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Ramifications of cultural exports for cultural dynamics: assimilation of *McDull*, a Hong Kong movie series relocated to China

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the cultural implications of the assimilation of Hong Kong movie production in the process of China–Hong Kong coproductions. Local Hong Kong cultural products tend to be stripped of their local characteristics to cater to the Chinese market when prosperous businesses become based in China. Moreover, distinctive cultural resources in the Hong Kong movie industry, such as techniques, professionals, and intellectual property (IP), are assimilated and coopted by China's cultural industry to ensure the success of its future development. This assimilation may result in cultural conflict, which was indicated by the reaction of Hong Kong audiences to China's embezzlement of their cultural products. This study analyzes three animated movies in the *McDull* series through focus group interviews with movie investors and audiences in Hong Kong and China. The findings show that assimilation driven by economic factors induces negative sentiment in Hong Kong audiences as they witness the assimilation of their nostalgic icons. Based on these findings, the ramifications of such assimilation for cultural dynamics are considered.

KEYWORDS

China–Hong Kong coproductions; cultural export; cultural dynamic; assimilation; China-based Hong Kong cultural product

The drastic expansion of China's cultural industry reflects an ongoing trend toward cultural and market globalization. In the field of media studies, this new phase of globalization has been considered to counteract American cultural imperialism (Su 2010, 2011) and cyber imperialism (Ebo 2001; Gittinger 2014). At the regional level, the growth of China's media market was formalized in 2004 by the establishment of cross-border economic cooperation with Hong Kong in the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA). In the past decade, several Hong Kong media companies have relocated to China and taken advantage of business opportunities in the market, which has local audiences worth billions. However, considering the cultural and political circumstances in China, such relocations result in the reconfiguration of media content, which then influences the cultural consumption patterns and cultural identities of audiences in Hong Kong (May and Ma 2014).

An emerging phenomenon in the twenty-first century, the southward flow of media content produced by Hong Kong companies relocated to China, has been overlooked in media studies on Greater China. Cultural researchers have explored the transnational consumption of local culture, such as indigenous Australian cultural products, and the consumption of Chinese animated movies

by the Chinese diaspora in America (Davis 2015). In China, media studies focus on creative clusters, cultural policies, censorship, and fan labor (Keane 2006; Fung and Erni 2013; Fung and Pun 2016, 2017; Pun 2018). Most research on cross-border cultural productions between Hong Kong and China has addressed changes in cultural policy and the revitalization of Hong Kong's declining cultural industry by engaging in coproduction (Chan, Fung, and Ng 2009; May and Ma 2014). Previous research has mainly consisted of reception studies. This study uses an in-depth approach to explore the shifting textual representation of Hong Kong cultural products and their influence on the social practices of audiences in Hong Kong.

The history of the assimilation of Hong Kong cultural products into China's market

In the late colonial period, Hong Kong was a regional cultural hub. In recent decades, Hong Kong's cultural products have been a means by which China's audiences can explore the unknown Western world, as well as appreciate authentic Chinese cultural elements, such as *kungfu*, *jiawu*, and *wuxia* (Chu 2013; Chew, Pun, and Chan 2016). In the West, there is a promising market for these elements; for example, Hong Kong *kungfu* blockbuster *Fist of Fury* (1972), *jiawu* movie *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), and Hong Kong-international coproduced *wuxia* blockbuster *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) (Wu and Chan 2007). Specifically, the fame of local *kungfu* stars, such as Bruce Lee, Sammo Hung, and Jacky Chan, has helped the local movie industry flourish (Ma 1999). The prosperity of Hong Kong filmmaking is also due to the popularity of specific Hong Kong movie genres, such as triad movies (e.g., *Teddy Boy*), *Mo lei tau* comedies (i.e., surreal humorous movies by famous directors starring actor Stephen Chow), and nostalgia/local movies (e.g., *City of Glass* [1998] and *McDull*). These genres appeal to foreign audiences because they are evocative of Hong Kong.

In addition, the high quality of local cultural products has paved the way for increased business opportunities, which have been realized in the thriving business of exporting Hong Kong cultural products to Southeast Asia, Malaysia, and Singapore, as well as to Canada and the US in North America. The advantageous position of Hong Kong in the regional cultural industry has a significant cultural influence on its neighbors, particularly China. Hong Kong has provided a successful model for China to imitate. At the same time, the emergence of Chinese consumer power has encouraged a shift in the cultural production market from the international market to the China market. The Hong Kong movie industry, a profit-driven business, is understandably targeting this prosperous market as well. Hence, Hong Kong–China coproduction seems inevitable.

The CEPA has boosted coproduction with the intention of providing a “win-win” situation for the movie industries in both China and Hong Kong. Through Hong Kong–China coproductions, the Chinese screen industry has increased contact with the outstanding techniques, companies, personnel, professionals, and intellectual property (IP) of the Hong Kong movie industry. Professionals in Hong Kong have brought knowledge, human resources, and creativity to the Chinese cultural industry. Since the first coproduced movie company “Chinese Film Coproducing company” (in abbreviation CFCC) and its animated movie *Intorelence* (*Yanmouhoyan*) in 1979 and *Out of Danger* (*Juechufengsheng*) in 1985, China's producers have regarded Hong Kong as a window for China to view the West (Chu 2013). The usage of plot, scriptwriting, and other cinematic operations in Hong Kong moviemaking have been the best reference for China's producers. Hong Kong professionals, including actors, lighting, and post-production crews who obtain Western skills through formal training, are also a good model for their counterparts in China. Assimilation was needed for the Chinese cultural industry to develop more prosperous circumstances.

The assimilation of Hong Kong movies was initiated during the operation of the CEPA in 2004. This assimilation largely refers to China's assimilation of Hong Kong's movie industry, and its practices or personnel. This paper aims to describe how the advantage of exported cultural material is assimilated by the cultural industry of an imported country by means of cultural policy. In the case of China, with the regulation of the CEPA, a high intensity of interactions between Chinese and Hong Kong talent occurs. One typical example is that the production crew of coproduced movies is forced to recruit one-third of mainland Chinese crew members (Chan 2013). This policy has enabled Chinese professionals to learn through real practice and collaboration with Hong Kong professionals (Szeto and Chen 2015). At the same time, Hong Kong talents are recommended to other Chinese production crews to develop their careers in this relocated industry.

