



Film authorship and national cinema: An analysis of “Chineseness” in John Woo’s Hollywood films

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ABSTRACT

Hong Kong has the world's third largest film industry after Hollywood and Bollywood. For many decades, Hong Kong cinema has long been transregional and transnational. Its audiences are spread across Southeast Asia and its films have been commercially successful in Europe and the USA since the 1970s. John Woo has been a distinguished auteur director of Hong Kong cinema since the 1980s. When Woo relocated to the USA (making English-language films in Hollywood), how were his authorial signatures and the influence of his Chinese background, namely “Chineseness”, represented and negotiated in a transnational context? This article investigates the ways that his transnational/global filmmaking intersects with his Chinese cultural identities and influences. The article takes Woo out of his own cultural contexts, the specific locality. The “Chineseness” in his Hollywood films is also out of its common realm. Hence, this article pushes the boundaries of the idea of national in national cinemas by looking at the ways auteur directors of Chinese origin (such as Woo in this case study) integrated their understanding of Chinese traditional culture in films that were intended for Western audiences.

Keywords: **auteur director, film authorship, national cinema, Hollywood, “Chineseness”, John Woo**

INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong is an international metropolis. Although seven million people are packed into a small geographical space, Hong Kong has the world's third largest film industry after Hollywood and Bollywood (Indian cinema). For many decades, Hong Kong cinema has long been transregional and transnational. Its audiences are spread across Southeast Asia and its films have been commercially successful in Europe and the USA since the 1970s. John Woo has been a distinguished filmmaker of Hong Kong cinema since the 1980s. Hong Kong cinema has long been the interest of film scholars for its martial arts and action films, its commercial success and global popularity, as well as its cultural hybridity and “local imagination” (or “*Imagined Communities*” in the Andersonian sense, 2016). The films of auteur directors such as Woo, Wong Kar-wai, and Ann Hui, etc. emerged from Hong Kong’s new wave cinema. Hong Kong’s distinctive history makes its cinema a particularly interesting case for discussion in relation to the notions of national cinema. Its multifaceted relationship with Mainland China and the West enables me to argue the representation of “Chineseness” in Hong Kong cinema.

This article employs the term “Chinese-language cinemas” not as a political claim but as a linguistic category. Chinese-language cinemas (including both Mandarin and regional dialects such as Cantonese in Hong Kong and Hokkien and Minnan in Taiwan) should be considered as a broader term to refer to the cinemas of Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The historical separation of film industries in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan has created “quite distinctive national cinemas within each territory” (Yueh, 2006, p.74). I assume that there is a shared cultural affinity that extends across these three Chinese-language cinemas and I use the term “Chineseness” to refer to the expressions of shared cultural, historical and philosophical continuities represented in these films. Prominent scholars maintain the view that “Chineseness” is promoted as a unique feature of national/regional culture which serves to connect localities to broader networks of power that include not only Mainland China but also Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. Fleming and Indelicato pointed out that:

“Or stated differently, by means of syncretic appropriation in an era of global semi capitalism and transnational funding, many modern films that appear to trade in signs of ‘Chineseness’ no longer denote ‘a national or regional identity’ at all, and instead constitute free-floating ‘elements’ or de-essentialised signifiers ‘that can be combined with other attractions to create an audiovisual “recipe” that may maximise a film’s marketability’.”

(2019, p.141)

Thus, “Chineseness” becomes a form of cultural capital that is shaped through transnational discourses that are negotiated in history. Ideas about degrees of authenticity as Chinese, which are seen as derived from links to territory and knowledge of “traditional” Chinese culture such as Confucianism and Taoism, have become a basis through which diasporic Chinese define themselves in relation to one another. When Woo relocated to the USA (making English-language films in Hollywood), how were his authorial signatures and influences of his Chinese background represented and negotiated in a transnational context? As an established action film director, facing the uncertainty of Hong Kong’s transition back to Chinese authority in 1997, Woo started pursuing his career in Hollywood in the 1990s. Eventually, his transnational action filmmaking style made him one of the most successful Hollywood directors of Chinese origin. His early Hong Kong films such as *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) and *The Killer* (1989) are popular worldwide and recommended him to Hollywood. Woo is considered an auteur, especially for his aesthetics of violence, by many film scholars (Lu, 1997; Hall, 2014; Li, 2017). To a certain degree, Woo is regarded as the figurehead of

