CHAPTER 6

Remaking "China"

While past remake studies have provided valuable insights into both the role of cultural difference and the importance of gender representation as a marker of this difference in remakes, the analyses conducted in previous chapters show that remake studies is able to move beyond the focus on cultural imperialism which was a feature of earlier Franco-American research in the field. Chinese-language remake studies have moved towards a less rigid, more transnational approach in keeping with the theoretical disposition of Chinese-language film studies more broadly, but they have similarly been inclined to discuss the Chinese-language remake with reference to the hegemonic visions of Hollywood. This monograph builds upon this work while simultaneously taking the study of Chinese-language remakes to a more neutral space, through focusing on reformulations of gender and the family in Chinese-language remakes of films from the U.S., Hong Kong and pre-communist China from a variety of genres and time periods. Rather than addressing remakes as purely a cynical commercial exercise, or as an example of one culture misappropriating another, it has instead investigated the broader myriad of potential reasons behind changes which can be observed between source films and remakes, and the significance of these differences in a Chinese-language cinematic and cultural context.

The films in this work were first chosen because they adhered to the strictest definition of a remake—the acknowledged, direct remake—which meant that arguments regarding what constitutes a remake could be set aside. However, the choice of films also takes remake studies in a new direction through the inclusion of both inter- and intracultural pairs of films, providing an opportunity for the discovery of new perspectives on remakes through their differing places of origin, generic categorisations and times of production. At the same time, all of the films shared a common thematic thread where gender representation emerged as a key juncture at which many of the variables involved in remaking the source film met. Each of the analyses conducted highlighted a different aspect of remakes studies to show the increasing complexity of issues related to the field.

Remakes and Perspectives on Being Chinese

While all four films approached the issue from different perspectives, with varying degrees of emphasis on the role of the director, genre and gender, at

the heart of the changes which have been made between each of the source films and their remakes are ideas surrounding what it means to be Chinese today. All four pair of films highlighted the contested nature of Chinese identity, raising different perspectives on contemporary life in China. Regardless of whether their source films were set in another time or place, these remakes speak to contemporary interpretations of Chinese history, society, politics, values and identity.

The analysis of *What Women Want* (2000 and 2011), supported the findings of early French-American remake studies, in that the film marked 'cultural difference' through the adaptation of gender roles between the source film and its remake. A comparative narrative analysis demonstrated that at the heart of the remake were crucial differences in gender construction and representation which reflected the different needs and expectations of the films' target audiences. Both films essentially put forward the same story of failed masculinity, redemption and transformation, but they relied upon different conceptualisations of gender and sexuality, and projected different ideal models of the family according to what is perceived to be their respective traditional and 'modern' cultural norms.

Psychoanalytic analysis conducted on both films found that while the original Hollywood production laid the blame for Nick's behaviour at his mother's feet for not providing him with a strong male role model or father figure, the Chinese-language remake introduces the concept of the multi-generational family via the character of Sun Meisheng, Zigang's father, to explain his son's attitudes. Zigang's masculinity is compared and contrasted to his father's in a way which connects with broader social discourses on the tensions between traditional and more contemporary values in Chinese society. While the original film was quite nostalgic, the remake adopts a more critical view towards history. Sun Meisheng's inclusion in the film, and his vocalisation of certain truths about his own treatment of his wife and family, both repudiate the negative aspects of traditional Confucian gender relations that were based in hierarchies, and at the same time, selectively reinforce values from the same tradition such as filial piety and the role of the parent as teacher.

As the protagonists of films which associate themselves so closely with the question of "what women want", the female characters in these narratives provide some interesting insights into how women might be represented in this kind of discourse on gender. While both versions featured women in the workforce, their agency was in most cases, low, and their characterisations were heavily bound to ideas regarding self-image, sex, domesticity, and materialism. These notions were conveyed to the audience powerfully and with a sense of authenticity, in women's own words and thoughts, through the

narrative vehicle of Nick's/Zigang's mind-reading ability. However, as in the case of masculinity, there were differences between the source film and remake in how femininity was projected. Woman in the case of the American film was neurotic, either sexually repressed or hypersexual, and indecisive. In the Chinese-language remake, Sun Zigang's early assessment, that "women want men with money" seems for the most part, correct in the context of the remake's narrative. Women in the Chinese-language film are self-obsessed, concerned mostly with self-image and material possessions. While the lead female protagonist has more substance, her financial independence and work ethic turn out to be fronts for her lack of success in relationships, and her life is only made complete through her integration into Zigang's family unit. The remake is thus deeply conservative in its depiction of femininity despite the occasional humorous attack on male characters.

