

*Wai, Hai Mai Lam Yun Lei Ga?*  
[Hey, You a Man or Not?]  
The Hui Brothers' 1970s Films and What It Meant to Be a Man in Hong Kong, 1974-78

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We accept this essay as conforming to the required standard.



University of British Columbia  
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*Ronny, don't forget, when we die, our movies don't die. Your grandson, your great-great grandson, will be watching that. Movies are immortal.*

--Michael Hui to Hong Kong New Wave film director Ronny Yu<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Odham Stokes and Michael Hoover, *City on Fire: Hong Kong Cinema* (New York and London: Verso, 1999), 170.

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## Prefatory Remarks: A Personal Take on the Young Man

A question and a look have always haunted me whenever I have told people that I am slaving away at a thesis. The first: “What, you’re a graduate student?” Apologetically, I begin to answer, “No, I’m working on a thesis on men in 1970s Hong Kong for my B. A. honours degree in history.” This answer always raises eyebrows. I always follow up, “I want to find out what’s wrong with my parents.”

To be sure, my parents and I enjoy a very close relationship. By either a fluke or the hand of God, they moved with me when I was supposed to depart for university: my father began pastoring one of the larger churches in Richmond, BC, and I ended commuting an hour to and from school every day from Richmond to the university instead of living on campus (as I had intended to do). When I was still in high school, I had always dreamed of university as a place where I could escape my harrowing past as a pastor’s kid and develop my own identity. But in 2004, I found myself once again trapped at home, going to my father’s church, and not the least more independent.

Curses can be blessings in disguise. Over the last three years, my parents and I have struggled through the hardships and enjoyed the blessings of ministry together. They have also pushed me to a greater sense of independence by making me get a job, do my own laundry, learn to cook, take care of my own car, and participate in the affairs of the family at a much greater level than when I was in high school. Much of the man that I have become over these last three years is due to their efforts.

When it came time for me to pick a thesis topic, I based my selection on several criteria. First, it had to be a way for me to explore who I was as a person. My father is also a pastoral counsellor, and he always emphasizes the effect of family dynamics on every individual’s growth

and development. To understand who I am requires that I understand my parents. The second criterion was that it had to be under the direction of Professor Timothy Cheek. I do not say this to curry special favour with him. Our seminar on post-1989 China had provoked me to research the Hong Kong “astronaut” phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s,<sup>2</sup> and one of the key arguments in my final presentation and paper was that the formative years for the astronaut men were the 1960s and 1970s. One might see impressions of my father’s counselling philosophy on this argument. While the astronauts were fascinating, I figured that understanding the 1960s and 1970s would be more formational for me because my father has never been an astronaut, though he has counselled many astronauts’ families. And because Professor Cheek actually bought the idea the first time, I figured that he should have no trouble buying it a second time. Moreover, judging from the way our seminar was run, I knew Professor Cheek to be one who gave solid, step-by-step guidelines much as my former-engineer father would. I judged correctly and am more than grateful for those clear instructions.

Over time, the thesis evolved into a topic encompassing three arenas of action in Hong Kong: the family, the school, and the media. It has always been my deep conviction that formative experiences come *Gestalt*, and the initial idea behind this thesis was to research young men in Hong Kong through a *Gestalt* of formative experiences. However, the deeper I dug, the more I discovered that I had a tendency to edge toward the media. Perhaps this was because whenever I would watch a Bruce Lee film for part of my work, my father, a former kung-fu master, would watch with me, commenting heavily on every part of the films and attempting to imitate the Little Dragon with his whoops and *wa-chas*. Moreover, I discovered during a domestic archaeological dig that my mother, who was a teenager in the 1970s, had a stash of

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<sup>2</sup> The “astronauts” (*taihongyun* in Cantonese) were professionals in the late 1980s and 1990s who moved their families to western nation-states while still working in Asia; they were called “astronauts” because they were supposedly always commuting back and forth *via* the sky (airplane).

1970s Canto-pop cassettes that we used to listen to on road trips but had long (I thought) been lost.

When I heard the familiar voice of Sam Hui singing some of my favourite childhood songs, I knew what I had to do. I quickly did some library research in Richmond and found that they carried all of the Hui Brothers' films from the 1970s. At this point, I had become quite overwhelmed by my research, and I decided on a very drastic narrowing of the topic: how did the Hui Brothers portray young men in the 1970s, and how did this portrayal reflect what it meant to be a man then and there? My senior seminar and Professor Cheek confirmed the wisdom of this greatly narrowed, vastly more doable project.

The following thesis is the fruit of that labour. It is above all a history thesis in the tradition of Charles A. Beard. Beard argues that written history is above all things “an act of faith”:

This selection and organization—a single act—will be controlled by the historian's frame of reference composed of things deemed necessary and of things deemed desirable. The frame may be a narrow class, sectional, national, or group conception of history, clear and frank or confused and half conscious, or it may be a large, generous conception, clarified by association with the great spirits of all ages. Whatever its nature the frame is inexorably there, in the mind. And in the frame only three broad conceptions of all history as actuality are possible. History is chaos and every attempt to interpret it otherwise is an illusion. History moves around in a kind of cycle. History moves in a line, straight or spiral, and in some direction. The historian may seek to escape these issues by silence or by a confession of avoidance or he may face them boldly, aware of the intellectual and moral perils inherent in any decision—in his act of faith.<sup>3</sup>

As much as I demonstrate that the Hui Brothers' films were reflective of the cultural ethos of young men in 1970s Hong Kong, I think the conviction that there is a history of cultural ethos is my act of faith. Another act of faith is that it is possible to write a history of cultural ethos while still being firmly rooted in the concrete (without shipping off to what Professor Cheek affectionately calls “discourse-land”).

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<sup>3</sup> Charles A. Beard, “Written History as an Act of Faith,” *American Historical Review* 39, no. 2 (1934): 227-228.

Writing this thesis has forced me to appreciate the communities in which I live—academic, spiritual, and blood (to use a traditional Chinese expression). At home, my thesis has evolved into a family project. My parents now regularly watch my Hui Brothers' films as they make mythical excuses for not having seen them before: my father was in Canada when many of them were made, and my mother says that she was a good girl when she was a teenager and did not go to the movies much. My sister Joanna has had to put up with endless streamings of Sam Hui's Canto-pop from my room—and has gotten many of the songs stuck in her head. I not only acknowledge them; I explicitly dedicate this thesis to them, and especially to my parents. Living in a generational complex with you over these last three years has been a pleasure, not a trap. When I become the head of my own home, I hope I can do even half as well as you as a husband to my wife and a father to my children. I love you.

My academic community has been extraordinarily supportive of this project as well. Professor Cheek cheerfully and methodically guided me through numerous tasks and deadlines that we set ourselves. Under his direction, I discovered that it is possible to write a thesis and still have a life—that is, if one is diligent and gets a draft out by the end of December. Professor Anne Gorsuch and the senior honours seminar provided superb comments on various stages of the thesis. I especially want to thank my colleagues in history honours who have had to put up with endless “roast duck” jokes, Bruce Lee imitations, and Michael Hui references they know nothing about. Thanks especially to Jodi Carlson, whose Dixonian advice has shaped much of the argumentative flow of this thesis, and Angy Wong, whose comments on one of the later drafts pushed me to the finish line.

From my spiritual community, there is a hodgepodge of names I would like to acknowledge: “Bro” Brian Chan and “Sis” Michelle “Michi” Koo, who had to endure the emotional ups and downs of my thesis craziness; “Miss” Janice Leung, who cheered me on

whenever I reported my thesis progress and went with me the first time to get *The Private Eyes* from Richmond's Cambie library; Dan "the Man" Leung, who spiced up my life with discussions of masculinity (Hong Kong and not) over instant messaging and kept me always thinking about what it means to be a man; Jenny Lee, who always seemed to ask a question about Hong Kong and get a lecture in return; Hannah "Bonita" Ellis, who was key to my early masculine development and who may be one of the few blondes who can appreciate self-deprecating Chinese humour; Allen Chang and Hannah Pang, who were the first to help me see the connections among manhood, girls, theology, and history over numerous lunches, coffees, and MSN conversations; Aaron Anderson and the Anderson clan, who endured me stewing endlessly over Chinese men since high school; Rev. Stephen Leung, who said that researching masculinity in Hong Kong was impossible but rooted for me anyway; the "Headlights" group from Enoch Youth Outreach Society, who had to endure my hypotheses on men in 1970s Hong Kong before school even started; Rev. Silas "Dude" Ng, who preaches like Michael Hui; Ignatius "Iggs" Ng, who sent me endless videos on YouTube to help me get this thesis from head to screen; Chris and Annie Fong, who got me more involved in the Hongkonger community in Richmond without making me undergo a complete makeover; and "Comrade"/"Mother Confessor" Ruth Chan, who checked on me nightly, bought me Sam Hui recordings, and let me discover that the elderly in age can be young at heart as well. Many thanks and masculine love to you all.

Lastly, not out of slavish piety or imperialistic motives but out of humble gratitude and childlike faith, I thank the Lord Jesus Christ for his sustaining message of *shalom* in Scripture and for rest for the weary soul that only he can provide. The words that have stayed with me throughout the writing of this thesis have been the latter half of 1 John 2:14: "I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one" (English Standard Version). Let this thesis be a sacrifice of praise to you, O Christ,



and let it be known that you are a God who fosters the intellect, encourages honest inquiry, strengthens the weak, brings *shalom* to all who trust you, and creates humour for the sake of your glory and for the joy of all people. I know that it is uncommon to bring the sacred into the secular (or in my case, the profane). However, one of my heroes, Lutheran Baroque composer Johann Sebastian Bach, provides a model for this final acknowledgement. Whenever he began a composition, he wrote at the top of the page *JJ: Jesu Juva* (“Jesus, help me”). Whenever he ended, he wrote *SDG: Soli Deo Gloria* (“To God alone be the glory”). As this preface winds down and the academic work actually begins, I write *JJ*. I hope that the stories told in the preface and the fruit of my labour, even though it is non-religious (if not sacrilegious) in content, will testify to *SDG*.

Vancouver, BC

13 February 2007

**Introduction:**  
**The Hui Brothers' 1970s Films and What It Meant to Be a Man in Hong Kong**

The film begins with a shot of the city. Hong Kong at sunrise is silent. Towering, shimmering skyscrapers eclipse the sun as the camera pans from right to left, cuts to a shot of the city and then to another of the skyscrapers from the bottom up. The streets are empty. The silence builds in anticipation. Hong Kong cannot be this quiet.

A techno riff breaks the silence, accompanied with the words in yellow, “The Private Eyes: A Michael Hui Film.” What was once silent now breaks out into activity. The streets bustle and burst with people, bicycles, buses, and the street car. Over the hustle and bustle is Sam Hui singing the theme song, “The Private Eyes,” known in Cantonese as “Half-Pound Eight-Ounces (*buun gun bat leung*)”. People are everywhere—on the bridges, at the outdoor markets, on the walkways, in the malls. The camera lingers on the escalator in the mall as two bare legs clad only in high-rise sandals come within the frame. Behind this woman follows a pair of trousers and old, un-polished dress shoes.

This thesis is about the men who worked for that man in that pair of trousers and old, un-polished dress shoes. Its approach is historical but not sociological. Instead, this thesis deals with the representations of young men—specifically in film—as reflective of the cultural ethos of the time (1974-1978) and place (Hong Kong). The ethos reflected in these films serve as a window into discourses about what it meant to be a young man in 1970s Hong Kong as well as how young Hongkonger men related to the generation above them and to the women they pursued. Specifically, this thesis focuses on the four comedy films that the Hui Brothers (Michael, Sam, and Ricky) made in the 1970s: *Games Gamblers Play* (*guai ma seung sing*) (1974), *The Last Message* (*teen choi yu bak tze*) (1975), *The Private Eyes* (*buun gun bat leung*) (1976), and *The Contract* (*mai sun kai*) (1978). This delimitation of time from 1974-1978 is convenient because of its

placement in the historical timeline of Hong Kong cinema: 1974 is explicitly post-Bruce Lee (who died in 1973) and 1978 is before critics hailed a “New Wave” in Hong Kong cinema, a direction that distanced mainstream Hong Kong cinema from its traditional fantastic focus on sex and kung-fu and into more realistic portrayals of Hong Kong society.

Michael Hui was a schoolteacher-turned-comedian whose screen career began on television. His roots began humbly in government-built, low-cost housing in Hong Kong. Majoring in sociology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Michael paved the way to his career in comedy in the 1970s. After a brief stint as a schoolteacher,<sup>4</sup> he began his film career as a co-host with his brother, Sam, in a successful game and talk show in the late 1960s, and after starring in four films between 1972 and 1974, he made his first ground-breaking film in 1974, *Games Gamblers Play*. Sam Hui, along with his band, Lotus, developed a musical trend known as “Canto-pop,” mixing the Hong Kong Cantonese vernacular with a Western 1970s pop music style. These songs became the inspirations for each of the films made by Michael in the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> These films, as film scholar Jenny Lau succinctly puts it, captured the transitions Hong Kong was going through in the 1970s: “Although Hui’s characters are strongly based on traditional Chinese social and moral norms, his concern is with how his protagonist uses these values in interacting with the modern environment of Hong Kong.”<sup>6</sup> If Lau’s analysis is *character-based*, then Lisa Odham Stokes and Michael Hoover augment it with a sociological perspective: in the 1970s and early 1980s, “Hui played working-class Hong Kong characters and introduced

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<sup>4</sup> For the record, Michael Hui interviewed for a teaching position at Asbury Methodist Primary School in 1963, where my grandmother was a teacher at the time (she later became principal). He had promised the superintendent, American missionary Ann Harder, that he would teach English but broke his contract when he got a job at St. Francis’s, a secondary school. He politely said sorry to Ms. Harder, and on Christmas, he bought a box of chocolates and visited her. My grandmother remarks that he really knew how to be a person—or a man.

<sup>5</sup> For corresponding sections on the Hui Brothers’ early pre-film and 1970s biographies, consult Jenny Lau, “Besides Fists and Blood: Michael Hui and Cantonese Comedy,” in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, eds. Poshek Fu and David Desser (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 166; and David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 32.

<sup>6</sup> Lau, 167.

stereotypes familiar to Hong Kongers; his sense of place, coupled with everyman characterization, helped to establish new Hong Kong comedy.”<sup>7</sup> The general consensus is that Hui’s films contributed to a sense of a grassroots Hong Kong community as it was struggling to define its place economically and socially in the world in the 1970s.

This thesis considers the Hui Brothers’ films as pre-cursors to the New Wave because they too focused on mainstream Hong Kong society, not on the sex and violence of traditional Cantonese films. Lau argues, “Hui’s success in combining entertainment with local social concern was also a factor that indirectly ushered in the Hong Kong New Wave (1979-1984),” largely because the sex-and-violence films had stopped attracting Hong Kong audiences by the late 1970s. She contends that Hui’s films convinced film producers during this time that films that attracted audiences were realistic, not fantastic, films.<sup>8</sup> Stephen Teo further underscores the crisis of Hong Kong Cantonese films to highlight how important Michael Hui’s work was in the 1960s-1970s: Mandarin films dominated the Hong Kong film world, and it was Michael Hui’s films that spurred the return of Cantonese cinema (especially in the New Wave) as an audience-attracting venue.<sup>9</sup> Both Lau and Teo imply that had Michael Hui’s films not appeared on the silver screen, the phenomenon of Cantonese cinema itself would have been history. As *Hongkong Standard* film journalist and Hong Kong film correspondent for *Variety* (an American magazine) and *Screen International* (a British cinema trade newspaper) Mel Tobias, writing for the *Screen International* in September 1978, puts bluntly:

A new wave of young Chinese film directors is gradually emerging on the Hongkong movie scene, edging out the die-hard traditionalists such as Li Han-hsiang and King Hu. The trend that the new breed are trying to set in viewing habits may take some time, but

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<sup>7</sup> Stokes and Hoover, 202.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 166-167.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Teo, “The 1970s: Movement and Transition,” in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, eds. Poshek Fu and David Desser (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 91, 107-108.

this move is a welcome and refreshing change. *Anything is better than our regular diet of sex and violence.*<sup>10</sup> (italics mine)

Lau and Teo contend that the Hui Brothers moved Hong Kong cinema into this positive direction that Tobias described, positive because, in Teo's words, "Cantonese would be recognized throughout the 1980s as the *lingua franca* of Hong Kong cinema."<sup>11</sup> In view of the 1971 government legislation that made Chinese an official language, this was hugely significant, especially with reference to the debates that surrounded the usages of Cantonese and Mandarin for Hong Kong government:

...we have to examine whether Cantonese alone (as advocated by the vast majority of the representations received, Cantonese and Mandarin, or Mandarin alone should be adopted. In this connection, we note from the statistical figures from the Report of the Census 1961, that Cantonese was the usual language of 79% of the Hong Kong population and it was understood by 95% of the population. We have no further information on these figures. Consequently, we have no doubt that Cantonese would at the present moment have more relevance and reality for the population as a whole and accordingly conclude that interpretation for the open meetings of the Legislative Council and Urban Council should be confined to English and Cantonese only.<sup>12</sup>

Even at the time of the Mandarin vogue in Hong Kong cinema (1971), the real *lingua franca* in Hong Kong was still Cantonese. In this sense, Michael Hui might be seen as a quasi-national<sup>13</sup> saviour figure who saved the quasi-national language from obscurity in the cinematic space.

