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Stereotypes for Solidarity: A Hong Kong Film on India

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This paper addresses the challenges posed by the persistence of Orientalist imaging and stereotyping in contemporary cultural production. It proposes that new approaches and reading strategies are required to understand the complex role played by popular cultural forms as they become global commodities and sink roots in contexts that are unlike their points of origin. Therefore, there is a need to shift the focus of our attention from a simple and politically correct critique of Orientalism to a) a recognition of its ubiquity and b) the political possibilities opened up by cultural forms that are saturated with stereotypes. With specific reference to the Asia region, there is a noticeable lack of fit between the hegemonic intent as well as the economic interests of states and the locally specific meanings produced by travelling cultural commodities. Whereas we could speak of the Hollywood film as the cultural front-end of the USA's hegemonic ambitions, it is difficult to sustain a similar claim with respect to any Asian cultural industry. It therefore implies that the earlier approaches critiquing globalisation of cultural commodities may not suffice here and now. In the following pages, I draw attention to a set of issues and questions that have to do with the global circulation of popular culture. I also propose that Asia is a location that underscores the need to move beyond familiar approaches to cultural criticism.

Asia, unlike Africa, is not an easy concept to work with. The very invocation of Asia, for very good reasons, triggers off anxieties among academics of the region. The concept of Asia has historically been mobilised by Western colonialism and Japanese imperialism. The very notion of Asian solidarity is therefore problematic because it reminds us of histories of oppression.

Nevertheless, as Kuan-Hsing Chen persuasively argues, 'the globalisation of capital has generated economic and cultural regionalisation, which has in turn brought the rise of Asia as a pervasive *structure of sentiment*. As a result, both a historical condition and an emotional basis exist for new imaginings of Asia to emerge'.[1] The key phrase in Chen's statement is 'structure of sentiment', which he borrows from Ding Naifei, to flag the critical role played by emotion in a context where material conditions for reconciliation and solidarity-building are not in place.[2] He notes that in twentieth-century intellectual history, 'the word "Asia" was in fact loaded with anxieties'. However, '[U]nder the present historical conditions, with the economic, historical, and cultural meanings of Asia fluctuating and contradictory, members of cultural intellectual circles in Asia are better equipped to move beyond the limit of the nation-state boundary, to develop discourses congruent with the new conditions to create a new discursive mood, and to imagine

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[1] Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Towards Deimperialization* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 214, emphasis added.
[2] Naifei Ding, 'Prostitutes, Parasites and the House of State Feminism', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 1, no. 2 (2000), pp. 97-108.

new possibilities'.[3]

Asian Popular Culture in the Global Setting: The Korean Wave in India

At this historic juncture when possibilities for imagining Asia anew are opening up alongside the increased circulation of mass cultural forms across national boundaries, I would like to ask what mass culture might have to say to (and about) inter-Asia solidarities.

There are multiple reasons for my asking this question. First is the familiar history of sites of consumption of 'degenerate' (politically regressive and aesthetically inferior) cultural commodities becoming sites of political contest. With specific reference to commodities Asian, what immediately comes to mind is Hong Kong cinema. Films produced in Hong Kong, which always had a large market beyond their territory, witnessed a massive expansion of their market from the 1970s to the early 1990s. Studies have shown that Hong Kong action films have been drawn into highly localised class, race, and other contestations in different parts of the world.[4]

More recently, Japanese, South Korean, and Indian content has begun to be consumed in new Asian markets, as well as other parts of the world. While Japanese and Indian popular culture — like that of Hong Kong — has always had a market beyond national boundaries, what we need to focus on now is not merely the geographical expansion of markets but the *modes of engagement with the (Asian) popular in different global settings*.

