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More English translation

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Research

Rediscovering Yau Ma Tei Theatre

Wong Ha-pak

The Yau Ma Tei Theatre (YMTT) has lodged in the minds of many as a squalid, filthy porn movie house which is no place for minors. Some years back, with its recognition as a Grade Two historic building, the Theatre was given a makeover to serve new purposes. The life story of this ‘veteran’, now in his new outfits, is gaining more limelight, and I am one of those who had the privilege to ask him questions and put down what had happened. However, after decades of service in the industry starting from 1930, the veteran is no longer as lucid as he was and can’t spell out everything in fine detail. Left with no other option, I could only sketch out his visage all over again with the scattered bits of information I managed to gather.

Facelift

The first question, to begin with, is naturally when YMTT came into being and which film marked its opening. According to *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, YMTT opened its doors on 14 June 1930, but didn’t start advertising itself in the papers until a week later. The film on view that day was, as per the advert, a Chinese silent picture titled *A Plum with Him*.

From this, some deduce that *Plum* was the first ever motion picture presented by YMTT. But since it wasn’t billed as the opening film in the advert, and a film run in general would last no longer than two or three days, the status of *Plum* remained doubtful. The lack of information regarding business of the first week made it impossible to draw any conclusion.

Thankfully, Mr Gordon Chung Kwan-hung, a collector of theatre ephemera, furnished me with a copy of *The China Mail*, wherein YMTT was said to have rerun on its first day *Fine Manners*, a silent movie starring Gloria Swanson, along with a comedy. All mysteries were thus deciphered.

Finally after 69 years, YMTT shut down on 31 July 1998, and had since been left to rot for almost a decade, until the recent revitalisation which turned out to be a source of surprise and delight. For instance, after the silver screen was taken down, a proscenium arch was found above the stage; after the concrete façade was removed from both sides of the main entrance, a pair of Western-style cylindrical pillars inscribed with crying and laughing faces – a throwback to ancient Greek plays – came to light. These discoveries made us all the more curious about this old theatre once plastered with adult movie stills. Tugging on my mind are questions waiting to be

answered...

Palace of sound cinema

Sadly walls don't talk. We can't rewind the past to find any clear answer to the questions. But still the two delicate structures mentioned above provided plenty of talking points. I know little about architecture so I turned to textual materials for clues.

YMTT's adverts in *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, for reasons unknown, were no longer seen as of 1 August 1933. Around half a year later dated 17 January 1934, the advert reappeared which included this note: 'We are proud to have enlisted the help of Broadway master artist Szeto Tit to modernise the Theatre from the inside out. We hope the audience will be happy with the Theatre in its newfound splendour.'

Refurbishment was finished on 23 January 1934. YMTT played films throughout the day and put up catchy adverts in the papers, stating its ambition, by 'splashing out a fortune gentrifying its premises,' to make itself 'the premier entertainment theatre on the Peninsula, the classiest arthouse sound cinema in Kowloon.' Inflated as the wording might seem, the renovation nonetheless revealed the management's intent to put the venue on a higher plane. Alongside Chinese films, they spiced up the lineup with more Hollywood and European productions, whilst featuring works from time to time as 'Kowloon premiere' and 'Hong Kong premiere'.

That is probably the first highpoint in YMTT's history. Launched at a time when the Theatre was just three and a half years old, the revamp was not intended to make good existing damages but to make things better. Could Szeto Tit, the aforesaid 'master artist', be the famous prewar Hong Kong cartoonist? I cannot but wonder if the faces carved on the cylindrical pillars were the idea of the cartoonist as well. 21 January 1934, the eve before completion of refurbishment, *Wah Kiu Yat Po* reported: 'Recently, YMTT has ploughed big money into an extension project, recruiting art experts in revamping the entire site. Not only the interior, the front gate has become incomparably grander than before.' With all the attention on looks, it is not unlikely that both the cylindrical columns at the main entrance, as well as the proscenium arch inside, were add-ons during the 1934 quest to make YMTT 'The Palace of Sound Cinema'.

