"Who's Your Buddy?: An Analysis of Intra-Black and Asian Relations in Buddy Cop Films
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Rush Hour, and Romeo Must Die both Black – Asian buddy cop films from the turn of the 21-century. While these films seemingly share little in common regarding plot, they do share a common thread: Black – Asian partnership and collaboration. While these movies were breaking stereotypes simply by having the two groups work together, they were still playing into the dominant narrative. In the United States, Blacks and Asians both have unique categories into which they are placed – Blacks as, “inferior insiders”, and Asians as, “superior outsiders” – both coming with their own merits and demerits. This paper will analyze the plots of Rush Hour, and Romeo Must Die, and the ways in which these movies fall within the prevailing, dominant narrative.

Buddy Cop films are films that, “highlight the relationship between two heroes of contrasting backgrounds who –initially at odds – learn to respect on another and work together to defeat a common enemy.” Buddy cop films can be seen as “breaking barriers”, because the films bring together two heroes of conflicting and contrasting backgrounds, who manage to overcome their perceived differences to work together. However, buddy cop films operate mainly in Black-white binary with few exceptions, and a, “a rigidly maintained power hierarchy, a hierarchy that is often replicated by the extra-textual star status of the actors.” To put it plainly, “the white guy cannot be the ‘buddy’” and the POC characters, “are placed under the “protective custody” of the white character.” In effect this showcases Hollywood’s want, and

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need, to capitalize on the Black dollar and audiences, but at the same time not wanting to have a standalone titular Black character.

However, the introduction and raise of Kung-Fu and martial arts stars in the West, made it possible for Asian talents, in particular Chinese action stars, to also have roles in these films. The addition of these Asian talents, such as Chow Yun Fat, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li, lead to films that were no longer, “concerned only with Americans fighting together…it also features Americans working in concert with international allies to deal with external threats or criminal infiltration.” This introduces the idea that despite America’s racism, it can still work together with allies of any color, or nationality, to overcome a common enemy. With the successful introduction of Asians into buddy cop films, the genre was revolutionized enough that partnerships could include two POC characters. Unfortunately, partnerships still fell into pre-existing and dominant power structures. Pre-existing structures that places Blacks into the categories of “insider, but inferior”, and Asians into the categories of, “outsider, but superior”.

The first film that this paper will focus on, Rush Hour, starring Chris Tucker and Jackie Chan nicely illustrates these categories and the Black-Asian binary in buddy cop films.

The Rush Hour franchise is a series of three Chinese-American martial arts/ action-comedy buddy cop films, directed by Brett Ratner. All three films center on a pair of mismatched police detectives: a Hong Kong Police inspector, played by Jackie Chan, and a Black

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American LAPD detective, played by Chris Tucker. The first Rush Hour film, titled *Rush Hour*, was released in 1998.

The establishing shot of the film, introduces the audience to the two titular characters Lee (Jackie Chan) and Carter (Chris Tucker). However, they are introduced to us in two completely different ways. Lee establishing shot sets him up as a serious and dedicated Hong Kong detective, who is not only capable, but also family-oriented. Although the little girl (Soo Yong) is not related to him by blood, Lee treats her as a close relative, if not a foster daughter. Lee’s establishing shots endear him to the viewer, and establish him as the straight man, which makes Soo Yong’s eventual kidnapping even more gut-wrenching, as we know that it will take a toll on him. Carter’s establishing shot, on the other hand, lies no room to even pretend that he is anything other than comedic relief; from the way, he comes careening into the shot in his shiny black beamer to the way he blows up a suspect’s car and proceeds to do a Michael Jackson dance amongst the flames – his character just shouts comedic relief. Carter is brash, arrogant, and loud, and the audience finds this out in his brief 3-minute character introduction. In addition to finding out Carter’s rather lackluster personality, we also discover that Carter is on the verge of demotion, further cementing in our minds that Carter is not a character that should be taken too seriously.

