

# Hong Kong Action Films' Aesthetics of Violence: Its Social Environment and Decline in the 21st Century

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## ABSTRACT

Hong Kong films with Cantonese as the main language have long been a significant part of Hong Kong's popular culture. The main themes of action movies with Kung fu films, gangster gunfights, and police-and-bandit films have become a major representative. As an important embodiment of violent aesthetics, a literary form in the history of films, shooting, fighting, chasing, and other scenes that can be seen in most actions films bring a multi-sensory feast to the audience. As time passed, this artistically presenting cruel and bloody scenes has changed in Hong Kong action films. Taking police and bandit films as an example, compared with the last century, the presentation of violent aesthetics in them seems to be gradually weakened. The reasons accounting for this phenomenon are complex and diverse. Political, economical and value factors have played an important role. For example, the signing of the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement in 2003 has brought closer ties between mainland China and Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). With the mainland market's increasing importance, filmmakers in this special administrative region have been facing a new market environment and censorship, and they have to adjust their products to meet a larger market needs. In addition, Hong Kong society's pursuit of the rule of law and harmonious and stable values also played an influential role in declining the direct representation of violence in films. The new action film racing fire, released in China on July 30, 2021, seems to bring some different voices.

**Keywords:** *Hong Kong action films, aesthetics of violence, Cantonese films, Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA)*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Early film culture in HKSAR

Hong Kong's early film culture is inseparable from its special historical background and economic development. When discussing the early development of film culture in this region, Cheung and Tsoi [1] mentioned that the development of this industry was driven by economic growth and cultural awareness. During the 156 years after the end of the First Opium War in 1842, Hong Kong became a British colony in Asia. With its superior geographical location, Hong Kong's economy quickly thrived through transshipment trade [1]. The development of trade has attracted Westerners and many Chinese businessmen returning from mainland China and overseas. Economic and population circulation development has introduced many entertainment cultures from different social backgrounds to the city. Among them, the introduction of free-to-air television has played an important role in shaping Hong

Kong's entertainment culture. It resulted in significant changes in the structure of television programming and the molding of popular culture in Hong Kong, including popular music and films [2]. Hong Kong film is the only genre that is named after a city rather than a country (like French film) or an industrial zone (like Hollywood film) [3]. It is of great significance to this city, one of which is that the resurgence of Cantonese films has further enhanced the self-identity of local people [4]. Among the numerous Hong Kong Cantonese films, Kung fu films, gangster gun-fights, and police-and-bandit films are some of the main film types. The attraction of early action films in this area is its unique Cantonese dialect and the fierce and bloody shooting battle scenes that can be found in most of the works, which embody an important stylistic form in the history of cinema - the aestheticization of violence. The style and presentation of this unique form of cinematic art can often provide a multi-sensory feast for the audience.

### ***1.2. Study of Violence Aesthetics in Hong Kong Action Movies in the 20th Century***

In the existing research on the aesthetic analysis of violence in Hong Kong action movies, many scholars have chosen the works of famous directors such as John Woo and Johnnie To in the last century as representatives to discuss the outstanding manifestation of this spectacular and ornamental art in Cantonese movies of that era. For example, Jiang & Bi [5] argue that John Woo's "violence aesthetics" originated from China's aesthetic tradition of emphasizing "rhythm", inherited the pursuit of action beauty in martial arts films, and also absorbed some of the shooting skills of western police and criminal films. As an aestheticist, John Woo often pursues dynamic beauty and rhythm beauty for the violent scenes in movies. Intense and bloody gun battle scenes are often combined with slow motion and dance-style fighting movements to create a poetic beauty. In Liu Li's research on Johnnie To, another outstanding representative director of violence aesthetics, she said that Johnnie To's violence could be mainly divided into three types: violence with static braking, the objective and calm narration of violence, and gamification of violence [6]. Most studies on the 20th century's artistic treatment of violence have concluded that John Woo and Johnnie To prefer to present violent scenes in front of the audience directly rather than an implicit way.

### ***1.3. Research Interests on the Weakening of Violent Aesthetics of Hong Kong Action Movies in the New Century***

Some scholars noticed that Hong Kong action movies had undergone many changes after entering the 21st century. One of the obvious changes is that the aesthetics of violence in Hong Kong action movies have been weakened. The police and bandit films represented by the Cold War and Storm films no longer use most of the space to highlight the fierce fighting scenes. Instead, the storyline of these types of movies has been increasingly emphasized and valued. For example, unlike the traditional police and bandit films that often only use "police" and "gangsters" as the main opposition, the forms of confrontation and conflict in Hong Kong police and bandit films in the new century with the Cold War series as an example have begun to diversify [7]. Although fierce and exciting fighting scenes still appear in most action movies, they seem to be not as bloody and scary as before. My research interest is to explore the weakening manifestations of violent aesthetics in Hong Kong police and bandit films entering the 21st century and some of the main reasons accounting for this phenomenon.

