
Hong Kong–Hollywood Connections

Part I: Industrial Collaborations and Divergences

Hollywood constitutes the only truly global cinema system. David Bordwell defines a global cinema as one that occupies “significant space” in the global film market that extends beyond a single picture or cycle of films (82). For 40 years, Hollywood has saturated the international film market with its products and has enjoyed some of the largest box-office returns. With a high demand for its films, Hollywood threatens other film industries by dominating their markets with generic English-language films often devoid of local/indigenous content and themes. While Hollywood might not be the most prolific film industry in the world, it is the most moneyed (Denison 105). In light of Hollywood’s domination of worldwide screens since 1980, aided by the rise of the Hollywood blockbuster, Hollywood has become the leader in global film culture (Desser, “Hong” 214).

In the wake of Hollywood’s increasing global dominance, Hong Kong was one of the few cinemas to thrive, entering its own golden age of filmmaking from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s; during this time, Hong Kong was second only to Hollywood in terms of its total overseas exports. These films, however, were almost exclusively screened throughout East and Southeast Asia¹ and brought in only a fraction of Hollywood’s international box-office returns² (Bordwell 82). In light of its regional influence, Hong Kong can be considered a transnational cinema whose production, distribution, and exhibition is regionally based and whose films cater to more localized audiences.³ Hong Kong filmmaking also evades the narrow definition of “national cinema” because of the complex and paradoxical history of the region, which, until 1997, had existed between two nations, the British Empire and China (Leary 58).⁴

The term “transnational” is used more often than it is defined and is frequently employed as a largely self-evident qualifier in film studies scholarship (Hjort 12). For Aihwa Ong, the transnational encompasses the horizontal and relational nature of social, economic, and cultural processes. She writes:

Trans denotes both moving through space or across lines, as well as changing the nature of something . . . [and] also alludes to the *transversal*, the *transactional*, the *translational*, and the *transgressive* aspects of contemporary behaviour and imagination that are incited, enabled, and regulated by the changing logics of states and capitalism.⁵ (4)

Nataša Ďurovičová argues that the prefix “trans” foregrounds not only mobility but also the unevenness of these relations (x). When applied to film, the discussion of transnationalism can become so broad that it encompasses every film that has ever been exported across a national border, or so narrow in its reference to any non-Hollywood film. Implicit in the discussion of cinematic transnationalism is the ideological tendency to pit Hollywood against the rest of the film-producing world (Hunt and Leung 3).

Scholars have long described the influence of “America,” through the cultural industry of Hollywood, as a form of “cultural imperialism.” As Zhiwei Xiao notes, scholars have historically stressed Western domination—which is often construed as Americanization—rather than the role of agency and appropriation in the cultural transaction (88). The problem with cultural imperialist theory, Ryan Dunch contends, is that colonized people are viewed as passive recipients of Western cultural texts, a sentiment that relays a condescending attitude toward the subalterns (302). Recently, film studies scholars have shifted away from cultural imperialist theory to embrace a more fluid and multidirectional conceptualization of cinematic exchange. Kathleen Newman explains:

The assumption that the export of European and U.S. cinema to the rest of the world, from the silent period onward, inspired only derivative image cultures has been replaced by a dynamic model of cinematic exchange, where filmmakers around the world are known to have been in dialogue with one another’s work, and other cultural and political exchanges to form the dynamic context of these dialogues. (4)

While the Hong Kong–Hollywood connection is central to this book, it is important to recognize that influence runs *both ways*; filmmaking personnel, cinematic technology and techniques, and narrative content flow back and forth between Hong Kong and Hollywood.

