

Killing Time: The Handover and Its Afterlives

Carlos Rojas

Abstract

This essay uses an analysis of Fruit Chan’s 2016 film *Kill Time* to reflect on the legacy of the Handover, and on the significance of its upcoming twentieth—and, later, fiftieth—anniversaries. Although Chan’s film is set in contemporary Beijing, is based on a novel by a mainland Chinese author, and at first glance appears to have little to do with Hong Kong, this essay argues that if we look beyond the film’s surface narrative, we find that the work explores a set of concerns relevant to the Handover and its legacies. Of particular interest is the sense of anticipation and anxiety that the Handover has generated, as well as the sense of potentiality and foreboding contained in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration’s guarantee that Hong Kong would enjoy a post-Handover moratorium of “fifty years without change.”

At the same time, [the Handover] also should not become a black hole that we pretend doesn’t exist so that we don’t need to approach it or touch it. Therefore, in 1997 I resolved to write not about its present, but rather about its past while at the same time writing about its future. From a future vantage point I sought to reconstruct the past; and from a past vantage point I sought to project the future. From this deliberate interweaving of past and future, I hope that a present that is more full of possibility might gradually emerge.

—Dung Kai-cheung, “Afterword” to the 2011 re-edition of *Atlas: Archeology of an Imaginary City*

In 2011, when Hong Kong author Dung Kai-cheung 董啟章 published a re-edition of his 1997 novella *Atlas: Archeology of an Imaginary City* (地圖集：一個想像的城市的考古學), he added a new afterword in which he discussed the work and its objectives. The novel describes a group of future archeologists who are investigating Hong Kong (or a fictional city that closely approximates Hong Kong) through a set of historical maps. In this way, Dung explains, he hoped to approach the Handover by focusing not on the present, but rather on both the future and the past, such that through a “deliberate interweaving of past and future . . . a present that is more full of possibility might gradually emerge” (162).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the process Dung Kai-cheung is describing here may be seen as a combination of the Freudian concepts of the fetish (*die Fetisch*) and of belatedness or deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*). Whereas the Freudian fetish is a product of a process whereby an anxiety about the possibility of future loss leads to the preemptive creation of a set of symbolic substitutes in the present, deferred action instead describes a process whereby a belated recognition of a past event leads to a reassessment of the subject's position in the present (Freud, "Project," "Fetishism"; and Rojas 851). What Dung is describing in his 2011 preface, accordingly, is how—in writing his 1997 novel—he was simultaneously deploying *both* an anticipation about the future *and* a belated reassessment of the past in order to reassess the condition of contemporary Hong Kong. The present, in other words, is no longer treated as a stable reference point from which one views the past and the future, but rather it is a product of a past and a future that are themselves in a dialectical relationship with one another.

A similar temporal logic informs the quality of *déjà disparu* that Ackbar Abbas elaborates in his 1997 book *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. In this study, Abbas describes the process by which Hong Kongers—during the decade and a half between the Joint Declaration in 1984 and the Handover in 1997—came to view contemporary Hong Kong through the lens of a deep-rooted anxiety about its potential future disappearance (Abbas, 25–26). Abbas contends that the Joint Declaration precipitated an urgent concern that Hong Kong might lose its distinctive identity after being returned to mainland Chinese control, which in turn led to a concerted attention to Hong Kong's present identity and its historical roots. The irony, he argues, is that Hong Kong had previously never been viewed as having a distinctive identity in the first place, and consequently it was precisely the post-Joint Declaration fear of loss of identity that brought that same identity into being.

Although Abbas does not refer explicitly to the concept of either the Freudian fetish or deferred action in this study, what he is describing is effectively a synthesis of the two Freudian paradigms—in that he posits that an anxiety about the possibility of future loss of Hong Kong identity results not only in the preemptive creation of a symbolic substitute in the present (a fetish), but also in a belated reassessment of Hong Kong's own past (deferred action). The resulting reassessment of the past, meanwhile, simultaneously leads to a reimagination of the present, and a concurrent attenuation of Hong Kongers' concerns about the possibility of future loss.

In contradistinction to Abbas's concept of *déjà disparu*, what Dung Kai-cheung emphasizes in *Atlas* is a process not of impending *disappearance*, but rather of vestigial *preservation*. By focusing on the future history of historical maps, Dung illustrates a condition in which

certain elements of the past may remain in a state of partial stasis even as the rest of the world is changing around them. What Dung is exploring in this work, in other words, is not the possibility that Hong Kong might lose its distinctive identity following the 1997 Handover, but rather that it may find itself partially frozen in time—trapped in a temporal stasis marked by the Joint Declaration’s promise that Hong Kong would enjoy a period of “fifty years without change” (i.e. the assurance that Hong Kong’s capitalist structure and its way of life would remain unchanged for a period of fifty years following the 1997 Handover).

