Kung Fu Hustle: Transnational production and the global Chinese-language film

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Abstract
In recent years a number of Chinese-language films have successfully gone global, appealing to large audiences in Asia and the West and generating Hollywood-level box-office receipts. Stephen Chow’s Kung Fu Hustle (2004) is an exemplary and unique instance of this development. It is also an exemplary work of transnational cinema, one that allows us to see the strategic enmeshment of the Hong Kong, Chinese and Hollywood film industries. This article explores Kung Fu Hustle’s transnational mode of production and reads it in relation to the film’s visual and narrative style.

The start of the twenty-first century has seen the emergence of a new kind of Chinese cinema. The global Chinese-language film appeared suddenly with Ang Lee’s Wo hu cang long/Crouching Tiger; Hidden Dragon (2000), a film whose stunning success in the United States and many other parts of the world radically altered the landscape of Asian film-making. This new cinema took fuller shape with Zhang Yimou’s epic trilogy of Yingxiong/ Hero (2002), Shimian maifu/House of Flying Daggers (2004) and Mancheng jin dai huangjin jia/Curse of the Golden Flower (2006). These films transcend many of the divides that have historically cut across the field of Chinese film: they appealed to both popular and elite audiences, were widely distributed and performed well in markets in Asia and the West, and generated Hollywood-level box-office returns. The media and scholars often refer to them as ‘Chinese blockbusters,’ a term that implies they are products of a distinct national cinema defined by the coterminous boundaries of a film industry, a nation-state and a culture. But this notion of national cinemas is becoming outdated, having always been something of a convenient fiction. Chinese cinema today is inescapably transnational. Its film-makers pool resources drawn from multiple film industries, cater to the tastes of foreign as well as domestic viewers, and appropriate genres and styles developed by other cultures. I prefer the phrase ‘global Chinese-language film,’ because it acknowledges that, while these films are linked through their use of one (or more) Chinese language, they do not necessarily share a singular and coherent national cultural identity.

Stephen Chow’s Gongfu/Kung Fu Hustle (2004) is both an exemplary and a unique part of this new cinema. Although Chow’s film, like Crouching Tiger and Hero, is a martial arts film that earned over $100 million worldwide (a rare accomplishment for a non-English-language film), Kung Fu Hustle differed from its predecessors in important ways. By the time Ang Lee and
Zhang Yimou made their global films they already had well-established international reputations as makers of art films. Chow, in contrast, has long been a maker of commercial films for Hong Kong audiences and has thus been largely unknown to American audiences, who have traditionally embraced foreign-language films only to the extent that they satisfy their (limited) taste for art cinema. And where *Crouching Tiger* and *Hero* are stately *wuxia* films, *Kung Fu Hustle* is a loopy comedy that tells a story about a petty hustler who inadvertently starts a war between a notorious criminal gang bent on taking control of a city and a quintet of martial arts masters hiding out in a dilapidated tenement. With *Kung Fu Hustle*, Chow achieved the remarkable feat (for a director) of retaining his unapologetic commercial sensibility and bypassing the art film as he made his very successful move into the mainstream global market.

Perhaps because of his commercial bent, Chow has received far less attention from scholars than have Lee and Zhang. When scholars have engaged with his films, they have typically read them as expressing a distinctly 'local' Hong Kong sensibility. S. V. Srinivas, for instance, focuses on 'the manner in which the local is produced in his films' through a 'web of references [that] produce a "spectator-in-the-know"' (Srinivas 2005: 290, 294), while Linda Chui-han Lai argues that Chow's films 'produce messages coded in ways that the local audience alone can interpret' (Lai 2001: 232). While such readings may make sense in relation to Chow's earlier films, they are inadequate for understanding *Kung Fu Hustle* and its global success.

*Kung Fu Hustle* is worthy of scholarly attention not because it is so local, but for precisely the opposite reason: it embodies a complex form of transnationalism that is becoming more common in Chinese-language cinema but that has not yet been fully recognized in the academy. Film studies scholars tend to define transnational Chinese cinema in geographic, ethnic and auteurist terms: it consists of a body of films made by ethnic Chinese directors who live in the three main Chinese political entities (mainland, Taiwan or Hong Kong) and in the diaspora (Lu 1997; Marchetti 2006). Their methodology has consisted mainly of textual analysis, as they interpret how individual films grapple with issues of identity, nationhood, gender and immigration. While these approaches have led to an impressive body of scholarship, there are still gaps remaining in the ways in which we think about the transnational dimension of Chinese cinema. I will address two such gaps in this article.

First, I will focus on the transnationalism of *Kung Fu Hustle's* production. In doing so, I am answering Jeroen de Kloet's call to 'move away from the textual to the contextual' (de Kloet 2007: 66). More attention needs to be paid to transnational Chinese-language films as products of industries that are in historically specific states of flux, and as regionally and globally circulating commodities. While film studies scholars often gesture towards such an analysis (Ie 2005: 191), they rarely work through the actual details of a film's production and distribution. Scholars who do undertake such materialist analyses often come from other disciplines (Wu and Chan 2007).

Second, I will expand the ethno-geographic and industrial parameters of transnational Chinese cinema by focusing on the role played by Hollywood in *Kung Fu Hustle's* production. The deep involvement of US-based studios and independent production companies in contemporary Chinese cinema is
not widely acknowledged by scholars. In many analyses, Hollywood's 'hegemony' is invoked as a threat but not critically engaged with. Such ritualistic invocations/dismissals of Hollywood support Paul Pickowicz's observation that 'All too often we accept a binary conceptualization that positions "Chinese" cinema at one end and "foreign" cinema at the other," when in fact 'they were and are all mixed up.' These binary formulations oversimplify the complex connections that exist between US-based and Chinese cinemas, while also assuming an ideal state of cultural purity and authenticity. 'To write about foreign influence,' continues Pickowicz, 'is in some minds the same as suggesting that Chinese cinema is somehow derivative--a slavish, lesser, imitator' (Pickowicz 2007: 45).

