A Hong Kong Modern in the 1980s Trilogy
It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World

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Comedy was the mainstream genre for consumption in 1980s Hong Kong. 'Comedy as a film genre has been much neglected in the history of early Chinese cinema despite the fact that it has a beginning dating back to the early farces produced by the Asia Film Company.'[1] While Hong Kong comedy films sell well, they are rarely taken seriously; most have been impressionistically dismissed as a random cumulation of gags, sentimentality and slapstick action. I argue in this article that comedy, as one of the genres that has enduringly produced blockbusters in Hong Kong cinema history for more than four decades, is key to understanding how Hong Kong popular culture has responded to and/or articulated socio-historical changes, through re-reading a series of three major blockbusters from the D & B Films Co., Ltd. in 1987-1989. Contrary to ways Euro-American comedies often call upon 'universal' situations to induce cross-cultural identification and sentiments, Hong Kong comedies tend to be more grounded in context-specific socio-political experiences.

Why did Hongkongers want/need to consume comedy so much? In 'Hong Kong Film Market and Trends in the '80s', Law Kar, studying the stats from Hong Kong film market, points out that 'comedy films (those with major comic elements) have always been the biggest box office hits' from 1977 to 1989.[2] While Cinema City, from the early 1980s on, did everything they could to amalgamate some comic elements in each production, D & B, following the footsteps of the Cinema City but with a different style, had taken considerable risk in investing in diversification, churning out generic films including gangster, thriller, New Year celebratory, romance, artsy, political satire, among others. However, amongst the sixty-seven D & B films made, the first two biggest hits in box office were comedies: *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987) and *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World II* (1988), surpassing *An Autumn's Tale* (1987), the winner of Best Film, Best Cinematography and Best Screenplay at the Hong Kong Film Awards.[3]

The Real in the Mad, Mad, Mad World

Why was the series of *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* so popular? Critics and fans have hailed it as accurately portraying the lives of 'typical Hong Kong common folks' in a 'laughing in tears' manner,[4] 'maintaining a heart-winning storyline without a big cast',[5] 'the joy, anger and sadness of Bill's family evoke the image of most Hong Kong families.'[6] But most families in Hong Kong do not win the first prize of the local lottery Mark Six; neither do they put money into a bank that easily goes bankrupt or gets robbed; most family members would not encounter kidnapping or find out about cancer diagnosis in one day followed with a misdiagnosis the next. One of the D & B

1 Law Kar, 'A Comparative Analysis of Cantonese and Mandarin Comedies', *The Traditions of Hong Kong Comedy*, the 9th Hong Kong International Film Festival Catalogue, Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1985, p 13.

2 Law Kar, 'Hong Kong Film Market and Trends in the '80s', *Hong Kong Cinema in the Eighties* (Revised Edition), the 15th Hong Kong International Film Festival Catalogue, Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1999, p 13 (in Chinese) (first edition in 1991).

3 The box office of the three films grossed: *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* HK$27,141,824; *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World II* HK$25,814,268; *An Autumn's Tale* HK$25,546,552.

4 Ernianji De Xiaolajiao: 'Shen Dianxia Yu *Fugui Biren* Xilie Dianying: Yongbu Tunise De Jingdian Xiju, Xiao Zhong Dai Lei' ('Lydia Sum and *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* Series: A Heart-wrenching Classic Comedy'), *kknews*, 19 December 2016 (in Chinese). https://kknews.cc/zh-hk/entertainment/qeao9g8.html. Accessed on 22 December 2019.

5 Ding Yuan Naxie Shi: 'Huiyi Xianggang Dianying Zhi *Fugui Biren* Xilie' ('Remembering the *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* Series'), *kknews*, 29 August 2017 (in Chinese). https://kknews.cc/zh-hk/entertainment/8b9moaq.htm. Accessed on 22 December 2019.

6 Bei Qing Wang (www.ynet.com): '*Fugui Biren* Yijia Wukou, Biao Shu Biao Shen Yi Buzai, Zui Piaoliang De Li Lizhen 51 Sui Le' (The Family of Five in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World*: Uncle Bill and Auntie Lydia were No Longer with Us; the Most Stunning Loletta Lee is Now 51'), *kknews*, 9 February 2018 (in Chinese). https://kknews.cc/zh-hk/entertainment/kmn8jv8.html. Accessed on 22 December 2019.

