

Analysis of the Cultural Causes of Undercover Images in Hong Kong Action Movies after the New Wave Movement

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Abstract: In the 1980s, the New Wave Movement opened up new space for Hong Kong cinema, providing opportunities for innovation and transformation of action films. Diversified action movies and characters tend to appear at this time. As a type of character with highly localized characteristics in Hong Kong, the complexity of undercover images helps people examine society from different perspectives. This paper reviews the development of undercover films in Hong Kong by selecting representative undercover films, and reveals that “undercover” is actually a reflection of the collective situation of social identity. Based on the concept of “marginalized individuals”, this paper finds through literature analysis and case analysis that the diverse types of undercover identities that emerged after the New Wave Movement not only reflect the survival dilemma of undercover agents themselves but also a true portrayal of the identity recognition’s dilemma among Hong Kong people in the rapidly changing political and social trends.

Keywords: undercover agent film, marginalized individuals, new wave movement, genre film, identity

1. Introduction

From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, with the joint efforts of film directors with overseas study experience, the Hong Kong film industry underwent diverse changes and innovations. A series of films based in Hong Kong with a strong sense of social responsibility emerged, which is also known as the Hong Kong New Wave Movement. This movement has had a profound impact on the Hong Kong film industry. The rapid development of undercover films is one typical manifestation of the influence. As an important representative of gangster films, since Zhang Guoming’s film *Man on the Brink* appeared, the diverse Hong Kong undercover films not only reflect the embarrassment and inner struggle of the undercover individuals in the films, but also reflect the psychological state of Hong Kong people in the rapidly changing political and social trends within Hong Kong’s unique regional and consumer culture. The important connection with Hong Kong’s identity and culture suggests the importance of studying undercover films in Hong Kong. Based on the concept of “marginalized individuals” proposed by German psychologist Köller, the author takes *Man on the Brink*, *Infernal Affairs*, and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* as important cases, and through review and related research, attempts to summarize the typified undercover images that emerged after the New Wave Movement and explore the cultural factors that led to their appearance. This paper not

only helps to explore the impact of political changes on Hong Kong films, but also improves the research framework for the undercover agents' images in Hong Kong.

2. Overview of the Historical Development of Undercover Characters

2.1. Single Dimension - Police Undercover

In the context of the New Wave, the police procedural began to gain popularity along with the “heroic film” craze in Hong Kong cinema in the 1980s. The undercover agent theme was repeatedly used in the form of the police story, and it gradually came to be regarded as a major sub-genre of the police film. In this context, undercover agent characters were almost always converted from police officers, and they were inextricably linked to each other. “Police undercover agent” also became a common image of undercover agents in Hong Kong films before handover of Hong Kong [1]. “Police undercover agent” means an undercover agent unilaterally selected by the police who has or will have police status such as a police cadet to be sent into the enemy's interior, with the purpose of penetrating into the enemy's interior and covertly carrying out the collection of evidence of crimes and information on crimes, in order to fulfil the task of eliminating criminal groups.

At this stage, the typical narrative design is to intersperse some elements of “brotherhood” or personal emotional clues outside the scope of duty in the undercover operation, so that the undercover policeman is caught in the dilemma of choosing between brotherhood and responsibility. For example, in *City on Fire*, undercover policeman Gao Qiu is ordered to break into a robbery gang as an undercover agent. During his time undercover, he develops emotional resonance with Ahu, a robber in the gang, in terms of feelings and outlook on life, and builds up trust and friendship with each other. However, Gao Qiu has to struggle between loyalty and brotherhood. In *Man Wanted*, undercover policeman Le Wenhua has been working undercover in the triad society for many years and has developed a deep friendship with triad boss Feng. However, due to the pressure of his position, he must eventually arrest Afeng even though he is filled with inner conflicts, and witnesses Feng's car being blown up during the chase. When he resumes his identity as a police officer, he feels guilty and blames himself. He not only violates the law to give Feng a funeral but also provides help to his former gangster brother and his girlfriend [1]. After the reappearance of Feng, Le Wenhua is even misled into becoming his accomplice in murder and revenge, and eventually embarks on a wrong path. This tragedy is based on the dichotomy between “code of brotherhood” and “duty”.