Hong Kong cinema in the same way that Zhang Yimou is for the cinema of Mainland China. His Western films such as *Hard Target* (1993), *Broken Arrow* (1996) and *Face/Off* (1997) successfully crossed national and geographical boundaries in terms of commercial cinema. In discussing auteur cinema and critical practice, as Livingston (1997) and Elsaesser (2014) suggested, an auteur is still often thought of as the single dominant personality behind a work of film art, a creative personality whose imprint should be discernible throughout the body of his or her films, or an agent of his/her film's meaning in the Livingstonian sense. National cinema is often associated with auteur directors and their *oeuvres*. For example, from the 1950s to 1980s, Akira Kurosawa was the epitome of Japanese cinema and Ingmar Bergman, of Swedish cinema. Accordingly, the studies of national cinema have often focused on a handful of auteurs and their cinematic styles and visions. In this article, I will specifically explore the continuous influence of "Chineseness" in Woo's Hollywood films in a transnational context.

With filmmakers' increasing "transitional movements" and capital flow in the global film industry, cinema has long been "transnational" in nature. From "the solidification of the transnational Chinese audience which Shaw Brothers achieved through their domination of the Mandarin-language movie circuit" (Desser, 2006, p.152) to the global phenomenal success of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), it could be argued that true transnational movements in Hong Kong cinema can already be observed in the evolution of Shaw Brothers' *wuxia* films and the symbiotic interactions/engagements with Hollywood. *Wuxia* films have emerged as "transnational" and the most obvious vehicle to present "Chineseness" in both the East and the West. Woo successfully transformed *wuxia* action into modern gunfights in a modern setting with what is labelled as Woo's aesthetics of violence.

The "transnational" outlook has become a tool for many (Lu, 1997; Ezra & Rowden, 2006) to approach the complex connections between the three Chinese-language cinemas and Chinese diasporic filmmaking in the era of globalization. In Berry's *Transnational Chinese Cinema Studies* (2011, p. 9), he articulates the three patterns regarding the usage of the term "transnational"; the second pattern "focuses on cultural formations that sustain cinemas that exceed the borders of individual nation-states or operate at a more local level within them, for example, Arab-language cinemas, Chinese-language cinemas". Cultural affinity, according to Berry (2011), is a larger force that shapes "the national" in the three Chinese-language cinemas in certain ways. This also consolidates my assumption regarding "Chineseness" or at least one of its dimensions (the influence of Confucianism/Daoism) being represented in Hong Kong cinema, and more specifically, as what will be argued later, in Woo's action cinema. The choices of films to be discussed in the article has been made carefully to contribute to the central arguments. Therefore, a conscious decision has been made to focus on *Face/Off* and to not include all of Woo's Hong Kong or English-language productions, not to mention their growing number; Universal Picture is developing a remake of Woo's classic action film *The Killer* and it is currently in pre-production (McNary, 2019).

Agency and authorship in cinema

Based on Andrew Sarris's work on the connection between auteur directors and *mise-en-scène*, Hudson (2017, p. 275) coined the term "auteur-mise-en-scène nexus" in his book entitled *The Elusive Auteur: the Question of Film Authorship throughout the Age of Cinema*, a comprehensive and up-to-date study of film authorship. The term refers to the critical discourse of favouring directors as auteurs in film scholarship originating from the Parisian film culture. Indeed, auteur theory, which considers the director as the author of his/her films, is one of the most powerful and pervasive views historically and continues to be the current thinking on cinema today (Hudson, 2017; Grant, 2008; Livingston, 1997). To avoid some potential misreadings, I will explain at the outset that there are multiple perspectives regarding auteurism and attempt to use auteurism more pragmatically to generate different insights for my analysis

