Abstract of thesis entitled

# "Besieged Brotherhood and the Transformation of Triad Traditions: The Hong Kong Triad Genre as an Allegorical Critique of Plutocratic Hypocrisy"

Submitted by

**Jasper van Holsteijn**

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This thesis examines the Hong Kong Triad genre as an allegorical critique of plutocratic hypocrisy in Hong Kong society. The genre subverts three myths of Hong Kong: the myth of the rule of law, the myth of representative democracy, and the myth of upward mobility. Triad films frame their critique of these myths through representations of an egalitarian ideal of brotherhood that is increasingly under threat of being lost.

So far, this loss of traditional Triad ideals has been interpreted primarily in light of a political and economic encroachment of the People's Republic of China on the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong. However, this thesis argues that Triad films offer internal critiques of Hong Kong's plutocratic society and politics instead. Since the protagonists of Hong Kong Triad films are primarily working-class men, the genre gives a voice to these underprivileged members of society who are expendable in ostensible meritocratic Hong Kong.

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The Hong Kong Triad genre explores brotherhood as an alternative form of societal belonging for these men. While some Hong Kong Triad films locate the continued existence of an ideal version of brotherhood either in like-minded individuals banding together, or in a mythical Chinese past, the most critical films represent this ideal as another Hong Kong myth, one that is made impossible through the permeation of plutocratic hypocrisy through all sectors of Hong Kong society.

(An Abstract of 227 words)

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# Besieged Brotherhood and the Transformation of Triad Traditions: The Hong Kong Triad Genre as an Allegorical Critique of Plutocratic Hypocrisy

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

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# Declaration

I declare that this thesis represents my own work, except where due acknowledgement is made, and that it has not been previously included in a thesis, dissertation or report submitted to this University or any other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualification.

Signed: …….

Jasper van Holsteijn



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During the last four months of 2014, several locations in Hong Kong were occupied by anti-government protesters who demanded more democratic representation in the region, in protests which were dubbed the Umbrella Movement. At one of those locations, Nathan Road in Mong Kok, a temporary shrine for the deity Guan Gong was erected by protesters.[1] Among other things, Guan Gong is the patron saint of the Hong Kong police force,[2] and a paragon of fierce loyalty to authority,[3] so his presence at this anti-government protest site seems contradictory at first. However, Guan Gong also represents the ideal of brotherhood, namely, the formation of symbolic familial bonds between men unrelated by blood for a specific cause. Guan Gong is based on the historical figure Guan Yu (deceased in 220), who is one of the main characters in the 14th century historical novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.[4] In this novel, Guan Yu forms a brotherhood bond with the specific purpose of crushing a rebellion that is caused by corruption at the imperial court. The imperial system itself is not questioned, but the problem is the dysfunctional nature of

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[1] Jennifer Ngo, "Religion on the Occupy Central Front Line Puts Faith into Practice," *South China Morning Post* (October 27, 2014).
[2] Allan Y. Jiao, *The Police in Hong Kong: A Contemporary View* (UP of America, 2007) 123.
[3] Barend ter Haar, *Guan Yu: The Religious Afterlife of a Failed Hero* (Oxford UP, 2016) 78.
[4] Henceforth, Guan Yu refers to the historical figure that was fictionalized in literary works such as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and Guan Gong refers to the deified version of this historical and literary figure.



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the ruling elite at that specific time and place. This brotherhood is thus presented as a righteous counterpoint to the selfish political scheming that corrupts the legitimacy of the emperor.[5] The worship of the deified Guan Gong has been promoted both by imperial forces such as the Ming dynasty court (1368-1644),[6] as well as by rebellious groups seeking to rectify the actions of a corrupt imperial state.[7] Guan Gong is thus an ambiguous figure, who is both an image of loyalty to state authority, as well as a figure of rebellion when those authorities are deemed corrupt or inefficient. The construction of a Guan Gong shrine in Mong Kok during the 2014 anti-government protests was therefore an indictment of a government that did not live up to its own democratic pretenses in the eyes of the protesters. Furthermore, the use of Guan Gong as an image of defiance of government hypocrisy was not unique to the 2014 anti-government protests.

The Hong Kong Triad genre consistently uses the equivocal image of Guan Gong, and by extension, the concept of brotherhood, to allegorically indict the failure of the Hong Kong government to live up to its own professed standards of democratic and economic liberty, as well as that of the possibility of social mobility. Hong Kong Triad films allegorically critique plutocratic hypocrisy, a political system in which the pretense of laissez faire capitalism, rule of law, democracy, and upper mobility is undercut by the overrepresentation of Hong Kong's privileged members of society within the government. In these films, plutocratic hypocrisy is allegorized through an

[5] Moss Roberts, "Afterword," *Three Kingdoms* (U of California P, 2004) 943-944.
[6] Ter Haar, *Guan Yu* 182.
[7] Ter Haar, *Guan Yu* 237.



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indictment of dishonesty among the leaders of the criminal organization, who hold their underlings to standards that they do not uphold themselves.

The genre undermines three myths of Hong Kong society: the myth of the rule of law, which professes that the city operates on a legal system in which everyone is treated equitably; the myth of representative democracy, which feigns a political system that serves the interests of the majority of its citizens; and the myth of upward mobility, where the city ostensibly purposes to offer equal opportunities to all of its citizens as long as they are willing to study and work hard. The Hong Kong Triad genre critiques these three myths through representations of an egalitarian ideal of brotherhood that is increasingly under threat of being lost. Yet ironically, many of these films frame their critique of Hong Kong society through the creation of a new myth: that of the existence of an untainted ideal of brotherhood that could serve as an alternative for the lack of equity in Hong Kong. Notwithstanding, close readings of the films illustrate that this alternative is not a viable one, as it is historically already embedded in plutocratic hypocrisy.

The films' critiques are structured around the idea of an endangered or already defunct Mandate of Brotherhood, defined henceforth as an ideal of egalitarian brotherhood based on reciprocity, where the leader is but a *primus inter pares* whose actions benefit the brotherhood as a whole. The main dramatic struggle in the Hong Kong Triad genre is between this idealized version of the Mandate of Brotherhood and the *realpolitik* of gang leaders who use and abuse this ideal to fit their own personal needs. For this reason, the Mandate of Brotherhood is composed of two separate competing incarnations: the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood, and the



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Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood, respectively. These two forms of the Mandate of Brotherhood are instrumental to decipher the critical dimensions of the Hong Kong Triad genre.

Finally, this allegorical critique of Hong Kong's plutocratic hypocrisy gives a voice to the underprivileged members of the region's society by positing that it is the lower-ranking members of criminal organizations who try to adhere to, protect, and/or reinstate the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood. These men are defined as black-collar workers to foreground their status as underprivileged working-class men within the Triads: defined here as ethnically and culturally Chinese criminal organizations. These black-collar workers are the only ones within the Triads who try to uphold the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood in lieu of the upper echelons of the Triads who adhere instead to the Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood in their Machiavellian pursuit of personal enrichment. In these films, black-collar workers become the champions of a righteous cause, namely, the reinstatement of equity within the Triads. The films' allegorical critiques of Hong Kong's plutocratic hypocrisy thus have a specific dimension of working-class heroism.

These allegorical indictments of plutocratic hypocrisy thus also dispute the idea of Hong Kong as a meritocratic society, as these films posit that the black-collar workers at the bottom of the Triad hierarchy are the most righteous and heroic members of society. The Hong Kong Triad genre explicitly posits that one's academic accomplishments and societal standing are not an indication of ethical superiority, and even that these factors are inversely correlated. The Triad genre is unique in comparison to other Hong Kong film genres in this explicit and persistent



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disavowal of the three myths of the rule of law, representative democracy, and upward mobility, as positive defining features of Hong Kong society.[8]

American gangster films are often read as a critique of capitalism, as far back as Robert Warshaw's seminal essay on pre-code gangster films as indictments of the ultimate ruthlessness of an American ethos of capitalist competition:

> At bottom, the gangster is doomed because he is under the obligation to succeed, not because the means he employs are unlawful. In the deeper layers of the modern consciousness, all means are unlawful, every attempt to succeed is an act of aggression, leaving one alone and guilty and defenseless among enemies: one is punished for success. This is our intolerable dilemma: that failure is a kind of death and success is evil and dangerous, is—ultimately—impossible.[9]

That is to say, Warshaw identifies the rise and fall of the gangster persona as an implicit critique of the tragic nature of capitalist American modern life, where success is merely measured in terms of economic success.

In the case of Hong Kong, any critique of plutocratic greed would be suspect because of its particular political situation in which the city's system of purported laissez faire capitalism and democracy is frequently positively juxtaposed with the authoritarian *de jure* communist regime of the PRC. Thus, a direct critique of possible internal problems would be frowned upon in Hong Kong, yet the Triad genre

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[8] Although Hong Kong comedy films often feature working-class protagonists, they do not portray them as struggling against their corrupt superiors with the consistency of the Triad genre.

[9] Robert Warshaw, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," 1948, reprinted in *The Gangster Film Reader*, edited by Alain Silver and James Ursini (Limelight, 2007) 11-16.



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becomes a vehicle for allegorical internal critique in a similar vein with its American counterpart. Because of the criminal nature of its protagonists, the critiques succeed because it does not attack Hong Kong and most of its citizens directly, thus allowing for a certain degree of disavowal that ironically allowed the genre to become the allegorically critical film genre in Hong Kong *par excellence*.

In the following two sections of this chapter, I further elaborate on the three dimensions of plutocratic hypocrisy, the Mandate of Brotherhood, and the black-collar worker, arguing that they are consistent elements of the Hong Kong Triad genre that shape the genre's critical allegorical dimension as indictments of societal injustices in the region.

## PLUTOCRATIC HYPOCRISY

Hong Kong has an international reputation for being a region that does not experience a large amount of corruption. Be that as it may, there is an incongruity between this image of low corruption and the existence of perverse incentives for cronyism in Hong Kong. Since the formation of Hong Kong's Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) in 1974, Hong Kong has repeatedly been described as exemplary in its battle against corruption. For instance, in the "Corruption Perception Index 2014" commissioned and published by Transparency International, Hong Kong received a high 17th ranking, indicating a low level of perceived corruption within Hong Kong society.[10]

[10] Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2014* (Transparency International, 2014).



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That being said, the article "Our Crony-capitalism Index," published by *The Economist* in 2014, reveals a very different picture. This index measures the extent to which a region's billionaires' wealth depends on sectors that are more likely to be monopolized, require government licenses, and/or benefit more from political connections. Examples of such industries are investment banking, real estate and construction, utilities, and telecom services. In this 2014 crony-capitalism index, Hong Kong ranked number one.[11]

This discrepancy between perceived corruption and the existence of perverse incentives for cronyism in Hong Kong is not a recent phenomenon. In the second half of the 1980s the perception of corruption in Hong Kong had notably dropped in comparison to the presiding decade after the Independent Commission Against Corruption's anti-corruption measurements began to be noticed by the Hong Kong public.[12] But as noted by Mark Williams, the same period also saw a consolidation of monopolies by companies in sectors such as real estate, utilities, and telecommunications,[13] which are all featured on the list of sectors on *The Economist*'s crony-capitalism index as more susceptible to crony-capitalist influences. Indeed, in 1996 the Hong Kong consumer council, which aims to protect and enhance Hong Kong consumers' interests, published a report that proposed to implement stricter competition laws to combat monopoly positions, but the government claimed that

[11] "Our Crony-capitalism Index: Planet Plutocrat," *Economist.com*, March 15 2014.
[12] Melanie Manion, *Corruption By Design: Building Clean Government in Mainland China and Hong Kong* (Harvard UP, 2004) 59.
[13] Mark Williams, *Competition Policy and Law in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan* (Cambridge UP, 2005) 239-249.



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there were no major issues that could be improved with a general competition law, which, to this day, does not exist in Hong Kong.[14]

Despite this fact, scholars hail Hong Kong as a haven for economic, and by extension, personal freedom. For economist Milton Friedman, Hong Kong represented an economic utopia that demonstrated the merits of laissez faire free market capitalism, writing in *Free to Choose* that:

> Hong Kong has no tariffs or other restraints on international trade (except for a few "voluntary" restraints imposed by the United States and some other major countries). It has no government direction of economic activity, no minimum wage laws, no fixing of prices. The residents are free to buy from whom they want, to sell to whom they want, to invest however they want, to hire whom they want, to work for whom they want.[15]

Note that Hong Kong did implement minimum wage laws in 2011, but at the time of writing of Friedman's book in 1980, published a few years before *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) launched a Triad film craze in Hong Kong cinema, this was not yet the case. The implication of Friedman's rhetoric is that an individual in Hong Kong is responsible for his own fortune or misfortune, as he is completely free to operate within a market unrestrained by government interference.

Nevertheless, *The Economist*'s crony-capitalism index, as well as Mark Williams' research, indicate that this utopian ideal of a Hong Kong market that

[14] Williams 256-266.
[15] Milton Friedman, *Free to Choose: A Personal Statement* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1980) 34.



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regulates itself without government interference is a myth, as monopolies exist that are left untouched by the government, and, more disturbingly, are maintained in collusion with government officials. While this is not illegal in Hong Kong per its existing, or, more accurately, largely non-existing, general competition laws, it is a far cry from the utopian ideal of a self-regulating market that thrives on government non-interference.

While *The Economist*'s crony-capitalism index only started tracking crony capitalism from 2014 onwards, long after the heroic bloodshed films discussed in this chapter were filmed, problems of corruption and government involvement in that corruption in Hong Kong have long been noted by scholars. For instance, Mark Hampton argues that the formation of the Independent Commission Against Corruption in 1974 was a reaction against widespread corruption, yet was implemented by a colonial government that itself had created many of the conditions that brought about this system of corruption.[16] As Hampton states, Hong Kong at that time was ruled by:

> a London-appointed Governor in consultation with appointed Executive and Legislative Councils, which were heavily dominated by trading and industrial interests; the only elected body was the Urban Council, whose purview was mostly limited to municipal services. It combined an official commitment to laissez-faire government with strategic intervention in cases of perceived market failure, seen most

[16] Mark Hampton, "British Legal Culture and Colonial Governance: The Attack on Corruption in Hong Kong, 1968-1974," *Britain and the World,* vol. 5, no. 2, 2012, 228-229.



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> prominently in a large-scale public housing programme beginning in the early 1950s.[17]

Put differently, at that time Hong Kong's government was already primarily committed to a laissez faire economic strategy, and the Executive and Legislative Councils were dominated by trading and industrial interests.

Moreover, as argued by Hampton, there was an incongruence between what the local population of Hong Kong regarded as corruption, and how the colonial government perceived corruption as Hampton states "what the law regarded as corrupt, ordinary Chinese people in Hong Kong often saw as a normal part of life, relating to Confucian ideals of building personal connections to obtain favour."[18] In a few words, there existed an idea among the local population that small-scale corruption was not problematic for Hong Kong as long as it was done in the context of consolidating connections between individuals. Instances of gift giving where not seen as a form of corruption, because they were embedded in the Chinese cultural practice of *guanxi*, defined by Y. H. Wong and Thomas K. P. Leung as "personal relationship" or "connections."[19] Gift-giving as a way to cement personal connections is a common cultural practice in the Chinese cultural sphere.

Before several widely reported scandals in the late 1960s,[20] corruption was therefore not seen as a substantial problem for either the colonial government, who preferred a laissez faire approach to Hong Kong rule, or the local population, who

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[17] Hampton 227.
[18] Hampton 228.
[19] Y. H. Wong and Thomas K. P. Leung, *Guanxi: Relationship Marketing in a Chinese Context* (Routledge, 2012) 12.
[20] Hampton 227-228.



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saw small-scale corruption as an acceptable way of improving personal relations. Widespread protests against corruption in Hong Kong primarily began as a reaction against police misconduct which involved demanding bribes from Hong Kong's local impoverished hawker population:

> At the centre of public outcry against corruption were the often petty bribes demanded by police of small business owners. Although victims included a wide range of entrepreneurs, illegal hawkers were perhaps the most vulnerable. Too poor to afford the rents paid by proper shopkeepers, and forced to keep their prices low both by fierce competition and by the poverty of most of their customers, hawkers sold their products from unlicensed stalls that were neither recognised nor genuinely forbidden, but were tolerated in exchange for 'tea money' paid to the police.[21]

That is to say, while gift giving between individuals to strengthen personal relationships was accepted by the Hong Kong population, this form of police corruption that victimized impoverished hawkers was not. Several reports on corruption in the Hong Kong police force, televised both in the United Kingdom as well as in Hong Kong, changed the public perception in both regions.[22]

In part, the corruption cases were an embarrassment for the Hong Kong colonial administration, who started an anti-corruption campaign shortly thereafter, which culminated in the creation of the Independent Commission Against Corruption

[21] Hampton 228.
[22] Hampton 230-231.



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in 1974.[23] This commission is independent from the Hong Kong Police Force, and as such is capable of combating corruption within this police force. As Hampton argues, the creation of the Independent Commission Against Corruption should be regarded as both a reaction against political turmoil in Hong Kong during the late 1960s, as well as an effort to bring the British administration of Hong Kong in line with perceptions of "British values of fair play, honest government, and rule of law."[24]

Yet, there are cases of legalized corruption that cannot be addressed by the Independent Commission Against Corruption, and addressing them would even be regarded as undesirable by the Hong Kong government. The concept of legalized corruption was first popularized by sociologist Amitai Etzioni to describe certain forms of corruption in the United States of America in the form of "deals, struck between a member of Congress and a representative of a private interest."[25] Etzioni argues that these deals are not strictly illegal, as there is no explicit *quid pro quo*. Nevertheless, these deals are specific because "the member knows quite clearly what general position the lobbyist seeks to advance," as made clear by the specific interest groups these lobbyists work for.[26] That is to say, Etzioni uses the term legalized corruption to denote specific cases in which agents of private interests influence public interests in legal ways, following the letter but not the spirit of the law. In this chapter, I broaden this specific definition of legalized corruption to include other

[23] Hampton 231.
[24] Hampton 239.
[25] Amitai Etzioni, *Capital Corruption: The New Attack on American Democracy* (Transaction Publishers, 1995) 57.
[26] Etzioni 57.



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cases in which private interests undermine public interests in legal, yet nevertheless unethical ways.

Despite claims of Hong Kong being a haven for laissez faire capitalism where the government keeps at a distance from private interests as much as possible, the region offers several incentives for such legalized corruption. Leo F. Goodstadt argues that there are several conflicts between public interest and private profit in Hong Kong. Labelling Hong Kong as a "capitalist meritocracy,"[27] Goodstadt argues that after the United Kingdom and the People's Republic of China commenced their negotiations about the future of the sovereignty over Hong Kong, the Hong Kong colonial administration "began a campaign to explain why conventional democratic institutions would be out of place and how instead the community enjoyed political arrangements that were ideally suited to its unique circumstances."[28] In practical terms, this involved the implementation of a political system where members of the Executive Council and Legislative Council were largely selected from interest groups from industrial and commercial sectors.[29] As quoted by Goodstadt, this system was even labeled by then-Attorney General of Hong Kong John Griffiths as "Hong Kong's version of Athenian democracy."[30] Put differently, a selection of the Hong Kong business and professional elite was selected to represent the interests of the Hong Kong general population.

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[27] Leo F. Goodstadt, *Uneasy Partners: The Conflict Between Public Interest and Private Profit in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong UP, 2005) 97.
[28] Goodstadt, *Uneasy Partners* 97.
[29] Goodstadt, *Uneasy Partners* 97-98.
[30] Goodstadt, *Uneasy Partners* 98.



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This co-optation of the Hong Kong business and professional elite is not a recent phenomenon. Goodstadt argues that this particular system is partly a continuation of earlier colonialist administrative practices. After anti-colonial sentiments rose in Hong Kong during the 1920s, the British colonial government chose to co-opt representatives of local Hong Kong elites in their interaction with the general population in order to better suppress anti-British sentiments.[31] In Goodstadt's evaluation, the partial continuation of this system in the formation of the Executive and Legislative Council has not led to a proper representative political system in Hong Kong, since:

> the co-opted representatives of the business and professional classes did not want to share power with the rest of the community, and they joined forces with the colonial administration to delay political reforms until the last possible moment. In 1985, the Legislative Council debated British proposals to introduce a token element of democracy now that the United Kingdom's departure in 1997 had been set by the Sino-British Joint Declaration. The Legislative Councilors rallied to preserve as much as possible of the system that had brought them status and influence in the past.[32]

Despite the claim of Hong Kong's governmental system as a form of Athenian democracy with implications of enlightened rule, unsurprisingly an arrangement where specific interest groups have more political influence is not conducive to

[31] Goodstadt, *Uneasy Partners* 101.
[32] Goodstadt, *Uneasy Partners* 109.



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government representation of the full range of Hong Kong's public interests. In the system of legalized corruption in the form of lobbying in the United States described by Etzioni,[33] there is still an intermediate between private interests and government representatives in the form of a lobbyist. In the case of Hong Kong, where currently half of the Legislative Council consists of members representing certain sectors of Hong Kong society, the so-called functional constituencies, this middle man between private and government representatives is removed. Because of this, Etzioni's concept of legalized corruption is very relevant for the political situation in Hong Kong, perhaps even more so than Etzioni's original use of the concept in relation to United States politics.

This is the legalized corruption that the protagonists of the Hong Kong Triad films fight against. These films, without using socialist or Communist rhetoric, provide a social critique of Hong Kong's stratified society, envisioning an alternative societal structure. Although they are violent fantasies of righteous revenge, they do not advocate a violent disposal of Hong Kong's wealthy upper classes. Instead, they are counter-narratives to the Friedmanian utopian idea of Hong Kong as a city where economic opportunity under the protection of an impeccable rule of law provides equal opportunities for all of its citizens. Indeed, Goodstadt argues that the specific form of Hong Kong administration has created situations in which the interests of the public conflict with that of private profit. For instance, Goodstadt argues that this is the case for the Hong Kong real estate market:

[33] Etzioni 57.



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> The Consumer Council had shown in the 1990s how competition in the housing market had been reduced by government land policies which favoured the largest property groups … The fastest way to stabilize the situation was to cut supply to the point at which it matched demand. This equilibrium could be best achieved, according to developers, by halting the supply of public housing. The fear was that if prices were not stabilized, a number of Hong Kong's richest corporations would be in jeopardy, with a matching collapse in share prices … The developers won. They persuaded the government to drastically reduce market competition in 2001, when the supply of public housing was slashed and sales of new land were halted. And officials continued to protect property interests throughout the rest of the decade and refused to introduce legislation to protect home purchasers from misrepresentation and collusion by developers.[34]

Said otherwise, in this particular case the business interests of large Hong Kong corporations, which had a stake in the housing market, were considered and strengthened through government intervention.This is a perfect example of how Etzioni's concept of legalized corruption is applicable to the Hong Kong political situation. In this case, government intervention in the housing market under the influence of private corporations was not illegal, as it followed government procedures on changing land policy. Be that as it may, it did go against the idea that the Hong Kong administration should represent Hong Kong's public interests, in this

[34] Goodstadt, *Uneasy Partners* xiii.



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case affordable public housing, and is therefore a case of legalized corruption as defined in a broadening of Etzioni's concept. In this case, the avowed government strategy of laissez faire capitalism was abandoned in an act of crony capitalism to benefit the real estate sector over Hong Kong citizens.

In conclusion, the idea that Hong Kong's government operates according to ideals of laissez faire capitalism without much involvement in the region's business operations does not hold up to scrutiny, as the political system offers perverse incentives for implementing policies that favor the business elite. As Goodstadt argues, a system of government in which Hong Kong's economic elite is disproportionately represented goes back to early Hong Kong colonial administration strategies of co-opting the wealthy and powerful members of society.[35] This system has persisted even after implementing more legislation on corruption, including the formation of the Independent Committee Against Corruption in 1974. One reason for this is that the corruption embedded in certain government practices are forms of legalized corruption. Since these practices are not illegal and, furthermore, are implemented by the government itself, they are not recognized as corruption as such.

The Handover of sovereignty over Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China in 1997 has not improved this situation, as the high ranking of Hong Kong on *The Economist*'s crony-capitalist index points out. As recently as 2014, then chief executive of Hong Kong Leung Chun-ying proclaimed the undesirability of broader representation of Hong Kong's population in the government, stating that:

[35] Goodstadt, *Uneasy Partners* 101.



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> You have to take care of all the sectors in Hong Kong as much as you can … and if it's entirely a numbers game and numeric representation, then obviously you would be talking to half of the people in Hong Kong who earn less than [US]$ 1,800 a month … Then you would end up with that kind of politics and policies.[36]

This statement exemplifies a feature of Hong Kong government officials laid down in this section, namely, that they do not aim to represent the interests of all Hong Kong citizens, regardless of income and societal status. It also explains the continuing popularity of the Hong Kong Triad films, as many of them allegorically critique this political system that proclaims to follow a laissez faire economic policy and operates according to the rule of law, but is stacked against less privileged members of Hong Kong society. Central to these critiques is the struggle between black-collar workers who try to defend the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood, and their superiors who follow a corrupted Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood.

## THE MANDATE OF BROTHERHOOD AND THE BLACK-COLLAR WORKER

By specifically locating the source of corruption of brotherhood at the top echelon of the criminal organizations, these films invoke the Chinese cultural and sociohistorical concept of the Mandate of Heaven. As defined by Mark Edward Lewis, this concept entails the following:

[36] Keith Bradsher, and Chris Buckley, "Hong Kong Leader Reaffirms Unbending Stance on Elections," *The New York Times*, 20 Oct. 2014.



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> the emperor ruled as the "Son of Heaven" on the basis of a "mandate" received from this highest celestial power. This became the classic form for the claim that imperial authority was bestowed by celestial powers, and that the emperor ruled as the agent of Heaven on Earth.[37]

This concept of the Mandate of Heaven encouraged ruling emperors to make frequent offerings to Heaven in order to consolidate their legitimacy as the primary source of order in the empire.[38] Yet, as Barend Ter Haar notes, this source of legitimacy was inherently unstable, as the Mandate could also be lost and usurped by a rebellious claimant to dynastic rule during times of natural disaster, food scarcity, and societal unrest.[39] In fact, the precursors of the modern Triad societies were keenly aware of the rhetoric of the Mandate of Heaven and used it to legitimize their own organizations.[40] The Mandate of Heaven is thus a two-edged sword, as it has the potential to be a source of both legitimacy and dissent.

Furthermore, the concept of the Mandate of Heaven also has to be split into two competing branches. First, the Ideal Mandate of Heaven, defined as the tautological notion that the emperor is a divinely appointed person who is the most capable and legitimate ruler by virtue of him taking up the position of ruler. Second, the Instrumental Mandate of Heaven, which implies that the idea of the Mandate can be used as a source of legitimacy and power regardless of the merits of a ruler in the arena of *realpolitik*. Ultimately, the idea of the Mandate of Heaven is intertwined

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[37] Mark Edward Lewis, *The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han* (The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2007) 62.
[38] Lewis, *The Early Chinese Empires* 188.
[39] Ter Haar, *Ritual and Mythology of the Chinese Triads* 308-309.
[40] Ter Haar, *Ritual and Mythology of the Chinese Triads* 354.



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with that of political power, and the question of who has legitimate authority over a region or organization.

The Mandate of Heaven is given a parallel position within Triad society via the Mandate of Brotherhood. The cultural significance of the concept of the Mandate of Heaven is still at work in modern Hong Kong Triad films. These films invoke the idea that the Triads' leaders are no longer the legitimate source of Triad order since they no longer adhere to the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood. Because these Triad leaders use and abuse the concept of brotherhood and adhere to the Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood, the higher-ranking members of the criminal organizations featured in these films are no longer the legitimate sources of an order based on brotherhood within the Triad. On the contrary, they merely use the organizations for their personal monetary benefits and only cynically invoke the ideas of brotherhood in order to control the black-collar workers of the organization. The gangster protagonists of these films are often found among these lower-ranking members, who seek to restore the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood that is perceived to have been lost.

The struggle between these two strata of Triad hierarchy who adhere to radically different versions of the Mandate of Brotherhood is key to the Hong Kong Triad films' allegorically critique of plutocratic hypocrisy within the region. The Triad leaders in Hong Kong Triad films cynically betray the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood for their own benefit, to mirror the Hong Kong government's breaking of the ideological rules of capitalism and democracy by merely utilizing these concepts for the advancement of the already wealthy strata of society. Ultimately, these films pose the question of who has legitimate political authority, both in the



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fictional Triad world as well as allegorically in Hong Kong society. This question takes place within the very specific historical context of Hong Kong, in which several models for political legitimacy must be considered: Confucian rule by virtue, Legalist rule by law, and British rule of law. The Hong Kong Triad film ultimately rejects all three of these models and instead points to an idealized possibility of rule by reciprocity.

