Hong Kong Dark Cinema: Film Noir, Re-conceptions and Reflexivity. By Kim-hui E. Elain Chan. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019. 241 pp. Hardcover. ISBN: 9783030282936.

Reviewed by Carlos Rojas

The female protagonist of Eddie Fong's 1994 movie *The Private Eye Blues* 非常偵探 is a teenage girl (played by Mavis Fan 范曉萱) from mainland China who possesses unusual healing abilities and other extrasensory powers. In China, she is charged with helping care for an unidentified powerful but infirm man, but she escapes to Hong Kong, where a private detective is hired to follow and protect her. She ends up befriending the detective, who happens to be in the process of divorcing his wife. At the end of the film, however, in a chase scene where Chinese government officials are closing in on the girl, she kisses the detective and announces that she simply cannot let the officials return her to China. She then pushes the detective out of a slowly-moving car and proceeds to drive the vehicle off the end of an unfinished highway overpass. In a dramatic nighttime sequence that is shot in slow motion with a combination of long shots and close-ups, the car explodes in midair before plunging into the water below, and then the screen goes black. In the film's final sequence, however, the protagonist reappears alive and well on an unidentified beach in what appears to be a foreign country. Speaking on a cellphone with the detective, who is now reunited with his wife and child, she happily assures him that she will definitely return for him.

As Elaine Chan observes in *Hong Kong Dark Cinema: Film Noir, Re-conceptions and Reflexivity*, Fong's film borrows from—and simultaneously undermines—several of the familiar conventions of the film noir genre. Like many noir films, *The Private Eye Blues* features plot elements that include an underground crime syndicate, morally ambiguous police, a femme fatale, and a "masochistic male" protagonist. The film's cinematography is also reminiscent of noir films, with

frequent use of dark lighting, close-ups, slow motion, and so forth. At the same time, however, Chan notes that the film's ending turns some of the genre's conventions on their head. In particular, viewers would normally expect that the femme fatale figure to be "punished" so that the male hero can regain his equilibrium, but this film instead ends with the female lead chatting happily with the detective and his family.

In the film's final line of dialogue, the girl stumbles over her words as she tries to warn the detective not to try to get rid of her. Standing in front of a handwritten sign covered in what appears to be an invented script, she stumbles over the colloquial Cantonese term *pitlat* 撇甩 "get rid of" (which she repeatedly inverts, into the meaningless term *latpit* 甩撇), and the film's official English subtitles struggle valiantly to capture the resulting dialectal wordplay: "Hello, 'Old Cake,' how are you? I'll come back for you, that's for sure. Yeah, we're meant to be for life. Don't you off me shake. Off shake or shake off, shake me off?"

Like the film's bilingual subtitles, *Hong Kong Dark Cinema* is similarly a product of multiple processes of translation. To begin with, the study originated as an English-language dissertation on Hong Kong film, which Chan wrote while pursuing her doctorate in Britain. The study was subsequently published as a Chinese-language monograph in 2017 before being released this year in the current English-language version. Moreover, the study emphasizes the way in which the category of film noir is similarly a product of translingual movement. As Chan explains, the term *film noir* (literally meaning "dark cinema") was coined in France in the 1940s to describe contemporary Hollywood movies that shared a loose aggregate of characteristics, including a dark atmosphere, a femme fatale, a focus on the criminal underworld, and so forth. The term was subsequently adopted in English-language film criticism beginning in the early 1970s. Chan details how critics attempted to define the category of film noir based not only on elements relating to the films' plot

and setting, but also qualities of tone and mood. She notes that some critics view noir as one of the most challenging film categories, since the category itself is grounded on gestures of transgression and subversion.

The noir category has continued to evolve and intersect with other genres, and some critics have coined the term *neo-noir* to refer to a group of later films that deploy qualities or characteristics associated with classical noir films of the 1940s and 1950s. More recently, some scholars have begun focusing more specifically on East Asian or Chinese noir, such as Chi-yun Shin and Mark Gallagher's 2015 edited volume *East Asian Film Noir: Transnational Encounter and Intercultural Dialogue* and Esther Yau and Tony Williams's 2017 edited volume *Hong Kong Neo-Noir*. In her analysis of 1990s Hong Kong cinema, however, Chan prefers to refer to the local works under consideration not as strictly noir or neo-noir, but rather as having various "noirish elements." In this way, she examines the way in which the noir category has continued to evolve through a process of historical and regional translation.

In addition to an introduction and a conclusion, *Hong Kong Dark Cinema* is composed of five body chapters, including one that offers an overview of the category of film noir and its relevance to Hong Kong cinema, followed by four chapters that each focuses on a different 1990s "noirish" Hong Kong film. The first film that the Chan analyzes in detail is Fong's *The Private Eye Blues*. In addition to her point about how the film's conclusion up-ends expectations associated with the noir genre, Chan also argues that, at crucial moments, it disrupts classical editing conventions designed to facilitate a process of cinematic suture—which is to say, the process by which film viewers identify with a film's imaginary gaze, and thereby figuratively insert themselves into the film's presumptive field of vision. Drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan and Slovoj Žižek, Chan argues that at several points in *The Private Eye Blues* this suture process is disrupted and the film instead introduces a gaze of an unidentified Other. (Chan's study complements her

analysis of the film's shot-reverse shot sequences with several examples of individual frames—which she illustrates not by using standard screen captures but rather, charmingly, by sketching the frames by hand.) Chan concludes that, by introducing this gaze of the Other, the film "opens up a psychological space for the spectating subjects to reassess the concepts of history, colonial experience and cultural identity" (111).

