Slipshod Horror: Low-budget Local Horror Film as Counter Discourse in Fruit Chan's Coffin Homes

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Abstract

In an attempt to de-Westernize film studies, this article first compares the different literary precursors, cultural references, and developments of horror as a film genre in Hong Kong and Hollywood to highlight their difference in cultural provenances. It then illustrates how the film evokes nostalgia for the "golden past" of Hong Kong horror through nostalgia casting and slipshod cinematography and extrapolates how the local spectators' criticisms of Coffin Homes reflect a cinematic amnesia and detachment from the Hong Kong horror as the result of the Westernization and modernization of movie theatres. By inventing a new subgenre of "slipshod horror," I separate this de-Westernizing local subgenre from other subgenres related to horror (such as B films, exploitation films, and cult films) to highlight its amalgam of cultness, low budget, cultural specificity, genre hybridity, and political awareness, and explain how, through both a cinematic and meta-cinematic attempt, the film practices a de-Westernizing approach through its genre to problematize, recalibrate, and re-imagine the horror genre via a local, non-Westernized logic.

Introduction

Many critics would agree that Fruit Chan is an indispensable part of Hong Kong cinema ever since his movie Made in Hong Kong premiered at the turbulent year of 1997 (Cheung). His films have since then served both as a visual allegory to articulate complex emotions of Hong Kong and as a lens to understand the city itself and in a broader, trans-regional, and global context (Yau, A. Y. Wong, Lee, Bingham, Bachner, Gan). However, Chan's recent work, such as Three Husbands (2018) and Coffin Homes (2021), faced unanimous criticisms by the local audience and film critics for their confusing motive, slapdash film effects, and chaotic structure. In the 46th Hong Kong International Film Festival, when asked about what contributed to the recent criticisms of his movies, Fruit Chan replied that he found his style quite consistent, in comparison to the changing environments, implying that there are obviously other factors that changed the public's view of his movies. While it can easily be interpreted as a response to the changing environments of movie productions in Hong Kong and in the digital age,

such a playful response also leaves room for other interpretations and prompts the question of what has changed if Fruit Chan's style remains largely consistent.

In De-Westernizing Film Studies, Bâ and Higbee (2-8) call for a de-Westernizing of film studies not to "homogenize, unify, or authenticate" the East and the West, as it is often impossible and futile, but rather one that "disrupts, displaces, de-homogenizes, muddies both 'West'/'Western' on the one hand, and the de-Westernizing gesture-processes at work in/on/through West or Western on the other hand." Indeed, the assumption that Hollywood is the dominating matrix which suppresses and marginalizes non-Western cinema is sometimes necessary and productive; however, this runs the risk of glossing over the more intricate, dynamic, and at times symbiotic relationship of the East and the West.

Departing from Chan's ambiguous remark, this article recalibrates the implications, meanings, and methods of de-Westernizing horror. It analyzes the reception, genre hybridity, and slapdash style of Fruit Chan's Coffin Homes and proposes a new subgenre, "slipshod horror", as an alternative, meta-cinematic practice that addresses what is in fact Westernized. I will first demonstrate how the communal moviegoing experience is erased in the development of the Hollywood paradigm that nurtures a universalized taste and homogenizes the audience's expectations, aesthetic standards, and viewing experience. Imagined as a critical response to this westernizing of local audience, Fruit Chan's Coffin Homes attempts to resurrect and emulate the Hong Kong horror films of the golden years (from mid-1980s to mid-1990s) through its casting, cinematography, and its comedy-horror genre. The failure (in terms of local reception) of his recent films is the manifestation of a westernized local audience whose tastes and expectations are largely different than that of the mid-1980s and mid-1990s. I aim to exaggerate this intended failure by proposing a new subgenre "slipshod horror" as both a lamentation and satire vis-à-vis the local audience and a meta-cinematic practice in attempt to de-Westernize horror. The intentional slipshod quality of the work, I argue, serves to highlight the changes in moviegoing in Hong Kong and the detachment from a local, low-budget, and communal genre that was once ubiquitous.

