

## **Cultural Impact of Music in Film and TV: Aesthetic and Filmmaking Approaches in Once a Thief by John Woo and Jing Wong**

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**Abstract:** In the era of 1990s seen as a golden age of the Hong Kong film and TV industry, music is considered as a tool to enhance the narrative effect and shape given to the aesthetics of art in the context of culture. In order to examine the cultural reflection and transformation power of music, this study attempts to examine the dynamic relationship between music, culture, and visual storytelling in Hong Kong genre film, with a focus on the adaptations of Once A Thief by directors John Woo and Jing Wong. Adopting a detailed thematic analysis framework with qualitative approach, this study explores how music enhances cinematic experiences by shaping narratives and conveying thematic subtleties within the cultural framework of Hong Kong. Set against the backdrop of Hong Kong's transformative 1990s film and TV industry, the study situates Once A Thief within its cultural and commercial milieu. It examines how music synchronizes with visuals to create emotional resonance and narrative depth, contrasting Woo's emotionally charged approach with Wong's incorporation of humor and local cultural elements. From a musicological perspective, the study finds out how music influences character development and story structure in film and TV narratives. It also reveals themes such as romanticism, consumerism, and the impact of colonial legacies on cultural identity in Hong Kong film. The study also addresses the cultural and ethical dimensions of violence portrayed in these films, shedding light on the moral complexities navigated by filmmakers and audiences alike. By comparing Woo's and Wong's directorial styles, the research underscores music's multifaceted role in Hong Kong film, celebrating its rich legacy and emphasizing its enduring contribution to cultural and cinematic artistry.

**Keywords:** Hong Kong Film; Culture; Music in Film; Visual Storytelling; Genre Films; TV Series

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In film and TV creation, music is not only a tool to enhance the narrative effect but also an important element to shape the aesthetics of art. Music plays an important role in enhancing the audience experience, conveying

emotions and deepening themes, particularly in the Hong Kong film and TV industry (Chiu & Siu, 2022). The era of 1990s was a golden age of the Hong Kong film and TV industry. Studies have reflected upon the cultural reflection and transformation of music in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hong Kong film and TV series, which is evident of a non-negligible achievement in the history of film and TV series development (Kar & Bren, 2004; Lilley, 1993). These studies testify that Hong Kong film and TV series in 1990s had massive research value and potential in the development of time. In 2017, particularly Lok Peter, in his study on acculturation through films and media, argued that Chinese new middle class solidates a new national identity program in Hong Kong through the film industry (Lok, 2017). In another study, Zhu & Ke, studied Chinese cultural politics and its connection with Hong Kong and reflected the history of social change and identity conflicts in Hong Kong in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Zhu & Ke, 2016). In contrast, domestic research on Hong Kong film and TV series in 1990s is in the primary stage. The Hong Kong genre film in 1990s was merely a replication of music in different genre films lacking identity (Cheuk, 2008; Lilley, 1993). Similarly, Li Yang sketched the mode, characteristics and the responses of audiences in mainland of China of Hong Kong TV series and found them lacking originality (Yang, 2018). A few other studies (Kar & Bren, 2004; Sun & Sun, 2021; Wang & Yu, 2024), though failed to examine how music reflected directors' aesthetics and cultural differences of the period, but contributed in recognizing the value of the film and TV industry in China, and focused only on the common features in Hong Kong film and TV series. Moreover, these studies lack the deep exploration and analysis of music and cultural transformation in film and TV series at the period of the return of Hong Kong (Mathews et al., 2007; Stokes & Braaten, 2020). Hence, there is a dearth of research on the application of music, particularly in the film and TV, that could explore how the music of 1990s affected the audience's emotional experience and cultural identity. Hence, there is a dire need to conduct research on Hong Kong film and TV series of the 1990s. The 1990s era was a period with many classical works, especially the film *Once A Thief*, released in 1996, directed by John Woo and Jing Wong, which is an ideal case study of the influence of music in the film and TV production. For instance, the classical music in all directorial works of John Woo and Kar Wai Wong reflect unique aesthetics and romantic culture and the political indifference and the characteristics of period reflected in the music of MDI productions in Jing Wong's recreations. The purpose of this research was to analyze the application of music in the film and TV *Once A Thief* and its influence on film production