in this article. Fundamentally, there are two types: auteurism as a marketing tool and auteurism as an agent of a film’s meaning. Hadas (2017) is a good example of the former. In *A New Vision: J. J. Abrams, Star Trek, and Promotional Authorship*, Hadas (2017) examines the use of authorship discourses as a marketing tool by conducting a case study of the film *Star Trek* (J. J. Abrams, 2009). My own philosophical assumption inclines me towards the latter approach which is largely indebted to Livingston (1997) and Gaut (1997). While both types of auteurism are examined, the focus is on the latter; a director as an agent of a film’s meaning. When auteur directors such as Woo expanded his career to Hollywood, were any elements of “Chineseness” reflected in his Hollywood blockbusters such as *Face/Off*? Are there any similarities between the films he made in Hong Kong and in Hollywood?

Auteur theory argues that the role a director plays in filmmaking is paramount. François Truffaut coined the phrase *la politique des Auteurs* in his 1954 essay *Une certaine tendance du cinéma français* (A certain tendency in French cinema), published in *Cahier du Cinéma*. Further, auteur theory holds that a director’s films reflect his/her personal creative vision, that is, the director is the principal creator of meaning. Andrew Sarris is an important figure in authorship as he pushes to extremes, arguments which in Cahiers, were often only implicit. As Hudson stated:

“For Sarri, an auteur-director’s visual style could govern the overall shaping and execution of a script (beyond mere rendition), and show how a specific director could reweight the given elements of a film project-performance, spatial manoeuvring, shot selection, camera movement and angle, etc.”
(2017, p. 43)

Drawing from the writings of Truffaut and other French critics in the 1950s, Sarris dubbed these viewpoints as “the auteur theory” in the 1960s. According to Caugie, auteurism shares certain basic assumptions:

“Notably, that a film, though produced collectively, is most likely to be valuable when it is essentially the product of its director (‘meaningful coherence is more likely when the director dominates the proceedings’: Sarris); that in the presence of a director who is genuinely an artist (an auteur) a film is more than likely to be the expression of his individual personality; and that this personality can be traced in a thematic and/or stylistic consistency over all (or almost all) the director’s films.”
(2013, p. 65)

In his *European Cinema*, Elsaesser (2014) placed the auteur as the most prominent feature for the representation of national themes. This is particularly useful for my argument in this article when considering the auteur as signifier of national style. For example, Maheendran (2017, p. 84) has identified Yasmin Ahmad as an auteur director of Malaysian national cinema whose films always featured multiculturalism as the theme despite negative criticisms: “the late auteur filmmaker, Yasmin Ahmad’s favourite theme to use in a film is multiculturalism; four out of her six films: *Sepet*, *Gubra*, *Muallaf* and *Talentime* used this theme”. While Maheendran (2017) adopted an auteurial approach to Yasmin Ahmad’s work by focusing on the recurrent themes in the director’s films, in a more recent publication, Hall (2019) summarised two basic sub-types of authorship critique: i) the auteurial manifestation in *mise-en-scène*; ii) the identification of recurrent features in the body of films of an auteur director. Hall (2019, p. 179) continued to claim: “these ‘varieties’ are not of course mutually exclusive: the second may well depend upon or incorporate elements of the first (recurrent

motifs or patterns in *mise-en-scène* being among the common factors to be traced in a director's oeuvre)". When auteur theories were first developed in the 1950s and 1960s, the first and perhaps most famous auteur of all time to be identified was Alfred Hitchcock, who only really became "Hitchcock" after he came to Hollywood. Woo, in a similar way, gained his auteur director status when he started his filmmaking career in Hollywood in the 1990s. The appropriation of Hollywood of auteurism as a marketing tool is undeniable. I do, however, argue that an understanding of "individual agency" is crucial to better understanding a film's meaning.

"Being an author, I have claimed, is intentionally making an utterance, and an utterance is an expressive (and perhaps also communicative) action, that is, one in which some agent (or agents) intends to make manifest some meaningful attitudes (such as beliefs and emotions.) To make an attitude manifest is to do or make something, the cognition of which is likely, under the right conditions, to bring that attitude to mind."

