

Father Absence, Surrogate Fathers and Patricide: The Meaning of Father Absence in pre- and post-97 Hong Kong Films

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Under colonial rule, Hong Kong has always been cultivated to be a passive, dependent and marginal object. Switched between Britain and China, Hong Kong has never fully owned an independent regime, orthodoxy, discourse power and so on. If we compare father-son relationships to the process of building one's own subjectivity, then, the representation of father absence in Hong Kong films would reflect Hong Kong's social and political changes. Through the analysis of 97 films, such as Wong Kar Wei's *Days of Being Wild*, Fruit Chan's "97 trilogy", *Infernal Affairs* series, Johnnie To's "*Election series*", this paper studies the meaning of father absence in pre- and post-97 Hong Kong films, which can be summarized as: Father Absence, Surrogate Fathers and Patricide.

Keywords: father absence, subjectivity, indigenous awareness

Introduction

In Taiwan, there were famous father-son relationship films, such as Lee Ann's father trilogy¹. In China, there was Zhang Yi-mou's *Red Sorghum* (1997) and *The Road Home* (My father and mother in Chinese) (1999). Comparing with Taiwan and China, there has no such father-son classic movies in Hong Kong. There are many Hong Kong movies with a theme on "Who Am I" but films on father figures are rarely limited. What interests us most is, around 97, Taiwan and Mainland father movies remind us of the paucity of Hong Kong father movies. Father as an image of social and spiritual structure of Chinese ancient and modern society has been marginalized. If we consider father's representation in films as a political allegory, then how would we interpret the absence of father in pre- and post-97 Hong Kong movies? Through an analysis of *Days of Being Wild*, *The 1997 Trilogy*, *The Infernal Affairs* series, *Election*, *Election 2* and the like, this paper attempts to examine the meaning of father absence in pre- and post-97 Hong Kong films.

Absence of Fathers: The Beginning of Detachment

Hong Kong was once called a borrowed place as well as borrowed time, which had been isolated from the mainland for almost 150 years. Hong Kong has never built up a blood-tie relation with Britain nor a kinship with Mainland China. Therefore, when represented in Hong Kong pre- and Post-97 movies, father as an image has never been concretized in comparison with cop or gangster images in local movies.

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¹ *Pushing Hands* (1992), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994).

Around 1997, films about 97 have one common denominator, which is the absence of father. Traditionally, families mean that a man, woman and children reside happily in the same household. However, due to the signing of the "Sino-British Joint Declaration" in 1984, Hong Kong was separated from the decision of its fate and future. Hong Kong is like a child who is growing up in single parent home. "Who is the father?" The father becomes a permanent question mark in the memory of Hong Kong people. Therefore, Orphan Complex has become Hong Kong's cultural identity in some films. The theme of abandonment can readily be felt in the films like *Days of Being Wild*, *Made in Hong Kong*.

In *Days of Being Wild*, Yuddy (played by Leslie Cheung) was abandoned by his mother. When Yuddy went to the Philippines to seek for his identity origin, he was rejected by his mother and his father, and Yuddy's father has never been mentioned throughout the whole film. The film actually depicted a sense of alienation and the displacement of HongKongers from middle 80s to the 90s, which was paralleled to the absence of HongKongers in Sino-British talks on Hong Kong future, losing the chance for a brand-new start and the control of future life.

More prominent scenes of the father absence are found in the film *Made in Hong Kong*, directed by Fruit Chan. Chan shares with his audience an acute social and political consciousness of ordinary and poor youngster which was affected by 97 takeover. Moon (Tsung Chao), Sylvester's (Ah Long) and Ah Ping's fathers are reclusive and irresponsible. Moon's father even has a mistress and refuses to pay for the family expenses. Tired of such a broken family, his mother also shirks her parental responsibility and runs away. One day, Moon stalks his father like a hunter. His father is not given a close shot but only consecutive long shots. The distance before the camera reveals the coldness, strangeness and detachment behind the two men, just like Moon narrates that his birth is an incident of his parent's intercourse, which is a metaphor of Hong Kong relationship with its suzerains.

