

My Brother, My Lover, My Self: Traditional Masculinity in the Hong Kong Action Cinema of John Woo

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Article abstract

Hong Kong Chinese filmmaker John Woo has been “misread” and his work “misappropriated” by exoteric factors in the methodology of Western film studies. His films, specifically his gangster genre films, have been labeled by Western film critics as “homoerotic”. This is not a derision of Woo’s crime thrillers, per se, in so far as none of these critics have used “homoeroticism” in a negative fashion, that homoeroticism in film is a bad thing, but Koven does believe that to read Woo’s gangster films as homoerotic misses the cultural producers’ point. Woo’s films certainly deal with male-male relationships, but to see these relationships in terms of erotic desire “misreads” the Hong Kong Chinese understanding of the codes of masculine behaviour. Instead, the author posits an alternative reading, alternative, that is, to the hegemony of the Western cultural studies discourse; John Woo’s action cinema can be approached as experiential phenomena regarding the construction of a kind of traditional masculine behaviour among the Hong Kong Chinese.

MY BROTHER, MY LOVER, MY SELF

Traditional Masculinity in the Hong Kong Action Cinema of John Woo¹

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Film scholar Lester Friedman notes, in the preface to his edited volume *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, that “when majority group members evaluate the work of minority group members, the results are at best simplistic misreadings and at the worst cynical misappropriations” (Friedman:3). What Friedman is responding to it is the tendency of Western film scholars to approach ethnic world views from their own, presumably Euro-North American perspectives. Friedman warns that to view non-Western cultures, from our own world view, is ethnocentric (Friedman, *passim*). I would extend Dr. Friedman’s thesis to include all non-Western representations of culture; what folklorists after Jansen, call the exoteric factor in folklore (Jansen:46).

Hong Kong Chinese filmmaker, John Woo, has been “misread” and his work “misappropriated” by such exoteric factors. His films, specifically his gangster genre films, have been labeled by Western film critics as “homoerotic” (cf. Rubio and Sandell; *passim*; Reynaud:23; Williams:48; and Brown:83). This is not a derision of Woo’s crime thrillers, per se, in so far as none of these critics have used “homoeroticism” in a negative fashion, that homoeroticism in film is a bad thing, but I do believe that to read Woo’s gangster films as homoerotic misses the cultural-producers’ point. Woo’s films certainly deal with male-male relationships, but to see these relationships in terms of erotic desire “misreads” the Hong Kong Chinese understanding of the codes of masculine behaviour. Instead I posit an alternative reading, alternative, that is, to the hegemony of the Western cultural studies discourse; John Woo’s action cinema can be approached as experiential phenomena regarding the construction of a kind of traditional masculine behaviour among the Hong Kong Chinese.

The phenomenology I propose here is David Hufford’s “pedestrian phenomenology” “the study of ... appearances in human experience, during which considerations of objective reality and of purely subjective response are

1. An earlier draft of this paper was originally presented on a panel titled “Masculinity/Sexuality/ Representation”, as part of the Film Studies Association of Canada annual meeting, Brock University, St. Catherine’s, 27 May, 1996. I’d also like to thank the anonymous readers who gave me some highly useful feedback on an earlier draft of this paper

temporarily left out of account” (Hufford:xv). Hufford notes that, “Many phenomenologists have apparently felt that since everyone has experience, the basic data of phenomenology are the subject of general consensus and may be taken as givens” (Hufford:xv). John Woo, as a heterosexual Hong Kong Chinese male, can be assumed to have experienced a kind of Hong Kong Chinese heterosexual masculinity. His expression of that masculinity appears to have been shared by consensus by virtue of his cultural products having resonance with other Hong Kong Chinese heterosexual males. Therefore, to watch a John Woo movie is to be witness to an expression of Hong Kong Chinese heterosexual masculinity. The consistency of that expression across an entire *oeuvre*, and the positive reception that *oeuvre* has had by the indigenous audience, is tantamount to Hufford’s “general consensus”. Paraphrasing Hufford, the object of this paper is not to argue either a pro or con stance with regard to the homoeroticism in Woo’s cinema, for that I leave to film scholars, but as a folklorist, to obtain a better description of those observations and processes of reasoning that are associated with a particular kind of widely distributed gender belief (Hufford:xix).