Researchers tracking the 'Korean Wave' (*Hallyu*) in the rest of Asia have made the somewhat sweeping claim that the popularity of Korean television content has contributed to the improved image of South Korea and its people in Japan and other countries as well. I will not make such a large claim on behalf of Korean or other imported Asian cultural commodities in the Indian context but, nevertheless, point out that popular culture often intersects with social and political mobilisations in the country. This is most striking in the Northeastern region of India — which borders China, Bangladesh, and Myanmar and has historically been a site for insurgencies and struggles for independence. Here, South Korean television and pop culture has a massive audience. This popularity is traceable to the widespread viewership enjoyed by Hong Kong action cinema in this region. At the height of Hong Kong cinema's popularity in India in the early 1990s, martial arts and other action films from the industry were frequently shown in VHS format in the video parlours of the area.

This brief history of the Korean Wave in India is striking on many counts. First, it reached Northeast India before the government-owned television network, Doordarshan, officially

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[3] Chen, *Asia as Method* (2010), p. 214.

[4] See David Desser, 'The Kung Fu Craze: Hong Kong Cinema's First American Reception', in Poshek Fu and David Desser, eds., *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 19-43; Meaghan Morris, 'Learning from Bruce Lee: Pedagogy and Political Correctness in Martial Arts Cinema', in Mathew Tinkcom and Amy Villarejo, eds., *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 171-186; Meaghan Morris, 'Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema: Hong Kong and the Making of a Global Popular Culture', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 5, no. 2 (2004), pp. 181-199; S. V. Srinivas, 'Hong Kong Action Film in the Indian B Circuit', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (2003), pp. 40-62.

introduced the Korean Wave in India. In 2006, Doordarshan telecast nationally (in the Hindi-dubbed version) the Korean television serials *Emperor of the Sea* and *A Jewel in the Palace*.[5] But Korean pop culture had begun to circulate in Northeast India from around 2000, as we shall see below. Second, and this is highlighted in the work of Kshetrimayum and Chanu[6] and Nekolie Kuotsu,[7] an overwhelming amount of Korean content that circulates in Northeast India over the past decade is *pirated*. This is likely to be true of the rest of the country as well but there has been no nationwide study on piracy and the Korean Wave to date. There is a third interesting fact related to the career of Korean popular culture in India: in contrast to the huge demand for Korean content on the grey market, the attempt made by a major Indian distributor of imported films to launch Korean blockbuster movies on the country's theatrical circuit failed.[8] Curiously, therefore, the Korean Wave in India is unofficial and its legality dubious. Its popularity does not result from the efforts of the Indian (or South Korean) state or established business establishments. While it is widely available, it exists mostly in the domain of the grey economy.

Most importantly, Korean pop culture has taken root and thrived in the context of protracted political struggles against the Indian state in some parts of Northeast India. Researchers have pointed out that the spread of Korean content in the Northeast is a direct fallout of a "blackout" of Indian cinema and television in some parts this region from the year 2000.[9] According to Kuotsu,

Image 1: Advertisement for Gopi Naidu's martial arts academy shares wall space with the latest film publicity. Photograph by the author. Notice how seamlessly the advertisement for the Taekwondo school merges with the rest of the landscape where the walls are covered with posters for the latest Telugu language films.
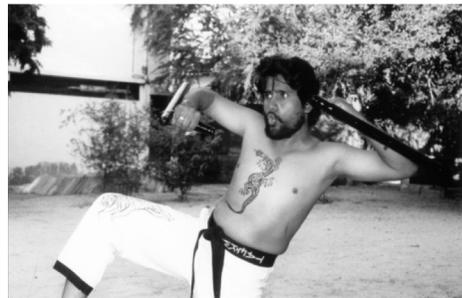
Image 2: Gopi Naidu poses for a photograph with Taekwondo weapons. Photographs by the author.

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[5] Otojit Kshetrimayum and Ningombam Victoria Chanu, 'Mapping Cultural Diffusion: A Case Study of "Korean Wave" (Hallyu) in North East India', in Sushila Narsimhan and Kim Do Young, eds., *India and Korea: Bridging the Gaps* (New Delhi: Manak Publications, 2008), pp. 181-195 [http://mappingculturaldiffusion.blogspot.com].

