

Irony and Heroic Fatalism in *A Hero Never Dies*

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21 June 2016

Johnnie To has been a very experienced director before he cofounded Milkyway Image in 1996, as he was trained at Shaw's TVB and then he worked as a film director there (Bordwell 251). He produces two types of films: crime films represent his personal style and are internationally successful, and comedy films are locally successful. Nevertheless, the core of his crime movies is irony. The film I choose, *A Hero Never Dies* (Hong Kong, 1998, dir. Johnnie To), is a film that embeds the heroic fatalism. Fatalism normally means that human's decisions will not change a person's fate; human fates are pre-destined. Stephen Teo proposes that the fatalism in this film is "heroic" because the heroes are consciously fatalistic (106). However, the curious narrative structure – and the use of irony – emphasizes the unchangeable destiny of two heroes. The film transcends the gangster genre by placing an emphasis on personal development of the characters. This essay will argue that the irony indeed modifies the tragic sense of heroic fatalism throughout the film and precludes any possibility to be a melodrama. Heroic fatalism suggests a realistic metaphor for the reflection on 1997 Asian financial crisis and handover.

A Hero Never Dies can be regarded as a crucial film that signals To's house style. It was released in 1998, a year after 1997 handover. It was also the very first film to be directed by Johnnie To himself after he cofounded Milkyway (Teo 101). The story is set in Thailand and Hong Kong at an unknown time frame, suggesting the present. As Grossman said, these characters are "creatures of the absolute present, without a past and a future as ambiguous as post-1997 HK" (Grossman 2). Unlike many of To's later films, this film seldom mention the politics of Hong Kong and is more likely intended to be taken as a fictional film that deals with gangster politics and personal vengeance. These are standard motifs of the HK gangster film. However, *Hero* is worth analyzing because it reduces genre to nearly pure stylization. *Hero* is not a gangster genre film or action film but it is a reconstruction of these genres representing the genre approach and film style of early Milkyway Image productions.

Milkyway films always try to avoid being sentimental by irony. Rather than using the simple storyline that heroes would finally win or lose in traditional gangster films, this film satirizes the “masculine ethos of the gangster” and presents heroic fatalism (Grossman 4). Thus, it also satirizes the over-commercial, and over-romantic gangster films made by John Woo a decade before and these films also present a crueler and more fatal world of gang.

However, one thing that To retains from Woo’s films is that his film has two protagonists, Jack and Martin, who each work for opponent gangster groups but they admire the loyalty each devotes to his gang. In the beginning scene at the bar, a close-up shot of the wine bottle with the memo writing “Jack and Martin” in Chinese characters underlies the unknown relationship between Jack and Martin. Mr. Yam and Jack go to Thailand for seeking predictions from a fortune-teller about his dispute with Mr. Fong. At that night, a roadside ambush of Martin’s team ends up with having a gunfight with Jack’s team. Soon Jack and Martin meet at Po’s bar in Hong Kong with their girlfriends’ first appearance. A second fierce gunfight in Thailand becomes a turning point of their lives. Jack’s boss, Yam, is a coward and he betrays Jack. Martin’s boss, Mr. Fong, also abandons him in Thailand. There, Martin loses his legs in the gunfight. Later, Mr. Yam and Mr. Fong decide to unite the whole gangsterdom in Hong Kong under the witness of a Thailand general. The narrative then departs from the triad dispute to concentrate on protagonists’ vengeance. The film becomes more personal. Jack and Martin’s loyalty to each other becomes the impulse of the rest of this film. Their bosses try to kill them. Moreover, their girlfriends all die for them, which becomes one of the obvious motives for their revenge. Martin dies first after his failure to avenge. Jack then comes back to Hong Kong and avenges for Martin. Both their bosses and Jack die in the final revenge. Jack and Martin are conscious of their fate at the very beginning, but they do not know who is the true enemy. Their enemy actually is the betrayers of *yi* who worship money but not honor.

