

The 1970s

The Influence of Television on Film in the 1970s

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With its box office records of over HK\$5.6 million, the impact of *The House of 72 Tenants* (1973) on Hong Kong films is well-known. It demonstrates the commanding influence TV had on the popular culture of the day, initiating a force that would revive the Cantonese film.

Film Production and the TV Factor

The powerful influence of TV, though not as evident at first, was felt before *72 Tenants*. Consider, for example, the success of *A Man Called Tiger* (1973). Its star, Jimmy Wang Yu, left Shaw Brothers in 1970 after making *The Chinese Boxer*. The income of his films had routinely been in the range of HK\$1 million. *Zatoichi and One-Armed Swordsman* (1971) brought him HK\$1.5 million. In 1975, he collaborated with George Lazenby in *The Man from Hong Kong*, which reaped over HK\$1 million. *A Man Called Tiger* was the biggest success which boasted a breakthrough ticket sale of HK\$2 million. Except for its female star, Okada Kawai, whose role as Asaoka Yumi in *The Sparkles of Youth*, a Japanese TV series about a group of women volleyball players, made her a household name in Hong Kong, *A Man Called Tiger* was not different from any of these earlier productions. A popular TV series thus made it possible for a Japanese actress to defeat George Lazenby, the international star who once played James Bond. Another example of the influence of TV is *The Boxer from Shantung* (1972), which catapulted Chan Koon-tai to fame with box office sales of over HK\$2 million, surpassing that of all Chang Cheh's previous films. Its success is partly attributable to the fact that in the film Chan defeats Milano, the most well-known wrestler in the wrestling shows that were broadcast on TV at the time. These were two examples of the day where the presence of foreign TV stars successfully raised audience appeal of local productions.

Similarly, the two superstars in the 1970s, Michael Hui and Bruce Lee, were originally TV celebrities. Hui caught Li Han-hsiang's attention with his TV comic show *The Hui Brothers Show*, and earned the main role in *The Warlord* (1972). Bruce Lee also made his fame on TV. He left a deep impression with his viewers for his participation in *The Green Hornet*, and after his return to Hong Kong, charmed the audience with his dazzling martial arts performance on TV, leading to his role in *The*

Big Boss (1971). The influence and box office potential of TV was visible before *72 Tenants*.

To be sure, *72 Tenants* has its historical significance that goes beyond the success story of one or two TV stars in the film world. It demonstrates to the full the clout of TV artists as a community and TV as a popular medium. *72 Tenants* was originally not a TV programme, but a highly successful stage performance starring TV artists. With a low budget, Shaw Brothers turned it into a film, adding to the original cast its own actors. The film surpassed *The Way of the Dragon* (1972) in ticket sales. TVB's influences had gone beyond the world of TV, and were felt in the entire domain of popular culture.

In the next few years, the Hong Kong film industry tried to make sense of the success of *72 Tenants*. The first notable new phenomenon is the appearance of many films that featured a collection of TV artists: *The Country Bumpkin*, *Fun*, *Hong Kong Style*, *The Tenants of Talkative Street*, *Gossip Street*, *Every Day is Sunday* (all released in 1974), *The Running Mob* (1975) and *Star Wonderfun* (1976). Some of these might have one or two TV stars in their cast with others playing subsidiary roles, such as *The Country Bumpkin* and *Every Day is Sunday*, while others featured groups of TV actors performing a story with no central plot, such as *Fun*, *Hong Kong Style* and *Star Wonderfun*. This latter type of films also went through a process of transformation. In the beginning, the stars of *Enjoy Yourself Tonight*, chief among them being Tam Bing-man, Lee Hong-kum, Lydia Sum, Cheng Kwun-min, Adam Cheng, Yu Ming, To Ping, Helena Law Lan, Yu Tzu-yun, Sum Sum, Shek Sau, Li Tien-sheng, Leung Tin, Ivan Ho, and Sandra Lang, constituted the main cast. Later, with new talents coming from TVB's training course, the cast expanded to include Lo Yuen-yan, Ng Yuen-yee, Ng Wai-kwok, So Hang-shuen, Rainbow Ching, Eric Kam, and Lo Hoi-pang. Lo Yuen-yan and Ng Yuen-yee, in particular, had a special place in the mind of the audience for their roles as two scheming daughters-in-law in *Sorrow of the Gentry*.

