“‘We are all the same, we are all unique’: The paradox of using individual celebrity as metaphor for national (transnational) identity.”

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Introduction:

This paper will examine the apparently contradictory public persona of a major star in the Hong Kong entertainment industry - an individual who essentially redefined the parameters of an industry, which is, itself, a paradox. In the last decades of the 20th Century, the Hong Kong entertainment industry's attempts to translate American popular culture for a local audience led to an exciting fusion of cultures as the system that was once mocked by English-language media commentators for being equally derivative and ‘alien’, through translation and transmutation, acquired a unique and distinctively local flavour. My use of the now somewhat out-dated notion of East versus West sensibilities will be deliberate as it reflects the tone of contemporary academic and popular scholarly analysis, which perfectly seemed to capture the essence of public sentiment about the territory in the pre-Handover period. It was an explicit dichotomy, with commentators frequently exploiting the notion of a culture at war with its own conception of a national identity. However, the dwindling Western interest in Hong Kong’s fate after 1997 and the social, economic and political opportunities afforded by the reunification with Mainland China meant that the new millennia saw Hong Kong’s so-called ‘Culture of Disappearance’ suddenly reconnecting with its true, original self.
Alongside this shift I will track the career trajectory of Andy Lau – one of the industry's leading stars who successfully mimicked the territory's movement in focus from Western to local and then regional. This individual – whose career roles include actor, singer, entrepreneur, author, and ambassador – has become a surrogate for millions and his career became a metaphor for wider societal movements during a time of cultural instability in the lead up and aftermath of Hong Kong’s 1997 reunification with Mainland China.

Originality through Mimicry: The Paradox of Hong Kong/US Pop Culture Relations:

An overview of cinematic influences upon some key American and Hong Kong film productions from the past two decades reveal an increasingly complex system of cultural flows between the two filmmaking centres. The kung fu craze of the 1970s opened up a cult-base Western market for badly-dubbed Hong Kong film productions but it was only in the 1980s and 1990s that a legitimate two-way exchange of popular culture really became apparent, with the arrival of Hong Kong action crime dramas and romantic comedies which reflected classical Hollywood sensibilities and the success of Hong Kong-style action films featuring Western martial artists, such as Chuck Norris, Steven Segal and Jean-Claude Van Damme. Two of the most influential Hong Kong filmmakers of this period were John Woo and Ringo Lam. In an essay on America’s historical appreciation of Asian popular culture, David Desser attributes John Woo’s international success to the fact that American audiences find his films “both familiar and pleasingly unique”, before going on to explain that the Hong Kong gangster films of Woo and Ringo Lam struck a particular chord with US film fans in the 1980s and 1990s because they “fit comfortably into patterns of male-orientated action and buddy films, such as those made by Howard Hawks or Sam Pekinpah” (188). The impact of

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1 Between 1985 and 2005, Andy Lau’s films grossed a total of HK$1,733,275,816 – beating both Jackie Chan (HK$894,090,962) and Stephen Chow Sing-Chi (HK$1,317,452,311) to become the territory’s biggest box office earner for the period.
landmark films, such as Lam’s *City on Fire* (1987) [Figure 1] and Woo’s *The Killer* (1989) [Figure 2] can be seen in the American ‘translations’ of both plot and directorial style in films like Quentin Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) [Figure 3] and Woo’s 1997 Hollywood production, *Face/Off* [Figure 4].

![Figure 1 – City on Fire (Lam 1987)](image1)

![Figure 2 – The Killer (Woo 1989)](image2)

![Figure 3 – Reservoir Dogs (Tarantino 1992)](image3)

![Figure 4 – Face/Off (Woo 1997)](image4)

By 2000, these intertextual cinematic references were becoming more multifaceted. Note, for example, how the *Point Break* (Bigelow 1991) [Figure 5] plot device of having criminals wear presidential face-masks was developed by Johnnie To and Wai Ka-Fai in *Fulltime Killer* (2001) [Figure 6] – complete with a homage to the original film in the form of a poster for *Point Break* being featured during an exchange between the central character and the girl he is dating [Figure 7].
Even more recently, audiences are seeing remakes of Hong Kong and American films that simultaneously maintain stylistic elements of the originals whilst being better contextualised for local viewers. One example is the Hong Kong blockbuster *Infernal Affairs* (Lau & Mak 2002) [Figure 8], which focused on the parallel experiences of an undercover police officer and his triad counterpart – a story which heavily drew upon audience familiarity with similar plots of oppositional character pairing in films such as *The Killer* and *City on Fire*. In the American remake, *The Departed* (Scorsese 2006) [Figure 9], the original cultural significance is lost and a new local construct is created when attention shifts to issues of loyalty within the Irish gangs of Boston.
A further example of the localisation of content is evident in Chen’s 2011 Chinese remake of *What Women Want* (Meyers 2000) [Figures 10-11]. In the Chinese production, the story of a chauvinistic executive who has an accident which gives him the ability to hear the thoughts of all nearby females is set in Shanghai. On the surface, the film seems very similar to a number of Lau’s Hong Kong romantic comedies/dramas but the shift in location to the rapidly growing city of Shanghai introduces a number of themes better suited to modern-day concerns of the Mainland China cosmopolitan elite – specifically, how these newly-moneyed young adults can balance the fast-pace lifestyles afforded by their booming careers with more traditional values, such as filial piety.

