Return Catalyzing Departure: Analyzing Hong Kong Identity in Film Before and After 1997

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am Chinese-Canadian, but I was born and raised in Hong Kong. Watching the rapid erosion of the one-country, two systems principle – a principle that has so thoroughly defined Hong Kong as a region – over the past three years invoked within me new grievances and anxieties regarding my homeland. With Hong Kong's political autonomy shrinking by the day, I wondered whether its distinct cultural identity would similarly be subject to gradual disappearance. Hence, I wished to re-visit how an autonomous 'Hongkonger' cultural identity formed and trace its development over the critical years before and after the 1997 handover. In my research paper for a class on the Borderlands of Modern China, I chose to track and analyze these changes to Hong Kong's cultural identity through the medium of film.

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Abstract

From being ceded by the Qing Empire and becoming a British crown colony in 1842, to formally returning under Chinese rule after the 1997 handover, the past two centuries have witnessed Hong Kong undergo immense socio-political changes that have critically shaped the trajectory of its inhabitants' cultural identity. Though the majority of Hongkongers are ethnically Chinese, with Han Chinese comprising ninety-two percent of the population, many consider the Hongkonger identity to be defined by the distinctions existing between its residents and mainland Chinese residents. Although prior to colonization Hongkongers never pondered the question of their 'Chineseness,' 156 years of rule as a British colony has created physical, cultural, and political segregation between mainland China and Hong Kong. Hence, many Hongkongers today continue to assert individuality — largely defined by their deviation away from 'pure Chineseness' — despite the island's official return to China in 1997.

Considering the factors that have led to the creation of a unique post-colonial Hongkonger identity, this paper will trace the evolution of Hongkongers' understanding of their own identity via the medium of film. Comparing a series of Hong Kong films before and after 1997, this paper suggests that the handover represents a critical turning point in which Hongkongers began to identify themselves with attributes beyond their inherent 'Chinese-ness'.

Introduction

From being ceded by the Qing empire and becoming a British crown colony in 1842 to formally returning under Chinese rule after the 1997 handover, the past two centuries have witnessed Hong Kong undergo immense socio-political changes that have critically shaped the trajectory of its inhabitants' cultural identity. Amidst the current political unrest and escalation of tensions between Hong Kong and China, the 'Hongkonger' identity has been a critical subject of discussion. Although the majority of Hongkongers are ethnically Chinese, with Han Chinese comprising ninety-two percent of the population, many consider the Hongkonger identity to be defined by the distinctions existing between its residents and mainland Chinese residents. Prior to colonization, Hongkongers never pondered the question of their 'Chineseness,' 156 years of rule as a separate British colony has created physical, cultural, and political segregation between mainland China and Hong Kong. Hence, many Hongkongers today continue to assert individuality — largely defined by their deviation away from 'pure Chineseness' — despite the island's official return to China in 1997.

Considering the significant political, economic, and cultural factors that have led to the creation of a unique post-colonial Hongkonger identity, this paper will trace the evolution of Hongkongers' understanding of their own identity through the medium of film. By comparing a series of Hong Kong films before and after 1997, this paper argues that the handover represents a critical turning point in which Hongkongers began to identify themselves with attributes beyond their inherent 'Chinese-ness.' Using film analysis, this paper suggests that although an independent Hong Kong identity had begun developing in the decades prior to 1997, ideological differences in the 1960s had led its inhabitants to differentiate themselves from the mainland Chinese. However, it was the anticipation of the handover (and later the handover itself) that catalyzed Hongkongers' conscious recognition of their own cultural identity as autonomous.

Pre-Handover: Hong Kong After 1967

Self-Censorship After the 1967 Riots: Mainland China as the Ideological 'Other'

Many consider the 1967 Riot, in which mass

protests were organized against the British Hong Kong government by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) supporters, a watershed moment wherein a separate 'Hongkonger' identity began to form. Countless experienced an awakening of political consciousness, ideologically distinct from the mainland Chinese. In response to the ongoing Cultural Revolution in the mainland, in which Mao Zedong's call on young people to purge society of capitalism and the Four Olds (i.e. old ideas, old culture, old habits, and old customs) amounted to extensive upheaval in the social order, CCP sympathizers in Hong Kong similarly engaged in violent protest against the British colonial government in 1967 (Tsang, 188). What were initially labour-dispute demonstrations escalated into large-scale riots, leading to massive bloodshed and chaos, which engendered widespread political division amongst Hong Kong society. The riot participants' espousal of violence significantly hindered the support that Hong Kong's leftist establishment had previously enjoyed, with the constant strikes, riots, and threats of a military takeover by CCP sympathizers serving to unify Hong Kong society against what Chinese communism represented (Tong, 42).