The first possible model for political legitimacy in Hong Kong is that of the Confucian rule by virtue. Jiang Qing argues that governmental authority in Confucianism is derived from the idea that the ruler is an exceptionally virtuous person. Within the hierarchical order of society, his place at the top of this order automatically implies that he is expected to be of supreme virtue in order to rule well.[41] While this Confucian model has been one of the ideological underpinnings of imperial Chinese authority, in the case of Hong Kong this model is not adequate in and of itself to legitimize power, as the region is not fully sovereign: it is not recognized as independent nation-states, and thus its rulers cannot be the highest political sovereign. Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China and is thus not allowed to independently conduct international diplomacy or have its own military. Since the rulers of both Hong Kong are not fully sovereign, they cannot function as the ultimate source of societal order in the Confucian governmental model.

[41] Qing Jiang, *A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China's Ancient Past Can Shape Its Political Future* (Princeton UP, 2012) 81.



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The second possible model for political legitimacy in Hong Kong is that of the Legalist rule of law. The idea of rule by law is associated with the Legalist philosophy of imperial China, whose ideas formed the basis of the written law code from the Qin dynasty (221 – 206 BC) onwards.[42] Legalist thinkers rejected outright the Confucian rule of virtue as a hopelessly naïve notion. For instance, Han Fei (280 – 233 BC) is pessimistic about the possibility of improving human nature. As Deborah Sommer notes:

> Han Fei rejected the Confucian sensitivity to ritual and to nuanced social mores on the basis that such personalised sensibilities were too subjective and inconsistent to be applied to the practical problems of political life. He instead advocated impersonal, nonsubjective, standardised systems of rewards and punishments. Humans were motivated, he believed, not by the desire for moral rectitude but by the desire for recognition and material rewards; they were constrained by the fear of punishment.[43]

Laws then, for Han Fei, were essential in ordering society because its subjects were not capable of becoming Confucian sages motivated by an inner moral compass, but needed to be restrained in their selfish desires. Furthermore, Han Fei does not presuppose that the ruler of a society must be a just person for society to function properly, as Confucian thinkers argue. Soon-ja Yang asserts that Han Fei even

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[42] Zhengyuan Fu, *Autocratic Tradition and Chinese Politics* (Cambridge UP, 1993) 111.
[43] Deborah Sommer, "Confucianism and Legalism," *Routledgecurzon Encyclopedia of Confucianism*, edited by Xinzhong Yao (Routledge, 2003) 127.



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expected the ruler to be unable to live up to the moral standards of the legendary sage kings Yao and Shun, the moral exemplars of Confucianism, and wrote his work specifically for "average rulers."[44] Simply put, Han Fei was a political realist *avant la lettre*, who was not concerned with a prescriptive moral system but wrote about what he considered the most practical methods for successful rule.

Ergo, the imperial Chinese model of rule by law cannot function as a legitimization of power in the case of Hong Kong, because the region's political system is based upon a disavowal of the imperial Chinese model of rule by law because of their historical secession from the Mainland Chinese nation. For Hong Kong, its position as a British Crown colony from 1842 to 1997 led to a specific form of government that was based on British rule of law, instead of the political foundations of imperial China, Republican China, or the People's Republic of China. An appeal to Chinese imperial rule by law or even the Mandate of Heaven at this period in time was not used as a source of legitimacy. The British colonial administration of Hong Kong never positioned themselves as legitimate successors to the Mandate of Heaven, something that earlier non-Han Chinese dynasties such as the Mongol-ruled Yuan (1271-1368) and Manchu-ruled Qing (1644-1911) had successfully accomplished.

On the contrary, the political legitimacy of modern Hong Kong hinges on the British notion of rule of law, as opposed to rule by law. Jesús Fernández-Villaverde argues that the current notion of rule of law is a continuation of ideas first set out in

[44] Soon-ja Yang, "Shen Dao's Theory of *Fa* and His Influence on Han Fei," *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Han* Fei, edited by Paul Rakita Goldin (Springer, 2012) 59.



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the royal English *Magna Carta* in 1215.[45] Central to this legal document is the idea that the English king is not absolved from the laws of the kingdom, which was unique at that point in time, and ended the previous notion of divine monarchy.[46] Fernández-Villaverde compares this notion of the king not being above the law to the Chinese rule by law at the time the *Magna Carta* was written in the following fashion: "In China, there was never anything remotely similar to parliaments, law was not conceptualized as an autonomous area."[47] That is to say, while British law in name moved towards regarding everyone in the same light regardless of social status from the conception of the *Magna Carta* onwards, a similar development never took place in imperial Chinese history. In the case of Hong Kong, which was administered as a Crown Colony of the United Kingdom from 1842 to 1997 and thereafter as a partly independent Special Administrative Region, its governmental and legal system is *de jure* based on the notion of rule by law. Especially in contrast to the one-party rule of the People's Republic of China, the governmental system of Hong Kong thus proclaims to be both democratic and based on the rule of law.

The Hong Kong Triad genre critiques this notion of Hong Kong as a haven of democracy and rule of law vis-à-vis a totalitarian Mainland China. The leaders of the Triad societies in these films only conform to the Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood as a way to legitimize their actions and keep their underlings in check. While ostensibly operating according to the rules of Triad society, ultimately they

[45] Jesús Fernández-Villaverde, "Magna Carta, the Rule of Law, and the Limits of Government," *International Review of Law and Economics,* vol. 46 (2016) 22.
[46] Fernández-Villaverde 27.
[47] Fernández-Villaverde 27.



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break the very rules that they expect their inferiors to adhere to and stay in power through a ruthless system of rule by violence. Thus, these Triad leaders operate according to rule by law, which allegorically represents the plutocratic hypocrisy hidden behind a mask of *de jure* rule of law. Most radically, the films disclose that Hong Kong's surface ideological underpinning of rule of law is as hypocritical as the Triad leaders' lip service to Triad rules, as the regions' laws are written in such ways that they lead to an inequitable society by favoring its wealthiest members. The black-collar workers of the Hong Kong Triad genre reveal this hypocrisy and thus offer allegorical critiques of a society that is ostensibly equitable but is ultimately not able to adhere to these ideals for all its members.

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

The concept of the Mandate of Heaven and its subsequent reinvention in the form of the Mandate of Brotherhood situates the Hong Kong Triad genre within a historical and cultural context rather than a vacuum. In fact, the aforementioned three concepts, namely, plutocratic hypocrisy, the Mandate of Brotherhood, and the black-collar worker, already appear *avant la lettre* in various guises in Chinese imperial philosophy, martial literature, and Triad historiography. As these concepts operate within a symbolic system where there is a difference, and even hostility, between the Ideal and Instrumental interpretations of the Mandate of Brotherhood, it is crucial to first historicize how these concepts came into being, and how they have been variously interpreted and utilized throughout Chinese history.



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Chapter one, therefore, offers a genealogy of brotherhood and reveals a strong Chinese tradition of social critical texts and historical events where underprivileged, martial men revolt against an ostensible meritocratic and equitable social hierarchy. Furthermore, as the central dramatic struggle of the Hong Kong Triad genre is that between the Ideal and Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood, this historical analysis of the concepts is necessary to counter the overly romanticized image of the Triad past that is presented in Hong Kong Triad films. Arguing against the dominant film scholarly consensus that the genre represents a feeling of nostalgia for pre-1997 Hong Kong, I instead posit that from early Imperial Chinese literature and historiography onwards, there has always been a struggle between the Ideal and Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood. The notion that the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood is endangered is therefore not an effect of modern political changes in this constellation.

The corpus of Hong Kong Triad films selected for this thesis is particularly explicit in referencing traditional Chinese history and culture, which places it in this subversive tradition of martial Chinese literature and historiography. Be that as it may, while the Hong Kong Triad genre consistently critiques the region's inequity in the form of plutocratic hypocrisy, the particular societal problems that are addressed in the genre are more specific to each film and/or director. Namely, John Woo's films mainly critique the myth of the rule of law, Johnnie To's *Election* (2005) and *Election 2* (2006) primarily undermine the myth of representative democracy, while Lawrence Ah Mon's *Besieged City* (2008) especially rebukes the myth of upward mobility. That being said, these three forms of critique constitute a broader indictment of plutocratic hypocrisy in Hong Kong and are often intertwined.



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Additionally, these three groups of films are located primarily in the Hong Kong regions of Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories, respectively, revealing a shift from center to periphery indicating an insidious spread of plutocratic hypocrisy to all districts of Hong Kong.

Chapter two centers on John Woo's heroic bloodshed films' critique of the Hong Kong myth of rule of law. These films offer a possibility of righteous revenge by way of forming brotherhoods through reciprocal appreciation of protagonists who are on opposite sides of the law. Righteous revenge in John Woo's films is the central concept that informs their specific version of a critique of Hong Kong's plutocratic hypocrisy. Namely, by presenting the possibility of police officers and criminals bonding together to achieve justice in opposition to their inept and corrupt superiors, they proclaim that the Hong Kong law codes are not the legitimate ultimate authority on questions of crime and punishment. Their return to a classical Chinese notion of righteous revenge might not be a direct call for vigilantism, but the films do posit that Hong Kong's rule of law is compromised by economic inequality.

Chapter three focuses on Johnnie To's films *Election* (2005) and *Election 2* (2006) and their rejection of the Hong Kong myth of representative democracy. They offer an even more radical critique of Hong Kong's plutocratic hypocrisy in comparison to John Woo's films. While Woo's films still offer the possibility of redemption by reconfiguring capitalist stratification in light of a pre-imperial notion of revenge, this redemption is impossible to achieve in To's *Election* and *Election* 2, since they portray a Hong Kong society that has been thoroughly hollowed out by the corrupting influence of plutocratic greed. While they demythologize the heroic nature



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of violence in Woo's films and instead represent the inhuman side of the Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood, they remythologize the Triads by locating the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood in the Triads' distant past. In doing this, they paradoxically strengthen an idea of a shared so-called Greater Chinese tradition, even though at the surface level, they offer a critique of the increased influence of Mainland China on Hong Kong's politics. By reading the allegorical elements of the films against the grain, they instead pose the more subversive question whether or not a growing political influence of the People's Republic of China on Hong Kong would be of significance in light of the existing influence of plutocratic greed on the region's politics.

Chapter four centers on Lawrence Ah Mon's *Besieged City* (2008) and its repudiation on the Hong Kong myth of upper mobility. The film is not merely an exploitation film that sensationalizes poverty, crime, drug use, and prostitution in Tin Shui Wai, one of Hong Kong's poorest neighborhoods and located in the New Territories near the Chinese border. In the film, the urban planning mistakes that were made while building this neighborhood have a direct negative influence on its residents. *Besieged City*, which focuses on a group of teenage criminals, represents a genuine critique of the precarious situation of underprivileged Hong Kong youth. In the avowed meritocratic Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong, where academic achievements and climbing the career ladder are seen as paramount, *Besieged City* questions both the idea that Hong Kong's underprivileged teenagers have equal educational opportunities, and the idea that joining a youth gang to gain a sense of status and belonging is a viable alternative for them. Thus, like Johnnie To's



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*Election* and *Election 2*, the film is a demythologization of the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood but goes even further in its disavowal of this Ideal by offering no possibility of redemption in a mythic Chinese cultural past.



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# Chapter 1

## Loving Your Brethren or Loving Wealth:

## A Genealogy of Brotherhood

The main theme of the Hong Kong Triad films included in this study is an allegorical critique of the three Hong Kong myths of the rule of law, representative democracy, and upward mobility by way of a discrepancy between the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood and the Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood. Film scholars so far neglect to examine the history of the Triads, and of brotherhood, and accordingly are unable to look critically at Hong Kong Triad films' diegetic Triad historiography and ideology. Because of this, they misread the erosion of the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood as represented in these films as an effect of political encroachment by the People's Republic of China.

For instance, in the case of the heroic bloodshed films by John Woo discussed in chapter two of this study, numerous film scholars read these as allegorical representations of social anxieties in relation to the impending 1997 transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China. Nevertheless, a close reading of these films reveals that these anxieties are brought about by the hypocritical nature of the three Hong Kong myths of the rule of law, representative democracy, and upward mobility, instead of concerns about increased political influence by the PRC. This erroneous emphasis on political as opposed to self-critical reasons for the Hong Kong Triad film protagonist's nostalgia for the disappearing Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood is directly linked to a film



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scholarly blind spot in regard to the origins of the Triads. Film scholars writing on Hong Kong Triad films fail to look critically at the Triads' own historiography so far, which holds that the origin of the Triads lies in anti-Qing dynasty (1644-1911) rebellious groups, who sought to restore the preceding Han-Chinese Ming dynasty (1368-1644) in opposition to the occupying Manchu authorities.

Even so, this historiographic narrative is not congruent with the historic reality of the origins of the Triads. As Dian Murray convincingly argues, this is a mythical fabrication of Triad historiography to increase the social legitimacy of a variety of mutual-aid organizations that in many cases were involved in criminal activities from their early stages onwards.[48] In spite of that, film scholars referring to the origins of the Triads only mention the alleged political reason why the Triads were originally formed. For instance, writing about representations of the Triads in Hollywood cinema, Kenneth Chan states that "the triads began in the seventeenth century in China as patriotic secret societies whose aims were to oppose the reigning Qing government in order to restore China to Ming rule,"[49] Ingham mentions that "the triads started out in the eighteenth century as patriotic political societies dedicated to the overthrow of the Manchu Qing Dynasty"[50] in his book on *PTU*, and Marchetti writes that the origin of the Triads lies in "the burning of the Southern Shaolin temple during the Qing Dynasty (under Manchu Emperors) and the scattering

[48] Dian Murray, *The Origins of the Tiandihui: The Chinese Triads in Legend and History*, in collaboration with Baoqi Qin (Stanford UP, 1994) 38-87.
[49] Kenneth Chan, *Remade in Hollywood: The Global Chinese Presence in Transnational Cinemas* (Hong Kong UP, 2009) 107-108.
[50] Michael Ingham, *Johnnie To Kei-Fung's* PTU (Hong Kong UP, 2009) 62.



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of loyalists who formed secret societies in order to attempt to restore Ming (ethnic Han) rule"[51] in her book on the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy.

Although this scholarly consensus in film studies about the origins of the Triads is in tune with earlier scholarship on the history of these organizations, recent discoveries in the Qing Dynasty imperial archives, such as legal documents regarding Triad members on trial, problematize the idea that they were formed as revolutionary groups. Dian Murray gives a comprehensive overview of the history of the Triads using sources from these archives, proving that the Triads were originally formed as mutual aid organizations in 18th century Fujian,[52] as opposed to patriotic Ming loyalist ones. References to an alleged revolutionary origin of the Triads only begin to appear in the 19th century, and even during this period the Triads were never a centrally organized secret society whose sole aim was to overthrow the Qing Dynasty.[53]

Ergo, the alleged revolutionary origin of the Triads was an invention that only appeared decennia after they were formed. Hobsbawm and Ranger argue that many traditions which "appear to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented."[54] Hobsbawm and Ranger sought to rethink the notion of traditions as deeply embedded in nations' cultural history by postulating that many of these traditions are recent, yet postulate an alleged link to the past. These invented

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[51] Gina Marchetti, *Andrew Lau and Alan Mak's* Infernal Affairs: *The Trilogy* (Hong Kong UP, 2007) 53.
[52] Murray 5-37.
[53] Murray 38-87.
[54] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press 2012) 1.



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traditions are then used in order to explain, interpret, and/or influence the modern present. In the words of Hobsbawm and Ranger:

> However, insofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of 'invented' traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious. In short, they are a response to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition. It is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some part of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that makes the 'invention of tradition' so interesting for historians of the past two centuries.[55]

In short, Hobsbawm and Ranger argue that traditions are not invented in a vacuum, but serve a specific purpose at the time they are invented, by postulating a "continuity" and thus "attempt to structure at least some part of social life."[56] Although Hobsbawm and Ranger primarily discuss the invention of traditions in the context of Europe and colonial Africa, this concept of invented traditions is also highly relevant to the invention of a Triad origin myth that claimed to be patriotic and revolutionary from the very start.

One reason for the persistence of the Triad myth is the fact that historical research on the Triads has been strongly influenced by specific political contexts. Murray argues that earlier scholarship (Western as well as Chinese historiography)

[55] Hobsbawm and Ranger 2.
[56] Hobsbawm and Ranger 2.



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that didn't incorporate sources from the Qing imperial archives often had a political stake in presenting the Triads as anti-Qing organizations. For instance, they describe how Jean Chesneaux's works on secret societies in China presented the Triads as proto-Marxist revolutionaries,[57] and how several Republican Chinese scholars claimed a direct line between the so-called patriotic origins of the Triads and the revolution of 1911 that managed to overthrow the Qing Dynasty.[58]

Film scholarship on Triad movies has not yet taken into account these new insights on Triad historiography. Because no film scholar writing on Hong Kong Triad films has mentioned this mythical dimension of the Triads' revolutionary origins and their actual economic motivation, it is unsurprising that many incarnations of the Hong Kong Triad genre have been read so far in terms of anxiety over the influence of the PRC government on Hong Kong. Although this is not explicitly stated by film scholars who mention the origins of the Triads without questioning their mythologized historiography, the implicit analogy here is as follows: just as the mythologized Triads rebelled against outside invaders in the form of the Manchus during the Qing dynasty, the modern day Triad protagonists in the Hong Kong Triad genre are threatened by another outsider, this time in the form of political encroachment from the People's Republic of China.

Therefore, a critical enquiry into the origins of the Triads and the ideal of brotherhood is not merely a matter of countering a received historically inaccurate notion, but is also vital for understanding that the Hong Kong Triad genre is primarily

[57] Murray 89-115.
[58] Murray 116-150.



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concerned with critiquing plutocratic hypocrisy in the form of the three Hong Kong myths of the rule of law, representative democracy, and upward mobility, instead of being allegories for anxieties over an increased political influence of the People's Republic of China. While this second idea is present at the surface level of various Hong Kong Triad films such as Johnnie To's *Election 2* (2006), their main concern is critiquing Hong Kong's plutocratic hypocrisy.

To counter the lack of critical inquiry into the nature of brotherhood, this chapter examines the concept of brotherhood through readings of Confucian philosophy, classical Chinese martial literature, and Triad historiography. As the concept of brotherhood can be traced back to pre-imperial China (pre-221 BC) and appears in a vast variety of sources, a comprehensive history of this concept in its myriad guises is outside the scope of this dissertation. Instead, I break down brotherhood into four themes that return, either implicitly or explicitly, repeatedly in its conceptualization:

1. Brotherhood is formed with a specific goal in mind, often patriotic in nature. Bonds of brotherhood are created in lieu of a functioning social order. In contrast, Triad members in historical reality, as well as their Hong Kong Triad film incarnations often only pay lip service to this goal, as it can be corrupted by the desire for monetary gains.
2. Indeed, brotherhood presents itself as being opposed to monetary, or any type of wordly, gains, but this is often only an ideal or appearance, as the historical reality as well as fictional depictions of Triad members tell otherwise.



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3. Brotherhood appears egalitarian but has a strict hierarchy.
4. Brotherhood is strictly homosocial, to the point of explicit misogyny.

These themes are not always present and/or do not take the same form in different sources, but instead offer an ideal type of brotherhood as it is conceptualized throughout Chinese history. An ideal type is defined by Max Weber as follows:

> An ideal type is formed by the one-sided *accentuation* of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent *concrete individual* phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified *analytical* construct (*Gedankenbild*).[59]

In other words, these four themes are not always present in representations of brotherhood, fictional or otherwise, but function as a generalized conceptualization of brotherhood. Furthermore, these themes are seldom separable, as they overlap in many regards. For example, the specific goal of brotherhood is often depicted as being jeopardized by the intrusion of women. In the following chapters on Hong Kong Triad cinema, these themes serve as lenses for analyzing the genre in its Hong Kong conceptions.

Another reason for giving a more comprehensive analysis of the concept of brotherhood is that the films discussed in this thesis in many cases posit the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood as a viable alternative for Hong Kong's plutocratic

[59] Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, translated and edited by Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (The Free Press, 1949) 90.



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hypocrisy in the form of the three myths of rule of law, representative democracy, and upward mobility. Yet, as they indeed offer a very idealized version of brotherhood, they ironically help to create a new myth: the idea that brotherhood once had noble intentions but has been eroded by Hong Kong's modern plutocracy. As the analyses of the four components of brotherhood in this chapter indicate, however, there has always existed a tension between the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood and the Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood. An awareness of this inherent tension in the concept of brotherhood thus serves to counter an over-idealized image of historical brotherhood.

The following subsections of this chapters trace the history of each of the four themes of brotherhood and give various examples from Hong Kong Triad films to reveal that these components are still prevalent in different forms in these films. Note that these are not comprehensive analyses of these films, but are used as examples of how the four components of brotherhood are transformed in the Hong Kong Triad genre. The following chapters offer comprehensive analyses of specific films, while the examples in this chapter serve primarily to illustrate that reinventions of the four components of brotherhood are widespread in the Hong Kong Triad genre.

## THE GOALS OF BROTHERHOOD

The first theme of brotherhood is that it is formed with a specific goal in mind, often patriotic in nature. This focus on a common goal immediately opens up the possibility of a tension between the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood and the Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood, as the common goal of a brotherhood can be



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subverted by the individual members' interests. A problem of not defining brotherhood well enough in film scholarship is that the concept can be misinterpreted through a Western lens, as merely an intense form of ritualized friendship which only emphasizes honor. Brotherhood is not a selfless kind of camaraderie, an end in itself without a specific purpose. At various points in Chinese cultural history, bonds between men unrelated by blood were formed with clearly defined goals in mind. These bonds created alternative forms of social order in times of rebellion and social upheaval. Mark Edward Lewis describes the earliest sources that are available on the subject of the blood covenant (*meng* 盟), which has formed the ritual basis of brotherhood from the Spring and Autumn period (770 BC – 476 BC) onwards.[60] In its early incarnations, the ritual involved the collective smearing on the lips and drinking of the blood of a sacrificial victim (animal or human) and a written text that contained the specifics of an agreement between the ritual participants.

Unlike representations in the Triad film genre of similar covenants as primarily underground phenomena, the practitioners of this ritual in early Chinese history were the ruling elite, or "warrior aristocracy."[61] Lewis argues that this reliance on blood covenants by the warrior aristocracy followed the disintegration of the feudalism of the Western Zhou dynasty (1046 BC - 771 BC), which relied on kinship bonds which were reinforced by mutual ancestral worship.[62] The blood covenant formed an important ritual component of power in the vacuum that was left by the

[60] Mark Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (State U of New York P, 1990) 43.
[61] Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* 15.
[62] Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* 43.



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gradual disappearance of the old, kin-based elites as "the sacrifices of covenants gradually replaced those of the ancestral cult as the primary mode of constituting a political order, and this order thus began to detach itself from kin structures."[63] That is to say, the blood covenant as performed during the Spring and Autumn period served the need of creating a new elite social order after the hereditary feudal system was abandoned.

This creation of an alternative social order in the face of societal chaos has remained an important function of the blood covenant ritual. Although the modern Triad practitioners of the ritual are not members of the elite by any means, this social cohesive function of the ritual still remains relevant to this day. For instance, in Hong Kong, where new Triad members are recruited from among underprivileged young men, the membership of the Triad promises to give them a form of social unity in a city where a lack of formal education and a professional career often excludes them from other forms of societal belonging. That being said, one of the arguments of the following chapters is that this alternative social unity in the form of joining a Triad does not, ultimately, offer a viable alternative to Hong Kong's plutocratic hypocrisy.

From its earliest incarnations onwards, the bonds that are formed through the blood covenant as described in historical sources are not simply a strong version of friendship, instead formalizing bonds between men within an unstable society with specific goals in mind. The same pattern holds true for fictional depictions of the blood covenant in Chinese traditional culture. The most well-known example of the blood covenant in Chinese literature is the 'oath of the peach garden' as described in

[63] Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* 44.



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the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*sanguo yanyi* 三國演義), written in the 14th century by Luo Guanzhong (羅貫中). In this section of the book, three main characters of the narrative, Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei, pledge their loyalty to each other in the ritualized form of the blood covenant.

At a superficial level, the central theme of this oath is the loyalty and friendship between the three characters, who are based on historical figures from the Three Kingdoms (220-280) period. Even so, a close reading of the oath reveals that the reason for undertaking the ritual is not unlike that of practitioners of the blood covenant ritual of the Eastern Zhou dynasty. Namely, the three characters become blood brothers with a specific goal in mind, as an alternative form of social cooperation in a society that is undergoing social upheaval. In the following section of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, two of the future blood-brothers meet for the first time:

> 玄德曰：「我本漢室宗親，姓劉，名備。今聞黃巾倡亂，有志欲破賊安民；恨力不能，故長歎耳。」飛曰：「吾頗有資財，當招募鄉勇，與公同舉大事，如何？」
>
> Xuande [a courtesy name for Liu Bei] said: "I am a member of the royal family, and my name is Liu Bei. Today I heard of the Yellow Turbans rebellion and I wish to destroy those traitors and restore peace to the people. I resent that it is not in my power to do so, this was the reason for my long sigh." [Zhang] Fei replied: "I possess great wealth



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which can be used to recruit the countryside's braves. I can help you with this great cause. What do you think?"[64] (my trans.)

That is to say, there is a specific rationale for the two men to work together: the suppression of the Yellow Turban rebellion which actually took place in history near the end of the Han-dynasty in 184 AD.

In times of social upheaval, a ritually formalized bond of brotherhood is required to create an alternative form of social order. The notion of this bond as having a specific, in this case patriotic, goal is further established in the novel's description of the blood covenant ritual:

> 飛曰：「吾莊後有一桃園，花開正盛；明日當於園中祭告天地，我三人結為兄弟，協力同心，然後可圖大事。」玄德、雲長、齊聲應曰：「如此甚好。」次日，於桃園中，備下烏牛白馬祭禮等項，三人焚香再拜而說誓曰：「念劉備、關羽、張飛，雖然異姓，既結為兄弟， 則同心協力，救困扶危，上報國家，下安黎庶。不求同年同月同日生，只 願同年同月同日死。皇天后土，實鑒此心，背義忘恩，天人共戮！」
>
> [Zhang] Fei said: "At the back of my house is a peach orchard and the flowers are fully blooming. Tomorrow we will make a sacrifice there and proclaim before Heaven and Earth that we three men will unite as brothers, combine our powers, and align our hearts. Then we will be able to outline our great undertaking. Xuande [Liu Bei] and Yunchang

[64] Guanzhong Luo, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (The Chinese Text Project).



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> [Guan Yu] replied in unison: "That would be perfect!" The next day in the peach garden, they prepared a black ox and a white horse to sacrifice. The three men burned incense, bowed their heads and took an oath, swearing: "We are Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei. Although our family names are different, we unite as brothers. We shall join forces and aid each other in times of need. We shall serve our country and bring peace to the common people. We do not seek to be born on the same date; we merely wish to die on the same date. Heaven and Earth, bear witness to the contents of our hearts. May Heaven and men execute us if we ever turn our back on righteousness.[65] (my trans.)

Thus, the oath of brotherhood taken by the three men in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is explicitly described as having a clearly defined goal, namely, suppressing the Yellow Turban uprising by joining forces. All of the men have specific qualities: Liu Bei is the descendant of a former Han emperor and thus possesses a claim to the throne, Zhang Fei is wealthy, and Guan Yu possesses formidable martial prowess. These men, therefore, represent three specific classes within society: that of the aristocracy, the merchants, and the soldiers. Note that the scholars are absent here, symbolic of the men's attempt to find a temporary alternative social structure to that of the Confucian meritocracy that was the norm in Imperial China from the Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) until the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911, but in the novel is not adequate in these times of social unrest.

[65] Luo.



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The fact that these three blood brothers bypass the bureaucracy of Confucian literati for their bond of brotherhood, as well as their mention of bringing peace to the common people, made their stories especially celebrated in Chinese folk culture. It offered an idealized version of a social order that was not based on a meritocratic Confucian bureaucratic system that illiterate people, and by extension, the underprivileged, did not have access to. Again, the blood covenant ritual is used here to create an alternative form of social order in the face of societal chaos that cannot be solved by the intellectual methods of the Confucian literati, although, as argued below, the implicit social hierarchy between the three men is still implicitly based on Confucian discourse. The specific words of the oath of the peach garden in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* still hold a strong power in the contemporary popular imagination: for instance, a part of the oath is paraphrased, for instance, in Johnnie To's *Election* (2005).

The blood covenant oath indeed was, and to a certain extent still is, an important ritual component of the non-kinship bonds established among Triad members. As Barend Ter Haar argues, this blood covenant among Triads is not solely inspired by vernacular traditions such as stories about the Three Kingdoms period, including the abovementioned novel, and harks back to earlier ritual traditions, as also described by Lewis in *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*. Ter Haar states that:

> Rituals of sworn agreements to be supervised by a supernatural agency, such as the blood covenant, have always been extremely common in traditional Chinese society. Such rituals are essentially empty ritual forms, which can be used for a variety of purposes. A



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> brotherhood on the other hand is not a ritual, but a social group that can be concluded in various ways. The two came together in Triad ritual by conscious choice, not because they were intrinsically linked.[66]

While there is enough historical evidence to support that the blood covenant was already a common occurrence in pre-imperial Chinese history, long before stories about the Three Kingdoms period began circulating, Ter Haar's assertion that blood covenants were "essentially empty ritual forms"[67] is not entirely accurate. As stories about the Three Kingdoms period began circulating shortly after this period[68] and have remained popular in Chinese folk culture ever since, the connotations of forming a blood covenant with an explicit goal in the face of societal upheaval must have been known by early Triad members, and thus an implicit connection between the blood covenant ritual and the formation of brotherhood already existed.