Scholarly inattention to production histories and the role of Hollywood has, on occasion, combined to produce inaccurate characterizations of individual films. Jenny Lau gets the financing and distribution history of *Crouching Tiger* wrong in an otherwise fine article about *Hero*, while Kin-Yan Szeto misidentifies the producers of *Kung Fu Hustle* in an essay about that film (Lau 2007; Szeto 2007). In both instances, the errors minimize the role of Sony Pictures, incorrectly characterizing the Hollywood studio as a mere distributor of films made by Chinese producers, when in fact various divisions of the studio were deeply involved in the financing and production, as well as the distribution, of both films. The result is that both films appear more purely 'Chinese' than in fact they are.

This is not to suggest that Hollywood has been totally absent from the study of transnational Chinese cinema -- far from it. Scholars have focused on the United States as a market for Chinese-language films (Walsh 2007; Desser 2000; Fore 1997), on the movement of Hong Kong actors into the Hollywood industry (Magnan-Park 2007; Clecko, 1997), and on Chinese-language films that use American *mise-en-scène* (Marchetti 2006) or have US settings (Ford 2007). But these analyses often maintain an implicit boundary between Hollywood and Chinese cinemas, and present Chinese-language films and industries as discrete entities that engage with the similarly discrete entities of the US market or the Hollywood industry.

These boundaries are today rapidly dissolving. In recent years, the Hollywood studios have become enmeshed in Chinese-language and other Asian film industries at the level of production, distribution and exhibition (Klein 2004). Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, pointing to these trans-Pacific ties, urge scholars to move beyond an assumed resistance to Hollywood on the part of Chinese film-makers and recognize the ways in which they are actively engaging with Hollywood in various forms of 'contested transaction' (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 208). As Chinese-language film-makers become integrated into the global capitalist economy and appropriate certain Hollywood conventions of style, mode of production and marketing, they enter into a relationship better defined in terms of 'ambivalence' than hegemony (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 205). It is of course by embracing Hollywood, rather than resisting it, that Zhang Yimou has been 'able to regain the Chinese audience otherwise lost to domestic films' (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 213). In recognizing the extent of these complex interactions with Hollywood, perhaps we can move beyond the intellectually exhausted charges of Orientalism and self-Orientalism and develop a more 'cosmopolitan' understanding of
Chinese cinemas, in which Hollywood's role is openly acknowledged and 'a whole domain of possible Chinesenesses' is thereby opened up (de Kloet 2007: 64).

It is in this spirit that I take up *Kung Fu Hustle*. I want to explore the film as a nexus at which the diverse globalization strategies of three separate film industries converge: Hong Kong's, Hollywood's and China's. In doing so I hope to show how the processes of globalization, localization, regionalization and nationalization can all be dizzyingly at play in a single film.

**Hong Kong**

As a Stephen Chow film, *Kung Fu Hustle* is grounded firmly in the Hong Kong industry. Stephen Chow Sing Chi has been the most popular actor and comedian in Hong Kong for the past fifteen years and is very much a local Hong Kong figure. A Hong Kong native, he launched his career in the early 1980s as co-host of a children's TV show and was propelled to stardom when *Dusheng/All for the Winner* (Jeffrey Lau and Corey Yuen, 1990), in which he had his first leading role, became a runaway hit and Hong Kong's highest grossing film up to that point. In keeping with the industry's rapid-fire mode of production during its peak years, Chow spent the early 1990s making lots of films very quickly, sometimes eight or ten a year, many of them successful. In 1992 he starred in five of the top ten box-office earners, which together generated fully 25 per cent of the industry's total receipts for that year total receipts (Elley 1994: 178). In the mid-1990s Chow formed a production company, The Star Overseas, and began writing, directing and producing his own films, thereby expanding his position within the industry. By 2004 Chow had made over 50 films, many of them major hits.

Throughout his career Chow has been an enthusiastically commercial film-maker with a robustly demotic comic sensibility. 'I wanted to capture the mass audience from the start,' Chow says (Walsh 2003). In his films he has made jokes about used toilet paper, set his crotch on fire, and invented a rat-powered sex machine. Chow built his early stardom around a unique style of verbal humour known as *mo lei tau*, or nonsense dialogue, which featured rapid-fire verbal play with Cantonese dialect and Hong Kong slang, and he made this verbal insouciance the core of his star persona. Chow's typical character (frequently named some variation of Chow Sing Chi) is a mischievous underdog who suffers humiliation at the hands of his superiors, but salvages his self-respect with his sharp tongue. This star persona appealed powerfully to those at the lower end of Hong Kong's hierarchical social order, who revelled in the fantasies of talking back to authority.

Chow's comic style brought him celebrity, but it also restricted him to the status of a local star. His Cantonese-based verbal humour did not always travel well in greater China, nor was it translatable into other languages, and the sheer volume of dialogue and the speed of its delivery made subtitles difficult to follow (Lai 2001: 242–43). As Chow developed his career, however, he began to de-centre this verbal play, putting greater emphasis on physical and situational humour and creating characters with greater depth.

In contrast to his anarchic and local-oriented star persona, Chow the film-maker was, like Jackie Chan before him (Fow, 1997), an ambitious
professional with aspirations beyond the local. With Shaolin zuqu/Shaolin Soccer (2001) he made his first concerted effort to go global. 'I can't rely on the local market, because it's too small,' he explained, 'so since Shaolin Soccer it's always been my ambition to go international, because that's the only way to do the business for me' (Gilchrist 2005). In Shaolin Soccer, Chow sought to attract a worldwide audience by emphasizing physical action and comedy and by synthesizing a variety of globally recognized pop cultural styles, from Bruce Lee-style kung fu to the underdog sports film genre to videogame-style CGI effects. To a large degree he succeeded. Shaolin Soccer shattered box-office records throughout East Asia to become the highest-grossing film in Hong Kong history (the sixth of Chow's films to achieve this distinction) (Walsh 2003) and it elevated Chow from local to regional star. But Shaolin Soccer failed to reach large paying audiences in two of the world's most important markets. In China, a small market with vast potential, authorities refused to release it theatrically, reportedly because it used the vaunted Shaolin Temple name without permission (Robinson 2006). In the United States, the world's largest and most lucrative film market, Miramax bungled the distribution with a tiny, much-delayed release that generated a mere half-million dollars. While Miramax and Beijing were keeping Shaolin Soccer out of their respective markets, however, millions of curious Chinese and Americans watched pirated versions that generated no income for Chow.

