famous as an actor in later years, the nostalgic cage still encloses his heart and he comes to visit the

old basement regularly and tries his best to preserve it, hoping that he will take Sun back some day. What he has fallen in love with is his own imagination rather than Sun herself. His resentment against Sun's cold blood keeps haunting him for years and he spends most of the nights being tortured by it. When he meets Sun again in the studio, the torture gets worse: he goes downstairs late at night hysterically. The camera again captures his movement through the guardrails of the stairs, similarly creating a sense of cage that encloses Lin and hinders him from moving on.

Similar to that with Lin, Sun bases her relationship with Nie on benefits, i.e. Nie's fame and recognition as an eminent director. Nie totally understands her motive to "cooperate" with him as his girlfriend and aims to make use of Sun's beauty and talent in turn. Nie Wen's words said with sigh explicate the essence of their relation:

*Back then, you needed a director, and I needed a companion. I thought after your first film, our relationship will end. I didn't expect that we'd make one film after another. We've been together for so long now. We asked too much out of each other...*

They built their relationship out of either benefits or loneliness. It is difficult to tell whether there is chemistry in their relationship or not. They both doubt it but they have to maintain the status quo. There is one scene that subtly exhibits this relationship. Prior to determining who is going to play the circus master, Nie has disagreement with the producer, as he insists on inviting a

famous actor he used to elevate, whereas the producer believes that it is impossible for a well-known actor to be interested if the role prepared for him is not the lead character. “This is a commercial society. No one needs to repay a favor for the rest of his life!” Screams the producer as Lin and Sun take the elevator upstairs. The elevator with the closed door again forms a cage that captures Nie and Sun. The producer’s words correspond with their relation, in which both take what they need from the other. What they do is just observe the rules in this society. They get stuck in the same relationship stemming from their individual (either material or spiritual) needs. In the blurred version of fiction and reality, the lyrics for the circus master in the musical reflect Nie’s feelings when it comes to the question whether Xiaoyu (Sun Na) loves him: *that will be all, just say no more. Because...you do love me...Perhaps...you do love me.*

As a matter of fact, Nie feels depressed when he finds out Lin and Sun’s history. He slaps Xiaoyu (Sun Na in reality) on behalf of the circus master in the play out of jealousy and even escapes from the studio. When he returns the hotel a few days later, he takes the elevator alone, or more precisely speaking, enters the “cage” again. The shadow on his face indicates his gloom: even though he does know that a relationship based on benefits will not last forever, he still covertly begs Sun to really “love” him. After all the advent of Sun greatly meets his spiritual needs. The cage-shaped elevator symbolizes Nie’s struggle between



sense and sensibility.

### **3.2 Voice-over: an Implicit Way to Reveal the Thoughts of Characters**

In Chan's love trilogy, there seldom are dramatic scenes in which characters cope with their conflicts. The drifting Chinese people in his films are more likely to either conceal their inner feelings or express them in a relatively implicit manner. How would the audiences understand what is inside the characters' minds? Chan utilizes voice-over to elaborate their emotions under certain social circumstances. What is voice-over, then? I would like to apply Steven Katz's definition in my discussion: the voice of an unseen narrator. Voice-over can also be used to indicate the thought of a character in a scene when the character is not speaking.<sup>36</sup> The use of voice-over implies a consistent artistic style of Chan's films. And more importantly, it embraces a consistent focus on the inner world of drifting Chinese people.

#### **3.2.1 Alan's Interior Monologue in *Alan and Eric*: Alan's Thoughts on His Relations with Eric and Olive**

Alan, as the main character in *Alan and Eric*, also provides first-person narration in the film. Quite a lot of the segments are embedded in the story and Alan's

---

<sup>36</sup> Steven D. Katz, *Film Directing Shot by Shot: Visualizing from Concept to Screen* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 1991), 362.

record of thoughts is presented in the form of interior monologue as well. Seymour Chatman assumes that the characterization of interior monologue includes the enactment of both perceptions and cognitions and interior monologue in films are frequently achieved by voice-over.<sup>37</sup> Alan's voice-over offers the viewers a special perspective to view the relations among the three young people and what they have experienced in society.