With and without sound

In its early years, YMTT screened silent films both East and West, with Chinese fare as a staple. Seating was divided into four classes, tickets priced from 10 to 40 cents, more or less the same as other theatres running Chinese films. 15 June 1931, the Theatre purportedly bought a dubbing machine from the United States to celebrate its

first anniversary, putting on show *A Mysterious Murder*, an all-dubbed Chinese sound movie. A closer look however reveals that films playing thereafter were Chinese silents for the most part, including some fantasy martial arts flicks which were all the rage at the time.

17 January 1934, YMTT officially declared itself as a 'sound movie theatre'. The Cantonese dialect was heard more often. Later on 14 February, the first day of the Lunar New Year, *Romantic Ripples on the Mei River* (1933), billed as an all-Cantonese talkie, opened as a festive highlight. The film, however, was not made in Southern China, but by some Siamese Chinese. Soon after, local productions burst upon the screen, such as the 20 February Kowloon premiere of *Return from the Battleground* (1934) starring Wong Man-lei and Wu Ngai-sing, an early Hong Kong silent shot on location in Guangzhou. Ever since, more and more local works were featured, and throughout its history, YMTT had never stopped running Hong Kong films.

Stronghold of Hong Kong films

After Liberation from the Japanese, YMTT returned to the fray on 21 November 1946, screening for a second time *The Fantastic Knight* (1940), a vehicle of Cantonese opera star Sun Liang Chau (alias Kwan Tak-hing). In January next year, YMTT formed a chain together with Pei Ho and The World, premiering *Sheung Ngo Dashing to the Moon* (1947) played by Ng Cho-fan and Sally So. By the early 1950s, the three theatres, with the addition of Sun Wah and International, had blossomed into a stable Cantonese cinema circuit.

In 1953, YMTT joined the Tai Wan chain fronted by Tai Ping and Globe theatres, a partnership that would last for over a decade. This chain specialised in quality Cantonese offerings by studios like The Union, Kong Ngee, Shaw Brothers, as well as Sun Luen, Shan Luen, International, Evergreen, and Lan Kwong. In 1967, YMTT moved over to the Central chain, when Cantonese cinema was undergoing a sea change amidst the rise of a new breed of star actors, namely Suet Nei, Kenneth Tsang Kong, Josephine Siao Fong-fong, and Connie Chan Po-chu. There was a boom of female-centred action dramas and youth musicals, along with ever-improving production quality on the whole, including a body of works shot in Eastmancolor widescreen format.

The bright colours, unfortunately, failed to reverse the sliding fortunes of Cantonese cinema. By the early 1970s, YMTT no longer played Cantonese pictures, but Mandarin pieces made in either Hong Kong or Taiwan, ranging from chopsocky actioners to romantic melodramas. Under the Golden Harvest banner, YMTT brought to audiences such box-office hits as Bruce Lee's *The Way of the Dragon* (1972),

which is fondly remembered by many to this day. Into the 1980s, YMTT witnessed the Golden Age of Hong Kong Cinema as a member of the Royal chain. From *Aces Go Pieces* (1982) to *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987), YMTT featured one crowd puller after another, only to find itself behind the times, not as favoured by moviegoers as its counterparts. Failing to fill all its screening slots, YMTT resorted to erotic fare to stay afloat. 31 December 1987, it formally joined the Nikkatsu porn film circuit.

The years from 1992 to 1994 saw a fad of Category III adult movies. YMTT partnered with various circuits in showing low-budgeters of the kind, thereby making itself a theatre which continued exhibiting Hong Kong films from the 1930s through the 90s.

Cantonese opera under Occupation

Today, YMTT has transformed into a performing venue dedicated to Chinese opera. Efforts have been made to study its ties with Cantonese opera to ascertain that the transformation didn't come out of nowhere, that there are grounds for reviving its past glory. Back in the 1950s and 60s, YMTT did present a fair bit of musical films characterised by gongs and drums; and in June 1979, a rerun of *Princess Cheung Ping*, the landmark Cantonese opera starring the classic duo of Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin, in a brand new print. That said, Astor Theatre in the same district, as evidence suggests, proved to have much closer connections with the operatic art.

