Between "I" and "You": An Architextual Construction of Li Wo's Broadcast Drama as Film Adaptation[1]

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In case readers find the title of this essay too esoteric, try this one:

…How Two Husband-hunters *hunt a* Second Spring *while a* Singing Nightingale *turns* a Spy *into a* Beautiful Ghost *staggering through* Blossoms in Rainy May[2]…

This alternative title is made up of half paraphrases and half translation of the six movie titles I am discussing in this essay. These films are all based on popular broadcast story-teller Li Wo's "airwave novel," or affectionately called "sky fiction" (*tiankong xiaoshuo*), which had, in the 1950s and 1960s, drawn many faithful crowds around the home radio sets simply because they wanted to know what would happen next to the characters. In my view, it takes no less than a meandering title with many twists like the one in the above to sufficiently qualify Li's typical flamboyantly plotted stories.

A Toboggan Fall through a Series of Trap Doors…

It was in a leisurely afternoon that I sat down to watch *Second Spring* [*cui lou chun xiao*, literally, the spring morning of a jade mansion, dir. Wang Tianlin, 1960]. My attention was immediately drawn to a slow long pan which marked an orderly, procedural, spatial transition from the river bank in the opening sequence, to the main text's pavilion (the centre stage for romantic eruption in the story), then the jade mansion (*chui lao*, the house of victimization), thus also completing the introduction of the male and female protagonists and their servants. I was very conscious of the effective treatment by Wang Tianlin, who wasted no time to set up a visual passage almost like a ritualistic walk-through that led me right to the core of the drama. A question was flashing in my mind: am I watching the film for Wang or for Li Wo, the subject of my writing assignment? But I had no time for that question. For what immediately followed for me -- a willing, absorbed viewer of suspended disbelief -- was an experience that totally threw me off the track of my normal informed viewing strategies.

Perhaps much less on the watch with shocks and surprises as when one is reading *Alice in the Wonderland* for the first time, the film, like the latter, was an unmistakable machine with a series of trap doors awaiting me to find them and fall,

while also drawing out my empathy, extreme care for the characters and, at times, tears I was ashamed of shedding. Looking back, the narrative process – a trap door series opening to roller-coasters with alternating swings of moral exaltation and pulsating pleasures of evil conspiracy -- commanded a highly visceral experience. At the same time, I noticed the phenomenology of viewing was very much at the function of the extreme artificiality of the narrative – that is, a kind of pleasurable constructed-ness that displays itself, with an effect almost like Brechtian distanciation. Many more questions had flipped and flashed along my process of viewing all the six films as a single occasion. This essay is an account of my meditation on the many aspects of story-telling and story reception while watching the six films back to back.

Try the toboggan slide in *Second Spring*: boy meets girl and they fall in love – brief separation necessary due to family obligation – girl forced to marry boy's brother, a now dying stranger arranged to be her groom when she was a child – groom dies the moment bride arrives at the wedding ceremony – bride makes death oath not to see her brother-in-law/lover at mother-in-law's command – young widow forced to shoulder heavy housework – widow escapes after much struggle – lover loses his mind – widow found – widow escapes – widow being cheated and caught again – widow locked up in brother's house – widow forced once again (by her brother's wife) to make death oath not to see her lover – widow escapes again – widow attempts suicide – lover loses his mind again – widow found once again… The rule of cheating and betrayal, the missing of essential information, thus erroneous assessment of situations, thus resentment, misunderstanding and misdirected (re-)action … hold all details together into a huge machinery of tricks and traps. A character may hit one of the trap doors, the viewer rushes in with him or her to fall upon the most impossible disaster, and yet at the last glimpse of life before one stops breathing, even the most irresolvable problem undoes itself.

Li Wo spoke of his plotting strategies:
"Not that I had injected morphine into my audience, but I did manage to `hook' them to my stories to make them want more. I would set up an almost impossible situation without obvious solutions. Say, an extremely wicked person locks up the protagonist in an iron box and drops it into the sea with a huge rock tied to it to make sure it sinks. How do I carry on with the story the following day? For I simply can't let the protagonist die or else there'll be no more story to tell." [interview notes, HK Film Archive's oral history project]

A tightrope walk on the impossible and the unthinkable is no better description of Li Wo's story machine. For a young widow, to have romantic ties with her brother-in-law is a deadly sin according to feudalist views, a sin that has invoked

many acts of persecution enough to keep the film busy. The remarkable solution is this: in the final scene, a Buddhist nun comes in to advice that since the widow has not consummated her marriage with the groom (i.e. has not lost her virginity), it is not a problem that the husband's brother marries her. A feudalist problem finds the solution from within its own paradigm: that is, the thinkable restores the possible!

