Contrasting "Infernal Affairs" Hong Kong and "The Departed" Hollywood

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Hong Kong and Hollywood studio systems, this article will also then analyze and contrast the two films, binging out their different modes of manifestation, characteristics, character portrayal, cinematic ideas social and artistic values. It will account for the mutation of one text in the two different social and cultural contexts of film production and audience.

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Introduction: Film Noir as a Genre

Film noir is a genre, which originated in Hollywood in the 1940’s. It won its name from the French film critic Nino Frank. (1) It has its particular characteristics, which are most systematically described by Paul Werner in the following terms:

a. It is the antithesis of the American Populism that was advocated mostly by the films of Frank Capra. (2) American Populism has been a strong mass belief of the American society, which deems that every one in the society can find his or her due success through firm moral beliefs, fortitude and hard work. Even in the classical gangster movies like “Little Cesar” (Mervyn LeRoy, 1930), “Public Enemy” (William Wellman, 1931) and “Scarface” (Howard Hawks, 1932), the heroes rose to power through their persistence and immense effort to overcome all hardships, despite their tragic ends. In film noir, however, the protagonists are unlike the traditional heroes and rogues who are masters of themselves, they are “manipulated, pestered by their contradictory behaviour, and in the end, they do not really know what they really want.”
b. The protagonist in any of the traditional gangster movies began as nobody in a world of misery and crime. Their rise and fall reflected a world of inequality and injustice, and thus these characters are embedded in a realistic social milieu. The “anti-heroes” in film noir are different. They normally belong to the petty bourgeois and stand marginal in the society. They are no characteristic “social type”, but just stand for themselves.

c. Traditional Hollywood genres like young westerns, gangster movies, screwball comedies and melodramas uphold strong contrasts between good and evil. In film noir, “the demarcation between good and evil is blurred.” “There are good and evil criminals, lone-wolves, detectives, policemen, men and women, rich and poor people. Even these are not in a pure form, everyone is ambivalent, a little bit good and a little bit evil, this one more in this way, that one more in the opposite. …”

d. Film noir as a genre is most characteristic in its style. Paul Schrader, J.A. Place and L.S. Peterson fully described the technical aspect of camera and lighting, with strong light and darkness contrast, unusual camera angle, strong chiaroscuro and silhouette effect. (3) Then there is also the frequent use of voice-over (confession in “Double Indemnity” (Billy Wilder, 1944)”, male protagonist Orson Welles in “The Lady from Shanghai” (Orson Welles, 1948), story told by a person shot dead in a swimming pool in “Sunset Boulevard” (Billy Wilder, 1950), flashback, and complex form of narration in “Citizen Kane” (Orson Welles, 1941). (4)

Paul Werner further investigated into the genesis of film noir, and pointed out the three forefathers of this genre:

a. German Expressionism: It dealt with the basic feelings of “dread (Angst), hate, greed and love”, which are also prominently expressed in film noir. There is also the presence of invincible Fate, inescapable doom and human obsessions in both of them. Stylistically, the use of dark shadows, strong light contrasts, either baroque or minimalistic decors are prevalent. Finally, stairs, mirrors, claustrophobic rooms, dark corridors and narrow streets are never missing in both.

b. French Poetic Realism: Werner emphasized the strong influence of the French films of Julien Duvivier (Pépé le Moko, 1937), Jean Renoir (Le Crime de M. Lange, 1936) (La Grande illusion) and (La Bête humaine) both 1938, and Marcel Carné (Quai des brumes, 1938) and finally (Le Jour se lève, 1939), with their heroes as “outsiders”, “socially
realistic fate”, “pessimistic ending”, and above all the “romantic overtone”.

c. American Gangster Movies: American film noir is an indigenous genre, and has inherited a lot of important elements from the American gangster movies, like “realistic representation of the social relationships”, “crime”, and “stylistic representation of the big cities” as crime scenes. (5)

I. Oversea and Hong Kong Reception of Film Noir:
Film noir developed in Hollywood deeply influenced European cinema. The most prominent is that of French films in the 1950’s. Important films like “Bob le flambeur” (J.-P. Melville, 1953, and he made a series of hard-core noir gangster films later, which deeply impressed and influenced John Woo, “Touchez pas au Grisbi” (Jacques Becker, 1954) and “Rififi chez les hommes” (Jules Dassin, 1950, which is more or less a re-make of “The Asphalt Jungle” (John Huston, 1950). French cineastes and directors of the New Wave movement like Truffaut, Godard, Rohmer and Chabrol never hesitate to deploy film noir thematics and stylism in their films. In Germany, R.W. Fassbinder is the greatest figure that advocated the noir approach among other approaches in his films.

