

Farce, Pathos, and Absurdity in Stephen Chow's Film Comedies: *From Beijing with Love* and *CJ7* Reconsidered*

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Abstract

The hugely popular Hong Kong film comedian and director Stephen Chow Sing Chi enjoyed international box-office success as well as critical acclaim for his *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004). Despite its lukewarm reception in the West, his latest film *CJ7* (2008) has been compared to Charlie Chaplin's classic *The Kid* (1921). This paper explores the seldom-discussed Chaplinesque aspect in Chow's oeuvre, arguing that how to evoke pathos while preserving the funniest ingredients of farce has in fact been an artistic obsession for Chow for years. Focusing on Chow's early work *From Beijing with Love* (1994), a daring blend of farce and pathos, and *CJ7*, his latest endeavor to "seek joy amidst sorrow," this paper examines Chow's major comic devices, including the significance of absurdity created by situational humor, and probes into the curious interaction between low comedy elements and narrative techniques which elicit emotional responses beyond belly laughs. How can pathos be created in a generally low comic climate without appearing to be playful insincerity? How can pathos so created be prevented from developing into sentimentality, an easy target for burlesque? Such are the questions in film aesthetics addressed by the present study. Attending to the dissimilar reception of *CJ7* in Greater China and the West, this paper also seeks to explore how cultural differences might have complicated Chow's recent attempts to cater his works for a more global audience.

Keywords

Hong Kong cinema, film comedy, pathos, absurdity, gag structure,
Stephen Chow, Charlie Chaplin, *From Beijing with Love*, *CJ7*

* I wish to thank Vivian P.Y. Lee as well as the anonymous readers for their insightful comments. In a closely related essay of mine titled "007 in Late Colonial Hong Kong: Technology, Masculinity, and Sly Humor in Stephen Chow's *From Beijing with Love*," I try to develop some ideas missing here to follow up on their kind suggestions.

In a BBC interview conducted shortly before the 2005 release of *Kung Fu Hustle* in the UK, the renowned Hong Kong film comedian and director Stephen Chow Sing Chi acknowledged that one of his favorite comedians of all time is Charlie Chaplin (Brett). Although there is nothing particularly Chaplinesque in *Kung Fu Hustle* and most of Chow's box-office hits, that Chow named Chaplin as a major comedy influence is quite telling in retrospect. Chow is never shy to mention his humble origins in public; his characters either come from the margins of society or lose their privileged status temporarily and learn through suffering and humiliation. Chow's lower-class background partly explains why he has been drawn to Chaplin, whose films abound in struggling, disadvantaged protagonists. Perhaps even more importantly, like Chaplin, Chow was sensitive to charges of crudity and triviality in his early career and has struggled, most notably since *King of Comedy* (1999), to aspire to respectability by infusing seriousness and meaningfulness into his works.¹ Critics have found affinity between Chow's *CJ7* and Chaplin's slapstick tragicomedy *The Kid* (1921), though Chow's professed inspiration came from Steven Spielberg's *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) (Douglas). While Chaplin succeeded in elevating his features chiefly by pathos and social satire, Chow's solutions are more precarious and complex. According to his long-time collaborator Lee Lik-chi, what Chow pursues in films like *King of Comedy* is a higher comic style which "finds humor in pathos and seeks joy amidst sorrow" (qtd. in Shi and Liu 224).² Chow's early screen image as an opportunistic and streetwise prankster epitomized by the "tricky expert" in *Tricky Brains* (1991), however, is scarcely conducive to the spirit of tragicomedy. Nevertheless, the bumpkin figure in films like *Love is Love* (1990) already reveals a more innocent side of Chow's comic persona capable of sympathy if not also of other delicate emotions. Beginning with Chow's directorial debut *From Beijing with Love* (1994), how to evoke pathos in a

¹ In *King of Comedy*, Wan Tin-Sau, the protagonist played by Chow, uses the Chinese translation of Constantin Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares* as his Bible. His high seriousness about acting even as an extra makes him a laughingstock, a pitiable character inviting pathos. Besides, having to make a choice between a very successful actress who offers to help with his career and a prostitute who loves him, Wan makes the "morally correct" decision to abandon the former in order to take care of the latter. Although Chow is never a Marxist promoter of "class consciousness," his sympathy for the underprivileged is beyond doubt.

² While working at TVB, Lee scripted and directed the 1989 TV series *Final Combat* (*Gaishi haoxia*) and *The Justice of Life* (*Ta laizi jianghu*), inaugurating Chow's rise as a star comedian in the screwball *mo lei-tau*, or "nonsense," style. Lee has not only directed a number of Chow's earlier films but also co-directed with Chow *From Beijing with Love*, *God of Cookery* (1996), *King of Comedy*, and *Shaolin Soccer* (2001). The last film witnessed a serious conflict between Lee and Chow and their ultimate split.

film which retains the funniest ingredients of farce seems an artistic obsession for Chow and has also complicated his more recent efforts at pleasing non-Chinese audiences. This paper focuses on *From Beijing with Love*, arguably the most successful of Chow's early attempts in this regard, and *CJ7*, his latest endeavor, also by far the most Chaplinesque of his works inasmuch as it deals directly with the question of how to survive poverty with a sense of humor while maintaining one's dignity and integrity. *CJ7*'s reversion to such an "old-fashioned," presumably anachronistic, theme has received very different responses from Chinese and Western audiences, and it makes an excellent case demonstrating how cultural differences might come to bear on film comedy reception. Drawing examples from the two films, I seek to analyze the comic devices used by Chow, especially the importance of absurdity in situational humor and the interaction between low comedy elements and narrative techniques which elicit emotional responses beyond belly laughs. With respect to *CJ7*, I also try to explore the translatability of some of Chow's comic strategies which have worked well with the audiences in Greater China.

Preliminary Clarifications and Three General Theories

To talk of low comedy or farce invites considerable confusion. A number of closely related and potentially conflicting criteria need to be clarified. Referring mainly to Hollywood comedies since the 1990s, Philip Drake notes that the phenomenal success of films "featuring physical gags, pratfalls, jokes about bodily functions and the loss of bodily control has been [seen as] part of an increasingly prevalent 'dumbed down' sensibility in popular culture that embraces stupidity at the expense of more cerebral pleasures" (187). Drake's compact statement, symptomatically, lumps together at least three pairs of opposition, namely, vulgarity versus propriety, dumbness versus intelligence, and puerility versus social sophistication. Apparently, Stephen Chow's humor, sometimes vulgar and occasionally childish, is seldom outright dim-witted. The silliest moments in Chow betray a worldly knowingness. With respect to language, Chow typically adopts a register of Cantonese that is widely used by contemporary lower-class Hong Kong people even when he is acting in a period piece, but he would create new meaning out of common parlance and borrow outmoded expressions and mannerisms from the Cantonese-speaking cinema of the 1950s and 1960s. This sociolinguistically "low" language choice goes well with Chow's constant emphasis that he comes from the working class, and the linguistic intimacy and demotic spirit therein partly

explain his mass appeal in much of the 1990s to a local audience including many less educated filmgoers.³ What has upset viewers with a more “refined” taste is probably not the lowness of speech as such; in any case, much of the linguistic coarseness is gone when Chow’s dialogue is dubbed into Mandarin Chinese or translated into English subtitles. Perhaps it is naked vulgarity in Chow’s films, particularly those collaborated with Wong Jing, that has offended some critics. Witty wisecracks and inoffensive *mo lei-tau*, or “nonsense,” humor based on verbal slapstick or outlandish incongruity aside, fairly explicit sex jokes, phrases alluding to indecent “three-letter words,” and gags pertaining to genitalia, excretory processes, and other forms of crudity are not hard to find in Chow’s early works.⁴ It is important to note that vulgarity is not a mere question of subject matter. Refinement in film comedy often implies a more euphemistic way of presentation which must avoid certain locutions and iconographic details currently considered impolite or taboo according to the “educated” taste.⁵

While coarse obscenity in a film comedy, for many viewers, is barely redeemable, pratfalls, pranks, lunacy, and knavery typical in farce could be rendered more acceptable when given due moral, thematic, narrative, or other justifications. As the great masters of slapstick have proved, a film containing raw physical humor and boisterous tomfoolery is not necessarily artistically inferior. Chaplin’s *The Tramp* (1915) is a case in point. The protagonist of this Essanay two-reeler is a flawed character, still rather remote from the “gentleman-poet-dreamer” who will rise to prominence in Chaplin’s mature phase. As a compulsive trickster, the “Little Tramp” is given to sadistic pranks. Clumsy and inattentive at his work in a farm, he takes enormous pleasure in repeatedly stabbing the backside of a fellow workman with a pitchfork and in mischievously dropping a rotten egg on a minister’s prayer

³ With recourse to Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque, Linda Chiu-Han Lai argues that Chow’s verbal humor is not only deeply rooted in the Cantonese slang of Hong Kong but celebrates “that aspect of humanness often suppressed or condemned by social etiquette, norms, and rationality, as well as pedagogic programs delimiting proper civic conduct that are geared towards effective government” (Lai 244).

