Chow Yun-Fat: Star-image in Transition

What was the cult popularity of Hong Kong cinema in the 80’s and 90’s has become a popular phenomena since the migration of some of Hong Kong most popular stars and directors to Hollywood. This move partially motivated out of Hong Kong cinema’s increased recognition in the west and partially motivated by the re-unification with mainland China in 1997 has brought stars such as Michelle Yeoh, Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Chow Yun-Fat into the popular media consciousness. The popular western understanding of the star-images of these actors lies primarily with the distribution of their Hong Kong films in domestic markets and the promotion and exhibition of their Hollywood projects. Unsurprisingly they are heavily associated with the primary genre of films they produce such as Jackie Chan’s martial arts action-comedies. Cultural subtleties of their Hong Kong star-image is lost in the importation as retro-active advertising and packaging of imported films confuse previous films with the current image of the star even if they have little relation. While Jackie Chan and Jet Li are for the most part in Hollywood as they are in Hong Kong, Chow Yun-Fat’s star-image is an interesting case of limited understanding and revisionism. A long time television actor, Chow stared in television dramas and variety shows. His abysmal early film career was overshadowed by the phenomenal success of John Woo’s *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) reinvigorated both Woo’s and Chow’s careers. It is Chow’s films after *A Better Tomorrow* that western audiences are most familiar, particularly his films with John Woo. *The Killer* (1989) and *Hard Boiled* (1992) are his most recognizable Hong Kong films in the west and are the source of much of the popular understanding of Chow Yun-Fat’s star-image before his Hollywood films. The Chow Yun-Fat of dramas and comedies is overshadowed by his action films and the results are obvious in his debut Hollywood film *The*
*Replacement Killers* (1998). Chow’s film star-image has changed significantly over time and perhaps is complicated by the penchant for his Hong Kong roles to have a tonal breadth relatively unseen in Hollywood film. To survey his star-persona in its Hong Kong and Hollywood contexts and its subsequent meanings illustrates how a star-image’s meaning is both derived from text and culturally situated.

**Chow Yun-Fat in Hong Kong**

Prior to his role in the wildly successful *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) Chow Yun-Fat possessed an underwhelming film career despite his popularity on television. Primarily starring in romances or comedies, his films performed so poorly that he was known as ‘box-office poison’. The explosive success of *A Better Tomorrow* revitalized both Chow Yun-Fat and John Woo’s careers. Chow proceeded to star in a number of Woo’s later films though none matched *A Better Tomorrow*’s success. Apart from action roles that emulated his performance in *A Better Tomorrow*, Chow continued to star in comedies and romances; garnering awards for his performances in *An Autumn’s Tale* (1987) and *All About Ah Long* (1989). His last purely Hong Kong production was the actioner *Peace Hotel* (1995). This outlines Chow’s film career in Hong Kong providing a basic idea of the trajectory of Chow Yun-Fat’s star-image in Hong Kong. Chow begins as a star of romance/drama/comedy films and is reinvented by Woo into an action star. After *A Better Tomorrow*, Chow continues to take on action hero roles and the drama/romance/comedy roles he previously played. Chow’s star-image would appear to diverge into an ‘action hero’ and ‘melodrama hero’ personas, yet there is more continuity that would appear at first glance.
Viewing Chow’s films out of their cultural context creates an idea impenetrability around his star-image and what it may signify. Stephen Rubio expresses the ineffability of Chow’s signature ‘cool’ in his essay “The Meaning of Chow (It’s In His Mouth)”. Rubio argues that we, as western viewers cannot know the meaning of Chow further than his conclusion that it has something to do with his mouth. Rubio has a valid point, the subtext of these Hong Kong films may be lost on us as western audiences. Much of framework which Dyer details for understanding stardom is primarily disposed toward heterosexual white men, something Dyer himself is quick to point out. However it is undeniable that there is ideology in Chow’s films and that a function of his star-image is the signification of these ideologies. The Hong Kong film industry produces narrative film; types, genre, and character are all present in Hong Kong film. True, a reading will doubtlessly be colored by imperfect cultural knowledge of Hong Kong and a lack of understanding of Cantonese, but a meaningful reading of Chow can be constructed from an understanding of his films.

A strong association between ideology and Chow Yun-Fat’s star-image is primarily played out in the roles he as played in John Woo’s films, starting with and since *A Better Tomorrow*. *A Better Tomorrow* is widely thought of as the turning point of both John Woo’s and Chow Yun-Fat’s careers. As Woo has become a favored topic of discussion for Hong Kong film fans and critics alike, *A Better Tomorrow* and subsequent actioners directed by Woo are the primary text through which western audiences have become familiar with Chow Yun-Fat. Much critical focus on Woo, beyond aesthetic commentary on his direction of gunplay, concerns the ideological subtext of his films, the anxiety over the 1997 take-over of Hong Kong, nostalgia for a lost moral past, and emotionally intense relationships between men. While Woo has received
intensive critical attention there has been little consideration of the implications of Chow’s star-image in relation to the films and the critical approaches of those that have examined them. A reading of Chow Yun-Fat in the context of the ideological undercurrents of Woo’s films would place his star-image in the position of reinforcing values under threat (Dyer, p.25). In casting Chow Yun-Fat for *A Better Tomorrow* Woo said that he was looking for “a modern knight … a strong man with a good heart,” (Sandell, p.38); this statement makes clear the intentionality of the implicit ideological functions that Chow Yun-Fat serves in his films.