and artistic aesthetics. The main question included: How does music shape the narrative in the works of two directors? What are the similarities and differences between John Woo and Jing Wong in terms of their use of music? How do these music choices affect the audience's emotional experience and cultural identity? This study not only fills the gap in the research on the role of music in the works of different directors on the same subject but also provides a new perspective for understanding the multiple functions of music in film and TV production. The findings will help to enrich film music theory, especially the relationship between music and visual storytelling in multicultural contexts. Besides, the potential of music in promoting cultural identity and transmission was also explored in this study, providing new insights into the "Sinicisation" process of Hong Kong film.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Zhutong Liu considers film art as a comprehensive production of modern scientific techniques and art, which expresses thought and feelings through the elements of vision, hearing and motion, including frame, shot, dialogue, scores, rhythm and montage (Liu, 2019). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, film frames were in black and white without any sound or dialogue, but cinema found someone to play piano or pipe as the first film score to cover the noise (Schwartz, 2013). With the development of technology and equipment, elaborate film scores appeared in the sound films like *King Kong* (1933). From silent films to sound films, music has played an important role not only for directors to fill the artistic effect that the frame cannot show, but also in helping audiences and filmmakers to understand the meanings and synesthetic effects (Whitelaw, 2008). The synesthetic effect is that human's brains can accept information from different sense organs through some technology or facilities to have different feelings (Liu, 2019). For example, the film score of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Upton, 2017) is lively with fast speed, revealing joy when Snow White decides to stay with them and the diligence of the seven dwarfs when they clean the room and make a new bed. When audiences hear the music of dwarfs working, they know that Snow White now has a peaceful and happy life after escaping from the pursuit of the evil queen, which is presented on the screen. Music becomes an indispensable and core part of filmmaking, which helps directors to increase the expression of shooting to highlight the personality of characters and make up for the monotonous and blank

of non-dialogue frame (Liu, 2019). Lefebvre asserted that space is not only a static “container” or “platform” for the transformation of social relationships, but most social spaces of modern society often paradoxically overlap and permeate each other (Lefebvre, 2012). In fact, the subjugation and integration of space has already become the main approach of consumerism because space has features of consumerism, such as individualism or commodification, it reflects the relationship of consumerism to the whole daily life, so the logic of consumerism becomes the logic of social space (Lefebvre, 2012). In the 1990s, a set of unique Hong Kong commercial films was formed, influenced by secular culture. In an international commercial urban environment, citizens have a faster pace of life and seem to be busy only on their career to make money. Besides, Hong Kong people demonstrated a sense of rootlessness and loneliness because of the war and historical legacy, so the living criteria of Hong Kong people became making money and enjoying their whole life, which made an essential impact on some directors’ film values and production mode (Zhang, 2016). The TV series by Jing Wong, too, put the emphasis on sensual stimulation, the features of which are the pursuit of entertainment effect and rejection of deep thinking. Although many film and TV series fans and critics confirmed Jing Wong as “the king of the bad film and TV series”, his works once ranked in the top ten box office from 1993 to 1997, especially the box office of his one film exceeding 40 million. In addition, in *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*, Jameson analyzes modernism and postmodernism by using two words: parody and pastiche (Fredric & Hal, 1983). In his opinion, the former represents modernism, and the latter represents postmodernism. These words are similar, which are the imitation of a special or unique style and the speaking of a dead language. From modernism to postmodernism, directors transform the technique of montage into a hodgepodge of many materials (Liu, 2004). This approach superimposes materials that are not necessarily related to each other, presenting a complicated and colorful Hong Kong, which just like the theme song’s description of the emotional complexity and change of life, as well as reflection on survival, fame and friendship.

### 3. METHODS

A qualitative research design guided this study, which aimed to discuss the interaction between music and visual elements in a detailed textual analysis of the film *Once A Thief*. The data included film clips, soundtracks,

interviews with directors, and critical articles. Specific methods include the analysis of music fragments and the study of synchrony between plot and music. According to Xu Yuhong, violence aesthetics is an expression that people are willing and good at in literature and art, and an approach to mention human violence and violent behaviors through aesthetical ways, poetic images, or even fantastical shots (Xu, 2010). For instance, through artistic processing and design, John Woo's film presents aggressive power and exaggerated and unconventional movements to pursue formal pleasure without emphasizing specific "ideological conclusions", and the features of this technique are vaudeville and formality (Sheehan, 2013). For example, the final duel in *Once A Thief* shows a brave and clever image of Bo Zaigao, who only uses a long stick to attack enemy with some quick movements, which leaving no time for the enemy to attack himself by using gun, through the song "Carmen's Overture". The music in this plot is the 'A' section of the "Carmen's Overture", as revealed in Figure 1, depicted in full vigor and vitality. The ensemble of woodwinds, brass, strings and percussion with strong playing and the cheerful melody, show the frame that the protagonist fights with the enemy with a long stick, replacing the bloody gunfight with Chinese kung fu and his heroic spirit (Li & Yi, 2013). Incidentally, the Confucian scholars used literature to disrupt the rule of law, and rangers use forces to violate prohibitions"(Xu, 2010). If the presentation of violence in film oversteps the limitation, it should be harmful to adolescents' physical and psychological health.



