

burst into | action

*The Changing Spectacle of
Glamour Heroines in
Contemporary Hong Kong Cinema* | STEPHEN C.K. CHAN

As the local people experience the transnational moment amid a seemingly endless circuit of social mediations in Hong Kong, and as that very process allows them to be dynamically involved in re-articulating various identity flows, tensions and negotiations through the collective shaping of contemporary culture (not least via a globally mediated form such as cinema), *the constituencies of the local* change. My question for now is: in what ways have the new currents of transnationality affected existing forms of cultural sensibility in the ‘post-colony’? Realised as a system of representation of the global popular, recent articulations of popular experience tend to be absorbed into generic cross-cultural media representations shared on the *glocal* level of operation by cultural producers, consumers and practitioners across geographical borders. In this paper, I shall focus on the changing spectacle of ‘the local’ through its cinematic action (along with its alternative heroine mediation), in light of such a transnational articulation as the emerging dominant. My purpose is to examine how *local action* has been re-imagined and can be re-aligned in relation to the specifically historical, national and postcolonial mode of imagination under the contemporary glocal context of the Hong Kong ‘Special Administrative Region’ (HKSAR), as this particular post-colony is officially renamed.

Since the mid-1980s, Hong Kong has been subjected to a rapidly evolving sociohistorical spectacle amid bursting tensions brought about in a period of political and economic crisis. The British colony’s historic return to China in 1997 and the Asian financial market turmoil that followed had been totally overwhelming for Hong Kong, well before the traumatic impact of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in the spring of 2003, an event that compelled

the disoriented community as a whole to pull itself together in coping with fragile collectivity in common plight. The people of the HKSAR would now realise how the extraordinary fate of their changing social life must involve subtle re-alignments and re-negotiations between the individual and the collective. However, for most Hong Kong people today what those two categories might represent can hardly be taken for granted. For instance, the collective as experienced in the popular genre of the action cinema may be registered socially or nationally. It often operates actively through various complex processes of culture flow and social exchange, thus mediating local embodiments of individuality. Glamour, as manifested through the action performed by the female figures in contemporary Hong Kong cinema, may provide what Ulf Hannerz refers to as 'a network of perspectives' for understanding one such form of individuality, in which collective experiences undoubtedly still supply a crucial link for popular social imagination that builds on the re-configuration of the (local and localised) individual.¹

The complex cultural formation of experience has changed over time, giving rise to various patterns in the re-configuration of the collective in the individual. In *Cultural Complexity*, Hannerz points out that 'the individual is surrounded by a flow of externally available, culturally shaped meaning which influences his ordering of experiences and intentions'.² I want, indeed, to argue, via the case of Hong Kong action cinema, for 'the individual's share, or version, of a culture as a collectively held structure of meanings'.³ I do this by conducting textual and contextual analysis of the interplay of (heroic) actions in local filmic representations, especially those as conveyed through narrative realisation and bodily performance by the unlikely female 'action stars'. Against this background, I intend to demonstrate how some of the local heroines of Hong Kong action cinema have *fought*, in style and with glamour, the intricate forces of the national and transnational—competing factors in the emergence of the global popular in any localised context, where specific sociocultural experiences are generated and mediated through a perspective grounded in the formation of particularised individual sensibilities.

The generic status and popularity of the so-called 'woman warrior' has evolved with the representation of wonder and glamour in action cinema. Significant work has been done in recent scholarship addressing various issues of gender and sexuality in Hollywood action films.⁴ While dealing with the fury, weaponry, and discourse of the body in the cinematic female actions concerned, we need to highlight the complex work of *negotiation* in the shaping of a common formation out of the cultural and ideological differences involved. For my purpose, the outcome of a coherent set of codes and values through the generic process is less interesting and significant than the articulation of a variety of linked perspectives on female action, against the context of social imagination that structures the cultural formation of coherence through negotiation. As such, negotiation here *works* through the interplay of

a complex of individual perspectives, each attempting to make sense of others' variant outlooks on the representation at issue.⁵ If the 'perspectives' on what I call the glamour spectacle in the Hong Kong action imaginary are 'the device which organizes the attention and interpretation which an individual gives to externally carried meaning ... in a tension zone between culture and social structure', then trajectories of identification with the female action heroine would be a tempting question to work on.⁶ Richard Dyer suggests that stars operate as 'figures of identification' through two ideological functions, namely the reinforcement of norms and the strategy of masking the very ideological work norm-identification involves.⁷ To take an example from Hong Kong action cinema of the last decade, the actress Brigitte Lin Ching-hsia's glamorous impersonation of the Invincible East prototype persona in *Swordsmen II* (1992), *East is Red* (1993) and a whole range of other films in the mid-1990s would substantiate Dyer's intriguing observation that 'a star's apparent changelessness over a long period of time can be a source of charisma'.⁸

That power of cinematic glamour is further related to a structure for modelling a form for the modern subjectivity. In his fascinating study of the cultural power of celebrity, P. David Marshall establishes a convincing case for the proposition that stars and the channels for collective identification they provide through cinema are structurally the 'permanent sign of the public sphere'. Borrowing from his insight that 'the screen image provides an aura for the film celebrity that constructs a form of *admiring identification*',⁹ I would argue that the aloof but seductive representation of devilish power and energy we find in Brigitte Lin's iconic screen representation of the Evil East offers the best case in Hong Kong action cinema for appreciating what Marshall calls 'auratic distance'. The latter, it is suggested, entails a 'larger than life' distance between the star-image and the audience intended to keep the cinematic apparatus 'as the center of cultural capital'.¹⁰ In other words, the different uses of stars in action are to be viewed in relation to the selective shaping of their heroine images on screen, as well as the various iconic features circulating with these glamour signs of the female warrior under the various factors in generic formation. In discussing some relevant figures of the fighting heroine, I shall deal with the well-known examples of Michelle Yeoh, Cythnia Rothrock and Brigitte Lin, but also draw reference to other popular and glamorous local icons such as Maggie Cheung, Anita Mui, Joyce Mina Godenzi, Carina Lau, Shu Qi, Karen Mok and Zhao Wei.