Although Hong Kong cinema has been highly imitative of Hollywood and good European films, film noir has never been solidly established as a genre until the 90’s. In the 50’s and 60’s, the zenith of Hong Kong film productions, averaging around 200 per year. Hong Kong cinema never lacked crime and police films, typical examples were police films starred by Cho, Tat Wah (Zhau, Dahua, 曹達華) as the able detective, and Yu, So Chau (Yu, Suqiu, 于素秋) as the kind-hearted brigand. Later these roles were played by a younger generation of stars like Tsang, Kwong (Zhang, Jiang, 曾江), Chan, Po Chu (Chen, Baoju, 陳寶珠) and Siu, Fong Fong (Xiao, Fangfang, 蕭芳芳) in the late 60’s to 70’s, but there was no film that approximated film noir in true spirits. This phenomenon can be explained through two main reasons:

a. The Moralism of Hong Kong cinema – Hong Kong cinema has long been dominated by the traditional moral mentality and characterization, which prescribed that the able detectives and the kind-hearted brigands should be positive characters, courageous
and merciful. The actions of the former were all directed towards evil and ruthless criminals, while the actions of the latter were all directed towards the evil and ruthless rich. Thus good and evil were distinctly divided. Finally, the good ones were rewarded and the evil ones were punished, so as to please the populistic audience.

b. The problem of this kind of moral sentiments is that it provided no room for the negative images of “femme fatale” and “not-all-too-innocent man” that existed in Hollywood film noir. (6) The main framework of Hong Kong police and brigand genre could never break away from the heroine, the hero and his beauty. The selling point of these films was always the moralistically stereotyped protagonists.

Concerning the dramatic action, the moralistic approach could never go deeper into the ambivalent motives and characters of the underworld, intriguing elements like depraved rich and privileged, double-cross plans, corrupted cops and the abuse of power of their superiors. (7)

I would like to emphasize that I am using the word “film noir” in a wider sense than more orthodox theorists, who claimed that “film noir” should be used to denote films in black and white, and colour films produced along this trend should be called “neo-noir”. If I abide by this orthodox understanding, there would be no colour films qualified as film noir in this sense, but all neo-noirs.

It is true that Hong Kong cinema in the 60’s began to pick up certain noir stylistic elements. A typical example is “The Story of a Discharged Prisoner/Upright Repenter” (Long Kong/Long Gang, 1967), in which there were stark light contrasts and unusual camera-angles that created stunning visual effects, like filming the victim at the other end from between the two legs of the gangster boss. These were obviously adopted from the versatile camera style and movements of the French New Wave. The plot of this film is about a newly released prisoner who was determined to become a good citizen, but was doubted and persecuted by the police, as well as forced to rejoin the underworld by his former gangster boss. Finally, the gangster boss was killed, and the protagonist was arrested for the crime committed by his brother. He emerged as a tragic hero. In the 80’s, some important Hong Kong films did bear certain characteristics of film noir. Tsui, Hark’s “Dangerous Encounter of the First Kind” (1980) was a violent and offensive film
about young delinquents, which deployed also highly contrasting lighting and colour tints. It was, however, more a psycho-thriller than a noir social thriller.

“Long Arm of the Law (I)” (Johnny Mak, 1984) was a classic Hong Kong crime film that bore a lot of important elements of film noir. The story capitalized on the true incidents of gangsters from Mainland China in the early 80’s robbing jewelry shops in Hong Kong. Their carrying far heavier weapons than the Hong Kong police like AK47 and military handguns terrified the citizens of Hong Kong. Furthermore, they were invited to cross the border illegally by Hong Kong gangsters who acted as their fends. The plot also included a storyline in which the boss of the Hong Kong gangsters tricked the Mainland Chinese gangsters to murder a detective for him. He further tried to double-cross the Mainland partners by informing the police of the murderers. Despite the fact that this film is very realistic in its portrayal of the infiltration of Mainland Chinese men as robbers and women as prostitutes, and its actions of robbery and police-gangster confrontations, it qualifies as a film noir with its deployment of double-cross, corrupt police, claustrophobic and chiaroscuro cinematography. It is even highly poetical when it flashes back to the Mainland lovers still living in material scarcity but innocence in the Mainland, while now one is a robber, the other a prostitute in Hong Kong, and they meet in a brothel neighbouring a kindergarten. In the final scene, the gangsters are killed by the police special unit, and light comes in through the bullet holes made in the roof to let the audience witness the violent death of all the Mainland gangsters, which is psychologically comforting to the brutalized and horrified Hong Kong audience in the social reality. (8)