The film starts with Alan's concert in San Francisco, followed by Alan's narration on his feelings about his singing career and memory about Eric:

*It seems odd for me to end my career in a far-away place like this. San Francisco is a dilemma. I feel so out of place, yet so involved, all because of Eric and his entanglement with the city. He used to say many times of his dislikes for this place. "Too many heartbreaks," he said. So I had my bias to begin with. I'd always believed in Eric. For all I possess today, Eric had been the main reason.*

This piece of interior monologue is accompanied with shots of Eric doing hard labor in that city, which intrigues the audiences to wonder what on earth happened to Eric there. From Alan's words, we can figure that Eric must have influenced his life greatly since he has a jaundiced view of the city where Eric had a tough life and it is Eric who contributes most to what Alan currently is. After recalling the generosity of Eric to give up the chance to perform to Alan and invite him to Eric's father's boat, Alan continues with the explanation of Eric's immigration to the USA and his childhood there.

*Until this day, I'm not sure if Eric just let me play the hero role or he*

---

<sup>37</sup> Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 183-194.

*actually preferred to be the pirate. If there is such thing as Guardian Angel, then Eric must be my Guardian Angel. That was the last time I sailed with him and his dad. I only remembered my parents said one day, that my best buddy's father, Opera Star Kau, was in heavy debt, that he hid away in America.*

*Eric wrote a lot after he left. He seemed to enjoy the Gold Mountain and all the novelties at first. I wish I were there too, to discover Treasure Island with him. But very soon, Eric began to write less. No mention of school or any good times, but to repeat time and again, that he'll be back very soon.*

*Years later, I noticed a small piece of news in the back pages, that Opera Star Kau committed suicide in San Francisco. Eric wrote less and less since then, and not a word on coming back. As for myself, I'd made a lot of friends since then. But "Sinbad and the Pirate" was buried history. After high school, my folks moved to the city. But I decided to stay in this beach house.*

Between the first two paragraphs of this monologue, Peter Chan inserts the scene where Alan and Eric dream of exploring Treasure Island someday. Ironically, the wonderful life depicted by young Eric is sharply contrasted by the scene of Eric's father desperately selling some of his belongings just to get money and being at a loss where to settle in the unfamiliar country. Through Alan's words, we can know that Eric's drifting life there is not at all fascinating as he expected. Living a hard life and losing his father must have exposed unbearable pain on him, especially in the strange continent. Alan's narration helps to reduce the plot-time as well as enrich the story of more than ten years within the elliptical plot. And the hardship that Eric has been through is revealed in the meantime.

Alan's narration does not continue when Eric returns to Hong Kong, until the conflicts between friendship and love among the three characters become irreconcilable. That is the time when two most important people, Eric and Olive,

choose to leave Alan on his big concert night, in order to escape from the dilemma.

*That evening was the biggest irony of my life. I became an idol of thousands overnight. But I only beg for the presence of the two dearest persons in my life. In her letter, Olive confessed she was too naïve and selfish. As long as she didn't know how to love, she didn't deserve to be loved herself. She might be right. But she being right didn't make me miss her less. In fact she showed her maturity just by being able to understand that. I must stop thinking about her. She'd only become more mature, and even more perfect. But she's no longer mine.*

*Eric wrote once in a while, but he never tried to explain or even mention that Christmas evening. Actually no explanation would be needed between us. His letters mentioned too many happy moments. I felt he was hiding something from me. I don't remember where I once bumped into Pierre. They sailed out together a few times. Yet when I asked about Eric, Pierre turned very quiet, refusing to elaborate anything more than trivia. I kept on writing to Eric. But he was always on the move. I never caught up with him. None of my letters reached him. Many years went by. He's stopped writing to me. I pretended we're still in touch. Who else could I talk to if not to him? I missed him a lot. I've been travelling everywhere in these 10 years. But I miss San Francisco every time. Why am I here finally?*

