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Author(s)	Martin, SJ
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The Death Narratives of Revitalization:
Colonial Governance, China, and the Reconfiguration of the Hong Kong Film Industry

Sylvia J. Martin
Department of Sociology
University of Hong Kong
The Jockey Club Tower
Pokfulam Road
Pokfulam, Hong Kong
Sjm1@hku.hk

This essay examines the repercussions of colonial and postcolonial governance for the Hong Kong film industry. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork, I analyze Hong Kong film personnel's "death narratives" about their industry and argue that while many informants criticized China for the demise of the Hong Kong film industry, the source of the film industry's instability also lies in the territory's British colonial film policies and Hong Kong's postcolonial turn to the "global city". I trace how the laissez-faire capitalism and "positive non-interventionism" policy of Hong Kong and its film industry that has been so deeply valorized has in fact contributed to its vulnerability. Demonstrating that film personnel of the former "Hollywood of the East" must increasingly cross borders to find work, the film industry's demise can also be understood as begetting revitalization through a free trade agreement with China that facilitates co-productions.

Keywords: Media production; Hong Kong; Production ethnography; China: Cross-border productions

Introduction: The Death Narratives

"You know how long your study will take you? One day? No, one hour! We are nothing anymore," Hong Kong film star, interview, August 2005.

On a winter afternoon in 2006, I was invited to observe a film production crew film a stunt scene on eastern Hong Kong Island. Members of the production took up their designated positions for filming the stunt scene. Behind the protective bar that separated observers from the production team, we watched as one of the young stunt workers dressed in a black track suit ran down the street as an oncoming car, squealing around the corner, collided with his body. His body slammed against the hood of the car, his torso thrust against the windshield, as the car screeched to a halt. The stunt man then rolled off the hood of the car, collapsed on the ground, and the director yelled, "Cut!" The stunt man jumped up off the ground, shook himself off, and as the crew applauded, the driver emerged from the car to enthusiastically shake the hand of the young stunt man.

FIGURE 1

As we applauded, one of the production coordinators told me that this stunt had been performed by a father-son stunt team: the father drove the car that hit his son. The father is in fact one of Hong Kong's premiere stunt choreographers.

After filming was completed, I was introduced to the father, Fred, who had driven the car. I asked him how it felt to hit his own son with the car.

Author: So how did it feel to hit your own son with the car?

FL: Oh, it felt great! [pumps fist in the air]

Author: Really, why?

FL: Well, he's well-trained. He knows how to do it, I taught him, he wouldn't do it

otherwise, I wouldn't let him.

As I continued to express awe at the father-son stuntwork, Fred paused, stopped smiling,

and said,

It's important to me – this is a family tradition, this is what we do. I teach my son. But

our film industry is dying out. Who will my son teach?

Fred's query illustrates how even the most physically robust members of the Hong Kong

film industry – the world renowned Hong Kong stunt men – have become highly vulnerable to

its deterioration. Hong Kong stunt men have for several decades been famous among fans of

martial arts and action films around the world for performing death-defying stunts (Teo, 2000;

Desser, 2000). Some of these stunt men were trained in the martial art of *kung fu* in kin-based

labor systems whereby their fathers and grandfathers who performed such acrobatics on the

Cantonese Opera stage trained their sons and grandsons alongside them.[1] Others were trained in

the Peking Opera tradition. Some of these performers transitioned to working in film and

television adaptations of Cantonese operas throughout the past century in Hong Kong. Yet as the

Hong Kong film industry goes into decline, and there are fewer films in which to feature such

crafts, these Hong Kong stunt men fear that their craft will become obsolete.