The 'group stars film' reached its height in 1974, but had by and large abated by 1978. The absorption of TV artists into the film industry had, however, become a norm. In that decade, Lau Yat-fan, Richard Ng, Rowena Cortes, Deborah Lee, Liu Wing-seong, Paul Chu, Michelle Yim, Kot Kin-ching, Liza Wang, the Wynners, Aaron Lau, Leslie Cheung, Wong Yuen-sun, and Marx Cheung Lui all found their niches on TV, landing roles in various films. Among them, Chow Yun-fat and Wong Hang-sau were the most active.

Not only the actors, but the TV programmes, too, found a new home in films. The actors of *Enjoy Yourself Tonight* often played their own roles on the silver screen. Shaw Brothers broadcast openly that *Gossip Street* was adapted from skits of *Enjoy Yourself Tonight*. Films were also made to exploit Tam Bing-man's role as a country bumpkin in *Enjoy Yourself Tonight*. The first of these made more than HK\$1.8 million, placing it fifth in ticket sales in 1974. *The Country Bumpkin in Style* was then made in the same year, *Country Man and the Scavenger* in 1976 and *Cunning Tendency* in 1978, all featuring Tam Bing-man in his TV role. Similarly, Li Tien-sheng played his title role Elmo in *Country Man and the Scavenger* and *Elmo Takes a Bride* (1976). Other actors may not have landed key roles, but they often played the same roles on screen as on TV. Leung Tin, therefore, was always an opera diva regardless of the films he may be asked to star, Yu Tzu-yun always a domestic helper, Helena Law Lan a switchboard operator, Shek Sau a well-heeled fop. Next to TVB, Commercial Television (CTV) produced programmes more suitable for adults. Among them, *Hello, Late Homecomers* immediately spawned two film adaptations in 1978, one in the same title while the other called *Hello, Sexy Late Homecomers*, both released at the same time to vie for audiences. The adaptation of non-dramatic TV programmes into films is not necessarily a good thing, however. Many film directors and screenwriters did not have the proper training in TV productions. Their poor grasp of TV camera work and comic rhythm resulted in some pathetic failures where audience looked in vain for cohesive film style or humour.

TVB and Shaw Brothers collaborated to turn many of the most well-known TVB series into films. *Sorrow of the Gentry* and *A Story of Three Loves* were originally adapted from literary works. Now, taking advantage of the craze created by TVB, Shaw Brothers made them into films once again. *Sorrow of the Gentry* (1974) even enjoyed some considerable box office success, proving once again the sway of celebrated TV series. *73*, a satire on the contemporary affairs, gave rise to the film *Hong Kong 73* in 1974, with ticket sales second only to *Games Gamblers Play* that year. Shaw Brothers often recast the roles of these adaptations with their own actors. Only Lo Yuen-yan and Ng Yuen-yee were retained as the second and third daughters-in-law in the film version of *Sorrow of the Gentry*, while in *Hong Kong 73*, only Lee Yin-ping was given her own role as the mother. Lu Chien took over Lau Yat-fan as the father, Elliot Yueh Hua took over Hung Tak-shing as the first son, and Ivan Ho took over Lau Tin-chi as the second son.

As the popularity of TV series continued to escalate in the 1970s, films were made of the best among them. *Cunning Tendency* was a send-up of the popular TV series

Torrents. In addition, CTV's *The Eagle-Shooting Heroes* started the trend of making films based on martial arts novels. Jin Yong's novels were guaranteed crowd pullers. Shaw Brothers purchased the film rights of Jin's novels, adapting most of his works into films. Beginning with Chang Cheh's *The Brave Archer* (1977), an adaptation from *The Eagle-Shooting Heroes*, Chor Yuen, Hua Shan, Sun Chung and other directors also tried their hands on Jin's works. Only the beginning few met with any success, however. Martial arts novels by another writer, Gu Long, had a different reception. His works were initially turned into films by Chor Yuen of Shaw Brothers. Both *Killer Clans* (1976) and *The Magic Blade* (1976) did reasonably well, but the TV production of *Swordsman Lu Xiaofeng* and *Little Lee the Dagger* created a Gu Long rage. Riding on its crest, Shaw Brothers made *The Proud Twins* (1979) which broke records of all films based on Gu Long's novels with over HK\$4 million ticket sales. Because the character of Hua Manlou in the TV production had a strong appeal to the audience, Shaw Brothers accordingly expanded the role of this character in the two Lu Xiaofeng films (*Clans of Amazons* of 1978 and *The Duel of the Century* of 1981).