In cinema, local film studios stopped the production of all content relating to communism; such self-censorship reflects the construction of an independent Hong Kong identity — one formed against the presentation of mainland China as the ideological 'Other.' With many of the island's inhabitants developing strong anti-communist sentiments in the aftermath of the riots, film studios ordered an abrupt halt in the production of movies with overtly political themes, knowing local audiences to be generally "scared of anything that even faintly hinted of communism (Foronoff, 305)." Consequently, much of the 1970s saw the proliferation of 'shallow' romances and films that lacked intellectual merit but found tremendous success within the market (306). The popularity of films like *The Adventurous Air Steward* (1974), a romantic comedy following the travels of a bumbling, inexperienced flight attendant in Southeast Asia, highlights the refusal of many Hongkongers to identify with the ongoings in mainland China under the CCP regime. The consumption of escapist entertainment showcases an affinity for films that transported them away from political realities of that era; it reflects an active desire to remain far away from the communist Cultural Revolution occurring across the border.

Bruce Lee and Kung Fu: Chinese Nationalism as Defense Against Colonialism

Although a unique Hong Kong identity had begun developing after 1967 — mainly in negation to what mainland China represented ideologically — Hongkongers remained culturally attached to their motherland. In spite of negative reactions to the 1967 riots, Hong Kong's film industry was significantly influenced by anti-imperialist and anti-colonial sentiments expressed during the demonstrations. The success of nationalistic kung fu movies in the decades following the riots underscored Hongkongers' defensive assertion of their 'Chinese-ness' (either explicitly or implicitly) as a response to their status as British colonial subjects.

Kung fu films re-emerged with immense popularity in the 1970s, featuring repeated storylines primarily characterized by the triumph of the Chinese over foreign foes. Mostly set in the late Qing Dynasty and early-Republic of China era, these films depicted kung fu masters as national heroes who would restore honour and dignity for the Chinese by defeating foreign imperialists (Zhouxiang, 322). Bruce Lee, a Hong Kong martial artist who came to prominence during the 'Kung Fu Craze,' starred in several films with explicit anti-colonial and anti-Western themes. In *Fist of Fury* (1972), Lee stars as a member of the Jingwu School of martial arts in 1910. Confronted by the Japanese taunting the Jingwu School by calling them "weaklings" and presenting them with a sign bearing the words: "Sick Man of East Asia," Lee ultimately breaks the sign and retaliates against the foreigners, symbolizing Chinese resistance against

colonial powers who seek to invade their nation and conquer their territories. The destruction of the sign has significant cultural relevance: as Hong Kong was ceded to the British due to the Qing dynasty's inability to defend against foreign aggression, Lee breaking the sign represents 'Hongkongers' reclamation of their 'Chineseness' despite China's status as 'the sick man of Asia', a term coined to refer to the state of the country after it was taken advantage of by great powers. *Way of the Dragon* (1972), a film in which Lee wrote, co-produced, and directed, is explicit in its expression of anti-Western xenophobia. Starring as a Hong Kong man who travels to Rome to rescue his relative's restaurant from being attacked by Italian gangs; Lee's character uses his *kung fu* skills to defeat mafia opponents. The movie's most famous scene features Lee defeating Chuck Norris, the mafia-recruited karate champion — an embodiment of the might of foreign powers — in their fight at the Colosseum of Rome — an emblem of Western civilization. This scene alone offers a powerful visual symbolization of the Chinese redeeming themselves from their history of subjugation by Western powers.

The recurring theme of anti-foreigner nativism in Bruce Lee's films reflects the discontent of Hongkongers towards British rule and their desire to reclaim an identity beyond that of colonial subjects. Whether that be its extensive depictions of hatred of foreigners or its

protagonists' steadfast assertions of their 'Chineseness,' his films can be interpreted as defensive in nature, often invoking Chinese nationalism to mitigate Hongkongers' reality as dominated and controlled by foreign powers.

Pre-Handover: Hong Kong Between 1984 and 1997

With the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 heralding the official transfer of the island to Chinese rule in 1997, Hong Kong entered a period of immense socio-political transition. Under this declaration, Hong Kong would cease to be a British colony and, instead, become a special administrative region under the People's Republic of China. However, it would maintain its own governing and economic systems independent from the mainland under the principle of 'one country, two systems' for the following fifty years (Tsang, 226). An analysis of the films produced during this era reflects an early crisis of identity that Hongkongers felt in anticipation of this transition, as movies produced after 1984 deviated from the staunchly anti-foreign themes in the past and featured more ambivalent characterizations of Western presence in Hong Kong.

