



Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts

THE CHINESE OPERA IN FICTION FILM

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**Bachelor of Applied Arts with Honours
(Cinematography)
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THE CHINESE OPERA IN FICTION FILM

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This project is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Applied Arts with Honours
(Cinematography)

Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK
2013

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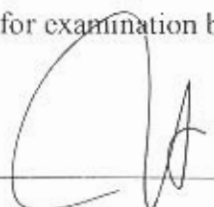
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii.
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv.
ABSTRAK	vii.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	
1.0 Introduction	1
1.0.1 Background of Research	1
1.1 Problem Statement	4
1.2 Research Objectives	5
1.3 Research Questions	5
1.4 Hypothesis	5
1.5 Research Scope	6
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	
2.0 Introduction	7
2.1 Definitions of Fiction	7
2.2 Adaptation of Play	8
2.3 Symbolism	9
2.4 The Play within a Play	10
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	
3.0 Introduction	11
3.1 Applied Research	11
3.2 Qualitative Research	12
3.3 Qualitative Media Content Analysis	13
3.4 Why is <i>Farewell, my concubine</i> (1993)?	14
3.5 Film Analysis	15
3.6 Literature Analysis (Film Criticism and others)	15

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS

4.0	Film Analysis	16
4.1	<i>Farewell, my concubine</i> (1993), A Play Within	17
4.2	<i>Farewell, my concubine</i> (1993), An Outer Play	20
4.2.1	The love story about the homosexual relationship between Dic-Yi and Xiao- Lou	20
4.2.2	The Beijing opera as an arts itself	21
4.2.3	The series of historical events	22
4.3	Literature Analysis (Film Criticism and others)	23

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.0	Introduction	24
5.1	The Play Within	24
5.2	The Outer Play	26
5.3	Interpretation of the Idea	27

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

6.0	Summary of Research	29
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BIBLIOGRAPHY	32-35
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ABSTRAK

OPERA CINA DALAM FILEM FIKSYEN

Tan Sieu Chen

Kajian ini berkaitan dengan aplikasi opera Cina dalam filem fiksyen untuk memperkenalkan persembahan opera Cina yang bilangan penontonnya kian mengurang. Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk mengenal pasti asal-usul bahagian solo opera Cina tertarik dalam filem fiksyen dan menentukan kaedah penyesuaian opera Cina dalam filem fiksyen seperti adaptasi drama, cerita dalam cerita, dan simbolisme. Hasil kajian ini adalah opera Cina dapat membentuk struktur selari dengan cerita fiksyen di dalam filem dan opera Cina dapat memperkayakan cerita fiksyen dengan teknik penulisan skrip di atas. Sebuah filem pendek berjudul *Flee by Night* (2013) akan dihasilkan seiring dengan hasil kajian ini.

ABSTRACT

CHINESE OPERA IN FICTION FILM

Tan Sieu Chen

Chinese opera in the fiction film introduces the application of Chinese opera which its audience decline year by year, into a fictional film. The topic objectives are to identify the origins of the solo section of Chinese opera are attracted into the fiction film and determine the methods of adapting Chinese opera into fiction film such as adaptation of play, play within a play, and symbolism. The outcomes of the research will be coming out by the Chinese opera shapes the parallel structures with the fiction story in the fiction film and Chinese opera also enrich the story given by the scriptwriting skills above. In the end, the researcher will practice to make a short film called *Flee by Night* (2013) which incorporates fiction story and Chinese opera performance.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

The Chinese opera is slowly vanishing in Malaysia (Oriental Daily News, 2012; Sin Chew Daily, 2012; China Press, 1993; Clarence Chua, 2011). Accordingly, some Chinese opera associations try to insert or adapt certain solo section of the Chinese opera's play into new media. There are some adaptations of the Chinese opera into fiction film (Kuhn, 2012). Put differently, there are audio-visual elements of Chinese opera that can be extracted and inserted in fiction films.

