Interpreting Identity and Cultural Reflections in Hong Kong's Transition Cinema: *The Phantom Lover* (1995) and *Fly Me to Polaris* (1999)

by

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Abstract

This thesis offers an analysis of two Hong Kong films, *The Phantom Lover* (1995), directed by Ronny Yu, and *Fly Me to Polaris* (1999), directed by Jingle Ma, and their source texts, examining how they depict the nuances of culture and identity within the context of historical transitions. Hong Kong came under British colonial control in the 19th century and returned to Chinese rule in 1997. Released during Hong Kong's significant period of transition from British colonial rule to Chinese rule, *The Phantom Lover* and *Fly Me to Polaris* offer insights into the societal concerns and cultural changes of that era.

Chapter one looks at *The Phantom Lover*, which explores the tragic romance between Yunyan and Danping, portraying the struggles of powerless individuals in a feudal society, while also symbolizing Hong Kong's fear of losing their identity as the handover to China approaches. Chapter two focuses on *Fly Me to Polaris*, which presents a modern and fairytale-like love story in the backdrop of Hong Kong in 1999, investigating themes of harmony rooted in traditional Chinese values, mirroring Hong Kong's struggles with identity after its return to Chinese rule. Through a detailed examination of characters, plot development, and narrative elements, this research uncovers the nuanced ways in which these films reflect Hong Kong's identity shift. This analysis sheds light on the evolving cultural landscape of Hong Kong, providing perspectives on navigating transformations during the period of transition.

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Introduction

The 1990s was a volatile period in Hong Kong-China history and relations. In the 19th century, Hong Kong came under British colonial control during the First Opium War because of its advantageous harbour location. Under British rule, it developed into a strong capitalist region, different from mainland China's communist structure. Due to the impending expiration of the lease on the New Territories in 1997, which was a part of Hong Kong territory leased to Britain for 99 years, the British negotiated the reversion of Hong Kong to mainland rule in 1984. Since real-estate investors feared they would lose everything in the reversion, Britain had to discuss the entire region's future with China, resulting in the Sino-British Joint Declaration that led to the handover under the "One Country, Two Systems" principle, which was meant to maintain Hong Kong's autonomy and freedoms under China's rule (Overholt 1). This historical backdrop sets the stage for examining how the cultural products of the era, specifically Hong Kong cinema, responded to and reflected the shifting political and social landscapes.

This thesis is interested in how films from the 1990s deal with the shift in Hong Kong's identity around the transition from one colonial power to another. Hong Kong cinema thrived during this period. Filmmakers co-produced with mainland China, exploring their role within a new reality. In particular, choosing two Hong Kong films will help me analyze the important issues around identity during this chaotic time in the region's history. First, this thesis will consider *The Phantom Lover*, an auteur film by Ronny Yu and released in 1995, two years before Hong Kong's return, as the first example of how Hong Kong grappled with this change. Secondly, a more popular film, *Fly Me to Polaris*, directed by Jingle Ma and released in 1999, two years after Hong

Kong's return, provides an opportunity to reflect on the changes the region was experiencing. Both films use famous actors and well-known storylines from *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Ghost* to attract viewers. Apart from the shared characteristic of belonging to the period when Hong Kong experienced a significant challenge to its identity, I selected these two films because they explore romantic relationships between humans and ghosts. The use of ghosts in both films can be seen as metaphorical. In *The Phantom Lover*, the non-literal ghost represents unresolved emotions and the lingering impact of the past. In *Fly Me to Polaris*, the literal ghost symbolizes memories, loss, and the transcendent nature of love. The human-ghost topic offers narratives that span various genres, including horror, romance, drama, and fantasy. This versatility allows for exploring diverse themes and emotional experiences, reaching a broader audience and treating the local political context.

Cultural productions carry ideological messages. In his book, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, theorist Fredric Jameson discusses the concept of political allegory. He suggests that "the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (Jameson 64). That is to say, films can be interpreted politically as allegories that reflect the ideologies, social conditions, and historical contexts of their time.

Since both films were made before and during the transition, seeing how scholars treated this moment in Hong Kong cinema is critical. In "*Painted Skin*: Negotiating Mainland China's Fear of the Supernatural," Andy Willis examines *Painted Skin* (2008), focusing on how its adaptation navigates Chinese censorship after

Hong Kong's 1997 reunification with China. He highlights the strategic changes filmmakers make to explore economic opportunities and comply with regulatory constraints in mainland China (Willis 23). Just as *The Phantom Lover* and *Fly Me to Polaris* were produced during Hong Kong's transition period, *Painted Skin* is also situated within a specific historical moment — the post-reunification era. This article provides insights into how cultural productions have historically addressed socio-political issues in the changing context of China and Hong Kong and helps us understand how art and politics influence each other in times of transition. According to Willis, *Painted Skin* experienced changes in themes, settings, and characters to adapt to China's requirements.

Similarly, Esther Yau analyzes the role of films in shaping Hong Kong's identity relative to mainland China, focusing on the cultural and national dynamics as depicted in cinema before the 1997 handover. Like *The Phantom Lover* and *Fly Me to Polaris*, Yau's examples demonstrate the struggles of grappling with politics. According to Yau, the "coexistence of cynicism and sentimentality testifies to the ambivalence and syncretism of Hong Kong cinema of the 1980s" (Yau 199). The mixed feelings about the city's postcolonial future provide insights into societal impacts and cultural expression. In *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, Yau analyzes the impact of globalization on Hong Kong cinema, focusing on its cultural hybridity, which reflects and influences global and local socio-political contexts. In this article, Yau explores how Hong Kong cinema adjusted to and reflected the changing political landscape and the exploration of its identity, similar to what is examined in *The Phantom Lover* and *Fly Me to Polaris* (Yau 5). Ruby Cheung's book *New Hong Kong Cinema: Transitions to Becoming Chinese in 21st-century East Asia* offers

insights into the complex dynamics of Hong Kong during its period of change. The concept of a "refugee mentality" among Hong Kong residents, which arises from concerns about the uncertainties of political, social, and economic transformations, is related to the underlying themes in the movies *The Phantom Lover* and *Fly Me to Polaris* (Cheung 44). These films explore the impact of these transitions on individual identities and society as a whole.

On the other hand, the increase of China-Hong Kong co-produced films, as seen in *The Phantom Lover*, which includes a Hong Kong director, both Hong Kong and mainland actors, and is shot in mainland China, reflects the evolving landscape of cinema and the collaborative efforts of Hong Kong and mainland China since the 1990s. Transnational co-production facilitates the exploration of themes and narratives that resonate with multiple audiences. In *The Phantom Lover*, the film incorporates elements from Western opera, historical themes, revolutionary content, and romantic melodrama, catering to the preferences of viewers from different regions.

Additionally, “sometimes the process of the Hongkongers’ self-identification as ‘Chinese’ can itself be an emotional trauma” (Cheung 71). This is reflected in the struggles of characters like Danping in *The Phantom Lover* and Onion in *Fly Me to Polaris* as they grapple with their altered identities in the aftermath of significant change. Current literature in Hong Kong cinema studies provides a valuable framework to interpret and contextualize the complex narratives presented in these films within the broader socio-political landscape of Hong Kong's transition.

The Phantom Lover stars Leslie Cheung, Jacklyn Wu, and Huang Lei. It tells the tragic love story of Du Yunyan, a young woman from a wealthy family, and Song

Danping, a famous musical singer who becomes a disfigured “phantom” after their love is torn apart. This remake received numerous nominations. Critics describe it as follows:

> 虽然保留了原作中的恐怖元素，但影片将重心放在了讲述一个凄美的爱情故事之上。整体上不仅把握好了戏剧性情节的细微，使电影有了现代气息。鲍德熹的摄影，张书平的服装设计让电影在视觉上极具可观性。张国荣在气质上非常适合演这种具有悲剧色彩的艺术家，而吴倩莲和当时尚属内地新人黄磊在片中皆有不俗表现 (While retaining the horror elements of the original, the movie focuses on telling a poignant love story. It captures the nuances of the dramatic plot on the whole and gives a modern atmosphere. Peter Pau's cinematography and William Chang's costume design elevate the movie’s visual appeal, making it enjoyable to watch. Leslie Cheung's temperament was perfect for the role of this tragic artist, and Jacklyn Wu and Huang Lei, then a newcomer to mainland China, both had good performances in the movie).

The story takes place in 1926 Beijing. Song Danping, a famous musical singer in the theatre, falls in love with Du Yunyan, who is from a wealthy family. Yunyan's father disapproves of the relationship because Danping is a theatre singer but wants to marry his daughter into the more powerful Zhao family. Danping is a maverick at the time, designing theatres in the Western style and staging overly daring Western plays. His actions are unacceptable to the powerful. Therefore, after the Zhao family finds out about Yunyan and Danping’s secret meetings, and because of Danping's bold Western theatre performance, the Zhao family sends someone to throw sulfuric acid in Danping's face and burn down the entire theatre, making everyone think that Danping died in the fire. Desperate, Yunyan marries the Zhao family's son, who discovers she is not a virgin on their wedding night. The Zhao family is furious and withdraws from the marriage contract with the Du family. Unable to elevate their status through the power of the Zhao family, the Du family abandons their daughter Yunyan, who has since lost her

mind and lives in the deserted Du family mansion, waiting for Danping to return to the theatre every night of the full moon. What she does not know is that Danping is not dead. Because he is disfigured, he does not dare to face Yunyan and can only hide in the abandoned theatre, singing silently to Yunyan every night of the full moon. Ten years later, an opera troupe rented and refurbished the burnt-down theatre for performances. Danping believes that one of the male singers, Wei Qing, is a great singer. Therefore, he lures him to his hideout and teaches him to sing his famous *Romeo and Juliet*, trying to get him to pretend to be himself so that Yunyan will think he has returned. The troupe, which originally sang revolutionary songs, was about to go out of business, but Wei Qing became famous again for performing Danping's masterpiece. This attracts the son of the Zhao family, who has now become a powerful man, and he steals Wei Qing's girlfriend, Mengdie, who is also in the same troupe, in the name of subsidizing their group. Wei Qing thought Danping was sincere in teaching him to sing, but when he realized he only wanted him to be his understudy, he angrily rebuked him for his selfishness. As a result, Danping removes the hoodie he has been wearing to hide his face and goes to Yunyan to confess, but Zhao's son attacks him. Yunyan is shot, and Danping chokes Zhao's son. In the opera house, Danping comes forward to expose the crimes of the Zhao family, and they are taken away. In the end, Danping leaves the city with Yunyan, who becomes blind after being shot. Through the relationship between Danping and Yunyan, *The Phantom Lover* explores the theme of romance and serves as a lens to examine the societal and cultural dynamics of Hong Kong during its transition period.

Due to the signing of the treaty for Hong Kong's return in 1984, during the release of *The Phantom Lover* in 1995, Hong Kong was grappling with apprehensions

about its impending return to Chinese rule. The people of Hong Kong were fearful of the political transformation. Critics used this context to interpret the film: "[...] the phantom's disfiguration and literal loss of identity (as suggested in his assumed death to the public) can be read as an allegory of disfiguration and defacement of Hong Kong history, as anticipated and feared by many Hong Kong-ers as well as international observers" (Wang 61). That is to say, through its narrative and visual symbolism, the film represents the struggles and transformations that have taken place throughout Hong Kong's history in resistance to China's presence.

Similarly, the same can be said of the Hong Kong film *Fly Me to Polaris*, released in 1999. Jingle Ma directs this romance, which stars Richie Jen and Cecilia Cheung. It was nominated for Best Film at the 19th Hong Kong Film Awards. The film tells the story of Onion, a blind and mute man who lives and works at a hospital. He has a crush on Autumn, the nurse who takes care of him, and plays Autumn's favourite saxophone at night, but refuses to admit that he is the player when Autumn asks. One evening, following a shared experience of watching shooting stars that deepens their relationship, Onion is involved in a car accident, leading to his immediate demise. He awakens to find his sight and ability to speak restored, and he is at the transit station to Polaris, the North Star. An angel tells him he is the sixty billionth person to go from Earth to Polaris, and a wish can be fulfilled. He hopes to return to Earth to see Autumn with his eyes and is granted the opportunity to go back for five days, but he can only borrow someone else's body and voice and would not be able to reveal his true identity. After returning to Earth, Onion, already in a different body, disguises himself as Cheuk Ji Mun, an insurance broker, and approaches Autumn, pretending to discuss Onion's insurance with her, only to be misunderstood by her, who thinks he has offended Onion.

Previously, Onion had written a letter and recorded himself disclosing his true identity, as he loses the ability to talk whenever he intends to disclose it to Autumn. Unfortunately, the letter and recording Autumn received were blurred and could not be comprehended. Onion then pretends to read Autumn his diary before his death, prompting her to realize that she has loved Onion and regrets not confessing her feelings for him during his lifetime. Afterwards, realizing that he cannot reunite with Autumn, Onion chooses to take care of her silently, which makes her feel his presence. However, Autumn's other admirer, Dr. Woo, a doctor who works at the hospital, investigates and realizes that Cheuk Ji Mun's identity is a fraud and advises Autumn to be careful. On Onion's last night on Earth, he asks Dr. Woo to pretend that he is the one who has been playing the saxophone for her for the sake of Autumn's happiness while he silently blesses them. After gaining Autumn's favour, Dr. Woo is unable to bear the torment of his conscience and confesses to Autumn, explaining that Cheuk Ji Mun is the one who plays the saxophone. After hearing this, Autumn runs to find him, and she discovers the items left behind by Onion. She understands that Cheuk Ji Mun is Onion. Onion, found by Autumn, initially denies his identity but is moved by Autumn's sincere confession, and the two finally recognize each other. In the end, Onion and Autumn return to the hospital rooftop and watch the meteor shower together, which is also the time for Onion to return, so Onion gradually disappears into the sky and flies to Polaris.

Sil-Metropole Organization Ltd., a Chinese-funded film organization in Hong Kong, funded this film. It has facilitated numerous film collaborations between Hong Kong and mainland China in the twentieth century. During the transition: "为了谋求市场的生存和产业的发展，'银都'的管理者审时度势，及时调整发展思路，将类型片的多元化创作和香港故事与中国主题相融合的电影创作作为主要方向，

并以普遍撒网、密集投资作为最重要的拓展策略。” [To seek the survival of the market and the development of the industry, the managers of “Sil-Metropole" assessed the situation and adjusted the development idea in time, taking the diversified creation of genre films and the creation of films integrating Hong Kong stories with Chinese themes as the main direction, and spreading the net universally and investing intensively as the most important expansion strategy] (Zhang 286). As a result, after the handover, Sil-Metropole invested in a diverse range of genre films, including the romantic film *Fly Me to Polaris*, which it co-produced with Hong Kong’s renowned Golden Harvest Film Company. While the history of Hong Kong's colonization is not directly referenced in the film, Onion’s return from the dead can be read as Hong Kong’s return to Chinese rule. Furthermore, the narrative continues to unfold, emphasizing the core principle of "harmony" deeply rooted in traditional Chinese beliefs.

In this paper, I aim to demonstrate how the films *The Phantom Lover* and *Fly Me to Polaris* engage with the historical backdrop of Hong Kong's transition from one power to another. Through a detailed analysis of the films and their source texts, each chapter will delve into the characters, settings, plot development, and the underlying themes conveyed in both films. In my thesis, I utilize the original novel, the Chinese adaptation in 1937, and the two Hollywood films as source references to explore the themes and narrative elements in the two Hong Kong Films. These works are foundational references for analyzing the cultural and thematic connections in the Hong Kong film adaptations. By examining how the source material has been interpreted in the context of Hong Kong cinema, I intend to explore the cross-cultural influences and storytelling techniques employed. By investigating the narrative elements, including

character dynamics and storyline progression, I intend to uncover how these cinematic works reflect and respond to the historical context of Hong Kong's identity shift. Through this focused exploration, the paper seeks to shed light on the filmmakers' choices and the deliberate conveyance of ideas, providing a comprehensive understanding of how these films reflect the societies of Hong Kong and mainland China.

