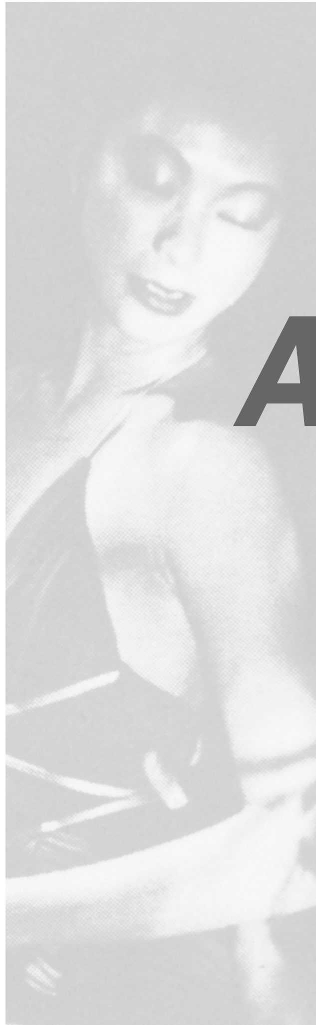
At Full Speed



# At Full Speed

## Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World

Esther C. M. Yau, Editor

MINNESOTA

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INTRODUCTION

# Hong Kong Cinema in a "Borderless World"

Esther C. M. Yau

## Globalization and Hong Kong Movies

Transactions across the terrain of a borderless world have emerged as an economic prerogative in the crossover decades of the twentieth-century. Increasingly, they shape the making of world styles in the metropolitan centers. Along with migrant communities, imported music and arts, Hong Kong movies have become a highly visible cultural component of changing world styles. As the products of a regional financial center and a colony lately transformed into China's Special Administrative Region, some Hong Kong movies circulate widely throughout the global cultural marketplace. Through video outlets, cable television, and digital networks along with theatrical distribution and select festivals, these films have reached disparate locations as far apart as Calcutta and Boston, Berlin and Seoul. Their choreographed action scenes, melodramatic sentiments, poeticized violence, and their depressing yet erotic urban imagery resonate with the worldly cinematic experiences. Their audiences seek entertainment variety from within the cultural spaces already densely occupied by corporate advertising, television imagery and American(ized) icons. Exoticism and primitive passions, packaged by tourist images, nature shows, art films, and ethnic goods, have become commonplace or even old-fashioned antidotes for the tensions and the blandness of modern everyday life. Increasingly, dangerous movements across space, transgressions of good tastes and norms, as well as tweaked, virtual visions of the present and the future have become regular screen features to induce odd and strange sensations for a new generation of image users. As a leader in this trend, Hong Kong movies deliver a wide range of sensations that both stimulate and saturate the imagination by blasting apart a banal contemporary world with unruly talk, fast-paced images of danger, hysterical behavior and excessive sentiments. Playfully combining generic clichés with easy-to-read emotions and quite unthinkable circumstances that are meant to provoke spontaneous responses

with short intervals between shows. Even though the practice of skipping over parts of a film (*tou pian*) in order to shorten projection time is infrequent (and a protest against this practice appears in Allan Fong's *Ah Ying/ Banbian Ren*[1981 ]), theaters commonly turn up the full house lights as soon as film credits appear so that the audience would leave quickly to make way for audiences of the next show. Without too much exaggeration, one may say that the speed of cultural production/consumption and the time inscribed in a Hong Kong film are generally in sync with the speed of investment/return and financial trading that take place elsewhere in this global city. In a rapid-fire manner, the forms of social life together with the signs and stories in the city are turned into palpable commodities which are quickly consumed and discarded. Hence, not only the "affect and sentiments" themselves but also what Negri calls the "economy of desire" as well are put under pressure to perform in a condensed, highly efficient manner. The mutations of commercial Hong Kong cinema in the past two decades, one may say with regard to this analysis, are as much about this global city's paradoxes in a politically unusual and truncated time as they are about super-efficient manipulations of economic opportunities and cultural resources.

