

Article

Revising the Noir Formula in the Chinese Context: *Black Coal, Thin Ice* and Beyond

Dinghui Zhou 

Department of Communication, Beijing Normal University–Hong Kong Baptist University United International College, Zhuhai 519087, China; dinghuizhou@uic.edu.cn

Abstract: Noir can be seen as a formula with a set of distinguishable thematic, narrative, and aesthetic elements matured in postwar Hollywood and later recycled, refined, or resisted by filmmakers worldwide. In the past decade, a handful of noirish crime films produced in People’s Republic of China particularly reworked this formula to articulate local concerns, one example being *Black Coal, Thin Ice*. By attempting a comparative analysis of this movie’s characterization with the noir formula’s conventional portrayal, this essay argues that *Black Coal, Thin Ice* revises the noir formula by drawing more attention to the noir killer’s plight as a demoralized state worker and deconstructing the formulaic presence of the femme fatale as a deadly and powerful seductress. Moving beyond the *Black Coal, Thin Ice* case, the essay also posits that the recent Chinese noirish crime films’ fusing of stylized chiaroscuro with color lighting to register various existential and psychological concerns enriches the chiaroscuro aesthetic of the noir formula.

Keywords: Chinese noirish crime films; Hollywood noir; the femme fatale; *Black Coal, Thin Ice*; Diao Yínan



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1. Introduction

Film noir, a term belatedly coined by French critics to discuss a trickle of Hollywood crime thrillers in the 1940s, has been extensively studied as a discursive construct, a genre, a mood, or a movement for half a century. Despite this critical vigor, very few researchers have examined it through the lens of a “formula” established through Hollywood’s studio practices and later refined and altered by filmmakers worldwide. Taking a formulaic approach to study noir, I argue, allows us to not only recalibrate noir film production as commercial practices relying on proven formulas and elements but also explore how each individual film recycles, reinvents, or resists the given narrative and aesthetic conventions. Such an approach, furthermore, obviates the conundrum of the genre theory about noir. As noir’s generic status has been constantly questioned, resituating noir in its studio production reminds us that the now-deemed “prototypical”¹ 1940s noir films were viewed as “melodramas” and represented “a shift within the crime genre” by the American trade press back then (Mayer 2013). The emergence of the noir formula dovetails with this shift in the category of crime melodrama, saving us the trouble of unraveling its generic myth.

Noir derives its formulaic status from at least three standpoints. First, various cultural, social, and technological transformations during and after World War II ushered in this “noirish” turn; this is also the time when a set of visual, thematic, and narrative elements typical to the noir formula started to shape up. Hard-boiled fiction writers, such as Dashiell Hammett and James M. Cain, gave form to noir’s quintessential characters and narrative, the most famous leitmotif being the “doomed love affair” (Borde and Chaumeton 2002b, p. 35) between the noir hero and the woman who threatens his masculine potency, the femme fatale. The war atmosphere and liberalization in censorship starting from around 1943 further prompted the studios’ unanimous turn to such dark scenarios, as the major studios felt that movies conveying positive messages of the country had fallen out

of favor (Mayer 2013). Moreover, technical achievements in film production, such as faster film stock, enabled the mass production of crime films with low-key lighting and “night for night” shooting scenes (Neve 1992). The favorable social, cultural, and technological conditions all laid the groundwork for the inception of the noir formula.

Second, taking shape somewhere between 1944 and 1945, following the success of A-budget movies such as *Double Indemnity* (1944), the noir formula worked at its best during 1946–1948 (Borde and Chaumeton 2002a; Mayer 2013) with some of its finest examples either mined from the hard-boiled detective lode or developed by exploring new ground in eroticism, violence, and existential and social themes. After 1948, just like every other formula that has its summit and downfall, noir was relegated to the safer and lower-budget B pictures’ domain after the audience got tired of the stereotypical themes and monotonous suspense (Borde and Chaumeton 2002a; Mayer 2013). Furthermore, American citizens’ increasing confidence in the nation’s future (Armstrong 2004), the popularization of television, and the studios’ corresponding swing to new escapist formulas such as “Cinemascope, color, and biblical epics” (Naremore 2008, p. 21) all terminated the formula’s widespread application. The third reason for noir’s formulaic status is that in the late 1960s, a revival arose with significant reworkings of the given formula. The changing social climate opened the door for large number of productions, many of which fared well enough to prove the formula’s commercial viability (Schatz 1981). Meanwhile, a number of global filmmakers reinvented or subverted the noir formula for local concerns or auteurist expressions, among whom the Chinese filmmaker Diao Yí’nan emerged as a pivotal filmmaker in advancing a local revision of the noir formula.

