



Deconstruction of Chinese Masculinity, Adaptation of Hong Kong Gangster Films, and Political Criticism in Television Series *The Knockout*

Xuechun Jin, University of Queensland, xuechun.jin@student.uq.edu.au

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Abstract

This study examines how the popular Chinese television series *The Knockout* crystallises political significance by mobilising intertextuality and deconstruction of masculinity. It argues that, *The Knockout* adapts the narratives and aesthetics of space, building, and natural scene in the Hong Kong gangster films to depict the crisis and precariousness of masculinity and thereby convey the criticism of China's modernity and state authority. This research contributes to the under-researched field of alternative masculinities on Chinese screen and sheds light on how the Chinese television series struggles to negotiate the strict censorship. Also, it foregrounds the intertextual impact of Hong Kong genre cinema on contemporary Chinese television and the inter-regional adaptation on East-Asian screen.

Keywords: screen masculinity; Chinese masculinity; Chinese television; adaptation; East-Asian television; television



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Deconstruction of Chinese Masculinity, Adaptation of Hong Kong Gangster Films, and Political Criticism in Television Series *The Knockout*

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Introduction

First aired during the 2023 Chinese New Year, *The Knockout* (Xia & Dai, 2023) has become one of the nation-wide top-rated series and constituted the shared experience of many audiences in celebrating the traditional festival (Qi, 2023). Characterised by a generic combination of gangster, police, and anti-corruption¹, this series was produced under the guidance and surveillance of Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission of CCP (Wang, 2023). However, far away from a pure propaganda discourse, *The Knockout* opens up a critical space to question the national politics by deconstructing the masculinity of lead anti-hero Gao Qiqiang, who is also the most favoured character². Adopting a close textual reading and a comparative analysis, this study shows how *The Knockout* highlights the crisis and precariousness of Gao Qiqiang's masculinity and invokes political criticism by adapting the narratives and aesthetics of space, building, and natural scene in the post-handover Hong Kong gangster film series *Infernal Affairs* (Lau & Mak, 2002, 2003a, 2003b) and *Election* (To, 2005, 2006).

This study will recuperate how the Chinese television endeavours to negotiate and criticise the state authority under the strict censorship. Bettinson (2020) exemplifies how the Chinese mainstream filmmaker forestalls the censorship and survives the plots of ghost and science fiction by innovating generic mixture and exploiting the convention of *film noir*. Therefore, the China's censorship does not diminish the creativity and subversive potential of motion pictures but instead stimulates the Chinese auteurs to invent more subtle and complex storytelling and genre experimentation. Likewise, *The Knockout* is an important case, which delivers the political significance by two key ways: deconstructing the screen masculinity and adapting from the Hong Kong gangster genre.

This study challenges the essentialist and hegemonic theory of Chinese masculinity. As what Chow (2008) has problematised, the understanding of contemporary Chinese masculinity has been totalised around the dominant cultural notions, including Confucianism, nationalism, and capitalism (Chan, 2000; Louie, 2002; Song & Hird, 2014). Further, studies have applied this hegemonic model to analyse how Chinese films and televisions depict “real Chinese men” without questioning its political consequence (Hu & Guan, 2021; Song & Hird, 2014). This scholarly limitation has consolidated the hegemonic masculinity and led to cultural essentialism and exclusion of alternative masculinities, such as masculinities of working-class people and

ethnic minority. Thus, this study will shed light on an alternative masculinity of the anti-hero gangster in *The Knockout* and explore its contradiction and instability.

While the Western scholars have shifted from assuming a concrete notion of heterosexual, middle-class, white masculinity towards inquiring a crisis of masculinity on the screen (Armengol, 2024), there is little discussion of how Chinese motion pictures orchestrate the crisis of masculinity. Notably, the crisis of masculinity is intricately linked with the specific social context. For instance, sufficient studies have demonstrated how the crisis of masculinity in the Western films and television embraces the influence of major social change, including feminism, civil right movement, war, and financial crisis (Lotz, 2014; Rehling, 2009). Hence, I will pay attention to the crisis of masculinity in the Chinese television series by relating to the questions of China's modernity and state authority. In so doing, this study will apply the dialectical approach of Armengol (2024) to deconstruct the television masculinity on the one hand, and recognise its impact on the gender politics on the other. Meanwhile, the existing Chinese studies mostly examine screen masculinities on ideological level by focusing on general characterisations and plots. There is little knowledge of how Chinese motion pictures construct masculinities through detailed audio-visual styles and *mise-en-scène*. Hence, this

study will foreground the close connection between the screen masculinity and aesthetics, following the theory of Bruzzi (2013).