They shed light on the challenges and opportunities the shift in colonizers presented, encouraging reflection. They serve as a platform for discussions about identity, autonomy, and Hong Kong's future, fostering conversations essential for navigating this historic period of change.

Chapter 1: Hong Kong's Transition through the Tragic *The Phantom Lover*

In exploring the adaptation of novels into films across various cultures and languages, a compelling example is a popular story like *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra.* It has been adapted many times by many cultures, such as the Hollywood and independent US adaptations in 1925, 1943, and 2004, as well as the Chinese interpretations in 1937, 1985, and 1995. This chapter will examine the Chinese and Hong Kong adaptations, the films made in 1937 and 1995, the Hollywood version from 1943, and the original French novel. This chapter investigates how cultural differences are developed in the same story. I will mainly focus on the 1995 Hong Kong version, *The Phantom Lover*, directed by Ronny Yu, a story set in Beijing. I will also reference the original novel, *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* (1910), written by Gerard Leroux, which is set in Paris and serves as the common thread connecting the Hollywood movie *Phantom of the Opera*, also taking place in Paris and directed by Arthur Lubin in 1943. *The Phantom Lover* is based on the Chinese film *Song at Midnight*, directed by Ma-Xu Weibang and released in 1937. Adopting similar character settings and plot development from *Song at Midnight*, *The Phantom Lover* was produced according to the characteristics of its time and shifted the story's setting from Shanghai to Beijing. While the story doesn't take place in Hong Kong, it returns to 1920s and 1930s society in mainland China, an interesting choice on behalf of the director grappling with Hong Kong's identity in the 1990s. The 1920s and 1930s in China, as the film shows, is a repressive time, especially for women and working-class people. To fully comprehend *The Phantom Lover*, it is essential to reference not only its immediate precursor, *Song at Midnight* but also the original novel and the Hollywood adaptation. I chose this Hollywood version because it is the first

official sound version adapted from the novel and references the period of its production during World War II. Therefore, it is a better reference than other versions since it reflects and comments on the socio-political moment. This chapter will mainly focus on *The Phantom Lover*. I will look at it through the lens of adaptation and thoroughly analyze the film by referencing the original novel, the Hollywood movie, and *Song at Midnight*. *The Phantom Lover* grapples with the transition from China through the main character's loss of identity, mirroring the potential changes of the impending return to Chinese rule and the people's apprehension of this transition.

Many cultures have adapted the story in *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* because it is a romantic tale that can be staged in different contexts. In 1937, the novel was adapted by Chinese director Ma-Xu Weibang. He created the first Chinese horror film, *Song at Midnight*, starring Jin Shan, Gu Menghe, and Zhou Wenzhu, a sound film released before the 1943 Hollywood version. The film tells the story of Song Danping, a performer and a revolutionary who falls in love with Li Xiaoxia, a landlord's daughter, but is disfigured by the bully Tang Jun because of Tang Jun's desire for Xiaoxia. Xiaoxia loses her mind when she thinks Danping is dead, unaware he is hiding in the theatre to protect himself. He sings for Xiaoxia from the theatre roof at midnight. Ten years later, Danping meets Sun Xiao'ou, a singer in the troupe that came to the theatre. Danping helps him with his performance and asks him to pretend to be himself and meet with Xiaoxia to comfort her. Xiao'ou, however, has a similar experience to Danping, as his girlfriend is also insulted by Tang Jun. Danping helps Xiao'ou fight Tang Jun, causing Tang Jun to fall off the top floor and die. In the end, because of Danping's hideous face and his former identity as a revolutionary, he is pursued by the police, and finally, he jumps into the river and takes his own life.

Song at Midnight and *The Phantom Lover* are similar in plot and characters. The biggest difference between these two versions is that *The Phantom Lover* is much less revolutionary. According to critics: “与 1937 年马徐维邦版的《夜半歌声》相比，虽然在故事情节上没有做大幅度的改动，但原版中的革命主题、抗战主题却被大大的削减弱化，而是着重于描写爱情和艺术的感染力，从恐怖剧情中一层层的剥离出一段凄美的爱情故事。” [Compared with the 1937 Ma Xu Weibang’s version of *Song at Midnight*, although no drastic changes have been made to the storyline, the revolutionary and anti-war themes in the original version have been greatly cut down and weakened, focusing instead on the portrayal of love and the contagiousness of the art, and peeling away a poignant love story, layer by layer, from the horrific plot] (Fu 2). On July 7, 1937, a battle arose between the Japanese and Chinese armies, and the Second Sino-Japanese War started. This incident is known as the Marco Polo Bridge incident. *Song at Midnight* was released during the Marco Polo Bridge incident and conveyed the Chinese people's belief in fighting against the Japanese. As a result, Danping was not only a singer but also a revolutionary, and the movie shows him fighting against feudal landlords, reflecting the face of revolutionaries against oppression. On the other hand, *The Phantom Lover* is set in the same era as *Song at Midnight*, but it was released in 1995 and does not reflect much about the war. The movie mainly focuses on the tragedy of love between Danping and Yunyan. Yet, it can also be argued that it is a metaphor and reflection of the poisonous effects of the feudal system and will reflect Hong Kong during the transition.

Because both films reference the figurative ghost, in Chinese culture, some of the most popular ghost stories can be found in the collection of classic Chinese stories

from the Qing Dynasty, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* by Pu Songling. There are examples of stories similar to *The Phantom Lover*, which discusses and criticizes social issues. Specifically, in the story of *Nie Xiaoqian*, through the depiction of the heroine's active struggle for love within the confines of a feudal society, Pu "indirectly endorsed Nie's courage to protest actively against the ideal of the passive female and arranged marriages" (Zheng 756). This theme parallels *The Phantom Lover*, which depicts Yunyan's tragic experience with an arranged marriage. Both narratives use ghostly tales to criticize women's oppression in their respective societies.

Consequently, similar to the contrast between the Hollywood adaptation and the original novel, *The Phantom Lover* falls short in political commentary compared to the original film, *Song at Midnight*. However, *The Phantom Lover* is not entirely devoid of mapping the era's characteristics; in 1984, China signed a treaty with Britain agreeing that Hong Kong would be returned to China's control in 1997. As a result, Hong Kong in 1995 was facing the situation of reverting to China. "[...] The phantom's disfiguration and literal loss of identity (as suggested in his assumed death to the public) can be read as an allegory of disfiguration and defacement of Hong Kong history, as anticipated and feared by many Hong Kong-ers as well as international observers" (Wang 61). Thus, *The Phantom Lover*, like *Song at Midnight* can be read politically as a reflection and reaction to what Hong Kong was experiencing leading up to 1997.

The Hollywood film *Phantom of the Opera (1943)*, directed by Arthur Lubin and starring Nelson Eddy, Susanna Foster and Claude Rains, tells the story of a "phantom" and Christine in an opera house. Because of Claude Rains' (the "Phantom") reluctance to be in a horror film, the director eliminated the film's focus on horror (MacQueen 82). However, critics saw this differently: "The 'new formula for horror'

now effectively meant no horror at all, and *The Phantom of the Opera* is frequently criticized for its lack of thrills" (MacQueen 82). Nevertheless, it is a high-grossing film, and *The Phantom of the Opera* secured four Academy Award nominations for colour cinematography, colour art direction, musical score, and sound recording (MacQueen 85).

In the story, Claudin is a violinist in a Parisian theatre orchestra. After a performance, the director dismisses him because he has a hand disease that affects his playing. Claudin wanders around because he is penniless since he spent his earnings on his love, Christine, a female singer in the theatre. He believes she is very talented and wants her to become a successful leading singer, so secretly and without Christine's knowledge, he uses his savings to pay for her singing lessons to further her training. His only hope is to publish his self-composed concerto, but he never heard back from the publisher to whom he submitted it. He goes to the publishing house to ask the publisher about his work, but the publisher's assistant says she cannot find it, and the publisher asks him to leave. At that moment, he hears his work being played, unbeknownst to him, by the pianist Franz Liszt, who is about to recommend it to the publisher for publication. Claudin mistakenly thinks that the publisher has stolen his work. Angrily, Claudin chokes the publisher to death, and his assistant throws etching acid in Claudin's face, which he covers as he flees. At night, in the drizzle, the police search the streets for Claudin, who has just committed a murder, and thus Claudin runs into the sewers of the theatre, where he hides as a phantom. Since then, objects have begun to disappear in the theatre, where a new legend about a ghost explains their disappearances. Claudin becomes the phantom of the opera.

As the phantom and to help Christine's career, he poisons the opera singer Madame Biancarolli, for whom Christine is a substitute so that Christine can perform the leading role. Madam Biancarolli suspects Christine and threatens the opera house by suing Christine in exchange for withholding the criticism of her performance that night from the press. As a result, Claudin, determined to make Christine the leading singer, kills M. Biancarolli and her maid, and the theatre goes out of business. Afterwards, Claudin threatens to destroy the theatre if they do not let Christine perform as the leading lady. But Christine's two suitors, Raoul, a policeman, and Anatole, the baritone of the opera house, have other plans: Raoul wants to trap Claudin, so by not allowing Christine to go on stage, they can lure the phantom out and capture him. On the other hand, Anatole plans to lure the phantom by inviting the pianist Franz Liszt to play Claudin's self-composed concerto on stage. They decide to combine both plans to trap Claudin. In the first instance, when Claudin realizes that Christine is not performing as he had requested, he cuts the chandelier from the theatre's ceiling, causing it to fall on the audience and bring chaos to the theatre. During the chaos, Claudin pretends to be a police officer and takes Christine to his sewer hideout. Secondly, the sound of Claudin's self-composed music comes from the stage, so Claudin plays the piano and asks Christine to sing along. Christine takes advantage of his playing to pull off his mask, revealing his disfigured face. Raoul and Anatole arrive and confront Claudin. Raoul accidentally shoots the ceiling with his gun, causing it to collapse, and they both escape with Christine. At the same time, Claudin appears to be dead in the shambles. Ultimately, Christine does not accept any of her suitors and instead pursues her singing career.

This film was adapted from the novel by French author Gaston Leroux titled *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra,* published in 1910 and then translated into English in 1911. In the original story, the Phantom Erik was born deformed, hence covering his face with a mask. He was working on constructing the theatre and secretly fell in love with soprano Christine. He taught her to sing to get close to her, but Christine considered him the "Angel of Music." Christine was unaware of the Phantom's true identity because she feared him. Later on, Christine's friend Raoul and the Persian are framed and captured in a water cellar by the Phantom. At this point, the Phantom develops a paranoid love for Christine. However, she is in love with her childhood friend Raoul. To save them, she agrees to marry the Phantom. Later, the identity of the Phantom is revealed, and the basement of the opera house is flooded. In the end, the Phantom passes away.

The novel and the film adaptation share certain thematic elements while deviating from significant plot details. In both versions, the Phantom is marked by physical deformity, whether from birth in the novel or disfigurement by etching acid in the film. However, their backgrounds differ; the novel portrays the Phantom as a skilled theatre construction worker who creates mechanisms and secret chambers within the opera house, while the film depicts him as a violinist finding refuge in a pre-existing hiding place within the opera house. The romantic dynamics between Christine and Raoul also transform. In the novel, Christine and Raoul reciprocate each other's affection and eventually elope.

In contrast, the film portrays Raoul's unrequited affection for Christine, with her declining the proposals of all suitors. Even more noteworthy is that the film strips away the original novel's political elements. This means that while societal factors

somewhat influence Erik's mistreatment, Claudin's harm seems to be more disconnected from the social environment, driven by personal motivations instead. The Hollywood version solely focuses on love and the obsession of the Phantom for Christine. However, it also remarks on the role of women in society as will be argued below, and Claudin is positioned as an outside threat to the order, perhaps a reference to the Nazi threat encroaching on the world.

Despite these differences, both texts serve as a commentary on socio-political, historical and cultural aspects. As discussed in "The Ghost-Image on Metropolitan Borders—In Terms of *Phantom of the Opera* and 19th-Century Metropolis Paris," *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* is set within the opera house, which was built between 1861 and 1875, coinciding with Haussmann's reconstruction of Paris under the order of Napoleon III. (Lee 3). The renovation occurred during a major social and political change, aligning with the Franco-Prussian War's aftermath. At that time, Paris struggled with modernization while recovering from military defeat. "The ghost in Leroux's novel reflects the fears and desires of the bourgeois facing huge cultural and social changes at the end of the nineteenth century" (Lee 2). This reflection examines how Parisians, similar to the characters in the novel, adapted to a new social order following their defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. In the opera house, the Phantom represents a controlling force that symbolizes the Prussian influence that shaped the city's fate. Through this character, Leroux comments on Parisians' geopolitical tensions and societal anxieties regarding their future and identity in the aftermath of the war.

Similarly, *Phantom of the Opera* reflects the cultural and societal effects of World War II, especially seen in how it sanitizes the horror elements to suit the wartime audience, as it softens the portrayal of the Phantom's disfigurement. "Given that

fighting had started again, it was imperative that such images not be recalled by a Hollywood studio now under heavy pressure both to support and to sanitize the reality of World War II" (Hogle 157). This comment illustrates how the film adapted its horror elements to provide relief and distraction from the brutal realities of the war, demonstrating Hollywood's role in shaping public perception and morale during global conflict. In addition, during WWII, the demand for workers in manufacturing jobs exceeded the supply of white males in the civilian economy, leading to a significant increase in available occupations for women and minorities (Anderson 35). In the United States, “up to 6 million women joined the workforce between 1942 and 1945” (Santana 1). Christine’s decision to prioritize her career at the end of the film resonates with the historical context of WWII. Her decision can be seen as a commentary on the changing social landscape. Moreover, both versions maintain a central theme of the Phantom mentoring Christine in her singing endeavours, aiming to shape her into the leading singer of the opera house. This shared focus on their musical interactions forms a common thread between the two renditions.

Phantom of the Opera and *The Phantom Lover* are distinct versions that diverge in various aspects. The former is set in the 1880s in Paris, while the latter unfolds in Beijing during 1926 and 1936. In the Hollywood version, the change in the protagonist's life begins with Claudin committing manslaughter and having his face splashed with etching acid; in the Chinese version, Danping's life begins with having his face splashed with acid by people sent by the Zhao family, who also set fire to his lounge room. But for Yunyan, her life change begins when she thinks Danping has been killed by fire and then enters into an arranged marriage only to be rejected and abandoned by her family because she is not a virgin.

Secondly, as horror films, horror is represented in Chinese and Hollywood versions. A sense of terror is created before the phantom reveals his true identity in both versions. In the Hollywood adaptation, horror elements can be observed in various shots depicting the phantom's shadow cast upon the wall. On the other hand, in the Chinese rendition, these horror elements are portrayed through Danping's haunting singing voice and the occasional gusts of wind emanating from his concealed location. In terms of the phantom's appearance, Claudin wears a black cloak, hat and mask after transforming into a phantom. However, the film does not shy away from showing his face with the mask in close-up shots, allowing the audience to see his appearance in a mask. The mask hides his disfigured face, which diminishes the sense of terror (Fig. 1) and aligns with the film's intention to soften the depiction of Phantom's disfigurement and provide consolation for the audience during WWII.

