one

"World Suicide Capital"

An excellent way of explaining the Hong Kong society in the first few years of its new status as HKSAR is through three movies that came out during the watershed year of 2002 and 2003. Both the production and reception of these films capture the particular political wrangle between Hong Kong and China and the culminating social anxieties within the Hong Kong society after the "Handover" in 1997. The examination here of these films in connection with the major events of this year serves to introduce the political and social background and some of the issues of the society that frame my discussion in this volume.

There was a minor earthquake in the Hong Kong film world in the winter between 2002 and 2003. The gradual decline of the Hong Kong movie industry that began in the late 1990s had turned into a serious slump by the new millennium.[1] However, at the end of 2002 and the beginning of 2003, three films in particular, generated unusual excitement in the Hong Kong cinema and the society at large. *Infernal Affairs* (W*ujian dao*), a film by Andrew Lau and Andy Mak, a major feature with a cast of Hong Kong's most prestigious actors, earned over fifty million HK dollars (about 6.2 million US) at the Hong Kong boxoffice alone and proceeded to break the boxoffice records in different East and South East Asian nations.[2] It received numerous awards worldwide, including the Hong Kong Film Critics Society Awards for Best Director and Best Picture. It was nominated for twelve categories at the 2003 Taiwan Golden Horse Awards and received five of them, including Best Actor, Best Drama, and Best Director.

The chapter title comes from a headline in *Asiaone*, describing Hong Kong in April 2004 (http://newspaper.asia1.com.Sg).

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It was named one of the year's ten best foreign films in the 2003 Tokyo Filmex. It was featured at the New York Film Festival in 2004, as well as many other film festivals around the world. At the same time that the whirlwind of *Infernal Affairs* was sweeping through Asia, Zhang Yimou, Mainland China's master filmmaker, brought out his extravagantly produced historical epic *Hero* (*Yingxiong*).[3] This film was greatly anticipated, greeted with enormous excitement, and was a boxoffice triumph in China. It was touted as a major film event and was the official entry to the Academy Awards in 2003. (It lost to Caroline Link's *Nowhere in Africa* in the best foreign-language film category.) In the midst of the fanfare of these major and expensive productions, was a small film that intrigued audiences and quietly garnered critical admiration within Hong Kong and abroad. *PTU* is directed by Johnny To, a veteran director of many popular gangster films and romances. It was the opening feature of the 2003 Hong Kong International Film Festival, included in the New York Film Festival; it received awards at the Berlin International Film Festival, the Tokyo Filmex, and the Melbourne International Film festival, among others.

Infernal Affairs, a genre film about the contest of power between the Hong Kong police and the Triad, was especially credited for having breathed much needed new life into Hong Kong's seemingly moribund film industry. It became the beacon for a new cinema after years of overproduction and stagnation. It was praised for the seriousness of its production and sophistication of the script. Proving that audiences can be wooed back to the theaters with quality, much hope was laid on its positive influence on Hong Kong's cinema culture in general. Though differing significantly in narrative style and plot, *PTU* shares a similar ethos with *Infernal Affairs.* These two intensely monochromatic and solemn films contrasted conspicuously with Zhang Yimou's vividly hued *Hero.* These three films became the focal point of the film world in Hong Kong in 2003. Each of them evoked different reactions from audiences, provoking unprecedented public attention and discussion. As Nestor Garcia Canclini argues, "[l]iterary, artistic and mass media discourse not only documents a compensatory imagination, but also serves to record the city's dramas, what is lost in the city and what is transformed."[4] Invested in the interest and debates generated by the films are the hopes and apprehensions of Hong Kong people toward their political future under China. In this way, the discourse created by these films substitutes for the nonexistent public venue for political discussions in Hong Kong. How is the audience's perception of the respective reality of Hong Kong and Mainland China coded into the images and hues in these films? What politics inform the somberness of the

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two Hong Kong films? And what is so striking about *Hero*'s brilliance juxtaposed to them? How does the audience's reception of these films in the winter of 2002 and 2003 echo their sense of the contemporary predicament?

Hero is based on a popular story about the historical first emperor of China, the Qin emperor. The historical Qin dynasty only spanned fifteen years, from 221 BC to 206 BC, but the emperor is generally credited with laying the groundwork for a centralized Chinese state and empire. The importance of the emperor's ability to regularize and standardize the Chinese writing system and weights and measures to the ideology of a unified China is unchallenged in Chinese political thought even today. In spite of this, in the standard dynastic histories and popular fiction alike, representations of the Qin emperor have been consistently focused on his tyranny, his brutal suppression of dissent, and his persecution of intellectuals who held alternative views, putatively burying many Confucian scholars alive and burning their books. He also burdened the common people with heavy levies of physical labor to build massive state projects, such as the completion of the Great Wall, along with his grandiose mausoleum and underground army of tens of thousands of terracotta soldiers. Regardless of the actual merit or demerit of his reign, the historical construction of the *Qin* emperor is unequivocally as a fearsome and hated despot.

Zhang's *Hero* is a fictionalized account of a plot to assassinate the emperor to prevent the Qin state's gradual swallowing up of all the other principalities to achieve a single empire unified under his dictatorship. The central issue is how Wuming, a swordsman, tries to gain proximity to the emperor in order to kill him. The emperor previously made a promise that whoever killed any of his three most feared enemies, all accomplished swordsmen, would be granted bountiful gifts and an audience with him. With each enemy eliminated, the emperor would increase the gifts and allow a closer approach to him, while decreasing the number of guards around him as a show of trust. Wuming's aim was to prove that he had killed all three by bringing tokens of the slain enemies as proofs so that he could get close to the emperor without his guards. Though the emperor could not dispute what Wuming had accomplished, because of incontrovertible proof, the suspicious emperor proffered his own version of what actually happened. The film was thus made up of four segments containing different versions of the story of how three of the Qin emperor's most feared enemies were killed.