Anxiety over the 1997 takeover of Hong Kong by communist mainland China was such that not only is an aspect of Woo’s films such as *A Better Tomorrow* but also a part of a greater movement in the pre-1997 Hong Kong film industry where the implications of the takeover were particularly imposing (Williams, 44-45). Characters in Woo’s films will wax on the fleeting temporality of the cultural and physical landscape of Hong Kong (Williams, p.45). In his reoccurrence in Woo’s films in roles that place him the center of the struggles between a lost past and dark future Chow’s star-image become implicated into the problematic of the 1997 anxiety. The takeover anxiety is combined with Woo’s concern with the erosion and loss of traditional values in Hong Kong in the face of explosive capitalism experienced by Hong Kong in the latter 20th century (Williams, p.45). The takeover anxiety applies pressure to the social structures, which are under threat from the erosion of honor and values. The juxtaposition of gangsters and cops provide the framework for this critique as Woo has imagined them as chivalrous brotherhoods in the tradition of knightly figures of old. The conflict between the ex-con, Ho (Ti Lung), and his brother Kit (Leslie Cheung), a police investigator, and the final confrontation between Ho, Mark (Chow Yun-Fat), and Kit against Shing (Waise Lee) embody these moral struggles which Woo desires to express in his films. The styling of the Mark Gor character as a
doomed heroic knight figure is by this analysis the predominant aspect of the star-image Chow evokes in *A Better Tomorrow* which he does on to reprise in *A Better Tomorrow 2* and *The Killer*. Chow’s reprisal of this character archetype in subsequent Woo and non-Woo films illustrates how the ideological function of nostalgia and idealization of the doomed knight’s morality and honor is adopted into Chow’s star-image.

Jillian Sandell’s analysis of the ‘spectacle’ of male intimacy in John Woo’s films builds on Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema”. Sandell notes how the portrayal of male intimacy in Woo’s films adopts what Mulvey classifies as feminine coding for the films, specifically masochism and ‘interruption of the narrative by spectacle’. Sandell lays the root of the spectacle of male intimacy in part at the anxiety over the 1997 re-unification and the manner in which Woo conflates this anxiety with his nostalgia for a codes of chivalry and honor that are under threat or are lost. Woo’s heroes alternately are active and masochistic both ‘doing and suffering’ (Stringer, p.30). In the cultural structure that Woo constructs in his films, the roles that Chow plays cannot be reconciled within Hong Kong society (Sandell, p.43). *A Better Tomorrow*’s Mark is too individualistic and freewheeling to survive the film’s finale (Sandell, p.43). As Woo’s emblematic leading man and widely recognized for Woo’s brand of aesthetized violence Chow’s character’s are only fully realized when he is paired with another male character. Woo imagines this kind of male bonding as a solution for the re-unification anxieties by portraying a union of equals (apparent only possible by men). This free agent that Chow represents can only be reconciled or realized through these intimate relationships between men (Sandell, p.43). The divide between Ho and Kit in *A Better Tomorrow* can only be bridged by the removal of Mark perhaps the mainland and Hong Kong can only be reconciled by the removal of the kind of individuality that Mark represents.
This kind of ideological function can be seen in an earlier film, *Hong Kong 1941* (1984). Chow plays a Yip Kim Fay, a northern Chinese actor who has come to Hong Kong to escape the Japanese invasion of northern China. Yip Kim Fay’s character traits in the film are not wholly dissimilar to those of *A Better Tomorrow*’s Mark Gor. He is smart, cool, and proficient. Coming from the era before *A Better Tomorrow*, *Hong Kong 1941* Chow’s cool as Fay is done through the character’s cleverness and acting ability rather than handiness with a firearm. In something of a precursor to the intimate male relationships of his roles in Woo’s films, the character Fay forges strong emotional bonds with the coolie Wong Hak Keung (Alex Man) and by association Keung’s girlfriend Han Yuk Nam (Cecila Yip). A romantic triangle develops between the three, with Fay rather than Keung seeming to be the center of tension. There is an underlying intensity to Fay and Keung’s friendship throughout the film that pales the stolen kiss between Fay and Nam while Keung is unconscious from injuries. One particular moment is when Keung is finally conscious after escaping execution with Fay’s help; bawling cries about his debt to Fay shatters his normally happy-go-lucky character. Further, at the end of the film as they try to escape Hong Kong, Fay sacrifices himself so that they can escape the Japanese. After their boat makes it away and Fay is about to suicide bomb the Japanese patrol boat, both Nam and Keung tearfully cry out to him. Clearly Fay’s relationship to Keung and Nam is similar to the kind of melodrama that Woo wishes to inspire in his action films. It is not hard to imagine the Japanese soldiers as mainland China’s. When Fay dies it is clear despite his cleverness as a double agent, his freewheeling deception of the occupying forces cannot last and he dies to save his friends. Mark’s death in *A Better Tomorrow* parallels this structure as his death facilitates the reunification of the brothers Ho and Kit.
Chow signifies Woo’s vision of the moral and chivalrous knight and as such is doomed by the march of capitalism and encroaching mainland China. Woo uses Chow to effect an appeal of the morals and honor not long for the world and to illustrate an often-poignant point about the decay of those same morals and honor in a greater social sense. As such Chow’s star-image contributes his capacity for melodrama which is an important part of the synthesis of action and melodrama that Woo constructs within *A Better Tomorrow* and his later films.

Outside of Woo’s ideology charged films Chow stars in dramas, romances, comedies, and after *A Better Tomorrow* action films. His star-image in this menagerie of genres can be understood in terms of the ‘types’ of roles that Chow performs and his subsequent ‘fit’ into those films as those roles. Social types are broad stereotypes of behavior for a group, a preconceived notion of how people of certain roles act (Dyer, p.47). Adapting the types Dyer highlights, for Chow there is the ‘good joe’, ‘tough guy’, and ‘male pin-up’. The ‘good joe’ is friendly, easy-going, has a strong sense of loyalty especially to friends, and is willing express his emotions. The ‘tough guy’ is the kind of stone-faced man of action common in action films; stern yet fair, often adhering to some principle or code. The ‘male pin-up’ functions similarly to the idea of a woman as ‘pin-up’ and serves to denote a male actor in a role that identifies them as a kind of sexual object and incorporates a tendency for melodrama and moodiness. The concept of ‘fit’ basically is the consideration of the audience’s identification of the actor’s star-image in relation to the character they play on screen (Dyer, p.129-131). Dissonance between the star-image and character can cause ‘problematic fit’ whereas a synchronicity between character and star-image renders a ‘perfect fit’. In these terms Chow’s Hong Kong films can be understood in how the
roles he plays identifies him as certain types or combinations of them. Also how Chow ‘fits’ into his Hong Kong films after *A Better Tomorrow*.