We find a similar approach to the Handover in Hong Kong director Fruit Chan’s 陳果 1997 film *Made in Hong Kong* (香港製造). Released near the beginning of Chan’s directorial career, *Made in Hong Kong* marked the first opus in what would subsequently come to be known as Chan’s 1997 trilogy—which continued with *The Longest Summer* (去年煙花特別多, 1998) and *Little Cheung* (細路祥, 1999). Although *Made in Hong Kong* was released in the year of the Handover and is regarded as the first work in Chan’s 1997 trilogy, the film actually contains only a couple of fleeting allusions to the Handover itself. Instead, the majority of the work revolves around four teenagers, and is framed by a reflection on mortality.

Made in Hong Kong begins with the suicide of a teenage schoolgirl named Susan (played by Amy Tam Ka-chuen 譚嘉荃), who jumps to her death from the roof of a building, and revolves around three other teenaged protagonists who are all haunted by the specter of death—including Sylvester (Wenbers Li Tung-chuen 李棟泉), a mentally challenged boy who witnesses Susan’s fall and retrieves the two suicide letters that she had in her pocket; Sylvester’s friend Autumn Moon (Sam Lee 李燦森), who works for the local triads as a debt collector, and who, after acquiring the suicide letters, proceeds to have a series of erotic dreams inspired by Susan’s death; and Ping (Neiky Yim Hui-chi 嚴栩慈), a young woman whom Autumn Moon and Sylvester meet as Autumn Moon is attempting to collect a debt from her mother, but who is dying from kidney failure. The film concludes with the deaths of Sylvester, Ping, and Autumn Moon—as Sylvester is killed by rival triads and Ping commits suicide in Autumn Moon’s hospital room while Autumn Moon is in coma after having been attacked. When Autumn Moon finally recovers consciousness and discovers that his two friends are dead, he kills himself next to Ping’s grave. Before doing so, however, he delivers Susan’s suicide note to her parents, and the film features a detailed reading of the note, which by this point also contains additional notes added by Ping and Autumn Moon before they each took their own lives. This multi-voiced letter ends with a line that Autumn Moon borrows from Ping’s mother: “If we die this young, we’ll remain forever young” (我們這麼年輕死, 所以我們永遠都那麼年輕)—suggesting that the young protagonists’ deaths in the film function not as a terminus,

but rather as an open-ended hiatus. The film's final sequence concludes with a shot of the cemetery and the voice, off-camera, of a female radio broadcaster reciting, in Cantonese, Mao Zedong's famous 1957 speech to Chinese students in Moscow, in which he declared, "This is your world, and it is also ours. But at the end of the day, it is yours. You youth . . . are like the morning sun, and we have placed our hopes in you" (世界是你們的，也是我們的，但是歸根結底是你們的。你們青年人……好像早晨八、九點鐘的太陽。希望寄托在你們身上). In a subtle but unmistakable nod to the 1997 Handover, the broadcaster then announces (still speaking in Cantonese) that she will re-read the same passage again in *putonghua*, though the voiceover cuts off before she is able to do so. In this way, Mao's 1957 appeal to China's youth as the key to the nation's future resonates ironically with *Made in Hong Kong's* reflection both on contemporary anxieties concerning Hong Kong's post-Handover fate, as well as the film's thematization of youths who die before their time.

Meanwhile, Fruit Chan's most recent film, *Kill Time* (謀殺似水年華)—despite having been released in 2016, on the eve of the Handover's twentieth anniversary—contains no explicit references to either the Handover, its upcoming anniversary, or even to Hong Kong itself. Instead, the film is based on a 2011 novel by mainland Chinese author Cai Jun 蔡駿, is set in Beijing, is entirely in Mandarin Chinese, and would appear to be focused primarily on Mainland-related concerns. If we look beyond the film's surface narrative, however, we find a set of allusions to thematic concerns relating to a sense of anxiety and anticipation surrounding the Handover and its forthcoming anniversaries. In particular, I propose that to the extent that Hong Kong cultural production during the decade and a half leading up to the Handover was characterized by a pervasive sense of *déjà disparu*, then *Kill Time* instead captures a sense of what we might call (in a nod to Abbas) a state of *déjà suspendu*—of seeing Hong Kong society and culture as being caught in a state of suspended animation marked by the post-Handover period of "fifty years without change."