⁴ “Three-letter words” in Chinese are equivalent to “four-letter words” in English, i.e., foul language having mainly to do with sex. Citing the joke about a piece of used toilet paper in *Tricky Brains* involving Chow and his usual sidekick Ng Mang-tat as a prime example, David Bordwell comments that such popular Hong Kong comedies represent “vulgar cinema at its most gleefully appalling” (172). It should be added that Bordwell’s main target here is Wong Jing’s oeuvre, not Chow’s comic performance as such.

⁵ Concerning sex humor, Freud has written that we “could never bring ourselves to laugh at the coarse smut; we should feel ashamed or it would seem to us disgusting.” Yet “when we laugh at a refined obscene joke, we are laughing at the same thing that makes a peasant laugh at a coarse piece of smut” (Freud 121).

book. Still, he commands our respect due to his surprising valor and resourcefulness in rescuing the female lead Edna; his genuine love for her, ultimately unrequited as she is above his station, may also touch our hearts. When Edna is reunited with her well-dressed, handsome fiancé, the tramp tries hard to hide his heartbreak, and gives the couple blessings before departing. The ending is free of sentimental self-pity: waddling down the road alone, our clownish hero suddenly improvises a ballet step and moves on eagerly. The pathos created naturally within a comic climate and the underlying optimism essential for human survival transform this knockabout short into a masterpiece of film art that is at once funny and serious, physical and cerebral.⁶

Some jokes and gags in Stephen Chow are considered rather “low-down” not so much because they are silly or vulgar but that they are deemed too mean or aggressive. Some of his other comic devices, by contrast, are quite elaborate and unobjectionable. To better appreciate the complexity and ambiguity of Chow’s evolving comic style, we need to equip ourselves with some basic concepts about mirth creation. The following three theories borrowed from Western scholars will be useful for a deeper discussion of Chow’s works. However, as I will demonstrate when addressing the totally dissimilar reception of *CJ7*, sometimes cultural differences might complicate the application of such general theories, however flexible they are as heuristic tools. The first theory to be introduced is known as the “superiority theory”: we laugh at the blunders and infirmities of others, such as in the classic example of watching someone slip on a banana peel. Self-aggrandizement and sometimes self-righteousness are involved. When we see characters suffering from the “gotcha” tricks of a prankster like Chow’s “tricky expert,” we may laugh wickedly at the victims and admire the clever ruses. And when we see that a prankster’s malicious scheme fails and he or she is trapped, we may laugh out even louder, because what happens can be taken as poetic justice (“it serves him/her right”), as though we were entirely innocent of gloating over others’ misfortune earlier. The worst humor, in Simon Critchley’s words, “seeks to confirm the status quo either by denigrating a certain sector of society, as in sexist humor, or by laughing at the alleged stupidity of a social outsider” (12). Fortunately, not all jokes and comic events are a matter of derision pure and simple. Besides, a fundamental principle of comedy dictates that victims of trickery and violence will not suffer too seriously, or we are left with pure malice and the fun is gone. In spite of abundant pratfalls and tit-for-tat pranksterism, even slapstick, supposedly the lowest form of

⁶ In Kenneth S. Lynn’s interpretation, Chaplin’s message is that “as long as you can count on humor, you must not entirely despair of life” (161).

film comedy, can be valued, as Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik argue, “for the populist foundation of its aesthetic in a relentless aggression against narcissism, vanity, snobbery, and pride” (24). However impure our pleasures may be when seeing characters being punished and dishonored, we are assured that no great harm will be done. More importantly, when observing them suffer from blunders, pranks, and mishaps time and again, our sympathy will be aroused, which may displace the baser kinds of sadistic pleasure.⁷

Traceable to Herbert Spencer and popularized by Sigmund Freud, the “relief theory” explains laughter in terms of a sudden release of pent-up psychic energy. Jokes dealing with obscenity and other taboo subjects make us laugh, for under the pretence of “play,” as opposed to sober reality, our repressions are temporarily lifted.⁸ The great appeal of Chaplin’s tramp and Chow’s trickster kid derives from the fact that they defy social conventions and challenge authorities, performing with extraordinarily quick wit and gusto what we ourselves cannot and dare not do in our lackluster docile lives. The difference is that Chaplin’s social outcast exhibits more naïveté while Chow’s prankster is much worldlier and always triumphs even if he might have to be humiliated and reformed in the middle of the story. So far as pathos is concerned, I would like to introduce a special kind of relief of an entirely different nature: when seeing an inept and unfortunate protagonist confronting a series of big troubles, we are worried about his or her fate (hence a tension is built up); when the threat is suddenly averted or the problem solved, we feel immediately relieved. For want of a better term, let us call this “sympathetic comic relief.” The joy so experienced is evidently more altruistic and thus sounder morally. I presume Chow’s ideal of “finding humor in pathos and seeking joy amidst sorrow” is akin to this kind of humor, though how far he himself has achieved it remains disputable.

Finally, the “incongruity theory” maintains that humor is produced, as Crichtley puts it, “by the experience of a felt incongruity between what we know or expect to be the case, and what actually takes place in the joke, gag, jest or blague” (3). In Jerry Palmer’s formulation, two processes must be conjoined: “1. the sudden

⁷ Incidentally, a vexing problem for some reviewers of Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940) is that, precisely because of the effective burlesque, Hynkel, the Hitler figure in the film, is much more human than Hitler himself. In Chaplin’s portrayal, Hitler has become, as Kyp Harness aptly phrases it, “a small, crass, ridiculous, mediocre loser whose ideas were crackbrained and absurd” (174). Paradoxically, the more successfully the dictator’s heroic image has been undermined, the more readily viewers might pity his miserable avatar.

⁸ Freud’s theory is actually more complicated. For him, in the so-called “tendentious jokes,” “fore-pleasure,” or pleasure drawing from “the sources of play upon words and of liberated nonsense,” helps us fight against suppression, “lift[ing] deeply-rooted inhibitions and repressions” and in so doing initiating “the larger release of pleasure” (164-68).

creation of a discrepancy, or incongruity, in the joke narrative; 2. a bifurcated logical process, which leads the listener [or viewer] to judge that the state of affairs portrayed is simultaneously highly implausible and just a little bit plausible” (96). In fact, many of Chow’s “nonsense” comic actions are hardly devoid of meaning but entail what Palmer terms “the logic of the absurd”: intriguing incongruity is presented, which, no matter how ridiculous or illogical it may seem at first sight, could be made perfect sense of in an albeit abnormal or insane way.

A good example that can be explained with reference to all three theories introduced above is found in the party scene of *From Beijing with Love*, where Chow’s Ling Ling Qi, or “007,” happens to be standing in front of a serving table. When a waiter asks what Chow would like to have, Chow declines to be served and, to our great surprise, draws his own huge pork knife to carve an enormous piece of pork for himself. The viewer will burst into laughter since it is highly implausible that a man so faultlessly attired would bring the lowly utensil of a pork vendor into a fancy party, not to mention using it to chop up meat for himself. This breach of decorum and the mere look of Chow drawing the knife from the sheath hidden under his shiny white jacket are quite beyond the film audience’s expectation. Even more surprising is his easeful and self-assured manner. Yet this ludicrous act is more than “a little bit plausible” if we remember early in the film Qi has claimed to be a “swordsmen” and insisted on carrying his pork knife as though it were a sign of honor for a knight-errant. This gag involves conceptual incongruity as well as deviation from social norms, and our response can be a mixture of derision and admiration. Qi’s unconventional behavior confounds our common sense and may be dismissed as sheer silliness, hence the butt of the audience’s laughter; but it could also be considered “cool,” for to boldly transgress propriety like that might well be a secret wish of our own, a demonstration of courage beyond the norm.