During the 1930s, YMTT was home to a wide array of performances from concerts by female opera singers to wrestling to musicals to spoken dramas. Adverts of any Cantonese opera actually staged there, as it happened, were only found during the period of Japanese Occupation. Throughout its history of some 70 years, YMTT strived to keep its doors open even during the Occupation, which made its story all the more legendary. At the time, the Japanese-run Motion Picture Distribution Corporation was the sole supplier of films released in the territory. Theatres were categorised according to a five-tier system. From Class Five, the lowest rung in 1943, YMTT was raised to Class Four the following year. Yet the day-to-day running of the Theatre was seldom covered in newspapers.

20 August 1944, the entire Hong Kong was struck by a power blackout. Citizens cloaked in darkness needed entertainment to ease their distress. 'Cinemas throughout the territory were temporarily closed, whilst performances continued on the opera stage lit up by kerosene lamps. There were crowds everywhere,' a newspaper article read. YMTT didn't reopen until 20 November. It doubled as a venue for Cantonese opera, opening its platform to troupes such as China, Venus and Lion, as well as seasoned performers like Liu Mung-kok and up-and-comers like Sin Kim-lai, keeping the masses entertained in times of hardship.

Looking back, snippets of music and shadows from a bygone era have now become pieces of a puzzle, which gather to form a fuller view of YMTT's trajectory. Movie palaces have been razed one after another. Once a stronghold of Hong Kong cinema, YMTT, the only surviving theatre from the prewar years, no longer has anything to do with film today. What's left of its tale is nothing but strains of nostalgia on paper. (Translated by Elbe Lau)

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100 Must-see Hong Kong Movies

Women in the Eyes of Li Han-hsiang: As Seen in the Adaptation of *Blood in Snow*

Po Fung

When *Blood in Snow* hit theatres in 1956, critics already pointed out that it was adapted from Shi Tuo's 1942 stage play, *Big Circus*.¹ Law Kar stated that there are huge differences between the two works,² but it is only by comparing them closely that one sees a makeover which truly lives up to Song dynasty literati Huang Tingjian's concept of complete transformation – although the story's structure holds true to the original for the most part, the movie's theme, as well as character focus, are something else entirely. Li Han-hsiang, both screenwriter and director for *Blood in Snow*, turned the villainous Gai Sansheng from *Big Circus* into the movie's heroine, the title character Xue Li Hong, the villain with whom the audience ends up sympathising. It is precisely through this bold move that we are able to observe the core characters and emotions that Li has been trying to depict over his entire directing career.

Let us backtrack a little further and take a closer look at *Big Circus* to begin with. The theatrical piece by Shi Tuo was not an original work in itself, but instead, derived from Leonid Andreyev's *He Who Gets Slapped* (1915). However, the writer exercised his own creativity during the writing process rather than translating the script directly, much like what Li Han-hsiang did with *Blood in Snow*.

Andreyev was a renowned Russian writer of the late 19th and early 20th century whose stories, such as *The Lie*, *Silence*, *In the Fog* and *Books* were translated by Chinese scholar Lu Xun. Lu once said that 'the mystique inherent in his works makes him one of a kind.'³ Andreyev was most active just prior to the Russian revolution, and the underlying themes of his pieces influenced the atmosphere of the turbulent times to a certain degree. Despite voicing out criticisms against the Tsar's oppressive dictatorship and corruption amongst nobility, as well as writing about revolutionaries and tyrants, he was not considered a Realist. The behaviour and mentality of his characters are often incomprehensible, making the stories philosophically pessimistic – their mindsets end up being completely twisted and consumed by darkness no matter which side they are on. Lu's novels are somewhat influenced by Andreyev's style in this regard.

