

Brotherly Bonding and Male Bodies in Anguish: A Historical Look at Hong Kong Fandom in the West

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Abstract

Hollywood began to gain hegemony over the world's movie industry as a result of the devastation Europe underwent in World War I. However, through the early 1990s, Hong Kong maintained a thriving local movie industry, both in production and exhibition. In fact, from the 1970s through the 1990s, when Hollywood was consolidating its control over most of the theaters of the world, Hong Kong actually began to expand its popularity in the West, especially in America, where certain Hong Kong directors and filmmakers enjoyed a cult following.

There are various reasons for this anomaly. For one, Hong Kong's smaller film budgets and less rationalized system of production allowed for a more spontaneous, varied, and energetic cinema, with movies that did not necessarily adhere to strict narrative formulas. In addition, lacking capital for expensive production values, Hong Kong movies featured higher levels of kinetic action, replete with action heroes capable of feats of impressive physical skill that amazed Western audiences with their real-life prowess and risk-taking. In addition, the martial-arts and "heroic bloodshed" genres used exuberant violence to mask an ethos of close camaraderie, and male homo-social bonding that had become taboo in Hollywood cinema due to the preference for go-it-alone individualistic heroism and the fear of homo-erotic displays of male physiques and masculine beauty.

In this paper, these points are demonstrated through close looks at the Western reception of three different styles of popular Hong Kong action star: Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Chow Yung Fat's collaborations with the director John Woo.

Keywords: Hong Kong Cinema, Fan studies, Alternative cinema, Homo Social-Bonding, Reception Studies

Looking back from 2017, it is hard to believe that for a time Hollywood was feeling some heat from Hong Kong cinema. Up until about twenty-five years ago, Hong Kong could be said to have had one of the world's two or three most dynamic national cinemas, until hitting a perfect storm of bad luck and geo-political circumstances that sent it into a decade's long decline. In a 2015 report, the Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China reported that "the protracted downturn in the local film industry since the early 1990s ... [was mainly] precipitated by (a) Shrinking number of cinema seats ... (b)[local films being] crowded out by foreign movies ... (c) Weakening overseas appetite for Hong Kong movies ... [and] (d) Rampant film piracy." This report fails to mention the 1997 handover of Hong Kong itself from Great Britain to the People's Republic of China, which may have been at least partially responsible for the outflow of a considerable amount of Hong Kong talent, such as top actors Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Chow Yun Fat, as well as leading directors John Woo, Tsui Hark, Ringo Lam, and Peter Chan. This combination of negative factors dealt a terrible blow to what many see as the golden age of Hong Kong cinema.

Before the collapse of its movie industry, Hong Kong had managed to maintain an extremely robust local cinema through the twin expedients of film-exports and its extremely loyal local fan-base. In an international context, this was a *huge* anomaly. In the early 1990s, the time of Hong Kong cinema's greatest strength, was exactly the time when other national cinemas were capitulating, *en masse*, to Hollywood. In their book *Global Television and Film*, Hoskins, McFadyen, and Finn reprint a historical table from the December 1993 edition of "Screen Digest" illustrating the increase of the United

States' market share within the national cinemas of France, Germany, Italy, and the UK in the years 1985 to 1992. Over this seven-year period, Hollywood's already significant share of these countries' box-office receipts increased by another fifteen to twenty percent. For example, ninety-three percent of the UK's box-office went to Hollywood made films, and even in Japan—the world's third most prolific film producer—Hollywood's take was over fifty percent. The authors attribute this dominance partially to the prevalence of English as a first and second language around the world, to Hollywood's vertical industrial organization, to its enormous promotional budgets, and to its well-developed star system. The most crucial factor, however, is the large size—coupled with relative affluence—of America's domestic audience.

Compare the Hollywood position to that of Hong Kong: natives speak Cantonese, a language little spoken outside of its own region; promotional budgets were pegged at 5% of production cost, which were frequently less than a million dollars; and its home market consisted of a mere six-million inhabitants, making export a necessity and therefore vertical integration (i.e., controlling distribution and exhibition) impossible. It is only in the area of star-power (consider Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Chow Yun Fat) that Hong Kong seemed less than totally disadvantaged. In spite of these handicaps, during roughly this same 1985-1992 period of Hollywood expansion, the cinema of this colonial island was also thriving, and its market expanding—even *into America itself*. What did this underdog cinema have that drew fans to it—especially from the highly coveted 18-35-year-old male cohort? How could it compete with the “juggernaut of Hollywood”?

One thing in its favor was the pure flexibility and dynamics that come with low budget filmmaking. If, as was the case in Hollywood, investors had to put \$40-60 million

or more into a film, we can be sure that characterization and narrative strategies would have been circumscribed and conservative; producers would not be willing to take chances with such huge amounts of money. They would never have allowed a director to start a project without a script, relying on daily brainstorming sessions of cast and crew to determine much of a day's shooting—but this was a practice not unheard of in Hong Kong's fast-paced production system, and one key to the unpredictable, energetic, and often (compared to mainstream western films) creative sequences commonly found in “golden age” Hong Kong films. It is this production style that gave them the freshness and spontaneity that their fans seemed to love. Compared to the obsessively story-boarded plots of Hollywood's “excessively obvious cinema,” “Hong Kong plots tend to be organized around vivid moments, fights or chases or comic turns or melodramatic catastrophes. The creators skill lies in making each set piece powerful and in livening up the connecting passages” (Bordwell, 2011, 11).

