

Representing Asia:

Indian Cinema from Bruce Lee to *Chandni Chowk to China*

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In spite of a large consumer base at home, the film industries in Asia have had serious problems in making significant inroads into international markets that are comparable to those of Hollywood. Observers have pointed out that even the Japanese entertainment industry, the largest in Asia, is largely confined to the domestic market and it is only in the twenty-first century that overseas markets have become an important consideration for the industry and Japanese government alike. The South Korean film industry's attempt to export its blockbusters (*hallyu*) has had limited success. Hong Kong, which had a significant international market for its films since the 1960s, has been caught in the high-volume, low-worth trap for decades now: hundreds of Hong Kong films have circulated all over Southeast Asia and South Asia, but the income generated from these markets has generally been modest. This was especially the case with the Indian market where Hong Kong films circulated in large numbers through the 1980s and 1990s but returning modest, almost negligible, revenues for the Hong Kong industry.

It is possible to extend Paul Willemen's argument about Korean cinema to suggest that the circulation of Asian film in global markets is limited, if not entirely blocked, by its being permeated with its context of production (Willemen 2002). Indeed, notwithstanding the spectacular success of the south Indian superstar Rajnikanth's *Muthu* in Japan, nobody, neither stars nor producers, knows why it was well received.¹

How then do Asian films travel? In the first section of this paper, I examine the evolution of Hong Kong films in India, focusing on the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, which is the single largest market for cinema in the country, to explore this question. My immediate concern is how these imported films, and therefore what they contain, were re-presented for Indian viewers by local distributors and exhibitors.

In the second section of the paper, I go on to discuss a hitherto unprecedented attempt at a cinematic representation of China, made in the Hindi film *Chandni Chowk to China* (Hindi, Nikhil Advani, 2009). I will argue that the film's engagement with China, mediated as it is by Hong Kong cinema, is framed by its attempt to address the value question that confronts Asian films: how does cultural visibility or value translate into economic value, especially at a time when value addition is inseparably linked to expansion of markets and thus a move beyond the comfort zone of the domestic market?

¹ As Ashish Rajadhyaksha puts it, if Bharathan, the producer of *Muthu*...had been asked why this film proved a hit and no other, or how he suggested Rajnikant capitalize on this sudden popularity to stabilize an East Asian market for his next film and his future film career, he may have admitted that he had no idea why *Muthu* did so well in Tokyo or why Rajnikant's subsequent films received virtually no release in Japan (2009, 74).

Section I: Re-Presenting Asia: Hong Kong Films in the Indian Market

As with other parts of the world, it was the success of Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon* (Robert Clouse 1973), released between 1976 and the early 1980s, which inaugurated the era of Hong Kong action films in India. Although kung fu films and action comedies comprise the bulk of imports and their economic worth is negligible for the Hong Kong industry, the list of influences is indeed long and varied.² From the 1980s, generations of stars have invoked the Hong Kong action film by performing their own stunts and simultaneously claiming to be trained in East Asian martial arts.

The story of how Hong Kong films made their way into the lower rungs of the distribution and exhibition sectors in Andhra Pradesh (and other parts of the country, if in smaller numbers) is a valuable lesson in the globalisation of Asian cultural commodities. The shortcomings of equating globalisation with Westernisation or even Americanisation and the further assumption that it is all about cultural imperialism are exposed when we examine the hows and whys of Hong Kong films in India. Furthermore, the importation and circulation of Hong Kong films also anticipated the flood of cheap goods and digital technology from the East (mostly the PRC) in recent years.

In the 1980s, the Telugu film industry witnessed the emergence of an entirely new category of distributor who specialised in cheap films—both Indian and imported—to cater to the hundreds of ill-equipped and badly maintained cinema halls that were no longer able to attract major releases in either Telugu, English, or Hindi. These new distributors specialised in re-runs (of Telugu films), films dubbed into Telugu from other Indian languages, and inexpensive imported films. Film prints could be rented for as little as a few hundred rupees in this segment.

At the apex of this pyramid were companies like Indo Overseas Films, among the country's largest and most experienced importers of Hong Kong and other Asian films. Indo Overseas Films was established by a non-resident Indian (NRI) who was a seafood exporter. Prior to 1984, the company distributed Hindi films. In 1984, it began to distribute films imported by the government-owned National Film Development Corporation (NFDC), which became the canalising agency for imported films in 1980.

The establishment of Indo Overseas Films was a direct consequence of the attempts made by the government of India in the 1980s to loosen the stranglehold of the Motion Picture Export Association of America (MPEAA) on the market for imported films in India. Manjunath Pendakur (1985) points out that the government of India asked MPEAA to leave the country in September 1983. The immediate reason, he states, may have had to do with government discomfort over the repatriation of the earnings of MPEAA. Till April 1985, when a new agreement was drawn up with MPEAA, the association did not have an office in India. This was the period during which Indo Overseas Films began to distribute imported films. In 1990, when the government relaxed its import regulations, it began importing films directly with foreign exchange earned from its

² I have suggested elsewhere that this influence is not limited to film but also includes popular print literature (Srinivas 2003).

seafood exports. The company released a number of Jackie Chan hits in the past and Thai and Korean blockbusters more recently.