As stated above, a patriotic origin of the Triads became a persistent foundation myth for some of these organizations that provided them with more legitimacy within a society in which they were forbidden by law, and this myth has been wrongly regarded as historical fact by a significant number of scholars writing on Hong Kong Triad films. But for all that, there is a more compelling reason for the formation of the Triads at that particular time (early eighteenth-century Qing-dynasty China) and place (Southeast China). David Ownby offers a convincing theory for the

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[66] Ter Haar, *Ritual and Mythology of the Chinese Triads* 151.
[67] Ter Haar, *Ritual and Mythology of the Chinese Triads* 151.
[68] David Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China: The Formation of a Tradition* (Stanford UP, 1996) 46.



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sudden appearance and rapid expansion of the Triads at that historical junction. Ownby argues that the structure of the Triads was formed by combining two societal practices: mutual aid organizations and the blood covenant.[69] According to Ownby, mutual aid organizations "shared a common financial mechanism: the pooling of funds and their investment in an interest-earning property or enterprise,"[70] and existed for a variety of purposes, such as the pooling of agricultural labor and/or resources to improve production,[71] or as a way to fund family rituals such as wedding and funerals.[72] Namely, these were, again, societies formed with very specific purposes in mind.

While this practice of mutual aid organizations might be as old as the Tang dynasty (618 – 907 AD), the widespread combination of this practice with the blood covenant, in the form of Triad organizations, did not happen until the Qing-dynasty. Ownby hypothesizes that the formation of the Triads was predicated on the particular societal upheavals in early modern Southeast China:

> The Southeast coast in the eighteenth century was a mobile, competitive, fragmented, violent society. Some members of society were fortunate enough to benefit from the protection of lineages or well-organized communities, but others were not. For those who found themselves at the margins of community life, the *hui* [of which the

[69] David Ownby, "Chinese *Hui* and the Early Modern Social Order: Evidence from Eighteenth-Century Southeast Asia," *"Secret Societies" Reconsidered: Perspectives on the Social History of Modern South China and Southeast Asia*, edited by David Ownby and Mary Somers Heidhues (M. E. Sharpe, 1993) 41-45.
[70] Ownby, "Chinese *Hui* and the Early Modern Social Order" 41.
[71] Ownby, "Chinese *Hui* and the Early Modern Social Order" 39-40.
[72] Ownby, "Chinese *Hui* and the Early Modern Social Order" 40.



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> Triads or *tiandihui* were one] offered a framework within which to organize for the pursuit of mutual benefit, be it protective or predatory, economic or defensive.[73]

These societal upheavals have been linked to several changes in early-Qing China, such as the intensified involvement in the world economy, which led to population growth and changing labor laws after the transition to this dynasty, which enabled more people to migrate within China.[74] Given the precarious situation of marginal men, many of them migrants, in early modern Southeast China, it is possible that this led to the formation of the Triads.[75] Although definitive proof of this relation has yet to be given, this explanation is more convincing at the moment than the persistent idea that the Triads were formed as anti-Qing revolutionary groups, for which negative proof *does* exist.

Again, brotherhood, in the context of the formation of the Triads had a specific goal, yet this goal was financial, not patriotic in this case. The blood covenant ritual was used by the Triads to form bonds of brotherhood in times of social upheaval, like the Eastern Zhou ruling elite and the fictionalized three main characters from the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* had done before them. Yet, their bonds were unique in that they were combined with the social practice of mutual aid. That is to say, the creation of the Triads notably shifted the goal of brotherhood from a patriotic one to one based on financial security. This had so far not been a common

[73] Ownby, "Chinese *Hui* and the Early Modern Social Order" 60-61.
[74] Ownby, "Chinese *Hui* and the Early Modern Social Order" 59.
[75] Ownby, "Chinese *Hui* and the Early Modern Social Order" 61.



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practice in imperial Chinese history yet became suddenly necessary in the precarious society of early modern Southeast China.

While the idea of the Triads as anti-Qing revolutionary groups is a myth, the power of this myth further indicates that the idea of brotherhood has been utilized according to various needs throughout Chinese history. In his memoirs, Sun Yat-Sen, one of the main architects of the overthrow of the Qing-dynasty in 1911, describes how he convinced Chinese emigrants living in the United States of the worthiness of his cause:

> The Chinese people were in constant conflict with the Imperial officials, and never abandoned their opposition to the Tsing dynasty. The watchwords: "Down with Tsing!" and "Long live Ming!" were near and dear to many Chinese. But the same cannot be said of our overseas emigrants, as they, being abroad in a free country, had no necessity to organise societies of a fighting character. Therefore in America the "Hung-Men" societies naturally lost their political colour, and became benefit clubs. Many members of the "Hung-Men" societies did not rightly understand the meaning and exact aims which their society pursued. When I approached them, during my stay in America, and asked them, why did they want to overthrow the Tsing dynasty and restore the Ming dynasty, very many were not able to give me any positive reply. Later, when our comrades had carried on a protracted revolutionary propaganda in America for several years,



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> members of the "Hung-Men" societies at last realised they were old nationalist revolutionaries.[76]

Ironically, Sun Yat-sen could use the mythologized history of the Triads in order to rally them for his cause of overthrowing the Qing-dynasty, even though, in reality, the societies in the United States where more in line with actual Triad practices in the form of mutual aid.

The political dimension of brotherhood that Sun Yat-sen was able to mobilize here goes back all the way to the use of the blood covenant in pre-imperial China. As this idea of brotherhood as revolutionary could survive the entirety of Chinese imperial history, it indeed also survives in the Hong Kong Triad films. Given the many instances in which brotherhood is established with a political or economic goal in mind, it is significant that brotherhood in these films is often, at the surface level, presented as having such patriotic goals. Indeed, film scholars who do not consider the genealogy of brotherhood are indeed unable to look beyond this surface level to reveal the specific financial objectives behind various instances of brotherhood in the Triad genre. An ambiguous attitude towards personal gain, financial gain in particular, is a recurring theme of the concept of brotherhood, one that is at the center of the Hong Kong Triad genre. Unlike the film scholars who argue that films within this genre react against a political encroachment by an outside force in the form of the PRC, it is the corrupting influence of plutocratic hypocrisy on the ideal of brotherhood that the gangster protagonists within these films struggle against.

[76] Yat-sen Sun, *Memoirs of a Chinese Revolutionary* (AMS Press, 1927) 190-192.



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A reworking of this theme of brotherhood as having a specific goal is present in numerous Hong Kong Triad films. In Johnnie To's *The Mission* (1999), five men are hired by a Triad boss after he survives an assassination attempt. Although they come from different backgrounds and have various levels of experience, these men form a brotherhood, partly because of the shared boredom they experience during their mission of protecting the Triad boss. In a twist related to the fourth theme of brotherhood, the fact that it is strictly homosocial, their brotherhood is put under pressure when its youngest member Shin has an affair with the Triad boss' wife. While this wife gets assassinated for her infidelity, Shin ultimately escapes by way of a staged shootout with a gun blank. Here, the woman is presented as a threat to the cohesion of homosocial brotherhood, who ultimately needs to be disposed of in order for this brotherhood to survive. This is in line with traditional notions of the rejection and sometimes downright hostility towards women in the service of brotherhood, which are further explored in my discussion of the fourth theme in this chapter.

Another example of cinematic brotherhood being formed in service of a specific goal is *A Brighter Summer Day* (1991) by Taiwanese director Edward Yang. While this film is not a Triad genre film, it still portrays the necessity for forming brotherhoods and sheds a more cynical light on the often idealized version of brotherhood portrayed in proper Hong Kong Triad films. In this film, these brotherhoods take the form of two competing youth gangs, the Little Park Boys who are children of government officials, and the 217s, who are mainly comprised of the sons of army officers. *A Brighter Summer Day* represents these brotherhoods as a necessary means of survival in Taiwan's chaotic 1960s. In the film, one of these



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youth gangs is comprised of the offspring of Mainland Chinese immigrants who fled the Mainland after the civil war victory of the Chinese Communist Party and speak Mandarin, and the other one consists of the offspring of Taiwan's earlier inhabitants, who speak Taiwanese dialects. Again, the formation of brotherhoods is predicated on the idea of defending one's own country and ethnic group against a foreign invader. Still, Yang does not choose sides in this conflict, offering a more subtle version of this familiar trope. The film offers a more introspective, critical vision on brotherhood, where the two brotherhoods' violence lacks the redemptive quality that, for instance, is present in the communal acts of revenge enacted by the brotherhoods in John Woo's heroic bloodshed films. In fact, the film is partly based on a murder case, as the literal English translation of the film's Chinese title, *The Murder Incident of the Boy on Guling Street,* refers to. The murder of an innocent girl that happens in the film against this background of competing youth gangs is very far removed from the romanticized version of brotherhood portrayed in numerous Hong Kong Triad films.

A final Chinese-language Triad film in which brotherhood is presented as having a particular goal is *The Last Tycoon* (2012), directed by Wong Jing. The story, which is set in Republican Shanghai, features an explicit blood covenant ritual to formalize the brotherhood between Cheng Daqi and Hong Shouting, two criminals who climb the ladder in the city's underworld to become two of the most powerful gangster bosses. This film features a particular nationalistic and patriotic iteration of the theme of brotherhood having a specific goal after both men get caught up in the Second Sino-Japanese War. Their main antagonist is Mao Zai, who changes from an



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officer in the National Revolutionary Army into a collaborator with the Japanese invaders. While at first the brotherhood between Hong Shouting and Cheng Daqi is formalized after the former's successful attempt to free the latter from prison, their brotherhood is transformed into an alliance to actively resist the Japanese invaders. They ultimately succeed in assassinating the traitor Mao Zai together but are themselves killed in this process as well. The patriotic nature of the two men's brotherhood is not unlike that of, for instance, the brotherhood formed in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* to suppress an internal enemy in the form of the Yellow Turban uprising, or an external enemy in the case of the Triad's origin myths of resisting the Manchu Qing dynasty in service to the Han-Chinese Ming dynasty discussed in this subsection. This film is also a revisionist take on the Republican-era real-life Green Gang boss Du Yuesheng, whose life was an inspiration for the character of Cheng Daqi. Brian Martin chronicles the life of Du Yuesheng, who in actuality had less patriotic, more cynical intentions than portrayed in the film:

> The involvement in organizations associations with the anti-Japanese boycott provided new opportunities for the Green Gang leaders to engage in racketeering, especially extortion. The "patriotic" nature of these associations, moreover, served to legitimize such activities.[77]

This instance of a brotherhood that utilizes a patriotic ideal primarily as a legitimization of illegal activities whose primary aim is monetary gains, is

[77] Brian Martin, *The Shanghai Green Gang: Politics and Organized Crime, 1919-1937* (U of California P, 1996) 154.



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interconnected with the second theme of brotherhood that is discussed in the next subsection, namely, their ambivalent attitude towards monetary gains.

## BROTHERHOOD AND WORLDLY GAINS

The second theme of brotherhood is that it purports not to take monetary gains as its first and foremost goal. Again, the inherent tension between the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood and the Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood embedded in this idea is clear, as individual monetary gains can directly subvert a brotherhood's common goal. The first philosophical exploration of the concept of brotherhood can be found in the Confucian *Analects*, where the author writes about the concept of *yi* (義, righteousness and/or justice), which is one of the characters in the compound word for brotherhood (義氣, which can be literally translated as 'the energy through which righteousness manifests'). By examining the ways the concept of *yi* functions in Confucian philosophy, it is possible to shed further light on the paradoxical nature of money, or any form of earthly gains, in Triad ideology.

Confucianism posits a binary opposition between the lofty ideals of the gentleman and the profit-oriented goals of the petty man. In *The Analects*, attributed to Confucius (551 – 479 BC), the concept of *yi* is not explicitly defined, yet its meaning can be explicated by examining some of the sections where the term is used. The following section explains the position of *yi* within the Confucian moral framework:

> 子曰：「君子義以為質，禮以行之，孫以出之，信以成之。君子哉！」



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> The Master said: "The gentleman considers righteousness (*yi*) as his essence. He practices it by performing rites, communicates it by being humble, and completes it by being sincere. That is a true gentleman!"[78] (my trans.)

In *The Analects* (and later Confucian philosophy), a gentleman is an ideal man who lives according to Confucian moral rules. From this section, it becomes clear that righteousness is the gentleman's central guiding moral principle that takes shape in his actions, demeanor, and speech. It is the ability to discern what is the right thing to do in a particular situation. In *The Analects*, this ideal of *yi* is explicitly juxtaposed against striving for personal gain:

> 子曰：「君子喻於義，小人喻於利。」
>
> The Master said: "The gentleman is aligned with righteousness (*yi*), while the petty man is aligned with profit.[79] (my trans.)

In *The Analects,* the petty man is the direct opposite of the gentleman and denotes someone who does not strive to follow the moral standards set out in this work. Thus, the positive ideal of *yi* in the section above is directly opposed to the striving for material gains (*li* 利, which means any type of personal advantage). According to this logic, a man cannot be righteous when his aim is based on earthly acquisition. This binary opposition between righteousness and material gains gets convoluted in the case of the Triads by the historical circumstances of their creation, because their

[78] Confucius, *The Analects* (The Chinese Text Project, 2006).
[79] Confucius.



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creation was predicated on combining the blood covenant ritual with the financial practices of mutual aid organizations.

The incongruous nature of the role of wealth and gain in Triads and, by extension, in fictional portrayals of Triads in the Hong Kong Triad genre, can be traced to its very origins. David Ownby argues that the Triads were formed in eighteenth-century Southeast China as a continuation of two sociocultural practices: that of mutual aid organizations and that of the blood covenant ritual.[80] Mutual aid organizations have had various functions for its members throughout Chinese history, such as the pooling of funding for weddings and funerals.[81] Of importance here, is that "many of these organizations, whatever their stated purpose, shared a common financial mechanism: the pooling of joint funds and their investment in an interest-earning property of enterprise."[82] That is to say, these organizations operated on the premise of material gains for their members. David Ownby states that in early Qing-dynasty Southeast China, this social practice was combined with that of the aforementioned blood covenant. As many migrants traveled to this area which had a long history of family feuding and violence, forming mutual aid organizations based on fictional brotherhood was a way to protect newcomers without local family ties in these precarious circumstances.[83] The *Tiandihui*, or Heaven and Earth society, which formed the basis of the later Triads, was one of these organizations.

[80] Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China* 39.
[81] Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China* 40.
[82] Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China* 41.
[83] Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China* 60-61.



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Again, the need for bonds of brotherhood was predicated on an unstable society in which individuals sought out an alternative form of social order. Dian Murray argues that "members were responding to a milieu in which the need for protection prevailed."[84] An important element of the *Tiandihui*, and similar organizations is that they often charged initiation fees for joining the brotherhood.[85] It is easy to imagine how this system of paid membership for protection can easily transform into downright extortion and racketeering. Indeed, Murray states that many branches of the *Tiandihui* were formed with money-making prospects in mind through the collection of membership fees.[86] In other words, almost from its very conception did the *Tiandihui* become involved in profit-making through sometimes clandestine means.

This is very different from the historical accounts of the Triads presented in both Hong Kong Triad films and scholarship on the genre. The Triads are not organizations that were formed with noble aims in mind that slowly descended into criminal activities as many film scholars writing on the Hong Kong Triad genre would have it. On the contrary, they were at least to some extent, involved in less noble undertakings from very early onwards. The fact that these early Triad societies branched out to seek new members in other regions let to a broadening of the idea of brotherhood, where one could belong to the same organization yet not know each other personally, as was the case with earlier instances of blood brotherhood. This

[84] Murray 34.
[85] Murray 35.
[86] Murray 35.



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widening thus also let to a need for more organization, and consequently hierarchy within the Triad societies.

This ambiguous nature of monetary gains *vis-à-vis* brotherhood in Chinese traditional philosophy and historiography is a theme that is reworked in numerous Hong Kong Triad films. One case in point is John Woo's film *Bullet in the Head* (1990), which features three childhood friends, Ben, Paul, and Frank, who are also members of the same gang. After Frank kills a rival gang member, the three decide to flee to war-torn Vietnam, in order to make their fortune as smugglers. After a botched smuggling attempt to deliver goods to the Vietnamese gangster boss Leong, Paul finds a container of gold in Leong's office and decides to steal it from him. While escaping by water, their boat breaks down, but Paul is primarily concerned with securing the gold instead of the welfare of his two friends and their companions. After falling into the hands of the Vietcong and contained in a prison camp, the three men eventually escape, but not before their friendship is ultimately destroyed by Paul's betrayal of his former friends in order to regain the gold. In the final scene of the film Paul, who is now a successful businessman, and Ben, who blames Paul for the betrayal of their friendship, meet on a pier where they often met during their childhood friendship. Ben ultimately takes revenge for Paul treachery by killing him, the final end of the brotherhood that once existed between them. *Bullet in the Head* is a very unusual film for John Woo, whose heroic bloodshed films usually feature brotherhoods that are incorruptible by monetary or other worldly gains. While these films do often end in the death of one of the brotherhoods' members, these deaths are nevertheless represented as redemptive acts of sacrifice. The film nonetheless fits in



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John Woo's heroic bloodshed films' critiques of Hong Kong's plutocratic hypocrisy, in this case symbolized by a container of gold that destroys a childhood friendship. This critical dimension of Woo's heroic bloodshed films is discussed in depth in the next chapter.

The pursuit of worldly gains as a potentially disruptive element in maintaining bonds of brotherhood also takes more abstract forms. At the start of Johnnie To's *Drug War* (2012), recreational drug producer Choi is captured by the Mainland Chinese police officer Zhang Lei. As his crimes warrant a death penalty, Choi decides to strike a bargain with police authorities in trying to assist them in bringing down his former business associates and workforce. While Choi repeatedly tries to sabotage this police investigation, he nevertheless does not hesitate to betray his former partners in crime. The persona of the rat is a common trope of Hollywood gangster films, for instance in the forms of Fredo Corleone in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather Part 2 (*1974), Henry Hill in Martin Scorcese's *Goodfellas* (1990), and David Kleinfeld in Brian De Palma's *Carlito's Way* (1993). While these films feature a single act of betrayal by these characters, betrayal in service to personal gains in Hong Kong Triad films is often either portrayed as redeemable by an act of heroism in service to the betrayed party, or represented as a path of no return, where every act of betrayal leads to more incidents of treachery. The first option is discussed in my analysis of *A Better Tomorrow* in the next chapter. In *Drug* War, Choi's betrayals are too widespread to be redeemed. Indeed, in the final scene of *Drug War*, Choi is about to receive a lethal injection after betraying his former associates and trying to subsequently sabotage the police investigation that he was forced to cooperate with in



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exchange for commuting his death sentence. As he is about to be executed for this second betrayal, Choi starts frantically yelling out names of former associates that he allegedly has information on. While Henry Hill in *Goodfellas* is able to live out his life after betraying his former Mafia associates, Choi is doomed as he has betrayed both his fellow criminals as well as the police.

This idea of betrayal in service to personal gains as a detriment to building genuine bonds of brotherhood is further explored in Andrew Lau and Alan Mak's *Infernal Affairs*, which revolves around two moles, Chan and Lau, who infiltrate each other's organizations while secretly working for the police force and a Triad society, respectively. During their undercover operations, they start to doubt their allegiances to either the police force or the Triad organization. Betrayals and deceptions as paths of no return are brought to their extreme conclusion here, as the Chinese title of the film (無間道 or Endless Path) refers to the lowest level of hell in Buddhist cosmology. As the two moles infiltrate deeper into each other's organizations, they begin to question which brotherhood they really belong to: that of the police, or that of the Triad society. Lau and Mak offer a cynical vision of both Hong Kong's police force and its Triad societies, as even their highest-ranking members are secret operatives for the other organization. At the end of *Infernal Affairs*, Lau has infiltrated into the police force so successfully that he is able to fully pass as a respectable policeman after murdering his foil Chan, the policeman who infiltrated the Triad society. This ending does not offer closure for Lau, as he questions the validity of this newfound persona and life. Betrayals in the service of personal gains



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appear to go unpunished in the film, yet these personal gains are ultimately hollow in the film.

## THE HIERARCHY OF BROTHERHOOD

The third theme of brotherhood is that it is an ostensible egalitarian system, in which every brother is on the same level as the others. Yet again, there is a tension between the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood and the Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood, as in many historical and fictional cases all brothers are equal, but some brothers are more equal than others. Most often, there is a strong hierarchy within brotherhoods, be it those formed within the context of the Triads or otherwise. The idea of brotherhood egalitarianism is undermined by close-reading texts that have informed the concept of brotherhood and the ideology of the Triads.

Once more, one reason for this tension between the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood and the Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood can be traced back to Confucian ideals. A famous, seemingly egalitarian saying from *The Analects* goes as follows:

> 司馬牛憂曰：「人皆有兄弟，我獨亡。」子夏曰：「商聞之矣：死生有命，富貴在天。君子敬而無失，與人恭而有禮。四海之內，皆兄弟也。君子何患乎無兄弟也？」
>
> Sima Niu said in grief: "Everyone has brothers, only I have not." Zi Xia [one of Confucius' disciples] replied: "I have become aware of this: Life and death are determined, riches and honor depend on the Heavens. A gentleman should respect this and not neglect this. He



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should be courteous to people and act according to the social customs. Within the Four Seas [the world], all men are brothers. How can a gentleman be worried about not having any brothers?"[87]

This quote is a strong justification for the idea that people unrelated by blood can still be brothers, something that is essential to Triad ideology both in historical sources and fictional depictions. See, for instance, the recurrent theme in the Hong Kong Triad genre, such as John Woo's 1989 film *The Killer*, of men unrelated by blood and even of opposing sides of the law who recognize each other as brothers who are following a similar moral code. Indeed, the first English translation of *The Water Margins* (*shuihuzhuan* 水滸傳*)* by Pearl S. Buck was given the title *All Men Are Brothers,* using the above quotation from *The Analects* to emphasize the theme of brotherhood within this classical Chinese novel. Be that as it may, besides the fact that this quotation talks only about brothers and leaves out sisters, there is one aspect of the quotation that is lost in translation from Classical Chinese to English: the fact that the Chinese word for brothers that is used here (*xiongdi* 兄弟) already contains within itself a hierarchy between older (*xiong* 兄) and younger (*di* 弟) brothers. While the quote appears to be egalitarian in English, by its very wording in Chinese it establishes a hierarchy based on seniority within brotherhood.

Again, the brotherhood bond between Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei from the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* illustrates this asymmetrical power relation within discourses concerning brotherhood. First of all, while the three 'brothers' indicate in their blood covenant ritual that they have the common goal of defeating

[87] Confucius.



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the Yellow Turban uprising, the roles they fulfill within this agreement are not based on equal terms. Liu Bei represents political power and is portrayed as a descendant of the Han-dynasty royal family who becomes emperor of the state of Shu in the novel. Guan Yu represents martial power, in the form of formidable physical strength and military insight. Finally, Zhang Fei represents economic power, as he is a merchant who has the money to recruit an army for the three men's common goal. Emperor Liu Bei, by virtue of him having that title, is granted a higher position within the brotherhood, following Confucian ideology as laid down in *The Analects*:

> 齊景公問政於孔子。孔子對曰：「君君，臣臣，父父，子子。」
>
> Duke Jing of Qi asked about Confucius about governing. Confucius answered: "Let the prince be the prince, the minister the minister, the father the father, and the son the son."[88] (my trans.)

Said otherwise, according to Confucius' prescriptive ideal, the political positions within a society should be clear and followed strictly. The four roles within society are presented from the highest to the lowest rank. Because Liu Bei is the emperor of the Shu state, the brotherhood between the three men is not based on equal terms.

Martial prowess is not as important in this hierarchy in comparison with hereditary political power. The *Romance of the Three Kingdoms'* character Guan Yu, who is often explicitly referred to in Hong Kong Triad films, is most well-known for his physical strength. Indeed, he is introduced in the novel as follows:

> 因本處勢豪，倚勢淩人，被吾殺了；逃難江湖，五六年矣。

[88] Confucius.



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> Where I come from there was a man of great strength who used his power to maltreat people, so I killed him. I had to flee from trouble into the rivers and lakes for five, six years.[89] (my trans.)

In other words, he is a man who uses his martial prowess for the promotion of justice. Having said that, in Confucian ideology that emphasizes learning as the highest pursuit, physical strength is constantly ignored or deemed inferior. Similarly, argued in the section on brotherhood and wealth, Zhang Fei is by his very nature as a rich merchant inferior in the eyes of Confucian ideology. The brotherhood between the three men appears to be based on equality, as they proclaim their wish to live and die together for a common cause. But at the same time, the symbolic powers they represent (political, physical and economic) are not equal in Confucian ideology. Even though it is not explicitly stated, Liu Bei is clearly the older brother to little brothers Guan Yu and Zhang Fei.

This hierarchy is mirrored in the ways the three men are unable to form sexual relationships within the novel. As Kam Louie argues in his analysis of Guan Yu in "sexual and political terms,"[90] Guan Yu and Zhang Fei are not only inferior to Liu Bei in terms of political power, but are furthermore subservient in the realm of sexuality:

> While the yi between the three brothers Liu, Guan and Zhang is . . . exclusive and jealously guarded, the fact that the two younger brothers submit to Liu politically means they also play the submissive role

[89] Luo.
[90] Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (Cambridge UP, 2002) 23.



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> homosexually. While Liu can establish yi bonds (often meaning sleeping together) with other talented men, Guan and Zhang must remain totally faithful to the dominant Liu.[91]

While Liu Bei, as the person who is at the top of the hierarchy, can have sexual relations with both women and men, the other two characters are presented as staying absolutely chaste in the pursued of the brotherhood's common goal. While there is no explicit textual evidence for Louie's claim that Guan Yu and Zhang Fei are sexually subservient to Liu Bei, the extent to which they can form sexual relationships is not equal for all three men. In other words, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei are inferior to Liu Bei in terms of political power, Confucian symbolic power, and sexual power.

The implicit idea that all brothers are equal, but some brothers are more equal than others, is mirrored in the history of the Triads. As Ownby discusses, early Triad societies often charged a membership fee for everyone who wanted to become a member, after which the candidate was initiated into the society.[92] By learning the Triads' esoteric rituals and communication methods, such as secret handshakes and passwords, this member could then move to another area in order to form his own branch of the society and in turn charge a membership fee. Indeed, Ownby argues that this is what caused the rapid expansion of the Triads after its formation.[93] In his discussion of the *Tiandihui*, Ownby quotes the following words from an 18th century Triad member:

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[91] Louie 36-37.
[92] Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China* 160.
[93] Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China* 130.



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> The more people you recruited, the more compensation and gratitude you earned, and consequently a great number of people wanted to enter . . . I got people to enter the *hui* [association] in order to increase the amount of money the *hui* rather than to make friends. When I first met Lin Shuangwen, I thought that he was generous, not stingy, so I led him into the *hui*, thinking that I could make something off of him.[94]

This Triad member was explicitly not in the Triad for the camaraderie. This almost pyramid scheme-like early history of the Triads reveals a cynical exploitation of the ideal of brotherhood. The early brotherhoods were involved in profit-making and the leaders of the Triad branches clearly profited more from forming a brotherhood than new initiates. Indeed, Qing-dynasty laws made a clear distinction between leaders and followers within Triad societies, which indicates that a more explicit hierarchy, compared to the fictionalized relationship between the three blood brothers from the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, become common practice with the branching out of the Triads.

In modern criminal Triads in Hong Kong, a clear hierarchical distinction between higher and lower ranking members has become even more pronounced and codified. As described by Yiu Kong Chu, Triad societies in Hong Kong have a chairman at the top, followed by the treasurer and the incense master, who takes care of the initiation and other rituals. Below them are the Red Poles or area bosses, who command a number of Blue Lanterns, gang leaders of a smaller area. Their followers,

[94] Ownby, "Chinese *Hui* and the Early Modern Social Order" 53.



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in turn, might be the leaders of youth gangs.[95] While Triads might at an ideological level be built upon the idea of equality among brothers, this idea does not stand scrutiny in either the historical sources or modern-day incarnations of the Triads. Of the five Confucian relationships (*wulun* 五倫), the relation between friends is the only one that is not based on a hierarchy, yet Triad ideology and Hong Kong Triad films consistently use the hierarchical relationship of brothers instead to describe the relations between gang members. In other words, although entering a Triad at first seems to offer a way out of the hierarchical Confucian family based on blood-relations, the new symbolic family is often represented in equally hierarchical terms. This hierarchy becomes especially prominent in the position of women within Triad ideology, discussed in the following subsection of this chapter.

