

# Analyzing the Deconstruction and Reinvention of Infernal Affairs and The Departed Remake from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to comprehensively analyze the phenomenon of deconstruction and reinvention in the remake process of the film *Infernal Affairs* (2002) and its Hollywood remake *The Departed* (2006) from a cross-cultural perspective. With the continuous advancement of globalization, the film is an important carrier of cultural communication, so its cross-cultural remake has become an important bridge connecting different cultures. Hollywood, as the leader of the global film industry, has not only maintained the vitality of the industry through the remake strategy but also successfully absorbed the cultural creativity of Asian countries. Taking *The Departed* and *Infernal Affairs* as examples, this paper explores in detail the differences in cultural positioning, the shift in narrative purpose, the similarities and differences in characterization, as well as the use of visual styles and the aesthetics of violence in the remakes of the two films. The study finds that Hollywood has profoundly deconstructed the Chinese cultural elements in the original film during the remake process, and reconstructed a narrative system in line with the American cultural background, thus realizing cultural reconstruction and dissemination. This process not only reflects the influence of cultural differences on film creation but also reveals the complexity of cultural infiltration in the context of globalization.

**Keywords:** Transnational cinema; Cross-cultural remake; Hollywood film industry; Hong Kong cinema; Cultural reconstruction and reinvention; Globalization

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## 1. Introduction

As the process of globalization continues throughout the world, traditional and new media are gradually breaking down geographical and national boundaries and integrating the characteristics of different cultures around the world. In this process, the media not only transmit cultural information within the country but also promote the culture of the country, region, and nation to the world. In this two-way cultural exchange, the media plays a crucial role as a bridge. Film, as the most globalized medium, effectively facilitates communication and exchange across

countries, nationalities, and languages. It has emerged as a crucial tool for cultural communication, exchange, trade, and influence. “Cultural narratives, acting both as overarching forces shaping the process and as expressions of these forces in cinematic narratives, play a prominent part in transcultural adaptation”<sup>[1]</sup>.

Hollywood is the best at mastering and controlling film as a cultural medium. Hollywood is the center of world cinema, not only controlling the world’s largest film market but also due to its strong influence and commercial operation ability, making film remakes an important means of maintaining the vitality and innovation of its industry. This also makes the original speed of Hollywood movies far from being able to meet the high speed of its commercialization. Remakes and narrative repetition had a very important role in the development of early film genres, and the repetition of film genres helped to define and solidify Hollywood’s style and status<sup>[2]</sup>. As a result, remakes, especially of Asian films, have become one of Hollywood’s key filmmaking strategies. “Remaking is a pervasive and perennial practice in different media and art forms”<sup>[3]</sup>. Hollywood’s early remakes were mainly of European films because of the generic nature of American and European culture. However, since the end of the 20th century, with the decline of Hollywood’s originality and the rising influence of Asian cinema, Hollywood directors have been increasingly inclined to remake Asian films in search of new inspiration and markets. As films from China, Japan, Korea, and Thailand have become hugely successful in the West, contemporary East Asian cinema has broken through geographical, cultural, and theoretical limitations<sup>[4]</sup>. Chinese films such as *The Eye* (2002), *Lust, Caution* (2007), *Black White Forest* (2024), *Kill Zone* (2005), and *Infernal Affairs* (2002) have been or will soon be remade into Hollywood films, many of which have achieved good box office results. One of the remakes, *Infernal Affairs*, also won four awards at the 79th Academy Awards. The success of this remake lies not only in its production quality and technical level but also in its deconstruction and reconstruction of the core values and culture. Therefore, this essay chooses two films, *Infernal Affairs* (2002) and *The Departed* (2006), to compare and contrast, focusing on analyzing what original elements Hollywood has deconstructed in the process of remaking and what new elements have been introduced in the process of reinventing, as well as exploring on what kind of cultural differences such deconstruction and reinvention are based on, and what the significance of the remake is.

## 2. Differences in cultural orientation

China and the United States belong to two different regions, so the cultural products created by the cultures to which they belong are not the same, as the cultural products of a region belong to the people of that region. For cultural products to generate cultural transactions and dissemination, creators need to understand different regional cultures and humanities. “People growing up in different regional and cultural environments will form different values, which are different in identifying things, distinguishing right and wrong, and likes and dislikes”<sup>[5]</sup>. The same is true for films. A film on the same topic, created in a different region, will most likely end up presenting two different styles of films. It is the difference in style that creates the gap, and the two will have the advantage over each other and finally collide with artistic innovation.