NRI were soon able to directly import films into India, without going through NFDC. According to Pendakur, between fifteen and twenty companies owned by NRIs were registered in the eighties, 'which have brought in mostly martial arts and sexploitation films' (1990, 241). The period coincides with the rapid growth of the Hong Kong film industry, whose export model was founded on the mass production of cheap films. In this period, an NRI could buy a Hong Kong film for a few thousand US dollars and release it in India.

Hong Kong films and other cheap imports were a lifeline for small distributors who catered to the bottom rung of the exhibition ladder. The films were cheap and had a dedicated viewership, which in spite of its ignorance of the language watched them in their English versions. Circulation of these films in India was determined by local industrial and cultural practices, as we shall see below.

As is common practice in India and elsewhere, with Hong Kong productions, film titles are changed before they are released locally. Let me track the career of a Hong Kong film that underwent multiple re-presentations to illustrate my point. *Twin Dragons* (Tsui Hark, Ringo Lam 1992) featuring Jackie Chan was initially released in the English version and soon remade, unofficially/illegally, in Telugu as *Hello Brother* (EVV Satyanarayana 1994).³ This film was then dubbed into Tamil and released as *Hello Brothers* (1995). The Telugu version was then remade in Hindi as *Judwaa* (David Dhawan 1997). The censor certificate for the exhibition of *Twin Dragons* in India was issued in May 1993 for the film with the title *Twin Brothers*.⁴ This title change is likely to have been made by the film's distributor Indo Overseas Films. Theatrical release is likely to have taken place within weeks of the certification.

In the early 1990s, Jackie Chan was already popular in many parts of India. A distributor who has dealt in Hong Kong films recalls that the film was initially released in Class 'A' (air-conditioned) theatres in larger cities and towns on the strength of Jackie Chan's presence. It then moved down the distribution and exhibition chain to smaller cities/towns and less comfortable cinema halls in larger cities.⁵ This latter segment of the film market I have elsewhere called the *B circuit* and I will have more to say about it presently. The Indian film print, which was obviously being prepared for a career in the B circuit, *changed the credits* and named Jackie Chan as the director.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, promoting Hong Kong films among audiences in Andhra Pradesh was accompanied by title and other changes to the original. Remakes of Hong Kong or other Asian films in this period are rarer. While there has been something of a tradition of remaking Hollywood films in part or in whole by Indian film industries, in the 1980s and 1990s, it

³ See Srinivas 2008 for a discussion of *Twin Dragons* and its Indian remakes.

⁴ The VCD version of the film, released by Discovery Video and Laser Company, Mumbai in December 2001, has *Twin Dragons* on its jacket and *Twin Brothers* on the discs.

⁵ Observations on Jackie Chan's films are based on an interview with Ramesh Reddy of Sree Suchitra Films, Vijayawada, by the author on 15th March, 2001.

was unusual for Asian films to be remade in spite of their popularity here. Instead, we notice liberal and unacknowledged (and indeed, blatantly illegal) borrowings of entire action/comic sequences. For reasons of focus, I will not dwell on such borrowings since they are far too common to merit detailed discussion.

The change of title and credits is a small but critical sign that films mutate in circulation. *Twin Dragons* (or rather, *Twin Brothers*) circulated in a context where, every once in a while, films that pass the censor certification process are spliced with explicitly pornographic sequences that sometimes do not belong to the original film at all. Indeed, a significant component of the pornography exhibited on Indian screens consists of films with spliced sequences.⁶ Virtually any film can be rendered pornographic in this manner. The extent of the mutation of Hong Kong films in the Indian B circuit cannot be accounted for by David Bordwell's point that 'Hong Kong companies gave foreign distributors carte blanche to recut their films' (2000, 90). Not the least because this is the fate of a number of European, Asian, and Hollywood, not to mention low-budget Indian, films, that enter this segment in India. While there is no evidence that most Hong Kong films underwent this degree of transformation, it is useful to note extreme instances in order to take on board the disconcerting possibility that the filmic object may not be such a stable one after all.

The point at which the importer more or less loses control is when the film is sold or released through smaller distributors in the B circuit. This is not to say that the company is unaware of what is happening at the lower rungs of distribution, but it has no stake in trying to discipline this segment, particularly when rights are reissued (that is, five years following first release). Anything that helps films is good for the business.

As films make their way into the B circuit, the title is often changed. There is nothing underhand about it since the Hong Kong-based distributors too are aware of such changes, as pointed out by Bordwell (2000, cited above), and are not worried about it. Raymond Wong of Mandarin Entertainment (Holdings) Ltd., Hong Kong, for example, did not particularly care (interview with the author, 28th May, 2002, Hong Kong). Hong Kong films have been released under different titles in different parts of the world in the past. Furthermore, the new titles are official in that they figure on the censor certificate or the film print itself, as in the case of *Twin Brothers*. Among the more prominent Hong Kong films whose titles have been changed in India is *Once Upon a Time in China* (Tsui Hark 1991), which was released as *The Rebel*. The point is that the B circuit distributor's liberty with titles is only in keeping with the broader conditions in which Hong Kong films circulate in India.

Another notable point about the relative autonomy of the B circuit is that there is only a thin line between value addition and deliberate obfuscation, especially before the mid 1990s when only the English versions were circulated among audiences most of whom knew little or no English.