To consider Hong Kong cinema in terms of globalization is to shift the discussion away from the parameters of "national cinema" and to avoid making its films an adjunct to the grand narrative of Chinese cinema. This does not mean dismissing the presence of China and Chinese culture in the films but to recognize the distance and the perspectives by which contemporary Chinese entities are interpreted by the filmmakers and audiences that would illuminate the discussions of colonial modernity, diaspora, cultural hegemony and global cultural economy. Within the parameters of a global narrative, the history, economy and the symbolic aspects of Hong Kong's cultural productions in the 1980 s and the 1990 s are Hong Kong's own and not quite so. Local cultural productions are not merely expressions of local identity and memory; instead, one need to consider them as being engulfed by shadows of the Chinese nation-state on the one hand, and as already part of the media clichés and generic conventions in circulation, on the other. The basic considerations for this cinema in the global and local contexts can be summarized in the following points: 1) Hong Kong films are produced in a city of immense geopolitical significance both during the Cold War years and beyond; the social orientation in this regional financial center has been consciously world-oriented, profit-driven and time competitive; 2) Hollywood productions continue to occupy a hegemonic presence on the city's theatrical and television screens; the post-war generations in Hong Kong grew up with American popular cul-

ture, while Japanese popular culture has shaped the tastes of most adolescents; 3) Hong Kong's film productions depend on Taiwan and southeast Asian investment and distribution to balance their budgets; and have a hegemonic presence in these regions for many years; 4) the dependence on overseas consumers has contributed largely to the generic language of "local" productions; 5) the films articulate their connections with and their detachment from both the Western world and the Chinese world—this dimension being part of the lived experiences of colony and diaspora; 6)those commercial films that engage the tensions and the politics in the city have particular significance for the local critics and audiences who are aware of the negotiations and transactions that the city makes with the rest of the world in order to stay active and competitive.

## Flexible Identities, Piracy, Syncretism

After Hollywood and Bombay as well as a few others, Hong Kong is the world's fifth largest producer of commercial films for some years. However, despite the volume of production, the survival of this film industry has become a serious concern in recent years. Along with Cantonese music (or "Cantopop"), Cantonese cinema provides the sights and the sounds of this world city's popular self-expression. The city's postwar generations, brought up in a milieu that encourages a *laissez-faire* economy and eclectic cultural tastes, are often less cognizant of the arts of traditional China than of the material cultures and popular trends coming from Japan, Taiwan, the United States and western Europe. In fact, many writers and filmmakers begin thinking seriously about early Cantonese cinema, the city's history, and the counter-modern Chinese legends as a gesture of cultural introspection that motivates active remembering and rediscovery. Such a gesture, taken after years of exposure to an eclectic mix of western trends and cultural fragments, signifies conscious efforts to reposition themselves in a largely bicultural setting. Even so, or as the result of such a unique process of accumulating cultural knowledge, many movies produced since the late 1970 s are extroverted, laced with multiple cultural references, and engaged with the expressive possibilities rather than the deep values of culture.

Together with the city's rapid transformations since the 1970 s, Hong Kong cinema has moved further and further away from being the cultural offspring of Shanghai tastes and styles. A high-risk endeavor, filmmaking is an integral part of the city's vibrant, low-budget, competitive business environment—a stark contrast to the government-sponsored, artistically serious propaganda

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Part I

# Hong Kong's New Wave Cinema

CHAPTER ONE

# An Overview of Hong Kong's New Wave Cinema[1]

Law Kar

In the early 1980 s, some Hong Kong films began to address the city's tensions and they conveyed a strong sense of its contemporary rhythms. These were the early works of several young directors and screenwriters who came to film through television. The impact of these young people on Hong Kong's Cantonese cinema began forcefully in 1979 . Young critics used a borrowed label and began debating the existence of a New Wave cinema in Hong Kong. There was no doubt that the films and their makers were forging a "new cinema" at the time. Even though this new cinema has changed its contours, directors such as Tsui Hark and Ann Hui who were associated with this cinema continued to play a significant role in the subsequent developments. To the extent that the New Wave filmmakers helped turn Cantonese cinema into a modern cultural entity with a cosmopolitan outlook, their contribution bears further discussion and analysis.