According to Wuming, he exterminated the emperor's enemies by stirring up feelings of jealousy, mutual suspicion, and hatred among the originally loyal

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friends, leading to the self-destruction of the alliance. However, the Qin emperor believed that, given the training and integrity of the trio, they would not have come to such a sordid end. He postulated that they had deliberately sacrificed themselves so Wuming could approach him. He suspected that the duel between Wuming and one of the assassins, Mingjian, witnessed by the Qin army was staged and that Mingjian had allowed herself to be killed by Wuming. In other words, the emperor had seen through the plot. However, before he called his guards on Wuming, Wuming offered a detail that created a surprising turn in the situation. Wuming revealed that Mingjian was still alive. Because Wuming was a highly accurate swordsman, he was able to control his sword and had only nicked her in the mock duel while she feigned death. However, before their fight, she had to seriously injure her beloved, Changkong, to prevent him from fighting Wuming to stop him from carrying out his assassination of the emperor. This last detail delivered its intended impact on the emperor. Wuming now sat within striking distance of the emperor. Both realized that Wuming's mission could be completed with one swift blow. However, in the back and forth of the narrative between the Qin emperor and himself, Wuming suddenly became enlightened as to why Changkong had wanted to stop him from killing the emperor.

At the end of the film and the end of his conversation with the emperor, Wuming decided to give up his mission and yielded to the emperor. At the news of Wuming's submission, Mingjian killed Changkong in rage and then killed herself in remorse. After a highly dramatic pause while the emperor struggled to decide what to do, he finally allowed his palace guards to kill Wuming.

Changkong had tried to make Wuming understand before his mission that killing the emperor would prolong the division and strife among the various warring kingdoms. In the end, it would only aggravate and lengthen the suffering of the common people. He knew, even if reluctantly, that the Qin emperor was the only man powerful and masterful enough to unify China and to end the incessant wars. It was a theory of peace above all else. Wuming, through his long conversation with the emperor, was moved by the aura of the emperor's authority and power. He surrendered his life as the ultimate acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the Qin rule. The Qin emperor was, in turn, grateful to Wuming and Changkong's ability to "truly understand" him—that his persecution of other kingdoms was out of a desire to end all strife and pacify the entire land by unifying it under his own grip. Wuming could easily have killed the emperor, but yielded himself instead to death by a thousand arrows from Qin's formidable war machine.

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The film was set in the great northern deserts of China, as austere and desolate as they are magnificent, especially under the cinematographer Christopher Doyle's romantic camera gaze. From the scale of the production to the expansiveness of the scenes, the director, Zhang Yimou, intends to impress the audience with the immensity, awesomeness, solemnity, and grandeur of the Chinese earth, asking the audience to imagine the one who truly deserves to be the supreme sovereign of this land. In fact, the only people on this mythical landscape are the magnificent heroes and heroines who walk the land in their flowing gowns like divinities. The design of the characters is to deliberately highlight the actors' unusual beauty and larger-than-life quality. This world exists in a special time and space bracketed from the mundane and is beyond the defilement of humans and their messy societies. The movie's heroic scale precludes the appearance of the common people. In fact, the camera gaze seems to disdain the ordinary. The decision of rulership naturally does not concern them. The audience, as the invisible masses, can merely observe the process of the investiture of power outside of the frame of action. They watch the faceless, ominous black troops of the Qin army swarming the screen and becoming the final pacifiers of the empire, while the heroes each yield to its advance.

The marching homogeneous and highly disciplined army embodies the massification of people in which individual subjectivity is not allowed to exist. If the assassins had attempted to assert individual will against the Qin hegemony at points during the film, the ending of the film is a flat refutation of any such effort. In the final scene of the movie, the screen is swallowed up by banks upon banks of the black troops, overwhelming the audience with their victory cries in an ostentatious demonstration of state power.

The different segments of the film are the different versions of how the assassins were killed by Wuming. Each of these segments has a dominant color scheme. In the first, in which all the characters appear in red, the assassins are seen to have succumbed under their passions and romantic entanglements. In the second segment in which they are clothed in green, their defeat is attributed to their distrust and jealousy of each other. In contrast to these various colors, the Qin emperor and his war machine appear in a uniform black—threatening and awful. Within this monumental presence of the state, individual colors appear fickle, minute, and inconsequential. This contrast seems to articulate the frivolity of individual expressiveness and desire against the doctrine of the nation. Temperaments and personal sentiments of love, vendetta, jealousy, and so forth, all have to be suppressed in order for individuals to fit into the

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machinery of the state. In the "red" segment of the film, Mingjian engaged in a passionate swordfight with Changkong's serving girl with the brilliant autumn foliage swirling around them. This scene of whirring silks and fluttering leaves is spectacular. However, no matter how brilliant and creative the individual dance is, it has no place in the order of the nation. In the final segment, in the mourning colors of white, the hero and heroine die, voluntarily or not, their personal will is sacrificed for the greater common good.

