Interlingual and Intersemiotic Transfer of Indian Cinema in Hong Kong

Abstract

The history of Indian immigration to Hong Kong can be traced to the 1840s, when Hong Kong became a colony of the British Empire. However, Hong Kong Chinese people’s knowledge of the local Indian community is limited. The stereotyping of Indian culture in the Hong Kong movie *Himalaya Singh* shows that Indian people and culture are often distorted and negatively portrayed in the media, and the secluded Indian community in Hong Kong is marginalised and neglected in the mainstream media. In recent years, Indian cinema has gained popularity in Hong Kong, but this survey of the Chinese movie titles, trailer subtitles and other publicity materials of four Indian movies (*Slumdog Millionaire; 3 Idiots; English, Vinglish;* and *The Lunchbox*) show that the films have to be recast and transfigured during interlingual and intersemiotic transfers so that it can become more accessible to Hong Kong Chinese audiences.

1. Introduction

The history of Indian immigration to Hong Kong can be traced to the 1840s, when Hong Kong became a colony of the British Empire. In the social and economic development during the early colonial days, Indian people played an important role. Some Indian families have lived in the territory for generations and consider Hong Kong their home. According to Kwok and Narain, about 2,700 Indian soldiers participated when the Union Jack was hoisted in January 1841, and in the 2011 population survey carried out by the Hong Kong Special
Administrative Region government, there were 28,425 Indians living in the territory, a tenfold increase.

Quite a number of Indian people living in Hong Kong are extremely wealthy. According to *The Tribune India* (July 8, 2007), it was estimated that there were more than 1,000 Indian millionaires (in US dollars) in Hong Kong, the most notable being Hari Harilela, who owns nine major hotels in Hong Kong (such as the Holiday Inn Golden Mile), the Westin Resort in Macao plus hotels in Bangkok, Montreal, Sydney and London. However, there are also Indians who are less well-off and have problems assimilating into the local community and moving up the social ladder. In recent years, there have been calls for the Hong Kong government to offer Chinese as a second language courses for Indians and other ethnic minorities in the territory. According to Stephen Fisher, Director General of Oxfam in Hong Kong, “Many of [the Indian people] still face the problem of being unable to learn Chinese. Some may know how to speak it, but cannot read nor write” (*South China Morning Post*, 18 September 2013).

Hong Kong Chinese people’s knowledge of the local Indian community is limited, and Indians are seldom seen in the mainstream media. This situation has changed somewhat only in recent years (e.g. Gill Mohindeepaul Singh, a Hong Kong-born actor of Indian descent, has become a regular face on Chinese television shows). Indian people tend to live in certain regions of Hong Kong (the Eastern District of Hong Kong Island, and Tsim Sha Tsui, Yau Ma Tei and Shum Shui Po in Kowloon). According to the Study on Racial Encounters and Discrimination Experienced by South Asians commissioned by the Equal Opportunities Commission of Hong Kong, local Chinese generally accept South Asians (of which Indians are a significant proportion) as part of Hong Kong society, but:

> [T]here had been little social interaction between local Chinese society and the South Asian community. The two appeared to co-exist in parallel; each got on with its own life and had little to do with the other. South Asians rarely seemed to be participating in Hong Kong society, not socially, culturally, or politically. The local Chinese community was aware of the presence of South Asian Hongkongers, but they might not have noted the absence of South Asians in Hong Kong Chinese’s social, cultural and political scene. (ii)
The second part of this paper briefly examines how Indian culture is portrayed in the mainstream Chinese media, using a Cantonese movie (*Himalaya Singh*) as a case study. Part three discusses how Indian movies are distributed and promoted in the Indian community in Hong Kong. Then, based on four Indian movies publicly released and shown in Hong Kong cinemas, part four examines the interlingual and intersemiotic transfer of Indian cinema to Hong Kong Chinese culture, using film titles, trailer subtitles and movie posters as research materials.

2. Representation of the Indian culture in Hong Kong’s mainstream media: *Himalaya Singh* as a case in point

Indian culture is seldom represented in Hong Kong’s mainstream media. Therefore, very little research has been devoted to this area. In this paper, one conference paper and one master’s thesis are examined. These two publications devote a significant part of their discussion to a Hong Kong commercial movie set in India, *Himalaya Singh*. The movie was released in 2005 and directed by Wai Ka-fai, who is a two-time Best Director in the Hong Kong Film Awards (2002 and 2009). The movie poster is shown in Figure 1.