(Livingston, 1997, p. 140)

Indeed in Hollywood, a producer-unit system functions throughout the whole film production process. As the biggest "national cinema" with mature industrial infrastructure, Hollywood is essentially commercial-driven and box-office oriented with a producer-unit system. Woo acknowledged in an interview that, unlike Hong Kong where he had full control over his filmmaking, he did not have the directorial right for the final cut of his films in Hollywood until his *Broken Arrow* became a huge box office success worldwide. This situation, however, it is somewhat different in the national cinema context. Especially in an authorial cinema framework, established directors yield more power in the making of a film and are often the principal decision makers. For example, Wong Kar-Wai, an auteur director who is known for shooting films without screenplays is considered by Bordwell (2000) as a typical example of how an auteur director shares primary creative control over a film's meaning in Asian cinema. Thus, meaningful attitudes (such as beliefs and emotions) are often represented in their films. Livingston (1997) provided a broader context of authorship in the cinema and further consolidated the role of auteur from various perspectives. His critical discourse regarding authorship serves perfectly for my later analysis regarding Woo's authorial expressions in his Hollywood action films.

"Chineseness" in John Woo's Hollywood films

Chinese traditional thinking emphasises moral education and a social realist tradition. In this cultural context, Chinese filmmakers (this cinematic tradition having spread from mainland China to Hong Kong and Taiwan) have always shouldered the social responsibilities and concerns of national crises on their shoulders. Thus, their films revolve around a number of themes such as humanist concerns, the experience of joy and sadness, and the spirit of *xiayi*. The spirit of *xiayi* is the cultural core of Chinese *wuxia* literature and eventually introduced a sub-genre of martial arts cinema: *wuxia* cinema. Woo's "heroism films" are a modern and Western adaptation of *wuxia* cinema. Its characterization is a combination of Chinese traditional culture and influence of European and Hollywood cinema, which will be elaborated in this article. This Confucian ideology of order (more from a moral perspective) plays an important role in the formation of the Chinese society and family, and it is important for us to understand the theme of family or father-son relationship in Woo's films.

Similar to the cultural hybridity of Hong Kong, while this article focuses on the representation of "Chineseness" in Woo's Hollywood projects, it does not deny the Western influence as well. Woo, himself has acknowledged the influence that Western filmmakers have

had on his filmmaking. As Bordwell claimed in *Planet Hong Kong* (2000), Hong Kong cinema has an ideological and technical relationship with Hollywood as many young Hong Kong filmmakers return home after practicing filmmaking in Hollywood. Woo adopted these influences in his Hong Kong filmmaking as well. In addition, his influence is also seen in Hollywood. Established Hollywood directors such as Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez practiced and developed Woo's aesthetics of violence in their filmmaking. Rodriguez's *Desperado* (1995) is a brilliant case of practicing and extending the aesthetics of violence in a Hollywood film in terms of action sequences. The representation of violence in Tarantino's *Kill Bill* series (2003, 2004) is another example. Woo's filmic style has had an enormous influence in contemporary Hollywood cinema and this has largely been studied as the aesthetics of violence where Woo has been discussed as an auteur. This is specifically in reference to his use of aestheticization and formalism to represent violence with special editing and slow-motion cinematography. Woo's filmic style does not, of course, solely come from his Chinese cultural understandings. As well as being influenced by Jean-Pierre Melville's style, Woo's slow-motion cinematography in action sequences is also influenced by American director Sam Peckinpah. As Woo admitted: "*The Wild Bunch* by Sam Peckinpah is one of my favourite westerns. I liked the way he used the slow-motion shooting. It conveys an extra sense of romanticism" (Woo cited in Elder, 2005, p. 12).

