Discovering the digital Stephen Chow: The transborder influence of Chow’s films on the Chinese Internet in the 2010s

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Abstract
This study uncovers and analyzes the transborder influence of Stephen Chow’s films in China in the 2010s. This influence takes a form that is new and different from that of the first three fan cultures of Chow’s films. It operates through various online carvalesque items co-created by Chinese netizens and cultural producers. I document this with an investigation of the online catchphrases, visual memes, and web novels inspired by Chow’s films. One can interpret this new wave of influence as the fourth fan culture of Chow’s films or as a merger between Hong Kong nonsensical culture with the Chinese online carnival. This study’s data come from primary sources including memes and web novels and secondary sources including relevant news reports, online commentaries, and Chinese-language scholarship.

Keywords
Chinese memes, Chinese online carnival, Hong Kong popular culture, Stephen Chow, transborder

Introduction
This study uncovers and analyzes the transborder influence of Stephen Chow’s films on the Chinese online carnival, which became a major part of the Chinese Internet since the late 2000s. I organize the discussion into five sections. In the introduction section, I identify the three research gaps that this study helps to fill. In the second section, I overview how current studies assess Stephen Chow’s films as a pioneering source of the Chinese online carnival. In the third section, I analyze some popular online catchphrase constructed on the basis of Chow’s films. In the fourth section, I discuss
Internet memes constructed with sources from Chow’s films. In the fifth section, I explicate the relationship and affinities between Chow’s films and Chinese web novels.

This study contributes to filling three research gaps. First, by uncovering the powerful and long-lasting influence of Chow’s films outside of Hong Kong (HK), this study helps to attract scholarly attention to allegedly lowbrow parts of HK popular culture. International and HK scholars pay disproportionately little attention to Chow’s films; they produce around a dozen English-language articles and book chapters (e.g. E. K. Yu, 2010). This is a very small number in comparison to other influential HK popular cultural products including, for example, the films of Wong Kar Wai or the celebrity Jackie Chan.

Second, by analyzing a case of contra-flow of culture from HK to China, this study helps expand the scope of investigation of HK cultures’ transborder influence. Although the study of HK culture is a relatively established field, research on HK culture’s transborder influence is underdeveloped. Existing studies discuss HK culture’s transborder influence on the West rather than that on China. They do so because the former influence constitutes evidence for global cultural contra-flow. The transborder cultural flow from HK to China before the handover may not be a contra-flow, but the situation becomes different in the 2010s. As numerous studies on the mainlandization of HK films, television, comics and animation, celebrities, and popular music show, post-handover HK culture is hegemonically controlled by China in the 2010s (Szeto & Chen, 2011). Under the pressure of the Chinese state and audiences, HK popular cultural production de-emphasizes locally distinctive elements and strategically emphasizes mainland Chinese ones. In this new context, it becomes meaningful to conceptualize transborder cultural flow from HK to China as contra-flow and to explore whether it exists. The case of Chow’s films can help answer this question.

Third, by explicating how Chow’s films still continue to generate cultural impact in China after the 2000s, this study identifies a blindspot in research on Stephen Chow and helps fill it. International and HK scholars are not interested in investigating Chow’s films. But mainland Chinese scholars are very enthusiastic and they have published over 2000 articles, postgraduate theses, and books on Chow’s films since the late 1990s. The scholarly quality of some of these publications may not be up to the international par, but they already compose a moderate-sized field. The vast majority of studies in this field investigate Chow’s films or their reception between the late 1990s and late 2000s. These authors assume that Chow’s films have become less culturally relevant after the 2000s. They have not discovered the shift of influence of Chow’s films from mainly offline-based film fandom to social media-based participatory cultures in the 2010s. This is the first study that systematically analyzes this shift.

Data

The study’s data include primary sources on relevant online catchphrases (i.e. verbal memes), memes (i.e. visual memes), and web novels. I collect them in association with two larger research projects of mine. The first explores the social meanings and reception of Stephen Chow’s films; the second can be described as a cultural sociology of Chinese web novels. I collected data on online catchphrases in the following way. I worked with lists of catchphrases inspired by Chow created by veteran fans and additional ones I found. I watched the original scenes with which these catchphrases were created. Then I searched with Google for instances in which the catchphrases were used. I examine their meanings in these uses by different netizens and in different online discourses. This examination went smoothly because I already knew most of these catchphrases in the
course of my own daily communication experiences on Chinese social media and my past research experience on different aspects of the Chinese Internet including gaming, net–public sphere, and online nationalism. Then I analyzed the transborder and sociocultural characteristics of these catchphrases.