1.0.1 Background of Research

Chinese opera has the meaningful rhythm and artistic sensation on the performance, even it is just performed on a small stage, it represents the traditional Chinese culture and its beautiful essence that one must retain and maintain (周 Zhou, 2009). For example, every masks or makeup of the Chinese opera's character has different dispositions of their patterns and colors representing. So, the opera performers can try to emphasise their natures, and then distinguish their characteristic from good to evil, or even used to praise or express condemnation (周 Zhou, 2009; Kuhn, 2012).

Fictional films do not mean the works purely based on fictive events but they can be creatively blended with history, the real story, and adaptation of literature to represent agents

and events that are framed, and imaginary. In other words, the filmmakers have the freedom to create storylines and other historical facts as he or she sees fit. This exemption allows the director to shape the movie and perfect the story (Bordwell, 1985; Lothe, 2000; Moura, 2012).

Opera films were produced since 1920s, several full length films on Chinese opera performance. For example, in 1947, a film named *Sheng Si Hen* performed by Lan-fan, Mei was made as he believes that film can be a new medium to perform and preserve Chinese opera (周 Zhou, 2009). Since then, the development of the Chinese opera in the fiction film has changed by having some scriptwriters adapts the Chinese opera's story element into the narrative fiction film, such as *Divergence (San Cha Kou)*, 2005. This is one of the films that borrows the idea from the original Chinese opera's story and inserts that into a new narrative story in the fiction film. So, this kind of insert the idea of the original Chinese opera performance into the new creation narrative story in the fiction film is one of the adaptations of the play into the film. It stands for the screenplay derived from plays, and the most successful adaptations originate as stories that already have clearly defined story concepts (McNulty, 2012; Hauge, 2010).

Besides that, the Chinese opera has some symbolic value to enrich the narrative of a fiction film. A symbol is something (an exceptional object, image, person, sound, event, or place) that renders the audience a system of expectations that stands for, suggests or triggers a complex set of ideas, attitudes, or feelings for the audience to what the genre is and let them convey the emotional state of a character in the drama (Boggs & Petrie, 2008). Symbolism is perhaps even more effective when it is on the ground or concealed in another image (Boggs & Petrie, 2008). In the context of Chinese opera, masks enable the audience to look into the

heart of a character simply by visiting his or her case. Such masks are called the picture of a character's soul (周 Zhou, 2009; Kuhn, 2012).

At the end of the project, a short film that incorporates Chinese opera in its narrative story will be produced. Qualitative Media Content Analysis to analysis the film, *Farewell, my concubine* (1993) in the research methodology. This is because *Farewell* is most successful incorporate with Chinese opera and a fiction story. *Farewell* had won international film festival which is Cannes Palme d'Or with co-winner, *The Piano* (1993). The researcher will focus on film analysis and literature analysis on Chapter 4 and then discuss the application of the findings in a short film project, *Flee by Night* (2013) directed by Tan Sieu Chen in Chapter 5.

1.1 Problem Statement

The Chinese opera in Malaysia is no longer popular among the youngsters because the Chinese opera is only performed during traditional occasion such as Hungry Ghost Festival and Ching Ming. It is a cultural form that soon will be forgotten by the public. "The younger generation does not have a stake in the Chinese opera; mostly the people think the performance during the traditional occasion is limited approaches to this culture." Hence, the researcher will attempt to insert Chinese opera into fiction film as a means to promote and introduce the Chinese opera.

"Perhaps equally important in encouraging opera to simplify and to dramatise its stories and subjects was the cinema. Even in silence, the stories, emotions, and drama of Hollywood and Shanghai-made films had made a big impression on viewers. Opera reformers tried to replicate that effect by emulating the new art forms" (Clark, 2008). The opera film is the simply show the full length performance in the film. The opera film is merely a subject to promote the Chinese opera. Although the opera film gives the biggest impression for the audience, but the filmmaker or the opera performer still must to discover the new art forms to continue this cultural performance.