The East-Asian genre films are under-discussed and often attributed to pure mimics of their Western counterparts, unless the genres like martial arts have been rendered exceptional spectacles (Aston & Feng, 2020; Kelso-Marsh, 2020). Also, little attention has been paid to the significant inter-cultural hybridity and mobility in East-Asian cinema, which is fundamental to the generic formations (Diffrient, 2022; Kelso-Marsh, 2020). Hence, this research will contribute to examine the inter-cultural adaptation between Hong Kong and China and the convention and variation of gangster genre on East-Asian screen. Also, while the critical discussion of Hong Kong cinema has been declined due to the recession of local film industry, my study resuscitates its importance to the contemporary Chinese television series making.

Before I start the analysis, it is necessary to note that, *The Knockout*'s gangster characters and plots are mainly filmed by the co-director Phat Chan from Hong Kong (Chan, 2023). He is also the executive director of the Hong Kong gangster films *Infernal Affairs* and *Election*. Although an analysis of production and auteur is out of the scope, it is clear that *The Knockout* significantly pays homage to and adapts these films. Some apparent adaptation aside³, this study will look at three clips of *The Knockout*, which shape the masculinity of the gangster Gao

Qiqiang by repeating and variating the narrative and aesthetic elements in the two Hong Kong films.

Analysis

The Knockout uses a classical three-act structure to narrate how Gao Qiqiang turns from a law-abiding man into a gangster and then develops into a government official who is eventually penalised during the time period from 2000 to 2020. In 2000, Gao Qiqiang is a middle-aged working-class man selling fish in a market. His parents died when he was young, so he plays a role as the parent of his two younger siblings and upholds the whole family. He embodies a crisis of masculinity, unable to accomplish the new model of masculinity stressing on upward mobility, capacity, and entrepreneurialism in the post-socialist market economy. This crisis is highlighted in the conflict between Gao Qiqiang and his younger brother happened in his suburban apartment in the episode 3.

After being bullied by the market managers and occasionally becoming friends with the police protagonist An Xin, Gao Qiqiang turns home and finds his brother abruptly comes back from his university in the capital city. The siblings sit in their worn apartment, which is featured by the palette of yellow, red, and green. These colors are frequently screened in the Chinese realistic films, expressing a nostalgia for Chinese citizens' domestic lives in the last century.

During the conversation, Gao Qiqiang's brother stands up and tells that he makes an adventurous decision. He shows Gao Qiqiang a cellphone and says, "I want to come back and sell this with you." A high-angle medium-shot frames Gao Qiqiang in juxtaposition with an unfocused cellphone figure. Staring at the cellphone, his facial expression is frozen and childlike. Cellphone, in this 2000 Chinese context, is an object of modernity and mobility. This recalls us about the frequent presence of information technology in *Infernal Affairs*, which signifies the postmodern information society and commodity capitalism. Different from the men in *Infernal Affairs* whose identities are both configured and fragmentated by their expertise of information technology (Marchetti, 2007), Gao Qiqiang is depicted to have no knowledge of cellphone, therefore being distanced from modernity. This also presents the contrast between Gao Qiqiang and his younger brother, an well-educated university student ambitious in dealing cellphone in the rising market economy.

Gao Qiqiang immediately rejects his brother's entrepreneurial proposal and forcefully pushes him away from their home and asks him to go back to the university. He locks his brother outside an iron gate in the hallway, and they argue across the gate. A long-shot positions the brothers at the hallway on the top floor of an old and poorly-decorated building. Notably, this shot illustrates that Gao Qiqiang is confined to a small domestic space inside the iron gate. The iron gate functions as a border, isolating him from the public modern world. Meanwhile, this

symbolic connection between man and the local space shows significant reference to *Infernal Affairs*. For instance, the rooftop where the undercover police Chan Wing-yan often meets with his senior in *Infernal Affairs I*, on the one hand “provides a quintessential male perch on top of phallic protuberances”, and on the other hand echoes Chan Wing-yan’s identity crisis by illustrating postmodern deterritorialisation (Marchetti, 2007, p. 47). In contrast, the limited domestic space underlines Gao Qiqiang’s immobility and isolation, highlighting his separation from the normative masculinity in the modern society.

