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The Portrayal of Women in MP & GI Films

Over the years, the Hong Kong film industry has remained one of the most unique and versatile industries internationally. Due to its rich cultural history as a British colony and as a sanctuary for refugees, Hong Kong has been able to combine both Western and Eastern influences to create a characteristically transnational cinema that has captured audiences around the world. The presence of such international stars as Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan solidified Hong Kong cinema into the world's memory and drew Western attention to the region's film industry beginning in the 1970s. However, while scholars have focused their attention on analyzing more contemporary Hong Kong films, one Hong Kong film production studio slowly became erased from memory, despite having produced over 100 films between 1955 and 1970 and being the primary rival of the dominant Shaw Brothers studio because their films were so critically well-received (Ain-Ling 354-67). This studio was known as Motion Picture and General Investment (MP & GI) Film Co., the Hong Kong subsidiary of the Cathay Organisation headed by the charismatic Loke Wan Tho. Before a discussion of the films can begin, however, a background of the studio's history is needed in order to understand what made MP & GI so exceptional.

The son of a successful businessman, Loke Wan Tho founded the Cathay Organisation in 1947 in Singapore with the dream of creating a film empire that could bring modern, sophisticated entertainment to every person in Southeast Asia. In his exhibition circuit, which included theaters in Singapore, Malaya, Brunei, and N. Borneo, he always sought to build new

cinemas that were equipped with the most modern technology and could provide the audience with the best atmosphere for enjoying films (Fu 66-67). These theaters were inspired by the West, showcasing features such as air-conditioners, comfortable furniture, earphones for the hearing impaired, and sleek architecture, all designed to create the best movie-going experience (67-68). They were immensely successful, with monthly attendance that exceeded one million (Po-Yin 42). After the success of this distribution and exhibition network, Loke, in a characteristically Western move, attempted to vertically integrate his empire and control film production as well so that he could have control of the film market every step of the way (37). To do that, he took over the former Yung Hwa studio in Hong Kong in 1955 to create Motion Picture and General Investment Ltd., which operated under the studio system modelled after Hollywood's (43). In such a system, each studio had its own contracted directors, actors and actresses, scriptwriters, and other personnel. The studio system was closely connected to the star system, which searched for promising young stars, orchestrated media contact, and controlled their private lives and public images (44). After its establishment, MP & GI announced ambitious plans to make 40 to 50 films in 1956 - 1957 alone (Fu 68). Although they were unsuccessful in reaching those numbers, Cathay, with the help of its new production studio in Hong Kong, was now able to supply films for the Southeast Asia market that Loke had already established with his extensive film empire.

Despite having to compete with the Shaw Brothers, who were already well-established in the Hong Kong film industry, MP & GI were ultimately highly successful with its array of films. The films were mostly in Mandarin and were widely regarded as having high production value, with many of the films and filmmakers winning awards at prestigious festivals such as Taiwan's Golden Horse Film Festival (Mo-Wan 55). With the 1957 film *Golden Lotus*, MP & GI became

the first Hong Kong studio to win a major prize at the Asian Film Festival, and in the following year, the studio won almost all the major awards at the festival, including Best Picture for the 1957 drama-comedy *Our Sister Hedy* (Fu 68). More often than not, MP & GI films were contemporary films: either light comedies, melodramas, song-and-dance films, or sing-song musicals (Kar 83). Stylistically, MP & GI films have been described as "popular but not vulgar, classy but not profound," which could explain why MP & GI films usually fared better critically than Shaw Brothers' mostly action-oriented films (82-83). Their films offered routes for escape and hopes for a better, more glamorous life, with most of the films featuring middle-class people, but perhaps the most striking aspect of MP & GI films is that they almost always involved women. Films that feature too many feminine characters are often perceived in Hollywood to be unmarketable, yet MP & GI was able to create successful female-oriented films back in the 1950s and 1960s. In order to understand how MP & GI was able to achieve this feat, this paper will analyze a couple of MP & GI's films to see how women were portrayed before moving on to which factors played a role in creating what I view as some of the most excellent and balanced depictions of women.

First, it is important to know what is meant by a good feminine portrayal. Studies in feminism and film have shown that women's conventional roles in film often do not fully represent women's real identities and experiences (Humm 13). While men's roles are more differentiated and varied, women have traditionally been given primitive stereotypes, with only a few modifications here and there as times have changed (Johnston 22). Conventionally, women are marginalized and mostly silent in films, used merely as props for the furthering of a male's development. For example, women normally only played mothers or love interests, which only supplemented a male's character (Humm 12-13). The end result is an overall one-sided portrayal

of women not as people with varied experiences and complex emotions, but as tools to be used to fit the needs of the film. In light of this, a good feminine portrayal should be defined as one that depicts *women as women*, meaning that they should illustrate how a woman realistically can be in all her complexities and roles. The character should not be defined in terms of what her role is to a man, but in terms of how she chooses to lead her life. Some feminist film critics tend to focus on the conformation of female stereotypes as an indicator of a bad portrayal, but in the context of this essay, the presence or absence of traditionally stereotypical traits will not be the main determinant of a good or bad portrayal, although stereotypes do naturally play a role in gender portrayals. This is because having a large number of non-conforming women, i.e. women that are not gentle, emotional, dependent, weak, etc., does not necessarily mean the women are portrayed well because realistically, some women fully embrace traditional roles, while others do not, and a film with a high presence of non-conforming women would underrepresent women who are more feminine. Furthermore, if a good portrayal of a woman was defined as one that is non-stereotypical, that would equate having non-female characteristics as the only way women can be depicted well, which further degrades the idea of being feminine. That's why the most important thing to consider when analyzing the following films is that the films should portray women's real identities and experiences. There should therefore be a variety of well-developed women, and they should not be pigeonholed into one role and used as a prop for a man.