However, this assimilation of local talent has eroded Hong Kong's cultural industry and led to the deviation of Hong Kong film genres from the local industry to movies that are coproduced and then distributed to the local Hong Kong film market. Significant differences in both production and content have been the result. Hong Kong–China coproductions receive enormous investments from mainland production companies, casts of well-known actors, much cheaper labor and production costs, and an emerging audience pool with huge business potential. Coproduced movies are expected to predominate at the top of box office lists, with significant turnover and profits. In contrast, movies produced locally in Hong Kong are targeted to echo the nostalgia and collective memory of local audiences. Movies about the lives of grassroots residents and their embracement of the classic “Lion Hill Spirit” (i.e., dedication, courage, durability in hardship) explore and define the Hong Kong identity and culture shared by multi-generational audiences. Such productions are expected to have small budgets and little turnover, use sentimental plots, and embed many signs of Hong Kongness (i.e., *Tong Lau*, pawnshops, trams, the Guangdong dialect, *mo lei tau* culture, grassroots wisdom, etc.) to emphasize “localness.” Such nostalgic references to Hong Kong and its collective memory are major elements to evaluate in exploring the “Hong Kongness” of movies through textual analyses.

Therefore, when classic Hong Kong movies shift their target market from Hong Kong to China, signs of Hong Kong are expected to disappear. China–Hong Kong coproductions require that the plots of movies be relevant to mainland Chinese audiences, both socially and ideologically (Chan 2013). Based on this premise, to sell appropriate cultural products to China, movie producers should assimilate and adopt the practices of the Chinese market. To a certain extent, such assimilation could be attributed to the strict censorship of movie content in China, including the wording of titles. For instance, the release of Hong Kong director Stephen Chow's blockbuster movie *Kungfu Soccer* was deferred until it was retitled *Sholin Soccer* (2001) to reflect the Chinese martial art *Sho Lin* (Monk). To be ideologically correct and invulnerable to censorship, thorough and comprehensive assimilation is necessary for Hong Kong movie productions relocated to China. The Hong Kongness of their content is the first to be abolished, delocalized, and strategically associated with “foreign characteristics” outside China.

The assimilation of Hong Kong movies targeting the Chinese market exerts cultural influence, not only on the content, but also on the audiences in Hong Kong. According to Szeto and Chen (2015), such actions show that Hong Kong's local values are undermined when cultural products are released to China's market, especially regarding sociocultural ideology (e.g., freedom and personal rights) and Hong Kong themes (Chu 2013). In addition to the reverse flow of delocalized cultural products to Hong Kong, China-targeted movies distributed in Hong Kong are regarded by local audiences as distortions of local culture and sentiment, as Hong Kongness has been replaced

by Chinese characteristics. In recent years, netizens in Hong Kong have expressed resistance by urging the boycotting of re-localized movies and demanding the return of local cultural elements (Lee 2011; Lim 2011). They may also have developed pessimistic attitudes, which is evident in claims such as “the end of local Hong Kong films” and the “teleportation of Hong Kong culture to China.” Such expressions indicate the home audience’s concern that China’s market threatens to erase Hong Kong’s local culture (Lee 2011; Lim 2011). Their concern even extends to similar boycott action in purely Chinese-produced movies; for example, the Chinese-made blockbuster *The Wandering Earth* recorded only 0.27 million HKD in the 2019 box office in the first week, ranked fifth among other movies in Hong Kong (for instance, *Captain Marvel* [2019] recorded five million HKD, 20 times that of *The Wandering Earth*.)

The case of *McDull*: articulating Chinese elements at the expense of Hong Kong culture

The assimilation of Hong Kong movie production is exemplified by the contrasting elements in the storyline of *McDull*, an animated movie featuring and characterized by its nostalgic, localized, and grassroots Hong Kongness. Hong Kong, as a “borrowed place” in “borrowed time” during the British colonial period, constructed a specific hybrid cultural identity that combined East and West (Ma and Fung 2007). This ambiguity resulted in an alternative approach to cultural identification: collective memories shared in the Hong Kong community became the roots of cultural identification. The *McDull* movie series, which initially targeted local audiences, includes many elements and signs of Hong Kong (e.g., appearance, customs, norms, lifestyle, etc.). The absence or diminishing of such features and signs in the *McDull* movies after their production was relocated to China provides evidence of this assimilation.

The year 2006 was a watershed in the *McDull* movie series because its market and production were relocated to China. Hence, conducting a textual analysis of the titles of movies in the *McDull* series before and after 2006 could reveal semiotic, pictorial, and indexical meanings, which then facilitates the identification of content that has been assimilated. The titles of three movies in the *McDull* series were selected for analysis. The first movie, *My Life as McDull*, which is rich in Hong Kong cultural elements, was produced in 1999 and famous in Taiwan, Korea, France, and Thailand (distributed with local subtitles) due to its Hong Kong cultural distinctiveness.

In 2009, the first coproduced movie, *McDull, Kungfu Kindergarten*, was highly successful, grossing 70.8 million RMB in box office revenue in China, and distributed to Canada, Hong Kong, and Japan with local subtitling and dubbing. The last movie, *McDull, Rise of the Rice Cooker*, was produced in 2016, distributed in Hong Kong and China with Cantonese and Putonghua casting, and grossed 18 million RMB in box office revenue in China, only one-quarter of that in 2009. As shown in Figure 1, the increasing box office revenues indicate the rising popularity of *McDull* in China when its production was first relocated. The decreasing box office revenues indicate that its popularity decreased after it was completely assimilated. Other influential attributors, such as the scriptwriter of three movies or publishing companies involved in Hong Kong–China coproduction, are controlled as Alice Mak, Brian Tse (the two cocreators), and Bliss Concepts Limited (the IP owner of *McDull* and publishing companies) all participated in the three movies. The box office is an objective indicator to show whether audiences in the two places were interested in *McDull*. It also reveals the change of enthusiasm of the *McDull* audience in two places before and after the assimilation.