I searched for memes based on Chow’s films through finding relevant news reports, tracing them on the “google image” search engine, following many Wechat groups, reading popular online forums, and identifying relevant packages of custom images (biaoqingbao) in specialized sites. The memes were dispersed in disparate sources. I found that the use and circulation of memes inspired by Chow’s films were generally less broad than catchphrases inspired by Chow’s films. A reason was that meme use sometimes involved the altering of the memes’ textual content. Popular memes could have hundreds of versions. I stopped after finding around 200 memes inspired by Chow’s films. A point of saturation was reached; the new ones I found after that were infrequently used. I analyzed these memes by examining their original meanings within the films, understanding their texts and visuals (which were sometimes altered through meme-making), and tracing how they were used by netizens. I found that they collectively differed from catchphrases in many aspects including their transborder characteristics.

I have collected much data for my project on Chinese web novels. Only a tiny part of them are analyzed in this study. There were three primary data sources: the textual contents of web novels, reader commentaries on web novels, and authors’ thoughts assessed through their commentaries and interviews. I read, analyzed, and coded in detail 200 novels written by a sample of 200 authors. These authors represented the most broadly read among all web novel authors in the 2010s. I read and coded a few hundred other novels in less detail. In doing these analyses and coding, I noticed bits of relevant information on Chow’s films dispersed in different novels. I collected these data since 2012. I read commentaries on individual novels, web novel industry, and web novel literary matters from various online sources including most importantly novel publication platforms and the major web novel criticism platforms, Longkong and Youshu. Specialized data I collected for this study included commentaries on Wukongzhuan (The Story of Wukong) and on the “posing and ass-kicking” (zhuangbidalian) school of Chinese web novels.

**Chow’s films as one of the origins and sources of the Chinese online carnival**

By scrutinizing studies on the reception of Chow’s films in mainland China, one can identify two large-scale fan cultures and a smaller scale one that arose between the late 1990s and mid-2000s. No studies have listed them together as the fan cultures of Chow’s films; none have examined exactly when each of these cultures lasted. But there is enough discussion on them to provide a background for my foregrounding of the “fourth fan culture” of Chow’s films.

Documented in hundreds of articles written by Chinese scholars, the “big talk culture” emerged among college students in 1998 with their enthusiasm for the film *A Chinese Odyssey Part Two* (Sun, 2018). Rarely discussed outside the research field on Chow’s films, the big talk culture became one of the biggest and most influential subcultures among Mainland Chinese educated youths in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Sun, 2018; Yao, 2005; S. Q. Yu, 2011). The content of the big talk culture includes the nonsensical (wulitou) discourses and practices that permeate all of Chow’s 20th-century films. The second fan culture of Chow’s films is indeed called “nonsensical (wulitou) culture.” However, the big talk culture is distinguished from the nonsensical culture by its focus on the most intellectual and serious parts of the nonsensical
culture. For example, the most celebrated scenes of the film for big talk fans include a philosophical dialogue that resembles a Zen Buddhist koan and a moving declaration of eternal love. In contrast, the typical and major manifestations of the nonsensical culture in Chow’s films are non sequitur logic, slapstick expressions, exaggerated bodily movements, and comical but mean retorts.

Mainland audiences of Chow’s films embraced the nonsensical culture in early 2000. While the big talk culture was based on a particular film of Chow and was mainly participated by highly educated youths, the nonsensical culture was based on all of Chow’s 20th-century films and was broadly participated by audiences from diverse backgrounds. Nonsensical speech and actions are recognized by Mainland scholars and audiences to be the identifying characteristics of Chow’s films. At the same time, the nonsensical culture was (and still is) a colloquial, informal, and low-brow culture in HK. Some understand it more broadly as a part of traditional Lingnan culture and Cantonese culture. Mainland participants of the nonsensical culture tend to see Chow as the originator of the nonsensical culture. Hongkongers do not; they learn this culture in their daily interactions and through media texts aside from Chow’s films. Chow is simply a particularly skillful practitioner of HK’s nonsensical culture. At the core of HK’s nonsensical culture is non sequitur logic, comical but mean retorts, and exaggerated facial expressions and gestures. These core elements are emphasized in Chow’s films. Mainland participants of the nonsensical culture also authentically emphasized and embraced them.

“Stephen Chow style youths” is a much smaller scale phenomenon than the big talk and nonsensical cultures. Few practiced it, but it was sufficiently high profile for scholars to coin the term to describe it. One of my informants from 2010 claimed he had been a “Stephen Chow style youth” for several years. He thought it was defined by humorous nonsensical talk and flamboyant nonsensical manners, which largely correspond to scholars’ descriptions (Yang, 2010). Fans think Chow’s performance in films and television dramas before 1994 most strongly represents the image of a Chow style youth.