Critics and fans alike largely ignore Chow’s early films. Yet by the time of *A Better Tomorrow* Chow had been making films for ten years. Chow the action star hardly sprang from John Woo’s head like Athena from Zeus. His films before 1986 can be largely classified as romances such as *Witch from Nepal* (1985), comedies, and dramas like *Hong Kong 1941* (1984). Chow apparently did not make action films with few exceptions such as his supporting role in *The Postman Strikes Back* (1981).

Chow’s minor supporting role in *The Postman Strikes Back* is interesting in its placement in contrast to the typical romance/comedy/drama selection of films he starred in before and after it. He plays the role of Fu Jun, a scholar/martial artist from southern China who becomes a companion of the main character Ma (Ka-Yan Leung), a courier in the flagging days of Ching Dynasty China. Fu Jun is introduced on screen in a scene where he wakes from a troubled dream, thus giving the audience the idea that the character is haunted by something. A later scene of his martial prowess also exhibits Fu Jun’s cunning as he had set up the fight. Overall there is a familiar image of Chow’s character as smart, cool, and proficient. While he starts aloof from the other characters he become over the course of the film emotionally connected to them, most notably a romance between Fu Jun and the young revolutionary Yao Jie (Yat Chor Yuen) and the friendship between Fu Jun and the burly miner Bu (Mui Sang Fan). Interestingly his friendship to Bu is much more substantial than his romance with Yao Jie, in part this is due to Yao Jie’s exit from the narrative two-thirds through the film when she is captured and executed by the archvillian. While all the male characters bond as friends, providing motivation for the revenge
battles of the film’s finale, Fu Jun and Bu have a particular moment when their plans for after
they deliver their cargo to its final destination. Further it is Bu who buries Fu Jun after they
discover his corpse upon returning to camp later in the film. This kind of friendship emphasis on
friendship between male characters is a part of the martial arts/sword play genre in which bands
of brothers are a convention, which John Woo later integrates into his vision of contemporary
equivalent beginning with *A Better Tomorrow*. Chow in this minor role fits the tough-guy type,
primarily defined by Fu Jun’s martial ability, aloof nature, and the brotherhood he develops with
the rest of the male cast. This typing as well as the role are exceptions to his early film roles.

*The Witch from Nepal* is a fairly forgettable b-grade romance film, yet it gives a sense of
Chow’s star-image apart from the spectacle of male intimacy of Woo’s films and serves to
illustrate Chow as the ‘male pin-up’ type in combination with the ‘good-joe’. Chow plays Joe, a
Hong Kong artist who goes on vacation to Nepal with his girlfriend (Kit Ling Yam) and is
chosen as the successor to fight the Messenger of Evil (Dick Wei) by a mystic trive. The film
gives a pretense of supernatural horror but is more honestly about the illicit romance that
develops between Joe and Shelia (Emily Chu) a slave of that tribe who instructs Joe on his
newfound supernatural abilities. Chow maintains an image of stylishness in the film through his
rather impressive home and smart clothes. Joe, in contrast to the cool typically associated with
Chow, is much more mundane, if good-humored and possessed of a fair amount of charm;
literally a good-joe. When Joe and Sheila become romantically entangled the character become
in the love scenes the ‘male pin-up’ especially during the film’s sex scene with its display of
Chow’s naked body. The notable absence of any significant male characters (aside from the
supernatural Messenger of Evil) is a curious inversion of the dynamic of the Woo films that
Chow would later star in. In *Witch from Nepal* Chow is engaged with melodrama with women, while in *A Better Tomorrow* he is engaged in melodrama with other men.

The success of *A Better Tomorrow* reinvigorated Chow’s career and consequently refashioned his star-image. After *A Better Tomorrow* Chow continued to make the romance/comedy/drama films he previously had been known for, however after 1986 a significant number of films he starred in either were action films in the tradition of *A Better Tomorrow* or incorporated recognizable elements of it. The character of Mark Gor, who in many ways can be seen as a culmination of Chow’s melodramatic roles given guns, was so popular that beyond spawning two sequels to *A Better Tomorrow* Chow’s star-image had been taken over and bifurcated by the Mark character. Consideration of the aspects of the Mark character and the roles that Chow plays in Woo’s films gives shape to the star-image that is constructed by Chow’s later Hong Kong films. Mark Gor is a combination of the good-joe and tough-guy given license for the ‘doing and suffering’ of melodrama (Nowell-Smith, p.72). Chow star-image become strongly identified with the melodramatic hero of ‘doing and suffering’, the intense male bonding of Woo’s film, and a conventional romantic figure. The first two concepts are clearly inherited from his role from *A Better Tomorrow*.

The strongest examples of the male intimacy/bonding aspect of Chow’s star-image are unsurprisingly found in his films with John Woo, particularly *The Killer* and *Hard Boiled*. In fact if Woo’s films were the only ones to effect these ideas, one would have to consider them an intention of Woo’s authorship rather than Chow’s star-image. However, Chow’s roles in other gangster/action films build and vary upon the kind of male bonding that Woo depicts. Ringo Lam’s *City on Fire* (1987) and *Full Contact* (1992), the kind of male intimacy we would expect
from a Woo film is present, albeit not necessarily framed with the same kind of romanticism and melodrama. The Fu/Ko dynamic in their intense friendship is very similar to Woo’s brand of melodrama. Yet, Ko is not Woo’s knight. Ko is more human, fallible. Despite his deep friendship with Fu, he still leaves a note with the location of the gang’s hideout for the police during the getaway near the film’s end. But Ko then also takes a bullet for Fu. Ko dies a victim of his honor/loyalty rather than as a martyr/poetic doomed knight. This emphasis on male bonding is not carried through as heavily in most of his other films and segues into the background of more conventional heterosexual romances. Though there are instances in other films in which the male bonding dynamic shows through. Tiger On Beat (1988) adapts it into a buddy action-comedy of the same mold as Lethal Weapon (1987). Chow’s role as rascal plainclothes cop Francis Li collides with the rash new recruit Michael Tso (Conan Lee). Though the film they go from animosity to friendship neatly symbolized in the end as they simultaneously raise their hands to be cuffed together by their superiors (who instead approve of their actions). In Treasure Hunt (1994) Chow plays Chang Ching, a CIA agent, who, while staying at the Shaolin Temple, befriends a young boy monk. The boy is caught and punished in Chang’s stead for an infraction of the Temple’s curfew. Chang cannot stand to see his friend caned for something he is partially responsible for and reprimands the monks for punishing the boy for failing to betray his friend. Chang then takes on the boy’s punishment as his own illustrating the value of loyalty to one’s friends.