**Figure 1:** Through the Song "Carmen's Overture" with Chinese kung fu

Likewise, Figure 2 depicts the temperament and violent behavior of the perpetrator romanticized, as found in the music composition, "Fung Gai Zuk Ceoi", The key of this song is major C and the melody in bars 1 to 36 is gentle and soft, with a steady rhythm, recounting the nice life of three characters in the film (Sheehan, 2013). However, in bars 37 to 67, both the

melody and the vocals of singer become stronger, with a brighter and more positive emotional character, showing the complexity of amour among them, which just like in the second half of the lyrics “I have already made you happy, and you have already made me intoxicated, and you have already been in my heart, so there is no need to ask to I remember who (Sheehan 111-114).” The combination of music and frame complements the lack of the transition to the kissing scene of three characters and sets up the ending of the film.

风继续吹  
1=C 4/4  
铁名作曲  
金色风铃网制谱  
(张国荣 演唱)

与你一起去追 要将  
我劝你 你早点回去 你说你 不想回去  
忧郁 苦痛 洗去 柔情 密意 我愿 记取 经强  
只叫我抱着你 悠悠 海风 轻轻吹 冷却了野火  
堆 我看见 伤心的你 你说我 怎会 得去 忍 离情 泪 未 许它 向下 垂 愁如  
哭态 也 绝美 如何 止哭 只得 亲 吻你 发边 让 锁 眉头 紧 别离 泪 始 终 要 下 垂  
风 继续吹 不 忍 远离 我已 令你  
心 里 极 渴望 希望 留下 伴 你再 快乐 你也 令我 痴 痴醉 你 已 在 我  
风 继续吹 不 忍 远离  
心 里 亦 有 泪 不 愿 流 泪 望 着 你 过去 1.2 (间奏略) 3  
多少 快乐 忘 记 何 防 为 何 仍 继 续 留 默 默 垂 为 何 仍 继 续 留

Figure 2: The music score of “Fung Gai Zuk Ceoi” Source: (Sheehan, 2013)

Finally, one can witness a transcendent, numb, and narrative approach or documentary style with a scientific vision. Just like a scientist, the phenomenon of violence is studied with a magnifying glass and microscope in a laboratory of light and shadow (Sheehan, 2013). For example, its plot shows the theme motivation by the trumpet, backed by the violin's broken bow, symbolizing Bo's bad feeling, because he is found when he stole the famous painting, which is a blow to his confidence (Huang, 1995). The breakdown of the primary chord of this song shows Bo Zaigao's boundless vigor in his life of stealing, which is not only as dangerous as walking a tightrope but also as elegant as dancing. He wanted to observe heroes' lives of thievery with a scholar's vision, and some classical actions of martial arts films appeared in this film, illustrating his chivalrous spirit. Jing Wong (Liu, 2004) copied the elements of mainland China to provide a container for Hong Kong people to put their nostalgia for home and used Shenzhen as a symbol of China in the heart of Hong Kong people, which reflected their proud urban legends and family belonging. For instance, the song “Feng Huo Qing Tian” is divided into two parts, the first half of the melody of A and B is melancholy and fuzzy, the rhythm is slow and the voice is hoarse, gives listeners a sense of heaviness, and presents characters' sad and complex life. The second half of the melody of A and B is suddenly clear,

the rhythm is accelerated, and the voice reveals the eagerness to understand life. Besides, the interlude between A and B adds jazz elements to give this pop song a richer soundtrack, providing some happy elements to this song. It is worth noting that the lyrics “My identity is either real or fake, and my feeling for Hong Kong is either deep or shallow” presents his dual identity: a wealthy man in Hong Kong’s upper class or a countryman in the mainland of China. Just like the “reverse illusion” pointed out by Abbas, Ackbar many of the new Chinese middle-class could not realize the essential civil value of the unification of China that Hong Kong people were fighting for (Abbas, 1997). Low-cost housing and rural neighborhoods in this TV series are not used to hide the reality space in Hong Kong but reflect the “four stages of image” concept held by Baudrillard: image is the reflection or absence of the basic reality (Baudrillard, 1981).