By deconstructing these films into a series of primary characteristics, I hope to demonstrate, by means of both textual analysis and critical comments by both vernacular informants obtained through the Internet, and reviewing the scholarly materials produced on Woo, that three specific dimensions to a traditional expression of Hong Kong Chinese masculinity emerge: proxemic relationships, male emotionality, and the virtues of duty, honour and loyalty. Finally, I shall posit a few points by way of a conclusion regarding the function of this portrayal of a traditional masculinity.

Proxemics

If, as the dictionary definition has it, proxemics is “the study of the cultural, behavioral, and sociological aspects of spatial distances between individuals” (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition*) then it should come as no surprise that Hong Kong Chinese proxemics are not necessarily going to reproduce the same spatial relationships as occur in the West, especially those based on inter-gendered relationships. Men may interact with each other differently in a heterosexual context in Hong Kong Chinese culture than they would in the West.

For example, in the crime thriller *A Better Tomorrow* [Ying Huang Boon Sik, 1986, Hong Kong], Woo introduces us to Ho (Ti Lung), a Triad operative about to go on assignment in Taiwan, rough-housing and tickling his buddy Mark (Chow Yun-Fat). The sequence of the two men tickling and playing with one another is immediately followed by another sequence where

Ho likewise cavorts with his brother Kit (Leslie Cheung). A parallelism is created whereby Mark should be seen rhetorically as much of a brother to Ho as Kit (Ho's biological brother) is. One of my informants, pHred tSui (sic), posted the following comment on the Internet's Usenet groups alt.asian-movies, soc.culture.hongkong and soc.culture.hongkong.entertainment:

...if any of these "theorists" [film theorists who identify male-male interaction in Woo's films as homoerotic] have spent time in any Asian country they will find that physical contact between same sex people is very common and quite natural. You will see men walking down the street arm in arm, women holding hands, etc. This is of course very different then western ideology of how same sex people should interact with each other (pHred tSui, 27 Feb, 1996).

What tSui identifies is an alternative proxemic relationship men have with each other in Hong Kong than one would recognize in a Western context. The assumption tSui makes is that men in Western cultures do not touch or become physically intimate with one another outside of the romantic relationship dyad.

Joan Shields, a Euro-North American informant of mine, notes the following:

I think it's more an American thing about "space" rather than something unique to Asian cultures. ... Apparently, (we) Americans envision a space around us, a personal space some call it. We are socialized to recognize this space and invade or not invade it (Joan Shields, 29 February 1996).

Again the assumption here is that an "invasion" of personal space is only appropriate when consent is given, based on the socialization process those in the West have experienced. The Chinese socialization process indicates a different experience, and there is no reason to assume an automatic reproduction of the spatial relationships which exist within a foreign culture (the West).

Emotionality

Beyond the spatial, the men in John Woo's films demonstrate an emotional relationship with other men that appears quite foreign to Western cinematic eyes. The men in these films are not afraid to explore their feelings for one another as men. Tabor Kimzey notes "I believe that the nature of the Eastern mindset is so alien to America ... that we could not understand relating to another's emotions as being a masculine trait" (Tabor Kimzey, 27 Feb, 1996).

In John Woo's last Hong Kong film, *Hard Boiled* [*Lashou Shentan*, 1992, Hong Kong], Tequila (Chow Yun-Fat), the hard-boiled police officer hunting down Triad gun-runners and forging an uneasy alliance with undercover officer Tony (Tony Leung Chiu Wei), is central to the narrative's development. In addition to resolving the crimes and putting the bad guys away (either in the ground or in jail), Tequila must find his lost sensitivity. In an early sequence, he talks to the owner of the Jazz club where he plays saxophone. The owner (played by Woo himself and therefore giving authorial presence to the scene), a former police officer himself who found himself becoming too "hard-boiled" and so left the force, chides Tequila about the fact that "you were once so sensitive...". The job has cost Tequila that sensitive side of himself. Tequila's romantic relationship with his superior officer, Theresa (Theresa Mo), has gone cold and he risks losing her to some anonymous suitor who keeps sending her flowers. The resolution, which narrative cinema demands, is as much about defeating the Triad gun-runners as it is about Tequila regaining that sensitive side to his nature. The penultimate sequence of the film, a gun battle in the hospital where the Triad were storing their arms, features Theresa and Tequila rescuing babies from the maternity ward. The central image here is that of Tequila, a cherubic infant in his left hand, and a shotgun in his right — the perfect balance of Chinese yin and yang, masculine and feminine, violence and sensitivity. It is this image of the ultimate Chinese hero. As Tony Williams notes, "Woo embodies his individual heroes with remarkable characteristics of gentleness and sensitivity" (Williams:48).

