

RESEARCH OF NOTE

The Politics and Culture of Identity Discourse: Representations of Mainland Chinese in Hong Kong Cinema

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As Amartya Sen points out in his *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, an individual human being is not bound to a single identity, but has multiple identities, each with claims on his loyalty.¹ The self-identification of the Hong Kong Chinese and their perceptions of mainland Chinese have been complicated by Hong Kong's colonial history and current status as a Special Administrative Region of China, and they have been impacted, too, by popular culture, which embodies, expresses and shapes people's perceptions, hopes and fears.

People moved freely between Hong Kong and China before 1950, when the new Communist government sealed the Hong Kong-China border. Thereafter each year small numbers of mainlanders received permission from the Chinese government to leave and approval by the Hong Kong government to immigrate legally. However, the number of illegal immigrants far exceeded legal immigrants. In 1970-74, a total of 79,083 persons were caught at the border, with an unknown but probably much higher number evading arrest and making it to the urban areas of Hong Kong.²

The Search for Unity

The majority of Hong Kong residents in the 1950s and 1960s were mainland refugees who did not intend to take up roots there. The major division was not between

mainlanders and Hong Kongers, but between Cantonese and Northerners (really meaning non-Cantonese). However, these regional identities were subsumed under the Chinese national identity.

The hilarious comedy hit *The Greatest Civil War on Earth* (1961) was the first Hong Kong film to combine dialogues in Cantonese and Mandarin. Zhang Sanbo, a Cantonese tailor, harbors strong prejudices against Northerners while his Mandarin-speaking counterpart Li Sibao likewise holds negative impressions of the Cantonese (Fig. 1). The daughters of the competing tailors both fall for men speaking the wrong dialect. The fathers ultimately drop their prejudices and merge their shops, and the couples become engaged (Fig. 2). *The Greatest Civil War on Earth* thus emphasized the community of the Chinese people despite regional linguistic and cultural differences.

The House of 72 Tenants (1973) reflected living conditions in Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s. The tenants are mostly poor shopkeepers, peddlers or



Figure 1: Contentious Tailors in *The Greatest Civil War on Earth*



Figure 2: Peace between South and North in *The Greatest Civil War on Earth*

artisans. Regardless of their geographical origins, they all speak Cantonese, albeit some with regional accents. The impoverished but public-spirited tenants

form a united front against their mean landlady and her boyfriend (a neighborhood bully), corrupt cops, bribe-seeking firemen, and oppressive officials (Fig. 3). In the end the neighbors outwit their oppressors and help the exploited adoptive daughter of their landlady and her shoemaker boyfriend escape to freedom (Fig. 4).

The House of 72 Tenants resonated with Hong Kong audiences who sought reassurance of the basic unity of the Hong Kong Chinese community based on shared communal values and communication through the Cantonese dialect. This reassurance was badly needed as the social fabric of Hong Kong was severely torn in 1967 when leftists, inspired by the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, tried to overthrow British rule through violent demonstrations, strikes and bombings. At the same time, the film also indicted the corruption and lack of social provisions of a minimalist colonial government.

The Colonial Government Responds

In response to the 1967 riots and the subsequent demand for social and political reforms by mass organizations and members of the colonial and Chinese elites, the British colonial government undertook a more activist stance by instituting policies to create a local identity and a sense of loyalty to the state.³ More Chinese were recruited into the upper ranks of the administration, Chinese was made an official language, social programs in public housing, health and education were instituted or expanded, and international trade fairs and art festivals were promoted.⁴

As the industrial economy of Hong Kong boomed in the following years and the demand rose for unskilled workers, the Hong Kong government instituted the reach base policy in 1974, allowing illegal immigrants who had made their way to the urban areas to apply for legal immigrant status. The end of the decade, however, saw an explosion of illegal immigrants that strained the absorptive capacity of the



Figure 3: The Neighbors vs. the Landlady in *The House of 72 Tenants*



Figure 4: The Neighbors Triumphant in *The House of 72 Tenants*

Crown Colony. The Hong Kong government thereupon abandoned the reach base policy in December of 1980 and forcibly returned illegal immigrants who were caught to the mainland.⁵ While this new policy of returning illegal immigrants stemmed the tide of illegal immigration to some degree, it did not address its fundamental causes.⁶

New Divisions Surface

Incessant political movements which ensnared countless political victims in China after 1949, climaxing in the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976, constituted a push factor behind the influx of mainland immigrants to Hong Kong. But economic motivations were even more important. The economy of mainland China suffered from political disruptions, the rigidity of central planning, economic boycott spearheaded by the United States, and other factors. In contrast, from the 1960s onward, the economy of Hong Kong was expanding rapidly, with an annual GDP growth rate of around 9.0% for the 1970s and 1980s.⁷ After the end of the Cultural Revolution, increasing numbers of Hong Kong and Macau residents visited China and brought with them glimpses of the material wealth of capitalism. Mainland Chinese blindly

worshipped Hong Kong as the land of golden opportunities, and many resorted to illegal entry to pursue an improvement in their standards of living.⁸

