

Not So Extravagant, Not So Gratuitously Wild: *Infernal Affairs*

BY 2002, HONG KONG cinema was apparently finished as a viable business. Despite a substantial output (about ninety releases), box office receipts were slim, and imported films claimed about 60% of them. Attendance hovered at around twenty million per year, as it had since 1997—a far cry from the sixty million or so of the booming 1980s. Exhibitors cut ticket prices on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, but this did nothing to compensate for the vast losses due to video piracy.

In December there appeared a film that raised hopes for a new era. *Infernal Affairs* opened on eighty screens, an exceptionally wide release. Featuring an all-star cast headed by two matinee idols, it became a must-see movie. In the final two weeks of the year, it scooped up US\$5.6 million dollars, twice that of any other local film released in 2002. It even beat the top import, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. By the end of its run, *Infernal Affairs* had earned US\$7 million. It confirmed Media Asia's position as a major producer-distributor and became a touchstone in Hong Kong popular culture. A Japanese fusion restaurant named itself after the movie, and Wong Jing mounted a parody.¹

The film community wondered whether the famine might be ending. Here was a hit that did not depend on the audience's enduring loyalty to

Jackie Chan, Jet Li, or Stephen Chow. Instead it was an ambitious ensemble drama that played as a trimly appointed genre picture. Endowed with a Buddhist subtext (the original title refers to a journey to Hell), it suggested that all of the characters were plunging toward eternal torment.² A cop drama that took itself very seriously, it was booked in foreign festivals and received a batch of festival awards. Surely, it seemed, Hong Kong cinema had not lost its touch; it might even be on the route to recovery.

The two followups, in October and December 2003, together attracted as much local business as the original had, ranking fifth and first respectively among Hong Kong productions. Part III also showed the virtues of product placement, with local fashionista Joyce dressing the stars in Armani, Hugo Boss, and other brands. Through tie-in advertisements, the project garnered US\$2 million worth of commercial sponsorship.³ Better still, after the first part sold two million legitimate video units on the Mainland, a version with a more moralistic ending was released theatrically there. Part III was set up as a revenue-sharing coproduction, and a sympathetic Mainland character was obligingly written into the plot. The strategy paid off: Part III did strong business in the PRC.⁴

The first installment was screened for Hollywood companies in early 2003, and several studios bid for the remake rights.⁵ Warner Bros. won, and eventually Martin Scorsese signed on to direct. The first acknowledged US remake of a Hong Kong film, *The Departed* became a worldwide success and won Scorsese his first Best Director Academy Award. After all the years of Hong Kong cloning American hits, Hollywood finally repaid the compliment.

THIS SERIES OF TRIUMPHS came from some unlikely sources. The creators of *Infernal Affairs* weren't leaders from earlier decades like Tsui Hark or John Woo or Wong Jing. Nor were they a more recent headliner like Johnnie To. Director Andrew Lau had started in his early twenties as a cinematographer at Shaws. He went on to direct many low-budget crime films, most famously the *Young and Dangerous* series. Like Wong Jing, his producing partner for some years, Lau proved himself a fast, efficient worker committed to pleasing audiences. Soon he moved up to bigger projects like *The Storm Riders* (1998), a CGI-heavy comic-book adaptation. Codirector and coscreenwriter Alan Mak Siu-fai had assisted on projects in several genres before moving to directing mid-range pictures like *A War Named Desire* (2000) and

Rave Fever (1999), an experiment in Gen-X network narrative. Felix Chong Man-keung had done some acting before working on the script for hits like *Gen-Y Cops* (2000) and *Tokyo Raiders* (2000). The men had worked together in pairs on some projects, but all three teamed up when Lau formed his Basic Pictures company in 2002. *Infernal Affairs* was the company's first effort.

Not much in the trio's prior work prepares one for the formal intricacy and somber tones of the trilogy. Crime films have long featured undercover cops who join a gang, or gangsters who infiltrate the police. In their script for *Infernal Affairs*, Mak and Chong combine these two sorts of plots. The result is a chessgame, far more cerebral than the standard cop film. The double plot creates symmetrical lines of action, tense efforts to send or block information, and the pressures put upon each man to track down his counterpart. Across the second and third installments, this dynamic of competition, role-playing, and covert investigation becomes elaborated—not only through the efforts of each man to hide his identity, but also through the proliferation of other people working undercover for the cops or the gang. Add to this a play with time: The second part fills in much of the distant backstory for the first part, while *Infernal Affairs III* splits its story duration into the period just before the first part and the period immediately after it. The scale and coherence of this plotting are very rare in Hong Kong film.

The trilogy's consistency is even more striking in the light of all the constraints placed on the later entries. The enormous success of the first film virtually demanded a sequel. But the more sympathetic of the two protagonists was killed, so any events taking place after that had to present him in flashbacks. Younger stars from the first part, cast in cameos to play the protagonists in the

early years, now had to carry more dramatic weight. To obtain coproduction funding from China for the third entry, it was necessary to add a Mainland actor to the cast. The temptation to succumb to hasty, strained sequels is often seen in Hong Kong, as when *A Better Tomorrow II* gave Chow Yun-fat a twin brother in order to bring the beloved actor back. For the *Infernal Affairs* sequels, the three creators find fresh and coherent ways to expand the first film's core situations.

Just as remarkable is the solemnity with which the tangled threads of action are presented. The *Infernal Affairs* films are in a sense anti-Woo action pictures—no extended firefights, no balletic violence. A more minimalist approach to underworld action had already emerged in the late 1990s, with Johnnie To's *The Mission* (1999) being the most famous example. But that film also includes gorgeous bullet-riddled set-pieces. In the *IA* films nearly everything is calm, understated, almost flat.

The subdued color scheme, with cool silvers, greens, and blacks, is echoed in the rather neutral performances of the major stars. Andy Lau as the gang's mole Lau Kin-ming strides virtually expressionless through the saga. He is characterized more by his tight, severe gait than by his masklike face. The older actors, Anthony Wong (Superintendent Wong) and Eric Tsang (Hon Sam), had been facile muggers through the decades, but here they are studies in edginess masked by blandness. Likewise Francis Ng had chewed many yards of Hong Kong scenery in the past, but he plays Ngai Wing-hau as a soft-spoken gang boss in glasses and a cardigan. The understated performance style of the trilogy suits the younger actors, like Edison Chen (the teenage Lau) and Shawn Yu (the teenage Chan), who have limited expressive range. Kelly Chan Wai-lam and Sammi Cheng, two more teen idols known mostly for

romances and comedies, are appropriately quiet as well. Leon Lai Ming, virtually a blank in any film he adorns, becomes the iciest figure of all and makes his Superintendent Yeung impossible to read.