Emotionality is an exceptionally important aspect of being masculine within Hong Kong Chinese culture. Christy Colcord, one of my Euro-North American informants, noted the following:

One of the most attractive things about the characters that Woo/Chow [Yun-Fat] create is their ability to involve themselves in healthy, strong emotional relationships with other men. It shows an emotional maturity that you don't see in the [Sylvester] Stallones and the [Steven] Seagals. Woo's men aren't afraid to grieve over their friends' or their own weaknesses. They experience all the pain of loss and betrayal and suffer the emotional consequences of the deaths they cause (Christy Colcord, 1 March 1996).

Mabel Lau identifies what my informants see as a major trope regarding John Woo's construction of Chinese masculinity, "friendship and bonding between male friends" (Mabel Lau 1996c). Eric Lo echoes Lau's identification of this major theme:

I don't think there is anything unusual for a guy to have a good relationship with his brother and also his good friend. I believe in the movie [*A Better Tomorrow*], it portrays the situation where a man can have a relationship with another man thru (sic) a brother-brother relationship; yet at the same time, due to the condition Ho is in, he is very lucky to have a friend who is willing to "walk through fires" with him, who is Mark here (Eric Lo, 26 April, 1996).

Even from the Euro-North American perspective, sensitivity within masculinity is seen as a desirable quality, and it is this which attracts a number of women to Woo's films:

My point ... is that this sort of emotional wholeness is much more attractive in its mature masculinity than the static American role model. I understand the Western reading of homoeroticism in Woo films because the same sort of on-screen relationships don't exist here, BUT I think that they're just confusing well-rounded masculine friendships with erotic relationships. Just because something is very symbolically male ... I don't think it's necessarily erotic (Christy Colcord, 1 March 1996).

Ann Raffel, a Euro-North American informant, seems to bridge this cultural gap, "[Woo's] men form strong interpersonal bonds [and that this] gets interpreted by us Westerners as homoerotic could be because we generally don't allow men to have such strong open feelings for other men. So since we have no other frame of reference to explain why a man would be so intensely loyal to another man, it is seen as a romantic bond" (Ann Raffel, 2 March, 1996). Raffel continues with what may be the most profound identification of this dissonance, "*Agape* gets seen (mistaken? ...) as *eros*" (Ann Raffel, 2 March 1996).

Woo made the movies with the intention of showing brotherly love between the actors, which is something treasured by most Chinese men and also by Woo himself. Woo is a very traditional Chinese man that values his families, his friends. ... 'You stand by your brother/men all the time', especially so in the Triad Society (Mabel Lau 1996a).

What appears central to John Woo's construction of Chinese masculinity, then, is not the *homoerotic* per se, but something much more germane to a Chinese experience of masculinity. This aspect of sensitivity is cited by Lori Saltis, another Euro-North American, who notes that "he has an obvious preference for relationships between male characters, which was fine with me because he has so much to say about it" (Lori Saltis, 1 March, 1996). Tony Williams cites a quotation from actor Chow Yun-Fat regarding this emotionalism of Woo's. "Chow describes Woo as 'a very romantic and sensual director who puts a lot of himself in his films: love, human dignity, but also anger about the

loss of tradition in the cities. He's a very traditional Chinese" (quoted in Williams, 44). Chow's comment reveals an important underlying dimension: that love and dignity, romanticism and sensuality are all traditional Chinese attributes of masculinity. That Chow and Woo collaborate so closely (of Woo's final six Hong Kong films, Chow starred in five) we can take yet a further step toward this cultural consensus, that this emotionality is a primary factor in the construction of traditional Hong Kong Chinese masculinity within heterosexuality.

