

Article

Hollywood Genre, Cultural Hybridity, and Musical Films in 1950s Hong Kong

Xiao Lu 

School of Cultural Technology, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Suzhou 215123, China; xiao.lu@xjtlu.edu.cn

Abstract: Following the trauma of the Second World War, Hong Kong, under British governance, enjoyed considerable economic and political freedom to establish a local entertainment industry. Musical films became a major genre of Hong Kong's film releases in the 1950s. Local melodramas, Hollywood musicals, celebrities, and ideals of female beauty were all present in the growth of Hong Kong musical films, which culminated in a glorious display of cinematic art. This article aims to provide insight into the popularity of Chinese-speaking musical films by examining the social, economic, and political complexity of 1950s Hong Kong, including post-war migration and colonial censorship. An in-depth analysis of Li Han-Hsiang's *The Kingdom and the Beauty* demonstrates how Hong Kong studios adapted the Hollywood musical to tell Chinese stories and how Hong Kong musical films incorporated Chinese literature and music to represent cultural memory, local identity, and modern aesthetics. This case study sheds light on the localization of a Hollywood genre and the hybridization of Chinese and Western entertainment forms to appeal to a Chinese audience, thereby broadening the definition of cultural hybridity and informing the practice of Hong Kong's musical filmmaking.

Keywords: cultural hybridity; Hollywood musical; Hong Kong film; Chinese cinema; *The Kingdom and the Beauty*



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1. Introduction

Since the early 20th century, musical films have become a popular genre in Hollywood productions and have acquired appeal in a variety of new continents and regions, including Asia, Africa, and Latin America, making the musical a border-crossing genre in the global film industry (Kessler 2010; Chen 2022). As an increasing number of live performances transitioned from the stages of Broadway to the Hollywood screen, Hollywood filmmakers saw the potential of musicals as a commercial genre that could be transformed to generate box office revenue in film productions (Lundskær-Nielsen 2008; Oja 2009). *Roberta* (1935), *On the Town* (1949), *Oklahoma!* (1955), and *The Sound of Music* (1965), among other stage-to-screen musical adaptations, reinforced the musical genre as a diverse and adaptable form of creation, and a way of communal and personal expression in everyday life (Broomfield-McHugh 2019). Music, song, and dance are essential ingredients in Hollywood musicals, which combine numerous traditions, forms, and styles in terms of entertainment approaches and aesthetic expressions (Neale 2005). The musical genre appears skilled in evoking audience members' sensation, kinaesthetic emotion, and engagement both on stage and on screen.

The adaptation of musical theatre for the big screen was not limited to Hollywood productions. The number of Chinese-speaking musical films made by Hong Kong studios increased dramatically in the 1950s and 1960s after sound film technology was imported to China in the 1930s (Jones 2020). In order to satisfy the varied interests of Chinese audiences from various countries and regions, Hong Kong, a city where the East and the West meet, emerged as a new hub in Asia for the production and consumption of musical films. The Hong Kong film sector tended to achieve the cultural diversity of filmmaking by

integrating various art forms, entertainment components, and cultural criticism into one piece of cinematic work. The musical genre serves as a relevant representation of historical memory, urban identity, and modern aesthetics in a local context during the post-war reconstruction. Similar to Hollywood musicals, Hong Kong musical films are characterized by singing and dancing and commonly adopt Chinese folklore and fictional short stories in practice (Mackerras 2008; Li 2002). Since 1950, musical films, literally meaning *yinyueju dianying* in Chinese, have borrowed music, songs, costumes, and storylines from a variety of traditional Chinese theatres. *Huang Mei Diao* (“yellow-plum-melody”) was one of the most popular musical styles used by Hong Kong film studios, which had an enduring influence on Hong Kong productions in the 1950s, with them capable of representing the distinctive features of Hong Kong film culture (Ng and Kwong 2018; Hong Kong Film Archive 2019). Chinese stories were used in Hong Kong musical films, such as *Red Bloom in the Snow* (1956), *Love Without End* (1961), and *The Blue and the Black* (1964) to retell familiar stories and new moral issues on screen. *Mambo Girl* (1957) and *Calendar Girl* (1959) are also a good example of Hong Kong musical films adopting the Hollywood musical genre to iterate stories about Chinese modern, urban life during the post-war era.