The production of *Hero* coincides with an optimistic, powerful, and nationalistic China in the new millennium. Successfully admitted to the WTO in 2002, winning the sponsorship of the 2008 Olympic Games; the ascension of the new technocrats in the Party, Wen Jiabao and Hu Jintao; the rapid economic development in the cities; not to mention sending its first astronaut to space in 2004—China was poised to assume the role as the next world power. This national progress seems to justify individual sacrifices. The disruption of rural livelihoods, the mass displacement of the urban poor, the curtailment of legal recourse, and the suppression of individual expression, especially of dissent, are all in the name of the cohesiveness of the nation and the morale of the society. This expectation of individual sacrifice is articulated in *Hero.* No individual interest or aspiration can come before the unity and good of the nation. Any state strategy, no matter how ruthless, can be justified as for the sake of national strength. The sweeping takes of Zhang Yimou's romanticism is a powerful expression of telluric nationalism.

The national narrative in *Hero* is reconstituted and mythologized in an extremely seductive and beautiful manner, if heavily overlaid with nationalistic aesthetic. The sacralization of China's first emperor as a national myth is unmistakable through the fascistic references—the stark images of Qin's formidable and highly disciplined black army on the march, their bloodcurdling war chant, "*feng!*" (translated as "hail" in the subtitles), and the glorification of absolute power of the supreme leader. *Hero* is a tacit affirmation of the use of military force for the sake of order and unity at the expense of individual will and lives. In interviews, the director, Zhang, insisted that he merely wanted to make a popular film and had no overt political intention. He argued that, "after a few years … perhaps the main ideas of the movies would be forgotten. All people might remember about it would be a few seconds of images or perhaps the way certain characters look."[5] The disingenuousness and condescension implied in Zhang's words hardly bear commentary. In a cursory survey of the web discussions of two major movie discussion sites, "Wangyi" in China and "Broadway" in Hong Kong, Zhang Zhiwei points out that the

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Hong Kong audience, even those who admired the visual beauty and technical accomplishment of the film, was mostly troubled by the "reinterpretation" of the character of the historical tyrant. Of the more than one hundred comments logged by Zhang in January 2003, a few weeks after the film's release, only three supported the notion that the movie actually had an antiauthoritarian message. Zhang commented that the arguments for this "alternative reading" were rather forced and unconvincing.[6]

Released around the same time as *Hero* during the Christmas season of 2002 was *Infernal Affairs* (*Wujian Dao*, a Buddhist term describing the journey through the lowest level of hell of never-ceasing suffering). It boasts a solid cast of award-winning actors, including Tony Leung and Andy Lau. Infused with Buddhist overtones, the film examines a complex network of people antagonistically bound to each other, conditioned by an inevitability out of their own control. This strong suggestion of karmic bond and individual destiny makes all the protagonists, on either side of the law, tragic heroes. Chan is an undercover police agent in the underworld, whose survival hinges upon his convincing act as the underworld boss's most trusted man. Lau, on the other hand, is a Triad agent within the police. The tragedy of both characters arises from their desire to be "good" despite their assigned roles in life. Lau's attempt is facilitated by all the surface paraphernalia—a decent, middle-class lifestyle, a loving companion, a tastefully decorated apartment—but he knows deep at heart he works for the forces of evil. Sharing the same fate, but on the opposite side, Chan is deeply submerged in the underworld of crime, living among thugs and finding it more and more difficult to maintain his identity though he is a legitimate policeman. All the while, both attempt to normalize their lives, trying to be sincere in their relationships with lovers and comrades, fully aware of their own treachery. Both live lives that are limited to accrued surface signifiers without access to interior reality. Chan wants to return to his original identity as a legitimate person in society. But that identity does not exist in material reality, only in his memory and that of his immediate superior who dies in the film. (All his records have been erased to protect him from being discovered.) Worried that he was becoming more and more schizophrenic about himself, Chan's supervisor sent him to a psychotherapist to help him reach his internal depth to recover his identity. But significantly, each time he tries, he merely falls asleep on the therapist's couch as if unable to rouse his dormant true self. Lau, on the other hand, avoids probing the depths of his interiority. His lover, a novelist, is unable to complete the portrait of her fictional character, a police officer, based on him. Lau wishes he could be

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legitimized as a decent person and citizen. However, his actual and karmic ties to his criminal origin cannot be simply severed or buried.

Mostly set in dark, brooding interiors or against massive modern concrete architectural structures of the city of Hong Kong, *Infernal Affairs* is a stark contrast to *Hero* with its expansive landscape. The claustrophobic and monochromatic world of the former, in which all the characters, "good" or "evil," "cop" or "robber," are dressed indistinguishably in black and white, is an ironic commentary of a world where there is no simple distinction among people, where nothing is black and white. Instead, making much use of mirror reflections and gloomy illumination, the film represents an illusory world of dim lights and shadows, smoke and mirrors, secrets and lies. The protagonists on both sides of the law have the gravitas and stature of heroes whose actions appear to be of great consequence at specific moments. Ultimately, however, individual identities are meaningless ciphers, to be manipulated, taken, given, and substituted, totally dictated by external forces beyond individual control. Personal struggles and actions placed within the complicated weave of cosmic reality are actually futile and minute. This is the same whether one belongs to the police or the underworld, "good" or "evil." Individual choice or will is merely an illusion as each person's life is shackled to a prescribed plot within predetermined historical conditions.

