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# Nostalgic Imagination:

## Poisonous Cure for the Sense of Loss

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When encountering discontent and depression in the current situation, people tend to look forward to the future or backward to the past to seek for the dawning of hope or an exit from temporal disorder. This kind of escapist and longing sentiment engenders nostalgia. A nostalgic person often mourns for the lost days, believing that the absent in the present will be found in some corners of the past. However, the lost past people are yearning for is still full of unpredictability and uncertainty. It may be an imaginary site that never exists or can never go back, since nostalgia is also about the reconfiguration and recreation of the past with imagination and fantasy (Boym XIII). On the positive side, nostalgic imagination enables people to challenge the modern concept of time and spatial logic, to rediscover the possibility of continuity amid dislocation, and fulfill what is absent in the present. Nostalgic films became popular in Hong Kong after the 1980s. The nostalgic narrative and sentiment in the films temporarily relieve native citizen's anxiety and the sense of loss in the transient and shifting society (Chan 257). Such films offer an alternative for contemporary audience to travel in any direction of time and space, to reconstruct

the past with freedom and possibilities, and to redefine the tenuous identity. The ways of shifting the spatial logic and overcoming the power of time tend to change and even subvert how audience perceive and interpret the history and knowledge. However, the dual histories and memories produced by nostalgia are dangerous, making people fail to distinguish the actual home and the imaginary one (Boym XVI). The proliferation of nostalgia in contemporary Hong Kong culture provides an arena to interrogate that whether the timelessness longing and rewritten past can cure or exacerbate the displacement of the present reality. After investigating the violation of chronological time and mediated representation of the past in Stanley Kwan's *Rouge* (1987), I demonstrate that the disruption of the space-time continuum and fragmented montage of presenting history in nostalgic imagination hinders the audience's ability to retain their real history and produces a greater sense of loss as well as displacement.

The word "nostalgia" comes from ancient Greek, referring to an afflicted mood and a painful yearning to return home (Boym 3). It was first noted by a Swiss physician, Johannes Hofer, to diagnose the fatal symptoms experienced by spatially exiled Swiss mercenary







soldiers (Boym 3). The mania of longing for homeland results in a series of physical illness, such as loss of appetite and high fever, and this sentiment of loss is also connected with one's own fantasy. The patients usually present a great capability of remembering and replicating the images of their long-missing home in their mind (Boym 4). The recreated homeland produced by nostalgia can be an "illusive phantasm" and an erroneous representation constituted with fragmented and distorted images of the patients (Chan 261). Nostalgia in modern society has been extended beyond the medical fields to many new meanings related to time and space. For example, the homesickness has been institutionalized, and made connection with patriotism as well as nationalism for political purposes (15). By commemorating the historical glories and consoling the painful sufferings, national ideologies are able to be propagandized and rooted in people's mind. Therefore, the "past" has been given new meanings to transcend individual and collective memories.

In the Hong Kong context, the deployment of nostalgia focused more on its temporal dimension rather than the spatial one. In the 1980s and 1990s, the political transition, economic recession, and future uncertainties brought Hong Kong society a great sense of discontent and displacement (P. Y. Lee 3). From British colony to Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), Hong Kong people had been experiencing a difficult process of redefining and reconstructing their identities. The emergence of nostalgic cinema in the 1980s offered a new entrance for Hong Kong people to return to the past, to awaken the sense of social belonging and to search for the cultural root as well as continuity amid the threat of dislocation.

Nostalgic cinema of Hong Kong can be categorized into four main types, mainly

representing and reconstructing the 1930s', 1950s-1960s' Hong Kong history as well as social scenes and the ancient history of China (Chan 257). With the nostalgic imagination, the history is recreated and represented through the cinematic manifestations. Through recollecting the unique and representative images of the past, nostalgia cinema created an elliptical temporality and collective memories for the city. Fantasies about the past in cinematic nostalgia are ways of revising the history, and tend to tantalize us to build an emotional attachment to the lost time (P. Y. Lee 11). The intertextuality between the revision of the past and the present creative film texts reconfigured the old motifs with new interpretations and expressions. However, the cinematic nostalgia subversion of "time" figuratively alter how we experience and memorize the course of history. Moreover, as Chan indicates, nostalgia is not only about how the history is rewritten, but also focuses on how individuals retrospect the past, and invoke the memories (264). The nostalgic feeling is "a self-reflexive mode of history representation characterized by self-conscious theatricality" and a personal engagement with the past (P. Y. Lee 10). Representing the 1930's Hong Kong, Stanley Kwan's *Rouge* demonstrates how the memories of a certain past is transcended and mediated by individual and collective subjectivity.