The concept of “musical” in Chinese film studies remains unclear and contentious and is frequently intertwined with the concept of “opera” in film genre studies (Law 2014; Gao and Yang 2021). Despite the immense popularity of Hong Kong musical films both domestically and internationally, there has been limited research on the subject of the musical genre in Hong Kong films (Petty 2018). Therefore, it is essential to examine the genre, story, music, and production system of Hong Kong musical films from a socio-cultural and socio-political perspective. This article will analyze *The Kingdom and the Beauty* (1959), directed by Li Han-Hsiang (1926–1996), to explore how Hong Kong studios utilized the Hollywood musical genre to depict Chinese stories in the productions of the 1950s. Additionally, the article will examine the ways in which Hong Kong musical films’ adaptations of Chinese literature and music reflect historical memory, local identity, and modern aesthetics. Based on the theory of cultural hybridity, this article aims to shed light on the production of Hong Kong musical films in the post-war era and how they reflect the cultural exchange between Chinese and Western cultures.

2. Cultural Hybridity and Hong Kong Musical Films

Young (2005) posited hybridity as an indistinguishable amalgamation of two distinct elements. His depiction highlighted the impact of hybridity on cultural production evolved from a biological term to encompass various cross-cultural phenomena in the fields of arts, media, and popular culture. The concept of hybridity was applied in response to the exchange of cultural products that occurred when Western cultural products flooded into colonial territories in the 20th century (Moore-Gilbert 1997; Saha 2018). This exchange inspired the emergence of hybrid genres, forms, and styles of cultural production in colonial territories, reflective of indigenous performance and multiple cultural resources. The hybrid nature of cultural products was a result of the postcolonial representation of intercultural exchange, in which Western colonizers attempted to entertain themselves by bringing Western entertainment to their expatriate communities (Kraus 1989; Liu 2013). Additional discussions have led to the argument that hybridity is the simultaneous joining and breaking of two different things (Young 2005; Werbner and Moddod 2015; Lee and Kolluri 2016). In this sense, hybridity refers to the process of embracing and rejecting various cultural resources that may be more beneficial to the artistic endeavors of cultural producers. However, cultural hybridity challenged diasporic artists, writers, filmmakers, and intellectuals to develop fresh hybrid selves as a means of re-examining issues with representation, cultural identity, and national affiliation in practice (Joseph and Fink 1999). In the realm of film and cultural studies, numerous academics have engaged with the theory of cultural hybridity to look at the artistic creation, representation, and cultural identity of Third World Cinema in the post-colonial discourse (Hall 1989; Gilroy 1993; Shohat and Stam 1994; Kolar-Panov 1996; Marchetti 1998; Wang and Yeh 2007; Prysthon 2016; Fan 2019).

Hybridity is thus a term used to describe the development of new transcultural forms in cultural production as a result of postcolonial migration and the expression of cultural and political diaspora.

An understanding of Hong Kong musical films inevitably involves cultural hybridity for thinking about the complex relations of cultures from the perspective of post-colonial criticism. Homi K Bhabha (1994) referred to hybrids as intercultural brokers in the interstices between nation and empire, producing counter-narratives from the nation's margins to the "totalising boundaries" of the nation. Hong Kong's geo-cultural and geo-political situations decide this place to negotiate nationness, community interests, and cultural values across different races and ethnic groups, fusing their identities as so-called Hong Kong-ers through the aesthetic forms of diverse cultures (Marchetti and Tan 2007; Gates and Funnell 2012). Hong Kong film studios represent a hybrid practice of filmmaking that adopts Hollywood genres, star packaging, and production systems to make local productions in which film narratives, stars, settings, and personnel management closely relate to Chinese aesthetic preferences and cultural psychology. Under the influence of the Hollywood studio system, Hong Kong musical films feature female leads to brand the production and the film studio in a local context. Female stars often show up at various international film festivals and award ceremonies, which quickly helps to build a reputation for the studios.

