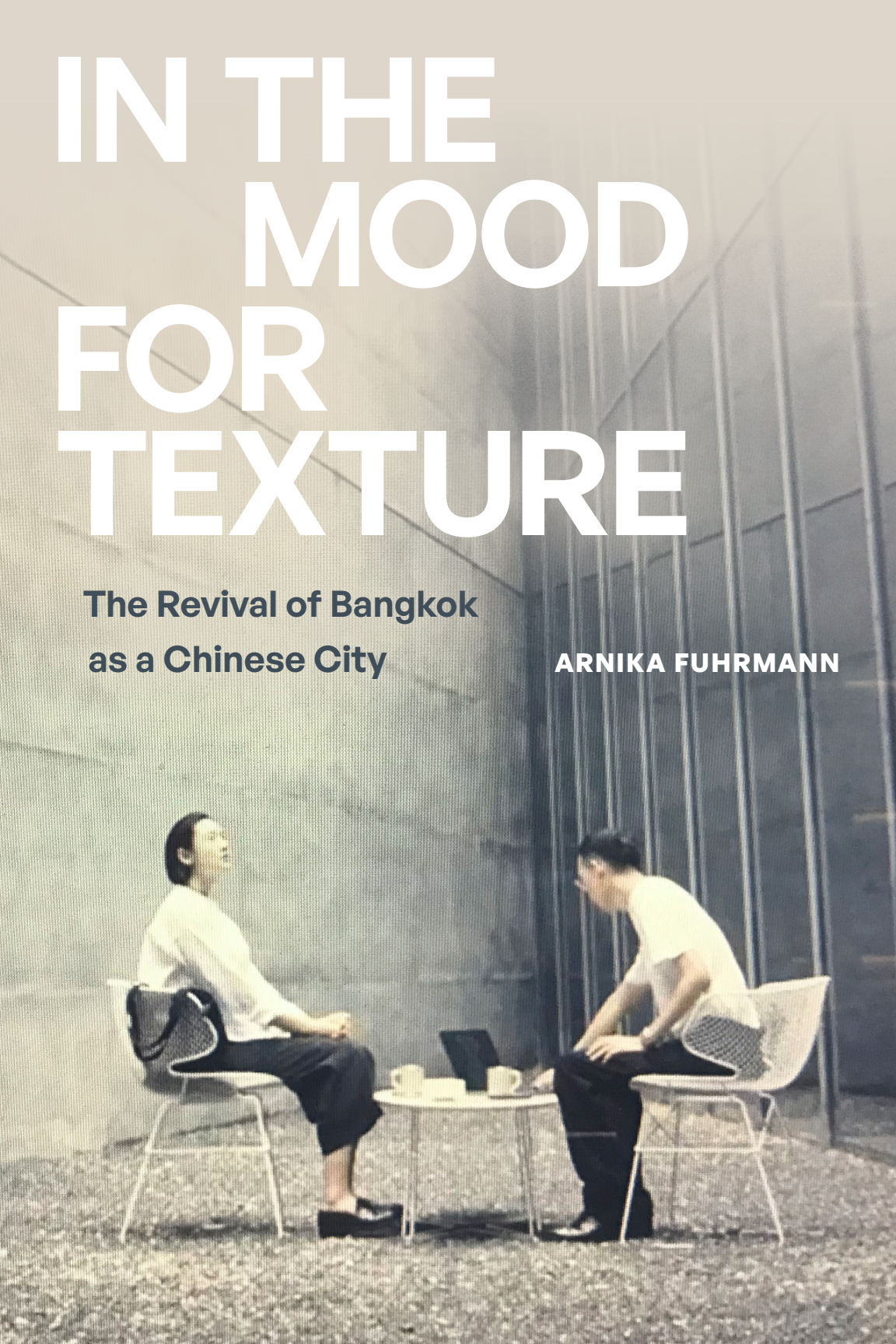
IN THE MOOD FOR TEXTURE

The Revival of Bangkok as a Chinese City

ARNIKA FUHRMANN



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INTRODUCTION

The Revival of Bangkok as a Chinese City

The larger-than-life portrait of a woman in a long red gown, circa the nineteenth century, greets visitors to the Shanghai Mansion Bangkok. Brightly lit, the floor-to-ceiling painting at the far end of the hotel's entrance occupies all visual attention. Whether the painting is antique or merely distressed, the femininity featured in it evokes the Shanghai of a bygone era. A more proximate eye-catcher is the red floor shrine that bears the Chinese characters for "landlord" and is adorned with offerings, the pineapple placed before it the most striking (fig. I.1).

This Bangkok venue is suffused with the aesthetics of Shanghai, but the pineapple offering at the shrine draws visitors back to Southeast Asia.[1] As visitors walk into the hotel's Red Rose bar and restaurant, a 1960s Hong Kong aesthetic is moreover superimposed on this mix of styles. What does it mean when a Bangkok hotel combines referents of Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Straits Chinese modernities while also highlighting the Chinese histories of Bangkok? More intriguingly yet, how might one understand Shanghai Mansion Bangkok's simultaneous foregrounding of the aesthetics of colonial modernity? What insights into new understandings of Asia emerge from this contemporary Bangkok with its citations of transregional Chineseness? Taking Asia as a question rather than a certainty, this book examines current reimaginations of region and identity in Bangkok.[2]

Thinking Region from Urban Southeast Asia

This book inquires into two concomitant occurrences: The first is the superimposition of three cities in East Asia and Southeast Asia onto one another in contemporary Thai cultural production and hospitality venues; the second consists of the simultaneous revival of Chinese pasts and the

I.1 Entrance of the Shanghai Mansion Bangkok hotel. Photograph by the author, 2018.

aesthetics of colonial modernity. Examining the doubling of Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Shanghai across literature, cinema, digital media, and the hospitality industry of Bangkok, I gauge the valences of a transregional Chineseness that is both virtual and anchored in material structures. I analyze these contemporary texts and sites to learn how they mobilize a colonial modernity inhabited by Chinese persons and signal alternative desires for region, identity, and collectivity.

The colonial aesthetics and transregional span of Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai's iconic film *In the Mood for Love* (2000; rerelease, 2020) centrally instantiate these conditions. The film's 1960s settings extend from the colonized locations of Hong Kong, Singapore, and Phnom Penh to the not formally colonized location of Bangkok, as the film's production site, and an implied semicolonial Shanghai. Wong's film features a colonial modernity that includes only Chinese persons, yet it turns precisely on the ways that these characters consume, produce, and trade goods circulated through colonial networks across Asia. At times in this book the term "Chinese colonial modernity" is used to denote the concomitant revival of Chinese pasts and the aesthetics of colonial modernity. Nowhere

does the term refer to a Chinese colonialism; rather, it connotes the features of a nineteenth- and twentieth-century treaty port culture and transregional modernity that vitally drew on colonial networks and products yet always exceeded conditions of imperial and national governance.[3] Cultural producers and designers call into play this colonial modernity to proffer critiques of national and regional formations in Asia today.

Across Southeast and East Asia real estate and hospitality ventures, cinema and new media, lifestyle brands, and wellness businesses draw on the colonial as the privileged aesthetics of the good life.[4] In urban locations practices of consumption, art, and the logics of real estate markets blend in unpredictable ways with the more ephemeral networks of taste cultures, nostalgia, and texture to produce new, transregionally informed cosmopolitanisms.

As film directors, hotels, bars, and clubs revive 1930s Shanghai and 1960s Hong Kong modernities—and exploit the Chinese past of Bangkok's old European trading quarters—these (semi)colonial urban histories are emerging as primary signifiers of a desirable Asian cosmopolitanism. Rather than invoke only the local histories of Bangkok's Chinese neighborhoods, contemporary cultural production and leisure venues blend these with Shanghai's and Hong Kong's aesthetics of colonial modernity.

I track the revivification of Chinese pasts and colonial modernity across locations and cultural domains. Why does a Shanghai-themed club in Bangkok or Hong Kong cinema's use of Bangkok as a filming location rely on referencing a transregional Chinese production and occupation of colonial modernity? My analysis seeks to understand the confluence of the spatial and temporal properties produced by this superimposition of the colonial modernities of the three Chinese cities onto one another. My initial primary interest lay in the intricate relationship between Bangkok and Hong Kong, but this relationship proves to be haunted also by the imaginary of semicolonial Shanghai. Bangkok as a Chinese city stands at the center of these inquiries. Both nationally and internationally the city represents a paradigmatic site of fantasy that provides for a particular elasticity of place and time and, by extension, personhood and belonging.

One would be able to relegate the temporal and spatial relays between the three cities to taste cultures, the exigencies of real estate arbitrage, or the continued tendency in the Hong Kong cultural imaginary to view Thailand as a terrain of ghostly alterity, sexual license, and financial corruption.[5] These would all be good interpretations, yet I aim to glean

knowledge about a different kind of intraregional desire from this confluence of time and space.