Li Wo, "The worst script-writing is to appeal to miracles and supernatural solutions… Many script writers rely on `the accidental,' such as so and so by chance runs into so and so… This is the most stupid way to develop a story, the worst, the most unworthy… [A strong script] should adopt the rule of `the necessary.' For example, I lost your phone number but I had to find you. Then I remembered I actually had your business card. I looked and looked and asked my wife. She didn't have it. So I kept looking and in the end I found it. That is what I mean by [a plot point emerging] out of necessity." [interview notes, HK Film Archive's oral history project]

Li Wo's highly self-conscious plot curves and story contours, plus the will to keep a story open, make the narrative process more considerable and enjoyable than the denouement (final resolution) alone.

In *Second Spring*, the drama is partly engined by the rapid closing and opening of doors… Door opens. A maid servant rushes in with tidings for a secret rendezvous. Door opens. A maid servant brings in bad news. Doors shut and open: door to the maiden chamber, rear door to the street, door to the garden, door to the wedding ceremony, door into and out of the feudalist mansion, door to hiding places, and many more… Doors open to challenge weak will and hesitant minds; doors close for conspiracies and life-saving tactics; doors open for admonition and rescue… At one point of the film, the maiden chamber's door is locked and so the lady escapes through the window to end her life. Around the same time, the front door is blocked, and the male protagonist, unable to exit, is threatened for suspected adultery.

Half way into *Blossoms in Rainy May 2*, the story gathers momentum, and a series of door opening and closing flushes haunting anxieties and failing hopes in and out of the household. The door of the tiny hotel room opens and closes: a hotel staff person presses the runaway young couple to surrender themselves to the police or he would. Behind the closed door of the hotel room, the young couple wed in moonlight's witness; they also fall out of one another in regret. The housemaid of the family is seen busily opening and closing doors almost a dozen times, channeling many conflicts and tentative solutions until the family reunites at the end of the film.

Architextual Possibilities[3]

Taking the analogy of a literary genre as a piece of architecture, Li's works can

be imagined as a huge mansion with many rooms and a variety of architectural parts,
structures of different sizes, and machinic parts for high and low-level operations.
Each work of his carries or deploys some of these components, and yet each work
adds onto the total structure already formed, to strengthen the existing structure,
sometimes to change its overall shape, but ultimately begging the observer to revise
her account of its totality. One may name such a big mansion the house of melodrama,
or of serials, or any name that describes its features.

What's most peculiar is that it is not always possible to see the house from a far view. My experience of watching six films back to back was more a process of discovering the possibility of a house. As I was watching and adding things up, I begin to see a network taking shape, revealed to me and growing, setting each film of very different story types and diverse subject matters in positions that would form an architectural paradigm whose full view I do not yet see.

Waiting for…

"Waiting" is one of those nodal points that link up the various works into an evolving network. Waiting is the emblem of the heroes and heroines in Li Wo's stories, the temperament of the many past generations they signify.

"How long will you take to return?" gently asked the female protagonist in *Oriole's Songs* [*Chu gu huangying*, dir. Lee Sun-fung, 1956].

"A few months," her lover answers equally gently and with care.

"Oh, a few months…," the pondering lady repeats softly to herself. The separation turns out to be two years long, long enough for China and the couple to have their course of future reversed.

The romantic couple in *Second Spring* swears they would wait for their love to consummate no matter what. But waiting is not necessary or it is a deadly act: for soon they share the same space of the feudalist household as brother and sister-in-law to one another. What they really wait for is absolutely prohibited in a community in which feudalist morality rules.

In *Blossoms in Rainy May 1*, the male protagonist waits for his ideal lady to say "yes." He has waited for ten years. From the film to its sequel, we witness the three main characters of the film walking through another nine years and all of them are still waiting – waiting for full acceptance among themselves as a family. *Blossoms 2* is virtually the last few weeks of the 19-year-long waiting process before the final completion of the "harmonious family" takes place. Yet the story-teller sets us on to witness that process as if we are also waiting in the real-present tense, reckoning time by the minute.

The architectural system of Li Wo's texts keeps growing as I look more and more.

