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The Evolution of Hong Kong

Crime/Thriller/Drama Action Cinema

in the 21st Century

by

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Abstract

Crime/thriller/drama action films have been a popular and commercially successful product of Hong Kong cinema. However, since the early 1990s, the Hong Kong film industry has been in decline. It has been posited that as a result, the distinctive style and content of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre are changing in an effort to re-engage audiences. This dissertation examines the evolution and commercial performance of this sub-genre within the context of the socio-political and economic pressures affecting the Hong Kong film industry. It is grounded in genre theory and in particular genre history and evolution. The previous literature on Hong Kong action cinema is reviewed. This includes: the evolving characteristics of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre, box office performance, competition from Hollywood, and the influence of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Recent Hong Kong crime/thriller/drama action films are then examined using a unique mixed qualitative/quantitative methodology. A semantic/syntactic analysis of an operationally-defined probability sample of films identifies previously unreported changes in their style and content. These include developments in fight choreography, camerawork and thematic binary oppositions. A comparative statistical analysis of empirical data derived from the Internet Movie Database and Box Office Mojo websites reveals that the sub-genre has maintained a low but constant domestic market penetration. However it has not been commercially successful in foreign markets apart from the PRC. A specific association between Hong Kong action films and co-productions particularly with the PRC is also identified. These empirical results have not been previously reported. The findings indicate that the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre has continued to evolve during the 21st Century. It is proposed that these identified developments in content and style function to maintain a core domestic audience and engage a PRC market rather than target a wider international audience. The need to take into account socio-political and media economic factors to fully understand genre evolution is emphasised.

Declaration and Statements

DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in any substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in any candidature for any degree.

Signed .... (candidate)

Date ....

STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by explicit references in the text. A reference and filmography list is appended.

Signed .... (candidate)

Date ....

STATEMENT 2

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Hong Kong action films have comprised one of the most popular genres of Hong Kong cinema. Within this action category, the distinctive crime/thriller/drama sub-genre has been particularly commercially successful. Films such as the *A Better Tomorrow* (1986-9) trilogy and *Hard Boiled* (1992) contain distinctive iconographic, thematic and structural features which have contributed to their appeal within domestic and international markets.

However, since the early 1990s, the Hong Kong film industry in general has experienced a commercial decline. Increasing competition from Hollywood and other overseas markets plus the influence of the People's Republic of China (PRC) following the 1997 Handover of Hong Kong have been posited as reasons for this. In an attempt to address the specific decline in popularity of the Hong Kong action genre, it has also been suggested that its style and content have undergone change (Klein, 2007; Curtin, 2007; Lee, 2009; Bordwell, 2011). These developments have been seen as an attempt to replicate the aesthetics of equivalent Hollywood action films in order to appeal to domestic, wider pan-Asian and other international audiences who are becoming increasingly drawn to Hollywood releases due to their higher-quality production values (Bordwell, 2011).

The decline in the film industry has also occurred within the context of Hong Kong's closer socio-political relationship with the PRC since the 1997 Handover. This has resulted in a situation of 'one country, two systems' for the former Colony. Hong Kong is now part of the PRC ('one country') but is still permitted to maintain separate governmental, legal and capitalist economic systems from the PRC ('two systems') until 2047. The Handover has potentially provided the Hong Kong film industry with improved access to the PRC market and increased funding from PRC companies (Klein, 2007; Bordwell, 2011).

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Overall, the literature on recent Hong Kong action cinema would suggest that this genre is evolving to increasingly target three markets: the domestic (Hong Kong), Mainland China, and a wider international audience. However, the research into the evolution and subsequent commercial performance of the Hong Kong action genre in the 21st Century is limited and several questions remain unanswered.

The previous qualitative research has predominantly focused on developments in the style and content of the historical epic, *wuxia* and kung fu action sub-genres, with only limited coverage given to the recent evolution of the crime/thriller/drama sub-genre. There has also been almost no attention paid to the commercial performance of the evolving action genre and no empirical studies of the market penetration of the specific crime/thriller/drama sub-genre. In addition, the quantitative market studies involving the action genre have not attempted to link its market share with qualitative changes in film content.

Finally there has been limited consideration given to the Hong Kong film industry's relationship with the PRC and other countries regarding their specific financial partnerships in action genre film co-productions.

Previous authors have posited that changes in the content of some Hong Kong genres including action films are associated with co-productions rather than solely Hong Kong-produced films (Klein, 2007; Bordwell, 2011). However, this relationship has not been validated empirically by these authors, who only provide qualitative examples from specific co-productions as evidence.

This dissertation will examine the textual development and commercial performance of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre within the context of the socio-political and economic pressures affecting the Hong Kong film industry. It is grounded in genre theory and in particular genre history and evolution.

The dissertation will address the following research questions:

- How have the style and content of the Hong Kong crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre further evolved in the 21st Century?

- Has the evolution of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre been associated with any change in its domestic and foreign market performance?

- Has the evolution of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre been associated with a specific pattern of co-production with other countries?

The study will combine a qualitative and a quantitative approach to examine the textual evolution and commercial performance of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre. A consistent qualitative semantic/syntactic film analytical method will be applied to an operationally-defined probability sample of Hong Kong crime/thriller/drama action films in order to provide a more detailed picture of the sub-genre's evolution. The films within the sample will be 21st Century productions that have not previously been analysed in this manner. In addition, quantitative data covering the box office performance and production pattern of the sub-genre during this period will be analysed statistically.

This combined methodological approach has not been previously undertaken for Hong Kong cinema. It will further delineate the evolution of the crime/thriller/drama sub-genre. In addition it will determine whether these developments in content can be associated with changes in the commercial performance of the sub-genre in the three main commercial markets (Hong Kong, PRC, and the wider international market). Finally the study will ascertain whether the crime/thriller/drama sub-genre is associated with a specific pattern of production with other countries which may influence its content.

This dissertation is divided into two parts: Part I details the evolving semantic/syntactic signature of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre and Part II covers the market factors affecting Hong Kong action cinema as well as my empirical analysis of the sub-genre's market performance and associated production patterns.

Chapter 1 is divided into three main sections. It opens with a literature review of genre theory as it applies to Hong Kong action cinema and a description of the semantic/syntactic approach used to track the evolution of genres. This is followed by a description of the semantic/syntactic features of the Hong Kong crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre prevalent during the 1980s-1990s and a description of the more recently described changes within the sub-genre identified by authors in films of the 21st Century. The final section identifies the methodological limitations of previous studies and recent research approaches which can address these issues.

Chapter 2 comprises the methodology and results of my semantic/syntactic analysis of a sample of recent crime/thriller/drama action films. The methodology section describes the probability sampling method employed to isolate the films to be analysed. The results section details the specific semantic and syntactic elements identified by the textual analysis.

Chapter 3 is divided into three main sections. It opens with a literature review of previous analyses of the market penetration of Hong Kong cinema and the external factors potentially influencing the content of Hong Kong action films. The next section comprises the methodology and results of my empirical analysis of market penetration and production pattern of Hong Kong crime/thriller/drama action films of the 21st Century. The methodology section describes the use of data retrieved from Box Office Mojo (www.boxofficemojo.com) and the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) (www.imdb.com). The results section details the

statistical analyses of domestic and foreign market penetration and associated single/co-production patterns of the sub-genre.

Finally the Conclusion draws together the key findings of my qualitative and quantitative study and places these in relation to the broader field of research on the evolution of genre and market factors in Hong Kong action cinema.

PART I

The Semantic/Syntactic Signature of Hong Kong Action Cinema

Chapter 1

Hong Kong Action Cinema: Sub-genre Characteristics and Evolution

Chapter Introduction

Crime/thriller/drama films have been a prominent and commercially successful sub-genre of Hong Kong action cinema. Recent evidence suggests that this sub-group is evolving in its style and content. In order to understand in what way the sub-genre may be changing, a detailed description of its established and evolving features is required. This raises core issues regarding: how the sub-genre is defined, how its characteristics are categorised, and how to track its developmental trajectory.

This chapter will cover a literature review of the Hong Kong crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre focusing on: theoretical genre issues, previously identified characteristics of the films, recently identified changes in the sub-genre, and research methodology issues.

The use of a semantic/syntactic analytical approach to categorise the previously-described features and its use in tracking film evolution will be described. The semantic/syntactic categories will provide a common framework to summarise the diverse reports in the literature in order to delineate the sub-genre's core characteristics. The reported features present in the films of the 1980s-1990s and the changes described in the literature for films made since 1999 will be presented separately. These latter features can be considered as representing the evolution of the sub-genre.

The semantic/syntactic features described for both time periods will also provide a baseline to enable me to conduct a direct comparison with the semantic/syntactic analysis I will undertake in Chapter 2. This will facilitate a

delineation of the further evolution of the sub-genre in the 21st Century. Finally, the chapter will detail the limitations of the previous studies and practical solutions offered by recent research developments.

Genre Definitions of Hong Kong Action Cinema

This dissertation is grounded in genre theory, particularly the issues of genre definition and genre evolution as they apply to the development of the Hong Kong action genre and specifically the prominent crime/thriller/drama sub-genre. However, before the evolution of a genre can be delineated, the genre itself must first be clearly defined. Difficulties in defining genres have long been a central concern within genre theory, including the problems resulting from the predominant use of Western perspectives on genre.

Robert Stam (2000) criticises the theoretical approach of applying a Western perspective to genres, arguing that it does not consider the greater presence of hybridity within non-Western genres (pp. 152-3). This is consistent with the views of Julian Stringer (1997, p. 30) and Stephen Teo (2007, p. 21), who identify frequent genre hybridity within Hong Kong cinema.

Authors have identified a range of overlapping sub-genres within the broad Hong Kong action genre. These include, amongst others, *wuxia pian*, which involves the use of special effect-driven stylised combat (Bordwell, 2002, p. 118; Rance, 2005, pp. 24-5), *wu da pian*, which contains the extensive use of stunts (Rance, 2005, p. 65), and the kung fu sub-genre (Rance, 2005, p. 65; West, 2006, p. 93).

Within the broad action genre, a prominent sub-group contains elements of the crime, thriller and drama genres. There are many culturally-specific terms used to refer to this sub-genre. These include: 'Kowloon Noir', referring to the specific crime and gangster films of Johnnie To (Teo, 2007, pp. 11-2), the 'black society' films focusing on the activities of Triad societies (Teo, 2007, p. 2), the 'hero' films

(*yingxiong pian)* featuring heroic gangster/criminal protagonists and containing themes of revenge and brotherhood/loyalty (Chiao, 1991, pp. 161-3; Teo, 1997, p. 236, Bordwell, 2000, pp. 41-2; Chu, 2003, p. 68), the 'Big Timer' films (*xiaoxiong pian*) which are historical/biographical accounts featuring criminal protagonists or corrupt police officers (Teo, 1997, pp. 236-41; Chu, 2003, p. 68), and the *fengyun pian* films featuring conflicts between gangsters/criminals and prison authorities (Chu, 2003, p. 68).

These multiple culturally-specific categories are consistent with concepts of Hong Kong genres identified by film historian Law Kar (Podvin and Viner, 2005). He notes that the majority of Hong Kong filmmakers define their films by emerging and developing trends rather than by Western concepts of genre. Some of the sub-genres described above such as the 'hero' film develop into other trends. This illustrates the problems raised by cultural differences in Hong Kong and Western concepts of genre, which are fundamentally irresolvable.

For the purposes of reviewing the literature describing the characteristics of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre and my later qualitative and quantitative analyses of this group, a Western definition of the sub-genre will be used.

Genre Evolution of Hong Kong Action Cinema

A criticism of genre theorists is the assumption of purity within genres and that they emerge fully formed with no antecedents. This gives little consideration to the delineation of the historical development of individual genres (Altman, 1984, p. 8). This lack of acknowledgement of genre history makes it difficult to trace the developments of a genre and hence limits an overall understanding of genres.

However, this concept of genre purity contrasts with the identification of a greater prevalence of genre hybridity within Hong Kong cinema by Teo (2007, p. 21) and Stringer (1997, p. 30). Both authors attribute the practice of hybridising to the

Hong Kong film industry's need to refresh the traditional characteristics of existing genres in order to maintain their commercial relevance. In addition, Stephen Neale (1990) notes that whilst consideration of genre hybridity can cause categorisation problems, developments within genres often result from genre hybridisation (pp. 57-8).

The difficulties in defining hybrid genres, as well as tracking the evolution of a genre, can be addressed by the application of a semantic/syntactic analytical approach as proposed by Rick Altman (1984). Semantic and syntactic categories delineate the main features of a genre's film language. The semantic elements refer to recurring broad formal, iconographic and topical features. The syntactic elements concern the narrower specific narrative and character/thematic relationship structures that contain the genre's core meaning (Altman, 1999, p. 89).

Altman (1984) proposes a combined approach to delineating genre evolution involving the analysis of both the semantic and syntactic elements comprising film language. He argues that both semantic and syntactic approaches need to co-exist in order for a full and accurate understanding of individual genres to be achieved. His approach combines the separate traditions of genre theory and genre history by enabling the delineation of the historical development of individual genres (pp. 11-3). This can be achieved by identifying notable changes within a genre such as the introduction and disappearance of semantic and syntactic elements, and changing semantic/syntactic relationships (Altman, 1987, pp. 97-8). These changes can include the development of a stable semantic group into a coherent syntax, and the adoption of semantic elements from another genre by an existing syntax (Altman, 1984, p. 12).

The use of a semantic/syntactic approach to delineate genre evolution opposes prevalent ideas within genre theory of fixed, narrow genre definitions and corpuses. It can also result in the incorporation of hybridised examples of films

within specific genres. However, a disadvantage to adopting a semantic/syntactic approach for tracking genre evolution is its reliance on Western genre constructs, with no consideration given to the existence of culturally-specific sub-genres. Altman (1999) acknowledges that his semantic/syntactic approach does not consider the presence of diverging multiple audiences for a film, including the differences between industrial and audience perceptions of the product. He notes that these differing perspectives result in different identifications of semantic and syntactic elements within films (pp. 207-8 and 214).

An alternative approach that could be used for the analysis of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre would be that provided by auteur-structuralism. This focuses on the work of a specific director and involves the analysis of recurring and developing structures including stylistic/thematic motifs and binary oppositions. The analysis of these features reveals the individual style and structure of the director (Crofts, 2000, pp. 89-90). This approach has been taken by Teo (2007) and Lee (2009) in their analyses of the action films of Hong Kong director Johnnie To. However, the auteur-structuralist approach restricts the analysis of genre development to the specific films of a director. It can result in any stylistic and structural developments within the genre being attributed solely to the director, with less consideration as to whether these apply to the genre as a whole.

I will adopt Altman's semantic/syntactic approach to provide a common framework to summarise the characteristics of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre described by previous authors. These features are summarised using a combination of the semantic and syntactic categories described by Altman (1984) and the formal (semantic) features identified by Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2008, pp. 62, 132-3, 162-81 and 218). This grouping of characteristics will act as a baseline to allow direct comparisons with the findings from my further semantic/syntactic analysis of this sub-genre of action films that

will be described in Chapter 2. This will enable a further delineation of the evolution in the 21st Century of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre.