From the late 1960s on, the cultural gulf between the Hong Kong Chinese and the mainlanders also widened considerably. As an emerging global city, Hong Kong enjoyed an abundance of material goods and cultural products from the West and Japan that were denied residents of a mainland China largely shut off from the outside world. Hong Kong itself was becoming a global cultural emitter as the world’s second largest film exporter behind Hollywood.

With the sharpening economic, cultural and political distinctions between Hong Kong Chinese and mainland immigrants and mounting social issues associated with the influx of immigrants, a new division between residents and immigrants emerged to displace the earlier division between Cantonese and Northerners that had prevailed in the 1950s and 1960s.

The “Hong Konger”

The 1971 Immigration Ordinance introduced the category of the “Hong Kong belonger” with the right of abode. This category included both locally born British subjects and Chinese immigrants who could prove settled residence for seven or more years. The legal category of Hong Kong belonger later evolved into Hong Kong permanent resident, and was transmuted in popular speech and cultural discourse in the media into the notion of Hong Konger (*Xianggangren*, or *Heunggongyan* in Cantonese).⁹

Thus, Hong Konger emerged as a cultural construct that the Chinese residents of Hong Kong used to reference themselves as urban sophisticates vis-à-vis the backward and provincial mainland

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immigrants, and also as a means of positioning Hong Kong vis-à-vis Mainland China. To achieve the Hong Kong dream or economic success, the quintessential Hong Konger must exhibit industriousness and quick-wittedness.¹⁰

Filmic Portrayals of Mainlanders

Hong Kong Chinese held strong images of mainlanders that were largely shaped or reflected by popular media including television and movies, and powerfully impacted by political events. One persistent Hong Kong image of mainlanders is that of the country bumpkin befuddled and amazed by the temptations of capitalist commercialism and the variegated sights and sounds of a global city. In the gritty film noir *The Long Arm of the Law* (1984), a gang of mainland desperadoes sneaks into Hong Kong to commit a jewelry store robbery. In a dark comedy scene, the gang sets up a memorial tablet for a comrade who has been killed by the Chinese border patrol. Instead of the traditional food offered to the dead, they put next to the tablet Big Macs, chocolate milk and pizzas (Fig. 5). In death, their fallen comrade gets to enjoy the Western amenities that Hong Kong can supply.

In the politically incorrect 1990 comedy *Her Fatal Ways*, Sister Cheng, a mainland Public Security officer comes to Hong Kong on a drug case. After checking into a hotel, she mistakes the round bed for an adapted dining table, washes herself with a washcloth while standing in a shower not knowing how to turn the shower on to use it, and panics when the massage function of the bed is turned on by accident (Fig. 6). She tastes the forbidden capitalist fruits by putting on lipstick and singing karaoke (though belting out a traditional folksong rather than a contemporary pop number) (Fig. 7).

A more realistic portrayal of the innocent mainlander is found in Peter Chan's 1996 masterpiece, *Comrades, Almost a Love Story*. Li Xiaojun, a Northerner who emigrates to Hong Kong in 1986, is entranced by McDonald's, but, unfamiliar with the concept of queuing, rushes to the head of the line. He moves in with his aunt who has emigrated to Hong Kong long before, but, not realizing that the location is a warehouse, wonders why people in Hong Kong sleep late and do not seem to go to work. He comes upon a group

of Hare Krishna devotees, and joins in their dancing (Fig. 8). He finds that Hong Kong is full of people from many lands: Indians, Westerners, and Thais. He also learns about the marvels of getting and using an ATM card.

A related and even more negative cinematic conception is the image of mainlanders as murderous criminals. In *The Long Arm of the Law* (1984), the mainland gang fires indiscriminately and even throws hand grenades in a public street during a getaway (Fig. 9). This gripping crime thriller tapped into public paranoia about mainland criminals who carried out some sensational crimes (in the early 1980s) on which the film was loosely based.

The 1998 cops and robbers drama *Expect the Unexpected* initially portrays a group of mainlanders as inept criminals, in contrast to a highly efficient and deadly Hong Kong gang. A police squad finally traps and kills the Hong Kong criminals. When it goes off to celebrate, they by coincidence spot the two mainland criminals and try to corner them. They are surprised by the deadly fire that the mainlanders return, and in the ensuing shootout, all six members of the police squad (who are not wearing flak jackets as they are off duty) and the two mainland criminals are killed (Fig. 10).

