

# A Probe in the Language Features of Fruit Chan's Films from the Perspective of Audio-visual Characteristics: Taking the Trilogy on Hong Kong's Return to China as an Example

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**Abstract.** After the territory of Hong Kong formally returned in 1997 to its rightful owner of China, Fruit Chan (Chen Guo), a director, rose to fame with his trilogy on HK's return (namely *Little Cheung*, *Made in Hong Kong*, and *The Longest Summer*). Since then, he has successively made many films reflecting humans' real living status. Most of Hong Kong-made films in the past were standardized and industrialized, such as comedies and action films which are familiar to us, while there were few realistic films that could indeed depict and present the social changes to the public. Therefore, films like Fruit Chan's, which demonstrates tragic and profound ideas, are extremely rare and valuable in Hong Kong's film industry. Although Chan has not produced many works, all of them are endowed with realistic hue, aesthetic characteristics, and profound humanistic thoughts, which makes his films monuments of Hong Kong's realistic ones. It is easy to find sense of mission and sentimental feelings in his films, enabling us to better see how Hong Kong films move forward in the direction of visual transmission after Hong Kong's return to China from multiplex angles of view.

**Keywords:** Fruit Chan; Trilogy on Hong Kong's Return to China; Tragedy; Audio-visual Language.

## 1. Introduction

The year 1997 has become an important dividing point of Hong Kong's films development, which not only reflected the alternation of Hong Kong's ideology and social nature, but also deeply demonstrated the historical concept and spiritual characteristics change. Films, as a diversified and popular art, has quite unique and obvious expression ways, from which we can find directors' different angles of thinking and diverge image styles shown on the screen.

Film is an Audio-visual art. Through the combination of image and sound, it conveys the director's ideological will to the audience and explain the theme of the film. Meanwhile, film is also a diversified art, which also shoulders the role of education and enlighten while expressing the value directors would like to deliver. That is to say, film is actually an art that has an impact on social development. In 1997, Hong Kong underwent great changes in its society, which exerted a great impact on Chan's creation. Against this backdrop, most of Chan's films focused on social issues, with strong social criticism and the profound examination on the social problems at that time. Eventually, his trilogy on Hong Kong's return came to existence. The realistic style made him rise to fame in the Hong Kong Film Festival with his own features, showing the audience an independent, unprecedented but familiar world of low-level people.

## 2. The Core of Tragedy --Themes in 1997

The year 1997 was a year of celebration for the people of mainland China because in this year, Hong Kong was officially returned to China. This is a manifestation of China's growing national strength and the unremitting struggle of several generations. However, things always have two sides. There are always some people with special conditions in Hong Kong, and this return may force themselves to give up the jobs on which they depend for their survival and turn to another one for earning their living. The social status they had before would even disappear. Some of them may be regarded as social elite or ordinary people in the past, while they later were recognized as the bottom group of the society. In their view, 1997 is destined to be an unforgettable tragedy for them.

These are the effects of Hong Kong's return on individuals. The following parts will be the influences on the whole community. It is undeniable that Hong Kong's return to China would have a

certain impact on society in the short term at that time. It might trigger an ideological struggle in people's hearts. Whether they could continue to live in this brand-new ideology and brand-new social situation, they might be confused, helpless, and even in urgent need of comfort. In such a condition, Fruit Chan brought out his trilogy and made his place in the realism film in Hong Kong.

The trilogy refers to *Little Cheung*, *Made in Hong Kong*, and *The Longest Summer*, and the three films tell different stories. However, they share the same core, that is, to reflect how difficultly the people in the bottom of the society survive by depicting their tragic fates. Besides, these works also demonstrate how the turmoil affected them at that time.

*The Longest Summer* tells a story of a group of Chinese British serving for Britain troops that was dissolved on the eve of Hong Kong's return and ended their military career. They lost their jobs in middle age and could not find a suitable one. Therefore, they were forced to decide to rob a bank together with their families. The protagonist is called Jiaxian, and his younger brother, Jiaxuan, was also involved. However, one of them was killed by a gang of thieves, and Jia Xuan was also killed by the head of another gang. Two of them were missing. Jiaxian lost his memory after being shot, and entered to a new way of life.

