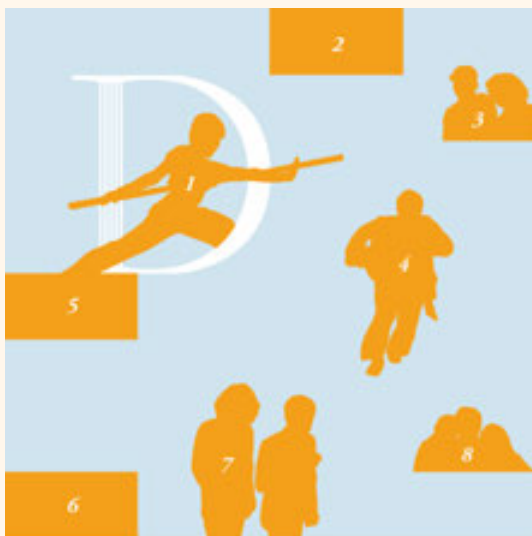




## A DIFFERENT BRILLIANCE

# The D&B Story



1. *Yes, Madam* (1985): Michelle Yeoh
2. *Love Unto Wastes* (1986): (left) Elaine Jin; (right) Tony Leung Chiu-wai
3. *An Autumn's Tale* (1987): (left) Chow Yun-fat; (right) Cherie Chung
4. *Where's Officer Tuba?* (1986): Sammo Hung
5. *Hong Kong 1941* (1984): (from left) Alex Man, Cecilia Yip, Chow Yun-fat
6. *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987): (front row from left) Loletta Lee, Elsie Chan, Pauline Kwan, Lydia Sum, Bill Tung; (back row) John Chiang
7. *The Return of Pom Pom* (1984): (left) John Sham; (right) Richard Ng
8. *Heart to Hearts* (1988): (from left) Dodo Cheng, George Lam, Vivian Chow

*A DIFFERENT BRILLIANCE*

# *The D&B Story*

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# Foreword

Kwok Ching-ling, Wong Ha-pak

In its some twenty years of history, the Hong Kong Film Archive has held a number of themed retrospectives on film companies, including the Mandarin film-focused MP & GI/Cathay, Shaws, Great Wall and Feng Huang; as well as Cantonese film studios such as Kong Ngee, Union Film, and Sun Luen. We also covered Golden Harvest, an indisputable leader of the industry since the 1970s until its closure; and Cinema City, which rose to prominence in the early 1980s. D & B, the subject of our retrospective this time, was established in 1984. Against the backdrop of commercialism of Hong Kong cinema, it's a company which espoused the philosophy of creativity-first and 'walking on two legs'.<sup>1</sup> Mainstream audiences who watched the Chinese New Year blockbusters from Golden Harvest, Cinema City<sup>2</sup>, and D & B from the 1980s may not have noticed some of the smaller, more unique offerings from D & B. As we review D & B more than three decades after its establishment, we are in an excellent position to clearly evaluate the company's strategies in balancing commercialism and creativity, their successes and their failures.

## I

With the rapid growth of Hong Kong films in the 1980s, Hong Kong cinema shed off its traditional labels of 'Cantonese films' and 'Mandarin films', and the once-mighty studio-made period films gave way to modern, contemporary dramas, as audiences welcomed the aesthetics of realism and authenticity. A new generation of filmmakers joined the fold, whilst the older generation also sought to break down their traditional structures and limitations. Even more extraordinary was the willingness of both generations to exchange ideas and collaborate.<sup>3</sup> D & B, which ascended quickly in the mid-1980s, can be said to be an example of, or even a leader of, that era of new and innovative trends. The D & B team was young, upon its establishment, the three bosses—Dickson Poon, Sammo Hung and John Sham—were all just around thirty years of age. Hung, who'd started working in the film industry at a very young age, had by then already achieved 'big brother' status. Having said that, he found great chemistry with Sham, and the two were keen to stretch their wings and collaborate.

The 'two-legged' strategy of D & B was: on the one hand, put emphasis on commercial genre pictures and add international appeal, such as shooting on location overseas, introducing foreign actors, and enhancing the visual effects (including action choreography). Take *Royal Warriors* (1986) as an example. Boasting an impressive cast of Michelle Yeoh, Michael Wong and Japanese star Sanada Hiroyuki (aka Henry Sanada), the film also incorporates high-octane action and explosion sequences, framing its story as an 'international' one. It yielded good results in the overseas markets of the time. Likewise, *Magnificent Warriors* (1987), with its large-scale sets and nostalgic tone (modelled after popular, contemporary Western blockbusters such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* [1981] and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* [1984]), also exemplified the studio's epic ambitions.

*Easy Money* (1987), produced during D & B's middle years, was shot on multiple locations in Europe, and was marketed as an overseas shoot to highlight the scale and quality of its production. In the film, Michelle Yeoh races across snowy slopes, paraglides, and steers a mount into a forest; and the end credits detail the professional trainers hired, highlighting the professionalism and competence of the action and stunt team. Later, films like

<sup>1</sup> The full names of the film companies are: Motion Picture & General Investment Co. Ltd. (MP & GI), which later reorganised as Cathay Organisation Hong Kong Ltd, Shaw Brothers (Hong Kong) Ltd, The Great Wall Movie Enterprises Ltd, Feng Huang Motion Picture Co, Kong Ngee Motion Picture Production Company, The Union Film Enterprise Ltd, Sun Luen Film Company, Golden Harvest (HK) Limited, Cinema City Company Limited and D & B Films Co., Ltd.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that D & B was established in 1984, the same year that Tsui Hark and Nansun Shi, once two of Cinema City's 'Gang of Seven', broke out and established their own production company, Film Workshop Co. Ltd.

<sup>3</sup> For the collaboration between the two generations of filmmakers, see the interviews with Norman Chan and Terence Chang on how this disparate group did or did not work together. Regarding the content of their oral history interviews, see 'Norman Chan' of this book, interviewed by Janice Chow, et al., collated by Janice Chow, pp 67-72; 'Terence Chang', interviewed by Cindy Chan, Wong Ha-pak, et al., collated by Cheung Po-ching and Doris Chiu, pp 73-77.

*Black Cat* (1991) and *Black Cat II: Assassination of President Yeltsin* (1992) were not only shot in North America, but also in more exotic locations such as Russia, incorporating many hi-tech sequences. The sequel even brings to life political figures from contemporary international relations, exemplifying D & B's experimental approach towards 'internationalising'. During this period, D & B was also producing light, contemporary comedies that chose to record audio on-set, enhancing the synchronicity of sound and images and creating a stronger sense of realism. All these developments signalled the D & B production teams' bold attempts at producing more modernised images and adopting more professional techniques.

Against the two monopolies of the film industry, Golden Harvest and Cinema City, D & B faced an uphill struggle trying to squeeze in at third-place. This tied in with its 'second leg', which chimed well with the stable of 'alternative' auteur-directors at D & B. Such alternative works often sought to highlight the status of Hong Kong, focus on contemporary social issues and raise local awareness. The first D & B-branded film, *Hong Kong 1941* (1984) (D & B's first production, *The Return of Pom Pom* (1984), was very much a sequel to a film from another studio), was a work that historicised Hong Kong's past and at the same time responded to the contemporary situation, as the city faced yet another pivotal moment in its history.

Other modern dramas also broached different social issues in their unique ways, such as minority groups (*Silent Love* [1986], *The Lunatics* [1986]), the psychology of modern urbanites (*Love Unto Wastes* [1986]). As the studio entered its later years, production of such niche works had indeed been reduced. Yet it is still possible to find works that explore violence towards women (*Vengeance is Mine* [1988]) and drugs (*Will of Iron* [1991]). Unfortunately they lack depth in their exploration of the issues and their critical and box office results were middling. Nonetheless, they represent an attempt to broaden the scope of topics in D & B's repertoire.

Apart from filmmaking, D & B also operated its own cinema circuit. Since their production was limited,<sup>4</sup> their cinemas relied on mostly showing films from other companies. Although the majority of these films were commercial in nature, there was still a diverse selection, with memorable *wenyi* works such as Ann Hui's *Starry is the Night* (1988); Shu Kei's *Soul* (1986); Clara Law's directorial debut *The Other 1/2 & The Other 1/2*; Sylvia Chang, Roy Chin and Wang Shaudi's *The Game They Call Sex* (1988); and even Ho Fan's *Desire* (1986). D & B also screened some of the more eccentric, interesting commercial pictures, which were often fan favourites of the time, such as *A Tale from the East* (1990), *My Hero* (1990), and *Don't Fool Me!* (1991).

Today, different organisations within the community (such as Fresh Wave) are dedicated to promoting the next generation of filmmakers. Looking back at the 1980s, however, when the commercial film market was so robust, it was the film companies who actively scouted and developed their own talent. At D & B, throughout both its two periods under the leadership of John Sham and Stephen Shin respectively, the company was keen to cultivate their own stable of creative talent. Up till its final work, *Heart Against Hearts* (1992), the screenwriting team still hired fresh voices, including Lee Man-choi, Ng Wai-shek and Carol Lai Miu-suet. Both Sham and Shin were generous in giving opportunities to rookie directors. In the earlier period, Derek Yee and Kam Kwok-leung were the most notably successful examples, whereas after Shin took over D & B, Lee Chi-ngai, Cheng Siu-keung, Arthur Wong and Alexander Chan Mong-wah all made their directorial debuts. These directors continued to be very active in the industry in the ensuing years.

D & B also launched the careers of many actors, such as the six newcomers in *The Island* (1985), among which were Timothy Zao, Ronald Wong and Tse Ching-yuen, who had also starred in *The Owl vs Bumbo* (1984). After the company set up its own cinema circuit, the most notable D & B newcomer was naturally Michelle Yeoh. Through his acting debut in the D & B production *Where's Officer Tuba?* (1986), Jacky Cheung was also

<sup>4</sup> At the height of its production capacities, D & B produced 16 titles in 1986, a feat they struggled to repeat in subsequent years.



able to break free from his impassive image and singing contest background and, showcase his comedic talent. Furthermore, D & B films often displayed different sides to experienced showbiz personalities. Although they had acted in films before, Bill Tung and Lydia Sum were mostly known as TV hosts when they starred in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987). Co-starring together for the first time and playing a boisterous but loving working-class couple, Tung and Sum produced comedic gold with their legendary level of chemistry.

Even in its later years, D & B continued to hire and promote new stars, including Cynthia Khan and Jade Leung, both of whom debuted by starring in action series. D & B's male actors were relatively less well-known, but still many were discovered and offered their first break by the company, such as Too Siu-chun, who was keenly promoted and had starred in works such as *Dreams of Glory, a Boxer's Story* (1991). The film also starred Jackie Lui Chung-yin, who graduated from the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts, while *Tiger Cage 2* (1990) introduced the studio's new action star Garry Chau. Stephen Chow, too, had a career breakthrough in *Love is Love* (1990). Prior to this film, he had mostly taken on supporting roles, and here he establishes the comedic template of the honest dimwit, which he would later evolve into his signature style and image as part of his long and illustrious journey as comedian and film star.

## II

As Norman Chan states in his interview: Hong Kong cinema was at its peak at the time with plenty of healthy competition. Some D & B directors had worked for Cinema City and Golden Harvest before, and to Chan, this was simply a sign of how everyone was working for and contributing to the greater good of the industry. In fact, Golden Harvest and Cinema City had very clearly distinct brands—the former focused on kung fu flicks and the latter on comedies. Yet, variety being the spice of life, studios cannot sustain their momentum making the same kinds of films forever, no matter how impressive their box office results once were. By the mid to late-80s, Cinema City's comedies were on their last legs, and the company adjusted and broke new ground with the introduction of 'heroic bloodshed' films and the 'On Fire' series. But the indisputable master of learning from its peers, connecting with contemporary trends, and constantly evolving and reinventing itself, was Golden Harvest, which had endured for over three decades. As Li Cheuk-to observes, the many successes of Sammo Hung (one of the Golden Harvest greats) can be attributed to how he absorbed the strengths and talent from Cinema City for his own team in 1985, thereby solidifying his status as the leader of Hong Kong cinema.<sup>5</sup> The *wenyi* picture *Rouge* (1988), produced by Golden Harvest with Jackie Chan as Producer, would not have been made if not for director Stanley Kwan's opportunity to showcase his abilities in the critically acclaimed *Love Unto Wastes*, produced by D & B and filmed by Pearl City. Hong Kong cinema was, in small but significant ways, embracing things that were 'different'.

This kind of 'different', not quite commercial in nature, was viewed as 'alternative' at the time (John Sham calls them C-films). Of course, these films did not begin or end with D & B. As Shu Kei recalls, he was invited to join D & B by Sham after the two had collaborated on the marketing and promotion for *Boat People* (1982). Indeed, all kinds of minor coincidences and factors built up to create a wider environment for such 'alternative' cinema to thrive at D & B within a few years of its initial inception: production abilities, access to creative talent and cinemas, the maturity of cinema audiences. *The Chinese Student Weekly* from the 1950s and 60s, Studio One from the 1960s and 70s, the Hong Kong International Film Festival from the 1970s and 80s... all helped nurture new generations of cinephiles, including John Chan Koon-chung, whose intellectual identity was greatly shaped by *The Chinese Student Weekly*. As a further example, the arthouse cinema scene in Wan Chai was also a vibrant community. The Cine-Art House had opened in 1988, and the same year, the Hong Kong Arts Centre was also showing repertoire programme films every day. Together with the Cinema Columbia Classics, which screened arthouse films from time to time, the area was a veritable cinema paradiso for cinema fans. In particular, the programmes at the Hong Kong Arts Centre were curated and selected by Wong Ain-ling, who had studied film in France before returning to Hong Kong. Notably, the programmes were sponsored by Dickson Concepts.

<sup>5</sup> Li Cheuk-to, 'Cheng Long#Shitailong/Hong Jinbao=Xinyicheng (Huigu Ba Wu)' ('Jackie Chan#Sylvester Stallone/Sammo Hung=Cinema City (Retrospective on the Year 1985)'), *Bashi Niandai Xianggang Dianying Biji (Vol 2) (Film Notes on 1980s Hong Kong Cinema (Vol 2))*, Hong Kong: Chuangjian Chuban Gongsì, 1990, p 41 (in Chinese).



Returning to the subject of D & B, the diversity of their output (although inconsistent in quality, they were unafraid to try) and their curation of B-films at their cinema circuit represented a breath of fresh air. Yet after the 1990s, Hong Kong cinema saw a steep decline, the reasons for which is a subject for another essay. However, with crisis comes opportunity. It is comforting to see that the new generation of filmmaking talent persist in their vision, opting for more refined and polished work when the usual crowd-pleasing vulgarisms fail to ignite the box office. With the arrival of ubiquitous digitisation, the line between 'mainstream' and 'alternative' is gradually getting thinner. Streaming platforms have recently become highly popularised, but they are by nature commercial platforms, where a title would struggle to stand out if it is not creative enough. Looking back, D & B represents the largest extent to which a mainstream Hong Kong film company has vacillated between commercialism and artistic freedom, without tilting towards one side of the spectrum completely. For this reason it is worth commemorating and treasuring the complex legacy that D & B has left us.

### III

Along with the publication of the monograph, the Hong Kong Film Archive is also organising an accompanying exhibition. During the process, we tried our best to arrange for interviews with professionals who had worked in different capacities at D & B and received their full support. They willingly shared their personal, first-person experiences, so as to help present a holistic picture of the D & B story.

This book consists of three sections: Chapter I: Production • Cinema Circuits, Chapter II: Creative Minds and Chapter III: D & B • Pre- and Post-1980s. In the first, we explore how Hong Kong audiences of the 1980s and 90s saw an improvement in their material lives and cultural levels, and how D & B's alternative films were a reflection of such trends. Key producers John Sham, Stephen Shin, Linda Kuk and Norman Chan share their observations and practical experiences. Furthermore, during this time, the company began expanding its businesses both locally (establishing its own cinema circuit) and internationally (distributing its films overseas). Otto Leong gives a detailed account of how the company came around to securing their own cinemas, while Terence Chang shares his experiences of expanding the overseas markets for D & B. Their first-hand accounts of the past serve as the perfect counterpart to the analyses by Po Fung, Wong Ha-pak, Eric Tsang Siu-wang, and Shu Kei. Together these pieces form a cogent argument for the position of D & B works in the history of Hong Kong cinema.

In Chapter II: Creative Minds, we focus on individual films. Thomas Shin, Joyce Yang, Yau Ching, and Mary Wong Shuk-han each produce pieces that hone in on films of different genres, discussing the characteristics of D & B productions, the company's spirit of creativity, the images in the films, their inner layers of meaning and how they connect with contemporary social tensions—in attempt to uncover the deeper connotations of the works. In interviews with Mabel Cheung, Kam Kwok-leung, Gordon Chan, Yank Wong, Michelle Yeoh, John Chan Koon-chung, Chan Kiu-ying and Ip Kwong-kim, the filmmakers describe how they broke the mold time and again in their creative process. Yet when faced with the practical considerations of the operations process, the working styles of the creative and production teams can be said to be at opposite poles. At the same time, they are intricately tied together in a mutually reliant process.

In Chapter III: D & B • Pre- and Post-1980s, Angela Law Tsin-fung explores the development of film music in the 1980s from the perspective of 'entertainment and creativity' and through analysing pieces of music from D & B films. Exploring D & B's history from the mid-1980s to early-1990s, Sam Ho details the temperamental differences between the two generations of intellectuals who participated in the film industry: the 'celluloid' quality of the 1980s vs. the 'bookishness' of the 1950s. On the other hand, Kenny Ng provides an impressive historical account of how *Hong Kong 1941*, released before the Handover, has its roots in 1930s 'national defence films', effectively connecting the modern-day D & B to a cinematic tradition from a previous generation, giving us much food for thought.

Our retrospective, 'A Different Brilliance—The D & B Story', would not have been possible if not for the kind and generous support of Fortune Star Media Limited, who has agreed to license and provide us with the relevant films, photos, and other materials. We hereby take the opportunity to express our heartfelt thanks to: Fortune Star, all our interviewees, writers, and all other organisations and individuals who has offered us their help.

[Translated by Rachel Ng]



〈Chapter I〉

# Production • Cinema Circuits

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## D & B's Development: From Production Company to Theatrical Distribution Circuit

Po Fung ■

In 1979, Shaws, Gala and Golden Princess became the three main cinema circuits for local productions across Hong Kong. Gala operated under Golden Harvest (HK) Limited, while Cinema City Company Limited was the primary movie production house supplying movies to its key investor, Golden Princess; it was an era, as many might already know, where three equally powerful studios, namely Shaw Brothers (Hong Kong) Ltd, Golden Harvest and Cinema City, fought for dominance.<sup>1</sup> But the status quo was set to change in 1985. As its movie production wing began to falter in the eighties due to waning popularity, Shaw Brothers' cinema circuit also fell into jeopardy, leading to its eventual demise in 1985. The once dominant film studio was forced to lease out four of its in-house cinemas. After a long period of inactivity, Shaws also leased out its film studios to its television station. The void left by Shaws as a film production powerhouse and theatrical distribution circuit operator was soon filled by D & B Films Co., Ltd. This article will chronicle the genesis and development of D & B and discuss its major contributions to Hong Kong cinema and the film industry.

### 1984: The Founding of D & B

Originally a movie production house, D & B held a press conference on 30 January 1984, to announce the launch of its new business initiative. At the time, the upstart company had close ties with Golden Harvest.<sup>2</sup> Dickson Poon, D & B's majority shareholder, had no previous involvement with the film industry. His two partners, Sammo Hung and John Sham, however, both had established relationships with Golden Harvest. Hung's film company, Bo Ho Films

Company Limited, was in fact a Golden Harvest subsidiary. Sham was Hung's production coordinator at Bo Ho. Hung became a driving force behind Golden Harvest's production wing after achieving massive box office success with *Winners & Sinners* (1983). In the early 1980s, Sham co-founded Johnson Film Company with none other than Philip Chan. The company produced *Sealed with a Kiss* (1981) and *Krazy Kops* (1981) with the financial backing of Golden Harvest. Sham was also a radio programme host, during which he created a comical personality known as 'Lui King', famous for his eccentric Chaozhou-like accent. The Lui King character, alongside Sham's unruly mop of curly hair, made his debut appearance in the 1983 film production, *Gun is Law* (starring Philip Chan), cementing Sham's iconic comic persona on the silver screen. During the same period, Sammo Hung invited Sham to play the role of one of the five lucky stars in *Winners & Sinners*. Sham went on to become Hung's associate producer, developing a variety of projects. One such collaboration resulted in the highly successful comedy, *Pom Pom* (1984), that starred Sham and Richard Ng, another 'Lucky Stars' alumni member. The film performed extremely well at the domestic box office in Hong Kong, grossing over HK\$20 million.

It's worth-noting that during the aforementioned press conference on 30 January 1984—long before the theatrical release of *Pom Pom* on 22 February—D & B had already announced its plans to mount a sequel entitled *The Return of Pom Pom* (eventually released in June of 1984). D & B's bold decision to green-light a sequel project before receiving any box office results for the original film, was a demonstration of its confidence. What was unusual about D & B's debut

<sup>1</sup> For the historical development of the 'three-horse race' among the aforementioned cinema circuits, see Po Fung, 'The Changing Business of Cinema Circuits in the 1970s and the Rise of Golden Princess and Cinema City', in *The Essence of Entertainment: Cinema City's Glory Days*, May Ng and Wong Ha-pak (eds), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2016, pp 15-25.

<sup>2</sup> 'Cen Jianxun, Wu Yaohan Zu Xiongdi Ban, Pan Disheng Touzi Yingye, Jihua Nianpai San Xinpian' ('John Sham and Richard Ng Form a New Duo / Dickon Poon Turns to Film Investment, Planning to Produce Three Films Per Year'), *Ming Pao*, 31 January 1984 (in Chinese).



The establishment of D & B was closely linked to Bo Ho, which explains why D & B's debut production, *The Return of Pom Pom* (1984), was a sequel to a film from another production studio.

production, *The Return of Pom Pom*, was that it was a sequel to a film originated from another production studio. *The Return of Pom Pom* was slated for release through both the Gala and Shaws cinema circuits. Since its inception, D & B made it clear that it was not a satellite company of Gala, but rather a new enterprise that worked in partnership with the Gala cinema circuit. Subsequently, D & B productions such as, *Hong Kong 1941* (released November 1984), *The Owl vs Bumbo* (December 1984) and *Mr. Boo Meets Pom Pom* (March 1985), were all released through the Gala cinema circuit.

However, the partnership between D & B and Golden Harvest hit a snag in 1985, the year that Shaws announced its plans to dissolve its cinema circuit and lease out its cinemas to competing operators. On 24 July 1985, D & B held a press conference to announce its plans to lease the Rex Theatre, Golden Theatre, Bonds Theatre and Jade Theatre from Shaws. Negotiations between the two parties took over seven months; in other words, the process had already been initiated in early 1985.<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, D & B's plan to operate its own



The 'D' in D & B was taken from Poon's name, Dickson.

cinema circuit put a strain on its relationship with Golden Harvest, as both sides found themselves competing in the same marketplace. Naturally, Gala cinema circuit's prior practice of slotting D & B productions into its screening schedule also saw a shift, even before the D & B cinema circuit went into operation.

Closely associated with D & B, Philip Chan founded Pyramid Films Limited and produced *Night Caller* (1985), a film that Chan wrote, directed and acted in. D & B was the film's distributor. Given the established, amiable relationship between D & B and Golden Harvest, it was only natural to assume that Gala cinema circuit would fit *Night Caller* into its screening schedule. Philip Chan recalled, '[*Night Caller*] was screened in the Golden Harvest cinemas for just a week. By Monday after the first weekend, the film had grossed HK\$210,000. Despite its impressive box office, our film was pulled out after a week because Golden Harvest had scheduled the release of its own big-budget production. Golden Princess was kind enough to re-release our film through the Royal Theatre circuit, the early momentum was lost. At the end, the film didn't do as well as it should have. We were naturally quite disappointed.'<sup>4</sup> However, according to news reports at the time, the film had originally been scheduled for release in May through the Gala cinema circuit, but Chan was unhappy with the time-slot allocated and chose to release the film in April through the Golden Princess cinema circuit instead.<sup>5</sup> *Night Caller's* official screening records suggest that the film was in fact released through the Golden Princess cinema circuit on 17 April 1985 and ran for eight days before switching over to another four cinemas (including the Isis Theatre and Lux

<sup>3</sup> 'Heyue Qiantuo Fang Zuo Gongbu, Jiangyu Debao Zu Xin Yuanxian, Zu Shaoshi Yingyuan Shimo, Pan Disheng Xishuo Congtuo' ('Public Announcement Will Be Made after Contract Signed / Scheduled to Form New Cinema Circuit with D & B / The Full Story of Leasing Shaw's Cinema Circuits / Dickson Poon Tells It All'), *Ming Pao*, 24 July 1985 (in Chinese).

<sup>4</sup> See 'Philip Chan: I Wanted to Redefine the Crime Thriller Genre', interviewed by Cecilia Wong and May Ng, collated by Eric Tsang, in *When the Wind Was Blowing Wild: Hong Kong Cinema of the 1970s*, May Ng (ed), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2018, p 265. [Electronic Publication] [https://www.filmarchive.gov.hk/documents/2005525/7439981/ebook\\_eng\\_01.pdf](https://www.filmarchive.gov.hk/documents/2005525/7439981/ebook_eng_01.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> 'Ping'anye Shangying Zaiji, Hu Yinneng Jiang Laigang Zhu Xuanchuan' ('The Premiere of *Night Caller* Is Near / Terry Hu Will Appear at the Publicity Event in Hong Kong'), *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 5 April 1985 (in Chinese).



Theatre) where the film continued its run until 3 May 1985. It's worth noting that after the D & B cinema circuit went into operation, *Night Caller* was given a re-release through the new circuit on 6 January 1986.<sup>6</sup> There might appear to be a few inconsistencies in Chan's recollection of the turn of events surrounding the release of his film, but the fact remains that the Gala cinema circuit failed to accomplish the intended schedule run of his film, and had sown the seed of further grudges. After announcing its plans to launch a new theatrical distribution circuit in July, and before the circuit went into operation in November, D & B was set to release its newly completed thriller, *The Island* (1985). For obvious reasons, the film was not released through the Gala cinema circuit cinemas but instead through the Golden Princess cinema circuit on 11 October.

The D & B cinema circuit was launched on 30 November 1985. The debut production set to be released through the new circuit was *Yes, Madam* (1985), a D & B production made to establish Michelle Yeoh as a brand-new female action star. As the company rapidly expanded from just a production company to a cinema circuit operator, Sammo Hung, who had been the determining force in D & B's early movie production direction, gradually withdrew from any involvement in the company's operations. From Golden Harvest's perspective, when D & B was strictly a film production house, it worked in support of the Gala cinema circuit as a film supplier. Therefore, Hung's involvement with D & B productions did not present a conflict of interest. But

as soon as D & B launched its own cinema circuit, in effect, competing in the same marketplace, it immediately placed Hung in an untenable position. Ironically, D & B's early productions greatly benefited from the Hung brand name. Most notably, even D & B's debut production, *The Return of Pom Pom* was a sequel based on the Hung-produced film, *Pom Pom*. The follow-up, *The Owl vs Bumbo* not only starred Hung but was also directed by Hung. D & B's third film *Mr. Boo Meets Pom Pom*, despite its addition of another stalwart star, Michael Hui, was still considered the third instalment to a trilogy kicked off by *Pom Pom*. What's more, Corey Yuen Kwai, the director of *Yes, Madam* was a close associate and fellow classmate of Hung's during his Peking Opera School days. As for the Hung's Troupe, they might not have received official credit for their contributions to the action choreography, but they performed all the stunts in the film. Hung had gone on record to state, 'We were all friends. When John Sham proposed starting up D & B, I was interested and offered to help. That was it. Golden Harvest had no objections. When it was starting out, D & B produced *The Owl vs Bumbo* and I was tasked with the directing duties. Later, there was *Yes, Madam* (Hung as producer).'<sup>7</sup>

After *Yes, Madam*, Hung was still credited as producer on several other D & B films. But *Where's Officer Tuba?* was the only D & B production where he had any direct involvement. Released on 20 March 1986, the film starred Sammo Hung and featured a creative team comprised of Hung's longtime collaborators from the Golden Harvest



*Yes, Madam* (1985), the debut production of D & B cinema circuit, established Michelle Yeoh as a brand-new female action star.



*Hong Kong 1941* (1984): The decision to shoot on location at a traditional rice shop added a sense of concrete realism to the film.

<sup>6</sup> I would like to thank the researcher of this book, Mr Wong Ha-pak, for providing the essential screening records of *Night Caller*.

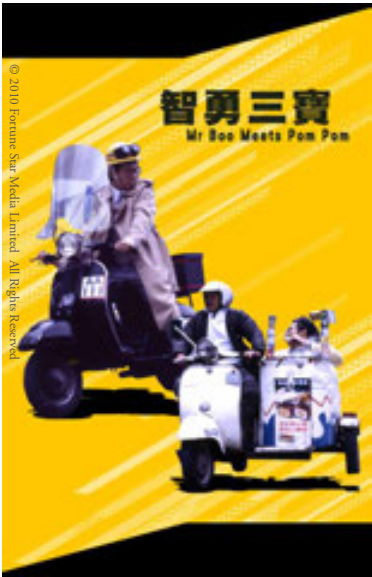
<sup>7</sup> 'Hong Jinbao: Wo Pai Dianying She Weile Yule Guanzhong' ('Sammo Hung: I Make Films In Order to Entertain'), interviewed by Geoffrey Wong, Alvin Tse and Ernest Chan, collated by Chu Siu-fung, in *Sammo Hung, Filmmaker in Focus*, Geoffrey Wong and Ernest Chan (eds), Hong Kong: The Hong Kong International Film Festival Society, 2019, p 31 (in Chinese).



D & B's production spiked after establishing its own cinema circuit.



Where's Officer Tuba? (1986)



Mr. Boo Meets Pom Pom (1985)



Yes, Madam (1985)



Final Victory (1987)



Fury (1988)



Double Fattiness (1988)

stable, including screenwriter Barry Wong, editor Cheung Yiu-chung and one of the directors Ricky Lau Koon-wai. *Where's Officer Tuba?* was originally set to be directed by Philip Chan. But when the film went into production, Chan was called away to direct another film in the US. Lau subsequently took over the directing duties. Hung then left to start filming *The Millionaires' Express* (1986) for Golden Harvest, bringing the production to a halt.<sup>8</sup> As a result, *The Millionaires' Express* was released on 30 January 1986; *Where's Officer Tuba?* was released in March, due to the lag time caused between Hung's departure and his subsequent return to complete the picture. This incident was a clear illustration of Hung's divided loyalties because he performed such crucial roles for both Golden Harvest and D & B. After *Where's Officer Tuba?*, Hung discontinued his involvement with any future D & B productions. Action films were not only Hung's forte but they were the most successful genre in the marketplace. Hung's departure from D & B certainly put the company at a disadvantage, but it did not stop D & B from continuing to produce grand-scale action films. Then again, it never managed to achieve the same level of excitement and grandeur of Hung's signature brand of action choreography. This, to a great extent, did account for the disappointing box office results of D & B's big-budget action epic, *Magnificent Warriors* (1987).

Just as Hung noted previously, it was John Sham's idea to found D & B. Sham had his own approach and philosophy towards filmmaking. When he was serving as Hung's associate producer at Bo Ho, he already demonstrated his savvy by convincing Hung to produce *Long Arm of the Law* (1984), the classic crime drama directed (also co-produced) by Johnny Mak. *Long Arm of the Law* was filmed using a cinéma vérité style to heighten the drama. It was diametrically deviated from Hung's signature approach of combining action and comedy. Sham confessed that he was responsible for bringing Hung and Mak together: 'There was a Bo Ho production entitled *Long Arm of the Law* for which I served as the associate producer. Sammo Hung and Johnny Mak were the producers. I came up with the story and recruited Johnny Mak for the production. Sammo was busy overseeing Bo Ho operations and directing films at the same time. He surrounded himself with a coterie of associate producers, creating a sort of think

tank. Their names were sometimes not listed in the credits. I was one of them, Wu Ma was another one.'<sup>9</sup> Sham's account was corroborated by Johnny Mak as he recalled, 'I remember it was also in Cannes, when John Sham and I were at the beach—not sure with who else—we talked about a story idea, and very quickly decided the title was to be "the tour heist"... John Sham, who came up with the idea with me, had sway in Bo Ho at that time, that was key! So I didn't need to go and try sell it to Bo Ho, things just fell into place.'<sup>10</sup>

When D & B was solely operating as a production house, in general, its production direction fell in line with Hung's hybrid brand of action-comedy. But Sham still managed to produce an off-brand project entitled *Hong Kong 1941* (1984), directed by Leong Po-chih and written by John Chan Koon-chung. Set during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong in World War II, the film chronicles the tumultuous period as experienced by three unlikely friends—Yip Kim-fay, a small-time opera performer (played by Chow Yun-fat), Wong Hak-keung, a coolie (played by Alex Man) and Ha Yuk-nam, the daughter of an affluent rice merchant (played by Cecilia Yip). The plot drew heavily on television soap opera narratives, featuring many dramatic twists and turns, including a love triangle, a sinister oppressor, an assassination attempt on a traitor (*hanjian*), a deadly fight against a Japanese army officer and so forth. But the consistent through-line of the film was an underlying sense of fatalism; no matter how hard one struggled to escape, Hong Kong itself was doomed to its fate. The production was a labour of love; the production team worked meticulous to accurately portray the bygone days of Hong Kong with historical authenticity. The decision to shoot on location at a traditional rice shop that had survived up until then, added a sense of concrete realism to the film. Even the use of such archaic slang as 'Petit *Pipa*' (teenage virgin singers in brothels), unfamiliar to younger audiences at the time, was incorporated into the dialogue. The film was not a commercial success at the box office, but the seriousness of the subject matter of this heartfelt historical drama set it miles apart from the commercial mainstream action-comedy genres. *Hong Kong 1941* was an incredibly special achievement. It also offered a glimpse of Sham's alternative yet innovative vision for the future of Hong Kong's film industry.

<sup>8</sup> 001, 'Xianchang Kuaixun: Pili Da Laba' ('Snippets On Sets: *Where's Officer Tuba?*'), *Film Biweekly*, No 183, 13 March 1986 (in Chinese).

<sup>9</sup> See 'John Sham' of this book, interviewed by Janice Chow et al., collated by Eric Tsang Siu-wang, pp 46-53.

<sup>10</sup> 'Johnny Mak: Master of the Impossible', interviewed by Cheuk Pak-tong and Cheung Chi-sing, collated by May Ng, in *Always in the Dark: A Study of Hong Kong Gangster Films*, Po Fung (ed), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2014, pp 138-139.

## 1985: Production Spike After Establishing Cinema Circuit

After the launch of the D & B cinema circuit, in order to maintain a continuous supply of productions for its cinema circuits, D & B had to increase its production volume. In 1984 when D & B was strictly a production company, it produced three films. In 1985, it produced four films, just as the cinema circuit was going into operation at the end of the year. In 1986, the D & B circuit released 16 in-house productions; in 1987, it released 11 productions. During those two years, John Sham could not have handled the increased production volume alone. Hence, D & B tapped Cinema City's Linda Kuk to serve as the producer for the three directors that she recruited from Cinema City—Ronny Yu, Clifton Ko and Raymond Fung. The three of them used to collaborate incessantly. When one was directing, the other two would serve as either writer or associate producer. 'The Trio' and Linda Kuk formed a nearly independent wing within the D & B production division. Catering to mainstream audiences, with a focus on youth, the collective produced commercial comedies. Fung's *My Family* (1986) and Ko's *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987) in particular, were released over the lucrative Chinese New Year period. Neither film boasted a big budget or a star-studded cast, but both achieved box office success, nonetheless. Grossing HK\$27 million, *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* even out-performed the big-budget Cinema City production, *The Legend of Wisely* (1987), that was released over the same period.

At this point, John Sham was still a key player in the D & B's production wing. Adhering to the production strategies inherited from the company's previous commercial successes, he continued to produce mainstream genre films, such as *Royal Warriors* (1986) and *Magnificent Warriors*, the productions responsible for cementing Michelle Yeoh's action star status, and the Stephen Shin directed film, *Brotherhood* (1986). However, the D & B films that reflected Sham's personal vision were a different category entirely. These films could not be easily classified into any specific Hong Kong film genre; each film adopted a different approach depending on its particular subject matter. This group of films, which Sham defined as 'quality films'<sup>11</sup>, include: John (David) Chiang's *Silent Love* (1986) and *The Wrong Couples* (1987), Derek Yee's *The Lunatics* (1986), Sylvia Chang's *Passion* (1986), Calvin Poon Yuen-leung's *Kiss Me Goodbye* (1986), Patrick Tam's *Final Victory* (1987), Wong Wah-kay's *Sapporo Story* (1987),

Mabel Cheung's *An Autumn's Tale* (1987) and Kam Kwok-leung's *Wonder Women* (1987), etc. These films were not always commercially successful at the box office, with the exception of *An Autumn's Tale* which enjoyed a miraculous run. However, even if a film such as *Kiss Me Goodbye* was not deemed an artistic triumph, the directors were given the artistic freedom and creative license to explore their unique vision. It's also true for Tony Au's *Dream Lovers* (1986) and Stanley Kwan's *Love Unto Wastes* (1986). Produced by Pearl City Films Ltd. and funded by D & B, the two films once again showcased John Sham's respect towards the artistic freedom of individual directors.

From the box office perspective, D & B was not considered particularly successful in 1986 and 1987. After its cinema circuit opened for business, only two of its productions, *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* and *An Autumn's Tale*, crossed the twenty-million-dollar mark. Most of its medium-budget films grossed somewhere between five to eight million dollars each. Its big-budget epic, *Magnificent Warriors* even failed to reach the ten-million-dollar mark. D & B's own productions never excelled at the box office, but its cinema circuit also never managed to pick up any runaway hits either. *Magic Crystal* (1986) (grossing over HK\$11.38M), *Mr. Handsome* (1987) (grossing over HK\$10.15M), *The Haunted Cop Shop* (1987) (grossing over HK\$11.74M) and *You're My Destiny* (1987) (grossing over HK\$10.40M) were the few out-sourced productions released through its circuit to cross the ten-million-dollar mark. Even the successes of *Magic Crystal* and *The Haunted Cop Shop* were only the result of additional screenings through the Gala cinema circuit. When it came to commercial grosses, D & B was the worst performer among the three cinema circuits.

## 1987: Major Shakeup

The internal management at D & B underwent a series of dramatic changes in August 1987. In September the same year, Dickson Poon announced his departure from the board of directors. Raymond Leung took over as the chair of the board. In October, Stephen Shin joined the board as executive director. Early in December, Linda Kuk announced that she had relinquished her role and responsibilities at D & B and resigned from the board. Around the same time, John Sham also announced his departure from the company. Later, even the directors originally recruited from Cinema City, Ronny Yu, Clifton Ko and Raymond Fung, dissolved their contracts with D & B. In short, internal control over D & B

<sup>11</sup> See note 9.





*Heart to Hearts* (1988): Thanks to its sophisticated sense of humour and narrative style unique to Hong Kong cinema at the time, the film appealed to middle-class audience sensibilities. (Left: Dodo Cheng; right: George Lam)



*Final Victory* (1987): The love story between 'little blood brother' (right: Eric Tsang) and his 'sister-in-law' (left: Loletta Lee).

B productions was transferred from John Sham and Linda Kuk to Stephen Shin. At the same time, the external environment also underwent a transformation. In mid-1987, there were already rumours about the formation of a new cinema circuit. On 21 December, cinema operators Chan Wing-mei, Gordon Fung Ping-chung and Lawrence Louey announced the founding of the Newport Circuit<sup>12</sup> — a fourth cinema circuit that included the Empire Theatre, Liberty Theatre, etc., that planned to screen Hong Kong films exclusively. *Who is the Craftiest*, the first production officially distributed through the Newport Circuit, was released on 1 January 1988. However, even before the newly named circuit was announced, the same network of theatres released the Derek Yee directed feature, *People's Hero* on 3 December 1987. The film's ad campaign even promoted the release of the film 'through the new cinema circuit'. In other words, the Newport Circuit was already a de facto operation at the time. Maverick Films Ltd., one of the production companies behind *People's Hero*, was founded by John Sham (the film was co-produced by Maverick and Long Shong Pictures Ltd.). Sham was also the film's producer. That is to say, although Sham continued to be credited as a producer on D & B productions until January 1988 when *Fury* was released, he had already broken all ties with D & B.

After Shin assumed office, it appeared to be business as usual for D & B's cinema circuit and production division, but the new management lacked vision and ambition. During this period, the company was still able to recruit such heavyweights as Yuen Woo-ping. Unfortunately, the rather formulaic

productions helmed by Director Yuen, including *Tiger Cage* (aka *Sure Fire*, 1988), *In the Line of Duty* 4 (1989) and *Tiger Cage 3* (1991) were a reflection of a downturn in Yuen's creativity, failing to achieve any stylistic breakthrough. In this regard, *Heart to Hearts* (1988), directed by Stephen Shin and executed by Gordon Chan, was the one exception. Thanks to its sophisticated sense of humour and narrative style unique to Hong Kong cinema at the time, *Heart to Hearts* appealed to middle-class audience sensibilities. After Gordon Chan left the company, the sequels to *Heart to Hearts* and remaining D & B productions under Stephen Shin's direction failed to capture the same charm. The D & B cinema circuit eventually closed down in November 1991, when its operations were taken over by Stephen Lo Kit-sing's Regal Films Co Ltd. D & B's production division continued to operate briefly; its final production, *Black Cat II: Assassination of President Yeltsin*, was released on 1 October 1992.

### Looking Back on D & B's Best Productions

From a market perspective, D & B never achieved great success as either a production company or as a cinema circuit operator. It was always considered the weakest contender amongst the three cinema circuits for Hong Kong films. By the time Newport Circuit joined the fray, D & B once again fell to the back of the pack. Compared to the other two major Hong Kong film production studios, D & B never achieved the same market dominance of Golden Harvest or Cinema City. But in terms of creativity and quality, during the four years under John Sham's

<sup>12</sup> 'Feng Bingzhong, Lei Juekun Deng Xuanbu Zucheng Xin Yuanxian' ('Gordon Fung and Lawrence Louey et al. Announced the Founding of a New Cinema Circuit'), *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 22 December 1987 (in Chinese).



Josephine Siao Fong-fong garnered Best Actress at the Hong Kong Film Awards for her role in *The Wrong Couples* (1987), a film directed by John Chiang. (Left: Josephine Siao Fong-fong; right: Pauline Kwan).



*The Lunatics* (1986): The groundbreaking film offered a gritty portrayal of the mentally ill patients. (Left: Paul Chun; right: Lai Suen).

leadership, particularly in 1986 and 1987, the first two years after its cinema circuit went into operation, D & B produced a string of quality feature films that might not have been commercial successes at the box office but certainly qualify as artistic triumphs that continue to hold up over time. One example was *Final Victory*, the Wong Kar-wai penned, Patrick Tam directed production that was released in March 1987, grossing over HK\$5.79 million. Released over the same period, Cinema City's *Seven Year's Itch* grossed HK\$11.18 million while Golden Harvest's *Sworn Brothers* took in HK\$8.48 million. Both films did considerably better at the box office. However, in retrospect, *Final Victory* is obviously the superior film amongst the three in terms of artistic quality.

A romantic comedy set in the triad underworld, *Final Victory* tells the love story between a gangster's 'little blood brother' (played by Eric Tsang) and his 'sister-in-law', i.e. the gangster's girlfriend (played by Loletta Lee). The film begins with a naive, incompetent and timid Eric Tsang forced into a comic predicament. He must travel to Japan to rescue Loletta Lee. However, when facing imminent danger, the little guy reveals his true courage, loyalty and capacity for romantic love. Director Patrick Tam's mis-en-scène and treatment were brilliant. For instance, in a scene where Tsang threatens Margaret Li with a knife, forcing her to drive the car under a cargo truck in order to reach Loletta Lee on the other side, a series of quick cuts is used before the car collides with the truck. But as soon as the car emerges from the other side, the scene shifts to slow motion as Tsang lifts Lee up and places her in the now roofless car. This is followed by a slow-motion shot of Lee embracing Tsang tightly while she gazes up at him. The small statured man suddenly seems as heroic as the character Mark from *A Better Tomorrow* (1986). Tam was just as adept at eliciting great performances from the actors. *Final Victory* gave Eric Tsang the

opportunity to prove himself as a serious actor for the first time. As for Loletta Lee, Patrick Tam designed several close-up shots to capture her specific charm. Lee's performance in the film was also worthy of praise. In one scene, after being repeatedly rejected by Tsang, Lee finally meets Tsang in a music lounge and he professes his love by singing Danny Chan's 'Deeply in Love with You'. Her facial expressions as she chokes up with tears is deeply moving. *Final Victory* was a brilliant piece of filmmaking on all fronts, from scripting, cinematography, editing, casting to acting. It deserves a place among the great classic films of 1980s Hong Kong cinema.

Similarly, Stanley Kwan's *Love Unto Wastes* only grossed a modest HK\$5 million-ish during its initial run in 1986. But the insightful script, co-written by Chiu Kang-chien and Lai Kit, along with Stanley Kwan's refined direction, imbued the film with a unique charm and style. The film continues to hold up even by today's standards. As for *Wonder Women*, the Kam Kwok-leung film that is reminiscent of his 1980 classic television series, *No Biz Like Showbiz*, it chronicles the friendship between two beauty pageant contestants being challenged when they compete for the same man. Kam captured the glamorous aura of the eighties by placing the two heroines, Dodo Cheng and Cecilia Yip against the backdrop of the 'Miss Hung Kung' beauty pageant. The film was an antithesis to the trend towards male-centric comedies at the time, focusing instead on two female character actresses. The results were whimsically delightful. These few films, along with *An Autumn's Tale*, represent some of the best films from the golden age of Hong Kong cinema in the 1980s.

Among John Sham's many contributions during his tenure at D & B, his penchant for unearthing talented new directors stands out the most. Derek Yee is a prime example. Prior to making his directorial

debut with the D & B production *The Lunatics*, Derek Yee was best known as one of the leading actors for Shaws before its demise. Adopting a social realist approach, *The Lunatics* offered a gritty portrayal of the dismal living conditions of one of the most marginalised groups in Hong Kong known as the mentally ill. The groundbreaking film not only helped to raise public awareness but also performed well at the box office, grossing over HK\$9 million. Yee was given the artistic freedom to establish his voice as a director, and the film itself served as an acting showcase for the cast.

Sham's special talent was not limited to offering opportunities to new directors; he was also responsible for giving many overlooked directors a second chance. For example, prior to making her critically acclaimed film, *Passion*, Sylvia Chang previously directed *Once Upon a Time* (1981). Originally a Tu Chung-hsun project, due to Tu's untimely death, Chang inherited the project and completed the picture. But the film was released without much fanfare and received little attention. It was only when Sham offered her the chance to direct *Passion* that gave her an opportunity to make her complete debut, a project that allowed Chang to display her exquisite and delicate directing style to the rest of the world. She went on to become a prolific director and establish her place among the pantheon of top tier female directors in Chinese-language cinema. John Chiang followed a similar path. Chiang had already launched his directing career while still a lead actor in Chang Cheh's films, even directing the *wuxia* hybrid comedy, *The Legend of the Owl* (1981). But it wasn't until *Silent Love* for D & B that he was finally able to prove himself as a serious director. He went on to direct the D & B production, *The Wrong Couples*, that garnered Josephine Siao Fong-fong her first Best Actress win at the Hong Kong Film Awards.

Under Sham's leadership, one of the most successful examples of D & B giving overlooked directors a second chance was its decision to back Mabel Cheung to make *An Autumn's Tale*. With the support of Shaws, Cheung completed her thesis film *The Illegal Immigrant* (1985). The film performed well enough critically and commercially. But when Cheung tried to get financing for her sophomore feature, she encountered many obstacles. It wasn't until she met with Sham that she finally received the support that she needed to make *An Autumn's Tale*. She was even able to cast the then rising box-office star, Chow Yun-fat for the lead. The film ultimately grossed over HK\$25 million and was considered both a critical and commercial success. Sham was willing to take risks and most certainly had a discerning eye when it came to discovering creative and talented new directors.

At the 7th Hong Kong Film Awards ceremony held on 14 April 1988, *The Autumn's Tale* won awards for Best Film, Best Screenplay and Best Cinematography. That same evening, various award winners, cast and crew alike, expressed their gratitude to Sham, the film's associate producer. Although Sham had already left D & B by that time, these acknowledgements and well-deserved applause served as a tribute to Sham's contributions in the creation of a golden era at D & B.

Post-script: I'd like to take this occasion to thank Mr Wong Ha-pak, the researcher of this publication. A lot of the content in this article was inspired by the research materials he passed on to me.

[Translated by Sandy Ng]

**Po Fung** is a veteran film critic and researcher, and former Research Officer of HKFA. He is the author of *An Analysis of Martial Arts Film and its Context* (2010) (in Chinese).



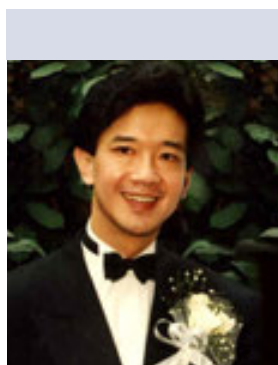
## Retrospective on the **Big Three**:

### Dickson Poon and the Rise-and-Fall Story of the D & B Cinema Circuit

Wong Ha-pak ■

The start of 1980s saw the fight for dominance between three rival cinema circuits in Hong Kong: Gala, Golden Princess and Shaws. At the time, both Gala and Golden Princess were thriving competitors, while Shaws was a shadow of its former self. That was until 30 November 1985, when under the stewardship of Dickson Poon, D & B Films made arrangements to lease Shaws' surplus theatres to form a new cinema circuit. Thus a formidable new rival was born, charging headlong into the dazzling golden era of Hong Kong cinema.

The head honchos behind the two major film companies, Shaws and Golden Harvest, both hailed from the film industry. The former belonged to a veteran film family, and the latter came out of the studio system, whereas Poon's family built its fortunes in the watch business. A relative 'amateur' to the film world, Poon invested generously in films and swiftly brought the D & B brand into prominence. Magazines described his herculean efforts as 'mythological', as Poon went on to create D & B's own cinema circuit, essentially making it a filmmaking powerhouse that integrated production and distribution. D & B was in operation for more than eight years. With lofty ambitions, it charted a course to establish itself as a modern entertainment corporation, and for a time it was a trendsetter and a pleasant surprise to the film industry. Its theatre operations ran for six years, changing a three-horse race to four in the Hong Kong cinema landscape. Looking back at the 1960s, Cantonese movie theatres also went through a 'three' to 'four' rivals trajectory. There are many parallels between the 1980s and its predecessor despite some distinct difference; for example, they both witnessed the twilight before



Dickson Poon founded his business at a young age.

the eclipse of the industry. Despite its haste, a retail mogul's dramatic entrance and exit from show business was an exceptional occurrence within the evolution of Hong Kong cinema in the 1980s.

#### A Family of Watch Enthusiasts

Dickson Poon is of Chaozhou ancestry, and his father Poon Kam-kai worked in the 1930s as a watchmaker, in the watch and jewellery department of Lane Crawford in Hong Kong. During that time, Poon's father met Chan Pang-fee (the father of performing artist Danny Chan) who worked in the same department. Around 1941, the two founded the small watch shop 'Wong Jaam Ge' on Des Voeux Road in Central. The shop was named after his father's mentor. After the end of World War II, the two founders expanded their watch business and merged with their neighbouring 'Artland' photography store. They renamed themselves Artland Watch Company.<sup>1</sup> Poon Kam-kai also simultaneously managed the Roue d'or Watch Co. in 1943.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hosted by Gigi Paulina Ng, written by Kanxing and Isaac, 'Joy of Dinning' (Guest: Chan Pang-fee), *Ming Pao Weekly*, No 2231, 13 August 2011 (in Chinese). See also 'Yilin Biaohang, Jinri Kaimu' ('Artland Watch Company Unveiled Today'), *Ta Kung Pao*, 4 April 1961 (in Chinese). The article reported that Artland Watch Company had reopened after a renovation, and pointed out that 'it has been in business for 20 years'. We may, therefore, logically assume that the company was founded in 1941.

<sup>2</sup> According to the news report, Roue d'or Watch Co. was co-founded by Poon Kam-kai and Lun Tin-lok, and that it was celebrating its 5th anniversary after expansion. We therefore made the assumption that the company was opened in 1943. See 'Jinlun Zhongbiaohang Kaimu Zhisheng' ('The Grand Opening of Roue d'or Watch Co.'), *The Kung Sheung Daily News*, 6 October 1948 (in Chinese).



At a promotional event of *Legacy of Rage* (1986): (from left) Brandon Lee, Dickson Poon, Ronny Yu, Michael Wong.



On the set of *Where's Officer Tuba?* (1986): (from left) Melvin Wong, Linda Kuk, Dickson Poon, Corey Yuen Kwai.

In April 1961, Artland reopened after renovation and expansion; it began representing international luxury timepieces and focusing on high-end clientele. The business opened a Kowloon branch in September of that same year. In September 1965, its Hong Kong Island store was relocated to the New Henry House. Uncle Samson Sun, the older brother of Poon's mother Sheila Sun, was also a person of renown in the watch industry. In his early years, Sun was the watch department manager at the Gilman Group. He later became the group's Deputy Chairman, as well as the Honorary Permanent President of The Federation of Hong Kong Watch Trades & Industries Ltd. While Sheila's brother-in-law, Casey Liu, was the owner of Budson Watch Co.

In addition to the watch business, Poon Kam-kai also ventured into real estate. At the invitation of his friend Woo Hon-fai, Poon was appointed board member for Lee Hing Investment Co Ltd and Shun Fook Enterprises Co Ltd,<sup>3</sup> as well as Chairman of Kamson Realty Ltd. Poon Kam-kai rarely dabbled in the entertainment business, except for the Pearl City Restaurant and Ocean City Restaurant nightclubs, which opened in 1972 and 1979 respectively. He was one of their board members. The prodigious nightclubs provided catering and invited countless celebrated performers on its stage, making it an iconic entertainment venue of its time.

### First Foray into Films

Dickson Poon was the only son of Poon Kam-kai. Born on 19 June 1956, Poon studied at St. Joseph's

College, before he left for the UK to attend the distinguished middle-school Uppingham. He took an interest in philosophy and economics while studying at Occidental College in Los Angeles. Following his father's footsteps, Poon once apprenticed as a watchmaker at the Chopard watch factory in Geneva, Switzerland for 18 months,<sup>4</sup> and also received training in the watches and jewellery business in Paris, France.<sup>5</sup>

Although his father was a celebrated figure with established businesses in the watch industry, Poon chose to strike out on his own. With the support of HK\$5 million from his father,<sup>6</sup> Poon opened his first retail shop 'Dickson Watch & Jewellery Company Limited' in Central on 27 February 1980. At the age of 23, Poon had an extraordinary vision. In addition to introducing luxury products, he gradually developed a market for the emerging middle-class bourgeoisie and continued to expand his business, establishing Dickson Concepts in 1986. At the same time, he also turned his attention to the entertainment world.