Duty/Honour/Loyalty

The Woo film which best exhibits the masculine traits of duty, honour and loyalty is *The Killer* [*Die xue shuang xiong*, 1989, Hong Kong]. *The Killer* is a significant film for two reasons: this film, more so than any of his others, has been "misappropriated" and "misread" as homoerotic because of this traditional construction of Chinese masculinity²; and it is probably the most famous of Woo's Chinese films, the first to get "art-house" appreciation in the West, and likely the one most people have seen. The narrative of *The Killer* is fairly simple: a hired assassin, on his penultimate assignment, accidentally blinds a young lady lounge singer and is so overcome with guilt and remorse that he agrees to take one last job in order to pay for her cornea transplant. Unfortunately this last job becomes more complicated than he originally thought as those he could trust begin to turn on him. And those he previously thought were his enemies, the police, turn out to be his most important allies.

The killer himself is erroneously referred to as "Jeff" in the subtitles. I'll refer to him as Chow Yun-Fat, the actor. Chow has a progressive series of relationships with other characters throughout this film. The film begins with Chow in what from a Western perspective could be considered a homoerotic relationship with Sidney (Chu Kong). He abandons Sidney for a heterosexual relationship with Jennie (Sally Yeh), which given this "misreading," is probably the instigation for Sidney to betray Chow to Weng. By the end of the film Jennie herself is abandoned for Inspector Li (Danny Lee). There is a movement in Chow's relationships from Sidney to Jennie to Li, which would appear to support textually the homoerotic reading from an exoteric perspective.

As the film begins, Sidney gives Chow his next assignment, and asks if he wants to check the gun. Chow replies "I trust you", and with one of

2. Jillian Sandell notes: "... *The Killer* (1989) [is] a film in which the eroticization of the gangster body reaches a whole new level ..." (Rubio and Sandell, n.p.)

Woo's signature freeze-frames on Chow's face, sets up a narrative motif about trust and betrayal which is central to this film's construction of masculinity.

The next relationship Chow has is with Jennie, the blind lounge singer. Jennie is unaware that her new benefactor is the assassin who was responsible for her lost eyesight. Jennie increasingly takes a narrative backseat, when Inspector Li comes on the scene, as the cop who hunts down Chow, using Jennie as bait.

The implicit exoteric assumption is that because of the positioning of Chow and Jennie, a male/female relationship, it is *a priori* a sexual one, which would then imply that Chow's relationship with both Sidney and Li are, therefore, likewise sexual. This would be especially true for the Chow-Li relationship, which is by far the most charismatic. Jillian Sandell, in an issue of *Bad Subjects*, notes this explicitly: "the doubling of Jeff with the cop ... is made explicit right from the start and once again this is coded as intensely homoerotic" (Rubio and Sandell, n.p.).

All of this would in fact be an acceptable reading if it were not for the problem of the unnamed killer. Toward the end of the film, in the middle of the final gun battle, Li turns to Chow and asks him for his name so that should Chow not survive, Li could know how to refer to him in the stories he will later tell. The subtitle makes no sense, since Li has been calling Chow "Jeff" for the entire film. What he, Sidney, and Jennie actually call him is "Ah-Jon", in Cantonese, a common term of affection and familiarity which means, roughly, "little brother". This is a dimension inaccessible to all but Cantonese speakers and those interested in the emic understanding of the film. The reference to Chow as "Ah-Jon" transforms not only Chow's relationship with Jennie, but also his relationships with Sidney and Li. All three relationships are more along the lines of the familial than the sexual; *agape* not *eros*.

Mabel Lau points out an important Chinese proverb which seems to indicate this Chinese attribute of traditional masculinity:

Remember how [Chow and Li] were in Jennie's house, the way they talk, the way they were so careful, the way they were so aware of each other's actions, show you they respect each other's strength. There is a saying in Chinese, which is to the same effect as 'A hero knows a hero when he/she sees one, and respects him/her'. That's exactly what [Chow and Li] felt towards each other. They have the same belief and that's why [Li] was willing to fight with [Chow] at the end of the film (Mabel Lau 1996b).

Eric Lo also cited the same proverb, and he continues, "so, the cop eventually felt that there is a relationship between the two of them..." (Eric Lo, 26 April 1996).

Likewise, Wing Luk noted:

Hard to explain [this gender construction] to you in America because the fraternal comradeship does not exist in the Western culture. ... I would recommend you to read an ancient Chinese novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. If you understand the fraternal relationship between the three "brothers" in the novel, then you understand the relationship in John Woo's movies (Wing Luk, 28 Feb, 1996).