The essay offers a short comprehensive account of the key aspects of Hong Kong's New Wave cinema. My discussion will situate the emergence of Hong Kong's New Wave cinema in the social and the political context of the 1960 s and the 1970 s and identify certain connections between local politics and the world of counterculture. With regard to media, the changes in Cantonese cinema, the rise of television and the appearance of cine-clubs and experimental filmmaking are instrumental as well. The readers will be introduced to the films and television programs that will expand their understanding of the New Wave cinema beyond the better- known titles and their directors.

## Political Activism and Counterculture

The major events and movements in the 1960 s were, in hindsight, manifesting the global aspects of modern political and popular culture. The Vietnam War, the student and worker unrests in Eastern and Western Europe crossed national boundaries and made their impact on Hong Kong, especially cultural

touch" confirms the orientalist appeal of the film. This attention predated that which was later won by director King Hu and *kung fu* star Bruce Lee. Indeed, *The Arch* is arguably the first Chinese film to depict a woman's inner emotion (that of a widow and her sexual desire) in a very subtle and moving manner. *The Arch* evokes classical Chinese poetry and paintings with a slowly-paced Oriental eroticism. Yet, the film was clearly filtered through a modern temperament, as if Chinese folklore were being retold from an existential point of view.

The second feature directed by Shu Shuen, *China Behind/ Zaijian Zhongguo*, 1974 ) is a technically daring work. Shot in Taiwan with the support of the Kuomintang government and some experimental filmmakers, *China Behind* uses China's Cultural Revolution (which was moving to its last phase at the time) as the background to a strong human drama. It tells a story of four mainland students who are driven by the Cultural Revolution to flee to Hong Kong as illegal immigrants and who are subsequently stunned by Hong Kong's unbridled capitalism. China's much-feared "Gang of Four" was then in power and the film was banned on the grounds that it would "damage good relations with other territories" or "contribute to possible breaches of peace" with Hong Kong's great neighbor. For unknown reasons, it was not released in Taiwan either. The film was screened at a French film festival and it was not until the late 1980 s that its significance was fully recognized.

Between 1967 to 1971 , these three directors and their remarkable efforts lit a beacon for a modern cinema to come, even though they could not stem the immediate decline of Cantonese cinema at the time. In 1972 , there was no Cantonese film production, and the Cantonese cinema sank into an eighteen-month coma. Chor Yuen was absorbed by Shaw Brothers Studio as a contract director while Lung Kong retained his independent spirit to continue exploring new genres and techniques in controversial films such as *The Call Girls/ Yingzhao Nulang* (1973 ) and *Hiroshima 28/ Guangdao Erba* (1974 ). After making more conventional films for about three years, Lung quitted the business in 1977 and briefly re-emerged as the producer of Patrick Tam's *Love Massacre* (1981 ). Shu Shuen's third feature film, *Sup Sap Bup Dup/ Shisan Buda* (1975 ), was an unconventional satire on the local residents' passion for gambling. It was a surrealistic work, aptly described by one critic as a "scatter-brained collection of short comedic sketches." She made a fourth feature, *Hong Kong Tycoon/ Da Fuweng* (1979 ) which failed. Since then, Shu Shuen quit filmmaking. Despite her outstanding work, director Shu remained a somewhat mysterious figure, especially regarding her artistic background. Still, she left other traces on the as-yet unformed New Wave directors by being the founder and liberal sponsor of a new film magazine, *Close-up*, in 1976 .

Figure 1
*China Behind* (1974). Daring work on China's Cultural Revolution, shot in Taiwan, by director Shu Shuen.

The film magazine drew together young writers including Li Kok-chung, Law Wai-ming, Shu Kei, Cheung Kam-moon, Leong Noong-kong, Kam Ping-hing and Cheuk Pak-tong. In 1979 , when the magazine stopped publication, many of her collaborators founded *Film Biweekly*, the first magazine to promote and monitor the New Wave cinema which emerged that same year.

Figure 2
*Hiroshima 28* (1974). Controversial film by "conscience filmmaker" Lung Kong.