“A Better Tomorrow” (John Woo, 1986) was another highly praised action film that bordered on film noir. It is fully filled with noir stylistics like highly contrasting warm and cold tints, as well as lighting. There are also cultic John Woo elements like capturing the climaxes in slow motion, (prevalent in the films of Chang, Chieh, for whom Woo worked as assistant for a long time, and Chang adopted this technique from “Bonnie and Clyde” (1967) of Arthur Penn, like many others,) a hard-boiled hero that never dies amidst hundreds of fired shots, and finally melodramatic elements of male friendship. His world is that of a distinct good and evil bifurcation, which lacks the noir ambivalence. In fact, the success of the cultic “A Better Tomorrow” not only led to its own serial development into a total of 6 episodes, all inferior to the first, it instigated the further
development of the gangster and heroic saga genre like “Bo Hao” (1991), which is the saga about the rise and fall of the notorious drug dealing emperor Bo Hao, then “Lee Rock I” (1991) and “Lee Rock II” (1991), which are about the rise (episode I) and fall (episode II) of the infamous corrupt detective sergeant Lee Rock. Although there are stylistic noir lighting and tints, the stories are melodramatized versions of the lives of these historically legendary figures. In the 90’s, this heroic saga form further degenerated into the “Young and Dangerous” series, which was parasitically developed from the popular Hong Kong comics about the rise of fictional gangster Chan, Ho Nam. The meaning of the title “Gu Wak Tsai” is actually “a junior follower of the triad society”, which can also mean a triad member, in general. As a whole, one can say that the retardation of the emergence of a truly film noir tradition in Hong Kong can be attributed to the obsession of Hong Kong cinema with populistic demands for heroes or big villains, action and sensations, visual plenitude and melodramatic effects, and thus sacrificing in-depth investigation of the complexity of criminal and human characters, crime motives and psychology, and social reality.


II. The Noir Elements of the Milkyway Trilogy:

All the three films won great acclaim from the critics, but their box-office revenues were not deemed successful:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Box-Office Revenue</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The Longest Nite”</td>
<td>HK$9,962,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Expect the Unexpected”</td>
<td>HK$5,359,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A Hero Never Dies”</td>
<td>HK$6,792,090</td>
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</tbody>
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(From – City Entertainment Annual Figures Booklet 1999) (Note: Any box-office revenue not exceeding over $10M is considered unsatisfactory in the late 90’s.)

“The Longest Nite” is one of the best films produced by Milkyway. The story is about the life and death struggle between a corrupt cop (played by Tony Leung) and a bounty killer (played by Lau, Ching –Wan). To prevent the explosion into a gangster war between two
triad societies, the former works for one of the two gangster bosses (A) in Macau, who apparently wants to make peace with the other gangster boss (B), but who is also suspected of offering a reward under the table to kill the opponent. Tony’s job is to protect boss B from harm, and he suspects that the killer is somehow working against him. The killer manages to kill both bosses, and frames the cop for both crimes. The film climaxes in a cop versus killer duel finale reminiscent of the mirror hall scene of “The Lady from Shanghai”. The cop succeeds in killing the killer and in order to escape from the framing, he disguises himself as the killer and tries to escape to Hong Kong. Still he meets a violent death, because the killer was hired by the paragon Hong Kong triad boss to kill both the Macau bosses and shatter their dominions. Finally the big Hong Kong boss has also planned that even the hired killer has to be killed to remove all traces of intrigue from Hong Kong.

The corrupt cop and bounty killer as characters of duplicity, double-crosses, and intrigues. Crimes walk hand in hand with drastic noir stylistics, making this an unprecedented film noir of Hong Kong cinema. In addition, there are dirty streets, messy rooms, claustrophobic interiors, further enhanced by tight framing and hand-held camera, contributing to greater anxiety and threat. (9) The protagonists divert greatly from the former melodramatic saga heroes. Both of them are small-timers trying hard to survive the impending disaster. Their fate resembles the not-all-too-innocent men in “Double Indemnity” or “The Asphalt Jungle”, the price they paid was too high in comparison with their wrong-doing, making them more like realistic tragic figures.

“Expect the Unexpected” is a film that capitalizes on the important notion that deviates from the clichés of mainstream Hollywood and Hong Kong cinema. The title already reveals the intention to frustrate the normal expectations of the audience. It is a film about the operation of a group of Hong Kong detectives. If one complains about the lack of realistic everyday interactions among the protagonists in “The Longest Nite”, one is satisfied this time with the realistic portrayal of the characters and interrelationships of them in the film. They are normal people with their love and naughtiness, concern and loyalty. Their job is to fight crime. Here they have to deal with the heavily equipped, highly capable and ruthless gangsters of Hong Kong, as well as a chaotic group of gangsters from the Mainland. They are lucky to overpower the Hong Kong gangsters,
which inspires them with confidence and delight. Their encounter with the chaotic group of Mainland gangsters ends with a man-to-man close combat. The shooting of this scene tells the audience that a confronting shoot-out can be so realistically brutal, hideous, offensive, threatening and heart-breaking, exposing the John Woo style as a totally choreographed and mythical farce. Anyone familiar with the political situation in 1998 can sense a basic tragic sense in the film. It was one year after the re-unification of Hong Kong with Mainland China. There was the great sense of uncertainty about the future of Hong Kong, and the film is interpreted as manifesting this sense, for the protagonists in the film can confidently deal with the local problems, as everything can be so predictable. Quite the contrary is the coping with China, where another set of values and form of behaviour operate which are beyond normal understanding.