Markedly informed by hard-boiled fiction, noir frequently features a seeker or victim hero entangled in the seedy world of violence and corruption (Walker 1992). In most cases, the seeker hero is a private eye, while the victim hero is not necessarily tasked with investigations but is defined in relation to the femme fatale, a sexually attractive, often duplicitous and dangerous woman typical of Cain’s stories (Walker 1992). At times, as if to constitute a sexual triangle, there is a proprietorial husband figure who exerts patriarchal control over the femme fatale and acts as a contrast to the hero (Walker 1992). Visually, the noir formula is preoccupied with chiaroscuro lighting and odd, unstable composition, the trademark aesthetic features of Weimar cinema (1919–1933) (Spicer 2002). German émigré filmmakers working in Hollywood, such as Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, and Otto Preminger, were the forerunners who brought the German look and feel to the noirish crime pictures. When making *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (白日焰火, 2014, hereafter *BCTI*), arguably the most internationally acclaimed Chinese noirish film, Diao did not base the script on the noir formula until the original script, concerning a miscarriage of justice, was rejected by the investors (Diao et al. 2014; Yin and Diao 2014). He then found a way to balance the commercial elements with social concerns, including adding eroticism and spectacular violence as the selling points while retaining humanism in the movie’s characterization and social commentary.

This essay seeks to shed light on how the underexplored Chinese noirish crime film *BCTI* reworks the narrative and visual staples of the noir formula to articulate its local sensibility. It intends to fill the gap left by the existing literature on Chinese noirish films, which focuses on a corpus of turn-of-the-century films’ critique of the society’s economic and cultural transformations and leaves the aspects of aesthetics and characterization largely unexplored.² Beginning with a brief comparison of the crime-related sites in the Hollywood noirish predecessors and *BCTI*, this essay elucidates how the latter draws more attention to the causes of criminality by foregrounding the criminal’s work environment. It then “historicizes” the film’s depiction of the criminal in the Chinese socioeconomic context to illustrate how *BCTI* portrays the figure as sympathetic and morally ambiguous. The story is set at a time when the transition from socialist economy to market economy has produced dramatic social changes to the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and their workers. The tumultuous transition process, in which state commands and market forces were both at play, threw many poorly operated state industries into bankruptcy and forced others to

cut back their workforces to become competitive (Solinger 2002). Meanwhile, the working-class split into different strata when their permanent employment entitlements shattered and market mechanism flowed in. Unskilled workers or those who have fewer resources at hand were trapped in low-status jobs and became increasingly economically disadvantaged. In *BCTI*, the criminal Liang Zhijun is among the low-strata state worker figures whose moral ambivalence finds its root in the dire consequences of the market reforms.

Next, the essay analyzes how *BCTI* deconstructs the formulaic portrayal of the femme fatale as a deadly and powerful seductress by promoting a more nuanced reading of the female protagonist Wu Zhizhen. Wu's multifaceted experience and fluid identity revealed through the film's narrative shape her as both victim and agent in the profit-driven consumer society. This section is followed by a scrutiny of *BCTI*'s revision of the chiaroscuro aesthetic of the noir formula through using alternating color lighting and shadow to underline a sense of uncertainties in characters' double-crossing acts. Moving beyond the *BCTI* case, this essay also briefly discusses how a few recent Chinese noirish crime films fuse stylized chiaroscuro with color lighting, which adds to the rich local reinventions of the noir formula. Overall, this essay argues that *BCTI* revises the noir formula established through Hollywood's noirish productions by drawing more attention to the noir killer's plight as a wretched state worker and deconstructing the formulaic presence of the femme fatale as a deadly and powerful seductress. Meanwhile, by expanding the discussion to encompass the more recent Chinese noirish pictures,³ the essay posits that these movies' vivid use of chiaroscuro shadows and color lighting enriches the chiaroscuro aesthetic of the noir formula.

BCTI follows a grotesque murder case in 1999, when dismembered bodies showed up in coal shipments across Heilongjiang Province in Northeast China. During the investigation, Policeman Zhang Zili and his colleagues identified the deceased as Liang Zhijun, a coal worker and husband to a laundry worker, Wu Zhizhen. The case was left unsolved after two suspects attacked the cops—Zhang was injured, and two of his colleagues were killed during the fight. Five years later, the alcoholic Zhang, who now works as a security guard at a factory, runs into his previous partner and decides to intervene in the investigation of two more murder cases involving Wu. He soon finds out that Wu has killed a nightclub boss customer in self-defense when he raped her in retribution for a coat she had accidentally damaged in 1999. To conceal the crime, Liang led the police to deduce that he was the murder victim. The case threw his marriage into crisis, and Liang became a troubled noir killer spying on Wu and brutally eliminating all her suitors. One of Zhang's former colleagues is also killed when trying to detain Liang. To catch the culprit, Zhang negotiates with Wu and encourages her to tell the truth. Wu makes up a story to scapegoat Liang for the murder five years ago and helps the police to arrest Liang. Suspecting that Wu has lied to the police, Zhang invites her on a date and euphemistically tells her to be more active. Wu realizes that Zhang may learn of her secret past and kisses him to swap sex for keeping her secret. Zhang eventually turns her in regardless of the deal they made. The film ends with Wu's arrest and Zhang shooting off fireworks on a rooftop to "escort" her to the police station and show sympathy.