The remake also relates itself to the perceived difficulties facing modern Chinese citizens, where some aspects of this traditional family model come into conflict with the demands of contemporary life. While the original American film is happy to accept the male protagonist's daughter being cared for by another man, the Chinese remake emphasises that the model of single, divorced parent is not ideal, and as such, Zigang finishes the film with a "complete" family—his new love, his daughter and his father. By adding the father figure in Sun Meisheng's character, the narrative of the remake thus shifted from being primarily concerned with the couple, to being about the wellbeing of the family. The remake is also aspirational in the way in which it presents a vision of the modern Chinese family, who is wealthy and successful and show their love for each other through the purchase of material goods. More broadly, the remake provides an expression of how China's increasing participation in the world economy, and its subsequent interactions with other expressions of gender, have in turn influenced gender roles within Chinese society.

While the chapter built upon the methodological approaches of early works, this pair of films also demonstrated how discussion regarding these differences is not necessarily inevitably tied to notions of cultural imperialism. While the remake certainly makes changes to the source material to reflect its audience's background, it does not set up an artificial dichotomy that pits American culture against Chinese culture. The remake instead functions as a commentary on Chinese culture made for a domestic audience, and it presents one particularly idealistic, aspirational vision of what it means to be Chinese today. In this way, this particular remake is indistinguishable from other forms of modern day propaganda that perpetuate notions of social stability through keeping families together and functioning as strong economic units.

Chapter Three approached issues involved in cross-cultural remakes from another angle, considering the mediating factors of auteur and genre in the analysis of *Blood Simple* (1984) and *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop* (2009). The generic shift which is evident between *Blood Simple* and *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop* and the fact the films were both made by auteurs who have particular styles, complicated the analysis of gender and familial representation, bringing to light the impact of these influences in shaping remakes. It is not necessarily social or political culture that is the dominant force here, it is cinematic culture through which directors construct images on screen to convey their understanding of cinema on multiple levels, narratively, visually and symbolically.

Gender is almost a by-way through which this communication is achieved, with the directors, while both drawing upon the concept of failed masculinities, approaching this theme in different ways. The Coen brothers had their male protagonists failing to meet macho cowboy, detective and even mafia stereotypes, and they broke down masculine-coded institutions such as the state and the law both through the narrative's setting in an isolated area and through the eventual killing off of all three male protagonists. Zhang achieved a similar effect by corrupting Beijing Opera roles, showing how previously noble and powerful men might become twisted, weak and impotent. His representations of masculinity are thus not inconsistent with male characters in his earlier films where older men inflicted terrible trauma on their families. Laobanniang demonstrates the same kind of steely resolve in the face of adversity that we see in many of Zhang's other leading women. She endures the humiliation of her marriage to a decrepit old man and the sexual punishment which physically marks her as Mazi's property, reminiscent of how cattle are branded by their owner. However, unlike some of Zhang's earlier female leads, particularly roles played by Gong Li, Laobanniang's infidelity does not correlate with any sexualisation of her character. Zhang's portrayal of her character appears to be a turning point in his focus, with less attention given to the depiction of the erotic dimension of female sexuality.

The two intercultural remakes in this study demonstrate that in the case of Chinese-language remakes, cultural imperialism is not necessarily a significant factor, however, cultural difference is still an important aspect of the creation of these remakes. In the second pair of films, cultural difference manifests itself instead through the different cinematic and/or artistic traditions drawn upon by the source film and remake. Zhang uses the language of symbols that simultaneously mark 'Chineseness' which he has deployed through his career to reinforce his status as a director equal to his global counterparts, converting a Coen brothers cult classic film into another visual language for those who understand his work and its cultural complexities.

While Chapter Three considered questions of genre when shifting from Hollywood to mainland China, Chapter Four took the discussion of genre to a new place with its analysis of the Hong Kong original film *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987) and its remake (2011). This love story between the young scholar and a beautiful ghost draws upon a long tradition of romance stories in Chinese literature which have also made their way onto the screen. However, the original film adapted this story to reflect the themes of political anxiety regarding Hong Kong's handover to China and its casting of bisexual actor Leslie Cheung presented a chaotic mixed-genre film featuring an array of sexually ambiguous characters.