There are many ways to cultivate the younger generation's interest in the Chinese opera. One of the common ways is to get the new narrative story to show the idea of the original play of Chinese opera. The Chinese opera would use the props and music to enrich the visual aesthetic and the meaning of Chinese opera "translate into the film" to create a play within a play. And this is one of the ways to promote the Chinese opera in an indirect artistic presentation form.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To identify the origins of the solo section of Chinese opera are attracted into the fiction film.
2. To determine the methods of adapting Chinese opera into fiction film.
3. To make a short film this incorporates fiction story and Chinese opera performance.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What are the origins of solo sections of Chinese opera are attracted into the fiction film?
2. Which are the methods of adapting Chinese opera into the fiction film?
3. How is a short film which incorporates fiction story and Chinese opera performance?

1.4 Hypothesis

The elements in Chinese opera can attract the filmmakers to incorporate it into fiction film. It will assist the filmmakers to create a new fictional story from the idea of the original play.

1.5 Research Scope

This research will explore the way of fictional film as a new medium to encourage the Chinese opera to younger generation audiences. Several scriptwriting skills such as adaptation of the play, symbolism, and the technic of play within a play will be discussed. With that, the researcher will identify the audio-visual elements of Chinese opera which can be adapted (incorporate) into the fiction film and how does the scriptwriting way that the researcher can insert this cultural performance in the fiction film.

This research will also focus on the script development for the short film project. The script will be based on a solo section in one of the famous Chinese opera performances which will be incorporated within a narrative fictional story. The script will involve thematic, dramatic as well as fictional elements to enhance the narrative flow. The researcher will join the Chinese opera and the story in order to bring out the meaning that can inspire the audiences. The researcher seeks to draw the audience's attention to the representing a narrative fictional story that combine the personal creativity and melodrama element of Chinese opera without changing the original works.

This research will analyse *Farewell, My Concubine (1993)* directed by Chen Kai-Ge. *Farewell* is the film which most similar to this research theme. The researcher seeks to identify the methods of adapting Chinese opera into the fiction film in the Chapter 4 by film analysis. Nonetheless, the researcher also would use the literature analysis: film criticism, some related articles or book as another qualitative method to determine the chemistry of the Chinese opera in the fiction film.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

The younger generations are losing their interest to the Chinese opera performance which is always performed on the stage during the Hungry Ghost Festival and Ching Ming. The younger audience might rather spend RM10 to go to the cinema and watch the popular films instead of standing in front on the Chinese opera stage to watch the performance. Chinese opera would be eliminated since the appearance of audience loses interest today (China Press, 1993).

If the fictional film is the new medium to promote the traditional cultural performance, some of the components of Chinese opera which is the form of expression, such as angry, sad, scare, hate, and mad would be refined through the fictional narrative. This is because those are the emotions in Chinese opera could be enriching the moral value in the fiction story. Chinese opera's precision and perfection of combination with lyricism, exaggerated, landscaping, and dance, as well as stylised. (Zhou, 2009)

2.1 Definitions of Fiction

In the fictional story no matter it is an opera or a film, a narrative is an event which is linked to the cause-effect and it is situated in the specific time and space (Bordwell, 1985; Lothe, 2000). A fiction is a representation of agents and events that is framed, and imaginary.

It aims to inform us since it is overlapped with narrative, their classes have a very common kind of representation because they are based on the actual states of affairs or historical texts, namely, the fictional narrative (Bordwell, 1985). For instance, the original Chinese opera play, Farewell, My Concubine is film that emphasises its national narratives and telling a story that is both epic and intimate during the Han Dynasty. This is because the fictional story conveys the drama into a complex mosaic of cultural upheaval caused by everything that happened between 1924 and 1977. (Braester, 2003; Berardinelli, 1993)

2.2 Adaptation of Play

Furthermore, the narrative fiction film can accept any adaptation of literature, play and folk story to enrich the fiction story. The similarity between the fictional story and adaptation of a play itself can solve the problems of length and then the point of view is minimised. The most important stage-film adaptation is how to create a suitable physical setting and imposed by the stage setting. Some kind of movement in space is almost essential to the film, and to keep the image moving, the filmmaker usually expands the concepts of visual space involved (Boggs & Petrie, 2008). Even from last time, some researchers have experience to adapt the whole Chinese opera story into film with dramatic way, such as *Love Eterne*; they have eight versions of *Love Eternal* from the year of 1948-1964 (Aw & Tan, 2003; Kun, 2012; Clark, 2008).