Furthermore, while Bruzzi (2013) states that the visual gestures in the Hollywood cinema convey the qualities of screen masculinity which are inconsistent with the narration, the visual manifestation of Gao Qiqiang’s crisis of masculinity is resonant with the clip’s narrative. The fierce argument between the brothers exposes the deep humiliation of Gao Qiqiang that he is deemed lacking capacity in this modern Chinese society. His brother angrily react to his rejection, “You can stay in your rotten fish stall for the rest of your life. Look at this factory courtyard, those who are capable have all gone away.” In this sense, the fish stall in which Gao Qiqiang makes a living, epitomising his lack of mobility and capacity, is consistent with his spatial confinement aforementioned. The long-shot then shifts to a close-shot of Gao Qiqiang’s awkward and frustrated face. He repeats his brother’s words and gradually turns resentful, “Yes,

those who are capable have all gone away... You are capable. You should go away!” At this moment, Gao Qiqiang’s verbal and facial expression, his physical isolation, and the soundtrack with only few low and dreary bass beat are synchronised to transmit his crisis of masculinity. His subsequent act of testily kicking the iron gate further shows his hysteria when being humiliated.

Moreover, Gao Qiqiang’s crisis of masculinity engages with the questions of China’s modernity. Despite theatricalising the conflict, this clip intentionally creates a nostalgic visual style. The clothes hanging on the ceiling of the hallway, the New Year’s red lanterns and scrolls in the background, and the overall nostalgic palette consistently evoke our collective memory of the early post-socialist China in the millennium. In this case, China’s socialist past haunts in the key landmark, the factory courtyard where Gao Qiqiang lives, which symbolises the communist planned economy and lifestyle. Gao Qiqiang with his once very honoured working-class identity, the factory courtyard, and the past socialism, are all alienated from the process of capitalist modernisation in the post-socialist China. This correlation between the man and the space and the nation’s local history also pays homage to *Infernal Affairs 2*, which maps the association between the death of gangster Ngai Wing-hau and the end of unlicensed restaurant and the pastness of Hong Kong’s local memory as a colony after the handover (Marchetti, 2007). As such, Gao Qiqiang’s crisis of masculinity embodies the criticism of China’s drastic

transition, which aggravates the social disparity and estranges suburban working-class people. This crisis also shares some similarities with the independent filmmaker Jia Zhangke's narrative and aesthetic structure, which portrays the crisis of working-class masculinity in China's modernisation and thereby reveals and inquires the social injustice through the interplay between fiction and realism (Lu, 2016). Moreover, Gao Qiqiang decides to overcome his crisis and humiliation and thus eventually agrees with his brother's entrepreneurial project. This leads him towards the illegal means in order to run his business. Unlike the classical narrative of American and Hong Kong gangster films which links the failure and death of gangsters with the broader social change and deficit of traditional values (Larke-Walsh, 2010; Nochimson, 2007), *The Knockout* implies China's troubled modernisation as a key catalyst of gang crime.

At the second stage of the three-act narrative, Gao Qiqiang turns into a lead gangster and a manager of a local construction group. He seemingly embodies the hegemonic masculinity in the post-socialist China, which equates with his social power and classed privilege. In the meantime, he becomes the biggest target of his old friend, the police protagonist An Xin, but they maintain the superficial friendship. While An Xin is struggling with detecting a case in which the suspect is Gao Qiqiang's rival, Gao Qiqiang messages him to meet up on a rooftop and bring him useful evidence for the case in the episode 19. The narrative and aesthetic in the

rooftop scene make significant reference to *Infernal Affairs*. Fundamentally, the rooftop is a space for exchanging information between the undercover police and his senior (*Infernal Affairs*) and between the gangster and the police (*The Knockout*). In *Infernal Affairs*, the rooftop simultaneously operates the phallic power and shows the undercover men's confused identities and psychological dysfunction (Marchetti, 2007). Differently, in this clip, the rooftop manifests Gao Qiqiang's hegemonic masculinity as a powerful criminal, whereas conveying the instability of this masculinity and its association with social problems. The rooftop is also a space of taboo, where the transgressive activity and relationship are tolerated and dramatised.