[6] Ibid. (2008).

[7] Neikolie Kuotsu, 'Architectures of Piracy: Encounters with Korean Wave in "Northeast" India', paper presented at the International Conference on Asian Culture Industries: A Comparative Study of India, Japan and South Korea, Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangalore, 21st and 22nd December (2010).

[8] S. V. Srinivas, 'When *The Host* Arrived: A Report on the Problems and Prospects for the Exchange of Popular Cultural Commodities with India', report submitted to the InKo Centre, Chennai (Bangalore: CSCS Media Archive, 2008) [http://www.cscs.res.in/dataarchive/textfiles/textfile.2009-08-26.5518967113/file].

[9] Kshetrimayum and Chanu, 'Mapping Cultural Diffusion' (2008); Kuotsu, 'Architectures of Piracy' (2010); Naorem Thoinu Devi, 'The Impact of Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) in Manipur', aper presented at the International Conference on Asian Culture Industries: A Comparative Study of India, Japan and South Korea, Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangalore, 21st and 22nd December (2010).

in the year 2000, an insurgent organization called the Revolutionary People's Front issued a diktat in Manipur prohibiting the screening of Hindi language films in theatres and the telecast of all Hindi language satellite channels barring the national broadcaster Doordarshan. The ban was promulgated on the grounds that Hindi films were promoting 'indecency' and undermining local Manipuri culture and language. Hindi soon became outlawed in the state and was discouraged in educational institutions. During a visit to Manipur's capital Imphal, I noticed that video shops widely displayed Korean, Hollywood and local Manipuri digital films but Hindi/Bombay films were markedly absent.[10]

South Korean popular culture thus came to occupy a space vacated by Hindi cinema and television. Furthermore, new opportunities were thrown open to home-grown video and digital filmmakers who began copying Korean films and serials.[11]

All this is not to suggest that localisation of Asian popular culture is devoid of stereotyping—both positive and negative. Let me present two sets of images from my research in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh to show how integral the stereotype is to the very process of localisation. The first set of images is from Tirupathi and belongs to a time (2001) when the Korean Wave as we know it today had not yet reached this part of the country. However, due to the popularity of Hong Kong action films, the Korean martial art form Taekwondo found many enthusiastic supporters. Images 1 & 2 show the publicity campaign for a martial arts school run by one Mr. Gopi Naidu and then the man himself posing for a photograph with a dragon tattooed on his body. South Korea (or for that matter, the East Asia region, including Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Japan) was strongly identified with martial arts and dragons.

The other image I would like to present is that of a ubiquitous sight in most parts of urban Andhra Pradesh in the past decade or so: the roadside noodle shop. What is interesting is that the noodles sold in these shops taste nothing like the variants available in 'authentic' Chinese restaurants in India or in other parts of the world. Nevertheless, those who run these shops are insistent on the invocation of Chinese*ness*, and that too in the most stereotypical fashion possible by painting dragons all over.

Images 3 and 4: Two different stalls belonging to the enterprising 'Sri Kanaka Durga Mana Dragon Noodles' on the streets of Vijayawada City. An image of the god Ganesh, the Remover of Obstacles, can be seen between the dragons. Photographs by the author.

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[10] Kuotsu, 'Architectures of Piracy' (2010), p. 13.
[11] Kshetrimayum and Chanu, 'Mapping Cultural Diffusion' (2008).

This degree of stereotyping does not prevent Asian popular cultural commodities from becoming *found objects of local political struggles*. Whether it is Korean pop culture in the insurgency-prone state of Manipur or the Dragon Noodles of Vijayawada, the larger issue at hand is precisely popular culture's tendency to become available for both political and economic deployment that has nothing to do with the contexts from which these commodities/forms originate.

