

***The Construction of Justice in John Woo's Films:
Culturally Specific or Ethically Universal?***

Mengshu Wang, Waseda University, Japan

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Abstract

2016 marks the 30th anniversary of John Woo's 1986 classic *A Better Tomorrow*, a gangster film which not only cemented the fame of the director himself, but also made profound impact on world cinema especially on the action/crime-thriller genre. In his more than three decades of film directing, Woo has constantly probed the depth of some traditional value: honesty and loyalty, family and relationships, and most importantly, passion for justice. For Woo, moral justice, rather than legal justice, is one of the dominant themes, through which he communicates with the audience the complexities of human nature and human emotion. The construction of crime and justice in Woo's films, on the one hand, shares particular content conventions and genre forms. On the other hand, some conflicting signatures are also frequently identified in the portrayal of justice within these films. As a result, considerations of genre alone are inadequate to examine the spectacle of justice and its meaning in Woo's films. An intertextual approach seems more promising to offer interpretations in keeping with the director's cross-cultural personal and professional experience. This article will cover selected works directed by John Woo, including titles produced in Hong Kong, Hollywood, and mainland China, to discuss the question: is moral justice culturally specific or ethically universal?

Keywords: crime film, John Woo, moral justice, genre study, intertextuality

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Introduction

30 years ago, legendary director John Woo made his first action/crime-thriller *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), which re-envisioned Hong Kong gangster film. This extremely successful commercial production introduced Woo's signature of Gun-fu to the world. Since then, he had made a series of films with similar motifs and familiar formulas in Hong Kong. He was thus labeled with such cinematic representation of extreme violent action scenes.

Meanwhile, the 1990s US showed an increased public interest in crime in various forms of media (Wilson, 2000). John Woo, with his cemented reputation and characteristic skills, took advantage of this favorable opportunity and debuted in Hollywood. He began his bigger-budget US productions in the early 1990s. As a response to market demand, Woo's filmography was expanded to a wider range of genres, including adventure, war, and sci-fi. Nevertheless, the debate of vice and virtue is a recurring theme which provokes controversial discussion about the interpretation of Woo's cinema.

As Woo himself confesses, he has made films trying to emphasize some traditional values, such as loyalty, honesty, passions for justice, and commitment to family, things that he felt were being lost then.¹ Justice – more precisely, moral justice – seems to be a very interesting motif through which he communicates with the audience the complexities of human nature and human emotions. This article looks into the construction of justice in selected films directed by John Woo, so as to explore whether his use of the concept is culturally specific or ethically universal.

'Made in Hong Kong'

John Woo's ethnic background used to be given considerable attention in making sense of his cinema. As a consequence, film studies on Woo have concentrated on an idea of made-in-Hong Kong, and even made-for-Hong Kong. Gangster film, representative of Hong Kong cinema, experienced a flourishing period during the 1980s and 1990s. Taking into account a particular historical context before the hand-over, most of Woo's Hong Kong crime films are argued of expressing a political anxiety of possibly losing a Hong Kong identity after 1997 (Williams, 1997). The social chaos and moral collapse, depicted in these films, are related remarkably to a temporarily specific value in a certain location.

Notable for his chaotic bloodshed action sequences through depiction of criminality, Woo is also generally considered a major influence on the action genre. It is widely acknowledged that Woo presents masculinity in a way highly different from the super muscular heroes dominant in the West, which in return has transformed the action genre (Tsang, 2016; Sandell, 1996). The furious gunplay, together with balletic movements between protagonist and antagonist, reinforces the concept of brotherhood, which, in particular, is interpreted from a very Sinocentric perspective (Hanke, 1999). Concerning the trans-Pacific passage that Woo took, a global affective cinema, argued by Xu (2010), distinguishes itself from traditional Hollywood crime

¹ "Things I Felt Were Being Lost: John Woo interviewed by Maitland McDonagh," (1993). *Film Comment* 29(5), p. 50

narratives. Accordingly, the impact of foreign culture on contemporary Hollywood seems almost impossible to measure (Cieko, 1997; Desser, 2003).

Still, previous researches maintain a thematic focus that culturally specific values in the films are transformed and modified into new representation in accordance with the director's cross-cultural professional career path. Is there another possibility towards which a novel comprehension of Woo's cinema – in other words, it is rather the universal ethics that are simply presented in different manifestations under different cultural contexts – could be reached? Examining the construction of justice in his specializing crime-thriller genre through discussion of narrative, characterization, and conventional iconography, I believe, could lead us to a way out of the dilemma regarding culturally specific moralities in the issue of justice portrayed in these films.

