
49 / Spectacle and Subversion In Trenchard-Smith's *The Man from Hong Kong*

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The Man from Hong Kong, the 1975 feature film written and directed by Brian Trenchard-Smith, was the first Australian-Hong Kong co-production. Capitalising on the popularity of Bruce Lee, the film brought the *kung fu* phenomenon to Australia in the character of Inspector Fang Sing Ling, who comes from Hong Kong to assist Australian police with an extradition in a drug smuggling ring, but instead ends up busting the drug boss himself.

The film's advertising promised its audience "*All action and great fun*" and the film delivers thrilling fight sequences, spectacular scenes of hang-gliding over Hong Kong and Sydney, and white-knuckle car chases and explosions that pre-date and outdo *Mad Max* in their visual excess – all real stunts performed by Jimmy Wang Yu and stuntman *extraordinaire* Grant Page without the aid of special effects.

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Whilst the spectacle is what has garnered most praise, the film also serves as a counterpoint to the earlier stereotype of Chinese masculinity in Australian cinema, replacing the marginalised, de-sexualised, disempowered, subservient Chinese with the exaggeratedly sexualised, empowered, aggressive and unrestrained Chinese character of Fang Sing Ling.

There is little doubt that Fang Sing Ling (played by Jimmy Wang Yu), would not have existed were it not for Bruce Lee. However, he was well established in Hong Kong before Lee entered the scene. *The Chinese Boxer* (1970), which Wang Yu directed and in which he starred, is the first major film to devote itself to *kung fu* and is a primer for the clichés and conventions of the Lee films.¹ There are also significant differences between the empowered and sexualised character of Fang Sing Ling and the legally disempowered, inarticulate migrant characters of Bruce Lee's films.

My focus, however, is on representations of Chinese masculinity in Australian feature films made within the period of the 'White Australia' policy of 1901-1973. I begin by examining those representations within the context of the policy as it evolved and as it was dismantled, which coincides with the Australian film industry in its early flourishing in the first decades of the 20th Century through to its mid-century decline and then onwards to its renaissance in the 1970s.

Australia and the Chinese

At the time of film's arrival in Australia in 1896, anti-Chinese sentiment and racial determinism were at a height. By 1901, 77.2% of the population was Australian-born, while another 20% were born in the United Kingdom or Europe. The

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population of Australia was overwhelmingly white, and the country wished to keep it that way. The newly federated nation indeed defined itself as an exclusively white nation through its first act of parliamentary legislation, the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901.

While this and later instances of legislation were primarily concerned with ensuring the racial homogeneity of Australia through deportations and by preventing the subsequent immigration of non-whites, they also operated to restrict the movements and associations of those Chinese who remained in Australia and other non-whites (including Aborigines), to limit opportunities for non-white reproduction, and to deny them the privileges of citizenship. The representations of male Chinese characters - Chinese females being largely absent - in Australian feature films of the early period then predictably echo the discourses of the 'White Australia' policy.

The British short film *Attack on a China Mission* (Williamson, 1900) was one of the first imported films to be exhibited in Australia, but home-grown anxiety about the threat to the white family and nation featured in the invasion film *Australia Calls* (Longford, 1912) in which Australia comes under attack on land and sea by an unnamed Mongolian force. Although it would seem that the narrative was prompted by anxiety about growing Japanese power, the film played on earlier fears of invasion by the Chinese and cast doubts on the loyalty of the Chinese in Australia.

As no copy of this film survives, it cannot be properly assessed, nor can films such as *The Double Event* (Lincoln, 1911) and *Satan in Sydney* (Smith, 1918), though it would seem that the Chinese and Chinatown operate as

synecdoches for vice and corruption in these films. *Thunderbolt* (Gavin, 1910) appears to be the first Australian film with Chinese characters. In the surviving fragments, three Chinese men on the road to the goldfields, played in yellow-face by European actors, are accosted by the bushranger Captain Thunderbolt, who shoots at their feet to make them jump, and proceeds to steal their clothes. A comic role is a recurrent feature of Chinese representation in the early films.

A Girl of the Bush

In Franklyn Barrett's popular 1921 film, *A Girl of the Bush*, the Chinese character Sing Lee (played by Sam Warr) is the cook on a sheep station who spends his time chasing the Chinese laundry-maid. His failed courtship parallels the real romance of the film between the white hero and heroine. Sing Lee is emasculated by his failure in the courtship stakes, and by the physical and verbal bullying the station-hands mete out to remind him of his place. When he fails to prepare a meal because of his romantic dalliances, the station hands declare, "*We'll have to deal it out to that blanky Chinkie*".

The character of Sing Lee also serves a narrative purpose. He witnesses a murder but his failure to report it results in the hero of the film being wrongly accused and tried for the murder. When Sing Lee confesses that he witnessed the murder and is confronted by the station hands as to why he didn't report it, he replies "*Maybe ole man killum me too*". Sing Lee is dragged on to a coach for a race to the courthouse to give evidence that will clear the charges.