At the beginning, a medium-shot parallels Gao Qiqiang with the empty and unfinished buildings and the cement road behind him and then shifts its focus to An Xin's moving car on the road. Gao Qiqiang picks up an exquisite teacup and drinks. This is synchronised by an audio message from Gao Qiqiang to An Xin, "Hi Sir, I heard that you are persistently investigating gambling nowadays. Would you have time to catch up? I have something you might be looking for." Similar to the reoccurring scenes of having food in *Infernal Affairs*, tea, as a crucial object operating the system of "guan xi" – "in which personal relations are used to curry favor and maneuver advantageously within the ethnic Chinese world", in this scene reifies the "guan xi" between the two men, which echoes the audio message (Marchetti, 2007, p. 75).

The camera traces An Xin stepping on the stairs of an empty building through a long-shot. Using *Chiaroscuro*, it depicts An Xin's movement from the left half of the frame in the sunshine towards the right half in the shadow of the building, predicting his enter into Gao Qiqiang's criminal sphere. Further, the camera continues to position An Xin in the empty architecture and the spiral staircase through a high-angle long-shot, heralding his entrapment. In this scene, the cement-made undecorated rooms and stairs without a fence or wall convey a sense of danger and uncertainty, resonated with the soundtrack which intersects the low pitch vocal with intense metal beat. The scene then changes to a low-angle wide-frame shot, manifesting that An Xin has stepped to the centre of the rooftop while Gao Qiqiang and his bodyguards are positioned in the two oppositional gazeboes on the both sides of the frame. The gazeboes are uphold by the pillars, whereas their interior are empty. As such, Gao Qiqiang remains on one floor higher than An Xin. An Xin is therefore depicted to be surrounded and entrapped by Gao Qiqiang's power.

An Xin finds a chip dropping in front of him and he goes to Gao Qiqiang's gazebo by following his gesture guidance. This is accompanied by Gao Qiqiang's soprano theme music, which indicates that it is Gao Qiqiang dominates the space and the scene. An aerial shot illustrates An Xin going beyond the two layers of the wall on a round square towards the

attaching gazebo, implying that he is stepping out from the maze of the case but stepping into Gao Qiqiang's conspiracy. Then he meets Gao Qiqiang, who brings him a manager of a underworld gambling house as a witness of the case.

Similar to *Infernal Affairs*, the rooftop here is an alienated and hidden space from the cityscape, distanced from the buildings and traffics in the background. Also, it is a space for uncovering the concealed affairs in the modern society. While the rooftop in *Infernal Affairs* is a key place where the undercover Chan Wing-yan can expose his true identity and reveal his psychological distress as a mole (Marchetti, 2007), the rooftop here is a stage to theatricalise the very dark side of the modernity. When An Xin judges that Gao Qiqiang deploys lynching on the manager who is severely wounded, the manager anxiously denied this. The manager's dramatised expression of fear and acting of handcuffing himself tell us that he is actually lynched and coerced by Gao Qiqiang, who takes charge of the illegal gambling business in the city. Notwithstanding, An Xin has no reason to accuse Gao Qiqiang. Hence, the rooftop has become a crime zone, where rule and justice do not work and the veiled illegal activities in the city are exposed and tolerated.

Meanwhile, the rooftop mirrors Gao Qiqiang's phallic power. This is evident in the extreme long-shot, which places the characters at the centre of the frame on the long gazebo

and distancing them from the bottom line where the shadows of urban buildings are located. In contrast to *Infernal Affairs 2* which frames men on the rooftop in parallel with the buildings in the background (such as the Bank Of China and HSBC buildings) to emphasise those buildings' impact on shaping Hong Kong's identity (Marchetti, 2007), the current scene downplays the significance of the urban buildings and underlines the superiority of the gazebo. Just as Bruzzi (2013) suggests in the visual evocation of screen masculinity, Gao Qiqiang's hegemonic masculinity is conveyed by the rooftop, which subordinates all other figures.

