

TOM CUNLIFFE

Implicating the Social Order: The Story of a Discharged Prisoner

ABSTRACT: Made and released during protests, riots, and other social crises in Hong Kong, *The Story of a Discharged Prisoner* (1967) is a pivotal work that transitions between the conventions of the 1950s social-realist melodrama and the crime film that would flourish in the 1970s and 1980s and is a key cultural piece in Hong Kong's changing structures of feeling during this volatile period. Lung Kong utilizes the crime film to challenge the dominant values of law and order and investigate how the system of colonial capitalist power in Hong Kong impacted social experience. This essay examines and contextualizes the industrial, historical, and sociopolitical context into which *The Story of a Discharged Prisoner* emerged to demonstrate how the film is a critical site for negotiating the reshaping of values in the emerging industrial city.

KEYWORDS: crime film, social-realist melodrama, censorship, Hong Kong cinema, colonialism, location shooting

In 1986, John Woo's seminal *A Better Tomorrow* revolutionized the Hong Kong crime action film, giving rise to the hero subgenre and serving as one of the key films that reignited interest in Hong Kong action cinema in the West. Woo's film is a loose remake of Lung Kong's *The Story of a Discharged Prisoner* (1967), and the two films share the same Chinese title—*Yingxiong bense*—which can be translated as “The Essence of Heroism.” Veteran film critic Law Kar mentioned that John Woo was watching Lung shoot *The Story of a Discharged Prisoner* (hereafter *Discharged Prisoner*) on location at Wader Film Studio in the New Territories, and both he and Woo were impressed with Lung at that time.¹ In a recent interview, *A Better Tomorrow*'s producer Tsui Hark revealed that he was very taken by the freshness of *Discharged Prisoner* because of Lung's approach to depicting social concerns, which reflected “a highly intellectual consciousness of what had been happening in the environment where we lived. He opened up a very realistic picture of our life.”² Tsui goes on to state that Lung's work

inspired him and other students to become attracted to film culture and also to make experimental short films. Despite the film's clear importance in Hong Kong film history, little has been written on *Discharged Prisoner* in detail, with it usually remembered today for simply being *A Better Tomorrow's* inspiration. What was it about this particular film that so hugely inspired future Hong Kong New Wave filmmakers and how did it mark a turning point for the crime film in Hong Kong film history?

The aim of this essay is not to compare the similarities and differences between *Discharged Prisoner* and *A Better Tomorrow* but rather to assess the range of artistic, social, and political forces that converged in 1967, a critical year in Hong Kong history, that led to *Discharged Prisoner* being one of the key transitional films between the 1950s social-realist melodramas and the Hong Kong crime film that would flourish in the 1970s and 1980s. It was made in 1966 and released in 1967, two years that were a crucial turning point in Hong Kong's history wherein a series of large-scale street protests and riots marked the anger and discontent of people caused by the corruption, oppression, and injustice of the colonial regime. Ordinary people saw that the government was completely unapproachable and disregarded the livelihood of the general population. If, as Martin Luther King proclaimed, a "riot is the language of the unheard," the 1967 riots gave a voice to people who had no democratic means to challenge the mass social inequality and deep class contradictions in the colony. Fearing loss of legitimacy and power, the colonial government began making efforts to close the chasm between the governed and the governors by implementing social-welfare policies in the 1970s. The 1960s and 1970s were also the period when Hong Kong was rapidly transforming into a modern industrial city.

For Raymond Williams, the ever-moving march of social history induces the arts to develop new conventions to grasp new life experience: "In principle, it seems clear that the dramatic conventions of any given period are fundamentally related to the structure of feeling in that period ... Conventions—the means of expression which find tacit consent—are a vital part of this structure of feeling. As the structure changes, new means are perceived and realized, while old means come to appear empty and artificial ... Changes in the whole conception of a human being and of his relations with what is non-human bring, necessarily, changes of conventions in their wake."³ Lung's experimentation with genre, style, and theme to depict the changing relationship between the individual and colonial Hong Kong society is a significant example of how film conventions were evolving in relation to the structure of feeling in this historical moment, which was marked by differences in generational concerns and sociopolitical protests.

Discharged Prisoner's narration of the struggles an ex-convict faces in re-entering Hong Kong society after a fifteen-year stint in jail was not new thematic content for Hong Kong cinema, but it sharply differs from what came before it due to Lung's treatment of the material. Censorship and the big studios' close relationship with the colonial government placed numerous constraints on filmmakers who desired to make socially critical films.⁴ Lung's independent spirit, however, was geared toward capturing a certain reality to explain how this ex-convict, imprisoned for taking part in a heist due to his socially limited mobility, is entrapped by the social conditions and structures of power that surround him, including the repressive actions of the police, which subtly articulates power relations and the exploitation of the colonial capitalist system.

The film also displays a profound ambiguity and anxiety over the replacement of the ethical and moral precepts that defined the 1950s left-leaning social-realist melodramas with the profit motive and the entrenchment of middle-class values. If the 1950s social-realist melodramas depicted people trying to live in a community constructed out of class solidarity, *Discharged Prisoner* negotiates the crises that occur when capitalism has reached a stage where the economic surplus motive is destroying the myth/possibility of such community. Lung Kong absorbed the pedagogical aspects of leftist social-realist melodramas that depicted how human beings could be transformed through group solidarity to create a more equal and just society, but within the rapidly modernizing late-1960s Hong Kong society, these values are shown to only be able to exist within the institution of the Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society that is run by a compassionate social worker. Lung's film shows us that outside of this space, these values of the older social-realist melodramas can no longer survive within society taken as a whole. When I argue that this film is transitional, it is in relation to how some of the residue of the left-leaning pedagogic tradition of the 1950s social-realist melodramas crumbles away as the colonial government is implicated and its presence can be felt more strongly than before.

The tension between older social formations—based on the conventions of the social-realist melodrama that were concerned with social relations—and new individual experience—Lung's experimentation with technique and the crime genre that represents the gradually disintegrating older formation of social relations replaced by individualism—vividly reveals profound anxieties over developments in Hong Kong's social setup. *Discharged Prisoner's* key intervention in Hong Kong film history is how it negotiates these anxieties in a way that implicates the structures of power in Hong Kong organized by the colonial government. By challenging and chipping away at the dominant values related to law, order, and stability in Hong Kong, values the colonial government highly

enforced for its own benefit, *Discharged Prisoner* is a key cultural piece in Hong Kong's changing structures of feeling during the volatile period of 1966–67.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE HONG KONG SOCIAL-REALIST MELODRAMA FROM THE 1950S TO 1960S

No genre is discrete, and it is impossible to discuss the Hong Kong crime film of the 1950s and 1960s without engaging with the way it was heavily mixed with the conventions of the social-realist melodrama. Andrew Britton's view of the way genre operates indicates how Hong Kong social-realist melodramas in the 1950s and 1960s negotiated societal transformations occurring under industrialization and modernization. In Britton's view, a genre is produced in historical circumstances in which an array of interlinking values, discourses, and practices that a particular culture depends on being maintained and reproduced meets with a crisis of consent, so that such values and practices are taken as essential, inevitable, and even natural, but also stand as a source of conflict, discord, and distress. He says, "Genres presuppose an ambivalence and uncertainty about a set of dominant values and institutions which is sufficiently profound and sufficiently generalised so as to create an audience for narratives in which the crisis of these values is repeatedly acted through ... and in which the terms of the status quo whose institutions are at stake are continually renegotiated and resecured."⁵

The left-leaning social-realist melodramas produced in the 1950s in Hong Kong negotiated deep misgivings over the dog-eat-dog society that capitalism encourages and were a subtle form of resistance against Hong Kong's colonial capitalist conditions. They were also very popular at the box office. These films could be quite didactic as filmmakers who adapted the left-wing filmmaking tradition from Shanghai into Hong Kong's local conditions saw cinema as having an educational value, and they attempted to instruct the audience about how to be ethically and morally responsible. Yet, their focus on capturing real human emotions makes them irreducible to simple ideological propaganda.⁶ In such films, a genuine spirit of compassion and class solidarity binds people on the lower rungs of society together as they help each other through the unjust social structures created by colonial capitalism, which included widespread poverty due to labor exploitation and the lack of a strong welfare system.