The emphasis in this film on the physical and legal control of Sing Lee mirrored a reality for those Chinese Australians

whose employment, movements and relationships were regulated by the legislation of 'White Australia'. In spite of the unusually high incidence of films which stress family relationships in Australian cinema of the 1920s and 1930's, Chinese family relationships are absent in these films.² For the most part, Chinese males in early Australian films are characterised as aging and emasculated, reinforcing policies inhibiting non-white reproduction.

The Birth of White Australia

The most notoriously anti-Chinese film to have survived is *The Birth of White Australia* (Walsh, 1928). Financed and produced by the people of the rural town of Young, the site of anti-Chinese riots in the gold-rush era, the film links a series of documentary vignettes and recreations of key episodes of white settlement to celebrate the role of the town of Young in establishing a White Australia.

Doubtless inspired by Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, which had enjoyed a seven-week season in Australia in 1916, *The Birth of White Australia* shared the racist ideology of Griffith's film, but lacked the high production values and structured narrative. As the film failed to find a buyer at its preview screening, it was not commercially released in Australia. The film cannot perhaps therefore be considered significant in Australian film history.³ Yet while *The Birth of White Australia* may have been anachronistic, it is not unique in its display of racial anxiety.

Hall's *Lovers and Luggers* (1937) sets a romantic adventure story in the exotic locale of the pearling industry on Thursday Island in Australia's far North. The ethnic mix of Thursday Island forms a backdrop to the action, which centres on a

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jaded London pianist's quest to compete for the affections of a socialite by diving for a pearl. At this time tensions on the island had come to a head with a protracted lugger strike by Torres Strait Islanders in 1936 to gain control of their passbooks and wages, and with growing concerns over the commercial activities of the Japanese in the industry and their military expansion abroad. The racial hierarchy of the film reassures audiences of the *status quo* of white hegemony.

The Japanese have no presence in the film and racial anxiety is deflected on to the Chinese, who are seen to be firmly kept in their place. Like the faithful islanders, the Chinese domestics and lugger crew labour obediently for their white bosses in uniforms of white singlets and shorts; white men in crisp safari suits drink at the Metropolitan, while the Chinese drink at China Tom's.

The Chinese entrepreneur Charlie Quong (played in yellow-face by Claude Turton) adopts the uniform of the whites and buys a lugger, but his attempts to rise above his station are undermined by his exaggerated Chinese accent and his crumpled safari suit, and he is killed off in a tussle after he attempts to steal a pearl on board the lugger.

The 1970s: An Era of Change

After *Lovers and Luggers*, films with Chinese characters in an Australian setting disappear from Australian cinema altogether until 1971, in a period which coincides not only with the demise of the Australian production industry but also with the Production Code in the United States, which prohibited the depiction of interracial relationships.

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By the end of the 1960s, attitudes towards immigration were changing and the White Australia policy was in the process of being dismantled. In the arts, the counterculture openly challenged censorship, parodied the old isolationist attitudes and sexual conservatism, and experimented with new ideas of national identity. The reappearance of the Chinese man in four Australian films of the 1970s was markedly different from the disempowered and de-sexualised Chinese of the earlier films.

Demonstrator (Freeman, 1971) is a story of inter-generational conflict set against the background of an Asian security summit hosted in Canberra. In a sub-plot of the narrative, an outspoken delegate to the conference from an unnamed Asian nation (played by Hong Kong actor Kenneth Tsang) has an affair with the secretary to the Minister of Defence. Despite its ambitions, the film held limited appeal for a commercial audience and it flopped at the box office.

The little-known *Gentle Strangers* (Holmes, 1972), which focuses on the difficulties faced by Asian students in Australia, did not even make it as far as the box office. Against the wishes of its director, the film was cut down to mini-feature length and released only through film libraries and television. At the beginning of *Mad Dog Morgan* (Mora, 1976) there is a scene in which Dan Morgan witnesses a brutal anti-Chinese attack on the gold-fields. Morgan flees along with the Chinese, and this incident marks his entry into his career as a bushranger.

Challenging Stereotypes: *The Man from Hong Kong*

While these three films challenged stereotypes, *The Man from Hong Kong* was the most commercially oriented and

arguably the most subversive in challenging the values of the popular audience. In writing the screenplay, Trenchard-Smith envisaged a film which would subvert the action film formula: *“What if Dirty Harry came to Sydney and wrecked the place after a Bond-style villain? What if the villain was played by former James Bond, George Lazenby? What if the hero was Chinese and the Australian characters reacted to his activities with typical Asian stereotypes - that would be an interesting genre cocktail I thought, shaken not stirred of course”*.⁴

The film’s hero, Fang Sing Ling, is empowered both in the legal and physical sense. He has a legal mandate which gives him unrestricted freedom of mobility. Although his Australian police colleagues attempt to rein in his activities, he is not subject to their authority, and sets his own rules. He is also their physical superior, which is highlighted through the intercutting between scenes of Fang’s physical prowess and the torpor of the Australian police.