In engaging with the notion of cultural hybridity, Hong Kong filmmakers integrate local and global popular cultural forms in their productions to express the representation of local sentiment and cultural identities. Cultural hybridization is noted to refer to the mixing of Asian, African, American, and European cultures and the making of global culture as a global *mélange* (Prysthon 2016). As a category, hybridity serves a purpose on the basis of the assumption of a difference between the categories, forms, and beliefs that go into the mixture (Pieterse 1994). Colonial Hong Kong tended to bring different cultures, languages, and values together to produce a new form of culture, which represents a Hong Kong identity through hybrid content, style, and the mixing of tradition and modernity of the West and the East (Pavis 1996; Kraidy 2005). As García-Canclini (1992, p. 207) pointed out, "hybridisation is the breakup and mixing of the collections that are used to organise cultural systems, the deterritorialisation of symbolic processes, and the expansion of impure genres". Hong Kong films have extensive employment of hybrid art forms, which indicates an irresistible result of modernization and globalization in local filmmaking practices. Its hybridization strategy reinforces the localization of Hollywood-style musical films to negotiate multicultural identities and transnational differences in Hong Kong society, which quickly transforms the musical genre into a local context conveying unique features and styles through cinematic expression.

Young (2005) continued to argue that hybridity transforms difference into sameness and sameness into difference but does so in a way that changes what it means for something to be different. The hybrid practices that early 20th century film productions used to appropriate Chinese and Western entertainment forms, content, and values appear to be present in Hong Kong musical films (Wang 2020). A substantial confluence of Western popular singing and dancing genres, such as jazz and the cha-cha-cha, appears to be present in one group of Hong Kong musical films that reflects middle-class lifestyles and current social challenges (Fan 2013). *Mambo Girl* (1957) and *The Wild, Wild Rose* (1960) by Grace Chang show how Western pop music and dance may be used to depict modern Chinese life in a metropolitan area. The other group of Hong Kong musical films from this time period, such as *It Blossoms Again* (1954), *Diau Charn* (1958), and *The Kingdom and the Beauty* (1959), emphasizes the use of dialogue and music for narratives and character development while heavily incorporating Chinese operatic elements into the music, characters, and stories. These productions use Chinese music, songs, and classic stories to offer nostalgic and innovative experiences to Chinese audiences throughout the world. They also showcase a musical sequence that is truly cinematic, featuring a melody moving from character to character in a way that is appropriate for the presentation of cinematic art.

The discussion of Hong Kong musical film strands has demonstrated the principle of aesthetic connection that occurs, from kitsch to high culture, from Western culture to Chinese convention and addresses the construction of identity in a context of ontological uncertainty. Hong Kong musical film is considered a culturally hybridized form produced under the colonial conditions of urbanized China. As Stuart Hall (1989, p. 69) suggested, “Our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history”. The Hong Kong film industry has played a fundamental role in the localization, production, and dissemination of Hollywood-style musical films in the Chinese-speaking world, which have cultivated a local Hong Kong consciousness among local and overseas Chinese (Li 2008). Hong Kong musical films combine different cultures, languages, singing, and dancing styles from the East and the West to make an audience-facing cinematic output. After the Second World War, the post-colonial struggle in Hong Kong was crucial for reconstructing people’s social and cultural life. Filmmakers attempted to remake Hollywood musicals that could be novel for most Chinese audiences and quickly recall a collective memory by familiar history, narratives, and melodies.

3. The Rise of Musical Films in 1950s Hong Kong

Since the 1910s, Shanghai has played a pivotal role in the establishment and development of the Chinese film industry, with prominent Chinese film studios such as Mingxing, Lianhua, and Tianyi producing numerous classic films that have captured the hearts of Chinese-speaking audiences (Fu 2003). Shanghai was even dubbed the “Hollywood of the East” during this period, with over 100 film productions and approximately 250 movie theatres in operation in the 1930s (Zhu and Nakajima 2010; Yao et al. 2013). Chinese and Western businessmen invested in and developed a large number of cinemas in Shanghai as a key location for the city’s social and cultural life. The Japanese invasion and occupation of Shanghai in 1937, however, severely hampered the development of the Chinese cinema industry, and numerous film studios were forced to close or relocate throughout the war. Hong Kong was a relatively safe place for film companies to relocate their employees, technologies, capital, production style, and ideology to gear up their enterprises. Up until 1949, numerous immigrants left Mainland China with no choice but to seek refuge from the civil war, starvation, and subsequent social and political upheavals. According to statistics, by 1951, over 70,000 people had migrated from Mainland China to Hong Kong (Madokoro 2015).

