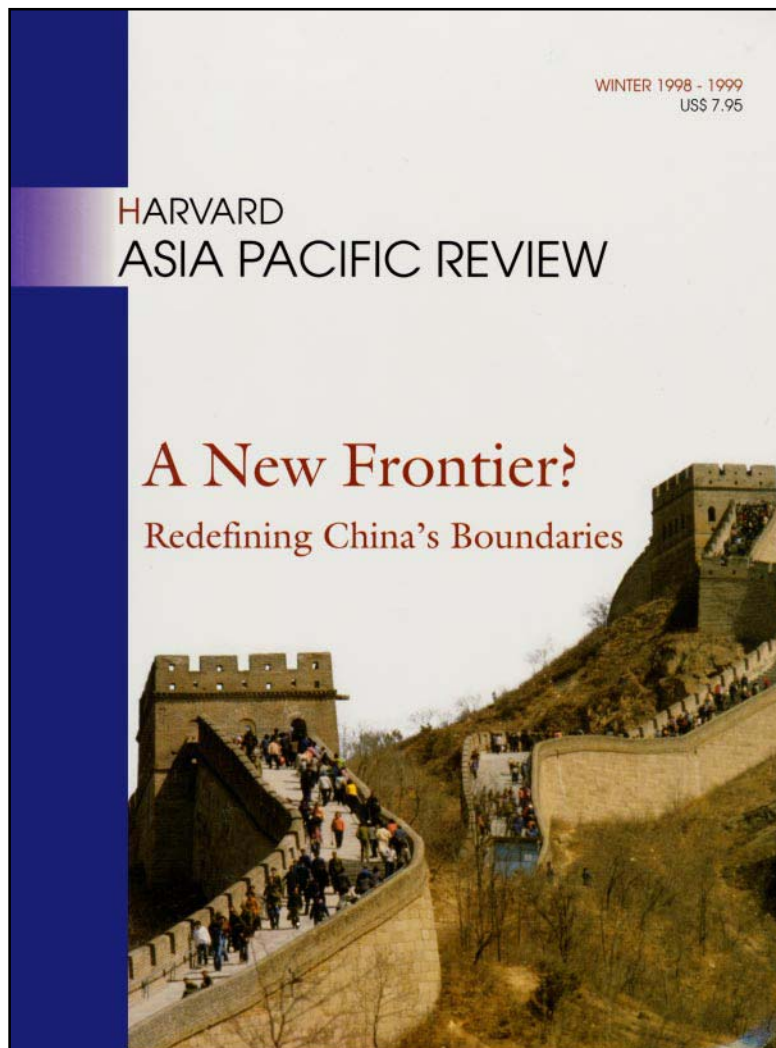


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Hong Kong Movies in Hollywood

An Informal Comment on Asian “Influences” in American Popular Culture

LEO OU-FAN LEE

ON A RECENT FLIGHT BACK FROM HONG Kong, I watched a new Hollywood movie called *Replacement Killers* starring Chow Yun-fat, a popular actor from Hong Kong, and Mira Sorvino, a former honors student from the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at Harvard. The movie was awful, but the experience itself serves as an interesting reminder: Yes, instead of the Russians, the Asians are coming! Everyone is watching and talking about Hong Kong movies nowadays. Recently transplanted Hong Kong directors are making American movies in Hollywood. Is Asian culture—at least a small part of it—finally going to exert a powerful impact via this most lucrative form of mass media? Or will it inevitably be Americanized?

I choose Hong Kong movies, my favorite subject, for a good reason. It's about time that Americans become exposed to foreign cultures, whether they come from elite or popular sources, because despite its global ambitions, the United States has become one of the most “provincial” countries in the world. Academically speaking, there's nothing new about Asian influence in America. My colleagues and I have been talking about it for several decades. However, our effort in studying and teaching Asian cultures has proven successful only on college campuses. Elsewhere, American mass media continues to overwhelm

the general public with sensational images, simplistic stereotypes, and preconceived notions of what makes Asians tick. The business leaders fare a little better than the politicians in Washington, but their understanding of Asian cultures remains limited to politics and money, and does not focus on culture in any form. Thus the popularity of Chinese movies from Hong Kong is a phenomenon worthy of attention, for it gives us an example of how a specimen of that culture is making inroads into the American mainstream.

Chinese Stereotypes

Let me talk a little more about *Replacement Killers*.

The local press in Hong Kong paid due attention to this first effort by Chow in Hollywood, but found the film rather disappointing. One columnist went so far as to raise a rhetorical question: Why doesn't Chow Yun-fat go to bed with Mira Sorvino, as any white male hero would do with a non-

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white heroine in a typical Hollywood movie? A few decades ago, Bruce Lee faced the same racial stereotyping and, in anger and frustration, returned to Hong Kong to make his own movies. While black actors and actresses have made great strides in getting accepted in American mass culture, argues the Hong Kong reviewer, Asians have not.