It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World (1987): Uncle Bill's family constantly goes through cycles of 'ecstasy' and 'frustration'.
(Front row from left: Loletta Lee, Elsie Chan, Pauline Kwan, Lydia Sum, Bill Tung; back: John Chiang)

masterminds John Chan Koon-chung says, in an interview conducted by Law Kar and Sek Kei in 1990, that 1980s Hong Kong cinema did have a narratology, including the use of inconsistent and/or incomplete structure, diversions, non-linear and jumping narratives, and a rushed tempo, which might seem reasonable to Chinese and South-East Asian audiences but often remains incomprehensible to non-Asian audiences.[7] These characteristics, he speculates, could be legacies from Chinese serial fiction and street-folk singing-telling traditions, therefore distinct from the Euro-American expectations of narrative realism.

For those of us in Hong Kong film studies, while we cannot take the Euro-American universalist assumptions of realism for granted, reconsidering the local generic characteristics of Hong Kong cinema is a much-needed task. Apart from the non-linear narratives and diversions, there is also a distinctively compressed rhythm and 'shallow' cartoonist characterisation that might render Hong Kong comedies 'incomprehensible' to some. How come Hong Kong audience could so readily take over-the-top plotlines as 'real' and identify with the characters' improbable situations? Chan Hoi-man defines Hong Kong major popular cultural discourses in the 1980s-90s as 'affluence', 'survival' and 'deliverance', and considered the juxtaposition of these three contradistinctive cultural discourses as defining 'the fabric of cultural mentality' which he calls the 'Hong Kong ethos'.[8] 'Affluence', as in the sense of material abundance as well as hope and possibilities offered by the spectacle of city life, has gradually become commonplace since the mid-1970s. Yet, there were many common folks struggling in survival processes for self-actualisation, while Hong Kong society was collectively caught in a critical political survival crisis: 'the sustenance of collective survival against overwhelming historical odds'. Between the contradictions of fulfilment and survivalism, popular cultural formations, especially comedy films, sought to deliver relief of anxiety and repressed sentiments, so that the you and me who were caught in the pendulum of enjoyment and frustration in modern life, could maintain a certain psychological balance however temporary.

The characters in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* series are made in exactly this kind of pendulum, going through cycles of 'ecstasy' and 'frustration', making it and losing it, as if to provide training for strengthening the hearts of the audience. Those whose hearts are not strong enough are considered losers. The Bill family in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World*, wins the lottery but the bank which they put their money in then folds; the family's dream of getting rich comes true, only to fall through. But towards the end of the film, the Hong Kong government announces that the bank will be supported, so the Bill family gets their funds back. In *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World II,* Bill (played by Bill Tung) finds out upon arrival at Canada, that being Editor-in-Chief at a Chinese newspaper not only means a struggle with cultural and language differences but also a challenge in being a one-man production team from reporter to office cleaner. Now that it feels like he has to start from scratch again, he cannot help looking back to the days

[7] Law Kar and Sek Kei, 'Interview with John Chan Koon-chung', *Hong Kong Cinema in the Eighties* (Revised Edition), see note 2, p 93 (in Chinese).

[8] Chan, Hoi-man, 'Popular Culture and Democratic Culture: Outline of a Perspective on the 1991 Legislative Council Election', in *Hong Kong Tried Democracy*, Lau Siu-kai and Louie Kin-sheun (eds), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1993.

of first moving into the housing projects, as if that whole process has to be reworked again. Just when the family is starting to cope in Canada, the boss fires Bill, so Loy-dai's (played by Loletta Lee) college education has to come to a halt. Once again, Bill and his wife with their newly born and Jiu-dai (played by Pauline Kwan) has to return to Hong Kong and squeeze themselves into a tiny room. In this most difficult time, Auntie Lydia (played by Lydia Sum) suddenly realises she has won the Canadian lottery. They borrow money for the plane ride back, are robbed on the journey, sweep floor in a restaurant and in the end, happily get their dough. In the third instalment, all their lottery savings get robbed in a bank. The family goes penniless (again), but Loy-dai earns three million from a jackpot machine in Macao, and then the bank reimburses them as the case is covered by an insurance company.