Not only does this film seriously question the Manichean divide between good and evil that is the foundation of the crime thriller genre, it also reassesses the notion of individuals as monadic entities with full control over their lives and the choices they make. It questions the notion of individual identity when one is karmicly conjoined to other lives and when one's story is predetermined and overdetermined by other narratives. Needless to say, these issues are deeply pertinent to Hong Kong people confronting their enforced affiliation with China, with their identity articulated by China's present agenda, especially under the doctrine of the nation. Is there a Hong Kong identity deeply buried beneath this nationalist narrative to be excavated or is Hong Kong merely glass and steel and what their glossy surfaces reflect?[7]

In *Hero*, the protagonists stoically acknowledge and yield to the powerful state monolith in a reality where both might and hegemony are respected and deemed the ultimate necessity, if not good, for the common people. In *Infernal Affairs*, the control of one's daily life and individual identity is more insidious, working through the individual's complicity and consent. It is an ambiguous world of no absolutes that gives a semblance of individual choice and freedom, but only within prearticulated perimeters. However, in contrast to *Hero*, the

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protagonists in *Infernal Affairs* are unyielding in their struggle against their destiny.

In a similar monochromatic moodiness of *Infernal Affairs* is another Hong Kong film, *PTU*. A comparatively small-budget film by Johnny To, *PTU* opened the Hong Kong Film Festival, which took place in the inopportune month of April 2003, when the entire city was shrouded in gloom by the threat of the SARS (the Sudden Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic and the suicide of arguably Hong Kong's most popular and iconic movie star of the 1990s, Leslie Cheung. *PTU*, in which Simon Yam, as a PTU (Police Tactical Unit) captain, led a small cast, is an intense and minimalist film. It initially received limited popular attention in the theaters but gradually amassed wide critical acclaim and popularity from both home and abroad. The whole narrative takes place within a small district of the city in the duration of a few long hours during a shift in a night patrol. The plot evolves around a police detective's lost gun and involves three different departments within the Hong Kong Police—the OCU (Organized Crime Unit), the PTU (Police Tactical Unit), and the CID (Criminal Investigative Detectives). Determined not to let this incident mar his chances for a promotion, the Organized Crime detective who lost his gun decided not to report it and asked his friend, the captain of a PTU division, to assist him in recovering it before dawn. The search for the gun led the PTU team through the dark streets of Tsimshatsui. In the mean time, a CID detective investigating the case of a murdered gang boss suspected that the detective who lost his gun was involved in the murder, because, through a complicated mistake, the detective swapped his cell phone with the dead man. The CID led her team, hot on the trail, through the same streets.

The suspenseful search for the lost gun was complicated by differences, rivalries, and distrust among the various police divisions. In the final scene, two bosses from rival gangs arrived on the scene to settle scores with each other over the dead man in the CID's case. On the trails of their different pursuits, the different groups from the three departments converged on the same street. It so happened that a group of heavily armed Mainland Chinese gangsters, who had just come ashore to Hong Kong, were waiting for their contacts at the same site. When all these parties met, a huge street battle erupted. The police units were clearly aligned despite previous misgivings and grievances. When the criminals were decimated, each captain of the different police units averted his or her attention from each other's foibles, leaving out in each of their official reports the offenses and mistakes that they had all accumulated over the course of the eventful night.

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The action of the film takes place in familiar streets with landmarks and signs easily recognizable to the local audience. However, these streets in this night are completely removed from the geography of everyday life. Nighttime Tsimshatsui in the film is deserted and oppressively silent. In this film, the usually heavily pedestrian city where the streets hop with life and are perpetually lit by neon becomes completely dark and empty except for the patrolling police units and gang runners scampering through alleys like startled rats. This is not a Hong Kong that belongs to the everyday, daylight reality of ordinary people. Every member of the night belongs to either the police or the gangs. However, one cannot be sure if these two are distinct opposites, much less if they can be differentiated as "good" or "evil." A police undercover agent became a drug addict, caved into the pressure of his job. Officers cowered in fright during operations. They use violent or bullying tactics toward small-time gang runners. In their semimilitarized gear, the PTU are overlords of the dark, imperiously patrolling their streets; they can be as ruthless as the gang members they deal with.

PTU depicts a subterranean world beneath the everyday reality of Hong Kong society, where the antagonistic forces contend with each other, sparking the energy and tension that undergird the great metropolis. This film is about a particular signifying space stretched to its limits—a society in crisis. Such times put to trial the boundaries of relationships in daylight transactions, testing the loyalty among the members of each group and faithfulness among friends and colleagues as each is asked to do things in times of difficulty that exceed the call of duty, even legality. *PTU* maps the psychological terrain of Hong Kong as a society on the verge. Can the relationships and the social structure survive under such stress? At what point will the tempest of this underworld boil over to the daytime reality of Hong Kong's everyday life?

Like *Infernal Affairs*, *PTU* depicts a visually as well as metaphysically very dark Hong Kong society. If *Hero* and *Infernal Affairs* respectively capture the Mainland and Hong Kong political ideology and social ethos, *PTU* depicts the clash of the values of the two places. However, it also reveals that Hong Kong society itself is plagued by acrimony, contradictions, and discontent. Despite their criminality, local Triads have their logic of operation as an alternative organizational mode in society. Lest one romanticizes the loyalty and friendship in the relationships between gang members in the underworld, one is also led to see the enforcement of absolute hierarchy, violently maintained in this world. It is certainly not a desirable alternative to that of the uniformed brutality offered by the police. However, despite the occasional eruptions of

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hostilities between the gangs and the police, there is a space in society for their coexistence, even if within extremely tight strictures.