Of course, this reviewer had not seen the re-

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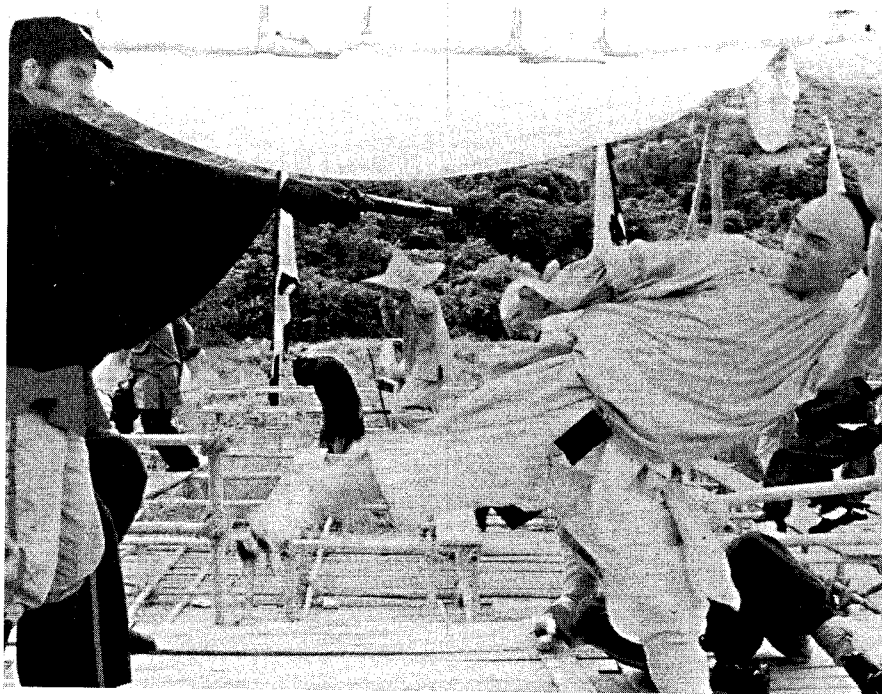
cent *Lethal Weapon IV*, in which Jet Li, another kung-fu actor from Hong Kong, makes his American debut as a villain. But then again, the film clearly belongs to the black and white duo, Danny Glover and Mel Gibson, whose funny give-and-takes are in the foreground during most of the film's tedious plot. Jet Li is left with little to do, except for a few kicks of his athletic feet. These fighting scenes are no comparison to the spectacular feats he is capable of performing in movies made in Hong Kong (*Once Upon a Time in China*, *Fong Si-Yuk*). The same can be said about Chow Yun-fat in *Replacement Killers*. What went wrong?

I was once told that American audiences do not want to read subtitles or listen to a foreign language (thus half of Chow Yun-fat's charm, his Cantonese pronunciation, is lost). Chow was given English lessons upon landing in Hollywood, but still he does not speak much English in this film. The character he plays is a professional assassin who comes to America (read: Chinatown) and gets himself into trouble. The murky plot suggests that he is in collision or collusion with Chinese Mafia elements. (At the time this film was shown in the United States, a San Francisco newspaper published an article disclosing that Chow himself was once connected with the Hong Kong Mafia. Is this really necessary, even if it were true?) The villain played by Jet Li in *Lethal Weapon IV* has a similar entanglement, again in Chinatown. Both films deal, however, with the issue of illegal immigrants from Asia. Despite the good intentions (especially displayed by the character played by Glover), the racial overtones are obvious.

But I am not intent on pursuing the race question; other Asian-American scholars have been doing it for years. The simple question I would like to ask is: why Chinatown? Can't they fight somewhere else? Why is the "artistic" imagination from Hollywood so incredibly limited when it comes to movies involving Asians? Why is Chinese culture, even in its Hong Kong variation, so "ghettoized"? Why can't Chow Yun-fat fight his way into corporate America (after all, he once played a talented gambler), or in Washington, or even on board Air Force One? Interestingly, it takes a highly successful commercial filmmaker

and star from Hong Kong, Jackie Chan, to drive the message home: the Chinese are everywhere in the United States and not necessarily ghettoized in Chinatowns. Whatever the film's faults may be, Jackie Chan dares to *Rumble in the Bronx*. I can mention scores of other Asian films that use various sites in America for their setting and plot. They are far more imaginative than the typical Hollywood film.

The American director who makes his debut directing *Replacement Killers* declared publicly that he is a great fan of Hong Kong movies and of Chow Yun-fat in particular. Herein lies the key problem with American assimilation of Asian culture: it never delves beneath the surface. The film is like an extended commercial, all surface glitter and visual clichés. There nothing beneath it—no insight into characterization, no cultural conflict, and no understanding of what life and people are like on the other side of the Californian Pacific. It does not even provide Mira Sorvino with a chance to speak Chinese, which she learned at Harvard. I wish the entire Hollywood crew, including director and scriptwriter, had taken a course on Chinese culture with any of my colleagues at UCLA.



Jet Li in *Once Upon a Time in China*

More Than Meets the Eye

On my way back from Hong Kong last summer, I decided to make a stop at Los Angeles and stayed with a friend. Soon after I arrived, the phone rang: it was John Woo, the famed Hong Kong director whose film *Face Off* was shown to great acclaim at the local cinema. I had never met him. My friend passed the receiver to me, and there was John Woo's gentle voice in Cantonese-accented Mandarin, "Professor Lee, I have been a longtime admirer of your writings." My academic writings? He must have been joking, but his tone remained serious. "Do you recall your articles on the New Wave in French cinema for that Hong Kong journal called *Chinese Student Weekly*?