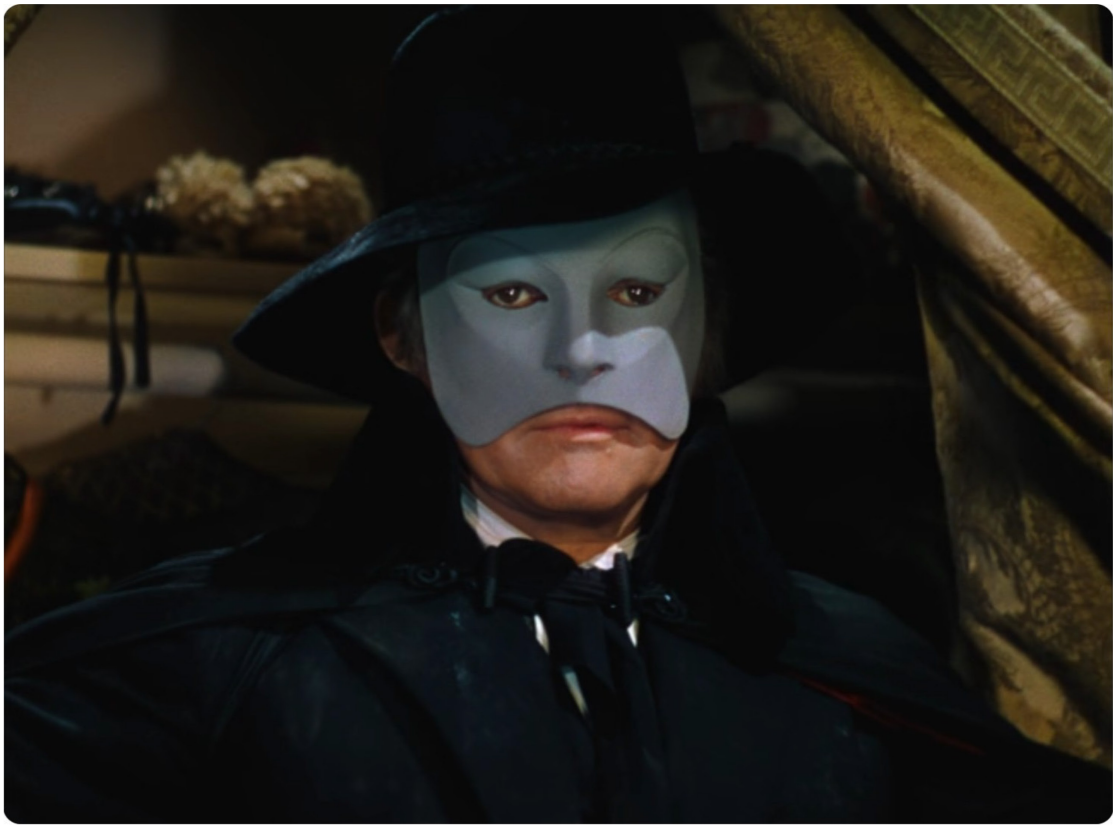

Fig. 1 Shadows cast behind Claudin in a close-up shot of his face in Phantom of the Opera (1943) help to create a sense of horror and mystery. On the other hand, the mask hides his disfigured face, reducing that terror.

Furthermore, his disguise and actions can be interpreted as those of an anti-hero, as he resembles a superhero in disguise but engages in heinous acts such as murder. Unlike in the other versions, Claudin is a threat to the society and the film positions him as an outcast responsible for various crimes. On the other hand, Danping only wears a black cloak but consistently keeps his disfigured face hidden, often tilting his head down. His scenes are mostly shot from behind and shrouded in darkness, preventing the audience from fully discerning his appearance. Even in close-up shots (Fig. 2), only the undamaged side of his face is revealed, adding to the mystique and horror surrounding the phantom and emphasizing the theme of terror. In addition, I

argue that Danping's disfigured part of the face is an allegory of Hong Kong's loss of identity. He conceals his physical scar. This act of hiding reflects the apprehensions and anxieties in Danping as an example of what Hong Kongers experience in the transition period.

Fig. 2 Danping in *The Phantom Lover* (1995) surrounded by darkness. His face is hardly visible. The only visible part is the half of his face, which remains unchanged. Unlike the Phantom, he does not wear a mask, but his appearance onscreen is always shrouded in mystery.

Although, as mentioned above, *Phantom of the Opera* and *The Phantom Lover* cut down their horror effects or political themes to focus on the theme of love, albeit manifesting in distinctly nuanced ways. The Hollywood version portrays love through the character of Claudin's actions, wherein his secretive efforts to secure a singing tutor for Christine underscore his devotion to her musical aspirations. Like the novel, Claudin's love for Christine is obsessive and unrequited. Claudin's transformation into the phantom persona leads to a distorted manifestation of love, marked by criminal acts such as poisoning a singer, murdering an opera performer, and cutting the chandelier

of the opera house. These acts of love in the Hollywood version are overt and entwined with sinful deeds, mirroring the portrayal in the original novel.

Conversely, in the Chinese version, love is depicted through the relationship between Yunyan and Danping. It is accentuated by profound symbols such as roses, a music box exchanged between them, and the song Danping wrote for Yunyan. As Danping becomes a phantom, his expressions of love take on a more implicit yet moral character. This is evident in his endeavour to find a double for himself to sing for Yunyan when he was not courageous enough to do so, engaging in a confrontation with Zhao Jun to protect Yunyan, and finally stepping forward to expose the evil deeds of the Zhao family. The symbols associated with Danping's love and subsequent actions are characterized by their implicit nature and a relatively righteous orientation. The distinction in the portrayal of love in these films underscores the narrative differences. The Hollywood version accentuates the darker facets of love, intertwining it with criminality. In contrast, the Chinese version opts for a more implicit and high moral value representation, echoing cultural tendencies in depicting emotional nuances.

The mise-en-scene of *The Phantom Lover* in the two separate timelines is different, with a higher saturation in 1926 and a lower saturation in 1936. In 1936, the colours are faded, which "[...] emphasizes the decay of the theatre and the shadows of the mysterious backstage area" (Scheid 41). Also, because this is the period when Danping has lost his identity, the use of faded colours serves as a visual metaphor symbolizing the situation in Hong Kong during this transitional period. The washed-out tones reflect the uncertainties and challenges experienced by the region as it grapples with a shifting identity before its upcoming return to Chinese rule. In 1926, brighter colours were utilized. As reviewer Ed Scheid indicates, "The flashback's bright

colours (especially the reds) accentuate the passion of the romance from the past. Lush images and opulent stage design make an appropriate setting for the intense emotions of Song's love story" (Scheid 41). The director chose to represent the different timelines through the use of colour on the screen. One reason for this is that it creates a contrast that facilitates the audience distinguishing between the two storylines while simultaneously rendering different effects and contrasting the protagonist's life in the past and the present.

On the other hand, the *Phantom of the Opera* uses a visual construction consistent throughout the film and through one timeline. The tonal saturation remains stable even in scenes marked by suspense and darkness, unlike horror and other popular genres. Notably, this film follows a singular timeline. Yet, the director chooses not to significantly alter the tonal saturation, even in moments of heightened tension, effectively reducing the sense of terror. This uniformity differs markedly from *The Phantom Lover*'s approach. Both directors chose different methods to get their point across. The low saturation of *The Phantom Lover* renders its horrific and frightening visual effect. At the same time, *Phantom of the Opera* is less frightening than *The Phantom Lover*, and the high saturation shots do not bring the audience much frightening emotions. The directors' divergent choices in tonal approach align with their respective narrative goals, with *The Phantom Lover* utilizing tonal shifts to convey different emotional tones. At the same time, *Phantom of the Opera* relies on consistency to maintain a less alarming overall atmosphere. As mentioned before, this could be an effect of the film's attempt to sanitize the horror and use the film as an escape from the horrors of reality.

Moreover, the Chinese version mirrors the Hollywood version with a similar stage performance as Danping performs bold Western plays. However, the two diverge in portraying the female protagonist's living situations. The Chinese version, even though it depicts a wealthy family living in a grand mansion, paints a depressingly dark imagery, reflecting the societal constraints prevalent in the feudal era. In this mansion, in scenes where Yunyan wears traditional clothes to send her greeting to her parents, Yunyan's father arranges her marriage into a powerful family. Thus, Yunyan is always depicted as being confined. This darkness serves as a visual metaphor for Yunyan's life, constrained by the societal norms and structures of the era. The images underscore the limitations imposed on women within the feudal system.

Fig. 3 In an underexposed shot, Yunyan, in confinement, sits at her desk in traditional attire to write a secret letter to Danping asking him to run away with her. The dark macabre atmosphere created by the underexposure emphasizes her difficult position in a feudal society.

Conversely, the Hollywood version depicts the daily life scenes of the heroine with contrasting vibrancy and brightness, typical of technicolour. While the horrors of World War II are undescribable, there is something positive in the film that is

represented through its luminosity. During WWII, many women joined the workforce. They have taken on roles that men previously dominated. This change fostered a sense of independence among women. A lot of single women have been enjoying more social freedoms than they used to in the past (Anderson 36), and "women had chances to meet and befriend outside of their neighborhoods and regular social circles" (Santana 4). In the Hollywood version, Christine can interact with men without constraint, and her suitors, Anatole and Raoul, can be in her house. This is different from the constrained existence depicted in the feudal society of the Chinese narrative, especially for women who had no choice but to marry for power.

Fig. 4 In *Phantom of the Opera,* Christine sits before the piano in her house, and one of her suitors, Anatole, is helping her sing. She is in the foreground, practicing her part to

advance her career as a modern woman. Despite the threat of the Phantom, she is happy with her career.

Regarding the female protagonists, the two heroines have different approaches regarding love. In the Hollywood version, Christine has two suitors with different social identities. Christine can choose who to be with and meet them openly. At the same time, Yunyan is not free to choose her lover. Her marriage is not related to love but to class and power. Her relationship with the one she loves is secret, revealing women's social condition and status at that time. At the end of the story, the disfigured Danping and the blind Yunyan finally get together. This ending can be seen as a metaphor for the class ideology of the society at that time. It is a society where two able-bodied people cannot break through their class status and choose freely to love. They can only come together after they have both become disabled and rejected from civil society.

Moreover, the perspective of gender adds another layer to this remake. One critic explains that “Song's decision to prevent her from seeing the abject and the excessive suggests that a woman should not see (too much). This patriarchal protectionism eventually literalizes in the bride-to-be's failing sight” (Wang 53-54). That is to say, Yunyan is blinded when she first faces Danping’s disfigured face. The phantom is depicted as a vision-deprived being who refuses to let his fiancée see his face to maintain his control and power over her. In addition, although Yunyan is from a wealthy family and the mansion she lives in is quite large, the settings are simple and dark, reflecting her living situation in the family and society. “在对浪漫主义诠释的最为浓重的 1995 年版中，影片巴洛克式风格的建筑设计一上来就为宋丹萍和杜云嫣二人的情感树立了一种‘离经叛道’的空间氛围，同杜云嫣在北京家中森严等级分明、威严不可侵犯的大宅子形成了鲜明对比。” [In the 1995 version of

the film, which is the strongest interpretation of Romanticism, the baroque architectural design of the film establishes a ‘deviant’ atmosphere for the relationship between Song Danping and Du Yunyan, contrasting with the strict hierarchy of Du Yunyan's grand mansion in Beijing, where she lives with her family in a dignified and inviolable manner] (Yang 144). The different environments that Danping and Yunyan are in imply the disparity in their relationship. Also, Yunyan's choice of clothes is relatively limited. Her clothing choices are largely dictated by societal expectations and specific occasions, such as the traditional ceremonial dress she has to wear when she greets her parents, the ornate and demure cheongsam she wears when she gets engaged to an arranged marriage, and the traditional red wedding dress she wears when she gets married. However, she wears Western-style dresses when she sneaks off to see her lover Danping's performances, which her family sees as deviant because she has to change when she meets her parents. The contrast between traditional and Western attire represents her internal struggle for autonomy within the confines of societal expectations.

In contrast, Christine's wardrobe in the Hollywood version is of many colours, including purple, blue, and gray, and no traditional culture has to be followed. This difference in Christine's clothing choices indicates her societal context, wherein social rules encumber less personal freedom and individual expression. The varied palette suggests a society allowing a more liberated and individualistic approach to personal style. Unlike Yunyan, Christine's clothing choices reflect personal preferences rather than being constrained by societal norms and expectations, revealing a distinct culture that allows greater autonomy to its people.

Additionally, *Phantom of the Opera* follows a single timeline with Christine at its core, along with her numerous suitors. Conversely, *The Phantom Lover* weaves two timelines, one centred on the romance between Danping and Yunyan and the other introducing a revolutionary subplot, which tells the story of Weiqing and his lover Mengdie, besides Danping and Weiqing's mentor-protege relationship. It uses flashbacks to tell the story of the two timelines, leading to the story of Danping ten years earlier through Weiqing in 1936, which allows the characters of the two timelines to mirror each other. As academic Meiyuan Zhong points out, "假设影片采用顺序性，一开始就讲述宋丹萍，影片就极大地缺失了曲折性，并且缺少了对两代人有缘的印证。" [Assuming that the movie adopts a sequential nature and begins with the story of Song Danping, the movie lacks twists and turns and is missing the seal of approval that the two generations are destined] (Zhong 111). What is more, compared to *Phantom of the Opera*, the role of "Christine" in the original novel becomes unspecified after the remake in the Hong Kong version. This is because of the addition of the role of "Wei Qing." In this story, Yunyan is a female character that Danping is in love with, like Christine to Erik. However, although Wei Qing is a male character, he is an opera singer like the Phantom. Their mentor-protege relationship mirrors Christine and Erik's communication.

The divergences between the Hong Kong and Hollywood versions suggest that the U.S. version focuses on individualism, mainly telling a blindly individualistic love story for the fulfillment of one's selfish desires without regard to the thoughts of others. The film ends with the death of the Phantom, which makes the audience feel a hint of sympathy for him. However, the ending is still a triumphant one from Christine's point

of view, as she finds passion in pursuing her career, which mirrors the social phenomenon that more women joined the workforce during WWII in the United States.

In contrast, the Hong Kong version reflects the complex social reality of contemporary society. It uses Danping's encounters to reveal the brutalization of the feudal and class system in China at that time, which deprived people of their human rights and blocked their minds. The feudal system makes it impossible for Danping and Yunyan to fulfill their love and destroys their lives. These films offer distinct cultural and narrative experiences, making them unique in their own right.

In the *Phantom of the Opera*, Claudin, after killing the publisher and being disfigured, escapes to the sewers of the theatre, puts on a mask, and becomes the Phantom. Claudin's disfigurement is, therefore, a turning point in the movie. The scene begins with a shot of the music publisher's sign pointing out the location. With a shot of a man entering the publishing house, the audience sees Claudin sitting in the publisher, waiting anxiously. Then he stands up, keeps pacing, and rubs his hands uneasily over the hat he holds. He has been dismissed from the opera house, and now his submission to the publisher is his only hope in continuing his career; therefore, he breaks into the publisher's office despite being told that the publisher is busy. After he enters the office, the shot shows the publisher and his assistant in the forefront and focused, while Claudin is in the background and appears out of focus and smaller than the others in the shot. This shot shows the inequality of power between the two parties, emphasizing Claudin as the weaker one. This deliberate framing sets the tone for the rest of the scene and serves as a visual cue for the power dynamics in the scene. This visual choice establishes a power imbalance that likely influences the subsequent interactions and decisions. Claudin's diminished presence in the frame suggests

vulnerability and a lack of agency compared to the publisher and his assistant. This implies that Claudin may be disadvantaged or face challenges when interacting with the more dominant figures. This visual storytelling technique effectively communicates the power dynamics within the narrative, shaping the audience's perception of the characters and contributing to the overall tension and intrigue of the scene. In addition, the portrayal aligns with the themes of isolation and alienation in Claudin's character. These techniques help the audience anticipate his potential reactions and drive the narrative forward.

