



Diaspora, Migrations, and Cultural Identity in *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*

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Abstract: *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* is a film by Hongkongese director Peter Chan, that tells the story of two Chinese Mainlanders who move to Hong Kong drawn by the economic possibilities offered by the city, and eventually fall in love. The film explores the themes of cultural identity, individual migrations, and Chinese diaspora. While Chinese transnational cinemas have been analysed extensively, less attention has been dedicated to this specific film. Making use of a post-structuralist textual analysis approach, this paper studies various elements of the film to understand how the characters perceive their own cultural identity and interpret diaspora and migration experiences, linking them to the context in which the film was produced: the year before the 1997 Hong Kong handover.

Keywords: *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*, Transnational Cinema, Cultural Identity, Chinese Diaspora, Migration

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Introduction

This paper analyses the film *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (1996) by Hong Kong director Peter Chan, with a focus on its transnational aspects. The film tells the story of two Chinese Mainlanders, Li Xiaojun and Li Qiao, who arrive in Hong Kong in 1986, drawn by the economic possibilities that the city offers. In the solitude of this fast-paced place, they begin to spend more and more time together, falling in love. However, when Qiao loses all of her savings in the 1987 stock market crash she becomes worried about her future, and the two fall apart despite retaining their feelings for one another.¹

More in detail, supposedly inspired by his own migration experiences in Thailand and in the United States,² Peter Chan explores the themes of cultural identity, individual migrations and the Chinese diaspora, key elements of the film that would seem to affect the past, present and future of all the people of Hong Kong. In fact, in an interview the director explained:

¹ Charles, *The Hong Kong Filmography*, 61.

² Odham Stokes, *Dictionary of Hong Kong Cinema*, 41–2.

“I’ve always wanted to film a story on the topic of immigration to reflect the ‘rootless status’ of Hong Kong people. [...] When I filmed *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*, it was 1996, the very time when Hong Kong people felt so lost, so they can relate to the meaning of drifting in the film.”³

Thus, the main aim of this study is to answer the following research questions: how are diaspora, migration and cultural identity portrayed in *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*, and what do they do reveal about the (trans)national nature of Hong Kong cinema?

According to Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim, within the discipline of film studies there has been a shift towards transnational cinema, as the paradigm of the national is no longer adequate as a means for understanding production, consumption and representation of cultural identity in an increasingly globalised world.⁴ They also argue for a critical approach to transnationalism, focusing on diasporic, exilic, and postcolonial cinemas, aiming, through the analysis of the cinematic representation of cultural identity, to question the neo-colonial construct of national culture and move away from Eurocentric tendencies.⁵ Furthermore, Mette Hjort and Petrie Duncan observe how “the case of Chinese cinema [...] facilitates a productive analysis of transnational/national dynamics in which culture and ethnicity, rather than territorial boundaries, play a dominant role.”⁶

As Wang Yiman illustrates in *A Companion to Chinese Cinema* (2012), Chinese Mainlanders who settle down in Hong Kong continue to have an ever-changing relationship with their homeland, that requires networking with diasporic communities, while Hong Kong residents, in response to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) reclaiming sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997, feel the necessity to reconfigure and sometimes even relocate their home.⁷ The author claims that the ways in which home is reimagined in the space of Hong Kong in concatenation with other spaces has not been sufficiently explored, and that filmmakers take advantage of multilocation shooting to foreground Hong Kong as a space whose meaning and identity depend on other interconnected locations.⁸ I argue that in *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* the director depicts this “transnationality” of Hong Kong in several ways in addition to multilocation shooting, such as language, diegetic sound, and cinematography.

The existing academic literature on both national and transnational Chinese cinemas is extensive and heterogeneous, but to the best of my knowledge no academic research has focused on the transnational aspects of this specific film, which speaks to the relevance of this study. To conduct my research, I referred to the post-structuralist textual analysis approach presented by Alan McKee in his book *Textual Analysis* (2003), which is aimed at understanding “the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live.”⁹ More specifically, I analysed the various elements of the film to understand how the characters perceive their own cultural identity and how they interpret diaspora and migration experiences, in order to link them to the context in which the film was produced.

From China to Hong Kong

In the film, when Li Xiaojun meets Li Qiao for the first time, she is working as a cashier at McDonald’s, and he struggles with making an order due to his broken Cantonese. After looking

³ Huang, *Cinematic Imagination*, 173.

⁴ Higbee and Lim, *Concepts of Transnational Cinema*, 8.

⁵ Higbee and Lim, *Concepts of Transnational Cinema*, 9.

⁶ Hjort and Duncan, *Introduction*, 13.

⁷ Yiman, *Alter-centering Chinese Cinema*, 543-4.