The down-gearing of performance is most evident in the restrained range available to Tony Leung Chiu-wai as the tormented undercover cop Chan Wing-yan. In the moment when he realizes that his mentor and protector Wong has been killed, we get subtle modulations of expression. He shifts from his customary grim demeanor, his armor in the world he has infiltrated, to shock at seeing Wong's body, to a mix of sorrow and desperation (Figs. IA.1–IA.3). He has lost his only friend, and he's now in even greater danger.

Another mark of restraint is the trilogy's refusal to rely on explicit violence. "There's only maybe thirty seconds of gun scenes," remarked screenwriter Chong of the first film, "and everything else is concentrated on the dramatic elements."⁶ Chong is exaggerating only a little. The first pistol shot in *IA* is heard thirty minutes into the film; the first major act of violence comes an hour in. The gun battles are remarkably brief, adding up to no more than four minutes of the film's running time.

The body count is slightly higher in the sequels, but all three parts rely remarkably little on the shattering glass, hurtling vehicles, and bullet ballets that rule local cinema. In *IA III*, after a burst of violence in a restaurant, fully an hour passes before any gunplay ensues, and that consumes less than a minute. Lau, Mak, and Chong keep a great deal of death offscreen, from the rooftop fight leading to Wong's fatal fall in *IA*, to Yeung's subduing of a demented officer in *IA III*. Even the opening police raid, which builds toward a free-fire assault, comes to nothing and is abandoned. Throughout the trilogy, onrushing music, a cliché

of action scenes, is largely abandoned in favor of quietly building orchestral chords, an ominous march, sporadic drumming, and occasionally a string threnody accompanied by a wailing chorus or a keening soprano.

Compared with the profane and operatic *Departed*, *Infernal Affairs* looks practically repressed: for once it's the American movie that's over the top. Andrew Lau, adept with the handheld camera and casual composition in his cinematography for



IA.1 *Infernal Affairs*.



IA.2 *Infernal Affairs*.



IA.3 *Infernal Affairs*.

Wong Kar-wai and in the *Young and Dangerous* series, here commits himself to sober tracking shots and unfussy shot design. True, scenes are decorated with flourishes like a prowling camera, rapid cutting among close views, and an occasional whooshing pan or bumpy reframing. But these are the current default in international film style.⁷ Mostly, however, things are stable to the point of quietude. The dry handling was considered Hollywoodish in its lack of sensationalism, but people forgot that Tony Scott and Paul Greengrass are overwrought to a degree that Hong Kong *policier* directors might admire. Even by Hollywood standards, *Infernal Affairs* is fairly dispassionate. Characteristic of this strategy is the scene in *IA* in which Lau betrays Hon Sam and kills him during a warehouse raid (Figs. IA.4–IA.9). This major turning point in the plot consumes seven seconds.

What replaces extravagant carnage? Trailing, spying, making inferences, rigging surveillance, setting traps, and above all sending messages (by phone, computer, Morse code). In short, the film is based on classic suspense to a degree rare in Hong Kong tradition. In a cinema that always considered it easier to dream up delirious stunts than to plot a cat-and-mouse thriller, this strategy sets the film apart. For instance, the standard Hong Kong film shows a cop squeezing information out of a suspect by beating him up. In *IA*, Lau gets what he needs by pretending to be a mob-appointed lawyer. This trick displays the sort of cleverness that will win Lau esteem from his colleagues, which furthers his undercover activities. In addition, the scene sets up the importance of cellphones and the traces they leave; one can track one's adversary digitally.

The suspense is given an elegant form. The first film, presenting two protagonists, lays down the principle of doublings and symmetries that will

rule the series. Then the dualities multiply: cops versus crooks, gang versus gang, gang boss versus gang boss, Ngai family versus Hon Sam family, Internal Affairs versus Security, Lau versus Yeung. There are even two women named Mary. Given all the lines of action, crosscutting is crucial to monitor the flow of information, to contrast the two protagonists' situations and stratagems, and, eventually, to tie together two large-scale periods of time. Meanwhile, wristwatches, playing cards, elevators, rooftops, surveillance cameras, salutes, and above all the Taiwanese pop tune "Forgotten Times" create motifs that bind characters and situations. Fluid transitions are provided by dialogue hooks and imagistic links. Flashbacks, either as bursts of images or recalled scraps of dialogue, interrupt present action to reiterate information or clarify a character's stream of thought. All of these tactics, openly borrowed from American



IA.4 A pair of unemphatic shots...



IA.5 ...shows the two men confronting one another.



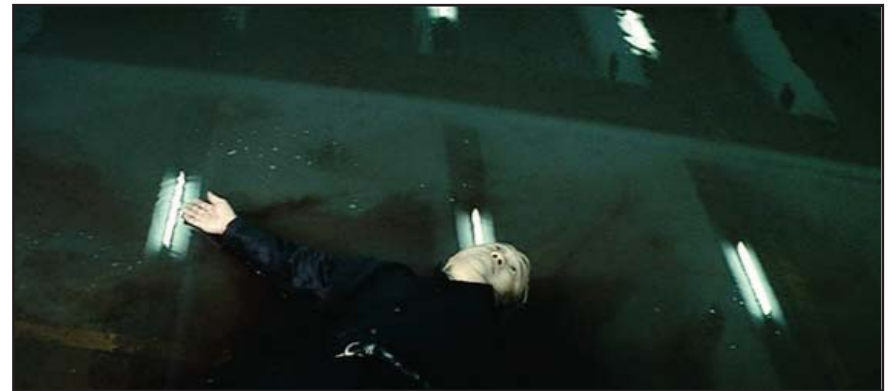
IA.6 When Lau fires, the action is shown in a distant image.



IA.8 Cut back to Lau lowering his pistol while we hear a soft splash.



IA.7 This gives way to an even more distant framing, as if providing a visual equivalent of the shot's echo.



IA.9 After Lau turns and leaves, cut to Sam lying in a puddle of spreading blood. The camera tracks gently in as the shot fades out.

films, are presented with an unassuming ease seldom seen in modern Hong Kong films.