The novel Wing Luk cites, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, was also cited to me by Eric Lo as a source Woo himself has identified as a major inspiration for his films (Eric Lo, 26 April, 1996). Thus the traditional Chinese hero has been modernized and set loose in a contemporary Hong Kong. Critic Tony Williams notes:

The [traditional Chinese] hero, Kwan-Yu, is one of Woo's key images throughout his Hong Kong films. Inhabiting a different world thousands of years ago, Kwan-Yu was known for qualities of loyalty and friendship. After death, he became a god in reward for his humanitarian qualities during his life. Woo obviously regards this figure as a better example for his audience. Mark, Kit [both from *A Better Tomorrow*], Jeff [in *The Killer*] and Tony [in *Hard Boiled*] are Kwan-Yu's twentieth-century counterparts. ... [As] cultural influence[s], Woo has said that ... [he respects] 'a lot of Chinese knight stories, so my themes are all around knight errants' (Williams:48).

Alice Cheung agrees:

I haven't watched as many John Woo movies as I would have liked. But from what I have seen, in essence, his films are like Chinese *wuxia* stories. About swordsmen [in his case, gun men] going out in the world to get justice the way they know how. The most important motives in their lives are loyalty to their "brothers", often not related by blood. But this fraternal connection is often even more precious than blood brothers for it is an association freely chosen. ... Betrayal by one's "brother", revenge of honour, restoration of the order of integrity. These are themes prevalent in *wuxia* movies and John Woo movies. In fact, many times, fraternal duty and loyalty is rated above love for a woman (Alice Cheng, 2 March, 1996, cf. Williams:46).

Tabor Kimzey made the following comment:

Most of Woo's action films deal with the themes of : Honor; Betrayal; Masculine friendship; What it means to be Masculine; and the Ronin concept. By Ronin concept I mean the theme of the Samurai with no leader or allegiance to anyone (Tabor Kimzey, 27 Feb, 1996).

Both the Wuxia narratives cited by both Eric Lo and Alice Cheng, and the Ronin concept of the Samurai warrior share a number of masculine attributes. The themes of honour, fraternal bonds, duty and loyalty appear throughout these narratives in oral, written and the audio-visual traditions. These themes are certainly not unique to the Orient; however, their articulation and their effect take on a different expression based on the culture experiencing them.

I offer another example from a different film. In *Bullet in the Head* [1990, Hong Kong], Woo explores these themes of duty, honour and loyalty set against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. Frank (Jacky Cheung), Paul (Wasie Lee) and Ben (Tony Leung) are all friends growing up in the same slum in Hong Kong, and are working for the same Triad lord. The night of Ben's wedding, Paul is mugged by a rival gang and in retribution the three kill the mugger. Escaping to Saigon, the three set themselves up as privateers, and meet the dashing Luke (Simon Yam). As Saigon falls, the four friends make their way through a Dante's *Inferno*-esque landscape of war, at every turn discovering treachery, dishonour, and betrayal, setting up a blatant opposition to what Woo himself sees as ideal attributes of traditional masculinity. At one point in a nightclub, where the three friends are trying to get hired by a local Triad boss, they meet Luke during a shootout in the men's room. The scene features an exchange of looks between Ben and Luke. Ben has previously been one of three main characters who have been guiding us through the narrative. We have only just been visually introduced to Luke, when he buys a handgun from the night-club's piano player. Or to put it in more basic terms, we know who Ben is, but Luke is unknown to us. The first time we see Luke in the toilet sequence, he is standing by the open door, underneath the sign which reads "Gentlemen", possibly Woo's rhetorical method of indicating that we can trust Luke. Luke and Ben have an exchange of glances, broken only by Luke giving a very slight head gesture to Ben to move back. This eyeline match is visually enforced by a repeated zoom in to both men. This is a Woo visual technique to indicate unspoken communication. The Western viewer may initially suppose an illicit toilet rendezvous, but then Luke whips out a gun, and shoots the smuggler, Mr. Chan, emptying out all six rounds of his revolver. Even more significant is the exchange of glances that Luke and Ben make after the murder, punctuated by the lyrics of the song in the background, a cover band doing a rendition of a Monkees' song, "and I saw her face/Now I'm a believer." Belief, for Woo, is linked with faith and trust, rather than the romantic/sexual meaning implicit in the Monkees' song. Based on the previous development of Ben as one of the three heroes of *Bullet in the Head*, perhaps the song for Woo is reflective of Ben's thought process, that he believes Luke is someone he can trust, a position supported by the rest of the film.