The 2011 remake transformed these roles to reflect more hetero-normative expressions of gender, abandoning the gender ambiguity of the original villain, and suppressing the homo-social relationship between the lead men in favour of a heterosexual love triangle narrative. The realignment of masculinities and femininities in the 2011 remake speak to a greater set of changes in the relationship between mainland Chinese cinema and its diasporic counterparts. Xiaoqian's memory loss at the hands of Yan points to the difficulty of dealing with the past and the tendency to forget—both issues which are of contemporary relevance when considered in relation to Hong Kong's colonial past and current political situation with mainland China. The suppression of deviant forms of sexuality present in the remake, as well as the repositioning of the original film as a relatively crude cinematic achievement in the face of the huge advances in CGI and cinematic techniques demonstrated in the remake also could be read as a re-defining of the relationship between the Hong Kong and mainland Chinese cultural production industries, where mainland China now holds the balance of audience and financial clout and Hong Kong must adapt to these pressures.

This relationship could be understood as mirroring that which exists between coloniser and colonised, with the British replaced by mainland China, and Hong Kong engaging in a battle for the right to maintain its own diasporic position in Asian cinema. The remake could be read as denying the contested nature of the Chinese identity, with the changes made to gender representations encouraging viewers to see Hong Kong and mainland China as the same 'Chinese' culture. The pair of films expands our understanding of the remake phenomenon by revealing other dimensions of remaking practices that are relevant within the specific framework of Chinese-language cinema, and the analysis is heavily bound to the social, cultural, cinematic and political circumstances of these regions.

Finally, this book considered a pair of films which highlighted the influence of the passage of time in shaping the differences between a source film and its remake, with a particular focus on how the remake bears the marks of past and

present interventionalist national cultural policies in China. *Spring in a Small Town* (1948) and its 2002 remake *Springtime in a Small Town*, initially appeared to be carbon copies of each other, despite almost sixty years having passed between their productions. The remake created by Tian Zhuangzhuang, approaches the original narrative under the pretense of being apolitical, creating a visual display which maximises the exotic and erotic pleasures of a love story set in the ruins of a grand Ming Dynasty home. The slow pace, ponderous camera shots and relationship-oriented narrative all appear to carefully distance the remake from any kind of political statement or sentiment.

But upon analysis, there was in fact a political edge to Tian's remake hidden beneath the layers of love, loss, obligation and infidelity. If the film is read with reference to how Tian has previously depicted political turmoil in his films, particularly *The Blue Kite, Springtime in a Small Town* also uses the family unit as a case study for the impact of political decisions on people's lives in China. The use of the failing marriage and family home in *Springtime in a Small Town* could be read as an extension of this political discussion, drawing parallels between this kind of familial deterioration and/or stagnation and the repeated failures of contemporary political leadership in China. The decadent lifestyle which Yuwen and Liyan perhaps used to live has faded, declined. Now the walls and corridors of the house block the communication between the married couple as well as the lovers, creating a labyrinth of secrets. Out in the garden, the surrounding walls are crumbling, opening the marriage up to interference from external powers and letting in light which illuminates painful truths.

While seeming to be apolitical, Tian's remake uses gender not to make a point about the pitfalls of arranged marriage, or the morality of infidelity, but for pointed political commentary. By choosing to almost exactly replicate the original film, the repeated imagery of the family home and failing marriage becomes an allegory that connects the feudal past and the Nationalist era in which the original film was made with the political environment of the remake. To emphasise the danger of a repeat of the same issues of corruption and nepotism that Chinese society has seen in the past, Tian mobilises the term 'Spring' in the film's title to draw attention to the political movements which have connected this word and its associations with new beginnings and change. This case study demonstrates how it is not just the time of production that influences a remake, but also the passage of time itself. Given the vast social and economic upheavals that have occurred over the past sixty years, this chapter expands the field of remake studies to consider the influence of these events in Chinese history, politics and society. The remake thus presents a particular vision of China's past in order to position these issues at the centre of the Chinese present.

