RESEARCH ARTICLE

From a critical perspective: The defects of Hong Kong comedy since the 1950s

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Abstract: This paper elucidates the defects of Hong Kong comedy since the 1950s with regard to five aspects: the inflexibility of structure, the obviousness of theme, the drawback of the plot, the slapstick style and the vulgarity of taste. The story and the characters are relatively stereotypical and rigid in terms of structure. The dialogue and the camera angles are straightforward and obvious in the way that they express the theme. With regard to the plot, the structural design is simplistic and lacking in depth and nuance. Their characteristic slapstick style is expressed through the liveliness and nonsense of folk discourse. They are typically in vulgar taste, which finds expression in the customs, imagery and language of carnivalesque civic culture. The Hong Kong comedy genre has a very strong aesthetic tradition and has performed brilliantly in a commercial sense, but filmmakers need to recognize and introspect on its shortcomings, with a view to improving the aesthetic quality of Hong Kong comedy films and Chinese comedy films more generally.

Keywords: Hong Kong comedy, civic culture, carnival, slapstick, vulgarity

1 Introduction

Henri (1911, p. 8) defines comedy in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* as something mechanical that is encrusted on the living, and laughter as a momentary anaesthetic on our emotions that allows us to censure behavior that is comically out of step. The comic film has always been one of the most popular genres among audiences all over the world. As Virno (2008, p. 73-123) observed, jokes–and we may include other forms of humor here–are "diagram[s] of innovative action" that display our capacity to make abrupt deviations from collective norms and conventions; they turn upon a "practical shrewdness" that seizes on "states of exception of discourse," and in so doing, they provoke in microcosm the "variation of a form of life". Hong Kong comedy has become one of the indispensable genres of Hong Kong cinema since the 1950s, which has come to be held in high regard and enjoyed commercial success. From 1946 to 1969, national and Cantonese comedies accounted for more than one-fifth of Hong Kong comedy films. Since the 1930s, Hong Kong cinema has experienced significant growth and, except during the Japanese occupation (December 1941 to August 1945), the production of comedy has rarely been interrupted, and indeed has become more prolific in recent years (Li, 1985, p. 8). Hong Kong comedy has a number of prominent assets, which is one of the reasons for the great success it has experienced since entering the East Asian film market in the 1970s. Hong Kong's comedy's ability to reflect everyday life, eclectic imagination, its timely and accurate portray of social events, and to grasp the new genres of various western movies, as well as the innovation of Kung Fu comedy, have not only initiated a new world of comedic art, but also conforms to the cultural requirements, knowledge, and aesthetic taste of most East Asian audiences. Both the quantity and the history of Hong Kong comedy are worthy subjects of attention, research and appraisal. It is necessary to point out the fact that the function of Hong Kong comedy of entertainment, especially for the grassroots in the mundane society, is momentous and significant, which should claim certain credit in Hong Kong film history. But this paper aims to address that an attempt to rethink Hong Kong comedy according to its tradition and development from a critical perspective is timely and helpful for a better film creation and production.

However, as most of the scholarship on Hong Kong comedy has praised it, there is still a lack of detailed analysis of its defects, and most researchers have tended to overlook them when discussing distinctive features of Hong Kong comedy. In this paper, I aim to point out that, despite its brilliant achievements, Hong Kong comedy has had significant limitations from the beginning of its development, and its style has tended to be one-dimensional. In fact, the recurrent patterns and drawbacks of Hong Kong comedy that are closely connected with Hong Kong's typically regional culture and historical factors have indeed been obvious since the 1950s. Some scholars mention the defects in their whole research in Hong Kong comedy. For example, Bordwell's (2011, p. 5) view is typical; he describes the shortcomings of Hong Kong movies in his book *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* as follows: "The vulgarity of popular

cinema reaches paroxysmic extremes in Hong Kong. Here a typical Movie will feature spitting, vomiting, nose-picking, and vistas of toilets and people's mouths." He also pointed out Hong Kong cinema's "reliance on conventions" and recourse to "...unkindly called formulas and 'clichés'–all those laughable, taken-for-granted devices that communicate instantly.... The films simply invoke conventions without vital commitment re revivification" (2011, p. 8). Lau (2009, p. 163) offered the following critique: "The indigenous culture was of low level and even base. These scholars tended to link such a "lack of culture" to Hong Kong's detachment from its roots (*i.e.*, mainland China) and related its baseness to its commercialism". With regard to the structural drawback of the Hong Kong film genre, Li (1988, p. 7) highlighted "its inability to handle plot effectively", while Pang (2001, p. 27) noted that, "In Hong Kong cinema the 'spectacle' often reigns over the plot: 'action' is generally conceived as its *tour de force*". Bordwell (2011, p. 117) also drew attention to Hong Kong film's episodic construction, but from an active perspective: "Episodic construction favors tonal ruptures. Vulgar comedy can be slapped alongside pathos or suspense". These arguments are convincing, but failing to provide a comprehensive and methodical analysis on it.