⁶ Lotte Hoek's work (2010) on cinema in Bangladesh shows that a number of features of the Indian B circuit, including the splicing of pornographic sequences into films after censor certification, are visible there as well. We may therefore be dealing with film industrial practices as well as cultural consumption that are prevalent across the South Asia region.

The sense of a general free-for-all spills over into the (official) VCD versions of Hong Kong films, too. *Armour of God II: Operation Condor* (Frankie Chan, Jackie Chan 1991), for instance, comes with a jacket featuring Jackie Chan and an unknown weapon-wielding actress (who is not in the film) in the background.

There is an underlying logic to the seeming chaos of the B circuit. R. K. Bhagawan, a distributor and also producer of Telugu-dubbed versions of Hong Kong and non-Telugu Indian films, offers a vital clue. Describing the process by which he selects Hong Kong films to dub into Telugu, he states that he often picks up older films whose rights have been re-issued (after five years, when they revert to the producer). He chooses ‘flop films with quality’.⁷ He explains that these are films that failed in their earlier release. This was either due to their complex plots or unfamiliar story lines that viewers could not follow because they *could not understand English*, the only language in which Hong Kong films were dubbed for Indian release till the late 1990s. Bhagawan himself sees the problem as one of intelligibility and finding local equivalents of elements (including titles of films) that are not immediately comprehensible. However, straightforward translation has never been the intention of the B circuit distributor. This is partly because, as Bhagawan indicates, importation poses a number of problems.

One area in which this becomes evident is stardom. In the 1990s, Hong Kong films circulated in Andhra Pradesh alongside Telugu films whose publicity revolved almost exclusively around stars—especially male stars. This mode of film promotion continues into the present. Distributors realised fairly soon that stars were important for promoting Hong Kong films, not the least because stars were central to local popular cinema. But the distributors faced a problem—it was not possible to build the careers of stars for local audiences due to the random manner in which films reached them.

In films by Jackie Chan or Jet Li, these stars were inevitably the focus of publicity, but what of other films featuring unfamiliar stars? A further difficulty was that low returns made major publicity campaigns unviable. Distributors therefore relied on the familiarity of a handful of stars, the list not always coinciding with Hong Kong’s own favourites.⁸ Low investment also meant that most publicity aimed at local (that is, Telugu-speaking) audiences was improvised from a set of photo-cards supplied by the importer. Distributors thus passed off unfamiliar Hong Kong actors as relatives (sons, daughters, brothers) or teachers of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan.

Distributors also ‘introduced’ elements absent in the film in question. Sree Suchitra Films issued publicity stills for Chan’s *Operation Condor/Armour of God II* (Jackie Chan 1987) with Hollywood actress Kim Basinger. She did not of course act in the film but that banal factual detail did not prevent the distributor from adding glamour to this film, which was presumably lacking in it. Distributors were therefore supplying flashy titles, actors with star value, heroines, and even comprehensible story lines. These elements were evidently *missing in the original* thus making it

⁷ R. K. Bhagawan, interviewed by the author, Chennai, 27th February, 2002. For more details on the work of the distributors discussed here, see Srinivas 2003.

⁸ For example, no Stephen Chow film was released in India till circa 2005-2006 when *Shaolin Soccer* was imported.

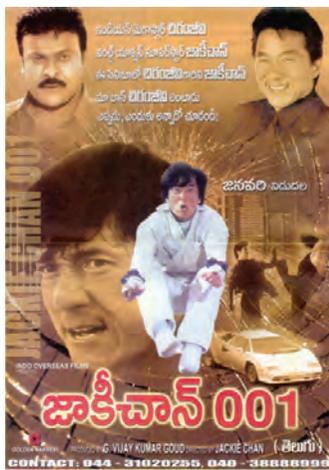


Image 1: Jackie Chan 001, Telugu version of the Hong Kong film entitled *Project A*

Notice the prominence of the Telugu superstar Chiranjeevi's image in the film's publicity (top left). The advertisement claims that the character played by Jackie Chan in the film can be heard saying, 'My boss [is] Chiranjeevi' (source: *Super Hit*, 30th January, 2004).

film industry's biggest star whose photograph also appears in the top left-hand corner of this advertisement (as well as on the jacket of the VCD version). Chiranjeevi is referred to by his fans as Boss or *Big Boss* (after one of his films directed by Vijaya Bapineedu, 1995). The process by which Jackie Chan, the more popular and bigger among the two in stature in the rest of the world, becomes a Chiranjeevi fan is one that involves taking considerable liberties with the original. It is also one that indicates that Jackie Chan not only speaks in 'my' language but also speaks like me and to me.

That this mode of indigenisation is not confined to Hong Kong cinema becomes evident from the career of the Korean film *The Host* (directed by Bong Joon-ho, 2006) in India. The Indian release of *The Host* through Indo-Overseas Films was the first major theatrical release of a Korean film in this country. At the time of the preview of the English version of the film, there was also a conscious effort to distance *The Host* from Hollywood productions with which comparison might be drawn (other creature films, for example). The press kit foregrounded the commercial success of the film in Korea as well as the critical appreciation of the film internationally. During the course of the film's journey down the distribution rungs of the film market, it was transformed into a B-grade creature film whose publicity drew parallels with a variety of Hollywood films of the genre. All claims to the film's distinction and superior aesthetic quality made at the time of the preview were lost. This is clearly evident from the visual materials generated at the different stages of the film's career in India.

fall short in comprehensibility and reducing its economic worth.

