

Discursive Stardom in Hong Kong and the Missing Referents

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The Opening Sequence

The Hong Kong film industry has been in decline since the mid-1990s. By the early 2000s, film stars of an earlier generation are retrospectively put forward in popular discourses as embodiment of a glorious time in Hong Kong's recent history. This is significant as the city has suffered from various economic and social problems since the handover of sovereignty from Britain to China in 1997. Therefore, these discourses around stardom are about re-evaluation of popular culture in pre-handover Hong Kong. In this paper, I shall examine empirical evidence from filmmakers (including actors), commentators and audiences in the subjects of Hong Kong cinema, stars and culture. I will detail a complex web of practices around Hong Kong film stardom and examine their significance.

Hong Kong 1980-2005

My doctoral project relates to Hong Kong from 1980 to the time of fieldwork, 2005, traversing several significant historical landmarks. Firstly, the early 1980s was the start of the awareness of the handover of the city when Margaret Thatcher visited Beijing in 1984 to sign the Joint Declaration that specified the terms of transfer of sovereignty from Britain to China on the 1 July 1997. The handover was therefore preceded by a long period of expectation, called the transition period. Parallel to that, the 1980s was a time when the Hong Kong film industry was commercially successful, prolific and had a strong local market. The early 1990s saw the beginning of the decline of the Hong Kong film industry. Then came the handover in 1997. Coincidentally, in early July 1997, a general recession swept across Asian economies. It became known as the Asian crisis and affected Hong Kong: 'As the recession began to bite, business slumped, the market tumbled and the tourists stayed away' (Abbas 2001: 621). Tam also suggests that the post-1997 slump of the economy had 'transformed the local psyche' (2002: 33), a process that overshadowed the political transformation. Since 1997, Hong Kong has existed as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) within China, governed by a Chief Executive Officer and Basic Law. The handover was therefore not a watershed but a significant date along the continuous cultural transformation of Hong Kong as Abbas states (1997: 7), 'the anticipated end of Hong Kong as people knew it was the beginning of a profound concern with its historical and cultural specificity'.

The political and economic difficulties were further compounded by several large scale public health scares, such as the bird flu virus, since the late 1990s. 2003 saw the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic that spread from the region to many Asian countries and other continents. The epidemic severely hampered the movie industry when public places like the cinema were deserted (Youngs 2004). It became yet another blow to the crisis of the industry that was already in steep decline. Half a million (out of a population of 7 millions) residents took to the streets in protest of the proposed anti-subversion law on the 1 July 2003.

By the time of my fieldwork in 2005, the city has existed as a SAR for 8 years and the problems of the film industry have reached a critical moment. It is against this context that some of my informants' comments provide a

rich ground for understanding how they see Hong Kong cinema, stars and their relationship with popular culture and the city. Baudrillard asserts that consumer products are 'a system of communication, a structure of exchange' (1988: 46), then what do the discourses around contemporary film stardom in Hong Kong communicate?

This comment from MJ, an informant, sums up the discourses well¹:

People in Hong Kong grew up with the stars and they became their memory. They reflect the people of Hong Kong. I wonder if fans of these new stars will still remember them in 10-15 years time. New stars like the Twins don't reflect society anymore. There is no more Leslie Cheung or Anita Mui, perhaps Andy Lau. The 1980s were the most glorious time of Hong Kong cinema.

MJ is a woman in her 30s who would have been a teenager in the 1980s. What she said interested me as she asserted an identity of 'people of Hong Kong', suggesting that stars could reflect the population but these representative stars only seemed to include those from the 1980s, that according to MJ, was the most glorious time of Hong Kong cinema. As I found out, MJ's comment was echoed in the discourses circulated in Hong Kong in the early 2000s.

The Decline of Hong Kong Cinema

At its height in the 1980s and early 1990s, the Hong Kong film industry was prolific and the majority of productions were generic commercial films. At the time, popular film stars, such as Andy Lau, Maggie Cheung and Tony Leung, worked on as many as 16 films a year. Furthermore, in the 1980s and early 1990s, Hong Kong films dominated the export markets in Asia to the extent that Lii (1998) argues that Hong Kong cinema was a 'marginal empire'. Hong Kong film production has since lost much of its regional markets in Korea, Taiwan and South East Asia. The decrease in the Asian export markets has been ongoing since the early 1990s. In addition, many of these countries were badly affected by the Asian economic crisis in 1997 and never recovered. For instance, Hong Kong films made up 80% of the Chinese language releases in Taiwan in 1990. Since the relaxation of import regulation in 1986, the Taiwanese audiences gradually abandoned Chinese films for Hollywood productions (Zhang 2004: 242). In 1999, Hong Kong films took 2.87% of Taiwanese box office whilst Hollywood productions represented 96.67% (Chiang n.d.). On the other hand, film industries in Korea and Thailand have taken off in the last decade and become keen competitors. In Hong Kong and the Chinese markets, piracy is a major problem (Chou Wiest 2005, Wang 2005).