In June, 1988 the journal *Film Comment* covered a Hong Kong Film Festival held in Toronto. In the introduction to a series of brief articles covering the event, John Powers announced “We are here to tell you that we've come across something that is, for once, genuinely worth studying” (35). He went on to express sentiments that would recur again and again when favorably inclined film critics and historians wrote about Hong Kong cinema, namely, that in “the best new Hong Kong movies, we get a startling rush of excitement; the pleasure and exhilaration of moviegoing in something close to pure form” (34). It would be over twenty more years before David Bordwell would painstakingly break down the inner workings of this cinema's practices in his magisterial work, *Planet Hong Kong*, and begin to explain, on a formal level, some of the elements

that make this island cinema's films so attractive to its fans. "Hong Kong cinema, in its drive for clarity and impact, has revitalized silent-film techniques. Slow-and-fast-motion, dynamic editing, striking camera angles, and other devices that the avant-garde of the 1920s declared to be 'purely cinematic' are stock in trade in this popular cinema" (Bordwell, 2011, 7). For Westerners that loved them and could appreciate their quirkiness, these movies had an energy, a breathtaking liveliness in both story and execution, that made the big-budget, lumbering dinosaurs of Hollywood seem turgid and muscle-bound.

To their critics, Hong Kong films were mindless, adolescent, and formulaic. Detractors pointed out that characters tended to be poorly developed, plots thin and patchy, and important issues, whether personal or political, eschewed. They declared these films to be empty of real content. However, this final opinion is not only mistaken, but virtually impossible: when fans engage passionately with a medium, it can only be because they are getting something from it that they want or need—although just *what* that is may not be obvious to non-fans. It appears that when critics and fans were watching these movies, they were seeing different things. In his seminal article "Encoding/Decoding," Stuart Hall points out that before a message

can have an 'effect' (however defined), satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use', it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded. It is this set of decoded meanings which have an effect, influence, entertain, instruct, or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioral consequences ...we are now fully aware that this re-

entry into the practices of audience reception and ‘use’ cannot be understood in simple behavioral terms. (131)

In other words, those who criticize fans of Hong Kong films for liking “inferior product,” are merely displaying their own ignorance; they are “decoding” (“reading”) the films using a different set of criteria than the fans, and then foolishly denigrating what they do not really understand. As they do not see the value of the films, they assume that others cannot, either. However, when fans return to certain experiences, it is because they *do* see value, and feel they are being challenged, engaged, or enriched. And one thing is certain, Hong Kong movie fans, in both the West and East, did come back to these movies, again and again. They rented them, bought them, bootlegged them, pirated them, and even memorized them. Although quantities have fallen sharply over the last twenty years, there were thousands of web pages, numerous discussion groups, and to my great surprise, a wealth of fan fiction (this last almost exclusively written by women) devoted to enthusiasts’ favorite stars. Viewers were getting something from these films that they apparently just could not get from Hollywood movies. As Jinsoo An puts it:

The expanding sphere of popular Hong Kong films in the United States illustrates the process whereby foreign cultural artifacts bring special meaning and pertinence to local consumers living in a global mass culture. Repetitive engagement with the foreign film text, thus, indicates a persistent and active effort to seek a particular viewing pleasure not available in conventional American films, a practice that signals a certain limitation of the cultural hegemony maintained by

the Hollywood machine. (96)

To repeat: although these films may not generally contain authorial pronouncements embedded in them in the manner of art films or literature, they cannot be “empty.” There is no such thing as a text divorced from content and ideology: if one appears to be so, yet is eagerly and repetitively consumed by fans, then all the more reason to examine it closely and determine its attractive force.

Rolanda Chu argues that the low status of Hong Kong films, seen “merely” as entertainment, can allow potentially transgressive readings or prohibited pleasures, Trojan horse style, “to slip easily into our mainstream spectatorship without much scrutiny” (1994). Drawing from the work of Richard Dyer, she argues that what is explained away as “sheer entertainment” often conceals “unruly pleasures,” and concludes that fans enjoyment of Hong Kong films must derive from qualities or content that is either prohibited or necessarily absent from American-made texts. This covert partaking of transgressive pleasure is what, she suggests, lies at the heart of much of Western fans appreciation of Hong Kong cinema, and that is something worth exploring.

There are numerous Hong Kong stars and genres that had (and often continue to have) followings in North America and Europe, and to attempt to break down and analyze all of them would be well beyond the scope of this project. Accordingly, I shall limit my study to three of the actors, each closely associated with a different aspect of the action genre, whose films have had the greatest impact outside of Asia: Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Chow Yun Fat (in his collaborations with director John Woo).