In the 1980s, the hybridisation of the local took specific forms in action cinema. One starting point could be the female cop sub-genre popularised by the action performance of Michelle Yeoh (known at the time as Michelle Khan) in a series of films. An interesting question here is to see how the sub-genre, through its liaison with the fluid local unconscious, has made way for articulation with the transnational. Michelle Yeoh's fresh and well-received appearance in *Yes, Madam* (Corey Yuen, 1985) is a useful entry point for us.

In the traditional Chinese *wuxia* (martial arts – swordplay) genre, the performance of *daxia* (the great knight-hero) can readily be analysed through the hero's most typical outfit. From the classic image of Wang Yu in Zhang Che's *Golden Swallow* (1968) to that of Adam Cheng (Zheng Shaojiu) in Tsui Hark's *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* (1983), the male figure of the heroic warrior-in-white has been firmly established among the local fans of *wuxia* films (referring here to all variants of the costume swordplay genre). In *Yes, Madam*, when Michelle Yeoh, the late-colonial Royal Hong Kong policewoman, pairs up with an unlikely partner, blonde Cynthia Rothrock,¹¹ they perform their duties through sequences of generic spectacles of force, energy and dynamism choreographed by director and martial arts veteran Corey Yuen (Yuen Kwai),¹² and we are quite pleased to accept that the best of such wonderful scenes presents the action heroines in visibly all-white jackets. It is not surprising that the white outfits for the policewomen would draw attention in the local cinema to the rising generic status of these female cop figures, whose filmic identity and cultural meaning were, in the 1980s, still fresh enough for movie goers to register their distinct image, read in reference to that of the male counterparts. So at one point in *Yes, Madam*, Yeoh moves her dynamic body in an assertive white outfit, doing her wonderful kicks and controlled, energising shouts, while the spectators wait breathlessly for the next glass-shattering moment to come when another—male—body must fall.

The kind of satisfaction Corey Yuen is capable of delivering to his spectators can be attributed to the calculated number of slow-motion shots he allows the frame to present his heroines' kicks and the way they smash their male opponents (with bamboo sticks, daggers, swords or bare hands). The novelty *Yes, Madam* brings to the genre lies crucially in the pairing of Yeoh with Rothrock, thus injecting a very peculiar element to the conventional mixing of ingredients, resulting in the hybrid blend of innovation and the reiteration of rules common to most generic developments. In Yuen's next film, *Righting Wrongs* (Corey Yuen, 1986), Rothrock is featured as the sole female lead, paired up now with Yuen Biao as the prosecutor who takes justice into his own hands. Again cast as a stern, upright policewoman, Rothrock similarly wears a white jacket with dark-coloured trousers. Corey Yuen plays Rothrock's less-than-competent assistant at the police station, bringing comic relief to all the serious jumps and kicks he directs. In the film he has a father, who is a lower-rank policeman always dressed in uniform. The jolly elderly man often catches up with the 'Madam' at the police station, making friendly requests that she take good care of his lousy, incapable son—by not letting him do any of the 'serious work'. This gives Rothrock the opportunity to shine with an embarrassing sense of superiority—embarrassing because the superiority she is supposed to exhibit here cannot be adequately exemplified in or explained away by a woman warrior bursting into action on the spot. Clearly, it is Rothrock, and not Corey Yuen or Yuen Biao, who engages in the noisy and persistent fight in the action sequence with Karen Shepherd,

a fellow kung-fu champion here in the role of the bad white woman. The trick, as we know, lies in gender and identity politics. For sure, political correctness was not something Hong Kong action film-makers were seriously concerned with in the mid-1980s. This ambivalence in sensibility, I suppose, is rooted in the hybrid tension brought about in the interplay between differential fixations in gender and ethnic constructions of identity. In the end, the unlikely cultural marker we may find here in the female cop (mixed unnaturally with a bit of classical *xia* icons) leaves some notable traces on Rothrock, when, for instance, her white shirt and jacket get stained messily in brutal blood red as she fails to win the final fight against the male villain (in this case, the police supervisor played by Melvin Wong).

Negotiation of cultural and ideological differences operate also at the disjuncture between the glamour of the female action involved and the vulgarity the heroines would sometimes be subject to, particularly when they are not being framed in 'action'. Perhaps the most alarming point of reference for such a critical analysis is the dialogue, something that can be set against 'action' as the other obvious cultural discourse. Blatant sexist language aside, the two Corey Yuen films both show the male characters addressing Rothrock either as 'Madam!' or with a whole range of colloquial appellations that basically translate as 'Bitch!' in the English subtitles.¹³ The audience would be taking in the mundane ordinariness with an understanding nod or tacit smile while listening to all the silly dialogue that punctuates the main business of the movie: female action. Hence, what might be called the Rothrock-speak (dubbed in Hong Kong-accentuated Cantonese slang) you find in Hong Kong action cinema is naturally taken by the local film industry and market to be easy, effortless and straightforward scores for delivering a bit of comic relief in the heavily packed action in which, yes, 'Madams' keep kicking and jumping on the less-than-competent male figures (whether they are in the role of police officer, gangster, father, son, husband or lover).