Surprisingly, then, there is relatively little historiography on Michael Hui's films from the 1970s, but unsurprisingly, most of the historiography that does exist views Hui as a quasi-nationalist. Lau's article on Hui, published both in the edited volume cited in this thesis and in

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<sup>10</sup> Mel C. Tobias, "The Young Directors," *Screen International* (September 1978), in Mel Tobias, *Flashbacks: Hong Kong Cinema After Bruce Lee* (Hong Kong: Gulliver Books, 1979), 182. Tobias's book is a collection of all of his film reviews from the 1970s with on-off captions about his experience as a film reviewer in 1970s Hong Kong.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>12</sup> "Chinese as an official language," from *The First Report of the Chinese Language Committee*, Hong Kong: Government, 1971, in *Society: A Documentary History of Hong Kong*, ed. David Faure (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), 298-299.

<sup>13</sup> I borrow from the work of Yingchi Chu in Yingchi Chu, *Hong Kong Cinema: Coloniser, motherland, self* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003). Chu considers Hong Kong a quasi-nation in the sense of it being an "imagined community" in the tradition of Benedict Anderson united by a common language (Cantonese) but not really being a nation-state like China.

*Cinema Journal*, deals mostly with Hui as a Hongkonger forming his identity in contrast to the mainland as seen in the 1981 film, *Modern Security Guards*. In her doctoral dissertation, however, she pays careful attention to cultural aspects of *Modern Security Guards*, as she traces concepts of self-effacement, having a heart for others, being “useful,” being a loner, being affirmed by the group, and being redeemed into the social group as being key to what the film described as being a good person.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, her comments are confined to what it means to be a Hongkonger as revealed in the films. In one paragraph in a survey of Hong Kong cinema, Teo mentions the *pak-dong* (partners and buddies) spirit portrayed by Michael and Sam Hui on the screen: “By [the 1970s], Hong Kong had become even more materialistic; the little men of the 60s might have become the middle class of the 70s, but their ranks continued to swell due to the influx of refugees from the Mainland, and times became meaner as people scrambled to make a living.”<sup>15</sup> Teo, like Lau, cites the cultural history of Hong Kong as reflected in the Hui Brothers’ portrayals of young men partnering up in a dog-eat-dog Hong Kong society and struggling together for meaning and affluence. Bordwell documents the effects of these *gang-chan-pian* (Hong Kong-made films): by 1988, over 80 percent of Hong Kong people responding to a poll called themselves “neither British nor Chinese but Hong Kongers.”<sup>16</sup> If anything, most film historians credit the Hui Brothers with the formation of an imagined Hong Kong community, something to which they indeed contributed crucially.

However, few have considered Michael Hui’s movies as a presentation of an alternative masculinity to that propagated by Bruce Lee in the 1970s. Very little consideration is given to Tobias’s telling words in a review of *The Private Eyes*, for example:

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<sup>14</sup> Jenny Kwok-Wah Lau, “A cultural interpretation of the popular cinema of China and Hong Kong, 1981-1985” (Ph.D. diss. Northwestern University, 1989), 210-222.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* (London: British Film Institute, 1997), 54.

<sup>16</sup> Bordwell, 32.

Hui may lack the super-macho appeal exuded by the late Bruce Lee, reports Tobias, but he is clearly well-placed to take over Lee's role as the supremo of the Chinese film industry. His talent lies not in kung fu but in a flair for Chinese comedy adroitly laced with foreign structure and theme. His pictures will not do as well in Western markets as Lee's did, but they promise to give the kung fu superstar's movies a run for their money on the Asian circuit.<sup>17</sup>

Teo also makes a similar parallel:

The rise of Michael Hui parallels that of Bruce Lee in the early 1970s. Both men were regarded as native sons who belonged to and were representative of the postwar generation that grew up in the 1950s without being burdened by the cultural and historical baggage carried by mainland Chinese refugees and immigrants who came to Hong Kong after the war.<sup>18</sup>

The "super-macho appeal" to which Tobias refers is worth consideration. Indeed, Hui did contribute to the re-formation of a Hong Kong as a quasi-national entity. However, the *means* for this end, this thesis contends, was the representation of a masculinity that contrasted with Bruce Lee's "super-macho appeal." That this contrast existed, nevertheless, does not mean that Hui's masculinity was "softer" or "more feminine." Taken in contrast with Lau's work, Hui's representations of masculinity were more realistic as opposed to Bruce Lee's fantastic kung-fu portrayals.

The idea that the Hui Brothers represented a new masculinity in 1970s Hong Kong is not new. While introducing a volume on masculinity and Hong Kong cinema, Laikwan Pang argues that the films of the 1960s and 1970s in Hong Kong distinctly made no attempt to attract a female audience: "This film trend of spreading overt male power and chauvinism has since played a dominant role in the development and success of Hong Kong's commercial cinema," not only in actions but also in "the extremely popular comedies of the Hui Brothers, Cinema City,

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<sup>17</sup> Mel Tobias, "Paydirt for the Hui Brothers," *Asiaweek* (28 January 1977), in Mel Tobias, *Flashbacks: Hong Kong Cinema After Bruce Lee* (Hong Kong: Gulliver Books, 1979), 165. The volume is a compilation of Tobias's essays, and the self-reference is probably a reference to something he reported on somewhere else. The anthology does not indicate anything else. Its credibility is insured because Tobias compiled the anthology himself with the help of an editor.

<sup>18</sup> Teo, "1970s," 96.

Wong Ching, and the early Stephen Chow from the 1980s and 1990s.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, Pang views the Hui Brothers as part of a larger male-dominated production discourse in Hong Kong cinema. Implicitly, he argues that the Hui Brothers’ films are a viable source for understanding popular notions of masculinity in 1970s Hong Kong, but she does not push the argument this far explicitly. But Agnes Ku does. Ku contends that Michael Hui’s 1970s and 1980s comedies pitted the everyday “man-on-the-street” against the “fast-changing modern society” in the tradition of the 1950s and 1960s Cantonese films.<sup>20</sup> However, her essay analyzes Stephen Chow’s more recent movies to see the Hongkonger man as a *man*, not just a Hongkonger.

Nevertheless, Ku’s methodological questions for Chow’s movies also apply to the Hui Brothers’ 1970s films. She formulates her central question, “Still, even if the comic hero appears more real than the kung fu hero, the question is, is the “Everyman” image in Chow’s works an a-gendered subject that represents man and woman alike, or is it a gendered (male) subject made omnipresent and invisible in our construction of folk identity?”<sup>21</sup> Applied to the Hui Brothers’ films, if Michael and Sam Hui represented the everyday man caught in the system, did they represent both men and women, or did their films portray the plights of an omnipresent male? She provides a thought-provoking answer:

...is not Chow a gendered subject after all? Don’t his characters bespeak the voice, desires, dreams, fantasies and fears of a heterosexual male subject? In his characters, we see much about the parodying of power, banality, shrewdness, playfulness, dreams about success, and a celebration of the individual. Although the tone is sometimes not without a tinge of compassion, there is comparatively less on human bonds, deep affection, understanding and emotional experiences. Although women are neither absent nor uniform in his movies, it is always Chow who stands center stage and takes the plot lead, while intermittently reminding his audience of the typical heterosexual male fantasy about women. In the same vein, jokes about male homosexuality are quite commonplace

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<sup>19</sup> Laikwan Pang, “Introduction: the Diversities of Masculinities in Hong Kong Cinema,” in *Masculinities and Hong Kong Cinema*, eds. Laikwan Pang and Day Wong (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>20</sup> Agnes S. M. Ku, “Masculinities in Self-Invention: Critics’ Discourses on Kung Fu-Action movies and Comedies,” in *Masculinities and Hong Kong Cinema*, eds. Laikwan Pang and Day Wong (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 230-231.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.



in his movies. All in all, masculinity as a set of gender qualities is manifested in a hierarchical order of social relationships, which differentiates not only between men and women, and between masculinity and femininity, but also among men of different positions and masculinities of different kinds. After all, doesn't the image of anti-hero or folk hero in Chow reflect the masculinist order and hierarchy in our culture? If he represents someone off the streets of Hong Kong, it is because he represents the popular as opposed to the official or the elite sector of society. The popular, however, remains a site where hegemonic values may prevail under the rhetoric of subversion: the belief in economic success, the ideology of masculinism, the talk of monumental history and so on. Since both readings by Lai and by the popular critics are framed within the narrative of "1997," they tend only to see in his image(s) a typical Hong Kong person within a hegemonic framework, rather than the gender specificity of a Hong Kong man in everyday social interaction. In the present masculinist discourse, Chow is both celebrated as a folk hero (or anti-hero) and forgotten as a gendered subject. This leaves us wondering whether in the critics' conscious attempt to construct the image of a Hong Kong person they are unconsciously naturalizing, and hence further reinforcing, the deeply embedded masculinist norms in our culture.<sup>22</sup>

Embedded in Ku's analysis of Stephen Chow's movies is the conviction that where men are on the silver screen, *that* is a representation of masculinity of some sort. Therefore, when men like Stephen Chow dominate the screen, the movie must in some way be about men. After all, her reasoning is sound. When the film is dominated by heterosexual male fantasies, the film is at least sexually slanted to the masculine. That she argues that Michael Hui films come in the same vein implies that she could envision such an analysis applied to the films with which this thesis deals.

What makes this conclusion seemingly problematic is Janet Salaff's 1983 groundbreaking ethnography of working women in 1970s Hong Kong, *Working Daughters of Hong Kong: Filial piety or power in the family?* In ten case studies of unmarried young women, Salaff argues that the socialization of women in traditional Chinese families (which dominated Hong Kong in the 1970s) was, while within a patriarchal system, no less economic than the socialization of men. Young men and women were expected to bring income to their families, which were at the centre of their worlds. Salaff's term for this phenomenon is the *centripetal family*: the family was

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 235-236.

at the centre of the Chinese political economy. The difference between young men and women, then, was that men would take over the family as the head of house. A woman's only hope, however, was to transfer her loyalties from her birth family to the family in which she married.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, in reality, working-class women worked just as hard as working-class men. On the ground, what was true of a Hongkonger man in the workplace should have been true of a Hongkonger woman in the workplace in the 1970s.

Moreover, Eliza Lee locates her study of gender in Hong Kong among three arenas of action: the colonial state, capitalist development, and Hong Kong society. Young women were becoming increasingly more educated as free primary education was opened in 1971 and Forms 1-3 (Grades 7-9) in secondary school became free in 1978.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, she argues that Hong Kong society was caught between *utilitarian familism* and *economic individualism*: families stayed together because of economic benefits, but individuals viewed themselves not as products of their family systems but rational individuals who could make independent, economic choices.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the first edited study on gender studies in Hong Kong reviews the 1970s as a time when compulsory education allowed women to compete economically on par with men.<sup>26</sup> These studies suggest that men and women should have been equal in Hong Kong discourse and that what was true for a Hongkonger man was true for a Hongkonger woman.

What is the credence, then, for analyzing the Hui Brothers' films for the ethos of the young man, not the ethos of the young working person? In an analysis of education processes in the 1980s, Anita Kit-Wa Chan argues that the educational shaping of young Hongkongers was

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<sup>23</sup> Janet Salaff, *Working Daughters of Hong Kong: Filial piety or power in the family?* Arnold and Caroline Rose Monograph Series of the American Sociological Association (Cambridge and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 44.

<sup>24</sup> Eliza W. Y. Lee, "Introduction: Gender and Change in Hong Kong," in *Gender and Change in Hong Kong: Globalization, Postcolonialism, and Chinese Patriarchy*, ed. Eliza W. Y. Lee (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2003), 3-5.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>26</sup> Fanny M. Cheung, "Introduction," in *EnGendering Hong Kong Society: A Gender Perspective of Women's Status*, ed. Fanny M. Cheung (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1997), 5.

inherently gendered, though it applied to both boys and girls. She finds that the education system had shifted with an underlying ideology of market values, namely that students were human capital and that they were autonomous, rational individuals.<sup>27</sup> These values in turn emphasized the need for students to study science (what she calls a masculine subject) as a way to compete to be leaders of the society. They also focused on well-rounded education that meant that students had to participate in various extracurricular activities such as sports and at least one musical instrument. Lastly, they devalued the home and the private sphere as dominant spheres of existence.<sup>28</sup> She suggests that this curriculum gendered all students as masculine, including girls who were instructed ostensibly to be silent *but* implicitly to compete with boys to be leaders. In other words, though what was true of young men may have been true of young women on the ground, the ethos surrounding their education was distinctively masculine. Similarly, in Salaff's analysis, though young women worked as hard as young men to contribute to their families, their hard work fit within a patriarchal system—and if they worked like men, they were being gendered male.

That is why this thesis deals with the history of the 1970s young Hongkonger male *ethos*, not sociological reality, revealed in the Hui Brothers' film comedies. This emphasis is not apathetic toward historical events; rather, understanding what it meant to be a man in the 1970s will hopefully provide further insight into historical events and sociological realities in the 1970s. The goal of this thesis (to explore Hong Kong's masculine ethos in the 1970s) may be the means to an end for social historians of Hong Kong in the 1970s. Therefore, film is an extremely viable medium for this historical project. Its themes and messages as well as its use of physical

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<sup>27</sup> Anita Kit-wa Chan, "The making of the 'ideal citizen' in schooling processes: Gender, differences and inequalities," in *Remaking Citizenship in Hong Kong: Community, nation, and the global city*, ed. Agnes S. Ku and Ngai Pun (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 75.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 80-88.

representations and aural dimensions may have fictional elements and may exaggerate sociological reality. However, as Eric Ma theorizes about Hong Kong television in the late 1960s and early 1970s, film spoke to the viewing audience by representing, if not caricaturing, them and reinforcing the social norms they already had.<sup>29</sup> That these films were the highest grossing Cantonese films at the time (and *The Private Eyes* was the highest grossing film in 1976 at 8.5 million Hong Kong dollars in a month) indicates that these films did speak deeply to Hong Kong audiences. However, they did not propagate a new culture but entertained them with a caricature of their own culture. The culture they caricatured, in turn, has changed over time: for example, Hongkongers in the 1970s were more concerned about their own livelihood than the possibility of capitalism ending after the 1984 Sino-British Joint Agreement that made 1997 the big year looming ahead. The Hongkonger watching *The Private Eyes* in 1976 lived in a different cultural ethos than the Hongkonger fretting about 1997 a decade later. To get at that ethos, a historian may watch film. Film reflects key elements of historical ethos in order to reinforce it. In other words, to analyze films from the 1970s is to analyze the historical ethos of the 1970s.