***From Beijing with Love:* Gag Structure and Farce Mixed with Pathos**

Marking his growing maturity in the mid-1990s, *From Beijing with Love* is one of the funniest and, in a sense, most experimental of Chow’s films. Grossing over 37.5 million Hong Kong dollars, this berserk spoof of the James Bond cycle has also earned Chow and Lee Lik-chi critical acclaim. Abandoning his successful naughty trickster kid persona, Chow approaches the role of a pork-vendor-cum-secret-agent in a much more restrained manner. The Hong Kong film critic Deng Tu claims that Chow’s deadpan performance, more lively and up-to-date, surpasses the

“Great Stone Face” Michael Hui Koon-Man at his best (177); Lin Li and others praise the film for its timely social criticism and black humor. Presumably because of its stinging satire on contemporary Chinese corruption, *From Beijing with Love* has been banned in the PRC.⁹ In what follows I would like to investigate how Chow and his co-director Lee manage to turn what is fundamentally a farce into something more artistically sophisticated by nuanced structuring of comic events and by ingeniously mixing low humor with pathos. The latter method is particularly noteworthy for its experimental daring.¹⁰

Critics have regretted that in Chow’s early works various gags are often unrelated to one another and unmotivated, that is, not logically grown out of the story proper. This weakness of fragmentation is actually not unique to Chow or to popular Hong Kong film comedies in general, for as Neale and Krutnik point out, comedy as a genre “not only permits but encourages the abandonment of causal motivation and narrative integration for the sake of comic effect” (31). But compared with many of his earlier films, *From Beijing with Love* does contain some comic routines which are much better organized. Let me give some concrete examples. One of the most memorable comic events in it has to do with the astonishing functions of Ling Ling Qi’s various gadgets: a mobile phone turns out to be an electrical shaver in disguise; a shaver is revealed as a hairdryer; a hairdryer a shaver; and a shoe doubles as a hairdryer. The gags concerned can be considered “dumb jokes,” because such camouflages are utterly useless as far as Qi’s job as a spy is concerned. In terms of comic organization, however, they do form a neat articulated gag sequence involving the clever play of repetition and surprise.¹¹ We laugh when Qi proudly reveals to his partner Xiangqin (Anita Yuen) that his phone is actually a shaver, stressing that with this device no one will notice he is shaving while participating in a social event. This part can be explained by both the “superiority theory” and “incongruity theory.” We sneer at such an absolutely unnecessary invention, treating Qi’s boast as a butt of fun. The audience’s position of superiority has been built up by a previous gap in which Qi ruins Xiangqin’s cabinet door, mistakenly assuming that someone is hiding inside her apartment. The discrepancy between the phone’s appearance and its actual function as a shaver further affords the pleasure of perceiving surprising incongruity. The “logic of the

⁹ The effectiveness of the ban is questionable. Nowadays the film is readily available at some Chinese film websites, such as PPS.TV <<http://www.ppstream.com/>>.

¹⁰ I am not suggesting that this film is faultless. Some unnecessarily crude gags are readily found, such as the Q-inspired Da Wenxi (Law Kar Ying) peeing on the wall.

¹¹ Neale and Krutnik call comic sequences involving complex elaboration “developed” or “articulated” gags (52).

absurd,” or “sense within nonsense,” becomes more obvious as the sequence “phone→shaver, shaver→hairdryer, hairdryer→shaver” proceeds. A good sense of coherence and closure is created in this series of gags: the second item of each pair, be it the shape or function, reappears in the first of the next pair, while the real function of the third object as a shaver harks back to the first gag. The common motif of useless disguise is milked by the symmetrical repetition with variation.

Owing to the repetition, the second and third gags are more predictable than the first. If the pattern drags on, the sense of surprise will definitely diminish. Instead, in this series the first three closely related gags also prepare for a potentially bigger laugh to come. As sort of a comic pause, Xiangqin asks Qi, tongue-in-cheek, what if his hairdryer is lost, a question entailing half-hearted adherence to rather than outright refutation of Qi’s very “logic of the absurd.” Suspense is created as we are wondering, with Xiangqin, what Qi’s reply will be. As Neale and Krutnik observe, suspense always implies a degree of predictability (55). We anticipate Qi’s answer to be equally ludicrous but unlikely to be too similar in content. Again we are taken by surprise: Qi picks up one of his shoes and shows us it can also serve as a hairdryer. A greater variation is found as the shoe, unlike the three preceding items, retains its proper function as a shoe. Still, the fourth gag is essentially the continuation of the first three. If we are caught by the surprise of unexpected repetition and laugh even more heartily, the fourth gag has served well as the “caesura” of the entire gag sequence, equivalent to the punch-line in a verbal joke. The fifth gag, in which Qi’s disguised hairdryer runs out of battery, appeals to a more conventional kind of humor but still offers a satisfying sense of ending.

A careful scrutiny will show that some comic events in this James Bond parody, no matter how facile, puerile or boorish they might appear in themselves, are meaningfully organized at a macro-narrative level, and together serve larger functions other than simply to draw laughs. To explicate my point, a brief plot summary is in order. The story begins when a dinosaur head guarded by the Chinese Army is stolen. Ling Ling Qi (Stephen Chow), an almost forgotten reserve secret agent leading the life of a lowly pork vendor, is summoned by a high official and assigned the job of recovering the bones. On his mission Qi arrives in Hong Kong and meets with his partner, Li Xiangqin (Anita Yuen). Qi’s superior turns out to be the villainous Golden Gun, who has not only stolen the national treasure but ordered Xiangqin to kill him. Left in the dark, Qi is first attacked by the agents dispatched by Golden Gun’s rival, and then shot and wounded by Xiangqin. Nonetheless, moved by Qi’s good nature and sincerity, Xiangqin finds herself falling in love with him. She decides to ignore her orders and save his life. Finally,

Qi defeats Golden Gun, reunites with Xiangqin, and happily resumes his humble meat-selling career. As can be seen in this bare outline, the film is an adventure story with a romantic subplot. While the rather straightforward action storyline is easy to handle, how to build up, amid a largely hilarious atmosphere, a serious romantic relationship between an unlikely pair—a laughable bumpkin and a sharp professional female assassin—is no easy task. With respect to characterization, we can discover a subtle recurrent pattern of comic action which helps delineate Qi's personality, and suggests a certain depth or mystery behind the façade of clumsiness and ignorance. Compared with his role model James Bond, Qi seems to be a pathetic imitation.¹² While Bond can charm almost every beauty he desires, Qi must resort to pornographic videos and cheap prostitution. Besides, Qi's frequent blunders, clumsy manners, and impractical low-tech gadgets provided by Wenxi all make him a laughingstock. Nevertheless, in the film we gradually learn, despite all his flaws and incompetence, Qi has a true heart of gold. Furthermore, he has his own peculiar sense of dignity and great martial arts skills, which allow him to overcome all indignities and eventually save the day. If the absurd shaver-hairdryer gags foreground Qi's inadequacy, the equally amusing "gun-testing" sequence which appears a little later suggests to the contrary that he might not be as dull-witted as he appears.