Remakes and Transnational Chinese-language Cinema

In the case of Chinese-language cinema, while flows of capital and cinematic styles are certainly no longer limited by national boundaries, these remakes nonetheless demonstrate that there are distinct narrative strategies employed to target specific audiences. There is no disputing that there are indeed strong transnational elements present in Chinese-language cinema, which have been discussed extensively already by a number of significant scholars in the field.[1] However, there are differing degrees to which this theory might be applicable to individual films, and in the case of the Chinese-language remake, the imperative to make a commercially successful film, where present, strongly drives filmmakers to create locally tailored products. In the case of *A Woman, A Gun and A Noodle Shop* and *Springtime in a Small Town*, these two remakes also highlight the complexity of the arthouse/commercial film 'divide', or lack thereof, in the context of Chinese-language cinema. The Chinese version of *A Woman, A Gun and A Noodle Shop* in particular shows how a Chinese-language remake can be both high and low art at the same time; both arthouse cinema and commercial product. This is a significant departure from the notion that remakes are a just a form of inferior low art that was of such concern to Franco-American remake studies. In the case of each pair of remakes in this study, there are thus different combinations of factors which work to emphasise or de-emphasise the globalised nature of Chinese-language cinema.

The degree to which the Chinese-language remakes in this study engage with ideas of a "global Chinese cinema" is reflected in how they adjust the source film in order to reach their intended audience, and each remake demonstrates a slightly different approach. In Chapter Two, the analysis showed very clearly the importance of the spectator through its quite overt restructuring of the film's narrative to address the multi-generational family. *A Chinese Ghost Story* moves to consideration of how the remake addresses the Chinese audience as a homogenous entity, with the seamless interaction of Hong Kong and mainland Chinese actors and a traditional Chinese story and setting.

Chapters Three, Four and Five demonstrated a more complex approach to audiences, with Zhang Yimou's directorial approach to remaking *Blood Simple* as *A Woman, A Gun and A Noodle Shop* quite clearly identifying two audiences for his remake. While he had already substituted the Coen brothers style with his own, Zhang further emphasised the duality of his remake by releasing two versions of the film, one for the domestic New Year's audience, the other, the international film festival elite. The stylistic flourishes which he incorporated into the internationally released version align the remake much more

1 This is discussed in Chapter 1, where some significant works exploring this theory are cited.

closely with the sensibilities of the original text; sensibilities which would be lost on the majority of the remake's domestic audience who would never have seen *Blood Simple*. Similarly, the local comedy of the domestic version would have been almost certainly lost in translation for an international viewer. The remake in this case cleverly connects both with exotic notions of "China" and broader cinematic culture for non-Chinese spectators, while at the same time, using indigenous generic markers that rely on local humour and cultural knowledge for the domestic audience, who have a different view of what it means to be Chinese.

Rather than creating two versions of the remake like Zhang did, Tian's remake in Chapter Five features a dual form of audience address within the same film. Unlike Zhang's remake, Tian's film doesn't appear to use this dual address for commercial reasons, but instead uses it as a way of disguising the potentially politically sensitive nature of his film from the censors. By concealing his political allegory behind the exotic images of past China which appeal to film festival audiences, Tian's film is at the same time exploiting the remake's inherently repetitive nature to make a political point regarding the repetition of past mistakes across history. These two remakes therefore show that remaking processes are highly contingent on audience understanding, and perhaps in the case of Tian's remake, changes made to a source film are not always designed to enhance audience comprehension in the Chinese-language cinematic context, with similarities instead creating new meaning for contemporary Chinese audiences through the connection they make with the past.

The Future of Remake Studies

Through observing the changes made to source films through the lens of gender and the family, a number of key elements which are crucial to understanding the complexities of the remaking process have been identified. The analyses conducted reached some significant conclusions regarding the similarities and differences in how gender and the family are represented, not just between source films and their remakes, but also between remakes included in this study.

Due to the need to limit the scope of the monograph, this study was not able to explore fully the potential alternative readings of the Chinese-language remakes within, for example, Chinese-speaking diasporic communities outside Hong Kong and mainland China, such as Singapore and Malaysia. It would be an interesting future project to consider how the different political and socio-cultural contexts of these regions may have influenced audience expectations and readings of these remakes. How, for example, would a Singaporean audience respond to a film such as *What Women Want?* How far do the values

depicted in this film reach; what aspects would be considered archaic amongst those who are considered ethnically Chinese, but have been raised in environments which are not subject to strict censorship in cinema?

