

Hong Kong through the “Infernal” Mirror: An Analysis of Urban Space Imagery and Cultural Implications in Infernal Affairs

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Abstract. With the acceleration of globalization and urbanization, films, as a cultural medium, not only reflect social realities but also construct a unique imagery of urban spaces. As an international metropolis, Hong Kong’s urban image has been extensively portrayed in films. *Infernal Affairs*, a classic of Hong Kong cinema, not only tells the story of an undercover struggle between the police and the triads but also, through its distinctive depiction of urban spaces, reveals cultural connotations unique to Hong Kong.

Keywords: urban imagery, urban space, cultural implications

1. Introduction

The 2002 Hong Kong undercover film *Infernal Affairs*, released by Media Asia, portrays two characters whose identities have been swapped—Chan Wing-yan, a police officer embedded in the Triads, and Lau Kin-ming, a Triad member working within the police force. Both characters are in constant torment because they are forced to live in ways that contradict their true identities, leaving them without peace or redemption, sinking into the depths of the “Avici Hell.” “Avici” is originally an abstract term in Buddhism, and it is clearly explained in the *Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva Pūrvapraṇidhāna Sūtra*: “There is only one hell, called Avici. This hell stretches 18,000 li in circumference. Its walls, made entirely of iron, are a thousand li high. Flames burn from top to bottom and bottom to top. Iron serpents and iron dogs spit fire as they chase one another, running along the walls. Within the hell, beds fill the space for tens of thousands of li... Endless eons pass, with no hope of release.” In the film, Hong Kong is a physical manifestation of Avici Hell, devoid of the warmth of bustling city life, with no glowing lights, busy traffic, or crowds. Instead, there is only the tension between good and evil, and the hopelessness of confronting fate. This Hong Kong may not be a real city, but this imagined city of danger and sorrow represents the modern world. Some may argue that real cities produce criminals, while fictional cities give rise to villains: he is the person we want to be, and he is also the one we fear we might become [1].

The director uses elevators, rooftops, and the night to give visual form to this “infernal” world. At the same time, the protagonists’ struggles with their dual identities serve as a metaphor for post-handover Hong Kong, which has lost its way in its quest for self-identity. Unlike the real-life international metropolis of Hong Kong, known for its vibrant nightlife and ceaseless traffic, *Infernal Affairs* offers a complex portrayal of Hong Kong as an “imagined city” after 1997 [1], where it is depicted as a city of fate and disillusionment, alternating between the realms of the living and the dead, heaven and hell [4].

2. Elements of Hong Kong’s Urban Imagery

Hong Kong’s urban imagery refers to people’s perception and understanding of the city in terms of psychology, culture, and society. It encompasses various aspects such as Hong Kong’s geographical features, historical culture, and social dynamics. Specifically, the construction of Hong Kong’s urban imagery includes the following aspects:

In terms of geographical features, Hong Kong, situated in southern China as an international metropolis, boasts a unique geographical location and natural landscapes, such as Victoria Harbour, Victoria Peak, and Repulse Bay. These iconic landscapes form a part of Hong Kong’s urban imagery.

In terms of social and cultural aspects, Hong Kong’s cultural background is rich and diverse, blending Eastern and Western influences. In the film *Infernal Affairs*, the struggle between the police and the Triads, family feuds, and moral dilemmas all showcase Hong Kong’s unique social atmosphere. The film presents this atmosphere through a range of settings, from ancient

temples and narrow alleyways to modern skyscrapers. This distinctive social and cultural atmosphere gives Hong Kong's urban imagery depth and complexity. The film's portrayal of the conflict between the police and the Triads highlights the complexity and contradictions of Hong Kong society. Moreover, the character development, such as the inner turmoil of Chan Wing-yan and Lau Kin-ming, reflects the struggles of Hong Kong residents under the pressures of reality, embodying a sense of humanistic concern.

In terms of lifestyle, Hong Kong's way of life is unique, ranging from bustling street food stalls and night markets to upscale restaurants and bars, all of which reflect the city's vibrant atmosphere. In *Infernal Affairs*, these lifestyles intertwine with the city's characteristics, showcasing the diversity of Hong Kong's urban imagery.

3. In-depth Interpretation of Hong Kong's Urban Imagery

The urban imagery in *Infernal Affairs* is rich in symbolism and metaphor. Elements like elevators, rooftops, and the night symbolize the ups and downs of the characters' fates and the choices they face in life. These symbols and metaphors deepen the artistic connotations of the film.