Pretending to show Qi some real weapons, Xiangqin loads a "Chinese PPK" handgun, puts a silencer on it, and aims it at Qi. Completely unaware of her intention to kill him, the curious Qi looks into the barrel, asking if toilet paper could be used as a filling material inside the silencer. Distracted by the silly question, she does not notice that Qi swiftly dismantled the silencer until she tries to pull the trigger. This motif of failed attack is repeated in a more elaborate way in the articulated gags which immediately follow. As Qi turns around to close the windows, Xiangqin immediately fetches his gun and shoots him. Unexpectedly, the bullet improbably comes out from the back of the gun and hits her upper arm. When Qi turns back and asks her, full of innocent concern, what has happened, she makes the weak excuse that she was "testing the gun." He tells her his gun does shoot backward and turns around anxiously to find her a bandage. Seizing this moment, Xiangqin tries to shoot him again. This time round, she has taken his warning well and points the barrel at herself—only to discover that the gun shoots forward in a normal way, and the bullet hits her other arm. The worried-looking Qi explains to

¹² In one shot Qi is shown watching the Bond film *Moonraker* (1979, starring Roger Moore). On his desk we see the pirated videotapes of Eon Bonds like *Thunderball* (1965) and *For Your Eyes Only* (1981) as well.

her belatedly that his is a “sly gun,” shooting forward and backward alternatively. The humor in this sequence is complex. First, we laugh because Xiangqin’s scheme is thwarted, as a combination of derision (how foolish she is and it serves her right) and relief (the good-hearted Qi is safe). Not only the ironies of situation involving Xiangqin’s failed plans but also the contrast (in terms of incongruity) between her murderous intent and Qi’s trusting and caring responses may be sources of fun. The latter appeals to our compassion and reinforces “sympathetic comic relief.” Also effective is the “eccentric” behavior of the gun belonging to Qi, who claims ironically to know little about guns. This sequence is rounded off later in a typical slapstick fashion: when Qi advises the wounded Xiangqin never to “test” a gun again, Xiangqin defiantly fires at the ceiling, causing a chandelier to fall on her head. As a side note, as is required of a comedy she recovers very soon.

For simplicity’s sake, I have confined myself mainly to gag structure, situational humor and the psychological implications of these. Yet we must remember that comic effects of a film rely also on such techniques as camerawork, editing, music and various aspects of *mise-en-scène*. Let me give a concrete example. Shortly before Xiangqin’s “gun-testing,” she has asked Qi what gun he uses as a professional spy. In reply, Qi tells her that his specialty is throwing knives. In the reaction shot, Xiangqin is shown being very curious about Qi’s strange choice. When she is muttering the expression “throwing knives” in disbelief, thunder suddenly appears and reflection of lightning can be seen on her face. Qi reiterates that his favorite method is indeed throwing knives, the same kind of weapon used by Xiaoli, a legendary “knight-errant” invented by the Taiwanese novelist Gu Long. Accompanied by mock serious music, they both rise from the sofa slowly, staring at each other while moving at exactly the same pace. A sense of absurdity and playfulness is created because of the verbal allusion to *wuxia* novels and the odd parody of the characteristic duel scene in a martial arts film with respect to staging, which is further dramatized by the improbable change of weather conditions in the background. Cinematography and editing make further contributions. When Qi is demonstrating his great throwing skill, a zoom-in on a Mickey Mouse doll on top of a TV set right before the close-up of his knife deliberately misleads us into thinking that Qi’s target must be the doll. After showing us his swift throwing action, however, the camera tilts up from the doll and zooms in to indicate that the knife has landed somewhere on the wall far from the presumed target. Like Xiangqin, we are naturally led to assume that Qi is a very bad thrower. However, a flashback closer shot in the subsequent shopping mall scene reveals that Qi’s knife has in fact pierced the tiny body of a fly on the wall: his

target was actually the small, barely noticeable fly rather than the big doll. In other words, through clever camerawork and editing, the film creates suspense to heighten certain kinds of comic effect.

If the “gun-testing” sequence intimates that Qi may not be as incompetent as he appears to be, what Qi does in the shopping mall fully unveils his powers. With his pork knife and throwing knives, Qi promptly finishes off three ruthless robbers and saves a child. Qi will continue to arouse our laughter with his ineptitude and oddity though. The discrepancy between Qi’s clownish persona and his hidden talents is certainly unconvincing yet rather fascinating. This duality allows us to laugh at his pratfalls and unseemly manners but also to expect amazing surprises from him. A similar doubleness is found in the paradoxical clumsiness of Chaplin’s tramp: he always amuses us by his ungainliness, but as the occasion warrants it, he will impress us with superhuman dexterity or an ingenious trick. The most touching scene of *From Beijing with Love* occurs in a party inside a magnificent residence. Qi goes there to gather information about the host, not knowing that Xiangqin has already prepared to kill him inside with her sniper bullets. The sequence begins just before Qi’s entry and ends when the pair escapes from an enemy. We can raise two important questions about comic aesthetics here. First, how can pathos be created in a generally low-comic climate without appearing insincere or artificial? Second, how can pathos so created be prevented from developing into sentimentality, an easy target for burlesque?

Admittedly, not all kinds of comic actions are compatible with pathos, which necessitates a certain degree of high seriousness and sincerity. Flippancy, blatant obscenity, and boisterous horseplay are obviously not very helpful. On the other hand, physical humor and comic actions that are not too malicious, mean, or riotous do not necessarily inhibit the development of more delicate emotions. The series of gags preceding Xiangqin’s assassination attempt go well with the above generalization.¹³ One of the gags involving Qi’s gadget vainly called “god of the briefcase” is particularly famous among Chow’s fans. In this triple gag, Qi tries to impress Xiangqin with his zany way of entering the house without using the key to the door. But he does not make it until he uses his spring-loaded briefcase as a catapult for the third time. The first time he is startled to find himself, after doing a graceful somersault in midair, landing on the same spot where he began. The second time he bumps into the wall and hurts his forehead. The third trial, though successful, is unnecessary, for the impatient Xiangqin has already opened the door

¹³ Apart from a passing pun on the breast of a woman in bikini, which is lost in the English subtitles, the butt there is always Qi’s ineptitude or eccentricity.

for him. All the comic events here reinforce our impression of Qi as a bumpkin, naïve, inexperienced, eager to prove himself, but they never undermine his saving virtues such as sincerity, loyalty and unselfishness, not to mention his martial arts feats. The indignities that Qi goes through only make him more likable.

But neither these gaps in themselves nor the exciting combat scenes appeal directly to our hearts: this is achieved by the romantic subplot, which is quite seamlessly woven into the adventure story proper. It is so arranged that, when Xiangqin is about to shoot Qi with her rifle, Qi suddenly plays the piano and starts to sing her a beautiful song for their friendship. Touched by his singing, Xiangqin hesitates. It is not until Qi has defeated their mutual enemies and suddenly emerged from a hiding place that Xiangqin can harden her heart and shoot him repeatedly. As another surprise, Qi survives her assault because he is wearing a bullet-proof vest, although one of his legs is seriously hurt. Just when Xiangqin grabs a handgun and tries to finish the job, Qi unexpectedly presents her with three white roses. It should be mentioned that, knowing they will soon go separate ways, a few moments earlier Qi had asked Xiangqin what she would like as a farewell gift, and her answer was roses. A flashback sequence reveals that Qi came out of the hiding place and became an easy target simply because he found the flowers and decided to pluck them for her. Xiangqin is deeply moved since Qi has risked his life just to get her what she casually mentioned she desired. To prepare for the touching scene, Chow's performance has been serious even in the most amusing gags, stressing his habitual naïveté as well as sincerity. Added to the sustained deadpan seriousness in a comic atmosphere is the sense of "no laughing matter" entailed by the life-threatening dangers, that is, Xiangqin's assassination attempts and their enemies' attacks. In fact, the sudden intervention of a third party has twice prevented Xiangqin's feeling for Qi from getting too sentimental and helped maintain, owing to the mortal danger implied, a sense of urgency that impels us to interpret the pathos as something other than mockery.

With Chow even a life-or-death situation can be funny. When Xiangqin has just rushed back to the car, not yet recovered from her murderous act, she is shocked when Qi shows up and tells her in a bizarrely calm voice that he has been shot. The reason why we laugh may be rather complex. There is no doubt a great sense of surprise, because the audience would not expect that someone who has been seen shot and lying motionless on the ground could recover so quickly. Qi's survival may also work on us as "sympathetic comic relief." Furthermore, as a piece of dramatic irony, we have already been shown that Xiangqin shot Qi. At any rate, judging from the blood on his white clothes, everyone can tell Qi has been shot.

Therefore his telling her “I’ve been shot” is superfluous, violating if unintentionally what the language philosopher Paul Grice terms the “maxim of quantity” in normal conversation.¹⁴ The deadly seriousness of Chow’s tone, together with the strong sense of incongruity in the scene, is remarkably amusing. Such kind of fun no longer depends, as in many of Chow’s early works, on exaggerated facial expressions, verbal witticism, or clever “gotcha” pranks.