However, the most insidious thing about both character’s introduction is that the theatrical release poster of *Rush Hour*, pictured below, already gave the audience a clue into the persona of each character, the tagline being: “The fastest hands in the East versus the biggest mouth in the West.”

Though Lee and Carter as pictured as a unit on the theatrical posture, the two’s postures differ extremely. Lee’s posture is very stiff and formal, giving the viewer the idea that he is the more serious of the two. In contrast, Carter’s pose is very open and silly, as he stands in the semblance of what appears to be a kung-fu pose. Before the film was even released the poster lets the audience know what to expect from who – seriousness from Lee, and silliness from Carter.

Moving forward we have the first meeting of Lee and Carter, or to more accurately put it – “the East meets the West”. However, before Lee even steps foot into the United States, he is already being framed as a foreigner and nuisance – a framework that has been placed upon many Asian immigrants. In the exposition to Lee’s arrival, a FBI agent says the following, “I don't need any help from the LAPD and some Cheng-King cop. We want to make a good impression,
Carter. It’s his first trip to America.” In this scene, Lee is referred to as a “Cheng-King cop,” the irreverence in regard to Lee’s origins signals a lack of respect of Lee, but it also.....

In addition, telling Carter that it's Lee’s first time in America hints that the agent is already aware that Lee is going to have trouble adjusting, and will stand out. Both statements, indicate America’s intolerance toward immigrants and foreigners. Further signaling Lee’s foreignness, rather his Asian-ness, is the distinct “Chinese/Asian” music, that announces his arrival. By clearly signaling Lee’s Asian-ness to the audiences, the movie is marking him as a “perpetual foreigner and outsider”, thus delineating the setup of the movie – outsider foreigner meets loudmouthed Black American.

Now one of the most infamous scenes of the movie – Detective Carter meets Detective Lee for the first time. In the scene, Lee steps off his flight from China, and thanks the flight attendant and the pilot in Chinese. Carter assuming Lee probably does not speak English says, “Please tell me that you speak English.” Then once he gets a blank look from Lee, proceeds to introduce himself slowly and loudly, “I’m. Detective. Crater. Do. You. Speak-a. Any. English?” Lee puzzledly looks back at the pilot. Tucker responds by increasing his volume and asking yet again, “DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE WORDS THAT ARE COMING OUTTA MY MOUTH?”, this time adding gestures. Lee blankly smiles back. Frustrated, Carter turns his back and mumbles to himself, “First, I get a bullshit assignment, now Mr. Rice-a-roni...Can’t even speak American.”

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While the scene is somewhat funny, the dialogue, or rather the one-sided dialogue, is rather blatant in the way that it perpetuates racist ideologies against Asians; the movie even manages to slide in a subtle jab at Blacks. First, Carter’s assumption that Lee does not speak English. This assumption dates to late-1800s, when Asian immigrants were first arriving to the United States. “The ideology dehumanized and criminalized [Asian] immigrants, defining them as “unassimilable aliens,” “un-welcome invasions,” “undesirables,” “diseased,” “illegal.” They were considered unassimilable due being a non-White, and a non-English speaking population. Unfortunately, this assumption still exists today almost two hundred years later as we see in *Rush Hour*. However, the whole situation is made ironic, due to Carter’s lack of “proper English” when speaking to Lee, and the fact that he refers to English as “American”. This simultaneously shows Carter’s “insider, but inferior” status. Carter speaks English, albeit a more vernacular and “inferior” version, his referring to English as American further illustrates this. Compare this to Carter lackluster use of Pidgin, “Do you speak-a any English?” Carter uses Pidgin in attempts to communicate with Lee. Pidgin being a type of modified, inferior English that is stereotypical thought to be used by Asian immigrants. Carter’s use of Pidgin in attempts to communicate with Lee, reflects that he sees Lee as an inferior to himself, and as an outsider. While the scene is only about 5 minutes, it neatly demonstrates Black-Asian sentiments.