After Shaolin Soccer's impressive but not-quite-global success, Chow devoted his energies to making a film that would truly go global, performing profitably in the US and Chinese markets as well as around the world. In the wake of Crouching Tiger's and Hero's success, Chow decided that a full-blown martial arts film would be the best candidate. A lifelong fan of the genre and a believer in its evolution rather than a genre purist, Chow felt inspired by Lee's and Zhang's aestheticized re-visions of the wuxia film and by the Wachowski brothers' marriage of CGI effects with the kung fu film in The Matrix (1999) (Sony 2004: 9). Over the next three years Chow developed the idea for a kung fu comedy that would push the genre forward with a heavy dose of CGI and also look backward by paying homage to its Hong Kong roots.

Chow nurtured the idea for Kung Fu Hustle within his own production company, but decided early on to partner with a Hollywood studio. He pitched the film to Columbia Pictures Film Production Asia, which is the Hong Kong-based division of Sony Pictures Entertainment, the Hollywood studio owned by the Japanese media conglomerate. The American executives at Columbia Asia and Sony were enthusiastic and agreed to handle the business end: the studio would finance 95 per cent of a $20 million production budget and take charge of worldwide marketing and distribution. Chow, in turn, would handle the creative end, serving as producer, writer, director and star, and hiring his own production team (Robinson 2006).

As an international co-production, Kung Fu Hustle embodies the faltering Hong Kong film industry's main strategies for globalization: specialization and regionalization. Until the mid-1990s, Hong Kong hosted a prolific, autonomous and full-service film industry. But around the middle of the decade a host of political, economic and industrial factors converged to send the industry into a downward spiral. Hong Kong's impending return
to Chinese sovereignty prompted a number of directors, producers, actors and choreographers to leave the territory in order to establish footholds in Hollywood or other western film industries. The Asian financial crisis decimated Hong Kong’s primary export markets in Taiwan and South-East Asia, the influx of Hollywood blockbusters raised local audiences’ expectations regarding technical sophistication, the creative energies of the remaining Hong Kong film-makers ran dry and rampant piracy weakened earnings. By decade’s end the industry’s established structure was fatally undermined (Curtin 1999; AP 2005; Shackleton 2004). Since then, it has been struggling to reorganize and reinvent itself. Instead of a production powerhouse exporting films to Chinese-speaking audiences around the world, Hong Kong today is becoming a hub for regional and transnational film production: a locus of highly talented individuals and specialized companies with deep experience in film finance, production, management and distribution. The industry is looking to develop new markets, primarily in China, but also in Japan and the West, where the big money is to be made. No longer the Hollywood of the East, Hong Kong is becoming, in the words of one journalist, its New York – a place where deals are done and creative teams put together, but not where many films are actually made (Walsh 2005).

*Kung Fu Hustle* is an emblematic product of the stripped-down industry that is emerging in Hong Kong. Chow himself is one of the few film-makers who remained in Hong Kong and prospered as the industry foundered. He exercised extensive creative control over *Kung Fu Hustle*, shepherding it carefully through every stage of development and production. Columbia Asia’s $20 million budget allowed him to assemble what he called ‘the best creative team imaginable,’ including A-list Hong Kong talent like co-producer Jeff Lau and industry ‘legends’ Yuen Wo-ping and Sammo Hung as action choreographers (Sony 2004: 5). He also hired all of his department heads and most of the principal actors from within the Hong Kong industry. This Hong Kong creative team determined much of the content of the film, shaping the humour, the performances, the *mise-en-scène* and the style of action.

Textually speaking, *Kung Fu Hustle* is in many ways a typical Chow film. We can see this in Chow’s familiar star persona and in the aesthetic of piling up comic set-pieces built around slapstick, bodily humour and scenes of masculine humiliation. Most important, the film extends the postmodern aesthetic evident in Chow’s earlier films (Teo 1997: 248–49). At the heart of *Kung Fu Hustle*’s visual style is Chow’s reliance on pastiche as his fundamental aesthetic strategy. Eschewing a logic of originality, Chow recycles narrative and comic bits from his previous films (*Duxia 2: Shanghai tan dusheng/God of Gamblers III* [Wong Jing, 1991], *Xiyouji di yibai ling yi hui zhi yueguang baohe/Chinese Odyssey I* [Jeffrey Lau, 1994], *Danae mitan 008/Forbidden City Cop* [Stephen Chow and Vincent Kok, 1996]) and combines them with ostentatious poaches from Hollywood (*Batman* [Tim Burton, 1989], *Gangs of New York* [Martin Scorsese, 2002], The Shining [Stanley Kubrick, 1980], *Spider Man* [Sam Raimi, 2002], Roadrunner cartoons). The film is constructed mosaic-like out of these borrowed fragments of commoditized culture, which crowd out any sense of the ‘real.’ The result is a film with a consciously shallow aesthetic that rejects
the ideal of psychological or social depth in favour of a lateral structure that continuously diverts the viewer’s attention to other texts.