Cathartic Realism

After they won the lottery in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World*, Auntie Lydia happily shows off her handful of goodies after shopping, plus her newly made rainbow-coloured hair, only to meet with Bill laughing at her as a 'Lioness from the North' with a scolding: 'Look how you've become a fashion slave, prisoner of cosmetics!'. Hong Kong is shown here on the one hand, as a society in which the value of each individual is defined by the value of the materials s/he owns (Bill also says in the first scene of *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World*: 'One's value depends on what one wears'); pursuing material comfort is a universal ideal; on the other, the film constantly reminds its audience of the decadence of this kind of comfort, the futility of the pursuit. The Bill couple epitomise how Hongkongers want/need to earn quick cash to escape from endless exploitation in capitalist madness, yet they also desperately cling onto residual Confucius values of family centredness, thriftiness and modesty. The values of what could be read as low-key anti-materialism may not be represented as dominant in the films, but they serve to keep various contradictions and anxieties at bay towards a happy ending of closure.

As one of the four Asian mini-dragons, Hong Kong in the 1980s, experienced a so-far-so-good economic boom as it suffered from critical class inequalities; middle-class lifestyles and values might be the fantasies of many Hongkongers but were not their lived realities. The opening credits of the first *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* are superimposed onto seemingly documentary footage of everyday Hong Kong, showing starkly its extremely uneven distribution of resources: a sparkling clean Benz with opaque windows, people squeezing into the Mass Transit Railway, some playing golf, an old man digging up leftovers in sidewalk trash cans, an old woman lugging cardboard boxes on her back to earn pennies, cruises at pier for tourists, wet market loaded with smells and sweat, fur coats for sale at Viking Fur Co. asking for HK$25,000, a bird's eye view of the squatter huts. Screenwriter/director Clifton Ko's credit is superimposed on a series of shots of public housing. Public housing, also known as cheap-rental housing, is a lived reality for many Hongkongers in the 1970s and 80s. This interpellation situates the cultural identification of its audience at a specific place, under a specific ethnicity and class. At the wedding banquet where Bill's relatives show off their jewellery and glitzy possessions, Auntie Lydia hectically moves her hand without rings off the back of the chair. The image of this family who cannot hold their chins up among relatives due to their address and income level produces an easy gateway for the audience to project onto the screen their everyday sense of failure.

It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World (1987): Auntie Lydia (front row middle: Lydia Sum) is an untamed, middle-aged grassroots housewife. Her 'anti-modernism' attitude is a burden to her family, who longs for a place in the modern world.

Non-Chinese culture is represented stereotypically in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World II* (1988). (From right: Bill Tung, Elsie Chan, Loletta Lee)

To escape from a sense of failure in a modernised society, one, first of all, needs to learn to be modern. But the films also remind us, the more modern one aspires to be, the more failures. Auntie Lydia uses her handbag to grab a seat for Loy-dai in the MTR and shouts at the top of her lungs: 'There, your seat!', rendering Loy-dai so ashamed of her mother that she refuses to answer her call. Auntie Lydia, as first-generation Chinese migrant in Hong Kong (who sometimes slips into Shanghaiese), a middle-aged grassroots housewife, carrying an untamed, oversized body that takes up too much space and makes too much noise in public, does not operate according to the script for a modernised Hong Kong subject in the 1980s. Bill, in response to the rigorous exchange of emigration information at the banquet table, tightens his tie and gives a speech: 'We are not emigrating! Although we are Hongkongers, we have Chinese blood in us. We should embrace our mother country. Emigration is an irresponsible act. We need to employ the Hong Kong spirit… to contribute to the four modernisations of our country. So I appeal to you all, stay in Hong Kong, don't become third-class citizens in another country!' Upon hearing this, all lower their heads to eat soup in perfect unison.

Bill often appropriates Chinese partyline patriotic lingo as a self-defensive ploy to resist Hong Kong's colonial/capitalist/pragmatic mainstream ideology. Still, the self-contradictions he embodies (between words and behaviour, between words and words) leave him with little credibility in representation. He advocates no emigration when he has no money in pocket, but turns into the first to plan emigration in the family upon winning the lottery, because, in his words quoting a Chinese proverb, 'a gentleman does not stand under a crumbling wall'. His daughters Mia (played by Elsie Chan), Loy-dai and Jiu-dai (both 'Loy-dai' and 'Jiu-dai' mean 'little brother forthcoming'), growing up in colonial Hong Kong amidst the Euro-American-Japanese cultural domination of the 1980s, are so formed by colonial modernity that they almost 'naturally' look down upon their supposedly pre-modern parents. The Bill family epitomises Hong Kong's hybrid cultural formation. How does one forget all the sweat and struggles as one *turns* around to perform as the model of Asia's colonial capitalist modernity, all the while sweeping the dust and mess from all the lived contradictions under the shiny carpet beneath one's twirling feet? It is only in such speed, as in Bill's incredible shifting of positions, that one (the audience as well as Bill) can protect oneself from seeing and more critically, *feeling* the contradictions and struggles. Perhaps this is what the Euro-American audience may have a hard time comprehending: the nauseating speed of that sweep—comic no less, almost farcical in fact, but no doubt *too* fast. If one sees this speed as performative of the compression and the *turning*, i.e. a speed *à la* Hong Kong, perhaps then that could be (re)considered as a form of 'cathartic realism', offering a kind of perverse or if you like, religious pleasure, close to one's emotional reality.

