Hong Kong and Bollywood in the Global Soft Power Contest

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Abstract

Much has been written about the desire of China and India to see their cinemas, television programs, and cultural products become competitive in the global media market. What is missing is a comparative analysis that brings together Hong Kong and Bombay, two Asian cities with their successful film industries that transcend the conventional categories of Chinese and Indian national cinemas, and reposition themselves as new cultural forces in the pantheon of world cinema. This article highlights the phenomena of cinematic appropriation, elaboration, and plagiarism in the cultural flows between Hollywood, Hong Kong, and Bollywood. It examines the force of globalization that has driven Hong Kong Chinese and Indian producers to make films for nontraditional audiences, to address controversies in their works, and to gain legitimacy from and negotiate with various state authorities. The investigation entails not just a mere description of two local-turned-global Asian film industries but also represents an attempt to theorize a fruitful area of study.

Keywords: Hong Kong, Bollywood, soft power, China, India, cinemas

Introduction

Much has been written about the desire of China and India to see their cinemas, television programs, and cultural products become competitive in the global media market. What is missing is a comparative analysis that brings together Hong Kong and Bombay, two Asian cities with their successful film industries that transcend the conventional categories of Chinese and Indian national cinemas, and reposition themselves as new cultural forces in the pantheon of world cinema. Seeing Hong Kong and Bollywood as broad analytical categories of urban cinema, this article highlights the phenomena of cinematic appropriation, elaboration, and plagiarism in the cultural flows between Hollywood, Hong Kong, and Bollywood. It examines the force of globalization that has driven local Chinese and Indian producers to make films for nontraditional audiences, to address controversies in their works, and to gain

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Historicizing Hong Kong and Bollywood

Hong Kong and Bombay (today's Mumbai) have much in common. They were once British colonies. India became independent in 1947 and Hong Kong was under British rule from 1841 to 1997. Given their strategic location, both cities were the economic hubs of the British Empire in the Far East, and continue to be global migratory routes across the South China Sea, Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean. Chinese and Indian migrants have established themselves in both places and contributed to cosmopolitanism as a way of life, embracing new ideasand practices from outside. The frequent crossover with the world has expanded the horizon of local filmmakers, making them aware of the new trends of global media while being sensitive to the need of localism. The success of Hong Kong and Bollywood in capturing the attention of global audiences has called for more attention to the dynamics of Asian cinematic landscapes and the rise of China and India in a multipolar world.[1]

For more than half a century, the Hong Kong film industry was dominated by martial arts action movies featuring Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung, Jet Li, and Donnie Yen. The plots of the movies were linear and repetitive, lacking coherence and depth, but their fight sequences were carefully choreographed. The industry owed its success to stunning visual effects, lavish fighting scenes, and tearful melodramas. The styles gave moviegoers pure entertainment, an escape from daily hardships, and an illusion for a better life. Jackie Chan's earlier films in the 1970s and 1980s were loaded with scenes of comedic violence. John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* trilogy (1986–1989) represented a new era of heroic bloodshed on screen and greatly influenced Hollywood and South Korean directors. Hark Tsui's*Once Upon a Time in China* trilogy (1992–1994), featuring Jet Li as the martial arts legend Wong Fei-Hung, reconciled Chinese nationalistic sentiment with Cantonese identity. Meanwhile, art house filmmakers such as Wong Kar-Wai, Clara Law, Stanley Kwan, and Anna Hui questioned the complicated issues of urban realism, identity formation, and border crossing. In contemporary Hong Kong cinema, violence, crimes, and overlapping identities are widely used in conjunction with more sophisticated storylines, the best examples being *Infernal Affairs* trilogy (2001–2003) and *PTU: Police Tactical Unit* (2003). These diverse styles helped Hong Kong filmmakers to earn worldwide

recognition. The action movies, romantic comedies, historical epics, and arts films not only shed light on the media representations of past and present as events, experiences, and myths, but also captured the cross-cultural flow between global and local cinemas, transnational capital, and Cantonese identity.