Chow explains his extensive poaching from Hollywood as a natural outgrowth of a lifetime spent watching Hollywood movies in Hong Kong. ‘I grew up on them, I love them, and I use a lot of elements of them in my films,’ says Chow. ‘Clips, whole routines, the Roadrunner in the new film, floods of blood from The Shining — so many perfect images. I want to take them and incorporate them, and more than just imitation, I want to demonstrate how important those films were to me’ (Chaw 2005). Chow here claims the right to appropriate from Hollywood films because they belong to him as a lifelong consumer of them, just as they belong to Americans. In this way we can see how Hollywood films have become an intrinsic part of Hong Kong’s ‘national’ cinema on the basis of their consumption rather than production (Higson 2002). These poaches are also a claim to power on Chow’s part, an insistence that he can borrow at will from Hollywood in much the same way that Hollywood in recent years has been freely borrowing from Hong Kong cinema. Chow’s poaching should also be seen as part of his carefully calculated effort to make a film that will speak to American audiences. ‘I think that my willingness to incorporate so many western elements in my films will, in a way, humanize these films for American audiences. To say, in a subtle way, that this isn’t that foreign a film or foreign a film-maker after all because we all grew up loving the same movies’ (Chaw 2005). Chow hopes that his poaches from Hollywood will culturally deodorize his film (Iwabuchi 2002), easing the taint of excessive foreignness that can be so deadly at the American box office. He wants these references to transform his film (and, by extension, himself) into something universally ‘human’ and thus easily consumed by American viewers who might find an ‘overly’ Chinese film unpalatable.

Chow’s textual references extend deep into Hong Kong’s film history as well. From the outset Chow had imagined Kung Fu Hustle as a homage to Hong Kong cinema of the 1950s to 1970s. Throughout the film, echoes of older films resonate through the choreography and presentation of martial arts, in bits of dialogue and in the presence of familiar actors from Hong Kong’s golden age, including Yuen Wah, Yuen Qiu, Bruce Leung Siu Lung and Chiu Chi Ling. The film’s primary setting, Pig Sty Alley, has been lifted intact from Qišti’er jia fangke/The House of 72 Tenants (1973), Chor Yuen’s classic Cantonese-language social comedy about daily life among Hong Kong’s working-class and refugee population. Much beloved in Hong Kong, this film marked the rebirth of the Cantonese-language cinema and the flowering of a distinctly local cinematic sensibility to which Chow has long been heir (Teo, 1997: 57, 59; Marchetti 2005; Xu 2005). When Sing blasts a four-storey high, palm-shaped hole through the tenement and a similarly shaped crater in the ground, historically minded Hong Kong viewers will catch the general reference to the long history of ‘palm power’ in the Chinese martial arts film, as well as the more specific references to the ‘Buddha’s Palm’ films from the mid-1960s and early 1980s.

This homage to Hong Kong cinema complicates the film’s postmodern aesthetic of ‘shallowness’ by expressing a genuinely historical sensibility. Chow is not so much interested in the history of Hong Kong, however, as
in its film traditions, which he presents in a highly compressed visual form. This homage also complicates the critical commonplace of Chow as a local film-maker because it reveals the extent to which in Hong Kong, as K. C. Lo writes, ‘the local is the transnational itself in its becoming’ (Lo 2005: 112). Many of Chow’s references to Hong Kong films carry this transnational history. *The House of 72 Tenants*, for instance, encapsulates a history of Hong Kong’s ties to mainland film industries and theatrical traditions: Chor Yuen’s 1973 Shaw Brothers film was a remake of a 1963 film co-produced by the mainland Pearl River Studio and a left-leaning Hong Kong studio, which was in turn based on a popular Shanghai play (Xu 2005; Marchetti 2005). The golden-age martial arts films which Chow evokes through the casting of older actors were also the first Hong Kong films to break into the commercial US film market (Desser 2000). And in the film’s climactic fight scene, Chow’s character evokes two iconic martial arts figures with strong transnational associations: Bruce Lee, the Hong Kong native and American citizen who became the first Chinese global celebrity and starred in the first Hollywood–Hong Kong co-production (*Enter the Dragon* [Robert Clouse, 1973]), and Keanu Reeves’ Neo from the *Matrix* films, who rose to fame on the basis of Yuen Wo-ping’s choreography and who marks the wholesale penetration of Hollywood by Hong Kong action-film style. Chow’s homage, then, is to the Hong Kong film industry as a fundamentally transnational enterprise.

Chow’s homage is a genuine tribute to the Hong Kong film-makers of a previous era. As Gary Xu and Gina Marchetti have explored, the film pays homage not just to the earlier films’ visual style, but also to their belief in social justice (Xu 2005) and to the Cantonese culture and customs that they so richly expressed (Marchetti 2005). At the same time, his homage betrays his recognition that Hong Kong cinema, and especially the kung fu film, has become, in Peter Hitchcock’s phrase, its own ‘transnational franchise’ with a 30-year history of appealing to viewers around the world (Hitchcock 2007: 230). The diversity of textual references that Chow makes in his film is a key part of his effort to transition from a local to a global film-maker. The commercial genius of his pastiche style is that it allows him to address multiple distinct audiences, each with its own particular viewing history, rather than assuming a single, homogenous, global audience as Hollywood blockbusters do. Hong Kong and diaspora viewers familiar with classic Cantonese comedies will catch one set of references; fans of older martial arts films around the world will feel hailed by another; long-time Chow fans will latch on to other references; and audiences familiar only with Hollywood films will feel themselves being spoken to by still others. The end result is a decidedly open text, in which different audiences around the world can each find their own point of entry into the film. This pastiche style helped Chow to hold on to his established fan base in East Asia while also attracting new viewers in the West, a success that has eluded some of the other Hong Kong actors and directors who have gone global.

**Hollywood**

Columbia Pictures Film Production Asia was receptive to Chow’s pitch for a homage to Hong Kong cinema because such a film fitted neatly within one of its parent studio’s strategies for globalization: going global by going
local. This strategy of ‘global localization,’ or ‘glocalization,’ was developed by Sony executives in Japan in the 1980s (Robertson, 1995) and has since been widely embraced by the Hollywood studios. Columbia Asia is an important part of Sony Pictures’ two-pronged strategy for selling movies around the world. The studio devotes most of its resources to making big-budget English-language blockbusters like the Spider-Man franchise (2002, 2004, 2007) that appeal to a mass global audience. At the same time, it devotes a smaller set of resources to making local-language films through co-production deals with non-American companies. These foreign-language films are financed with Hollywood money and overseen by Hollywood producers, but are otherwise made outside the United States using the creative resources of a non-US film industry and aimed at that industry’s local market. Sony launched Columbia Asia in 1998 to make Chinese-language films for the East Asian market, and it quickly established itself as the most ambitious and successful of Hollywood’s local-language enterprises. By the time it signed on to produce Kung Fu Hustle, the division had already produced about a dozen films by directors such as Zhang Yimou, Tsui Hark, Feng Xiaogang and Ang Lee, whose Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon has been its biggest hit. Taken together, these two strategies – making big English-language blockbusters and smaller local-language films – embody both the homogenizing and localizing tendencies of corporate-led globalization: while the blockbusters treat the globe as a single mass audience, the local-language films cater to multiple discrete audiences with culturally specific tastes and histories.