The operation sequence which follows is even more noteworthy for mixing low humor with pathos. The scene begins when the guilt-ridden Xiangqin carries the bleeding Qi into her own apartment. A high level of seriousness is maintained because Qi, as he himself suggests, will soon suffer from paralysis and might even die if the bullet embedded deep in his thigh is not removed in time. Chow and his co-director Lee Lik-chi boldly develop a potentially rather vulgar gag without damaging the seriousness required for the storyline of romance. The gag alludes to the legend about a respected general in ancient China named Guan Yu, who is said to have undergone an agonizing operation without the use of anesthetics. To divert his attention from the great pains, General Guan allegedly concentrated himself on a game of chess. In Qi’s case, the diversion is preposterously provided by a porn video. The dialogue between Qi and Xiangqin directly deals with sex in the video and Qi’s own private parts. Part of the fun is that Xiangqin, despite the urgency of the operation, is distracted by the video and Qi must press her to pay attention to what she is doing. A while later she is supposedly embarrassed by Qi’s bulging organ (not shown on screen), which blocks her view. Qi explains in a deadpan tone that he must keep all the blood flowing to a particular region so he won’t bleed to death. Concentrating on the demanding task of bullet removal, Xiangqin is distracted again soon, and this time because Qi is cheering on the actor in the video, almost oblivious to her presence. The sex jokes here are rather candid but not too offensive due to two important conditions. First, all along Qi’s fondness for Xiangqin has been strictly “Platonic”; despite his sexual interest in other women, Qi never takes advantage of her. Hence, even when they are talking about the porn or his penis, there is absolutely no hint of advances or flirtation. It is as if they were obliged to mention such things for purely “business” purposes. Second, this sequence works nicely with Palmer’s theory about “the logic of the absurd”: however ridiculous Qi’s words might sound, they make sense in the situation.

A moment later, the atmosphere becomes graver as Xiangqin accidentally

¹⁴ This Gricean conversational “maxim of quantity” dictates that one’s speech must be as informative but no more than what is required for the current purposes of the exchange. See Levinson 101.

breaks a blood vessel and Qi bleeds profusely and almost faints: his life is obviously at stake. The sequence from then on becomes more touching without losing much humor. When Qi urges Xiangqin to ask him a hard question to keep him awake, the deeply worried Xiangqin comes up with a long and entirely incongruous mathematics question. When Qi learns that Xiangqin is also an orphan like him, he expresses his affection for her in a very decent way. Their romantic relationship symbolically begins when she puts his arm around her just to keep him warm, and the camera zooms in on the painting on the wall showing her parents sitting side by side in a similar posture. There is also a bundle of white roses on the lap of Xiangqin's mother that look like Qi's gift for Xiangqin. Qi eventually loses consciousness at the end of the operation. When he suddenly comes round, Xiangqin is overjoyed and embraces him tightly. Yet the moment of mutual affection does not last, for Qi quickly discovers that she is the sniper. Having expressed his deep disappointment at her betrayal, Qi sadly leaves. It is intriguing to note that, despite the deep sense of seriousness in the scene, Qi does not forget to take his porn videotape at departure, reminding us once more of the sex jokes earlier. The entire sequence is an audacious blend of ostensibly low humor and genuine pathos, tremendously funny and surprisingly tender, representing Chow's attempt in this regard at his best. For sophisticated viewers, the totally chaste relation between Qi and Xiangqin in this sequence, while necessary for redeeming the otherwise vulgar connotations, is rather implausible. This sense of absurdity, rather than fatally undermining the two characters' presumed sincerity, might well serve as an additional source of knowing amusement.

If I have stressed the importance of sincerity for preventing pathos from turning into an easy object for burlesque, I must point out that a more flexible sense of sincerity or psychological credibility has been nurtured by a certain "meta-filmic" tendency in Hong Kong cinema. Since roughly the mid-1980s, many Hong Kong films, especially low comedies, highlight the main actor's own, that is, "extra-diegetic," identity from time to time. In Stephen Chow's works, for example, the name of the role that he acts may contain the character "sing" (or "xing" in *pinyin*) taken from Chow's Chinese name "Sing Chi," reminding us they are "comedian comedies," highlighting Chow's star status rather than encouraging us to immerse completely in the story and see him merely as a character in the film. Near the end of *From Beijing with Love*, Qi tells Xiangqin not to use "such conventional lines again" when she gladly asks if he's alright. "Brechtian" moments like this obviously draw our attention to the film medium as an artifact, a "stage" for enjoying the performance of familiar actors playing different roles. Viewers

accustomed to such “postmodern” leanings must be more willing to maintain a “suspension of disbelief” rather than questioning too critically if the plot is realistic or if a character’s motive is comprehensible or credible enough. It should be mentioned in passing that Chow’s experiment with truthfulness reaches an extreme in *A Chinese Odyssey Part Two: Cinderella* (1994), where Chow’s Zhizun Bao/Monkey King makes the same love vow twice with different degrees of commitment. The first utterance is intended as a blatant lie, which later turns out to be a possible disavowal of hidden true feelings; given the playful invocation of the Freudian unconscious and the comic motif of identity confusion, it is hard to tell if the reiteration is much more sincere. The Taiwanese voice artist Shi Chao-Tsai said when he was dubbing the Mandarin version of the first love vow for Chow, he tried to express “75% sincerity plus 25% pretence” in a slightly crying tone (qtd. in Liang and Wen 8). It is a pity that Shi did not mention how he interpreted the same vow when he did it the second time. Since neither *A Chinese Odyssey* nor *From Beijing with Love* is well known beyond Greater China, it is difficult to discover if Chow’s comic devices work for non-Chinese audiences as well, particularly those unfamiliar with Hong Kong films. On the other hand, *CJ7*, representing Chow’s unsuccessful attempt to please Chinese as well as Western audiences at the same time, demonstrates very nicely how cultural differences may complicate comedy reception, especially in relation to pathos.

***CJ7*: Cultural Differences, the Chaplinesque, and the Perception of Mawkishness**

Tracing the evolution of Stephen Chow’s comic style, one can easily find that the kind of situational humor perfected in *From Beijing with Love*, explicable in terms of incongruity, and physical humor refined lately by CGI, have gradually replaced wordplay as the main comic ingredient, presumably because Cantonese-based verbal witticisms often fail to translate into other languages. Besides, catering his works since *Shaolin Soccer* (2001) to a wider audience beyond Greater China, Chow has tried to attain respectability by avoiding naked vulgarity and “politically incorrect” humor involving, in particular, explicit misogyny.¹⁵ Perhaps a little sadly, since the late 1990s Chow has also abandoned the kind of devastating black humor initiated in *From Beijing with Love* and fully developed in *Out of the Dark* (1995) as well as the “postmodern” subversion of singular truth in

¹⁵ Ridicules of homosexuality, if rather light-hearted, can still be found in *Kung Fu Hustle* though.

the two-part *A Chinese Odyssey* (1994), opting instead for greater simplicity and comprehensibility. Made more than a decade after *From Beijing with Love* and shortly after the huge international success of *Kung Fu Hustle*, *CJ7* is the best case for our examination of Chow's mature style not only with reference to farce, pathos, and absurdity but also, if obliquely, to the issue of translatability of humor. Grossing over 200 billion RMB in the PRC alone, *CJ7* was an admirable commercial success in Hong Kong and Taiwan as well, but it fared poorly when screened in the United States. It is not my purpose to fully account for the glaring discrepancy here. Suffice it to mention at the outset that adult American viewers who were expecting Chow's wild "slapstick chopsocky" in the R-rated *Kung Fu Hustle* must have been let down by this essentially martial arts-free comedy intended as wholesome family entertainment.¹⁶ Yet small American children "at ages between 'Teletubbies' and 'Dora the Explorer,'" who would appreciate the film most, as Jim Emerson suggests, could not read the English subtitles to follow the story. On the contrary, a Chinese reporter observed that during the film's Beijing premiere the audiences roared with laughter some 20 times.¹⁷ While many Chinese filmgoers, already familiar with Chow's numerous previous works, could welcome *CJ7* as a refreshing if momentary change, Western audiences who came to know him for spectacular airborne theatrics and extreme cartoonish violence in *Shaolin Soccer* and *Kung Fu Hustle* might not share the same sentiment.