Next, Chan turns to Mabel Cheung's film *City of Glass* 玻璃之城. Released in 1998, the year after the Hong Kong Handover, the film adopts a non-linear narrative structure that jumps back and forth between events in the 1970s (anchored by the student Diaoyutai protests) and the 1990s (similarly anchored by the events surrounding the 1997 Handover). Interwoven with these socio–political historical narratives, meanwhile, is an intensely personal plotline involving a couple, Vivian and Raphael, who are discovered to be carrying on an extramarital affair only after they are killed on a car crash together on New Year's Eve at the end of 1996. Chan argues that just as the film uses a series of flashbacks to the period when the couple were university classmates in 1970s, the work challenges and ultimately upends the film's own initial suggestion that Vivian was a femme fatale figure responsible for disrupting Raphael's marriage. Chan suggests that, at the same time, and by extension, the film simultaneously invites a similar reassessment of the sorts of broader historical narratives against which the work is itself positioned.

Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together* 春光乍洩, the third film analyzed in *Hong Kong Dark Cinema,* is the only one of the films discussed here that is not set in Hong Kong. Shot and released in 1997, the majority of the work takes place in Buenos Aires, where Wong Kar-wai was attempting to avoid the turmoil associated with the Handover—though he subsequently acknowledged that the film was, in fact, thoroughly and inextricably engaged with issues relating to the Handover and its implications. In her chapter, meanwhile, Chan approaches this topic of

the film's relationship to the Handover at a tangent, by critically examining the common characterization that *Happy Together* is a nostalgic film. Drawing on work by Linda Hutcheon and others that critically interrogates the category of nostalgia, Chan argues that *Happy Together* is not, in fact, nostalgic, and instead suggests that the film "invokes cinema's conventional linear order of temporality by invoking a sense of past-tenseness" (148). Chan also suggests that, by focusing on a gay couple, the film replaces the conventional noir figure of the femme fatal with an "homme fatal," who embodies the process of geographic and psychological displacement on which the work itself is predicated.

Finally, the last film considered in this volume is Tony Ching Siu-tung's 1991 film *Swordsman II: The East Is Red* 東方不敗：風雲再起, which is based loosely on the novel *Xiao'ao jianghu* (笑傲江湖; *The Smiling, Proud Warrior*) by Jin Yong (a.k.a. Louis Cha). In her analysis, Chan focuses on the film's transgendered portrayal of the character known as Invincible East (Dongfang Bubai 東方不敗). Played by leading Taiwan actress Brigette Lin 林青霞 (whom Chan refers to as "Lin Chin-hsia" and "Chin-hsia Lin," using an unusual variant of the more common transliteration of Lin's Chinese name), Invincible East is actually male swordsman who, within the diegetic space of the film, subsequently begins masquerading as a woman. In playing this role, accordingly, Lin is effectively performing a double cross-gender masquerade—as a woman performing as a man performing as a woman. Identifying Invincible East as an intriguing variant on the traditional film noir figure of the femme fatal, Chan argues that this "transvestite-transsexual swordsman" is used to "differ and defer cinematic identification" (171). In this way, she concludes, "while cinematic identification and de-identification may take place at the same time, the film offers multiple perspectives for the audience to make new comprehension of crises—personal, social, political and cultural—diegetically and inter-diegetically" (171).

In this analysis of *Swordsman II*, and throughout *Hong Kong Dark Cinema*, Chan draws on Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance*, and on Derrida's more general deconstructive method. In particular, Derrida uses *différance* to refer to an iterative process grounded on a simultaneous gesture of differing and deferring—of mobilizing difference while at the same time deferring the putative site of origin. For Chan, this figure of *différance* offers a useful way of understanding the development and transformation not only of the film noir category itself, as it is redeployed at different moments and in different contexts, but also of a loose aggregate of socio-political and cultural categories associated with Hong Kong during the period in the years immediately before and after the Handover. Like the category of film noir, she implies, Hong Kong is itself a product of translation that is constantly being reinvented.

Challenging Beijing's Mandate of Heaven: Taiwan's Sunflower Movement and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement. By Ho Ming-Sho. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019. 269 pp. Paperback. ISBN: 9781439917077.

Reviewed by Ophelia Tung Ho-yiu

Ho Ming-Sho's *Challenging Beijing's Mandate of Heaven: Taiwan's Sunflower Movement and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement* provides a detailed and perceptive account of Taiwan's Sunflower Movement and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, and how they radically and permanently change the trajectories of the political development of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China in multiple socio–political aspects. Ho notices the many similarities of the two movements, both occurred in 2014, including their "unanticipated emergence, large-scale and intense participation," "deep and far-reaching consequences," as well as the bottom-up leadership style in face of China's autocratic mandate (3). In his book, Ho