

# ***Encoding and Decoding: Mapping Social Value Shifts and Social Contexts in Hong Kong Crime Films***

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**Abstract:** Since the 1980s, Hong Kong film has had a wide impact on the world. Amongst this, crime films take a salient position. It results from the strong artistic tension within the production of crime films itself, and on the other hand, it provides us with rich material for studying the changing socio-cultural context of Hong Kong. The creation and dissemination of art is both a process of coding for the creator and a process of coding for the social context, a process that involves both the personal expression of the creator and inevitably the shaping of cultural codes by ideology. Since *A Better Tomorrow*, Hong Kong crime films, as a category of films closely connected to social reality, have had a significant impact in responding to social issues. The main content of Hong Kong crime films also has a strong role in shaping social contexts and influencing audiences' perceptions in a subtle way. Therefore, in the process of creation, apart from thinking about the artistry of the films, the impact on the shaping of social perceptions of the films also needs to be taken into consideration.

**Keywords:** crime film, cultural codes, ideology, Hong Kong film, film symbols

## **1. Introduction**

Because of their socially relevant subject matter, Hong Kong crime films have always maintained a close relationship and interaction with the social context. Since the handover, the social value of Hong Kong crime films has gradually changed from a romanticized expression based on the “morality” of the protagonist to an expression based on the interests of society and judged by objective criteria, depending on the stage of society. This change is partly due to the fact that commercial films have to reinvent themselves in order to gain market share, but also resulting from the subtle influence of social changes on the producers.

The current research on Hong Kong crime films focuses on the ontology of the films, more specifically on the changes in the ontology and the evolution of thematic meanings through the narrative and symbolic perspectives of the films, but there is little research and discussion on the interaction between such films and the socio-cultural context. This paper aims to analyze the interaction between Hong Kong crime films and social contexts through the films' themes, character relationships, and other aspects by using some films, such as *A Better Tomorrow* and *Infernal Affairs* as materials drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of interpretivist media studies and Althusser's theory of

ideological state apparatus as tools to provide new perspectives and materials for the study of Hong Kong crime films and for audiences to examine and think about the film.

## 2. Concept Definition and Theoretical Basis

### 2.1. Definition of the Scope of the Study

From the perspective of genre cinematography, crime films can only be described as “crime films”, and as the content of these films is a mixture of gangster, action, police, detective and mystery elements, there is currently no credible and strict definition in domestic and international research. However, a study of crime films in Hong Kong requires a clear definition of the concept. In *Screenwriting Taxonomy: A Roadmap to Collaborative Narrative*, Eric Williams gives a definition “crime films explore themes of truth, justice and freedom, encompassing the fundamental opposition between criminals and lawmakers. This relationship can be explored in a variety of multi-layered and complex stories. Typically, the crime genre involves the protagonist assessing the crime and then attempting to meet appropriate justice. Law enforcement must find clues, evaluate weaponry and gather information to assess how to punish the criminal.” [1]. This is close to the concept of Hong Kong crime films that this paper will explore.

The Hong Kong crime films discussed in this article refer to the films produced in Hong Kong in which the main character is either a police officer or a bandit, and the main plot is a confrontation between the police and the bandits, in which the characters and their relationships are transformed in the course of the crime and the pursuit of the murder, triggering people to reflect on the existing social order.

Crime films in Hong Kong exist in the genres of crime comedy films represented by *Aces Go Places* and gore-heavy violent crime films represented by *Legal Innocence*, but both do not emphasize crime or police confrontation, but rather comedy or strong audio-visual impact as a selling point, so they are not within the scope of this article.

### 2.2. Introduction to Stuart Hall’s and Althusser’s Theories

Stuart Hall argues that culturally produced messages, if they are to produce meaning or effect, must be coded in a particular linguistic way by social-institutional relations, but for this message to produce ‘meaning’ or ‘effect’, “it must first be understood as meaningful discourse and decoded in a meaningful way. In other words, at one particular prescriptive moment, the social and productive organizational structure produces the message by means of the symbolic code, and at another prescriptive moment, the message enters the contextualized social and organizational structure through decoding and is transformed into particular behaviors and consciousness.” [2]. The ‘effect’ of culturally produced messages is not simply a straight line from the sender to the receiver but a meaningful cultural practice of the subject in the context of complex semantic structures and contexts, based on the interpretative meanings derived from decoding [3].