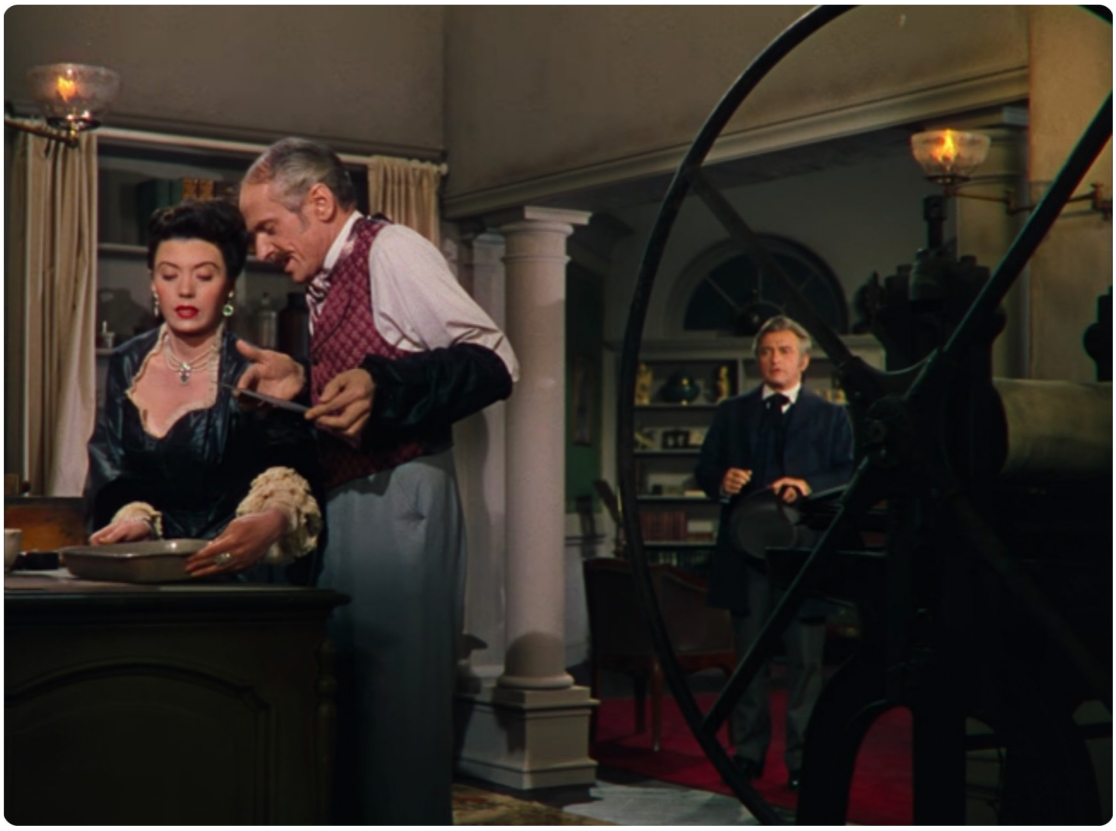

Fig. 5 This shot of Claudin entering the room shows him out of focus and more vulnerable than the publisher and his assistant.

After the assistant fails to find Claudin's concerto, the publisher and Claudin have a head-on confrontation where the publisher scolds and tells him to leave. At this

point, Claudin hears the pianist Liszt playing his concerto. Claudin mistakenly believes that the publisher has stolen his concerto. Claudin's assumption is incorrect because he is unaware that the composer has played the piece to promote his work. Following a medium close-up shot capturing Claudin's angered expression, the scene intensifies as he initiates an aggressive act by strangling the publisher.

The subsequent close-up shots of Claudin's grimacing face heighten this pivotal moment's emotional and dramatic impact. By zooming in on Claudin's facial expressions during the act of aggression, the audience is provided with an intimate view of his emotions. The close-ups of his grimacing face convey a mix of anger, desperation, and a sense of retribution, deepening the audience's connection to the character's emotional state. This technique allows the audience to witness the intensity of Claudin's actions and emotions up close. It serves as a visual device to elicit a stronger emotional response from the audience.

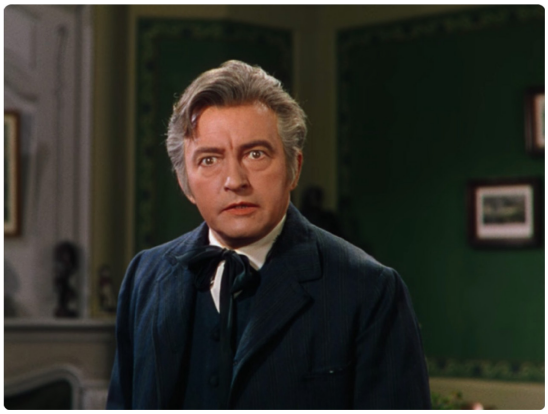
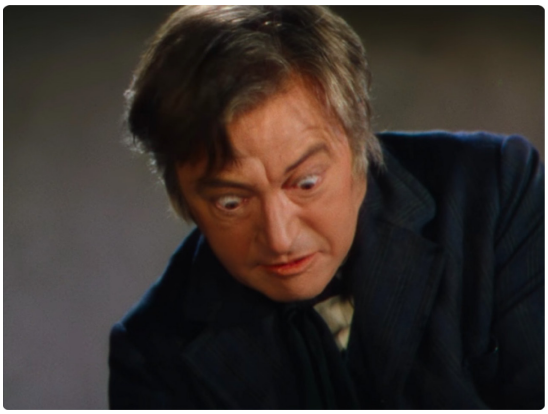

Fig. 6 - Fig. 7 Two close-up shots of Claudin's emotional state before and while he is murdering the publisher. The look of anger and possession both emphasize Claudin's emotional state.

After he pushes the publisher to the ground, the camera shows a medium shot to display the state of events. Claudin is then thrown etching acid in the face by the

assistant. He covers his face and runs away in a panic as he stumbles out of office. Claudin's back is turned to the camera in this process, hiding his disfigured face. Even when we see him from a shot showing him fully, his hands cover his face. The audience never sees his disfigurement aligning with the film's intention to sanitize the horror for wartime audiences.

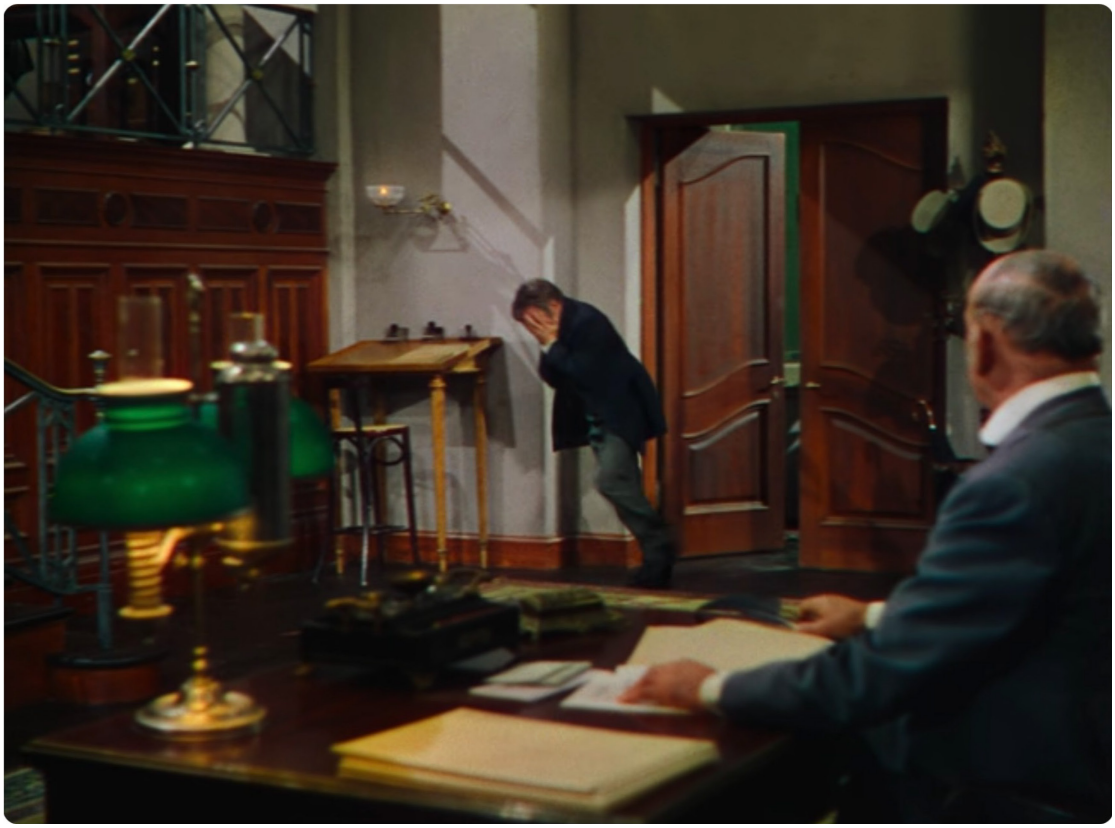

Fig. 8 In this long shot, we see Claudin fully as he exits the office, but he hides his disfigured face with his hands.

Likewise, its Chinese version, *The Phantom Lover,* has a scene to explain how Danping was injured before he became the Phantom. The scene begins with a close-up of Danping's face in the mirror, where he looks up, and then the camera pulls away to show him in costume in the theatre's lounge, preparing for his next performance. The mirror shows his self-reflection in a representation of his own identity. He is aware that

he will be playing the role of “Romeo” in the play to be performed that night. At this moment, he is in a costume and a character from a well-known play, *Romeo and Juliet*. The mirror, therefore, becomes a visual representation of Danping's self-awareness and the complex interplay between reality and theatricality. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the two protagonists are in a romance forbidden by their families, leading them to tragic fates and, ultimately, deaths. By adopting the persona of Romeo, Danping not only mirrors a character from a well-known play but also, crucially, mirrors the circumstance of a forbidden love and hints at the impending tragedy that awaits him and Yunyan.

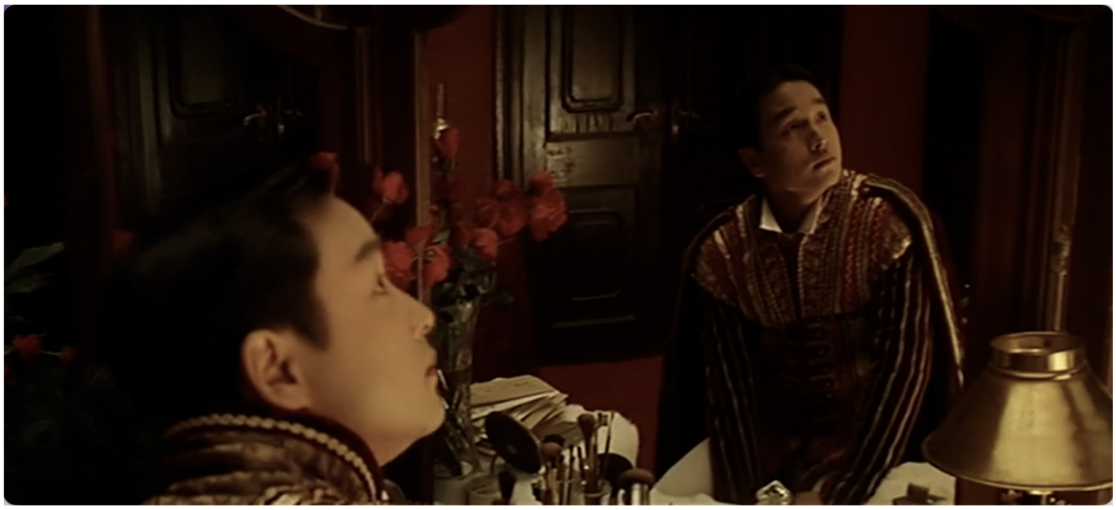

Fig. 9 Danping is shown in front of the mirror moments before he is disfigured. This version is more self-reflective of the main character’s acting and suggests Danping is more aware of his circumstances and position.

Danping starts to read the fan letters on his desk, but by mistake, he throws away the letter Yunyan secretly sent him, asking him to run away together. Just as he finishes reading a letter and is about to open Yunyan's, the camera pans down. It slowly zooms in on Danping, signalling that a great disaster will befall him (Fig. 10). Like the *Phantom of the Opera*, Danping is portrayed as vulnerable in the shot, seen from above with little power or agency.

Fig. 10 As Danping sits at his desk to read his mail, he is seen from a high-angle shot showing his loss of power and vulnerability.

In the next shot, Danping hears a knock on the door and opens the lounge door. There is an extreme close-up of Danping, following his eyes, a medium close-up of two of Zhao's hired thugs, and a close-up of Danping's facial expression before he is attacked, which is also the last shot of Danping before he becomes the Phantom. The close-up allows the audience to witness Danping's reaction in detail, creating a heightened tension for the impending threat. By making this close-up of the last shot of Danping before he transforms into the Phantom, the filmmakers create suspense and pique the audience's curiosity about the actual turn of events. Just like Claudin, the close-up emphasizes his beautiful, flawless face before he is disfigured. But unlike Claudin, he shows no emotions and is unaware of what is to come.

Fig. 11 - Fig. 12 The exchange between Danping as he meets the thug who will attack him. In both close-ups of Danping's face, we see that he shows no emotion as he does not know what is happening to him.

What follows is a shot of the thugs shutting the door to the lounge after setting a fire. The opera house goes up in flames, and the audience in the theatre escapes. The implication is that Danping was burned to death. However, the details of Danping's attack are omitted, and the film's spectator does not know precisely what happened. Ten years later, in the scene where Danping encourages Wei Qing to take care of Yunyan for him, this scene reappears, and the process of Danping's injury is revealed. After

Danping opens the door to the lounge, a close-up of the thug is followed by a close-up of the acid on the carpet. Danping, who has been doused with acid, then rolls around, covering half of his face before the carpet begins to catch fire. Then the thugs lock the lounge door from the outside, and Yunyan's elopement letter to Danping is burned. The scene ends with the image of a raging fire in the lounge.

Comparing the scenes of the injuries these two protagonists suffered before becoming the Phantom shows the nuances and similarities made by the remake. First of all, they are both disfigured, one by etching acid and one by sulfuric acid; however, while neither shows shots of their faces after the acid is thrown on them, *Phantom of the Opera* shows the images of Claudin being thrown the acid. At the same time, Danping's is omitted and revealed in the confession scene later in the film. In *Phantom of the Opera*, the film depicts the process of Claudin's disfigurement, offering a visual representation of the horrific event. By showing this moment, even if omitting its direct impact on his face, the film gives the audience a more direct and explicit understanding of the character's demise. This approach evokes a frightful reaction, but the horror is somewhat alleviated by exposing everything.

On the other hand, the *Phantom Lover* employs a different strategy by initially omitting the depiction of Danping's encounter. The choice creates a sense of mystery and anticipation, heightening the emotional impact when his disfigured face is eventually revealed during the confession scene. This delayed revelation enhances the element of horror and shock, as the audience is kept in suspense, not fully aware of the turn of events until the revealing moment. In addition to the acid being thrown, both versions contain another conflict in this scene. In *Phantom of the Opera*, Claudin kills the publisher, and Danping is set on fire by Zhao's thugs in *The Phantom Lover*. In this

case, Claudin's crime is an unprepared act arising from a misunderstanding in a moment of anger. Meanwhile, the Zhao family's thugs are sent by the Zhao family to commit an intentional act of murder, making Danping a pawn in a larger societal context. In addition, in both conflicts, the confrontation between Claudin and the publisher and its results are clearly shown, while the thugs' attack on Danping is only implied.

Moreover, this scene in *The Phantom Lover* is interspersed with shots of the main female character, Yunyan, attempting to escape from her house and her confinement, suggesting that the attack Danping suffers at the theatre is related to Yunyan. So, in the previous scene of the attack, Yunyan attempts to run away but is chased by the servants in her house. They lead her outside, where her face is illuminated by the servants' lanterns, who find her on the ground. The camera pans down to her, kneeling on the ground, looking at the sky and sighing. This shot mirrors the earlier one of Danping reading fans' letters. The overhead angle is a narrative device, creating a sense of vulnerability and shared destiny. This visual symmetry enhances the storytelling by creating a motif that unifies the characters' fates. The shared image becomes a visual cue for the audience, fostering an understanding that the narratives of Yunyan and Danping are intertwined and that they are both trajectories that will lead to tragedy. Like Danping, Yunyan is a victim of her circumstance. She lacks agency and power.