On 22 November 1983, 'Dickson Films Company Limited' was registered. Through his networks, Poon enthusiastically courted the film circles. He partnered with John Sham, and also received the endorsement from Sammo Hung. On 10 February 1984, Poon founded D & B Films Co., Ltd.

### Forceful Investment to Establish Own Cinema Circuit

The operation of a cinema circuit is a mammoth undertaking. A year after the establishment of D &

<sup>3</sup> Gao Junbao, 'Hao Fuqin, Hao Pengyou: Pan Jinxi' ('A Good Friend and Father: Poon Kam-kai'), *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 16 January 1989 (in Chinese).

<sup>4</sup> Susan Berfield and Alexandra A., Seno, 'How Dickson Poon Made Fashion Pay—Bringing business savvy to an industry known for excess', *Asiaweek.com*, [edition.cnn.com/ASIANOW/asiaweek/97/0321/cs1.html](http://edition.cnn.com/ASIANOW/asiaweek/97/0321/cs1.html).

<sup>5</sup> Samson Sun's congratulatory message was included in the grand opening advertisement of Dickson Watch & Jewellery Company Limited, *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 27 February 1980 (in Chinese).

<sup>6</sup> *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 28 June 1990 (in Chinese).



Jade Theatre, Causeway Bay—one of the top theatres in the D & B cinema circuit (Photo shot in 1986)



Golden Theatre, Sham Shui Po—one of the top theatres in the D & B cinema circuit (Photo shot in 1989)

B, organising their own cinema circuit was already in the works. Poon personally negotiated with Shaws to lease its existing theatre properties. As to the origins on how the idea came about, there were reports that D & B had initially collaborated closely with Golden Harvest. However, the two parties had clashed over holiday schedules with the releases of *Mr. Boo Meets Pom Pom* (1985) and *Night Caller* (1985), both distributed by D & B. It was speculated that as a result, the idea for their own cinema circuit was born.<sup>7</sup>

### Kickstart: Lease on Shaws' Top Four Cinemas to Form New Cinema Circuit

In the summer of 1985, D & B secured leases on Jade, Rex, Golden, and Bonds theatre owned by Shaws Company, while further announcing a franchise agreement with Shaws' own cinema circuit to form the D & B circuit:

**Jade Theatre:** Opened on 24 December 1969, it was located on Paterson Street, Causeway Bay. It was Shaws' first established theatre with 1,480 seats and had become the flagship cinema on the Hong Kong Island District for Shaws' cinema circuit.

**Rex Theatre:** Opened on 15 February 1969, Rex was located on the ground floor of the Far East Bank Building, on Nelson Street in Mong Kok. With 1,352 seats, it screened western films when it was launched. In 1975, Shaws purchased it for HK\$24 million<sup>8</sup> and arranged for the western films to be screened also at

Shaws' subsidiary Pearl Theatre. In November 1981, Rex was integrated into the Shaws main cinema circuit.

**Golden Theatre:** The curtains rose on 30 November 1962; located at the junction of Yen Chow Street and Fuk Wing Street in Sham Shui Po. The theatre had 1,399 seats and since its opening, had been screening Mandarin language films from the Shaws cinema circuit. In 1977, it switched to Golden Harvest cinema circuit for a time but returned to the Shaws on 31 December of that same year.

**Bonds Theatre:** Opened on 17 December 1965, it is located in Yue Man Square in Kwun Tong. A 1,402-seat theatre that mainly showed Mandarin and Cantonese films. As of December 1975, the original distribution for Golden Harvest was switched to the Shaws cinema circuit.

According to box-office revenues of Hong Kong cinemas in the first half of 1982, the above four theatres ranked amongst the top 20 for moviegoers. Jade and Rex were ranked 5th and 10th, while Golden and Bonds came in at 16th and 18th.<sup>9</sup> There were guesses that D & B's annual rental costs for these four theatres reached up to HK\$40 million.

On 30 November 1985, the D & B cinema circuit officially launched with the screening of *Yes, Madam*. According to the print media, the flagship theatres in the cinema circuit proved they were well-worth the money D & B spent on their rental costs.

<sup>7</sup> Leng Xiaoping, Ji Er and Mumu, 'Debao: Dianying Shenhua Lingyizhang' ('D & B: Another Miracle in the Film Industry'), *Film Biweekly*, No 176, 28 November 1985 (in Chinese).

<sup>8</sup> Liu Wenhe, 'Gangjiu Xiyuan Jiang You Shime Biandong' ('What's Next for the Theatres in Hong Kong?') *Ming Pao*, 8 February 1975 (in Chinese).

<sup>9</sup> Wei Yifeng, 'Qianhu Wanhuan Shi Chulai, Xianggang De Mini Xiyuan Zhongyu Dansheng' ('A Long Awaited Appearance: The Birth of the Hong Kong Mini-Theatres'), *Film Biweekly*, No 91, 15 July 1982 (in Chinese).





The SB insignia was changed to the eye catching 'D'. The design of the new theatre tickets was minimalistic and uncluttered.

On the opening day for the circuit's second release, *It's a Drink! It's a Bomb!* (1985), box-office revenue was nearly HK\$430,000. The aforementioned top four cinemas alone totalled around HK\$300,000, accounting for 70% of the entire circuit's income<sup>10</sup>. From box-office revenues in the first quarter of 1986, the four top theatres continued to rank amongst the 30 best-selling cinemas, with Jade and Rex ranked 2nd and 7th. New releases after the launch of the circuit continued to sell well. From January to April in 1986, the circuit's box-office revenue was more than HK\$56 million, which was 50% more compared with the same period of the previous year under Shaws cinema circuit.<sup>11</sup>

D & B's diverse productions showed a daring and innovative spirit. Coupled with the films' textures and cultural context of their creator, all gave a stylish and intellectual impression. The result was an ideal box-office income that garnered the approval of Hong Kong's audience. Through its movie releases, the cinema circuit established a healthy and positive image. D & B was also conscientious early on about rebranding the theatres under their management: 'existing ticket-sales ladies, ushers, and foremen, etc., were first dismissed, and then rehired by the new company. New uniforms were tailor-made with the SB insignia being changed to D'.<sup>12</sup> The theatres themselves were also renovated, and new theatre tickets were printed with the unique signature 'D' trademark.

At that time, theatre lobbies were filled with posters and film stills. And posters were also enlarged and painted as gigantic billboards on cinemas' outer walls. Poster design was an essential part of a theatre's image. D & B comedies *The Return of Pom Pom* (1984)

and *Mr. Boo Meets Pom Pom* followed the trend of comic-style illustrations until *Pom Pom Strikes Back!* (1986), which used photos collage in the poster designed by Joel Chu.

When D & B was founded, Joey Chu joined as part of the Art Department. In addition to *Pom Pom Strikes Back!* he also designed posters for *Hong Kong 1941* (1984), *Silent Love* (1986), *Brotherhood* (1986) and *Passion* (1986). Regarding the choice of illustrations or film stills, Chu explained that it depended on the film's genre; comedies utilised illustrations to exaggerate for humorous effect, while 'film stills or photographic styles lend themselves better to serious and realist film genres because it creates a sense of immediacy'.<sup>13</sup>

In its first two years of operation, D & B did not focus on comedy films, and its poster designs involved mostly photographic collages or film stills. For example, both *Silent Love* and *Passion* used photographs of their actors as film posters. Although the latter featured a star-studded cast, its poster was atmospheric and highly stylised. One of the posters for *Dream Lovers* (1986) did not actually feature its stars; the long-exposure images were blurry and mingled with the fantasy of the film. These posters broke through the hard-sell on stardom and sublimated it to emotive and stylised works. The results were in synergy with the cinema circuit's overall image and brought out the best in each other.

### Extension: A 'B-line' in Partnership with M2 Theatre to Target Niche Markets

1986 was the first year the D & B cinema circuit was in full operation. In that year, the company produced 16 films, including many relatively marginal works,

<sup>10</sup> Chow Tsz, 'Kafei Huo Cha' ('Coffee or Tea') Column, *Ming Pao*, 22 December 1985 (in Chinese).

<sup>11</sup> Wei Yifeng, 'Mei Liyou Bu Leguan—Debao Yuanxian' ('There's No Reason to be Pessimistic: D & B Cinema Circuit'), *Film Biweekly*, No 190, 19 June 1986 (in Chinese).

<sup>12</sup> Xing Bangzhu, 'Puguang Zhuoying' ('Exposure/Capture') Column, *Film Biweekly*, No 176, 28 November 1985 (in Chinese).

<sup>13</sup> Ho Wai-han, 'Haibao Sheji Chu Yingxiong: Zhu Zu'er' ('Heroes Portrayed by Posters: Joel Chu'), *Scene Magazine*, No 9, 16 August 1990 (in Chinese).

Designs of film posters varied according to different genres. They were stylish and in synergy with the cinema circuit's overall image.



Passion (1986)



Silent Love (1986)



In the Line of Duty 4 (1989)



Magnificent Warriors (1987)



Devoted to You (1986)



Perfect Match (1991)

such as *Love Unto Wastes*, *Passion*, *Dream Lovers* and *The Lunatics*. Even though the slate of films was scattered, it reflected new conditions for Hong Kong film productions. On 4 August of the same year, the M2 Theatre joined forces with D & B cinema circuit and became the leading theatre line in the Yau Tsim District. On 1 January 1987, D & B formed its B-line after M2 announced its partnership with the new Imperial Cinema 1 on the Hong Kong Island, and launched with the Taiwanese film *Sayonara Goodbye* (1985).

**M2 Theatre:** Opened on 28 October 1978, it was located on Saigon Street in Yau Ma Tei. It was known as a ‘new European-style’ theatre<sup>14</sup> with 1,180 seats in spacious auditoriums and comfortable viewing environment.

**Imperial Cinema 1:** The original theatre opened on 15 February 1969, with 1,289 seats. It was the first classic theatre in Hong Kong to be miniaturised. It converted its auditorium and mezzanine level into two theatres, each with 801 and 460 seats respectively.

Development of a B-line was not a new concept for Hong Kong cinema circuits. On 28 December 1985, M2 theatre partnered with Harbour City Cinema, the Gala Theatre, and Global Theatre to re-release *The Story of Woo Viet* (1981), which subsequently earned over HK\$2 million at the box-office. In January of the following year, the Golden Harvest Western Line (also known as the Gala B-Line) composed of the four above-mentioned theatres was established. It screened niche productions such as the Japanese film *The Makioka Sisters* (1983) and Hong Kong arthouse film *Lost Romance* (1986). And whenever Gala’s main line released a blockbuster, it would seamlessly screen it across this theatre network. The model for D & B’s B-line was similar to that of the Gala B-line. In that it often screened D & B’s headline movies, in-between it would also show selected Western movies or niche Chinese-language films.

The concerted effort made by mainstream cinema circuits to expand their B-lines, actually reflected the societal progress happening in Hong Kong. Driven by an economic boom in the mid-1980s, urbanisation in Hong Kong became increasingly mature. The rise of a new intellectual class emphasised on quality of life; they enjoyed movies, as well as non-mainstream



A gigantic movie billboard were hung on the façade of a building in Jordan Road (Photo shot in 1989)

offerings. In an analysis by Law Kar on the Hong Kong film market in the 1980s, he pointed out that local ‘niche audiences’ began to flourish at the end of the 1970s. Through promotions by small film festivals and the Urban Council, ‘a regular fixture of non-mainstream and arthouse audiences was gradually cultivated. Since 1983, the rise of small independent theatres became the new trend... The high number of smaller theatres broke the monopoly held by a few large cinema circuits on the entire market, thus helping more obscure films (from Taiwan, the Mainland and Europe, etc.) find better opportunities for release. At the same time, some sub-mainstream and even non-mainstream films also found more room for survival’.<sup>15</sup>

Large cinema circuit owners expanded their B-lines or small auxiliary lines, as a result of observing developments in the market at that time. Peter Choi, then deputy managing director of Golden Harvest Films, pointed out: ‘after the war, cultural literacy of younger generations was broadly improved. This discerning audience was able to appreciate, as well as critique a film on different levels. It was obvious that appreciation for substantial and high-quality films was no longer confined to small select circles. The idea of “Selected Audience” had become obsolete in describing the audience for such films’. With this in mind, Choi argued ‘rather than targeting audience as a strategy, it was better to provide more opportunities for a variety of films to be released, which allowed the audience to choose for themselves’. Choi’s observation partly explains the development of a new cinema circuit led by M2 and Harbour City Cinema (i.e.: the Gala B-Line).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Wah Kiu Yat Po, 28 October 1978 (in Chinese).

<sup>15</sup> Law Kar, ‘Hongkong Film Market and Trends in the ‘80s’, *Hong Kong Cinema in the Eighties (The 15th Hong Kong International Film Festival)*, Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1991, p 73.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Choi, ‘Cong Yige Gongtong Yinian Chufa: Tan Xindahua, Haicheng Yuanxian Chengli’ (‘Linked by A Common Idea: On the Establishment of M2 and Harbour City Cinema Circuits’), *Shehui Bianqian Zhong De Yazhou Dianying*, (Asian Films in an Evolving Society), a free special publication of *Film Biweekly* (No 187), Hong Kong, Gala Film Distribution Ltd., 1986 (in Chinese).





From 1988 onwards, D & B started to release films that were shot entirely in sync-sound. On the set of *Happy Together* (1989).



*A Bite of Love* (1990) is the first Hong Kong movie that adopted digital sound recording and the Dolby system.

From 1985 to 1988, Hong Kong's cinephile culture underwent various changes: Cinema Columbia Classics and Cine-Art House opened one after the other. They were the first cinemas to position themselves for arthouse and niche films explicitly. Hong Kong Arts Centre began showing alternative films every day and construction of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre was also on its way, which opened at the end of 1989. During this period, the cultural atmosphere of Hong Kong had undergone a positive change and was moving towards accommodating more non-mainstream works.

Looking back on D & B's B-line in its first months, its intention to promote smaller niche films was clear. After its launch with the screening of *Sayonara Goodbye*, in April of the same year, M2 and Imperial Cinema 1 were screening venues for the Hong Kong International Film Festival. On 1 May, Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Summer at Grandpa's* (1984) premiered. While on the same day, the Imperial Cinema 2 screened *Taipei Story* (1985), which was distributed by D & B and directed by Edward Yang.

D & B also made good use of the above B-line to extend screening time for more obscure films: After the run on the main line ended, *Sapporo Story* (1987) was re-screened at M2 Theatre and Imperial Cinema 1; *Love Unto Wastes* was also re-released by Imperial Cinema 1 in partnership with four other theatres and took in more than HK\$260,000 at the box office in five days. Beginning of August 1987, *The Autumn's Tale* was still in high demand after showing for three consecutive weeks, but the cinema circuit had signed a joint film release for the Hollywood production *An American Tail* (1987). As a solution, the Jade was separated from the main line, and along with M2 and

several other theatres, continued the screenings of *The Autumn's Tale*. This adaptive mechanism enabled extended screening time for alternative films; however, another shift was quick to follow.

### Changes: The Fourth Line and Middle-Class Comedy Came of Age

In October 1987, Stephen Shin became director of D & B and led the company's business after succeeding John Sham. After the personnel changes, its production volume decreased and the cinema circuit mainly showed productions from other studios; the variety of films still remained diverse. On the whole, however, the circuit lost some of its distinct, innovative vision from its earlier years. Newport cinema circuit was launched in January 1988. With four lines running in the race, D & B's relatively poor performance did little to impress. The D & B cinema circuit ranked last in terms of box-office revenues in 1988 and 1989, as well as, the first eight months of 1991. Eventually, it ceased operations at the end of that November.<sup>17</sup>

During this period, D & B's best-selling works were *Heart to Hearts* (1988) and the sequel *Heart into Hearts* (1990). Both of which were amongst the top ten blockbuster films for those two years. Later, several light comedies with middle-class sensibilities were successively introduced, which became a significant feature of D & B productions at the time. This kind of urban situation comedy was not only effective in its sharp and insightful dialogues, but also required the actor's dedicated performance to combine both the form and spirit. The films also adopted synchronous live recordings of sound on set.

<sup>17</sup> Chow Tsz, 'Kafei Huo Cha', ('Coffee or Tea') Column, *Ming Pao*, 6 September 1991 (in Chinese).

Among them, *A Bite of Love* (1990) also introduced the Dolby sound system, and promotions for the film highlighted ‘the first digital sound recording to be conformed back to stereo sound design in a Hong Kong movie’. This system had already become industry standard for Western films, and Shin stated that the adoption was not a ‘commerical stunt’ to boast they were ‘the first’; ‘we only hoped to improve the quality of sound in movies’. For the system to work, theatres must be equipped with the corresponding facilities. Shin further explained: ‘currently, many Hong Kong theatres are already equipped with this capability, even the newly constructed mini-theatres. We have also inspected the London Classics Cinema and intended to hold the premiere there’.<sup>18</sup> As an early adopter, *A Bite of Love* had to ‘travel to the UK for post-production with its Dolby audio design’; since Hong Kong’s first Dolby movie recording studio was not opened until 14 August 1990.<sup>19</sup> D & B’s last film, *Black Cat II: Assassination of President Yeltsin* (1992), also employed the Dolby sound system.

Taking a closer look at the theatres that were part of the D & B cinema circuit, Rex Theatre had already installed the Dolby stereo system in 1979. While, new theatres that later joined the circuit were generally equipped with these new audio systems, including the aforementioned London Classics Cinema.

**End: Reconstruction of Top Theatres and Mini-Theatres a Continued Trend**

In September 1991, D & B officially announced that it would cease operations of its cinema circuit. The chairman of its board, Raymond Leung revealed that Shaws ‘shall recover the Jade Theatre in Causeway Bay on 1 December; it will be demolished and reconstructed together with the adjoining Pearl Theatre as a mall... The Golden Theatre in Sham Shui Po will also be demolished by the end of February next year. The four top flagship theatres will become two. D & B felt that it was no longer necessary to operate a cinema circuit, thus decided to end it.’<sup>20</sup>

Since the launch of the D & B’s cinema circuit, these four top theatres had been the key to its box-office success. It is not hard to imagine the gravity of

D & B’s decision to let go of its big earners. However, while theatre sizes had shifted from big to small, multiplexes with numerous screens at one location also became a major trend for cinemas. A rough estimate of the number of cinemas vs screens in Hong Kong from 1988 to 1991 is shown in the table below.

Estimated number of cinemas and screens from 1988 to 1991<sup>21</sup>

Year	Theatre (individual)	Screens (unit)
1988	102	129
1989	112	152
1990	117	165
1991	106	157

Note: Theatres with different names but situated in the same building with shared facilities, such as Global/Cosmo, Flower (*xinghua*)/Flower (*lanhua*), Paladium/Ruby Palace, etc., are counted as a single theatre.

The D & B cinema circuit later joined in the trend of mini-theatres. Take *Black Cat* (1991) as an example, it premiered in 18 theatres across its whole circuit; the scale was even larger than that in 1985 when D & B launched its circuit with 12 theatres. Twelve of the circuit’s 18 theatres were mini-theatres with multiple screens. Many of these mini-theatres were located in newly developed residential districts, which broadened the coverage of D & B’s cinema circuit, and its theatres were also more evenly distributed. When D & B gave up on its operations, the circuit was very much a desirable proposition that immediately became part of Regal Films’ cinema circuit.

**Trendsetting Ventures Under the Prefix ‘D’**

In addition to film productions and running its cinema circuit, Dickson Poon also invested in other entertainment ventures:

- In July of 1984, Dickson Pictures and Entertainment Limited was established.
- In November 1985, Poon joined Wallace Cheung and others to establish Impact Entertainment

<sup>18</sup> ‘Fang Xian Qiran Tan Yiyao OK Shengxiao Xin Changshi’ (‘An Interview with Stephen Shin: On *A Bite of Love* and Experiments in Sound Recording’), interviewed by Wei Xuan, collated by May, *Film Biweekly*, No 297, 16 August 1990 (in Chinese).  
<sup>19</sup> Ning Ning, ‘Jishu Shuizhun Gao, Yinxiang Reng Jiao Ruo, Bengang Dianying Zhizuo Jiaqiang Yinxiang Xiaoguo, Shou Jia “Dubu” Luyinshi Qiyong’ (‘Superb Technical Standard but Relatively Weak in terms of Sound System / Locally-produced Films Strengthen Sound Effects, Hong Kong’s First Dolby Movie Recording Studio Opens’), *Wen Wei Pao*, 15 August 1990 (in Chinese).  
<sup>20</sup> *Ta Kung Pao*, 6 September 1991 (in Chinese).  
<sup>21</sup> Statistics gleaned from *Hong Kong Film* (published by Hong Kong Motion Picture Industry Association Ltd.) and the joint-advertisement by Hong Kong theatres (*Ming Pao*). This is a rough estimation as the information gathered may not represent the actual numbers.



On the set of *Hong Kong 1941* (1984): (from left) Chan Pui-wah, Paul Chun, Leong Po-chih, John Sham, Dickson Poon, Cecilia Yip, Alex Man, Angela Yu Chien, Hon Yee-sang, Kuk Fung.

Holdings Limited, which engaged in concert event productions. Poon remained a shareholder till early 1986, when he withdrew his stocks from the company.

- In August 1986, Poon and EMI Records formed Dickson Music Industries Ltd (DMI).
- In December 1990, D & B, Golden Harvest, Hutchison Telecommunications and an American Broadcasting Group founded Metropolitan Broadcasting. They applied for a second commercial broadcasting license that became Metro Broadcast.<sup>22</sup>

Poon's various investments listed above, in conjunction with his film and theatre business, ceased operations in the early 1990s, and he eventually discontinued his participation in the radio business as well. The real reason behind Poon's foray into filmmaking is hard for onlookers to decipher. The most apparent connection between D & B and his retail business, was sponsorships from watchmakers he represented on each film.

When founding D & B, Poon wished that the company's trademark would adopt the letter 'D' from his English name.<sup>23</sup> In the end, he used the same 'D' company logo for D & B and his other entertainment, media and record companies, as well as his watch and jewellery business. The capital 'D' signified both his retail and entertainment empires,

while reflecting the public image of his young entrepreneurial talents, as well as the impeccable taste in the products he sold.

When Dickson Watch & Jewellery was established, international watchmakers praised Poon for his keen sense of the market, and shrewd business acumen at catering to a new generation with high purchasing power.<sup>24</sup> Other cultural commentaries defined Poon as 'THE NEW YOUNG ENTREPRENEUR', referring to him as the 'ultimate embodiment of Yuppie ideals'. He had a taste for fashion and everything he did set him apart from other 'heirs' to dynastic businesses. His brand was 'everywhere the prefix "D" appeared'.<sup>25</sup> Sammo Hung saw in Poon 'this immense drive to succeed, an ever-present urge to "propel" forwards. He always moved ahead, sometimes without regard for the consequences'.<sup>26</sup>

## Shaking Up the Big Three in Retrospect

As a retailer and outsider investing in the movie industry, Poon achieved extraordinary results, with films that won amazing public endorsements. The founding of D & B cinema circuit had definitively shaken up the film industry and helped complete the final chapter of Hong Kong film industry's Big Three at the time. Although D & B mostly followed the commercial mainstream, it dared to push the envelope in a limited capacity. It created new

<sup>22</sup> *Wah Kiu Yat Po* and *Ta Kung Pao*, 5 December 1990 (in Chinese).

<sup>23</sup> See 'John Sham' of this book, interviewed by Janice Chow et al., collated by Eric Tsang Siu-wang, pp 46-53.

<sup>24</sup> Congratulatory messages from European Watch Brands were included in the grand opening advertisement, *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 27 February 1980 (in Chinese).

<sup>25</sup> Charles Chau, 'HONG KONG NEW MAN-ISMS', *City Magazine*, No 115, March 1986 (in Chinese).

<sup>26</sup> Law Kar, 'Interview with Sammo Hung', *Playboy (Chinese Version)*, December 1986 (in Chinese).

possibilities for non-commercial films, and some of them achieved great success that brought new life to alternative cinema. During this period, it also opened up its B-line to test niche market audiences. As the company evolved, its management policy also changed. This led to works losing their earlier daring and originality, while the brilliance of its cinema circuit progressively faded. However, D & B still led in the trend of light-hearted comedies for urbanites, and followed that by stepping up in audio technology to improve the quality of viewing experience.

Unlike the perpetual elegance and grandeur that the watch and jewellery industry aspire towards, mainstream movies as popular entertainment, must provide variety and be responsive to the prevailing zeitgeist and desires of the people. Looking at the slate of films produced by D & B, we could see that Poon was determined to raise the bar and be positioned slightly above the mainstream status quo. He strived to create fresh, trend-setting offerings, which mirrored the development of his retail business. However, the external environment was undergoing seismic changes; the fourth Hong Kong cinema circuit entered the market, which later evolved into a fifth. The increased competition saw the volume of films produced escalate. Even though this appeared to be a prolific period for Hong Kong cinema, people within the industry observed worrying changes to the filmmaking ecosystem in the late 1980s. Overshooting, budget imbalances, invasion of the triads and content piracy, among other things, all seriously challenged the industry's sustainability.

In the 1960s, four rival cinema circuits first emerged in Cantonese cinema; the number of rival theatres kept chopping and changing over the subsequent years. At the tail end of 1964, the New Fourth Cinema Circuit again appeared to dominate the market, which all eventually went into decline and collapsed after five years. In the 1980s, D & B's challenge on the industry opened up the final chapter for the 'Big Three' circuit rivalries. The pages of history turned and luminescence of the past ebbed and flowed, leaving little more than an elusive echo.

[Translated by Hayli Chwang]

**Wong Ha-pak** is a media veteran, editor, freelance writer and researcher for multiple HKFA projects, such as the one on Yau Ma Tei Theatre. His authored works (in Chinese) include *Remembrances of the Theatre* (2007) and *Retrospect of Hong Kong Theatres* (2015).



# An Unconventional Filmmaker

## —John Sham

Eric Tsang Siu-wang ■

Looking back at the rise of D & B Films Co., Ltd. in the 1980s, one cannot go without mentioning John Sham, an essential figure in its history as well as the heart and soul of the company. Within merely a few years' time, from the establishment of D & B in 1984 to his departure at the end of 1987, Sham managed the company so well that it rivalled Golden Harvest (HK) Limited and Cinema City Company Limited, two of the city's top-notch movie studios at the time—no small feat indeed. This essay will examine Sham's contribution to the success of D & B, as well as his on-screen performances in D & B films.

Compared to his peers—those who rose from the bottom ranks of the industry or academics—Sham's background was rather unique. Born in 1952, he belongs to the generation of post-war baby boomers. Sham was heavily influenced by Western thoughts and pop culture in his youth and had actively participated in protests against the Vietnam War and the *Baodiao* movement in defending the Diaoyu Islands. Later he travelled to the UK, where he worked as a news reporter and researcher for a local TV channel. In 1978 he teamed up with (yet to become famous) American director Michael Mann to conduct research for a documentary on drugs; he was then back to Hong Kong and had the opportunity to meet local filmmakers such as Leong Po-chih and Philip Chan, who had just made *Jumping Ash* (1976). Afterwards Sham stayed in the city, but he did not immediately join the film industry. Instead he became Editor-in-Chief of the monthly *City Magazine*.

### From Cultural Circles to the Film World

Founded in 1976, *City Magazine* targeted young intellectuals and the middle class as its readership, and the publication was a pioneer in its ground-breaking



With his curly mop of hair and round spectacles, John Sham was known for his distinctive image. He was also a multi-faceted film veteran.

exploration of local pop culture, trends and tastes. Yet, by 1980, when Sham formally joined, the magazine was in extreme financial straits. Sham proved himself to be an excellent leader in helping the company reverse course and securing the support of various advertisers.<sup>1</sup> Later, when Sham co-founded D & B, he assembled a team consisting of many of his friends and ex-colleagues from *City Magazine*, including associate producer and screenwriter John Chan Koon-chung, publicity manager Shu Kei and art director Yank Wong. In the 1980s, Hong Kong was on the cusp of its 'golden age' and both *City Magazine* and D & B were key in shaping the tastes and media consumption of the rapidly burgeoning middle class. There is no doubting about Sham's crucial role in the achievement of both.

At about the same time when Sham was moving back to Hong Kong, a group of Hong Kong New

<sup>1</sup> Peter Dunn, 'Haowai Yu Cen Jianxun' ('City Magazine and John Sham'), Peter Dunn's archival website <http://www.dengxiaoyu.net/News/View.asp?ID=1153> (in Chinese). Original article in *City Magazine*, Issue 435, December 2012.

Wave directors and screenwriters were transitioning from television to film. According to Sham, his interest in working in the film industry was greatly piqued after he got acquainted with Tsui Hark. In 1981, he too became part of the 'Wave' itself when he established a film company, Johnson Film Company, with Philip Chan, which produced Shu Kei's *Sealed with a Kiss* (1981) and Wong Chi's *Krazy Kops* (1981). Sham himself served as associate producer for both pictures, but the box office results were disappointing. The company then prepared to take on Tsui Hark's period epic *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* (1983). But just as scripting was about to commence, investor Lau Leung-wah suddenly pulled out. The film's contract was then switched to Golden Harvest, forcing Johnson Film to close down.<sup>2</sup>

Yet Sham's unsuccessful venture did not dampen his enthusiasm for the film business. Instead he devoted himself fully into his film career, and in 1982 he began doing marketing and promotional work for *The Dead and the Deadly*, directed by Wu Ma. In January of the subsequent year, he formally joined Bo Ho Films Company Limited as associate producer, kicking off his full-time career in film.

Sham's greatest achievement at Bo Ho was linking up Sammo Hung and Johnny Mak, convincing the two men to collaborate on *Long Arm of the Law* (1984). At the time, armed robbers from the Mainland were the biggest news story in town, and Sham wanted to use it as a subject matter for a film. He asked Philip Chan, a former superintendent, to write the screenplay, and invited Johnny Mak to direct the picture, with Sammo Hung as producer.<sup>3</sup> *Long Arm of the Law* was a great hit, in no small part thanks to Mak's trademark style of realism, high-octane action and violence that he had developed during his directorial era at Rediffusion Television (RTV). The film grossed more than HK\$10 million at the box office, and Mak won the Golden Horse Award for Best Director. Later Sham was invited by Dickson Poon, who owned a watches and jewellery business, to help him found and manage a new film company.

## The Creation and Management of D & B

In February 1984, D & B was born, with Dickson Poon as the major shareholder (holding 60% of the stocks). Sammo Hung held 25% of the company and the remaining 15% by Sham.<sup>4</sup> Although he was the major investor in the business, Poon did not participate in the daily operations of the company in its early days. Hung was likewise focused on his movie productions at Bo Ho and Golden Harvest, and according to Sham, Hung very often was simply carrying the label as producer and received a producer's salary every year, and the only D & B picture he directed was *The Owl vs Bumbo* (1984).<sup>5</sup> In other words, much of the decision-making and administrative work fell on Sham's shoulders. In the nearly four years, he was at D & B, he was swamped with work duties both on-screen and off-screen: he was producer for 17 films, associate producer for two, deputy director for one, as well as actor for ten. In fact, he was involved in various film projects without being credited.

At the time Sham was not a particularly seasoned producer as yet, but his lack of experience allowed him to think outside the box and manage D & B in unconventional ways. Poon trusted him, and so Sham had a great deal of autonomy in running the company.<sup>6</sup> In the 1980s, Hong Kong cinema entered a highly competitive period, with different studios and companies all jockeying to produce audience-pleasing action films and comedies with star-studded casts. Sham's approach was different from that of his peers. Apart from commercial blockbusters, Sham also produced 'quality films' that had riskier subject matters with less box office guarantee.<sup>7</sup>

Sham's unconventional strategy was apparent even in the early days of D & B. While at Bo Ho, Sham starred in *Pom Pom* (1984) with Richard Ng, which earned over HK\$20 million at the box office. Four months after that, D & B released the sequel *The Return of Pom Pom* (1984) as its inaugural work, raking in a still impressive HK\$18 million at the box office. Yet the second film produced by D & B, despite also being a co-investment with Bo Ho, was

<sup>2</sup> See 'Philip Chan: I Wanted to Redefine the Crime Thriller Genre', interviewed by Cecilia Wong and May Ng, collated by Eric Tsang, in *When the Wind Was Blowing Wild: Hong Kong Cinema of the 1970s*, May Ng (ed), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2018, pp 262-263. [Electronic Publication] [https://www.filmarchive.gov.hk/documents/2005525/7439981/ebook\\_eng\\_01.pdf](https://www.filmarchive.gov.hk/documents/2005525/7439981/ebook_eng_01.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See 'John Sham' of this book, interviewed by Janice Chow et al., collated by Eric Tsang Siu-wang, pp 46-53.

<sup>4</sup> Leng Xiaoqing, Ji Er and Mumu, 'Debao: Dianying Shenhua Lingyizhang' ('D & B Films: Another Miracle in the Film Industry'), *Film Biweekly*, No 176, 28 November 1985 (in Chinese).

<sup>5</sup> See note 3.

<sup>6</sup> See note 3.

<sup>7</sup> Chak Ho-yin, *Guang Yu Ying De Jiti Huiyi (Collective Memories of the Cinematic World)*, Hong Kong: Ming Pao Weekly, 2011, p 46 (in Chinese).





In 1984, D & B released its inaugural work *The Return of Pom Pom*, just four months after the blockbuster *Pom Pom* (1984) premiered. (From left) lead actors Richard Ng and John Sham with director Philip Chan.



Chow Yun-fat, touted as the 'box office poison', garnered the Best Leading Actor at the Golden Horse Awards and the Best Actor at Asia Pacific Film Festival, for his role in *Hong Kong 1941* (1984); the film's cinematographer, Brian Lai (right), also won his recognition at the Hong Kong Film Awards.

not a comedy or action flick. Instead, Sham decides to produce and release a war drama *Hong Kong 1941* (1984), directed by Leong Po-chih. A heavy subject depicting Hong Kong during the Japanese occupation of 1941 and starring 'box office poison' Chow Yun-fat, the film was not viewed in a positive light by investors prior to release.<sup>8</sup> Yet beyond everyone's wildest expectations, *Hong Kong 1941* grossed over HK\$7 million at the local box office, in addition to raving reviews from film critics. Chow picked up Best Leading Actor at the Golden Horse Awards and the Best Actor at Asia Pacific Film Festival, while Brian Lai won Best Cinematography at the Hong Kong Film Awards. The artistic and commercial success of *Hong Kong 1941* greatly encouraged the D & B team, a confidence booster for them to continue their unconventional strategy.

Initially D & B did not have any cinema circuits under its umbrella, and so its productions could only be released in the Gala cinemas under Golden Harvest. Yet D & B frequently clashed with Golden Harvest in matters concerning scheduling and distribution.<sup>9</sup> During this time Shaw Brothers was gradually cutting its output, and so in November 1985, D & B decided to rent several flagship theatres from Shaw Brothers, as well as around a dozen of cinemas. Together these formed the D & B cinema circuit, and thus the company's primary goal was to increase the number of films they could show.

Inevitably, there was immense pressure to amp up production.<sup>10</sup> However, Sham insisted that they would not give up quality for quantity, and that their own cinema circuit was an opportunity to showcase their less mainstream films and to further their strategy of diversified production. Arthouse film genres were also benefited from this approach.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, 1986 was a banner year for D & B, as they released a record number of films, over half of which can be classified as 'alternative films' which either dealt with less popular subject matter and had limited commercial appeal, or they lacked a star-studded cast and were mostly helmed by novice directors with small budgets and limited resources. A prime example is *Silent Love* (1986), directed by John (David) Chiang and depicting a group of deaf-mute characters who pickpocket for a living. Not only does the film explore an unconventional subject, it also boldly cast Season Ma, a character actress, and Sean Lau Ching-wan, who had just gained prominence from his TV work. Similarly, Derek Yee, who used to be a leading actor at Shaws, made his directorial debut with *The Lunatics* (1986), which explored the oft-ignored topic of the mentally ill. The only objection Sham raised against the film was Yee's request to use new actors. Instead, he approached and persuaded Chow Yun-fat and Tony Leung Chiu-wai to star in the film at special 'reduced rates', and even acted in the film himself as well.<sup>12</sup> When recalling his experience, Yee

<sup>8</sup> See 'John Chan Koon-chung' of this book, interviewed by Sam Ho et al., collated by Wong Ha-pak, pp 148-153.

<sup>9</sup> See note 4.

<sup>10</sup> D & B produced three films in 1984 and four films in 1985 when it was just established. After forming its own cinema circuit, the company's production increased to 16 films in 1986 and 11 films in 1987.

<sup>11</sup> 'Debao Wei Shihe Chaoliu Pai Qingchunpian, Cen Jianxun Shiyuan Bu Lanpai' ('D & B Is Set to Produce Popular Youth Films / John Sham Vows That Quality Is Always Over Quantity'), *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 5 October 1985 (in Chinese).

<sup>12</sup> See note 7, p 47.

was keen to emphasise that D & B never interfered with his creative process, and allowed him freedom to make the film he wanted to make.<sup>13</sup>

Sham's dedication to promoting new directors is exemplified in *An Autumn's Tale* (1987), directed by Mabel Cheung. Before then, Cheung had only directed one picture, *The Illegal Immigrant* (1985). For her sophomore project, she planned on telling a love story set in the US between a student from Hong Kong and a 'nasty' local American Chinese man, but this idea was not well-received by Hong Kong film companies. It also did not help that Cheung was adamant that Chow Yun-fat would play the male lead Figurehead (aka Samuel Pang).<sup>14</sup> Later Cheung and screenwriter Alex Law were introduced to Sham by their university senior John Chan Koon-chung, and handed him their script. Sham immediately agreed to invest and to let the film crew shoot in the US.<sup>15</sup> He also agreed to Cheung's casting request, and released Chow from *Magnificent Warriors* (1987) in order to let him work on *An Autumn's Tale*.<sup>16</sup> Sham's decisions effectively provided the support and encouragement a novice director such as Cheung needed on the project. In the end, *An Autumn's Tale* did not disappoint all those who put in the efforts and is now considered a classic of Hong Kong cinema in the romance genre, a testament to Sham's vision and star-making abilities.

Despite his commitment to non-mainstream subjects, Sham was at the same time devoted to developing commercial projects, and was very hands-on with the big-budget productions at D & B. The company was also very eager to discover and develop their own action stars, including Malaysian beauty pageant queen Michelle Yeoh and Brandon Lee, son of Bruce Lee. The former was particularly successful. When Yeoh initially joined D & B, she played a quiet, demure teacher in her first film, *The Owl vs Bumbo*. Sham felt that this kind of role was not right for her, so he asked Corey Yuen Kwai and Lam Ching-ying to teach her kung fu techniques.<sup>17</sup> Yeoh learnt quickly, thanks to her background in ballet dancing, and in 1985 she co-starred in *Yes, Madam* with Cynthia Rothrock, firmly establishing herself as a rising female action star to look out for. The next year, she worked on *Royal Warriors* with Japanese star Sanada Hiroyuki (aka Henry Sanada), with the intention of conquering

international markets. She also headlined the David Chung-directed *Magnificent Warriors*, which cost a whopping HK\$20 million to make. Sham personally travelled to Hualien, Taiwan to supervise the shoot, hired Johnnie To and Derek Yee to help out, and even directed parts of the film himself. Unfortunately, the film was a flop and only earned around HK\$8 million at the box office.

As D & B expanded and grew, multiple creative units were formed. Ronny Yu, Clifton Ko and Raymond Fung, Cinema City veterans who had joined the company, formed 'The Trio' and were co-ordinated by Linda Kuk, also from Cinema City. Other creative teams were mostly managed by Sham, whose management approach was largely hands-off, and he was thus on good terms with everyone. For example, the creative team headed by Winnie Yu made two films—*Kiss Me Goodbye* (1986) and *Wonder Women* (1987). The former was a youthful romantic film, marking the directorial debut of lyricist Calvin Poon Yuen-leung. Sham was unsatisfied with it and wanted to recut and reshoot parts of the film, but relented when Yu, the associate producer of the film, argued that they should give up-coming directors more creative license and that the low-budget film was unlikely to cost the company too much money. Eventually the film was released without any major changes, but earned merely HK\$1 million at the box office.<sup>18</sup> *Wonder Women*, on the other hand, was the first film project for Kam Kwok-leung after he

One of the 'lunatics' in *The Lunatics* (1986).



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<sup>13</sup> Wu Shengfang, 'Haosi Kao Shengzhongshi Gan...—Fang Er Dongsheng Tan Paixi Ganshou' ('It's Like Taking A Secondary School Entry Exam...—Interviewing Derek Yee On Filmmaking'), *Film Biweekly*, No 189, 5 June 1986 (in Chinese).

<sup>14</sup> Alex Law and Mabel Cheung, interviewed and collated by Kwong Po-wai and Lao Hui'er, *Cixiong Dadao (Mabel Cheung x Alex Law: The Modern Bonnie and Clyde in the Film World)*, Hong Kong: Cosmos Books Ltd., 2012, p 51 (in Chinese).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p 50.

<sup>16</sup> See note 8.

<sup>17</sup> See note 3.

<sup>18</sup> See note 3.



John Sham (left) seldom had a love interest in his films. He played opposite Kara Wai (right) in *The Return of Pom Pom* (1984).



John Sham (left) and Richard Ng (right), long time on-screen duo, collaborated for the fourth time in *Pom Pom Strikes Back!* (1986).

left the television medium, and Sham let producer Yu have full control over the project. The film's unconventional subject matter, zany comical style, as well as Kam's trademark repartee and dialogue, separated it from its peers. *Wonder Women* was a prime example of D & B's respect for creative freedom and its courage in experimenting with different genres and films.

D & B's newly established cinema circuit needed to show films other than D & B productions, and so the company was under pressure to source a wider variety of films. As a distributor, Sham was not only interested in profit-making; instead he often chose art films that he found impressive despite their niche appeal, such as Tong Shu-shuen's *China Behind* (1974). The film depicted young Mainland Chinese intellectuals fleeing to Hong Kong illegally, and the Film Censorship Authority considered it as 'damag(ing) good relationship with other territories and contribut(ing) to possible breaches of peace', banning it from wide release until the 1980s. When the ban was lifted, D & B did not consider the film out-of-date and instead arranged for it to be shown in its cinemas in May 1987.<sup>19</sup> The same year, D & B also released *Warlords of the Golden Triangle*, co-directed by Peter Yung and British director Adrian Cowell. The documentary focused on the conflicts between various drug lords in the Golden Triangle area, and Sham himself provided the voiceover narration for the film.

### Iconic On-Screen Images

Apart from his work behind the scenes, Sham's on-screen achievements were also remarkable. Although he claimed to have little interest in acting, he was inadvertently one of the hottest comedic actors of 80s Hong Kong cinema. His first appearance on-screen was a cameo role as a Special Branch agent in *Dangerous Encounter—1st Kind* (1980), directed by his good friend Tsui Hark. His subsequent roles were in *All the Wrong Clues (...for the Right Solution)* (1981), *Charlie's Bubble* (1981), *Happy Sixteen* (1982), etc. but these were all minor cameo roles performed as a favour and did not have much room for Sham to strut his stuff.

During this time, Sham was also hosting a regular radio program with Philip Chan and Tina Liu, in which Sham created his iconic character Lui King, the angry man from Chaozhou. The character, with his heavily-accented Chaozhou-like Cantonese, was inspired by the elders from Chaozhou who Sham encountered in his childhood, and was deeply beloved by listeners.<sup>20</sup> Later Sham brought Lui King alive on-screen, first in the Norman Law-directed crime flick *Gun is Law* (1983). As a detective, Sham plays quite a heavy role in the film. At the time, it was common for actors to let their lines be dubbed over by professional voice actors in post-production, but Sham had to dub his own lines in his accented Cantonese in order for his character to come alive. The same year, Sham also played a similar Chaozhou character, Curly, in

<sup>19</sup> Shu Kei, 'Finding Cecile: The Legend of Tong Shu-shuen', in *When the Wind Was Blowing Wild: Hong Kong Cinema of the 1970s*, May Ng (ed), Hong Kong, Hong Kong Film Archive, 2018, pp 92-93. [Electronic Publication] [https://www.filmarchive.gov.hk/documents/2005525/7439981/ebook\\_eng\\_01.pdf](https://www.filmarchive.gov.hk/documents/2005525/7439981/ebook_eng_01.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> See note 3.





*It's a Drink! It's a Bomb!* (1985): John Sham plays a taxi driver who is a smart aleck. The character almost gets killed but ultimately emerges unscathed.



John Sham (front row in white) landed a groundbreaking role in the thriller *The Island* (1985).

Sammo Hung's comedy *Winners & Sinners* (1983).

*Winners & Sinners* opened up the world of comedy to Sham, solidifying his iconic, cartoonish image as an oafish-looking man who took things too seriously. He continued to play in other comedies as a Chaozhou man, and in 1984 he co-starred with Richard Ng in *Pom Pom* as a crime-fighting duo, and the film's box office was surprisingly comparable to the star-studded *Winners & Sinners*. Therefore, after D & B was formed, Sham and Ng continued to collaborate in *The Return of Pom Pom*, *Mr. Boo Meets Pom Pom* (1985), and *Pom Pom Strikes Back!* (1986), making *Pom Pom* one of D & B's best-selling comedy series. Ng's mischievous and cheeky Ah Chow makes the perfect counterpart to Sham's dull-witted, childish Beethoven, who keeps running into trouble and getting pranked. Sham's talents are substantially showcased in both *The Return of Pom Pom* and *Pom Pom Strikes Back!*, and in the former film he even gets to play a romantic lead. On the other hand, Wu Ma's *Mr. Boo Meets Pom Pom* focuses on the character of Michael Hui, in his first film after leaving Golden Harvest.

Apart from Richard Ng, Sham also worked closely and extensively with other actors at D & B. In *Yes, Madam*, he partners with Mang Hoi to play petty thieves who are best mates with forgery expert Tsui Hark. In *It's a Drink! It's a Bomb!* (1985), Sham plays a taxi driver who fails to enlist in the police force, who is then inadvertently embroiled in a bomb conspiracy with George Lam and Maggie Cheung. In the film,

Sham is a garrulous smart aleck who almost got killed multiple times, but ultimately emerges unscathed. The three main characters share a subtle and complex relationship, while both Sham and Lam have an eye on Cheung romantically, but Cheung only sees them as brothers and never reciprocates their feelings.

Most of Sham's on-screen career at D & B was spent on commercial films, and the most 'alternative' project he ever participated in was Leong Po-chih's *The Island* (1985). Sham plays the lead in the film and suggested that shooting took place on location at Tung Ping Chau. He also cut his signature curly hair to signify a departure from his usual comedic persona.<sup>21</sup> His character is a secondary school Geography teacher, who brings six students to the island for a camping trip in order to relive the innocent days he spent exploring the island as a young man. The group runs into a trio of insane brothers, who butcher and massacre the youngsters, and Sham resorts to violent means for self-protection and vengeance. Modelled after contemporary Hollywood B-movies, *The Island* is a fascinating, underrated work in the D & B oeuvre. Leong's direction does a fine job of creating tension and horror, while Sham delivers an effective dramatic performance.

## Farewell to D & B

Sham participated frequently in D & B films as actor initially, but such involvement dissipated after he finished *Pom Pom Strikes Back!* and started to refocus his efforts to behind-the-scenes work. By early 1987,

<sup>21</sup> See note 3.

<sup>22</sup> Lam Bing, 'Yi Dijian Fugui Biren Zou, Cen Jianxun Liji Sheng Yixin' ('Upon Reading "Someone Is Ousted By *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World*" / John Sham Becomes Suspicious'), *Wah Ki Yat Po*, 1 April 1987 (in Chinese). 'Cen Jianxun Kangcheng Gui Chengqing Yaochuan, Founen Likai Debao, Yu Gu Weili Wu Buhe Yi Weiwen Qi Cizhi' ('John Sham Clarifies Rumours After Returning from the Cannes / He Denies Leaving D & B and Clashing with Linda Kuk / No Sign of His Resignation'), *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 25 May 1987 (in Chinese).



rumours that he and Dickson Poon did not see eye-to-eye were rampant<sup>22</sup>, and Sham left the company at the end of the year, leaving Stephen Shin to fill in and take over his role and responsibilities. According to Sham, the main reason for his departure was Poon's interference in production decisions despite never having participated in company affairs before. The final straw was Shin's *Easy Money* (1987), which Sham did not support; he was not convinced that Michelle Yeoh should play against her established martial arts image. He refused to be producer for the film, and Poon stepped in instead. As the rift exacerbated between the two men, Sham decided to leave D & B.<sup>23</sup> In his account of the events, Shin mentioned that Sham's extravagant spending led to financial problems at D & B, and at one point a disheartened Poon considered closing the company after their contract with Shaws' cinemas expired. According to Shin, Poon had approached him to take over Sham's role, but initially Shin was hesitant to do so, out of deference for Sham, who had hired him. Eventually he agreed after consulting with Sham.<sup>24</sup>

After the leadership change, D & B began focusing almost solely on mainstream commercial films at the expense of its edgier, more diversified offerings, eventually stopping production entirely in 1992. On the other hand, after leaving D & B, Sham focused his efforts onto the Maverick Films Ltd. founded by himself. Without the pressure of having to support a cinema circuit, his company could freely produce whatever films they wished to support, including *My Heart is that Eternal Rose* (1989) and *Eight Tails of Gold* (1989). Both pictures were reminiscent of D & B-style films. Yet after the June Fourth Incident of 1989, Hong Kong society was deeply shaken by the events of that summer. Investment from Taiwan continued to roll in, but by that time Hong Kong film business had become grounds for financial speculation and gangster violence. Many filmmakers who took their craft seriously, such as Sham, found themselves ill-suited to such an environment and quietly retreated from the scene. Nonetheless, the years Sham spent managing and spearheading D & B marked a golden era in local cinema, forever enshrined as a fascinating fairy tale within the hearts of cinephiles.

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[Translated by Rachel Ng]

**Eric Tsang Siu-wang** is a film and cultural studies specialist who contributes to *Sing Tao Daily* and literary website 'p-articles' among other media outlets. He is also Vice-Chairman of Film Culture Centre (Hong Kong), member of Hong Kong Film Critics Society and guest lecturer at The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts.

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<sup>23</sup> See note 3.

<sup>24</sup> See note 7, p 53.

## My Days at D & B

Shu Kei ■

I joined D & B Films Co., Ltd. in 1984, at the invitation of John Sham. Prior to that, I had worked for the Hong Kong International Film Festival for three years. In the first two years, I was in charge of curating the ‘Hong Kong Cinema Retrospective’. In my final year there, I took charge of the ‘International Film’ section and invited Martin Scorsese as the special guest for the festival opening film, *The King of Comedy* (1982); I also curated a ‘Pier Paolo Pasolini Retrospective’. For the retrospective’s publication, I invited Mr Kam Ping-hing to write an article, in which he used a Cantonese term ‘糟質’ similar to the English word, ‘screwed’. The film festival manager<sup>1</sup> (who was my boss) said it was a foul word and ordered me to delete it. I dashed into her office and chastised her for ‘her poor knowledge in the Chinese language’. I knew that would probably cost me my contract renewal. John’s phone call turned out to be a lifeline, and I happily took his offer (especially since it was quite the generous offer involving very good conditions). He wanted me to take charge of the publicity department.

I believe John wanted me to manage the publicity team because of *Boat People* (1982). In 1981, Ann Hui went all the way to Hainan Island to secretly shoot this film—a prophetic film that used post-liberation Vietnam as the premise to project (I

prefer the term ‘project’, rather than ‘insinuate’) the Handover fears that were starting to grow in Hong Kong people’s subconscious.<sup>2</sup> Ann had invited me, John and Tina Liu<sup>3</sup> to watch the test screening and we were all stunned by its boldness (Hong Kong films in the past had rarely touched on politics, let alone been critical of the Communist Party authority; prior to this there was perhaps only *China Behind*, which remained banned since Tong Shu-shuen completed the film in 1974.)<sup>4</sup> From the late 1970s, more than 80 or 90 percent of locally produced Hong Kong films were dominated by three genres: comedy, kung fu and gangster films, or combinations of them. Serious (traditional?) dramas were extremely rare, and the box office outlook for *Boat People* was of course grim. So we spared no effort in trying to come up with ideas to drum up some fanfare for the film. It was probably under Ann’s suggestion that the film’s producer Hsia Moon<sup>5</sup> decided to let Tina and me take charge of the whole promotional campaign. Between my stint with Tong’s *Close Up* magazine during my second year at university, and *Film Biweekly*, I’d worked as an editor for about a year and a half (with the former essentially a one-man-band job). As such, I had a pretty good network of film critics and entertainment journalists, as well as some ideas and views on film promotions. Tina, on the other hand, had experience in design, and working for *City Magazine*. We hit it off right away and came up with a bunch of bold ideas that resulted in *Boat People* becoming a surprise box office

<sup>1</sup> At the time, the film festival operated under the Urban Council, the predecessor to the Leisure and Cultural Services Department. Managers were officials appointed by the government. In 2005, it became an independent entity.

<sup>2</sup> The decision for Hong Kong to be handed over back to China was triggered after British Prime Minister Margaret Hilda Thatcher’s 1982 trip to China. Negotiations ensued and eventually the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed on 19 December 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Sham and Liu married in 1984.

<sup>4</sup> Going back a little earlier, there was also Patrick Lung Kong’s *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (1970), which used a fictional epidemic (inspired by Albert Camus’ *The Plague*) to tell the story of the 1967 anti-Colonialism riots. Government film censors ordered the film be cut down massively before its release was permitted.

<sup>5</sup> Hsia Moon was the star of left wing Hong Kong film company The Great Wall Movie Enterprises Ltd., and was extremely popular in the 1950s and 60s. Her films include *A Widow’s Tears* (1956), *Bride Hunter* (1960), *The Princess Falls in Love* (1962), etc. After she retired as an actor, she founded Bluebird Movie Enterprises Ltd. in 1979, which debuted with *Boat People*, and also produced *Young Heroes* (1983, directed by Mou Tun-fei) and *Homecoming* (1984, directed by Yim Ho).



Shu Kei (front row facing camera) attended the pre-shooting ceremony of *The Island* (1985).

hit. It made more than HK\$15 million and was the year's sixth best-selling Hong Kong film<sup>6</sup>—that was pretty much a miracle! Hong Kong is tiny and the film circle is even smaller. The good thing about that is you can very easily get a grasp of certain networks and operations, and even the dynamics between people. I was still young (enough, at 28) at the time, so even though I didn't have much experience, I didn't give it too much thought before accepting John's offer, to become the publicity manager of D & B.