The melodramatic male hero that John Woo formulated in Chow with A Better Tomorrow is a major aspect of his post-1986 star-image. In many of his films after A Better Tomorrow Chow plays roles that do and suffer, occupying a sadomasochistic position of identification for the audience (Sandell, p.50). Obviously a prime component of his gangster action films. It also
finds application in his other films such as the action-comedies *God of Gamblers* (1989) or *Treasure Hunt*. In performing the melodramatic hero Chow is given to displaying extremes of emotion which one can associate the conception of this kind of hero both doing and suffering rather than unflinchingly enduring all (like a typical western action hero).

After *A Better Tomorrow* Chow continued to make romances, comedies, and dramas, despite the fact that his star-image as an action hero was such as success. His performance as the melodramatic hero in action films is foregrounded by the roles in dramas, comedies, and romances. Essentially Chow’s star-image is divided between genres and sometimes within films. While films like *An Autumn’s Tale* are removed from his action hero star-image, other films, action-comedies like *God of Gamblers* are broken up by scenes that seem constructed purely to serve the action hero conception of Chow’s star-image, a kind of literal expression of the problematic fit. Chow spends most of *God of Gamblers* reduced to a chocolate scarfing child yet when he must defend his life he hefts two pistols and guns down his assailants like a figure from one of Woo’s films. *Treasure Hunt* opens with a fierce gun battle in which Chow goes through the paces of his action persona, after this scene and until the final scenes of the film Chow is starring in a romance comedy. The film shifts gears at the end when Chow guns down a small army of men. This schizophrenic conflagration of genre and tonality is in part a symptom of Hong Kong film’s desire to please everyone (Bordwell, p.8), but also it is very much a part of Chow’s star-image (though he is not necessarily alone in this respect, Andy Lau is another example of an actor who’s films are often discordantly multi-tonal).

The big picture of Chow’s Hong Kong star-image is perhaps captured by his last Hong Kong film, the sepia-toned *Peace Hotel* (1995) which continues the pattern of ‘polygot,
expectation-twisting’ films that Chow stars in (Hampton, p.15). While not the film’s screenwriter, Chow is credited with the story idea and John Woo produced it. While conjuring the profile of Chow’s star-image from his action films in his role as ‘The Killer’. Its possible to see this as a kind of self-reflexive take on his star-image. Chow would rather imagine himself as a romantic hero (Mixon, p.4), mediating between his action star-image and his dramatic/comedic/romantic star-image. As such Peace Hotel is broken up similarly to Treasure Hunt, the action is all focused in the beginning and the end with the middle occupied with a romantic comedy. ‘The Killer’ is the guardian of a hotel that is a neutral ground and provides amnesty to anyone who enters. His relationship to the tenants of the Peace Hotel is that of a stern patriarch, though he is particularly friendly with the young son of one of the families residing there. ‘The Killer’ develops a romance with a dead ringer for a dead lover (Cecilia Yip) who ultimately leads to betrayal and his death. A complex collage of genres associated to Chow, Peace Hotel seemingly tries to reconcile all the aspects of Chow’s star-image into one film. In a sense it can also be seen to exhibit each aspect of Chow’s star-image separately such that the action Chow is still separate from the romance melodrama Chow in all but a few moments of overlap where he is the melodramatic hero. Peace Hotel in its combination of genre and tone conveys more accurately a sense of Chow’s star-image as a whole than his performances in The Killer and Hard Boiled. In Chow’s Hollywood films to follow he lacks the multiplicity of this kind of Hong Kong role, rather they imagine a narrower vision of his Woo films.

Chow Yun-Fat in America

With The Replacement Killers (1998) Chow Yun-Fat made his debut into mainstream western cinema as such the film attempts to reprise the Hong Kong action role of Chow’s later
Hong Kong films that are most familiar to western audiences. Chow Yun-Fat plays the role of John Lee, an assassin indentured to Chinese crime boss Terence Wei (Kenneth Tsang). When the police detective Stan Zedkov (Michael Rooker) kills Wei’s son, John is given the order for one more hit which would absolve his debt to Wei. John has a crises of conscious, one of several token bits of character depth that hearken back to Chow’s Hong Kong films, and fails to go through with killing Zedkov’s son. In doing so, he and his famil in China become hunted by Wei’s men. John seeks the help of Meg Coburn (Mira Sorveno), a forger, to get a passport out of the country. Meg gets drawn into the crossfire of John’s evasion of Wei’s men and while at first unwilling, comes to actively aid John’s efforts. After a series of shootouts, the execution of John’s friend the Buddhist monk, and pressure from Meg, John decides to prevent the assassination of Zedkov’s son and kill Wei. This leads to the climatic gun battle in the alleys of Chinatown. The attempt by former music video director Antoine Fuqua to emulate the gunplay of John Woo’s films (who is also one of the film’s executive producers) is obvious. More so, the film relies a star-image of Chow built on his action films which have achieved the most recognition in the west, particularly his role as Jeff Chow in *The Killer. The Replacement Killers*, from beginning to end recycles the iconography of Chow’s performance in *The Killer*. As such Chow’s previous dominant star-image in Hong Kong as a comedic and dramatic actor is supplanted by the image of the stylish gunplay hero of John Woo’s films. His close association with the ‘heroic bloodshed’ genre, heightened by the limited film knowledge of western audiences, expressed in the film shows how thematic conventions persist in Chow Yun-Fat’s star-image.