In *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World II*, the family, upon landing, seems to be fascinated by the space and material abundance (supermarkets, ice-cream brands) offered by life in Canada but are soon frustrated by the inconvenience of the suburban space, a big leap from the highly compressed density of Hong Kong. Non-Chinese culture is represented stereotypically for laughs: a Caucasian youth makes his punk hairstyle through ironing. Dormmates bully Loy-dai by luring her into a bikini then locking her out in freezing temperature and making her a public scene. These aim to show the exoticism and vulgarity of a 'foreign' country, speaking to the anxiety and fear of an audience facing emigration challenges as well as appeasing those who might not have the resources to do so. To what extent is Hong Kong's local identification, or Hongkongness, built upon a colonial ethnocentricism nurtured by psychological habits of self-defence and self-belittlement?

A Mad, Mad, Mad Dream

If emigration is a dream, to be rich is another dream. In the dream of becoming rich upon buying the lottery, Auntie sees Bill in a huge bubbling massaging tub while she orders a group of dehumanised servants around. Soon the family is all in white formal wear, all ready for a glamour party. All's well according to common Hongkongers' western modern dream come true. In the centre of all this though, Jiu-dai's demonstration of her 'Dalang Bay' (a word-play referring to 'Daya Bay') model suddenly explodes, rendering the whole family besieged. A thunderstorm woke the whole family. A dream of becoming rich is bound to be a nightmare; fantasies are haunted; diversions are allegories. This dream sequence immediately cuts to the next scene of Hongkongers squeezing into MTR on the Admiralty platform, suggesting on the one hand, the commonness of this kind of fantasy-nightmare, as a collective affective experience of the Hong Kong working mass, and on the other, reminding the film-watching audience of the nature of cinema as a dream-making factory and comedy as a temporary (and futile) outlet for fantasy-nightmares. Dream over, film over, you and I re-join the mass work team, squeezing flat our faces into the reality of the tube of train. Bill's flattened face on a train window is the image of Hong Kong's compressed modernity. The audience in the cinema joins a fantastical journey of making it in a brave new world, but cannot escape from how mad it is. Whether rich

or poor, in film and in life, compression/oppression is a constant.

The youngest girl Jiu-dai's 'Dalang Bay' model marks the crucial turning point in this narrative twist from dream to nightmare. The nuclear power plant located in Shenzhen's Dapeng Peninsula, which was built in 1987 only 51 km straight from Tsim Sha Tsui, was one of the most important gifts to Hong Kong from then CCP Chair Deng Xiaoping. As much as 70-80% of its power would be supplying to Hong Kong. More than one million signatures from Hongkongers petitioned to oppose its construction to no avail. The film was made during this controversy. Hong Kong, as the most intimate witness of the series of political struggles in China, including the anti-rightist campaign in the 1950s, and the Cultural Revolution in 1966-1976, all the while tackling its own traumas of the 1966 and 1967 'uprising/riots', the refugee and survivalist mentality has always been a mainstay in Hong Kong culture. It wasn't until the mid-1970s to early-1980s with steady economic growth and political stability that a sense of security was gradually nurtured in Hong Kong society.

In *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World III* (1989), the Bill's family, having never seen as much cash as three billion, goes to the bank to withdraw it all out just to look at it. Later Auntie Lydia brags about this with her friends and takes them again to the bank to see the money. This plot reminds one easily today of the small province official in the opening episode of *In the Name of the People*, who, as a farmer's boy turned rich, cannot spend one penny of all the renminbi he has gathered through corruption but houses all the paper money in his furniture, behind walls and inside his refrigerator. At this historical moment of then in Hong Kong and now in China, money is foregrounded here as a fetish and spectacle in our capitalist world; the absurdity of and the religiosity in pursuing it as a material *per se* brings one almost to tears in either context.