Bruce Lee as Countercultural Icon in the West

Although Hong Kong had been one of the top five film producing centers for decades, most Americans knew next to nothing about the Asian island's output until 1973.

Between the breakdown of the production code (which extra-legally maintained strict censorship standards) in the late 1960s, and Hollywood's reassertion of hegemony over America's screens via its monopolistic control over the ratings system in the early 1970s, black independent films, or so-called "blaxploitation pix," foreign art films, pornography, and Hong Kong kung fu movies gave Hollywood's hegemony over American screens the greatest challenge it has since received in the post-World War I era.

During 1973, especially, this combination of non-Hollywood product was particularly volatile, making up approximately one-quarter to one-third of *Variety's* top 50 films for most of the year. Of these four types of film, kung fu movies were the only ones to reach the #1 position. As David Desser writes, "From late March 1973 until mid-October of that same year, an incredible six films from Hong Kong had reached [#]1, at least for one week; during that same period, no less than fifteen dubbed imports had hit the Top 50" (34). On May 16th, *Fists of Fury*, *Deep Thrust—The Hand of Death*, and *Five Fingers of Death* held *Variety's* #1, #2, and #3 positions. This was a glorious moment for Hong Kong film, but one that would also have an unfortunate and lasting effect: to this day a large percentage of Americans—even those not yet born in 1973—tend to think of quickly produced, horribly dubbed, "chop-socky" (as they were referred to in industry magazines such as *Variety*) movies as synonymous with Hong Kong film.

As a box-office phenomenon, the 1970s Hong Kong movie fad would be short lived, although it is not completely clear why it came to an end. The *Variety* review of *Fists of*

Fury suggests that many fans enjoyed these films ironically, as “food for giggles,” and no doubt there is some truth to the claim. It is easy to believe that the poorly synchronized dubbing, and the formulaic plots that seemed only to build towards terrible dialog like “But master, he insulted our school. We must have revenge!” would soon begin to bore audiences. Kung fu movies disappeared from all but inner-city screens almost as abruptly as they had appeared, suggesting the typical life cycle of a fad. However, the real case might be more complex than that, as the almost contemporaneous rise and fall of African-American independent cinema (generally referred to as “Blaxploitation” by the press) seems too similar to be a mere coincidence.

The Latino and African American appreciation of Hong Kong martial arts films is well known but little discussed in film studies. David Desser convincingly summarizes the situation by pointing out that “outside of the blaxploitation genre it largely replaced, kung fu films offered the only nonwhite heroes, men and women, to audiences alienated by mainstream film and often by mainstream culture. This was the genre of the underdog, the underdog of color...fighting a foe with greater economic clout who represented the status quo” (Desser, 38). This suggests that these films were potentially subversive and transgressive, especially for audiences of color. Looking through the *Variety* box-office chart for 1973, however, does not support Desser’s claim that Kung fu films displaced Blaxploitation films: their popularity was concurrent. *Variety* articles like “Chi[cago] Loop Films Must Be Either Black or Action” (3 Jan. 1973) make clear that there was a crossover audience, and the article “Black, Chop-Socky Parlay on Coast,” mentions six Hong Kong stars “being brought over to work in black pix,” demonstrating that the American film industry saw the trends as connected (*Variety*, 11 Nov. 1973).

Both genres were mainly distributed by Warner Brothers. In his book on African Americans in mainstream films, *Framing Blackness*, Ed Guerrero pointedly does not mention either kung fu or its most famous practitioner, Bruce Lee. Concerning the decline of African-American films after their burst of popularity in the early 1970s, he states that when “Hollywood became less economically dependent on the genre for short-term profit, Blaxploitation came to a speedy demise” (70). Why Hollywood would reject short-term profits when they could have them is not clear. According to Jon Lewis, independent black film kingpin Melvin Van Peebles blamed the *Miller* decision, the legal precedent that once again made case-by-case censorship at local theaters possible, for black-cinema’s demise. Summarizing Van Peebles argument, Lewis states “It [the *Miller* decision] made legal or legitimate once again the very sort of restrictions that forced African American artists like him [Van Peebles] into marginal, countercultural enterprises and ensured that the dominant, studio product adhered to certain standards and practices—images and narratives—that were at once repressive and racist” (271). In other words, it seems that the popularity of early 1970s kung fu and African American films did not die a natural death, although there is no clear explanation of what actually happened. Perhaps, after the mass race riots of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Warners merely succumbed to pressure from those fearing empowered minority representations, and so stopped funding. Perhaps, as Lewis suggests, if the local populace of each town could vote on whether films could be shown or not, Hollywood felt that so many communities would opt to ban violent blacks and Asians (e.g. Blaxploitation and kung fu movies), that profits would be impossible. Both genres were abandoned without a fight, and kung fu films soon disappeared from mainstream theaters, although they survived in

inner-city African-American and Chinatown venues, where they hung on throughout the decade before finally fading out along with most of the neighborhood theaters themselves.