My investigation tracks the vestiges of urban imaginaries that are counterposed to a present in which city space is overwhelmingly corporately owned and regional imaginaries overdetermined by the aftermath of the Cold War (in formations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and affected by the economic and political ascension of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as well as the resurgence of the Thai military since 2006. I ask how invocations of twentieth-century translocal Chinese modernity point to enduring regional imaginaries that diverge from global notions of "China Rising," the goals of the PRC's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Western Orientalisms, and the policies of national governments. At the moment of the disappearance of the material remnants of Chinese pasts—as Bangkok undergoes massive transformation—ephemeral infrastructures take up the work of historical memory. In a period of impoverished geopolitical imaginaries, one can track the submerged persistence of other regional formations in contemporary design, writing, and media. In the global Asian city, lifestyle venues and cultural production represent key sites that store, visualize, and transform such prior cultural and social models.

To unearth the material, affective, and historical doublings that occur between Bangkok, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, I examine a transmedia archive that centers on Wong's *In the Mood for Love* (*Fa yeuhng nihn wah* [Age of blossoms] in Cantonese). This archive also includes Marco Wilms's *Durch die Nacht mit Christopher Doyle und Nonzee Nimibutr* (Into the night with Christopher Doyle and Nonzee Nimibutr, 2010), other transnational Chinese and Thai cinematic materials (*Chalad kem kong* [*Bad Genius*, 2017]; *How to Ting . . .* [*Happy Old Year*, 2019]; *Rouge* [1987]; *Baober in Love* [2004]), selected social media pages ("Kratham khwam Wong" [Doing Wong-ness]), literature (*Phutthasakarat atsadong kab song jam khong song jam khong maeo kulab dum* [Dusk of the Buddhist era and the memories of the memories of the black rose cat, 2016], published in an English translation as *Memories of the Memories of the Black Rose Cat* [2022]), other print media, and new ventures in Bangkok's hospitality industry. The latter include the nightclub Maggie Choo's, the Shanghai Mansion Bangkok, multiple bars and cafés in Bangkok's Chinatown, and the Lhong 1919 commercial complex. My rationale for choosing these materials is their proliferation, mobility, and appeal across locations; role in the resignification of Chineseness in Thailand; and renegotiation of a regional imaginary.

My analysis concentrates especially on texture, or the features of the built environment and the feminine sartorial styles highlighted in the cinematic materials and exploited in Bangkok's hospitality industry. Thus in Wong's *In the Mood for Love* the revivification of cosmopolitan Chinese modernity is anchored and actualized in the materiality of the urban environment that the film obsessively details, especially in the colonial ruin. At the heart of Wong's films lies also the nostalgic-futuristic distressing of a particular kind of Chinese femininity. His films undertake this distressing in conjunction with referencing the modernities of 1930s Shanghai and 1960s Hong Kong. These are likewise the aesthetics exploited in Bangkok's hospitality industry, where historical surfaces and representations of femininity furnish frontiers for the expansion of capital in the transforming city.

I use the notion of distressing in Susan Stewart's sense of "to make old, to antique." Stewart notes that "if distressed forms involve a negation of the contingencies of their immediate history, they also involve an invention of the past that could only arise from such contingencies. We see this structure of desire as the structure of nostalgia."[6] Distressed genres rely on operations of fantasy and improvise on time and history. These dynamics are at play in Wong's films and sections of the Bangkok revival that "[negate] the contingencies of their immediate history": the current structures of governance, the colonial heritage of the Thai polity, nonredemptive aspects of Chinese Thai history, neoliberal urban transformation, and the role that femininity plays in this context.[7] Others represent imaginative contentions with precisely these conditions.

The array of textures materializing in architecture, design, and the sartorial links 1920s and 1930s Shanghai and 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong with Bangkok past and present. The current reoccupation of physical sites relies on actual histories of transregional exchange linking the trade port cities of East and Southeast Asia. At the same time, it responds to contemporary desires for the imagined affective plenitude, atmospheres, and political affordances of these cultural histories. The actuality of their material remnants and the affects and practices surrounding them come together to form one textured field.

The focus on the texture of the ruin and of feminine style allows us to understand the doubling between Bangkok, Shanghai, and Hong Kong as something other than merely metaphor. Texture and surface constitute conduits between urban pasts and presents and between the "looks" of the city and the material grounds of its transformation. If it is to be criti-

cal, a history of the recoveries of Bangkok's Chinese pasts must be a material and materialist one. An investigation of contemporary design's focus on urban materiality is thus not merely frivolous. The analysis of texture reveals the city as composed of an infrastructure that exists at the seamlines of the virtual and the material. With Eve Sedgwick, Tom McEnaney, and Michael Lucey, I understand texture as indexical of the contexts of its emergence, allowing us to connect the present with often-obscured historical occurrences.[8]

I classify the Chinese pasts and colonial modernities invoked as *cosmopolitan* on the grounds of their hybrid and translocal character. The concept of cosmopolitanism denotes the plural composition of culture as well as a particular mode of cultural circulation.[9] "Cosmopolitan" describes cultural formations that envision themselves as transcending immediate locale and laying claim to at least regional universal validity. With regard to figurations of femininity, Su Lin Lewis's delineation of the global appearance of the Modern Girl is a persuasive example of the cultural work of a cosmopolitan trope in the colonial context: "She did not come from any one center, but emerged in cities everywhere, as a worldwide phenomenon consolidated through the newly international media of newspapers and cinema. Viewed within the context of colonial and world history, the Modern Girl completely collapses traditional dichotomies between the modern imperial métropole and a 'backward,' colonial periphery."[10]

Bangkok's Chinese revival recuperates ideals that lay claim to transregional cultural universality, are multiply constituted, and reference distinct figures such as the Modern Girl from an early and mid-twentieth-century trans-Asia colonial modernity. The ways that participants access this culture is predominantly through the textured, material remnants of Chinese and colonial histories extant in Bangkok as well as through contemporary design and cultural production.

Rather than dismiss it as merely bad taste or questionable politics, I understand the revival of colonial modern feminine styles as a fetish in the Marxian and psychoanalytic senses. What can the prevalence of distressed, translocal Chinese femininities tell us about alternative regional imaginaries in the present? The textures of femininity and of the ruin emerge as elements of film syntax as well as of club and hotel décor but also furnish a material substrate that breathes life into regional imaginaries that exceed those of the post–Cold War and of an Asia "rising" under the dominance of the PRC. Thailand's semicolonial temporality, the anomalous colonial temporalities of Shanghai and Hong Kong, and the func-

tions that their aesthetics, regional networks, and notions of sovereignty take on in the present stand at the heart of this inquiry.

In the context of my analysis, identity and region—notions of Chinese Thai personhood and Asian interconnection—inflect each other. Area and identity formation are intricately bound with each other and premised on violent processes. Naoki Sakai and Gavin Walker investigate "area as an epistemological-political technique."[11] As they explain, "Area is a technology according to which elements—which may or may not have been thoroughly heterogeneous to each other—are gathered and redeployed as a point of reference for a variety of social—racial, class, religious, gender, and so forth—distinctions."[12]

Walker argues that the notion of area is premised on capture and enclosure, and as such is closely tied to the clearing of new terrain for capital, or primitive accumulation. Most pernicious, however, is area's definitional power—the ways in which area determines the parameters of belonging.[13] In the materials analyzed here it is predominantly from the area of the city that region is reenvisioned. The city and its surfaces, its digital spaces, and the gendered, racialized, and ethnicized bodies inhabiting it represent prime "areas" for the expansion of capital and the realization of divergent political projects.

Against this background, my inquiry into urban trans-Asia revivals of Chinese colonial modernities does not merely substitute one notion of region for another. Rather, it aims to uncover the ways that contemporary cultural production, hospitality venues, and leisure practices either conjure or aim to undo the violence at the heart of belonging itself. My project draws on ethnographic and archival research undertaken in Bangkok and Hong Kong from 2014 to 2020 and from 2022 to 2023. Engaging scholarship in urban studies, Chinese history, media studies, semicoloniality, critical regional and area studies, gender studies, and theories of surface and image, this book sheds light on the current conjuncture of historical imagination, reregionalization, and the transformation of cities in Asia.

Bangkok as a Chinese City

Physically, materially, and affectively, the location of (post)colonial Bangkok and the styles of femininity referenced here furnish the raw material for the layering of cosmopolitan moods, textures, and histories. Since 2000 all of Wong Kar-wai's films about colonial Hong Kong have in fact

been shot in Bangkok. I argue that it is especially the chronotope of Bangkok's disavowed coloniality that allows for the mobility in time necessary for the visceral reliving of a colonial ideal. I thus focus on uncovering the (post)colonial temporalities of the Chinese modernity of Bangkok—a city that remains under-studied and that may not primarily be understood as Chinese.[14]

But Bangkok as a Chinese city stands at the center of prominent reconceptualizations of region; its study may hold out more fine-tuned, egalitarian perspectives on region than the East Asia–based inquiries to date. In Bangkok, abiding, alternative notions of culture, ethnicity, and regional connectivity persist—shadow memories of *other* regional networks that manifest in ruins, bodies, and affect. What does it mean to understand Chineseness from this location? Why does Bangkok currently figure as one of the most "originary" Chinese cities? What happens when Bangkok urbanites and visitors imagine Asia beyond reductive, hegemonic visions?