The theme of the loss of identity, like the Buddhist references, doubtless helped the films gain critical respectability. Likewise, the reigning semantic fields of modernity and postmodernity can be mapped easily onto the films' action. Academics will be interpreting these films for many years to come. But if we want to understand the artistry of popular cinema, we should not expect philosophical profundity or incisive social cri-

tique. Mass-audience filmmakers are opportunistic. They scoop subjects and ideas floating in the public domain into their movies, with the aim of creating forms that have force. The result may not have conceptual integrity, but it should have artistic impact.

The film will be shaped by expectations about genre and other conventions. It will be subject to the constraints and opportunities of a production system. (Knowing that audiences would want several scenes between the two big stars in the

first part, Lau asked Mak to create exactly six.⁸) And all these factors combine with creative choices about narrative structure, narration, and cinematic style. In *Infernal Affairs*, the artists' goal was to innovate within a tradition that had begun to flag. "We wanted our film to be different from previous Hong Kong movies," said Lau. "If we don't change, we'll die."⁹ Ironically, however, the makers innovated by mimicking American cinema—in concept, plot structure, and film technique—in a slightly different tone of voice.

Infernal Affairs called out for an American remake because it had already smoothly absorbed some of Hollywood's norms.

UNDERCOVER COP Chan Wing-yan is a trusted member of Hon Sam's gang, while Lau Kin-ming is an inspector working under Superintendent Wong. In the course of the plot each mole stalks the other. In private life, each man has a sympathetic woman: Mary, Lau's novelist wife, and Dr. Lee, Chan's therapist. After Lau engineers the death of Superintendent Wong, he kills his true employer Hon Sam in a police raid, which brings Chan out of hiding. Abruptly Chan realizes that Lau is the traitor in the force and flees. He tries to pressure Lau into revealing himself, but the first installment ends with Chan shot by Billy, a police inspector now revealed to be another mole. Lau remains in place, although Mary, having discovered his secret, leaves him.

Infernal Affairs has a strict three-act plot structure, each part running a little more than thirty minutes. The first section establishes that Chan, embedded in the gang, can transmit information secretly to the police using Morse code on his cellphone. This enables Wong's squad to disrupt Hon Sam's deal to buy a shipment of cocaine from Thailand. Although the drugs are seized, Hon Sam himself avoids prosecution thanks to his mole Lau's warning him via cellphone during the operation. The collapse of each side's effort tells both senior figures, Sam and Inspector Wong, that each has a traitor in his crew. This section ends in a stalemate, with Inspector Wong's squad facing off Hon Sam's gang. Wong warns Sam that the loser of this game will die. Both men will be dead before the film's end.

The film's second phase begins with Sam instructing Lau to identify the traitor, and Wong

asking the same of Chan. At this point the two moles' personal lives are fleshed out with romantic interests. Unaware that her lover Lau is a triad, Mary raises the question of his split identity by explaining that she's writing a novel about a man with twenty-eight personalities. The problem is: Who is he when he wakes up in the morning? The sleep-and-waking motif is furthered by the parallel female figure, the psychologist Dr. Lee. Her couch is the only place where Chan can get a night's sleep, so instead of therapy she offers solace.

The bulk of this section involves intertwined efforts to reveal the moles. The dramatic high points consist of two pursuits, one the inverse of the other. Chan follows Hon Sam to a movie theatre, where Sam gives Inspector Lau dossiers he's gathered on his gang. Chan doesn't manage to identify Lau at a distance, and eventually he loses the scent. In the parallel pursuit, Chan is meeting with *his* mentor Inspector Wong. They are trailed by Sam's gang, who catches up with Wong after he has separated from Chan. The gang throws Wong off the skyscraper's roof. This lengthy sequence ends with Chan escaping along with the gang's driver, Wai-keung, who has been wounded in the firefight. He dies saying that he realizes that Chan is the mole.

At the end of this second act, Chan is trapped. Through Wong's violent death he has lost his sole contact in the force, and Wai-keung's accusation makes him realize that his disguise is imperfect. In fact, he has been fatally vulnerable from the start. Although the film gives us two parallel protagonists, they are unevenly matched.

The film's opening scene has already established the triads as being a jump ahead of the cops. At a temple Hon Sam recruits teenage boys to go to the Police Academy as spies. By the time Wong talks the young Chan into becoming an

undercover cop, there is already a traitor marching through training in the courtyard outside. Years later, at their first encounter in a stereo shop, Chan pretends to be a salesman and recommends an audio cable, but Lau shows Chan a better one from the store's stock.

Chan will always be a beat behind. During the initial raid, Chan sees Sam getting a phone message from his police spy, but he isn't given a clue to the spy's identity. By contrast, Lau watches Wong tapping out Morse code (Figs. IA.10–IA.11). Through point-of-view shots, the narration emphasizes that Lau realizes that this is how Wong communicates with his mole. Later, after the movie theatre rendezvous, Chan catches Lau snapping the dossier briskly against his thigh (Figs. IA.12–IA.13). But this parallel gesture doesn't give Chan a trail to follow. More generally, he simply can't undertake an investigation on the scale that Lau can, with all the police technology at his disposal. A string of brief sequences shows Lau checking records and studying Morse code. The corresponding passages of Chan's life show him given Sam's authority to vet the gang members, but he pursues this assignment off screen.

Similarly, while Lau is given some affectionate domestic scenes with Mary, Chan is shown running into an old girlfriend, a moment that emphasizes the emotional barrenness of his gang life. Soon he will turn again to Inspector Wong, the only friend he has. But Lau, proactive as usual, sends his squad to trail Wong, while also dispatching Sam's triads to find Wong's snitch. Lau precipitates Wong's death and the gunfight that ensues, while Chan is reduced to standing transfixed in shock.

The power disparity plays itself out in the third section of the film. Lau cleverly takes the blame for Wong's death, pleading that he was simply trying to consider every cop a potential suspect.



IA.10 *Internal Affairs.*



IA.12 *Internal Affairs.*



IA.11 *Internal Affairs.*



IA.13 *Internal Affairs.*

His superiors issue a new order: “Find our man and get him out of there.” Again the narration emphasizes Lau’s stratagems: checking Wong’s computer files, calling Chan on Wong’s phone, even tapping out Morse code on the handset. This last stratagem inspires a degree of trust in Chan. Another raid parallel to the first ensues, but this time Lau is even further ahead of the game. He allows Chan to transmit his message, brings the police on the scene, and then kills Hon Sam—another mentor eliminated, another step toward finding the mole. Now Lau is a completely free

agent. Chan now trusts him enough to come in from the cold (“Was the stereo okay?”) but in Lau’s office he glimpses his own scribbled note on Hon Sam’s dossier. He realizes that Lau is the traitor and flees.