He Who Gets Slapped is set in a circus where the ringleader takes in an outsider (addressed as "He" throughout the entire play). Whilst this newest member of the troupe obviously comes from a privileged background, He willingly chooses to be a clown who entertains the audience by getting slapped. As the story progresses, we learn that He was once betrayed by his wife, who had an affair with someone close to

him. He leaves his previous life behind to become a clown and falls in love with Consuelo, the co-star of the daredevil horseback riding act. Consuelo's avaricious father, however, betroths her to a baron who is obsessed with her, leading He to poison her at their wedding feast. The moments between the clown's mirth and solemnity bring about a tension that is almost frightening, and although love is present in many different forms throughout the play, it ends up being a force of destruction as opposed to offering any kind of redemption. The story is told from the clown's perspective for the most part, and in addition to watching the plot develop, there is also constant referencing to the amusement that results from the clown's humiliation – a dig at the satirical nature of literary works, whereby anything meaningful is either snuffed out or treated as banter, all for the sake of entertainment.⁴

Apart from changing the play's setting to China for *Big Circus*, Shi Tuo also does away with the ambiguous theme of the original work by omitting and changing certain plotlines, characters and their associated traits, as well as using a Leftist perspective based on class struggle to give a clear-cut distinction between love and hate. The clown is now an old man without the complicated background and takes on the secondary role of an onlooker. The other characters and their dispositions, on the other hand, are much more clearly defined by class. Although the baron in Andreyev's piece is the subject of the clown's persistent mockery, he gets so depressed from Consuelo's death that he commits suicide, which goes to show that the character was at least capable of loving. In *Big Circus*, Master Huang assumes the role, but he is not depicted in such a positive light. He is depicted as someone who has lost his fortunes and lusts after the film's heroine, Cuibao. However, unlike the baron who is willing to marry Consuelo despite their class differences, Huang is only interested in her body and sees the relationship as a monetary transaction.

The ringleader and his animal tamer wife, who are relatively neutral in *He Who Gets Slapped*, are also transformed in a similar fashion to reveal the ugliness of class exploitation and corruption, associated with their status as an employer. In *He Who Gets Slapped*, Consuelo shares a mutual love with the daredevil horseback rider with whom she performs, but things get complicated when he becomes the object of the animal tamer's affection. This love triangle is reworked and emphasised upon in *Big Circus*, turning the ringleader's wife into the drama's antagonist, Gai Sansheng. In addition to the suffocating sense of oppression she inherits from her blueprint, she is also hegemonic and sinister. Gai cheats on her husband, schemes to break up the story's lovers and ultimately brings the play to its tragic end by selling Cuibao off to Huang. Her hideous and despicable behaviour is truly on par with Madam Wang of *Water Margin* and Wang Xifeng from *Dream of the Red Chamber*. This reinvention is uncannily similar to what Shi Tuo and Ke Ling did with the character of Sai Guanyin

in *Night Inn*, their adaptation of Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths*.⁵ It is interesting to note that Shi Tuo highlights the intense hatred toward unfaithful women of mature years whose craving for love and lust is depicted as the source of immorality and destruction.

The extraordinary thing about *Blood in Snow* is how Li Han-hsiang puts these women under Shi Tuo's curse on a pedestal. Despite the film being inspired by *Big Circus* and having a similar plot, the greatly demonised Gai Sansheng becomes the piteous Xue Li Hong in many of its crucial moments, rendering her the heroine.⁶ Although no longer an animal tamer,⁷ she retains her domineering aura, and is involved in a love triangle with Golden Tiger (played by Lo Wei) and Dainty Lotus (played by Grace Chang). Li does not shy away from exposing Xue's menacing and devious side, vividly illustrating her persistent ploys to undermine the lovers' relationship as per *Big Circus*'s storyline. Unlike Shi Tuo's depiction of a villainous superior, however, he tackles it from a different angle. Li uses an understanding perspective, using her past sufferings as an explanation to why she has become this way – she has a similarly tragic history to Dainty Lotus, whose parents sold her for money, as well as the character Xiao Hong. Neither of them manage to deal with their problems and the latter is eventually knocked down and killed by a train, making Xue the only one to soldier on. Lee synonymises malevolence with survival, suggesting that becoming evil was the only way for her to have endured the series of misfortunes she underwent.