This long piece of interior monologue vividly elaborates the inner world of Alan after Olive and Eric's departure. To begin with, he is reminded by Olive that their love might be too selfish and unfair to Eric. Neither of them should have hurt Eric so much and ignored his feelings. Second, Alan regrets failing to accompany Olive because of his ascending career when she needed him. Third, he learns to forgive the kiss that Eric and Olive had, for Alan begins to understand Eric's sheer torture of choosing between friendship and love. Last but not least, his concerns are mostly taken up with friendship rather than love, as he realizes what a considerate friend Eric is with all his care for Alan's life and

feelings. This sudden enlightenment calls for a possibility of the reunion all the three after years.

Unfortunately, when meeting Olive in San Francisco with ecstasy, Alan is informed that Eric is already badly ill and may not live for long. If it were not for Eric's severe sickness, never would it be easy for Eric to tell Alan that he does cherish the friendship with Alan and Olive more than his love for Olive. Impressed by Eric's affection, Alan makes up his mind to realize his and Eric's childhood dream of sailing together. With the high angle shot of the sailing boat on the sea, comes Alan's narration again:

*At last, we can fulfill our childhood dream. Come to think of it. This voyage is indeed a treasure hunt. What we're hunting for is the one thing we've lost all these years: our most precious friendship.*

It reveals Alan's thoughts facing his best friend's death. In this particular condition, friendship beats up everything else and Alan would preserve the last chance to be with Eric at all costs. It is the pain of separation that really changed Alan's thoughts. And all his narration in this film tracks his thoughts on friendship and love as time goes by, therefore makes a contribution to the discussion on the emotional experiences of drifting people.

### **3.2.2 Xiaojun's Letters in *Comrades*: The Bitterness of "Small Potatoes" in a Metropolis**

As an "inferior mainlander," Xiaojun does not have many people to talk to when

he first sets foot in Hong Kong. Therefore writing to his fiancé in the mainland, Xiaoting becomes a vital way of communication with the exterior world. He looks like the Other to Hong Kongers. Yet in his letters, Hong Kong turns to be the Other. The contents of the letters are in fact read by the actor who played Xiaojun (Leon Lai [黎明]) in the form of voice-over. Due to the language barrier (Mandarin vs. Cantonese), Xiaojun cannot talk freely to local people and only in his letters can he have the confidence to comment on what he sees in this prosperous metropolis. His very first letter to his fiancé is as follows:

*Dear Xiaoting,*

*Finally I've arrived. Hong Kong is very far away from home. Everything is so different from Tianjin: lots of cars, lots of people and lots of pick-pockets, too. The Cantonese speak loudly and rude. Xiaoting, I already miss you.*

*There are a lot of foreigners here speaking unknown languages. Even Chinese Cantonese, I still don't have a clue. It is so foreign, with the exception of aunt. She speaks Mandarin.*

*Aunt is very nice. She gave me a room, all to myself. It has sufficient lighting, and even my own toilet. So I don't have to go out to pee at night. Everything is fine here. Don't worry about me.*

*Hong Kong people are weird. It seems they don't need to work. They wake up late in the morning, and dress up and go out for fun every night. Aunt told me not to call her "aunt" but "Rosie."*

Xiaojun's first days in Hong Kong are filled with alienation: he can neither adapt himself to the highly modernized city, nor understand the languages and life style of residents there. According to his narration, aunt is the only person who treats him nicely. However, the images accompanying his narration reveal that the accommodation his aunt offers him is not so convenient as he depicts it: the bedroom with sufficient lighting and toilet turns out to be very dim and there

is no separate washroom. He cannot take a good rest even at night, because the place he rents from his aunt is shared with some prostitutes. The obvious contradiction between what he tells his fiancée and what he really experiences shows his consideration for his fiancée as well as arouses sympathy among the viewers. In the following letter, he keeps comforting Xiaoting and selects only the good news to tell her. And this piece of voice-over records the changes in his life together with the motif “bicycle,” as mentioned in the previous paragraphs.