The Mainland gang as depicted briefly at the end of the film is unambiguously a foreign intrusion. The director expends no time to relate their stories. Heavily armed and with little understanding of their environment, the situation, or their opponents, they immediately opened fire on everyone upon arrival on the scene. The police departments, otherwise fractious, became cohesive and aligned when confronting this external challenge. The allegory of the relationship between Hong Kong and China is obvious here. As bad as the Hong Kong social problems might be, here represented by rampant gang activities, these gangs are part of the society and are part of Hong Kong's problems that are to be resolved internally. The Mainland's presence, whether culturally or politically, is perceived as a kind of invasion. Through the metaphor of the gangsters, China's strategy of rule in Hong Kong is represented as a combination of insensitive stampede, ignorant aggressiveness, and ruthless rampage.

The differences among the police departments and between the Hong Kong Triads are more a matter of class value than political difference. From the demeanor, behavior, and clothing style, each member of the different departments is seen as a stock character of a particular social class. The detective of the Organized Crime Unit who lost his gun is tough looking, heavy set, disheveled, and rude. He constantly talks about mahjong games and cusses at others, embodying all the stereotypes of a working-class person. The refined CID detective in her impeccable suits and officiousness affects the characteristics of the elitist bureaucrats, often seen as "effeminate" and ineffectual. She is bossy, and throws her rank around; she is cowardly and spineless and is generally an unpleasant and depthless character. The heroes of the film are the members of the PTU, described in detail by Johnny To. They are tough, but disciplined and orderly; they are dedicated in their mission to eliminate criminals but do not hesitate to transcend the rigidity of fussy rules to help a comrade in need. They are highly trained, skilled, and confident. They are hardworking and never shrink from difficulties. They are action heroes, but they also have soul, expressed through their loyalty to friends and to their members. They understand both the rules of the streets and the laws of the city. They mediate between the OCU and the CID who are otherwise irreconcilable in their antagonism toward each other. The PTU, in other words, are the sensible, rational, mythical, middle-class professionals of Hong Kong, who embody the true Hong Kong spirit.

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The director, Johnny To, uses various stereotypical gender characteristics to represent these different sectors of the population. The OCU detective's hyper-machismo and hubris (but total lack of judgment and composure when under danger) contrast sharply with the CID's effeminate, over-persnickety arrogance but cowardice in actual action. If both of these are less than desirable, the PTU once again captures the ideal gender representation. There are two separate PTU divisions in the film. One is headed by a male captain and the other by a female. In the same uniform, neither evinces any obvious gender characteristics. Both can be violent and ruthless toward their enemies, but tolerant, understanding, and supportive to their comrades. In the film, the two units operate separately but converge seamlessly in a pincer movement in the final battle, fighting courageously and with unflinching coolness. The PTU were the heroes in the actual battle, while the other two groups either cowered or lost their wits.

Through the adventures of the characters from the different police forces as well as their enemies, the Hong Kong gangsters or the Mainland brigand, all entangled in the case of the lost gun, the director narrates the way the society confronts and ideally, as in the filmic world, eradicates its problem. If Hong Kong's social world is rent by class and cultural tensions that can turn explosive, like the surging violence of the Triads, the society ultimately pulls together and overcomes its problems. The film ends with the voices of the captains of each department recording their reports of the night's events. If these police reports can been seen as a kind of Hong Kong narrative, then the recuperation of consensus in the reporting—what should be kept out of the records and what should be included—represents a triumph of unity at the end. Each police group experiences the event through their different perspectives, but all come to a fundamentally similar understanding of it. Although class division is an issue, Hong Kong society, it is believed, will pull together when confronted with problems, whether internal or external, under the leadership of its hardworking and professional middle class. Reflecting a rather common sentiment in Hong Kong, the film reaffirms the official ideology that, because of the Hong Kong people's rationality, professionalism, and unity, the city will eventually be led out of its darkness. This is a pervasive understanding of Hong Kong's "core value" that is considered crucial to the recovery of the city's economic and social health, the two being seen as equated.[8]

In the coincidence of their release around the same time at the end of 2002 and the beginning of 2003, the three films in Hong Kong interestingly capture and reflect the range of complicated emotions in a society plagued by many

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troubles during this time. If *Hero*, as we have seen, is a particularly fitting product of a China on the ascent in the world as an economic, political, and military power, the two Hong Kong films, *Infernal Affairs* and *PTU* reflect the society in crisis. The dark alterity of *PTU* or the counterfeit world in *Infernal Affairs* are symptomatic of the schizophrenia in the everyday reality of the city.

The new HKSAR government that took over the administration of Hong Kong after 1997, headed by the Beijing-appointed chief executive of Hong Kong, Tung Chee Hwa, had proven to be extremely ineffectual and unpopular. Hong Kong had not been able to recover from the 1997 Asian financial crisis before the situation was compounded by the U.S. post–9/11 economic slowdown. The government's various policies failed miserably to revive Hong Kong's economy, exposing both the perceived ineptness of the new government and its unresponsiveness to the needs of the people. The unemployment rate between the months of May and July 2003, according to a study by Lingnan University, reached a record high of 8.7%.[9]

In the midst of the financial problems, in order to assuage the government deficit, the then-secretary of finance, Anthony Leung, proposed a draconian budget policy that called for large cuts to many government services, increases in taxes, and reduction in salaries for the 170,000 civil servants (about 3% of the total population) in Hong Kong. In general, his unpopular economic package asked for immense sacrifice from the citizens of Hong Kong, which resulted in great resentment.