One of the most famous genres of Hong Kong cinema is the crime and gangster film, which has become one of Hong Kong’s icons and connects the country to the international community. Compared to horror and romance films, crime and gangster films are the genre that can be most easily transformed into Hollywood action across cultures. Since crime and gangster films are so action-packed, Hollywood directors do not need to change much about the plot, only focusing on the two main references to the complex police struggle and the inner

lives of the characters. “Movement” as a symbol of body language is more easily understood and accepted by a global audience than written language. The huge success of the remake of *Infernal Affairs* into *The Departed* is a favorable example. However, the fact that the adaptation was successful in a Western context also meant that the Hong Kong culture in the blueprint of this film was deconstructed to its full extent in the remake.

Almost a hundred years of British colonial rule have shaped a distinctive local culture in Hong Kong. The traditional Chinese culture, which is the parent body, has always occupied a central position in Hong Kong culture, while Western culture, as a strong foreign culture, has taken root in Hong Kong. At the same time, Lingnan culture, with its relatively lesser constraints from Confucian orthodoxy, has also quietly gained ground in Hong Kong culture under the influence of these two major cultures. Chan states that Hong Kong’s local culture is a composite culture formed by the combination of three cultures: traditional Chinese culture, Western culture, and Lingnan culture<sup>[6]</sup>. In essence, the influence of traditional Chinese culture on Hong Kong cinema is far-reaching and persistent. As a result, Hong Kong cinema has significantly preserved the characteristics of Chinese culture, despite the fusion of various cultural elements. *Infernal Affairs* begins with a quote from the nineteenth volume of the Buddhist scripture *Nirvana Sutra*: “Avici is the most painful of the eight great hells.” Therefore, what the film expresses is a painful life situation — a misplaced identity, where the two male protagonists can only wander between their undercover identities and their real identities. The expression of this theme itself is strongly colored by Chinese Buddhist culture and has a strong traditional Chinese cultural orientation. The traditional Chinese culture embedded in Hong Kong cinema became the first subject to be deconstructed in the remake process. The tracing of Buddhist classics had to be discarded by Hollywood directors in the American-set *The Departed* in favor of cultural elements that are closer to daily life and more realistic for Americans, and a new culture of crime and gangster films was reconstructed. This represents that “Hong Kong identity” has already been “Hollywoodized.” Director Scorsese himself grew up in a Catholic family and has had a deep-rooted Catholicism since he was a child. Therefore, in the process of transplanting *Infernal Affairs*, he also incorporated Catholicism into the film, quietly transforming the suffering of reincarnation in the original film into Catholicism’s feelings of guilt and atonement. The film has just the right amount of Scorsese’s use of Catholic elements. In *The Departed*, it is the Irish immigrants in Boston who are involved in the gang fight, most of the Irish immigrants are devout Roman Catholic believers, and some of them have formed a dark evil force because of the local oppression. The church and the gang just represent the two opposing elements of good and evil, which not only reflect the moral conflict but also profoundly reflect the difficult life conditions of Irish immigrants in the United States. Scorsese’s adaptation not only preserves the religious overtones of the original film, which allows the film to transcend the cult of violence and power-hungry dimensions of the average gangster film but also retains the immigrant culture unique to the Boston area of the United States<sup>[7]</sup>.

### **3. Shift in narrative purpose**

At the beginning of *The Departed*, the director uses the voice of mobster Frank Costello to promote American values: “Everything is centered on the individual and individual is the highest value”<sup>[8]</sup>. Thus, the two films show the difference between Eastern and Western cultures in the opening of the film, which also determines the difference between the two films in terms of cultural positioning and narrative purpose. In *Infernal Affairs*, director Andrew Lau intentionally conceals all the symbols in the film that can reflect the background of the time and place, and the concepts of Buddhist karma and reincarnation are used to unfold the narrative, so that the audience

cannot derive the time and place of the story's occurrence from the film at all, to let the audience pay better attention to the storytelling itself as well as its embodied values and philosophical reflections. Moreover, Lau has changed the common one-sided undercover agent in previous crime and gangster films into a double undercover agent. This amplification of the pain brought about by identity dislocation evolves into a metaphor for the overall existential dilemma of Hong Kong people, fitting the lonely and anxious psychology of the Hong Kong public at that time due to the lack of identity caused by the handover, and focusing on the depth of universal humanity and the breadth of society<sup>[9]</sup>.