The research design of this paper is: Through the analysis of almost 200 Hong Kong comedies collected from the 1950s to the 2010s and using the carnival theory of Bakhtin, I elucidate the defects of Hong Kong comedy since the 1950s with regard to five aspects: the inflexibility of structure, the obviousness of theme, the drawback of the plot, the slapstick style and the vulgarity of taste. This paper is intended to supplement existing research on Hong Kong comedy from a critical perspective, and then reveal the key characteristics that affect the aesthetic quality of Hong Kong comedy and Chinese comedy more generally.

2 The inflexibility of structure: Rigid characters and plots

The problem of inflexibility or "directness" is common in Hong Kong films, with regard to storyline, the structure, and the development of the characters' roles. There are no unexpected twists and turns, no ups and downs, just like a garden in which everything can be seen at a glance and thus holds little fascination. I will discuss this in regard to two aspects: characters and plots.

The characters in Hong Kong comedy are often stereotypical and rarely developed. The unity of the role played by the character does not compensate for the absence of the development of a character within a storyline. This is a misunderstanding about the unity of character, which leads to the characters and their roles becoming oversimplified. Simply describing a character's personality is not sufficient. Many directors only list a few details about the characters in keeping with the genre's sketchy style. This not only results in a loose and incohesive structure but also leads to a kind of trivial naturalism in the way that the characters are portrayed. The character is too rigid and there is a lack of character development. In addition, the relationship between the characters and their roles never changes, remaining the same from the beginning to the end of the film. For example, the landlord and the landlady were stock characters that appeared in social satirical comedy films of the 1950s and 60s, who were consistently evil, greedy, mean and ruthless.

This shortcoming existed until the advent of Li Han-hsiang's trick films and romantic films; most films were primarily concerned with pursuing the aesthetics of the scenes and ignored the shaping of the characters and the development of the plot. Most of the characters were lascivious men and promiscuous women, who never changed or underwent any development. *The Golden Lotus* (Li, 1973) portrays the experiences of Ximen Qing, indulging his womanizing desires, while Pan Jinlian remains frivolous and profligate throughout the film. In the 1980s, characters such as Sang Mei in Lv Qi's comedy, described by Cheng (1984, p. 100) as "just a harlequin, noisy, crazy, and ecstasy, without any depth, but flat and pale" were commonplace.

The comedy of the Hui Brothers also contained such obvious defects. Michael Hui always tended to play a clever, self-satisfied older brother; Sam Hui was often a simple and honest younger brother, who was frequently exploited. In the *Games Gamblers Play* (Hui, 1974), Michael Hui and Sam Hui play two swindlers who lie and trick people to make a living; the characters are slick but not fully rounded, and the story is incomplete. The whole film consists of one joke after another (most of which depend on the dialogue–the so-called verbal gag) and mimes (the so-called comic situation), while the characters lack detailed depiction and development, and their inner contradictions are rarely revealed (Law, 1984, p. 62). In *The Private Eyes* (Hui, 1976), Wang is a mean, greedy, and exploitative boss throughout the film. After a series of embarrassing incidents, he is forced to cooperate with Li and Hetun, but his temperament remains unchanged. Similarly, the character of Hetun remains that of a simple, honest, and lowly employee. Ultimately, he simply continues to serve the boss, and his character does not undergo any growth and development.

In Stephen Chow's comedy films of the 1990s, most of the characters were binary oppositions of good and evil, and there were obvious distinctions between right and wrong. As Cheng (1985, p. 39) observes, "Characters must be sharply contrasted between black and white. Personality conflicts become moral conflicts, and the relationship between enemies is always painted with morality". Heroes were unfailingly positive characters, without flaws, who bravely fought villains, while their opponents were mostly vicious and evil people from the underworld–killers, traitors, and profiteers–such as the Axe in *Kung Fu Hustle* (Chow, 2004). Characters and plots were clearly divided into good and evil, and poor people always represented the good side, while the wealthier a character was, the more wicked he/she would be. The idea that "Poverty is justice, richness is wicked" became a fixed and established template, with no flexibility. The female characters in Chow's comedies generally had no personality. The heroine was pure and innocent and fulfilled the narrative function of helping the hero to overcome some kind of catastrophe or complete his moral sublimation. However, the realization of this function was entirely based on the hero's love for her.

The plot development of Hong Kong comedy has consistently been simple. However, a good story should have plot shifts and turns, with more turning points still to come after each one has arisen. A hallmark of advanced way is that the ever-increasing accumulation of turning shifts develops into a big outburst of core contradictions leading to the catastrophe. Some films create a kind of effect, with plotlines that go up and down rapidly, and are immediately followed by another. This makes them so chaotic that, even if the film has a strongly clear theme, it is unlikely that the audience will accept it. The "Happy Ghost" series (Wong, 1984-1991) is an example of films with these kinds of simple plots, all of which involved small contradictions, without proper climaxes or resolutions, ending with lacking a deep impression.