Fig. 13 A shot of Yunyan after her failed attempt to escape her house. The high-angle shot from above mimics the same fate the camera alludes to with the shot of Danping in the early scene.

After Danping is set on fire, the camera cuts to Yunyan in captivity. The scene begins with her leaning desperately against the wall of a dark room in a black dress. Then, her room is illuminated by the red light from the theatre's fire.

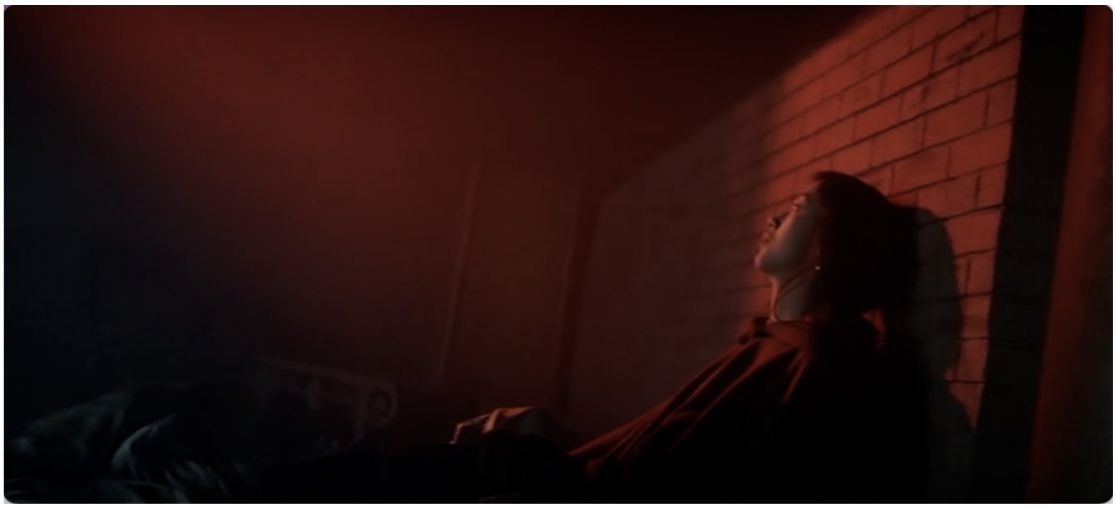

Fig. 14 Yunyan is in a literal prison, unable to do anything as the theatre burns down.

The next shot indicates that the red light is coming in through a small window in the wall, accompanied by someone else shouting that the theatre is on fire and that

Song Danping has been burned to death. A close-up of Yunyan's nervous expression as she hears the door locking. She runs to the door, begging her mother to open it for her, and the scene ends with a shot of the locked door that Yunyan cannot open. In these two shots, only half of Yunyan's face appears. Either the other half is not shown or hidden in the dark. The technique of obscuring part of Yunyan's face adds an element of mystery and unease to the composition. It implies that she has yet to comprehend hidden aspects or impending threats fully. The visual representation creates a sense of impending doom or concealed danger by keeping part of her face in darkness or not showing it at all. Furthermore, it anticipates the disfigurement of Danping to half his face and what is about to happen to Yunyan herself because of this incident. Again, their fate is intertwined.

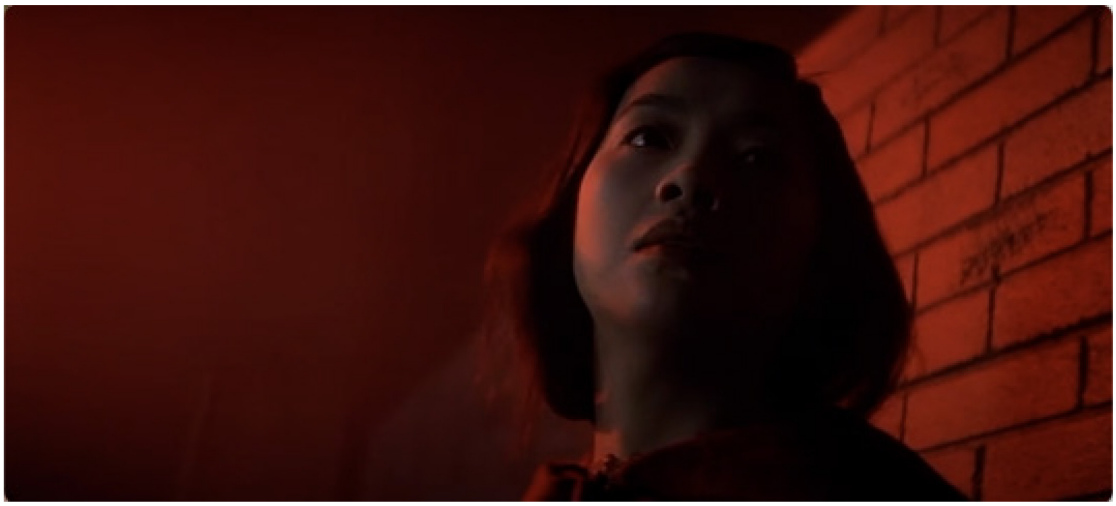

Fig. 15 Yunyan realizes Danping is in danger in the fire, and she cannot act. She is stressed as we only see half her face in close-up. The reference to Danping's predicament also highlights the entwined destiny of the lovers and their societal constraints.

Phantom of the Opera, on the other hand, does not intersperse any further shots, including that of Christine, the heroine, who is absent from the plot and is only

abstractly the reason behind Claudin's actions. The film implies that this is Claudin's behaviour out of self-will. Christine stands for the inspiration of his act. The film contrasts with the Chinese version, as the harm suffered by Danping comes from the Zhao family, representing the powerful and influential power and status in society. Yunyan's family is indirectly involved. Yunyan, a woman, and Danping, an opera singer, could not resist this powerful oppression. This incident and the arranged marriage epitomize the feudal society, symbolizing women's confined thoughts and limited voice in this era.

Furthermore, their encounters can metaphorize Hong Kong's fear during the transitional period. The influence of the Zhao family, representing societal power and status, can be considered an allegory for mainland China's impact on Hong Kong's autonomy and identity. By mirroring the feudal society depicted in the film to the historical context of Hong Kong's transition, the narrative reflects a shared fear about the challenges individuals face against powerful forces.

In the penultimate *Phantom of the Opera* scene, Claudin cuts the chandelier on the theatre roof during a stage performance because Christine was not scheduled to perform. He disguises himself as a policeman and takes advantage of the confusion to take Christine away. When he is about to enter his hideout, the sewers, Christine realizes that he is not a policeman, and so Christine, in a state of panic, is forced by Claudin to walk through the dark sewers and into his hideout. Claudin then hears his concerto being played on stage and begins to play it. Christine realizes that it is based on a lullaby from when she was a child, and then Claudin asks Christine to sing along as the camera switches between Claudin playing and Christine singing. Then, when Claudin isn't looking, Christine removes his mask, and the camera advances and zooms

in on Claudin's disfigured face as Christine backs away in shock. The camera's zooming in on Claudin's disfigured face intensifies the visual impact of the revelation. This technique draws the audience's focus to the significant moment of the first unveiling of Claudin’s disfigured face, heightening the emotional intensity of the scene, including Claudin’s shock and the audience’s fear.

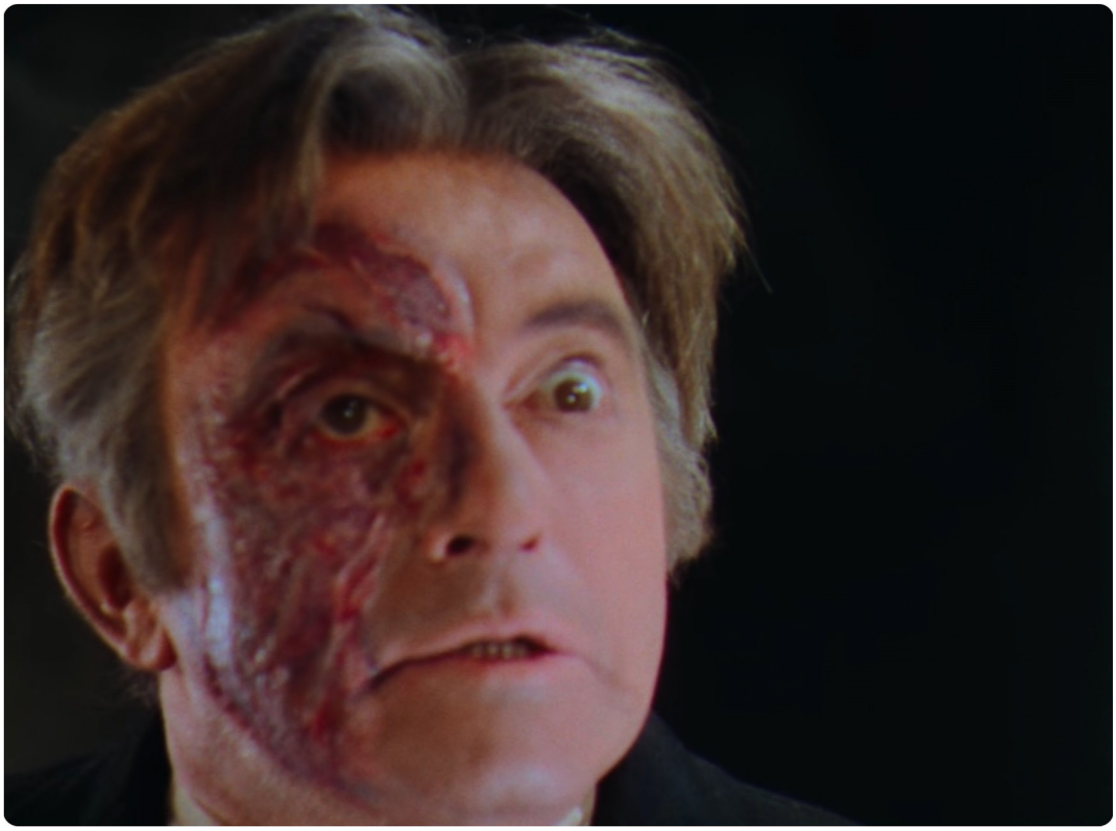

Fig. 16 The reveal of Claudin’s disfigured face also shows his eyes big and threatening.

At this point, two of Christine's other suitors find them pointing guns at Claudin. They are followed by a tilted shot of Claudin swinging a sword in a low-angle shot. The low angle makes the subject appear larger and more imposing, evoking a sense of menace in this context. The upward perspective makes the character visually imposing and can convey a sense of looming threat or danger. This shot contrasts with *The Phantom Lover. Claudin* has agency, unlike Danping and Yunyan.

Fig. 17 A low-angle shot of Claudin with this sword shows that he has agency and is the maker of his misfortunes. It also suggests that Claudin is responsible for the suffering he has caused.

Then, the two suitors accidentally gunshot the ceiling, causing it to collapse, and they rush to escape with Christine while Claudin disappears into the dust. After escaping, Christine expresses her pity for Claudin, an unknown suitor. Finally, the camera returns to Claudin's hiding place from earlier, the scene ending with a close-up shot of his mask and violin in the rubble, implying that Claudin died in the collapse. The mask, representing his Phantom identity, and the violin, a symbol of his artistry and passion, are now left in ruins, underscoring the tragedy of his death. The film ends with Christine not accepting any of her suitors and instead pursuing her dream of singing, demonstrating her agency as an independent woman. Claudin and Christine

both have the agency to choose their lives, while Claudin chooses poorly, so he takes consequences for his actions. They take on different paths as a result of their autonomy.

The Phantom Lover's final scene begins with a close-up of walking feet in a very dark shot, drawing the audience's attention to the character's movement.

Fig. 18 A close-up of Danping's feet as he walks towards Yunyan. The straight-angle shot emphasizes his feet to show his movement and his action.

Then, a shot from behind as he walks through a dark corridor into a lit room contributes to a sense of suspense with this lack of visibility in a confined space.

Fig. 19 In this shot, Danping is about to enter a lit room. We only see him from behind, covered in darkness.

Then Danping pushes open the door to reveal the surprised face of Yunyan's maid, Xiaohua. Her reaction adds a layer of mystery about the identity of this figure. The choice not to show this character's face during this sequence is a cinematic technique that heightens suspense, intensifying the anticipation of the upcoming revelation. The camera then follows him back to a hospital bed. He lifts a curtain, and Danping's disfigured face is revealed. The act of lifting the curtain serves as a symbolic unveiling. As Danping is finally courageous enough to face Yunyan with his uncovered disfigured face, it evokes a strong emotional response from the audience. The camera pans down to reveal Yunyan lying in the hospital bed. She recognizes Danping but is blinded by her ex-husband, the Zhao family's son. She can only touch Danping's face with her hand.

Fig. 20 In front of Yunyan's bed, Danping lifts the curtain, revealing for the first time his disfigured face and the secret he has been hiding from Yunyan and the audience.

Afterwards, the two promise never to be apart again. They kiss, and Danping sings a song he wrote for her into Yunyan's ear. At this point, the camera switches

between a close-up of the disfigured Danping's face as he sings with deep emotion and a close-up of the blinded Yunyan as she is moved to tears. These close-ups allow the audience to connect with Danping and Yunyan's emotional journey. The alternating close-ups create a visual exchange of emotions and the resonance between Danping and Yunyan. It suggests the profound impact of the song and communicates their emotional bond. It should be noted that this time, we see only the disfigured part of Danping's face as he has now overcome his past. Unlike the rest of the film, which only shows the untainted side, indicating something has changed.

Fig. 21 The close-up of Danping shows only the disfigured part of his face as he sings to Yunyan; the other part is hidden in the dark.

Fig. 22 The close-up of blinded Yunyan moved to tears as Danping sings to her.

At the end, a carriage runs through the wind and sand, signifying the characters' journey towards happiness and resolution. Then the camera shoots into the carriage, where Danping, who no longer wears a mask, hugs his beloved Yunyan with a satisfied smile. The final part of the film symbolizes acceptance and liberation from the constraints and secrets of his past. It also emphasizes the character's growth and reconciling his internal struggle with his new identity as a disfigured man. This resolution provides closure for the character and a metaphorical consolation for Hong Kongers grappling with changes and identity struggles during the transition period. The

credits then show that Yunyan died a year later after an illness, and Danping has been alone ever since.

By comparing these two scenes, the Phantom both unmasks to reveal his disfigured face, exposing the characters' vulnerabilities and confronting his deformity. Although, in *Phantom of the Opera,* it is lifted by the heroine, against Claudin's will, the moment of revelation is created with her discovery. In *The Phantom Lover,* the Phantom finally emerges from the shadows of his low self-esteem and voluntarily removes his mask to face his lover. This action reflects a significant moment of empowerment and self-acceptance. Also, Christine does not recognize Claudin even though she unmasks him, but she feels familiar with him through his music, underscoring their spiritual connection through music. Yunyan, on the other hand, though blind, senses Danping, who comes to her, highlighting the deeper emotional connection between the characters, transcending physical attributes.

Moreover, the two versions also have different endings; Christine in *Phantom of the Opera* is not in love with Claudin, and after Claudin's tragic death, she, who still has the power to choose her lover freely, is instead inspired by his contribution to her singing career and decides to pursue it. On the other hand, *The Phantom Lover* has a happy ending on top of a tragedy as the man and woman fall in love after being denied by their parents. Ultimately, one disfigured and the other blind finally come together. Therefore, of the two works from different eras and regions, the Hollywood version reflects the evolving gender roles and women's increasing independence. On the other hand, the Hong Kong version reflects the social reality through a love story, revealing the brutalization of feudal society. A story of sadness and helplessness depicts the situation of disadvantaged groups and the difficulty of being powerless to change their

lives. The portrayal of the challenges faced by the characters resonates with the struggle of Hong Kongers as they navigate the anticipated changes and find identity during societal evolution in a rapidly transforming society. These two versions show the conflicts and contradictions between individualism and social reality through different perspectives and narrative styles, presenting people's thinking about freedom, love, and social justice in different cultural contexts.