2. The Sympathetic, Morally Ambiguous Killer

Borde and Chaumeton (2002a), two key writers of the noir formula, note that moral ambivalence is an essential trait that differentiates noirish crime films from police procedurals. In noirish crime films, the police and lawbreakers reside in shades of gray, and the boundary between good and evil is often challenged and blurred—the cops no longer adhere to strict moral codes and may be crooked and villainous, while the lawbreakers, accordingly, are sympathetic, endearing, and even angelic, as in such instances as *Gun Crazy* (1950) and *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950). Borde and Chaumeton (2002a), however, do not go any further beyond describing the thugs in *The Asphalt Jungle* as "average guys" who "have kids, love their young wives, and aspire to return to the rural haunts of their childhood." We may speculate from the limited context that the moral ambiguity the perpetrators har-

bor lies in their ordinariness, which makes them different from the cold-blooded or underdeveloped criminals in police procedurals. A shift in narrative perspective from the outside to the inside enables the killers in Hollywood noirish crime films to evince humanistic qualities, which show another side of them to such an extent that their violent acts are condoned or negated (Borde and Chaumeton 2002a). *BCTI*, too, rounds out the criminal figure Liang by accenting his ordinariness as a devoted husband; in revising the noir formula to fit the local context, it nonetheless takes the theme of moral ambiguity further by holding particular social forces responsible for Liang's criminality, thus humanizing him as what I call a "victimized criminal." While some American noirish films feature maladjusted World War II veterans as killers not fully in control of their actions, many do not specify how wartime trauma triggers civilian crime. In *BCTI*, the killer cum state worker's wretchedness, unveiled through well-defined settings and iconography, elicits the audience's sympathy and leaves them to question how this relates to his criminality.

In the Hollywood noirish predecessors, prominent sites of investigation and crime include middle-class houses and cars, or, in a more working-class setting, flophouses and piers. These sites represent class distinction, clouds illicit (and later punished) desire, or register a sense of inhospitality and transitoriness as they lack the "domesticity of a 'proper' home" (Sobchack 1998, p. 138). In comparison, *BCTI* foregrounds the criminal's work environment, a decaying state-owned coal factory, as a primary locus for the homicide investigation and the criminal himself. The opening sequence reveals a severed arm in a shipment of coal transported to the factory where Liang once worked. The film then connects the gruesome murder with the squalid and claustrophobic place that traps the workers: dim light, grimy walls, and windows coated with coal dust all signal the poor working conditions Liang and the other laborers must endure. In a shot that shows a worker dashing to stop the machinery after spotting the body part, bold geometrical lines of rusty machines, pipes, and the vaulted ceiling are carried in sharp focus to minimize the worker's compositional importance and underline the sense of entrapment. This working-class milieu emphasizes not the impossibility of having a safe and comfortable haven but the suffering of the criminal in the faltering state-owned factory, thus drawing more attention to the causes of criminality.

The movie's contextualizing effort is made clearer when it introduces more details about the workers' shared existential emptiness. In another scene, the workers' restroom is presented as cramped and dilapidated, with large patches of mold on the walls and the door to the shower cubicle missing. As the cops follow Liang's friend, an overweight, unmotivated worker, into the cubicle, a telephoto shot shows one of his coworkers lying motionless in his bath. After the state initiated the market reforms, production shrank in the SOEs that faced fierce market competition. Workers were thus given less work to do and more free time to spend, which explains their flabbiness and sluggishness. An empty wine bottle discovered in the plant—where it is not supposed to be—suggests a sense of spiritual emptiness shared by the workers, who turn to alcohol to kill time.

Adroitly avoiding any explicit criticism of the state's policies, the film nevertheless insinuates, in its narrative and iconography, its subtle commentary on the socioeconomic transformations occurring in reform-era China. One crucial motif is the beleaguered state-owned coal factory, which suggests what the industry and its staff have been through: once the powerhouse of the socialist economy, the coal industry now offers testimony to noncompetitive SOEs and their many "redundant," underprivileged workers. Due to the projects that supported "blind, duplicated construction" largely to provide jobs for the returning cultural revolution-era sent-down youth,⁴ a great number of SOEs were already in debt in the 1980s, resulting in massive unemployment (Solinger 2002). Market competition further exacerbated the decline, and although a "reemployment project" was created to help the unemployed, quotas were used to determine the number of people receiving such aid, which means that there were always people left out (Solinger 2002). Those who remained employed in SOEs may be seen as the lucky ones that hold a job, yet many of them were no less poor and disenfranchised than their laid-off counterparts. First, the im-

plementation of the Labor Law transformed workers from a privileged class guaranteed the “iron rice bowl” — the cradle-to-grave benefits including permanent employment, free housing, and pensions (Weston 2004, p. 71)—to ordinary employees in the labor market whose contracts can be terminated at the will of either side (Naughton 2003). The abolition of the welfare system also drove workers’ living costs higher (Kernen and Rocca 2000). Second, as market principles were introduced, the state workers’ reduced workload led to lower pay if they failed to make their factories competitive or turn themselves into self-enterprising subjects. For reasons left unexplained, the beleaguered SOE depicted in the movie shows no sign of resurgence. Moreover, privatizing activities associated with the neoliberal logic of motivating self-enterprising individuals to confront the risks and instabilities of the market with one’s own capacity (Ong and Zhang 2011) are never a sound option for state workers, most of whom lack the skills and money to start a business. With no turning back to their glory and lifelong entitlements, and little access to privatizing practices, the workers became unproductive, idle bodies left in a stifling work environment.