It should be pointed out that films of the Hong Kong genre can be regarded as somewhat rigid. Formulaic stories, stereotypical and flat characters based on established templates, and the same stock scenes, had become staples of the socially ironic comedies in the 1950s and 1960s. A common type of film was based on the notion that 'poor people search for food', such as in *Ah Chiu is Getting Married* (Wui, 1958), *Ghost Wife*(Zhou, 1953), *Daily Bread* (Chan, 1964), *The Sweepstakes Seller* (Mo, 1958) and *The Rickshaw Puller Wins a Pretty Girl* (Yeung, 1958). The model for these storylines was structurally very weak, revolving around the endless misfortunes of poor people. At the beginning of the film, the poor man was down on his luck and was preyed on by the wicked, offended the police, and became a vagrant. During the middle section, he tried all kinds of jobs and was refused more than getting chance, but got sympathy from the main female character. By the end of the film, he might have developed into someone with a rhapsody style, which would cause him to do things like stealing treasure, embezzling the bonus, and so on (Ng, 1985, p. 18). In Xin Ma Zai's films, the protagonist was always a bachelor who had no money but still adopted orphans, whose luck finally turned resulting in his receiving a fortune. However, if the character became dishonorable after the windfall, the money would be lost. The plot of such films was weak and the structure was consistently rigid.

In the 1970s, "the Crazy Bumpkins" series (Lo, 1974-1975) depicted the hero A Niu coming to the city from the countryside to make a living but being cheated by treacherous people. The films usually involved a combination of gossip, crazy jokes, funny fight scenes, and a routine full of human kindness (Zhao, 2017, p. 267). To provoke laughter, the director made the hero extremely stupid, which meant he was a flat and one-dimensional character. In the 1980s, the "Mad Mission" series (Tsang, 1982-1984) by Cinema City repeatedly broke box office records at the time, but its creations became increasingly mechanized and dehumanized: the jokes relied too much on basic formulations, the visual stimuli were lifted from a stockpile of stunts, and the characters became increasingly trapped within their roles on the set, even lapsing into cartoon-style exaggeration at times (Law, 1984, p. 63). Similarly, the structure of Cinema City's ghost films and musical films crystallized into one of "action at the beginning, laughter, and movements in the middle, and finally ended up with actions" (Law, 1991, p. 96). The storylines were monotonous and unremarkable. Stereotypical characters based on fixed templates and genre rigidity are one of the reasons why Hong Kong comedy has encountered major obstacles to its development in the past ten years, and it also constitutes the primary aesthetic problem with the films that needs to be solved urgently.

3   The obviousness of theme: Direct revealing through the dialogue and camera angles

Hong Kong comedy always talks directly about the theme of the film, thereby instilling it in the minds of the audience, so they are left in no doubt, rather than letting the theme emerge from the scenes and plots. A good writer does not have to spell out the solution to the social conflicts

he describes but allows the theme to become implicitly revealed. By contrast, the theme is made explicit by the exposed scenes and the direct lines spoken by the characters in Hong Kong comedy films.

Hong Kong Kung Fu directors have tended to change the speed of the camera by frequently using a racking focus to portray characters and exaggerate the atmosphere, which has become a hallmark of Kung Fu films. At the beginning of *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* (Yue, 1978), Shangguan fights with Zhao's father and kills him. The director used a zoom lens to get close-up shots of the facial expressions of Zhao dying in an excruciating way and the viciousness of Shangguan. Later in the film, when shooting the scene where Bai encounters Xiao, the director used the same technique. This use of racking focus became ubiquitous and hence lost its impact. Scholars such as Zhang (2006, p. 12) have pointed out that this kind of abuse of the zoom lens reflected "the colonial vision when it was not self-sufficient" and "was a brand of the restless era". However, Bordwell (2011, p. 5) adopted a more positive attitude towards it, arguing that "Hong Kong cinema, in its drive for clarity and impact, has revitalized silent-film techniques. Slow-and fast-motion, dynamic editing, striking camera angles, and other devices that the avant-garde of the 1920s declared to be 'purely cinematic' became stock in trade in this popular cinema. Its makers have intuitively rediscovered the short, sharp flashback that serves to remind the audience of an earlier scene, as well as the 'symbolic insert' beloved of early film storytelling". This characteristic was greatly improved upon in the works of the 1990s. The intense and nervous fight scenes were shot all in one go and much more professionally, which was also related to the increasingly standardized nature of the commercial film industry. The film's climax had to be eye-catching and attention grabbing. For instance, in *Rush Hour* (Ratner, 1998), the Hong Kong police officer Lee falls from a high shelf in the exhibition hall and slides down on a giant scroll. The speed of the lens does not change and thus was consistent with the actual length of time that the action took. After reaching safety, Lee kisses Carter, in a funny but sweet way, and the image of the two heroes makes them appear charming and lovable.

Directors often used asides or the lines spoken by the characters to express themes straightfor-wardly, which could make the audience feel that they were being preached at, and thus denied the opportunity to come to their own conclusions. Specifically, *The Golden Lotus* (Li, 1973) talked about the affairs that Ximen Qing had with Li Pinger and Pan Jinlian. Throughout the whole film-making process, Li Han-hsiang paid attention to the aesthetics created by the camera, but at the end of Ximen Qing's funeral scene, an abrupt aside suddenly states: "Ximen Qing is the leader of the landlords, bureaucrats, and poor tyrants. He is also a businessman, a bully, a hooligan, a sinister sorcerer, a satyr, a land-grabber, and a rapist. Nobody could imagine that retribution would come imminently at the moment of his death, and soon his wealth would be diminished, his wife and concubines scattered. Even if he had not died, he would still have lost his bearings." The narration coupled with the close-up of the plaque inscribed with the words "Ji De Xing Ren" (One good turn deserves another), resulted in the theme being too obviously spelled out.