While much Chinese history in Bangkok has been lost or is on the brink of disappearance, several material histories persist. Opened in 1997, About Studio About Café anticipated the occupation of material Chinese Bangkok for artistic and lifestyle purposes in later decades. The venue inhabited a historical corner shophouse on Maitrichit Road near the Roundabout of 22 July, in the vicinity of auto shops, the Khristhajak Maitrichit Chinese church, massage parlors, and other small businesses in the Pom Prap Satru Phai district of Bangkok's Chinatown. In a multifloor café and pub space, the avant-garde About Studio About Café featured performances and exhibitions.[15] Only in the 2000s and 2010s did other individual bars, clubs, and hotels draw on the city's Chinese pasts, when FooJohn Building, Maggie Choo's, Shanghai Mansion Bangkok, and Lhong Tou Café began to open. By the early 2020s revival venues were burgeoning all over the city, too numerous to track. Thus the 2023 bilingual *Song Wat Guidebook* lists dozens of leisure venues clustered around Song Wat Road alone in the historically Chinese and Indian neighborhood of Song Wat in the Samphanthawong district.[16]

At present Chinese revival venues augment—rather than replace—established community venues. The revival thereby brings into being a contemporaneity of cultural practices across generations. It valorizes that which is about to disappear, while also recurring to that which cannot be recovered in originary form—a counterfactual relation to the present and skeptical-hopeful anticipation of futurity. Two different modes of "assay-

I.2 The historical coffee shop Eia Sae, one of Bangkok's "six most classical Chinese-style cafés." Photographs: *BKK Menu*, February 20, 2018.

ing" history manifest concurrently in two venues in Bangkok's Chinese neighborhood of Yaowarat.[17]

The nearly century-old coffee shop Eia Sae historically functioned as a venue frequented by Chinese migrants of different vocations, serving as a place to find work and orientation for those newly arrived from China.[18] Today the café continues to be popular with the older denizens of the neighborhood. At the same time, Eia Sae has become a lifestyle destination: The website *BKK Menu* features it as one of the "six most classical Chinese-style cafés" (fig. I.2).[19]

Almost concurrently *BKK Menu* introduces the newly designed Lhong Tou Café, located just one minute away from Eia Sae.[20] Approximating the style of historical coffeehouses, Lhong Tou opened in 2018, roughly ninety years after Eia Sae. *BKK Menu* nevertheless classifies the venue as "Vintage / Chinese," reviewing favorably its design and a menu curated to offer stylized versions of "Chinatown" favorites.

In contemporary Bangkok both Eia Sae and Lhong Tou represent Instagrammable locations. While the older Chinese residents of Yaowarat do not frequent the stylish Lhong Tou, younger Bangkokians haunt both the new and old cafés. Both modes of engaging the city's Chinese history will eventually be superseded by more lucrative real estate developments but, for the moment, the historical and a curated patina coexist in Bangkok.[21] As revival destinations like Lhong Tou join established venues like Eia Sae, the city's Chinese culture enters a new temporality, in which quotidian cultural rituals coexist with new prosthetic lifestyle practices. As embodied and material histories disappear, the task of memory devolves onto cinema, digital media, print media, and new embodied publics. Alison Landsberg has described contemporary medial and embodied transgenerational and transethnic witnessing as "prosthetic memory."[22] In Bangkok's Chinese revival, texture plays an important role in prosthetic remembering.

Texture

The lens of texture facilitates an understanding of the ways in which urban venues and media store and invoke local pasts and regional imaginaries. Texture points beyond immediate historical context and can move analysis beyond "genre," so that film does not stand in opposition to urban design, nor the virtual to the material. When Bangkok urbanites frequent the cafés, hotels, and bars that are textured by the city's enduring pasts or consume revival media, what might they be looking for?

Sedgwick's delineation of texture's intersubjective logic and its link to affect helps to elucidate the participatory, sensory elements of Bangkok's Chinese revival. For Sedgwick "affect and texture . . . seem to belong together" and "both are irreducibly phenomenological."[23] Texture is moreover closely connected to touch as well as to (historical) intersubjectivity: "To touch is . . . always also to understand other people or natural forces as having effectually done so before oneself, if only in the making of the tex-

tured object."[24] As Sedgwick further explains, "Perceiving texture is never only to ask or know What is it like? nor even just How does *it* impinge on *me*? Textural perception always explores two other questions as well: How did it get that way? and What could I do with it?"[25]

In Sedgwick's conceptualization, texture always allows for an etiology of the object or context as well as bearing a conjectural dimension. This notion facilitates insight into how Bangkokians are touching (Chinese) history and interpreting it for the future-present. As an online review of the then newly opened Lhong Tou in Yaowarat notes, the café "presents the particular charm of traditional Chineseness but reinterprets it through the fun and fresh tactics of the new generation; it is able to communicate these concepts through the design of the space, the decoration of the venue, and of course through the food and drinks menu, with an identity unlike any other."[26] When patrons experience Lhong Tou and taste the café's *kiao* (wontons), *bao* (buns), *khao tom* (congee), desserts, and flower teas, flavors are carefully evaluated, but the venue's menu and atmospherics also index the pasts of Bangkok's Chinese neighborhoods, of Hong Kong and Shanghai, as well as of the patrons' (or others') immigrant grandparents and great-grandparents.

In appraising the textures of Chinese Bangkok, this book thus explores what C. Nadia Seremetakis would call a commensal event: I understand the Bangkok revival as propelled equally by objects and by consciousness, the material and the phenomenological. In Seremetakis's theory, memory bears a material dimension, and its storage is equally distributed across bodies and artifacts.[27] When bodies and artifacts come together in a commensal encounter, lost histories can be reanimated and remembered. In Bangkok the past is simultaneously enlivened by the material remnants of Chinese and colonial textures and texts and by the sensory perceptions, experiences, and memories that patrons or consumers of culture produce in relation.

In the Mood for Love provides a kind of supertexture for the media, design, and consumptive experiences of the Bangkok revival. *In the Mood for Love*'s multiple media lives unfold as a citational creative-consumptive loop that extends across the filmic and built environment in East and Southeast Asia. Shot in Bangkok, Wong's film exploits the city as a "raw material" that lends texture to a Chinese-inhabited colonial modernity.[28]

Wong's celebrated work tells the story of the epochal love between So Lai-Chen (in Cantonese; Su Li-Zhen in Mandarin) and Chow Mo-Wan: "Wong's *In the Mood for Love* is a romance melodrama, which tells the

story of a married man (played by Tony Leung) and a married woman (played by Maggie Cheung), living in rented rooms of neighbouring apartments, who fall in love with each other while grappling with the infidelities of their respective spouses whom they discover are involved with each other."[29] Set in a Shanghai émigré community in 1960s colonial Hong Kong, with scenes also in Cambodia and Singapore, Wong's atmospheric love story is closely connected to social and political transformations underway in Asia in the second half of the twentieth century.

In the Mood for Love's outdoor scenes of 1960s Hong Kong were shot at Bangkok's 1880s Customs House, its worn-out shutters and textured walls suturing affect and history. In this location the lovers play out scenes of attachment and weigh the "what could have been" and the "what could still be" of their affair.[30] By extension the Customs House anchors the collective vision of region, style, and community that the love relationship personalizes. As the nostalgic conditional of the affair comes together with a regional vision, Bangkok emerges as the iconic site of (post)colonial fantasies of the good life in Asia.

With Giuliana Bruno I also understand texture as a bridge between the material and virtual. Her analysis of *In the Mood for Love* further provides insight into how texture is connected to a particular fashioning of time: "In this film attire is carefully constructed, as if it were a tangible form of architecture, while the city's fabric, in turn, is fashioned as if it were an enveloping dress, a second skin. In fact, tailored in the guise of one of Maggie Cheung's cheongsams, the city of Hong Kong appears itself encased, tightly wrapped in time and sheathed in space, somewhere in the 1960s."[31]

While the city in question is Hong Kong, the fabric of its 1960s ambiance materializes in Bangkok, the quintessential Chinese and colonial city. At present Bangkok's revival bars, clubs, cafés, and restaurants host patrons craving new consumptive experiences. But they also attract second- and third-generation Chinese Thai writers, intellectuals, and filmmakers engaged in a new wave of cultural production that revives Thailand's Chinese pasts with a difference. What "second skin" can a filmmaker like Salee Every (Waraluck Hiransrettawat), who makes films about her Chinese Thai family, or the novelist Veeraporn Nitiprapha, who chronicles Chinese migration to Thailand, take on in these locales? In their leisure practices the patrons of Chinatown hospitality venues are "sheathing" themselves in the fabric of an imaginary that ties in to pasts that are about to be erased—as well as into an indeterminate future.