From 1988-1996, the annual average number of production in Hong Kong was 153 films, which was reduced to 63 in 2004, and 55 in 2005 (Zhang 2004: 156, Chow 2005a, Cahiers du Cinema 2006). The market share of local films has also shrunk dramatically (table 1).

Table 1
Local VS Foreign Films Box Office Ratio²

	Percentage of Box Office (Local Films)	Percentage of Box Office (Foreign Films)
1988	78.58	21.42
1989	72.15	27.85
1991	77.2	22.8
1995	58	42
1996	52.05	47.95
2002	40	60
2005	35.1 (estimated)	64.9

Illustrated by the above table, local productions have been losing the domestic market in favour of foreign, mainly Hollywood, films.

Increasing cost and decreasing profit led to less investment in film, a trend that continued right through the 1990s. Although stars might guarantee commercial success at the box office, they were expensive: stars' fees consumed at least a third of the budget of a blockbuster (Bordwell 2000: 117-119).

The formulas for success in the 1980s and early 1990s paradoxically became the cause for the industry's subsequent difficulties. Complacent, prolific production of film cycles and copycat storylines did not harm the box office, until a generation of film goers in Hong Kong started watching foreign movies, especially those from the cash-rich Hollywood studios. The disparity in production quality became apparent and the locally made commercial genre films began to appear stale.

The decline of Hong Kong cinema since the mid-1990s is therefore closely linked to the overwhelming change in the way feature films are consumed and the re-structuring of domestic, regional and global film markets. Local films are not considered value for money, so the audiences opt for the less expensive option of watching video discs (TELA 2001: 38). With the growth in home entertainment, audiences have more choices now than in the 1980s and early 1990s. There are the options of going out to theatres, watching domestic and foreign film products and television series at home which consumers buy, rent or download (often illegally).

Law & Bren (2004: 294) sum up the situation in 2004:

What is clear is that Hong Kong film could still [sic.] not compete with Hollywood on an equal footing, although it had been accepted in the international market as a legitimate provider of mass-appeal action products and high-end art films. Closer to home, the coveted Chinese market remained largely out of reach and its government nowhere near implementing fundamental reform. Hong Kong film was thus looking at a period of hardship ahead as it sought transformation from an autonomous regional cinema to being a part of the Greater Chinese cinema.

Stardom in the Crisis of Hong Kong Cinema

The sea change in film production and consumption in Hong Kong has clear effects on film stardom. Simply, there is less opportunity for film actors today, compared to a decade ago, a direct result of the reduced number of productions each year. The most popular stars of the 1980s and early 1990s, Andy Lau, Tony Leung, Stephen Chow, Maggie Cheung, have continued to make films though become less prolific over time, whilst new and emerging actors are hampered by the lack of work.

By the late 1990s, even stars like Stephen Chow and Jackie Chan were unable to guarantee box office success. It is contradictory as star vehicles are seen as a tired way of film production but, at the same time, the biggest commercial successes have been about the stars. They also dominated the peak seasonal releases: Chinese New Year, summer holidays and Christmas. Since the 1997 economic downturn, many of these releases struggled. Even with well known actors, they did not achieve commercial success (Sze n.d.). On the other hand, the films with highest box office returns in the last few years have been high budget, star vehicles, such as the *Infernal Affairs* series (Andrew Lau & Mak Siu Fai 2002-2003) and Stephen Chow's films, *Shaolin Soccer* (2001) and *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004). The surprised success of the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy set a standard for filmmakers in Hong Kong who want to lure audiences back to the cinemas: detailed script, well known cast, famous director(s), high technical quality and aggressive marketing.

As a result of the lack of Hong Kong film stars who have 'box office clout', local film productions turn to foreign (mainly Asian) actors (Chow 2005b). These Asian stars increase the international appeal of the oft-co-productions and are reportedly cheaper than their popular Hong Kong counterparts (Chow 2005b).