In a similar vein, as the study focused on narrative discourse analysis and associated theories and methodologies, it was not able to consider the role of industry structures in Chinese-language cinema and the influence these may have on the production of remakes. While gesturing towards the remake as an example of the breaking down of the silos of arthouse versus commercial cinema, future projects could more fully investigate the remake in an industry context. Co-productions and remakes with new collaborators outside the Hollywood-Japan traditional partners, such as Korea, are another future area of research in terms of how ideologies are negotiated in these spaces; complexity which is only compounded in the case of a 'remake'. While this book did not endeavor to define, or redefine what constitutes a remake, there certainly is room for consideration of how partnerships between Chinese and other film production companies and corporate partners might influence the boundaries of these definitions, as well as the narrative content of the remake. With such strict quotas and censorship guidelines, there is a need to consider more deeply in another study how these factors can alter a source text in ways which previous studies on French, Hollywood and Japanese remakes would have had little grounds to concern themselves with. Brian Yeclies and Kai Soh (2017) have begun this work with their investigation into the Korean-Chinese co-production systems that have been evolving over the past fifteen years, including an analysis of the Chinese remake of *Miss Granny* (2014), which shows how Korean filmmakers utilise the co-production structure to bypass restrictions much in the same way Hollywood counterparts do, and Chinese companies likewise hire Korean staff to get around the need for purchasing expensive TV or film rights. There is more work to be done in terms of the implication of these burgeoning relationships for cinematic production, including remakes; a task for a different study into industry connections.

Following on from this, the potential for remakes to serve as tools of propaganda to disseminate ideas regarding Chinese values and society, which was identified as a possible factor influencing the narrative of *What Women Want*, could be further investigated in the context of Chinese films which are aimed at international audiences, as part of advancing understanding of how Chinese cinema functions as a tool of soft power in a variety of media-consuming spaces. Already, with television and film moving towards individual streaming platforms such as Netflix in the West, and sites such as Youku, Douban and Tudou in China, viewers are being engaged both as part of a viewing community and as individuals. Licensing agreements and co-productions in these

spaces may lead to some very interesting cinematic experiments, opening the door for audiences who would not previously have been exposed to Chinese productions to have this content brought into their living rooms. Online platforms in particular provide a wonderful opportunity for researchers to gauge audience expectations and reactions to films in ways which would not have been possible ten years ago—Yecies and Soh demonstrate this through their analysis of content found on website Douban (Yecies & Soh, 2017). No longer is a film's success with an audience measurable by its box office takings. Now, we can, and must, look beyond these dollar figures to consider other numbers; number of likes, number of views, number of shares, number of comments, and audience ratings online. A remake's success could therefore be mapped not by the figures released by the film company or its media, but by audiences themselves, providing new and exciting ways of measuring audience reception.

Also included under this theme of audience reception could be the consideration of counter-narratives or transformations of source texts in the form of unofficial remakes and fan productions created for online platforms. There is already an extremely prolific fan-based literary world online, and several films have recently been produced off the back of successful online novels (Qin, 2016), with fan feedback forming part of the writing process for some online content authors (Qin, 2016). The idea of remakes informed directly by audience inputs is a tantalizing one. Who's to say that in the future, Chinese-language films may not be constructed from what is traditionally considered "the audience" up, rather than from the industry/top down?

The findings of each of the chapters demonstrate how each pair of remakes present a different view on what it means to be Chinese, and the remakes included in this study show the continued struggle in Chinese-language cinema and society over what can be considered 'cultural authenticity'. With the increased presence of the new media technologies outlined above, and the potential multiplicity and fragmented voices that comes with them, it is unlikely that this issue is going to be quickly resolved. Despite the success of films such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Hero*, the remakes in this study show the continued relevance of the domestic, locally oriented narrative, in contrast with the alternative depictions of Chineseness that were seen as inauthentic and did not appeal to Chinese audiences (K. Chan, 2009). When the remakes in this study are considered together, they indicate that while Chinese-language cinema might be considered to be increasingly global, or transnational, there are nevertheless very clear indications that the transnational is still articulated with reference to the national (C. Berry & M. Farquhar, 2006), and that this conceptualisation of the national is a very significant factor in how the narratives of remakes are created.

The remake is a highly fruitful tool for the study of trends and concerns within Chinese-language cinema more broadly, through the way in which this kind of film exploits the concepts of similarity and difference to redefine its source text. As China continues to grow economically and cinematically, increasing its connections to the global cinematic community and defining and redefining its values and direction as a nation, the remake will continue to be an important cinematic phenomena which yields interesting and useful findings for Chinese-language cinema and culture scholars alike.