Chow Yun-fat and territories of Hong Kong stardom, by Lin Feng, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2017, 181 pp., £75.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1474405898

The bloodshed, melodramatic gun fights in John Woo's action films have always been remembered as the height of Chow Yun-fat’s career, which brought him not only international fame but also the opportunity to lead in Hollywood action films afterwards. However, unlike other Hollywood Chinese stars such as Jackie Chan and Jet Li, Chow has never been trained to specialise in martial arts or action films. Indeed, to Chinese audiences, he is better known for more diverse genres of screen media. It is from this perspective that Lin Feng’s Chow Yun-fat and Territories of Hong Kong Stardom – the first book-length research on Chow – aims to provide us with a broader view of his relatively flexible stardom.

As foregrounded in both the introductory and concluding chapters, Feng places particular emphasis on the book’s methodology – a critical, intertextual analysis of four major types of prefigurative materials, including industry-produced promotional materials, star appearances beyond cinema, media publicity and film reviews (p. 10–11). Looking beyond the film texts, the central enquiry is how Chow’s star image has been constantly reconstructed by the media industries to engage the changing demand and identity of particular groups of audience.

The book is divided into two parts, with Chow Yun-fat’s crossover to Hollywood in 1998 as a watershed. The first part comprises four chapters, covering Chow’s stardom in Hong Kong from the 1970s to the 1990s. Chapter One focuses on his early image as a modern xiaosheng in TV drama – a sexually attractive, cosmopolitan yet down-to-earth Hong Kong young man. Historicised to the period of rapid industrialisation, Feng relates such branding of Chow to the emergence of a Hong Kong identity, which underscores the city’s economic development and devalues its connections to the mainland. As Chow later redirected his career to the big screen, Chapter Two tracks how he was gradually appreciated by local film critics as a serious actor in the 1980s. In addition to his personal endeavour, Feng attributes his achievements to the rise of New Wave directors in Hong Kong Cantonese cinema, who supplied Chow with more sentimental characters to polish his acting skills.

In consideration of Chow’s commercial values, Chapter Three reviews his endorsements of luxury brands. Feng maintains that in these advertisements, with his image as an ordinary young man, Chow is manipulated not simply to showcase affluent lifestyles, but to provide middle-class citizens with a rags-to-riches aspiration. Not limiting himself to action and melodramas, in the late 1980s Chow also starred in a number of popular comedies. In Chapter Four these are linked by Feng again to the concurrent Hong Kong identity. Since these comedies celebrate the international mobility of Hong Kongers while making fun of the social problems caused by the outflow of population, Feng asserts that Chow’s humorous characters effectively address the desires and anxieties shared by middle-class families at that time. The first part of the book clearly argues that Chow, with his image constantly trans- formed in accordance with industrial and social changes, had successfully become an icon of Hong Kong identity before he left for Hollywood in 1998.

The second part shifts our attention to Chow’s transnational stardom, which can be sub- divided into three major developments. It focuses on Chow’s Hollywood career from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. Chapter Five demonstrates how his image was ambiguously articulated by the film publicity and commentaries circulating in the USA. Feng suggests this ambiguity reflects Hollywood’s internal struggle in producing a more positive, complex Asian hero while unavoidably highlighting his cultural otherness.

Entering the new century, not only has Hollywood been keen to use Chow to entice Asian audiences, but Chinese filmmakers have also been eager to use his international fame to penetrate the Anglophone market. Situated in-between these two giant industries, Chow’s star image thereby became increasingly fluid across national and cultural boundaries since the 2000s. To understand the overlap of the two forces, in Chapters Six and Seven Feng examines the (online) publicity and reviews of Chow’s films in this period, comparing those written in English and Chinese. Materials related to his transnational Chinese blockbusters Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000) and Curse of the Golden Flower (2006), and his latest Hollywood work to date Pirates of Caribbean III: At World’s End (2007), are examined. In these two chapters, Feng demonstrates how Chow’s image in a single film was publicised and interpreted divergently in different languages. The impressive contradictions found in these chapters allow Feng to persuasively define that, transnational stars ‘are those whose images are constantly adjusted to cater for different market specifications’ (p. 112).

The constantly adjusted image of Chow underwent another turning point in the mid- 2000s when he retreated from Hollywood to transnational Chinese blockbusters. In these films – mostly made in the mainland and by state-owned studios – Chow plays fatherly figures in stories set in ancient China or with themes rooted in Chinese mythologies. Amid growing tension between Hong Kongers and mainlanders, Feng suspects this image of Chow is a political strategy to propagate an imagined ‘social harmony’, in which Hong Kong identity is absorbed into a mainland-centred Chinese one. However, what is left unmentioned is that paradoxically in Hong Kong, in resistance to such dilution of Hong Kong identity, local media also resorts to Chow by branding him as a symbol of a ‘genuine’ Hong Konger. Having little to do with his films, this image is grounded completely in Chow’s off-screen persona. For example, he is applauded for being frequently spotted on public transport, at markets and hiking tracks, or for openly supporting John Tsang in 2017’s Hong Kong Chief Executive election, a candidate who topped the opinion polls yet lost the race without Beijing’s blessing. In this book, using Chow’s acting career as a reference point, most prefigurative materials selected are those published upon the production and release of his screen works (p. 12). However, witnessing the recent contradiction between Chow’s on- screen representation and his local image isolated from his performances, incorporating more media accounts of his private and leisure life may provide us with some alter- native perspectives.

Nonetheless, Chow Yun-fat and Territories of Hong Kong Stardom does offer a fascinatingly detailed account of not only Chow Yun-fat’s career, but also the industrial and social contexts where his stardom is produced and consumed. Particularly, interpreting the star’s meanings neither solely by his on-screen performance nor by individual audiences’ reception, Feng crafts a well-balanced ‘midlevel’ study (Havens et al. 2009) by reminding us of the value of prefigurative materials. Enquiring how the media industries produce and circulate knowledge of a film/star text to guide the audience towards certain readings of it, this book is remarkably engaging in bridging the methodological disjuncture among industrial, textual and reception analyses in star studies. Closely tracing Chow’s prolonged stardom spanning nearly half a century, understandably this book is centred on Chow’s unique star trajectory. Yet, in its juxtaposition with other recent studies on Chow’s coevals, with a similar emphasis on their changing images constructed by the industries in connection to Hong Kong identity (Leung 2015), Chow Yun-fat and Territories of Hong Kong Stardom will certainly bring us a more comprehensive landscape of the contemporary Hong Kong star system in operation.

References

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