At various intervals between 2003 and 2007, I conducted anthropological fieldwork with

over fifty media personnel as part of a larger, comparative study with Hollywood on how

commercial films and television are made. Examining the "production culture" (Caldwell 2008),

I conducted participant observation and interviews at production offices, studios, at screenings,

and on film and television sets. As in other media industries, many Hong Kong media personnel

work across occupation (e.g. writer-actor; stuntperson-director) and sometimes in both film and television.[2]

Almost all of the media personnel described their film industry as not merely suffering a lapse but as a vanishing entity - "dying" or "dead". "We are dying, and you are here to record it," an actress in the Hong Kong film industry repeatedly told me. Tapping on my notebook, a producer instructed me, "Write this down, what I am telling you, so people know who we were". "Let's toast the last of the Hong Kong film industry," another producer-director suggested over tea, proffering his tea cup. During these times, which anticipated some of the sentiments that drove Hong Kong's 2014 Occupy protests and Umbrella Uprising, I felt as if I was being given data for a eulogy instead of an ethnography. Informants described their cinematic art form as rapidly becoming an artifact to be excavated, and their distinctively "Hong Kong" commercial filmmaking practices (known for their stylistic action and fast-paced shooting schedules) as becoming extinct. These "death narratives," as I labeled them in my fieldnotes, reflected the salient downturn with which the Hong Kong film industry has been struggling to overcome for nearly two decades after the decline started in the early 1990s, and the scholarship that explores it.[3] The turning point was the 1997 return to mainland China as a Special Administrative Region under what is called a "one country, two systems" form of governance which has bred tensions, most evident in the Umbrella Uprising in 2014. Yet in critically reading these death narratives I illustrate that despite the demonization of China as depleting Hong Kong of its resources, it is also the policies of colonial administration played out in a global city formation that have led to the current demise. In other words, the very government rhetoric and policies about "openness" and "laissez-faire" that are attributed to the growth of businesses and industries in Hong Kong

such as film were in fact what led to its decline. I also suggest that the demise of the Hong Kong film industry has actually generated a new configuration of film production bolstered by China.

"King Kong in Hong Kong": The Specter of Return

To film workers during my fieldwork the specter behind the narratives of demise appeared to be China. Explicitly and implicitly, industry discourse and imagery attributed the desiccation of Hong Kong's film industry to competition from China's growing media industries, which were entering the global marketplace and supported by a vast (albeit lumbering) governmental infrastructure undergoing market reform. Hong Kong's cinema, and even Hong Kong itself, was understood by many film workers as being subsumed by China. In the 2002 Hong Kong film *Runaway Pistol*, one of the storylines revolves around a young Hong Kong boy who is kidnapped by a pair of mainland Chinese immigrants (Lau & Lam, 2002). After Hong Kong's return to China and the subsequent increase in cross-border traffic, anxieties regarding the penetration of the city-state by immigrants (legal and illegal) have arisen – an anxiety that films such as *Runaway Pistol* play upon. In the film, the boy is forced into a child slavery ring with other Hong Kong children who have similarly been abducted deep into China.

This film's imagery of vulnerable Hong Kong bodies snatched up by corrupt mainland Chinese was one of a growing collection of on-screen representations that depicted fears among many Hong Kong people (and film industry workers in particular) of China as an entity that is inducing the demise of the Hong Kong population and depleting Hong Kong of its resources (Davis & Yeh, 2001). Even though Hong Kong existed under Chinese sovereignty until its capture by the British in a series of Opium Wars, and many Hong Kong Chinese have parents who grew up in China, most of the Hong Kong film personnel I encountered expressed a strong

sense of a Hong Kong cultural identity that was formed largely under a laissez-faire capitalist system introduced by British colonial rule. I will posit later that the absorption of Hong Kong bodies and depletion of Hong Kong resources should also be attributed to the U.S. media conglomerates as a result of SAR (Special Administrative Region) government policies that uphold colonial practices and manifest in the global city of Hong Kong.

In my interactions with film workers in Hong Kong between 2003 and 2007, I was frequently confronted with commentary about "primitive" and plundering mainlanders, who, in a less dramatic manner than the Chinese couple depicted in the film, participate in the depletion of Hong Kong bodies, labor, and knowledge. Strains of this discourse were echoed in some of the print and popular media that I encountered, and is captured in Rey Chow's essay, "King Kong in Hong Kong: Watching the Handover from the US" (Chow, 1998). Rey Chow likens the specter of China in Anglo-American political, legal, and media discourse to the spectacular beast "King Kong" – an image which resonated with how many Hong Kong film workers and some members of Hong Kong society spoke to me of mainland Chinese. Lawless and looming over a population that many informants described as "civilized" by colonization, China served as the monolithic Other against which many Hong Kong film workers defined themselves. In January 2006, William, a Hong Kong producer and director, discussed filming co-productions between Hong Kong and China in China, and expounded on his attempts to raise money from mainland investors. William said,

> People in China need a long time to be educated, to be polite, to be civilized. Most people are farmers and most now have money. They suddenly get rich, but they skipped certain stages of development. They really are primitives. They didn't have to think, they just got

the money [from the government]. But they need a long time to come up to speed. Like in Hong Kong: we are also Chinese, but we learned how to think from the British.