Also embedded in this thesis is Joan Wallach Scott's philosophical presupposition: gender categories are empty categories that can be historically defined. Writing about political processes being inherently gendered, she concludes,

We can write the history of that process only if we recognize that 'man' and 'woman' are at once empty and overflowing categories. Empty because they have no ultimate, transcendent meaning. Overflowing because even when they appear to be fixed, they still contain within them alternative, denied, or suppressed definitions.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Eric Kit-wai Ma, *Culture, Politics, and Television in Hong Kong*, Culture and Communication in Asia (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 17. Ma's argument tackles the development of the Hongkonger culture in opposition to mainland China's culture through television's reinforcement strategy. This thesis uses his understanding of television as reinforcement for film because both media are watched as products of a cultural ethos, not creators of it. Because they are products, they reflect the cultural ethos, which means that a study of film reveals the cultural ethos that it is trying to reinforce.

<sup>30</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Chichester, and West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1988), 49.

This thesis is based on this premise because it assumes that representations of masculinity in 1970s Hong Kong is not the way masculinity always has been portrayed in every culture at every time in every place. Judith Butler's understanding of gender as performative is also helpful: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."<sup>31</sup> This thesis holds that Michael Hui's films were expressions in the 1970s of the masculine discourse. It does not impose a definition of masculinity on the films; rather, it reads masculinity out of the films.<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, this thesis asks at the core: how did the Hui Brothers' 1970s films portray what it meant to be a man in 1970s Hong Kong? It is divided into three chapters that explore how young men were portrayed in the films, how they related to other social groups, and how these films intentionally fit within the 1970s cultural ethos. The first chapter deals with *generational masculinities*, or how the films portray the relationship between the young man and father figures with economic clout, be they blood relatives, older brothers, or bosses. Through an analysis of the films' humour, it introduces a new term into the historiography of Hong Kong: *the culture of complaint*, or a proclivity among young men to verbally complain about their

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<sup>31</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 25.

<sup>32</sup> That being said, approaches to gender need to be reformulated to fit Hong Kong's historical situation, especially the dominant works on Western sexuality by Michel Foucault, Thomas Laqueur, and Judith Butler. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 105-106, 122-127. Foucault argues that sexuality in nineteenth-century Europe was deployed through family alliances to maximize life. The elites exercised regulation of sexuality among themselves, and these regulations trickled down to the lower classes. Indeed, Foucault's regulative discourse of sexual practices is interesting but is relatively irrelevant in a Chinese situation because Chinese Hongkongers (the dominant population of Hong Kong) do not share the same Victorian history as their British colonizers. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), 11. Thomas Laqueur's archaeology of sexuality from the Greeks to Freud outlines a Western trajectory of sexual thought, tracing the development of biologies from females being inverted males to females being distinctly, biologically different from men in the nineteenth century. Despite Hong Kong having been colonized by Britain, obsession with the body in a discussion of Hong Kong's gender roles may overlook Neoconfucian narratives as well as the rise of Hong Kong's feminist practices in the 1980s. Butler, 17. Butler's obsession with the imposition of heterosexual desire as the formational locus of gender may also be irrelevant in the case of Hong Kong because it assumes that all gender can be analyzed through constructs of sexual desire. In short, this thesis's main methodology will neither be from the vantage point of the body nor sexual desire. Instead, it will be from the portrayal of the Hongkonger man's behaviours on the silver screen.

economic plight without taking physical agency to overturn Hong Kong's Neoconfucian generational system. The second chapter deals with *practical masculinities*, or how the films portray young men constructing their own identity and attempting to gain economic status through pragmatic means. In other words, through being a master of improvising everyday situations and partnerships known in Cantonese as *pak dong*, young men hoped to break out of the generational system by becoming heads of their own familial systems. The third chapter deals with *playboy masculinities*, or how the films portray men and their heterosexual fantasies for thrills of sex and gambling but being held back by their families. Through an extended discussion of masculinity in the Hui Brothers' films, this thesis attempts to demonstrate that the young male ethos in 1970s Hong Kong had a pragmatic core as young men (presumably) struggled under a repressive Neoconfucian older generation in the faint hope of becoming heads of their own families and workplaces and secretly living lives of playboy luxury.

Chapter 1:  
Generational Masculinities:  
Cheap Bosses, Centripetal Families, and the Ethos of Complaint

Sam<sup>33</sup> gives the ashen-faced, bony middle-aged man a look of disgust as he slams his whole body into him. Fearful, the man runs off. Out of his Columbo-style jacket, Sam pulls out a wallet and slaps it several times against his palm, seeing the man off with a look that says, *Serves you right for pick-pocketing my boss*. He walks back to the double doors of the kitchen and leans against the wall. He is the paragon of detective style with his coolly victorious facial expression and his Columbo coat.

His flustered boss bursts through the double doors. His hair is dishevelled, his glasses fallen below the level of his eyes, and his face covered with spots of flour. He wielded empty pans, link sausages, and a swordfish in his fight with the ashen-faced, bony middle-aged man in the kitchen for his pick-pocketed wallet—and lost when a wok that he threw boomeranged back onto his temple. Disgustingly impressed with young man Sam’s victory, he splutters, “You have a couple moves in you, don’t you?”

Sam hands him the wallet. The boss is even more flustered. Faking a calm voice, he spits out, “Five hundred dollars a month, two dollars per meal. You up for the job?”

“*Wah!*” Sam exclaims. “You can’t even afford a bowl of rice for two dollars.”

“If you eat too much rice,” the boss retorts, “you’ll get haemorrhoids.”

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This chapter seeks to answer the question: how did the ethos of young men being at the economic mercy of their bosses shape what it meant to be a young man in 1970s Hong Kong? As

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<sup>33</sup> For the reader’s convenience, this thesis will refer to Michael Hui’s characters in the films as “Michael,” Sam Hui’s characters as “Sam,” and Ricky Hui’s characters as “Ricky.” After all, this thesis is examining these actors’ images on screen, not just their characters and the plots (or lack thereof) of their movies. To this end, it will be less confusing to name the characters with their actors’ namesakes, not their characters’ namesakes.

Jenny Lau argues, the harshness of everyday living in Hong Kong's transition to affluence in the 1970s was painfully but comically portrayed in Michael Hui's early films.<sup>34</sup> One of these painful representations was that of *generational masculinities*, namely constant servility to an older man in a Neoconfucian Hongkonger setting. The young man in Hong Kong did not live in an isolated bubble of his male age cohorts; he lived in a world of fathers, clergymen (if he was religious—as films like *The Last Message* satirize), and employers, all of whom were regarded as part of “the older generation” in a Hong-Kong-style Neoconfucian sense. Sometimes Michael Hui's films portray Michael Hui as the older man capitalizing on the efforts of younger men like Sam or Ricky, or they portray the Hui Brothers themselves as the younger generation either trying to make ends meet in light of the older generation's social advantage over them or (more practically) making light of trying to make ends meet. The relationship between older-generation men and younger-generation men was that of social hierarchy, and hence, economic hierarchy. The older generation, as shown in the pick-pocketing scene in *The Private Eyes*, was represented as the controllers of how much money the younger man literally took home.

To understand the emotional ethos of young Hongkonger men in this plight, this chapter examines masculinity in Michael Hui's films as *generational*. It understands Hui's portrayal of employer-employee relations as not merely hierarchical but generational in Hong Kong's Neoconfucian sense because these relations have to be understood in the terms of *Chinese* Hong Kong, not from a simplistic Western colonial perspective. In other words, it positioned older men (even if they were only older by a few years) in a superior subject-position to younger employees simply because they were older. As portrayed in the Hui Brothers' comedies, these young men responded with a *culture of complaint*. In the films, the younger men do not directly

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<sup>34</sup> Lau, “Michael Hui,” 167.



confront their bosses but practice indirect criticism and complain among themselves about their bosses. In fact, this chapter argues that the films themselves were expressions of the cultural ethos of complaint through the medium of comedy films. In other words, the popular understanding (*i.e.* the historical ethos) of what it meant to be a man in the 1970s in Hong Kong was framed in a context in which the young man was continually struggling to make ends meet because of a system established and reified by an older, more Neoconfucian generation. He was at the bottom economically because he was at the bottom socially and hierarchically, and all he could do to (so to speak) “be a man” was to complain in humorous terms about his higher-ups.

In the 1970s, Hong Kong may have been modernized but the dominance of the family made it a dominantly Neoconfucian society. Indeed, this thesis argues that the ethos surrounding the Hongkonger young man was fundamentally familial, not *laissez-faire* capitalist. The workplace was more than a place to make money; it was an extension of the family. Therefore, this chapter describes the historical ethos around the workplace in the 1970s in generational, not capitalist, terms. However, traditionally, the history of Hong Kong and the development of the Hongkonger identity has been characterized as simultaneously Chinese and capitalist—but more capitalist than Chinese. For example, Jan Morris’s supposedly definitive 1997 travel account and popular history discusses Hong Kong as a dominantly Chinese place with a single objective: to make money. Granted, Morris regards Hong Kong as a fundamentally Chinese place.<sup>35</sup> But describing Hong Kong in the early 1900s, she describes Hong Kong’s beauty as “the beauty, like it or not, of the capitalist system.” Citing how “more than a usual

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<sup>35</sup> Jan Morris, *Hong Kong: Epilogue to an Empire*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Penguin, 1997), 118. This thesis feels justified in using a travel account as representative of a popular historiography of Hong Kong because Morris’s account has been sold and received as “the definitive study” in *The Washington Post* and hailed for its “enormous account of historical research” that “lays out for inspection a complete colony, start to finish, visually, analytically, anecdotally, and with passages of personal impression” in the *Evening Standard*. In short, it is something that most people, even historians such as Alan Birch in *Hong Kong: The Colony That Never Was*, regard as an authoritative history.

share of this city's energies goes towards the making of money, and nobody has ever pretended otherwise," she quotes British business pioneer James Matheson of Jardine, Matheson, and Company, the dominant enterprise of Hong Kong in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as saying, "We have every respect...for persons entertaining strict religious principles, but we fear that very godly people are not suited to the drug [opium] trade."<sup>36</sup> Morris's description seems to typify what Tak-Wing Ngo calls the "*laissez-faire*" narrative of Hong Kong.<sup>37</sup> It was, after all, Jardine and Matheson who were instrumental in persuading Lord Palmerston to acquire Hong Kong after the First Opium War, a barren-rock island mostly known to pirates, merchants, and indigenous peoples prior to it becoming a British colony, as a British colony. From the beginning of its colonial history, Hong Kong was a moneymaking enterprise, according to Morris, not a place for family values.

However, an understanding of Hong Kong identity requires analysis that is outside the box of typical post-colonial deconstruction of the West: Hong Kong identity and its capitalist outlook is distinctively and indigenously Hong Kong—not quite Chinese but not quite British. Tu Wei-Ming argues, for example, that Hong Kong's *laissez-faire* capitalism "is a far cry from *laissez-faire* as it is traditionally practiced": "Hong Kong's free-market capitalism, ably guided by government-appointed local leaders, exemplifies the 'loose-rein' political philosophy characteristic of traditional China," not the West.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, Aihwa Ong contends that "new narratives of Asian modernity, spun from the self-confidence of vibrant economies, cannot be reduced to a pale imitation of some Western standard (for instance, full-fledged democracy combined with modern capitalism). Ascendant regions of the world such as the Asia Pacific

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>37</sup> Tak-Wing Ngo, "Colonialism in Hong Kong Revisited," in *Hong Kong's History: State and society under colonial rule*, ed. Tak-Wing Ngo (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 3.

<sup>38</sup> Tu Wei-Ming, "Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center," *Daedalus* 120, no. 2 (1991): 10.

region are articulating their own modernities as distinctive formations.”<sup>39</sup> Ong’s premise indicates that historians need to understand the Hongkonger identity on its own terms. Ong suggests that Hongkongers have been complicit in forming their own identities, collaborating with and borrowing from both the British and the Chinese to their own entrepreneurial advantages.

Traditional Chinese culture itself can be characterized by Neoconfucian family ideology. Key to Confucius’s (551 BC-479 BC) thought was the notion of *filial piety*, or the complete service and submission to one’s parents, if not all of one’s elders. In the *Analects*, for example, Confucius replies to a pupil regarding filial piety, “When anything has to be done the young people undertake it; when there is wine and food the elders are served—is this all there is to filial piety?”<sup>40</sup> Confucius implies that there is more to filial piety than getting the job done and serving wine and food to elders; it has to consume one’s lifestyle. His later disciple Mencius (372-289 BC?) reinforced the importance of filial piety as a lifestyle: “The substance of humanity is to serve one’s parents; the basis of righteousness is to obey one’s elder brothers.”<sup>41</sup> The extent of this lifestyle was not just obedience to one’s own blood parents, then. For Mencius, filial piety was based on a patriarchal system in which a man had to serve his elders in general because that was what a good man did. Confucius and Mencius were then canonized in the Song dynasty (960-1279) when scholars like Hu Yuan (993-1059) began to educate youth in the tradition of Confucius and Mencius by fusing Buddhist meditative methodology with the Confucian classics. Such an approach was a new approach to the Confucian classics and so has been termed “*neo-Confucian*.” Students were taught to memorize Confucian and Mencian

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<sup>39</sup> Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 23.

<sup>40</sup> Confucius, *The Analects* II:8, in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. 1, eds. William Theodore de Bary, Wing-Tsit Chan, and Burton Watson, Introduction to Oriental Civilizations, ed. William Theodore de Bary (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1960), 27.

<sup>41</sup> Mencius IV A:27, in *Sources*, 98.

literature in a Buddhist way “as deposits of eternal truth rather than as antiquarian repositories, and the true aim of classical studies was to bring these enduring principles [of Confucian thought], valid for any place or time, to bear upon both the conduct of life and the solution of contemporary problems.”<sup>42</sup> In short, applying Confucian ideology (including filial piety) as a universal truth was the hallmark of Neoconfucian ideology—and of most of Chinese culture from the Song dynasty forward.

It is this Neoconfucian thought that needs to be linked with 1970s Hongkonger identity. To see Hongkonger identity on its own terms, Tak-Wing Ngo challenges Morris’s ostensible *laissez-faire* premise by appealing to the agency of the Hongkonger. Morris implies that Hong Kong was run by British merchants in a *laissez-faire* way: a careless reader would infer that it was the British who captured the barren rock, turned it into a financial oasis, and set its Chinese people to work for them as cogs in their machine. This colonial narrative easily turns into a nationalistic history that situates Hong Kong as an integral part of China that the British somehow stole. Ngo counters,

Without doubt, Hong Kong’s development has always been affected by Britain and China, but thanks to the active part played by different actors, the people of Hong Kong also took the initiative in shaping its history. Moreover, while both British rule and Hong Kong’s relationship with mainland China had an imprint on Hong Kong society, it was the complex state-society relations that intertwined with the British and Chinese factors which created Hong Kong’s unique socio-political landscape.<sup>43</sup>

Ngo argues against the nationalistic narrative by positioning Hongkongers as active agents in the colonial system. If they were complicit in the shaping of Hong Kong, he suggests, then they were not so much colonized subjects as they were localizing agents assimilating Chinese and British elements to shape their unique identities. However, reading Ngo and Morris together, this assimilation process would naturally mean that Hongkongers actively assimilated a *laissez-*

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<sup>42</sup> *Sources*, 384-385.

<sup>43</sup> Ngo, 2-3.

*faire* capitalist approach to business; it was not arbitrarily forced on them. In other words, Chinese Hongkongers were not only part of the machine; they *were* the machine—a distinct Hongkonger machine that actively fused British capitalism with Chinese familial culture.