This type of articulation, which recognizes the fundamental role society plays for humanity, was not unique to Hong Kong's commercial film industry. Warner Bros., for instance, produced a series of left-leaning films in the early to mid-1930s in the wake of the economic depression, and a film like William Wellman's *Wild Boys of the Road* (1933) shares a similar social-realist aesthetic, tone of empathy, and community spirit/mutual support among those

living in and through economic crises. Edward Buscombe's description of these left-leaning Warner Bros. films could equally apply to the left-leaning Hong Kong social-realist melodramas: "[They] are in [no] sense revolutionary, but all display at least a feeling of unease about the condition of society, and a desire for change."⁷ Popular cinema from different geographic locations, despite differing cultural and political formations, is often reacting to the economic and material conditions in which people live. Naturally, 1930s America and 1950s Hong Kong were vastly different in many ways, but in terms of the struggle to eke out a living in a vicious capitalist system, they were similar, and this is reflected in each of their cinemas, partly enabled by how amenable studio heads were to producing such films.⁸

However, we can trace a gradual fading out of the theme of class solidarity in Hong Kong cinema in the 1960s as Cold War intensities grew (including the Vietnam War and the Cultural Revolution) and rapid industrialization and modernization occurred. Certainly, there was still a grave sense of doubt expressed about the human cost of the developing ruthless society founded upon the capitalist logic of the profit motive, but in a slightly different ideological key. Emblematic 1950s left-leaning Cantonese social-realist films, such as *In the Face of Demolition* (1953) and *An Orphan's Tragedy* (1955, a loose adaptation of *Great Expectations* given a strong left-wing twist), depict a deep sense of class solidarity with those who aspire to the capitalist class and attempt to climb the social ladder eventually returning to the working masses. Sek Kei argues that these films served as a type of "folk art" (*minjian yishu*) that could touch the hearts of the masses, and Chor Yuen's *The Great Devotion* (1960) was the last masterpiece made in this tradition.⁹ There are several sequences in *The Great Devotion* that exemplify the disdain toward the merciless society that capitalism encourages, including one where a penniless teacher who finally finds a job immediately gives it up out of human solidarity to a woman in an even more dire situation. The class solidarity is already less accentuated in this film, however, as it is set in a petite bourgeois milieu of teachers, students, and neighbors when compared to the more working-class milieus of earlier films. By calling this the "last masterpiece" in this tradition, Sek Kei alludes to the way such films were on the verge of becoming anachronistic as a new phase of industrialization and urbanization ripped through Hong Kong society during the 1960s.

From the early 1960s, filmmakers began to blend the social-realist melodrama with noir and crime elements. As Timmy Chih-Ting Chen points out, a lesser-known influence on *Discharged Prisoner* is Lee Tit's 1961 Cantonese film *Father Is Back*, which is a darker, almost noir-like vision of Lee Tit's earlier *In the Face of Demolition's* more positive and hopeful view of communal living.¹⁰ The film dramatizes a wrongly imprisoned father's release from prison after serving

a ten-year sentence and his struggles to reintegrate into society. Its lament over societal discrimination against ex-convicts is strongly echoed in *Discharged Prisoner. Father Is Back*, however, focuses on a shared living space in a cramped tenement house, in which the father's children share their sleeping quarters with a group of the poverty-stricken, prostitutes, drug addicts, and criminals. The father is too ashamed to tell them he is their father due to his ex-convict status, but he rents a bed in this space in order to protect his children. Eventually, this environment of poverty and criminality results in the father returning to prison.

This film has far more in common with the 1950s social-realist melodramas than the crime film. Its narrative structure revolves around a communal living space, thus focusing on the struggles and dramatic conflicts of the characters within the family as a social environment, without broadening the perspective to look at what causes these problems. James Kung suggests that the social-realist melodramas made around this time appear to reflect social reality but usually tend to simply depict rather than concretely analyze the social situation.¹¹ Law Kar points out that the focus on the family and interpersonal relationships in these films depoliticizes them so that the family becomes the primary environment, as if the social and political realities of the time had no relation to the fate and fortunes of the family.¹² In addition, Shu Kei states that the realism in these films is on a socio-psychological level since their melodramatic tropes displace the actual problems in society.¹³ In short, the critical consensus is that this cinema can depict the internal contradictions of bourgeois capitalist ideology but displaces structural problems onto the family, which depoliticizes them. However, by introducing elements of criminality, the prison system, and noir shadings, *Father Is Back* does begin to scratch at the surface of social problems caused by colonial capitalism, which Lung pushes much further in *Discharged Prisoner*.

LUNG KONG'S EARLY CAREER AND NAVIGATION THROUGH THE COMMERCIAL HONG KONG FILM INDUSTRY

The decisions Lung made before becoming a director reveal his desire to remain as independent as possible and enabled him to work in genres more closely connected with the 1950s social-realist melodramas. In 1964, Kim Chun, Lung's most important mentor and a director associated with 1950s left-leaning social-realist melodramas, had just defected to the Mandarin cinema camp in reaction to the Cantonese film industry's decline. On the first three Mandarin films Chun directed, Lung assisted in various capacities, including as assistant director and scriptwriter. *Pink Tears* (1965), the final film of this trio, was made at the Shaw Brothers studio, where Chun would remain for the rest of his career. Chun invited Lung to join him at Shaw Brothers, but after Lung had finished

working on *Pink Tears*, he had no desire to carry on working there due to the severe restrictions a director faced: “in a big studio like Shaws, the producer would follow his tried and true formula that was not to be challenged; a rookie director would certainly not be given free rein to make the kind of films he wanted to make. Besides, I had a love affair with Cantonese films to carry on and its name to avenge.”¹⁴

Lung worked at relatively smaller film studios throughout his directorial career in an attempt to more successfully navigate the treacherous terrain between art and business. Of the three films he worked on with Chun, *Mimi-Private Eye* (1965) relates most strongly to *Discharged Prisoner*. Lung stated that Chun entrusted him with making the Mandarin debut film for the company Cinearts. In *Mimi-Private Eye*, Lung acted as producer, screenwriter, deputy director, and actor.¹⁵ The handbill for this film features images from the film, the list of actors and director (Chun), and actually lists Lung as assistant director. This signals that Lung was popular enough as an actor, which he had been since the late 1950s, for this to be a significant event, since generally handbills never listed the assistant director. It also perhaps signifies Lung’s major creative involvement in blending the ethical and moral functions of the 1950s social-realist melodrama with a comical detective thriller.

Clearly riffing on the popularity of James Bond films at this time, *Mimi-Private Eye* revolves around the young spy/detective fiction fan Mimi (Jeanette Lin Tsui) who starts investigating a real-life murder to prove the innocence of a murdered woman’s working-class husband who is framed for the murder. She surreptitiously enters the husband’s house to gain clues, and the scene she witnesses hiding behind a curtain is an empathetic depiction of the struggling underclasses that could have appeared in a left-leaning 1950s social-realist melodrama. There are three children in the room and one complains of hunger. A ruthless landlady, stock villain of countless 1950s films symbolizing capitalism, enters and complains about their father and the unpaid rent, while the children stick up for him. The father enters the room and shortly afterward tries killing himself before Mimi jumps out and proceeds to lecture him on how selfish he is for not thinking of his children: “your children are starving.” There is a cut to the father staring down sadly as she continues, “live for your children, let them eat and grow up to become adults.” The two of them are now in a medium close-up shot and as she finishes her speech the camera moves in to a close-up of the father’s face as he seems to understand what he must do, and while still visibly emotional, nods his head in a resolved way: he has learned his lesson and the error of his ways. The didacticism here is very idealistic. Law Wai-ming notes that “Chinese culture has always put family first, and a man’s achievement was judged by the completeness of his family,” and the tragic element and drama

of a film derives from the weak father figure who, unable to survive in a materialistic society, precipitates the family's collapse.¹⁶ Law Kar analyzes Chun's own 1955 Cantonese melodrama *Parents' Hearts* and describes the tragedy in the film as emanating from the way the father is caught in a rapidly changing environment and cannot adapt but must still struggle to eke out a living for the sake of his children.¹⁷ The father here is a mix of the self-pitying type Law Wai-ming describes who morphs into Law Kar's archetype by resolving to do what he must for his children's survival. It is significant that the blending of the pedagogical aspects of the social-realist melodrama and the detective/crime film happened in the film that Lung had most creative control over in the three films he worked on with Chun. This demonstrates how Lung wanted to restore the moral and ethical functions of the 1950s social-realist melodramas in a new age, while being keen to at least partially focus on the lives of the underclasses that Shaw Brothers' contemporary-set films shunned at this time.