Chow and Sony were drawn to each other by mutual need. Sony needed Chow to go local. Studio executives saw great value in Chow’s stellar track record of making commercially successful films for Chinese-speaking audiences, and Shaolin Soccer had proved to them that the combination of martial arts, comedy and special effects could attract large audiences throughout East Asia. Chow, in turn, needed Sony to go global. As the Hong Kong film industry has become leaner, it has become dependent on other film industries to provide the services it has shed and the resources it lacks. Chow needed Sony’s deep pockets and global distribution infrastructure to get into the crucial US and Chinese markets. More important, Chow wanted to avail himself of the studio’s ability to craft a film that would attract viewers across the globe. This is precisely Columbia Asia’s mission as a local-language division. As one Columbia executive put it, speaking of the film-makers with whom he works, ‘We take the best of their very rich culture and marry it with the professionalism and polish of Hollywood’ (Rose 1999).

This ‘marriage’ entailed making compromises between what Barbara Robinson, Columbia Asia’s managing director, has called Hong Kong’s ‘director-driven’ mode of production, in which the director controls everything, and Hollywood’s ‘producer-driven’ one, in which the producer takes a more active role in developing a story and bringing it to fruition (China Daily 2005). The script was the biggest area of difference between Chow and studio executives. According to one Sony executive, Chow approached him with a two-sentence synopsis and announced he was ready to start shooting – an improvisatory approach that would have been fine in Hong Kong, but unthinkable for Hollywood (Holson 2006). Columbia Asia wouldn’t even
sign on to the project until Chow agreed to pull his ideas together into a fully developed script. He did agree, and with his team of Hong Kong screenwriters spent a year and a half drafting and revising the script with liberal input from Los Angeles. While Chow provided the ideas, studio executives were very involved in ‘shaping’ them and getting the script up to what they deemed a ‘mature level,’ by which they meant more like a Hollywood script: narratively ‘cohesive,’ with all events logically motivated and no extraneous scenes (Robinson 2006). While such a drawn-out and collaborative writing process is standard for Hollywood, it is very rare in Hong Kong.

One might be tempted to read the close involvement of studio executives in Chow’s writing process as a foreign corruption of Chow’s authentic Hong Kong sensibility. But it is important to remember that Chow is a commercial film-maker as well as a Hong Kong one, and catering to audience expectations is a key aspect of commercial success. Chow understood that if he wanted to reach new audiences in the United States and around the world, he would have to make a somewhat new kind of film. This willingness to modify his working style presumably derived, at least in part, from his unsatisfactory experience working with Miramax on Shaolin Soccer. Miramax, having acquired the rights to the finished film, delayed its US release in part because they were uncomfortable with the film’s structure and pacing, which they feared might be off-putting to a mainstream American audience. With Kung Fu Hustle, Chow decided to work with a Hollywood studio from the very start, in part so that the finished film would not have to be reconfigured for American viewers. The specific kinds of legibility that American viewers demand would be structured into the script from the outset.

The end result of this collaborative scripting process was a narrative that, while typically characterized by American reviewers as ‘wafer thin’ (Elley 2004), was actually more substantive than that of many a Hong Kong kung fu film. Kung Fu Hustle maintains much of Chow’s more-is-more comic spirit, as is evident in the scene where Sing is stabbed five times by his partner, bitten on the lips by two snakes, chased at high speed by his nemesis, and forced to dive under a moving truck. But the film contains Chow’s manic energy within a Hollywood-style narrative. We can see the maturity that Sony executives insisted on in the way that the script conforms to the basic conventions of classical Hollywood storytelling. Virtually every scene in the film is logically connected to Sing’s central goal of getting into the Axe Gang: we see the childhood humiliations that motivate that desire, the steps he takes to achieve it, the obstacles he encounters, and his ultimate rejection of that goal in favour of a higher one. As a result, the film as a whole has a Hollywood level of consistency and integration that is absent from Chow’s earlier films: the anarchic spirit of individual scenes is not allowed to spill out and determine the shape of the narrative as a whole. The film’s pacing is also indebted to Hollywood conventions, as extended scenes of comic mayhem are cushioned by periods of calm that allow the viewer to regroup mentally. There are several moments in the film, for instance, when the camera quietly captures the intimate details of daily life in Pig Sty Alley; in one of these shots, the camera glides past open apartments and reveals their inhabitants cooking, squabbling, hunting bugs, and ... defecating. This is a perfect example of a ‘contested transaction’...
with Hollywood, as Chow accommodates himself to the studio’s demand for a certain tempo without abandoning his signature comic style. (Although the version released in the United States digitally removed the paper and excrement visible beneath the character’s haunches, there is no doubt as to what he is doing).

Columbia Asia’s participation in the film was felt in areas beyond the script, including the seven months Chow spent in pre-production and the four months spent shooting. Like the extended script-writing process, these long months of preparation and production are standard procedure for Hollywood and very unusual for Hong Kong, and they had a complex effect on the film’s identity. On the one hand, they allowed Chow to get things exactly as he wanted them. On the other hand, they were key to achieving the visual polish that distinguishes a Hollywood studio production from a typically somewhat rougher Hong Kong film. Hollywood’s presence was also felt in what Barbara Robinson characterized as ‘constant oversight’ from the studio during production. Sony was not about to give Chow $20 million and simply let him do with it what he pleased. While Chow and his team were in charge of what happened on the set, Sony hired an American producer from Los Angeles and two Chinese producers who had worked on previous Columbia Asia films to keep an eye on things. Such oversight is the essence of producer-driven studio film-making. As Robinson said, ‘This is what it means to work with a studio’ (Robinson 2006).