What kind of the affinities can there be between the points of origin (say South Korean, Hong Kong, Japan, etc.) and those of reception (India)? Do these affinities exist prior to the encounter with the popular? In 1994, I was a part of a group of researchers who carried out a study of video parlours in Arunachal Pradesh, one of the Northeastern states. We noticed that regular patrons of video parlours, belonging to indigenous communities, frequently said that Hong Kong actors were, or rather looked, 'tribal'. What they meant was that, like themselves, they had 'Mongoloid' racial features — these were the racial features that marked their difference from the Indians of the rest the country. I am struck by the echo of a similar claim in the otherwise pioneering study of the Korean Wave in Manipur by Kshetrimayum and Chanu. These authors argue that

> *cultural proximity between Manipuri and Korean societies can be discerned. Manipur can trace its history back 2000 years… The Koreans are believed to be descendants of several Mongol tribes that migrated onto the Korean Peninsula from Central Asia. Meiteis [who constitute the majority in the state] in are ethno-linguistically Tibeto-Burman family of Mongoloid stock… The family name comes first in traditional Manipuri names like the Koreans. Manipuris akin to the Koreans do not refer to others by their given names except among very close friends.*[12]

Such a claim does not account for the global circulation and popularity of cultural forms, including Indian and Hong Kong cinemas among racially *dissimilar* audiences such as Africans and African-Americans respectively. The problematic claim by Kshetrimayum and Chanu[13] cautions us against trying to locate racial/civilisational similarities in order to account for contemporary developments. Indeed, similar claims were made in the East Asia region, as noted by Beng Huat Chua. Countering the argument that East Asia is unified by 'Asian values' which are in turn traceable to the ancient civilisations of the regions, in particular Confucianism, he contends that

> *in contrast to the very uneven and abstract presence of Confucianism, since the 1980s popular cultural products have criss-crossed the national borders of the East Asian countries and constituted part of the culture of consumption that defines a very large part of everyday life of the population throughout the region. This empirically highly visible cultural traffic allows for the discursive construction of an 'East Asian Popular Culture' as an object of analysis.*[14]

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[12] Kshetrimayum and Chanu, 'Mapping Cultural Diffusion' (2008).
[13] Ibid. (2008).
[14] Beng Huat Chua, 'Conceptualizing an East Asian Popular Culture', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 5, no. 2 (2004), pp. 200-221.

The challenge before us is to devise the critical and analytical tools required to make sense of the political work of the popular as it circulates in diverse Asian contexts without resorting to simplistic explanations.

Popular Culture and the Dematerialisation of Politics

One of the reasons for my focus on Asian popular culture is the highly localised struggles and contestations that it has become a part of in contexts that are very different from their point of origin. Another reason is the more 'global' and non-region-specific phenomenon, which I will call the *dematerialisation of politics*. By this, I mean the shift of the political away from the familiar sites of action, such as the university and workplace as well as the conventional institutions of mass mobilisation (unions, political parties), towards places of consumption and the representational domain. In the process, *mobilisation and consumption are becoming inseparably linked*. I propose that in the light of the global dematerialisation of politics, the importance of popular culture in understanding the political is significantly increased. While evidence of the larger phenomenon is plentifully available from across the world, for reasons of focus, I refer to two examples from the Indian context.

The first of these occurred in the Northeast Indian state of Meghalaya, which has a history of ethnic tension between the indigenous populations and the non-indigenous Bengali speakers. In 2007, Amit Paul, a Bengali-speaking resident of the state, became the winner of the television reality show *Indian Idol 3*. The event led to much celebration that cut across the ethnic divide and also resulted in the state government nominating Paul as brand ambassador of the state. Mass consumption of television had thus become the site and a catalyst in at least temporarily transcending the ethnic divide in the state.[15]

The other instance that I wish to draw attention to is the 'Pink Chaddi [Panty] Campaign' centred on Bangalore but for the most part carried out online, on social networking websites like Facebook[16] and Blogspot.[17] The group initiating the campaign provocatively called itself the 'Consortium of Pub-going, Loose and Forward Women'. The campaign itself was in protest against the attack by a Hindu right-wing group, Sri Rama Sene, on young women who had visited a pub with their male companions in Mangalore city, Karnataka.