Gary Hamilton refines this argument with his definition of Chinese capitalism: Chinese people were capitalist in the sense that heads of households who wanted to get rich operated on a supply-and-demand model within small, family-owned businesses that resembled kinship networks. Hong Kong, he argues, was the spearhead of this kind of capitalism after the Second World War. Both China and Japan's economies were devastated by the war. However, in Hong Kong, Chinese entrepreneurs discovered new markets outside of the China-Japan area, linking up with large Western firms to cause a new economic boom and spearheading the Chinese commercial enterprise.<sup>44</sup> The success these Hongkongers met eventually led to a shifting of their identities over the last five decades, Hamilton argues elsewhere, from "being resident migrants who trace their origins to nearby districts in South China to 'Hongkongers,' people who identify deeply with the locale and its urbane outlook...Hong Kong's colonial status kept politics in the background and brought to the fore the considerable abilities of the Chinese to make money for themselves and for their families and friends." He suggests that this identity has led to a severing of identity ties with the People's Republic of China since the 1970s.<sup>45</sup> The idea of being a Hongkonger, Hamilton implies, developed over the last fifty years due to Hong Kong functioning as the spearhead for the Asian capitalist endeavour. However, this spearheading was neither to Britain nor to China's ultimate benefit: it was to the small family networks of Hong Kong's family-owned businesses. To be a Hongkonger, then, was not to be economically

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<sup>44</sup> Gary Hamilton, "Hong Kong and the Rise of Capitalism in Asia," in *Cosmopolitan Capitalists: Hong Kong and the Chinese Diaspora at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Gary G. Hamilton (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1999), 27.

<sup>45</sup> Gary Hamilton, "Introduction," in *Cosmopolitan Capitalists: Hong Kong and the Chinese Diaspora at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Gary G. Hamilton (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1999), 8.

loyal to one's state (although the state invariably had influence on identity) nor to *kowtow* to the British as colonial masters but *simply to make money for one's family*. It was to be caught between Neoconfucianism and capitalist ideologies.<sup>46</sup> To apply this argument to family concepts of masculinity, Hamilton's suggestion that it was the heads of households who ran these kinship networks implies that young men were potentially groomed to take over these headship roles. In short, understanding the familial nature of Hong Kong capitalism is essential to understanding the portrayal of the ideal Hongkonger man in the Hongkonger family.

But if the family was the locus of twentieth-century, postwar Chinese capitalism, then the Hui Brothers portray Hong Kong's small businesses as *families*. For example, in *The Private Eyes*, Sam and Ricky sleep in boss Michael's home on cheap, steel bunk beds that are so low that attempting to sit up will cause one to bang one's head on the bunk above. That Sam and Ricky live with the boss implies that by becoming hired, they have entered into Michael's family business. Because Michael is the male head of this family, his relationship with Sam and Ricky is not merely hierarchical in employer-employee terms. It is *generational*.

In other words, what the film implies about the ethos about work for the young Hongkonger man in the 1970s was that working for a boss meant regarding one's boss as a familial higher-up. Though Janet Salaff's 1983 triangulation of Hong Kong's centripetal family values, the monotonous workplace, and female workers focuses on young women (not young men), her concept of the centripetal family is again helpful for understanding *The Private Eyes*,

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<sup>46</sup> Alvin Y. So, "The Economic Success of Hong Kong: Insights from a World-System," *Sociological Perspectives* 29, no. 2 (1986): 242. So contests this understanding of Hong Kong from Andre Gunder Frank's world-system approach. So argues that this Neoconfucianist and capitalist ideology is simply a modernization narrative: Hong Kong was modernized, so it became successful. Instead, he argues that Hongkongers, especially in the 1970s, saw beneficial ties to the capitalist world-system and entered as a power independent of Britain and China. His argument, however, is more pertinent to the economic success of Hong Kong, which is *not* the focus of this thesis. This thesis focuses on the development of the identity of the Hongkonger and its application to young men. However, his argument confirms this thesis's premise that the Hongkonger identity arose out of the 1970s when Hong Kong was becoming an economic power in the capitalist world-system.

especially because the historical time period of her study of working women (1971-1976) and the film (1976) coincide. Salaff's basic argument centers around the Hong Kong centripetal family being itself an economic unit:

The family head was a male who represented the household in all contractual matters with other families and outsiders and made key decisions on family work schedules, sources of income, and expenditures. Patrilineal and patrilocal family patterns lent continuity and leadership to the economic enterprise, and this combination of delegated leadership and cooperation by all members was the key to the economic family.<sup>47</sup>

A man at the head of the house was not the family breadwinner in a traditional Hongkonger context. Rather, he was the decision-maker—the boss—and all the other family members won bread for the family according to the head's agenda. After all, this was the Neoconfucian way: it was a matter of filial piety to work for the family's interest, and filial piety was the centre of what it meant to be a good person. Indeed, in that same scene, Michael almost sends Sam and Ricky to spy on a tycoon's young, promiscuous wife (until he sees her big eyes and cleavage in a photograph, after which he goes in place of Ricky). Michael is a decision-maker; Sam and Ricky are the ones who bring back results and profits. In short, the workplace in *The Private Eyes* fits Salaff's understanding of the economic centripetal family in 1970s Hong Kong. The ethos surrounding boss-employee relations was generational, not merely hierarchical.

But could this ethos be extended beyond the small business—or even beyond *The Private Eyes* as a film? 1983 film *The Contract* suggests yes. In *The Contract*, the relationship between boss and employee was again portrayed as familial at heart: on the part of Michael Hui, the relationship is that with a female boss and her two combative thugs; on the part of Sam, it is with an Indian magician; on all of their parts, it is with MTV's grey-haired evaluation committee that makes them sign eight-year-long blank contracts. The joke in *The Contract* was that signing

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<sup>47</sup> Salaff, 36.

a working contract for MTV meant signing “the contract that sells your life” because the contract was blank, and the signer was subject for eight years to do whatever the boss wanted him or her to do. When Michael wants to transfer to TVB as a game show host, his female boss refuses him: “As long as you are under this contract,” she tells him menacingly, “your life belongs to me.” While she represents an atypical head as a woman, her decision-making behaviour, her lack of evidence of heterosexuality, and her constantly being flanked by two thugs gives her a quasi-masculine appearance. That Michael trembles in her presence suggests that he regards her as a parent, as much as he schemes to steal that contract after he leaves her office. In other words, *The Contract* suggests that the ethos around the workplace in larger corporations like television stations were also familial, not just capitalist, in atmosphere. Working for these companies meant selling one’s life to them and entering their centripetal family system.

Relations with the boss were *generational*.

In *Games Gamblers Play*, Michael Hui demonstrates that this familial understanding of the workplace even extended to quasi-crime networks. A casino boss known as Ah Chuen regards his henchmen as sons who bring back pimping profits, stall on horse races, keep the books, and make sure that the casino frequently wins, not loses. His relations with them resembles that of an abusive father with nervous sons who conduct the everyday workings of the family business. His prominent line in the film is, “Have you washed your head yet?” directed to his bookkeeper when he realizes that he has lost a significant bet in a horse race and when his pimp hides 300 Hong Kong dollars from him; they both tremble nervously when he asks this menacing question. This is followed by a violent blow to the top of the head with a small club; head-washing refers to the anticipation of blood flowing from the wound, which means that the henchman would have to wash his head to get it off. However, these abused henchmen are loyal like loyal sons: when Michael defeats them in a horse bet, they travel together with their boss to Macao to beat



Michael up. Their lives revolve around their workplace: it is not exactly a gang, although the boss clearly has drug-lord connections (he constantly snorts crack), but a quasi-family-run casino business. The workplace signified an all-male, economic, centripetal family in *Games Gamblers Play*.

Indeed, understanding the workplace as familial augments Salaff's understanding of the workplace in 1970s Hong Kong society: the workplace was not just a place for Hongkongers to bring income back to the family but was viewed as an extension of the family itself. Salaff's study of three factory workers reveals that while different factories had different management ideologies, the one conclusion was that factories were run paternalistically, either by keeping information from workers, by controlling the lifestyles of workers in small shops, or by simply being family-owned.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the workplace-as-family is not a concept that Salaff pushes. Rather, her agenda (Marxist at times) is to show that the centripetal family dominated the lives of working women in the 1970s; working women had to bring what they earned from the workplace to the family. Nevertheless, the films add to Salaff's sociological study the understanding of the workplace as a familial organization itself in the tradition of Hamilton's family-based capitalism. In other words, the cultural ethos in the 1970s held that bosses related to their employees *generationally*: they were the heads, and the employees were their working arms. For the sake of convenience, this thesis will refer to this understanding of the workplace as the *family-firm* or the *family-workplace*.

But what does all this familial talk have to do with *men* (as opposed to general, non-gendered Hongkonger society)? After all, could this not have been the average Hongkonger ethos, regardless of gender? Indeed, from pure sociological data (such as Salaff's study of

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 119-120.

working daughters), this ethos of cheap bosses and the centripetal family applied to both men and women. However, Susan Brownell and Jeffrey Wasserstrom suggest three important distinctions to understanding gender in Chinese societies both before and after extended Western contact (which includes Hong Kong in the 1970s). These concepts illustrate why the *ethos* was inherently masculinist from a Chinese perspective:

(1) gender concepts were anchored in beliefs about family structure and social roles more so than in beliefs about biological sex (even beliefs that we might call “biological” were based in classical Chinese medicine, not Western science); (2) “men” and “women” were plural categories rather than unified categories opposed to each other; (3) “manhood” and “womanhood” were not directly linked to heterosexuality, and reproducing the lineage was a more important aspect of sexuality than individual pleasure...The existing scholarship seems to indicate that contact with the West brought about profound changes; nevertheless, Chinese gender maintained its own distinctive character—in particular, sexuality did not occupy the central role that it does in Western gender. Sexuality seems to have regained importance in the 1990s, but concepts of femininity and masculinity still seem to be primarily anchored in the roles of mother/father and wife/husband.<sup>49</sup>

Chinese masculinity, Brownell and Wasserstrom suggest, would be best understood from the perspective of Neoconfucian family philosophy: instead of asking, “How did men derive sexual pleasure, and what did this have to do with being a man?” one must ask, “How did men view their duty to their family, and what did this have to do with being a man?” In other words, to understand representations of masculinity in 1970s Hong Kong requires more of an analysis of *duty* rather than *desire*. What is significant about the Hui Brothers’ films, as Laikwan Pang and Agnes Ku have pointed out, is that it mostly portrays *men* and their plights.<sup>50</sup> That the only female boss in the Hui Brothers’ 1970s films (in *The Contract*) is rather asexual suggests that the boss was a dominantly masculine role. The cultural ethos then held that these bosses related

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<sup>49</sup> Susan Brownell and Jeffrey Wasserstrom, “Introduction: Theorizing Femininities and Masculinities,” in *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, ed. Susan Brownell and Jeffrey Wasserstrom (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2002), 34.

<sup>50</sup> Pang, 8; Ku, “Masculinities,” 230-231. See this thesis’s introduction for a detailed discussion of Pang and Ku’s views.

generationally with their male employees by sending them into the workplace, for (in terms of family structure) men were the economic heads. Women, on the other hand, could only serve in inferior, helping roles such as being a prostitute like Betty Ting Pei in *Games Gamblers Play*, the assistant nurse that Sam tries to seduce in *The Last Message*, the secretary in *The Private Eyes*, and Sam's assistant magician (who happens to portray his sister) in *The Contract*. Indeed, sociologically, Salaff demonstrates that women were working as factory workers and in professional roles, but the cultural ethos reflected in the Hui Brothers' films show that such roles were perceived as *masculine*. The generational ethos in the 1970s placed the masculine boss as the upper generation and in authority over his male employees who lived to profit the firm-family.

Young men trying to beat this generational system faced a futile task, or at least so it was popularly thought. *The Last Message* demonstrates the futile inability of the younger employees to rise to economic prominence. Both Michael and Sam portray members of the younger generation in opposition to a neurologist, a hospital chaplain, and a mad diver (played by Roy Chiao). When the mad diver gives Michael scraps of Ming Dynasty porcelain that he found while diving, Michael daydreams himself eating a banana sitting in an inner tube in a pool with a host of bikini-clad women at his side. He sees the older chaplain—the one who keeps on telling him off because he is disrespectful to religion and to his superiors—as the pool janitor. He throws the banana peel into the water and tells the chaplain to pick it up. When the chaplain hesitates, Michael taps the chaplain, and he falls headlong into the water. On the same note, while Sam puts plugs on a patient's head to test his brainwaves, he starts dreaming of the diver's very attractive daughter played by Elizabeth Sahlins coming down to him from a house in a wedding dress as he arrives in a helicopter. As he fantasizes pulling the clips out of her hair to loosen it, he accidentally pulls the plugs off the patient, to which the doctor (his generational

higher-up) reprimands him. Apathetically, Sam leaves the room with his verbal resignation from the hospital, assuming that he has struck it rich. Both Michael and Sam have the same basic dream: when they strike it rich because of the Ming Dynasty scraps, they can throw off the shackles of the older generation in the form of their bosses and live life in luxury. In other words, while it was discursively masculine to work in such a family-firm, men within this cultural ethos did not like this arrangement. Rather, they wanted their independence from this generational masculine complex.

However, when a private detective agency confiscates the Ming Dynasty scraps because the scraps are actually submerged in public waters, all of Michael's dreams fade away. In his imagination, the chaplain sits in the inner tube and he is the janitor—and because of this daydream, he goes mad. Although Michael and Sam's behaviour in trying to coax Roy Chiao's character into giving them places to look for antiques so that they can strike it rich *seems* to indicate that they are greedy, a more careful analysis of the film demonstrates that their greed is a means to an end: it is so that they can best their superiors. However, that even what they find to topple their superiors is taken away indicates that such an effort is futile. Michael goes mad, and Sam loses his job as a nurse in the mental hospital. The older generation will always be socially superior to the younger generation. However, *The Last Message* is not so much tragic but *funny*: it is not comedic in a Shakespearean sense because it ends with the demise of its two main characters, but it is not tragic because the ending is supposed to be funny. A tragedy looks like the Bruce Lee morality tale, *Jing wu men* (1972), when Bruce Lee gets shot in the end for not containing but exercising his vengeance over the *bushido* school that murdered his teacher. *The Last Message* rather laughed at Michael and Sam's stubborn pragmatism in their quest for money, portrayed them as greedy, and straddled a dialectic of seeing their loss as what was coming to

them and causing the audience to pity them (because their get-rich-quick schemes undoubtedly mirrored the lives of many in the audience). The generational boss who operates the brain wave machine now with Michael as the patient and Sam as the fired nurse gets the last laugh.

Therefore, these generational hierarchies shaped the 1970s ethos of young Hongkonger men into an ethos of humorous complaint. These movies and their title songs, after all, were meant to be *funny*. Humour itself is historically interesting: for example, Robert Darnton's examination of why the story of cats being massacred by young French apprentices is funny illustrates how "our own inability to get the joke is an indication of the distance that separates us from the workers of pre-industrial Europe."<sup>51</sup> Similarly, this thesis's examination of the humour of complaining in the Hui Brothers' films illustrates not only what may separate the reader of this thesis from a cultural Hongkonger but what may separate twenty-first century North Americans from 1970s Hongkongers. It reinforces the understanding that dealing with comedy films from the 1970s is inevitably the writing of history, not just film criticism from a cultural perspective. Why and how was complaining about the system funny? Simply put, it was a "Hongkongerized," Neoconfucian spin on James Scott's "weapons of the weak." While Scott's context was a Malaysian peasant village, his analysis of the "*everyday* forms of peasant resistance" that "stop well short of outright collective defiance" includes aspects as "not pretty" as "backbiting, gossip, character assassination, rude nicknames, gestures, and silences of contempt which, for the most part, are confined to the backstage of village life" because it is virtually impossible for peasants to outright revolt and not be immediately crushed.<sup>52</sup> As was seen in *The Last Message*, young Hongkonger men, though far from being the "peasantry" of Hong

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<sup>51</sup> Robert Darnton, "Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin," in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage, 1984), 99.

<sup>52</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), xvi-xvii.

Kong, met enormous difficulty in trying to get rich quick to break free from the system of generational masculinities. An alternative form of resistance similar to Scott's "weapons of the weak" was the humorous culture of complaint.

The title songs of the movies highlighted many of the plights of working men, which led to their popularity as staples of early Canto-pop. For example, the hit title song of *The Private Eyes* in 1976 satirized the hardships faced by the young men by complaining about the cheapness of bosses of the older generation. Sam Hui's voice begins the movie as random shots of the busy streets of Hong Kong are shown. The camera then zooms in on a man's feet following feminine feet in high-rise sandals (the boss hard at work on the heels of a woman having an affair with his client's husband). Sam sings,

We the class of working people / rushing around with errands—our guts are wasted—  
/earned so little—how can we spend to the month's end? (so cheap!) / Surely, truly  
indigestion.