Across textured exteriors and interiors, *In the Mood for Love*'s melancholy love story unfolds the temporalities of the "what could have been" and the "what could still be." In Bangkok these temporalities meet the "never" and "yet still" of Siam/Thailand's semicoloniality. Both temporalities provide ample room for fantasy. In Bangkok hospitality venues, *In the Mood for Love*'s regional cultural imaginary collides with the material actuality of the Chinese modernity that the film foregrounds. Wong's film in turn furnishes a blueprint for the design of clubs, restaurants, and hotels. Together the venues and the film provide the virtual and material basis for the ways in which Bangkok urbanites can reimagine their lives as cosmopolitan and transnational. In locations such as the Shanghai Mansion Bangkok the citation of Wong's film becomes explicit; several additional Bangkok venues will reveal themselves as cognate with Wong's 1960s Hong Kong.

Temporality in Hong Kong Cinema

That a film by a Hong Kong director would come to stand at the center of the Bangkok revival is apt. Around the turn of the twenty-first century Hong Kong cinema probed novel temporalities and recalibrated the past. The scholarly literature variously classifies the productions around the time of the city-state's 1997 handover from Britain to China as nostalgic, future-oriented, evincing a heightened concern with temporality, or postnostalgic.[32] Stanley Kwan's film *Rouge* (1987) is exemplary for the consideration of urban historical revival because it excavates the city as multiply constituted in place and time. Part of the nostalgic contingent of the Hong Kong New Wave, it tracks the ghostly reappearance in 1980s Hong Kong of the 1930s courtesan Fleur.[33] In an iconic scene Fleur stands in front of a modern-day department store. Its mirrored façade gives way to the view of a Cantonese opera performance in the 1930s teahouse that Fleur remembers in its stead. Bliss Lim writes that "this film sequence depicts one space as splintered yet whole." She notes that instances such as these constitute "'spatial palimpsests' traversed by divergent temporalities."[34] Kwan's use of this palimpsestic device is pertinent for my analysis as it breaks open the supposed unity of space and time and shows the city as possessed of sedimented temporalities and spaces instead.

Vivian P. Y. Lee underlines the significance of the new Hong Kong cinema for historical revision: "Within the fissures of colonial and national

histories, and the temporal-spatial displacements that result, the local cinema has reinvented itself as a form of visual history. . . . This visual history is a dynamic register of codes, styles, and images that help to recall and critically reposition the historical in a popular and highly idiomatic visual medium."[35]

In the Mood for Love premiered in 2000, shortly *after* Hong Kong's 1997 transition from British colony to Special Administrative Region of China. Wong's work is frequently situated in a "'second wave' of the Hong Kong New Wave," immediately after that of Stanley Kwan, Ann Hui, Tsui Hark, and Yim Ho.[36] Lee classifies Wong's *In the Mood for Love* as post-nostalgic, noting that the film deploys nostalgia but reflects on it critically.[37] With its facility for critical historical inquiry, atmospheric design, and affective density, Wong's film thus provides a generative paradigm for the temporal experiments of the Bangkok revival.

Chinese Thai Histories

To unpack the complex temporality that the Chinese revival summons, we have to consider the fact that Siam/Thailand's coloniality remains largely unacknowledged. On the one hand, the country's semicolonial status meant that its sovereignty was compromised by laws of extraterritoriality. On the other hand, Siam/Thailand itself acted as a colonizing power.[38] Lysa Hong argues that Siam declared itself postcolonial already in the nineteenth century while remaining colonized by its elites until today.[39] While the dominant nationalist discourse foregrounds the fact of Thailand's not having been formally colonized, critical historiographies uncover the disavowal of enduring authoritarian power structures that bear colonial elements. I take up Hong's argument to posit that Thailand's semicolonial history engenders a temporality of the "never/yet still." This temporality provides the grounds for the elasticity of the colonial imaginary that makes Thailand and its capital city a local and global subject of fantasy. It moreover allows for the imaginative importing of the colonial temporalities of Hong Kong and Shanghai. The time of contemporary Bangkok is determined by the "never" and "yet still" but also augmented by "that which will not have been."

Wasana Wongsurawat's *The Crown and the Capitalists: The Ethnic Chinese and the Founding of the Thai Nation* positions Siam/Thailand's ethnic Chinese populations as pivotal in the country's nineteenth- and

twentieth-century history. Especially the merchant, middle-class, and upper-middle-class Chinese populations represented linchpins for the country's political development and relations to larger powers. From the Qing era (that ended in 1911/1912), to the rise of imperial Britain in nineteenth-century Southeast Asia (culminating in the 1855 Bowring Treaty), Thailand's alliance with Japan (1930s–1940s), and US Cold War dominance, Thailand's Chinese populations mattered for the country's educational, medial, economic, political, and social formation.[40] What happened in China's history remained foundational for Siam/Thailand's history throughout this time. Monarchical rule, republicanism, and communism; language, identity, and education; as well as China's relation to the (other) superpowers were watched closely and had an impact on Siam/Thailand's political systems.

Wongsurawat studies Chinese Thai history in proximity with colonial history and argues that the first event that vitally reconfigures Siam's position in the region is the nineteenth-century shift from "the economic context of the Chinese tribute system" to a world in which "the center of the universe regarding trade and political power had been relocated from the Great Qing Empire to the British Empire."[41] Siam's extraterritorial conditions from 1855 to 1938 allowed Chinese entrepreneurship to flourish and accorded Chinese traders, who were often subjects of a colonial nation (e.g., Britain or the Dutch Empire), a particular place within the polity.[42]

The largest waves of Chinese migration arrived from the second half of the nineteenth century until the 1920s.[43] These migrations occurred in part to satisfy Siam's need for large, new labor contingents to replace slave and corvée labor.[44] Jeffery Sng and Pimpraphai Bisalputra designate the years 1855 to 1900 the "Age of Emigrants": "The second half of the 19th century saw a flood of Chinese emigrate to Siam . . . form[ing] an enormous non-native population in Siam."[45] The years from 1855 to 1925 also saw the emergence of new infrastructures, markets, and ideas that were significantly propelled by these migrations.[46]

Total population numbers remain unclear, but some figures regarding migration are extant. Brian Bernards writes: "From 1876–98, nearly 185,000 Chinese passengers came from Swatow directly to Siam, with only about 27,000 returning. Between 1906 and 1918, the number of total Chinese arrivals increased substantially to more than 630,000, while the number of returnees also increased to nearly 250,000, showing the growth of circular migration after earlier pioneer settlement drew Siam into the South Seas network. In total, nearly 3.7 million Chinese settled in Siam

throughout a century of emigration following the Opium Wars."[47] Lawrence Chua presents similar figures for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[48] By the 1930s, Wongsurawat reports, Kuomintang sources estimated the Chinese population as making up approximately one-third of the total population.[49]

Key events in twentieth-century Chinese Thai history include the 1910 Chinese general strike, "which brought the kingdom to a virtual standstill for nearly three days," and indicated the growing economic significance of Chinese entrepreneurs and laborers.[50] In the early 1910s Rama VI Vajiravudh designated the Chinese the "Jews of the Orient"; this constituted a first wave of anti-Chinese sentiment during which "substantive anti-Chinese policies were [however] relatively few. Vajiravudh's anti-Chineseness was only ideological; it was never operationalized into immigration, economic or social measures."[51] A second wave of anti-Chinese sentiment occurred under Phibun Songkhram (1938–1944), whose policies included arrests, deportations, the nationalization of Chinese businesses, the closing of two hundred Chinese schools and all newspapers except one, and the reservation of positions for ethnic Thais only.[52]

In the postwar period Wongsurawat draws particular attention to two nearly forgotten race riots, the 1945 Yaowarat and 1974 Phlapphla Chai incidents. In late September 1945 police forbade the display of Republic of China flags for National Day celebrations without the concurrent hoisting of Thai flags. The military was called in to subdue ensuing protests. In the immediate aftermath residents of the area experienced "violent repercussions not only from military forces but also from the non-Chinese general public."[53]

In early July 1974 a Chinese taxi driver's resistance to police extortion sparked multiday clashes with police and military that spread from Chinatown's Phlapphla Chai police station. A national state of emergency was declared.[54] Wongsurawat underlines the anti-Chinese tenor of both state documentation and Thai-language news reporting of the Phlapphla Chai incident.[55] Both incidents have nearly been expunged from historical memory.[56]

Multiplicities of Migration

I review the present-day shifts in understandings of region and identity against the background of narratives regarding Chinese migration to Thailand that are marked by contradictory elements and significant elision.