Dubbing of Hong Kong films into Indian languages from the 1990s opened up immense possibilities for localising imported films. An interesting example came to light in January 2004 when newspapers and film magazines carried an advertisement for the Telugu version of a Jackie Chan starrer entitled *Jackie Chan 001* (*Project A*, Jackie Chan 1983). The English version of the film had been in circulation since the 1980s. According to the film's advertisements, Jackie Chan could apparently be heard saying, 'My boss [is] Chiranjeevi.' This was an obvious reference to the Telugu



Image 2: Press kit issued by distributors (August 2007)



Image 3: Advertisement for the first Telugu preview of the film aimed at local distributors (*Andhra Jyothi*, 15th August, 2007)



Image 4: Announcement that the film would be released on 28th December aimed at smaller distributors, exhibitors, and potential viewers alike (*Andhra Jyothi*, 19th August, 2007)

The actual release was a week later.

The erasure of distinction: The evolution of *The Host* into *Bhetala Samudramlo Vichitra Jantuvu* ('Strange Creature in the Ghostly Sea').

Section II: *Chandni Chowk to China* and the Question of Cultural Value

What happens in *Chandni Chowk to China (CC2C)* is quite different from any earlier engagement of Indian cinema with its Hong Kong and mainland counterparts. As reviews of the film pointed out, this is the very first Warner Brothers production in India and the third Indian production involving a Hollywood major. The film ran into trouble in Nepal, where screenings were stopped due to protests against a passing remark by a character in the film that Buddha was born in India.⁹ The film had the largest release ever for a Hindi film in the US but had a 'lukewarm reception' from the media there.¹⁰ Although the producers were hoping to release the film theatrically in China, the Chinese government denied them clearance to do so.¹¹ Within a week or so of the film's release, it was declared to be a flop in India.¹² Evidently, the grand plans the producers had for using Warner's distribution network to capture the global market fell through, for a variety of reasons. Nevertheless, as one of the reviewers of the film put it,

Chandni Chowk to China is one of the most significant films to emerge from India in some time. The reasons for this are partly economic: it's being distributed by Warner Brothers, whose execs are hoping to make inroads into the vast market for Bollywood movies across the world.

The film is culturally important, too: its subject matter, albeit candied up with many gags, pratfalls and

⁹ See <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/chandni-chowk-to-china-banned-in-nepal/83407-8.html>.

¹⁰ See <http://www.zeenews.com/news499390.html>.

¹¹ See <http://khabarbollywood.com/chadni-chowk-to-china-stopped-from-release-in-china.html>.

¹² According to one report on the internet, 'Audiences hated the film so much, some people even walked out of theatres mid-way.' The verdict of the same report was that the film was a 'disaster'. See <http://specials.rediff.com/movies/2009/jan/19box.htm>.

whizzy CGI effects, is India's relationship with China.¹³

Presently, I will come to the question of India's relationship with China, which the review does not dwell on. To begin with the economic context, the significance of the entry of Hollywood needs to be viewed against the backdrop of the inability of Indian films (in all languages) to create economic value that approximates even remotely their hypervisibility in the social, political, and cultural domains. In southern India for example, film stars have established political parties and some have even been elected chief ministers of their respective states.¹⁴ Yet others, like the Kannada star Rajkumar, have kept out of electoral politics but have become cultural icons endowed with the authority to represent entire linguistic communities.¹⁵ While cinema is literally everywhere in India, the film industry has routinely reported year-on-year losses with about 60 percent of films produced failing to recover their production costs on average. In the words of Ashish Rajadhyaksha, the problem that the Indian film industry is confronted with is one of 'defining culture economically' (2003, 31) or realising economic value from an excessively visible and omnipresent film culture.

In the Indian context, one of the critical issues that confronts culture industries is the difficulty of translating cultural value into economic value. The Indian film industry has traditionally been the key site where this translation problem was battled by generations of industry as well as government functionaries. While cinema has been a 'national form' for over half a century now, the film industry has been making losses throughout its existence. A further point to note is that in spite of being highly regulated—with laws governing every aspect of its existence from minimum wages of workers to pre-censorship of films to restrictions on the number of seats in a cinema hall as well as the price of tickets—the film industry continues to be opaque. Information that would be considered fairly basic in other industries, including the number of screens, gross annual collections, etc. remains unavailable. This results in a situation in which established local players not only operate with far greater ease than newcomers regardless of their place of origin but also run businesses involving highly sophisticated methods that do not require the generation and processing of self-explanatory data.

The Indian market has historically posed a problem for non-Indian film industries as well. A Hong Kong film distribution executive told the author that her company considered the Indian market 'just a bonus' in comparison with other markets.¹⁶ This in spite of the large size of the market for films in general in India as well as the considerable penetration of Hong Kong films into the lower rungs of distribution and exhibition and the riotous practices of distributors in selling Hong Kong films. Clearly, creative input by distributors does not translate into economic

¹³ Sukhdev Sandhu, 'Chandni Chowk to China, a review'. *The Telegraph*, 16th January, 2009. See the full text at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturecritics/sukhdevsandhu/4269579/Chandni-Chowk-to-China-review.html>.