Walter Benjamin's *flâneur* has been at times evoked to describe the intrigue and alienation experienced by Hongkongers when wandering around the city spectacles. However, for Benjamin, the 1930s Paris Arcades was also an embodiment of the collective utopias of European progress turned nightmarish labyrinth.[9] He saw the mesmerising effect of a capitalist and civilised modernity as facilitating the rise of European fascism. Korean sociologist Hong-Jung Kim, inspired by Benjamin's 'archaeological' discourse of modernity as fantasy/nightmare and Manuel Castells' 'Politics of Survival', reads the post-cold war 'economic miracle' of (South) Korea as producing and a product of a form of 'survivalist modernity'.[10] Under Park Chung-hee's anti-communist militarised governance, a sense of imminent danger coupled with a need for emergency conditions have never left Korean daily life experience, resulting in a collective fantasy/nightmare that prioritised and centralised self-preservation and self-strengthening as a core cultural and moral value, which dominates the structure of feeling in Korean society.

In contrast to the post-cold-war martial law rule South Korea experienced, 1970s-80s Hong Kong, also hailed as an 'economic miracle', witnessed unprecedented freedoms in speech and publishing to an extent that it saw itself as *the* freest Chinese society at the time. Thatcher's collapse on the footsteps of Beijing's Great Hall of the People during the Sino-British talks in 1982 followed by the signing of Sino-British Declaration in 1984 became a curse hovering over Hongkongers, who otherwise felt pretty good of themselves. But the 'China factor' remained a source of crisis and emergency. The heavy-handed treatment of using the 'Dalang Bay' model's explosion in the film as the key plot twist speaks not only to the imminent danger of radiation exposure presented to Hongkongers at the time but also more poignantly, to the political promises and cover-ups that were felt to be as untrustworthy as kids' play; these become sources of huge anxiety and fear. Ng Ho has claimed that a 'sense of crisis' has reinvigorated Hong Kong cinema after the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989, as the emotional unrest among Hongkongers has impacted the choice of subjects, characterisation and imagery in post-1989 cinema.[11] If one looks at *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* series, however, Hong Kong as a 'city in danger' was already a rather dominant feeling from mid-1980s on. The couplet line from the film 'With money many ways out; no money one Basic Law' has long become local slang.

In another MTR (subway being the signifier for a Hong Kong modernity that appears again and again in the series) scene in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World II*, the couple runs into Taiwanese tourists and

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[9] Benjamin, Walter, *The Arcades Project*, Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (trans), Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999.

[10] Hong-Jung Kim, 'Survivalist Modernity and the Logic of Its Governmentality', *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, No 27, The Japan Sociological Society, 2018, pp 5-25.

[11] Ng Ho, '"Liusi" Hou Xianggang Dianying De Weiji Yishi' ('The Sense of Crisis in Post-1989 Hong Kong Cinema'), *Luanshi Dianying Yanjiu* (*A Film Study by Ng Ho in the World of Turmoil*), Hong Kong: Subculture Ltd, 1999, pp 127-144 (in Chinese).

migrants from the Philippines and Vietnam, leading Bill to exclaim: 'When can we get back our land?' The caricature representation of non-Hong Kong Chinese here again seeks to provoke laughter through ethnocentric sentiments. Bill's exclamation is soon after followed by an episode on Sino-Hong Kong differences. One Mainland-looking man mistakes a ball-shaped handrest in a train as a microphone and uses it to communicate to the driver for getting off in Putonghua. Also in Putonghua, another woman speaks to her partner in disgust, 'The air is so bad here, Hong Kong subway is shit… What's good about Hong Kong? So many people, so much ugliness, everyone busy for nothing.' Bill overhearing, whispers to Auntie, 'See how she looks down on us. Soon when we are ruled by people like this, we'd have the hardest time. No wonder everyone wants to emigrate.' But the Putonghua woman's partner retorts, 'Hong Kong is highly prosperous. People are busy because they are hardworking and efficient. We need to see things objectively. Hong Kong has its own progress. Our country has our advantages.' Auntie Lydia immediately looks at him with respect, 'See how wise this gentleman is. Life can't be too bad if governed by people like him!' The disgusted woman, though, continues to vent, 'Things are so expensive in Hong Kong, all poisoned by capitalism here. People are corrupt, and idolise money and everything Western. We really need to fix it here.' She is again corrected by her partner, 'Hong Kong is a real cosmopolitan. We need Hong Kong people to help open our motherland's door to the outside world. Under one country two systems, Hong Kong will stay 50 years, unchanged. The present conditions need to be kept.' Just when Auntie Lydia is moved by his speech, all filled with anticipation, the couple struggles to get off the train. The 'gentleman' out of habit spits on Auntie's foot. Uncle ends up being the one who has to squat in front of Auntie to help clean.

