From local cinema to national : Stephen Chow's 'competent loser' and the question of Hong Kong identity

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**FROM LOCAL CINEMA TO NATIONAL:
STEPHEN CHOW'S 'COMPETENT LOSER'
AND THE QUESTION OF HONG KONG IDENTITY**

**TSENG KE TING, CHRISTIAN
SCHOOL OF ART, DESIGN AND MEDIA**

2020

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KONG IDENTITY**

TSENG KE TING, CHRISTIAN

A thesis submitted to the School of Art, Design and Media,
Nanyang Technological University,
in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts (Research)

2020

Statement of Originality

I certify that all work submitted for this thesis is my original work. I declare that no other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement. Except where it is clearly stated that I have used some of this material elsewhere, this work has not been presented by me for assessment in any other institution or University. I certify that the data collected for this project are authentic and the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of Nanyang Technological University and that the research data are presented honestly and without prejudice.

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.....
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I push on

in your memory.

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ABSTRACT

This study centres on a recent development in the filmmaking career of the well-known Hong Kong comedian, actor and director, Stephen Chow; by focusing on a character typically applied by him, the *competent loser*. While much of the widely cited studies on Chow focus only on his nonsensical style of humour (known as *mo lei tau*), as well as his success(es) within the Hong Kong television and film industry, Chow's productions for the mainland remain relatively understudied. Since moving on to seemingly produce films exclusively for the mainstream mainland Chinese audience from the 2010s, a lack of close attention and scrutiny is afforded to his recent work. The question of Chow's Hong Kong identity, or a lack of Hong Kong identity, is the central concern among Hong Kong insiders and locals as Chow's mainland productions continue to receive little regard. Since Ackbar Abbas' widely cited theory of Hong Kong as a culture of disappearance in the lead up to Hong Kong's transfer of sovereignty to the People's Republic of China in 1997, the primary concern among Hong Kong critics and scholars has been the loss of cultural identity and its fears of mainlandisation. Thus, the more pressing question arises as to how much of these ongoing fears can actually be attributed to Chow. Through a formal analysis of films like *Love on Delivery* (1994), *King of Comedy* (1999), *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons* (2013) and *The New King of Comedy* (2019), this study is able to recognise, define and trace the developments of Chow's competent loser; and appreciate that all is not lost for the cultural identity of both Hong Kong and Chow.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Study

Background and scope

Libraries and critics might confirm, if not bemoan, the lack of scholarship on Stephen Chow and his films. As one of the more understudied filmmakers to date, much of the analysed academic attention¹ so far is focused on his distinctive style of *mo lei tau* (literally: ‘nonsensical’) comedy and his success with *Shaolin Soccer* (2001) and *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004). Furthermore, as an icon of Hong Kong cinema and popular culture, either poor reception or little regard (or harsh disregard) is given to Chow’s recent foray into mainland Chinese cinema, with the filmmaker seeming to target the audience of the mainland exclusively. Taking these aspects into consideration, this study thus seeks to investigate Chow’s shift from producing films for Hong Kong local cinema (and beyond) to producing films for mainland Chinese audiences, especially with the ongoing debate surrounding Hong Kong’s cultural identity in the face of hegemonic forces from the mainland²; more elaborately, this study seeks to uncover the effected changes, if any, in Chow’s cinema as a result of his move to producing films for the mainland audience

¹ It should also be pointed out that much of the analysed articles for, and in preparation of, this study are comprised mainly of those published in the English language. A personal lack of proficiency in Mandarin, as well as a lack of access to translation services and articles in Mandarin, have limited and focused the attention here to articles in my own native language.

² At this time of writing, much has emerged within the socio-political tension between Hong Kong and the mainland. The middle of 2019 saw the beginning of a series of protests and demonstrations that quite notoriously escalated into violence. Triggered by the proposal of the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation Bill that has much connection with the ongoing tension stemming from social inequality and a lack of preferred liberties for Hong Kong, protestors were demanding for a complete withdrawal of the bill, among other things.

through tracing an observable commonality within his films, a trademark character, the *competent loser*.

Conceived independently for this study, the figure of the competent loser is novel and cannot be cross-referenced with other scholarly work at this time of writing; however, initial observations of the character point to similarities with a few universal character archetypes and prototypes, namely the trickster, the jester and the wise fool. Undeterred by their currency within various studies, the aforementioned characters are not the basis of this study because they do not represent the uniqueness of Chow; as the figure of the competent loser will reflect his uniqueness as a filmmaker more accurately. To put it briefly, the competent loser is somewhat a ‘postmodern Prometheus’³ for Chow. The character is instrumental to, and an instrument of, the postmodernity of Hong Kong and Chow—which is a distinguishable feature of them. Despite crossing genres, shifting narrative contexts and to some extent, changing themes, the one consistency in Chow’s films is this character of the competent loser. Briefly put, the competent loser is an individual of self-assured competence but is always perceived to be a loser. This will be elaborated on as this reads on but for now, the central hypothesis is that the tension between perception (loser) and actuality (competence) reflected in the competent loser’s relationship to social rules and power structures, is akin to, or an outcome of, Hong Kong’s perennial existence on the margins, and therefore makes the character an artefact of Hong Kong popular culture and identity.

³ If the quotation marks are not enough, do note that this term does not attempt to draw strict comparisons with the character of Greek mythology. This term is used purely as a light play of words with reference to Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel *Frankenstein; Or, The Modern Prometheus* as well as to the similarly named title of an episode of the television series *The X-Files* (1993 – 2002). Here, the comparison to Frankenstein only involves the very fact of Frankenstein being man-made; and the only intimation is that the competent loser is a creation of Chow’s to exact his own postmodern tendencies.

The aim

Thus, the central aim here is to distinguish how Chow's shift to mainland Chinese cinema has impacted his competent loser in the representation of Hong Kong identity (or vice-versa). To facilitate this, the overlying aims are to establish the competent loser as a recurring theme/character; and assess the cultural flows and influence of Chow as a product of Hong Kong cinema on Chinese mainland cinema. To accomplish these aims, the objectives are to first define and identify the competent loser, define the function of nonsense in Hong Kong identity and cinema, analyse the inter-, intra- and extra-textual roles, functions and shifts, if any, of the competent loser in varying contexts off-screen and on-, evaluate the preservation, if any, of Hong Kong cinematic and cultural identity, and finally, define Chow's position as a Hong Kong-Chinese filmmaker.

1.2 A Brief Introduction to Stephen Chow and Hong Kong Cinema

Most audiences around the world would be familiar with Stephen Chow as a result of his critically acclaimed cult films like *Shaolin Soccer* and *Kung Fu Hustle* that were released globally just after the turn of the millennium. Chow was born in Hong Kong on 22 June 1962 to parents from Zhejiang, an eastern coastal province of the PRC (Hua 4-5). Inspired by his hero Bruce Lee to become a martial arts star, Chow was accepted into an acting school conducted by Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB), a television broadcasting company in Hong Kong (Hua 15-19; 69-73). After graduation in 1982, Chow managed to achieve various acting roles for television before eventually starring in *Final Justice* in 1988. His rise to stardom in the following decade thereafter was meteoric, with about forty acting credits to his name by the early nineties. Chow made his

directorial debut in 1993 with the release of *Flirting Scholar*, a comedy set in the Ming dynasty of a scholar's quest for true love. Starring in the lead role of *Flirting Scholar* as well, Chow continued his career in the same way from then on, performing both directing and acting roles in a total of nine of his own films till 2008—with an apparent focus on directing from the 2010s.

Much of Chow's successful career has been attributed to his style of comedy and the popularisation of it. His sense of humour comprised of nonsense and slapstick have become quintessential of Hong Kong popular culture. Even though *mo lei tau* might not have originated from Chow himself, his name has become quite synonymous with the style of comedy. While some studies on Hong Kong cinema and identity argue the importance of *mo lei tau* to Hong Kong's postmodernity, it is clear as to how significant Chow is to the local culture of Hong Kong.

The trend in studies centred on Hong Kong cinema seems to focus on its search for, or definition of, its own identity. Within the search, multiple scholars⁴ point towards a prevailing postmodernism in Hong Kong cinema. As this reads on, it will become clearer as to how significant nonsense and nostalgia is to the postmodernity of Hong Kong. It is argued that much of Hong Kong's postmodern phase is the result of, and response to, its colonial history; coupled with the anxieties leading up to 1997—when it was arranged for the sovereignty of Hong Kong to be transferred from the British Empire, or the United Kingdom, to the PRC. Moreover, studies also centred on the popularity of Hong Kong cinema and its decline from the early nineties; with some scholars citing the looming

⁴ See chapters 2.1 and 2.3.

event of 1997, and the conditions to arise after, as one of the mitigating reasons for the downswing.

The event of 1997 was the central preoccupation for discussion among Hong Kong locals and scholars alike. Already subjects under decades of colonial rule, the bona fide Hong Kong-er was at the mercy of a new impending regime with political, social and economic ideologies and agendas of their own. The discourse throughout the periods surrounding 1997 were fuelled by the notion of Hong Kong's 'disappearance' following the publishing of the widely cited *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* by Ackbar Abbas in 1997.

While fears and anxieties surrounding the disappearance of Hong Kong's culture and identity prevailed, the turn of the millennium saw the release and success of Chow's *Shaolin Soccer* and the following *Kung Fu Hustle*. Some scholars argue that these films of Chow's represented a similar postmodernity that was emblematic of Hong Kong cinema before. Much of Chow's success had assuaged the sense of fear and anxiety from before as Hong Kong's cultural identity seemed to have to found some hope of survival, or appearance. This observation also coincides with a period where Hong Kong cinema and identity was recognised, negotiated and defined within regional and international co-productions.

That being said, what followed the period of Hong Kong's regional and international co-productions was the beginning of a new wave of Hong Kong's *national* co-productions, or Hong Kong-mainland co-productions. Stricter limitations and censorship laws are blamed to have forced Hong Kong into co-producing films with the mainland while being subject to an adherence to the cultural and perhaps nationalistic

sensibilities of the PRC. As doubts surrounding the survivability of Hong Kong culture began to resurface within the discourse of ‘mainlandisation’, Chow had also embarked on a string of mainland Chinese productions—via mainland producers and distributors; although some might consider them co-productions with Hong Kong only on the basis of having a few familiar Hong Kong names both on- and offscreen. Thus, questions and doubts concerning Chow’s current significance to Hong Kong culture have hitherto been raised⁵. Within this debate, it is worth investigating and determining as to how much doubt Chow actually deserves.

Moreover, considering how much of Hong Kong’s identity has been associated with Chow before, doubts concerning Chow’s current significance would raise further controversy, if not vindication, of Hong Kong’s disappearance. Thus, further investigation and definition of Chow’s shift to the mainland can better consider and address its implications on, and surfaced questions of, Hong Kong, as well as Chow’s own, identity.

1.3 Terminology

Before this reads on to the crux of the study, do permit a brief explanation of the foreseeable terms that might frequent the passages of this thesis for the sake of clarity and the avoidance of uncertainty. Because it forms much of the essence of this study, the first term that shall be addressed is *cultural identity*. To denote distinctiveness, uniqueness and individuality of a particular culture, the term shall henceforth be assumed, unless otherwise stated, to pertain to the specified culture as *both* a collective of peoples and as an entity that possesses and delivers its own arts, like cinema. To clarify, in the event that

⁵ See pages 24-25.

the term ‘cultural identity of Hong Kong’ is stated, one can assume it to point towards the cultural distinctiveness of Hong Kong as a collective of Hong Kong locals and of the cinema of Hong Kong, or what Hong Kong films represent for Hong Kong’s individuality.

Hong Kong, as it is widely referred to as such, shall remain as it is to represent the former colony of the British Empire on the eastern Pearl River Delta of the South China Sea, that is officially known as the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China (HKSAR). *China*, the mainland, mainland China or the People’s Republic of China (PRC), obviously refers to the world’s most populous country in east Asia. Although Hong Kong is officially part of China, the two shall be referred to in exclusivity to one another especially considering that this study centers on the relationship between the cinemas and identities of the two in a dynamic that already insists on some form of separateness from one another. Moreover, in spite of how it is used in various articles, I will adhere to an opposing trend of not capitalising the ‘m’ in ‘mainland’; while mainland is merely a descriptor and not officially part of the country’s name, it would dangerously grant a status of privilege to the governing PRC. By the same vein, directions like ‘east’ and ‘west’ shall remain as directions—unless it is part of a name like South Africa or South China Sea—no capitalisation will be afforded to any references pertaining to the east-west dichotomy.

Known formally as Stephen Chow Sing Chi (周星馳), the filmmaker is also referred to in some articles as Stephen Chiau, Chiau Sing-Chi, Chiao Sing-Chi, Chinu Sing-Chi, Zhou Xing-Xi as a result of dialect and translation (HKMDB). For consistency,

this thesis shall assume the option commonly used in most articles, as Stephen Chow, or Chow for short.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Hong Kong Cinema and Identity (Before 1997)

Hong Kong on the global stage

From the 1970s to the early 1990s, before the British had transferred the sovereignty of Hong Kong to the PRC, the cinema of Hong Kong had emerged to achieve commercial success and acclaim on account of its release of *kung fu* films. “Graphic violence, [stylised] fight scenes, and gravity-defying feats of acrobatic derring-do were *de rigueur* for the genre that had come to dominate the commercial screens of Hong Kong” (Fu and Dessser 3). Moreover, Hong Kong cinema had also become recognisable through a distinct (audio-) visual aesthetic within the *kung fu* genre—one that is argued “intervenes in global film aesthetics on multiple fronts [and] pushes the parameters of scholarly understanding of film form as well as camp culture” (Cheung, E. et al 6). Some scholars agree on the instrumentality of the *kung fu* genre to garner international attention for Hong Kong and its cinema, they also bemoan the stereotype that it had come to sustain (Fu and Dessser 3; Szeto and Chen 92). As argued, “Triumph is also a curse when Hong Kong cinema achieves global visibility through being [stigmatised] as a *kung fu* / action cinema by audiences and much film scholarship alike” (Szeto and Chen 92). In this regard, scholars have since taken up the mantle of defining Hong Kong, its cinema and its position on the global stage—particularly within local, regional, international and more recently, national, cultural flows. Through these discussions, the central argument is for Hong Kong and its cinema to be understood as transnational or marginal.

Hong Kong, a hybridised identity of cultures east and west, near and far

For its colonial past and its postcolonial present, which unearths a unique conundrum under a new regime in the form of the PRC, Hong Kong has been established as a space for diversity to congregate—a *contact zone*⁶ of multiple and varied cultures.

Cheung writes:

Hong Kong, like Hollywood, is a cinema that has been shaped by exiles, immigrants, and diasporic migrants throughout its history, and the continuing exchange of technology and talent within Asia as well as with the [west] needs to be understood theoretically in relation to postcolonial flows, hybrid cultures as well as global capitalism (Cheung 6).

Cheung formulates a point that reconciles a division of terms used (not necessarily exclusive to one another) to define Hong Kong cinema and identity— as *marginal* (or a borderland) and *transnational*. In his essay titled ‘Hong Kong Cinema as Ethnic Borderland’, Lo establishes that:

But unlike a modern nation state that divinizes, sacralises, and hence absolutizes its borders, (colonial) Hong Kong not only deprives border of its designated meaning, but also relativizes its function and detaches it from the idea of sovereignty by making border a midway zone and an object of *constant transgression* [my emphasis] (Lo 72).

From then on, Lo argues the various functions of Hong Kong being a marginal borderland; these include its ability to dis-institutionalise, deconstruct and more significantly, to establish a site where “national, local, indigenous, and foreign cultures are mixed together, and multiple identities are traditionally constructed in contingent, hybrid, and fluid modes ...” (Lo 74-76). Moreover, to sum this up cohesively with

Cheung’s point, Lo concludes:

The marginal borderland can also be understood as bustling and noisy zone of interactions and crossings, where hybrid cultures emerge to subvert the imaginaries of the dominant and allow new identities and alternatives to come into being (Lo 85).

⁶ I use this term in the same vein as it was coined and applied by Marie Louise Pratt in ‘Arts of the Contact Zone’. Contact zones are places (not necessarily spatial) where diverse identities and cultures are inclined to interrelate and intermingle.

One layer of both Cheung and Lo's arguments speaks of a multiculturalism that prevails in Hong Kong and its cinema. By the same vein, it elevates a layer that opens up the discussion centred on the transnational aspect of Hong Kong cinema. In other words, the multiculturalism of Hong Kong adds to its transnationality; but let it be said that Hong Kong's transnationality does also contribute to its multiculturalism. In this regard, many scholars like Liu (116), Fu and Desser (5) agree that the transnational approach is more appropriate to study contemporary Hong Kong cinema. Understood as a transnational cinema, Hong Kong cinema can also be studied via the postmodern model and understood as "a cinema of pastiche, a commercial cinema, a genre cinema, a self-conscious, self-reflexive cinema, ungrounded in a nation, multiple in its identities" (Fu and Desser 5). This circles back to supplement Hong Kong as a borderland with identities that are able to be fluid, hybridised and transgressive.

Additionally, these scholars agree that much of Hong Kong cinema's transnationalism is also the result of its co-productions (Chu; Khoo; Lo; Liu; Szeto and Chen; Fu and Desser; Yau). While co-productions add to Hong Kong cinema's transnationalism, they also supplement its transgressive function. While it is argued that "transnational genre studies have also shown how the globalization of Hong Kong action genres can exceed the orientalist [east-west] binary by being transnational" (Szeto and Chen 91), Yau elaborates and argues that:

Borrowing, mimicry, citation, and reinvention that are said to have marked Hong Kong cinema and its relationship to American, European, and Japanese films in the context of cultural globalization are relevant in examining co-productions ... To note a certain [levelling] capacity of genre conventions does not amount to saying that the films undergo an auto-Westernization, or that the differences in the two cinemas would be erased as a result of homogenization. Rather, the appropriation and reinvention complicates the territorial bounded concept of national cinema (Yau 33).

In agreement, it is also argued:

Hong Kong cinema is a transnational cinema *par excellence*. The transnational is not merely a two-way traffic from one nation to another nation. It could be also translocal and polylocal, subnational and supranational. Nor is transnational cinema a handmaid of transnational capitalism; rather, it could be a liberating force breaking out of the narrow confines of the nation-state (Liu 118).

At this point, the consensus thus appears to centre on the transgressive postmodernity of Hong Kong cinema and identity. In summation, “Hong Kong cinema has always found itself in a precarious state of flux, of crisis, of being a cinema in search of an identity” (Fu and Desser 5). With this established, it is worth investigating what said search has come up with leading up to 1997—a lengthy and significant portion and period of Chow’s career.

Hong Kong cinema, of Cantonese, nonsense, nostalgia and a mainland Other

First and foremost, let it be established that Cantonese is the language most predominantly used in Hong Kong cinema. Originating from Guangzhou, or Canton, Cantonese is a dialect within the Chinese language that is the official and native language of Hong Kong (“Chinese, Yue”). More particularly for Hong Kong, it is a Hong Kong Cantonese that involves its own terminology and code-switching with English; that has emerged as a result of British colonial rule (Li 307). Furthermore, “because of its deep local roots and linguistic affinity with the colonial audience, Cantonese cinema has lent itself since the 1930s to the exploration, articulation, and projection of a Hong Kong identity vis-à-vis the mainland mentality” (Fu and Desser 2). While Cantonese is the *lingua franca*, Hong Kong cinema is a Cantonese cinema—a significant part of its own identity and one aspect that distinguishes itself from the mainland. Supplementarily:

The power of Cantonese slang is instantaneously differentiating at the moment of utterance: it distinguishes not only Cantonese from Mandarin speakers, but also Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong ... The local identity enacted through Cantonese is embodied in the instantaneous and transient moment of its performance” (Lai 242-243).

At the same time, this distinguishing factor does fuel the tension between Hong Kong and the mainland, or to describe it more geographically, the North-South divide. More historically, Lo argues:

The North-South divide is a substitute for discriminatory class difference between Mandarin cinema and Cantonese cinema. In such view, the former, mostly made by emigrants from Shanghai, is considered modernized, arty, high-budgeted, and prestigious, whereas the dialect-oriented latter is local, cheap, backward and provincial-looking ... It is Mandarin cinema that has been regarded as the most advanced symbol of modernity (Lo 76).

