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Order/Anti-Order: Representation of Identity in Hong Kong Action Movies

Dai Jinbua

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the reality was fast approaching that China would resume sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997 and the power structure in Hong Kong society was beginning to experience gradual changes, a profound anguish and a sense of political powerlessness permeated Hong Kong society. At the level of cultural expression, these feelings of anguish and powerlessness became an oppressing sense of uncertain identity. While Hong Kong's colonial rule of nearly 150 years was coming to an end, the end of the cold war was giving new vigor to globalization. The nation-state was suddenly more ambiguous in meaning, weaker in the imagination, and more brittle in its geographical boundaries. Hong Kong's cultural sense of self and other was thrown into an immense tension of violent joinings and separatings, against the background of the facts that China was in rapid change but maintained a powerful central government, that the British colonial democracy was fading, that the decolonization process was in full swing in Hong Kong, and that the cold war "national" boundary between Hong Kong and the Mainland marks (in reverse) the global division between North and South, i.e., between global wealth and poverty.

Such a strong and oppressive sense of lost identity, the fear of abandonment and desire for belonging, find expression in the Hong Kong film industry at its height and particularly in action movies, often called "Tsui Hark Films" by Mainland film critics.¹

First appearing were *Dragon Inn* (Li Wai-man 1992), *Swordsman II* (Ching Siu-tung 1992), *Burning Paradise* (Ringo Lam 1994), the series *Once upon a Time in China*, and other movies based on Jin Yong's novels. Next came the huge commercial success in Hong Kong of the series *A*

Chinese Ghost Story and the movie *Green Snake* (Tsui Hark 1993). Also extremely popular were Stephen Chiau's movies, with their distinctive Hong Kong local flavor, often called "*mo-lei-tou* (*wulitou*) Films" ("無厘頭" 電影, films of absurdity or "rubbish films"). Superior to the "Tsui Hark Films" or new martial arts movies, John Woo's "Hero series", also called "Fashion Gunfight Movies" (時裝槍戰片), brought unprecedented fame and glory to the Hong Kong film industry. At the same time, with Jackie Chan as the paramount hero and trademark, the "Police Story" series ("警察故事" 系列) and the *Young and Dangerous* (蠱惑仔) series popular in the 1990s elevated Hong Kong style cop-and-robber movies and gangster movies to the international arena and then brought global recognition.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the history of Chinese film, *Dragon Inn*, *A Chinese Ghost Story*, and Stephen Chiau's movies in traditional settings all belong to a special subgenre in Chinese films — "*guzhuang baishi pian*" (classical-costumed tales of anecdotal history, 古裝稗史片). In such films, the story is one of ancient times as understood by popular tradition. But the emergence of the *guzhuang baishi pian* was not something special to Hong Kong movies of the 1980s and 1990s. Rather, it is a recurring cinematic phenomenon in the history of Chinese film, popular in stifling times of social upheaval, times of anxiety and uncertainty. I call this phenomenon of recurrence the "transmigration" of *guzhuang baishi pian*. If we say that the *guzhuang baishi pian* are an effective way for popular culture to reorganize the pre-modern Chinese social life experience into modern culture, we can then say that the first wave of the *guzhuang baishi pian*, the supernatural martial arts movies popular just after the revolutionary setbacks in 1927, offered people at that time a way to escape from and replace the difficult reality during a time rife with social and identity crises.

We can look at the issue from the perspective of another branch of Chinese popular culture: the new martial arts fiction that arose in the late Qing and early Republican Era. By re-articulating the common binary themes of "Order/Anti-order", "Law/Outlaw", and "Orthodox/Unorthodox" in pre-modern Chinese narrative, the new martial arts fiction opened up a new discourse on the value of the individual and on the existence of imaginary space. Undoubtedly, this was one of the social and cultural functions of the earliest *guzhuang baishi pian*, supernatural martial arts movies. The new martial arts fiction voiced the intellectual's dream of being a roaming chivalrous swordsman, representing

the modern transformation of the Chinese literary tradition and a tangled link between the literati and the mass culture. On the other hand, the new martial arts movies (*guzhuang baishi pian*) have developed closely along the lines of interest of urbanites and mass culture.