The hierarchical nature of brotherhood that is disavowed at the ideological level, but nonetheless shapes factual relationships within Triads is prevalent in various Hong Kong Triad films. One example is *Made in Hong Kong* (1997) by Fruit Chan, which offers a critical view on the myth of brotherhood as an egalitarian system. In this film, small-time youth delinquent Moon strikes up an unlikely friendship with the terminally ill girl Ping, and the mentally challenged boy Sylvester. As argued by Esther Cheung in her monograph on the film, *Fruit Chan's* Made in Hong Kong offers an alternative vision of Hong Kong's troubled youth in reaction to the glamorized version of youth brotherhoods popularized by the *Young and Dangerous* series[96] In *Made in Hong Kong*, the disenfranchised teenager Moon gets

[95] Yiu Kong Chu, *The Triads as Business* (Routledge, 2002) 28.
[96] Esther Cheung, *Fruit Chan's* Made in Hong Kong (Hong Kong UP, 2009) 41.



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involved with a gang leader who recruits him for an assassination. In the first, imagined version of this assassination, Moon stoically shoots his target. Nevertheless, in reality he is unable to go through with this act of violence, throws up and runs away.[97] Cheung interprets this scene, and *Made in Hong Kong* in general, as a filmic act of *détournement* of the parameters of the Hong Kong Triad genre. This term, coined by Guy Debord, refers to a reconfiguration of certain conventions within art forms with the intention of subverting those conventions, as well as received notions within bourgeois society.[98] In her book, Cheung argues that *Made in Hong Kong* subverts patriarchal notions of gangster heroism as portrayed in glamorous films such as the *Young and Dangerous* series[99] and John Woo's *The Killer*.[100] This demythologization of glamorized Triad portrayals also extends to the film's subversion of the idea that brotherhoods are egalitarian. In the film, the younger generation is ruthlessly exploited by criminal organizations who regard them only as pawns in their clandestine schemes. While Ping is a target of extortion, Moon and Sylvester take part in the organizations' criminal activities. Besides the aforementioned assassination mission that the inexperienced Moon is thrown into by a gangster boss who regards him as dispensable labor, and the mentally-challenged Sylvester "has little use but to serve as a scapegoat in the gang."[101] After Sylvester is murdered by gang members who see him as dispensable and Moon learns that Ping has died from her illness, he enacts a final act of revenge by shooting the local gang's

[97] Cheung 67-68.
[98] Cheung 54.
[99] Cheung 56.
[100] Cheung 69.
[101] Cheung 65.



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leader. This final act of revenge is not, as would be the case in one of Joh Woo's heroic bloodshed films, depicted in a heroic way. After this act of desperate revenge, Moon commits suicide, as the last member left of the group of three friends. The film juxtaposes the indifference of the local gang members to the situation of their lowest-ranked underlings with the genuine egalitarian friendship that exists between the three youngsters. Two other films that to some extend subvert the idea of egalitarian brotherhood are Johnnie To's *Election* (2005), and Election 2 (2006). In these films, the younger generation of gangsters is used by the senior members of the Triad in service to their nefarious goals. These films and the ways in which they subvert the idea of Triad brotherhood are further discussed in chapter three.

## THE HOMOSOCIAL NATURE OF BROTHERHOOD

The fourth theme of brotherhood is that it is strictly homosocial in nature, to the point of disavowing women as threats to a brotherhood's stability. In Confucian thinking, the five cardinal hierarchical relationships (*wulun* 五倫) codify how members of a society relate to each other in terms of position. In the third relationship, the husband is given authority over his wife, who has to obey him if she is to be virtuous. While all people under Heaven might be brothers, albeit younger and elder ones, sisters are not even considered by Confucius. This already patriarchal system is intensified in discourses on brotherhood. Song Geng analyses masculinity in the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms* and *The Water Margins* through the lens of male homosocial desire. This concept, coined by queer theory pioneer Eve Sedgwick, is defined by Song Geng as a "measure of male bonding practices and a way of



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emphasizing the structure of men's relations in a patriarchal society."[102] Unlike Sedgwick, who argued that homosocial desire is structured by the competition of men in their heterosexual relations with women, Song Geng argues that in classical Chinese texts', homosocial bonds are often based on the rejection of women.[103]

This rejection of women in service of homosocial bonding is exemplified by several sections of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Water Margins*. After Zhang Fei fails to protect Liu Bei's wife and children from rivals in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the following dialogue takes place:

> 卻說張飛拔劍要自刎，玄德向前抱住，奪劍擲地曰：「古人雲：『兄弟如手足，妻子如衣服。衣服破，尚可縫；手足斷，安可續？』吾三人桃園結義，不求同生，但願同死。今雖失了城池家小，安忍教兄弟中道而亡？
>
> It is told that Zhang Fei pulled out his sword to cut his own throat. Liu Bei came forward to hold him, took his sword and threw it on the ground. He said: "The Ancients said: 'Brothers are like your hands and feet, your wife is like clothing. If your clothes are torn, you can mend them. But if your hands and feet are severed, how can you go on?' I came together with three men in the Peach Garden to form a brotherhood. I do not seek to be born at the same time, I merely seek to die at the same time. Even though I lost my city and family today,

[102] Geng Song, *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese culture.* (Hong Kong UP, 2004) 172-173.
[103] Song 172-173.



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how could I endure losing my brother in the middle of our shared path?[104] (my trans.)

In other words, while women are replaceable, ones brothers can never be replaced. In order to comfort his sworn brother, Liu Bei states that the loss of his family is not irreversible, while Zhang Fei's death would be a disaster. Indeed, as Kam Louie observes, the fact that the villain of the novel, Cao Cao, wills some of his properties to his wife and concubines on his deathbed exemplifies his unheroic nature. As he is surrounded by his sons and grandsons, showing affection towards his wife and concubines in this form is regarded as a negative quality.[105] In this scene of the novel, Cao Cao allows women to come between the bonds he has with men, something that the heroic Liu Bei would never think of. Showing affection for women is thus regarded as unheroic and unmanly.

This masculine ideal of not caring for the welfare of women at the expense of ones (symbolic) male family members also extends to the realm of sexual relationships. As mentioned before, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei remain celibate throughout the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. As they are subordinate to their symbolically elder brother Liu Bei, their loyalty could be compromised if they choose to engage in a relationship with women. Their willingness to forgo relations, sexual or otherwise, with individuals other than Liu Bei is presented as a positive heroic quality. This 'heroic celibacy' is described in another classical Chinese novel that deals with the theme of brotherhood. *The Water Margin*, attributed to Shi Nai'an,

[104] Luo.
[105] Louie 37.



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who in Chinese folklore was either the teacher or a pseudonym of the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms* writer Luo Guanzhong, describes to exploits of 108 outlaws who live in the Liangshan marshes. The leader of the group is described in the following terms:

> 原來宋江是個好漢，只愛使槍棒，於女色上不十分要緊。
>
> Song Jiang was a real hero, who only loved using his spear and club. He was entirely unmoved by feminine charms.[106] (my trans.)

The fact that Song Jiang is a real hero is exemplified by both his love for weapons and his disinterest in women. The Chinese characters that I have translated as 'charms' here (色) signifies any type of earthly beauty, in this case that of a woman.

Once more, Confucianism provides a precedent for regarding interest in female beauty as detrimental to appropriate behavior for men. In the *Analects*, Confucian describes a similar dichotomy between being an ideal man and being interested in beauty:

> 子曰：「已矣乎！吾未見好德如好色者也。」
>
> The Master said: "It is over! I have not seen anyone who loves virtue as much as he loves beauty!"[107] (my trans.)

Being a real man, either the martial type in *The Water Margin* or the scholarly type in the *Analects*, entails avoiding the affections of women. In this masculine ideal, even platonically caring for women does not have a place. While Eve Sedgwick theorized homosocial bonding as structured by men who compete over women, in Chinese

[106] Nai'an Shi, *The Water Margin* (The Chinese Text Project, 2006).
[107] Confucius.



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vernacular literature professing interest in women would be detrimental to forming and maintaining homosocial bonds altogether. In the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Water Margin*, the patriarchal elements of Confucianism are intensified. Not only is a woman supposed to be subordinate to men, but the masculine ideal is to reject the importance of women as much as possible. In Triad historiography, women are absent altogether. There are no records of female Triad members in Imperial China or Triad-like societies that were formed by women.

The homosocial nature of Triads and brotherhood is clearly evident in various Hong Kong Triad films. In Wong Kar-wai's film *As Tears Go By* (1988), gang member Wah has to constantly intervene in problematic situations because of the actions of his younger biological brother Fly, who works for the same gang but is not as successful and ruins his chances of climbing the Triad ladder by various reckless acts. Wah receives a phone call concerning his cousin Ngor, who needs to stay at his place to undergo several medical procedures in the nearby hospital. As his cousin grows closer to him, she discovers that he is a member of a gang. While she is shocked at first, they continue seeing each other and start a romantic relationship. In the film, Wah is presented with the choice of starting a law-abiding life together with Ngor, but this would mean abandoning both his gang and his younger brother Fly, who is bound to get into trouble without the help of his elder brother. After leaving for Lantau island to live with Ngor, Wah learns that Fly is about to embark on a dangerous assassination job, and realizes that he will most likely not survive. Having to choose between the loyalty to his reckless brother and the love for Ngor paired with a regular law-abiding life, Wah chooses the former and returns to find Fly



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botching the assassination attempt, and witnesses his brother being killed by the police. In retaliation, Wah takes his brother's gun and finishes the assassination job, yet is himself shot down as well. In other words, *As Tears Go By* the woman Ngor is a possible hindrance in maintaining bonds of brotherhood between older and younger brother. While Wah's ultimate choice of abandoning Ngor in favor of his brother is presented in the film as a tragic one, the film nevertheless follow remodels traditions concerning the homosocial nature of brotherhood and the rejection of heterosexual relationships as possibly detrimental to maintaining bonds of brotherhood.

In Tang Huang's early Triad film *Tradition* (1955), the main antagonist in the form of a woman from Shanghai has a more malicious role in trying to break traditional bonds of brotherhood. The film features the tribulations of a gang member named Xiang, who inherits the gang's leadership from the man who raised him. This *pater familias* was adamant in running both his family and his gang in accordance with traditional values, and Xiang tries to continue this strategy. Xiang is sabotaged in this conservative project by the late gang boss' widow, as well as her sister San, who recently arrived from Shanghai. San dresses in the modern Shanghainese *qipao* as opposed to the traditional clothing worn by the other female members of the household. She slowly convinces her family to change their traditional ways, despite opposition by Xiang. For instance, she converts the ancestral house into a casino. The only way Xiang can ultimately uphold the traditional values of his predecessor is by violently disposing of San in a final confrontation at the end of the film. In *Tradition*, women are represented as possible obstacles between homosocial male brotherhoods, and even actively try to undermine these bonds. Thus, the film offers a more



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reactionary cinematic version of the trope of woman as a threat to brotherhood. *Tradition* also has a nationalistic dimension, as Xiang tries to smuggle supplies to the anti-Japanese forces during the Second Chinese-Japanese war, despite the disrupting efforts of San, who collaborates with the Japanese invaders and considers the war as merely a pretext to further modernize the household. This combination of misogyny and nationalism is a feature of numerous Hong Kong gangster films.

A film that partly subverts the traditional and filmic conceptualization of brotherhood as strictly homosocial is *Portland Street Blues* (1998), directed by Raymond Yip, which features a bisexual female gangster protagonist in the form of Sister 13. The film, a spin-off of Andre Lau's *Young and Dangerous* series, nevertheless portrays the difficulties of being a female Triad boss, as Sister 13 has to stand her ground amidst the patriarchal Triad system. *Portland Street Blues* also problematically explains Sister 13's bisexuality as an effect of her upbringing by a weak father. While the film offers a rare exception to the rule that women are fully excluded from the homosocial circles of Triad brotherhood, it still portrays Sister 13 as a woman who has to be largely independent because she is not accepted by her male Triad peers.

## CONCLUSION

The four components of brotherhood conceptualized in this chapter keep returning in various guises in discourses on brotherhood. In pre-imperial aristocratic culture, Confucian philosophy, and classical Chinese literature, the goals of brotherhood were originally mainly political, yet became more focused on the



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financial gains as the social practice of the blood covenant ritual fused with that of mutual aid organizations with the creation of the Triad societies. This pursuit of wealth, which is anathema to the idea of righteousness, became a *de facto* feature of the Triads from its very early history onwards, as the revolutionary slogans of these organizations are merely legitimizations of their illegal practices under the law of the Qing dynasty who declared the existence of Triads, no matter their activities, illegal by default. Unlike an idealized version of friendship based on equality, brotherhood in historical reality and fiction still has a hierarchy, either implicit or explicit. Throughout the history of brotherhood, sisters, or women in general for that matter, have usually been ignored or rejected. These discourses do not suddenly lose their power at the end of Imperial China. As argued in the following chapters, these elements are transformed in various guises in the Hong Kong Triad genre, yet the overarching theme of these films is the corruption of the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood and its gradual replacement by the Instrumental Mandate of Heaven as a critique of Hong Kong's plutocratic hypocrisy. That being said, this possibility of corruption of the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood has always been a central element of the concept of brotherhood.



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## Chapter 2

## The Righteous Revenge of the Black Collar Worker:

## John Woo's Heroic Bloodshed Films

John Woo's heroic bloodshed films *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), *A Better Tomorrow 2* (1987), and *The Killer* (1989) critique a system of plutocratic hypocrisy specific to Hong Kong by championing their gangster protagonists as the ultimate source of justice, as opposed to a corrupt legal system. Specifically, they undermine the Hong Kong myth of the rule of law. As all three films feature policemen, official representatives of legal regional authority, who ultimately realize that the gangsters that they are trying to apprehend have a higher moral integrity and authority than the official legal system of which they are a part. The gangster protagonists are portrayed as black collar workers, who manage to evade a corrupt system of economic stratification by creating bonds of brotherhood with likeminded righteous men, regardless of their social status.

With the impending transfer of sovereignty of Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China, any critique of Hong Kong's economic stratification using socialist or communist rhetoric would be suspect. John Woo's heroic bloodshed films bypass this problem by offering an alternative vision of justice in Hong Kong society based on a tradition of brotherhood which predates Communist China, the colonization of Hong Kong by the British Empire, and even the start of the Qin dynasty in 221 BC. Thus, the black-collar workers are not, in an allegorical way, choosing sides in face of the impending 1997 Handover, instead envisioning a radical



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egalitarian ideal of brotherhood that is incorruptible by political motivations. Ultimately, they are able to preserve the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood among a small circle of like-minded men, against all odds in a society where their superiors are operating according to the Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood. Allegorically they thus condemn the Hong Kong myth of the rule of law that is undercut by a reality of plutocratic hypocrisy.

## THE DISCOURSE ON JOHN WOO AND HIS HEROIC BLOODSHED FILMS

Film scholars writing on John Woo's heroic bloodshed films so far do not address this critical dimension of his films, partly by interpreting the films as allegories of a sense of loss brought about by the then-impending Handover, implicitly reading them as nostalgic lamentations for Hong Kong under British rule, thus neutralizing the rebellious dimension of John Woo's brotherhood. This critical dimension of John Woo's heroic bloodshed films takes shape in the form of righteous revenge. In John Woo's heroic bloodshed films, righteous revenge is necessary because there is a discrepancy between justice, that what is right and wrong according to moral laws, and law, that what is right and wrong according to official, state-sanctioned codes. In fact, the protagonists of the genre enact revenge in direct opposition to state-sanctioned laws, as they perceive those laws to be morally corrupt, and not in line with their idea of justice. Righteous revenge is thus a heroic gesture in which the protagonists follow their own moral compass in opposition to the authorities. The central role of righteous revenge in John Woo's heroic bloodshed



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films as a critique of modern Hong Kong's legal and economic corruption, and the fact that this places these films within a tradition of subversive classical Chinese martial literature, has not been identified by numerous film critics and scholars writing on John Woo's heroic bloodshed films.

Violent revenge as an important element of his films is not identified as such by John Woo himself. While he has hinted at a link between his films' protagonists and classical Chinese martial traditions, stating that his films are "influenced by the ancient Chinese qualities of chivalry (meaning self-sacrifice), friendship, loyalty, and honor. The characters will give their lives for their friends,"[108] John Woo downplays the potential violent nature of these chivalric qualities. The tradition that Woo refers to here is that of the Chinese knights-errant, defined by James J. Y. Liu as "men who roamed around the country and used force to right wrongs."[109] Indeed, the heroism of John Woo's heroic bloodshed protagonists takes the form of a violent quest for justice in the form of revenge, a fact not acknowledged by John Woo himself. This blind spot for the violence inherent in the heroism of the knights-errant that John Woo admires is understandable.

First, John Woo has repeatedly mentioned that he does not like violence. For instance, he has stated that "actually I hate violence. I'm a peace-lover … if it cannot stop, we need some kind of hero to stop it . . . the hero sacrifices his life for honor,

[108] Lisa Odham Stokes, and Michael Hoover, *City on Fire: Hong Kong Cinema* (Verso, 1999) 40.
[109] James J. Y. Liu, *The Chinese Knight-Errant* (U of Chicago P, 1967) xii.



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chivalry, and sometimes for sympathy. It's a very Chinese tradition."[110] That the heroes in his heroic bloodshed films have to use violent methods themselves to stop violence, and furthermore express their heroism first and foremost through this use of violence, is an uncomfortable truth glossed over by John Woo.

Second, despite his Methodist education[111] and frequent use of Christian film imagery such as doves, churches and crucifixes, John Woo's heroic bloodshed protagonists do not follow the Christian moral ideal of turning the other cheek in the face of violence, instead adhering to the *lex talionis* of an eye for an eye. The Old Testament notion of justice as *lex talionis* is explicitly disavowed in the Christian *Sermon of the Mount* and replaced with the notion of turning the other cheek and loving your enemies, as noted by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism in his analysis of the sermon.[112] The *lex talionis* in Woo's heroic bloodshed films is based on the idea of Chinese pre-imperial righteous revenge, which also forms the apex of Chinese classical martial literature's moral universe. This moral universe is incongruous with John Woo's Methodist background and Christian film imagery, and thus it is unsurprising that he does not properly acknowledge the violent nature of his ideal chivalric hero.

Nevertheless, John Woo's Methodist education is still relevant for considering the portrayal of revenge as a positive force in his films since it offers a model for a

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[110] David Chute, Mark Rance, et al. "*The Killer*: Criterion Collection Commentary Track Interview Excerpts," *John Woo: Interviews*, edited by Robert K. Elder (U of Mississippi P, 2005) 77.
[111] Karen Fang, *John Woo's* A Better Tomorrow (Hong Kong UP, 2004) 113.
[112] John Wesley, *The Sermon of the Mount*, edited by Clare George Weakley Jr. (Bridge-Logos, 2010) 126.



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more direct personal intervention in relation to justice. Methodism is a form of Protestant Christianity, a spiritual movement which originally began as a form of resistance against perceived injustices of the Catholic Church. One of the main differences between Catholicism and Protestantism is the latter's concept of the priesthood of all believers, which connotes that a person does not require human mediators to be directly in contact with God. This stands in contrast to Catholicism, which features many of these human mediators in the form of the pope, saints, and priests, who are supposed to guide common believers on the right path. Similarly, in John Woo's portrayal of righteous revenge, a human mediator in the form of the legal authorities is not necessary, and even detrimental, for achieving justice. Like Protestantism rebelled against the need for human mediators in the Catholic Church, John Woo's protagonists rebel against the ineffectiveness of Hong Kong's legal authorities and take the law into their own hands in order to restore an Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood.

Film scholars have noted the influence of a Chinese martial tradition on John Woo's films. For all that, they do not touch upon heroic bloodshed's theme of righteous revenge, and the historical importance of this theme as a current through imperial Chinese literary history. Thus, they do not identify revenge as the primary basis of a righteous code-of-conduct in John Woo's films. Po Fung points at the classical Chinese martial novels *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Water Margin* as influences on the Hong Kong Triad genre. For instance, he notes how the ideal of *yi qi* (brotherhood) is represented by the character Guan Yu, who cannot be



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persuaded to turn on his former comrades after he is captured in battle.[113] Yet, besides a single mention of how *A Better Tomorrow* "pays tribute to the concept of male bonding in the name of *yi qi*,"[114] he does not offer further analysis of how this concept is paid homage to, or even represented, in the film.

Likewise, other scholars point to the influence of *wuxia* literature and film on John Woo's heroic bloodshed films, yet do not elaborate further on what this influence entails. For instance, Kenneth E. Hall, whose monograph *John Woo's* The Killer mostly traces filmic influences on John Woo, mentions the influence of *wuxia* on John Woo's Triad films,[115] but the implications of this influence are only sporadically discussed by him. He offers no further insight, for instance, on how the righteous ideals of *wuxia* knight-errantry that influenced John Woo[116] differ from the code-of-conduct of European chivalry. Karen Fang mentions that Hong Kong audiences were more receptive towards certain elements of the film, because for them "the plots, dialogue, and film grammar of male intimacy in the *yingxiong pian* [hero film, the Chinese term for heroic bloodshed films] genre had a clear precedent in the literature and heroic tradition which had been the source of the swordsman films."[117] Despite this assertion, Fang never returns to this notion of different reception because of a tradition known in Hong Kong, only noting that "the concept that Woo was portraying in *A Better Tomorrow* is known as *yi qi*, a kind of righteousness and fealty

[113] Po Fung, "The Origins of Hong Kong Gangster Films," *Always in the Dark: A Study of Hong Kong Gangster Films* (Hong Kong Film Archive, 2014) 7-8.
[114] Fung 8.
[115] Kenneth E. Hall, *John Woo's The Killer* (Hong Kong UP, 2009) 15-17.
[116] Hall 15.
[117] Fang 53.



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honored in these ancient chivalric and heroic traditions," but the vagueness of Fang's "a kind of" reveals that she does not delve deeper into the specifics of this tradition. While Fung, Hall, and Fang are right in the assertion that traditional Chinese literature and history have influenced John Woo's heroic bloodshed films, they do not elaborate on what the significance of these influences are besides mere points of reference or homage for John Woo. Thus, they do not mention the paramount influence of the traditional concept of revenge on these films.

Several film scholars interpret John Woo's film primarily in light of the Handover of sovereignty over Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China. For instance, Tony Williams states that:

> John Woo's past and contemporary heroes (played by actors such as Chow Yun-Fat and Ti Lung as well as others associated with the earlier wave of martial arts cinema such as Danny Lee and Chu Kong) form a fallen group of knightly heroes. Their modern counterparts embody that old tradition that now exists in inhospitable capitalist hells in a world about to be dominated by the bloody specter of Tiananmen Square.[118]

Again, note that Williams emphasizes the positive qualities of the knightly heroes here, and does not mention violence and revenge as a part of this tradition. Likewise, Karen Har-Yen Chow argues that John Woo's late 1980's films "allegorize Hong Kong's anxieties about China's crackdown on democratic freedom, i.e., the

[118] Tony Williams, "Space, Place, and Spectacle: The Crisis Cinema of John Woo," *Cinema Journal*, vol. 36 no. 2 (1997) 72.



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Tienanmen (sic) Square massacre."[119] Notwithstanding, the idea of a hostile political environment that threatens to destroy traditional codes of conduct is a familiar trope within Chinese *wuxia* and Triad genres that is not particular to the pre-Handover Hong Kong situation. For instance, as early as Tang Huang's Hong Kong Triad film *Tradition* (1955), the gangster is presented as a conservative champion within a rapidly changing world that is endangered by political influences, in this case the Japanese invasion of China, and economic forces in the form of the corrupting influence of a decadent Shanghai. In *wuxia* films such as King Hu's *A Touch of Zen* (1971), the knight-errant protagonists are pitted against corrupt government forces and are the only ones upholding codes of reciprocity in times of an untrustworthy society. In other words, John Woo's heroic bloodshed films are far from unique in pitting their righteous protagonists against an unrighteous society.

Furthermore, the main antagonist in all three films is a local Hong Kong Triad boss, who has abandoned a Triad code-of-honor in favor of a brutal capitalist profit-seeking agenda. Unlike later Hong Kong Triad films such as Fruit Chan's *Made in Hong Kong* (1997) and Johnnie To's *Election 2* (2006), there is no mention of Mainland Chinese involvement in Hong Kong's criminal underworld, not even implicitly. Therefore, allegorical readings of these films as lamentations for an impending loss of freedom and democracy under Communist rule misread the gangster protagonists' nostalgia for a lost past as a longing for Hong Kong under

[119] Karen Har-Yen Chow, "American Transnationalism in John Woo's 'Bullet in the Head'," *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 30, no. 3 (2000) 366.



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British rule, in spite of the fact that this nostalgia has been a trope in Hong Kong Triad and *wuxia* cinema long before the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed.

Phillippa Gates and Julian Stringer consider John Woo's film in light of gender and masculinity, reading the films as masculinist melodramas that offer distinctively different portrayals of masculinity compared to the Hollywood gangster and action genres. Stringer argues that Woo's heroic bloodshed films "collapse … two paradigms of masculinity … They combine simultaneously doing and suffering heroes."[120] Following Nowell-Smith, Stringer notes that in Hollywood cinema these two paradigms have "split off … into male action or 'doing' genres (the Western, war films) and female 'suffering' genres (melodrama, the woman's film),"[121] but that Woo's films offer a distinctive representation of masculinity by combining the Triad film with the melodrama genre.[122] Stringer convincingly argues for a reconsideration of received theoretical notions about male subjectivity by examining the specific historical, social, and political circumstances under which this masculinity takes form:

> Moreover, in terms of how western critical theory conceptualizes non-western masculinities, the two films also point out for us how hard it is to come to terms with any construction of gender identity outside of specific historical contexts. It seems to me that it is most useful to return Woo's films to the more psychoanalytically-inflected models of

[120] Julian Stringer, "Your Tender Smiles Give me Strength: Paradigms of Masculinity in John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer*," *Screen,* vol. 38, no. 1 (1997) 30.
[121] Stringer 29.
[122] Stringer 30.



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> analysis favoured by recent film studies only after we have begun to open up some of the questions concerning the social and political nature of male subjectivity.[123]

Indeed, uncritical attitude towards applying western critical theory, in this case psychoanalysis, to a non-western context without reconsidering the assumptions of the parameters of the theory itself, is very problematic.

That being said, Stringer does not offer a historical context of male subjectivities as represented in Chinese traditional sources, which would have helped to expand his analysis on the specific nature of masculinity in Woo's films. Stringer connects John Woo's ambiguous masculinity with the historical situation of the at that time contemporary "Hong Kong uncertainty over 1997," where the discordant masculine paradigms of doing and suffering echo the precariousness of the political situation before the Handover.[124] Again, an allegorical reading of ambiguous masculinity as a sign of Hong Kong's political situation is not fully convincing, as this representation of masculinity is not exclusive to Woo's films and in fact is a staple of *wuxia* literature and film. For instance, Chang Cheh's *One-Armed Swordsman* (1967) features a protagonist who seeks revenge after the murder of his master, as well as the loss of his arm, and this film features no less melodramatic depictions of pain and suffering than Woo's heroic bloodshed films do. While Stringer is right in his assertion that masculinity in John Woo's film cannot simply be analyzed without consideration of the historical and cultural specifics of male

[123] Stringer 38.
[124] Stringer 34.



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subjectivities, his ideas about the specific nature of masculinity in Woo's films could have been deepened by placing it in the context of the Chinese traditions that influenced male subjectivities in Woo's films.

Phillippa Gates critiques Julian Stringer's ideas on melodrama in Woo's films by stating that "Woo's films are not a combination of action and melodrama but are melodrama *because* of the action as well as the emotion."[125] This is partly a case of semantic hairsplitting, as the melodramatic nature of the action in John Woo's films is already implied by Stringer when he argues, for instance, that Woo's protagonists who "both rapturously, sadistically do and painfully, masochistically suffer, are brought together in their actions. The utmost concern is to visualize a man's ability to feel something very intensely."[126] Gates defines melodrama as "a text characterized by moments of excess in *mise-en-scène*, emotion, music, and gesture which disrupts the realism of the text, and thus, subverts the surface reading or ideology of the text (whatever that ideology may be)."[127]

But this conflation of melodrama in the form of excessive unrealism with subversion of the surface text is a problematic one. Consider, for instance, the 1970 film version of the Chinese revolutionary model ballet *The Red Detachment of Women* directed by Pan Wenzhan and Fu Jie. According to Gates' definition, this film is a perfect example of melodrama as it features heightened emotions, theatrical gesticulations, and bombastic music, yet a subversive reading of the film as praising

[125] Philippa Gates, "The Man's Film: Woo and the Pleasure of Male Melodrama," *Journal of Popular Culture,* vol.35, no. 1 (2001) 62.
[126] Stringer 33.
[127] Gates 63.