*Dear Xiaoting,*

*I've found a job in the transportation business. It's very laid back and it pays well. I make around \$2,000 a month plus bonus. Are you proud of me? I'm making more money than the mayor of Tianjin.*

*I work on the streets a lot, especially Tsim Shat Tsui. I know the area by heart. It is where all happens. Learning Cantonese is vital in HK. But even after I've learnt it, I still don't get much of what people said on the street.*

*Xiaoting, tomorrow is my pay day. I'll buy you a present. And I will go to a place where Tianjin people have never been to.*

The above narration serves as a turning point of Xiaojun's focus in life, and the mysterious place he mentions in the second letter is in reality McDonald's. The world's largest fast food company did not set up business in mainland China until the 1990s, so it was a novelty to most mainlanders at the end of the 1980s. Out of the curiosity to explore this new place, he runs into Li Qiao, who is doing a part-time job as the cashier. As his story with Qiao goes on, he misses Xiaoting less and less. It is Qiao who leads him to become assimilated into the local community, lets him know a variety of opportunities to make a fortune in Hong Kong, and helps him out during the hard time in the unfamiliar

city. It is no wonder that love sprouts secretly between them, but Xiaojun feels strongly denounced by his conscience. During the time when their love develops, Xiaojun attempts four times to write to Xiaoting but only to feel too embarrassed to tell her anything. The parallel cut of Xiaojun's letters with the love affairs between them and their acquaintances in Hong Kong displays not only Xiaojun's guilty feelings and addiction to his sexual relation with Qiao, but also the great shock to him which open sexual conceptions give rise to.

Xiaojun's life with Qiao is totally left out in his letters. As a matter of fact, he stops writing to Xiaoting for quite a while after he knows Qiao. When his life is going on smoothly and his relation with Qiao becomes stable, Xiaojun decides to write to Xiaoting again. The next letter manifests that Xiaojun eventually gets accustomed to life in Hong Kong and is making progress. With the company of Qiao and no constraint from his fiancée, he is having the happiest time in Hong Kong:

*Dear Xiaoting,*

*I am very busy recently, so I write to you less. Don't get mad at me. I'm now taking an advanced-level English class and there is an increase of my salary for the transportation job. Everything is fine.*

*I almost forgot to tell you. I meet a new friend recently. He says he can help me become a cook, which can make a lot of money. Even ordinary cooks can make more than \$10,000 a month. Xiaoting, I am such a lucky dog now!*

Afterwards Xiaojun does not write to Xiaoting for a long time again, until he and Qiao make a huge loss in the stock market. Although he has saved enough money to get married as he expected before coming to Hong Kong, he



has lost the girl who helped him out through the hardest time, due to the lack of a sense of safety. The great frustration forces Xiaojun to focus back on his fiancée:

*Dear Xiaoting,*

*I heard that there is a hot wave in Beijing recently. The heat even killed a couple of people. How is Tianjin? Remember that summer? It was hot. You were with me...*

*Is everyone fine at home?*

*Remember to wear warm clothes. The weather is changing by the day. People say this is the coldest year in fifty years...*

*Everybody is talking about immigration here, mostly to Australia or Canada. While Hong Kong is every Mainlander's dream, Hong Kong people dream about moving to other places.*

*...*

*Xiaoting, this seems to my last letter to you, isn't? Because you are finally coming to Hong Kong next month.*