For many Western audiences, Woo is "only" an action director. However, film scholars (Li, 2017; Yip, 2017; Bordwell, 2000; Bruder, 1998) regard him as an auteur director and almost all studies have placed emphasis on his authorial style based on a distinctly recognizable aesthetics of violence. Woo's action cinema is regarded as a generic transformation of Hong Kong's kung fu (martial arts) cinema. Yip (2017, p. 191) contended: "The intense emphasis on male bonding in many of Chang Cheh's films, for instance, was re-examined and expanded in the 'gun-fu' movies of John Woo—from *A Better Tomorrow* and *A Better Tomorrow II* (*Yingxiong Bense II*, 1987) to *The Killer*, *Bullet in the Head* (*Diexue Jietou*, 1990) and *Hard Boiled* (*Lashou shentan*, 1993)". Bruder (1998) described the aesthetics of violence as "stylistically excessive", in a "significant and sustained way". When violence is depicted in this fashion in films, television shows, and other media, Bruder (1998) argued that audience members are able to connect references from the play of images and signs to artworks, genre conventions, cultural symbols or concepts. Here I draw upon Bruder's notions to connect "plays of images and signs" to Chinese "artworks, genre conventions, cultural symbols or concepts" in the themes, styles and concerns of Woo's Hollywood films. Although some attention will be paid to the aesthetics of violence in his cinema, the emphasis is placed on the relationship between filmic style and "Chineseness". I will go beyond the usual discussions regarding the aesthetics of violence and explore more on the cultural meaning and significance beyond the technical aspects.

Be it Hong Kong or Hollywood action films, Woo has always strongly emphasised culture and art. In particular, he draws upon traditional Chinese values such as brotherly love, the notions of family and the spirit of *xiayi*. All his films revolve around heroism, including his Hollywood projects such as *Hard Target*, *Broken Arrow*, *Face/Off* and *Mission Impossible 2*. As a master of Hong Kong heroism films, Woo incorporates this expertise in his Hollywood films, transforming Hollywood generic concerns and conventions by emphasising the Chinese understanding of brotherly love and family. Very few directors are thought of as auteur directors in Hong Kong cinema. As suggested earlier, his action films are closely associated with Hong Kong martial arts films, *wuxia* films, and of course, Western police/gangster films. I would argue that as a director, he has pursued a distinct filmmaking style and offers a coherent signature in his heroism films whether in Hong Kong or Hollywood.

The concept of Xia in Woo's films

The spirit of *xiayi* is the essence of *wuxia* cinema. However, *wuxia* cinema has often been misinterpreted in English as martial arts cinema or kung fu cinema when in fact, it means much more than that. In fact, there are fundamental differences between *wuxia* cinema and kung fu films. The former projects the spirit of *xiayi* while the latter focuses on the showcase of martial arts fighting sequences. The culture of *xiayi* is a special component of the Chinese traditional culture. Since ancient times, the Chinese have had expectations and longing for the legends/tales of *xiayi*. Heroes of *xiayi* often possess dualistic characters. On the one hand, while their actions are often against laws and formal rules, they are guided by moral/ethical disciplines. On the other hand, heroes of *xiayi* have highly defensive skills or techniques which enable them to save those they encounter on their journey. *Xia* represents a unique characteristic in the Chinese traditional culture and is very popular among ordinary Chinese people.

Wuxia cinema creates concrete characters/heroes to represent the spirit of *xiayi*. These warriors have a spiritual function as well as a martial arts function. Psychologically, they offer ordinary people a rich fantasy to resonate or identify with (similar to the figure of Robin Hood in the Western culture) which helps them feel less powerless in the face of state oppression (a continuing theme from ancient times through to fears of the PRC state regime). With this psychological outlook, *wuxia* cinema became popular and played a prominent role in Hong Kong's film industry. *Wuxia* cinema is the most important film genre between the 1950s and 1970s. To name a few here: *Come Drink with Me* (Hu Jinquan, 1965), *The Golden Swallow* (Zhang Che, 1968), and *Du Bi Dao* (Zhang Che, 1969) etc. A number of key *wuxia* filmmakers such as Hu Jinquan, Zhang Che, and Chu Yuan gained international recognition for *wuxia* cinema at film festivals around the world (for example, *A Touch of Zen* (King Hu, 1969) won the Technical Grand Prize award at the 1975 Cannes Film Festival).