However, there would be one survivor—culturally, if not literally. Bruce Lee’s popularity continued long after the initial kung fu fad died, even to the present day. He was apotheosized through his early death, but even before that he had already become an icon of cool, with his posters sneering down from the bedroom walls of the rebellious and disaffected youth of all colors and classes. Most remarkably, this is a Chinese hero rocketing to fame even as soldiers were returning from Vietnam: for fans to embrace Lee at such a time has a profound political valence. His very physiognomy marked him as the transgressive other; this was the face America had just been fighting in a controversial war millions of young people refused to support. It seems significant that the Vietnam War era would mark both the demise of the American movie Western, which had been ubiquitous on screens for seven decades, and the rise of Lee.

Movie westerns regularly stressed camaraderie and male bonding, and the power of the white patriarchal group to withstand outsiders. These are themes that tend to be popular in times of war. Instead of John Wayne or other traditionally styled American heroes, however, at the close of the Vietnam War era, millions of young American men turned to Lee. In his movies, Bruce Lee is always connected to a group, but on the fringes, more outsider than insider. Alienated and oppressed, he tends to fight his battles alone, and, unlike cowboys, he doesn’t need a weapon—because *he* is a weapon himself. No smiling Charlie Chan, Lee’s calculated scorn took “cool” all the way to icy-chill, and his rope-tight musculature and cat-like poses announced that he was, in his very essence, a physical threat.

The focus of Lee imagery tends to be on his body, with its Gray's-Anatomy-vivid musculature, impressive not just because of how it looked, but what it could do. Powerful and lightning fast, Lee's body was a trained machine; in his films, his fans can see it at work, witnessing in incontrovertible images what his physique could do, what it could do to other people, and also what punishment it could withstand. Although Lee's preening vanity is manifest in all of his films, the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of his body, to borrow Laura Mulvey's expression, resists feminization through its regular engagements in violence, especially during the key moments of its display. For example, in his most famous "pin-up," taken from the film *Enter the Dragon*, Lee stands in a medium-shot, facing the camera in a fighting pose. He is bare from the waist up, muscles taut, with two series of long, bleeding cuts, one just under his pectorals and another on his cheek. Like the gory, crucified Jesus of Catholic iconography, or the painting *St. Sebastian Pierced by Arrows*, the extreme eroticism of the way the male bodies are displayed are masked by the apparently antithetical violent suffering of its subject. This is an idea we will return to later with Chow Yun Fat and the films of John Woo.

What makes Lee attractive to his fans is that his abilities are, more or less, real. He is a martial artist, and unlike the typical Hollywood hero, it is assumed he can do the same amazing feats in real life that he performs in front of the camera. As Stephen Teo puts it, "Lee shows himself to be a specimen of thorough physical training, a true-to-life fighter and not the imaginary creation of an action movie director" (114). Unlike heroes such as the six-foot four-inch John Wayne, Lee is of ordinary size and build, if not smaller, suggesting that fans, too, can achieve these physical levels of ability and do the same things he can do. Nan-chuks started to sell briskly, and martial-arts schools sprang up all

over the United States, ironically, just as martial arts films and fighting Asian heroes began disappearing from American screens.

Jackie Chan as Super-Everyman

It would be more than twenty years before another such Asian hero would generate comparably widespread fandom, and eventually make the crossover in the West from an obscure Hong Kong star, cultishly worshipped by a small core of devotees, to a household name with his own Saturday morning cartoon. Writing in 2017, with Chan having long since gone to Hollywood and lost all but a glimmer of his once shining cult status, it takes a little bit of reconstruction to recall how he was once perceived.

In 1996 Chan was all but unknown in the west when his film *Rumble in the Bronx* was given general release by Tri-Star Pictures. The film briefly hit #1, and scored a modestly respectable \$30 million at the box-office. New to most Americans, Chan had already been a mega-star throughout China and South East Asia for nearly twenty-years, since his 1978 breakthrough martial-arts comedy films *Snake in Eagle's Shadow* and *Drunken Master*.

Before these two films established his star-persona in Asia, he had struggled through a series of embarrassingly poor films as a Bruce Lee imitator. With his broad, open face, near-homely cuteness, and humble, winning charm, Jackie Chan could not be further from the angularly good-looking, dauntingly sophisticated, broodingly narcissistic Bruce Lee. The one trait they shared was their ordinary size; both men were well under six-feet tall. Chan finally forged a winning image for himself only when he decided to become the exact foil of his inimitable predecessor. As Chan himself puts it, “I kid around—

totally opposite to Bruce Lee. When Bruce Kick high, I kick low. When Bruce Lee acts like a hero, I act like an underdog. Nobody can beat Bruce Lee; everybody can beat me. He's not smiling; I'm always smiling" (Gentry, 21). The persona that Jackie developed, combined with substantial talent, made him, in the late 90s, very possibly the most popular and recognized star in the world. An outspoken fan of the heroes of the silent American screen, especially Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, and Harold Lloyd, Chan got from them not only ideas for physical comedy and prop use, but also the seed for his winning star-persona—one so down-to-earth and likeable that fans willingly followed him through series of movies with the same simple message that formed the fundamental trajectory of Keaton and Lloyd features: when pushed to the absolute limit, an ordinary person can execute great feats.