The unveiling of Liang’s and his fellow workers’ poverty and psychological state makes him a morally ambiguous and sympathetic figure, which is reinforced by his love for Wu and his resolution to be a “living dead” to save her from being executed for accidentally killing an abusive customer. The moment Liang sacrifices his identity for her as an “officially declared” dead man, he becomes an abject cast out from the state worker community and hence a member of a disavowed class. In the paradigm noirish films such as *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), the male protagonists are fueled by a fantasy to start a new life with the femme fatale and thus willingly leave behind their previous identity or social position. Liang’s sliding into the abject identity, by contrast, results from his impotence as a disenfranchised worker, a lack of trust in the government policies and correspondingly the police, and a strong desire to protect his wife. These motives place the audience’s sympathy with him as a noir underdog whose troubles are “not necessarily of [their] own making (or a malign fate) but a wider social system” (Short 2019, p. 34).

Liang’s moral ambivalence thus differs from that of the characters in Hollywood noirish films, as it is rooted not only in his humanistic desire to protect his wife, but also in his plight as a despondent state worker. Whether killing for passion, materialistic pleasure, or rebellion against unsatisfying realities, most Hollywood noirish crime pictures explain their assassins’ criminality by way of personal desires. In comparison, Liang has no criminal intent to kill until he takes on the abject identity and transforms from a victim of a slum environment and the volatile policies to a desperate killer. His moral ambiguity lies precisely in his victimhood, laid bare by a realistic depiction of his workplace and the larger socioeconomic environment, which then triggers the audience’s sympathy for him. Therefore, *BCTI* revises the noir formula’s portrayal of morally ambiguous characters by drawing attention to the victimized criminal’s plight and relating it to his moral ambiguity grounded in both his ordinariness and social ills.

3. The Deconstructed Femme Fatale as Both Victim and Agent in a Profit-Driven Consumer Society

As noted, the femme fatale, one of noir’s most common character types, generally refers to the central female character who leads men to danger. Although the femme fatale’s aggressiveness or deadliness varies, it is often believed that this figure’s presence in Hollywood noirish crime films mirrored male anxiety triggered by women’s changing roles in postwar society (Grossman 2009). As a cinematic incarnation of independent women working outside their home during and following World War II, the femme fatale reflects patriarchal society’s fear that these women may threaten male authority (Place 1998). Hence, in most cases, the femme fatale is punished or killed in the movies (Place 1998; Doane 1991). In existing scholarship, “male theories” on the femme fatale often foreground her danger to men as a male destroyer, while feminist readings tend to affirm her strength, activity, and ambition.⁵ These two dominant lines of viewpoints

strengthen the formulaic presence of the femme fatale as shaped by movies such as *Double Indemnity*. Based on James Damico (2001)'s proposal of a narrative structure paradigm for Hollywood noirish films made from 1944 to 1949, the central female figure's presence can be summarized in terms of her attraction to the noir hero, the hero's subsequent ignoble acts to gratify her desire, the heroine's later betrayal of this man, and her own literal or metaphorical destruction.

In a departure from this simplistic and formulaic portrayal, *BCTI* invites a more comprehensive understanding of the heroine, the laundry worker Wu, by complicating her presence as a formulaic femme fatale known for her destructive power. Desiring sexual freedom and dating other men after Liang becomes a "living dead," Wu seemingly betrays her husband, who sacrifices his career and identity for her. Accordingly, Liang exercises control over her as noir's proprietorial figure and murders all her suitors. One may assume that Wu's sexuality and desire cause destructive damage to men and threaten patriarchy. On the other hand, the movie never presents her as an ungovernable and sexually powerful woman dominant in the (sexual) relationship with her husband and lovers. She is consistently trapped in these relationships and victimized by various male control and desire.

First, Wu is afflicted by a suffocating, male-dominated work environment physically and mentally. The audience's first view of Wu is her long, lovely legs, half-masked by a curtain and later surrounded by a cop's legs. As the medium close-up is cut to a long shot that shows Wu surrounded and investigated, the movie reveals the crowded environment of the dry cleaners: a string of clothes fills the upper right part of the frame, making it hard for people to sit without lowering their heads. The series of shots does not aim at directing the audience's gaze toward Wu's sexuality as how the Hollywood noirish predecessors frame the femme fatale⁶ but at revealing her workplace as claustrophobic and overwhelming just like Liang's. Furthermore, Wu's feeling of oppression is enhanced by the sexual harassment from her boss, who blatantly caresses her despite her repulsion. Wu's self-defense injures her fingers, which gives Zhang a chance to win her over by buying her the medical essentials and inviting her to skate afterward. Rather than manipulating men for her own good like the iconic femme fatale, Wu is persistently subjected to male demand for sex and phallic power.