#### 4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

During the crazy period in which the imperialist powers promoted colonial expansion by the industrial Revolution, Hong Kong became the ideal transit for the British to dump goods and pillage resources from China (Ngo, 1999). Hence, its economy rapidly developed, and the cultural industries started to emerge. What’s more, as one of the most open cities in the last century, its significant cultural industry, film making, almost monopolized the whole East Asian market and attracted the attention of the Western capital based on Hollywood, such as *God of Gamblers* (1989) and *All’s Well, Ends Well* (1992) are favored by film lovers all over the world (Lie, 2002). Rehling believed that the unicity and the nature of inactive participation by the government of Hong Kong’s economic policies contributed to the inevitable economic bubble crisis of the capitalist market, the result of which is the loss of natural sources and audiences of its entertainment industries (Rehling, 2015). Nevertheless, Yanfang Wu asserted that with cultural independence and historical inheritance, the Hong Kong film and TV series industry continued to make progress in the complicated creative environment integrated polarization and unification, competition and cooperation with invariability and revolution (Wu, 2021). Therefore, film and TV series became highly commercialized, which, to some degree, resolved the problem of economic recession and industrial stagnation. According to Sun Jian, the genre film is a spontaneous product based on the same topic, using fixed templates and similar shooting techniques, featuring fast speed, low cost and high output, which provided

financial support for Hong Kong's short-term economic development (Sun, 2021). However, according to theory of common culture, as pointed out by Raymond Williams, "the meaning of one nation of the particular genre of the life of one nation in a specific period seems to derive from their common experience and complicated expression (Williams, 2016)." In 1997, the fact that Hong Kong returned to China from the British government broke the aspiration of continuous peace, so a struggle for identity, recolonization started (Lok, 2017). The films and television industry became the primary medium for a large number of Hong Kong people, who reflected questioning and conformity, acceptance, and transformation. Social identity is the individual experiences of an imaginative community, whereby the individual acquires social orientation and a sense of collective belonging, holding on to the established order of the social group (Ellemers et al., 2002). This appeal to identity is beneficial to the stability of the social situation. In 1990s, genre films and TV series emerged from the directors' reaction to the transformations of Hong Kong society and the diversity of film content represents various comments on its culture, economy and social construction (Lok, 2017). In the film, *A Thief Once*, while John Woo maintains its colonial characters, Jing Wong strongly responds to the domestic audience's call for identity, both of which reflect the complexity of identity in this particular period in a particular region, Hong Kong. Therefore, both directors maintain their respective styles, highlighting romanticism and their unique personal aesthetics. The director duo completely changed the content of the film, shaping Hong Kong as a purely hedonistic space that serves the consumption desires of modern China (Lok, 2017). The first generation of directors making sound films in Hollywood preferred to select classical music as film scores based on romantic thought and classical music education background (Kalinak, 1992). This is not only a music quotation of classical music, but also provides the principle of film scores for filmmakers in the future. *Once A Thief*, therefore, reveals characteristics of the symphonic soundtrack. Fu, Long made a conclusion for the features of symphonic soundtrack like a large number of scores are used in the film, with less natural sound, like explosion sound and wind sound (Fu, 2017). Second, the frame and sound move ahead simultaneously. One character Hong Dou (Cherie Chung) dances with the director of art museum, and with other two characters, Zhan (Leslie Cheung) and Bo Zaigao (Chow Yun-fat). They sing the theme song *Sous Le Ciel De Paris*. It presents Bo's innate humor that more natural than Chaplin's, through his expression of the music's rhythms and accents by bobbing his head from side to side. In



addition, the combination of romantic and upbeat melody and Bo Zaigao's stealthy movements, the tension of their theft is undermined and replaced by the joy of the trio's reunion and the tacit understanding of working together again. In the second song of this plot, Hong Dou does three things: dance, talk to the director and steal the key. Contrasting with this fresh and playful music, such a busy scene decreases the presence of this illegal action but shows Hong Dou's charm and beauty. The melody of this song is more stable, with the dialogue between Hong Dou and the director as well as the frame of stealing the key separating the phrases and providing the audience a sense of leisure. The rhythm of the third tango is the strongest. Apart from the lively melody and enthusiastic mood of this song, the determined attitude of characters and their constant movements with the melody show the joy of successful theft. The total length of three songs is about three minutes, however, the whole process of stealing and the psychological changes of three characters are presented, injecting elements of comedy and romance into the main theme of gunfighting in this film. Third, film scores with multiple emotions are used in one scene to show complex and varied psychological characteristics (Fu, 2017). John Woo used two songs when A. Zhan and Bo Zaigao stole the famous work *Femme de chambre de Hering* of 1874. The first music shows their caution when crossing the infrared ray, but the second one shows their gloat on the occasion of success when they bite the glass by their mouth and dance to move forward. The music is not separated with the frame, the style, theme, melody and speed. It provides emotion and dramatic expression for the frame, playing the role of explanation and commentary. Figure 4 depicts Hong Dou and A Zhan dancing on the stolen key.