The concept and culture of *xia* plays a key role in Woo's Hong Kong films such as *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer* etc. It represents a symbol or a code for certain aspects of the Chinese traditional culture. When Woo moved to Hollywood, he did not abandon this core cultural element in his Hollywood projects. Instead, he wished to include the spirit of *xiayi* into his transnational works. In *Hard Target*, the protagonist Chance represents *xia* in the Chinese traditional culture. He helps Natasha find out that her father was killed by an organization that kills targets for a fee. Chance also takes over Natasha's avenging crusade by risking his life. Here Chance is a different hero compared with other classic Hollywood action heroes. In Chinese traditional culture, *xia* is different from a fighter or warrior. *Xia* is always ready to help others (even strangers) for a just cause. This spirit does not exist in common warriors or fighters.

Woo did not abandon his personal style in his Western projects. Be it *Hard Target*, *Broken Arrow* or *Face/Off*, Woo's heroism films possess a nuanced distinctness to the action or police and gangster films found in the Western culture. His Hollywood blockbuster *Face/Off* is typically such a case. The following analysis of the film will demonstrate how Woo's auteur stylisation of heroism films enriches the Western action genre.

Face/Off and Face Off (bian lian) in Chuan opera: A chinese perspective

It would be disingenuous to deny American influences even if the articulation of "Chineseness" in Woo's Hollywood films is prioritised. Hollywood generic conventions are of course also in play in Woo's Hollywood films. Both in terms of box office and critical reception, *Face/Off* has become a summit of Woo's filmmaking career in Hollywood thus far. Instead of making the film in the exact way like the majority of contemporary Hollywood hybrid sci-fi action blockbusters at the time, Woo emphasised the spirit of humanism and the concept of family in his film. Many Hollywood action films have obviously centred their values around humanism

and family (*Die Hard*, McTiernan, 1988; *Lethal Weapon*, Donner, 1988; *Terminator 2 – Judgement Day*, Cameron, 1991; *True Lies*, Cameron, 1994); however, Woo stresses the importance of familial reconciliation (harmony as advocated by Confucianism) in his narratives by emphasising the importance ascribed to harmony as being crucial for families and by extension, the society. In the film, Castor Troy (Nicholas Cage), a terrorist, is in a coma; Sean Archer (John Travolta), whose son Troy had killed, arranges for plastic surgeries to switch not only faces with Troy but also the voice and body. With Troy's face, Archer goes into prison to approach Troy's brother for information. Then the faceless body of Troy (who comes out of his coma) forces the doctor to give him Archer's face. Each man slips into the life of his deadly enemy. Archer and Troy represent goodness and evil, respectively; however, after changing faces, they seem to be two sides of the same person. The mind of each is in the body of the other. Thus, a strong suspenseful plot is created when Archer goes "home" (Troy, with Archer's face, goes to Archer's home). Although there is a strong emphasis on family in *Face/Off*, Woo does not abandon the spirit of *xiayi* and romanticism. Contrary to Western traditional action blockbusters, apart from pursuing the aesthetics of violence, Woo also stresses the protagonists' emotional journey with detailed psychological depictions. Thus, his action heroes display more human emotions, differing from traditional Hollywood action heroes such as *Rambo* (Sylvester Stallone) and *The Terminator* (Arnold Schwarzenegger).

An analysis of the title *Face/Off* reveals a strong connection with Chinese traditions. It is a perfect blend of Western and Chinese cultures. "Face changing or face off" is a famous term in Chinese traditional culture. It has a long history in China as a technique in Chinese traditional art. Based on Chinese history, people used different colours to paint their faces to scare away wild animals. Chuan drama brought this tradition to the stage and developed it as a unique form of Chinese art in Chinese opera. Both tragedy and comedy in Chuan drama have unique characteristics and face changing is used to interpret the conflicts and changes in characters' emotion and psychology. It uses uncanny and ferocious masks to represent characters' psychological complexities. Performers can change up to approximately 14 faces without being detected and within a few seconds. Not surprisingly, this Chinese theatrical technique has earned international acclaim.



Figure 1. Face off in chinese Chuan opera
(Source: <https://test1.thkms.org.sg/portfolio-item/face-changing-performance-bian-lian/>)



Figure 2. *Face/Off* film poster (John Woo, 1997)
 (Source: Walmart/Paramount Pictures)

The *Face/Off* film poster which was designed using two halves of the different faces of the protagonist and antagonist to form one face (one person) obviously shares similarities with this Chinese art tradition (Figure 1 and Figure 2). As opposed to a superficial creation, Woo managed to capture the essence of “face changing” as a reference to the narrative portrayal of the characters’ complicated psychological emotions.