Remarkably, though, Yeoh is never made to speak as vulgarly in those early female-cop films of the 1980s when compared to Rothrock, even though in action Yeoh could be no less determined, ruthless and powerful than her blonde partner in *Yes, Madam*. In the other landmark genre film that confirmed her fame as a local action star worthy of the name, *Royal Warriors* (also known as *In the Line of Duty*, David Chung, 1986), Yeoh shows off her unmistakable physical talents in the opening scene with a cute touch of humour. Delivering her flexible body movements in swift and joyous kung-fu mode, she wears her typical white jacket outfit. At the end of that signature glamour scene, just before the film title and credits come on screen, Yeoh introduces herself self-assuredly and unmistakably as 'Royal Hong Kong Police' to the utterly bewildered Japanese man who passes by. The film features two handsome male leads, Michael Wong and Henry Sanda, for whom Yeoh would smile and cry, and act a little like a pretty woman. By comparison, in another exemplary work of the genre, *The Inspector Wears Skirts* (Wellson Chin, 1988), the senior inspector Rothrock plays assumes

her authority very firmly as training consultant of the female commando known as *Ba-wong fa* (or *bawang hua*, literally 'The Imperial Flowers' in the Chinese title). It appears that the inspector does not actually wear skirts, but moves energetically in a white jacket and white trousers, an almost standard woman-warrior outfit for the cinematic run of its time. Interestingly, the first line our Cantonese-speaking blonde inspector speaks in the film is made up of none other than swear words in Cantonese (interpreted as 'You-son-of-a-bitch' in the English subtitles).

The cultural ambivalence we encounter here captured certain kinds of local sensibilities in the making, during a period of rapid transformation for Hong Kong society as a whole, before the political crisis became a real down-to-earth concern for people, as witnessed in the march of 500,000 people on 1 July 2003 protesting against the incompetence of the HKSAR Government. The result has been a distinct brand of localism that could be approached through what Raymond Williams calls 'the structure of feeling'. Within this realm of what is also referred to in cultural studies as local 'insiderism',¹⁴ we see our common sense re-configured in an obsessive, messy, but pleasurable form and horizon of imagination. It is obsessive and pleasurable because innumerable twists and turns of the image/action on screen are being articulated to what seems to be emerging from inside the cinema, from within the very individualistic, inward-looking, and hence inevitably *messy* desires for spectacles of (cultural) action among the utterly bewildered and particularised audience.

Two examples will allow us to see how the (trans)national is increasingly saturated with a fluid, sometimes almost alien, form of local 'unconscious', displacing the master discourse inside, which used to dominate the ways we address ourselves. They are *The East is Red* and *The Heroic Trio*, both made in 1993 by Ching Siu-tong (action choreographer of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, 2001), who is mainly responsible for the martial arts direction. After the success of *Swordsman* (Tsui Hark, 1990)—a film said to have marked the revival of costume swordplay cinema in contemporary Hong Kong—Tsui Hark's Film Workshop released *Swordsman II* (Ching Siu-tong, 1992) and its sequel *The East is Red* (Ching Siu-tong and Raymond Lee, 1993).¹⁵ Both these Tsui Hark productions feature the unforgettable Brigitte Lin in the fascinating role of Asia-the-Invincible (or *Dongfang bubai*, literally The-East-Never-Loses), a pure glamour role in Hong Kong action cinema of the 1990s. Elsewhere I have discussed in detail how the martial arts world of *jianghu* is as much the condition for fighting as the controlling theme for action in Tsui Hark's dream workshop.¹⁶ Now there might well be different interpretations of these films, but everyone would agree that Tsui Hark is breaking new ground in his ingenious use of Lin in these two East-Never-Loses films. In fact, the Hong Kong new-wave film-maker had first directed Lin in *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* (Tsui Hark, 1983), when he cast the young Brigitte as the hyper-cool leader

of a quasi-evil clan of female fighters hidden in the mythical Zu Mountain. Her colourful outfit in that film contrasts effectively with the standard white-warrior figure played by her counterpart, the ever-handsome-and-righteous Adam Cheng. Almost twenty years later, Tsui Hark admitted that the minute he came across the story of Asia-the-Invincible, he thought right away of Lin's memorable depiction of the fragile but devilish woman warrior in *Zu*, remembering the fluid sensibility she brought to the full embodiment of evil with beauty.¹⁷

In *East is Red*, the postmodern *Dongfang bubai* sequel, the (anti-)nationalist appellation of Asia-the-Invincible as *qiangu zui ren* (the eternal sinner) turns out to be a political reference to Chris Patten, especially in the minds of the local audience. Patten, the last British governor of Hong Kong, was given that name by mainland Chinese officials for his way of handling the relationship between Britain, Hong Kong and China at the time. Later, in a farcical switch to the mode of excess, the desire of East (Lin as the seducer of men and women alike) is transfigured into that of a certain hybrid prototype of East-West, fashioned in colourful dress codes adopted transnationally with a free touch of Japanese arms and masks. The dress code in particular and the stylistic address in general, which capture much of the audience's fascination and imagination in *Swordsman II*, have returned in *East is Red*, but with an unapologetic shift to the mode of excess. Hence, the tyranny of desires reign in the lonesome flagship announcing itself as 'The-East-&-West-Never-Lose'. There is no question that the local viewers grasped the seemingly thick allegory of the (trans)national in this fake and sinful tyrant played by Lin, the glamorous sinner, and in all her look-alikes, who appear to be none other than inauthentic jokers. As the film unfolds with the messy flow of fluid local sensibilities, we experience in the horrific sensations staged by its breathtaking action spectacles (choreographed by Ching Siu-tong) a certain ambivalent desire named hybridity (East-West?) and, alongside that, the sinful longing for a justified cause of action that the cinematic unconscious would help register inside a culture.¹⁸