How dare you… I'm sorry…

In a climatic scene in spy film *The Beautiful Ghost's Grievance* (*Li gui yuan chou*, Lee Sun-fung, 1959), while the male and female protagonists are both executing the final mission of their espionage with identities concealed from each other, the male utters the following line to the female, almost out of place of the on-going events of a patriotic nature, "Never would I have imagined you to be such a shameless woman with no integrity," -- a typical line almost in exact wordings one often hears in Cantonese melodrama about an unfaithful woman committing adultery. And he slaps her on her face. She does not resist. He walks out in fury…

In *Second Spring*, the male protagonist also scolds his sister-in-law who should be his lover, "You absolutely deserve what you are because this is the consequence that you've brought upon yourself. …You slut, you fickle-minded, selfish woman. You deserve this… How easily you have changed within such a short time. Don't you remember...Don't you remember…Don't you remember… You've been all up to lie and to make fun of me… You lewd, voluptuous…" The performative overtone of these lines takes over the female protagonist's very belated account of her misfortune.

In *Oriole's Song*, the male protagonist's sarcasm splashed all over the female protagonist, a singer at the evening song forums, who has married a friend from his home county, "There's no need to say any more. I get it. It's all because someone thinks I'm just less good than the other man no matter what." She responds, "Cheng, I owe you and have mistreated your love. Please forgive me." The fact is: the couple separate because of China's war with Japan. All the same, it takes the woman to apologize.

In *Blossom 1*, the male protagonist, returning after ten years of waiting, expresses his great distress to the woman he has anticipated, "Why hadn't you told me earlier? No wonder you said I didn't understand you. For ten years, you have never told me that you have a daughter." Equally distressed and heart-breaking, she tells him how she has also taken ten years to try to tell him how much she has wanted to marry him but cannot. Nonetheless "she" owes "him" the lost or wasted time of anticipation, like in the other stories, and she needs to beg for "his forgiveness."

The boy-girl relational balance sheet in *Blossom 2* seems to read a little differently. This time, the 18-year-old young female screamed at her classmate-lover righteously, "Now finally I see what a weak mind you have… If you really had any guts, you would have hanged in here with me… Now you're regretting. I've totally mistaken you! Alright, leave me and go!" His young male lover walks out to return home, unready for independence from his parents. The young woman is left alone in the hotel room where they have hidden to invent a new life of theirs. Who owes who, whose right is it to regret, and who should apologize? The plot leaves its hint: it is, in

the first place, the young woman who recklessly pushes her lover to run away from home. Repent…

Blame and regret. The settlement of the relational debts lies outside the story world – in the machinic space of the narrative engine, like the hidden structures behind the walls and ceilings of a house. Males blaming females is just a manifest feature. The hidden machinery is built upon the principle of one party withholding crucial information, the other party knowing too late, too little or not enough. The female characters' swallow of undeserved blame and pain in silence, the male character's lack of access to information that is available to the viewers, thus erroneous assessment and decision, and subsequent destructive action and irreversible mistakes, together compose the duet of sadist-masochism, also the nodal turns of Li's machinery of relational ethics.

Story Sense: an Open, Generative System
Multiplying the melodramatic

As suggested earlier, Li Wo's own architextual system can be mapped onto a higher-level architextual system made up of family and ethical melodramas peculiar to Hong Kong cinema. This system, I argue, showed its first signs in the mid 1920s, evolved through the 1930s to pick up particularities of a Hong Kong society caught up in the intense process of Cantonization,[4] consolidated in the 1950s and 1960s and re-injected into the domain of TV drama since the 1970s and preserved until now as a highly hybridized entity not always differentiable from imported components from Japan and Korea. Such a trajectory obviously deserves a separate investigation. What I would like to follow up below is a more anatomical view of the interiors of Li's textual architecture, and a tentative proposal for a more dialogic participation in such an entity for historians, cultural critics, creative practitioners and film buffs.

Based on my stocktaking exercise of Li's story features, I want to propose a new, tentative definition of a story. A story is a hyper-structure made up of plot lines of many species. Imagine a small carrot growing out of the body of a big carrot. A story is an open system. It is capable of breeding new structures based on what is already there. There is always a next step to a story that seems to be finished: one can always re-open a story, push it forward to reach for the next possible step, or many more steps, as long as one is willing. Every unit of a story, including the final unit of resolution, has something potentially developable, adaptable or shapeable: identify a fine thread and pull from there, and one will have another totally different story to tell. I suppose this is one way to characterize how serial story-telling works. The sequel to *Blossoms in Rainy May* to me is that "extra carrot" bulging out from the body of part one of the film. The focus of the sequel, the daughter's struggle for her own autonomy due to

resentment of her mother's second marriage, is indeed subtly suggested in part one. But *Blossoms* without the sequel is self-sufficient with its own set of problems displayed, worked through and tidily resolved. One may regard Li Wo the predecessor of "soap opera" even before the term entered the accepted vocabulary of TV drama. One may also reconsider the assumed hierarchy that places film necessarily above television and broadcast serials in general. For the "soap" format has great potentials for more progressive moves, playful subversion of story formulae and formal experimentation due to its structural openness and tentativeness of narrative closure – qualities that are not immediately shared by a one-off feature-length movie.