2.3 Symbolism

With any good fiction story, the setting has strong symbolic overtones. Symbols can help to create a certain atmosphere. Even some of the characters are often used as symbols but once the characters become symbolic, it helps to explain the plot twists until the conflicts bring out the meaning of these character roles. It is simply seen to be an interesting new way to look at something in the fictional story (Boggs & Petrie, 2008; Lanphier, 2007).

There are some interesting symbolisms in the Chinese opera stage performance. For instance, we see the exaggerated facial expressions, gestures and simple properties of Chinese opera are often symbolic. For example, if the actor or actress is walking in a circle, it means a long journey has been taken; chairs and tables are often put together to represent things like mountains or beds (Hays, 2008; Zhou, 2009). "In the Chinese opera, the color is a symbol to the character's personality traits. Black indicates honesty. Blue symbolises courage. Red indicates loyalty. White can be a tip off for a traitor. Green is associated with virtue. Black sometimes indicates vulgarity. Yellow is reserved for the emperor and the royal court" (Hays, 2008; Zhou, 2009; China Culture Org, 2012).

Since the fictional story adapted from the solo section of the Chinese opera, the character is also bringing out the symbolism in the fictional story. "The dramatic device of a play within a play has proven very effective and has been successfully employed in many plays. Its use, although frequently dictated by technical considerations, may actually be considered to be related to a familiar psychological mechanism seen in dream work, namely, a dream within a dream". (Grinstein, A., 1956)

2.4 The Play within a Play

We can see the example in the screenplay of *Farewell, My Concubine* adapted from the novel by Lilian Lee. She leads two opera stars best known for their famous track *The Hegemon-King Bids Farewell to His Concubine* in the Beijing opera. The story is set in two different levels, which mean on stage and off stage. On stage, Duan Xiao-Lou and Cheng Jie-Yi live in the world of performance act likes an ideal heterosexual couple; off stage, they are two male opera performers and perform together (Tan & Aw, 2003; Chen, 1993).

In addition, the use of “play within a play” can attract a young audience. According to Corn (1984), he interprets a play within a play as a literary device or conceit in which one story is told during the action of another story. It is attracting because when characters in a play perform on stage the action of another play, often with other characters forming an “audience”, the audience in the theater sometimes loses its privileged, omniscient position because it is suddenly not clear who is in the play and who is in the play within (Corn, 1984).

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In the methodology, the researcher attempts to figure out the origins of Chinese opera are attracted into the fiction film. The adaptation of the play, symbolism and the play within a play are the method to produce the two narrative fiction parallel structures in the film.

In this application, the researcher tries to apply two method researches: there are applied research and qualitative research. The applied research will be applied in the short film, *Flee by Night* (2013) on the Final Year Project because the researcher tries to apply what the studies and analysis into the short film.

Secondly, the researcher will apply qualitative media content analysis of the selected film, namely *Farewell, my concubine* (1993).

3.1 Applied Research

Applied research is a research techniques, procedures and methods that form the body of research methodology in order to solve the real-world problems or making practical decisions about actions in actual situations (McIntyre, 2005; Kumar, 2005; Reaves, 1992). The researcher chooses this method's purpose is to apply the incorporation of Chinese opera into the film.

So, the researcher would apply it into the Final Year Project titled by *Flee by Night*, which is the play within it: the famous Kunqu's solo section of the old folk story, *Flee by Night*; and insert it into the outer play, which is the experience of a character, Ah Lian, who is an opera performer and also a well-known gambler too. In the other story, Ah Lian is the anti-materials of the character, Lin Chong that acts on the stage. In other words, this is a short film with the incorporation between the fiction stories with the Chinese opera's play.

3.2 Qualitative Research

Secondly, the research tries to apply the film analysis and literature analysis under the Qualitative Media Content Analysis which is the qualitative method of research use to figure out the chemistry of incorporating Chinese opera into fiction film.