Since 1945, a considerable number of intellectuals and businesspeople have relocated to Hong Kong from Mainland China to escape war and political unrest (Ngo and Li 2016). This essentially attracted a large number of talents, investments, and media technologies to Hong Kong for local cultural development. Cultural elites and practitioners including Grace Chang, Linda Lin Dai, Li Jun Qing, Wang Chun, and Li Han-Hsiang moved to Hong Kong during this migration wave. Their life experiences and refugee mentality expanded their careers in the 1950s Hong Kong film industry to showcase Chinese history, literary works, and traditional acting techniques on screen. The presentation of leading actors and actresses was infused with the meaning of Chinese culture to act in Chinese-speaking works (Chang 2019). For example, Grace Chang was born in Nanjing and raised in Shanghai where she was trained as a Peking Opera artist before moving to Hong Kong with her family. Similar to Grace Chang, Linda Lin Dai emigrated to Hong Kong in 1949 and she received acting training in Japan and the United States during her time in Hong Kong film studios. These female images were advertised as the “beauties” of cultural ideals in the Hong Kong film industry, and their cinematic performances demonstrated their proficiency in musical genre acting and “stars’ cosmopolitan skills” (Hu 2010, p. 186).

Following Chairman Mao’s dictum that “culture should serve politics”, the film industry in Mainland China quickly mimicked Soviet-style production and operation to spread Communist Party ideologies after the foundation of the People’s Republic of

China in 1949 (Zhu 2022). The filmmaking process frequently followed the Communist Party administration model, which emphasized state ownership, centralized planning, and public production subsidies (Zhu and Rosen 2010). The majority of productions featured ideological backdrops and propaganda to reflect the social conditions of a new China, and subjects included the Chinese class struggle, the anti-Japanese war, and the civil war to highlight the Communist Party's significant triumphs (Johnston 2010). In contrast to Mainland China, Hong Kong served as a colonial location for supporters of various political ideologies and cultural fusion to establish a base for producing commercial motion pictures in a variety of languages and dialects. Hong Kong took over from Shanghai as the new powerhouse of Chinese cinema, redefining its reputation as the "Hollywood of the East" throughout the Chinese-speaking world. In common with Shanghai, Hong Kong has been at the vanguard of bridging the West and the East to reflect China's urbanization and modernization in every aspect of people's economic, social, and cultural lives since the 20th century. The ethos of modern cities has been greatly affected by Western culture and civilization in both Shanghai and Hong Kong.

In the 1950s, the Hong Kong film industry prospered with a high rate of production, achieving output of over 200 film productions annually in response to the growing need for urban entertainment (Zhang 1999; Zhu 2006). This high output demonstrated how the film industry evolved from a local film culture to a global entertainment sector, but the market tended to be competitive due to the large number of film studios and production companies based in Hong Kong. In particular, Chinese opera adaptations and song-and-dance films frequently brought in the highest box office revenues in the early and middle decades of the 20th century (Ng 2008; Chen 2022). This can be attributed to the popularity of opera in Chinese people's entertainment life. According to Berry and Farquhar (2006), Chinese films employed opera to feature cultural identities and shared meanings to expand their audience members and market share. The influence of Hollywood inspired the production of Hong Kong musical films characterized by different traditions, forms, and styles. The musical genre, however, differs from the opera genre in Chinese cinema because it initially appeared in the semi-colonial Shanghai enclave in the 1930s as an imported, hybrid, and modern entertainment form for Chinese audiences (Li 2008). Hence, the musical has evolved into a generic term to denote a variety of performance forms featuring music, song, and dance components. The Hollywood term "musical genre" is essential for the post-production, distribution, and promotion of the film, and, in a broader sense, it represents a style of filmmaking that has been used by Hong Kong studios and filmmakers to brand their works by a globally recognized genre, aiming to appeal to a transnational audience.