In this regard, Hong Kong and its cinema has always been seen as an *Other* when compared to the mainland, and vice-versa. Thus, the conception of Hong Kong's own identity does make the effort to establish and sustain the identity politics in relation to the mainland. As a quick example to point out with regards to Chow, "Movies often portray the cousins to the north as hayseeds or martinets. In *All for the Winner* (1990) Stephen [Chow] plays a nose-picking hick from Beijing, complete with plaid suit, shrill tie, and straw suitcase" (Bordwell 40). Thus, it could be argued that Hong Kong cinema has, on occasion, misrepresented its mainland Other to reinforce its own identity as superior. On the other hand, Hong Kong films were seen to carry "spiritual pollution" in the eyes of mainland officials (Yau 21) as Hong Kong was often referred to as a 'cultural desert' and therefore an inferior Other (Ackbar 6; Fu 208; Lo 73). To further supplement this point:

History (both colonial history and history on the mainland) has seen to it that the Hong Kong Chinese are now culturally and politically quite distinct from mainlanders; two peoples separated by a common ethnicity, a first example of disappearance. This has produced many instances of mutual mistrust and misunderstanding, with one side *demonizing the other* [my emphasis] (Abbas 2).

Thus, Hong Kong cinema and identity has had to straddle with both perceptions of superiority and inferiority, especially in relation to the mainland. This is very much a significant influence on Hong Kong cinema's conception of itself, its own perpetual search for identity—especially when 1997 was looming. Having said that, while opinions

and anxieties about the impending events of 1997 were split, Hong Kong cinema relied on more indirect means to make its own political statements as “sidelong references and moments of mockery attract less controversy than would an explicit and thoroughgoing political critique” (Bordwell 40). A(n) product/instance of this is Hong Kong cinema’s postmodern identity; according to Bordwell, “[for most scholars, local postmodernism] came after the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989⁷, and it expressed the public’s urge to escape into nostalgia and nonsense, emblemized in a series of parodic retro films and Stephen [Chow’s] *mo-lei-tau* (“gibberish”) comedy” (Bordwell 44).

Literally translated to ‘nonsensical’ or ‘gibberish’, *mo lei tau* quite esoterically offered the Hong Kong local some escapism from the political realities and anxieties of the time. Derived from the famous wacky films of the Hui Brothers (Michael, Samuel and Ricky) in the seventies (Zhang and Xiao 41; 127), Chow developed the style of humour further as it became the core of his star persona (Klein 192); Chow’s “signature nonsense gags are variably lauded and dismissed as symptom of, and satire on, Hong Kong cinema’s anti-intellectual culture” (Lee, “The Kung Fu Hero” 118). Furthermore, because of its Cantonese wordplay, it can be argued that *mo lei tau* is both fully embedded in and emblematic of the Hong Kong Cantonese language; and therefore of Hong Kong identity. *Mo lei tau* addresses the Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong local as a “privileged viewer”, especially since only [the true Hong Kong local] can have an up-to-date knowledge of contemporary linguistic practices and an appreciation for the comic [*defamiliarisation*] of ordinary popular language” [my emphasis] (Lai 232; 242). Thus, at this point, it is argued

⁷ Also known as the Tiananmen Square Incident, the event was sparked by numerous political disagreements led by students in Beijing; that led to violent suppressions and a declaration of martial law. While much of the protests involved cries for democracy, many in Hong Kong began to fear that China would fail to honour its ‘one country, two systems’ promise (Lee, Francis 141-162).

that Cantonese and *mo lei tau* (or nonsensical humour) is a significant part of Hong Kong cinema and identity because they are esoteric to the Hong Kong local. Lest we forget the mechanics and implications to which Chow employs language and *mo lei tau* in Hong Kong cinema, which will be discussed in the later part of this chapter, the other aspect of Hong Kong's postmodernity should also be acknowledged.

As quoted of Bordwell earlier, in addition to nonsense as an avenue of escapism for the Hong Kong public, is nostalgia. With numerous explanations for its emergence, nostalgia in Hong Kong cinema has been attributed to a lack of quality content as well as a need to respond to the threat of 1997; in any case, nostalgia interacts with and re-presents meanings and materials from the past (Lai 233-234). Nostalgia and nonsense are not mutually exclusive; just as nonsense is esoteric to the Hong Kong insider, nostalgia is understood the same way since the Hong Kong local is more likely able to remember the history of Hong Kong's popular culture. Together, the practice of nostalgia and nonsense is what Lai refers to as 'enigmatization'; defined to be:

The selection and reorganization of existing images from popular culture in order to distinctly select the local audience as a privileged hermeneutic community, thus facilitating a state of internal dialogue, distinguishing those within from the 'outsiders' by marking who partakes in a shared history of popular culture. Engimatization is necessary, I argue, to preserve a textual domain where local expressions, memories, and contentions that may potentially contradict official views will find articulation (Lai 231).

Thus, following Lai and Bordwell, the postmodernity comprised of nostalgia and nonsense in Hong Kong cinema functions to solidify or unite a distinct Hong Kong identity among the local audience by sustaining shared popular traditions (as 1997 looms, some might add).

Much has been said here in this study so far regarding the general attitude of the Hong Kong local in the lead up to 1997—with words like 'fears', 'threat' and 'anxiety'

being used rather habitually. If it has to be reminded, such negativity surrounding the impending transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty to the PRC stems much from the mutual othering discussed above, among many other socio-political reasons that do relate on some level with the aforementioned demonising of the other. Consequently, Hong Kong cinema and its own search for identity have been, in the lead up to 1997, also widely defined and marked as a culture of *disappearance*. This is worth noting as this discussion very much underpins and untangles the discourse surrounding Hong Kong cinema and identity throughout various developments in Hong Kong-Mainland dynamics after the eventual transfer in 1997. On the eve of Hong Kong's transfer, Ackbar Abbas perceptively and famously theorised Hong Kong as a culture of "disappearance" (Szeto and Chen 89; Liu 117; Lee, L. 2). As referenced earlier, Abbas' first example of disappearance is that the Hong Kong Chinese and the mainland Chinese "are two peoples separated by a common ethnicity" (Abbas 2). For Abbas, disappearance relates to representation and self-representation (Abbas 8). With that established, Hong Kong's culture of disappearance is the result of the perennial need to reconceptualise its own identity because of the ambiguity and unfamiliarity surrounding questions of representation arising from strange circumstances of marginalisation. Abbas elaborates with another example:

When sovereignty reverts to China, we may expect to find a situation that is quasi-colonial, but with an important historical twist, the colonized state, while politically subordinate, is in many other crucial respects *not* in a dependent subaltern position but is in fact more advanced—in terms of education, technology, access to international networks, and so forth—than the colonizing state (Abbas 6).

To clarify, Abbas points out that Hong Kong was moving into the position of becoming subjects of a sovereignty that is, by definition, comparatively undeveloped. This is another instance of a strange circumstance of marginalisation especially considering that

colonisers throughout history are traditionally and seemingly more infrastructurally advanced than their subjects. Overall, the overlying concern for Abbas is that Hong Kong, as a result of going from one coloniser to another (or what might essentially seem to be another), will always lack a *post*-coloniality; which is important in the address of problems of representation (Abbas 14). In this regard, the postmodernity of Hong Kong cinema in the lead up to 1997, its metatextuality and genre bending in particular, have been argued to represent Hong Kong's exercise, or assertion, of postcoloniality in the face of a denial of such. Moreover, for Abbas, the futility of Hong Kong cinema to continue defining itself after the transfer of sovereignty remained to be seen, uncertain and subject to doubt.

2.2 Hong Kong Cinema After 1997: Return to the Mainland

Has Hong Kong disappeared?

Naturally, the discussions surrounding Hong Kong cinema following 1997 centred on the accuracy of Abbas' theories concerning Hong Kong's disappearance. While some might rightly insist that the anxiety of disappearance still exists into the mid-2010s (Liu 117), perhaps even to date, others expand on the details and implications of such anxiety; for instance:

Hong Kong has aged depressingly from a culture of budding self-discovery in resistance to 'disappearance' and 'reverse hallucination' (qtd. in Szeto and Chen 89), into a middle-aged culture 'lost in transition' (qtd. in Szeto and Chen 89), embarrassingly inhibited by blocked horizons and anxious about not moving on ... The younger generations, however, are becoming impatient about this extended mid-life crisis and its procrastinatory identity politics of ambiguity, deferral, and 'disappearance'" (Szeto and Chen 89-90).

Thus, according to scholars like Szeto and Chen, in its resistance and wait against and for its own disappearance, Hong Kong has strayed away from the big picture as it straddles

between its own ideals of a time before and of moving on. Chu argues that since 1997, Hong Kong has paradoxically “[taken] great pains to retain its status as a global city, [while] on the other [hand], it cannot but lean toward China for the sake of economic opportunities” (Chu 12-14). Let it be reminded that Hong Kong’s transfer to the PRC also coincided with the economic decline of Hong Kong via the Asian financial crisis as well as the meteoric economic growth of China; furthermore, the period beginning from the early 90s onwards is also argued to be one of ‘decline’ for the Hong Kong film industry.

Scholars might diverge on the reasons for Hong Kong cinema’s decline, but the general consensus is that Hong Kong’s film industry (and various other industries) had to turn to the mainland to survive commercially. Described as an “embrace of the motherland” (Chun, “Hong Kong ‘Identity’” 186), such shifts have been attributed to the economic crisis of the mid-1990s while China was conversely beginning its own emergence as an economic power (Chu 12-14; Teo “Promise and Perhaps” 342). Moreover, the mainland Chinese market was at the time, “to a large extent unrealized and unfulfilled” (Khoo 125). The signing of the Close Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) by Hong Kong and China in 2003 opened the mainland Chinese market to Hong Kong and made it more lucrative for the Hong Kong film industry to make co-produced films with the mainland; with many Hong Kong filmmakers insisting that to be the future of the Hong Kong film industry (Chu 102-104; Liu 117). However, CEPA privileges requires strict adherence to State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) requirements. In this regard, some question the possibility of preserving Hong Kong identity with few referring to the strategic reliance on the mainland market as “culturally

unsustainable” (Szeto and Chen 94). In this aspect, much has been said against Hong Kong’s film industry being integrated into China’s.

Much of the resistance to mainlandisation of Hong Kong cinema—to quite exclusively feature mainland Chinese settings, themes and cast—(and why ‘mainlandisation’ itself comes with negative connotations) stems from the critical approach to hegemonies and hegemonic structures. In compliance with CEPA and SARFT rules, mainland relocation describes an “explicit subjection to the powerful tactics of control” (Choy). Thus, “a disappointment when it comes to any self-expression of Hong Kong in the co-produced films (Yau 22). Here, on the basis that mainlandisation is evidence of submission, compliance and/or being subsumed, it is unforeseeable for many that Hong Kong identity can be produced or preserved in its films for the mainland.

Raised eyebrows concerning Hong Kong-Chinese co-productions brings the discussion back to Chu’s point about Hong Kong getting “lost in transition” as a result of its paradoxical ideals. While international co-productions in the lead up to 1997 received praise for their transgressive and postmodern potential, the merit of Hong-Kong-mainland co-productions are discounted quite immediately. In the face of such doubts, some critics like Yau rightly argue:

Rather than nationalization, there is cultural renationalization through the making of co-produced films whereby the mainland’s setting, cultural sensibilities, historical events, spoken language, literary resources, and talents have prominent presence ... Circulation of cultural renationalized films can easily make business a witting or unwitting partner of transnational projections of soft power” (Yau 34).

Thus, with regards to Hong Kong-Chinese co-productions, there is certainly that transgressive potential that marked Hong Kong cinema before 1997. It is the lingering anxiety concerning disappearance that results in the double standards surrounding co-productions. Moreover, to explain more about the implications of Hong Kong’s

paradoxical thinking, Chu argues that Hong Kong's particular focus on its past to develop its own autonomous imaginary in relation to China:

Hong Kong had to claim its own imaginary by referring to theories of "hybridity"—a culture of translation instead of tradition—while searching for an authentic and pure local identity. I would term this complex imaginary a "hybridized" nostalgia for a pure local past" (Chu 107-109).

Chu's observations offer much insight and basis for updated theories, or redefinitions, concerning the nostalgia of Hong Kong cinema since 1997. But before that is detailed here, let the argument for Hong Kong-mainland co-productions be further described.

With reference to Yau's arguments earlier about the potential of "renationalised films" to exert "transnational projections of soft power", Yau means to suggest that the recycling, reproduction or reinvention, of conventions belonging to pre-existing Hong Kong films in later co-productions work to *both* sustain markers of Hong Kong identity and create something new as well. Yau argues that the collaborative aspect of co-productions preserves the "cultural memories" of Hong Kong—comprised of its narrative strategies and film crafting—and combines them with the demands of Chinese cinema. In this regard, the identity markers of Hong Kong:

... [Do] not vanish. Instead, this cultural memory is entangled with a retroactive identity of this cinema which infuses the co-produced films of Hong Kong and China in a particular manifestation of cultural globalization that is not entirely that of Hong Kong or of China (Yau 43).

Additionally, it is also argued that:

Co-productions do not necessarily mean a process of thorough [mainlandisation] (state control, to be more precise) ... [Films that feature] mainland Chinese settings, mainland Chinese themes and even entire mainland Chinese cast no longer [centre] on the idea of resistance but on that of deliberate adaptation or feats of plastic identity shape-shifting, and may use duplicitous discourse to get around censorship (Lo 84).

Therefore, as mainlandised as they might seem, Hong Kong's co-productions with the mainland, or Chinese productions that have employed producers and directors from Hong Kong for that matter, are actually capable of invoking a distinct Hong Kong-ness; it is just

that a *new* search for identity has emerged as a result of an overlying ambivalence—as it was the case before 1997, but its transnationalism and transgression at present has to be negotiated on the site of the local (Hong Kong) versus the national (China).

Into a cinema of post-nostalgia

Overall, scholars contend that Hong Kong has not “disappeared” as it was predicted, neither is it disappearing. Its disappearance might seem apparent on the surface, but it is agreed that a cultural memory of local Hong Kong is embedded, invoked and remembered in Hong Kong’s co-productions with the mainland; not forgetting the same with mainland cinema’s productions with certain figures of Hong Kong (like Chow) as well.

With some resemblance to Lai’s theories about nostalgia, nonsense and “enigmatization”, Vivian Lee theorises an update to better approach Hong Kong cinema post-handover. In a moment coined as “post-nostalgic” or “post-nostalgia”, Lee argues that the seemingly nostalgic films post-handover are not exclusively representative of the sort described by Lai—to cultivate a cultural solidarity among privileged viewers, that is—but function to rethink the significance of cultural remembrance. “In essence, the post-nostalgic is not ‘anti-nostalgic’, but implies a nuanced relatedness to the past as history/text/image; as such, the post-nostalgic can also be construed as a form of meta-(con)textual self-critique” (Lee, V. “Hong Kong Cinema” 6). This will be described and explained as a form of *progressive nostalgia* later in the Analysis chapter, with particular reference to Chow’s *King of Comedy* (1999). More immediately, Lee’s arguments of post-nostalgia have been widely applied to understand Chow’s success with *Shaolin Soccer* (2001) and *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004).

2.3 Stephen Chow

The 'King of Comedy' — a phenomenon from Hong Kong for Hong Kong

As one to emerge from Hong Kong's Television Broadcast Limited's (TVB) performing artist training program, Stephen Chow featured in the releases of the "golden slots" throughout the eighties and early nineties among the likes of Jackie Chan, Chow Yun-fat, Jet Li, and other big stars (Bettinson 381; Bordwell 35-36). As intuitively expected of one to emerge from a local system, much of Chow's influence comes from Hong Kong local popular culture (Lee, V. "The Kung Fu Hero" 117). Additionally, scholars agree that Chow belongs to a group of Hong Kong entertainers that "employs source material grounded in local genres, stars, styles and cross-media alliance [that] are endogenous to East Asian popular culture" (Davis and Yeh 43; Lee, V. "The Kung Fu Hero" 117). Evidently, apart from the obvious influence of Kung Fu (Srinivas 292), it is observed that Chow consistently attempts to restage cinematic icons in his own films (Lee, "The Kung Fu Hero" 118). In this regard, many refer to Chow's work (at least before *CJ7*) as distinctly local (Srinivas 290). That said, it is also worth noting that Chow also draws much from outside the local. In line with his attempts to restage cinematic icons, Chow has also, for instance, adapted the James Bond character in a couple of his films, namely in *From Beijing with Love/Guo Chan 007* (1992) and *Forbidden City Cop/Da nei mi tan 008* (1996) (Lee, V. "The Kung Fu Hero" 118). It is this mesh of local and global influences that make Chow an emblem for hybridity and transnational studies.

Not forgetting the influence of Chow on popular culture in addition to the influence of popular culture on the filmmaker, many recognise that it was Chow's

particular style of comedy, *mo lei tau*, that came to characterise Hong Kong comedy and popular culture.

Making sense of Chow's nonsense.

Although *mo lei tau* was very much embedded in Hong Kong cinema before Chow's own rise to stardom, many have attributed its popularity to the man himself⁸. Much of *mo lei tau*'s status of synonymity with Chow has to do with his execution of the style of comedy and the significance of which. While it has already been established that *mo lei tau* is very much tied to the Cantonese language, Lai observes that "[Chow] creates slang by taking common Cantonese expressions and attaching new meanings to them, literalizing metaphoric expressions or producing intentional nonsense and thus overthrowing established meanings and dominant values" (Lai 242). Chow's wordplay within the Cantonese language is a significant component of *mo lei tau* as it functions to challenge certain conventions. In summation, "'Word' and 'play' together constitute [Chow's] rhetoric of subversion directed against norms of social propriety" (Lai 243). Moreover, let it be reminded that *mo lei tau* is not exclusively verbal or linguistic; it is also slapstick, or physical (Yu 216). Thus, the 'play' aspect also plays with physical propriety, or actions that constitute social decorum, for instance. In this regard, Lai argues that Chow's work challenges the dichotomy of the arts, of being either high or low, but his films "not only collapse the high-low boundary, but also overthrow established social orders, corroding the high while blatantly inhabiting the space of the low" (Lai 244). Thus, the significance of *mo lei tau* to the Hong Kong local is that it confronts the status

⁸ See page 13.

quo, while uniting those with a language in common; at the same time, let it be reminded that with regards to enigmatisation, nonsense also works with nostalgia.

According to Lai, “like the nostalgia film, [Chow’s] nonsense weaves its own communicative system of internal commemoration” (Lai 246). As a part of Hong Kong’s postmodernity, Chow’s *mo lei tau* addressed questions of its own cinematic and cultural identity. However, at the same time, and more particularly with Chow’s films in the early to mid-2000s, Lee argues that there is much nostalgia embedded within the nonsense that exhibits Chow’s means to interact with the very images that built his own imaginary, and “instead of history per se, Chow is more interested in a visual “reinhabitation” of a mediated past—a reinvention of “style” through displacement and recontextualization” (Lee, V. “Lightness of History” 506). While nostalgia represented a significant part of Hong Kong cinema in the lead up to 1997 according to Lai, for Vivian Lee, a *post-nostalgia* is the overlying theme in the Hong Kong imaginary post-1997. More elaborately, “the aesthetic of nostalgia after 1997, especially in the mainstream cinema, tends to be *less celebratory* in its evocation of the past; more importantly, it is less certain about the meaning of the past images and codes being recycled in the present” [my emphasis] (Lee, V. “Hong Kong Cinema” 11). Again, this relates to the ‘progressive nostalgia’ mentioned earlier and will be detailed later⁹. But to first highlight the mechanics as to how Chow in particular achieves his post-nostalgia, Chow’s works (and his localness) has to be understood within the intertextual frame of reference. The self-conscious use of intertextual references across genres and origins, the repetition of his signature *mo lei tau* gags and motifs, are Chow’s attempts to find some grounding in local

⁹ See pages 20 and 72.

popular cultural tradition while revising it at the same time (Lee, V. “Hong Kong Cinema” 11; 118; 214). Moreover, with the post-nostalgia of films like *Kung Fu Hustle* and *Shaolin Soccer*, scholars like Lee, V., Srinivas and Klein observe Chow’s hybridity, transgression and transnationality as part of his ability to produce the local for the global stage—further evidence that Hong Kong has not entirely ‘disappeared’.