The themes of all these films have one thing in common: fathers do not appear in the screens. In the movie, Sylvester's father or Ah Ping's father never shows up. Usually, the traditional and idealized Chinese father images are deemed to be strong and fearsome. In contrast, image of fathers in *Made in Hong Kong* changed from that of a strong family leader to an ineffectual figure and this was absent both physically and psychologically. They tend not to bear responsibility and fight for their son's/Hong Kong's interest. Actually, parental absence is associated with the building of personality and psychological development including "negative self-concept, negative self-esteem, emotional instability, anxiety, social and emotional withdrawal, and aggression... and forms of mental disorder such as depression, depressed affect, and borderline personality disorder" (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001, p. 397). In the movie, all the younger generation was forced to face the world all by themselves with anxiety, confusion and despair. The relationship between father and son seemed to be very detached and alienated. Alienation, strangeness, anxiety and fear of the future, which is a microsm of the Hong Kong film around 97.

Surrogate Fathers: The Creation of Indigenous Father

In retrospect, during Britain's hundred years of colonial rule, Hong Kong has never had any say about its governance. For example, the members of Basic Law Committee Drafting which helped draft Hong Kong's law and protected Hong Kong freedom were mostly appointed by Chinese government but Hong Kong was seen as an outsider. Therefore, there exists the negation of colonial-infected culture and Chinese culture in Hong Kongers' memory. Rejected by both sides, an ambiguous sense of Hong Kong indigenous cultural identity is

articulated in the form of double refusal: refusing the colony as well as refusing Chinese takeover.

Just as we have previously pointed out, Hong Kong has never fully owned an independent regime, orthodoxy and discourse power politically. Right after the return, Hong Kong encountered 1998 financial turmoil, the honey moon between China and Hong Kong was soon terminated. What struck Hong Kongers most was the key values such as an independent judiciary upheld had been gradually sabotaged.

In 1999, Hong Kong SAR government asked the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress for legal interpretation, the result was just like what the Chairperson of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights said:

There appeared to be threats to the freedom of the press... In 1999 the Committee had been told that appeals to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress for legal interpretation of the Basic Law were exceptional, but such interventions had occurred quite frequently since then.²

Since Hong Kong's prosperity rested on the rule of law, an independent judiciary, freedom of speech, the interpretation, against the Covenant guaranteed by the Basic Law, definitely broke the cornerstone of confidence in China's central government.

Being abandoned by two countries, as an important carrier of local culture, Hong Kong movies tend to yield to its own culture to create its own dependence. If we compare the abandonment to Sigmund Freud's repetition compulsion, in this theory, Freud reported that observing a child throw his favorite toy from his crib, become upset at the loss, then reel the toy back in, only to repeat this action (Freud, 1976, p. 151). Freud theorized that the child was attempting to master the sensation of loss. If abandonment is also a kind of sensation of loss, then, the repetitions of creating fathers such as McBing in the *Mcdull, prince de la Bun*³ could be seen as the result of an attempt to retrospectively "master" the situation, to turn passivity into activity: "At the outset he was in a passive situation ... but by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an active part" (Freud, 2011, p. 14).

Sharing the Chinese traditional values, movies in Hong Kong still proclaim some ancient thought and ethics, such as filial piety, which gave children a sense of duty to their parents, though it tends to resort to more and more indigenous consciousness in recent years in Hong Kong's circumstances. Confucian thought took the patriarchal family as a model for all the social relations with the exercise of power in the state. And its patriarchal ladder, such as royalty and kinship has become the basics of many local gangs. When represented in Hong Kong movies, for example, in *Election*, the movie was weaved by different kinds of local gang rituals, such as chicken beheading and offering burning. These films showed us the ancient governing style which was based on the elements of blood-tied and kinship (Craib, 1997, p. 66) blood-tied and kinship mean father and son relationship and indigenous recognition.

² Human Rights Committee, Eighty-sixth session, Summary record of the 2351st meeting held at Headquarters, New York, on Tuesday, 21 March 2006, at 10 a.m., *Chairperson: Ms. Chanet* Contents: Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 40 of the Covenant and of country situations, *Second periodic report of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China*. Retrieved 2016 September 9 from <https://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/2468605.48853874.html>.