Familiar Narratives: “disruption” that damages relationships

Structuralism theory suggests that an “equilibrium” is usually the case before a plot starts to unfold. According to Todorov, this harmonious establishment is where all the potential opposing forces are in balance. Many of Woo's films, although set in a modern society, are about the underworld of gangs and triads. This balanced start, through depicting a fictional outlaw community of its own social orders, distances the ordinary audience. As a consequence, attempt to fully make sense of Woo's narration of criminal activities and retributions in these films arises not from a cultural vacuum of Hong Kong but owns many of it to intertextual referencing to martial arts or *wuxiao pian* (Magnan-Park, 2007). In these martial-chivalric fictions, the social system of morality in a certain community is framed by traditional Chinese codes under Confusion philosophy.

John Woo is unquestionably influenced by his mentor Zhang Che, a significant filmmaker specializing in martial arts in the history of Hong Kong cinema. Yet in a point of fact, what really differentiates is not a seemingly unordinary setting of the equilibrium. Neither is the ideological assumptions of Confucian ethics that provides foundation for the traditional Chinese culture. It is rather the distinct plot of “disruption” that assists in constructing the controversy over justice in Woo's cinema.

A recent study on a group of 30 American crime films identified a major thematic category of constructing crime as “a social problem originating in a community context where relationships among interconnected individuals are damaged, thus requires healing as opposed to punishment” (Welsh, Fleming, and Dowler, 2001). A homogeneous framework can be identified in the “disruption” stage of several of John Woo's films. In some cases, instead of presenting an actual crime, the breaking force that disrupts the previous balanced status quo is an inside incident that damages relationship between individuals. *A Better Tomorrow* describes a retribution story in which justice is represented through regaining self-esteem and restoring private relationships. Ho (played by Ti Lung) and his best friend and partner Mark (played by Chow Yun-Fat) are respected members of the Triads. They soon are betrayed by their subordinate apprentice Shing (played by Waise Lee), which puts an end to the friendship/brotherhood relationship within the Triad community. Ho's arrest, as a result, exposes his criminal identity and deteriorates the relationship with his younger brother Kit (played by Leslie Cheng), who is about to graduate from police college and become a detective. Just as Sandell (1996) discovered, in Woo's films, “personal

dilemmas are always already part of the public ones”. These acts concerning the matter of loyalty and commitment to family, undoubtedly prioritize discussion of moral (as opposed to legal) problems. Ho and Mark’s reaction towards Shing in the ensuing events, places the emphasis more on restoring these values in society, than on purely seeking revenge. In this type of films, representation of the official response to a crime from legal system is not absent but merely weakened. It is worth noticing that, at the end of *A Better Tomorrow*, Ho, Mark, and Kit choose to bring Shing to justice, both personally by preventing Shing’s criminal plans, and legally by handing him to the police.



Figure 1: Triad boss, Ho, Mark, and Shing (from left to right). Taken from Woo, J. (1986). *A Better Tomorrow* [Screenshot].



Figure 2: Ho (left) and his brother Kit in the hospital, visiting their father. Taken from Woo, J. (1986). *A Better Tomorrow* [Screenshot].

In some other cases, the harm to relationships is in consistent with criminality. In *Broken Arrow*(1996), Major Deakins (played by John Travolta) and Captain Hale (played by Christian Slater) are military pilots in the United States Air Force. The opening scene of a boxing practice reveals the relationship between leading characters more as frenemies. Later during a top secret assignment, Deakins does not only steal the nuclear warheads but also frames his partner Hale. The shift that deterioration among multiple relationships is reduced to a dominant opposing one is normal in Woo’s Hollywood productions. Magnan-Park (2007) points out this disruption of a

key established Hong Kong theme of a group of heroes in favor of the singular hero. Accordingly, the response to damages on relationships becomes the response to crime itself. As can be seen in *Broken Arrow*, the response of Hale going after Deakins seems morally ambiguous, since it can be addressed as a personal reaction, through which Captain Hale is restoring the value of loyalty. But at the same time, it can also be addressed in general/formal terms, because as a figure representing law enforcement, Hale himself is also responsible for the crime.



Figure 3: Major Deakins (left) and Captain Hale, before their last assignment together. Taken from Woo, J. (1996). *Broken Arrow* [Screenshot].