Interestingly, the explicit expression associated with Cantonese comedy could sometimes even be reflected in the actors' names. Almost all the comedians in the films had very specific and visually evocative stage names, based on their physical defects, so that they would be directly asso-ciated with them in the audience's imagination. "The following are illustrative: Xin 'Ma Zai' (thin, flexible), Liang Xing 'Bo' (obese), Zheng Jun 'Mian' (thin), Xi Gua 'Bao' (whistling, stuttering), Gao Lu (tall) Quan, Ai Dong Gua (short, obese), Da Sheng Po (cockroaches), Tan Lanqing (the pictogram of the word conveyed a sense of bloatedness), Tao 'San Gu' (gossip, superstition), Yi Qiushui and Deng Jizhu (the names were elegant and beautiful, and not commensurate with the babbittry and gigmanity that they were characterized by at all)" (Cheng, 1985, p. 36). However, the comedies that rely on visual appearances (in particular combined with funny costumes) are generally held in low regard, and seen as not very desirable films, because it could undermine their comic power (the intrinsic element of the film) and they tended to be vulgar.

4   The drawback of the plot: Looseness and simplicity of structural design

Cantonese comedies are often inconsistent in style, which is reflected in the frenetic plots that are just concerned with pursuing facetiousness, thus resulting in different film genres becoming mixed up together. The rhythm of the film is often sacrificed in order to highlight the jokes. Being funny is seen as more important than the plot, so the plots are inevitably weak (Ng, 1985, p. 17). In this section, I discuss this drawback with regard to three aspects: structure, plot, and negligence.

In relation to structure, the unique genre of comedy determines the importance of comedy fragments, and thus it is easy for films to fall into the set pattern of a loose structure. Since the setting of the comedy plot is mainly dictated by bodily activities, during the heyday of Cantonese

comedy in the 1950s and 1960s, there was a marked tendency to favor "characters over plots and actors over roles". On one hand, since many protagonists of Cantonese comedy at that time were older and tended to behave like divas, directors often had to pay attention to the amount of screen time that they were allocated. Therefore, the producers did not seek a sense of completeness from the film as a whole, but tended to highlight the individual performances of the protagonists. Plots gave way to scenes, which resulted in a loss of fluency and rationality (Law, 1985, p. 11). On the other hand, the performance of harlequins had long been associated with a strong burlesque composition, and they often became the objects of laughter, because of the physical defects that they embodied, such as obesity (Liang Xingbo, Liu Guikang, Tan Lanqing, Zhu Yougao), skinniness (Deng Jizhu, Xin Ma Shihui, Zheng Junmian), ugliness and funniness (Yi Qiushui, Xi Gua Bao, Gao Luquan), and so on. The actors even looked deformed most of the time but also pretended to be elegant and handsome gentlemen. Tao Sangu and Chen Lipin painted their faces with exaggerated makeup, wore sexy costumes and pouted excessively, and casually touched male protagonists. Such formulaic ridiculous scenes meant that the resultant amusing miscellaneous patchwork tended to seriously impair the integrity of a comedy: often songs were used to create a lively atmosphere, or the character and rationality were disregarded in favor of gimmicks, and they were viewed as a panacea (Liu, 1985, p. 47).

As Li (1984, p. 123) explained, "This episodic structure, which was based on the unit of a scene, that is, seeking entertainment regardless of the whole structure, found its way in the 1970s". Li Han-hsiang's films, Michael Hui's comedy, and Kung Fu comedy were typical examples. Li Han-hsiang's trick films and romantic films were characterized by a loosely structured story, which mostly relied on traditional scripts for story-telling. They were composed of three short stories. For example, *Legends of Cheating* (Li, 1971) used several traditional tricks. Together with *Legends of Lust* (Li, 1972) and *That's Adultery* (Li, 1975) it formed a trilogy of erotic stories about love. *Adventures of Emperor Chien Lung* (Li, 1977) showed a series of three episodes in Emperor Qianlong's life. *House of 72 Tenants* (Chu, 1973) was criticized at the time on the following grounds: "the structure of the plot is loose… It seems to be a long-winded chronicle, and there are many meaningless fragments" (Huang, 1983, p. 56). From a genre perspective, the key features of the Hong Kong comedy films of the 1970s and 1980s were that they centred on characters/film stars, had a loosely structured, weak plot, relied on visual gimmicks and spectacle.

Hong Kong comedies of the 1980s still tended to use collective types instead of the closed structure of the traditional narrative, with a great proportion of the character's comedy performances being rooted in the scene itself. They also commonly followed a linear structure, which meant that the performances often took precedence over the plot. Thus, they generally lacked logicality. In *Chocolate Inspector* (Hui, 1986), Hui's comedy performance, such as the scene where he is shown applying cosmetics, causes the film to seem disjointed and disrupts its rhythm. In the manhunt scene, it can be seen that the excessive attention focused on Hui's personal performance hampers the flow of the plot. The preference for slapstick further exacerbates the lack of narrative. The visual appearance of such spectacles inevitably impedes the development of the plots and seems to freeze the process in the moment of gazing at the fight scenes.