David Bordwell sums up a typical Chan film very neatly:

Typically the film centers on a sweet-natured, fairly innocent, not-too-bright ordinary guy. The villains assail him mercilessly, and his superiors treat him unjustly, but his fighting skills are magnified by his untiring dedication to his goal and his seraphic luck. He is Hong Kong's Harold Lloyd, with Buster Keaton's and Douglas Fairbanks' gift for tailoring punishing stunts to his star persona."

(58)

The simple, everyman charm of this character, like Chaplin's 80 years previously, seemed to travel effortlessly across national and cultural barriers.

When *Rumble in the Bronx* was released in America, Chan already had thousands of ardent fans who had dedicated dozens of sites to him on a fledgling new medium: the internet. These pages were alive with enthusiasm, excitement, and hyperbole, often shot through with smart-alecky adolescent wit. Even a cursory glance revealed enormous similarity between pages: greetings, expression of devotion, Jackie's filmography, biography, a few pictures, links to other pages, and finally, most importantly, lists.

Lists were a hallmark of Hong Kong fandom, but the lists fans compiled about Jackie Chan eventually honed in on one target: although there were lists of favorite films and fight scenes, the lists most central to the sites focused on Jackie's body—not as a site of beauty, masculinity, or sexuality, but as a site of physical skill and, more importantly, a site of injury, risk and sacrifice. Lists of worst injuries, broken bones, worst falls, most dangerous stunts and scariest moments awed and delighted fans: Jackie's pro-filmic injuries seemed to indicate an incontrovertible testament of unconditional love and dedication to his fans and to his craft. As the new defunct website (look at the title! It says it all!) admirationsociety.com/everythingjackie/ put it "He holds nothing back and risks all to give his fans the ride of their lives!" Pages delighted in describing, in minute detail, the intricacies of his stunts, reveling in the writers' extra-filmic knowledge of the extent of damage and details of recovery. Another site, still extant as I type in March of 2017, Web-vue.com/body.htm, is fairly typical in showing Jackie standing, arms spread, with bunches of tiny captioned arrows (the type found in an illustrated medical book) indicating the sites and nature of damage sustained by the various parts of Jackie's body. True fans all knew that the concluding credits of Jackie Chan movies scroll over outtakes of flubbed stunts, in which we can see Jackie grimacing in pain, bloodied, or perhaps

unconscious. As David Kehr puts it “A Jackie Chan movie is also a Jackie Chan documentary” (41). It seems that fans watched and re-watched these scenes with wonder, amazement and pleasure, accepting each injury as a token of love, and, oddly, there seemed to be nothing sadistic or ghoulish about this. On the contrary, as an everyman hero, fans seem to identify with Jackie. Every injury was seen as a sign of his greatness, authenticity, and paradoxically, invincibility—and by extension, of the fans own.

Jackie Chan fans wanted, more than anything else, to conflate the pro- and extra-filmic aspects of his life and injuries. Every bruise and pro-filmic injury, which fans can see in the “text” that Chan takes with him everywhere, inscribed on his body, further conflated his real and “reel” lives. Even more than with Bruce Lee, every blow, fall, car crash, and explosion that this comical and unprepossessing little man survived was a testament to what the fans themselves could surely achieve, or at least survive, if they had to. And when Chan successfully executed a particularly difficult bit of acrobatics, fighting or stunt-work, the viewer often has the unreasonable feeling that he or she too could do it just as well. This tendency has also been commented upon by David Bordwell, who suggests fans’ heightened sense of their own ability arises from the interaction of the characters’ real ability and the films’ style. As he puts it, Hong Kong films

seem to do more than stir our senses and intensify our feelings. They offer us the illusion of mastering the action. Why do we leave these films not only tired but jubilant? Why do we think we can do anything? Partly because the kinetics have stamped the action’s rhythm onto our senses; but also, I think because the very

cogency of the presentation has invited us to feel something of what supreme physical control might be like. (244)

Whether it is identification with the performer, the style of filmmaking, or a combination of the two, Chan himself clearly became aware of the fans desire to conflate him with his roles, and cooperated in creating the effect. During his halcyon days in the 1990s and early 2000s, he behaved much like his cheerful boy-next-door film persona, whether in films or in more informal media events. More significantly, in most of his Hong Kong films of the 1990s, he retains his own name. He truly becomes “Jackie,” both on-screen and off.

At the time of his crossover into the American mainstream, his fans were breathlessly buying into his image. Home-pages excitedly recounted his every interview and television appearance. These sites were updated regularly and grew at an impressive rate. However, in researching this paper, I went back to some of these pages and found that, if they are still accessible at all, many of the older sites hadn’t been updated since that very time (1997 or so), as though fans devotion died even as it peaked. These “original” fans no longer held a privileged position in relation to the object of their adulation. They would no longer have to trek into Chinatown or ferret out bootleg copies of tapes to stay abreast of their hero. Now Chan’s films are released by Miramax and Tri-Star Pictures. There was no more wrestling with the delightfully incomprehensible or inane English subtitling mandatory in all Hong Kong films, with lovingly collected and traded cryptic lines like “You always use violence. I should have ordered glutinous rice chicken.”