The film's topic is quite unique. It focuses on the unemployed soldiers. In most people's eyes, soldiers will never lose their jobs, and they can work for the army for long. This stereotype prevents the whole society from noticing the unemployed soldiers, and this was also a great issue after Hong Kong returned in 1997. Chan cast their story on the big screen, hoping to attract social attention to them, because their years of military life made them unable to adapt to the new life in society after unemployment.

In the film *Little Cheung*, the little Cheung's family was a lower-class household in Yau Tsim Mong District. The father was not good at educating his children, and mother was fond of gambling, resulting in his eldest son leaving. Little Cheung was more intimate with the Filipino domestic workers than with his mother. When Little Cheung was six years old, he often helped his family's teahouse deliver takeout. He was cute. The neighborhood loved him and called him "Little Cheung". One day, he met a girl of the same age called Little Fan, who came to his teahouse to apply for a job and was rejected. Little Cheung shared the "business" of delivering takeout and earned money together. From then on, the two began their city adventure like what the film *A Little Romance* is about. Little Cheung asked about the whereabouts of his brother who was thrown out of the house by his father. Similarly, he was beaten up by his father and ran away from home. Little Fan was also discovered by the police her true identity -- a stowaway, and she might be forced to send back to the mainland. Their love left great impression on the audience. The film examines the times from a child's point of view. Superficially, the film is all about gossip topics and daily trifles, but the plot actually reflects the political changes.

The whole film seems to be composed of the trivial matters of the protagonist's family, but what director Chan wants to express through this film is the anxiety of how to find a way out under the disintegration of traditional family relations. Under the background of the Hong Kong's return in 1997, the family relations are also in a transition period. Under the colonial rule of the British government in the past, the traditional Chinese family concept was greatly impacted by the western culture. The "big family" model was deeply affected by "small family" model in the west, and the family consciousness and responsibility were correspondingly weakened. This is exactly what director Chan hopes to express. He is worried about the original Hong Kong family model and his expectations for the changes that the traditional Chinese family model can be back after Hong Kong's return to China.

In the film *Made in Hong Kong*, the protagonist, Chung Chau, has always been aggressive since his childhood. His father abandoned his wife and son early on for a mainland woman. For this reason, Chau hated his father. When his mother also ran away from home, Chau could no longer bear. He ran to his father and that woman's home and wanted to chop him down. But in a public toilet, he was shocked to see a teenager cut off one of his father's hands. Chau, known as a marginalized teenager, were in mood swings recently. It turned out that he fell in love with a terminally ill girl, Ping. Ping's father borrowed money from Chung Chau's head in a gang. To prove his love towards Ping, Chau

borrowed money from Rong to help here cure kidney disease, and he even became a killer. On the day of a mission, Chau eventually failed, while Rong who had promised to protect him, had already run to the mainland. One day, Chung Chau was unexpectedly hacked by a teenager and forced to be in the hospital. More than a month later he was discharged from hospital, only to find that Ping had died. The mentally retard boy he had been taking care of, Lung, was also cheated by Rong to carry drugs, and Lung was accidentally killed. This time, Chung Chau was determined to revenge to the world.

*Made in Hong Kong* is the most wonderful and shocking Hong Kong film made in 1997. It takes youth rebellion as the theme. It does not heighten the atmosphere of romantic feelings of heroes or gangster heroes. Instead, it shows those gangsters who can not see the hope of tomorrow through a dystopian and anti-hero way. As the first of the trilogy on Hong Kong's return, it meets with the creative concept of film's social responsibility as a whole. In particular, it discloses the living environment of Hong Kong's public housing, which is parasitic by gangs and grassroots. It has epitomized a big picture like Hong Kong's economic take-off into such a narrow space, and used it to describe the indelible memory and unforgettable pain of a generation in the process of growing up.

