
How to Become a Star in a Strange Land



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It helps if you're a generalist with no ego.

In 1991, a Beijing actor named Li Lianjie was given the starring role in a marquee Hong Kong film. Once Upon a Time in China, a biopic of a legendary Chinese kung fu master, ushered in a golden age of kung fu movies in Hong Kong, then the centre of Chinese cinema. It also made the career of Li, a champion martial artist who, as it happened, was also pretty good at acting. He would become a household name millions of moviegoers now know as Jet Li.

Around the time Li was wowing audiences, another Chinese émigré was also making her mark in Hong Kong. Faye Wong (known to Mandarin-speakers as Wang Fei) began her singing career in the late 1980s with Cantopop, the mainstay in the Cantonese-speaking city's music industry. But she was only one of many churning out formulaic songs. And, as a mainlander, she was seen as less “sophisticated” or “glamorous” than her Hong Kong counterparts.

In danger of sinking into oblivion, Wong experimented with alternative music, infusing influences from the likes of Scottish post-punk band Cocteau Twins into her repertoire. She also took up acting in both television and [movies](#). Her gamble paid off – Wong became a huge star in the Chinese music industry, with a status few have surpassed.



From relative unknowns to superstars, from communist China to freewheeling Hong Kong, Li and Wong epitomise the classic rags to riches story. But besides “hard work pays”, there are deeper lessons to be learned, especially in the [creative and innovative industries](#). They are detailed in our new paper, [“Can you do kungfu and also act? New entrants’ status attainment in the creative industries”](#).

We analysed the experience of Li and some 1,200 mainland Chinese actors who migrated to Hong Kong between 1927 and 2012. We found that migrants of low status tended to attain more status relative to migrants who had higher standing back home. But significantly, we also found that versatile generalists who traversed genres had better odds of success in their new home.

Be like water

We collected Hong Kong and mainland China movie information from film archives, databases and books. We coded cast credits, the year of release, names of directors and studios that made the films, and the genres. The year a mainland actor first appeared in the credits of Hong Kong movies following prior appearances in mainland ones was considered the year she moved to the city.

We computed the Chinese actors' status in the mainland movie industry and the Hong Kong actors' status in the Hong Kong industry, as well as status in Hong Kong for both native actors and new entrants. The analysis covered a three-year window – the average length of studio employment contracts – and was based on movie credits, which list actors per role importance.

Our models show that high-status mainland actors who moved to work in Hong Kong experienced status loss. Furthermore, we found that generalist, low-status Chinese actors enhanced their status in Hong Kong compared to specialist compatriots. But this happened only if the generalists previously performed in categories in China that were also popular in the host market. Versatility and diligence pay off when they are appreciated and suitably exploited for new creative possibilities in the host market.

Jet Li offers a great case study. Li began his career acting in a series of movies about Shaolin monks in the early 1980s. He later branched out to the patriotic film genre and starred in documentaries before fading to relative obscurity in the mid-1980s. After arriving in Hong Kong, Li demonstrated a similar versatility and work ethic. While his forte was undeniably fighting sequences, he also handled dramatic scenes and even **slapstick comedy** with aplomb, and was equally adept in both historical and contemporary films. Ultimately, it helped that he was active in action and patriotic film genres, which are popular in both mainland China and Hong Kong, and was not averse to dabbling in Hong Kong-style comedy.

Asset of foreignness

Generalist migrants, it would appear, make for attractive hires into teams involving high-status incumbents. The breadth of their foreign skills, knowledge and experiences can inject novel ideas into creative projects. Li, for one, elevated Hong Kong kung fu films with his virtuosity in Northern Chinese martial art styles. By contrast, although specialist migrants may also spur innovation, they can do so only in limited contexts.

Our findings offer a glimmer of hope for low-status generalist migrants, whose skills are often undervalued or even discounted in their adopted land. In the creative and innovative industries at least, such versatile migrants can rise in society to a level they never attained back home. With the right conditions and mindset, migrants may be able to turn their foreignness into an asset.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/strategy/how-become-star-strange-land>

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About the research

"Can you do kungfu and also act? New entrants' status attainment in the creative industries" is published in *Journal of World Business*.