

## CINEMATOGRAPHY IN *MOTHERHOOD*: A HONG KONG FILM ADAPTATION OF *GHOSTS*

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No study has been made on the Hong Kong film *Motherhood* (Ci mu xin, literally meaning the “Heart of a Loving Mother”, 1960; sometimes also translated as *Salvation*) (Figure 1) as an adaptation of Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, though it has been acknowledged in the film’s credit lines that its story is based on Ibsen’s play (Figure 2). According to the excellent survey done by Karin Synnøve Hansen, “Henrik Ibsen – A Filmography: Ibsen Films by Work”, there are 9 screen versions of *Ghosts*: (1) *Sins of the Father* (U.S.A., 1911); (2) *Prividenija* (Russia, 1915); (3) *Ghosts* (U.S.A., 1915); (4) *Gli Spettri* (Italy, 1918); (5) *Gespenster* (Austria, 1918); (6) *Gespenster – Konnen Tote Leben...?* (Germany, 1922); (7) *Jhooti sharm* (India, 1940); (8) *Ghosts* (U.S.A., 1997); and (9) *Ghosts* (Scotland, 2007).<sup>1</sup> To this list should be added *Motherhood*, which is so far the only Chinese film version of *Ghosts*. *Motherhood* was released in 1960 by Overseas (Huaqiao) Chinese Films, a company established in Hong Kong which made films for screening in the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, North America and Europe. According to a poll conducted by the magazine *Timeout* in 2012, the film is ranked the 46th of 100 best films from Hong Kong.



(Figure 1. Poster of *Motherhood*)

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<sup>1</sup> <Ibsen.nb.no> (<http://ibsen.nb.no/id/11119508.0>). Accessed on 20 May 2013. Previously available in <Ibsen.net>.



(Figure 2. Acknowledgement in the credit lines: "Adaptation based on the World Master Ibsen's *Ghosts*.")

The film is directed by Tso Kea (Zuo Ji) who is well-known for his meticulous treatment of artistic elements in cinematography and borrowing of details from Western masterpieces of drama and film for *mise-en-scène* in his works. Tso Kea is also noted for his experimentation with film adaptations of Western authors. Other than Ibsen, he also adapted Emily Brontë in one of his films. Like many Chinese filmmakers of the early generations, Tso Kea was a self-educated film director.<sup>2</sup>

With a Hong Kong family as its background, *Motherhood* is a feature film doing almost an impossible job in converting Ibsen's *Ghosts* into a story ready for consumption by the Chinese audience. Any cross-cultural adaptation of *Ghosts* is confronted with two daunting tasks: one cultural, and the other aesthetic. The former has to do with making the play's message convincing to the Chinese by bridging the cultural gap between Western, particularly Christian, and Chinese values; the latter to do with presenting the story and making it meaningful in a Chinese context and aesthetically acceptable to the audience. The adaptation of *Ghosts* into a Chinese film thus involves processes of both "cross-cultural" and "cross-media" appropriation. The two processes require changes in both content and form that can make possible the transposition of an Ibsenian drama into a screen experience framed in a Chinese cultural context. This experience, unlike that in a drama, is enhanced by the use of visual devices such as close-up shots that can add meaning to the details by placing them in focus and interconnecting them with other visual clues and cues.

### Cross-Cultural Consumption

As a British crown colony, Hong Kong was Westernized in the 1960s in terms of its education, law, English speaking environment and in the reception of Western popular culture including film and music. In the film industry, there had long been a trend in adapting Western classics for Chinese consumption. However, the film *Motherhood* was

<sup>2</sup> Tso Kea was born in Nanhai, Southern China in 1916 and received university education in Sociology at Guangzhou University. He moved to Hong Kong and entered the film industry in the late 1940s. He directed more than 70 films before his retirement in Vancouver in the 1980s, and he died in 1997.

made not simply for the consumption of the Chinese audience in Hong Kong. It was meant for distribution in the Chinese communities outside China. In terms of social values, Hong Kong remained a community that preserved much Chinese culture in the 1960s, particularly the Confucian values that place family and marriage in an important position in its cultural hierarchy. To make the adaptation more relevant to the Chinese, the Christian background of *Ghosts* is removed in *Motherhood* and is replaced by Confucian values, both of which attach great importance to the institution of family and ethical values at the expense of the individual's choice or preference.