Characteristics of the Crime/Thriller/Drama Action Sub-genre

Characteristics of 1980s-1990s Films:

Bordwell (2000), Yingchi Chu (2003), Teo (1997), Hsiung-ping Chiao (1991) and Jinhua Dai (2005) have identified a unique stylistic, thematic and narrative signature for the crime/thriller/drama sub-genre of Hong Kong action films made in the 1980s-90s.

a) Semantic Features

Action Choreography

Bordwell (2000) identifies the martial arts choreography as combining martial arts techniques, the acrobatics and theatrical traditions of Chinese Opera, and props. This combination results in a unique stylised form of fight choreography (pp. 217-8 and 231). In addition he notes the increased emphasis on providing clarity and physical specificity to the action through physical gestures, staging, editing and camerawork. This produces a more coherent sense of action and is contrasted by Bordwell with the visual and physical non-specificity of Hollywood action sequences (2001, pp. 74-8).

Bordwell (2000) notes this emphasis as a form of expressive amplification where the clarity and rhythmic consistency of this Hong Kong style provides the action with a distinct emotional profile. As a result, the action becomes physically and emotionally exaggerated, with no aim towards realism (pp. 231-2). This form of expressive amplification is also enhanced by the use of a multi-accentual system within action sequences. This emphasises specific pieces of action using formal

elements and techniques such as music, sound effects, editing and slow motion (Bordwell, 2001, pp. 86-9). A further distinctive feature of Hong Kong action cinema noted by Bordwell as a reason for its international appeal is the use of excessive melodramatic violence (2000, p. 200).

Cinematography

A core semantic feature highlighted by Bordwell (2000) is its distinctive cinematography. He provides examples of the use of slow motion to emphasise specific physical movements that would otherwise pass too quickly at normal speed. The use of slow motion as a component of expressive amplification is also emphasised, specifically its use to highlight the difficulty or danger of a stunt. The technique can further expand suspenseful moments. Bordwell provides a specific example of this technique with his analysis of the climax of *The Big Heat* (1988) (pp. 234-5).

Bordwell (2000) also highlights the expressive use of colour, specifically saturated colours. These are employed in conjunction with other formal elements such as physical gesture, shot composition and music. This stylistic combination is similar to that seen in Cantonese Opera and serves to accentuate individual movements by juxtaposing them with excerpts of music and vivid colour (pp. 162-4).

Bordwell (2000) further notes that specific shot selections are employed to amplify the emotional dynamics of performances during action sequences. These are usually characterised by the use of long takes with minimal camera movement except for smooth panning shots. In addition moderate long shots are employed to show the entirety of the action, with medium shots or close ups emphasising the clarity of the physical movements (pp. 210 and 232-3).

Themes

Bordwell (2000) identifies a recurring revenge theme within crime/thriller/drama action narratives. This commonly features a male protagonist taking revenge on criminals out of loyalty to family and friends. A legal solution to the predicament is depicted as not being viable, and violence therefore becomes the only option. Conventional notions of right and wrong are inverted, with the protagonist usually not considering the morality of taking revenge. In addition there is no sense that he is corrupted by these acts. Bordwell identifies this theme as being particularly present in the 1980s and 1990s films, where both gangster and police officer protagonists are motivated by revenge and go to any extent to pursue this (pp. 194-5).

Chu (2003) identifies the issue of national identity as occurring within 1980s and 1990s films. She sees this as deriving from the triangular relationship between Hong Kong, the British coloniser and the Chinese motherland. Chu argues that representations of the Colony as being both a distinct community from the PRC yet sharing an ethnic identity result in Hong Kong having a 'quasi-national' identity. As a result, it becomes defined in relation to either its individual colonial status or, with the PRC. She provides examples of this identity issue in films such as *Long Arm of the Law* (1984). The film constructs Hong Kong in relation to both the British colonial legal system and the shared ethnic identity with the Mainland Chinese. This dual construction of Hong Kong's identity results in both the British colonial authorities and Mainland Chinese criminals being characterised as the foreign 'Other'. It also leads to the Hong Kong characters being seen simultaneously as being either ethnically Chinese or British colonial subjects. Chu attributes this emphasis on issues of identity as expressing the sense of crisis regarding the future of Hong Kong following the impending Handover to the PRC (pp. 91, 98-105 and 114).

A further theme relating to anxiety regarding the Handover is the emphasis on masculine bonding and relationships built on a Confucian system of values that Teo (1997) identifies within the films of John Woo. Teo emphasises the established system of brotherhood, honour and justice binding both criminal and non-criminal protagonists within an established social hierarchy. He further identifies the recurring theme of loyalty as defining character relationships between both protagonists and antagonists. In addition Teo identifies the elegiac tone of Woo's films as reflecting a personal nostalgia for the values of brotherhood, loyalty and heroism which he believes no longer exist in contemporary Hong Kong (pp. 175-6 and 178).

Chiao (1991) extends the identification of the theme of brotherhood and loyalty to include similar 1980s and 1990s films such as *City on Fire* (1987). She attributes the rise of this theme, which she identifies as forming a 'hero film' sub-genre, to a specific fatalism and fear of chaos arising from the Handover. Chiao identifies this fatalism as being represented in the 'hero films' by shared elements such as an emphasis on eternal loyalty and the lack of clear distinctions between friends and enemies (pp. 161-2).

Character Archetypes

Both Teo (1997) and Chu (2003, pp. 72-3) identify in 1980s and 1990s films the presence of Mainland Chinese gangsters and illegal migrants as antagonists. Whilst both authors describe the sympathetic depiction of the Mainland criminals in *Long Arm of the Law*, Teo specifically notes that the sequels *Long Arm of The Law II* (1987) and *Long Arm of the Law III* (1989) both portray their Mainland antagonists as murderous, savage representations of the 'Other' who pose a threat to the security of Hong Kong (pp. 230-3).

However, Chu argues that representations of Mainland Chinese characters changed during the 1990s. She suggests that these representational shifts

reflected developments within the triangular relationship between Hong Kong, Britain and the PRC during the pre-Handover period, and the subsequent establishment of closer economic ties between Hong Kong and the PRC. She cites the portrayal of sympathetic Mainland protagonists in films such as *Rock N' Roll Cop* (1994) and *Bodyguard from Beijing* (1994) as examples of the increased use of positive Mainland characters in 1990s films in comparison to those of the 1980s. However, Chu maintains that Mainland Chinese characters were still depicted as having distinct national and cultural identities from Hong Kong (2003, pp. 115 and 127).

In contrast to the portrayals of Mainland criminals, Hong Kong gangsters were often portrayed as heroic and sympathetic characters in both the 'hero film' and 'Big Timer' sub-genres (Chiao, 1991 and Teo, 1997). Films such as *A Better Tomorrow* and *To Be Number One* (1991) both feature criminal protagonists whose actions are either justified by traditional notions of loyalty and honour, or the glamorising of their real-life crimes. Similar depictions of corrupt police officers can also be seen in films such as *Lee Rock* (1991), where their activities are presented as heroic (Teo, 1997, pp. 236-8). In addition, Chiao notes recurring plots within the 'hero films' involving police officers collaborating with criminals. She links these characterisations of the police as reflecting the resentment of authority in Hong Kong and the depression of the urban middle class regarding their inability to take control of the impending Handover (1991, p. 163).

This factor can also be seen in the glorification of gangsters and criminals as heroes in the 'hero films', which Chu (2003) citing Law (1997, p. 60) and Sek Kei (1997, pp. 114-8) identifies as reflecting the frustration felt by Hong Kong society in the years leading up to the Handover, with a lack of confidence in either the Colonial or PRC Governments regarding their handling of the issue (p. 69).

b) Syntactic Features

Narrative Structure

Bordwell (2000) notes that the narratives do not usually contain the cause and effect structures present in Hollywood cinema. He identifies Hong Kong action film narratives as being composed of self-contained plot strands, with complications resolved sequentially in the form of mini-climaxes rather than at a single climax. This often results in plot phases becoming connected by coincidences such as chance meetings. Bordwell notes that this episodic plot construction results in tonal shifts within the narrative. Dramatic or suspenseful scenes are followed by comedic moments sometimes unrelated to the narrative. Bordwell further identifies the use of parallel situations and associations between motifs within episodic narratives as methods of uniting separate lines of action. These parallel elements can be indicated by recurring dialogue, props and music, which are emphasised and repeated throughout the film (pp. 182-6).

Binary Oppositions

The uncertain political situation of Hong Kong in the years leading up to the Handover can also be seen in the ambiguity of status which occurs in some films, where the binary opposition between order and resistance is represented by the blurring of the roles of police officer and criminal. Dai (2005) identifies conflicts between order and resistance within the 'heroic bloodshed' films of John Woo (p. 87). Examples include conflicts between the criminal protagonists and the police in *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer* (1989). In addition, Chiao identifies the blurring of the distinctions between criminal characters and the police in *City on Fire* and *Long Arm of the Law II* (1991, p. 163).

Chu (2003) and Dai (2005, pp. 89-90) note that films made during the mid 1980s and early 1990s depict a 'Self'/'Other' relationship between Hong Kong and the

PRC involving issues of power and identity between the two countries. Hong Kong was usually perceived within these films as the 'Self' and was represented by the male protagonist, whilst the PRC is depicted as the foreign 'Other' posing a threat to Hong Kong. The PRC was often represented by Communist archetypes such as Red Guards and illegal migrants, as with the antagonists of *Long Arm of the Law.* These depictions reflected fears that the Handover to the PRC would affect the Colony's capitalist lifestyle. However, as noted earlier in the section on Character Archetypes, Chu describes how these representations developed during the 1990s to reflect closer relations between Hong Kong and the PRC (pp. 72-3).

Characteristics of 21st Century Films:

Curtin (2007) and Bordwell (2011) have identified new developments within the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre that have occurred in films made since the beginning of the 21st Century. These new features can be considered as representing the evolution of the sub-genre and are delineated as follows:

a) Semantic Features

Cinematography

Bordwell (2011) describes the use of fast and slow motion establishing shots of traffic or landscapes, whip pans, the increased use of abstract colour, and unique shot compositions as examples of the changing visual aesthetic. He describes these changes as a way of competing with the visually stylised approaches of the European, Hollywood and South Korean film industries (pp. 229-30).

Editing

Bordwell (2011) identifies the use of flash cuts as a further stylistic innovation to distinguish Hong Kong action films from commercially-successful Hollywood and South Korean productions (p. 229).

Special Effects

Curtin (2007) describes the use during the late 1990s and early 2000s of high-quality miniature special effects in the films of production company Media Asia as an attempt to appeal to younger audiences who were increasingly favouring effects-driven Hollywood output. Curtin identifies that the recruitment of young actors from the overseas disapora rather than more expensive established actors allowed money to be diverted to greater special effects budgets. He notes that these filmmaking approaches are derived from the need for Hong Kong film studios like Media Asia to compete with Hollywood films to gain a wider international audience. This would result in increased revenue to compensate for declining cinema attendances in Hong Kong. Curtin cites the films *Gen-X Cops* (1999) and *Purple Storm* (1999) as examples of this extensive use of high-quality special effects, which he notes were rarely present in Hong Kong films of the time (pp. 259-61). In addition, Bordwell (2011) identifies an increased use of Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) to create smoother slow motion shots and enable the filming of previously difficult stunts (pp. 236-7).

Themes

Curtin (2007) identifies the use of plots and themes that are more international in nature and so could enable greater exportation to foreign markets. He provides the international spy plot of *Purple Storm* as an example of this development (p. 261).

b) Syntactic Features

Narrative Structure

Bordwell (2011) mentions the changes in the narrative structures compared with earlier films. He notes that episodic plotting has now been replaced by more complex cause and effect plot structures. These emphasise continuous plot strands converging together at a single conclusion with less use of self-contained plots with mini-climaxes. Goals and aims are clearly established at the beginning and are eventually resolved within the film's final act. Bordwell mentions the use of this complex plotting in films such as *Love Battlefield* (2004), *One Nite in Mongkok* (2004) and *Divergence* (2005). He attributes these developments in narrative structure to the emulation of similar narrative complexity within Hollywood and international films, and as a method of building suspense (pp. 232-4).

Bordwell suggests that these cause and effect narrative structures enable greater tonal consistency, with fewer variations between drama and comedy. He describes the use of restrained and sombre plotting, cinematography and acting styles in the *Infernal Affairs* (2002-3) trilogy to maintain a consistently serious tone to the film narratives, which he notes are comparable to the narratives of Hollywood films. Bordwell also claims that the use of symmetrical prologues and epilogues in the Derek Yee films *One Nite in Mongkok* and *Protégé* (2007) further help to provide narrative and thematic consistency. This identification of tonally consistent cause and effect narratives contrasts with Bordwell's identification of episodic, tonally shifting narratives as a syntactic feature of earlier films (2011, pp. 204-5, 209-11 and 234).

Bordwell further notes that recent Hong Kong action films have a non-linear narrative structure similar to the plot structures of Hollywood cinema. He identifies the increasing use of flashbacks either as part of a non-linear framing

device, where a scene is replayed to show an event in a new context, or to remind audiences of moments seen earlier. He provides examples of this narrative technique being used in *Divergence* and *The Beast Stalker* (2008). However, Bordwell also notes the occasional persisting presence of episodic devices within films such as *Initial D: Drift Racer* (2005). However, he largely identifies the continuation of episodic narratives as occurring in comedies and Chinese New Year films (2011, pp. 232 and 234-5).

Methodological Issues

The film analyses undertaken by the authors described above contain methodological limitations. These include: the use of a variety of terms to define the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre in the films analysed, the use of a limited range of films focusing on specific directors or film series, differing emphasis employed within the textual analyses, and differing detail of analysis. As a result their findings on genre characteristics may not necessarily be representative of the genre as a whole. In addition, this limits the ability of the authors to track the evolution of the genre.

However some of the above limitations can be addressed by the application of recently-developed research approaches which employ IMDb genre categories and probability sampling of online film datasets. It is impossible to identify a universally acceptable definition of film genres. However, in recent years, film researchers have increasingly employed the IMDb genre classifications assigned to individual films to identify film populations for study.

The advantage of the IMDb category system is that it is operationally-defined with stated inclusion and exclusion criteria for each genre. These definitions are based on the American Film Institute classifications. The reliability and validity of the IMDb genre system has been verified in a recent study of genre hybridity (Hsu, Negro and Perretti, 2012). The authors demonstrated that in large film

samples user-assigned IMDb genres closely overlapped with the genre assignments in the American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures, with at least 90% agreement between the two systems.

The use of IMDb genre definitions is consistent with Neale's suggestion of the need to use pragmatic definitions employed by both the film industry and audiences (1990, pp. 49-52). However the IMDb genre classification system is limited by its reliance on Western genre definitions. In addition the assignment of categories to individual films is user-dependant. Although a moderating team will remove any genre assignments made by users that are considered to be inappropriate, this system can never completely remove user-bias. Despite these limitations, the IMDb genre categorisation system provides a pragmatic approach that is applicable for film research purposes.