¹⁴ See Pandian 1992 for an examination of the career of the Tamil superstar M. G. Ramachandran, who went on to become the chief minister of Tamil Nadu.

¹⁵ Janaki Nair's (2005) study of Bangalore city studies the involvement of Rajkumar and his innumerable fan clubs in Kannada language politics.

¹⁶ Chiu Yi Leung, Mandarin Films, interviewed by the author, 19th September, 2001, Hong Kong.

value addition for the exporters/producers of films because they are a part of highly localised economic circuits. The situation has certainly changed in the past decade but Hollywood alone has persisted with its attempts to tap the Indian market and has of late made considerable inroads.¹⁷

Since the 1990s, there have been attempts by domestic players to address value questions by integrating cinema into a larger culture industry, which *disperses film into multiple sites of consumption but also atomises film into a range of commodities as a means of addressing the problem of value*. As a result, there has been a gradual downgrading of the domestic theatrical exhibition's importance in the economics of a film. The real action is at other 'windows' of revenue: digital formats, generation of consumables for new technologies (ringtones, for example), and most importantly for our purposes, *non-local distribution territories*.

Value creation, we notice, is closely linked to movement: to new geographical locations, including exhibition spaces like multiplexes, or media forms (video, optical disc, internet, and mobile phone).

I suggest that the central problem—which has economic as well as aesthetic manifestations—that *CC2C* attempts to address is one of value. The problem as well as the attempt to resolve it has exercised the Indian film industry and, more recently, other players in the culture industry. Once the problem is defined thus as one of value, it becomes possible for us to notice the multiple parallels that the film has with *Kung Fu Hustle* (Stephen Chow 2004), a Hong Kong martial arts film whose production involved actors from Hong Kong, Japan, Hollywood, and the PRC.

Martial Arts, Melodrama, and Textual Manifestation of Value

It is interesting to see how the value question is *textually manifested* in both *CC2C* and *Kung Fu Hustle*. An exploration of this element of the films also allows us to understand better the striking parallels between them at the level of plot and structure of narrative.¹⁸

Kung Fu Hustle, like a number of earlier films featuring Stephen Chow, especially those directed by Wong Jing, is a parody of the Hong Kong martial arts films of the 1970s and 1980s as well as Hollywood hits. His oeuvre makes numerous references to action films from yesteryears and often has a weak and cowardly petty crook masquerading as a major martial arts master or superhero. The protagonist is subject to violence and ridicule almost throughout the film and at the very end, is rather dramatically transformed into a real hero who, it turns out, is a martial arts adept.

The broad structure of the narrative as well as the manner in which the star is deployed (both are closely related) follow a pattern that is carried over from one film to the next. Stories and

¹⁷ According to a recent report, the gross output (that is, aggregate revenues of all companies involved) of the entire international film industry in the Indian market is USD 108 million. Although this appears to be substantial, it is less than 1 percent of the takings of the Indian film industry, which were estimated to be USD 2,709 million (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2010, 4).

¹⁸ Reviewers also drew attention to other, mostly Hollywood, sources for *CC2C* including *Kill Bill*, *Kung Fu Panda*, and *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* (Sandhu 2009, cited above).



Images 5 & 6: References to Stephen Chow's films: Dada's kicks send Sidhu flying into the air over Delhi city.

settings change, while there are repetitions and parallels at the thematic level. The most significant of these is kung fu, which is in turn inextricably linked to the protagonist's fate. His progress from ignorance to expertise in kung fu has been important for the plots of films like *King of Beggars*, *God of Cookery*, and *Kung Fu Hustle*. Stephen Chow's star persona figures prominently among the films' intertextual references. For example, in *Fight Back to School* (Gordan Chan 1991) he is Star Chow and in *God of Cookery* (Stephen Chow, Lik-Chi Lee 1996), he plays Stephen Chow, the 'God of Cookery'. The spectator's acute awareness of Chow's particular star persona is critical for the films' narrative, which, I will suggest, inevitably unfolds in a predictable fashion in spite of the numerous twists and turns. Predictability is an important part of the pleasurable familiarity of the Chow vehicle.

Although *Kung Fu Hustle* itself is an exception, in virtually all the major Chow vehicles including *Shaolin Soccer* (Stephen Chow 2001), there is an older avuncular-guru figure that is inevitably played by Ng Man Tat. The character played by Ng is often crooked and cheats the gullible protagonist. Between them, the Chow and Ng characters are deployed to produce a very interesting and arguably 'Asian' parody of the martial arts film in which the *object of parody is reclaimed by the end of the film*. Shaolin kung fu eventually does come handy in meeting modern day challenges (such as, for example, winning a cooking contest or a football match).

The process of parody and reclamation of the object is in evidence in Indian films of the period corresponding with Stephen Chow's career. I have argued elsewhere that this approach found in older film forms can be found in the Telugu film *Hello Brother* (Srinivas 2008). The point however is not the parallel between *Hustle* and *CC2C* at this level. What *Hustle* achieved was the reclamation of the martial arts film (particularly the kung fu comedy) from a global B circuit, which in spite of its phenomenal international popularity was, after all, marked by its relatively low economic worth.