Love and Revenge

Unlike many of Fruit Chan's previous films, which tend to be quirky art house productions, *Kill Time* was a Hong Kong–Mainland co-production that was clearly intended for a broader audience. Although the film ultimately performed poorly at the Chinese and Hong Kong box offices,¹ in principle it could be seen as making a rather different appeal

¹ The film sold approximately US\$2 million in tickets in mainland China, placing it 53rd out of 61 Hong Kong films released in China in 2016. In Hong Kong, it sold only about US\$7,000, placing it 26th out of 33 Hong Kong–Chinese co-

to audiences in each region. For Mainland audiences, the film follows Cai Jun's novel in underscoring the degree to which the present (which is the year 2010 in Cai Jun's original novel and 2015 in Fruit Chan's film) is haunted by a series of events that can be traced back to the period of the Sino-Vietnamese War in the late 1970s, while for local Hong Kong audiences, I will argue, the film offers a subtle commentary on the Handover and its legacies.

To appreciate *Kill Time's* underlying implications, it is necessary to begin with an overview of the work itself. The film is a hybrid of the detective and the romance genres, and the plot oscillates between several different historical periods ranging from the 1970s to the contemporary moment. The film's primary narrative plane is set in Beijing in the year 2015, and opens with the protagonist, Tian Xiaomai (played here by Yeung Wing 楊穎, a.k.a. Angelababy), receiving a phone call informing her that her father, a police sergeant named Tian Yuejin (Yin Zhusheng 尹鑄勝), has just died in an accident. After the funeral, Xiaomai begins perusing her father's diaries, including an entry from 1995 that describes his investigation of the case of a woman who had been strangled with a silk scarf. Upon reading this entry, Xiaomai develops an urge for a purple silk scarf just like the one with which the woman had been strangled twenty years earlier. She therefore calls up her friend, Qian Ling (Reyizha Alimjan 熱依扎, a.k.a. Rayza), and asks her whether she knows of a website where it is possible to purchase anything one might want. Qian Ling replies that there is a site called Witch Zone, but she warns Xiaomai not to visit it, since it is highly addictive. Xiaomai visits the website anyway, then goes to visit Qian Ling and tells her about the 1995 murder her father had been investigating.

Later that same night, Xiaomai receives a text message from Qian Ling saying, "I'm sorry, Xiaomai. Let's excavate the secrets from the grave together" (對不起，小麥，讓我們一起把秘密從墳墓裡挖出來). Xiaomai is still puzzling over this mysterious text the next day when, as she is riding to work with her fiancé, Sheng Zan (Zhang Chao 張超), she receives a phone call informing her that Qian Ling has just been murdered. Xiaomai proceeds to the crime scene, where one of her father's former colleagues, Detective Wang Zhixian (Huang Jue 黃覺), informs her that Qian Ling was murdered the same way as the other woman had been twenty years earlier. He adds that when he was in Qian Ling's apartment, he noticed a picture of Xiaomai wearing what appeared to be an identical purple scarf. Detective Wang immediately reassures Xiaomai that she is not a suspect in the investigation, noting that he had a considerable degree of respect for her father. In return,

Xiaomai tells him about her father's diaries, and together they attempt to identify and track down Qian Ling's killer.

Most of the remainder of the first half of the film is devoted to a series of flashbacks revolving around the courtship between Xiaomai 小麥 (whose given name literally means "little wheat") and a young man her same age, named Qiu Shou 秋收 (whose name literally means "autumn harvest"). Qiu Shou was the son of the woman who was strangled in 1995, and after Xiaomai's father found the thirteen-year-old boy hiding at the crime scene, he took the boy home to stay with his family. It was in the Tian household that Qiu Shou meets Xiaomai for the first time, and although the thirteen-year-old Xiaomai (played here by Li Yichen 李逸辰) initially viewed the more rustic Qiu Shou (played here by Su Jiahang 蘇嘉航) with considerable suspicion, Qiu Shou nevertheless declared his fondness for her. He subsequently left the Tian household for unspecified reasons, and the two teenagers didn't see each other again until five years later, when Qiu Shou (played here by Ruan Jingtian 阮經天, a.k.a. Ethan Juan) returned to Beijing in 2000. It is in these flashbacks to Xiaomai's and Qiu Shou's initial meetings, meanwhile, that we find two of the film's most suggestive allusions to themes associated with Hong Kong and the Handover.