The worst part is that the boss will easily exercise his position / constantly—right or  
wrong—crazily barking (rah rah rah!) / If you beg him for a raise, his face will turn mad  
(whine a bit) / In your dreams!

(Half-pound eight-ounces) work till you look like a beast / (Half-pound eight-ounces)  
how do wet firecrackers explode? / (Half-pound eight-ounces) if you've got guts, take a  
gun and rob / If you gave half a pound of effort and said you wanted your share of eight  
ounces / This generation's so difficult to win bread / Can there be half-pound eight-  
ounces, so ideal? (whatever...)

We the class of working people / For our whole lives, being slaves to money, / That kind  
of misery is so bad that it'd scare a ghost if you tell them (watch me die) / Don't say it  
doesn't matter.

(Half-pound eight-ounces) even if you had blessings, they're not yours to enjoy / (Half-  
pound eight-ounces) worse than boiling pork sausages / (Half-pound eight-ounces)  
chicken feed and you still need to peck / If you gave half a pound of effort and said you  
wanted your share of eight ounces / This generation's so difficult to win bread... / Can  
there be half-pound eight-ounces, so ideal? (whatever...)<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Sam Hui, "Half-Pound Eight-Ounces [*Ban Jin Ba Liang*]," in *The Private Eyes*, prod. Raymond Chow, 96 minutes, Golden Harvest Productions, 1976. DVD. My translation.

This song described the misery of the younger male as subordinated to a familial boss too cheap to pay him a “half-pound” for his “eight ounces” of work. In other words, young men were slaving away trying make ends meet and were being economically thwarted by their cheap bosses. That it became such a hit in Hong Kong demonstrates its near-complete capture of the hearts and minds of the young, working-class men. Indeed, working-class images lurk through the song: its description of guts, slavery, suffering, superstitious ghosts, and chicken feed reflect a mixture of country images and the sufferings of the underdog; indeed, they are portrayed as little more than beasts of burden.

Of course, the song’s intent was to be sarcastic, but in sarcasm there was a reflection of a cultural ethos of complaint. What this song demonstrates that the description of one’s sufferings in explicit toilet humour and exaggerated working-class imagery was *funny* in the 1970s. The source of that suffering was the cheap boss who goaded his employees and paid them so cheaply that they said that they could hardly survive. This was reality (according to the historical ethos), but described in the song, it was funny—largely due to the pop 1970s tune accompanying the toilet lyrics. The image jokes, based on popular medical and culinary knowledge, demonstrated the futility of life in this generational system. Overworking resulted in wasted bowels. Cheapness would result in the herbal doctor examining one’s indigestion. Wet firecrackers could not explode. Looking like a beast was to look subhuman. Scaring ghosts meant that one’s condition was horrible. If one boiled pork sausages, they shrank significantly. If one pecked at chicken feed, there was little to peck at. These exaggerated statements of the young Hongkonger man’s misery were meant to provoke (likely sarcastic) laughter. This was common Hongkonger knowledge addressed to the Hongkonger man on the street to give him an outlet to joke about his misery, if not to cheer on Sam Hui as someone who understood him in relation to his ever-barking, choleric boss. At last, he might say, someone understood his boss

not as a venerable generational higher-up but an abusive dog-like creature who was working him to death. Needless to say, the young man did not enjoy this generational arrangement.

The movie corroborates this caricaturing complaint regarding bosses. In *The Private Eyes*, Michael Hui's portrayal of a cheap boss who refuses to pay his employee more than 500 Hong Kong dollars per month with two dollars for each meal, excusing the cheap fee because of haemorrhoids. In the context of the movie, the song describes Michael. He tells his other employee, played by Ricky, that if he would rather be dead from the flu than to waste money on the doctor in an effort to coerce him onto a mission that he does not want to go on: he is the cheap boss ordering his "son" to bring profits back to the centripetal family-workplace. On another occasion, Ricky slams the door of the car, shattering a window, a side mirror, and a window frame: Michael subsequently takes out a calculator and subtracts from his salary the broken parts of the car. These lines and actions are portrayed as *funny* because they exaggerated Michael's cheapness. That *The Private Eyes* was the highest grossing film in 1976 and that these scenes were meant to provoke laughter indicates that the ethos around bosses was that they were cheap. What could his workers do? Ricky responds to Michael's neck brace by calling him a "turtle" (*guizi*); when Michael retorts in an unfriendly way, Ricky responds, "Then you're a cuckold" (*guigong*). Ricky responds tactfully but caustically to Michael (again, exaggerated for humour) as indirect criticism of his cheap ways. Indeed, young men were portrayed within the cultural ethos as ones who complained and made fun of their boss. To join with laughter at these films' portrayal of bosses reinforced the boss as the butt of young men's jokes.

Therefore, young men in the 1970s were in Michael Hui's movies as at the bottom of the cultural ladder in Hong Kong because they were not the generational heads of their family-firms. The cultural ethos around young men, then, evolved into a creative expression of complaint



against the older generation that had built this fatalistic situation around them. In other words, the movies of Michael Hui attacked the cultural ethos of fatalism—that the generations were there and the system was there and that was all that there was for young men—and instead gave the young men an outlet for complaining through comedy. Through the culture of complaint, young men regained some power over their bosses by being able to call them funny animal names. Young men were not the heads of the firms, but the films gave them a sense of male dignity when they slaved away for their bosses, their surrogate fathers. The Hui Brothers demonstrated that in the 1970s, there was a vibrant Neoconfucian system that thought of masculinities in terms of generations and that this system extended from the home to the workplace. However, by satirizing it, they showed a general discontent among young men regarding this system, though they were powerless to overthrow it. Therefore, a young man was not manly by being a revolutionary; he was a man by being a *complainer*—until, of course, one day fortune should smile on him and he became the boss of his own company.

Chapter 2:  
Practical Masculinities:  
Masters of Improvisation, the *Pak Dong* Spirit, and the Ethos of Pragmatism

The gate opens. Michael walks out in his thick-rimmed glasses with a string as a substitute for one earpiece, a good luck charm. He squints at the light.

As he turns the corner and walks down the road, Sam meets him with two cigars, one for immediate smoking and one for pocketing. “How are you feeling?” Sam asks him.

“No one has ever picked me up before,” Michael replies, taking an extended puff. He adds, “I don’t want to go to heaven, and I can’t go to hell.”

“Why would you want to go to hell?”

“Drugs, crime, mahjong, girls, brandy—they’re all in hell. I mean, who’d want to go to heaven and talk to God about Jesus, man? Hey, wait up.” He runs behind a tree on the side of the road, opens his fly, and lets her fly.

That is when Sam looks up and comes up with a brilliant idea. “You know, if we just worked together [*pak dong*], we could win a lot of money. I’ve borrowed a ton of money from Boss Chuen, and I’m playing poker with some older men tomorrow night. If you were in this deal, we could never lose.”

They talk about how perhaps to pull off a gambling heist some more. Having finished his business, Michael walks down the road with Sam, still discussing the real business. The camera stays on the tree, waiting for a wet couple in the throes of undressing (until they were interrupted by a stream of liquid overhead) to emerge from the shrubbery and curse Michael and his urine.

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The above scene from *Games Gamblers Play* establishes a second masculine triangulation in 1970s Hong Kong—and none of the elements have to do with being able to “aim” when doing a

man's "natural" business. Indeed, the first chapter set a foundational triangulation of cheap bosses, the centripetal family, and the culture of complaint in an effort to understand how young men in 1970s Hong Kong thought of themselves as trapped within a system of generational masculinities. The second triangulation deals with the young men themselves: it holds that while young men may have thought of themselves as trapped within a Neoconfucian structure, they still had agency to define their own identities as men. The three elements of masculine invention appear in this scene with Michael, who portrays an older young man but not a boss. First, Michael's quick eye toward the tree defines him as a master of improvisation: where he does not have a toilet, he can make *ad hoc* arrangements. Second, Michael and Sam talk about working together: this concept is summarized by the Cantonese term *pak dong*, or "partnership" with social and economic benefits. Third, Michael and Sam's improvisation schemes and *pak dong* serves an ethos of pragmatism—pragmatic because their aim is to get rich and live in luxury.<sup>54</sup> Improvisation and the *pak dong* spirit were not ends in themselves but means toward affluence.

This chapter argues that pragmatism so characterized the 1970s Hongkonger man that it was the centre of what it meant to be a man in 1970s Hong Kong. It first deals with the ideal of being a master of improvisation both as part of the *kung fu* tradition and the satirical tradition in the Hui Brothers' films. It then deals with *pak dong* as part of a larger tradition of Chinese masculine partnership and examines its imagined deployment in 1970s Hong Kong in the Hui Brothers' films. It seeks finally to answer the question: how did the masculinity propagated by this triangulation of *kung fu* improvisation, the *pak dong* spirit, and Hongkonger pragmatism fit within 1970s Hong Kong's context of generational masculinities?

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<sup>54</sup> How living in luxury includes women will be saved for an extended discussion in the third chapter.

This chapter analyzes the parodic *kung fu* scenes in Michael Hui's movies as windows into a greater cultural icon: the young man as a master improviser. Prominent throughout *The Private Eyes* and *The Contract* is the line, "The student is better than the teacher" (*tou dai zhong lak guo sifu*). From this line, this chapter argues that the competence of the young man came from his ability to master the context whereas older men tended to play by the rules. As a result, the young man was portrayed as someone who could pull *kung fu* moves to defeat the savviest villains and to humiliate the cheap older generation. The younger man may have been socially and generationally at the bottom, but in improvisatory competence, he was actually at the top (so the movies portrayed). This double-sided reflection of the Hong Kong ethos in the 1970s reveals not only that younger men were discontent with the older generation's cultural superiority but that deep inside, they likely thought—and perhaps knew—that they could outsmart the older generation, given the opportunity.

Preserving the parallel between Bruce Lee and Michael Hui, this thesis first looks to Bruce Lee's work to understand the *kung fu* tradition in Hong Kong and its relationship to being a master of improvisation. Bruce Lee's *kung fu* is good *kung fu* because of its ability to be used in improvisation. *Kung fu*, after all, does not mean "fighting technique" in Cantonese; it means "skill." Chefs, for example, will say that a difficult dish requires a lot of *kung fu* to cook. It is in this broader sense that this thesis conceptualizes *kung fu* improvisation. When he was twenty-four and auditioning for 1960s show *The Green Hornet*, Bruce Lee tells his interviewers after demonstrating blows to the eyes, the head, and the chest, "And, of course you know, *kung fu* is very sneaky—you know, the Chi-Chinese—they always hit low," after which he demonstrates a

groin blow.<sup>55</sup> For Lee, sneakiness meant doing what works to fell one's enemy, and if that called for a groin blow, then it may be an unfair hit, but it gets the job done. The groin blow was a pragmatic improvisation. Lee demonstrates this point in *Jing wu men (dzing mo moon)* (1972). Lee fells the Russian strongman who is so strong that he can bend a bar of steel with his brute strength by biting his ankle when the Russian has him in a body twist, making him dizzy with a show of quick arm movements, and cutting off his air circulation with a *kung fu* (not *karate*) chop. These are unconventional moves that confuse the Russian, who is apparently used to simply crushing his opponents. The master of improvisation, Lee suggests, used *ad hoc*, unconventional, and at times unfair moves to defeat his opponent.

However, the trick in Lee's *kung fu* was not to follow steps but to improvise with agility and grace. In that same screen test, he says,

...you will read it in a book, a magazine, that when somebody grabs you, you will first do this and then this and then and then and then and then—thousands of steps—before you do a single thing. Of course, this kind of magazine would teach you to be feared by your enemies and be admired by your friends. But, uh, in *kung fu*, it always involves a very fast motion. It's not the idea when someone grabs your hand that you go through the steps, but *ugh!* step one, step two. This is what we mean by simplicity. It has to be based on a very minimum motion, so that everything will be directly expressed—one motion—and it's gone—doing it gracefully, not going and yelling and AHHHHH!!! jumping, but *doing it*,

as he performs a quick motion to ward off an imaginary attacker.<sup>56</sup> At the heart of Lee's *kung fu* was grace and speed, not elaboration and ostentation; indeed, that Lee's signature form, *jeet kune do* (the way of the intercepting fist), was based on knocking out an opponent with a swift fist indicates that Lee valued speed over ostentation. He illustrates this point in *The Way of the Dragon (mang long guogong)* (1973). In a back alley, the owners of a Chinese restaurant in Rome (relatives of Lee's character) face four Mafia members in a fist-fight. An older worker at the restaurant

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<sup>55</sup> "Devil Ducky: Bruce Lee Screen Test," n.d., <http://www.devilducky.com/media/37308/> (6 March 2007). The video is available free of charge at this site.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

who knows *karate* first tries to take down one Mafia member: he first shows off blow after blow in the air. But as he attacks, the Mafia member simply knocks him out with a blow to the head. Bruce Lee, angered by the mob members' taunts, declares in Chinese, "You watch! This is really Chinese boxing!" The Mafia member steps toward him, and Lee delivers one quick blow: "Dragon seeks path." He finishes him with another blow: "Dragon whips his tail." The atmosphere suddenly shifts as the restaurant owners realize that Lee may be able to save them from the mob. However, the scene contrasts the *karate* member's elaborate and complex moves with Lee's simple moves. It implies that one needs training in the martial arts to be useful (the Mafia members have no training), but the martial arts must be deployed in simplicity to defeat one's opponents.

In other words, what was masculine about Bruce Lee was not his body (his arms of steel, legs of iron, and infinite cuts on his abdominal muscles) but his ability to improvise with speed and precision. Granted, there were female martial artists or actresses who graced the silver screen such as Nora Miao and Angela Mao, but women in Bruce Lee's 1970s films often play damsels in distress (like Maria Yi in *The Big Boss* and Nora Miao in *The Way of the Dragon*), neophyte martial artists (like Nora Miao in *Jing wu men*), prostitutes (like Malalene in *The Big Boss* and Ahna Capri in *The Way of the Dragon*), or women to be avenged (like Angela Mao in *the Way of the Dragon*). As far as Lee was concerned, *kung fu* was a masculine domain where even female *kung fu* stars in other films had to play second fiddle to his fists and kicks in his films.

Lee's conception of this graceful, improvisatory, and agile masculinity rested in a tradition of Chinese masculinity best articulated by Kam Louie. Louie laments, "There is little that examines the activities of Chinese and Japanese men as men, or Asian masculinities as social

constructs.”<sup>57</sup> To this end, Kam Louie theorizes Chinese masculinity as an intersection of two concepts taken from the *Yijing* (Book of Changes): *wen* (the cultural or civil) and *wu* (the physical or martial). He justifies his usage of these two terms through Confucius’s words: “There is no man who does not have something of the way of *wen* and *wu* in him.”<sup>58</sup> The ideal man, then, sought “a balance between the two styles of masculinity...to achieve continued successful and long-term national government and self-management.”<sup>59</sup> Louie implies that there were economic and political benefits to this type of Asian masculinity: because men were expected to be the heads of their families to seek their economic benefit, Chinese masculinity required both cultural and martial skills. Moreover, the ideal man, even in expressing his *wu*, was self-controlled: “Containment of the self informs the Chinese male’s sexual self, in contrast to the conquest and control over others that is the case in the Western context.” When expressing *wen*, for example, men traditionally contained information within themselves while sitting in contained examination halls to practice civil containment. When expressing *wu*, men sought to contain war—and when having sex, to contain orgasm.<sup>60</sup> Lee’s sense of control and restriction of movement to controlled but agile impulses certainly rested within Louie’s framework of contained and balanced *wu* and *wen*.