Global Aspirations, Transnational Connections

Since the 1970s, Hong Kong filmmakers and producers (much like their Hollywood counterparts) have had global aspirations, desiring to export their films beyond their local and regional markets and into the West and especially the American film market. With the release of *King Boxer* (Jeong 1972) in 1973, Hong Kong experienced global success with its kung fu films. By the end of that year, Hong Kong had released 38 films in the United States, including those of Chinese American superstar Bruce Lee. The novelty of the genre, however, quickly faded, and kung fu became a bad joke in the United States because of the low production values and poor voice dubbing of the films (Bordwell 84, Patridge 408). Since the 1970s, Hong Kong producers like Raymond Chow of the Golden Harvest production company have tried to replicate the success of the “kung fu craze” to compete with Hollywood and break into its lucrative domestic film market.⁶ In the 1990s, Terence Chang made significant strides toward achieving this goal, becoming what David Bordwell describes as Hong Kong’s “first significant liaison with the United States” by opening doors in Hollywood for his Hong Kong client list that includes director John Woo and actor Chow Yun-Fat (86). Their success in Hollywood has paved the way for the crossover of other Hong Kong creative film talent, including directors Tsui Hark, Ringo Lam, Stanley Tong, Kirk Wong, Peter Chan, and Ronnie Yu; actors Jackie Chan, Jet Li, Donnie Yen, and Simon Yam; and choreographers Corey Yuen, Woo Ping Yuen, Cheung-Yan Yuen, Sammo Hung, and Dion Lam.⁷ Bordwell contends that Hong Kong cinema only “began to go global by joining the only truly global film industry” of Hollywood (86).

Following the handover of Hong Kong to mainland China in 1997, Hong Kong cinema experienced an industry-wide crisis that significantly altered its production and distribution practices and affected its global aspirations. The (temporary) decline of the cinema can be attributed, in part, to uncertainties as to how the “one country [China]—two systems [Hong Kong, mainland China]” policy governing the amalgamation would affect Hong Kong’s film industry. In the late 1990s, Hong Kong saw the migration of creative film talent overseas and especially to Hollywood,

which drained the local industry of some of its most bankable filmmakers. As a result, the creative film talent that remained in Hong Kong struggled to produce commercially viable action films that could compete in the local and regional markets against more polished Hollywood blockbusters, many of which starred and/or were stylized by Hong Kong émigrés (e.g., John Woo's *Mission Impossible II* [2000] and the Jackie Chan star vehicle *Rush Hour* [Ratner 1998]). In response to the industry crisis, Hong Kong filmmakers adopted a range of production strategies aimed at ensuring the survival of the local cinema.

Some Hong Kong filmmakers began to adjust the narrative and stylistic conventions of their films to compete with Hollywood blockbusters in their local and regional markets. Some of these changes include the implementation of a more systematic approach to filmmaking, an increasing emphasis on scripts and the scriptwriting process, the improvement of production values and an increasing use of CGI, the inclusion of English-language dialogue as well as the production of English-language action films, and the casting of transnational and multilingual Chinese actors to star in their films. For example, the implementation of a more formalized system of production diminished the role of improvisation in the filmmaking process, a characteristic that once defined Hong Kong cinema during its golden age (Curtin 247). Considered outdated, this ensemble style of filmmaking has been replaced with a more structured mode of production in order to attract potential regional/international financiers (ibid. 248). While attempting to compete with the popular appeal of Hollywood, Hong Kong filmmakers have sacrificed many of the local qualities that once defined the industry, and as a result, the post-1997 cinema is often described as experiencing an identity crisis in addition to an industrial one.

Other Hong Kong filmmakers relied on collaborative partnerships with Pan-Asian cinemas in order to generate revenue. In 1997, the Asian financial crisis strongly affected the economies of East and Southeast Asia to such a degree that many countries were unable to temporarily import and screen Hong Kong films. Having lost a primary source of revenue, Hong Kong filmmakers instigated partnerships with various Asian cinemas to secure funding for their projects and gain access to the film markets of their collaborators. The most significant connection Hong Kong filmmakers have established in the post-1997 era is with mainland China. Following the international success of *Crouching Tiger*, Hong Kong has collaborated with the mainland on a number of Mandarin-language action films that strongly rely on the cinematic expertise of Hong Kong