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capitalist values is quite impossible to make. Because of her claim that melodramatic characteristics subvert the surface text of John Woo's films, Gates ultimately arrives at the conclusion that the melodramatic excess of these films allow them to "address male emotionality" and the "ineffable, unrepresentable homoeroticism of male bonding without any anxiety for their heterosexual male audience" that are usually not permissible in Hollywood action films.[128] Be that as it may, despite their subversions of Hollywood action film masculinity, Woo's vision of intense male bonding and heroism also features misogynistic elements, as Stringer has correctly observed:

> Melodramatic reunions and expressions of love are played out under male eyes, producing contradictory texts - A Better Tomorrow and The Killer sadistically push, lock up and blind women, while placing centre-stage men who will not just be beaten but thrashed senseless, not just shot but ripped apart by bullets. The spectacle being offered here is as much masculinity as masochism as it is masculinity as active agency.[129]

This homosocial nature of heroism in John Woo's film, where women have no such active agency as heroes and are often primarily used to accentuate the protagonists' heroism, is not as easily subverted by melodramatic excess as Gates claims. Besides the *reductio ad absurdum* argument against Gates' argument of melodrama as subversive excess, there is a more serious problem with her analysis of Woo's films.

[128] Gates 62.
[129] Stringer 38.



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For Gates, melodrama in Woo's films is subversive because it disrupts the realism of the text, implying that this allows an ironic detachment from the text after which it can be read "against the grain."[130] Nevertheless, an ironic reading of the films does not change the fact that, for instance, women can never enter the homosocial circle of Woo's heroic brotherhoods, and do not have agency as executors of righteous revenge.

On the contrary, the subversive elements of John Woo's heroic bloodshed films lie exactly in their ability to affect audiences through melodramatic excess. Both *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer* feature violent acts of revenge by policemen against an unarmed criminal who has surrendered himself, which in a real-world scenario would most certainly not be accepted by most people as justice but renounced as a case of vigilantism. Even so, because of the films' affective melodramatic features, it becomes possible to consider this revenge justified and natural within their diegetic world. Revenge as a central theme of the films has been glossed over by all scholars writing on John Woo's heroic bloodshed films discussed so far, exactly because of this uncomfortable truth. The subversive quality of the films in relation to viewers' established ideas about law and justice can thus only be affectively experienced by an un-ironic viewer.

In conclusion, both Stringer and Gates propose to read John Woo's heroic bloodshed films in light of melodrama. Stringer connects the melodramatic masculinity of the films' protagonists to an allegorical representation of pre-Handover Hong Kong, thereby ignoring the fact that this melodramatic masculinity is

[130] Gates 62.



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a continuation of a tradition already present in the *wuxia* genre at a time when the Sino-British Joint Declaration had yet to be signed. His argument that male subjectivities must be analyzed in terms of their historical, social, and cultural specificities instead of being submitted to an ostensible universal Western critical theory such as psychoanalysis, is a very valid one. In spite of that, he does not take this idea far enough, by not mapping the historical context of traditional Chinese male subjectivities outside the timeframe of pre-Handover Hong Kong. Gates misreads the subversive quality of melodrama in Woo's films by claiming that it creates an ironic detachment, while these films truly subversive property is their ability to affectively suspend the viewers' notions on the merits of revenge.

Another interpretive approach to John Woo's heroic bloodshed films is to examine his films through the lenses of nationalism and transnationalism. Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar propose to study how divergent ideas of the nation are conceptualized in Chinese-language cinemas, not "as a unified and coherent form that is expressed in the cinema but as multiply constructed and contested."[131]. They consider Chinese-language cinemas not to be a monolithic totality that is a continuation of a single coherent Chinese tradition, but examine these cinemas in terms of a multitude of heterogeneous cultural influences:

> the transnational is understood not as a higher order, but as a larger arena connecting differences, so that a variety of regional, national, and local specificities impact upon each other in various types of

[131] Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (Columbia UP, 2006) 9.



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> relationships ranging from synergy to contest. The emphasis in this case is not on dissolving the distinctions between different Chinese cinemas into a larger cultural unity. Instead, it would be on understanding Chinese culture as an open, multiple, contested, and dynamic formation that the cinema participates in.[132]

Indeed, this approach is especially valid in relation to a place as historically complex as Hong Kong. Considering Hong Kong cinema as a diverse body of works with a multitude of divergent cultural influences that exhibits a wide range of performative takes on the idea of the national and transnational, is certainly more analytically and historically valid than making the wrong assumption that Hong Kong cinema is a uniform entity that can simply be examined in relation to an ostensible unified 'Chinese cinema' that is purely a continuation of alleged monolithic traditional Chinese influences.

Even so, while Berry and Farquhar propose to examine "how the imported discursive techniques of the cinema work with and are worked upon by existing local narrative patterns and tropes, creating cinematic traditions in which Chinese national identities are cited and recited,"[133] they do not fully address traditional influences that are part of those local narrative patterns and tropes in their discussion of John Woo's films. For instance, Berry and Farquhar mention a code of righteous brotherhood as central to the plot of *The Killer*, they present this code itself as a given, without going into the historical details of its development.[134] When they state that "cops and

[132] Berry and Farquhar 5.
[133] Berry and Farquhar 9.
[134] Berry and Farquhar 152-158.



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criminals […] evolve intimate and unlikely friendships that reinvent the code of brotherhood and honor in modern times,"[135] the question remains what exactly is reinvented here, or how this code is different in John Woo's film as compared to that in Chinese traditional sources. While I do not propose a regression back to the erroneous belief that there is a monolithic Chinese tradition that all Chinese cinemas are merely continuations of, examining these traditions in a more comprehensive fashion is still necessary to pinpoint exactly how these are transformed and reinvented by John Woo's films.

In fact, the influence of tradition on Chinese cinemas should be contemplated in the same fashion that Berry and Farquhar propose to do for the influence of the national and transnational. Where Berry and Farquhar's persuasive call to understand the transnational "not as homogenization but as a connection of difference"[136] is primarily conceptualized as a reconsideration of geographical space, their ideas are also very relevant for evaluating the divergent influences of history on Chinese cinemas. Chinese traditions should not be understood as immovable cultural roots that John Woo's films return to, but still needs to be comprehensively considered as cultural tropes that Woo seeks to reinvent for his cinematic critiques on modern Hong Kong. Berry and Farquhar do not address the historical tropes of righteous revenge and the influence of traditional sources on John Woo's heroic bloodshed films, and are thus unable to recognize the black-collar nature of the brotherhoods that are

[135] Berry and Farquhar 154.
[136] Berry and Farquhar 15.



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formed in Woo's films that stand in direct opposition to corrupt official authorities, a fact that points at a higher standard of justice that is not based on sanctioned laws.

The reinvention of the code of brotherhood that Berry and Farquhar refer to[137] takes place at this level. Following Julian Stringer's analysis of John Woo's heroic bloodshed films that connect the ambiguous masculinity of its protagonists to the political situation of Hong Kong in the years before the 1997 Handover, Berry and Farquhar extend this idea by arguing that this "certainly seems to apply to the gangster-movie boom, with its frenetic violence, at the time. In 1989, the year of *The Killer* and the June 4th Tiananmen Square massacre in China, 100 of the 250 films produced in Hong Kong were Triad movies."[138] Despite their own assertions that the ways in which ideas of nationalism and transnationalism are explored and reinvented in Chinese cinemas should be considered in their myriad divergent forms, they then continue to conflate one hundred Triad films made in Hong Kong through a single allegorical interpretation of Hong Kong before the 1997 Handover. Furthermore, while they do recognize that John Woo's heroic bloodshed films represent a modern Hong Kong where brotherhood "is the only ethical retreat from the absent center of Hong Kong society, beset by lawlessness" (156), Berry and Farquhar do not identify the reasons for this state of lawlessness in these films, besides their allegorical reading of the films as representing anxiety over the 1997 Handover.

Yet this allegorical interpretation, as well as those by Julian Stringer, Tony Williams, and Karen Har-Yen Chow mentioned earlier in this chapter, begs the

[137] Berry and Farquhar 154.
[138] Berry and Farquhar 153.



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following question: if the films represent anxiety over the Handover of sovereignty over Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China, then why is the current society and legal system of Hong Kong under the administration of the United Kingdom represented in the films as largely dysfunctional? Again, there are no references made to any Chinese political influence on the chaotic, lawless state Hong Kong society is represented as in these films. As Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar note, the "the onscreen vision of Hong Kong is of a city beset by extreme lawlessness and graphic violence,"[139] but this is long before the Mainland Chinese government possessed actual political sovereignty over the region. The protagonists in John Woo's heroic bloodshed films are indeed nostalgic about a lost past, but there is no visual or narrative evidence that the United Kingdom's sovereignty over Hong Kong is part of that nostalgia. Nonetheless, there are clear signs in the films of plutocratic greed as the primary factor that corrupted the codes of honor and brotherhood that the protagonists are nostalgic for, which I examine further in my analysis of the films.

Indeed, another approach to John Woo's films is to interpret them as critiques of a ruthless capitalist Hong Kong society. Lisa Odham Stokes and Michael Hoover argue that "Woo's gangster movies create a political and social subtext of early capitalism as a bloody battlefield."[140] Stokes and Hoover are explicitly Marxist in their analysis of the films, describing characters from *A Better Tomorrow* in the following way: "Shing will be the vampire-capitalist, who 'only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. Ho and Mark represent

[139] Berry and Farquhar 158.
[140] Stokes and Hoover 63.



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loyal employees, the physical labor part of the operation, but also set apart from the other Triads."[141] Indeed, the influence of greed in Hong Kong is the biggest threat to the gangster protagonists' righteous way of life in John Woo's heroic bloodshed films. However, Stokes and Hoover do not notice that a similar dynamic of corruption is at work within the police forces as portrayed in the films. Furthermore, the films' critique has a more specific target, that of social stratification and an unrighteous legal system within a system of plutocratic greed, not that of making profit per se. Unlike the myth of the rule of law and the perceived notion of Hong Kong as a utopian laissez faire capitalist experiment, the films offer a different perspective on Hong Kong society.

A final approach to analyze the heroic bloodshed films of John Woo is in relation to Confucianism. Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park argues that protagonists in John Woo's heroic bloodshed films made in Hong Kong operate according to the Confucian ideal of the *junzi* (superior person).[142] Magnan-Park holds that in modern Hong Kong, with its un-Confucian emphasize on "placing economic profits as the single most important social imperative,"[143] John Woo's gangster protagonists offer "a final possibility of social redemption via a bottom-up restoration of Confucian social legitimacy."[144] Indeed, the protagonists in the films are rebelling against the laissez faire economic system of Hong Kong in which profit prevails over personal

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[141] Stokes and Hoover 46.
[142] Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park, "The Heroic Flux in John Woo's Trans-Pacific Passage: From Confucian Brotherhood to American Selfhood," *Hong Kong Film, Hollywood and the New Global Cinema*, edited by Gina Marchetti and Tan See Kam (Routledge, 2007) 41.
[143] Magnan-Park 39.
[144] Magnan-Park 37.



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values and erodes social cohesion. Having said that, while the protagonists in John Woo's film are undeniably in search of an alternative ethical system and take as their role model a character from the Chinese past, the Confucian *junzi* is not the only candidate to act in this role. The Confucian ethical system operates on the premise that people's actions towards others should be based on hierarchical relations, most clearly expressed in the idea of the five relationships: those between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, and between friends.[145] Yet, the protagonists in John Woo's heroic bloodshed films reject such a hierarchical system and act according to the knight-errant ideal of reciprocity.

The protagonists in John Woo's heroic bloodshed films act according to the knight-errant ideal of reciprocity. This ideal of reciprocity had a subversive quality in imperial China, as it went against several of the ideological premises of the ruling Confucian elite. This subversive quality is recruited in John Woo's heroic bloodshed films in order to critique a different ruling elite: the Hong Kong plutocratic class, and the ways in which their policies lead to an inability to properly legally address wrongdoings. By championing righteous revenge as a more equitable response to injustice than the official state-sanctioned laws, the films indict a legal system that has been corrupted by plutocratic hypocrisy.

[145] Linghao Wang and Lawrence B. Solum, "Confucian Virtue Jurisprudence," *Law, Virtue and Justice*, edited by Amalia Amaya and Ho Hock Lai (Hart Publishing, 2013) 110.



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The subversive nature of revenge in imperial Chinese history has been noted by several scholars. Roland Altenburger analyzes the knight-errant in terms of the concept of *bao* (報, reciprocity):

> The Chinese notion of reciprocity does not mean that a favor done to another person must be returned in the same currency and the same amount. Rather, the response to a favor can be in a different form, and the symbolic value returned infinitely higher than the original gift. When a lord in ancient China hired a roaming knight, he thereby expressed his appreciation of the latter's martial skill and sense of duty. In response, the youxia, in accordance with the code of bao, might have considered it appropriate to sacrifice his life for his lord, if the situation required it.[146]

The concept of *bao* can be either beneficial when "returning a favor" (*bao en* 報恩), or harmful when "avenging a wrongful event" (*bao chou* 報仇).[147] This concept of reciprocity does not necessarily follow a hierarchical structure of relations, as it simply follows the logic of "an eye for an eye" or "a favor for a favor." Indeed, Margaret B. Wan argues that the martial hero has been a possible threat to the hierarchy of Confucian relationships, as they are willing to, for instance, die for someone else than their own parents, and eschew Confucian protocol[148].

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[146] Roland Altenburger, *The Sword or the Needle: The Female Knight-Errant (Xia) in Traditional Chinese Narrative* (Peter Lang, 2009) 29.
[147] Altenburger 29.
[148] Margaret B. Wan, *Green Peony and the Rise of the Chinese Martial Arts Novel* (State U of New York P, 2009) 2.



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Finally, Liu mentions several incompatibilities between the knights-errant ethical and ideological system and that of Confucianism.[149] First, the knights-errant operated according to a system of universality, in contrast to the particularism of Confucianism:

> The knight-errant … considered the same principles of justice and moral duty applicable to relatives and strangers alike … This, to the Confucian way of thinking, was not only unnecessary but also undesirable, for if one died for a stranger, what should one do for one's parents?[150]

Note, for instance, how in *The Killer* the protagonist Ah Jong is presented as a hero who does not merely concern himself with the safety of family and friends, but rescues a girl unbeknownst to him from the violence of rival assassins. Moreover, Liu notes that while the "Confucians taught 'forgiveness' (*shu*) … the knights-errant made revengefulness a virtue."[151] Indeed, revenge is at the center of all of the John Woo films discussed in this chapter. While it was permissible in certain eras of Chinese history to take revenge, in the case of the murder of one's father, for instance, this process was more and more regulated by the imperial government, so that revenge could only take place through a government intermediate, as noted by Michael Dalby.[152]

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[149] Liu 7-9.
[150] Liu 7-8.
[151] Liu 8.
[152] Michael Dalby, "Revenge and the Law in Traditional China" *The American Journal of Legal History*, vol. 25, no. 4 (1981) 271-275.



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In John Woo's heroic bloodshed films, protagonists on opposite sides of the law unite in a quest for righteous revenge, thus subverting the idea that the legal system is the ideal measurement of right and wrong. Paradoxically, the criminal protagonists in John Woo's heroic bloodshed films are the highest exemplars of justice, exposing a lack of equity in a Hong Kong society that denounces them. Therefore, the films are counter-narratives to the myth of the rule of law: the idea of modern Hong Kong as a legal and economic utopia where the rule of law ensures equality for all its residents. Although situated in modern Hong Kong, John Woo's heroic bloodshed films retain this subversive nature of the traditional Chinese knight-errant. Through righteous revenge, the protagonists in these films reassert a martial masculinity in a modern Hong Kong that has marginalized the martial in favor of a seemingly civil meritocracy. As this civil meritocracy has been morally corrupted by monetary incentives, the protagonists of John Woo's heroic bloodshed films have to operate outside the confines of the legal system to achieve justice.

## RIGHTEOUS REVENGE IN IMPERIAL CHINA

This theme of righteous revenge by marginalized men as a reaction against a corrupt, unjust society is a reworking of tropes from traditional Chinese martial narratives, such as Sima Qian's fictionalized biographies of historical assassins, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and *wuxia* literature. This subsection traces the development of the concept of revenge throughout Chinese imperial history, demonstrating that revenge as a concept in Chinese history designates an ethical duty that originated in pre-imperial China that was largely prohibited through the



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codification of laws in early imperial China ruled by the Qin (221 BC -206 BC) and Han (206 BC – 202 AD) dynasties. The resulting imperial monopoly on violence, implemented through a Confucian bureaucracy, was the ultimate expression of the suppression of the martial by the civil. As subsequent dynasties largely based their law codes on that of their predecessors, a disavowal of revenge enacted by individuals was a constant through Chinese imperial history.

Although the colonial Hong Kong of John Woo's heroic bloodshed films is not operating under this Confucian legal system, the films transport this disavowal of revenge by the authorities to a fictionalized modern Hong Kong. The pre-imperial ideal of righteous revenge survived in the form of literature about knights-errant, bandits, and other marginalized martial men, from which John Woo took his knightly code-of-conduct. As these narratives glorify revenge as an ethical duty that takes priority over duties sanctioned by the authorities, they are by nature a challenge to the idea of a righteous imperial monopoly on violence. Indeed, the acts of revenge in these narratives are often directly targeted at a corrupt regime that lacks the ability and/or will to uphold justice, and is even the prime source of injustice.

Early imperial Qin dynasty (221 BC – 206 BC) laws saw a radical shift from the pre-imperial conceptualization of revenge as a matter of personal honor irrespective of social standing, to a notion of revenge controlled by the imperial authorities and codified in a Confucian hierarchical ethical system and Legalist law code. Mark Edward Lewis notes that: "in contrast with the revenge systematized by later ritual theorists and written into imperial law, which was justified only in response to a murder or a family member, revenge in Spring and Autumn China



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answered any derogation of a man's honor."[153] This culture of personal revenge was based on the notion that perceived slights of honor were to be answered with violence regardless of the social standing of the person who inflicted this dishonor.[154] Said otherwise, enacting revenge was not a privilege of an elite social class, but was regarded as a moral imperative for all Chinese men.

While pre-imperial China was a violent world, this violence was not yet monopolized by a central authority that decided on the righteousness of acts of revenge in the context of a person's social standing. The introduction of a Confucian hierarchical ethical system and Legalist law code sanctioned by the authorities in early imperial China changed this egalitarian culture of violence. Emperor Wu of Han (156 BC – 87 BC) was the first to proclaim Confucianism as the official state ideology,[155] and before that, the first Han emperor Gaozu had already commissioned a written law code based on the Legalist Qin dynasty laws.[156] Although Confucianism and Legalism disagree on the proper guiding principles for a stable society, the state-sanctioned versions of these ideologies both reject personal revenge as a righteous way of addressing wrongdoings, unless this revenge is sanctioned by the imperial authorities.

Revenge as a concept can be found in Confucian texts but is embedded in a system of hierarchical relationships. *The Classic of Rites* (*Liji*), one of the five main pre-Qin dynasty (pre-221 BC) Confucian texts, proposes that a proper justification for

[153] Lewis, *The Early Chinese Empires* 39.
[154] Lewis, *The Early Chinese Empires* 42.
[155] Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge UP, 2000) 57.
[156] Zhengyuan Fu, *Autocratic Tradition and Chinese Politics* (Cambridge UP, 1993) 111.



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revenge depends on the position of the person to be avenged within this familial order.[157] Early Confucian thought did not approve of revenge by default, only allowing it as an act of filial piety in the case of the murder of a parent. Other acts of violence against one's family are to be answered according to a hierarchical scale based on familial closeness.[158] In the Confucian vision of an ideal society, everyone would know his proper hierarchical position and act according to ritualized customs (*li* 禮) that structure this hierarchy.[159] Of special importance within this hierarchical social positioning were the five relationships: that between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, and between friends.[160] Confucianism is based on an ideal of rule by virtue, in which society will be harmonious if all people act according to their own hierarchical social position. The people on top of this hierarchy are expected to be an example to their subordinates, who will become virtuous by following the example of their superiors. In reality, the empire's sanctioning of Confucianism as the state ideology from the reign of emperor Wu of Han (156 BC – 87 BC) onwards[161] led to an interpretation of Confucianism that favored the ruling elite in matters of law and punishment. For example, in contrast to the common people, Confucian officials were supposed to be able to control their behavior as an effect of their moral superiority, and thus punishment was unnecessary for them.[162]

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[157] Altenburger 30.
[158] Altenburger 30.
[159] Wang and Solum 120-122.
[160] Wang and Solum 110.
[161] Yao 57.
[162] Chin-Shan Wu, *Subordinates and Evildoers: Song Scholar-Officials' Perception of Clerks* (State U of New York UMI, 2008) 145.



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Consequently, as the ruling bureaucracy consisted of officials trained in Confucianism who were deemed morally superior, the majority of Chinese men who did not belong to this class of literati were in an underprivileged position before the empire's law that punished their misbehaviors much stricter than those of the civil bureaucracy. In this way, the propagation of a Confucian moral system led to a marginalization of martial men. The idea that crimes should be judged according to the social standing of the perpetrator and victim naturally lead to an advantaged position for the bureaucratic elite, who were themselves the propagators of this Confucian hierarchical moral framework. Michael Dalby observes that the early Han dynasty text *The Rites of Zhou* stipulated a state-sanctioned intermediary for imposing punishment on murderers.[163] If a person wanted to avenge a wrongdoing to one's family, he first had to report to the authorities, who would decide if taking revenge was justified.[164] Early imperial Chinese law, under the influence of a Confucian moral framework, thus changed the pre-imperial culture of honorable revenge that was unrestrained by a hierarchical and political order, to a systematized, bureaucratic revenge that first had to be sanctioned by the imperial authorities.

Early imperial Chinese law was thus the starting point for a domestication of revenge, in which the earlier moral imperative to avenge wrongdoings was gradually supplanted by a strictly regulated system of revenge within a legal framework. Dalby argues that "vengeance was made a successively more refined legal concept in traditional China,"[165] thus further codifying in what circumstances enacting revenge

[163] Dalby 271-272.
[164] Dalby 275.
[165] Dalby 269.



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was justified. As such, revenge became embedded in a moral and legal system in which the state had a monopoly on sanctioning violence. Dalby argues that this state legitimization of revenge became more and more codified in laws throughout Chinese imperial history, specifying in increasingly greater detail in which cases taking revenge was justified.[166] No dynasty after the Han retracted their prohibitions on personal revenge not sanctioned by the authorities. Heiner Roetz argues that the codification of the notion of revenge in an imperial legal system was one of the conditions that made the creation of a unified Chinese state possible in the first place, as it transformed a system of justice based on "*lex talionis* (an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth)" into one controlled by a central authority, thus ending a destabilizing cycle of feuds and retaliation.[167] Ergo, the state's monopoly on violence was predicated upon the sublimation of the notion of personal revenge into an impersonal Confucian moral and Legalist judicial system.

Rephrasing this sublimation in terms of Kam Louie's dichotomy of *wen* (civil) and *wu* (martial) masculinity[168]: the typical martial notion of pre-imperial revenge was made subordinate to a civil codified system of justice. While the martial was originally an essential part of the Chinese "warrior aristocracy,"[169] the civil became "progressively more dominant for the upper classes."[170] Violence in the form of personal revenge thus became a so-called uncivilized gesture, at least for the ruling

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[166] Dalby 291.
[167] Heiner Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age: A Reconstruction under the Aspect of the Breakthrough toward Postconventional Thinking* (State U of New York P, 1993) 37.
[168] Louie 6.
[169] Lewis, *The Early Chinese Empires* 15.
[170] Louie 11.



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class of Chinese imperial society. Martial masculinity was further marginalized by an asymmetrical implementation of the law that was legitimized by Confucian thought, as officials were exempted from corporal punishment on the basis of their status as literati.[171] The Confucian and Legalist codification of violence therefore not only marginalized martial men, but also made them the primary target of state-sanctioned violence. This becomes even more problematic when the authorities are weak, corrupt, or otherwise unable to impartially carry out justice. Situations in which the official law is unable to mete out justice, paradoxically also creates the conditions for martial men to reinstate their masculinity by harking back to the pre-imperial notion of justice as revenge.

Despite being disavowed by both Confucian and Legalist judicial thinking, revenge as a form of justice survived in the form of martial literature, which is a direct precursor to the heroic bloodshed genre in this regard. As noted by Jian Zhao, the earliest fictional incarnations of martial men who operate outside of the state-sanctioned laws to enact righteous revenge are described by the Han dynasty historian Sima Qian in his biographical notes on *youxia* (knights-errant), which offer an idealized version of the men as selfless upholders of a code-of-conduct based on reciprocity.[172] Written during the same period that the pre-imperial notion of personal revenge outside of the control of the authorities was coming to an end, righteous revenge began appearing as a trope in narratives about these knights-errant. While

[171] Wu 145.
[172] Jian Zhao, "From History to Historical Romance: *Xia* Imagery in the Late Han Era" *NUCB Journal of Language Culture and Communication*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2003) 84.



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unsanctioned revenge was being suppressed by the authorities the martial side of revenge survived in literature. Liu traces the literary history of these knights-errant, convincingly arguing how they were consistently characterized as following a code-of-conduct based on reciprocity, of which revenge was the most direct expression, which often clashed with the official state authorities.[173] Karl S. Y. Yao argues that revenge serves as the narrative drive in a variety of Chinese martial narratives, by creating "conflicting principles of narrative motivation," thus becoming the "source of primary tension in the text."[174] Thus, revenge as an important element of martial masculinity was marginalized by the Confucian elite from early imperial China onward, but continued to exist in martial literature.

In John Woo's heroic bloodshed films, revenge is a primary narrative drive as well, offering an alternative justice that is, by definition, an indictment of the dominant forms of judicial discourses as it goes beyond state-sanctioned conceptions of the law. John Woo's heroic bloodshed films' gangster protagonists operate outside of the law as criminals, but their upholding of a righteous code of revenge against a corrupt society gives their criminality a heroic dimension, as they enact an illegal righteousness against the dominant civil society's legalized corruption. Whereas the corrupt society in classical martial literature consisted of an unequitable Confucian legal system that favored the Confucian scholars who upheld state-sanctioned law, in

[173] Liu 4-5.
[174] Karl S. Y. Yao, "Bao and Baoying: Narrative Causality and External Motivations in Chinese Fiction," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR),* vol 11 (1989) 137.



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John Woo's heroic bloodshed films this corruption takes the form of a legal system which favors the wealthy.

## REMEMBERING A BETTER YESTERDAY: JOHN WOO'S HEROIC BLOODSHED FILMS

In John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), the three protagonists all seek revenge in the face of the inadequacies of the legal authorities as an allegorical indictment of the Hong Kong myth of rule of law. The literal translation of the Chinese title of the film (英雄本色) is "True Colors of a Hero," and the protagonist's heroism takes form through their shared quest for revenge, as this righteous revenge reaffirms their martial masculinity that has been suppressed by the civil codification of violence. As Hong Kong has never had sovereignty and does not possess its own army, becoming a martial arts master, joining the police force, or joining the Triads are the few major career paths in which martial masculinity can be expressed. Indeed, Sung Tse-Ho is a Triad member, while his younger brother Kit is a policeman. This does not cause any problems between them until their father is murdered because of Sung's Triad connections. Kit learns that the man responsible for his father's death is Shing and tries to bring this man to justice following the authority-sanctioned path of the law. However, his superiors regard him as too personally involved in this case and forbid him to continue his legal investigations.

The police force in *A Better Tomorrow* is ineffective and needs to be disobeyed in order to achieve justice, an explicit critique of Hong Kong's judicial system. Kit can only continue his quest for justice by disobeying the orders of his



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superiors, who represent the official jurisprudence, and returning to the pre-imperial ideal of personal revenge outside of the confines of the law. Another factor that complicates the brothers' quest for revenge is the fact that they used to operate on opposing sides of the codified law. A solution to this impasse is offered by Sung's Triad brother Mark who enacts justice by returning to the pre-imperial concept of righteous revenge. Before he has to take on the serious role of an avenger of wrongdoings, Mark is a jokester with a similar disregard for protocol and hierarchical relationships. He plays around with his Triad brother Sung, defiantly greets a policeman after helping an illegal hawker on the street, and readily shares his wealth with his subordinates. Thus, Mark is presented as a black-collar worker, a working-class Triad member who does see himself as being above his peers and subordinates. This image is very far removed from that of the gravely serious Confucian gentleman. At the same time, this irreverence allows Mark to circumvent the moral dilemmas that Kit and Sung face in the pursuit of justice. His ideal of justice operates both outside the confines of state-sanctioned justice in the form of the British legal system, or the hierarchy of the Triad, as Shing is now his superior, and thus should not be disobeyed within this hierarchy.

Justice is thus only achievable by disregarding the hierarchies of both the police force and the Triad. Mark's insistence on taking martial revenge, as opposed to a judicial one, ultimately reconciles the two brothers Kit and Sung, who are able to corner their nemesis Shing. As both Shing and Sung are out of bullets after an extended gunfight, Shing assures the brothers that he will be a free man soon, as he has enough money to buy his way out of prison by way of attorneys. Hence, the



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British colonial judicial system is inadequate in achieving justice. As argued by Michael Dalby, the idea of revenge is seen in Western legal thinking as a primitive vestige of pre-modern society that has been supplanted by a civilized law,[175] not unlike the changing discourses on the legitimacy of revenge in early imperial China. Since the British legal system cannot offer an adequate response to wrongdoings in *A Better Tomorrow*, the three men have to resort to an older form of justice, that of revenge. In the final scene of the film, Mark sacrifices his life, the ultimate form of returning a favor for someone, but not before scolding Kit for still not accepting his older brother Sung who is trying to change his ways. Moved by Mark's martial version of justice in the form of self-sacrifice, Kit decides to hand his loaded gun to his older brother Sung in the final scene of the film. Thus, by circumventing the official, sanctioned law, the brothers can finally enact justice for their father's death.