Hong Kong cinema has rebranded itself. The development prompted local film producers to engage with Taiwanese, Japanese, South Korean, European and American filmmakers. For a city with a population of 8 million, Hong Kong continues to be a relevant cinematic force in the face of a hegemonic Hollywood system and a resurgence of Taiwanese, Chinese, Japanese, South Korean, Indian, and Thai cinemas. By partnering with studios in the USA and China, Hong Kong directors produced movies both for regional and international audiences. The most notable transformation was the Hong Kong filmmakers' cooperation with China after the implementation of the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) in 2004. The CEPA allowed Hong Kong films to enter the lucrative Chinese market, often in the form of co-productions, without being restricted by the import quotas set for foreign films.[2] Removing the barriers that had hampered Hong Kong filmmakers, the business model was designed to "spread risk, provide greater market access, furnish access to extensive infrastructure and studio facilities, offer more options for location shooting, and generally boost production values."[3]

China is determined to turn itself into a global powerhouse of film and media production, and the coproduction agreement with Hong Kong has paved the way for reshaping the landscape of regional filmmaking.[4] Attracting Hong Kong filmmakers with irresistible financial incentives, China seeks to dominate the domestic box office with Chinese films rather than Hollywood productions.[5]The Chinese Film Bureau has expressed the hope that under the CEPA, Hong Kong producers would advance the goal of promoting national reintegration, but the products turned out to be politically ambiguous. Previous large-scale representations of Chinese history like Jacob Cheung's *Battle of Wits* (2006) and Teddy Chan's *Bodyguards and Assassins* (2009) displayed a rising China that is trapped in confusion, chaos and instability rather than being capable of building a prosperous society and achieving national rejuvenation.[6]Instead of submitting themselves to the broad category of "Chinese national cinema," many Hong Kong filmmakers take advantage of new business opportunities and resources to produce films for a Greater China film market.

The rise of the China-Hong Kong co-productions coincides with the rise of a critical "new wave" in the Hong Kong film scene. The term "new

wave" was used to describe the television and documentary works produced by idealistic directors from 1976 to 1984. Cheuk Pak-Tong expands the definition to the cinemas that came during the period of Hong Kong's transition to China (1984–1997).[7]However, Mirana M. Szeto and Yun-Chung Chen redefine the term "Hong Kong SAR New Wave" as a new generation of postcolonial filmmakers whose political worldview differs considerably from those of the 1970s and 1980s.Witnessing the transition of Hong Kong from a colony into a special administrative region under communist rule, the young producers oppose the pressure for Sinicization. They are aware that they are working in an environment different from British Hong Kong. They address local controversies with a critical awareness of intra- and intercultural flows in the region. Their cosmopolitanism rejects the patriarchal, chauvinist and xenophobic Hong Kong sentiments typical of colonial inferiority.[8]Searching for local sensitivities, these conscientious directors articulate a cinematic vision of grassroots resistance against capitulating to Chinese hegemony.

In parallel, Bollywood has transformed itself from a cinema of pure entertainment into one that embraces innovative genres to make the audiences think about historical and contemporary controversies. "With more than a dozen major film companies including Sony and FOX Searchlight that now produce the bulk of the films released in India instead of thousands of individual producers which was the case until neo-liberalization reforms took hold, Bollywood is a new film industry. It speaks a new language–when it is making films, when it is marketing and distributing them and when it is retailing them."[9] The globalization of India's economy and the rise of its cosmopolitan middle class have prompted filmmakers to address the dichotomies between tradition and modernity, religion and secularism, rural and urban cultures, collectivity and individuality, prearranged marriage and romantic love, and patriotism and treason. Given the worldwide spread of the Indian diaspora and its rapid growth in the West since the 1980s, Bollywood consciously made "a global turn" by addressing the Indian diaspora's experience in blockbusters like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), *Pardes* (1997), and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001), and articulating what Hamid Naficy called the language of "transitional and transnational" conditions of diasporic existence, bereft of the nation and yet rooted in it emotionally and symbolically.[10]