The Hollywood remake of *The Departed* has completely changed the meaning of the Hong Kong version of *Infernal Affairs*, from the gang struggle to the national struggle, making the time context clear and localized<sup>[10]</sup>. Scorsese changed the setting of a Hong Kong Crime and gangster film to an Irish immigrant neighborhood south of Boston, USA, and pushed the time period up from the 1990s to the 1970s. This adaptation makes the film embedded with the immigrant culture specific to the particular period of time in the region. With this adjustment to the time setting, the American version is more focused on reflecting realistic American social and political conditions. Jack Nicholson plays the role of a gangster based on James Whitey Bulger, a real American gang leader who is still present at large. *The Departed*'s opening monologue introduces the audience to the complex racial tensions in Boston, where the Knights of Columbus, a group of Italian immigrants, took over most of the city's neighborhoods, and the Irish were unable to find jobs under the prevailing circumstances until the Irish formed a gang that defeated the Italian organization, which ushered in a relatively stable life for the Irish. Tang states that the United States is a multi-ethnic country of immigrants, and from the arrival of the first group of immigrants, the various ethnic groups have fought over territory, jobs, and living space, which later centered on the battle between the Irish mob and the Italian mob. The monologue part of the film shows the audience the historical background of the story as well as the current situation of the society, which gives the film a sense of the vicissitudes of national history.

In terms of narrative themes, *Infernal Affairs* focuses on a spiritual quest, while *The Departed* focuses on a critique of reality. This difference is reflected in the differences in the endings of the two versions. At the end of *Infernal Affairs*, the police officer Yan, who is an undercover gangster, dies, while Ming, who is a member of the gangster, survives, which shows the purpose of the director Lau — a philosophical reflection on the “pain” in life situations. The values expressed in Hollywood gangster films are often critical, and the endings are mostly moralistic, with Bill, an undercover police officer, dying, and Colin, an undercover gangster, dying under Officer Mandy's gun. The adaptation of the ending of the American version of the film is in essence a pandering to American culture. The change achieves a psychological balance that allows American audiences to identify with the film's values and at the same time meets their expectations of the film's aesthetics<sup>[11]</sup>. This shows that from *Infernal Affairs* to *The Departed*, the perspective of the film changed from a philosophical exploration of human nature to a critical reflection on social reality.

#### **4. Differences in characterization**

From *Infernal Affairs* to *The Departed*, the commercialization of the characters significantly exemplifies an aspect of cultural deconstruction. The deconstruction of characterization is reflected in the following two aspects: Firstly, in *Infernal Affairs*, the only police superintendent, Wong, who knows the identity of Yan's undercover agent has become two police officers — Queenan and Mandy, who know the identity of Bill's undercover agent. Secondly,

the fiancée of Ming, Mary, the psychiatrist, and object of Yan's affection, Dr. Lee, and Yan's ex-girlfriend May have become one character — the police department psychiatrist, Colin's fiancée and Bill's lover, Madeleine. The inclusion of additional emotional scenes in *The Departed* enhances its Hollywood style, with these emotional complexities effectively illustrating the complex ties between the police and gangsters. *The Departed* clearly reveals the ambiguous relationship between the characters in the original, and directly shows the emotional entanglements between the two undercover agents, thus making the plot more complex and compact, and the narrative focus of the film also shifts from focusing on the identity mismatch between the two "undercover agents" with dual identities to the identity mismatch between the two "undercover agents" in the police and the gangsters<sup>[12]</sup>. The narrative focus of the film also shifts from focusing on the identity dislocation of the two "undercover agents" with dual identities to the role of these two dislocated "undercover agents" in the struggle between the police and the gangsters.