Pastor Manders has no place in the adaptation, in which he is replaced by the combined figures of Sau Yin's (Mrs Alving) father and brother, the former is a Confucian patriarchal father (Figure 3) and the latter a Westernized modern businessman (Figure 4). Hence, Christian values are replaced by Confucian practical business ethics in the Chinese adaptation. The hidden love relation between Pastor Manders and Mrs Alving is removed in the adaptation. Instead, it is Sau Yin's practical and business-minded brother who provides the spiritual guidance to Sau Yin and tells her how to run the family business. Sau Yin (whose name means "virtuous beauty") finally becomes a successful business woman mainly because of her acceptance of Confucian ethics by turning it around as a philosophy of business that can be applied to her family matters. At the end, Sau Yin is rewarded with a happy family reconciliation. She is forgiven by both Sze Wah (Oswald) and Ah Chun (Regine) who acknowledge her as a loving mother. This deviates from Ibsen's *Ghosts*, but is typical of a happy ending in traditional Chinese drama and film.

One purpose of cutting out the Christian background of *Ghosts* and replacing it with Confucian values is to let the audience in overseas Chinese communities have a taste of how such a complex relationship is handled in a traditional Chinese family and how Chinese values triumph at the end, so that their desire of reconnecting themselves to Chinese culture can be satisfied by viewing the film. The emphasis on the practical value of Confucianism in solving family and business problems is to reassure the usefulness and wisdom of traditional Chinese culture.



(Figure 3. Pastor Manders is replaced by Sau Yin's father who is a Confucian patriarch)



(Figure 4. Pastor Manders is replaced by Sau Yin's brother who is a modern businessman)

Because of the difference in the Chinese habit of appreciation which prefers every detail to be presented and explained in an orderly way, the retrospective exposition in *Ghosts* is replaced by a chronological plot in the Chinese film which is divided into two parts, with the first forming a prelude to the main body of the story. In the prelude part, the sins of Siu Kau (Captain Alving) are given a full account. The main body of the film begins in the second part after ten years have passed when Sze Wah (Oswald) is returning home from Europe. Then the development of the story follows much the plot of *Ghosts*, though with some details added and changed

A synopsis of the film shows in what ways the adaptation resembles but also differs from the original. Sau Yin is the Chinese counterpart of Mrs Alving whose son—Sze Wah (Oswald)—has been studying overseas since childhood. Sau Yin's husband Siu Kau (Captain Alving), who is dead, is said to have been a charitable man, so Sze Wah respects him very much. After Sze Wah returns from overseas, Sau Yin finds him always sick, so she advises that he be attended by a doctor. However, Sze Wah refuses. When Sze Wah meets a maid called Ah Chun (Regine), he falls in love with her. Fearing that Sze Wah's relation with her will repeat the sins of Siu Kau, Sau Yin secretly sends Ah Chun away. Frustrated by it, Sze Wah wants to end his life by taking a poison pill. The family is so frightened that they let Sze Wah meet Ah Chun again. After Sze Wah and Ah Chun plead with her, Sau Yin finally agrees to their marriage but urges them to leave the family when the construction of a school in memory of his father is completed. At the party celebrating the launch of the school, Sze Wah collapses after realizing that his father was a sinful person and that he has inherited syphilis from him. He feels very disappointed and loses control of himself. Sze Wah throws a glass to smash the picture of Siu Kau, an act breaking the curse of hypocrisy on the family. The film ends with a positive note that Sze Wah is going to face life positively and take up the family business when he learns that syphilis can be cured. Sau Yin is finally rewarded in her efforts of running the family business. The film shows that a modernized version of Confucianism, which is practical and business-oriented, can lead to final success in a woman's effort to save her family.

*Motherhood* has been widely acclaimed as a good film made in the 1960s. Its significance lies in its success as a film in its own right. Critics are more interested in its cinematographic art than in how it has adapted *Ghosts* for the screen. Perhaps this is the reason why not much attention has been given to *Motherhood* as an adaptation of *Ghosts*.

However, it is *Ghosts* that has inspired Tso Kea in his new interpretation of Confucianism, and it is this new interpretation of Confucianism that has given *Ghosts* a new dimension of adaptation in a Chinese context. The adaptation is not simply an adaptation of a drama into a film, but also an adaptation of Ibsenism into New Confucianism.

