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## ***Kung Fu Hustle: a note on the local***

S.V. SRINIVAS

**ABSTRACT** *The success of Kung Fu Hustle within and beyond Hong Kong provides a convenient starting point for a discussion of actor-director Stephen Chow's films and the manner in which they present themselves as belonging to a particular 'local' context. The production of the local is a critical issue in south Indian cinemas, where the local has been named as the linguistic-cultural identity and became available for political mobilization. Chow's work has significant implications for the study of south Indian cinemas because the dissimilarities between the two facilitate the identification of similar cinematic techniques used by both.*

**KEYWORDS:** Hong Kong cinema, Indian cinema, Telugu cinema, film theory, comparative film studies, identity, intertextuality

Early box-office reports indicate that the actor-director Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004) is among the most successful Hong Kong films ever produced. The film's local and international success reminds us of an earlier moment – the 1980s and 1990s – when Hong Kong could indeed have been thought of as a rival to Hollywood in the Asian film-market. There are crucial differences between the past and now, of course, but for old times' sake I will overlook the Sony/Columbia as well as the PRC companies' role in the film's production and distribution.

Before discussing the film itself I would like to admit that I have seen less than half the star's oeuvre and mostly on video. I do not make any claims to being an authority either on the star or Hong Kong film. My point of entry is the strange sense of familiarity that I have encountered while watching Stephen Chow's films, starting from the very first film of his that I saw. The films themselves should rightfully be credited jointly to Chow and writer-director-producer (and occasional actor) Wong Jing who contributed significantly to Chow's

emergence as Hong Kong's 'king of comedy'. A number of other films (i.e. those which do not feature Chow) directed by Wong Jing too strike me as being recognizable, indeed very 'Indian', but I will leave him out of the discussion. I will only note that some of Wong's films are quite popular in India – recently his *Claws of Steel* (a.k.a. *Last Hero in China*, 1993), which was earlier released in its English version was dubbed into Telugu as *Tiger Jet Li*. Of significance to those interested in the global career of the Hong Kong film is the complete indifference of the Indian market to the phenomenal success of Stephen Chow. While the Indian market has been relatively unimportant for Hong Kong based production and distribution companies, I am struck by the inability of Hong Kong film to make a comeback in the Indian market. In this context it is interesting to note that despite the huge success of Chow's earlier film, *Shaolin Soccer* (Stephen Chow, 2001) in many parts of the world, neither this film nor the other big Hong Kong success of recent times, *Infernal Affairs* (Wai Keung Lau, Siu Fai Mak, 2002) have been released theatrically in India.

They went directly to television, thanks to STAR Movies. So, it is not like old times after all. The reason why I bring in the Indian connection is because it is my point of entry into the Wong–Chow film. I will suggest that, in spite of the indifference of the Indian market to Chow, his oeuvre offers an interesting point of comparison/contrast to understanding some issues critical to the study of film in India. I will attempt to give a sense of what the larger project might look like before going on to discussing *Kung Fu Hustle*.

Over the past decade or so, Chow has acquired something of a reputation, and I believe a formidable one, as a local cultural icon. Part of his appeal, it would seem from online discussion forums,<sup>1</sup> lies in his Hong Kong-ness – his films are often inaccessible to outsiders (and therefore require glossaries of various kinds, which of course fan websites will go on to provide). More importantly, as a consequence he can be claimed as belonging exclusively to Hong Kong.<sup>2</sup> Further, unlike some of the other major stars and filmmakers of the industry, he *did not* relocate from Hong Kong. *Kung Fu Hustle*, however, clearly points to a new stage in Chow's career, because the bettering of *Shaolin Soccer's* takings at the box-office could well mean that he will no longer make films for the local market alone. What challenges this might pose to the star filmmaker and how this will change the form and content of his films is not something I wish to speculate on. But this is certainly an appropriate moment to ask what made/makes Chow a local phenomenon.