The screenplay of *Face/Off* was originally a science fiction action film but Woo decided to highlight the psychological complexity of the protagonists in the film. Following his communication with the film’s producers, the screenplay was rewritten to meet his requirements. Thus, the screenplay places more stress on the notions of family, brotherly love and emotional conflict, providing a subtle re-emphasis of Western values through the lens of Chinese values. A clear example here is the spirit of *xiayi*. Woo wanted the protagonist Archer to take care of Troy’s (the villain) son at the end of the film. This was questioned by his production company but after an American preview, it was endorsed and the director of the production company apologised to Woo and accepted his version of the ending (Woo, as cited in Elder, 2005).

At the beginning of the film, in terms of cinematography and narrative, Woo positions Archer’s whole family in a dark and sorrowful place due to the death of their little son. Archer shoulders a great responsibility for his family’s loss and pursues Troy who killed their son. Thus, Troy becomes a nightmare in the psychological world of Archer’s family. At the end of the film when Archer comes home, Woo decides to shoot the sequence in slow motion. In the last sequence, Archer walks through mist but slowly and clearly appears in front of his house in warm sunshine. The sequence is symbolic to the fact as Troy dies, the whole family frees itself from a long, painful psychological struggle, and accepts its enemy’s son as a member of the family. The previous depictions of the family’s troubled life to the point of disintegrating is rescued by the ending which stresses unity. This highlights the theme of family and emphasises the emotional world of protagonists. As argued earlier, Archer’s adoption of Troy’s son (although initially disagreed by the production company) allows Chinese family ideologies to remain firmly in place. The Chinese and Hollywood values coincide with Woo, I would argue, enhancing the final product through the fusion of cross-cultural values.

The Confucian concept of family is paramount in Chinese traditional culture. In *Face/Off*, family is a major motive for both protagonists, Archer and Troy. In prison, the greatest motive for Archer to escape from prison is his extreme anxiety and worry for the safety of his wife and daughter as Troy now has Archer's face and infiltrates deep into Archer's family. The fact that Archer saves Troy's son may also be interpreted as being influenced by the spirit of *xiayi*. Additionally, in such action blockbusters, Woo projects themes of brotherly love. In the film, Troy ties his brother's shoelaces with a double knot. Portrayals such as this not only stress brotherly love and family affection, but creates a villain with strong human emotions. This makes the antagonist different from the inhuman villains found in most classic Hollywood action films.



Figure 3. Archer and Troy in a suspended moment with a Mexican stand-off scene in *Face/Off*
(Source: Paramount Pictures)



Figure 4. Typical staged fighting with a suspended moment in Beijing opera
(Source: Pre-Tend Magazine)

Another interesting signature of Woo is his use of Mexican stand-off where two protagonists are captured in a two-shot pointing at each other. In a two-shot (Figure 3), both characters remain highly vigilant and at the same time, elegant. By holding fire (for a suspended moment) before the ensuing action, they generate a significant pause in the middle of the action. Frequently appearing in Woo's Hong Kong films, this framing illustrates that in the middle of a life-and-death moment, one confronts his/her own mortality. In his studies of Asian action

films, Bordwell (2000) called this technique “the pause/ burst/ pause structure”. This is in fact a traditional technique of choreography of staged fighting in Beijing opera (Figure 4). As with the use of “face changing” to explore ideological and psychological struggles, Woo uses aesthetics drawn from the Beijing Opera to explore and represent crucial tension between the protagonist and the antagonist, Archer and Troy. This directing signature from his Hong Kong films adds further a stylistic layer to his Hollywood works.