The specific question that this analysis asks about Chinese Thai history is the following: What happens when a history of oppression and disavowal meets a present of cultural revival? The historiography of Chinese migration and integration is overdetermined by discourses of the radically unassimilable difference of the Chinese, on the one hand (the "Jews of the Orient"), and their complete assimilation into Thai society, on the other (the disavowal of histories of adversity and dissent).[57] Historically minoritized persons are thereby conceptually situated between notions of radical difference and complete disappearance. As in other Southeast Asian contexts, Chinese migrants to Thailand are credited with bringing about Thai modernity. At the same time, they were charged with extraterritorial loyalties and with depleting the resources of the country. What does it mean to live in a context in which the current taken-for-granted ubiquity of Chinese persons and culture coexists with the consistent disavowal of details of their history?

In *Ghostly Desires: Queer Sexuality and Vernacular Buddhism in Contemporary Thai Cinema* I analyzed the dynamics of a revival that since the 2000s valorized the very features of Chinese femininity that were once disparaged in Thailand.[58] In order to situate these dynamics historically, I reviewed the narratives of difference and assimilation that constituted the majority of dominant and vernacular accounts of Chinese Thai history. I examined both the logics of assimilation derived from self-positioning and those that are externally imposed:[59]

> The vast majority of overseas Chinese reside in Southeast Asia; in the scholarly literature about this geographic context, Thailand has represented the paradigmatic example for the notion of Chinese assimilation since the 1950s. Yet it is currently this site from which notions of Chineseness are being reconfigured.
>
> Not only academic perspectives on Chinese Thai history have espoused the idea of assimilation. In popular discourse denials of Chineseness stem from negations by the Thai ethnic majority of a history of denigration or can come from a refusal of essentialist notions of Chineseness on the part of Thais of Chinese descent. As Ien Ang writes with regard to Chineseness in Southeast Asia, "In these narratives, the very validity of the category of Chineseness is in question, its status as a signifier of identity thrown into radical doubt."[60]

Conversely, "Discourses of assimilation become particularly problematic when they deny a notion of agency to the ethnic subject yet fail to protect

from violence whenever notions of ethnic difference are reanimated. Significantly the notion of assimilation obscures past suffering and trivializes ongoing discriminations."[61]

Older scholarly analyses tend either to espouse notions of the harmonious assimilation or of the discrimination of the Chinese in Thailand. This scholarship also frequently invokes the idea of Chinese economic centrality and political and social marginality.[62] By contrast, recent scholarship concentrates increasingly on the simultaneous operations of centrality and marginality, of Thainess and Chineseness, and of allegiance to the Thai nation and transnational political projects. Thus Sitthithep Eaksittipong and Saichol Sattayanurak assert in their history of Chinese emotion in 1950s–1970s Thailand that migrants always maintained complex links to their Chinese heritage as well as to their positioning in Thai society.[63] At present Chineseness as social positionality exceeds the formula of a "historical status of economic centrality and social and political marginality."[64] Present-day shifts have transformed Chinese heritage from "a racialized minority position to one of increasingly desirable ethnic membership."[65]

But why is it a *Chinese* historical modernity that informs the desire for new transregional collectivity in the first place? For one, the Chinese represent the paradigmatic transnational figure in the modern history of Southeast Asia. To an extent historical Chinese migration to Thailand has come to figure as a blueprint for the notion of the diasporic: The term *phon thale*, "overseas," is synonymous with Chinese migrants. The ways in which historical Chinese migration today stands in for the diasporic as such is indexed in the title of Anocha Suwichakornpong's short film *Phon Thale* (*Overseas*, 2012), which alludes to the notion of historical Chinese migration in order to address the plight of contemporary *Burmese* labor migrants in Thailand.

China's current increased agentive power in regional economies and politics also inflects narratives regarding Chinese migration to Southeast Asia in complicated new ways. The facile assumption that a resurgent converging of center and diaspora is responsible for the revivals of Chinese identity in Southeast Asia is erroneous. While the Chinese revival in Thailand is in many ways connected to the PRC's ascendancy, a unity between a hitherto-disparaged minority and a new regional hegemon cannot be assumed. Such conflation disregards the many disjunctures between Chinese Thai and mainland Chinese histories, interests, and practices.

China's BRI is frequently taken to overdetermine all current PRC–Southeast Asia relations. As David Lampton, Selina Ho, and Cheng-Chwee Kuik write, "The strategic intent of Beijing's policy is to make China an economic hub for its vast periphery, provide connectivity nodes for military power projection, drive China's move up the value-added ladder, and increase its neighbors' dependence on the PRC. The . . . BRI . . . is the broad signboard under which these objectives are articulated and advanced." The authors are quick to qualify, however, that the BRI designates a conglomerate of dispersed projects, rather than emanating from an all-powerful center.[66] State and commercial initiatives have powerful impacts yet do not exhaust the multiple factors that determine regional relations.

China's involvement in Thailand includes infrastructural, military, and cultural projects. Infrastructural projects include a high-speed rail network, an economic corridor, a potential canal across the Isthmus of Kra, and digital infrastructures as well as projects on the Mekong River. "Soft-power" projects extend to tourism, language teaching (Confucius Institutes), media, and cultural and religious initiatives. While Benjamin Zawacki notes Thai civil society's highly divergent responses to China's activities in the country, Kornphanat Tungkeunkunt claims that most cultural initiatives are welcomed.[67] Sittithep argues that the PRC does not provide inspiration for Thais of Chinese descent on account of its handling of COVID-19 as well as its involvement in Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang.[68]

In the current conjuncture, neoliberalism constitutes the dominant idiom of economy, politics, and subjectivity. The nostalgic longings for past regional coherences evident in revival cultural production and Bangkok hospitality venues are closely, though not symmetrically, connected to neoliberal paradigms. Wendy Brown stresses that neoliberalism has to be understood as "more than a set of free market economic policies that dismantle welfare states and privatize public services," but rather as the "explicit imposition of a particular form of market rationality" on "the social, the subject, and the state."[69] A neoliberal order thus manifests also in technologies of the self that include the professional sphere, affective dispositions, and the domains of belief and aspiration.

The ways that neoliberalism comes into play in the visual materials and writing of the Chinese revival are manifold. It centrally informs not only the mode in which relations of center and diaspora are imagined but also the negotiations of personhood in the contemporary city. Chinese femi-

ninity in particular is invested with the capacity to figure optimal productivity in changing economic systems. The flexibility demanded of markets is demanded also of persons, and the female protagonists of the films and stories under consideration are tasked with accelerating and stretching to actualize it.[70]

Why is colonial modernity associated with the aesthetics of the good life? The splendors associated with coloniality in Asia were possible only through the "superfluity" of immense labor forces.[71] Conditions such as these lie at the heart of, and are obscured by, the fetish of a revived colonial modernity. This fetishization also draws attention to the relative absence of a temporality of the present in the sites and materials under consideration. At the same time, the draw of transregional Chinese cosmopolitanisms is hardly exhausted by desires for the colonial. Instead multiple causalities determine the desirous gaze on a Chinese-inhabited colonial modernity. In a dispiriting present, in which authoritarian national politics generate oppressive structures, people are turning to spatialities, eras, and collectivities that extend beyond their immediate purview. In Bangkok, Hong Kong, and other parts of Asia this includes what Koichi Iwabuchi terms the "nostalgia for a different Asian modernity."[72] These feelings are prompting imaginary and imaginative migrations into the past and across the region.

The City and the Modern Girl

In the pages that follow, a woman will make a prominent appearance, or rather a reappearance, in Bangkok, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore, and Phnom Penh, as well as ultimately in New York.[73] She is the Modern Girl of 1930s Shanghai or 1960s Hong Kong—but her look is cognate with that of her peers across the globe in the twentieth century.[74] She stands at the center of the contemporary revival in media and urban design that brings to life Chinese pasts and the aesthetics of colonial modernity. Thus upon entry to the Shanghai Mansion Bangkok's Red Rose bar, one will find the walls adorned with photos of this Modern Girl embarking on a transnational nightlife.

The Chinese and colonial modern femininity that she embodies is generic in the sense in which Lauren Berlant defines the relation between gender and genre: "To call an identity like a sexual identity a genre is to think about it as something repeated, detailed, and stretched while retain-

ing its intelligibility, its capacity to remain readable or audible across the field of all its variations. For femininity to be a genre *like* an aesthetic one means that it is a structure of conventional expectation that people rely on to provide certain kinds of affective intensities and assurances."[75] To think of the contemporary Modern Girl as a genre allows us to recognize her appearance across fields and to claim her significance for the present. At the same time, understanding the Modern Girl as a genre still accounts for the varied, at times contradictory, kinds of work that she performs in the present. A genre, according to Berlant, is a form of aesthetic expectation "with porous boundaries allowing complex audience identifications."[76] In her analysis many of the identifications and expectations attached to femininity have to do with hopes for the "good life." In the context studied by Berlant this desired good life consists of an emotional richness and reciprocity that is both generated and experienced by women. In the case of the revived Modern Girl in Bangkok, the focus of the analysis lies on expectations especially for the collective good life. Her location in Thailand and in Asia endows this figure with a particular recent history.