Through the travel of the female protagonist, Ruhua, a courtesan died fifty-three years ago, fails to find her past lover, Chan, who promised to die with her, so she comes back to human world as a ghost to find him. As a former courtesan lived in the 1930s' Hong Kong, she finds herself helplessly lost in the unfamiliar cityscape of 1980s' Hong Kong in this return journey. Fortunately, she gets help from a young couple journalists (Mr. Yuan and Ms. Chu), who offer her temporary accommodation and help

her to publish the Notice for Missing Person. The sense of loss and displacement brought by the impersonal and irreversible changes of time and place are well presented in *Rouge*. The whole film is framed as a story within a story, and the history for modern audience is double mediated and refracted by Ruhua's nostalgic reminiscences and the two journalists' interpretations. When traveling the city, she feels frustrated about the changes in Shi Tang Zhu [Shek Tong Tsui]. The Tai Ping Theatre in the 1930s has been replaced by a Seven-Eleven convenience shop (00:29:56). The Yi Hong Lou, the brothel she used to live has become a kindergarten (00:35:35). The physical changes in the local landscape are pieced together to project a sense of displacement resulted by the contrast between the past glories of pleasure and the present alienated modern atmosphere. Moreover, not only the disappearance of old buildings, from dressing styles to behavioral manners, Ruhua is isolated and disconnected from the people of the 1980s. She used to be the most charming and elegant courtesan, and she sold her parts of body for male customers to caress: a client needs to pay 500HKD to caress her hand, and 1000HKD for her ears (00:26:36). Whereas, in the 1987, her extraordinary beauty and charm are not more attractive for the modern people. For example, when she intends to seduce Yuan to become her client for money in return, Yuan is indifferent with her words (00:27:05). After half a century, Ruhua had become an alien of the city.

The history narrated by Ruhua represents a rupture of temporal order and a mixture of individual subjectivity, consciousness and nostalgic memories. Imagination and characters' subjective states play a significant role in fabricating the past, and the past becomes a site of contending personal memories. Both the

couple journalists and the audiences read the refracted past through the narratives of Ruhua and the ways she pieced together the history, but there is one critical scene that Ruhua thinks she cannot find her lover because he has already died with her and has become a stray ghost lost in human world. Under this assumption, her lover still loves her as she does. However, when the journalists track Ruhua's oral past via external sources, they find a "fact" different from Ruhua's narrative. According to the 1934s' local newspaper, Ruhua's lover survived from hypnotics. Ruhua confesses her intention of killing Chan using hypnotics without noticing him in advance, which have not been mentioned before. The newspaper offers a different source of records about the past. Mr. Yuan and Ms. Chu then have different understandings of Ruhua's story. Yuan has shown more signs of compassion, but Chu regards her as a murderer. Ruhua's lover, Chan is alive, while living in poverty. She finally finds him, and returns back the rough locket that symbolizes their love, and feels disenchanted. Since the voice of Chan fading out from the movie, like Yuan and Chu, we cannot learn how he read his relationship as well as his past with Ruhua. Whereas, he did not spontaneously choose to die, and when he has accidentally survived, he is unwilling to die again to keep his promise to Ruhua. If Chan becomes the narrator of the whole story, he will have a different appropriation and reconfiguration about the past. The legendary past Ruhua longing for probably has been romanticized by herself. The charm of the past is determined by its freedom and possibilities, that is "a freedom to remember, to choose the narratives of the past" to unfold them in our own way (Boym 354). Therefore, it is difficult for us to have an authentic course to explicate the history, but the history comes to have meanings because of the



lived experience of the people. Nostalgic cinema also never aims to replicate an authentic history, but "to remark the past from the present time" and to give some foresight to the future (Chan 256).

In conclusion, nostalgic films tend to preserve the past by spatializing it, and revisit the past like visiting a site, while Ruhua's experience still reminds us of its irreversibility in reality. At the beginning of the film, Ruhua attempts to bring back her past lover, but she eventually fails to do so. "All have changed," as Yuan said after fifty-three years (00:34:48). The director doesn't attempt to romanticize the past, but maintains a distance from it. The nostalgic homeland Ruhua built for us is a past can never return to, even never exists. Boym indicates that "nostalgia can be both a social disease and a creative emotion, a poison and a cure" (354). The reconstructed past and homeland offer us possibilities and freedom to fulfill what is lack in present and what we want to foresee in the future. Whereas, being too addicted into it can also make us lost, since the imagined past is too attractive or even utopian, but never come to life. Furthermore, the disjunction between time and space and the altered nostalgic site also tend to destabilize how we memorize the history. We may fail to distinguish what is real, and what is unreal. Ruhua fails to keep a distance from the nostalgic past, then she finally suffers a greater sense of loss and pain. Without the authenticity and depth in history, nostalgic kitsch constructs the past with imagination mainly for public consumption. The politics of nostalgia has been an important part of popular culture production (Appardurai 30). The object of Hong Kong nostalgic films usually is to build "another land of exotic ambience" rather than the "original homeland" (Ng 10). The imaginary hyperspace of a utopian past may temporarily



alleviate the predicament in the actual present. However, only when we detach from the state of timelessness of the nostalgic imagination, and face the reality bravely, the real problems of the present can be solved, and the predicament in the actual present can be truly alleviated.





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