It is important to add here that Lung was not a filmmaker associated with the left-wing studios. Some critics in fact argue that he is a relatively conservative director. Vivian Lee, for example, argues that Lung's didactic undertone reflects his confidence in modern institutions in Hong Kong to bring about social progress.¹⁸ In his early films, these institutions include the Hong Kong Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society, a blind school run by nuns in *The Window* (1968), and a reformatory school for female juvenile delinquents in *Teddy Girls* (1969), each of which Lung researched in great detail. However, as Shu Kei argues, while these institutions symbolize morality, justice, and salvation, none of them can change the tragic fates that await the characters.¹⁹ These institutions, each of which is separate or distanced from colonial state institutions, become spaces similar to the worlds of older 1950s social-realist melodramas in which group solidarity and warmth in human relations through kindness and altruism can be fulfilled, or at least gestured toward. However, as soon as the characters in each film leave these safe spaces, the ambiguities, tumult, and political alienation that made up late-1960s Hong Kong await them, and the traditional didacticism of Cantonese melodrama is revealed to be a construct with less and less currency in the modernizing age. Lung responds to the changing structures of feeling in Hong Kong related to its rapid industrialization, with institutional failure resounding in each of the three endings: the ex-convict returns to jail; the male protagonist in *The Window* dies; and while the reformatory school in *Teddy Girls* is undoubtedly idealistic, the female protagonists end up dead, mad, or arrested.

Each of these three early Lung films focuses on disenfranchised people who are attempting to reclaim their agency within a matrix of social and political repression. The context is important. In 1966, Hong Kong faced such severe



Fig. 1: Lung Kong visualizes the collusion between the colonial government and business tycoons in his directorial debut *Prince of Broadcasters* (1966).

social problems that rioting erupted in 1966 over a proposed increase in the Star Ferry fare that shuttled people across the harbor between Kowloon and Hong Kong Island. Nine hundred and five people were arrested and charged in relation to this incident, and a Commission of Inquiry report stated that the predominant age of those who contributed to “the main source of violence” was sixteen to twenty years old.²⁰ The majority of these youths were employed but in jobs that “held little for them by way of future security or advancement.”²¹ Before 1967, the average monthly salary was \$100 for unskilled laborers and \$300 for skilled, which resulted in 45 percent of families in Hong Kong living below the poverty line (less than \$400 per month).²² The protests over the Star Ferry price increase emerged out of a growing sense of frustration over social injustice, terrible living and exploitative labor conditions, as well as a gap between the government and the people and the corruption of government officials. The 1967 riots initially erupted over labor disputes. Lung attempted to explore the subject of Hong Kong and these sociopolitical problems within the commercial, popular traditions of Hong Kong Cantonese cinema.

Lung also tackled issues like those confronted by left-wing filmmakers. In his debut film as writer-director, *Prince of Broadcasters* (1966), he inserted

his own political critique into the cookie-cutter love story he was given to work on by making the female lead's father's political ambitions be the cause of the melodramatic impediment to the fulfillment of romantic desire. This business tycoon is running for an elected seat, and we are specifically told that the politicians are looking for somebody from the business sector to run for election. Lung here is raising the problem of collusion between the government and big business, and Lung stated that an interviewer from the Hong Kong Film Archive mentioned such themes were rarely found in non-left-wing films of the time.²³ Indeed this sequence connects to a scene in the aforementioned *In the Face of Demolition* where landlord management orders the rent collector not to tell the residents sharing a rickety old house that the government will demolish it in ten days' time, since if they are aware of this they may not pay their rent. This instantly implicates local capitalist collusion with the colonial government, which had no visible presence in cinema in the 1950s. Lung depicts this subtly critical attitude toward the colonial government in the conversation that takes place at a cocktail party between the business tycoon father, politicians, and also two white people who due to their deportment and expensive-looking clothes, jewelry, and accessories clearly reside in the upper echelons of Hong Kong society. It was very rare to see any trace of Hong Kong's colonial hierarchy specifically represented by white people in Cantonese films of the 1950s and 1960s: they are usually absent from films of this era. Lung's decision to include them in this scene relates to his ambition to more strongly reveal the presence of the colonial government than had been seen before, and this entire sequence demonstrates an ambivalence and uneasiness about the dominant values and institutions related to the colonial hierarchy of power in Hong Kong.

Despite such similarities there is no doubt that Lung's films were in a different ideological key than the films being made at Hong Kong left-wing studios around 1967. For instance, *Oh, the Spring's Here* (1968), produced at the left-wing Great Wall studio, features a "comedy of remarriage" narrative but subversively reworks it by making the wedge that comes between husband and wife be the wife's contempt at her husband's constant attempts to make more money, climb the social ladder, and ingratiate himself with his company's rich boss. She is against this way of living and is instead like a transplant from 1950s left-leaning melodramas, such as when she leaves her husband, begins working at a factory, and uses the little salary she has to help pay off her neighbor's loan from dangerous loan sharks. This narrative and negative depiction of the social climber directly resists the capitalist subjectivity that was promoted by the colonial government and was becoming more prevalent in Hong Kong during the late 1960s. *Discharged Prisoner*, however, does not contain such stark resistance to capitalism; instead, it articulates the terrible cost of trying to uphold

patriarchal capitalist values and what is lost in the process of doing this. The resulting ambiguous and complicated register of the film captures the complex political and ideological conditions of Hong Kong during this period. These conditions could veer and form a symbiosis with strong anticolonial feelings and protests on one side and large-scale acceptance of capitalist subjectivity, as promoted by the colonial government in the wake of the 1967 riots, on the other.

CRITIQUING THE PATRIARCHAL CAPITALIST SYSTEM IN *DISCHARGED PRISONER*

In *Discharged Prisoner*, the titular discharged prisoner is Lee Cheuk-hong (Patrick Tse), released on probation after serving fifteen years for being involved in a safecracking heist. He is determined to go straight and start a new life but is persecuted on the one hand by the law, represented by Inspector Lui (Lung Kong), and on the other by a criminal gang, represented by the gang boss One-Eyed Jack (Sek Kin), who also masquerades as a respectable businessman known as Boss Long. The former refuses to believe that an ex-convict can reform, while the latter needs Lee's safecracking skills. Each makes it almost impossible for him to find legitimate work. The Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society (DPAS) helps him find lodging and work after One-Eyed Jack's gang violently forces him to leave his friend Ah Hong's house and compels Lee's various employers to fire him. Mak Sze-yan (Patsy Ka-ling), the compassionate social worker and director of the DPAS, believes that ex-convicts should be given a second chance by society. One of the central tensions that runs through the film is between her perspective and Inspector Lui's belief that criminals can never reform. Eventually, driven into a corner when One-Eyed Jack lures Lee's younger brother Chi-sum (Wong Wai) into committing a crime, the innocent Lee takes the blame to save his brother and ends up back in prison.

First, it is worthwhile considering how the film's critique of the patriarchal capitalist system, which was inextricably tied up with the problems that were running rife in Hong Kong in the late 1960s, is linked by Lung with the colonial government's regime of law and order as one of the main sources of Lee's social entrapment. Robin Wood notes how Freud and Norman O. Brown among others observed that there is a close psychoanalytical association between money and excrement—"money as the 'dirt' of capitalism."²⁴ Wood lists a few English euphemisms linking money and excrement to illustrate this connection, before discussing why money matters were not usually discussed in the traditional home since "the dirt of 'business' must not sully the purity of the family."²⁵ Wood gives a few examples from Hollywood films including the character Bannion from *The Big Heat* (1953), who is unsuccessful in his attempts to maintain his domestic purity from the contamination of organized crime,

which leads to Wood concluding that purity is impossible in a world dominated by money values.²⁶ This situation Wood describes is vividly dramatized in *Discharged Prisoner* in the narrative of Lee's struggles and eventual downfall.