The main characteristics of the Hong Kong martial arts movies of the 1980s and 1990s are the re-adaptation and mockery of the historical anecdotes portrayed in Chinese fiction. There is an intertextual relationship among the different genres such as prose fiction, television drama, and cinema. Hong Kong martial arts movies also look back to supernatural *guzhuang baishi pian* in earlier Chinese film history. The earlier *guzhuang baishi pian* took their themes from pre-modern Chinese drama, folklore, vernacular short stories or *huaben* (話本), storytelling or *pingshu* (評書), storytelling to the accompaniment of stringed instruments or *tanci* (彈詞), essays on miscellaneous subjects or *bijiwen* (筆記文), and the novels and martial arts fiction (new and old styled) of the Ming and Qing periods. In the 1930s when Shanghai fell to the Japanese occupation and became an “isolated island”, the first transmigration of the *guzhuang baishi pian* took place. This subgenre was then already a re-remaking of the classical themes. The *guzhuang baishi pian* have formed a very popular subgenre of films especially for overseas Chinese, originating with the Tianyi / Nanyang / Shaoshi Film Studio which operated in occupied Shanghai and then in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong. In view of the political and cultural separation between mainland China and Hong Kong in terms of film developments after 1949, one would not be surprised to see that the *guzhuang baishi pian* have become a prominent and even characteristic element of Hong Kong film.

However, we must point out that as in the last two decades of the twentieth century the *guzhuang baishi pian* phenomenon in Hong Kong became a series of variations on specific older films, carrying a strong post-modern nostalgia. Outside of art films such as *Time Flies* (Yim Ho 1984), *Center Stage* (Stanley Kwan 1992), and *In the Mood for Love* (Wong Kar-wai 2000), the nostalgia evinced is not a sentimental yearning for bygone days, but rather a negotiation of many layers of significance involving belonging/abandonment, order/resistance, and identification/rejection. The film *Burning Paradise* seems to return to the original splendor of the early supernatural *guzhuang baishi pian* by tracing a “Century of China”. *Dragon Inn* was a remake of the famous movie *Dragon Gate Inn* (1967) directed by King Hu, with a substantially new script. The new “Wong Fei-hung” series, *Once Upon A Time in China*, perfected the Hong Kong film convention of a unified plot following the experiences of one main character throughout. While paying tribute to the politically

“orthodox”, the “mainstream”, and the “(new) order”, these films also focus directly on the recognition of Hong Kong identity and its dilemma. The absurdist *mo-lei-tou* (*wulitou*) films, mainly featuring Stephen Chiau, are a revealing part of this wave of quasi-nostalgic remakes. The so-called “Stephen Chiau Films”, such as *King of Beggars* (Gordon Chan 1992) and *The Chinese Odyssey Part One and Two* (Jeff Lau 1995), are full of local Hong Kong elements, profaning and mocking the Mandarin of the original films with long and delirious Cantonese speeches, thus creating a text of deconstruction and cynicism in an atmosphere of carnival.

GLOBAL/LOCAL MARKET

If we look at the history of *guzhuang baishi pian* transmigration from the perspective of the film industry, in addition to the social and cultural perspectives, we can observe that this transmigration serves as the connecting point between the global market for Hollywood films which was established after the First World War, and the local Asian film market. In the late 1920s, Tianyi Film Studio began the trend of *guzhuang baishi pian*, and was successful in markets outside China: Southeast Asia, the South Pacific, and overseas Chinese communities worldwide. Targeting Hollywood as the chief competitor, the early supernatural *guzhuang baishi pian* became a successful vehicle for oblique social messages, avoiding direct confrontations while evoking real problems and dilemmas. The *guzhuang baishi pian*, with their fresh “Oriental”/Chinese features, later grew into a genre specially dedicated to these outside markets. Similarly, the golden age in Hong Kong films is marked by its challenge to the Hollywood film industry on a global scale by taking over huge profits from the Southeast Asian film market.

Regarding Hong Kong films of the last twenty years of the twentieth century, one relevant factor is that in the mid-1980s, the Chinese government began to allow outside film studios to enter the Mainland to shoot scenes and to “co-produce” films with Mainland film agencies, thus opening up the Mainland film market. This development has meant some reorientation of the mass culture products of Hong Kong and Taiwan film and television studios in search of markets.