The trilogy is set in 1997 as the historical background to show the impact of Hong Kong's return in 1997 on society. The collision and interweaving of the two ideologies have made Hong Kong young people who have "returned home" at the beginning become confused because they have "left home" for too long. Their broken hearts are constantly wandering and searching in this strange and familiar society. Chan gives an artistic interpretation of such a realistic historical period. He delicately combines the authenticity of history and the artistry of the film together, so that the moviegoers feel an unspeakable tension.

### 3. Tragic Images Presentation of the Trilogy

Film is a kind of Audio-visual art, and is a world where authenticity and artistry coexist. Chan skillfully combines artistry and history and strengthens the tragic appeal of the film through the combination of vision and sound, and creates a pessimistic image world. The tragic world Chan created is teemed with sadness and strength, which can not only express the darkness side of the world, but also make the audience feel the shocking power of tragedy. At the same time, Chan also used a large number of black humor scenes to create a tragic atmosphere.

#### 3.1 Spatial Tragedy

Compared with chronological narration, space-order narration is often ignored, and it is actually the most direct way to reflect the visual art characteristics of movies. For example, the axis principle often talked about is closely related to space. As is mentioned before, film is the art of vision and sound. The layout of space is the most direct visual impact. A good director can complete the expression of the theme through the picture, and can render the space atmosphere he needs through the selection of space.

Calvino once said, "Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else." The city is the most advanced space that nurturing both individuals and communities. However, the true face of the city is always difficult to generalize. In Chan's work, Hong Kong owns high-rise buildings and is ablaze with lights together with shadow. In reality, however, it only reflects people's survival under the special background. It can bring you both great success and devastating failure.

*The Longest Summer* begins with a rusty iron window and a few veterans sitting in a cafeteria in contrast to the scene behind it. Everyone in the highway Harbor Square is celebrating Hong Kong's return to China, while the unemployed soldiers have no place in such a festive atmosphere. They are forgotten like wild animals in prison. People always want to see contrast, hoping that the story in the film and people's cognitive Behavior in daily life are contrary to each other, so should the film

characters be. The protagonist lives in such a difficult situation, and the outside world is so colorful. This scene is like what the famous quote said, "Spring is coming, but I cannot see anything."

Public housing, as a product of Hong Kong special times, is also common in Chan's film space narration. It is small and closed, but it contains the hope of the poor. Countless poor people hope to get a public housing to ease their immediate survival difficulties. However, when they really live in public housing, they will find that it is actually more like a cage, in which the whole life is invisibly confined. The stairs are round and the whole design is hollow. It is like a beast's big mouth trying to swallow all life and vitality into it. In *Made in Hong Kong*, the hero and heroine are living in a narrow and closed public housing, which implies the fate of the protagonists --besieged all the time. The exact same structure symbolizes that the protagonists are constantly repeating the same fate trajectory, and it is difficult for them to escape from the control of fate. The weakness of fate and the disappointment of life are repeated in the public housing again and again. Chan also set up some imaginary virtual spaces in his films, which provide visible external models for the audience to understand the inner world of the characters, which effectively show the tragic theme of the film.

In such a special background, the change of urban space is faster and broader, but at the same time it is also more varied. The protagonists under Chan's lens often fail to keep up with the changing speed of urban space for their own environment and role positioning, and they cannot see themselves clearly. They cannot gain recognition in such a changing environment, either. Chan expresses the character's inner struggle through these specific environments, making good combination of artistry and reality. His work poetically shows the agitation and loss of security of urban people in the free public space of China, and renders the tragic atmosphere.

### 3.2 Infectious Sound

Film is a combination of visual and auditory art. In the performance of tragedy, sound is even better than the picture. The tragedy can be delivered in various form. Its infectious power can hit people's heart directly.

In *Little Cheung*, the sound at the end of the film can be regarded as a stroke of genius. Little Cheung is chasing after Fan, who was taken away by a police car. In front of the car are people laughing and fireworks shining brightly. However, little Cheung is running after the car. In the sound design, the picture is shown together with little Cheung's heart-breaking cries. There are both happy scenes and sad ones, but the audience will definitely feel more about sadness. That's the effect of sound. It can not only attract audience's attention, but also can amplify and emphasize the tragic atmosphere of the film. The heart-breaking cries, in such an environment, are even more shocking, harsh and desolate. With such a happy picture being the background, Cheung's sullenness becomes more prominent. In this way, the irony of social reality can be found.