The IMDb genre category system has been employed in a range of film studies and has been shown to be a reliable and relevant measure of genre. Examples of these studies include: the development of film recommendation systems (Fleischman and Hovy, 2003; Ahn and Shi, 2009), overseas market box office performance (Hennig-Thurau, Walsh and Bode, 2004; Lee, 2006), and the economics of film technology (Wang, 2011).

Franklin Wilson (2008) has developed the Unified Film Population Identification Method (UFPIM). This combines the use of the large dataset provided by IMDb with a probability sampling method in order to identify representative and replicable specific film populations for the purpose of quantitative and qualitative film research. This procedure involves establishing explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria to isolate operationally-defined film samples for study. He has applied this methodology to identifying a sub-genre of American police films (2008) and a further population specifically depicting homosexuality within this sub-genre (Wilson, Longmyre and Swymeler, 2009).

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has covered the issues concerning the definition of the Hong Kong crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre. These include the differing culturally-specific terms used by authors and the resulting difficulties in tracking genre evolution. The use of a semantic/syntactic analytical approach as described by Altman (1984) has been posited as a possible solution due to its ability to delineate developments within the semantic and syntactic features of a genre over a period of time. This approach was used to provide a shared categorisation of previously described signature features of the 1980s-90s crime/thriller/drama action films and recent developments in this sub-genre during the 21st Century. The characteristic features include the use of stylised fight choreography, graphic violence and recurring themes of revenge, brotherhood/loyalty, and fate.

The developments identified in the 21st Century films include the increased use of miniature and CGI special effects, complex cause and effect narrative structures, and the use of stylised editing techniques. Curtin (2007) and Bordwell (2011) have attributed these developments to the increasing need for Hong Kong filmmakers to emulate the style and content of Hollywood and South Korean films to either compete with them in the domestic market, or to appeal to wider international audiences.

The methodological weaknesses of the previous studies were identified including the lack of clear genre definitions, the use of non-probability sampling, and inconsistent analytical approaches. The use of IMDb genre definitions as part of an operationally-defined probability sampling method has been described to address these limitations. The characteristics of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre described above will act as a baseline for my semantic/syntactic analysis of an operationally-defined larger sample of recent crime/thriller/drama action films.

Chapter 2

A Semantic/Syntactic Analysis of
21st Century Hong Kong Crime/Thriller/Drama Action Films

Chapter Introduction

This chapter will detail a qualitative study of the semantic/syntactic analysis of eight Hong Kong crime/thriller/drama action films made in the 21st Century which have not been previously analysed in this manner. This will address the first research question as to how the style and content of the action sub-genre have further evolved during this period. As detailed in Chapter 1 the unique semantic/syntactic signature of the 1980s-90s crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre has been described by previous authors. However as noted there has been limited delineation of the sub-genre's development in the 21st Century and these findings may not be wholly representative.

This qualitative study will further delineate developments within the sub-genre and address the methodological problems of the previous research identified in Chapter 1. These included: inconsistent definitions of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre, the absence of probability film sampling, and varying analytical detail/focus.

To address these limitations I will adopt Wilson's UFPIM approach (2008) involving the probability sampling of the IMDb dataset for operationally-defined genre classifications and using explicitly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. This will allow the identification of a more representative homogenous film sample. In addition this study will employ a consistent semantic/syntactic analytical approach. This will enable a direct comparison of the findings with the previously delineated characteristics of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre to identify its subsequent evolution.

Method

A specific sub-group of recent Hong Kong films containing combinations of action, crime, drama and thriller genres in a contemporary setting was identified via IMDb. The UFPIM sampling approach (Wilson, 2008) was employed. This methodology applies probability sampling using explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify replicable parameters for specific film populations from large databases such as IMDb. It therefore allows the isolation of homogenous groups of films for qualitative and quantitative study.

IMDb can provide multiple genre classifications for each film using 28 separate operationally-defined categories (Appendix A), with users assigning genre categories for individual films. The IMDb categories chosen for this study were 'Action', 'Crime', 'Thriller' and 'Drama'. The remaining IMDb genres (e.g. 'Comedy', 'Horror') were excluded as it was felt that their distinct nature would overly influence the content and style of the action genre.

a) UFPIM Film Sampling Search Procedure

The IMDb 'Advanced Search' function was used to identify the films as follows:

1) The IMDb genre category of 'Action' was selected followed by the specific country of origin ('Hong Kong') and the search results were restricted to the years 2000-11.

2) The resulting list of 233 Hong Kong 'Action' films was then refined by the exclusion of films containing any genres other than 'Crime', 'Drama' or 'Thriller'.

3) The resulting 120 films were further refined by examination of the IMDb plot synopsis for each film. Any film which did not have a contemporary setting, such as those films set in the early 20th Century and those set in the future were

excluded. (Films classified by the IMDb 'History' genre category had already been excluded in Stage 2).

4) The subsequent list of 108 films was further reduced by focusing on the films only involving the 10 most prominent directors or actors within the Hong Kong action genre. The specific actors chosen were: Jackie Chan, Donnie Yen, Sammo Hung and Jacky Wu. The specific directors were: Johnnie To, Wilson Yip, Benny Chan and Dennis Law.

5) The list of 27 remaining films was further refined by the removal of any films which had a published detailed semantic/syntactic analysis undertaken by one of the following prominent film academics in Hong Kong cinema: Bordwell, Lee and Teo.

6) Of the 19 films identified, a non-probability sampling approach had to be employed. This was determined by the availability of the film in English subtitled format on Region 2 DVD. This produced a final sample group of eight films (Table 2.1).

The eight films were released between the years 2000-2008. In addition to the IMDb genre classification of 'Action', additional IMDb genre categories were present as follows: 'Crime' (five films), 'Thriller' (three films) and 'Drama' (three films). Six of the films were co-productions, four of which involved the PRC.

b) Semantic/Syntactic Analysis Procedure

The semantic/syntactic analysis was conducted by individual viewings of the eight films to identify any developments that had not been previously reported in the literature detailed in Chapter 1. These included new semantic/syntactic features and variations in established semantic/syntactic features.

Table 2.1 Hong Kong crime/thriller/drama action films identified for semantic/syntactic analysis

Film	Year	IMDb genre categories	Director/lead actor(s)	Description	Production countries
2000 AD	2000	Action Thriller	Gordon Chan	Espionage thriller	Hong Kong Singapore
New Police Story	2004	Action Crime Drama Thriller	Benny Chan Jackie Chan	Police drama	Hong Kong PRC
Breaking News	2004	Action Crime Drama	Johnnie To	Police vs. robbers/ assassins	Hong Kong PRC
Kill Zone	2005	Action Crime Drama Thriller	Wilson Yip Donnie Yen	Detectives vs. crime lord	Hong Kong Macau
Fatal Contact	2006	Action	Dennis Law Jacky Wu	Gang-controlled illegal fight business	Hong Kong
Invisible Target	2007	Action Crime	Benny Chan	Police vs. criminal gang	Hong Kong PRC
Flash Point	2007	Action	Wilson Yip Donnie Yen	Police vs. criminal gang	Hong Kong PRC
Fatal Move	2008	Action Crime	Dennis Law Sammo Hung Jacky Wu	Triad gang conflict	Hong Kong

The same list of six semantic and two syntactic features described in Chapter 1 and derived from Altman (1984) and Bordwell and Thompson (2008) was employed in the analysis. This comprised:

- Action choreography
- Cinematography
- Editing
- Special effects
- Themes
- Character archetypes
- Narrative structures
- Binary character and thematic oppositions

A proforma (Appendix B) for each individual film was constructed listing the above semantic/syntactic categories and details of each film (title and year of production). Handwritten film analysis notes taken during the individual viewings of each film were typed into the individual proformas under the appropriate heading. The data was then further analysed to determine whether the previously unreported changes represented specific new semantic/syntactic features or a variant of an established semantic/syntactic feature. The final results were tabulated. Examples of the new features or variations of traditional features are reported from selected films.

Results

Within the eight films analysed, 16 previously unreported semantic/syntactic developments were identified. These comprised: 13 semantic and three syntactic features. Within the semantic features, five were new features and eight were variants of established semantic features. Of the three syntactic features identified, all were variants of previously described syntactic elements. Tables 2.2 and 2.3 summarise these findings.

Table 2.2 New and variant semantic features identified in the eight Hong Kong crime/thriller/drama action films analysed

Semantic category	Semantic feature	Description	Number of films
Action choreography	Naturalistic fight action	New feature	7
Action choreography	Stylised fight action	Less prominent	2
Action choreography	Graphic violence	Less prominent	2
Cinematography	Handheld camera	New feature	8
Cinematography	Slow motion	Less prominent	7
Cinematography	Visual non-specificity	New feature	4
Cinematography	Desaturated colours	New feature	4
Cinematography	Colour tinting	New feature	4
Theme	HK national identity	Absent	8
Theme	Revenge	Subverted De-emphasised	4
Theme	Brotherhood/ loyalty	Less prominent Changed context Subverted	3
Theme	Shared fate	Less prominent Changed context	3
Character archetype	PRC as 'Other'	Subverted	3

Table 2.3 New and variant syntactic features identified in the eight Hong Kong crime/thriller/drama action films analysed

Syntactic category	Syntactic feature	Description	Number of films
Binary opposition	Modern vs. Traditional values	More prominent Changed context	5
Binary opposition	Order vs. Resistance	Clear delineation	4
Binary opposition	'Self' vs. 'Other'	Subverted De-emphasised	3

a) Semantic Features

Action Choreography: Naturalistic Fight Action

The use of naturalistic fight choreography is a new semantic feature and occurred in all eight films. Although using the same modern kickboxing style as 1980s and 1990s films such as *Police Story* (1985), the fight choreography for *2000 AD* places less emphasis on acrobatic moves such as jump kicks or back flips. Similar fight choreography can be observed in *New Police Story*, contrasting with the previous use of flips, rolls and jump kicks within action sequences in the earlier *Police Story* films (1985-96). The action scenes in *New Police Story* also make use of rollerblading and mountain biking. Whilst some earlier films such as *City Hunter* (1993) and *Police Story 4: First Strike* (1996) show Jackie Chan using skateboards and snowboarding for brief sequences and stunts, the extensive use in *New Police Story* of rollerblades and mountain bikes for major stunt sequences updates Chan's trademark large-scale stunts for a younger generation.

The Donnie Yen films *Kill Zone* and *Flash Point* place more emphasis on mixed martial arts (MMA) within their fight scenes along with aspects of the

contemporary kickboxing style seen in earlier films. *Fatal Contact* also combines MMA with traditional Chinese martial arts and the use of other established conventions including weapons. The action co-ordination employed for the above films contrasts with the stylised fight choreography identified by Bordwell (2000) and seen in films such as *Police Story*, *Dragon From Russia* (1990) and *City Hunter*. This also applies to the lack of balletic choreography in gunfights compared with those seen in earlier films from the 1980s and 1990s.

The changes in action choreography may be related to a number of factors as noted in Chapter 1. Curtin (2007) reports that film companies such as Media Asia increasingly recruit young actors from overseas but he does not relate this factor to any identified changes in action choreography. However it could be argued that the use of these actors, who have no previous martial arts training compared with the established martial arts stars such as Jackie Chan, limits the range and complexity of the action choreography.

Other reasons for the changes include the need to innovate the fighting styles to appeal to domestic audiences increasingly accustomed to more Westernised martial arts styles such as MMA. The change in choreography can also be seen as an artistic variation from previous conventions. This view is supported by Donnie Yen (2010), the fight choreographer for *Kill Zone* and *Flash Point*, who explains in the audio commentary for *Kill Zone* that the use of MMA within the films stemmed from his growing interest in this form of martial arts.

Action Choreography: Stylised Fight Action

The use of stylised fight action is a variant of an established semantic feature. However it was noted to appear in only two films (*Kill Zone* and *Fatal Move*). This is less frequent in comparison to earlier films. The fight choreography in *Kill Zone* includes acrobatic elements such as wire-assisted throws and kicks. A more stylised weapons-based choreography is also used during fight scenes involving

Wong Po's assassin. Ma's fight with the assassin towards the film's climax uses traditional weapons choreography seen in films such as *Tiger on the Beat* (1988) and *Outlaw Brothers* (1990). This stylised form has been mostly replaced by the more naturalistic fight choreography described earlier.

Action Choreography: Graphic Violence

The use of graphic violence is a variant of an established semantic feature and occurred in only two films (*Kill Zone* and *Fatal Move*). There is decreased emphasis on graphic violence in the action sequences of present day films, with a lack of focus on bloody impact shots compared with equivalent scenes in the John Woo films *A Better Tomorrow II* (1987) and *The Killer*.

In the eight films analysed, examples of decreased emphasis on graphic violence include only brief shots of the police gunfight with the X-Crusaders gang in *New Police Story* and the lack of detailed shots of Wong Po twisting his assassin's knife into Chan's hand in *Kill Zone*. This is counterpointed by the use of graphic violence in *Kill Zone* during the fight between Ma and the assassin. *Fatal Move* features similar detailed graphic violence for the majority of its weapons-based action sequences, despite an absence of detailed impact shots in most of the film's gunfights.

The minimal use of graphic violence within the films analysed could be related to censorship both in the PRC and in other international territories. This content restriction could also be intended to re-engage domestic audiences by emulating the more restrained style of popular Hollywood films. Whilst the limitations posed by restrictions on violent content by PRC censorship are mentioned by Curtin (2007) and Bordwell (2011), reduced violence is not noted by them as a significant semantic change. Other foreign censorship regulations and the need to emulate Hollywood are also not mentioned as possible factors in this change.

Cinematography: Handheld Camerawork

The use of handheld camera shots is a new semantic feature, occurring in all eight films. This technique contrasts with the more static shot compositions seen in earlier action films, which used minimal camera movement. In *New Police Story*, Wing and Frank rappelling down the side of a building is shown in close-up handheld shots as well as wide shots to show the actors performing the stunt from a greater variety of angles. The varied use of shots for this sequence is an extension of the shot sequences used for similar stunts in 1980s and 1990s films such as *Police Story* and *Police Story 3: Supercop* (1992) which mostly utilised wide shots of the action.

The final fight between Ma and Wong Po in *Kill Zone* initially alternates between close-ups and handheld medium shots, only introducing wide shots later into the fight. Handheld camera shots are also used in earlier scenes, such as during the team's drug raid. The use of handheld camerawork within all of the films contradicts Bordwell's assertion of the lack of handheld shots within most action films. Bordwell maintains that most directors such as *New Police Story* and *Invisible Target*'s Benny Chan do not make use of the technique (2011, pp. 239-40).

Like the changes in fight choreography noted above, the increase in handheld camerawork can be seen as a stylistic variation from the more static compositions used in earlier action sequences. However, another factor could be to replicate the similar use of handheld shots in Hollywood action sequences.

Cinematography: Slow Motion

The use of slow motion is a variant of an established semantic feature and was employed in all of the films analysed except *Fatal Move*. Slow motion is an established semantic feature and was employed extensively within individual

films. However in the films analysed the technique is used to a lesser extent and is now primarily reserved for crucial moments within the action.