Here, we see in action the discourse of fashion, and of style in its representation of the filmic persona, whose visual glamour not only appeals to the messy ambivalence of an audience quite lost as to their sense of identity orientation at that particular juncture in history, but also re-captures in spectacular motion their absent 'historical' imagination in ways that escape beyond the normal reach of the politics of 'returnification' in the messy mix of the return and re-unification of Hong Kong in 1997. The discourse at work provided the material and symbolic form for a particular realisation of the shared 'structure of feeling' at that point in time. It allowed the local crowd in the cinema to break away from the drowsy political light of day and subject themselves collectively to the shaping of the contradictory experience of fascination for that unintended and unexpected cinematic form. In other words, it serves to precipitate a peculiar form of popular sensibility Raymond Williams would call

'practical consciousness', in which the subject, framed and shaped by that particular cinematic formation, sets out to engage itself in the cultural action involved and indulges in the ambivalent pleasure that such a process entails.

Hence, in *Swordsman II*, the East-Never-Loses is visibly the embodiment of the unconscious of the orientalist mindset turned upside down, or inside out. Confronted by the long road ahead of political transition, Hong Kong at the time had collective nightmares about how the East (China) would never allow itself to be left out, or challenged, let alone defeated. In the sequel, *East is Red*, it is interesting, though hardly surprising, to see that the many impersonations of Asia-the-Invincible turn out to be all fakes, with the exception of one—Brigitte Lin's embodiment of the Evil East (the authentic inauthentic *Dongfang bubai*, as it were). Heavily criticised during the 1990s by the Chinese authority for nurturing the desire to turn Hong Kong into a potential base for 'peaceful transformation', the colonial imagination now ran the risk of messing things up for those desiring subjects as the copycat power of the Invincible East grew. Given the dominant discourse of the time, the groundbreaking mythos of the 'One Country, Two Systems' project was enacted to deliver the promise that re-configuration and re-alignment of the collective good would take shape here, amid excessive fatigue turned desire-for-action.

Such articulation of fatigue with desire are well echoed in the wonderful and unforgettable appearance Brigitte Lin makes in *The Bride with White Hair* (Ronny Yu, 1993) and *Ashes of Time* (Wong Kar-wai, 1994). Whether one is totally bewildered by the spectacular suffering of the bisexual lone-fighter (*Ashes of Time*), or overwhelmed by the horrific beauty of the devoted love-avenger (*The Bride with White Hair*), it seems that Lin has succeeded powerfully in her glamorous embodiment of the disturbing sensibility in contemporary Hong Kong. She has almost become the unlikely 'perfect fit' for that specific cultural (action) representation.¹⁹ There, the desire for action leads substantially to a transforming path for localism, in which the popular sensibility at issue is characteristically an index of the common experience missing from the political public sphere, and the action imaginary thus evoked, an instance of the 'practical' dimension of consciousness, as it were. Indeed, action itself becomes the cultural desire for a peculiarly local brand of identity loyalty, fetishism and (trans)formation, in which glamour is in search of the right version of self, desperately demanding justice, or seeking damnation.²⁰

I would argue that the sudden consolidation of Brigitte Lin as an 'action star' in the 1990s was the outcome of a surprising upsurge of local loyalty and perspectives, possibly an outcome of the combination of acute sociopolitical uncertainty, repressed cultural imagination and aggressive corporate representation of desires. The other case for our discussion of this sort of local precipitation of desires is *The Heroic Trio* (Ching Siu-tong and Johnny To, 1993), whose original Chinese title literally reads as 'Three Xia of the East' (*Tongfang san xia*).

In other words, not unlike the *Invincible East* we find in the swordplay genre of the 1990s, the heroic trio seem also to be concerned somehow with the predicament of the 'East' (*Tong-fang*). But the film no doubt belongs to a completely different category of action movies, capable of delivering fantasy in a commodity-form accessible to market sensibilities during a period of political uncertainty and cultural impotence.²¹