While Lau destroys Chan’s identity as a policeman by erasing his file, so Chan belatedly begins to fight back. He plays the only card he has. He mails tapes of Lau talking with Hon Sam to Lau’s house. Mary intercepts them and realizes that her lover is a triad spy. But Lau shrugs this off and takes steps to eradicate Chan. On the rooftop

where Chan had met with Wong, Lau arrives, followed by his right-hand man Billy. In the elevator Billy murders Chan—as ever, outmatched and outmaneuvered. Billy then reveals himself as another triad mole, recruited in the same ceremony in which Lau had participated as a teenager. Since Billy’s knowledge threatens Lau’s security, Lau kills him and arranges the elevator carnage to seem that Lau and Billy both died in a shootout.

Lau gets off scot-free. He is able to attend the police funeral for Chan, now acknowledged as a heroic undercover man. It’s the third funeral in



IA.14 Billy's cellphone rings, and he answers. It appears to be another officer, and Billy says they must use walkie-talkie channels.

the film (one in each part), and Chan is buried beside Wong. Dr. Lee's mourning for Chan contrasts sharply with the impassivity of Lau, who is now revealed as even more hollow than at the start. Chan, more sensitive and anguished, living on a hair-trigger, has throughout expressed the most expansive emotional range. This corresponds to one aspect of Tony Leung Chiu-wai's star image; his early films *Love unto Waste* (1986) and *My Heart Is That Eternal Rose* (1989) portrayed him as a sensitive youth struggling in a corrupt world. Lau, always a step ahead, is far colder, with his calm demeanor hiding his feelings. Andy Lau has in his hundred or more films played many different sorts of roles, but his more stoic side here works to present Lau as initially all business but eventually a moral nullity.

A crisp, sober technique maintains tension across the parts. The song "Forgotten Times" threads through the film, changing its implications from scene to scene. Apart from its evocations of a lost past—both men have had their youth stolen by others—it becomes a spectral reminder of both men's inability to find or sustain a woman's love.¹⁰ Ironically, in death the loner Chan gets Dr. Lee's devotion, while Lau survives and prospers but loses his woman. What makes him a good traitor makes him a failure as a human being.



IA.15 As Billy hangs up, Wong stares suspiciously at him.

The training of each recruit is counterpointed through crosscutting, both between the young men and between images of them as boys and shots of them as men. The rest of the film will be built on ingenious intercutting—not only to build suspense with messages crisscrossing different lines of action but also to contrast the lives of the two protagonists. Chan is already driven and fraying, sampling cocaine and grabbing packaged noodles. Lau enjoys an upscale flat, tailored suits, and a beautiful girlfriend; in headquarters he is trim and brisk and on the way up.

As the film skips among lives and plotlines, the crosscutting is often motivated by cellphones. A constant means of contact, they become dramatically pivotal when Lau's signature ringtone alerts Hong Sam to his approach in the warehouse. And in the welter of fake calls and covert calls during the first, aborted raid, a neat piece of misdirection shows Inspector Billy, a character we have scarcely noticed, answering a call and being upbraided by Inspector Wong for violating radio silence. In retrospect we realize that the pattern of shots could imply that like Lau, Billy is tipping off Sam (Figs. IA.14–IA.16)—prefiguring the revelation that Billy too is a mole. This sort of suggestive storytelling has always been rare in Hong Kong film, but *Infernal Affairs* carries it off smoothly.



IA.16 Cut to Hon Sam on the phone. He's actually now in conversation with someone else, which leads us to think that he wasn't the one calling Billy. Once we know that Billy is another of Sam's moles, we're likely to speculate that the first was a call from Sam, and the cutaway to Wong covers the time during which Billy hung up and Sam dialed someone else. In retrospect, this is an almost throwaway hint about Billy's true loyalties.

AFTER THE SUCCESS of the first film, Lau and his colleagues had a franchise. How to continue it? The balance between familiarity and novelty driving all popular film becomes acute in a series because the choices contract sharply. If actors are unavailable for the new project, their roles must be filled with new faces or written out altogether (e.g., George McFly in the *Back to the Future* sequels). Some characters must continue, but they must either be given new things to do or new traits of personality. Some basic *données* have to be respected (such as Indiana Jones' fear of snakes) while new motifs need to be invented. The whole enterprise has to be scaled up, leaving escape hatches and potentially unresolved issues in case more future episodes can be launched.

What comes to the aid of the popular filmmaker is the flexibility of narrative. A story can always be added to: *So they didn't live happily ever after*. New characters and goals can be conceived, perhaps building on elements of the first entry. The

original story can also be split open. A string of scenes in the original can be pulled apart, gaps opened up, and new material inserted, as in *The Bourne Supremacy* and *The Bourne Ultimatum*. As viewers have become more adroit at following a complicated tale, and as home video has permitted them to replay a movie at leisure, filmmakers have created works that exploit time-jumps and shifts in point of view across a series. But the latitude available in popular storytelling threatens to diminish the founding entry in a series. A clean, cogent film like the first *Infernal Affairs* can seem fractured by the digressions, repetitions, and overdecoration seen in later installments. The three films were eventually issued on DVD in chronological order, chopped and reshuffled in the manner of *The Godfather: A Novel for Television* (1977). While straightening out the story line, this tactic somewhat spoils the integrity of the initial film.

In keeping with the new sobriety of the series and the new ambitions of Hong Kong storytelling, the makers of *Infernal Affairs* didn't resort to the trick of *A Better Tomorrow II* (1987) and invent a lookalike substitute for Chan that would allow Tony Leung Chiu-wai to appear in a sequel. Instead, *Infernal Affairs II* provides a prequel, following the template of the *God of Gamblers* series (1989–1997). But because the prologue of *Infernal Affairs* had cast different actors as the young Chan and Lau, the filmmakers were obliged to make those minor players central to the prequel. Part III brings back the big stars, Tony Leung Chiu-wai and Andy Lau, but to do this it resorts to the sort of time-juggling that had become common in Western popular cinema. By showing what immediately preceded and immediately followed the events of the first film, the third entry risked a narrative strategy that would tax the

local audience and mystify overseas viewers unfamiliar with the series.