Characterized by smaller budgets, a few filmmakers have begun to address the fissures and contradictions in a fast-changing Indian society troubled by an insatiable appetite for materialism and a strong assertion of identity politics. This resonates with Paul Willemen's characterization of non-Western films' effort to "stage" historical conditions as a key to

exploring fissures and antagonisms that structure Indian society.[11]As a result, directors of more complex films like*Black Friday* (2004), *Khoslaka Ghosla* (2006),*Dev-D* (2009), *Udaan* (2010), *Noise in the City* (2011), *Dhobi Ghat* (2011), *Gangs of Wasseyepur* (2011), *Jolly LLB* (2013), *The Lunch Box* (2013), *Ship of Theseus* (2013), *Shahid* (2013), *Queen* (2014),*Court* (2015),*Tanu Weds Manu Returns* (2015), and *Masaan* (2015)have carved out their niche audiences among the urban film festival attendees, who have grown weary of the old Bollywood formula of cinematic escapism. While this "New Wave" partially operates within the well-established economic structures of Bollywood and multiplex cinemas of metropolitan India, it has revived the tradition of parallel or art house cinema in India during the 1970s and 1980s. It is ironical now to witness big global studios like FOX and SONY producing complexurban films in response to their critical acclaim and growing commercial success. The sheer numbers of Indian audiences at home and abroad make these films some of the most powerful discourses in contemporary media culture. Bollywood's simultaneous embrace of cosmopolitanism and provinciality as well as its complicity with global capital demonstrate the dialectical relationships between nation and diaspora, tradition and modernity, sacred and secular in contemporary South Asia.

Bollywood still has a long way to go before it can assume the "global" status of Hong Kong or Japanese film. Even though Hollywood cannot compete with its Indian counterpart in the domestic market due to the latter's pan-Indian structure of feeling based in the national language of Hindi and film music, one cannot deny that even Bollywood fails to exercise cultural hegemony over the regional Telugu, Marathi, Tamil, and Malayalam cinemas, which are self-sufficient, creative, resourceful and more innovative than Bollywood, and which act as counter-hegemonic forces to the language of Bollywood, Hindi, that happens to be the(m)other tongue for most Indians. It is important to examine what is really global about Bollywood, and how its global or transnational outreach differs from that of Hong Kong. Put it differently, should we regard Bollywoodas a global brand name that originated in the multicultural cities of the USA and UK but which singularly designates a particular form of film "that is both a product and experience and is constituted as Indian popular film through transnational aesthetic impulses and multiple sites of reception?"[12]Ravi S. Vasudevan rejects such a characterization of Bollywood because it overlooks the transnational impulses and multiple aesthetic currents that determine the output of a specific industry. He suggests a way to contextualize such impulses and currents in a historically informed way, without forsaking the national as an oppressive and restrictive conceptual frame that

contains little explanatory influence in producing specific films and genres.[13]

Outside South Asia, Bollywood is limited to the South Asian diaspora in the West and to countries in Africa and the Middle East. When asked to comment on the global impact of Indian cinema, Bollywood superstars Amitabh Bachchan and Shahrukh Khan were under no illusions that Bollywood and Indian cinema had much to doin order to be recognized as a truly global force on the world screens cape. Not surprisingly, this was not the case when it came to A. R. Rahman, who truly arrived on the global stage through his musical scorefor*Slumdog Millionaire*, which won him the Oscar for original score in 2009, andfor *Warriors on Heaven and Earth*, a Chinese period film nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2003.

There is, however, a cautionary tale attached to this moment in history because the conventional pairings of India's neoliberal economic policies starting in 1991 and the growth of Bollywood are misleading and tell us little about the cultural phenomenon known asBollywoodization. Adopting a methodology of content analysis that is more an exception than a rule in the field of Indian film scholarship, David J. Schaefer and Kavita Karan carefully investigate the highest grossing Hindi films between 1947 and 2007, a postcolonial period that signified "the potentially changing social-political-economic context of Hindi cinema" along with the "geographical, cultural, nationalistic, infrastructural and artistic" modes of globalization. Theycautionthat "the oft-repeated conclusions of scholars regarding the widespread influence of global forces on Hindi film production–particularly in the current era of Bollywoodization–are more complex than suggested in prior research."[14]Bollywood's relationship to the "global"should be understood as originating from the multicultural spaces in South Asia, the Middle East and Gulf States,the USA, Britain, parts of Africa, and now increasingly in Eastern Europe. It is the fastest growing industry in India and the only one that has not seen a decline in profits since the 2008 global financial crisis. And yet, compared with Hong Kong, Bollywood still lacks the "transnational" element in the making of crossovers, remakes and hybrids that have characterized East Asian cinemas, and its relatively limited global appeal with wider international audiences has as much to do with the generic inflexibility and lack of curiosity on their part as it does with an obsessive focus on an all-inclusive, risk-free, and formulaic "masala" genre of Bollywood which sacrifices creativity at the altar of commercial success.