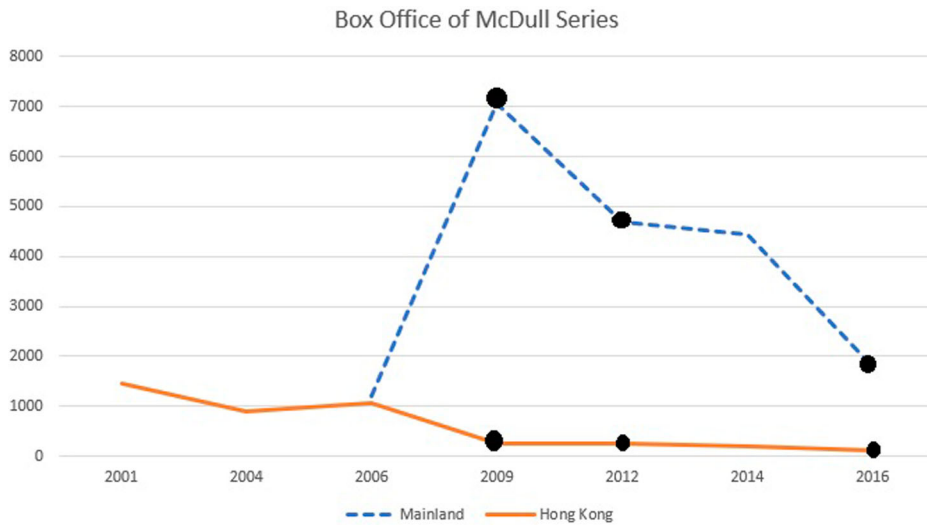


Figure 1. Official box office revenue of three *McDull* titles in Mainland China (dotted line) and Hong Kong (straight line), highlighted in black spots.

The sense of Hong Kongness in *My Life as McDull*

The first movie in the *McDull* series, *My Life as McDull*, which was produced in Hong Kong, is distinct from other movies in the series because of its hallmark features of the Hong Kong lifestyle, such as living spaces, local dialects, and customs. In the movie, the protagonist McDull and his mother Mrs. Mak are grassroots Hong Kong-born residents who live in Tai Kok Tsui, a district with a high proportion of poor people. They reside in the tenement building Tong Lau, which will be demolished shortly to make way for urban reconstruction. This setting conveys a typical contemporary Hong Kong cityscape. The emphasis on the “Hong Kong-born” and “grassroot” protagonists resonated with the Hong Kong audience because they identified with the lifestyles of Hong Kongers. The demolition of the tenement building signifies the fading of the historical architectural style in Hong Kong, which echoes the contemporary demand for cultural preservation by Hong Kong society and nostalgia for the “prosperous old good time”¹ (Szeto and Chen 2015).

The depiction of Hong Kongness is not limited to the movie’s setting but includes the language and songs in *My Life as McDull*. In the movie, the specific language of Cantonese, the Chinese dialect spoken in Guangdong Province, was chosen for the lyrics, movie script, and daily life culture of Hong Kong illustrated in the movie. The lyrics “Big buns, give me two more sets of big buns, I still like eating it” (trimmed at the time 1:02:01–1:02:54) are in Cantonese, which represents the *yum cha* culture (i.e., tea house dining), *mo lei tau* culture (a Hong Kong joke), and the traditional “bun scrambling” festival in Cheung Chau, where buns are eaten as a ceremonial ritual to ensure good fortune. The lyrics of another song, “Gonna make it, gonna make it” (trimmed at the time 10:10–12:21), is a social parody of the hustling, efficiency-oriented lifestyle of Hong Kong people. In the same song, the line “Grab the stick, grab it hard. Poor people just have to work it hard” (trimmed at the time 12:10–12:25) conveys Hong Kong’s “Lion Rock Spirit” and the belief that hard work paves the way to success and helps the poor ascend the social ladder.

Not only does the movie represent Hong Kong linguistically in lyrics and the script, it also cleverly depicts the local spirit, customs, and norms, which appeal to the collective memory of

localness. In a study of Hong Kong's societal structure, Lui (2011) found that hard work, endurance, and devotion to family had been the core values of Hong Kong since World War II. This spirit has evolved into a special meaning in Hong Kong: parents are expected to "sacrifice themselves to achieve the best for their children." This spirit echoes the plot in the *McDull* movie, in which the protagonist's mother, Mrs. Mak, has dedicated herself daily to non-stop part-time jobs without a word of complaint. To meet high demands and expectations, the poorly educated mother spends all her savings so that her son can attend extra-curricular activities and training, which will bless him with a better and brighter future. The sentimental interaction of mother and son reflected the lives of the local audience, who had similar experiences, and it aroused the social phenomenon of demanding parents and frustrated children in Hong Kong. This distorted maternal love, which is culturally engrained in Hong Kong society, integrates Hong Kongers' collective memories into the storyline. Other plots, such as the Hong Kong Olympic wind-surfing champion Lee Lai-shan and the traditional "bun scrambling" at the Cheung Chau Bun Festival, not only enriched the fictional world of the story but also resonated with the local Hong Kong audience's cultural imagination.

A shift in Chinese cultural tastes in *McDull, Kungfu Kindergarten* and *McDull, Rise of the Rice Cooker*

If the richness of collective memory and Hong Kong characteristics were the reasons for the success of the first *McDull* movie in Hong Kong, this magic would not be sparked in another market. Therefore, in addition to the relocation of *McDull*'s creative team, the story world of *McDull* was also relocated in China. In 2009, *McDull, Kungfu Kindergarten*, bridged the narrative from Hong Kong to China by claiming, "Hong Kong people suffer from difficulty in Hong Kong and seek their fortune in flourishing China." In this movie, Mrs. Mak and her son McDull move to Mainland China. The representation of prosperous life in Hong Kong was replaced by a Chinese one: massive development and urbanization, the Mandarin language, the astonishing landscape of *Wudang* Mountain and the Pearl River, and profound cultural ideologies, such as Mohism and Taoism. This is a relatively positive and optimistic representation that is triumphed in Chinese society.