### **Cross-Media Adaptation**

Ibsen's *Ghosts* presents a number of critical difficulties for any cross-media adaptation, which have to be overcome with the help of technical devices. Similar to a drama, a film presents part of its message through dialogue. But different from a drama, it relies heavily on visual images in creating an aesthetic experience that can appeal to the audience. In its form as drama, *Ghosts* has a level of abstraction that is difficult to present in images. For example, the concept of "ghosts" as outdated values and as hypocrisy cannot be easily transcribed into screen images. The hidden secrets in the family, such as the identity of Regine and the sins hidden behind the philanthropic character of Captain Alving, cannot be simply told to the audience by means of dialogue. Hence, Director Tso Kea has to be innovative in cinematography so that he can make use of screen images to re-present Ibsen's ideas in the adaptation.

In order to overcome some of the critical difficulties presented in *Ghosts*, *Motherhood* has borrowed from Orson Wells' *Citizen Kane* several devices in cinematography, including major elements of mise-en-scène, such as décor, lighting and costume. Elements of décor in *Motherhood* include landscape, buildings and furniture that carry visual meaning and shed light on the plot and characters. Same as in *Citizen Kane*, the use of a large mansion in the opening scene with a gate separating it from the outside world is to build up an atmosphere that the house does not allow trespass into its territory (Figure 5). The large house represents the social status and wealth of the family, but is contrasted with a limping servant Ah Tak (Engstrand). This is a cinematic metaphor for the hidden secret inside the house. The discrepancy between appearance and reality is also hinted by the hooligan servant Ah Tak (Engstrand) who tries to take advantage of the maid by forcing a kiss on her when he and the maid are alone at the entrance gate (Figure 6).



(Figure 5. A large mansion separated by a gate)



(Figure 6. Ah Tak tries to force a kiss on a maid)

When the characters reveal themselves later in the film, they all have a hidden self which is different from what they appear to be. Sau Yin (Mrs Alving) is not the meek, sacrificing figure so readily sanctified by Cantonese/Chinese films. By being caring and scheming, indulgent and clueless, bitter and cruel, she is a flawed but full-fledged human being. When Ah Tak (Engstrand) is attacked by Sze Wah (Oswald) as a liar, Ah Tak discloses the truth that Sze Wah's father Siu Kau (Captain Alving) is the biggest lie. The large picture of Siu Kau hanging in the sitting room and in all the bedrooms shows that he is revered as a philanthropist (Figure 7), but is actually a hypocrite and sinner who ruins the lives of other people. The hypocrisy is ironically created by Sau Yin (Mrs Alving), and her father and brother who teach her how to lie and make herself a successful business woman. Even Sze Wah (Oswald) has his own secret of syphilis. Both the plot and the theme of hypocrisy depend on the manoeuvre of characterization which hinges on how the characters present themselves so that they can cover up their secrets and their real selves. The link between appearance and reality, in this case, is a psychological one that has to be presented through screen images filled with meanings. In this sense, décor and costume play an important role in characterization in *Motherhood*.



(Figure 7. The picture of Siu Kau as a philanthropist.)



(Figure 8. Sze Wah discloses the family secret by opening the gate.)

Décor is a device repeatedly used in the film to strengthen the visual effects that bring out hidden messages. For example, the gate separating the house and the outside world is a device to hint at the secret hidden inside the house and behind the symbolic figurehead of Siu Kau. There is also a gate at the entrance of the school which when opened shows a monument with the picture of Siu Kau. When Sze Wah opens the gate, he symbolically discloses the secret of the family (Figure 8). Burning down the school is also burning down the monument together with the hypocrisy it carries. As an element in *mise-en-scène*, the use of costume also carries symbolic meaning in the film. When Sau Yin becomes a business woman, she changes her costume from that of a housewife (Figure 9) to that of a career woman (Figure 10).



(Figure 9. Sau Yin in the costume of a housewife.)



(Figure 10. Sau Yin in the costume of a career woman.)

The change in Sau Yin does not occur simply in her costume, but also in her facial expression which shows the confidence of a woman with a new self (Figure 10).

Lighting is one of the elements of *mise-en-scène* used in the film to bring out meaning. In *Motherhood*, low-key lighting, similar to the technique of *chiaroscuro* in

painting, is marked by strong contrast, often employed to unnerve the audience. In the film, low-key lighting is used to suggest the hidden secret behind the love between Sze Wah (Oswald) and Ah Chun (Regine). It is also used in the scene when Ah Tak (Engstrand) emerges from the dark to blackmail Sze Wah (Oswald). The use of low-key lighting in the film contributes much to the atmosphere of a hidden secret that has been plaguing the characters for two generations. What is suggested is that the revelation of the secret would bring everything to light.