The disadvantages of this loose structure could still be glimpsed until the new century. *Chung Mo Yim* (Johnnie, 2001), *The Twins Effect* (Lam, 2003), and *All's Well Ends Well 2010* (Wong, 2010), and others blended eastern and western genres, time-travel and a nonsensical culture. Rather than putting stories at the center of their films, directors sometimes overlooked important details of the plots and thus sacrificed logic and dramatic tension in the process.

Second, most of the contradictions in Hong Kong comedy were obvious, and the way in which the turning points of stories were constructed was often hasty and clumsy. A "turning point" implies a "climax" of some sort or a "vertex", which may involve a sudden shift from victory to defeat or vice versa. To make the story 'turn' well, we must pay attention to the unpreparedness that precedes it; in other words, it is not foreshadowed. When it is difficult to determine whether a character will experience a win or a loss, accidents will suddenly occur, so the victory and defeat are clearly delineated and the contradictions are resolved. The plot is so weak that it needs a god to appear, which should be avoided. In Stephen Chow's films, the key difficulties depicted seem so impossible to overcome that they need a 'god' to resolve them. At the moment of emergency, the protagonist is always able to defeat his rivals by God's intervention and even gain love with sweet words. In *A Chinese Odyssey Part Two: Cinderella* (Chow, 1995), when the classic love confession, "There was a sincere love in front of me. I didn't cherish it. When I lost it, I regretted it. The most painful thing in the world is nothing more than this… If God can give me a chance to start again, I will say three words to the girl: 'I love you.' If I have to add a deadline to this love, I hope it is… 10,000 years!" is uttered, Zhi Zunbao's life is being threatened by Zixia holding a sword against his throat. He has to say something persuasive to save his own life, which he succeeds in doing as Zixia is immediately moved by his words and falls in love again.

Third, Hong Kong comedy has many omissions and flaws in the editing and screenwriting

process. For example, In *Hail the Judge* (Chow, 1994), when Bao Longxing is forced to leave town because of the outcome of a trial, it is June but there is snow on the ground. At that time, Qi Qinshi was just two months pregnant, but when the death penalty is awarded in the autumn, she is already in labor. This represents a very obvious mistake in the design and continuity of the plot. In *Royal Tramp* (Chow, 1992), Long eats an aphrodisiac and mistakes Wei Xiaobao for Jia Baoyu (the hero of *The Story of the Stone*). However, *The Story of the Stone* was created during the reigns of Emperor Yongzheng and Qianlong, but the film was set during the Kangxi period before *The Story of the Stone* existed. Additionally, Wei Xiaobao is illiterate when he meets Ke, but is later able to recognize the word "revenge" on Duo Long's arm, which provides a further example of a screenwriter error.

In short, the drawback and superficiality of the plot structure is one of the shortcomings of Hong Kong comedy, which has been criticized, and thus it deserves to be given more careful attention and consideration by filmmakers.

5 The slapstick style: The liveliness, nonsense, and fandangle of folk discourse

Hong Kong comedy is market-oriented, and all too often farcical and vulgar content is used to cater to the tastes of the audience. The slapstick is manifested in a civil and secular style, which provides an amusing means of intertwining various annoyances and elements of exaggeration. According to Li (1985, p. 8), "The audience is mainly the urban petty-bourgeois and the proletariat, so the fun is vulgar, the production is simple, and the style is close to the slapstick". Chernyshevsky (1965, p. 166) explained slapstick as follows: "When ridiculousness is limited to external behavior and ugliness, it is called 'slapstick'". It can be divided into three aspects: liveliness, nonsense, and fandango.

The quality of liveliness means that directors are striving to create an atmosphere of frenetic activity and vivid, energetic scenes, sometimes even using unscrupulous means. As Li Han-hsiang recalled in relation to his last work, the Shaw Brothers' *Passing Flickers* (Li, 1982), "The audience likes to laugh, we let them laugh; the audience likes to watch fights, we let actors fight." This is largely manifested by unconditionally adding bodily movements to the plots to grab the audience's attention. The coarse aesthetics of Hong Kong comedy movies have developed through various aspects of the characters' behavior, without any taboos. Films appeal to the direct enjoyment of the audience, but do not seek to allow the plot to unfold in an implicit way, and thus focus on coarse jokes in everyday settings, often involving tumbling, stumbling, excretory functions and accidents with ladders, sometimes even reaching the point of being completely out of control. Contradictions and conflicts are often achieved by relying on bodily movements. For instance, the slapstick-style plots usually depend on the absurdity of the action to achieve comedic effects. The outstanding example of this is Kung Fu comedy, but it is also embodied in the comedy of the 1950s and 1960s. For example, in *One Queen and Three Kings* (Chen, 1963), a long camera shot depicts a scene showing three men chasing children several times; later, the children's mothers rush out, madly chasing the three men around in circles.