In the further dialogue, An Xin and the manager sit opposite each other around a table, while Gao Qiqiang standing behind the table. The camera switches between the shot-reverse shots of each of the three characters in multiple standpoints and the long-shot facing upon Gao Qiqiang. Thus, both An Xin and the manager are shot in juxtaposition with the mazy architectures behind them, but Gao Qiqiang's standing position enables him to be framed in front of the blue sky. The long-shot also foregrounds him to be the highest, approaching the top of the sky and contrasting the vague and small cityscape in the background. As a result, Gao Qiqiang is depicted to be totally unconstrained and superior by this visual expansiveness. Meanwhile, the visual manifestation reaches a synchrony with the body gesture of Gao Qiqiang, who easily and elegantly throws up his hands and leans his head and smiles at An Xin to show

he is free from any guilt. This synchrony between the aesthetic and bodily movement resembles the scene in which the men purposefully walk through the expansive landscape in *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Bruzzi, 2013). Consequently, Gao Qiqiang's free and expressive body gesture and his visual dominance over the cityscape present that he is free from any juridical constraint and also in control of the affairs in the city. Therefore, the rooftop is a space in which Gao Qiqiang's hegemonic masculinity is exercised and manifested to the extreme.

Relating to the scenes and visual styles before and after An Xin and Gao Qiqiang's meeting, we would allege that this clip is to indicate how An Xin gets entrapped and exploited by Gao Qiqiang to beat down his rival. However, this meaning is complicated by the further narration of the two men's homosociality. When An Xin inquires the motivation why Gao Qiqiang helps him, Gao Qiqiang explains in affectionate tone, "You have helped me last time. I'm appreciated. I also want to help you a bit, right?" His word suddenly crosses into the personal and intimate sphere, just like the moment on the rooftop in *Infernal Affairs I*, when Chan Wing-yan considers a watch his senior gives him as a wiretap but his senior declares that it's the birthday gift for him. Such a transcendence over the public and private sphere boundary underscores the private emotional attachment between the men. Meanwhile, the rooftop as a detached and prohibited space from the general public, embodies the libidinal significance of the intimacy between the men (Marchetti, 2007). Hence, the rooftop theatricalises not only the

hidden affairs but also the transgressive relationship. In this scene, the homosociality between An Xin and Gao Qiqiang potentially subverts not only heteronormativity but also the conventional morality and justice. Therefore, the relationship between them conflates the private homoeroticism with the publicised benefit-based connection. Indeed, this opaqueness of relationship consolidates Gao Qiqiang's hegemonic masculinity, showing his ability to handle the entanglement of his public business with personal intimacy and maintain the relationship with his seemingly enemy in the public sphere.

However, the rooftop also deconstructs this hegemonic masculinity. Although Gao Qiqiang's phallic power peaks at the rooftop, the various depictions of the building's emptiness underscore that his superiority is hollowed. There is nothing at the interior of the building except for the red bricked walls and grey cement pillars. On the one hand, the stylised manifestation of the undecorated empty building transmits the sense of danger and entrapment, thereby illustrating Gao Qiqiang's aggressive power. On the other hand, this architecture indicates the precariousness of his hegemonic masculinity.

This hegemonic masculinity is also problematised in relation to the realistic issues. The rooftop in *Infernal Affairs* functions as a border between the postmodern anonymous "non-place" and Hong Kong's cityscape concerning its specific political and economic climates. In

so doing, it mirrors the men's identity struggle between "essentially anonymous cogs in the machinery of transnational capitalism managed by the state or as embodiments of a specific local identity associated with Hong Kong triads and the Hong Kong police" (Marchetti, 2007, p. 47). *The Knockout* once again adapts this association between men's identity and urban building and social problem to the Chinese context. Although the place where An Xin and Gao Qiqiang meet is named as a "displaced plant" in the series, the visual depiction of the building recalls a prevalent phenomenon in our collective memory – the unfinished building, as a result of corruption and inadequate government legislation in the booming real estate market during China's modernisation. In this case, the unfinished building vitalises a postmodern aesthetic and embodies the aftermath of modernity, which is alienated from the good face of cityscape. Also, it echoes Gao Qiqiang's hegemonic power, which is sourced from his corruption and criminality as a gang-related construction group manager. As a result, through the visual evocation of masculinity, this clip effectively deconstructs this masculinity and conveys the criticism of modernity.