What has most attracted filmmakers and television program producers from Hong Kong and Taiwan are the vast natural resources and cheap labor resources. The Chinese government’s decision to lift the ban on film and television crews from outside China made it possible to film on-site scenes in *guzhuang baishi pian* — the Gobi Desert, the ancient silk road

paths, the temples, and the imperial palaces — in a relatively economical way. At the same time, these film crews benefited greatly from two things: the fact that the Mainland film industry had been at a low ebb since the mid-1980s, and the large number of well trained martial arts professionals, which provided outside film crews with another cheap and rich human resource. Even though the so-called “co-production” of the films was a way for the Beijing censors to control content, it also provided opportunities for Hong Kong studios (other than the Hong Kong *Yindu Jigou*, a Mainland front organization stationed in Hong Kong) to enter the Chinese film market on a large scale. So for the first time the Hong Kong film industry, which had already taken over the Southeast Asian film market, began to consider the potentially huge box-office profits in the Mainland. If we say that the approach of 1997 prompted the fusion between the historical sense and the present-day consciousness shown in Hong Kong films, then the attraction of the Mainland box-office profits also demanded that in order to lure Mainland viewers, the Hong Kong film industry had to retain its qualities of “pure entertainment” and ideological non-commitment. Also, the co-production of a film meant certain compromises with the Mainland film review board, which meant that the Hong Kong films with an eye for the Mainland market would have to conform to orthodoxy. Such elements involved in filmmaking reinforced in a way the tension between order and resistance, between identification and rejection in the Hong Kong films, particularly the “Tsui Hark Films”.

The Mainland government holds the view that allowing outside film companies to enter China to make films is a way to save the slowly collapsing Chinese film industry. At the same time, as a component of Beijing’s international cultural and diplomatic strategy, allowing outside film companies to make films in China is a measure of China’s “openness” or (to use another image) China’s entering the world market. Whatever the motives behind the new policy, it provided official and legally permitted channels for the mature and unique mass culture of Hong Kong films to enter the Mainland cultural mix. Before this policy change in the mid-1980s, Hong Kong films and Hong Kong popular culture could only be accessed on the Mainland through the many illegally installed television antennas in the Pearl River Delta pointing toward Hong Kong, through the many producers and distributors of pirated videotapes, and through the circulation of numerous “aberrant” magazines and newspapers. Even though in the 1980s Hong Kong popular culture was already flooding the Chinese landscape, Mainland official culture still regarded Hong Kong culture as alien and peripheral, as “a piece of background music remote and pleasant to the ear”.² This “background music remote and pleasant to

the ear” served as an excellent close-up demonstration model in structuring the Mainland popular culture industry and stealthily helped transform Mainland social ideology. As the 1980s ended and the 1990s began, Hong Kong movies, though not huge in quantity, almost completely took over the Mainland film market, winning an unprecedented victory at the box office through the legal channels of film co-production. This victory signifies Hong Kong popular culture’s official entrance on the Mainland socio-cultural stage. Albeit displaced into the position of a latecomer, Hong Kong took its place as one of the most prominent features of the fantastic mosaic of the Mainland cultural scene in the 1990s.

HISTORICAL MASQUERADE: ORDER AND THE RESISTANT “INDIVIDUAL”

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the setting for most Hong Kong martial arts movies was the late Ming Dynasty or the late Qing Dynasty, when each dynasty was struggling against collapse. The difference is politically significant. To favor the late Ming is characteristic of the new martial arts fiction, particularly the stories by Jin Yong. To favor the late Qing period, on the other hand, is rather troubling, because the “barbarian” non-Han rulers of the Qing empire are seen as less legitimate than the Han Ming rulers. This choice among thrones in the context of the current conventional understandings of the past amounts to a choice among conceptions of the modern Chinese nation-state. In the practical logic of mass culture, this scheme is an effective approach to narrative, perfectly understood both by the filmmaker and the audience. (The first joint-venture film between Hong Kong and the Mainland, *Sbaolin Temple* (Zhang Xinyan 1982) was set in the historical background of the high Tang, which like the Ming was a glorious and Han-dominated era.)