Film is essentially created to represent certain information by highlighting or compressing it, which fits in with the meaning-generating system of Hall’s proposed code-and-decode framework, where, as Hall puts it, “the process of communication consists not of a number of visual elements that have been fixed in a pre-arranged system of runes, but of various performative rules, i.e., rules of competence that employ available logic, which attempt to place a particular semantic domain above other domains.” [2].

In his article *Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus (Research Notes)*, Althusser first introduced the concept of the ‘ideological state apparatus’. In contrast to Marx’s notion of a violent ‘state apparatus’ such as the army, Althusser argues that the ‘ideological state apparatus’ works implicitly through culture and custom. As he concludes, “all state apparatuses work both through

coercion and through ideology, the difference being that the coercive state apparatus relies heavily and predominantly on coercion, while the ideological state apparatus relies heavily and predominantly on ideology.” [4].

In Althusser’s view, the structure and function of ideology remains constant, i.e., the ideological state apparatus always plays the same role regardless of changes in social reality, so ideology never developed independently, but was always dependent on the state apparatus and social reality. Social culture, as an important part of ideology, is also influenced by this law, as evidenced by the changes in social value judgements in Hong Kong crime films.

### 3. A Legacy of Chivalry: Hong Kong Crime Films Before the Handover

Hong Kong in the 1980s faced a complex social environment prior to the Handover of Hong Kong. At the economic level, the 1980s saw a wave of economic development, with Hong Kong entering the ranks of developed regions for the first time. Although Hong Kong experienced two economic crises in 1983 and 1987, it soon returned to the right track. The unemployment rate was even as low as about 1% and began to enter a period of economic transformation with the rapid development of international trade, finance, and service industries. However, in the 1980s, especially after the *Sino-British Joint Declaration* came into effect in 1985, there was a clear crisis of trust in Hong Kong society. The social movement in Hong Kong in 1989 cast a cloud over the social expectations of Hong Kong after the handover from the perspective of that time. In the aftermath of this event, a wave of immigration to Hong Kong broke out, with a massive loss of local talent on the one hand and an influx of Vietnamese refugees on the other posing a huge potential threat to Hong Kong’s law and order.

Social tensions were gradually intensified, and crime rates grew due to corruption and inaction on the part of the British Government, while many people seized the opportunity to succeed due to the dividends brought about by the economic takeoff. Against this backdrop, Hong Kong became increasingly stratified and, as a result, brought about many factors of social instability. At this time, although Hong Kong people enjoyed a privileged material life, they also maintained a certain degree of political cynicism. In a state of uncertainty, the people of Hong Kong were caught in the middle and desperately needed to find spiritual support to complete the emotional catharsis of their inner confusion and anxiety [5]. Under the influence of these two forces, the 1980s saw the emergence of a widespread reverence for individual heroism in Hong Kong’s intellectual and cultural spheres as an ideological response to their social conditions.

Since the beginning of *A Better Tomorrow*, Hong Kong crime films have entered a golden period of development. John Woo’s series is a continuation and inheritance of the spirit of martial arts films represented by director Chang Che since the 1970s; his films take “righteousness” as the core of their value criteria, wrapping the “immoral” part of crime films in “righteousness” and creating a parallel spiritual world outside of modern society. The film’s values are judged on the basis of “righteousness”, and the “immoral” parts of the crime film are wrapped in a veneer of “righteousness”, creating a parallel spiritual world outside of modern society. The values at work are pre-modern and simple, with the gangster protagonist often being the positive hero, the upholder of order. Although Hong Kong gangster films also have their evil antagonists (gang betrayers, corrupt cops) and pessimistic endings leading to death, whether the characters die violently or triumph through trials and tribulations, they reaffirm the validity of the “righteousness” they live by [6]. Like Mark in *A Better Tomorrow* or Xiao Zhuang in *The Killer*, although they are all criminals from a legal perspective, the “public order and good customs” they represent are some kind of justice that is not a legal sense, but it exists as a social norm. The nobility of character and the relentless pursuit of ‘moral righteousness’ exhibited by these characters are in great dramatic tension with their status as ‘criminals’. This broad expression of values based on the core of “righteousness”, this dichotomy between “good” and “evil”

based on the protagonist's perspective, foreshadows It is also a central expression of the hope for a "hero" rather than a government, echoing the political, economic and cultural features of society.

At the same time, it is important to note that after 1985, crime films in Hong Kong gradually began to include episodes such as *Police Story*, in which a policeman incriminates himself, and *The Killer* in which a gang is destroyed. This was partly a result of the need to expand plot possibilities in the film business, but it was also an important reflection of the changes in social order that had taken place since the ICAC began to play an important role in Hong Kong in the 1980s.