First, shortly after Qiu Shou joined the Tian household in 1995, he demands that Xiaomai's father let him watch *101st Marriage Proposal* (*101 Kaime no Puropōzu*, 101 回目のプロポーズ)—a popular 1991 Japanese television series that was re-serialized in Hong Kong in 1994.² The *Kill Time* flashback features a scene in the Japanese series in which the protagonist tells another character (in dubbed Mandarin Chinese), "I swear that fifty years from now, I'll still love you" (我發誓，五十年以後我依然就那麼愛你) (see Figure 1). Upon hearing this line, Qiu Shou promptly stands on a chair, holds out his right arm like the figure in the television show, and says to Xiaomai, "Xiaomai, it doesn't matter if you don't like me now, but one day, I will have you love me like her [the woman in the show]" (小麥，別看你現在不喜歡我，但總有一天，我會讓你像她那樣說愛我) (see Figure 2). The significance of this "I swear that in fifty years" line is further underscored in the film's contemporary narrative plane (in 2015), when Xiaomai visits Qian Ling just before her death and gives her a DVD set of *101st Marriage Proposal* that she had purchased on the internet, whereupon the two women enthusiastically recite the same "fifty years from now" line from the earlier scene. The same line is repeated twice more in the film, including in the final sequence.

² In the 1990s, some Chinese households and businesses had access to Hong Kong television via either cable or satellite. The show was subsequently remade as a Chinese television series in 2004, and as a mainland Chinese movie in 2013.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Second, approximately five minutes (of screen time) and five years (of chronological time) after the 101st *Marriage Proposal* scene with Qiu Shou and Xiaomai, Xiaomai enters a convenience store near her home in Beijing, and finds Qiu Shou (whom at this point she has not seen for five years) watching a famous scene from Jeffrey Lau's 劉鎮偉 1995 film *A Chinese Odyssey* (大話西遊) on the television.³ This immensely popular Hong Kong diptych features a comic reimagining of the Ming dynasty classic novel *Journey to the West* (西遊記), and the scene Qiu Shou is watching here is one in which the protagonist, Joker (who is the reincarnation of the Ming novel's protagonist Sun Wukong [a.k.a. the Monkey King], and is played here by Stephen Chow 周星馳), and is telling a female character named Zixia (played by Athena Chu 朱茵):

³ The two films that comprise the *Chinese Odyssey* diptych are *Pandora's Box* (月光寶盒) and *A Cinderella* (仙履奇緣), and were released one after the other in 1995.

“I should in fact die. I once had my true love in front of me, but I didn’t cherish her, and it was only after I lost her that I came to feel incredibly regretful. If Heaven were to give me another chance, I would definitely tell that girl three words: ‘I love you.’” (我也應該死，曾經有一份真誠的愛情放在我面前，我沒有珍惜，等我失去的時候，我才後悔莫及。。。如果上天能夠給我一個再來一次的機會，我一定會對那個女孩子說三個字「我愛你」)。When Xiaomai enters the store, Qiu Shou is standing on a soap box while reciting these lines along with the Joker character in the film, and although he momentarily falls silent upon seeing Xiaomai, it nevertheless appears as though the Hong Kong film’s “I love you” line were being addressed directly to her (see Figure 3). Qiu Shou and Xiaomai then begin talking to one another while the broadcast of *A Chinese Odyssey* continues to play in the background, including the famous line, “If I had to give this love an expiration date, I would hope that it would be . . . ten thousand years” (如果非要在這份愛加上一個期限，我希望是……一萬年)。



Figure 3

Both of these flashback sequences use allusions to other filmic works (each of which is reproduced in Fruit Chan’s film via a television broadcast) to anchor Xiaomai’s budding romantic relationship to Qiu Shou. Whereas the filmic intertext in the 1995 sequence is grounded on a sense of anticipatory promise (“I swear that fifty years from now, I’ll still love you”), the 2000 sequence instead foregrounds a sense of retrospective remorse (“it was only after I lost her that I came to feel incredibly regretful”). Furthermore, whereas the first sequence revolves around a fifty-year interregnum, in the second sequence and its corresponding intertext this interregnum is extended from half a century to a millennium—which is to say, from the realm of historical time to something akin to geological time.

Although the filmic intertext in the first sequence, *101st Marriage Proposal*, was a Japanese television series, and Fruit Chan borrows this

allusion directly from Cai Jun's mainland Chinese novel (which also repeatedly cites the line "I swear that fifty years from now . . ."),⁴ Chan's film introduces an additional layer of connotations to the line. That is to say, given Fruit Chan's position in Hong Kong cinema, and the fact that his professional reputation is grounded in large part on his critically acclaimed 1997 trilogy, when the "fifty years from now" line is repeatedly cited in *Kill Time* it is very tempting to view it as an allusion to the 1984 Joint Declaration's famous "fifty years without change" promise—and, by extension, to consider the film as a whole as an indirect commentary on the Handover and its afterlives.