Discharged Prisoner's narrative is formed from a web of interconnecting characters who all have different levels of knowledge about Lee's past as a thief. Lee is initially reluctant to even return home after his release from prison, and his cellmate agrees with this sentiment since "nobody would like to have a jailed person at home." He initially stays with his friend Ah Hong in a squatter settlement, and a conversation between the two reveals that Lee's younger brother Chi-sum is unaware of his imprisonment and believes that Lee has been working in Singapore for the past fifteen years. This occurs so Chi-sum remains untainted by association with him, despite the audience discovering later that Lee pulled the final heist that led to his imprisonment in order to pay for Chi-sum's university education, which none of his family is aware of. Ah Hong has supplied Lee's family with money (obtained from the heist) each month from Lee, telling them it is a monthly remittance from Singapore. Lee still refuses to go home since he is worried his return might affect Chi-sum's job as an accountant and his mother (Ma Siu-Ying) might not welcome him. His mother also tells Ah Hong she thinks Lee's criminal past may affect Chi-sum's high position. Chi-sum eventually discovers his brother's return and takes Lee home. There, his mother greets him coldly, while he discovers that Chi-sum's fiancée, Anna So (Chan Tsai-Chung), is the daughter of his former cellmate. Lee's mother welcomes Anna warmly, however, since the mother has no knowledge of Anna's father's criminal smuggling, only that she is rich and from a prosperous family. Her coldness toward her own son relates to his "contamination" with crime, yet her daughter-in-law is "pure" in her eyes, despite her money coming from a similar source to Lee's. Due to Inspector Lui's refusal to hand over the probation bond to the DPAS, as well as One-Eyed Jack's plot to fire Chi-sum on the pretext that Lee is a thief, Lee is forced to leave his home again because of his mother's concern for her younger son. As he leaves, his mother shouts at him that Chi-sum's career has been completely ruined from the moment Lee stepped back into their house. In true melodramatic fashion, the mother's rant continues completely oblivious to the truth: "all you criminals know is evil, if not for you your brother would not be involved." A medium close-up captures a pained expression on Lee's face as he leaves, rejected by his family.

In the following section the truth is belatedly revealed to Lee's mother. Lee's former fiancée Betty (Mang Lee), who cuts a tragic figure in the film as One-Eyed Jack's lover, spies on the latter due to her love for Lee. She runs to tell Lee that One-Eyed Jack has kidnapped Chi-sum. Instead, she meets Lee's mother and sister-in-law. His mother tells Betty that Lee cares nothing about

Chi-sum. Betty reveals what actually happened; in order to fulfil his father's duty, Lee sacrificed his love and marriage plans with her and did one final job so that he could pay for Chi-sum's university education. Lee's mother's eyes well up with tears as she is told this. Thus, it is revealed that it is the patriarchal capitalist system itself that has destroyed the human relationships in the film. If, as Stephen Tao states, "the theme of filial piety and the counter theme of the transgression of the young runs through the sixties" Cantonese cinema,²⁷ then here the focus is placed on how living up to filial piety in a capitalist system destroys the relations between numerous people. Poshek Fu argues that, for the older generation in Hong Kong in the 1960s, the youth were "spoilt, restless, and dangerously westernized, turning their backs on traditional codes of behaviour (especially filial piety and discipline) and thereby posing a threat to the social order."²⁸ In *Discharged Prisoner*, however, following the traditional code of filial piety within a ruthless capitalist system generates problems. Naturally, Lee did not have to perform a heist, but it is implied that working a laboring job would never have sufficed to provide for his family and send his younger brother to university. It was this money from the heist that got Lee's younger brother a good job as accountant, making a mockery of the mother's words to Lee, before she knew the truth, about it being his fault that her younger son lost his job. If it were not for Lee's criminal action, his younger brother would not have gone to university and acquired such a job, especially in the setting of Hong Kong where education and qualifications are so highly valued. Lee's mother punishes him throughout the film for taking over the father role of the family and helping his family through his criminal activities, yet ironically this is deeply contradicted by her celebration of her younger son's successful business job, which was only possible due to Lee's sacrifice. Indeed, it is unrealistic that Lee's mother did not know where the money was coming from to fund Lee's younger brother's education, since she knew Lee was in jail and not in Singapore. Lee's mother has no explanation for the source of these funds and simply accepts them. This unrealistic plot element can partly be explained by Lee's attempts to hide the contaminated money's source from his family to maintain domestic purity.

The only respite for Lee comes when his mother and Ah Hong rush to the DPAS to tell him about his younger brother's kidnapping. As Lee leaves to save his younger brother, his mother, by this time understanding his sacrifice, warmly tells him to take care of himself, the only sign of affection she has shown him throughout the entire film. Lee turns around, and in a medium close-up, visibly swallows and almost smiles as we see that these words mean the world to him, a rebuttal to the previous medium close-up full of sorrow and suffering after his mother scorns him in the scene earlier in the film discussed above. Yet this comes too late, and the film ends with Lee sacrificing himself for his

brother and going back to prison. Referring back to Britton's point about genres presupposing ambiguity and uncertainty about a set of dominant values and institutions, *Discharged Prisoner* narrates the crises of the values of capitalism when the desire to produce an economic surplus, here articulated in Lee's personal sacrifice to provide a comfortable middle-class life for his mother and brother, has become all too clear. While characters in left-leaning melodramas of the 1950s to the early 1960s focused on class solidarity and characters supporting each other spiritually and financially, *Discharged Prisoner* blends the melodrama with the crime film to highlight the crises arising from the replacement of these values with individualistic monetary concerns. The film ends with Inspector Lui gloating over his perceived correctness about Lee's inability to reform, which is an indictment of the Hong Kong system since, as Lui mentions earlier, he himself is simply "an instrument carrying out the law."

CENSORSHIP AND SUBVERSION: THE ONSCREEN REPRESENTATION OF THE COLONIAL POLICE FORCE AND LOCATION SHOOTING

Outlining the function of the police force and its role in upholding law and order in colonial Hong Kong and detailing how film censorship regulated the depiction of the police force and criminals/triads is vital to understand Lung's intervention in utilizing the crime film to investigate how the system of colonial capitalist power in Hong Kong impacted social experience. Kristof Van Den Troost's archival research has shown that the colonial government was highly sensitive to how police were depicted in cinema. The 1950 Directive for Film Censors singled out the following for special attention: "Any incident which glorifies crime, or any incident in which the recognised authorities of the law are held up to contempt or ridicule, incidents where use of violence or criminal methods go unpunished."²⁹ These stipulations naturally rendered making crime films difficult, especially when the commissioner of police (or his representative) was in charge of censorship until 1953–54, and after that was on the board of review, whose main role was "to comment on depictions of police officers, criminals and violence."³⁰ Law Kar indicates that it was only after the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) was set up in 1974 that police procedures and the relationship between the police and triads could begin to be shown in film and TV dramas, although even then these could still be banned due to their realistic depictions of police corruption and relations with criminals.³¹

Despite these severe handicaps filmmakers faced, in 1969 the secretary to the Censorship Board, Nigel Watt, proclaimed the board's policy as "liberal," arguing that "artistic and moral cuts are few."³² The colonial government relied on projecting a liberal image to paint Hong Kong as part of the free world which,

in my opinion, is why they were so sensitive about both how police, a vivid symbol of colonial power, and the rule of law were depicted in Hong Kong cinema, since these images of Hong Kong traveled far and wide to global markets. Elsie Tu's outlining of the notorious corruption of the colonial police force helps explain the censors' sensitivity. Tu discusses how street hawkers in 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong had to pay protection money to triads and the police would take a cut.³³ Tu elaborates on how corrupt police officers could destroy witnesses, which meant that "there was no way in which hawkers could enjoy the much-vaunted rule of law in Hong Kong and no way to escape paying bribes to permit them to earn a simple living."³⁴ Drug trafficking was also a huge source of income for triads and police.³⁵ Critics have argued that corruption was inevitable when the entire rationale of the colonial administration was to advance the conditions for capital accumulation, and that the police force was "not so much engaged in suppressing crime as in *mediating* between the exploited masses and the ruling class. The police force is a crucial element *within* corruption and crime" (emphasis in original).³⁶