filmmakers and the popular appeal of their marquee male stars. In 2003, Hong Kong signed a free trade agreement with China—CEPA (Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement)—that delineates the parameters of Chinese film collaborations. While CEPA does not limit the number of Hong Kong “principle creative personnel” (i.e., director, screenwriter, cinematographer, choreographer) on a project, the agreement stipulates that one-third of the film’s “leading artists” (i.e., lead and/or supporting actor/actress) must originate from the mainland (“CEPA” par. 9). While promoting the participation of Hong Kong creative film talent behind the scenes, CEPA insists that film castings (i.e., the faces of the film) reflect the transnational nature of co-productions.

Mainland performers seem to benefit the most from these casting parameters, riding the coattails of Hong Kong action stars in these films and gaining visibility in the local, regional, and at times even global film markets (e.g., Zhang Ziyi). More importantly, these co-productions rely on the action filmmaking expertise of Hong Kong practitioners, who work under the strict guidelines imposed by mainland censors. As Ilaria Sala notes:

Neither CEPA nor any other commercial agreement has been able to change the fact that officials of China’s Department of Censorship and Propaganda will retain the right to remove all sections of a movie they deem offensive or inappropriate. In the case of a movie shot wholly or partially on the mainland, the censors maintain the right to screen the footage before it is released or taken abroad, and to take permanent possession of those sections they choose to excise. (75)

Hong Kong filmmakers working in mainland cinema struggle with the question of artistic integrity, engaging in the act of self-censorship to secure distribution for their films in China. While CEPA offers Hong Kong filmmakers access to the lucrative Chinese film market, it also compels them to align with and promote the ideological mandate of the mainland Chinese government.

In the new millennium, Hong Kong and Hollywood have also collaborated on large-budgeted action films in the hope of replicating the widespread success of *Crouching Tiger*. Hollywood has not only invested in Chinese films, but American production companies like Columbia Pictures have also set up production centers in Hong Kong (Curtin 99). As Tony Wang of BVI notes:

[I]n the U.S., there are a lot of action directors who can fill the pipeline in Hollywood, but a film like *Crouching Tiger* or *The Wedding Banquet* can only be made in Asia. And if they are done well, these films will bring new audiences to the theater both here and abroad. (Qtd. in Curtin 99)

The increase in Hollywood/American financing offers Chinese filmmakers access to creative resources that will help to improve production values and render their films competitive on the international market. Hollywood, for its part, can also maintain market dominance in the Chinese-speaking world by co-producing high-quality Chinese blockbusters and releasing them alongside its popular domestic action films.

Through these collaborations, Hong Kong and Hollywood have entered into a strategic partnership that seemingly benefits both industries. Hong Kong filmmakers initially collaborated with Hollywood out of necessity. Unlike the global aspirations of Hong Kong filmmakers during the “kung fu craze,” recent interest in the American film market via co-productions appears to be a strategy of survival for Hong Kong’s struggling post-1997 film industry. In contrast, Hollywood appears to be motivated solely by the prospect of commercial gain. Michael Curtin describes Hollywood’s recent investment in Chinese filmmaking as “the latest turn in a strategy that has perpetuated American media dominance in global markets for almost a century and contributed to the homogenization of popular culture under the aegis of Western institutions” (1). Using Hong Kong cinema as a point of entry, Hollywood moguls are attempting to gain a stronger foothold in the burgeoning Chinese film market. With more than 1 billion television viewers and 200 million moviegoers in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), as well as more than 60 million overseas Chinese living in Taiwan, Malaysia, the United States, and Canada, Chinese audiences around the globe constitute the most attractive film market. These films also represent the expanding ambitions of Hollywood as it refashions Chinese narratives for Western audiences (Curtin 1).

