

all contributors, in their own way, successfully challenge, contest and stretch any preconceived notions of what queer Chinese art might constitute. The sources discussed in this volume are rich and varied, encompassing papercuts, photography, painting, performance, curatorial projects, exhibition reviews, film screenings, interviews and newspaper articles, among others. Unlike conventional conference proceedings, the poignant personal accounts of the artists, curators and activists, which are woven into the very fabric of many chapters, become primary sources in their own right. Furthermore, the varied approaches used throughout the volume unlock diverse perspectives. On the one hand, the contributors deploy storytelling and personal reflections as their main method, often coupled with textual and visual analysis. On the other hand, the authors also draw on thematic, discourse and semiotic analysis, and to a lesser extent, on interviews and online workshops.

While there is no doubt about the significance of this courageous scholarly intervention, the following two suggestions might serve as starting points for further enquiry. First, the “queer” in queer art tends to be reduced to (a) the gender and sexual identity of the artists in discussion or (b) the theme of the work or event. What would queer art look like, and be conceived of, in the absence of queer-identifying artists or representations of gender-queer bodies? Second, increased visibility not only comes with recognition and support but also with potential risks and dangers. What role do lower-visibility strategies, such as camouflage, non-disclosure and illegibility, play in the production, display and reception of queer art in China?

Over the course of the book’s 248 pages, the reader witnesses how activists turn into writers, artists become critics of their own work, and scholars inevitably transform into advocates for the unconditional acceptance and support of queer lives. The moments in which these distinct perspectives intersect and blur are arguably when this volume becomes most stimulating. *Contemporary Queer Chinese Art* will appeal to scholars and students in the fields of cultural studies, gender and queer studies, Chinese studies, art history and social activism. The volume not only creates a rich archive of feminist activism, queer-themed exhibitions and artistic practices; it also brings to the fore the lived experiences of queer individuals that have been consistently relegated to the margins of public and academic discourse. This pioneering volume is a major achievement for the study of queer art in China and demonstrates the great potential – and urgency – of this novel field of research.

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## Hong Kong Crime Films: Criminal Realism, Censorship and Society, 1947–1986

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Hong Kong action-crime films are so extensively studied that there may seem little new to say on the topic. Over the years countless scholars, critics, journalists and fans have dissected the genre’s chief talents, stylistic attributes and industrial practices. Yet, that discussion invariably focuses on films



from the mid-1980s through the early 1990s, a period when a particularly spectacular form of Hong Kong action-crime captured global attention. The more remote that era becomes from the present, the more obvious is the question of that topic's limited historical span and generic specificity. Hong Kong had had a diverse and prolific cinema for decades before that cycle, rife with varied genres and shaped by local conditions still not widely known to global scholarship, so how pertinent is the well-trodden subject of action-crime to this rich but still little-known early history?

Into this imposing but intriguing field wades Kristof Van den Troost, with his book *Hong Kong Crime Films: Criminal Realism, Censorship and Society, 1947–1986*. Despite the extensive writing on action-crime, Van den Troost points out, crime films are rarely addressed as a genre independent of action. Previous emphases on action, he claims, misunderstand the *narrative* significance of crime, independent of action, and already evident in Hong Kong's social realist films that were common in the 1950s. This organizing attribute of "criminal realism," as Van den Troost calls it, mirrored contemporary sociopolitical issues and was reinforced by censorship practices that at times both inspired and undermined creative impulses. Long obscured by the spectacular nature of Hong Kong's action-crime films from the mid-1980s and early 1990s, it is censorship and the longer history of criminal realism, Van den Troost demonstrates, that defines Hong Kong cinema and the culture and community that made and watched it.

In its detailed history of local film censorship, Van den Troost's book makes a major contribution to Hong Kong film history and studies of cinema censorship more broadly. Prior to this book, little had been published about film censorship in Hong Kong. Conventional wisdom regarding Hong Kong film history long held that in the fast-paced, freewheeling capitalism of the 1970s–1980s, censorship was rarely imposed by a government committed to *laissez-faire* capitalism and unlikely to intervene in a prolific and seemingly low-stakes economic sector that provided jobs, captivated local audiences and helped grow the colony's visibility abroad. Yet in excavating such subjects as the Theatres Regulation Ordinance of 1908 and the Panel of Censors established in 1947, Van den Troost presents a far-reaching and materially informed history, drawing on both British colonial records and Chinese-language news reports. Building on and extending the similarly important work of Herman Yau, Van den Troost references figures such as Nigel Watt, a career colonial official with prior experience in Africa and Aden, whose effort to improve transparency in Hong Kong film censorship was calculated to entrench its legitimacy.