Tony Williams likewise identifies these themes throughout the Woo *oeuvre*: “Woo understands his cops and robbers as alienated brothers with comparable codes of loyalty and professionalism now obsolete within late capitalism” (Williams:48). It is this resurrection of traditional concepts of Chinese masculinity, Woo’s rhetorical effect, which I now wish to address.

Cinema as Cultural Lesson

Perhaps it is a truism in cinema studies, as Jeffrey Brown notes, that “cultural values are taught or validated by portraying them as natural and absolute” (Brown:82). Bascom’s third function of folklore, “that which it plays in education...” (Bascom:293) is particularly relevant here. But the implication in Brown is that the portrayal of natural and absolute cultural values is somehow static. There is a simplicity in so much of cultural studies, of which Brown is but a single minor example, which argues that by portraying cultural values as natural and absolute, the (implied) passive audience will accept and internalize these values. The educational function of narrative is much more emergent, creating a dialectic between the cognizant ideals and the cognizant reality. Both sides are by necessity rhetorically polarized. As Williams noted above, we have the ideal codes of traditional Chinese masculinity, “codes of loyalty and professionalism,” opposed to the reality of “late capitalism.” *A Better Tomorrow* and its sequel, *A Better Tomorrow 2* [*Yinghung Bunsik II*, 1987, Hong Kong], broke domestic box office records when they were released in the late 1980s, and seemed to touch Hong Kong filmgoers in an unprecedented way (Williams:48). Chow’s character in the first film, Mark, sparked a number of imitators in style and dress³, so much so Woo creates a “shrine to the fallen Mark” in *A Better Tomorrow 2* as a satirical parody of the phenomenon he himself created. What the Hong Kong Chinese embraced about *A Better Tomorrow*, and by extension the rest of the Woo *oeuvre*, is noted by Tony Williams: “Woo’s *Better Tomorrow* box-office breakthroughs stress both Chinese knightly values and features...male sensitivity, gentleness and friendship — qualities that could herald a better tomorrow if society were organized on less violent lines” (Williams:48).

Likewise, Mabel Lau identifies this function in Woo’s films, “All he was doing was trying to teach the younger generation of brotherly love, trust, honest friendship which he sees is lacking in the younger generation in Hong Kong, which has become much more money-oriented” (Mabel Lau 1996a).

3. Including the Christian Slater character in Tony Scott’s *True Romance*, who not only has adopted Mark’s style, but in one sequence is watching *A Better Tomorrow 2* on video.

Conclusion

To watch a film is to engage phenomenologically with the culture that produced it. When the themes of the film, or an entire *oeuvre*, are about one particular topic — in this case, the action cinema of John Woo —, certain traditional Hong Kong Chinese beliefs about masculinity emerge. To examine the cultural experience of an ineffable dynamic like masculinity, one needs to carefully identify the primary features of that belief. In this case, primary features are cultural differences in proxemic relationships between members of the same sex, freedom men are given to express their emotionality, and the underlying themes of honour, duty, and loyalty. For John Woo, *as* “a very traditional Chinese [man]” (Williams:44) these features are the recipe *for* being a traditional Chinese man. We have Woo’s friend, colleague and lead actor, Chow Yun-Fat’s testimony that his films are extensions of his own perception of masculinity (Williams:44). By general consensus of a variety of Chinese and Euro-North American vernacular and academic informants, Woo’s experience of masculinity has resonance with the culture within which Woo experienced it. I can conclude that through watching Woo’s gangster films, I have seen a kind of traditional Chinese masculinity expressed.

Beyond that engagement, the educational function of narrative posits not only an experience of a kind of traditional Chinese masculinity, but further indicates that such traditional values are currently in jeopardy, and that these values are in opposition to contemporary Chinese culture in Hong Kong. We have, to paraphrase Tony Williams, a blueprint for a better tomorrow.

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