Examples can be seen during the climax of *2000 AD*, when Peter is shot in the shoulder and in *Breaking News* where the assassins throw a gas canister at the police. This contrasts with the extensive use of slow motion for emotional impact in earlier films such as *The Big Heat* and *The Killer*. This de-emphasis on slow motion as a component of expressive amplification can be seen as another attempt to bring the aesthetic closer to the style of recent Hollywood films to attract domestic audiences.

Cinematography: Visual Non-specificity

The presence of visual non-specificity is a new semantic feature, occurring in four of the films analysed (*2000 AD, Breaking News*, *Kill Zone* and *Fatal Contact*). These films contrast with earlier examples from the 1980s and 1990s by making increased use of ambiguous space within some of the action sequences. This technique limits the visual specificity of the action.

Examples of the uses of ambiguous space within action sequences can be seen in the flashback to Portland Street Fighter fighting Triads in *Fatal Contact*. The fight choreography is rendered indistinct by the dimly-lit alleyway setting, casting most of the action in shadow, plus the use of handheld medium shots, keeping most of the fight choreography off-screen. The gunfights in *Breaking News* take place in smoke-covered corridors as the result of bomb and grenade explosions. This restricted unclear space adds to the chaotic nature of the film's police operation.

The use of ambiguous space is more consistent with the style of Hollywood action films and contrasts with Bordwell's identification of the emphasis of visual clarity and physical specificity in the action sequences of earlier films (2001, pp.

74-8). However, Bordwell does not identify this use of ambiguous space as a significant feature of recent films.

Cinematography: Desaturated Colour

The use of a more muted/desaturated colour palette is a new semantic feature and appears in four films (*New Police Story*, *Breaking News*, *Invisible Target* and *Fatal Move*). This contrasts with the use of saturated colours in 1980s-1990s films for visual legibility and expressive intensity identified by Bordwell (2000). The prevalence of desaturated colour also counters Bordwell's (2011) descriptions of the increased use of abstract saturated colour in 21st Century films to distinguish them from competing Hollywood and South Korean films within the domestic market.

Desaturation is employed to convey the emotions of a scene. For example, *New Police Story* uses desaturated shots of ambulances and firefighters attending to Wing and his dead team members, and later for their funerals, which convey the emotional context of these scenes. *Invisible Target* uses desaturation to differentiate between the past and present by showing a shot of Chan in the foreground with a desaturated background shot of him speaking to his girlfriend before she is killed in the armoured van explosion.

The use of desaturated colour in these films is similar to the use of desaturation and muted colour tones in Hollywood films such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), which Bordwell associates with attempts to create a visual realism (2000, p. 163). This change in visual style can be seen as a further attempt to replicate the aesthetics of Hollywood films in order to attract domestic audiences to local productions.

Cinematography: Colour Tinting

The use of colour tinting is a new semantic feature and appeared in four films (*2000 AD*, *Kill Zone, Fatal Contact* and *Flash Point*).

Colour tinting can serve several functions. In *2000 AD*, tinted shots are used to emphasise the emotional significance of a character's death and a scene's overall emotional temperature. However, tinting also functions to obscure the few moments of graphic violence occurring within some of these scenes. Finally, colour tinting is employed for visual differentiation. For example, the opening intercut scenes of *Kill Zone* involving Chan and his two team members' car crash and Wong Po's release from prison are tinted green and blue respectively to stylistically differentiate the main characters and events.

Flash Point also uses sepia-tinted freeze-frame shots of the three Vietnamese criminal brothers at the beginning of the film to highlight their significance to the narrative. The film later uses a red-tinted freeze-frame of a witness being assassinated, either for stylistic reasons or due to possible censorship requirements. Whilst Bordwell (2011) has identified the use of 'abstract colour' as being a recent semantic change, he does not identify the specific use of colour tinting as an example of this.

Theme: Hong Kong National Identity

None of the films analysed contained reference to the national identity of Hong Kong. As noted in Chapter 1 this theme had been described by Chu as a semantic feature of pre- and early post-Handover films. The absence of this theme is included within this analysis as despite its brief identification by Chu (2003, p. 127), it has not been mentioned as a significant development by Curtin (2007) and Bordwell (2011).

The absence of this semantic element in the films analysed is possibly due to the changing socio-political climate of post-Handover Hong Kong. The lack of significant discourse on Hong Kong identity in 21st Century films may be the result of resolution of Hong Kongers' anxiety regarding their future identity in the years since the Handover. However, the increasing political and economic influence of the PRC on Hong Kong, despite the latter's quasi-autonomous status, makes this unlikely. As a result, an absence of the theme of Hong Kong's national identity in these films may be due to the increased need for the Hong Kong film industry to appeal to the PRC market. Raising the national identity issue may be considered inappropriate by both the PRC censorship board and Mainland audiences.

Theme: Revenge

The use of the revenge theme is a variant of an established semantic feature and occurred in four of the films analysed (*Kill Zone, Invisible Target, Flash Point and Fatal Move*). As opposed to its representation in earlier Hong Kong action films, the theme of revenge was noted to be subverted and de-emphasised in all four films.

Kill Zone features Ma opposing the plans of Chan's team to frame Wong Po for the murder of their colleague. He argues that it is wrong for a police officer to operate outside the law to benefit their own interests. This subversion of revenge is also featured and expanded on in *Invisible Target*, where Chan is criticised by his cousin for thinking about revenge for his girlfriend's death. This is later repeated by Ho during his first scene with Chan and Carson at the restaurant, and at the climax where Carson is about to kill Tien for causing Ho's death, but is restrained by Chan. This criticism of revenge further subverts the emphasis on exacting revenge previously identified by Bordwell (2000) and seen in films such as *A Better Tomorrow* and *Full Contact* (1992).

Theme: Brotherhood and Loyalty

The presence of the theme of brotherhood and loyalty is a variant of an established semantic feature and appeared in three of the films analysed (*Kill Zone, Invisible Target, and Fatal Move*). The main themes of these films move further away from the traditional Chinese concept of chivalry which is emphasised more in earlier examples such as *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer.*

The use of brotherhood and loyalty in *Kill Zone* is derived from a combined result of the professional and personal relationships between the detectives. This theme is reinforced by Ma at end of the film. He asserts his loyalty to the team when confronting his superior and later tells Chan that he fought Wong Po to win back some respect for the team. However, *Kill Zone* does not use concepts of brotherhood to transcend the boundaries between the police and criminals, with both the detectives and Wong Po maintaining opposing value systems.

The film also challenges the traditional use of loyalty and honour as a means of justifying the actions of the protagonists. An example is Ma's criticism of the team's plans to frame Wong Po for the death of their colleague. This further contrasts with the use of brotherhood and loyalty to justify violent revenge identified by Chiao (1991) and seen in films such as *A Better Tomorrow II.*

In addition, despite the film's 1997 setting, this theme is not explicitly associated with the pre-Handover fears of future uncertainty and chaos that have been previously suggested by Chiao (1991). *Kill Zone* shares the nostalgia of Woo's films by depicting the values of loyalty and honour upheld by Chan's team as becoming increasingly rare. However, its tone is more restrained and less romanticised than the earlier films.

Invisible Target also contains a similar theme of brotherhood and loyalty. However, this theme is less prominent and does not feature the socio-political

contextual significance of the Handover. Whilst both Chan and Carson refrain from killing Tien out of loyalty to Ho, it is the Mainland antagonists who provide the main example of a society bound by brotherhood and loyalty. Tien refers to the other criminals as his 'brothers' as they were all orphans. He interrogates the armoured car driver whom he suspects of informing the police and causing the deaths of three of the 'brothers'. The lack of socio-political context for this theme is highlighted by the film's contemporary setting (2007), with no references to the crucial date of 1997 that *Kill Zone* contained.

Theme: Shared Fate

The presence of the theme of shared fate is a variant of an established semantic feature, appearing in three of the films analysed (*Kill Zone, Fatal Contact and Fatal Move*).

The fatalistic tone of *Kill Zone*, along with the film's use of the theme of fate, can be seen in earlier films such as *City on Fire* and *The Killer*. However the use of fate within these films represented concerns over the possible future of Hong Kong following the Handover. In contrast, *Kill Zone* does not use fate and fatalism within a political context but instead links fate to Chinese astrology.

The film opens with a text prologue describing three Chinese Zodiac stars that can determine a person's fate. Ma mentions to Chan that his superstitious father tried to use this belief to prevent Ma from becoming a police officer. Whilst Ma dismisses his father's warning, the prediction is realised with Ma's death at the hands of Wong Po, reflecting the recurring theme of unavoidable fate.

The thematic use of fate within the context of Chinese astrology provides *Kill Zone* with a culturally localised frame of reference mostly understandable only to Chinese audiences. This represents a direct cultural appeal to a 'greater Chinese' market consisting of Hong Kong, the PRC, Taiwan and other significant

Chinese diasporic communities in countries such as Malaysia and Singapore. This identification of a targeted 'greater Chinese' market is consistent with Bordwell (2011), who notes that the highest-budgeted Hong Kong co-productions are aimed at this wider Chinese market of Hong Kong, the PRC and Taiwan (p. 196).This contrasts with the establishment of distinct Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese cultural identities in films such as *Long Arm of the Law* and *Tiger on the Beat* and identified by Chu (2003) and Teo (1997).

The use of a greater Chinese contextual theme also reflects the increasing need of the Hong Kong film industry to tailor the content of its films to a greater 'pan-Asian' audience. This is consistent with Lee's view that the main focus for Hong Kong companies such as Applause Pictures is the pan-Asian market (2009, pp. 184-6). However this contrasts Curtin who describes an increased emphasis on creating contemporary-set Hong Kong action films to appeal to wider international audiences, with less emphasis placed on specific local or Chinese themes (2007, pp. 261-4).

The theme of fate is also present in *Fatal Contact*, where Ko's fighting skills are exploited by the Hong Kong gangsters for money and his fate is foreshadowed by Captain. He mentions that those who are skilled but powerless will be exploited, comparing this to tigers being killed for their skin. Captain's prediction comes true when Ko is shot by police after being told about Tin's co-operation with the gangsters to make him fight. However, along with *Kill Zone*, *Fatal Contact* does not place the theme of fate within a socio-political context of pessimism over the future of post-Handover Hong Kong as it contains a contemporary setting, indicated by references to the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Themes: Technological Themes

The use of technological themes is a new semantic feature and appeared in three of the films analysed (*2000 AD*, *New Police Story* and *Breaking News*).

The plot of *2000 AD* places this theme within an espionage narrative concerning potential international spy warfare involving computers and employs technological devices (e.g. a stolen laptop) for plot developments. In *New Police Story*, the X-Crusaders gang is shown watching Wing's police team through security cameras. The images of the captured and maimed officers are displayed on the gang's computer monitors as 3D images. The gang later uses these images in their online game. *Breaking News* also features the use of technology by both the police (to locate the criminal gang), and the gang's leader Yuen (to disrupt the police force's coordinated PR operation).

The prominence of technological themes within these films reflects its increasing importance in modern day Hong Kong society, and the use of more international subject matter to appeal to global audiences. Whilst this is similar to Curtin's (2007) general observation on the use of globalised themes such as international espionage in Media Asia's action films, the specific use of technological themes has not been previously identified as a notable semantic change within the prevalent discourse.

Character Archetypes: PRC as the 'Other'

The decreased emphasis of the foreign 'Other' depictions of Mainland Chinese characters is a variant of an established semantic feature and appeared in three of the films analysed (*Breaking News, Fatal Contact* and *Invisible Target*). In these films, the 'Other' archetype is both subverted and de-emphasised with a more sympathetic depiction of Mainland Chinese antagonists and protagonists.

In these films there is less emphasis placed on the distinct Mainland Chinese national identity. There is an increased emphasis on their shared ethnic identity and similarities with Hong Kongers that can be seen in films from the mid-1990s onwards such as *Bodyguard from Beijing*. When the distinct national identity of

Mainland characters is emphasised, it is not used to distinguish them as an antagonistic foreign 'Other'. The use of such characters with the de-emphasis of their nationality is both a variant on traditional depictions and a further development of Chu's (2003) description of Mainland Chinese character evolution.

The depiction of the Mainland antagonists in *Breaking News* positions them as less of a foreign 'Other' in comparison to characters from Hong Kong. There is little emphasis on their national identity and an increased focus on their human qualities. This is similar to the heroic characterisations of Hong Kong gangsters in 1980s and 1990s films such as *A Better Tomorrow*.

A similar representation of Mainland criminals can be seen in *Invisible Target*, where the antagonists are provided with more detailed and sympathetic characterisations than previous depictions. They are characterised as orphans who are unified by the similar principles of honour and loyalty as the Hong Kong protagonists in earlier films. This representation is a more nuanced variant on the depictions of Mainland Chinese characters seen in 1980s and 1990s films such as *Long Arm of the Law*. The Mainland criminals are depicted in these films to have a distinct political identity separate from Hong Kong. Despite their shared ethnic identity and values, the criminals are shown to represent the threat posed by a Chinese takeover of Hong Kong (Chu, 2003, pp. 100-4).

The sympathetic portrayal of Mainland Chinese characters is further extended in *Fatal Contact*, which features Mainland protagonists. This provides a greater contrast with the majority of 1980s and 1990s films, which usually depicted Mainland characters as the foreign 'Other', either as antagonists, supporting roles, or comic relief. The character of Ko is a patriotic PRC citizen who embodies positive virtues such as loyalty and is unwilling to engage in illegal activities. His characterisation contrasts with the mercenary attitude of Tin. However whilst Tin appears to be similar to the archetypal impoverished

Mainland immigrant seen in earlier films, she is given a more sympathetic portrayal than the Hong Kong characters. Tin is provided late in the film with character development explaining her cynical materialistic perspective.

In contrast, the Hong Kong characters are portrayed as corrupt gangsters involved in illegal underground fighting and exploiting Ko for money. This contrasts with the sympathetic portrayals of Hong Kong gangsters in films of the 1980s and 1990s. The criminals in *Fatal Contact* are now placed in the role of the unsympathetic 'Other'. The depictions of Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong characters in *Fatal Contact* are a reversal of the majority of previous characterisations seen in 1980s and 1990s action films.

b) Syntactic Features

Binary Oppositions: Modern versus Traditional Values

The presence of the modern versus traditional values binary opposition is a variant of an established syntactic feature, despite its lack of explicit identification by the previous authors. It occurred in five of the films analysed (*2000 AD, New Police Story, Breaking News, Kill Zone* and *Fatal Move*).

This opposition is most represented by conflicts between older and younger generations, which occur more frequently and within an increasingly different context than earlier films. Previously, generational conflict was used to represent the loss of values such as brotherhood, honour, and chivalry within a Hong Kong society facing the Handover. This can be seen in films such as *City on Fire* and *The Killer*. However in the films analysed, the modern/traditional opposition is primarily used to represent the increasingly modernised society of 21st Century Hong Kong and overlaps with the introduction of technological themes mentioned earlier.

New Police Story places the middle-aged Wing against a gang of young adults as well as opposite the younger characters of Frank and Sasa in his police team. The gang's leader Joe is also placed in opposition to his Superintendent father, whose abuse is implied to have caused Joe's violent criminal behaviour. Another example can be seen at the film's climax, when Wing and Frank bring the gang members' parents to confront them at the Convention Centre. Fire and Tin Tin then offer each other money to kill their parents.