The late Ming was a time of an empire falling apart and besieged by internal and external catastrophes; such a setting is full of significance for a film audience. The enemies in the film stories set in this time are often eunuchs who have deceived the Son of Heaven, or heretical evil elements who have usurped the emperor’s power, or non-Han forces aspiring to conquer China. The protagonists rise to fight against the evil or the invasion, to protect the imperial power and restore order. But such films often omit what is known to all the viewers — the imminent fall of the Empire. Further complicating matters, the Emperor remains off-stage in most such films, and the evil forces are nominally his agents. Hence even as the protagonists defend the true Imperium, they can be seen as

resisting the magistrates in power. On the other hand, the late Qing as a historical setting for a film narrative, with its ambiguous imperial orthodoxy (the minority Manchu nationality ruling the majority Han nationality), grounds a more complicated dialectic between order and resistance among various parties, such as revolutionaries whose goal is to drive out the barbarian Manchu and restore Han China, foreigners seen as agents of aggressive imperialist invasion, and sworn brothers who live by the ethical code of the martial arts.

If we put the Hong Kong *guzhuang baishi pian* side by side with two similar sets of films made on the Mainland from the early 1990s to the present day, the ideological significance of such rendering becomes even clearer. One of the latter is the film series "Assassin", for instance, *Song of the Emperor* (Zhou Xiaowen 1995), *The Assassin* (Chen Kaige 1998), and *Hero* (Zhang Yimou 2003). The other is a group of television programs about the Qing dynasty (*Prime Minister Liu Luoguo*, *Yongzheng Empire*, *Kangxi Empire*, *Kangxi in Disguise*, *Iron-Mouth Ji Xiaolan*, and others). In "Assassin", although the main narrative is the attempted assassination of the first Chinese emperor, the focus is on the Qin Emperor as a positive symbol, rather than on the assassin. The 1980s film script for the film *Song of the Emperor* was titled *Blood Built*, referring to the building of the Great Wall in which millions of people died. But when it was finally filmed and released in the mid-1990s, it was renamed *Song of the Emperor*. Similarly, the entire plot in Zhang Yimou's film *Hero* is about giving up the opportunities to assassinate the Qin Emperor. The various television series moved their historical setting back from the late Qing to the High Qing period.

One of the social and cultural functions of the new martial arts fiction is to provide narrative and imaginative space for individuals in the social transition from the pre-modern to the modern. In American Western movies, the protagonist kills the bad guys, helps the weak, and departs alone, gloriously and by preference. Such an ending celebrates living outside the social order. By contrast, in the Hong Kong action movies, particularly in the *guzhuang baishi pian*, when the hero departs alone on a horse, the sad implication is one of self-exile and a sense that there can be no home to return to. In other words, in Hong Kong movies it is his own individuality, rather than the nation or community, that burdens the protagonist. Such conflicts between order and resistance, society and the individual, are fully expressed in John Woo's hero films, with their outstanding portrayal of the sworn brotherhood of traditional Chinese culture. But this narrative model is lopsided and dissolved in Wong Kar-wai's post-modern space and Stephen Chiau's absurdist carnivals.

WOMEN WARRIORS DEPARTING

In view of the history of Chinese films, one of the prominent characteristics of the Hong Kong action movies of the late 1980s and early 1990s is that the image of the woman warrior, which always occupied an important position in the *guzhuang baishi pian*, has been pushed to the backstage. What has replaced it is an increasingly re-enforced male world. The male gender has become the only gender for the resolution of social identity and individual crises.

