

New Publication

Hong Kong Filmography Vol VII (1970–1974)

Kwok Ching-ling

In the social evolution of the early and mid-1970s, women were fighting for equal work equal pay with men, student organisations were promoting the use of Chinese as an official language, university students were demanding to know about China, import and export trade was prospering, a number of stock brokerages opened, the stock market underwent a slump. Just as the city was rapidly developing, people's mindsets were also changing drastically. As we pore over the Hong Kong film industry at this time, it becomes all the more evident that film and its universe are by no means isolated. Hong Kong was evolving to become an international metropolis at this time. While the film industry was cut off from mainland China because of the Cultural Revolution, it only became all the closer to Taiwan.

(1) Film History

The coexistence of Mandarin and Cantonese films in Hong Kong tipped in favour of the former in the mid- and late 1960s. In 1972, there was not a single Cantonese production. *The House of 72 Tenants* that came out the next year represented a turning point. Cantonese cinema began to revive in 1974. The previous volume of the *Hong Kong Filmography* series alludes to the shifting balance of Cantonese and Mandarin films, and the reasons for the decline of the former.¹ With the expansion of the Mandarin film circuits, the demand for Mandarin productions increased, and companies that were devoted to Cantonese films now switched to produce Mandarin films. In the beginning of the 1970s, the exchange between Hong Kong and Taiwan cinemas became all the more frequent.²

Many Hong Kong filmmakers and studios took their productions to Taiwan in the mid- and late 1960s, thereby promoting the industry there, while dubbing, developing, distributing and film importation were still carried out in Hong Kong. Around 1970, overseas film companies were discouraged from entering Taiwan by some of the crude productions there, with the result that many Hong Kong film companies returned to Hong Kong. Even Taiwan film companies were trying to come to Hong Kong to develop an overseas market. By 1973, Taiwan tightened censorship against violence and sex, with the result that increasing number of film companies moved to Hong Kong and other places such as Thailand and Korea to ensure that they could sell their output overseas.

History has often left behind tracks that lead us back to the origin of things. Under these circumstances, in addition to the passing of baton from one generation to the

next, a large number of Taiwan film workers are now added to the Hong Kong film circles. When we compiled this volume of the 1970s, there emerged many film companies and actors who are almost completely new to us. As we came face to face with the new data, the biggest question that came to us was: should these be considered as Hong Kong films?

According to Mr Yu Mo-wan, Hong Kong films are those that are made by companies established in Hong Kong (*Hong Kong Filmography Vol I*, p xiii), which explains why films that are produced by Hong Kong companies in Taiwan such as Wong Cheuk-hon's *First Film* and Tong Yuejuan's *Hsin Hwa* are categorically considered as Hong Kong films. It is a fact known by all, however, that in the 1970s, many Taiwan film companies registered in Hong Kong with the word Hong Kong added to their names, had all that production work done in Taiwan. Should the films be considered as Hong Kong films? Should those whose filming and post-production work were done in Taiwan be included in the *Filmography*? Our research team and editorial team have gone through many discussions, examining closely the lengthy film lists and cross-referencing the list of registered companies provided by the Hong Kong and Kowloon Cinema & Theatrical Enterprise Free General Association, and the information contained in the censor cards such as the place of production. We decided that companies that were registered in Hong Kong and those with the word Hong Kong in their names would be included in the *Filmography*. In fact, regardless of the place of origin, most films were produced in Taiwan. It is an era where films could not be clearly identified as Hong Kong or Taiwan productions. We believe that by doing so, we could present a more complete picture of the inseparable Hong Kong and Taiwan film industries at the time.³

Besides, we have also considered the importance of the creative personnel of the film in deciding whether it should be listed as a Hong Kong production in the *Filmography*. For example, the selection criteria of the Hong Kong Film Awards would be a useful reference. Films whose director and principal crew members are from Hong Kong deserve the attention of those who study Hong Kong cinema.

In the days that followed, co-productions became increasingly large-scale, and that further brought about disputes over the definition of 'Hong Kong film' in recent years. This is a matter that entails our deliberation while we are gathering historical materials. History is an important factor for the *Filmography*. We will discuss and adjust the definition further taking into account the characteristics of different periods.

(2) Happenings

The major news of the 1970s Hong Kong film circles was of course the departure of Raymond Chow from the Shaw Brothers, the industry giant at the time. Chow was

Shaws' production manager, and with Leonard Ho and Leung Fung, established Golden Harvest which became Shaws' rival. Shaws, even with the departure of a number of important members, was still able to corner the market by inviting Dong Qianli and Evan Yang to join from Cathay. Golden Harvest and Cathay opened the Yung Hwa Motion Picture Studios (which Golden Harvest ran, and which would become the Golden Harvest Studio later). By then, Cathay was on the decline, and stopped production altogether in 1971.

In the beginning, Golden Harvest had already instituted a strategy to collaborate with independent film companies by providing actors, directors and capital. Its work style was different from the Shaw empire's. In 1971, Golden Harvest set off a bombshell by signing a contract with Bruce Lee to film *The Big Boss*. When Bruce Lee died suddenly in 1973, the few kungfu films starring him became an eternal myth in Hong Kong film history. Subsequently, Golden Harvest collaborated with the Hui brothers in 1974 to make *Games Gamblers Play* and started a fad of comedies. Since then, Golden Harvest became a major force in Hong Kong cinema for 30 years.