“A Hero Never Dies” is the third of the trilogy, which depicts the friendship between two killers. They serve two bosses who are deadly enemies. They are manipulated and sacrificed by the two bosses. One of them is crippled and attempts to assassinate his boss to avenge his having killed the girl friend of the crippled killer. He is killed by the boss in return. The other killer, whose girl friend is disfigured, finally takes revenge for the injustices done upon them. Again, this film exhibits a lot of contrasting warm and cold tints to reflect the friendship on one side, and the underlying danger of the two on the other side. The loyalty of the two killers becomes an ironic contrast between the ruthlessness and cunning of the two privileged gangster bosses. The end is total perdition for all.

This trilogy marked the beginning of Hong Kong film noir that is comparable with the Hollywood genre by having all the stylistic characteristics, on the one hand, and bearing profound character portrayals, on the other. Together, they abandoned the romantic heroism and moralism that existed in former Hong Kong crime and police genre. This series was the forerunner of the “Infernal Affairs” series. Here, one should not lose sight of the dismal sense of social and political reality of Hong Kong immediately after the 1997 political hand-over. There was the keen sense of uncertainty, the sense of betrayal by the British and Chinese Government concerning the participation of the Hong Kong people in this political decision, and the sense of agitation as well as helplessness. The trilogy was like a kind of symbolic protest.
III. The Advent of “Infernal Affairs” –
The Chinese name of the film “Infernal Affairs” should be more literally translated as “Unrelenting” or “Relentless Hell (of Suffering)”, which is a more forceful representation of the suffering in the 8th (lower) level of hell expressed in the Buddhist scriptures.

The project started like any other main-stream one, as the script-writer and co-director, Alan Mak, who first conceived a story of good guy as undercover against the bad guy within the gang, a kind of hero against villain action film. He waited for 2 years, before the project was accepted by Andrew Lau, the other co-director. (10) Lau, however, was trying to set up a new production house (Base Production), and deemed that he “had made too many films to please the public audience, and this time he wanted to make some breakthrough.” This showed that the mainstream was too conservative, and only the new production house under Lau was interested in innovation and creativity.

Interestingly, Andrew Lau made some very important suggestions, and the outcome was a remarkable film that deviated greatly from mainstream Hong Kong film. He provided, most importantly, “a second undercover sent by the gang to the police force”, and the main theme became the struggle between these two protagonists. (11) The result was a kind of “Face/Off” without the changing of the two faces. (12) The identity crises of the two were also stunning, for they had one basic role to play and adopted a new and contradictory one. Lau despised also the clichés (ultimately represented by John Woo) of having resort to action and violence to end the important scene. This time, he replaced “action” by “dramatic tension”. Thus, “Infernal Affairs” won the acclaims of the film critics and the public who discovered that the film was “delicate, minimalistic,” flouting mainstream moralism and action. Finally, there is also the “special colour tone” suggested by Christopher Doyle, the cinematography consultant. (13)

The problem of production did not end here. When the two co-directors finished the script and started casting, they realized that the film was bound to be a major production, which required around HK$30M. The cake was too big for the new company to chew,
and they started looking for co-operation. Many declined, until they found Chong, Ching, John of Media Asia. Chong had been himself a script-writer, before he led the production projects of Media Asia. He labeled the Script as bearing a “High concept” (14) By “high concept” Chong meant “the idea of the film can be expressed in one or two sentences,” it is “unique”, “the work poses some questions and is also able to resolve them”, and “no one in the past has done that”. He also considered the film highly original and “did not imitate Hollywood”. He fully complied with Lau’s plan and despite the ebb of Hong Kong film in 2002, he estimated a budget of above $30M and a risk of around several million. His idea was “to invest in a good film so as to upgrade the brand-mark and image of Media Asia”. (15) The final result was a surprise to everyone. The film earned $55M in Hong Kong, second best box-office of the year, and was able to draw the attention of Hollywood to launch a re-make. Hollywood gave Media Asia US$1.75M for the rights of launching a re-make. Chong was exceedingly happy about the success of “Infernal affairs”. He attributed part of the success to the globalization of the film market and the “openness of information”. “The US received news the next day, after the film opened with great success. Two days after launching the film, the whole world already knew about the film.” Chong also took into consideration the opening up of the China film market. The distribution of first episode in Mainland China took place 9 months after screening in HK. The second took only 2-3 weeks, and the third was a co-production with Mainland China. Film business developed in a fast pace.

I am convinced that he future of HK cinema lies in the fusion of technology, production teams, ideas and capital among Mainland China, Taiwan, HK and even Macau, as well as the implosion of the Mainland film market, so as to achieve an economy of scale comparable to that of Hollywood.

