

# *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 Hong Kong horror as the result of the Westernization and modernization of movie theaters. By inventing a new subgenre called "slipshod horror," I separate this de-Westernizing local subgenre from other horror-related subgenres, such as B films, exploitation films, and cult films. This distinction highlights its unique combination of cultness, low budget, cultural specificity, genre hybridity, and political awareness. Additionally, I explain how the film employs both cinematic and meta-cinematic techniques to practice a de-Westernizing approach that seeks to problematize, recalibrate, and reimagine the horror genre through a local, non-Westernized perspective.

## **Introduction**

Many critics would agree that Fruit Chan has been an indispensable part of Hong Kong cinema ever since his movie *Made in Hong Kong* (香港製造) premiered in 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 in a broader, trans-regional, and global context (Yau, A. Y. Wong, Lee, "Cinematic Remembrances," Bingham, Bachner, Gan). However, Chan's recent work, such as *Three Husbands* (三夫) (2018) and *Coffin Homes* (鬼同你住) (2021), faced unanimous criticisms by the local audience and film critics for their confusing motive, slapdash film effects, and chaotic structure. In the 46<sup>th</sup> Hong Kong International Film Festival, when asked about what contributed to the recent criticisms of his movies, 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 Chan's style remains largely consistent.

In *De-Westernizing Film Studies*, Bâ and Higbee 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." (2-8) Indeed, the assumption that Hollywood is the dominating matrix that 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 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 the local audience, Chan's *Coffin Homes* attempts to resurrect and emulate the Hong Kong horror films of the golden years (from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s) through its casting, cinematography, and 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 an 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 begin 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 moviegoers 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, but 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 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” (7); 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 about 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 that 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 the emergence of the Scary Movie franchise that aroused sizable interest in comedy-horror and aroused sizable interest in Hollywood (Hallenbeck).

Unlike Western horror, Hong Kong horror, depicted as a bright yet short-lived genre popular from the 1980s to mid-1990s, is characterized

by its mixture of comedy and horror, such as the film *Mr. Vampire* (殭屍先生) (1985), an iconic figure of vampire movies, or *Out of the Dark* (回魂夜) (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* (鬼打鬼) (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 grossed 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* (殭屍) (2013) and *Vampire Cleanup Department* (救殭清道夫) (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 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***

Chan’s *Coffin Homes* is unabashedly slipshod and cult in style. With the budget of less than HK\$ 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 insatiable offspring, 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 was 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 phenomena 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, like 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 barbecue forks, which appear out of nowhere, while the background music changes from lullaby-like tones to 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 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 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* (香港有個荷里活) (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 the 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 (Travelerwithmovie). On the film commentary site Hong Kong Movie, the film receives a disappointing 2.6 stars 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 film 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 (陰陽路系列), for instance, has a total of 20 installments produced between 1997 and 2003, with the last installment released in 2017 as a 20<sup>th</sup> 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 crises 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* (見鬼) (2002) and *The Eye 2* (2004) (Lee, “Ghostly Returns” 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, changes in 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 theaters also contributed to the plummet in local film production and theater commission and has 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 given 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 Hongkonger, born in the 1960s, who frequented the cinema theaters. 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 cinema-going through ethnography, Wong and McDonogh contend that going to the cinema is an experience beyond the movie itself and that multiple facets around the movie theater are included, such as “architecture, ambience, prestige and choice of product, shared clientele, and even food.” (82) Moviegoing, in other words, was both a social practice and a manifold experience. This communal feature also has its precursors. For instance, Cantonese Opera 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 theater, where the audience can react, eat, comment, and communicate freely; or the “open-air projections of Chinese films to theaters 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 hark 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 they were convenient, cheap, and entertaining. The multi-sensory, communal experience of moviegoing was a collective memory as children remembered how they could eat popcorn 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 theaters closed down because of the continuous decrease in theater admission, which precipitated the

arrival of mini-theaters and art house multiplexes. In 1985, the major distribution chain United Artists introduced mini-theaters in Hong Kong, which were soon followed by other major distribution chains, since mini-theaters were more economical and flexible in scheduling movies. The mini-theaters, which 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-theaters were usually elegantly adorned and designed and often located in shopping malls near commercial centers instead of the neighborhood. With the upgrade and multiplication of mini-theaters, moviegoing became less of a communal, everyday experience and more of a 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-theaters gradually stripped away the communal experience, different sensations, and lively ambience of the moviegoing experience from the 1980s to 1990s in Hong Kong.