In conclusion, remakes serve as compelling reflections of different cultures. *The Phantom Lover* is a powerful example, with its role as an allegory to Hong Kong's identity during its transition period, shedding light on cultural nuances and the social milieu. Through its reinterpretation of a classic narrative, the film serves as a tool to reveal cultural distinctions, offering insights into societal norms, interpersonal dynamics, and historical contexts.

Chapter 2: Hong Kong's Transition through the Fairytale-like *Fly Me to Polaris*

In this chapter, the focus shifts to the Hong Kong film *Fly Me to Polaris*. By exploring how the film unfolds its story, establishes characters, develops the plot, and explores its core themes, I aim to illustrate how this film engages with the historical context of Hong Kong's transition from colonial rule to Chinese sovereignty.

The two films, *The Phantom Lover* and *Fly Me to Polaris*, depict Hong Kong's transition period from different perspectives. *Fly Me to Polaris* was released two years after Hong Kong's return to Chinese rule, while *The Phantom Lover* was released before the transition period. In *The Phantom Lover*, Danping's disfiguration and loss of identity can be interpreted as Hong Kong's defacement during the transition, while in *Fly Me to Polaris*, Onion's return from death to earth symbolizes Hong Kong's return to Chinese rule. Furthermore, *The Phantom Lover* showcases traditional Chinese elements and culture, including clothing and architecture, reflecting Beijing society in the 1920s and 1930s. In contrast, *Fly Me to Polaris* is set in Hong Kong in 1999, and due to British colonization history, British culture has significantly impacted Hong Kong society. The difference in cultural background highlights how historical events have shaped the portrayal of Hong Kong's identity, offering a nuanced examination of the region's cultural evolution in cinematic narratives. As previously introduced, the Hong Kong film *Fly Me to Polaris* narrates a love story between a woman and a man who dies and returns to earth. It portrays a love that transcends mortal boundaries and depicts the theme of the connection between life and death.

In China, the film became known as "The Chinese *Ghost,*" a romance movie directed by Jerry Zucker. *Ghost* was released in the U.S. in 1990, starring Patrick

Swayze, Demi Moore, and Whoopi Goldberg. It tells a human-ghost love story. “Between becoming the highest-grossing film of 1990 and scoring five Oscar nominations (including a Best Supporting Actress win for Whoopi Goldberg), *Ghost* was an unqualified smash” (Lawrence 83).

The story is about a loving couple, Sam, a banker, and Molly, an artist, robbed one night on their way home. Sam is shot during the struggle with the robber, and after chasing him for a few steps, Sam turns around only to find Molly holding his dead body. It turns out that he has become a ghost and is not visible to mortals. While in Molly's apartment, the ghost Sam runs into the thug who killed him when he came to the apartment looking for something. He follows the thug back to his apartment and learns his name is Willy. Sam finds Oda Mae Brown, a psychic who can hear him, and hopes to communicate with Molly through her to notify Molly that she is in danger. Then Sam gains Molly’s trust by telling her secrets that only they know through Oda Mae, and Molly goes to the police and tells them that Sam was murdered, but only receives disbelief. Molly tells Sam’s colleague and close friend Carl about the thug that Sam told her about, and Sam follows Carl to the thug Willy's house, only to find out that his best friend Carl is the mastermind behind his death. Carl was laundering money for drug dealers and wanted to steal a staggering amount of money from the bank. Therefore, he bribed Willy to rob Sam to obtain the passwords he possessed. Sam learned how to move objects with his mind to protect Molly from an experienced ghost at the subway. He then finds Oda Mae and asks her to withdraw the four million dollars by pretending to be the name on the account where Carl deposited the money. Carl and Willy go to Oda Mae for the money. Willy is hit by a car and killed after Sam's scare, and his soul is dragged down to hell. Sam and Oda Mae then go to Molly's apartment.

Sam makes Molly believe in himself by moving a coin with his mind. After that, Oda Mae and Molly flee to an unfinished loft to escape Carl. Carl pulls out a gun and takes Molly hostage, but Sam pushes him away—and the two fight. Carl attempts to take down Sam with a hook hanging from a rope, only resulting in his death as the hook breaks the window glass, and a chunk of glass impales him, and his soul is dragged to hell. In the end, Sam, having accomplished his mission to protect Molly, disappears into the white light and returns to heaven under Molly's gaze.

Both *Fly Me to Polaris* and *Ghost* are centred around a love story that involves characters who undergo death and later return to the mortal world. I will explore how different cultural backgrounds can interpret and depict the same story by comparing these two films.

Ghost follows a classic Christian narrative, which depicts a division in the afterlife where the righteous go to heaven, while those who commit sinful deeds end up in hell. The religious context of the film is used to explore the themes of protecting truth and justice, emphasizing the moral consequences of one's actions beyond mortal life. The dichotomy between heaven and hell is a moral guide, shaping the film's central message. In contrast, *Fly Me to Polaris* does not adopt religious concepts and introduces a fictional creation for the destination of the afterlife, Polaris. Using the North Star as a symbol is significant in creating a fairytale-like atmosphere and distancing itself from Eastern and Western religions. Choosing a celestial element, as opposed to traditional religious imagery, adds a touch of fantasy to the creative expression. Also, the shooting star is a metaphor for hope and transcendence, adding a magical quality to the film that contributes to its fairytale-like quality.

Moreover, *Fly Me to Polaris* draws on traditional Chinese ideology, presenting a more reserved approach to love. Critic Zeng Yaonong compares *Ghost* and *Fly Me to Polaris* in his work "Cultural Differences and Spiritual Identity – A Comparative Study of the Films *Fly Me to Polaris* and *Ghost*." Zeng points out that the two films illustrate different cultural values within the shared theme of romantic relationships involving humans and ghosts. "中国人文精神的主要内容是"相和"，以人人相和为人生理想与审美理想" [the main content of Chinese humanistic spirit is 'harmony,' which is the ideal of life and aesthetics that everyone should be in harmony] (Zeng 53). The protagonist's help of the other suitor and his silent support of the heroine align with Chinese notions of harmony. The primary focus is on the woman's happiness, emphasizing the selfless dedication of the characters that differ from the moral values depicted in *Ghost*.

This chapter will explore the symbolic significance of Onion's return from the dead in *Fly Me to Polaris*, viewing it as an allegory for Hong Kong's return to Chinese rule. Through this interpretation, the analysis provides insights into broader historical transitions, uncovering the relationship between the film's narrative and Hong Kong's historical context. Additionally, examining the theme of "harmony" contributes to understanding societal values in both Hong Kong and mainland China. Through a thematic exploration, this chapter seeks to reveal the film's cultural and historical implications, offering a comprehensive appreciation of their significance.

Ghost and *Fly Me to Polaris* explore themes of love transcending the boundaries between the living and the departed. In *Ghost*, the central characters, Sam and Molly, share a profound romantic relationship tragically interrupted when Sam is betrayed and murdered by a friend in a conspiracy. After death, Sam becomes a ghost,

visible only to other spirits, struggling to communicate with the living. On the other hand, *Fly Me to Polaris* introduces Onion, who experiences unrequited love for Autumn. Their connection deepens as Autumn gradually realizes her feelings for Onion, leading to a mutual confession. While Sam's afterlife is marked by the challenges of being unseen by the living, Onion, who meets a tragic end in a car accident, finds himself in a transit station to Polaris. Although Onion is granted a return to the mortal realm in a different guise, his true identity remains unrecognized by those who know him. Despite these narrative differences, both stories share a common thread—the exploration of love between a human and a spirit, with Sam and Onion meeting untimely deaths that shape the course of their supernatural romances.

While *Fly Me to Polaris* and *Ghost* explore the theme of love between humans and spirits, whether in a non-literal or literal ghost context, they diverge from *The Phantom Lover* and *Phantom of the Opera* by choosing to eliminate horror elements and narrate their stories through fantasy narratives. The fantasy elements in *Ghost* are portrayed in diverse forms. It is first embodied in Sam’s ghost itself. Sam is killed and transformed into a ghost that exists in a form that the living cannot see, but only by those who are also ghosts, and he silently explores the truth of his death and makes it his mission to protect his lover, Molly. When Carl betrayed his friend and tried to kiss Molly, Sam, with a solid conviction to protect Molly, used his mind to control the actions of a man who had no contact with the real world and knocked over the photo. Sam communicates with the ghost seniors in the subway and learns the skill of controlling real objects with his mind. In addition, Oda Mae, as a psychic, adds another layer to the fantasy representation. Acting as a bridge between the ghostly realm and the living, she listens to Sam's request as a ghost. She uses her psychic abilities to help

him, a ghost who cannot communicate with the real world, accomplish his mission in the mortal world.

In *Fly Me to Polaris*, Onion's return from death to Earth is the central representation of fantasy in the movie. When he returns, he does not look like the dead Onion in the mortal world. He claims his identity as Cheuk Ji Mun, an insurance agent, and tries to confess his identity to Autumn in various ways but fails to do so because he cannot speak the truth. Also, Onion retains a way of drinking Salted Lemon 7 Up to symbolize that the spirit and soul can transcend death and continue to exist in different forms. Besides adding a layer to the representation of fantasy, Onion's return to earth is also an allegory of Hong Kong's return to Chinese rule. After returning to the mortal world, he regains his hearing and vision, and in the eyes of the world, he no longer looks like Onion. Autumn, who is in love with Onion, mistakenly thinks that he, who claims to be an insurance agent, is up to no good when he comes to her. These changes Onion experiences symbolize the changes in Hong Kong during its transition period. Originally a Chinese territory, Hong Kong had been colonized by capitalist countries. After its return to Chinese rule, it continued to practice capitalism under the "One China" system, which is different from the ongoing socialist system in mainland China. Like Onion, Hong Kong returns with a new identity; Autumn's doubts towards him also mirror the fear of the people of Hong Kong of the social and political transformations occurring upon Hong Kong's return to China's rule.

Furthermore, romance is reflected in many ways in *Ghost*: the building of the pottery wheel when Sam is alive, Sam and Molly's shared belief in the lucky penny, Sam's unexpected response to Molly's "I love you," and the theme song that plays when they are bonding. In *Fly Me to Polaris*, like Sam and Molly, Onion and Autumn also

share some items that have special meaning to both, symbolizing their love. First of all, the main element of this movie is the shooting star. Onion and Autumn watch the meteor shower together and make wishes, as well as Onion's final transformation into a star in the sky. Onion knows Autumn's favourite octagonal box of fruit candies, so he secretly puts them into her shopping cart, and Autumn misses him while eating the candies. Onion silently plays the saxophone for Autumn to listen to. As Onion was blind, he could not see the shooting star, so Autumn imitated the trajectory of the shooting star in the sky and drew a line on Onion's forehead with her finger. There is also the lamb doll, which accompanied him in lonely moments, was taken away by Autumn after Onion's death, she talks to it as if Onion is having a conversation with her. The absence of traditional Chinese cultural elements in the objects and imagery of romance in *Fly Me to Polaris* contrasts with the rich display of traditions in *The Phantom Lover*. This distinction reflects the impact of Hong Kong's colonization history. Set in 1990s Hong Kong, *Fly Me to Polaris* presents a region greatly influenced by British colonization regarding its culture, language, and business. Consequently, the film lacks the presence of objects with traditional Chinese traits, demonstrating the status of Hong Kong society at that time. This shows the lack of nostalgia, indicating Hong Kong's embrace of a different future.

Although, as mentioned above, the symbolic objects appearing in *Fly Me to Polaris* have lost their traditional Chinese cultural characteristics, the overall imagery that characterizes its work still retains the spirit of Chinese culture. This spirit is specifically reflected in the difference in how the plots of the two movies develop. In the Hollywood movie *Ghost*, the communication between the characters is positively characterized. "西方文化的精髓在于进取，进取的目的在于求真" [A core value in

Western culture is to be enterprising to seek truth] (Zeng 54). The idea here is that people take positive actions in the West, are determined to make a difference and seek the truth. For example, when Sam discovers his murderer, he follows him to his home and warns him to stay away from Molly. Similarly, when he learns that his best friend is the mastermind of his death, he does not hesitate to question him directly, even though he is acting as a ghost invisible to the world. Unable to communicate directly with Molly, he seeks the help of a psychic to convey a message. Moreover, in the final scene, he uses his mind to control objects and engage in hand-to-hand combat with Carl to protect Molly. The positive approach to communication reinforces the proactive spirit of Western culture. Also, with characters involved in the captivating battle against evil forces, the story's central focus is the exploration of morality, examining the dynamics of good and evil. Moreover, "*Ghost* is a film about individuals" (Lannin 79). Each character in the story is driven by personal emotions and desires, shaping their motivations and actions throughout the film. In contrast, in *Fly Me to Polaris*, the communication between the characters is more implicit, and they do not pursue direct conflicts. For example, when Onion encounters someone who ran over him by chance, he just gives up chasing them after a few moments of pestering. He instead blames himself for the miscommunication between him and Autumn, believing that he should not have returned to earth. In addition, according to Zeng, "莫莉和森的爱情是完全建立在个人情感之上的，而不像秋兰对洋葱头的爱不是以单纯的个人情爱为基础的爱" [Molly and Sam's love is based entirely on personal feelings, unlike Autumn's love for Onion, which is not a feeling purely based on personal affection] (Zeng 57). The unselfish characteristic of love is reflected in Onion's refusal to admit that he played the saxophone, instead giving Dr. Woo credit. He silently takes care of Autumn,

fetching things out of her reach and putting her favourite candy in the shopping cart, showing quiet companionship and affection. Although he and Dr. Woo are seen as rivals, unlike Sam and Carl, there is hardly any direct conflict between them; instead, they help each other at the end of the film, and both intend to wish Autumn nothing but happiness. “而中国传统文化中，则从来没有超越群体价值孤立肯定个体的传统，中国价值观是以天人合一观念为基础的，以整体主义为本质特征的，以和谐为美的极致。” [In traditional Chinese culture, on the other hand, there has never been a tradition of affirming the individual in isolation beyond the value of the group, and Chinese values are based on the integration of nature and humans, with holism as the essential feature, and harmony as ultimate beauty] (Zeng 56). In contrast to pursuing individualism and exploring truth and goodness in *Ghost*, *Fly Me to Polaris* emphasizes the Chinese cultural spirit of mutual harmony. Even rivals can assist one another, and love can involve silently giving without expecting anything in return. The narrative choice reflects a cultural perspective that prioritizes collective happiness over individual success, promoting a sense of togetherness that echoes the core principles of Chinese cultural values.

The scene in *Ghost* where Sam becomes a ghost is pivotal. It begins with images of darkened streets as Sam and Molly approach from a distance, arm in arm. They then walk from the noisy street to a less populated one, chatting intimately. A close-up of the two follows as they discuss deeper issues about marriage and their relationship. The tension is then heightened as, in the background, the killer emerges from the shadows. Initially, out of focus, the dangerous figure gradually becomes clearer as Sam and Molly exit the scene. This visual technique creates a suspenseful atmosphere, causing the audience to feel tense as they realize the looming danger that

the characters are unaware of. In addition, this scene emphasizes the film's theme of good versus evil and the exploration of morality. The intimate conversation between Sam and Molly is visually contrasted with the presence of the killer, who has a vicious intention, highlighting the duality of heaven and hell in Christian theology.