The assimilation was not limited to the change in portrayal of Hong Kong. One example showing Hong Kong people's inadequacy in China is demonstrated in the following conversation between McDull and his Chinese classmates at a martial arts school in *Wudang* Mountain:

McDull: (After a long time since the start of the lesson) I want to pee.

Classmate (laughing): Oh no! The Hong Kong boy is going to pee his pants!

Teacher: You're the Hong Kong boy, aren't you? Is there anybody here who can help and teach him how to use our pit latrine? (Trimmed at the time 29:56–30:08 in the animated movie *McDull, Kungfu Kindergarten*)

Comments about this story plot from the Hong Kong interviewees were all negative. Some referred to it as a "stigma of Chinese against civilized Hong Kong" that they could hardly tolerate. Hong Kong interviewees all identified with McDull and realized that the movie created a likelihood of innocent Hong Kongers (McDull) being teased by the Chinese under the ridiculous setting of studying abroad in *Wudang* Mountain. From a perspective of a Hong Konger, the interview data suggests that the image of McDull be "adorably silly, innocent, and pure," but not "stupid and dependent" and "ludicrous, be laughed at by the mainlander," which is portrayed in *McDull, Kungfu Kindergarten*. McDull's stereotyping satire is, as Hong Kong interviewees insisted, a

common joke used by Mainlanders to tease “over-civilized” Hong Kong people who devalue the living style in China and always ask for a more “civilized” infrastructure, such as a sanitary toilet. The different treatment of the glorified Chinese kids (as “tough”) and the demonized Hong Kong kids (as “spoiled and vulnerable to adversity in affluent societies”) is seen in the eyes of Hong Kong audience as a typical tactic used to impress Chinese audiences who have experienced difficult relationships with Hong Kong people since the handover of Hong Kong in 1997. At this point, however, we do admit that there is also a prejudice of Hong Kong interviewees over mainland Chinese. On the level of production, the McDull movie is also an imagination and production by Hong Kong producer over how Chinese would perceive Hong Kongers, and it is not about the real perception of mainland Chinese.

The interpretation of the interviewees however does tell their possibly unsubstantiated imagination regarding the purpose of the plot (to please the China market) and that imagination reflects their general frustration with the coproduced movie. Their focus on contrasting representations of the smart local Chinese and the sluggish Hong Kong newcomers may not equate with the exact cultural meaning and purpose in the mind of the mainland audience. Instead, it shows the Hong Kong audience being exaggeratedly sensitive to the inferior feeling depicted in the coproduction’s cultural context. Hong Kong audiences identify with the protagonist (McDull), and perceive the laugh and joke made by the Chinese in the movie as disgraceful. The frustration of dismissing Hong Kong cultural elements in Hong Kong IPs after relocation to China triggers the hate and prejudice of Hong Kong audiences, and induces the predicted result of this essay, the rejection of consumption by Hong Kong local audiences.

McDull’s assimilation can also be found in the story setting in cultural aspects that detach from contemporary Hong Kong society. Mrs. Mak left her beloved son, McDull, at the martial arts school and worked in another well-developed city. This setting deviates from the established image of the mother and son in the original series and from the imagination of Hong Kong audiences. Hong Kong parents rarely live and work away from their children, and they would be reluctant to send their children to boarding schools, such as martial arts institutions. Indeed, this plot echoes a social phenomenon in China in which “stay-at-home children” are extremely common in families where parents leave to work in urban areas.

The dismissal of Hong Kong characteristics is exacerbated in the 2016 movie *McDull, Rise of the Rice Cooker*. Although the background of the movie is Hong Kong, the story is detached from any geographical representation of Hong Kong. McDull resides in a common fishing village that could not be identified as being in either Hong Kong or China. All signs of Hong Kong culture (e.g., Tong Lau, Chinese tea houses, trams, etc.), grassroots lifestyle, or collective memory (e.g., urban reconstruction, cultural heritage, bustling lifestyle in Hong Kong society, etc.), which appeared in the first movie, were abandoned. Other possible semiotic signs (e.g., traditional writing in Chinese characters) are also dismissed.

In addition to the exclusion of Hong Kong’s characteristics, the portrayal of McDull is completely different from that of previous movies in the series. The protagonist begins his adventure in a fantasy world and becomes a hero. As pilot of the combat robot “The Rice Cooker,” he defends the planet against the invasion of evil aliens. McDull is portrayed as a brave kid and superhero who saves the Earth. The classic depiction of Hong Kong culture and grassroots lifestyle in the McDull movie series is replaced by often mismatched multiple moral values, such as peacefulness, harmony, heroism, diligence, and courage, which are commonly portrayed in emerging contemporary Chinese movies, such as *Wolf Warrior* (2015) and *The Wandering Earth*. This cultural detachment from Hong Kong was regarded by the producer as an approach to delocalization. Moreover, the

connection between McDull and Hong Kong is barely traceable in the Cantonese dubbing of the movie in the Hong Kong version. In the business relocation of McDull's creative team, Hong Kong culture has been minimized in the story world of McDull.