At the same time, the society was split by the debate on "Article 23," the referendum on the antisubversion law to be introduced to the legislature. The HKSAR government was under pressure from Beijing to push through this unpopular legislation. Many believed that such legislation would threaten free speech, freedom of political organization, and worst of all, it would allow government control of the media. The then-secretary of security, Mrs. Regina Lau Yip's hard sell of the unpopular antisubversion law and her aggressive rhetoric that many deemed arrogant and patronizing, added to the general resentment toward the HKSAR government.

The figure of Mrs. Yip soon began to epitomize the entire Tung Chee Hwa government and, to a certain extent, the proximity of Beijing in the everyday life of Hong Kong. She embodied all that was feared about the new Chinese regime—undemocratic oppressiveness cloaked in the guise of enlightened paternalism. She soon became a cathartic figure toward whom all the anxiety and hatred for the new regime was directed. Many Hong Kong people, especially those who grew up under the British, are ambivalent about China. They iden-

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tify themselves according to an image of the modern free world with which they associate the British, and they perceive China as a nation of backward, erratic, and violent politics.[10] The antisubversion law became an affirmation of their worst fears about Chinese political encroachment. Mrs. Yip traveled from district to district to try to convince Hong Kong people of the absolute sincerity of the Hong Kong government in its attempt to respect individual rights while also making sure "national security" was not compromised. Her efforts only resulted in a year of contentions and heated debates among all sectors of the society. The final defeat of the referendum led to her resignation.

Zhang Yimou's film *Hero* opened in Hong Kong in this moment of political impasse in December 2002. It immediately became the target of intense scrutiny by the Hong Kong audience as a sign of the will of the Beijing central government. This was in no small measure because of Zhang Yimou's status as the party's most acclaimed director. Not only has he brought international attention to Chinese cinema since the late 1980s with films such as the *Red Sorghum* and *Raising the Red Lantern*, he has also faithfully and unapologetically projected an aesthetic portrait of China that avoids the politics and social nuances of his contemporary world, adhering to the party's sanctioned visions of China's past.[11]

This pretense of apoliticism in Zhang's films was never more ironic than when *Hero* became the first film ever to hold its premier in Beijing's formidable state monument, the Great Hall of the People. The Beijing government's regard for this film was only too clear to the Hong Kong people. As Zhang's first martial-arts movie set in ancient China, many critics have pointed out that this was Zhang's attempt to rival the Taiwan national, Ang Li's international success, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and also to ride the tide of interest in martial-arts epics among the international audience Ang Li's film created. Like Li, Zhang relied on a mainly Hong Kong production crew and cast that have a great degree of international renown in a calculation to attract attention outside of China. For example, his cinematographer, Christopher Doyle, has won recognition for his work with the Hong Kong director Wong Kar-Wai since the 1980s in such films as *Chungking Express*, *Happy Together,* and *In the Mood for Love.* Zhang even uses Wong Kar-Wai's favorite leads, Maggie Cheung and Tony Leung, the celebrated screen lovers. The other cast members include Jet Li and Donnie Yen, both Hollywood's favorite Hong Kong martial arts actors and director.

Whether by conscious calculation or coincidence, this particular cast and crew composition managed to attract a lot of interest in Hong Kong. Because they represent the crème de la crème of Hong Kong's international film industry, their participation in this film immediately rallied local attention

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when most Mainland films, if shown in Hong Kong at all, languish at the boxoffice.

From a Hong Kong perspective, this movie inadvertently brought out many difficult questions, especially given the timing of its release. What does "national unity at all cost" mean in terms of China's policy in Hong Kong? How does it translate into issues of human rights and individual freedom? Ultimately, what is the relationship between this vision of the state and China's urgent promotion of the antisubversion legislation in Hong Kong? The most disturbing thing about *Hero* is not necessarily Zhang's fascist aesthetic or his self-appointed role as China's Leni Reifenstahl, but the Beijing officials' warm approval of the film, reflecting their endorsement of the political ideology within it. The popularity of this film among the Mainland audience, despite controversy, also attests to a popular support within China for China's aggressive "One Country" policy, not just claiming sovereignty over former colonies like Hong Kong and Macau, but also asserting historic rights over disputed regions such as Xinjiang, Tibet, and Taiwan, ROC, in the name of national unity.[12] This kind of nationalist doctrine of unification is based on ethnic and cultural fundamentalism and forceful suppression of differences and heterodoxy. There are good reasons for Hong Kong people to be anxious about the Mainland audience's excitement over this film and its ready embrace of a questionable and problematic reinterpretation of history.

The discourse of state tyranny in *Hero* and the notion of a single individual who is both extralegal and wields absolute power create discomfort in Hong Kong. To many Hong Kong people, it articulates a particular propensity toward political hero worship in China. Zhang Yimou's depiction of the Qin emperor captures a particular nostalgia for the personal charisma and totalitarian rule of China's most recent "monarch," Mao Zedong.[13] To many, among the postwar generation in Hong Kong, Mao connotes China's great famine in the 1950s that resulted from the disastrous experiments of the Great Leap Forward and the destruction of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s and 1970s. Many recall images of the struggle sessions, and news of family members succumbing to persecutions or committing suicide.[14] The whole communist experience seen from Hong Kong had none of the vision or exuberance of political possibility of mass movements, only the zealousness of Mao worship and the consequences of rabid nationalism.