Horror in Hollywood and Hong Kong

To being with, it is essential to address the uneasy task of defining a genre, horror in this case, as it pertains to defining cultural significance and difference. Genre is a necessary concept for critics and movie-goers because its pragmatic functions and financial values facilitate film distribution and audience expectation. Not only does such differentiation help the audience decide which film would most likely satisfy them according to their tastes, it is also useful for foreign films to

be introduced, procured, and consumed in other regions despite cultural, linguistic, and stylistic differences. However, the classification becomes trickier when it comes to what constitutes a genre, what its principles are, and why we group certain recurring features into a genre and not the others. Tudor (7) points out that "the crucial factors that distinguish a genre are not only characteristics inherent to the films themselves; they also depend on the particular culture within which we are operating"; in other words, genre notions are "sets of cultural conventions." This consideration of the underlying cultural subtext behind the taxonomy of genre is a good starting point to inquire on the origin, development, and difference of horror as a genre in the East and the West.

Harry Benshoff recapitulates the generic history of Western horror film: from the "creepy pix" in the 1940s which uses a mix of genres; the sci-fi trend in the 1950s which was influenced by the post-war technological progress; the gothic revival in the 1950s to the 1970s; slasher films and gore in the 1980s, to the more transnational and diversified content in the 21st century. Although this is a summary of the over-90-year history of Western horror, it is observable that the development of Western horror is indeed bound to its cultural and historical context. For instance, the sci-fi trend which depicts scientists as an "omnipresent institutional force" corresponds with the fear, spectacle, and imagination of the techno-scientific advancement of the post-war United States, or the change in narratives and attitudes in post-9/11 horror films (Wetmore). Likewise, the emergence of genre mixture also varies according to different cultures. While genre mixture is not uncommon in the history of Western horror, especially in the 1940s, comedy-horror "has suffered an unfortunate, vulgar reputation" in Hollywood, with only a few exceptions (Grossman 82). It is perhaps until the emergence of the Scary Movie franchise that comedy-horror arouses sizable interests in Hollywood (Bruce).

Unlike Western horror, Hong Kong horror, depicted as a bright yet short-lived genre popular in the 1980s to mid-1990s, is characterized by its mixture of comedy and horror, such as the film Mr. Vampire (1985), an iconic figure of vampire movies, or Out of the Dark (1995), starring Stephen Chow who is famous for his slapstick, local humor. Indeed, "[r]are is the Hong Kong horror film that occupies unalloyed generic terrain" (Bettinson & Martin 5). With Encounter of the Spooky Kind (1980) receiving huge success, other films of the same style soon emerged and blossomed, such as the Mr. Vampire franchise where each of all five movies of the franchise glossed over HK$10 million at the box office (Liu). Even after the evanescent boom in the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, many Hong Kong horror films inherited and retained the comedic feature, as in the case of Rigor Mortis (2013) and Vampire Cleanup Department (2017). Its narratives, on the other hand, are conceived by different literary traditions and cultural sources than

Hollywood, which are the exhaustive Chinese mythologies and folklores, such as Qing-dynasty writer Pu Songling's Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio which "form[s] an enduring prototype of the Hong Kong horror, and set out precisely the way subsequent writers, poets, artists and film-makers would use a variety of fantastic horror premises to comment on contemporary society and politics" (Bettinson & Martin 3).

In other words, Hong Kong horror has a cultural precursor drastically different from that of Hollywood that inspires, shapes, and influences the imagination, definition, and representation of horror. This pretext of Hong Kong horror is conducive to a better understanding of how Fruit Chan, and his film Coffin Homes in particular, renders critiques on the divide between Hollywood and non-Western cinema, and explains the film's seemingly out-of-place slipshodness which apparently runs counter to the taste of the local audience.

Fruit Chan's Coffin Homes

Fruit Chan's Coffin Homes is unabashedly slipshod and cult in style. With the budget of less than HKD 10 million (Liu), the film tells a few interweaving stories of haunted properties through an overwhelming mix of exaggerated film effects, a whimsical plot, and farcical actions. The film opens with the first story which resembles a typical Hong Kong soap opera revolving around greedy children fighting for the luxurious mansion of a dying mother. Only one daughter out of the ungrateful and unsatiable offsprings, alongside a long-time serving foreign domestic helper, genuinely cares about the health of their mother. Perhaps the children's callousness is too repulsive – the dying mother gained terminal lucidity, but in a possessed, evil-spirited manner, which eventually led to the slaughter of the unfilial daughters and son. The film then zooms in on a young housing agent who regularly sneaks into an unsold haunted property with his girlfriend where a former-owner-turned ghost resides. The hardworking yet impecunious agent later learns that his girlfriend is heavily in debt. When a group of triad-like debt collectors chase after him in the haunted property, the landlord ghost who resides in the house appears and kills the debt collectors. The last story narrates the battle between an imp who tries to scare away the greedy landlord who plans to subdivide his house into unlivable cage homes. The imp turns out to be a victim of child neglect and domestic accident who died tragically, at the age of four, in a subdivided flat due to a gas leak. Like the landlord ghost, the imp deployed scary tricks and paranormal phenomenon simply to stay in his own house and "live" peacefully.