When I was last in China to make a film, I noticed that the changes within China are going too fast, they haven't developed a business acumen. The investors there, they are not sophisticated like Hong Kong investors, the way the British taught us. They don't really know how to invest. Thank God for the British! Thank God they taught me how to invest money.

William's comments were not unique; many of the directors, producers, and actors that I interviewed articulated similar sentiments, although some expressed more tolerant views of mainland Chinese peoples' perceived rush to integrate capitalist practices. His comments should also be seen in the context of fear of becoming disposable; when we met a year later, he was morosely contemplating leaving Hong Kong for good. While many Hong Kong entrepreneurs and filmmakers hoped to capitalize through mainland China "opening up" their market for financial gains, with Hong Kong serving as a bridge to China's market, many personnel I interviewed also expressed concerns about China's propensity to plunder Hong Kong's industries, and to dislodge Hong Kong as a key global Chinese hub in the East Asian region. They expressed a fear that "unsophisticated" mainland Chinese film workers would leach off of principal Hong Kong creative personnel (such as writers, cinematographers, stars, and directors) their knowledge and skills as Hong Kong film workers crossed the border to work on mainland Chinese productions or co-productions and Chinese film workers crossed into Hong Kong to work.

Such cross-border work was made possible by CEPA – the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement. In fact, what the Hong Kong Trade Development Council refers to as the "revitalization" of the Hong Kong film and television industries has been supplied in many ways by the mainland Chinese government (HKTDC, 2004; 2005). The Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement between mainland China and Hong Kong, put into effect in 2003, is a free trade agreement that facilitates the integration of mainland China's recently liberalized industries with the capitalist ones of Hong Kong. CEPA also attempts to repair the Hong Kong film industry's downturn by allowing Hong Kong filmmakers access to mainland Chinese investment and distribution markets. The Hong Kong government touts the revitalization of Hong Kong's economy and its film industry in particular through joint film productions. CEPA has been implemented in various phases: during my fieldwork CEPA moved from Phase II to III. The benefit of CEPA for Hong Kong audio-visual industries is that as long as Hong Kong film and television scripts receive approval from mainland censors, Hong Kong films and television shows are not subject to import quotas and are distributed as domestic products in mainland China. Under CEPA III, Hong Kong production companies may own more than 50% of the copyright of films co-produced, and Hong Kong residents may comprise more than 50% of the total principal personnel in the motion pictures concerned. The ostensible benefit to mainland Chinese production personnel is the opportunity to work on these media and acquire filmmaking skills from crews and principal personnel who possess extensive experience in commercial filmmaking. The purpose of CEPA is not just to assist Chinese industries as they liberalize, but to also help Hong Kong's ailing industry. Yet what triggered a decline such that Hong Kong's film industry required revitalization?

Industrial Decline

The Hong Kong film industry has over the years been referred to by scholars and practitioners as the "Hollywood of the East" for its mass production of films which for decades was consumed by both local and transnational audiences. A Cantonese language industry, with the rise of the PRC after World War II and subsequent upheaval in Southeast Asia, Hong Kong's film industry became dominated by mainland Chinese and Singaporean filmmakers who relocated to Hong Kong (e.g. Shaw Brothers and the Cathay) (Fu, 2000, pp. 72, 78). Consequently, local Cantonese cinema "became a nonentity" within Hong Kong up through the 1970s as Mandarin-language cinema dominated locally and with overseas audiences (Teo, 2000, p. 91), although, as Laikwan Pang asserts, a Hong Kong sensibility remained in these films (Pang, 2007, p.10). By the late 1970s, local filmmakers reclaimed the industry, sparking the New Wave (Teo, 2000, p. 102) and ushering in the highly commercial era of the 1980s and 1990s. By the late 1990s, however, the Hollywood of the East experienced a significant downturn.