³ To secure a better future, Mrs. Mc sends her son McDull to many different classes and she has also bought her grave on mortgage. Inspired by J. K. Rowling, Mrs. Mc tries her hand at writing. At bedtime, she tells McDull the story she wrote although McDull keeps asking her to read him Harry Potter instead. The story she wrote is actually the story of McDull's father, McBing, Prince de la Bun.

Under such patriarchal background, in the movie featuring Hong Kong characters, local violence gangster and police power substituted suzerain's authorization. It attempted to constitute a sense of patriarchal dependence which represented in Hong Kong movies. In *Infernal Affairs*, Superintendent Wong from the police and gang leader Hon Sum, became a police undercover cop Chen Wing-yan and the mole Lau Kin Ming's spiritual fathers respectively.

Lee Ann said "I think father figure represents the Chinese patriarchy, the social and psychological structure of society" (Michael, 2005, p. 88). In some movies, constituting patriarchal dependence means that there is a need to create one's own father who can fulfil territory's needs. In *Infernal Affair 1*, Superintendent Wong becomes the undercover cop Chen Wing-yan's "spiritual father" who supports and helps him, even brings him to a psychologist during all his hard time. In one of the scenes when the two men meet on the rooftop, it is not just the meeting of the traditional exchange of undercover information but also a scene facing Victoria harbor under the beautiful blue sky, it also renders a strong parent-child love in a very Hong Kong background. Superintendent Wong as the surrogate father, is a typical representative of the messenger of justice in terms of his tall image, calm manner, who is a virtual image of the ideal father Hong Kong people need nowadays, who can bring Hong Kongers back to those old days. The abject undercover cop Chen Wing-yan was more like the Hong Kong in Post-97, being confused and lost, seeking for dependence, and surrogate fathers were the characterization of transition from pre 97 to Post-97.

Sandwiched in two strong patriarchal forces (China and Britain), Hong Kong movies, has to make use of other violent systems in its cultural genes. It is through this invisible surrogate father, through which encourage and build their confidence, their strength, and even a sense of subjectivity fostered.

Patricide: A Jailbreak of Spirit

Based on the Yin Yang theory in Chinese culture, as long as the presence of the authority of his father the sons have to be non-males. Father-son relationships are the embodiment of subjects and objects: Yang and Yin. Yang is the father and Yin is the son. Yang is the king, Yin is the official, Yin is lead by Yang. Despite Chinese diversity, the stereotypical image of the Han Chinese father has been exemplified by the motto *yan-fu-ci-mu* (嚴父慈母, "strict father, kind mother") (Ho, 1987, pp. 227-245) and has been a unifying cultural concept for centuries. In addition, the Confucian principle of respect for elders has been basic to Chinese relationships, particularly between fathers and sons (Ho, 1987, pp. 285-313). When we come to the fathers and sons relationships, we found that in fact, the quality of father-son relationships proved to be a crucial mediating variable: When the relationships between masculine fathers and their sons were good, the boys were indeed more masculine. Subsequent research even suggested that the quality of the father-child relationships was more important than the masculinity of the father (Mussen & Rutherford, 1963, pp. 589-607).

On 24 September 2002, the government released its proposals for the anti-subversion law. There are concerns with the legislation arose because of the authoritarian nature of the Chinese government: the new law invokes concepts of treason against the PRC in certain circumstances. Hong Kong people were afraid that the legislation will erode freedom of speech. Therefore, on 1 July 2003, an estimated 350,000-700,000 people demonstrated against the anti-subversion law and against the failing economy, the handling of the SARS epidemic and Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa.

Hong Kong Basic Law Article 45 is an article in the Basic Law (constitution) of Hong Kong. It states that the Chief Executive should be chosen by universal suffrage upon nomination by a broadly representative nominating committee as an eventual goal.⁴ However, on 26 April 2004, Beijing reneged on earlier promises to allow Hong Kong the right to determine the timetable to universal suffrage, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPCSC) ruled out universal suffrage before 2012.