Again, combined with the motif bicycle and compared with his rusty bike, his kind words for Xiaoting seem to consciously conceal his inner grief. Instead, he keeps talking about the weather. The last combination of several letter prior to Xiaoting's arrival in fact offers knowledge of the social changes at the transition from the 1980s to 1990s. By mentioning the heat wave of Beijing in 1989 via Xiaojun's words, the director and screenwriter actually refer to the Tian'anmen Square protests of 1989, which remains a controversial but crucial incident in the process of democratization of modern China. There is no exact number about the casualties in this student-led demonstration. However in the film *Comrades*, this important incident is played down and is unlikely to impact on civilians like Xiaojun and Xiaoting. Another remarkable social trend reflected in Xiaojun's letter is the immigration wave of Hong Kongers before 1997, which represents

the social anxiety about the takeover of sovereignty, Nevertheless, this huge wave does not hinder Xiaojun from building up his family in Hong Kong, either. Although Xiaojun also moves to the USA by coincidence, there is nothing political related to his life decision.

After getting divorced from Xiaoting, Xiaojun writes her the last letter as follows right before immigrating to the US:

*Xiaoting, I don't have anything for you. This money belonged to my aunt. All I want is for you to live happily. I'm leaving tomorrow. I'm scared. It's the first time I fly. I've never been too gusty. I dare not ask you to forgive me. I just think that we have been together all these years and we have walked all these paths....Xiaoting, it broke my heart, too.*

Xiaojun's inner pains emerge from his last interior monologue: in the highly developed society of Hong Kong, he was fascinated and benefited physically from modernity at first, but as well placed himself in the dilemma of choosing between two women who love him, said goodbye to his friends who found true love but have to combat AIDS,<sup>38</sup> and lost the only relative, his aunt, who struggled in the lower social class. Hong Kong is a city full of the bitterness for small potatoes like Xiaojun. He once possessed a lot, but finally he lost nearly everything. He is a nice guy by nature, but the swift changes of life render him bewildered. Peter Chan shows great pity on Xiaojun by contrasting his real-world complex experiences with the contents of his letters to Xiaoting.

---

<sup>38</sup> They are Xiaojun's English teacher at the continuation class, Jeremy and his girlfriend "Cabbage," who is a kind-hearted Vietnamese prostitute in Hong Kong and yearns for love. Unfortunately, she gets infected with AIDS because of prostitution after she dated Jeremy.

### 3.2.3 Lin's Last Recording in *Perhaps Love*: The Emotional Trauma Left by Sun

The Walkman in *Perhaps Love* functions as a special medium for Lin and Sun to communicate. In the past, Sun left some money and a message via Lin's Walkman when she abandoned him:

*This is all the money I've saved since I came to Beijing. It should be enough for your return airfare to Hong Kong. Donkey (nickname for Lin), remember, the one who loves you the most is always YOURSELF.*

The Walkman presented on the screen shows the source of Sun's voice, but Sun's words soon become the voice-over for the shots of Lin's stunned reaction: he runs in a daze through the darkness of the basement, as if his heart is wrapped by the desperation caused by Sun's departure. As he runs away, the slightly shaking camera tracks backwards into the basement and makes the darkness swallow him. This scene is followed by one in which Lin lies on the cold iced river alone. The dizzy sense created by the swirling camera evidently demonstrates his depress and helplessness.

Sun's abrupt disappearance has left an incurable trauma on Lin's heart and her betrayal has kept haunting him every night since then. His sincere love for Sun is gradually transformed to endless hatred. He spent ten years planning to take revenge on Sun and kept records of his thoughts by the old Walkman. He finally gets a chance to take Sun back to the basement and makes love with her.

And this time it is he who leaves a message with the Walkman the next morning.