There is yet another side to the question raised here. Every componential unit of a story is capable of branching out into many directions. Why then does a writer pick one direction and abandon others? This is not solely a question of personal preference. Genre studies and, in the context of this essay, the appropriation of melodramatic conventions point us to a broader range of activities that have to do with the production of "common sense" via representational practices and selective choice assumed as necessity.

Lubricants, conjunctives, and conjunctures…

To complete my account of Li Wo's archi-textual construct, I also stock-take some prominently repeating catch phrases or lead sentences in the dialogues: "Never would I have imagined you…" [xiang bu dao ni…] (*Second Spring*, *Beautiful Ghost*); "You heartless, shameless…" [xiang bu dao ni…wu qing wu yi, xialiu wuchi…] (*Second Spring*, *Beautiful Ghost*); "You have wronged me…" [ni yuanwang liao wo…] (*Second Spring*, *Beautiful Ghost*); "I owe you…" [gufu liao ni…] (*Blossom*); "I've taken the wrong path…" [zou cuo liao lu…] (*Blossom*); "I cannot return your grace…" [buneng baoda ni…] (*Blossom*) and so on. Li's textual work is like an encyclopedia for the lexicon and grammar of melodramatic plot-making for relational-ethico exegesis.

The insight of generative-transformational grammar after Noam Chomsky (1928-) seems relevant. According to the generative approach, the grammar of a particular language is not a bulk of rules that prescribe use, but descriptive accounts of how language is actually performed, that is, grammatical rules provide the parameters for competence and performance. Competence then should be understood as the ability to distinguish between well-formed sentences and ill-formed sentences -- to go beyond linguistic accuracies and to define grammaticality by usage. For the linguist, the task to account for daily competence and performance is always in progress. It follows that actual daily language activities involve an individual's freely mobilizing rules that s/he has acquired to create new utterances that may not already have existed. Grammar from this perspective has generative powers, and language

activities are creative activities.[5]

Chomsky and the Generative grammarians' emphasis on competence and performance also leads me to another line of thinking on language that also prices usage and performance – by what is usually known as the Ordinary Language theories. The Speech Acts theorists, a component of this camp, for example, assert that language is not purely a matter of organization, communication and comprehension of linguistic meanings. They think of speech as utterances always pertaining to, and carrying an intention for, action.

The writings of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975) provide us with a different but related framework, the "dialogue" or "dialogic," within which the notion of "words" as "acts" is understood as the manifestation of the "I" in action. Bakhtinian dialogue underlines communicative interaction between speaker and listener. It is "a multiplicity and diversity of voices." All meaning is relational: "the result of a dialogue between and among bodies – physical, political, conceptual."[6] This means that utterances, such as a story system, always embody multiple subjectivities, and meanings cannot be settled unless they are read as engaging in an I-thou dialogue in a complex unity.

A juxtaposition of generative grammar, the speech act perspective, and Bakhtin's dialogism forms a new framework that productively sheds light on Li's story-telling system, especially its connectivity with the culture of story-listening and everyday ethics at large. From a research-creation perspective, the encyclopedic character of Li's textual architecture is a rich archive from which we can draw catch words, phrases, plot patterns and character models for re-creation or invention of new expressions via free employment and combination. But Li's big archive is not just a big inventory of speech manners or generic catch phrases, but attitudes of mind, moral pictures and subsequent ethical practices that have taken material form in language activities. Here for me also lie the critical potentials: unless one's retrieval of types is purely for nostalgic purposes, every single conscious act of mobilizing an existing form of representational and signification practice opens up the room for critical examination -- via de-contextualization and re-contextualization.

Cultural studies people call the above the politics of appropriation. It is also in the process of appropriation and inventing a new context to use the familiar expressions that a critic is forced to look carefully at what has been trapped, silenced, reinforced or valorized by a certain stock component in the big archive, thus also the obligation to release, reveal and re-invent. It is therefore not just a pure fashion that cultural studies in the past decade have prominently engaged in language as the particular location in which other forms of human activities meet and connect.

Intertextuality: Lin Kunshan, His Multiples, and so on

Lin Kunshan is an actor who has appeared in three of the films that I have watched for this essay. His "repeated" presence provides interesting details and evidence of a network of becoming.