The figure of "woman" in Asia has in the past decades above all encoded new forms of efficacious labor. "Woman" was the agentive figure of a continent that manufactures nearly the majority of the world's products, as "Asian nation-states have become the world's manufacturing center of gravity."[77] The female figure haunting contemporary cultural production and leisure venues in Bangkok can also be linked with wage labor, yet she becomes most efficacious through other kinds of work. She is instrumental in three processes: the leap from the historical denigration of Chineseness into present-day desirability in Thailand (a local phenomenon); the denotation of a particular continental past and the key to a transregional future (a regional phenomenon); and, finally, the encoding of the changing forms of value in the city under finance capitalism (a global phenomenon).

To undertake a transcultural inquiry such as the present one, we have to pay attention to both "history" and "style." My inquiry into style includes an investigation of cinematic, digital, and literary forms. By history I mean the past, but also the current social, political, and economic contexts in which the recuperated Modern Girl lives. Within such a history Asian femininity currently exemplifies the collapsing of pasts, presents, and futures into a single temporality. According to Harry Harootunian such temporal collapse is a hallmark of the global present.[78] His paradigm of an undifferentiated historical present attains great salience in Asia, where both cities and bodies are transforming quickly.

Femininity is not a transhistorical concept and still in nineteenth-century China was not a quality attributed solely to female bodies.[79] But when the Chinese femininity of a colonial modern era appears en masse across social fields, the proliferation of this trope points to "highly charged areas in the social fantasy that produced it."[80] What kinds of questions should we ask about the ubiquity of this distressed Chinese femininity across national locations and fields of inquiry? How might this figure aid in the critique of Asia as a spatial and temporal construct—but also of what is conventionally assumed to be China or a Chinese city? What account of this figure's aesthetic form can we provide and what information does it transmit? What animates her? What kind of "social theory" does she enable that another figure cannot?[81]

A distressed Chinese femininity drives *In the Mood for Love* and also appears prominently in Bangkok's leisure venues, where the textures of her sartorial style are set in scene before those of crumbling colonial ruins. In Bangkok she is a particular kind of avatar. As such she allows for the suturing of historical temporalities; she salvages a past whose material disappearance is imminent; she provides for a bridge between the material and the virtual; and she facilitates new ways of encoding history.

In the contemporary city the distressed Modern Girl often recuperates a market-friendly, easily consumable multiculturalism. Most recently the notion of "women" in Asia has moreover shifted from encoding labor to encoding surplus value, to standing in for compounding forms of value under finance capitalism in the present.[82]

At the heart of the work that femininity performs across contemporary Asia stand particular histories of associating women with a "more"—the more of excess and surplus as well as of consumption and production. In early twentieth-century Chinese history, Tani Barlow has shown femininity to be located at the heart of notions of the productive, specifically of logics of eugenics and capitalist social progress.[83] In the past few decades Asia has stood at the center of a recoding of femininity as surplus value.[84] This propensity of the feminine not merely to embody but rather to produce the "more" is currently heightened, making femininity the quintessential figure of a finance capitalism that needs to create pricelessness in commodities in order to produce enhanced forms of value.[85] In this incarnation the figure of woman lends style and history to mundane urban surfaces. She thus underwrites the neoliberal phenomenon in which urban locales are given patina and invested with historical cachet in order to both absorb and increase spiraling real estate values.[86]

At the same time, as Jean Ma teaches us, the task of telling history—especially that which centers on traumatic events—has in many locations in Asia devolved onto women.[87] In Thailand the revived Modern Girl allows us to track the minoritized histories of Chinese femininity and this femininity's rise into mainstream desirability. This figure both recalls a denigrated form of personhood *and* reasserts it precisely in a location in which it was previously disparaged. In the elastic fantasy space of Bangkok a repositioning of minoritized identities thus also finds great traction.

Locally and regionally this incarnation performs the work of a lived deconstruction of area—of Asia and its dominant geopolitics—and makes different forms of personhood and belonging available to anyone in Bangkok, or indeed to visitors from Hong Kong, Shanghai, and elsewhere. In Bangkok almost everyone can inhabit a "better" Chinese cosmopolitanism than that of present-day trans-Asia geopolitical alliances. Here a distressed Chinese femininity represents a compact figure of thought that allows insight into processes and desires that define the global present. The revival makes this figure available to the present as "intellection"—that cognitive effort that appraises the present and anticipates the future in transformative ways.[88]

The Bangkok revival draws on templates of female consumptive and productive power from semicolonial Shanghai and from a burgeoning 1960s industrial Hong Kong. This figure of trans-Asia Chinese femininity is both elastic and bears great synthesizing capacities. As such she represents a "dense transfer point" for desires that both exemplify and stand in strong contrast to impoverished geopolitical imaginaries.[89] Stretching across eras and modes of production, the figure of Chinese femininity encodes all-encompassing neoliberal demands for ever-greater malleability and flexibility and at the same time reveals loopholes in these frameworks.

A few key figures, texts, and sites recur throughout this book. The spotlight on femininity guides the reader through different registers of the revival: the opulent, fantastic registers of the heritage revival; the material registers of hegemonic, statist revivals; and the understated, citational registers that revive forgotten histories of labor and dissent. *In the Mood for Love* weaves through the book as a supertexture. Bangkok's 1880s Customs House instantiates Thailand's semicolonial conditions in chapters 1 and 2, and the analysis circles back repeatedly to the Shanghai Mansion Bangkok with which I opened this chapter. The hotel is pivotal because of its heightened attention to Chinese history on the levels of architectural materiality, design, and publicity. The digital Shanghai Mansion Woman

also appears twice; she illustrates the role of femininity in contemporary urban transformation (chapter 2) but also rewrites the possibilities of the minoritized actor in the present (chapter 3).

Structure

The book proceeds by immersing the reader in the affective experience and textures of the revival and its foundational filmic inspiration in part I. After introducing intercity referencing between Bangkok, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, it analyzes *In the Mood for Love*. Part II examines the revival's concrete instantiations in Bangkok in more depth: After exploring the materiality of Chinese Bangkok, it investigates a progressive style of revival in conjunction with a film analysis. Part III reflects on the potential of this Southeast Asian location for new understandings of identity, belonging, and region. It examines a literary account of Chinese migration, homes in on the function of femininity in the city, and returns to the question of Southeast Asia's role in the reimagination of region and identity. The book thereby theorizes "up" from the individual contexts in Bangkok to speculate on the significance of Southeast Asia as an intellectual site. Individual chapters are weighted toward medial or material questions, yet most combine the investigation of the city's materiality with media analysis.

Part I: In the Mood for Texture

This section investigates the theoretical implications and aesthetic features of the Chinese revival in media and sites that immerse viewers and visitors in the aesthetics of colonial modernity. It introduces the superimposition of Bangkok, Shanghai, and Hong Kong onto one another and the revival of colonial modern style. Its primary cinematic text is *In the Mood for Love*, set in 1960s colonial modern Hong Kong but shot entirely in Bangkok. For present-day Bangkok hospitality venues, *In the Mood for Love* functions as a framework for design.

My investigation centers on the texture of the built environment (the colonial ruin) and the feminine sartorial styles (the high-modern *cheung sam*) highlighted in the cinematic materials and exploited in Bangkok's hospitality industry. The ruin and the cheung sam, or *qipao* (Mandarin), emerge as switch points that allow for the bridging of historical and

present-day plurality, affective and historical contexts, and national and regional divides. They instantiate the ways that neoliberal urban governance markets city and femininity as surface and image in order to maximize not only surplus value but also compound value.

Chapter 1, "City Connectivities," presents a first foray into Bangkok's historical and imaginary, material and medial constitution, and its connection with Hong Kong and Shanghai. It weighs the significance of the semicolonial and shows how it materializes in Bangkok. The discussion lays out the elements of the contemporary urban condition and introduces the medial and material recuperations of Bangkok's Chinese pasts and colonial modern elements. Chapter 2, "In the Mood for Texture: Transmedia Revivals of Hong Kong's, Bangkok's, and Shanghai's Chinese Pasts and Colonial Modernities," analyzes *In the Mood for Love* but underlines the film's imbrication with the material city.

Part II: Bangkok: Originary Chinese City

To think about Bangkok as a Chinese city allows for the reconfiguration of notions of minoritarian and majoritarian citizenship in the context of shifting transregional desires. At present Bangkok figures as the most "authentic" Chinese city among the three under consideration: It consistently provides the raw material for the recovery of Chinese pasts in cinema, tourism, transregional spiritual activities, and the hospitality industry. I draw on ethnographic data acquired in my study of urban transformation and design in Bangkok's "Chinatown," the Samphanthawong, Bang Rak, and Pom Prap districts of the city south of the historical palace. This area is undergoing some of the most severe transformations in the history of Thai urban renewal.