Hero makes its efforts to escape from the mode of popular genre films by the curious structure of narrative and irony. Katherine Spring states, “the striking departure from our expectations of the gangster genre places *Hero*’s unique narrative structure in the domain of irony” (135). What the viewers generally expect for is the eternal loyalty and backup from brothers. In the famous gangster-genre film, *Young and Dangerous*, the protagonist’s boss never betrays his brothers. Whatever mistakes the protagonist makes, the boss always forgives him. Every character honors the heroic codes of *yi*. In *Hero*, the betrayal of Yam and Fong breaks this principle because they only honor money. Johnnie To moves the emphasis smoothly from the triad dispute to the personal revenge. This narrative structure is an irony to the masculine violence. Grossman notes, “To has stripped away the calloused romance of the gangster’s masculine violence to expose the ridiculous, cowering, and nihilistic skeleton beneath” (2). The lack of polices in *Hero* renders the violence meaningless. After Jack and Martin are betrayed by their bosses, their loyalty each devotes to their bosses move to each other. The narrative then concentrates on their personal lives. The biggest irony in this film maybe the violence in the first half film of triad dispute is meaningless, because Yam and Fong easily decide to unite together. The sacrifice of Jack and Martin then becomes ridiculous. The personal vengeance in second half of film is also an irony to the loyalty to heroic codes. Irony depends on this narrative structure. Spring points out the modern definition of irony: “it is not only a trope involving incongruities between what is expected and what occurs, but also is a self-referential impulse that precludes sincerity and sentimentality” (133). In other words, irony does not help the protagonist to attain the narrative goal; rather, it establishes the attitudes of the director towards the theme.

Hero brings the stylistic technique over the narrative content for drawing viewers’ attention to the irony. Irony is irrelevant to the narrative but it relaxes viewers’ nerve and that modify the sense of fatalism. There are some outstanding instances for irony, which also

forecast the fates of the heroes. First of all, Jack and Mr. Yam are in a shack in Thailand with a fortune-teller and his translator. However, Jack does not believe him at all. When Mr. Fong sincerely asks the fortune-teller who will win in the gang fighting, the fortune-teller lectures him. After Mr. Fong begs the fortune-teller for saving him, Jack threatens the fortune-teller with a gun and asks him could he foresee whether he will get shot on one foot today. The fortune-teller answers “no.” Unexpectedly, Jack does shoot him. Jack and three gangs go to urinate on the trees surrounding the shack. The mise-en-scene is carefully arranged here. A long shot positions the three gang members on a imaginary diagonal across the screen, extending from the left foreground to the right background, where Jack stands (Spring 135). Later the scene in the shack recurs, and Martin asks the fortune-teller the same question. Yet the fortune-teller answers “Yes” and got shot on the other foot. The dialogue and mise-en-scene outside the shack also recur and Martin replaces Jack this time. These two sequences have two important functions. First, When Jack/Martin asks the fortune-teller if he would get shot today, the answer and the shot are unpredictable for viewers. The uncontrollability of the plot enhances the sense of fate. Second, the irony here is the parallel between Jack and Martin. Martin’s appearance in the shack seems meaningless since he has not asked something relating to the narrative. Rather, it is a stylistic concern of parallels between Jack and Martin that gives rise to the irony. Furthermore, these sequences explain the fact that they are very conscious of their own fates. Both Jack and Martin says, “You do not need to ask God for an answer, as long as you know who your enemy is, you will know the result.”