The satirical spin that the Hui Brothers put on the *kung fu* motif was that, especially in their later 1970s films, they promoted the concept of “the student is better than the master” (*tou dai zhong lak guo sifu*). As Stephen Teo contends, “the rise of Michael Hui parallels that of Bruce

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<sup>57</sup> Kam Louie, “Chinese, Japanese, and Global Masculine Identities,” in *Asian Masculinities: The meaning and practice of manhood in China and Japan*, ed. Kam Louie and Morris Low (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 3.

<sup>58</sup> Kam Louie and Louise Edwards, “Chinese Masculinity: Theorizing *Wen* and *Wu*,” *East Asian History* 8 (1994): 139-140.

<sup>59</sup> Confucius, *Analects* XIX.22, as quoted in Louie and Edwards, 143.

<sup>60</sup> Louie, “Chinese, Japanese, and Global,” 6-7.

Lee in the early 1970s”;<sup>61</sup> part of the parallel, this thesis contends, was their understandings of masculinity, and demonstrating that masculinity was their use of *kung fu*. Scenes in the Michael Hui’s 1970s films do parody *kung fu* fighting scenes. However, these parodies of *kung fu* reverse the cultural ethos wrought by Bruce Lee. In *Jing wu men*, for example, the young students—Bruce Lee included—venerates the murdered older teacher. Bruce Lee’s fellow students honour the older man’s philosophy of nonviolence: do not retaliate, do not be rash, mind your own business, and use *kung-fu* for personal holistic development. Bruce Lee, while going against his master’s principles, avenges the old-timer on the Japanese *bushido* school that murdered him. Similarly, in *Enter the Dragon*, Lee’s orders to infiltrate his master’s former student’s island fortress by way of a *kung fu* competition comes directly from his master. Out of loyalty to his master, he exercises his *kung-fu* skills and vanquishes Shek Kin’s character (also the villainous godfather in *The Private Eyes*). The lessons that Bruce Lee taught about generational masculinities is that one must *venerate* one’s teacher from the upper generation. Michael Hui’s agenda was to subvert them by using *kung fu* pragmatically.

Moreover, the ethos around young masculinity in 1970s Hong Kong was largely economic. Chinese entrepreneurs were also the heads of their households and were expected to provide for their families through capital gains in their small family firms. Agnes Ku and Ngai Pun theorize a transition into a Hong Kong citizenship beginning in the 1970s, making significant headway in the mid-1980s, and becoming officially part of China in 1997: Hong Kong citizens were constructed as citizen-subjects who were required “to acquire a specific ethic of self: the enterprising individual.” They explain,

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<sup>61</sup> Stephen Teo, “The 1970s: Movement and Transition,” in *Hong Kong Cinema: History, Arts, Identity*, ed. Poshek Fu and David Desser (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 96.



The enterprising individual is someone who is always on the lookout for resources and new opportunities to enhance their income, power, life chances and quality of life in order to take advantage of the rapid changes of economy and society. It is a conception of an ideal citizen-subject emphasizing self-enterprise and self-help.<sup>62</sup>

Ku and Ngai argue that, in the 1960s and 1970s, Hongkongers developed this civil sense of Hong Kong identity in light of a shift toward neoliberal values by the Hong Kong state. This shift coincided with a shift from a mostly migrant population to a people who considered Hong Kong home.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, on the ground, student activism and urban collective action began shaping Hong Kong into a large community in which citizens were increasingly distinctive as Hongkongers—somewhere in the *mélange* of being entrepreneurial, Chinese, and connected to Hong Kong itself as a place.

This enterprising ethic was then reinforced by the education system in Hong Kong. Education gendered students in the same way as the Hongkonger family did by creating enterprising individuals who did their economic duty for their families. Indeed, David Post contends that the changes in the 1970s by the state was mostly due to the economic demands of parents: “During the 1970s, a latent demand for public education at this level [primary and early secondary school] that frequently charged high tuition.”<sup>64</sup> In other words, parents were sending their children—mostly sons—to schools to be made into human capital for their families, rather similar to the males in traditional Chinese culture who had to be educated in the *wen* and taught to control the *wu* so that they could be effective heads of their households. The Hong Kong state merely reflected the demands of the parents, Post argues, and opened free education so that all of Hong Kong, regardless of gender and class, could benefit—“benefit,” of course, meaning to have

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<sup>62</sup> Agnes S. Ku and Ngai Pun, “Introduction: Remaking citizenship in Hong Kong,” in *Remaking Citizenship in Hong Kong: Community, nation, and the global city*, ed. Agnes S. Ku and Ngai Pun (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 1.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>64</sup> David Post, “Educational Stratification, School Expansion, and Public Policy in Hong Kong,” *Sociology of Education* 67, no. 2 (1994): 122.

all students gendered male (as Anita Chan would argue).<sup>65</sup> In other words, to be male was to be a good businessman, and being a good businessman meant being able to improvise through delicate situations, and (presumably) boys and girls went to school to be educated to do just that.

Therefore, the concept of the student being better than the master was more precisely that the student was a better improviser than his master. It was still a “weapons of the weak” complaint tactic but confirmed by a third party observer. The young man never overturned the generational masculinities system; rather, the tactic was to perform better than one’s master in order for others to recognize and help one break away from one generational system into another where the oppressed young man would become the dominating head. In *The Private Eyes*, this concept applied not only to everyday situations but actual *kung fu* situations as well. The line (*tou dai zhong lak guo sifu*) appears when Michael and Sam inspect a grocery store that is frequented by thieves. Although Michael catches the thieves, a karate chop from one of the thieves incapacitates him. However, Sam chases the man and defeats him even though that man uses the five animals of *kung fu* in an attempt to defeat Sam. The grocery store owner’s comment, then, is, “Next time I don’t have to see the boss; I’ll just find you! The student really is better than the master!” In this scene, Sam has no agenda to upstage his boss; rather, it is to fell the thief. His recognition comes from the grocery store owner: instead of Sam seeking to subvert the system, his well-done *kung fu* actions that come from pure motives result in his acclamation by a third party. Similarly, when Sam captures the entire gang that wants to bomb the local cinema, his being rewarded by a plaque by the police commissioner, his shaking hands with Miss Hong Kong, and his opening of a new detective agency of which he is the head demonstrate the likely

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<sup>65</sup> However, this thesis will not present a feminist critique of Hong Kong’s patriarchy as most supposed “gender studies” volumes (such as the two previously mentioned) do. Instead, it seeks simply to illuminate what ideas were floating around what it meant to be a young man in 1970s Hong Kong.

results of being so recognized: he becomes head of his own family business and so reproduce for himself the Neoconfucian family hierarchy. Such a plot line suggests that the ethos of the time was not as fatalistic as the generational masculinities argument may sound. Young men may have thought of themselves as trapped but still nurtured hope of rising to the top when they became heads of their own business if they could be recognized for their improvisatory competence.

The same line (*tou dai zhong lak guo sifu*) reappears in *The Contract* in an ultimate defiance of the generational system in the workplace. Although Sam's Indian magic master threatens Sam's magic business, when they both appear on television, Sam's magic tricks are far superior to his master's (including removing his master's pants in a climactic victory). This causes the audience to exclaim, "The student is better than his master!" The people in the booth frantically panic both at the ruckus that Sam is making with the magician and what a mess Michael is making in another studio where he disrupts a dance sequence to get away from his boss's giant thug. But the board member in the studio knows better: "This is why our ratings are so low," he tells the people in the booth. "You don't know how to admire good stuff." In the next scene, the board members hire the same thugs to drag off Sam's Indian magician master and promote Michael and Sam to become the managers of MTV. Similar to *The Private Eyes*, they are empowered by an outside party. However, unlike *the Private Eyes*, they also have the power to refuse: the board at MTV requires Michael and Sam to sign a blank contract with them, to which Sam responds that such a deal smells worse than pigeon excrement. *The Contract* refines the popular ethos around practical masculinities, then: it demonstrates that being empowered by an outside third party did not give that third party generational authority over that young man. Instead, the young man, liberated from a system of generational hierarchy, had power to choose how he wanted to

establish himself. *Choice* was the hope of the young man trapped in the generational system, and the means to this end was hard work and competence in the faint hope of being recognized by an outside party.

Therefore, scenes that do not involve martial *kung fu* also highlight a man's need to be a master of improvisation. In *The Contract*, the skill was magic. In *Games Gamblers Play*, Michael is not a martial artist, but Michael and Sam are master schemers. Their improvisatory *kung fu* (skill) was deployed to beat the casino system. Indeed, even the heist idea was produced by Sam and executed (with flaws) by Michael. Sam plans the idea, executes the idea flawlessly, and escapes with the money. The dynamic in *Games Gamblers Play* demonstrates for this chapter that while older men may have served as mentors in the Hong Kong cultural ethos, the young men were the innovators. Young men were valued in Hong Kong because they thought of tricks for how to beat *the system*. In *Games Gamblers Play*, the system was the casino system. Because young men were trapped in a system of economic subordination to older men, their only chance at succeeding was not only in voicing their complaints behind closed doors but by subversively beating the system. In *Games Gamblers Play*, beating the system involved conducting a heist.

In *The Last Message*, improvisation involved scuba diving to get rich quick. However, after finding the artefacts from the Ming Dynasty in a sunken ship, their findings are immediately confiscated by a private detective agency—at which point Michael becomes insane. It seems like they did not beat the system. But they tried, especially in the various ways that they tried to awaken the dead scuba diver played by Roy Chiao. Michael tries to awaken him through cheap necromancy practices, and Sam tries acupuncture; they both use the brain wave sensor in the hospital when all else fails. When they fail, they find his daughter (whom he calls “Princess”) who discovers that he is sending them messages by Morse Code through the brain wave sensor.

It was these practices that made Michael and Sam Hui masters of improvisation. They knew that the system had them at the bottom—and indeed the system did hold them at the bottom. But through these various means, they creatively tried to advance their situation. They would do whatever it takes, manipulate whatever technology possible, and even resort to superstitious practices to get ahead. In short, the Hongkonger young man of the 1970s was a *pragmatist*.

Necromancy practices had no spiritual value, but they could be used to awaken the dead *for money*. Brain wave sensors, which are supposed to be used for psychiatric purposes, become a way of communicating with the dead for the purposes of *money*. Acupuncture, originally used for healing purposes, became a pragmatic device for *money* in *The Last Message*.

However, this spirit of improvisation was not a one-man show; neither did it encourage young men to *desire* to be free: rather, the young man was pragmatic with money in mind but contained the expression of his desire in *pak dong* relationships. Indeed, containment of desire is a recurring motif in traditional Chinese culture and has led traditional men to gravitate toward homosocial male bonds as integral to their sense of manhood. Traditionally, desire has been associated with sexual relationships with women. The ideal man was undistracted by sexual desires toward women; rather, he concentrated on developing himself in *wen* and *wu* in order to be a good governor of all those under his power, including himself. If he could control himself, the logic goes, then he could effectively exercise power in humility over his family and over those in his care. However, Louie reveals a further dimension beyond self-control in the *Sanguo* hero Guan Yu: Guan Yu demonstrates the Neoconfucian *yi* (righteousness) in being unswervingly loyal to his male friends, his sworn brothers in the fight to preserve the Han dynasty.<sup>66</sup> The ideal

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<sup>66</sup> Kam Louie, "Sexuality, Masculinity and Politics in Chinese culture: The Case of the 'Sanguo' Hero Guan Yu," *Modern Asian Studies* 33, no. 4 (1999): 853-854.

man had to live *yi* as well as balance *wen* and *wu* to contain himself: he had to be loyal even at the emotional level to his male friends. Susan Mann contends that these male bonds themselves can be analytical categories to understanding Chinese masculinity. She argues that male bonds can be seen in the family (among brothers), sworn brotherhoods, and male friendships (especially at civil service examinations). Traditional Chinese men were socialized in these three arenas because parents wanted these male heirs to “carry on the descent line.”<sup>67</sup> The education of the male (*i.e.* the development of *wen*) was then paramount to an ideal traditional Chinese male so that he could rule over his household effectively.

What the Hui Brothers did with the “sworn brotherhoods” concept was to show that Hongkongers had adapted it to a capitalistic, consumeristic, and Neoconfucian Hong Kong society. While sexuality still played an important role,<sup>68</sup> containment of the real desire to be the family head channelled masculine desire into work areas like the detective agency in *The Private Eyes*, the magic shows and television shows in *The Contract*, and the mental hospital in *The Last Message* as well as leisure arenas such as gambling, scuba diving, and sexual encounters. But this ethos was not individualistic: rather, it was accomplished through the *pak dong* spirit. Ostensibly, two (and usually no more than two) men entered into mutual partnership for concrete purposes: winning gambling money, getting rich quick by digging up Ming Dynasty ceramics, starting a detective agency, and stealing a contract from the boss’s safe. However, these activities sublimated a deeper masculine desire because they were *means*, not *ends*. Men in *pak dong* improvised their schemes together not just to get money or sex but to become *de facto* heads of a family-firm. The end of pragmatic *pak dong* partnerships, then, was assuming the position of male headship *by* together helping each other look competent enough to take on this role.

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<sup>67</sup> Susan Mann, “The Male Bond in Chinese History and Culture,” *American Historical Review* 105, no. 5 (2000): 1603.

<sup>68</sup> See the third chapter.

However, once the position was established, it was assumed that *one* of the two partners would take a leading, representative role in the new family-firm.

In *Games Gamblers Play*, Sam and Michael enter into an older-younger brother *pak dong* to defeat the gambling system and gain financial freedom by striking it rich. Sam portrays a casino-frequenter thrown in prison because of cheating. Ending up in the same cell as an older gambler (Michael), Sam venerates this man as a higher-up, more experienced, more savvy gambler than he and resolves to learn his gambling ways by entering into *pak dong* with him. The theme song illustrates the combination of the value of improvisation and the *pak dong* spirit:

For two meals I'd do anything—PAST LIFE! / It's just that I lost everything and feel like I have heartburn / Hoping to strike it rich I keep relying on cheating folks: / Ghost Horse Double Stars' / tricks are brilliant.

Crudely bluffing, doing illegal work—it's not bad / Used to being a prison sitter—it's a habit / Hoping to strike it rich I keep relying on cheating folks: / Ghost Horse Double stars' / eyes unfocused.

Life is like gambling. / Winning and losing are unpredictable. / Winning gets you laughter. / Losing—don't be so mad.

Being a cheater earns you more than a king / You're a pretending crab, but getting caught is just laughable / Hoping to strike it rich I keep relying on cheating folks. / Ghost Horse Double Stars / fear recognition / (but really have style...)<sup>69</sup>

What this song highlights is not just improvisation (or cheating) but the togetherness of the “Ghost Horse Double Stars.” “Ghost” (*gui*) in Cantonese has implications of behind-the-scenes scheming, and “ghost horse” refers to a deceptive scheme, literally a “ghost horse” that appears and plunders from out of nowhere. In the film itself, “ghost horse” is taken literally when Michael and Sam enter into a *pak dong* relationship to increase the bet on the favoured dog in the dog races and rake in the profits when the dog wins. To contrive this elaborate scheme, Michael

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<sup>69</sup> Sam Hui, “Ghost Horse Double Stars [*Gui ma shuang xing*],” in *Games Gamblers Play*, prod. Raymond Chow, 107 minutes, Golden Harvest Productions, 1973. DVD. My translation.

plays *mahjong* with Boss Chuen, the owner of the dog races. At the last moment, Sam increases his bets on all the other dogs to boost the bet on the favoured horse while Michael unhooks Boss Chuen's telephone line so that his henchmen cannot transfer the bet on the favoured dog. This elaborate scam takes both Michael and Sam to concoct, and its success rakes in 320,000 Hong Kong dollars. These 320,000 dollars add to their familial financial security—or so Michael thinks until Sam loses 300,000 dollars in one bet while Michael is in prison (the frame freezes at the end of the movie to make this the punchline of the movie). The idea behind the *pak dong* spirit in *Games Gamblers Play* was to gain economic security as heads of their families. However, there was no way that they could have pulled off the heist without being in a *pak dong* relationship. *Pak dong* relationships were key to this Hongkonger masculine pragmatism.