The casting of Coffin Homes is obviously a conscious choice that reminds people of the "golden years" of Hong Kong horror, as many of the actors participated in multiple Hong Kong horror films in the 1980s

and 1990s, such as Tai Bo, Paul Che, Susan Shaw, and Loletta Lee. This nostalgic casting is not an uncommon approach in Hong Kong horror and Hong Kong cinema. Deemed as a hopeful beam of light to resurrect Hong Kong horror, Rigor Mortis (2013) also casts movie stars well-known in the 1970s and 1980s, and references the classics of golden-age Hong Kong horror by featuring a Daoist exorcist and a Chinese vampire. Hong Kong horror, in another sense, is often intertwined with nostalgia, with the nostalgic casting elegizing the irretrievable past. On the other hand, the theme and message of the film are direct and instantly relatable to the audience: the housing crisis reflects the insatiable greed of the money-minded, ravenous people who are more horrifying than the lingering ghosts who are more humane and less cold-blooded. The film delivers this straightforward message in an exaggerated, farcical, and cult style which, similar to the nostalgic casting, resembles the low-budget, spectacular genres popular in the 1990s, such as action and horror. The opening scene features the fight between the resurrected mother and the eldest daughter stabbing each other with different sharp tools, such as a saw and barbeque forks, which appear out of nowhere, while the background music changes from lullaby-like tones, dramatic and artificial sound effects, to a poignant hum every few seconds. The film effects are exaggerated in a farcical style, with excessive blood in different colors spilling out like a running lawn sprinkler. For instance, when the ghost helps the agent kill the debt collectors, one single stab in the toes is enough to make their blood spill everywhere, painting the walls in bright red; the climax scene, even more exaggerated, showcases a chaotic mix of wandering headless corpses spilling out colorful blood, rolling human heads like bowling balls, and exposed organs gnawed by the delirious protagonist.

The usual motifs of Fruit Chan are visibly present in the film, such as the marginalized yet fluid female "outsider", who straddles between the local and the foreign, in this case Amy the Southeast-Asian domestic helper (A. K. Wong); the abject body parts, in a literal form of bleeding body chunks that "linger against the shadowy and dark urban landscape of Hong Kong" and "mirror the history of unaffordable urban living" (Huang 166); the tension between global capitalism and the neoliberal subjects (Heinrich, Cheah); and finally, food and cannibalism as allegorical symbols of geopolitics (A. Y. Wong, Bachner). In a sense, these recurrent symbols indeed demonstrate how Fruit Chan views his recent films as "rather consistent". The film still acutely addresses global capitalism reified in possibly the most absurd form—caged homes. The critique of money-minded Hong Kong people, such as landlord Lam, is also astute, but it is further complicated as the spectator witnesses his more humane emotions and fatherly love. If previous films such as Made in Hong Kong (1997) and Hollywood Hong Kong (2001) require a critical reading or decipherment, Chan's situated critique and allegory of Hong Kong in Coffin Homes is evidently more

legible. In addition, unlike the realist approach prominent in the 1997 trilogy and prostitute trilogy, Coffin Homes is visibly more outlandish and over-the-top. It is thus curious how the audience, possibly because of the whimsically different aesthetics, gave unanimously negative reviews to Chan's film. What sort of careful reading, then, is required for Coffin Homes, in tandem with the audience's criticism?

A deteriorating Fruit Chan?

In the regular section "editorial shorts" of Hong Kong Film Critics Society, two critics excoriate Coffin Homes for its "bad taste of vulgarity" and "random, slapdash, fragmentary, and ramshackle" qualities (Yip & Chan, my translation); other blogpost critics castigate the film for its confusing, incoherent plot and lousy film effects, with one critic rating the film a zero out of 100 (Hei). On the film commentary site Hong Kong Movie, the film receives a disappointing 2.6 star out of 5, with more than half of the comments decrying its confusing style, except a few comments that credit the film for its outspokenness on political issues. The opprobrium might indicate how the cult, alternative, and anti-mainstream style is undesirable and strange to the audience.