Thanks to an excellent team of directors (with Johnny To directing the drama and Ching Siu-tong, the action), the mixed generic form of the film generates much pleasure by displacing the anxiety and desire we tend to see as part of the local unconscious at war during a period of instability.²² Significantly, this has resulted in a far more interesting and sophisticated experiment in the female action form, when compared with works in the police sub-genre that feature mainly women fighting, such as *The Inspector Wears Skirts* (Wellson Chin, 1988), or *She Shoots Straight* (Corey Yuen, 1989). With its mystical and ostensibly ahistorical milieu, complete with a wonderful translocal set design by Raymond Chan, and the touch of film noir, cross-cultural art direction by Bruce Yu, *The Heroic Trio* dwells nonetheless on a political motif: 'China must have an Emperor'. This is repeatedly played out in the narrative (screenplay by Sandy Shaw), given as the motto of the evil Eunuch, a baby(boy)-eater who is the archetypal villain you would find in the more conventional quasi-historical swordplay genre, of which Tsui Hark's *Dragon Inn* (Raymond Lee and Ching Siu-tong, 1992) would serve as an exemplary contemporary model. Here, it is only possible to refer to the overall setting of *The Heroic Trio* as categorically modern (or early modern), even though with some of the details provided we are prepared to identify a few traces of national references: the title of one newspaper is *Minshen wanbao* ('Everyday Evening Post') and the hospital is called *Guomin yiyuan* ('National/People's Hospital'). Yet these general references to an imaginary nationhood are direct but non-specific, modern but archetypal; they are set against the backdrop of a legendary rather than historical narrative, captured in a peculiar style and ambience that tends to suggest the sort of postmodern ambivalence more readily identifiable (especially for younger audiences) in a certain transnational, post-apocalyptic mode of sensibility driven through the evolving circuits of cultural consumption available in Hong Kong of the 1990s.

Hence, re-emerged after a brief break since her success in the female warrior genre of the 1980s, Michelle Yeoh leads the heroic trio in her unusual red outfit; the fashionable Maggie Cheung (*Iceman Cometh*, 1989; *Dragon Inn*, 1992; *Ashes of Time*, 1994) is in a stylish full-leather outfit with her aggressive urban motorcycle; and the Cantopop Queen Anita Mui plays the wonderful Wonder Woman in mythic black with her nostalgic mask and high-power, bullet-strong secret weapons adopted fantastically from the traditional martial arts style. The postmodern trio do not simply kick men, talk back to them in jokes or slang, or jump to a single solution; they do so in exquisite style, and with a touch of glamour that

seems to have materialised through a fine mix of nostalgia and fashion, of local sensibility in its subtlety and a contemporary, global form of crisis narrative, sensational action spectacle and hybrid postmodern cultural outfit.

In *Executioners* (Ching Siu-tong and Johnny To, 1993), the heroic trio sequel, nuclear catastrophe is the apparent backdrop for the unfolding action. There the military shoots at the common people amid internal political struggles at the highest level; on the sideline is an opposition leader (played by a shy Takeshi Kaneshiro), the handsome pacifist representing the fragile beauty of idealism in the face of the evil enacted by the monstrous villain (wonderfully performed by Anthony Wong Chuo-sang). The question is, reassuringly, how sisterhood can save the world by securing a safe source of water for humankind, now that the motherly Wonder Woman (Anita Mui) is slightly handicapped by her family commitments, which closes the narrative in *The Heroic Trio*. But at the end of the day, the order of a nation is redeemed, and with the husband of Wonder Woman (a government official played by Damian Lau) dead midway through the movie, the girls have their show again, now joined by Wonder Woman's young daughter. But Charlie's Angels they are not. Followed by the little girl (the second-generation little Wonder?), the vanguard vagabond Chan Chat (Maggie Cheung) rediscovers the natural source of water, thus completing the generic plot sequence of a pseudo-apocalyptic crisis. In a bleak postmodern mood, her compatriot partner (the cowboy figure enacted by Lau Ching-wan) dies in the process because he can not swim. As there's no nuclear contamination after all, Yeoh the ambivalent military 'warrior' is killed, to the audience's small surprise. In the end, we are taken through a series of unforgettable action scenes choreographed by Ching Siu-tong with a fantastic touch of mixed local/(trans)national sensibility, conjuring up one's sensations gathered from such global action references as the invisible man, the batman, the local black female avenger also known as 'the lady killer' in the 1960s.

For analytical purposes, suffice it to say here that we may indeed approach the specific global popular form of female action by considering three of its most prominent mediatory functions, namely communication, consumption and identification. I find this sort of mapping helpful for understanding the particular kind of action cinema we are interested in. With regard to the communicative function, for instance, we can see that in the Hong Kong female action film, women fighting is not only about the fly-over kicks, the automatic freezes in body posture and the accompanying slang and fight-speak that tend to punctuate the show. Also delivered in the process is, centrally, sociocultural communication of a kind that transmits its impact via the pleasurable commodity-forms embodied in the hybrid popular genre, and the resultant sensibility traces we have been trying to map in the late-colonial culture of Hong Kong. It would seem that at the core of the action imaginary, collective sensibility is mediated through 'private' pleasure in the local consumption of whatever our desire

seems to be driving at during that sociohistorical juncture in cinematic identification. In this sense, female action is without question a form of commodified fantasy, of which *The Heroic Trio* and *Executioners* are no doubt exemplary cases. As Marshall suggests in *Celebrity and Power*, 'the construction of identity in the domains of consumption as opposed to production made the film star an image of the way in which a lifestyle/identity could be found in the domain of nonwork'.²³ Hence, the three processes of mediation operate as a whole in the female action film by providing a network of perspectives for the capture of a glocal popular form of sensibility. But to understand the overall effects of the action heroines, one needs to bear in mind that such functions cannot be clearly discriminated except analytically. Under globalisation, I think the hybrid nature of this whole process will become even more integrative. What is being consumed? What does one identify with in a film and how does that identification takes place and move about in the larger cultural circuit of our private desires and collective imaginations? These remain some of the questions we need to consider given the emerging role of the new matrix of identification, posed for us as a critical challenge in view of new changes in the development of a transnational genre.²⁴