Figure 4: Major Deakins (reflection on the window), before pointing gun at head of Captain Hale. Taken from: Woo, J. (1996). *Broken Arrow* [Screenshot].

Stereotypical Characterization: beyond cultural boundaries

The stress on morality can also be observed in the analysis of stereotypical characterization. The conventionally coded characters assist in getting rid of cultural restrictions in comprehending justice in John Woo's films. As mentioned above, male heroes in Woo's films, especially in his Hong Kong productions, are usually interpreted as being saturated with male codes of traditional Chinese values, known as *zhong*/忠, *xiao*/孝, *ren*/仁, *yi*/义 in mandarin, which can be translated as loyalty, filiality, compassion, and righteousness. These traditional values, grounded in Confucian philosophy, have been argued as the most culturally specific signification in Woo's cinema. *The Killer* (1989) may be Woo's most romantic crime-thriller in portraying a twisted friendship/brotherhood relationship between a hitman and a police detective. Yet throughout the movie, hitman Ah Jong (played by Chow Yun-

Fat) spends much effort in protecting a blind club singer, Jenny (played by Sally Yeh). He feels guilty for causing such tragedy to her and the protection ends up in a romantic relationship with Jenny. Ah Jong's moral attitude towards an innocent figure used to be considered an inevitable path to re-gain his *junzi* status, another concept reflecting Sinocentric ideology. However, taking into account the similar characterization among Woo's films, what's transparently transcendent is more likely to be a moral reasoning that is common to all people, than certain values that are specific to a single culture. *Face/Off* (1997) is Woo's most positively reviewed Hollywood production. Its narrative is about the cliché of a story between an FBI agent and a domestic terrorist. At the beginning of the plot, John Travolta plays FBI agent Sean Archer and Nicholas Cage plays domestic terrorist Castor Troy. In order to get more information about a potential bombing attack, Archer is forced to put on Troy's face, through plastic surgery, to approach his brother in jail. While still wearing Troy's face, Archer tries with all his heart to save and look after the innocent boy caught in the crossfire. Is Archer, the desperate sympathetic great white American heroic protagonist, acting according to Confucian philosophy? Or does the innocent boy represent a reward to the chivalric knight, which is more specific to a Western culture? The answer is highly unlikely, especially in the case of *Face/Off*, because the final scene when Archer brings home Troy's orphan (the same innocent boy caught in the crossfire, who also reminds Archer of his own lost son), is a re-edited plot added to the film after a test screening.² To call it *junzi* or chivalric behavior is merely a matter of terminology but does not affect its substance.

Aside from the characters themselves, the structure of relations between the leading roles is another function worth examining. The crime/thriller genre in the 1990s tends to show a shift in focus from detective/law-enforcers to criminals. The criminals in Woo's films have been assigned almost equal importance with, if not greater than, their opponents. The setting of dual focuses, including dual protagonists and dualistic structures in Rick Altman's term, plays an essential role in genre analysis. The relationships between leading protagonists, or between protagonist and antagonist, when pushed forward, helps to construct the socially contextualized narratives of morality and justice in these films. In *The Killer*, hitman Ah Jong shares settings with Li Ying (played by Danny Lee), the proactive police officer who is investigating him. The clear distinction between the good and the evil, between hero and villain, blurs as Ah Jong is portrayed as a moral assassin and Li as a rough cop. Their relationship with each other changes every time they encounter each other, and eventually becomes an intensive personal bond. In the end, when Ah Jong is shot dead by the triad boss Wong (played by Shing Fui-On), Li responds according to justice by choosing to revenge his friend. He kills Wong, other than taking him into custody. Berry and Farquhar (2006) explain that Li is reacting within the code of brotherhood rather than within Western style of legal protocols. Similarly, it can be treated as an extreme example of the power of friendship to rectify injustice (Magnan-Park, 2007). However, what is underlined at this specific juncture is that Li the cop becomes Li the killer. It might be easy to address that during the final scene, Woo constructs, through

² John Woo mentioned the backstage story about making *Face/Off* in a conversation after he received the SAMURAI Award during the 28th Tokyo International Film Festival in 2015. The original scene of Archer bringing home the innocent boy was shot and edited in the first director's cut. Producers disagreed and deleted the scene. Reviews of a test screening before the film was officially distributed indicated that most spectators were expecting the plot. As a result, Paramount Studio re-edited the film, adding it back to its original ending.

cinematic representation, an idea of moral retribution surpassing that of legal justice. Then it is equally justifiable to suggest that the dilemma between morality and legitimacy is the one called into question. After all, constructing justice through outlaw retribution is such a popular motif among world cinema.