The popularization of multiplex movie theaters in the early 1990s has a more far-reaching impact on Hong Kong cinema. According to Curtin (39–42), the ticket prices more than doubled as theater chains were upgrading and multiplexing their theaters, 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, which must now pursue low-cost production strategies. As Bordwell 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.” (234), reflecting how low-budget horror was also a response to the dominance of Hollywood blockbusters. Also, according to Curtin’s Moviegoing in Hong Kong, which was “primarily a family form of entertainment[, it] became a dating experience for teenagers and young adults” (39) with action films and spectacles 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* (97 古惑仔之戰無不勝)

(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 theaters and dominance of Hollywood blockbusters. If the multiplexation of movie theaters contributes 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 theaters.

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 about 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 and more of a new, meta-cinematic form of critique by Chan, whose movies have always been inherently dialectic.

### **Fruit Chan’s Conformity and Rebellion**

Exploring the Hong Kong-ness of Chan and his films, Pang Laikwan (*Sunset Not Yet*) points out the rebellious nature of Chan’s films by illustrating how his films, although infiltrated with allegories of Hong Kong identity, are always unstable and volatile in meaning and often end with a tortuous, ambiguous, and serpentine ending. For instance, through the analysis of the Hong Kong trilogy, Shih showcases how the sequence, which appeared at a time when “[t]he audiences across national boundaries needed a national allegory from Hong Kong in the year of 1997” (150), does not fulfil such need but rather “frustrates the viewer’s desire for national allegory” through its jumbled temporality, refusal to nostalgia, and the mournful deaths of all four protagonists. Chan’s films have overt allegorical symbols that unapologetically represent Hong Kong; conversely, 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 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 is much like 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 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, Chan, as he 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 festival system to secure funding. For example, *Durian Durian* (榴槤飄飄) (2000) is funded by Wild Bunch in France, which is an international film distribution and sales company (Cheung 147). His reliance on the international film festival 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 separate 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 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 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 the 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 the 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, Chan also presents ambiguous, culturally specific, and obfuscating symbols that are not easily decipherable 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 applause 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, 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 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 coexist 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 Chan repeatedly relies on for an allegorical articulation (Huang). The pregnant remark narrated by 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 Chan's films. The interpretability of these ambiguous symbols echoes with the duality of Chan's films. Pang

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” (*Sunset Not Yet* 41, my translation), but something more complex, conflicting, and genuine. She concludes that Chan’s reliance on the international film festival 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 Chan’s style.

Indeed, the position of Chan as an international independent filmmaker is simultaneously a blessing and a curse from which he cannot escape. However, this peculiar position also implies that he could produce films that are neither purely commercial nor fetishistic for the West nor entirely local. His films are, as Bâ and Higbee propose, a de-Westernizing work within the West that “disrupts, displaces, de-homogenizes, muddies both ‘West’/‘Western’.” (2–8) 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 positions of the Westernizing and the Westernized are reversed. It also invalidates the binary opposition of the 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 to de-Westernizing horror? By representing Hong Kong-ness dually, insisting on an obfuscating ending that rejects easy interpretations, and imitating Hong Kong horror in the mid-1980s, Chan, much like the mischievous imp in *Coffin Homes*, did not provide a direct answer but rather captures, addresses, and reimagines 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 the 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 on a limited budget. While subgenres related to horror abound, such as B films, exploitation films, and cult films, and *Coffin Homes* can easily fit into one of these categories based on their 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. However, more situated film criticisms toward Chan and, more specifically, his horror films, such as *Dumplings* (餃子) (2004) and *Tales from the Dark* (迷離夜) (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 Chow calls “ethnic supplement,” that is, modifying Western epistemology “by way of historical and cultural characteristics that are specific” (3) to the region.

In simpler terms, 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. 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 in Mainland China (Liu), but it is also

partly intentional, as 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 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 that demonstrate filmic and cultural specificity that escapes a Hollywood taxonomy, to name but a few: the Troublesome Night series, the A Wicked Ghost series, *Thou Shalt Not Swear* (七月十四) (1993), *Haunted Mansion* (香港第一凶宅) (1998), *Erotic Nightmare* (勾魂惡夢) (1999). With a new, de-Westernized category, these horror films are tied organically to the particular cinematic history of Hong Kong. Also, as Pang 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" ("States Against Ghosts" 474), but also show 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 theaters was slowly taking place and replacing local moviegoing experiences with individualized and disciplined ones. The gothic literature tradition makes the distinction between terror and horror, in which "terror is experienced as fear in anticipation of a (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 content but also an industry response that encapsulates the fear and insecurity of Hong Kong cinema in the 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, muddle and upset 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 into 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 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.

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