The continual give and take between Chow and studio executives during the shooting of the film echoed the back-and-forth script-writing process. Even though Chow had a ‘mature’ script in hand and was surrounded by Sony overseers, he was able to maintain his improvisatory working method to a surprisingly large degree. He continued to incorporate new ideas as they arose during shooting and to add entirely new scenes that were not in the original script (Cheng 2005). In the end, the script provided what a Sony executive characterized as a ‘clear structure’ and a ‘framework’ for the production, rather than a blueprint that had to be followed exactly (Holston 2006). Sony executives were willing to accommodate themselves to Chow’s Hong Kong-style working method, as long as he stayed within the budget. At the same time, Chow, who had never directed such a big production with such an extensive crew, relied on Sony’s people to help him bring his creative vision into line with his new production capacities (Gilchrist 2005).

Textually, the marks of Hollywood’s participation are most evident in the film’s high production values, which visibly express the $20 million budget and careful studio oversight. This can be seen in the film’s opening scene, in which the Axe Gang does away with a rival gang leader. The police station and exterior street sets are expansive, spatially intricate and well dressed with period detail. The cinematography is audacious and elegant: the scene begins with an extended tracking crane shot through the two-storey police station, and the camera remains moving through the rest of the scene, gliding vertically and horizontally through close, medium and long shots. When the camera pauses, we find ourselves in unusual locations, looking down from atop a movie theatre as the older gangster is axe murdered, for instance, or staring straight at his moll’s derriere as she sashays across the street in a skin-tight cheongsam. The digital
effects, while minimal – a foot chopped off, a sunset sky – are first-rate and blend seamlessly into the rest of the scene. The editing, which cuts crisply between this diverse array of shots, works together with the soundtrack – a combination of an original, Henry Mancini-like score and the sound of popping flashbulbs – to create a dynamic rhythm. The pacing starts out slow with the crane shot and the older gangster haranguing the police officers, accelerates up to the murderous acts of violence, then pauses for effect. The rhythm builds up speed again during a montage sequence of Weegee-like black-and-white crime-stills that are intercut with visually dynamic shots of the Axe Gangsters dancing, and then ends abruptly on a suspended upbeat as the dancers suddenly stop and hold their signature weapons overhead as a sign introduces them to the viewer. The scene has a pleasingly substantive weight, derived from the masterful use of the full range of cinematic form; when it ends, the viewer feels deeply satisfied and certain that she is in the hands of an accomplished director.

Contrast this lushly mounted scene to its predecessor in God of Gamblers III (1991), which looks like a rough draft in comparison. In terms of content, the scenes are very similar, with both depicting a gang fight in an urban street, in which men wearing western suits and bearing both axes and guns materialize out of thin air. The difference is in the production values. In the earlier, purely Hong Kong film the street set is smaller, with no long vistas or dramatic skies. The cinematography is simpler and more utilitarian: the crane shots are fewer and less elaborate, shot sizes and camera positions are less varied, and medium shots predominate to frame Chow’s performance. The pacing is less rhythmically sophisticated, conforming to the basic pause-burst-pause pattern of Hong Kong cinema (Bordwell 2000: 217–45), and is driven more by the frenzied rushing of characters than by camera movement, editing or sound. The synthesized score is musically simple, barely audible and thematically insignificant. The acting style is bluntly exaggerated and the scene, devoid of narrative content, is played purely for comic spectacle. Overall, this scene is simply less textually rich – visually, aurally, thematically, dramatically – than its recycled version in Kung Fu Hustle.

I don’t mean to imply that high production values are the exclusive property of Hollywood, but rather that Hollywood’s participation in Kung Fu Hustle allowed Chow to raise the film’s production values far beyond those found in his earlier films. While the seeds for many of the ideas in Kung Fu Hustle’s opening scene can be found in the earlier films, Chow needed Hollywood’s resources to bring those ideas to their fullest cinematic expression and to execute them with such a sure hand.

Hollywood’s presence was also felt during post-production. While the digital effects were done by Centro Digital, a Hong Kong company that both Chow and Columbia Asia had worked with before, the rest of post-production was done in Australia with a company Columbia had used for its previous Asian films and that Chow could not have afforded on his own. Sony executives also insisted on doing sound effects for a key scene – the fight with the harp-playing assassins – at an expensive studio in Los Angeles. They hired a well-known Hollywood sound engineer who had worked on Spider-Man and other Sony blockbusters, and he worked with Chow to make sure that the layering of sound effects, music and dialogue

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came out just right. The result of this Hollywood level of attention and resources devoted to post-production can be seen in the very high quality of its special effects, which far surpass those found in other recent Chinese-language films made without Hollywood’s participation, such as Shenhual/The Myth (Stanley Tong 2005), Wuj/A Promise (Chen Kaige 2005), and even Chow’s own Shaolin Soccer. As Vivian Lee has argued, these high-quality digital effects proved a key means through which the film acquired ‘a new transnational accessibility that was not available to Chow’s previous films’ (Lee 2007: 15). Hollywood’s resources are similarly apparent in the quality of the soundtrack, the originality and full orchestration of which are likewise unparalleled in recent Hong Kong films.

In the film’s textual polish we can see the homogenizing force that a Hollywood studio exerts on a heretofore local film-maker. But it is important to see that studio participation also represents an opportunity for Chow. As Sheldon Lu wrote in relation to Zhang Yimou, ‘transnational capital is [...] at once a constrictive and a liberating force for Chinese cinema’ (Lu 1997: 107). While Columbia Asia clearly shaped how Chow structured the narrative, shot the film and edited it for tempo, the big budget and large, experienced production team also liberated Chow’s imagination from its customary financial constraints and provided him with fresh challenges as a director. The result is a stylistically hybrid film that is both a polished studio product and an authentic Chow film.