3.1. The "Elevator" Symbolizing the Boundary Between Life and Death

The elevator, a product of modern urban civilization, is an essential part of life in Hong Kong, a densely populated city filled with skyscrapers. As a vertical transport tool within these tall buildings, elevators are indispensable in urban life. However, in *Infernal Affairs*, the elevator is imbued with the meaning of the boundary between life and death.

The most memorable elevator scene involves Superintendent Wong, played by Anthony Wong, whose death leaves a lasting impression. This scene was shot in the Yuehai Investment Building at 148 Connaught Road in Sheung Wan, a building with 28 floors. After a brief meeting on the rooftop, Superintendent Wong and Chan Wing-yan receive word that the gang members working for drug lord Hon Sam are on their way. To protect Chan's undercover identity, Wong advises him to take a different route down, saying, "You go from up there." Chan asks, "What about you?" Wong responds, "I'll take the elevator." At this moment, Chan realizes that the gangsters are approaching via the elevator, making Wong's descent far more dangerous. Chan warns Wong, "Be careful." Wong grabs a magazine and pretends to make a phone call, brushing past the gang members as he exits the elevator. Just as we think he has narrowly escaped danger, a loud bang occurs—the elevator doors are forced open by one of the gangsters. Wong is recognized and pushed off the skyscraper, landing on top of the taxi Chan had just vacated. The combination of strings, piano, and soft female vocals creates a requiem-like effect, as memories of Chan and Wong flash back, accompanied by the music of *Goodbye, Officer* that floods Chan's mind. The elevator becomes a symbol of the boundary between life and death—had Wong successfully descended without being detected, the outcome would have been drastically different.

Following Superintendent Wong's death, Chan Wing-yan's tragic end is also set in the elevator by the director. While escorting Lau Kin-ming and confronting Officer B, Chan is suddenly shot dead as the elevator doors open, collapsing in front of Officer B's gun. The doors repeatedly open and close, striking Chan's body, now trapped in the middle. After nine years of silently working undercover for the police within the Triads, Chan meets his tragic end. For audiences accustomed to the narrative of "good deeds being rewarded," Chan's death comes as a shocking surprise. There was no prior foreshadowing, and the protagonist's story is abruptly cut short. Officer B also fails to exit the elevator. After shooting Chan, he reveals his identity to Lau, confessing that he too was a mole planted by Hon Sam in the police force. Frustrated by the lack of recognition for his talents, he seeks to follow Lau's lead. As the elevator descends, gunshots are heard, and when the doors open, only Lau emerges. It becomes clear that Lau has killed Officer B, knowing he was privy to his secrets. The dissonant, descending melody underscores the film's tragic conclusion and seems to mock the officers who believed in Lau Kin-ming's claim, "I'm a cop."

In *Infernal Affairs*, several key death scenes are deliberately set inside elevators. These elevator spaces are enveloped in darkness, devoid of any light, symbolizing death and the unknown, creating a stark contrast to the vibrant, illuminated world outside. According to film psychology, people are more affected by the fear of the unknown. Compared to realistic depictions of horror—such as the infernal hell filled with vengeful ghosts and eerie screams—the film's elevator scenes evoke a more profound sense of dread, fulfilling our imagination of hell.

3.2. The Rooftop: A Space for Revealing Inner Emotions

Apart from the elevator that separates life and death, the most iconic space in the film is undoubtedly the rooftop. Located on North Point's Java Road, the North Point Government Offices, completed in 1998, stands 24 stories tall. After the release of *Infernal Affairs*, the rooftop of this building became a pilgrimage site for fans of the movie.

In the real-world, Hong Kong is characterized by its cramped spaces, and for the protagonists with dual identities, their movement space is even more confined, to the point of making it difficult to breathe. Therefore, to catch a breath of fresh air amidst Hong Kong's "concrete jungle," the rooftop might be one of the best options [6]. The rooftop of an office building offers a place disconnected from daily work and provides a privileged viewpoint to overlook Hong Kong's skyline. Chang Yingjin's description of rooftops in Taipei films is equally applicable to *Infernal Affairs*' portrayal of Hong Kong: "Looking at the scenery

from above immediately instills a remarkable sense of superiority, a voyeuristic pleasure, and creates a complete distance and estrangement between the observer and the city. It's a performance, an optical manipulation, a visual illusion" [2].