Complicated feelings and discontent with Hong Kong moviegoers

After the analysis of the visual and textual content of the three *McDull* movies and their titles, data on audience reviews were collected to examine the complicated feelings of Hong Kong moviegoers. Six focus group reviews and 42 Hong Kong interviewees were asked to comment on the three *McDull* movies and their titles. The interviewees were randomly selected from different demographic groups based on open recruitment in popular domestic forums in 2016.² The majority of the moviegoers expressed complex feelings about changes in the content of the China-based Hong Kong cultural product. Not surprisingly, some interviewees revealed anger and unwillingness to witness the fading of Hong Kong values in the movies produced after 2004, which they labeled the “post-McDull product.” The complicated feelings of the informants were expressed using adjectives such as “disgrace,” “lose,” “inferior,” “subordinated,” “powerless,” “shameful,” and “angry” regarding delocalized Hong Kong movies. Some participants grudgingly accepted the shift in marketing based on the producer's perspective, describing it as a “sad but reasonable” decision to aim for China's larger market for economic reasons. Such comments matched local movie reviews in the late 2000s, which claimed that the movie was the “reflection of Hong Kong–China assimilation” and “the portrayal of the Hong Kong people who rely on China and seek their fortune there.”³

The interviewees were asked to comment on how they differentiated between pre- and post-relocation *McDull* titles. One interviewee responded as follows:

I think that depends on how many Chinese elements are embedded in the products. Looking at the one about McDull in Chinese Kungfu, it especially seems like a tourist advertisement spending a lot of effort introducing the local customs and practice of Wuhan. (Interview with Yu, 4 April 2016)

Yu's interpretation demonstrates the common perception of audiences in Hong Kong: only *McDull* movies rich in Hong Kong characteristics and features would be regarded as Hong Kong movies. It also indicates the political sensitivity of the local Hong Kong audience and their disillusionment with the ideological implications underlying the China-based cultural product and the political bifurcation of the Chinese and Hong Kong contexts. The term “tourist advertisement” used by Yu revealed that Hong Kong cultural coproductions are perceived as promotional tools. Of course, by arguing that, the interviewee also neglected the fact that Hong Kong movies also advertise Hong Kong by promoting local elements.

The Hong Kong interviewees commented that the Chinese settings and scenery depicted in the animated movies were not realistic but exaggerated. Chinese cities are depicted as “beautified and civilized” (interview with Cheung, 18 April 2016), and so “developed and prosperous that Hong Kong businessmen have to go there to make a living” (interview with Chan, 18 April 2016). The settings are idealized and imaginary, as “they [the Chinese cities] should not be in such a good order and should be a bit dirtier” (interview with Cai, 28 April 2016). The interviewees described feeling upset when they saw a Hong Kong animated movie set triumphantly in a Chinese city to impress the Chinese audience. Their clear separation of Hong Kongness and Chineseness might be attributed to recent social incidents in Hong Kong and the power struggles between Hong Kong and China. Nevertheless, the Hong Kong interviewees expressed a strong desire for Hong Kong's cultural distinctiveness, which included the Hong Kong lifestyle and collective memories.

This mindset reflects the “betrayal” of a local cultural product that was relocated to China for economic reasons.

Such feelings of betrayal indicate the opposition of the local Hong Kong audience to China-based coproductions. The local audience in Hong Kong chose not to watch “Chinese-produced Hong Kong movies.” One interviewee claimed that he had deliberately boycotted this movie “since it is an insult to see those Hong Kong local cultural products pursuing bigger revenue from the Chinese market” (interview with Yu, 4 April 2016). This claim could be supported by the box office record of *McDull* in Hong Kong, which dropped drastically by one-fifth in 2009 and to one-tenth in 2016 (around 0.8 million HKD), compared with the highest box office record in 2002 (12 million HKD).

Discussion: the consequences of cross-border economic partnerships after assimilation

The case of the *McDull* movies demonstrates that Hong Kong home audiences harbor negative feelings about China-relocated productions, which originally represented the pride of Hong Kongers in their cultural distinctiveness. Based on the decreasing popularity and box office revenue of the *McDull* movie series after relocation to the Chinese market, would it be fair to regard such cross-border economic partnerships as a successful business strategy?

Sze Yan Nga, an investor in the *McDull* animated movie series and chairman of the famous Hong Kong-based game bridgehead company Gameone, regarded his successful financial interest in *McDull* as helping the Chinese governor “have faith in Hong Kong production products, as those products are welcomed by the domestic audience” (interview with Sze, 19 November 2016),⁴ which is due to the cultural appreciation of Hong Kong products in China over the last 30 years (Wong 2006). Sze believed that his investment connected China and Hong Kong, and he enjoyed the fruitfulness of a cross-border economic partnership.

However, the declining box office revenues and the interviewees’ comments about the *McDull* series shed doubtful light on Sze’s claims, which may have been appropriate only when the production was first relocated. Since the significant decrease in box office revenues from the last movie, *McDull* has disappeared from the animated movie market in China. No investors have funded the relaunching of this IP. Instead, they have shifted their investments to other domestic Chinese movies, which have shown higher market potential because of their exponentially higher box office revenue. For example, in 2016, the successful Chinese animated movie *Big Fish and Begonia* generated 562 million RMB in box office revenues, which was more than 500 times the revenue made by the last *McDull* movie, *The Rice Cooker*.

This downfall was predictable. When the *McDull* series was moved to the Chinese market, Chinese audiences who had already adopted Hong Kong cultural products were excited. The high box office revenues also provided a significant cultural turning point for the Chinese movie industry at the time, which claimed to be a milestone in the Chinese movie industry (Tse 2009). Instead of crediting the Hong Kong production team, the success of the first *McDull* animated movie was ironically attributed to the great improvement in the quality of China’s domestic animated movie production. In the coproduction of other movies, the techniques, uniqueness, and creativity of Hong Kong professionals (e.g., actors, lighting, and post-production crews) were supplanted by Chinese coworkers and culturally assimilated into their institutional training system or cultural creation practice. A few years later, the Chinese movie industry was gradually nourished and matured. The Chinese movie industry preferred to create domestic IPs that were genuinely set in China,

instead of “borrowing” from other places. The aforementioned example of successful Chinese animated movies after the industrial assimilation by coproduction illustrates domination of the market and devaluing of the original Hong Kong IP as a “no-longer-admired brand-name” in the Chinese market.