Because of this, Hong Kong people are wary of "heroes." Even a decision in 2003 to dedicate in Hong Kong a memorial to Sun Yat-Sen, the early twentieth-century revolutionary and China's first republican president after bringing down the last dynasty, provoked concern. Although Sun spent his

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formative years and received his education in Hong Kong and is generally an uncontroversial figure, this planned memorial prompted much discussion in Hong Kong society and, particularly, objections from the well-known columnist and film critic Shek Kei. Pointing to the already overabundance of Sun Yat-Sen memorials in Zhongshan (Sun's hometown), China, and in Taiwan, he admonished his readers: "The era of hero-worship is over. As true revolutionaries, we must oppose this kind of superstitious hero-worship. I recall the story celebrating Sun Yat-Sen himself smashing idols [in temples] when he was a child."[15] For Shek Kei, the propensity for hero worship in popular historical narratives contradicts the spirit of rationality and the principles of the rule of law that Hong Kong residents see as identifying them as part of the "modern" world and as distinct from China.[16]

Hong Kong people's fear of Communist China had been ameliorated in the beginning of the 1980s as China gradually shifted to a market economy under Deng Xiaoping and opened up its borders to Hong Kong people, many of whom were able to visit their families for the first time since the 1950s. However, the brutal military suppression of the 1989 Tiananmen prodemocracy movement, in which scores of young college students and their supporters were killed by China's military, sent shock waves to Hong Kong that reversed much of the trust. Zhang Yimou's image of the Qin emperor resonated powerfully in Hong Kong because it captures filmicly China's capacity for violence when the authority of the state is challenged. Though Zhang argued that he had no intention of celebrating militarism, many see it as an inevitable part of the Chinese Communist Party's absolutism.

Hong Kong's fear of China's state violence can be seen from the people's attitude toward various martial symbols of the Chinese state, such as the Public Security and the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Even at the height of China's massive public relations campaign around 1997 to court Hong Kong people's loyalty and trust, and despite a general surge in nationalist feelings among Hong Kong people toward China around that time, these government organs, ostensibly "in the service of the people (*wei renmin fuwu*)," were still regarded with distain and distrust.[17] The Mainland government had to issue many reassurances to the Hong Kong people that the PLA sent to replace the outgoing British forces in Hong Kong would not interfere with the Hong Kong society. It is hard not to make a visual connection between the awesome images of the Qin emperor's massive war machines and the banks of PLA entering the territory of Hong Kong on July 1, 1997.[18]

Both *Infernal Affairs* and *PTU* depict a world of shadowy nocturnal cityscape. The battles of the various groups of the subterranean world,

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however, never contaminate the daytime world of the regular citizens of the city. More than *Infernal Affairs*, *PTU* maps a terrain of alterity, a signifying space that is the negative space of the city—the psychological underside of daytime quotidian familiarity. What is the relationship between the "subconscious" reality of *PTU* or the secret lives of the individuals of *Infernal Affairs* and the everyday metropolis? How do both films recuperate the narrative of Hong Kong against its extravagant representation in the government branding campaigns as "Asia's World City"?[19]

Hong Kong was shrouded by sadness, anxiety, and discontent between 2002 and 2003. First, in the world of pop culture, the Hong Kong society was shocked and bereaved by the deaths of two of its most prominent, iconic, and beloved performers, Roman Tam in November 2002 and Leslie Cheung in April 2003. 2003 then ended with the death of another popular singer and actress, Anita Mui, in December. The lives of these popular idols and their particular endings came to be seen as highly symbolic of "the Hong Kong story." Roman's songs resounded almost nightly on television and were a ubiquitous part of the everyday life of Hong Kong during the decade of its economic takeoff. In the 1970s and 1980s, Roman's ornate costumes and extravagant performance style coincided with the ebullience of the time and the flamboyance of, increasingly, a nouveau riche society. He embodied the aspirations and optimism of a whole generation, whose formative years spanned the decade. His decline in health in the late 1990s also coincided with the downward spiral in Hong Kong's economy, beginning with the Asian crisis in 1997, the year of Hong Kong's return to China, and hitting rock bottom by the first half of 2003.

If Roman represents the native product of the 1970s, whose image was extravagant if a bit kitsch, a working-class success story through hardscrabble, Leslie Cheung epitomizes the 1980s and 1990s generation. Best known to the international audience as the female impersonator in Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* and Wong Kar-Wai's leading man in *Days of Being Wild*, *Ashes of Time*, and *Happy Together*, Leslie, typical of his generation, strongly identified with European refinement. He studied in the UK, spoke fluent English, and affected a mannered, languid grace. He was Hong Kong's first and only openly homosexual actor, a fact that seemed to accentuate the melancholy and decadence in his androgynous beauty. His public persona embodied his prosperous generation's fin de siècle ennui, their reality constantly dominated by a tragic sense of ending marked by Hong Kong's Handover to Chinese sovereignty. Of course, British Hong Kong ended in 1997, but people's clinging attachment to the colonial aura in Hong Kong only became irrevocably and rudely severed when Leslie leaped to his death on April's Fools Day, 2003, from the twenty-first

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floor of the Hong Kong Mandarin Hotel, itself, an extravagant symbol of high colonial culture in Hong Kong.