In his second Hollywood film, Chow Yun-Fat takes on the role of Nick Chen, a corrupt Chinatown detective, in *The Corruptor* (1999). The hero of his precinct Nick Chen must teach
rookie detective Daniel Wallace (Mark Wahlberg) the ins and outs of working Chinatown. As Daniel is tapped by the tong leadership to be bought, a friendship forms between Nick and Daniel. Daniel becomes ensnared with Nick in the web of corruption in Chinatown; with only each other to trust they plan to extricate themselves from their situation. When Nick discovers that Daniel is an Internal Affairs agent he must make a decision between friendship and saving himself. With *The Corruptor*, Chow’s American star-image continues to evoke an appearance of the highlights of his Hong Kong films with John Woo. However his performance in *The Corrupter* has a charisma, absent from *The Replacement Killers*, but familiar to his Hong Kong roles. More interestingly, the intense male relationships that are the hallmark of his most recognizable Hong Kong films have been transformed in between the *Replacement Killers* and *The Corruptor* into a more conventional paternal intimacy. This turn from the platonic-romantic male relationships to a sort of paternal relationship negates the possibility of homoeroticism while also maintaining a distance from the possibility of heterosexual romance. Chow Yun-Fat’s third Hollywood film, *Anna and the King* (1999) further solidifies this shift by placing Chow in the role of King Mongkut which provides opportunity to affirm the paternal aspects of his star-image while enabling an aloof romance.

In Andy Tennant’s *Anna and the King* Chow Yun-Fat plays the role of Siam’s King Mongkut across from Jodie Foster’s Anna Leonowens. As the third Hollywood film Chow has starred in it displays a continued trajectory of redefinition in his star-image for the west. *The Replacement Killers* rendered an iconic distillation of his prominent action performances, largely void of the subtext of the John Woo films it emulates and with the romance/comedy/drama aspects of Chow’s Hong Kong star-image absent. It also charged Chow’s star-image with foreign exoticism. *The Corruptor* placing Chow in a conventional western cop thriller provided
continuity for Chow as a man of action while also introducing the idea of him as a dramatic actor to a western mainstream audience. *Anna and the King* further serves to affirm the star-image of Chow Yun-Fat as a ‘dramatic’ Hollywood actor, exotic commodity, and as a strong paternal figure.

The nature of these three films as relatively recent Hollywood productions enables an examination of them using Dyer’s formulation of the star-image as promotion, publicity, film, and criticism and commentaries (Dyer, p.60). Dyer qualifies promotion as materials designed to advertise a star or particular star-image in association to a film (such as movie trailers or promotional posters). Publicity entails non-deliberate image making such as entertainment news gossip or fanzines; it is problematic in that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish true ‘publicity’ from studio-engineered promotion. Films are the text through which we typically engage with a star’s image, while not necessarily a privileged text in other star’s cases for Chow Yun-Fat it is his films that are essential to our understanding of his star-image. Criticism and commentaries are what is written about or on the star and their films, like reviews or obviously, this essay. To break down his Hollywood films in this manner is to get at the heart of Chow’s new star-image and the understanding (or perhaps the lack thereof) of his previous star-image.

The promotion of Chow Yun-Fat for *The Replacement Killers* takes a tack of exoticism. The trailer voice-over spells it out quite explicitly “In theatres around the world where action is almost a religion, they worship a hero and in theatres … he arrives…” with which the trailer cuts to a dramatic low-angle medium shot of Chow to a close-up of his eyes and then the trailer cuts to the initial gunplay scene of the film. The medium shot of Chow has low key lighting and medium backlighting interrupted with stroboscopic flicker giving him a particularly ominous
quality to compliment the explicit exoticism ascribed to Chow by the voice-over. Later in the trailer the voice-over intones “… executive producer John Woo, international action star Chow Yun-Fat …” this statement conjoins John Woo with Chow Yun-Fat as an action star creating and reinforcing connections between the two. Billing Chow as an international action star, much in the same way as Hollywood trailers promote Michelle Yeoh or Jackie Chan, make him more accessible to an American audience who may have little knowledge of him. The film’s promotional imagery relies on Chow’s image from *The Killer* just as much as *The Replacement Killers* does as a whole.

The trailer and poster for *The Corruptor* as promotional text have similarities to those of *The Replacement Killer* in terms of their presentation of Chow Yun-Fat. The poster shares basic composition wherein Chow Yun-Fat is paired with the other top-billing star of the film Mark Wahlberg. However, graphically the image is more balanced than that of *The Replacement Killers* poster where, while Chow Yun-Fat and Mira Sorvino are paired, the implications are different. In the *Replacement Killers* poster Chow Yun-Fat is the one holding a pistol in a ready, execution-style aim while Sorvino is unarmed and standing close to Chow Yun-Fat. From the composition of the *Replacement Killers* poster one surmises that Chow Yun-Fat is the active character and Mira Sorvino is possibly the passive romantic interest in the film. This provides a version of Chow Yun-Fat’s star-image that firmly distinguishes him as an action star and associates him with a traditional heterosexual romance, rather than the kind of male bonding that is typical of the films he made with John Woo or Ringo Lam. The poster for *The Corruptor* instead pairs both Chow Yun-Fat and Mark Wahlberg both ready with handguns with a bit of space between them implies that they are both equal and active participants in the film’s events. The trailer for *The Corruptor*, while more overtly focused on conveying the narrative of the film,
engages similar tactics to *The Replacement Killers* trailer in conveying a particular image of Chow Yun-Fat. Chow’s role as the Chinatown cop Nick Chen is highlighted and the shot selection of the trailer does much to emphasize the action elements of the film. Additionally the framing of Chow, Chinatown, and the tong gang-war suggests a subtler version of the exoticism that *The Replacement Killers* so bombastically conveyed in its trailer. The foreign exoticism is repeated in the copy on the reverse of the DVD release of *The Corruptor* which labels Chow Yun-Fat as ‘international superstar’ while referencing *The Replacement Killers* and specifically ‘John Woo’s’ *Hard Boiled*. An additional reading of the poster’s graphic design is the idea of Chow and Wahlberg paired. In many of his Hong Kong actioners Chow is paired with another male lead. In Woo’s films this served his male bonding motif, in other films such as *Tiger On Beat* (1988) it functioned in a more traditional buddy film fashion.