How has it been possible for Chow, who has more or less remained confined to the Chinese-speaking audiences of Hong Kong cinema until recently, to move into a larger market now? The answer to this question also helps us understand what made a project like *CC2C* possible. Promotion by the *Hustle*'s Hollywood producer Columbia Pictures is not really the



Image 7: Allusions to the 1980s Hong Kong martial arts film: Sidhu's training sessions

answer because it begs the question of why such companies did not promote him earlier. One point of entry into Chow's movies is the frequent references to Hollywood cinema and to those parts of Hong Kong film history that have a circulation well beyond the Chinese communities across the world. For example, you do not need to be a resident of Hong Kong or Cantonese speaking to catch a reference to Bruce Lee. There are a number of contingencies that might overdetermine the success of both *Shaolin Soccer* and *Kung Fu Hustle*.

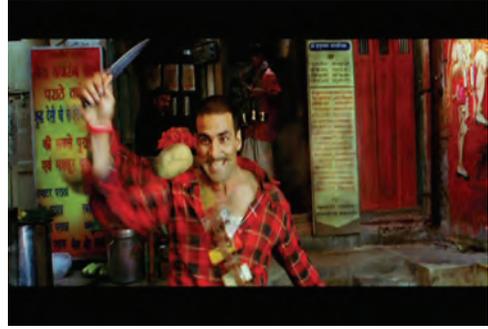
But one interesting factor that has worked in their favour is the falling into place of a new frame of intelligibility. In part, this is a direct consequence of the incorporation of certain elements of Hong Kong film into mainstream Hollywood productions. There is also a set of referents that are now available, which have the effect of familiarising *Kung Fu Hustle*.

It is into this intertextual field space that *CC2C* inserts itself in order to make a tongue-in-cheek gesture towards Asianness of a particularly *cinematic* kind, cinematic in the sense that the primary cultural resource from which this Asianness is woven is popular films themselves. Let me examine the film to illustrate the point.

CC2C, like kung fu comedies from Jackie Chan's early career (for example, *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow*, Yuen Woo-Ping 1978) is centred on the progress of the hero from a worthless, gullible cook to a martial arts expert. The film's representational breakthrough is that it overlays this genre, which was invented in Hong Kong, with a narrative that is immediately recognised as 'Indian'. The film's story begins in the past, with the death of the warrior Liu Sheng who dies protecting the Great Wall from invaders. It then cuts to a remote province in modern day China where antique smuggler Hojo (Gordon Liu) oppresses the people by forcing them to excavate treasures—quite literally mining the past and selling it away to foreigners. The poor people of the province consult a Buddhist monk who tells them that that Liu Sheng has been reborn and will liberate them from their oppressor. Framed thus as the story of a Chinese community on the lookout for their reincarnated hero, the film introduces Sidhu (Akshay Kumar), a superstitious cook in Delhi's crowded commercial area Chandni Chowk. Although the voiceover narrator does not say so, this is quite obviously the hero who is going to save the oppressed Chinese community. Like in the 1980s kung fu comedy, however, he is far from the hero he will eventually grow up to be. His sole expertise lies in performing menial tasks like cutting vegetables, kneading dough, etc.

The casting of Akshay Kumar, one of the leading stars of Hindi cinema, in the role of cook-turned-martial-arts-expert is quite clever in that the star is trained in martial arts and has spent a part of his youth working in a restaurant.¹⁹ Sidhu's mentor and father figure, Dada (Mithun

¹⁹ One of the international reviews of the film pointed out that Akshay Kumar was a former cook and a waiter and



Images 8 & 9: The hero at work in his two incarnations: Liu Sheng defending the Great Wall and Sidhu trying to chop a potato

Chakraborty, a star of low-budget action films in the 1980s and early 1990s) attempts unsuccessfully to reform him. The Chinese connection within Sidhu's story is first introduced through the character of Chopstick (Ranvir Shorey), a con-man who claims to be a master of Feng-Shastra—a fusion of the Chinese Feng Shui and Indian Vaastu Shastra—and half Chinese, too. Chopstick, like the Ng Man Tat characters in Stephen Chow's films, lies to the gullible protagonist that Sidhu was a mosquito in his previous life and peddles him amulets to change his luck. Just as his mentor and employer Dada (Mithun Chakraborty) is giving him a thrashing, he is discovered by the two Chinese men who have set out to find Liu Sheng's reincarnation. Chopstick deliberately mistranslates the mission ahead for Sidhu—which is to kill Hojo—and lies to Sidhu that he has finally become lucky. Both Sidhu and Chopstick set out for China. While he is attempting to get his visa, Sidhu encounters Sakhi (Deepika Padukone), who works for a telemarketing channel selling cheap hi-tech Chinese products. He falls in love with her after an initial misunderstanding. It turns out that Sakhi makes frequent business trips to China in the hope that she will meet her twin separated at birth. Sure enough, the twin is very much alive but has been kidnapped by the villain and grows up as Meow Meow (Deepika Padukone), a deadly assassin and key member of his gang. Their father Chiang (Roger Yuan), a former police inspector who confronted Hojo in his younger days, is thought to be dead. However, he has merely lost his memory due to shock and is living the life of a vagrant.