A major trend in the last decade in the creation of stars has been in the emergence of large entertainment conglomerates in Hong Kong. One of these powerful media corporations, set up by private capital, is the Emperor Entertainment Group (EEG), which multi-media investment has taken off since it was formally established in 1999³. The group includes Emperor Motion Pictures that recently released Jackie Chan's attempt at an international blockbuster, *The Medallion* (Gordon Chan 2003). Of equal importance is EEG's pop music branch that has contracts with many young multi-media stars in Hong Kong. The corporation also covers artiste management, television production, event management and a publishing franchise and it fully utilises all these business arms to promote its contracted artistes. The publishing branch, for instance, prints *the Hong Kong Daily News* (*Sun Pao*) and *Oriental Sunday*, both mass newspapers, *Weekend Weekly*, a weekly infotainment magazine and *New Monday*, a teens magazine launched in 2000.

In Hong Kong, stars participate in a variety of media in order to increase their income, as markets for individual mediums have shrunk (So 2005). The multi-media stars contracted by corporations work across media forms including films, Canto- and Mando-pop (pop music sung in Cantonese or Mandarin), television drama series, advertising, live shows, all promoted through intermedia commentaries. In addition, many of the multi-media young stars have been produced in an attempt to capture the teen market. The pervasive presence of these stars is

reflected in the fact that Charlene Choi and Gillian Chung, who made up the girl band, the Twins, together or individually appeared in 11 films in 2004 (out of a total of 63). In their first year after signing with the Emperor Group in 2001, The Twins issued 3 records, made 4 films, 8 commercials, a television series, published a photograph album, did 35 concerts and made 30 public appearance (such as openings)⁴. They immediately became the most profitable group under the management.

The printed press in Hong Kong is a major avenue for the circulation of stars' off-screen images. Newspapers and magazine publication in Hong Kong has also undergone radical transformation in the last fifteen years that directly impacts on the production and consumption of general stardom. Figures in 2004 show that 32% of the population read weekly magazines that were dominated by infotainment and entertainment (So 2005). The result of the domination of popular press and gossip as the staple is that paparazzi journalism has become the prevailing practice in the generation of such news. The practice is intrusive and the resultant images overwhelm the news-stands. Given the level of consumption of the printed press, celebrity gossip is an important part of daily and weekly reading.

The Discourses around Stardom and the Missing Referents

During fieldwork, I set out to gather discourses around Hong Kong cinema, stars and everyday life in the city, especially from those who worked in the industry, consumers of Hong Kong cinema and actors themselves.

I conducted short semi-structured interviews at several cinemas in Hong Kong. An interviewee provided a notion pertinent to the current debate:

Interviewee (A)⁵: I don't have much impression of the new ones. If you mention them, I may know but I have to think. My thoughts are those [Andy Lau, Stephen Chow, Maggie Cheung]. I don't watch films these last few years, so they are only stars on paper.

Leung Wing-Fai (LWF): So you mean, you've only seen them in the other media?

A: Yes, just newspapers, magazines.

What the interviewee suggests is that the multi-media stars no longer sell their labour as actors, singers and so on, but as stars chiefly in the printed press. As the film industry in Hong Kong experiences a crisis, economic reality and the circulation of stardom as images form a disjuncture. In Hong Kong today, the professional work of the multimedia stars is relatively little seen or heard in comparison to the widespread visibility of their images in the printed press. The earlier generation, Andy Lau, Stephen Chow and Maggie Cheung, on the other hand, stays in the audiences' minds.

The idea of stars on paper reminds me of Baudrillard's notion of simulacra (Baudrillard 1981), as the origin of film (the work of an actor) is now almost expunged in the generation of star images:

Simulation ...is the generation of models of a real without origin or reality. (Baudrillard 1981:166)

The age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials...It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself. (Baudrillard 1981:167)

As stars become multi-media, promoted by mainly the press and advertising, there is a disjuncture between the selling of images and work such as feature films. Many are well known only as stars on paper. However, the double bind is that the concept of simulation intimates real and hidden referentials that have disappeared alongside the decline of Hong Kong cinema.

Joe Cheung, the Vice Chairman of Federation of Hong Kong Filmmakers, sums up the ideas about the two generations of stars from the point of view of someone who has had a long film career⁶.

In the past, actors like Chow Yun Fat, Jackie Chan, Andy Lau, Tony Leung, they had to be trained, that was from TVB. They spent time in TVB, then film⁷. They spent time working with different directors, different films, they also put in effort, [developed] their talents, it created their mega star position. [Nowadays] These management companies use promotion. To make a film may require 1million [Hong Kong Dollars] but making a record only costs 100 000. So they have these singers, [they] try to promote them. There are audiences, listeners who are blinded by the promotions and led by them. So, popularity [of these idols] may seem high, but there's no real skill. Singing, if you

have a pretty face, in the studio, everyone can sing... they'd die if they had to sing live. They show their real face in films, [they have] no personality, can't act. There is not much talent. So in the cinema, the result is poor. [It shows].