In *Oriole's Song*, he plays an authoritative, patriarchal snob with absolute class bias. More than once we hear the Father he plays admonishing his son who is in love with a songstress who makes a living in the evening song forum in a tea restaurant, "Listening to a songstress' [performance of] songs is an exquisite leisure, but pursuing a songstress is the lowliest and most contemptuous."

In the next hour, while watching *Second Spring*, I saw Lin in "western" tie and suit, strolling back and forth in the living room of a traditional Chinese mansion, delivering his elderly insights to his nephew, the male protagonist. Another scene reveals that he's a returning Chinese from overseas education in the "west," and is blamed by the male protagonist's mother (i.e., his own sister) for being too loose-minded and failing to direct young people to the right track of behavior.

As I moved on to the ludic *Two Naughty Girls Thrice Insulted Siu Yuet-pak*, Lin came again as an obsolete "scholar" from the feudalist times. A total failure in taming his two "modern," eccentric daughters, he further loses control of himself while accompanying them to Hong Kong to pursue their dreamed romance with a popular singer Siu Yuet-pak, whose face no one has seen. As if it is his due response to the daughters' declaration of the dawn of the "atomic age," the father loses his time in the dancing hall, learning to dance as well as hanging out with the hostesses there, while the two daughters get entangled in their own romantic pursuits.

The flipping of Lin's screen personae within a single afternoon is astounding, undermining any claim for a uniform, rigid moral paradigm. Since intrinsic to the notion of narrative is the idea of persuasion via discourse, the relative validity of ethical decisions and discrepancies in moral standards are subject to the persuasive function of a particular attitude in a particular narrative discourse.

I am highly conscious of my appeal to the many structuralist categories which I have usually cautiously restrained in my general approach to cinema. But in this particular investigation, the need to trace Li Wo's story-telling principles hidden beneath the audio-visual construct in film form has forced me to go back to the textual level to re-configure Li's equivocal articulations on the manners of life. An inter-textual reading, as I have proved so far, is a crucial exercise for me to construct Li's own story-telling conventions before they can be tied to other forms of cultural and social texts.

I also suggest that right after *Second Spring* we should watch *Two Naughty Girls*. In my view, the latter is the redemption of the suffering women in the former. *Second*

Spring's women are either heartless victimizers in the name of feudalist values or the victimized. Those victimized need to go through rounds after rounds of betrayal and abuse in the end to find relief just so they can perfect the lives of the male protagonist.[7] In *Two Naughty Girls*, we have two "modern women," one of them absolutely androgynous and the other aggressive – they waste no time plotting to track down the mysterious male popular singer, the object of their romantic pursuit, and to compete against each other to win his consent for love.

A second look may show that Two Naughty Girls, *produced in 1952, eight years before* Second Spring, *carries a special charm of subversive irony that seems to be tamed by moral propriety in* Second Spring, *with a conservative overtone that also marks* Blossom, *both made in the same year in 1960. There is obviously another research pending here: what does the moral regression in the course of eight years suggest? What pretexts and contexts of Cantonese cinema closed down the subversive playfulness freely celebrated in* Two Naughty Girls*?*

Feminist Sensibility, Humanist Sensibility

In *Second Spring*, the "good people" are mostly individuals with a lowly status, such as the maid-servants, the valet, and those who make a living with their own hands. The ever victimized female protagonist, for instance, owes her life and freedom to all of them, especially the three maid-servants in the two households in the film. However, as suggested earlier, the valorization of the lowly class' contribution ultimately dissolves in the final scene: all the "upper class" males – the female protagonist's elder brother, the male protagonist's uncle and the physician – stand together to give the final endorsement to what they hold as moral enlightenment, whereas all the females lower their head to admit their elliptical views and erroneous treatment of others. Only attentive viewers know that along the entire narrative process, it is the passive "non-action" of the males that gives silent consent to the "evil deeds" of the two women in power. And those who read carefully enough certainly notice that the central figure of *Second* is NOT the female protagonist although the whole film unfolds her victimization procedurally in front of us like a long-lasting ritual. The real central figure is the male protagonist whom we see –half of the time in the film -- lying sick in bed, losing his senses screaming and talking to himself because of his loss of love. His madness rules over the entire course of events: if anything in film ever changes for the better, it is just so the male protagonist's life and sanity will be preserved. The story of "saving the woman" is actually that of "saving the man."