Wu also falls victim to nightclub boss Li Lianqing, who rapes her in retaliation for an expensive coat she inadvertently ruined. Placing Wu's victimization in the local socio-economic context, one may nonetheless argue that the fallout of the tumultuous transition to market economy—escalating social disparities and the prevalence of capitalist logic in consumer society—remains at the core of Wu's misfortune. The reform-era state construed consumption and private entrepreneurship as a chief driving force for economic growth in the 1980s (Davis 2000). These state-sanctioned neoliberal-influenced practices gave rise to a highly stratified, money-oriented consumer society (Croll 2006). Meanwhile, as the state granted market principles a central role in commercial activities and loosened its control of everyday sociability (Davis 2000), the logic of a market economy infiltrated the social fabric, commodifying individuals' conduct and social relations (Croll 2006). Bringing nearly all human actions into the highly uneven market domain, the capitalist logic of market exchange replaced the moral codes and ethics under the former leader Mao Zedong (Harvey 2005) and became the new ethics in the reform era.

Wu's victimization lays bare how the social ills brought by market economy work together to commodify and disempower the poor. Liang feels castrated when Li demands sex from Wu as compensation for the ruined coat. As a private entrepreneur (*getihu*), Li benefits from new state ideologies such as "to get rich is glorious" (*fuyu guangrong*), which proclaims the legitimacy of moneymaking activities through private entrepreneurship (Ong and Zhang 2011, p. 14). In a consumer society targeted at people's newly unleashed hedonistic desire, entertainment for pleasure quickly became one of the most lucrative industries in contrast to the decaying SOEs (Zhang 2010). A widening chasm between the rich and the poor arose and is manifested in people's distinct consumption capacities. While Li can lavish over 20,000 yuan on a leather coat, its price is astronomical for Liang

and Wu. Li's demand for sex as payment for the coat also reflects how the capitalist logic embedded in commodities informs people's mindsets. In Marxist theories, once products of labor enter the markets, their overarching exchange value represented by the "universal equivalent"—money, determines the transaction of goods and obliterates the use value (Marx 1982, vol. 1, pp. 176–82). For Li, although the coat can still be used for warmth, the blemish on the 28,000-worth leather coat suggests its depreciation. With the logic of market exchange in mind and no pity for the poor, Li nullifies Wu's will and demands that she "sell" her body in exchange for the compensation money. Wu is thus reduced to a mere commodity for the economically empowered Li to consume. Liang, who has long abandoned the idea of seeking justice in law and asking the government for help, feels emasculated at Li's unreasonable demand. When the desperate Wu protests and accidentally kills Li, Liang can only switch his identity with Li to cover up the crime, and thereafter becomes an abject "living dead."

Liang's failing masculinity, which manifests itself both socioeconomically and sexually—as these two are interconnected—is more responsible for the homicide of Wu's two suitors than her extramarital affairs. Due, in part, to Liang's impaired manhood and in part to the dissolution of conventional morality in the consumer culture milieu, Wu craves freedom from her moral responsibility as Liang's wife and a more virile (and perhaps more economically powerful) partner. On the surface, it is Wu's desire for freedom that threatens Liang and provokes him to eliminate his antagonists. Nevertheless, as Gaylyn Studlar (2013) asserts, male loss of control and power in film noir is not constructed solely in relation to a beautiful woman who may be the *femme fatale*. Doomed male protagonists' conscious choices and deep-seated compulsions, which may be related to certain class issues, also account for their failed masculinity (Studlar 2013). One should not forget that Wu's suitors are both businessmen who once worked in SOEs. Their career prospects and potential to be in the middle-class contrast sharply with Liang's stagnant mobility and impossibility of returning to normal life. Liang's frustration and anxiety about his impotence in both socioeconomic and sexual senses mutate into a perverted desire to slice Wu's suitors with the blades of a pair of ice skates, a phallic object he always carries around to compensate for his thwarted manhood. Wu's sexuality and desire serve only as the catalyst for the homicide, which is based more on socioeconomic factors than male/female relations.

If one follows Frank Krutnik (1991)'s categorization of male heroes in three subdivisions of noir crime thrillers (this is not suggesting that it is an overarching model for examining masculinity in film noir), the ex-cop Zhang may fall somewhere in between the first and the second group, namely the hard-boiled detective-type guy with the mission to restore order and the non-detective, less potent hero of male suspense thrillers aiming to restore himself to a secure position. In the opening of the movie, he is clearly depicted in a marked situation of predicaments that evoke the second type. After unwillingly divorcing his wife, he faces a job-related crisis that comes in conjunction with his domestic struggle: a violent confrontation with two suspects amid the investigation of Wu's case causes the death of his two colleagues and his hospitalization. Five years later, he is shown in a long take that delineates his transformation from a cop recuperating from his injury to a drunk slumping on one side of the road, gesturing toward the state of masculine defeatism and inertia. A chance encounter with his former colleague leads him to a series of murders closely connected with Wu, which arouses his interest and sets off on his journey to redeem his masculinity. The film quickly switches gears: Zhang not only plays a leading, active role throughout the investigation but also proves his masculine professionalism in withstanding the threat posed by Liang and the problematized *femme fatale* Wu's lure. In marked contrast to his previous passivity, Zhang becomes the one that takes the initiative in seducing Wu for information and sex, whereas Wu's seduction only begins when Zhang finds out about her "guilty" past.