Chow’s several new films of the 2010s are still very commercially successful. But no scholars have suggested that Chow films, including old and new ones, are generating a new fan culture or new cultural impacts in the 2010s. It is easy to reach such conclusions if one narrowly fixates on films, film-watching, and film audiences. Since the late 2000s, social media arose in China and enormously changed the consumption of popular culture. By extending the focus on films to social media, one will be able to observe a fourth fan culture emerging. This culture is composed of netizens practicing Chowian nonsensical culture in a variety of reproductive, co-creative, and interactive ways. This study analyzes the three ways that I think are most impactful. I tentatively use the concept of “fan culture” to describe it. But it differs from typical fan cultures; it is not only participated by fans of Chow and it is less coherent than fan cultures. I will return to this issue in section “Conclusion.”

Although current studies of Chow’s films entirely overlook this fourth fan culture, current studies of various aspects of the Chinese online carnival have tangentially mentioned it. Over a dozen studies testify that Chow’s films and their nonsensical culture are one of the most important origins of the Chinese online carnival. They are a main source of the e’gao culture (H. Yu & Xu, 2016; S. Zhang, 2010; T. Zhang, 2013, p. 90), a second generational pioneer of shanzhai culture (Chubb, 2015, p. 274), “the richest source of Chinese camp” (S. Q. Yu, 2011, p. 139). They are the main reference of Chinese online parody (H. Li, 2011, p. 73) and spoofed videos (H. S. Li, 2012, p. 66; Voci, 2014, p. 49). Chow is recognized as a precursor of Chinese Internet culture (Guo, 2012, pp. 114–124) and a Chinese master of the carnivalesque (T. Zhang, 2015).
Nonetheless, these studies do not treat Chow, Chow’s film, and Chow’s fan cultures in any detail. For example, T. Zhang (2013) focuses on Chinese e’gao culture and mentions only Chow once in a footnote. This study goes far beyond these abstract and general attempts to link Chow’s films to the Chinese online carnival. It concretely elaborates Chow films’ direct influence on online catchphrases and memes and their indirect influence on Chinese web novels. This study is not able to cover all aspects of influence that can go under the umbrella concept of the fourth fan culture of Chow’s films. Chow’s films’ impact on online games is an example. As early as 2001, a very successful massively multiplayer online role-playing game, *Fantasy Westward Journey*, was inspired by the big talk culture and it attracted many big talk fans. There are similar but smaller scale games in the 2010s that may qualify as a part of the fourth fan culture.

**Chow’s films and online catchphrases**

Online catchphrases refer to broadly adopted terms or phrases that are popularized on the Internet. “My dad is Li Gang (wobashiligang),” for example, is a sociopolitically critical online catchphrase that remains broadly used from 2011 to the present. They are genuinely socially impactful in China since the late 2000s because so many citizens from different backgrounds use them in daily online and offline discourses. But for unexplored reasons, online catchphrases constitute a much less impactful phenomenon in North America and Europe than in China. Consequently, only a few dozens studies of them exist and most of them are on Chinese online catchphrases (Guo, 2018).

Online catchphrases are also a major part of the Chinese online carnival and the earliest developed part of it. They were present even before web 2.0 arrived and social media was popularized. Some popular online catchphrases from 2003 are still profusely used in the late 2010s. Catchphrases are short texts without graphics. They could diffuse through bulletin boards, online forums, and email messages before information technology allow large size uploads and smooth interactive communication between netizens. Online catchphrases are seen as a part of the Chinese online carnival because most of them are humorous in satirical, vulgar, and/or transgressive ways. A significant minority of them focuses on sociopolitical critique (Guo, 2018).

Between 1998 and 2000, a few (offline) catchphrases including “ten thousand years” (yiwannian) were already created by big talk fans with dialogue from *A Chinese Odyssey*. They relied on face-to-face interactions more than the Internet to diffuse these catchphrases. When the Internet became popularized in China in the early 2000s, these early catchphrases straddled both online and offline discursive contexts. If these particular catchphrases are counted as a part of the fourth fan culture of Chow, they are entirely continuous with the first and second fan cultures. Nonetheless, most of the 40 or more catchphrases constructed with Chow’s films were not created in the late 1990s but after the early 2000s. In addition, new ones keep being created even in the late 2010s. It is therefore meaningful to recognize these online catchphrases as mainly belonging to the fourth fan culture.

One of “the ten most popular online catchphrases of 2013” (shida wangluoyongyu) was developed from a series of dialogue in *The God of Cookery*. It was the neologism “not sure I understand it but it looks impressive” (bumingjueli). This neologism did not exist before 2013 (Chen, 2013). Its Google search count, which was 1.49 million by December 2019, indicated the popularity of this catchphrase. One of “the ten most popular online catchphrases of 2015,” ‘bachelor dog’ (danshengou), is partly inspired by a line in *A Chinese Odyssey Part Two*. Its Google search count is 21.9 million. These search counts enormously underestimate the frequency of usage of these catchphrases
because their uses on social media including Wechat and Weibo are not included and unavailable. The actual number should be dozens of times higher.