There are similar conflicts in *Breaking News* and *Fatal Move*. In *Breaking News*, the older, more experienced Eric is opposed to Rebecca's emphasis on full media access and PR management of the operation. He considers her to be too young and inexperienced and is shown voicing disagreement over Rebecca's PR suggestions such as re-editing footage of the explosion that killed PTU officers.

This generational conflict is also used to a lesser extent in *Fatal Move*, motivating the fight between the older Lung and younger Tin Hung, who challenges Lung's leadership. This subverts the traditional social hierarchy seen in films such as *A Better Tomorrow II* and is used to represent the breakdown of Lung's Triad society as well as notions of honour.

Despite the use of this binary opposition in previous films, it is more prevalent and central to the newer films. This reflects the increasing modernity of Hong Kong and the influence of youth culture, which can be seen in the increased emphasis on casting younger actors within the sub-genre to appeal to teenage audiences. This development has been identified by both Curtin (2007) and Bordwell (2011), the latter also noting this casting choice within other genres (p. 190).

Binary Oppositions: Order versus Resistance

The presence of the order versus resistance binary opposition, specifically the clear delineations between the police and criminal characters, is a variant of an established syntactic feature. It appeared in four of the films analysed (*New Police Story, Kill Zone, Invisible Target* and *Flash Point*).

In 1980s and 1990s films such as *A Better Tomorrow*, *City on Fire* and *The Killer*, the division between the police and criminals was obscured by developing relationships between the two character archetypes, with the focus often being skewed towards the criminal. In contrast, *New Police Story*, *Kill Zone*, *Invisible Target* and *Flash Point* present clearly delineated positions distinguishing police officers from criminals.

The antagonists in *Invisible Target* are shown causing the death of Chan's girlfriend and in *Flash Point* the criminals are shown trying to assassinate and intimidate Wilson into not testifying against them in court. There are few attempts by police and criminals to communicate with or understand each other. When Tien attempts to establish a similar connection with Chan in *Invisible Target*, it is rejected by Chan, who states that he is different from Tien's brothers. Similarly in *Flash Point,* there are no overt connections between the police and the brothers, who are depicted as violent criminals with little redeeming qualities. This contrasts with the close relationships between police officers and criminals seen in earlier films such as *City on Fire* and *The Killer*, as well as the heroic depiction of Triad protagonists in films such as *A Better Tomorrow*.

This distinction between police and criminals is further reflected by less emphasis being placed on corrupt police officers accepting bribes from criminals. This contrasts with films featuring corrupt police officer protagonists such as the 'Big Timer' films identified by Teo (1997). The clearer delineation of the roles of police officers and criminals could be the result of content restrictions resulting from

PRC censorship. This forbids the sympathetic portrayal of criminals and the glorification of crime, along with portraying the police as corrupt (Cain, 2011, pp. 3-4). This content modification could have occurred to enable a theatrical release in the PRC. This further highlights the increasing importance of the PRC market to Hong Kong filmmakers.

Binary Oppositions: Hong Kong versus PRC

The presence of the Hong Kong versus PRC binary opposition is a variant of an established syntactic feature and occurred in three of the films analysed (*Breaking News, Fatal Contact* and *Invisible Target*) where it is subverted and/or de-emphasised. This contrasts with the previous focus on the 'Self'/'Other' opposition within 1980s and early 1990s films, where there is a greater emphasis on separate Hong Kong and PRC national identities.

Breaking News and *Invisible Target* both feature Mainland Chinese antagonists. However, their national identity is not emphasised as separating them from the Hong Kong characters and they are not defined as the foreign 'Other' posing a threat to Hong Kong. This is an extension of the trend identified by Chu (2003) in mid-1990s films such as *Bodyguard from Beijing* which emphasised the shared cultural values between the PRC and Hong Kong. In *Fatal Contact* this binary is subverted, with Hong Kong presented as the foreign 'Other' from the perspective of the Mainland Chinese protagonists Ko and Tin.

However, in *Breaking News* and *Invisible Target* the Mainland criminals are also shown to be violent and threatening despite their more three-dimensional characterisations. After the Yip father tries to flee from his apartment in *Breaking News*, Chun threatens to kill him if he tries to escape again. Similarly, the antagonists in *Invisible Target* are shown to cause the death of Chun's girlfriend when she is killed by the explosion of the armoured van they are robbing. They are later shown shooting police officers during the film's police station climax.

The increasingly sympathetic and more nuanced characterisations of Mainland Chinese characters, even if they occupy criminal roles, may also be the result of the increasing need for Hong Kong filmmakers to guarantee commercial success within the PRC market. This also includes the subverted binary seen in *Fatal Contact*, which provides a Mainland Chinese perspective of Hong Kong that could potentially be shared by PRC audiences. The nature of this binary development reflects the growing dependent relationship of the Hong Kong film industry with the PRC. Hong Kong filmmakers are increasingly reliant on PRC funding and audiences for the effective production and distribution of expensive sub-genres. Whilst this growing dependence on the PRC and centrality of the PRC market has been noted by Bordwell (2011), he provides minimal focus on its effect on the changing depictions of the Hong Kong/PRC binary within the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre (pp. 195-201 and 213).

Chapter Conclusion

This qualitative study of recent Hong Kong crime/thriller/drama action films has involved a semantic/syntactic analysis of an operationally-defined probability sample of films that have not been previously analysed. This sample is more likely to be representative of the subgenre. The semantic/syntactic analysis has identified how the sub-genre has continued to evolve in the 21st Century. The previously unreported new and variant features of the sub-genre were primarily semantic in nature.

The new features reflected changes in the style of action choreography and cinematography. These included the introduction of: naturalistic fight action, handheld camerawork, visual non-specificity, desaturated colours and colour tinting. The variants of previously-described characteristics included reduced prominence of action choreography and cinematographic features such as stylised fight action, graphic violence, and slow motion. These changes reflect an

emphasis on stylistic shifts towards a greater visual similarity with Hollywood action films and away from the localised characteristics of the sub-genre, possibly to try and re-engage domestic audiences and appeal to a wider PRC market.

The semantic/syntactic variants represent more nuanced developments. These include the changed emphases within themes and binary oppositions such as revenge, brotherhood/loyalty, shared fate, modern versus traditional values and order versus resistance. The changing relationship between Hong Kong and the PRC was reflected in the absence of discourses on Hong Kong's national identity and the reduced emphasis of the PRC as the foreign 'Other'. These developments further reflect the wider attempts of the Hong Kong film industry to appeal towards the increasingly important PRC market.

The commercial success of these stylistic and content changes on the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre and the effect of the growing PRC influence on Hong Kong film production will be addressed in Chapter 3.

Part II

Hong Kong Action Cinema: Market and Associated Factors

Chapter 3

Market Performance, Financial Incentives and Censorship

Chapter Introduction

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first part comprises a literature review of studies analysing the output and commercial performance of the Hong Kong film industry including the action genre since the 1960s. In addition the general and specific economic, political and film industry factors that have affected the content of the action genre will be described. This review will provide the contextual background to understand the commercial performance of the more specific crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre.

There is no published literature specifically focusing on the empirical data regarding the market performance of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre or quantifying its commercial partnerships relating to co-productions. These are important issues given Hong Kong's increasing economic ties with the PRC.

To address the gaps in the previous research, the second part of the chapter consists of my empirical analysis of the Hong Kong crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre's domestic and foreign box office penetration in the 21st Century. In addition the involvement of partnerships with other countries in the production of the sub-genre will be examined. The market penetration and production pattern information is sourced from two large internet data-sets (IMDb and Box Office Mojo) and the results analysed statistically.

This analysis will address the second and third research questions as to whether the evolution of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre identified in Chapter 3 has been associated with any change in its domestic and foreign market

performance and a specific pattern of commercial production with other countries.

Hong Kong Cinema and Market Penetration

The output and commercial success of Hong Kong cinema has been analysed by previous authors using data derived from a variety of industry sources. The Hong Kong film industry was commercially highly successful in both domestic and foreign markets from the 1960s to the early 1990s (Bordwell, 2000, pp. 34 and 66-75). Poshek Fu (2002) notes that during the 1960s, Mandarin-language Hong Kong films began to compete with and outgross Hollywood films at the domestic box office (p. 80). The golden age of the industry was during the late 1980s, where Hong Kong films comprised between 70-80% of annual domestic box office takings (Chu, 2003, p. 55). Wang (2007) notes that the box office revenue for Hong Kong films peaked in 1990 at US$ 212 million (p. 1).

However, since the early 1990s, the film industry has been in decline with decreases occurring in both the number of films produced and box office receipts for Hong Kong films in the domestic market. The share of domestic market revenue for Hong Kong films decreased from 78% in 1988 to 54% in 1996 (Chu, 2003, p. 55). This share further decreased to 41% for the 1995-2004 period (Wang 2007, p. 1) and continued to fall to 21% in 2009 (Bordwell, 2011, p. 189). During the 2009-11 period the revenue share remained low at 21-22% (Hong Kong Trade Development Council, 2011; export.gov, 2011).

In conjunction with the falling box office returns, there was a similar decrease in the number of Hong Kong films produced during this period. Wang (2007, p. 1) notes that the output of Hong Kong films reached a peak in 1993 with 234 films produced. This fell to 51 in 2009 (Bordwell, 2011, pp. 187-8) and remained low at 54 films in 2010 (Hong Kong Trade Development Council, 2011).

There is a paucity of published empirical evidence of the commercial performance of Hong Kong films within overseas markets. Bordwell (2000) notes that Chinese diasporic markets in East Asia, such as Singapore and Malaysia, enabled the overseas commercial success of Hong Kong films from the 1950s to the early 1990s (pp. 64-7 and 73) although does not provide data to quantify this. However he notes that the traditional markets in East Asia increasingly favoured Hollywood films and reports that between 1993-5 only 13% of the top 30 grossing films in Taiwan were made in Hong Kong (p. 75). David Desser (2002) specifies the high positions of Hong Kong kung fu imports in the top 50 US box office rankings during the 1973-4 period but also details the declining US box office grosses of Jackie Chan films during the mid to late 1990s (pp. 19-23 and 34).

There is little detailed empirical data analysis regarding the domestic commercial performance of specific Hong Kong genres and no identified empirical studies of their foreign market penetration. Wang (2011) using IMDb-defined genre categories and box office information derived from Box Office Mojo and the Hong Kong Movie Database identified a gradual reduction in the number of Hong Kong action films appearing in the top 20 domestic box office rankings from 65% in 1969 to 15% in 2007 (pp. 576 and 586).

A report on the film and television market in Hong Kong (Read, 2005) noted that in 2003, of the 77 Hong Kong-produced films appearing in the domestic box office, the most popular genre was action/ kung fu (p. 7). A film industry analysis of genre and international box office (Film Victoria, 2010) using IMDb-defined genres noted that during the 2002-9 period, action films were the third most popular locally-produced genre appearing in the Hong Kong box office (p. 5). However neither report provides specific empirical data to quantify these findings.

Factors Affecting Hong Kong Action Cinema

Factors contributing to the decline of the Hong Kong film industry as a whole have been well-documented. These included video piracy, the 1997-8 Asian economic recession, and the Handover to the PRC in 1997 (e.g. Bordwell, 2000, pp. 75 and 78-81). Factors specifically affecting the Hong Kong action genre have also been identified. These include: the increased competition posed by Hollywood action films, the pre- and post-Handover emigration of action genre talent, the increase in film co-productions with other countries, the Closer Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the PRC, and censorship restrictions imposed by the PRC.

Francis Lee's (2006) study of box office performance of Hollywood films in Hong Kong found that the action genre was relatively successful due to the genre's lack of requirement of cultural knowledge from audiences. Hence it is easily exportable, unlike more culturally-specific genres such as comedy (p. 270).

Bordwell (2011) attributes the success of Hollywood action genres within the Hong Kong market as in part being due to their extensive use of CGI effects (p. 236). Wang (2011) also identifies the action genre with its associated CGI-enabled visual effects as being 'technology friendly'. She notes that during the 1990-2007 period there was a significant decline in the production of the Hong Kong action genre and an increase in the production of most non-technology intensive genres such as comedy. She posits that due to Hong Kong having a small domestic market, it is unlikely to recoup its budgets for action films due to the high cost of special effects technologies. This has resulted in the Hong Kong action genre being non-competitive at home and overseas compared with action films from countries such as the USA, which have larger home markets that enable them to produce profitable CGI-laden action films (pp. 573-5 and 587).

The content of the action genre was further affected by the pre- and post-Handover emigration to Hollywood of directors and performers such as John Woo and Jackie Chan who had provided the genre with its distinctive characteristics. This, along with the increased recruitment of inexpensive young unknowns by film studios resulted in a decline in consumer demand (Bordwell, 2011, pp. 189-90; Curtin, 2007, pp. 260-1; Law and Bren, 2004, p. 287). These factors can also be attributed to the development of a more homogenised style of action cinema contrasting with the distinctive characteristics traditionally found within the Hong Kong action genre.

The increase in co-productions involving other national film industries has contributed to changes in the content of Hong Kong action films. These joint ventures enable greater access to foreign markets and provide larger production budgets. This facilitates the increased use of techniques prevalent in Hollywood action films such as advanced sound design and, as noted above, the extensive use of CGI effects (Klein, 2007, pp. 199-201; Lee, 2009, pp. 131-5).

In addition, co-productions involving the PRC, which have increased since the January 2004 enactment of CEPA, have provided greater access to the PRC market. CEPA was set up with the intention of integrating Hong Kong business activity into the PRC economy, with one of the particular areas being the audio-visual industries (Bordwell, 2011, p. 194). However these co-productions have resulted in the increased production of film content primarily aimed at PRC audiences, such as the historical epic or *wuxia* sub-genres (Lee, 2009, pp. 211-2).

A significant negative effect of co-productions with the PRC concerns the restriction of content in accordance with PRC censorship regulations. Klein (2007) identified that the involvement of PRC studio Huayi Brothers in the production of *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004) determined the vague setting and time period of the film in order to circumvent the censors. She notes that PRC

censorship prevents any depiction of issues of police corruption and organised crime in any narrative set after 1949, the year of the Communist Revolution (p. 202). This regulation particularly affects the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre which primarily features contemporary settings. This is consistent with my finding in Chapter 2 which identifies the absence of corrupt police officer characters and criminal protagonists within the films analysed.

In addition, PRC censorship prevents the inclusion of content traditionally prevalent in Hong Kong action cinema such as graphic violence and the glorification of crime (Cain, 2011, pp. 3-4). This again is consistent with my findings in Chapter 2 of an absence of extreme violence and the clear moral delineations between police officers and criminals. Curtin (2007) identifies the censorship restrictions posed by the PRC as problematic for film producers in Hong Kong, mentioning that over 50% of Hong Kong films fail to receive an uncut release in the PRC (p. 258).

Further PRC censorship restrictions were proposed in December 2011, banning the promotion of anti-Government messages and the portrayals of terrorist activity. This further restricts the traditionally subversive qualities of the Hong Kong action genre (Coonan, 2011; *Dawn*, 15 December 2011). These censorship restrictions, along with PRC audience demands, result in the removal of distinctive features of Hong Kong action films and further limit the content that co-productions between Hong Kong and the PRC can contain.