Nevertheless, Zhang and Wu's relationship goes far beyond the dichotomy between seducer and prey or the conqueror and the conquest. Informed by the market exchange logic and neoliberal-influenced activities, it is laced with calculation, self-advancement,

and utility, despite not being completely devoid of sympathy and guilt. As the counterpoint to Liang, Zhang is single and virile, and his new identity as an ex-cop allows him to act more freely than his cop friends since he is not constrained by any discipline or obligations. In approaching Wu for possible leads, Zhang uses his masculine prowess to win Wu's trust. He helps her get rid of a customer by beating the latter more violently than necessary to buy time for Wu to treat her finger wound. He then gets the chance to seduce her, seeing her as the channel to release his sexual energy and acquire more information about the murder cases. When advised not to interfere in Wu's case, Zhang tells his cop friend that he has to find something to do to "lose more slowly, if he cannot be a winner in life," a seemingly self-effacing line that reveals his purpose to reinvent himself by resolving the murder case. As Zhang never mentions his commitment to bringing order back to the community, one may assume that his yearning for self-reinvention and sexual fulfillment outweighs his other goals. To Wu, Zhang fills the void left by Liang's troubled masculinity, so she can also profit from this relationship. Once the victim of the capitalist logic of market exchange, she uses it to negotiate with Zhang to escape from Liang's control and the punishment for a crime of which she was found guilty.

Their exchange of sex, information, and hidden agendas and attempts to exercise control over the other is in constant flux, as encapsulated during their car conversation and their date on the Ferris wheel. When talking to Zhang in the cops' car, Wu weaves a web of reality and lies to make Liang the fall guy for Li's murder. Her face is partially lit by the phantasmagorical neon lights from the street, and the remarkable play of light and shadows coincides with the vicissitudes of her reactions, emanating a sense of uncertain fluidity. After identifying Wu as a solid suspect in Li's death, Zhang takes Wu to a Ferris wheel where the Daylight Fireworks Club—the place Li previously owned—can be seen from a distance. Zhang and Wu's unsettling positions and the unsteady movement of the wheel betray what should be regarded as a rendezvous for lovers, alluding to the characters' precarious relationship mainly sustained by their shared interest. Zhang then leads Wu to see the sign of the club and asks her to be more "active," a pun that points to her passivity in confessing to her "wrongdoing" and engaging in a new (sexual) relationship with Zhang. Realizing that Zhang may discover her sordid past, Wu kisses Zhang to trade sex for his commitment to keeping her secret. Although her attempt turns futile as Zhang ultimately spills the beans, she is by no means a loser in their relationship. In the concluding scene where Wu is on her way to be taken back to the police station, Zhang sets off fireworks on the rooftop of a nearby building to see her off. A reminder to Wu that Zhang remembers everything between them (the fireworks evoke the club's name) and does so out of the more feminine emotion—compassion and guilt, Wu smiles as if she has manipulated a man and derailed him from being a tough and undivided seeker hero for a short time.

In so doing, the film deconstructs the Hollywood noirish predecessors' formulaic portrayal of the femme fatale by eliciting a more nuanced and sympathetic reading of the noir heroine backed by her complex experience and fluid identity. Contrary to the James Cain-influenced misogynistic image of the femme fatale, who often wields guns at the males at a critical moment to force them to bend to their goals, Wu is a tragic protester forced to use knives to end a wealthy man's endless demands for sex. However, her victimization is less an implication of the toxic patriarchal culture than a ramification of the socioeconomic reforms in post-Mao China. She falls prey to the twin forces of social disparities and the overwhelming capitalist logic in consumer society, exemplifying how the socioeconomic context shapes her experience and proves to be a more productive tool to illuminate her presence in the film. Through following the capitalist logic and negotiating with Zhang, she shifts from a victim of the social malaise to an agent in the profit-driven consumer society. Despite her failure to swap sex for Zhang's silence about her accidental killing, she provokes tender emotions from Zhang and seems to wrest back some control of a heterosexual relationship. Paradoxically, she subverts her previous presence as a tragic victim

and restores some agency associated with the preconceived femme fatale as a manipulative and competent figure.