What are the implications of thinking about Chineseness in a present in which it, while constantly referenced, cannot be recovered in genuine historical form? While Chinese Thais historically faced decades of discrimination, Chineseness became a valorized feature of personhood since the 1990s. What happens when a denigrated minority identity ascends into cultural desirability at the very time of its purported disappearance? To think about Chineseness from a site of heterogeneity—Bangkok, rather than cities assumed to be self-evidently Chinese—allows for the revision of the fixity of identities. The notions of ethnic personhood that emerge from this location do not merely stand in for the notion of difference in a national context (Chineseness as the other of Thai nationalism)

or for regional difference (Chineseness in Southeast Asia) but present a general platform for future pluralities while retaining links to a particular history of migration.

Two different registers of revival are counterposed in this section: Chapter 3 focuses on dominant invocations of Bangkok's Chinese history, while chapter 4 shows the progressive referencing of Bangkok as a 1960s Chinese city in film and café culture. Thus chapter 3, "Bangkok: Chinese City of Colonial Modernity," primarily investigates dominant occupations of Chinese Bangkok as a material site and highlights temporalities of governance and updated narratives of development in the neoliberal era. By contrast, chapter 4, "*How to Dump*: Radical Revitalization in Thai Cinema and Hospitality Venues," draws out the concretely material and quotidian modes of revival projects that foreground submerged histories of labor migration and dissent. Investigating the vicissitudes of contemporary Chinese Thai identity, it works toward a notion of a prosthetic, postmigrant historical memory.

Part III: Thinking Region from Southeast Asia

This section deliberates on an understanding of region that emerges from Southeast Asia. Other current efforts to reconceptualize Asia originate in the field of East Asian studies. Here Southeast Asia at times appears as a "new" generic stepping-stone for interventions into notions of power, governance, and historical trajectory. By contrast, chapters 5 ("*Memories of the Memories of the Black Rose Cat*: Thai Literature as Contemporary Chinese Literature) and 6 ("Southeast Asia as Question: Thinking Region from Bangkok") argue that a method that privileges Southeast Asian texts, sites, and languages promises to produce a less monumental perspective than other reconceptualizations of Asia to date. It yields frames of reference that are less burdened than East Asia–based efforts that recur to problematic prior regional formations, such as that of Japan's Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere in the 1940s, or liken today's PRC expansion to a historical tributary system.

My claim is that the heterogeneity attributed to Southeast Asia as well as precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial conceptualizations of the region are all being reanimated productively in the Bangkok revival. Southeast Asia represents a site in which Chineseness becomes salient both in its historical trajectory of becoming-race and in its subsequent becoming-ethnicity. In the largest Chinese diaspora in the world, Chineseness bears

historical traces; is an indelible element of national modernities; and furnishes an intricate part of reregionalization processes that involve Southeast Asian nations' fraught relations with the PRC. While Southeast Asia does not possess any "natural" unity but was created through political events such as World War II and the Cold War, it represents a site in which majority-minority relations take on instructive formats. Chapters 5 and 6 examine how two contemporary films and a novel reenvision region through their formulations of Chinese femininity. The coda, "Women in Asia and the World," closes the analysis with a glimpse of how such a formulation might play out in New York and speculates on the significance of a Chinese colonial modern revival beyond Asia.

Notes

Introduction. The Revival of Bangkok as a Chinese City

1 As a symbol of Straits Chinese, or Peranakan, culture, the devotional pineapple sutures the regions of East Asia and Southeast Asia.

2 I base this formulation on the title of Kuan-Hsing Chen's *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*.

3 In "Situations and Limits of Postcolonial Theory," Pheng Cheah debates China's colonial experience as well as notions of China as empire in a section titled "History of Sino-Postcoloniality: 'Chinese' 'Colonial' Experiences" (1–29).

4 In Bangkok, see, e.g., the hotels the Siam and the Sukosol (http://www.thesukosol.com); the scent company Karmakamet, which lays claim to a Chinese migrant history (http://www.karmakamet.co.th); and numerous real estate projects that reproduce colonial aesthetics as ciphers for a sophisticated, aspirationally upper-middle-class lifestyle. In Hong Kong, not only hospitality venues but also clothing brands, such as Shanghai Tang (https://www.shanghaitang.com), advertise Chinese colonial modernity as the ultimate in historically rooted, personal style.

5 A recent cinematic example is Cheang Pou-soi's *SPL II: A Time for Consequences* (Hong Kong/China, 2015). For two different perspectives on how to calibrate the deployment of temporal difference in intra-Asian media contexts, see Knee, "Thailand in the Hong Kong Cinematic Imagination," and Iwabuchi, ""Nostalgia for a (Different) Asian Modernity."

6 Stewart, *Crimes of Writing*, 67, 74.

7 Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, 68.

8 See Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, and Lucey and McEnaney, "Introduction."

9 Haiping Yan examines the cosmopolitanism of 1930s Shanghai literature and cinema in "Other Cosmopolitans." Bruce Robbins and Paula Lemos Horta's edited volume *Cosmopolitanisms* provides a diverse, global view of the notion of the cosmopolitan beyond any presumed European exportation of culture.

10 Lewis, "Cosmopolitanism and the Modern Girl," 1386. Christopher L. Hill's theory (described in "Conceptual Universalization in the Transnational Nineteenth Century") about how concepts attain global universality precisely by traveling corroborates such claims further. My understanding of the cosmopolitan is also informed by Sheldon Pollock's inquiry into the nature of the "Sanskrit cosmopolis," a premodern Asian cosmopolitanism. Although this is a temporally distant cosmopolitanism, Pollock's description of the Sanskrit cosmopolis's "transportability"—"the Sanskrit cosmopolis was wherever home was"—is instructive (Pollock, *Language of the Gods in the World of Men*, 16).

11 Sakai and Walker, "A Genealogy of Area Studies," 22.

12 Sakai and Walker, "A Genealogy of Area Studies," 24.

13 Walker, "The Accumulation of Difference and the Logic of Area."

14 Two book-length studies of Bangkok include Marc Askew's *Bangkok: Place, Practice, and Representation* and the 2021 publication of Lawrence Chua's *Bangkok Utopia: Modern Architecture and Buddhist Felicities, 1910–1973*. The latter includes a central focus on the ways in which Bangkok was constituted as a Chinese city.

15 Personal communication with Klaomard Yipintsoi, August 5, 2022. Only in retrospect can About Studio About Café be understood to have pioneered the revival trend.

16 Pattareeya, *Song Wat Guidebook*.

17 I take this term from Garrett, "Assaying History." Yaowarat is the name of a street in the Samphanthawong district but is frequently used to refer to (at least sections of) Bangkok's Chinatown as a whole.

18 "Tam roi kafae Ia Sae: Tamra ran amata nai chum chun Jin jud kamnoed achip hai khon phoeng tang tua" [Following the traces of 'Eia Sae Coffee': Legendary Chinese community business, vocational beginning for the just-established], *Silpa-Mag*, April 5, 2020, accessed December 11, 2024, https://www.silpa-mag.com/culture/article_27147.

19 "6 khafe satai Jin sud khlassik" [Six most classical Chinese-style cafés], *BKK Menu*, February 20, 2018, accessed December 11, 2024, https://www.bkkmenu.com/eat/stories/cafe-hopping-back-in-time.html.

20 "Lhong Tou Café," *BKK Menu*, June 17, 2018, accessed December 11, 2024, https://www.bkkmenu.com/eat/we-recommend/lhong-tou-cafe.html.

21 Chinese architectural history was recuperated in the lifestyle venue Patina Bangkok, as seen on their Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/Patina.bkk/, accessed December 11, 2024.

22 Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*.

23 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 21.

24 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 14.

25 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 13.

26 "Lhong Tou Café: Hippest Chinese-Style Café @ The Market Bangkok," *Review Aroii*, undated, https://reviewaroii.com/lhong-tou-cafe/.

(This link is no longer active. The corresponding short Facebook and Twitter posts are from the end of June 2022.) While the review mainly focuses on a new branch, it accounts for the original café's location, concept, and design in Yaowarat.

27 Seremetakis, *The Senses Still*.

28 The *New Yorker*'s elaborate visual collage represents a good introduction to the film's colonial modern aesthetics and enduring global appeal. Kyle Chayka, "Wong Kar-wai's 'In the Mood for Love,'" *New Yorker*, September 1, 2023, accessed December 8, 2024, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/touchstones/wong-kar-wais-in-the-mood-for-love.

29 Teo, "Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love*."

30 Vivian Y. P. Lee formulates this as follows: "If embedded in the postnostalgic is the temptation to look back at what 'would have been,' the 'post' here implies a desire to translate what is lost into a continued questioning of what is and what will become"(*Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997*, 42).