Despite the reality of police collusion with the triads, we can see the colonial government's official position in a book published in 1960 entitled *Triad Societies in Hong Kong*, written by senior police officer W. P. Morgan, and prefaced by police commissioner W. H. E. Heath, within which we learn that gang activities have always been a serious problem since the beginning of British rule over Hong Kong. In the preface, Commissioner Heath expounds on his hopes that this book will enlighten the "ordinary reader, and especially the citizen of Hong Kong" about the "true nature of these criminal societies that plague us,"³⁷ although Heath's hypothetical reader is clearly a figment of his own imagination. This is because police collusion with triads was widespread during this period, so it is unclear who exactly would desire to read a book about the triads written from the official perspective of a senior police officer, apart from those interested in learning about how colonial propaganda worked. Heath continues: "in present-day Hong Kong the triad is nothing more than a run-of-the-mill hoodlum ... [and that] today, the word 'Triad' should not engender fear but contempt; should not command subservience but determination to assist the authorities in ridding Hong Kong of its presence."³⁸ One may wonder how the commissioner viewed police collusion with triads, but such views are not forthcoming. The underlying assumption of Heath's comments is that the structures and laws that the police uphold are fundamentally a force for good, rather than being a system built to maintain the grasp of capital and power within a small elite, and to oppress the working classes. As Tu points out, since nothing was done to curb the activities of triads and corrupt officials and police, "anger built up in the minds of the poor, the uneducated, and underprivileged,"³⁹ which

is perhaps one reason why censorship of crime films was so strong during this period; normalizing the true face and role of the police force in cinema could have caused problems, especially when, as Jing Jing Chang discusses based on archival research of reports and minutes of meetings between government officials and film censors, the colonial government genuinely feared films could mobilize audiences and lead to public disturbances.⁴⁰ A later Lung Kong film, *The Call Girls* (1973), was initially banned by the censorship board for depicting the issue of triad-controlled forced prostitution, which was later lifted after appeal.⁴¹ One wonders to what extent police involvement with triad activities provoked the initial ban. Commissioner Heath's comments on the triads paints a black-and-white world of the good guys (police) and bad guys (triads), which could be taken as a kind of blueprint for how the film censors expected to see depictions of the police and criminals in the 1950s and 1960s.

It was in the 1970s and 1980s when police corruption, bloody violence in contemporary settings, and heroic gangsters filled the screens of Hong Kong cinema. Po Fung observes that a change in social psychology in relation to shifting economic contexts precipitated this: while the male protagonists in 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong films were always full of integrity, in the 1970s this focus changed to emphasize that ability was required in order to achieve success in a rapidly developing cutthroat capitalist system. Po illustrates how this connects to Robert Warshaw's notion that "gangster films are a distorted expression of people's pursuit of success in the modern world."⁴² The conditions in 1970s Hong Kong were ripe for such a genre to take off. The late 1960s were on the cusp of such change. Po argues that the heavy emphasis that 1950s and 1960s social-realist melodramas placed on moral education seeped into the 1960s gangster/crime thrillers, making it somewhat difficult for gangster/crime films to disentangle themselves from such traditional moral stances.

Lung attempts to remove some of this heavy residue by transplanting the norms of the 1950s melodramas—group solidarity and warmth in human relations through kindness and altruism—into the institution of the Hong Kong Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society (HKPAS) although, as mentioned above, ambiguity, tumult, and political alienation awaited outside this safe space. Crime, committed out of economic desperation, fractures the unity of Lee's family, and Lung interrogates the sociopolitical structures of Hong Kong that box in the ex-con after he is released from jail.

Through Lung's choices of shooting at specific Hong Kong locations, the first fifteen minutes of *Discharged Prisoner* associates the system of colonial capitalism with poverty, which is the source of Lee's problems. Without these location shots, the social critique of the film would not be as resonant to Hong Kong's specific political condition.



Fig. 2: The union flag atop Stanley Prison signals the colonial power in charge of the law.

The sequence of Lee leaving prison begins with a long shot of Lee being escorted by an Indian prison guard through the outdoor section of the prison. Above them, a British union flag blows in the wind. The flag and the Indian guard signify this institution as foreign/colonial in the context of Hong Kong, immediately revealing that the laws that lock people up in Hong Kong are created by a colonial power, as are the laws that govern society. There is a cut to Lee and the guard walking through a doorway, to the right of which hangs an English-language board that reads: HM Prison Stanley, another sign signifying imperial power.

Before Lee leaves prison, there is a short sequence where Lee tells his cellmate how difficult he thinks it will be to readjust into society again after fifteen years behind bars, referring to Hong Kong's rapid modernization. These words reverberate once Lee leaves the prison. At the prison gates, we see a long shot of Lee walking toward the camera and Hong Kong society. The camera suddenly zooms out so that Lee becomes a mere speck in the distance, which visually represents his immediate estrangement from the social order outside the prison walls. As he walks down the long road into the outside world, he turns his head and looks back at the prison with an almost melancholic expression. There is a



Fig. 3: Lee leaves prison.



Fig. 4: The camera zooms out, estranging Lee.



Fig. 5: Lee looks back at the prison.



Fig. 6: Point-of-view shot staring back at the prison

cut to a shot of Lee's point of view looking at the prison doors, the camera bobbing up and down mimicking Lee's walking motion. This repeats again as Lee moves further away from the prison. Lee's hesitancy serves to conjure up the feeling that he does not particularly want to leave, worried at what the prospects outside hold for him in a rapidly changing, and perhaps unwelcoming, Hong Kong. Throughout the film, Lung uses dynamic camera movements, disjunctive editing, and hand-held shots to create a tone of immediacy, which constructs the subjective effect of disquiet in Lee.

Lee arrives at a squatter settlement after being followed and chased by the police and the associates of his former boss One-Eyed Jack, which immediately sets up the pressures that both the criminals and police force place on Lee. Squatter settlements sprang up in the wake of the mass influx of people fleeing to Hong Kong to escape wars in the 1940s. Due to a chronic housing shortage, many of the newly arrived into Hong Kong built makeshift housing out of iron sheets and timber. Since there was no planning involved, the squatter settlements that developed were often quite chaotic and ramshackle. Portia Ho vividly describes the often horrific conditions where many families had to "live in the midst of rubbish heaps and permanent stench in the squatter areas."⁴³ The idea of a plague hitting Hong Kong that makes up part of the story of Lung's fifth film *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (1970) came from Lung's observation of the squatter settlements and of "the great social divide between the rich and the poor," which materialized in squatter dwellers being forced to drink sewage water due to water shortages.⁴⁴ A 1969 report detailed that there were some 610,000 squatters in urban areas, the New Territories, and on boats.⁴⁵

The sensitivity that capitalist film industries have in relation to onscreen poverty is demonstrated by Rebecca Prime's analysis of how Universal edited out all of the scenes depicting poverty on New York's streets in *The Naked City* (1948) in the wake of the first wave of McCarthy purges, which, much to Jules Dassin's disgust, eradicated the stark contrast between wealth and poverty that he considered to be the film's most striking aspect.⁴⁶ Little to nothing has been written on how the Hong Kong colonial censors viewed poverty shot on location in Hong Kong cinema, although films made between the 1950s and 1960s generally depicted poverty on the studio set where it could be controlled. Poshek Fu argues that due to the Shaw Brothers' Cold War propaganda efforts to assist Taiwan and the colonial government, films made at the studio in the aftermath of the 1967 riots made no effort to reflect on the mass social inequality and huge gap between rich and poor.⁴⁷ *Dead End* (1969), one of the rare contemporary-set youth-gone-wild crime films from the Shaw Brothers in the late 1960s, delineates class conflict resulting from a romance between an upper-class woman and a poor white-collar man, but there are no signs of poverty in the almost



Fig. 7: Surveying the squatter settlement in *Discharged Prisoner*

exclusively studio-bound version of Hong Kong, which hides the stark contrasts between rich and poor that Lung was intent on capturing.

In my research I have found that squatter settlements did not feature prominently in Hong Kong cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, with tenement housing usually preferred to depict the cramped and poor living conditions of the lower classes, perhaps since this was easier and cheaper to represent in a studio. If squatter settlements did appear in a film, they would typically be seen in establishing shots filmed on location before an immediate cut to a studio set, which helped romanticize the squatter settlement since the real squalor and poverty is airbrushed away. What immediately distinguishes Lung's approach is how his establishing shot of the squatter settlement from a high angle in bamboo scaffolding is not followed by a cut to a studio set. Instead, the ensuing shots are filmed on location.

As the police car following One-Eyed Jack's men pulls up into the squatter settlement, a cop radios in to his boss to give him the location: Kwun Tong Squatter Settlement area near Kowloon Bay. The naming of the settlement's actual location further highlights the attention to realism. After shaking off One-Eyed Jack's minion by telling him he has left the criminal world for good, Lee starts looking for his friend Ah Hong's Congee stall and house inside the ramshackle squatter settlement.



Fig. 8: Lee asks the crippled beggar for directions.



Fig. 9: Lee watches on as the beggar departs.