Chow beyond the turn of the millennium

But as approving as fans and scholars are of Chow’s ability to produce the local for the global stage, a question does arise as to how much of this can be recognised especially considering that all of Chow’s films since *CJ7* (2008) were made with mainland sensibilities for mainland Chinese audiences—quite intuitively, one would argue that Chow, in vindication of certain fears, has completely succumbed to mainlandisation and in dramatic fashion, beg the question if Chow’s onscreen disappearance mirrors that of Hong Kong’s both onscreen and off-.

To put it quite briefly, it looked like Chow had betrayed who he was and where he came from. As observed, “While *CJ7* generated a Stephen Chow wave across the Mainland, his fans in Hong Kong were dropping their jaws when they realized that the typical Hong Kong style of Stephen Chow had completely evaporated” (Chu 119-121). Additionally, it should also be pointed out that Chow was appointed as a member of the Guangdong provincial committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in 2013. The CPPCC has been described as “the place where messages are developed and distributed among party members and the non-party faithful who shape perceptions of the [Chinese Communist Party] and China” (Hsu and Cole 3-

39). However, criticism of Chow's inactivity, ineffectiveness and unattendance within this committee was later reported in 2016 (May Also Ask; Stephen Chow Fails). Whatever the case, some do appreciate the complexities behind the developments in Chow's career:

This transition from making quintessential Hong Kong films to complete mainlandisation is a complex decision ... Stephen Chow's career demonstrates the dilemma. He moved from *Shaolin Soccer* (2001) a proud Hong Kong film refusing to bow to the Chinese market, to successfully globalizing while maintaining local appeal in *Kungfu Hustle* (2004) and choosing China against the rest in *CJ7* (2008), at the expense of halving the profits of *Kungfu Hustle*. His decision to completely mainlandize in terms of casting and cultural sensitivities in *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons* (2013) made it the third highest-grossing film in China ... The ontological definition of Hong Kong cinema is called into question by such phenomenal success of Hong Kong—China co-productions (Szeto and Chen 96).

Thus, while it is essential to recognise the importance of economic sensibilities, i.e. 'following the money', or political ones, it is also important to approach co-productions, particularly Hong Kong-China ones without prejudice to accurately suggest a total disappearance (or lack thereof) of identity or uniqueness. Moreover, the general consensus among scholars is that identity is unfixed, fluid and subject to (re-)definition (Lee, V. "Hong Kong Cinema" 7; Fu and Desser 5; Abbas 14). Considering this, I argue that themes of ambivalence and fixities do manifest in/with a particular character of Chow's that seems to perennially feature in his films. The competent loser might be a term of recent conception, however, it must be asserted that the character does resemble a few of the widely-discussed and studied archetypes throughout history across various performative media.

Distant Relatives (?) of Chow's competent loser—the jester and the wise fool

While this particular character of Chow's has not officially been referred to, or widely-studied, as the 'competent loser', it is necessary to point out that the observable and interpretive qualities of this character are not unfounded. With some resemblance to

certain arche-/prototypes that have emerged throughout the ages across various media, the competent loser can be argued to both exist, and do so within similar functionalities.

Throughout the early stages of this study, the competent loser was observed to somewhat resemble the jester and the wise fool. Here, a disclaimer must be made that this study does not attempt to insist on an absolute derivation or relation between the competent loser, the wise fool and the jester. However, since it is understood and assumed that images of the past can repeat (especially so with Chow), a possibility does exist that some inspiration has been drawn from iconographies, figures and such by Chow in the conception of his own films.

Regardless of one's ability to recognise similarities between the competent loser and the wise fool and/or jester, let it be first established that both the wise fool and the jester are generally omnipresent across different cultures. While it is said that the "court jester is a worldwide phenomenon" (Ruggiero 3), "many studies have celebrated the universality of the jester and fool across time and place" (qtd. in Pamment 69). Thus, there is already some connection between the jester and the wise fool in the sense that they are often studied inclusively of one another; and in their universality, there are variations of them across cultures—including, more particularly for the purpose of this study, Chinese ones. After all, to reference the title of Beatrice Otto's publication, fools are everywhere¹⁰.

The importance of these characters lies in their ability to communicate without risk, as they are "allowed to speak even when not spoken to, to interrupt ongoing dialogue, and to speak to anyone without permission" (Clark and Mangham 843). This

¹⁰ In full, Otto authored *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester around the World*.

allows them to confront and challenge societal conventions and structures without censure. “This is because Jesters [and wise fools], ultimately, are not answerable to the specific demands of authoritarian officials. [Their] duty is to shock, to formulate ideas not imagined, or to state out loud what most are not willing to admit” (Ruggiero 4). For instance, studies of early Sufism recognises the character’s instrumentality in the transgression of social norms” (Pamment 78). Additionally, the wise fool is able to highlight the absurdities within relations of power as he “in his negations, also affirms the hierarchical structures, wherein his madness holds a therapeutic value for tyrannical rulers, laws, knowledge, and other forms of power” (Pamment 79). Overall, jesters and wise fools “[mimic] the *carnavalesque*, which sabotages convention and ‘celebrates temporary liberation from prevailing truths and the established order; mark[ing] the suspension of hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions” [my emphasis] (qtd. in Ruggiero 4). This does relate to Lai’s observations of Chow’s films, as they “bear the mark of a carnival’s ‘grotesque realism’” (Lai 244), while referring to his performance of *mo lei tau* as “carnavalesque” (246). Thus, it is feasible to conclude that an emblem of Chow’s comedic persona, his competent loser, is functioning in the same way as jesters and wise fools particularly to transgress societal norms, if not to fully represent an appropriation of the character arche-/prototype.

For the purpose(s) of this study, the conception of the term ‘competent loser’ stems from the naming and figure of the ‘wise fool’—that represents the “paradoxical notion that the fool may be wise and that the wise may be foolish” (Phan 732). By the same vein, it is with hope that the naming of the character with two conflicting terms ‘competent’ and ‘loser’ is able to suggest a similar paradox, to unearth the character’s

ability to transgress various polarities that relate to competence and inadequacies in and around the social realm.

CHAPTER 3: THE COMPETENT LOSER

If Chow manages time and again to drive entertainment to his viewers, then his vehicle would have to be his onscreen persona. Just as an auteur-star like Woody Allen has his neurotic intellectuals, Chow has his competent losers. In somewhat the same vein as Charlie Chaplin's or Peter Sellers' idiosyncratic characters, the competent loser fits the role of the underdog—but it might take a little convincing for one to actually root for him. To put it quite briefly, the competent loser talks more than he acts and always seems like he is trying too hard. He generally starts off seeming and being totally inadequate (and perhaps relatively difficult to like), but actually prove to be rather competent in the end. As initially observed, “[Hong Kong] films may build in references to their star's uniqueness ... Stephen [Chow] often plays a bungler who has one outstanding skill, so each film must come up with a new area of expertise” (Bordwell 158). While Bordwell astutely observes Hong Kong cinema's pattern of pandering to audience expectations of their stars, it is worth expanding on this here by investigating the significance of such expectations and indulgences. To achieve this, a closer look at the developments within Chow's career would be useful.

In order for us to better distinguish the transformations in Chow's cinematic career amid the obvious political shifts, especially with regards to the production (and reproduction) of his auteurist sensibilities, this chapter will define Chow's competent loser as someone more than a bungler. In other words, while the character's identity (distinctiveness) will become much clearer here, this section will also discuss the character as an object of identification (or something to identify with) among fans of

Hong Kong cinema, more particularly so with the local audience; and vice-versa, or how the character also identifies with the Hong Kong local.

3.1 A Brief History of The Competent Loser

Mo lei tau and Chow's nonsensical career

Before answering his directorial calling, Chow had managed to garner considerable success as an entertainer having starred in numerous television programs and films. From his debut on film in 1988 to his directorial debut in 1993, Chow achieved multiple awards and accolades for his acting; but more significantly (at least in this case), many consider him to be quite synonymous with the genre/style of comedy, *mo lei tau*. Chow's sense of humour, or comedic repertoire, has contributed to the conception of his trademark character; that is to say, we have to appreciate the competent loser's origins in Chow's practice of *mo lei tau*.

Much of said appreciation is rooted in defining Chow's practice of *mo lei tau*, or discerning Chow's performative continuities, by discussing the question regarding Chow's method of delivery. This, on a large part, can be described in the brief illustration of Chow's observable acting patterns and trends that stem from his early roles. Undeniably, much of these quirks have a direct connection to what *mo lei tau* can be translated to be, at least linguistically, nonsensical.

In the spirit of nonsense, irrelevant elements—both verbal and physical—are typically strewn together, often repeating in inappropriate instances. In *The Final Combat*, a Hong Kong television series that aired from April to May in 1989, Chow, as its mischievous protagonist, pulls off the catchphrase, 'Let's sit down, take a sip of tea, and

have a bao', or more phonetically in the untranslated original Cantonese, '*Chor dai yum daam cha, sik gor bau*'. As plain and normal this statement might seem even in a wide variety of contexts, it is Chow's (in character) random and repeated utterance of the line at the most unlikely of instances that manages to incite laughter, and in so doing fulfil the conventions of the *mo lei tau* sense of humour (Pang 29). Apart from catchphrases delivered at random situations, another verbal example of Chow's *mo lei tau* is his wordplay. More esoterically, puns, sound substitutions and pronunciation errors involving the Cantonese language form much of Chow's verbal arsenal (Kraicer). In addition to irrelevance and wordplay, Chow fuses his formula for incongruence within the Cantonese language to produce meaningless sentences made out of meaningful words (or words that do actually contain meaning). In *Out of Dark* (1995), Chow makes a meal order for '*See jup jing chang*' which translates to 'Steamed orange with black bean sauce'. In this instance, "each word makes sense, and the syntax holds together, but the resulting combination is inconceivable for a Chinese food eater and displays the [*mo lei tau*] principle of juxtaposition of irreconcilable elements" (Kraicer). Because of Hong Kong's inherent use of Cantonese, the verbal aspects of *mo lei tau* makes it quite exclusively appreciated among the local audience of Hong Kong as well as a distinct characteristic of Hong Kong's sense of humour and its local identity.

More accessible to those less inclined towards Cantonese to appreciate, are the physical examples of *mo lei tau* which can be simply described to be largely slapstick and silly. Apart from the obvious reason of linguistic esotericism (or lack thereof), the physical aspect of *mo lei tau* is comparatively easier to discern because of distinct visual cues and patterns. Inasmuch as these patterns are repeated and reinforced through Chow's

performances, some (audio-)visual cues do rely on the audience's pre-existing knowledge of other texts, especially cinematic ones, and not exclusively and necessarily from Hong Kong or his past performances.

Chow's repertoire of facial expressions and body language make up much of these visual cues. His distinct style of acting can be factored down to, among others, how he acts cool, pontificates wisdom, expresses disgust and conveys bewilderment. One might argue that this point merely describes acting in general, but if one were to consider the circumstances of the aforementioned performance cues delivered in the middle of, or to incite/suggest, absurdity and/or irrelevance, then one can recognise how they do align with *mo lei tau*—just as there are incongruencies in speech and/or linguistics in the verbal aspect, there are incongruencies in action in the physical aspect.

Figure 3.1. A random towel in the middle of a fight in *All for the Winner*.

Figure 3.2. Ridiculous headwear in wrong circumstances in *Royal Tramp*.

Moreover, an essential accompaniment to these cues is exaggeration; instances and/or motifs are often either overplayed or escalated to the point of absurdity. One classic example is the scene from *When Fortune Smiles* (1990) where Chow (in character), from a jail cell, exchanges mimetic gestures with someone in the effort to

liberate himself to use the toilet. As unwilling as Chow's co-star¹¹ (in character) is about risking her safety to unlock his cell, she crudely suggests plugging himself at the rear with a bottle cap. As ridiculous as such a suggestion already is, Chow continues the mimetic argument and the two continue the discussion through an exchange of crude gestures that get increasingly crude with each turn. Here, an instance of silliness/ridiculousness/nonsensical is not enough for Chow's *mo lei tau*—it has to multiply.

On the other hand, Chow relies much on parody to deliver his brand of *mo lei tau*. For instance, to an audience familiar with Chow Yun-fat's slow-motion introduction as he walks on to scenes in John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) and Wong Jing's *God of Gamblers* (1989)—both classics of Hong Kong cinema—much humour is incited in viewing one particular scene of Chow's in Jeffrey Lau and Corey Yuen's *All for the Winner* (1990). Here, Sing (Chow) *tries* to emulate his hero, Chow Yun-fat, by literally walking slowly into scene. With very similar mise-en-scène and non-diegetic background music to the scene in question in *God of Gamblers*, it is quite obvious what and who Chow is parodying in *All for the Winner*. On one level, walking unnaturally slow can be as silly as it can get while looking absolutely ridiculous in opposition to the intention of being cool; while on a metatextual level, more incongruence is added as Chow breaks from the narrative (and perhaps character) to play with popular culture and the conventions of editing.

While it is possible for Chow's *mo lei tau* to be categorised into either physical or verbal, his method for nonsense is varied, often delivered via pointless mono-/dialogue,

¹¹ Played by Cutie Mui Siu-wai.

random breaks from narrative and/or character, or random (and almost surreal) scenarios or incidents of slapstick. As Chow's career develops with his own adoption of added responsibilities and leadership, he undeniably repeats, recycles and even refines his own performative style especially in his self-directed works. It is certain that his early application of *mo lei tau* had laid the groundwork and formed the foundations for Chow's trademark character, the competent loser, to become uniquely his, as well as a cultural marker, if not a symbol, of Hong Kong's cultural identity¹².

3.2 Identifying the Competent Loser

Getting onscreen — Chow's foray into acting and directing in the early nineties

Chow was already a household name in Hong Kong¹³ when he released his directorial debut *Flirting Scholar*¹⁴ in 1993, a comedy film about a well-known scholar named Tong Pak-fu (Chow), whose dissatisfaction with his own eight wives leads him on a quest for a woman who can truly appreciate his talents. With acting credits in over thirty productions by then, it is safe to assume that the Hong Kong audience was already familiar with Chow's comedic style and performance. Although the protagonist of *Flirting Scholar*, Tong Pak Fu (Chow), does not quite fulfil all the characteristics of the competent loser, the discernible mix of genius-level competency with jester-like qualities

¹² While some examples of derivations and antecedents of Chow's competent loser are listed here, I do acknowledge the likelihood that plenty more in the history of cinema and popular culture in- and outside of Hong Kong might have existed as influences or counterparts on and to Chow's competent loser. While uncovering the full historical context of the competent loser does prompt an interesting study, here I do beg the reader to merely accept the possibility of Hong Kong popular culture's influence on Chow and his competent loser; especially considering the time and space constraints of this study.

¹³ It is worth mentioning that *Flirting Scholar* had grossed a total of HK\$40,171,804. The popular Wong Jing film *Royal Tramp* (1992), in which Chow starred in only as an actor, brought in HK\$40,862,831 at the box office (Hong Kong Movie Database).

¹⁴ Co-directed with Lee Lik-chi.

in his character does foreshadow the shape of things to come in, or at least lay the foundations for, Chow's subsequent productions, especially with regards to establishing the competent loser as an idiosyncratic character of his. Above all, Chow's ongoing popularity at the time of *Flirting Scholar*'s release does not only explain the film's relative success¹⁵, it also accounts for the local acceptance of Chow's directorial efforts, not forgetting his content. That is to say, Chow relies much on his familiarity among the local audience—a result of his past work—to deliver his own brand of entertainment. More elaborately, Chow draws much from his preceding roles—evident in his intertextual allusions and references which will be explored further in the analysis section—to capture the Hong Kong imagination and speak for its identification. While this point opens the discussion of the competent loser's significance to Hong Kong identity, let us first establish the distinct characteristics of the character.

a. The Nonsense

Chow might draw much from the successes of his past work in his directorial efforts but it can also be argued that he was merely persisting with his own brand of comedy and performance. In any case, Chow applies a tried-and-tested formula all the same as he reproduces the *mo lei tau* style of comedy that he was always famous for throughout the early days of his career. In this regard, a discernible trait of Chow's competent loser, especially so in its earlier renditions, is its penchant for nonsense. As discussed earlier, Chow's nonsense is very much a reliance on the *illogical*, or the *incongruent*, hence, the competent loser is the executant, if not the embodiment, for illogic (or incongruence).

¹⁵ *Flirting Scholar* is referred to as “the number one local hit of 1993” (Zhang and Xiao).

In *Love on Delivery*¹⁶ (1994), Chow plays Ang Ho-kam, a cowardly and weak lunch delivery boy who struggles to win the affections of the girl of his dreams—and incidentally, the first appearance of the competent loser. As another example of Chow's nonsensical parodies, the audience is introduced to Ang Ho-kam (Chow) the same way they are introduced to the Terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger) in the Hollywood science fiction action film, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*¹⁷ (1991)—emerging, half-kneeling and fully nude, from the shadows amid lightning and mystique. While such imagery alludes to power and even godliness—as effected in *Terminator 2*—we soon learn that Ang's nakedness is the result of him being robbed of everything. And this is exaggerated to the point of absurdity when a police officer inconsiderately requests for Ang to produce his identification card while obviously being bereft of all belongings—a point that Ang does explicitly make. Do bear with the brief interjection here because this does bring us to another defining quality of Chow's comedic style—while he (in his characters) does embody the nonsense, he does also draw attention to the nonsense (while in character); as much as Chow *is* the joke, he can very much be *in* on (or around) the joke as well. While on some level audience expectations are played with as pre-established motifs, if not conventions, are nonsensically subverted, the ultimate take-away from the scene, or product of the nonsense, is that the character in question is quite a loser, or at least seems rather pathetic.

With this established, it is important to note that the competent loser has other defining qualities. One cannot surmise a character of Chow's to be that of the competent loser on the sole account of nonsense because that would erroneously make all of Chow's

¹⁶ Also co-directed with Lee Lik-chi.

¹⁷ Directed by James Cameron.

characters, especially in productions devoid of his major creative involvement, to be competent losers. In other words, all the competent losers might exhibit nonsense but not all characters of nonsense are competent losers.

b. The Non-Achievement

This is where the ‘loser’ aspect of the competent loser reveals itself. With skill or in spite of skill, Chow’s trademark character will always be an underachiever, at least at the beginning; and ‘Bungler’, as labelled by Bordwell, would be an apt term to describe this aspect of the competent loser.

Again, the cowardly Ang from *Love on Delivery* is a bona fide loser for much of the narrative—unfortunate, mistreated and underrated in both professional and personal aspects of his life. More complexly, Ling-ling-chat (Chow) in *From Beijing with Love* (1994) only seems like an inadequate or incompetent spy to all around him as well as to the audience but actually turns out to be rather effective as the narrative unfolds. Much like Ling-ling-chat, budding actor Wan Tin-sau (Chow) of *King of Comedy* (1999) and wannabe gangster Sing (Chow) of *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004) are undervalued failures in their respective walks of life till an event arises to reveal some level of competence or extraordinariness; which brings us to the next crucial point of the competent loser.

c. The Competence

As hinted in the preceding paragraph, the loser ends up with a victory through an unearthing of some latent competence; hence, the *competent* loser. As an ironic twist of circumstances, Ang wins a very public fight and consequently, the girl; Ling-ling-chat’s childish naiveté or immature foolishness actually conceals extraordinary superspy abilities; Wan Tin-sau’s acute awareness of behaviours allow him to perform the many

roles required of him as an actor or a social being; and Sing's own rethinking of his priorities and values put him on a path to enlightenment as a Kung fu genius.

d. As Sum of All Parts

It would be largely ill-considered to forget that the competent loser, as a character of a narrative, is part of a whole and functions to result in, and as a result of, interplaying components.

First and foremost, the competent loser is the product of a dynamic combination of the aforementioned points a. The Nonsense, b. The Non-Achievement and c. The Competence. Inasmuch as these distinct characteristics do typify the competent loser, it is also the narrative, or the character's development within the narrative, that further establishes the competent loser. As described earlier about Ang Ho-kam in *Love on Delivery*, the nonsense establishes the loser and the loser goes on to exhibit some competence as the narrative develops. However, there is more to this trajectory—as added complexity to the narrative and character, the competent loser's development can more accurately be described as an ebb and flow of victory and loss as it wavers back and forth between competence and hopelessness. One can even surmise, quite rightly too, the competent loser to be a character quite competent at losing. *King of Comedy*'s Wan Tinsau does seem to have plenty of victories in the romantic and professional realms throughout the narrative, but he does also lose as much. As a result of both inherent and external circumstances, such as personality flaws (and even virtues) and social discriminations (more so against him), Wan loses the affection of various characters as well as his career opportunities at various instances throughout the narrative. Furthermore, what accompanies this ebb and flow of victory and loss is a cycle of psychological trauma

and ease as the character makes an emotional journey back and forth between humiliation and honour. This is an important distinction of the competent loser—while these events can describe and distinguish the character to be maladjusted and/or nonconformist with interpersonal and societal norms, it also has much to say about the significance of the competent loser, especially with regards to Hong Kong identity. This will be discussed further in the last subunit of this chapter.