**Figure 4:** Hong Dou and a Zhan Dancing for Stealing Key Successfully

Nevertheless, the communication space of TV series is larger than that of film and compared with watching films in a fixed and closed space, audiences usually enjoy TV series at home or in a free environment. Therefore, audio-visual desynchronization usually appears in TV series. In the third episode, Ming Xing (Deanie Ip) has already thumped the table

and is angry and confused about the agent's argument. Hence, the music should have faster rhythm and more passionate and confrontational melody, which could not only present the real emotion of character, but also lead audiences to image the subsequent plots. However, the music used in this TV series did not adjust to the mood of the characters in the frame, so the connection between music and frame is not perfect, and audiences are always delayed entering the next plot, so that they cannot empathize with characters. In order to finish the meaning recombination of music, directors sometimes adopted classical music, with small changes in structure, tempo and content to create different meanings from the original composer give it, which can re-interpret the emotions and thoughts of characters and the plots. The opening of theme song is used to summarize the plot and provide historical background and culture to audiences. The music *Sous Le Ciel De Paris* of 1951 is a melancholy Chanson with great lyrics, including romantic, charming, sentimental, disorientation, and sentimental emotion. It describes the Paris features and portraits of people there and presents the romantic French atmosphere by accordion, which can quickly take audiences into the Paris atmosphere. John Woo's *Once A Thief* opens with a melody that flies under the Parisian sky, implying the inspirational power of the Parisian atmosphere. Apart from this, the Eiffel Tower immediately afterwards shows the daily vitality of Paris, and Notre Dame de Paris presents that the problems occur here can be solved by simple pleasures, such as the summer sky or the music of the accordion. The frame of Zaigao Bo in Paris Art Museum and melancholic tones of the frame emphasize the dual nature of the beauty and hardship of Paris. As the opening of this film, it presents the cultural vitality of Paris and its capacity for love, so everything three characters do are witnessed under the Paris blue sky. However, the end song is usually abstract, which is used to expand the annotation of plot and summarize the story of film with three characters in the center (Pavlović & Marković, 2011), as depicted in Figure 5.



**Figure 5:** Three Characters in Paris with the Background Music *Sous Le Ciel De Paris*

In *Once A Thief*, John Woo accelerated the tempo of the song, changed the legato to staccato, and replaced the solemn opening of the original song with a new joyful piano melody. Its purpose was to show the funny image of Zaigao Bo, who wears an apron with cream on the face and throws out Hong Dou and A Zhan's child as a toy, reflecting the relaxing and wonderful life after giving up their old business, as seen in Figure 6. Just like Zaigao Bo says in the film "Actually, loving someone does mean that I need to stay with her forever. If I love flowers, do you pick it to me? If I love wind... If I love sea, do I jump into sea?" The romance and love in this film is not as same as that in his previous films, which is not a love that characters would be give up for responsibility and brotherhood, but the unselfish love that character provides love when his or her friends need and not forcible possession when they do not need. The filmmaker transformed elegance into vulgarity without any derogatory sense. It is a comparison between a noble but false life to a normal but peaceful life, reflecting their emotion beyond love and friendship (Ellemers et al., 2002). Figure 6 illustrates a still moment of the stable and happy life of three characters after leaving their old business.



**Figure 6:** Stable and Happy Life of Three Characters after Leaving their Old Business

Theoretically, the shift of political stand inevitably spawns new collective identity, so new political boundaries bring about political, economic and cultural transmutations, causing a change in the sense of identity of the member of the society (Pavlović & Marković, 2011). According to Hall (1989), "Cultural identity is how people position themselves differently, placing them into a narrative of the past". However, the independence revealed by Hong Kong media is a rejection of the premise of "placing people in the narrative" emphasized by Hall. Chan Ching-kiu Stephen, a Hong Kong scholar argued "This emotional deficiency may stem from the

ambiguity of our generation's historical imagination and the fear of, or resistance to it. Compared with the suffering of people's livelihood and political fissures in the mainland of China, Hong Kong enjoyed the serenity of being a remote third party". As an independent third party, Hong Kong formed a unique cultural and political landscape between China and the British, but this identity could not be a sustainable development (Wang, 2003). Hence, in *Once A Thief*, Jing not only retained Hong Kong's iconic exteriors and colonial traces but also emphasized the influence of national politics to avoid complete assimilation and alienation. There were three songs among 42 episodes, especially the song Xiazhu, which is the background music of Li who is kidnapped but escaped, appeared more than 20 times in this TV series. The soundtrack is about ten seconds long, with the feature of one same phrase and increasingly loud volume, reflecting the bitterness and despair when he hails a car but is rejected constantly, which gives audiences the illusion that they have this experience for several hours. Figure 7 depicts Li Zhaotian who could not take a taxi to a police office without any money.