As Lee searches for Ah Hong in the maze of narrow alleys, he comes across a crippled beggar who pulls himself along on a small cart.⁴⁸ Lee asks for directions, and after the beggar tells him, the camera remains on the beggar as he uses his arms to drag himself along on his makeshift cart. A cut to a medium shot of Lee watching the crippled beggar's departure reveals the briefest of expressions on his face that show an intense empathy for the old man's plight. The fact that this all takes place on location in a squatter settlement full of dirty huts strengthens the empathetic feeling. If it had been filmed on a backlot in a studio, the denunciative power would have been weakened: Lung's choice to film on location here reveals the poor living conditions that were the norm for many in Hong Kong and which were part of the reason for the eruption of discontent in 1966–67.

There were limits to the reality that Lung captured, however. A former inmate at Stanley Prison outlined the truly inhumane conditions prisoners were expected to live in, yet despite Lung's thorough research we do not see such negative images in *Discharged Prisoner*.⁴⁹ In Teruo Ishii's Japanese film *An Outlaw* (1964), partially shot in Hong Kong and Macao, we see more of the poverty and more detail of the slums/squatter areas in both Hong Kong and Macao than we do in *Discharged Prisoner*. It is difficult to know how much this related to restrictions imposed by the colonial censorship board, but it is striking that Ishii's crime film revealed more of the poverty in Hong Kong (and Macao's) slums than did any Hong Kong film made in the 1960s.

Once Lee reaches Ah Hong's hut, Lung does cut to a set to represent Ah Hong's wooden hut and some other areas of the squatter settlement. But the images of the ramshackle squatter settlement from the location shots remain, emanating through the film, quite unlike the almost entirely studio-bound representations of squatter settlements seen in earlier films. One-Eyed Jack's henchmen later destroy Ah Hong's hut since he lets Lee stay there. Having nowhere else to stay, Lee goes to the crippled beggar, who lets Lee stay in his room in the squatter settlement. The generosity of this beggar letting a stranger stay in his room also references the 1950s social-realist melodramas in which everybody looked out for one another at a time before the 1967 riots when government welfare policies were almost nonexistent. Shortly after this, however, the beggar is pushed down a steep flight of steps by one of One-Eyed Jack's henchmen for helping Lee, snuffing out this communal flame.

Now that we have established the way Lung chooses to film Hong Kong in order to illustrate the relationship the city has with its inhabitants, the stage is set to analyze how this relationship plays out. Broadly speaking, nearly every character's common antagonist in the film is Hong Kong itself, from the disciplinary power of the law and police to the merciless capitalist operations of the big

city that make life a struggle for the majority. As crime sweeps over the city, the unity between people that was an emblem of the social-realist tradition in the 1950s and early 1960s starts to fray. Lee, along with other characters, including the crippled beggar, are societal outcasts. Lee's own alienation, expressed by the restrained anguish of Tse's performance, results from the way Lung relates crime to social causes.

The starting point of the film is Lee's incarceration and subsequent release. Lee commits the crime to help his family escape the poverty represented by the squatter settlements Lung's camera has shown us. Lee does not represent an audience's desire and fantasy for absolute success in a cutthroat world that Robert Warshaw's gangster thesis argues for and which Hong Kong crime films would begin enacting in the 1970s. Lee spends the entire film valiantly attempting to go straight but is thwarted at every turn by societal and criminal forces out to stop him. The viewer is encouraged to identify with him as the most sympathetic character in the film, who constantly sacrifices himself for others. He is like one of the underclasses from a 1950s left-leaning melodrama in this respect. Lee obtains his first job thanks to a reference letter from his former cellmate. One-Eyed Jack, masquerading as respectable Boss Long, gets Lee fired. Due to Lee's close relationship with his former cellmate, Lee is offered his monthly salary despite not working but declines. Lee is not out to make a dollar of unearned money, is morally upright in his mission to be "a good man," and is about as far from the classic gangster figure, from Paul Muni in *Scarface* (1932) to Chow Yun Fat in *A Better Tomorrow*, as it is possible to get.

However, Lung utilizes the basic criminal figure to attempt something fairly new in Hong Kong cinema: to assess how an individual is affected by the structures of power in operation in Hong Kong. Whatever positive action he attempts after leaving prison fails due to the social networks of power at work. This is represented on the one hand by the dogmatic Inspector Lui, who signifies an almost authoritarian view of the police force, and on the other by ingrained social attitudes that society has toward ex-convicts.

Whereas the right-wing view contends that environment does not explain anything since some are able to escape from dire conditions while those who cannot are societal rejects, the left-wing view contends that environment does have a large impact on a human being's potential and future prospects. Lung clearly sides more with the latter view as we see the effects the Hong Kong environment has on its inhabitants. Compared to older films, Lung's intervention can be seen through the strong stance that *Discharged Prisoner* takes on the necessity of social welfare. It was not until after the 1967 riots that the colonial government became slightly more responsive to public opinion, including calls for social welfare reform. Lung explores this issue in *Discharged Prisoner* in the

narrative opposition between Inspector Lui and Supervisor Mak, who runs the DPAS. The former believes ex-convicts can never reform and it is not worth trying to help them, while the latter argues that with adequate provision and help, discharged prisoners can be rehabilitated. This becomes an articulation of debates between those who support the continuation of a society built upon cruelty, vengeance, and hatred toward those who have committed crimes and those who believe that rehabilitation programs built upon compassion and humanity would result in better outcomes. Lui believes that investing taxpayer money in helping ex-convicts reform and get back on their feet is a waste, while Mak passionately believes in it. Visible here is a shift from the 1950s social-realist melodrama's perspective of group solidarity enabling personal growth and transformation to two different institutions now discussing the possibility of Lee's personal transformation.

Supervisor Mak, due to her alignment with civil society, is one of the few characters from the establishment portrayed in a positive light in Lung's cinema, as Lung usually paints such establishment figures as corrupt and self-serving. This kind of compromised progressive view again shows the shift from the 1950s social-realist melodramas: hope for progressive change has shifted from focusing on how the masses could realize this to a more elite perspective that sees change as being dependent on good people in the establishment, which is why Lung is sometimes charged with being a conservative director. Yet, as Lui Tai-lok points out, Supervisor Mak's goodness and sense of social justice is dwarfed by the system and social attitudes of prejudice and ostracism.⁵⁰ This is why it is only inside the space of the DPAS that the ethical values linked to the 1950s melodramas can be fulfilled. As Mak shows Lee around the dormitory, she informs him they provide meals for free until the discharged prisoners can support themselves. As the camera pans past the bunk beds, a number of the inhabitants are introduced, including an *erhu* player and a guy with a bad leg that Mak asks after. Mak then tells Lee about the job she has lined up for him. There is then a serene moment of stillness as a cut to a shot of the *erhu* player sitting on a bunk bed playing his instrument lasts for around fourteen seconds before the camera slowly tracks through the space of this dormitory. This serenity symbolizes the idealism of this entire sequence that depicts solidarity among the people there and Mak's concern for them all. A later sequence features a musical performance by twelve former drug addicts and ex-convicts who thank Supervisor Mak for helping them recover. This spirit of compassion and solidarity is the world of the 1950s social-realist melodramas transposed into the small space of this institution. In the chaotic late 1960s, this spirit can seemingly only exist in a space that is removed from the daily operations of society.

Outside of this space, it is Inspector Lui's ingrained attitude that ex-convicts will always be bad and can never reform that is one of the impediments in Lee's way. Inspector Lui sends police to check up on Lee at his home. Lee's mother suggests to Lee that he must leave home if this continues, out of concern over the impact this could have on Lee's younger brother's career. Supervisor Mak tells Lee this is a common problem for those on probation, and she will ask the inspector whether the DPAS can take over Lee's supervision so the police will stop causing problems. Inspector Lui flatly refuses the request despite knowing this will damage Lee's position at his family's home, saying, "it is our duty by law, we are only the instrument to carry out the law. We can't help." This depiction of the police force as a partisan organization subtly questions the legitimacy of the Hong Kong police force and the colonial Hong Kong government, as the police are simply a "tool to carry out the law" according to Inspector Lui, and Lui is shown as being a negative force impeding Lee's chance to reform. The colonial British flag blowing atop Stanley Prison at the start of the film also makes this connection stronger.