There is a clear distinction in the film between the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood and the Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood, and while the former is under siege because of the brutal reality of the latter, there is still a possibility of recreating the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood on a personal scale. The Ideal Mandate is represented first by biological brothers Kit and Sung, who reconcile after realizing they serve a higher order of moral justice than that of the bureaucratic police force leadership. Second, symbolic brother Mark is the catalyst of this reconciliation, indicating that even within the Triads the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood can still be found and maintained.

[175] Dalby 267.



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As revenge in both Chinese and British conceptualizations of justice is by definition a subversion of state-sanctioned law, the fact that the protagonists of John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* enact revenge as a form of justice is an implicit indictment of modern Hong Kong society. As mentioned earlier, Shing mocks the idea of justice by stating that he is wealthy enough to buy his freedom. Although this is a perfectly legal strategy in modern-day law, it does not conform to an idea of justice that is impartial, as people of affluence are thus less likely to receive a punishment for their misdeeds. The rule of law, the idea that the law treats everyone equally, is thus revealed to be a myth. *A Better Tomorrow* has several scenes in which money functions as a corrupting influence on justice, and modern Hong Kong society at large. When Shing is still a foot soldier in the Triad society, Mark offers him a stack of dollar bills in order to go to the doctor, indicating that he is willing to share his wealth with his fellow Triad members. After Mark's knee injury and subsequent downfall, Sung spots his former Triad brother wearing disheveled clothes. Shing, now the Triad society's leader, is portrayed as Mark's foil: wearing a long white trench coat, he disrespectfully throws some bills on the street for Mark to collect, ignoring the martial virtue of reciprocity. Money is presented as a corrupting force in relation to this virtue.

In John Woo's heroic bloodshed films, there are still some members of the police force and Triads whose Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood is incorruptible by greed. In one of the first scenes of the film, Mark is presented as being immune to this corrupting influence: the camera first zooms in on a counterfeit press printing fake dollar bills, after which Mark lights a cigarette with one of the bills. While Mark



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does have a monetary incentive for his criminal activities, his ideals of brotherhood are not corrupted by this financial gain, as he does not idolize money as a goal in itself. Thus, while the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood in *A Better Tomorrow* has become eroded by the corrupting influence of the Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood, righteousness still exists within individual members of society.

The righteous protagonist who maintains a personal code-of-conduct based on bonds of brotherhood within a corrupt society which discourages such bonds is a returning feature of John Woo's heroic bloodshed films. In *The Killer* (1989), policeman Li, who is assigned to find and arrest assassin Ah Jong, encounters difficulties in upholding his personal code of conduct within the bureaucracy of law enforcement, as his superiors are more invested in upholding protocol and climbing their career ladders. After he shoots a fleeing criminal holding a hostage, he is summoned for an inquiry into his conduct, as the hostage has died of a heart attack. This scene starts with a close-up of the god Guan Gong, revered by both police and Triad members for his strict adherence to righteousness, juxtaposing this upright mythologized historical figure with Li's superiors who are most concerned about protocol and blame Li for the hostage's death. Li, on the other hand, claims that he acted out of instinct, after witnessing the criminal's violent behavior for months, and after just having seen him kill a police colleague.

From the start of the film, Li is a police officer who acts more according to the Chinese knights-errant ideal of revenge than according to the official law. Li's career climbing superior, who is mostly concerned with how a failed arrest would look on his resume, reassigns Li to another case after several failed attempts to catch



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the killer, a scene which is directly followed by another close-up of Guan Gong. In both scenes, the image of Guan Gong is an implicit critique of a lack of righteousness in law enforcement agencies that are more concerned with gaining prestige and improving their career. The film's gangster protagonist faces similar difficulties in upholding their code-of-conduct within a Triad society where most senior members' prime motivation is profit. Again, the main antagonist is a greedy gangster boss who no longer adheres to the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood and traditional codes-of-conduct within the Triads. In a similar vein as *A Better Tomorrow*, the gangster antagonist in *The Killer* has committed an act of betrayal that the sanctioned law enforcement agencies are unable to address, thus creating the need for righteous revenge by the protagonists.

Comparing this to Hollywood films about revenge, the most striking difference is the fact that the American avenging hero/anti-hero is a solitary one. Films such as *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Death Wish* (1974), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *The Crow* (1994) all feature vigilantes who operate primarily as individuals in a crime-ridden society. Garry Hoppenstand detects a reactionary, right-wing ideology in some of these films:

> Urban vigilante films generally present an ultra right-wing political stance, and connect themselves to such concepts as religious salvation, as best seen in *Dirty Harry*, and the frontier ethic, as demonstrated in *Death Wish*.[176]

[176] Gary Hoppenstand, "The Pleasures of Evil: Hedonism and the Contemporary Horror Film," *Beyond the Stars: Studies in American Popular Film*, edited by Paul Loukides and Linda K. Fuller (Bowling Green State UP, 1996) 161.



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Although John Woo's heroic bloodshed films portray a dysfunctional law enforcement system in Hong Kong not unlike that in Hollywood vigilante films, there is an element of John Woo's films that prevent a reading of these films as similarly reactionary: the emphasis on brotherhood. While not quite becoming comrades in the Communist sense, the emphasis on brotherhoods formed between unlikely allies in these films does transform them into social critiques of the inadequacies of the rule of law in Hong Kong.

Brotherhood in these films is established through a process of reciprocal moral understanding, a homosocial gaze through which the films' working-class protagonists mutually recognize their superior moral standards in a corrupt, profit-driven society. In *The Killer*, policeman Li and Triad hitman Ah Jong are exceptional individuals on opposite sides of the law, who are operating according to traditional codes of conduct that their superiors deem outdated within modern capitalist Hong Kong. The only way in which these two protagonists can counter this vertical hierarchy that seeks to suppress their personal codes-of-conduct is by creating a horizontal bond based on mutual recognition of this code.

This horizontal bond is visually structured in the film through constant shot reverse shots of the two protagonists. In the first scene in which police officer Li and Triad hitman Ah Jong meet directly, the shot reverse shot establishes the beginning of a mutual understanding between the two unlikely friends. After Ah Jong brings a young girl wounded in the crossfire of an ambush set for himself to the hospital, he ends up in a Mexican standoff with officer Li and his police partner, as the hospital



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staff attempts to rescue the little girl's life. In a series of shot reverse shots, the two men gaze at each other, then at the girl. When she shows a sign of life by moving her hands, Ah Jong is visibly relieved as he acknowledges that the girl is still alive, a relief that is in turn noticed by officer Li, who realizes that he is not dealing with a cold-blooded killer here, but a man with a code.

This is the start of a mutual respect and recognition between the men, who acknowledge each other's adherence to a code of conduct that is beyond the law. Throughout the film, this reciprocal moral understanding through the medium of a helpless female character is repeated in the form of the wounded night club singer Jennie. She is literally left in the dark within the structure of the film's shot reverse shots, as her eyesight has been accidentally damaged by Ah Jong during his first assassination mission in the film. The few times there is a reverse shot of what she is looking at, is to emphasize her increasing inability to see. Ergo, mutual recognition in *The Killer* is thus made possible for men through the medium of a helpless woman, making the reciprocal moral understanding a strictly homosocial act. While Ah Jong meets Jennie's eyes in the first scene of *The Killer*, this is not an instant of reciprocal moral understanding, as a medium in the form of a helpless third person through which Ah Jong and Jennie could recognize each other's moral standards is not present. As such, Jennie is not given the opportunity of participating in the homosocial pact between Ah Jong and Li, as she is not able to prove herself as a righteous person through an act of reciprocal moral understanding.

The importance of looking each other in the eye to mutually recognize superior moral standards is further emphasized by the fact that both *The Killer* and *A*



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*Better Tomorrow 2* feature cold-hearted Triad hitmen who permanently wear sunglasses, unlike Mark, who doesn't wear his signature sunglasses in any of the scenes in which a bond of brotherhood is established, thus blocking the possibility of reciprocal moral understanding. The hitman in *A Better Tomorrow 2* only takes his sunglasses of right before his only and final heroic act of enabling a fair gunfight between him and his opponent. This reciprocal moral understanding is furthermore essential in scenes in which the death of one of the gangster protagonists leads the police protagonist to an act of vigilantism. In both *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer*, the policeman becomes instrumental in enacting righteous revenge on the main antagonist after witnessing the sacrifice of his friend, or friend's friend. After seeing his newfound companion Ah Jong die at the hands of the main antagonist, he shoots this man in the head after police reinforcement has arrived. While a newspaper article about a policeman killing an unarmed, capitulating suspect would meet with disapproval by most of us, this final act of revenge is a heroic deed of poetic justice in these films.

Furthermore, the final sacrifice Ah Jong makes in his pursuit of righteous revenge inverts the logic of *lex talionis*, as this sacrifice literally gives back sight to Jennie, who was blinded on accident by Ah Jong at the beginning of the film. In the final shootout of the film, Ah Jong is wounded in the eyes himself, but this becomes a sacrifice that Ah Jong makes in order to correct his earlier mistake of blinding Jennie. While the knight-errant code defined by Roland Altenburger involves both reciprocity in the forms of "returning a favor" and "avenging a wrongful event,"[177]

[177] Altenburger 29.



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*The Killer* has up to this point mostly dealt with this second iteration of reciprocity in the form of revenge. Yet, Ah Jong's sacrifice ensures that Jennie can afford an operation on her eyes, which restores her vision. This ethical system based on reciprocity also makes offers an opportunity for redemption for characters in John Woo's films who have betrayed the protagonists. In *The Killer*, Fung Sei is a former friend and associate of assassin Ah Jong, who early in the film betrays his friend on the orders of his ruthless Triad boss. This act of betrayal is still redeemable by a heroic act of sacrifice, in this case the retrieval of a suitcase of money owed to Ah Jong for his last assignment.

The film explicitly laments the gradual replacement of the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood with the Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood. In one of the films' iconic scenes, gangster associates and friends Ah Jong and Fung Sei meet at a mountain road overlooking the skyline of Hong Kong's Central area, which is the city's main financial district. This skyline also features in the opening scene of the film in the form of an extreme long shot with the title credits superimposed, and is a symbol of the city's rapid economic development. At this location, they lament the negative effect this economic development has had on their traditional ideals of brotherhood, with Ah Jong stating that "Our world is changing so fast. It never used to be like this. Perhaps we are too nostalgic." Fung Sei's dying words near the end of the film are even more explicit in their disavowal of Hong Kong contemporary society when he says that "We're outmoded characters, outcasts of our community." The two men's selfless brotherhood based on an ethical system of reciprocity has



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become an anomaly in the profit-driven society of modern Hong Kong, but nevertheless still points at the possibility of the survival of this ethical system in the form of righteous individuals.

Reciprocal moral understanding and righteous revenge as an answer to the inadequacies of the official legal authorities also play an important role in John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow 2*. In this film, Sung is offered an early release if he helps the police force with infiltrating into the criminal organization of his former boss Lung. Sung accepts the offer after he discovers that his younger brother Kit, who he has reconciled with after the heroic sacrifice of Mark in *A Better Tomorrow*, is on an undercover police assignment in the same organization. After Lung is framed for a murder, he flees to New York, but subsequently suffers a mental breakdown after he learns that his daughter has been assassinated. In New York, Lung is taken into care by Ken, the twin brother of Mark from the *A Better Tomorrow*, played again by actor Chow Yun-fat. In another example of reciprocal appraisal, Lung regains his sanity after witnessing the wounding of Ken at the hands of New York gangsters who want to extort Ken's Chinese restaurant. Staring intently at his wounded comrade, Lung finally recovers after calling out his friend's name and witnessing the look of suffering on his face. Immediately, he transforms back into his former self and helps Ken defend against his enemies in a violent shootout. Again, *A Better Tomorrow 2* also features a form of righteous revenge. When Ken and Lung return to Hong Kong and meet up with Sung and his younger brother Kit in order to enact righteous revenge on Ko, the man who murdered Lung's daughter. Later, this man is also responsible for the death of policeman Kit, after he tries to infiltrate in Ko's villa on



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his own. Here, justice is again portrayed as an undertaking that cannot be enacted by the official police authorities, as represented by Kit.

Instead, righteous revenge outside of Hong Kong's sanctioned rule of law is again the only way to achieve justice for a wrongdoing. Also, it emphasizes that in John Woo's films, taking righteous revenge is always a collective effort, as a single person is doomed to fail in his efforts. Again, note the difference between the vigilantism in these films versus that in Hollywood vigilante films such as *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Death Wish* (1974), *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *The Crow* (1994), where vengeance is portrayed as an individual act against a corrupt world. This partly safes John Woo's heroic bloodshed films from becoming reactionary, as righteous revenge in Woo's films offers an alternative way of regarding one's peers in the economically stratified society of Hong Kong. They offer hope for fixing some of the ills of society in a communal way, as opposed to the solitary quest for revenge of the aforementioned Hollywood films where violence is the final and only answer to corruption. The second to last scene in *A Better Tomorrow 2* features Sung, Ken, and Lung collectively enacting righteous revenge on Ko in his villa. While they succeed in murdering their enemy Ko, all three of them are most likely mortally wounded in the process. When police inspector Wu, who saw Ko's criminal organization as merely a prestigious last case before his retirement, arrives at the scene, he finds Sung, Ken, and Lung sitting amidst the bloody aftermath of the final gunfight. Sung tells him "Inspector Wu, you'd better not retire. There's a lot for you to do yet," thus sardonically indicting the Hong Kong police force's ineffectiveness.



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Here, similarly to *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer*, the Hong Kong official legal authorities in the form of the police force is unable to effectively deal with a case of injustice, and righteous revenge outside of the confines of legal procedures becomes necessary. *A Better Tomorrow 2*'s final scene ends on a positive note, portraying the employees of Ken's New York restaurant who are able to continue to manage the establishment after Ken has resisted local gangsters' attempts to extort him and answered them with violence. Violence in the form of righteous revenge is thus presented as a positive force in the film, as it can correct injustice in ways that the legal authorities cannot.

Revenge constituting a heroic act within the diegetic moral universe of the films has two radical implications. First, there is the fact that the final act of righteous revenge is enacted by the police protagonist who has realized that his newfound gangster friend's moral standards are considerably higher than that of the official authorities. Ironically, the gangster heroes of John Woo's films are the ultimate manifestation of justice. While paying for top lawyers to evade legal prosecution, as criminal Shing in *A Better Tomorrow* brags about before being killed, is perfectly legal, the film condemns this act as unrighteous. The three films question the idea of Hong Kong as a city where the rule of law is impartial and the highest standard of justice.

Second, John Woo's heroic bloodshed films point to the possibility of transcending vertical economic stratification by forming horizontal bonds through mutual recognition. In these films, righteousness, and not wealth, is the ultimate standard for judging a person's character. Again, this is a radical proposition in Hong



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Kong. As Gordon Matthews and Tai Lok-lui note when discussing class in Hong Kong in Bourdieusian terms:

> Because its population is so fluid, and because of its recent rapid rise in wealth and its colonial status, for much of its history, no large, stable high class has had the chance to develop, one whose membership could be based on criteria such as intimate familiarity with high culture. Instead, social class in Hong Kong has been based, quite nakedly, on money: the richer you are, the higher class you are.[178]

John Woo's heroic bloodshed films reject this societal structure by offering an alternative way of determining an individual's worth and creating working class heroes for Hong Kong's disenfranchised. John Woo's heroic bloodshed films present an ideal of righteous revenge that is more just than that enacted by the sanctioned judicial system, because the latter is corrupted by being embedded in an economic system where punishment can be bought off. Nonetheless, it is not a direct attack on a particular political system, instead offering a notion of brotherhood that precedes and exists outside of, and even in opposition to, any political order. The specific working-class nature of the resistance against Hong Kong's economic and judicial system that operates against them is further strengthened by Chow Yun-fat's public persona.

Chow Yun-fat, who plays Mark in *A Better Tomorrow* and Ah Jong in *The Killer*, is frequently portrayed in the Hong Kong media as an unassuming man who

[178] Gordon Matthews and Tai-lok Lui, *Consuming Hong Kong* (Hong Kong UP, 2001) 8.



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lives a frugal and normal life despite his wealth and is not conceited in his interactions with his many fans. For instance, in an article published online by the South China Morning Post, Woo is described as follows:

> As Hong Kong cleaned up after the trail of wreckage left behind by Typhoon Hato on Wednesday, one unlikely resident was spotted lending a helping hand and clearing fallen tree branches by the side of a road – movie star Chow Yun-fat … A passer-by in Kowloon Tong saw the beloved actor, who was alone and dressed in a black jacket and shorts … Chow obliged a request for a selfie with the fan, and the picture was posted on Instagram, together with another shot of the star in clean-up action.[179]

I do not intend to insinuate in any way that Chow Yun-fat's good intentions here are merely an effect of him personifying the working-class heroes he portrayed in John Woo's heroic bloodshed films, but it is nevertheless interesting to note that Hong Kong's media frequently reports on Chow Yun-fat's acts of kindness. The congruence of the personality of Chow Yun-fat's public persona and that of his characters in John Woo's heroic bloodshed films is likely one of the reasons for the continued popularity of black-collar worker characters played by Chow Yun-fat, like Mark and Ah Jong.

[179] "Hong Kong Star Chow Yun-fat Spotted Clearing Fallen Tree Branches On Roadside After Hato," *South China Morning Post* (South China Morning Post, 25 Aug. 2017.



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# CONCLUSION

The subversive implications of John Woo's heroic bloodshed films are not directed against the then-impending Hong Kong Handover to the People's Republic of China. By reconciling protagonists who are on opposite sides of the state-sanctioned law through codes of brotherhood and righteous revenge, John Woo's heroic bloodshed films present a perennial system of justice that is pre-governmental altogether, as it hails back to a pre-imperial Chinese moral code. Thus, the films should not merely be regarded as allegories for pre-Handover Hong Kong, as it circumvents the requirement of Hong Kong sovereignty for establishing a just moral framework in the first place. Instead, the films offer critical counter-narratives to the Hong Kong myth of rule of law. While the film presents a corrupt modern Hong Kong society, this corruption can be confronted by a code of conduct that is not in allegiance with any particular source of state power: indeed, this is what makes the code incorruptible in the first place, as it is based on unpartisan, unbound to either police or gangster hierarchies, bonds of brotherhood that are uncompromisable by the temptations of gaining individual power.



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# Chapter 3

## Reassessing Revolutionary Brotherhood:

## Johnnie To's *Election* and *Election 2*

On June 29th of 2003, two years before the premiere of Hong Kong filmmaker Johnnie To's Triad film *Election,* the governments of Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China signed the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA for short), a free trade agreement between the two regions in order "to strengthen trade and investment cooperation between Mainland China and Hong Kong and promote joint development on the two sides." At first glance, Johnnie To's *Election* (2005), as well as its sequel *Election 2* (2006) lament this growing political and economic influence of the PRC on Hong Kong. Despite that, the films instead offer an internal critique of the Hong Kong myth of representative democracy by positing that Mainland Chinese influence is ultimately just a continuation of the political system of plutocratic hypocrisy. The films subvert the idea of righteous brotherhood that is a staple of John Woo's heroic bloodshed films discussed in the second chapter of this thesis. Specifically, in their rejection of a continued existence of an Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood within the modern Triads, they allegorically dismantle the idea that the Hong Kong authorities operate in the best interest of its people, regardless of Mainland Chinese influence.

These films portray a cynical vision on the loss of the ideals of brotherhood in post-Handover Hong Kong. Whereas John Woo's heroic bloodshed protagonists are still upholding a code-of-conduct based on righteous revenge, reciprocal moral



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understanding, and an adherence to the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood, the Triad protagonists depicted in To's *Election* and *Election 2* have by and large totally discarded this code-of-conduct in favour of reaping the monetary benefits of fully participating in Hong Kong's system of plutocratic hypocrisy. While this appears as a full subversion of the idea of righteous Triad traditions, these two Johnnie To films are, on the contrary, further mythologizing of these code-of-conducts by positing the historical existence of romanticized Triads that originally adhered to these codes. The Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood is thus still positioned in an idealized past that is juxtaposed to the present in which Triad members merely adhere to the Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood.

As argued in the first chapter of this thesis, the formation of the Triads as revolutionary groups whose purpose was to resist the Qing dynasty is a mythologized fiction, and this chapter demonstrates what is lost if this historical fact is not properly considered in light of Johnnie To's Hong Kong Triad films *Election* and *Election 2*. Arguing against both director Johnnie To and film scholars who interpret the films as a demythologization of the Triad genre, the films further *strengthen* the myth of the Triads. Moreover, Johnnie To employs this mythologized version of the original Triads in order to criticize the current Machiavellian plutocratic political system of Hong Kong. Yet because this version refers back to a mythologized glorious shared Chinese past, they propound an equally false myth of the original Triads as an alternative to Hong Kong's present day woes. Furthermore, instead of being allegories of PRC political encroachment on Hong Kong, the societal upheaval that is portrayed in the films is instead an allegorical representation of the internal Hong



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Kong myth of representative democracy, and not of interference by a specific country or political party.

## THE DISCOURSE ON JOHNNIE TO'S ELECTION AND ELECTION 2

Johnnie To's *Election* premiered in 2005 and was both a financial and critical success. It grossed over 15 million HKD at the Hong Kong box-office, which is especially high for a Category 3 film, and received awards for best picture, best director, best actor, and best screenplay at the 25th Hong Kong Film Awards, as well as for the best screenplay at the 42nd golden horse film awards. The sequel, *Election 2* or *Triad Election*, was released the following year and became an international film festival favorite after an Out of Competition screening at the Cannes Film Festival, being the official selection at Busan, Rotterdam, Toronto, Moscow, and many other film festivals. When *Election* premiered at the 2005 Cannes Film Festival, Johnnie To had already established himself as an auteur of Triad films, being the creator of movies such as *A Hero Never Dies* (1998), *The Mission* (1999) and *Fulltime Killer* (2001).

*Election* was his first film to receive a Category III rating, however, which means persons younger than 18 years of age are not permitted to watch the film according to the Hong Kong motion picture rating system. This category is normally reserved for either soft-porn films such as *Sex and Zen* (1991) and it's 2011 3D remake, or horror films with gruesome images such as *Three...Extremes* (2004). Notably, films featuring Triads do not receive a category III rating very often. For instance, *A Better Tomorrow* retroactively received a Category IIB rating when the



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rating system was introduced in 1988, which means it is not suitable for young persons and children. Quantitatively, *Election* features much less violence than most of John Woo's Triad movies, and its violence is not as aestheticized as in Woo's carefully choreographed gun ballets. In an interview with Johnnie To in *Cineaste*, the director mentions the reason his film received a category III rating:

> Before the three-category film ratings system was introduced in 1988, it was impossible to feature any Triad-related language, gestures, or hand signs in movies. (John Woo's Triad movies, some of which were made before the system was introduced, didn't go into any specifics about Triad activity.) Once the ratings were in place the Hong Kong censorship board said that if a filmmaker wanted to depict any Triad-related rituals in a movie, that movie would automatically be rated Category III.[180]

Indeed, *Election* features several scenes which depict these kinds of rituals, such as the blood covenant ritual.

The film opens with a shot of a triad membership certificate superimposed by the opening credits. In Gustave Schlegel's book on the triads, *Thian Ti Hwui. The Hung League or the Heaven-Earth-League*, he includes several pictures of very similar texts which are certificates for people who have become members of the so-called *Hong* family through the ritual of the blood covenant.[181] This *Hong* family was

[180] Martha Nochimson and Robert Cashill, "One Country Two Visions: An Interview with Johnnie To" (*Cinéaste* vol. 32, no. 2, 2007) 38.
[181] Gustave Schlegel, *Thian Ti Hwui: The Hung League or the Heaven-Earth-League* (A. G Banfield Government Printer, 1866) 28-31.



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a common name for some of the early incarnations of the Triads, and the film is thus explicitly framed in the context of this history. After about a minute, the yellow paper on which the text is written turns black and is superimposed on images of people engaging in the blood covenant ritual, while the words of the oath that is taking there can be heard faintly. In other words, the movie begins by hinting at the mythologized ritual background of the Triads by way of esoteric texts and rituals.

Over the last ten years, Triad films including Johnnie To's 2005 *Election* have made more explicit references to the Triads' ostentatious origins as revolutionary and patriotic organizations which resisted Qing dynasty rule in China. In the film, a voice-over narrator recounts the following history of the Triads:

> 300 years ago, the Manchurian Empire exterminated patriotic Shaolin monks. 5 survivors got away, joined forces, swore to be brothers to restore the Ming Empire. Known as the 'Five Ancestors', they created the Hung Society. It conducted heroic uprisings. Thousands of patriots valiantly died in battle. The Hung continued to exist as a secret society.

As stated in the first chapter, historians such as Dian Murray and Lin Baoqi have already debunked this origin myth of the Triads as revolutionary Shaolin monks from around the beginning of the 1980s, roughly at the same time that John Woo's heroic bloodshed films started mythologizing the gangster. Yet, as mentioned in chapter one, scholars who analyze Hong Kong Triad films do not refer to serious academic studies on the history of the Triads. Consequently, these scholars give an inaccurate account of Triad historiography.



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Most scholars specifically writing on Johnnie To's *Election* and *Election 2* read the films either as demythologizations of the romanticized Triad protagonists of John Woo's Heroic Bloodshed films, or allegorically in terms of Hong Kong's political situation as a Special Administrative Region under the sovereignty of the People's Republic of China after the 1997 Handover. For instance, Mark Walters argues that:

> Election and Election 2, however, foreground a specific hierarchical society. In other words, violence is not deconstructive by virtue of its mere existence in the narratives. It exists outside of and in direct opposition to the Wo Shing Society's historical adherence to heroic bloodshed themes. As such, death as a heroic notion is either withheld from the characters, or, if it is granted, it is ugly and highly unheroic.[182]

Note here that Walters links what he refers to as the films' "unheroic bloodshed"[183] to an ostensible historical Wo Shing society that did still adhere to certain codes of conduct. Ergo, he contrasts the contemporary Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood with the ostensible historical Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood.

Both films are interpreted as political allegories for encroachment of the PRC on the economy and politics of Hong Kong. In his monograph on Johnnie To, Stephen Teo comments on the political nature of the second film as follows:

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[182] Mark Walters, "De-heroicizing Heroic Bloodshed in Johnnie To's *Election* and *Election* 2" (*Asian Cinema*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2010) 247.
[183] Walters 246.



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> Election 2 is by far the more political of the two films. Its conclusion reveals China's hand in the lawmaking agency of violence perpetrated in that film. Louis Koo's character, Jimmy Lee, the victor of the election, has a meeting with the provincial PSB deputy chief Shi (played by You Yong) who instructs him to go for total power and ensure stability by hereafter passing the power on to his family rather than have the triads go through elections … The figure of Shi therefore reflects the collusion between the Chinese Government and the Hong Kong triads in protecting their respective vested interests in Hong Kong — on the pretext of ensuring stability and peace. To makes the political point that China is against democracy in Hong Kong, believing it to be injurious to stability and the growing economic cooperation between China and Hong Kong.[184]

Stephen Teo, in other words, primarily interprets Mainland Chinese police chief as a representation of the growing political influence of the People's Republic of China over Hong Kong. Even though Teo notes, by referencing Sek Kei, that not much will change as the Triad elections have never been democratic, Teo stills considers *Election 2* "the most directly political film made in Hong Kong in the post-97 era."[185] He does not consider the possibility that this ultimately empty nature of changing the Triad society's elective system of succession into a hereditary one, point at a larger issue confronting Wo Shing's traditional customs: the threat of plutocratic hypocrisy.

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[184] Stephen Teo, *Director in Action: Johnie To and the Hong Kong Action Film*. (Hong Kong UP, 2007) 181.
[185] Teo 182.



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In her book *Hong Kong Cinema Since* 1997, Vivian Lee comes closer to an interpretation of the two films' Triad society as primarily transformed by plutocratic, and not Mainland Chinese influence, when she observes:

> In these films, the group, be it a police unit or a triad society, exhibits a corporate spirit that emphasizes the need to survive in an increasingly versatile, crisis-stricken, and business-oriented world. Here, heroism is repeatedly sidestepped by professionalism, emphasizing self-/group preservation, operational efficiency, and shrewd and unscrupulous decision-making.[186]

Unfortunately, Lee does not expand on this observation and does not offer a comprehensive analysis of the films in light of the capitalist "corporate spirit"[187] that is at work in the films' Triad society. Kinnia Yau bluntly states that "the English title of the movie Election apparently mirrors the election of the Chief Executive through the depiction of conflicts within the triad. It is Johnnie To's usual style to convey social implications in his films,"[188] but declines to give any further elucidation on her politically allegorical interpretation of the film besides its title. In other words, scholars who have written on Johnnie To's *Election* and *Election 2* in general posit that they allegorize Hong Kong politics. Be that as it may, a close reading of the films reveals that the allegorical nature of the films lies more in its depiction of the effects on plutocratic hypocrisy on the inner working of the Triad society.