Lau as Metaphor:

In the anxious lead up to Hong Kong’s 1997 reunification with Mainland China, Lau was able to distinguish himself from other stars of the industry through a series of public gestures which increasingly positioned the star as a kind of symbolic figurehead for the territory. Lau began focusing more intently on his Chinese heritage and came to be thought of as the ideal Chinese man for the new millennium. By emphasizing the shared cultural heritage of all
Chinese people and embracing the potential for greater co-operation between Mainland and Hong Kong Chinese Lau demonstrated a way for Hong Kong’s population to ease themselves through the uncertainties of the reunification’s transition phase.

In one of his first public statements on the topic, Lau wrote an essay for the Hong Kong Handover special edition of *Time Magazine* in which the star made explicit references to his feelings about the mass exodus of industry talent in the lead up to the reunification with Mainland China. In the article, Lau explains the reasons behind his decision to stay in Hong Kong beyond 1 July 1997 and he implores his fellow artists “to follow their convictions and persevere with their endeavours,” noting that “it is time Chinese people earned the recognition they deserve” (“The People Have High Expectations”). Unlike many other megastars of the Hong Kong film industry, such as Jackie Chan, Chow Yun-fat, Jet Li, Sammo Hung, Tsui Hark, John Woo, and numerous others, Andy Lau consistently refused to entertain the idea of abandoning Hong Kong at the time of the territory’s reunification, instead making public demonstrations of his optimism for Hong Kong’s future and proving his sincerity by publicising his decision to invest in local businesses and real estate. In addition to his financial investment in the future of Hong Kong, Lau began to publically reinvest himself in his Chinese heritage – wearing traditional Chinese clothing more often and sharing with his fans his love of Chinese history and culture. This last gesture took many forms, including public displays of his Buddhist faith, and frequent media references to the various traditional skills (such as calligraphy and martial arts) that he had acquired over the years.

Revered by millions of fans from Hong Kong and China, to Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, Korea, and the various Chinese communities around the world, Anthony Fung notes that Andy Lau’s astounding international popularity is a reflection of the entertainer’s ability to accommodate “both the national and local markets” (266). One way that Lau seemed to
consciously promote a stronger *regionally-based* public persona in the lead up to the Handover was through a shift towards more traditional Chinese elements in his recording output. For example, during the 1990s, Lau started leaving behind the Westernised dance routines and raps and began incorporating traditional Asian music styles and instruments into his pop-fused ballads. Lau also started to present himself more often in music videos dressed in traditional Chinese outfits and engaging in culturally-significant scenarios, such as performing complex lion dance routines and striding along the Great Wall of China with dozens of uniformed flag bearers lining his path. The remarkable shift in style and tone of his songs and music videos reflected Lau’s seemingly sudden evolution from an Americanised urban youth to connoisseur of traditional Chinese culture.

A particularly striking case in point is the difference in Lau’s performance in his music videos for “Happy Monkeys” (開心的馬騮) and “Chinese” (中國人). The music video for “Happy Monkeys”, taken from Lau’s 1993 Cantonese album “The Answer is You” (答案就是你), features Lau and a group of dancers dressed in the kind of street wear favoured by American basketball players and rappers during the early 1990s. Lau, himself, is shown wearing a colourful sports team jacket, long basketball shorts and high top basketball sneakers along with a cap for a US basketball team, worn backwards [Figure 12]. Adding to the American feel of the song is a refrain at the end of the song, which features the repeated English-language phrase, ‘Andy, go, Andy, go go’ – a line which also makes effective use of Lau’s Romanised first name. English language also features on the graffiti wall that Lau and his co-stars pose and dance in front of. The final images show how a Western style of dancing is employed in the clip, including moves made famous by American stars such as Michael Jackson, Will Smith, Prince, and others [Figure 13]. Although Lau occasionally still
makes reference to Western elements in his more recent music videos, he has never returned to such obvious displays of American pop culture.²

![Image 1](image1.jpg)  ![Image 2](image2.jpg)

Figure 12 – “Happy Monkeys” (開心的馬騮) MV

Figure 13 – “Happy Monkeys” (開心的馬騮) MV

The second example represents the peak of Lau’s surge in racial national pride, which would neatly coincide with the reunification of Hong Kong with China. In March 1997 Lau released the patriotic anthem “Chinese” as a Special Edition single that was distributed on China-shaped compact discs. The following month the track was included on his new full-length Mandarin/Cantonese album, *Love is Mysterious* (爱如此神奇). Sung in Mandarin, rather than Cantonese (the local dialect of Hong Kong), the song was a massive hit, both in Hong Kong and Mainland China. The song details the five thousand year history of the Chinese people, with references to generations of Chinese ‘with yellow faces and black eyes’ – people who share the same blood, heart and dreams of the future. The final lines of the song encourage the listener to “let the world know that we are all Chinese.”