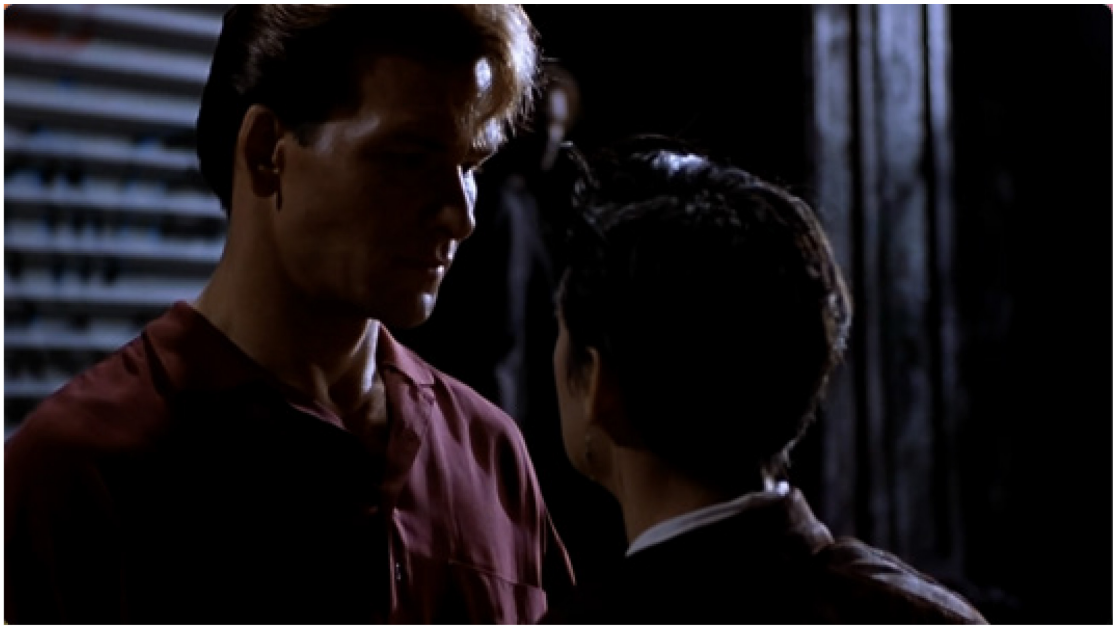

Fig. 23 Sam and Molly are in the front, and the killer appears in the dark background and is out of focus.

Sam then takes a few steps before turning around and is threatened by this thug holding a gun to his chin and demanding his wallet. Instead of giving in, Sam tries to resist, only to have the thug hit Molly in the face. The following shot alternates between the thug and Sam, who fight each other. The scene is interspersed with shots of Molly anxiously begging for help. The plot development highlights the enterprising spirit suggested above as Sam chooses to stand up to fight back rather than retreat. Sam's fight against the attacker emphasizes the pursuit of justice and represents a physical reaction to wrongdoing. This scene highlights the conflict of moral values and the characters' determination to resist injustice, which reflects the film’s examination of

how the characters' cultural background influences their responses to challenging situations. Their battle stops when a gunshot rings, and the thug runs off. Sam chases after him, then Sam turns around and, fearfully, finds Molly sitting on the ground hugging his dead self. An arc shot is used before Sam sees his dead body. The camera moves from the back of his head to his front, which shows a startled facial expression. The camera movement intrigues the audience with what he sees, emphasizing the change in his emotions through its suspenseful technique.

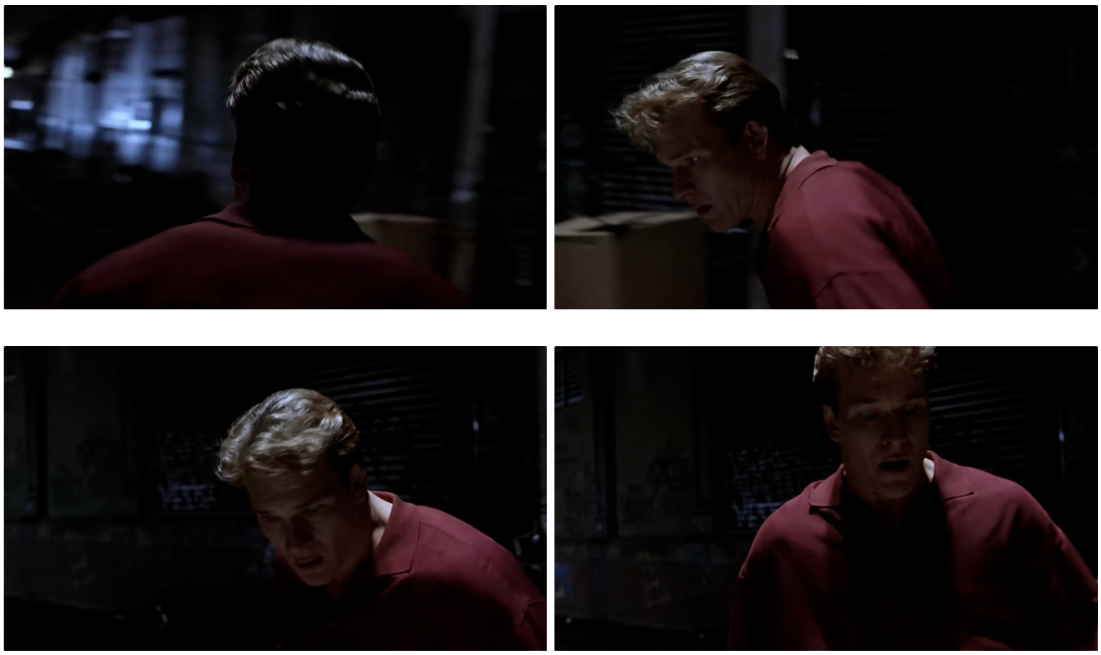

Fig. 24, 25, 26, and 27 An arc shot that moves around Sam when he finds his dead body, showing his facial expression changes in his emotions and evokes the audience's curiosity. The shot helps Sam come to the realization he is dead.

After that, there is a crosscut to another scene where Molly becomes a ghost doll and lies beside Sam on their bed. Then, Molly reappears as a human, and her voice from the real world echoes. The intercut portraying Sam's thoughts brings a sense of horror to the film and enhances the film's supernatural theme. Then, a shot shows Sam standing alone in the street. A light from the sky surrounds him while the rest of the

environment remains in darkness. The arrangement of this visual element represents Sam's association with the divine, indicating the celestial realm. The contrast between the brilliant light encircling Sam and the obscurity of the surroundings represents the concept of heaven, underscoring the spiritual nature of the moment and the film's fantasy elements. This imagery adds to the film's thematic exploration of the afterlife and the intersection between the earthly and the divine. Sam is watching himself under the light. He chooses not to enter the light as Molly asks him to stay with her. Again, Sam decides to fight against his circumstances by deciding to stay with Molly.

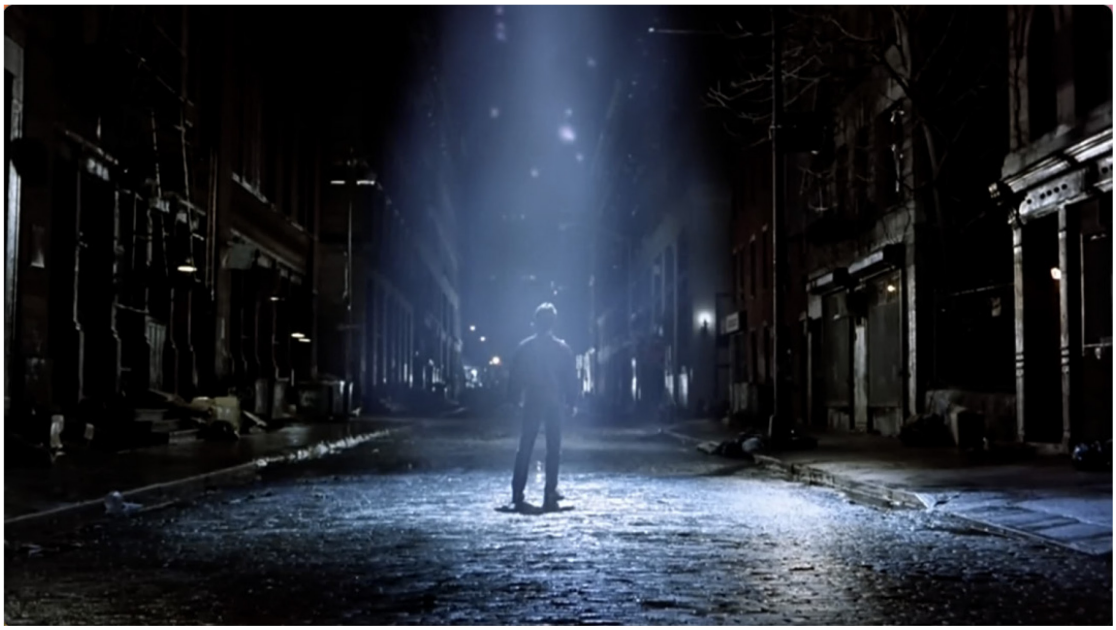

Fig. 28 “Ghost” Sam is standing alone on the street, surrounded by a light from heaven, a calling from above to enter the light and enter a new existence. Sam defies this calling.

In *Fly Me to Polaris*, Onion suffers a similar accident. This scene begins with a panoramic shot; the camera holds still as Onion and Autumn emerge from the depths of darkness, and they gradually become clearer, symbolizing the gradual clarification of their relationship. Both hold secret affection for each other, and their bond deepens during the previous scene where they watch shooting stars together. After watching the

stars from Autumn's rooftop, they emerge in the darkness, having fun with a wheelchair as Autumn tries to return to work.

Fig. 29 Onion and Autumn emerge from the darkness in a fixed shot.

The accident scene is set next to a hospital with Western-style architecture, reflecting Hong Kong's colonial history under British rule. This underscored the influence this period had on the building's architectural features. This same shot shows the couple again.

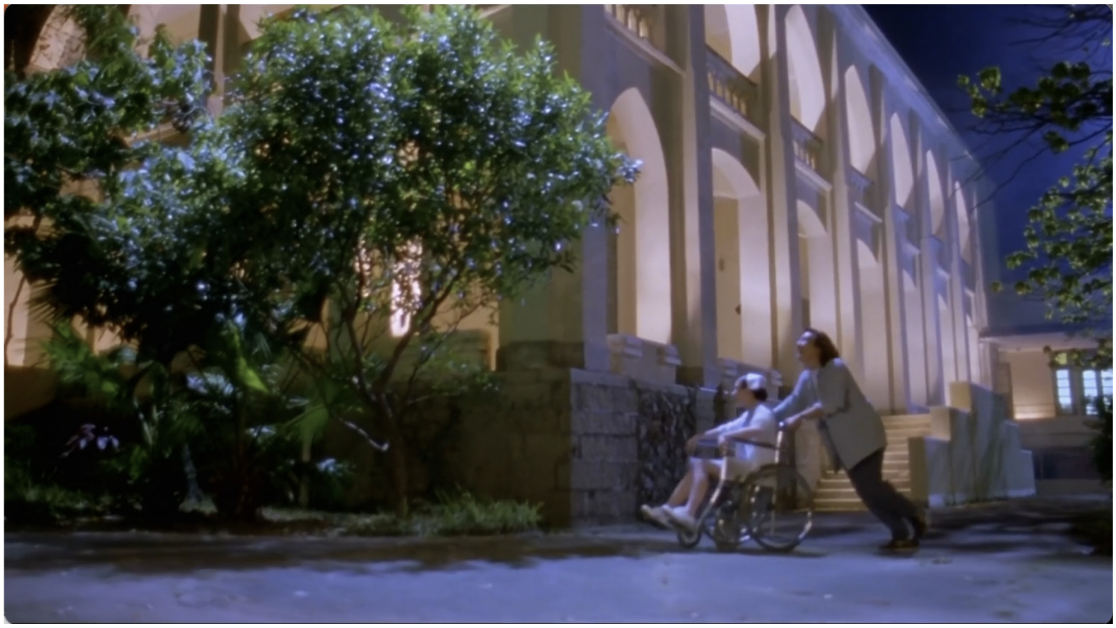

Fig. 30 Western-style architecture in *Fly Me to Polaris* serves as a reminder of Hong Kong's colonial era. Visually, the remnants of the past are traced.

Subsequently, Onion escorts nurse Autumn to work, and she writes a message for him to wait for her in his hand. Delighted, Onion spins joyfully and shares his happiness with the people he encounters. However, due to his blindness, he accidentally runs from the hospital to the side of the road. He trips over a rock, flies into the road, gets hit by an approaching car, and rolls off the car onto the ground. After his death, a beam of light emerges from the sky on the right side of the frame, illuminating Onion lying on the ground before he slowly rises and gazes toward the sky.

Fig. 31 Onion rises from his dead body and is surrounded by a beam of light from the sky in a scene almost copied directly from *Ghost*. The difference is that Onion leaves his body and follows the light.

Similarities and contrasts emerge in the scenes depicting the protagonists' deaths in *Ghost* and *Fly Me to Polaris*. In both instances, the protagonists encounter their death at night, shrouded in a mysterious atmosphere illuminated by white light after dying. However, the light has different meanings. In *Ghost*, the white light surrounding Sam represents a traditional Christian depiction of heaven. This portrayal aligns with the film's exploration of morality, good versus evil, and the afterlife.

On the other hand, in *Fly Me to Polaris*, the white light surrounding Onion after his death carries a different connotation. It represents the film’s fairytale theme rather than a specific religious interpretation, which can be associated with Chinese or British colonialism. The director chooses, instead, to come up with a third invented option. This light symbolizes Onion's departure from the mortal world and his transition to another state of being, reflecting the film's theme of harmony and the cycle of life and

death. The nature of their deaths diverges, with the protagonist in *Ghost*, Sam, being the victim of intentional murder involving a gun. At the same time, Onion in *Fly Me to Polaris* faces an unintentional death in a car accident.

In contrast to the theme of truth-seeking in *Ghost*, where Sam's death is part of a conspiracy, and his ghostly existence revolves around uncovering the truth behind his murder, Onion's death in *Fly Me to Polaris* is depicted as an accident. This narrative choice preserves the fairytale-like quality of the film, avoiding the complexities of suspense. Also, unlike *Ghost*, which delves into concepts of heaven and hell and explores the dichotomy of good and evil, the setting of an accident in *Fly Me to Polaris* maintains an overall theme of harmony. Moreover, Onion and Autumn hold unspoken feelings for each other but lack the courage to confess, mirroring the implicit nature of Chinese culture. In contrast, Molly proactively approaches Sam, expressing her desire to advance their relationship. When she doesn't entirely feel Sam's reciprocal love for her, she will ask Sam directly to seek a definite answer from him. These two examples contrast a more subtle and implicit way of being in Chinese with a Western enterprising spirit.

The connections between both couples climax in two scenes that reveal the true identity of each ghost. Each scene is crafted carefully, so Molly and Autumn realize who the ghost is. While both stories reveal the ghosts' identity, *Fly Me to Polaris* has more nuance in its development. Not only does Onion want to reveal his true self throughout the film, but he reaches a moment when he realizes this is not the right path. In finding true love with Autumn, he must let her go. Onion's return to earth can be seen as a journey where he learns the deeper meaning of love that aligns with traditional Chinese values. As the story unfolds, he realizes that love is not just about individual

desires but also about selflessness and sacrifice for the greater good. His action to encourage Autumn to seek happiness with another man demonstrates an evolution towards a more harmonious perspective, embracing traditional Chinese values that prioritize greater happiness over individual pursuits.

The scene where Sam and Molly recognize each other occurs before the final duel between him and Carl. In this scene, he tries to keep Molly safe by convincing her that his ghost is still in this mortal world with the help of Oda Mae. Sam uses his mind to control a penny that slides on the door in front of Molly and gives it to her. This scene employs a depth-of-field technique to visually emphasize the significance of the coin in Sam and Molly's interaction. At first, the coin is sharply in focus, while Molly remains blurred in the background, emphasizing the importance of the coin. As Molly reacts with surprise, her face becomes the focal point, shifting the viewer's attention away from the coin and onto her expression. This creates an emotional connection as it engages the audience's curiosity and anticipation, prompting them to wonder about the significance of the coin and its impact on Molly.