Indeed, the guarantee of fifty years without change was a popular motif in Hong Kong political discourse and popular culture during the period leading up to the Handover. In Stanley Kwan's 關錦鵬 1988 film *Rouge* (胭脂扣), for instance, the protagonist Fleur is a Hong Kong courtesan who takes her own life in 1934, and then returns as a ghost fifty years later, in 1987, to look for the lover she assumed had committed suicide with her. When Fleur's ghost arrives in modern-day Hong Kong, she seeks assistance from a journalist. The journalist reluctantly agrees to take her home, where Fleur meets his skeptical girlfriend, who takes Fleur into a bedroom and demands proof that Fleur is actually a ghost. The girlfriend points to Fleur's underclothes, asking why they are so well-preserved and how they could have endured for "fifty years without change"? Although Kwan's film might not otherwise appear to be overtly political, this reference to "fifty years without change" has been seen as an allusion to the Joint Declaration promise—suggesting that the film may be viewed as an allegorical commentary on the Hong Kong return itself.

The "fifty years without change" trope remained a key touchstone in the years following the Handover, as reflected for instance in works such as Wong Kar-wai's 王家衛 film *2046*—a film that Wong began planning shortly after the Handover itself but did not complete until 2004. *2046* takes its title from the work's conceit that the protagonist, Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung Chiu-wai 梁朝偉), is writing a science fiction novel titled *2046*, which is set in the future and features a mysterious location called 2046, where nothing ever changes and from which virtually no one ever returns. As Wong Kar-wai himself has acknowledged, however, the film's title is also a reference to the final year of the period covered by the "fifty years without change" promise. As Wong explains in an interview conducted after the film's release, "We had the idea of this film, and this number, in 1997, when Hong Kong was going back to China. The Chinese government promised Hong Kong fifty years of [no] change. So, from 1997, plus fifty, we have 2046 [sic]. That'll be the last year of this promise" ("Interview"). The

⁴ The line is cited four separate times in Cai Jun's novel, which happens to be exactly the same number of times that it is cited in Fruit Chan's film.

published English-language version of this particular interview actually refers to the Chinese government's promise as one of "fifty years of *change*," rather than "fifty years of *no change*." Although this is obviously a typographical error, it inadvertently reveals the underlying focus of Wong's film itself. As Wong had explained in an interview conducted in 2001, during a very early stage of the filming process, "The first thing I wanted to do is imagine how it would be if Hong Kong would stay the same for 50 years, while the rest of the world is changing. I want to make a film about change, because so many inhabitants of Hong Kong are afraid of it" (Lührs). Wong's point here is that to imagine Hong Kong without change ignores the reality that the rest of the world will remain in a state of dynamic transformation—meaning that Hong Kong's relationship to the rest of the world would also continue to change, even if Hong Kong itself were somehow able to retain exactly the same capitalist structure and way of life during the intervening period.

Although it is true that Cai Jun's novel already contains the allusion to *101st Marriage Proposal* and its "in fifty years" promise, it is in *Kill Time's* subsequent allusion to *A Chinese Odyssey* that we may find a model for understanding the double-voicedness that the "in fifty years" line comes to assume in Fruit Chan's film. Although Joker's emotional declaration of his love to Zixia (in Jeffrey Lau's film) directly parallels Qiu Shou's own declaration of his love for Xiaomai (in Fruit Chan's film), the broader context of the *Chinese Odyssey* sequence from which this sequence is excerpted gives the "I would definitely tell that girl three words: 'I love you'" line a rather different valence. In particular, the scene in which Joker offers Zixia his profession of love is immediately preceded by another sequence in which Zixia is trying to kill him—and just as she is about to slice his throat the film cuts to a freeze frame, whereupon viewers hear Joker reflect in a voice-over:

At the time, that sword came within 0.01 cm of my throat, but after [the amount of time required to burn] a quarter of an incense stick, the female owner of that sword would fall head over heels in love with me—all because I decided to tell her a lie. Although I've told countless lies in my lifetime, I nevertheless am confident that this was my most perfect lie.

(當時那把劍離我的喉嚨只有 0.01 公分，但是四分之一炷香之後，那把劍的女主人將會徹底地愛上我，因為我決定說一個謊話。雖然本人生平說了無數的謊話，但是這一個我認為是最完美的)。

Moreover, not only does this earlier sequence (which is not explicitly cited in Fruit Chan's film, but which would have been well-known to his presumptive target audience) completely invert the significance of the vow of love that follows it (in that it reveals Joker's declaration of devotion to be a mere ruse), but furthermore *the way* in which the

earlier sequence does so is interesting in its own right. As fans of Wong Kar-Wai's films will immediately recognize, Joker's remark about how "that sword came within 0.01 cm of my throat" tropes on one of the best-known lines from Wong's 1994 film *Chungking Express* (重慶森林), in which the character played by Takeshi Kaneshiro 金城武 remarks, "At our nearest point, I was separated from her by only 0.01 cm, but 57 hours later, I fell in love with this woman" (我們最接近的時候，我跟她之間的距離只有 0.01 公分，57 個小時之後，我愛上了這個女人). Wong Kar-Wai and Jeffrey Lau collaborated closely in the 1990s, with several of Lau's films explicitly parodying Wong's own, and both Lau and the actor Stephen Chow have remarked that in this scene from *A Chinese Odyssey* they were deliberately poking fun at the line from Wong's earlier film. In other words, they are ironically appropriating a line about romantic encounter to offer a meta-ironic parody on the very possibility of romance itself.