But D & B wasn't my first time working with John. Not long after he returned to Hong Kong from the UK (around 1978), we met at *City Magazine*. He was good friends with the magazine's founder John Chan Koon-chung. At the time, I was a guest writer for the film section. Shortly after, he became the chief editor of the magazine and I began contributing every issue (sometimes multiple articles, under different pen names), and occasionally I would curate some small features. John was a hearty, passionate man, someone who really walked the talk; if there's some common interest, one could easily become friends with him. Very quickly, his activities expanded from publishing to all kinds of different popular media: film, broadcast, music, onscreen, behind the scenes; one could catch him anywhere.

In 1980, Tsui Hark finished his third film *Dangerous Encounter*—*1st Kind*. Although it faced many obstacles from the film censors, who forced him to cut out and reshoot much of the film, it still managed to capture and surprise its audience with its finesse. Right after that, he joined the rising Cinema

City Company Limited, and shot *All The Wrong Clues (...for the Right Solution)* (1981). Golden Harvest (HK) Limited's Raymond Chow tried to poach him quietly through John. Tsui Hark wanted to film *Zu Mountain*, a supernatural *wuxia* film with ambitious stunts, but it was a large-scale, complex project that would need a bit of preparation time. At the time, John wanted to ride on the Hong Kong New Wave momentum and open up new paths in the film industry. So he made a deal with Golden Harvest: first, set up a satellite company called Johnson Film Company with Philip Chan to make low-budget movies with new directors; and at the same time, finalise the *Zu Mountain* screenplay with Tsui Hark.<sup>7</sup>

I'd always wanted to be a director, so after I wrote the *The Happenings* screenplay for Yim Ho in 1980, and upon hearing about John's plan, I plucked up my courage to tell him about an idea I had, inspired by an American paperback novel. It was a love story about a couple with minor mental retardation. John didn't hesitate in letting me follow my directorial dream, and that became *Sealed with a Kiss* (1981), which had terrible box office results. Because of this, plans for my second film fell through, and that's why I went to work for the film festival.

## II

The name D & B refers to watch merchant Dickson Poon and Sammo Hung's Bo Ho Films Company Limited.<sup>8</sup> The former roped in the latter through John, with John in charge of all film productions. Hong Kong film in the 1980s inherited the boon from the 70s, and reached its peak in both volume and earnings. That drew a lot of investment from businesses and syndicates unrelated to film or entertainment (including, later on, the triads), for example, behind Cinema City (and its distributor, Golden Princess Amusement Co. Ltd.) was The Kowloon Motor Bus Co. (1933) Ltd. As for Shaw Brothers (Hong Kong) Ltd., which had begun to dominate the entire Hong Kong film industry since the late 1960s, the company began its downfall in the 1980s because it could no longer catch up with the progress of the times, no thanks to the film studio's old fashioned attitude, conservative cultural genetics (with a focus on rebuilding and providing a sort of façade and imagination of the country) as well as its rigid bureaucratic style. As such, D & B seized the

<sup>6</sup> In 1982, the top five were: 1. *Aces Go Places*: HK\$26,043,773; 2. *Project A*: HK\$19,323,824; 3. *Dragon Lord*: HK\$17,936,344; 4. *It Takes Two*: HK\$16,724,578; 5. *The Shaolin Temple*: HK\$16,157,801.

<sup>7</sup> Ni Kuang and Chiu Kang-chien were separately brought on as screenwriters for the film, but eventually Szeto Cheuk-hon took on the project, which was eventually re-named *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* (1983).

<sup>8</sup> The Chinese name for Bo Ho [寶禾] links to Golden Harvest [嘉禾], while the 'Ho' in the English version refers to co-founder Leonard Ho.

opportunity to squeeze itself into a crucial space in the industry, with the objective of taking over Shaw's monopoly and becoming the city's top three movie makers alongside Golden Harvest and Cinema City.

Sammo Hung was in fact one of Golden Harvest's three ace cards (the other two being Jackie Chan and Yuen Biao), but under pressure from an ambitious Cinema City, Golden Harvest also quietly struggled with the same crisis that faced Shaws: a change of allegiance. At the start of the 1980s, it first lost its best-selling director John Woo: in order to give himself a chance for more creative freedom with Cinema City, Woo flew off to Taiwan as soon as he was done filming *Laughing Time* (1980), released under the pseudonym Ng Sheung-fei,<sup>9</sup> and waited there quietly until his contract with Golden Harvest ended. The company's next loss was box office guarantee Sam Hui, who made *Aces Go Places* (which premiered during the 1982 Lunar New Year and earned a whopping HK\$26 million-ish) after he was poached by Cinema City. That left brother Michael Hui with a solo act that did not quite hold up as before.<sup>10</sup> Sammo Hung and Jackie Chan were trained under the same master and both came from the 'Seven Little Fortunes' movie family,<sup>11</sup> but their styles were too similar (both doing kung fu comedy) and even though Hung founded Bo Ho, it did not help tie him down to the company. Looking back at the situation, it appears on the surface as though Raymond Chow was being lenient about it, giving Sammo Hung tacit consent to form D & B with Dickson Poon while keeping him with Golden Harvest under certain conditions. He even lent D & B some help (D & B's first few films, from *The Return of Pom Pom* (1984), *Mr. Boo Meets Pom Pom* (1985) to *The Owl vs Bumbo* (1984), *Hong Kong 1941* (1984), etc., were all screened at Golden Harvest's Gala circuit, even during prime time). But in actual fact, Chow was using the power of the latter to replace Shaw. He had eyed Dickson Poon's ambitions, and encouraged him further to start his own cinema circuit; Poon officially rented all the cinemas under the Shaws name to gain

control of the screening schedules. Perhaps one might ask: By doing this, isn't Golden Harvest nurturing its own rival? Yes, but also no, because from a macro point of view, if D & B was able to stand on its own, it could become a pawn in helping to crush another, even stronger rival (Cinema City). On the other hand, however, the veteran filmmaker Raymond Chow knew from experience that to run a cinema circuit is the biggest challenge within the movie business world. That's because in order to meet the demands for a cinema circuit, a film company must produce on a large scale: at least 25 to 30 films a year, and this of course requires large amounts of capital flow. I believe Chow probably realised that Poon would not be able to afford such a huge investment, and if the situation arose as expected, he could take over D & B once and for all.

### III

Considering my film critic background, I understand that to many people, even today, it still feels like a kind of conflict of interest for me to take up the job of film promotions. Anything to do with promotions involves the commercial market, which stands in contradiction to critiques of artistic achievement; especially with the history of own pen, which appears not to have taken too kindly to many locally produced films.<sup>12</sup> To be honest, I never thought that much about it. I simply always thought how lucky I was, because film chose me when I was very young (around six years old), and has since filled up the most part of my life. No matter how big or small, as long as the work is related to film, I am able to find enjoyment within. Of course, among the countless films I was in charge of promoting, there were indeed few I truly liked. However, my idea of promotion never involved a critique of the film; rather, it is to recognise its special characteristics—these aren't necessarily its strong points, but points that set it aside from other films—and to find an audience suited for it. If possible, I would even try to expand on those characteristics to raise its legitimacy. Of course, there

<sup>9</sup> The Chinese characters of the name hints at Woo's desire to fly free from constraints, but irony was that his surname in Cantonese is similar in sound to the word 'not', so the pseudonym that was supposed to mean a man desiring freedom became the equivalent of 'Don't Want to Fly'.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Hui filmed the Hollywood production *The Cannonball Run* with Jackie Chan in 1981, but returned to home turf with little to show (the film only earned HK\$5 million-ish, less than a third of the Hui brothers' collaboration in the same year, *Security Unlimited*). In 1983, the older Hui did even worse with Ronny Yu's *The Trail*, which he only wrote and produced. The film made just HK\$4.7 million.

<sup>11</sup> The 'Seven Little Fortunes' was the name given to the young apprentices hired by Peking opera star Yu Zhanyuan (the father of Cantonese film star Yu So-chow) in the 1960s, when he opened the Peking opera school 'The Chinese Operatic School' in Hong Kong. When used in a broad sense, it refers to all students trained in the school, but it's often used to specifically mean the seven most outstanding students, who also often acted together: Yuen Lung (Sammo Hung), Yuen Lau (Jackie Chan), Yuen Biao, Corey Yuen Kwai, Yuen Wah, Yuen Mo and Yuen Tai. Their first act together was in fact called *Seven Little Fortunes*. In 1988, Alex Law wrote the story of the Seven Little Fortunes into a movie of the same name, with Sammo Hung playing the role of Yu Zhanyuan.

<sup>12</sup> This is not limited to back then; even today looking back, I still think Hong Kong films in the 1980s (and even through the 1990s) were largely rough and problematic. Very few of them are able to stand the test of time.



were on occasion films that I felt were hopeless; in those cases I would simply continue according to the workflow and complete the necessary processes of the job. It would feel less gratifying to do it this way, but I believe every job in the world involves some degree of torment.

Speaking of film promotions in the 1980s, one must first understand the situation of Hong Kong society and the media ecology then. The former inherited the late 1970s economic boom, which brought great job opportunities for Hong Kong people; as long as one was willing to put in the effort (and brain power), a financial reward would be on the table. That left almost everyone (including students) with several part-time jobs under the table, on top of their full time ones.<sup>13</sup> Yet looking back now, what's confusing is that the long hours of work pressure not only did not exhaust people, it put people in some state of euphoria, which drove them to use up their remaining rest time to pursue all kinds of different information media/entertainment, in order to release the pressure. From free-to-air radio, TV, to low-cost newspapers and periodicals (comic books, pornos), to mass appeal films,<sup>14</sup> and increasingly high-end discos, nightclubs and concerts. Among those, film offered the most concentrated sensory enjoyment,<sup>15</sup> and as such this culminated in the so-called 'golden period' of Hong Kong cinema.<sup>16</sup> It was under such a 'mutual protocol' that this time period created decidedly and utterly commercialised Hong Kong films (which prioritised audience demands for satisfaction above all).<sup>17</sup>

Obviously, when formulating marketing strategy for mainstream films, how to lock down the target is not particularly difficult (the most important thing is how to cover the largest audience denominator). As for 'non-mainstream' films, to be honest, there were really scant few in a year—even for D & B, which was already the company most willing to take risks. In the face of these productions (or products) that were born in a world that comes with a series of inviolable game rules, for someone like me born with my own set of

rebellious genes, the only thing that could be done was on the overall packaging: try to keep a finger on the pulse of the times, avoid excessive kitsch, formula or homogeneity, and occasionally perhaps add a splash of class.

For example: when almost all the posters for kung fu (and/or) comedy films would have Mr Yuen Tai-yung illustrate them in comical styles, I went for the younger, less sophisticated, less mature kid, who was full of curiosity, adventure, and willingness to explore comics, art, and design. His name was Joel Chu. I forget where I saw his work for the first time, but I still remember the meticulous, unshackled and naughty sense of excitement that his paintings gave me. In the following two years, Joel, who was in his early twenties, painted the movie posters for *The Return of the Pom Pom*, *Mr. Boo Meets Pom Pom*, *The Owl vs Bumbo*, *The Island* (1985), *Hong Kong 1941* and *The Lunatics* (1986), among others, as he launched a brilliant career as an illustrator and graphic designer. Undoubtedly, at the beginning (the two *Pom Pom* movies), his work was still unrefined (the composition of the characters were out of balance), but very soon, by the time he reached the *Owl* film, his personality began to shine through (the colourful, childlike naughtiness leapt out from the paper). In *Hong Kong 1941* and *The Island*, he tried to break through the tired genre by going for realism. The former was mainly based on watercolour and acrylic colours, and the latter made use of pastels—the two vividly presenting the different atmospheres of the two films (monumental epic vs horror thriller). His work became even bolder by the time of *The Lunatics*, pushing the colouring to the edge of the monochrome, and using much finer lines. But the most outstanding part was its compositional concept: a demonic hand grasping the eight characters firmly to convey a sense of suffocation. The idea was to combine both the realistic and abstract elements, and the resulting visual effect was truly powerful.

In a time when video tapes (VHS) and laser discs (LD) were not so popular yet<sup>18</sup>—that is, when

<sup>13</sup> Myself included. Apart from working for D & B, I continued my role as a writer of film reviews (long and short), essays, columns, and even serial novels. These showed up in a variety of daily, nightly and weekly papers, official and independent TV publications, as well as a range of different magazines.

<sup>14</sup> Some reference points for cost in the 1980s: a newspaper cost on average HK\$0.8 in 1981, and by 1989 that rose to HK\$2 (a 150% rise); movie tickets cost on average HK\$8 (for back row seats) in 1981, and rose to HK\$24.5 by 1989 (around 206% rise).

<sup>15</sup> Back then, cinemas were generally very large, even the smallest could contain 500-600 people. The biggest could seat an audience of 2,000.

<sup>16</sup> I would limit this term to just the economics or commercial side of things, and not cultural or creative (let alone artistic achievement). I stand firm by my view that the 1950s and 60s were the real golden period of Hong Kong cinema.

<sup>17</sup> This result of this complete commercialisation is described by David Bordwell in his *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000, p 1) as 'all too extravagant, too gratuitously wild'.

<sup>18</sup> Remember the name KPS Video Express? The supermarket-like movie videotape and disc rental opened its first shop in Hong Kong in 1987, on the fourth floor of Cityplaza in Taikoo.

Illustrations and film posters by Joel Chu for the D & B productions



*The Owl vs Bumbo* (1984): The colourful, childlike naughtiness leaps out from the paper.



*Hong Kong 1941* (1984): Following a monumental epic style.



*The Island* (1985): Capturing the horror ambience.



*The Lunatics* (1986): The idea is to combine both the realistic and abstract elements, thereby creating a powerful visual effect.

moving images were not readily shown in every corner of the city or the mobile phones that people hold in their palms—posters (and film stills) played a largely decisive role, because the audience's first impression of the movie is established through the images and messages they provide. Back then, most of the theatres were located on the ground floor, with very spacious lobbies. On the exterior wall and both sides of the door would be large, hand-painted billboards that were based on the design of the poster. Many light boxes would be placed in the lobby, showing posters and stills of three to four schedules of movies (same day, up next, and coming soon). The traditional poster size was 20 x 30 inches, which was also the biggest size that could be printed by ordinary printing machines. But shortly, that was expanded to 30 x 40 inches, and became the standard for the major productions. The poster size was a display of its production scale. In addition to the display in the lobby, posters were put up all over the streets and alleys of Hong Kong (today, due to the systemised urban management, public spaces have increasingly become privatised and monopolised by commercial syndicates, and we no longer see the concrete walls on the sides of the street or the boards surrounding construction sites covered with posters for different commodities.) Another important display point of movie posters was the giant outdoor billboards built on the exterior walls of buildings. When D & B started up, it was of course not going to pinch pennies over this. The billboard we eyed up was on the outer wall of the Everest Building at the junction of Jordan Road and Nathan Road in Kowloon. The rectangle had just about the right aspect-ratio of a widescreen. It was the busiest intersection in Yau Tsim District. Apart from the MTR exit in one corner, there were traffic lights on all four sides. Pedestrians, drivers and passengers could all see that billboard, and the daily views were extremely high. We signed a one-year lease in one go, and as it turns out, it was indeed worth the money.

As for movie stills, which came in a set of 8-10 photos, they were used to show the film's 'cast', production value and best scenes. At that time, computer technology was not yet at the point of being able to extract a certain frame from the 35mm film for enlargement. Stills had to be taken by a still photographer on the set, but because the position and salary offered very little, it was difficult to hire a skilled photographer to take charge of this job that was in actual fact very critical. And this was

because aside from being used for movie stills, the photos taken could also be end up being used for the poster, if the illustration was scrapped or deemed not suitable for the movie. For this reason, most of the time I chose to arrange separate studio shoots for the main actors of the film, according to ideas discussed by me and the graphic designer, and complete the poster using computer synthesis technology. This method was undoubtedly much more expensive, but in the 1980s, Hong Kong-made films were sold in many overseas markets, including almost the entire Southeast Asia, Chinatowns in Europe and the US (in almost every major city), and even as far as Latin America and Africa (mainly kung fu movies; also there were so-called 'overseas films' produced specifically for third world markets, and which were not released in Hong Kong). The demand alone for the promotion in these regions was very considerable, and when that is taken into account, it in fact made the whole plan rather cost-effective.

In the pre-Internet era, the trailer was the second most important publicity tool before the release of a movie, because it marked the first time the audience got to see what the movie was like (although these were very limited and could only be seen tagged to another feature film in the theatre), and as such could influence their decision on whether or not to buy tickets to it. Before the late 1970s, the trailers of Hong Kong movies were generally very long (quite often over three minutes), as producers tried to capture the audience with the film's most exciting moments. But as the market flourished, the cinema executives began to limit the number of trailers (only one per movie) and their length (preferably within 90 seconds, with an upper limit of 2 minutes), in order to schedule the maximum number of films in a day (eight to nine), be it a weekday or weekend, to boost revenue (this is probably another kind of 'excess', right?—See footnote 17). The length of feature films naturally fell under the same knife: the most popular format was 90 minutes or less, and 93 minutes would already be considered the upper limit. Later on, in a move to further limit screening time (as basic cleaning was required between each film screening), they even pushed the speed of the original 24 frames per second up to 26 frames per second.<sup>19</sup> Although this method did cut down the time of each screening, it also sped up the rhythm of the movie, while making the voices of the actors (mostly dubbed) sharper and harsher. But as it gradually became the norm, the unaware audience simply accepted the movies for what they

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<sup>19</sup> A few cinemas even boosted it up to 28 frames per second! For a 90-minute film, 26 frames a second could save them about 7 minutes of screening time.



were, and in turn even affected the filmmakers' perception and sense of rhythm: 'Fast' became a subtle habit, or even an editing standard.<sup>20</sup> Western critics often consider this rollercoaster speed in film pacing one of Hong Kong cinema's most unique features, but few understand that it is simply a glorified fault.

I digress; let's return to the trailers. To adapt to the increasingly diverse development of mass media, film promotion campaigns are broken down into detailed jobs. For example, trailers are planned ahead by a specialised company, long before a film's early production stage. They may even be shot and produced separately. But in the days of D & B, most of the tasks were taken up by just yours truly (my department started off with just three people, and even when I left there were only six), including trailers. I must admit, of all the different tasks and processes in the publicity area, trailers were the most time-consuming and most difficult, and yet they were one of my favourite parts of the job. That's because what I learned from making them were some of the rarest insights one could get. To cut a trailer, you have to watch the original film in its entirety repeatedly. After mastering the overall style of the film and its centre of gravity, you can slowly pick out the highlights (picture, dialogue, comedic moments, action, scene, plot), and then re-arrange, structure and edit them (this could include the need to retrieve clips/shots deleted or discarded<sup>21</sup>). It could be narrative, lyrical, spectacle or emotional in direction/form.

On two occasions, when releasing films from other companies, there were orders to substantially re-cut the finished film (including deleting and shooting additional scenes), of course, all with the consent in advance from the director and film company.<sup>22</sup> These tasks not only gave me the opportunity to work with many excellent video editors in the industry, they also gave me some very important training, experimentation and learning experiences for my own

editing techniques (I had previous editing experience, mainly absorbed at the TV station through following and watching Patrick Tam and Yim Ho as they filmed their TV films. Later in my debut film, I was able to put those skills to use.)

## IV

Public relations is another big part of publicity. Many people regard it as method reserved for sycophants. I don't think that's necessarily true. As mentioned earlier, Hong Kong has very small circles, and those in the media dealing with the movie world are typically entertainment editors and reporters, as well as film critics (including regular columnists and amateur independents). These were the different 'tribes' of people I was in frequent contact with, and they all have different personalities. Among the former group, many were senior reporters, authors, and some were even active in different roles as early as the Cantonese film period (for example, Mr Lam Kam, who helped Chun Kim set up Kong Ngee Motion Picture Production Company in the mid-1950s, also participated in some creative processes behind the scenes). I've always enjoyed making friends and especially listening to other people's stories, so I treated them as friends to a greater extent. The atmosphere in the circle of entertainment reporters at that time was relatively simple. Because there were so many newspapers and publications, the manpower required was far more than the headcount within the industry, so many reporters often worked concurrently as part-timers or contributors in different publications. They were really busy. Although the movie industry was booming, exclusive interviews and features were not so popular. So, gradually, a 'news sharing' system evolved out of this environment. This meant every day around 5 or 6pm, whether there had been a collective interview or an 'investigative' report, everyone would gather at The Penthouse on the top floor of the Nathan Hotel (which is also the usual

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<sup>20</sup> Another reason for the unusually fast pace of Hong Kong films is that dialogue and foley were added in post-production, instead of synchronisation on set. In other words, the film is silent during editing, and all the sounds are dependent on the notes taken by the continuity, the actors' mouthing of the dialogue, and the film editor's imagination and understanding (the continuity or deputy director would usually be there to prompt the editor, since they were on set at the shoot). In fact, sound is really the movie's main track that guides the dramatic rhythm connecting each and every frame (for example, pauses and silences in dialogue; the actors' breathing, vocals and intonation; the ambient sounds in the scene, etc., all have an impact on the film's rhythm and the tensions of the drama). Without sound, even the most professional and experienced video editors would have a tough time accurately grasping the rhythm of the film. On top of that, Hong Kong films generally left very little time for post-production (a month, if one is lucky; the most extreme cases were less than two weeks!) I haven't even mentioned the cinema's strict rules over film length... ah, almost forgot! In processing Hong Kong action movies, the frame rate was often adjusted from 24 frames per second to 22 frames, so as to create a more dynamic effect of the action. This also accelerated the rhythm of the film. As such, under the influence of these factors, most films ended up, to different degrees, imbalanced in rhythm. A nice way to describe it would be 'crisp', 'sharp', 'dynamic', and 'no nonsense', but in actual fact they were but one thing: 'Fast'.

<sup>21</sup> Movies from the 1980s, especially action movies, used a lot of film, and there were a lot of clips that ended up on the chopping board (up to half an hour or more). It is a pity that almost none of these deleted scenes have been preserved.

<sup>22</sup> Both were Taiwan productions: *The Outsiders* and *Desire* (both 1986).



place for general film company press conferences) to exchanges materials for reports.<sup>23</sup> It was all rather ‘democratic’ and ‘fair’. The size and weight of the report that was eventually published simply depended on the editor’s final decision. Because of this format, there was always a tacit understanding that the reports would stick to the agreed upon tone and content. There were rarely any toxic rivalries, shock stories, exaggerations and fabrications. The relationships with actors maintained a basic trust, and many of them even built friendships with individual stars.

Among the many entertainment reporters, one deserves a special mention: Lam Bing (1941-2004), who was commonly called Bing Jeh, or ‘Big Sister Bing’. From the early days (1964), when she started as a film and television reporter after joining *Entertainment News*, Bing Jeh continued writing for more than 40 years. Her personality was straightforward and optimistic (I can still hear her hearty laugh today), and she loved to help others (With *Hu-du-men* [1996], if she had not sold it so well to Clifton Ko, who then became the film’s producer, there’s no chance I would’ve been able to make that movie). She was also loyal and dependable (When I invited her to join D & B, she agreed immediately, and never worked for other film companies after), hospitable (how could I possibly forget her unrivalled fish steaming skills and her marvellous spicy pepper soup noodles?), observant, meticulous and intelligent (I always thought she was the reincarnation of Huang Rong, the legendary heroine from Louis Cha’s *wuxia* novel *Legends of the Condor Heroes*). She also had an astonishing memory (she would interview actors and directors for three or four hours without an audio recording, and be able to write a 10,000-word exclusive feature, with verbatim quotes, which were in-depth, dynamic, vivid, juicy and yet still respectful. Reading her articles is like meeting the interviewee in person). So it was no surprise that she was offered her own columns in different papers shortly after she began her career (Lam Bing’s name is said to come from her fondness for ice popsicles in her teenage years, as ‘Bing’ is the word for ice in Chinese; her other pen name is ‘Ah Gut’, which she mostly used for short write-ups). Technically speaking, she was more of a renowned author than a reporter. She and I got along really well (I was a meaner person than her, and she would often remind me in private to



The meticulous and intelligent Lam Bing (left). Lam was adept at writing in-depth and vivid exclusive features, and was later invited to join D & B. (Right: Alfred Cheung)

avoid making many mistakes), and because we were almost neighbours (I lived in Lockhart House, she lived in Elizabeth House), we saw each other almost every day during the two years we worked together. After I left D & B, we maintained a close relationship (at one point, she gave me a set of back-up keys to her home for safekeeping, just in case). I consulted her before making every important decision at work. Unfortunately, on 23 November 2004, she was found dead in her bathroom at the age of 63. (The cause of death was believed to be due to her slipping in the bathroom and hitting her head.<sup>24</sup>)

Bing Jeh was born on 1 January (her original name was ‘Mei-nin’, meaning ‘beautiful year’); it’s easy to remember. Thanks to her, there is an extra meaning for me to the day every year.

I left D & B around the second half of 1987. In those 1,000-odd days, most of the time I was happy. Our whole department was young and we would laugh all day together at work. From what I understand, they have kept in touch over the years, even as each family’s kids have their own families now. On occasion, they would continue to have gatherings where we used to hold post-preview-screening dinners with paper editors and critics—at the Peking Restaurant at the junction of Nathan Road and Jordan Road (alas, it is no longer). My relationship with John Sham was completely based on mutual trust, so I always felt very free. This trust was

<sup>23</sup> To find out what The Penthouse looked like back then, check out Chor Yuen’s masterpiece *Winter Love* (1968). In the film, Patrick Tse Yin plays the author Chim Kei (the character was likely based on Yee Tat’s original novel) who loves to write his novels in one particular cafe, where he meets mystery woman Mimi (played by Josephine Siao Fong-fong). The cafe scenes were shot at The Penthouse.

<sup>24</sup> See ‘Fage: Qu Jingchang Tixie Houbei, Zhuanlan Zuojia Yiren Zhiji: Lin Bing Cushi’ (‘Chow Yun-fat: She Always Guided and Supported Her Juniors / Lam Bing, Columnist and Bosom Friend of Many Performing Artists, Dies a Sudden Death’), *Apple Daily*, 24 November 2004 (in Chinese). [https://hk.entertainment.appledaily.com/entertainment/daily/article/20041124/4461684?itm\\_campaign=hkad\\_internal\\_link&itm\\_medium=internal&itm\\_source=hkad\\_web&itm\\_content=internal\\_link\\_1](https://hk.entertainment.appledaily.com/entertainment/daily/article/20041124/4461684?itm_campaign=hkad_internal_link&itm_medium=internal&itm_source=hkad_web&itm_content=internal_link_1)

something I also sensed between him and Dickson Poon in the early days of D & B, until people with different styles joined later (which was also the time when most of the non-mainstream productions John gave the green light to were not very popular). I didn't like, and, to a degree, looked down on some of the new producers, and naturally began thinking of leaving. *An Autumn's Tale* (1987) was the last film (and one of the most satisfying films) I promoted at D & B. The film broke out under poor expectations from everyone (except for John and me), and reached box office earnings of HK\$25,546,552. It ranked fifth that year, and certainly gave me a sort of fairy tale ending in reality.

[Translated by Diane To]

**Shu Kei**, Hong Kong film director and critic. He is the Founding Chairman of the Cantonese Cinema Study Association and former Dean of School of Film and Television, The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts.



Chapter I >>

# In-Depth Portraits

# John Sham

## Diversification Strategies of a Resolute Producer



Interviewers: Janice Chow, Priscilla Chan, Kwok Ching-ling  
(8 December 2019)

Collated by Eric Tsang Siu-wang

**I**n the 1980s, D & B Films Co., Ltd. rose to fame in an environment teeming with competition, like Golden Harvest (HK) Limited and Cinema City Company Limited. As its helmsman in the early years, John Sham's contribution to the production company did not go unnoticed. Unlike filmmakers who went to film school or learnt their ropes in the industry, John Sham was a social activist in Hong Kong as a young man. He went to the UK where he worked as a journalist and a documentarist. After returning to Hong Kong, he joined the film industry by chance as an amateur, and subsequently became involved in various roles, from associate producer, producer to actor. He was literally everywhere, from behind the scenes to the big screen. In D & B's early years, John Sham already had a clear direction—besides shooting mainstream commercial titles, the studio would give opportunities to creatives to realise their pet projects. Works like *The Lunatics* (1986) and *An Autumn's Tale* (1987) enjoyed both popular and critical acclaim. Despite Sham's modest claim that he did not achieve very much, he was undoubtedly an important figure in 1980s Hong Kong cinema. His innovative energy and vision come through in this interview as he discusses D & B's organisational structure and creative direction.



I was born in 1952 in Hong Kong to a family of six boys and girls. I was the youngest. As children, we were surrounded by elders of Chaozhou descent who spoke Cantonese with an accent. We got used to their speech. Later when I was hosting ‘Three Hours Time Travelling’ at Commercial Radio, I invented a character named Lui King who spoke Chaozhou-accented Cantonese. I thought it was fun. Then it just spiralled out of hand. While making *Winners & Sinners* (1983), Sammo Hung said you must speak like that. After that, there was no stopping—I had to do the accent in whatever role I was playing until everyone mistook me for a Chaozhou native. But actually my father hailed from Enping county in Guangdong province.

My family wasn’t particularly well-off. I loved film even as a child. Though I didn’t always understand everything, I tried to. I remember after seeing *Blow-Up* (1966), sitting in Macpherson Playground with a good friend, discussing life. We were intrigued that tennis could be played strike by strike, without a ball. It felt almost like a zen philosophy.

Like all baby boomers, I read English magazines, paid attention to foreign news, and was influenced by the protests against the Vietnam War in the US and the European students’ movements as a young man. My social consciousness sharpened in 1968 and I devoured books by Yin Haikuang and Bertrand Russell. I belonged to the cultured crowd, a hipster if you will, but I was not drunk on poetry and art; rather I was into reaching out and social reform. I also liked music and was a professional musician for four years. I had a gig in a bar in Wan Chai. I disapproved of the Vietnam War. I told the marines at the bar, ‘It’s not your war’ and almost got beaten up. Then I joined the hunger strike for the *Baodiao* movement in defending the Diaoyu Islands and stopped going to work. I was fired. That marked the end of my music career.

## Joining the Film Industry

In the 1970s, I was a freelance investigative reporting researcher at a television station in the UK. Coincidentally American film director Michael Mann made contact through some other people. He’s famous now, but back then he hadn’t even shot his first film. He wanted to write a story about drug trafficking in the Golden Triangle. At the end of 1978, Michael and I were to go to Hong Kong to do research. I did not know anyone from the local film circle, so I asked a colleague for help. He said, ‘There’s someone named Leong Po-chih who was a film editor at the BBC. He has just made a film called *Jumping Ash* (1976)’. Back in Hong Kong, I got in touch with Po-chih and Philip Chan. I hadn’t thought of making film my career. After this I went to work for *City Magazine* as an Editor-in-Chief. Director Tsui Hark had just finished shooting *The Butterfly Murders* (1979). We were chatting one day and my interest was piqued. I contributed plot ideas for *Dangerous Encounter—1st Kind* (1980) and soon became acquainted with a number of people in the industry.

During those two to three years, I grew from dabbling in film to making it my secondary career. Sammo Hung and I developed a close working relationship starting in 1982. We did the planning for *Winners & Sinners*. In January 1983, I joined Bo Ho Films Company Limited as a production coordinator, committing myself to film full-time. Back then ‘Ad Magazines’ for films were popular on TV. I came up with most of the content for the ads for our titles. As I was on friendly terms with the Hong Kong New Wave directors, I invited Ann Hui and Yim Ho to make guest appearances in *Winners & Sinners*. How else would Sammo Hung who rose from the bottom ranks of the industry know them? I also ran into Johnny Mak at Cannes. He said, ‘Curly, why don’t we team up?’ I replied, ‘How? We’re both producers... unless you direct.’ And he did. There was a Bo Ho production entitled *Long Arm of the Law* (1984) for which I served as the associate producer. Sammo Hung and Johnny Mak were the producers. I came up with the story and recruited Johnny Mak for the production. Sammo was busy overseeing Bo Ho operations and directing films at the same time. He surrounded himself with a coterie of associate producers, creating a sort of think tank. Their names were sometimes not listed in the credits. I was one of them, Wu Ma was another one.

## Founding of D & B

As Bo Ho was a Golden Harvest satellite company, distribution would sometimes involve much internal politics that I had no interest in. Dickson Poon approached me in 1983. He said he wanted to set up a film production company and that he was treating it seriously like a business. We were friends, so negotiations went smoothly. I said I wanted to recruit Sammo Hung. Sammo’s relationship with Golden Harvest was an intriguing one; he wasn’t bound by contract, yet he would never leave the company. I proposed, ‘I’m not asking you to leave Golden Harvest. Bo Ho can carry on making films. Although I took care of the literary side of affairs, I was still part of the Hung’s Troupe, wasn’t I? By the same logic, you and your troupe can help D & B.’ Sammo was the one who came up with the two characters of D & B’s name. He liked the second character ‘Bo’, which coincides with the



At the pre-shooting ceremony of *The Return of Pom Pom* (1984): Dickson Poon, John Sham (front row left, right).



John Sham (left) and Sammo Hung (right) are two friends who respect and admire each other. Sham was part of the Hung's Troupe and included Hung when D & B was established.

transliteration of his own name. Dickson said there must be a 'D' somewhere, so Sammo suggested, why not D & B? In terms of shares, Sammo and I own 40%, Dickson 60%. We paid a producer's fee to Sammo every year to show we were working together, but in actual fact, his responsibilities were nominal; at times he hadn't even seen the films or participated in administrative decisions. Basically if I gave the green light, the film would go ahead.

Dickson wanted the 'D' in D & B's logo to align with that of his watch company, some sort of a 'continuity'. Five lines and the letter 'D'. I heard it was designed by Richard Yung. I got Chan Wing-leung to compose the accompanying music for the opening theme. I had worked with Chan Wing-leung when I was a musician. He also wrote soundtracks for D & B films. What's amazing is he knows orchestration and how to write symphonic scores, which not many people can do.

D & B was officially established between October and November 1983. We had a tiny office in Chatham Court, Tsim Sha Tsui; not long after, we moved to The Mangan on Cameron Road, where the office even had a screening room.

## Diversified Creative Direction

In the vibrant 1980s, Golden Harvest had several satellite companies of different orientations—Jackie Chan's Golden Way Films, Sammo Hung's Bo Ho, and also those involving Michael Hui. Cinema City's mainstay was comedy of course, being so resourceful. From the start, D & B's positioning was about diversity, using a 'two-legged' approach. On the one hand, it heeded commercial demands—genre and cast were essential for overseas sales; examples included *The Return of Pom Pom* (1984), *Yes, Madam* (1985), *It's a Drink! It's a Bomb!* (1985). On the other hand, I wanted to shoot topics that creatives were passionate about—quality films, not only box-office hits. Many people wondered, why make films that defy categorisation? For instance, what is *Hong Kong 1941* (1984)? It's not *wenyi* film, and there's no romance. *Hong Kong 1941* is representative of this second type of film D & B was producing. It was followed by other titles. The plots for most of them were conceived by myself and others, with the exception of *An Autumn's Tale* which is not my brainchild. Stanley Kwan's *Love Unto Wastes* (1986) and Tony Au's *Dream Lovers* (1986) were alternative D & B films that didn't come out of market calculations. At that time, *Rouge* (1988), the much talked about film directed by Stanley Kwan and produced by Golden Harvest had not been released yet.

Viewers who hadn't seen *An Autumn's Tale* had no idea what it was about. The publicity manager Shu Kei came up with lines like 'The most dizzyingly-paced, wildly bonkers car chase you've ever seen!' and 'Women are all troubles!' I said, 'Seriously? Are we stooping that low?' He said, 'All the *wenyi* film lovers are here. But the sugarcane-chewing masses are intimidated. We need something that speaks to them'.

The Taiwan distributor Wang Ying-hsiang gave our films, such as *The Lunatics* and *Yes, Madam*, new Chinese titles. He changed *The Lunatics* into 'Everyday is Day Seventh'. I asked him what's the matter with you? He said, 'You don't understand. Come on, how on earth would there be "Day Seventh"? That's lunatic!'. For *Yes, Madam*, he said unlike for the Hong Kong market, the selling-point was not the relatively unknown Michelle Yeoh,

but nobodies like myself and Tsui Hark, hence the Taiwanese title, 'Little Shrimp versus Whale'. *An Autumn's Tale* had an even more outrageous Taiwanese title that meant 'Rogue Tycoon'. All this happened post-*A Better Tomorrow* (1986). Wang commented, 'They're walking around Chinatown unarmed? What's wrong with them?' These Taiwanese titles were downright misleading. But I didn't argue with him. He was the distributor; he knew his market.

D & B did not operate like a corporation. Affairs of different nature were handled by small teams of creatives. Say, Ronny Yu, Clifton Ko and Raymond Fung were friends; Linda Kuk was tasked with communicating with them. Winnie Yu and Kam Kwok-leung were chummy so they paired up to make movies. D & B did not have real satellite companies. Though *Dream Lovers* and *Love Unto Wastes*, under Vicky Leung, was nominally filmed and produced by The Pearl City Films Ltd., the crew were our people. Mobile Film Production Ltd. discussed collaboration possibilities with me, but ended up working with Golden Harvest. It didn't matter, as long as it worked and they were happy. I was producer for titles with high ticket thresholds or a large budget, such as *Where's Officer Tuba?* (1986), *The Owl vs Bumbo* (1984), as well as those starring Michelle Yeoh in the lead. Besides I served as producer for *The Lunatics* and *Passion* (1986) because they were films I wanted to make. I went about my role with zeal. I read the screenplay, watched the dailies. I watched right after the first scene was shot. If they were on the right track, they wouldn't get a call from me; otherwise, I would question what the heck they were doing.

### Struggling to Secure Circuit Release

Signing an agreement with the Shaw Brothers (Hong Kong) Ltd. cinema circuit was an ordeal. Dickson and some others were the negotiators, not me. Golden Harvest was our only competitor. They tried to convince us to compromise. 'Let's not compete. Fifty-fifty, what do you say? Fifty-two weeks—you get 26, I get 26'. Initially we were worried about film supply, then we thought 'What the heck? We've to give it a shot'. From 1985, we had secured four leading cinemas in D & B cinema circuit, with the subsequent addition of M2 Theatre that we secured after negotiating with the Fu Lo-yung family. M2 Theatre was suited for D & B films, but it was given to us on condition that we also rented its sister theatre, Majestic. So we leased out Majestic to another company.

What followed was we had to come up with films. We needed things to screen and it wouldn't be us doing striptease. If we relied on independent studios for supply, it could hurt box-office revenue if the quality wasn't up to par. Shaws had agreed to provide us with a certain number of titles, but in the end, they gave them to Golden Harvest. It was a verbal agreement so we didn't much say about this. We had to ramp up production. If we had our own studio we could work around the clock. At the time, Kin Shing Film Production Studio in Diamond Hill was pretty much the only studio left in Hong Kong. We asked Yip Wing-cho of production to talk to them. We rented the studio; Yip was made the studio manager. Then began days and nights of non-stop shooting. The crew could work on shifts but the leading actors and the creatives couldn't. I had so much on my plate that I basically lived in the studio. My record was seven days straight, sleeping either in the studio or in my car.

Boosting production coincided with my mindset. We had to have high ticket threshold or big-budget peak-season runs. Such Category A releases run for a minimum of three weeks, and gross at least HK\$20 or \$30 million at the box-office. It was quite a feat, considering tickets were only HK\$30 each. Category B screen for



The talents behind *Yes, Madam* (1985): (from left) John Sham, Tsui Hark, Mang Hoi.



D & B made a last-minute decision to move *It's a Drink! It's a Bomb!* (1985) into its Christmas release slot. The film starred (left to right) George Lam, Maggie Cheung and John Sham.



at least two weeks and bring in HK\$7 to \$9 million. Category C need to gross HK\$3 to HK\$4 million with a theatrical run of one week; the shooting budget for this category was usually between around HK\$1 million. I recruited John Chan Koon-chung to make low-budget Category C films; we thought it might well be an opportunity to groom new talent. Films like *Conduct Zero* (1986) and *The Goofy Gang* (1987) all came out of that.

Hong Kong was making tons of movies in those days. We needn't have to worry about not having anything to screen. But if they were all week-long affairs, how were we going to pay the rent? The cinemas had to be full all the time. The rent per month of the four Shaw cinemas was HK\$3.3 million; M2 was relatively cheap—HK\$0.75 million, I think. If we wanted to make money, we had to shoot our own films. That way, we wouldn't have to share box-office income. *Magnificent Warriors* (1987) may be a flop, but we were looking at the big picture.

Meanwhile, we also distributed other company's productions to fill the screening schedule. Some were quite interesting. I personally like *Super Citizen* (Taiwan: 1985; HK: 1986) and *China Behind* (1974). Peter Yung's documentary *Warlords of the Golden Triangle* (1987) was also pretty good.

### Heeding Directors' Requests

*The Return of Pom Pom* was released in the summer of 1984. It was D & B's debut film, but we had more than one project in mind at the same time. I hadn't completely left Bo Ho when *Hong Kong 1941* was being filmed, but was D & B's executive director already, so it was a joint production between the two companies. Back when I was at Johnson Film Company, I had a screenplay written by John Chan Koon-chung. Titled *Hong Kong 1941*, it was about air force pilots from different parts of China battling Japanese aircrafts in World War II. This kind of film is easy to make nowadays, but back then, we didn't have the capability, so the screenplay was shelved. Later I had the idea of transplanting the title onto our own creations. It ended up on Leong Po-chih's film.

In the finale of *Hong Kong 1941*, Chow Yun-fat, Alex Man and Cecilia Yip were at sea when the Japanese patrol boat approached. Wielding a hand grenade, Chow decides to sacrifice himself in order to take out the enemy and save his friends. The ending had been fixed from the start, but I told Leong Po-chih to remove it from the script and just tell the two male actors verbally what it's about. I wanted to watch the footage before deciding who should die. I remember Chow came to me under some pretext and made the remark, 'John, you're creative. You must know who should die'. What he meant was 'It should be me'. Alex Man in his usual dramatic style proclaimed, 'Me—I am the one who should die. Me of course!' Actually I had known it should be Chow after reviewing just some of the footage. His death would make for smoother flow of the plot and the impact would be immense.

*The Island* (1985) was shot on Tung Ping Chau. I had visited the island as a child, and thought it stunning and extraordinary. I wanted to make a thriller, written by Shu Kei, about the helplessness of modern civilisation in the face of irrational violence. I recruited a lot of people, including Deanie Ip who came to learn the ropes of behind-the-scenes work. As there had been a lot of delays, the director Leong Po-chih needed to return to the UK to shoot *Ping Pong* (1986). He left the set after shooting three-quarters and David Chung took over the reins. Since Po-chih was absent, I supervised the editing of the film.



Chow Yun-fat (right) and Alex Man (left) both wanted to be the martyr in *Hong Kong 1941* (1984).



Michael Hui (right) played opposite John Sham (left) in *Mr. Boo Meets Pom Pom* (1985).





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*The Island* (1985) was shot on location in Tung Ping Chau. It was a challenging experience for the crew, who had to endure plenty of hardships in a remote environment.

For over two months, we lived on Tung Ping Chau, making trips back to the city every few days. We had this cordless phone the size of a shoe-shine box that could only make calls in a certain spot below the police station. We did everything from scratch. We hired a cook and built three latrines. The hardships were plenty but not apparent. During the shooting, I noticed a pond on the island and remarked aloud that it would be nice to have a tree in the middle of it. I shouldn't have said it. The props crew had to drain the pond, transplant a tree, and pour the water back in. I was thinking on my feet; ideas popped up as the shooting progressed. I saw a snake one day. Poor actors. The next thing they knew there was a snake behind them in one scene.

*Mr. Boo Meets Pom Pom* (1985) was Michael Hui's first non-Golden Harvest title. In retrospect, the production wasn't amazing. There's supposed to be one scene where he tries to save me after I fall into a freezing lake. When I'm about to go under, he hands me some kind of a tube. However, none of that scene materialised. It would have been too difficult and we didn't have time. Things were really tough at times. For instance, *It's a Drink! It's a Bomb!* was slotted for an Easter release; however the shooting of *Where's Officer Tuba?* couldn't finish in time to make the Christmas slot. We had to really hurry up, so we recruited Johnnie To to head a second shooting unit.

*Passion* was about a topic I liked—what happens when two best friends fall in love with the same person. I got in touch with Sylvia Chang: 'You love romance and you have so much experience. Why don't you take care of it?' She said, sure. Winnie Yu suggested getting Isabel Ni to write the screenplay but it wasn't what I had in mind. I said to Chang, 'Sylvia, Ni's novels are excellent, but her screenplay isn't what I want. Let's not trouble her anymore. Why don't you write?'

I always respected creatives. I rarely rejected directors' requests. That said, I didn't let Derek Yee use entirely new actors in *The Lunatics*. Using inexperienced actors in a film about the mentally ill would have posed two risks—the audience would be bored; if the actors didn't do a good job, we would be finished. It wasn't a film that rode on its actors' renown. Chow Yun-fat and Tony Leung Chiu-wai were not yet the stars they would go on to become. The film takes the perspective of the mentally challenged and conveys the message that one should not give them labels. Calling them 'lunatics' may be derogatory now, but back then it was just another description. The film is clearly sympathetic to them.

*Kiss Me Goodbye* (1986) was Winnie Yu's baby. I remember telling her after watching it, 'This is not going to work. It'll flop'. I remember sitting in the editing room telling Tsang Kan-cheong that we needed to reshoot 40%. But Winnie managed to convince me, 'Let's not do that. Let's give the director a chance. We probably won't lose too much. It's not an expensive movie to start with.' If I had moved in, it would have been something completely different. But I decided to keep the film as is and let it flop.

Getting Sean Lau Ching-wan to play *Silent Love* (1986) was John (David) Chiang's idea. Lau was green, yet you knew he would shine, so I let him try. The story was also Chiang's idea. I felt having a bunch of deaf-mute pickpockets running into such a jerk is quite unusual. It was also John Chiang who came to me to discuss the screenplay for *The Wrong Couples* (1987). I recall casting Josephine Siao Fong-fong was my idea. Richard Ng is an excellent actor, but not many people knew how good he was at serious drama. He was a stage actor in the



John Sham (left) produced the D & B headliner *Yes, Madam* (1985), which starred Michelle Yeoh (middle) and Cynthia Rothrock (right).



*Final Victory* (1987) was shot at Kin Shing Film Production Studio: (from left) Margaret Li, Loletta Lee, Winnie Yu, John Sham, Eric Tsang, Patrick Tam.

UK. Watching him and Josephine Siao Fong-fong battle it out on-screen is delicious. These films were two-week releases—relatively low-cost but wonderful to watch.

*Magnificent Warriors* had multiple sets. Director David Chung had to fly to the US for the air combat scene; there Derek Yee and I each headed a unit. Johnnie To remained in Hong Kong to shoot the scene of Richard Ng's entrance. We found ourselves in a similar situation with *Royal Warriors* (1986), due to a tight schedule. Philip Chan was in charge of the unit that filmed Blackie Ko Shou-liang's car stunt; Johnnie To took care of the unit shooting Sanada Hiroyuki (aka Henry Sanada). One day everyone sat there not knowing what to film. When I arrived, I noticed there was no script for that particular scene. I said, 'Good. Let's have a wide shot then.' Back then lighting a wide shot took at least an hour. Chan Kiu-ying and I pored over the scene anxiously, while Tsang Kan-cheong wrote the script. *Magnificent Warriors* is about a very small country that we assumed to be Bhutan. We built an entire set in Hualien, Taiwan. As the shooting progressed, I couldn't think of an ending. Since the budget was running out and the film was already long enough, I decided to burn the city down.

*An Autumn's Tale* came about when John Chan Koon-chung rang me about a story that Mabel Cheung and Alex Law wanted me to read. I later found out that they hadn't been able to find investors, because it's not a genre film and Chow Yun-fat wasn't a big name yet. Chan told them why don't you show John Sham the script? I was shooting late that night so I read it on the set. Ten pages to the ending and I was already ecstatic. I called them, 'Come to the office tomorrow morning.' The amount they requested wouldn't have been enough. I added a bit more and asked Winnie Yu to follow up. I had intended to cast Chow Yun-fat in Derek Yee's role in *Magnificent Warriors*. I pondered for a long time. Finally I decided to put him in *An Autumn's Tale* instead—that character had to be him and nobody else, unlike his role in *Magnificent Warriors*. Chow had only one film left on the D & B contract.

At the time I had to fly to Hualien to film *Magnificent Warriors*, whose investment was four or five times that of *An Autumn's Tale*. I was personally shooting for close to 20 days. I told them, there's no way I can come to New York to watch you. The truth was to avoid influencing the director, I rarely showed up on set. While filming was underway, some people were pessimistic about how *An Autumn's Tale* would turn out. Being too remote to judge, I suggested that when the location bits were done, they should come back to Hong Kong for the rest of the film. Hence all the indoor scenes of *An Autumn's Tale* were shot in Hong Kong. Since the original cinematographer in the US would not come with the rest of the crew, I recruited David Chung to be the cinematographer.

After reviewing the footage, I knew *An Autumn's Tale* would be a winner. But did I know it would be the champion that it was? It's hard to say. I remember it grossed only HK\$0.7 million on its first day. Dickson got a hold of me to break the news that he had signed the US animation *An American Tail* (1986) without my knowing. But two weeks in, *An Autumn's Tale* was doing better than the first day. It had every sign of being a long-running success. I got in touch with Gordon Fung Ping-chung. We split the D & B cinema circuit. Then with M2 Theatre heading the pack, we found 11 more theatres to take over. We gave 15 or 16 theatres to *An American Tail*; if not they could sue us. Under such circumstances, *An Autumn's Tale* ran for two more weeks, grossing HK\$0.4 million or HK\$0.5 million on its last day. Who would have known that it had so much staying power? If it wasn't for this arrangement, it might have broken box-office records.

Kam Kwok-leung was a genius with a fixation on twins. I adopted a laissez-faire attitude to two-week films like *Wonder Women* (1987). Since it was a collaboration between him and Winnie Yu, it couldn't be bad. I was happy to give creatives more freedom. *Sapporo Story* (1987) was another two-week film. I liked the story, it wasn't expensive to make and the song was nice. I flew to Hokkaido to watch the filming. By this time, D & B had a reputation for making interesting, non-mainstream films. That's why Wong Wah-kay contacted me. There's no question of losing money, because our focus was on the big picture.

People who wanted to make period films wouldn't have come to me. I suppose if there was a project like *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987), I might have taken it on. But no one got in touch and I didn't seek them out.

## D & B's Position

One day, Stephen Shin said he had a story. After listening, I said it's not bad, go ahead. *Brotherhood* (1986) was a two-week film. Stephen did a good job. But I didn't agree with his subsequent work *Easy Money* (1987); it was a copy of *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968). I said we invested so much into building Michelle Yeoh's image as an action actor, why would you want to make her a pretty rich girl? I told Dickson that I didn't want to be credited as producer. We began to see things differently and I felt maybe we would be better as friends. I left D & B in late 1987. At Maverick Film Ltd. which I co-founded, I continued to make films with Patrick Tam, Derek Yee, and Mabel Cheung.

Compared to Golden Harvest and Golden Princess, D & B was the youngest sibling. They had many satellite companies. We didn't; we did everything from scratch. But we had drive and energy, and tons of friends who stood by us. I told Johnnie To, I'm grateful to this day that we waved and you ran over to help out.

Honestly, I never felt I did anything of significance. I supplied the direction, the creativity was theirs. But I had one principle—that I could let my daughters watch any film with my name. Several decades down the road when my grown daughters ask her father, why did you make this kind of film, can I say it was just for bread and butter? No, I can't say that.

I'm no longer involved in production. The last project I initiated was *Echoes of the Rainbow* (2010, John Sham is listed as an executive producer); it was the sort of thing I like. At my age, I'm only good for making suggestions as I've lost touch with people's tastes. After producing *Eight Tails of Gold* (1989), I left the film industry. The Newport Circuit had just opened and the Taiwan market was flourishing, but I noticed a lot of indiscriminate film-making. Sometimes people not even qualified to be assistant director would go on to become executive producer and start selling movies once they grabbed hold of two actors. I told Michael Hui, 'I don't know how you carry on. I'm feeling my age. I'm out of touch and no longer in the prime of my creativity. So I stop'.

[Translated by Piera Chen]

## Stephen Shin

### Targeting the Middle-Class Audience Demographic



Interviewers: Wong Ha-pak, May Ng, Kwok Ching-ling

(9 December 2019)

Collated by Wong Ha-pak

**I**n 1979, Stephen Shin made his directorial debut with *Affairs*. A few years later, he directed *Eclipse* (1982), which depicted urban femininity. Both films appeal to the sensibilities of the growing demographic of middle-class audiences. With his next picture, however, Shin shifted course with the male-centric crime film, *Brotherhood* (1986), resulting in both a critical and commercial success. Marking a turning point in Shin's filmmaking career, the film also earned him an invitation to join the board of D & B as an executive director to oversee its creative team and production division. From the onset, Shin had a clear strategy and preference for productions that appealed to middle-class sensibilities. The company's party line aligned with D & B's image and closely reflected the predominant lifestyle trends at the time; D & B even went one better to become some sort of a trendsetter. Under this model, Shin directed *Heart to Hearts* (1988) and *Happy Together* (1989), etc. and produced a string of urban comedies. As the company's executive director, he was committed to maintaining certain standards while continuing to explore new genres and to expand overseas markets accordingly. Adopting a fiscally responsible approach, he ensured that costs were kept under control. Assuming the helm after John Sham's sudden departure, Shin's journey was not without its challenges. In retrospect, rather than producing big-budget fare that featured epic battle scenes, Shin was happy to craft light-hearted and modestly-budgeted films that delivered positive, meaningful messages, in which the audience could find a little piece of themselves.



## From Television to Film

I moved from Macao to Hong Kong in 1957. I was accepted to the Chung Chi College at The Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1971, majoring in Sociology. I began working for TVB (Television Broadcasts Limited) while I was still at university. After graduation, I worked at TVB as an assistant producer before becoming a full-fledged director. At the time, TVB was in the process of transitioning from film to electronic media, and I learnt a few skills and techniques by chance. I was one of the first to shoot with a video camcorder, when I was the producer on the mini-drama series, *Strange Tales in the World*. But I had to contend with an overwhelming array of technical issues and eventually fell ill. I was admitted to a hospital. No one at the station seemed to care. But then, Kitty Ip paid me a sudden visit at Selina Chow's request. Ip said, 'The entire team is at CTV (Commercial Television). Come join us!' I was deeply moved and immediately jumped ship to CTV.

Not long after, CTV shut down. Ambitious as I was, I thought to myself: Now I'm free under no obligations, why not try my hand at feature films? Uncle Fu Che said to me, 'Our company needs talent, but we're leftists. What do you think?' As long as we promoted altruistic values, I didn't see a problem. So I drew from personal experiences and anecdotes from the people around me to craft the narrative for my first feature film, *Affairs*. I adopted the pseudonym, Mok Song, for the screenwriting credits. Since the film was backed by the Great Wall Movie Enterprises Ltd, Fu Che and Shek Hwei agreed to perform in it before their retirement. Perhaps my unconventional approach to filmmaking is the reason why I was listed among the Hong Kong New Wave directors.