However, Laikwan Pang (2010) argues that the implementation of the CEPA V Amendment in 2008 enables Hong Kong cinema to expand its domestic market to include the Guangdong Province by removing quota restrictions on the release of Cantonese-language Hong Kong films. This potentially allows an avoidance of the political and cultural restrictions placed on co-productions between Hong Kong and the PRC. Pang further claims that this development could potentially

result in the return of distinctive Hong Kong films containing local characteristics (p. 141).

As a separate but related censorship issue, in January 2010 the PRC blocked access to Chinese users of IMDb. This has been speculated to be the result of the inclusion on the website of information concerning controversial documentaries covering political issues such as Tibet (Landreth, 2010). This prohibited access has continued into 2012 (GreatFire.org, n.d.).

An Empirical Analysis of Hong Kong Crime/Thriller/Drama Action Cinema

This empirical study addresses two of the research questions posed in this dissertation:

- Has the evolution of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre been associated with any change in its domestic and foreign market performance?

- Has the evolution of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre been associated with a specific pattern of co-production with other countries?

Method

Box Office Mojo and IMDb online datasets were the primary sources of information used for the quantitative analysis of the films. The Box Office Mojo film rankings based on annual box office returns were used to determine domestic and foreign market penetration. IMDb entries for the films identified from the Box Office Mojo rankings provided information on year of release, genre categories, and the nationality of the production companies involved.

Ten foreign markets (USA, Australia, Japan, Thailand, South Korea, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and PRC) were chosen which reflected countries

with either a high Chinese population or a large potential market for Hong Kong cinema. Box Office Mojo data was available for the 10 year period 2002-11 for the Hong Kong domestic market. However, data for the 10 foreign markets was less consistently available (see Table 3.2 for details).

The Box Office Mojo database was examined to identify the number of Hong Kong-produced films appearing in the annual top 50 box office rankings for the Hong Kong domestic market and the 10 foreign markets for the available years. The numbers of non-Hong Kong films (NON-HK) in the top 50 rankings were also noted.

The IMDb entry for each Hong Kong film was examined to identify their genre categories and production patterns. The Hong Kong films were then divided into two groups based on the presence or absence of the IMDb 'Action' genre category (termed HK ALL-ACTION and HK NON-ACTION respectively).

The HK ALL-ACTION films were further sub-divided. Films containing 'Action'-only or 'Action' and/or 'Crime' and/or 'Thriller' and/or 'Drama' IMDb genres were identified (termed HK CTD-ACTION). The presence of any other IMDb genre (e.g. 'Romance') excluded the film from the CTD-ACTION group. The remaining films within the HK ALL-ACTION group were given the variable title HK OTHER-ACTION.

The data derived from Box Office Mojo and IMDb variables for each film were entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet database (Appendix C). Manual calculations of relevant variable totals were carried out and the resulting summated data analysed using the VassarStats online statistics calculator (www.vassarstats.net). Chi-square testing of the variables was employed with Fisher's exact test being used for small sample sizes where at least one individual cell value was < 5. All tests were 2-tailed and the p-level of significance was set to < 0.05.

Results

a) Market Penetration

Hong Kong Domestic Market

A total of 169 (33.8% of 500 films) Hong Kong-produced films were identified from the annual box office rankings for the top 50 films shown in the Hong Kong domestic market covering the 10 year period 2002-11.

Table 3.1 shows the distribution of film categories that appeared in the top 50 Hong Kong domestic box office rankings for the 2002-11 period. Overall 331 (66.2%) were NON-HK films, 105 (21.0%) were HK NON-ACTION films, 64 (12.8%) were HK ALL-ACTION films. Out of the 64 HK ALL-ACTION films 41 (8.2%) were HK OTHER-ACTION films and 23 (4.6%) were HK CTD-ACTION films.

The annual box office data was collapsed into two 5 year periods (2002-6 and 2007-11) to allow a simple time trend analysis. There was a significant difference in the profile of the annual top 50 films over the two time periods (X^2 = 19.0, df = 3, p < 0.001). This was due to a significant increase over time in the proportion of NON-HK films (57.6% vs. 74.8%) (p < 0.0001) and a significant decrease in the proportion of HK NON-ACTION films (27.6% vs. 14.4%) (p < 0.001). However there were no differences in the proportion of HK CTD-ACTION and HK OTHER-ACTION over the two time periods (p = 0.823 and p = 0.073 respectively).

Over a third (35%) of the action films identified were from the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre indicating that it remains prominent within Hong Kong action cinema. However the results show that the Hong Kong action genre has had a relatively low market share for the 10 year period examined (12.8%). Wang (2011, p. 586) reports a similar figure (15%) for the year 2007.

Table 3.1 Film categories appearing in the Hong Kong domestic market (top 50 annual box office rankings 2002-11)

Year	HK CTD-ACTION	HK OTHER-ACTION	HK NON-ACTION	NON-HK	**Total**
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	**n (%)**
2002	1 (2.0)	3 (6.0)	14 (28.0)	32 (64.0)	**50 (100)**
2003	4 (8.0)	5 (10.0)	16 (32.0)	25 (50.0)	**50 (100)**
2004	3 (6.0)	6 (12.0)	17 (34.0)	24 (48.0)	**50 (100)**
2005	3 (6.0)	6 (12.0)	10 (20.0)	31 (62.0)	**50 (100)**
2006	0 (-)	6 (12.0)	12 (24.0)	32 (64.0)	**50 (100)**
2007	6 (12.0)	1 (2.0)	10 (20.0)	33 (66.0)	**50 (100)**
2008	2 (4.0)	4 (8.0)	5 (10.0)	39 (78.0)	**50 (100)**
2009	2 (4.0)	2 (4.0)	8 (16.0)	38 (76.0)	**50 (100)**
2010	1 (2.0)	4 (8.0)	6 (12.0)	39 (78.0)	**50 (100)**
2011	1 (2.0)	4 (8.0)	7 (14.0)	38 (76.0)	**50 (100)**
Total	**23 (4.6)**	**41 (8.2)**	**105 (21.0)**	**331 (66.2)**	**500 (100)**

NON-HK vs. Rest (2002-6 vs. 2007-11) X^2 = 16.5, df = 1, p< 0.0001
HK NON-ACTION vs. Rest (2002-6 vs. 2007-11): X^2 = 13.1, df = 1, p < 0.001
HK CTD-ACTION vs. Rest (2002-6 vs. 2007-11): X^2 = 0.05, df = 1, p = 0.823
HK OTHER-ACTION vs. Rest (2002-6 vs. 2007-11): X^2 = 3.21, df = 1, p = 0.073

The results confirm the decrease in market penetration of Hong Kong cinema in the 21st Century reported by Bordwell (2011, pp. 186-7). However when analysed further, it can be seen that this decline is due to a significant decrease in non-action genres which are being increasingly overtaken by non-Hong Kong films. The market share for the action genre including the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre has remained constant over the 2002-11 period. This finding has not been previously reported.

The semantic/syntactic developments identified in Chapters 1 and 2 would not appear to have resulted in an increase in the domestic market penetration of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre. However, these changes could have contributed to the retaining of a core audience through the updating of the stylistic and narrative characteristics to meet the standards of Hollywood cinema to which Hong Kong audiences have become accustomed. This is consistent

with the views of Bordwell (2011, pp. 229 and 236-7), who attributes changes within the action genre as a means of attracting domestic audiences increasingly favouring higher-quality output from Hollywood and South Korea. However, these changes also contradict Bordwell's identification of the film industry moving away from re-engaging the domestic market and moving towards gaining revenue from the PRC market (2011, p. 197).

In addition, the constant market share for the Hong Kong action genre during 2002-11 could indicate that the genre has reached a state of stable equilibrium within the market and that the previous decline identified by Wang (2011, p. 586) reflected in part an over-saturation of the Hong Kong market as a result of the earlier overproduction of films. Bordwell (2011) identifies this overproduction in Hong Kong cinema as occurring during the early and mid 1990s (pp. 190-1).

Foreign Markets

Table 3.2 shows the distribution of HK CTD-ACTION, HK OTHER-ACTION and HK NON-ACTION films that appeared in the top 50 box office rankings for the 10 foreign markets. An exception was the PRC, which only provided the top 35 rankings. The time-frames available for the data differ depending on the individual country.

There was no market penetration for any Hong Kong films in the Philippines and only minimal presence (< 5%) in the USA, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and Taiwan. However, Hong Kong films comprised 27.6% of PRC, 9.0% of Singaporean and 8.5% of Malaysian box office rankings.

The HK CTD-ACTION category had almost no foreign market penetration apart from the PRC (4.8%) and minimal presence in Thailand (0.2%). However HK OTHER-ACTION films were present in more than 5% of the box office rankings

in PRC (8.6%) and Singapore (7.0%) and had a minimal (< 5%) penetration in 6 of the remaining countries.

Table 3.2 Hong Kong film categories appearing in foreign markets (top 50* annual box office rankings 2002-11)

Country	Years (total number of films)	HK CTD- ACTION n (%)	HK OTHER- ACTION n (%)	HK NON- ACTION n (%)	All HK n (%)
Australia	2002-11 (500)	0 (-)	1 (0.2)	0 (-)	1 (<1)
Japan	2002-11 (500)	0 (-)	4 (0.8)	0 (-)	4 (<1)
USA	2002-11 (500)	0 (-)	1 (0.2)	0 (-)	1 (<1)
Thailand	2004-11 (400)	1 (0.2)	4 (1.0)	4 (1.0)	9 (2.2)
Philippines	2007-11 (250)	0 (-)	0 (-)	0 (-)	0 (-)
South Korea	2007-11 (250)	0 (-)	2 (0.8)	1 (0.4)	3 (1.2)
Malaysia	2008-11 (200)	0 (-)	8 (4.0)	9 (4.5)	17 (8.5)
Singapore	2008-11 (200)	0 (-)	14 (7.0)	4 (2.0)	18 (9.0)
Taiwan	2008-11 (200)	0 (-)	6 (3.0)	3 (1.5)	9 (4.5)
PRC*	2007-9 (105)	5 (4.8)	9 (8.6)	15 (14.3)	29 (27.6)

* PRC data for top 35 annual box office rankings only

The availability of box office data for foreign markets is patchy and as a result the findings must be interpreted with caution. Data for the PRC in particular is limited in availability. Since August 2011, the Box Office Mojo website has suspended collection of data for the PRC market until more reliable data sources can be identified (Box Office Mojo, n.d.). This may reflect restrictions placed on the release of business-sensitive data by the PRC.

With the exception of the PRC, the results show that all Hong Kong action and non-action genres have limited foreign market penetration. This includes the traditional diasporic territories of Malaysia and Singapore. In particular, the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre is almost completely absent from most of the foreign box office rankings. This data indicates that the semantic/syntactic changes that have occurred within the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre are unsuccessful in targeting wider international audiences.

However the PRC has an almost identical market share and genre profile to that of Hong Kong. In particular the similar market penetration of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre within the PRC and Hong Kong may reflect the effectiveness of changes in the semantic and syntactic to appeal to Mainland Chinese audiences. These include the use of 'pan-Chinese' themes and sympathetic Mainland characters.

These results run counter to claims by Curtin (2007, pp. 260-1), Klein (2007, pp. 189-91 and 195-201), and Lee (2009, pp. 205-10) that the changes to the semantic and syntactic of the Hong Kong action genre have been with the intent of attracting wider international audiences. The empirical results also refute claims from Bordwell (2011, p. 239) that the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre is still an internationally significant product of the Hong Kong film industry. However, the results are consistent with Bordwell's identification of the growing centrality of the PRC market to the economic fortunes of the industry compared with domestic and other international markets (2011, pp. 187-8 and 196-7).

b) Production Pattern

Due to the limited availability of data for foreign markets and the above noted low penetration of Hong Kong action films in most countries, the production pattern analysis will be restricted to an examination of the Hong Kong domestic market for the 2002-11 period.

Of the 169 Hong Kong-produced films, 89 (52.7%) were made solely by Hong Kong production companies and 80 (47.3%) were co-productions involving Hong Kong and at least one other country. Of the co-productions, 66 (39.0% of the 169 films) involved the PRC and 30 (17.8%) involved 12 other countries. Of the action genre films, 68.8% involved co-productions with the PRC. (The total figures sum

to over 100% as more than one country may have been involved in the co-production) (Table 3.3).

Table 3.4 summarises the production pattern for the individual Hong Kong film categories. There was a significant difference in the proportion of the 3 film categories with regard to production pattern ($X^2 = 31.8$, df = 2, $p < 0.0001$). More specifically, HK CTD-ACTION and HK OTHER-ACTION films were associated with a significantly higher proportion of co-productions (78.3% vs. 42.5%; $p < 0.01$ and 73.2% vs. 39.1%; $p < 0.001$ respectively), whereas HK NON-ACTION films were associated with a significantly higher proportion of single productions (69.5% vs. 25.0%; $p < 0.001$).

Table 3.3 Production pattern by country of Hong Kong film categories appearing in the Hong Kong domestic market (top 50 annual box office rankings 2002-11)

Production Country	HK CTD-ACTION (n=23) n (%)	HK OTHER-ACTION (n=41) n (%)	HK NON-ACTION (n=105) n (%)	All HK Films (n=169) n (%)
HK-only	5 (21.7)	11 (26.8)	73 (69.5)	89 (52.7)
HK + PRC	16 (69.6)	28 (68.3)	22 (21.0)	66 (39.0)
HK + others:	5 (21.7)	8 (19.5)	17 (16.2)	30 (17.8)
Singapore	3 (13.0)	2 (4.9)	3 (2.9)	8 (4.7)
Taiwan	0 (-)	1 (2.4)	5 (4.8)	6 (3.6)
USA	0 (-)	2 (4.9)	4 (3.8)	6 (3.6)
Japan	1 (4.3)	2 (4.9)	2 (1.9)	5 (3.0)
South Korea	0 (-)	3 (7.3)	1 (1.0)	4 (2.4)
Thailand	0 (-)	1 (2.4)	2 (1.9)	3 (1.8)
Macau	1 (4.3)	0 (-)	1 (1.0)	2 (1.2)
France	0 (-)	0 (-)	2 (1.9)	2 (1.2)
Canada	0 (-)	0 (-)	1 (1.0)	1 (0.6)
Germany	0 (-)	0 (-)	1 (1.0)	1 (0.6)
Italy	0 (-)	0 (-)	1 (1.0)	1 (0.6)
Malaysia	0 (-)	0 (-)	1 (1.0)	1 (0.6)

Table 3.4 Single- and co-production pattern of Hong Kong film categories appearing in the Hong Kong domestic market (top 50 annual box office rankings 2002-11)

Production pattern	HK CTD- ACTION n (%)	HK OTHER- ACTION n (%)	HK NON- ACTION n (%)	All HK Films n (%)
Single HK production	5 (21.7)	11 (26.8)	73 (69.5)	89 (52.7)
Co-productions	18 (78.3)	30 (73.2)	32 (30.5)	80 (47.3)
All productions	23 (100)	41 (100)	105 (100)	169 (100)

2002-11: HK CTD-ACTION vs. Rest: (single vs. co-productions): * FET, p < 0.01
2002-11: HK OTHER-ACTION vs. Rest: (single vs. co-productions): X^2 = 14.5, df = 1, p < 0.001
2002-11: HK NON-ACTION vs. Rest: (single vs. co-productions): X^2 = 31.6, df = 1, p < 0.001
* FET = Fisher's exact test

The results show a high number of PRC co-productions for all action genres. This finding provides empirical support for the widely-reported increase in co-productions between Hong Kong and the PRC by authors such as Klein (2007), Lee (2009) and Bordwell (2011).