## The Shaping of a New Film Culture

### *Publications and Cine Clubs*

During the chilliest years of the Cold War (from the late 1940 s to the early 1960 s), Hong Kong media was the battleground of the conservative Right (with pro-Nationalist and pro-American forces) and the conservative Left (with pro orthodox Communist forces). From the mid-1960 s onward, the beginnings of a "new Left" coming from global counter-cultural movements began to take influence on the young critics and their film and literary writings in Hong Kong. In the early 1970 s, more than 200 independent magazines came onto the scene, all of them published by volunteer organizations and private groups to pursue interests in social criticism, literary criticism and creative writing. Magazines like *The Tabloid* and *New Sensibility* focused on cultural and social criticism, and *The 70s Biweekly*, a radical "new Marxist" magazine for students and workers, engaged in topics directly linked to Chinese politics. Other popular magazines such as *Youth Garden Weekly* ran regular discussions on cinema, espousing a leftist view that commercial films from the West "polluted" local culture, while the *Hong Kong Youth Weekly* accepted Western culture as a liberating force and introduced western films and popular music. From 1963 onwards, the *Chinese Student Weekly*, under the editorship of Law Kar and Ada Luk, carried a regular film page and printed film criticisms and writings by authors such as Sek Kei, Si Si, Dai Tin, Kam Ping-hing, Shu Ming, Ng Ho, Yong Fan, Ng Chun-ming, Fong Yuen, Lin Lien-tung, Chan Yum, Do Do, Ku Chong-ng, and later, Shu Kei, Patrick Tam, Wong Chi, Leung Noong-kong, Freddie Wong and Liang Hai-chiang.

*Sample spread running one line long*

These and other publications provided a battleground of ideas, venues for information on popular culture and a practice ground for a critical community of film critics and scholars.

*Close Up Film Review*, a magazine financed by Shu Shuen, appeared in 1976 and in three years, became *Close Up Weekly* and folded quickly. Its writers and other young critics came together and launched the influential *Film Biweekly* in 1979. Quickly, *Film Biweekly* became the city's major film magazine espousing the "new Hong Kong cinema." This focus had much to do with the fact that some of the editors and writers were also television writers and actors. Shu Kei, for example, wrote screenplays for Ann Hui, Yim Ho and Patrick Tam; Law Wai-ming wrote for Allen Fong and Ann Hui, and Lee Kwok-chung acted in the television films of Yim Ho and Ann Hui. Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, *Film Biweekly* (which became *City Entertainment*) sustained artistic and critical interests in national cinemas and in Hong Kong's New Wave films and filmmakers.

> Cine-club activities began in the early 1960s as part of the youth culture. Until then, there were no venues for the screening of class, art or experimental films. The first major film club, Studio One—Film Society of Hong Kong, was formed in 1962, the year City Hall opened on Hong Kong island. The organisers were expatriates and local enthusiasts who were particularly keen on European art films. Even though they showed no interest in Hong Kong films and their programs were published in English, these art films provided a rare "alternative" at the time. Its membership peaked in the late 1970s with over 3,000 people and Studio One folded in the mid-1980s.

Between 1967 to 1968, local, non-expatriate film buffs launched the College Cine Club (*Dai Ying Hui*) in Kowloon. Its core members were the writers and editors of both *College Life* and *Chinese Student Weekly*. The club's activities were rather co-extensive with the *Chinese Student Weekly's* topics on auteur theory, Taiwanese modernism, and contemporary trends in western poetry, theater and literature. It was during this time that film buffs and young critics happily "discovered" Hollywood's *auteurs* as well as those from Europe and Japan. Prominent 'B' feature professionals in Hollywood and Japan, as well as experimental cinema from both Europe and Taiwan became more rather widely known.

*Experimental Films*

Some young critics joined the College Cine Club to make their own 8mm

Part II

# In Action

## Entertainment and Aesthetics

the films point toward the emergent formation of Hong Kong civil society from the bedrock of individual and familial changes wrought by women in different locations, and the collective strength of their aggregation. For all her narrative peregrinations, Ann Hui's films have in the main been configured as social critiques and utopian projects. Her future cinematic passage, post–1997, into the ambivalent intersections of postmodernity and ethnic and nationalistic corporatism, will certainly be worth waiting for.

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Part III

# A Culture of Disappearance

## Nostalgia, Nonsense, and Dislocation