*The Private Eyes* elaborates on this *pak dong* spirit: though two men *pak dong*, if they stay within the same system, only one could be the boss. At the end of the film, Sam and Ricky start the Cannon Private Detective Agency next to Michael's Mannix Private Detective Agency. When the camera first shoots inside the office, Sam's picture (not Ricky's) is on the wall. It is Sam who interviews clients and hires fellow workers, although Ricky is at his side as his *pak dong*, filing cases and looking like an expert in the business. When Michael asks Sam and Ricky to partner with him, it is Sam's word that is binding, not Ricky's: Sam says that they can split the profits, but when Ricky asks for weekends off because he wants to play "mahjong" (*i.e.* enjoy sex) with Michael's attractive secretary, Jacky, Jacky slaps him, the frame freezes, the credits roll, and the audience assumes that the answer is hilariously no. Only Sam can be the boss—and the audience assumes it is so because Sam looks more stylish and attractive than Ricky does. Indeed, pragmatism, competence in improvisation, and *pak dong* were the hopeful means to get to be the heads of one's workplace. However, when at the top, then masculine sex appeal determined



who would be the actual head in the partnership. That Ricky is content with this arrangement—and that the audience does not protest but rather assumes that Sam will be the boss—implies that this ethos was the “normal” way of thinking about male headship in 1970s Hong Kong.

Oddly enough, comic books have a similar history. John Lent notes that when Tony “Jademan” Wong and the brothers Kwong Tung-yuen and Kwong Nam-lun arrived in Hong Kong in the late 1960s and early 1970s, “comics production was considered a waste of time in money-mad Hong Kong.” What they had to do to sell comic books was to prove that it was *not* a waste of time, *i.e.* that it was economically profitable. They did this by adopting “Japanese-style sex and violence themes and factory production methods,” producing popular comics in the 1970s such as *Siulauman* (Street Fighter).<sup>70</sup> Portrayals of masculinity even in these martial arts and seemingly hyper-masculine setting need to be set in their wider Hongkonger context. These were portrayals of strong, overbearing, highly sexual men by entrepreneurial young men who used these portrayals to sell their comics. In other words, this portrayal sold. An analysis of the business practices again places mastering improvisation and the *pak dong* spirit at the forefront: Wong and his brothers pragmatically improvised Japanese sex-and-violence for a Hong Kong audience in a spirit of *pak dong*. Wong could not have done it alone, the history assumes. In order to establish themselves as heads of their comic book family-firm, they had to *pak dong*, but when it was established, Wong became the boss, just as Sam becomes the firm of the boss at the end of *The Private Eyes*.

Why was this an alternate masculinity to Bruce Lee? Filmmaker David Chiang explained in 1973 that the Hong Kong *kung fu* scene was not realistic. He told interviewers,

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<sup>70</sup> John A. Lent, “Comics in East Asian Countries: A Contemporary Survey,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 29, no. 1 (1995): 185.

I want to make a film that has no violence in it, no sex, nothing. I want to tell Hong Kong people what they are, what they are doing. The audience is there, they know when a film is good, when they see something they recognise and when it is false they laugh or hiss at the screen. I have lived in Hong Kong all my life and there are many things that aren't right, the gap between the rich and the poor, the corruption, the rich who steal, the businessmen who already have so many wives but have to find a different prostitute every night...the poor who get hooked on drugs. The sword fight film is all heroes and killing, and you have to kill and you always win. Real people can't do that.<sup>71</sup>

Michael Hui was the *de facto* answer to this request. Indeed, the Hui Brothers portrayed young Hongkongers as suffering at the bottom of the economic ladder because they were not the heads of their family-firms. They saw that these young men had hopes and dreams that they could have fulfilled as the heads but now were being suppressed. However, the Hui Brothers twisted Chiang's words. For Chiang, real people suffered and could not get up. For the Hui Brothers, real people may have suffered but still had *kung fu* agency. *Kung fu* for the Hui Brothers was not a heroic, swordsman sport. It was the ethos of pragmatism.

Therefore, this chapter has shown that the heart of the ethos of 1970s Hong Kong masculinity was everyday pragmatism, not good fighting *kung fu*. If a man was competent to improvise with what he had on hand for his economic benefit, that was manly. This competence could be recognized by an outside party through which he might gain access out of the generational masculinities in which he was bound and could become the head of his own family-firm. However, this competence could not be achieved alone: rather, he needed a *pak dong* to help him to be recognized. Sam, for example, uses Ricky as a *pak dong* in *The Private Eyes* to gain recognition; Michael uses Sam for his economic ends in *Games Gamblers Play* so that they can both get money and become heads of their respective families. When the men needed to head the same family-firm, though, they defaulted to whoever had the better style and could represent the family-firm with better masculine sex appeal. Again, this arrangement was pragmatic: if he

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<sup>71</sup> Vernita Glaessner, *Kung Fu: Cinema of Vengeance* (London: Lorrimer Publishing, 1974), 132.

could represent the firm, then the firm would theoretically grow economically. In other words, though young men felt trapped in a system of generational masculinities, they hoped that in working harder and with improvisatory competence in *pak dong* relationships, they could become heads of their own generational systems in the future. Michael, Sam, and Ricky gave them hope for a future that was not locked in its present drudgery and encouraged them to be pragmatic. A real man, in other words, may not have had generational authority in the present—but the student could become better than the master.

Chapter 3:  
Playboy Masculinities:  
Paying the Family, Chasing Girls, and the Ethos of Luxury

Michael, Ricky, and the infuriated, cuckolded wife walk down the corridor. Michael talks very fast: “Now, it probably isn’t a good idea to use physical violence, or else this will be very hard to cover up. Well, you have to understand. At home, men can eat all their shark fin gourmet soups; sometimes, they just want to have a bowl of ox-innards *fun*.”<sup>72</sup>

The wife spits back, “I will sue him till his pants fall off, and for the rest of his life, he’ll be eating ox-innards *fun*.”

Michael and Ricky, after discovering Ricky has left the master key in the office, proceed to break down the door. The wife’s husband is in the embrace of a beautiful woman, both wearing only towels, and exchanging a rose with their teeth like oxen at the slaughter. The wife points accusingly at her husband, “*Ha!* You had so much shark fin soup to eat at home; you just *have to* eat these ox-innards *fun!*” As the man’s face contorts in protest, Ricky catches four shots of him and the woman he is having an affair with. The wife will use this as proof in court that her husband was having an affair and that she has the right to divorce him and get money for it.

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A thesis about the ethos of *heterosexual* men seems incomplete without a chapter on girls. After all, when *Games Gamblers Play* opens in a prison work-camp, Michael gambles with a fellow inmate for his lunch. To distract this inmate from watching him cheat, he points to a new inmate and remarks, “Look at that newcomer. He’s so feminine.” His gambling partner immediately becomes depressed. He explains that he likes to play the woman as well—and

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<sup>72</sup> *Fun* is a thin Chinese rice noodle either stir-fried or, in the case of ox-innards, served in soup.

begins caressing a very disturbed Michael's chest. To say the least, the scene portrays Michael as thoroughly *heterosexual*.

For the bulk of this thesis, the argument has been economic: the younger man sat at the bottom of the cultural ladder because of his social and economic inferiority in the family system. In this chapter, that thesis takes a unique twist. Consider it a punchline, perhaps. It argues that despite the young Hongkonger man's social inferiority, he was in fact superior to older men in what every young Hongkonger heterosexual man craved: *girls*. Older men were portrayed as playing by the book, which was not impressive to girls, much less their wives. However, younger men like Sam and Ricky were generally portrayed as both savvy, innocent, and attractive. With their longer hair, winning smiles, and social suaveness, they captured the hearts of the young women they pursued. And yet still, the mother factor (*i.e.* the familial aspect) complicates this issue. The predominant hidden theme in *The Private Eyes* and *The Contract* especially is that the young man must earn money for the sake of his mother. The theme is more hidden in the earlier movies like *Games Gamblers Play* because the *wife* serves as the mother figure ("wife" in Cantonese is "lo poh," or old woman). Mothers and old wives signified figures of *duty*: it was not a pleasure to provide for them or live with them, but it was duty.

This final chapter adds a sexual element to the familial, economic argument that has been advanced. It asks: was the desire to be the head of the family-firm an end in itself, or was it also a pragmatic means to an end? This chapter argues for the latter. It describes the ethos of playboy luxury that young men in 1970s Hong Kong desired. The goal of becoming the head of the family-firm was so that he could have enough money not only to feed his family but to make them so secure that he could pursue a playboy lifestyle. Granted, the playboy lifestyle included gambling, mansions, brandy, and smoking, but the heart of the playboy lifestyle was a

heterosexual desire. As this chapter describes, the young man was caught in a Neoconfucian world where he had a duty to feed his family, which included economically taking care of one's wife if one was married or sending remittances to one's mother if one was unmarried. However, if a man fulfilled this duty, then he might justify to himself (although, as seen in the ox-innards scene from *The Private Eyes*, the wife might think otherwise) that he had the right to indulge himself in a playboy lifestyle that would fulfill his heterosexual fantasies.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, becoming a successful head of the family-firm was an essential part to fulfilling the heterosexual masculine desire because it was thought to lead to an actual, physical fulfillment of the sexual pleasure. However, what created this tension (and why men could not just leave the home and chase women all day long) was the woman at home, be it his mother or his wife. The ethos of playboy luxury was thus caught between two women: the family woman and the woman outside. It was a thoroughly heterosexual ethos, but the heterosexuality itself was conflicted.

In a sense, then, this chapter both problematizes and reifies Hong Kong anthropologist Hugh Baker's argument in 1983 about the Hong Kong man in the 1970s. He concludes his seminal article on the ethos of the Hong Kong man:

"Life in the short term" is not, of course, unique to Hong Kong, but something unique has been emerging from Hong Kong's cities: it is Hong Kong Man. He is go-getting and highly competitive, tough for survival, quick-thinking and flexible. He wears western clothes, speaks English or expects his children to do so, drinks western alcohol, has sophisticated tastes in cars and household gadgetry, and expects life to provide a constant stream of excitement and new openings. But he is not British or western (merely westernized). At the same time he is not Chinese in the same way that the citizens of the People's Republic of China are Chinese. Almost alone in the Chinese world Hong Kong has not adopted *Putonghua* (Mandarin) as the lingua franca: instead Cantonese holds sway. Admiration for and empathy with his compatriots Hong Kong Man certainly has, but he also now has pride in and love of the society which he has created through his own determination and hard work. He gives little credit to the Union Jack under which his success has been nurtured, and he is not necessarily happy

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<sup>73</sup> Morris, 118. This thesis does not contradict itself at this point because it argues that the playboy fantasies were framed within a context of Neoconfucian values. Morris does not. She argues rather that the Neoconfucian values were framed within a context of British *laissez-faire* capitalist values.

at the prospect of the five-starred red flag presiding over his activities. Hong Kong Man is *sui generis* and the problems of the territory's future are more difficult to resolve because of it.<sup>74</sup>

Baker concedes that the centre of Chinese Hong Kong life was “the home and family”<sup>75</sup> and that intellectual skill (*i.e.* being a master of improvisation) was a means to social advancement.<sup>76</sup>

However, as much as Baker addresses the party life in urban Hong Kong and contrasts it with the intellectual skill and centripetal family, he does not explicitly call the party life *heterosexual*.

That remains for British historian Bill Osgerby to address. In *Playboys in Paradise*, Osgerby traces the development of the American Playboy ethic from its bohemian roots in the nineteenth century to Hugh Hefner's Playhouse in the 1970s. He explains,

And, while the ideologies and imperatives of this group [the Playboy culture] certainly placed an accent on individual freedom and sexual liberalism, there were always firm boundaries to this broadmindedness. The discourse of ‘swinging’ enjoyment, for example, largely spoke to heterosexual pleasures. Keen to appear the sexual liberal, Hugh Hefner admitted to experimenting with one homosexual experience, although he did not feel inclined to repeat it.<sup>77</sup>

*Playboy* magazine's heyday, Osgerby contends, was in the 1960s in the United States; the 1970s saw a significant recession in *Playboy*'s sales because of the rise of conservative Nixonian values as well as the availability of more sexually explicit magazines like *Hustler*. However, given Baker's description of the 1970s Hong Kong Man, it may be reasonable to assume that the leisure-type Playboy culture still held sway in the 1970s. And given Osgerby's analysis of the playboy culture, it was a thoroughly heterosexual culture. The Hui Brothers thus tapped into the Hong Kong incarnation of the heterosexual playboy culture and revealed that, unlike its American manifestation, it was not an exclusively leisure-based culture. Rather, it was fraught

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<sup>74</sup> Hugh D. R. Baker, “Life in the Cities: The Emergence of Hong Kong Man,” *China Quarterly* 9 (Sept. 1983): 478-479.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 474.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 472, 474.

<sup>77</sup> Bill Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise: Masculinity, Youth and Leisure-style in Modern America* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001), 167.

with family ties and remained for most a fantasy because of the generational masculinities trap and the strong economic pull of the woman at home. However, problematizing Baker's argument, the playboy ideal was not merely stylish, for being stylish meant having heterosexual sex appeal. In other words, the ethos of luxury had sexual pleasure at the centre.

*Games Gamblers Play* makes explicit this dynamic of having duty to one's wife but pursuing a girl on the side for sexual pleasure. Frequently jailed, Michael Hui's character frequents the home of a call girl played by Betty Ting Pei when he gets out of jail; he does not go directly home to his wife. His relationship with his wife is characterized by mutual criticism; at times, it seems like she desires him (from her smile), but her smile almost always immediately disintegrates as he insults her. Her face is haggard, her skin dark, her clothes old-fashioned: her specialty is to criticize Michael when he is lazy. She explains to Michael, for example, why she had to take another job while he was in prison for a gambling scam: "With you in jail and not bringing any money home, do you expect me and *mui tou* [a derogatory way of regarding one's younger sister] to starve?" Her silent accusation is that Michael has not been fulfilling his responsibilities as a husband. Indeed, this accusation refines the argument that the heads of the home merely deployed his family members to get money for the family: it suggests that children were deployed, but that the cultural ethos also held the man responsible for providing for his wife.

Therefore, the message of *Games Gamblers Play* shows Michael as pathetically funny when he cheats on his wife—but does not moralize about it. In a way, it shows Michael to be a fool when his wife discovers Betty Ting Pei in a hotel room wearing only a towel in Macau. When he discovers his wife is there, he pushes Betty into Sam's room to make it look like Sam was cheating on his girlfriend (Michael's sister). In an odd twist, though, Sam pushes her back into



Michael's room where they discover together that Michael has been having an affair. Michael then escapes the room only to find himself surrounded by gangsters from a casino that he had robbed and is forced to climb down the walls of the hotel and get himself arrested to escape getting mobbed. This scene makes acute (and acutely funny) the tension of having to pay one's wife and desiring another woman ("Pei Pei"). On the one hand, Michael has a duty to his wife to provide for her and to even love her. On the other, his masculine drives push him to desire Pei Pei as a side fling (in addition to his viewing of pornography when he is at Pei Pei's house at the beginning of the movie). As Michael explains the good life even when he is running from Boss Chuen in Macau, "We can go down to the casino, and afterward bring up a woman," to which Sam responds, "That's disgusting. I can't have sex with a woman I don't love."

But was marriage for love in this sexual ethos of luxury? It is quite apparent, for example, that Sam and Michael's sister love each other, but so did Michael and his wife, his wife explains, on their honeymoon (and not afterward). In other words, the sexual ethos held that *chasing a woman* was the fun part, but after marriage, the woman became a man's duty, and it was not fun anymore because it was not part of the Playboy leisure lifestyle. For example, after Sam marries *mui tou*, he continues his compulsive gambling and loses Michael 300,000 Hong Kong dollars. Gambling was part of this luxurious lifestyle at which young Hongkonger men aimed. However, for Michael, and indeed, for this heterosexual ethos, gambling and women came in one package because the aim of the playboy lifestyle was pleasurable consumption. In other words, what was fun in chasing a woman was not the pleasure of intimacy or the joys of procreation but the thrill of sex (and similarly, the joy of gambling was the thrill of risking money).