2.2. The Appearance of Dual Undercover

In the first few years after the handover of Hong Kong, the “undercover cop” remained the most dominant undercover image in Hong Kong's undercover films. However, compared to the pre-handover period, undercover police officer characters during this period have taken on more diverse screen forms, such as Zhou Shijie, who loses his memory and acquires the fictional identity of an undercover police officer in *Purple Storm*, and Mike in *Cop on a Mission*, who couldn't withstand the temptation of power, sex and profit and chose to defect from his identity as an undercover police officer in *Knowing the Law*, as well as Fang Lijuan, a sentimental undercover policewoman who went forward in her love in *Love Undercover*. Although the combination of these undercover agents with various narrative elements has presented a richer look than before the return, they still have not departed from the exclusive police undercover agent narrative formula. It was not until the end of 2002 that the appearance of *Infernal Affairs* fundamentally changed this situation, and the “undercover initiative” in Hong Kong cinema, which had been in the hands of the police for more than twenty years, was challenged like never before. The main characters of this film are undercover police officer Chen Yongren and undercover villain Liu Jianming [1]. The film tells the story of these two men with confused identities who, after a constant struggle, finally decide to be their true selves.

Infernal Affairs broke the long tradition of “police undercover” in Hong Kong undercover films, and for the first time, “gangster undercover” is included in the undercover story, which greatly broadens the angle of the undercover image. This innovative attempt of “double undercover” has filled the gap of Hong Kong undercover film, and set off the trend of undercover film again. The film is an excellent representative of Hong Kong’s undercover films and even police films, and the term “Infernal Affairs” has become synonymous with “undercover”.

2.3. Undercover Group Images

On 1 January 2004, the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) agreement came into force. In order to better meet the demands of the mainland and Hong Kong film markets, Hong Kong filmmakers made new attempts at the undercover subject, they tried to go for an all-round and multi-angle representation of the undercover agent’s image, which led to great innovation in the characteristics of the undercover agent’s image, and sketched out spectacular undercover agent group images.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is the first undercover film made by Hong Kong and mainland directors after the signing of CEPA. The film explored the undercover agent image from an unprecedented angle. The film transforms the original single “undercover agent image” in Hong Kong cinema into various “undercover agent groups” for narrative creation and expression. From the very beginning, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* clearly tells the audience that the biggest attraction of the film is “sending 1,000 undercover agents to fight tigers (reactionary gang)”. Later, when the news of “1,000 undercover agents” spreads, all the villainous organisations are on tenterhooks. There are many undercover agents in the film, but they are difficult to find. So every character suspects that someone close to them is an undercover agent.

If *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is still a “preliminary attempt” for Hong Kong undercover agents to enter the mainland market after the signing of the CEPA agreement, then films such as *Drug War*, *Special Identity*, *The White Storm*, *Line Walker* and so on appeared after 2010, which made the image of undercover agents more adaptable to the trend of co-operation between Hong Kong and mainland China. Zhang Lei, Chen Zilong, Su Jianqiu, Ading and some other various undercover images cater to the aesthetic psychology of the mainland Chinese audience, but at the same time, can also be recognised by the Hong Kong audience [2]. The “undercover” image has also become a bridge to help audiences from mainland China and Hong Kong to understand each other and communicate with each other.

In short, Hong Kong cinema uses “undercover agents” to tell a historical fable about social changes in Hong Kong. Even though these undercover images have grown and evolved under the influence of the development of the Hong Kong film industry, and the undercover stories have been constantly updated, the worries and sentimental emotions that Hong Kong people place on the “undercover” are always present.