Hong Kong witnessed a confluence of political and ideological conflicts in the 1950s. In the years following the end of the Second World War, socio-political complexity that was intertwined with the Cold War, industrialization, colonial governance, and nationalism had an impact on Hong Kong's culture and society, driving the local population to seek out means of quickly re-establishing a new normal life and emotional belonging in a multicultural society. Under the British administration, Hong Kong enjoyed tremendous economic, political, and creative flexibility to grow a local entertainment industry, accompanying the devastation of the two world wars. Films, in particular, developed into a popular form of entertainment in Hong Kong, which sparked an explosion of studios and production firms entering the local film market. Film stars, stories, and cinema venues in Hong Kong typically cater to a wide spectrum of audiences' tastes. During the Cold War, Hong Kong was referred to as a "contact zone" between the East and the West, colonialism and nationalism, and the two. However, the colony turned into a location of turmoil and fluctuating politics where communist and capitalist ideological forces clashed and collided in the 1950s (Chang 2019). Hong Kong's openness to communicate with the West entailed bringing popular transnational genres to local works. The colonial government of Hong Kong expressed caution regarding the screening of films that, in the local context, had developed into ideological weapons controlled by numerous transnational entities (Ng 2008). The British censorship system in colonial Hong Kong also targeted movie images

with violent, political, and sexual themes from Hollywood (Ng 2008). To realize the artistic, innovative, and critical expressions in the context of the Cold War, local filmmakers had to figure out ways to get beyond the film censorship system (Chang 2016). They expertly adapted the ideologies by utilizing the Hollywood storytelling approach and emerging genres to showcase Hong Kong/Chinese culture, including folktales, music, and ethics as well as expressions of patriotism and shared memories for the nation (Teo 2013).

The colonial government described the targeted audiences of Hong Kong films as being “mixed” (Ng 2008). Despite the presence of immigrants and various ethnic and racial communities, the majority of the population in Hong Kong was of Chinese origin, with over 90% of the population being Chinese (Li 2008; Yeh 2023). During the 1950s and 1960s, film studios such as Shaw Brothers and Motion Pictures & General Investment (MP&GI) began to employ the musical genre to brand their studios, outperform their competitors, and package female stars to maintain their audiences (Hu 2010). Hong Kong film studios recognized the benefits of the musical genre, including excellent production standards, carefully constructed stories, and visually and emotionally impressive spectacles (Needham 2010). As a result, they specifically chose the Hollywood-style musical as a more engaging genre to reimagine traditional Chinese theatre through film, which sparked a trend of rival musical films from several studios.

The Shaw Brothers Studio, formerly known as Unique Film Productions (also known as Tianyi Film Company), was one of Shanghai’s first privately operated film companies. The studio successfully pioneered the creation of “epics of unofficial history” and “costume dramas”, enjoying great commercial success by filming several traditional Chinese stories to increase its market share (Ng 2008). The company focused on extracting content from Chinese folklore, anecdotal history, legends, and vernacular stories. As early as 1926, Shanghai-based Unique Film Productions had expanded its film distribution and exhibition business to Southeast Asia and Hong Kong. By 1931, the company controlled and managed a total of 139 theatres in Southeast Asia, but in 1937, it had to terminate all of its production activities in Shanghai and subsequently transferred all of its funds and equipment to Hong Kong due to the outbreak of the Sino–Japanese War, then establishing the Nanyang Film Company to produce films in Singapore (The Long History of Cinema 2023). In 1958, the Shaw Brothers Studio established its filmmaking entity in Hong Kong’s Clear Water Bay, imitating the Hollywood studio model for film production and distribution (Fu 2008). As a result, the Hong Kong film industry was able to quickly recover after the end of the Second World War.