The exoticism/pairing dynamic continues in the promotional materials for *Anna and the King*, which unsurprisingly is implicit in the film’s own narrative/popular identity inherited from all the previous versions of the film. Unlike previous films Chow does not get first billing unsurprisingly Jodie Foster snags it under the moniker ‘academy award winner’. Surprisingly the trailer and poster for the film both are notably void of references to either *The Replacement Killers* or *The Corruptor* and his prominent Hong Kong films. While the trailer is cut in ways to imply much more action than appears in the film (armed rebels, a man leaping from a great height, etc.) Chow is not cast as the gun-wielding man of action from his previous films, rather his role as the king of Siam is in line with previous portrayals of the character such as Yul Brynner’s. Chow is situated as the central figure in the exotic pageantry of this period costume drama; the exoticism continues to be a consistent undercurrent in the promotion of both of his previous Hollywood films. By fulfilling the expectation of exoticism and eccentricity associated
with the King Mongkut role from *The King and I* Chow reinforces the exoticism aspect of his star-image to American audiences (unsurprisingly the entire exoticism tack of the star-image is culturally specific after all in China, Chinese food is just food). However, in the promotional materials for *Anna and the King* Chow Yun-Fat is distanced from ‘action’ in the role of King Mongkut yet remains ‘active’ through the character’s power relations in the film. In *The Replacement Killers* promotional poster with Mira Sorveno is pressed against Chow Yun-Fat so as to create a sense of intimate closeness between the characters they play, an expectation that there is some kind of romantic relationship in the film, which is subsequently never truly developed. *Anna and the King* also creates an explicit expectation of romance, more so than either *The Replacement Killers* or *The Corruptor*. This marks a transformation from the image of male intimacy of his Hong Kong films (propagated by the commercial success of in foreign markets of his John Woo films) to a paternal/romantic intimacy more conventional to Hollywood.

The promotion of Chow in the west has focused on two things: the display of the prominent characteristics of his roles in John Woo films and contextualizing him in ways unfamiliar western audiences can relate. As it can be understood from the promotion of the first two films Chow is an action star, perhaps THE action star. The iconography of the films (such as Chow’s designer suits and pistols in each hand) work to create bridges between his Hong Kong action films and his Hollywood films. Creating expectations in those who know of Chow’s films with Woo that the Hollywood films are very much like Chow’s Hong Kong films. For the audience without prior knowledge of Chow the promotion for the first two films attempt to place him in familiar terms as an action-hero and as a ‘foreign’ actor. The promotion of *Anna and the King* places somewhat more emphasis on Jodie Foster than Chow Yun-Fat. Chow’s appearance
in the promotional materials of *Anna and the King* is notable in that it distances him from the action-hero profile of his previous films and by giving the audiences images of him as King Mongkut makes it consider Chow as a ‘dramatic’ actor.

*The Replacement Killers* enacts the visual genre conventions of the ‘heroic bloodshed’ films that Woo and Chow pioneered in Hong Kong. Yet it is only in the practice of stylized gunplay and measured action choreography that it shares with those films. Chow’s role as John Lee makes allusions to his role as Jeff Chow in *The Killer* with his stylishly tailored suits, two pistols in hand, and aloof character. While this would represent continuity of his star-image between Hong Kong and the Hollywood it also shows how western audiences have distilled Chow’s star image into his performances in John Woo’s films. In *The Replacement Killers* Chow’s star-image is almost solely built upon the fearsome gun-wielding action hero. To this effect gunfights are choreographed with many techniques reminiscent of Woo’s films such as slow motion and synchronized or stylized movements. Additionally, several times in the film, most notably in the beginning and the end, John fades in and out of the frame via a wipe-like effect as people walk between the camera and Chow. These fades give an almost supernatural feel to the character, further enhanced by the ritualistic connotations given as he places the inscribed bullet on the table of the gangsters he executes in the beginning of the film. Overall these touches of mise-en-scene and editing serve to enhance the notion of Chow Yun-Fat as a kind of god of action-heros (as the trailer makes effort pointing out), as having exotic qualities (common with foreign film stars in Hollywood), and perhaps even further ascribing a mystical quality to him (a stereotype of the orient). The last point mostly serves the first, if Chow Yun-Fat is to be made out as the god of action-heroes then it serves the film to frame him this way
(making the stereotyping more coincidental than determined). *The Replacement Killers* cannibalizes a western understanding of his star-image and reassembles it within Hollywood conventions; Chow goes from being a melodramatic action-hero to being something more of the mold of stone-faced tough-guys familiar in Hollywood film.

When compared to the films it is emulating *The Replacement Killers* come across as being comparatively vapid thematically and emotionally. In a similar manner to the way Chow’s complex star-image is distilled, so too are the genre conventions of the ‘heroic bloodshed’ films. Yet, in the empty reenactment of the conventions of the ‘heroic bloodshed’ films, particular details of the film show how closely the hallmarks of the genre and Chow Yun-Fat’s star-image are associated to each other. Despite being in the mold of the ‘heroic bloodshed’ films, the film is not centered on male intimacy loyalty, and honor; rather it creates it problematic around morality of vengeance and vigilantism. Hollywood action films often are constructed around a validation of vigilantism; rooted in preoccupation with the frontier justice of westerns, it’s often the domain of amateurs or law officers working beyond the system. Vigilantism enables one to qualify a criminal as the protagonist, like Leon in Luc Besson’s *The Professional* (1994), since their subsequent crime/violence is moral. Unlike the ‘heroic bloodshed’ of John Woo there is no other male character for John to develop an intimate relationship with rather there is Meg, whose presence would imply the possibility of a traditional romantic relationship for John. However, Meg actually seems to serve more as the ‘male buddy’ than as a romantic entanglement, and her feminine qualities (i.e. her appearance) are primarily used on screen in typical spectacle/voyeurism manner for the (male) audience’s edification (such as the dressing scene when she is first onscreen). The way in which she engages with John has similarities to the way John and Li engage and are paired in *The Killer*. Just as Li decides to aid Jeff’s escape to Hong
Kong, Meg decides to aid John in the course of the film. Meg’s decision to be motivated by John’s plight rather than money or her own survival aligns her with the vigilantism theme, making it ok for audience to identify with a criminal. In the gunfight in Meg’s office there is a moment where Meg and John aim and fire their pistols synchronously which is similar to the way which Jeff and Li are synchronized in the final shootout of *The Killer*. Jillian Sandell points out that Jeff and Li’s harmonious gunplay is an expression of their intimate bond (Sandell, p.27) whereas in *The Replacement Killers* it is likely little more than an interesting point of choreography. The Buddhist monk Alan Chan (Randall Duk Kim) serves similarly to Jeff’s triad contact Sidney in *The Killer*. Like Sidney, Alan is the initial intimate friendship of the film, the only point where John’s aloof nature is broken. Similarly, as Li overtakes Sidney as Jeff’s intimate friend as *The Killer* progresses, John’s relationship with Alan segues into his intimate ‘male-bond’ relationship with Meg. There is a parallel of the moment of transfer is affirmed as Alan dies in John’s arms in the Buddhist temple, just as Sidney dies in Jeff’s arms in the Catholic church in the final scenes of *The Killer*.