If transposed to *Kill Time*, these contextual considerations from *A Chinese Odyssey* invite a reassessment of how the quoted lines in question are being used in Fruit Chan's film. To the extent that the original *Chinese Odyssey* line is presented as being a lie, we might reconsider the reliability of the citations that appear in *Kill Time*, together with the sincerity of the love that these citations ostensibly avow. In particular, while the original *Chinese Odyssey* passage is introduced via an ironic allusion to yet another film (Wong's *Chungking Express*), we may similarly consider how the citations appearing in Fruit Chan's film may also have an ironic dimension, in that they are not only used to articulate themes of love and revenge within the film, they themselves stand in a complicated relationship of fidelity and betrayal with respect to their own textual sources. Just as the intertextual chain from *Chungking Express* to *Chinese Odyssey* and *Kill Time* illustrates how the significance of textual or cultural elements may be radically transformed in the process of being cited, a similar logic may be found in the film's 1995 sequence. In explicitly quoting the 101st *Marriage Proposal* and implicitly citing the Cai Jun novel that originally thematized the line from the Japanese serial, Fruit Chan's film is both affirming a line of continuity with these earlier works, while at the same time introducing a series of radical breaks and ruptures within that same continuum.

Interregna and Spectral Returns

In Fruit Chan's film, the "fifty years without change" motif is mapped onto the relationship between Xiaomai and Qiu Shou, who appear to be caught in an open-ended cycle of desire and separation. Following their initial reencounter in 2000, Xiaomai and Qiu Shou fall in love—despite the objections of both Xiaomai's father (who feels that the teenagers' class and family backgrounds are simply too incompatible) and one of

Xiaomai's high school classmates (who had hoped to have Xiaomai for himself). Eventually, the latter classmate—who is revealed to be Sheng Zan, Xiaomai's future fiancé—kidnaps Qiu Shou and locks him up in the basement of an abandoned warehouse. Left to die of thirst, Qiu Shou proceeds to scrawl Xiaomai's name all over the ceiling and walls of the room, until he is too weak to move. He is ultimately rescued five days later, but upon being released from the room he discovers that (the man he believed to be) his father died while searching for him. Grief-stricken, Qiu Shou leaves Beijing without bidding Xiaomai goodbye.

Qiu Shou's five-day-and-five-night imprisonment in the warehouse basement echoes a key detail in both Lau's *A Chinese Odyssey* as well as the original Ming-dynasty novel *The Journey to the West* on which it is based. In particular, the Ming novel opens with an account of the supernatural Monkey's mythological origins as a sentient block of stone, and then provides an overview of Monkey's existence up to the point when he is imprisoned under the Mountain of the Five Phases by the bodhisattva Guanyin as punishment for his perennial insurrection. He is finally liberated five hundred years later, in the early Tang dynasty, so that he may accompany the monk Tang Sanzang (a.k.a. Tripitaka) on his pilgrimage to the so-called Western regions to recover some Buddhist scriptures. Lau's 1995 adaptation, meanwhile, opens during the early Tang setting of the original *Journey to the West*, whereupon Monkey is again captured and imprisoned by Guanyin for insubordination, and then is reincarnated five hundred years later as an outlaw named Joker. At the end of the first film in the diptych, Joker, who by this point has reverted back to his original identity as Monkey, is sent back five hundred years in the past, to rejoin his original companions and resume their quest. For Joker/Monkey, however, this trip back in time functions as a form of virtual imprisonment, in that he spends much of the second movie attempting to return to the period five hundred years in the "future," to save a female character he loves. Paralleling Monkey's five-hundred-year imprisonment under the Mountain of the Five Phases (in *Journey to the West*) and the character's virtual imprisonment when he is sent back in time five hundred years (in *A Chinese Odyssey*), *Kill Time*, meanwhile, is similarly structured around a series of temporal interregna, all of which happen to involve units of time containing multiples of the number five—including the five-year gap between Qiu Shou's departure in 1995 and his reappearance in Beijing in 2000, his subsequent five-day imprisonment later in 2000, and the following fifteen-year gap between his departure from Beijing in 2000 and his reappearance in 2015. In stitching the narrative around this series of temporal hiatuses, the film invites a view of time that is not linear as much as it is a composite of overlapping interregna.