I was the editor of its film page." Yes, indeed I wrote about Godard, Truffaut, and the French New Wave. I also lambasted the excessive violence of Hong Kong kung-fu movies. John Woo might have shared my interest in French cinema, but not necessarily my abhorrence of violence in any form. Still, this personal episode led me to an insight that may have

escaped most American admirers of John Woo's movies—his own French interest. A Hong Kong film buff told me years ago that at the time of the French New Wave in the 1960s and early 1970s, there was a film director by the name of Jean-Francois Melville. Melville was deeply influenced by the samurai movies of Japanese director Akira Kurosawa, and made a gangster movie of his own called *Le Samurai*. John Woo declared later that he was a great admirer of Melville's films, which might have inspired him toward the gangster genre. Now that Woo's films are exerting an impact on the likes of Quentin Tarantino (*Reservoir Dogs*), the circle of influences seems complete: from East (Japan) to West (France) to East (Hong Kong) to West (America), except of course that the quality of the products vary a great deal.

The influence of French film on John Woo was not skin-deep. He was able to appropriate its style

and part of its content in constructing his own film world, a world steeped in an ethos of loyalty and male bonding, which stems from traditional Chinese chivalric novels. The French gangster movies directed by Melville and others were themselves influenced by Hollywood, especially in its so-called "film noir" genre, but they also contain a peculiar existential anguish—a death wish, if you like, often exhibited in the roles played by Alain Delon—which Woo probably found most appealing. In addition to his cinematic interests, John Woo, a young radical in the early 1970s, was involved in editing a political journal of Trotskyist sympathies called, appropriately enough, *The 70s*.

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I was teaching in Hong Kong then and partook of the unique political temper of that period—a temper shaped by years of suppressed rage under British colonialism which could only express itself in the form of an existential anxiety sometimes coupled with a youthful idealism inspired by the Cultural Revolution in nearby China. We were not allowed to cross the Chinese

border; we could only quench our idealistic thirst by reading radical tracts and watching radical French and Italian films: Godard's revolutionary films inspired by Mao and Bertolucci's *Before the Revolution*. There was even a film called *China Is Near*.

I mention this background in order to reconstruct a special kind of intellectual milieu of Hong Kong that has largely escaped the attention of American media. I don't think John Woo ever forgets this part of his past; otherwise he would not have mentioned that student journal in our brief telephone conversation. And this is the John Woo I treasure: behind the face of a hot Hollywood action director lurks another face, one of a committed intellectual, an existentialist, and an aficionado of the European *auteur* film. He was by no means merely the commercial filmmaker he is now. For evidence? Just watch his old film, *Once a*



Selling the blockbusters

Thief, a light-hearted comedy featuring two heroes, played by Chow Yun-fat and Leslie Cheung, named Jules and Jim in Cantonese. This film obviously pays homage to Francois Truffaut's classic film of the same name, as evinced by the same *menage a trois* plot in which Jules and Jim love the same woman.

Through this formal tribute to an old master, Woo unveils and reaffirms a special film genealogy. If a literary work often contains allusions to other literary works, so too do films and filmmaking. Paradoxically, without this derivation, John Woo's films would not have been so original: he needed to stand on the shoulders of other films to make films of his own. In comparison, few Hollywood directors or writers are as educated about Asian cinema and Asian culture. Needless to add, few American audiences know as much about Asian popular culture as audiences in Asia know about American popular culture. This may indicate the enormity of American influence abroad;

at the same time, however, it also belies an alarming American ignorance about other cultures.

In my view, the two faces in *Face Off* belong not only to John Travolta and Nicholas Cage; they also belong to two cultural traditions, although I fear that Woo's Asian face might soon be erased by Hollywood's special effects. If so, this form of Americanization would be a true tragedy.

Theorists and scholars in cultural studies have been telling us that in today's world there is no longer such a thing as "one-way traffic" in matters of cultural influence. People and commodities flow all around, and cultural influences are mutually interactive. The crucial difference, however, lies in what one makes of such influences. We need to remind ourselves that contemporary Asian cultures are themselves pluralistic and multifaceted. When any of these diverse cultural elements becomes "melted" in one American pot, it can become "mushy" and therefore re-

semble a Hollywood movie—a commodity full of sound and fury, yet signifying nothing but money and market.

Still I remain hopeful, for I think America, as a country, is truly unique: of all the nations of the world, it is the only great "multicultural" country by tradition. This we all know. But we do not need the kind of mushy or wishy-washy multiculturalism of Hollywood movies. Instead of "melting" foreign cultures into a narrowly American pot, we should widen it with a generosity and openness great enough to embrace their differences, and to make sure that their cultural roots shine through. For me, there is only one path to genuine cultural understanding—the way toward true cosmopolitanism. Given time, the continuing influx of Asians and Asian cultures can only make American culture and society more enriched, more cosmopolitan, and perhaps more enduring. ■