After many misadventures, Sidhu meets Chiang who regains his memory and is reunited with Sakhi. He becomes Sidhu's *sifu*, who is a familiar figure in kung fu comedies. Sidhu undergoes a strict regime of training and gains expertise in martial arts, thereby growing into this role as the saviour of the community. In the film's climax, he confronts and kills Hojo.

The film inserts the Chandni Chowk-based protagonist into the kung fu comedy, and in the process becomes the very first instance of an Indian remake of the genre. Also notable is the integration of recognizably Indian and Hong Kong character types, such as, for example, Dada literally meaning 'big brother' and the sifu, and the kung fu master, respectively. Likewise, there

also grew up in the Chandni Chowk area of Delhi. See <http://www.villagevoice.com/2009-01-14/film/bollywood-goes-east-mdash-far-east-mdash-for-chandni-chowk-to-china/>.

are other shared similarities such as plot devices (separated twins routine) and settings (the sifu's home or training ground).

The *representational breakthrough* achieved by the film is to draw on Hong Kong (and to a lesser extent, Hollywood and mainland Chinese) cinema to tell a story that involves both Indian and Chinese characters. More importantly, the film gestures towards an aesthetic-affective zone that is shared by both Indian and Chinese film. Let me add a rider to my claim: the film's representation of China is primarily mediated by Hong Kong cinema, not PRC cinema, although there are borrowings from twenty-first-century mainland productions by Zhang Yimou in the epic scale of representing the landscape of China.



Image 10: Sidhu dances with the Imperial Guards amidst mustard fields

There is almost nothing we see in and of China in the film that is not a reference to an earlier film. A striking example of the way the film refers to images from earlier films is the song 'From Chandni Chowk to China', dreamt by Sidhu on his flight to China. The song begins with a morphed image of the Forbidden City whose vast grounds have become mustard fields. From the late 1990s, images of mustard fields have been among the most familiar stereotypes of the western Indian state of Punjab in Hindi cinema. Furthermore, the film makes a direct reference to Zhang Yimou's *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006), where the empty grounds of the palace are filled with soldiers to digitally create a spectacle of imperial power. Ada Tseng (2009) points out that the film uses Yimou's set.

This mediation of China by popular cinema is notable because the commonality that the film identifies between India and China is not at the level of cultural essentialist traits of these 'ancient civilisations'. The mutual discovery of the Indian and Chinese characters in the film that their stories are interlinked is analogous to the spectator's discovery that two filmmaking conventions (Indian and Hong Kong) are now being juxtaposed. Once they are juxtaposed, the spectator will then realise that like the Indian and Chinese stories of the film, there are parallels. Indeed, it becomes evident that there is only one story, whether we begin with Liu Sheng, as the film itself does, or with Sidhu.

The film's story progresses along a series of acts of recognition, and some of these are in fact major acts of *misrecognition*, for example, the two Chinese men's discovery that Sidhu is indeed Liu Sheng. This particular sequence is both hilarious and fascinating. Dada, upon discovering that Sidhu has once again got himself into trouble due to his superstitions, gives him a thorough beating. Dada's kicks send Sidhu flying into the sky and, eventually, he lands at the feet of the two Chinese gentlemen who have been delegated by the villagers to find Liu Sheng's reincarnation. The camera focuses on the sketch of the long-haired warrior Liu Sheng that the Chinese men are using to discover Sidhu, and then on the protagonist's face with its extremely short hair, topknot,



Images 11, 12 & 13: Misrecognition: Picture of the hero Liu Sheng and Sidhu the reincarnate

and prominent black eye from Dada's punches. There is of course no likeness at all!

While the discovery/recognition of Chiang and Sakhi is quite straightforward, Meow Meow mistakenly believes that Chiang has killed her father and injures him after an attack. Right at the end of the film, we discover that Chopstick is not half Chinese but part African! And so on.

The film suggests that the common ground for Indian and Chinese cultures is not to be found at the level of parallels between the value systems of their ancient cultures. Like the recognition of Sidhu as a reincarnation of Liu Sheng, this would be a mistake. The common ground is the history of the Hong Kong film industry's representation of Chinese traditions on the one hand and Indian cinema's history of consumption of and borrowings from Hong Kong cinema on the other.

Popular Pan-Asianism

The film itself does not make any explicit gestures beyond China to the rest of Asia. At best, the film makes an oblique reference to the 1950s Third Worldist slogan of the 'Indo-Chinese Brotherhood', which was seriously discredited after the 1962 border war with China. Nevertheless, the film opens up a much larger discursive terrain that is of immense significance at the present time. This terrain I tentatively term *popular pan-Asianism*, using 'popular' not as an index of the prevalence of the notion among the common people but as the domain of cultural production and consumption that is the source of a new way of relating to Asia. I am also aware of the association between Japanese notions of pan-Asianism and the imperialist project. My location in a context that has not been shaped to any notable extent by the Japanese imperialist project allows me to attempt to re-deploy the term pan-Asianism in a discussion of inter-Asian cultural flows in the present time and their politics. India and China are for a number of reasons the best starting point for an exploration of post-national, globalised inter-Asian alliances and solidarities.