According to the statement put out on Facebook by Nisha Susan, who started the campaign,

the Pink Chaddi Campaign kicked off on 5 February 2009 to oppose the Sri Ram Sena. The campaign is growing exponentially (31,888 members at this point in the life of our Consortium of Pub-going, Loose and Forward Women) and that is not surprising. Most women in this

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[15] *Indian Idol 3* has been the subject of discussion by media researchers. For an interesting account of the show and its significance, see Aswin Punathambekar, 'Indian Idol and Flash Fandom' (2007), [https://bollyspace.wordpress.com/2007/10/02/indian-idol-and-flash-fandom/].

[16] [http://www.facebook.com/pages/Consortium-of-Pub-going-Loose-and-Forward-Women/54434846926].

[17] [http://thepinkchaddicampaign.blogspot.com].

country have enough curbs on their lives without a whole new franchise cashing in with their bully-boy tactics. Of course, a lot of men have joined the group as well.[18]

The participants in the campaign located in different parts of India and the world couriered pink panties to the attackers. They also decided to meet in the real world to celebrate Valentine's Day (of late a target of right-wing groups) by visiting pubs in Bangalore.

An interesting question posed by the Pink Chaddi Campaign to researchers and activists alike is whether the campaign is 'feminist'. I am not particularly interested in a definitive yes-or-no answer but will only underscore the manner in which consumption and lifestyle became the focus of the attack and the protest against it. 'Pub culture', in this instance, became synonymous with immorality as well as a signifier of the new assertive, independent woman, depending on which side you were on. Dematerialisation of politics could well be the general condition of the political in the twenty-first century when consumption of cultural commodities mediates our encounter with the world at large.

Against the unfolding scenario of Asian popular culture's increasing consumer base in the Asia region and the dematerialisation of politics, the possibility of the former being drawn into highly localised political contests is considerable. This is therefore a good time to ask what popular culture might be doing to the imaging of Asia.

The Film in Question

In the rest of this paper, I examine a Hong Kong film set in India, *Himalaya Singh* (Wai Ka-Fai, 2005), to ask what resources popular culture might offer for understanding the idea of Asia and inter-Asia solidarities.

The earlier sections of the paper suggest that the analysis of popular culture today confronts a number of challenging questions. Cultural commodities that circulate in the region are not always sourced from the West; neither are they necessarily available through official channels of distribution and are not, for the most part, 'progressive' or 'oppositional'. In this section, I will focus on a remarkable film that opens up new ways of thinking through the question of how popular culture might contribute to the new imaginings of Asia and regional solidarities that are not necessarily driven by the hegemonic interests of nation states.

Himalaya Singh, the film I choose to elaborate on, is replete with Orientalist stereotypes of India. This makes the film a typical instance of the popular, which has a tendency to produce racial and gender stereotypes. At the time of the film's release, there were protests by the Indian community in Hong Kong. In all likelihood, the film was never even released in India. Although it is now being appreciated on online forums, reviews on fan websites, written soon after the film's release, indicate that the film was far from being a critical success at the time. A commentator went

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[18] Nisha Susan, Facebook statement [http://www.facebook.com/pages/Consortium-of-Pub-going-Loose-and-Forward-Women/54434846926?v=info#info_edit_sections].

to the extent of saying that the film was 'universally reviled' and added:

Himalaya Singh isn't about Hong Kong, and it's definitely not about India. Instead, it's a completely random hodgepodge of jokes with no rhyme or reason, and after a good ninety minutes of such pointless silliness, a person could become insane if not agitated and downright murderous.[19]

Notwithstanding the reception of the film among Hong Kong film buffs and the fact that the film was not even released in India, I would like to argue that this is a significant film because it foregrounds the issue of how popular texts, in spite of their politically regressive/objectionable representations, might be attempting to address the questions and problems posed by the globalisation of cultural commodities. Furthermore, the film throws up the interesting methodological challenge of how the researcher can make sense of undeniably stereotypical 'Asian' representations (that is, images of Asia by Asians). The saturation of film with stereotypical images—and this can be established with any randomly selected two-minute sequence from *Himalaya Singh*—necessitates a methodological manoeuvre, a reading strategy, to avoid reaching simplistic and predictable conclusions about stereotypes, Orientalism, and racism.