## **2. PRESENTATION OF VIOLENCE IN THE WORKS OF JOHN WOO AND JOHNNIE TO**

As one of the best practitioners of violent aesthetics in movies, director John Woo pays great attention to rendering spectacular scenes in most of his works. As Wang summarized, John Woo likes to use a lot of slow-motion shooting techniques when expressing different scenes and forms of gunfighting scenes, sometimes with a freeze-frame, to emphasize the rhythm of the action, leading to the creation of an agitated and tragic poetic situation. For example, in the *Better Tomorrow*, when John Woo describes the scene of Mark avenging Song Zihao at a Taiwanese restaurant, he uses slow-motion shooting techniques to capture his actions of shooting the enemy everywhere with a gun, presenting this bloody and violent scene as a highly ornamental performance [8]. Similarly, in the movie *The Killer*, John Woo uses slow-motion shooting techniques to present flexible shooting movements like dance when the protagonist Xiao Zhuang shoots with two guns, making a bloody gun battle a poetic scene [8]. Suppose we consider that John Woo's film contains more scenes where opposing subjects draw guns and shoot at each other. In that case, Johnnie To, another outstanding representative of Hong Kong film violence aesthetics, pays more attention to the calm display of violence [6]. Liu has mentioned that instead of using slow motion to decompose the violent action, Johnnie To prefers to use documentary shooting methods and realistic sound effects to directly present the bloody scene to the audience, such as fingers being chopped off by the underworld leader. Regardless of whether special shooting techniques such as slow-motion are used or not, it is not difficult to find that most of the 19th century Hong Kong police films represented by the works of John Woo and Johnnie To contain direct bloody and violent scenes. This kind of artistically processed violent scene does not make most of the audience unacceptable but can bring them a multi-sensory feast.

## **3. MANIFESTATION AND REASONS FOR THE WEAKENING VIOLENT AESTHETICS**

The direct presentation of violent and bloody scenes in Hong Kong action movies seems to have been weakened to a certain extent after entering the 21st century. The reasons accounting for this phenomenon are complex and diverse, among which changes in politics, markets, and public values play an important role in promoting.

### ***3.1. After signing up for the CEPA***

China's state power supervision mechanism has influenced the creation of Hong Kong police films to a certain extent [9]. The Mainland and Hong Kong Closer

Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) was signed by the Central Government of the People's Republic of China and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government in June 2003. Although the formulation of CEPA is intended to strengthen the economic and trade ties between Hong Kong and mainland China by reducing market barriers and government control measures, it is undeniable that the signing of CEPA has forced Hong Kong filmmakers to face new censorship environments and rules [9]. The production of Hong Kong police and criminal films after CEPA has taken effect may even appear to be restricted by political factors. The improvement and perfection of the political structure in the real society will also cause the manifestation of the police role in film works. Unlike traditional gangster films that emphasize that the police fight alone, the new gangster film, taking the Cold War series as an example, presents a transformation from individual heroism to collectivism. They desire to show the audience the entire legal system of Hong Kong and the cooperation and mutual supervision within the police and between various departments [7].

### ***3.2. To meet the new market***

The promulgation and implementation of the policy have promoted changes in the censorship environment, thereby further affecting film production. The impact of economic changes, especially market changes, on the weakening of violent aesthetics in Hong Kong art cannot be ignored. As mentioned by Wang, Hong Kong pop culture has indeed experienced a golden age in the past few decades and has formed features rich in local culture. However, in recent years, the number of sales and production of major pop culture products has dropped significantly [10]. The popularity of the mainland entertainment industry among the Hong Kong population seems to be higher than that of local productions. The rapid expansion and intensified competition of the entertainment industry in mainland China since the 21st century have gradually led to the outflow of many actors, actresses and directors from this special administrative region. This phenomenon became more obvious after the Central Government and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government signed the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) in 2003. The mainland market has become more and more attractive to this region struggling in fierce market competition, and the status of the mainland market has been increasingly important, which has attracted many Hong Kong films to enter the mainland through the co-production of mainland China and Hong Kong [9, 10]. In addition to the increasingly important role of the mainland market, Hong Kong's local market has also been shaken. In the 21st century, Hong Kong is gradually getting closer to a society under the rule of law [9]. In recent years, the situation that Hong Kong films are more non-violent than before is also