According to the Denzin and Lincoln's opinion, the qualitative research is a situated activity that places the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that constitute the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, pictures, recordings, and memos to itself. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people brings to them. (Flick, 2007) Qualitative research is truly unique in content, focus, and form.

Within the attempting to make sense of, or interpret, a phenomenon in terms of the meanings people brings Chinese opera incorporate into the fiction film:

1. Is it the solo section of the Chinese opera inserts or adopt into fiction story can create the new form of traditional performance and enrich the story telling in fiction film?

The role of qualitative research chosen is because the researcher attempts to analyse the film's content:

1. Is it they are using the adaptation of play, play within a play and symbolism?

Thus, the researcher identifies *Farewell, my concubine* (1993) which has been done in that direction. And then the researcher found some literature reviews, film criticism to support the researcher's content analysis.

3.3 Qualitative Media Content Analysis

According to Neuendorf (2002), media content analysis is a specialised sub- set of content analysis, a well-established research methodology. Neuendorf (2002) describes the content analysis as "the main message-centered methodology". And then cites studies such as Riffe and Freitag (1997) and Yale and Gilly (1998) which "reported that in the arena of mass communication research, content analysis has been the fastest growing technique over the past 20 years or so" (Macnamara, 2006). The Media content analysis became increasingly popular as a research methodology during the 1920s and 1930s for investigating the rapidly expanding communication content of movies. (Macnamara, 2006; Wimmer, 2003) The "content" refers to words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes, or any message that can be conveyed. The "text" is anything written, visual, or spoken that serves as a medium for communication" (Neuman, 1997).

3.4 Why is *Farewell, my concubine* (1993)?

Farewell, my concubine (1993) is an artistic fiction film that incorporates Chinese opera (Beijing opera). This film has received international recognitions throughout the world. *Farewell* is one of the masterpieces of Chen Kai-Ge who is one of the Fifth generation directors in China. The play within the film is the famous drama: *The Hegemon-King Bids Farewell to His Concubine*. *Hegemon* is the most famous masterpiece by the opera actor, Mei Lan-fang, the master of the female role's opera actor in the Beijing opera. And this play had a history over hundreds of years, but it is re-written by Mei Lan-Fang to become his famous opera drama in the last mid-20 century.

The politic events in the film such as the Cultural Revolution (1956-1964) are parallel to the drama within. In the narrative of the play, Xiang Yu (or called Ba-Wang), the king of Chu (dynasty) had been defeated by Liu Bang, the king of Han (dynasty). Ba-Wang feels that his country would be led by Liu Bang, and he would lose in the war, so he tries to save his concubine, Yu-Ji. But Yu-Ji refuses to be apart from him unless she prefers to go. At the end, she kills herself to reduce the anxiety of Xiang Yu. The transition of power to Han dynasty is similar to the changeover to the People's Republic of China; while then commits suicide of Yu-Ji had been imitated by Dic-Yi in the outer play of this film.

Meanwhile, *Farewell* gets the attention in the international festivals is: they won the Cannes Palme d'Or co-winner with *The Piano* (1993). *Farewell, my concubine* (1993) nominated Academy Award as Best Foreign Language Film in Academy Award and earned the Best Foreign Film in the Golden Globe in the same year.

3.5 Film Analysis

The researcher would use the *Farewell, my concubine* (1993) to analysis the content of the film: Is it they are given information of words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes, or any message that can be communicated?

The researcher would simply focus on the solo section of the Chinese opera.

1. Is it the solo section of Chinese opera enriched the fiction story by music, props, makeup?
2. Is it the method of symbolism, adapted to play and the play within a play can apply into the Chinese opera incorporation with fiction film?

3.6 Literature Analysis (Film Criticism and others)

According to the Berelson, Kracauer and Lowenthal (1994), the content analysis is standardised measurement are applied to metrically define units and these are used to characterise and compare documents. (Lincoln. D, 1994) Hence, the researcher examines the film from the film reviews, books and other articles in order to support the researcher's film analysis.