In fact, sometimes sex was seen in terms of gambling. In *The Last Message*, Sam and his assistant nurse play a strip version of "spin the bottle" with an acupuncture figure (while in the

morgue, of all places): they spin the figure, and to whomever the body's finger points, he or she needs to take off an article of clothing. While both participate in consensual, heterosexual foreplay (their tryst is interrupted by mortician Michael bringing in a new body), the nurse presents herself as an unwilling victim as every time the figure points to her, she pouts, "Oh, me again?" On the other hand, when the figure points to Sam, he very quickly and eagerly takes off his shirt and his pants with a sleazy, "Mm-hmm!" In other words, the luxury ethos was primarily a masculine ethos because it placed men in a superior consuming subject-position over women who may have eagerly consented but presented themselves as pouting victims for men's consumption. Sex was a *man's* luxurious thrill through a woman's body.

In *The Private Eyes*, sex is referred to as a game of "life mahjong" (another gambling term). Michael explains to Sam as they tail a beautiful young woman having an affair with the police commissioner, "You can't blame her—being married to that old guy. She just has to come out and play some 'life mahjong.'" When they get to the luxurious rooms where they are sleeping, they softly pull open the door, and Michael asks Sam to look inside. Sam reports in an eager tone that they are playing mahjong and have just come to the end of the first round (a euphemism for having climaxed and are experiencing afterglow by rubbing each other's feet) but that the chips may be set for another round. Indeed, with these two private detectives looking in, the cheating couple was really gambling. Unbeknownst to the woman, her husband had hired these two detectives to spy on her so that he could divorce her on grounds of infidelity and win a huge sum of money. The police commissioner who was having the affair with her risks his honour and perhaps his position to a sex scandal.

In other words, unlike Hefner's public displays of sexual liberation and a flashy leisure lifestyle, the 1970s Hong Kong ethos of luxury with its heterosexual connotations was a *secret* lifestyle. If a man was discovered by his wife or exposed to the public, he would be publicly

shamed and sued—albeit by scheming, pragmatic spouses or public figures who wanted the money. For Bruce Lee, these reasons called for his films to be morality plays. In *Enter the Dragon* (1973), for example, his character is viewed as most virtuous because he refuses the women that the master of the tournament sends him (like Guan Yu in *Sanguo*), unlike an African-American karate champion who beds several women but is killed the next day and an American compulsive gambler who shares a tryst with the head mistress (played by Ahna Capri) and loses her when she is killed at the end of the movie. Bruce Lee, on the other hand, uses the prostitute given him as a mole for information, not as a sex tool, and exposes the master of the tournament as a druglord. The movie suggests that part of what made Bruce Lee a hero was his ability to contain his sexual desire and do something useful (*i.e.* catch the druglord). Similarly, in *Jing wu men*, because Bruce Lee cannot contain his drive for revenge, he brings disaster on his home school and must die at the end at the hands of the colonial government: the moral lesson was that it is better to contain one's desires than to express them and bring catastrophe on one's home.

However, the secrecy of the ethos revealed by the Hui Brothers served comedic ends to simply illustrate the tension between duty and desire in the heterosexual young man's *mentalité*. Because of this tension, participating in the playboy lifestyle was a risk fraught with the danger of being caught and losing one's honour and status. However, the films were not didactic; rather, they revealed the internal tensions of what it meant to be a man in 1970s Hong Kong. They showed that men dreamed of pursuing a playboy culture because what was fun about it was the thrill of sex and gambling. But they also demonstrated that most men could not participate in it because their families kept them tied back; if they did participate in it, they were risking their status as familial heads. The catch was that one had to be the familial head in order to

participate in this playboy culture and that this luxury was the purpose of the pursuit of headship. Actualizing the fantasy was a risk.

Therefore, marriage was not for love but for pragmatic duty and social advancement. In *Games Gamblers Play*, Michael tells Sam to court his sister: “We’re *pak dong*. We might as well become *tzun gah* [in-law relatives].” Marriage, in other words, was a tool for Sam’s social advancement because it meant that Sam was starting his own family and breaking out of his older system of generational masculinities at the bottle factory he used to work at. He can spend all his time now on gambling schemes and trying to strike it rich as his new occupation. That the Hui Brothers do not show Sam at work in a factory but hard at work coming up with gambling schemes demonstrates that gambling is indeed Sam’s new occupation legitimized by his courtship of Michael’s sister. Marriage was part of the pragmatic arrangements of being the head of one’s own family-firm, then.

However, in *The Contract*, the maternal presence *obstructs* the dating relationship between Ricky Hui and Sam’s sister. In other words, though marriage was not for love but for duty, generational hierarchies might even have threatened the process of courtship. After all, young men could not become heads of their families without a wife, and if a parent wanted constant remittances, the man was stuck under the headship of his parents. Therefore, when Sam loses his job as a magician, he and his sister start packing for home in Indonesia where their mother lives (and to whom Sam has been sending remittances). Ricky asks his girlfriend (Sam’s sister) in a tone riddled with pathos, “You’re going?” *The Contract* portrays the cruelty of the reality of parental and work relations hampering the advancement of their children. If a child lost his job, he had to return to his parents; if he kept his job, he had to send money back to his parents; whatever the case, he saw himself as trapped under his parents until he got married.

In her discussion of the factory women's marriages, Janet Salaff emphasizes the role of the mother in arranging the marriages and how the young women were discontent with these arrangements. In one instance, working daughter Mae outright rejected her mother's authority over her and chose for herself a low income earner to marry; moreover, she realized that if she lived with her mother after marriage, it would result in endless arguments with her mother on how the family should be run.<sup>78</sup> In another case, the mother arranged the marriage. However, Salaff explains the courtship arrangements:

It is common in Hong Kong for courting couples in their late teens or early 20s to become engaged and then continue in their respective occupations for several years to contribute financially to their families. Most of the engagements contracted among my twenty-eight working girls and their siblings exceeded 12 months, and some continued for more than 5 years. In these cases the working daughters invariably maintained economic contributions of well over half of their wages to the family's budget.<sup>79</sup>

Salaff implies that the mothers' arrangement of marriages and courtships was to prolong the centripetal family *via* their maternal authority. The centre of the courtship and marriage was not the young man and woman themselves but their parents. Unmarried men and women were expected to contribute their earnings back home, then, and if something disastrous happened, the children were expected to default back under their parents' authority, not run off, get married, and start a new life.

However, because marriage was viewed as a duty, it was celebrated mostly as a chore, not a long-awaited delight. The second stanza of *The Contract* views marriage as part of "the contract that sells your life":

The kid has grown up / Knows how to date and be naughty like others / Once he steals a chicken, it'll be useless even to cry. / Going back to the girl's house and bargaining, / Pestered by the gossip queens' taunts / Friend, the cost just never totals. / Hey, don't think it'll be free / Don't buy into the "wise method." / "I'm waiting for your money, / So clean out your vault— / Plus you'll need a three-meat banquet." / Sign the contract that

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<sup>78</sup> Salaff, 67.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 115.

sells your body— / And the house deed— / And the dowry / (Thicker than thick  
tapioca)— / Then the kid can come out.

The first “kid” refers to the young man who has grown up from the first verse in which he is born and is expected to know all the rules of life. “Stealing a chicken” is a euphemism for having stolen sex with the girl and gotten her pregnant. Because he had “stolen the chicken,” the young man in the song has to preserve his and his girlfriend’s honour by marrying her. However, this marriage is a contract that sells his life because it threatens to ruin him financially because of the woman’s family’s demands on their wedding. Moreover, it sells his life to one woman with whom he will be trapped forever.

Therefore, marriage in the ethos of 1970s Hong Kong male culture was necessary to preserve one’s honour and perhaps gain economic linkages with other families (as in *Games Gamblers Play*), but it was also what held the playboy lifestyle in check and secrecy. Prior to marriage, there was no use in even dreaming of being the head of one’s family because an unmarried man was under the generational authority of his parents who required from his hand the earnings that he earned from his generational boss at work. However, after marriage, he was at least the head of his household but had responsibility to pay his own family; he also had a moral obligation to be sexually loyal to his wife. Yet the purpose of headship was so that he could fulfill his heterosexual fantasies of thrills with women, gambling, brandy, and cigars as long as he did not get caught.

In other words, if pragmatism was the centre of what it meant to be a man in 1970s Hong Kong, luxury was the goal. However, being pragmatic to become the head was one side of the coin to attaining the goal of luxury; the other was being secretive enough to hide one’s life of luxury. What it meant to be a man in 1970s Hong Kong was to be the head of one’s household, which include being married. However, it also meant that a man had heterosexual fantasies of

experiencing constant thrills. To give these fantasies physical manifestation, he had to be secretive about his experiences. In the end, life was one big gambling match. A man was a man if he could participate in the game, but in so doing, he was gambling his very status as a man.

**Conclusion:**  
*Wai, Hai Mai Lam Yun Lei Ga?*

Michael stares blankly at the detective. He has just been told that the fragments of porcelain from the Ming Dynasty are officially government property. His thoughts wander. Now instead of himself in the inner tube, the chaplain is indulging himself, surrounded by bikini-clad women, eating a banana. Michael is sweeping the pool grounds. The chaplain looks up at Michael, throws his banana peel into the pool, and points to it, indicating that Michael should pick it up. Michael hesitates. Using a bamboo stick, the chaplain hits Michael, causing him to fall into the pool. The chaplain laughs with pleasure while all the women indulge him with their laughter. Michael goes insane and becomes an in-patient of the mental hospital at which he used to work.

Based on readings of the Hui Brothers' 1970s films, this thesis has argued that the *context* in which Hong Kong masculinities in the 1970s developed was *generational* in nature, whether in the home or in the workplace. Men had two modes of agency in this generational masculinities system. They complained about their bosses, and they worked hard, mastering improvisation with everyday situations as a practical outworking of their *kung fu* ethos and entering into *pak dong* relationships with peers. Thus, the *centre* of Hong Kong masculinity in the 1970s was *pragmatism*. Men manipulated everyday situations to their advantage in an effort to be recognized for their competence in improvisation. While the goal of this pragmatism was to move from being the underling to the head of their families and firms, the *purpose* of being the head was *luxury*. However, this luxury, heterosexual and liberating though it was, had to be a hidden culture fraught with the possibilities of getting caught and being shamed in scandal by one's family.



What did it mean to be a man in 1970s Hong Kong? It was to live in the tension of wanting to be free to enjoy one's luxuries and of needing to financially support one's family and either gain or maintain the status of being the head of one's family and workplace. Such a view problematizes simplistic notions of Hongkonger masculinity that either err solely on the side of the Hongkonger man being a sophisticated, modern, James-Bond-speaking-Chinese figure or a devoted family man who had no extra-familial desires for luxury or power. The 1970s young man had to straddle the tension of being a Chinese man who contained his sexual desires and was the financial power-broker of the family (or was deployed by him) and being a modern playboy who lived for the next great thrill. He wanted to live "the good life" (*i.e.* the playboy life) so he needed to have the status as a family man, but it was precisely being the family man that made it hard for him to live the "good life" of a playboy.

This thesis has explored the Hong Kong man's cultural ethos in 1970s Hong Kong as reflected through film. While it has referred to sociological data that supports the views of the film, it has not done primary research on those data. While it has referred to political movements to change the official language to Chinese in 1974 for legal purposes, it has not explored in detail the social and political movements that swept through Hong Kong in the late 1960s and early 1970s that would have contributed to the development of this Hongkonger man's ethos. The thesis merely demonstrates that this masculine ethos existed. It does not demonstrate from where it originated and where it might have led in the development of Hongkonger culture into a culture of affluence in the 1980s.

Therefore, in proper Hong Kong Chinese humility, this thesis bills itself as a modest contribution to the historiography of Hongkonger culture in the 1970s (because if it billed itself otherwise, it would risk arrogance and it not being recognized for its improvisatory competence). In turn, it hopes to provoke further scholarship on Hongkonger culture in the

1970s, masculine and feminine. How, for example, did Hong Kong develop into a colony with a quasi-national identity, and can this phenomenon be explained from a non-media studies perspective? What did it mean to be a young woman in 1970s Hongkonger culture? What did it mean to be a parent? Because compulsory elementary education began in 1971, how did schools contribute to the development of an indigenous Hongkonger culture in the 1970s? What was the role of the family in producing this culture? How did comic books affect the development of young men? How did television gender young people in the 1970s? The list of questions that can be asked of this period are endless—and deserve to be answered.

This thesis has focused on the Hui Brothers because of the relatively scant historiography on their work. If there is a significant scholarly gap on the Hui Brothers, how much more might there be other scholarly holes in other fields of research into 1970s Hong Kong culture? After all, though they were billed as cultural icons and Sam Hui was the pioneering father of Canto-pop, the relatively low amount of scholarly literature on them suggests that historians need to pay more attention to this period and location in history. There was a time, this thesis implies, when the Hui Brothers were the new kids on the block, representing an alternative man to the one portrayed in the Bruce Lee films. It was a man who desired but struggled. It was a man who would have liked to win, tried to win, but could hardly ever win. It was a man who was locked in a family and desired something else besides merely doing his duty. It was a man who wanted a thrill but felt like he had scrape to just feed himself when he had given all he had to his parents. If the historiography on this man is missing, historians may be tempted to think that 1980s affluence meant the minimization of economic struggle on the part of these young Hongkonger entrepreneurs. This thesis suggests that what affluence there was in the 1980s was birthed from a chaotic time of generational struggle in the 1970s.

However, this thesis most importantly sees itself as contributing to an understanding of the Hongkonger men who are still living all over the world and who were shaped in their youth in the 1970s. After all, it is not only important to ask how a historiographical study contributes to the study of history but how the study of history contributes to the betterment of the world. The men who were immersed in this cultural ethos are now fathers, perhaps grandfathers. Their own family ideologies are likely largely shaped by this historical cultural ethos of familial duty, improvisatory pragmatism, and playboy desire. To take a local context, for example, a study of semi-retired men from Hong Kong in Richmond, BC needs to take into consideration the ethos of what it meant to be a man in Hong Kong in the 1970s because that was when they grew up. The writing of recent history, in other words, necessarily contributes to present sociology. Present sociology, in turn, necessarily contributes to understandings of what the people we live with are really like. It helps build relational bridges as humans from different cultures realize that they are fundamentally human and can engage in cultural dialogue.

But for all these sociological projections, this thesis ends thoroughly historically. Having considered the Hui Brothers' 1970s films as primary documents for an ethos that described what it meant to be a man in 1970s Hong Kong, it re-imagines for a final time this culture. Classical historian R. G. Collingwood asks in his seminal work *The Idea of History* what the historian must do to know history, not just empirical evidence of the past. He answers that "the historian must re-enact the past in his own mind" and explains:

In a general way, the meaning of the conception is easily understood. When a man thinks historically, he has before him certain documents or relics of the past. His business is to discover what the past was which has left these relics behind it. For example, the relics are certain written words; and in that case he has to discover what the person who wrote those words meant by them. This means discovering the thought (in the widest sense of that word...) which he expressed by them. To discover what this thought was, the historian must think it again for himself.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, rev. ed., ed. Jan Van Der Dussen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 282-283.

The relics before me are the Hui Brothers' films from the 1970s. Let me recast for a last time the thought that I have re-thought and the experience that I have re-enacted again in this thesis. Suppose I lived in the 1970s, and suppose I went to see one of these films. In these films, I see masculine heterosexual desire portrayed for Betty Ting Pei or a girl in a yellow bikini that Michael sees out of the side of his camera. As a young, unmarried man, I have come into the theatre cinema desiring a woman as well. I laugh at the portrayals of bosses, knowing that my boss can be just as cheap, and I celebrate Sam who can improvise with any situation to his own advantage. I watch Michael and Sam *pak dong* and wish that I had such a partner too. But I also know that if I do not laugh at the jokes and gags, then I do not fit in with this crowd of men who have come to have a good time. In fact, I know that were I to object to this cultural ethos, one of these men might turn around and ask me, "*Wai, hai mai lam yun lei ga?*"<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> "Hey, you a man or not?"

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