The point of course is not Chow's inaccessibility to outsiders – there are innumerable cultural forms/artefacts that do not travel beyond their immediate contexts and it is not at this level that Chow becomes interesting to an outsider like me. My concern is the manner in which the local is produced in his films. This is a question I bring from my primary object of research, Telugu cinema. Telugu cinema is India's second largest film industry, produced in Andhra Pradesh, which is India's biggest market for film. Telugu cinema is provincial

– it does not travel beyond Andhra Pradesh and its neighbouring states or Telugu speakers elsewhere. In Telugu cinema, it is my hypothesis, the local is produced by constructing a particular spectatorial position that is misrecognized or conveniently named as the 'Telugu'. In other words, the local is not produced by historical, political and other contextual references at the level of theme or story alone, but also by the deployment of a variety of cinematic techniques that add up to a particular *mode of address*. Telugu films address me as someone who belongs to a particular context, a context that can at times be said to be the root of my Teluguness, my linguistic and cultural identity. The larger issue in the southern Indian context is what M. Madhava Prasad calls cine-politics (Prasad 1999). This is a complex process by which popular cinema in southern India became a focal point of linguistic identity politics, throwing up highly successful star-turned-politicians in the Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh and a major cultural icon who has a great deal to do with language politics in Karnataka. For obvious reasons I cannot elaborate further on my understanding of cine-politics here. I strongly suspect that the Wong–Chow film does something that is familiar to me from the land of cine-politics. That is the creation of a highly localized cinematic language, a dialect if one were to extend the metaphor, which addresses the spectator as if s/he is a member of an in-group. So although I can never really understand what Chow is saying, I think I am justified in trying to figure out the overall pattern, the general drift of the argument.

How is the local produced in films? I do not intend the local to refer to little traditions or sub-nationalisms or the like. How do films become context and location specific? It is not of immediate relevance whether this specificity is named as Indian-ness, Teluguness or Hong Kongness. The production of the something-ness is what I am trying to get at.

Let me first list out the things I am not interested in for the present: references to places (action being set in 'real' spaces,

which at times only the authentic locals can recognize) and references to people or events that are rooted in a particular context (the naxalite film, a uniquely Telugu film genre, often depicts real events and atrocities widely reported in the press and on occasion these occurred while the film in question was being made). There are a number of techniques as well as shorthand references that films can use to present themselves as being about a particular context/place and belonging to it. Some of these would require the equivalent of subtitles with elaborate footnotes in order for those unfamiliar with the context to even begin to understand what is happening. Others offer vantage-points that are relatively more easily available to outsiders.<sup>3</sup> One particular technique that I would like to foreground is intertextual references to film and also note that the intertextual field would necessarily include other popular cultural forms, such as print and television. Unless we assume that identity pre-exists popular cultural production and consumption, this intertextual field might hold the key to the production of the local in *Kung Fu Hustle* and its predecessors. Since I only have access to Hong Kong film I will confine the discussion to my limited knowledge of it. No doubt the production of the local is an issue that surfaces across film industries and a more thorough investigation would require a familiarity with a much wider field of cultural production and consumption than film itself.

The Wong–Chow film works through the play with *recognition* of a variety of references. To begin with, these films are parodies – of the martial arts films over the decades but also of Hollywood hits. I will return to the question of parody presently. I will cite a posting on the IMDB forums to give an example of the film’s play with recognition: ‘The skill used by the Beast at the end of the film is of course the Toad Stance, used by again, 1 of four highly skilled martial artists in the film *Legend of the Condor Heroes* (also a prequel to *Heavenly Sword and Dragon Sabre* mentioned above) of whom are translating loosely again, Western Poison, Eastern Evil, Southern and Northern Begger.’<sup>4</sup>

I will suggest this is a ‘natural’ response to the film. Indeed the kind of response that the film actively elicits because Wong–Chow films consistently and continuously refer to other films and also earlier films of the oeuvre itself. Another forum posting points out: ‘The scene where the two Qin players are blown backward by the force of the Lion’s Roar until their clothes are torn off is similar to the scene in *Shaolin Soccer* where the goalie on the opposite side is thrown backward.’<sup>5</sup>