However, the results show that that both the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre and the other action genres are significantly associated with co-productions. In particular the PRC is the main partner. This contrasts with the production pattern for Hong Kong non-action genres which are significantly associated with Hong Kong-only single productions. These specific associations have not been previously reported. In addition, the results clarify and identify the general association of all action sub-genres with co-productions and not just the *wuxia* and historical/kung fu sub-genres as previously identified by authors such as Klein (2007, p. 189).

In addition, the significant association of non-action films with single productions contrasts with Lee's emphasis on the identification of co-productions with the horror and musical genres (2009, pp. 185-203). Similarly, Kevin Heffernan (2009,

pp. 57-68) and Adam Knee (2009, pp. 70-84) place particular emphasis on co-produced drama and horror films. However these authors do not examine the full range of non-action genre films and limit their focus to the output of specific studios such as Applause Pictures. Although Bordwell (2011) identifies co-productions as occurring across all genres he only briefly refers to the use of co-productions in romance and musical genres and does not identify a specific association with the action genre (pp. 195-6).

A possible reason for the increased use of co-productions for the action genre is the requirement for large budgets to meet the higher production values required in comparison with non-action genres. Whilst the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre has fewer requirements for extensive CGI effects compared with the *wuxia* and historical sub-genres, there is still a need for increased production budgets to allow it to compete within the domestic market with similar Hollywood action output. This includes the use of CGI to achieve complex stunts and explosions. This is consistent with Bordwell's identification of the use of CGI technology within the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre (2011, p. 237). In addition this need to develop financial partnerships through co-productions to achieve sufficient budgets to use CGI technology is consistent with Wang's findings that Hong Kong's small domestic market prevents it recouping budgets for the technologically expensive action genre were it to try and fund these films entirely on its own (2011, p. 575).

It could be argued that the increased use of co-productions for action genre films can also be attributed to the low cultural specificity of the genre which in theory could result in a greater international appeal and that the financial partnerships would allow it to access a greater number of these overseas markets. However, although there were eight separate countries involved in co-productions of action films with Hong Kong, the low market penetration in the foreign markets (apart from the PRC) suggest that these films are not being produced with wider

international audiences in mind, but instead to regain or maintain their domestic market share and attract a PRC audience.

Chapter Conclusion

The decline in Hong Kong cinema since the early 1990s has been well documented in the literature. The limited studies on the Hong Kong action genre indicate similar box office and production declines. There was a notable absence of data analysis for the foreign market penetration of Hong Kong cinema irrespective of genre.

In addition to factors affecting the Hong Kong film industry in general, specific positive and negative variables impacting on the content of the Hong Kong action genre were also identified. These included the increased competition from Hollywood, the Handover-related emigration of genre talent, increases in international co-productions, CEPA, and PRC censorship restrictions.

My empirical analysis of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre revealed that unlike non-action genres this action sub-genre has maintained a steady albeit small domestic market penetration. However it has no/minimal foreign market penetration with the exception of the PRC. These previously unreported results suggest that the semantic/syntactic developments within the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre are aimed at maintaining a local market and attracting PRC audiences rather than targeting a wider international market.

The production pattern finding revealed a previously unreported significant specific association between Hong Kong action genres including the crime/thriller/drama sub-genre and co-productions. These partnerships predominately involve the PRC although a range of other countries are also involved. Larger co-production budgets enable the use of special effects

technologies such as CGI to compete domestically with the action output of Hollywood.

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined the evolution and commercial performance of the prominent Hong Kong crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre in the 21st Century. These developments can be understood within the context of the socio-political and economic pressures affecting the Hong Kong film industry. In particular, they have occurred in a unique post-Handover setting in which Hong Kong has a significantly altered relationship with the PRC. The dissertation has addressed three research questions:

- How have the style and content of the Hong Kong crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre further evolved in the 21st Century?

- Has the evolution of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre been associated with any change in its domestic and foreign market performance?

- Has the evolution of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre been associated with a specific pattern of co-production with other countries?

The dissertation has addressed the research questions using a unique mixed qualitative/quantitative methodology which has not been previously employed in studies of Hong Kong cinema.

The results of the semantic/syntactic analysis have addressed the first research question and demonstrated that the style and content of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre have further evolved in the 21st Century. The majority of the changes identified were semantic rather than syntactic in nature. These primarily involved the increased use of naturalistic action choreography and handheld camerawork within action sequences. In addition, most of the specific developments identified were variants of established semantic and syntactic features rather than the *de novo* appearance of elements. For example, the

familiar themes of revenge, brotherhood and loyalty, and shared fate were less prominent within the films analysed and were no longer placed within the socio-political context of the Handover. Similarly, identified variants in binary oppositions such as modern/traditional values and order/resistance included subversion of the established relationships and changes in their emphasis, delineation, and contextual significance.

The findings of my semantic/syntactic analysis have not been previously identified in the literature and expand on the developments within the Hong Kong crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre described by Curtin (2007) and Bordwell (2011). However both authors identify only a few *de novo* developments in the semantic and syntactic of the sub-genre. These included the use of CGI effects and complex narrative structures. Curtin and Bordwell attribute these changes to the increasing need for Hong Kong filmmakers to emulate the stylistic, thematic, and structural characteristics of equivalent Hollywood films to increase the domestic and foreign commercial viability of the sub-genre.

However there are limitations to their findings. The authors give no consideration to any nuanced variants of existing semantic/syntactic features within the films. In addition their results are restricted by the use of convenience film samples and varying depth of textual analysis. Bordwell (2011) provides only brief examples of changes within individual films and only a detailed analysis of the *Infernal Affairs* (2002-3) film series. Similarly, Curtin (2007) provides only short superficial examples of developments within films produced primarily by the Media Asia film company, with little focus on other studios.

The new and variant semantic/syntactic developments which I identified can be interpreted as an attempt by Hong Kong filmmakers to re-engage a domestic audience by imitating the popular stylistic features of competing Hollywood and South Korean films. However, aesthetic reasons also play a part in these developments. As noted in Chapter 2, Donnie Yen (2010) has included MMA

hybridised fight choreography in *Kill Zone* and *Flash Point* due to his growing interest in this martial arts style. However some of the identified semantic/syntactic developments may also reflect the post-Handover socio-political climate in Hong Kong. It can be argued that PRC censorship resulted in changes in content, such as the de-emphasis of traditionally-prevalent themes e.g. revenge. In addition the high level of involvement of the PRC in co-productions with Hong Kong (present in 50% of the films I textually analysed) could be seen to have influenced content in an attempt to gain an increased market share of the PRC audience.

My comparative statistical analysis of box office ranking data has addressed the second research question. The results confirm the overall decline in the domestic market share of Hong Kong films during the 21st Century as reported by Bordwell (2011). However, I have identified that during 2002-11 this was the result of a significant decrease in the domestic market penetration of non-action genres. The action genres including crime/thriller/drama films maintained a low but constant share of the top 50 rankings in the domestic market over the same period. This leveling-off in domestic market share for the action genre in the 21st Century has not been previously reported.

Bordwell (2011) identified that during the 1990s there was an overproduction of Hong Kong films and a subsequent oversaturation of the domestic market which contributed to the decline in their commercial success. However the recent constant domestic market share for the Hong Kong action genre which I have identified suggests that these films have now achieved relatively stable market equilibrium. The semantic/syntactic developments in the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre which I identified may have contributed to the maintenance of a core Hong Kong audience. This would support Bordwell's (2011) view that developments within the action genre partially reflect the need to re-engage domestic audiences. I have also identified that despite the low level of overall market penetration, the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre still comprised over

a third of the total action genre output appearing in the top 50 rankings of the domestic market. This underlines the continued commercial prominence of this distinctive sub-genre within Hong Kong action cinema.

My analysis of 10 foreign markets revealed that with the exception of the PRC the Hong Kong action genre achieved low/minimal penetration. These findings have not been previously reported and contrast with claims made by Curtin (2007), Klein (2007) and Lee (2009) that the content developments within the Hong Kong action genre have been intended to attract wider international audiences. The absence in most foreign markets of the crime/thriller/drama action films also counters Bordwell's (2011) claims that this sub-genre remains an internationally significant product of the Hong Kong film industry. However, the similarities between the Hong Kong and PRC market penetration profiles which I have reported are consistent with Bordwell's (2011) identification of the increasing importance of the PRC market to the Hong Kong film industry in comparison with other international markets.

In terms of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre, the level of market penetration in the PRC suggests that the semantic/syntactic developments identified earlier in my analysis have been successful in producing content popular with the PRC market. This includes the use of sympathetic Mainland Chinese characters to appeal to Mainland PRC audiences. In addition the reduction in graphic violence and the clearer moral delineations between police officer and criminal characters will have been more acceptable to the PRC censors.

My comparative statistical analysis of the empirical data has also addressed the third research question. The majority of the action genre films are co-productions and predominately involve PRC studios. The identification of this significant PRC involvement in action film production is consistent with findings by Klein (2007), Lee (2009) and Bordwell (2011) who describe a range of genres that involve

Hong Kong-PRC co-productions and note the growing influence and importance of the CEPA legislation in this type of Hong Kong film production.

However my finding of a significant specific association between the action genre and co-productions (and Hong Kong-only productions with non-action films) has not been previously reported. It contrasts with the association of co-productions with both action and non-action genres described by Lee (2009), Heffernan (2009), Knee (2009) and Bordwell (2011). However these authors' descriptions are not based on a systematic quantitative analysis of Hong Kong films. Lee, Heffernan and Knee for example focus only on non-action co-productions from the output of specific studios.

This specific association between the Hong Kong action genre and co-productions could be the result of the need for larger production budgets for the action genre due to their technology-intensive requirements. This would enable the Hong Kong action genre to compete with the larger-budget, effects-laden Hollywood output for the attention of domestic audiences and so maintain its market share. This would be consistent with Wang's (2011) view that small nations are unable to compete directly with Hollywood in terms of producing technology-intensive action films. In addition, the association between non-action genres and single productions may reflect their often lower budgetary requirements.

The used of a mixed qualitative/quantitative method in this dissertation contrasts with the approaches employed in the previous academic literature on Hong Kong action cinema. These studies either focus on the qualitative analysis of aesthetic changes in film texts or the quantitative investigation of the commercial market and industry-related variables. These separate discourses are infrequently integrated which limits a fuller contextual understanding of genre evolution.

For the qualitative analysis of films, I have employed a probability sampling method using a large online film dataset and operationally-defined genre categories. This has enabled a well-defined homogeneous film population to be isolated. As a result the film analysis findings are likely to be more representative of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre compared with the use of convenience samples employed in previous studies. In addition, this clearly defined probability sampling approach has allowed the study to be replicated by other researchers. The use of a consistent semantic/syntactic analytical approach has also enabled developments in both the formal and structural features of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre to be delineated and tracked over time, thereby providing a more detailed and accurate picture of genre evolution. This semantic/syntactic approach to film analysis reinforces Altman's (1984) emphasis on the importance of understanding genre history and genre evolution within studies of genre theory.

The quantitative analysis element of this dissertation employed two online datasets to identify a large replicable sample of 21st Century Hong Kong films plus data on their domestic and foreign market penetration, and associated production patterns. By employing operationally-defined IMDb genre categories, specific Hong Kong crime/thriller/drama action films, other action genres, and non-action genres could be separately identified and compared. Previous empirical studies have either focussed on Hong Kong films in general or a broadly-defined Hong Kong action genre.

In addition the majority of these earlier quantitative studies limit their analysis to a simple narrative description of data. In contrast this dissertation employed comparative statistical analysis to identify significant changes over time in the market penetration of genre categories, and significant relationships between genre categories and production patterns. These statistically significant associations have not been previously reported in the literature and provide a fuller understanding of the contextual developments in the crime/thriller/drama

action sub-genre compared with other Hong Kong films. In addition they provide further indirect support for the impact of the semantic/syntactic changes identified in my qualitative analysis of the sub-genre.

The limitations of my mixed qualitative/quantitative study of the Hong Kong crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre included theoretical and practical issues. It can be argued that a Western-centric approach to genre can never be reconciled with the culturally-specific concepts and definitions of genre prevalent within Hong Kong cinema. The use of Western genre categories to define the Hong Kong film samples analysed did not take into consideration the unique localised definitions of action sub-genres such as the 'young triad' films. The differences between the criteria for IMDb genre categories and these culturally-specific sub-genres could have resulted in the inclusion or exclusion of films from the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre category. In addition the IMDb genre assignations are ultimately dependant on the subjective perceptions of individual users which may have introduced further bias in the crime/thriller/drama action film sample.

The probability sampling method used to identify the film sample for semantic/syntactic analysis was also not purely non-randomised. A convenience sampling approach had to be employed for the final stage of selecting the eight films for analysis due to issues of non-availability of English subtitled films released on the Region 2 DVD format. This may have limited the representativeness of the sample. In addition, the non-availability of box-office data from foreign markets, particularly the PRC, prevented a full understanding of the performance of the crime/thriller/drama sub-genre and other Hong Kong action genres within these markets. As a consequence, the quantitative results concerning foreign market penetration must be interpreted with caution.

This dissertation has raised implications for future research on the evolution of specific Hong Kong genres and sub-genres. In order to understand how the

content and style of a genre evolve and how they articulate with commercial performance, future research warrants the use of a combined qualitative/quantitative approach employing: operationally-defined probability film samples sourced from readily available large datasets such as IMDb, a consistent semantic/syntactic analytical approach, and a statistical analysis of market penetration and related production data. This will provide a more complete and representative picture of genre evolution by taking both aesthetic and commercial developments into account.

The limited data available for the PRC box office rankings suggest an almost identical market penetration profile for action and non-action genres to that of the Hong Kong market. However further research is required in this area to clarify the issue but this will depend on the future availability of more reliable commercial data.

The hegemonic influence of the PRC on the production of Hong Kong action cinema also requires further investigation. As has been seen, co-productions and associated funding incentives are important in producing expensive, effects-laden high quality genre products. These have been facilitated by PRC Governmental measures such as CEPA. However the financial inducements for the film industry must be understood in the context of the potentially negative impact of PRC censorship restrictions on film content and sub-genre production. In my semantic/syntactic analysis of the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre I have identified a de-emphasis on graphic violence and blurred delineations of police officer and criminal roles. These changes are in keeping with the known PRC restrictions on these stylistic and content features. Additional research is required to examine whether the more recent PRC censorship amendments introduced in December 2011 have further affected the style and content of action genre co-productions. These could be examined via comparative textual analysis of co-productions released before and after this date.