Infernal Affairs II shows how each mole burrowed into his milieu. This premise allowed the filmmakers to revive vigorous characters like Inspector Wong, triad boss Hon Sam, and the driver Wai-keung. But the protagonists of the first film were played by fairly weak young performers Edison Chen (Lau) and Shawn Yu (Chan). The solution was double-barreled: to create subplots that take the spotlight off Chan and Lau and to surround them with new characters. Connoisseurs of Hong Kong film tend to enjoy *IA II* because it allows much-loved secondary actors to carry a good deal of the action.

The subplots establish the situation in place at the beginning of the first film, but they also create a web of new character relationships. Before both men go to the police academy, Lau is shown as a ruthless street punk, attracted to Hon Sam's wife Mary. It's now revealed that Chan is related to another triad family, the Ngais. The murder of the head of the Ngai family impels his eldest son, Wing-hau, to plot revenge on the other triad clans. Chan, dismissed from the academy on the pretext of being distant kin to the Ngai family, joins their gang. Lau learns that Mary is a police informer, put in place by Superintendent Wong. The plot builds toward a confrontation between Hon Sam's gang and the Ngai crime family. Lau, having helped send Mary to her death, wins respect in the force for killing Wing-hau in a standoff. Now Hon Sam is the triad supreme, the status he enjoys at the start of the first installment, and he will take Chan into his gang.

If Hon Sam instigates the action of the first film, Inspector Wong initiates the plot of this one. Seeking to bring down the Ngai family, and to avenge the death of his partner, he cynically sets

up a gang war. Once the Ngai patriarch is killed, there follows a grand struggle between Ngai's son, the quietly dangerous Wing-hau, and other gang lords. In the process, the film develops strong backgrounds for both Wong and the triad Hon Sam. Wong is in friendly competition with his colleague Luk, while Hon Sam becomes more sympathetic through his devotion to his wife Mary.

By shifting emphasis to the triad world, in which the young Chan and Lau are still novices, the film gives screen time to an array of practiced character actors who anchor the film emotionally. For example, the first film presents the vagaries of male pain largely through Chan, but here this expressive material is played for variations. Wing-hau turns his grief at his father's murder into a program of vengeance carried out as virtually an intellectual exercise. Hon Sam is more resigned to suffering, fleeing to Thailand to start a new family after Mary's death; but he eventually accepts Wong's offer to bring down his enemy Wing-hau. Inspector Wong himself, so equable in most of his confrontations in the first part, collapses when he sees Luk murdered and realizes that he has set in motion a killing spree. He would welcome, he says, being put out of his misery.

Expanding the underworld milieu seen in the first part also allows treachery and double-crossing to expand. Here we have not only Lau, the triad embedded in the cops, and Chan, the cop among triads. The plot turns on the revelation of more moles: Wong has recruited Mary, and Luk has embedded Law among Ngai's number. When we see Luk following Wong, we're likely to recall Inspector Billy from the first part and wonder if Luk too is bent. The effect is to spread complicity. Here the central figure is Mary. She has betrayed Sam and ordered the murder of the senior Ngai. Even as relations between Wong and Hon Sam

become warm and respectful, Wong cannot reveal that Sam's wife was in Wong's pay. But Mary knows that Lau is an informer planted in the police, yet she never tells Wong. In this installment, no one can afford sincerity because no one has clean hands.

The story unfolds in three eras: 1991, 1995, and 1997, with the periods echoing the three-part template of the first film. The 1991 section presents the triggering incident, the murder of Ngai Kwun by young Lau. He is already attracted to Mary, who rebuffs him. Chan, half-brother to Wing-hau, is approached to join the Ngai gang. But neither of the young men has as yet gone underground. The bulk of this section is devoted to explaining Wong's plan to bring down the Ngai gang and Wing-hau's establishing himself as fully capable of ruling over the rival gangs. At Mary's urging Lau is sent to the police academy, while Chan is dismissed and sent undercover. Chan's kinship with the Ngais is now seen to motivate his expulsion in the first part. The section ends with Chan building up his credibility by sharing a cell with the hapless Wai-keung, whose father has just died. The two men become friends through shared suffering, establishing this as Chan's emotional register throughout the series.

In 1995, both young moles are in place, and although they rise in each organization, they mostly watch and wait while their elders carry out maneuvers. Wong's unfolding scheme to unseat the Ngais runs up against his rivalry with Luk, who says he has his own mole in the family. As the first part built toward a (failed) police raid, this one moves toward a series of violent deaths. Ngai's brutally wipes out his rivals, with the killings crosscut much in the manner of the climax of the *The Godfather*. The massacre is followed by an even more harrowing scene that

Chan witnesses: Wing-hau kills one of his closest associates, Law, whom he's convinced is a police spy. (He's right: Law is Officer Luk's man.) Luk is blown up when a bomb in Wong's car explodes. Sam, brokering a deal in Thailand, is shot. And after Mary resists Lau's advances, he arranges for her to be run down at the airport.

This flurry of killings would be the climax of a typical Hong Kong film, but in keeping with its more serious demeanor, the film supplies a 1997 section, and it takes its time in winding up the plot. As Wong faces discipline for setting up the gang war, Lau has been advanced in the ranks. Chan has moved up in the gang, becoming his half-brother Wing-hau's trusted lieutenant. With the handover to China approaching, Wing-hau looks forward to a political career. But Wong's pressure pays off, and in a rapid exchange of phone calls reminiscent of those in the first film, the bosses engage in tit-for-tat kidnappings. The upshot is a face-off in a night café, with Lau killing Wing-hau—but not before Wing-hau discovers in his last moments that his beloved Chan is wearing a wire. The protracted epilogue shows Sam assuming power and hesitantly ordering the execution of the Ngai family. As the handover arrives, Wong turns his attention to Hon Sam, who is celebrating with the new power brokers. In the final sequence, Chan has joined Sam's gang and Lau meets a woman who comes to the police station for help; her name is Mary—in effect, a substitute for Hon Sam's wife. The plot has laid the groundwork for the first *Infernal Affairs*, but it has also provided a fresco of the triad world that is engrossing in its own right.