His voice-over unleashes his outrage over Sun's betrayal:

*You're awake. I really wish I were here to see the look on your face now. I've waited 10 years for this moment. You were holding me tight last night. You must be thinking that I'm everything to you. Since when have you become so naïve? Have you forgotten what you've said? "The one who loves you the most is always yourself." Do you know what the biggest failure in my life is? I fell in love with someone I despised, and I ended up despising myself. You've made me despise myself for the rest of my life! What happened last night was fake, but those tapes are real. And I'll keep them forever. Because I know...I'll never be able to talk like that again.*

This piece of voice-over serves as a self-reflection of Lin's reluctance to forget the past rather than condemnation of Sun. From Sun's indifferent face when she hears this recording, we may assume that what Lin stresses is not what she thinks of their relation. It is always Lin that goes back to the past and indulges himself in the past. He dwells on his pure but fruitless love so much that he tries his best to meet Sun again and compels her to understand what has been torturing him all the ten years. Nevertheless, that does not mean so much to Sun since she has got no faith in their relationship right from the beginning. Lin's voice-over is in fact merely his nostalgia for the old days. Therefore the feelings he has for Sun now are unlikely to be called "love."

The common motifs through Chan's love trilogy inspire us to contemplate the life of drifting Chinese people. The swift changes in society improve the mobility of population and commodity. Affection and relations may be generated

for various reasons, such as similar experiences, mutual support and material benefits. The cages in the films represent the instability of a society that sometimes prevents people from satisfying their emotional needs. Under the constraints imposed by the fast developing society, drifting Chinese people have very limited ways to express their interior feelings explicitly. As a consequence, Chan's love trilogy all unfolds their thoughts by means of voice-over, which leads the audiences to concern about their inner world.

## Conclusion

The examination of the narrative functions of the motifs in Peter Ho-sun Chan's love trilogy proves his attention to details in film narratives. The motifs are meticulously designed as they reflect the features of certain eras so well that they remind the audiences of their own experiences, and that their metaphorical, social and cultural significance is closely connected with the plots and characters' inner world. Before I draw my conclusion, I would like to come back to the questions I have raised at the beginning of this thesis: a) what implicitly and symptomatically about the love of drifting Chinese people do these motifs exhibit as a whole? and b) what does Peter select and what does he omit when discussing these issues and why?

Many of the motifs in Chan's love trilogy manifest conflicts between characters, and all the conflicts can be generalized as *an Idealism vs. Pragmatism binary opposition*. Love seems to be the thing almost all the people yearn for. In Chan's love trilogy, drifting experiences are the reason for most love stories. However, people have to compromise to some extent in front of the realistic limitations. For Olive in *Alan and Eric*, the motif "ships" indicate that Eric is supposed to be the one who has more in common with her spiritually because of the immigrating experience in childhood and careful consideration

for people he loves. But Alan, who seems more talented and good-looking while not caring enough about others, attracts her especially with the beautiful song *Moon River*. In the polarization formed by these two men, Eric represents pure love with one's whole heart (idealism), and Alan represents temptations on a superficial level (pragmatism). Olive overlooks Eric's heart but falls for Alan, perhaps merely because of his charming voice and handsome appearance. As for Eric himself, he cannot give up his dream of sailing and pursuing true love in spite of his bad luck and below-average appearance in reality. Similarly, in *Comrades*, the hero and heroine keep being tortured by the choice between idealism and pragmatism: on the one hand, through his letters to his fiancée Xiaoting, Xiaojun feels guilty about his morally criticized but genuine love with Qiao, but his relation with Qiao gets reinforced by sharing Xiaojun's bike and the common recognition of Teresa Teng's popular songs, and the scenes with the ATM and the Opportunity Fortune Store witness their mutual support through the hardship; on the other hand, out of the fear of poverty and moved by Pao's consideration displayed by Mickey Mouse, Qiao chooses Pao's influential power rather than Xiaojun's "worthless" love. Last but not least, *Perhaps Love* constructs a more complicated situation among the characters. If it was not for the hardship in Beijing, Sun Na and Lin Jiandong's encounter would never happen, let alone their love story and mutual support. But due to the trauma of

childhood poverty exhibited by grinding teeth, Sun switches her attention to whoever benefits her. She betrays Lin for a better career in acting and thinks more of material satisfaction than of spiritual needs, let alone interdependent love through thick and thin. The hug on the ice implies their fragile love on no solid material basis. Poverty in the real world beats her up and destroys her dream of pursuing true love, which also ruins Lin's view on love, leaving him struggling between the past and the present in the swimming pool again and again, since he once appreciated his relationship with Sun so much. It seems to be both Sun and Nie's dream to shoot a film with the theme of pure love, but in reality neither of them ever realizes it and thus both remain trapped in the cage of their so-called mutually beneficial relationship.

