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## Self and Other in post-2002 China-Hong Kong co-productions – Johnnie To's *Drug War*

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*The cinematic landscapes of both China and Hong Kong were significantly changed after CEPA, the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnerships Arrangement, was formed in 2002, which saw Chinese and Hong Kong co-production films become domestic rather than foreign films. This change calls for a new theoretical framework in reading 'nationhood' in co-productions. 'Nationhood,' or identity, is usually articulated in masculine terms which are constructed as an ideal Self through an evil Other in both China and Hong Kong. Using Hong Kong director Johnnie To's co-production *Drug War* (2012) as an example, this article argues that through his auteurship, To deconstructs this cinematic representation of masculinity in both China and Hong Kong. By doing so, To points out the problems inherent in the nationhood/identity of both China and Hong Kong and further offers a subtle critique of the state narratives of China.*

### **Introduction**

The cinematic landscapes of both China and Hong Kong were significantly changed after the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnerships Arrangement or CEPA was formed. The CEPA, implemented in 2002, saw Chinese and Hong Kong co-production films become domestic films rather than foreign films (Yau 18). This means representations of China's 'nationhood,' based on Yau's (18) and Zhu and Nakajima's (33) studies, are aligned with the Chinese state's narratives that aim to project a positive image of China on a global scale due to China's increasing international engagement. This seems to imply that the state's grip on culture would restrict the talents of the Hong Kong film industry, and the narration of 'nationhood' in co-production films would be completely in line with the state narratives of China. However, previous studies have shown that, within a certain limit, the state would loosen its grip on cultural productions for commercial benefits (Zhu and Rosen 4). Taiwanese and Hong Kong cinematic talents are also able to influence Chinese cinema aesthetically (Tu 146-155), suggesting that even in co-production, it is still possible for Hong Kong cinema to shape representations of China as a nation.

This calls for a new theoretical framework of reading 'nationhood,' or 'identity,' normally articulated in masculine terms in both China and Hong Kong (Cui xi, xii; Walters; Pang), in co-production films. Moreover, based on studies by Berry (2004), Pang (2002), and Teo (2009), the ideal masculine self in both China and Hong Kong is constructed through an inferior Other. This paper argues that this cinematic tradition can be altered in China-Hong Kong co-productions as

resistance to the state power of China. Johnnie To's China-Hong Kong co-production *Drug War* (2012) serves as an example.

To's films, especially his gangster films, based on Pang's and Walters' study, normally address political tensions using masculinity as a metaphor and thus can be read as 'political allegories' reflecting the identities within China and Hong Kong. *Drug War* is To's first co-production film, as well as being his first gangster film that is entirely shot in mainland China, under the constraints of state power. Most studies on To's films have focused on how he retains his unique mirror-image style trope in the age of Chinese cinema (Chu 193), or how he reworks the old generic idiom of the 'alliance' and partnership in Hong Kong gangster cinema to generate new possibilities in the age of hegemonic Chinese cinema (Yau 42). Studies about how Johnnie To shapes Chinese cinema by working within Chinese cinematic conventions and countering state narratives of 'nationhood' in the context of co-productions have not been widely seen. This study is crucial as co-production films blur the boundary of mainland Chinese cinema and Hong Kong cinema and further request us to read 'nationhood,' and 'identities' from a new perspective. This article argues that in *Drug War*, through his auteurship, To deconstructs the cinematic representation of masculinity as the ideal 'Self' usually defined against an inferior 'Other' in both cinematic traditions.

### **Synopsis**

Set in the old, grey, post-industrial port city of Jinhai in China, *Drug War*'s plot revolves around the power struggle between the Chinese anti-drug squad and the Big Seven Hong Kong gang. After fleeing from an explosion at his drug manufacturing facility, Hong Kong drug producer Choi is caught by anti-drug police captain Zhang at a hospital. To avoid arrest and execution, Choi agrees to cooperate with Zhang to overthrow the Hong Kong drug gang he is involved with. With Choi's help, Zhang successfully masquerades as Haha, the Chinese drug dealer as well as Chang, one of the fronts of the Hong Kong gang, to obtain incriminating evidence. However, Choi double-crosses Zhang who commands his subordinates to take Choi to the anti-drug headquarters for execution. To overthrow the Hong Kong gang, Zhang and his whole team masquerade as a huge criminal organisation that can easily command the entire port in Jinhai. Lured by the huge potential of a global market, the Hong Kong gang exposes their true identity to the Chinese squad. The brutal power battle between the Chinese anti-drug squad and the Hong Kong gang eventually ends up in mutual destruction. Through the destruction of both Chinese and Hong Kong masculinities, To reveals the violent crisis between China and Hong Kong.