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[186] Vivian Lee, *Hong Kong Cinema Since 1997: The Post-Nostalgic Imagination* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 90.
[187] Lee 90.
[188] Shuk-ting Kinnia Yau, "A Study of Post-Handover Action Cinema 1997-2007" *(Asian Cinema*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2009) 122.



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In conclusion, there is a certain tenacity with which film scholars writing on Hong Kong Triad films have avoided historical studies on the Triads and their origins. So far, a majority of the scholars writing on Johnnie To's *Election* and *Election* interpret the films as clear allegorical representations of the growing political influence of the People's Republic of China on the politics of Hong Kong. An analysis of both *Election* films reveals more clearly why the historical evidence against patriotic Triad origins is ignored both within the films themselves and the current paradigm of transnational and Hong Kong film studies. Furthermore, allegorical readings of the films as representing PRC and Hong Kong political tensions need to be nuanced by a thorough analysis of the actual influence the Mainland Chinese government has on the Triad societies in the films.

## CONTEMPORARY TRIAD IDEOLOGY AS HYPOCRISY

From the very opening scene of *Election* there is an allegorical link to the lack of representative democracy in Hong Kong, in the form of the eponymous election of Johnnie To's film which is presented as a tradition within the Wo Sing Triad. This tradition is not entirely fictional, as reported on by the Hong Kong media. For instance, the article "Jail Terms Delay Triad Elections" published in *The South China Morning Post,* reports on the election system within the Wo On Lok Triad society. In *Election*, a new chairman is elected every two years by the Triad uncles; the older members who are in the upper echelon of the organization. Indeed, both the voters as well as the two candidates are high-standing members of the Wo Shing Triad, thus



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echoing the election of elite members of society in Hong Kong's Legislative Council by a select group of industry representatives.

*Election* posits that the distinction described in the introduction, that between gift giving as a form of cementing *guanxi* on the one hand, and direct corruption in the form of bribery on the other hand, is a false one. In the film, two candidates respectively use these two options to try to swing the election for the new chairman of the Wo Sing Triad in their favor, at first tricking the viewer into seeing only the direct corruption as such. After the aforementioned opening scene of the Triad certificate and blood covenant ritual, the next scene features several present-day gang members discussing the leadership capabilities of the film's election contestants, Lok and Big D. Both are campaigning heavily, although their approach is different: Lam discusses business and says he will increase the gang's territory to include the profitable Hong Kong neighborhood Tsim Sha Tsui if he is elected, while Big D gives HK$ 200.000 to an intermediary in order to directly bribe uncle Cocky into voting for him at the upcoming election. He also tries to bribe uncle Long Gun with the same amount of money, but this attempt fails because the intermediate has a gambling as well as a drinking problem and only gives half of the money to Long Gun. This failed bribe attempt will prove crucial in the next scene, in which ten Wo Shing uncles attend a meeting to elect *Wo Shing*'s next leader.

During the election, the continued power of seniority within the Triad ultimately decides the outcome. At first, Big D seems to be standing a good chance of winning: five of the uncles say they support Big D during the election, and Long Gun



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is still considering which candidate to choose. But then the eldest member of the group, uncle Teng Wai decides to step in, telling the others that:

> When I was young, the Uncles got to elect the chairman. I thought they were very old. I wondered why it had to be that way. Later I realized it was their seniority. Whatever they said carried weight. Getting a little money is fine, but if bribery corrupts this election, we're better off auctioning the seat! […] This society needs harmony, not a one-man show.

Right before the speech, Teng has stopped a heated argument between the uncles, by serving tea to all of them. While they drink from their cups, a song by 1930-40s Shanghai-based singer Zhou Xuan plays in the background. Teng's seniority is emphasized by this scene, as he is the only uncle who was born around the time of this music. Teng is portrayed here as a wise and influential voice from the past.

The system of representation portrayed in the film, in which only the senior members of Wo Shing can vote for their favorite candidate, is in fact not unlike Hong Kong's political system of representation, where a disproportionate amount of Legislative Council seats are reserved for members of specific interest groups, as discussed in the introduction. After the speech by Wo Shing's most senior member Teng, two of the relatively older uncles who stated that they were in favor of Big D before now vote for Lok. Therefore, Lok receives seven out of ten votes, including Long Gun's, who is the last to raise his hand. Meanwhile, Big D is convinced he will win the election, as he is preparing for his inauguration party while the election is still underway. Indeed, he is furious when he learns that Lok will be the next leader of Wo



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Shing, and kidnaps and tortures Long Gun and the intermediate who failed to influence him. Big D is furious about this seventh vote, even though it didn't directly influence the election process, as six votes were enough to win.

The reciprocal concept of *bao* discussed in the first chapter is an important key in understanding this scene, as it undermines the idea that gift giving in the name of *guanxi* and direct corruption in the form of bribery are absolutely distinct. Big D is convinced that Cocky and Long Gun will both support him as he believes that they have received his HK$ 200.000 and are now morally obliged to return this favor. If Long Gun would have supported Big D from the start, there would have been six in favor of him before Teng's speech, increasing his chances to win considerably. As Big D believes he has honestly bribed just the right number of uncles to win the election, he feels cheated when one of them decides to vote for the other candidate. Indeed, Long Gun is the only uncle receiving punishment: the two elders who changed their mind about Big D after Teng's speech are left unharmed. Long Gun is tortured because he failed to hold up his side of the bargain. When viewing the film for the first time, it appears that Big D is just a bad loser. Lok appears to have honestly won the election without resorting to bribery. Yet, Lok's supporters also have their personal reasons to vote for him that do not focus on his leadership capabilities. For example, one of his supporters states that "Lok respects the elders most. Last time, he paid my bail money out of his own pocket." Perhaps Lok has just been less obvious about his bribes, making them appear to be unrelated to the election, while his gifts are still expected to be returned in the spirit of *bao*. Therefore, while allegorical readings of *Election* as a battle between a good



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democratic tradition of Hong Kong in the form of an election embodied by Lok and a greedy and power-hungry totalitarianism embodied by Big D seem obvious at first, they do not do justice to the film's complex story. When viewing the first half of the movie, it is easy to fall into the trap of regarding Lok as the good gangster, and Big D as the bad gangster, but this dichotomy is subverted during the two electors struggle for power.

Even though the traditions and code-of-conducts of the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood are revealed to be merely a camouflage for the brutal reality of the Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood, these traditions still serve to legitimize the Triad's leadership. Winning the election is not enough for Lok, as the newly appointed leader has to be in possession of the dragon head baton to formalize his position. The baton is first mentioned by Uncle Teng, the oldest members of the Triad and the prime defender of its traditions, who explains its function in the following way to the new chairman:

> In ancient times before telecommunications the chairman could remain unknown to the brothers of his own Triad and not be identified. The Dragon Head Baton helped the chairman to be recognized. Now, with progress, it represents the Chairman's authority…. This baton is over 100 years old. It has been handed down to dozens of Chairmen. Losing it would mean losing face for the Society.

In other words, the baton no longer has the practical function that it had in ancient times, and has been reduced to being merely a symbolic representation of the chairman's authority. The film repeatedly offers similar examples of Triad traditions



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that have become devoid of their original meaning under the influence of plutocratic hypocrisy, and their repetition only functions as a means to structure the power-relations within the Triad.

The absolute distinction between the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood and the Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood is more ambiguous in this film in comparison to John Woo's heroic bloodshed films, however. In *Election*, the two contenders for the leadership position are Lok and Big D. Lok is deceptively presented as a stoic, unassuming widower who has the Triad's interest at heart, while Big D is portrayed as a hot-headed, rambunctious gangster who tries to bribe his way to the top. The struggle to win the election and obtain the dragon head baton is largely waged on the level of politics. The classic dichotomy of good gangster versus bad gangster fully collapses during their violent confrontation at the end of the film, but is already subtly eroded by the fact that both gangsters are operating solely in terms of material gains. In typical John Woo Heroic Bloodshed films such as *The Killer* or *A Better Tomorrow*, the protagonist distinguishes himself from corrupt Triad members by his adherence to a code of brotherhood. The high-ranking Triad members of *Election* are too cynical to still believe in such antiquated notions. In *Election* it is only the older, more powerful members of the Triads who display this cynical attitude towards the Triad traditions. It is exactly their lack of faith that gives them power over the younger members who still genuinely believe. Analyzing the different ways these two groups participate in the struggle to obtain the baton sheds light on this discrepancy.

In the film, symbolic representations of Triad legitimacy, such as the dragon baton, serve as a means for the Triad elders to control their underlings. The five



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Triad's foot soldiers who ultimately bring the baton to Lok in a sort of relay race, have very different motivations during the search than their cynical leaders. For example, Jimmy seeks the baton to avenge the torture of his bosses by Big D's hand, while Jet wants to display his toughness and loyalty to the Triad society. None of these younger Triad members have an explicit monetary desire in their quest for the baton, in sharp contrast to their scheming bosses. The clearest example of the divergent ways the older and younger generation perceive the Triad doctrine can be found in Big Head's allegiance to the Triad oaths. In a scene exemplary of Johnnie To's black humor, Big Head overzealously recites the Triad oaths that are taken during the Triad initiation ritual while defending the baton. As he is being viciously beaten, he states that "If I rob a brother I shall be killed by five thunderbolts." At that very moment, some Triad elders decide to switch camps and call him with the message that he should give the baton to his assailant. Covered in blood, he obediently hands it over while reciting another Triad oath: "I will never embezzle property from my brothers. If I do so, I will be killed by 10,000 knifes."

In other words, the Triad oaths have become emptied of meaning, as they can be used for diametrically opposing goals, depending on the whim of the bosses. The foot soldiers' adherence to certain codes of loyalty to one's boss or the Triad, or of adherence to solemn oaths that the elders no longer believe in, is exactly what makes them useful pawns in the Triad's power struggle. The importance of a ritual object the dragon head baton to legitimate the chairman's rule can thus be located in the fact that the power-structures within the society are based on an asymmetrical adherence to the Triad's traditions. Only the Triad elders are cynically aware of the ultimately



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empty nature of the baton, which gives them power over the foot soldiers who lack this insight. Even so, the baton is ultimately not able to neutralize the power struggles in the upper regions of the Triad's hierarchy.

Yet the symbols of the Triad elders' legitimacy ultimately cannot contain the violence that is inherent to the Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood. Once Lok has obtained the dragon head baton, the Triad only temporarily returns to an equilibrium when Big D decides to concede. This does not mean that he suddenly regains his faith in the power of the baton as a true source of legitimacy. He did not play by the rules of the election, so the symbolic nature of the baton should not matter. Again, this appears more as a calculated action, as a civil war within the Triad ranks would most likely result in his death. To solidify their truce, Big D, Lok and several other high-ranking Triad members perform the blood covenant ritual. This ritual is intended to create a symbolic fraternal bond between men who are not biologically related. In spite of that, this ritual is also just an empty gesture which covers up an inconsistency in Triad ideology, as becomes apparent in the final scene of the film in which Lok rears his violent head. While the two men go on a fishing trip, Big D jovially suggests that the Wo Sing Triad could have two chairmen. Instead of just refusing Big D, Lok bludgeons him to death with a heavy rock in a primordial act of violence. He then continues to strangle Big D's wife, as she is a witness to his violent outburst.

Triad ideology in *Election* structures, while at the same time conceals, the imbalance in power between the different hierarchies within the Triad. It attempts to suppress the ultimately violent nature of individual Triad members regardless of their place in the Triad hierarchy. Without a certain ideological structure, the Triad would



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not be able to function as an apparently coherent whole and would collapse into chaos. Even so, the ideological structure of the Triad can never completely erase the violence between members of the same Triad society. Even the elders, who do normally not like to get their hands dirty in their struggle for financial prosperity, ultimately cannot repress the irrational antagonism at the core of their being.

At first glance, Johnnie To's *Election* thus seems to offer a rather critical view of Triad members as heroes following a code of honor or loyalty. This film portrays the Triad elders as cynical plutocrats, prone to irrational bouts of violence, who use their naïve foot soldiers as pawns in their struggle for monetary gain. Johnnie To ultimately tries to restore the Triad ideology as a coherent whole by going back to its mythical origin. On the surface, Johnnie To's *Election* appears to demythologize the heroic image of the Triad protagonist who adheres to a moral code. Indeed, the director himself offers such an interpretation of his film in an interview in Stephen Teo's monograph about the director:

> The question is why when I was so fond of guns in my previous films, I don't use them in Election. I wanted to show a Buddhist notion of cause and effect relating to the history of the Chinese triads. They have a 300-year history where the original aim was to oppose the Qing and restore the Ming. But today, the triads have forgotten the principles of the founding fathers in the Hong Men society; they have forgotten brotherly affections.[189]

[189] Teo 245.



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Again, there is the idea that historically, the Triads followed certain codes of loyalty and brotherhood, as portrayed in heroic bloodshed films, but these codes no longer exist in the contemporary Wo Shing Triad society.

Despite Johnnie To's seemingly critical appraisal of the notion of a continued Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood in John Woo's heroic bloodshed films, he is not nearly as critical on the so-called historical version of this Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood. In *Election*, two versions of the Triad blood covenant ritual are depicted. The first one offers the so-called historical version of the Triads as revolutionaries. It is rife with insurgent rhetoric of overthrowing the Qing and restoring the Ming. When the ritual participants are asked whether they prefer money or their brothers, of course they choose their newly found brothers.

In this case, Johnnie To's criticism of Triad ideology is fully absent; the ritual is non-ironically presented as a faithful recreation of the authentic ritual. This ancient blood covenant ritual is then juxtaposed to the contemporary Wo Sing version. The ritual, now enacted in a contemporary setting by several prominent *Wo Shing* members including Lok and Big D. In front of an altar with a statue of Guan Gong, Lok gives the following speech at the end of the ritual:

> Honor shall bring prosperity, those of no honor will be broken. The God of War is our witness. Our sabers united as nine brothers. We shall no longer fight: if one of us is in danger, the rest shall go to his rescue. We shall conquer Tsim Sha Tsui!

It is relevant to compare these words with the oath taken by Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei in the first chapter of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, as translated in



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the first chapter of this thesis. While the goal of these three men is the defeat of the Yellow Turbans in service of their country, the nine brothers in *Election* unite for more pragmatic reasons. A ritual that was according to the movie's historical account on the origins of the *Hong* traditionally enacted to unite patriotic Chinese against foreign invaders, is transformed in a modern gangster setting. The covenant is now aimed at economic gain, embodied by the wish to conquer Tsim Sha Tsui, and honor is important because it "shall bring prosperity." Whereas the original Triads supposedly did not care for money, the contemporary ritual is thus explicitly framed in terms of the financial benefits. Furthermore, the ritual does not create a lasting fraternal bond, as Lok later viciously kills his new blood brother Big D. The film posits a radical difference between the past and present blood covenant ritual; again, the past revolutionary aim of the ritual is revealed to be hollowed out by commercial interests in the contemporary Triad society. Having said that, as argued earlier, this romanticized view of the Triads' history has already been contested.

Johnnie To's *Election* is critical to a certain extent, in that it no longer follows the good gangster versus bad gangster dichotomy of heroic bloodshed films, and explicitly subverts this notion by making us identify with an apparent good gangster who eventually turns out to be the most violent and brutal character of the film. While the younger generation in *Election* still believes in certain Triad values, they adopt the elders' cynical attitude once they reach a higher position within the Triad hierarchy in *Election 2*, which I discuss in the following section of this chapter. Notwithstanding, while Johnnie To subverts this dichotomy within his representation of the contemporary Triad, he posits a new, even stronger dichotomy between the



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original revolutionary Triads that still adhered to a Triad code of brotherhood and loyalty, and their contemporary decadent incarnations, who are only in it for the money. The representation of this dichotomy within Johnnie To's *Election 2* is even more explicit in its critique of contemporary Hong Kong society.

## THE END OF BROTHERHOOD IN JOHNNIE TO'S *ELECTION 2*

In *Election 2*, the erosion of the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood in lieu of the Instrumental Mandate of Brotherhood is completed by way of the Wo Sing's juniors, the black-collar workers who in the first film still genuinely adhered to the traditions and code-of-conducts of the Triad. In the film, Lok is still the current chairman of the Wo Sing society but is nearing the end of his terms. A new election has to be held, and again there are several competing members of the Wo Sing society who vie for the position of chairman. Lok desires to hold onto power at all costs, even though he cannot be re-elected after he has been Wo Sing's leader for two years. Several of the organization's foot soldiers who helped Lok obtain the dragon baton in the first film, now wish to run for the position themselves. The most prominent of them is Jimmy, who is praised by his peers for his business acumen, and indeed he wishes to attain the position of chairman only because it will allow him to invest in real estate projects in Mainland China, which will then allow him to become a legitimate businessmen and cut his connections to the Wo Sing society.

This cutting of roots and connections is a recurring idea in the film connected to the logic of late capitalism. In his book *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson argues that late capitalism and its formal ally



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postmodernism, both in terms of an art form and a way of experiencing the world, leads to a schizophrenic subject position:

> I take such spatial peculiarities of postmodernism as symptoms and expressions of a new and historically original dilemma, one that involves our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities, whose frames range from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentering of global capital itself. Not even Einsteinian relativity, or the multiple subjective worlds of the older modernists, is capable of giving any kind of adequate figuration to this process, which in lived experience makes itself felt by the so-called death of the subject, or, more exactly, the fragmented and schizophrenic decentering and dispersion of this last.[190]

What Jameson argues here is that the postmodern condition leads to a fragmented and schizophrenic subject position, as subjects are bombarded with "a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities,"[191] meaning a multitude of disparate ideas, images, sensations, etc. This schizophrenic postmodern subject is intrinsically linked to the "unimaginable decentering of global capital itself,"[192] which in other words denotes the fact that the system of late capitalism is no longer tied to a particular space. In the film, this decentered nature of the subject under the influence of the

[190] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke UP, 1991) 413.
[191] Jameson 413.
[192] Jameson 413.



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system of plutocratic greed is most thoroughly represented in the form of Jimmy. Jimmy considers himself a businessman who no longer needs the traditional values and ties of the Wo Sing society, and neither is tied to the physical space of Hong Kong. Jameson further observes a loss of historicity within the postmodern late capitalist world system,[193] which means that subjects are no longer consciously embedded within a historical context. In blunt terms, for Jameson the logic of late capitalism that simply moves where the most profit can be made regardless of spatial ties is also mirrored in the rootlessness of the postmodern subject.

Jimmy, as a representative of this logic of late capitalism, therefore sees no problem in severing the ties between him and the Wo Sing society and its specific historical and geographic context, and he believes he can easily migrate to a new location in order to start a new life with his family. Jimmy is portrayed as a member of the *nouveaux riche* who started building his fortune with counterfeit pornographic DVDs but is now able to invest in real estate. Furthermore, he has big aspirations for his unborn child and already dreams of his child's future career as a lawyer or doctor. In one scene, Jimmy is specifically represented as a part of a new generation of Hong Kong businessmen that seeks to invest in the Mainland Chinese market when he tries to practice his broken Mandarin in an upscale restaurant.

Yet, his dreams of further upward mobility and becoming a legitimate businessman are shattered in his interactions with the Mainland Chinese high-ranking police chief Shi. After detaining Jimmy who is on a clandestine business trip in Mainland China, Shi tells Jimmy that he can only start his real estate projects in the

[193] Jameson 8.



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Mainland if he manages to get elected as Wo Sing's new chairman. While initially Jimmy planned to leave the Triad society altogether, he realizes that he has no choice but to comply with the officer's request. What follows is a power struggle between Lok, who doesn't want to relinquish his power, and Jimmy the aspiring legitimate businessman. In his aspirations of becoming a bona fide entrepreneur, however, Jimmy goes to extreme lengths to win the election.

In perhaps the most brutal scene in Johnnie To's oeuvre, Jimmy intimidates Lok's hired killers by butchering one of their colleagues with a cleaver, pushing the severed limbs through a meat grinder, and feeding him to the German shepherds that guard the men. Sardonically, this scene happens right after Jimmy the aforementioned scene where Jimmy visits an upscale restaurant. In an instant, Jimmy switches from being a *nouveau riche* consumer into a brutal producer of human dog food. The aspirations of Jimmy of becoming a legitimate businessman are mocked here by indicating that his riches are only made possible by instances of plutocratic greed and brutality. To further emphasize this, the camera zooms in on several bloodied Hong Kong dollar bills during this meat grinder scene. This scene reveals the brutal underbelly of daily consumption. Lok's hired killers are here literally portrayed as dispensable pieces of flesh that are caught up in the power struggle of the Triad's upper ranks.

The portrayal of animals as beings that are less animalistic than the violent protagonists of the film is also a feature of the first *Election*. The ugly side of Hong Kong's democracy, in which the myth of representative democracy conceals the business interests that are embedded in the region's governance is represented in the



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two films in the form of animalistic violence. When Lok murders Big D and his wife in that film, the camera lingers on a group of wild monkeys, who appear to anxiously scream at witnessing this act of human brutality. In both scenes, the inclusion of animals is used to indicate the dehumanizing effect the relentless pursuit of monetary gains has had on Wo Sing's members, who are willing to forgo all human ethics in their climbing of Wo Sing's corporate ladder. Yet these acts of brutality do not offer Jimmy the possibility of escaping his Triad origins. After Lok is killed by his former employees, Jimmy manages to win the election for Wo Sing's chairman position and meets up with police intendant Shi to further discuss Jimmy's legitimate investment plans in Mainland China. They meet in the area of land designated to Jimmy's future real estate projects, in a place which currently has no human history or tradition, emphasizing Jimmy's rootlessness under the postmodern condition of late capitalism.

Mirroring a growing influence of the PRC on the economy and politics of Hong Kong, Shi informs him that he will have to turn the Wo Sing organization into a hereditary one, as opposed to using the election system to select a new chairman every two years. Jimmy is furious, as this shatters his dreams of becoming a bona fide businessman, as well as his aspirations for his child to become a lawyer or doctor. Jimmy hits Shi in the face, but he only replies with the ominous words "thank you for your cooperation." In the face of Shi's seeming omnipotence, Jimmy appears resigned to his faith, as he has already passed several ethical thresholds in his mission to become the Triads' chairman. It is unsurprising that the scholars writing on Johnnie To's *Election* and *Election 2* interpret this final scene as a direct allegorical representation of Mainland Chinese's political influence on Hong Kong, among other



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things in the form of regulating and influencing the election for Hong Kong's Chief Executive. Indeed, at the surface level of the film the omnipotence of police intendant Shi in influencing the age-old traditions of the Wo Sing society seem to echo the precarious political position of Hong Kong vis-à-vis Mainland China and its Chinese Communist Party.

Nevertheless, this straightforward allegorical interpretation of the film is disrupted by elements comparable to my rejection of the allegorical reading of John Woo's heroic bloodshed films as representations of anxiety over the then impending 1997 Handover, as argued in chapter two. In John Woo's films, the society of pre-Handover Hong Kong is already portrayed corrupted by the influence of plutocratic hypocrisy, and at that time there was certainly no reason to be nostalgic about the widespread corruption already embedded in the political system of then colonial Hong Kong. Similarly, the Wo Sing society has already abandoned all semblance of adhering to traditional ethical values of brotherhood in the first *Election* film, even though the Triad society still nominally follows its symbolic traditions.

In the first *Election* film, there is no political pressure from Mainland China on the inner workings of the Wo Sing society, yet its proclaimed democratic tradition has already been hollowed out by its members' personal interests. While the lengths Jimmy goes through to gain entrance to the Mainland Chinese business market are indeed brutal, this brutality was already an integral part of Wo Sing's Machiavellian power struggles, exemplified by the final murder of Big D by his blood brother Lok. Furthermore, the democratic nature of Wo Sing's elections is already portrayed in the first film as simply a matter of the Triad's elders representing all members of Wo



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Sing, including the foot soldiers who are treated as expendable by most of their superiors.

The conclusion of *Election 2* begs the question of what would really be lost in transforming the Wo Sing society from a nominally democratic one into one run by a system of inheritance of the chairman position. The political influence of Shi ultimately pales in comparison to the corrupting influence that the lack of representative democracy has had on the traditional values of brotherhood of the Wo Sing society. Following these perspectives, the two films allegorical meanings become quite cynical. Although Johnnie To probably did not intend this effect, both films ultimately suggest that a more prominent role of the People's Republic of China's Communist Part in the political affairs of Hong Kong would not be too different from the current political situation. Reading the two films against the grain in this fashion leads to the cynical conclusion that in Johnnie To's diegetic universe, state politics are largely irrelevant in the face of plutocratic hypocrisy.

In this sense, the allegorical implications of the films are related to those of John Woo's heroic bloodshed films discussed in chapter 2. While in John Woo's heroic bloodshed films the official state authorities are unable to enact justice because of their inherent system of legalized corruption, state authorities in Johnnie To's *Election* and *Election 2* are irrelevant altogether when compared to the power of plutocratic hypocrisy. Although the figure of Shi represents a more authoritarian way of controlling the politics of Hong Kong, in the films this political change is ultimately not that influential on an already unrecognizably changed Hong Kong under the influence of plutocratic hypocrisy. More explicitly stated, the films pose the



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question of to what extent Hong Kong would change for the worse in the case of more political interference from Mainland China. If these allegorical implications of Johnnie To's films are visionary cannot be predicted, but the truly subversive quality of the films lies in posing this question in the first place.

## CONCLUSION

Johnnie To's *Election* and *Election 2* attempt to extend John Woo's heroic bloodshed films' critique of the erosion of traditional values and ethics of Hong Kong's society in the face of plutocratic hypocrisy, and allegorically subvert the myth of representative democracy in Hong Kong by offering a vision of the Triad elections as merely a symbolic sham, as they are controlled by the Triad's elders through violent means. While John Woo's films offer a vision of the Triads were social redemption in the form of genuine horizontal bonds of brotherhood was still possible because of the existence of righteous individuals, the corruption of the Triads in Johnnie To's films seems both irreversible and all-encompassing. Instead of suggesting the possibility of sincere incorruptible bonds of brotherhood still exists within Hong Kong society, as Woo's heroic bloodshed films do, Johnnie To is much more cynical in his vision of this possibility of redemption. Johnnie To's films posit that while genuine brotherhood once existed in the form of the original Triad societies, these brotherhoods no longer exist in contemporary Hong Kong. Even so, his mythologized notion of a historical patriotic Triad origin has already been debunked by historians such as Dian Murray, thus making his apparent demythologization of the Triads a remythologization, as Johnnie To offers a



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romanticized version of the early Triad societies. Furthermore, despite their seemingly clear-cut allegorical messages, both *Election* and *Election 2* offer a more complex allegorical diagnosis of Hong Kong's predicaments and challenges after 1997. Instead of a black-and-white vision of Hong Kong's autonomy being under threat by the political encroachment of the government of the People's Republic of China, the films question to what extent this political influence is relevant in light of the immense influence of plutocratic hypocrisy on Hong Kong society, and the absence of representative democracy long before the PRC started influencing the region more directly.



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Chapter 4

The Myth of Brotherhood:

Lawrence Ah Mon's *Besieged City*

On 9th July 2006, the former Director of the Social Welfare Department and current Chief Executive of Hong Kong Carrie Lam coined the term City of Sadness to describe the impoverished Tin Shui Wai district.[194] After a string of highly publicized domestic murder and suicide cases in the area, Tin Shui Wai became synonymous with poverty, juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, and domestic violence in the eyes of the Hong Kong public. Lawrence Lau's youth gangster film *Besieged City* (2008) at first glance appears as merely a sensationalist representation of this image of Tin Shui Wai as the irremediable ghetto of Hong Kong. Notwithstanding, the film offers a salient social critique of Hong Kong by rejecting an idealized narrative of upward mobility, as well as rejecting the idea of brotherhood as a valid alternative for the nuclear family.

In comparison to John Woo's heroic bloodshed films and Johnnie To's Triad films, *Besieged City* has received much less critical acclaim and scholarly attention. One reason for this might be the film's low budget and sensationalizing aesthetics, to portray the criminal youth underbelly of Tin Shui Wai, the poorest areas in the New Territories area of Hong Kong. Be that as it may, the film offers an even more critical perspective on plutocratic hypocrisy in Hong Kong than either John Woo's heroic

[194] Ling-Ling Cheung, *Constructing Tin Shui Wai as the 'City of Sadness'*, Diss, The University of Hong Kong (2009) 1.



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bloodshed films, in which the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood is still upheld by morally superior individuals who bond together, or Johnnie To's *Election* and *Election 2*, in which the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood is lost in contemporary Hong Kong, yet was still kept intact by the historical incarnations of the Triads. Contrarily, *Besieged City* not only indicts Hong Kong's plutocratic hypocrisy by way of rejecting the myth of upward mobility, but it also dismantles the myth of brotherhood by dismissing it as a viable alternative to solving the social issues in Hong Kong. Thus, it offers an even more radical critique than the Triad films of the previous two directors. So far, no extensive English-language scholarship on the film exists, despite *Besieged City* being one of the few films to fully reject the nostalgia for an Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood that perhaps only ever existed as an ideal.