In the beginning of the 1970s, there was a large demand for films in the cinema circuits. Together with the global China craze,⁴ the sale of Hong Kong films increased drastically. Major companies sought to expand their market by going global, while taking advantage of the favourable circumstances, independent companies made their appearance. Some received the support of major companies and operated on a collaborative model in order to cut cost. Quite a few directors and actors formed companies of their own, such as the 'Rat Pack' with Paul Chang Chung, Patrick Tse Yin, Willie Chan, Chen Hao, Charlie Chin, Alan Tang and Lydia Sum. Paul Chang Chung, Patrick Tse Yin and Chen Hao even took up directorship at times.

(3) Films

The violent martial style that began in the mid- and late 1960s continued to go strong in the early 1970s (see 'Preface: Martial Arts and Action Films', *Hong Kong Filmography Vol VI*). Chang Cheh's unswerving adherence to his aesthetics of staunch masculinity came to influence other films: martial arts, kungfu and bare-knuckle fights became all the more realistic, and martial arts actors were in high demand. Ng See-yuen's Empire Cinema Centre Ltd took the lead with *The Bloody Fists* in 1972. Of course, no one could hope to rival Bruce Lee in popularity. Films that featured fighting the Japanese such as *Fist of Fury* (1972) became quite a craze.

During this period when the silver screen was filled with endless fighting scenes, there were some remarkable works that strayed from the dominant style, which was in any case tiring out from overuse. *A Touch of Zen* (1971), completed after many a twist and turn, represented King Hu's precise and painstaking style. The director later left

Taiwan for Hong Kong and formed his own studio to make *The Fate of Lee Khan* (1973). Chang Tseng-tse's *From the Highway* (1970) combined Western firearms with traditional weapons in a film strong in nativist sentiments. Chor Yuen's *The Cold Blade* (1970) heralded the romantic and mysterious series of Gu Long martial arts films, making it possible for the multi-talented Chor Yuen to make the smooth transition from directing Cantonese films to directing Mandarin films. In a few years, *Duel for Gold* (1971), *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan* (1972) testified to the dramatic tension that Chor Yuen is capable of producing. *The House of 72 Tenants*, which he made at a time when Cantonese films were poison to box office sales, became the work that marked the revival of Cantonese cinema. He showed himself adept in adapting TV dramas to the silver screen, making *72 Tenants* a blockbuster production that brought together the best-known TV artists at the time.

Another famous director, Li Han-hsiang, closed down Grand Motion Picture he founded in Taiwan and returned to Hong Kong in 1971 to make a series of fraudster and *fengyue* films (softcore erotica). On the pretext of offering something new, many films at the time were in fact mongering sex and violence. Li Han-hsiang's erotic period films betrayed a strong personal inclination, and have since become a trademark of his. His comedies about cons-artists also reaped handsome profit. His later works, *The Warlord* (1972), *The Happiest Moment* (1973) were products of collaboration with Michael Hui, who set up his own shop soon afterwards. In 1974, *Games Gamblers Play* came first in box office sales, leading in its wake a fad of slapstick comedies.

At this time, the *Huangmei Diao* opera film popular in the 1960s was coming to its end. In its stead, song and dance troupes coming from Taiwan to perform in Hong Kong started a trend of Mandarin songs. Taiwanese singers such as Yao Su-yung and Ching San became household names, and their musicals set in contemporary periods enjoyed box office success. Outside of the mainstream genre, realistic social drama and films based on real criminal cases also began to draw attention. Patrick Lung Kong's *The Call Girls* (1973), Cheng Kang's *Kidnap* (1974) and Kuei Chi-hung's *The Teahouse* (1974) are some of the notable examples.

In retrospect, this is a period when sex and violence held sway. That film censorship was subjected to questioning deserves a special mention. Incidents of young people engaged in gang fights made the news almost every day, and film and TV, with their prevalent violence, was being blamed. The police also criticised pornography and violent scenes for the exponential increase of rape cases.⁵ A newspaper editorial in 1971 bemoaned the fact that of the more than 10 films shown in Hong Kong in a day, 50% belonged to the erotic genre, 30% to the action genre, and 60% were labelled 'Not Suitable for Children'. It went on to castigate the excessively lenient censorship,

saying that ‘the social ethos of Hong Kong is getting worse, while crime rate is getting higher day by day. The conduct of young people is becoming outrageous and aggressive. That films, for the unhealthy lessons that they impart, have to shoulder part of the responsibility.’⁶ The label ‘Not Suitable for Children’ is only advisory in nature, and often served as an added advertisement for the theatres. The voice for stricter censorship got louder and louder. In 1973, the Hong Kong government reviewed its film inspection standard, and exacted stricter measures against violence and scenes considered to incite criminal behaviour.⁷ However, filmmakers found the measures too vague and difficult to follow, until 1988 when the ‘Three Categories’ were established (in 1995, Category II was subdivided into IIA and IIB) and put into practice until now.