Lastly, while the competent loser is the sum of all parts, the character is very much part of an ensemble. Within composites of recurring character types, the competent loser distinguishes itself as it interacts with its respective counterparts; to clarify, the aforementioned emotional journeys are brought about by agents as they interface with the competent loser. Some examples include the sympathetic girl with misguided ideals, like Lily (Christy Chung) in *Love on Delivery* and to some extent, Turkey (Karen Mok) in *The God of Cookery*; the bullying brute, like Black Bear (Joe Cheng) and Lau (Ben Lam) in *Love on Delivery*; and the mentor, often disillusioned, fallen from grace, and customarily performed by Ng Man-tat. With this established, let it be said that while it is entirely possible to suggest these additional characters as trademarks of Chow's as well, the focus here will remain on the competent loser and all supporting characters will be taken, for various intents and purposes of this study, as points of reference to which the competent loser can be identified and subsequently analysed.

Tracing the competent loser's legacy—Chow's acting "retirement"

Just as Woody Allen's neuroses have become apparent in his films that lack the auteur in a starring role, Chow's competent loser manages to find himself in his films in

spite of his own absence from the cast list. First and foremost, one can easily recognise Chow's performative continuities in the multiple and varied actors playing 'his' role. There are plenty of similarities between the aforementioned examples of Chow's physical reactions, especially facial expressions, with those of his successors. With these uncanny resemblances, it is not entirely fallacious to assume the competent loser's perennial existence (at least superficially), especially with regards to Chow's directorial career in mainstream Chinese cinema. In any case, these resemblances do provide hints and clues, or starting points, for investigating any shifts—thematic, characteristic, etcetera—as Chow and the competent loser make their marks on mainstream Chinese cinema.

3.3 Significance of the Competent Loser

Hong Kong Cinema: An Identity in Flux

As stated in the Literature Review regarding cultural identity, there is an argument against having a singular or fixed approach to identity. Consider the case of Hong Kong's, doubly marginalised in the discourses of Chinese nationalism and British colonialism, Hong Kong locals and its cinema have thus generated an ambivalent, hybrid identity (Fu 201). British-but-not-quite as a colony, Chinese-but-not-quite as part of 'One Country, Two Systems', Hong Kong has geographically, politically, socially and culturally existed on the margins. And:

Although margins usually denote the subjugated, the silenced, and the excluded, the marginal borderland can also be understood as a bustling and noisy zone of interactions and crossings, where hybrid cultures emerge to subvert the imaginaries of the dominant and allow new identities and alternatives to come into being (Lo 85).

As a marginal borderland, "in short, this is the space of hybridity itself, the space in which cultural meanings and identities always contain the traces of other meanings and

identities” (Ashcroft, et al. 71). This adds much to Ackbar’s statement that, “Not all identities are worth preserving. This is to say that disappearance is not only a threat—it is also an opportunity” (Ackbar 14). The ‘opportunity’ is for Hong Kong identity to further transform and define itself since “cultural identity ... is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’ (Hall 223-225)”. Moments of ‘becoming’ and of ‘being’ perfectly sum up the ambivalence and hybridity of Hong Kong’s identity, which is why most call for an approach to Hong Kong cinema as one that is, “multiple in its identities” (Fu and Desser 5).

Competent-but-a-loser, loser-but-competent, Chinese-but-not-quite—Chow’s competent loser represents an arbitrarily oscillating identity, one that mirrors that of Hong Kong’s identity politics. To put it quite simply, if we can track the character’s presence in Chow’s filmography, even in Chinese co-productions, we can possibly trace the remnants or transformations of Hong Kong identity throughout the various shifts in Hong Kong cinema, more particularly to the mainland.

Embracing the Mainland (And Saving Hong Kong)

It would be oversimplifying the matter to insist that Hong Kong-Chinese co-productions negate the local identity of Hong Kong. As it was stated before, co-productions do not mean a process of “thorough mainlandisation” or “cultural renationalization”, but represents “feats of plastic identity shape-shifting” that manifests “cultural globalization that is not entirely that of Hong Kong or of China” (Yau 43; Lo 84). In any case, it is argued that in Hong Kong-Chinese co-productions, “there remains a range of styles, narrative strategies, and craftsmanship that make the obvious legacies and

currents of Hong Kong cinema and popular culture” (Yau 26). Chow’s competent loser represents such currents. Additionally, Hong Kong cinema has a tradition of using the genre of comedy to alleviate North-South ethnic and cultural conflict (Lo 75). Thus, the comedic performance of the competent loser can be argued to address ethnic-border tensions and politics as well. Overall, the formation of Hong Kong’s cultural identity in this climate has to be negotiated in a new site: co-productions (Chu 109-112).

Furthermore, it could be argued that as Chow’s competent loser, representative of Hong Kong identity, situates itself in more Hong Kong-Chinese co-productions, mixing mainland sensibilities with Hong Kong humour, the problem of “two peoples separated by common ethnicity” (Abbas 2) is addressed as the co-productions might allow us to “modify our conception of Hong Kong and envision alternative Chineseness” (Chu 107-109).

CHAPTER 4: METHOD

As much as the purpose of the analyses centers on distinguishing possible shifts in the competent loser, as well as their respective implications for Hong Kong identity, the initial step in the analysis of each particular film of Chow's is to prove the presence of the character. Although, it has to be reiterated I do anticipate, or at least endeavour to investigate, possible changes to these established qualities in Chow's later work for the mainstream Chinese audience; in this regard, the question of how much of these definitive traits can be afforded to Chow's Chinese productions remains to be answered—but for the purpose of facilitating the analyses of these films, the presence of the competent loser can at least be predetermined based on various recognisable consistencies on the surface at the initial stage of analysis. With this said, this is a list of possible primary films featuring the competent loser; arranged chronologically and grouped according to historical significance, the Hong Kong Productions, *Love on Delivery* (1994), *From Beijing with Love* (1994), *Forbidden City Cop* (1996), *The God of Cookery* (1996) and *King of Comedy* (1999). The Global Co-production, *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004), and the Chinese Mainstream Productions, *CJ7* (2008), *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons* (2013), *The Mermaid* (2016) and *The New King of Comedy* (2019). But for the purposes of adhering to the central focus of this study, many of the aforementioned films can be excluded to leave much of the analyses focused on **four** particular films of Chow's direction. Again, it must be reiterated that the primary films are selected on the basis that they coincide with significant moments in Chow's career; and not arbitrarily so on a whim or on the grounds of convenience.

4.1 The Primary Films

The beginning — Love on Delivery

As one of Chow's earlier films and the inaugural film for the competent loser, *Love on Delivery* should best describe the character's connection to Hong Kong identity for various reasons, one especially being that the film was released in 1994 before Hong Kong's transfer of sovereignty to China in 1997, at least a decade before Chow moved into co-productions and subsequently mainstream Chinese productions. Additionally, Chow's relative inexperience at the time of *Love on Delivery*'s release could define the competent loser in its infancy, relatively immature and undeveloped as a work-in-progress—an aspect that could uncover the changes to Chow's competent loser on a grander scale.

The old and new kings of comedy — King of Comedy & The New King of Comedy

While *King of Comedy* offers a complex appreciation for Chow's competent loser, the film also occurs at a significant moment in Hong Kong's cinematic and political history. Released in 1999, *King of Comedy* situates itself right after the handover in what can be described widely as a transitional period for Hong Kong and its cinema. More interestingly, Chow later adapts this particular film of his for Chinese mainstream cinema to produce and release *The New King of Comedy* in 2019. With plenty in common, the two films will provide an ideal site of comparison to best distinguish the differences and shifts in Chow's competent loser. Furthermore, based on the string of augmenting successes leading up to these respective films, it can be argued that each film does

represent pinnacles of Chow's creativity and filmmaking at those respective moments of his career.

Finding success in Chinese mainstream — Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons

As one of Chow's comparative successes¹⁸ in his Chinese mainstream career, *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons* should provide a decisive marker with regards to the competent loser's position. With five elapsed years since Chow's full inauguration into the Chinese mainstream with *CJ7* and three years yet to come before his success with *The Mermaid*, it is worth investigating Chow's *Journey to the West* as a product of someone who has learnt from his struggle to fit in; and therefore, through his application of newly-acquired solutions for acceptance, one might distinguish a shift in his own artistic sensibilities and/or choices.

4.2 Textual Analysis

This study involves in-depth formal analyses of four particular works of Stephen Chow. More elaborately, the analyses will examine how Chow's trademark character, the competent loser, works with formal elements to represent Hong Kong identity on intra-, inter- and extra-textual levels. Additionally, as much as the established checklist will be used to discern the presence of the competent loser, the listed qualities will also be analysed as part of, and in conjunction with, the constituents of film.

While the competent loser and its listed qualities do already describe, or at least hint at, the thematic significance of the narrative, the acting and obviously the character(s)

¹⁸ *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons* has an average score of 68 (*CJ7* has 46) on *Metacritic* and is one of China's record breakers at the box office (*Metacritic*).

of the respective films, much meaning can also be derived from, or be supplemented by, cinematography, editing, sound, music, art direction, mise en scene and self-reflexivity. In the effort to fully distinguish the significant (and the significance of) shifts in the competent loser across Chow's body of work especially in his charge on Chinese mainstream cinema, it has to be understood how the various elements of the respective films are working together in each film as they relate to the larger contexts of their social, historical, cultural and political environments.

Based on the definitive qualities of the competent loser, the character can generally be argued to challenge certain social conventions as it blurs the lines between expectation and actuality¹⁹—experienced both offscreen by the audience as well as onscreen by the characters—especially with regards to the performance of societal roles in the face of inconvenient realities. Therefore, in the textual analyses of the primary films, the central theme can be assumed to be *expectation versus actuality*; and the central question that will guide the analyses is how all the formal elements of film are creating meaning in accordance to the aforesaid theme.

A brief word on intertextuality

With the primary films established, this study will also rely on some referencing of other filmic sources both in and outside of Chow's body of work. In his study²⁰ on Chow's production of the local in *Kung Fu Hustle*, Srinivas focuses on the intertext with the assumption that popular culture production and consumption does much to define

¹⁹ Here 'actuality' is used to denote matters of fact, as opposed to using words like *truth* or *reality*—which are already academically loaded terms that might connote or incite much philosophical and/or semantic debate.

²⁰ Detailed in an article titled "Kung Fu Hustle: A Note on the Local."

cultural identity (the local in this case). In somewhat a combination of methods in her own study²¹, Lee both acknowledges the context of transnationalism behind the production and distribution of Chow's films and focuses on the intertextual aspects of them to uncover a "nostalgia for old form" (Lee 118). Through her method, Lee is also able to discuss and define a local significance to Chow's films, namely that of *Shaolin Soccer* and *Kung Fu Hustle*. As established earlier, Chow has drawn much from his prior acting roles in the conception of his trademark character. Additionally, as part of Chow's *mo lei tau* repertoire, he has a tendency to, among diverse instances, break from narrative, break from character and reproduce audio-visual cues from popular culture; in this regard, meta-/intertextuality is a significant quality in Chow's body of work. Much like the studies conducted by Srinivas and to a certain extent, Lee, cultural identity can be distinguished and traced in the intertext. It is worth examining Chow's self-referentiality, self-reflexivity, and his referencing of other texts—either as an homage or just simply repeating certain iconographies— to investigate the preservation (or not) of Chow's Hong Kong-ness in his mainstream Chinese films.

4.3 Discourse Analysis

Finally, this study also considers the views of Chow's audience. With particular attention to the Hong Kong perspective on the selected films, sources like blog articles and reviews, are analysed with especial consideration for the aforementioned temporal moments to better explain and discuss such perspectives in relation to the current political, social and cultural (and perhaps economic) realities.

²¹ Collected in a publication authored by herself entitled *Hong Kong Cinema since 1997: The Post-Nostalgic Imagination*.

Quite similar to that of a particular chapter in Ruby Cheung's *New Hong Kong Cinema: Transitions to Becoming Chinese in 21st-Century East Asia*, where audience reception is primarily considered to discuss recent transitions in Hong Kong cinema, this study acknowledges that the members, or consumers, of culture do significantly contribute to the conception and conduct of cultural identity. Unlike Cheung however, who focuses much attention on concerns surrounding fandom, much of the analyses here centres on the general attitudes of Hong Kong locals (or those that identify with Hong Kong) towards Chow's films. In this regard, much of the analyses of the discursive texts shall assess and determine sentiments of approval, identification and pride, to name a few. More elaborately and for instance, if a blog article written by a Hong Kong film enthusiast about *CJ7* were to bemoan a lack of Hong Kong uniqueness in favour of Chinese sensibilities, one can surmise a disapproval of Chow's efforts to (re)produce the local in that particular work. Overall, it is through this aspect of reception, coupled with textual analyses, that this study endeavours to investigate the various transitions in Chow's career.

CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS

Analysing the four films—nothing is what it seems

To briefly recapitulate the essentials for analyses, while it is a character that represents the central focus of this investigation, it is also equally important to acknowledge its relationship to the filmic components that surround it. To both align the analyses of multiple and varied components across several films along a cohesive path as well as to evaluate certain consistencies among the films throughout the analyses, the theme of *expectation versus actuality*, is the site of concern as it connects the competent loser with the filmic components and vice-versa to create meaning relevant to certain structural contexts—namely social, cultural and political. Therefore, this discussion of *Love on Delivery*, *King of Comedy*, *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons* and *The New King of Comedy* shall examine and evaluate the competent loser and the various formalities of film as they work together respectively to imply that *nothing is what it seems* (or everything is *not* what it seems)—this will get a lot clearer as the chapter progresses.

5.1 An Analysis of *Love on Delivery* (1994) — The Competent Loser and Hong Kong as Battling Underdogs

Overview

Love on Delivery tells the story of a cowardly delivery man, Ang (Chow), who learns to overcome his own cowardice to win the affections of Lily (Christy Chung). While confronting one's own cowardliness is itself a personal battle, *Love on Delivery* is comprised of multiple battles of varied types. Considering the many fights, duels and

challenges that occur throughout the film between the characters, they are more obviously the physical battles that seek to address questions and assertions of dominance among individuals. Incidentally, a philosophical-physical battle does arise at some point to raise the question of superiority among the different schools of martial arts—this ultimately leads to a one-on-one between Karate and Kung Fu, with the film's ultimate antagonist, Lau (Ben Lam), representing the former and Ang fighting for the latter. But the pressing significance of these physical battles are the underlying personal battles that arise in and around them. As stated earlier, Ang's eventual participation in a physical battle revolves around his personal battle between cowardice and courage. At the same time, Lily's own romantic ideals set up demands for Ang to live up to; in this regard, Ang gets cast into a personal battle between his own masculinity and expectations of such. Above all, it is Ang's battle against the seemingly superior, or the favourite, as a presumed inferior that defines him and his journey as an underdog sort. As an underdog, the overlying battle is ultimately against fixed ideas and expectations. When Ang accepts and acts on his feelings for Lily, he embarks on a perennial negotiation with fixed ideas and expectations that clash with his own being and character—which partly describes the fundamental role and situation of the competent loser, as defined earlier. In *Love on Delivery*, the competent loser is in constant negotiation with certain fixities concerning courage, heroism, romance and redemption. Within the respective sets and subsets of battles, Ang struggles to come out on top, oscillating between winning and losing; and through this oscillation, expectations are challenged on multifarious levels, where fixed ideas on various matters do not pan out accordingly as nothing is what it seems.

Courage, heroism, romance and redemption — nothing is what it seems

The competent loser Ang is introduced to the audience as a pathetic down-on-luck bungler via a sequence comprising a parody of an introductory scene from the blockbuster movie *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. As a stark contrast to what audiences actually get at the end of the scene in *Terminator 2*, viewers discover a comically pitiable character in that of *Love on Delivery*. As a prime example of expectations being played with, this instance is one of many that Chow employs to suggest that *nothing is what it seems*. More elaborately, these instances produce respective ironies, or reveals, that the seemingly powerful, the seemingly heroic, the seemingly competent, are not quite so, and vice-versa.

As previously stated²² about the scene but an important point to recall is that the first shot of Ang in this scene (and also the first shot of this scene) succeeds that of an Arnold Schwarzenegger poster, in character as the Terminator, on the door of Lily's locker. Over this shot is Lily's voice telling her friend of her desire for a heroic man. While the direct sequence of the two shots can/does foreshadow Ang as Lily's impending hero, the juxtaposition of the two shots and scenes does also invoke an irony concerning Lily's heroic man, especially considering how dissimilar Ang is to the Terminator, or Schwarzenegger. Considering that the reader here is now quite aware of how events unfold for Ang, it can be promptly stated that the evocation of this irony is one instance of many to ultimately serve the grand purpose of challenging societal ideals and expectations of heroism, or the image of the heroic male at least with regards to the obvious disparity between Ang and Schwarzenegger within these two scenes.

In addition to *Love on Delivery*'s reproduction of the mise-en-scène in *Terminator 2*, it also reproduces, or at least introduces a sound-like of, the background music for the

²² See page 35.

original scene. While this makes the parody plainly obvious, it also suggests Chow's intention to invoke the same atmosphere, at least for the initial part of his own scene. The dark tones, blue lighting and the inclusion of mist, create an aura of mystique to herald a figure of power, if not godliness, in the introductions of Ang and the Terminator. More particularly with Ang, one gets the impression of power, and therefore the impression of competence, as a result of Chow's replication of the cinematography, art direction, visual effects, sound and music in *Terminator 2*. But as one would later witness, any seemliness of Ang's power and competence is subject to doubt as they learn the actual reason for his nakedness. Apart from its comedic function of incongruity—where expectations are set and later contradicted—the sequence also sets in motion the pendulum of the character's competence as defined earlier of the competent loser, a continuous oscillation between being a winner and a loser (or from competent to incompetent). Moreover, the truth about Ang's state of undress, having given everything to his mugger out of *kindness* in addition to his disinclination towards conflict, substantiates the defined quality of the competent loser as one that can lose out, or at least be disparaged, in spite demonstrating some well-established qualities of virtue.

Inherent qualities (virtuous or vicious) aside, much of the competent loser's identity—more particularly so with the negative side—is perceived and attributed by surrounding characters. Before Ang receives his fortunate and unexpected kiss from Lily²³, multiple incidents reveal him to be generally looked down upon as the butt of all jokes. First, an inadequate handling of a fly in a customer's soup leads to his boss calling

²³ On Ang's route as a lunch delivery boy, he falls in love with Lily after being kissed quite randomly by her at the local sports centre. He soon learns that she kissed him not on account of some romantic affection for him, but merely to repel the advances of her Judo instructor, Master Blackbear (Joe Cheng).

him a ‘moron’; next, numerous patrons of the fitness centre spare no respect as they hit Ang on the head as mean-spirited greetings while one of them condescendingly offers his own girlfriend for him to date—in response to these, Ang compliantly laughs along with his provokers. To foreshadow, for the audience, the shape of things to come for Ang, the only person to actually acknowledge him nicely is Lily right after this described series of mistreatment. But as it is already known, Lily’s act of affection towards Ang is actually part of a ruse—while some might argue this to be a form of mistreatment as well, this does also betray some preconceived impressions Lily has of Ang especially when she insists on her actual intentions in spite of Ang expressing an interest to actually accompany her to a Jacky Cheung concert; thus, the status of the competent loser is ultimately confined to the perceptions of those that surround him. Of significant interest is the way Chow presents Ang’s moment of securing hope as it transitions to one of losing hope. From the timestamp of 11:43 onwards, as Ang rambles on (in Cantonese) quite nonsensically with the impression that he is getting a date with Lily:

Ang: I like Jacky Cheung too. If you really want to go, I’ll be happy to go out with you. But make it a Wednesday, that’s the only day I’m off ... in the whole month.

Ang: If you must go today, mind if I wear a hat? Or give me some time to fix my hair? My hairstyle doesn’t go with your personality. May I?