The two MP & GI films that will be analyzed are *Our Sister Hedy* (1957) and *The Wild, Wild Rose* (1960). The first one, *Our Sister Hedy*, is a heartwarming romantic comedy melodrama that stars four sisters with very different personalities. The film, directed by Tao Qin, is more character-driven than plot-driven, allowing for a greater development of the women onscreen. The eldest sister, Hilda, is burdened by responsibility and acts as a motherly figure and

role model for her younger sisters. She is a careful, genuine, and conscientious woman, but because of all her duties – she does housework, cares for her father, and works as well – she barely has times for her love life. The men that she meets are usually stolen by the second-eldest sister, Helen. Helen is a gorgeous, care-free woman who seduces any men in the vicinity. This becomes a source of conflict because her sisters' lovers usually end up with her by the end of the night. Hedy, the third-eldest sister, is an energetic and playful tomboy who excels in all types of sports, as well as intellectual games like chess. Although she does not seem too concerned about finding a man for herself, she is extremely involved in her sisters' lives and often plays matchmaker to much comedic effect. Finally, the youngest sister, Hazel, otherwise known as Susu, is very agreeable, keen, and slow. She is the first to be married and leave the house, creating an interesting dynamic for the sisters since she is the youngest. In the course of the film, various situations involving romance and sibling rivalry create humorous scenarios and reveal the other sides of the sisters' personalities. For example, it turns out that Hilda, who always makes sacrifices for her little sisters, has her breaking points and needs to be loved and care for too; Helen is revealed to be lonely, which is why she always needs men around her; and Hedy, although portrayed as uninterested in men, still ends up in a relationship. The four women in the film are on different parts of the spectrum of female personalities possible, which is part of what makes this film so riveting. Despite having four female leads, the film never feels like a chick flick. Each woman seems very real, and in fact, the opening credits even acknowledge this realism with this line: "Look through this window: you can see people who live like you and me." The point of the film is to show the humorous side of real-life romantic situations that occur when personalities clash. Therefore, portraying realistic and varied women is vital for the film to

succeed, and succeed it does. *Our Sister Hedy* is not only critically-acclaimed, but can be appreciated for its dynamic female portrayals.

The second film, *The Wild, Wild Rose*, was directed by Wang Tianlin, and it blew audiences away with Grace Chang's phenomenal acting and singing. A stylish adaptation of *Carmen*, this film follows the engaged pianist, Liang Hianhua, who gets a new job at a nightclub working with the beautiful and flirtatious singer Deng Sijia, played by Grace Chang. Although the film is framed as a story about Liang Hianhua, it is ultimately Sijia who is the most complex and enthralling character in the film. From the very beginning, she is a powerhouse, opening the film with a song that mocks love, dancing seductively with her mostly male audience members, and offering a wild first impression for both Hianhua and the filmgoers. During the course of the first few scenes, she proves to be sexy, talented, charming, and manipulative. She attempts to and succeeds in seducing Hianhua after much initial resistance, and by doing so, she seems to function as the *femme fatale*, a woman whose charms ensnare her lover and lead to his downfall. In most *femme fetale* tales, the seducer often functions simply as a villain and as an obstacle designed to test the man's control over his primeval urges. The focus is therefore on the male and on how he triumphs, or fails to triumph, at resisting seduction. In contrast to the *femme fetale*, however, Sijia is a wholly sympathetic character and is never seen as evil, despite having some seemingly negative qualities, because the film makes sure to show her softer side. Underneath her hard, sassy exterior lies a surprisingly soft heart. When her friend Old Wang is laid off for showing up late too many times due to his wife's poor health, Sijia uses her cunning and charismatic charms to try to keep Old Wang from being fired. Later, she visits him, and when she sees that he is in dire financial trouble, she does not hesitate to make some sacrifices and get some money for him. Without these soft moments, the focus of the film would be on the male

and on how a villainous woman changed his life, but by fully developing Grace Chang's character, however, the film shifts the focus back on the woman. Since she is not a villain, she loses her function as a simple "obstacle" and becomes a wholly human character. The film ends up being as much of a story about Hianhua as it is about Sijia. Their fates are intertwined, and Hianhua and Sijia both affect each other's well-being, which legitimizes Sijia as a character whose life can also be affected by love and romance. With such a strong, versatile performance by Grace Chang and a well-developed character, *The Wild, Wild Rose* succeeds in portraying a woman who could so easily have been marginalized into a purely sensual role, but instead is given life as a multi-dimensional figure that audiences sympathize with and see as the main attraction of the film.