## TIN SHUI WAI AS URBAN DYSTOPIA

*Besieged City* centres on the betrayal of young gang members by both their peers and their elders. Through a system of parental impiety, namely, the abuse of power by both the parents and the elder Triad members, the lack of perspective that the young gang members in the film try to escape from in their everyday lives is merely replicated when they join a Triad. Parental impiety is one of the central problems that Confucianism has never given a clear answer to: what should you do if the parent, political leader, or older brother, who is supposed to be your role model acts unethically? *Besieged City* is thus also an implicit critique of the idea of filial piety, since the film does not offer any good alternative role models to emulate. The film portrays a structure of *jianghu* determinism, which denotes the impossibility of



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social mobility within the film, as the liminal spaces that the teenagers escape to physically mirrors the place that they are trying to escape from. Thus, joining a Triad and escaping into the *jianghu* to escape the injustices of mainstream society, as Guan Yu does in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, is ultimately a futile attempt because these injustices are present in Triad society to at least the same degree.

The film's protagonists' inability to escape the district of Tin Shui Wai, and by extension, achieve upward mobility is further accentuated through visual similarities between the liminal spaces to which the youth gang escapes, and the architecture and urban planning of Tin Shui Wai itself. As one of Hong Kong's so-called new towns, Tin Shui Wai was built in the 1980s as a reaction to rapid population growth in Hong Kong, primarily through emigration from Mainland China. The district, which is close to the PRC border and offers a view of Shenzhen from certain areas, was built specifically to house a large number of people, mainly through social housing projects.

While this exclusive focus on housing is understandable, given the rapidly increasing population of Hong Kong in the 1980s when the construction of Tin Shui Wai began, an inclusive urban design was neglected because of this overemphasis on rapid construction. As asserted by Hendrik Tieben et al., the layout of the neighborhood is radically different from the majority of areas in Hong Kong in terms of its grid pattern:

> In fact, Hong Kong's older districts, which were developed in the same period as those western cities in the late 19th century, share very similar grid layouts, small urban blocks and public transport systems



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> (of trams, buses and later an underground mass transit system). However, like many North American cities, following the introduction of private automobile, modern planning ideas and standard vehicular road design, the earlier street grid patterns have disappeared almost entirely from the urban planning repertoire. In Hong Kong … it is revealing that the idea of grid patterns returns at a moment when government agencies and urban planners seek to boost "creative districts". However, the highly connected grid pattern is absent in the layout of new towns in Hong Kong, which are planned purely for housing.[195]

Unceremoniously, the city was designed solely with this idea in mind. Consequently, it has no discernable neighborhood center or public space where people can congregate. While most of the areas in Hong Kong follow a grid pattern, Tin Shui Wai has a limited number of streets alongside which the neighborhood's various public housing estates are situated.

As a result, the city offers little opportunity for opening small-scale shops or businesses, such as is the case for many neighborhoods in Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. In a comparison between a similarly sized section of the areas of Sai Ying Pun, located on Hong Kong Island, and Tin Shui Wai, Tieben illustrates how the

[195] Hendrik Tieben et al., *How to Create Sustainable Communities in Hong Kong? Inherent Problems of Recent Urban Layouts for Microeconomic Opportunities and Quality of Living*, Sustainable Building 2013 Hong Kong Regional Conference (2013) 4.



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latter's urban layout limits small-scale business opportunities. Firstly, he discusses the economically vibrant area of Sai Ying Pung:

> In 2012, we conducted a survey of all ground-level businesses and workshops in Sai Ying Pun, which allowed us to study the changes of the district after the opening of the new MTR West Island Line in 2014, and the almost completed hillside escalator on Centre Street … All 25 blocks together provide spaces for 1,240 shops and workshops, on the street level alone. If we assume that 2-3 people work in each shop, the district already generates 2,480-3,720 jobs. In addition, there are 121 stalls in the two indoor markets in the district … and there are many more agencies, associations, tutoring classes, medical and massage services on the upper storeys of buildings.[196]

Conversely, this vibrant infrastructure for small-scale businesses is complete absent in Tin Shui Wai. Tieben continues,

> Both areas in Tin Shui Wai are organized as super blocks and surrounded by large distributor roads. Each super block contains one commercial centre with an integrated market. There are 142 businesses, private agencies and service providers in Area A's Tin Yiu Plaza, including stores on upper levels (18) and market stalls (75). The Tin Chak Shopping Centre of Area B has 189 businesses, including shops on upper levels (77) and market stalls (88). The numbers are similar in that they are fixed by design, which makes adaptability to

[196] Tieben 11-12.



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> changes almost impossible whether on the building or the urban scale. In residential towers in Tin Shui Wai, unlike the case in Sai Ying Pun, commercial activities are also not permitted (should such activities take place, residents would risk losing their subsidized home). As almost none of the businesses have access to street spaces, and they instead have to follow the strict management rules of shopping malls, it is impossible to open workshops (for example carpenters, car mechanics, bicycle repair and larger printing shops) in both areas (with a joint population of 69,394 people).[197]

Otherwise said, without taking into account the possibility of Sai Ying Pun harboring more shops than found in Tieben's study, two similarly sized areas in Sai Ying Pun and Tin Shui Wai offer 1,361 versus 331 places for setting up a small-scale business, respectively. This is a concrete example of the ways in which the different urban layouts of the two areas radically inform the opportunities, or lack thereof, for the area's residents.

Tin Shui Wai's abysmal lack of local neighborhood job opportunities is illustrated in the area's median household income compared to that of the entirety of Hong Kong. In the most recent population census conducted by the government in 2016, the poorest District Council Constituency Area of Tin Shui Wai, Yuet Yan, has a median monthly household income of HK$11,600. In comparison, the median monthly household income of the whole of Hong Kong is HK$25,000, and the

[197] Tieben 14-15.



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median monthly household income of Hong Kong Island is HK$31,250.[198] Similarly, out of the 18,849 residents living in Yuet Yan, less than 15 percent has attained an education higher than the upper secondary level, compared to over 29 percent over the entire population of Hong Kong.[199] Thus, the option of studying diligently to gain entry into one of Hong Kong's prestige schools or universities is also not an option for people living in this area. With educational prospects so dim, there are almost no other means to attain upward mobility.

Unsurprisingly, this lack of opportunities for residents of Tin Shui Wai translates into numerous social issues. The corrosive effects of the urban layout of Tin Shui Wai trickle down onto its population. While the city was built as a quick answer to Hong Kong's rapid population growth, the lack of foresight on the side of urban planners reveals itself in the area's statistics. As Bidisha Banerjee states:

> Statistics paint a dismal picture of Tin Shui Wai. It is the poorest district in Hong Kong and also the most densely populated with census figures showing a density of 62 579 persons per square kilometre in 2006. It has the second highest figure for spousal abuse in Hong Kong and ranks highest in family violence. The 2009 report on Tin Shui Wai conducted by the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at the University of Hong Kong highlights many of the problems associated with the new town and the report merits some discussion. Some of the major problems identified by the Study

[198] *2016 Population By-Census*, Census and Statistics Department (2016).
[199] *2016 Population By-Census*.



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> include distance of the new town from the urban centre, the lack of a vital, local economy that may generate jobs, relatively high daily living expenses, including higher transportation costs and more expensive consumer goods due to a lack of competition amongst retailers, and an agglomeration of a large percentage of low-income groups and vulnerable groups (such as new immigrants, divorced or separated individuals and single parents).[200]

While Banerjee does not explicitly link Tin Shui Wai's various social issues to poor urban planning on the side of the government, most of the problems she mentions can be traced back to the failed urban layout of the neighborhood. The distance from the area to Hong Kong's urban centers leads to higher transportation costs, the absence of a vibrant local economy leads to a lack of local jobs, and a lack of local business competition leads to more expensive consumer goods, which when combined leads to a large concentration of low-income inhabitants. Needless to say, this concentration of low-income residents creates a breeding ground for criminal activity, and youth gangs are especially prevalent in Tin Shui Wai.[201]

While the social issues in Tin Shui Wai have been identified by Hong Kong's government officials, there has not been any official statements on the role the urban planning, and by extension, the government itself had in the creation of these social issues. Indeed, in the current long-term strategic plan for Hong Kong, the government

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[200] Bidisha Banerjee, "Looking Beyond 'Buildings of Chrome and Glass': Hong Kong's 'Uncanny Postcoloniality' in photographs of Tin Shui Wai," *Visual Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2017) 62.
[201] Yiu Kong Chu, "An Analysis of Youth Gangs in Tin Shui Wai in Hong Kong," *Hong Kong Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 29 (2005) 1-3.



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plans to build several more so-called new towns in the very north of the New Territories. While the plan does refer to a possible "science park/industrial estate,"[202] the urban planning mistakes made in the case of Tin Shui Wai need to be avoided in order for these later generations of new towns to succeed in terms of livability. *Besieged City* functions as a direct call to future action in terms of proper urban planning in response to the failures of Tin Shui Wai. The film overtly reveals the urban layout mistakes of the neighborhood in both narrative and visual terms, and exposes the falsity of both the Hong Kong myth of upward mobility along with the myth of brotherhood. This latter myth, in the form of joining a Triad, is ultimately not a viable alternative to the lack of opportunities for Tin Shui Wai's population, and by extension, all of Hong Kong's underprivileged.

## THE BROKEN MYTH OF BROTHERHOOD

In *Besieged City*, a high school student named Ling-Kit, who lives in a government subsidized housing project in Tin Shui Wai, is trying to locate his younger brother Chun-Kit, who has left his parental home for several years already. As Ling-Kit is focused on excelling academically to escape his dire circumstances, he has ignored the bullying that his younger brother endured at his school. This ultimately leads his younger brother to run away from home and join a youth gang. Ling-kit, who has never been involved in criminal activities, nevertheless needs to locate a stash of drugs that his younger brother allegedly hid from his Triad superiors.

[202] "Conceptual Spatial Framework," *Hong Kong 2030+: Towards a Planning Vision and Strategy Transcending 2030*, Planning Department (2016).



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Furthermore, he learns that Chun-kit is currently in a coma after trying to commit suicide and that he is also the primary suspect in a murder case.

In the failed relationship between the older brother Ling-Kit and younger brother Chun-Kit, there is already a critique of Hong Kong's myth of social mobility. Trying to succeed in Hong Kong's educational system of extreme competition for a limited number of good schools and universities is presented in the film as detrimental to harmonizing traditional family relationships, as Ling-Kit preferred not to protect his younger brother from his bullies in fear of becoming the next target and thus being distracted from his intense daily studies. This failure to protect and care for one's younger family member is echoed in the representations of dysfunctional parents in the film. The two brothers have a father who is a gambling addict who irrationally blames his children for his losses and throws their study books out, and their mother appears catatonic and mentally ill, not reacting to her husband's abuse of their two sons.

At first glance, Triad life is presented as a viable alternative to the plutocratic hypocrisy of mainstream Hong Kong society. As Ling-Kit searches to locate the hidden drugs and learns more about what happened to his younger brother after he ran away from home and joined a youth gang, he meets several of his younger brother's former fellow gang members. Chun-Kit's life on the streets is portrayed in a series of flashbacks based on conversations that Ling-Kit has with these youth gang members. At first sight the life away from the influence of dysfunctional parents and the school is presented as an idealized alternative to the lack of perspective for youngsters who cannot compete within the ruthless Hong Kong educational system.



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The gang members squat at an empty apartment, and it appears that they are able to do what their parents cannot: create a functional symbolic family. The gang members take revenge on the abuse that they endured at the hands of their parents by frequently robbing their parents' apartments. They decorate their squat with a porcelain statue of Guan Gong, representing their newfound brotherhood in the alternative social structure that they have created.

This alternative social structure created in Tin Shui Wai ostensibly mirrors the *jianghu* (江湖) as a physical space that is prevalent in Chinese martial arts literature. The literal translation of this term, rivers and lakes, indicates that this physical space is one away from urban centres. In this locale the morals of corrupt official authorities can be evaded, and a better alternative social structure is created as a more viable and honorable alternative. Tin Shui Wai, as an area that was built on former wetlands, physically mirrors this tope of the *jianghu*. Be that as it may, the urban landscape of the neighbourhood prevents this alternative social structure from becoming a permanent viable solution to plutocratic hypocrisy and the lack of opportunities for social mobility that the youngsters in the film face. In *Besieged City*, the government policy of laissez-faire capitalism has translated into a lack of care altogether: the people of the neighbourhood have to fend for themselves.

Since failed government planning is literally built into the structure of the neighbourhood, the film offers a dystopian version of the Confucian top-down moral system. In traditional Confucianism, the moral superiority of a leader positively influences that of his underlings, and they in turn morally affect the people below



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them within the social hierarchy. Magnan-Park asserts that this Confucian ethical framework is already compromised in John Woo's heroic bloodshed films:

> Nevertheless, Hong Kong's status as a British Crown Colony provided a wrinkle to this basic Confucian social political doctrine since the titular political head was not an ethnic Chinese, did not adopt Sinocentric values as did China's former non-Han Chinese rulers … and operated within a British model of imperial glory where the local indigenous population was intentionally disenfranchised from the political arena. the first level of the Confucian five human relationships, namely ruler to minister, was vacant. With this structural vacancy came a destabilising force to the vertical model of a Confucian secular utopia and brought into question the ethical possibility of a just and moral society.[203]

Said otherwise, since Hong Kong's rulers did not operate within the Confucian ethical framework, they created a vacuum at the top of this framework, traditionally the most important position within Confucianism. In *Besieged City* an even darker side of this compromised trickle-down moral system is revealed: the plutocratic hypocrisy of the Hong Kong government in the incarnation of the physical layout of Tin Shui Wai corrupts first the area's parents, then their children, who in turn fail to properly look after the next generation. Thus, the corruption at the upper echelons of society trickles down to the lowest levels of society, creating a perverse, inverse form of the Confucian top-down ethical framework that leads to social disharmony.

[203] Magnan-Park 39.



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The temporary illusion of a Triad utopia within *Besieged City* is dismantled because by the youth replicate their parents' parental impiety. One of the gang members is a girl nicknamed Panadol, after the Hong Kong brand name for paracetamol, because of her proclivity towards using various recreational drugs. Again, she has fled her home because she was a victim of parental impiety, in her case it is sexual abuse at the hands of her father. Panadol has a son who she brings to the squat, and her own father is most likely the father of this child. Due to Panadol's own drug dependency, she cannot properly take care of her child. Furthermore, Panadol enables sexual abuse of other girls by luring them into the gang's squatted apartment, drugging them, and filming them while the other gang members sexually abuse the girls, apparently in a blackmailing scheme. She even tries to do the same thing to her own older sister, who she blames for not being able to protect her from their abusive father. Thus, the youth gang members fail to escape the system of parental impiety after running away from home, since they replicate this dysfunctional family structure within the alternative symbolic familial structure of their own gang.

Just as the youth gang members replicate their bad experiences with parental impiety within their own alternative symbolic family, the criminal underworld has a direct effect on the people living in Tin Shui Wai that are not involved in clandestine activities. Even though Ling-kit has ignored his little brother's troubles in favour of concentrating on his studies, and by extension enhancing his upward mobility, he is nevertheless dragged into the criminal underworld because, as the biological elder brother of Chun-Kit, he is the proxy target for the Triad boss who is looking for his



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lost drugs. Said otherwise, in *Besieged City* the civilian world and the underworld are inextricably intertwined. Upward mobility is a myth in the film, since even though Chun-Kit would like to escape from the dire circumstances of the urban jungle of Tin Shui Wai, he needs to disavow his biological bond with his younger brother in order to do so, an act that ultimately still fails to give him the means to attain upward mobility for himself.

Since Tin Shui Wai does not offer a centralized place where people can meet and congregate, the youth gang members in *Besieged City* meet each other in liminal places: under bridges, in the fields between the different housing projects, and in abandoned apartments. Yet, through a variety of graphic matches, the similarity between the district proper with its rows of housing project skyscrapers along straight roads, and the liminal spaces that constitute the physical *jianghu* of Tin Shui Wai is accentuated. The rivers bordered by tall marshes and grasslands that are situated in the *jianghu* of Tin Shui Wai appear in a similar visual composition as the district's roads. The similarity between the two locations is foregrounded to further emphasize the myth of upward mobility as a lie both in the civilian world as well as in the underworld because they mirror each other to such an extent that they fuse into a unified singularity.

As the youth gang members do not leave Tin Shui Wai altogether but instead remain in the district's abandoned areas, they are inevitably imprisoned by the physical space of the district. Said otherwise, since *Besieged City* posits Tin Shui Wai's *jianghu* as only a temporary place of escape from the troubles of daily life in the civilian part of the district, it both attacks the myth of upward mobility in Hong



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Kong's civilian world as well as the underworld. Thus, the film ultimately also undermines the myth of brotherhood, since brotherhood cannot function as an alternative to Hong Kong's plutocratic hypocrisies. Furthermore, this plutocratic hypocrisy is itself embedded in the physical space of Hong Kong.

Indeed, *Besieged City* offers an explicit metaphor for the ultimate failure of brotherhood. As the youth gang members get in a fight in their squat, Panadol gets shoved down, hits her head against the furniture, and dies from a head wound. During this scuffle, the porcelain statue of Guan Gong that was displayed proudly on the gang's makeshift altar falls down as well and breaks into pieces. The alternative symbolic family that the teenagers form in order to compensate for the failure of their biological family as a result of parental impiety literally breaks down as soon as Panadol dies, as the various members of the gang immediately scatter.

## CONCLUSION

*Besieged City* offers a more comprehensive critique of Hong Kong's plutocratic hypocrisy than either John Woo's heroic bloodshed films or Johnnie To's *Election* and *Election 2*, since it not only subverts one of the three myths that constitute this plutocratic hypocrisy, but it furthermore also disavows the possibility of an Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood as just a false fantasy. In John Woo's heroic bloodshed films, there is still the possibility of redemption via the Ideal of Brotherhood because of the existence of selected groups of highly righteous individuals. In Johnnie To's two films, this redemption is impossible in contemporary Hong Kong, yet the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood still operated successfully in the



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historical past of the Triads. In contrast, Lawrence Ah Mon presents plutocratic hypocrisy as built into the very physical fabric of Hong Kong, which makes it impossible to redeem the Ideal Mandate of Brotherhood, either through individuals or a mythical past. Thus, the film is also the most cynical one of the Triad films discussed in this thesis, as it discloses that it is almost impossible for Hong Kong's underprivileged to escape their fate since alternative forms of societal belonging are themselves bankrupt.



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# Conclusion

An allegorical critique of Hong Kong's plutocratic hypocrisy lies at the core of the Triad genre from its popularization in the form of heroic bloodshed films in the 1980s to the more explicitly critical Triad films of the late 2000s. The genre serves a central role as a critical indictment of the three myths that Hong Kong purports to embody: the rule of law, representative democracy, and upward mobility. In rare cases, it also undermines the myth of brotherhood as a viable alternative form of social belonging. In a region where self-criticism is often transfigured into an easier outward critique of the influence of an authoritarian Communist People's Republic of China on the ostensibly democratic, capitalist, and liberal region of Hong Kong. That being said, the increasing influence of Mainland China on the Hong Kong film industry does create an uncertain position for the critical role of the Triad genre as an internal critique on Hong Kong society.

Following the signing of the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA), the Hong Kong film industry has become increasingly reliant on co-productions with Chinese companies in order to reach the potentially lucrative Mainland Chinese market and be able to survive amidst the global cinematic dominance of Hollywood. This increase in co-productions between Hong Kong and Mainland China has allowed the Hong Kong film industry to survive. That being said, the increased cooperation with the Mainland Chinese film industry means that Hong Kong co-productions lose their potential for critiques that are too overt.



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First, this can take the form of direct censorship, where films are not allowed to be shown in Mainland China due to specific topics that it raises, such as the Hong Kong government as the ultimate culprit of various social issues, the dysfunction of the Triads as incarnations of this government inefficiency, or the lack of a specific ethical system in Hong Kong that takes into account its unique historical contingencies. The latest film regulation law passed in 2016 includes stipulations on which elements cannot be included in films shown in the Mainland:

> (1) violations of the basic principles of the Constitution, incitement of resistance to or undermining of implementation of the Constitution, laws, or administrative regulations;
>
> (2) endangerment of the national unity, sovereignty or territorial integrity; leaking state secrets; endangering national security; harming national dignity,honor or interests; advocating terrorism or extremism; …
>
> (5) endangerment of social morality, disturbing social order, undermining social stability; promoting pornography, gambling, drug use, violence, or terror; instigation of crimes or imparting criminal methods; …[204]

Second, this erosion of the critical potential of the Hong Kong Triad genre can take the form of self-censorship, where directors, writers, and producers do not wish to burn their fingers on issues that could potentially lead to an official ban, and thus

[204] "Film Industry Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China," Standing Committee of the National People's Congress.



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make films that lack the critical function that the Hong Kong Triad genre had in its locally produced incarnations.

One recent Triad film co-produced by Hong Kong and Mainland China that follows this trend of reduced critical potential is *The Last Tycoon* (2012) directed by Wong Jing from Hong Kong. Firstly, this Triad film no longer takes place in Hong Kong, but has changed its locale to 1930s Shanghai. Thus, the film loses the potential to directly critique specific contemporary issues in Hong Kong, as done in John Woo's heroic bloodshed films, Johnnie To's Triad films, and Lawrence Ah Mon's *Besieged City*. Although *The Last Tycoon* could potentially still critique contemporary Hong Kong or the PRC through allegorically transposing certain contemporary issues onto Shanghai in the 1930s, this does not happen in the film.

Secondly, the critical dimension of the Hong Kong Triad genre is neutralized by situating the film outside of modern Hong Kong and aiming its critique at the least controversial target, the Japanese during the Second Word War. *The Last Tycoon* does not dispel any of the Hong Kong myths, and posits a new myth on top of the existing ones: that of Han Chinese ethnic nationalist pride. The film is loosely based on the life of Shanghai gangster Du Yuesheng, whose Green Gang controlled large parts of the city's underworld during the 1930s. The historical Du Yuesheng was strictly a ruthless businessman, who only became involved in politics at times that it would personally benefit him. For instance, he helped purge the Communist Party members during the infamous Shanghai massacre on April 12, 1927, in order to win the favor of the Kuomintang.[205] While this historical background offers plenty of

[205] Martin 154.



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material for an indictment of, for instance, unethical forms of cooperation between government officials and business, *The Last Tycoon* transforms Du Yuesheng into a patriotic gang leader who does not participate in the drug trade and prostitution rackets, even though these two activities were the two most lucrative illegal activities in 1930s Shanghai. In the film, the gang leader actively resists the Japanese invaders during the Second Sino-Japanese War, while the antagonist of the film is a general in the Kuomintang's National Revolutionary Army who collaborates with the Japanese invaders. This is, again, not an allegorical transfiguration of contemporary Hong Kong problems, but simply takes the most uncontroversial antagonists, the Japanese during the Second Sino-Japanese War and their collaborators, as its antagonists.[206]

From his film *Drug War* (2012) onward, Johnnie To has also made numerous co-productions with Mainland Chinese companies, forcing him to expel the allegorically critical dimensions of his Triad films in order to conform to the PRC censorship laws and Mainland Chinese market. In *Drug War*, the location of the Hong Kong Triad genre has moved so far from the center to the periphery that the film takes place behind the border in Mainland China. While the film features the classic Hong Kong Triad film ingredient of a gangster who is trying to escape the law, the film is fundamentally different in terms of its ending. From John Woo's heroic bloodshed films onward, the Hong Kong police force has very often been portrayed negatively in Triad films, as ineffective and bureaucratic extensions of Hong Kong's plutocratic bureaucracy, unable to achieve justice for wrongdoings.

[206] In films produced in Mainland China, the Japanese often serve a similar role as Nazis do in Hollywood: the safest antagonists, since the vast majority of viewers will not see them as sympathetic in the first place.



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However, in *Drug War* the Mainland Chinese police force in the form of Captain Zhang Lei manages to capture the gangster protagonist. Moreover, even the death sentence by lethal injection is presented on-screen. The Mainland Chinese authorities thus not only locate and arrest the criminal, which is already rare in the case of earlier Hong Kong Triad films, but also administer the corporal punishment the gangster receives for his crimes. Said otherwise, the official state authorities are able to effectively catch, sentence, and execute the gangster. *Drug War* is the beginning of a new Hong Kong myth: that of Mainland China as an effective cure for Hong Kong's societal ills.

Since the critical dimensions of the Hong Kong Triad genre are being eroded under the influence of increased co-productions with Mainland China, the question remains if there are any other genres that could take up this function of the genre. Locally produced films within the Triad genre were ideal for allegorical self-critiques, since they raised contemporary issues and unmasked the myths of Hong Kong's plutocratic hypocrisy, yet did not directly make people feel personally attached since the critiques were transposed onto gangsters, characters whose profession most of the audience members do not share. By critiquing the underworld, these films subtly offered demystifications of the myths of the Hong Kong upperworld, yet not in ways that would be rejected by audiences as too personal.

At first glance, alternatives for the Hong Kong Triad genre in terms of critical function are not readily available. Comedy filmmaker Stephen Chow, whose films were renowned for their specific use of Cantonese slang and homonyms and were long believed to be untranslatable, has started making successful co-productions with



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Mainland Chinese companies, such as the *The Mermaid* (2016), the sixth highest grossing film in Mainland China at the time of writing with a worldwide gross of over 550 million USD. Of this worldwide gross, Hong Kong screenings only accounted for 0.6% of this sum.[207] Given the financial incentives of co-productions with Mainland China, not just in personal monetary terms but also as a way to obtain more funding for bigger productions, co-production seems an offer that Hong Kong filmmakers simply cannot refuse. Almost all of the popular genres are translatable to the Mainland Chinese market and the financial price of not doing so in order to tell a more critical story is too high.

Be that as it may, there is one genre which cannot simply be adapted to the Mainland Chinese market with a few ideological changes. One of the stipulations in the latest PRC film law is an embargo on scenes that include "inciting the undermining of national religious policy, advocating cults or superstitions."[208] As films with too blatant elements of the supernatural are forbidden to be screened in Mainland China as forms of superstition, the horror genre is one that might take up the vacuum that is left if the Hong Kong Triad genre fully loses its function of allegorically critiquing Hong Kong internally. Films such as Fruit Chan's *Dumplings* (2004) and Juno Mak's *Rigor Mortis* (2013) do not simply blame Mainland China for all of Hong Kong's societal ills, but allegorically look inwards at the complacency of Hong Kong in covering up its shortcomings by its own acceptance and even celebration of the myths of plutocratic hypocrisy. These horror films feature

[207] "The Mermaid (Mei Ren Yu)," Box Office Mojo.
[208] "Film Industry Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China," Standing Committee of the National People's Congress.



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consumption of the aborted fetus of a pregnant teenager, Mainland Chinese immigrants as merely facilitators to Hong Kong's internal perversions, and elderly monsters in need of the blood of youngsters. The Hong Kong horror genre is replete with images of older Hong Kong generations acting as parasites vis-à-vis the younger generations, and the possible allegorical readings of these films are many.

Compared to the Triad genre, the horror genre has a similarly transgressive nature, in that it has the potential to transpose certain internal societal critiques onto characters that are different enough from the films' spectators that it does not personally attack them. Whereas gangsters serve this role in the Triad genre, supernatural beings take up this role within the horror genre. While films with monsters and other supernatural elements do exist in Mainland China, such as *Painted Skin* (2008), they are often more akin to fantasy films from Hollywood and Europe, and the fox spirits, ghosts, and demons featured in Mainland Chinese horror films never manage to deeply scare or disturb the viewer. Simply put, while a Triad film could be translated to the Mainland Chinese market relatively easily by ensuring the police authority is effective and manages to catch the films' criminals, Hong Kong horror films such as *Dumplings* and *Rigor Mortis* cannot be as easily transformed into a safe Mainland Chinese equivalent. Thus, the Hong Kong horror genre might prove to be more resilient in retaining the ability to allegorically critique Hong Kong internally by dismantling its various myths of plutocratic hypocrisy.

The increase of co-productions with Mainland Chinese companies has defanged the Hong Kong Triad genre's critical dimension in many cases. Yet, it is still possible that either locally produced Triad films or Triad films that take a more



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subtle approach to critiquing Hong Kong internally will continue the critical dimension of this genre. Johnnie To's *Election 3*, currently in the production phase, may continue the critical appraisal of Hong Kong's societal ills of its two predecessors. *Election 3* is rumoured to have Umbrella Revolution (雨傘革命)[209] as its subtitle, which would signal Johnnie To's return to more politically critical Triad films after *Drug War*. Regardless of this particular film's ideological stance, the critical dimension of the Hong Kong Triad genre might prove resilient, as Hong Kong does not offer many instances where internal critiques are encouraged. Given the strong tradition of at least forty years of allegorical critiques of plutocratic hypocrisy that took shape within the genre, and given that the societal problems that are critiqued have largely remained in place, the Hong Kong Triad genre can still work within the confinements of the contemporary global film market in order to continue to produce critical indictments of the persistent myths of Hong Kong society.

[209] *Hong Kong Movie Database*, "Election 3."



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