The music video for the song features Lau, dressed in a white traditional long robe, standing on the Great Wall surrounded by a small army of flag-bearers, each man holding a red flag emblazoned with the characters for ‘Chinese people’ (中國人) [Figure 14 and Figure 15]. Between verses, the men are replaced by a group of young children, lined up as they follow

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² In a 2003 review for *The China Quarterly*, Maghiel van Crevel notes that, in Mainland China, such Western influences were dubbed “spiritual pollution” (176).
Lau’s instructions to wave their arms and perform unified dance gestures [Figure 16]. As the sun rises behind him, Lau looks meaningfully out into the distance [Figure 17] as he continues to sing the deeply patriotic lyrics – occasionally putting his hand over his heart [Figure 18] or raising an arm and spreading it out to reveal the picturesque vista [Figure 19]. These melodramatic gestures combine with iconic references to the Great Wall location, the ancient army-style flags and the flag-bearers’ ‘Mao suits’ stress the solemnity of the song’s themes. Further substantiation of the premise of Chinese unity is then implied by Lau’s incorporation of a repeated cultural signifier into his performance as, four times during the video, Lau stands straight with his head held high, as he rests one hand in front of his body and uses his other hand to sweep the front flap of the robe behind him [Figures 20-23]. It is a classic gesture frequently employed by heroes in traditional Chinese opera and kung fu films.
Even after the Handover, Lau continued to advertise his pride in the Chinese culture in his music videos. One especially striking example is the video for “Woodfish & Goldfish” (木魚 與金魚). In this clip, Lau reinvents himself as a Buddhist monk, slowly fingering prayer
beads [Figure 24] and, at one point, softly taking hold of a fly that lands on his face before releasing the insect in a pointed gesture towards the Buddhist ethos of non-violence to all living things [Figure 25]. Throughout the clip, Lau can also be seen carefully practicing the art of calligraphy and landscape painting [Figure 26]. Lau is also shown watching over young novice monks as they play and train; practicing martial art manoeuvres and tapping the classic Chinese instruments – the ‘woodfish’ of the song’s title [Figure 27].

Figure 24 – “Woodfish & Goldfish” (木魚與金魚) MV  Figure 25 – “Woodfish & Goldfish” (木魚與金魚) MV

Figure 26 – “Woodfish & Goldfish” (木魚與金魚) MV  Figure 27 – “Woodfish & Goldfish” (木魚與金魚) MV

Perhaps the most striking thing about Andy Lau’s remarkable transformation from a young, highly Westernised pop idol of the 1980s and early 1990s to a legitimate Pan-Asian cultural icon for the new millennium is that it appeared to be an entirely natural progression. Fung quotes a 1991 interview in which a fan of Lau’s claims that Andy Lau had always been seen as patriotic and that “his image as a Chinese is not ‘suddenly political’” (266). Fung also
notes that, whilst “other stars either used politics unwisely or simply avoided it; [Lau] used it carefully, made it public and explicit, and yet did not aggravate the authorities” (266). Unlike local film stars Jackie Chan, Chow Yun-Fat and Stephen Chow or directors Tsui Hark and John Woo, Lau refused to publicly declare any concern about the future of Hong Kong after the reunification. Instead, he wrote a sentimental essay for the special Hong Kong 1997 Handover edition of *Time Magazine* entitled, “The People have High Expectations.” In this article, the entertainer explains the reasons behind his decision to stay in Hong Kong beyond 1 July 1997 whilst imploring fellow artists “to follow their convictions and persevere with their endeavours,” noting that “it is time Chinese people earned the recognition they deserve”.

Conclusion - ‘Pan-Asian Andy’: Crossing Borders and Local/Global Translations:

One way in which Lau has attempted to earn this recognition is through his involvement in Pan-Asian film productions. Once considered simply a star of the local Hong Kong entertainment industry, Lau’s phenomenally successful music career, his high profile participation in the 2008 Beijing Olympics events, and his involvement in numerous blockbuster Pan-Asian – primarily Chinese – films over the past decade has seen him become a legitimate megastar of the region. Perhaps surprisingly, this movement into a transnational entertainment arena did not necessitate Lau having to downplay his local identity. In fact, Lau’s significant success as a Pan-Asian celebrity relies upon his apparently contradictory ability to simultaneously maintain a defined local Hong Kong political identity within a broader Asian (primarily Chinese) cultural identity – an identity which, he often reminds fans, is based on centuries of shared heritage.
Works Cited


*Reservoir Dogs.* Dir. Quentin Tarantino. Perf. Tim Roth, Harvey Keitel, Steve Buscemi, Michael Madsen, Christopher Penn. Lions Gate, 1992. DVD.