Hollywood’s recent interest in Hong Kong cinema is part of a broader trend in filmmaking that centers on the remaking and repackaging of East Asian films into a mainstream American form (Marchetti and Tan 1). Leon Hunt attributes the Asianization of Hollywood film to American producers like Quentin Tarantino and Joel Silver, who have functioned as the transnational gatekeepers of East Asia cinema. Hunt describes Tarantino as a “connoisseur” gatekeeper who not only incorporates the aesthetics of East Asian cinema but also is explicitly referential toward these sources.

In comparison, Silver, who produced *The Matrix* franchise, assimilates the aesthetics of East Asian cinema into his films in a non-referential way (“Asiophilia” 220). Yet, in a post-*Crouching Tiger* era, Hunt contends that it is “decidedly regressive to see a global Martial Arts film return to fantasies of white warriors triumphing over the ‘Orient’” (ibid. 233).⁸

Stephen Teo describes Hollywood’s approach to filmmaking as a form of “globalizing postmodernism,” which he defines as a process through which the conventions of Asian film genres are reconstructed for the global film economy (“*Wuxia*” 198). The commodification of Pan-Asian cultures does not require foreknowledge of said traditions; instead, Hollywood filmmakers transcribe “what is culturally specific in order to make [their films] more presentable to a worldwide audience” (ibid. 198). Bliss Cua Lim similarly argues that Hollywood deracinates Asian genre cinema by transforming “a signature (a mark of innovation, of originality, of newness or novelty greeted by vigorous, profitable audience demand)” into “a formula (no longer a marker of local, national, or cultural singularity but a marker of deracinated iterability)” (“Generic” 116). Lim writes:

[B]y way of homage, by hiring émigré talent, through distributor pick-ups of foreign films and through the funding of transnational productions . . . [Hollywood] neutralise[s] national or regional cinemas that have acquired cult US audiences and have proven able box office adversaries abroad. . . . All of a sudden, Hollywood action blockbusters look just like Hong Kong martial arts flicks and the distinctions between J-horror and Hollywood horror films become less acute. (“Generic” 116–17)

Both Teo and Lim draw attention to the centrality of genre and especially the action film to Hollywood’s deracination of Asian cinemas like Hong Kong.

Star Cultures and Systems

The economic success of Hollywood has been historically dependent on star culture and, more specifically, on the construction and promotion of star personas. Richard Dyer has theorized that the star phenomenon “consists of everything that is publicly available about stars,” including their filmic images, studio-released promotional materials, (un)intentional publicity, and the circulation of star discourse (*Heavenly* 3). Always intertextual and multimedia, star images are complex systems of representations

that work to present Hollywood actors as being fascinating and intrinsically important to the social and cultural welfare of Hollywood's loyal audience (ibid. 3, 17). Because the movie star is made and not born, he or she can be considered a cultural commodity whose appeal is measured primarily in box-office terms. Each actor willingly participates, to some degree, in the manufacturing of his or her own star persona (ibid. 5). While serving as the provisional face of Hollywood, contemporary stars possess limited control over the direction of their images and careers because of the lack of personal capital they invest in their films (Tashiro 30). Each star faces structural limitations in the forms of role choice, typecasting, and/or (gendered, racial, sexual) stereotyping, and the degree of control a star retains over his or her image varies greatly from star to star, as well as across the phases in a star's career (Dyer, *Heavenly* 5).

In Hollywood, a star comes second to his or her film, which is considered the primary commercial product, and the sole purpose of the star is to promote his or her vehicle (Bordwell 36). Historically, there has been limited star crossover between American entertainment industries such as film, television, and music, and the star system of Hollywood is believed to produce in its audiences "a craving to see the cross-over star fail" (Dickinson 185). Hollywood also promotes an "illusion of individuality" by highlighting or even exaggerating the contributions of filmmakers and actors as artists. The goal, according to Tashiro, is to draw attention away from the hierarchy of corporate control and obscure the structural dynamics that, in fact, determine Hollywood production (32, 34). With the conglomeration of Hollywood and the rise of the blockbuster in the 1970s, American producers have invested extremely large and concentrated sums of money into a smaller number of film projects.⁹ As a result, Hollywood has increasingly relied on the box-office appeal of its exclusive roster of marquee stars to promote blockbusters and guarantee a profitable return on their investments.