IA III CONFRONTS the nagging problem of what to do next. Having provided a prequel to the first film, the obvious move is to supply a sequel. But

then the only continuing character would be Lau. That wasn't an option: the film's investors demanded that both major stars, Tony Leung Chiu-wai and Andy Lau, return. So Chan was revived, along with Inspector Wong and Hon Sam. The creative team settled on a narrative structure indebted to *The Godfather Part II*: a combination prequel and sequel. *IA III* consists of two alternating time schemes, one set in 2002 just before the incidents of the first installment, the other set in 2003 just afterward. In effect, the linear parallels and doublings of the first two parts are now carried out at two levels of time. This was a daring gesture in local filmmaking, especially since it makes the film virtually incomprehensible to anyone who hasn't seen the initial entry. *Variety's* critic complained: "Pic would take several viewings and hours of computer time to figure out whether the plot actually makes sense."¹¹ Moreover, Part III expands its purview by deepening the character of Lau. He cracks under the pressures of keeping up his charade and eventually succumbs to madness.

The 2002 thread introduces the film's two new characters. Shen Ching is a Mainland gun-runner who wants a deal with Hon Sam. Part of the plot involves Chan's inquiry into him, on behalf of both Sam and his real mentor Wong. Another newcomer, Superintendent Yeung, seems to be pursuing Shen. A secondary line of action fills in Chan's growing romance with the therapist Dr. Lee.

The 2003 portion, while continuing the plotlines involving Shen and Yeung, wedges in some bits that "rewrite" moments seen at the climax of the first film.¹² This is a good instance of the expandability of narrative. No matter how smooth or tight the surface, there is always a way to open up a gap. In the aftermath of what we saw in the first installment, Lau is exonerated for

Billy's death, and Billy is identified as Hon Sam's mole. But new flashbacks to the elevator scene in the first film reveal that another corrupt cop has died leaving evidence of Hon Sam's infiltration of the police. This initiates a fresh line of action, putting Lau on the defensive and obliging him to hunt for the cop's dossier.

Part II concentrated on the power plays among the triads, but there's little of that here. Long stretches of 2002 scenes are taken up with Chan's affair with Dr. Lee. But in the 2003 sections, now that Lau has lost his lover Mary, he has no romantic interest, and these scenes are filled with an emphasis on police bureaucracy. We are introduced to staff in Wong's bureau, in the Internal Affairs office, and in Security, headed by Yeung, who is charged with ferreting out Hon Sam's agents. Under these pressures, Lau succumbs to guilt-filled hallucinations, imagining himself as Chan and coming to believe he's heroically exposing all the moles among the police. In a standoff he is shot by Shen, who's revealed as Yeung's mole. Although Lau recovers, he seems to remain in a mental limbo, summoning up figures both alive and dead from his past. The overall result is

a structural equilibrium across the franchise. *IA* balances triad world and cop world, *IA II* expands on the former, and *IA III* probes the latter.

The opening of *IA III* provides a condensed introduction to the film's method. Arrested in 2002 after a massage-parlor brawl, Chan and his sidekick Wai-keung leave the hospital under police escort. The film's credits appear over looming shots of an elevator descending. When the elevator arrives, the doors open and we are in 2003. Inspector Lau enters on his way to attend the inquiry into Chan's death. Such hooks between scenes are used throughout (Figs. IA.17–IA.18).

After the prologue, the film alternates blocks of time from each period. The sections are strictly chronological, apart from brief flashbacks that clarify information. An epilogue brings us to November 2002, with Chan entering a mob-run stereo shop and retrieving some hidden cocaine. When Lau comes in to ask about a stereo, we have a replay of the two moles' encounter in the early part of the first film. Now we even know why Chan's arm was in a cast at that point. The entire series buckles shut.

Novel as the alternating structure is, probably the most daring, and debatable, experiment here is the change in Lau. The issue of identity, raised by Lau's wife Mary when she asked about the man who had twenty-eight personalities, resurfaces. Lau gradually becomes convinced he is the dead Chan. This is in a way appropriate, for his mask of bland severity throughout the first film suggests what was revealed at the end: He is empty, ready to be filled by a new self. As he does so, several subjective techniques are used, including one man's voice heard over the other's face, and Lau glimpsing Chan's face in a mirror. The crucial scene, set in 2003, shows Lau obsessively bent over his surveillance screen. He answers a phone call—from the dead Chan. "Boss, I saw Yeung with Sam today. He may be a mole. Run a check on him." Chan goes on to suggest that he's still working on the Shen case.

What we have is a call from the past, reporting incidents whose consequences have long since been played out. Lau's reaction, rubbing his eyes and replacing his contact lenses, is rendered in abrupt jump cuts uncharacteristic of earlier scenes. Lau then answers a call from Mary, who reports



IA.17 In 2002 Chan agrees to see Dr. Lee and approaches her office door.



IA.18 Cut to inside the office, with the furniture shrouded. The door opens and we see Dr. Lee and Lau enter, in 2003.

getting a tape from Chan—another impossible call from the past. This last moment is a good example of how difficult the third film would be for a viewer unfamiliar with part one.

The phone calls initiate Lau's descent into madness, in which he first assumes the role of Wong's colleague, let in on Chan's role. In a scene in a hospital lobby he imagines sitting in on a meeting between Chan and Wong, culminating in Chan pulling his gun and pointing it at Lau's head, as in the climax of the first film. Eventually Lau envisions himself as Chan, righteously exposing the police mole Lau. "All I want is to be a good cop!" Gathering his colleagues, he plays the incriminating tape that Yeung has discovered, and then, claiming Yeung is Lau, shoots him. He is shot as well. Recuperating in a hospital he sees Sam's dead wife Mary pointing a pistol at him, and—perhaps—his own wife Mary visiting to announce that their son can say "Papa." As Lau listens, his fingers restlessly tap out Morse code, as if he had become at once Chan and the man who learned Chan's secret. With his mad outburst in headquarters and this ambivalent detail, the film summons up a mite of sympathy for the most enigmatically inhuman character in the series.

THE THREE INSTALLMENTS of *Infernal Affairs* show how popular narrative strategies can adjust to the presence or absence of stars. Part I was able to showcase two of Hong Kong's top players, filling out the rest of the canvas with strongly profiled character actors. Part II, lacking top stars, deployed more complex plotting, which in turn gave secondary performers more to do. Part III brought back the original stars, and when one is subtracted (Tony Leung Chiu Wai, from the 2003 plot), another big name (Leon Lai) was added.