To flag the challenge posed by stereotypes of Asia by Asians, I will draw attention to the work of one my Japanese collaborators, Ms. Kyouko Nobi of Contemporary Natyam Company, a professional dancer, trained in the Indian classical dance form Bharatanatyam. She is an avid viewer of Indian cinema and teacher of, among other forms, 'Bollywood dance' in Tokyo. Among her contributions to the promotion of Indian cinema in Japan are her books on Indian cinema in Japanese. These books introduce the major Hindi and Tamil film stars to Japanese audiences and also explain the intricacies of the complicated plots of Indian films with the help of drawings of family trees. What is striking about these books is the blend of a genuine love for the cinema in question and stereotypical imaging of India and Indians. This becomes clear from the visual imagery used in the books.

There are in fact two levels at which stereotypical imaging is at work here: first is in Indian popular films themselves, which are notorious for their tendency to produce stereotypical images of everything, from caste to gender to religious community to the occasional non-Indian seen on screen. The second is at the level of the interpretation of these Indian images/films by Nobi. This latter is in turn framed by local (Japanese) stereotypes of the Indian/non-Japanese 'Other'. Notwithstanding the films themselves or their interpretation by Ms. Nobi, something interesting is happening. Spaces are opening up for an engagement with the Other on terms that are not determined wholly by statist or hegemonic concerns. Racism may, perhaps, be read into them but that misses out on what is new about these images. That *structuring of sentiment*, the attempt to comprehend and reach out to the Other, is what I would like to hold onto in my examination of *Himalaya Singh*.

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[19] [http://www.lovehkfilm.com/reviews_2/himalaya_singh.htm]. Visited on 5th May, 2005.

This film's complicated plot revolves around the misadventures of two sets of characters who arrive at an Indian city that is crawling with royals, yogis, magicians, thieves, and supernatural creatures. The film begins with a voiceover narrator stating that in India, people believe the world is within the god Brahma's dream and if he were to wake up, everything would be destroyed. The exotic framing of the action is accompanied by the bizarre characters and their frequent encounters with the supernatural.

The protagonist Himalaya Singh (Ronald Cheng) grows up with his parents in the mountains, in complete isolation from other humans but in perfect harmony with nature. He is introduced playing I Spy with the clouds. The youth's father sends him from the Himalayas into the world below to marry Indian Beauty (Gauri Karnik), the daughter of King of Yoga. In order to marry her, Singh has to win a yoga competition. Before he sets off, Singh's father tells him that it is important to experience the bad, too, and gives him a pouch that he is to open only if he has become totally degenerate. Singh comes down from the mountains and accidentally wins the competition that qualifies him to marry Talli (Cherrie In), a female gangster. This he manages by falling into a pot that has been placed in the open to test the yoga skills of the suitors.