Although *Expect the Unexpected* is a well-executed and suspenseful police drama, it was a box office failure. Possibly the reason is that, as the film was released soon after the 1997 Handover, the bleak surprise ending—if it is interpreted as a metaphor for a scenario in which the mainland government wrecks the economic prosperity of Hong



Figure 5: Offerings to a Fallen Comrade in *The Long Arm of the Law*



Figure 6: The Mystery of the Shower in *Her Fatal Ways*



Figure 7: The Joy of Karaoke in *Her Fatal Ways*



Figure 8: Dancing with Hare Krishna Disciples in *Comrades, Almost a Love Story*



Figure 9: A Deadly Shootout in *The Long Arm of the Law*

Kong by amateurish and heavy-handed inter-ference—may have been too disturbing for the Hong Kong audience.

The Limitations of Differences

Yet the boundaries between Hong Kongers and mainlanders were not absolute. A mainland immigrant could become a Hong Konger by achieving the Hong Kong dream. She could legally gain permanent residency after seven years of residence.

Moreover the cultural identity of *Heunggongyan* could not become the basis of a national identity separate from that of China. The Hong Kongers identified with China even if they did not necessarily approve of the Communist government. Despite the high level of Westernization in Hong Kong, Hong Kongers and mainlanders in Hong Kong held similar values consonant with the Chinese tradition.

According to a 1994 survey, 92.9% of those self-identified as “Hong Kongers” and 94.1% of those self-identified as “Chinese” agreed that traditional Chinese virtues including loyalty, filial piety, benevolence and righteousness should be respected in today’s Hong Kong.¹¹ (Lau Siu-kai, 2002).

The more positive image of mainland Chinese immigrants as hard-working aspirants to achieve the Hong Kong dream (and therefore can qualify as *Heunggongyan*) can also be found in Hong Kong cinema. In *Comrades, Almost a Love Story*, Li Qiao is an entrepreneurial immigrant from Guangzhou who dreams of achieving economic success and works hard at multiple jobs while trying out various schemes to accumulate money (Fig. 11). Her schemes do not always pan out. Nonetheless, she does not give up after her failures, and finally she achieves some small economic success as a shopkeeper. She self-consciously becomes a Hong Konger, who no longer has to endure the cold shoulder from store clerks who identify mainlanders by their dress and manner.

In the End, Unity

No matter how different the mainlanders may be in their speech, habits and behavior from the Hong Kongers, Hong Kong films emphasize the fundamental unity of the Chinese people. In *Her Fatal Ways*, Sister Cheng and her

nephew move into the household of the Hong Kong police officer who is assigned to work with her. She constantly bickers with the police officer’s father, a retired Nationalist army officer who is strongly anti-Communist. The exasperated son shouts, “We are all Chinese!” (Fig. 12) Later in the film, however, Sister Cheng wins over the father and his fellow Nationalist retirees by out-drinking and by matching toasts with them in a drinking contest (Fig. 13). In the end, a United Front is achieved between Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The mainland and Hong Kong policemen and the Nationalist retirees join forces to rout the drug traffickers.

In *Comrades, Almost a Love Story*, the Chinese title of which is the name of a signature song of Taiwan songstress Teresa Teng, her music serves as a unifier of the Chinese people. It was said that “where there are Chinese, there is the music of Teresa Teng.” Mainland immigrants Li Qiao and Li Xiaojun are fated to be lovers, and yet unexpected obstacles crop up to keep them apart. Both end up living in New York by 1994, but never running into each other until both are drawn to a television in a shop window broadcasting the news of the sudden death of Teresa Teng in Thailand in 1994 (Fig. 14).

As China’s economy began to take off in the 1990s, and people-to-people contacts across the China-Hong Kong border also expanded, the economic and cultural gaps between the mainland China and Hong Kong continued to narrow. Mainland visitors to Hong Kong were no longer primarily unskilled workers filling factory and menial
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Figure 10: A Deadly Shootout in *Expect the Unexpected*



Figure 11: Selling Teresa Teng Tapes in *Comrades, Almost a Love Story*



Figure 12: Hong Kong Mediating between Mainland and Taiwan in *Her Fatal Ways*



Figure 13: Forging a United Front in *Her Fatal Ways*



Figure 14: The Lovers Reunited in *Life by Teresa Teng in Death*

jobs. They included Chinese government representatives, professionals, and graduate students.¹² Transborder families formed by Hong Kong residents married to mainland spouses are on the increase, and a growing number of elderly Hong Kong residents are also moving to the Mainland to enjoy a lower cost of living or a quieter living environment, or to return to their native place. The psychological barriers between Hong Kongers and Mainlanders are steadily eroded by the formation of such relationships.¹³

As the cultural and economic distance between these two groups continues to shrink, Hong Kong Chinese will likely identify themselves increasingly as “Chinese” or as “both Hong Konger and Chinese.” The percentage of Hong Kong residents who identified themselves primarily as “Hong Konger” has dropped from 58.3% in 1990 to 49.3% in 2001, while the percentage of those who self-identified as “Chinese” has risen from 26.2% to 30.6%, and the percentage of those who self-identified as both have risen from 14.3% to 19.2%.¹⁴ Negative stereotypes of mainlanders in Hong Kong media will likely disappear,

particularly as Hong Kong cinema increasingly looks to China as a primary market and as a production partner.