However, this type of low-budget horror films with slipshod cinematography has in fact been an essential part of Hong Kong cinema which "once was famous for churning out hundreds of formulaic horror films" (Pang, States Against Ghosts 474). The Troublesome Night series, for instance, has in total 20 instalments produced between 1997 to 2003, with the last instalment released in 2017 as a 20th anniversary celebration of the first film. The profuse production of the formulaic horror films indicates that this genre was consistently consumed by the local audience and was by no means an unfamiliar, alien genre. In the late 1990s to 2000s, due to financial crisis and global attention to the emergence of Asian Extreme, these low-budget Hong Kong horror films even expanded their local influence and facilitated the popularization of pan-Asian horror, where inter-Asian casting, talents, styles, and cultural references are prominent, especially evident in Pang Brother's The Eye (2002) and The Eye 2 (2004) (Lee 214).

Why, then, would Coffin Homes receive such critical reviews when it attempts to recreate the slipshod, low-budget horror films once so profuse, familiar, and commonplace? What has changed after the golden period of Hong Kong horror and what makes the cut-price, low-budget horror films fall out of the mainstream? Pang (States Against Ghosts 474) suggests that horror films in Hong Kong "has almost completely died out" due to "the industry's fraught efforts to adapt to the Chinese market and its policy environment"; while Bordwell speculates that digital technology, change of leisure patterns, and the dominance of Hollywood blockbusters contribute to the long slump of

Hong Kong cinema since 1995. To render a different analysis that escapes a binary mindset in which Hong Kong is positioned as inferior to China or Hollywood, I instead propose that the Westernization of movie theatres also contribute to the plummet in local film production and theatre commission, and have estranged the public perception of low-budget horror films. In the following, I survey the history of the moviegoing experience in Hong Kong to examine how the difference in attitude has gradually disappeared and gives way to an individualized, institutionalized, and standardized moviegoing experience.

Moviegoing as Consumption

In the 1960s, cinema slowly became the major form of entertainment for the general public in Hong Kong because of its then-unprecedented and mesmerizing visuality. Wong and McDonogh capture the vivid memories of a Hong Konger, born in the 1960s, who frequented the cinema theatres. As the oral history shows, the tasteful, familial, and communal depiction of the moviegoing experience was once a public and central practice for modern-day Hong Kong people. Many others who frequented neighborhood cinemas also recounted the lively, bustling milieu outside the cinemas with hawkers peddling their street food. Remembering this multisensory and collective experience around cinemagoing through ethnography, Wong and McDonogh (82) contend that going to cinema is an experience beyond the movie itself and that multiple facets around the movie theatre are included, such as "architecture, ambience, prestige and choice of product, shared clientele and even food." Moviegoing, in other words, was both a social practice and a manifold experience. This communal feature also has its precursors. Cantonese Opera, for instance, was a major form of popular entertainment for Hong Kong people in the mid-1800s and a popular genre for film adaptation in the early 1900s. It often takes place in semi-open space with a temporarily built bamboo theatre, where the audience can react, eat, comment, and communicate freely; or the "open-air projections of Chinese films to theatres that wove together opera and film to undistinguished neighborhood buildings" (87). The multi-sensory experiences, or "hot noise"熱鬧, of open-air cinema in socialist China also harks back to such communality (Li).

Although cinema arrived in Hong Kong as early as 1900 with the opening of Chungking Theatre in Central, there was a clear division between high-end multiplexes and neighborhood cinema to differentiate the colonials, expatriates, and tourists from the locals who do not have the cultural capital and money to consume Hollywood movies in multiplexes. Neighborhood cinemas remained popular among the local audience as it was convenient, cheap, and entertaining.