3. The Cultural Causes of Undercover Image

Although the induction and organization of undercover characters in Hong Kong action movies after the New Wave Movement has been regarded by some scholars as very meaningful work, only by understanding the cultural factors behind the appearance of these undercover characters on the screen can the significance of exploring and researching Hong Kong undercover characters be realized to a greater extent.

3.1. Marginalized Individuals--Reflections on the Identity Crisis Caused by the Colonial Rule's History

Exploring the local culture reflected by the image of undercover agents in Hong Kong, the concept of “marginalized individuals” is a very important concept. The concept of “marginalized individuals” generally refers to individuals between two social groups whose participation is incomplete. This idea was first proposed by German psychologist Kler, who believed that the concept of social change could also be applied to changes in individual social psychology [3]. Changes in social status can lead to changes in individual psychological and behavioral characteristics. When an individual transits from one work environment to another, the habits he previously developed have not yet been formed, and he has not yet adapted to the new work environment. At this time, their attributes are unstable for the new work environment, resulting in a sense of tension and loss, showing excessive caution, inferiority complex, and the inability to make independent decisions, and suppressing their own nature. The characteristics of “marginalized individuals” in the concept have inspired this research on the changes in the identity characteristics of Hong Kong groups.

From a historical perspective, after the First Opium War, the Qing government was forced to sign the humiliating Treaty of Nanjing, officially ceding Hong Kong Island to Britain. From then on, Hong Kong began to become a British colony, under British colonial rule for over a hundred years. Before its return to China, Hong Kong was a special community located “outside of its home” and living on the edge of its ethnic group. For over a hundred years, under British colonial rule, the local culture of Hong Kong had conflicts and resistance, as well as compromises and blends with the culture of the colonizers [4]. In Hong Kong, not only the gradually deepening Western cultural customs in the lives of Hong Kong citizens, but also the secular life that still preserves the ancient Chinese cultural traditions can be seen. Although Hong Kong shares some cultural characteristics of both China and the West, it seems to be not accepted by both sides. As a result, Hong Kong has become a special borderland without nationality, located on the edge between China and the West, unable to accurately locate its own position [4]. In the transitional period of return, facing the upcoming transformation of identity and belonging, the sense of wandering without knowing where to go is a reflection of the mainstream collective psychology in Hong Kong society before the “97” era [5]. Hong Kong people are immersed in the anxiety of returning, and Hong Kong society generally presents a state of panic and unease. After the return of Hong Kong, the identity of Hong Kong people has become sensitive again due to the differences in two ideologies. A good example is that Hong Kong people are sometimes very enthusiastic about the country’s disaster relief, poverty alleviation, and even territorial defense, while sometimes deliberately maintaining a distance from the mainland, showing a contradictory mentality.

Under the joint influence of Eastern and Western cultures, the city of Hong Kong exhibits obvious marginality characteristics, and the psychological states of several generations of Hong Kong people who grew up between the two cultures also exhibit varying degrees of marginality characteristics. Hong Kong films, as an artistic carrier for the expression of local culture and ideas in Hong Kong, are very enthusiastic about documenting and reflecting Hong Kong people in a large scale who are on a “marginalized” state, making “marginalized people” an indispensable social presence in Hong Kong society. In Hong Kong films, “undercover” is usually portrayed as a wandering and helpless peripheral figure, accompanied by a sense of anxiety about uncertain self-identity, which coincides with the anxiety of Hong Kong people under colonial rule after obtaining a “dual identity”. Therefore, undercover films have a good creative foundation in Hong Kong. In the process of transitioning from a single-dimensional undercover to a double-sided undercover in Hong Kong, and then from a double-sided undercover to the undercover group image, the stability of the character’s identity is becoming increasingly poor, and the anxiety of identity change will also strengthen, making identity issues an

increasingly complex issue. Meanwhile, during the process of Hong Kong's return, traditional Eastern memories were gradually awakened, posing a challenge to the British model that may have had a profound impact on the way Hong Kong people live [5]. This confrontation gradually intensified with Hong Kong's return, stimulating the generation of identity anxiety. The similarity between process and identity factors seems to suggest that the causes of the changes in the undercover image are closely related to the changes in Hong Kong's politics and culture.