In Chan's love trilogy, love is at first disturbed by superficial advantages such as appearance and talent during the period when Hong Kongers dreamed of exploring the continent across the ocean between the 1970s and 1990s; then love is mixed with impurities like fortune and power, as immigrants flooded from the mainland to Hong Kong and Hong Kongers were anxious about their state after the handover of sovereignty in 1997, which makes his second romance ALMOST a love story; and at last the reliability of love is highly doubted not only in the title of the film "PERHAPS Love," but also through so many factors like loneliness, wealth and fame, which represent multitudinous standpoints that



people were exposed to as the migration movement between different regions within China (rural and urban, Hong Kong and the mainland) is taking place since the 1990s. People are facing various sorts of temptations as Chinese society develops rapidly with countless benefits interwoven, and people have to deal with more and more complex emotional life. However, Chan's point does not lie in offering solutions to solve these thorny love problems, for all the "third (or fourth)" persons to the original two-sided love end up with (symbolic) deaths: Eric dies on his last voyage accompanied by Alan and Olive on the sea; Pao gets killed by teenage gangsters in the street of New York and Xiaoting agrees to get a divorce with Xiaojun, disappearing in his life for good; the actor-director Nie Wen directs his own suicide scene in the acrobatic performance of the musical and he himself decides to leave Sun Na and end their relationship. Then we come to the next question: what is the focus of Chan when illustrating the love of drifting Chinese people and why?

Peter Chan distinguishes himself as a prominent director with his special artistic style demonstrated by the motifs that he utilizes. On the one hand, some symbolic motifs like ships, Mickey Mouse, hug on the ice, grinding teeth, swimming pool, cages and voice-over convey the complicated emotions of the drifting Chinese people. On the other hand, some motifs carry the stamp of different ages of China's development, such as the ATM, the Opportunity

Fortune Store, the bike and the popular songs. With the help of these typical motifs and even his personal experiences, Chan aims to awake the audiences' memory of a certain period of time so that they would identify themselves with the characters in the films. Whether you are a "social elite" or one of the "grass roots," you will find part of yourself in his works, experiencing the ups and downs with the characters.

What about other elements with regard to the theme of immigration in these films, such as politics, economy, society and so forth? Scholars like Yingjin Zhang may criticize Chan for the insufficient discussion on the immigration theme,<sup>39</sup> but if we take a look at these three so-called "immigration" films, we are supposed to notice that such a theme might not be the focus of Chan at all. *Comrades* is probably the one which involves the political, economic, and social situation most among Chan's love trilogy. Yet these elements are only located in the background of the story: the Tian'anmen Square Incident in 1989, the prosperity of Hong Kong's economy, immigrants' alienation from the local community are just covertly indicated in Xiaojun's letters. As for the characters, Sek Kei comments that "the two Mainlanders were neither portrayed stereotypically nor labeled with derogatory names- they were

---

<sup>39</sup> Yingjin Zhang, *Screening China: Critical Interventions, Cinematic Reconfigurations, and the Transnational Imaginary in Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press: 2002), 274.

regular people.”<sup>40</sup> As for the other two films, these elements are too vague to recognize. In *Alan and Eric*, the characters seem to live in a vacuum with no social events: Hong Kong is a place full of childhood memories, and San Francisco is a place where pains grow but finally dreams come true. In *Perhaps Love*, Beijing is only represented by battered buses, deserted factories and seemingly endless snow, while Shanghai is represented by the flamboyant and nostalgic studio. And Lin’s hometown Hong Kong, becomes a faraway place that seldom influences him, whether his accent or experiences. Based on ideological film studies, I would like to argue that *making the political, economic, and social background ambiguous* in Chan’s love trilogy is his strategy rather than a flaw. Only by playing down the background information can he better fix the audiences’ attention on the inner world of the characters. The reason why he carries out this strategy is that ***he is consistently more concerned about humanism than anything else***. In his works, the repetition of motifs reinforces the emotional resonance among audiences. And he is especially proficient in employing popular songs, one of the cultural symbols, to perfect this effect. No matter how China’s society changes, Peter Chan cares about the spiritual needs of people.