The film’s casting works as an open invitation to join in the game of spotting the reference: *all* the major characters are either Chow’s co-stars in his earlier films, or better still, recall a long history of Hong Kong cinema. For example, Leung Siu Lung playing ‘The Beast’ the film’s main villain, we are told by the film’s official website is a 1970s and 1980s film star and action choreographer who was, ‘at one time ranked close to Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan in the hearts of Hong Kong film fans’.<sup>6</sup> He hasn’t been seen on screen for over 15 years. The website also tells us that Yuen Qui, playing the Landlady, returns to the screen after 28 years. She is a former colleague of Jackie Chan and Sammo Hung from their Peking Opera days. And of course, she smokes a cigarette like her character in *The Man with the Golden Gun*. The one exception to this intertextual casting, if I may coin a technical term, is the film’s mute heroine played by Huang Sheng Yi. But then, like some of Chow’s earlier heroines she is marked by her disability (for example Chow’s ‘ugly’ heroines of *God of Cookery* and *Shaolin Soccer*).<sup>7</sup> Also remarkable about the casting is the *absence* of Ng Man Tat, Chow’s co-star in over a dozen films (more on him below). Given the critical importance of his roles in the Wong–Chow films over the past decade and a half, the absence of Ng is in fact strikingly noticeable. A parallel from Hindi cinema would be a Govinda film by David Dhawan which does not feature Khader Khan.

In the Wong–Chow film, the broad structure of the narrative as well as the manner in which the star is deployed (both are closely related) follow a pattern that is

carried over from one film to the next. Stories and settings change while there are a number of repetitions at the thematic level. The most significant of these is kung fu, which in turn is inextricably linked to the protagonist's fate. His progress from ignorance to expertise in kung fu has been important for the plot in films like *King of Beggars*, *God of Cookery* and *Kung Fu Hustle*.

Stephen Chow's star persona figures prominently among the films' intertextual references. For example, in *Fight Back to School* (Gordan Chan, 1991) he is Star Chow and in *God of Cookery* (Stephen Chow, Lik-Chi Lee, 1996), he plays Stephen Chow, the God of Cookery. The acute awareness of Chow's particular star persona is critical for the films' narrative, which I will suggest, inevitably unfolds in a predictable fashion in spite of the numerous twists and turns. Predictability is an important part of the pleasurable familiarity of the Chow vehicle.

*Kung Fu Hustle* is an example of the kind of pattern that is typical of a Chow vehicle. First, however, a brief outline of the plot. In this film Chow plays Sing, a petty crook masquerading as a member of the vicious Axe gang. He lands up at Pig Sty alley, a tenement block which bears a striking resemblance to the China of *Shaolin Soccer's* epilogue where *everyone* knows kung fu. Chow himself knows no kung fu and is frequently beaten up with his equally inept (and literally) sleeping partner. Chow's arrival at the Pig Sty alley triggers off a sequence of events that result in a series of discoveries of good and evil kung fu experts and spectacular contests between them. Eventually, Chow himself undergoes a transformation into the greatest of experts and tames the Beast.

Returning to my point about star recognition, one of the frequent methods used to underscore the recognition of the star and his screen history is the masquerade. Pathetic or successful, Chow characters often either masquerade as experts or disguise their true identity. This is a recurring element in his films and at times a twist can be given such as the one witnessed in *Love of Delivery* (Stephen Chow, Lik-Chi Lee,

1994). In this film it is Chow's older co-star in a number of films, Ng Man Tat, who plays the fraud (a fake kung fu master ripping off the gullible delivery boy who wants to impress the girl he loves). Ng, like Chow, brings to the films an extra-textual presence which is indexed (among other indications) by the naming of his characters as Tat, Uncle Tat, etc. In the *Love of Delivery*, the masquerade is complex for another reason. Towards the end of this film it is revealed that the Ng character (called Tat) is indeed the master fighter (Devil Killer) he has been masquerading as!