To further exacerbate the situation, Carter refers to Lee as, “Mr. Rice-a-roni”, alluding to the fact that rice is usually a staple of some Asian diets, and that it is “against the norm”, and

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therefore makes Lee even more of an outsider. Carter further displays his anti-Asian sentiment when he later laments about his “babysitting job”, and that he’ll drop Lee off at the Panda Express, implying that Lee should feel more at home, because Panda Express is “Asian Cuisine”, and is something that Lee should be familiar with. And as we see in the next scene, he does exactly that – he takes Lee to Chinatown. A place that, “looks just like home!”¹¹ While this is a misguided attempt to become more familiar with Lee, Carter is inadvertently playing on two tropes. The first being that Asians are more comfortable around other Asians, and the second being that all Asians like alike, especially since Carter later loses Lee in a crowd of mostly Asian visitors/residents in Chinatown. This miscommunication between Carter and Lee displays the sentiment that, “the Asian hero is never fully integrated into American culture, and the films always flag up the cultural differences—from music to language, from food to fighting skills—between the Asian hero and his American partner.”¹²

*Rush Hour* is considered a movie that combats the typical Black and Asian narratives in movies, however, “Tucker as Carter may represent a potential alternative to the mainstream but any resistance he might embody is undermined by his comic performance.”¹³ In effect, Tucker’s performance reinforces the stereotypes that it’s hoping to combat. To focus more on the negative Black stereotypes in the film, we have the scene where Carter and Lee visit a gang den. This scene centers in on the idea that all Black people know each other, and/or are in some way related to each other. In this case, both assumptions turn out to be true. Carter just

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happens to know the leader of the gang, he and Lee visit, and this random gang leader, just so
happens to be his cousin. The gang leader, played by Clifton Powell, states that Carter’s mother,
“bought him this suit for Christmas”, and that Carter will see him, “at Thanksgiving”.

Secondly, *Rush Hour* upholds the idea that Blacks are one, cowards, and two, that they
are loud-mouthed cowards at that. Lee: “Why were you hiding?” Carter: “Man, whatchu talkin’
looked up and you was gone.” In this scene Lee confronts the FBI by himself, because he
believes that the ransom meet between the FBI and Sang – the villain – is a trap. Lee confronts
them by himself, because Carter has mysteriously disappeared. When confronted by Lee he
comes up with some lame excuse about tying his shoes. Though the film, tries to push this as
comedic, we the audience know the real reason, or at the reason that the movie is trying to
push, the fact that Carter, and ultimately all Blacks, are cowardly.

Not only is Carter cowardly, he’s a loudmouth coward. He’s constantly shouting and
posturing, while Lee does all the heavy lifting. Something to note, Carter talks exponentially
louder than all other characters in the movie. These traits are nicely illustrated when Carter is
captured by Sang later in the movie. Throughout most of his capture, Carter is terrified and
shouting, which honestly constitutes the bulk of his character in the movie – shouting and
afraid and waiting on Lee to save him. While this is essence deconstructs Lee’s otherness as
Asian, and places him in the role of an Asian savior, and to regain his masculinity, however, it in
effect relegates Carter to a static minstrel character. “Chan as Lee is moved into the

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mainstream, or Americanized, to a (desirable) degree, Tucker’s “black Other remains a stock character” because of the “static quality of Tucker’s blackface minstrel mask.”

Next, we have everyone’s favorite moment of the Buddy Cop film genre—the racial reconciliation/bonding montage. The moment in *Rush Hour*, where Carter and Lee bond over Edwin Starr’s *War*. The, “moment of trans-national cultural exchange and, with it, understanding and acceptance. With its [War] declaration that war is good for “absolutely nothing,” the song becomes a metaphor for transnational cooperation.” This song is particularly fitting as Edwin Starr is a Black singer, singing over a stereotypical “Asian” sounding music track complete with Kung-Fu “Wahs!” and “Huhs!”; nicely completing the picture of Black-Asian solidarity in the film.