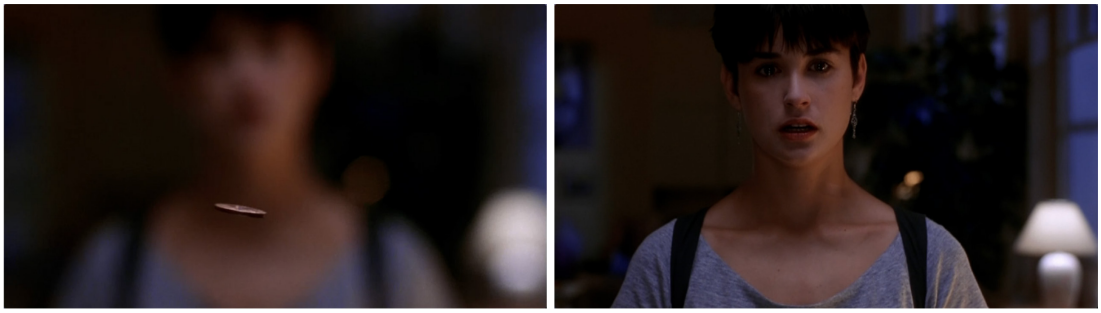

Fig. 32 - Fig. 33 The focal point switches from the penny to Molly, indicating the penny's significance and showing Molly's emotional expression as she understands the meaning.

Then Sam speaks of the beliefs the two shared about lucky pennies when they were together, and Molly finally believes in Sam. A close-up focus solely on Molly's face conveys her emotional state directly to the audience, highlighting the intensity of her emotions and allowing the audience to share in her joy and happiness.

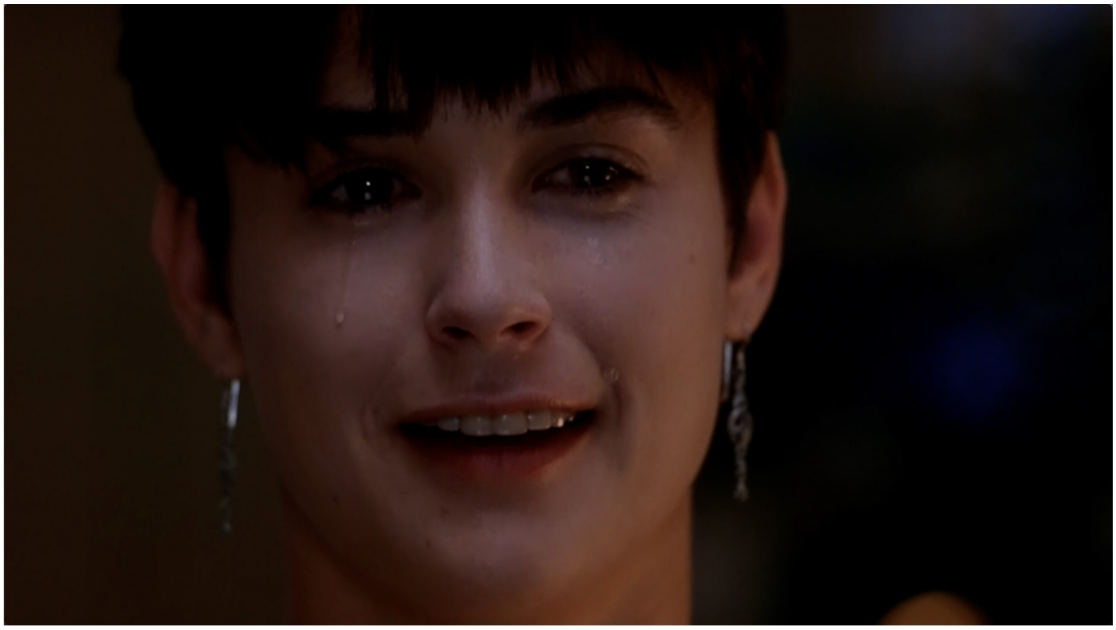

Fig. 34 A close-up of Molly showing her delighted expression after she finally realizes Sam's existence as a ghost.

In *Fly Me to Polaris*, the scene in which Onion and Autumn recognize each other occurs towards the film's end. After Dr. Woo tells Autumn that the one playing the saxophone is Cheuk Ji Mun, Autumn suddenly realizes that Cheuk Ji Mun is Onion in disguise. She looks for Onion everywhere and runs from the depths of darkness again. It is the same setting as before Onion's accident when they were together, a similar fixed shot where she runs out of the depths of darkness and towards the camera. This time, a similar scene where the character gradually becomes clear represents the truth of Onion's identity being revealed.

Fig. 35 Autumn runs from the darkness, a shot similar to the one before Onion's accident, echoes their relationship and represents the revelation of the truth about Onion's identity.

Autumn runs to a pool and yells at Onion for him to show up, but at this point, Onion does not want to tell her who he is and hides behind a wall, where he stands in the shadows and contrasts with the light of the other wall. The technique employed in this scene involves contrasting lighting to emphasize the character's emotional state, the tension in the story, and knowledge. Onion hides behind a wall, showing his reluctance to reveal his identity. By positioning Onion in the shadows, the scene creates a visual contrast between light and dark, underscoring his inner conflict and the secrecy surrounding his character.

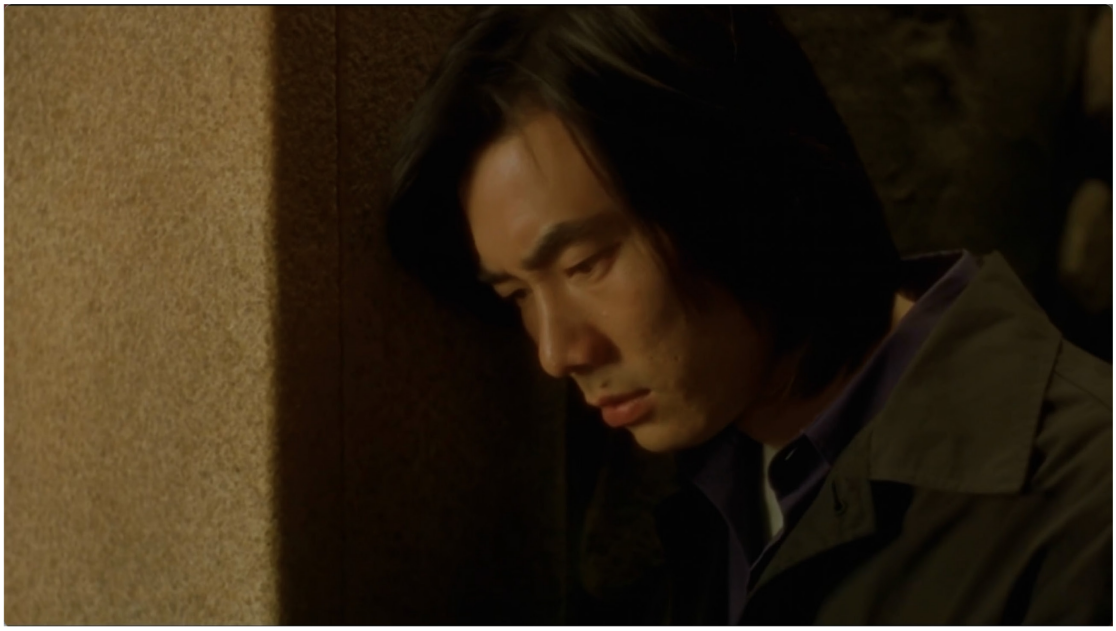

Fig. 36 Onion hides behind a wall in shadow; the contrast between light and dark emphasizes his inner struggle to reveal his true self for Autumn or let her go forever.

Then Autumn deliberately jumps into the pool, and Onion cannot help but jump in and save her. Autumn tells Onion she already knows his true identity and runs her finger across Onion's forehead, just like when Onion was alive. Autumn does this to tell him what a shooting star looks like. It is a secret code that only the two of them share. But Onion stops her, still refusing to admit his identity and leaves. Autumn catches up with Onion and confesses her feelings to him, while Onion, disguised as Cheuk Ji Mun, tells her to forget about “Onion” and find her happiness. In this scene, the emotional interaction between Onion and Autumn is conveyed through alternating focus on their close-ups. By placing Onion's close-up on the right side of the frame in the front and Autumn's medium close-up on the left on the back, the scene creates a balanced visual representation of the two characters and their emotions. Throughout their conversation, the focus shifts back and forth between them. This technique helps the audience connect with the scene by visually following Onion and Autumn's

dialogue and emotional nuances and emphasizing harmony. Finally, Onion, impressed by Autumn's words, acknowledges his identity with their code - a finger across Autumn's forehead - and the scene ends with the two embracing each other tightly.

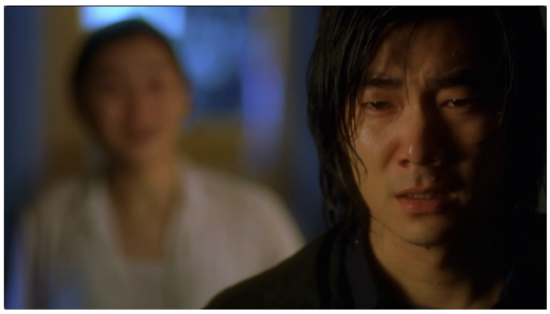
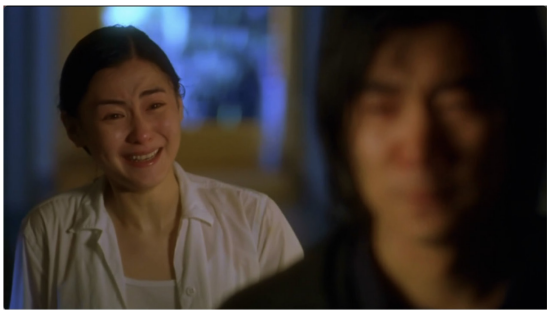

Fig. 37 - Fig. 38 The focal point switches back and forth between the close-ups of Onion and Autumn throughout their conversation, allowing the audience to be more engaged with the scene and visually tracing their emotions and the interplay of dialogue. It also creates a balance between both characters on the screen.

Ghost and *Fly Me to Polaris* feature a crucial moment of realization, where the main characters disclose their true identities to the ones they love. However, cultural and thematic differences are reflected in each story. In *Ghost*, Sam actively and assertively reveals himself to Molly, aiming to gain her trust and protect her from impending harm caused by Carl. This scene is followed by a confrontation with the antagonist, emphasizing enterprising themes in Western culture and the discussion on the dichotomy of good and evil, reflecting Western values of individualism and the pursuit of justice. Sam takes assertive action to protect Molly from harm and seeks to resolve conflicts through personal agency. This portrayal aligns with the Western narrative tradition, which often emphasizes the hero's journey and the triumph of good over evil through individual actions. While in *Fly Me to Polaris*, despite Autumn figuring out that "Cheuk Ji Mun" is Onion, he refuses to admit it. This reluctance comes

from his realization that he is soon returning to the North Star and cannot provide Autumn with happiness. Instead, he encourages her to seek happiness elsewhere, even actively seeking his rival, Dr. Woo, to ensure her happiness. This reflects a more reserved and collective cultural spirit, prioritizing the greater good over personal desires.

Furthermore, both films employ secret codes in identity revealing, reinforcing the films' shared themes of the afterlife and the power of love beyond death. In *Ghost*, Sam moves the lucky penny with his mind, adding a supernatural dimension to the scene. The gesture of mimicking a shooting star over the forehead in *Fly Me to Polaris* symbolizes a whimsical and fairytale-like atmosphere, underlining the film's emphasis on fantasy.

Moreover, Onion's reluctance to reveal his true identity to Autumn despite her discovery symbolizes the struggle of many Hong Kongers to embrace a Chinese identity after the handover fully. The handover of Hong Kong from British colonial rule to a Chinese colony prompted many Hong Kongers to question their identity and sense of belonging. Like the character Onion's uncertainty and hesitation, many Hong Kongers may have felt ambivalent about fully embracing China's new position due to concerns about preserving the city's autonomy or the political and social implications of closer integration with mainland China. Thus, Onion's dilemma reflects the complexities of identity post-handover in Hong Kong. While Onion ultimately decides to support Autumn's happiness and accept his death, the film does not suggest fully embracing the new colonizer. While it accepts some fundamental ideals in China-Hong Kong cultures, it does not fully embrace British and Chinese traditions.

The analysis of *Ghost* and *Fly Me to Polaris* reveals how these movies reflect societal values between different cultures by exploring themes such as romance,

morality, and cultural identity. *Ghost* embodies Western ideals of individualism and truth-seeking. On the other hand, *Fly Me to Polaris* embraces cultural values more aligned with Hong Kong and mainland China, those of harmony, sacrifice, and collective well-being and showcases the complexities of Hong Kong's cultural identity during the transition period of the handover to Chinese rule. Overall, *Fly Me to Polaris* reflects Hong Kong in the context of its identity shift, revealing the connection between the film's storyline and the historical backdrop of Hong Kong.

Conclusion: Cinema Mirrors Social and Political Landscapes

The analysis of *The Phantom Lover* and *Fly Me to Polaris* and their source texts offers a nuanced exploration of how these films grapple with the historical period of Hong Kong's identity shift from being a part of British rule to returning as a part of China. These two films align with the literature discussed in the introduction about the cinema produced in Hong Kong during the transition. The cinema of this time shows how Hong Kongers resist embracing a Chinese identity. Their experience under British rule taught them to see themselves as different from mainland China. The new reality, however, has made it difficult for Hong Kongers to keep such distinction. These two films mark two different moments of the transition and show the continued struggle for Hong Kong during this new political reality.

The Phantom Lover delves into the tragic romance between Yunyan, who comes from a wealthy family and becomes mentally disturbed and homeless, and Danping, a renowned opera singer, who is reduced to a disfigured phantom who disappeared and was presumed dead. Set against the backdrop of the 1920s and 1930s, the film reflects the suffering of powerless individuals in a feudal society and the lack of agency for women in the Chinese past. Also, it reflects the anxieties of Hong Kongers as they approach the handover to Chinese rule. This film was released in 1995 when Hong Kong was fearful of potential changes brought about by the impending return to China. The character's transformation into a disfigured phantom mirrors the region's apprehension about the potential loss of its autonomy and individuality under Chinese rule.

On the other hand, *Fly Me to Polaris* presents a fairytale-like love story that reflects the historical transitions of Hong Kong. This film was released in 1999, two

years after Hong Kong's return. In the story, Onion's unwillingness to disclose his real identity to Autumn, despite her finding out, represents the reluctance of Hong Kong citizens to accept their Chinese identity after the handover completely. Additionally, Onion's difficulty finding a sense of belonging upon his return from the afterlife reflects the unease among Hong Kongers who grapple with a similar lack of belonging after the handover and harbour concerns about possible changes. Therefore, Onion's return from death symbolizes Hong Kong's return to Chinese rule. What is more, this film offers a more contextual portrayal of ghostly presences, integrating Eastern philosophical perspectives instead of relying on Western cultural frameworks. It emphasizes harmony and sacrifice in traditional mainland Chinese and Hong Kong values.

Throughout this analysis, both films mirror Hong Kong's societal evolution, grappling with questions of identity, love, and agency amidst shifting political and cultural contexts. *The Phantom Lover* delves into the traditional Chinese cultural spirit and societal constraints. At the same time, *Fly Me to Polaris* reflects a more contemporary, post-handover Hong Kong, navigating the complexities of Chinese influence and Western legacies.

Films can be viewed through a political lens, serving as allegories that mirror their time's ideologies, societal issues, and historical backgrounds. In this thesis, I examine two Hong Kong films that deal with the city's transition from one colonial power to another. These films offer insights into how Hong Kong navigates and confronts the legacies of colonialism imposed by different powers. Through the exploration, art provides a critical lens through which we can interpret these complex relationships. Through their examination of these relationships and challenges, the

films highlight the unique role of cinema in shaping and reflecting socio-political discourse and identity.

In conclusion, *The Phantom Lover* and *Fly Me to Polaris* offer reflections on their characters' struggles and identity crises. They show the cultural nuances related to China and mirror the societal anxieties of Hong Kong during its transition period. Film serves as a powerful medium for interpreting and articulating political struggles and transitions. It provides a distinctive way to explore and understand complex socio-political themes.

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