Revival of the Cantonese Film with Hong Kong Characteristics

A lot can be said about the change in the film language brought by TV. Traditional Cantonese films vanished from the scene in 1972 when Hong Kong switched to produce only Mandarin films, making its reappearance only after *72 Tenants*. At first, only productions related to TV would shoot in Cantonese. Later, films starring TV artists also used Cantonese, because the audience was used to hearing their voices. As more and more TV stars were featured in films, films made in Cantonese became all the more common. The comic kungfu genre of the 1970s, with Jackie Chan and Sammo Hung, adopted Cantonese right from the start. Cantonese thus became the dominant language of Hong Kong films. By 1979, only period pieces of Shaw Brothers and films from Taiwan used Mandarin.

Even though TV brought about a revival of Cantonese films, it is worth pointing out that the films of this era were not the same as the pre-1972 Cantonese films with the imprint of a different period. The young artists who worked behind the TV screen had nothing to do with the earlier Cantonese film industry. They came under the influence of Western culture in a way more profound than the directors and the screenwriters of Cantonese films, and their feeling for Hong Kong was likewise much stronger than those workers of Cantonese films who came to Hong Kong as refugees. For all the changes that TV culture had undergone in the 1970s, its affirmation of love for Hong Kong, its passion for the youth culture, its identification with the middle class, and its

pursuit for individual accomplishments are very consistent. All these trends got increasingly clear that set them apart from the didactic and social emphases in traditional Cantonese films. They might not have come to the fore in the period immediately after *72 Tenants* because films were still made by directors of an earlier generation, such as Lee Tit, Ng Wui, Yeung Kuen and Wong Fung, who imitated the new style of TV with limited success. A new era of films required a new generation of artists, among whom Michael Hui and Josephine Siao are outstanding examples.

In the beginning of his switch from TV to the silver screen, Michael Hui acted in four of Li Han-hsiang's Mandarin films: *The Warlord*, *The Happiest Moment* (1973), *Scandal* (1974) and *Sinful Confession* (1974). Three of these were set in northern China of the Republican period. Only *Sinful Confession* was put in contemporary Hong Kong. Yet, the story was far removed from the plebian life in Hong Kong. In conception, it was also miles from *The Hui Brothers Show*. Hui later signed up with Golden Harvest where he enjoyed greater autonomy in directing and acting in *Games Gamblers Play*, a truly watershed production. The Cantonese films in the wake of *72 Tenants* were mere transitional works, while the new style Hong Kong film was finally completed in *Games Gamblers Play*. 'The ox in the field is hardworking, but nobody ever sees it making big money,' a line uttered by Michael Hui in the film, articulates a world view different from that of the Cantonese film. The new generation went for practical results, and ridiculed the tradition that was dissociated from reality. Michael Hui might have cut his teeth in TV, but he developed his own filmic style. His personal experience also underscores the need of those film workers who began their career in TV to launch into the new world on their own, at odds as they were with the Mandarin film culture at the time.

The case of Josephine Siao tells a different story. She was a successful star in the earlier Cantonese film era, but was able to adjust herself to the new times and break new artistic grounds. Even at the height of her career in 1969, she hosted *Fong Fong's Melody* at TVB, where, as a deputy director at the same time, she set her mind to master the skills of TV production. When she returned from the US, she hosted the comic show *Not So Simple* and created the role Lam Ah Chun. Later, she made three films on the same character: *Lam Ah Chun* (1978), *Lam Ah Chun Blunders Again* (1979), and *Plain Jane to the Rescue* (1982). The former two were particularly successful in the box office. Lam Ah Chun projects a gender-neutral image, a far cry from the virginal maiden whom Siao used to play in her former career in Cantonese films. Her character now is a well-educated and perceptive young woman, yet lacking the practical skills that would see her through from day to day. At odds with

her surroundings, she runs into difficulties all the time, making her story an apt satire of the absurd reality that is Hong Kong. Siao's performance is charged with a personal style, and carries with it a unique comic tempo and the flavour of the modern times, different from the older genre of Cantonese films.