As Ang speaks the second line, the film cuts to an uncanny, in various respects, shot (at least within the film) of Ang side-by-side with Lily, facing the camera.

Figure 5.1. Mind if I wear a hat? Image from *Love on Delivery*.

Such a shot draws much emphasis on the staged-ness, performativity, or artificiality of the scene/event especially since it breaks the continuity of the moment, or in other words, exhibits an injection of *unnatural* arbitrary action in the middle of *natural* flowing action. Inasmuch as the shot emphasises the artificial, it also underscores Ang's short retreat into fantasy; and the succeeding shot (conventionally shot; back in the natural flow) of Lily apologising for misleading Ang is a snap back to reality (screen/narrative reality). Overall, the sequence teaches both Ang and the audience a brief lesson that nothing is what it seems at least onscreen, if not off-.

Of course, there are more exclusive lessons for the audience in expectation and actuality. Much like how audience expectation and perception is played with in Ang's introductory scene, the audience learns to distrust its own gaze of the protagonist as it wavers between that of celebration and that of lamentation. As one can expect from the oscillating nature (resulting and resultant in/of circumstances) of the competent loser, Ang does eventually win a date with Lily through a fortunate twist of fate²⁴ and some effort to

²⁴ In almost *deus ex machina* fashion, Jacky Cheung makes a cameo in the film and as himself gives Ang tickets to his own concert.

present those concert tickets to her. Upon hearing the good news, our view of Ang is more flattering than before. Between the timestamps of 18:15 – 18:43, Ang is featured in a sequence, or a montage, that resembles that of a music video—edited with romantic background music, shots in slow-motion and shots of sublime imagery. Perhaps in line with the comedy genre, or to foreshadow the impending return trip of the oscillation (or both), the sequence ends quite comedically with Ang’s face literally on the ground after a misstep.

Figure 5.2. Ang’s montage of glory. Images from *Love on Delivery*.

And it does not take long for the pendulum to swing back. After a confrontation with his antagonist and dodging a punch to inadvertently let Lily take the blow, the camera once again treats Ang as a lowly subject.

Figure 5.3. Framing the loser. Image from *Love on Delivery*.

With high-angle shots of him and low-angle ones from his point-of-view, Ang’s status is certainly devalued, and most certainly descends from his moment in the sun not too long

ago. Moreover, to supplement the camerawork, Chow highlights Ang's sense of defeat with a reference to the *sad walk* popularised by the cartoon character Charlie Brown right after being definitively called a coward by Lily.

Figure 5.4. Ang's sad walk. Images from *Love on Delivery*.

It is worth noting that from this narrative beat, the camera continues to belittle Ang for much of his subsequent scenes and shots, including those that arise from his meeting his kung-fu mentor, Tat (Ng Man Tat). It is also worth noting that at this part of the narrative, the pendulum that is Ang's wavering stature spends much time—significantly longer than that of the recent oscillation—in the momentum towards the unfavourable, or loser, side of the spectrum. Moreover, viewers do not see Ang win, nor display some level of competence, for a sufficiently obvious amount of time. Inasmuch as this represents a strategy of dramatic pacing, Ang's extended moment as a loser also represents an important strategy in Chow's challenge with the fixities concerning courage, if not masculinity as well. Although it has been argued that the audience learns to distrust its own gaze of Ang, let it be reminded that such a lesson does not come instantaneously and consciously. One should recognise the comparatively rapid oscillations earlier to be merely a process of initiation (especially since only eighteen minutes of the film have elapsed) for the audience in the lesson of distrust. As the audience further accustoms (or re-accustoms) itself with the disparagement of Ang as a loser, and at this point, a coward as well, they are also undergoing a process of imposing their own or subscribing to fixed

ideas about Ang based on how the character is currently viewed—just as how societal ideas about cowardliness and other qualities both favourable and unfavourable are generally developed and cumulatively fixed.

It is not a coincidence that Ang's extended moment as a loser coincides with his seemingly misguided mentorship under the tutelage of the obviously fraudulent²⁵ Tat. In spite of Tat's own claims to be a kung-fu master, the viewer is not immediately compelled to trust his legitimacy as a proper guide for Ang's journey in kung-fu, at least if not towards self-betterment; as a result of set design, Tat's appearance and Ng Man Tat's performance. Everything about Tat's kung-fu school is as *makeshift* as the stall that it situates itself in. From the creased posters slapped onto the wooden walls to the improvised training equipment made out of appropriated junk, all that decorates the scene suggests Tat's kung-fu training to be merely an afterthought or a means to hustle. Additionally, with Tat shabbily dressed and displaying an unathletic and defeated demeanour, one cannot help but opine that this is a case of one loser seeking help from another; which makes it difficult for one to be sympathetic or supportive of Ang's cause. Moreover, the audience does have every reason to be suspicious of Tat especially when Chow chooses to light his face from below to invoke a menacing image of him. But all this is done to the same effect as that of the unreliable gaze on Ang. As the viewer later learns that Tat is indeed a kung-fu master²⁶, the current image of Tat is also meant to train the audience to distrust what they see and subsequently decide.

²⁵ In addition to his obvious greed for money, Tat involves plenty of swindling techniques or unconvincing demonstrations in his sales pitches to Ang of his various kung-fu training packages.

²⁶ In the heat of confrontation, Lau recognises Tat and makes a revelation that Tat is actually a world-renowned martial artist and champion.

Figure 5.5. It is not easy to trust Tat. Image from *Love on Delivery*.

Furthermore, one can argue that Tat's inclusion in Ang's journey adds some complexity to *Love on Delivery* especially with regards to showing that nothing is what it seems. Firstly, as Ang seeks help from another supposed loser, it is not merely a case of him learning from a mirror image because Ang ultimately does everything as told as opposed to doing the opposite²⁷. Secondly, Tat's inclusion also adds another layer of established ideas that require challenging, namely with regards to those pertaining to competence, supplementing the central purpose of Chow's competent loser at the same time.

In addition to his strategy of the unreliable gaze to challenge fixities pertaining to competence, Chow also subjects specific embodiments of competence to direct confrontation. Inasmuch as Ang's duel²⁸ with Karate master, Lau, subscribes to the underdog motif, it also directly pits the *seemingly* incompetent against the *seemingly* (and actually) competent. As a clean-cut individual and a capable, efficient fighter, Lau symbolises the conventional idea(s) of competence and the competent individual. It is assumed that this works on the basis that one would certainly surmise the victor of a match

²⁷ This is based on the assumption that mirror images unearth flaws and in order for one to redeem themselves from their flaws, one has to perform in contrast to their earlier selves.

²⁸ The duel stems from Ang's failure to timely reveal to Lily the truth about his identity as her rescuer. One successful pretender turns out to be Lau, who manages to deceive Lily and forge a romantic relationship with her. Bent on changing Lily's thoughts about him and proving his identity as the hero behind the Garfield mask, Ang seeks out this fight.

between contenders to have the rightful claim to represent the virtues of whatever was in contest. Should Ang prevail over Lau, one could recognise a crumbling of the paradigms associated with competence; but as one will come to see momentarily, it is not as simple as that with *Love on Delivery*.

Figure 5.6. Losers finding a common cause. Images from *Love on Delivery*.

For starters, let us discuss the hints surrounding the contest of the two champions. After the literal challenge, or duel, is proposed and accepted, a montage follows to chronicle Ang and Lau's (more so for Ang) respective preparations for the fight. While Ang gets a montage of silly antics showcasing what one would typically *not* do when preparing for a fight, Lau gets a few shots of himself doing some serious preparation work comprised mostly of skilful movement drills. More interestingly, Chow decides to superimpose or crossfade Ang's montage on to the shot of Lau's comparatively diligent preparation work (see Figure 5.7).

Figure 5.7. Ang creeps in. Images from *Love on Delivery*.

If this sequence does not demonstrate an unsettling of expectations concerning preparedness and competence, it does at least foreshadow an impending crumbling of the fixities in question. And as it will turn out, Ang's eventual 'victory', of not being knocked out, does represent a victory of seemingly undesirable qualities over seemingly desirable ones. Moreover, the conditions for Ang's victory does also question the accepted ideas to state of being victorious.

Overall, *Love on Delivery* demonstrates a well-orchestrated production for the competent loser to make his statement. More notably, cinematography, editing, narrativity and self-reflexivity work together with the character to unearth the identity politics that are resultant of conventionalised qualities and ideas. As one instance of the competent loser's initial and disciplined appearance in Hong Kong cinema, *Love on Delivery* also describes the character's initial significance to the Hong Kong local.

Connecting 'Love on Delivery' with identity politics of Hong Kong in the early 90s

With news of Hong Kong's return to China breaking in the mid-1980s, Sino-Hong Kong dynamics had undergone, or was undergoing, "a realignment of political power" and shifts in identity politics at the time of *Love on Delivery*'s release during the early nineties (Ma 332). As politically subordinate to China, Hong Kong was subject to a process of 'resinicization', or what can be defined as a "reconstruction of identity categories to legitimize new social relations [between Hong Kong and China]" (Ma 332-335). To clarify, Hong Kong culture was effectively pressed to align itself with a more nationalistic Chinese culture and identity. As observed, nationalising Hong Kong culture

limited public choice and position (Chun, “Discourses of Identity” 1996), while Ma concludes:

[Resinicization] strengthened the historical identity of Hong Kong, yet the national identity, which often implies implicit political commitment, was still incompatible with the indigenous Hong Kong culture (Ma 345-456).

Thus, one can arguably discern a cultural/identity disconnect among the Hong Kong local in relation to their political superiors. In this regard, one can also assume a crisis of identity, or anxieties about its own uniqueness, within Hong Kong culture in the face of the hegemonic forces from the mainland; a crisis that Chow looks to address with his cowardly competent loser, Ang, in *Love on Delivery*.

Apart from the parenthetical interjections above, the thematic question of things turning out to be different from what they initially seemed to be is indeed discernible even from a quick retelling of the film’s plot. More for the Hong Kong audience, it is Ang’s fight with Lau that carries much significance. As two Cantonese critics Lau and Li from a regular podcast program insist:

Chow’s presentation of the champion fight sequence creates a rewarding viewing experience for Hong Kong viewers. The fact that Ho wins the fight like a streetwise prankster is a reflection [of] Hong Kong’s desperate [attempts] to deflect CPC governance leading up to the handover [in the nineties]. The film [mirrors] Hong Kong going up against CPC—an absolute and deterring power—Chow might hilariously enact Hong Kong’s pessimism, but he equally provides optimism to lift people’s spirits amidst a frustrating political climate (Poon 29; Lau & Li).

Although this interpretation is based mostly on Ang’s underdog qualities, they are still very much qualities of the competent loser as well—very much so here in *Love on Delivery*, at least. Thus, one can also assume the competent loser to carry much significance for the Hong Kong audience in a particularly disagreeable political moment; but as mentioned earlier, this argument is based and focused only on the underdog qualities of the competent loser. To apply, strengthen and supplement this argument, the

analysis here in the succeeding paragraphs will acknowledge other qualities of the competent loser to determine Chow's character(s) and films as subjects not merely for the Hong Kong audience to *relate to* on particular temporal moments, but as subjects to *identify with* on broader sociocultural contexts.

5.2 An Analysis of *King of Comedy* (1999) — The Competent Loser as Hong Kong's Ache to be Taken Seriously

Overview

Chow's 'first' *King of Comedy* is a story about a movie extra, Wan Tin-sau (Chow), who aspires and struggles for success as a professional actor. Not taken seriously within the movie industry for taking his bit part roles *way too seriously*, Tin-sau often gets thrown off sets and denied of more significant roles. His failures on set translate to more shortcomings in his secondary occupations as an acting teacher and leader of a stage production as those outside the industry refuse to take him seriously as well. Moreover, Tin-sau also suffers romantically after eventually falling for a call girl named Lau Piu-piu (Cecilia Cheung), as both fail to take their feelings for one another seriously²⁹.

While the concern of being taken seriously is a motif of the film, identity can certainly be argued to be the central question of *King of Comedy* as Tin-sau struggles to be regarded as someone worthy of attention. As a competent loser experiencing the to-and-fro momentum of failure and success (or some measure of it), disregard and regard,

²⁹ Besides, having to make a choice between a very successful actress who offers to help with his career and a prostitute who loves him, Wan makes the "morally correct" decision to abandon the former in order to take care of the latter. Although Chow is never a Marxist promoter of "class consciousness," his sympathy for the underprivileged is beyond doubt" (Yu 214).

and displaying both incompetence and competence within various realms both personal and professional, Tin-sau negotiates the arbitrary establishments and extremities of, and pertaining to, the status quo, celebrity and talent—all that is required for him to *fit in* as a proper actor and a favourable member of a community. Again, the competent loser exists to challenge a variety of societal fixities by highlighting instances of fixed ideas not panning out accordingly to how they seem or are supposed to.

Furthermore, as a film set mostly behind-the-scenes of a film-within-the-film, with a stage-production-within-the-film as well, *King of Comedy* is a very much a self-reflexive film about the creative and performative processes. As much as it is about the craft of moviemaking, it is also an emphasis on the social roles that people have to play and perform with one another. Additionally, as a Hong Kong film about filmmaking, *King of Comedy* can be argued to speak for and comment on, if not define, Hong Kong cinema and by extension, Hong Kong.

We're all merely players—but what's my role again?

King of Comedy is a lesson on remembering, and forgetting, one's role. Once again, the competent loser is introduced as something that he is not (but could be) and immediately revealed to be something that he actually is, but ultimately not. The audience first observes Tin-sau as a director on a movie set, calling out "Cut!"—a catchphrase that is typically associated with film directors. After being interrupted and lambasted by a crew member for fooling around on set, the audience learns from Tin-sau that he is actually an actor—although, this is later corrected as an extra by another crew member.

Figure 5.8. Meeting Wan Tin-sau. Images from *King of Comedy*.

Again, the audience is slightly deluded of the protagonist's grandeur but here—as opposed to that of *Love on Delivery*—viewers do get a glimpse of this competent loser, Tin-sau, as an assertive figure of authority. Furthermore, while there is the irony of Tin-sau directing as an extra, there is also the more complex irony of the director Chow as Tin-sau the extra being told to know his place, in a manner of speaking. This sequence heralds the first of plenty ironies, diegetic and extra-diegetic, that the audience will come to encounter throughout the film; ironies that unearth the absurdities surrounding all the established ideas concerning identity and capability. Irony is the prime strategy applied by Chow in *King of Comedy* to imply that nothing is what it seems; and this is accomplished primarily through performance, mis-en-scene, editing and self-reflexivity.

In the competent loser's first display of incompetence, Tin-sau messes up an opportunity to play a dead priest in a movie by overthinking and taking unwanted liberties with the role. Expected to get shot and lay still on the ground, Tin-sau later wanders into the main actor's, Sister Cuckoo (Karen Mok), scene over-dramatically in pain. Interestingly, despite the scene being set behind-the-scenes of a film production, Chow decides to alter the screen reality throughout the shots of Sister Cuckoo performing her action sequence for the diegetic film production. Quick cuts, slow-motion shots, shots of aerial stunts without safety cables and explosive sound effects are applied to alter the realism currently accepted by the audience; while the viewer has become accustomed to a screen reality very much similar to off-screen reality, they are abruptly and briefly invited

into a new reality where human action can defy the laws of physics, among other fantastic elements.

Figure 5.9. In the background, Tin-sau takes a long time to die. Image from *King of Comedy*.

Regardless of this creative choice being for the purpose(s) of misdirection, *distraction* or deviation, the effect is ultimately the same. More elaborately, there could be numerous reasons for switching realities like that; firstly, as a comedic device to make Tin-sau's interference of Sister Cuckoo's work more impactful; secondly, as a tool for drawing attention towards the *distracted* audience, in a sense defined by Walter Benjamin³⁰; and lastly, to merely inflect (screen) reality for the sake of difference. Nevertheless, the usefulness of Chow's alteration of reality ultimately trains the audience to distrust any established reality. While it also can be argued that this oscillation of screen reality does mirror the competent loser's oscillating status, it actually functions very much like the unreliable gaze applied in Chow's *Love on Delivery*. As with the unreliable gaze, unconfirmed realities work to unconfirm or discredit fixed rules, ideas and conventions.

³⁰ In *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Benjamin argues that "The distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves ... Even the distracted person can form habits" (40). By this definition, the habitual consumption of film and its ideas by the mass audience has ultimately resulted in a mass *distraction* from various truths/the truth.

Lest we forget the role of self-reflexivity, *King of Comedy*'s frequent display of its own awareness of itself as a film is very much supplementary to establishing and defining screen reality. As the film makes regular references to the various personalities and elements of Hong Kong cinema, the audience is reminded of the artificiality of *King of Comedy* and is likely to offer some, if not drastic, suspension of disbelief. This, in addition to cultivating *narrative complexity*³¹ in the film, facilitates the unquestioning compliance from the audience with multiple and/or inconsistent realities in *King of Comedy*.

Right after snapping back to the initial reality established at the introduction of Tin-sau³², Sister Cuckoo berates Tin-sau for ruining the production and calls for his replacement, who turns out to be played by the famous Hong Kong actor, Jackie Chan³³, who auditions for the director on the spot and competently pretends to be dead as requested.

Figure 5.10. Tin-sau meets his replacement. Image from *King of Comedy*.

³¹ I borrow this term coined by Jason Mittell to define a trend in storytelling in television that relied much on self-referentiality and metatextuality—much like *King of Comedy*.

³² It is worth noting that before we are introduced to Tin-sau, we are in a screen reality of a film that Tin-sau is ‘directing’. We only realise the reality to be false when we snap to Tin-sau’s reality when he orders “cut”. Again, nothing is what it seems.

³³ By the time of *King of Comedy*’s release, Chan had starred in over 100 Hong Kong films (HKMDB).

Although he remains unnamed, a majority of the viewing audience, especially those familiar with Hong Kong cinema, will be able to recognise the world-renowned actor Jackie Chan, and appreciate the humour and irony of a superstar being made to assume and perform a bit-part role. Also worthy of note is the exchange between Tin-sau and his replacement especially since viewers will come to notice a different message within a similar reference and scene in Chow's remake of the film in 2019, *The New King of Comedy*, which will be examined later towards the end of this chapter.

Tin-sau: Where did you learn acting, man?

Extra (Jackie Chan): I've never learnt it.

Tin-sau: You're a real genius.

Extra: You can make it if you work hard.

This scene and exchange comprise multiple ironies working together almost simultaneously. Mentioned a few lines ago, the first being a publicly known established actor needing to audition for a bit-part role; secondly, the publicly known established actor claiming that he never learnt acting; and the third being the claim that Tin-sau, if not anyone in general, can 'make it' with hard work. Much of these ironies are reliant on, and pertain to, knowledge. On one front, there is a reliance on public knowledge, or knowledge of the audience; more elaborately, the film is very much aware of what its audience knows—it is ironically unexpected for Jackie Chan to say he never learnt acting while it is quite commonly known that the actor was formally, and some might argue, rigorously, trained as a child to be a performer³⁴. On another front, there is an irony pertaining to, or a questioning of, the knowledge possessed by Tin-sau. While it has become quite obvious that Tin-sau tends to adopt a cerebral approach to his bit-part roles, the audience will later learn that he also “uses the Chinese translation of [Konstantin]

³⁴ Chan had accumulated ten years of training in Chinese opera and was enrolled in a “strict but world-class institution called the China Drama Academy” (Jackie Chan Biography).

Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares*³⁵ as his Bible" (Yu 214); on one hand, this is also an instance of Chow's metatextuality but more significantly, despite Tin-sau's display of knowledge of his craft, he mostly ends up being subjected to ridicule and failure. Ultimately on both fronts, *King of Comedy* appears to discredit the role of acquired knowledge; and while competence can be widely assumed to be associated with knowledge, or know-how, the components of competence, and by extension competence itself, is challenged.

With regards to 'making it' through hard work, this way of thinking about success is also subjected to some scrutiny and derision in *King of Comedy*. Tin-sau is arguably a hardworking character; he perpetually hustles himself to the production staff on movie sets for bit-part roles, he makes the effort to prepare for his roles and hones his craft through learning and teaching, and organises stage productions for and by himself while putting in the time to publicise them. In spite of his efforts, Tin-sau is pinned onto losing positions that are quite obviously the contrary to 'making it'.

Figure 5.11. No one turns up for Tin-sau's production. Image from *King of Comedy*.