However, *McDull* fans in Hong Kong have demanded that they see local cultural elements and their collective memories represented in Hong Kong cinema, and they have rejected Chinese repackaged versions. As media companies unavoidably lead to productions that are contextually and ideologically assimilated into the Chinese market, the return to the old market would not be a happy solution. Local audiences who seek to experience the cultural elements of Hong Kong prefer locally produced movies that echo nostalgia and collective memory. As a result, China-relocated cultural products have failed to rebuild prestige in the original domestic market.

The consequences of cross-border economic partnerships after assimilation provide an insightful theoretical interpretation of the emergence of coproduction in China. While studies on the cultural industry have focused on contraflow and transculturation/localization, the case of Hong Kong–China coproduction demonstrates the roles of local (China) and external (Hong Kong) cultural products in industrial assimilation. This phenomenon is different from transculturation or localization because Hong Kong’s cultural characteristics were neither localized nor applied, but abandoned in coproductions. Instead, industrial concerns, for instance technique, professional knowledge, information, and even IP, were the only issues absorbed by the coproducer, who then repackaged it as native IP in the industry of the imported country.

When, a few years later, Hong Kong cultural elements, professionals, human resources, and IPs were appreciated and adopted thoroughly in the Chinese cultural industry, the mature domestic industry would be capable of producing their “solo” cultural production without the involvement of Hong Kong cultural sectors. At that time, China-based Hong Kong cultural products were dismissed in the Chinese market, while also losing originality and cultural distinctiveness through assimilation, and barely recognized by the Hong Kong audience due to the decontextualization of their culture. This assimilation in the case of Hong Kong–China coproduction provides a theoretical contribution: to remind us about the consequences of over-assimilation in coproduction.

The consequences of such coproduction have extended the discussion in academics. Based on the studies of Ziff and Pratima (1997), Roger’s view of cultural appropriation partially articulates the cultural dynamics of this case. He defined cultural appropriation as “the adoption or taking of specific elements (such as ideas, symbols, artifacts, images, art, rituals, icons, behavior, music, styles) of one culture by another culture” (Roger 2005, 474). Roger further described assimilation as the “active use of another culture’s elements under a variety of conditions, and with varying functions and outcomes” (476). However, the consequences of coproduction in the case of the *McDull* series do not involve the manipulation of cultural elements. The culture exported from Hong Kong was refigured as a cultural import to China (Nouriani, 2011). The techniques, professional knowledge, information, and IPs were absorbed during coproductions and then further applied and utilized in subsequent cultural productions. This has contributed to the emergence of a competitive opponent in the movie market. Such economic-driven assimilation could be regarded as based on a short-term vision that would harm exported cultural products and the feelings of audiences for which the production was originally produced.

In this example, the notion of assimilation further enriches the discussion of cultural globalization in media studies. The flow from the Global North to the Global South will be accompanied by cultural domination (Tomlinson 1991; Boyd-Barrett 1998; Waisbord 2004). Despite the possibility of contraflow from the Global South (Straubhaar 2007; Wu and Chan 2007; Thussu 2008), cultural

domination by the Global North predominates and underlies the binary typology of the subordinated East and the dominant West.

The significant influence of Chinese cultural policy

The significance of cultural policy should be considered in the case of the assimilation of *McDull* after its production was relocated to China (May and Ma 2007). This example highlights that the cultural policies of import countries, such as China, influence non-domestic cultural products, such as those from Hong Kong, which are reshaped for the new market. Institutionally, China's strict censorship system has driven cultural producers to re-work content that conveys negative societal and political implications. China-relocated Hong Kong companies deliberately avoid politically sensitive issues in their cultural products, and they articulate that harmony and prosperity have triumphed in China. This restriction is monitored under the scrutiny of the party state's culture units.

One of the culture units is the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT), the former China Film Administration, under the publicity department of the PRC. SARFT has implemented guidelines for different stages of development to maintain the stability of the cultural industry. According to Du (2004), the strategic means of limiting the soaring importation of foreign cultural products to China is to claim that some are "offensive" and "inappropriate" through the filtering of SARFT's censorship guidelines (Sala 2003). These censorship guidelines were included in the new articles in Chapter 3 of the "2002 Regulations on the Administration of Movies" issued by the PRC's State Council. According to this guideline, a movie would be either suspended or withdrawn from circulation if its content involved "leaking national secrets," "promoting national hate or harming Chinese cultural habitus," "distorting the religion, social order, and social stability," or "promoting cult, gambling, or related criminal activities." Without a detailed interpretation, the movie production sector must evade any possible consequences that could violate the guidelines, which has resulted in its over-sensitivity to political issues.

How influential Chinese cultural censorship is in reshaping the media content of and the creation in *McDull* can be illustrated by the interview with *McDull*'s producer, Brian Tse (2009), in MingPao's report:

Interviewer: Are you happy in these few years dedicating yourself to the movie *McDull*, *Kungfu Kindergarten*?

Tse: Not so far ... It is a lonely task which I do not have the condition to do so ... Adding Chinese elements [in the movie, I] have to consider many issues which a normal creator should not do. There is also a drawback in the story script ... in the movie, I have to write a Taoist figure, and I have to worry about [the possibility] of ... offending religion. They would reject my film license without hesitation ... (Brian Tse, interview in MingPao's report, 23 August 2009)

The production of *McDull*, according to the producer, was also "edited" to meet the requirements of censorship policy. The Taoist master appears in the latter part of *McDull*, *Kungfu Kindergarten*, when *McDull* recognizes him as his ascendent, the Chinese philosophical character *Makzi* (literally in English in the movie, the master of a *McDull*, its courtesy name *zhongfei* is a joke mimicking the great Chinese Confucius philosopher *Kongzi*, whose courtesy name is *zhongni*). The worry of the *McDull* author indicates that his creative joke and illustration of *Kongzi* may be judged under cultural censorship as "offending and distorting religion" by displaying misleading images of a religious figure. Therefore, in his first attempt at coproduction with China, Tse abandoned his creative and distinctive "old trick," humanizing a character by adding a natural bad habit. This character humanization was successfully building a satirical, joyful, interesting, and fun-

making image of McDull's daddy, the Prince de la bun in 2002 (meaning the Prince of pineapple bun, a traditional Hong Kong style food). In contrast, the image of *Makzi* in *McDull, Kungfu Kindergarten* in 2009, is more like a rigid and classic prototype of a religious character. This comparison shows how cultural policy influences creators to produce standardized media content in the process of assimilation.