![Fig. 1 Movie poster of *Himalaya Singh*](image)

This film tells the story of Himalaya Singh (Ronald Cheng), a not-so-bright yoga instructor who has lived in the Himalayas his entire life until, when the movie opens, his parents kick him out to marry his betrothed, Indian Beauty (Gauri Karnik). Himalaya, however, is in love...
with a Chinese girl named Tally (Cherrie In), who is not too pleased to hear that he is engaged to another girl. She goes on a rampage, determined to turn Himalaya into a jerk and punish Indian Beauty with an unhappy marriage. At the same time, two traveling hoodlums, who have drunk a memory-loss potion and cannot keep track of who they are, add chaos to Himalaya’s already miserable situation.

This “farcical, pseudo-Bollywood comedy” (Sung 117) was shown during the Chinese New Year in Hong Kong in 2005. Chinese New Year is an important festival for Hong Kong people, and this movie grossed US$2 million in the box office. Despite its financial success, the movie illustrates a stereotypical image of Indian people in the Hong Kong mainstream media. Although the word Singh (in Cantonese sing) can also mean “star” in Chinese, it is a common Sikh surname which appears in a large number of Cantonese films and television programs in Hong Kong to denote Indians, Pakistanis or even South Asians in general.

In Srinivas’s paper, he argues that “this [Himalaya Singh] 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” (72). In Himalaya Singh, an Indian man says, “I sold curry in Chungking Mansions, killed people in Mongkok; I was also imprisoned in Stanley”. This representation, that all Indians are criminals, is without question objectionable and stereotypical. But there are also misrepresentations of Chinese people. There is one scene showing Chinese eating snake. Therefore, Sung is correct in her summary of this movie:

In terms of common misconception/misrepresentations, in which Indians and Chinese are essentialized and homogenized, this film represents a symbolically simple but remarkably discriminatory conceptualization of Hong Kong/Indian relationship and beliefs (118–119).

3. Distribution and promotion of Indian movies in Hong Kong

The distribution and promotion of Indian movies in Hong Kong is little documented. There are two major companies distributing Hindi films for the Indian community in the territory. According to their websites, both have been around for nearly a decade. One calls itself “the largest Indian entertainment company in Hong Kong for Hindi films” and other says that it “has been in the entertainment and event management business since 2005”.

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One of them states on its website that it has distributed blockbusters like *Sarkar* (2005), *Krrish* (2006), *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2006), *Don: The Chase Begins Again* (2006), *Guru* (2007), *Gandhi, My Father* (2007), *Om Shanti Om* (2007), *Ghajini* (2008), *Kites* (2010) and *Dabangg* (2010). Perhaps the most notable film is *3 Idiots* which the company helped to have shown in the 34th Hong Kong International Film Festival (2010). The movie was then in public release in Hong Kong in September 2011 and holds a box office record of over US$3 million (higher than for *Himalaya Singh*). Due to the significance of this film, it is discussed again later in this paper.

These Indian movies are often shown in “special sessions” on Saturday or Sunday in one of cinemas in Tsim Sha Tsui, where a lot of Indian people live. A ticket costs US$20–25, which is more than double the price of an ordinary movie ticket in Hong Kong. The tickets for these movies are sold through a shop in Chung King Mansions in Tsim Sha Tsui or by calling the company’s telephone hotline.

A writer for the Independent Media Hong Kong has provided a description of these movie-going events as follows:

> These events will not be publicised in the Chinese media and the organisers do not care to send press releases to the Chinese media. Therefore, how could ordinary Hong Kong people know about these events? But it can be quite fun to attend these shows, because if you go there, you will be the only Chinese. The Indian movie-goers will dress up and there will be a really big crowd. (Lu)

We can see that there is not much interaction between the Hong Kong Indian community and mainstream society. However, according to a study by Hong Kong Unison (a governmental organisation founded in March 2001 to advocate policy reforms for ethnic minority residents in Hong Kong), in 2006, mass media played an important role in the shaping of the Hong Kong Chinese perceived image of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong: 27.3% of respondents said that their perception of ethnic minorities comes from cinema and TV programs, and 21.6% responded that it is from newspapers and magazines. The group thus urges the media to be objective about ethnic minorities.

4. **Interlingual and intersemiotic transfers of Indian Cinema in Hong Kong**
Although Jakobson (1959) conceptualised inter-semiotic transfer (including but not limited to image) as a valid form of translation more than 40 years ago, it is only recently that this area of intercultural transfer has activity received more attention. In 1992, in an article titled “Film (Adaptation) as Translation: Some Methodological Proposals”, Patrick Cattrysse urged scholars worldwide to expand the field of translation. He said: “there seems to be no valuable argument to keep reducing the concept of translation to mere cross-linguistic transfer processes. The scope has to be extended to a contextualistic semiotic perspective” (68).