IV. Comparing “Infernal Affairs” with “The Departed” –

It is important and of points of great interests to compare these two films. There is the textual problem revealing the orientation of the Hollywood of the re-make, which is based on the understanding and calculation of the producer and director. Then there are
the cultural aspect and the stylistic elements of the re-make. As a matter of fact, both Chinese and US critics paid a lot of attention to the comparison, and it is understandable that both camps are eager and anxious to understand how the challenging film is absorbed and transformed by the US film business empire. The problem is particularly acute, because the re-make is undertaken not by any studio-submissive director, but by the renowned Martin Scorsese, who is considered to be an “auteur”.

a. Textual Aspect:
The plot: No one can deny that the “The Departed”(TD) follows the main lines of the story of “Infernal Affairs”(IA). The two undercover protagonists are sent and monitored by their respective bosses. Both the confrontations between the moles and their bosses are portrayed. The boss of the good guy planted among the gangsters is killed (pushed and falls from the rooftop) after a rendezvous of them both. The bad guy planted in the police force wants to carry on enjoying his popularity and affluent life, and consequently defies acting as a mole any longer. He finally murders his boss in a set-up. The good guy planted among the gangsters meets a violent death. The bad guy lives on. (TD provides a different ending for him.) The most thrilling scene is that the good guy tracks the gangster boss into a cinema, who tries to deliver the personal information of his gangsters to his mole to check them up and expose the identity of the mole from the police. The good mole then follows the bad guy, but the ringing of the cell phone of the good guy alarms the bad one, who subsequently makes his escape successfully. Despite the fact that TD (149mins) is much longer than IA (101mins), there are imbalances in the character portrayal. The bad guy in TD (played by Matt Damon) is given far less scenes to express himself. On the contrary, the gangster boss in TD (played by Jack Nicholson) is made the dominant figure, interacting with both moles. He is as usual overacting and exhibitionistic (in one scene, he even shows his erected penis). Of course, this is especially disturbing, if one is familiar with the same character played by Eric Tsang in IA, who is shrewd and cool most of the time, but also clever and quick in his repartees. The role of the police boss (played by Martin Sheen) in TD dwindles to barrenness, failing to develop a father-son relationship between him and his mole (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) that can result in a deep tragic sense, when the former finally falls to his death, witnessed by the latter. This relationship is well
developed in the Chinese version between the cool, determined and honourable superior, Anthony Wong, and the hemmed in as well as agitated police undercover played by the superb Tony Leung. (16)

The women in IA were considered by Andrew Lau as bare essentials like salt in a soup. (17) In IA, the gangster mole as police officer has a girlfriend, and she finally discovers his true identity. The police mole is so psychologically disturbed that he takes up psychotherapy from a female psychoanalyst. There is a development into mutual trust and good feelings between the two, but no sex act is involved. The directors even set up a scene in which the he meets his ex-girlfriend with her 6 years old daughter, insinuating that the little girl is his child. The love relationships are all torn and unrequited, rendering the two protagonists more tragic and forsaken in life and death. In TD, the scriptwriter Monahan links up the two protagonists with one woman, the shrink. It is really difficult to conceive how she can live up to co-habiting with the bad guy, and having one night stand with the police mole, then bearing the child of the good guy. Is it meant to be a reward for the deceased good guy? (18) This is cheap Hollywood moralistic sentimentalism. Even Andy Lau, the star who played the role of the mole sent by the gangster boss, regarded that “it was a strange arrangement,” and he did not think (it is likely) that “the two men could fall in love with the same woman.” (19) It is concise, but it is very unlikely, too fictional. This happened often in Hollywood, but in bad films.

b. The Cultural Aspect:
If it is asked why then the imbalanced TD can be so long, then it is because both scriptwriter and director want to give the film an authentically American setting. This is why that film is hailed as a development or “return of the tone of “Goodfellas” and “Mean Streets” of Scorsese.” In this aspect, it is a success. Again, film scholar like D. Bordwell is “more hesitant”, for “…. We’ve seen a lot of this before.” (20)

TD expanded the two introductions of DiCaprio. He is first interviewed by his two superiors, and is excessively insulted by Dignam. Then he meets Costello (the gangster boss). For Asian audience, TD is full of swearing and violence, which can be annoying. (21) Likewise, Bordwell also criticized: “Again guys cuss a lot and make sexist jokes. (the first ten minutes have three references to menstruation, non complimentary).” (22)
The endings of the two films make a great difference. The spirit of IA is well received in Asian as well as Non-Asian circles. The scriptwriter and co-director Alan Mak deliberately gave up a normal happy end. The good mole dies, and the bad one lives on. However, the living will go on experience the torture of the conscience like in relentless hell. (23)

David Bordwell is well aware of this difference in endings. He realizes that: “A Hong Kong movie hero needn’t survive the final confrontation (he even gains in stature from dying grandly), but the villain is seldom left standing.” He then criticizes the ending of TD: “But the American ending is oddly more faithful to the Hong Kong mainstream. Now our hero doesn’t die in vain. The bad dude is paid back, thanks to a contrived in-case-of-my-death message sent to the shrink-girlfriend whom the two protagonists share.” (24) In the final scene, Dignam slips into the bad mole’s flat and shoot him dead. So the bad is avenged, a moralistic ending, and bordering on cliché.