A veteran fan constructed in 2016 a list of 31 catchphrases created on the basis of dialogues in Chow’s films (Ztmn1986, 2016). The table also listed the search counts of these catchphrases on the main search engine in China (i.e. Baidu) in 2016. Several went under a million; only a few went under half a million. Most of them went up to multiple millions or tens of millions. I stress again that these counts greatly underestimated actual usage. The list is important for showing us that an astoundingly large number of online catchphrases are constructed by taking Chow’s films as their source. There is no other single source—unless one counts the Chinese state and its officials as one—that has generated so many Chinese online catchphrases. Furthermore, the actual total number of popular online catchphrases based on Chow’s films is over 40. For example, the list left out the sociopolitically critical catchphrase “a tissue paper, a pair of underpants” (yizhangweishengzhi, yitiaoneiku), which summarized a conversation in From Beijing with Love. The list also inevitably missed those that develop after 2016, including the catchphrase “I want them all” (woquandouyao), which was popularized in 2017 and adopted from a HK visual meme that was in turn created with a screenshot from Hail the Judge.

These 40 online catchphrases were popularized at different times between the early 2000s and the present. Around a third of them have been long lasting and very popular. They are regularly used in the Chinese Internet from the moment of their creation to the present. Some of the long-lasting ones managed to do so because they evolved from being fashionable catchphrases to stably used diction with specialized meanings and emotions not readily expressible with any existing Chinese term. “Collecting the lunch box” (lingbiandang), which refers to a minor character dying in a fictional narrative, is such an example.

Cultural localization likely occurs with transborder travel of cultures (Author, 2020). The transborder travel of Chow’s films is no exception. Nothing like the big talk fan culture exists in HK, for example. The fourth fan culture and online catchphrases similarly feature complex processes of localization. The majority of the 40 online catchphrases have been invented in China and remain unknown to HK netizens. The HK online carnival (and the Taiwanese one) develops their own catchphrases based on Chow’s films; they are much fewer than Mainland Chinese ones. Only a few were imported or adopted from HK to China. An example is “I want them all.” A few are identical but independently developed in HK and China. An example is ‘I’m actually an actor’ (woqishi shige yanyuan). A minority of catchphrases managed to export from China back to HK (and also to Taiwan in some cases). Examples include “collecting the lunch box,” “ten thousand years,” and “lying dead but is still shot” (tangqiang). Each of the long-lasting and very popular catchphrases tells a complex transborder and localization story. The relatively short-lived and less popular catchphrases have simpler stories. They tend to directly and authentically adopt the meanings of a line from a film by Chow. I observe in social media and my own Wechat groups that their circulation was largely limited to audiences who appreciate Chow’s films and nonsensical culture. In contrast, the very popular and long-lasting catchphrases diffuse to netizens in general instead of fans and audiences of Chow’s films. Some of these netizens do not know Chow’s films or they do not know that Chow’s films are the origins of the catchphrases.

I tell the transborder and localization stories of a few very popular online catchphrase. The first is “salted fish” (xianyu), which was made with the line “If one doesn’t dream [about ideals or a better future], one is not different from a salted fish” from Shaolin Soccer. In HK colloquial discourses, “salted fish” refers to the dead body. The original HK Cantonese meaning of the line is as follows: you are not alive if you do not dream and possess ideals. The use of “salted fish” in the
film’s context is exaggerated and entirely metaphoric. Chinese netizens, who generally do not know that “salted fish” refers to dead bodies, turns “salted fish” into a simile for individuals who lack the courage, vision, knowledge, and/or emotional energy to dream of a better future. The original grotesque meanings of the line in the film, which are achieved with accusing someone as a dead body, are undermined. An elegant and quite broadly used variant of the catchphrase is a fake four-character idiom in classical Chinese. The catchphrase of “salted fish” is currently used in China in online and offline discourses to cheer up or emotionally mobilize a friend. In HK, “salted fish” has never become a catchphrase; none will think about Chow’s films or associate “salted fish” with a person who does not dream.

There are online catchphrases that largely faithfully capture their HK colloquial meanings. Examples include “cleaning up the floor” (xidi) and “toughy” (xiaoqiang). “Cleaning up the floor,” originally coined in late 19th-century HK to refer to efforts taken to ensure that an infected indoor location is hygienic. In contemporary HK, it has been appropriated in gangster-speak to mean the destruction of evidence in a crime scene to ensure the legal safety of the perpetrator. Chow simply adopted this contemporary colloquial meaning in Kung Fu Hustle. Chinese audiences and netizens took the term—not knowing whether it was invented by Chow or taken from HK culture by Chow—and used them in a similar way that contemporary Hongkongers used them. In this way, Chow’s films not only travel across borders but acted as a transmitter of local HK culture to China. There is another online catchphrase that faithfully adopts its HK meaning and this meaning was originally invented by Chow. Chow called cockroaches in an affectionate tone usually reserved for pets, “toughies” (xiaoqiang), in three of his films including Flirting Scholar. This nickname of cockroaches is broadly used in HK, Taiwan, and China.