In the wake of the trilogy's success there appeared a cycle of undercover films that shows the variorum nature of popular cinema. Wilson Yip Wai-sun's *Flash Point* (2007) halts its mole plot a third of the way through, while *Undercover* (2007, Billy Chung Siu-Hung) and Herman Yau's *On the Edge* (2006) emphasize the suffering of an undercover cop returning to the force, trusted neither by his colleagues nor by his criminal buddies. Perhaps encouraged by the time-bending experiments of the *IA* films, *On the Edge* alternates between two parallel periods, the cop's rise to power in the gang versus his plunge into dissolution after his return to the force. Wong Jing provided unexpectedly serious variants on the mole premise, including *The Colour of the Truth* (2003) and *Wo Hu* (literally, "Crouching Tigers," 2006). The latter is an ambitious effort to trace out the overlapping lives of several gang members, somewhat in the manner of *IA II*. Although the later entries in the cycle avoided the designer colors and unsensational pacing of the original, preferring instead harsh realism (*On the Edge*) or flamboyant action scenes (*Flash Point*), the Basic Pictures team had opened a path to a renewal of the triad genre.

The team members also boosted their own careers. Lau prospered the most, taking on the blockbuster manga adaptation *Initial D* (2004), a pan-Asian hit in an eye-candy style. He made a foray into Hollywood (*The Flock*, 2007, taken from him for recutting), into Korea (*Daisy*, 2006), and into television with an adaptation of a martial arts novel (*Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain*, 2006). He also continued to work in many local genres, making, again with Mak and Chong, the slick thriller *Confession of Pain* (2006), full of red herrings and point-of-view gambits. Lau's 2010

project was a PRC coproduction providing a sequel to Bruce Lee's *Fist of Fury*. Meanwhile, with help from Lau, Alan Mak and Felix Chong set up their own company and collaborated on *Moonlight in Tokyo* (2005) and *Lady Pop & Papa Crook* (2008), the latter plagued by PRC censorship problems. Their police surveillance thriller *Overheard* (2009) has something of *IA*'s play with mind games and split loyalties. Chong moved to directing with *Once a Gangster* (2010), a late-in-the-day parody of Lau's *Young and Dangerous* series.

However much the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy benefited its creators, it did not rescue the filmmaking community. Despite the success of the first installment, local films earned 24% less in 2002 than in the previous year. 2003, the year of the SARS outbreak, was even worse, with only 77 films released and a new low in attendance. Soon the slump got steeper. From 2005 through 2009 annual box office takings for all local releases sank to between US\$25 million and US\$32 million. By 2009, local productions were claiming only a fifth of total receipts. The three *IA* films showed that Hong Kong cinema could pull off a coup occasionally, but a fresh foray into long-form storytelling, even one firmly attached to local traditions, could not revive an entire industry. The future lay in China.

- pp. 143–174. See also Yeh and Davis, “Re-nationalizing China’s film industry,” pp. 39–42; Zhang, pp. 281–296.
30. Jeremy Hanson, “Digging in to China,” *Variety*, 26 June–2 July 2000, p. 38.
 31. Wellington Fung quoted in Saul Symonds, “Happy Together,” *Hollywood Reporter*, 29 May–4 June 2007, p. 18.
 32. An overview of CEPA as a policy can be found in Y. W. Peter Chiu, “CEPA: A Milestone in the economic integration between Hong Kong and Mainland China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 15 (May 2006): 275–295. For a good summary of CEPA’s film policies to 2007, see Davis and Yeh, *East Asian Screen Industries*. pp. 102–105. An official statement of film-related CEPA provisions, updated through 2010, is on the Hong Kong Trade and Industry website at www.tid.gov.hk/english/cepa/tradeservices/av_cinema_picture_lib.html. Some useful early reporting is Liz Shackleton, “Hong Kong/ China trade agreement heralds production boom,” *Screen Daily*, 9 July 2003, at www.screendaily.com/4014117.article; and Carlye Adler, “New Year brings looser mainland import laws,” *Variety*, 21 December 2003, at www.variety.com/article/VR1117897426. On the results, see Vicki Rothrock, “China pact perks up biz,” *Variety*, 14–20 March 2005, pp. A1, A10.
 33. Patrick Frater, “Asian tiger roars as Hollywood listens,” *Variety*, 3–9 September 2007, p. C5; Liz Shackleton, “CineAsia opens with focus on mainland China’s growth,” *Screen Daily*, 9 December 2009, at www.screendaily.com/5008898.article.
 34. Quoted in Liz Shackleton, “Hong Kong/China trade agreement.”
 35. Winnie Chung, “Hong Kong,” *Hollywood Reporter* special supplement, May 2006, p. 74.
 36. Figures are taken from the annual Exhibition Profile in *Screen Digest*, 2004–2010.
 37. Clifford Coonan, “Chinese B. O. totals \$1.14 bil,” *Variety*, 19 October 2010, at www.variety.com/article/VR1118025904; Kathrin Hille, “Chinese cinema set to overtake India’s,” *Financial Times*, 14 October 2010, at blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2010/10/14/chinas-cinema-set-to-overtake-india/.
 38. “Sizing up China’s cities,” *The Economist*, 18 September 2010, p. 92.
 39. Patrick Frater, “‘Invisible Target’ goes to Weinstains,” *Variety*, 13 July 2007, at www.variety.com/article/VR1117968562.
 40. My business-oriented account has neglected the important changes in PRC popular culture taking place over the period. For an account of them, see Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).
 41. Quoted in Liz Shackleton, “Mainland Mission,” *Screen Daily*, 4 May 2009, at www.screendaily.com/5000759.article.
 42. Vivienne Chow, “Asia’s young directors given some clout,” *South China Morning Post*, 24 March 2005, p. C3.
 43. Liz Shackleton, “Columbia Asia to back new film from Stephen Chow,” *Screen Daily*, 2 June 2003, at www.screendaily.com/4013716.article; Vicki Rothrock, “Columbia cracks China,” *Variety* (14–20 March 2005), pp. A1, A10.
 44. Crucindo Wong, head of the Motion Picture Industry Association, quoted in Patrick Frater, “Asian film biz weathers financial storm,” *Variety*, 12 March 2009, at www.variety.com/article/VR1118001333.
 45. Clifford Coonan, “Mega-film ‘Red Cliff’ makes history,” *Variety*, 26 September 2007, at www.variety.com/article/VR1117972838.
 46. Something similar seemed to be forthcoming from Jackie Chan’s partnership with Shanghai Film Group on *1911*, a war picture centering on Sun Yat-sen. See Liz Shackleton, “Jackie Chan’s *1911* sells to US, UK,” *Screen Daily*, 6 November 2010, at www.screendaily.com/5020275.article.
 47. See Shaojung Sharon Wang, “Connected through Remakes: Cultural Dialogue between Hollywood and Chinese Cinema Industries,” *Asian Cinema* 21, 1 (Spring/Summer 2010): 179–192.
 48. Min Lee, “New managers vow to resurrect storied HK film studio Golden Harvest,” Associated Press (21 October 2009) at www.filmcontact.com/hong-kong/new-managers-vow-resurrect-storied-hk-studio. The company also made a \$25 million investment in Legendary Pictures, the company behind *Inception* (2010) and *The Dark Knight* (2008). The plan was for Legendary to get involved in Chinese projects. See Dave McNary, “Orange Sky invests in Legendary,” *Variety*, 26 September 2010, at www.variety.com/article/VR1118024674.
 49. Mark McDonald, “From icon to lifestyle, the marketing of Bruce Lee,” *New York Times*, 12 December 2009, at www.nytimes.com/2009/12/12/business/global/12iht-lee.html.