Conversely, Hong Kong cinema is part of a Cantonese-language multimedia entertainment complex known as *ge-ying-shi* (music-film-TV) that is geared toward promoting the star first and his or her vehicles second. A Hong Kong producer typically builds a film around an intermedial star with a devoted fan base, and that star then sells the film, along with his or her other vehicles (e.g., CDs, concerts), through public appearances and interviews with fan magazines (Bordwell 36). The success of the Hong Kong film industry is contingent on the development and promotion of intermedial stars. In the early 1990s, for instance, Hong Kong popular culture was dominated by male Cantopop stars like "The Four

Heavenly Kings”—Jackie Cheung, Aaron Kwok, Leon Lai, and Andy Lau. These four singers parlayed their Cantopop success into lucrative acting careers and have been featured in numerous high-octane action movies (Logan 179). In Hong Kong, the most successful (Cantonese-language) stars typically enjoy careers in more than one entertainment industry.

The intermedial star system of Hong Kong presents a different and interconnected relationship between the film star and the auxiliary market; as a result, it is difficult to speak about Hong Kong film stars without considering their entire body of work. This requires the use of a trans-medial lens in order to take into consideration the confluence of various (popular) cultural texts through which the identity of the Hong Kong star is shaped. In order to speak knowledgably about the warrior women of Hong Kong action, one cannot discuss their filmic representations in isolation from their intermedial star personas, which are informed by such entertainment industries as Cantopop (e.g., Charlene Choi), beauty pageants (e.g., Kristy Yang), television (e.g., Bernice Liu), and even pornography (e.g., Shu Qi).

Part II: Heroic Identities in Hong Kong Cinema

Scholarly interest in Hong Kong cinema was sparked by the signing of the Joint Declaration in 1984, which determined the date of Hong Kong's handover to China. Identity, according to Kobena Mercer, “only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent, and stable is displaced by the appearance of doubt and uncertainty” (503). Mercer's statement draws attention to the fact that preliminary research on Hong Kong cinema primarily discusses the industry in relation to the impending amalgamation. Gary Needham notes that early dossiers in *Film Comment* and *Cahiers du cinéma*, as well as the festival reports that appeared in *Screen*, “read Hong Kong films in a highly allegorical way as explicitly or implicitly symptomatic of a culture responding to the negotiations between Britain and China” (64). Films produced from the New Wave (1979–84) onward were generally regarded as formally embodying concerns about the accelerating handover deadline and exhibiting signs of postmodern crisis. These early writings set the tone for subsequent film scholars who, consciously or not, also consider Hong Kong cinema in relation to its colonial history (ibid. 64–65).

The volume of film scholarship produced on Hong Kong cinema greatly increased in the years bookending the amalgamation of Hong

Kong and mainland China (1997). North American and European scholars became increasingly attentive to the generic, formal, and aesthetic qualities of Hong Kong cinema and addressed issues regarding the cinema's history and representation of local identity (Needham 65). Scholarship produced in the late 1990s and early 2000s can be divided into two categories. First, scholars such as Bey Logan (1995), David Bordwell (2000), David Desser (2000), and Leon Hunt (2003) have published comprehensive studies exploring the action cinema of Hong Kong. Mapping out the history of Hong Kong cinema via the action genre, these scholars highlight the contributions of prominent male directors, actors, and action choreographers working in the kung fu (1970s), gunplay (1980s), and kung fu revival (1990s) genres. Because the crossover of Hong Kong stars to Hollywood coincides with the production of these books, scholars frequently discuss the emigration of creative film talent at the end of their studies without fully considering its impact on the domestic cinema. Second, scholars such as Esther Yau (1994), Stephen Teo (1997), Julian Stringer (2000), and Gina Marchetti (2006) frame their discussions of Hong Kong cinema in relation to the (social, political, economic, ideological, cultural) impact of the handover. They are most interested in exploring how, in the years leading up to the handover, Hong Kong cinema began exhibiting symptoms of a "1997 consciousness" (Yau, "Border" 181) or "China syndrome" (Teo, *Hong* 207). They focus on dramas and art films produced before 1997, which take the experiences of diasporic Chinese as their subject matter. These scholars also end their examination of Hong Kong cinema in 1997 and provide limited insights into the production of films in the post-1997 industry.