**Figure 7:** Li Zhaotian cannot take a Taxi to a Police Office without any Money

Apart from this, the same music appeared when a kind-hearted and simple family in China helped Li Zhaotian to return to Hong Kong, for which he deeply realized how arrogant and hubristic he used to be, as shown in Figure 8. This background music repeats the same phrase over and over again, which not only to save creation costs, but also to show Li's long thinking about re-understanding the world after experiencing huge changes in his life. Jing uses the same piano piece to depict the character's images in a different period, demonstrating the fickleness of human nature and the success and failure of Hong Kong's commercial business.





**Figure 8:** A Poor but kind Chinese Family help Li Zhaotian to Return to Hong Kong

In the first half of the twentieth century, two parties of China started the largest and most far-reaching civil war, which became an important turning point in the destiny of many Chinese people (Huang, 2010). After this war, because of the destruction of their hometown and the serious political situation, five-year-old John Woo and his parents moved from Guangdong to Shek Kip Mei in Kowloon, Hong Kong, where many illegal immigrants lived. Unfortunately, his father could not go out to work due to tuberculosis, so he suffered a brutal and poor childhood. Moreover, a fire that happened in 1953 destroyed all their belongings, including identification paper, so they were stranded in Hong Kong, living in a three-plus square-foot room in the Tolo Mansion. He memorized that, “Here, I used to fight with hooligans and ruffians and came home bleeding. My mother is unable to move to another peaceful place like the story *Mencius Mother Move Three Times*. My father told me to become a strong man who was responsible for his whole life and was kind to everyone, without the feeling of being world-weary” (Huang Xiaohong, 2010: 280-285). These two civil wars cast a heavy shadow of death over the people who were scared of death and desired life, contributing to the rise of films with themes of violence and death. Many violent films only show superficial force and physical violence, which bring pleasure to people but mislead teenagers, contributing to social disorder and crime. However, as Zhao Xin (2017) found John Woo having a deep reflection on violence, death and personal responsibility, pointing out some questions, like “Did you insist on your dream when addressing violence? Did you help your neighbors or some strangers to avoid persecution? Did you adhere to your original aspiration, when facing inhumane violence (Zhao, 2017)” “Fung Gai Zuk

Ceoi” was adapted from the song *Goodbye The Other Side* sung by Momoe Yamaguchi. The original version expressed her sadness and helplessness of retiring from song circles because of marriage and family. “Goodbye” refers to saying goodbye to their previous career, which implies the beginning of another journey in her life. MTV time refers to an interaction mode, including only music and frames, without any dialogue or natural sound. Music integrated with its counterpart characters, which provided a unique viewing effect. Apart from this, spatial symbols illustrate the subjective emotions of characters. According to Zhao Yiheng, the closed space is mainly indoor, just like home, which is a shelter for everyone to relax and protect themselves from exposing to the weather. In addition, home is also helpful for the audience to empathize with characters, which is a synonymous with happiness, carrying memories and warmth, and giving people a sense of belonging (Zhao, 2011). However, in this clip, Hong Dou is quietly lying on the sofa in a grey space, with the song playing in her heart, as illustrated in Figure 9.



**Figure 9:** MTV Moment that Hong Dou and A Zhan are sad for Friend's Sacrifice

This melody is sad and graceful, exhibiting a pessimistic sense of frustration. The sound brings endless sorrow rather than enjoyment. The lyrics “I have not to cry and do not allow my tears to drop down. My sadness makes me tired and finally my tears still fall”, imply the end of Bo’s life. However, the lyrics “How many happy memories of the past? Why not memorize with you,” I want to forget the sorrow and bitterness and to remember the cheerful memories”, seal their enjoyable life in Hong’s and A Zhan’s hearts. Apart from this, John combined this song with a set of short, non-chronological sequences, breaking the continuous narrative of time and space, showing the frame of three people is converted into that of two people through the montage technique, which implies Hong and Zhan’s afternoon of life. John Woo chose some French architectures, like