So far, we might easily claim that Gao Qiqiang, just as the American mafia gangsters, embodies the ethos of modern capitalism but simultaneously functions as a scapegoat for its corruption (Larke-Walsh, 2010; Warshow, 1948). Nevertheless, the political criticism has been evoked further and deeper in accordance with the deconstruction of Gao Qiqiang's masculinity

in the episode 26. Gao Qiqiang successfully joins the camp of a powerful government official by helping him to kill two of his political enemies. They firstly meet with each other at a sea coast. This clip pays homage to *Election 2* in aligning the aesthetic of natural scene with the political allusion.

Gao Qiqiang's and the government official's vehicles approach each other from opposite directions on the coastal road before coming to a stop at a distance. The road separates the frame into the waving sea on the left side and the beach on the right side which consists of factories, sand beach, and a tributary of the sea. In an intersection of a rotary aerial shot intersects with a medium-shot, Gao Qiqiang gets off his car and gradually walks towards the official's car. Also, the soundtrack compounds the slow and bass melody with the sound of sea wave, expressing a feeling of tension. Gao Qiqiang slightly lowers his head in front of the passenger window of the official's car and then takes off his tie. At this moment, the camera shifts to a high-angle shot of the window's mirror reflection, in which the image of Gao Qiqiang appears at a high elevation. His gesture is dramatised in the glass's reflection, forcefully tearing off the tie and gravely staring at the window. This cinematography and performance depict Gao Qiqiang to be powerful and dominant, synchronised with the intensified string music. Also, the close depiction of the mirror reflection invites our narcissistic identification with Gao Qiqiang's

masculinity (Neale, 1983). The camera switches from Gao Qiqiang's hands gradually rolling his tie to the official inner the car, who feels threatened by his gesture. By looking at him at a distance, we are provoked into a masochism (Neale, 1983). As a result, Gao Qiqiang's masculinity allows our fluid identifications (Bruzzi, 2013). What strikes here is that he occupies an aggressive and sadistic subject position.

When we are convinced to assume that Gao Qiqiang will insult the official, the intensified music slows down and changes into the bass melody. The camera turns to the close-shot of Gao Qiqiang, who gets closer and exhales his breath to the glass window. His face is doubled by the mirror reflection. He then wipes away the mist he exhaled with his tie to show that he is cleaning the window for the official. This *mise-en-scène* and act deconstruct Gao Qiqiang's masculinity, revealing that our previous preoccupation with his powerfulness through the glass reflection is illusive. This scene is also resemblance to the one Noodles visits Deborah in *Once Upon a Time in America*, in which the truth about Deborah is gradually uncovered accompanied with the camera turning from her face in the mirror reflection to the reality. Further, the camera inner the car films the official looking outside the window, but only frames Gao Qiqiang's wiping hands. Thus, Gao Qiqiang is out of the camera lens, exerting no power to threaten the official. The camera outside then showcases that Gao Qiqiang steps backwards and bows in a very deferential gesture. In this scene, our reception of Gao Qiqiang's hegemonic power is

dismantled. This clip ends up with an aerial shot increasingly distant from Gao Qiqiang. His figure is enveloped by the sunshine from the higher sky, facing upon the official's car and the coastline and the borderless sea.

Throughout the clip, we might easily link the expansive aesthetic of the sea with Gao Qiqiang's masculinity because of the several shots position him near the sea and the synchrony between his act and the sound of sea wave. However, a contrary reading could be derived from the discussion of the clip's reference to *Election 2*. Jimmy, the lead character in *Election 2*, is a Hong Kong gangster who struggles to become the gang boss through the biennial election in order to cooperate with the Chinese government and run his business in mainland China. After he won the election, Jimmy meets with the Chinese official he partners with in a mountain. He notices that he has been manipulated by the official, who asks him to turn the gang's tradition of democratic election into hereditary system for the purpose of Hong Kong's social harmony. This destroys his dream of upward mobility. Jimmy hysterically fists the official for several times, but he eventually falls down on the ground. The camera shoots behind Jimmy, whose upper body lying on the ground and facing upon the official. The official's head approaches the top of the frame and his shoulder parallels the chain of the mountains behind him, which dominates the frame. As such, the immense mountain echoes the official, in contrast to Jimmy,

whose figure is in line with a few leaves in front of the camera. The cinematography and the natural scene indicate the power imbalance between them and imply that the official is upheld by the political hegemony.