Alongside this questioning of the role of the police, Lung also shows the regressive attitude of Inspector Lui toward social reform, welfare, and the possibility of a society built on compassion rather than cruelty, which makes visible the governmental ideology that induces law-abiding people to imagine that harshly punishing criminals will miraculously make the social causes of crime disappear. Lui's attitude mirrors that of the colonial government in relation to social welfare: in 1969–70 there was a budget surplus of \$HK618,670,000, but total expenditure on social welfare amounted to only 1 percent of government spending. HK\$160,247,697 was spent on the police force but only HK\$19,204,686 was spent on social welfare.⁵¹ Lui, wearing an unwavering self-satisfied smirk throughout this sequence, tells Mak that of the 12,950 defendants per year, 9,200 of them have three or more offenses on their criminal records and asks her if she thinks they can reform themselves so easily. Mak replies that this is due to society not having enough concern for them, to which Lui bats back that he thinks the DPAS is a waste of time and money. Mak counters this by telling him that the average expenditure for one prisoner is two hundred dollars per month, while it costs only one hundred dollars per month for each member of the DPAS. Therefore, to help an ex-convict reform and establish a good character is better and more economical than locking him up. Lui refuses to even contemplate the idea and continues his dogmatic attitude throughout the film, obstructing Mak's desire to rebel against the common prejudices of society and also at her aim of utilizing social welfare to help those who have fallen on hard times. This too is a repudiation of the system and colonial authority, as Lui, representing governmental power, shows interest only in dealing with the effects and not the

causes of crime, specifically rejecting Mak's suggestion that kindness and compassion could help ex-convicts back on their feet far better than punishing those who have committed crimes. Lui specifically criticizes the idea of social welfare in his rejection of the DPAS. It is this governmental authority that eventually leads to Lee's downfall at the film's conclusion, as it boxes him in to a suffocating degree. The police, symbolizing the authority, occupy the seat of power. In this formulation the spectator can observe the social conditions that entrap Lee.

The censors were presumably happy with this critical depiction of Inspector Lui because on the surface he is indeed promoting the colonial government's approach to criminals. In this sense, Lung pushes censorship requirements of depicting police positively to their natural extremes, just as Johnnie To does in *Drug War* (2012) in a different political context (but under a similarly strict censorship system) by portraying the mainland police more as machines relentlessly obeying intangible orders and holding absolute power.

Lung's depiction of the police connects to how 1950s left-leaning filmmakers had long depicted police in a subtly critical way; consider, for instance, the way the police are shown to collaborate with the local corrupt businessman at the start of the aforementioned *An Orphan's Tragedy*, while the police harass the working-class blacksmith. This is a far cry from David Lean's adaptation of *Great Expectations* (1946) where in the same scene the policeman who calls on the blacksmith's house is very friendly and there is no collaboration between the elite and the police. In comparison to this left-leaning perspective, in Shaw Brothers' productions like *Dead End* the police force's sole job appears to be gunning down criminals or rebellious youths to wipe out any potential threat to social order and stability, marking them out as a necessary force. In the later Shaw Brothers film *Police Force* (1973), the police are depicted as brave, clever, and morally incorruptible, upholding law and order to maintain a safe society, with numerous scenes of police training and marching in unison to reinforce their collective discipline.

The opposition between Lui and Mak concludes with nothing changing. At the end of the film as part of a devilish scheme, One-Eyed Jack gets Lee's younger brother Chi-sum fired on the basis that Lee is a thief. One-Eyed Jack convinces Chi-sum to break into his ex-boss's safe to take revenge. Lee goes to rescue Chi-sum, but Chi-sum angrily believes it is Lee's fault that he lost his job. Lee eventually sacrifices himself out of his love for Chi-sum and takes the blame for the crime of breaking into the safe. He is imprisoned for three years and before being escorted to prison there is a farewell conversation between Lee and Mak that captures the resigned acceptance of the failure of the DPAS.⁵² In the final moments of the film, Inspector Lui gloats to Mak about his seemingly correct prediction that an ex-convict can never reform. As they leave the

courthouse, the inspector tells Mak that it is difficult for Lee to change, and he is not a bit surprised over his reimprisonment. Lui, however, fails to realize that Lee is completely innocent and sacrificed himself for his younger brother.⁵³ Lee's fate, combined with the portrayal of Lui, demonstrates the film's ambiguous stance toward the rule of law. The idea that the law is rigged echoes in Lung's later film *Teddy Girls* when a rebellious teenager scornfully shouts that the law is only applied (negatively) to the weak and the poor. Lui and Mak each turn left and right and walk off in their own directions into the bustling heart of Hong Kong, the conflicts and disputes between them, and thus Hong Kong society, conspicuously unresolved. This is an ending with no easy comforts or solace for the audience. A montage of documentary-like shots of Central Hong Kong follows this with a jazzy score accompanying images of cars zooming by. Law Kar suggests that in this ending the law and human relations are separated or that the relationship between the two has no way of finding a balance or equilibrium. This being the case, "how many more people will be sent to jail? And how can Hong Kong still be as lively and bustling as before?"⁵⁴ The implication of this is that the individual is powerless and the injustice in society, especially toward the underclasses, is obvious but society is uncaring, unsympathetic, and exploitative. How then are things to change? This is Lung's update of the social-realist melodrama through blending it with the crime genre. He explores the contradictions in Hong Kong society but refuses to offer happy endings as was the norm, which perhaps is Lung's answer: the problems depicted were too big to solve, at least in one film.

Chun Kim actually demanded a different ending, requesting that Lee kill all the villains and the film conclude with a happy reconciliation between the brothers. Lung refused this studio-mandated happy ending because it would undermine the voice of accusation and so render the film pointless.⁵⁵ Chun acquiesced and Lung's persistence allowed his vision to shine through, and the ambiguities of the restless, changing Hong Kong of the late 1960s to reverberate long after the closing credits. He also breaks away from the traditions of older Cantonese social-realist melodramas where any problems characters faced were to be dealt with by the help of family or friends—the unjust structural problems related to governmental policies were almost never discussed in these older films. In *Discharged Prisoner*, society as a whole was taken into account, where the government's presence could be felt and where the home was no longer a safe refuge.

CONCLUSION

This essay has demonstrated how *Discharged Prisoner*, made and released during the 1966 street protests and the 1967 riots, can be seen as a critical site that negotiated the reshaping of values in the emerging industrial city. Lung did this

by attempting to implicate the social order when assessing the reasons for why his characters find themselves entrapped and powerless. The attention paid to Hong Kong's social and political context signals Lung's desire to explore Hong Kong's social setup in a deeper way than had been attempted before. The colonial capitalist system is exposed as deeply unjust, highlighted especially by the inspector's unconcealed loathing for ex-convicts, which critically interrogates the role of the police and the law. Lung's decision to take his camera away from the studio and onto the streets to better delineate the impact this world has on his characters also deepens the sociopolitical critique. The failure of the DPAS and ambiguity of the film's ending with more questions than answers reinforce the feeling that the current system is unable to address the social problems. The tension between Supervisor Mak's perspective that ex-convicts should be given a second chance and Inspector Lui's position that criminals can never reform also represents a significant change from the left-wing films of the 1950s: in those latter films human beings could be positively transformed, but in the emerging industrial city and the context of the 1967 riots, an institutional perspective has replaced group solidarity and there is a hesitancy about whether human beings can be transformed due to the darkness of society. Lung's apprehensive feelings about Hong Kong's dominant values and institutions related to the colonial hierarchy of power move beyond older melodramas' standard insular focus on family. This increasingly critical stance toward the system and ideology promoted by the colonial government and the focus on the establishment versus the powerless individual was Lung's way of pushing the conventions of the social-realist melodrama and the crime film in new directions to account for the changing structures of feeling in Hong Kong during this period. Ultimately, Lung's plea for the recognition of the fundamental role society plays for humanity continues to echo and reverberate.

Notes

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1. Tom Cunliffe and Raymond Tsang, "Interview with Law Kar," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* (forthcoming).
2. Sam Ho, "Tsui Hark," *Nang* 5 (2018): 14.
3. Raymond Williams, "Film and the Dramatic Tradition," in Raymond Williams and Michael Orron, *Preface to Film* (London: Film Drama, 1954), 21–23, quoted in Dana Polan, "Raymond Williams on Film," *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 7.
4. In 1967 this mainly refers to the Shaw Brothers, but also included Motion Picture & General Investment Co., Ltd. (MP & GI) earlier in the decade.