Therefore, the quality of father-son relationship between China and Hong Kong is not good. In the actual state of Hong Kong being abandoned, Hong Kong people are anxious about whether they can build up their masculinity, which is a metaphor of building up subjectivity. In *Infernal Affairs*, casting Eurasian actor Anthony Wong as a high ranked official, the role of Superintendent, helps to underscore the point that British authority once marked Hong Kong governance—Under colonial rule, Hong Kong has always been cultivated to be a passive and dependent object. Superintendent Wong acts as a father to Chen Wing-yan but Wong does not keep his promise—to recruit Chen back to the police force and live a normal life as soon as the end of the undercover job. In so doing, Chan Wing-yan's fate is still under Wong's control.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault builds on Bentham's conceptualization of the panopticon as he elaborates upon the function of disciplinary mechanisms in a prison and illustrated the function of discipline as an apparatus of power. The inmate, Foucault suggests, is always “the object of information, never a subject in communication” (Foucault, 1975, p. 210). Similarly, the patriarchal disciplinary mechanism is also an apparatus of power from the central government where Hong Kong is an object. This idea is also anticipated by how central government governed Hong Kong's gang in *Election* series. China's police force is always in inspection of everything and in monitoring everyone's secret in Hong Kong. The spy on Hong Kong people means controlling as well as distrusting. Just like Foucault said, “I don't know it's too much or too little reason, but in any case surely facing too much power”, therefore, Foucault thinks critique is one way back to reason (Foucault, 1997, p. 53). “I will say the critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects on power and question power on its discourses of truth” because critique can liberate the subject. “Critique would essentially insure the desubjugation of the subject in the context of what we could call, in a word, the politics of truth” (ibid., p. 53).

Therefore, the rebellion to surrogate fathers is no longer a meaningless act, to Chen Wing-yan, the death of Superintendent Wong was definitely a grief as well as a deep sense of sadness. Such an emotional state pushed him to learn to be independent, and to control his own destiny. Another character Lau Kin Ming has been controlled by Hon Sum for a long time. He has fulfilled his will of being a justice police officer after murdering

⁴ Article 45 gives the requirements for choosing the Chief Executive: “The Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall be selected by election or through consultations held locally and be appointed by the Central People's Government.” Details of procedures to be adopted are found in Annex I to the Basic Law where the same expression “broadly representative” is used to describe the constituency of the Election Committee notwithstanding its only representing a tiny section of the total number of registered electors. The focus of initial controversy was on the timetable for progress towards universal suffrage, but having extracted a promise of a timetable of reform (2016 for the legislature and 2017 for the Chief Executive) heated debate ensued over the details of the election systems to be employed. Positions on both sides hardened in early 2013, with the newly appointed chairman of the PRC government's Law Committee, Qiao Xiaoyang, espousing hard-to-define pre-conditions on CE candidature, (“love China and Hong Kong” and “not oppose the Central Government”) including declaring that Beijing would refuse to appoint an unsupportive Hong Kong CE even if democratically elected. Pro-democracy groups formed the Alliance for True Democracy in support of the Occupy Central with Love and Peace protest movement devised by University of Hong Kong Associate Professor Benny Tai, demanding unconditional universal suffrage.

Hon Sum. Both Chen Wing-yan and Lau Kin Ming can be seen as having committed a (mental) patricide. They both established themselves successfully after the patricide and took over the control of their own life. The *Infernal Affairs* trilogy was shot around the 1st of July in 2003 (A critical political movement in Hong Kong). It is clear that the movies purported to express the political unconsciousness of de-colonization.

Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, it is believed that the movies in Hong Kong around 97 are closely related to Hong Kong's political environment. If the absence of fathers in *Made in Hong Kong* unconsciously reflects the political atmosphere in Hong Kong, then *Election* series would reflect the election situation in Hong Kong. It even shows the challenge of the patriarchal authority made by Hong Kong citizens. The spiritual patricides mean that Hong Kong is aware of its problems by decolonizing or even seeking local dependence⁵. Consequently, patriarchy immerse in these films, whereby and the confrontation between father and son represents an attempt to establish indigenous self-consciousness. The change of encounters of fathers is indeed political spectrum reflected in the pre-and post Hong Kong films.

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⁵ On 31 August 2014, the tenth session of the Standing Committee in the twelfth National People's Congress set limits for the 2016 Legislative Council election and 2017 Chief Executive election. While notionally allowing for universal suffrage, the decision imposes the standard that "the Chief Executive shall be a person who loves the country and loves Hong Kong," and stipulates "the method for selecting the Chief Executive by universal suffrage must provide corresponding institutional safeguards for this purpose". Many people in HongKong think this is a fake democracy.