In the late 1970s, John Woo embarked on a series of cartoon slapstick films with *The Pilferer's Progress* (Woo, 1977), all of which rely on lively fight scenes between the actors. The most important element of Kung Fu comedy–action–means that the comedy genre must contain a high proportion of martial arts scenes, inevitably involving jokes based on physical conflicts. In *Dirty Tiger, Crazy Frog* (Maka, 1978), Tianji goes to find Jin to recapture his armor. He puts a pot containing a cactus on a chair, and when Jin is pricked by the cactus and stands up, Tian Ji slams his head to make him sit down again. The scenes repeatedly shift between the exaggerated and funny facial expressions of Jin and a close-up of the cactus. Finally, Jin becomes angry and disoriented, rolling his eyes and yelling "I want to pee". Hansen (1999, p. 306) asserted that slapstick describes Hong Kong cinema's reformulation of these dimensions in terms of "accelerated speed, escalated violence, and refined mechanisms of power".

In addition, the type of gimmicks that these films employed, based on throwing food and excrement at the actors when they were fighting, became overused. The repeated use of jokes involving damage of some sort to the actor's body was not an astute strategy. As Chaplin (1988, p. 174-175) said: "Throwing one or two cream cakes may make people laugh, but if you always use the method, the film will soon become monotonous. Maybe my method can't be successful forever, but I would rather like to use clever movements to make people laugh, rather than use rough movements or coarse ones".

Nonsense, on one hand, was embodied in a new form of expressive language created by Stephen Chow's comedy films; a hybrid system that combined Cantonese slang with Hong Kong English, and ruffians' words to constitute a wonderful language game based on exaggerated colloquialism

and repetitive performance. It produces a kind of amusing effect, which has no order or theme, but operates as a form of catharsis through its repetitive and exaggerated use. As Lai (2001, p. 242) explained, "Chow creates slang by taking common Cantonese expressions and attaching new meaning to them, literalizing metaphoric expressions or producing intentional nonsense and thus overthrowing established meanings and dominant values". On the other hand, it manifests through farcical scenes in the nonsense comedy, without any real source, which were merely ridiculous. These pieces of nonsensical slapstick that had little connection with the plot, and were simply there to provoke laughter, constituted the distinctive feature of the nonsense comedy.

Third, unlike the two kinds of "slapstick" described above, the fandango tended to be manifested via unreasonable mischievous behavior. This was the case with *The House of 72 Tenants* (Chu, 1973). It took the popular route of the urban petty-bourgeois, with the dialogue and situation being very exaggerated, and the director censuring the darker aspects of society to cater to the audience's tastes. In the 1980s, the ghost comedies *The Haunted Cop Shop* (Lau, 1987), and *The Haunted Cop Shop 2* (Lau, 1988) made fun of the police, portraying them as behaving strangely and chaotically, and mostly consisted of chasing scenes. Meanwhile, the films *Encounter of the Spooky Kind* (Hung, 1980) and *Mr. Vampire* (Lau, 1985) were based more on fierce fighting.

Jeffrey Lau took this form of fandango to the extreme, for example in the series *Saviour of the Soul* (Lau, 1991-1992), *92 Legendary La Rose Noire* (Lau, 1992), and other films, adding a liberal sprinkling of laughter, sadness, Kung Fu, emotions, gun battles and other elements, which were extremely exaggerated, evoking the essence of cartoons, refining the absurdity of fandango, tampering with and even subverting the traditional film genre, reversing the comical creation of orthodox positive characters and packaging modern fashion in an alternative way. "The form is a hodgepodge, evoking Cinema City slaptick, high camp Maria Montez-Carmen Miranda comdies, Chinese episodic novels and Vaudeville sketches from Chiense opera" (Teo, 1997, p. 250). Its unconventional plot transcended the accepted range of audiences.

6 The vulgarity of taste: The customs and carnival of Hong Kong civic culture

The distinctive secular culture of Hong Kong comedy often descends into vulgarity because it caters to the preferences of the majority of viewers. The "secular" aspect of Hong Kong films breaks through the limitations on physicality and sex, action and violence, foul language and rustic taste, and other taboos relating to content and theme, thereby embodying Bakhtin's carnival, free from the dominance of the supreme truth and the established order, and marking the suspension of all hierarchical status, all privileges, norms, and prohibitions. However, at the same time, it can easily become the victim of consumerism. I divide the secular into three aspects: elegant-vulgar hybrid, folklore, and vulgarity.

Although some Hong Kong comedy films contained vulgar elements, the extent of the vulgarity was still appropriate or in accordance with aesthetic taste and/or spiritual connotations. Li Han-hsiang's romantic comedies were full of eroticism and displays of nudity, which were typical of erotic films, but they were also characterized by the director's profound classical and humanistic qualities. The smooth scene control and classical atmosphere created a unique aesthetic value. The "Shaw Brothers" directors, represented by Li Han-hsiang, paid attention to portrayal of a freehand atmosphere, the shaping of characters, and creating an impression of worldly taste. In this sense, the "vulgar" aspect of the romantic films in the 1970s was still permeated by literary taste and classical traditions. The vulgarity in Jackie Chan's films was also appropriate, temperate, and unthreatening. There were few explicit shots that exposed female sexuality. The image of "feces" that appears many times in *King of Comedy* (Chow, 1999) has become a metaphor for the fate of the grass-roots elements of society. The references to 'feces' had a strong intertextual relationship with the destiny of the protagonist Yin Tianchou and his unwillingness to fail. In this way, feces were no longer merely a part of carnivalesque language, but reflected the sorrow of life.