reflected in the growing number of police films that emphasize police officers using wisdom to fight with criminals rather than simply relying on physical combat. There has been a noticeable shift in Hong Kong police and bandit films since *Infernal Affairs* (2002). The number of films that promote personal ability and the spectacle of the police is decreasing, while the number of films with a high-IQ conflict between cops and criminals as a selling element is on the rise. In the all-media environment of the new era, the intense scenes in traditional movies that rely on physical strength to fight alone can no longer satisfy many audiences. In contrast, police officers with both combat effectiveness and wisdom are obviously more popular with the public [9]. Even though the emphasis and increase in the length of the wit scenes make the action movies less violent than before, such police and bandit films are not lacking in fun and appreciation. An important change brought about by the background adjustments caused by political factors is that Hong Kong filmmakers have to face the new market environment and audiences, forcing them to adapt to Hong Kong films [9]. Currently, Hong Kong police films seem to be more willing to create a police image that meets the needs of the public. For example, in shaping the image of the undercover police, the traditional police and bandit films emphasize that the just and honest police can adhere to their beliefs and win honor under the aura of the police even when they blend into the underworld. In contrast, the police and bandit films in the new century emphasize more the struggle and helplessness of the undercover police in the factional struggle as an ordinary person [9]. The story behind the character and its plot has gradually become an increasingly important highlight in the movie.

### ***3.3. Change in public's values***

In addition to being affected by the policies and demands of the market, changes in social values in Hong Kong's local society have also affected the presentation of violent aesthetics in police and bandit films. In the past, Hong Kong films, especially in the 1950s, tended to agree with the "rule of man" rather than the "rule of law", which has something to do with its complicated historical background. After the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, Hong Kong became a British colony and began life under colonial rule for 156 years. Due to long-term colonial rule, Hong Kong lacks a top-down official ideology dominance, coupled with the declining connection with the mainland of China. It is gradually less affected by mainland culture. In this cultural context, Chinese and Western official ideologies are absent [11]. Hong Kong Cantonese films in the 1950s and 1960s constructed this unique and valuable concept of the city, and the "rule of man" has gradually been highly recognized in Hong Kong films. During this period, the police films represented by Jackie Chan's films, such as *Police Story* (1985) and *Who Am I?* (1998), emphasized that the

normal operation of society relied on the sympathetic and sense of justice in Hong Kong police. In recent years, the appearance of a series of films such as *Cold War* has implied that the value identity of Hong Kong police films has gradually shifted from "rule of man" to "the rule of law" [11]. Pursuing the rule of law and the values of a more harmonious and stable society have prompted Hong Kong Police and bandit films to gradually stop using too long space to emphasize violent scenes but their storyline and theme.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

On July 30 this year, a Hong Kong police and bandit film called *Raging Fire* was released in China, which aroused strong social repercussions. Except for its powerful lineup, the audience is refreshed by the exciting and fierce violent fighting scenes that have not been seen in Hong Kong-made police films for a long time. *Raging Fire* is directed by Benny Chan, a former assistant of violence aesthetics representing director Johnnie To. Having directed many classic police and bandit films, such as *New Police Story* and *The White Storm*, Benny Chan, who has some attainments in action films, has not disappointed the audience. With the participation of action superstars, Donnie Yen and Nicholas Tse with excellent acting skills, the fierce battle action in the film is crisp, coherent and exquisite, leading to this film winning a lot of praise. In some film reviews about *Raging Fire*, a Hong Kong film which is gaining momentum, some critics believe that this film has the hope to reproduce the aesthetics of violence in Hong Kong, and may become an example of guiding the later Canadian action film to pay more attention to the emphasis on action scenes.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, compared with the traditional police and bandit films in the last century, the current Hong Kong police movies no longer spend too much space with direct shooting methods to describe bloody and violent scenes. With the changes in policy, market demand and public values, many filmmakers have to adjust the film content and shooting methods to adapt to the changing censorship environment and cater to the tastes of an increasing number of audiences. Although the expression of violent aesthetics in Hong Kong police films entering the 21st century has been weakened compared with the previous century, under the influence of changes in political, market, and social values, Hong Kong police films represented by the *Cold War* series have still developed their own characteristics, for example, from emphasizing individual heroism to collectivism, from emphasizing the use of force to resolve contradictions to emphasizing the use of wisdom to fight. Lacking bloody and cruel direct violence, Cantonese police and bandit films in the new century

have not completely lost their fun and appreciation. Simultaneously, they are establishing their own characteristics, and it may be possible to take on the creation of a new era of characteristics of Hong Kong action films. However, this does not mean that we should simply divide the embodiment of violent aesthetics in Hong Kong police and bandit films into two centuries. The emergence of new films such as *Raging Fire* may bring some different voices and challenges. In most Hong Kong action films of the new century, taking the *Cold War* series as an example, the embodiment of violence has indeed been weakened to some extent. The emergence of *Raging Fire* may rekindle filmmakers' interest in violent art scenes, which is expected to bring the glory of violent aesthetics again.

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