The close genealogical connection with Chinese ancestors inspires McDull to use Chinese philosophy to invent combat skills and fight in the Chinese kung fu championship. This plot not only serves as a dramatic device in the movie, but also implies that Hong Kong people share blood ties with Chinese. It implies that people across the border have the same ethnicity as Chinese people who live in the mainland of China. Thus, *McDull, Kungfu Kindergarten*, describes McDull's exploration of his cultural affinity with China, his undeniable motherland. The representation of social integration, harmony, and cultural unity in the 2008 movie *McDull, Kungfu Kindergarten* fit both the party state's cultural censorship requirement and China's film market.

Cultural policy functions not only to censor content, but also to explore better business opportunities globally and even apply a conservative approach to protect the nascent domestic cultural industry from competition by the massive influx of foreign cultural products. In China, coproduction provides an opportunity for the Chinese industry to culturally assimilate the operations of the CEPA, which mandates that one-third of production crews must be Chinese citizens (Chan 2013). Chinese workers absorb professional knowledge, practices, and creativity during Hong Kong–China coproductions. Their coproducts also draw the attention of global cultural entrepreneurs who are tapping into the Chinese market to benefit from its huge audience by increasing their return on investment. According to Curtin (2007), Hong Kong functions as a meeting point between China and the West. However, as Western–Sino coproductions became more common, Hong Kong has been pushed toward the margins of the coproduction market, and the advantageous position of Hong Kong as a cultural hub in the cultural economy has gradually weakened. This process was exacerbated when SARFT implemented policies and agendas to match the global trade requested by the World Trade Organization.

Foreseeing China's high vulnerability to foreign cultural domination due to increasing global trade, the PRC government utilized different censorship policies to control the influx. This conservative action allowed for the stable development of the domestic film industry. Relevant policies included ensuring that two-thirds of the films in circulation were produced domestically, stricter regulations, and limitations on imported films. In August 2010, the state delegated censorship to the provincial level by the People's Congress Decision on the 5th Batch Cancellation of and Delegation of Approval to the Level of Management and Controlling Unit. In 2015, proclaiming the intention to “protect the mentality of youth and eliminate the potential of juvenile delinquency,” the Ministry of Culture announced a list of prohibited cultural products, including famous IP, in the Hollywood and Japanese filming industries. These political policies and agendas successfully limited the number of imported films, and many foreign companies were compromised in agreeing to coproduction to extend their market from the West to China. As a result, cultural policies have enabled the domestic market to gradually increase and accelerate assimilation.

It was foreseeable that this mode of assimilation overshadowed foreign media enterprises. For example, the famous animated movie *Kungfu Panda*, which was jointly produced by DreamWorks SKG and the China-based Oriental DreamWorks, was a great success in both China and the global market in 2008. The reason for this is that *kungfu* and panda are symbolic Chinese cultural elements recognized by the majority of Chinese (Tong 2009). Therefore, the integration of Chinese symbols, such as *kungfu* and the panda, could have been a cultural strategy to ensure that Chinese

cultural products affected the hearts of audiences in both the East and the West. This implies that the mechanism of economic cultural appropriation may be applied not only to relocated creative teams from Hong Kong, but also to foreign companies that seek to enter China's market. As a result, Chinese elements are deliberately integrated into their products to appeal to the vast Chinese market, which serves as a contraflow or soft political promotion to audiences in export countries in the West (Rawnsley and Rawnsley 2010; Fung and Ho 2016). Moreover, under the "one-belt-one-road" policy, such globally successful Chinese cultural products would be widely distributed to developing countries that form economic partnerships with China, which also serves to promote assimilation by providing soft propaganda that emphasizes the image of "brighter and better China."

The following figure shows the present study's framework regarding cultural policies and assimilation by means of Chinese coproductions. It highlights cultural production houses with professional and competitive standards. However, a low profit-making domestic market (e.g., Hong Kong) would be attracted to a more prosperous market with fewer cultural resources (e.g., China). Compared with the US, Japan, and Korea, where the cultural industry is established and large consumer markets and strong competitive cultural policies are present, Hong Kong, with its weak market and loose cultural policy, is particularly vulnerable to China's assimilation.

This graph also indicates that assimilation occurred beyond the economic perspective after China had absorbed professional information from Hong Kong during the coproduction. It could be expected that a higher level of assimilation would be sought by China, and the domestic film market would grow significantly as the number of coproductions with the West increased (e.g., the US). Such products would also be widely distributed to third-world countries under economic partnerships (Figure 2).