In fact, throughout the history of Chinese films, the woman warrior is a very distinctive figure. Whenever there is a woman warrior in a film, she is never a secondary character, but almost always the dominant focus. And in contrast with the gender assignments in Hollywood or other major commercial films in the West, although the female image (a woman warrior) is an object of the male audience's gaze, she is very rarely an object of desire for the male protagonist. She not only comes to the assistance of other female characters in trouble in the film, but also helps to save the male protagonists. The plot schema "beauty saves hero" makes the image of a woman warrior socially subversive and transgressive. The image of the woman warrior in films bears the influence of the woman warrior in traditional Chinese drama and the influence of the novel *A Chinese Romance*, which wildly exaggerates the stories of women warriors. Still, in most of the films in which a woman warrior is the main character, she can be the action hero, savior, and a person of power, but she cannot gain social acceptance in her world. Like the cowboy of the American Western, she can establish a certain emotional involvement with the male protagonist, but she will eventually act as a go-between for the match between the male protagonist and another woman whom she has helped, and then she will depart with a sword in her hand. We can read such an ending as a surpassing and abandoning of the social order and the gender order codes; but if we put the ending within the contextual structure of the film, such an ending looks more like an exile, or at least a suspension. In the martial arts movies, the fact that the male protagonist meets a martial arts master and becomes his disciple is an important step for him on the path of growth. When he finishes his training and leaves the mountain, he becomes a completely self-governing subject and a hero. Whereas in the woman warrior films, the moment when the woman has finished her martial arts training and becomes a master is the moment when she has given up her gender identity and earthly life. In other words, the completed woman warrior has become an all-powerful

and otherworldly saving force, alien to ordinary social existence, serving as an Other for the imaginary world of the audience.

In other films in which the woman warrior is not only the action hero but also the subject of desire, she can eventually become the mate of the man she loves (although after this happens she loses interest for the audience). In order to achieve such an ending, the entire film has to be built on double or more than double structures of masochism. For it to be fully legitimate that the male protagonist is both the object of her desire and the beneficiary of her help, he often has to be placed in a paralyzed and helpless state, both real and metaphorical. If the audience identifies with the male protagonist, they too will have to go through a masochistic experience. Alternatively, in order to gain her love, a woman warrior must go through torture, misunderstanding, and other tests much more severe than a male protagonist would have to face. In order for the audience to identify with the woman warrior's actions, they must also have a masochistic appreciation of her experience.

In a sense, woman warrior films constitute a subgenre of Chinese martial arts films. They reflect fast changing and turbulent times, the pressure of a reality in which there are no ways out and no solutions. These films become a vehicle of transference for those who feel politically powerless and helpless. There are two modes: 1) the woman warrior is a savior from the outside, thus providing an imaginary solution to real life problems, or 2) the pressures of real life are transferred to a masochistic choice and pleasure.

Perhaps this interpretation can explain the disappearance of the image of woman warrior in the Hong Kong action movies of the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is my view that during this time Hong Kong movies, particularly the action movies, try to address issues of identity and power between Hong Kong and China, at least at the level of the political unconscious. The hero in the action movies and the martial arts movies tends to represent Hong Kong and the self. In the conventional power scheme, the female is a weak figure on the margin, so for the protagonist representing Hong Kong to be female would cut too close to the quick. On the other hand, Hong Kong's painful experience and sense of political powerlessness came from forces external to Hong Kong society: the British government's abandonment, and the Mainland's heavy-handedness and overwhelming force. Such outside powers produced multiple rifts in the Self/Other power relationships, and in the Chinese identity that had been taken for granted although not highlighted in the past. Therefore, the imaginary savior from real predicaments could not be an external, alien image in the form of a woman warrior. Rather, salvation had to come

from within the male hero himself, as he gathered potential strength from despair to wage a life-and-death fight against a decidedly superior force.

In fact, in the Hong Kong martial arts movies, one narrative element necessary in the martial arts plot — the suffering of the main protagonist³ — has faded or disappeared as well.⁴ The reason is no doubt similar to the reason for the disappearance of the woman warrior, but other influences are at play here. For one thing, Hong Kong's post-modern writing is full of jest and mockery, a mode that does not easily bear the melancholy and "solemnity" that is required in the narration of a suffering protagonist. Also, Tsui Hark's films glorify the aesthetics of violence, and their market requires a rapid succession of action scenes. Substantial description of suffering by the protagonist would slow the narrative and has to be eliminated.

THE "INDIVIDUAL" AND GENDER RHETORIC

If we place the action movies of the 1980s and early 1990s in the context of local Hong Kong mass culture, we find that these movies both continue and break with the traditional gender descriptions in Hong Kong martial arts fiction. The quintessential works of Hong Kong martial arts fiction are those by Jin Yong. Departing from previous martial arts writing, Jin Yong used a main theme in modern Western fiction: the story of a man growing up, searching for his father, and killing his father. A basic characteristic common to Jin Yong's works is the original fatherlessness of the protagonist and his search for his father. The protagonist usually takes as his father or master an evil man, and later comes to recognize that his father or master is evil. Jin Yong's romance stories also often show clear traces of a son's Oedipal love for his mother. Recent gender theory involving global anticolonialism and decolonization shows that in colonial and post-colonial cultures the "Father" and paternal power are seen as symbols of the colonizing metropolis, whereas "Mother" often represents the native land, the ancient country before colonization, or the future nation-state to be established after gaining independence.