In the 1950s, the Hong Kong film industry released productions in a variety of Chinese languages, including Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka, Amoy, and Teochew dialects, responding to the nostalgia of the Chinese diaspora for a Chinese homeland. The usage of Chinese rural folk singing and songs in particular helped local and diasporic Chinese audiences to feel nostalgic and homesick by listening to familiar songs and tales (Chu 2009). The Shaw Brothers Studio and its renowned film director Li Han-Hsiang decided to create specialized musical films in response to the fierce market competition in light of the enormous potential of the Taiwanese, Southeast Asian, and North American markets (Fu 2008). The Shaw Brothers Studio employed the musical genre to produce movies that included singing, dancing, and acting to appeal to “worldly” audiences seeking a Hollywood-style, high-fashion entertainment experience. *Huang Mei Diao* was specifically transformed by Li Han-Hsiang of the Shaw Brothers Studio to reproduce the Chinese historical costume drama, which enjoyed a distinct financial advantage during that period.

4. Li Han-Hsiang’s *The Kingdom and the Beauty*—A Case Study

Mandarin-speaking films continued to make up a sizable share of Hong Kong’s cinema productions in the 1950s, with the majority of them focusing on viewers in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia (Ng 2008; Yeh 2023). Li Han-Hsiang’s production *The Kingdom and the Beauty*, released in 1959, is one of the most successful Mandarin-speaking

musical films made in Hong Kong and subsequently won awards at the 6th Asia-Pacific Film Festival. It was the first Chinese film ever distributed in Australia and the first Shaw Brothers production to break through in the Western market (Wang 2010). Li Han-Hsiang, a film director, was born and raised in Mainland China before moving to Hong Kong to launch his filmmaking career. In his movies, he typically talks about Chinese gender and romantic relationships to look at the fate of Chinese women in imperial and feudal China (Yau 2010). *The Kingdom and the Beauty* is based on the Peking Opera traditional classic *Wandering Dragon and Playing Phoenix* (You Long Xi Feng), which describes a love story set in the Ming Dynasty when the emperor falls in love with a village girl while on his journey.

The film chronicles the journey of the emperor (portrayed by Zhao Lei), who embarks on a voyage to the Jiangnan region of China. During his travels, he encounters the enchanting village girl, Da Feng (portrayed by Linda Lin Dai), during a springtime procession. After learning that she works at a nearby liquor shop, the emperor decides to visit her. As they spend time together, playing games and conversing in the forest, they develop a mutual attraction. The two young people fall in love, and the emperor vows to wed Da Feng during a night of passion. However, when the emperor returns to the court, he discusses the possibility of marrying Da Feng with his mother, but she disapproves due to Da Feng's lower social class background. This conflict arises due to the power dynamics between different social classes and the tension between romanticism and social morals in Chinese society. In imperial China, marriage-related decisions were made by parents, as it was seen as a morally and ethically sound practice throughout the nation. Da Feng's unfortunate demise is the consequence of her status as the mother of the emperor's illegitimate child. Due to her social standing as a single mother, she is subjected to public humiliation and criticism, which cause her emotional distress and ultimately lead to her illness. When Da Feng's elder brother, Da Niu (played by King Hu), goes to the palace to confront the emperor on her behalf, the emperor is reminded of his earlier romance with Da Feng. He subsequently instructs the minister to retrieve her from the palace. Despite her eagerness to leave, Da Feng has no alternative and is forced to endure the harsh journey. Tragically, she passes away before reaching the palace.

The film's conclusion underscores the director's empathy towards Chinese women who are denied the autonomy to determine their own paths in life and are oppressed by their gender status in the feudal society of China. Li Han-Hsiang adapted the storyline of the Peking Opera to present a joyful resolution, which serves to accentuate the harsh realities faced by a village girl in imperial China. The narrative now centers around Da Feng, a female protagonist who is endeavoring to raise the emperor's child on her own while being condemned by Chinese morality. The aim of the film is to spark reflection on the role of Chinese women in society, particularly in the aftermath of the war, by reinterpreting traditional Chinese stories and examining contemporary moral and class issues. The film achieves this by incorporating elements of Chinese literary classics and music to create a distinctively Chinese romance set in imperial China. As Yang (2022) observes, Chinese film narratives carry a unique responsibility to depict and relate stories of national history, folklore, and social conditions.