Both *The Wild, Wild Rose* and *Our Sister Hedy* are successful in creating unforgettable and realistic portrayals of women. In contrast to how women are normally portrayed, there are a wide variety of personalities that women can have, as seen in *Our Sister Hedy*. There is also significant character development in both films, which shifts the role of women from marginalized tools that are used to advance male characters development to legitimate characters capable and worthy of having plots revolve around them without losing audience attention. There are a couple characteristics of MP & GI that allowed for such gender portrayals to occur in the studio's films. The first was the role of Loke Wan Tho and his dream of modernity. Loke was born in Kuala Lumpur and received a mostly Western education, having studied in Switzerland, Cambridge, and London (Po-Yin 40). When he came back to Singapore to reorganize the Cathay business, he structured his film business after Hollywood's studio system (44). Although he incorporated the structure of Hollywood into his business, he did differ in that the business remained a family one. Loke himself remained involved in the business, becoming Chairman of

MP & GI when it was formed (Mo-Wan 55). This allowed him to have some power over what was produced, although this was limited because he had little actual experience in filmmaking (Fu 69). As mentioned before, Wan Tho was a westernized man who loved the idea of modernity and made sure that his theaters were modernly equipped. It should come as no surprise then that the "modern woman" appeared in MP & GI films. If Loke's dream was to modernize the everyday life of Southeast Asia, then it only followed that his company's films should portray women in modern, non-traditional ways, and it makes sense that many MP & GI films center on women as people instead of as props. Many of the women in his films have jobs, such as Hilda in *Our Sister Hedy*, Sijia in *The Wild, Wild Rose*, and Grace Chang's character Lin Kepin in *Air Hostess*. Even the weakest character in *The Wild Wild Rose*, Hianhua's wife, has a job as a teacher. In contrast to the traditional role of women as domestic and subservient to men, most of the women in MP & GI films were, as long as they are young, independent and not defined by their male counterparts. This is a fairly modern concept, and it's no wonder that MP & GI's films, which were aimed at modernity, chose to depict their women in such refreshing new ways.

Another factor that resulted in strong women portrayals in MP & GI films was the studio and star systems. Because personnel were contracted, the staff had a sense of security that allowed them to focus on developing their craft. Every contracted member knew who they would be working with for years to come. More specifically, screenwriters and directors knew the actors and actresses that would play the roles in their scripts, often tailoring their scripts to fit the actor or actress or to create new images for them. Screenwriters would use the temperaments and personalities of the stars to create characters (Kei 93-94). This may explain the diverse and real portrayals of women in *Our Sister Hedy*. Mu Hong, the actress who played Hilda, was considered gentle and virtuous, Yeh Feng, who portrayed Helen, was described as sexy and

seductive, Lin Cui, who played Hedy, was known as being boyish and outgoing, and Soo Fung, who played Susu, was affectionate and fragile (94). Screenwriters also used the actual talents of their performers to create films for them. Grace Chang was talented in dance, song, and acting, and so she was case in a myriad of musically-oriented drama films, such as *Mambo Girl* (1957) and *Air Hostess* (1959) (94). To prove her acting skills, Nellie Chin Yu wrote a script specifically for her that would provide a contrast to the star's primary image as the innocent, nice, musical girl (99). This script was for *The Wild, Wild Rose*, and in the film, she portrays a completely different character, one that was crude, manipulative, and sometimes selfish. With this film, Grace Chang showed that she had more than just musical skills to offer: she also had versatile acting abilities and could convincingly portray a completely different character than what she normally did (99). The audience's recognition of this is probably one of the reasons she was so popular. All these examples just go to show that the filmmakers knew their colleagues and how to use the strengths of each star to create characters. By grounding the characters in real people, the films stayed true to what real women's talents and personalities were, which is ultimately what helps make a gendered portrayal a good one.

Both the studio system and the vision of Loke Wan Tho contributed to the strong portrayals of women in MP & GI films and the uniqueness of the MP & GI era. Loke succeeded in creating many stars and an excellent reputation, but unfortunately, in contrast to Shaw Brothers, MP & GI suffered great financial losses over the years. Some have said that Loke "made good films, but not good money" (Po-Yin 47). After years of intense competition with the more financially savvy Shaw Brothers, it seemed that the rivalry was starting to take its toll on Cathay in the early 1960s. In the midst of this decline, the ill-timed and unfortunate death of Loke in a plane crash in 1964 signaled the beginning of the end for MP & GI. Business was

handed over to Loke's brother-in-law and MP & GI was reorganized into Cathay (Hong Kong), but the retirement of Grace Chang and the departure of other actors and directors resulted in drops in output and market shares (48). At this point, Shaw Brothers stepped up their production, leaving no room for Cathay to make a come-back. In the end, production closed down in 1971 (49). Yet although MP & GI is no longer around, it managed to produce many outstanding films during its golden days. Its film legacy, one characterized by high-quality films and the direction of a visionary patriarch, most certainly should not be forgotten.

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