

Understanding Hong Kong through Its Films

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The best way to learn the culture of a foreign country is to interact with the people from that particular country. If you can't afford to do so, one of the alternatives will be to watch films, with appropriate subtitles, imported from the country that you would like to learn about. However, you had better be equipped with a couple of basic tactics when watching foreign films for cultural studies, since it is surely more than a little mindless entertainment.

The most important assumption you need to make for studying other cultures is that the characters appearing in a foreign film are not much different from you and they may have different experience from what you have. This means that every single of their motivation can be explained by the situations they have been in and not by their innate characteristics. Based on this assumption, you are able to better understand their situations (i.e. the culture) by analyzing what drove them to behave in such a way and to make such a decision on screen. In this sense, it is obvious that films featuring the main characters with extraordinary capabilities (e.g. super heroes) may not be suitable for cultural studies.

The second thing you have to keep in mind is that there are full of symbolic representations in films. Some of them are 'cinematic settings' carefully calculated by the film directors, while some of them are merely 'cultural symbols' inadvertently inserted into the films. Of course, it is critical for you to decode all these symbols while trying to catch a glimpse of the director or screenwriter's intention and then ultimately understand the people of the country that you are interested in.

Here, let's take a classic Hong Kong film called *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* (1996) as the subject of analysis for cultural studies. This film tells us a love story between two Chinese mainlanders, Xiao-jun and Qiao, who migrated to Hong Kong. The two immigrants fell in love with each other when they worked together at a McDonald restaurant in Hong Kong. Unfortunately, however, they were separated from each other for some reasons. Many years later, the two main characters finally reunited in New York City on the day when the news of Teresa Teng's death started to circulate.

In the film, it seems that Xiao-jun didn't really fight for love and just let Qiao leave him for another man named Pao, her long-term patron. This might lead foreign audience to look for circumstantial evidences being able to justify his motivation. Considering the fact that this film was released just before the 1997 Handover, it might be possible to interpret his wimpish behavior as a metaphor for the unavoidable reality that most Hongkongers were scheduled to embrace sudden social changes caused by the approaching monumental social event.

Other than Teresa Teng's death, there were two more deaths told in the film. One of the two was the death of Xiao-jun's aunt who migrated to Hong Kong long before him. She endured a tough life in Hong Kong simply relying on her dramatic memory of the old days. When she was young, she happened to have a date with a famous American actor who visited Hong Kong to shoot a film called *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing*. Seemingly, she symbolizes a legacy of Hong Kong's western colonial history. After her death, Xiao-jun left Hong Kong for the United States. This can be interpreted as the end of colonialism in China's territory and a fresh start of economic refugees (or victims of drastic social changes) at the heart of capitalism far from their homeland.

Another death was for Pao. He was a gangster but was a nice guy at least to Qiao. In other words, he was rather a complicated character, like Hong Kong to Chinese mainlanders. At the New York medical examiner's office, Qiao was able to confirm his identity only through the Mickey Mouse tattoo on his back. The tattoo, just like McDonald, seems to symbolize the Western-style capitalism Hong Kong society has pursued. The westernization is what made the city quite different from the other parts of China and at the same time what many Chinese mainlanders, including Qiao, really longed for. It is an irony that a Hongkonger with a Mickey Mouse tattoo was killed in robbery in New York City, the iconic place of capitalism. The death of a man wearing a symbol of capitalism on his back side implies that Hong Kong wouldn't be what it used to be any longer. Hence Qiao needed to look for something else, most probably her true love.