Masquerade in the Wong-Chow film is thus worked out at two levels.<sup>8</sup> First as play with star recognition (will he or will he not do his number in this film?) and secondly as a plot device (he pretends to be someone else in the fiction). Other films in which both levels are simultaneously at work are *God of Gamblers III: Return to Shanghai* (Wong Jing 1991) and *Flirtong Scholar* (Lik-Chi Lee, 1994). In the latter film, Chow makes a direct address to the camera in the course of one of the many rap songs in the film.

In a number of Chow films the dramatic transformation of the star (but also at times those whose fates are linked to his) is central to the narrative. In fact there is a deliberate build-up of anticipation and/or anxiety in the run up to this transformation. This virtually formulaic element deserves close attention because it facilitates the production of a particular kind of spectator. In *God of Cookery*, Chow plays a highly successful fraud, whose ignorance of cooking is exposed, leading to his public disgrace and loss of wealth. In the film's climax, Stephen Chow (the character) makes a dramatic return to reclaim the title of 'God of Cookery'. Until he actually goes on to demonstrate his skills, it is not at all clear whether he has any real skills or how he has acquired them. The sheer relief of learning that he has in fact become an expert cook is amplified by the comic narration (in the form of brief flashbacks) of how he acquired them. We learn that his 'training' is mostly through beatings by monks in the Shaolin monastery, resulting in a cooking style that fuses martial and culinary arts. The

parody acquires an additional dimension because his rival is a rogue student of Shaolin, who like his predecessors in the martial arts movie, has to be beaten by the hero to restore the honour of Shaolin.

The transformation is at times played out in an interesting relationship with that of other characters, especially the Ng Man Tat characters, as in the case of *Love of Delivery*. Often the transformation is preceded by extremely moving sequences, which seem quite out of place in the overall scheme of things. Interestingly, they are even presented as such – as moments of melodrama that arrive almost without announcement. Except that the announcement is by now over a dozen films old. Let me call this the *moment of irrationality* – which results in a transformation that is improbable or impossible and magical at once. It is also deeply satisfying because it is *willed* by the spectator: I want it to happen and it happens. The best example of the moment of irrationality in a Chow starrer occurs in *Shaolin Soccer* during the first match played by the Shaolin team. The team is completely overpowered by the wrench and hammer-wielding ruffians. The first big brother, Iron Head (Yut Fei Wong), signals the surrender of the team by waving his white shorts. The captain of the other team (Vincent Kok?) hands over his underwear to Iron Head and insists that he wear it around his head. The brother does so and bows in the direction of the camera – almost as if he is appealing to the spectator to make the suffering stop. The match, which in spite of the violence inflicted on the Shaolin team is presented as being funny till this moment, suddenly becomes an oppressively *emotional* event. Moreover, it is almost certain that Chow's plans to revive kung fu through football are doomed to fail. At this point, however, the brothers get their unique kung fu powers back in a most spectacular fashion. And the rest is history.

There can be little doubt that the transformation of the brothers in *Shaolin Soccer* is presented as something that is willed by the spectator. The bow at the camera could not have been a chance occurrence; in fact it happens all the time in Telugu cinema. The

difference between *Shaolin Soccer* and earlier Chow films as well as *Kung Fu Hustle* is that, in the former, the star himself is not the object of transformation – he already has his powers. In *Kung Fu Hustle*, it is Chow himself who will have to unleash his inner power, something that he is only vaguely aware of till this point. Here too the spectatorial injunction is crucial for the transformation of the Chow character. However, it is of a slightly different order from the earlier films. Chow in this film is for the most part on the sidelines during the action sequences. A range of characters – stars from 40 years of the Hong Kong industry's history – have to be given their turn on the stage. This roll call of the forgotten is pleasurable to a point but it also creates a sense of anxiety. The spectator is wondering when Chow, the biggest star of them all, will do his bit. Not surprisingly therefore, the scale of the spectacle in the film's climax is in inverse proportion to the screen time at our star-protagonist's disposal. It is bigger than anything we have seen before.