In the film, it is not state-defined national interests that are seen to be the foundation of the complex and intimate relationships between the people of the two countries in question. On the contrary, it is the leakage of commodities that facilitate the formation of new alliances and discovery of affinities. In *CC2C*, intertextual references to cinema on the one hand and cheaply manufactured Chinese goods on the other serve as relays between the two countries. Hong Kong cinema as a constant referent and Chinese goods as the facilitator of story-level movement of the character Sakhi between India and China are both essentially *consumed* in India. From the level of consumption, the film suggests, emerges an *interpretative framework* and indeed, the intelligence

that integrates Hong Kong and Indian filmmaking conventions and thereby facilitates identification of common ground between the two countries.

The thoroughness with which the film combines elements of Indian and Hong Kong film—the latter referring to China—suggests that in the larger scheme of things, what really matters is the common ground that can be claimed on behalf all three contexts and speaks to the world at large. This, I suggest, is the emerging terrain of Asia that is no longer dependent on identifying timeless inherited ('Asian') values. Possibilities offered by contemporary times—of globalisation and commerce in cultural commodities—allow affinities to be built.

What then does the film propose be shared by India and China? The short answer to the question, which is nevertheless easily recognised by students of cinema, is melodrama. 'Asian melodrama' has received some critical attention (for example, by the contributors to Wimal Dissanayake 1993), but a number of critical issues remain underexamined. The work of Ashish Rajadhyaksha (2005) suggests that melodrama remains the template against which narrative cinema works out its critical questions, whether they be related to history and modernity or nationalism, in India as well as other contexts, including Taiwan. Rajadhyaksha goes on to make an even greater claim about the significance melodrama by arguing that it is not merely a genre but *a mode of production* of narrative cinema (2009, 41). Melodramatic structures, he goes on to state, are necessary to recoup the *affective spillovers* of narrative cinema (42).

The film reiterates the efficacy of melodrama as an entry point into comparative studies of Asian cinema. The film alternates between comic and emotional excesses. The suffering of the village community at Hojo's hands and the tragedy of Sakhi, Meow Meow, and Chiang are never the object of ridicule.

During the film's climax, Sidhu confronts Hojo in the presence of the village community. The sequence is structured around an emotionally charged moment when Sidhu is brought down by the villain. He recovers after Dada's spirit advises him to look within himself for the moves that will defeat Hojo. Like in the typical 1980s kung fu comedy, it is the most mundane acts of manual labour—vegetable-chopping and dough-kneading motions—that prove to be the basis of the moves that help overpower the villain. The film therefore ends with an invocation of the imported genre that it adopts within the melodramatic structuring that is shared by both Indian and Hong Kong film.

Kung fu, as it is represented by Hong Kong cinema, has a considerable history as a resource. In martial arts films, it is seen as a *cultural* resource that is the only means available for the hero to either defeat the immensely powerful forces of evil or, in the works of Wong Jing and Stephen Chow, to succeed in life. Culture, then, is the means of addressing economic and political inequalities and injustices. Whether it is gambling or soccer, kung fu works. By rendering the martial arts film into an ensemble film of the Indian kind (with such set pieces as song and dance routines, fights, comic sequences, etc. that do not contribute to the progress of the story), the film extends the value question beyond its familiar framing in the Indian context. How does a cultural resource—whether this is martial arts or the film itself—become an economic resource?

We can now see that both Indian and Hong Kong film confront a similar problem: whether it

is the typical Hindi film or the martial arts film, the size of the customer base and the geographical spread of its constituency notwithstanding, its cultural visibility is disproportionately high in comparison to its economic worth. It is therefore not surprising that Stephen Chow's work should be an important referent for this film because he too is engaged in an attempt to extend Hong Kong films beyond the global B circuit.

In the Indian context, the attempt at value addition has been termed by the film theorist Ashish Rajadhyaksha as the 'Bollywoodisation' of Hindi cinema (2003). Bollywoodisation is the process by which film is integrated into a much larger culture industry that includes fashion, food, tourism, etc. and is disseminated in non-celluloid formats on satellite television and the internet (Rajadhyaksha 2003). Arguably, it is as a part of this process of value creation that Hindi cinema encountered and engaged with a prior instance of this very attempt in the form of Stephen Chow's recent work.

In conclusion, I offer one final point about popular pan-Asianism. The failed attempt to position *CC2C* in the global market, and that too as a crossover film that could tap into the circuits of martial arts cinema worldwide, is crucially dependent on cultural stereotyping and the exoticisation of China. Nowhere is this clearer than the song shot in Zhang Yimou's *Forbidden City* set. The film's pan-Asianism, it is therefore possible to suggest, is centred on stereotypical representations of the Orient. Nevertheless, the '*affective spillovers*' (Rajadhyaksha's phrase) of the melodramatic narrative make the stereotype the starting point for exploring cross-cultural affinities. Under these circumstances, the task of cultural analyses cannot be limited to the identification of the Orientalist stereotypes generated by films and the mass media. It is perhaps more useful to turn our attention to how the stereotype becomes a resource for affinity building in the domain of the popular where we are what we consume.

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