It seems that as fans' often repeated wish of "If only everyone could see how amazing Jackie is, how much better, more authentic, than Hollywood action heroes," died in being granted. Chan's biographical data began to appear in popular magazines, his movies received thumbs-up from the popular movie critics Siskel and Ebert, and his earliest, precious, ultra-low budget movies were suddenly in discount VHS cassette bins for \$3.99. As Jackie came to belong to everybody, he was no longer the property of the original fans.

While continuing to praise the older films, the earlier web pages that were still in business at the turn of the millennia began to savage the newer movies, in which the rapidly-approaching-middle-age Chan discontinued or down-graded what "The Temple of Jackie" website had called "The Really Big Stunts," those nearly insane feats that had kept fans in such awe. Even if he could perform them, the more dangerous stunts are impossible in his American made films, due to insurance reasons.

Even in the early 2000s, when Jackie's medical problems did make it into the news, they tended to be about back and neck problems, ailments smelling suspiciously of age and wear-and-tear, rather than the badges of honor that accompany the successful defiance of death. Jackie's amazing regenerating body, a fountain of eternal health, inspiration, and possibility for his fans, had begun to run dry. To make matters worse, Jackie's new mainstream Hollywood blockbusters, while huge moneymakers, were deemed dull and lifeless by aficionados of his earlier works. Chan had become just another big Hollywood star. Regarding his feature films after 2002 or so, we can no longer claim, as David Kehr did in Chan's pre-American crossover days, that Jackie Chan "belongs not just to a different world, but to a different cinema—a popular, directly pleasurable cinema that many American moviegoers no longer seem able to connect with.

Chan's barreling action comedies are by no means primitive, but they are innocent—innocent in that they are unmarked by irony, camp or self-consciousness" (37).

This notion of a refreshing pre-postmodern simplicity, coupled with the natural tendency of Hong Kong's films and characters to unselfconsciously and unpretentiously take themselves seriously, is a key to their charm. Like some independent film, these films project an earnest sincerity and seeming willingness to do anything to please that apparently delighted fans.

Blood Spattered Heroes: Chow Yun Fat in John Woo's *The Killer*

There is a spontaneous excessiveness in Hong Kong's action movies, constantly referred to, whether as criticism or praise, as "over-the-top." That quality is the main appeal of the films for many fans, especially the body of gangster films made by John Woo.

Hollywood films pride themselves on being slick, seamless, and linear. Any excessive elements, whether in the story, acting, or action, are carefully prepared and intricately built-up by the narration. Such points of intensity are only likely to appear at certain plot points in the story line, determined by custom and a strict application of a certain brand of story logic. Even story lines that appear to stand narrative on its ear, like *Groundhog Day* or *Memento*, map unproblematically onto a traditional dramaturgical trajectory. In addition, if a "special moment" is approaching, then viewers can be certain some combination of dialogue, music, editing pace, or narrative cue will prepare them, like a patient for surgery, and then the violent showdown, extra-funny joke, show of tears, or whatever, is professionally and efficiently milked for maximum impact.

The Hong Kong film, by contrast, tends to be unpredictable in both narrative and tone. A hero, a love interest, a dog, or a cute child can join the narrative or get killed off at any point in a story, without a moment's warning. The other characters may dismiss the event off-handedly, or be overwhelmed by joy or grief. Shocking violence can be preceded or followed by slapstick or tenderness. Whatever happens, the narration tends to take itself seriously and, projecting something like sincerity, seems to call on the viewer to do the same. Fans of these films need to be willing to surrender some filmic sophistication, genre expectations, and commitment to Hollywood norms of realism, but as a reward they get to be surprised by the unexpected. The director John Woo moved from television to film, and directed a number of much loved and imitated Hong Kong films like *A Better Tomorrow*, *A Better Tomorrow II*, and *Hard Boiled*, all starring the handsome and charismatic Chow Yun Fat. Woo's growing popularity in the West was eventually recognized, and he was lured away to Hollywood, where he would make big budget films with Mark Wahlberg, Nicholas Cage, and John Travolta.

Probably the most passionately loved and watched of all John Woo's pre-Hollywood films is *The Killer*. There is hardly a moment in this film which can be called realistic; the tone from beginning to end is, in one way or another, excessive—even bombastic. *The Killer* is a story of police and criminals in which handguns hold a seemingly endless supply of bullets, and are fired, machine-gun style, through much of the film. The death rate is extraordinarily high, but for the main characters, being riddled with shots is not much of a hindrance. Soaked in blood, they may stop to talk meaningfully in brief but convenient lulls in the action. Far from being either a comedy or a fantasy, *The Killer* takes itself seriously and presents itself, more or less, as a realist text. However, it

violates the principles of the Western canon of realism more often than it follows them. The violence is as stylized as opera.

