Hong Kong Cinema: Double Marginalization and Cultural Resistance*

Tan See Kam
University of Melbourne, Australia

This paper presents a position on Hong Kong’s postcoloniality through an analysis of one of its cultural institutions: cinema, and in particular three of its films: HOME AT HONG KONG (1983), THE KILLER (1989) and MARY FROM BEIJING (1992). In doing so, it also challenges the current dominance, within the field of popular cultural and literary studies, of the exclusivity of postcolonial texts in English. It also questions a dominant (‘western’) film studies tradition which has persistently prioritized Hollywood as the norm of creativity. As a result, Other cinemas (as opposed to Hollywood) are relegated to the realms of negativity, understood mostly in terms of lack, silence, absence or marginality. For me, Hollywood cultural supremacism has little value for understanding, problematizing and politicizing different cinemas as social practices and institutions, of which films are one of its many products and processes, because it fails to recognize issues of contradictions, difference, heterogeneity, regionality, ethnicity, class, gender and the colonized other.

The colonized other

Edward Said’s classic study Orientalism gives a persuasive history of Orientalism as exemplary academic strategy for representing this colonized Other as “not Europe’s interlocutor, but its silent Other” (Said, 1985b:17) for the European collective subject. For Said, the Oriental was managed politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively by the European imperialists through Orientalist strategies that fix, particularize and divide things Oriental into manageable parts, so much so that: “The Orient was almost a European invention” (Said:1985a:72).

Gayatri Spivak theorizes this as a process of ‘othering’ (Spivak, 1985:132). Like Orientalism, ‘othering’ is an imperialist form of representation. ‘Othering’ works by projecting the Self’s systemic codes onto the territory of the Other, construed as ‘vacant’ and ‘uninscribed’, thus giving licence for Self-inscription on behalf of, as well

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Please Note: All transcriptions for Cantonese are in italics, and are distinguished from pinyin which is in bold type. All translations for THE KILLER are my own and are based on the Cantonese dialogue.
as onto, the Other. "(T)hey [the Orient] cannot represent themselves, they must therefore be represented" (Said, 1985b:19). In this way, the subjectivities of the colonized are denied.

Orientalism remains an important and valid neo-colonial strategy used for legitimizing imperialist projects in a postcolonial era, as demonstrated for example in Bob Hodge's analysis of ('western') media representation of the war between Iraq and the United States and its allies in 1991. For Hodge, contemporary Orientalist incursions upon mass media and popular culture are too important to ignore. Orientalist-style management, through its strategic use of the ('western') media, sanitizes and legitimizes the war for popular consumption and also mobilizes images of popular support for the United States-led militarism (Hodge, 1992).

Tales of ‘othering’ in contemporary Hong Kong however, come in rather 'humbler' proportions, but are never the less just as significant. Consider the following from a 'western' critic on Hong Kong cinema, Ian Buruma:

Hong Kong audiences are still relatively unsophisticated, but there are enough people interested in films other than kungfu and comedy to provide an audience for more personal movies. (Buruma, 1984:45)

Buruma has the attitude: “I am sophisticated but the Hong Kong audience (Other) is not.”

Cultural imperialisms like this come to the Hong Kong film industry in many ways and forms; Hollywood's cultural hegemony is only one of them. The Hong Kong film industry is not a homogeneous one and has undergone continual and dynamic changes since its formative years in the 1930s and has drawn its styles and themes from a wide range of sources, both inside and outside its boundaries. Similarly Robert Kolker's model for understanding 'world' (read 'other') cinema, for example, as always in relation to Hollywood is an inadequate and irresponsible approach to Hong Kong cinema (or for that matter, any cinema):

[In fact, no direct split between film making in America and elsewhere exists. There is rather an interplay in which the dominant style/s of American movies are always present to be denied, expanded upon, embraced and rejected, only to be embraced again. (Kolker, 1983:5)

Kolker's position is a reductive one. Not only does it ignore the symbiotic relationship that operates between and amongst cinemas, but it also overlooks the many different discourses of class, region, gender and ethnicity that connect and differentiate cinemas worldwide. Hollywood may 'dominate' some film circuits worldwide, but its dominance is not, as Kolker appears to suggest, absolute. Moreover, Hollywood's dominance and cultural hegemony are not evenly and universally distributed worldwide. I am not suggesting here that studies of Hong Kong cinema should ignore Hollywood, for example, as a source of cultural hegemony. But comparative studies, which uncritically accept Hollywood's so-called worldwide cultural supremacism as in the case of Kolker, misconstrue the pluralistic traditions from which Hong Kong cinema derives both its distinct, specific, contradictory and even ambivalent characteristics. Moreover, implicit in Kolker's position is a colonialist view which conceptualizes power as monolithic and emanating downwards from