Neither Hui and Siao were lone fighters by any means. They resorted to the support of the crew on which they relied for their TV productions, such as Lau Tin-chi, Thomas Tang, Wong Jing, Ng Yu and Ricky Chan, who became the active members of the film circles of the late 1970s. Their contributions to the establishment of Hong Kong film are not to be ignored. The absorption of TV talents into the film industry started on the front stage, but only when TV production crew found their places behind the screen did any change of substance and quality take place. Without them, Cantonese films would not have made their transition to Hong Kong film, and the Hong Kong New Wave would not have come into being.

(Translated by Tam King-fai)

Seminars

Madame Kawakita and Japanese Cinema

Many film buffs got their first taste of Japanese art films at cine clubs in the early 60s. That Japanese cinema managed to make its way to the global market owed much to the dedication of Kawakita Kashiko, the ‘Mother of Japanese Cinema’. In recognition of her contributions, the HKFA put together a programme that showcased the signature pieces of eight Japanese masters from May through July, as well as a seminar on June 6.

Veteran film critic Shu Ming and Prof Kinnia Yau of the Department of Japanese Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong were invited as guest speakers. Hosting the seminar was Kiki Fung, Assistant Manager of the HKFA. Prof Yau gathered a large pool of materials to recount the Kawakita family’s efforts in promoting film culture in both Japan and China (especially during the Orphan Island period). Shu Ming explained the selection criteria of the Kawakita Award, which aims primarily at cultural exchange. This explains why the award goes mostly to film researchers, critics, authors and directors rather than actors.

During the Q&A session, scholar Shu Kei recalled that when he negotiated with Kawakita Kazuko on film distribution matters, he noticed that the Kawakitas were much more powerful than an ordinary distributor. While giving the family due credits, he was candid about his doubts that the Kawakitas might have in fact assisted the Japanese government in its propaganda campaign on the pretext of cultural exchange. The two speakers said that no concrete proof has been found so far, and further studies are necessary as to whether such allegations are valid. Filmmakers’ achievements are no doubt worthy of commendation, yet it is also important to take a broad view of the multiple roles they have played. (Collated by Elbe Lau)



(From left) Prof Kinnia Yau, Shu Ming, Kiki Fung

The Cold War and Hong Kong Film

On 13 June 2009, Dr Lee Pui-tak, Research Assistant Professor, Centre of Asian Studies, The University of Hong Kong, and Dr Kenny Ng, Assistant Professor of Humanities, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, explored in historical, cultural and social terms the relationship between the Cold War and Hong Kong cinema. They also analysed how filmmakers tactfully conveyed political ideologies in their films against the stringent censorship imposed by the colonial government during the Cold War years. (Collated by Shirley Wu)



(From left) Dr Kenny Ng, Dr Lee Pui-tak, and Ms Wong Ain-ling, the seminar host.

Confucius: Aesthetic Significance

At the August 15 seminar, Mr Shu Kei (Dean, School of Film & Television, The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts) analysed the economy of aesthetic means in Fei Mu's works, and the director's heartfelt efforts to address his times. Examining the score of *Confucius* and citing as example the employment of *guqin*, Prof Lau Chor-wah (Head, Centre for Chinese Cultural Heritage, Hong Kong Baptist University) discussed Fei's dedication to using authentic instruments and his general approach to film music. Film scholar Ms Wong Ain-ling moved on to suggest that Fei's works have mirrored the psyche of historical figures, as well as the behaviour, moral values and traditional culture of the Chinese people. (Collated by Cindy Shin)



(From left) Prof Lau Chor-wah, seminar host Sam Ho, Wong Ain-ling, Shu Kei.

Lin Dai: The Star, the Actress, the Legend

The seminar was held on August 22 at the Archive Cinema. Accompanied by HKFA Programmer Sam Ho, the seminar host, Peter Dunn (sitting on the right in the left photo) first shared with the audience his views on Lin Dai and her films. Lung Tzong-hann and Fung Bo-bo (sitting on the left in the right photo), Lin Dai's son and goddaughter respectively, moved on to talk about the life of their mother.

That day, the Archive Cinema was teeming with fans of the screen goddess. Fans who could not find a seat gathered at the G/F Lobby and Exhibition Hall to view live broadcast of the seminar on monitors. The crowd was enthusiastic and the event concluded orderly. (Collated by Shirley Wu)



Customer Liaison Meeting



To better serve the community, the HKFA held the Customer Liaison Meeting on 7 June where patrons were asked to fill in a questionnaire and share with us their comments on our services. (Collated by Cindy Shin)

(Translated by Elbe Lau)