The confession of the female protagonist in *Blossom 1* is introduced in one of the very early scenes: her pre-marital pregnancy is an unforgivable mistake. And

heaven punishes her through the hands of the story-maker: for her groom was killed in a car accident while he's on his way to their wedding ceremony. Her confession is repeated in different wordings throughout the 19-year-long story time of the film: her mistake has been the roots of her own suffering and her daughter's. The morally degraded female protagonist is yet complemented by her celibate sister who plays the model of the conscientious woman – self-sufficient, independent, determined to free herself from emotional reliance on men. She also provides continuous spiritual support to her weak-minded sister, encouraging her to sit through many long nights to acquire the skills of typing and to use the abacus in order to be worthy of the clerical job a friend gets her through relational ties. Quietly and deeply, though, the elder sister has been emotionally suffering as much as the female protagonist, until towards the end of the story she declares the end of celibacy.

Li's story world is a big mansion with tenants of all sorts. There are the senseless women who enjoy the sheer pleasure of victimizing both men and women; there are the passive, comprising men, the silent compliant to both male and female sufferers; there are fragile women subject to all kinds of abuse; and there are strong and tough women who struggle to break away from abuses… But it all comes down to one treatment: the narrative logic computes the final balance of relational ethics, turning a particular option of resolution into the necessary choice.

The most natural critical step to follow from here would be to invoke feminist criticism to give texture to the social cultural embedded-ness of the operational features of the narrative outlined above. But I prefer to take a different route without losing out the feminist project. I suppose even without the standard vocabulary of the feminist discourse, the casting of moral stereotypes and the distribution/balance of dramatic action-reaction based on gender differences are too prominent to dismiss. The details I have captured in the above paragraphs have demonstrated that a factual inventory of the manipulated dramatic components alone is sufficient to show how repeatedly female characters are assigned to very similar types of roles in the broader network of human relations. The repetitions are far from pure coincidence. They are "systematically" contagious – within Li's corpus and Cantonese melodrama in general. The fact of women being locked up in particular roles in an ethico-narrative paradigm applies to men as well, though to very different ends. In the context of Hong Kong's local cinema, a highly revered (social-) reflectionist principle upheld by filmmakers and critics gives the above paradigm an extra license so that it is read as the shared knowledge of social reality. A plot line is always also narrative persuasion of a certain ethical logic received as proper values. It is worth another essay to examine how such logic is reproduced as broadly circulated social discourses and what channels facilitate such discursive practices within and outside cinema.

The assemblage of an apparently diverse bulk of character types, social roles and actions within a narrative construct can be viewed as a morality-based, role-oriented, action paradigm with pedagogic value. It contains multiple points of identification as each character is defined by his/her choice of action and consequences, effectively interpellating individual viewers as ethically incomplete subjects in need of admonition, self-modification and maintenance.

The Dialogic "Self" & Heteroglossia

The difficulty of writing this essay is this: my task is to explore Li Wo's role in cinema; what I was asked to study is the the airwave novelist, the radio serialist dramatist, Li Wo; and yet what I was really looking at were films that adapt his novels. I have fluctuated between plot and style, speech and manner, the conceptual signified and the visual signifier. This is where Bakhtin's dialogic theory offers insights on detecting the "I" of the author as not isolated personhood with a single, distinct, personal history, but a multiple "I" that can only be traced momentarily and fragmentarily in complex unity with different story situations and assemblage of characters.

In regard to the paradox of a "new woman," educated and independent, who is nonetheless trapped in old value systems and whose life is thus a necessary trauma, one must go back to Li's own mother, who is described as "the first female Chinese herbalist physician officially licensed by the Health Department of the Guangdong Province after the revolution in 1911" (December 28, 2003, *Yangcheng* evening news, Guangzhou).

[Li Wo:] When I was three, two sedan chairs came to our house one day to pick us up. One was for Father, and the other for me and Mother. Father didn't say where he was taking us. We arrived in the entrance of a big, old mansion in the city. Mother asked what that place was. Father then told her, "Let's get in to see our son's Mother." Mother asked, "Why? Am I not our son's Mother?" It was at that moment that Father revealed to us he was longed married before he met my Mother. It was like lightning and thunder on a sunny day. At that time, women had no right to say anything. So Mother just accepted her fate and entered the house.