Endnotes

¹Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006).

²Li Ruojian, “Zhongguo dalu qianru Xianggang de renkou yanjiu [A Study of Migration from Mainland China into Hong Kong]” (2004?), Table 3. <http://www.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/wk_wzdetails.asp?id=2909>

³Wong Cheuk Yin, “The 1967 Leftist Riots and Regime Legitimacy in Hong Kong,” *E-Journal on Hong Kong Cultural and Social Studies*, 3 (June 2004). <http://www.hku.hk/hkcspp/ccex/ehkcss01/issue3_ar_lawrence_wong.htm>

⁴Yingchi Chu, *Hong Kong Cinema: Coloniser, Motherland and Self* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 44-45, 94.

⁵Agnes S. Ku, “Immigration Policies, Discourses, and the Politics of Local Belonging in Hong Kong (1950-80),” *Modern China* 30 (July 2004), 349; Li Ruojian.

⁶Li Ruojian.

⁷Chen Wen, “A Study on Technological Progress and Economic Growth in Hong

Kong,” *E-Journal on Hong Kong Cultural and Social Studies*, 1 (Feb. 2002), Table 1. <http://www.hku.hk/hkcspp/ccex/ehkcss01/a_pdf2.htm>

⁸Li Ruojian.

⁹Ku, 342-7.

¹⁰Hui Yew-Foong, “In Search of Heunggongyan: The Construction of a Metropolitan Identity,” *E-Journal on Hong Kong Cultural and Social Studies*, 1 (Feb. 2002).

<http://www.hku.hk/hkcspp/ccex/ehkcss01/a_pdf8.htm>

¹¹Lau Siu-kai, “<Xianggangren> huo <Zhongguoren>: Xianggang huaren de shenfen rentong 1985-1995 [Hong Konger or Chinese: Self-Identification of Hong Kong Chinese],” *Ershiyi shiji* 41 (June 1997). <http://www.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/wk_wzdetails.asp?id=1847>

¹²Hui Yew-Foong.

¹³Werner Breitung, “Transformation of a Boundary Regime: the Hong Kong and Mainland China Case,” *Environment and Planning A*, 34 (2002), 1755-6.

¹⁴Victor Zheng and Wong Siu-lun, “Xianggang huaren de shenfen rentong: jiuqi qianhou de juanbian [Self-Identification of the Hong Kong Chinese: Changes Before and After 1997],” *Ershiyi shiji* online edition, 7 (Oct. 2002). <http://www.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/wk_wzdetails.asp?id=1865>

Surveys (continued from page 4)

analyzed to give us a picture of the Asian Studies landscape at some of our member campuses.

Regardless of the small number of responses and the self-selection of those who participated, the results from these surveys provide us with some hard facts as opposed to impressionistic assumptions about the state of Asian Studies at our member campuses. We have learned some important lessons from our experiences with this survey. One key lesson is that we need a more systematic way to collect information about the areas of expertise of our members if we are to build a reliable data base that will be a useful resource for the broader academic community. In the very near future, we will contact you for that information, and when that time comes, I hope that a significantly larger portion of our more than 900 individual members will respond.

Consultancy Awards for the Asian Art in the Undergraduate Curriculum Project

At the selection meeting last February, the Steering Committee of the Asian Art in the Undergraduate Curriculum project composed of Stan Mickel, Karil Kucera, Mary-Ann Milford, Paul Nietupski and Joan O'Mara selected the following schools to receive consultancy visits to evaluate their Asian arts collections: **Berea College, DePauw University, Lake Forest College, Mills College, Swarthmore College, Valparaiso University and Willamette University**. In addition, subgrants of \$1,500 each were awarded to the following schools to help them digitize and document some of their Asian arts collections: **Bowdoin College, Carleton College, St Olaf College and Wittenberg University**.

This is the last round of such consultancy and subgrant awards. The project will then move to its next phase, the writing of a book with accompanying DVD that discusses how selected pieces of Asian arts and material culture collections that were discovered during the consultancy phase can be used in the teaching about Asia. The target date for publication of the book is Spring 2009.