TABLE 1

In 1984, Hong Kong's return to China was negotiated by the British government in the Joint Sino-British Talks, in which Hong Kong people had little say about their city's autonomy. The hovering date of return to China in 1997 sparked nervousness among Hong Kong's top talent, resulting in a rash of film workers moving or seeking more work overseas as people were uncertain how a "one country, two systems" form of governance would impact Hong Kong's liberalized economy, its "democratic" colonial government, and its political and cultural autonomy.[4] Conducting research in Hong Kong nearly a decade after 1997, a sense of expiration – a looming countdown to an ending with a planned 2047 convergence of Hong Kong and China

– pervaded the Hong Kong film community. As a veteran film producer and distributor said to me in February 2007,

> What's going to happen to Hong Kong people? In ten years China will have a healthy [film] distribution system but right now they need Hong Kong people and others to do it for them. In 80 years, in two generations, they can do it themselves. And in two generations Hong Kong film people won't be around. They [the mainland Chinese] won't need us anymore. They need to catch up. And when they do, that's the end of Hong Kong film.

A cinematographer, Henry, also predicted that within the next ten or twenty years, his skills as a cinematographer would no longer be needed in China as camera technicians there would absorb the knowledge he currently passes onto them when he works there through CEPA. Henry interwove his comments about redundancy that Hong Kong film workers face across the border with complaints about the threat from mainland Chinese people within Hong Kong, including the film industry. Increasing numbers of Chinese come to Hong Kong to shop, work, and make money, and in a preview of the 2014 protest commentary, Henry warned of Hong Kong's standards of "good taste" being eroded by mainland sensibilities. "The market in Hong Kong is toned down to cater to mainland tourists. Have you noticed that the styles and models of things like clothing and cameras have gone down?" he said. The siphoning off of knowledge and taste was a recurrent theme alongside the decline of films produced and consumed.

1997 was also a critical year for the film industry due to the Asian financial crisis which, triggered by the collapse of the Thai currency, spread throughout the Southeast Asian economies and caused film investors to retract their financing from what many considered to be risk-prone ventures (Curtin 2007). Combined with investors' skittishness about China's impending

governance of Hong Kong, local and regional financing diminished. The decreased investment, combined with smaller audiences for an abundance of local films, damaged the film industry. Aggressive marketing and distribution of Hollywood films throughout the 1990s resulted in a reduction of consumption of Hong Kong films, further slowing financial investment in them. The increased capability to produce pirated films also hurt the film industry. Yet the death narratives I encountered were also, I argue, a response to political economic factors that rendered the Hong Kong film industry vulnerable; these causes emanated from Hong Kong's colonial mode of governance.

Structural Causes of Decline

Colonial policies extending into the postcolonial phase and its iteration in the global city model reveal that the "open," "free" economic environment of Hong Kong that many film workers championed to me is actually one of the prime causes of its vulnerability. These policies mean that such an industry cannot withstand challenges to it that its American counterpart, Hollywood, has been able to withstand with its federal and state financial and legislative support as well as research and development from high tech and education sectors and the U.S. military industrial complex (see Miller, Govil, McMurria, Maxwell & Wang, 2005).

While government officials and economists such as Donald Tsang and Milton Friedman have declared Hong Kong to be a haven of free-market practices with minimal government interference, scholars have also pointed out that Hong Kong's colonial government played a decisive role in the economy, in a policy that came to be known as "positive non-interventionism" (Castells, 2000; Ngo, 1999; So, 2004) which I argue had implications for the film industry. Positive non-interventionism, a policy pursued by Hong Kong's Financial