Some of the online catchphrases are neologisms constructed by Chinese netizens rather than taken directly from a line in Chow’s films. “Collecting the lunch box” is one of them. It started as a catchphrase and has now turned into a specialized terminology with condensed meanings. Anyone who has read Chinese online commentaries of television dramas or films is likely to come across it. It is not derived from a dialogue; it summarizes a fictional practice in a film and develops it into a catchphrase. The practice is the distributing of lunch boxes to extra actors as they finish the job and leave the studio. The practice of an extra collecting a lunch box is re-constructed by Chinese netizens to mean a minor character exiting a narrative, which usually involves the character’s death. This catchphrase cannot be replaced by the phrase “a minor character dies” because it carries some additional meanings. First, the catchphrase marks a commentator’s literary-critical distance and self-reflexivity. Second, it signals a light-hearted and humorous tone that suggests that the commentator thinks the dead character is insignificant or hateful. Third and less importantly, it shows the commentator’s familiarity with popular cultural criticism in China. Because there are no other terms that succinctly integrate these meanings, it is likely to last and turn formal by being listed in dictionaries.
“Not sure I understand it but it looks impressive” is another subtle catchphrase that contains complex meanings. Constructed on the basis of a scene in The God of Cookery, the catchphrase originally expresses sarcasm and suspicion on someone who is striving to look impressive. The catchphrase increasingly expresses the seemingly irreconcilable emotions of suspicion and being impressed. On one hand, it is used in many situations in current China, with its shanzhai culture and politicized atmosphere, in which one is uncertain whether a certain thing or person is genuinely good or not. On the other hand, it is used when a netizen wants others to become unsure whether she is being appreciative or sarcastic.

Chow’s films and memes

Among the three aspects of the fourth fan culture that this study examines, online catchphrases are the most continuous with the first three fan cultures. Web novels are least continuous with them; they depart the farthest from film content and their meanings, the practice of film-watching, and the screen personality of Chow. Memes fall somewhere in between these two extremes.

While Chow’s films help create a larger number of popular online catchphrases in China than any other source, they only constitute one of the many influential sources of memes. I have found hundreds of memes constructed with elements taken from Chow’s films. The actual total number could be more, but it is difficult to locate memes that have been abandoned or those created but scantily used. Unlike online catchphrases, there are no public rankings or relatively transparent ways to gauge how popular each meme is. According to my personal experience and data collection, which certainly has its bias, at least a hundred among the memes are frequently used. For example, I have seen the old meme “just one word: ‘superb’” (yigezi: jue) and its variants used in many of my Wechat groups. Furthermore, there are at least a few memes that have reached the kind of extreme prominence that rivaled the most popular online catchphrases. I briefly discuss them later.

Memes have been a rapidly rising social phenomenon since the late 2000s in the West because of the popularization of social media. Research on them started only a decade ago but is quickly developing (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Only a dozen of studies discuss Chinese memes, however (Mina, 2014). Memes found in the Chinese Internet partly differ from those found in the world wide web. Chinese style memes such as custom images (biaoqingbao) dominate. There is a rising research field on Chinese style memes inside China, though it is unconnected to the international scholarship on memes. Chow’s films inspired conventional visual memes, stickers, custom images, and emojis. I observe that a large portion of them are conventional visual memes.

These memes are made from either a still screenshot or a short video in GIF (graphics interchange format) taken from Chow’s films. These screenshots and videos can feature Stephen Chow alone, Chow with a secondary character, or one or a few secondary characters without Chow. Like memes in the West, most of these memes come with a line of text. Some of these texts are simply the original subtitle of Chow’s film. Making a meme with original subtitles is not a typical practice in the West, but it is the most common way of meme-making in HK and to a lesser extent in China. The GIF meme with Chow saying the line “just one word: ‘superb’” is an example of meme-making with original subtitles. Further rounds of meme-making often proceed by altering and substituting the original subtitles with self-constructed texts. I found over 10 meme variants of the “just one word: ‘superb’” meme.