In the buddy montage, Carter and Lee bond over food, music, and culture; Lee teaches Carter about kung-fu and Chinese food, while Carter teaches Lee how to be more “cool” and to “fit in”. “African American hypersexuality is set against Asian/American asexuality, and African American immaturity is set against Asian/American overdisciplined stiffness. Excess is cast against rigidity, the beast against the robot.” In this scene, Lee and Carter are finally bonding, they are each bringing a piece of themselves, a piece their cultures to the table. However, Lee is coming from a “stiff, rigid culture” where he must be “taught” fun, while Carter is coming from a “childish, immature” culture, where he must be “taught” how to be an adult. These polar

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opposites come together to form a tight bond. However, the sinister thing about this scene is the fact that these two would not be able to “bond” if they were equals. The fact that they are not equals allows for this bonding to occur. In this positioning, Lee has the upper hand. As a Chinese man, he carries connotations of the model minority, and these connotations make him more assimilable into mainstream American culture, as we see in the film. People are more willing to listen to Lee, than they are Carter due to his brash, immature nature. Yet, Carter’s “brash, immature nature” is related to the negative stereotypes held about Black men in the imaginations of White men, and therefore in the film.

Whereas Rush Hour focuses on a platonic friendship between an Asian man, and Black man, the film Romeo Must Die, featuring Jet Li and singer Aaliyah, includes an almost romantic relationship between the two main leads. I say almost here, because the film had two endings. The first, featuring a platonic hug between the two titular characters Trish and Han, and the second, purported ending, featuring a kiss between the two. However, this ending failed. “The original ending [Romeo Must Die] had Aaliyah kissing [Jet] Li, a scenario that didn't test well with an "urban audience." So, the studio changed it. The new ending had Aaliyah giving Li a tight hug. Says [Gene] Cajyon, "Mainstream America, for the most part, gets uncomfortable with seeing an Asian man portrayed in a sexual light." This is doubly ironic as both Asian men and Black women are thought to be at “the bottom of the totem pole” when it comes to desirability, due to harmful stereotypes about each group; audiences did not find an interracial romance between an Asian male, Black woman (AMBW) relationship believable.

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The romance between the two mismatched lovers, Li and Aaliyah, is one of the main focuses of the film *Romeo Must Die*, a 2000 American crime thriller directed by Andrew Bartkowiak, the other focus being the rivalry between the two’s families – an American (read: Black) mob and a Chinese mob.

The film starts with a rapper DMX’s song, *First I’m Gonna Crawl*, playing in the background, while a black town car drives through the streets of Oakland, California. As the establishing shot is set, English and Chinese flash across the screen. This is the very first introduction viewers have to the film, and as an establishing shot is serves its purpose – to let the audience know that this film is set in a more urban location, and more than likely has something to do with China.

The first scene of the film sets up the animosity and the rivalry, between the two main mobs of the film – the Blacks and the Chinese. Po Sing, youngest son of the Chinese mob, is seen waiting for someone in a predominantly Black club. As he waits, he watches two of his female companions dance and make out; the other Black patrons in the club look on warily. This scene serves two purposes. The first being the set-up of the Black-Asian conflict of the film. The second is slightly more insidious – the use of the Asian female body as a sexual provocation. “Thus, the film opens with an erotic spectacle in an African American disco-casino in which the open display of sexuality on the dance floor is meant to be a provocation”\(^{19}\)

In response to Po’s display of sexuality, the next scene shows his body hung from an electrical wire, in a Black neighborhood. Essentially Po Sing was “lynched” for his brazen display

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of sexuality. If Po Sing was lynched by the rival Black mob, as the film would have you believe, this would be a type of “re-appropriation” and a “re-claiming” of the act lynching – a heinous crime historically used by whites to terrorize and victimize Blacks. Lynching is not only a display of power and aggression, but it also meant to send a message to outsiders. A message that says, look at what we [whites] can do, look at how powerful we [whites] are. In this case, the lynching of Po serves not only as a signifier of power and aggression, but also as a catalyst. It signifies that Blacks were more than likely the doers of the lynching, as they have reclaimed the act of lynching, but it’s also the beginning of a “war” between Blacks and Asians, but also the beginning of Trish and Han’s relationship.

