Genre in Asian Cinema: An Introduction

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The concept for this special topic came from a conversation Patrick Noonan and Earl Jackson began at National Chiao Tung University in Taiwan. Patrick gave one lecture on anime at NCTU and one on the films of Yoshida Kiju at National Tsing Hua University. He was also scheduled to give a lecture at NCTU on two Japanese genres: the *jidai-geki* and the pink film. He did give the lecture, but the evening before, he and Earl had had a long discussion about genres, and they decided that Patrick’s lecture would segue into a conversation between the two of them on the genres they chose. Patrick continued his discussion of *jidai-geki*, and combined it with the subgenre of yakuza films that also involve swordplay. Earl discussed melodrama, particularly the shift in the political agenda of early postwar melodrama.

When the idea of a special issue for *Concentric* came up, Earl immediately thought of these conversations and suggested “Genre in Asian Cinema” and contacted Patrick. An invitation was sent out and now there are four essays here dealing with different aspects of genre.

While we have very specific ideas regarding genre, we did not want to limit the contributions to essays that aligned with our views. In fact, there are essays included that are completely opposed to how we conceive of the categories and perhaps even the stakes involved. Such inclusions are not intended to create strife, but to encourage debate and dialogue.

US audiences in the late 1960s found themselves startled that three low-budget Italian films shot in the deserts of Spain could revive the dormant Western, unaware that Europe had been producing their own “Cowboy” films since the early 1900s. The 2011 Busan International Film Festival showcased Westerns from Japan, the
Philippines, Thailand, India, and China. The dissemination of this mode does not, however attest to any “universality” of Western values nor a capitulation to a cultural hegemony. Quite the contrary, such adaptation and localization reveals genre to be not so much a quasi-Platonic form as a negotiation—a range of signifying practices, a variable and dynamic template for affective narrative mapping of communal fantasies and realities.

Cinematic genres are characteristically, perhaps necessarily, porous. While specific genres may share a set of seemingly stable features, genres are nevertheless ongoing processes that change over time and in relation to other systems of cultural production. This instability makes genre an effective category for analyzing cinema as a complex series of negotiations between the audience and the film, shifting cultural and political contexts, national ideologies, and economic imperatives. The regions that cinematic genres traverse are also, much like genres themselves, constructed categories that articulate relations, demarcate boundaries, and reinforce or disrupt dominant narratives. The study of genre in Asian cinema thus offers a starting point for rethinking how cinema reflects, mediates, and reproduces shifting relations within Asia as well as between Asia and other regions in the world.

Indeed, examining Asian cinematic genres allows us to ask: how does the transnational production of cinema shape discourses on Asia, and vice versa? How do cinematic genres represent and shape regional narratives within Asia—between, for example, East and Central Asia? How do genres reinforce or disrupt notions of race and ethnicity within national or transnational contexts? How does the codification and transgression of genre conventions intersect with discourses on and performances of gender? Let us take a look at each essay for its respective concerns and how the discussion of genre articulates those concerns.

Ting-Ying Lin’s “Re-Negotiations of the ‘China Factor’ in Contemporary Hong Kong Genre Cinema” seems an excellent place to start, in that “Hong Kong” both as concept and as geopolitical reality is often associated with a “vernacular” or “colloquial” idiom somehow displaced from the “canon” of Chinese culture. But it is precisely this essay’s focus on the films that embrace Hong Kong’s insistence on its localisms that lead to its valuable contributions to understanding the full significance of genre and its strategic deployment.

To begin the discussion of the “China Factor” with the film *Vulgaria* is a brilliant strategy in that the film celebrates Cantonese while engaging a classic “porn film.” To remake *Confession of a Concubine*—this action itself becomes a productive metaphor for a refusal to accept the cultural delegitimation of Hong Kong. And—for the sake of possible future inter-Asian dialogues—we would like to point out that this
comedic valorization of the porn film resonates with the leftist deployment of sexually explicit film in Japan, as seen in the work of Adachi Masao, Wakamatsu Koji, and Oshima Nagisa. But the idiom of Vulgaria is what is paramount here. It is an audacious attempt to preserve that which—by official accounts—has always already been discarded.

From here Lin moves on to Fruit Chan, who holds an interesting position in international film festival circuits for his celebration of Hong Kong that is both unflinching and idealistic. The idea of Hong Kong remains a kind of pastiche horizon against the contradictions of daily life—both in the colonial legacy and the Chinese encroachment. How much Chan’s commitment to these questions speaks across borders was recently very vividly brought home to Earl Jackson when he was able to see almost all of Chan’s films again in a mini-retrospective in the Five Flavours Film Festival in Warsaw in November 2019. The setting of Warsaw with its own history of wartime devastation, Soviet occupation, and its new immediate threat of a growing right-wing authoritarianism gave Chan’s work a poignance and a kind of wake-up call sobriety that was at once unexpected and only logical.