Secondly, the symmetrical editing demonstrates the stylistic matching rather than seriously depicting a real fight between Jack and Martin. It also reveals the opponent relationship in professional and the friendship in private. Soon after they get back to Hong Kong, they leave messages with dirty words to each other via a mediator and also demolish

their cars in a head-on collision. For instance, a medium shot of Martin in the car following by a shot of a running wheel symmetrically matches to a medium shot of Jack in the car following by a shot of running wheels. Although they seem to have a fierce competition, they leave their cars when their car engines break down. The insincerity of competition gives rise to the irony. They meet at Po's bar afterwards. They do not stop competing with each other at the bar, so they toss coins to hit the wine glasses and the wine bottles. This scene seems incongruous to the narrative goal, but it confuses viewers about their relationship. The arrival of Yoyo and Fiona resumes the narrative. This scene carries out the origin of wine bottle with a memo at the first scene as well. The wine bottle is used to be the symbol for the intensive and complicated relationship between Jack and Martin. Yam and Fong destroy the wine bottle (a fake one replaced by Po), and that formally destroys the opponent relationship between Jack and Martin.

Finally, the song and lighting in *Hero* serve as stylistic techniques for the reconstruction of genres, undermining any melodramatic potential. Martin's theme song *sukiyaki* first appears in the bar. This song is so romantic and lazy so it easily overwhelms the emotion of viewers. However, Spring comments on this song, "the excessiveness of this song precludes an attempt at sincere melodrama" (135). The song only appears three times, yet there is not doubt that viewers can notice *sukiyaki* consciously. This consciousness helps to develop self-reflexive irony in *Hero*. When the song is played at the end of *Hero*, it echoes to the first time viewers here while Martin is still alive. The unrealistic lighting is used only when Jack and Marin appear at the same scenes. It enhances the absurdity of the ironic plots, such as the head-on collision of their cars. The blue and red lightings of *Hero* are quite stylized in high saturation and high contrast for alienating this film from reality. The Western-cowboy looking of Martin also enhances the absurdity and alienation.

The heroic fatalism reflects people's depression on the 1997 Asian financial crisis and

their uncertainty to the future of Hong Kong after handover. Pang mentions two crucial themes in early Milkyway films: “the entrapment and powerlessness, which reflected the gloomy economic environment Hong Kong people were experiencing in 1997 and 1998” (326). Martin’s death reveals the theme of powerlessness. After the death of Martin’s girlfriend, Martin decides to take vengeance on his previous boss, Mr. Fong. Although he loses his calves, he takes up exercise and makes himself a simple skateboard. All these masculine behaviors direct viewers’ expectation to the imagination of a successful revenge. However, Martin has died before Jack comes back to Hong Kong. His heroic fatalism is achieved by the double scenes on the rooftop with repetitive shot scales, angle, and position. For the first scene, Martin is ready to kill Mr. Fong with a sniper rifle on rooftop. An iris shot shows the view on the rifle optics. Nevertheless, Martin gets shot and tries to get back to rooftop again. For the second scene, when Mr. Fong appears on the iris shot, viewers expect Martin’s bullet. The viewers do not notice Martin’s death until the moment that Mr. Fong walks into safe zone. The irrelevant repetition offers expectation to viewers and also shocks them. The irony renders Martin’s death becomes heroic and fatal simultaneously. He dies with dignity but powerless.

To summary, To’s style largely depends on his attitude towards life. Irony is his attitude towards fatalism and as an approach to present it. Johnnie To does not take the issue of death seriously, because he believes that life is unexpected and also predestined. In fact, “unexpected” and “predestined” all describe human’s life. Human’s life seems to be unexpected, but it actually is predestined. This doctrine also underlies the theme of *Hero* – heroic fatalism. There’s no eternal gangster/hero, because destiny-machine’s wheel will not stop. The fate of gang is predestined. Heroic fatalism should be sad, but irony serves as a means to present the romantic aspect for heroes’ death. In other words, irony precludes viewers being over-sentimental about the fatalism. *Hero* employs death to allegorize the

changing attitudes towards the heroic codes of *yi*. The rise of rampant capitalist excess in post-colonial Hong Kong does influence the attitudes of gang towards *yi*. *A Hero Never Dies* is just the prelude for To's later films about realistic gang issues and mainland politics.

Notes

1. *yi*: The utmost loyalty to their brothers. Example: Martin's girlfriend, Fiona, once says, "Either Jack or Martin will die on other's hand...they treat their brothers better than their women; I knew this since day one."

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