Let us return for a while to Michelle Yeoh, with whom we started, and briefly consider her latest work, *The Touch* (Peter Pao, 2002). Set in Qindao, Malaysia and Tibet, and equipped with a huge budget, an international cast (Yeoh, Ben Chaplin, Richard Roxburgh and Brandon Cheung) and exotic story-line (story by Yeoh, Thomas Chung and Peter Pao), the film is rather ineffective in its presentation of the action superstar as a plausible, not to say interesting, heroine. The Hong Kong critic Shek Kei remarked that Yeoh's ambitious work in the latest transnational action genre is clearly not of the same calibre as her work in Ang Lee's Oscar-winner *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*; it is more like an average dull imitation of such Hollywood films as *Tomb Raider* (Simon West, 2001), flavoured with some orientalist taste 'half Chinese – half foreign' (*bun tong-fang*, usually meant as a criticism or sarcastic remark),²⁵ and positioned somewhere between the real transnational blockbuster and the local action movie. Yeoh speaks English throughout the film, along with most other characters, but the fact that local elements are nonexistent except in vague traces of religion and ethnicity and that the few national references are totally stereotypical and unoriginal may have contributed to its partial failure. A productive parallel here from that point of view is Yeoh's previous representation of the 'national cause' in *The Magnificent Warriors* (David Chung, 1987), set in the late 1930s, in which she plays a nationalist soldier leading the Chinese people to fight the Japanese imperialists in Tibet. There, the storyline is designed again (in binary opposition to her trajectory in the *Royal Warriors*) simply as an excuse for staging various battles scenes with aeroplanes, cannons and explosives. Despite a deliberate attempt for some comic relief through such male leads as Richard Ng and Lowell Lo, Yeoh delivers at best an average performance in the film. Somehow, Michelle as a nationalist is never too

popular or convincing for the audience, in contrast to the dynamic life and performative action she is capable of providing the heroines in *Yes, Madam*, *Royal Warriors*, *The Heroic Trio*, or even *Ah Kam* (Ann Hui, 1996), where she is given the more dramatic part of a local kung-fu stunt-woman/martial artist in search of personal love.

To be sure, the basic tricks in communication, consumption and identification could function in an entirely different way, in order that the female action stars can begin to work a new kind of glamour into their performative action. I would like to make a final reference to a more recent work of distinction in the genre by veteran director Corey Yuen: *So Close* (2002), also known as 'The Sunset Angels' by its Hong Kong Chinese title. The heroic trio is here re-enacted at the beginning of a new era of cyber-action, with an unconventional mix of local and (trans)national elements. This time the trio show includes Shu Qi (Shu Kei), Karen Mok Man-wai and Vicki Zhao Wei, who are originally from Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland respectively. None of the three actresses can be said to be icons of the action heroine the way Michelle Yeoh or Brigitte Lin are (albeit in very different ways).

Against the background of the spectacles of action-desire given to us in *The Heroic Trio*, we may perhaps try to put the work of the new sisterhood trio here side by side with the same director's earlier work *She Shoots Straight* (Corey Yuen, 1989), an example in the female-cop genre starring Joyce Mina Godenzi, Tony Leung Ka-fai and Carina Lau. In that film, interestingly enough, family provides a basic framework to the (police) narrative and action. Upon closer scrutiny, it would appear that in both works, family centres on the female bonding between sisters. Obviously, the two sisters, Lynn (Shu Qi) and Sue (Zhao Wei), in *So Close* are fashionable (middle-class?) professional killers, having full access to the cyber-vision of satellite technology, the secret invention they inherit from their scientist father. After the elder sister, Lynn, dies in a spectacular scene in which she is shot violently by a whole gang of men-in-black as she sits in front of the computer screen trying to save Sue from a car chase by police, her sister pairs up with the runaway policewoman Hong (Karen Mok) for some revenge action, ending in a female cop-criminal friendship that echoes interestingly the brotherhood pact popularised by Chow Yun-fat in John Woo's films (for example, *The Killer*, 1989). This time, however, a light touch of lesbian love is explicitly indicated by Sue's repeated show of youthful affection for agent Hong, a minor turn-away from the sexist Hollywood norm as defined by *Charlie's Angels*. In his earlier work *She Shoots Straight*, Corey Yuen tells a police story around the motifs of the traditional family. Only there, jealousy between the sister (Carina Lau) and sister-in-law (Joyce Mina Godenzi) happens to be the root source for the film's plot/action—a rather traditional motif indeed, if completely out of place as a modern scenario for cinematic action. But Yuen did it, despite everything. Both policewomen (the sisters) here are attached to the fellow policeman in the family—Carina's elder brother and Joyce's husband played by Tony Leung Ka-fai. Joyce, of mixed heritage, is insulted

frequently by her sister-in-law; the two of them only join force in reconciled sisterhood to fight the villain after the man of the family (Leung) is killed by the villain.

In *So Close*, on the other hand, Corey Yuen works with a completely different set of possibilities. Continuing with tradition, he makes Shu Qi fight with grace and purity—by resorting again to the spectacular white outfit! When in the opening scene, she falls down in white during a planned escape from the top of the building after the assassination she so stylishly accomplished, the localised *angelic* descent is brilliantly set to the crystal-clear soft-pop tune of ‘They Long to be (Close to You)’. From then on, Shu Qi kicks and kills as a white angel would, sleeps in all white in an all-white bedroom, and dies in stylistic blood red splashed on her glamorous white in that cool cyber-look studio apartment she ‘lives’ in. Later, both her younger sister Sue and the policewoman Hong also fight in white outfits against the all-in-black men.²⁶ My point is, if identity of all kinds is indeed significant in a wide spectrum of cultural representation and practice, we have to be aware of the emerging role of the new matrix of identification involved. As I have been trying to suggest, action-sisterhood is possible not only under the traditional context of gender reversal framed in the social relationships defined by professionalism (*Yes, Madam; Righting Wrongs*), or kinship (*She Shoots Straight*), but it is now also a viable option under the hybrid possibilities of a sort of universal idealism (*The Heroic Trio, Executioners*), or cyber-romanticism (*So Close*).