⁸ Yiman, *Alter-centering Chinese Cinema*, 544.

⁹ McKee, *Textual Analysis*, 1.

around and lowering her voice to make sure that no one else can hear her, Qiao leans towards Xiaojun and switches to Mandarin to help him (see **Figure 1**). Having finally found someone he can talk to, he starts asking her all sorts of questions, and she poses herself as his mentor, explaining that if he wants to find a decent job, he has to learn English, and even helps him to apply for a credit card.



Figure 1. *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*, directed by Peter Chan (1996, Mei Ah Entertainment, 2007), 0:10:20, DVD.

Since she speaks Cantonese and shows him around this chaotic city he hardly understands, Xiaojun perceives Qiao as a Hong Kong girl. When later in the film she confesses that she comes from Guangzhou and he replies: “I knew it! We’re comrades,” she replies that they are not, as in Guangdong people speak Cantonese, watch Hong Kong television and drink Vitasoy, being much closer to Hong Kong. The geographical proximity between the two places, as well as language, culture, and everyday commodities, contribute to the formation of Qiao’s flexible cross-border identity,¹⁰ that also extends to other intercultural elements, such as wearing a Mickey Mouse sweatshirt, watch, and pin, and working at both the McDonald’s and the English school, in order to achieve the ultimate Hong Kong dream of becoming rich.

Moreover, **Figure 2** shows a scene in which the director provides a unique perspective on the city’s perception on both its newcomers by portraying them from an ATM screen, with Qiao in the front and Xiaojun in the back). By positioning Qiao in the foreground, Chan underscores her extensive experience and integration into the city. Contrarily, Xiaojun’s position in the background illustrates his reliance on Qiao’s guidance and expertise with technology.

At a deeper level, the relationship between Guangzhou and Hong Kong creates a connection with the PRC based on cultural and sociological aspects rather than nationality, which implies that if a Mainlander is not left out of this community based on nationality, they will have the possibility to become a part of it by taking on the same habits and by learning the language, as Xiaojun’s character demonstrates.

Furthermore, it is worth emphasising that while during the first half of the film the two Mainlanders speak Mandarin between them, once Xiaojun learns Cantonese and adjusts to the rhythms of Hongkongese life, they switch to Cantonese. This transition signals not only a shift in Xiaojun’s self-definition, but also a closer proximity within the couple.

¹⁰ Huang, *Cinematic Imagination*, 174.



Figure 2. *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*, 0:43:18.

On the other hand, Xiaojun and Qiao first grow closer when they hear the song *Tian Mi Mi* (“sweet as honey,” also the Chinese title of the film) by Taiwanese singer Teresa Teng. The song is playing in the background while they are riding on Xiaojun’s bike, and after Qiao starts to sing it, Xiaojun smiles and joins her. From this moment, their love for Teresa Teng will be the *fil rouge* of their relationship, i.e., Xiaojun and Qiao sell her cassette tapes, they discuss of national and cultural identity in relation to her music (“only Mainlanders love Teresa Teng’s songs”), they even run into her on the street, and in the very last scene of the film they are brought together once again by her death, accidentally meeting in front of an electronics store in New York, with a TV reporting the sad news between them.

In the last sequence of the film, Qiao arrives in front of the electronics store accompanied by *Tian Mi Mi* playing softly in the background. The camera alternates between perspectives from inside and outside the store as she stops to watch the news, and close-ups of her face and the TV emphasise her connection to the singer. Shortly after, Xiaojun enters the scene, and once again, the camera frames him from outside and inside the store, followed by a close-up of his face juxtaposed with the TV. As Qiao turns towards him and their eyes meet, the camera alternates between the two characters and the two of them with the red TV in the middle, as seen in **Figure 3**. This visual sequence mirrors the lyrics of the song, reinforcing the connection they share through the music.



Figure 3. *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*, 1:52:11.

Teresa Teng (1953–1995) was one of the first singers from Hong Kong or Taiwan to become popular in the Mainland and throughout East and Southeast Asia, becoming the voice of the world's Chinese communities in diaspora, singing of romance and yearning.¹¹ Her presence in the film illustrates the significant effects of popular music within “the lived, sentimental experiences of history,”¹² as her nostalgic music perfectly matches not only the characters' rootless status and ever-changing cultural identity, but also the sense of incompleteness in their love story (further emphasised in the English title with “almost”). Teng's music plays a pivotal role in uniting the two characters throughout the film, transcending physical borders and cultural boundaries with its intangible nature and permeable quality. Like an invisible thread, her melodies weave together their diasporic identities, serving as a constant reminder of their shared heritage and strengthening their bond, regardless of where they are and who they are with.