As testified by their postings on the Internet, some Chinese fans were also a little disappointed not so much by the lack of exciting action in *CJ7* but because they could not find enough of Chow's characteristic verbal insouciance, crafty pranks and bizarre situational humor. That Chow plays a relatively small part in the film might not be the main concern, for he already did this before in *The Lucky Guy* (1998) without visibly upsetting his fans. One palpable problem is that the impoverished father Ti played by Chow is simply too decent and humorless, resembling Chaplin's tramp only in his scruffiness but not sharing the backside-kicking mischief or clownish manners. The "relief theory" introduced

¹⁶ The expression quoted is found in a review in *Entertainment Weekly*, which gives the film a D+. See Gleiberman. So far as rating is concerned, *CJ7* was rated "PG" in the U.S. and "IIA" in Hong Kong. See the "Cheung Gong 7 hou" entry at The Internet Movie Database <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0940709/>>. *Kung Fu Hustle*, by contrast, was rated "R" in the U.S. and "IIB" in Hong Kong because of the violent fighting scenes. See the "Kung Fu" entry at The Internet Movie Database <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0373074/>>. Both accessed 10 August 2009. Kindly note that no motion picture rating system exists in the PRC.

¹⁷ See Yan Yunfei's newspaper article. The writer does not mention the composition of the audience. In a small premiere for invited guests, probably those present were mostly adults.

above suggests that much of the fun in watching a comedy derives from the temporary lifting of our repressed desire to rebel against moral restraints. The “incongruity theory,” on the other hand, implies that we will laugh when seeing a comic character behaving in a way which dramatically deviates from social norms.¹⁸ When we hear Ti soberly warning his son again and again “we might be poor but we don’t lie, we don’t fight, we don’t take things that don’t belong to us,” we might smile approvingly. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that we would burst into laughter the way we do when hearing Longevity Monk’s (Law Kar Ying) verbose moralizing in *A Chinese Odyssey Part II: Cinderella*, for Ti’s “nagging,” devoid of Chow’s habitual playfulness, sounds a little dull, while Longevity Monk’s verges on the grotesque. Thematically, *CJ7*’s message is plain: it wants to show us that poverty is not shameful provided that we are honest, hardworking and hopeful.¹⁹ This is by no means the first of Chow’s attempts to elevate his comedies by endowing them with social relevance or educational value. We have already found bitter satire in his early film *Justice, My Foot!* (1992), a period piece in which Chow’s minor government official courageously fights against a corrupt bureaucracy. Paradoxically, all the mean tricks and deceits practised by Chow’s character in that box-office winner of the year are well justified as the only viable means of restoring justice, and the audience can thus enjoy the entertainment without much moral apprehension. Other Chow comedies like *King of Beggars* (1992) and *God of Cookery* can be considered *Bildungsromans*, where meaningfulness is conferred by the plot of growth or reform featuring a more mature, upright, or enlightened protagonist toward the end of each story. Despite the presence of a certain degree of high seriousness in these earlier films, we can always guffaw at the trickery, illogicality and pratfalls. However, I am not suggesting that *CJ7* has too much didacticism and pathos but insufficient farce. More pertinent to our enquiry is how these elements interact with one another. Besides, we must discriminate between the different aspects of “low” comedy. As a family film, *CJ7* is free of obscene jokes and, unlike the great majority of Chow’s works, makes practically no allusion to sex or genitalia. It is rated PG partly because of the presence of rude humor, where “rudeness” refers primarily to scatological references and occasionally violent physical gags. For some Western

¹⁸ In this respect, Jerry Lewis has written instructively that his hugely popular comic character “flout[s] dignity and authority, and there’s nobody alive who doesn’t want to do the same thing” (qtd. in Levy 73).

¹⁹ Writing for *Christian Spotlight on Entertainment*, Michael Karounos claims that the film “teaches a valuable lesson that children and parents are partners together in life, sharing love, friendship, and trust with one another in times of poverty or despair.”

critics, the humor in *CJ7* is “low” not in the sense of vulgarity but for its inanity, that is, its lack of subtlety or sophistication. Sentimentality is also considered a gross weakness of *CJ7*.²⁰ In what follows, I will attend to a few representative comic sequences and discuss whether the presumed crudity and childishness are partly redeemable in view of narrative or other functions, and explore how cultural differences might subtly influence perceptions of mawkishness.

Compared with *From Beijing with Love*, the comic events in *CJ7* are more loosely organized. Still, some seemingly disparate gags are linked thematically and bear non-trivial connotations. Let me use the three gags which deal either with UFO sightings or the closely related belief in aliens to illustrate my points. In the first gag Ti and his son Dicky are squatting by the roadside, watching the report of a UFO sighting on a TV set inside a shop. The witness shows the reporter a picture in which a flying saucer happens to look exactly like his own weird-looking hat. Seeing this, Ti jeers that the incident is complete nonsense. Later, at a dump looking for something to give his son as a gift, Ti is unaware that a flying saucer which looks like the one in the fake UFO photo is parked right in front of him. When the alien vehicle suddenly moves, making noise, emitting light and swiftly ascending to the sky, he is so absorbed in examining an abandoned TV set that he misses the spectacular sight. In the first gag, the way the father and son watch TV by the curb looks funny, at least to the average viewer who can sit comfortably on a sofa at home while watching TV with the family. The squatting posture, not entirely uncommon among the lower classes in China, violates what is prescribed for polite manners. The sense of oddity so generated can provoke laughter according to both the “superiority theory” and “incongruity theory.” In addition, when we discover that the man on TV who brags about a UFO sighting is a poor liar, we will laugh with Ti. The second gag at the dump, on the other hand, is an instance of dramatic irony. We might or might not consider Ti’s blindness to the spaceship foolish, but laugh owing to the absurdity of the situation. From the previous gag, we can deduce that the poverty-stricken Ti must want a TV set badly. Hence his blindness can be explained by the possibility that he is too excited by the chance that the old TV works to realize that it is being illuminated by a spaceship. At the thematic level, both gags continue to dramatize the pitiable condition of the family as stressed by the earlier shots of Dicky’s dilapidated shoes and the second-hand electrical fan in

²⁰ Richard Schelb, for example, suggests that Chow seems to have been “affected by the woolly-headedness that beset Robin Williams from the early 90s onwards where he became a family man and went from an edgy comedian to making a whole lot of mawkish mush that his kids would watch.”

their shabby home that doesn't work.

Actually, Ti's refusal to believe in extraterrestrials, like his rejection of superstition, is part of his principle of living with dignity, captured by the lines he repeats to his son which begin with "We might be poor." Due to Ti's stubborn sense of integrity, Dicky has to lie to him about the origin and identity of CJ7, his "alien pet dog." When, in the third gag, Dicky eventually confesses to Ti that CJ7 is an alien, transformed from the green orb picked up from the dump, Ti lectures him, reiterating "we don't lie" and so forth. In fact, this is probably the only time in the film that Ti's habitual moralizing becomes an obvious butt. Paradoxically, when we are invited to laugh at the limitations of Ti's teaching, it does not mean the moral qualities he advocates are being challenged. Earlier on, Ti has regretted that because of his lack of education, he knows nothing about technology. The reason why he works so hard to send Dicky to a private school is precisely that he wants Dicky to transcend his own ignorance and have a brighter future. These and other gags, simple or even silly on the surface, shed light on Ti's and Dicky's respective characters and resonate with the larger themes of the film.

Some Chinese audiences have found the cockroach-swatting scene the most funny and touching at the same time. In this one-off gag, the impoverished father and son are sitting by the dining table. Having no better entertainment, they pass their time bashing and stomping the swarm of cockroaches on the wall, as if engaging in an exciting Wii competition.²¹ At the diegetic level, that Ti and Dicky can stick together and so heartily enjoy their everyday slum life is an excellent example of seeking joy amidst sorrow, a manifestation of the true comic spirit pursued by Chow. Considering *CJ7* as a whole, pathos does not often blend with humor. The most emotionally charged sequences like the bitter quarrel between Ti and Dicky and CJ7's death after using up its vital energy to save Ti are not immediately brightened up by comic actions. A noteworthy exception is found in the scene where, right after Ti's untimely death, the sobbing Dicky refuses to accept the brutal reality, wishing desperately that when he wakes up things will all go back to normal, and his wish will finally come true. As he opens his eyes in the morning, his father, already revived by CJ7, is lying by his side. Unanticipated by us but perfectly credibly, what Dicky receives from Ti is neither affectionate sweet words nor a tender hug but Ti's usual, banal nagging: "Why didn't you change your clothes [before going to bed]?" A remarkable dramatic effect is created by this

²¹ This is not the first time Chow uses the cockroach for comic effect. In the huge hit *Flirting Scholar* (1993), Chow's scholar claims that a cockroach which has been crushed is his beloved pet "Xiaoqiang."

deceptively anti-climatic reproach, which nicely shows the supposedly Chinese wisdom that true filial love is to accept your parent as he or she is and to cherish the relationship while it lasts. In fact, quite a few other parts of the film also subtly touch on the father-son bond.