The mourning was barely over when another superstar, Anita Mui, succumbed to cancer, initiating another bout of melancholia. She was publicly dubbed "Hong Kong's daughter" because of her rags-to-riches story that many see as representative of Hong Kong's historical experience. Her earthy personality, her sense of righteousness, and her diligence and true talent that helped her rise to superstardom despite her very humble background, were also seen as quintessential qualities of Hong Kong and, as such, she was deemed a personification of the "Hong Kong Spirit." With the extinguishing of the brightest stars in the entertainment world, the era of prosperity and exuberance had come to a resolute end.

The despair and discontent of Hong Kong people were endemic by 2002 and 2003. In this year the city was saddened by a spate of suicides, from college students who could not see a viable future, to owners of failed businesses saddled with immense debt. In 2002, there was a total of 1,100 self-inflicted deaths, which means 15 suicides per 100,000 people. It accounts for 3% of the city's death rate that year.[20] By 2003, Hong Kong was dubbed the "suicide city," and had one of the highest suicide rates in the developed world, at 16.4 per 100,000 people. It has been reported that the major cause of suicide in Hong Kong was financial troubles, which accounted for 24.7% of the total suicides. 34% of those who committed suicide were men between the ages of forty and fifty-nine. Half of the suicide victims were unemployed.[21] The most chosen forms of death were jumping from tall buildings and asphyxiation by burning charcoal at home. Because the collective mental prostration had become so dire by the beginning of 2003, the Good Samaritans began publishing inspirational messages and their hotline number on the bags of charcoal sold in supermarkets.

The government was accused of being unresponsive or uncaring with its relentless rhetoric of optimism and continued to alienate the population with its policies. However, if this discourse of cheer was ineffectual in alleviating immediate human problems, it was nevertheless necessary in nurturing the long-term confidence of capital. That is to say, for Hong Kong to continue to accommodate capitalism by providing a safe, orderly, and positive environment that nurtures business, all the pathos of the Hong Kong society would have to be driven underground. This subterranean unsettlement is reflected in the divided worlds in both *PTU* and *Infernal Affairs* (fig. 1.1, Bounce Back, Hong Kong!).

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Fig. 1.1: Bounce Back, Hong Kong!
In the difficult days of early 2003, many buses and mini buses in Hong Kong had slogans to inspire and encourage painted on them. This one says, "Fallen behind? We will catch up soon!" There is an English version that says, "Bounce Back, Hong Kong!"

In the spring of 2003, societal ennui was spreading like an infection. People were frustrated that the government seemed not to hear the opposing voices to "Article 23." The chief government officials, the chief executive, as well as the pro-China DAB Party (Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong), became increasingly unpopular. In February, the secretary for home affairs, Dr. Patrick Ho, as in the territory's old Chinese New Years custom, went to Chegong Temple to divine Hong Kong's fortune for the year. Much to the city's collective horror, he received a double negative divination—a prediction of a very bad year for Hong Kong. This incident was criticized as an exceptional government public relations blunder, yet another proof of the incompetence of the government. However, no amount of embarrassed laughing off of this as a silly old custom could disperse the ominous mood it created in the city.

As gloom spread like a miasma over the city, the repressed pathos erupted metaphorically and literally in the worst epidemic in the territory's recent history. The SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak that ravaged

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Hong Kong at the beginning of March 2003 brought the city to its knees, infecting over a thousand and killing 299 people, including doctors and medical personnel on the frontline. By the time everything blew over in May, the SARS epidemic had left the Hong Kong economy, which relies heavily on tourism and its related industries, such as food and entertainment, completely prostrate.

The promise of capitalism was unrealized and the incentive to serve its cause dissipated. When the government tried to refocus on the issue of Article 23 after the epidemic subsided, the people erupted. The anti-Article 23 and antigovernment demonstration on July 1, 2003, was one of the largest protests in the territory, second to the 1989 prodemocracy demonstration in support of the Chinese students in Tiananmen. Both the Hong Kong and Beijing governments were alarmed at the size of the event in which five hundred thousand (of a population of six and a half million) people participated. The protest resulted in the resignation of two top officials, the unpopular secretary of security, Regina Lau Yip, and the secretary of finance, Anthony Leung. The government postponed the legislation indefinitely and Beijing accelerated an economic bale-out package for Hong Kong in order to pacify the people, all the while admonishing the Hong Kong people that unity and stability were crucial to reviving the economy.[22]

The Hong Kong people were understandably proud of the outcome of July 1, believing they had successfully pressured the government to "return governance to the people (*huanzheng yumin*)." Mainland politicians, however, favored the phrase "*fanzhong luangang* (rebelling against China, creating turmoil for Hong Kong)," cautioning Hong Kong against being overly tolerant of dissent. This phrase is an adaptation of an idiomatic expression in historical narratives used to describe rebellion against a legitimate dynasty.[23] This kind of dynastic reference is particularly redolent with Zhang Yimou's reinterpretation of the Qin emperor in *Hero*. Not only does it bring to focus the pretensions of absolutism of China's central government, it also directs our attention to the military might behind this will to rule. Soon after the July 1 protests, a cartoon in the *Ming Pao Daily* shows two women celebrating the success of the July 1 protest. One said that she was proud of the orderliness and discipline displayed by the demonstrators. The other said she was even more delighted at the restraint of the PLA.[24] Despite the general exuberance about the demonstrations, many in Hong Kong were also keenly aware of the possibility that the Mainland government could have reacted with the same violent intolerance of 1989.

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