Elsewhere I have suggested that we can view contemporary cultural productions in Hong Kong in light of three modes of identity representation informed respectively by the local, the national and the transnational imaginaries.²⁷ Briefly, it could be noted that discourses of the local in the 1950s and 1960s were coextensive with a regional (southern) Chineseness bearing no distinct Hong Kong identity traces. What the local signifies has since changed drastically with the outburst of the Great Cultural Revolution on the Chinese mainland and the advance of the glocal mass media (especially commercial TV and the new-wave cinema) in capitalist Hong Kong of the 1970s, which could no longer be simply identified as an entity inside China, culturally speaking. The 1980s also saw the hybridisation of the local through its articulation with a changing, unsettling national unconscious. This obviously had much to do with the political transition and sociocultural condition triggered by the bloody events of 1989 and after. Once the handover was over, the end of the twentieth century brought along a new stage on which the local as a new postcolonial discourse was being transfigured by and into the complex cultural formation of the transnational.

Through the projected work on the global popular, the *transnational* as a function of filmic imagination is, therefore, not opposed to the *local*, nor does it necessarily imply the elimination of the *national*. It transcends the national and re-works the logic of the international, without rendering either of them totally ineffective. My suggestion is that traces of local and (trans)national imaginations in Hong Kong culture tend to overlap and displace each other,

as witnessed in the way in which the cinematic commodity-form of female action is functional in saving moments of glamour for the contemporary culture of Hong Kong. The aim of my larger project, of which the present work is a part, is to argue that during the last two decades, this mode of social imagination has indeed come to reconstitute moments of the colonial-international within the emergent logic of post-imperialist global order, through which contemporary forms of locality are re-articulated in Hong Kong's cultural transformation. Whereas in the previous colonial stage of history the production of modernity went through its late capitalist phase, Hong Kong culture since the mid-1970s has taken on new roles and now registers a new logic of identity formation operative in the current stage of capitalist culture. The transnational imagination in culture thus captures in an evolving cultural space the historical links between subjectivity and the state (be it colonial or national). In order to do this we would need to re-invoke the very messy social contexts for a critique of the contemporary identity imaginary and the shaping of collective subjectivity it entails. My broader critical strategy has been to confront it in an effort to trace the action trajectory of its passage through phases in our contemporary history, as the changing spectacles of our cultural action burst through the collective unconscious into scenarios predominated by the heroines of cinematic glamour.

The basic task in my preliminary analysis here is to examine how such work can allow us to better understand the complexity in the formation of the cultural experiences we are concerned with. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Hong Kong people developed through the practices of their daily life a local and contemporary set of cultural icons, discourses and representations distinct from that of other urban Chinese cultures. One obvious irony of colonial experience is that the younger generations would tend to recognise, indeed identify with, the colony as the collective sphere of home caught de-territorialised, as it were, between a whole range of local, national and transnational positions. These hybrid articulations have since resulted in the formation of distinct cultural sensibilities never quite matched in the historical formation of Chinese modernity. I have tried to suggest that the formation of Hong Kong sensibilities must be seen in the process of a particular collective subjectivity working through a complex of negotiated, contested and mobile flows and counter-flows of divergent cultural components. In short, we have been looking for the changing signs of cultural relevance, identity and sensibility through the action spectacle of the filmic heroines since the mid-1980s, as a gateway to a certain common logic of the larger 'cultural action' at stake. I have borrowed from Hannerz's notion of a 'network of perspectives' to accommodate this mobility and negotiation for us to see how Hong Kong identity traces have moved from a more localised form within a larger Chinese cultural sphere to a hybrid kind of local form within a transnational sphere of cultural production and circulation. Indeed, 'perspectives are perspectives toward perspectives'.²⁸ In my analysis here, the figure of the 'woman warrior'

in contemporary action films provides one such perspective to re-vision and to trace the changes of locality in Hong Kong as a cultural form amid the complex mediation processes at large.

This article is based on a paper given at the annual conference of the Society of Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) held in Minneapolis, USA, 6–9 January 2003. It emerged from the joint research project sponsored by Research Grants Council (Hong Kong) Earmarked Research Grant entitled ‘Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema: Hong Kong and the Making of a Global Popular Culture’, jointly held with Meaghan Morris and Siu-leung Li. I am grateful to them both for their continuous support and to Jenny Lau for her valuable comments during the SCMS conference.