John Woo's transnational perplexity

As I have attempted to demonstrate, there are some dimensions of “Chineseness” expressed in Woo’s Hollywood blockbusters. However, it can also be argued that this “Chineseness” provides us with some new interpretative and explanatory perspectives to read such films made in such a complex context. Woo’s recognizable signatures and styles in his Hong Kong movies and later in his Hollywood blockbusters, lead us to believe that he is the authorial agent of the film’s meaning. However, the above analysis also leads to another issue that is only sparingly discussed here: the authorial expressions and stylistics that are transformed and complicated by global industry-based concerns. I should also acknowledge that there are some clear differences between the films he made in Hong Kong and the films he made in Hollywood. When he crossed cultures, there were compromises and changes that needed to be made. The transition from making films in Hong Kong to Hollywood demonstrates the influences that different film industries and cultures can have on authorship.

From an industrial perspective, making a film in Hong Kong is easier for an established director than it is in Hollywood. With a complicated hierarchy of film production, Hollywood has rigorous rules and procedures for how a film’s pre-production, production and post-production should be undertaken. In Hollywood however, Woo needed to sacrifice some authorial control for commercial considerations. In Hong Kong, once production finance is secured, the director assumes complete freedom in making the film in the way he prefers. However, in Hollywood, a film’s production is controlled by a set of different people working in a hierarchical but also collaborative team.

His first transnational film, *Hard Target*, did not perform as well as expected at the American box office. For most Chinese audiences, this film was equally disappointing, as it lacked his authorial signature/style evidently found in his Hong Kong films. This lack of freedom to intermingle styles may be one of the limitations of Hollywood filmmaking. In order to cater for the American audiences, *Hard Target* was re-edited by the production company after Woo finished post-production. However, by conceding to Hollywood’s studio system, Woo gained valuable experience from this first project and strived to find the right balance that satisfied his authorial style and Hollywood’s commercial considerations. As described earlier, *Face/Off* is such a transnational project.

CONCLUSION

This article explored how Woo sustained his authorial signature and the influences of Chinese traditional culture evident in his Hong Kong films (the concept of *xiayi* and Confucian notions of brotherly love and family) in his Hollywood films. The article has identified elements of “Chineseness” in Hollywood blockbusters such as *Face/Off* by analysing and comparing Woo’s authorial choices and the cultural similarities of his Hong Kong and American films. Thus the study of Woo’s films in Hollywood provides us with an interesting take of further problematizing ideas of national cinema as traditionally formulated in film scholarship, that is, focused on the nation state.

The traditional notions of national cinema can no longer satisfactorily define themselves in terms of exclusion. National cinema today is multi-cultural and multi-ethnic, and its internal and external borders are porous following transnational co-productions in this era of globalization. Further, it is challenged by the diasporic filmmaking movement of auteur directors such as Woo in Hollywood. Facing the complexities of national cinema in this era of transnationality, Elsaesser (2014) offered a detailed insight into the changing configurations of the so-called *national cinema*. What used to be mainly seen as art-house movies, represented by individual auteurs, are increasingly emerging as an important cultural practice for groups and communities to negotiate transnational identities and intercultural narratives. Where once art cinema could be reasonably regarded as synonymous with Chinese-language cinemas, now Chinese-language cinemas can be regarded as a subset of auteur cinema with a minor presence in the programmes of global film festivals. Hudson (2017) also emphasised the link between festival and the consolidation of the “constructedness” of auteur status. Based on the above analysis of Woo’s Hollywood films and contestations of film authorship, I am also putting forward an authorial cinema framework by focusing on one that could examine national meaning beyond the national cinema level.

Woo’s success as an auteur director relies on the persistence of his authorial status both in terms of the aesthetics of violence and Chinese cultural traditions. As argued earlier, Woo is precisely using a set of international filmic conventions to include Chinese traditional values/stylistic visions within a transnational progress. Woo’s cinema, especially his Hollywood films, have provided film scholars with an interesting case of problematizing notions of film authorship and its relationship to specific cultural identities. The case of Hollywood cross-over directors of Chinese origin such as Woo shows that notions of authorship and national/cultural identity are challenged in a transnational context where the pre-set contexts of theoretical framework are switched, transformed and eventually challenged. Although arguments have been furthered regarding the inclusion of “Chineseness” in Woo’s Hollywood films, its articulation in these Hollywood films problematises the notion of authorship and cultural/national identity.

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