This book is part of a new phase of scholarship on Hong Kong cinema that began in the mid-2000s with the publication of Needham's "The Post-Colonial Hong Kong Cinema" (2006), Michael Curtin's *Playing to the World's Biggest Audience* (2007), and Vivian Lee's *Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997* (2009), as well as the edited collections *Hong Kong Connections* (2005) and *Hong Kong Film, Hollywood, and the New Global Cinema* (2007). What collectively defines this body of work is an explicit focus on post-1997 filmmaking. While attentive to the industry crisis, these scholars discuss how Hong Kong cinema, through a range of new production strategies, has continued to produce commercially viable films throughout the 2000s for the local, regional, and international film markets. More importantly, these scholars explore how post-1997 films reflect the contemporaneous concerns and/or lived experiences of local residents in the new Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China. They explore a range

of topics, including the impact of return migration and repatriation of Hong Kong's diaspora; the role of memory in the (re)negotiation of Hong Kong identities in local, regional, and global spaces; and the rethinking of national reunification in a post-handover period that has been defined by an increasing interconnection of the economies and cultural industries of Hong Kong and mainland China. This new phase of scholarship does not discount previous scholarly works, but rather reconceptualizes the history of Hong Kong cinema to include both pre-1997 and post-1997 phases, and argues for the continuity of, rather than a disjuncture in, Hong Kong filmmaking.

In a similar vein, this book seeks to revision Hong Kong film history in two key ways. First, it considers films that were produced in the years bookending the handover and explores how social, cultural, and geopolitical changes in Hong Kong have influenced the conceptualization and performance of Chinese screen identities. Of primary concern is the role that migration—both to and from Hong Kong—plays in informing filmic narratives and on-screen representations. Second, this book examines the contributions of Pan-Chinese and Chinese North American warrior women to Hong Kong cinema—a topic that has been largely overlooked in film scholarship. Although Rey Chow (“Nostalgia” 2004) and David Eng (2010) explore issues of gender and sexuality particularly in relation to art films, the discussion of Hong Kong identity within the context of the handover should be expanded to include a consideration of the action cinema and female heroic performance. My intent here is to explore how the Asian female body in action can also be considered a locus of identity that connotes powerful messages about nationality and ethnicity to local, regional, and international audiences.

Masculinity and Identity in Hong Kong Action

Hong Kong has a rich tradition of action filmmaking. Since the 1970s, heroic identity in Hong Kong cinema has been firmly associated with masculinity, male performance, and physical achievement. This perception stems from the popularity of kung fu and especially the films of Bruce Lee in the global film market. Lee's fighting style, according to Leon Hunt, was rooted in the concept of physical authenticity, as he “grounded his action in crisp, rapid techniques, multiple kicks, ‘realistic’ exchanges and a fluid grace that the genre had never seen before” (*Kung* 9). Lee often performed martial arts shirtless, and his muscular body in action offered a counter to a history of Western representation that “femi-

nized” and pacified the Asian male subject (Tasker, “Fists” 445). While he starred in only a handful of projects, Lee’s kung fu films remain the most widely viewed Hong Kong productions in history, and his iconic image has strongly influenced global perceptions of Hong Kong heroic identity.