The multi-sensory, communal experience of moviegoing was a collective memory as children remembered how they could eat sweet popcorns during the movie and go for a "happy meal" at McDonald's afterwards, while adults recalled the mix of noise and sounds from the playing screen, the hawkers outside the cinemas, and the small talk and commentaries of other moviegoers (Wong & McDonogh). However, with the popularization of television, home video, DVDs, and bootleg videotapes, many movie theatres closed down because of the continuous decrease in theatre admission, which precipitated the arrival of mini-theatres and art house multiplexes. In 1985, the major distribution chain United Artists introduced mini-theatres in Hong Kong which were soon followed by other major distribution chains, since mini-theatres were more economical and flexible in scheduling movies. The mini-theatres, originated in the US, had a set of regulations unprecedented in neighborhood cinema, including the banning of indoor smoking and food not purchased in the cinema. In addition, the mini-theatres were usually elegantly adorned and designed, and often located in shopping malls near commercial centers instead of the neighborhood. With the upgrade and multiplexation of mini-theatres, moviegoing became less of a communal, everyday experience but a more privatized and disciplined consumption. As a result, "[e]ven those who fondly recalled neighborhood theatres and family outings in the 1950s and 1960s often were likely, as adults, to choose sleek multiplexes in glistening commercial centers for movies in the 1990s" (Wong & McDonogh 83). In other words, the emergence of mini-theatres gradually stripped away the communal experience, different sensations, and lively ambience of the moviegoing experience in the 1980s to 1990s in Hong Kong.

The popularization of multiplex movie theatres in the early 1990s has a more far-reaching impact on Hong Kong cinema. According to Michael Curtin (39-42), the ticket prices more than doubled as theatre chains were upgrading and multiplexing their theatres, and, as a result, "audiences began to gravitate to Hollywood films". This resulted in a continuous and rapid decrease in ticket sales for Hong Kong movies, which in turn impeded the regular financial and production flow of quality local movies, while Hollywood's lucrative domestic market ensures high-budget productions of blockbusters. This further distanced the financial and production gap between Hollywood and Hong Kong cinema who must now pursue low-cost production strategies. As Bordwell (234) points out: "For most national cinemas, horror films are cheap to produce and easy to market, and the new financial pressures obliged Hong Kong directors to plug away at the genre. The horror-film anthology, typically three stories linked by a theme or location, became a cut-price item," reflecting how low-budget horror was also a response to the dominance of Hollywood blockbusters. Also, according to Curtin (39), moviegoing in Hong Kong, which was

"primarily a family form of entertainment[,] became a dating experience for teenagers and young adults" with action films and spectaculars becoming more popular and welcomed. This trend of low-budget, spectacular genre is captured by Bordwell (21) who vividly describes the ambience of midnight shows in the 1990s where popular action films such as Young and Dangerous 4 (1997) are screened and consumed by young audiences who would cheer, laugh, clap, or boo, scream, and stand up to shout: "Who the hell wrote the script?" Midnight screenings, as a cheaper, more accessible form of moviegoing, encapsulate the adaptive low-budget production strategies of Hong Kong cinema in response to the multiplexation of movie theatres and dominance of Hollywood blockbusters. If the multipelxation of movie theatres contribute to the significant drop in ticket sales, the contemporary development of movie entertainment only adds to the plight, as the popularization of streaming platforms, not unlike DVDs and home videotapes in the 2000s, allows cheaper and more accessible options for people to watch movies without going to the theatres.

If we contextualize Coffin Homes and link its slipshod, low-budget features back to the temporal framework in the 1980s and 90s, it is apparent that the film harks back to the earlier era of Hong Kong horror and reminisces the communal, multisensory, and at times participatory moviegoing experience that was once uniquely Hong Kong and free of Hollywood's influences. In other words, the film is less of a failed production but more as a new, meta-cinematic form of critique by Fruit Chan, whose movies have always been inherently dialectic.

Fruit Chan's Conformity and Rebellion

Exploring the Hong Kong-ness of Fruit Chan and his films, Pang Laikwan (Sunset Not Yet) points out the rebellious nature of Fruit Chan's films by illustrating how his films, although infiltrated with allegories of Hong Kong identity, are always unstable and volatile in meanings and often end with a tortuous, ambiguous, and serpentine ending. For instance, through the analysis of the Hong Kong trilogy, Shih (150) showcases how the sequence, appeared at a time where "[t]he audiences across national boundaries needed a national allegory from Hong Kong in the year of 1997," does not fulfil such need but rather "frustrates the viewer's desire for national allegory" through its jumbled temporality, refusion to nostalgia, and the mournful deaths of all four protagonists. On the one hand, Fruit Chan's films have overt allegorical symbols that unapologetically represent Hong Kong; on the other hand, his ambivalent characters and equivocal endings negate an easy, direct interpretation of the films, which is why, as Shih suggests, his films can be read as both a national allegory and an anti-allegory at the same time. Pang (Sunset Not Yet) supplements that the conflicting

duality of Fruit Chan is also what makes his representation of Hong Kong so beguiling and enchanting as it creates a careful tension between the text and its interpretation. The conflicting duality inherent in his films are much like Fruit Chan himself, who is also caught in a conflict between catering to the taste of international film festival judges and those insisting on a local narrative.