In the iconic rooftop confrontation scene, Lau Kin-ming, played by Andy Lau, remarks, "You undercover guys are really interesting, always meeting on rooftops." Indeed, the rooftop is undeniably a signature space in *Infernal Affairs*. It serves as a regular meeting point for Superintendent Wong and Chan Wing-yan, where they exchange crucial information while Chan remains undercover in the Triads. Additionally, Lau Kin-ming practices golf with his superior on the rooftop of the police headquarters, marking an important step towards his promotion. The rooftop offers a sense of stability, giving the characters a feeling of control over everything within their sight, but it also embodies danger—the fear of falling, the risk of exposure when meeting a superior, and the constant anxiety of being unmasked [3].

In addition, it is on the rooftop where Chan Wing-yan can momentarily shed his "disguised mask" and confront his true self as a police officer. On the rooftop, Superintendent Wong questions the internally struggling Chan, saying, "You know, you've hurt people several times now. I had to beg the Department of Justice to say you had psychological issues, tell them to get you to see a therapist, and yet you're still out there beating people up. Are you really a psychopath? Have you forgotten if you're the good guy or the bad guy?" Chan responds, "It was supposed to be three years. Three years, and then another three years, and another three years. It's almost been ten years, boss." Faced with Chan's frustration and complaints, Wong retorts, "Can you treat me with some respect? Right now, I'm the only person in all of Hong Kong who knows your identity. I could go back and delete all your files. You'd be a triad for the rest of your life, and I wouldn't have to care anymore." Chan replies, "What do you want me to do? Remind myself every day that I'm a cop? Tell myself in my dreams, 'Drop the gun, I'm a cop!' Is that what you want?" This exchange reveals that it is only on the rooftop, in its expansive space, where Chan can release the anxiety brought on by his dual identity and return to the core understanding of "I am a cop."

The film's most iconic confrontation, where both protagonists reveal their true identities, also takes place on the rooftop. Lau Kin-ming says, "Give me a chance. I didn't have a choice before, but now I want to be a good person." Chan responds, "Sure, tell the judge. See if he'll let you be a good person." Lau asks, "So, you want me dead?" Chan replies, "Sorry, I'm a cop." Lau retorts, "Who knows?" The camera shifts from medium and close-up shots to a distant panoramic view during the line "Who knows?" At this moment, the rooftop merges into the vast blue sky and ocean, amplifying the audience's realization that the secret of Chan and Lau's identities is known only to "heaven and earth, you and me." Furthermore, everyone who steps onto this rooftop has their image distorted by the reflection of the giant glass windows opposite them—Chan Wing-yan, Lau Kin-ming, Superintendent Wong. As a "mirror text" within the film's symbolic structure, the rooftop reflects these warped images of people who have lost their true selves, as if they can never escape the world's arbitrary "rewriting" of their identities [4]. Both men are pawns placed on each other's chessboards, and as pawns, they never had the freedom to make their own choices—only the sorrow of being powerless.

3.3. The Night as a Symbol of Crime

The film *Infernal Affairs* features a substantial number of nighttime scenes. Unlike *Detective Chinatown*, which uses the bar's lively atmosphere to highlight the bustling nightlife of Bangkok, or *In the Mood for Love*, which conveys the quiet melancholy of Hong Kong nights through tender emotions, *Infernal Affairs* fills its night scenes with crime. For instance, the drug deal between Hon Sam and the Thai dealer occurs at night, where both the police and the triads engage in a battle of wits throughout the transaction. Lau Kin-ming, who is embedded in the police force, and Hon Sam meet secretly at a cinema late at night, while Chan Wing-yan nearly uncovers Lau's true identity while tracking him. Following Chan's suggestion, Hon Sam relocates the stored drugs during the night, and after being put on the police's wanted list, Chan can only meet Lee Sum-yeet at night to reveal his identity as a cop. Under the cover of darkness, black market deals between triads unfold, and aside from the blinding headlights of cars speeding through like raging bulls, nothing shines brightly [2]. Chan Wing-yan, as he moves through the night, is portrayed as being engulfed by the triad underworld, navigating a boundary between life and death. His world is one "without light," reflecting not only the nature of his undercover role but also the film's director's unique cinematic aesthetic [5].

4. Hong Kong's Urban Space and Cultural Significance in *Infernal Affairs*

4.1. Urban Space and Cultural Identity

Hong Kong, known as the Pearl of the Orient, possesses a unique urban landscape that reflects not only its highly developed economy but also its rich cultural significance. Within this bustling metropolis, *Infernal Affairs* offers a distinctive perspective, showcasing the unique imagery of Hong Kong's urban spaces and the identity tied to them.