In Hong Kong, however, the films of Lee were less popular (Logan 43), and kung fu, as a genre, was more profoundly shaped by director Zhang Che, who is credited with “re-masculinizing” an action cinema that was previously dominated by female stars (Hunt, *Kung* 53). Zhang’s foregrounding of the muscular body in action was a relatively new phenomenon in Hong Kong and, according to Hunt, was a product of the “colonial government’s attempt to shift local identification away from China” (ibid. 53–54). Matthew Turner similarly argues that the Hong Kong body was designed to match Western models of masculinity influenced by the health and fitness movement in the United States (38). The emergence of muscular masculinity also coincides with the rise of a Chinese middle class in Hong Kong and sparked local interest in “gazing” at healthy bodies (Hunt, *Kung* 54). The muscular heroes developed by Zhang were heavily promoted by the Shaw Brothers star system, which celebrated male heroism while commodifying male beauty (ibid. 55).

By the end of the decade, “pure” kung fu had gone out of fashion, and the late 1970s saw the rise of the kung fu comedy, which evolved soon after into the modern action comedy of the 1980s (Bordwell 207). What distinguishes these generic hybrids from classical kung fu is their representation of heroic masculinity. Heroic identity in kung fu and action comedies is centered on the principle of “corporeal authenticity,” a term defined by Hunt as the measure “of the stunt work and physical risk as much as fighting ability” (*Kung* 39). This high-impact and high-risk aesthetic is most notable in the films of Jackie Chan, the most famous comedy dragon to emerge during this time. The logic of corporeal authenticity is evident in the “Jackie Chan outtake reel,” which documents Chan’s failed attempts at performing stunts. Marketing himself as a “real” action star, Chan takes physical authenticity, a concept popularized by classical kung fu films, into a new direction that has subsequently defined his career (ibid. 39).

The mid-1980s saw a shift away from kung fu filmmaking with the rise of the modern gunplay genre (1985–94). While exchanging martial arts combat for “airily choreographed” gun battles (Bordwell 32), gunplay films remained focused on male heroes and their hyperbolic bodies. Gunplay heroes had slimmer bodies than their kung fu counterparts and performed fully clothed in the space of violent action. Kwai-Cheung Lo

contends that the male heroes featured in the films of John Woo, Tsui Hark, and Wong Kar-Wai possess “virile bodies” that played an important role in the “reinvention” of Hong Kong and the “re-masculinization” of the Chinese body on both local and global scales (“Chinese” 81). Kam Louie notes that through the gunplay genre, male heroism in Hong Kong was reconnected with a pre-existing Chinese mode of representation; exemplified by the military god Guan Yu, male heroes were (re-)connected with the ideals of brotherhood, honor, and trust (155–58). Gunplay films expanded on this Chinese heroic tradition and parlayed it into a compelling representation that appealed to local and regional audiences (*ibid.* 81).

Director John Woo is credited with popularizing heroic bloodshed in the gunplay genre and emphasizing the bonds of brotherhood that linked his male protagonists. Julian Stringer reads Woo’s gunplay films as masculinist texts that combine the male “doing” film genres (e.g., action flicks, westerns, war films) with the female “suffering” genres (e.g., melodrama, women’s film) to create a hero—usually played by Chow Yun-Fat—who was both active and suffering; it was the hero’s suffering that compelled him toward violent action (“Your” 29–30). Philippa Gates contends that gunplay films “are not simply saturated with emotion *and* violence but it is the emotionality of the male hero—his loyalty and devotion to other men—from which the excess of violence erupts” (“Man’s” 63). The emphasis on male interpersonal relationships, rather than heterosexual romantic connection, played a central role in defining the morality of the Chinese hero. As Sun Longji notes:

In Existentialism, a man . . . “exists” by virtue of retreating from all social roles and searching his own soul. If he fails to go through this process, he cannot become a man in the philosophical sense. By contrast, a Chinese fulfills himself within the network of interpersonal relationships. A Chinese is the totality of his social roles. Strip him of his relationships, and there is nothing left. He is not an independent unit. His existence has to be defined by acquaintance. . . . In Chinese, the worlds “single” and “alone” have the connotations of “immoral” and “pathetic.” (Qtd. in Stringer, “Your” 39)

In the gunplay film, the hero (usually played by Chow) was defined by his interpersonal relationships with his “brothers,” whom he supports, defends, and/or avenges through his employment of heroic bloodshed.