Not so extravagant, not so gratuitously wild

1. This 2004 film is known in English as *Love Is a Many Stupid Thing*.
2. For an interpretation of the film relying upon its Buddhist references, see Gina Marchetti, *Andrew Lau and Alan Mak’s Infernal Affairs* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), pp. 51–95.

3. Nick Gentle, "Coming soon to a screen near you –More advertisements," *South China Morning Post* (15 December 2003), Life section, p. 1.
4. Darrell William Davis and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, *East Asian Screen Industries* (London: British Film Institute, 2008), p. 34.
5. Michael Fleming, "Warners hot for 'Infernal Affairs,'" *Variety*, 2 February 2003, at <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117879861>.
6. Quoted in Wendy Kan, "Studies find local scripts still lacking good stories," *Variety*, 12–18 May 2003, p. 15.
7. I discuss this technique as "intensified continuity" in *The Way Hollywood Tells It* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 117–157.
8. Thomas Shin, "Andrew Lau puts drama before action," *Hong Kong Panorama 2002–2003* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong International Film Festival, 2003), 67.
9. Quoted in Tony Rayns, "Deep Cover," *Sight & Sound* 14, 1 (January 2004): 29.
10. For an account of the song's significance in Chinese popular and political culture, see Marchetti, *Infernal Affairs*, pp. 14–20.
11. Derek Elley, "Infernal Affairs III," *Variety*, 17 February 2004, at www.variety.com/review/VE1117923157.
12. My analysis relies on the original release version of the film, not the slightly longer director's cut available on video.
1. The best introduction to Chow's work that I know is Kraicer's article "Stephen Chiau: A Guide for the Perplexed," *Cinema Scope* no 10 (March 2002): 18–21. At that writing, Chow preferred the alternative spelling of his family name, and I used that in the original chapters of this book. Since then, however, he has become universally known as "Chow," so that's the form I use throughout this edition.
2. Most Mainland audiences heard Chow's dialogue in Mandarin, often courtesy of Taiwanese voice-dubber Shi Ban-yu. Shi has become famous as a Chow sound-alike. Thanks to Li Cheuk-to for this information.
3. Mathew Scott, "Comic chameleon," *South China Morning Post*, 19 December 2004, at archive.scmp.com.
4. Brian Hu, "CJ7 on Blu-ray: Alien Tongues," *Asia Pacific Arts*, 22 August 2008, at www.asiaarts.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=96258.
5. His ultimate ambition, he explained, was someday to direct films without acting in them. See Tasha Robinson, "Stephen Chow," *The Onion*, 6 April 2005, at <http://www.avclub.com/articles/stephen-chow,13925/>.
6. Jeremy Hansen, "F/x kick 'Soccer' into high gear," *Variety*, 23–29 July 2001, p. 41.
7. The title *CJ7* refers to China's manned space missions Shenzhou 5 (2003) and Shenzhou 6 (2005).
8. See "HK\$300 min funded to develop local film industry," Ministry of Commerce, People's Republic of China (6 July 2007) at english.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/subject/secondcepa/lanmua/200707/20070704890017.html. See also Patrick Frater, "China threatens red card for Chow's Soccer hit," *Screen Daily*, 1 August 2001, at www.screendaily.com/406470.article.
9. Local box-office figures are taken from reports of the Hong Kong Motion Picture Industry Association. According to boxofficemojo.com, Chow's three films had the following global receipts: US\$42.7 million for *Shaolin Soccer*, \$100.9 million for *Kung Fu Hustle*, and \$47.3 million for *CJ7*. See also figures in Mike Goodridge, "CJ7," *Screen Daily*, 4 February 2008, at www.screendaily.com/4036979.article.
10. The fullest analysis of Wong's creative process at this period can be found in Tony Rayns, "The Long Goodbye," *Sight and Sound* 15,1 (January 2005): 22–25. See also Jaime Wolf, "The Director's Director," *New York Times Magazine*, 26 September 2004, pp. 36–41.
11. See Alison James and David Rooney, "Late pic has Fest taking Wong turn," *Variety*, 18 May 2004, at www.variety.com/article/VR1117905184; Alison James, "Wong pic on a slow train to Cannes," *Variety*, 19 May 2004, at www.variety.com/article/VR1117905255; Liz Shackleton, "Wong Kar-wai's 2046 to miss planned debut at Cannes," *South China Morning Post*, 20 May 2004, at archive.scmp.com.
12. The films have captivated critics; among Hong Kong filmmakers only Jackie Chan has inspired more books. See, among several, Stephen Teo, *Wong Kar-Wai* (London: British Film Institute, 2005); Peter Brunette, *Wong Kar-wai* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005); *In the Mood for Love*, ed. Jean-Christophe Ferrari (Chatou: Éditions de la Transparence, 2005); Thierry Jousse, *Wong Kar-wai* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2006); Nathalie Bittinger, *2046 de Wong Kar-wai* (Paris: Colin, 2007).
13. Vicki Rothrock, "Crowded House," *Variety*, 16 May 2007, p. A6.
14. Vicki Rothrock, "Wong sharpens his commercial instinct," *Variety*, 16 May 2007, p. A6.
15. The rollout of *In the Mood for Love* was accompanied by an art book offering many photos related to the film, as well as a translation of Liu Yichang's *Duidao* (known in English as "Intersection"), which was an inspiration for the the film. The volume includes an interview with Liu about the film.