Genre and sexuality are foremost in the critical attention of Leo Chia-Li Chu’s “From ‘Crisis of Masculinity’ to Queer History: Gender, Border, and Body Politics in Post-Handover Hong Kong Crime Films.” The attempt to explore the relations of gender and sexuality and national borders is very welcome and works wonderfully when focused with Hong Kong. The reading of these issues in the context of the end of colonial rule in the film Intruder is very compelling; we respectfully suggest that it could be even more compelling if the sexual dissonance at play is not reduced to a “crisis in masculinity,” since we believe masculinity itself is a crisis and in fact generates crises such as those enacted both micro- and macro-politically in crime sprees, colonial brutality, and police barbarisms—all of which are depicted in the films under discussion.

We also would like to see inter-Asian collaborations in reading films such as I Come with the Rain. It would be interesting to hear from a specialist in Vietnamese cinema discuss the work of the director and the implications of the choices he made in this multi-national production. And a Japanese popular culture specialist could perhaps provide insights into the overdetermined nature of the use of Kimura Takuya’s body as both the impossible object of desire and the repetitively abused toy for both consolation and redemption. Finally we could perhaps jointly protest the investors’ insistence on inserting utterly irrelevant white men like Josh Hartnett into the film as the surrogate embodiment of hegemonic American mediocrity to stare vacantly at the “exoticism” of the Asian setting.
William Carroll’s essay, “The Unexpected Encounter of Two Parallel Lines: Urban Space in the Films of Johnnie To,” is a tour de force of erudition and critical acumen, taking on not only To’s crime films but also his underappreciated romantic comedies. Carroll’s division of the two genres according to their respective division of space is in itself a brilliant insight, and grounds his very suggestive demonstration of how those divisions function narratively and ultimately ideologically.

The science fiction writer and critical theorist Samuel R. Delany has thought and written about the question of textual genres very extensively, and many of his observations are highly relevant to the discussions at hand. He warns against attempting to define “genre” since it is a “social object” and as such, “can only be described.” While we agree with this, we also recognize that in the absence of a generally recognized definition, certain ways of conceiving genre will be controversial. This brings us to a valuable essay that contains a premise we vehemently object to, while admiring the essay itself, Kyoung-Lae Kang’s reading of the film *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*. In her abstract, she states that she will “explore the Korean blockbuster, a film genre that enjoyed popularity in South Korea as a local translation of the Hollywood blockbuster.” We do not believe that “blockbuster” is a film genre. It is a marketing category. Nevertheless, Kang’s reading of the film in terms of its relation to issues of “national identity” is very valuable and she draws on a knowledge of Korean language and history that enriches the discussion, apart from any moments that describe the film’s adherence or departure from the “blockbuster genre.”

What is important in Kang’s essay is that she identifies the actual genre the film parodies, the “Manchurian action film” or to use the Korean term (which she does not supply), the *hwalguk*. Understanding this genre allows us to appreciate its adaptation into a more contemporary, “postmodern” idiom in *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*. Here we would like to supplement Kang’s attention to the genre by mentioning two extremely important examples, and films that must have definitely been in the director’s mind. The first one is *Eagle in the Wilderness*/*황야의 독수리* (dir. Im Kwon-Taek, 1969). In this film a Korean family is massacred by Japanese soldiers just after they have taken a family photo. Only the third son is spared, and he is adopted by the commander who had ordered the killing. The boy is raised as Japanese and he follows his putative father’s footsteps as a soldier for the Imperial rule over greater Asia, until he discovers the secret.

The other film is *Break the Chain*/*쇠사슬을 끊어라* (dir. Yi Man-hui, 1971). In this one three unrelated career criminals in Manchuria join forces (with occasional lapses in loyalty) to steal a Buddhist statue. In the pursuit of the prize,
however, the three come to understand the nature of the Japanese threat to the region and the meaning of their own common identity as Koreans. Considering these films and their legacy would provide a kind of cinematic literacy that Professor Kang clearly commands, and would allow the reader to fully appreciate her analyses that are in any event a rich contribution to this collection.

The essays here each stand on their own but they also can generate cross-dialogues among each other, and it is our humble wish that this collection itself will stimulate ongoing conversations, like the one Patrick and Earl began several years ago and continue through this effort.

About the Authors

Earl Jackson is Associate Professor Emeritus from the University of California, Santa Cruz and Professor Emeritus from National Chiao Tung University and currently Chair Professor at Asia University. He is the author of Strategies of Deviance: Studies in Gay Male Representation (1995), and has recently completed a monograph entitled, Critical Conditions: Japanese Film Theory and Practice. He has worked in the Korean Independent Film Industry and is currently writing on the films of Kawashima Yuzo.

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Earl Jackson

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**Translations**