Memes are a different social media phenomenon than online catchphrases. They emphasize visuals, facial expressions, and body language and movements. Although they contain texts, they
are less dependent on abstract meanings and semantic subtleties than catchphrases. Because memes
directly draw a netizen’s attention to facial and bodily expressions rather than semantic meanings,
the cultural or intellectual meanings of memes inspired by Chow are much less variegated than
catchphrases inspired by Chow. The common feature of most of these memes is the flamboyant,
theatrical, hilarious, and sometimes grotesque facial and bodily expressions of Chow or a secondary
character. Another common feature is the expression of anger and aggression, which is especially
salient in memes with altered texts instead of the original subtitles. Verbal conflict and
making acerbic retorts are indeed a part of HK’s social culture. A common way of using these
memes, which does not differ from the usual practice of using Chinese style memes, is to have
Chow (in the meme’s visual or gif) perform a social media user’s retorts, sarcasm, or humor.
Another common usage involves “meme battles” (*doutu*), during which netizens keep firing fun
memes at each other without regular textual communication. The exaggerated and confrontational
expressions of many screenshots in Chow’s films yield memes that suit this purpose. In the course
of using these memes, meme-user practice online what a Chow style youth used to practice offline
in the 2000s. The difference is that young meme-users of the 2010s are not likely to strongly self-
identify as a fan of Chow’s films.

The theatrical visuals of these memes solidly qualify them as a part of the Chinese online carni-
val. Chow’s films from the early 1990s and mid-1990s feature many exaggerated facial and
bodily expressions. Consequently, many memes are made with these films rather than Chow’s
21st-century films. An interesting point regarding the choice of these screenshots and videos is that
a significant minority of them does not feature Chow. Chow is well-known as a director who care-
fully designs the dialogues and images of minor characters in his films. An unintended result is that
even though these characters may look ugly and weird and starred by new actors or unsuccessful
ones, netizens find them to be a good source of meme-making. Examples include “the landlady”
(*baozupo*) in *King Fu Hustle*, the cross-dressing “Flowery” (*Ruhua*), who makes cameo appear-
ances in many of Chow’s films, the “head disciple” (*dashixiong*) in *Love on Delivery*, and the
“Chinese Santa” starred by Elvis Tsui in *Hail the Judge*. The popularization of these secondary
characters–based memes supports the claim in China that Chow is an “auteur of the mass-line.”

Many of the memes inspired by Chow’s films were originally created in the 2000s. It is possible
that a portion of these memes is only used by middle-aged netizens now. If this portion is too large,
my argument that memes constitute a fourth fan culture is undermined. There is no accurate quan-
titative data to conclusively assess this portion. But there is evidence that shows that the younger
 generation of netizens still use memes inspired by Chow’s films and more importantly, they con-
tinue to create new memes with Chow’s films during the 2010s. The best example is a very recent
and extremely popular meme, “I want them all.” I analyze this meme in detail in a separate study;
I briefly overview it here.

In 2017, Chinese netizens popularized the use of this meme. It was taken directly from HK,
where it was created in the late 2000s. It is a screenshot with Chow and Elvis Tsui in *Hail the
Judge*, with Tsui threateningly saying he wants all that Chow offers as a bribe and will leave no
share to Chow. In December 2017, netizens started to create fan-art, serious art, and pop art with
the meme. This unique and impressive wave of artistic meme-making lasted until mid-2018.
More than 200 outstanding pieces were collated in a few posts on *Zhifu* and other platforms. In
December 2018, the Elvis Tsui character from the screenshot became the target of a new round of
meme making—it was repackaged as the “Chinese Santa.” “I want them all” and other screen-
shots that featured Tsui alone were made into online Christmas cards. Sina Weibo and a comic
artist turned Tsui’s character into a series of official stickers of Weibo. The two official Weibo
posts that distributed and discussed these memes and stickers managed to accumulate 370 million view counts in December 2018. Not all these viewers download the memes. But given each downloader would show them to many friends in their social circles, the reach of the memes should have been extraordinary. This extreme degree of popularity solidly demonstrates the renewed relevance of Chow’s films for the Chinese Internet. Moreover, the Chinese Santa memes and sticker endorse critical sociopolitical meanings in a carnivalesque way. It indirectly challenged the state’s attempt to ban Christmas celebrations in 2018.

Chow’s films and Chinese web novels

Chinese web novels, which began the late 1990s and rapidly grew especially since the late 2000s, are one of the most broadly participated entertainment products in current China. Web novels also enjoy a significantly large readership and industry in Japan and South Korea. But they are almost absent in the United States and Europe. Consequently, there is not an international research field on web novels. There is only a small research field on Chinese web novels; it has published over 30 English-language papers and books and some Chinese-language ones (e.g. Feng, 2013). But because the majority of them do not regard Chinese web novels to be aesthetically or sociopolitically worthwhile, few of them investigate the content and historical development of Chinese web novels. The fact that Chow’s films are one of the precursors of mainstream Chinese web novels has never been discovered.