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Secretary John Cowperthwaite in the 1960s, was the colonial policy of maintaining an open and "free" economy without government intervention – a policy that was already in development since Hong Kong's early days as an entrepot. Yet, citing Manuel Castells in his discussion of Hong Kong's rise as a global city, Wai Kit Choi points out that the British colonial government *did* intervene in Hong Kong's economy – through the realm of collective consumption (Castells, 2000, p. 270-276; Choi, 2007, p. 396). In response to wide-spread poverty, the colonial government offered public housing, universal health care, and free education, and subsidized public transport, food, and social services. Thus, by intervening in the realm of collective *consumption*, rather than *production*, the colonial government allowed manufacturers to maintain workers at low wages (Castells, 2000). Choi notes that governmental policy did not allow Hong Kong's low-cost, low-end industries to move into the high-technology sector (Berger & Lester, 1997, p.22; Choi, 2007, p. 396-7). Many of Hong Kong's industries that had initially thrived in the entrepreneurial environment for which Hong Kong is famed entailed small and medium-sized labor-intensive companies that manufactured textiles, clothing, electronics, watches, plastics and food (most of which were family owned and run). Hong Kong's success in its export-led industrialization thus emanated from a form of state intervention that chose to not grow domestic businesses and industries. Unlike other developmental states in East Asia which received government support for research and development as well as capital to upgrade, Hong Kong's colonial government refrained for the most part from investing in the development of industries. So for instance, as Choi explicates, in 1994 the total spending on R&D as a percentage of GDP was 2.29% for South Korea, 1.80% for Taiwan, 1.18% for Singapore, but only 0.10% for Hong Kong (Berger & Lester, 1997, p.77; Choi, 2007, p. 397).

As Stephen Chiu, K. C. Ho, and Tai-Lok Lu assert, without state support for scientific and technological development, most Hong Kong industries were not equipped to transition from their low-technology and low value-added status into the more specialized knowledge-intensive production niche that South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore formed (1997). Thus, in order to compete with manufacturers in other East Asian developmental states in the early 1980s, most Hong Kong factories, instead of upgrading, moved to China, where labor was cheaper (Choi, 2007, p. 397). Challenges to Hong Kong industrial production that MIT researchers Suzanne Berger and Richard Lester summarize (and which I posit encompassed the film industry) include "gaps in human resource development systems; low investment in new technology development; the limitations of family ownership of business enterprises [such as limited transparency which is necessary to secure bank loans]; the low rate of formation of new technology-based enterprises; the scarcity of specialized technical knowledge in government; and high labor and land costs" (Berger & Lester, 1997, p. 59). Many Hong Kong production companies were run as flexible family labor systems, or formed only to make one movie, and so did not sustain an organization structure that was invested in long-term technological or creative growth (see also Fu, 2000, p. 77). The family-run (and sometimes triad-connected) film businesses rarely featured human resource development systems. As a lawyer at a Hong Kong studio recounted to me in 2005, legal departments and contract lawyers are a relatively new phenomenon for Hong Kong film companies, which (similar to Bollywood's film industry) existed in a system of oral as well as written contracts, arcane payment methods, informal management, and secretive records (see Ganti, 2002). Technical drawbacks also became apparent when films were screened in newly built cineplexes in the 1970s; the improved audio system installed in the theatre only served to amplify the poor quality of audio recording, revealing the outdated recording equipment used in

production and post production at that time. Subpar lighting in the studio also detracted from "the artistic integrity of productions by creating unnecessary shadows" (Fu, 2000, p. 77). The film industry would technologically upgrade over time, but without state support, and as Joseph M Chan, Anthony Y.H. Fung and Chun Hung Ng point out, filmmakers continue to complain of "a lack of technical back-up infrastructure, for example post-production facilities and studios" (Chan, Fung & Ng, 2010, p. 21).