The way in which the content, characters and plots of these films are set is partly a matter of artistic choice on the part of the director, but it cannot be ignored that social reality has a fundamental influence on artistic creation. The fact that these films were highly successful at the box office and had a strong social impact in the social context of the time is a strong argument for this view.

#### **4. Absurd and True Mistaken Identity: Hong Kong Crime Films Before and after the Handover**

The reunification of Hong Kong has not been smooth, and antagonism was evident in Hong Kong society before and after the reunification, with particularly heated discussions on the central issue of where the future of Hong Kong lies. After a series of events such as the '89 social movement, waves of emigration, the 1994–1995 Legislative Council transition fiasco and the 1998 Asian financial turmoil, the gap between the rich and the poor in Hong Kong society widened, social order was challenged and people's confusion about the future of Hong Kong became increasingly apparent.

At the same time, after the handover, the Chinese government has always taken a proactive stance to face these challenges from political, economic, and cultural perspectives, whether it is by insisting on the protection of the linked exchange rate system in Hong Kong, promoting the signing and implementation of CEPA and other economic means, or initiating government reforms such as the accountability system for senior officials, which have objectively contributed to the smooth transition and development of Hong Kong society after the handover.

After the reunification, Hong Kong's cultural identity has undergone a process from fragmentation to unification. Although Hong Kong was under the administration of the British government before the reunification, the British government did not interoperate with Hong Kong at an ideological level, which led to a misalignment of the first perception of Hong Kong's identity. After the reunification, the values and social norms established in British society became obsolete, but the new social values and norms were still in the process of being established after the reunification, which brought about the second dislocation of Hong Kong's identity. The superposition of these two identity dislocations has greatly increased the cultural identity anxiety in Hong Kong.

Just as Hall suggests that "the violence elements in the western film are essentially not in the violence content itself, but a series of discourse construction of the code of conduct." [2], the dislocation of identities in Hong Kong film during this period is not only a result of the pursuit of commercialism, but also a response to cultural identity. It is also a response to and an answer to the problem of cultural identity anxiety.

This sense of anxiety is clearly expressed in 1998's *Who Am I?* Although this film has a large proportion of comedy and action elements, the entire film revolves around the main character's recovery of his memory as a police officer and his pursuit of the murderer to prove his innocence, which is therefore within the scope of the Hong Kong crime films discussed in this article. Although the film is only set in the African savannah for the purpose of highlighting the dramatic tension, it is designed to gradually return the protagonist to urban life as his memory is recovered, but in the period of 97-98, such a design does deserve our consideration. The life of a man who has lost his memory and completely lost his past is simple and uneventful, but as he returns to city life, the protagonist's situation becomes more and more complex, and when his memory is recovered, the conflict between

good and evil reaches its peak. The retrieval of memories and the recovery of social identity means that one needs to confront a myriad of contradictions, but without the recovery of memories and social identity, one has to survive in a relatively backward environment. Although the film is a masterpiece of Jackie Chan's action comedy, the sense of confusion and fatalism stemming from the fragmentation of cultural identity is always present as an indelible undercurrent underneath the comedy.

This anxiety reached its peak in 2002's *Infernal Affairs*. The identity mismatch between Lau Kin-ming and Chan Wing-yan blurring the boundaries between police and bandits, good and evil, and inverting the logic of their actions and value judgments so that the good guys and bad guys were no longer distinct from each other. At this point, the values inherited from the previous stage of martial arts film have gradually been dissolved, and the criteria for judging "right" and "wrong" are no longer "righteousness" based on the protagonist's perspective, but instead, it is the individual's 'righteousness' and the mainstream social order that are repeatedly jumped across. The protagonist is no longer the perfect romantic hero, but a more grounded figure with flaws, selfishness and entanglements. Lau Kin-ming and Chan Wing-yan are both equally committed to the "justice" represented by the police force, but at the same time, they lose themselves. Their struggle for identity is a metaphor for the mental state of Hong Kong people, who are "torn between memory and amnesia, and anxious about their lack of identity" [5].