In one aspect are the two films alike. They both capitalized on the prevalent star culture. Andy Lau (the bad mole) in IA exhibited his cool, pleasingly and lovely outlook, that apparently innocent boy-next-door image, just like what he did as a pop-singer. Tony Leung (the good mole) always excelled as a contrived and introvert type. Then there were Anthony Wong (the police boss) and Eric Tsang (the gangster boss), both great stars and actors. In TD, both DiCaprio and Damon performed well, but they were out-shone or just blotted out by the dominating Jack Nicholson. These are all great stars and great actors for great box-office. These arrangements make both films commercial and highly marketable.

c. The Stylistic Elements –
Although both IA and TD were major productions, the budget of the former was a far cry of the latter. No one can fail to see the difference. TD has a glossiness that IA can never reach. Despite the complaints of Bordwell that TD had too many close-ups and too fast an average shot length (ASL) of 2.7 sec. (ASL of IA is 3.2 sec.) The former allows “too little space for geography”, and the latter “spares more time to define a scene’s locale.” One has to admit that TD created a lot of colourful and authentic scenes. (25) There are open large police offices, beautiful flats of Costello and Damon,
neighbourhood shops and bars, even impressive China town in Boston. These scenes dwarfed the IA sets and locations.

One can compare two important sequences in both films. One is what I have mentioned as the most thrilling tracking scene. The good mole follows the bad one with the personal files, received from the gangster boss for check-up, out the back alley of the cinema in Tsimshatsui in IA. The directors make use of dim cold lighting and the scene is a minimalistic location. The escape is made after the cell-phone of the good mole rings. The whole scene rests in low-key lighting and subdued cold colour tone. In TD, that is changed to a porn-film house and the tracking takes place in rather busy and colourful China town, with a lot of traffic. There is one scene in which one sees a lot of colourful reflections of metal plates, reflecting both the pursuer and the pursuit. Then they move into a deserted area with low-key lighting, which is a bit sudden, and the cell-phone of the good mole rings, alarming the bad mole. The bad mole even hides himself and attacks a Chinese passer-by with his hand knife, mistaking him for the good mole. The tumult created helps him to make a successful escape. Smoke and shadows are added to enhance the mood of imminent danger.

Another shocking scene is the death of the gangster boss. In IA, he leads his team to deal with drugs and thus falls into a trap set by the police. He himself manages to escape alone and enters a deserted car-park. Then the bad mole appears and moves up to him, and then the bad mole shoots his boss at a distance, a surprising act, but understandable because the bad mole wants to kill his boss so as to be able to perform his duty as a cop and blot out his unfavourable identity. Again, low-key lighting, minimalistic location sequence, and no exchange of words, create a desolate and pessimistic atmosphere. In TD, the sequence is far more boisterous. There has been a lot of shooting and car clashes, before Costello ends up in a show-down with his mole. There is a lot of talk and the bad mole seems rather threatened and has to kill Costello more out of self-defense than premeditatedly and cold-bloodedly. There is fire burning around and the bad mole shoots at his boss not dead right away, leaving him the breath to shoot back, though in vain.

Just comparing these two different sequences in both films can reveal why TD can be so glossy, even glamorous, and thus far more costly. IA is however, bleak and distressing, but that reveals uncompromising creativity within a specific social and political context.
of Hong Kong.
Having a large budget is a good thing, but wasting it doing something wrong or superfluous is another. There is a blunder in the film that, unfortunately, Chinese can tell. In TD, there is a sequence about Costello delivering to the Chinese fake super-chip or hi-tech gadget. The Chinese secret agents are allegedly from Mainland Chinese. However, they don’t even speak putonghua (Mandarin, or the official language), the leader (supposedly a Chinese spy) speaks Cantonese (southern Chinese dialect) with a regional accent. (26) I can further explain this. The accent is audibly from Taishan (Toishan) of Guangdong (Canton) province, from where the earliest batches of Chinese immigrated into the United States as labourers to build the trans-continental railway in the mid 19th century. Obviously, the actors are descendents of the big Chinese ethnic group, and this group has been working in Hollywood conveniently representing the Chinese as a whole. That the production team is not aware of this fact, and launched such mismatch, is really ridiculous and shameful, not to mention also that this sequence capitalizes on the “yellow peril” of communist Chinese constantly infiltrating the “Land of the Free”.