5. Andrew Britton, "A New Servitude: Bette Davis, *Now Voyager* and the Radicalism of the Woman's Film," in *Britton on Film: The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 28.
6. Tsui Cheong-ming, "To Behave Like a Human: The World of Emotions in Union's Cinema," in *One for All: The Union Film Spirit*, ed. Grace Ng (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2011), 61.
7. Edward Buscombe, "Walsh and Warner Bros.," in *Raoul Walsh*, ed. Phil Hardy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Film Festival, 1974), 54.
8. Jack Warner was asked to help with Franklin D. Roosevelt's West Coast campaign by powerful figures from the Democratic Party, which helps explain why many of the Warner Bros. films shared sentiments similar to the New Deal. In Hong Kong, some of the left-wing studios were partially funded by the Chinese Communist Party, while others, such as the Union Film Company, were formed by a collective of left-leaning film personnel.
9. Sek Kei, "Chun Kim's Films" [in Chinese], *Chinese Student Weekly*, no. 884 (June 27, 1969): 74.
10. Timmy Chih-Ting Chen, "'The Orchid in Flames': Consanguinity, Community, and Criminality in *Father Is Back*" (presentation at 11th International Convention of Asia Scholars, Leiden, the Netherlands, July 15–19, 2019).
11. James Kung, "'Social Reality' in the Realist Cinema of the 1950s," in *A Comparative Study of Post-War Mandarin and Cantonese Cinema: The Films of Zhu Shilin, Qin Jian and Other Directors*, ed. Shu Kei (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1983), 155.
12. Law Kar, "Archetypes and Variations—Observations on Six Cantonese Films," in *Cantonese Melodrama 1950–1969*, ed. Li Cheuk-to (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1986), 17.
13. Shu Kei, "A Postscript on the Cantonese Cinema Retrospective (1960–1969)," in *Cantonese Cinema Retrospective (1960–69)*, ed. Shu Kei (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1982), 119.
14. Angel Shing, "Oral History Interview: Patrick Lung Kong," in *Oral History Series (6): Director Lung Kong*, ed. Angel Shing and Lau Yam (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2010), 22.
15. Shing, "Oral History Interview," 22.
16. Law Wai-ming, "Time for Tears," in Li Cheuk-to, *Cantonese Melodrama 1950–1969*, 25.
17. Law, "Archetypes and Variations," 17–18.
18. Vivian Lee, *The Other Side of Glamour: The Left-Wing Studio Network in Hong Kong Cinema in the Cold War Era and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 122.
19. Shu Kei, "Talking about Lung Kong," in Shing and Yam, *Oral History Series (6)*, 60.
20. Steve Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 188.
21. Tsang, *Modern History of Hong Kong*, 188.
22. Poshek Fu, "The 1960s: Modernity, Youth Culture, and Hong Kong Cantonese Cinema," in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, ed. Poshek Fu and David Desser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 73.
23. Shing, "Oral History Interview," 24.
24. Robin Wood, "*Rancho Notorious*: A Noir Western in Colour," *Cineaction*, no. 13/14 (Summer 1988): 90.
25. Wood, "*Rancho Notorious*," 90.
26. Wood, 90.

27. Stephen Teo, "The Decade with Two Faces: Cantonese Cinema and the Paranoid Sixties," in *Mandarin Films and Popular Songs: 40's–60's*, ed. Law Kar (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1993), 18.
28. Fu, "The 1960s," 71.
29. Quoted in Kristof Van Den Troost, "Born in an Age of Turbulence," in *Always in the Dark: A Study of Hong Kong Gangster Films*, ed. Po Fung (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2014), 61.
30. Van Den Troost, "Born in an Age," 62.
31. Law Kar, "Changes and Social Influences in Hong Kong Cinema Post-1967: A Comparison with Hong Kong Television," in *When the Wind Was Blowing Wild: Hong Kong Cinema of the 1970s*, ed. May Ng (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2018), 46–47.
32. Elizabeth Yung, "A Time for Swordplay," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 23, 1969, 165.
33. Elsie Tu, *Colonial Hong Kong in the Eyes of Elsie Tu* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 36.
34. Tu, *Colonial Hong Kong*, 36–38.
35. Tu, 87.
36. Hong Kong Research Project, *Hong Kong: A Case to Answer* (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1974), 16.
37. W. P. Morgan, *Triad Societies in Hong Kong* (London: Routledge, 2000), x.
38. Morgan, *Triad Societies*, xi.
39. Tu, *Colonial Hong Kong*, 39.
40. Jing Jing Chang, *Screening Communities: Negotiating Narratives of Empire, Nation, and the Cold War in Hong Kong Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press), 39. Although Jing Jing Chang is discussing meetings in which film censors and government officials were discussing the dangers of screening films within the Cold War context of the ideological war taking place between left-wing and right-wing factions in Hong Kong, I think this argument can also apply to the ways police were depicted in cinema, since police corruption was widely resented during this period.
41. "Call Girl Notes," in Shing and Yam, *Oral History Series* (6), 132.
42. Po Fung, "The Origins of Hong Kong Gangster Films," in Fung, *Always in the Dark*, 12.
43. Portia Ho, "The Struggle for Air," in *Hong Kong Society in Transition*, ed. I. C. Jarvie (New York: Praeger, 1969), 319.
44. Shing, "Oral History Interview," 29.
45. Fung Ho Keung, "Squatters Burden: A Review of the Resettlement Policy," *The 70's Biweekly*, no. 8 (June 1, 1970): 19.
46. Rebecca Prime, "Cloaked in Compromise: Jules Dassin's 'Naked' City," in *"Un-American" Hollywood: Politics and Film in the Blacklist Era*, ed. Frank Krutnik et al. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 142.
47. Poshek Fu, "Cold War Politics and Hong Kong Mandarin Cinema," in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*, ed. Carlos Rojas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 128.
48. It is interesting to note in passing that Luis Bunuel's *Los Olvidados* (1950) features a crippled beggar who pulls himself along on a cart. Since Lung was a big movie fan, it would not be surprising if this character inspired him, especially since Bunuel's film is partly about how poverty drives people to crime.
49. Kan Chi Tung, "I Spent 3½ Years in Stanley Prison," *The 70's Biweekly*, no. 19 (March 1971): 29–31.

50. Lui Tai-lok, "That Long and Winding Road," in Shing and Yam, *Oral History Series* (6), 120.
51. Jon Halliday, "Hong Kong: Britain's Chinese Colony," *New Left Review* 87–88 (1974): 108.
52. I thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing out that this scene in the Hong Kong Film Archive copy of the film is edited out of the DVD version. Shu Kei informed me that Lung Kong allegedly wanted to enter the film into some film festivals and asked editor Wong Yee Shun to re-edit the film. Wong trimmed, deleted, and rearranged some of the scenes, and this edited version was used for the DVD release (which runs for 110 minutes) while the longer version (the Hong Kong Film Archive copy that runs for 118 minutes) was the originally released version in 1967.
53. Law Kar indicates that the Hollywood film *Once a Thief* (1965) was an influence on *Discharged Prisoner*. See Law Kar, "The True Colours of Lung Kong," in Shing and Yam, *Oral History Series* (6), 54. *Once a Thief's* basic structure mirrors *Discharged Prisoner's*: a former crook (Alain Delon) is placed in between the forces of the police and a criminal gang, and society's cold shoulder makes it almost impossible for him to go straight. The detective figure especially is similar to Lung's inspector in the way they both relentlessly tyrannize the former convict. By the end of *Once a Thief*, however, the detective has formed an uneasy mutual bond with the criminal, while the inspector in *Discharged Prisoner* remains steadfast in his belief that criminals can never reform. The detective of the former film genuinely mourns for the criminal after another policeman shoots him dead, while the inspector in the latter gloats when Lee is sent back to prison, despite being innocent of the crime. This makes the Hollywood film's ending arguably more positive, while Lung's ending is more pessimistic. Furthermore, the chip on the detective's shoulder in the Hollywood film is due to an overriding suspicion that the former crook once shot him, which turns out to be so. *Discharged Prisoner's* inspector simply displays an un concealed loathing for ex-convicts, which renders the depiction of the law and the police more negative in Lung's film.
54. Law Kar, "The Story of a Discharged Prisoner: Lung Kong's New Position" [in Chinese], *Chinese Student Weekly*, no. 791 (September 15, 1967): 85.
55. Shing, "Oral History Interview," 25.

Tom Cunliffe is an associate lecturer in film studies at UCL. His essays have appeared in journals including *Framework* and *Screen*. He is currently working on a book about the filmmaker Lung Kong and is co-editing a special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* on the topic of the politics of Hong Kong left-wing cinema, 1950s–1970s.

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