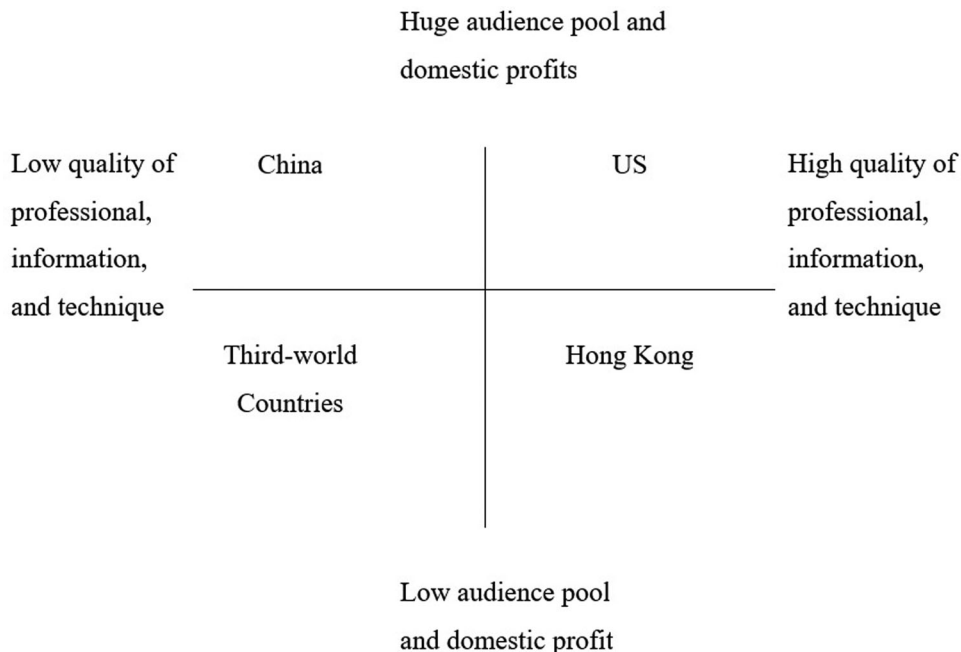


Figure 2. The typology of audience pool, domestic profit, and quality of professional/technique/information.

Further investigation: today's Hong Kong, tomorrow's US

Considering the close social, cultural, and political connections between Hong Kong and China and their assimilation in coproduction, a similar cultural outcome may be foreseen in the US due to the increasing number of China–US movie coproductions. For example, the increasing number of coproductions with Chinese producers has led to the popularity of Hollywood movies in China. Moviemakers therefore decided to create cultural products that fit the tastes of Chinese audiences, as well as censorship operated by the PRC government. From *The Great Wall* (2016) starring Matt Damon and the Chinese superhero in *Marvel*, to the animated movie *Kungfu Panda*, many US cultural brands have included Chinese cultural elements, and coproduction projects are manipulated by the Chinese cultural industry under the auspices of “censorship.” Although the cultural background of Hong Kong and the *McDull* series may lead to an alternative interpretation of the feelings of a domestic audience, it still has the potential to evoke frustration in US audiences when their well-known intellectual property or national brand is targeted by the emergent Chinese market. Perhaps there is an alternative approach to understanding the US’s isolation and conservative trading policies that privilege domestic industrial consumption and production. The recent Nike and H&M face a backlash in China regarding the Uighur stance, which could also indicate the degree to which the Chinese market can manipulate foreign companies, even in terms of ideology and global values.

Regarding Hong Kong’s decaying media industry, the findings of this study also indicate the need for a comprehensive cultural policy that ensures the sustainability of Hong Kong’s market development and the retention of its creative talents.

Conclusion

Based on the case of Hong Kong–China movie coproduction, this study explored the concept of assimilation to examine the deliberate reconfiguration of an exported culture to suit the tastes of the importing culture. Under the policies of the CEPA and increases in Hong Kong–China coproductions and business relocations in the cultural industry to cater to the tastes of the lucrative Chinese market, Hong Kong movies and other cultural products are reconfigured to represent Chineseness for the sake of increased box office revenues in the Chinese market. However, such coproductions lead to the problem of assimilation, which is a reversed form of cultural domination based on economic strength.

Local cultures are in second place in market shares. Although removing the cultural “odor” of media products makes it easier to enter global markets, in the case of Hong Kong–China coproductions, it is a “lose-lose” situation. Imported cultural products are redesigned for absorption into the Chinese cultural industry, but coproduced products tend to be unpopular and rejected by local audiences in the home market, and such cultural coproducts might be “abandoned” in the Chinese market when the domestic filming industry in China is mature enough to generate its own content without relying on imported ideas (Iwabuchi 2002). Even if imported content continues to generate revenues in the short term, audiences in China will eventually lose interest in an imported coproduct that is similar to what is being produced in their domestic market. From a commercial point of view, one could ask whether such coproduction could still provide investors with a sustainable and promising return on investment.

This case study illustrates the problem of assimilation in cultural globalization. Assimilation in relation to cultural and industrial coproductions, in this sense, is not a natural phenomenon. It is

artificial, and it is a politics of culture. In the case of China, cultural policy includes strict censorship that controls the content and number of cultural products imported from other countries, which allows the domestic market in China to grow and benefit from the assimilation induced by coproduction. In the short term, assimilation might sustain the business of the assimilated partner, but ultimately dilutes and erodes the values of the assimilated culture. This is not limited to the case of Hong Kong. Hollywood, Bollywood, and other movie markets that enter China face the same challenge. The negative feelings of Hong Kong audiences about China-relocated cultural products may reflect similar outcomes regarding Hollywood coproductions configured to suit the Chinese market. These effects might also include a gradual change in the representation of China in Hollywood movies.

Notes

1. The depiction of the “good old days” in Hong Kong movies and cultural products usually highlights the 1980s and 1990s when Hong Kong enjoyed distinctive advantages and privileges socially, culturally, and economically because of its rapid modernization and urban development.
2. Open recruitment was conducted in three major Hong Kong forums: the Golden Forum, the Lihkg Forum, and the Discuss Forum. In total of 42 interviewees, 19 were males and 23 females. The age of interviewees was regularly distributed, with 10 of them below 21 years old, 12 aged from 21 to 25, 11 aged from 26 to 30 and the rest (9) above 30. Most interviewees (>90 percent) had bachelor’s degrees or other higher degrees. Approximately half were students.
3. This comment was written by a user named HiuLung on 21 February 2010, under the topic of “The delocalization and Sinicization of Hong Kong movies” in Film Critics China. <http://www.filmcriticschina.org/?p=1361>
4. This interview was conducted in another research project.

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Special terms

jiawu	江湖	yum cha	飲茶
wuxia	武俠	Makzi	麥子
Yanmouhoyan	忍無可忍	Kongzi	孔子
Juechufengsheng	絕處逢生	Zhongfei	仲肥
Tong Lau	唐樓	Zhongni	仲尼
mo lei tau culture	無厘頭文化	Wudang	武當
Sho Lin	少林		

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