The Kingdom and the Beauty is not a typical opera film (*xiqu dianying*), as some scholars have categorized it under the Chinese opera genre (Chen 2006; Teo 2013). The Shaw Brothers Studio utilized the figures of cosmopolitan female and male stars, Linda Lin Dai and Zhao Lei, to suggest that the Hollywood genre was created by Hong Kong studios through star discourse. Li, the director, reworked the themes, acting conventions, and music of Chinese opera with his knowledge of filmmaking, resulting in a new interpretation of the Chinese repertoire classic. Chinese opera films were based on traditional melodies, fixed tunes, and rhythms, with musical notes from instrument players that occasionally varied. Most Chinese opera music was in the hands of performers and instrument players who used considerable improvisational flexibility in singing and playing a traditional set of tunes, without honouring the role of composers (Kraus 1989). Rather than replicating

Chinese opera repertoires in films, Li hired music composers to arrange music, songs, and melodies in *The Kingdom and the Beauty*. His film composer, Wang Chun, portrayed the magnificence of the imperial palace and the cozy life of Jiangnan and created a musical soundscape by combining *Huang Mei Diao* resources and Western musical techniques in the production. The use of *Huang Mei Diao* is a musical technique to recall Chinese audiences' impression of Chinese opera, building cultural connections through a familiar story and songs with the film production.

The processes of cultural hybridization result in a unique viewing experience of Chinese-language musical films that foster dialogue between Hong Kong/China and the West. Hollywood filmmakers have frequently employed genre-mixing techniques to greatly impact the cinematic experience (Staiger 1997). Hong Kong film studios adopted the Hollywood genre formula as a means of producing films that appealed to a Chinese-speaking audience in a cross-cultural context (Schatz 1981). The incorporation of the Hollywood musical genre into Hong Kong cinema facilitated a cross-cultural conversation between local studios and transnational audiences to attain commercial goals. Li Han-Hsiang's mastery of utilizing historical epics, opera scripts, musical genre, and modern thinking as essential resources in his musical films underscored the genuine interest in this genre with enormous potential to combine multiple art forms, genres, and technologies, appealing to both Hong Kong and overseas Chinese communities. The historical costume drama, a genre that originated in Shanghai's film studios, had a particularly significant influence on Hong Kong cinema in terms of genre choices. *The Kingdom and the Beauty* blended the musical and historical genres to satisfy a cinematic aesthetic transformation in the 1950s, aiming to provide comprehensive sensory experiences, collective memory, and modern human values on the screen. The production embodied a hybrid filmmaking practice of Hong Kong's aesthetics, considering various audience preferences and utilizing cultural memory as a selling point to evoke individual audience nostalgia and common identities. Furthermore, the mixed genre was a culturally, aesthetically, and politically conservative option that is likely to pass colonial censorship in cold-war-period Hong Kong for commercial and entertainment purposes. The localization of Hollywood-style musicals exemplified a Hong Kong-specificity of filmmaking that could combine historical, musical, and realistic genres to produce distinctive Hong Kong musical films in the 1950s.

Cultural hybridization was a vital process in *The Kingdom and the Beauty*, as it involved combining various musical elements to create a unique sound style that appealed to audiences. This can be observed in the blending of regional opera songs, such as *Huang Mei Diao*, Western music, and Shanghai-style Mandarin pop songs, to produce new melodies throughout the film. The pronunciation of the *Huang Mei Diao* language was relatively flexible, which was a product of its late origin and maturation during the Second World War. Moreover, cultural policies implemented by the KMT and the Communist Party contributed to the standardization of the vocabulary and expressions of *Huang Mei Diao*, making it easier to learn without dialectal variations (Wang 2015). The melody of *Huang Mei Diao* was inspired by ancient genres, such as Peking Opera and Kunqu Opera, as well as modern arrangement principles and techniques. In the 20th century, *Huang Mei Diao* was significantly influenced by pop music accompanied by Western instruments. One of the film's signature songs, entitled "Fooling Feng (Xi Feng)", which was written by Wang Chun, featured a distinctive style of Mandarin pop music that was associated with the city of Shanghai. This musical genre showcased soft and lyrical melodies, reminiscent of those found in the tracks of *Huang Mei Diao* while emphasizing clear and approachable lyrics that can easily relate to Chinese stories and enhance the plots, characters, and dramatic conflicts of the film. The incorporation of Chinese popular music into the film was akin to how Hollywood musicals blended elements of jazz, rock, and Italian opera to enrich the cinematic experience. Similarly, Li Han-Hsiang adapted the style of *Huang Mei Diao* to create Chinese-speaking musicals that established new film aesthetics and influenced the methods of storytelling and music composition in Hong Kong film productions. Through