Regarding the good and evil sides, Scorsese cast different types of actors for the film, reinforcing the contrasting personalities. He placed a special emphasis on the psychological and character aspects reflected in the actions of the characters in the film. Therefore, instead of pursuing the composed and seasoned image of the undercover agents in the Hong Kong version, he chose younger but increasingly mature actors, Leonardo DiCaprio and Matt Damon. This is also due to the reliance on Hollywood star power. Throughout the film, the two protagonists seem to be in awkward and tense situations, while their true humanity is deeply portrayed. "Catholic morals, the allusion to previous films, action, dark aura, violence, foul language, tough masculinity, and lyricism", are the elements that Scorsese specializes in<sup>[13]</sup>. The film's crude and impulsive behavior of the characters, intense scene transitions, and extensive moving photography present a style of imagery that is completely different from the original. Unlike the refined and subtle art style in *Infernal Affairs*, *The Departed* is a more realistic representation of the environment in the Irish immigrant neighborhood south of Boston. In the Hong Kong version, the police and triad members are stylishly dressed. The scenery of Hong Kong also looks stunning in light and shadow. However, in *The Departed*, the characters' clothing became ordinary and even a bit scruffy. Leonardo DiCaprio's image also changed from handsome to muscular and rugged-looking. Although the American version retains the rooftop confrontation, the setting is no longer a glossy building, but a real-life scene of a building under renovation in a dilapidated setting south of Boston.

*Infernal Affairs* possesses greater artistic merit and moral depth, allowing viewers more room for contemplation. The varied stylistic approach of Scorsese renders the film direct and accessible, providing audiences with richer sensory experiences. Besides, the visual style of the adapted *The Departed* is extremely impactful. The characters in the film are very different from the Hong Kong version, with the gentleness gone and replaced by characters who espouse violence and bloodshed. The film is full of violent scenes where conflicts arise from disagreements between characters, such as the bar fight between Billy and a customer over a disagreement. The film also features numerous gory scenes, where the audience can clearly see the blood splattering from bullets hitting the characters' bodies, creating a powerful atmosphere of violent aesthetics. At the same time, there is a great deal of philosophical dialogue, slang, and vulgar language, all of which truly reflect the living conditions of the underclass.

## 5. Conclusion

Hollywood's remake of Asian films firstly shows a decline in creativity, but Hollywood can still make up for

the lack of creativity with a mature industry model, absorbing cultural creativity from Eastern countries and strategically distributing it globally. Secondly, from a cross-cultural perspective, Hollywood's remake behavior is not only a simple cultural transmission but also a profound cultural infiltration. Therefore, remake movies are a way for Hollywood to outsource production tasks <sup>[14]</sup>. Hollywood's remake of a Chinese film transcends mere repackaging; it fundamentally deconstructs the original film's culture and reconstructs it within the context of American culture. Cultural disparities serve as both the initial inspiration and the primary attraction for Hollywood's remakes of Asian films <sup>[15]</sup>. When Hollywood remakes Chinese films, it draws on storytelling constructs that are primarily based on Chinese cinema. The culture of reconstruction has become, in a very real sense, a symbol of American "identity" <sup>[16]</sup>. Filmmakers are often unconsciously influenced by the narratives of their respective cultures to impart new values to the same storyline <sup>[17]</sup>. The remake of *Infernal Affairs* became *The Departed*, which underwent a thorough Americanization, from the macro background to the detailed settings. The Chinese Buddhist allegory and humanistic concern in the original film are transformed into American police culture and typical American emotional entanglements, making this Hollywood film profoundly penetrate the "American spirit."

If the global dissemination of Hollywood's original films is a kind of pure and strong cultural output, then Hollywood's re-exportation of remakes of Chinese films is a kind of cultural aggression in disguise; its essence remains unchanged, but this kind of cultural output is more easily recognized and accepted. Hollywood remakes can make audiences forget about the "Asian conspiracy" and "globalization schemes" <sup>[18]</sup>. Regardless of the audience's purpose in watching the film, they are unconsciously influenced by the ideologies, lifestyles, values and so on contained in the film, while ignoring the value and significance of the existence of the local culture in the film blueprint. Therefore, when confronted with Hollywood remakes, viewers need to remain vigilant and take a critical look at the cultural differences and cultural infiltration involved.

In the remake process of *Infernal Affairs* from the Hong Kong version to the United States version, Hollywood writers and directors did a complete deconstruction of the Hong Kong version of the film blueprint that shows the traditional Chinese cultural heritage and a strong sense of humanistic concern, so that the remake of the film completely lost the connotation of Hong Kong culture. However, it reconstructed a sense of criticism and reflection on the dark side of American social life, making the remake socially relevant and the most successful Hollywood remake of an Asian film.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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