4. Conflating Chiaroscuro with Color Lighting

Aesthetically, chiaroscuro lighting, which favors the high contrast of intense light and deep shadows, is another staple of the noir formula. It is introduced largely by German expatriate filmmakers including Otto Preminger, director of the landmark noirish film *Laura* (1944). Close to the final murder scene in *Laura*, expressionist lighting renders the morally ambiguous killer Waldo Lydecker's shadow long and crisp on the staircase wall, revealing a murderous and envious self that threatens to engulf both Lydecker and—as he suddenly stops and looks back—the crown of his life that must be destroyed if no longer possessed—Laura. The following section describes how *BCTI* attenuates the German stylization of elaborate shadows, as illustrated by *Laura*, while employing alternating color lighting and shadow to connote uncertainties in the narrative. Moving beyond the case of *BCTI* to encompass more recent Chinese noirish crime films, this section posits that the latter demonstrates more polyvalent reinventions of the aesthetic property of the noir formula. Not only does color lighting persist in these recent noirish crime films to enhance moods and ambience, but it also works in tandem with chiaroscuro to cement themes and characterization, deviating from Kathrina Glitre (2009)'s claim about the rare presence of chiaroscuro in noirish crime films from the 1960s onward.

Refraining from using the German stylization of elaborate shadows, *BCTI* retains only low-key lighting, a prerequisite of the Expressionist aesthetic, to indicate moments of intimacy and its precariousness. In particular, the scene in which Wu leads Zhang to a low-lit passage on their first date suggests illicit sexuality interwoven with danger lurking in the shadows. As Zhang tries to grasp Wu's hand and accidentally causes both of them to slip on the ice, he seizes the chance to kiss her, which is disrupted shortly by a cop who tails them. The elimination of artificial fill light throws the two characters in shade, implying, on one level, the clandestine relationship to which Wu acquiesces, and on another level, impending danger from Liang, who also hides in the dark and shows up in the next scene to annihilate Zhang.

In addition to using the mitigated low-key lighting effect, *BCTI* also recasts the noir formula by adorning the film's visual tapestry with alternating color lighting and shadow in a less stylized fashion. In the aforementioned conversation scene in a car, reddish back light from a restaurant nearby sets the tone for the whole sequence smacking of deception and betrayal, while the other colored lights intermittently illuminate Zhang and Wu's faces. As Zhang slowly reveals his true intention to approach Wu, and Wu, in responding to Zhang's questioning, tells half-fabricated stories to exculpate herself, complementary yellow and blue light alternately suffuse their faces, hinting at almost every subtle emotional change and the uncertainties inherent in the double-cross. One may also notice the use of color contrast in lighting, which differentiates the scenes featuring Wu and Zhang from those involving Liang. While the former are often associated with warmer colors that signify danger and passion, greenish and beige lights infuse Wu and Liang's dingy apartment to connote their souring marriage.

A more recent feature, *The Wild Goose Lake* (南方车站的聚会, 2019, hereafter *TWGL*), directed by Diao, alters the noir formula one step further by conflating color lighting with chiaroscuro. In "Under the Neon Rainbow: Color and Neo-Noir", Kathrina Glitre (2009, pp. 20–21) posits that "the kind of complex, layered chiaroscuro effect" is rarely seen in noirish crime films produced in the 1960s and onward (which she refers to as "neo-noir"), whereas color lighting has since become mainstream and "shape a different moral universe". Glitre's claim certainly holds true in some cases; nevertheless, *TWGL* and several other Chinese noirish features belie it by combining color lighting with no less prominent use of chiaroscuro. *TWGL* chronicles how the fugitive cop killer Zhou Zenong seeks ways to find his estranged wife so she can turn him in for the huge bounty on his head. Zhou's doomed fate springs from a brawl in which one of his henchmen wounds a rival gang mem-

ber with a gun. In the shots that delineate Zhou's gang's meeting after the brawl, magenta light fills the whole frame and lends a sense of hyper-reality to the city Wuhan, where guns are readily attainable for ruthless self-interest. The neon light, which evenly washes over every gang member's body and face, also foreshadows imminent danger and a sense of fatality indiscriminately imposed on the thugs.

The movie's narrative, however, refutes this earlier mood of doom by highlighting the agency of the existential "non-heroic" hero Zhou, which is evinced figuratively through Expressionist shadows. When he learns that his life is worth 300,000 yuan, Zhou decides to make his capture more meaningful by getting his wife to report him to the police and claim this reward. In doing so, Zhou qualifies as what Robert Porfirio (2001, pp. 83–87) terms an existential "non-heroic" hero who chooses "being" —not succumbing to a malevolent fate but creating his own values in a morally decadent world—in preference to "nothingness" and nihilism. After losing his friends in confrontations with the police, Zhou kills a man who has raped Liu Aiai, the alleged femme fatale who has assisted and imperiled him for a share of the bounty, largely out of sympathy and the realization that she is the only one left to help him accomplish his goal. As Liu, panic stricken, rises to uncover the killer, a yellow streetlight casts Zhou's shadow deep on the wall and right behind her, intimating Zhou's agency as he chooses to live by his morals and mete out justice for her, rather than being imprisoned by his sealed fate and society's prescribed rules. The images of Zhou's shadow and Liu's head superimposed to the point of being barely differentiable alludes to their intertwined fates, as they rely on each other to break free from their existential dilemmas.⁷ Zhou's existential choice to cast aside the constraints of fate and exercise what he believes to be morally right is reciprocated by Liu's help in fulfilling his wish posthumously, while Liu gets a share of the bounty to cast off her ignoble past. Unlike those in *Laura* that make a person's evil self surface, the chiaroscuro shadows in *TWGL* help express agency and individuality.