This scene pointedly caricatures the power struggle and ideological contradictions in China of the Reform and Open Up Era, and its conflicting attitudes towards Hong Kong, with envy, rational understanding of its use-value and disgust all combined. It also expresses concrete fears of Hong Kong people towards the handover, not only whether their capitalist lifestyles could be kept, or whether one needs to turn the modern clock backwards (to cope with spitting in public areas for example), but more importantly, whether Hongkongers would be 'looked down upon' and be 'fixed'. However, one should note that in the whole scene, it is the gentleman together with Auntie Lydia who have the last words, with Bill and the Hong Kong-hating woman standing corrected. Hong Kong common folks, as seen here in the 1980s, express hope and faith in China, in its wisdom and growing civility, even before China 'rises'. The open culture of 1980s Hong Kong in its so-called Golden Age, lies in this kind of public discussion of multi-faceted Sino-Hong Kong relations. Foregrounding these ongoing political discourses on public screen is especially important, taking into consideration the depoliticised tradition of Hong Kong popular culture and the current dehistoricised discourse of Hong Kong as an always already anti-communist base. In retrospect, all the pre-warnings here regarding Chinese governance of Hong Kong, including Mainland's discriminatory gaze, the unbearable 'poison' and 'corruptness' of capitalism, and the will to sustain Hong Kong's identity to become China's door to the world, i.e. as mediator for influx of Western capital—all of these will be kept at all costs, and will continue to haunt Hong Kong in the next 30 years to come.

Unqualifying Everyman

Zhong Xueping has coined representations of Chinese masculinity in Chinese literature of late 20th century as a 'besieged masculinity', signalling men facing challenges of a weak country under unequal East-West power relations, enhanced by cultural repression channelled through a national apparatus.[12] These historical processes result in a persistent sense of lack, longing (for more and/or redemption) and/or fear, as represented of men in literature, which she terms a 'marginality complex'. She further points out that post-1949 gender policies claim to be revolutionising this cultural tradition, but in reality also inherited its legacy. Chinese men have traditionally been both yin and yang, taking up most space in the gender spectrum. Only the women who are seen as exceptions, for example the empress who killed her emperor-heir son, the female soldier in drag, among others, would be given voice in narratives. The post-1949 'holding up half the sky' national campaign also in effect advocated women to become more masculine, to become men, in order to be granted more power.

Although the series *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* primarily focuses on being rich as the key subject, what takes up most screen time, though, is the subject of gender and sexual relations. What are the relations between being rich and being gendered in the films? How has Hong Kong's modernising project reconstructed our genders and sexualities? First, it's

[12] Zhong Xueping, *Masculinity Besieged? Issues of Modernity and Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of the Late Twentieth Century*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000.

worth noting that Bill chooses an adversary position to the two main plotlines of the series: gaining riches and falling in love. He is all opposed to Auntie's gambling habits, while his work ethic and capability do not look promising in helping the family out of poverty. The riches his family manages to gather in the films are all from gambling (by women and girls). In fact, his adversarial relationship with his female boss, including his accidental intervention into her sexual affairs with the company chief, also costs him his job. Throughout the series, he repetitively opposes any (potentially) sexual relations, including those between his elder daughter Mia and Smiley Joe (played by Eric Tsang), between Mia and non-Chinese men, and between his younger daughter Loy-dai and Ah Shui (played by Christopher Chan). Of course his opposition also ends up making some of these relations stronger and more dominant in the films. Bill's adversary relations with these plotlines only render him an obstacle in the narratives, and situate him in the position of a loser. For the longest time, he could not bring himself to forgive his sixth younger brother (played by John Chiang) who shamed him publicly in his most joyful moment by slamming a birthday cake on his face. His not being able to get over his shame is represented as a character flaw: for being a weakling, not having a big heart, and unable to cope with Hong Kong bonding style through speed and bullying. He pays lip service in supporting family values but as a husband, father or even brother, he fails to register, not to mention fulfil, desires of his family.