Jin Yong's novels written in the 1950s and 1970s reveal the political unconscious of the Hong Kong colonial and anti-colonial experiences. His novels have been a continuous source of material for other products of mass culture. However, an important change in the gender rhetoric of films based directly or indirectly on Jin Yong's work among the *guzhuang baishi pian* of the late 1980s and early 1990s is the disappearance of the plot described above, in which a son finds an evil father and then comes

to recognize this evil. In these films, fatherlessness becomes a pre-existing or *a priori* personal/subject identity of the protagonist. If abandoning the growing-up theme affirms the subject or personal identity of the protagonist and suspends the anti-colonial and decolonial implications in the narrative, it becomes more interesting to observe the gender rhetoric about the female or “mother” in these films. In many Hong Kong films, including mainstream movies, action movies, and even art films, a common theme is a son’s searching for and then killing his mother. The most characteristic of these films are *Days of Being Wild* (Wong Kar-wai 1990) and *The Day the Sun Turned Cold* (Yim Ho 1995). The former shows a son desperately searching for his birth mother, only to stop short at her door and leave without meeting her. The latter shows a symbolic matricide by a son when he finally testifies in court that his mother murdered her husband.

In the *guzhuang baishi pian* of the late 1980s and early 1990s, another feature of the gender rhetoric is misidentified gender or gender ambiguity. The eunuchs in the late Ming stories became symbols of both order and rebellion, while their identity as neither male nor female is a traditional characteristic of “evil spirits”. In the film *A Chinese Ghost Story* (Ching Siu-tung 1987), the tree spirit (“Grandma”) has a changeable voice — sometimes male, sometimes female — showing the spirit’s position as authority and evil spirit, as both patriarchal and matriarchal power. A tree is inherently a phallic symbol, but the tree spirit’s ability to suck and devour represents a castration threat by the matriarchal power. A tree a thousand years old, with its twisted roots and gnarled branches, fully demonstrates the complicated relationships of rejection and identification with the expressions of order and resistance, political community, and individual identity. Another example is the Hong Kong movie *Swordsman II*, which is based on Jin Yong’s novel *Swordsman*, with several important changes. In the novel, the main story line is that the hero, a martial arts disciple disowned by his master, fights to regain the trust of this father figure. In the film version, the character called “Dongfangbubai”, a minor character in the original story, becomes the main character. In the original story, Dongfangbubai castrated himself to become a eunuch in order to work in the imperial court — recall that a eunuch is an evil spirit in traditional gender rhetoric. In the movie *Swordsman II*, Dongfangbubai is played by the famous female star Brigitte Lin and thus is identified by the movie’s viewers as a “male” pretty woman. The “male” pretty woman Dongfangbubai overshadows the “authentic woman” Ren Yingying, the hero’s sworn sister, in a comically ambiguous gender position. As played by Brigitte Lin, Dongfangbubai operates both as the male protagonist’s opponent and as the object of his questionable desire, turning

the entire movie into a playful take-off on Jin Yong's original Oedipal story. Dongfangbubai, as an image of misidentified gender and gender ambiguity, works as an obstacle to the male protagonist's firm grasp on his own identity. The movie, by excising the "search-for-father" storyline and suspending the love story to incompleteness through gender ambiguity, makes it difficult to locate the expression of identity in the individual's position. The expression of identity can only be accompanied by Stephen Chiau's absurdist ecstasy and cynicism, by the aesthetics of violence and the strong brotherhood in "resistance in despair" shown in John Woo's movies, and by the post-modern imaginary space and nostalgia in Wong Kar-wai's movies.