In addition, Pang (Sunset Not Yet) addresses the possibility that Fruit Chan's films are interpellated by the international film festivals' need for films that represent Hong Kong. Due to the failed initial attempts at commercial films, Fruit Chan, admitted himself, became an international independent filmmaker coincidentally as his experimental work Made in Hong Kong received critical acclaim and twenty-nine film awards domestically and internationally. This coincidental career development also implies that his future films rely on the international film festivals system to secure funding. Durian Durian (2000), for example, is funded by Wild Bunch in France, which is an international film distribution and sales company (Cheung 147). His reliance on the international film festivals system means that his films are under the gaze of the West and might be subject to an Orientalist call. They are confined by the imagination, expectation, and doctrine of the West from which he can never fully separates himself. However, as illustrated above, his films also reject the curious outsiders' need for a national allegory in Hong Kong cinema. His films, with ambiguous symbols and tortuous endings, leave the international audience frustrated and yet also enchanted. As the Italian expression Traduttore, traditore (Translator, traitor) goes, one might say Fruit Chan is also a translator and traitor as he must balance between translating Hong Kong to the international audience and representing Hong Kong "faithfully" and accurately, while also at the risk of pandering to the imagination of the West.

It is obvious that Coffin Homes also reflects the ambivalence between conformity and rebellion. Featured at the New York Asian Film Festival and Udine Far East Film Festival, Coffin Homes has a direct appeal to the curious international audience as it addresses one of the gravest social problems in Hong Kong, that is, the housing crisis. The synopsis, written by the programmer Colleen O'Holleran from Seattle International Film Festival, encapsulates how this straightforward message is captured by the international audience: "Coffin Homes is a wild ride full of gore, humor, and unblinking satire, offering a glimpse into the absurdity of real-estate prices and the lengths people must go to in order to survive in the city." Indeed, the theme of housing crisis in Hong Kong can easily satisfy the curiosity of the voyeuristic West who cannot fathom the idea of cage-sized subdivided flats. The greedy characters also conjure up the image of Hong Kong as capitalism incarnate and a city full of money-minded people and social inequalities, which are not uncommon stereotypes of Hong Kong. However, apart

from these overt symbols of Hong Kong, Fruit Chan also presents ambiguous, culturally specific, and obfuscating symbols that are not easily digestible to the international audience. For instance, in a later scene, the housing agent must find the dead landlord to sign a lease agreement. With no other possible options, he visits hell and eventually confronts the Ghost King (Gwai Wong 鬼王). When the Ghost King suggests he forge the lease agreement, the agent cautions him against the illegal act. The Ghost King replies: "the greatness of Hong Kong law lies in its malleability." This line echoes with the local audience and earns their applauses and laughs as it satirizes how the constitution of Hong Kong is constantly amended through annexes. If the political satire might be comprehended by the international audiences who are familiar with Hong Kong's political situation, there is a whimsical scene where the headless corpses are spilling out different colors of blood, including blue and yellow, alluding to divided political views of Hong Kong people. The intentional emphasis on colors in Coffin Homes is among the very few, if not only, merits that local film critics laud. In other words, Fruit Chan displays two forms of Hong Kong-ness in Coffin Homes: the housing crisis, which is an overt Hong Kong social problem that is itself spectacular for the international audience; and the satirical political references, which serve to resonate with the local audience.