3.2. The Trend of Character Typology in Hong Kong Commercial Movies

As a pioneer of Chinese language films, Hong Kong has accumulated long-term funds and technology. In addition to establishing a developed film industry production system, it is also an important Chinese language film industry base and export destination, and has always enjoyed the reputation of "Oriental Hollywood" [6]. At the same time, Hong Kong, as one of the earliest regions in the world to have a visual trajectory, is quite similar to Hollywood. Since the birth of its films, it has consciously adopted a commercial production route and continuously adjusted its film form and industrial production mode in the pursuit of commercial profits. As a result, Hong Kong films have shown obvious commercial creative characteristics, most of its film products are for profit, and the market is the dominant factor driving the creative development of Hong Kong films.

Influenced by Hollywood's commercial film model and its own development experience, Hong Kong has now formed a comprehensive film industry and genre system. The improvement of the film genre system has led to the widespread application of "genre" as a production standard for film works in Hong Kong cinema. Driven by genre concepts, the creative exploration of the Hong Kong film industry has combined with market demand to create genre film forms with Hong Kong characteristics, such as martial arts films, gangster films, horror films, and comedy films.

Due to the close connection between Hong Kong commercial films and popular culture, creators consciously start from the audience's entertainment consumption needs, and while creating various types of films, they also pay great attention to finding popular characters from the types of films that have achieved market success and recognition, such as the Great Hero in martial arts films, the police and the Puppy in gangster films, and the Taoist and Goddess in horror films [7]. These types of characters fit the characteristics of their respective subordinate genres of movies and are an important foundation for the establishment of "genre". Under such principles, the formation of the "undercover" image is also a result related to the influence of Hong Kong commercial film's tendency towards character generalization. At the end of the 20th century, compared to characters' types with clearer identity labels such as police officers and gangsters, the intertwined identity characteristics of undercover agents were able to accommodate a stronger creative tension. They were a character type that could be mass-produced according to their inherent type routines and innovatively created according to the rules of type replacement. For decades, there have been dozens of undercover characters portrayed in traditional police and bandit genre films, such as Jiang Lang in *Hard Boiled* and Wang Zhicheng in *Century of the Dragon* [7]. There also exists undercover characters appearing after integrating into comedy films, campus youth films, and crime suspense films, such as Nezha in *Grotesque Beast Institution* and Chen Zhijie in *S.P.L.2*. Therefore, under the guidance of the trend towards typification of characters in Hong Kong commercial films, "undercover agents" who can adapt to different types of themes have a longer life cycle than ordinary types of characters.

4. Conclusion

In short, the generation and development of undercover images are closely related to Hong Kong's social, historical, and cultural context. Over the past few decades, undercover images have undergone changes along with Hong Kong's social, historical, and cultural context. From the various forms of

police undercover agents before the return to China, to the gang undercover agents introduced in *Infernal Affairs*, and then to the undercover group images that emerged after the signing of the CEPA agreement, the image of “undercover agents” has gradually become a cultural symbol in Hong Kong, moving from single to rich and from simple to complex.

Through in-depth analysis and research on the image of undercover agents in Hong Kong films, the author found that Hong Kong films not only depict the living conditions and spiritual outlook of this special group of undercover agents in the unique cultural background in Hong Kong, but also attempt to allude to the collective spiritual state of Hong Kong people. This metaphor implies a ruthless criticism of society and power, and also includes sympathy for the “undercover agents” and real Hong Kong people who are unable to control their identity and destiny. Citing multi-dimensional references about undercover agents and considering the changes in undercover images from the perspective of technological progress are still the directions that the paper needs to focus on. Although exploring the cultural causes behind characters or images seems to have become a research climate, understanding the relationship between their creative ideas and cultural context from the perspective of relevant directors or producers in the research cases of undercover films in Hong Kong may be a worthwhile direction to explore.

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