More complexly, while no one customarily turns up for his acting classes and stage performances, Tin-sau does display some competence as an acting coach and does achieve

³⁵ Stanislavski's approach to acting seeks to encourage novel performative results through the activation of subconscious processes as opposed to the conscious adaptation of simulacrum. It must also be said that these notions of *subconscious* and *conscious* are all pre-Freudian (Benedetti 169).

some recognition among his closer peers because of that; but more ironically, these instances arise in areas that are completely unrelated to the stage or movie set³⁶. Thus, the competent loser's failures in spite of his diligent efforts, along with his little victories through the application of his knowledge and competence in unexpected and unrelated realms, underscore the arbitrariness of success—through which, the meaning of success, as the product, or evidence, of hard-work and competence, among others, is methodically deconstructed and disputed, if not disestablished. Moreover, in the end, Tin-sau does not exactly succeed as a professional actor; but he does succeed, or gain a victory, performing a role in a sting operation for the police. In that instance, the question arises to whether one can count that as true success.

Figure 5.12. Tin-sau's competence is recognised more among his non-professional peers. Image from *King of Comedy*.

Unlike *Love on Delivery*, the competent loser in *King of Comedy* is “a pitiable character [that invites] pathos” (Yu 214). Perhaps an indicator of Chow's maturity as a filmmaker since *Love on Delivery*, “What Chow pursues in films like *King of Comedy* is a higher comic style which ‘finds humor in pathos and seeks joy amidst sorrow’” (qtd. in Yu 214). More elaborately, Chow does lobby for more empathy and sympathy from the

³⁶ Through somewhat unconventional means, Tin-sau teaches a group of call girls to use wasabi to bring about teary eyes so that they can evoke innocence. He also steps on the toes of a fraudster so that he can learn how to convincingly pretend to be in pain.

audience for his competent loser in *King of Comedy*—arguably more so, or more effectively, than in *Love on Delivery*. Again, Chow relies on public knowledge, or popular culture, to draw the audience into Tin-sau’s aspirations. With reference to Figure 5.13 below:

Figure 5.13. Tin-sau’s wall-of-fame. Images from *King of Comedy*.

First of all, much of the scenes in Tin-sau’s bedroom evoke the despair of a single-purposed individual that has been perpetually found wanting. Recall Tin-sau’s photo collage of famous actors from Hollywood and Hong Kong cinema on his bedroom wall with a mirror for him to longingly include himself among those in his own wall-of-fame; this is one instance that effectively posits the aching desire of this particular competent loser. With the set dressed sparsely save for Tin-sau’s photo collage, along with Chow’s own performance of unrequited yearning, the audience becomes very much aware of, if not invested in, the poignancy of the competent loser’s plight, as well as his pitiable status. However, the combination of diegetic and extra-diegetic elements that are reliant on cultural knowledge produces an *alienation effect*³⁷, in the Brechtian sense, to facilitate audience criticism of the particular elements of culture portrayed in *King of Comedy*. That is to say, the audience experience of the film is not just limited to their own effected empathy for the competent loser, it also involves their active questioning of all that

³⁷ Here, I assume Féral’s definition of the term as, “a process by which both theatrical and extra-theatrical phenomena are rendered strange, forcing the spectator to adopt a critical distance with regard to that which is given to see and hear” (461).

transpires by, around and to the competent loser, especially with regards to acquired knowledge (including assumptions) that have nothing, little and everything to do with the narrative and film. With this explained, Chow's use of meta-textuality in *King of Comedy* becomes increasingly clear; especially when the seemingly familiar throughout the film turns out to be something else entirely—as was the case with Jackie Chan.

Overall, the intertextuality of and surrounding Chow's competent loser is comparatively amped up in *King of Comedy* to not only unsettle social conventions in Hong Kong, but to also unsettle Hong Kong's cinematic conventions; much of this pertains to the accepted, or accustomed, significance of nostalgia.

'King of Comedy' and the question of a nostalgic Hong Kong cinema leading into the late nineties

There is almost little doubt as to what carried the most significance to Hong Kong and its people in the late nineties; 1997 marked the handover and transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China. While plenty of discussions led by Ackbar Abbas have debated the “disappearance”, or identity crises, of Hong Kong culture in the lead up to the handover, Vivian Lee notes particularly with Hong Kong cinema of the same period, that

Beginning from the mid-1990s, the local film industry ran into a period of recession. Many critics lamented the decline in both quality and box-office returns of local productions, thus almost confessing a fin-de-siècle *nostalgic* mourning of loss [my emphasis] ... The fate of Hong Kong cinema, it seems, ‘mirrors’ the political uncertainties, economic failures, and the concomitant social malaise that visited the ex-colony at this critical historical juncture (Lee *Hong Kong Cinema* 2-3).

The “nostalgic mourning of loss” so pointed out by Lee is worthy of note here as Lai highlights a trend of nostalgia films from Hong Kong that began in the early 1990s. She also insists, “In the popular press, local film critics and academics have also defined

certain films as ‘nostalgic,’ laying down a genealogy of the phenomenon that accounts for the recent fad *as a response to the threat of 1997*” [my emphasis] (Lai 233-234). While it is important to recall that *King of Comedy* was released in 1999—after the handover, and therefore categorically not “a response to the threat of 1997”—it is a film that is definitively metatextual for its wide application of self-reflexivity, intertextuality and referentiality; and therefore has to be considered part of a genealogy, or history, of meta-cinema—which is argued to be “all about nostalgia” (Chinita 33). Thus, *King of Comedy* and its competent loser are, if not nostalgic, then at the very least, interacting with the nostalgia of the (preceding) moment shared among the locals of Hong Kong as they conceive their own collective identity³⁸.

But before discussing the question of nostalgia within this analysis and context, let the relevant terminology be first established and clarified. Fundamentally, ‘nostalgia’ is a noun used to denote “a sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past” or “something done or presented in order to evoke feelings of nostalgia” (Nostalgia: Definition of). Etymologically, ‘nostalgia’ is compounded of *nostos* and *algos* in Greek, which respectively mean ‘return’ and ‘pain’. In this case, nostalgia quite literally describes a suffering from a yearning for preceding conditions (Sedikides et al 304). While the subject has been investigated and redefined much throughout the ages in the fields of psychology, psychiatry and the humanities, let us assume the “contemporary definition of nostalgia as a sentimental longing for one’s past” (Sedikides et al 305). That being said, the more pressing matter here is to establish a possible division in the

³⁸ According to Lai, nostalgia films were an important component in the conception of identity for the Hong Kong local as they “correspond to a contingent and deeply felt yearning for an affirmative local Hong Kong identity” while they facilitate a sort of “ritualistic commemoration” (Lai 233).

approach to nostalgia. Let it be recognised that the possible attitudes toward the sentimental longing for one's past can be rather inclined towards the *conservative* or *progressive*. Here these terms are ascribed to describe nostalgia in the respective denotative meanings of the words; more elaborately, a *conservative nostalgia* suggests a perpetuation of the generally accepted definition of nostalgia as a relentless insistence on the past; while a *progressive nostalgia* offers a more revisionist outlook towards the past as well as the act of looking back at it. With this understood, one can better appreciate the idea of a *post-nostalgia* that will be described in the following paragraph.

While it has already been established that Chow's comedies and his competent loser(s) function to challenge fixed ideas, one can surmise that Chow's intertextuality, too, or in a similar vein, functions to challenge its own conventional application(s). This might find some accord with Lee, who theorises a post-nostalgia in Hong Kong cinema after 1997. More elaborately, "the post-nostalgic is not 'anti-nostalgic', but implies a nuanced relatedness to the past as history/text/image; as such, the post-nostalgic can also be construed as a form of meta-(con)textual self-critique" (Lee *Hong Kong Cinema* 6). Thus, the intertextuality as (post-)nostalgia in *King of Comedy* and its competent loser can be argued to re-evaluate Hong Kong's preoccupation with the past, as opposed to, and counter-intuitively, honouring and yearning for its past. Generally, "the aesthetic of nostalgia after 1997, especially in the mainstream cinema, tends to be less celebratory in its evocation of the past; more importantly, it is less certain about the meaning of the past images and codes being recycled in the present" (Lee *Hong Kong Cinema* 11).

Furthermore, and more particularly with Chow, Lee argues

Insofar as Chow's films have always been intertextual in the sense that they self-consciously refer to a long tradition of comedy, kung fu and martial arts films in Cantonese and Mandarin cinema, and very often Chow's own works, Chow's *localness* has to be understood within this

intertextual frame of reference ... It is justifiable to understand Chow's localness as a form of symbiotic cinephilia, a desire to reincarnate into one's favourite screen persons in a highly idiosyncratic yet recognizably nostalgic style (Lee *Hong Kong Cinema* 118).

Overall, *King of Comedy*'s significance to the Hong Kong local via its competent loser in the expression/definition of its own cultural identity is reliant on Chow's *nostalgic* impulses that involve the reproduction of known and familiar imagery. Furthermore, while "Chow's *localness* has to be understood within [an] intertextual frame of reference" to appreciate his sense of nostalgia, it should also be understood as a form of progressive nostalgia.

5.3 An Analysis of *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons* (2013) — The Competent Loser as Hong Kong's Familiarity

Overview

Chow's *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons*—*Conquering the Demons* for short—can be seen as a prelude, or an origin story, to the classic Chinese tale of *Journey to the West*³⁹. The film follows the story of Chen Xuan Zang (Wen Zhang), the competent loser, who struggles to be taken seriously⁴⁰ as a demon hunter before actually being able to subdue one; and eventually gather his fabled disciples before embarking on their legendary journey to the west⁴¹.

While the film is very much based on a classic Chinese tale, *Conquering the Demons* represents a complete departure of Chow's from Hong Kong for mainland China,

³⁹ "Written in the Ming Dynasty (about 1592), *Journey to the West* is one of the four great classics of Chinese literature, and it's long been a standard source for movies" (Hendrix 68).

⁴⁰ Much of his setbacks are the result of his unconventional methods and appearance. Xuan Zang is described as "a wan hipster in a filthy robe who believes that he can defeat demons with love" (Hendrix 68).

⁴¹ The classic character from *Journey to the West*, Tang Sanzang, also spelled as Chen Xuan Zang, is largely based on the Buddhist monk Xuanzang; whose pilgrimage to India had inspired the eponymous journey in the tale.

so to speak. Apart from a cast comprised mostly of mainlanders, the film was also shot and distributed predominantly in Mandarin—an obvious withdrawal from his traditional use of Cantonese in the preceding films analysed in this chapter. Furthermore, *Conquering the Demons* features the inauguration of a competent loser that is not portrayed by Chow himself. As a product that might seem very unlike Chow to his avid fans and followers, and one that typifies his mainlandisation (Szeto and Chen 96), *Conquering the Demons* is one worthy of attention especially since it marks a complete transition for Chow; that will illuminate how much his competent loser has changed or not.

Unlike the two films before, the narrative of *Conquering the Demons*, as suggested in its title, is about Good versus Evil—which is comparatively straightforward. Having said that, much like the two films before, nothing is what it seems. Like Ang in *Love on Delivery*, Chen (or Xuan Zang) subscribes to the stigma of seeming pathetic to the observer, both on-screen and off-; like Tin-sau in *King of Comedy*, Chen is more prone to ridicule and doubt as opposed to being taken seriously. Although the character is set in more fantastical, supernatural, and religious circumstances, Chow again applies the competent loser to challenge various conventionalised ideas and values in society concerning competence very much in the same ways observed in both *Love on Delivery* and *King of Comedy*.

Conquering the familiar—haven't we seen this tale before?

As one of the four main heroes⁴² of the original *Journey to the West*, the tale of Chen Xuan Zang has been reinterpreted on countless occasions in film and television—it is also worth noting that Chow himself has played the role, or at least a variation, of the Monkey King, Sun Wukong, in *A Chinese Odyssey* (1995), directed by Jeffrey Lau. Overall, considering the persistence of this iconography, *Conquering the Demons* can be viewed as a pastiche of the tried-and-tested, and can be viewed similarly to *King of Comedy* as an intertextual film.

Conquering the Demons opens with Xuan Zang's first test and encounter with the film's own adaptation of the River Demon played by Lee Sheung Ching. A riverside village that resembles a "labyrinthine fishing village right out of Robert Altman's *Popeye* [(1980)]" (Hendrix 68) is the first indicator of Chow's recycling of images from cinematic history. But more worthy of note is the recycling of the Chen Xuan Zang character, that does not at all subscribe to the conventionalised image of holiness⁴³ and/or heroicism. Traditionally presented in golden garbs with a crown-like headdress throughout antecedent adaptations, Chen is introduced quite unceremoniously in *Conquering the Demons*.

⁴² Led by Xuan Zang, the other three are Sun Wukong (The Monkey King), Zhu Bajie (The Pig Demon) and Sha Wujing (The River Demon).

⁴³ The historical figure Xuanzang was sanctified and so well-revered in East Asian tradition. Wong classifies four separate ways for his reverence accordingly via "1) the orthodox literary tradition in China, 2) the founder worship tradition in Japan, 3) the religious icon tradition in China, Japan, and Tibet, and 4) the folkloric tradition in China" (Wong 46). As a result, the visual representations of Xuanzang, in religious art and more contemporarily, the media, have been observed to "[mix] facts with fancy, the bizarre, and extravagant romanticism, [and thus] the folklore about Xuanzang embedded his image in the popular psyche" (Wong 69).

Figure 5.14. You don't look the part at all. Image from *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons*

Dishevelled and modestly dressed, our Chen appears more to be a drifter rather than a demon vanquisher to the people in the village, and to the audience as well. His appearance does not make him a credible source of doubt towards the Taoist priest who claims to have liberated the village of their demonic tormentor (or what turns out to be merely a large Manta ray). While the Taoist priest looks more like the Xuan Zang traditionally depicted in popular culture before *Conquering the Demons*, the villagers (and the audience) are more inclined to trust the Taoist priest instead.

But as observed with the competent losers so far, Chen gets his moment to demonstrate his abilities. Eventually proven to be right about the Taoist priest's mistake, Chen is presented with an opportunity to vanquish the demon after some tedious battling. Again, in defiance of expected methods for demon subjugation, Chen starts reciting a nursery rhyme for the River Demon in its human form.

Figure 5.15. Chen insists on subduing demons with love. Images from *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons*

This does not go according to plan for Chen; who only manages to annoy his target into physically assaulting him. At this point, the audience is introduced to another demon hunter named Duan (Shu Qi); who quite effectively and competently subdues the demon after throwing a series of punches. Again, it becomes rather easy for everyone to distrust and discredit the protagonist as a capable individual. Moreover, it becomes more convenient to resist the new image of Xuan Zang and hold on to that of convention.

Figure 5.16. Duan, a model of competence? Images from *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons*

Treated like an action hero, the mise-en-scène and editing of Duan's scenes flatter her character more so than for Chen. Gravity defying stunts, quick-cuts and slow-motion shots amplify the physicality of Duan in action against demons. As Duan achieves much success right after Chen's bungling attempts, her glorification ceases to exist as mere hype—one begins to believe the hype and wonder who actually is the star of the film.

Like the competent loser in *Love on Delivery*, Chen receives guidance from a suspicious and unconvincing mentor. Anonymous throughout the film and self-referentially listed as Master Nameless (Cheng Sihuan) in the credits of *Conquering the Demons*, Chen's mentor seems to exist only to offer expositional details concerning the demons and to verbally assure Chen of his own ideals with regards to demon hunting; but it is difficult to trust him as someone who he claims to be, especially as a legitimate

mentor, when he seems more like a grifter as opposed to a wise counsellor while he even gets his wig slapped off—further evidence of his compulsion to obscure the truth—after eating a hawker’s chicken without offering payment. As with the competent loser-suspicious mentor dynamic observed in *Love on Delivery*, various inquiries arise concerning expectations and conventionalised ideas in *Conquering the Demons* as a result of a similar relationship when Chen eventually prevails in spite of initial doubt: such as questions of how much one’s identity can be attached to its predecessors and figures of authority, how much stake can one place on an image of seniority, how much competence can one expect from a position of seniority—especially since it is the conventionalised image and representation of the mentor role that is undermined. With that said, the image of a mentor is only one of many that the audience learns to question throughout the film. Collectively, *Conquering the Demons* teaches the viewer to distrust the importance of images.

While various aspects of the narrative serve to question the trustworthiness of images, the same question arises formally as well. One feature of *Conquering the Demons* that sets itself apart from Chow’s earlier works analysed in this study⁴⁴ is the extensive application of and reliance on Computer-generated imagery (CGI) for multiple applications that are mostly intertwined. First and foremost, the film reimagines and revises representations of demonic characters and the supernatural as a result of Chow’s use of the technology. Traditionally reliant on costume and make-up in past adaptations of *Journey to the West*, CGI in *Conquering the Demons* is able to seamlessly reveal diegetic illusions and actualities, between human forms and grotesque demonic ones, among other

⁴⁴ It must be clarified here that Chow has worked rather extensively with CGI before *Conquering the Demons*, namely on *Shaolin Soccer* and *Kung Fu Hustle*.

quick transformations, to further underscore how things are not what they seem. While this aspect of CGI serves to expose various characters throughout the narrative, it also functions to underscore the unreliability of images by exposing their own falsities on extra- and non-diegetic levels. Inasmuch as the technology functions to pander to a demand for the realistic by making things look believable, it also works to sustain the suspension of disbelief from the audience to accept a reality on screen that the supernatural can exist. Within CGI's ability to reconcile this tension between requirement and relinquishment of credibility, the audience ultimately is very conscious of the fabrication of the images onscreen. Regardless of the quality of the CGI, how much more or less is required (and satisfied) or relinquished (and forgiven), the ambiguity, or simulation, of the images is nevertheless obvious. Thus, the underlying question that arises throughout the film is how much trust can one place in an image.

More particularly with the competent loser on the other hand, CGI is applied mostly to both aid and reveal the character's ultimate competence and victory over the Monkey King (Huang Bo) as an enlightened being. Not only does the CGI allude to religious, supernatural and cosmic iconography to suggest Chen's state of enlightenment, Chow also recycles much imagery from his own past works like *Kung Fu Hustle* and *Shaolin Soccer*— and quite recognisable among followers of Chow is the 'hand of Buddha' technique⁴⁵.

⁴⁵ The same technique, illustrated and memorialised by big a hand descending palm-wards towards the villain, was used by Sing (Chow) to finally defeat the Beast (Bruce Leung) in *Kung Fu Hustle*. Moreover, this technique is also a reference to the Hong Kong wuxia film series *Palm of Ru Lai* (1964) by Yun Ling.

Figure 5.17. Chen summons the power of the Buddha to give him a hand quite familiarly. Images from *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons*

It is also worth noting that Chow has applied CGI to a compelling effect in both *Shaolin Soccer* and *Kung Fu Hustle*. For Lee, Chow's use of CGI, in conjunction with intertext, in those earlier films, cultivates a kind of "cinematic nostalgia—as cultural memory—[that] becomes the very substance of a hybridized global visual vocabulary through which the local is given new and changing articulations" (Lee *Hong Kong Cinema* 137). Functioning similarly as it did for both *Kung Fu Hustle* and *Shaolin Soccer*⁴⁶, the use of CGI in *Conquering the Demons* bridges the popular cultural imaginary, along with the folklore of the classical Chinese tale, with the actual realisation of the otherworldly possibilities imaginable within the legend; to establish or cultivate a new aesthetic that stems from an "effort to adapt a distinctive sense of locality" for audiences in- and outside China (Lee

⁴⁶ Lee insists that the, "Multiple citations of both Chinese and Western sources ... create a cinematic spectacle that is strangely familiar, tantalizingly archaic and yet fashionably contemporary, a postmodern pastiche that playfully re-engages the past in nuanced configurations of fragmented times and spaces ... What emerges from these creative adaptations, or re-appropriations, however, is not merely generic assemblage, but an aesthetic that bridges what is real, that is, authentic martial arts tradition in the popular cultural imaginary, and what is virtual, that is, the actualization of the fantasmic potentialities within that imaginary" (Lee *Hong Kong Cinema* 133-134).

Hong Kong Cinema 130). Thus, in spite of the fact that the competent loser in *Conquering the Demons* is neither played by Chow nor exclusively representative of Hong Kong like his predecessors, he is part of an effort to redefine and transform Chinese identity in cinema to include much of Hong Kong's local identity—especially considering that much of its own cultural moments and artefacts are alluded to in the film.