Film scholar Wong Ain-ling once noted Li Han-hsiang's fondness for strong female characters and discussed in detail how Xue Li Hong was the first of her kind in his works.⁸ On closer inspection, one can see that Li is illustrating a woman who sells her body in order to cope with the adversities she faces in an environment dominated by spineless men. She is, however, unwilling to resign to her ill fate and does whatever is necessary to survive and fight back. He goes to great lengths in trying to portray the fearlessness which this courageous woman exudes in the face of hardship. Li has made countless movies with various themes throughout his career, and the fearless heroine is a frequent feature, as evident in *Beyond the Great Wall*, *Empress Wu Tse-tien*, *The Empress Dowager*, and even *Golden Lotus* (in which the title character cheats on her husband). This intrepidity extends to roles of a gentler nature too, such as the part played by Linda Lin Dai in *A Mellow Spring*.

The significance of *Blood in Snow* is not only limited to demonstrating this recurring theme in Li Han-hsiang's works, as it is also a remarkable movie in itself. The script's ingenuity lies in how Xue Li Hong is already established as the villain at the beginning, with the audience learning of her tragic past seemingly only through dialogue, when, in fact, it is re-enacted before their very eyes – the ruthless beatings

that Xiao Hong suffers and Dainty Lotus's misfortune of being sold by her parents are exactly what Xue went through as a child. When she spots Golden Tiger at the liquor store and calls him spineless, one could almost imagine a backstory whereby the two had planned to elope after Xue found out she was to be sold, but he chickened out at the last minute. This is a very clever writing technique which allows the audience to understand what Xue means when she says 'If there must be suffering, then we must all suffer together.' Interestingly enough, it is also in her unfortunate past that Xue finds redemption, resulting in her decision to break the vicious cycle and letting the lovers be. *Blood in Snow*'s tight script makes it far superior to most of Li's subsequent works, whilst the character of Xue Li Hong is rendered realistic and larger than life under Li's direction and Li Lihua's splendid portrayal, making her intricately modern and truly well before her time. (Translated by Johnny Ko)

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Notes

¹ Yu Manzi, 'Let's Talk Movies', *New Life Evening Post*, 19 March 1956 (in Chinese).

² Law Kar, 'Red Bloom in the Snow', *Mandarin Films and Popular Songs: 40's – 60's*, the 17th Hong Kong International Film Festival catalogue, Hong Kong: Urban Council, p 103.

³ Lu Xun, 'Miscellanies on Andreyev', in *Stories from Abroad*, extracted from *The Complete Collection of Lu Xun's Translated Works, Vol 1*, Fujian: Fujian Education Press, 2008, p 128 (in Chinese).

⁴ It seems that there is not yet a faithful Chinese translation of *He Who Gets Slapped*. This synopsis comes from Gregory Zilboorg's English translation, found in *Twenty-five Modern Plays*, Alan S Downer (ed), New York: Harper, 1953.

⁵ Lo Wai-luk, 'From *The Lower Depths* to *Night Inn*, A Discussion on the Impetus and Potential Bias of Chinese Theatre Culture during the 1940s', Chinese Theatre Association Circular.

⁶ *He Who Gets Slapped* (1924) was MGM Pictures' first production. Although the plot strays from the original work, the clown remains the main character. As *Blood in Snow* is a reworked version of an adaptation, it is almost impossible to trace the two films back to the same source.

⁷ Chun Kim directed a movie titled *The Big Circus*. Despite it being hugely different from Shi Tuo's play, its heroine was a tough animal tamer, indicating that this character has definitely made a mark.

⁸ Wong Ain-ling, 'Women in Charge, Men in Exile', in *Li Han-hsiang, Storyteller*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2007, pp 28–40.

100 Must-see Hong Kong Movies

A Touch of Hu in Vienna

Victor Or

The anniversary of an organisation can be likened to stopping at a roadside inn to rest after a long walk and, while sipping tea, measuring the accomplishments over the past year or years. Of course, if you really are going to pause at a roadside inn, be sure it's not the Ko Shing Inn. In that place there's always the possibility some bandits might attempt to provoke a fight with the Golden Swallow and you'll find yourself involved in the conflict. Last year, the Hong Kong Film Archive celebrated its 10th anniversary. A well-known Chinese saying goes, 'It takes 10 years to grow trees and 100 years to rear people.' This year the Austrian Film Museum is halfway there, celebrating its 50th anniversary. To commemorate the occasion, the City of Vienna donated an additional 50,000 euros in support of 50 projects. Wouldn't it be nice if the projects result in 50 additional retrospectives?