Cheung's comment compares and contrasts the two groups of (film) stars. The new generation of multi-media idols are asserted to be lacking in skills, manufactured by heavy promotion, made possible by the ease of the recording studio. At least some consumers are unable to resist the manipulation. What is interesting though is that he looks to the generation of stars from the 1980s as the embodiment of professionalism, skills, hard work and talent. These are the qualities that suggest the hidden referents to simulations that are contemporary stars' images.

The Hong Kong media not only promote the end of film stardom through the over exposure of multi-media idols, they also actively pronounce the death of the Hong Kong stars, after several stars from the 1980s died. Most notably, Leslie Cheung committed suicide in April 2003 and Anita Mui died of cancer aged 40 in December of the same year. Leslie Cheung was a singer/actor. He won a song contest in 1977, became a recording artist and worked in television drama. Cheung started a film career in 1980. His most well known roles were probably collaborations with Wong Kar-wai (including *Days of Being Wild*, 1990, *Happy Together*, 1997) and *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige 1992).

The late Anita Mui, who entered the entertainment industry through winning a television song contest in 1982, remained primarily a singer but gradually built up a reputation as an actress through making some 40 films. She was a child performer, supposed to have started when she was 2 or 3. Her image, even at the beginning of her career at 18, was one of mature, experienced and able performer. She was called the Queen of Pop. Mui's career as a singer was matched by her acting work: roles that demonstrated a diverse repertoire, a sign that she was a 'serious' actress rather than a young ingénue from the start. For her role in *Rouge* (Stanley Kwan 1989, co-starring Leslie Cheung), she received several Best Actress awards. Mui worked with Hong Kong New Wave directors including Tsui Hark and Ann Hui.

The reportage in the popular press and discourses around the city in response to the deaths of Cheung and Mui are illuminating:

The funeral of 'Daughter of Hong Kong', Anita Mui, took place on the 12th [January 2004]. It rocked Hong Kong. Thousands of fans said goodbye to the megastar of a generation at the funeral home and cremation.

Within a year, the death of two entertainers who have accompanied the growing up of people in Hong Kong, Anita Mui and Leslie Cheung, touched many people...⁸

The funerals of Anita Mui and Leslie Cheung drew mass crowd. Can you imagine any of these [current] stars being able to do that? May be Stephen Chow⁹.

A Legislative Council councillor immediately suggested that the government should build a Museum of Hong Kong Entertainment World at the West Kowloon Cultural Area in order to record the history of the glory of the entertainment industry (Tao 2004: 33). Many of the comments refer to stars like Mui and Cheung as legends and icons for a generation of 'people of Hong Kong', echoing MJ's comment cited at the beginning. Through reassessment of Hong Kong cinema and employing the figures of film stars to assert past glories, the popular commentators, institutions and individuals appear to be suggesting a unified, essential Hong Kong identity (represented by the stars) retrospectively. The comments by filmmakers, stars, commentators and audiences often compare and contrast the two generations of stars. They provide the raw materials for investigating values that are constructed discursively as elements that associate with the real (behind mere simulacra).

Edward Lam, a writer and critic, repeats and expands on the themes asserted by Joe Cheung¹⁰:

Edward Lam (L): The entertainment today is only about consumption, so you buy, consume and discard, you're only creating a memory blackhole, you won't remember. You'll mix them all up. Before, you'd remember Elizabeth Taylor, she's in *A Place in the Sun*, *Cat on the Hot Tin Roof*, whichever role she's been in, each was a brand. The impression is always there.

Leung Wing-Fai (LWF): One thing, like what you said, stardom seems to be more prevalent now. When you see stars everywhere, in the weekly magazines.. but the more stardom is out there, the less glamorous the stars seem?

L: Because they don't have the quality. I saw just now on television in the IFC [a shopping mall], like Stephy [a young idol] etc. you won't recognise them. I won't, definitely not. They don't have individuality. But it's related to

what you said about corporations. They would promote whom you'd call common looking people. Then they could create identification.

First of all, Lam refers to, strangely, a Hollywood star but the notion of contemporary popular culture as less valuable, more disposable and only for crass consumption remains. He also decries the young idols as ordinary people without individuality, promoted by corporations. He asserts a sense of nostalgia for the earlier generation, suggesting that endurance, long lasting impression, individuality and extraordinariness are no longer the qualities of the present multi-media idols.

The same question can be put to the stars themselves. If, according to Edward Lam, the young idols no longer possess special qualities that distinguish them from the consumers they serve, how do stars talk about the meanings of their own existence? Here is a long extract from an interview with Sylvia Chang, an actress, producer, director, writer, who has been in the film business since the 1970s¹¹:

Leung Wing-Fai (LWF): In Hong Kong, you've been a star for many years. What is stardom, in Hong Kong? How do they see you? What is it?