To further disestablish, or disassociate, itself as a film derivative of a singular and traditional identity, *Conquering the Demons* incorporates motifs outside East Asian cinema, from the West, as it ends very similarly to how a typical film of the Western genre would. Definitively expected of the classical Western, a vast open desert sets the scene for characters to saunter proudly towards a setting sun.

Figure 5.18. Journeying to the west. Image from *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons*

To make the reference additionally obvious in *Conquering the Demons*, the score accompanying the described scene sounds like it could have been composed by Ennio Morricone⁴⁷—one would certainly find difficulty resisting comparisons to Spaghetti (Noodle?) Westerns⁴⁸. While this allusion illustrates the hybridity and the articulation of the ‘global visual vocabulary’ produced by Chow in *Conquering the Demons*, it also

⁴⁷ Who scored *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966), among other Spaghetti Westerns.

⁴⁸ The Spaghetti Western got its name from the fact that most of the films were produced by Italians (Introduction). Incidentally, Juzo Itami's *Tampopo* (1985) has been referred to as a Ramen Western (Tampopo).

exemplifies one of the many instances posed to question the reliability of images. Via the seemingly uncontrived ‘re-appropriation’ (as worded by Lee) of iconography particular to the Western genre in a scene of a film that has thus far established itself as one unclassifiable as a Western, the audience is compelled to rethink the ownership of such images by one particular genre of film, origin of a film and that of the filmmaker; and by extension, the importance of the image(s) to define particular genres of films, origins of films and those of the filmmakers.

Journey to the Mainland: Conquering the West — stepping out with the un/familiar competent loser

By the year of *Conquering the Demon*’s release in 2013, many of Hong Kong cinema’s popular directors had made the transition from releasing Hong Kong productions, to Hong Kong-Chinese co-productions, and finally to Chinese productions⁴⁹. More particularly with Chow, his first transnational production to include some Chinese involvement was *Kung Fu Hustle* in 2004. While *Kung Fu Hustle* also included much involvement from Hollywood, Chow’s first mainland Chinese film was *CJ7* in 2008. More significantly, this was also the point where criticism and accusations of Chow’s mainlandisation and creative compromise were beginning to materialise⁵⁰.

In spite of that, Chow pressed on in the same vein to release *Conquering the Demons*. Szeto and Chen point out that, “his decision to completely [mainlandise] in

⁴⁹ Not necessarily via the exact same trajectory as some managed a few films in Hollywood in the course of their careers; but ultimately, most have returned, in a manner of speaking, to produce films with and for mainland China. In the same year, Wong Kar Wai released the *The Grandmaster* (2013), John Woo had experienced much success with his 2-part epic war films *Red Cliff* in 2008 and 2009, and Tsui Hark released *Young Detective Dee: Rise of the Sea Dragon* (2013) to continue the ‘franchise’ that began in 2010.

⁵⁰ Page number of the point in Literature Review section to be advised.

terms of casting and cultural sensitivities in [the film] made it the third-highest-grossing film in China (US\$196.7 million)” (Szeto and Chen 96). While this sort of commercial success can be seen as a high for Chow’s career, the overlying significance of those facts and figures should not be overlooked. As Bettinson observes:

The Chinese market, on the other hand, is both fast-growing and receptive to Hollywood product: currently, Mainland audiences favour Hollywood imports over locally-produced films [however] the theatrical success of some recent Chinese movies—including *[Conquering the Demons]* ... suggest that this trend may be shifting” (Bettinson *Journey to the 267*).

Thus, one cannot discount the elevated feats accomplished by Chow that were not available to him before in his career in Hong Kong. In this regard, the real concern should not be about what was lost for Chow in his own transition, but what was gained; more specifically, one should consider what Chow is able to do in spite of/as a result of his mainlandisation.

As detailed in the analysis of *Conquering the Demons*, the film negotiates the familiar with the otherwise unfamiliar; and challenges the significance of images in its association with familiarity. Here, familiarity refers to the recognisability, or the ability to incite or invoke a sense of being initially known, of certain filmic elements; perceivable as a result of traditionalisation, conventionalisation and repetition, by an imaginary of/across various contexts—that include local culture, Chinese culture and popular culture. Within *Conquering the Demons*, the unfamiliar face (an actor apart from Chow) is able to embody the competent loser familiarly; and the unfamiliar image of Chen Xuan Zang (or Tang Sang Zang) is able to fulfil the certain familiarities of the character of legend. Moreover, as familiar images are able to fit into differing contexts via the re-appropriation of audio-visual titbits from multiple sources, their new applications imbue a sort of strangeness to induce a sense of unfamiliarity for them. Overall, as the competent loser of

Conquering the Demons works with the formal elements of the film to oscillate between familiarity and unfamiliarity, what ultimately remains consistent (apart from the inclusion of the competent loser character) with Chow's earlier work before his foray into mainland Chinese cinema is the motif of nothing being what they seem. It is through this continuing ethos that Chow seeks to negotiate an identity of Hong Kong within the mainland in the face of/in response to anxieties concerning mainlandisation and disappearance.

Considering that much of the familiar relies on and involves the images used in/of the past, *Conquering the Demons* can thus be held similarly to *King of Comedy* in the sense that they both have some connection to cinematic nostalgia. Law argues:

[Films like] *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons* ... have suggested that cinematic nostalgia or the "ritualistic commemoration" of earlier cinematic images (qtd. in Law 392) has continued to define Hong Kong cinema after the handover and the signing of CEPA with the PRC (Law 392).

While her article rightly observes the continuation of a tradition of Hong Kong cinema with the release of *Conquering the Demons*, especially with regards to the anticipation for and consumption of Chinese New Year films; Law also points out that *Conquering the Demons* is actually part of an effort to continue defining Hong Kong cinema and indulge its audience even in new circumstances following the handover as part of mainland China and Chinese cinema. However, Law overlooks Lee's appreciation of Chow's earlier work with regards to the *post-nostalgic* in Hong Kong cinema. If we appreciate Chow's body of work as meta-cinema and a form of progressive nostalgia, one can discern Chow's application of the competent loser to negotiate the familiar with the otherwise unfamiliar and vice-versa in *Conquering the Demons* to function very much similarly to the intertextuality of the competent loser in *King of Comedy*.

In his negotiation of multiple self-reflexive elements within the context of Hong Kong cinema, *King of Comedy*'s Tin-sau challenges various ideas and fixities conventionalised by Hong Kong cinema to proffer or cultivate a rethinking of Hong Kong identity; by the same vein, while *Conquering the Demon*'s Chen negotiates with past images within and from the context of Chinese cinema, Hong Kong cinema, Hollywood, and Chinese cinema as part of the ecology of global cinema, he challenges various ideas and fixities conventionalised both separately and collectively to cultivate a rethinking of both Hong Kong and Chinese identities, to proffer a Hong Kong-Chinese identity—a hybrid⁵¹ that is able to represent all within as it competes with cinemas from the rest of the world.

This study does not endeavour to categorise Chow as either pro-China or pro-Hong Kong; nor suggest that he has conclusively done so for himself as a performer and a filmmaker. Furthermore, this study also does not seek to define Chow's motives for commercialising his filmic output for mainstream mainland Chinese cinema and its audience beyond doubt to completely oppose the critical discourse surrounding the suggested mainlandisation of Chow's creative sensibilities and those of his contemporaries. The main takeaway here in the analyses of these films from significant moments in Chow's career is that one cannot afford to be outrightly determined to disavow the ability of a filmic text to define identity based on certain political and economic developments surrounding and within the career of the filmmaker; because

⁵¹ This perspective can supplement the compounding view that, "*The New Hong Kong Cinema* (especially in the senses of film industry and cinematic tradition) has transcended, is transcending and will most likely continue to transcend the interfaces between Hong Kong, China, East Asia and the rest of the world" [my emphasis] (Cheung 5). For Cheung, *The New Hong Kong Cinema* involves "Hong Kong-related Chinese-language films".

doing so would be akin to essentialising cinema and identity, among others. Overall, it is without a doubt that Chow's career in film has undergone much sinicisation; and while it is also important to avoid approaching Chow's Chinese films with a sort of neo-conservative bias to highlight all the opposing points for the sake of argument, it would be precariously dichotomous to suggest that he has lost identity completely.

As observed from the analyses of the three films thus far, Chow habitually draws much from Hong Kong local cinema in his references—aside from the competent loser. Considering that this continues on into his mainland Chinese production, *Conquering the Demons*, one cannot argue that the identity of the Hong Kong local is altogether lost in the film. Furthermore, as the analyses so far demonstrates the questioning of various social conventions and identity markers via the competent loser, it can be argued that Chow seeks to revise norms within the conception of identity in his films. Thus, it is additionally feasible for Chow to re-conceive identity in *Conquering the Demons* because every film before does represent a re-conception of identity regardless, even within those that are exclusively Hong Kong. With this said, the analysis of the final film in this study can thus begin. With a minor tweak to the title of his own classic, *King of Comedy*, one would expect *The New King of Comedy* to represent the Chow's effort to continually revise.

5.4 An Analysis of *The New King of Comedy* (2019) — The Competent Loser in Flux

Overview

As the title and initial scenes of the film would invoke much familiarity and suggest a somewhat beat-by-beat remake of Chow's original *King of Comedy* from 1999, *The New King of Comedy* is arguably able to stand as a film of its own. While a few

obvious differences stand out, like the action being relocated to mainland China, and the particular detail of the competent loser being played by a young and relatively unknown Chinese-speaking actress, much of *The New King of Comedy* seems to offer much variance from the original, as far as narrative, style and form are concerned, despite the obvious recycling of select themes, scenes and gags from *King of Comedy*.

The New King of Comedy follows the story of Dreamy (E Jingwen), and like Tin-sau in *King of Comedy*, she aspires to be a successful actor in spite of much humiliation from production staff on movie sets as a result of her own mistakes or flaws. *The New King of Comedy* also centres on a daughter-parent relationship in addition to a romantic relationship amid the protagonist's struggle to make her mark in showbusiness. More notably, the wishes of the protagonist are fulfilled rather straightforwardly in the end—albeit not as ambivalently as for Tin-sau in *King of Comedy*.

Apart from having another unfamiliar face assume the competent loser role, *The New King of Comedy* also includes an additional competent loser in the form of Ma Ke, or Marco, played by Wang Baoqiang. As opposed to Dreamy, who quite obviously incites pathos and invites sympathy, Marco is much more of an antihero who is difficult to like by both audiences and surrounding characters. While Marco's competence stems from him being an established actor, the loser aspect of his character comes from his treatment and self-consciousness as a has-been—an arc applied by Chow before in *The God of Cookery* (1996) for its competent loser, Stephen Chow⁵² (the character shares his real name).

⁵² In *The God of Cookery*, Stephen Chow (Chow) is a morally-questionable celebrity chef who actually knows little about cooking, cheats his way to stardom and mistreats all around him.

In conjunction with the other characters of the film, the competent losers underscore the arbitrariness of stardom, the capriciousness of opportunity and the insignificance of talent and hard work. Also similarly to *King of Comedy*, the competent losers of *The New King of Comedy* struggle to negotiate themselves with the expectations to perform their respective roles both in- and outside the professional realm. Like *King of Comedy*, the action of *The New King of Comedy* revolves around a particular film production. While the film-within-a-film aspect is less thorough in the latter, various other fictional productions are featured in the narrative. Moreover, while *King of Comedy*'s metatextuality involves much of Hong Kong cinema of the past and of Hollywood, the intertextuality of *The New King of Comedy* draws much from its antecedent. As much as *King of Comedy* is arguably about Hong Kong cinema, *The New King of Comedy* is about Chinese cinema, especially as one that seeks to subsume all local cinemas and contend on the global stage. As a more accessible production imbuing family values and virtues of hard work in relation to wish fulfilment, the outlook of *The New King of Comedy* is less unbelieving compared to its predecessor. That being said, despite this pandering to mainstream sentiment, *The New King of Comedy* and its competent losers are still able to highlight that nothing is what it seems.

Initiating an unfamiliar king of comedy — the familiar is not what it seems.

The New King of Comedy is very much aware of its position as a successor to an original film, or at least to one that came before; and it immediately expresses the need to distinguish itself at the beginning. The film opens with the same shot as its predecessor, of waves coming into the shore. Those already acquainted with the first film would

recognise this; but just as the familiarity of the scene begins to settle, *The New King of Comedy* delivers something entirely contrasting, if not unexpected. As the title of the movie fades in and the camera pans out to reveal the scene, a song plays with the lyrics “Follow your dreams and don’t hold back”. This sequence starkly contrasts that of *King of Comedy*; which sees Tin-sau shouting at the waves (or the sea) to “work harder!”. Here, the differing ethos that will guide the rest of each film are quite clear. Tin-sau’s ironic encouragement of the waves to work harder raises the question of to what end; that mirrors the film’s challenge with conventionalised ideas surrounding the concept of hard work. On the other hand, the absence of irony to the same scene in *The New King of Comedy*, notwithstanding the clear-cut message of the song lyrics, seems to suggest a subscription to the promises of hard work.

Figure 5.19. Top: Tin-sau tells the waves to work harder. Bottom: The irony is lost. Images from *King of Comedy* and *The New King of Comedy*.

It must be said that the virtues of hard work are not completely extolled in *The New King of Comedy*. The arbitrariness of success is highlighted in the ‘discovery’ of Dreamy’s roommate, Xiao Mi (Jing Ruyang), by a casting director on the street; and in Ma Ke sprouting back to fame overnight upon the release of an embarrassing video. These instances, in the face of Dreamy’s enduring persistence, function to challenge the ideas,

expectations and promises surrounding hard work. In this regard, it is important to note that the message delivery of *The New King of Comedy* might not necessarily be the same as *King of Comedy*, but the themes, challenges and questions are still very much the same and/or continuing. Overall, it is clearly evident that *The New King of Comedy*'s intertextuality—its catalogue of references—is very much dedicated to the filmmaker's own work. It functions as if for Chow to say (quite figuratively), 'Yes, I have done this before; but that does not set in stone what it or I have to be'. In this instance, Chow unsettles the recognition of his own self to emphasise that even the familiar is not what it seems. Thus, it is safe to assume the competent loser in/and *The New King of Comedy* functions to redefine Chow's identity, and by extension, Hong Kong's.

In very much the same manner as Tin-sau in *King of Comedy*, Dreamy proves her competence to the audience as she actively does her homework to prepare for her bit-part roles. Not only does she study *An Actor Prepares*⁵³ as well, Dreamy displays much knowledge about reproducing emotions from lived experiences—but this knowledge is subverted when she gets thrown off set on the basis of underacting while she was actually replicating a man's almost stoic⁵⁴ response to pain after an actual accident. But before this failure, at the 8-minute mark, Dreamy volunteers to perform a reaction to an "Icy Palm Attack" where she does actually act out a sensational reaction to pain and of feeling intensely cold. Considering that Dreamy fails this initial audition as well, the lack of success through both performative methods, the learned approach and the instinctive

⁵³ Chow again references the publication authored by Constantin Stanislavski. See footnote 14 of this chapter.

⁵⁴ The word 'stoic' is used here to denote an expressionlessness and less about the philosophical school of Stoicism. Although, it must be said that considering the *indifference* denoted by its dictionary meaning, "the sense of the English adjective 'stoical' is not utterly misleading with regard to its philosophical origins" (Baltzly). While that makes for an easy association, the nature of the competent loser does tempt the question of a connection between a principle of Stoicism and those of Chow's films.

approach, subjects the notion of preparation, if not competence, to doubt. Interestingly of the latter scene, Dreamy's audition includes CGI to enhance her performance to the viewer; but more worthy of note is that a green-screen is coincidentally (at least within the diegesis) placed behind her as part of some background action.

Figure 5.20. A conveniently placed green-screen to facilitate some CGI. Images from *The New King of Comedy*.

As pointed out about *King of Comedy* earlier in this chapter, Chow oscillates between multiple screen realities to place little significance on what is seen and heard onscreen; and Chow reapplies this strategy to some degree here in *The New King of Comedy*. On one level, the mise-en-scène of the shot in question alludes to the craft of moviemaking with particular reference to the application of CGI. While the green-screen itself is typically never obvious in CGI-heavy productions in the sense that we do not ever see the green-screen (case in point: *Conquering the Demons*), Chow opts to draw some attention to the obviousness of its usage in *The New King of Comedy*. In this regard, on another level the shot underscores the falseness of the image—even the inauthenticity of Dreamy's performance as well. Overall, this feature can function to facilitate an *alienation effect*⁵⁵ to maintain a critical distance between spectator and film. While the audience has the opportunity to learn to distrust the significance of images⁵⁶ (which in turn facilitates a distrust of the familiar), they are also invited to question the virtues

⁵⁵ See footnote 16 of this chapter.

⁵⁶ Just as so with *Conquering the Demons*. Refer to analysis of the film in this chapter.

upheld by and around the competent losers as they negotiate the expectations surrounding their professional and personal ambitions that are very much intertwined with cultural and societal conventions that align with the conception of identity.

In another instance of Chow's metatextuality that alters the screen reality of *The New King of Comedy* and invokes both *distraction*⁵⁷ and *alienation*, Chow has Dreamy and Young (Xiaopeng Huang) re-enact a scene from the first *King of Comedy*. Between the timestamps of 10:02 – 10:43, the two characters play out the scene where Tin-sau declares his romantic intentions towards Piu-piu⁵⁸. The onscreen reality seems to change suddenly as everything (except location and setting) from *King of Comedy* is replicated—the dialogue, acting, mis-en-scene, wardrobe, editing and music.

Figure 5.21. A familiar scene plays. Images from *The New King of Comedy*.

Interestingly, before this scene-within-a-scene plays out, Chow references the book *An Actor Prepares* without actually mentioning it by name. More elaborately, while the title of the book is so obviously visible, Dreamy answers Young, “Yes, you like ‘King of Comedy’ too?” when he asks, “You’re reading this book too?”. In this instance, Chow outrightly assumes Stanislavski’s *An Actor Prepares*’ direct association (at least for the Mandarin translation) with his 1999 film. Thus, *The New King of Comedy* is very much for an audience familiar with Chow; and whatever way Chow manipulates the familiar is his way of speaking about, or responding to, his own familiarity. As the familiar unfolds

⁵⁷ See footnote 9 of this chapter.

⁵⁸ If it needs clarifying, Tin-sau and Piu-piu are characters from *King of Comedy* played by Chow and Cecilia Cheung respectively.

before the recognising viewer as Dreamy and Young perform their respective roles, a sense of nostalgia is invoked. But at the same time, an uncanniness emerges as well to unsettle the familiarity since the recogniser is not fully fulfilled on account of very different players. And then, as a snap back to screen reality, Dreamy (still as Piu-piu) goes off script and announces the arrival of her boyfriend and it abruptly ends the re-enactment—as if to say the nostalgia must end. This, along with the uncanniness⁵⁹, seeks to suggest that the familiar is not what it seems.

Although the familiar is not what it seems in *The New King of Comedy*, the film does maintain the legacy of the competent loser to a significant extent. In the typical fashion established before, the perception of the competent loser is in an almost perpetual flux as it wavers from one of pity to one of favour⁶⁰. Notwithstanding all of Dreamy’s incidents of failure and subsequent ridicule from surrounding characters, the gaze on Dreamy often represents her as a downtrodden figure. In one particular example, mis-en-scene and cinematography work to underscore the disparities between main actors and extras. In a scene about what happens in between takes in the production of a water scene,

Figure 5.22. The difference between main actors and extras. Images from *The New King of Comedy*.

a faceless actor gets pulled out of the water without haste and is pampered by a team of staff. Conversely, all the extras that include Dreamy and Young are left to fend for

⁵⁹ Again, to alleviate the risk of unleashing an academically loaded term, ‘uncanny’ and ‘uncanniness’ are used here to denote something as recognisably strange within the process of recognition. That said, it is difficult to discount any discussions here concerning *the uncanny*, the “psychological experience of something as *strangely familiar*” (Royle 1), especially considering the inner workings of alienation; as a technique that imbues the familiar with strangeness.