However, the politically charged cultural symbols are not as direct and stable as well. Before the closing credits, the Ghost King's head pops up and stares at the audience, asking: "So you want to rent a house? What color are you?" followed by an offscreen response possibly voiced by Fruit Chan in a frivolous tone: "Erm… Is orange okay?" Here the film plays with the political connotation of colors again and, once again, complicates the film with an obfuscating ending. The film ends, after the protagonist obtains the signed lease agreement from the Ghost King, by depicting an uncanny, dream-like, and utopian future. The characters move on from the haunting past while the ghosts still linger and co-exist with humans in the hustling city. However, a post-credit scene cuts to the imp who stares at a backyard. It is exactly the place where the murdered siblings in the beginning scene are buried. The hand of a dormant corpse breaks through the soil planted with colorful flowers. It is, quite literally and visually, an abject body that Fruit Chan repeatedly relies on for an allegorical articulation (Huang). The pregnant remark narrated by Fruit Chan himself, the overzealously utopian ending, and the foreshadowing hand clearly negate an easy interpretation of the film as a political satire and enhance the ambivalence inherent in Fruit Chan's films. The interpretability of these ambiguous symbols echoes with the duality of Fruit Chan's films. Pang (Sunset Not Yet 41, my translation) asserts that his films "produced under the international film festival system do not necessarily reinforce cultural voyeurism; the conformity and imitation of the foreign culture

might be a necessary condition to incubate a deeper understanding of cultural representation and self-reflexivity" because "imitation is not replication, and the ceaseless, vigorous kind of creativity is always based on unconscious imitations," and maintains that "consciously constructing an identity for Hong Kong people might not merely generate a simple replication of a unified, coherent Hong Kong identity," but something more complex, conflicting and genuine. She concludes that Fruit Chan's reliance on the international film festivals system and his insistence on representing Hong Kong, in contrast with his overzealous longing for freedom and independence, creates the most captivating tension that informs Fruit Chan's style.

Indeed, the position of Fruit Chan as an international independent filmmaker is both a blessing and curse he can never get rid of. However, this peculiar position also implies that he could produce films that are neither purely commercial, fetishistic for the West, nor entirely local. His films are, as Bâ and Higbee (2-8) propose, a de-westernizing work within the West that "disrupts, displaces, de-homogenizes, muddies both 'West'/'Western'". Screened at international film festivals and often funded by international film distribution companies, his films are situated both in Hong Kong and in the West. The dilemma he is caught in invokes his deeper, more dialectical observation of the binary oppositions between Hong Kong vis-à-vis the West and local vis-à-vis Hollywood. Coffin Homes' double Hong Kong-ness, one for the international audience and one for the locals, can be seen as both a conformity and rebellion to the West as he fulfils the West's voyeuristic desire of Hong Kong while inserting local symbols that seem foreign to the international audience. This double Hong Kong-ness can also be seen as an attempt to blur the border between local and foreign as the two are imbricated with each other in the serpentine ending that refuses easy interpretations. On the other hand, his intended failure to resurrect Hong Kong horror in the mid-1980s exposes the changing attitudes, aesthetics, and tastes of the local audience. The local and the West are upended in this exposure of the westernization of the local audience: the international audience is fervently begging for Hong Kong-ness in his films while the local audience disregards and dismisses the local subgenre that was once emblematic of Hong Kong cinema. The de-westernizing question becomes a perplexing one as the position of the westernizing and the westernized are reversed. It also invalidates the binary opposition of non-West vis-à-vis the West which perceives the West as the dominant, hostile, and vicious Other and the non-West as the submissive opposite. What, then, considering these subversions, should be the appropriate approaches of de-Westernizing horror? By representing Hong Kong-ness dually, insisting an obfuscating ending that rejects easy interpretations, and imitating Hong Kong horror in the mid-1980s, Fruit Chan, much like the mischievous imp in Coffin Homes, did not provide a direct answer, but rather

captures, addresses, and re-imagines this question, in a recalcitrant, hide-and-seek, and ambiguous way through Coffin Homes.

Slipshod Horror

I propose the concept of "slipshod horror" to highlight the slipshod, low-budget, local, and spectacular horror films once popular in the mid-1980s to 90s Hong Kong. The slipshod horror films, in face of the challenges of Hollywood, television, piracy, and other then-emerging audio-visual devices, are produced with local narratives and symbols that resonate with local audiences in a limited budget. While subgenres related to horror abound, such as B films, exploitation films, and cult films, and that Coffin Homes can easily fit into one of these categories based on its cinematic features, they are nonetheless shaped by Western epistemology that, because of its self-proclaimed universality, ignores regional films' history, stylistic development, and cultural context. On the other hand, more situated film criticisms toward Fruit Chan and more specifically his horror films, such as Dumplings (2004) and Tales from the Dark (2013), while offering cogent analyses on Hong Kong and its geopolitical and neoliberal complexity, might not be able to fully take extra-filmic or para-cinematic elements into consideration. They run the risk of adopting what Rey Chow (3) calls "ethnic supplement", that is, modifying Western epistemology "by way of historical and cultural characteristics that are specific" to the region.