Singh innocently refuses to marry Talli saying he intends marry Indian Beauty instead. A furious Talli, who is also jealous of Indian Beauty, decides to tempt him into degeneracy to punish both Singh and Beauty. She easily convinces him to become bad by saying it is a prerequisite for marrying Beauty. Talli tries to train him in evil by making him watch DVDs of gangster and pornographic films. Meanwhile, a group of bumbling tourists from Hong Kong—two young men and their uncle, Uncle Panic (Lau Ching-Wan), and a fourth unrelated youth (Francis Ng) with a suitcase full of money—arrive in the same city. The three youths lose their memory after drinking magic oil while the uncle is hypnotised and robbed by local thieves. While in a hypnotic trance, Uncle Panic hallucinates that he is married to a beautiful woman (Cecilia Cheung). It turns out that she is actually a magical white peacock. Himalaya Singh tries earnestly to be bad and fails miserably. Talli falls in love with him. The Hong Kong youths, who now believe they are related to each other, have a series of adventures in their search for the rest of the tourists. Uncle Panic seeks the thieves so that he can be hypnotised again and again to re-enter the hallucinatory world where his 'wife' lives. Each time he is hypnotised, he enters a scenario from a different movie. Peacock leads him to the palace of Indian Beauty, where the England-educated princess refuses to consent to an arranged marriage and runs away. She is guided by a two-headed snake which speaks Cantonese with one head and Hindi with another. The snake ensures that she meets Uncle Panic. It also goes on to turn Himalaya Singh into a gambler and drug addict but is killed and eaten by the three Hong Kong youths. Upon eating the snake, the youths have a severe allergic reaction that has them twisting on the floor. King of Yoga, who is passing by, sees the contorted figures and believes one of them to be Himalaya Singh. Meanwhile, Singh is transformed into a truly degenerate man. Talli gives him the magic oil and also drinks it herself. Both forget about their relationship and strike a deal to share the dowry if Singh wins Indian Beauty's hand. All the major characters come together at the venue of the yoga competition. Himalaya Singh wins but is unable to regain consciousness because it is now his task to watch over the sleeping Brahma (imaged as an infant)

and ensure that life goes on. He takes over this responsibility from Peacock. The three Hong Kong youths, the Uncle, and Indian Beauty manage to catch the tourist bus, presumably for Hong Kong. Talli carries away the statue-like Singh. The film ends with Singh inadvertently disturbing Brahma's sleep. Creation starts all over again. All the characters go back in time to the Stone Age.

The film is consistent in its references to cinema in enunciating the founding myth that the world is an illusion. All the major characters in the story encounter a world which is already part of a recognisable representation, such as for example a film story. Individuals are modelled, or fashion themselves, after film characters. Uncle Panic for example imitates Mr. Bean (played by Rowan Atkinson on television and screen). *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981), the *Kill Bill* series (Quentin Tarantino, 2003 & 2004), and *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) are among the other films referred to.

Illusion as a story-level concern becomes the means by which the film elaborates on *misrecognition*. The term misrecognition has two very different meanings, both of which are relevant for a discussion of the film. The first is simply the case of mistaken identity—to incorrectly attribute features/characteristics/traits to someone. In discussions of political theory, misrecognition has come to be closely identified with racial and gender stereotyping. Charles Taylor, while disagreeing with the view that misrecognition causes real harm to minorities, offers the following summation of the concept's significance in the debates on multiculturalism:

The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.[20]

The second sense in which the term is used is to be found in film theory that draws on psychoanalysis. Here, the concept refers to the process by which we mistake an image to be a more perfect version of ourselves (misrecognise the image as an ideal). This notion of misrecognition too is of relevance to the film.

Characters in this film are constantly misrecognising themselves and others. Throughout the film, misrecognition is deployed to generate comic effect. There is a brilliant sequence in the film when the three Hong Kong youths enter into the melodramatic life story of an Indian character. While waiting for a bus, the three tourists meet an Indian cook who hears them speaking in Cantonese and introduces himself. He was a cook in Hong Kong and was sent to prison for murder. Now, he is returning to his wife along with his two sons. The Hong Kongers begin to believe that *they* are the father and son trio returning home and go all the way to the Indian's house for a reunion.

There are a number of other instances of misrecognition in the film. Late in the film, the three youths wake up believing they are Japanese gangsters and the Francis Ng character develops a

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[20] Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition', in Charles Taylor, K. Anthony Appiah, Jurgen Habermas, Steven Rockefeller, Michael Waltzer, and Susan Wolf, eds., *Multiculturalism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 25.

twitch of the eye like the gangster played by Takeshi Kitano in the post-modern Japanese genre film *Takeshis'* (Takeshi Kitano, 2005). Soon after taking on the gangster persona, this youth is mistaken by King of Yoga to be Himalaya Singh himself.