V. Conclusion:
It is a tale told many times. The Hollywood film industry is the most admired and hated enemy of every national cinema. Hollywood has its formidable economy of scale, for it can line up planning, production, distribution and exhibition practically all over the world. It has dominated the world for nearly a century, so that the form and content, value and vision of its productions have been deeply implanted world-wide, and are seen and felt as international culture, dwarfing every local or national cinema. Worse still, whatever good that can emerge from every local or national cinematic scene, longs to go to Hollywood, regardless whether it is a director, a script or any related expertise. IA and TD is a case study that reveals a facet of the movement of the tentacles of Hollywood to adopt anything good from outside. It is not as bad as the case of “Le Jour se lève” (1939), the right of which was purchased, and re-made as “The Long Night” (1947) by Anatole Litvak, before the original film was released. (27) There was a lot of resentment, which is comparable to our IA and TD case. “Le Jour se lève”
depicted the tragic fate of a labourer who was exploited in life and deceived unto love. He became a murderer not entirely out of his own will, and finally committed suicide. It is changed into a moralistic tale in which all “improper sexual liaisons” in the original film were blotted out, and the ending is not suicide, but the hero gives himself up to the police.

Comparing IA and TD, we should have far less resentment than the French. After all, Hong Kong cinema has learnt and adopted a lot from Hollywood, while French poetic realism was so original and influential. As Chinese from Hong Kong who cherishes great love for Chinese and Hong Kong cinema, I think we should be happy to see IA produced and has won very high praise all over the world, and also has become the first remake in Hollywood by Scorsese, not any other small potato. I have tried to be fair to both films, perhaps also fair to the reality of re-makes, which seldom can exceed the greatness of the original. TD has succeeded in many aspects, but failed in bringing up more creativity and originality. It has neatly contextualized IA into Irish-American Boston. It missed the keen tragic sense and the existential plight of the treacherous in life upheld by Buddhism.

I would like to quote other critics instead of prolonging my own discursions for fear of becoming more and more narrowed down in vision and biased. Ram Ganesh stated: “I remember while watching IA, I was on the edge of my seats all the time. Andy Lau and Tony Leung held you captive, you just do nothing except watch wide eyed and enjoying every moment of it, waiting to see what happens next. It was visual assault. But TD, but with all the fancy back stories and forced emotional connections looked and sounded hollow. IA with its simply story was far more emotional and far more believable. (28)

I honour greatly occidental critics often because of their immense understanding of film art, but Martha Bayles convinced me that she could do more. She was able to grasp the true and concrete sentiments of Hong Kong Chinese that is poured into or that is pouring out from IA. She was shrewd enough to look into the political context of Hong Kong, the 1997 hand-over from the British to the Chinese Government. She remarked: “It’s not a political movie, it’s a cool, stylish thriller. But its central premise – that
serving two masters is bad for the soul – resonates powerfully with the atmosphere of unease surrounding the handover.” (29) This is what Hollywood cannot re-make and contextualize, and this explains why TD can receive only a box-office revenue of slightly over HK$22M, far lower than the HK$55M of IA in Hong Kong. What more is also the higher praise of IA than TD among Chinese critics, professionals and the film public.

World-wide: “The film TD grossed $26,887,467 in its opening weekend, becoming the third Scorsese film to debut at number one. The film saw small declines in later weeks, remaining in the list of top ten films for seven weeks. Budgeted at $90 million, the film grossed $132,384,315 in the United States and Canada and $289,835,021 worldwide, becoming one of the most commercially successful of Scorsese's career.”(30) I always regretted that film making is not classified like boxing, but my question is a heavyweight of US$90M (TD budget) should be how much better than the featherweight of US$4M (IA budget)?

(END)

Footnote:
1. Nino Frank was the first one, who discovered a new “genre policier” with its “criminal adventures (adventures criminelles)” and “criminal psychology (psychologie criminelle)”’. Please refer to “Un Noveau genre <policier>: L’Aventure criminelle” in L’Ecran Français, no. 61, page 8ff.


4. The above is a enriched summary of the description of the characteristics of film noir by Paul Werner, those words in quotation marks are key ideas of the author (my own translation). Please refer to Werner, Paul (1985) Film Noir: Die Schattenspiele der <Schwarzen Serie> (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer) p.15-16.

5. Ibid, p.110-121.

6. Typical examples of femmes fatales and not-all-too-innocent men are Phyllis Dietrichson (played by Barbara Stanwyck) and Walter Neff (played by Fred MacMurray) in “Double Indemnity”(Billy Wilder, 1944), Elsa Bannister (Rita Hayworth) and Michael O’Hara (Orson Welles) in “The Lady from Shanghai” (Orson Welles, 1948), Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) and Joe Gillis (William Holden) in “Sunset Boulevard” (Billy Wilder 1950), and also Helen Grayle (Charlotte Rampling) and Philip Marlowe (Robert Mitchum) in the coloured version of “Farewell, my Lovely” (Dick Richards, 1975).

7. The most typical example that portrayed all these interesting genre elements is “The Asphalt Jungle” (John Huston, 1950).