In the following, four “Indian” movies, *Slumdog Millionaire* (2009), *3 Idiots* (2011), *English, Vinglish* (2012) and *The Lunchbox* (2014) are examined for their interlingual and intersemiotic transfers. The term “Indian movies” here is used in a liberal sense because *Slumdog Millionaire* is a British Indian drama film directed by Danny Boyle. However, the movie was hugely popular in Hong Kong and earned a record US$1 million in its opening weekend, making it the second biggest opening in 2009. Since then, more Indian movies have been introduced into Hong Kong for commercial release. The research materials used in this study include movie titles, trailer subtitles and other publicity materials.

4.1 Translation of movie titles

In a research study of the foreign film titles in Hong Kong (Cheang), it was shown that most of the translated titles in Hong Kong are domesticated, probably reflecting a stronger sense of local identity. The translation of 3 Idiots in Hong Kong Chinese is 作死不離三兄弟 (zoksei batlei saamhingdai). The meaning of “3” is retained as 三兄弟 (saamhingdai) meaning “three brothers”, but the meaning of 作死 (zoksei) is a bit difficult to explain. This Cantonese dialect can be literally understood as “taking the road to ruin” but it is also used by people to reprimand those close to them who do something silly or dangerous to look for trouble. In the age of the Internet, it is also used by Chinese netizens to comment on a stranger’s remarks (*Shenzhen Daily*, 1 May 2014).

The translation of the *Slumdog Millionaire* is also interesting. Komal Nahta commented, “There was a problem with the title itself. Slumdog is not a familiar word for majority Indians” (Reuters, 30 January 2009). The term “slumdog” also causes problem when translated into Chinese because there is no equivalent term. Instead, the movie title was translated into 一百萬零一夜 (jatbaakmaan ling jat je or One Million and One Nights) when it was released in Hong Kong. “One Million” has been used because it is an allusion to the
popular TV game show “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?” However, this movie title can also be interpreted as a reference to *One Thousand and One Nights*, which is a collection of West and South Asian stories and folk tales compiled in Arabic during the Islamic Golden Age.

The other two movies, *English, Vinglish* (2012) and *The Lunchbox* (2014), did not do as well in Hong Kong as the two movies discussed above. They grossed US$230,781 and US$151,765 respectively. And the translation of these two Indian movie titles adopted the same method, that is, allusion to a previous blockbuster. *English, Vinglish* and *The Lunchbox* were translated into Hong Kong Chinese as 紐約精華遊 (naujoek zingwaajau or A Tour of the Best in New York) and 美味情書 (meimei cingsyu or A Delicious Love Letter). The former alludes to *The Holiday* (jyunfan zingwaajau緣份精華遊) (2006), a romantic Hollywood comedy starring Kate Winslet, Cameron Diaz, Jude Law and Jack Black. The latter alludes to *Love Letter* (情書), a 1995 Japanese film directed by Shunji Iwai, which had a box office record of US$3.8 million in Hong Kong in 1995. *Love Letter* has been lauded as one of the ten best romantic movies in Asian cinema by the *South China Morning Post* (9 February 2014).

From the above translated movie titles, we can see that Indian movies tend to be recast using local terms of reference. The titles are either vulgarised (*3 Idiots*) so that they can cater to a broader audience or exoticised (*One Million and One Nights*) so that they might be easier for cultural consumption. Although Hong Kong boasts movie festivals from various countries or genres every year (e.g. Hong Kong Jewish Film Festival and Hong Kong Lesbian & Gay Film Festival), Indian culture is still marginalised in the territory. Take the Indian Independent Movie Festival organised by the Hong Kong Arts Centre in late 2012 as an example. The title of the festival was “You Don’t Belong” and the poster portrays a highly stereotypical image of Indian culture. The poster is shown in Figure 2.
Fig. 2 Poster of the Indian Independent Movie Festival

The colour yellow is used because Hindus consider yellow a sacred colour. The elephant probably represents Ganesh, the elephant god, a widely worshiped Hindu god and one of five main Hindu deities. The English letters at the top of the poster have also been printed in a way that imitates Modern Standard Hindi.