The next two scenes are meant to introduce the viewer to the films two titular characters – Trish and Han. The film uses music to mark the transition from the United States to China – a shift from American hip-hop to Chinese/Asian music. This clearly marks to the viewer that we, the audience, are no longer in the United States, and that we are about to embark on foreign territory – meeting Han. Han is a harden criminal, who is in jail because he helped both his father and his brother escape to the United States, so that they could escape the Chinese authorities. In stereotypical fashion, Han uses WuShu to break out of jail, so that he can return to the United States and avenge his brother. Put simply, Han’s introduction sums up everything “Asian” about him – China, Chinese, martial arts, avenging lost honor, etc. Han is a collection of “Asian” parts – a trope meant to cater to the Western gaze – a “stereotypical” Asian.

The audience’s introduction to Trish is quite like Han’s introduction – an “urban”, hip-hop introduction, that constructs Trish as a summation of stereotypical “Black” parts. Trish is charismatic, pretty, owns an “urban” boutique, which doubles as a type of community center to
help keep poor Black kids off the streets. Not long after Trish’s introduction, Aaliyah and all the people in her boutique have a small dance party, all of which shows that Trish is a “hip and cool” “urban” Black woman.

Although neither Trish, nor Han (though Han was before the start of the film) are members of the police force, this film still counts as a buddy cop film. Both Trish/Aaliyah and Han/Li serve as a bridge between two separate worlds and cultures, which is ultimately the pillar of the buddy cop film. The film is, “expressing cross-racial solidarity for possible subversive politics by crossing the prescriptions of racial magnetism.”

In short, Trish and Han’s relationship is not only crossing racial boundaries, but they’re each supposed to be showcasing, and subverting stereotypes, about Black women and Asian men. Unfortunately, while the film does try to dispel certain stereotypes about Blacks and Asians, it does a far better job at expounding them.

The romance, or the lack thereof, between Trish/Aaliyah and Han/Li is probably the greatest case where the movie simultaneously fails and succeeds at subverting and perpetuating racial stereotypes. An interesting moment happens in the movie between Trish/Aaliyah and Han/Li halfway through the film. In the scene, Aaliyah relies on Han for strength. The impact of this scene is seemingly small, however it’s quite big. The scene concurrently subverts both the myth that Asian men are effeminate and weak, and the myth that Black women are overly masculine and strong. By pairing together an Asian man and a Black woman, and then having said Black woman rely said Asian man, the movie is subverting both myths.

Instead of weak, and easily controlled, Han/Li is the protector and the leader in his relationship with Trish/Aaliyah. On the contrary, Aaliyah can be soft, and a woman, instead of a loud-mouthed, domineering jezebel. Asian men and Black women have been historically denied access to the respective woman and manhood, but in this one scene, they can lay claim to it.

However, the failed romance between Han and Aaliyah manages to completely emasculates Han/Li and all Asian men in the process. Throughout the film, Han and other Asian men are strong and capable, however he fails the “Romeo” aspect of the film. “…he [Li] is expunged of the typical leading man’s sexuality, even being denied a romantic kiss, a standard reward for the white male action hero.” Instead of the romantic kiss, and an implied romantic ending, that all action heroes with a female sidekick receive, Han/Li is denied this and instead receives a chaste kiss on the check, and a side hug. The insidious nature of this ending is twofold. The ending implies that Black women are too much for Asian men, and the reverse as well. “this erasure, this process is a sexual bleaching and signals the anxiety of producers about the overdetermined sexuality of the hero.” But it also reflects the producer’s anxiety towards the sexuality of the heroine, and Black/Asian miscegenation. By having Han/Li and Trish/Aaliyah end up together, they would be going against the dominant narrative – that Blacks and Asians are from two separate worlds – and would be promoting a type of cross-racial coalition.