Moreover, these interregna gesture toward the future insofar as they speak to themes of love and devotion, but simultaneously gesture to the

past insofar as they speak to themes of trauma and vengeance. For instance, after Qiu Shou finally reappears in Beijing in 2015, he arranges for Sheng Zan to be kidnapped and taken to an empty warehouse similar to the one in which Sheng Zan had imprisoned Qiu Shou himself fifteen years earlier. There, Qiu Shou confronts Sheng Zan and threatens to kill him—though after securing Sheng Zan’s confession and contrition, Qiu Shou agrees to let him go. Second, we learn that when the thirteen-year-old Qiu Shou witnessed his mother’s murder, he did not see the killer’s face but did glimpse a distinctive carnival-style mask—a mask that led the young Qiu Shou to imagine the murderer as a “demon” (魔鬼 *mogui*). Qiu Shou vows to avenge his mother’s death, and eventually determines that the killer was Sheng Zan’s father. It turns out that Xiaomai’s, Qiu Shou’s, and Sheng Zan’s parents had close relations in the 1970s, during the end of the Cultural Revolution and the Sino–Vietnamese War, and the legacy of those relationships continues to haunt their descendants in the present.

Accordingly, near the end of the film—in 2015, twenty years after the murder of Qiu Shou’s mother—Qiu Shou finally corners the elder Sheng and attempts to strangle him. Xiaomai and Officer Wang both realize what Qiu Shou is trying to do, and arrive just in time to intervene. At this point, Xiaomai reveals to Qiu Shou that the elder Sheng, whom Qiu Shou is attempting to kill, is actually Qiu Shou’s biological father. She explains that she has recently learned (from her father’s diaries, as well as from Detective Wang’s investigations) that the elder Sheng and Qiu Shou’s mother had been having an affair that resulted in Qiu Shou’s birth, but when Qiu Shou’s mother subsequently tried to convince the elder Sheng to acknowledge their son, the elder Sheng strangled her. Confronted with this information that the elder Sheng is actually his biological father, Qiu Shou briefly pauses, but then resumes strangling him until he is stopped by Detective Wang, who shoots and arrests him. Next, Xiaomai proceeds to the office of Sheng Zan’s mother and charges *her* with having strangled Qian Ling with the same kind of purple silk scarf that her husband had used to murder Qiu Shou’s mother in 1995. It turns out that Sheng Zan’s mother had learned that Qian Ling was having an affair with her husband—who also happened to be Qian Ling’s boss—and therefore decided to murder her in order to protect her family. Confronted with evidence of her guilt, however, the mother remains unrepentant, contending that she simply did what she had to do.

Following this cascade of revelations, *Kill Time* concludes with Xiaomai visiting Qiu Shou in prison, where he has been sentenced to serve an unspecified term for the attempted murder of the elder Sheng, his biological father. As Qiu Shou and Xiaomai sit on opposite sides of the glass window separating the detention cell from the visitation hall, they use the prison’s phones to talk to each other. At one point they each hold up a hand to the glass as Qiu Shou promises Xiaomai once

again, “Fifty years from now, I will still love you” (五十年後，我依然會這樣愛你). As Xiaomai and Qiu Shou are speaking, however, snowflakes appear to be falling all around them—giving the sequence a dreamlike, almost spectral quality, as though one or both of them might already be dead. The implication, accordingly, is that the prison phone appears to traverse not only the spatial distance that separates them (the 0.01 cm that separates them when they hold their palms up to the glass?), but also perhaps an existential gap between the mortal world and the afterlife.

In fact, the entire film features a persistent fascination with the intersection of communicational media and spirit mediums. From the cell phone on which Xiaomai receives the news of her father’s death in the opening shot of the film’s first (post-credit) sequence, to the prison phone on which Xiaomai and Qiu Shou use to converse with each other in the final scene, virtually the entire film revolves around communicational media traversing not only space and time, but even the boundaries between life and death. For instance, after the death of Xiaomai’s father, the father’s spirit repeatedly sends Xiaomai and Officer Ma clues to help them solve the murders of Qian Ling and Qiu Shou’s mother. These clues include pages from the father’s diaries, from which Xiaomai learns that not only did her father manage to solve the mystery of who murdered Qiu Shou’s mother, he also visited the cellar in which Qiu Shou had been imprisoned by Sheng Zan—and, upon seeing how Qiu Shou had covered the walls and ceiling with Xiaomai’s name during the five days he was trapped there, came to regret his earlier efforts to undermine his daughter’s romance with Qiu Shou. Moreover, Qiu Shou himself is closely allied with both media and mediums. For instance, when Qiu Shou returns to Beijing following his departure in 2000, he initially decides not to seek out Xiaomai in person, but rather to contact her indirectly via the online shopping site Witch Zone—which in Chinese is called *Monüqu* (魔女區), or literally “zone of the possessed woman.” The irony, however, is that—as Xiaomai herself later puts it—she ended up being the last person to discover the site. After Qian Ling finally introduces Xiaomai to Witch Zone, Xiaomai exchanges a series of text messages with an unidentified figure who turns out to be Qiu Shou.