## Joining the Board at D & B

I became involved with D & B entirely due to an accidental encounter with John Sham on the street. He simply asked, 'Interested in making films?' I answered, 'Yes!' The resulting film was *Brotherhood*. It was released immediately following *Caper* (aka *Hong Kong Cyber Brothers*, 1986). Fortunately, *Brotherhood* did quite well at the box office. It opened many doors for me in terms of my career.

After the midnight preview screening of *Brotherhood*, Dickson Poon literally dragged me to his house and we talked until daybreak. By Sunday, the following day, news had spread that the film had already grossed over HK\$1 million. On Monday, Dickson requested to see me. During the meeting, Raymond Leung, another board member, told me that the company wanted to appoint me as executive director. I said I needed to discuss it with John Sham first. Sham said that he and Dickson had decided to part ways due to irreconcilable differences. He was set to leave the company. 'Take the job. At least the company will survive a little longer.' It was clear to me that the livelihoods of many people were at stake. So I accepted the offer, and was tasked with managing the creative team and production division.

## Two or Three Things About *Easy Money*

D & B's management structure was very simple with Dickson as the owner and Raymond as the chairman of the board. The three of us comprised the entire upper management. Linda Kuk was the other executive director but left the company soon after I joined. The distribution department was headed by Otto Leong. Of course, there were also the marketing and creative departments and so forth.



*Brotherhood* (1986) was a critically acclaimed production: (from left) Lam Wai, director Stephen Shin, Alex Man, Danny Lee, Kuk Fung.



(From left) *In the Line of Duty 4* (1989) director Yuen Woo-ping, Stephen Shin, Raymond Leung. Leung succeeded Dickson Poon as the new chairman of the board.



The crew travelled to Europe to shoot *Easy Money* (1987). (Left photo, from left) Stephen Shin, Michelle Yeoh and Kuk Fung.

Mr Poon gave me the freedom to pursue whatever projects that I wanted, with the exception of *Easy Money* (1987). At the time, he was itching to try his hand at directing and wanted to personally oversee a planned scene to be shot in Repulse Bay. But once we arrived on location, he promptly handed the directing reins back over to me. He said later that he was only joking about wanting to direct.

At the time, Michelle Yeoh was struggling with old injuries. She didn't perform any fight scenes in the film but there were still a number of action sequences that required her to perform such taxing activities as paragliding and horseback riding. To shoot a car chase scene in Paris, Mr Poon recruited a local stunt coordinator, who was famous for having previously worked on James Bond films. His asking price was quite high. Due to the tight production schedule we conducted simultaneous shoots with two separate units; I planned to splice the parts with the actors together with the action sequences in post-production. Unfortunately, the stunt scenes were handled quite sloppily. After Paris, we were scheduled to go to Switzerland and film in the snow. It would be logistically impossible for us to retrieve the vehicles and horses that we had been filming with afterwards! I decided to handle the remaining stunt car scenes myself. The local stunt coordinator flipped out and seized much of our equipment and supplies. They threatened us and even held people hostage. It was reported in the news.

### Focus on Lighthearted Middle-Class Sitcoms

Dickson was passionate about cinema and respected creative talent and directors. The company had a strict code of practice, with several clear principles: we did not produce Category-III films, period films and films dealing with subject matter such as 'prostitution, drugs or gambling'. If such content popped up within the narrative of an action film, it was never treated in a gratuitous or exploitative manner. D & B's standards and practices were very much in line with my own personal ethos, a middle-class kind of style. It was also consistent with the images of the company's affiliated fashion lines and watch brands. Our overall direction was to promote 'middle-class' culture starting from the intellectuals. The most important decision I made was establishing a solid creative team. I put my junior from university, Ip Kwong-kim, in charge. I didn't discriminate when it came to the provenance of script. What we would do was simply set a price for the script and made sure it's fair.

We were operating a theatrical distribution circuit. With 52 weeks in a year, we essentially needed at least twenty films to fill the screening schedule. D & B produced around ten films in-house; the remaining slots were filled with outside commissions. Sometimes outside production companies expected us to fund their projects. Other times, the films were already completed but needed a theatrical distribution deal; they would all come knocking on our door. I loved finding directors for various projects; I had so many ideas that I could not possibly realise them all myself. D & B spent quite a sum of money on many of its early productions—on casts, special subjects, or even air travel to Taiwan, hotel accommodations... shooting on location overseas.... They literally

just sent over suitcases full of cash. When I took over the production department, Raymond Leung warned, ‘You know what you need to do!’ That was the main reason why I stuck to smaller-scale productions and lighthearted comedies. But they still wanted to maintain D & B’s reputation for producing blockbuster epics. So we had to make room for both and strike a balance. Even on a production like *Easy Money* that featured locations that spanned the globe, we could still succeed in keeping costs down.

As a company, D & B was very open and accommodating as long as I didn’t lose money or sully the company’s reputation. Later on, many people said to me, John Sham won many awards for the company when he was in charge, so how could you let D & B fail under your watch? To be frank, I didn’t take risks by gambling big money and resources into just one or two productions, hoping to draw big audiences with big name stars. I wasn’t concerned with popular trends and produced slightly more low-key fare such as *Dreams of Glory, a Boxer’s Story* (1991). I also enjoyed discovering new talent, such as Stephen Chow in *Love is Love* (1990). The bottom line was, we made films that promoted positive values. Naturally, due to the demands and pressures of overseas markets, we also had to meet a certain quota of genre films.

**New Collective to Create *Heart to Hearts***

We produced *Heart to Hearts* solely because of George Lam. I even used ‘100% George Lam’ for the tagline on the movie poster. We had just finished negotiating a contract with him. He didn’t want to make films that required over-the-top acting. I was overseeing the cinemas business, distribution, talent management, finance and overseas sales at the time. I said I needed creative talent and Ip Kwong-kim introduced Gordon Chan to me. Later, Ip also brought in Chan Hing-kai.

I was the producer and director on *Heart to Hearts*. I didn’t want a writing credit because I committed to giving opportunities to first-time writers. After the film became a hit, much debate ensued, especially around the question, who was in fact, the director? Whenever I get asked: did Stephen Shin direct *Heart to Hearts*? I answer, yes. Did I get help? Lots. Many people collaborated on the screenwriting process. Gordon Chan was a key contributor. He was essentially the deputy director. As discussion around the dialogue and script progressed, we decided that he would even handle some of the scenes. With respect to *Heart to Hearts*—from the conception to script to directorial approach—it was a true collaborative effort; I didn’t dictate or issue directives. Actors were free to interpret the scenes on their own. Even the gaffer or art director might have a difference of opinion. But in the end, the director was the person who ultimately decided which takes to use.

*Heart to Hearts* was the first crisis that I had to face at D & B—without the benefit of a midnight preview screening, the film performed poorly on its opening day (Thursday). I lobbied to expand our marketing campaign efforts. But there was an ongoing power struggle within the company at the time. One senior executive even said, ‘There is no need to place ads. With any luck, the film will run a few more days, maybe until Wednesday, or Monday or Tuesday, or we could even replace it as early as Saturday or Sunday.’ I was livid and instructed the marketing manager to reserve all available advertisement slots in newspapers and placed a call to Mr Poon in the early evening, at around six o’clock. Mr Poon said, ‘Let’s just pull the film and see what we can replace it with.’ I



The *Heart to Hearts* series, directed and produced by Stephen Shin, were an exemplar of middle-class films.



rushed over to his headquarter and hurriedly knocked at his door, petitioning him to approve a full-page colour ad for the next day (Friday) and Saturday. At the time, colour ads for movies were quite rare. Mr Poon had yet to see the film but agreed eventually. There was no improvement at the box office on Friday. But on Saturday, something miraculous happened; the film took in over a million dollars in just one day. On Saturday and Sunday, office ladies and middle-class viewers suddenly flocked to see the film.

## The Advent of Female Action Stars

The strategy to transform the stereo-typical damsels in distress into warrior women proved quite effective. *Yes, Madam* became a signature production of D & B. Michelle Yeoh's hard work and personal sacrifices had paid off. Unfortunately, the injuries that she sustained while filming the physically demanding stunt scenes took their toll, leaving her unable to perform stunts. At that time, she also became Mrs Poon. So we started to groom Cynthia Khan as her successor.

Cynthia Khan was referred to us by a friend of Taiwanese actor, Wong Yung. Arthur Wong and I flew to Taiwan to meet with her. Cynthia was a Hualien local. She performed in nightclubs, doing all sorts of acrobatic tricks. She was certainly presentable enough, so we signed her on. Her first production at D & B was, *In the Line of Duty III* (1988). Two films later, people tried to poach her away from us. Many nefarious characters with triad associations appeared on our doorstep to cause a scene. Dickson finally said, 'It's not worth it. Release her from contract.'

After Cynthia's departure, we shot *Black Cat* (1991). During pre-production, I auditioned several Miss Asia winners, but eventually cast Jade Leung, a contestant who did not even place, for the title role. *Black Cat* was a hit. A sequel followed. Midway through production, more nefarious characters appeared and tried to poach our star again with threats. *Black Cat* sold well in overseas markets. During the Cannes Film Festival, Luc Besson caught hold of me and chastised me [*Black Cat* was sort of a remake of Luc Besson's *La Femme Nikita* (1990)]. It was not a secret. I didn't feel the need to defend myself.

## Back Story Behind *Dreams of Glory, a Boxer's Story*

*Dreams of Glory, a Boxer's Story* was directed by Larry (Lawrence Lau aka Lawrence Ah Mon). I also produced his previous film, *Gangs* (1988) that I ended up being a minor investor in it. Back then, expectations were quite low for *Gangs*. The entire cast consisted of newcomers. I recommended Lawrence to Fu Che from the Sil-Metropole Organisation Ltd. That's how Fu ended up getting a producer credit. I was credited as the co-producer under the pseudonym, Sum Kai-yuen. I notified D & B ahead of time and agreed not to use my real name.

Filming *Gangs* was tough. Larry had no concept of what a film production budget entailed. He just kept shooting and went through tons of film stock. When the production ran out of money, I put in some of my own to complete the film. The completed film was three hours long; the director was adamant that it could not be cut any shorter. Coincidentally, he flew to a meeting in Paris to discuss a new film project. For the first and only time in my life, I edited a film without the director's consent, trimming it down to a two-hour version.

Larry was quite upset upon his return. Naturally, he petitioned to re-edit the film. I agreed but with the stipulation that the film's running time would not exceed two hours. Afterwards, I apologised and said, 'I owe you one. Next time I'll give you total freedom as long as the film's running time stays under two hours long. I won't put any other conditions on your budget.' The resulting film was *Dreams of Glory, a Boxer's Story*. The narrative was more commercially viable but the style of the film retained its arthouse film roots.



*Dreams of Glory, a Boxer's Story* (1991): Directed by Lawrence Lau, the film centres on boxing, but its style retains the arthouse film roots.





The pre-shooting ceremony of *Middle Man* (1990): (from left) David Wu, Elvina Kong, producer Stephen Shin, Cynthia Khan and director Cha Chuen-ye.



Jade Leung landed a breakthrough role in *Black Cat* (1991)

## Recruiting Behind the Scenes Talent

In my opinion, D & B instituted two very good operational frameworks. The first was talent nurturing, especially for editors. Many acclaimed editors in Hong Kong, such as Chan Ki-hop, Eric Kong Chi-leung and Danny Wong Wing-ming, to some certain degree, started out at D & B. Some of them eventually became directors, like Chiang Kwok-kuen. The second was the creative team led by Ip Kwong-kim. In many film companies, the creative teams had a fixed membership. Examples were Hung's Troupe, Tsui Hark or Cinema City's 'War Room'. Instead, D & B set up a flexible creative team dedicated to sourcing and exploring new material. At times, it even recruited and nominated potential directors for projects.

I made it my mission to give opportunities to new directors, many had been recommended by Ip Kwong-kim. He would also put forward the names of established directors such as Yuen Woo-ping. At the time, Yuen was struggling in Taiwan. He wanted to return to Hong Kong and make films. But Mr Poon had an aversion to period pieces or what he described as 'ragged costume dramas' set in the early Republic era of China. So we suggested that Yuen try his hand at modern action film. The resulting film was *Tiger Cage* (aka *Sure Fire*, 1988), a solid crime thriller that sold quite well in overseas markets.

## Keeping up with Technological Advances

I was the first person in Hong Kong to use the stereo sound format and digital editing system. The audio mixing of *A Bite of Love* (1990) was sent to London for further processing. Kinson Tsang and I worked closely together. At the time, many in the industry were resistant to any type of change in the editing process. A veteran editor at RTHK (Radio Television Hong Kong) even cursed at me. The newly developed Avid (digital editing) system required editors to input a complicated series of commands before they could even perform a single edit. You also needed to be well-versed with the thick technical manual, written only in English. I said to him, 'If you don't adapt to the new computer technology, you'll be left behind and obsolete.' When I was in the US, I had witnessed how many (post-production) processes were already being computerised. That's why I personally invested in two Avid machines to allow our editors to learn and gain hands-on experience for free. In the end, all of them learned how to operate a digital editing system.

When *A Bite of Love* was released, we launched a series of special screenings, complete with onsite special effects such as laser beams, lightning effects and theatrical fog. These special screenings were presented at our circuit's four flagship cinemas as well as the London Classics Cinema. Other theatre owners within the circuit refused to follow suit because it meant additional costs—you needed a technician to monitor each screening; in the film when Jacky Cheng Pak-lam transforms into a vampire, the technician needed to be present to activate the laser-fog-and-lightning effects. Despite the initial resistance, I insisted on continuing the special presentations. In the end, it was quite a rewarding experience.

## Expanding Overseas Markets Through Internationalisation

Much of our profit was dependent on foreign sales. The distribution rights for D & B productions in Taiwan was acquired by Wang Ying-hsiang. Our main distributors in Singapore and Malaysia were either Eng Wah or

the Shaw Brothers. We did well in the European market. I would attend the Cannes and Milano Film Festivals almost every year. As for Canada and the US, we set up a theatrical distribution circuit in some cities. As for the Japanese market, due to the box office success of *Yes, Madam* (1985), we maintained a close relationship with Gaga, Toho, Toei and Shochiku. Action films was their preferred genre, but they also accepted more serious *wenyi* films as well. Hong Kong films had gained a certain reputation internationally by that time. Overseas markets were flourishing. Unfortunately, no one was looking ahead to further industry development. Instead they were too busy trying to outbid each other for blockbusters and big name stars.

*Black Cat II: Assassination of President Yeltsin* (1992), was shot on location in Russia with the addition of foreign actors to the cast. The film did quite well in terms of foreign sales. Most Hong Kong film producers were quite shortsighted and lacked the vision to expand to other markets. Unlike the Shaws in the past, 'cinema' was no longer their sole focus, the studios now were corporations with many other enterprises. The film business was just a sideline, almost an afterthought.

## End of D & B Cinema Circuit

After I took over, D & B didn't go into mass production. I was more interested in quality versus a high volume of productions; I didn't want to churn out films at the cost of quality. We never initiated an in-house production unless it met certain requirements. Otherwise, I preferred to fund other outsourced productions. D & B did not branch out into subsidiaries or satellite companies. It was my personal decision to back *To Catch a Thief* (1991). I wanted to provide support to Tony Leung Hung-wah; he pitched the project to me. I was given a producer credit.

The lease renewal for the Shaws cinemas was negotiated alongside other business matters. We wanted to renew the agreement but the power struggle within the company left Dickson quite discouraged. In the end, we ceded the cinema circuit operation to Regal (Regal Films Co Ltd). At the time I was in the midst of filming and directing *Heart Against Hearts* (1992) and *Black Cats II: Assassination of President Yeltsin*. Later, both films were released theatrically through the Regal circuit. The release and publicity campaign for the films were both regrettable affairs. Neither project did well at the box office. Dickson had asked me to prepare the filming of *Black Cat III*, but the operation of our cinema circuit had already ended. Many issues within the *Black Cat* production also began to surface. In the end, D & B brought an end to all film production.

## Dream Projects

I was always attracted to historical subject matter and was eager to produce a period film. Around 1992, I began the pre-production for *The Great Conqueror's Concubine*. At the time, Zhang Yimou had just directed *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) but it was still banned in the Mainland. I mentioned the ban to Ma Fung-kwok at Sil-Metropole in a conversation by chance and suggested that we helped Zhang develop a project that would examine the domestic issues in the Mainland from a more positive angle. That was how *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992) eventually received backing. *The Great Conqueror's Concubine* received behind the scenes help and support from Zhang in return, from the screenplay and cast (Gong Li played Lady Lui) to the directorial approach.

In 1994, I produced *The Young Offenders*, directed by Elizabeth Wong. The film was completed but was never released. I later invested in the production of *Lunch with Charles* (2001) but it all came to nought. A few years back, I made *The Last Race* (aka *On Wings of Eagles*, 2016), a film about the Olympic 400m gold medalist, Eric Liddell. The film chronicles his time in China during World War II, including his return to his birthplace, Tientsin, to serve as a missionary teacher and his incarceration at the Weihsien Internment Camp. During the same period, I also made the documentary film, *The Forgotten Weihsien Internment Camp* and published a book with the same title. I hired Michael Parker to serve as a co-director. The contract stipulated that he was not the film's director. I would receive top billing in the credits for director. In the end, he was given the sole director credit when the film was distributed overseas. I financed, wrote and directed the film. I insisted on having the record corrected, but never heard from him again. I was the director. It's important for a director to receive credit for his work.

In 2017, I decided to retire from filmmaking. But then I met a doctor and was deeply moved by his story. Now I hope to make a film about Médecins Sans Frontières. I'll write the script myself. I just need to set aside my affairs in Hong Kong and spend two to three months in Africa. Then I'll be ready to start production. After all, filmmaking has always been my dream, my *raison d'être*!

[Translated by Sandy Ng]

## Linda Kuk

### An Administrative Producer Who Embodies Both Strength and Gentleness



Interviewers: Janice Chow, Priscilla Chan,  
Kwok Ching-ling, Carmen Tsoi  
(10 February 2020)  
Collated by Daphne Chan

**L**inda Kuk plunged headlong into the colourful world of light and shadow after graduating from the Faculty of Arts at The University of Hong Kong (HKU) in 1976, beginning her career at Rediffusion Television (RTV) as a production assistant (PA) in the same year. She went on to join Cinema City Company Limited in the early 1980s and later caught the eye of D & B Films Co., Ltd., which recruited her to be the head of administration in 1985. She jokes that she was D & B's 'housekeeper'—she had to oversee the operations of every department, all matters had to be run past her, and she had to spend every cent with the utmost prudence. Her time there also enabled her to witness how a liberal, open, stylish, and tasteful film company developed from its humble beginnings to reach peak prosperity. After leaving D & B in 1987, she fought alongside a host of talented individuals for a number of years, establishing a network that would be of great help to her. In 1991, she founded Milestone Pictures Limited with John Woo and Terence Chang, producing such features as *Once a Thief* (1991) and *Hard-Boiled* (1992), which are among the long-time favourites of Hongkongers.

## Applying to Be a PA at RTV

I've preferred the arts, especially languages, since I was a child. So, I majored in English and Translation at HKU. When I was little, I didn't really have any ambitions or aspire to any dream jobs. I remember seeing a female producer on the panel in the control room during a secondary school visit to a TV station. The way that she was in command of the situation seemed pretty amazing. I found that quite interesting and it left an impression on me. I graduated in 1976. Most of my classmates became teachers or worked for the government after graduation, but that didn't sit too well with me as I felt those jobs were boring. After slacking off for several months, I saw in the newspaper that RTV was hiring PAs, so I applied. The person who interviewed me was Joseph Yau, who was their human resources manager at the time. The monthly salary of a PA was only HK\$900, while that of a civil servant was more than HK\$2,700. 'Have you gone mad?' my mother asked.

After joining RTV, the first programme that I worked on was *Saturday Variety* [premiered in December 1976], which Robert Chua was in charge of. It was a variety show similar to *Enjoy Yourself Tonight*, with singing, interviews, and so on. Mr Chua's wife, Peggy Jen, was his assistant. And I, in turn, was Mrs Chua's assistant. I was involved in pre-production coordination, such as making bookings and securing talent, which put me in contact with a lot of people. During the live filming, Mrs Chua would let me watch her on the panel.

A few months later, I was assigned to the soap opera *Crocodile Tears* as a writer-director along with others such as Mui Siu-ching and David Lai. Johnny Mak was the show's executive producer. In around 1978, I was also involved in the production of *Guxiang Xinmao* (Hometown Makeover) [reported to be an information programme filmed in the Mainland in late March 1979]. At the time, the Chinese economic reform had just been implemented. I was responsible for Nancy Sit Kar-yin's segment. Her mother was from Chaozhou. Back then, the Mainland was quite underdeveloped. The team consisted only of David Lai, a cameraman, and myself, but the company gave us sufficient resources to make a good programme. Then I was put in charge of *Maotouying Shijian* (Owl Time), for which I travelled with the crew to Frankfurt and Hamburg in Germany, as well as London in the UK, for location shooting. The likes of Michael Lai and Lo Yuen were also involved. In addition, I also took part in *Xishuo Dangnian* (Back in the Day), a show about Chinese history. We found a lot of archive footage and historical clips. It was hosted by Tina Ti. She was exceptional and extremely eloquent. She never read the script word for word when presenting the programme. After digesting the information, she'd discuss it with us and make many valuable suggestions to enrich the programme content.

I worked at RTV for two to three years. Steve Huang Shih-chiu, who was the boss at the time, gave me the impression of being someone who was decisive and valued talent. This gave rise to a pool of brilliant individuals, including Johnny Mak, Stephen Shiu, Joseph Yau, and Peter Lam Yuk-wah, at RTV. There was also Nansun Shi, who was responsible for production and administration as deputy director of the production department. Shortly after departing to work for Cinema City, she recruited me to handle administrative and human resources responsibilities.

## The Move to Cinema City

Doing the administrative work of a film company meant handling everything. I even had to translate Chinese movie subtitles into English. Both Nansun and I did that often. It was by no means easy. In theory, English subtitles are for foreign viewers. The translated sentences have to be succinct but also retain their original essence, so that they'll understand what each gag is. We had to translate a myriad of Cantonese colloquialisms into English ones with similar meanings, which was rather challenging.

The directors working for Cinema City at the time, such as Clifton Ko and Eric Tsang, liked coming to my office to complain whenever they were troubled by something—they said that it was 'therapy'. So, my office was often crowded. I eventually began to take part in production, and once travelled to Spain to shoot *The Perfect Wife?* (1983). For *Banana Cop* (1984), because most of it was filmed in London, the company decided to hire a local production crew. Consequently, they needed someone who was relatively fluent in English to be part of the team. The producer, Teddy Robin, knew that I had production experience from working at RTV and asked Nansun if he could take me with him to be his production manager.

The several years that I spent at Cinema City were greatly conducive to the establishment of my personal network. I got along quite well with my colleagues and they all trusted me. I also became familiar with filmmaking. Nansun Shi is highly competent and very decisive. I benefitted much from working with her. I'm relatively shy, but she's able to take charge wherever she goes. I'm in awe of her. I had to deal with people





Linda Kuk (right) joined D & B in 1985 through the recommendation from George Lam (middle). *Yes, Madam* (1985), which starred Michelle Yeoh (left), was a headliner of the production studio.



The pre-shooting ceremony of *It's a Drink! It's a Bomb!* (1985): (front row from left) Eddy Ko Hung, David Chung, Maggie Cheung, John Sham, Linda Kuk; (back row from left) Chui Po-chu, Elvis Tsui Kam-kong, Li Mingyang.

personally for work, but it's mostly on a one-to-one basis. If I were to give a speech at a big event or face a lot of strangers, I'd be frightened. However, my job demanded that I bite the bullet and overcome this fear, even when dealing with complicated people and issues.

### Joining D & B Through George Lam's Referral

By the time *Banana Cop* wrapped, I'd gotten to know George Lam well. Sometime later, Dickson Poon founded D & B. They wanted a 'housekeeper' figure [administrative controller] at the company. I think that George knew Dickson quite well. He was the one who introduced me to him. Dickson met me in person. He's very gentlemanly and decisive.

When I joined D & B in 1985, I oversaw the production crew to prevent them from spending money frivolously and took care of all administrative and human resources matters. D & B had a very simple organisational structure and a liberal culture. Everyone was united. Every department worked and got on well with one another. Nobody tried to undermine anyone else. I was on especially good terms with the executive director, John Sham, who was in charge of the creative side of things—we're still like brother and sister to this day.

In terms of creation, Dickson gave the staff great freedom. You could make all sorts of different films, from niche and romantic films to action and big budget movies. We'd have about two or three Category A productions every year for screening in the peak seasons. The working environment facilitated diversity. I think this should be attributed to John, because he managed the creative aspect. He gave many opportunities to different directors. After a script was submitted, as long as he gave the OK, you could shoot it. Dickson would also pay attention to the mainstream and large-scale productions that cost more money. As for the films with less investment, he gave us a lot of freedom and creative space so long as they didn't make a loss. He placed utmost importance on the motion pictures that were sold abroad, so was naturally partial to making action films. When unconventional features such as *The Island* (1985) and *The Lunatics* (1986) are concerned, what boss in their right mind would like them? But he let us make them anyway.

The first film that I worked on at D & B was *Yes, Madam* (1985), for which I was the co-ordinator. Michelle Yeoh was a ballet dancer. She's well-mannered and easy-going. We all liked her. Gangster films were popular at the time, but mainly starred male actors. The company wanted to make something different and fresh, so they cast Michelle and Cynthia Rothrock as the leads and got Corey Yuen Kwai to direct. Michelle held nothing back and was very hard-working. She has a first-class working attitude. Despite being injured on several occasions, she still insisted on doing her own stunts. As a result, the crafting of her image as a 'madam' was very successful and well received, enabling her to become an iconic female action star.

Riding on the box office success of *Yes, Madam*, the company set about making *Royal Warriors* (1986). It was a collaboration with Sonny Chiba's production studio in Japan and starred Sanada Hiroyuki (aka Henry



The pre-shooting ceremony of *Bless this House* (1988), a brainchild of 'The Trio': (from left) Bill Tung, Deborah Lee, Loletta Lee, Stephen Ho, Ronny Yu, Raymond Fung, Linda Kuk, Clifton Ko, Manfred Wong.



At a gathering: (from left) Linda Kuk, Clifton Ko, Helen Chan, Terence Chang.

Sanada). Japan was a huge market back then, along with South Korea and Taiwan. This is no longer the case nowadays. Only action films could break into the Euro-American markets, but the profits they generated paled in comparison. For these co-productions, it was common to include renowned local actors in the cast in hopes of selling them to Japan and other countries. We'd sell blockbusters like these at film markets.

### Managing 'The Trio'

When D & B wanted to make a Lunar New Year film, I recruited 'The Trio' from Cinema City. They each have their own strengths: Clifton Ko is adept at comedy and was mainly responsible for screenwriting; Raymond Fung, who has a relatively cool personality, was more in charge of planning; and Ronny Yu is proficient in action movies and big productions. The three of them would often get together to brainstorm, create, and overturn each other's ideas, making up for one another's shortcomings. The first feature they made for D & B was *My Family* (1986), starring Richard Ng and Fung Bo-bo.

Another important work by 'The Trio' is *Legacy of Rage* (1986), which was directed by Ronny Yu. At the time, the company wanted to make an action movie that could profit from pre-sales. The lead actor needed to be young but also slightly famous. After careful consideration, we decided on Bruce Lee's son, Brandon Lee. I didn't know him very well and heard that he was quite rebellious and emotional. I think that the descendants of celebrities probably don't want to hear, 'You're such-and-such's son', all the time, but instead, be appreciated for their own self. Brandon had opinions about his role and didn't always just do what was asked of him. For example, he'd say, 'This isn't so good. It's too much like my dad'. He wasn't really trained in kung fu. Because there were a lot of action scenes, we had to get a master to teach him. A stunt double was also brought in occasionally. Later, while filming *The Crow* (1994) in the US in 1993, he passed away due to an accident. He was taken before his time. It's such a shame.

The following year, 'The Trio' produced *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987). Clifton Ko might've wanted to make this movie before, and he finally had the opportunity to do so after coming to D & B. Because of the ample creative freedom at the company, as long as we thought the screenplay was viable and he could meet the budget as well as forecast the box office earnings, then he'd be given the greenlight. The housing estate scenes in the film were shot at Kin Shing Film Production Studio, which D & B rented. *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World II* (1988) was filmed in Canada. Although the production costs were slightly higher, the script was quite solid. Ko is an efficiency-oriented director, so he can draw up a relatively reliable production budget. Moviegoers like to watch motion pictures that make them laugh. This series was scheduled for release over the Lunar New Year period and achieved impressive box office results.

### The Way of the Administrative Producer

Before the company owned a cinema circuit, Dickson felt that he had to beg people for a slot whenever scheduling a release. This always left him disgruntled, so he wanted to establish his own cinema circuit. Nonetheless, both John Sham and I thought that it'd be a mammoth task to fill up the cinema circuit's schedule



The 23rd Golden Horse Awards took place in 1986: (front row, from 2nd left) Shu Kei, Lam Bing, Linda Kuk, Winnie Yu, May Lo, Fung Hak-on; (back row from left) John Chiang, Derek Yee, Paul Chun, Vicky Leung, John Sham, Wang Ying-hsiang, Dickson Poon, Michelle Yeoh, wife of Wang Ying-hsiang.

entirely, as it meant that at least 20 to 30 productions had to be made a year. However, Dickson was very persistent. At the time, he negotiated a theatre leasing deal with Shaws. John Sham and I were also involved. One time, John was in the middle of filming *The Island* in Tung Ping Chau, and we had to take a helicopter to discuss the matter with him. D & B eventually formed its own cinema circuit. In addition to making its own films, the company also invested in third-party independent productions. For example, Winnie Yu had set up A Certain Production Company Limited. She was solely responsible for making films, with D & B being the investor and producer. After the film was released, these third-party production companies were eligible for dividends.

In the films produced by D & B, I held the titles of ‘Producer’, ‘Co-ordinator’, and ‘Associate Producer’. I was in fact the Administrative Producer and didn’t have much to do with the creative side of things—that was John Sham’s territory. I mainly managed the budget, carried out administrative work, and supervised the entire production process. ‘Planning’ was part of the producer’s duties, and while there was a separate title for the person in charge of ‘coordination’, the job nature of the two were similar. Every film had a producer, but usually only big budget movies had associate producers and co-ordinators to help share the workload. I was involved right from the beginning. Once the company decided to make a film, I’d have to review the screenplay, talk to the people or organisations that we were working with, and determine which actors to cast. After preparing the budget, I didn’t have to participate in the creative process, and mainly took care of the administrative work.

When it comes to making a film, the most important thing is to have a complete script. Otherwise, it’s easy to overspend. In reality, however, screenplays are often revised while filming, and usually at the last minute. At times, we had no choice but to commence shooting in order to meet the release schedule. The way we controlled costs was by having the film crew report how much they spent each day and comparing the costs to the overall budget. For example, if the original budget for this scene was HK\$30,000, but they ended up spending HK\$50,000, I’d have to ask them why this happened and press them to recover some of the expenses in the next shoot. I had to constantly update the information so as not to overspend. If I was only told that we’d gone overbudget by millions of dollars at the very end, it’d be too late. Therefore, I kept an eagle eye on the situation. Regardless of being on set or not, I had to know whether each day’s filming went smoothly and if there were any issues. If problems were spotted, they could be dealt with as soon as possible before they piled up. It’d be disastrous if you ran out of money before even half the movie was made.

*An Autumn’s Tale* (1987) is a D & B classic. It’s also an exception where the budget was increased during filming. Mabel Cheung was a novice director at the time, and John Sham, as well as the rest of us, all liked the script. However, the initial budget for the movie was very low, so the crew had to return to Hong Kong as soon as they completed the location shooting in New York. They were worried that they wouldn’t be able to continue shooting at one stage. Alex Law’s screenplay was actually very thorough and well-written. Mabel and Alex both studied filmmaking in New York. They were very familiar with the city and were able to capture its autumn charm. Therefore, we had confidence in them. Moreover, we saw the dailies and were pleased with them, so we decided to bump up the budget to enable them to make a better film.





Linda Kuk founded Milestone Pictures Limited with John Woo and Terence Chang, and produced such outstanding films as *Hard-Boiled* (1992).

As producers often have to manage the production team, it's inevitable that they'll clash with the creative staff. Because creatives tend to be more unrestrained and perfectionistic, it's necessary to have people like us to keep them in check. A good producer must first control the budget. They must also be good at maintaining interpersonal relationships. In the movie industry, you need to get along with people from various walks of life. Sometimes, whether someone is willing to do you a favour or help you out of respect depends on the relationship you have with them. It's also necessary to be decisive. There's usually a producer and administrative producer attached to a film, with the former overseeing the creative aspect and the latter taking care of the rest. I was on good terms with most people. Everyone trusted me and respected me, because I'm quite straightforward and wouldn't deceive others. I usually make good on my promises. I think these things are all very important.

Although D & B was only operational for eight years, it nurtured a plethora of talent, recruited numerous elites, and produced a number of excellent works. Our team mostly consisted of academics. Big Brother John (John Sham) is an intellectual, while Terence Chang originally studied Architecture before developing a fondness for cinema. Many individuals from the cultural sector also joined the company in its early days, such as John Chan Koon-chung, Shu Kei of the publicity department, and Joel Chu who was in charge of art and design. The majority of them are creatives, so managing finances was very challenging for them. The cultured and educated are quite strong-willed. I had to take my time talking to them and to reason with them. This is what's interesting about the industry. Each person has a different role: directors create on the spot, actors are preoccupied with mood, distribution focuses on market taste, while producers control the finances with an iron fist. By cooperating with each other, chemistry is sparked, giving rise to masterpieces.

I got married in 1987 and was no longer suited to a round-the-clock job, so I left D & B. However, I didn't stop working completely. I once set up Companion Films Co. Ltd. with Amy Chin and Barry Wong, which made *Carry On Hotel* (1988). Later, I also founded Milestone Pictures Limited with John Woo and Terence Chang, which produced *Once a Thief* (1991), *Now You See Love... Now You Don't* (1992), *Hard-Boiled*, and *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (1996). I assumed my old role of administrative producer and tapped my previous connections to secure investors and distributors, taking care of external communications. After John Woo left for the US to further his career, Terence and I went on to form Eastern Renaissance Pictures Ltd and made *Treasure Hunt* (1994). My children then needed my attention more, so I returned my focus to my family. In recent years, I've mainly been devoted to charity work. In 2001, I established the Hong Kong Blood Cancer Foundation with Professor Raymond Liang Hin-suen to assist patients diagnosed with the condition and to support related research. I've also helped people with schizophrenia and their families raise public awareness in the hope of eliminating prejudice.

[Translated by Johnny Ko]



# Norman Chan

## A Production Controller Who Changes the Game



Interviewers: Janice Chow, Priscilla Chan, Michael Lau, Carmen Tsoi  
(19 November 2019)  
Collated by Janice Chow

**A**fter graduating from Pui Ching Middle School, Norman Chan went onto study Film & Television Production at the University of Southern California. At the time, his fellow alumni included Hong Kong New Wave directors Allen Fong, Cheuk Pak-tong, Lawrence Lau (aka Lawrence Ah Mon), Lau Shing-hon and others. After graduating in 1976, he returned to Hong Kong, and joined the ranks of those working in the then-fiercely competitive television industry. He met Lau Shing-hon at Commercial Television and was persuaded to become his production manager for *House of the Lute* (1980). With his outstanding producing capabilities and strong interpersonal skills, Chan was able to create the hugely coveted ‘low cost but highly efficient’ team, a rarity in New Wave productions. Also with his know-how in film creation, Chan’s demand quickly escalated. He had served three different film companies with varied operations and business models—Shaw Brothers (Hong Kong) Ltd., Cinema City Company Limited and D & B Films Co., Ltd.—and demonstrated ‘healthy competition was the principal driving force for Hong Kong’s film industry to flourish’. He joined D & B when it was headed by John Sham, and left before its cinema circuit ended. Chan lived through two-thirds of the D & B era and had an intimate view of its rise and fall. Chan is currently the Programme Director of the Higher Diploma in Creative Film Production at Hong Kong Baptist University, nurturing newcomers in film and continuing to contribute to the industry in a different capacity.

## The Short but Fulfilling Time at Commercial Television

Actually, I had offers from three different TV stations (Television Broadcasts Limited [TVB], Rediffusion Television [RTV], Commercial Television [CTV]). When I was in the US, I had been introduced to various higher-ups at TVB through Cheuk Pak-tong, such as Patrick Tam and his wife Kitty Ip, Wong Kei, Thomas Tang, etc. They asked that I reconnect with them at TVB after graduation. In the end, I joined CTV because the company was still very small and vibrant. It was full of young people with different personalities, but their goals aligned. They all wanted to run an exceptional TV station.

I became an assistant director and was promoted to writer-director six months later. At that time, the general manager was Yvonne Sun Yuk-bui, and production manager was Feng Tsui-fan. I met Lau Shing-hon at CTV, who was a fellow alumni. Lau proposed for us to collaborate on a film together, hoping that I would be his associate producer. I resigned without a second thought. When I left, I was chastised by Sun, the general manager. I had reassured her that I would come back after the film wrapped. However, that proved irrelevant, as CTV went bankrupt shortly after.

## The Red-Hot New Wave Production Manager

When I was a kid, I had put together a football team that became popular at Pui Ching Middle School. I also managed the Southern California Chinese Football Team while in the US. I was responsible for recreation, liaison, and finding sponsorships. To accomplish all these, you need to be thick-skinned, eloquence, sociable and hard working. The principle of organising a production team is much the same. I used this principle to help Lau Shing-hon connect with like-minded talents. This was in 1977.

At that time, Lau Shing-hon only raised little more than HK\$100,000. I searched for crew everywhere, and the goal was to find young talents with lower salary expectations. The cinematographer I scouted was the 'Handheld King' Johnny Koo, Johnny Mak's 'official' work partner. Koo was known for going into the Kowloon Walled City to shoot the *Long Arm of the Law* (1984); the art director was David Chan brought in by Lau, who later went on to become the production designer for Michael Hui; the deputy director was Chow Fai, who later directed for the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC); the gaffer was Chow Lam, the lead light designer for Shaws; Sunny Leung was the continuity, who continued on producing with me. Some veteran crew of classic Cantonese films were still around those days. They were a little out of touch with us, who came from the TV world or returned from abroad. However, they had experience, were semi-retired and willing to work for lower rates. Once the production was underway, the two groups bonded quickly and very much enjoyed the collaboration with one another.

The team slowly took shape, and we began to film *House of the Lute*. Afterwards, people began to associate Norman Chan with 'low cost but highly efficient' productions, and the calls started coming in.

## Joining Cinema City

I joined Cinema City because Nansun Shi and Paul Lai kept pursuing me relentlessly. At the time, I was a self-proclaimed 'Gold Class Production Manager', unencumbered by lack of opportunities; I was able to pick and choose scripts I wanted to produce. With all the New Wave directors around, I was the only New Wave production manager. One who also knew how to create and assist the director in script development. Lai often invited me to meals, because he was struggling with juggling too many productions. I wrapped on *Cream Soda and Milk* (1981) and joined Cinema City.

Shi mentioned there was a director who would be a great fit for me, someone who also returned from the US. The next day, I arrived at Cinema City, where discussions for the filming of Ronny Yu's *The Occupant* (1984) was taking place. In fact, I was being brought in for questioning by Yu. We got along without a hitch, we exchanged enthusiastically about cars, football and other shared interests. By that time, I already had a regular crew, including assistant producers, deputy directors, production and filming units. They tried to dissuade me from joining Cinema City, citing frustrations for endless bureaucracy and paperwork. I asked them whether it would be more difficult than working with the Shaws? They had nothing to say to that, and acquiesced in following me to Cinema City.

My monthly salary as a production manager was about HK\$15,000. This was the early 1980s. Remuneration for a new director making a film was only in the tens of thousands while veteran directors broke into the hundreds of thousands. Usually for each film, monthly-salaried employees who were retained on project basis signed on for three or four months; there were also some 'daily rated' employees within the crew.

## 'The Trio' Was a Pull Factor

One day, Linda Kuk called me and said that the boss of D & B had asked me to be a Chief Production Manager there, and said that 'The Trio' (Clifton Ko, Raymond Fung, Ronny Yu) needed me. This was because I had been amazing with the three directors at Cinema City, who had left for D & B more than a year earlier before me.

When I boarded D & B in 1986, Linda Kuk was still there [Kuk left at the end of 1987]. At the time, Chui Po-chu was another D & B Chief Production Manager. I was in charge of 'The Trio', while Chui was responsible for the films produced by John Sham. The first movie I collaborated with 'The Trio' on was *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987). Uncle Bill (Bill Tung) and Auntie Lydia (Lydia Sum) were exceptionally experienced performers, who would pick at the script and dialogues. Ko was still very young at the time. He and the screenwriters Joe Ma Wai-ho and Chow Yuk-ming were not even 30 years old. How could they write dialogues for people in their 50s? In the end, they jotted down the critiques by Uncle Bill and Auntie Lydia, who went on to conceive a large portion of the film dialogues.

I never imagined that *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* would have such an incredible response. I proposed to Ko for producing a sequel immediately. If it hit over HK\$10 million, then we could shoot a third episode; if it again exceeded HK\$10 million, then we would shoot a fourth. Ko retorted that he would not cope with handling Uncle Bill and Auntie Lydia, but I told him that he could leave the two veterans to me, because I was already well-acquainted with Uncle Bill when I filmed *Mummy Dearest* (1985) with him at Cinema City.

## Though Small-scale, the Operation Wanted for Nothing

D & B used to have two offices in Tsim Sha Tsui, before moving to Kowloon Tong where I rented our office on Kent Road. I leased it for HK\$50,000 a month and it was a two-storey house with a garden, fish pond and various rooms.

**Production/Administration** When I joined D & B, the production department composed of two production managers, me and Chui Po-chu [Norman Chan was appointed Administrative & Production Controller in early 1988], as well as project-based production managers and production assistants. D & B already had a cinema circuit in 1985, and there must be a blockbuster slated for each golden period of the year: summer vacation, New Year, Christmas and even the Mid-Autumn Festival. Other periods were just not profitable enough. The production plan looked at how many directors we have and whether they had stories suitable for these periods. This was not an easy feat. Everything hinged on the right actors and directors being available while the distribution department would be urging us to hand in the films. When I was at Cinema City, I did not have to get involved in distribution and budgeting. So the new responsibilities and challenges were much greater.

D & B utilised a computer to control its budgets. I had introduced it, then commissioned an American classmate to write a custom programme for this purpose. After filming three to four units for each film, I would



Norman Chan (right), Bill Tung (middle) and Lydia Sum (left) collaborated time and again for the *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* series.



The pre-shooting ceremony of *Double Fattiness* (1988): (from left) Dennis Chan Kwok-sun, Lydia Sum, Maggie Cheung, Bill Tung, John Chiang, Norman Chan, Lim Chan.



(From left) Norman Chan, Jacky Cheung, Dodo Cheng, Cheang Mang-ha



Norman Chan's debut directorial work was a fairy tale style urban romance.

ask the crews to submit the relevant accounts to do a run down on the computer, I would then meet with the production managers and assistant producers to review our budget projections. With almost ten years behind me as a production manager, I had enough experience to see if we would be over-budget after a third of the shooting had been done; I just needed a computer to input the data as soon as possible. I think Mr Poon was very satisfied with this approach. I could directly inform him how much money the company was spending each month and whether there would be overspending. If there was, what percentage would the company be over, with calculations that were immediate and accurate. Other film companies just did not operate like this. We were small, but highly efficient.

**Creative Development** Chan Kiu-ying was the leading force behind the creative department and was responsible for assisting Mr Sham in creative development. Sham recruited many new directors, and gave them opportunities for exploration that Golden Harvest (HK) Limited and Cinema City could not provide. Namely, producing art-house, romance films for the middle class, such as *Passion* (1986), *An Autumn's Tale* (1987) and *Wonder Women* (1987). In fact, this very much mirrored the route western films were taking at the time, productions that appealed to middle-class, mature audiences and intellectuals. Our lack of action superstars led us to explore other subjects and genres. The first time I directed a movie was at D & B with *The Nobles* (1989); it was a production tailored to Dodo Cheng and also aimed for a middle-class audience.

The best part was having a team of screenwriters and being able to unearth talents such as Chan Hing-kai, Joe Ma Wai-ho and Chow Yuk-ming. Gordon Chan appeared halfway through. Stephen Shin later let him serve as executive director in *Heart to Hearts* (1988). Shin and I would secure all the screenwriters, and conceive of a plan for the year. Whether we were playing offence or defence, all depended on what productions other companies had slated. We would also make some action movies, since we already had such productions as *Yes, Madam* (1985), produced by Sammo Hung, and *Tiger Cage* (aka *Sure Fire*, 1988), directed by Yuen Woo-ping. Many regions abroad loved our action films.

**Production Studio** D & B's film production studio was located at the old Kin Shing Production Studio from the classic Cantonese film era, which was subsequently leased to us. The studio manager was Yip Wing-cho, nicknamed 'Uncle Ya'. Yip was a northerner who worked as a cinematographer for Shaws. He had also produced, directed and acted at one time. After wrapping on *Black Cat II: Assassination of President Yeltsin* in 1992, D & B no longer rented the studio.

Our film processing laboratory was situated inside the Shaw Studio, so we had to go there whenever we needed to process or edit anything. The laboratory director was a man named Yang, who we 'bought' from Mona Fong along with the facilities. The editing department was managed by Chiang Kwok-kuen at that time. He was hired along with Uncle Ya by Mr Sham. I also recruited a group of young people from Cinema City, including Chan Ki-hop, Wong Wing-ming and Eric Kong Chi-leung. Kong is now a famous editor in the Greater China region.



**Publicity** The publicity department was originally under the supervision of Shu Kei. When I arrived, he had already left the position. His successor Manfred Wong only stayed for a short period and then departed again. I asked his deputy Jessica Wan to step in and she remained in that role till the company ended. The younger staff in the publicity department all came from the advertising world and were rather open-minded. I had met many film marketing personnels who were very old-fashioned, while those at D & B were by contrast quite bold. Jessica's assistant Jim [Jimson Liu] used to be an assistant producer. After D & B's operations ended, so many films [as well as photos and documentation] had to be managed by someone and 'Tall Jim', as he was nicknamed, rose to the occasion.

**Artist Management** D & B also had its own artist management, which was overseen by the publicity department. During the years with John Sham, there was an actor training class; at that time there were Bowie Lam, Danny Poon and some others. Michelle Yeoh was the first generation 'madam' in the *In the Line of Duty* series, who left after two films; we then hired Taiwanese newcomer Cynthia Khan as her replacement. Khan was cast in the role on the strength of her solid foundation as a Chinese dancer.

After I started at D & B, I hired some actors over from Cinema City. We knew Russell and he had introduced his younger brother Michael Wong to shoot *City Hero* (1985) at Cinema City. D & B later signed Michael. May Lo and Loletta Lee also came from Cinema City. Other D & B actors include George Lam, Richard Ng, Jacky Cheung, Cheung Kwok-keung, Kent Tong, etc.

Later, Ronny Yu thought of scouting Bruce Lee's son. Through his connections in California, he found Brandon Lee's manager. We entrusted lawyers to negotiate with Lee's representation for almost a year. At first, he only signed onto one film. We thought it was too risky an investment. Say Stephen Chow, we signed him for two films, not one [In the end, Chow only made the one movie *Love is Love* (1990)].

We discovered that enthusiasm for Early-Republican kung fu movies was beginning to wane, so we quickly connected with Yuen Woo-ping and asked him to switch track and shoot a contemporary action movie; but we didn't have a kung fu star. How would we shoot it? Yuen said that he knew a person (Donnie Yen) in New York who could really 'fight'. We decided to sign him just by looking at his photos; we also cast other stars to support him, including Jacky Cheung, Michael Wong and Dodo Cheng. The first film was *Tiger Cage*. Yuen brought a black man, a MMA champion, to fight against Yen.

At the time, Willie Chan had Jacky Cheung, Jackie Chan and the hottest female stars in Hong Kong. So I made sure to cultivate a good relationship with Willie as soon as I arrived. I negotiated with Willie every year. We signed Dodo Cheng for three films, Maggie Cheung for three films, Cherie Chung and Jacky Cheung for two each, etc. Signing on for more films would actually work out to be more economical, as I could sell production rights to other affiliates and satellite companies, if we pass on a project. Foreign investors were all looking for films with a good cast; without a good cast, everything would have been in vain.

**Distribution Network** The distribution network was the most important and the most profitable. Sometimes, in order to cater to preferences abroad, film companies would skew heavily towards certain types of movies. Since we only had a limited amount of productions, our overseas revenues were relatively lower. We therefore had little



The cast and crew of *Love is Love* (1990): (from left) Norman Chan, Pauline Kwan, Woo Fung, Kwan Sau-mei, Tommy Leung, Jeff Lau, Sandra Ng, Stephen Chow.

incentive to accommodate those predilections. As a result, D & B films were more diversified in terms of themes and genres, such as *The Lunatics* (1986), *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World*, *The Autumn's Tale*, etc.

If I were to start over again in making movies, apart from production, I would definitely be involved with the business side of things. Working in marketing and distribution would enable one to meet film merchants and cinema circuit owners from around the world. Those connections and insights would allow one the power to better manage the production team and decide what to shoot.

### **On Boss Dickson Poon**

As a boss, Mr Poon was professional, astute in finance and market-savvy. At times he would suggest which kinds of movies we should make. Once the plan was finalised, we would be given full rein to implement it. He had deep trust in me, and the collaboration was one of the happiest and most enjoyable I had experienced with a chief in over thirty years. D & B spent up to HK\$100 million annually, but for him that was still a small amount and did not warrant spending so much time to manage the company. In fact, Mr Poon's goal was mostly to leverage movies and celebrities to promote his luxury products such as watches, so advertisements for Guy Laroche would appear in the opening titles and credits of our films. This practice was unique to D & B at the time.

After Dickson withdrew from the board of directors in 1987, Raymond Leung took over his position. Although he was a barrister, Leung quickly grasped the film operations and was a discerning boss. I remain very grateful to Mr Poon and Mr Leung for their support in those years.

### **D & B's Position Within the Hong Kong Film Industry**

Without much rhyme or reason, a group of filmmakers somehow banded together and joined D & B. They worked tirelessly to make great movies for their audiences, and sometimes even co-produced with other companies. Some D & B directors came from Cinema City and Golden Harvest. I cannot say that it was solely D & B's contribution to the industry. Without Golden Harvest, Cinema City and Sil-Metropole, there would be no friendly competition. And it was the resultant healthy competition that made a great contribution to the Hong Kong film industry.

The cinema circuit that D & B leased from Shaws expired when I left, and the Hong Kong film industry was also facing a downturn. Mr Poon said that he did not wish to continue with the business; so I started my own company because I already had contacts with overseas distributors, thanks to the distribution network that I helped to build back then.

### **Proposed Establishment of Hong Kong Film Production Manager Association**

In the 1980s, there was an inflation of rates every two years amongst film industry professionals; these included lighting, grips, electricians, costumes, makeup, assistants, props and daily rated crew. This was due to the market boom and shortage of labours; thus crews were able to ask for as much as they wanted, and we had no bargaining power within the producing team. The crews had their unions, while we had not; they raised their salaries consistently, while we suffered silently as our bosses reprimanded us.

One day, I ran into Chui Po-chu, and she was also troubled by the same issue. We jointly proposed the establishment of an association for production managers, and approached Shaws' Wan Pak-nam to discuss with filmmaking extraordinaire Richard Cheung. This association would only deal with the issue of price hikes for various lines of work, but was not official (unionisation). We negotiated on behalf of our superiors, in order to unify rates and prevent disputes. This was how the Production Manager Association was established.

[Translated by Hayli Chwang]

# Terence Chang

## Bringing Hong Kong Films to the International Stage



Interviewers: Cindy Chan (2 December 2003);  
Wong Ha-pak, Kwok Ching-ling,  
Cheung Po-ching, Janice Chow, Michael Lau  
(12 February 2020)  
Collated by Cheung Po-ching & Doris Chiu

**A**s a child, Terence Chang was mesmerised by the cinema. He studied filmmaking at New York University (NYU). Upon return to Hong Kong, he worked for a number of organisations including Golden Harvest (HK) Limited, Rediffusion Television (RTV), and Johnny Mak Production Ltd. From 1986 to 1987, Chang was the overseas distribution manager at D & B Films Co., Ltd., responsible for developing overseas markets for the studio; it was then that he made Brandon Lee and Michelle Yeoh known to overseas audiences. He was close friends with John Woo and facilitated his entry into Hollywood and rise to international renown. The two set up various production companies and went on to collaborate on shooting projects in the Mainland that resulted in titles such as *Red Cliff* (2008) and *Red Cliff II* (2009). Since first joining the film industry, Chang had been involved in producing, editing, scriptwriting, art direction and film direction, eventually specialising and excelling in the role of producer.

## A Young Film Buff

I was born 1949 in Hong Kong to parents of Zhejiang descent. I had a younger brother and a younger sister. After World War II, my father worked in Shanghai where he met his future wife; after marriage they moved to Hong Kong. As a child, my parents would often take us to the movies—Queen's Theatre and King's Theatre in Central, as well as Tai Ping, Kam Ling and Ray Theatres in Sai Ying Pun. Most of the films we watched were imported from the West or Mandarin films. After finishing Form 5 at St. Paul's College, I studied Form 6 at New Method College in Causeway Bay. I would often skip class to watch the 12:30 noon matinee at State, Oriental or East Town Theatres. I kept a diary where I would write film reviews.

In September 1968, I left Hong Kong for studying Architecture at the University of Oregon in the small town of Eugene where I also lived. My favourite directors at the time Fritz Lang and Nicholas Ray were also with architectural background. There was a film-loving English professor teaching 'Film as Literature'. Once he invited Jean-Luc Godard to give a lecture and even brought a copy of *Tout Va Bien* (1972) to screen. It was an excellent lecture that made me want to study film and I began aspiring to do so at NYU.

In 1972, my parents and sister died when our home Kotewall Court collapsed in a landslide. It dawned on me that I should spend my life doing what I loved. In 1974, I went to NYU to study filmmaking.

## Early Years in the Film Industry

In September 1977, I began working officially at Golden Harvest. The monthly salary of HK\$1,200 was just enough to cover my rent in Tsim Sha Tsui and commute. When I left Golden Harvest in 1979, I was only earning HK\$1,500. But one person was very nice to me—Leonard Ho [co-founder of Golden Harvest and managed the production side of business]. He asked me to re-edit *Yellow Faced Tiger* (1974) to make Chuck Norris the protagonist and retitle it *Slaughter in San Francisco* for sale. The film sold very well. After that, I served as assistant producer for *Itchy Fingers* (1979). I got along with Leong Po-chih, Richard Ng and Cora Miao. I threw myself into the film. I didn't sleep in my own bed for 28 consecutive days after cameras first started rolling.