Unlike the Chinese of the earlier films, Fang Sing Ling is not constricted by a lack of English. Fang’s command of English is in marked contrast with the poor English which served to exclude the Chinese in the early films, echoing the notorious Dictation tests, developed to exclude non-whites in the White Australia policy era. Caricatured Chinese speech or the use of the obfuscating *“No savee”* as a cover for suspect activities provided the butt of jokes in films such as *A Girl of the Bush*, where Sing Lee’s proposal to the laundry-maid was made ridiculous by his poor English.

Whilst racial insults are still flung around in this film, they are no longer passively absorbed. In one scene, frustrated by Fang’s success in getting ahead with the case, Australian

detective Morrie Gross tells Fang to back off, adding “*This is Australia mate, not ‘55 days in Peking’*”. According to Trenchard-Smith’s script, Fang was to snort derisively and walk away, but Wang Yu insisted on changing the script so that he instead points menacingly at Gross and says “*Hey, don’t give me any shit*”, whereupon Gross backs down and apologises. (It is perhaps worth noting that in the version of *The Man from Hong Kong* released for the U.S. market as *The Dragon Flies*, this scene was cut, ostensibly because the audience would not be able to decipher the accents.)

Sexuality: Reversing the Stereotype

While the humour in *A Girl of the Bush* comes from ridiculing the notion that a Chinese male could make a suitable sexual partner or husband, in *The Man from Hong Kong* Fang Sing Ling is portrayed as sexually attractive and active, engaging in two sexual relationships with white Australian women. Given the limited time that the action genre allows for the development of relationships, the sex is contextualised within relationships and is mutually desired, pleasurable and visceral.

Meaghan Morris has noted that “*In the economy of mid-1970s sexual representation, these sexually forthright women are not unusual ... at the same time it was not common in 1970s Australian cinema for white women to be smitten on sight by Chinese men*”.⁵ But Trenchard-Smith commented of these scenes: “*I had a point to make. Generally it’s a white hero bedding Asian girls in this type of picture. I wanted to emphatically reverse that stereotype.*”⁶ The sexualised hero of *The Man from Hong Kong* satirises the sexual stereotypes of the Chinese, and for a change, the audience laughs with him, not at him. In the scene when Fang is making love to

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Angelica she murmurs “*Mmm, this is good*”, to which he replies “*What did you expect, acupuncture?*”.

If in interview the director acknowledged that commercial success rather than social criticism was the motivation behind the film, he more explicitly critiqued the notion of white cultural superiority in his futuristic *Dead End Drive-In* (1986). Hero Tony and his girlfriend become trapped in a drive-in cinema from which there is no escape. Tony’s girlfriend is seduced by the lifestyle within the drive-in, which offers free beer for the men and free hair-dos for the women.

She becomes a willing prisoner along with the other denizens of the drive-in who are motivated into action only by the opportunity for a fight and the arrival of a truckload of Vietnamese refugees which prompts them to set up a ‘White Australia’ movement. If *Dead End Drive-In* engages with debates around Australian masculinity, car culture, phobic narratives and the ‘White Australia’ policy, so too does *The Man from Hong Kong*, but ten years earlier and with greater humour and success.⁷

The hyperbolic character of Fang Sing Ling does not represent the real experiences of Chinese Australians, nor does it escape the cinematic paradigm of the tragic interracial relationship. Yet in playing out the liberation of the Chinese man from the legal, physical and sexual restrictions which had long confined him in Australian cinema, *The Man from Hong Kong* is one of the few films to cinematically engage with a popular audience on the political and social changes that marked the end of the ‘White Australia’ era. *The Man from Hong Kong* strives for what Morris calls “*an imagined Australian cinema that might no*

longer be bound by spaces or genres of national trauma and marginalization”⁸. It is a pity that the social dialogue this film opened and the path it forged for co-productions were not followed in the subsequent direction taken by Australian cinema.

Notes and References

¹ Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions*, London: British Film Institute, 1997, pp. 103-4.

² William Routt, ‘The Fairest Child of the Motherland: Colonialism and Family in the Australian films of the 1920s and 1930s’, in Albert Moran and Tom O’Regan (eds.), *The Australian Screen*, Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1989, pp. 28-52.

³ Tom O’Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, London: Routledge, p. 348.

⁴ Brian Trenchard-Smith, interview with the author, 2012.

⁵ Meaghan Morris, ‘The Man from Hong Kong in Sydney, 1975’, in Judith Ryan, Chris Wallace-Crabbe (eds.), *Imagining Australia: Literature and Culture in the New New World*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Committee on Australian Studies, 2004, pp. 235-266.

⁶ Trenchard-Smith, 2012.

⁷ See Rebecca Johninke, ‘Not Quite *Mad Max*: Brian Trenchard-Smith’s *Dead End Drive-In*’, *Studies in Australasian Cinema*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2009, pp. 309 – 320.

⁸ Meaghan Morris, ‘Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema: Hong Kong and the Making of a Global Popular Culture’, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 5 no. 2, 2004, pp. 181-199.