Upon Kung Fu Hustle’s completion, Sony nudged Chow aside and took full control of the picture, plugging it into the studio’s high-powered marketing and distribution machine. Sony gave the film a truly global release in about 40 countries in Asia, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and North America. In the United States, Sony gave it the second-widest release of any foreign-language film in US history, screening it in over 2,500 theatres (only Mel Gibson’s American-made Passion of the Christ [2004] went out wider). Both parties got what they wanted: Sony got a popular commercial artist with unparalleled appeal throughout East Asia, while Chow got the access to Hollywood’s capital and infrastructure that enabled him to take his career to a new level.

China
While Columbia Asia was Chow’s most important partner on Kung Fu Hustle, it wasn’t the only one. Two Chinese companies also served as co-producers. China Film Group, which is the country’s largest state-run film company, came in as a non-equity partner, and Huayi Brothers & Taihe Film Investment Co., the leading privately owned film company, contributed 5 per cent of the production budget (Robinson 2006). While their contributions were relatively small compared to that of Columbia Asia, they played a crucial role in the film’s market success in China and thus its ability to go global.

China features prominently in the Hong Kong industry’s long-term globalization strategy. In a process that began in the early 1980s and accelerated dramatically after the economic crisis of 1997 and Hong Kong’s return to Chinese sovereignty, Chinese companies are increasingly serving as key partners for Hong Kong film-makers, providing resources that the shrinking Hong Kong industry no longer provides for itself. China provided
the shooting locations for *Kung Fu Hustle*, many of the below-the-line crew members who worked under Hong Kong department heads, and the actors without speaking parts. Chow shot the film at the massive Chedun studio facilities outside Shanghai, which allowed him to build more elaborate sets than would have been possible in crowded Hong Kong, while China’s low-wage labour force allowed him to keep costs down.

China Film’s and Huayi Brothers’ true value as co-producers was that they made *Kung Fu Hustle* a ‘Chinese’ film in the eyes of mainland regulators and thus ensured its privileged access to China’s market. The Hong Kong film industry, following the loss of its traditional export markets, is coming to regard China as its primary source of income. ‘The mainland,’ writes journalist Bryan Walsh, ‘is finally beginning to offer Hong Kong what the city has always lacked: a large domestic market’ (Walsh 2005). While foreign films – and, until recently, Hong Kong films – are subject to onerous restrictions, films that are co-produced with Chinese equity partners are automatically classed as local films. As such, they sidestep the many obstacles that Beijing puts in the way of imported films. As a ‘Chinese’ film, *Kung Fu Hustle* did not have to struggle to find a slot as one of the twenty foreign films that China imports annually on a revenue-sharing basis. Domestic status also increased the share of box-office revenues that Columbia Asia could claim, from the mere 13–15 per cent allotted to producers of imported films to the more generous 30–40 per cent allowed producers of local films. The participation of the state-owned China Film Group, which is China’s most powerful domestic distributor, ensured that *Kung Fu Hustle* would be well distributed (a major benefit in a market that lacks a centralized distribution network) and that Columbia Asia would actually receive its fair share of box-office receipts from sometimes recalcitrant theatre owners. Huayi Brothers, which has an unparalleled record within China of making commercially successful films, helped guide the film through China’s murky censorship system (Robinson 2006).

Textually, Huayi’s participation can be seen in the loosely defined time and place in which the story is set: while the costumes and props suggest the 1930s or early 1940s, and the architecture and streetscape suggest Shanghai, neither city nor year is clearly specified. Huayi executives specifically recommended this vagueness as a way to avoid conflict with Chinese censors and thus ensure a timely and maximally profitable release (Robinson 2006). To set this story of police corruption, organized crime and rampant urban violence any time after the 1949 Communist revolution would have run the risk of having the film’s distribution in China delayed or cancelled entirely.

In order to gain access to the China market, then, Chow had to make *Kung Fu Hustle* a ‘local’ film. And to do that, he needed global Hollywood’s help. None of Chow’s previous films, which had been made without mainland or Hollywood partners, had managed to get into the Chinese theatrical market. It was Columbia Asia that had the relationship with China Film and Huayi Brothers and that recruited them as co-producers (Robinson 2006). Ironically, Chow needed Hollywood to establish *Kung Fu Hustle’s* ‘official’ Chinese identity.

If *Kung Fu Hustle* is emblematic of the Hong Kong industry’s transformation under the pressures of globalization, the film is likewise a marker
of the Chinese film industry's efforts to transform itself from a state-run instrument of education and propaganda into a viable commercial industry. This transformation is driven by the country's shift from a socialist to a capitalist economy, and by competition from the increased number of Hollywood films that have been allowed into theatres since the mid-1990s (Lau 2007). Chinese film policy makers are driven by a form of economic nationalism: they hope to strengthen the Chinese film industry so that it can withstand the growing competition from Hollywood that will arise as the Chinese economy continues to open up. This is not an easy change to make. Not many people within the industry, other than directors Zhang Yimou and Feng Xiaogang, know how and want to make films that the mass of ordinary Chinese want to see, and there is ambivalence about embracing the capitalist aesthetic of entertainment. In addition, the industry lacks much of what a modern commercial film industry needs to succeed in a globalized market. China has sufficient capital, large studio facilities, a competent labour force and skilled actors and film-makers. But it still needs up-to-date technology, greater expertise in attracting large audiences at home and abroad, and a workable national and international distribution network. Above all, it needs experienced, market-oriented producers who can guide a film from start to finish. 'The advantage of the producer system,' says Jiang Ping, an official at the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, 'is the producer's sensitivity to the market.' Reporting on the industry's mixed success at adjusting to a market economy, Jiang says, 'We now urgently need film producers who are politically sensitive, aesthetically sophisticated and have a flair for marketing' (Xinhua 2007).

Co-productions with Hong Kong and foreign partners, including Hollywood, have become China's primary tool for accessing these resources. As a result of co-productions and the increased openness of its market to Hong Kong films, China is gradually absorbing the Hong Kong industry and eroding the boundaries that have kept them separate for 50 years. And as Kung Fu Hustle shows, China is also enmeshing itself with Hollywood — which is ironic, given its goal of protecting itself from Hollywood's economic encroachment and cultural influence. As Chinese companies seek to make films of a high-enough quality to compete with Hollywood imports, they are doing so in part by importing material and human resources — such as producers — from the major Hollywood studios. We can see here how the Chinese film industry's relationship with Hollywood is following the model of knowledge and technology transfer that has revitalized other Chinese industries and is thus far more nuanced than any model based on simple opposition or 'hegemony' can account for (Coonan 2007).