Framing Hong Kong and Bollywood

As this article sets out to capture the cultural representations of commonality and difference in Hong Kong and Bollywood, it challenges the theoretical hegemony of Hollywood and concomitant Eurocentric framing of film studies and initiates new insights that engage other temporalities and spatialities. Undeniably, both Hong Kong and Bollywood transcend the boundaries of time and space, by allowing national and international audiences to experience part of a chain of shared memories and identities, connected to a past, a present, and a future. Their transnational, translational, and transhistorical appeals have made cultural fusion and border-crossing the norm rather than the exception. Kathleen Newman best summarizes the conceptual merits of this cross-disciplinary focus:

> Truly interdisciplinary theoretical and historical analyses, ones erasing the borders between humanities and social sciences, that is, between the theorists of meaning and theorists of society, must make explicit their assumptions regarding representation and other social practices, the mediations between texts and social context, the multiple determinants of social changes, and the role of language and other sign systems in the constitution of societies, including the social divisions they instantiate internally and across societal boundaries.[15]

Today, scholars have rejected the conventional practice that a universalizing West formulates a theory for a "Rest" that is rich in cultural particularities.[16] They trace the articulations among national, world, regional, and local cinemas in film studies against the backdrop of a "globality that seems to emanate from reality itself even as it speaks persuasively for that reality" and "presents itself both as reality and representation." This globality manifests itself cinematically in the tensions between perspective and content, between unipolar and multipolar, and between process and realized vision and product.[17] Such an analytical category prompts scholars to examine the agential role of the nations, especially Asian nation-states, in positioning themselves as inferior to the dominant discourses of cosmopolitanism, hybridity, multiculturalism, and transnationalism. But the epistemological nature of the"national cinema"model simplifies each cinematic school as a homogeneous entity and overlooks the intra- and inter-Asian dimensions of social, cultural, and economic flows in this globalized world. One obvious impact of globalization on Hong Kong and Bollywood is a shift

toward the practice of joint production across national boundaries. Closely linked to the mechanics of coproduction are the international film festivals from Cannes and Venice to New York and Pusan which reshape filmmaking in Hong Kong and Bollywood as art and business. The force of internationalization has called for the need to redefine the model of national cinema along transnational, transcultural, and transhistorial tropes.

Furthermore, the cinematic interconnections between Hong Kong and Bollywood constitute an actively advancing part of the emerging inter-Asian cultural space. Through this rubric of inter-Asia, it is possible to move beyond the old framework of "national cinema" to capture the rich varieties of cinematic aesthetics, genres, and practices from these two cinemas in Asia. Although Hong Kong film industry has achieved a national status within the Chinese-speaking world, it still obscures the conventional category of national cinema. Hong Kong presents "a theoretical conundrum" because it is "a cinema without a nation, a local cinema with transnational appeal."[18]Hong Kong cinema has modeled itself along the popular, urban, transnational, and even postmodern and ethnic lines. It has also repositioned itself as a crisis cinema by considering the various political and socioeconomic mutations that the postcolonial city is caught up with. Adding to this, the multiplicity of cinematic expressions from martial arts to queer cinema in Hong Kong parallels with that in Bollywood,but the latter never experienced the crises that Hong Kong has faced, and its history in national and cinematic terms took a different trajectory. The semi-independent relationship of Hong Kong to the Chinese and Taiwanese national cinemas further complicates the issue. Hong Kong was always, and is still, a first-world city, being a preeminent financial hub second only to Tokyo, even though the city was closely linked to the formation of these two rival Chinese polities during the Cold War.