The folklore of Hong Kong comedy was a specific product of Hong Kong's civic culture and an important part of the Hong Kong-style aesthetics. The filmmakers incorporated fragments of the traditions of local folk culture, and picked out stories and characters from Cantonese operas, folk tales, and the folk beliefs of Confucianism and Taoism, which they used to represent modern day life in Hong Kong and depict a past that was connected to the present. The most representative director of this trend was Li Han-hsiang, whose works such as *Legends Of Cheating* (Li, 1971), and *Cheating in Panorama* (Li, 1972), contained rich and vivid folk elements. They were based on rumors about disparate religions in ancient times in China and were arranged into episodical opusculum collections. Li Han-hsiang's romantic comedies were mostly adapted from anecdotes relating to folk history. The films accurately depicted the social strata and local customs, which meant they conveyed the texture of the social life of that era and evoked a feeling of the ancient

world. *The Golden Lotus* even added an element of legendary ghost revenge in the romantic style. Ximen Qing and Pan Jinlian's wedding banquet scene depicts in detail not only the wedding custom that ancient Chinese brides toasted and kowtowed to their husband and their husband's other wives, but also the social world in which it was set, including how the wives jealously fought for their husband's love, and remained outwardly friendly but inwardly estranged and plotted against each other. Moreover, the "Qianlong" series of films represented a completely new departure from the way that historical costume movies were filmed in the past, instead using the storyteller's perspective to recount anecdotes about Qianlong, which focused on the mental games played by courtiers and folk dialects. It must be emphasized that Li Han-hsiang's introduction to historical material is meticulous. For example, the content, compilation process, and storage location of Sikuquanshu were detailed in *Adventures of Emperor Chien Lung* (Li, 1977), where his artistic skills and humanistic heritage could be clearly seen.

The vampire comedies of the 1980s had a similar folkloric hue, drawing on the records of the Qing Dynasty vampire, the method of Xiangxi vampire-driving, and Daoist Maoshan sorcery, to produce a variety of erotic, action, fantasy, and other sub-genres of films. *Mr.Vampire* set a precedent for a new genre that blends the culture of geomancy (*fengshui*), Daoist sorcery, and vampire films. Vampires were dressed in Qing dynasty official uniforms, stretching out their hands and leaping out, and distinguishing whether someone was human by feeling their breath. In these films, vampires were defeated by the use of red lines, glutinous rice, silver swords, mirrors, mahogany, magic figures, and incantations, which had a very typical Taoist distinction. Classic folk superstitions featured in the films, such as the belief that raw glutinous rice could rid a corpse of poison, yellow paper could control vampires if it was tacked to their foreheads, and holding one's breath could enable one to avoid vampires, which were familiar to the audience. In the "Wong Fei-hung" comedy series of the 1990s, the large-scale lion dance scene offered a powerful representation of folk spectacle.

Hong Kong comedy's vulgarity manifested in the use of urine, farting, excrement, and other 'unclean' bodily functions, which attracted considerable criticism. This culture of vulgarity resisted the oppression of the environment in the most secular style of the lowest level of society, and its anti-intellectual, anti-moral and anti-authoritative orientation developed to the extreme. But it was also often abused in a way that went beyond the boundaries of acceptability. One of its key aspects was reflected in the dialogue of Hong Kong comedy. Bakhtin believed that the human body could be conceptualized in carnival discourse via the following pairings: impregnated-gestated, parented-being born, engulfing-being engulfed and ingesting-discharging, morbidity and death. This discourse was related to parts of the human body, such as the sex organs, the bottom, the stomach, the mouth, and the nose. In unofficial language, i.e. folk language, the more ambiguous, vulgar, and awkward it became, the more it mixed praise and abuse, the more it blurred the boundaries of distinctive things, surpassing the insurmountable relationship between people and people, and people and things. In this way, a new conversational carnival discourse was established. Cantonese had always been a language that was rich in proverbs, whimsical slang and nonsense verse and puns. Cantonese comedy often relied on dialogue to convey jokes, which were expressed in mantra, homophones, antithesis, rhyme, and wording, while those that were low-level manufactured laughter through the use of feces, urine, farting, and sexual relationships, and thus tended to be vulgar and obscene.

Vulgarity was also reflected in the display of various filthy images of human excrement. Bakhtin pointed out in *Rabelais Research* that materials–which were associated with the 'grotesque' lower part of the body factor in life–were dominated by primary needs such as diet, excretion, and sex , and images of these often appeared in an extremely exaggerated way, as well as of their contents, such as sputum, toilets, feces, urine, and vomit, and even excessive saliva, eating, and drinking, etc. All these could be regarded as an alternative performance or catharsis of sex (or birth). In the 1980s, Lv Qi's comedy often used excrement and the human body to make jokes. In Stephen Chow's comedy, most of the jokes revolved around sweat, saliva, snot, toilets, sputum, vomit, and other scatological references. Similar extreme gimmicks frequently appeared in other Hong Kong comedies, whose tastes indulged in mining human extremes.