…But no more than a week, Father's First Wife found excuses to drive us out of the Li's family. At that time, we had no where to go. Struck by our miseries, we returned to our old dwellings in Xiguan. [interview notes, HK Film Archive's oral history project]

According to Bakhtinian dialogue, the "I" who performs an act or deed holds a unique place within the architectonic whole of being. The uniqueness of the being is

given and yet to be achieved and actualized: that is, the "I" has to be acted out within a complex unity in the context of communication. This unites story-telling – a communicative act, or "words as actions" – with autobiographic utterances as a mutually implicated project.[8] Utterances are not just sentences, but by their nature dialogic in that their meanings are shaped by the listeners from the outset. In Bakhtin's views, within an utterance, two voices are meant to be heard as interacting. That is, utterances are the `double-voiced words.'"[9] Dialogism is a metaphor for the quality of cultural products capable of creating the living experience of dialogues.[10]

In Li's works, the autobiographic element seems to be far more deliberately contemplated than Bakhtin would suggest:

[Li Wo:] Each of all the novels I have written carries elements of my own life in it – the difference is only a matter of which particular part of my life it is in each work. There are only two films that carry the general profile of my past history -- *Plum Blossom in the Snow* [*Xueying hanmei*, dir. Ng Wui, 1951] is about myself and my first wife, and 泣殘慈母淚 [*ci can cimu lei*, dir. Wong Doi, 1955] is about my parents. Otherwise, there's a bit of myself in all other films.
…in *Ci can*, I played myself, the son, and Ng Chu-fan played my father… [interview notes, HK Film Archive's oral history project][11]

I wish *Plum Blossom* were available for viewing:

[Li Wo:] The character Jiang Xueying is me, Han Sumei is my first wife. …When we got married I was only seventeen: that's because and my life was too much lacking in warmth. Mother died when I was fourteen, and since then I had to take care of my own living and education. I met her, who is from a very good family – so I won't say much. When I was most down and out, she left me for Guangzhou. Eighteen months later, when I saw her again she was pregnant. I didn't blame her: it's all because I was too poor and I couldn't take care of her. [interview notes, HK Film Archive's oral history project]

I know nothing about the character Jiang Xueying, but I recall the orphan (impersonated by Tse Yin) in *Blossom May 1*, who grows up in an orphanage and turns himself into the manager of a business firm via evening education. I also see another shadow flipping from *Blossom May 2* -- the 18-year-old kid, Mok Lung, who elopes with his girl-friend .but immediately regrets because he is incapable of providing for their daily needs.

More autobiographic fragments in more films:

[Li Wo:] When guests were around, Mother could only be addressed as a maid-servant, said Father's

First Wife… Mother would hide herself to weep…the two of us was assigned a room next to the storage can for fire-wood. Mother was gentle person, wouldn't even kill an ant… But one day the First Wife ordered my mother to kill a goose alive because Father was fond of goose meat. Mother wept in front of the goose. A servant saw it and offered to kill the goose for her, but the First Wife found out and forced Mother to do it herself. Oh, women…! Mother dropped the goose, held me up in her arms, and left that house in the middle of a big rainy storm… It really sounds like a fiction…

One finds such details and sentiments reproduced and adapted in *Second Spring*.

In Bakhtin's view, Language is necessarily stratified, diverse and socio-ideological. While it may seem to be sheer yielding clay to assist the revelation of struggle at the heart of human existence, it is also more often additive, at the service of the specific needs of different social groups and purposes such as a certain type of professionals, literary genres and generations. The two contending tendencies of language and speech activities are in collaboration, shaping the way we experience reality.[12] Bakhtin used the term "heteroglossia" to describe the "peculiar interaction between the two fundamentals of all communication." "On the one hand, a mode of transcription must, in order to do its work of separating out texts, be a more or less fixed system. But these repeatable features, on the other hand, are in the power of the particular context."[13] The fictional-autobiographic details, too, work on two levels: the level of semantics, and the level of genre. Language gives forms to the texture of human existence and emotions. Yet the vocabulary and formulaic narrative embodied in the melodramatic convention is no pure container: it shapes the realities it is treating, adding an ethico-cultural logic that was not part of the raw experience.

One among many things that the melodramatic convention has offered to Li himself is probably the norm of resolution in the denouement. In all of Li's film adaptations, no matter how nerve-wrecking the viewing process is, one can also trust in a timely, final salvation to arrive when all things seem to go out of control – in the final moments of the film. In that sense, Li's adapted stories are themselves the acts of self-redemption.

The "heteroglossia" of Li works is also traceable in the function of a cultural archive delivered by his architextual system. The references to radio broadcasting and star personae of broadcast announcers (as in *Two Naughty Girls*), the speech modes of airwave novels (as in the final scene of *Blossoms 1* and the opening scene of *Blossom 2*), the material spatial presence of the evening song forum (as in *Oriole's Song*) and so on are far more than just supportive, dramatic details. The various scenes set up in *Oriole's*, dubbed 1941, are particularly in line with the research I have conducted elsewhere, confirming the song forum as a highly gendered space, by which the legitimacy of confession and emotive outlet of the women is strictly confined to the

limited space of the song stage. One may say the song forum in the pre-war era was a uniquely marked out/locked up, gendered space total free for the outpours of emotions; and yet, as a public space, it is highly disciplined by the gaze of the male (audience), and ruled by an implicit hierarchy of loyalty. The many outdoor location scenes in these films also preserve for contemporary viewers glimpses of the actual urban space back in the 1950s of Hong Kong. These many "voices" are autonomous in meanings and at the same time contextual to the specific paradigm of ethico-relational logic.