In one of Bill's dreams, he drops a coin at a wishing well outside his home and turns Auntie Lydia into a young sexy dame, who in turn makes a wish to get a young muscle boy, the latter in turn makes a wish for the dame to vanish so he could have a private moment with Bill. Bill, in shock, wishes the boy away and Auntie back. Awakened, Bill cuddles around Auntie in bed, mumbling: 'So good to have you!' This diversion again follows the curse of all dreams come true become nightmares, cooks Bill's chauvinistic and homophobic anxieties all into one and foregrounds the impossibility of Bill's self-recognition. His complex of being a pre-modern residue soon to be disposed finds outlet in dismissing Auntie as the stereotypically disposable wife. But of course, the audience is not dumb either, and could see easily from these narratives that it is after all the woman who again and again, with her persistence and perseverance, succeeds and rescues the family from predicament. Hong Kong's colonial capitalism devalues the masculine body, and situates it in a 'perverse' position close to the homosexual body, as it constructs the diligent, mediocre, feminine man as the model mediator. This feminised male body could be seen as a variation of inheriting the yin-yang amalgamation in traditional Chinese masculinity; but it is crucial in the construction of Hong Kong modern masculinity to defy sexuality (signified by Bill's sexual fantasy) in order to be granted positions of power and security however limited.

All the male characters in the films, from Bill to Smiley Joe, Hairy (played by Lowell Lo) to Ah Shui, albeit diverse, all are losers. Smiley Joe is saved by Mia from drowning as he struggles to 'protect' Mia from being harassed. Upon awakening on the beach, he exclaims: 'I have finally rescued you!' This line from the weakling male gives it a comic effect but also shows how men need to perform according to the face-saving script of dominance. As losers, they are still designated as speaking to the Hong Kong everyman, the focus for the audience's projection of empathy. Ah Shui works at a meat factory to support

It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World (1987): The scene where Mia (top: Elsie Chan) saves Smiley Joe (below: Eric Tsang) from drowning subverts existing gender relations; it also shows how men need to perform according to the face-saving script of dominance.

It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World (1987): Working class living lives as disposable labour in a neoliberal economy displace their fears onto supposed threats posed by a strong female boss.
(Left: Leung Shan; right: Bill Tung).

It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World (1987): The scene where Uncle Bill dreams of Auntie Lyida (Lydia Sum) transforming into a Wonder Woman shows that men are no match for women, and neither men nor women qualify quite as human.

It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World (1987): Mia's (Elsie Chan) positive body image and cultural adaptiveness give her an upper hand in the gender power relations.

It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World III (1989): Loy-dai (Loletta Lee) is a sample of the 1980s generation of Hong Kong women: smart and hardworking, strong-willed and opinionated, conservative and unsexed.

It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World II (1988): Jiu-dai (Pauline Kwan) is young but mature, a metaphor for the mid- to late-80s Hong Kong, which remains hopeful despite the uncertainties.

Loy-dai's tuition in Canada but being not strong enough to move the meat around, an entire dead pig collapses on him. He switches to selling stinky tofu on the sidewalk, finding himself soon to be arrested and deported by Canadian immigration. In *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World III,* a lot more screen time is spent on Ah Shui's desperate efforts to support Loy-dai and her family, including enduring injuries repetitively working as an extra in action films. Auntie Lydia then forces him to roll down the stairs as she cannot recognise him when he is all bandaged up as a mummy walking with sticks. While slapstick with dead meat recalls Michael Hui's now classic comedian tradition from the 1970s, the injured/impotent abject male flaunting his immense malleability in surviving flagellation to evoke laughter and sympathy clearly paves the way for Stephen Chow's upcoming 'no-sense' comedies in the 1990s. Ah Shui's seeking to perform the Confucius male ideal of being the breadwinner in trying to singlehandedly support his girlfriend's family, in Canada and Hong Kong, only reiterates once and again, his own incapabilities. This feeling of helplessness and impotence, caught in the huge discrepancy between deeply rooted beliefs in ideologies and unfulfilled realities, produces positions of identification for Hong Kong viewers to project their own sense of helplessness in everyday life.

Women in Progress

The formulation of male characters as stand-ins for the everyman indeed serves to hide and perpetuate the unequal power relations between the two sexes. However, as shown in these films and as discussed above, men are no match for women and neither men nor women qualify quite as human. For all sexes and genders, what seems most recurrent and perhaps most marketable in these films, is evoking the common feeling of *not* being qualified for sustainability and stability, not to mention success; the common feeling is of *not* making it. The wishy-washy, sissy and

swishy men rendered as everyman on screen does not necessarily empower them—they only naturalise the abjectness of Hong Kong Chinese masculinity in a way that seduces their viewers to stay on and cuddle, whereas the women and girls, including Auntie Lydia, Mia, Loy-dai and Jiu-dai, take up a spectrum of progressing, success-to-be positions in their constant struggles for upward mobility. Upon winning the lottery, Uncle Bill dreams of shooting Auntie Lydia who, however, transforms into bullet-proof Wonder Woman picking up his gun to shoot back. Smiley Joe's relentless sexualisation of Mia does not make Mia a sex object, but rather exposes his babyish psychological demands and renders him more laughable. In return Mia stays cool around her multi-cultural courters, showing a self-confidence towards displaying her body. As a colonial modern subject, her physical, language and assimilation attributes render her the fastest mediator for the family upon immigration into Canada. Seen from these characterisations, colonial capital is more of a determining factor in power relations than gender.