Lastly, I must point out that many of the jokes in Hong Kong comedy also came from vulgar gimmicks that were associated with sexual lust. In *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious,* Freud (2012, p. 49) discusses the conversion of obscene jokes into obscene wit, and explains how pornographic humor came into effect. In addition to the wit creator, there was a second person who was targeted by hostility or libido, and a third person–the listener–who made the wit produce fun. Through the first person's obscene words, the female protagonist was exposed to the third person–in this case the audience–was suborned because the needs of his libido had been met. The audience appreciated the humorous effect produced by the obscenity and wit, and it made them laugh. This explains why comedy movies liked to use erotic jokes. Thus, the appearance of the body in comedy movies became an important factor in attracting viewers. People derived

voyeuristic pleasure from watching and completing the visual process for themselves.

This strategy is sometimes used in comedy as a direct display of sensuality. In the latter half of the 1960s, the Animal Comedies reflected "the pure style of sex chase: men only want to have sex with women without love, and do everything possible to achieve the goal" (Ng, 1997, p. 99). The audience was dominated by men, and directors used erotic jokes to cater to the tastes of the lower-class audience, such as in *Lucky Seven* (Yang, 1970), which involved seven men competing for women's bodies; *Triangle Round Bed* (Wong, 1970), which showed a group of men spying on women bathing; *De Zuo* (Chan, 1969) and *King of Swindlers* (Wong,1970), which contained a strong element of sexual fetishism.

Li Han-hsiang's romantic films appeared during the 1970s. His costume films or fashion films all involved obscene themes. They appealed to the audience's baser instincts through pornography and wantonly displaying ancient sexual techniques; the 'stories' consisted of nothing more than explicit dialogue and erotic scenes. As Stephen Teo explained: "His romantic films provided a modern artistic foundation and helped people understand the erotic traditions in Chinese literature - although he might have confused pornography and obscenity (such as in the *Sinful Confession* (Li, 1974), in which Ricky Hui sniffed a woman's underwear salaciously, or *Passing Flickers*, the blue film director demonstrated to the actors how to make facial expressions and actions when having sex" (Teo, 1984, p. 93). In *Passing Flickers*, when a man is massaging Shao Yinyin's legs, a close-up shot shows the top of her thigh and an exaggerated facial twitch; another scene depicted an actress being made up in a studio, her body naked and exposed by a lingering close-up shot; as a director advised actors how to kiss, the lens zoomed in on the tongues of two of the actors; it was deemed necessary to foreground a woman's bare legs when the film showed the process of shooting scenes in a studio. Instances such as these were extremely common. The director seemed intent on exposing the female body to the greatest extent possible as a gimmick. This shortcoming was not absent from Chu Yuan's social ironic comedy and Jackie Chan's Kung Fu films either. Wong Jing and Stephen Chow's series of comedies adopted the same strategy. The flaunting of sexuality was a means of venting the repressed sexuality of nonsense comedy, but it was excessive and in poor taste.

Since 2010, Hong Kong comedy has continued to include pornographic content. However, the high density of vulgar language in Vulgaria (2012) was indeed rare among Hong Kong films. In an interview, the lead actor Chapman To (Yangcheng Evening Newspaper, 2013) even claimed that: "vulgarity is a core value of Hong Kong films". Raising the status of obscene language to that of a core value of Hong Kong culture was irresponsible of Hong Kong filmmakers. The charm of Hong Kong films originated from their popularity, but this was not supposed to rely too much on vulgarity. The unconstrained consumption of obscene language and sex contributed nothing to their value, but could only undermine and threaten the excellent tradition of Hong Kong comedy.

7   Conclusion

Thus, the classification of the defects of Hong Kong comedy has led us to conclude that the inflexibility of structure, the obviousness of theme, the drawback of the plot, the slapstick style and the vulgarity of taste can all be regarded as negative features of Hong Kong films throughout their history. To be specific, the story and the characters are relatively stereotypical and rigid in terms of structure. The dialogue and the camera angles are straightforward and obvious in the way that they express the theme. With regard to the plot, the structural design is simplistic and lacking in depth and nuance. Their characteristic slapstick style is expressed through the liveliness and nonsense of folk discourse. They are typically in vulgar taste, which finds expression in the customs, imagery and language of carnivalesque civic culture.

The findings are intended to contribute an overall and theoretical complement to the existing literature on Hong Kong comedy, and to guide filmmakers to recognize and introspect their defects and sum up experience, then help them achieve the innovation on comedy genre and content. Film artists should start from the film genre's traditional roots, and go back to exploring the origins of the earliest comedy, as well as learning lessons from Western cinema. They should consider a wider range of possibilities for development, move away from relying on the stereotypes and stock features of Hong Kong comedy, and continue to enrich and develop themselves to break fresh ground in the form of comedy.

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