While in the process of de-industrializing in the 1980s, Hong Kong's colonial government transformed Hong Kong into a "global city" that facilitates the transnational flow of finance capital (Sassen, 2000; 2001). The global city model of development entails the establishment of regional headquarters of multinational corporations, investment banks, law firms, accounting firms, and other transnational service providers, such as Citibank, Goldman Sachs, Bank of America, Deloitte, and Royal Bank of Scotland (Choi, 2007, p. 398). By the 1990s, Hong Kong became the financial center of Asia, and the third largest financial hub in the world, after New York and London (So, 2004). As Wai Kit Choi argues regarding Hong Kong's loss of sovereign autonomy, many domestic businesses within Hong Kong participated in this global city model only by offering the requisite physical infrastructure to maintain this complex of financial services, such as office and apartment space, a telecommunications network, and a power source; thus, "[g]iven Hong Kong's dependence on the presence of a multinational specialized service complex, it cannot have a new institutional structure other than the one it has always had since the colonial days" (Choi, 2007, p. 399). Civil servants in Hong Kong's colonial government remained in place after Hong Kong's return to China (Choy, 2005, p. 9), hence maintaining continuity in policy and personnel between colonial and postcolonial SAR governance. Therefore, as Choi posits, Hong Kong's SAR government (with China's consent

and participation) retained its colonial mode of governance in the first ten years after the Handover.

Consequences of Decline

This lack of sovereign autonomy and government intervention has had significant consequences for Hong Kong's film workers, such as its stunt community. Joe, a leader in the Hong Kong Stunt Man Association and who comes from a family of three generations of stunt workers, remarked to me that while he has been able to survive jumping off of buildings eight stories high, he cannot endure the steep decline of the Hong Kong film industry. In the early 2000s he petitioned the Hong Kong government for funding for the film industry, but has met with very little support. The current SAR government of Hong Kong has continued the former British colonial policy of "positive non-interventionism" in many aspects of Hong Kong society – in this case meaning minimal involvement in the realm of local cultural production (see also Chan et al., 2010, pp. 19; 82).

Yet it is not solely Hong Kong's stunt community that has experienced the Hong Kong government's active indifference spanning both its colonial and postcolonial phases; other film workers such as directors, producers, and actors complain of neglect and preferential treatment for overseas (and particularly American) productions. In November 2007, the Hollywood production of *The Dark Knight* chose to film in Hong Kong for eight days (Thomas, Roven & Nolan & Nolan, 2008). The director was quoted in Hong Kong news media as wanting to feature the spectacle of Hong Kong's famed skyline and world's longest escalator for certain action sequences in his *Batman* film. During the eight day film shoot, the production required the use of local film crews who could work round-the-clock shifts. The production also received

permission from the Hong Kong government media authorities to close down local businesses surrounding the escalator in the busy financial and tourist center of Hong Kong Island for filming. The production was additionally granted law enforcement personnel for managing crowd control in order to accommodate outdoor filming. The government even asked business owners to comply with the production's request to keep the skyline lit throughout the night for an entire week, an enormous drain on the territory's resources of electrical power at a time when the Hong Kong government had started to heed environmentalist calls to promote energy-saving practices among its citizens (Crawford & Chan, 2007).

Although the stars and principal creative personnel of *The Dark Knight* derive from the Hollywood establishment, this Hollywood production relies upon the lax labor laws and loose environmental and safety regulations of Hong Kong. This process is what Miller et al refer to as the "new international division of cultural labor" in which the Hollywood-based production disperses its filmmaking process to various parts of the world where labor is cheaper and contingent (Miller et al., 2005, p. 111-140). During the *Dark Knight* film shoot, Hong Kong filmmakers as well as environmentalists objected to what they saw as the appropriation of Hong Kong's resources. Renowned Hong Kong filmmaker, Johnnie To, publicly accused the Hong Kong SAR government of "discrimination" by continually facilitating the needs of US and overseas productions while repeatedly ignoring the requests of local Hong Kong filmmakers for similar forms of government assistance (Ho, 2007).

To's accusation echoed what I had heard throughout fifteen months of fieldwork in Hong Kong from a range of film workers who had continually complained about the lack of assistance from the government's media authorities, such as the Hong Kong Film Services Office. A leader of the Hong Kong Stunt Man's Association had complained bitterly of how for several decades

the government authorities had not safeguarded crews filming outdoors when threatened with theft and extortion by local gangs in Kowloon and Hong Kong Island. Several producers had complained that instead of protecting local film crews, the Hong Kong police patrolling the area being filmed had harassed them while demanding to see permits. Of the double standards a film producer told me:

> I would tell the police that my films were promoting Hong Kong, making it look good, but they didn't care. We'd get into huge shouting matches in the street and they'd waste my time. But when foreigners film a Coke commercial here, that's a different matter. Everything is available to them.