31 Bruno, *Surface*, 38.

32 Rey Chow discusses nostalgia in "A Souvenir of Love"; Stephen Teo speaks of a heightened concern with temporality in *Wong Kar-Wai*; and Vivian Y. P. Lee investigates a postnostalgic cinema in *Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997*.

33 Lee, *Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997*, 8.

34 Lim, "Spectral Times," 290, 291.

35 Lee, *Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997*, 29–30.

36 Lee, *Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997*, 24.

37 Lee classifies Wong's films as postnostalgic on the grounds of "the films' self-reflexive intertextuality, hybrid temporal/spatial references, and stylistic flourishes" (*Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997*, 14). Critics such as Audrey Yue have also highlighted *In the Mood for Love*'s facility for movement within time ("In the Mood for Love," 129).

38 See Loos, *Subject Siam*.

39 L. Hong, "Invisible Semicolony." The Thai Marxist Udom Sisuwan (his pen name is Aran Phromchomphu) is frequently credited as having introduced the notion of semicoloniality with regard to Thailand in his book *Thai kueng mueang khuen* (Thailand: A semi-colony, 1950).

40 Wongsurawat's *The Crown and the Capitalists: The Ethnic Chinese and the Founding of the Thai Nation* contains chapters focusing on education, media, economy, World War II and nationalist narrative, and the Cold War.

41 Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists*, 4–5. Southeast Asian Chinese history in general is increasingly researched in proximity to colonial history. See the work of scholars such as Eric Tagliacozzo, Guo-Quan Seng, and Oiyan Liu.

42 Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists*, 5.

43 The first two books on Chinese Thai history to be published after William Skinner's *Chinese Society in Thailand* (1957) are Pimpraphai Bisalputra and Jeffery Sng's *A History of the Thai-Chinese* (2015) and Wongsurawat's *The Crown and the Capitalists* (2019). In 2023 these were joined by Sittithep Eaksittipong's *Pen Jin phro ru suek: Prawatsat suea phuen mon bai thi phoeng sang* [Being Chinese because of feeling Chinese: A very recent rags-to-riches history]. Given the centrality of Chinese migration to Thailand's nineteenth- and twentieth-century history, these publications represent very urgent contributions.

44 Pimpraphai and Sng describe the ways in which Chinese labor and business activities increased in the decades after the abolition of slavery in 1905 (*A History of the Thai-Chinese*, 255–257).

45 Pimpraphai and Sng, *A History of the Thai-Chinese*, 157.

46 Pimpraphai and Sng, *A History of the Thai-Chinese*, 211–277. The chapter is titled "Metamorphosis (1855–1925)."

47 Bernards, *Writing the South Seas*, 170.

48 According to Chua, population numbers in Bangkok in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remain unclear, but he notes that "the arrival of Chinese migrants in Thailand had increased from about 2,000 persons annually in the early 1820s to 16,000 persons annually between 1882 and 1892. The figure increased exponentially to 68,000 per annum between 1906 and 1917" ("The City and the City," 936, 937).

49 Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists*, 164n6.

50 Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists*, 98.

51 Pimpraphai and Sng, *A History of the Thai-Chinese*, 306.

52 Pimpraphai and Sng, *A History of the Thai-Chinese*, 331–352.

53 Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists*, 142.

54 Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists*, 145–148.

55 By contrast, English newspapers directly named the state brutality and anti-Chineseness, and Chinese-language news combined images of violence with measured reporting. Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists*, 148–153.

56 Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists*, 141.

57 Wongsurawat argues against the "success story" of Chinese assimilation in Thailand in *The Crown and the Capitalists*, 158. Analyzing knowledge production about the Chinese in Thailand in "Textualising the 'Chinese of Thailand': Politics, Knowledge, and the Chinese in Thailand During the Cold War," Sittithep diagnoses a shift from viewing Chinese as the other to positioning Chinese as "the Chinese of Thailand."

58 A. Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires*, 92–96.

59 A. Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires*, 104--107.

60 A. Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires*, 104. The Ien Ang quotation is from "Can One Say No to Chineseness?," 236.

61 A. Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires*, 104.

62 See, e.g., Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand*; Rigg, "Exclusion and Embeddedness"; and Kasian Tejapira, "Imagined Uncommunity."

63 See, e.g., Wongsurawat, *The Crown and the Capitalists*, and Sittithep and Saichol, "An Outline for History of Emotion for the Chinese in Thailand."

64 A. Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires*, 104–105. The footnote in the text cites Rigg, "Exclusion and Embeddedness," 100 (on 218n41).

65 A. Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires*, 105.

66 Lampton, Ho, and Kuik et al., *Rivers of Iron*, 10.

67 Benjamin Zawacki, "Of Questionable Connectivity: China's BRI and Thai Civil Society," Council on Foreign Relations, June 7, 2021, https://www.cfr.org/blog/questionable-connectivity-chinas-bri-and-thai-civil-society. Kornphanat reflects on the effects of China's contemporary official soft-power activities in Thailand, accounting for the domains of tourism, language teaching (Confucius Institutes), cultural initiatives, and media. She argues that cultural initiatives are largely welcomed and attributes their success to historical ties and the contemporary ethnic Chinese community's support. Conversely, she notes that "the increased penetration of Chinese capital is meeting resistance" ("Culture and Commerce," 167).

68 Sittithep, *Pen Jin phro ru suek*, 261.

69 Brown, "American Nightmare," 693.

70 Andrea Muehlebach writes about flexibility in labor markets in *The Moral Neoliberal*.

71 I borrow this concept from Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity."

72 Iwabuchi, "Nostalgia for a (Different) Asian Modernity," 569.

73 I take this subheading from Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, 292.

74 See Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, *The Modern Girl Around the World*. For the Bangkok Modern Girl, see Natanaree, "The Siamese 'Modern Girl' and Women's Consumer Culture, 1925–35."

75 Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 4.

76 Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 4.

77 Ong, "Buoyancy," 193.

78 Harootunian, "Remembering the Historical Present."

79 See Barlow, "Femininity."

80 Mulvey, "Introduction: Fetishisms," 10.

81 Barlow, "Advertising Ephemera and the Angel of History," 113.

82 See Barlow, "'Green Blade in the Act of Being Grazed.'" I take the notion of "compounding value"—as a definition of the type of value that governs the logic of urban capitalism today—from Harvey, "The Right to the City."

83 See Barlow, "Advertising Ephemera and the Angel of History."

84 Barlow, "'Green Blade in the Act of Being Grazed.'"

85 Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity."

86 My analysis of femininity adapts notions of value and surface in the contemporary city from Mbembe's "Aesthetics of Superfluity."

87 See Ma, *Melancholy Drift*.

88 Barlow, "Debates over Colonial Modernity," 617.

89 Michel Foucault describes sexuality as a "dense transfer point" for power (*The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, 103).

Chapter 1. City Connectivities

1 "Kratham khwam Wong" [Doing Wong-ness], Facebook, accessed December 11, 2024, https://www.facebook.com/whysowong/.

2 See the critic Kong Rithdee's remarks on the usage of "wong" as an adjective in Thai in his discussion of the 2020 restored version of *In the Mood for Love*. Mongkol Cinema, "Wong sonthana" [Wong conversation/Conversation round], live-stream discussion with Kong Rithdee, Prawit Taengaksorn, and Nawapol Thamrongrattanarit, Facebook, October 23, 2020, accessed December 11, 2024, https://www.facebook.com/MongkolCinemaMovie/videos/998733380633545.

3 Describing late nineteenth- to mid-twentieth-century patterns of migration, Brian C. Bernards highlights a "Swatow-Bangkok corridor" (*Writing the South Seas*, 166).

4 Mattern, *Deep Mapping the Media City*.

5 See Tagliacozzo and Chang, *Chinese Circulations*; Barlow, "Debates over Colonial Modernity"; and Barlow, "Advertising Ephemera."

6 Fu, *China Forever*; Teo, "*Wuxia* Redux"; Knee, "The Pan-Asian Outlook of *The Eye*"; Wongsurawat, "Home Base of an Exiled People."

7 See Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*.

8 Spivak, "~~Megacity~~"; Saskia Sassen, "Who Owns Our Cities—and Why This Urban Takeover Should Concern Us All," *Guardian*, November 24, 2015, accessed December 13, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/nov/24/who-owns-our-cities-and-why-this-urban-takeover-should-concern-us-all; Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity." David Harvey, in "The Right to the City," describes the city as a product of capital, in the sense that cities represent prime transfer points for the absorption and production of surplus value.

9 Harvey, "The Right to the City."

10 Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity."

11 Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity," 374.

12 Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity," 393.

13 Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity," 394.

14 See, e.g., Mbembe's analysis of a South African casino's adoption of a Tuscan village look, in "Aesthetics of Superfluity," 396.

15 Abbas, "Cosmopolitan De-scriptions."

16 Cheung, "On Spectral Mutations," 182, 191.