### **‘Nationhood’ in China-Hong Kong co-productions**

To read co-production films as “national cinema” that is “limited” and features “finite boundaries” (Anderson 23) no longer seems to be a proper conceptual framework. Even though Teo’s work is focused on multinational co-production/pan-Asian films, it can be summarized that Teo’s work transcends “cultural nationalism” and further points to “Asian universalism” (354–355). Nonetheless, this does not mean “the effacement of national cinema,” but rather multiple nations express their identities “on the same stage” (354–355). It can be claimed that co-production films allow both China and Hong Kong to express their identities on the same stage.

Teo’s work does not point out the impact exerted by the Chinese state on how representations are allowed in such cinema. Yau points out that “co-produced films are not just about China and Chineseness on one side, and Hong Kong or Hongkongness on the other” but have to be understood in the context of China’s ‘managed globalization,’ which means the critique of American capitalism is allowed but “the critique of internal hegemony and colonisation is forbidden” (19–20). China thus is represented as unified and peaceful without any negative depiction; however, such a positive portrayal of China is disrupted by the intervention of cinematic narratives originating in Hong Kong. According to Abbas’ study, even though Hong Kong is not an “independent nation,” its cinema can be taken as a “national” cinema because “it constantly views ‘nationhood’ not as a finished entity but catches it at a moment when the nature of nationhood itself is changing, under pressure from globalisation” (117). Abbas states:

Globalisation, as we know, does not mean that nation-states are disappearing; if anything, more nation-states are coming into being because of it – witness the breaking up of the Soviet Union into Russia and a number of smaller nation-states. It seems therefore that what the nation in fragments is producing as an entirely unexpected corollary is the fragment as nation: that is, the ‘small nation’ that exists as a nodal point in the global network, where strategic position can compensate for smallness of scale. (117)

Considering Hong Kong’s unique geopolitical location as a global city “that exists as a nodal point in the global network,” it is possible to claim that Hong Kong fits into Abbas’ “small nation” conceptual framework even though Hong Kong has never been taken as an independent nation but is taken as part of China. Hong Kong as a ‘small nation’ is able to exist as a fragment, which further fragments the nationhood of China.

Hong Kong cinema constantly views “nationhood,” or identity as ‘fragments’ under the pressure of globalisation. “The nation as absent presence,” Abbas states, “is the negative horizon of Hong Kong cinema” (117). That is to say, “nationhood,” or identity is represented through “negation” in Hong Kong cinema. As to the representation of China as a nation in Hong Kong cinema, Abbas observes “the elusiveness and absence of the Chinese nation, in spite of political

assurance to the contrary of how Hong Kong is part of China” (117). What is present in China’s state narrative is thus “absent” and “negated” in Hong Kong cinema, China as a unified nation is thus “fragmented” as non-unified.

Hong Kong, a fragment as a ‘nation,’ is ‘present’ in its cinema through its distinguished cinematic style, regardless of being ‘absent’/negated in Chinese state narratives. Abbas states, “it is nevertheless discernible as having ‘nationhood’ through the way films skew social and affective relations, which influence both the style and content of particular films” (118). The representation of Hong Kong in its cinema as ‘fragment nation’ constantly enables viewers to view ‘nationhood,’ or identity, not as unitary but ‘fragmentary’ in Hong Kong cinema. This further reflects the nature of nationhood “caught in a moment of transition under the pressure of globalisation” (117) in both Hong Kong cinema and co-production films.

### **To’s Self and Other**

Johnnie To captures the crisis of nationhood through his auteur function of “enunciating texts” – deconstructing both Chinese and Hong Kong masculinities in *Drug War*. To’s auteur function, Teo states,

[I]s a seminal process of precise and complex procedures of enunciating texts. Enunciator is a term used by Tom Gunning to describe Fritz Lang. The director as enunciator need not be thought of as ‘a Judaeo-Christian creator ex nihilo’ but as an Aristotelian demi-urge who works with pre-existent material, and the nature of that material will always function as one of the causes of the creation. (15)

That is to say, To’s auteur function as an enunciator is, on the one hand, to both question as well as work with the cultural values of Hong Kong. On the other hand, To works on the “nature of that material,” the “cultural specificity” of Hong Kong that “determines the way the films respond to the specific urban culture of Hong Kong, and how the characters’ behaviour drive the pacing and rhythm of the narratives” (Teo 16). The two aspects of To’s auteur function are manifested through the ways he deconstructs masculinity in his films.