Someone else who treated me well was John Woo. He would often take me to have fun, eat Japanese food and party at night clubs. After *Itchy Fingers*, we were going to shoot a film about a bumbling James Bond, but couldn't agree on the cast with Golden Harvest, so the plan fell through. Then Rogerio Lam Sou-fung, who wanted a film made for Cora Miao, asked me to be the production manager because I knew Cora. I asked Louis Sit, my supervisor at Golden Harvest, if I could take no-pay leave. He said yes, then recanted. I resigned in a fit of rage.

Around 1979, Johnny Mak recruited Wong Sum to be deputy director of RTV. I tagged along and became assistant to the deputy director, in charge of production administration. Being the weaker station, RTV's ratings were consistently less than ideal, even when its productions were good. I was extremely frustrated and bad-tempered too. Johnny Mak was a friend with whom I saw eye to eye. In 1981 we went to Cannes together, where we observed and learnt about the film festival while devouring films.

Johnny and I watched a great number of films in Cannes. When we came back to Hong Kong, we left RTV. Johnny went on to recruit a bunch of people, including Vicky Leung, Cheung Yiu-wing, David Lai, Hon Yee-sang and George Ma, together we set up Johnny Mak Production Ltd. Our debut was *Lonely Fifteen* (1982), for which I was the associate producer. After completing *Dragon Force* (1982) in the same year, Johnny and I went to Cannes again. We had the audacity to set up a booth just to sell one film—*Dragon Force*. Despite not even knowing how to set the price, we managed to sell it to the US, Europe, and South America, among other places. In 1984, disputes arose among partners and the studio eventually disintegrated.

In 1985, Wong Sum asked me to join Shaws as a director. But finding that I wasn't achieving much, I soon left. Later Wong Sum got his friend to fork out HK\$1 million for a film he wanted to make. I was recruited as the director and *Escape from Coral Cove* (1986) was born. With no script, no props, no crew and no actors, I had to wing it, doubling as the screenwriter and art director. It was a real nightmare.



## Overseas Distribution at D & B

In October 1986, a former RTV colleague Linda Kuk invited me to join D & B. She knew I had experience with sales at Cannes with Johnny Mak, so when D & B's original overseas distribution manager Dennis Chan Kwok-sun left, she asked me to replace him. D & B films that I helped to distribute overseas included *Yes, Madam* (1985), *Legacy of Rage* (1986), *Magnificent Warriors* (1987), *Easy Money* (1987) and *An Autumn's Tale* (1987). At the time D & B had a presence in the more traditional overseas markets, such as Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, the US, Canada, and Australia. Cathay Organisation took care of Singapore and Malaysia; Taiwan was the jurisdiction of Long Shong Pictures Ltd.; while Gordon Fung Ping-chung's Variety Entertainment Co., Ltd. was in charge of the US and Canada. They all signed long-term contracts with D & B. When someone's contract was expiring, I would sign another one or two years with them. The terms were fixed. Our collaborations were cordial. I would tour the various places to see how promotion was being done at the cinemas. I would take pictures and collect data about the cinemas, then compile a report for the perusal of Dickson Poon and other bosses.

Besides this, D & B partnered with Japan's Toei Company Ltd. in the early days. Sanada Hiroyuki (aka Henry Sanada) was a leading actor in *Royal Warriors* (1986). He was very famous in Japan, so we gave distribution rights to Toei. However it was screened as a double feature with another Japanese film, and this hurt ticket sales. By contrast, *An Autumn's Tale* which I tentatively sold to Pony Canyon Inc. by a lower minimum guarantee ended up doing quite well. Chow Yun-fat was extremely popular in Japan, perhaps as a result of *A Better Tomorrow*, a hit in Korea and Japan. Mabel Cheung and Alex Law were also recognised for their talent by Pony Canyon which went on to invest in their future project [referring to *The Soong Sisters*, 1997].

When I joined D & B, Dickson Poon had signed Bruce Lee's son Brandon Lee. Although these were Chinese films, Lee enjoyed a bit of fame. Poon's girlfriend Michelle Yeoh was a martial arts star with huge potential. Hence he wanted me to promote films starring the two, especially in non-traditional overseas markets.

Brandon Lee had a lot of hang-ups. He didn't want people to say he was Bruce Lee's son; he didn't even like kung fu movies. His contract specified that his father's name and photo images could not be used for promotion. Hence when designing publicity materials for *Legacy of Rage*, I hired someone to hand-draw Bruce Lee's image in the background, behind Brandon Lee. The result was good; many buyers expressed interest in the film.

Overseas viewers often had very different tastes from the local audience; their primary language of communication was usually English. D & B had to redesign publicity materials like posters and trailers for overseas markets. I would come up with the concepts and have someone outside the company take care of production. They did not go through D & B's publicity department. Dickson Poon would sign off the designs. Also films were often re-edited by overseas buyers to better cater to the taste of their audienceship.

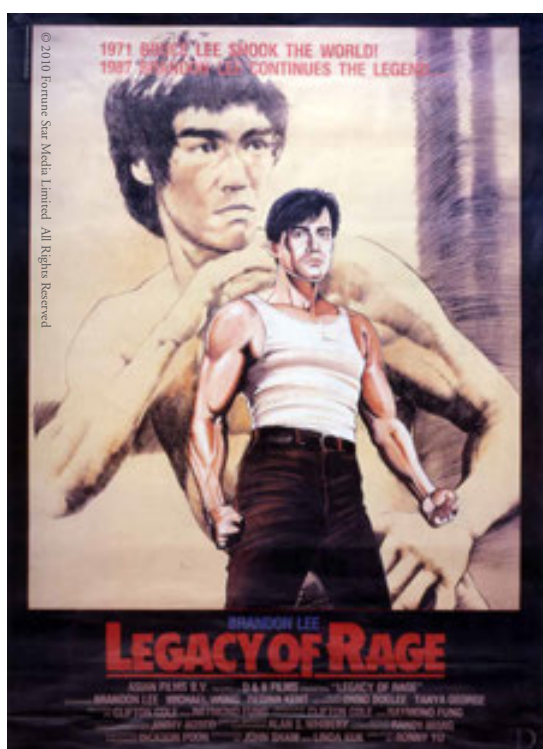
At the time, videotapes were starting to gain popularity. I also helped to develop their overseas market. It was a huge market, spanning almost the whole world, reaching as far as the Middle East and South Africa. The highest-paying buyers were France, Germany and the UK. For action films, our South American sales were also good.



The background in which *Magnificent Warriors* (1987) was set was not as appealing to foreign buyers. Thus the film was publicised for its action spectacles.



Terence Chang (left) pulled strings for Michelle Yeoh (right) to further her career development in Hollywood.



The overseas poster image of *Legacy of Rage* (1986), which starred Brandon Lee.

## Sales Done Properly at Film Festivals

In May 1987, I went to Cannes to sell films for D & B with assistant manager Chan Lai-fong. We did pretty well. In October of the same year, I went to Fiera Milano (MIFED) alone. I set up a booth, and juggled contract writing, business negotiations, and promotion. When I came back to Hong Kong, Dickson Poon asked me how things went, I replied, 'Almost \$800,000.' He said, 'Hong Kong dollars?' I said, 'No, US dollars'. He was very satisfied: 'That's good. You don't have to report to me from now on.'

Although I spent under two years at D & B, I was quite happy. Not only did I manage to achieve certain things, I had good relationships with colleagues. However, there were personnel changes at the company. Tsui Hark and Nansun Shi asked me to join Film Workshop Co. Ltd., and I left D & B.

At the end of 1987, I joined Film Workshop as general manager. Besides production, I had to take care of publicity and distribution, etc. In essence, all operations. By that time I had had some experience at Johnny Mak's studio and D & B. When I was selling films for D & B, some overseas buyers would insist that they contained kung fu elements and preferably with white or Eurasian actors, like Cynthia Rothrock and Brandon Lee. That didn't sit well with me. I felt Hong Kong films deserved better. So I stopped contacting these buyers when I worked for Film Workshop. Instead I invited film critics to the test screening. When the reviews came out, I made copies for other buyers. This turned out to be very effective. *The Killer* (1989) was sold very successfully this way. The Japanese and Korean markets were not secured at film festivals, but through separate negotiations. I had to go to Tokyo to pay visits to the studios individually to show my sincerity and respect.

## Hollywood with John Woo

I already knew John Woo quite well at Golden Harvest. *A Better Tomorrow II* (1987) had just hit the theatres when I joined Film Workshop. It didn't do as well as its predecessor. He was unwilling to edit out a lot of things. Hence Tsui Hark and some others were not too happy with him and vice versa.

John subsequently set up his own production company to make *Bullet in the Head* (1990). He was hoping to get Golden Princess Film Production Limited to invest, but they refused on account of what they considered a weak cast. I knew Golden Princess's bosses Lawrence Louey, Ng Siu-chan, and Gordon Fung Ping-chung, so I volunteered to help John block-book in three places, and then convince Golden Princess. In the end, he managed to shoot the film.



Michelle Yeoh (3rd left) was awarded the Excellence in Asian Cinema Award at the 7th Asian Film Awards in 2013. Alex Law, Mabel Cheung (1st and 2nd left), (from right) Terence Chang, Catherine Hun, Linda Kuk and John Sham offered their congratulations.

At the time Linda Kuk had approached me about setting up a company, so taking advantage of the opportunity, I founded Milestone Pictures Limited with John and Linda. Milestone Pictures made a total of four films—*Once a Thief* (1991), *Now You See Love... Now You Don't* (1992), *Hard-Boiled* (1992), and *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (1996). While shooting *Once a Thief* in France, I received Fox's invitation, expressing the wish to recruit John as a director through me. I urged John to make a stopover at L.A. for two days before returning to Hong Kong, so that the two parties could meet. However, he bluntly turned down the offer in the meeting. The reason was that the other party was speaking English too quickly and he couldn't understand. So I found him an English tutor in Hong Kong.

Half a year later, we went to the US again. Through an intermediary, we met with the representatives of many film studios. One of them was Universal Studios. John knew that the US market was interested in him so he wanted *Hard-Boiled* to adopt a more westernised approach. The screenplay was tweaked to become a story about an undercover cop. David Wu edited a brilliant trailer that created quite a stir at its MIFED screening and also got more American studios interested in John. In the end, Jim Jacks of Universal Studios invited John to shoot *Hard Target* (1993), his first Hollywood movie.

In 1994, John and I, as well as our American intermediary and partner, co-founded the Hollywood studio WCG Entertainment, which made titles including Fox's *Broken Arrow* (1996) and Paramount's *Face/Off* (1997). Many people would say that *Face/Off* is John's best American movie.

After this, John decided to set up a new studio, which he named Lion Rock Productions Limited. Lions are fierce; rocks are sturdy; and Lion Rock is Hong Kong, a reminder of where we came from. The studio specialised in Hollywood films, such as MGM's *Windtalkers* (2002) and *Bulletproof Monk* (2003), and Paramount's *Paycheck* (2003). Of these, the story of *Bulletproof Monk* was developed by me after reading its comic version; I was hoping to tailor a film for Chow Yun-fat. During this time, I also served as a manager to Chow and Michelle Yeoh, in my capacity as a friend. For instance, Michelle's role in *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997) was specially written for her.

In 2004, John made his last two films in the US. They didn't sell very well at the box-office. He hoped to try his hand at shooting in the Mainland, but had no idea how to proceed. Fortunately a friend in Beijing showed him the ropes, making *Red Cliff* (2003) and *Red Cliff II* (2009) possible. Both films did wonderfully, so John decided to continue shooting in the Mainland. I stayed to work with him.

In recent years, I also worked as a producer for upcoming directors, helping to find actors and capital for them. I have played almost every role in the film industry, but I think I'm best as a producer.

[Translated by Piera Chen]

## Otto Leong

### Cinema Circuit Management: Flexibility Is the Way to Go



Interviewers: Wong Ha-pak, Janice Chow,  
Cheung Po-ching, Kwok Ching-ling  
(12 February 2020)

Collated by Cheung Po-ching & Wong Ha-pak

Otto Leong spent much of his childhood in Lee Theatre where his father worked as a manager. He broke into the entertainment industry after graduation. In 1985, D & B Films Co., Ltd. expanded its business by forming its own cinema circuit. Though without prior experience in cinema operation, he was entrusted with a prominent role in its distribution wing, overseeing film distribution, cinema circuit management and film production investment at the age of 29. Despite being new to the game, Leong's diligence and willingness to try new things helped him successfully get D & B cinema circuit on track, by adopting new management methods and working hand in hand with old-timers. The uneven path of developing a new cinema circuit required him to be flexible in applying different strategies, as well as uniting the cinemas, arranging appropriate film release schedule, and prudently investing on outsourced film productions to avoid financial loss. After six years in D & B, Leong became a veteran not only in cinema operation but also local and overseas film distribution. He then brought his great depth of knowledge and experiences into television channels business. From observing the distinctive reactions of male and female audience on the 1986 romance movie *Passion*, to first-hand witnessing conflicts between gangsters and cops, Leong's pragmatic and flexible approach brought every challenge to a successful close.



### A Childhood Spent in Cinema

I was born and raised in Hong Kong. My father Leung Sin-fun was the manager of Lee Theatre. I spent much of my childhood in the theatre and this has greatly influenced my later career choice in the entertainment industry.

In 1978, after graduating from the Department of Government and Public Administration at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, I took a part-time job in Commercial Television's marketing team. After a few months, the television station closed down. Meanwhile, Capital Artists Limited leased the Academic Community Hall for its sister company TVB (Television Broadcasts Limited), and I was then hired as their booking coordinator. Later I was transferred to Capital Artists' headquarter and became a programmer in Lee Theatre. My work also included organising shows such as the audition of The 1st New Talent Singing Awards, and taking singers to perform overseas.

Capital Artists also distributed foreign language films. The first film that was handled by me to release in Edko Films' cinema circuit was Japanese animated film *Queen Millennia* (1982; released in HK in August 1983). During that time, due to the underproduction of Shaw Brothers (Hong Kong) Ltd., TVB transferred some staff from Capital Artists to IP Movie Productions Limited. That was how I set foot in film production and became the producer of *Young Cops* (1985).

### Joining Dickson Poon's Young Team

In 1985, D & B leased four prime cinemas (Jade Theatre, Rex Theatre, Golden Theatre and Bonds Theatre) from Shaws and formed its own cinema circuit. While they were hiring someone to manage the cinemas, I was referred by an ex-colleague to meet Dickson Poon. He expressed his love for cinema and he believed that we could make less 'common as muck' movies and more highbrow ones targeting the middle class. I shared my views on how to develop D & B cinema circuit such as reforming the management structure. I suggested that ticketing and financial affairs should be separated from cinema administration, and to be overseen by independent managers. By decentralising management, the company could have a clearer grasp of its earnings. Mr Poon accepted my suggestion and established D & B Films Distribution Ltd. to run the cinemas and distribute films for theatrical releases.

Without the backing of Shaws films, where could we find over 30 movies each year to show in our cinemas? How many films should D & B make and which film production companies should we cooperate with? After a long discussion, we began with acquiring western and Taiwan movies. I was only 29 years old and Mr Poon was about the same age, that was why we formed a very congenial relationship. Despite being the least experienced among all the candidates, I was chosen and even offered with a remuneration that was a triple of what I got previously in Capital Artists. Perhaps my inexperience was exactly the reason he picked me, because I was not bound by any preconception, and he also wanted a young team to bring out and execute new ideas.

### Gangsters' Weapons Found Inside Rex Theatre

We only got a month's time to get ready before D & B cinema circuit was officially founded on 30 November 1985. When we signed contract with Shaws, we agreed to take over all its existing employees. We recruited those who wanted to stay and introduced our new management structure to the managers and assistant managers.



At a company gathering: (from left) Otto Leong, Norman Chan, Raymond Leung, Stephen Shin.

They were all old hands in the industry, and we made a smooth transition by working side by side with them. The rent of these prime cinemas cost tens of millions of dollars, which was six to seven times higher than renting Lee Theatre. After making some refurbishments, such as replacing the broken chairs, renovating the foyers, re-designing new tickets and giving our staff new uniforms, D & B circuit officially started its business. Our office was located inside Bonds Theatre.

These four cinemas were all situated in the most prosperous areas and advantageous locations. Jade Theatre and Rex Theatre were particularly crowded and busy during their night screenings. We did morning, matinee and midnight screenings all year round, which were rarely done by other cinemas but were proven to be a lucrative source of income. Our distribution company was making profits. My most unforgettable incident was the one that happened in Rex Theatre, located in the notorious neighbourhood of Portland Street. One night we found a bunch of retractable knives and beef knives discarded and hidden inside the cinema by the gangsters when they were being hunt down by the police. For Mr Poon, his favourite cinema was Jade Theatre, and the manager there was very adept at serving him.

### M2 Theatre Vs Majestic Theatre

In August 1986, D & B leased M2 Theatre and Majestic Theatre. Our initial target was to lease M2 Theatre, but we were required to lease both cinemas as a bundle. Completely beyond our plan, we needed to find someone to help with the film programming in Majestic Cinema, and was fortunate enough to have Joseph Lai undertaken to provide us with non-mainstream movies that had great profit potential. And with the support from his sister Terry Lai, Joseph ran Majestic Theatre under a underwrite-and-split deal [screening Japanese films distributed by Joseph Lai's IFD Films & Arts Limited] for us, and it was a huge success.

However, our decision to expand our cinema circuit was doubted by many in the industry, since M2 Theatre was in Jordan, while we already had Rex Theatre in Mongkok. It was like having your own cinemas competing against each other in the same district. But we would rather have one more 'worthy' cinema under our umbrella to consolidate our circuit, and we were lucky that both cinemas were making profits. When *Passion* (1986) opened in cinemas, M2 Theatre had the best box office performance, and the audience reaction was also remarkable. If the film started at 2:30 pm, you would see a bunch of men coming out to the foyer for a cigarette break at around 3:00 pm. They probably came watch the film with their girlfriends but were bored and needed a break. It was the same in every screening. When the movie ended, the girlfriends all left the theatre with tears in their eyes. This was how I knew this film was made for women and women only.

### Letting Go of Secondary Cinemas

To form our own cinema circuit, we also needed to acquire some secondary cinemas which were smaller in scale and located in less prominent locations. We signed contracts and discussed terms with these cinemas, both corporate-owned and independent ones, on a yearly basis. Almost half of D & B circuit's income came from its prime cinemas, and we were in the same league as Golden Princess and Gala cinema circuits. However, our secondary cinemas were relatively weak in profit-making, so we used different strategies such as joint screening with cinema circuit that showed western movies, or let them go 'off-circuit' occasionally.

Normally when a cinema joined a cinema circuit, it could not screen movies that were not shown within the circuit. However, D & B allowed its secondary cinemas to go 'off-circuit' when a movie was not performing well



The D & B team was very proud of its decision to move *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987) into the Chinese New Year release slot.



*Passion* (1986): The audience reaction shows that the film was made for women.



During the later release period, *It's a Drink, It's a Bomb!* (1985) only performed well in the prime cinemas. So D & B allowed the secondary cinemas to go 'off-circuit'.

there. For example, during the later release period of *It's a Drink, It's a Bomb!* (1985), it was still performing very well in the prime cinemas but not so much in the secondary ones. We did not want it to go off the screen yet so that it could keep running in the prime cinemas for one more week, and so we allowed the secondary cinemas to go 'off-circuit' and screen some other movies independently to maintain their business. This flexibility was welcomed by many secondary cinemas, and was a pull factor for them to continue the partnership with us.

### Strategic Film Programming

*Magnificent Warriors* (1987) was supposed to be a Chinese New Year film, but its release date was finally postponed and replaced by *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987). It was a successful strategy and we are still very proud of it. At that time, people in our publicity team including Shu Kei shared the same thought as mine that *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* would be a box-office hit. With a rather low production cost of around HK\$3 million, we were confident that it would be a big earner. At first Mr Poon disagreed, because his then fiancée Michelle Yeoh was the leading actress of *Magnificent Warriors* and he insisted to roll out the film in the Chinese New Year period. It took a lot of persuasion to convince him to watch our competitor's New Year picture *Mirage* (1987) before making up his mind. Once he saw it, he realised that its story setting, action and production design were all similar to *Magnificent Warriors*. He was convinced that it was not worthwhile to go head-on with our competitor. At last, we successfully turned the tables by releasing *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World*.

Take *Kiss Me Goodbye* (1986) as another example. After arranging some midnight screenings to test audience reaction, we were not very optimistic about its box office. We rethought about our promotion strategy and decided to delay its release date for two months. It was also not a wise choice to compete head-on when your rivals' titles were much stronger than yours. We once rolled out a special showcase of D & B films, rerunning old titles to avoid direct competition with our rivals. In short, D & B's flexibility and boldness were what made it different from traditional cinema circuit.

### Investing in Independent Films

Besides producing its own movies, D & B also looked for outside sources. We co-operated with Tony Wong Yuk-long and Eric Tsang's Alan & Eric Films Limited. Under a 50-50 investment deal which did not involve equity share, they promised to provide ten or more films each year to be released in our cinemas. I was responsible for negotiating with the producers from D & B and Alan & Eric Films, but I found it difficult to arrange the film release schedule with so many movies all competing for the best release dates. Therefore our partnership only lasted for one year.

The independent films released in D & B cinema circuit were also distributed by us, but it was a challenging task to work on. Since star-studded big budget films were quickly acquired by other cinema circuits, we only encountered some topical movies for our cinemas occasionally. One of the examples was *A Terracotta Warrior* (1990). Producer Zhu Mu knew that other cinema circuits might only release his film for a week, but with D &

B, there would be more room for discussion. This film was directed by Tony Ching Siu-tung with guaranteed quality. Though without a well-known cast, we believed it would become a much-discussed work, and so we decided to give it a prime release period and a massive promotion campaign.

To ensure a stable source of films, we also invested on film productions by providing instalment loans to independent film companies. We worked closely with companies like Chun Sing Film Co., Chan's Films Company, Tomson (Hong Kong) Films Company Limited, etc. We would study their production plan, synopsis, cast and director list, and issue loans to them if we found their projects worthy for investment. They would repay the loan after finishing the production, and we would distribute their films for theatrical release. We invested on several such films each year, *Stars & Roses* (1989) was one example.

Although this could ease our burden on self-production, it was more difficult to control quality. These film companies might cut their expenses due to different financial considerations, and so there was no guarantee on quality. As a result, if they failed to make any profits, we could only have the loans paid back. There were cases that they took the money but failed to finish the production, and all we could do was to urge them to repay the debt.

D & B was known for its refined and high-class image. As long as we did not distribute films that were overly obscene or violent, Mr Poon would not interfere or raise too many objections. However, movies that contained obscenity and violence usually sold better. And while film studios often sold their films in bundle, we had to compromise and distribute these films as well.

### Taking On Multiple Roles

In 1987, John Sham left D & B. Terence Chang, who took care of overseas distribution, also left soon after. Mr Poon assigned me to take over overseas distribution as well. Previous overseas distribution managers, including Dennis Chan Kwok-sun and Terence Chang, used to report directly to John Sham. But Mr Poon decided that from then on, all matters including cinema operation and film distribution would be managed by D & B Films Distribution Ltd. This was a major change in the management structure, and I started to work closely with Stephen Shin, who joined our management at that time.

Since then, D & B became even more aggressive on film distribution, putting more effort on overseas distribution to regions such as Europe, Middle East, South America, East and West Africa, and even more remote territories like Pakistan. D & B also produced more action films at the time, such as *Black Cat* (1991), drawing much attention from overseas studios. With the hard work of our distribution team and growth of non-traditional overseas markets, our overseas distribution became a regular source of profit. Among all the regions, the South Korean market was the most profitable and our action films were particularly lucrative, each was sold at several hundred thousand US dollars.

Uncle Eight's (Yuen Woo-ping) *Tiger Cage* (aka *Sure Fire*, 1988) excelled at action sequences and was well-sold in different regions around the world, so as the subsequent action films he went on to direct for D & B. Though the new ones were not sequels to *Tiger Cage*, they were named after it to form a film series.

Our department heads or representatives had a meeting every one to two weeks to report on our work. We also needed a weekly statistic report on distribution and film programming because they were crucial for the upcoming week's planning and strategy. For example, we would predict a film's performance using its box office numbers for midnight screenings, and we needed to discuss with the overseas distribution team on the release schedule in Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand when we were about to roll out our own titles. Sometimes we found movies that were suitable for overseas release, but the film owners might not have the network they needed. In such cases, we could help them distribute their films by charging a certain amount of commission. Publicity campaign determined the fate of a film. For self-produced movies, our publicity team reported directly to our production team; while for films made by other companies, we had to communicate with our publicity team and report to the film owners.

### Transforming into Regal Cinema Circuit

I had not yet joined D & B when Mr Poon first discussed cinema lease with Shaws. In around 1990, Jade Theatre was under renovation, and without this prime cinema, we had to constantly seek help from other cinema circuits which screened western films. The lease term between D & B and Shaws was three years, and we leased its cinemas for a total of six years. Our partnership ceased by the end of 1991 due to disagreement on rental price





*Tiger Cage* (1988) was well-sold in different regions around the world.



*Black Cat* (1991), an engaging action feature, drew much attention from overseas studios.

and also the triad's intervention in the film industry. Mr Poon's core business was brand retail, and he did not want it to be affected by the film business.

I enjoyed working in D & B very much and felt grateful for the trust and autonomy given by Mr Poon. He trusted me enough to let me make a four-million-dollar decision, or to release whatever movies that I was confident of. But of course I had to be accountable if it flopped in box office.

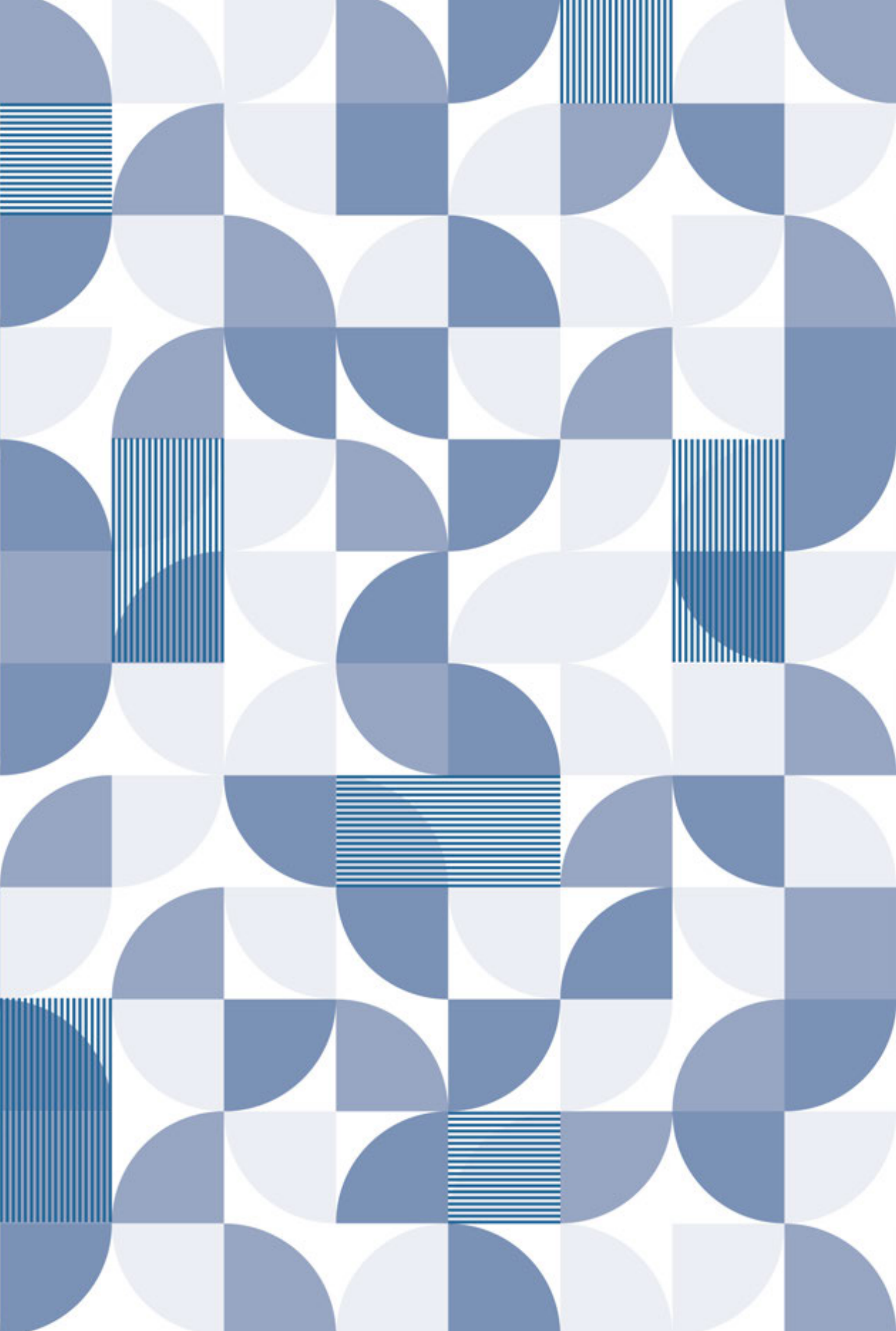
After D & B cinema circuit ceased its operation, it was taken over by Raymond Wong and Steven Lo Kitting's Regal Films Co Ltd, and our whole department was directly integrated into their company. It was a smooth transition. Later, I followed Raymond Wong when he left Regal and started working in his newly-formed cinema circuit named Mandarin. At that time, there were as much as five cinema circuits in Hong Kong. Amid the flourishing film industry I only saw fierce competitions. More and more films were made, but good ones were rare. When overseas buyers found that Hong Kong movies were of bad quality, it would only damage our reputation, and I had the feeling that Hong Kong's film industry would take its toll sooner or later.

## A New Chapter in the TV Industry

I stayed less than a year in Mandarin cinema circuit, and left in 1993 to join United Media & Entertainment Ltd., a company co-founded by my friend Danny Hui Chi-ho and a Mainland television station, which produced TV series to be released in the Mainland. I decided to start a new career there because it seemed to be a prosperous business, and I believed the film distribution industry in Hong Kong would only get tougher.

In 1998, I left United Media & Entertainment and was hired by Tsui Siu-ming to work in Emperor Motion Picture Ltd.'s distribution department. Soon, I followed him to Sun TV and Cable TV. In Cable TV, I was responsible for distributing self-produced programmes, and also developing TV channels in the Mainland. Later, Cable TV established Sundream Motion Pictures Ltd. and Tsui Siu-ming was the CEO. I became vice president in charge of distribution. We produced films like *A Battle of Wits* (2006) and *Eye in the Sky* (2007). Sundream's film production came to a halt after Mr Tsui left Cable TV. In 2009, Cable TV also stopped developing Mainland channels. I was then appointed by BBC Worldwide Channels Asia as distribution head for the Greater China region. I still work there as of today.

[Translated by Jane Ching]



〈Chapter II〉

# Creative Minds

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## D & B:

# The Creative Trajectory of a Trailblazer

Thomas Shin ■

**D** & B Films Co., Ltd. was formed by Dickson Poon, Sammo Hung and John Sham. The ‘D’ stood for Dickson, and the ‘B’ for Sammo Hung, whose Chinese name is Hung Kam-bo. In the eight years from 1984-1992, D & B produced 67 films, and together with Golden Harvest (HK) Limited and Cinema City Company Limited, was a formidable force in the film production scene during the 1980s.

The Golden Harvest roster of films was dominated by action adventures starring Jackie Chan and Sammo Hung. Meanwhile Cinema City emphasised ensemble creative team efforts and genre films for their markets. Under the leadership of very colourful personalities, such as Karl Maka, Dean Shek and Raymond Wong, their focus was creativity. D & B was the upstart among these giants. They referenced the strengths of both companies but also had their fair share of unique creations.

As head of operations of D & B, one of John Sham’s first moves was to bring Sammo Hung over from Bo Ho Films Company Limited (part of the Golden Harvest group). D & B’s first film, *The Return of Pom Pom* (premiered on 22 June 1984), featured the pair of bumbling detectives played by Richard Ng and John Sham. It was directly lifted from Bo Ho’s *Pom Pom* (premiered 22 February 1984), which in turn was inspired by Ng’s and Sham’s hilarious performances in Bo Ho’s *Winners & Sinners* (1983). They also rushed production on *The Return of Pom Pom* so that it premiered just four months after *Pom Pom*’s release, scoring a respectable box office of over HK\$18 million, a good start for D & B.

D & B chose a comedy to be their debut film with good reason. Since the early 1980s, Golden Harvest had been very successful with its kung fu comedies, while Cinema City blended comedy into their action-genre films, starting with their first film *Laughing Time* (1980). Guided by such examples, it was in fact a very safe choice for D & B to debut with a comedy.

Although D & B had further success with *Mr. Boo Meets Pom Pom* (1985) (Michael Hui’s first time

acting in a non-Golden Harvest film after his debut with Golden Harvest in 1974) and *Pom Pom Strikes Back!* (1986), once the company got on its feet, John Sham gradually shifted his focus to behind the camera, fading out of his very successful career as a comic actor. Then Clifton Ko, who had directed the *Happy Ghost* series of films at Cinema City, came over to D & B and forged another creative path, the urban situation comedy, with *It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987). The film’s protagonists, Uncle Bill and Auntie Lydia, are relatable characters living in a low-cost government housing estate. This series of sit-com films played to the grassroots populace, enjoyed great popularity in the Chinese New Year time slots and became the highest-grossing series in D & B history.

### Bold Choices and Experimental Themes

The early D & B films were quite eclectic. The company, having picked up experience from the past successes of Bo Ho and Cinema City, found its feet very quickly. However, in spite of having John Sham as commander and Sammo Hung as general, D & B did not have a central war room for creativity and lacked a strong production department. Rather, they relied on experienced producers and associate producers to bring something special to each individual project. In other words, D & B did not have one specific direction on creativity. The producers would make decisions based on commercial box-office pressures and to satisfy the needs of the newly-established D & B cinema circuit, assigning talent according to demand, resulting in quite a few bold experiments.

The most obvious example was in the early days, with Leong Po-chih’s *Hong Kong 1941* (1984). Leong got his start in the Hong Kong film industry when he directed *Jumping Ash* (1976), and by the 1980s was already a famous director. He had just directed the commercial genre film *He Lives by Night* (1982) at Cinema City, and came over to D & B to direct the non-mainstream *Hong Kong 1941*. He cast the then box-office poison Chow Yun-fat in the lead role. The





Derek Yee (left) made his directorial debut with *The Lunatics* (1986). Tony Leung Chiu-wai (right) was still a new actor at the time and was brilliant in the film.

film portrays the dark days ahead of, during and after the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, revealing the beauty and the cruelty of human nature in the face of disaster, and people's struggles and persistence while in the depths of despair. The high degree of realism and intimate portrayals of human nature were new to Hong Kong films. At the time it was considered unique and very bold. Time has proven that it has since become a classic Hong Kong film, the imprint on the identities of a whole generation of Hong Kong people who grew up during the post-war era. For his brilliant performance, Chow Yun-fat received the honours of best actor in the Golden Horse Awards and the Asia Pacific Film Festival.

Because in the early days of D & B there was a dire need for films, it became a cradle for inexperienced directors. With John Sham in charge, the company produced some films with experimental topics. Soon after D & B was formed, long-time A-list actor John (David) Chiang directed his film *Silent Love* (1986) about deaf-mutes in Hong Kong. He cast new film actor Sean Lau Ching-wan against Season Ma, who was outstanding in *Boat People* (1982). A crime film with a focus on marginalised handicapped young people, *Silent Love* became a rare treat in Hong Kong's film history.

Within three months of the release of *Silent Love*, John Chiang's younger brother Derek Yee, also an A-list actor, decided to make his directorial debut, also about a social issue. His *The Lunatics* (1986) proved his mettle. Based on a true incident, the film took a solemn yet sympathetic view as it observed the dire situations of mentally handicapped people in Hong Kong and how much additional harm social prejudice could do. Yee's elder brother Paul Chun played the lead role magnificently. New actor Tony Leung Chiu-wai was brilliant as well. The audience, who only knew Yee through his portrayal of characters like the Chinese period-costumed swordsman Third Master in the Shaw Brothers films, was finally able to see his

artistic achievement and ambitions as a director. A true filmmaker was born.

As D & B grew, it gave many opportunities to 'new directors' who were senior behind-the-camera crew members from various departments who wished to direct. For example, action choreographer Corey Yuen Kwai's directorial debut *Yes, Madam* (1985) featured new actress Michelle Yeoh from *The Owl vs Bumbo* (1984), here with a new image as a martial arts actress, and made her a star. D & B also gained a slew of film franchises from this genre, and Yuen himself became known as the specialist in martial arts actress films. Renowned cinematographer David Chung made his directorial debut with *It's a Drink! It's a Bomb!* (1985), followed by two action films: *Royal Warriors* (1986) and *Magnificent Warriors* (1987).

For a few years in the 1980s, radio mogul Winnie Yu produced several films for D & B, including being an associate producer for *Passion* (1986), *Kiss Me Goodbye* (1986), *Final Victory* (1987) and *An Autumn's Tale* (1987). She was producer for *Wonder Women* (1987) and *Carry on Dancing* (aka *Keep on Dancing*, 1988). Famed lyricist Calvin Poon Yuen-leung's directorial debut was romantic *wenyi* film *Kiss Me Goodbye*, featuring new actor Anthony Wong Yiu-ming against Loletta Lee, a choice befitting a romantic lyricist. In addition, the songs 'Kiss Me Goodbye' and 'Obsession' by Tat Ming Pair (of which Anthony Wong Yiu-ming is a member) blended wonderfully with the production design by William Chang and Yank Wong, thereby creating a new *wenyi* style and bringing heartbreaking sadness to a new level of beauty. The following year when Kam Kwok-leung chose D & B to make his directorial debut with *Wonder Women*, Calvin Poon Yuen-leung was his deputy director. The sophisticated Kam Kwok-leung opted *Wonder Women* as his cross-over vehicle from television to film. It was a humorous, playful urban satire; his over-the-top style expressing the necessity for women in the 1980s to respect and improve themselves.



Sean Lau Ching-wan made his film debut in *Silent Love* (1986), a crime film with a focus on marginalised handicapped youngsters.



*Kiss Me Goodbye* (1986) features new actor Anthony Wong Yiu-ming (right) and Loletta Lee (left). The film, directed by the famed lyricist, is pulsated with sensuous imagery.

Experienced directors also found a refreshing new start at D & B. A prime example is Patrick Tam. Several years after his much talked-about films *Nomad* (1982) and *Cherie* (1984), Tam directed *Final Victory* at D & B. The film is about a small-time thug (played by Eric Tsang) and his struggles between loyalty and righteousness after having an affair with a fellow gangster's girlfriend. It was written by the then newcomer Wong Kar-wai, who did a spectacular job.

### Urban Sense and Sentimentality

Perhaps D & B's most unwitting contribution to local cinema is a new urban sense and a new kind of sentimentality. In numerous films, such as Tony Au's *Dream Lovers* (1986), Stanley Kwan's *Love Unto Wastes* (1986), Sylvia Chang's *Passion* and D & B's bestselling *wenyi* film *An Autumn's Tale*, no matter whether they are aesthetic, feminine, desperate or dreamy, the choices made by a woman makes her realise that the vanities of the moment are all but a fleeting urban dream.

In its early days, D & B lacked a central creative room that Cinema City had, and because of that it forged its own path. The experienced directors stayed with the comedies and action films, while most of the newer directors were at D & B to seek an opportunity to make their second film (such as Tony Au, Sylvia Chang, Stanley Kwan and Mabel Cheung); at the same time many cast and crew members also became directors (such as David Chung, Corey Yuen Kwai, Calvin Poon Yuen-leung and Derek Yee). All of them contributed to the vibrance, creativity and boldness that was D & B.

These new directors' works would not have been so distinctively outstanding without a team of emerging screenwriters, who are all in some ways a trailblazer. Apart from Chiu Kang-chien, Sylvia

Chang and Alex Law, there were also, of course, John Chan Koon-chung, Wong Kar-wai, Kam Kwok-leung and Calvin Poon Yuen-leung. A whole generation of young writers found their creative outlets through the medium of film, and developed magnificently. Stanley Kwan in his humility said that *Love Unto Wastes* was a Chiu Kang-chien film. Sylvia Chang wrote her first script for her film *Passion*; since then she has been writing all her own films. This kind of individualised creativity also developed into different genres, themes and plots. Although it can be said not every one was commercially successful, there is no doubt that this set D & B apart from the ensemble creations of Cinema City and the purely commercial films of Golden Harvest.

### Bourgeois Themes and the Creative Path of D & B in its Later Years

To put it simply, in the 1980s, although D & B was founded after Golden Harvest and Cinema City, it did what they could not: it began to cater to niche markets with films about social issues and feminine sensibilities, films that are high-art and intellectual. Under the common assumption that film is an entertainment product, D & B began to develop projects for the middle-class audience. The most obvious of these are controversial films about social concerns, such as *Silent Love* and *The Lunatics*, as well as *An Autumn's Tale* which was born out of the initialing of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration. The bourgeoisie audience demanded more than entertainment that just made them laugh, but rather something that began to explore and face up to hidden social problems and disadvantaged communities. In the wake of the Declaration's initialing, D & B released *Hong Kong 1941*, which explored the contemporary milieu through a historical context; as well as *An Autumn's Tale*, an immigration fable.

It is easiest to gain insight into D & B's evolution from the change in one actor's image. After starring in Cinema City's *All the Wrong Clues (...for the Right Solution)* (1981) and *All the Wrong Spies* (1983), George Lam began to work with D & B starting with *The Owl vs Bumbo*. Not only did he sing the theme songs of many of the films, his acting roles also began to change. *Passion* completely turned him away from his comic image, casting him as a middle-class man trapped in the shackles of marriage vows and time. In taste as well as theme, *Passion's* exploration of who loves whom the most in these modern times is an echo of Hong Kong's east-meets-west society and its basic need for an outlet to express the soul.

Stephen Shin, who joined D & B in its latter years, ran with George Lam's new image and created for him films such as the *Heart to Hearts* series and a Chinese presentation of a western theme, *A Bite of Love* (1990), playing directly to the middle-class professionals, developing the genre into relatable urban romantic comedies. *Heart to Hearts* (1988) made over HK\$24 million at the box office, while *Heart into Hearts* (1990) made over HK\$23 million. Those were Stephen Shin's most profitable D & B films, proving the successful blending of the middle-class market with romantic comedies. The Dodo Cheng vehicles *The Nobles* (1989) and *BB30* (1990) also followed this path. The bourgeois romance in the *Heart to Hearts* series and the grassroots dreams of striking it rich in the *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* series became the genre tentpoles of D & B in its latter years.

In the eight-year existence of D & B, it was managed by John Sham in the first half. That was the pioneering stage, as they boldly tried new things to satisfy the demand for films with which to feed the circuit. The products were usually not set to a certain style but rather provided an opportunity for quite a few cultural youth and creators with potential to stretch their wings. And thanks to Sham's numerous

and wide-ranged connections, quite a few talented people from other industries became involved in D & B films. Following in Sham's footsteps, Stephen Shin ran the company in its latter half by deepening and expanding the genres that had proven to be box-office guarantees. In addition to the *Heart to Hearts* and *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* series mentioned above, he also created the *Yes, Madam* and *Black Cat* series starring martial arts actresses.

During his tenure at D & B, Stephen Shin directed as well as produced. In four years, he produced 28 and directed ten films. In fact, even during John Sham's reign, Stephen Shin was already directing at D & B. That film was *Brotherhood* (1986), starring Danny Lee and Alex Man. Even before Ringo Lam's masterpiece *City on Fire* (1987), *Brotherhood* explored the almost fraternal bond between villain and police, and touched upon the plot twist of a policeman switching sides to become a successful thief. The clash between right and wrong was violent, emphasising the conflict between loyalty and righteousness. At the time, it grossed over HK\$7.7 million at the box-office, which was a decent result for a D & B film.

Stephen Shin graduated from The Chinese University of Hong Kong in the 1970s and worked for Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB). He eventually crossed over to Commercial Television (CTV), and when CTV ceased transmissions, he joined the film industry. His works include *Eclipse* (1982). Prior to officially managing D & B, Shin directed *Easy Money* (1987). That film was produced by the boss Dickson Poon himself, and starred Michelle Yeoh and George Lam. Yeoh played an intelligent and educated thief against Lam's insurance investigator. They were locked in conflict and yet romantic sparks flew. Yeoh ditched her tough *Yes, Madam* image for an elegant, beautiful style and graceful poise. Her high intelligence and quick wit charmed Lam's character to distraction. Shin spared no expense, filming on location in



*In the Line of Duty 4* (1989): Cynthia Khan (right photo) played opposite Donnie Yen (left photo, left).





Donnie Yen showed off his martial arts skills in Yuen Woo-ping's *Tiger Cage* (1988).

France. In the film, Yeoh did not have any life-threatening stunts, just horse riding and paragliding. The emphasis was on romance and beautiful visuals, literally an extended beauty shot. Shin did not disappoint. The film grossed over HK\$14 million. After this film, much to everyone's delight, Michelle Yeoh married Dickson Poon. It is worth noting that Lee Chi-ngai was the second unit director on the film, and among the list of screenwriters is famous dramaturg Wai Ka-fai: a star-studded crew.

Under Stephen Shin's reign, D & B's creative direction turned towards the commercial. This was in stark contrast to the auteur-driven practice of old. They made a complete return to genre films. For example, the *Heart to Hearts* series, urban romances geared towards the young bourgeois; and the *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* series, situation comedies geared towards the grassroots populace.

Another important genre was action. After her marriage, Michelle Yeoh retired from hardcore action films. Stephen Shin groomed a replacement, Cynthia Khan. From *In the Line of Duty III* (1988) on, D & B made one such film a year for four years until *Sea Wolves* (1991). Since the martial arts actress films were quite popular, Shin produced and directed *Black Cat* (1991), grooming another new talent, Jade Leung. The concept of this film was very similar to Luc Besson's *Nikita* (1990), but the response was positive, so Shin made a sequel, *Black Cat II: Assassination of President Yeltsin* (1992). Unfortunately, it didn't do well at the box office, and D & B ceased film production entirely after that.

In addition to continuing with genres that grossed well, another interesting development at that time was, Stephen Shin brought over the multi-talented

producer-director Jeff Lau, who produced *Love is Love* (1990). Directed by Tommy Leung, known previously as a television director, the film kicked off actor Stephen Chow's extremely prolific year. Other new directors included Lee Chi-ngai in debut *Vengeance is Mine* (1988) and Yuen Woo-ping in his key work in contemporary action, *Tiger Cage* (aka *Sure Fire*, 1988).

*Tiger Cage* was Yuen Woo-ping's second contemporary action film after *Mismatched Couples* (1985), which he had directed for Cinema City. In the film, Yuen completely departed from the kung fu action style popular since the 1970s and incorporated quite a few special effects elements. He also went from mere punches and kicks to handling major action effects, explosions, gunfights, stunt driving, a technically very demanding and potentially lethal leap from a building, dangerous actions captured in one long shot—foretelling the demise of the era of acrobatic stunt action. In pursuit of a realistic look, numerous visual composition, design and choreography techniques were combined. The general visual effect was emphasised, the handling of the image was even more thrilling and better-loved by the audience than his kung fu sequences. This was evidence that Yuen had fully matured as a director of all types of action films.

More importantly, Yuen Woo-ping's storytelling abilities in this cops-and-robbers film was a very pleasant surprise. The way he handled the in-fighting within the narcotics unit and the endless betrayals, how he set up the suspense in the scenes, the complex and entangled interpersonal relationships, and dealing with all the different types of actors: Simon Yam, Dodo Cheng, Jacky Cheung, Ng Mang-tat and more; he attained perfect balance among all the elements.



In addition, the young actor he had been grooming, Donnie Yen, was also able to show off some of his real martial arts.

*Tiger Cage* grossed over HK\$11 million in the box office. It was followed by *In the Line of Duty 4* (1989) where Cynthia Khan played against Donnie Yen, as well as *Tiger Cage 2* (1990) and *Tiger Cage 3* (1991). During these years at D & B, Yuen Woo-ping directed more contemporary films than he ever had. Without that track record, he might not have gone to Hollywood in 1999 to work on *The Matrix*. In that regard, he has D & B Films and Stephen Shin to thank.

After Cinema City ceased to make films in 1991, D & B also stopped film production in 1992. Changes in market demand cannot be steered by mere human will. But D & B's right use of the right talent, encouragement of creativity, seeking out of new blood and forging of their eclectic path in the 1980s has certainly been missed.

[Translated by Roberta Chin]

**Thomas Shin**, a veteran film critic and former vice chairman of Hong Kong Film Critics Society. His articles can be found on the website of Hong Kong Film Critics Society as well as in *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, *Ming Pao Weekly* and *HKinema*, etc.

## From *Yes, Madam* to *Magnificent Warriors* —Michelle Yeoh and Her *In the Line of Duty* Series

Joyce Yang ■

Michelle Yeoh appeared in a total of five D & B productions. Her screen debut was in *The Owl vs Bumbo* (1984) where she was cast in a supporting role, serving as a love interest alongside Deanie Ip for the film's protagonists, George Lam and Sammo Hung. In 1985, D & B took over the Shaws circuit. Due to the popularity of the action film genre at the time, Sammo Hung suggested that the company start producing female-lead action films. On 30 November 1985, *Yes, Madam* was released theatrically (a month prior to Jackie Chan's *Police Story*) to celebrate the opening launch of the D & B cinema circuit. The move helped to establish Michelle Yeoh's top actress status at D & B. In the film, Yeoh played Senior Inspector Ng, a beautiful, determined policewoman with exceptional fighting skills. The iconic role not only made her a shooting star, but also cemented her career trajectory as a 'female action star' for the next three decades.

The subsequent D & B films, *Royal Warriors* (1986) and *Magnificent Warriors* (1987), served to showcase Yeoh as the reigning female action star. The productions and storylines for both films revolved around Michelle Yeoh, the serial heroine. At the time, it was rare to see female stars front such large-scale

productions, let alone the entire series. It was unheard of for a novice actress. *Easy Money* (1987) was Michelle Yeoh's final picture for D & B before her eventual marriage in 1988 and retirement from acting. She was once again cast opposite George Lam, playing a wealthy heiress-thief. Not only was the role a departure from her previous clean-cut image as a policewoman, she was also recovering from some past injuries. As a result, she didn't manage to shine in the role.

As part of the new 1980s generation of female action stars, Yeoh was able to set her own boundaries for things she would and would not do. She almost always refused to use stunt doubles, performing most of her own stunts. Perhaps due to the prevailing daredevil practices of male-dominated action film community at the time, she was among the few female action stars to go head to head with their male counterparts; but was also the first to suffer the consequences. Due to her many injuries resulting from performing dangerous stunts, she was dubbed the 'female Jackie Chan' for a period of time. Despite being a former beauty pageant winner, Yeoh never capitalised on her sex appeal or used it as a selling point. Even when cast as a Bond Girl or in *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005), Yeoh declined to perform in nude



In her debut role in *The Owl vs Bumbo* (1984), Michelle Yeoh played a gentle young woman who has been wronged and is brought to tears.



Michelle Yeoh relied on her dancer instincts to master the martial arts movements, and she successfully cemented her iconic image as a policewoman in the *In the Line of Duty* series.

and revealing scenes. Her sense of self-respect and modesty likely stemmed from her family background, upbringing and education. Yeoh was born into an affluent Malaysian family. Her father was a renowned lawyer. She received an upper-class education and excelled at swimming, piano, squash and Chinese painting. However, due to her exceptional talent in ballet, she was accepted into the UK Royal Academy of Dance at the age of 15; she took an interest in dance as well as drama. When she arrived in Hong Kong to collaborate with Jackie Chan on a watch commercial, Yeoh was already a beauty pageant winner. As Miss Malaysia, she had the opportunity to visit different countries, serving as ambassador for various charitable causes. Her subsequent marriage to D & B's founder Dickson Poon was also a somewhat positive early influence in her development. These experiences gave her the poise and confidence to become the quintessential Royal Hong Kong policewoman on screen.

More impressive still, the beautiful actress never succumbed to vulgar or showy displays, maintaining a certain grace, modesty, and reserve in all of her roles. Her graceful and reserved presence was on clear display in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) when she was cast opposite Zhang Ziyi; in stark contrast to the young, impulsive Jen Yu: who could not control her ambitious nature, Yu Shu-lien remained restrained and dignified, never losing sight of her duties and responsibilities. But this distinct sense of decorum was clearly evident even in Yeoh's early career during her days in the *In the Line of Duty* film series. Yeoh demonstrated exceptional martial arts skills on the silver screen but also displayed great poise and control. Her athletic fight scenes were always tempered by her intellect. The characters that she portrayed always turned to violence only as a last resort to combat injustice; the fight scenes were never mindless, vengeful excuses for gratuitous violence. That's what made Yeoh's early movie persona so special. The *In the Line of Duty* series also advanced female representation in Hong Kong cinema, elevating the status of the female action star on many fronts. The newly-minted female action star was a modern, international heroine and the martial arts choreography designed with her in mind, was down-to-earth and almost a bit mannish. As part of the wave of Hong Kong police dramas at the time, this revolutionary new female action star at D & B broke gender stereotypes and paved new ground for female representation on the silver screen.

## Positioning

In *The Owl vs Bumbo*, Yeoh played Miss Yeung, a gentle, elegant young woman with shoulder-length black hair—the costume designer dressed her in

light colours to highlight her benevolent nature and pure beauty. To lend dramatic complexity to her character, Miss Yeung's vocation is a teacher at a youth probation centre; her job is to help her juvenile delinquents re-enter society and lead productive lives. The character of Miss Yeung serves a supporting role, following the prevailing prescription as a romantic interest for the male protagonist, a retired gentleman-thief played by George Lam. She functions primarily just a pretty face, a damsel in distress to be rescued and swept off her feet by the dashing Lam. Even though 'Miss Yeung' is a relatively small part, the role draws from some aspects of Yeoh's upbringing and experience prior to her joining the film industry.

In the film, the underdeveloped character of Miss Yeung is essentially just a pretty face. In the scene where she attempts to instruct her delinquent wards how to prepare for a job interview, she's helpless in the face of a fierce social class critique from Season Ma's character: 'Miss, you're lucky, you were blessed with a good life. You never worry about money, never failed a grade at school. Your parents took you on trips overseas. You even have a pretty face. Do you really think squeezing into a bus and eating outdoor at a dai pai dong is hardcore life experience? It's not a crime to be born lucky.... But our world and your world are two completely different things'. In face of such shrill critique, Miss Yeung is as fragile as an expensive vase, damaged, embarrassed and unable to defend herself. Feeling wronged by the accusation, she is reduced to tears. Of course, the plot twist creates an opportunity for George Lam to come to her defence, turn the situation around and save the day.