Mainstream Chinese web novels are action-packed and action-oriented. A major and institutionalized way the industry maps Chinese web novels is by gender. “Novels for men” largely contain action themes; “novels for women” largely develop romance themes. The sales volumes, artistic authority, and commercial status of novels for men are generally much higher than those for women except in specialized niches including television drama adaptation. There developed numerous action subgenres including Chinese style fantasy (xuanhuan), immortal cultivation (xiuxian), fantasy and martial arts in contemporary urban settings (dushi), Western-style fantasy (qihuan), science fiction or fantasy in space settings (kehuan), martial arts in historical settings (wuxia), apocalypse (mori), historical transmigration (lishi), and others. Action-oriented novels for females, which emphasize both romance and action plots, are also popular.

Chow’s influence on Chinese web novels is difficult to detect and prove—it is indirect, trans-border, and trans-genre. Nonetheless, it starts early and it is profound. The influence can be analyzed in two parts. The first part involves the framing of conflicts in Chinese web novels’ narratives. The second concerns the rise of comical style action-oriented novels in the 2010s.

I argue that one of Chow’s films features an unconventional kind of narrative plot, and by doing so, it indirectly opened up the path for a similar kind of plot in action-oriented Chinese web novels. The classic novel Journey to the West (Xiyouji or JTTW) contains three parts. There has been a great debate on whether they display a sociopolitical sell-out or a typical Bildungsroman narrative structure. This debate was abandoned rather than settled in the post-reform era. The former view argues that while the first part of JTTW heroizes how an unjustly oppressed and exploited protagonist (i.e. Monkey or Sun Wukong), violently rebels against a ruling elite (i.e. Jade Emperor and Buddha), the third part approvingly recount how the protagonist obediently serves the ruling elite. This assessment implies that if there is a single author of JTTW, she lacks progressive political thinking and that if there are multiple authors, the politically conservatives ones successfully appropriated the art of the politically progressive ones. The latter view holds that the seemingly abrupt shift from the first part to the third simply marks the socialization of a young and reckless
protagonist into society. Namely, the shift simply resembles a Bildungsroman and it should be considered edifying instead of politically conservative. Chow’s *A Chinese Odyssey* series firmly stand with the former view. They do so by adopting the politically progressive ethos of the first part of *JTTW* to rewrite the other parts of *JTTW*. An example is the re-imagining of the Buddha and other celestial elites as superficially respectable but substantially corrupt and hypocritical. This rewriting is generally understood by big talk fans and was the main reason *A Chinese Odyssey Part Two* managed to generate a major youth subculture in the late 1990s.

*Wukongzhuan* (*The Story of Wukong*), a web novel published by Zeng Yu (more commonly known by his pen name Jinhezai) in 2000, does in the literary format what *A Chinese Odyssey* does with *JTTW* in film format. *Wukongzhuan* is recognized without dispute as one of the most pioneering and genre-defining works in the history of Chinese web novels. Many think it is one of the most philosophically deep Chinese web novel. Meanwhile, Zeng openly admits that *Wukongzhuan* is deeply inspired by *A Chinese Odyssey*. *Wukongzhuan* re-writes the other parts of *JTTW* significantly differently than *A Chinese Odyssey* does and it has higher artistic value than *A Chinese Odyssey* from a conventional literary criticism perspective. Nonetheless, *Wukongzhuan*’s status as a seminal web novel and its imitation of *A Chinese Odyssey* render *A Chinese Odyssey* a precursor of the Chinese web novel.

Although *Wukongzhuan* is seen as a seminal Chinese web novel, what exactly the hundreds of thousands of Chinese web novels published since 2000 inherit from it is never clarified. Current scholars are not interested in such questions; fan commentators notice a certain structure of feelings but cannot enunciate it. My previous discussion of the debate on *JTTW* prefigures an answer to this question. Action-oriented Chinese web novels directly follow *Wukongzhuan* and indirectly follow *A Chinese Odyssey* in preferring the sociopolitical frame of the first part of *JTTW* in designing conflicts in their narratives. It will take a full study to empirically substantiate this interpretation. I outline my theoretical arguments here as optional information. Violent conflict is the staple of action narrative plots. Most entertainment narratives across the globe frame these conflicts in terms of a morally good protagonist beating up some evil villains. The alternative frame encouraged by the first part of *JTTW* is politically different. It is that of an oppressed underdog violently struggling against an unjust social order. The unjust social order contains an superficially respectable ruling elite and many morally good, dutiful, lawful, but apolitical citizens who happen to defend the status quo. A result is that some conflicts would require the protagonist to slaughter morally good and lawful characters. Action-oriented Chinese web novels contain many of such scenes. This kind of protagonists would look opprobrious and/or incomprehensible to a reader who is used to the frame of morally good protagonists versus evil villains. This type of frame is very rare in contemporary entertainment, but Chinese web novels are not the only entertainment genre that embraces it. Cyberpunk and dark fantasy, for example, are two exceptions.