The wash of colored light across a large space figures prominently in another recent noirish feature *Are You Lonesome Tonight?* (热带往事, 2021, hereafter *AYLT*) to accentuate the existential moods of fear, anxiety, and alienation. The movie tells of a hit-and-run driver, Wang Xueming, who struggles with confessing to his deeds. Red light floods the crash scene and returns to haunt him when the insomniac Wang thrusts himself into a street brawl to assuage his fear of being captured. Aside from portending violence and underscoring dread, red light soaks Wang and his girlfriend in their post-coital scene to undercut a sense of intimacy and security as Wang refuses to tell her what happened to him. The use of recurring red light culminates in the last murderous hunt between Zhou and his antagonist to intensify alienation, anxiety, and loss of control.

In *AYLT*, chiaroscuro comes to the aid of color lighting to underscore the protagonist's fight against his darker and repressed self, concretized through shadows and mirror reflections. The first fragmented mirror image appears after Wang runs over the victim and drags the corpse into the weeds. The double images of his face reflected on the broken mirror represent a splitting of selves, namely, the coexistence of an evil self—the doppelgänger—and a finer and more innocent one. Building upon Sigmund Freud's conception of the human psyche, Mladen Dolar (1991, p. 12) theorizes the double as "constitut[ing] the essential part of the ego; ... carries out the repressed desires of the id; and ... with a malevolence typical of the superego, prevents the subject from carrying out his desires—all at the same time." The doppelgänger, once conjured up through the mirror image, forces the hero to confront his guilt and fear—as one finds Wang subject to pathological self-harm to vent his emotion—and propels him to approach the victim's widow, instead of the police, for confession and atonement. It finally looms large as the shadow of a killer that looks just like his in the scene preceding the showdown between Wang and the killer. As Wang counter-stalks the killer from outside the building where he lives, high-contrast back lighting renders the killer's shadow and Wang's own strikingly alike, as if Wang is wrestling with his doppelgänger. The moment Wang defeats the killer by striking

him, it is as if his evil self has also been extinguished, which enables him to stave off his repressed concerns and fears and face arrest.

5. Conclusions

Through examining *BCTI*'s narrative and visual representation in comparison with the noir formula's conventional portrayal and situating *BCTI* in the Chinese socioeconomic context, this essay opens up existing approaches of studying Chinese noirish films that center on the movies' social critique to the underexplored arenas of characterization and aesthetics. In light of the depiction of the morally ambiguous killer, *BCTI* reveals this character as a despondent state worker by foregrounding his suffocating work environment and imbuing him with a moral ambiguity rooted more in socioeconomic disparities than elsewhere. He is not only an "average guy" who loves his wife, as in some cases of the Hollywood noirish predecessors, but also the product of brutal social realities. In a similar attempt to articulate local concerns, the movie deconstructs the central female figure's alleged presence as a femme fatale by reorienting the audience's attention to her complex experience beyond seducing and imperiling men. Expanding the focus from narrative to visual registers, the essay also examines *BCTI*'s mitigation of the stylized Expressionist shadows by using alternating color lighting to hint at the uncertainties in the characters' double-crossing of each other. A further discussion of the more recent Chinese noirish crime films' visual reinvention of the noir formula brings into relief the former's innovative coupling of the stylized chiaroscuro with color lighting, initially deemed as rarely seen in noirish films from the 1960s onward. While in *TWGL*, Expressionist shadows symbolize the existential "non-heroic" hero's agency, those in *AYLT* work in unison with color lighting to reify the protagonist's fight with his doppelgänger. At this stage, it might be too early to postulate a Chinese specificity in film noir, as this notion is still undergoing evolution. However, based on the examples discussed in this essay, suffice it to say that these movies all utilize color lighting to highlight various thematic concerns not limited to social criticism while in line with the portrayal of morally ambiguous characters rooted in the Chinese context.

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Notes

¹ See, for example, Naremore (2008, p. 13).

² See, for example, Zeng (2013) and Lovatt (2015).

³ Here, I limit the scope of the subject matter of this essay to Chinese noirish crime films made in the People's Republic of China.

⁴ In 1968, Chinese former president Mao Zedong mandated that urban youth be sent to the countryside to contend with problems posed by the widening urban-rural gap. See Honig and Zhao (2019).

⁵ See, for example, Kaplan (1998).

⁶ See Place (1998) on how the iconography and visual style of Hollywood noir predecessors conveys the femme fatale's sexual power and its danger to the male characters.

⁷ Liu is a prostitute who, albeit not explicitly shown in the movie, desires freedom from her current identity.

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