FILLING AND REBUILDING

It can be said that the Hong Kong action movies of the late 1980s and early 1990s are effective expressions of, and imaginary solutions to, the identity crisis in Hong Kong society before and after the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to China. Interestingly, such movies became central to the early 1990s Mainland cultural market. In symbol and subterfuge, Hong Kong action movies gave expression to the idea of rejecting Mainland political power. However, throughout the 1990s, Mainland mass cultural development wholeheartedly welcomed and identified with Hong Kong and Taiwan social and popular culture. Such a phenomenon enabled China to locate itself in the process of rapid globalization. Hong Kong and Taiwan popular culture not only serve as models and forerunners for the Mainland production of popular culture, but also work to fill gaps and construct transitions for the ideological collapse and discursive perplexities in the transformation of the Chinese social system.

If we say that Hong Kong action and martial arts movies were introduced to the Mainland film market as "mere stories" and "mere forms", separated from their original contexts of production and reception in Hong Kong to meet different understandings and imaginings on the Mainland, we can also say that the cultural expression of estrangement and suspension in the Hong Kong movies of the late 1980s and early 1990s became, on the Mainland, the best carrier for post-June-Fourth-1989 cynicism and nihilism about reality and history. The ambiguous and painful sense of "no man's land" for individuals as shown in Hong Kong action movies provided an effective imaginary hide-out for Mainland young people who had experienced the June-Fourth governmental repression and felt they had no place of refuge. Indeed, in the early 1990s mainland China was in

an ideological vacuum, following the political shutdown and the serious wounds and disruptions of the June-Fourth event. Chinese society went from a broad opening in the 1980s to a sudden closing after 1989, complicated by the ambiguous international political situation following the fall of the Soviet Union. After June Fourth the dream of democracy or at least reforms in the Chinese political system was suspended. The articulation of the cruel fact of the widening division of Chinese social classes was forbidden. Chinese society sank deep into a voiceless identity crisis. The vacuum and crisis in the Mainland found absurd though accurate expression in the popular movies of Hong Kong. The multiple layers of identification versus refusal, order versus resistance, in the Hong Kong martial arts films took on new meanings in the Mainland. In the name of “co-producing” films with Hong Kong companies, Mainland filmmakers turned the *guzhuang baishi pian* into an alternative to the officially approved mainstream films. Such was the cultural reality in Mainland society in the early 1990s.

In addition to the showing of Hong Kong action movies in Mainland theaters, the current trend is for the Chinese audience to access these movies through pirated VCDs and DVDs imported from Hong Kong, and also by downloading from the Internet. The *guzhuang baishi pian* shown in Chinese cinemas had at first served to fill an ideological vacuum on the Mainland. But through the 1990s, Hong Kong and Taiwan popular culture gradually came to occupy the mainstream of culture on the Mainland, becoming one of the most active constructive forces in commercial consumer ideology and popular culture. The popularity of Hong Kong films has been a cultural preparation for the individualism fomented by global consumer culture. Whereas at the beginning of the 1990s, the Hong Kong movies popular in the Mainland cinema worked as an imaginary space and cultural release for the real and spiritual post-June-Fourth-1989 pressure, they soon became a reference for the self-identity and self-expression of Mainland young people growing up in the fragmented and ineffective ideological space between the imagination of globalization and local reality.

A certain aura of “late-comingness” surrounds the arrival and popularization of Hong Kong (and Taiwan) popular culture on the Mainland. But the Mainland’s coming late to these films is not simply a matter of China’s being a latecomer to the process of modernization. For one thing, the time difference is more complex. Movies that appeared simultaneously in Hong Kong are shown successively on the Mainland: first Tsui Hark’s films, and then John Woo’s films, to be followed by Wong Kar-wai’s films and “Stephen Chiau films”. Grouped in this way, the films are

more intelligible to the Chinese market. This phenomenon can be seen as a local trace in the new ideological construction, or as an interval of imaginary solution to the dilemmas of commercialized individualistic expression.

Perhaps we can view the interactions of mass culture production and consumption in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China, even the whole of East Asia, as one of the movements in the localization of a global spectacle. In this way, the cultural realities within the Mainland and the rest of the region are the local spectacles of globalization. A different cultural landscape is formed by the movies of Jackie Chan, John Woo, and Ang Lee, and by the rise of South Korean films and Korean popular culture (which is also called the “Korean Wave”). But I shall address this topic on another occasion.

Translated by Zhang Jingyuan