In the film, Hong Kong is depicted as a space filled with contradictions and conflicts. On one hand, it presents the vibrancy and prosperity of an international city, with towering skyscrapers and flashing neon lights, symbolizing the city's modernization and openness. On the other hand, it is a place overshadowed by darkness and crime, where underground forces run deep, and the battle between the police and the triads never ceases.

Through carefully designed scenes such as the bustling streets of Mong Kok, the solemn atmosphere of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), and the tense confrontations within elevators, *Infernal Affairs* showcases Hong Kong's

urban spaces from multiple layers and perspectives. These spatial images not only reflect the geographical characteristics of Hong Kong but also convey a strong sense of identity.

The characters in the film, whether police officers or triad members, have their identities closely tied to the city of Hong Kong. The police, while upholding justice, also fight against crime. This struggle is not just an external battle against triads but also an internal one, involving introspection and challenges to their own identities. Triad members, on the other hand, are caught in the pursuit of wealth and power, facing moral and ethical dilemmas. Their sense of identity in the film is portrayed as ambiguous and conflicted.

Furthermore, the urban spaces in the film carry cultural meanings unique to Hong Kong. For instance, religious sites like temples and churches in the film reflect the city's blend of cultures and represent the psychological need of Hong Kongers to seek spiritual solace in the face of life's pressures. Meanwhile, nightlife venues such as nightclubs and bars depict the city's bustling nightlife and serve as arenas where identity and values clash.

4.2. Urban Space and Moral Dilemmas

In the film, the urban space of Hong Kong is divided into two main realms: the police and the triads. These two domains intertwine and conflict, forming the core of *Infernal Affairs*. Within this city, both the police and the triads fight their own battles while, to some extent, sharing similar moral dilemmas.

The imagery of Hong Kong's urban space is first reflected in the backdrop of a thriving metropolis. The film showcases landmarks in areas such as Central and Tsim Sha Tsui, illustrating Hong Kong's modernization and internationalization. However, behind this splendor lies darkness and corruption. The struggle between the police and the triads unfolds within this urban space. This spatial imagery not only highlights the unique charm of Hong Kong but also exposes the moral dilemmas underlying it.

In the film, the police and triad characters represent justice and evil, respectively. However, under the *Infernal Affairs* scenario, both sides are mired in moral dilemmas. The police officer Chen Yongren and the triad member Lau Kin-ming, each undercover in the other's camp, face constant moral choices in the execution of their tasks. These dilemmas are evident not only in their internal struggles but also in their relationships with those around them. For instance, Chen Yongren experiences misunderstanding and suspicion from his colleagues within the police force, while Lau Kin-ming deals with the harsh realities of the triad world.

5. Conclusion

This paper, through an analysis of the Hong Kong urban space and cultural implications in *Infernal Affairs*, draws the following conclusions. First, the regional characteristics and social culture of Hong Kong are profoundly reflected in the film. By depicting iconic landscapes such as Victoria Harbour and skyscrapers, as well as the social atmosphere of East-West cultural fusion, the film constructs a multidimensional urban image of Hong Kong. Second, the symbolic meaning of urban space plays a crucial role in the film. Elements like elevators, rooftops, and the night not only serve as settings for character interactions but also symbolize the boundary between life and death and internal struggles, showcasing the characters' choices and destinies in a complex social environment. Third, the film reveals the complexity and diversity of Hong Kong's urban space, presenting not only the city's regional features but also reflecting people's identity and psychological state within this space. Finally, the characters' identity is closely linked to the city of Hong Kong. The struggle between the police and the triads is not merely an external confrontation but also an introspection and challenge to self-identity. The characters face moral dilemmas and internal struggles in their pursuit of personal values, reflecting a deep understanding of the complexity of Hong Kong society.

Despite the in-depth analysis of Hong Kong's urban space and cultural implications in *Infernal Affairs*, some limitations remain. First, the study focuses mainly on the film's narrative and visual representation, lacking exploration of how viewers' cultural backgrounds and personal experiences influence their perception of urban space, which limits the applicability of the conclusions. Second, the interpretation of Hong Kong's urban space in the paper does not sufficiently consider the impact of historical background and social changes on urban imagery, resulting in a lack of depth in the analysis. Additionally, the study does not compare similar urban spaces and cultural implications in other films, which limits the generalizability of the conclusions.

Future research will continue to explore the relationship between Hong Kong's urban space and cultural implications, particularly by incorporating other types of films for comparative analysis of urban space construction and representation across different films. Through multi-layered analysis and comparison, this research aims to make a more significant contribution to the theoretical and practical fields.

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