Figure 5: detective Li Ying's relationship with hitman Ah Jong changes from enemy to ally. Taken from: Woo, J. (1989). *The Killer* [Screenshots].

In *Face/Off*, the same dual protagonist structure can also be identified. But this time, the changes in relationships brought into focus are more between the characters and their families, respectively, than between the leading roles themselves. The opposing position between FBI agent Sean Archer and his antagonist domestic terrorist Castor Troy is consistent throughout the narratives, even when they switch faces and shift identities with each other. Archer stands in an incompatible situation with Troy, personally as Troy is responsible for the death of Archer's son, and generally as Archer represents law enforcement. Once again, personal dilemmas overlap with public ones. Yet similarly to *The Killer*, in the end Sean Archer, while wearing Castor Troy's face, emotionally killed Troy as the psychopath criminal was destroying Archer's face. Again, the cop becomes the killer, psychologically, by wearing his face, as well as physically, by committing vicious act. The dilemma, as mentioned above, continues through switches in identity and subjectivity, which is another thematic motif of the film. *Face/Off*'s narrative concentrates on the issue of how to retrieve the original identity and how to restore relationship with the family. Therefore, justice in this type of films is on both social and personal level: to reassert law and order, and to regain status of a good father and husband. Shifting faces additionally challenges the pure essence of Archer's and Troy's identities as it dissolves a logic of binary opposition. Woo thus constructs a novel image of justice behind which the sheer distinction between right and wrong, between good and evil, is blurred.



Figure 6: FBI agent Sean Archer is in opposition to domestic terrorist Castor Troy throughout the narrative. Taken from: Woo, J. (1997). *Face/Off* [Screenshots].

Visual Repertories: challenging binary opposition

Finally, in discussion of moral justice in Woo's films, a series of conventions and formulas also question the absolute standard that distinguishes right and wrong under an assumption of binary opposition. For example, white pigeon is a regular presence in many of Woo's films. While usually symbolizing peace and harmony, they mostly appear before or during the chaotic bloodshed of gunshot sequences. Churches and chapels, as well as the status of virgin Mary, on the one hand, suggest Woo's childhood of being raised as a Christian. On the other hand, they are one of the most frequent locations where extreme mayhem takes place in the films. Last but not least, the expression of violence, which Woo is famous for, is not a theme but more a style in considering and constructing a moral standard in his films. The more vicious a character becomes while defending an immoral force, the higher scale of morality he will achieve. Just as in *The Killer*, Ah Jong achieves much sympathy by demonstrating a very low scale of immorality (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004). This mixture of good and evil, as can also be seen from Woo's stereotypically coded characters, challenges the meaning of justice established through a crude and reductionist way of binary opposition. In other words, although moral justice is concerned with the principles of right and wrong, Woo communicates with the audiences the vulnerable common sense that a sharp contrast between right and wrong is universally in doubt.

It is worth mentioning that for genre films, it is the continuous production and reproduction of such conventions that attract and speak to the audience, most of who are eventually aware of these signatures/patterns. It helps contribute to an overall larger genre or auteur scape since after a long time, spectators become familiar with and agree on them. In the case of John Woo, many of his visual repertories have transformed into films defined in genres other than crime-thriller. For instance, white pigeon also appears in his history-drama *Red Cliff* (2008) and war-epic *The Crossing* (2014). It seems that Woo manages to address the discussion of justice, under different cinematic context, on different scales.

Conclusion

In conclusion, even though John Woo diversifies crimes and criminals in his films, his emphasis on justice stands out as he moves from Hong Kong to Hollywood. The justice issue, for Woo, concerns more with morality and law. The moral issue is presented through conflicts and damage to relationships of interconnected individuals. These stereotypically constructed characters are to break down cultural boundaries within the film. By making contrast to regular significations using cinematic language, Woo encourages positioning justice outside an absolute binary opposition in which certain actions are considered either right or wrong. Under such circumstance, the construction of justice in Woo's films is arguably more ethically universal than culturally specific, as the disposition to respond to certain moral situations, depicted in selected films, is represented in structurally similar ways, regardless of differences in cultural contexts. In the cinema of crime-thriller by John Woo, moral justice on a personal level is seeking fairness; on a general level, it is restoring certain social values.

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Contact email: suewang@suou.waseda.jp