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1. On the view that culture is made up of a ‘network of perspectives’ rather than any one single perspective, see Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1992. For a discussion of its relevance for cultural studies refer to Nick Couldry, *Inside Culture*, Sage Publications, London, 2000, pp. 98–104.
 2. Hannerz, p. 65.
 3. Hannerz, p. 64.
 4. See, in particular, Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*, Routledge, London, 1993; and Sherrie A. Inness, *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1999.
 5. See Hannerz, pp. 6–10; also Couldry, p. 102, drawing on Hannerz’s notion of cultural complexity.
 6. Hannerz, p. 65.
 7. Richard Dyer, *Stars*, second edition, British Film Institute, London, 1998, pp. 96–9.
 8. Dyer, p. 98.
 9. P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1997, p. 187.
 10. Marshall, p. 189.
 11. Yvonne Tasker calls Cynthia Rothrock ‘an unlikely action heroine’, in *Spectacular Bodies*, p. 24.
 12. In an interview he did early on in his career, Corey Yuen describes force and energy as the key components of action cinema. See *City Entertainment*, no. 399, 1994, p. 52.
 13. Ng Ho has confirmed that ‘no film genre is more male-chauvinist than the *kungfu* comedy ... in which women are supposed to bring bad luck’; in ‘Kungfu Comedy: Tradition, Structure, Character’, in William Tay (ed.), *Cultural Criticism and Chinese Cinema*, Rye Field, Taipei, 1995, p. 180.
 14. See Couldry, Chapter 6, ‘Accounting for the Self’, for a discussion of ‘insiderism’ as an inevitable dimension of culture, and the ‘messiness’ (that is, the inherently contradictory nature of experience taken from the point of view (‘inside’) of any particular individual.
 15. Lau Tai-muk, ‘Conflict and Desire: Dialogues between the Hong Kong Martial Arts Genre and

- Social Issues in the Past 40 Years', in *The Making of Martial Arts Films as Told by Filmmakers and Stars*, Hong Kong Film Archive, Hong Kong, 1999, p. 33.
16. See my discussion of the world of *jianghu* with reference to *Swordsman II* in 'Figures of Hope and the Filmic Imaginary of *Jianghu* in Contemporary Hong Kong Cinema', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 15, nos. 3–4, 2001, pp. 486–514.
 17. See Law Kar's interview with Tsui Hark, in Law Kar and others, *Generic Studies of Hong Kong Cinema*, Oxford University Press, Hong Kong, 1997, p. 54.
 18. The East and the West were not able to meet in Hong Kong through 1997, or so it seemed. There was no 'through train', as even Chris Patten admitted:

What was this vehicle [the 'through train'] exactly? Like many metaphors seized on by the Chinese side in negotiation, it became a substitute for thought or for real exchange of views. The notion was this. We should be working towards a set of constitutional arrangements that allowed legislators elected in 1995 to serve through to the end of the four-year term of their council in 1999. This would obviously mean that the Chinese would have to give their broad approval to the arrangements made for the 1995 elections. But the Chinese extended the concept to mean that they would need to approve the legislators as well as the method that produced them. There was already a through train for civil servants and judges, and, not to take a new oath to the future government of the Special Administrative Region ...

Chris Patten, *East and West: The Last Governor of Hong Kong on Power, Freedom and the Future*, Macmillan, London, 1998, pp. 75–6
 19. See Dyer, p. 129, for whom a 'perfect fit' between a star's image and the character represented is one in which 'all the aspects of a star's image fit with all the traits of a character'.
 20. Here I borrow the idea of audience loyalty from Marshall, p. 83: 'The star has become an individualized corporate entity, with recognizable brand and hoped-for audience loyalty'.
 21. The local box office for *The Heroic Trio* amounted to a modest HK\$9.5 million (or US\$1.2 million), ranking thirty-ninth in popularity amid a total of 239 productions made in Hong Kong in 1993.
 22. Speaking of *The Heroic Trio* and *Executioners*, Linda Lai points out that although they 'may appear to be without genre precedents, they actually integrate a swordplay ethos noted in the value of chivalry and philanthropy with the female Robin Hood, the detective/crime film, the comic book visual effects and action choreography of Japanese TV cartoons'. See her 'Nostalgia and Nonsense: Two Instances of Commemorative Practices in Hong Kong Cinema in the Early 1990s', in Law Kar (ed.), *Fifty Years of Electric Shadows*, Hong Kong International Film Festival, Hong Kong, 1997, p. 97.
 23. Marshall, pp. 92–3.
 24. See Marshall, p. 94:

With the film star's relative nonattachment to material forms of production because of his or her work solely in the manufacture of images, the discourse on and about screen stars was particularly concerned with the manner of consumption and the associated construction of lifestyles ... Through various extratextual sources, the celebrities provided the ground for the debate concerning the way in which new patterns of consumption could be organized to fit the innate patterns of personality.
 25. Shek Kei, *Ming Pao Daily*, 5 August 2002, p. 9.
 26. Karen Mok, who plays Hong, has previously appeared in *Black Mask* (Daniel Lee, 1996), *The God of Cookery* (Stephen Chow and Lee Lik-chi, 1996), *The King of Comedy* (Stephen Chow and Lee Lik-chi, 1999), *Shaolin Soccer* (Stephen Chow and Lee Lik-chi, 2001). And Zhao Wei, who is Sue, was wonderful in *Shaolin Soccer*, in which she makes traditional buns in the kung-fu style, plays the ultimate goalkeeper in the final soccer match duel against the villains and saves the whole team with her magical tai chi-style hands.
 27. Stephen Ching-kiu Chan, 'Mapping the Global Popular in Hong Kong: Re-Articulations of the Local, National and Transnational in Contemporary Cultural Flows', in Yee Leung and others (eds), *Re-Inventing Hong Kong in the Age of Globalization*, Chung Chi College and Faculty of Social Sciences, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, 2002, pp. 47–52.
 28. Hannerz, p. 67.