The deaths of Xiao-jun's aunt and Pao are the symbols that the director (i.e. Peter Chan Ho-sun) intentionally prepared to deliver a strong message on the impending social changes to his audience in a rather sophisticated way. Other than these allegorical symbols, there are also some cultural symbols you can find throughout the film. One of them is a bicycle. Xiao-jun enjoyed riding a bicycle in the middle of traffic in Hong Kong. In the consideration of the

fact that there are much fewer bicycle riders in the city area of Hong Kong than in Northern China where he came from, it is fair to assume that the bicycle symbolizes his Chinese-ness. He continued to ride a bicycle even in the downtown area of New York City. Thanks to that, Qiao was able to recognize him right away when he passed by her in a heavy traffic. From this, it can be inferred that his identity didn't change at all. In the same manner, audience can easily guess that his love for her (or Hongkongers' love for their home city) didn't change for all those years.

At the final scene of the film, Xiao-jun and Qiao finally met with each other in the front of an electronic shop where the two were accidently attracted to the TV news about Teresa Teng's sudden death. The legendary Taiwanese singer's songs were one of the memories commonly shared by the two Chinese mainlanders. In the sense that her death brought to their reunion, this seems related to Buddhism's reincarnation. In other words, the bond made in heaven can't be broken by any outside interferences. Hence a further interpretation of this scene is that the Handover (i.e. diplomatic or political matters) can't break the *nidana* between Hongkongers and their home city, even though many of them have migrated somewhere far from Hong Kong.

The film *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* was commercially and also critically successful. According to a survey conducted a few years ago, this film was nominated as the most favorite Chinese-language film among South Korean audience. As discussed, this film is also a good reading material for those who wish to better understand the culture of Hong Kong, particularly the anxiety that Hongkongers of those days had about the imminent changes in social environments driven by the 1997 Handover the most important social event in the modern history of Hong Kong.

In every film, the main characters feel emotional and psychological pains for many different reasons. In good films, those pains should be closely related to what audience experienced in the past or will be likely to experience in the future. In other words, you will be able to better appreciate the film, if you understand what kind of pains the main characters feel under the circumstances. This is one of the main reasons why decoding symbols in films is important and why a certain level of cultural studies is required for foreign audience.

After the Handover, it seems that the Hong Kong film industry has focused on Chinese style action-packed blockbusters targeting mainly on Chinese audience through cooperation with

Chinese productions. As a result, films like *Comrades*, *Almost a Love Story* have been hardly produced in Hong Kong in recent years. Moreover, Chinese style action films are not well received by international audiences like they used to. It is probably because they are easily overshadowed by much higher-budget Hollywood's films. Therefore it is very hard for South Korean audience to find a Hong Kong film, whether it is a hidden gem or blockbuster, at a local theater these days. As a long-term fan of Hong Kong films and a scholar in comparative cultural studies, I am just hoping to watch new films with full of Hong Kong flavors in the near future.

<Note>

In this article, only one film *Comrades*, *Almost a Love Story* was examined. During the talk titled "A Korean Scholar Reads Hong Kong Films" at City University on March 12, however, three more Hong Kong films were also discussed. They are *Chungking Express* (1994), *Infernal Affairs* (2002) and *Crossing Hennessey* (2010).

<About the Author>

A native of South Korea, Dr. Hyewon Kang Kim has been living in Hong Kong since 1997. She taught Korean language and culture at City University and The University of Hong Kong. Her main area of expertise is comparative cultural studies. Her publications on cultural studies have gained much recognition both in China and Korea. One of her books, *Talks about Cultures of China and Korea* 中韩文化谈 (Peking University Press, 2013) has been placed on Phoenix Great Books 凤凰好书榜. Another book of hers titled *To Have Dim Sum for Jeomsim* (Korea University Press, 2013) was awarded as The Year's Excellent Books in the social science category by Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of South Korean Government. Her recent publication titled *Busy Koreans: Essays on Contemporary Culture and Society of South Korea in East Asian Context* (Korea University Press, 2014) is the first English book of its kind. She has also published around thirty semi-scholarly articles mostly on culture and films to major Hong Kong literary magazines. She is currently one of the five scholars who are invited to write a weekly column titled "Reports on the 21st Century Liberal Arts" for *Maeil Business Newspaper* the largest business newspaper in South Korea.