Action-oriented Chinese web novels in the 2000s did not favor comical content and comical styles. A change gradually occurred during the early 2010s: authors of action-oriented novels began to favor comedy. By the late 2010s, action-oriented novels generally come with some comical elements. Many of the top-ranking action-oriented web novels are very comical. These novels borrow from different comical styles and a major one among them is nonsensical humor. One finds the protagonists of many novels to act in flamboyant, vulgar, exaggerated, slapstick, and carnivalesque ways. One may describe them to be acting like Chow style youths. This comical style is well captured in a rising school of web novel writing called “posing and ass-kicking.” “Zhuangbi” is a popular expletive that describes one’s posing in a self-conscious and trollish way. Ass-kicking, or face-slapping in Chinese, describes the image of complacency, meanness, and readiness to
humiliate others. The best novels of the school, including for example *The Super System of Posing and Ass-kicking* (*Zuiqiang zhuangbidalian xitong*), seamlessly integrate serious action and hilarious comedic elements, much like Chow’s *Kung Fu Hustle*.

I do not argue that all of these authors consciously try to copy the nonsensical humor in Chow’s films to their novels. It is more accurate to describe their relationship as affinity and casual borrowing. An example of such borrowing is the transplanting of certain flamboyant and carnivalesque lines or scenes from Chow’s films into the novels. The catchphrase “anyone else?” (*haiyoushui*), which comes from *Kung Fu Hustle*, describes a protagonist effortlessly beating up several opponents and then challenging other onlookers to a fight. This catchphrase is used in numerous novels in the 2010s. My favorite is a line from a GIF meme: “I’m not picking on you . . . every lady and gentleman in this room is trash” (*wobushi zhenduini . . . woshishou zaizuogewei doushilaji*). This is used in situations in which a protagonist wishes to insult a roomful of opponents and then beating them. Most words in this line make it look like a polite apology. The entire line turns into an abusive insult only after the last two Chinese characters are enunciated.

There are a variety of other ways through which authors of Chinese web novels pay homage to Chow and show affinities with Chow. One of the most highly acclaimed web novels in the late 2010s is *Fangkainage Nvwu* (*Take Your Hands off the Witch*). This novel title is constructed by revising a Chinese character of an online catchphrase inspired by Chow: “take your hands off the girl (*fangkainage nvhai*) from *Love on Delivery*. There is an ‘infinity school’ (*wuxianliu*) of web novel writing that arranges for the protagonist to travel into different fictional worlds of well-known popular cultural texts. These novels’ plots build around how protagonists interact with original characters in these worlds and change the path of original narratives. The fictional worlds of Jinrong’s martial art novels become the most favorite choices for such novels; those of Chow’s films are also occasionally chosen.

**Conclusion**

The previous analysis uncovers the powerful influence of Stephen Chow’s films in mainland China long after the HK handover. This shows that at least some lowbrow parts of HK popular culture can become well-received outside HK. The lasting influence of Chow’s 20th-century films also suggests that there are significant contra-flows from HK to China and they do not seem to be weakening. An important finding is that there are various online ways through which Chow’s films continue to exert their cultural influence and that these various ways mainly involve the Chinese online carnival.

In the introduction section, I heuristically call this recent wave of influence as the “fourth fan culture” of Chow’s films. The purpose of this way of labeling it is to make sense of them in relation to the three earlier fan cultures. I wish to highlight that various strands within the culture have a sufficient degree of coherence to warrant the label of a culture, that it is already the fourth wave of influence that Chow’s films generate in China, and that this influence attracts old fans of Chow as well as create an entirely new fandom. But the label “fourth fan culture” is also inaccurate and misleading in some ways—they needed to be clarified here.

As my analysis shows, the cultural items that the fourth wave “fans” watch, love, circulate, learn, and/or practice are not exactly Chow’s films or Chow as a celebrity. They are online catchphrases, memes and emojis, and novel narratives produced by fans, co-created by non-fan cultural producers. If this is a fan culture, it is one directly built on the basis of these items and only indirectly on Chow’s films. Fans of this culture may or may not be audiences of Chow’s films. They
have much less developed collective identities than fans of the first three fan cultures. They may or may not see themselves as fans.

Nonetheless, the concern on transborder cultural influence from HK to China is not narrowly limited to Chow’s films. The finding that colloquial HK culture has traveled to mainland China through derivative social media co-creations of Chow’s films—catchphrases, memes, and web novels—in the 2010s is not any less theoretically intriguing. The “fourth fan culture” may be assessed in the following perspective. Chow’s films were an early and original inspiration of the Chinese online carnival, as current studies show. Chow’s film merged with the Chinese online carnival, enhance it, and continue to inspire it through the co-creative efforts fans, netizens, and professional cultural producers. Although it is difficult to measure how big this influence is, this study has proved that it is significant. Future studies on major parts of the Chinese online carnival not covered by this study, including, for example, kuaisihou or mobile games, will further help to shed light on this transborder influence.

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