In addition to the use of voice to depict tragedy, Chan's use of film music is also very distinctive. In *The Longest Summer*, there was a scene of people being killed near the river. The time was set on the eve of Hong Kong's return to China. Many citizens were standing by the Xiangjiang River and watching the fireworks show. The background music was very festive. The protagonist found the person to kill and committed the crime very calmly. In the process, uncharacteristically, the background music adopted a more joyful jumping rhythm. The audience's mood may change with the music. The killing scene, together with the music, kept audience in a high spirit as if they were in this environment. In such a celebratory atmosphere, the audience witnessed such a thrilling crime with their own eyes, as if it had happened around, but there was a great sense of powerlessness because that could not be stopped. At the same time, through the performance of this play, the director incisively and vividly portrayed the mentality of Hong Kong young people who were poisoned by society to be almost numb. It is more like a silent accusation. The protagonist used his own behavior as a silent indictment of how society has wronged him.

As is mentioned above, compared with the picture, there are more forms of sound expression, such as sound and picture matching, and sound and picture separation, etc. Every director has his own ideas, while Chan is better at separating sound and picture to play their own functions, and at the

same time stripping sound to give full play to its original meaning. Putting the same sound in the same plot can produce a completely different effect in Chan's hands. In the trilogy, through the proper use and exquisite treatment of music, the tragic atmosphere is repeatedly highlighted and the audience is slowly brought into the plot, as if to personally experience the breathless feeling of powerlessness.

### 3.3 Tragicomedy of Romanticism

Film is a diversified art. People can feel the beauty and the theme of the film. These are not only limited to sound, light, color and other Audio-visual language role. The use of film props, editing style and so on are also involved in the film creation, which is enough to interpret the theme of the film. In addition to being able to meticulously display the right props in the right era, the same props will also play different roles in different scenes. For example, fireworks, which is often seen is some joyful occasion, is used to show sorrow in Chan's trilogy. Fireworks often come with happiness, but most of the works endow them with desperate feelings, which seems to conform to another characteristic of fireworks: although they are beautiful but fleeting, and they are difficult to escape the fate of disappearance.

The use of such props is very common in Chan's films. For example, the car little Cheung ran after appears to be so delicate and festive. Because of Hong Kong's return, it was hung with red flowers. However, he watched the red flowers shaking back and forth in front of him, as if his hope was farther and farther away from him. Similarly, a very festive prop is used as a tragic prop to render a tragic atmosphere and form a contrast effect.

Chan removes the romantic characteristics of the objects themselves, so that these objects or props can really be used for their own. This is director Chan's unique creative thinking: to make the props come to life.

## 4. Conclusion

Chan's films are about social tragedies based on Hong Kong society. It is of certain social realistic significance to explore them. On the one hand, from the perspective of the evolution of film art ontology, Chan's tragic films are not only a reflection of realism, but also a beneficial improvement and transcendence on the basis of realistic aesthetics. The films have a poetic realism characteristic and are a poetic interpretation of realistic spirit. As is mentioned before, in Chan's films, there are not only freehand space presentation, but also the unique use of sound, color, light and shadow, and props of tragicomedy. These settings made great breakthroughs compared with lens and picture mode adopted in traditional realistic films. They create a poetic tragic aesthetic feeling with rhythm, which is a poetic interpretation of the spirit of realism.

On the other hand, in Hong Kong's film industry, such a place with a lot of talents, Chan, with his own unique image style, earned his own status. At the same time, he has also established a new voice channel for the bottom of Hong Kong society. Chan presented the real events that he had experienced, seen, and been shocked to the public through conscious processing. As a director, he knew that he was shouldering the heavy mission of social education. The tragedy of Hong Kong's real society is presented to the audience in the form of films. His films have become "moving novels" of the social tragedy of Hong Kong, with the strength and depth of social criticism, which is of great significance in the history of Hong Kong films development.

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