The academic contribution made by my thesis lies in its originality to

---

<sup>40</sup> Sek Kei, “Home and Homelessness,” in *Peter Ho-sun Chan: My Way* ed. Li Cheuk-to, 136 (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing co., Ltd., 2012).

specially concentrate on motifs in order to discover the artistic style and thematic significance of Chan's love trilogy. All the conclusions drawn from his love trilogy can also be modified and extended to his other works which exhibit the life of drifting Chinese people, like his new release *American Dreams in China* (2013) [中国合伙人]. As the first phase of my research on Chan's films, this thesis has its own limitations. First, motifs do not equal all the important elements in Chan's films. For example, Chan particularly selects some settings, props, and costumes with social and cultural significance, and these elements perform various narrative functions in his love trilogy, albeit not repeated. Second, other than ideological analysis, other film theories like psychoanalysis and postcolonial theories can also be applied to my research, since the *emotional world* of Chinese people in the context of *modernization* is the focus of my research. Hopefully this thesis will inspire my future studies to enrich the analysis of Chan's special filmic style as well as the study on the mental aspects of modern Chinese people.

## Bibliography

Berry, Michael. *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Bordwell, David. *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Film Interpretation Revisited." *Film Criticism* 17: 93-119.

Bordwell, David and Thompson, Kristin. *Film Art: an Introduction*. 4th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993.

Cai, Hongsheng 蔡洪声, Song, Jialing 宋家玲, and Liu, Guiqing 刘桂清, eds. *Xianggang dianying 80 nian* 香港电影 80 年 [80 Years of Hong Kong Film]. Beijing: Beijing Broadcasting Institute Press 北京广播学院出版社, 2000.

Chatman, Seymour. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980.

Fu, Poshek and Desser, David, eds. *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Gong Lihong 龚莉红. “Caogen jieji de piaobo aiqing- daoyan Chenkexin de aiqing sanbuqu.” 草根阶级的“漂泊爱情”——导演陈可辛的爱情三部曲 [“Floating Love” of the Grass Roots: Peter Chan’s Love Trilogy] *dianying wenxue* 电影文学, 2006 (01): 13-14.

Lee, Vivian P. Y., ed. *East Asian Cinemas: Regional Flows and Global Transformations*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York, NY : Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Lee, Vivian P. Y. *Hong Kong Cinema since 1997: the Post-nostalgic Imagination*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Li, Cheuk-to, ed. *Peter Ho-sun Chan: My Way*. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing co., Ltd., 2012.

O’Neill, Patrick. *Fictions of Discourse: Reading Narrative Theory*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994.

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

Rosen, Philip, ed. *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: a Film Theory Reader*. NY: Columbia University Press, 1986.

Strokes, Lisa Odham and Hoover, Michael. *City on Fire: Hong Kong Cinema*. New York: Verso, 1999.

Teo, Stephen. “*Promise and Perhaps Love: Pan-Asian Production and the Hong*

Kong-China Interrelationship.” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2008: 341-358.

Thompson, Kristin. *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988.

Wang, Georgette and Yeh, Emilie Yueh-yu. “Globalization and Hybridization in Cultural Products: the Cases of *Mulan* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, June 2005, Vol. 8 No. 2:175-193.

Zeng, Hong. *Semiotics of Exile in Contemporary Chinese Film*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Zhang, Yingjin. *Screening China: Critical Interventions, Cinematic Reconfigurations, and the Transnational Imaginary in Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press: 2002.