One of the most elaborate comic sequences in *CJ7* takes place in the family's shabby home. Mellowed by pathos, it also coincides with a significant turning point in the plot. Three events are interestingly knit together, namely, Ti's disciplining Dicky, Dicky's unreasonable fear of ghosts, and the metamorphosis of *CJ7* from an ordinary-looking ball into a cute puppy-like creature that becomes Dicky's friend. Unfortunately, a few Western reviewers evidently do not find the treatment of what happens between Ti and Dicky touching at all and so miss much of the fun. When this part begins, Ti is scolding Dicky because his school uniform is dirty and torn, indicating that he must have disobeyed Ti's frequent reminder that "we might be poor but we don't fight." Perhaps partly because he is afraid of the stern father and partly because he doesn't want to hurt him, Dicky does not disclose to Ti that he fought with his classmates simply because they sneered at his poverty, saying that his useless ball must have been found in a dump. Exactly because Dicky refuses to give a reasonable explanation, Ti becomes so angry that he wants to give Dicky a good lesson. Yet instead of picking up a clothes hanger to beat his son, Ti just uses a bundle of newspaper to make a threatening gesture. At this very moment, Dicky finds that the ball is strangely changing its shape. Scared, he tells Ti it is haunted. In a kind of dramatic irony, whenever the ball shows a noticeable change, Ti happens to be busy with something else and looks away, oblivious of the metamorphosis. So Ti gets even angrier thinking that Dicky is lying to divert his attention from his misbehavior at school. The situation becomes more and more laughable when Dicky's dread grows stronger: he screams when a lamp accidentally falls down with a piece of red cloth, mistaking it for the apparition of a hanged woman, and screams yet again when his shaggy-haired father looks ghostly in the poorly lit room. Most dramatically, a moment later Dicky discovers that the ball is glowing inside a wooden box. This time round he can scarcely repress his scream though he knows he will be punished for "lying." Infuriated, Ti locks his son inside the box. In a surprise twist, however, nothing scary happens. In the dark the orb from outer space projects lights and shows Dicky a beautiful cosmic view. When Ti regrets he has punished his son too severely and opens the box, Dicky is already in an elated mood. How this comic sequence works, in brief, depends on at least two things. First, there is the differential distribution of knowledge: we are fully aware of the entire situation while Ti and Dicky remain partially blind each in his own way. Yet Ti's

ignorance and Dicky's unwarranted fear are hardly the only sources of fun, knowing viewers will be amused by the subtle father-son relationship so revealed. As can be seen elsewhere in the film, behind the thin veneer of harshness Ti loves Dicky deeply and is always willing to sacrifice himself for him. To fully enjoy the humor, the second condition is that we know very well Ti means no harm even at his angriest moments. Dicky and Ti's relationship is also mirrored by that between Ti and his boss, who appears to be rude to Ti in front of other workers but always tries to help Ti. Not all Western reviewers, however, seem able to fully appreciate the father-son bond subtly depicted here. Jim Emerson, for instance, argues that "Dicky's dad really shouldn't have pushed his son into a small wooden box and then locked him in there," for such kind of action "delves into a child's deepest, darkest fears." Richard Schelb claims that "Stephen Chow's parenting methods do raise considerable eyebrows by more liberal Western standards—in one scene that becomes quite difficult to watch without flinching we see Chow repeatedly slapping Jiao Xu to stop crying when he asks him to buy a CJ7 doll; while at other points he seems to order Jiao Xu to succeed by a mixture of browbeating, demanding and derisive name-calling." I do not agree that there really is "derisive name-calling." Granted that the father-son relationship in *CJ7* could be tolerated, I would venture to add that Chow's comic performance is actually at his best when showing a little cruelty. In the scene where he mishandles CJ7 by testing its elasticity, believing it to be a high-tech toy, one can find humor in pathos. Again, the fun depends on our knowledge that Dicky is unable to let Ti know of CJ7's true identity because Ti's otherwise faultless moral convictions would not allow Ti to believe in ghosts or aliens. While sharing Dicky's worries about CJ7's safety, we also know that this extraordinary creature from outer space will recover soon. In comparison, when Chow appears as a most decent father in other parts of the film, he can be as dull as a Michael Hui cured of his hallmark meanness.

To my knowledge, Chow has never admitted that *CJ7* was inspired by Chaplin's works. Nonetheless, inasmuch as it deals directly with the weighty question of how to live with integrity in a world of great disparity between the rich and the poor in a humorous way, *CJ7* is undeniably Chaplinesque in spirit. I have mentioned that Chow's own lower-class background and the apprehension especially during his early career about not being considered "serious" enough as an artist might have drawn him to Chaplin as one of the most successful film comedians in the world of humble origins. Chow's reversion to the moralistic theme of dignity in poverty in *CJ7*, on the other hand, might have been motivated by his intention to target the huge audience of China. With the handover of sovereignty in

1997, the Hong Kong film industry has become more and more dependent on the mainland in recent years. For example, Chow's *Shaolin Soccer* and *Kung Fu Hustle* actively recruited actors from the mainland, obviously because of commercial considerations. Unlike *Shaolin Soccer*, a strictly Hong Kong-based film so far as production and distribution are concerned, both *Kung Fu Hustle* and *CJ7* were supported by international (Columbia Pictures) as well as PRC companies and were thus transnational products.²² When it comes to the film narratives themselves, however, while *Kung Fu Hustle* is set in an unspecified, vaguely Chinese town in roughly the early twentieth century, the setting of *CJ7* is obviously contemporary China. Besides, in addressing the serious "Realist," if not necessarily communist, social problem of poverty, *CJ7* is definitely much more acceptable to those old-school Chinese who consider Chow's early works like *Flirting Scholar* morally suspect.

To introduce the Chaplinesque theme effectively, the opening sequence of *CJ7* juxtaposes the image of Ti mending a dilapidated shoe with the logo of a Rolls Royce. Regarding the representation of poverty in world cinema, we should remember that when Chaplin put on baggy pants and donned a derby and a moustache to create his celebrated "Little Tramp" in the mid-1910s, tramps were perceived as a major threat to social order. During the Great Depression, when Chaplin was at the zenith of his career, vagrancy and unequal distribution of wealth were pressing problems in America. It was in an atmosphere of such anxieties that Chaplin's comic alter ego worked most effectively on his first audiences by simultaneously eliciting their compassion and addressing their latent fears.²³ Some 30 years after Premier Deng Xiaoping launched the historic economic reforms in China, there have been significant developments in special economic zones and major cities like Shanghai. Nevertheless, agricultural China obviously lags behind. Even in the new millennium, China has not entirely got rid of the so-called "mengliu problem," that is, hordes of impoverished people from rural areas swarming to the cities in search of employment. Given that *CJ7* was shot mainly in

²² Please see Note 28 for details.

²³ When America was hard hit by a major depression in the mid-1890s, tramps were a visible public concern. A growing sympathy for tramps in the 1890s was indicated by the fact that some popular commentators could handle the subject humorously. In 1914, during the resurgence of the tramp problem, in some cities where social unrest occurred, the police "reacted to alarmed calls for increased protection by stiffening the enforcement of vagrancy laws" (Lynn 154). Chaplin's classics like *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936) were made during the Great Depression (roughly 1929-1941), when poverty was a palpable daily problem for many viewers. Chaplin first appeared in his "Little Tramp" role in *Kid Auto Races at Venice* (1914), followed by *The Tramp* (1915) discussed above and other films like *The Kid* (1921).