The film as a whole, meanwhile, is itself framed by a focus on spectrality. To begin with, *Kill Time* does not actually open with the post-credit 2015 sequence of Xiaomai receiving the phone call informing her of her father’s death, but rather with a pre-credit sequence that begins with shots of the Sino-Vietnamese War (1979), which turns out to be a dream-memory sequence attributed to Tian Yuejin, who is dozing in a police car while on his way to investigate the murder of Qiu Shou’s mother. When Tian Yuejin enters Qiu Shou’s home, he hears a cassette player playing a hand-labeled cassette tape of music by Leslie Cheung 張國榮, and sees that Qiu Shou’s room is

decorated with numerous posters of the actor and Cantopop star. The date and time of this latter sequence is identified very precisely: the sequence begins on May 8, 1995, at 17:45, and when Tian Yuejin wakes up in the police car, his radio is playing a song by the Taiwan pop star Teresa Teng 鄧麗君, after which the radio announcer informs her listeners that Teng had passed away earlier that day.

Conversely, *Kill Time* does not actually end with the sequence in which Xiaomai visits Qiu Shou in prison, but rather the prison sequence is followed by a series of six intertitles consisting of white text against a black background, each commemorating a Hong Kong or Taiwan pop star who died between 1993 and 2003 while still in their thirties or forties. Beginning with the singers Wong Ka-kui 黃家駒 and Danny Chan 陳百強, continuing with Teresa Teng and fellow Taiwan singer Chang Yu-sheng 張雨生, and concluding with Leslie Cheung and his fellow Cantopop co-star from Stanley Kwan's *Rouge*, Anita Mui 梅艷芳, each of these intertitles offers a separate memorial page with the name of the deceased, some brief information about their career, the date and cause of death, together with their age when they died.

Like *Kill Time*, Cai Jun's novel begins and ends with references to Teresa Teng (who was extremely popular in mainland China in the 1980s and 1990s, having been the first foreign pop star to establish a solid foothold in the Mainland market), and the novel opens with the same list of international pop stars that are featured in the film's closing credits. However, like the "in fifty years" line itself, this thematization of death and spectral returns in Fruit Chan's film is similarly subject to a process of double-voicing, whereby in a contemporary Hong Kong context the focus on death and spectrality becomes overlaid with the sense of suspended animation associated with the post-Handover period. While death signifies rupture, the spectrality connotes a condition of uncanny stasis, marking an inability to leave the past behind and advance to the future. As such, the condition of suspended animation explored in *Kill Time* and other works is characterized by a sense not only of *déjà suspendu* but also of what we might call *déjà revenu*—or seeing the present as haunted by specters that have "returned" from the past and are unable to advance to the future.

References

- Abbas, Aqbar. *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Print.
- Cai Jun 蔡駿. *Murdering Things Past* (謀殺似水年華). Hainan: Nanhai Chuban Gongsì, 2011. Print.
- Dung Kai-cheung. *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City*. Trans. Dung Kai-cheung, Anders Hansson, and Bonnie McDougall. 1997. 2011. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. Print.

- Freud, Sigmund. "Project for a Scientific Psychology." *The Origins of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Basic Books, 1954. 349–455. Print.
- . "Fetishism." Trans. James Strachey. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 21. London: Hogarth Press, 1994. 147–57. Print.
- "Interview: Wong Kar-Wai on 2046." *Film4.com*. N.d. Web. 31 May 2017.
- Kill Time* (謀殺似水年華). Dir. Fruit Chan 陳果. Wuzhou Film Distribution and Wanda Pictures, 2016. DVD.
- Lühns, Stefanie. "Wong Kar-Wai: The Privilege of Time Travelling." *Artist Interviews*. Mar. 2001. Web. 31 May 2017.
- Made in Hong Kong* (香港製造). Dir. Fruit Chan 陳果. ICA Projects, MK2 Diffusion, and Shu Kei's Creative Workshop Ltd., 1997. DVD.
- Rojas, Carlos. "On Time: Anticipatory Nostalgia in Dung Kai-Cheung's Fiction." *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Chinese Literatures*. Ed. Carlos Rojas and Andrea Bachner. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 847–65. Print.