Returning to the parody in the Wong–Chow film, I will suggest that it is characterized by a sense of indebtedness, even reverence, to the object of parody. For example, the business about Sing's inner power is complicated by the fact that as a child he was sold a self-help manual by a vendor who claims that it will bring out his inner powers. The child's trust in the manual results in a beating by neighbourhood bullies. Nevertheless, to put it very schematically, the films suggest that at the end of the day, kung fu works and trust in its powers is not misplaced.<sup>9</sup> The deliberately exaggerated nature of the spectacle in both *Shaolin Soccer* and *Kung Fu Hustle* may not really be very different from the 1990s' martial arts film, which is always exaggerated and well within the domain of the impossible.<sup>10</sup> In the Wong–Chow film, in spite of the bawdiness of the humour and the endless jokes at the expense of martial arts films of the past, kung fu always works. Why else would Yuen Woo Ping be employed as the action choreographer of this film? I will go on to suggest that it is



not kung fu alone but something larger – as far as Hong Kong cinema is concerned – that is seen as working. Apparently unrelated to the kung fu is the film's theme of the lost and found son – a classic ingredient of melodrama. Although the very invocation of the theme in a film like this would qualify it as an object of parody, there can be little doubt that Sing is the missing son of the Landlord and Landlady. Even though it is made adequately clear that he is not their real son. Not surprisingly, Sing's transformation occurs when the middle-aged couple is reminded of their dead son; when he is claimed by them, in a manner of speaking. The need for the Wong–Chow film to retain the link to the object of parody is an important element of the production of the local – this set of films cannot afford to either snap or disown this connection. What we witness here is not a *Kill Bill* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003) type of smart reading of a convention that will produce quotations that are better than any existing 'original'. The fundamental difference between a *Kill Bill* and a *Kung Fu Hustle* is that the latter is characterized by the impossibility of disengagement from the object of parody, and maybe even the anxiety to claim it through the very act of parody. Where would the missing son theme be today but for *Tricky Brains* (Wong Jing, 1991), *Twin Dragons* (Ringo Lam, Tsui Hark, 1992) and of course *Kung Fu Hustle*?

To bring my argument to a close, the kung fu and the overall melodramatic structure point to the larger web of references, which produce a spectator-in-the-know.<sup>11</sup> The moment of irrationality contributes to the production of a particularly intimate star-spectator relationship that furthers the sense of ownership of these films. It is possible to argue that these films speak to the Hong Kong viewer, who is the only category of viewer that can catch all the jokes and also wide range of references therefore approximating to the film's knowledgeable spectator. I have no serious disagreement with this position. Except that I would like to add that the local in these films is often mediated by Hong Kong film itself. That is

to say, it is often by making references to films that the past is invoked. For example, is the rival of the God of Cookery a figure from Chinese *history* or from Hong Kong *film*? Even if the answer is *both*, does the Wong–Chow film have access to a history – or for that matter martial arts fiction – that is unmediated by the cinema?

Finally, how and why now? How has it been possible for Chow, who has more or less remained confined to the Chinese speaking audiences of Hong Kong cinema until recently, to move into a larger market now? Promotion by Sony is not really the answer because it begs the question of why such companies did not promote him earlier. One point of entry into Chow's movies is the frequent references to Hollywood cinema and to those parts of Hong Kong film history which have a circulation well beyond the Chinese communities across the world. You don't need to be a resident of Hong Kong to catch a reference to Bruce Lee. There are a number of contingencies that might overdetermine the success of both *Shaolin Soccer* and *Kung Fu Hustle*. But one interesting factor that has worked in their favour is the falling in place of a new frame of intelligibility. In part this is a direct consequence of the incorporation of certain elements of Hong Kong film into mainstream Hollywood productions. There is also a set of referents that are now available, which have the effect of familiarizing *Kung Fu Hustle*. Let me once again illustrate by quoting from the IMDB board on *Gong Fu*, this time from a viewer who is encountering Chow for the first time:

I'm 32 and I grew up loving Bruce Lee movies and have always hated how Jackie Chan's comedy seemed to take over Martial Arts movies. I respected Jackie Chan, but never felt that he was a true martial artist. Jet Li came along and brought some of the Bruce Lee feeling back with movies like *Fist of Legend*, while updating them with wire work, and I began to deal with the fact that wire work was going to be a permanent part of martial arts movies. When *The Matrix* hit, I liked it but never could I

consider it a true martial arts movie. Unfortunately, the rest of America did. I suffered through numerous *Matrix* ripoffs, including Jet Li films like *Romeo Must Die*. Then *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* cam[e] and it was a wonderful movie. Once again though, it's not really the type of Martial Arts film I like. I liked *Hero* and *The House of the Flying Daggers*, but since these movies are more art motivated than Martial art, this is all that we see in America. Then comes along a movie like *Kung Fu Hustle*, which was everything I expected and not at all what I expected at the same time.<sup>12</sup>

The point of course is not whether a viewer has got it all wrong. But the film works for him/her – even if it is for all the wrong reasons.

### Notes

1. For the sake of convenience, I look at the postings on the forums of *Gong Fu*, the Hong Kong title of the film, on the Internet Movie Database (IMBD, [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)) to illustrate my argument. I found an interesting mix of both Hong Kong based viewers as well those from elsewhere. This mix actually raises quite a few interesting questions, which I will point to in passing but not deal with in any detail, about the interpretative frames of viewers in various locations.
2. Linda Lai has drawn attention to most of the points that I discuss below and has also provided additional arguments for how Chow becomes a Hong Kong local. (Lai 2001).
3. How films become accessible and what is read into them might not be easy to anticipate. There was a time when English language academic writing on Hong Kong film spoke of nothing but its allusions to history or the 1997 handover. Whether or not these readings are accurate is debatable but my point is that the search for references to 1997 itself became a point of entry into the films.
4. Posted by 'yonghow', 6 January 2005. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0373074/board/thread/14631524>
5. Posted by 'giggle001', 15 January 2005, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0373074/board/flat/14629099>
6. [http://www.kungfuhustle.com/index\\_en.php](http://www.kungfuhustle.com/index_en.php)
7. For an interesting comment on Chow's heroines, see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0373074/board/thread/14965269>
8. *Love on a Diet* (Johnny To, Kai-Fai Wai, 2001) and *Running on Karma* (Johnny To, Ka-Fai Wai, 2003), both featuring another Hong Kong icon Andy Lau, involve a play with star recognition that is quite complex and sophisticated. Clearly, we are dealing with a phenomenon that has a far wider currency than Chow, even in the Hong Kong industry.
9. To the list of allegories that plague the academic reading of Hong Kong film, I am tempted to add another: kung fu, insofar as it is an object of parody and reverence, is the cinema itself.
10. See for example *Swordsman* (King Hu, Tsui Hark, Ching Siu-Tung, Raymond Lee Wai-Man, Andrew Kam Yeung-Wah, Ann Hui On-Wah, 1990) and its two sequels.
11. The transformation of the Chow is one of the elements in the film that is *not accessible* to those who are not in-the-know. Notice for example this posting from a viewer who has an obvious and logical objection to it: 'Sing (Chow) is a weakling during most of the movie, what exactly happens to him that makes him become superhuman at the end? Just thought it was bizarre that it seemed to happen out of nowhere.' Posted by 'manicsounds', 3 January 2005, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0373074/board/flat/14362336>
12. Posted by 'trueheart\_1', 14 January 2005. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0373074/board/flat/14879914?d=14881870#14881870>

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