In the lulls between the exquisitely filmed orgies of shoot-em-up bloodshed, the film is a sentimental melodrama and paean to male homo-social bonding. This, it seems, as much as anything else, is the root of the “unruly pleasure” the film brings. Hollywood cinema’s institutional practices simply could not blend these elements in this manner, although, apparently, it wanted to cash in on the film’s popularity. Tri-Star bought the rights to remake *The Killer* all the way back in 1991, but has apparently been unable to figure out how to squelch what Western audiences perceive as the homosexual overtones of the story (Dannen, 43).

Jinsoo An argues in his article “*The Killer*: Cult Film and Transcultural (Mis)Reading” that all cult films, especially imported ones, supply a pleasure that is not available in standard fare (i.e. Hollywood films). In the case of Hong Kong action movies, An pinpoints the imported pleasure as lying in two related fields: male melodrama and male-bonding—not, as many had assumed, the extreme action sequences. In fact, I would argue that the excessive amounts of death, blood and mayhem that fill the film (and other John Woo/Chow Yun Fat collaborations) are a necessary red herring. The constant spray of bullets and fountains of blood create a hyper-masculine smoke screen which fans can covertly cross behind to soak up the pleasurable suffering and catharsis associated with the “feminine” genre of the melodrama; they can get emotional about the characters’ various tragic misfortunes, and even gaze unabashedly at the wonderfully handsome (but distractingly gore-splattered) face and figure of Chow Yun Fat. Such a screen allows fans to ignore the prohibitions against male homo-social bonding that American

homophobia requires, and vicariously enjoy the feelings of protection, loyalty, and emotionally uninhibited closeness that the various dyadic male pairs in the film enjoy. Enjoy, significantly, in the absence of women, and the obstacles they might pose to male bonding. It would be easy to assume that all of this must be a male-centered pleasure, but it turns out that there are plenty of female fans as well. Jillian Sandell, author, critic, and professor of Women's studies, is an outspoken fan of *The Killer*, and similar to my argument concerning violence screening the pleasure fans take in gazing at the body of Bruce Lee, she asserts that in John Woo/Chow Yun Fat collaborations

homoeroticism always occurs with moments of excessive violence, a violence that is invariably represented as beautiful, stylized, and desirable. The very filmic techniques used—soft focus, slow motion, and subtle colors—characterize the violence as romantic. Moreover, in shoot-outs, between the heroes and villains, the heroes seem almost to dance and swoon as they fire their weapons, and such scenes are inundated with discharge (bullets and blood) being expelled from male bodies and weapons. (Sandell, 24-5).

This is particularly effective with Fat because of his exceptional good looks, and “The fact that Chinese and Western audiences accept him as a sexy male icon indicates that indeed Chinese masculinity is changing Western notions of masculinity while it itself is also transformed by Western masculinity” (Kam, 159). Chow Yun Fat tends to look good, whatever he is doing, and audiences recognize this immediately. Good looks are

often universal, which explains why so many stars have been able to go from West to East or East to West and retain their appeal.

Hong Kong critic Sek Kei argues that films like those of Jackie Chan, Bruce Lee, and Chow Yun Fat are popular in the West not as film's of "the other," but because they blend Eastern and Western traditions in a way that is exotic yet knowable for viewers from both hemispheres of the globe. In addition, these "male melodramas" are not inverted female melodramas but, "nothing more than Western-suited variations of the old swordfighting heroes of the popular Chu Yan adaptations of the Gu Long martial arts novels in the '70s"(Kei, 4.4). In other words, the narration animating *The Killer* and various popular martial arts movies are from an Asian action/melodrama pulp-literature tradition similar to American western tales. However, if this is true, it brings up a question: If this tradition is quite similar to an American one, why are these fans watching imported, subtitled movies with Asian heroes, instead of their own domestic brand?

There have been plenty of American films celebrating male homo-social bonding. This was a staple of the western, with the films of Howard Hawks being the best example, and male bonding is also essential to the 1990s genre of "buddy films." These examples, however, all have certain drawbacks for more contemporary fans.

Howard Hawks last film, *Red Line 7000*, was made in 1965, making it a little too old to be fashionable, especially those younger ones likely to enjoy films like *The Killer*. The western in general, as mentioned earlier, has been conspicuously absent from American screens since just before the Vietnam War. Sophisticated westerns since that time, for example *The Unforgiven* and others by Clint Eastwood, have tended to debunk

typical western themes like camaraderie and brotherhood-in-arms rather than celebrate them.

As for the “buddy flick,” it tends to use two key strategies to diffuse rather than explore homo-social themes and their homoerotic possibilities. The *Lethal Weapon* series, the *Beverly Hills Cop* series, and more recently, the three *Rush Hour* films use (predictably) heterosexual relationships as a convenient tool to tame homo-social overtones. There is also a second strategy which stands out when listing the films as I have just done: all the buddy pairs are divided racially. This literally and figuratively adds color to the buddy pairings, but it also uses miscegenation taboo as a strategy for reducing possible homosexual anxieties the films might otherwise evoke. (The proposed but aborted American remake of *The Killer* contemplated in Hollywood in the early 1990s was supposedly to have starred Denzel Washington and Richard Gere.)