pont des Arts, Arc de Triomphe and Notre Dame de Paris. Therefore, his film firmly held the right of choice to express his love of French romantic culture. For example, the opening song of *Once A Thief* directed by John, *Sous le ciel de Paris*, takes audiences into a lazy atmosphere. What is more, this gentle melody plays a significant role in the development of the storyline. As a result, this typical “Delerue style” film score also appears at the end of the film, with distinct features. Fast speed and lively melody show the frame of three thieves settling down in busy Hong Kong, starting their ordinary lives and worrying about trivial matters. *Once A Thief* reflects John’s aesthetic, presenting his “stolen” childhood, the influence of French film culture, and the success and failure of his directing career. Due to the lack of funds, John Woo came back to Hong Kong to finish the subsequent part of the film, but these problems could not stop him from seeking his primary aspiration as a director. As he said, “I only want to make a comedy film. It is my work which may be questioned and criticized again. However, it does not matter. I trust my instincts and vision” (Luo, 1997) The reasons why Jing Wong became a master of commercial film are his childhood experience, literary education and commercial ideology (Li, 1992). When he was a child, ancient and modern Chinese and foreign literary masterpieces accompanied him to grow up, such as *Romance of Three Kingdoms* and *Water Margin*, because of his father’s busy career, which provided the foundation for him to become a famous writer of film. Hence, when he was employed as a full-time writer in *Radio Television Hong Kong*, a dozen TV series were created in just three years. In an interview, he called himself a film businessman, believing that film-making is just like falling in love. He added “Some people like the rich, while others uphold that love is the most important thing. The same is true for films. Others preferred literary films, while others only wanted to earn money”. In order to achieve the goal of “box office success and make money for the boss”, he developed a set of his strategies. First and foremost, the “Give Me” doctrine, according to Xinying Zhang, refers to intentionally copying or using classic costumes, dialogues, and film frames familiar to the audiences and strengthening comedic effect by using the audience’s viewing experience and associative thinking (Zhang, 2016). The soundtrack of the third episode, *Nan Er Dang Zi Qiang*, is theme song of “Wong Fei Hung: A Mighty Heart”. This song is recreated by the Tang Dynasty royal music “Jiang Jun Ling”, the lyrics of which mainly presents the majesty of ancient military when they win the battle. Various music instruments were used in this song, including suona, gong, drum, flute, sheng, ten gong and bass gong, displaying rich timbrels, bright rhythms and strong melodies, so this

song is used in many martial arts scenes in films and TV series. Therefore, the melody of this song is strong, and the lyrics emphasize masculinity and self-realization, such as “To be a good man, to strengthen yourself every day. You are passionate like the sun.” Therefore, the audience came up with Wong Fei Hung’s martial arts and his manliness in addressing challenges without cowering by listening to this Chinese song, which is full of chivalrous spirits, but a petite priest in the frame is so odd with the song. As a result, the combination of music and frame provides the audience with a great sense of contrast, enhancing the comedic effect. Second, he knew Hong Kong’s secular life and respected the entertainment needs of the grassroots after five years of working experience in RTHK, so the characteristics of Hong Kong’s local culture are reflected in his work, including grassroots, secular and entertainment (Zhang, 2016). In *Feng Huo Qing Tian*, “I was influenced by fickle feelings, which makes me obsessed. Fate is strange, but I still believe we are a couple.....our life is colorful. Have you betrayed me? I want to ask you”. These lyrics directly described theme of love for the masses to kill time, reflecting the most challenging problem in the world, “Why do I fall with you? Why do I become confused when you betray me? Why do I hate you after you hurt my heart?” Therefore, in *Feng Huo Qing Tian*, Hong Kong was described as a complex society of luxury and warmth under the influence of capitalism and socialism, which attracted the Chinese new middle class and has become the common theme of Chinese modern city films. Third, there are many imitations and references in his work. Jing found out the insufficient utilization of resources due to the inevitable conditions in the past by reproducing classic film and TV series, and let the audience pay attention to the classic during the period of Hong Kong’s society transformation and the reconstruction of Chinese culture (Zhang, 2016). Hence, more film and TV series makers, fans, critics and audiences have regained their confidence in the face of confusion of the lack of classic film and TV series resources.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Culture and politics are inextricably linked, so a contradictory Hong Kong identity emerged in the 1990s. On one hand, Hong Kong scholars argue that the “Hong Kong Miracle” should be associated with “China factors”, revealing the national character of Hong Kong people, who are as hard-working, clever and flexible as the Chinese, as Peter Lok upheld (Lok, 2017). On the other hand, Rehling, Petra thought decolonization



