

Yang and Yin

Contrasting Masculine Archetype in *A Better Tomorrow* and *Chungking Express*

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Near the end of year 2023, a motivational Chinese beaver took over the internet, inspiring countless people despite the language barrier, as the beaver spoke Chinese and most of the audience did not. It turns out that the clip this animated character is known for is a rendition of a clip from John Woo's 1986 movie *A Better Tomorrow*. After nearly 40 years since its debut, *A Better Tomorrow* continues to affect its audience through a different media, once again connecting them to Mark Lee, one of the main protagonists of the film. Another film that is known for its capability to affect the audience is Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express*, which is about the lives of four lonely souls seeking love in Hong Kong. Its iconic lines speak out for countless broken hearts even today. While both movies deeply affect their audiences, the male figures are being portrayed in drastically different ways. In *A Better Tomorrow*, masculinity is portrayed as loyal and unwavering. In contrast, *Chungking Express* presents a more feminine side of male characters, where masculinity is portrayed as sentimental. These differing portrayals offer a glimpse into the complex society of the city and the instabilities of masculine subjectivity around the hand-over of Hong Kong near the turn of the century.

As a director, John Woo is known for his stylized portrayal of masculinity and his use of hyperkinetic action sequences. Unlike many of Bruce Lee's film, Woo does not portray masculinity through the direct display of physical strength. Instead, masculinity is portrayed in his films through the loyalty, brotherhood, and redemption of his characters. Robert Hanke notes that Woo's heroes emphasize male sensitivity rather than traditional macho qualities, a closer look at the mental activities rather than physical traits (Hanke, 47). Sandell also emphasizes that the masculinity in Woo's post-1986 Hong Kong films is a mix of both physical and emotional presence (Sandell, 24). In *A Better Tomorrow*, Mark Lee is a prime example of such characters

that embodies the traits of a traditional male hero in John Woo's films. Throughout the film, there is no display of Mark Lee's physical body to portray masculinity. Instead, this character is portrayed through a series of events that shows his loyalty to his friend and his determinability. Mark displays loyalty through revenging for his friend and shows determinability through willing to put himself down and wait for Sung Tse-Ho to come back to achieve redemption together. Even in the end, Mark displays brotherhood by turning back to help his best friend and eventually sacrificing himself for the cause of Sung Tse-Ho. The other technique that John Woo is known for is also center to his portrayal of masculinity. The hyperkinetic action sequences in John Woo's films is an exaggeration of reality. Indeed, John Woo very often uses violence to portray masculinity in his films. He mostly does it through two ways, either the character taking a shot to show resilience or shooting to kill to assert dominance. An example of such portrayal would be the scene where Marks revenges Sung Tse-Ho by slaughtering the local gang of Taiwan. In this scene, Woo first have Mark strategically and brutally annihilates the local gang to show the dominance of this character. Then, the bullet that Mark takes at the end of this scene cripples him for the rest of the movie. Woo then displays Mark's resilience by showing how the character still wants to revenge even after he is crippled and has become vulnerable.

In contrast, Wong Kai-wai portrays masculinity in the almost polar opposite direction. In his films, especially *Chungking Express*, male characters are almost always sentimental and indecisive. A key element that Wong uses to portray such masculinity is through the use of props as part of the narrative. These props in the film represents the male characters in the film in which both the character in the film and the audience could project the character onto. In the first story of *Chungking Express*, the item that represents the male character is canned food that

expires on May first. The Hong Kong police officer He Qiwu is dumped by his girlfriend, and buys a can of canned pineapple everyday for a month until the day of his birthday. The act of stop buying on his birthday connects the character to the prop. Later on in the film, the character also consciously make references to himself with canned food, projecting himself onto an item. This is seen even more with the main protagonist of the second story, police office 663. For this character, the item that he projects himself onto is the whole room in which he resides in. He would project himself onto different props such as the soap, the towel, and even the shirt that his ex-girlfriend left. Unlike many of the previous scenes where the character's monologue is within, cop 663's monologue is explicit. Instead of a voice in the head, his monologue is spoken out, which is a direct display of vulnerability, an unconventional portrayal of masculinity.

The contrasting portrayals of masculinity in Wong Kar-wai and John Woo's films are akin to the Yin and Yang in Chinese philosophy: masculinity in Wong Kar-wai's films is passive and sentimental, whereas in John Woo's films, it is virile and tough. Representing the Yang, John Woo's portrayal of masculinity stems from his nostalgia for traditional masculine traits that he believes are vanishing. On the other hand, the Yin, embodied in Wong Kar-wai's depiction of masculinity, defies the traditional masculine archetype and embraces aspects of masculinity that were once unaccepted. This divergence in portrayals serves as an allegory for the complex societal dynamics of the city and the instabilities of masculine subjectivity around the handover of Hong Kong at the turn of the century.

Works Cited

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