Production crews recounted how filming outdoors had been difficult without the support of the government bureaucracy and the free or low-cost protection of law enforcement for crowd control. Several producers complained that they had to pay police officers to work as private security in their off-duty hours, without the aegis of their police uniforms to keep gangsters away. This was in sharp contrast to the access to various locations and forms of assistance that overseas filmmakers generally receive through the Hong Kong Film Services Office, a division of the Hong Kong government's Trade Development Council.

Hong Kong's government seeks to attract and associate with transnational capital without simultaneously developing its own cultural industry, since Hong Kong positions itself as offering Anglo-American style financial services in a liberalized economy. Informants complained that film and television programs at Hong Kong universities have until recently been underfunded and underdeveloped (see also Chan et al., 2010, p. 55). Paradoxically, by offering up the city's scenic landscapes, labor, and energy resources to Hollywood conglomerates such as Warner Bros. as part of a strategy to internationally promote Hong Kong's image, the Hong Kong

government contributes to the deterioration of its own, place-based "Hollywood of the East" legacy.

As a result of the multiple causes of decline, the stunt performers and other Hong Kong film personnel have become highly mobile workers. A famous stunt coordinator has been able to find work in Hollywood and China. Joe and other stunt workers I observed have also worked as consultants on Hollywood productions, and, as a result of CEPA, trained mainland Chinese film workers in stunt work. In doing so, these film workers have recently also had to become flexible in ways that their martial arts training did not prepare them for, in some cases learning new languages later in life (such as Mandarin and English), renewing family ties in China, and training in new skills, such as computer literacy and film budget software. Since Hong Kong film workers do not have strong unions and the government has provided little in the way of infrastructural resources or support, these increasingly entrepreneurial film workers fear that the craft that initially put Hong Kong cinema on the global stage will soon become a lost art within its own region and among its own community, regenerating only within the American and mainland Chinese film industries.

Conclusion

The global city model of development has had implications for Hong Kong's film industry such as unimpeded access for foreign-based media conglomerates (including Colombia and Sony, Warner Bros, and Walt Disney Co.). While several family-run Hong Kong film production companies such as Golden Harvest and Shaw Brothers went public, the 1980s filmmaking boom was financed by many independent production companies whose investors were also involved in real estate and jewelry businesses, and disbanded after one or several productions. It has not helped that the SAR government, as with the colonial government, does

not hold the film industry in high cultural regard, instead for years seeing it as what many interlocutors described as *lo pin moon* (involvement in dubious business), girded by marginal entrepreneurial forces (see also Curtin, 2007, p. 75). Many of the films of the late 1970s and 1980s and early 1990s were made with entrepreneurial capital. Even though some Hong Kong filmmakers were only indirectly linked to illegal networks, the perception shaded the tone of the industry. Yet the prevalence of illicit activity within the film industry is due in part to the marginality in which governmental forces have encased it. In fact, the Hong Kong film industry has for decades been a shadowy capitalist enterprise. A major exporter of Hong Kong icons such as Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, John Woo, and Chow Yun Fat, the Hong Kong film industry constituted a virtually spectral presence in the annals of British commerce. A glance at the official British almanac of businesses and industries in 1982, a year in which Hong Kong's film industry was particularly profitable and visible throughout international film markets, revealed that while so many other local industries were accounted for, such as textile, jewelry, and wigmaking, there was no mention of the film industry.

It was intriguing that so many Hong Kong film workers frequently pointed to the developmental state of South Korea and its strong government support for cultural production as an example of a successful East Asian film industry with its quota system (see also Chan et al., 2010). The "death narratives" both emerged from and articulated contradictory desires: on the one hand Hong Kong film workers claimed that as members of "a people" who are not predisposed to political organization they wanted to uphold the practice of minimal government interference. On the other hand, some of these same film workers held up the South Korean film industry as an admirable model of national government support in maintaining a place-based industry. It is noteworthy that the Hong Kong film industry grew in popularity in the 1950s

amidst the backdrop of the Cold War, with films made by "anti-Communist companies such as Cathay and Shaw Bros." at a time when Hong Kong came to "see itself as an outpost of the 'Free World'" (Jarvie, 1977, p. 33). When I asked about past and future attempts to form more viable unions, many informants brushed off unionization as too closely related to communism. One producer told me,

> The Brits wouldn't allow unions – they represent communism. A while ago, Hong Kong Performing Artistes tried to form a union. But also, we Chinese, we are very different. It's in our genes to not align with other people to fight for a cause unless it's something very personal.