Chow Yun-Fat as Nick Chen, the New York Chinatown detective, provides a greater breadth in performance on screen that attempts to broaden his star-image to western audiences. One of the initial scenes of Nick encourages the viewer to think of him as a hero of one of Chow’s Hong Kong films. Nick sits in a lamp shop playing cards with the shopkeeper, waiting for the arrival of members of the Fukinese Dragons tong, when they arrive a gun battle is initiated and when it is resolved Nick coolly picks up a lamp, pays and leaves. A spectator familiar with his most widely know Hong Kong films would readily see shades of the opening tea shop shootout of John Woo’s *Hard Boiled* in the scene. The audience gets the impression that Nick Chen is cool, capable in action, and perhaps a bit more quick to pull the trigger than
Tequila of *Hard Boiled*. His sudden initiation of the gunfight in the lamp shop sets the precedent of ‘manic’ behavior that Nick expresses at several points in the film, points where Chow expresses a sort of emotional flux that is normally associated with climatic moments such as Alan’s death in *The Replacement Killers*. These emotional fluxes, while associated with moments of intense anger and rage, sever in *The Corruptor* to signify the vulnerability of Nick Chen despite his normally immaculate aura of cool. Chow’s role as Nick Chen can be seen as similar to his role as the undercover cop Ko Chow in Ringo Lam’s *City On Fire*. Both Nick and Ko are distressed by their divided loyalties to the police and criminal organizations. The role of Ko is also mirrored by Mark Walhberg’s role as the undercover internal affairs cop Daniel Wallace. A comparison of the roles in *City On Fire* and *The Corruptor* shows the differences in their handling of the male relationships and the thematic significance of them.

The relationship between Ko Chow and Fu (Danny Lee) in Ringo Lam’s *City On Fire* is similar to the relationships depicted in John Woo’s films such as *The Killer*. Ko and Fu meet and are fast friends in the film, and the intensity of their relationship overshadows the relationship between Ko and his estranged girlfriend. The homoerotic overtones of this relationship are not quite as pointed as they are in Woo’s films, though there are moments that easily come across as romantic moments on screen between Ko and Fu. The bond between Ko and Fu even surpasses the bonds of the criminal brotherhood Fu belongs to (Fu shoots fellow gang members in the film’s climax to protect Ko) while Ko obstructs the police capture of Fu (Ko shoots cops as they make their getaway from the failed jewelry heist). They overcome the cop/criminal barrier as Fu still pleads for Ko to live and reunite with his girlfriend in Hawaii after Ko reveals that he is an undercover cop. While the relationship between Nick and Daniel mirrors the Ko/Fu relationship it is constructed along paternal lines rather than the somewhat
homoerotically charged friendship. Nick serves in the film as a replacement for Daniel’s father, who was also a crooked cop. The paternal aspects of the Nick/Daniel relationship are embodied by Nick’s training and instruction of Daniel as well as his efforts to protect him physically (as in the brothel gunfight) and from the corrupting influence of the tongs (Nick actively rebuff’s Henry Lee’s initial efforts to recruit Daniel). There are moments however, where their relationship almost slides into the intimate male bonding of Woo’s films, such as the scene at the bar before they raid the cargo ship where Nick says ‘You’re right … It’s good to know that you’re not alone in it’ and gives Daniel a long look which hearkens back to the kind of romantic stares that Jeff and Li exchange in The Killer. Unlike the Fu/Ko relationship, Nick’s relationship with Daniel falters when he discovers that Daniel is an internal affairs cop. On the cargo ship Nick threatens to shoot Daniel, forcing Daniel to reevaluate his moral code (which his father criticized earlier), but tong assailants interrupt their interlude. The stress of immanent danger manages to maintain and reaffirm the relationship between Nick and Daniel by providing opportunities for them to prove themselves to each other. Ko dies a victim of his circumstances and his divided loyalties in City On Fire; Nick Chen instead dies a hero. While Nick similarly sacrifices himself for his friend, he displays that his true loyalty is both to his friend and to the police as he takes the bullet knowing that Daniel is an internal affairs cop. Nick’s sacrifice is qualified by its loyalty to the law/police whereas Ko sacrifice is in defiance of the law and in defense of his friendship a crucial difference between the Hollywood and Hong Kong treatments of this thematic element.