8. A series of 3 more were made following the first episode, but no one reached the level of episode I.


10. All the words in quotes are taken from a forum organized by the Hong Kong Film Critics Society on 26-01-2003 attended by Alan Mak and Andrew Lau, please refer
11. Please refer to an interview of Andrew Lau by the “Southern Metropolis Daily” (南方都市報). All important words are in quotes:
http://ent.163.com/edit/021204/021204_143900.html

12. Please refer to the interview of Andrew Lau conducted by the “City Entertainment”(Film Bi-Weekly) 05-12-2002 (Issue 617). All important words are in quotes:
http://www.iatolife.com/CEDB/magsearch.jsp?artid=10144

13. Please refer to (10), and the characteristics were discovered and mentioned by the film critics and members of the forum audience.

14. Please refer to the interview of John Chong by the “City Entertainment”(Film Bi-Weekly) 04-12-2003 (Issue 643). All important words are in quotes:
http://www.iatolife.com/CEDB/magsearch.jsp?artid=10402

15. Here one can realize the different in economic scale between Hong Kong and Hollywood productions. With anything more than HK$20-30M (US$1=HK$7.8), the film is a major production. For Hollywood films, anything less that US$60M is already a low budget film. For Hollywood, the cost of a Hong Kong film at HK$30-40M = US$8-9M is not a low budget, but a “no budget” film.

16. The (over-)expanded role of Jack Nicholson is questioned and excused by the
understanding that Scorsese might be emphasizing on making the film along the lines of a gangster film like the past:
http://www.hudong.com/wiki/%E3%80%8A%E6%97%A0%E9%81%93%E3%80%8B

17. Please refer to an interview of Andrew Lau by the “Southern Metropolis Daily” (南方都市報). All important words are in quotes:
http://ent.163.com/edit/021204/021204_143900.html

18. Please refer to Danél Griffin who criticized: “I never bought Vera Farmiga’s character as the woman for whom both the police informer and the mob informer happened to fall I love. She is a fine actress with the type of honest, girl-next-door face made for the cinema, but her character is underwritten and a bit superfluous. (From”: The Departed – Film as Art: Danél Griffin’s Guide to Cinema)
http://uashome.alaska.edu/~dfgriffin/website/dearted.htm

19. Please refer to an analysis from mainland China on internet:
http://www.hudong.com/wiki/%E3%80%8A%E6%97%A0%E9%81%93%E3%80%8B

20. Please refer to “THE DEPARTED: No Departure” by David Bordwell. All important words are in quotes:
http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=18

21. Please refer to an internet film critic in Hong Kong who found the swearing and violence excessive:
http://www.taosmemory.com/bbmbbs/viewtopic.php?=282&sid=8becbc1bea4eb94ec3b17c673eebe58f

22. Please refer again to “THE DEPARTED: No Departure” by David Bordwell. All important words are in quotes:
http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=18

23. Please refer to the forum organized by the Hong Kong Film Critics Society on
26-01-2003 attended by Alan Mak and Andrew Lau, please refer to the full text in:
http://www.filmcritics.org.hk/%E9%9B%BB%E5%BD%B1%E8%A9%95%E8%AB%96%E5%BA%A7%E8%AB%87%E6%9C%83%E8%A8%98%E9%8C%84/cia%E5%BA%A7%E8%AB%87%E6%9C%83%E2%80%94%E3%80%8A%E7%84%A1%E9%96%93%E9%81%93%E3%80%8Bhttp://www.filmcritics.org.hk/%E9%9B%BB%E5%BD%B1%E8%A9%95%E8%AB%96%E5%BA%A7%E8%AB%87%E6%9C%83%E8%A8%98%E9%8C%84/cia%E5%BA%A7%E8%AB%87%E6%9C%83%E2%80%94%E3%80%8A%E7%84%A1%E9%96%93%E9%81%93%E3%80%8B

The explanation of Mak pointed out that they had fully considered all the 4 possible endings, both die, one dies and the other lives on, and both live on. They decided upon this tragic ending.

24. Please refer again to “THE DEPARTED: No Departure” by David Bordwell. All important words are in quotes:
http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=18

25. Please refer again to “THE DEPARTED: No Departure” by David Bordwell. All important words are in quotes:
http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=18

26. Please refer to criticism of the use of dialect in:

27. The publication “L’Avant scène du cinéma” condemned this act as “‘re-made’ and treachery” (“refait” et trahi). See L’Avant scène du cinema: R53, Le Jour se lève, p.44.

28. Please refer to “Infernal Affairs vs the Departed” by Ram Ganesh:

29. Please refer to “The Departed –Diss in Translation” by Martha Bayles:
30. From:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Departed

(I have to express my hearty thanks to Mr. Chan, Pak-sang, the editor-in-chief, and a walking dictionary of film art, for providing me with all the rich and invaluable sources, which enables me to finish this article.)