the stylized singing and music arrangements in the movie, *Huang Mei Diao* portrayed unique Chinese ethnic music in filmmaking that evoked the audience's shared identities and cultural experiences, drawing them back to Chinese conventions. The incorporation of Mandarin pop songs in Chinese culture signified the societal and political changes that took place, reinventing the traditional and folk style of *Huang Mei Diao* with contemporary musical tastes.

The film *The Kingdom and the Beauty* exemplified the use of communal representations of time, culture, and historical notions in Hong Kong musical films to engage the Chinese population in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and beyond. The film industry in Hong Kong sought to create a fusion of modern and historical conventions to provide a variety of genre experiences for various audiences, while Chinese audiences continued to maintain a strong connection with Chinese culture and history despite the colonial modernity presented in the industry. The film utilized Chinese tales and songs to build a shared memory and reflected the thoughts and emotions of Chinese audiences through historical characters and storylines, conveying the cinematic representation of homeland, memories, and shared cultural meanings during the 1950s. The application and modification of Chinese literature and music served as an implicit and inventive way to affirm national and cultural identity, functioning as a cinematic call of nostalgia for Chinese tradition and an opportunity to examine traditional ethical and moral principles while promoting and mobilizing support for current themes and cultural values.

5. Conclusions

This article has examined the work of film director Li Han-Hsiang and his reinterpretation of historical costume dramas into the Hollywood musical genre in the production of *The Kingdom and the Beauty*. Additionally, it has explored how Hong Kong filmmakers utilized cultural hybridity as a strategic tool for creativity, local studio promotion, and the depiction of a city's modern image through musical films in the 1950s. Cultural hybridization, as defined by [Rowe and Schelling \(1991\)](#), was the process of combining existing practices with new forms to create something unique. Hong Kong's musical films challenged the conventional Hollywood genre by incorporating Chinese cultural elements and reflecting the image of Chineseness in their productions. The majority of these films also downplay political content through the use of vivid colors, hybrid genres, simple music, and engaging stories to promote the cultural and commercial reconstruction of Hong Kong society in the post-war period. The production and consumption of Hong Kong musical films reached its peak in the 1950s due to the contributions of Hong Kong filmmakers, cross-border funding, historical heritage, and Hollywood inspirations, all of which collectively revitalized the Hollywood musical genre in the Chinese-speaking world. Through the medium of film, a diverse population consisting of Southeast Asian diasporas, British colonizers, and Chinese immigrants transformed the musical genre by incorporating local characteristics more closely related to the real life and cultural memory of local people.

The findings of this study indicate the complex portrayal of Hong Kong/Chinese identities in musical films, which fills an important gap in the understanding of musical genres in Hong Kong's film industry and the application of Chinese opera resources to build a collective identity through familiar stories and music for Chinese-speaking audiences. Chinese audiences favored *Huang Mei Diao*-style musical films as their singing and dance, spoken language, and story patterns were strongly tied to the memory of Chinese social and cultural life, albeit the storyline and musical arrangement had been rearranged by the director. The findings also shed light on the localization of Hollywood musicals in Hong Kong films by fusing Chinese opera elements, Western music, and Mandarin pop music as a way of producing and promoting film productions in order to appeal to a Chinese audience's changing taste, emphasizing entertainment value over political and ideological debates in the 1950s Hong Kong film industry.

Hong Kong musical films have demonstrated the ability to transcend cultural boundaries by integrating two distinct styles, resulting in a unique cinematic experience that blends Chinese and Western cultures as a transformative practice of Hong Kong filmmaking (Bakhtin 2010). This study only focuses on one particular example of a Hong Kong musical film to examine the adaptation of Chinese literature and music and its connection to cultural memory, local identity, and modern aesthetics. Further analysis of additional cases would likely provide valuable insights into the localization of Hollywood musicals and the emergence of Hong Kong musicals as a new subgenre in world cinema studies.

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