From Hong Kong to New York

Towards the end of the film, Qiao and Xiaojun fall apart again, and, being unaware of each other's plans, they both move to New York. In particular, Qiao moves in with her boyfriend Pao (a mob boss who is later killed in a street fight), and Xiaojun becomes a cook at a Cantonese restaurant in Chinatown. They almost meet a couple of times, but it never actually happens until the final scene, conveying to the viewer the feeling that the characters are now located in a different and large geographical space far from Hong Kong, which now appears as a distant periphery, both physically and in their memory.

On the other hand, Hoover and Odham Stokes explain that both Hong Kong and New York have emerged as “global cities,” centres of finance affecting international migration patterns: the economic opportunities offered by these global cities might be appealing – despite the hardships – for those living in under-developed areas of the world.¹³ In the case of Qiao and Xiaojun's migration experiences, however, along with the economic discourse there is an underlying anxiety caused by the imminent handover to the PRC, which is never explicitly addressed in the film but is certainly known to the people of Hong Kong watching the film right after its release. In fact, Hong Kong's history is marked by over a century of British colonial rule since the mid-19th century. During this period, the city thrived as a global financial hub, and became known for its economic stability and vibrant multiculturalism. In 1997, the sovereignty over the city was set to be transferred back to the PRC under the “one country, two systems” principle, indicating that Hong Kong would maintain its legal and economic systems until 2047.¹⁴ In his 1997 book, Abbas delved into the intricate fabric of Hong Kong's identity, describing it as a “colonial space of disappearance.”¹⁵ The city was characterised by a unique population, made up of refugees and expatriates who perceived Hong Kong not merely as a fixed place but rather as a transient space. Furthermore, Abbas underlined that after the handover, despite the quasi-colonial arrangement with the PRC, in crucial aspects – such as education and international networks – Hong Kong emerged as not subordinate to its colonising State but more advanced.¹⁶ In the years leading up to the handover, Hong Kong residents lived with an underlying anxiety about their future, particularly regarding the autonomy they had

11 Rodekohl, *Death of Teresa Teng*, 834–5.

12 Rodekohl, *Death of Teresa Teng*, 833.

13 Hoover and Odham Stokes, *Hong Kong in New York*, 513.

14 Encyclopædia Britannica, “Handover of Hong Kong.”

15 Abbas, *Hong Kong*, 3.

16 Abbas, *Hong Kong*, 4–6.

enjoyed under British rule. This is the atmosphere influencing Qiao and Xiaojun's decisions in the film, and which shapes the immediate viewing experience for the audience.

Nevertheless, at the end of the film, despite relocating to New York, the protagonists cannot help but maintain ties with their Chinese roots: Xiaojun by working at a restaurant in Chinatown, Qiao by being a tour guide for Chinese visitors at the Statue of Liberty, and both eventually reconnecting in front of the news of Teresa Teng's death, as to suggest that part of what keeps them together are their shared origins.

Conclusion

The overall aim of this research was to investigate how diaspora, migrations and cultural identity are portrayed in director Peter Chan's *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*, in order to reflect on the (trans)national nature of Hong Kong cinema.

My analysis of the film demonstrated how, when it comes to self-definition, the characters' cultural identity is more important than their nationality, as they mostly define themselves by the language they speak, what they like, and how they inhabit the different spaces where they are located. This emerged not only from their spoken languages and the content of their dialogues, but also through cinematography, as shown by the shots framing Qiao and Xiaojun from an ATM screen.

Similarly, by making use of Teresa Teng's song *Tian Mi Mi* for the film's soundtrack and as a thread running through the relationship of the protagonists, the director gives their experience a transnational significance, in which the entire diasporic Chinese community can identify. Due to its intangible nature and permeable quality, Teng's music transcends borders and weaves the characters' identities together.

Moreover, the fact that the final part of the film is set in New York provides an additional perspective from which to look at Hong Kong, whose geopolitical dimension is constantly shifting throughout history, from periphery to centre and again from centre to periphery. This is best exemplified by a conversation that Qiao has with a group of Chinese Mainlanders tourists during one of her guided tours; after discovering that she is originally from Guangzhou and plans to return soon, one of the tourists says: "Right... People used to want to leave in the 1980's, but now they want to go back. Many Hong Kong people now work in the Mainland. [...] There are lots of opportunities to make money in China."

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Images

Figure 1. *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*, directed by Peter Chan (1996, Mei Ah Entertainment, 2007), 0:10:20, DVD.

Figure 2. *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*, directed by Peter Chan (1996, Mei Ah Entertainment, 2007), 0:43:18, DVD.

Figure 3. *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*, directed by Peter Chan (1996, Mei Ah Entertainment, 2007), 1:52:11, DVD.

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