Jackie Chan and Foreigners: Shifting Depictions of Western Influence

The career of Jackie Chan serves as a prism to view the changing trajectory of Hongkongers' perception of their own cultural identity, given his breakthrough in the late 1970s and his peak in the late 1990s and into the 2000s. Not only did Jackie Chan become the face of Hong Kong cinema domestically, but his performances also captured audiences abroad; many accredit his films with projecting the culture of Hong Kong and its values across the world (Ding, 7).

Re-visiting his films before and after 1984, the significant shift in depictions of Westerners conveys Hongkongers' conflicted understanding of their cultural allegiances as a result of the forthcoming 1997 handover. First emerging into the film industry in the late 1970s, Jackie Chan reached the height of his stardom in the 1990s when he became a household name for his leading roles in funny action films (7). In his breakout film *Drunken Master* (1978), Chan plays a mischievous kung fu kid who humorously and valiantly defeats gangster villains colluding with foreign officials. Re-using the familiar trope of Chinese patriots defeating Western imperialists through traditional martial arts, Chan's early films, including *Drunken Master,* reflected Hongkongers' understanding of their inherent 'Chinese-ness' reigning superior to Western colonialism. However, *Drunken Master II* (1994) presents a narrative that contradicts that of its predecessor. Although featuring a similar plotline of Freddie Wong

defeating foreign rivals, the film portrays the Western world with increased ambiguity. Though the primary antagonists of the movie are corrupt British consulate officials, the film highlights the superiority of the Western world over that of the Chinese. One scene depicts Chan's character entering the train carriage for British consulate staff, but he is taken aback by the quiet, clean, and luxuriously spacious carriage and its posh, elegantly-dressed passengers. In stark contrast, the Chinese carriage he returns to is dirty, loud, and crowded with rude passengers. In another scene, Chan accidentally drinks a different liquor than the traditional Chinese alcohol he uses to prepare for his kung fu performance. After the performance, when he finds out he consumed a French Brandy, Wong is impressed and praises the alcohol. These scenes emphasize Hongkongers' perceived superiority of the Western over the Chinese world — a significant deviation from previous comparisons between the two cultures.

Though the British remain the villains of the storyline, representing a rejection of the subjugation of Hongkongers by their colonizers, the rosier illustration of the Western world in *Drunken Master II* implies a sense of nostalgia towards British Hong Kong amidst its looming end — a period in which the island flourished into a cosmopolitan metropolis under Western laissez-faire capitalism. Altogether, the growing complexity in which Jackie Chan's films illustrated Westerners communicates the beginning of a perception shift in Hong Kong's understanding of their 'Chinese-ness' in anticipation of its return to mainland China. Departing from the nationalistic assertions displayed in *kung fu* movies, greater ambivalence towards Western influence and doubts regarding Chinese cultural superiority was now observed in Hongkongers' projection of their own identity.

Post-Handover: Hong Kong After 1997

Whereas many pre-1997 Hong Kong films (such as those of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan) featured relatively light-hearted and straightforward tropes of "good prevails over evil" and "justice prevails over injustice" (Ding, 136), seminal works of Hong Kong cinema after 1997 present significantly more serious and complicated storylines that often involve protagonists facing uncertainty regarding their values, social status, and identity. This complexification of narratives in Hong Kong films reflects how the handover intensified Hongkongers' anxieties regarding re-integration with China and catalyzed the internalization of Hong Kong identity as a distinct persona.

First colonized by the British, the island evolved from a fishing village to the affluent financial capital of East Asia. Accompanying a wholesale economic transformation was a gradual cultural transformation: British influence embedded within Hong Kong civil society, whether that be its espousal of Western political ideals (such as the rule of law and human rights), its high regard for capitalism and the freedom it brings, or its thorough consolidation of English language into all facets of society, including incorporating English into the Cantonese vernacular or naming streets after British aristocrats (Mathews, 9). Upon the transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty by the British back to China and what many consider as 'recolonization' by China, Hongkongers then faced the issue of becoming 'Chinese' again.

Infernal Affairs: Post-Colonial Identity Crisis

Infernal Affairs (2002), directed by Andrew Lau, follows a gang member mole infiltrating the Hong Kong police force and his counterpart, an undercover policeman planted in his triad. When tasked with uncovering their respective perpetrator, the two characters simultaneously experience an identity crisis: the gang member mole desires to become a real police officer, and the undercover policeman desires to reclaim his real identity. The film's intricate narrative is explicitly symbolic of the struggle in national identity faced by Hong Kong's inhabitants after the 1997 handover (Choy, 56).