4.2 Trailer Subtitles

Trailers, a form of film advertisement, have great importance in the publicity and promotion of a film. They play a particularly crucial role in Hong Kong because trailers can be viewed not only on television and on the Internet but also on most of the LED display boards in the metro stations. The trailer subtitles are always bilingual, so they are important materials for our intercultural analysis. The subtitles of *3 Idiots* and *English, Vinglish* movie trailers are the focus of analysis in this section.

According to Yau, since the early 1990s there has been a trend “for subtitlers to use Cantonese to translate colloquialisms, slang terms, swear words, and sexually explicit or suggestive language intended for entertainment, e.g. comedy, romance and action” (565). This seems to be the case for *3 Idiots*, a comedy about three university students in India. A lot of colloquial expressions which are commonly used among young people in Hong Kong can be found. For example, 巴打 (*baadaa* or *bro*) is a colloquial term used by male online forum users to greet each other. The female equivalent of this is 絲打 (*sidaa* or *sis.*) Slang terms related to movement have also been used. Examples include 閃 (*sim* or disappear like a flash) and 龜速 (*gwaicuk* or move at the speed of a tortoise). These two terms are so new that they cannot even be found in *A Dictionary of Cantonese Slang: The Language of Hong Kong Movies, Street Gangs and City Life* (2005) published by the University of Hawaii Press. This indicates that colloquialisms can change extremely fast, particularly in an era when mobile communication demands more concise and crisp language.

In *English, Vinglish*, a housewife enrolls in an English course while she is in New York, to stop her husband and daughter from mocking her English skills. Because this is basically a movie about culture shock and clashes, a lot of cultural features (both Indian and American) are included. For example, ladoo, a ball-shaped sweet popular in Indian, is mentioned. This dessert is made of flour, sugar and a number of other ingredients such as cardamom, cloves
and cashews. In the subtitle, ladoo has been translated as 甜奶球 (tim naai kau or sweet milk ball). Although this rendition manages to provide a description of the shape, taste and ingredients of this sweet, it may be a bit bland and cannot arouse the interest of the viewers. Another example is that the protagonist has not come across the term “jazz dance” and mispronounces it as “jhaans dance”. The translator seems to have used creativity and translated it as 雀屎舞 (zoeksi mou or bird’s poo dance). An Internet search shows that the Chinese term is indeed quite often used in blogs and discussion forums. This term may sound a bit vulgar but it should be able to trigger laughter among the audience.

4.3 Movie poster

Word of mouth and celebrity endorsements play an important role in the promotion of movies. And the promotional poster for The Lunchbox illustrates how an Indian movie can be reframed so that the potential movie-goers find meaning and respond to it in a meaningful way. In Figure 3, we can see that, on the left, there are endorsements from a number of Hong Kong celebrities.

Fig. 3 Poster of the movie “The Lunchbox”

These celebrities include writers, film critics and radio deejays. Modern written Chinese (as well as English) is read from left to right, so Chinese endorsements seem to occupy a more prominent position than do the English ones. One Hong Kong celebrity, Chip Tsao, a famous columnist, wrote “The Lunchbox has shown the flavours of the early works of Lee Ang [a Taiwanese-American film director who won an Academy Award for Best Director twice, first for Brokeback Mountain (2005) and most recently for Life of Pi (2012)]”. Tang Siu Wa, another writer, said “This movie is an Indian middle-aged man’s version of [Wong Kar-wai’s] In the Mood for Love”. The above references, together with the translated title, A Delicious Love Letter, attempt to reframe this movie so it becomes accessible to the Hong
Kong Chinese audience who are more familiar with Ang Lee and Wong Kar-wai than with Ritesh Batra (the director of *The Lunchbox*).

Though frames of reference are a necessary part of the human experience, they also show that Indian movies are a cultural commodity that Hong Kong Chinese may not be very familiar with, so they have to be reformulated to become more accessible.

5. Conclusion

The above discussion shows that, although Indian cinema is no longer just for domestic consumption in India and has gained popularity in many parts of the world, it has to be recast and transfigured during interlingual and intersemiotic transfers so that it can become more accessible to Hong Kong Chinese audiences. The stereotyping of Indian culture in the Hong Kong movie *Himalaya Singh* also shows that Indian people and culture are often distorted and negatively portrayed in the media, and the secluded Indian community in Hong Kong is marginalised and neglected in the mainstream media. Having said that, from the above movies, we can see that Indian culture has indeed become more visible in Hong Kong in recent years. As a result of the government’s efforts in introducing Chinese as a second language courses to Indian youth in Hong Kong and enhancing the linguistic rights of the ethnic minorities, it is believed that status of Indian culture in Hong Kong will improve and command a less peripheral or even more central position.

Works Cited


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