The role of Miss Yeung was largely passive. This was the movie persona that D & B first assigned to Michelle Yeoh, the former beauty pageant winner. This type of role was often marked by moments of tears and suffering in service of the formulaic narrative. While Hong Kong cinema at the time had a surplus of such tragic beauties, Yeoh broke free from being typecast in such roles after *The Owl vs Bumbo*. Taking advantage of her years of dance training, Yeoh forged her own path, following the career trajectory of her male action star counterparts. The action sequences of *The Owl vs Bumbo* was overseen by the film's producer-cum-lead actor Sammo Hung and Hung's Troupe. After witnessing how these scenes were constructed during production, Yeoh had the confidence to handle fight scenes and perform her own stunts, which were akin to choreographed dances. At the time, Yeoh had already signed a long-term contract with D & B. Before the company began production on the sophomore feature for the aspiring starlet, its three decision makers—John Sham, Sammo Hung and Dickson Poon—decided to tailor-make a screen persona that would leverage



Michelle Yeoh (left) and karate champion Cynthia Rothrock (middle) formed a female duo in *Yes, Madam* (1985).



*Magnificent Warriors* (1987): Michelle Yeoh was transformed into a full-fledged hero modelled after the 'Lone Ranger'.

Yeoh's background and dance training. At the time, the hybrid genre of kung fu action and comedy was a successful formula in the marketplace. Because Yeoh was not yet fluent in Cantonese, she decided to cast herself in a straightforward action film that did not require comic timing and delivery of complex dialogue.

It was rare for female stars to be given the agency to determine their own screen personas and career trajectories within the commercial industry landscape, while bypassing any form of sexual exploitation on screen. Michelle Yeoh did not need to rely on her beauty or sex appeal to survive in the industry but instead broke free from being typecast as 'another pretty face' in service of the male protagonist, allowing her to pursue her full potential in terms of both her 'martial arts' and 'acting' skills.

### Mixed Temperament

Yeoh trained with Hung's Troupe for eight months in preparation to film *Yes, Madam*. The actress had no prior martial arts training but relied on her dancer instincts to master the complex martial arts movements, which required similar attributes such as coordination and timing. Her peers, such as Kara Wai and Cynthia Khan, also had similar backgrounds in dance before becoming female action stars; the choreography of their fight scenes put an emphasis on showmanship. The guidance and training from seasoned Hong Kong stuntmen were transformative, providing Yeoh with a strong foundation for her future career as a female action star. She acknowledged their importance, recalling that prior to filming *Yes, Madam*... 'Dicky Wei, Billy Ching and others taught me that the key to fight sequences is to have the proper facial expression, there must be a certain intensity and ferocity in the eyes. They also taught me the proper flourishes to start and end each martial arts movement'. [see 'Michelle Yeoh' of this book, pp 143-147]

Unlike Cynthia Rothrock who had formal training in the martial arts, what distinguished Yeoh was her brilliant interpretation of each martial arts movement. The fierce look in her eyes and her attention to detail were quite impressive. *Yes, Madam* also served as karate champion Cynthia Rothrock's debut film, featuring both her and Michelle Yeoh in the two lead roles. During the fight scenes, Rothrock was able to complete powerful and quick strikes effortlessly. Yeoh could not match her force and strength but was able to compensate with her own compelling screen presence, showmanship and rapport with the camera. Stuntmen were the unsung heroes responsible for the birth of action film stars in Hong Kong cinema; they understood the importance of merging traditional martial arts with showmanship on the silver screen.

The success of Yeoh's policewoman persona in *Yes, Madam* could be directly attributed to the foundation of martial arts and movie stunt magic, choreographed and visualised by such luminaries as Corey Yuen Kwai and Blackie Ko Shou-liang, and a strong supporting cast of action veterans such as Mang Hoi, Cynthia Rothrock and Dicky Wei. Their collaborative efforts, knowledge and experiences unique to Hong Kong action cinema, along with Yeoh's international image, helped pave the way for the female action star to venture into the male-dominated world of police films. Adopting a complex variety of character traits only added to the allure of Yeoh's portrayal of a policewoman, from her fighting skills and street smarts, perfectly balanced mix of masculine and feminine attributes, to her professional integrity, perseverance and courage. From the streets to the police station, each fight scene was designed to showcase that Inspector Ng would not disappoint. Yeoh did perform all the action scenes quite effortlessly.

After the kung fu action sequences, the second key consideration was crafting the image; style and



appearance were especially crucial for female action stars, serving as cyphers for essential plot developments within the narrative. To ensure a successful debut for its new starlet in *Yes, Madam*, D & B subjected Yeoh to a complete makeover. In the film, Inspector Ng was styled with an olive complexion, a pixie haircut and a practical monochrome wardrobe suitable for combat. Her determination and audacity accentuated by dark straight brows and piercing gaze often associated with the young male kung fu stars. This approach also gave added appeal to the variety of guises in her role as a detective in the film. In the first scene where Inspector Ng works undercover in a video shop in order to catch a flasher, she's wearing glasses with black frames, looking somewhat coy and bookish. In the next scene, she removes her glasses and subdues a group of bank robbers with a shotgun. Next, when meeting a friend at a hotel after work, she's wearing her glasses again but this time sporting a short ponytail tied with a ribbon and a suit jacket over her dress. In a matter of five minutes, the character transformed her appearance three times; Yeoh transitioned seamlessly between the male and female facets of her character, demonstrating the undercover skills befitting a policewoman. In terms of outward appearance, her masculine persona is associated with work and duty while her more feminine persona is reserved for her personal life. This approach was utilised throughout the *In the Line of Duty* series.

The first instalment of the series, *Yes, Madam* was designed to establish Yeoh's iconic image as female action star and therefore, only dutifully featured her more feminine side outside of work. After the success of the first film, the second instalment in the series, *Royal Warriors* devoted more screen time to portraying the emotional, personal life of Yeoh's Michelle Yip character, which even helped to drive the plot forward. So it was only natural for the film to feature a wider variety of feminine looks for her character. After her suitor Michael Wong's tragic death towards the end of the films, she once again

adopts the athletic, masculine persona of a police detective to avenge his death, arriving at a deserted mine in an armoured car, making her grand, heroic entrance like a female version of Batman. The third instalment in the series, *Magnificent Warriors* upped the ante even higher. Discarding her tomboy city policewoman persona, Yeoh was transformed into a full-fledged hero modelled after the 'Lone Ranger'—playing a legendary resistance fighter against Japanese wartime invaders in a period piece.

### Against the Grain

Each instalment of *In the Line of Duty* series managed to appeal to mainstream sensibilities while subverting dominant tropes. In the first instalment, *Yes, Madam* broke new ground by introducing a female action star in the male-dominated world of martial arts films. Instead of the usual 'buddy' movie with two male leads, the film featured two female leads. It also subverted the iconic heroic model established by Bruce Lee in the seventies. In a typical Bruce Lee movie showdown, the hero storms his way into the lair of foreign villains and single-handedly fights off hundreds of foes. In *Yes, Madam*, the two female leads, Inspector Ng and Carrie, barge into the gangsters' headquarters, each taking on twenty men. The policewomen represented justice and colonial power. Carrie is British. Ng may be Chinese but she serves 'the Crown'. Their enemies are no longer 'foreign devils' or the Japanese but local gangsters. Instead of damsels in distress, they are the ones who rescue the male characters (in this case, Strepsil, Panadol and Aspirin). The two heroines demonstrated the desire of women to compete with their male counterparts; they defeat the villains and rescue the men. The fight scenes were still the key focus of the film, but the female bodies of Yeoh and Rothrock inverted the male and female archetypes within traditional narratives, maintaining their physical identities as women yet performing actions normally reserved for male heroes. The way the female protagonists acted countered the



*Royal Warriors* (1986): Michelle (right: Michelle Yeoh) defies the authority, throwing her badge in the face of her superior (left: Kenneth Tsang Kong) and telling him to 'shut up'.



*Royal Warriors* (1986): Yamamoto (back: Sanada Hiroyuki) relies on Michelle (front: Michelle Yeoh) to rescue him at the critical juncture, subverting the patriarchal paradigm of gender relations.



*Magnificent Warriors* (1987): The waving flags, the uplifting anthem, the military salute to the pilots, all suggest a deliberate decision to bolster the film with elements of Chinese nationalism.

patriarchal assumptions about women, which was both paradoxical and ‘ambiguous’ to the viewers at the time.

Framed around two lead heroines, *Yes, Madam* also offered a new alternative where the male viewer empathised with the male victims being rescued. For example, Aspirin is not entirely helpless in the film; during a confrontation at the mansion of the crime boss Tin, Aspirin manages to gun down the formidable head henchman and turn the tables. But justice does not prevail in the end—when the police arrive, they arrest Ng and Carrie, giving the villains the upper hand. At the last moment, Aspirin grabs a policeman’s gun and shoots Tin to death. And justice is served. The story of Inspector Ng and Carrie ends here. Ng remains subject to the rules and restrictions set by men. Despite her beauty and martial arts prowess, she cannot change the rules of the game; the men still determine who wins. *Yes, Madam* simply flirted with the idea of subverting the genre. The most popular action/comedy series at the time was Golden Harvest’s *Lucky Stars*, and its female characters merely served as set decoration or excuses for sexist humour. One example was Sibelle Hu. Her most notable roles included the stern drillmaster Madam Wu from *The Inspector Wears Skirts* (1988). However, the same role originated in *My Lucky Stars* (1985), where the main function of the Madam Wu character was to provide excuses for sexist jokes. In the context of this prevailing trend and the fact that Michelle Yeoh was a newcomer, D & B erred on the side of caution in their first foray into launching a police film that featured a female action star; *Yes, Madam* was not a straightforward action film, borrowing heavily from the cast and the action/comedy playbook of *The Lucky Stars* series. But the resulting film did manage to gross over ten million dollars at the Hong Kong box office.

As part of D & B’s campaign to break into the Japanese market, *Royal Warriors* begins its story in Japan. Sanada Hiroyuki (aka Henry Sanada) was cast as Japanese Interpol agent, Yamamoto, who was paired with Michelle Yeoh for the planned fight

sequences. A newcomer to the silver screen, bi-racial actor, Michael Wong was cast as Yeoh’s suitor. An impressive cast of veteran actors was chosen to play the villains, including Michael Chan Wai-man, and Bai Ying among many others. The good versus evil narrative pits the brotherhood of the villains against the familial and romantic love, and friendship represented by the heroic Yeoh. Opening with jam-packed action sequences, the film then delves into the personal and emotional crises of the heroes, all in service of providing the characters with a more three-dimensional portrayal that they are not merely invincible fighters. Compared to Yeoh’s policewoman persona from the first picture, the second instalment placed more emphasis on Yeoh’s emotional development, providing her character with more opportunities to explore her feminine side. At the time, female action stars were given a certain amount of freedom to adopt different personas, and allowed to take on certain male characteristics, but only up to a point. If they acted too butch, fighting like men without the requisite balance of feminine qualities, they might risk upsetting mainstream audiences who wouldn’t accept the extremes of gender-bending. *Royal Warriors* adhered to the traditional tragic hero tropes but also subverted the patriarchy in terms of its treatment of gender. In contrast to *Yes, Madam*—a conservative genre film that made no pretence of disrupting the status quo, *Royal Warriors* had the confidence to take it another step further.

The narrative of *Royal Warriors* revolves around the adventures of policewoman Michelle Yip, a loyal, compassionate friend and ideal love interest, capable, full of youth, grace, and beauty... in short, the perfect heroine. What’s of greater interest is her love interest played by Michael Wong. In this female-centric picture, Michael is the male equivalent of a damsel in distress within a traditional narrative—he is defenceless, unable to fight and needs protection. Being the weakest among the three leads, Michael ends up being kidnapped and tortured by the vengeful terrorist (played by Bai Ying) who uses him as a pawn to blackmail Michelle. The character has a single moment of agency when he cuts the rope

around his ankles and plunges to his death from the rooftop of a tall building; sacrificing himself in order to protect Michelle. His death is what motivates Michelle to seek vengeance, transforming the ideal heroine into a vengeful vigilante hellbent, meting out justice at all costs. Unlike Inspector Ng in *Yes, Madam*, Michelle operates outside the existing power structures. At Michael's funeral, ignoring the advice of her superior (played by Kenneth Tsang Kong) she announces her plans on a television broadcast to avenge Michael's death. In the next scene at the police station, after being reprimanded, she quits the force, even throwing her badge in her superior's face and telling him to 'shut up'. In the end, Michelle succeeds in her revenge, taking the law into her own hands. As her sidekick, Yamamoto also relies on Michelle to rescue him at several critical junctures. The subversion of patriarchal tropes in the film essentially paved the way for *Magnificent Warriors* to fully endorse a heroine protagonist. Over the course of three films, Yeoh's policewoman heroine developed from a loyal officer in the Royal Hong Kong Police Force to an officer-turned-vigilante before finally becoming a full-fledged saviour of the people—leaping back in time from a modern-day Hong Kong setting to a period setting in war-time Asia.

*Magnificent Warriors*, was D & B's highest budget film at the time, shot entirely on studio sets and on location in Taiwan. Set against the backdrop of the Sino-Japanese War in the thirties, the story follows Ming-ming (played by Yeoh), an aviator and armed-courier for hire who joins up with a Chinese spy known as 001 (played by Derek Yee) to thwart the plans of the Japanese Army to manufacture poisonous gas and save the Bhutanese border town of Kaal. Rather than just an aviator/bodyguard for hire, Ming-ming is perhaps best described as a female Indiana Jones, a blend of elements from Eastern and Western culture. For her grand entrance, she lands a small plane before taking the reins of a horse-drawn carriage to transport valuable goods for a client. When ambushed by villains, she brandishes a bullwhip to subdue her attackers and quickly escapes with her horse drawn carriage. An amalgam of Chinese kung fu and classic western hero tropes, the Ming-ming character offered a representation of a pan-Asia vision of the world, a mosaic of sorts, filled with both complimentary and clashing elements from an eclectic mix of genres.

In the film, from armed-couriers dressed in western suits, to the Bhutanese monarch and his generals, to the Japanese Army officers and the Chinese spies—a plethora of characters is introduced one after another. Meanwhile, Richard Ng (a *Lucky Stars* alumni) shows up as a con-man to provide the audience with comic relief. It's a wildly

imaginative adventure that transports viewers through a kaleidoscope of spectacular imagery and landscapes. The pastiche-like film was littered with leaps of logic, flights of fancy and plot twists. For instance, when Ming-ming flies home, we discover that her residence is located in the wilderness, but comes complete with an immaculate airstrip. Later, to rescue her kidnapped grandfather, Ming-ming engages the kidnappers in a series of elaborate kung fu fights only to realise that they are all a test from Uncle Lung, aka 'a pillar of the nation and the people's hero'. Uncle Lung wants Ming-ming to accept a secret mission to rescue the monarch of Kaal City, 'it's a matter that affects the survival of our entire nation and all of its people'. The following day, Ming-ming departs on a plane and is given a send-off by a legion of soldiers. It's difficult not to associate the troops with the Nationalist Army at the time. The waving flags, the uplifting anthem, the military salute and the Chinese National Emblem emblazoned on the aircraft—all suggest a deliberate decision to bolster the film with elements of patriotism and Chinese nationalism. Although the film was strictly a commercial enterprise, the box-office receipts being the paramount concern, the core of the story was revolved around defending the Chinese nation. Subverting gender role was no longer at play within the narrative. As a legendary patriotic hero, Ming-ming's struggle is no longer just personal but more importantly, for the greater good.

The original *In the Line of Duty* series (starring Michelle Yeoh) from 1985 to 1987, covered just a short span of three years. To a certain extent, the series conformed to Hong Kong movie trends at the time and reflected changes in the Zeitgeist. The three films followed the eighties trend of local productions to cast foreign talent and even Japanese pop stars. The role of the heroine in the series gradually evolved and also reflected the transformation of politics in Hong Kong cinema after the Sino-British Joint Declaration came into effect. The journey began with a female police officer but ended with a national hero. Yeoh retired from acting after she got married but returned to the silver screen in 1992 with *Police Story III: Super Cop*, cast as Yang Jianhua, the Interpol Superintendent of China's police force. In spite of her time away from the silver screen, Yeoh seamlessly resumed her screen persona of a policewoman whose patriotism could be traced back to the *Magnificent Warriors*.

Out of all D & B productions, the *In the Line of Duty* series was the most ground-breaking. The success of Yeoh's portrayal of a policewoman inspired a wave of policewomen films and provided the Hong Kong film industry with the commercial incentive to market female action stars. The *In the Line of Duty* series stands alone, not just because each instalment was independent from the others in the series in terms

of storyline, but because each instalment, raised the stakes in terms of both the scale and complexity of its narrative, not to mention the careful attention paid to developing Yeoh's movie character and screen persona, something never to be replicated in successive female action star lead films. After Yeoh retired, Taiwanese actress Cynthia Khan was chosen as her successor to continue the *In the Line of Duty* series. Khan's martial arts skills and policewoman image were equally impressive. What's worth noting was the shift towards more graphic depictions of violence during fight scenes. Unlike her predecessor whose face remained virtually unscathed after combat, during Khan's stint, they were not shy about showing nosebleeds, or the cuts and bruises all over her face. Perhaps it's also the reason why the narratives in the series lacked tension.

In all her roles from Inspector Ng to Michelle Yip and Ming-ming, Yeoh maintained a certain idealised iconic image. As a result, the conflicts that she faced were all external ones. The narratives were essentially about the capable heroine solving cases and solving problems. The villains that she faced might have grown in scale with each instalment—from gangsters to mercenaries, and finally to the Japanese army. But there was never really any doubt that our immaculate heroine would overcome any of the challenges that came her way. The suspense was diluted; it came as no surprise that Yeoh's characters in these films were able to solved all problems and triumphed in the end.

[Translated by Sandy Ng]

**Joyce Yang**, a film critic, member of Hong Kong Film Critics Society. She has served as a jury member for FIPRESCI Prizes of HKIFF, Fresh Wave Short Film Competition and IFVA Awards, as well as participated in curating film programmes, which include 'Women Directors: BREAK and MAKE' (2017) and 'Black & White as an Aesthetic Choice' (2018). She has also co-edited a book on the selection of Chiu Kang-Chien's award-winning film scripts.



# A Hong Kong Modern in the 1980s Trilogy

## *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World*

Yau Ching ■

Comedy was the mainstream genre for consumption in 1980s Hong Kong. 'Comedy as a film genre has been much neglected in the history of early Chinese cinema despite the fact that it has a beginning dating back to the early farces produced by the Asia Film Company.'<sup>1</sup> While Hong Kong comedy films sell well, they are rarely taken seriously; most have been impressionistically dismissed as a random cumulation of gags, sentimentality and slapstick action. I argue in this article that comedy, as one of the genres that has enduringly produced blockbusters in Hong Kong cinema history for more than four decades, is key to understanding how Hong Kong popular culture has responded to and/or articulated socio-historical changes, through re-reading a series of three major blockbusters from the D & B Films Co., Ltd. in 1987-1989. Contrary to ways Euro-American comedies often call upon 'universal' situations to induce cross-cultural identification and sentiments, Hong Kong comedies tend to be more grounded in context-specific socio-political experiences.

Why did Hongkongers want/need to consume comedy so much? In 'Hong Kong Film Market and Trends in the '80s', Law Kar, studying the stats from Hong Kong film market, points out that 'comedy films (those with major comic elements) have always been the biggest box office hits' from 1977 to 1989.<sup>2</sup> While Cinema City, from the early 1980s on, did

everything they could to amalgamate some comic elements in each production, D & B, following the footsteps of the Cinema City but with a different style, had taken considerable risk in investing in diversification, churning out generic films including gangster, thriller, New Year celebratory, romance, artsy, political satire, among others. However, amongst the sixty-seven D & B films made, the first two biggest hits in box office were comedies: *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987) and *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World II* (1988), surpassing *An Autumn's Tale* (1987), the winner of Best Film, Best Cinematography and Best Screenplay at the Hong Kong Film Awards.<sup>3</sup>

### *The Real in the Mad, Mad, Mad World*

Why was the series of *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* so popular? Critics and fans have hailed it as accurately portraying the lives of 'typical Hong Kong common folks' in a 'laughing in tears' manner,<sup>4</sup> 'maintaining a heart-winning storyline without a big cast',<sup>5</sup> 'the joy, anger and sadness of Bill's family evoke the image of most Hong Kong families.'<sup>6</sup> But most families in Hong Kong do not win the first prize of the local lottery Mark Six; neither do they put money into a bank that easily goes bankrupt or gets robbed; most family members would not encounter kidnapping or find out about cancer diagnosis in one day followed with a misdiagnosis the next. One of the D & B

<sup>1</sup> Law Kar, 'A Comparative Analysis of Cantonese and Mandarin Comedies', *The Traditions of Hong Kong Comedy*, the 9th Hong Kong International Film Festival Catalogue, Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1985, p 13.

<sup>2</sup> Law Kar, 'Hong Kong Film Market and Trends in the '80s', *Hong Kong Cinema in the Eighties* (Revised Edition), the 15th Hong Kong International Film Festival Catalogue, Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1999, p 13 (in Chinese) (first edition in 1991).

<sup>3</sup> The box office of the three films grossed: *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* HK\$27,141,824; *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World II* HK\$25,814,268; *An Autumn's Tale* HK\$25,546,552.

<sup>4</sup> Ernianji De Xiaolajiao: 'Shen Dianxia Yu *Fugui Biren* Xilie Dianying: Yongbu Tunise De Jingdian Xiju, Xiao Zhong Dai Lei' ('Lydia Sum and *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* Series: A Heart-wrenching Classic Comedy'), *kknews*, 19 December 2016 (in Chinese). <https://kknews.cc/zh-hk/entertainment/qeao9g8.html>. Accessed on 22 December 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Ding Yuan Naxie Shi: 'Huiyi Xianggang Dianying Zhi *Fugui Biren* Xilie' ('Remembering the *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* Series'), *kknews*, 29 August 2017 (in Chinese). <https://kknews.cc/zh-hk/entertainment/8b9moaq.htm>. Accessed on 22 December 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Bei Qing Wang (www.ynet.com): '*Fugui Biren* Yijia Wukou, Biao Shu Biao Shen Yi Buzai, Zui Piaoliang De Li Lizhen 51 Sui Le' (The Family of Five in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World*: Uncle Bill and Auntie Lydia were No Longer with Us; the Most Stunning Loletta Lee is Now 51'), *kknews*, 9 February 2018 (in Chinese). <https://kknews.cc/zh-hk/entertainment/kmn8jv8.html>. Accessed on 22 December 2019.



*It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987): Uncle Bill's family constantly goes through cycles of 'ecstasy' and 'frustration'.  
(Front row from left: Loletta Lee, Elsie Chan, Pauline Kwan, Lydia Sum, Bill Tung; back: John Chiang)

masterminds John Chan Koon-chung says, in an interview conducted by Law Kar and Sek Kei in 1990, that 1980s Hong Kong cinema did have a narratology, including the use of inconsistent and/or incomplete structure, diversions, non-linear and jumping narratives, and a rushed tempo, which might seem reasonable to Chinese and South-East Asian audiences but often remains incomprehensible to non-Asian audiences.<sup>7</sup> These characteristics, he speculates, could be legacies from Chinese serial fiction and street-folk singing-telling traditions, therefore distinct from the Euro-American expectations of narrative realism.

For those of us in Hong Kong film studies, while we cannot take the Euro-American universalist assumptions of realism for granted, reconsidering the local generic characteristics of Hong Kong cinema is a much-needed task. Apart from the non-linear narratives and diversions, there is also a distinctively compressed rhythm and 'shallow' cartoonist characterisation that might render Hong Kong comedies 'incomprehensible' to some. How come Hong Kong audience could so readily take over-the-top plotlines as 'real' and identify with the characters' improbable situations? Chan Hoi-man defines Hong Kong major popular cultural discourses in the 1980s-90s as 'affluence', 'survival' and 'deliverance', and considered the juxtaposition of these three contradistinctive cultural discourses as defining 'the fabric of cultural mentality' which he calls the 'Hong Kong ethos'.<sup>8</sup> 'Affluence', as in the sense of material abundance as well as hope and possibilities offered by the spectacle of city life, has gradually become commonplace since the mid-1970s. Yet,

there were many common folks struggling in survival processes for self-actualisation, while Hong Kong society was collectively caught in a critical political survival crisis: 'the sustenance of collective survival against overwhelming historical odds'. Between the contradictions of fulfilment and survivalism, popular cultural formations, especially comedy films, sought to deliver relief of anxiety and repressed sentiments, so that the you and me who were caught in the pendulum of enjoyment and frustration in modern life, could maintain a certain psychological balance however temporary.

The characters in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* series are made in exactly this kind of pendulum, going through cycles of 'ecstasy' and 'frustration', making it and losing it, as if to provide training for strengthening the hearts of the audience. Those whose hearts are not strong enough are considered losers. The Bill family in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World*, wins the lottery but the bank which they put their money in then folds; the family's dream of getting rich comes true, only to fall through. But towards the end of the film, the Hong Kong government announces that the bank will be supported, so the Bill family gets their funds back. In *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World II*, Bill (played by Bill Tung) finds out upon arrival at Canada, that being Editor-in-Chief at a Chinese newspaper not only means a struggle with cultural and language differences but also a challenge in being a one-man production team from reporter to office cleaner. Now that it feels like he has to start from scratch again, he cannot help looking back to the days

<sup>7</sup> Law Kar and Sek Kei, 'Interview with John Chan Koon-chung', *Hong Kong Cinema in the Eighties* (Revised Edition), see note 2, p 93 (in Chinese).

<sup>8</sup> Chan, Hoi-man, 'Popular Culture and Democratic Culture: Outline of a Perspective on the 1991 Legislative Council Election', in *Hong Kong Tried Democracy*, Lau Siu-kai and Louie Kin-sheun (eds), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1993.

of first moving into the housing projects, as if that whole process has to be reworked again. Just when the family is starting to cope in Canada, the boss fires Bill, so Loy-dai's (played by Loletta Lee) college education has to come to a halt. Once again, Bill and his wife with their newly born and Jiu-dai (played by Pauline Kwan) has to return to Hong Kong and squeeze themselves into a tiny room. In this most difficult time, Auntie Lydia (played by Lydia Sum) suddenly realises she has won the Canadian lottery. They borrow money for the plane ride back, are robbed on the journey, sweep floor in a restaurant and in the end, happily get their dough. In the third instalment, all their lottery savings get robbed in a bank. The family goes penniless (again), but Loy-dai earns three million from a jackpot machine in Macao, and then the bank reimburses them as the case is covered by an insurance company.

### Cathartic Realism

After they won the lottery in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World*, Auntie Lydia happily shows off her handful of goodies after shopping, plus her newly made rainbow-coloured hair, only to meet with Bill laughing at her as a 'Lioness from the North' with a scolding: 'Look how you've become a fashion slave, prisoner of cosmetics!'. Hong Kong is shown here on the one hand, as a society in which the value of each individual is defined by the value of the materials s/he owns (Bill also says in the first scene of *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World*: 'One's value depends on what one wears'); pursuing material comfort is a universal ideal; on the other, the film constantly reminds its audience of the decadence of this kind of comfort, the futility of the pursuit. The Bill couple epitomise how Hongkongers want/need to earn quick cash to escape from endless exploitation in capitalist madness, yet they also desperately cling onto residual

Confucius values of family centredness, thriftiness and modesty. The values of what could be read as low-key anti-materialism may not be represented as dominant in the films, but they serve to keep various contradictions and anxieties at bay towards a happy ending of closure.

As one of the four Asian mini-dragons, Hong Kong in the 1980s, experienced a so-far-so-good economic boom as it suffered from critical class inequalities; middle-class lifestyles and values might be the fantasies of many Hongkongers but were not their lived realities. The opening credits of the first *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* are superimposed onto seemingly documentary footage of everyday Hong Kong, showing starkly its extremely uneven distribution of resources: a sparkling clean Benz with opaque windows, people squeezing into the Mass Transit Railway, some playing golf, an old man digging up leftovers in sidewalk trash cans, an old woman lugging cardboard boxes on her back to earn pennies, cruises at pier for tourists, wet market loaded with smells and sweat, fur coats for sale at Viking Fur Co. asking for HK\$25,000, a bird's eye view of the squatter huts. Screenwriter/director Clifton Ko's credit is superimposed on a series of shots of public housing. Public housing, also known as cheap-rental housing, is a lived reality for many Hongkongers in the 1970s and 80s. This interpellation situates the cultural identification of its audience at a specific place, under a specific ethnicity and class. At the wedding banquet where Bill's relatives show off their jewellery and glitzy possessions, Auntie Lydia hectically moves her hand without rings off the back of the chair. The image of this family who cannot hold their chins up among relatives due to their address and income level produces an easy gateway for the audience to project onto the screen their everyday sense of failure.



*It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987): Auntie Lydia (front row middle: Lydia Sum) is an untamed, middle-aged grassroots housewife. Her 'anti-modernism' attitude is a burden to her family, who longs for a place in the modern world.



Non-Chinese culture is represented stereotypically in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World II* (1988). (From right: Bill Tung, Elsie Chan, Loletta Lee)



To escape from a sense of failure in a modernised society, one, first of all, needs to learn to be modern. But the films also remind us, the more modern one aspires to be, the more failures. Auntie Lydia uses her handbag to grab a seat for Loy-dai in the MTR and shouts at the top of her lungs: 'There, your seat!', rendering Loy-dai so ashamed of her mother that she refuses to answer her call. Auntie Lydia, as first-generation Chinese migrant in Hong Kong (who sometimes slips into Shanghaiese), a middle-aged grassroots housewife, carrying an untamed, oversized body that takes up too much space and makes too much noise in public, does not operate according to the script for a modernised Hong Kong subject in the 1980s. Bill, in response to the rigorous exchange of emigration information at the banquet table, tightens his tie and gives a speech: 'We are not emigrating! Although we are Hongkongers, we have Chinese blood in us. We should embrace our mother country. Emigration is an irresponsible act. We need to employ the Hong Kong spirit... to contribute to the four modernisations of our country. So I appeal to you all, stay in Hong Kong, don't become third-class citizens in another country!' Upon hearing this, all lower their heads to eat soup in perfect unison.

Bill often appropriates Chinese partyline patriotic lingo as a self-defensive ploy to resist Hong Kong's colonial/capitalist/pragmatic mainstream ideology. Still, the self-contradictions he embodies (between words and behaviour, between words and words) leave him with little credibility in representation. He advocates no emigration when he has no money in pocket, but turns into the first to plan emigration in the family upon winning the lottery, because, in his words quoting a Chinese proverb, 'a gentleman does not stand under a crumbling wall'. His daughters Mia (played by Elsie Chan), Loy-dai and Jiu-dai (both 'Loy-dai' and 'Jiu-dai' mean 'little brother forthcoming'), growing up in colonial Hong Kong amidst the Euro-American-Japanese cultural domination of the 1980s, are so formed by colonial modernity that they almost 'naturally' look down upon their supposedly pre-modern parents. The Bill family epitomises Hong Kong's hybrid cultural formation. How does one forget all the sweat and struggles as one *turns* around to perform as the model of Asia's colonial capitalist modernity, all the while sweeping the dust and mess from all the lived contradictions under the shiny carpet beneath one's twirling feet? It is only in such speed, as in Bill's incredible shifting of positions, that one (the audience as well as Bill) can protect oneself from seeing and more critically, *feeling* the contradictions and struggles. Perhaps this is what the Euro-American audience may have a hard time comprehending: the nauseating speed of that sweep—comic no less,

almost farcical in fact, but no doubt *too* fast. If one sees this speed as performative of the compression and the *turning*, i.e. a speed *à la* Hong Kong, perhaps then that could be (re)considered as a form of 'cathartic realism', offering a kind of perverse or if you like, religious pleasure, close to one's emotional reality.

In *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World II*, the family, upon landing, seems to be fascinated by the space and material abundance (supermarkets, ice-cream brands) offered by life in Canada but are soon frustrated by the inconvenience of the suburban space, a big leap from the highly compressed density of Hong Kong. Non-Chinese culture is represented stereotypically for laughs: a Caucasian youth makes his punk hairstyle through ironing. Dormmates bully Loy-dai by luring her into a bikini then locking her out in freezing temperature and making her a public scene. These aim to show the exoticism and vulgarity of a 'foreign' country, speaking to the anxiety and fear of an audience facing emigration challenges as well as appeasing those who might not have the resources to do so. To what extent is Hong Kong's local identification, or Hongkongness, built upon a colonial ethnocentrism nurtured by psychological habits of self-defence and self-belittlement?

## A Mad, Mad, Mad Dream

If emigration is a dream, to be rich is another dream. In the dream of becoming rich upon buying the lottery, Auntie sees Bill in a huge bubbling massaging tub while she orders a group of dehumanised servants around. Soon the family is all in white formal wear, all ready for a glamour party. All's well according to common Hongkongers' western modern dream come true. In the centre of all this though, Jiu-dai's demonstration of her 'Dalang Bay' (a word-play referring to 'Daya Bay') model suddenly explodes, rendering the whole family besieged. A thunderstorm woke the whole family. A dream of becoming rich is bound to be a nightmare; fantasies are haunted; diversions are allegories. This dream sequence immediately cuts to the next scene of Hongkongers squeezing into MTR on the Admiralty platform, suggesting on the one hand, the commonness of this kind of fantasy-nightmare, as a collective affective experience of the Hong Kong working mass, and on the other, reminding the film-watching audience of the nature of cinema as a dream-making factory and comedy as a temporary (and futile) outlet for fantasy-nightmares. Dream over, film over, you and I re-join the mass work team, squeezing flat our faces into the reality of the tube of train. Bill's flattened face on a train window is the image of Hong Kong's compressed modernity. The audience in the cinema joins a fantastical journey of making it in a brave new world, but cannot escape from how mad it is. Whether rich



or poor, in film and in life, compression/oppression is a constant.

The youngest girl Jiu-dai's 'Dalang Bay' model marks the crucial turning point in this narrative twist from dream to nightmare. The nuclear power plant located in Shenzhen's Dapeng Peninsula, which was built in 1987 only 51 km straight from Tsim Sha Tsui, was one of the most important gifts to Hong Kong from then CCP Chair Deng Xiaoping. As much as 70-80% of its power would be supplying to Hong Kong. More than one million signatures from Hongkongers petitioned to oppose its construction to no avail. The film was made during this controversy. Hong Kong, as the most intimate witness of the series of political struggles in China, including the anti-rightist campaign in the 1950s, and the Cultural Revolution in 1966-1976, all the while tackling its own traumas of the 1966 and 1967 'uprising/riots', the refugee and survivalist mentality has always been a mainstay in Hong Kong culture. It wasn't until the mid-1970s to early-1980s with steady economic growth and political stability that a sense of security was gradually nurtured in Hong Kong society.

In *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World III* (1989), the Bill's family, having never seen as much cash as three billion, goes to the bank to withdraw it all out just to look at it. Later Auntie Lydia brags about this with her friends and takes them again to the bank to see the money. This plot reminds one easily today of the small province official in the opening episode of *In the Name of the People*, who, as a farmer's boy turned rich, cannot spend one penny of all the renminbi he has gathered through corruption but houses all the paper money in his furniture, behind walls and inside his refrigerator. At this historical moment of then in Hong Kong and now in China, money is foregrounded here as a fetish and spectacle in our capitalist world; the absurdity of and the religiosity in pursuing it as a material *per se* brings one almost to tears in either context.

Walter Benjamin's *flâneur* has been at times evoked to describe the intrigue and alienation experienced by Hongkongers when wandering around the city spectacles. However, for Benjamin, the 1930s Paris Arcades was also an embodiment of the collective utopias of European progress turned nightmarish labyrinth.<sup>9</sup> He saw the mesmerising effect of a

capitalist and civilised modernity as facilitating the rise of European fascism. Korean sociologist Hong-Jung Kim, inspired by Benjamin's 'archaeological' discourse of modernity as fantasy/nightmare and Manuel Castells' 'Politics of Survival', reads the post-cold war 'economic miracle' of (South) Korea as producing and a product of a form of 'survivalist modernity'.<sup>10</sup> Under Park Chung-hee's anti-communist militarised governance, a sense of imminent danger coupled with a need for emergency conditions have never left Korean daily life experience, resulting in a collective fantasy/nightmare that prioritised and centralised self-preservation and self-strengthening as a core cultural and moral value, which dominates the structure of feeling in Korean society.

In contrast to the post-cold-war martial law rule South Korea experienced, 1970s-80s Hong Kong, also hailed as an 'economic miracle', witnessed unprecedented freedoms in speech and publishing to an extent that it saw itself as *the* freest Chinese society at the time. Thatcher's collapse on the footsteps of Beijing's Great Hall of the People during the Sino-British talks in 1982 followed by the signing of Sino-British Declaration in 1984 became a curse hovering over Hongkongers, who otherwise felt pretty good of themselves. But the 'China factor' remained a source of crisis and emergency. The heavy-handed treatment of using the 'Dalang Bay' model's explosion in the film as the key plot twist speaks not only to the imminent danger of radiation exposure presented to Hongkongers at the time but also more poignantly, to the political promises and cover-ups that were felt to be as untrustworthy as kids' play; these become sources of huge anxiety and fear. Ng Ho has claimed that a 'sense of crisis' has reinvigorated Hong Kong cinema after the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989, as the emotional unrest among Hongkongers has impacted the choice of subjects, characterisation and imagery in post-1989 cinema.<sup>11</sup> If one looks at *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* series, however, Hong Kong as a 'city in danger' was already a rather dominant feeling from mid-1980s on. The couplet line from the film 'With money many ways out; no money one Basic Law' has long become local slang.

In another MTR (subway being the signifier for a Hong Kong modernity that appears again and again in the series) scene in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World II*, the couple runs into Taiwanese tourists and

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin, Walter, *The Arcades Project*, Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (trans), Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Hong-Jung Kim, 'Survivalist Modernity and the Logic of Its Governmentality', *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, No 27, The Japan Sociological Society, 2018, pp 5-25.

<sup>11</sup> Ng Ho, "'Liusi' Hou Xianggang Dianying De Wei Ji Yishi" ('The Sense of Crisis in Post-1989 Hong Kong Cinema'), *Luanshi Dianying Yanjiu* (A Film Study by Ng Ho in the World of Turmoil), Hong Kong: Subculture Ltd, 1999, pp 127-144 (in Chinese).

migrants from the Philippines and Vietnam, leading Bill to exclaim: 'When can we get back our land?' The caricature representation of non-Hong Kong Chinese here again seeks to provoke laughter through ethnocentric sentiments. Bill's exclamation is soon after followed by an episode on Sino-Hong Kong differences. One Mainland-looking man mistakes a ball-shaped handrest in a train as a microphone and uses it to communicate to the driver for getting off in Putonghua. Also in Putonghua, another woman speaks to her partner in disgust, 'The air is so bad here, Hong Kong subway is shit... What's good about Hong Kong? So many people, so much ugliness, everyone busy for nothing.' Bill overhearing, whispers to Auntie, 'See how she looks down on us. Soon when we are ruled by people like this, we'd have the hardest time. No wonder everyone wants to emigrate.' But the Putonghua woman's partner retorts, 'Hong Kong is highly prosperous. People are busy because they are hardworking and efficient. We need to see things objectively. Hong Kong has its own progress. Our country has our advantages.' Auntie Lydia immediately looks at him with respect, 'See how wise this gentleman is. Life can't be too bad if governed by people like him!' The disgusted woman, though, continues to vent, 'Things are so expensive in Hong Kong, all poisoned by capitalism here. People are corrupt, and idolise money and everything Western. We really need to fix it here.' She is again corrected by her partner, 'Hong Kong is a real cosmopolitan. We need Hong Kong people to help open our motherland's door to the outside world. Under one country two systems, Hong Kong will stay 50 years, unchanged. The present conditions need to be kept.' Just when Auntie Lydia is moved by his speech, all filled with anticipation, the couple struggles to get off the train. The 'gentleman' out of habit spits on Auntie's foot. Uncle ends up being the one who has to squat in front of Auntie to help clean.

This scene pointedly caricatures the power struggle and ideological contradictions in China of the Reform and Open Up Era, and its conflicting attitudes towards Hong Kong, with envy, rational understanding of its use-value and disgust all combined. It also expresses concrete fears of Hong Kong people towards the handover, not only whether their capitalist lifestyles could be kept, or whether one needs to turn the modern clock backwards (to cope with spitting in public areas for example), but more importantly, whether Hongkongers would be 'looked down upon' and be 'fixed'. However, one should note that in the whole scene, it is the gentleman together with Auntie Lydia who have the last words, with

Bill and the Hong Kong-hating woman standing corrected. Hong Kong common folks, as seen here in the 1980s, express hope and faith in China, in its wisdom and growing civility, even before China 'rises'. The open culture of 1980s Hong Kong in its so-called Golden Age, lies in this kind of public discussion of multi-faceted Sino-Hong Kong relations. Foregrounding these ongoing political discourses on public screen is especially important, taking into consideration the depoliticised tradition of Hong Kong popular culture and the current dehistoricised discourse of Hong Kong as an always already anti-communist base. In retrospect, all the pre-warnings here regarding Chinese governance of Hong Kong, including Mainland's discriminatory gaze, the unbearable 'poison' and 'corruptness' of capitalism, and the will to sustain Hong Kong's identity to become China's door to the world, i.e. as mediator for influx of Western capital—all of these will be kept at all costs, and will continue to haunt Hong Kong in the next 30 years to come.

### Unqualifying Everyman

Zhong Xueping has coined representations of Chinese masculinity in Chinese literature of late 20th century as a 'besieged masculinity', signalling men facing challenges of a weak country under unequal East-West power relations, enhanced by cultural repression channelled through a national apparatus.<sup>12</sup> These historical processes result in a persistent sense of lack, longing (for more and/or redemption) and/or fear, as represented of men in literature, which she terms a 'marginality complex'. She further points out that post-1949 gender policies claim to be revolutionising this cultural tradition, but in reality also inherited its legacy. Chinese men have traditionally been both yin and yang, taking up most space in the gender spectrum. Only the women who are seen as exceptions, for example the empress who killed her emperor-heir son, the female soldier in drag, among others, would be given voice in narratives. The post-1949 'holding up half the sky' national campaign also in effect advocated women to become more masculine, to become men, in order to be granted more power.

Although the series *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* primarily focuses on being rich as the key subject, what takes up most screen time, though, is the subject of gender and sexual relations. What are the relations between being rich and being gendered in the films? How has Hong Kong's modernising project reconstructed our genders and sexualities? First, it's

<sup>12</sup> Zhong Xueping, *Masculinity Besieged? Issues of Modernity and Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of the Late Twentieth Century*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000.

worth noting that Bill chooses an adversary position to the two main plotlines of the series: gaining riches and falling in love. He is all opposed to Auntie's gambling habits, while his work ethic and capability do not look promising in helping the family out of poverty. The riches his family manages to gather in the films are all from gambling (by women and girls). In fact, his adversarial relationship with his female boss, including his accidental intervention into her sexual affairs with the company chief, also costs him his job. Throughout the series, he repetitively opposes any (potentially) sexual relations, including those between his elder daughter Mia and Smiley Joe (played by Eric Tsang), between Mia and non-Chinese men, and between his younger daughter Loy-dai and Ah Shui (played by Christopher Chan). Of course his opposition also ends up making some of these relations stronger and more dominant in the films. Bill's adversary relations with these plotlines only render him an obstacle in the narratives, and situate him in the position of a loser. For the longest time, he could not bring himself to forgive his sixth younger brother (played by John Chiang) who shamed him publicly in his most joyful moment by slamming a birthday cake on his face. His not being able to get over his shame is represented as a character flaw: for being a weakling, not having a big heart, and unable to cope with Hong Kong bonding style through speed and bullying. He pays lip service in supporting family values but as a husband, father or even brother, he fails to register, not to mention fulfil, desires of his family.

In one of Bill's dreams, he drops a coin at a wishing well outside his home and turns Auntie Lydia into a young sexy dame, who in turn makes a wish to get a young muscle boy, the latter in turn makes a wish for the dame to vanish so he could have a

private moment with Bill. Bill, in shock, wishes the boy away and Auntie back. Awakened, Bill cuddles around Auntie in bed, mumbling: 'So good to have you!' This diversion again follows the curse of all dreams come true become nightmares, cooks Bill's chauvinistic and homophobic anxieties all into one and foregrounds the impossibility of Bill's self-recognition. His complex of being a pre-modern residue soon to be disposed finds outlet in dismissing Auntie as the stereotypically disposable wife. But of course, the audience is not dumb either, and could see easily from these narratives that it is after all the woman who again and again, with her persistence and perseverance, succeeds and rescues the family from predicament. Hong Kong's colonial capitalism devalues the masculine body, and situates it in a 'perverse' position close to the homosexual body, as it constructs the diligent, mediocre, feminine man as the model mediator. This feminised male body could be seen as a variation of inheriting the yin-yang amalgamation in traditional Chinese masculinity; but it is crucial in the construction of Hong Kong modern masculinity to defy sexuality (signified by Bill's sexual fantasy) in order to be granted positions of power and security however limited.

All the male characters in the films, from Bill to Smiley Joe, Hairy (played by Lowell Lo) to Ah Shui, albeit diverse, all are losers. Smiley Joe is saved by Mia from drowning as he struggles to 'protect' Mia from being harassed. Upon awakening on the beach, he exclaims: 'I have finally rescued you!' This line from the weakling male gives it a comic effect but also shows how men need to perform according to the face-saving script of dominance. As losers, they are still designated as speaking to the Hong Kong everyman, the focus for the audience's projection of empathy. Ah Shui works at a meat factory to support



*It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987): The scene where Mia (top: Elsie Chan) saves Smiley Joe (below: Eric Tsang) from drowning subverts existing gender relations; it also shows how men need to perform according to the face-saving script of dominance.



*It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987): Working class living lives as disposable labour in a neoliberal economy displace their fears onto supposed threats posed by a strong female boss. (Left: Leung Shan; right: Bill Tung).





*It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987): The scene where Uncle Bill dreams of Auntie Lyida (Lydia Sum) transforming into a Wonder Woman shows that men are no match for women, and neither men nor women qualify quite as human.



*It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987): Mia's (Elsie Chan) positive body image and cultural adaptiveness give her an upper hand in the gender power relations.



*It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World III* (1989): Loy-dai (Loletta Lee) is a sample of the 1980s generation of Hong Kong women: smart and hardworking, strong-willed and opinionated, conservative and unsexed.



*It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World II* (1988): Jiu-dai (Pauline Kwan) is young but mature, a metaphor for the mid- to late-80s Hong Kong, which remains hopeful despite the uncertainties.

Loy-dai's tuition in Canada but being not strong enough to move the meat around, an entire dead pig collapses on him. He switches to selling stinky tofu on the sidewalk, finding himself soon to be arrested and deported by Canadian immigration. In *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World III*, a lot more screen time is spent on Ah Shui's desperate efforts to support Loy-dai and her family, including enduring injuries repetitively working as an extra in action films. Auntie Lydia then forces him to roll down the stairs as she cannot recognise him when he is all bandaged up as a mummy walking with sticks. While slapstick with dead meat recalls Michael Hui's now classic comedian tradition from the 1970s, the injured/impotent abject male flaunting his immense malleability in surviving flagellation to evoke laughter and sympathy clearly paves the way for Stephen Chow's upcoming 'no-sense' comedies in the 1990s. Ah Shui's seeking to perform the Confucius male ideal of being the breadwinner in trying to singlehandedly support his

girlfriend's family, in Canada and Hong Kong, only reiterates once and again, his own incapacibilities. This feeling of helplessness and impotence, caught in the huge discrepancy between deeply rooted beliefs in ideologies and unfulfilled realities, produces positions of identification for Hong Kong viewers to project their own sense of helplessness in everyday life.

### Women in Progress

The formulation of male characters as stand-ins for the everyman indeed serves to hide and perpetuate the unequal power relations between the two sexes. However, as shown in these films and as discussed above, men are no match for women and neither men nor women qualify quite as human. For all sexes and genders, what seems most recurrent and perhaps most marketable in these films, is evoking the common feeling of *not* being qualified for sustainability and stability, not to mention success; the common feeling is of *not* making it. The wishy-washy, sissy and



swishy men rendered as everyman on screen does not necessarily empower them—they only naturalise the abjectness of Hong Kong Chinese masculinity in a way that seduces their viewers to stay on and cuddle, whereas the women and girls, including Auntie Lydia, Mia, Loy-dai and Jiu-dai, take up a spectrum of progressing, success-to-be positions in their constant struggles for upward mobility. Upon winning the lottery, Uncle Bill dreams of shooting Auntie Lydia who, however, transforms into bullet-proof Wonder Woman picking up his gun to shoot back. Smiley Joe's relentless sexualisation of Mia does not make Mia a sex object, but rather exposes his babyish psychological demands and renders him more laughable. In return Mia stays cool around her multi-cultural courtiers, showing a self-confidence towards displaying her body. As a colonial modern subject, her physical, language and assimilation attributes render her the fastest mediator for the family upon immigration into Canada. Seen from these characterisations, colonial capital is more of a determining factor in power relations than gender.

Women in the job market do face as much, if not more, disciplining of their bodies as men. Bill, as the news anchor at satellite TV for 18 years, is about to be sacked when he accidentally finds out that his boss is having an affair with producer Lui, nicknamed 'Female Devilhead'. Her gender reduces her to a signifier of immoral sex translating into evilness, taking up the role of the culprit. Monogamy, for one, has to be strictly observed in and outside marriage for a modern society, while sexual relations could not come with a price tag. Suggestions of non-monogamous relations, sex for money or for career advancement—all become, in the film, material for bashing and satire, revealing repetitively, the relentlessly obsessive anxiety over sex produced by the making of Hong Kong modern subjecthood. A class issue disguises itself as a gender issue when working class viewers living lives as disposable labour in a neoliberal economy displace their fears onto supposed threats posed by a strong female boss.

Likewise, the public/private divide is again challenged when Smiley Joe is suspected to be peeing on the grass in front of the family, and is thus considered 'degenerating'. Towards the end of *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World*, neighbour Fung who used to borrow money from Bill, suddenly shows up to repay the tab and announces with a smile: 'My wife has returned with a man!' Auntie Lydia is perplexed. 'Why happy if your woman has a man?' 'Of course! As long

as the man is rich!' Smiley Joe immediately throws the cake on his face, with a scolding: 'You scum, what kind of a man are you!' One little man pokes fun at another to establish his sense of superiority, demonstrating for the viewers the best position from which to enjoy the movie. If laughter is a fascination with the shameful and the base in order to establish a sense of superiority for the person who laughs,<sup>18</sup> homophobia (Smiley Joe's disgust at sissy neighbour Fung's thrill with the threesome afforded by his wife's sexual partner) is often used as a stand-in to displace and release anxiety over one's self turning into modern trash in Hong Kong comedies.

Loy-dai is a sample of the upcoming generation: smart and hardworking, strong-willed and opinionated, conservative and unsexed—including when sleeping with a boyfriend on the same floor of an apartment. But curiously she never challenges nor lends a helping hand to Ah Shui when he risks his life in supporting her family. The next in line may be the most evolved after all. Jiu-dai is the smartest among all boys and girls, grabs most of the attention in the scenes with her presence and unbeatable colloquial skills. Ultimately she manages to escape from a kidnapping ordeal. She is the one who truly brings the brother in, not only because Auntie Lydia does give birth to a son after all, but even more remarkably, she is the son as well as the daughter. Her strength lies not in her gender but in her (under) age (thus naturally unsexed); how her maturity far exceeds her body. The characterisation of Jiu-dai and her experience in the series points towards a Hong Kong in the future that may land herself in difficult situations but would come out safe and sound. Dreams may be nightmares but with enough hope and togetherness, starting over may not lead to an endgame.

## Concluding Remarks

This essay closely studies the three generic films from the blockbuster comedy series *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* from the mid-late 1980s to investigate how the 'golden age' of Hong Kong cinema produced a certain realism in constructing and consuming Hongkongness, a kind of cultural identification built upon ethnocentric notions of colonial capitalist modernity. Its narrative logic and speed in cinematic form replicate as well as provide relief to a social reality of compressed and oppressive (over)development, which this essay argues, (partly) explains the genre's long-lasting success. It also explores how these comedies used tropes of self-

<sup>18</sup> Murray S. Davis, *What's so Funny?: The Comic Conception of Culture and Society*, Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1993.

defence, malleability, survivalism, self-flagellation and hope in formulating a consumable socio-political analysis at a time when Hong Kong was experiencing an unprecedented identity crisis. This very specific Hong Kong modernity at its prime (re)constructed power relations as class and ethnic anxiety was displaced onto sexuality and gender. Perhaps the social and ideological contradictions surfacing in Hong Kong today showed their roots and tendencies in films made more than three decades ago, as it is only through studying history that we may begin to understand ourselves and the society that makes us.

Translated from the original Chinese version by Yau Ching.

**Yau Ching** teaches at the Chinese University of Hong Kong ([www.yauching.com](http://www.yauching.com)).

# The Middle-Class Story in Hong Kong Cinema —Creativity and Conservatism of D & B Films

Mary Wong Shuk-han ■

## Prologue: Reviewing the 1980s

It takes courage to look back on 1980s Hong Kong cinema in 2020. A series of social incidents and a potentially fatal disease have transformed the values of our society, and the pendulum of life has swung from complexity to simplicity. Things are no longer the same. Under such circumstances, how do we confront the Golden 80s? How do we judge heavy makeup and chunky shoulder pads? What about over-the-top movie plots? Car stunts and explosions at the drop of a hat—like a male at the height of his virility. Casting a retrospective eye over the 1980s Hong Kong cinema, it's hard to distinguish between splendence and excess. For instance, many scenes in *A Better Tomorrow* (1986)<sup>1</sup>, a top box-office hit that triggered the hero film craze, feel hyperbolic. Interestingly Patrick Lung Kong's *The Story of a Discharged Prisoner* (1967), a 1960s production which has the same Chinese title as *A Better Tomorrow*, seems to have more emotional relevance in the current milieu, perhaps due to its subtle yet mournful accusation of social realities. Without a doubt, the 1980s were the heyday of Hong Kong cinema—genre cinema became mainstream; Cantopop was all the rage; and almost every film starred A-list actors. It was when the influence of Hong Kong cinema extended to the rest of the world, a time of abundant production resources that left many memorable works in its wake. Now that the party is over, perhaps we can cast a cool but understanding eye on the past.