Hence, the identity crisis illustrated in *Infernal Affairs* expands beyond the binary of 'good and evil'

used to symbolize the duality of Chinese and Western culture in Hong Kong in films past. Instead, the film highlights the impossibility of clearly extricating 'Chinese-ness' or 'British-ness' out of Hong Kong's cultural identity. Lau showcases this through the two characters' internal monologues. While the mafia mole battles his inner thoughts of wanting to become "a good guy," the undercover policeman struggles in his quest for "[his] identity as a normal man" — neither fulfill their pursuit at the film's conclusion (Choy, 56).

While scholar Howard Y.F. Choy surmises the failure of both protagonists in resolving their identity crises to represent Hong Kong's schizophrenic struggle in "resuming a single, clear-cut identity" after 1997 (Choy, 56), the ending of *Infernal Affairs* can alternatively be interpreted to show how Hong Kong's cultural identity is rather defined by its state of flux. Though officially 'returned' to China, Hong Kong's identity did not return unchanged. Therefore, upon national reintegration, one can instead view the confusion and anxiety felt by Hongkongers as a robust indicator of the autonomous nature of their cultural identity (inevitably clashing with external pressures to conform) rather than a symptom of an identity disorder.

Dumplings: The Horror of Losing the Hongkonger Identity

Similar to *Infernal Affairs*, the 2004 horror-thriller *Dumplings* directed by Fruit Chan also features a protagonist who suffers from an identity crisis to illustrate the post-1997 anxiety experienced by Hongkongers (Wu, 44). However, it differs from the former in that it demonstrates post-handover anxiety as somewhat correlated to Hongkongers' sense of grief, rather than confusion, over its cultural identity.

In the film, former actress Mrs. Lee attempts to regain her fading beauty and prevent her wealthy husband from leaving her for younger lovers by eating magical dumplings prepared by an underground mainland Chinese obstetrician. When she finds out that the dumplings are made of human fetuses, she is initially horrified; however, upon observing their age-rewinding efficacy, she consciously continues to seek Mei and pressure her to procure even more potent fetuses. Mrs. Lee's yearning to restore her former youth is a metaphor for Hong Kong's nostalgic longing for its golden colonial past. Her tycoon husband Mr. Lee is a winner of the market economy, embodying the economic might of Hong Kong during its heyday as the most free capitalist market in Asia. Thus, Mrs. Lee's drastic resort to cannibalism to retain her husband's affections can be understood to demonstrate the desperation that many felt upon impending reunification with communist China. In this light, Chan's painting of the loss of Hong Kong's capitalist appeal as a loss of identity reflects capitalism's centrality (and inseparability) in Hong Kong's own cultural identity. More precisely, the horror genre of the film highlights the fear and trepidation associated with the prospect of Hong Kong's loss of its economic status because it will, by extension, generate a crisis of identity.

Dumplings highlights that the root of the Hong Kong identity crisis is not simply uncertainty, but also loss. Unlike *Infernal Affairs*, Chan's film does not emphasize the confusions between 'Chinese-ness' and 'Britishness' within Hong Kong identity, but rather the fear that arises out of a loss of identity in its postcolonial future. *Dumplings*' prophecy of loss implies with certainty the loss of an autonomous cultural identity after the 1997 handover — one that can broadly be defined by its economic success under a capitalist system. Chan's film has even greater relevance in retrospect; the CCP's blatant disregard for the 'one country, two systems' is a manifestation of the metaphorical fears exhibited by Mrs. Lee. Not only has the decreasing political and economic autonomy in Hong Kong caused a massive exodus of foreign firms whose presence generated immense prosperity for the city, but increasing crackdowns by the CCP have already led many Hongkongers to lose their freedom of expression and conform to the

regime's demands.

Conclusion

Positioned between the two empires throughout its history, Hong Kong cinema has become a site where different projections of its identity have been cast. Between its pre-colonial past and postcolonial present, a unique Hong Kong identity had begun developing both in conjunction with and separately from Chinese and Western influences. As reflected in the analysis of Hong Kong films over time, the trajectory of this cultural identity formation came to a critical junction in the immediate years leading up to and following its official return to China in 1997. With inevitable re-integration with the mainland confronting Hongkongers with a new reality — one in which their identity could become homogenized, and thus, extinct — the handover accelerated within Hong Kong the recognition of their own cultural identity as defined by more than 'Chinese-ness.' Just as Michel Foucault proselytizes, "one should totally and absolutely suspect anything that claims to be a return. . . . there is in fact no such thing as a return" (Choy, 53). In the case of Hong Kong, its return as *a part of* China catalyzed Hongkongers' recognition of their cultural identity as one that is *apart* from China.

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