Upon its release Kung Fu Hustle performed very well in the domestic markets of each of its producing partners and in other markets around the world — proof that each of the three industries' globalization strategies was working as planned. In Hong Kong, Kung Fu Hustle earned $8 million and broke Shaolin Soccer's record as the highest-grossing Hong Kong film ever made. It grossed $17 million in the United States, which made it the top-earning foreign-language film of 2005. It generated its biggest box-office returns in China, which all producing partners saw as its primary
market: at $20 million, it became the second highest-grossing Chinese-language film ever released up to that time. Officials in Beijing, eager to promote the industry’s commercial viability and in keeping with their economic nationalism, enthusiastically embraced *Kung Fu Hustle* as an unambiguous product of the Chinese film industry and Chow as an unambiguously Chinese director. *Kung Fu Hustle* helped make 2004 a banner year for the Chinese film industry: production was up 51 per cent (making it the third-largest film-producing industry in the world, after India’s and Hollywood), box-office receipts were up 58 per cent and, most important, local films out-earned imported Hollywood films for the first time since the latter were allowed into China on a revenue-sharing basis in 1994 (Landreth 2005). Significantly, Chinese films made with Hong Kong or Hollywood participation were key to this success. In a sign of the industry’s dependence on outside resources, the top three films, which together generated about 60 per cent of the year’s total box office earnings – *Kung Fu Hustle, House of Flying Daggers* and *Tianxia wu zei/World Without Thieves* (Feng Xiaogang, 2004) – were all co-productions (Dams 2005).

In recent years *Kung Fu Hustle*’s blueprint of making Chinese-language films with the combined resources of Hollywood, China and Hong Kong has become further institutionalized. In 2004 Warner Brothers joined the state-run China Film Group and the privately owned Hengdian Studios to create Warner China Film HG, the first-ever Sino-foreign joint venture for film production and distribution. The Beijing-based company had a big commercial hit with *Fengkuang de shitou/Crazy Stone* (Ning Hao, 2006), a comic heist movie co-produced with Hong Kong’s Focus Films. And in 2007 Stephen Chow signed a multi-picture deal with Columbia Asia to produce (sometimes with Chinese partners) and distribute a slate of films featuring new talent; the deal is evidence of Chow’s commitment to revitalizing the Hong Kong industry by increasing production and thereby creating more opportunities for new actors and directors to develop their skills.

**Conclusion**

In recent years scholars have devoted much energy to theorizing and mapping the global flows of culture. Some have focused on the flows out of western media centres and into the peripheries (Tomlinson 1991). Others have investigated cases of reverse flows, in which forms of culture move out of Asia and into the West (Tobin 2004; Wu and Chan 2007). Still others, seeking to de-centre the West, have focused on cultural flows out of non-western centres and within the periphery (Iwabuchi 2002, 2004). In most cases, scholars focus on a flow that moves in just one direction. *Kung Fu Hustle* is worth studying, in part, because it embodies a more complex model of how global flows work today.

First, the film allows us to see multiple flows moving in different directions in a single film. In *Kung Fu Hustle* we can see flows out of Hollywood (in the form of capital, mode of production, stylistic conventions) into Hong Kong; reverse flows out of Hong Kong (in the form of the film itself and Chow’s star persona and comic sensibility) into the United States; and regional flows out of Hong Kong (in the form of its film workers and expertise) into China.
Second, *Kung Fu Hustle* allows us to see how the scale of players initiating and managing these flows varies greatly, and includes individuals (Chow), transnational corporations (Sony), and national film industries composed of both state-run and private entities (China).

Third, it allows us to see how the categories of local, regional, national and global, far from being fixed, are themselves fluid. We can see the global (Sony Pictures) becoming local and regional by making a local-language film with a local star for local and regional audiences. We can see the local (Chow) becoming global as he avails himself of the material resources of a transnational media conglomerate and crafts a film that will succeed in the global marketplace. We can see the national (the Chinese film industry) trying to enlarge and protect itself from foreign competition by collaborating with, and learning from, its local (Hong Kong) and global (Hollywood) competitors. The processes of localization, globalization, regionalization and nationalization are all playing out simultaneously in the film.

Fourth, *Kung Fu Hustle* allows us to see how the interests of players in the global film economy can both diverge and converge around a single film. Chow wanted to make *Kung Fu Hustle* as a means of advancing his career and breaking into the lucrative and prestigious US market. Sony's participation was motivated by the corporate search for profit in an expanding Asian market. The participation of the privately-owned Huayi Brothers was also presumably motivated by the search for a profitable investment, while that of the China Film Group was more likely a result of economic nationalism and the state's agenda of strengthening a national industry. Despite these differing interests, all parties benefited from the film's critical and commercial success worldwide.

Fifth, the film allows us to see that even as the Hollywood studios are pushing deeper into the Chinese film markets with their English-language blockbusters, some Chinese-language film-makers are gaining access to the studios' material resources and global infrastructure, the very advantages that once guaranteed Hollywood's domination of foreign markets and kept local film-makers in a secondary position in their own domestic markets. As a result, these film-makers are having improved access to local, regional and global markets.

Finally, *Kung Fu Hustle* allows us to see that clear-cut distinctions between 'Hollywood films' and 'Chinese cinema' are becoming harder to make, in terms of production, style, market performance and national-cultural-industrial identity. How can we assign Chow's film a singular identity when it functioned equally well as a vehicle that allowed a Hollywood studio to earn substantial profits in the China market and a vehicle that helped the Chinese industry reclaim a majority share of its own domestic film market from Hollywood? Chow's film obliges us to think about contemporary Chinese-language cinema in terms of the complex interconnections that are emerging both regionally within greater China and globally in relation to Hollywood.

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