When did what we call '80s Hong Kong cinema' actually begin? I think in 1984. It was in 1979 that Hong Kong New Wave burst onto the scene. However, these artistic experiments were eclipsed by a pervasive commerciality, and the movement lasted

until 1983.<sup>2</sup> In 1984, a major New Wave figure Tsui Hark made *Aces Go Places III* for Cinema City Company Limited. This marked Tsui's initiation into the mainstream and the end of New Wave Cinema and all its creativity. When we talk about the Golden 80s, we should count from 1984 when mainstream commercial cinema was starting to take off. It was also the year when D & B Films Co., Ltd. was established. Socially and politically, D & B experienced an important time of change in Hong Kong. The studio bore witness to the heyday of Hong Kong cinema and of Hong Kong, beginning from the Sino-British Declaration in 1984, up until the June Fourth Incident in 1989; after which it reduced production and withdrew from the scene, before showing its final film in 1992.

The golden age of Hong Kong cinema was built upon political instability, yet the films addressed the uncertainty with far-out entertainment and a frivolity, superficially at least. The Sino-British negotiations kicked off in 1982. Faced with a looming deadline, a mass immigration wave began as most Hongkongers were mistrustful of China. Meanwhile, the film industry gave itself over to entertaining and making quick money. Veteran film critic Law Kar describes Cinema City, the most representative studio of the 1980s, 'Cinema City continued to produce its "new style" entertainment as an admirable escape from the "down" climate regarding the forthcoming 1997 "handover." Cinema City benefited from the knacks acquired by the directors in their earlier, more introspective careers. Whereas their earlier films had been too depressing for general audiences, their high-energy entertainments for Cinema City became huge box office successes.'<sup>3</sup> D & B had a completely

<sup>1</sup> The film grossed HK\$34,651,324 at the box office. Data sourced from the website of Hong Kong Film Archive.

<sup>2</sup> Law Kar, 'Hong Kong New Wave: Modernization Amid Global/Local Counter Cultures' in *Hong Kong New Wave: Twenty Years After*, the 23rd Hong Kong International Film Festival Catalogue, Hong Kong: Provisional Urban Council of Hong Kong, 1999, pp 48-50.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



*Dream Lovers* (1986): Most middle-class titles fit more or less into the *wenyi* category, focusing on explorations of the human psyche.

different feel from Cinema City<sup>4</sup>—it had more taste, to put it abstractly. It may have made the boisterous *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987), but it also lays claim to such delightful romances as *An Autumn's Tale* (1987) and *Kiss Me Goodbye* (1986); as well as non-mainstream titles like *Hong Kong 1941* (1984), *Love Unto Wastes* (1986), *Final Victory* (1987), and *Carry On Dancing* (aka *Keep on Dancing*, 1988). What's more, D & B produced dramas that flopped at the box-office, such as *Passion* (1986) and *Dream Lovers* (1986). This essay will discuss the last two films, both 'tasteful' dramas about the new middle class, and through this, highlight what made D & B stand out against the backdrop of rowdy mass entertainment of the 1980s.

After the economic take-off of the 1960s and 70s, a middle class was beginning to take shape in Hong Kong. D & B's creative team had on board the likes of John Sham and John Chan Koon-chung, both from *City Magazine*<sup>5</sup>, an icon of middle-class values. How was the new social class represented by D & B? What were the visual features of these works? How did they respond to society's political uncertainty?

## What did Hong Kong's Middle-Class Cinema Come From?

The 1980s saw the emergence of films centred on memorable middle-class stories. These include *Love Massacre* (1981), *Nomad* (1982), *The Last Affair* (1983), *Passion*, *Lost Romance* (1986), *Starry is the Night* (1988), and *Full Moon in New York* (Taiwan: 1989; HK: 1990). Most titles fit more or less into the *wenyi* category, focusing on explorations of the human psyche. Another feature and an unfortunate one at that is they generally didn't do well at the box-office.

In essay 'Fleeting Glory of 1980's Middle-class Films', Cheung Chi-sing points out that although middle-class movies became popular in the mid-1980s, it was not until *Heart to Hearts* (1988) that notable achievement was made.<sup>6</sup> *Heart to Hearts* was D & B's fourth best-selling title.<sup>7</sup> Cheung believes the film was a winner because 'Hong Kong's economy was at its peak; as society rose in affluence, people began to talk taste'.<sup>8</sup> In hindsight, I think on the contrary, its box-office success lay in its downplay of middle-class elements and putting middle-class characters in a setting palatable to the masses. The story revolves

<sup>4</sup> In referring to the middle-class films produced by Cinema City, Lau Yam writes: 'Middle-class romantic comedies did not maintain a foothold in Cinema City's production plans. Even though there were similar-looking films, they were not serious in referencing the culture, characteristics of the middle class when the stories and jokes were hatched out'. See 'Ripples in the City', in *The Essence of Entertainment: Cinema City's Glory Days*, May Ng and Wong Ha-pak (eds), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2016, p 74.

<sup>5</sup> *City Magazine* was founded in 1976.

<sup>6</sup> Cheung Chi-sing, 'Bashi Niandai Zhongchan Dianying De Cha'na Guanghui' ('Fleeting Glory of 1980's Middle-Class Films'), in *Hong Kong Cinema in the Eighties*, the 15th Hong Kong International Film Festival Catalogue, Law Kar (ed), Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1991, pp 28-29 (in Chinese).

<sup>7</sup> There are six D & B films whose box-office revenues are over HK\$20 million. (1) *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987): HK\$27,141,624; (2) *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World II* (1988): HK\$25,814,268; (3) *An Autumn's Tale* (1987): HK\$25,546,552; (4) *Heart to Hearts* (1988): HK\$24,676,380; (5) *Heart into Hearts* (1990): HK\$23,275,483; (6) *The Owl vs Bumbo* (1984): HK\$21,313,636. Data sourced from the website of Hong Kong Film Archive.

<sup>8</sup> Cheung Chi-sing, 'Bashi Niandai Zhongchan Dianying De Cha'na Guanghui' ('Fleeting Glory of 1980's Middle-Class Films'), see note 6, p 28.



around Alex (played by George Lam) who meets single mother Chu (played by Dodo Cheng) and her daughter (played by Vivian Chow), after his attractive live-in girlfriend Peggy (played by Rosamund Kwan) breaks up with him; Alex later falls for Chu. The protagonist is a middle-class salaryman, which in itself is down-to-earth. In terms of genre, *wenyi* elements are ditched for the modest urban comedy style. In the breakup scene, Alex and Peggy comically fight for the toilet seat cover. A possible reason for the film's success is its 'vulgarised' portrait of the middle class.

Hong Kong was a society that had experienced the 1967 riots, and the stock market crash and energy crisis of the 1970s, before its financial and social institutions underwent construction in the MacLehose era. This is how sociologist Lui Tai-lok describes the middle class:

As the middle class rapidly took shape in the 1970s and 80s and gained considerable size, it found itself in a very friendly social environment. The bourgeoisie and the colonial government were pleased to see the emergence of a middle class to help with social and economic development. For the other social classes, it told success stories of ascending the social ladder; they wanted their children to do the same.<sup>9</sup>

The middle class were the victors, the elite in a developing Hong Kong; educated and professionally skilled, they marked a departure from the 'Under the Lion Rock' generation who toiled for a living. But in order to maintain the status quo and pass on their advantage to their descendants, they were conservative, selfish even. Interestingly these successful ones had never been seen in a positive light in Hong Kong cinema. D & B's other hit *An Autumn's Tale* shows the female protagonist Jennifer (played by Cherie Chung) choosing the unlikely Figurehead (aka Samuel Pang; played by Chow Yun-fat) over the sophisticated Vincent (played by Danny Chan). Figurehead the uncultured commoner is crude, clumsy and speaks poor English, but he is kind. Vincent, the middle-class boyfriend, is refined, speaks fluent English, but aloof. Heaven knows how many times this dichotomy has appeared in Hong Kong films.

So when did favourable portrayals of the middle-class begin? Before the social class took shape, a prototype of the middle class story had existed in Hong Kong cinema. The most obvious examples were the Mandarin films of Motion Picture & General Investment Co., Ltd. (MP & GI), including *Our*

*Dream Car* (1959) which revolves around a married couple's dilemma of whether to buy a car. Both husband and wife are white-collar workers in Central; the man moreover works in an architectural firm. *June Bride* (1960) is about lingering doubts over marriage of a young woman who has just returned from Japan. Will love last? Is marriage just a ritual? That said, the elegant middle-class tales of 1950s MP & GI did not have any significant impact on the 1980s. Their presence can only be felt in Wong Kar-wai works like *In the Mood for Love* (2000). Meanwhile in the realm of Cantonese films, while most 1950s titles were about the lower classes, stories with a middle-class backdrop began appearing by the 1960s. One example was the highly popular Sun Ngee's production *Prince of Broadcasters* (aka *Prince of Broadcasting*, 1966) which may have over-romanticised the middle-class lifestyle of its protagonist (Patrick Tse Yin).

If we take 'middle class' to mean not only portraying characters from a certain background, but also the exploration of complex psychology or the development of a certain aesthetic, I would say such films did not appear until the arrival of New Wave TV dramas, especially the experiments of director Patrick Tam.<sup>10</sup> The anthology series *Superstar Specials*—*Wang Chuan-ju* (1975), directed by Tam and written by Joyce Chan, examined the struggles between desire and duty of attractive married women. The 'Miu Kam-fung' and 'Liza Wang' episodes, among others, of the *Seven Women* series scrutinised the repressed desires of middle-class women; in the absence of life's more pressing problems, deep emotional issues come to the fore. By the time *Love Massacre* and *Nomad* came about, New Wave art direction has established a style for the middle class—restrained palette and clean design, complemented by modern film language; a new aesthetic worlds apart from the excessive sensationalism of melodramas.

### Subtle Is Conservative?—*Passion*

As mentioned above, D & B's middle class stories were closely connected to the development of Hong Kong cinema. We will now discuss two films—both are *wenyi* pictures; both with a middle-class backdrop, featuring middle-class characters; and both visually experimental, which makes them worth rewatching 34 years later.

Sylvia Chang's *Passion* is special because though it was made in the flashy 1980s, an era preceded by

<sup>9</sup> Lui Tai-lok, *Zhongchan Xinshi Weiji Zihou (Middle-Class Anxiety: After the Crisis)*, Hong Kong: Up Publications, 2011, pp 13-14 (in Chinese).

<sup>10</sup> For further discussion on TV Films of this time period, see Law Kar (ed), *e-wave: The TV Films of Patrick Tam*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2008 (in Chinese).



Wendy Pai (left: Sylvia Chang) and John Lam (right: George Lam) can't help falling in love.



It turns out that Ming (Cora Miao) knows all along their relationships and even tries to sabotage their date.

the violence and erotica of the 1970s, it brings back the seemingly forgotten art of subtlety. The film won a few major prizes in the Hong Kong Film Awards and Taiwan's Golden Horse Awards. This and a nice theme song meant that it garnered much attention despite not being much of a hit.<sup>11</sup> When I watched it for the first time, I wondered, where is the passion? The film had a restraint absent in most Hong Kong films at the time, and Sylvia Chang was well aware of it. She remarked in an interview, 'This is not a film that you should judge by tickets sales of the midnight screening. That kind of audience only want comedy, not exposure to other genres. They're a sad bunch who only watch one kind of film.'<sup>12</sup> Chang certainly made something neither nonsensical nor comical. From this perspective at least, it is well worth watching.

What was the inspiration for this film that strayed from the mainstream? Many reviews at the time compared *Passion* to Edward Yang's *That Day, on the Beach* (1983).<sup>13</sup> While most critics affirmed its effort, they deemed it artistically inferior to the latter. John Sham revealed in an interview in recent years that he was the one who came up with the theme of two close friends falling for the same man. He discussed it with Sylvia Chang. Winnie Yu suggested letting

Isabel Ni write the screenplay. He was not satisfied with her work so he asked Chang to write.<sup>14</sup> After the film was screened, Chang pointed out what had influenced her, 'I love watching old films. I wanted to make it something like those old black-and-white Cantonese films, so full of Chinese flair...'<sup>15</sup> I found this rather interesting, especially the connections she made between the films of different eras. If *Passion's* understated emotions were derived from 1950s and 60s Cantonese films, perhaps we should do a comparison of the two.

It is evident in the characters' styling that the story straddles the decades between the 1960s and the 80s. Ming (played by Cora Miao) and John (played by George Lam) are engaged to be married. Ming's close friend Wendy (played by Sylvia Chang) comes back to attend their engagement ceremony. She and John develop feelings for each other, but not wishing to upset Ming, they keep it under wraps; they have trouble expressing their feelings even to themselves. Just before the wedding, Wendy and John sleep together. Wendy goes on to date an older man, a doctor (played by Chung King-fai). Years later, after both men have passed away, Ming and Wendy meet one gorgeous afternoon at a country club with their

<sup>11</sup> The film won the Best Actress (Sylvia Chang) and Best Original Film Song (Who Is Most Beloved; music: Lowell Lo; lyrics: Calvin Poon Yuen-leung; vocal: George Lam) at the 6th Hong Kong Film Awards; and Best Leading Actress (Sylvia Chang), Best Supporting Actress (Cora Miao) and Best Art Direction (William Chang) at the 23th Golden Horse Awards. It grossed HK\$8,757,828 at the box-office. Data sourced from the website of Hong Kong Film Archive.

<sup>12</sup> 'Zuiai Shishui? Zhang Aijia Tan Shenghuo, Ganqing, Dianying' ('Who Is Most Beloved?—Sylvia Chang on Life, Love and Films'), interviewed by Jing Hua and Ni Lai, collated by Jing Hua, *Film Biweekly*, No 193, 31 July 1986 (in Chinese).

<sup>13</sup> See Shu Kei: 'Huiying' (1), 'Zhixian' (2), 'Lingli' (3), 'Xintiao' (4) ('(1) Responsiveness; (2) Linearity; (3) Forcefulness; (4) Heartbeat'), *Ming Pao*, "Pijia Ji", 24-27 August 1986 (in Chinese).

<sup>14</sup> See 'John Sham' of this book, interviewed by Janice Chow et al., collated by Eric Tsang Siu-wang, pp 46-53.

<sup>15</sup> 'Who Is Most Beloved?—Sylvia Chang on Life, Love and Films', interviewed by Jing Hua and Ni Lai, collated by Jing Hua, see note 12.

daughters. In the course of the conversation, Wendy reveals the secret. It turns out that Ming knew all along and even tried to sabotage their date. But Wendy and John still met up, and this led to them having a daughter. In the last rays of a setting sun, the two childhood friends feel the full impact of life's unpredictability and their own powerlessness.

*Passion* is a film about the middle class. John is a lawyer from a wealthy family. Ming and Wendy come from comfortably well-to-do homes. Wendy works in advertising design. They are classy and cultured; John and Wendy are fond of painting. William Chang's clean and elegant art direction, though tweaked for the 1980s, retains the simple grace of the 1960s (Wendy's home in particular). Being subtle may be a feature of the middle class, but there's a fine line between subtle and conservative. The film portrays the characters' subtlety in a positive light, but this very quality is also the start of Hong Kong's middle-class conservatism.

Sylvia Chang mentioned she likes old Cantonese films. However, such films were almost always about the grassroots. That said being from the lower echelons of society did not prevent the characters from being subdued. For example, in *Eternal Love* (1955), though Hung Sin Nui elopes with a married man, she manifests her boldness in an understated manner. The women of old Cantonese films show how subtle does not necessarily equate conservative or weak. By contrast, *Passion's* restraint feels cowardly—love is given up for the sake of a stable life. In one memorable scene, Ming gleefully opens the door to the large new flat only to find Wendy and John seated quietly in the darkened living-room. There is nothing intimate about them, yet Ming knows right away what is happening. Not daring to look straight at them, she pretends nothing is out of the ordinary. And John doesn't tell her the truth either. The scene encapsulates the subtle relationship among the three. Ming was John's secretary; they fell in love due to work. One can say that Ming has achieved upward mobility through marriage. She doesn't like to read. She plays mahjong, as opposed to Wendy who paints. Losing John would mean losing the good life. Her silence is hence unnerving as hers is a restraint tinged with selfishness and conservatism.

The film also steers clear of John's complexity. On the one hand, he is the typical Mr Nice—good student, good husband, dedicated to his work, and a fine citizen. But how does his romance with Wendy



*Passion* (1986): The multi-faceted Sylvia Chang (front) wrote, directed and acted in this film.

tie into his reserved and inarticulate character? The film does not explore that direction. John seems like two different persons with Wendy and Ming. What kind of man is he really? The parts where he and Wendy goes to the sea at night and drive around are done very nicely as the film makes a deliberate attempt to release them from the restraint of the middle class space. Unfortunately it is not developed any further.

*Passion* embodies many of our views and critiques of the middle class. It begins and ends in the country club. The entanglement between the characters is a very 'safe' one, because it's in the past. Though the truth outs over a decade later, the man being fought over is dead; it is over. Yes, the truth is a little shocking but life goes on, as does the pour of white wine in the country club. *Passion* portrays one of the faces of Hong Kong society through the telling of an elegant and subdued story. The film has its moments, yet it also brings to light the conservatism and insularity of the middle class.<sup>16</sup>

### Middle-Class Romance and History—*Dream Lovers*

*Dream Lovers* is another extraordinary D & B title about the middle class. In 1983, Tony Au shot *The Last Affair*, a non-glamorised depiction of the lives of Hong Kong immigrants in Paris and their feelings of despondence and exasperation. The art direction is very middle-class. The wardrobe and styling of protagonists Dodo Cheng, Pat Ha and Chow Yun-fat are minimalist, but a little too posed. *Dream Lovers* was Tony Au's sophomore film and critics generally

<sup>16</sup> There were also Taiwanese critics who disapproved the film's insularity and lack of openness, see Edmond Wong, 'Zhang Aijia Zuiai Beihou De Henyi' ('The Concealed Hatred Behind Sylvia Chang's *Passion*'), in *Cinema in the Republic of China Yearbook*, Hsu Li-Kong and Luo Shu-nan (eds), Taipei: *Cinema in the Republic of China Yearbook* Editorial Board, August 1987, pp 18-19 (in Chinese).



## Dream Lovers (1986)



Previous life: A husband in Qin dynasty (Chow Yun-fat).



She's a wife (Brigitte Lin) of a Qin man and would follow him till death do them part.



Two thousand years keep Song Yu (left: Chow Yun-fat) and Yuet-heung (right: Brigitte Lin) apart.

felt he had improved.<sup>17</sup> Chiu Kang-chien wrote the very unusual story and produced the film jointly with Manfred Wong. Box-office sales were similar to *Hong Kong 1941*.<sup>18</sup>

In today's language, it's a tale about time travel. Song Yu (played by Chow Yun-fat) is a music conductor back from overseas. His live-in girlfriend of eight years Wah-lei (played by Cher Yeung) resides in Hong Kong. Yu is haunted by visions of a woman dressed in Qin dynasty costume and even of himself as a terracotta warrior. One day he goes to a terracotta army exhibition in Hong Kong where he meets Yuet-heung (played by Brigitte Lin) and their past life connection is revealed—they were married some 2000 years ago; after Yu angered the emperor and got himself killed, Yuet-heung followed him to the netherworld; they reincarnated in 1960s China, and it is in Hong Kong that they cross paths again. After realising the backstory, Yu decides to stay with Yuet-heung. Wah-lei commits suicide—she does not think that an eight-year relationship is any less significant than one spanning millennia. But after she dies, Yu and Yuet-heung part ways.

This is a special story where the ancient and contemporary worlds exist side by side, and it is clearly Chiu Kang-chien's style. Critic Ma Chi thinks the film contains a metaphor for 1997. 'The choice of "2,197 years" is in remarkable coincidence with "1997"'.<sup>19</sup> Made a few years after *Hong Kong 1941* with its allegorical reference to the city's impending

fate, *Dream Lovers* is another response to socio-political realities. What it essentially says is that just when you're living your happy, much coveted middle-class life, the past catches up with you, like it does Hong Kong. But what I really want to know is this: Is history in *Dream Lovers* constructive or destructive?

*Dream Lovers* features three kinds of histories or three spaces that embody history. The first is the Qin dynasty; it is also the most dramatic and beautiful. The second is the emphasis that Song Yu and Yuet-heung were born in China, belonging to the generation that came to Hong Kong during the Cultural Revolution and made it here, especially Yuet-heung's father with his past in archaeology. The third is Hong Kong's own history—Wah-lei's past is in Cheung Chau; her maternal grandmother is a spirit medium. In one scene, Yu visits Cheung Chau where he witnesses a ritual to send off deities. All three characters live a middle-class life in Hong Kong. Yu and Wah-lei's new home is perched high, overlooking the harbour. Yuet-heung's family is upper middle class. Interestingly these three histories are destructive to their present lives. The return of Qin history causes Wah-lei's suicide. When a good relationship is destroyed, Yu and Yuet-heung do not end well either. The wounds of the Cultural Revolution are evident in Yuet-heung's father for whom the pains of the past are vivid when he meets old friends. Yu and Yuet-heung's history is unveiled when he visits Cheung Chau for the first time. The island seems to be a vessel for history, yet it is also terrifying to the characters. The

<sup>17</sup> See Sek Kei, 'Mengzhongren (Xia)—Qingdiao Chanmian, Gushi Qianqiang' ('*Dream Lovers* (Part II)—An Unconvincing Plot for a Promising Romance'), *Ming Pao Evening News*, 26 April 1986 (in Chinese).

<sup>18</sup> *Hong Kong 1941* and *Dream Lovers* hauled in HK\$7,223,400 and HK\$7,289,958 at the box-office respectively. Data sourced from the website of Hong Kong Film Archive.

<sup>19</sup> Ma Chi, 'Menghuan Mengyi Beiguan Menglong—Mengzhongren' ('A "Sleep-Talking" Fantasy—*Dream Lovers*'), *China & Overseas Movie News*, No 81, June 1986 (in Chinese).





Cast and crew of *Dream Lovers* (1986): (from left) Tony Au, William Chang, Brigitte Lin, Chow Yun-fat, Stanley Kwan.

return of history has not done any of the characters any good; if anything, it is a threat to present-day middle-class life. Yet *Dream Lovers* tells you—time’s up, you have no choice. History always returns.

The film’s attitude to history is a complex one. The ancient world and its people are mesmerising, but danger lurks. Yu loses his life after offending the Qin emperor. Yu and Yuet-heung were going to pick up where they left off in the modern world, but can history be repeated? The film is fascinated by the beauty of the past, yet it is also apprehensive. I think Wah-lei’s character is simple and direct, a woman true to her emotions, free from the middle-class need to maintain the status quo. I think if Yu and Yuet-heung are really in love and believe in the predestined union history has endowed upon them, they would have persisted. But the ending tells us, they don’t want to continue this history although it has left an indelible mark on their lives. *Dream Lovers* expresses the middle-class identification with a returning history and also their fear of it.

## Conclusion

Despite their flaws, D & B’s representative works *Passion* and *Dream Lovers* should be lauded for their attempts to express another voice in the boisterous world of genre films. In films of the 1970s up till the mid-1980s, the middle class expressed a certain anger. In *Nomad*, for instance, there was violence and liberation. But as things evolved, the middle class seemed to exhibit a disconnect with reality, or only appeared in the world of *wenyi* films removed from reality. Although the middle class formed rapidly in 1970s and 80s Hong Kong, people still preferred the endearing and quick-witted characters of the lower classes when it came to films. If the middle class is what in Hong Kong’s contemporary protest lingo is referred to as ‘wo lei fei’ or advocates of ‘peace,

rationality and non-violence’, I think now is the time to rewrite the story of these people.

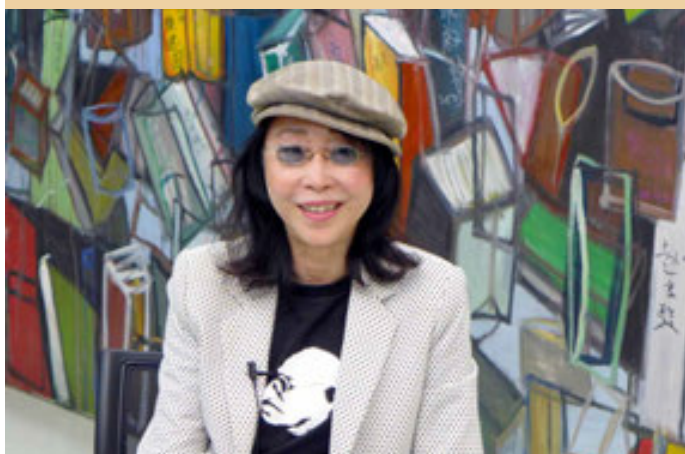
[Translated by Piera Chen]

**Mary Wong Shuk-han** is a writer and Associate Professor at the Department of Chinese, Lingnan University, Hong Kong. She received her Ph.D. at the Department of Comparative Literature of The University of Hong Kong. She is the author of prose books *From Kafka* (2015) and *Against the Grain* (2017); collection of short stories *Surviving Central* (2013); two collections of essays, including *Feminine Writing: Cinema, Literature and Everyday Live* (2014) and *Hong Kong Cinema: Writer, Literature and Cinema* (2013). Major edited books include *Hong Kong 1960s* (2020), *Hong Kong Literature and Culture of the 1950s* series (2013), *Hong Kong Literature and Cinema* (co-ed.) (2012), etc. She was also the co-producer and literary advisor of the documentaries *1918* (2015) and *Boundary* (2015).



Chapter II >>

## **Dialogues on Films**



# Mabel Cheung

## On Directing *An Autumn's Tale*

Collated from the post-screening talk of *An Autumn's Tale* (17 February 2013)

Moderator: Winnie Fu; &

oral history interview on 17 January 2020

Interviewers: Janice Chow, Priscilla Chan, Carmen Tsoi, Kwok Ching-ling

Collated by Doris Chiu



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*An Autumn's Tale*

1987 Col Cantonese 98 min Prod Co: D & B Exe Prod: Dickson Poon Prod: John Sham Dir: Mabel Cheung Scr: Alex Law Assoc Prod: Winne Yu Cinematographers: James Hayman, David Chung Eds: Chiang Kwok-kuen, Lee Yim-hoi, Chan Ki-hop, Jue San-git, Eric Kong Chi-leung Art Dirs: Christy Addis, Yank Wong Orig Music: Lowell Lo Cast: Chow Yun-fat, Cherie Chung, Danny Chan, Gigi Wong, Cindy Ou

**Origin of the Film's Lead Characters**

**The dialogue of this movie is brilliant, can you tell us about the process of creating the screenplay?**

All the dialogue was written with meticulous care by us, and after watching the movie again, I still think the character of Figurehead (aka Samuel Pang) is incredibly attractive and very suitable for Chow Yun-fat to play. In fact, his role was based on a friend I met in Chinatown. At the time, I met this guy in Chinatown called Chau Pei Ling (literally: Wrinkled Lemon), a worldly character who loved to help people out. But if you hurt him, he would remark something like, 'I have nothing left except dignity'.

**As for the role of Jennifer (aka Sup Saam Mui), you had put a lot of your own life experience into the story. Is it your own story or your friend's story?**

It's not 100% my story—at the time I didn't have any Figurehead chasing me. However, Jennifer's experience at school was exactly my experience at New York University (NYU). Penniless international students had to come up with many ideas to survive. For me, I went to find work in Chinatown, and over time, I became acquainted with the illegal immigrants who often stayed there.

**The restaurant Sampan that shows up at the end of the movie—that was supposed to be a gift for your friend Chau Pei Ling?**

Yes! Producer John Sham originally suggested ending the movie with Jennifer giving the watch to Figurehead and Figurehead looking woefully at the watch. I said no way, because Chau Pei Ling is my friend, and in real life there's no way he could ever own a restaurant; but since I am a director, I can gift him this fantasy in the world of movies.

**Struggling with Funding**

**Are you loyal to the script when shooting? Is there any moment that's conceived on site?**

We pretty much stuck to the script. After the screenplay was finished, I thought that in the whole world, only Chow Yun-fat could play the role of the ill-bred yet romantic Figurehead. Although he was considered 'box office poison' at the time, I insisted that Figurehead be played by him. Some film companies liked the screenplay very much, but when they learned that I was going to star Chow, they said this 'box office poison' would not do. One company even offered me a range of superstars to choose from, such as Sammo Hung, Jackie Chan, and also Michael Hui, but I still insisted that the person to play Figurehead would be none other than Chow Yun-fat.

Later my fellow HKU alumnus John Chan Koon-chung suggested I get in touch with John Sham, so I approached him in trepidation, placed the script in front of him and left. Soon after, he called me and asked me to go up to his office the next day to sign a contract. He had no idea we were in fact at the end of our tether, and he was the last person we could get in touch with for investment to get the movie filmed.



*An Autumn's Tale (1987)*



Only Chow Yun-fat could play the role of the ill-bred yet romantic Figurehead.



Cherie Chung was perfect for the role of Sup Saam Mui, as she has a sort of stubborn streak to her.



The lighting at sunset was best for shooting, so the director ordered Chow Yun-fat to go running at dusk.



The director was moved by the meticulous acting of Chow Yun-fat, describing it as the magic moment.



Whenever Figurehead is hurt, he repeats his own saying: 'I've nothing left except dignity'.



Table for two

### Did he agree to Chow Yun-fat playing the main role?

Yes! But just as I was planning out the shoot in New York, *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) premiered in Hong Kong and Chow Yun-fat became an overnight sensation. Suddenly everyone was inviting him to star in their films. In a moment of desperation, I called him up and asked if he was still coming to New York for my movie. He said, 'I promised you I'll do it, so I will. You go ahead first!' So, with that promise, I went ahead with the preparations.

### What about Cherie Chung? Did you decide to bring her on as Jennifer early on?

The in-chief (John Sham) had some reservations about getting Cherie Chung to play the role of Jennifer. I thought Cherie was perfect for the role, as she has a sort of stubborn streak to her. In the film, there's one scene in which she meets Danny Chan again at the train station. We had rented a station beforehand to film the scene, but when the clock hit 6pm, the station's managing staff demanded we pack up right away. We were still missing a close-up of Cherie at that point, and Cherie surprised us by marching up to confront the staff, who was a tall and well-built black man. It didn't work out in the end, but it really showed us her strong character. As for that close-up shot, we filmed it after we came back to Hong Kong.

### Returning to Hong Kong Severely Overbudget

#### You mentioned that the interior scenes were shot after coming back to Hong Kong. How did you manage to make it look so seamless between the scenes shot in Hong Kong and New York?

I didn't actually want to come back to Hong Kong for any of the shoot. My plan was to shoot the whole film in New York, but we ran overbudget halfway through the shoot. We had set aside HK\$3 million for the whole movie, but by midway we'd already used close to HK\$4 million. Someone then reported this to the bosses, saying I was overbudget, and that it seemed like I didn't know what I was filming—because I'd ordered Chow Yun-fat to go running every day at dusk. I told him to do so because the lighting at sunset is the best for shooting that scene. Chow Yun-fat himself didn't understand either why he had to run at that time, so someone reported all of this to the top.

After hearing about it, John Sham rang me up and said, 'Stop the shoot for now, hold your remaining interior scenes and let us watch what you have first. Give us a cut to take a look.' Thankfully, after I came back to Hong Kong and gave the boss an edit, his first response was, 'Not bad! There's no problem at all, keep shooting then!'

He even found me the best crew to work with: David Chung, a top-notch Hong Kong cinematographer, Yank Wong, an incredible artistic director, and Lowell Lo, an amazing musician. Before coming back to Hong Kong, I took a lot of photos. I showed them all to Yank Wong, who faithfully recreated the interior scenes from New York here.

### Miracle Moments that Boost Motivation

#### You didn't have a budget for extras, so were all those people queuing outside the Broadway Theatre real New Yorkers?

Of course, we didn't apply ahead to shoot that scene there. It's something that might be allowed in New York, but not in Hong Kong. I first told Mr Fat (Chow Yun-fat) what he had to do, then when it came to the shoot, as soon as we set up the cameras, we held up a sign that said, 'We are making a film, please don't look at the camera'. And when the New Yorkers saw the sign, they really did ignore the camera and went about their own business. When Mr Fat jumped the fence to try and cut the queue, the people in the line started yelling at him and fencing him off to the back of the queue. They knew he was an actor, but they were fully embracing the roles as movie extras.

#### The film is known for its great shots and camera angles. How do you plan ahead for camera positions?

The cinematographer in New York was a classmate of mine from NYU, and together we used all our patience combined to wait for the perfect light. For example, there's a scene for which we wanted to capture a seagull flying by the seaside—we shot around 20 times, waiting for the right light to hit the right seagull flying past. The seagulls you see in the movie—they were the fruits of our patience. I am a very persistent person, to the point

where it might frustrate some people. But sometimes you have to be that way; otherwise you won't get that right moment and might regret it for life.

**There is that scene when Chow Yun-fat says goodbye to Cherie Chung, in which he goes from not caring, to realising he is in love with her. Is that one of the shots you're most satisfied with?**

Well, it's one of the shots I'm most satisfied with. That was actually Chow Yun-fat's last shoot day in New York, and he had to return to Hong Kong for another movie the next day. Thinking back on the moment, almost all of Chinatown had come to watch the shoot. There were police keeping order, and it was extremely noisy. I was really worried whether or not we could finish the shoot on time given the environment, but there was nothing we could do, except keep at it. I told Chow Yun-fat to conjure up some heartbroken memories and started rolling the cameras. It was still quite noisy then. But as the cameras started rolling, and he started acting—first it was the nonchalant smile, then his expression became sad before tears welled in his eyes, when he decides he will in fact chase after Jennifer. By this point, the whole set had fallen silent; even I was entirely absorbed in the scene, feeling the heartache. It wasn't till he walked off camera that I remembered to yell 'cut', and the whole crowd then exploded into applause, moved by his performance. It's that kind of magic in moviemaking, the miracle moment that makes you feel like every bit of effort, every moment of waiting is worthwhile.

**The scene in which Cherie Chung gifts Chow Yun-fat the watch is very moving. Where did the inspiration come from?**

The scene was inspired by a book called *The Gift of the Magi*. It's about a woman with very long, beautiful hair, whose husband wanted to buy her a comb or hair accessory that would complement her lovely hair. But when he finally found the right gift, she had cut her hair short to sell it for money, so she could buy him a gift. So even though the two of them had each other in their hearts, and wanted to get something perfect for each other, their timing was unfortunately all off. Just like Figurehead and Jennifer wanting to offer each other something perfect, but because of the wrong timing, the moment was missed. When it comes to love, timing is key.

**Is there any other scene that's unforgettable to you?**

In making a movie, every element is added after careful consideration, so I can't say there's any particular scene I could think of all of a sudden. However, I always remember the actors' faces. For me, actors and directors have a special relationship. We all spent several months together, so even if we don't necessarily meet again and have dinner together, they inevitably become a part of my life. Chow Yun-fat, Cherie Chung, Danny Chan, Shu Qi, Leon Lai, Sean Lau Ching-wan, Jiang Wen... all their faces are etched in my mind.

**Now that you're looking back at this movie, is there anything you want to add or delete?**

In fact, it's not just this one. When I rewatch movies I've made, I see flaws and have regrets in all of them. I think that's what it takes to be a director: you constantly challenge yourself and constantly hope to do better. So for many things, you shouldn't try to change them; as Chow Yun-fat said, don't look back, don't look back at the things that are done and dusted.

## **Inside and Outside Movies**

**Did the actors give you any feedback after seeing the film?**

They of course loved it. I remember meeting Danny Chan again after a decade or so and he opined that since the film has become a classic, it's time for a sequel. But I've never had that thought. At the start of this production, I had an innocent desire to gift the movie to a friend who'd helped me a lot. In part, I also wanted to keep a record of all the parts that made up my experience growing up in New York: the NYU I knew when I was studying there, the Chinatown, my lowly comrades, all of it.

**There are five editors involved in the film. Why so many?**

It was like this: D & B had an editing department, which was headed by Chiang Kwok-kuen; whether or not he was involved in the editing, his name would still be tied to the film. And actually, the situation was that anyone who was free would help cut a little of it; the one who cut the most was Eric Kong Chi-leung. When I was studying at NYU, I cut all my own student productions, including *The Illegal Immigrant* (1985). So when there

was no one free to help on this movie, I would jump in and do the editing myself too. I place a lot of emphasis on the editing; because it has such an impact on the rhythm of the entire film.

**Let's talk about music. Lowell Lo was in charge of the music for the movie, so how much involvement did you, as the director, have in that regard?**

First, I gave Lowell Lo some music that had a similar feeling to what I was looking for. Then he wrote me a few songs to choose from, and I chose this one 'Goodbye Autumn' as I really liked it, even after the first listening. In the final scene of the movie, when Chow runs straight to the bridge, with the cars honking at him, the music arrangement was the most important and we put in a lot of effort there. At first, when Chow runs past, where we use a long shot showing him running to the other side, the music is simpler, with just one guitar. But as he continues running, we added the flute, and when he runs up to the bridge and sees Cherie Chung, the piano comes in. After that, all the instruments are brought in. We did it slowly, adding the instruments in one by one.

**Did you decide to engage Lui Fong to sing the theme song right from the start?**

No, we brought him on later. He sang it so well; I really like him. Danny Chan had written a song and wanted us to use it as the theme song. But he was a character in the film, and if he sang the theme song, how would that affect the audience's understanding of his character? We felt that the theme song is a part of the film, and it should be composed by the musician who is leading the entire film score. So, we decided to have Lowell write it.

**How did the film title *An Autumn's Tale* come about?**

That was decided right from the start, though originally, I didn't want to film a 'fairy tale'. I wanted to film a realistic love story—actually not a love story, just a relationship between two people while they are in New York. I thought 'An Autumn's Tale' sounded quite nice and suggested it to the in-chief. He didn't mind it, but when the film was screened in Taiwan, the distributor there didn't like it, so they changed the name in Chinese to 'Rogue Tycoon'. As the distributor, they had a right to change it.

**If not a director, what would you be doing?**

I would learn to play music and be a musician. When I was young, I wanted to learn playing the piano, but I never did because we couldn't afford lessons. That's why I'm so happy to see Lowell Lo and all those who make music for me. Every time I make a movie, the happiest moment is when we put in the music: everyone sitting in front of the big screen, watching the visuals without music, and when the music is added, it suddenly gives you such a different feeling. I really enjoy that process.

[Translated by Diane To]





## Kam Kwok-leung

### *On Wonder Women and Carry on Dancing*

Collated from the post-screening talks of *Wonder Women* (26 November 2011) and *Carry on Dancing* aka *Keep on Dancing* (17 December 2011)

Moderator: Sam Ho; &

oral history interview on 16 March 2020

Interviewers: Kwok Ching-ling, Janice Chow

Collated by Doris Chiu



## *Wonder Women*

1987 Col Cantonese 93 min Prod Co: D & B Prod Plan: A Certain Prod Co Limited Exe Prod: Dickson Poon Prod: Winne Yu Dir: Kam Kwok-leung Scr: Kam Kwok-leung Cinematographer: Poon Hang-sang Eds: Chiang Kwok-kuen, Lee Yim-hoi Art Dir: Fong Ying Music: Danny Chung Music Arrangement: Tang Siu-lam Cast: Dodo Cheng, Cecilia Yip, Michael Wong, Lawrence Cheng

## *Carry on Dancing aka Keep on Dancing*

1988 Col Cantonese 90 min Prod Co: D & B Exe Prod: Dickson Poon Prods: Kam Kwok-leung, Winne Yu Dirs: Leong Po-chih, Kam Kwok-leung Scr: Kam Kwok-leung, Winne Yu Cinematographer: Wong Po-man Eds: Chiang Kwok-kuen, Chan Ki-hop, Lee Yim-hoi Art Dirs: Luk Suk-yuen, William Chang Music Arrangement: David Wu Cast: Cora Miao, Richard Ng, Eric Tsang, Mang Hoi, James Wong, Sun Ma Si-tsang

## *Wonder Women*

### *Yammie Leung vs Brigitta Lin*

***Wonder Women* was produced by A Certain Production Company Limited. Can you elaborate on how the company was established?**

At the time I'd just left TVB (Television Broadcasts Limited) and it just so happened that D & B invited my good friend Winnie Yu to collaborate with them to set up a company. While Winnie considered herself better at matters of coordination, I was happy to partake in the creative work. She thought with the two of us combined, we would be good at running a company. And that's how A Certain Production Company Limited came into being.

D & B in fact didn't involve itself very much in the productions of A Certain Production because many of the film producers involved were either already very experienced in the industry, or came from TV or radio, so it was easy to achieve the right chemistry between us.

**The film especially resounded with the female audience at the time. How did you come up with this topic and these two very special characters?**

I'd worked at the TV station for so long, where there was plenty of raw material to absorb. At the time, the beauty pageantry was all about 'equal emphasis on intelligence and beauty', and it had certainly unveiled many modern women with great ideals. There were of course many behind-the-scenes stories, so a lot of people thought I was mocking the pageantry back then, but it was definitely not the case. I was exploring the value systems of Hong Kong people at the time.

Many families thought their daughters were smart and capable, and many girls thought they were very 'pretty'. But to their surprise, after taking part in a beauty contest, they suddenly realised millions of Hongkongers thought so poorly of them. This had a big impact on how you face society in the future.

**It's said the role of Yammie Leung was specially written for Dodo Cheng. Is that true?**

For every protagonist in my screenplays and in my movies, I planned everything specially for them, without exception. At the time, all the films starring Lisa Wang, Louise Lee, George Lam were written specially for them. When they take part in my productions, I love them wholeheartedly.

**Yammie Leung had a bit of a speech impediment. What made you decide to use that feature to define her character?**

It's a plot device. Leung had this flaw to her, but she never found it problematic for her, and that in fact signified her sexiness.

**You also used the term 'dumb blonde'; did you consider her a 'dumb brunette'?**

If you look at her, actually, no. Dodo Cheng in fact came up with it herself. There's a moment when Yammie Leung is about to throw a tantrum, she glares at Cecilia Yip, that is Brigitta Lin in the film, and feels she must speak the truth in chastising her—that's when she returns to her real age, the normal her. All other times, she is just acting out another role.



Yammie Leung (right: Dodo Cheng) and Brigitta Lin (left: Cecilia Yip): Losing the pageant means yet another new chapter in life!



Brigitta Lin feels she is superior to her peers while questioning why she has to debase herself by taking part in beauty pageants; yet she has no choice but to give it a go, or risk losing the opportunity forever.



Yammie Leung speaks with a bit of a lisp, which signifies her sexiness.



Michael Wong (left) casts a charm spell over the two female characters the moment they meet.

**It seems Brigitta Lin's character was not as outstanding as Yammie Leung, although it's a joy to watch her too. How did you decide on the dynamic between the two women?**

It was all about the subject matter. Both of them were pretty average; that is to say they wanted to join the beauty contest but struggled to reconcile with it. On the one hand, they felt they were superior to their peers, questioning why they had to debase themselves by taking part in such games to be a part of society; yet they felt they had no choice but to give it a go, or risk losing the opportunity forever. They may have also thought since a young age that they would easily win out in such contests, only to be shocked by a sense of insignificance after joining the pageant.

Ever since there were beauty pageants, nine out of ten contestants have 'scripted' their stories, thinking that once they stepped on stage, their grandiose 'scripted' life would be opened up for them. However, destiny often plays jokes with them and prevented them to act out their self-scripted life. Many of them even spoiled their life along the way and would be more than happy to rework the time machine to a world where they never have had joined a pageant contest.

### **Michael Wong's character was also very special—does it contain any hints of his own personality?**

With Michael Wong's character, I adjusted many parts of it to fit him. If we just used a local Cantonese lad to play the role, it wouldn't have been as funny as with Michael playing it. He was absolutely able to fool you into thinking that he came back from overseas, and he was so handsome that all the girls would just fall for him. So you could say these characteristics were written for him.

He cast a charm spell over the two main characters the moment they met. And because the two were experiencing failure at the time, both felt they must win over Michael Wong. It was as though an angel suddenly flew into their lives, and they felt they must hold tightly onto him. Of course, afterwards they realise he's just another guy. But while they are still giddy about him, he has some fun with them for a few days. In the end everyone comes out fine, just like a little holiday.

### **Collaborating with Like-Minded Friends**

#### **The film's art director was Fong Ying. In your discussions with her, did you give her any particular directions or instructions?**

I'm a good friend of Fong Ying. She started in the industry as an actor, and at the time she was already quite avant-garde, often going off to see European films. She and I were very much in sync, with plenty of common topics, and we were both equally fascinated by all that were going on in the film industry. So I didn't really need to give her any instructions.

There was another reason to bring Fong Ying on as art director. Since she was an actor herself, who had hosted shows and acted in TV series for Commercial Television (CTV), she had been through the rise of television entertainment, and as such was the perfect person to create a sense of what the two protagonists are experiencing in the story.

In fact, everyone I collaborated with at the time were good friends, for example Winnie Yu, who has always shared everything with me. Another one is William Chang, who was art director of *Carry on Dancing*. He was even closer friends with Winnie Yu, and the two worked together seamlessly. That's why the movies we made together are still a topic of discussion decades later.

All this aside, the original song of the film's theme song 'Dare to Love Me' is Starship's 'Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now'. It was Winnie Yu's pick. She has many interesting projects from her work in radio broadcast, and with her connections, our whole project was given a voice as well as shape and form.

#### **Why did you bring on Dodo Cheng and Cora Miao?**

When I was at TVB, I had worked with Ann Hui and wrote many scripts for her. We both admired Dodo Cheng and Cora Miao. At the time, there weren't many different media platforms, and when you saw a rising star who immediately became the talk of the town, you naturally also wanted to work with her.

### ***Carry on Dancing***

#### **Everyone is an Individual**

#### **Your TV shows such as *Between the Twins* and *Double Fantasies* involve one person playing two roles. You seem to have a special interest in the topic of twins?**

Everyone is an individual subject, from their faces to what happens to them, everything is individual and separate. There is no double. That's what these shows want to emphasise.

#### **Tell us something about Cora Miao.**

She had also taken part in a beauty pageant. I saw online an old clip of her question and answer session during her beauty contest and I realised she was already very insightful as a young lady. Right at the start of her career, there were many directors who wanted her in their films. Ann Hui brought her on for *Boat People* (1982). We were colleagues at the TV station, when I was a new director and she was a new actor. After some years, we



## Carry on Dancing (1988)



The director dug out Cora Miao's comedic nature in *Carry on Dancing* (1988).



We are all chasing dreams; but can you tell the foolish from the wise in this deceiving world? (Left: Cora Miao; right: Richard Ng)

became real friends, and it was sheer fate that we both got involved in the film business. Along the way, there were many things that were outside our control.

### **Cora Miao is the quiet, wise type of person, often described as someone with grace. How did you dig out her comedic nature?**

Perhaps some people disagree, but I think Chinese societies generally lack humour. Humour in young people can demonstrate their attitude towards life and this can delight people. I don't mean those who keep babbling, or communicate with verbal bullets filled with harsh sarcasm—that's not humour. I think Cora Miao, or Dodo Cheng, at the time gave me a sense of straightforwardness, whether in speech or action, or the way they treated people. At the time, people often misunderstood such attitudes and would say they are 'macho'! When in fact, all females who are a step ahead and open to new things share this same nature.

### **Two Faces of One Entity**

#### **What was the intention behind your decision to use an asylum as the backdrop?**

The plot never implied that such an environment did exist on earth. Unless, for example, it's a film like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), do you think a bunch of people like that really exist in some corner of the world? We may have told a bold story, but it's not the same as saying the film world exists in the real world, that in some apartment on some street, you can find these people there. It's not like that. The film, to a certain degree, is being ironic.

#### **The movie is about a pair of twin sisters, but it's really about the two faces of one entity. And it seems fate brought two directors to the creative process, giving us two faces of the same story.**

There was a minor detour in the making of this film. At the time, the shoot for *Wonder Women* was already underway, and I was worried I might drop the ball if I also took up the shoot for *Carry on Dancing*. So I rationally suggested having a friend take over the film—that was Mr Leong Po-chih. Unfortunately, halfway through, Leong Po-chih didn't quite get along with Winnie Yu and had differences in opinion about the script. Ultimately, Winnie Yu was the producer and she would say, 'I think Kam Kwok-leung didn't mean it this way', while Leong Po-chih didn't feel that he had missed anything. I was stuck between the two of them, unsure of what to do. We had a responsibility to D & B, so in the end, I just toughed it out and took back over the film myself. There's a lot I can't forgive myself about; it was not executed particularly well.

Actually, looking back now a decade on, I still think unless it's my own project, if a screenplay has been handed to a director, and the investor is willing to trust the director, then they should be absolutely free to interpret it the way they see fit.

**Filmmaking is an art, and art mimics life. Yet now it's as though life is mimicking art.**

We often stress how the two cannot be equal. How could the two be identical? No matter how much of a reflection it is, it's still not the same. If you feel it is becoming the same, the two will be confused together. But we should rationally separate the two. What we create in film is not to say we should have it in real life as well. It could just be a reflection of what we don't have.

**In the 1980s, the term 'dance' had multiple meanings to it. What was the meaning for you in choosing the film title 'Carry on Dancing'?**

To be honest it was very shallow, in the 1980s, Hong Kong people were lost and afraid; I actually didn't have any profound insight to share through the film. In *Wonder Women*, there is a line of dialogue that didn't make it into the film, which said something along the lines of 'Hong Kong people only care for prosperity, when did Hong Kong people ever care for stability?' *Carry on Dancing* was about that; in truth, Hong Kong people were not clear about what they were so anxious about. They thought they should just carry on dancing, since no one knows what tomorrow will look like. This point of view, looking back now, seems quite ironic.

**How do you feel looking back again at your work after so many years?**

I never had many feelings for my past; things that are done are done. I think the process is the most meaningful part of everything I do. Especially with films or TV shows, where you're forced to push it out at the last moment, and you often didn't get a final product that fully satisfy your expectations. To me, what I enjoy is the process of doing each thing, and the stories along the way are very personal. Only I know about them, you don't. I enjoy thinking back at all the things that happened during a project, rather than reminiscing about the final product.

[Translated by Diane To]



## Gordon Chan

### On Writing and Directing *Heart to Hearts*

Collated from the oral history interview on 4 January 2020

Interviewers: Janice Chow, Priscilla Chan, Carmen Tsoi, Kwok Ching-ling

Collated by Doris Chiu



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## Heart to Hearts

1988 Col Cantonese 93 min Prod Co: D & B Exe Prod: Dickson Poon Prod: Stephen Shin Dir: Stephen Shin Exe Dir: Gordon Chan Scr: Nip Wang-fung, Siu Kwok-wah, Gordon Chan, Ip Kwong-kim, So Fung-ye Cinematographer: Horace Wong Wing-hang Eds: Chiang Kwok-kuen, Chan Ki-hop, Lee Yim-hoi, Eric Kong Chi-leung, Kwok Ting-hung Art Dir: Fong Ying Orig Music: Danny Chung Music Arrangement: Tang Siu-lam Recording: Dai Li Cast: George Lam, Dodo Cheng, Rosamund Kwan, Vivian Chow, Elaine Jin

### On Executive-Directing *Heart to Hearts*

#### Why did you decide to work at D & B?

At that time, I had just left Film Workshop Co. Ltd., and wanted to work as a free agent. Chan Pui-wah asked me to work at Golden Harvest, but there were so many stars at Golden Harvest back then, the writers had only to cater to what those superstars liked. I felt that it wouldn't be a happy, creative environment for me, so when Kim (Ip Kwong-kim) suggested that I go to D & B, I agreed.

#### Please tell us about the reason and process in directing *Heart to Hearts*.

At the time we had to get a George Lam star vehicle ready. We devised seven different concepts of different genres. One of them was like a super-thief concept, and there was even a *wuxia* (period-costume martial arts) film in there, all commercial film treatments. But George Lam looked through them and just remarked, 'Is there anything else?' And because he asked that, *Heart to Hearts* was brought on the table. *Heart to Hearts* was not among the seven concepts. At the time everyone thought the story lacked commercial appeal and had set it aside. But as soon as Lam read it, he liked it.

#### How did you come up with this topic? Is it from your personal experience?

Definitely not. I'm actually a film nerd. When I rented films at video stores, I didn't choose titles. I would rent in order of the numbering system. When I finished watching and returned the tapes, I would rent the next numbers in line. At the time I watched an American film starring Richard Dreyfuss [*The Buddy System* (1984)]. The actors did a great job, but the film did poorly at the box office and in critical acclaim. It's about an unsuccessful author and his relationship with a woman. This author worked as a school security guard until the woman encouraged him to do what made him happy, so he changed careers. This film moved me, and I felt that with some changes it could be right for us. Therefore, the concept for *Heart to Hearts* actually came from a failed film.

The most difficult thing is to make a film touching, and to cause the audience to continuously care about a character. At the time, we wrote various drafts but felt that they were unconvincing. I remember Kim, Chan Hing-kai and I even went to Macao to brainstorm, to think about how to write it. Suddenly, the solution dawned on me: why is the love story of Cherie Chung and Chow Yun-fat in *An Autumn's Tale* (1987) so irresistible? It is because of the male lead's inferiority complex. I needed a character that can bring some kind of feeling to the film, and what feeling can Lam best bring to the audience? Inferiority! George Lam is the kind of person that attracts admiration from men but makes women feel insecure. I felt relieved after coming to terms with my doubts.

I finished the script, but no one dared to film it. No one felt confident about a script about a middle-aged housewife and an ad man, which also wasn't a comedy in the style of the *Winners & Sinners* series popular at the time, where women were only there for ornamental purposes. Thus, no one was willing to direct it. Lam suggested that I direct it. My first reaction was, 'You're all crazy!' I later consulted with Yuen Woo-ping, and he encouraged me to give it a go, so I agreed. Stephen Shin allowed me to be executive director. I told him if I didn't do well, he should get someone else to replace me. I shot the film with that mindset, so there was not much psychological pressure.

#### As a first-timer, do you remember which was the first scene you shot as a director?

The first day we shot the scene where Christopher Chan met Vivian Chow on the street. Stephen Shin was on set that day. After that day of shooting, Lam told Shin, 'If you're here Gordon can't spread his wings'. Shin later



*Heart to Hearts* (1988)



There was good chemistry between Dodo Cheng (left) and Vivian Chow (right).



How to make the story between a housewife (above: Dodo Cheng) and a yuppie (below: George Lam) touching? Inferiority! George Lam is the kind of person that attracts admiration from men but makes women feel insecure.



Vivian Chow's (left) naiveness and puzzled gesture are very likeable.



Elaine Jin (left) played Dodo Cheng's (right) soul sister

adopted the laissez-faire approach and gave me all the trust I needed. I am very thankful to Lam for his support of my opinion on a lot of things. Like in the beginning no one agreed to have Vivian Chow play Dodo Cheng's daughter. They said she didn't look the part. I insisted on it, because I thought she could do it. Lam said, 'If you insist on it, I will insist along with you.' In fact, at that time I was a nobody. There was no reason for him to stand on my side.

Also, I told Shin I wanted to shoot sync sound. He was very supportive of me. At that time, it was a really idiotic thing to do, because shooting in synchronised sound was incredibly troublesome. But Shin said, 'If you don't mind hardship, go ahead!' I even had to sneak onto a TVB (Television Broadcasts Limited) set to watch them film, in order to learn to shoot in sync sound.