This anti-Black/Asian sentiment is represented in the film itself. When Han and Trish return to the nightclub from the beginning of the film, they are greeted with hostile and puzzled stares – mostly from Black men. This is indicative of how Trish and Han’s relationship is

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viewed as strange, but it’s also indicative of the audience’s gaze. There is little to no interact between Blacks and Asians, due to Black’s insider/inferior and Asian’s outsider/superior status.

In the film, Trish and all the other Black characters speak for all things “American” and “cool”, as they are the “urban” center of the film. This theme of Blacks as urban and cool is a theme that presents itself regularly throughout the film, as we see in with Trish’s introduction scene. However, it arises again in a particularly telling scene later in the film. In the scene, Trish must style Han as a “cool, b-boy” to gain access to a club. Han then tries to impress Trish by stating that he, “know[s] hip-hop”.23 This is a play on Han’s foreignness and his role as a naïve outsider; he is an outsider, so he is not a part of hip-hop or hip-hop culture, he can only “know” of it, and put on the affect of a b-boy. Consequently, this outsider status positions Han in such a way that he is superior. “We are not the blacks, our loyalty to one another is unquestioned.”24 This line was spoken by Han’s father, but it nicely illustrates my point about the perception of Blacks as insiders, yet inferior, and Asians as outsider, yet superior. Han’s father is buying into the idea that Black people are savages that easily turn on each other – they are inferior to Asians, who are, “loyal to each other.”25

The film works hard to cement the idea that Asians are “superior” to Blacks, as most of the film consists of “Black whipping boys“ – Black extras whose sole purpose in the film is to be beat up by Han. Regardless of the size, amount, or skill of these “whipping boys” they always manage to find defeat at the hands of Han, and of the Asian gang. In a scene, reminiscent of the

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MLK marches, Han sprays the “whipping boys” with a fire house, blowing them away with the water. This scene is irrelevant of the Black bodies that are the victims of the hose, like the MLK marches themselves. While the scene could be wholly stylistic effect, the fact that there was a lynching earlier in the film makes this coincidence unlikely. If it’s not a coincidence, then this means that the film is targeting a specific audience with its imagery – a Black audience.

Yet, the movie does not let you forget that Han is a foreigner. In a hilarious bit of irony, a South Asian taxi driver with an accent (suggesting that he is possibly foreign) asks Han, “Can’t you understand English?” This scene is using the foreignness of both the Asian characters in the scene to get a laugh, but framed in a different light, the scene is actually a struggle for dominance. The South Asian, Achebar, is more established in the United States – as he has a job as a taxi driver. However, in a bid for power he tries to shame another foreigner about his English, showing that in a quest assimilation, he has adopted the racist ideologies of the dominant culture.

In another scene playing off Han’s foreignness, Han/Li plays the stereotypical role of the Chinese food delivery man to escape Trish’s bodyguards. And they believe him; mainly, because he is an Asian male with an accent. However, this scene is poking fun of this – the readiness of others to assume that Asian men are Chinese food delivery boys. Unfortunately, this is the main role that most Asian men in the media fall into. Though Li is combatting this stereotype, the film still felt the need to bring it up, possibly in hopes of reminding the audience of that injustice.

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Yet in the not breath, Maurice, played by Anthony Anderson, calls Han/Li, “Dim Sum”\(^{27}\), slapping us again in the face again with reality.

While both *Rush Hour* and *Romeo Must Die*, work hard at combatting the dominant narrative about Blacks and Asians, and Black/Asian coalition the films ultimately play into the very stereotypes they wish to combat by building their characters as bits of a racial stereotypes. The films craft Blacks as urban and loud, while Asians are the silent, martial artists from China. However, these films are timeless classics that everyone can relate to and see themselves in as they do in part accurately represent Black and Asian culture respectively. However, before a movie can be created that wholly represents the Black/Asian/Asian American experience more work needs to be done in the realm of cross-racial coalition and partnership.

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Works Cited