Taking this seamless coincidence between narrative and aesthetic into account, we would find out that the power relation and the political allusion in the clip of *The Knockout* have already been foreshown in the establishing shot at the beginning. The rotary shot manifests that the official's vehicle is a border, which separates Gao Qiqiang from the sea behind it. Gao Qiqiang is thus approximate to a narrowed tributary of the sea in the beach, which only takes little space in the frame contrary to the large proportion of the sea. Therefore, this *mise-en-scène* is borrowed from *Election 2*, presenting the power asymmetry between the official and Gao Qiqiang through the contrasting aesthetic elements. Also, this clip adds a new layer to the political allegory by using the metaphor of sea and tributary to imply that Gao Qiqiang's power stems from the corrupted state.

Conclusion

This research interprets the screen masculinity in *The Knockout* by addressing the critical relations between narrative and aesthetic and between fiction and realism and investigating the series' reference to the Hong Kong gangster films. *The Knockout* displays a successful example to crystallise the political significance by mobilising the inter-cultural adaptation and the

deconstruction of masculinity. Unlike the major Chinese scholarship which is preoccupied with the fixed model of hegemonic masculinity in films and television, this study indicates the necessity to investigate alternative masculinities, which are essential to criticise the national politics and cultural and gender norms. Meanwhile, as the global scholarship pays increasing attention to the crisis and inconsistency of masculinity, it is important to closely engage with the text and explore its aesthetic and narrative structure to understand how masculinities flourish on the screen and observe their performative and contradictory nature before making an ideological criticism. In particular, in line with Bruzzi (2013), my analysis shows that the audio-visual styles and *mise-en-scène* are critical to deconstruct screen masculinity.

The connection between Chinese and Hong Kong texts is especially significant since the 1997 handover and the 2003 agreement of Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement between the two regions (Diffrient, 2022). In this case, my study indicates that the intertextual relation with Hong Kong genre films is fruitful for Chinese television to negotiate with the censorship and reconfigure the political sensibility and textual complexity. *The Knockout* significantly reiterates and recontextualises the Hong Kong gangster genre by adapting its aesthetic and narrative conventions to the specific cultural and political context in post-socialist China. Consequently, this research underscores the intertextuality as both a critical point of departure

to examine East-Asian and Chinese motion pictures and an inspirational practice for the industry.

There are a few aspects that this study does not cover and merit further discussion. First, being indebted to the Hong Kong co-director Phat Chan, *The Knockout* epitomises the broader trend of Hong Kong auteurs turn their careers to mainland China and co-produce films and television with Chinese industry. Hence, the production of this series warrants future research to better understand how it exploits the industrial and cultural dialogue between Hong Kong and China. Second, the television seriality creates more space to depict the complexity of Gao Qiqiang's masculinity before he is eventually punished by the state and indeed by the censorship. Thus, the future study should pay attention to how the television seriality impacts on the construction of masculinity and delivery of political allegory in *The Knockout*. Third, *The Knockout* also features an innovative generic mixture to attain a balance between responding to the state propaganda and incorporating critical potential. As such, it is necessary to get insight into how this series modifies and conflates various generic conventions to negotiate the censorship.

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ENDNOTES:

¹ *The Knockout* continues the generic features of anti-corruption and anti-crime dramas, which are produced in response to CCP's political campaign after Xi Jinping came to power. Consequently, these generic conventions are profoundly shaped by the state discourse. However, *The Knockout* is an exceptional and inventive case, which delivers a highly coherent and complicated gangster plot. This makes *The Knockout* more successful than its predecessors such as Huang Xing's *Crime Crackdown* aired in 2021.

² For instance, Gao Qiqiang has become the mostly viewed television character with the related hashtag on the short-video platform Douyin (Chinese version of TikTok).

³ *The Knockout* shows a few direct allusions to the scenes and plots in *Infernal Affairs* series, which are not covered in this study. For instance, the plot of Gao Qiqiang staying in the police office and simultaneously manipulating the violent conflicts in multiple places and the use of cross cutting and parallel editing in the episode 18 adapts from *Infernal Affairs 2*, which depicts the gangster Ngai Wing-hau ordering the homicides when he is detained by police. This also remakes the plot and cinematography of the baptism scene in *The Godfather*. Likewise, the scene and plot of Gao Qiqiang coerces the managers in the construction group by exploiting evidences of their misbehaviours when having hotpot in the episode 19 resembles the scene and plot of Ngai Wing-hau coerces the gangsters by the same way when they are having hotpot.