As a result, when John Woo was imported by Hollywood, he had to leave behind the theme of male bonding that had made his Asian works so beloved in American and Europe. As Magnan-Park explains:

Once John Woo enters Hollywood’s corridors, his Sinocentric ideology of friendship is modified to fit with the demands of American individualism and its own tradition of singular heroics. Thus, a heroics of more than one becomes a heroics of just one, and with it the devaluation of politicised friendship’s centrality in John Woo’s oeuvre. (37)

The argument here is that to become an American director, Woo had to adopt an American approach to characterization, and abandon the bonding theme that had been central to his Hong Kong films. It is reasonable to ask, If American fans of these films are drawn by the male-bonding theme, wouldn't they know it? Mightn't they know exactly what they enjoy in these films? Some at least, do. I found a discussion among fans of *The Killer* at the internet site ezboard.com, which makes telling comments on this topic. I will reproduce it almost entirely as written. The first couple of entries speak specifically about homoerotic tensions in John Woo films. [I have left grammar, syntax, and spelling intact.]

Gabriel: As for the supposed "Homo Eroticism", intimate {And nonsexual of course} male relationships aren't frowned upon in many other societies, but are apparently they are in societies with a Western mindset. It's something we've lost, called brotherhood.

Razorlizard: I have noticed a lot of the bonding and brotherhood which is actually quite touching and dare I say beautiful in Hong Kong films would not work in a Hollywood film. I mean, I can't picture George Clooney bonding with Nicolas Cage in such a way, it just wouldn't seem right...whereas in these foreign films, the bonding works so well, you barely think about it.

Fong Sai Yuk: true. It works a whole lot better in Chinese films. If I ever saw Nicholas Cage turn around and call George Clooney Mickey Mouse and then wink at him I think my eyes would melt. Asian actors seem a lot more gentle and have

more finesse than American guys do. They can pull it off, but I'm too much of American to not think it seems fruity.

Although a lot of the more interesting themes this discussion introduces fall outside the scope of this paper, it raises some interesting points. The first is that the viewers seem explicitly aware of the bonding/homoerotic elements in *The Killer*, and feel ambivalent about them. There is some sense that their own culture has "lost" something special, something associated with good qualities (gentleness, finesse). The second is that, although these people are apparently fans of the movie and enjoy watching this behavior when performed by these actors, they feel these elements are, rather inexplicably, only appropriate for non-westerners.

Of course, this is only one example, and I cannot claim it is representative of all fans. However, it does support the idea that when fans repeatedly consume Hong Kong films, they are getting something that they feel they cannot get elsewhere, especially images of the displayed male body (actors putting their own bodies at extreme risk in front of the camera), or something that is unfashionable or even taboo in Western film (homosocial bonding). One thing that surprises me about this dialog is that it violates the commonly held assumption that fans who know precisely why they like about something which exists on the margins, like Hong Kong film in America, would either want to keep that pleasure to themselves (knowledge belonging only to the in-group), or integrate it into the mainstream. These three fans, however, do not hold either of these views.

Perhaps one of keys to fandom and pleasurable cultural consumption, is the keeping of pleasures in their appropriate "bins," where they can be taken out and enjoyed, but then

put back again, as we “cross back” into the rules systems of the ordinary, mainstream world we live in. The Hong Kong movies we have discussed were not aimed at Western audiences, despite the similarity of some of the genres. The difference between Hollywood genres and their Hong Kong counterparts “might lead some to conclude that the Hong Kong filmmakers had learned the conventions of the genre imperfectly ... In reality, however, instead of applying a formula mechanically, they have transformed the genre’s conventions to meet their own cultural needs” (Collier, 149).

In other words, Hong Kong is not just an inferior Hollywood imitator, it is a unique industry with a culturally distinct set of values and production norms that has led to its own, highly engaging cinema. This is where the real pleasure of watching these films comes from: it is fresh, and vigorous cinema that appeals to those who are not satisfied with Hollywood fare. In many ways individuals within a society are far more different than societies—in the aggregate—are from one another. Cultural affinity can be a powerful attraction—as the popularity of Hollywood film themes around the world testifies. That a segment of the Western audience became enamored with Hong Kong films is far from surprising; however, that this source of alternative pleasure has mostly disappeared *is*. And should be lamented.

According to the February, 2017 report of the Hong Kong National Economics Website, the Hong Kong film industry is finally starting to thrive again, and is generating healthy profits—but this time their market expansion is not towards the West, but into China through a series of co-productions tailored specifically to Chinese audience’s interests. This, in my opinion, is highly unfortunate for Western fans, who will be

missing out on what one of the world's most exciting and distinctive cinemas might otherwise have had to offer.

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