Another achievement of *Hong Kong Crime Films* that will be obvious to any reader is the sheer depth and expert knowledge of the cinema that Van den Troost demonstrates. The author moves easily between English- and Chinese-language scholarship and criticism, and he discusses dozens of films from the 1950s–1970s that are little known among existing English-language scholarship. The volume is also beautifully illustrated with nearly two dozen excellent frame grabs, archival images, and reproductions of posters and contemporary ephemera, which all give a commendably immersive account of Hong Kong film history. Scholars and film buffs already well-versed in Hong Kong film will find their knowledge challenged and refined by *Hong Kong Crime Films*. Readers new to Hong Kong film will get an excellent education in the cinema's preeminent themes.

If any complaint can be made about such a comprehensive and compelling book, it might be that its detailed account of bureaucratic-industrial negotiations can sometimes obscure the demotic voice of audiences and their knowledge or perspective on the films themselves. In any media ecosystem questions of reception and the degree to which audiences know, care or understand the behind-the-scenes processes shaping their entertainment consumption is just as relevant as the policies and final product themselves. In a colonial context such as the films from 1947–1986 on which Van den Troost focuses, it could be especially powerful to counter the intriguing selections from colonial records not only with the films but with more voices of the filmmakers and filmgoers themselves. Such a counter-history would be meaningful both as a more nuanced narrative of colonial film culture, but as a prehistory to Hong Kong's current era of mainland Chinese media control. As Van den Troost often notes in his judicious comments

comparing his film history with current Hong Kong cinema, “‘everyday resistance’ is sadly very relevant again in Hong Kong today” (p. 191).

Censorship, as Ven den Troost notes, has sadly only grown more relevant in understanding contemporary Hong Kong film. In using one of the cinema’s most familiar topics to unearth a much longer history of censorship than normally recognized, *Hong Kong Crime Films* is a richly textured, deeply rewarding contribution to Hong Kong film studies and to histories of censorship in world film.

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## Ruling the Stage: Social and Cultural History of Opera in Sichuan from the Qing to the People’s Republic of China

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Chabrowski’s book is a formidable and highly original addition to the literature on the social organization of traditional Chinese opera from the last years of imperial Qing rule in the 19th century to the impact of Western-style spoken dramas in the years of the Republic (1912–1949), and up to the consolidation of Communist control over the performing arts in the 1950s. Based on dedicated in-depth archival study, the author presents a rich, stimulating and important account of operatic practices and contexts in Sichuan. The book offers significant complementarity to recent studies of operatic culture in Beijing, Shanghai, Xi’an, Guangdong and across the Chinese diaspora.

The study comprises three parts. Part one, “Opera in Qing-era Sichuan,” contextualizes operatic culture in this southwestern region. As Sichuan recovered from devastating conflict during the transition from Ming to Qing rulership, diverse genres of traditional opera became deeply established in the broader society’s communal lifeways. Opera productions constructed a sense of history and community, and they shaped economic, hereditary and religious landscapes. Among numerous interesting insights that nuance our historical understanding, Chabrowski’s research reveals that local authorities across the province often welcomed opera performance; rather than wishing ban opera, they recognized that the large gatherings it stimulated presented opportunities not only for communal solidarity but also for social and moral transgression. Opera was a keystone of Sichuan society; it therefore demanded careful management.

In part two, Chabrowski looks at the institutionalization and commercialization of opera in the period 1902–1937. Chapter two examines the new relationships between theatre and power that appeared in the reform and Republican periods. Here, the analysis of taxation practices and the symbiotic involvement of urban police forces is particularly fascinating. The author notes that the police needed to keep opera profitable so that they could receive their cut of the earnings in turn: “Because of these sorts of policies, some theatres ...weathered all the political, economic, and social storms in the early twentieth century” (p. 94). Chapter three addresses the rise of new spaces for opera in prosperous urban centres (Chongqing is the primary example), as commercial