Looking over the Film Museum's projects, one that caught my eye was the King Hu retrospective held in May and June. The sensation was akin to sitting in a restaurant in a foreign country and suddenly hearing a sentimental Mandarin song sung by Zhou Xuan. Nine of Hu's films were selected for the retrospective, said to be the first major exhibition of his work in German-speaking Europe. While most were martial arts films, including *Come Drink with Me* (1966) and *Raining in the Mountain* (1979), both on the list of HKFA's *100 Must-see Hong Kong Movies* and soon to be screened there, *The Love Eterne* (1963) and *All the King's Men* (1982) were also featured. Pairing these latter two films with all the martial arts titles is tantamount to being in a gymnasium exercising when suddenly an instructor enters and begins giving lessons in opera-singing and royal court etiquette.

Actually, Hong Kong cinema is no stranger to Austria. Austrian film critic Ralph Umard has authored two books on the subject, *Film ohne Grenzen: Das neue Hongkong Kino* (*Film Without Borders: The New Hong Kong Cinema*) and *Woo: Leben und Werk* (*John Woo: Life and Work*). As Marko Locatin writes in the Austrian magazine *Format*, 'Who can forget the Bruce Lee poster in every other child/youth's room?'¹ There's no doubt that Bruce Lee was a global sensation for many young adults around the world. However, a number of Viennese critics agree that 'King Hu was the key to unlocking the study and exegesis of an entire popular culture.'²

Differentiating Hu from all other masters of martial arts cinema, it's noted in the Austrian Film Museum programme, '...his aesthetic is firmly rooted in traditional Chinese art forms, especially painting and music theatre – one can sense this even

without having attended a performance of the Peking Opera.’³ If this statement were to come from anywhere but Vienna, we could surmise that the writer was driven by romanticism. However, having been written by a Viennese, not only is it appropriate, one can sense the author’s piety, particularly when it is remembered that Vienna is the music capital of the Western world and its citizens are especially fond of opera. After the Second World War when the city was devastated by bombed-out buildings and food shortages, the top priority of its citizens was to rebuild their opera house, a telling case of passion overcoming practicality.

King Hu was quite aware that *mise-en-scene* is equally important to opera as the singing. The Viennese, constantly influenced both by what they see and hear on stage, are able to discern many of King Hu’s techniques. Gerhard Midding notes that *Come Drink with Me* begins with a slightly low-angle shot of the bandits’ leader (he is actually the second-in-command) looking towards the highway and then striding in the opposite direction away from the camera, Hu’s deliberate technique, not always noticed by the average viewer, to set the stage for the violence that is to come. Midding goes on to say that this points to the director’s ‘oneness’ with his characters.⁴

Umaré seems to echo this view, pointing out that Hu distinctly arrays his characters. In *Dragon Inn* (1968), the loyalists are dressed in plain clothes while the ‘perfidious eunuch Cao wears robes, puts rouge on his cheeks and behaves like a peacock.’⁵ King Hu’s trait of purposely creating scenes that are pleasing to both the eye and mind and never leaving anything to chance is evident to Umaré. He comments that with the collaboration of veteran Peking Opera actor Han Yingjie, the battle sequences are meticulously designed on the storyboard, filmed from different angles and then artfully assembled on the editing table. At first the fighting scenes seem quite realistic, but as the film proceeds they gradually become surrealistic, especially the decisive duel. Hu and Han choreograph the battle sequences as if they are ballets, with traditional wood percussion instruments from Peking Opera providing a musical background. Viennese film critics agree that Hu brought martial arts films to another level because of these poetic touches.

At the turn of the 20th century, Vienna was populated by cultural elites who gathered in cafés that dotted the cityscape. For the pittance of a cup of coffee, a patron could spend the entire day in a café reading free newspapers and magazines, discussing art and literature, writing an essay or novel, and playing cards for hours on end. To this group the café served as a home from home. Even today you can see individuals dawdle the hours away in Vienna’s cafés.