does not recognize the return of Hong Kong to China and the replacement of capitalism with socialism, leading to Hong Kong's autonomy. In the dualistic mode of thinking of Hong Kong scholars, both views are Essentialism (Rehling, 2015). No matter which kind of Hong Kong identity, people have a real and clear agreement of one identity, which could not change over time (Luo, 1997). In some gangster films, words like 'gangster', 'hood' and 'gamble' depict the resistance to leaders' decisions and the struggle for independence and assimilation in the dialogue (Peter Lok (Lok, 2017). Directors preserve its unique culture and tradition through these words to show people's doubt and fear of the invasion and replacement of Chinese culture. Under the rule of the gang organization, the film's heroes are notorious thieves living on the fringes of the city, replacing 'crime' with 'loyalty' and advocating the idea that violence should be prevented by violence (Rehling, 2015). Under the rule of the police, they are kind citizens who help lonely older adults search for food, showing that there are no absolute good and bad people. In fact, taking out the personality of righteousness, the leader of the gang organization is an outlaw who violates the law and kills people without morality (Sun, 2021). This violence was condemned in the Chinese traditional culture, but reveals the hesitation and selection of a hero between life and death. As a social problem and bad behavior, violence attracted the attention of scholars worldwide. In the past, any violence was regarded as a thought, denying democratic order and legal principles, which was incompatible with modern concepts (Ohldieck, Hans Jacob and Gisle, Selnes, 2020). John Woo's "Hero Series" of films, which regard violence as an independent theme, is a milestone in the history of Hong Kong films. As a cultural product, the remake TV series has a special characteristic that distinguishes it from other products: it satisfies audience's critical mind. Andrew Horton and Stuart McDougal argue "the remake products consciously or unconsciously lead audiences to enjoy the differences handled between texts, but provides different reading, expression, development and result (Braudy, 1998)." Therefore, Jing Wong used the combination of the tone of music, nationalistic emotions and different frames creates an audible-visual contrast (Liu, 2019). Furthermore, it extends the original content to create a new interpretation and deepen theme. Besides, the main audiences of TV series are never the intellectual elites who uphold certain humanistic ideals and values or are keen on certain political slogans, but the general public in Hong Kong, who choose TV series as their main way to spend leisure time after work, because watching TV is the most convenient and cheapest way among all entertainment (Fung, 2003). Furthermore, most

TV series producers in Hong Kong are profit-oriented businessmen whose purpose in investing in TV series production is making benefit (Zeng, 2000). Therefore, since the 1990s, the family business TV series have become popular, with theme of the business war and family entanglement. Directors are in favor of describing the ever-changing business world of competition or family property disputes, as well as family feuds and emotional entanglements to explore human morality and the essence of human nature. The songs used in Jing's *Once A Thief* repeatedly talks about long-lasting friendship, but the audiences witness the confusion, weakness and faint wandering of the characters in the struggle of their world.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to determine the difference in music, culture and aesthetics between Hong Kong film and TV series in the 1990s and set an example between John Woo and Jing Wong's work under the same name: *Once A Thief*. One of the most significant findings to emerge from this study is that John Woo's film, Jing Wong's TV series, and the music in their works reflect different cultures and aesthetics during the period of the return of Hong Kong. As the earliest director to enter the Western entertainment industry and Hollywood, John is strongly influenced by the Western film culture, preferring different kinds of Western classical music, like *Blue Danube* and French chanson. These elegant songs were once performed in concerts, but he added them into his films, combining East and West, past and modern, elegance and leisure, which show the beauty of the combination of art. In addition, his tragic childhood and the chaotic city life of Hong Kong in his youth did not break his pursuit of art. On the contrary, John's impotence in the face of social chaos laid the foundation for his violent aesthetics. He retains the theme of the "little guy, big hero" of Hollywood, with the center of his unique aesthetic of violence and the art of gangsterism, which push the artistry of the film to its peak. Jing's recreation further sublimated John's *Once A Thief* ideological consciousness, spiritual core, and value concept. He pays attention to finding the modern value of original work and unearthing the inner meaning of the combination with the characteristics of Hong Kong's transformation period, arousing the emotional resonance and intellectual identification of contemporary audiences. He retained the original story about gangsters and gunfights, but the focus shifted to love disputes and family ethics, weakening a series of behaviors banned by Chinese modern

law. In terms of commercial value, Jing's *Once A Thief* was strongly driven by the interest of investors, but it cannot be said that it is a practical need, which is the active embodiment of respect for art, culture, and classics. Art was further popularized and commoditized, so his TV series production cycle was short, making it easy to satisfy the audience's need for rapid mass production of artwork. Therefore, most of the music he selected is pop music, such as "Feng Huo Qing Tian" and "Xia Zhu." Apart from this, some classic Chinese songs are in his TV series, such as "Nan Er Dang Zi Qiang," which not only saves cost and production time but also reflects his Chinese identity. Finally, the theme songs of *Once A Thief* directed by John Woo and Jing Wong were studied in the current to enhance the theme of the film and TV series, strengthen the visual effect and the narrative. However, how other music in *Once A Thief* forms the background elements and what kinds of images the theme song of other characters in TV series embody respectively are worth further studying.

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