Masculinity is deconstructed in To’s “Kowloon Noir” through the “frequency of illness and infirmities in the male characters” (Teo 11). That means:

[T]he frequency of illness and infirmities afflicting To’s primarily male bodies can only be seen as a put down of the male heroic tradition – but perhaps only to emphasize the male plight of fighting back in a perennial physical and spiritual struggle capped by the fatalistic awareness of, and even insistence on, death. (Teo 11)

Teo's work reveals that Johnnie To deconstructs masculinity in the way he works with, while simultaneously questioning, the cultural specificity of Hong Kong. However, in *Drug War*, masculinity is represented in relation to others, which means the problems of masculinity are not only caused by itself but also others, yet Teo's work does not reveal this aspect. It is thus necessary to turn to Pang's work to shed light on the construction of masculinity as "self-referential" and "other-defined" (327). Pang argues that every masculinity has its own history and forms its own discursive structure. Pang argues that Johnnie To's Milkyway Image (a film company established and owned by To) represents Hong Kong's masculinity in crisis (332) which is done by questioning the traditional representation of masculinity heralded as heroic in Hong Kong cinema, opening up a new space for the male subject to confront himself (Pang 332). Taking To's *Expect the Unexpected* (1998) as an example, Pang states that even though in that film the Hong Kong cops are portrayed as refined and brave, "the bloodshed depicted in the final scene of the film is echoed with double accents, reflexively punishing both the Hong Kong cops for their self-confidence (developed internally within the narrative), and the audience for their ignorance (developed intertextually with Hong Kong cinema in general)" (332).

Even though Pang's work is mostly focused on the cinematic tradition how of Hong Kong masculinity is represented, it is also "the audience's ignorance" and belief that Chinese masculinity is inferior to Hong Kong masculinity, which is why when *Expect the Unexpected* ends with bloodshed, where the vulgar Chinese gangsters kill the refined Hong Kong cops, it shocks the audience. In another way, Hong Kong masculinity is constructed in relation to Chinese masculinity: Hong Kong is thus represented as 'superior.' Therefore, to push Pang's argument one step further, I would say that Johnnie To's questioning and deconstructing of Hong Kong masculinity means questioning and deconstructing the traditional cinematic representation of Hong Kong as an ideal hero/Self by portraying China as a threatening Other/villain.

The representation of 'Self' as the ideal hero fighting against evil forces in both cinematic traditions can trace their roots back to the 'xia' figure (chivalric knight-errant) in Chinese literature who were the rebels against a corrupt government to protect less-advantaged people, as discussed in Teo's book, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema*. Nonetheless, the 'xia' figure is eventually re-articulated as the ideal gangster-hero in Hong Kong cinema (Nochimson 71), whereas it is re-articulated as the ideal agent of the state in Chinese cinema (Teo 19–20; Berry 87–98). To's deconstruction of both Chinese and Hong Kong masculinity in *Drug War* thus also deconstructs the cinematic traditions of representing the Self as the ideal 'xia' using a threatening 'Other' disrupting identities manufactured by both cinematic traditions.

The representation of Captain Zhang in *Drug War* can trace its origin to the cinematic tradition of representing the 'xia' as an agent of the state, which is usually portrayed as righteous and ideal in contrast with an evil Other in the Chinese cinema. In *Drug War*, To deconstructs this

cinematic tradition by rendering Zhang as morally ambiguous, imperfect because of his illness mirroring those of the Hong Kong gangster Choi. This is shown through the ‘undercover cop’ trope and the ‘mirror image’ convention of Milkyway Image films. By doing so, To portrays the Chinese state agent not much different from the Hong Kong drug lord both cruelly exploiting others for personal gains. Johnnie To firstly ‘conforms’ to the cinematic representation of Self and Other by portraying Hong Kong as different from China countering state narratives of China being a unified nation. To then questions this cinematic tradition by portraying the Chinese masculinity represented by the cop as no different from the Hong Kong masculinity as a criminal, which lead to the destruction of both masculinities through each other. Hong Kong is initially shown as different from China through the binary representations of a cop and a criminal. As Captain Zhang says when he overthrows the Chinese drug trafficker at the beginning of the film, he is a cop and it is definitely right for him to overthrow a criminal. By representing the ‘capitalist’ Hong Kong masculinity as criminals while ‘socialist’ Chinese masculinity is represented as an agent of the state, To contrasts how ‘capitalist’ Hong Kong values capital above anything else, while socialist China views the state authority above anything else. In this sense, ‘capitalist’ Hong Kong is by no means a ‘part’ of China, regardless of the state narratives of China being a coherent and unitary nationhood.