Although this producer's comment was historically inaccurate (unions did actually emerge under British colonialism), his sentiment reflects a popular anti-union stance on the part of many in the managerial class.[5] It is also worth pointing out that the business of making films – whether for capital accumulation or aesthetic pleasure or family tradition or other reasons – has indeed become "very personal" for many film workers. The disavowal of the kind of protection that unions or collective bargaining ostensibly offers (the latter not being allowed in Hong Kong), juxtaposed with many informants'envy of South Korean government support of its film industry, revealed the complexity of attitudes and ambivalence as the film industry undergoes dramatic shifts. One of the main issues underlying such tensions is the fact that Hong Kong is not a nation-state such as South Korea, and its film industry is not a *national* industry such as South Korea's. Hong Kong is a city-state, and historically it has been a territory of China, then Great Britain, and now China again as a Special Administrative Region.

The kind of support that the Hong Kong film workers attributed to the South Korean government is similar to the support that the mainland Chinese government has provided for its film industry. And it is mainland China's government support, through CEPA, that has arguably rejuvenated Hong Kong's film industry. For instance, Hong Kong produced fifty one films in 2006. Six out of the top ten films were made as co-productions with China. These co-productions brought mainland revenue to Hong Kong filmmakers. Since the Handover, and as a result of co-productions with China – as well as the colonial legacy – non-local industry personnel and audiences have resumed their prevalence in what Mirana M. Szeto and Yun-Chung Chen refer to as the Hong Kong film industry's "mainlandization" (Szeto and Chen, 2013, Mainlandization or co-production section). As Szeto and Chen emphasize, "since 2006, almost half of the 50 'Hong Kong' films made every year have been co-produced" (Szeto and Chen, 2013). And so we see that it is China, through CEPA, that is indeed positioned to "revitalize" Hong Kong's film industry. But while the "death narratives" that I encountered expressed fears about "parasitic" mainland Chinese making Hong Kong film workers redundant, depleting their vitality, it cannot be overlooked that the imperatives of global capital in the form of Hollywood productions (including the recent *Transformers 4: Age of Extinction*) which seek cheaper production sites such as Hong Kong's also deplete the territory's labor, energy, and resources. Quite a few film workers expressed admiration for the legacy of the British experiment in laissez-faire capitalism; a film producer told me, "The Brits did a great job with Hong Kong, and I wouldn't be like this, the way I am, without them and Hong Kong wouldn't be a great-planned city, a world class city, without them." Yet the consequence of the management of this "world class" global city is that this realm of cultural production requires bolstering by the governmental infrastructure of China.

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Notes

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[1] Daughters and sisters sometimes were trained to perform in Cantonese Opera, and transitioned to film and television work, but these numbers are much fewer (and were unavailable). I interviewed a couple of stunt workers whose sisters were trained by family members in Cantonese Opera, but these women did not go on to work in film and television. The majority of Hong Kong media personnel I met were male, particularly those with the most status, and the film industry is male-dominated.

[2] I protect anonymity for informants who work in a small community and could easily be identified.

[3] This includes Laikwan Pang's 2001 article "Death and Hong Kong Cinema," Ackbar Abbas' analysis of Hong Kong's "culture of disappearance" (Abbas, 1997), and discourse on cinematic imagery of crisis and expiration as well as industrial decline (Cheung and Chu, 2004; Marchetti, 2000; Pang, 2007; Szeto and Chung, 2013; Williams, 2000).

[4] See Rey Chow's critique of the British colonial government's push to accelerate democratic measures through the Hong Kong government (Chow, 1998; see also So, 2004, p.229-230).

[5] I am indebted to the reviewer regarding this point.