Sylvia Chang (S): it's only a profession. I always, people ask me how should I address you, director or what? What to write? I'm a filmmaker, okay? Star or actor, director or what, all under the category of filmmaker. It's only a profession. But sometimes it depends a little on our face, to make people remember us, so people have an impression of our faces. Other than that, you must have certain skills, just like any other profession. You need certain skills to survive. That's what it is to me.

Later, we talked about paparazzi journalism:

S: Paparazzi didn't come from the East. It's from the west. We, in this industry, continuously copy the outside world. I said we, the Chinese's originality is becoming less and less. [sighs] Hong Kong. This thing, it's not good or bad. It exists for a reason. It exists in a specific space. A lot of brainless people like to read gossip press. They allow paparazzi to exist, [and paparazzi are] proud of being paparazzi.

LWF: It seems that it's got worse in the last 10, 15 years.

S: Very. Perhaps there's nothing else to say. There's nothing to say about the film industry. No good films. Not many good films. Fewer and fewer films made. They'd say we have fewer and fewer film sets to visit and report. If we don't do stars' juicy news, what can we do? The whole society is changing, they don't see that this is a sign of the decline of the industry. They are still happy doing it. There's nothing you can do.

Chang is here asserting the skills of an actor. By criticising the practice of paparazzi journalism, she is pulling back all that is lost in an industry in decline: productivity of an actor, opportunities and professional work that have been under threat in a mediated world full of simulacra. There is also a sense of the decline of culture, of which paparazzi journalism is a sign/by-product.

Both commentators and stars aim to indicate continuity with the (glorious) past and assert values, such as professionalism, hard work and acting skills. Retrospectively, popular culture and pop/film stars of an earlier generation are put forward as part of the success story, the building of modern Hong Kong, especially at a time when the city suffers from economic and social problems. These critics and stars (re)invent the importance of acting skills of a generation of film stars that explain their powerful positions and endurance. In the early 2000s, as the city's economic and social lives rapidly changed; the film industry went into recession; the powerful influences of popular culture of the 1980s declined, the response was a discursive reinvention of a past of plenitude and the rearticulation of a strong and continuous connection with that past through the stars.

By discursively recreating iconic stars, the commentators, producers and consumers of film stardom in Hong Kong assert that they are subjects who can distinguish between qualities of acting skills and so on, professional values that are alienated through mediation. In so doing, they also constitute themselves as subjects who are not passive, alienated consumers of media products that are mere simulations without contents.

Closing Credits

[E]ven while the notion of the individual is being assailed on all sides, it is a necessary fiction for the reproduction of the kind society we live in. stars articulate these ideas of personhood, in large measure shoring up the notion of the individual but also at times registering the doubts and anxieties attendant on it. (Dyer 1986:10)

My informants' need to find the missing qualities behind empty images has become an urgency since the mid-1990s. This discursive (re-)construction of film stardom in Hong Kong is an effort to find the missing referents, authenticity and professional work, in the simulacra. The constructed version of the recent history of Hong Kong by way of film stardom is also attempt to recuperate respectability of a film industry in decline and a city under political, social and economic pressures. Stars embody the changes and a (lost) essential Hong Kong identity. For those grew up or lived through the 1980s and 1990s, looking to previous generations of stars conjure up nostalgia of a time when Hong Kong is perceived to be in good shape. That creates a continuity with the past imaged through these stars as they respond to the political, economic and social rupture in Hong Kong since the hand-over in the early 2000s.

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Notes

- ¹ Conversation took place on 6 February 2005.
- ² Information from *City Entertainment* (1990, 2003, 2005), the only film magazine in Hong Kong, Chu 2003: 55, *Cahiers du Cinema* 2006.
- ³ See the group's website www.emperor.com.hk
- ⁴ *Next* 14/3/2002 pp.42-44.
- ⁵ From an interviewee, single male, 33 at Broadway Cinematheque, Hong Kong in March 2005.
- ⁶ Interview with Joe Cheung on the 29 July 2005. His film career started in the late 1960s, early 1970s.
- ⁷ TVB is the local television station that runs actors training classes and many film stars emerged from the classes in the 1980s and 1990s.
- ⁸ *Sing Tao* 14 January 2004 p.B7.
- ⁹ An informant, C, during a long dialogue on 20 May 2005.
- ¹⁰ Interview with Edward Lam on 3 August 2005.
- ¹¹ Chang originated from Taiwan but has been working in Hong Kong for over twenty years (see Teo 1997: 259).

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