Action filmmaking in Hong Kong remained a masculine space throughout the 1990s with the emergence of the kung fu revival film and, with it, the return of hand-to-hand martial arts combat. Jet Li is the biggest star of the genre, who, unlike his “pumped up” predecessors of classical kung fu, remains fully clothed while performing in the space of physical action. Rather than foregrounding physical impenetrability, kung fu revival films emphasize the moral impenetrability of their male heroes, a quality that was enhanced, reinforced, and/or inspired by their training in martial arts. Deviating from muscular masculinity, kung fu revival films distanced their heroes from Western models of masculinity and reflect the mediation of Hong Kong and mainland Chinese identities in anticipation of the handover. This is clearly evinced in the performances of Li, a mainland actor who became an iconic figure in Hong Kong cinema’s countdown to the amalgamation (Hunt, *Kung* 140). For instance, Li starred in *Once Upon a Time in China* (Tsui 1991), a film that explores the newly formed relationship between Hong Kong and its British colonizers at the turn of the twentieth century. The film arguably creates a parallel between the negotiation of Chinese identity amid early British colonial rule and the city’s impending reunification with China. These experiences are embodied by the physically proficient and morally-inclined Cantonese folk hero, Wong Fei Hung (played by Li), who uses martial arts to negotiate issues of national/ethnic identity.

Warrior Women in Hong Kong Cinema

Hong Kong action is a predominantly male-dominated and male-oriented space, and the most profitable films in the local and regional markets center on popular male Chinese stars (e.g., Jackie Chan, Chow Yun-Fat, Andy Lau, Tony Leung, Jet Li, Donnie Yen). The centrality of male performance is evident in film scholarship, which emphasizes the accomplishments of male stars while overlooking the contributions of women. In such seminal books as Logan’s *Hong Kong Action Cinema* (1995), Bordwell’s *Planet Hong Kong* (2000), and Hunt’s *Kung Fu Cult Masters* (2003), the discussion of female performance is limited to a subsection or a separate chapter and is dislocated from the author’s primary discussion of film history and action aesthetics. Studies that do address action women tend to focus on a handful of “key” texts that are considered representative of female performance. For instance, film scholars interested in exploring female heroic identity seem to gravitate toward *The Heroic Trio* (To 1993). While the film stars three of Hong Kong’s most notable female performers—Mag-

gie Cheung, Anita Mui, and Michelle Yeoh—it was a box-office failure in Hong Kong and had limited social/cultural impact. Yet *The Heroic Trio* has been championed by Western film critics interested in exploring the underlying political context of the film, as it is set in a postapocalyptic city that is considered a metaphor for post-1997 Hong Kong. The film presents women, rather than men, as the heroes of the film who safeguard the city from attack. In reality, however, Hong Kong filmmakers have relied on the popular appeal of action men, rather than women, to ensure the survival of the post-1997 film industry.¹⁰

The overwhelming impression provided by film scholars is that Hong Kong identity is inextricably bound up in discourses of Chinese masculinity, male performance, and physical achievement. The male body in action has long been considered a locus of national and ethnic identity for local, regional, and international audiences. While this may be the case, the history of Hong Kong action remains incomplete and can only be expanded through an in-depth examination of Chinese warrior women. While men have set the heroic precedent in Hong Kong action, warrior women have subsequently matched (and in some cases surpassed) this standard by demonstrating their martial arts skills in the space of physical action. In the chapters that follow, I explore how the female body can also be considered a locus of transnational Chinese identity and examine how elements such as gender performance, iconography, generic verisimilitude, corporeal authenticity, language/accent, and family ties/trees connote powerful messages about ethnic authenticity and local identity in Hong Kong as the city moves toward and past its 1997 amalgamation with mainland China.