Ningpo and set in an unspecified city in contemporary China, Ti's poverty is not entirely unbelievable although it would be impossible for a laborer like Ti to afford to send his son to a fancy school. Apparently, the messages conveyed by the film about the issue of poverty and the rich-poor divide still speak to many Chinese. City-dwellers no longer suffering from destitution may find Ti's high principles somewhat outdated but nostalgically relevant, not so remote as to appear utterly preposterous.²⁴ Unfortunately, some Western reviewers, including those writing for well-known newspapers and magazines like *Washington Post* (Desson Thomson), *Entertainment Weekly* (Owen Gleiberman), and *Time Out* (Derek Adams), assume that the story takes place in the highly developed and much more Westernized Hong Kong. I suspect this partly explains the criticism about *CJ7*'s alleged "mawkishness," which implies a more cynical perspective that considers the family's hardship unconvincing and the pathos affected. Even in the late 1960s, as J. Hoberman reminds us, some American filmgoers might regard Chaplin's masterpieces as no more than "puppy dog, in-your-face humanism and crude theatricality" (37). In Chow's case, confronted with such cultural barriers, how to blend humor with pathos successfully for non-Chinese audiences still remains a profound artistic challenge.²⁵

Wittingly or not, Chow has used a rather Chaplinesque dream sequence effectively to contrast Dicky's fantasy about *CJ7* helping him with his actual school life as an underachiever and poor boy bullied by fellow students. The juxtaposition of a dream with reality to dramatize their discrepancy is a cinematic technique famously adopted by Chaplin in such accomplished works as *The Gold Rush* (1925) and *The Kid*. If the scenes in *CJ7* involving Dicky's family life are generally serious and subtle, the representation of his school life is much richer in low farcical elements, ranging from childish pranks, through cartoonish violence, to gags featuring excrement. Yet for children growing up with video games and Japanese cartoons and animations, such kinds of humor will not be a problem at all. As for Chow's adult fans, they may be particularly drawn to the comic bits recycled from

²⁴ For Chow's fans in Greater China and considering *CJ7* as a cartoon-like "children's film," whether the story is "realistic" enough might not even be a major concern. See also my argument at the end of the previous section about the greater "willing suspension of disbelief" in the viewers familiar with post-1980s Hong Kong film comedies in general. In any case, ordinary viewers in Hong Kong and Taiwan are unlikely to challenge the stereotypical image of Mainland China (at least some parts of it) as relatively "backward" economically.

²⁵ So far as "non-Chinese" audiences are concerned, the present study is limited to "advanced," English-speaking "Western" countries, especially the U.S., because the reviews concerned are readily available on the Internet. We have yet to explore if Chinese-language film comedies like *CJ7* work for viewers in the rest of the world.

Chow's other hits like *King of Comedy*, *Shaolin Soccer* and *Kung Fu Hustle*. Unlike the usual parodies of other people's films either as a gesture of homage or to subvert the originals for comic effect, the references here capitalize mainly on Chow's own past achievements and tend to highlight a certain local (ambivalent between Chinese and Hong Kong) rather than global identity, however elusive the term "local" might have become in an increasingly globalized world.²⁶

Analyzing the stunning success of *Kung Fu Hustle* as an "exemplary work of transnational cinema," Christina Klein attributes it to Chow's "postmodern" aesthetics of pastiche as well as the fruitful cross-national cooperation in its production and distribution. Klein stresses Chow's extensive poaching from Western pop culture, particularly famous Hollywood productions, and his generally reverent allusions to the older Hong Kong cinema, which has its own earlier history of globalization. Various kinds of viewers from different cultures, Klein argues, can catch a set of references they are familiar with which helps them overcome the foreignness of the film and fully enjoy it. Although *CJ7* ultimately fails to attain global success, Chow seems to know that mere pastiche will not do. It is true that reviewers have compared the title character to Spielberg's *ET*, Gizmo in Joe Dante's *Gremlins*, Po (the youngest of BBC's *Teletubbies*), a tribble (a fictional animal in *Star Trek*) and Pikachu (one of the *Pocket Monsters* in Japanese animation), and Chow himself has credited *ET* as his chief inspiration. However, Chow's self-referential intertextuality aside, in terms of narrative development, iconography and comic routines, the film does not really make extensive references to Hollywood blockbusters, world film classics and the like to form a sort of multivalent "open text." On the contrary, this time Chow has paid more attention to thematic coherence and reasonably credible characterization even when "quoting" from his own oeuvre. In the most obvious case of borrowing from the West, Boney M's song "Sunny," the meaning of the lyrics evidently matches the scenes concerned. It is hard to fully account for *CJ7*'s unremarkable box-office performance overseas. In addition to what I have mentioned earlier on, such factors as the difference between Chow's status as a well-established star comedian in Chinese-speaking communities and his fame elsewhere as well as the different generic expectations involved might have also played a part. According to the California-based film review aggregator *Rotten Tomatoes*, of the 75 selected reviews on *CJ7* only 49% are positive, and the consensus is: "Eccentric and sweet,

²⁶ No doubt similarities not only in terms of action but also of cinematography and mise-en-scene help viewers recognize the references to previous Chow films.

[the film] is charming, but too strangely and slackly plotted to work as a whole."²⁷ Part of the strangeness probably has to do with the gap between what Asian viewers and those in the West expect from a family comedy in terms of comic pacing. It seems that Western spectators feel less comfortable with the frequent change of moods from the comic to the more serious and vice versa. The perceived structural looseness, on the other hand, might have been aggravated by their inability to follow some deeper cultural logic at work that helps connect digressive narratives without invoking causal forms of motivation. One may speculate that if, as in the case of *Kung Fu Hustle*, Sony's Columbia Asia had actively been involved in the production of *CJ7* with input directly from Hollywood, Chow could have been alerted to the kind of subtle cultural differences discussed above and tried harder to surmount the related difficulties.²⁸ But when making *CJ7*, Chow seemed to have in mind film-goers in the PRC as his chief target audience.²⁹ In any event, Chow's latest endeavor to create a comedy that is not only funny but also morally educational, judging from its warm reception in Greater China, is a laudable if incomplete success.

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²⁷ See the *CJ7* entry at *Rotten Tomatoes* <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/cj7/?page=4&critic=columbus&sortby=date&name_order=asc&view=#contentReviews>. 20 Aug. 2009. The statistic is based on approved *Rotten Tomatoes* critics, mostly writing in English for media outlets and film societies in North America. In the case of *CJ7*, a few British reviewers are included.

²⁸ In the case of *Kung Fu Hustle*, according to Christina Klein, Chow's script was "shaped" by studio executives at Los Angeles for greater narrative cohesion (197-98). *CJ7*, on the other hand, was the collaboration of Chow's Star Overseas and Han Sanping's China Film Group and Beijing Film Studio. Chow was said to be unhappy about surrendering much of *Kung Fu Hustle*'s post-production to Columbia. And this was possibly the reason why the successful model of Hong Kong/Hollywood/China collaboration was not repeated in *CJ7*. Nevertheless, Columbia Pictures has acquired the overseas distribution rights of the film.

²⁹ Although Chow has used actors and actresses from Mainland China in previous films like *Shaolin Soccer* and *Kung Fu Hustle*, in *CJ7*, for the first time, a mainlander (Xu Jiao) plays a central rather than subsidiary role in the film.

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Glossary

| English film title | Chinese title |
|--|---------------------|
| <i>A Chinese Odyssey Part One: Pandora's Box</i> | 西遊記第壹佰零壹回之 月光寶盒 |
| <i>A Chinese Odyssey Part Two: Cinderella</i> | 西遊記大結局之仙履奇緣 |
| <i>CJ7</i> | 長江七號 |
| <i>Flirting Scholar</i> | 唐伯虎點秋香 |
| <i>From Beijing with Love</i> | 國產凌凌漆(aka 凌凌漆大戰金鎗客) |
| <i>God of Cookery</i> | 食神 |
| <i>Justice, My Foot!</i> | 審死官(aka 威龍闖天關) |
| <i>King of Beggars</i> | 武狀元蘇乞兒 |
| <i>King of Comedy</i> | 喜劇之王 |
| <i>Kung Fu Hustle</i> | 功夫 |
| <i>Love is Love</i> | 望夫成龍 |
| <i>Out of the Dark</i> | 回魂夜(aka 整鬼專家) |
| <i>Shaolin Soccer</i> | 少林足球 |
| <i>The Lucky Guy</i> | 行運一條龍 |
| <i>Tricky Brains</i> | 整蠱專家(aka 整人專家) |

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