The inn featured in many of King Hu’s films, a classic meeting room where a microcosm of life gathers, offers a familiar scene to the Viennese. Hu’s inn debuts in *Come Drink with Me* with a scene where the character Golden Swallow uses a

chopstick to catch a bunch of coins thrown at her. In two later works, *Dragon Inn* and *The Fate of Lee Khan* (1973), the entire story involves the inn. In each, after an exchange of threatening glances and insults, the characters suddenly jump up from their seats and fly through the air, turning the inn into an aerial circus and providing a spectacular scene. Umard notes that with tracking shots, panning, fast-changing perspectives (P.O.V.) and quick intercuts, Hu offers ‘...theatrical entertainment that is alternately exciting or humorous’.⁶

It’s easy to trade the city scene for one of nature by riding a tram to the forested hills of Wienerwald, immortalised by Strauss’ waltz *Tales from the Vienna Woods*. Beethoven came here to be inspired when he was composing the *Pastoral Symphony*. The spindly trunks of the tall Norwegian spruce in particular bring to mind the bamboo forests seen in King Hu’s films. Little wonder Isabella Reicher seems to be writing from familiar ground about the action scenes in King Hu’s films. In the Austrian newspaper *Der Standard*, she imaginatively describes warriors falling ‘like fruit from camphor trees amid bamboos and in slow motion doing somersaults with their silk robes billowing’.⁷ Hu’s action scenes in the bamboo forests add a spiritual dimension to his martial arts films or, to paraphrase Midding’s comments about *A Touch of Zen* (1971) and *Raining in the Mountain*, they are relatively bloodless with the characters intermittently fighting as they dash through a forest, resulting in a film of mystical ambiance and morality.⁸ Hu knows his characters well; they may stubbornly fight among themselves for fame and gain, but ultimately their destinies are determined by a higher power. The characters in *Raining in the Mountain* don’t understand this. They come up empty-handed, leading Austrian Film Museum’s Rui Hortênsio da Silva e Costa to comment, ‘...life itself is already divine.’⁹

Umard observes that with the Vietnam War escalating and the Cultural Revolution taking hold in China in 1966, King Hu turned to ancient legend to avoid sensitive political subjects and made *Come Drink with Me*. Umard apparently didn’t realise that Hu was playing dumb like ‘Drunken Cat’ in the film and subtly using the character to convey his thoughts. ‘Drunken Cat’ intends to eliminate the evil monk but is held back by the fact that the monk bestowed favours on him. Contrary to Umard’s opinion that Hu was avoiding sensitive political subjects, the director was actually tackling them.

After love at first sight for King Hu’s films by the Viennese critics, it’s time for them to really get to know this director.

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Notes

¹ Marko Locatin, '50 Jahre Viennale: Retrospektive King Hu' ('The 50th Anniversary of Vienna Film Festival: King Hu Retrospective'), *Format*, Vienna, 2 June 2012.

² 'King Hu', Austrian Film Museum programme, Vienna, May/June 2002, p 18.

Ibid, p 20.

³ Gerhard Midding, 'Die moralische Autorität des Schwertes' ('The Moral Authority of the Sword'), *Falter*, Vienna, 2012, Issue 23, p 29.

⁴ Ralph Umard, 'King Hu – Die Ästhetik der Kinetik' ('King Hu – The Aesthetics of the Kinetics'), *Ray Filmmagazin*, Vienna, June 2012, Issue 6, p 43.

⁵ *Ibid*.

⁶ Isabella Reicher, 'Der König der leichtfüßigen Helden' ('The King of Light-footed Heroes'), *Der Standard*, Vienna, 23 May 2012.

⁷ See note 4.

⁸ Rui Hortênsio da Silva e Costa, 'Kongshan Lingyu' ('*Raining in the Mountain*'), Austrian Film Museum programme, Vienna, May/June 2012, p 25.

Editor's note: HKFA supports retrospectives throughout the world that feature Hong Kong films. For the 'King Hu Retrospective' presented by the Austrian Film Museum, HKFA loaned copies of the director's cut of *The Valiant Ones* (1974) and *Legend of the Mountain* (1979).