Himalaya Singh proves to be a textbook example of misrecognition as understood in film theory discussion. He watches DVDs and attempts to model himself on characters he sees on the television screen. This is the source of much hilarity in the film. Singh demonstrates what he learnt from the DVDs in the course of a street fight along with Talli's gang. Having watched a pornographic film instead of a gangster film due to a mix-up in the DVD collection, he tries to rape a (male) member of the rival gang instead of hitting him. He improves somewhat later in the film but by way of being menacing, he can only manage to ask people on the streets if they want to buy flowers or learn yoga from him. The uncle, in his many hallucinations, mistakes the peacock and also one of the thieves to be his 'wife'. There is a fascinating twist to serial misrecognitions in the latter part of the film when Uncle Panic begins to believe that reality is an illusion—that Indian Beauty is a bearded man, and his nephews (who fail to recognise him because of the magic oil) are a part of a hallucination.

The manner in which the film handles racial and linguistic differences is interesting. Chinese actors (from Hong Kong) play the roles of Indian characters like Himalaya Singh, Talli, and her gangsters. Further, while some of the Indians we see on the screen (Singh and his parents, Talli and her gang) speak Cantonese among themselves, other Indians (like King of Yoga and Indian Beauty) and also the minor characters speak in Hindi.

Rather late in the film, King of Yoga is seen verbalising the spectator's surprise at the mismatch between the names/locations of characters and their racial origins. King of Yoga sees the Hong Kong youth twisting on the floor after eating the snake and mistakes one of them to be Himalaya Singh. He expresses his surprise at discovering that Singh is a 'Chinaman, not Hindustani' (in the subtitles of the Mandarin version). This brief sequence is the only reference to racial difference in the film. Interestingly, in response to the King's comment, the Hong Kong youth pulls back the skin near his eyes to look Chinese. The real Himalaya Singh and the one who is mistaken for him are in fact *both* Chinese!

The linguistic and cultural mash-up in the film is all the more striking in the Mandarin-language version. In this version, all Hindi-language dialogues too are uniformly dubbed into Mandarin and as a result, even King of Yoga and Indian Beauty speak the same language as the Hong Kong tourists. As a result of the crude dubbing, the hilarity resulting from Uncle Panic's incomprehension of Beauty is of course lost, but within the film's overall framework, it is perfectly plausible for characters to make no sense to each other in spite of speaking the same language, not least because the film is set in a place where animals speak and people rarely comprehend each other or understand what is going on around them.

While the film is concerned quite centrally with cultural differences, the casting of actors and also the randomness of the characters' linguistic competences suggest that these differences do not in fact matter. Furthermore, the overarching frame provided by the myth of the sleeping Brahma ensures that all the characters we see—regardless of their differences—are united by their common

fate: when the infant Buddha is disturbed, *everyone* is back in the Stone Age.

Why then does the film need to be set in India? Evidently, the geographical setting of the action anchors the Brahma myth. Further, the Indian setting facilitates the film's exploration of the relationship between representation and reality. Virtually everything we see in the film is already framed by an earlier representation. Both popular cinema (Hollywood/Hong Kong/Japanese/ Indian) and Orientalism are invoked separately and sometimes together, become instances of such pre-existing structures overdetermining comprehension and meaning-making. The film's repeated foregrounding of the *mediation* of the action by these pre-existing frames facilitates a fascinating representational breakthrough: stereotypes cease to matter because of their sheer banality. As a result of this manoeuvre by the film, we can then ask the question: what comes after the stereotype and in spite of it?

The film does not explicitly deal with the issue of transcultural or regional solidarity. It is important because it presents the interesting problem posed by the domain of representation. *The effort to build inter-Asia solidarities has as its first obstacle and also its most readily available resource a popular culture that is saturated with stereotypes of the Asian Other*.