To further counters this state narrative by portraying Hong Kong as politically and linguistically different from China. Throughout the film all the Hong Kong characters, including Choi and his gang, speak Cantonese, even when they are conversing with the mainland Chinese cops, who only speak Mandarin. Politically, In the film, Captain Zhang seems to have absolute control over the fate of his entire anti-drug squad. The whole anti-drug squad follows Zhang’s commands without any resistance, leading them all to destruction. In contrast to Zhang, even though the Hong Kong gang has a gang leader, everybody votes to make decisions together. Even though the representations of Captain Zhang and Choi are consistent with the binary opposition of the ‘xia’ figure as the ideal agent of the state and the criminal that challenges the state authority respectively, To deconstructs the two cinematic traditions of binary representation of masculinity by portraying Zhang and Choi as his “noir heroes,” who mirror each other in their “illness and infirmities” (Teo 11).

In *Drug War*, the ‘illness and infirmities’ of both masculinities are reflected by the mirror image trope, for which To’s Milkyway Image films are famous. To deconstructs both masculinities by pointing out the ‘self-referential’ problems inherent in the cinematic representation of each; Captain Zhang’s ‘illness and infirmities’ are manifested through his extreme loyalty to the state. Choi’s ‘illness and infirmities’ are manifested through his desire for survival. Both work as an undercover cop or a mole to reach their aims without any sense of morality. Unlike the typical Hong Kong undercover cop figure who suffers from moral consciousness, like Yan in the *Infernal*

Affairs Trilogy (2002–2003), Zhang and Choi never hesitate to betray or sacrifice anyone to reach their aims. This is evident when Zhang betrays the Chinese drug trafficker, and later sacrifices his whole team to uphold state authority. Meanwhile, Choi betrays the mute brothers and his gang, his faithful followers, and his friends and relatives in order to survive. Zhang/the Self and Choi/the Other are thus portrayed as no different from each other in their ‘illness and infirmities’, reaching their aims without any sense of morality.

Johnnie To uses this immorality to point out the problems inherent in the cinematic representation of masculinities in both China and Hong Kong. In China, the ideal agent is actually as morally ambiguous as the gangster, who to remain loyal to the state, does not hesitate to betray and sacrifice anyone. In Hong Kong, the representation of Choi is by no means consistent with the ideal gangster hero figure. For example, in John Woo’s *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), Mark, the hero, is willing to sacrifice himself to redeem the fallen world. Through Choi, To seems to imply that ideal masculinity in Hong Kong cinema is too ideal to exist in harsh circumstances when Chinese interests are involved, to borrow from Walters (249).

To’s critique does not end with masculinity but further points to ‘nationhood’: masculinity in *Drug War* is ‘Other-defined’ by the ‘nationhood’ of China and Hong Kong. The mutual destruction of both representatives of masculinity thus offer insight into To’s critique of ‘nationhood’. What needs to be noted is that, within the Chinese anti-drug squad, each individual is completely subsumed into the collective and thus loses their individuality. The whole squad acts strictly to Zhang’s command. However, in the Hong Kong gang each individual differs from the others and thus they retain their individuality. Even though Choi betrays his gang, the other gang members remain loyal to each other until they die. If Choi’s destruction can be attributed to the problems of masculinity in Hong Kong cinema and the state power of China, then the Hong Kong gang’s destruction is caused by both Hong Kong’s capitalist desires and the state power of China. Urged by Hong Kong’s capitalist desire and lured by huge profits from a potential global market, the Hong Kong gang exposes their true identity to the Chinese squad which leads to their destruction. It is Choi’s extreme desire for survival that leads both Choi and the anti-drug squad into a fatal battle. It is also because the anti-drug squad has already been turned into an inhumane weapon to uphold the state authority, that the entire squad ends up dead. The squad’s being turned into inhumane weapons can be seen as each team member loses his/her individuality and is completely under the command of Captain Zhang. Merged into the collective as one to uphold the state authority, the anti-drug squad is fated to be destroyed. Therefore, Zhang and his team’s destruction can thus be attributed to the state power of China. To sustain its authority within and outside its borders, the state does not hesitate to turn its agents into its weapons and sacrifice them to sustain its authority. By doing so, To offers a subtle critique to China’s state narrative of “building a harmonious society and world” within and outside China (Callahan 219).



To's *Drug War* demonstrates that 'nationhood' in co-productions is not only shaped by the state power of China, but also by Hong Kong cinema. It also demonstrates that Hong Kong film talents are able to shape Chinese cinema by how they represent China, and further offers a subtle critique of the state narratives of China. While working in this Chinese cinematic tradition, To paradoxically questions and deconstructs the Chinese cinematic tradition of representing masculinity as the ideal agent of the state and Hong Kong masculinity as the ideal gangster hero. Through portraying Zhang and Choi as mirror images of each other, To further critiques nationhood, as masculinities are 'Other-defined' by nationhood.

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