Women in the job market do face as much, if not more, disciplining of their bodies as men. Bill, as the news anchor at satellite TV for 18 years, is about to be sacked when he accidentally finds out that his boss is having an affair with producer Lui, nicknamed 'Female Devilhead'. Her gender reduces her to a signifier of immoral sex translating into evilness, taking up the role of the culprit. Monogamy, for one, has to be strictly observed in and outside marriage for a modern society, while sexual relations could not come with a price tag. Suggestions of non-monogamous relations, sex for money or for career advancement—all become, in the film, material for bashing and satire, revealing repetitively, the relentlessly obsessive anxiety over sex produced by the making of Hong Kong modern subjecthood. A class issue disguises itself as a gender issue when working class viewers living lives as disposable labour in a neoliberal economy displace their fears onto supposed threats posed by a strong female boss.

Likewise, the public/private divide is again challenged when Smiley Joe is suspected to be peeing on the grass in front of the family, and is thus considered 'degenerating'. Towards the end of *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World,* neighbour Fung who used to borrow money from Bill, suddenly shows up to repay the tab and announces with a smile: 'My wife has returned with a man!' Auntie Lydia is perplexed. 'Why happy if your woman has a man?' 'Of course! As long as the man is rich!' Smiley Joe immediately throws the cake on his face, with a scolding: 'You scum, what kind of a man are you!' One little man pokes fun at another to establish his sense of superiority, demonstrating for the viewers the best position from which to enjoy the movie. If laughter is a fascination with the shameful and the base in order to establish a sense of superiority for the person who laughs,[13] homophobia (Smiley Joe's disgust at sissy neighbour Fung's thrill with the threesome afforded by his wife's sexual partner) is often used as a stand-in to displace and release anxiety over one's self turning into modern trash in Hong Kong comedies.

Loy-dai is a sample of the upcoming generation: smart and hardworking, strong-willed and opinionated, conservative and unsexed—including when sleeping with a boyfriend on the same floor of an apartment. But curiously she never challenges nor lends a helping hand to Ah Shui when he risks his life in supporting her family. The next in line may be the most evolved after all. Jiu-dai is the smartest among all boys and girls, grabs most of the attention in the scenes with her presence and unbeatable colloquial skills. Ultimately she manages to escape from a kidnapping ordeal. She is the one who truly brings the brother in, not only because Auntie Lydia does give birth to a son after all, but even more remarkably, she is the son as well as the daughter. Her strength lies not in her gender but in her (under) age (thus naturally unsexed); how her maturity far exceeds her body. The characterisation of Jiu-dai and her experience in the series points towards a Hong Kong in the future that may land herself in difficult situations but would come out safe and sound. Dreams may be nightmares but with enough hope and togetherness, starting over may not lead to an endgame.

Concluding Remarks

This essay closely studies the three generic films from the blockbuster comedy series *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* from the mid-late 1980s to investigate how the 'golden age' of Hong Kong cinema produced a certain realism in constructing and consuming Hongkongness, a kind of cultural identification built upon ethnocentric notions of colonial capitalist modernity. Its narrative logic and speed in cinematic form replicate as well as provide relief to a social reality of compressed and oppressive (over)development, which this essay argues, (partly) explains the genre's long-lasting success. It also explores how these comedies used tropes of self-

[13] Murray S. Davis, *What's so Funny?: The Comic Conception of Culture and Society*, Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1993.

defence, malleability, survivalism, self-flagellation and hope in formulating a consumable socio-political analysis at a time when Hong Kong was experiencing an unprecedented identity crisis. This very specific Hong Kong modernity at its prime (re)constructed power relations as class and ethnic anxiety was displaced onto sexuality and gender. Perhaps the social and ideological contradictions surfacing in Hong Kong today showed their roots and tendencies in films made more than three decades ago, as it is only through studying history that we may begin to understand ourselves and the society that makes us.

Translated from the original Chinese version by Yau Ching.

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