In other words, slipshod horror is necessary because this cluster of Hong Kong horror films has the potential to bridge the gap between film criticism and industrial considerations. Fruit Chan, because of his inherently dialectical position and allegorical ambivalence in his films, heralds a new form of film analysis that incorporates genre tradition, cultural specificity, sociopolitical sensibility, commercial considerations, and audience reception without sacrificing the films' own allegorical importance. The films rather appropriate these multifarious aspects to render a cinematic and meta-cinematic critique at once. The slipshodness in Coffin Homes is partly utilitarian, as it is low in budget and expected not to be screened on the mainland China (Liu); but it is also partly intentional, as Fruit Chan appropriates and transforms the limitation into creative energy that harks back to the local cinematic tradition that was once, likewise, full of limitations and possibilities. The slipshodness, in other words, is intended and expected to be criticized by the audience so as to question and problematize the difference in Hong Kong's moviegoing experience and film criticism propelled by social and technological changes, such as the multiplexation of movie theaters and the emergence of streaming platforms. By coining the term "slipshod horror", I also allude to many other films which demonstrate filmic and cultural specificity that

escapes a Hollywood taxonomy, to name but a few: Troublesome Night series, A Wicked Ghost series, Thou Shalt Not Swear (1993), Haunted Mansion (1998), Erotic Nightmare (1999). With a new, de-Westernized category, these horror films are tied organically to the particular cinematic history of Hong Kong. Also, as Pang (States Against Ghosts 474) proposes, these low-budget horror films not only signify a prominent period of Hong Kong cinema which "once was famous for churning out hundreds of formulaic horror films," it also shows the tenacity and creativity of Hong Kong cinema amid challenges and dominance of the West. Although short-lived, slipshod horror films have nonetheless marked the turning point of Hong Kong cinema as the Westernization of movie theatres was slowing taking place and replacing local moviegoing experience with an individualized and disciplined one. The gothic literature tradition makes the distinction between terror and horror, in which "terror is experienced as fear in anticipation of an (horrific) event; in contrast, horror is experienced as a sense of revulsion after the event occurs" (Chan 98). Perhaps the "horror" in slipshod horror is not only a strategic attempt to allure its audiences through over-the-top gore and exploitative contents, but also an industry response that encapsulates the fear and insecurity of Hong Kong cinema in face of fierce competitors such as Hollywood.

For a city that is "always already in-between, impure, and incomplete—a place where neither East nor West suffice, where both constructs are characterized by a lack rather than substance" (Chow et al.), a more impure approach in both film analysis and filmmaking is indeed necessary. Coffin Homes' nostalgic casting and intertextual references to earlier horror films, for instance, muddles and upsets a pure film analysis that solely focuses on the film itself, or imported film categories that are, when coercively transplanted to describe Hong Kong horror, culturally and historically illegible. By imitating and resurrecting slipshod horror, Coffin Homes not only resuscitates the already-lost genre once popular in Hong Kong through its nostalgic casting and lousy cinematography to bring new possibilities of Hong Kong cinema into the international and local audiences' eyes, but it also parodies and performs the golden past of Hong Kong horror through an intended failure to highlight and problematize the Westernized local spectators who are amnesiac about and detached from the cinematic tradition in Hong Kong (both in terms of moviegoing and slipshod horror). Also, Coffin Homes is a performative and meta-cinematic practice that extends the discussion of Hong Kong horror beyond the screen. It questions and refines the de-westernizing logic that follows a Western critical tradition or that champions binary oppositions. By rendering a meta-cinematic critique of the local audience, it provides new insight to the definition, implication, and practice of de-Westernizing film studies in a practical, dialectical, and slipshod manner. I hope that by proposing the concept of "slipshod horror"

through Fruit Chan's Coffin Homes, the approaches of de-Westernizing horror can be refined, recalibrated, and re-imagined to better locate and address the Westernizing/Westernized subjects.

Acknowledgement

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