⁶⁰ Refer to analysis of *Love on Delivery* on pages 49 – 61.

themselves and only get to be featured in either the corner or the background of the shot; this quite literally suggests them to be mere background figures. At the same time, while there is a frequent portrayal of the competent loser as a downtrodden figure, Dreamy is also featured in comparatively flattering moments throughout the film. Similarly to how screen reality is subject to change, various sequences throughout the film are edited and shot to seemingly celebrate Dreamy's character. Interestingly about the scene between the timestamps 42:55 and 44:51, Dreamy and her boyfriend⁶¹ Charlie (Quandan Zhang) engage in a quick sing-along together that resembles a bittersweet music video or at least a scene out of a musical⁶². This gentle moment dedicated to Dreamy, that more than adequately demonstrates her individual talents and competence, does offer some reminder of who the main star of the film is in particular; but more significantly, it does make an obvious effort to invoke pathos and inspire audience compassion and emotional investment in Dreamy's journey—in this regard, this does deviate from the first *King of Comedy* and from preceding competent losers where it is not as easy to access and sympathise with the character. That is to say, Chow does apply more conventional and commercial methods here in *The New King of Comedy* to make his competent loser more easy to understand. Moreover, Chow opts to shimmer the shots of this musical sequence with a sort of fantastical glare (see Figure 5.23):

⁶¹ In true *nothing is what it seems* fashion, her seemingly supportive boyfriend will later turn out to be a male escort who just tells women what they want to hear in exchange for money. On the other hand, her pursuant and colleague, Young, turns out to be a rich person who just does acting for fun.

⁶² It is also worth noting that the film breaks from the Mandarin language and the song is sung in Cantonese.

Figure 5.23. Dreamy gets a little dreamier. Images from *The New King of Comedy*.

While the gaze on Dreamy does obviously become more flatteringly glamorous, apart from the perception or portrayal of Dreamy that is thrown off-course is also the film's screen reality. With a certain realism already established earlier, this glamorous glare afforded to Dreamy's musical scene with Charlie invokes for the audience an atmosphere that is quite dream-like. If inconsistent realities are not enough to convince one of the presence of unstable and unreliable realities, a reality that resembles a dream⁶³ sequence can certainly be much more persuasive of that point. While unreliable realities do supplement the notion that nothing is what it seems, the matter of dreams is taken further in the film when Dreamy's own dream is fulfilled.

At this point, it is worth interjecting that it is no coincidence that the protagonist of the film is named as such⁶⁴. Dreaming, the act and the fulfilment of, is certainly a theme of *The New King of Comedy*. While the wishes of the competent loser, Tin-sau, in the first *King of Comedy* are not fulfilled straightforwardly, both competent losers of *The New King of Comedy* experience a comparatively happier ending, quite akin to that of a typical rags-to-riches film. One can say that Chow affords *The New King of Comedy* with a fairy-tale ending; after Dreamy eventually performs a successful audition at a talent contest, she

⁶³ This is based largely on the dictionary definition of 'dreams' as images that occur in a person's mind, i.e. unreal.

⁶⁴ In the original Mandarin, the protagonist is named 如梦 (Ru Meng) which translates to 'like a dream' or 'dreamy'.

literally walks into the light and the story cuts to a year later at an award show where she bags the prize for ‘Best Actress’ (see Figure 5.24).

Figure 5.24. Dreamy walks into a bright future. Images from *The New King of Comedy*.

The formal circumstances of this sequence reveals Chow’s perspective on aspirational thinking, at least for and within *The New King of Comedy*. To list them, there is the application of CGI to have Dreamy open some doors and walk into a fantastically unreal source of light; secondly, in a combination of editing and narrative pacing, the film abruptly leads on to Dreamy’s success—considering how long is spent experiencing Dreamy’s failures, the sudden change in Dreamy’s fortunes is arguably abrupt and somewhat reminiscent of a plot device like *deus ex machina*; lastly, before Dreamy produces her winning performance, the audience witnesses Dreamy fall terribly short in comparison to her fellow competitors in various stages of the talent competition. For this mass audition scene, Chow opts to cast multiple young talents to showcase their actual offscreen abilities in the film. Between the timestamps 1:11:26 to 1:14:32, the audience is treated to a spectacle of various performances that include dance, contortionist, and drama for instance. As these talented individuals continuously outperform Dreamy (she follows the performance of a contortionist by making sounds of flatulence with her hands), as well

as for the fact that the production staff seem to repeatedly brush her off, one cannot help but doubt Dreamy's chances of making it through⁶⁵.

These creative choices of Chow's work on multiple levels to address certain conventions and established ideas concerning stardom and/or in relation to hard work and talent. While Dreamy's meteoric success in the face of obvious inadequacies and doubt underscores the insignificance of talent, Chow's decision offscreen to cast an unknown face like E Jingwen's highlights the insignificance of *both* talent and hard work. Whether Chow's decision to cast her is to reward her persistence within the industry or to uncover an overlooked talent (or both), it is nevertheless a decision made by one filmmaker, if not an arbitrary one, that enabled a means to success⁶⁶.

On the other hand, regarding Chow's fixation on dreams in the film, demonstrated in the protagonist's name and the dream-like screen realities of the musical sing-along and of walking towards the light, a positive outlook seems to prevail especially since dreams are ultimately fulfilled in *The New King of Comedy*. However, the altered screen realities of the aforementioned scenes should also be acknowledged and considered. While it is already assumed that these altered realities function to highlight the unreliability of images and established realities, an inquiry into the authenticity and actuality of Dreamy's wish-fulfilment has to be raised. More elaborately, it can be argued that the inculcated distrust of reality in *The New King of Comedy* further establishes the events of the film, or Dreamy's journey, to be like how its protagonist is so named, merely *like a dream*.

⁶⁵ In the face of all those seasoned performers, it is also worth noting that Chow chose to cast E Jingwen, an actress with plenty of experience playing only minor and bit-part roles prior to *The New King of Comedy* (Lee, Jan).

⁶⁶ Incidentally, this does mirror Dreamy's means to success as it was dependent on merely one judge to approve of her.

Furthermore, in conjunction with Chow's meta-cinema and the self-reflexivity of the film, that applies Brechtian *alienation*, the audience maintains a critical distance from the film, and more particularly accepts that *The New King of Comedy* is just a work of creation, a figment of one's imagination—just a film—very much like a dream is a just dream. With this said, the argument can be brought back to revisit the earlier statement about the difference between the opening scenes of *King of Comedy* and *The New King of Comedy*.

As it has already been described⁶⁷, the overlying visual difference is that the viewer will come to acknowledge the shot of the sea to be the point-of-view of the film's protagonist in *King of Comedy*; while the sea in *The New King of Comedy* is no one else's point-of-view but the audience's. As *King of Comedy*'s Tin-sau makes the ironic statement about hard work, the tone of the rest of the film is set as a sardonic challenge against aspiration and hard work. On the other hand, as sole viewers of the repetitive and hardworking waves, the audience of *The New King of Comedy* is invited to become fellow dreamers. But since a film is just a film, and a dream is just a dream, the overlying outlook towards aspiration and hard work is ultimately similar to that of its predecessor. That being said, it is not as if *The New King of Comedy* refuses to extol the virtues of hard work in the fulfilment of personal aspirations; of the film, Chow insists:

I didn't really think about how it'll do at the box office. I just want to do what I want to do. I hope audiences identify with this film and understand the spirit of it. That's more important to me. I want people to know that you should always work hard because opportunities are on the horizon (qtd. in Lee, Jan).

Thus, I argue that the film endeavours to encourage some stubbornness even in the face of virtues and qualities not turning out to be what they seem—especially with regards to

⁶⁷ See page 90.

dreams, aspirations and hard work. More elaborately, talent and competence might not be as valued as one might think; and opportunity could be as arbitrary as the wind, but some persistence and pain will eventually be rewarded. Accordingly, Chow opens *The New King of Comedy* with more positivity with regards to the horizon as opposed to that of *The King of Comedy*. Overall, as much as they seem to lose familiarity, Chow's recent competent losers still exist to deliver similar messages—just in differing ways and attitudes.

All hail the king of comedy — who is unapologetically not exclusive to Hong Kong any longer

If *Conquering the Demons* epitomises Chow's inclination towards a continual revision of cultural identity⁶⁸, *The New King of Comedy* would represent Chow's continuing revision of his own identity as a filmmaker. Undoubtedly metatextual and self-reflexive, *The New King of Comedy* is a statement about the creator's own career and of his lived and shared moments within significant social, cultural and political shifts that surround his cinema.

Let it first be established that much of Chow's meta-cinema and familiarity is reliant on repetition, or repeated instances on multiple levels. Over the course of his career, he repeats, among many things, gags, sequences, themes and in this case of *The New King of Comedy*, arguably a whole film. More diegetically speaking and within a particular film, failures and adversities repeat for the competent loser. As much as repetition trains the audience to recognise the familiar, since the reproduction of things cultivates familiarity, it also trains the audience to recognise difference—to acknowledge

⁶⁸ See page 87.

that the repeated object is not entirely and necessarily the same. This also occurs when the familiar turns out not to be what it seems.

Thus, in a manner of speaking, Chow ‘repeats’ *King of Comedy* as *The New King of Comedy*. Within the context of the repeating criticism of Chow as he continues to repeatedly produce mainstream Chinese films, Chow is actively defying his critics⁶⁹. While this can be interpreted as Chow’s own withdrawal from the recurrent controversy and debate surrounding his own local Hong Kong identity, the significant differences within his recent ‘repeats’ are a statement of his intentions and perspectives moving forward.

As observed, the notable difference uncovered in the ‘repeat’, *The New King of Comedy*, is its encouraging attitude towards dreams and aspirations. To consider the moment for this repeat to occur, *The New King of Comedy* was released in 2019, about sixteen years after the first signing of CEPA in 2003; as well as twenty-two years after the transfer of sovereignty of Hong Kong from Britain to China. On the other hand, the first *King of Comedy* was released in 1999, two years after the transfer of sovereignty and towards the end of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Some might consider it ironic, if not unfavourable, that in *King of Comedy*, released at a time when Hong Kong was still very much entrenched in a capitalist and consumerist system while China was just beginning their own brand of capitalism⁷⁰, Chow adopts a more scoffing attitude towards the ideas perpetuated and valued by capitalistic ideals, such as hard work; while on the other hand, Chow appears to be more complicit with similar tenets of capitalist ideology twenty-years

⁶⁹ See page 24.

⁷⁰ In 1996, the People’s Republic of China had initiated an economic policy of ‘grasping the large, letting go of the small’ which included efforts to privatise smaller state-owned enterprises and maintain state control over the larger ones (Naughton 301-302).

later with *The New King of Comedy*, incidentally while Hong Kong is very much entrenched in China's economic system and in the legal system of mainland China that has resulted in numerous conflicts and tensions, no less.

It might be argued that *King of Comedy* and its competent loser did perfectly reflect the generally dissatisfied sentiments of the Hong Kong local throughout the economic recession, representing the Hong Kong local perfectly at that moment; while *The New King of Comedy* does not seem to attempt to address the current state of affairs of the Hong Kong local. However, as observed in the analyses so far, in conjunction with the three other films in this chapter, it is evident that Chow endeavours to challenge various fixities, and this includes those that pertain to cultural identity as well.

Mainlandised or not, Chow nevertheless seeks to negotiate a Chinese identity that is inclusive of Hong Kong as well⁷¹. Furthermore, if it is assumed that part of Chow's strengths, if not a hallmark, is his ability to effectively produce the local for the global⁷², then it has to be considered that since his move to the mainland, Chow has had to negotiate a new globality—a new commercial climate and environment where Chinese cinema aims to compete, and a new globality where Chinese cinema is representative of multiple localities that include, and very strictly not limited to, Hong Kong. This is one reason that Chow's competent loser has been redesigned to be more accessible.

Thus, in *The New King of Comedy* and its competent loser's familiarity and unfamiliarity, in its similarities and differences between its precedent, Chow maintains a connection to and the legacy of his own Hong Kong origins, while revitalising and

⁷¹ Let it be reminded that Chow's Mandarin-speaking stars of *The New King of Comedy* sing a song in its original Cantonese.

⁷² See pages 21-22 in Literature Review.

revising an all-encompassing Chinese identity to compete on the global stage. Chow's redefinition of himself as a filmmaker involves the negotiation of the commercial and influential aims of Chinese cinema with the local sensibilities of Hong Kong that are still in negotiation with a national Chinese identity. Regarding this recent note, as observed of countless negotiations that the competent loser has to encounter, they often involve plenty of asymmetrical sacrifices that are often unresolved and/or unmitigated. Overall, more particularly with *The New King of Comedy*, the competent loser still serves to challenge the sociocultural expectations and conventions that prevail; but is not subjected to the same fatalism as before. Projecting more optimism, Chow seeks to encourage some hope in the face doubt, that there is something worth fighting for in the horizon—perhaps something plenty of Hong Kongers believe.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Chow's competent loser as a postmodern device

It is fair to suggest that Chow's competent losers carry much significance to his films, to his own identity, and to that of the culture that he is part of—whether it is Hong Kong or Chinese. Chow's main characters are more than mere bunglers as Bordwell might point out; and although they are quite similar to the universal jester and wise fool, the competent loser distinguishes itself as a character of its own and unique to Chow. Unlike the jester, the competent loser is able to invoke pathos; and unlike the wise fool, the competent loser is conscious of his wisdom or skill. But above all, the competent loser is able to interact with itself on an intertextual level.

As an early competent loser, *Love on Delivery*'s Ang establishes himself as a pastiche of Hong Kong popular culture and as a streamlined and disciplined version of the various comedic personas (early versions of the competent loser) that Chow has delivered in the course of his career till the time of the film's production. Tin-sau of *King of Comedy* represents Chow as an established figure of Hong Kong cinema as Chow's performance is seasoned and the character development clearly appears to be more refined compared to its predecessors. Furthermore, as meta as the film and character are, Tin-sau is able to both establish and comment on matters of identity within Hong Kong cinema and culture. With familiar performative cues and character arc, *Conquering the Demons*' Chen is the competent loser's first deliverance of a strange familiarity; one that carries references to Chow's earlier work within Hong Kong cinema and hints at a possibility of preserving Hong Kong identity within mainland cinema. Finally, the competent loser of

The New King of Comedy introduces, or reintroduces, quite literally, the *new* king of comedy—it is Chow's statement on his own and shared identity, and his negotiation of the current moment where significant industrial changes are in effect, if not already effected.

As observed, Chow's competent loser embodies and delivers his trademark nonsensical humour. Thus, the nonsense that has marked the postmodern identity of Hong Kong is very much present in Chow's mainland productions. That being said, perhaps it might be argued that the nonsense in Chow's mainland productions cannot fall under the category of *mo lei tau* especially considering the absence of the Cantonese dialect. To that effect, I argue that Chow attempts to deliver a translation of *mo lei tau*—a less esoteric version of his nonsense for wider and diverse audiences to appreciate. This aligns with the arguments, particularly those of Yau and Lo, concerning co-productions as hybridised assemblies, not distinctively Hong Kong nor Chinese, but new creations that carry semblances of both Hong Kong and the mainland to negotiate the demands of globalisation. With his competent losers in his mainland productions, Chow seeks to deliver a sort of post-*mo lei tau* or post-nonsense—similar to the post-nostalgia theorised by Vivian Lee.

Via the inter- and metatextuality of Chow's competent losers, nostalgia is prevalent in Chow's mainland productions. Also a significant marker of Hong Kong's postmodern identity, nostalgia seems to have survived the transition. However, again it is not the same kind of nostalgia that Lai argues to be part of a process of enigmatisation that fosters solidarity among the Hong Kong locals. Delivering a form of progressive nostalgia, or a post-nostalgia according to Vivian Lee, Chow's competent losers again translate and present something both familiar and unfamiliar simultaneously in his

mainland films to proffer novelty, newness or at least a call for, or make an insistence on, the revisability of cultural identity.

It is worth pointing out that in early 2019, Chow had confirmed, nearly fifteen years after its release, that a sequel to *Kung Fu Hustle* was in the works. However, Chow does disclaim that it will not be “exactly *Kung Fu Hustle 2*, but it is similar ... the sequel will be set in modern times, and will have a similar direction as the original *Kung Fu Hustle*” (qtd. in CNA Lifestyle). After *The New King of Comedy*, this will thus be the second time that Chow revises or remakes a familiar title from the period of his career when he was more involved in Hong Kong. Although it remains to be seen if a competent loser will be present in the ‘sequel’ to *Kung Fu Hustle*, it is quite clear that Chow is referencing himself, participating in a form of post-nonsense and post-nostalgia as defined here, actively revising his work and translating it to suit contemporary sensibilities and global cultural flows.

Overall, as rightly observed, Chow’s films have to be understood within an intertextual frame. Perpetually referencing popular culture and not forgetting his own work, Chow’s competent loser is very much part of his own postmodern repertoire that facilitates his meta- and inter-textuality. As already observed in tracing its development throughout Chow’s career, his competent loser is both emblematic of Hong Kong’s postmodernity, as well as an implement for creating new meanings. Moreover, while Chow does maintain a sense of Hong Kong identity in his work for the mainland, he also consciously does not; and his reluctance is not on account of an overly submissive compliance with the mainland, but as an effort to redefine a collective identity to assuage

the tensions between Hong Kong and the mainland within a dynamic of separateness as a result of the local-national, local-mainland, dichotomy.

On mistaking the quintessential Hong Kong as an essential Hong Kong, and vice versa

To repeat a question often posed, “one question always asked but never quite answered (if answerable) is, ‘What is the future of Hong Kong cinema?’” (Lee, V. Hong Kong Cinema (215). Doubts to the answerability of the question might call for a rethinking of the question itself; perhaps the better query is ‘what is Hong Kong cinema now?’ Perhaps an investigation of the latter might unearth the suggestion that while movies from Hong Kong are coming out under the banner of China, there is no Hong Kong cinema now (it has disappeared!), at least essentially. However, accepting Hong Kong’s presence in Chinese cinema does facilitate a better understanding of what Hong Kong cinema is now—especially considering that Hong Kong’s identity has to be negotiated and understood within the site of co-productions (Chu 109-112). With better definitions of the present, it would be intuitively better to argue feasible predictions of the future. With all that said, perhaps the root of doubt and irreconcilable definitions and predictions is the simple denial of, or aversion to, the conception of Hong Kong cinema being reliant on co-productions, especially with the mainland.

Of course, Hong Kong’s tense relationship with the mainland is the product of a complex combination, and a culmination, of multiple factors that encompass long colonial histories, ideological differences and homogeneous ideas concerning Chineseness. It would be naïve to assume that a simple solution, a paradigmatic shift of sorts, would be enough to cut the tension and untie all the knots that are constricting the conception and

expression of self-identification. While that is disclaimed, the main takeaway of this study is that the definitions of any particular thing cannot be essentialised; and Chow's competent loser has proven this particularly with regards to qualities within the social realm, about conventions in cinema, and about the filmmaker as a Hong Kong filmmaker. Chow is inessentially Hong Kong; and considering the postmodernity that Hong Kong has come to be characterised with, Chow's own identity reflected in his films for the mainland is arguably still quintessentially Hong Kong.

The competent loser for future studies

As Chow's competent loser has demonstrated in its own trajectory from questioning the current sociocultural conventions to more explicitly revising and redefining identity, it is arguable that Hong Kong identity, and by extension cultural identity, is always subject to change. In tandem with the discussion above about over-essentialising identity, one cannot strictly define identity especially since it is constantly in flux. To better appreciate this, the transnational approach should be considered in cinema studies on a wider scale, not just for the cinema of Hong Kong.

While this study of the competent loser offers a closer look at the innerworkings of Chow's filmography and thus a better understanding of Chow as a filmmaker, it also highlights the transnationality and hybridity of contemporary mainstream cinema as a result of the multidirectional cultural flows amid globalism. As a result of the lengthening and widening reach of the many cinemas around the globe there is arguably an emergence of new forms of, or resemblances of, co-productions—as we have witnessed of China's recent foray into Hollywood. Thus, there will be a significant rise in the hyphenation

between cinemas. To remind the reader of the hyphen in focus in this study, the one that situates itself between Hong Kong and China has opened more significant questions regarding what is happening within the hyphen itself. While the transnational approach better facilitates the answering of these questions, I dare argue that Chow's competent loser can be representative of this hyphen (and perhaps all similar hyphens). Like the competent loser, these hyphens demonstrate a negotiation, a struggle, or an oscillation between, various fixities that are quite often in conflict with one another. Like the competent loser that has and seeks to revise itself, newness is created within the hyphen as a result of perpetual conflict. Above all, Chow has shown that while we hang on to one particular side of the hyphen, we are all competent losers.

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