In Anna and the King Chow stars across from ‘academy award winner’ Jodie Foster, giving him a proving ground for his dramatic acting ability within Hollywood. The nature of this film also allows this to happen without the specter of his action film star-image motivating his
performance as was the case in *The Corruptor*. Chow performs his role with a kind of charm and playfulness not unlike some of his Hong Kong roles, particularly his roles in *The Killer* and *Peace Hotel*. However, unlike his Hong Kong dramatic roles his playfulness is very reserved showing through usually in coy dialogue with Jodie Foster. The kind of mutability that can be found in many of his Hong Kong roles, where he oscillates between a comedic silliness, the icon of cool, and intense emotional outbursts of sadness or anger (a kind of schizophrenic tonality that is common in many Hong Kong films), is absent save for kind of dramatic outbursts which his performance in *Anna and the King* shares with *The Corruptor*. The most significant example from *Anna and the King* is the scene where Mongkut is in a temple during the execution of his concubine and her lover. The scene is framed low and then subsequent shots of the temple are either high-angle shots from the position of the figure of Buddha that Mongkut is praying to or low-angle shots from Mongkut’s point of view giving a sense of powerlessness to the character in the face of the execution with which this space is cross-cut. The last two shots of Mongkut are a high-angle shot of him repeating the gestures of prayer bowing his head and raising it, but with subtle body language on Chow’s part (a slight hesitation or tremble to his movements) the audience gets the idea that the bravo façade is weakening as he then starts to cry (cross-cut with Foster’s characters similarly breaking down. The final shot is identical to the initial framing of scene, but with Mongkut shaken and rolling over presumably overcome with grief. This scene like much of his performance for this film is much more reserved than similar instances in the previous Hollywood films. An interesting point that is shared between *The Corruptor* and *Anna and the King* is that his outburst of anger/rage occurs in public and his crisis of grief/conscious occur in private. This division between the place in which the expressions of emotions take place is a notable difference the kind of melodramatic roles Chow performed in Hong Kong especially
John Woo’s films, where men weep openly before their peers (the finale of *The Killer* is a
exceptional case of this, Jeff weeps for Sidney, Li weeps for Jeff).

As King Mongkut, Chow Yun-Fat assumes the role of a supreme patriarch of a nation.
By being placed into paternal relationships Chow excises the homoerotic subtext of the male-
male relationships from the Hong Kong films which are well known here. A strong emotional
relationship of equals between men is absent from *Anna and the King*, rather Chow as Mongkut
shows exceptional paternal affection for his eldest son and one of his daughters. The paternal
nature of Mongkut colors the romance that develops between Mongkut and Anna, serving to
create a kind of distant romance more like Jeff’s attraction to Jenny in *The Killer* than Joe’s affair
with Shelia in *Witch From Nepal*. A notable difference in the Mongkut/Anna romance and the
romances of both *The Killer* and *Witch from Nepal* is that the Mongkut/Anna romance is
presented as a meeting of equals, a kind of more romanticized buddy, whereas Jenny and Sheila
are both motivating sexual objects. Chow’s Hollywood star-image now incorporates the idea of
him as this kind of reserved dramatic figure with a wry wit and charisma.

Within these three films the trajectory of Chow’s star-image can be traced in three steps.
*The Replacement Killers* exploits a particular part of his Hong Kong star-image, simplifying it
into the image of aestheticized violence that has gained significant popularity with western
audiences. *The Corruptor* continues with the distilled Hong Kong image; though rather than just
imagining Chow as an ideal receptacle for two handguns it builds on the kind of melodramatic
performances that were also a part of the Hong Kong action films his star-image is being built
from. *Anna and the King* completely distances itself from the previous two films and
concentrates on a portrayal of Chow as a ‘dramatic’ Hollywood actor. Successively these films
seem to build a new star-image for Chow at each turn. A narrow interpretation of his Hong Kong star-image a first, broadening with each film. Though with *Anna and the King* his star-image in promotion seems to have completely turned from the idea of Chow as an action star. Overall there seems to be an imbalance with the Hollywood formulations of his star-image in contrast to his Hong Kong star-image. In Hong Kong films Chow shifts from severe to silly with ease; the Hollywood Chow has a more stable tone in his roles, the shifts are never as extreme as they are in his Hong Kong films. As such the Hollywood Chow seems to have created a new star-image with each film, possessing more continuity with his Hong Kong star-image than each other. His most recent film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) again appears to revise his star-image, this time both in the west and in Hong Kong.

Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a melodramatic Hong Kong style swordplay film which is hard to exactly place its geographic point of origin. It’s based on a Chinese novel with a screenplay written by English and Chinese screenwriters, directed by a Taiwanese director starring Hong Kong actors and produced by international production companies. Chow Yun-Fat stars as Li Mu Bai a monk and master swordsman, a role originally offered to Jet Li who turned it down to be with his pregnant wife. Once again Chow’s star-image is tossed up by confounding expectations with a role in a genre he has had little to do with. However, upon examination *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* displays a great amount of continuity with Chow’s star-image through his performance. The romance between Li Mu Bai and Yu Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh) hearkens to the romance between Mongkut and Anna in *Anna and the King* rather than Chow’s Hong Kong romance films. As Li Mu Bai tries to recover the Jade Destiny from Jen Yu (Zhang Ziyi) and entreats her to become his student the paternal qualities that have been cultivated in *Peace Hotel, The Corruptor*, and *Anna and the King* show.
An even more striking example of this paternal streak is when Li Mu Bai saves Jen from being killed by her former teacher Jade Fox (Pei-Pei Cheng). Further, Li Mu Bai is the kind of melodramatic hero Chow has played since *A Better Tomorrow*. Interestingly the melodramatic heroes of *A Better Tomorrow* are based on the kind of chivalrous warrior that Li Mu Bai represents in the swordplay film genre. Chow is not so much playing a new role as going through the paces without guns.

**Once and Future Chow?**

Chow Yun-Fat is an interesting example of the fluid nature of the star-image and its dependency on constituent text (in this case Chow’s films) and cultural context. His star-image has been fragmented and remade several times in his career, in 1986 with *A Better Tomorrow* and with each of his Hollywood films, and with *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Chow is now even more deeply bifurcated, not along the lines of genre but rather across a cultural divide of Hong Kong and Hollywood where two different, but perhaps intersecting, versions of his star-image resides. Despite apparently radical shifts in his star-image, Chow has held on to a core of his dramatic/comedic/romantic star-image, such that his acting in even the narrowest of action roles (*The Replacement Killers* comes to mind) he effects a depth of character. Curiously much like his last two Hong Kong films Chow’s star-image is tough on the outside and mushy in the middle.
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