"In the Sentimental Past": Cultural Identity Through Film Music Before and After the Hong Kong Handover

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“IN THE SENTIMENTAL PAST”
CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH FILM MUSIC BEFORE AND AFTER THE HONG KONG HANDOVER
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SO, WHY HONG KONG?

Hong Kong: Jackie Chan, night markets, and of course, dim sum. To most people, this is all Hong Kong is, however, the city encompasses more history, culture, and art than one might preconceive. This coastal city’s uniqueness is present through its culture, night life, and people, but what is even more interesting is Hong Kong’s unique governmental and political history. For the past few decades, Hong Kong has gone through significant changes in their governing powers as a result of the handover from Britain to China. With the changing government, Hong Kong-ers’ sense of cultural identity has also been shifted. Before 1997, Great Britain was the main governing force. Subsequently, after 1997, Great Britain handed over the island of Hong Kong to China – resulting in drastic governmental and political changes. Facing the political turmoil that is currently occurring in Hong Kong, its films are an important marker of cultural identity and expression. As all art reflects culture, the films Hong Kong produces reflects their cultural and political attitudes. Through the analysis of A Better Tomorrow (1986), Beast Cops (1998), and In the Mood for Love (2000), I illustrate how Hong Kong’s attitudes toward their governing powers and their cultural identity have changed over time.

A BETTER TOMORROW (1986)
THE SINO-BRITISH JOINT DECLARATION & CANTOPOP

Mike and Tung. The new kid on the block and the weathered, corrupt police officer.
- "Sha-la-la" by Dreamland: Underscores a scene in which Tung "hazes" Mike at a night club
- English "sha-la-la-la-la" lyrics emphasize emphasizes Mike’s foreignness and naivety and Tung’s carelessness
Just one year after the handover, Beast Cops coves the mistrust and anxiety from Hong Kong towards their governing countries.
- Hong Kong has been a colony for 99 years, yet still maintained a high degree of freedom.
- Post-Tiananmen Square, Hong Kong has witnessed how the Communist Chinese system of government is broken and corrupt.
- In the year after the handover, Hong Kong is experiencing mistrust towards the unpredictable Chinese government, and this can be seen in Beast Cops’ score.

BEAST COPS (1998)
THE HANDOVER & “SHA-LA-LA”

Mrs. Chow and Mr. Chen. The adulterers and their spouses.
- “Yumeji’s Theme” by Shigeru Umebayashi: Leitmotif for Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow’s fleeting interactions
- Forward-moving, pizzicato accompaniment & slow, sad, lingering violin solo. Their spouses are betraying them, and Mrs. Chan and Mr. Chow have done everything morally “right,” but they are unable to get what they want.

IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE (2000)
THE AFTERMATH & DESIRE

Beast Cop

In 1998, Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement is in full swing. As a result of the 2019 Hong Kong extradition bill, among other motives, the people of Hong Kong have protested against the assertion of power that China has placed over the city. The Sino-British Joint Declaration provided a transitional time for Hong Kong to be fully assimilated into the Chinese system of government, yet China is continually exerting more of their power onto Hong Kong too quickly. Even though protections for Hong Kong have been put into place to slowly integrate into China, the protests and attitudes of the people clearly demonstrate a refusal of that integration. Because Hong Kong was separate from China for so long, they have developed their own distinct culture, people, and government. As seen through their films, Hong Kong craves autonomy and freedom. They had a taste of what that was like when Great Britain colonized them, but they were still classified as a colony. To be their own country – distinct from the West and from the East – is a tall yet appropriate order.

SO, WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

In 2019, Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement is in full swing. As a result of the 2019 Hong Kong extradition bill, among other motives, the people of Hong Kong have protested against the assertion of power that China has placed over the city. The Sino-British Joint Declaration provided a transitional time for Hong Kong to be fully assimilated into the Chinese system of government, yet China is continually exerting more of their power onto Hong Kong too quickly. Even though protections for Hong Kong have been put into place to slowly integrate into China, the protests and attitudes of the people clearly demonstrate a refusal of that integration. Because Hong Kong was separate from China for so long, they have developed their own distinct culture, people, and government. As seen through their films, Hong Kong craves autonomy and freedom. They had a taste of what that was like when Great Britain colonized them, but they were still classified as a colony. To be their own country – distinct from the West and from the East – is a tall yet appropriate order.