### ***Motherhood as New Chinese Melodrama***

In traditional Chinese drama, there is a strong element of melodrama in which heightened emotions are emphasized in characterization. In the Chinese stage tradition, characters' emotions are presented in theatricalized gestures and movements that serve semiotic functions. Such gestures and movements are symbolic of meaning, resembling those in dance. In *Motherhood*, however, expression of emotions is done in a realistic way. Sau Yin (Mrs Alving) and Sze Wah (Oswald) are characters who have experienced extremes in life. The truth is too hard and harsh for them to face, but they have to. When Sze Wah learns about the sins of his father, he bursts into anger and shouts at his mother, other family members and guests, and calls them: "Ghosts, they are all ghosts" (Figure 11). His collapse after he becomes broken hearted at the news that he has inherited syphilis from his father and also that Ah Chun (Regine) is his half-sister conjure up a scene showing extreme emotions expressed in a visually realistic way (Figure 12).



(Figure 11. Sze Wah (Oswald): "Ghosts, they are all ghosts.")



(Figure 12. Sze Wah (Oswald) collapses after learning that he has inherited syphilis from his father)



Different from a traditional Chinese melodrama, *Motherhood* has a dimension of psychological portrayal which is indebted to the characterization in Ibsen's *Ghosts*. The Ibsen text gives Tso Kea an opportunity to experiment with subject matters seldom treated in traditional Chinese drama or Cantonese films, such as love-hate emotions and troubled psychology. It is Ibsen's *Ghosts* that has added a new dimension of characterization to Chinese film.

The creation of a successful business woman Sau Yin not only revolutionizes Confucian ideology for modern use, but also projects a new type of womanhood based on the image of Mrs Alving. This new woman is self confident. She is determined and acts as head of the family in the absence of a husband. Placed in the context of Chinese reception of Ibsen, the creation of a new woman who stays in the family and finally succeeds in having her own business signifies an interpretation that this "Hong Kong Mrs Alving" can transcend her limitations and avoid being victimized. If this is new feminism, it is Hong Kong feminism in the 1960s. The film creates the visual image of a new woman who survives the family disaster and wins at the end. The film is more than an adaptation and more than borrowing the story from Ibsen, but is a departure from the victimized Mrs Alving and all previous Chinese experimentations of womanhood based on Ibsen's models.

*Ghosts* provides a plot for experimentation in *Motherhood*, in which the opposite becomes true when the reverse of fortune occurs to a woman who stays and takes control of the family and is eventually rewarded. In the adaptation, it is New Confucianism which emphasizes sacrifice and patience that wins. Sau Yin (Mrs Alving) is presented as a personification of New Confucianism. However, what makes the film successful is the innovative use of stage techniques, such as lighting and décor, by turning them into cinematographic devices that give the Chinese film a new dimension of character portrayal in cinematic terms.

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### **Summary**

This is a study of a Hong Kong Chinese film adaptation of *Ghosts* made in 1960. It deals with processes of cross-cultural and cross-media adaptation, and probes issues of how stage techniques are turned into cinematographic devices. Ibsen's plays, except *Ghosts*, have been adapted numerous times for the Chinese stage and screen in Hong Kong and China. Unlike in China, the reception of Ibsen in Hong Kong is not meant for political purposes. In most Hong Kong adaptations, Ibsen is valued for the purpose of theatrical experimentation. Among the stage adaptations, *A Doll's House* and *The Master Builder* are the most popular. However, there was a film adaptation of *Ghosts* in 1960, which has never been discussed in Ibsen scholarship. In this adaptation, Director Tso Kea borrowed the plot from *Ghosts* and made a perfect Chinese melodrama film highlighting the Chinese emotions and relations in a wealthy family that undergoes a crisis. In traditional Chinese drama, there is the lack of psychological rendering in characterization and characters act according to moral considerations. In Tso Kea's film, the portrayal of the mother provides a new sense of characterization by combining Mrs Alving with the traditional Chinese mother figure. The borrowing from Ibsen makes it possible for the Chinese film to create a character with emotional and psychological complexities. Images from the film are selected as illustration in the article.

### **Keywords**

*Ghosts*, *Motherhood*, film adaptation, Hong Kong, Ibsenism, New Confucianism