In summary, this dissertation has examined how the Hong Kong crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre has evolved and negotiated a market position to adapt to the changing socio-political and economic context of its 21st Century post-Handover environment. The semantic/syntactic changes identified within the sub-genre would appear to be aimed at a domestic audience increasingly accustomed to the higher production values of Hollywood action films, and a growing Mainland Chinese market. The evidence would further suggest that the crime/thriller/drama action sub-genre is not currently evolving to target a wider international market. The evolution of the sub-genre must also be understood within the context of Hong Kong's developing relationship with the PRC. In particular the commercial benefits of closer financial co-production partnerships with the PRC must be balanced against the censorship restrictions which affect the style and content of the sub-genre. This study underlines the need to take into account such socio-political and media economic factors in order to fully understand the evolution of film genre.

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A Better Tomorrow (1986) Directed by John Woo [Film]. Hong Kong: Film Workshop/ Cinema City.

A Better Tomorrow II (1987) Directed by John Woo [Film]. Hong Kong: Film Workshop.

A Better Tomorrow III (1989) Directed by Tsui Hark [Film]. Hong Kong: Golden Princess Film/ Film Workshop.

Bodyguard from Beijing (1994) Directed by Corey Yuen [Film]. Hong Kong: Golden Harvest/ Eastern Productions.

Breaking News (2004) Directed by Johnnie To [Film]. Hong Kong/ PRC: Media Asia Films/ China Film Group/ Milky Way Image.

City Hunter (1993) Directed by Jing Wong [Film]. Hong Kong: Golden Harvest/ Golden Way Films/ Paragon Films.

City on Fire (1987) Directed by Ringo Lam [Film]. Hong Kong: Cinema City.

Divergence (2005) Directed by Benny Chan [Film]. Hong Kong/ PRC: Universe Entertainment/ Shanxi Film Studio.

Dragon from Russia (1990) Directed by Clarence Fok [Film]. Hong Kong: Cinema City Entertainment.

Fatal Contact (2006) Directed by Dennis Law [Film]. Hong Kong: China Star Entertainment/ One Hundred Years of Film/ Gold Label Entertainment/ Point of View Movie Productions.

Fatal Move (2008) Directed by Dennis Law [Film]. Hong Kong: China Star Entertainment/ Point of View Movie Productions/ One Hundred Years of Film.

Flash Point (2007) Directed by Wilson Yip [Film]. Hong Kong/ China: Mandarin Films Distribution/ Chang Ying Group/ Beijing Poly-bona Film Publishing/ Beijing Enlight Pictures/ China Film Co-Production.

Full Contact (1992) Directed by Ringo Lam [Film]. Hong Kong: Golden Princess Film Production/ Silver Medal Productions.

Gen-X Cops (1999) Directed by Benny Chan [Film]. Hong Kong: Media Asia Films.

Hard Boiled (1992) Directed by John Woo [Film]. Hong Kong: Golden Princess Film/ Milestone Pictures.

Infernal Affairs (2002) Directed by Andrew Lau/ Alan Mak [Film]. Hong Kong: Media Asia Films/ Basic Pictures.

*Infernal Affairs II (*2003) Directed by Andrew Lau/ Alan Mak [Film]. Hong Kong/ PRC/ Singapore: Media Asia Films/ Basic Pictures/ Eastern Dragon Film/ Mediacorp Raintree Pictures.

Infernal Affairs III (2003) Directed by Andrew Lau/ Alan Mak [Film]. Hong Kong/ PRC: Media Asia Films/ Basic Pictures/ Tianjin Film Studio/ China Film Co-Production/ Eastern Dragon Film.

Initial D: Drift Racer (2005) Directed by Andrew Lau/ Alan Mak [Film]. Hong Kong/ Japan: Avex/ Media Asia Films/ Basic Pictures/ Sil-Metropole.

Invisible Target (2007) Directed by Benny Chan [Film]. Hong Kong/ China: Universe Films/ Sil-Metropole/ Guangzhou Ying Ming Media.

Kill Zone (2005) Directed by Wilson Yip [Film]. Hong Kong: Abba Movies/ Greek Mythology Entertainment/ 1618 Action.

Kung Fu Hustle (2004) Directed by Stephen Chow [Film]. Hong Kong/ China: Columbia Pictures Film Production Asia/ Huayi Brothers/ Taihe Film Investment/ Beijing Film Studios/ China Film Group/ The Fourth Production/ Star Overseas/ China Film Co-Production.

Lee Rock (1991) Directed by Lawrence Ah Mon [Film]. Hong Kong: Win's Movie Productions.

Long Arm of the Law (1984) Directed by Johnny Mak [Film]. Hong Kong: Johnny Mak Productions.

Long Arm of the Law II (1987) Directed by Michael Mak [Film]. Hong Kong: Bo Ho Films/ Golden Harvest/ Johnny Mak Productions.

Long Arm of the Law III (1989) Directed by Michael Mak [Film]. Hong Kong: Movie Impact/ Johnny Mak Productions.

Love Battlefield (2004) Directed by Pou-soi Cheang [Film]. Hong Kong/ PRC: Beijing Film Studio/ Mei Ah Films/ Xi An Mei Ah Culture Communication/ Singing Horse Productions.

New Police Story (2004) Directed by Benny Chan [Film]. Hong Kong/ China: China Film Group/ JCE Entertainment.

One Nite in Mongkok (2004) Directed by Tung-Shing Yee [Film]. Hong Kong: Film Unlimited/ Universe Films/ Sil-Metropole.

Outlaw Brothers (1990) Directed by Frankie Chan [Film]. Hong Kong: Movie Impact.

Police Story (1985) Directed by Jackie Chan [Film]. Hong Kong: Golden Way Films/ Paragon Films.

Police Story 2 (1988) Directed by Jackie Chan [Film]. Hong Kong: Golden Way Films/ Paragon Films.

Police Story 3: Super Cop (1992) Directed by Stanley Tong [Film]. Hong Kong: Golden Harvest/ Golden Way Films.

Police Story 4: First Strike (1996) Directed by Stanley Tong [Film]. Hong Kong/ USA: Golden Harvest/ Paragon Films/ New Line Cinema.

Protégé (2007) Directed by Tung-Shing Yee [Film]. Hong Kong/ Singapore/ PRC: Mediacorp Raintree Pictures/ Film Unlimited/ China Film Group/ Beijing Poly-bona Film/ Global Entertainment Group/ Beijing Jinyinma Movie & TV Culture/ Artforce International.

Purple Storm (1999) Directed by Teddy Chan [Film]. Hong Kong: Media Asia Films.

Rock N' Roll Cop (1994) Directed by Kirk Wong [Film]. Hong Kong: Sky Point.

Saving Private Ryan (1998) Directed by Steven Spielberg [Film]. USA: Mutual Film/ Amblin Entertainment/ Paramount Pictures/ DreamWorks SKG.

The Beast Stalker (2008) Directed by Dante Lam [Film]. Hong Kong: Emperor Motion Pictures/ Sil-Metropole.

The Big Heat (1988) Directed by Andrew Kam/ Johnnie To [Film]. Hong Kong: Film Workshop/ Cinema City.

The Killer (1989) Directed by John Woo [Film]. Hong Kong: Film Workshop/ Golden Princess Film Production/ Magnum Films/ Long Shong Pictures/ Media Asia Group.

Tiger on the Beat (1988) Directed by Chia-Liang Liu [Film]. Hong Kong: Cinema City.

To be Number One (1991) Directed by Man Kit Poon [Film]. Hong Kong: Golden Harvest/ Johnny Mak Productions.

Internet Movie Database Genre Definitions
(Internet Movie Database, n.d.)

Action
Should contain numerous scenes where action is spectacular and usually destructive. **Note:** if a movie contains just one action scene (even if prolonged, e.g. airplane-accident) it does not qualify. Subjective.

Adult
Reserved for hardcore pornography only. Must be used with the plot keywords 'hardcore' and 'sex'. Objective.

Adventure
Should contain numerous consecutive and inter-related scenes of characters participating in hazardous or exciting experiences for a specific goal. Not to be confused with Action, and should only sometimes be supplied with it. Subjective.

Animation
Over 75% of the title's running time should have scenes that are wholly, or part-animated. Any form of animation is acceptable, e.g. hand-drawn, computer-generated, stop-motion etc. Incidental animated sequences should be indicated with the keywords part-animated or animated-sequence instead. Objective.

Biography
Primary focus is on the depiction of activities and personality of a real person or persons, for some or all of their lifetime. Events in their life may be re-enacted, or described in a documentary style. If re-enacted, they should generally follow reasonably close to the factual record, within the limitations of dramatic necessity. A real person in a fictional setting would not quality as a production for this genre. If the focus is primarily on events, rather than a person, use History instead.

Comedy
Virtually all scenes should contain characters participating in humorous or comedic experiences. The comedy can be exclusively for the viewer, at the expense of the characters in the title, or be shared with them. Please submit qualifying keywords to better describe the humour (i.e. spoof, parody, irony, slapstick, satire, black-comedy etc). If the title does not conform to the 'virtually all scenes' guideline then please do not add the comedy genre; instead, submit the same keyword variations described above to signify the comedic elements of the title. Subjective.

Crime
Should contain numerous consecutive and inter-related scenes of characters participating, aiding, abetting, and/ or planning criminal behaviour or experiences usually for an illicit goal. Not to be confused with Film-Noir, and only sometimes should be supplied with it. Subjective.

Documentary
Should contain numerous consecutive scenes of **real** personages and not characters portrayed by actors. This genre demotes other genres (Short, Family, Music, History, and War are ones that can co-exist with Documentary) such that they should be supplied as keywords instead. For example, "making of" shows and tribute/ biographical shows are Documentary (even if the encapsulated subjects within fit other genres). This does not include fake or spoof documentaries, which should instead have the fake-documentary keyword. A documentary that includes actors re-creating events should include the keyword "re-enactment" so that those actors are not treated as "Himself." **Note:** This genre restricts the use of most genres, which should instead be submitted as keywords. Objective.

Drama
Should contain numerous consecutive scenes of characters portrayed to effect a serious narrative throughout the title. This can be exaggerated upon to produce melodrama. Subjective.

Family
Should be universally accepted viewing. For example, aimed specifically for the education and/ or entertainment of children or the entire family. **Note:** Usually, but not always, complementary to Animation. Objective.

Fantasy
Should contain numerous consecutive scenes of characters portrayed to effect a magical and/ or mystical narrative throughout the title. **Note:** Not to be confused with Sci-Fi which is not usually based on magic or mysticism. Subjective.

Film-Noir
Should be shot in black and white, American, and set in contemporary times (relative to shooting date). We take the view that this genre began with *Underworld* (1927) and ended with *Touch of Evil* (1958). **Note:** Neo-noir should be submitted as a keyword instead of this genre for titles that do not fit all criteria. Objective.

Game-Show
Competition, other than sports, between, usually, non-professional contestants. The competition can include a physical component, but is usually primarily mental or strategic as opposed to athletic. This also includes what are known as

"quiz shows." Talent contests staged expressively for the program are considered Game Shows.

History
Primary focus is on real events of historical significance; in current terms, the sort of thing that might be expected to dominate the front page of a national newspaper for at least a week; for older times, the sort of thing likely to be included in any major history book. Whilst some characters, incidents, and dialog [sic] may be fictional, these should be relatively minor pints used primarily to bridge gaps in the record. Use of actual persons in an otherwise fictional setting, or of historic events as a backdrop for a fictional story, would not qualify. If the focus is primarily on one person's life and character, rather than events of historical scope, use Biography instead.

Horror
Should contain numerous consecutive scenes of characters effecting a terrifying and / or repugnant narrative throughout the title. **Note:** Not to be confused with Thriller which is not usually based in fear or abhorrence. Subjective.

Musical
Should contain several scenes of characters bursting into song aimed at the viewer (this excludes songs performed for the enjoyment of other characters that may be viewing) while the rest of the time, usually but not exclusively, portraying a narrative that alludes to another Genre. **Note:** Not to be added for titles that are simply music related or have music performances in them; e.g. pop concerts do not apply. Also, classical opera, since it is entirely musical, does not apply and should instead be treated as Music. Objective.

Music
Contains significant music-related elements while not actually being a Musical; this may mean a concert, or a story about a band (either fictional or documentary). Subjective.

Mystery
Should contain numerous inter-related scenes of one ore more characters endeavouring to widen their knowledge of anything pertaining to themselves or others. **Note:** Usually, but not always associated with Crime. Subjective.

News
Reports and discussions of current events of public importance or interest. If the events are not current (at the time the title was initially released), use History instead. This generally includes newsreels, newsmagazines, daily news, and commentary/ discussion programs that focus on events.

Reality-TV
Features non-professionals in an unscripted, but generally staged or manipulated, situation. May or may not use hidden cameras; generally, but not always, in a non-studio setting.

Romance
Should contain numerous inter-related scenes of a character and their personal life with emphasis on emotional attachment or involvement with bother characters, especially those characterized by a high level of purity and devotion. **Note:** Reminder, as with all genres if this does not describe the movie wholly, but only certain scenes or a subplot, then it should be submitted as a keyword instead. Subjective.

Sci-Fi
Numerous scenes, and / or the entire background for the setting of the narrative, should be based on speculative scientific discoveries or developments, environmental changes, space travel, or life on other planets. Subjective.

Short
Any title, specifically as a "feature", with a running time of less than 45 minutes i.e. 44 minutes or less. If known please submit the running time if we do not have one on record. Note: For TV series and TV movies the limit is reduced to 22 minutes (21 minutes or less) as a "half-hour" show should not be listed as a short feature. Objective.

Sport
Focus is on sports or a sporting event, either fictional or actual. This includes fictional stories focussed on a particular sport or event, documentaries about sports, and television broadcasts of actual sporting events. In a fictional film, the sport itself can also be fictional, but it should be the primary focus of the film.

Talk-Show
Discussion or interviews of or with a series of guests or panellists, generally appearing as themselves in a non-fictional setting (though fictional programs that mimic the form are also included). (aka "chat show").

Thriller
Should contain numerous sensational scenes or a narrative that is sensational or suspenseful. **Note:** Not to be confused with Mystery or Horror, and should only sometimes be accompanied by one (or both). Subjective.

War
Should contain numerous scenes and/ or a narrative that pertains to a **real** war (i.e. past or present). **Note:** For titles that portray fictional war, please submit it as a keyword only. Objective.

Western
Should contain numerous scenes and/ or a narrative that portrays frontier life in the American West during 1600s to contemporary times. Objective.

Appendix B

Semantic/Syntactic Film Analysis Proforma

Film:

Year:

Semantic Features

Action Choreography:

Editing:

Cinematography:

Special Effects:

Ideological Codes/Themes:

Character Archetypes:

Other Semantic Features:

Syntactic Features

Narrative Structure:

Binary Character and Thematic Oppositions:

Other Syntactic Features:

Appendix C

Spreadsheet Database Variables for Hong Kong-produced Films

Year of Production [*2002-11*]

Market [*Name of Country*]

Box Office Mojo Ranking [*1-50*]

Film Title

IMDB Genre 1

IMDb Genre 2

IMDb Genre 3

IMDb Genre 4

IMDb Genre 5

Production Country 1

Production Country 2

Production Country 3

Production Country 4