By comparison, the historical specificity of Bollywood differs considerably from that of Hong Kong. Mumbaiforms part of the Indian nation, being the capital of the State of Maharashtra (adjoining Gujarat) and the financial center of the country.As the popular name for commercial Hindi films produced in Mumbai and a major component of the Indian national cinema, Bollywood serves as a transnational contact zone in South Asia and constructs cinematically "a linguistics of contact" that emphasizes "the workings of across rather than within the lines of social differentiation, of class, race, gender, and age. It achieves

the status of so-called "national cinema"in dominant representative terms because Hindi is the official language alongside English, although it is spoken by a little less than 500million in a nation of 1.2 billion people. Bollywood's appropriation of Hollywood through its own storytelling has made it a new Indian soft power to the extent that the categories of Indian popular culture and Bollywood have become coterminous with each other in the eyes of the West.

Energized by the vibrancy of Hong Kong and Bollywood, film scholars have embraced the two urban cinemas with intellectual vigor and rigor, and turned them into some of the most theorized categories in global cultural studies. Even the labeling of Bombay cinema as Bollywood in a gesture of derivativeness to Hollywood is challenged by critics and theorists,who ask the unresolvable "question of whether this term is a pejorative or subversive description"[19] that simultaneously "mocks the thing it names and celebrates its difference."[20] Naming aside, there is a new tendency to situate Hong Kong and Bollywood in the context of transnational flows of production, distribution and reception within and without the Chinese and Indian nations. Vijay Mishra embraces Indian aesthetics, postcolonial theory, anthropology, sociology, and Hindu mythology to explain the constitution of Indian cinematic subjects and the cultural politics of film production and spectatorship, even as he negotiates the hegemonic role of Western hermeneutics and semiotics in accounting for new theories of Indian cinema.[21]The same can be said of Hong Kong. *Infernal Affairs* trilogy (2001–2003),remade by Martin Scorsese as *The Departed* (2006), symbolized a new undercover film genre in postcolonial Hong Kong. The previous undercover films by John Woo such as *City on Fire* (1987) and *Hard Boiled* (1992) critiqued the institutional hypocrisy in a British-ruled capitalistic society and sympathized with undercover agents torn between their professional duty as police officers and their fraternal loyalty to the triads. But *Infernal Affairs* looks at the complex encounters between two undercover characters, the undercover cop in the triad and the trial mole in the police. Their psychological struggles on screen mirrored the crisis of identity that the people of Hong Kong experienced in a transition from British colonial subjects to citizens of the People's Republic of China. Hong Kong is an autonomous city-state that pretends to be part of China. Even though the city officially reunited with China after July 1, 1997, its people are reluctant to embrace the Communist regime and subscribe to the new Chinese national identity. In this respect, Hong Kong and Bollywood are complex cultural entities that have transcended conventional categories like urban, popular, transnational, and

postmodern cinemas. They entail a wide range of filmmakers who assert their agency against the externally imposed hegemonic influences and who reclaim and recreate cinematically their political, moral, and cultural consciousness. The complicated process of art-politics encounter in Hong Kong and Bollywood has exhibited different patterns and results, and it is often filled with hope, idealism, angst, and disillusionment.

Conclusion

All the latest cinematic trends and innovations from Hong Kong and Bollywood reveal a dialectical relationship between film culture and everyday life in these places. They address the discourses of religion, political economy, colonialism and nationalism that have shaped these Asian cinemas.In particular, they highlight the constant reinvention of these film industries in terms of moving away from superstar-driven films with weak scripts to story-driven ones with powerful scripts and complex characterization. Many critical Hong Kong and Bollywood directors who subvert the dominant discourses of power have created new space for alternative expressions.

By bringing Hong Kong and Bollywood under one umbrella, this study anticipates exciting times ahead for both urban film industries by way of Wong Kar-Wai's religious-historical drama about Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang in the Tang Dynasty (618–907), and of Stanley Tong's action comedy *Kungfu Yoga*. Such collaborations further trans-Asian cultural dialogues that every cinema fan and scholar would desire. To echo Chen Kuan-Hsing's passion of launching the field of Inter-Asia Cultural Studies as a fertile area of research, this analysis hopes to advance the ongoing discussion about the rise of Asia as a new cultural entity in which relations between media and cultural industries are being reimagined in creative and constructive ways.[22]

Endnotes

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