At the same time, as the relationship between Hong Kong and the Chinese Mainland grew closer after the handover, the ideological state apparatus of the mainland gradually came into play, and the guidance of mainstream values and Mainland censorship began to have a huge impact on the values conveyed in films, which had a huge impact on Hong Kong crime films in this period. For example, the repeated emphasis on Chan Wing-yan's dedication as an undercover agent in *Infernal Affairs*, the adjustment of different plots or endings of the same film, etc., all conveyed the mainstream values and ideology of the Mainland, either explicitly or implicitly, through the content of the film. This role of the ideological state apparatus through cultural influence is an inevitable need to maintain good relations between the Mainland and Hong Kong, to bridge the identity rift and to promote social development.

## 5. Access to the Main Theme: Hong Kong Crime Films Since 2009

Since 2009, although Hong Kong's economy and society have recovered from the 2008 financial crisis at a relatively fast-paced thanks to the joint efforts of the Mainland and Hong Kong governments, many Hong Kong people are still facing serious social problems such as the disparity between the rich and the poor, soaring property prices and the controversy over the political system. Under the influence of external forces, these social problems have gradually developed into a series of social movements, "Anti-High-Speed Train Protest", the "Occupy Central" and the "Anti-China Transfer of Power Protest". Although Hong Kong has gradually improved its social security since the handover and has been repeatedly ranked as one of the safest regions in Asia, social movements of all sizes have not only seriously affected the social order of Hong Kong, but also its international image.

Since 2009's *I Corrupt All Cops*, the portrait of the ICAC has been repeatedly featured in Hong Kong crime films, with a series of films such as *Cold War* and *Z Storm* being the focus. These films have already seen a shift in social value judgements, with mainstream social values replacing the individual perspective of 'right' and 'wrong'. Although the triumph of good over evil is the outcome of most films, the victory of justice in post-2009 Hong Kong crime films is not the triumph of the individual protagonist, but the triumph of the government behind the protagonist, with the ICAC as the central figure, or the triumph of mainstream values.

For example, in the *Cold War*, K.F. Lau, as the representative of the "righteous" side, is constantly bound by the system during his activities, such as chasing the murderer and testifying against himself.

This transformation dissolves the “evil” in the film and minimizes the expression of “evil” in society without affecting the drama of the film. Although the main plot of these films is still a confrontation between the police and the bandits, the identity of the “bandits” has changed considerably, from being reckless people from the society to colluding with or being government employees, and the film often ends with the government making internal adjustments through its own efforts to get back on the right track. Through this common design, the films convey the idea that there are no real villains in society, that the perpetrators are only momentary missteps, and that the government, despite its problems, can still be ‘purified’ through its own efforts. From the notion of state apparatus, these typical plots show that the state (or government) is in power, and other social forces are less likely to make social change if not based on the government capacity.

As Howard Suber said, “People don’t go into the film to see the real world, they want to see a world that compensates for the known world.” [7]. The reinvention of Hong Kong’s international image of justice, law and order, stability and security in film, the most internationally influential cultural product of Hong Kong, has become the main theme of Hong Kong-made crime films since 2009. At this stage, the focus of the content of Hong Kong crime films shifted from the representation of the process of crime and the characters’ entanglement between good and evil to the portrayal of an excellent image of the government, which is in fact a compensation for the lack of stability in society and for the international image of Hong Kong, which is also a visual manifestation of the ideological state apparatus at work through culture.

## 6. Conclusion

The subject matter of Hong Kong crime films, the standards of social value judgement and the changing social context are related; it is a visual representation of the changing social context, and at the same time, it has a strong social context-shaping effect, shaping the audience’s perception of society. It works whether the producers themselves are intuitively aware of it or not. Therefore, in addition to paying attention to the audiovisual and narrative artistic standards of the film itself, producers need to take a more comprehensive view of the ideological and values conveyed by the film’s content in the creative process.

Combining Stuart Hall’s basic theory of interpretivist media studies and Althusser’s theory of the ideological state apparatus as a tool for progression, this paper explores the interaction between the subject matter, character design and the standards of social value judgement embodied in Hong Kong crime films and social reality in three stages. Although the paper is categorized and discussed in relation to specific cases, the period spans a wide range, and thus there is still much room for depth within each stage. In future research, it would be worthwhile to explore the direction of compressing the temporal scope of the research object in order to conduct more detailed visual textual analysis, or to compare and study the same subject matter with the creative presentation of different producers in different time periods.

It is hoped that future Hong Kong film producers can maintain the dramatic tension and provide audiences with a good aesthetic experience while at the same time paying attention to the social impact of their films to convey mainstream values in a subtle rather than preachy manner. At the same time, the author hope that this article will serve as a guide for audiences to think more deeply about the films they watch, so that they can better understand the films themselves, the film producersproducers and the cultural context in which we live.

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