Afterword

Mr Huang Yah-bai, who has served multiple terms as Chairman of the Hong Kong and Kowloon Cinema & Theatrical Enterprise Free General Association, once wrote that he was delighted to see that the market for Mandarin film not only covered Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, the USA, and Hong Kong, but was extending to places such as South Korea, Africa, Central and South America, the UK and Canada. But at the same time, he was saddened by the proliferation of crudely made films that caused the film industry to decline.⁸ When blood and gore became a thing of the past, comedy became the order of the day until the 1980s. Even action films had to put on a comic garb creating thereby a new trend. When midnight shows became a trend, Cantonese films once again appeared on the screen as Hong Kong films. Mandarin cinema declined, until the arrival of the era of Chinese-language films...

Thanks to the continuous support of our colleagues at the HKFA and the assistance of friends, film veterans and various organisations, the *Hong Kong Filmography* series has been able to see the press. We earnestly hope that these bricks would become the foundation stone for future studies on Hong Kong cinema. (Translated by Tam King-fai)

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Notes

¹ See Kwok Ching-ling, ‘Foreword’, *Hong Kong Filmography Vol VI (1965–1969)*, Hong Kong Film Archive, 1997, pp x–xix. In short, the control of the market in the hands of cinema circuits, the instability of Southeast Asia, the collapse of the presale system, the increase in the cost of production,

the airing of old films on TV, the failure of Cantonese films to catch up with the times, audiences' confidence in Mandarin films all combined to accelerate the decline of Cantonese films until they almost disappeared completely in a few years. A noteworthy point is that there was strong reaction from the profession (especially strong in Taiwan) to the threat posed by the airing of old films on TV. Now decades later, as one film company has closed after another, many film copies are preserved, thanks to the TV stations that purchased them in those days.

² Huang Jen analyses the factors that contributed to this period of frequent exchange of film workers between Hong Kong and Taiwan in his essays, 'Hong Kong Filmmakers in Taiwan in the 1970s', *Hong Kong Film Archive Newsletter*, No 51, February 2010, pp 13–16, and 'Crossing Between Taiwan and Hong Kong: Taiwanese Filmmakers of the 1970s', *Hong Kong Film Archive Newsletter*, No 52, May 2010, pp 9–11 (in Chinese).

³ Taiwanese directors such as Li Hsing and Pai Ching-jui made films for different companies in both Hong Kong and Taiwan. It is only logical not to be bound by the geographical differences when we study their films. At the same time, *Home Sweet Home* (1970) and *The Autumn Execution* (1972) produced by the Central Motion Picture Corporation were extremely well-received when they were shown in Hong Kong, but they are beyond the scope of this book.

⁴ Stepping into the 1970s, the People's Republic of China adjusted its foreign policy. Through what is known as the Ping-pong Diplomacy, China and the USA resumed their diplomatic relationship, leading to the US support of China's admission to the United Nations in 1971, followed by President Nixon's visit to China in 1972. China's return to the international arena triggered a China craze all over the world. Bruce Lee's works came to stun the screens in the West at the time, provoking on its own a fad in Chinese martial arts.

⁵ A sampling of related newspapers reports includes 'Increasing Gang Fights among Young People Attributable to the Insidious Influence of Films and TV. Most Japanese and American Films Incite Criminal Behaviour' (*Wen Wei Po*, 6 November 1970), 'Pornography and Violent Films Lead to the Exponential Increase in Rape Cases' (*The Kung Sheung Daily News*, 30 April 1974), etc (in Chinese).

⁶ See 'Hong Kong Film Inspection System', Editorial, *The Kung Sheung Daily News*, 14 May 1971 (in Chinese).

⁷ See 'New Inspection Criteria on TV and Films. Stricter Measures Against Violence and Crime-inciting Scenes. Appropriate Principles Now in Force on Film Production and Cinema Circuits', *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 3 May 1973.

⁸ See Huang Yah-bai, 'Mandarin Films Dominate the Southeast Asian Market. Cantonese Films Must Break Through the Stranglehold to Open a New World of Their Own', *The Kung Sheung Daily News*, 1 January 1972.

References

The Kung Sheung Daily News, *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, *Ta Kung Pao*, *Ming Pao Daily News*, *Wen Wei Po*, *Cinemart*.

Events

The Bitter Tears of Ruan Lingyu

Ernesto Maurice Corpus, an experienced live music accompanist for silent film screenings, as well as local artist Yank Wong and his friends were invited to perform live music for a series of silent works starring Ruan Lingyu. Three post-screening talks were also held to offer audiences and speakers a platform to exchange views.



Yank Wong (1st left) and his friends performing live music for *The Little Toys* (1933) and *The Goddess* (1934)



Film critics Kiki Fung (left) and Grace Mak at the talk after the 13 June screening of *The Goddess*



Film critics Kiki Fung (left) and Lawrence Lau at the talk after the 20 June screening of *Homecoming*



HKFA Programmer Sam Ho (left) and Executive Editor Elbe Lau at the talk after the 20 June screening of *The Little Toys*

(Collated by Cindy Shin; translated by Elbe Lau)