Melodramas operate on many levels: they console, they generate empathy, they provide points of identification, they allow moral argumentations to unfold, they imagine ideal solutions, and they make complex realities singular and manageable. The toboggan slides and meandering twists of the story line contains vicissitudes of "everyday wisdom" and moral/relational logic – yet when tamed, contained and transformed by language activities, they are no more hearsays of banality. For those who are interested, a clever integration of semiotics, narratology, ideological critique and discourse analysis is required, and perhaps more…

There is no better way to end this meandering essay with Li Wo's own recipe for story construction:

I remember Tong Hiu-dan told me once… Learning to write a script is like eating wonton. First of all you need to prepare a delicious broth. That broth is the base of your scripting. Without good broth – or simply with boiling water only, the food will be tasteless… Secondly, the making of the wonton wrapper-skin requires many rounds of work: mixing the flour, preparing the dough, cutting it up into right portions. Thirdly, you need to put meat, vegetables, shrimps, dried shrimps and mushroom; and you need to let it cook well without over cooking the skin. Only when you have done all of the above will the wonton taste well in your mouth. This is how one prepares a script. Really wonderful!

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[1] Li Wo is spelt in the Cantonese way as "Li Ngaw" in the Hong Kong Film Archive's Filmography.

[2] The English title is a playful combination of titles of the five films I discuss in this essay. They are: *How Two Naughty Girls Thrice Insulted Siu Yuet-pak* (*liang ge diaoman nv san qi Xiao Yuebai*, 1952, dir. Ng Wui, or Wu Hui), *Oriole's Song* (*chu gu huangying,* 1956, dir. Lee Sun-fung, or Li Chenfeng)*, The Beautiful Ghost's Grievance* (*li gui yuanchou*, 1959, dir. Lee Sun-fung)*, Blossoms in Rainy May I & II* (*wuyue yu zhong hua*, 1960, dir. Qin Jian)*,* and *Second Spring* (*cui lou chun xiao*, 1960, dir. Wang Tianlin)*.*

[3] "Architext" is one of the five classes of text and textual meanings according to French narratologist Gerard Genette. (The other four types are paratext, intertext, metatext and hypertext.) The architextual invites us to look at a work not just as an isolated work, but as a member of the existing corpus of a genre and how that particular work bears a tangential relation to the totality of the genre by lending itself

as an instance of substantiation, or by altering the total shape of the genre because of its unique acts of modification. See the introductory chapter in Genette's *Palimpsestes: Literature in the Second Degree*; first published in 1982 in French (University of Nebraska Press, 1997), pp. 1-6.

[4] For a thorough discussion of the process of Cantonization, see Linda Lai, "HK Cinema in the 1930s: Docility, Social Hygiene, Pleasure-seeking and the Consolidation of the Film Industry," in *Screening the Past* (Australia), issue #11, officially uploaded on November 1, 2000. See:

http://www.latrobe.edu.au/www/screeningthepast/

[5] Andrew Radford, *Transformational Grammar: a first course* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 17-19.

[6] James P. Zappen, "Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975)," in Michael G. Moran and Michelle Ballif (eds.) *Twentieth-Century Rhetoricians: Critical Studies and Sources* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), pp. 7-8.

[7] While writing this line, I realize more and more how the visceral presentation of the women's suffering process is comparable to the relentless victimization of Marquis de Sade's female protagonists such as Justine and Juliette, minus the lengthy philosophic exegesis of the latter.

[8] Ibid..

[9] See overview of M.M. Bakhtin at:

http://www.press.jhu.edu/books/hopkins_guide_to_literary_theory/m._m._bakhtin.html

[10] See Eduardo Kac, "Negotiating Meaning: the Dialogic Imagination in Electronic Art," at: http://www.ekac.org/dialogicimag.html.

[11] Only *Ci can cimu lei* is available for viewing at the Hong Kong Film Archive.

[12] Michael Holquist, "Introduction" in M.M. Bakhtin, *the Dialogic Imagination: four essays*; trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. xviii-xix.

[13] Ibid., pp. xix-xx.

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