Making this film was definitely an adventure. I still didn't entirely know how to be a director. I remember one night, I was up at two or three in the morning making my shot list, with no clue how to proceed. What was I going to do? I was in a quandary when I happened to glance at the TV. I saw Leung Sing-por on the screen, and suddenly it was clear to me. In fact, the camera doesn't have to move around. Those old Cantonese films set the camera up and kept rolling. As long as the plot was funny, it worked. If you pay attention you will see that many scenes in *Heart to Hearts* were filmed in one shot. I applied my experience in live theatre in this film. Almost every scene was filmed in one shot.

The principal photography of this film was completed without incident. But when it came time to edit, I ran into a huge problem. It is a lot of work to cut sync sound footage and no one wanted to do it. In the end, we finally found Chan Ki-hop. After the editing was done, I turned the film over to Shin and left Hong Kong. I did not take part in anything else. Later, Shin filmed an extra scene, the attempted suicide of the Rosamund Kwan character. I actually don't know if any of that made it into the release version.

The director's fee for the film was HK\$60,000. I spent it on a backpacking trip around Europe. I remember I read a review of the film in *Ming Pao Weekly* when I was in the Netherlands. Lam Bing said the film was very good, and asked, 'Who is Gordon Chan?' And that's how I became a director. By the time I heard D & B was preparing to shoot a sequel to *Heart to Hearts*, Chan Hing-kai was in pre-production for *The Yuppie Fantasia* (1989, a Maxi Harvest Film's production, distributed by Golden Harvest). He had recommended to (producer) Chua Lam that I should direct it. So I directed *The Yuppie Fantasia*, and did not participate in the sequel to *Heart to Hearts*. And after *The Yuppie Fantasia* I continued directing films at Golden Harvest.

**You had just mentioned the Rosamund Kwan suicide scene in *Heart to Hearts*. That scene was not in the original script?**

That scene was not in the original film. It was added on later. They felt that the film needed a climax. I really dislike the idea of the suicide. She actually did not need to attempt suicide. Her boyfriend would have come back to her anyway. That's my personality. I don't like to write the character as a bad person. To me, every character is a friend, a human being and I want to examine both their strengths and weaknesses, instead of focusing on the evilness of a certain character. My weakness is, I don't write villains well. I've discovered that Hong Kong films utilise villains to push the plotlines to a climax. Hollywood films do that, too. This is a necessary device in commercial films. But I don't want the audience to leave the cinema with a sense of hate, that's why I seldom wrote scripts that way.

**You had mentioned that you insisted on casting Vivian Chow. What special qualities do you see in her?**

I cannot verbalise it. I just felt that she could do it. I had seen Vivian Chow in the RTHK (Radio Television Hong Kong) cafeteria. At the time I thought she was a naive young girl. I like her sense of lost when she does not know what is going on in the surrounding. She's a very honest and sincere person. I liked that feeling about her.

**So when you write a script do you write for the person who will be playing the role?**

Usually my first draft of a script is just the blueprint. After casting, I will definitely rewrite. Even when I was a screenwriter, I would keep asking the director, which actor will be playing this role? I'm not a literary man; I can't quote passages from the classics. I can only use the simplest words. And what I ask of myself is to write less and less, to be more and more precise. What I mean is each sentence represents one shot. Tsui Hark once told me not to write so much garbage, because they cannot be filmed. In the scripts that I wrote subsequently, every line served a purpose.

**Elaine Jin played Dodo Cheng's soul sister.**

Shin suggested casting Elaine Jin. This kind of role is common in sitcoms, and both Chan Hing-kai and I love sitcoms. In fact, Elaine Jin's role is necessary, because she projects the fears the character feels. You cannot have the character speak them out herself, so you create a friend. But this friend has to be a little twisted. In fact, the more ridiculous she is, the more entertaining she becomes. Thus, the Elaine Jin character was born.

**You felt the success of *Heart to Hearts* only after you returned from the Netherlands?**

Yes. Before, I was just a minor screenwriter. Then the film suddenly became the talk of the town, and then a plethora of middle-class films rushed out. At that point, you realised that a trend has been set. I felt that the success of *Heart to Hearts* had a lot to do with the 'Golden Trio' of Kim, Kai (Chan Hing-kai) and me. Kai is a trendsetter. Kim is a calm analyst. He can pick out problems in a script and point out what is missing. While I would always think about what else can be done.

**Were there any scenes during shooting *Heart to Hearts* where you experienced extra obstacles, and which scene left the deepest impression on you?**

During production I kept rewriting. They're all used to it by now and know there will be new changes. I don't shoot according to the script. I'll prepare tomorrow's script today; and decide how to shoot, and where to set the cameras, when I arrive at the location. My first film was uneventful, I think mostly because each scene was shot in one shot. I only needed to handle the rehearsals. If it looked fine on the set, it wouldn't be terrible on screen. Fortunately, I have live theatre experience and those skills are transferrable to film.

**Can you talk about Miss Do (Dodo Cheng)? This is because our impression of her is one of a tough lady. How did you convince her to play a housewife?**

At first, she had tremendous doubts about me. I remember the first two days of shooting, I was most afraid to hear Miss Do ask, 'Have you decided? Is this what you want to do? If so, I will perform it that way'. And I would pretend to be calm and answer, 'Yes! Miss Do.' I wrote the character to be very cheeky, very impudent. In those days no one wrote their characters that way. But a week or so into the shoot, the happy atmosphere gave her a lot of confidence. Every scene was very funny. Comedy can be funny without being disgusting or sexual. That is what I really wanted to accomplish at the time.

**The Success of *Double Fattiness* Is a Confidence Booster**

**Can we talk about *Double Fattiness* (1988), the film you wrote before directing *Heart to Hearts*? You had mentioned that director John (David) Chiang asked you to rewrite the script. What are the differences between the old and new versions?**

The differences are mainly in the personalities of the characters. The film industry back then had a bad habit of copying other films. When I first read the scene breakdowns from the previous version, there were actual written notes on which scene is copied from the scene breakdowns of which films. I don't mind copying from other films, but can they not be exact copies? Don't think the audience can't tell. Many of our colleagues would attend foreign film festivals and then make exact copies. I remember I had discussed this topic in depth with Tsui Hark. I had said that if this continues, we will never have any future, and can only follow Hollywood films, so I hope I can break others of the habit of copying from other films.

In fact, in the old version of the *Double Fattiness* script, not one scene was original. They were all borrowed. I started from scratch and restructured the entire concept. John Chiang is an interesting director. His preference is 'less is more'. He doesn't like it when you give him too much. He would say, 'Gordon, I don't need it. This is already enough'. But by Tsui Hark's standards, that amount is not enough. John thinks the audience doesn't like density, and it's enough if they like the character and become engrossed in the film. From John, I learned how to be laid-back. I learned it after I left Film Workshop, because at Film Workshop the demand was for density.

*Double Fattiness* (1988)



John Chiang's (front row, 2nd left) 'less is more' directorial approach put Gordon Chan at ease and boosted his confidence.



Lydia Sum (left) and Maggie Cheung (right) exchange their bodies and souls in the film, creating a polarised dramatic effect.



Gordon Chan (middle) made a cameo appearance in *Double Fattiness* (1988)

Without *Double Fattiness* there would not have been *Heart to Hearts*, because when I wrote *Double Fattiness*, I still had a little doubt whether it would work, but the box office results were quite good, so I was confident enough to dare to do the same on *Heart to Hearts*.

**In that film, the Lydia Sum character is possessed by Maggie Cheung. As soon as she gets home she says to sit down. When Bill Tung gets his clothes to get into the shower, she says ‘Come with me’, because she used to be his wife. That’s a funny scene.**

Because we captured the differences in their characters, we thought it would be funny if she played the role. I had originally thought of a lot more, but John felt it was enough, this was fine, no need to add too much, because this is a family film. He took pains to emphasise that point. I really appreciate him for that.

### **In Creation, You Must be True to Yourself**

**In fact you are very lucky, because you watched the films directed by Alex Cheung Kwok-ming and thus decided to recommend yourself for a job at Shaws, and after leaving Shaws you had many job opportunities.**

Yes. In fact, I only have one ‘trick’, and that is not to care about the reward. I never ask how much I would be paid. My philosophy is, I’d do the work if you want me to; the most important thing is you think I’m worth it. For example, in *Heart to Hearts*, how could I ever have imagined I would become a director? I never thought about whether I would succeed, I just knew that I was really happy, that I enjoyed it very much.

### **Because you were doing what you like to do.**

Yes. You must be true to yourself. But in the process of being true to yourself, you must know what it is you are doing. Being true to yourself doesn’t mean you do whatever you want to do, it means that after careful analysis, you decide what you should do, and you do it. I must continuously remind everyone, if you only follow the money, you will no longer be creating. I strongly disagree with people who say that being creative means you can’t pay your bills. I don’t make much money, but I make enough to get by.

Creation is always something to be established. The works by screenwriters will be passed down through generations. For example, *Fist of Legend* (1994) did not do well in the box office when it came out, but now you call it a classic. At the time, a lot of people told me off violently, but now it is one of the best-selling videos in America. *Okinawa • Rendez-vous* (2000) also caused me to be told off badly. I did my best, but to others you were ‘lining your own pockets’. There are some other films that are considered classics in the Mainland, that some had said were my ‘quit’ films—as in, they felt I should quit filmmaking. That’s what it is to work in a creative industry. As they say, ‘If you can’t take the heat, stay out of the kitchen’.

[Translated by Roberta Chin]





## Yank Wong

### The Art Direction of *The Lunatics* and Several Others

Collated from the oral history interview on 16 December 2019

Interviewers: Wong Ha-pak, Kwok Ching-ling, Janice Chow

Collated by Wong Ha-pak



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### *The Lunatics*

1986 Col Cantonese 96 min Prod Co: D & B Exe Prod: Dickson Poon Prod: John Sham Dir: Derek Yee Scr: Derek Yee Assoc Prod: John Chan Koon-chung Cinematographer: Wilson Chan Ed: Chiang Kwok-kuen Art Dir: Yank Wong Music: Phil Chan Cast: Feng Tsui-fan, Deanie Ip, Chow Yun-fat, Tony Leung Chiu-wai, Paul Chun, Season Ma

### *Kiss Me Goodbye*

1986 Col Cantonese 92 min Prod Co: D & B Exe Prod: Dickson Poon Prod: John Sham Dir: Calvin Poon Yuen-leung Scrs: Calvin Poon Yuen-leung, John Chan Koon-chung Assoc Prod: Winne Yu Cinematographer: Ardy Lam Ed: Chiang Kwok-kuen Art Dirs: William Chang, Yank Wong Orig Music: Lau Yee-tat Cast: Loletta Lee, Anthony Wong Yiu-ming, Bowie Lam, Mok Sin-yu, Cheng Wan-lun, Wong Chi

### *An Autumn's Tale*

1987 Col Cantonese 98 min Prod Co: D & B Exe Prod: Dickson Poon Prod: John Sham Dir: Mabel Cheung Scr: Alex Law Assoc Prod: Winne Yu Cinematographers: James Hayman, David Chung Eds: Chiang Kwok-kuen, Lee Yim-hoi, Chan Ki-hop, Jue San-git, Eric Kong Chi-leung Art Dirs: Christy Addis, Yank Wong Orig Music: Lowell Lo Cast: Chow Yun-fat, Cherie Chung, Danny Chan, Gigi Wong, Cindy Ou

### *Dreams of Glory, a Boxer's Story*

1991 Col Cantonese 100 min Prod Co: D & B Exe Prod: Dickson Poon Prod: Stephen Shin Dir: Lawrence Lau (aka Lawrence Ah Mon) Scrs: Chan Man-keung, Sin Kam-ching Cinematographers: George Chang, Wong Po-man, Kwan Park-huen Eds: Chiang Kwok-kuen, Wong Wing-ming Art Dir: Yank Wong Cast: Jackie Lui Chung-yin, Too Siu-chun, Lam King-kong, Rain Lau

## **D & B hired many novice directors. How did you work with them?**

It didn't matter whether I was working with an experienced director or an up-and-coming director. We'd always start with discussing his or her concepts. Usually, after you've read through the script, you needed to communicate with the director to see if you could develop the film together, whether it'd be fun, and these are things you only know after thorough discussion.

## **Does an art director need to attend the whole of the film shoot?**

Yes, you need to be on set. The fun of it is to see how your imagination comes to life before your eyes; whether it all works or whether it turns out to be even better than imagined. That's the fun of it. I think this is a basic requirement of the job. How could you design for a film without knowing what the actual environment is like?

## ***The Lunatics***

### **A Near Black-and-White Palette**

## **The film is about the mentally ill. How much research did you do before working on the project? Did you come into contact with any mental patients?**

The screenwriter did a lot of research, and we also visited some mental patients at Castle Peak Hospital to try to understand their conditions.

## **You mentioned that you would discuss aspects of the film with the director, such as its colour palette. What was the director of *The Lunatics* looking for in terms of its production?**

I asked for the film to have a colour tone that was close to black and white, and this matched the director's vision as well. We both wanted the film to be convincing, to look and feel realistic. But a key question arose: looking realistic and actually reflecting reality are two different things; in fact they are two different approaches. Most audiences would find an aesthetically pleasing film more appealing, and this preconception is a fact we have to recognise. A mad person walking on the street—do you want the audience to know immediately that he is mentally unstable, or do you want people to not notice anything until the character acts out of place? Who decides? The screenwriter, the director, the art director, or the actor? Some characters you can tell at once that they are mentally ill—this serves the story; others may seem normal and don't reveal the depth of their psychosis until they open their mouths—this also serves the story, not the aesthetics of the film. It would be a mistake if art direction were to mess up this sense of narrative order.



*The Lunatics* (1986): The entire film is in monochrome, and the only pop up colour is Tony Leung Chiu-wai's costume. No matter how crowded or chaotic the wet market scenes get, you can always spot him.

The palette of the film is close to monochrome, but it's not a black-and-white film. The effect is similar to old colour television sets that have a button that let you switch the colour picture to black and white, but in actual fact there is still some residual colour onscreen. Apart from black, white, grey and rusty shades of brown, the only pop up colour in the film is green; the colour of Tony Leung Chiu-wai's wind jacket. No matter how crowded or chaotic the wet market scenes get, you can always spot him.

### **Was the film shot in winter? Is that why very few scenes are sunlit?**

We filmed around the winter season. None of the scenes were sunlit, we used artificial lighting throughout the film. I didn't deliberately ask for the film to look very dark, but given the conditions and environs we were working in, the lighting wouldn't have been particularly bright.

### **Was the wooden squatter home that Chow Yun-fat's character lived in real, or was it made especially for the film shoot?**

Some of the sets were there already and some were built. Chow's house was made by our team but the fire aftermath was on a real location. I read in the newspapers that there were fires at two squatter settlements, so all the buildings and things left there had been burnt to a dusty grey. We chose one of the two to be the location for our set, and we built a house there, out of materials we could find in the area, so that the colours would match.

### **Apparently Derek Yee's script was very detailed. Did he specify that Chow would enter his house via the roof?**

The original intention in the script was simply that Chow's character lived in one of the wooden huts in the squatter area. After we scouted the location, we arranged for his character to enter the house via the roof to add an extra dimension to his character. After all he's a madman and he could do anything as he liked.

### **The alley that 'Third Auntie' (Ma Suk-jan) lives in has a lot of different-coloured metal cans hung up. How was that scene conceived?**

That character is a scavenger who makes a living picking up cans and tins, so you can imagine that her home is filled with such bric-a-brac. But how many cans and tins did we need to make an impact on the audience? Our props team met all my asks and arranged for several trucks of cans to come in, and then strung them together. The cans were hung in a flexible way, so when the camera moved we could remove some of the cans and let the camera move freely. When you replicate a single object over and over again, a great number of times, the vast difference in quantity also creates a shift in the texture of the object, leading to an uncanny or unsettling feeling.

### **Madness Achieved via Incongruity**

### **Was there any special treatment done to the apartment or housing estate that Paul Chun's character lived in?**



Third Auntie's home is filled with metal cans. When you replicate a single object over and over again, the vast difference in quantity also creates a shift in the texture of the object, leading to an uncanny feeling.



Chow Yun-fat's house was built out of materials found in the squatter settlements, which had been burnt to dusty grey.

The challenge was to make a normal housing estate look convincingly like it was inhabited by Chun's character. The colours had to match the original scheme of the housing estate, as well as the overall palette of the film, and also reflect his identity and mental state. He was dressed in a way many housing estate residents would be dressed: a shirt and pyjama pants; very normal-looking and most people would dress like that. You didn't see him as particularly crazy. Yet when he did act out of sorts, his mismatched outfit would make him seem even crazier. It's a quiet, subtle way of communicating something that is anything but. Incongruity is a very effective technique.

**Was the kindergarten you filmed a real housing estate kindergarten? The children in the scene seemed very calm. How did you pull it off?**

The production team spent a lot of effort securing a kindergarten that was willing to let us film. We didn't tell the kids what was going to happen, so they were calm. If they knew, they wouldn't be as calm.

**None of the scenes in the film are particularly violent or gory, but the most impactful scene is perhaps that of Feng Tsui-fan's character, the social worker, falling prone to the ground and bleeding. Did you discuss how the scene would be filmed?**

I didn't discuss with the director about how we would treat this scene specifically, but I did feel that he was building up to it, restraining the use of blood to a point when it was absolutely necessary. If there had been a lot of blood and gore before, then the film's ending scene, where Feng Tsui-fan was attacked and bleeding profusely, would not be as shocking. Its effectiveness depended on a contrast with the rest of the film. The props team had to prepare quite a lot to create Feng's bleeding effect, including installing a pump and tube on his back.

**I know that *The Lunatics* made quite an impression on you and you think of it fondly. In your opinion, what makes the film special?**

Visually speaking, I think the film hits the mark. The art direction met the needs of the film, but it was not done particularly 'well'. All art direction should aim to hit the mark and serve the film, as opposed to trying to create something 'beautiful'.

## ***Kiss Me Goodbye***

### **A House Without Corners to Reflect Personality of the Character**

**In *Kiss Me Goodbye*, Anthony Wong Yiu-ming lives in a house with a winding staircase. Is the house located in Repulse Bay? How did you find it?**

It was a place in Lido Complex in Repulse Bay which is now closed and demolished. It was a strange piece of architecture. It wasn't a residence building, but a certain corner within the building. It was my first time working with Calvin Poon Yuen-leung, and the film had two art directors: William Chang and me. Chang pulled out of the project halfway and I took over from there. When I first stepped in, we still hadn't found the house.





*Kiss Me Goodbye* (1986): A house without corners reflects the personality of the character.  
(Left: Loletta Lee; right: Anthony Wong Yiu-ming)

The script never specified what the house looked like. Film sets could look and develop in a million different directions, but every set and location should serve a common function: to let audiences know more about the characters. We all loved that house, and the director was fond of it because it had no ‘corners’. It’s said that people would sit or squat in a corner and reflect or cry when they’re blue. Yet this house had no such corners for people to take refuge in. But this was simply an extra idea of mine, audiences might not share my view. But all creative design comes from people having extra ideas and thoughts.

**The house looks like a lighthouse, from which the main character stare out into the sea, as though he’s looking forward to the future.**

I believe the director had a similar image in mind. Even though he never said it, I believe he did.

### **Painting a Cliff Face to Simulate a Tunnel**

#### **Which scenes or parts of the shooting process made an impression on you?**

In the car-race sequence, the race starts at a stone quarry. The quarry was stone-coloured, very monochrome and minimal. Yet the lines and texture were very rough and the director might have felt that it conveyed more a sense of hardship, which was what he was looking for. He and I sat on a slope in the quarry discussing, if the race took off from here, where would they go and end up? I suggested that the quarry had a steep cliff opposite from where we were sitting and was quite a long way away, and if the cliff had a tunnel, the racers could have driven through the cliff after the race started. We could set the starting point there. The director accepted my proposal, but how could we construct a tunnel? I came up with the idea that we needed to paint a black cave-like tunnel entrance, so we immediately got the props team to buy black paint. We painted a tunnel entrance on the facade of the cliff, which, of course, one couldn’t drive through in reality. Before the cars reached the edge of the tunnel entrance, we would have cut to a scene in an actual tunnel.

From where we sat, the cliff face was around a few hundred to 1000 feet away. If we drove there, the car would reach its destination almost immediately, so we had to create an illusion. We used some small flags to create a sense of false perspective. Usually you would plant a flag every few dozen feet, but in the far distance the length between flags got shorter and shorter. We started with ten feet, then seven feet, then five feet, so on and so forth. This was a perspective technique we’ve been using since the Cantonese cinema era.

# An Autumn's Tale

## A New York Basement in Hong Kong

### Were the indoor scenes of *An Autumn's Tale* filmed at Kin Shing Film Production Studio?

No, they were filmed in a Kowloon Tong mansion. It was a local private residence converted into the New York apartment. Since the space was very limited, we had to cut up different parts of the set to film. For example, the corridor in the New York apartment was meant to be 50 to 60 feet long, but the one in the mansion was only half the length. We therefore had to make two corridors by setting the camera in the middle of the corridor. On one side was corridor number one, and on the other was corridor number two.

### Was there a real basement that served as the blueprint for the shoot in Hong Kong?

In the film the character lives in a basement but there wasn't a basement where we shot the film. But what was important was that we convinced the audience that it was a basement. So I made the bottom floor of the mansion the 'basement', and filmed it from above. I also installed the windows closer to the ceiling to reinforce the illusion.

### I heard that the crew had to ship a local phone from the US back to Hong Kong for the shoot. What else was needed for the film sets?

The whole shoot was in Hong Kong and not New York, so I designed and installed all the pieces in the sets. In the corner space of the corridor, they wanted the cameraman to be able to move with the actor down the stairs in one shot, without cutting. However, there wasn't enough space, so I had to uninstall the railings on the staircase to make way for the camera to come down. After it came down, we had to reinstall the railings again. When needed, that was the sort of design we had to come up with.

### In discussions with the director and the screenwriter, did they express any special requirements regarding set design?

I just remember Alex Law telling me that the garden party held in New York wouldn't use colour light bulbs and only white ones. I gave the matter a lot of thought but I still preferred colour ones. So I sourced some very cheap Christmas decoration lights in the end. He never asked me the reason but if he did, I would have explained that the intention was to make the scene look cheaper and tackier. Other people would use white lights, and they do it now in Central too, because they consider that more elegant. Yet I didn't think the point of the scene was elegance, because the characters were in Chinatown, right? As I mentioned just now, do you want something pretty? Or realistic? Or what one perceived as 'realistic'? Choices have to be made.

### In the film Chow Yun-fat uses beaded curtains. Wouldn't this contradict his personality?

The way I thought about this was, Chow's character is someone who wouldn't have picked and bought everything in his apartment, because he's just staying there as a lodger; his relationship with the house was transient. If everything in the house were things he loved, then that would not fit with his character. That's why all the objects were ready-made and second-hand, just things he acquired out of need.



If everything in the house were things that Figurehead loved, then that would not fit with his character.



In the garden party scene, the art director opted the budget colour light bulbs, which were more realistic and appropriate. (Left: Danny Chan; right: Cherie Chung)



*Dreams of Glory, a Boxer's Story* (1991): The rooftop boxing stage was in an open-air space where people could see all the buildings around.

## ***Dreams of Glory, a Boxer's Story***

### **The Rooftop Boxing Gym: The Real and the Unreal**

***Dreams of Glory, a Boxer's Story* is not a very intense film. Rather it's about young people growing up. Was the boxing gym on the rooftop a real location?**

Parts of it are real, and we also made up parts of it. The gym was indeed located on a rooftop.

**In the film, the boxing stage was in an open-air space where you could see all the buildings around. Was that where it was originally?**

The boxing stage was my creation. A real stage wouldn't move but ours could revolve. We also moved the stage to an open-air space where we could see the buildings in the background. Part of our design work is to choose the best foregrounds and backgrounds for shooting.

**Were the boxing matches filmed in studio sets or on location?**

A combination of the two.

**In the scene where Jackie Lui Chung-yin is waiting for his fight to start, behind him are the silhouettes of the previous fight. Was this your design?**

I proposed it. The situation was that we needed to convey the character's mindset and feelings during that moment, but we didn't want too many audience members there. So we adopted an approach which required very few people but still effectively communicated the way his character felt. We arranged for him to sit alone on the side, with a plastic sheet behind him that would show the silhouette of the boxing match audience. You'd feel that there were a lot of people present, when in actual fact not many were on set.

### **The D & B Style**

**Do you think that D & B films had a distinct visual style?**

No. But D & B had a good sense of the market and were able to make films that were popular with audiences. At the same time, they were willing to make edgier films, films that I thought I know how to do. The difference between the two was that, the films they saw as mainstream were ones I didn't think I know how to work on, whereas the films they saw as auxiliary, more serious-minded films, I liked to participate in.

**Not many film companies at the time were making these sorts of edgy films, right?**

Yes, everyone was swarming to make popular blockbusters, instead of spending time on films that might not make a profit, but were interesting or worth making. At least Golden Harvest and Shaws were not investing in such films, whereas I felt that D & B had the heart to do so.

[Translated by Rachel Ng]



Chapter II >>

## **In-Depth Portraits**



# Michelle Yeoh

## A Heroine On and Off Screen



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Interviewer: Donna Chu (16 January 1999)  
Collated by Janice Chow

**B**orn in Ipoh, Malaysia, Michelle Yeoh was the apple of her parents' eye. Quick and sharp in body and mind, she was good at almost everything—from swimming and squash to piano and Chinese painting. At 15, she was accepted into London's Royal Academy of Dance. Upon graduation, she returned to Malaysia, and her unique temperament won her the crown of Miss Malaysia 1983. She shot a commercial with Jackie Chan and then joined D & B Films Co., Ltd., a decision that changed the course of her life. Her delicate appearance and elegant demeanour belie her magnificent aura: she can take out strong men with her bare hands. Her smile is gracious, and she is heavily involved in philanthropy. Her fans are enthralled by her beauty and moved by her kindness. Her track record is stellar as well: she was the first Bond Girl to fight alongside James Bond while brushing aside her sexiness; she has garnered international acclaim for her roles in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and *The Lady* (2011); she has established Mythical Films to produce her own films. In addition, she is the first actress of Chinese heritage to be awarded the title 'Dato' in Malaysia. With her tough determination and perfectionist attitude, Michelle Yeoh would be a success in any industry. The fact that she chose to be in the film industry is truly a boon to audiences everywhere.



Michelle Yeoh (left) entered the film industry after shooting a watch commercial for Dickson Poon (right)



Michelle Yeoh played a kind hearted girlfriend in her debut film *The Owl vs Bumbo* (1984)

## Becoming an Actress

After graduating in the UK, I returned to Malaysia and won the Miss Malaysia pageant, then went on to represent Malaysia as an ambassador—visiting other countries, doing charity and development work. At the end of my reign, I came to Hong Kong to appear in a commercial, and that was my entrance into the entertainment industry. It was in fact quite opportune and direct.

The process was very interesting. At the time, Dickson Poon was looking for an actress to appear in a watch commercial with Jackie Chan. One of my friends knew Dickson, and told him there was a Miss Malaysia who would be suitable for the job. I remember they approached me in Chinese and told me the commercial would be with ‘Sing Lung’. I was thinking to myself: ‘Who is Sing Lung?’ I had always studied in the UK, and my Chinese was not very good. If they had said ‘Jackie Chan’, I would have known right away who it was.

On the first day of the commercial shoot, when Jackie Chan arrived on set, I saw his familiar face. I recognised his nose (giggle)! After shooting the commercial, they offered me a film contract. I have a degree in dance and drama. I’m a dancer. And I felt this contract would give me a chance to try something new. So why not? I took the opportunity, came to Hong Kong and became an actress.

## Debut Film

My first film, *The Owl vs Bumbo* (1984), was an action film. Sammo Hung and George Lam played professional thieves while I played George Lam’s girlfriend. Deanie Ip played Sammo Hung’s girlfriend. My character in the film is very demure, a good girl who is often bullied. During the shoot, I watched how they handled the action scenes. On the one hand I was just curious, but on the other I felt that I could do these moves, because it was a kind of very elaborate dance where every move was choreographed.

When it came time to make my second film, John Sham, Sammo Hung and Dickson felt that since they had this non-local Michelle Yeoh with such an unusual background, why not take advantage of it instead of having me play ordinary roles? They asked me, ‘Would you rather make comedies or action films?’ At the time, my Chinese was even worse than it is now. I felt that comedy films would require good timing and fluent Cantonese, whereas in action films I didn’t need to talk very much, so I chose action films. Thus, I started on my first action film, *Yes, Madam* (1985).

It was very hard at the time, but I'm tough and would work very diligently when trying something new. I received a lot of direction from many different stuntmen. For that, I must thank Lam Ching-ying and the director of *Yes, Madam*, Corey Yuen Kwai.

Stuntmen would train at a gym every day. I would go every morning at eight or nine and watch them train. In the beginning, they thought of me as a little kid, a girl who wanted to play at fighting, and thought it was cute. But they later discovered that I was a quick learner, and my coordination was good from my dancing days. When they taught me movements, I was quick to catch the timing, but obviously, I didn't quite know how to strike hard for maximum effect. I remember in particular one day I sat in front of a mirror while Dicky Wei, Billy (Ching) and others taught me that the key to fight sequences is to have the proper facial expression, there must be a certain intensity and ferocity in the eyes. They also taught me the proper flourishes to start and end each martial arts movement.

### Hong Kong Stuntmen: Best in the World

I think the hardest part is to be able to live with yourself. Sometimes some movements can be very dangerous, but you cannot be too ambitious and must know your own limits. So you must train often; through training you will know what level your strength and ability are at. After having acted in foreign films, I can say the stuntmen in Hong Kong are among the best internationally. They are very aggressive, often working very hard to achieve the effect they want; but sometimes they forget that actors are human, too. It's also important to take care and ensure safety.

Of course, the stuntmen's first priority is for a good visual, to satisfy the audience. Now the audience demands more and more. If they don't see the actor make that fall personally, or really get beaten, they will feel, 'That's so easy, I can do it!' For example, I was in *Yes, Madam*. And when I did [its sequel] *Royal Warriors* (1986), the standard of every action scene had to be higher, and performed better, than the previous film. Each time, you have to raise your own standard. Clearly, you will get to a point where you cannot improve any more, and you can no longer really execute the very difficult moves. In that case, you have to look to the director and cinematographer for direction. They have to use other means to assist you.

When they were about to begin filming the James Bond film [*Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997)] and told me that I would have many action scenes, we immediately requested the participation of Hong Kong action choreographers and stuntmen. Besides, our film location was in Thailand, so it made sense to use Hong Kong stuntmen. They had cast me in the part, so it would behove them to show me at my best, and the only way to properly bring out my best was to let me bring on the people that I worked with. For that film I chose Philip Kwok. Fortunately, master Philip Kwok had some time, and he brought his team to the shooting location.

When we started filming our fight scenes, the crew and their whole teams spared time to watch us work: from the carpenters to the writers to the management level people like accountants and producers. They had never really seen this kind of action and fight sequence being choreographed or filmed, and were so impressed by Philip Kwok and our Hong Kong stuntmen. In Hollywood fight scenes you seldom see them make such close contact. Nor would their stuntmen make the same kind of reactions and plan such intricate movements. Their moves are very practical. Punch, one-two punch, once you fall down you can't get up again. What we do is different: even if



Michelle Yeoh (front row left) put forth a completely new image in Corey Yuen Kwai's (front row right) *Yes, Madam* (1985).



*Yes, Madam* (1985): Thanks to her training in dance, Michelle Yeoh was quick to learn the rhythm of the martial arts moves.



Hong Kong stuntmen are best in the world: Michelle Yeoh had lots of kicks and punches in *Magnificent Warriors* (1987).

you fell from a high place you could still jump right back up. We needed to strike a good balance somewhere in between.

At first the stuntmen just choreographed the scenes that I participated in; but when director Roger Spottiswoode saw the movements that they had choreographed, the reactions they gave and their sheer energy, he requested that they remain on location for two more weeks for the film. Later, after Philip Kwok and the stuntmen had all returned to Hong Kong, the director requested them to go back to the studio once more to help out in the production.

I like to do my own stunts as much as possible. I often think, 'If others can do it, why can't I?' Back then, Corey Yuen Kwai, Stanley Tong and Stephen Tong would often tell me, 'You know, we had to learn and practice for ten to twenty years before we could do these stunts. Don't think you can do them only after two or three years of training! Let us have the chance to do them!' I would really want to do them, though, except for some stunts like flipping a car, which I can't try because you must go through considerable training and have certain experience to do. When we get to those scenes I would just say, 'Great, take your time, I'll watch from the sidelines.' But if it involves kicks and punches, I would try to do it myself.

### From *Yes, Madam* to *Ah Kam*

I think that's how it is when you make films. If you have a hit movie in a certain genre, the producers and distributors definitely would want you to keep making films in that genre. Sometimes that would limit your development. But fortunately we all agree now that the most important aspect is the film itself, the content, rather than just the action sequences. Therefore, I later made films with more dramatic scenes, such as *Ah Kam* (1996) and *The Soong Sisters* (1997).

I put a lot of myself into each film I make, and every film has a most unforgettable incident. In particular, when I make an action film, it takes a lot of sweat and hard work to accomplish. During my first film, I really knew nothing back then and showed up on set totally blank, blindly feeling my way around. I needed to be guided by many stuntmen, and had to 'mess up' a few times before I realised what was going on. But thankfully, touch wood, I often had people protecting me so that I could get through it without incident.

I hurt myself most badly on *Ah Kam*. It was a real lack of planning. I fell from a height of about 18 feet, landing on my head. At that time I thought I may have broken my spine, and how would I live the rest of my life? When making an action film I know there is a risk factor. We want to try to remove as much risk as possible, but the satisfaction of a successful action sequence will compel you to keep doing it as before.

I reckon women characters in films have different faces: martial arts, dramas, tragedies, comedies. In fact, it should be varied like that with male and female characters, not just female characters.





Michelle Yeoh (left) garnered the Excellence in Asian Cinema Award at the 7th Asian Film Awards in 2013, Linda Kuk (middle) and Terence Chang (right) offered their congratulations.

Nowadays, when people hear that Michelle Yeoh is in a film, they will immediately think it is an action film. I hope in the future it will be different, and I can present a variety of faces of myself to the audience. But right now I'm very proud of myself for what I've done, creating a niche for myself in action films, because I've worked very hard to achieve this. I really treasure this status and do not take it lightly. But as an actor, you just want to try to act in different styles, and pursue being in different genres of films.

### The Styles of Different Directors

I believe that every director whom I've worked with, such as Stanley Tong, Yuen Woo-ping, Tony Ching Siu-tung, Johnnie To, Ann Hui and Mable Cheung, are all passionate about films. They all want to make the best film they can. In fact, every actor and crew member puts a lot of effort into making each film. Of course we hope every film we make is successful and memorable. I have worked very well with every director I have had, and often we would work together again, often more than once. Before the start of every film, I would first gain an understanding of the director because I think the director is the soul of the film. The director sets the tone for the whole film. No matter how good the actors are, if the director cannot articulate what he wants, and cannot help the actor create his vision, it is all in vain. Ultimately it's up to the director to present the full picture to the audience.

Whenever there is a chance out there, I will go after it. Shooting that commercial was a milestone, getting married was a milestone, returning to the industry and filming *Police Story III—Super Cop* (1992) was a milestone, falling and injuring myself (on *Ah Kam*) was also a milestone. When I went to Hollywood to film *Tomorrow Never Dies* it was another milestone. So I think that life is like a book, with chapter after chapter. You must open the book every day, keeping the faith that your Chapter Two, Chapter Three... will be as promising as ever.

[Translated by Roberta Chin]

# John Chan Koon-chung

## Pursuing Innovation Is a Mindset



Interviewers: Sam Ho, Janice Chow, Kwok Ching-ling, Wong Ha-pak  
(31 October 2019)  
Collated by Wong Ha-pak

After returning from his studies in the US, John Chan Koon-chung founded *City Magazine* in 1976. Through his unique take on the examination of urban culture, he made a name for himself in the publishing and cultural circles. In addition to appreciating and critiquing cinematic works, the long-time film buff even ventured into the movie industry as a newcomer in the early 1980s, embarking on a rocky screenwriting journey. After D & B Films Co., Ltd. was established, he was commissioned to write the script for *Hong Kong 1941* (1984). This feature, which set against the fall of Hong Kong to the Japanese, received critical acclaim and marked the beginnings of his frequent collaboration with the company. Although the many D & B productions in which he participated were minimal in both scale and budget, what he had in abundance was creative freedom. He also enjoyed exploring innovative approaches with directors, and went on to become D & B's associate producer and producer. After fading from the industry in the early 1990s, he shifted his focus to writing. His discourse on issues related to China and people of Chinese descent led to his rise as a renowned writer in the Chinese literary world. We have taken this opportunity to look back on films such as *Silent Love* (1986), *The Lunatics* (1986), and *Conduct Zero* (1986), all of which touch on niche issues and shed light on the inner workings of the youth, encouraging new blood to take the first step and writing a truly unforgettable and heartening chapter in cinematic history.

## The Road to *wenqing* that Began with Film

My parents were originally from Ningbo, but moved to Shanghai for work. I was born in Shanghai in 1952 and was only four years old when I came to Hong Kong in 1956. I was admitted to The University of Hong Kong (HKU) in 1971, where I studied Sociology. Attending HKU opened my eyes to a host of things I had never known. One of them was organising a film club. At the time, one of the teachers collected prints and loaned them for screenings; we also showcased many old Chinese movies. After graduating from HKU in 1974, I went to Boston University in the US to study Journalism. Boston is just across the river from Cambridge. I'd go to the theatre along the road to Harvard University every Saturday. I still have a keen interest in films to this day.

My becoming a *wenqing* (young man of literature and art) was somewhat serendipitous; it all started with the film section of *The Chinese Student Weekly*, which sparked my interest in films. I remember my then classmate Peter Dunn asked me if I would be interested in seeing French movies, and from that day on, we would always keep each other's company watching films at the Alliance Française de Hong Kong (AFHK). I became a *wenqing* because of films, rather than literature.

After returning to Hong Kong in 1975, I landed my first job working for *The Star*. After being there for about nine months, I told my former classmate Peter Dunn that I wanted to start a magazine. He said, 'Sure!' I set about doing it purely based on that response. When we were in secondary school, we read youngster-oriented publications such as *The Chinese Student Weekly*, *Hong Kong Teens Weekly*, and also *The 70's Bi-weekly* which was launched in 1970. However, they were all discontinued between 1974 and 1975. We wanted to create something in the same vein. It was 1976 at the time.

My former university classmate became vice president at a big corporation at the age of 30. I knew another who was the number-two man at an advertising agency. He took over the position from a western colleague and the success came fast. People from that generation were really lucky.

## A Screenwriting Path Fraught With Obstacles

After founding *City Magazine*, I became acquainted with some young directors. When the Hong Kong New Wave emerged, we wrote reviews and frequently expressed our opinions, showing admiration to new directors the likes of Patrick Tam. They asked me to write for their films. Sadly, my life as a screenwriter was rather bleak. From establishing my magazine in 1976 to the birth of my first child in 1981, I only had a meagre income. I was in a rush to become a screenwriter so that I could make a decent living, but many of the scripts that I wrote failed to materialise on the silver screen—only probably three of my first ten screenplays were turned into films.

My first project was with Century Motion Picture & Dist. Co., Ltd., which was run by Dennis Yu and Jeff Lau. Dennis recruited commercial director Tony Hope to helm *My Darling, My Goddess* (1982). Tony didn't understand Chinese, so Dennis enlisted my help and appointed me as associate producer. When Patrick Tam asked me to write a script for him, he said, 'This time, I want to shoot a film about Nietzsche's nomad thought'. He assumed that I was familiar with Nietzsche because I'd written a book on post-structuralism. That was his first instruction. Secondly, he said he wanted to experiment with the three colours of red, white, and blue, like Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le Fou* (1965). I accompanied him every day, walking around the city from morning to night. I wrote down whatever crossed our minds, the majority of which were his ideas, and gave occasional feedback. This ultimately resulted in the screenplay for *Nomad* (1982). The original concept was to have four youngsters who were like rootless nomads in the city. They'd cross paths and eventually board a boat to continue drifting in Africa. After Patrick made about half the film, the money ran out and the company immediately brought in several seasoned screenwriters to modify the script. So, even though I had a screenplay credit on this feature, the names Chiu Kang-chien, Joyce Chan, and Kam Ping-hing [as well as Eddie Fong and Patrick Tam] were listed before me. I was still a novice.

Yonfan approached me next. I wrote the light romantic comedy *Shanghai Blues* for him. However, he was unable to secure any funding and ended up gifting the screenplay to Tsui Hark, who said he wanted to make it. Tsui Hark brought Raymond To and Szeto Cheuk-hon on board, and all the dialogue was rewritten, transforming the light comedy into a slapstick film. Tsui Hark's *Shanghai Blues* (1984) was fantastic—I wouldn't have come up with such great ideas myself. The story and character backgrounds were my conception, but the use of blunders and confusion as plot devices was theirs. In the end, there were three names under the screenplay credit. They were both famous, while I was still a newcomer.



John Chan Koon-chung was screenwriter and associate producer for the headliner *Hong Kong 1941* (1984); he learnt a lot about production from director Leong Po-chih.

(Front row from left: Alex Man, Leong Po-chih, Kuk Fung)

## A Long-Awaited Dawn

It wasn't until 1984 that there was finally a movie for which I was credited as the sole screenwriter. John Sham and Philip Chan, who had founded Johnson Film Company, asked me to write the script *Dengdai Liming* (Waiting for Dawn) between 1982 and 1983. This work was different from the later version; it was about the Chinese Air Force's efforts in the Second Sino-Japanese War. At the time, I heard that several old warplanes had been left in Manila, and I wanted to fly over and make this film. However, the resources were limited back then and it simply wasn't possible to shoot such a high-budget feature. The screenplay was revised by Chang Yung-hsiang from Taiwan, but it ultimately failed to materialise, and the title was the only thing that we were left with.

Because of my liaison with John through Johnson Film Company, he asked me to write *Hong Kong 1941* (Chinese title also *Dengdai Liming* (Waiting for Dawn)) after the establishment of D & B. Leong Po-chih was the director, and I requested to be appointed as associate producer. Leong Po-chih was already very well versed in film production then and I learnt a lot, including film editing. Screenwriting takes place before filming, but I was associate producer this time round and really became a member of the production crew. People got to know me on the set, and I finally got my foot in the door.

Comedies were all the rage during those several years, and it was difficult for anything outside of this genre to attract any attention. The higher-ups had a particular aversion to drama features. While shooting *Hong Kong 1941*, the script was constantly revised; but Leong Po-chih has very strong cinematic sensibilities. When Dickson Poon, Raymond Chow, Peter Choi, and the staff from the distribution department at Golden Harvest came for the test screening, they said that they couldn't understand the film. What could be done about it? We modified it as appropriate, added a few sunrise images, and supplemented it with some narration to make it seem like an aged version of the character portrayed by Cecilia Yip was recounting the past. This connected the plot and helped them understand it better.

## Unfazed by Box-Office Pressure with John Sham's Support

Later on, I even became a producer, working on projects with the lowest budgets. After my boss Dickson Poon teamed up with John Sham to acquire a cinema circuit, the company had to supply at least a dozen or so films each year. It wasn't possible to shoot every single one like a Lunar New Year feature, nor was it feasible to cast all the actors who were popular at the time in comedies, so there had to be some low-cost productions. No one wanted to be involved in these projects with budgets of just over HK\$1 million. I was the perfect person for the job. Plot conception was the only thing required as far as these motion pictures were concerned. The directors called all the shots and made whatever they wanted. The subject matter of Sean Lau Ching-wan's silver screen debut *Silent Love*, for example, was something that the director (John (David) Chiang) wanted to explore. He proposed the story himself.

The same was true of *The Lunatics*. As soon as Derek Yee sat down, he talked to me about it for two to three hours, starting from the very first shot. I used to think that he was just another good-looking actor who starred in Shaws' films, but he turned out to be very serious and had already conceived the entire movie before we met. John Sham said, 'Sounds terrific, we must let him try.' At the time, Derek insisted on having newcomers play in the film including the 'lunatics', which was the equivalent of box-office suicide. In the end, he agreed to cast some well-known actors. We were on relatively good terms with Chow Yun-fat, and he was willing to make a cameo appearance. Tony Leung Chiu-wai and Deanie Ip portrayed the 'lunatic' and reporter respectively. It was a well-made film featuring a star-studded cast, with Yank Wong serving as the art director.





John Chan Koon-chung (right) and Wong Wah-kay (left), director of *Sapporo Story* (1987)



*The Wrong Couples* (1987): John Chan Koon-chung tailor-made the script for Josephine Siao Fong-fong.  
(From left: Dennis Chan Kwok-sun, Josephine Siao Fong-fong, John Chiang, John Chan Koon-chung)



John Chan Koon-chung associate-produced the meticulous and touching *Silent Love* (1986).  
(Front row from left: Sean Lau Ching-wan, Season Ma, So Chor-yee; back row, left: Louis Fan)



*The Lunatics* (1986): The film was supported by well-known stars Chow Yun-fat (left) and Deanie Ip (right).



Experienced deputy director Simon Yip was given the greenlight to direct *Conduct Zero* (1986), a film played by a host of new actors.

When it came to *Conduct Zero*, Simon Yip, who was an experienced deputy director at the time, said, ‘Let me shoot a movie.’ The company gave him the greenlight, but we only had a shoestring budget. I knew that he liked cycling, so we decided on that as the theme. The cast constituted entirely of newcomers, but the box office earnings were way too low [about HK\$1.16 million]. I made a lot of films like that. There was a high degree of autonomy, with nobody constantly looking over your shoulder. The most important things were to control the budget well and to pick themes that the company approved of.

## Reprising His Role as Screenwriter for Josephine Siao Fong-fong

Because of my unpleasant past experience, I didn’t want to write any more screenplays after taking up the role as associate producer in 1984. *The Wrong Couples* (1987) was an exception. At the time, D & B had signed John Chiang as a director and asked Josephine Siao Fong-fong to star in a motion picture. He originally wanted to make a detective film [with *Dai Lushi* (The Barrister) as the Chinese title], but about a week before filming began, the company suddenly rejected the idea and insisted that a comedy be made instead. Josephine had immigrated to Australia at the time and was asked to return to Hong Kong on a three-month contract. With the schedule locked in, what could we do? I spent three days writing the script, went to Macao with John Sham for two days to talk it over, polished it with the director over two days, and then started shooting.

Josephine was initially very angry, asking why a detective film had suddenly become a comedy. However, as soon as she saw the screenplay, she was fine with it, because she was practically in every scene. I didn’t have the time to think about anything. I knew Josephine, so I put in everything she was capable of delivering. It ended up being a success, and she even won Best Actress at the Hong Kong Film Awards for the role. Life is funny that way—the screenplays that I put painstaking effort into didn’t necessarily come to fruition, yet this one which was hastily written won a Hong Kong Film Award because of Josephine’s superb performance. Fate really is an unpredictable thing.

## A New Era of Cinema Led by the Young

John Sham became the head of D & B at the age of just 31. I think that he is a very bold person who believes in his intuition and has the courage to let people try things. He had only made a few films prior to assuming this role and was also a newcomer. He didn’t need to take convention into account. There was a manpower shortage at the time, and the young were suddenly being ‘idolised’. When I went on the set in 1981, I saw young people everywhere, from the prop technicians to cinematographers. The older generation were all in the studios, like Shaws in Clearwater Bay. We began doing location shoots, refusing to use studios. It was in 1981 that Jackie Chan and Sammo Hung, who started their careers in the studio, as well as Tsui Hark and Ann Hui, who had returned from abroad, suddenly burst onto the scene together. It was a breath of fresh air.

D & B’s productions didn’t always chase trends—it also made some very unique features, because with Cinema City, Shaws, and Golden Harvest as its rivals, something different was needed for the company to stand out from the rest. That’s not to say that it avoided making ensemble comedies or Lunar New Year movies, but rather what else it could offer apart from those? Everyone remembers the Hong Kong New Wave, but not many directors of this movement were good at comedy. They were best suited to fast-paced works such as gangster or horror movies, which involved editing and abundant shots. I usually worked on my productions outside of the office. In fact, I never really set foot in D & B—I wasn’t an employee and only worked for them on a per-project basis.

## Making American Films

Having been involved in the production of commercial movies since day one, I never thought about making *wenyi* films as I wasn’t a director. If I were a director, I might’ve created works that I enjoyed. I was a producer, and making *wenyi* films would’ve been painful. I didn’t know anything about film or screenwriting to begin with. When I eventually began to get a handle on it, I switched to producing. I once thought about becoming a director, but looking back, I don’t think I’m director material. Moreover, back then, directors only worked on one film at a time and you couldn’t be attached to another project at the same time. Being a producer enabled you to take on multiple films at once, which suited my ‘omnivorous’ personality better. I also enjoyed playing second fiddle. When I gave directors advice that they found interesting, I felt very satisfied. I got a real kick out of assisting them.

Why did I come up with the idea of making American features between 1988 and 1989? It was because Hong Kong films were getting harder and harder to make. Those of us already involved in production before then were very particular about budget control. At that time, local movies had become too successful and a lot of foreign capital was pouring in, usually with requests for certain stars. Who was most capable of finding them? The triad, obviously. As soon as they got hold of you, you had to star in the film, and they could collect their money. There used to be a 'first call' system, whereby whoever entered production first had access to the actors first. However, the triad wanted everybody to give them priority, and even hogged the actors. This made it impossible to calculate the budget and also messed up the entire production process.

In around 1988, the American director Wayne Wang wanted to shoot *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989), a small production set in 1950s Chinatown funded by Columbia Pictures. Since the Chinatown in New York wasn't suitable for location shooting, they came to film it in Hong Kong and asked me to be the producer. After that, I helped Wayne raise funds in Hong Kong for *Life is Cheap... But Toilet Paper is Expensive* (1989).

In addition, I co-financed the American motion picture *The Force* with Bill Kong. We went to Los Angeles to search for an American director and to write the script. It was a low-budget supernatural gangster film which only had a direct-to-video release. Later, Wayne got in touch with Francis Ford Coppola, who liked Asian movies very much. He recruited Wayne and myself to make Asian-themed features. We came up with two, one of which was directed by Wayne and written by British film critic Tony Rayns. However, the stage play *M. Butterfly* penned by David Hwang suddenly surfaced and we had to shelve our plan due to plot similarities. The other one was about the 13th Dalai Lama, for which we interviewed some monks and historians. Alas, Francis Ford Coppola soon went bankrupt and production came to a complete halt. I switched careers after that and parted ways with filmmaking.

### Settling in Beijing to Write about China

In 1992, Yu Pun-hoi set up his media consultant company and I stayed in the Mainland to expand its business. After working there for a little over two years, I left for Taipei. I discovered that the cable television penetration rate there was as high as 70%, so I came back to Hong Kong to raise HK\$5 million and then flew to Taiwan with John Sham and Wallace Cheung to look for Taiwanese partners to start a cable channel. It was launched in October 1995 and became quite successful. We sold it to Sony Pictures Entertainment after a while, and I went on to stay in Taiwan for another two years. Later, I thought that I ought to take up writing. I wanted to write about the Mainland, so I moved to Beijing.

Filmmaking is extremely exhausting because of the heavy workload. One thing you must know is that those who work in the business have to go out to 'play' at night. Everyone drinks, goes to bed very late, and doesn't get up in the morning. I eventually realised that the 'play' aspect of it was quite meaningless. Now that I'm an author, I rise early in the morning and sleep early at night. I finally have the space to talk about culture and the friends to converse it with.

[Translated by Johnny Ko]

# Chan Kiu-ying

## My Unfulfilling but Unregretful Screenwriting Journey



Interviewers: Wong Ha-pak, Janice Chow, Priscilla Chan  
(22 January 2020)

Collated by Wong Ha-pak & Doris Chiu

Chan Kiu-ying's creative journey began in television, with *The Bund* (1980) catapulting him to fame. Having dreamt of working in the film industry since he was young, he left his previous employer for D & B Films Co., Ltd. upon John Sham's invitation. In charge of the creative department, he oversaw the realisation of many of the studio's signature blockbusters, including *Yes, Madam* (1985), *Royal Warriors* (1986), and *Magnificent Warriors* (1987), laying the foundation for the company's commercial films. Although the collective creation model prevailed in Hong Kong cinema in the 1980s, he loved to incorporate his personal observations into his screenplays. He also enjoyed 'arguing' in defence of his own creativity, as he believes in the Auteur Theory and not the 'Ouija Board creative method' whereby the ideas of multiple individuals are pieced together. Despite having worked in the film and television industries for numerous years, he candidly admits that his journey in cinema is far from fulfilling, and that his foray into moviemaking might have been a wrong move. However, if he were to go back in time, he would still embark on this voyage all the same. He jokes that it is his destiny



## Pursuing His Dream: From Paris to the World of Television

I was born in the middle of the last century and was already a film buff when I was young. I once studied Journalism at Chu Hai College of Higher Education, but eventually dropped out as I wasn't cut out for traditional education. When I was 20, I went to Paris alone and expanded my knowledge in film. In the year or so that I was there, I watched many movies, including the works of French New Wave directors such as Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, to grasp their essence. After returning to Hong Kong, I worked for the film magazine *Cinemart*. I had to do everything, from editing to writing articles, and even creating the content for the 'Letter to the Editor' section.

I finally got my break when TVB (Television Broadcasts Limited) was recruiting screenwriters. My mentor Lau Tin-chi was the one who took a chance on me. That was in around 1977. I was assigned to *Enjoy Yourself Tonight*, with which I was not very contented. Why should someone who has studied Shakespeare ended up in writing gag shows, I thought. It was only later that I found out if one is capable of conceiving good gags, one would also be capable of conceiving other genres. Writing for *Enjoy Yourself Tonight* was like practising at Shaolin Temple. After about two years, I was transferred to the drama team. The first project that I helmed was the soap opera *Conflict* [Chan Kiu-ying and Wong Jing were the script editor and supervisor respectively].

In 1980, TVB began developing limited-run serials. I was a script supervisor by then and conceived *The Bund*. The idea came from the novel by Wumingshi (Mr Anonymous), which features a character who actively participates in student movements. He becomes dispirited afterwards and eventually joins a triad society in Shanghai. It's a story about self-harm and self-pity. It resonated with me and I couldn't help but get entangled, creating the character Hui Man-keung portrayed by Chow Yun-fat. The rest of the show was inspired by the French movie *Borsalino* (1970). I never dreamt of the unprecedented success that *The Bund* would achieve. It wasn't only popular in Hong Kong, but also throughout the Mainland, attracting over one billion viewers. It changed my entire life.

## Leading the Creative Team in Crafting Category A Productions

In around 1984, John Sham invited me to join D & B [the media reported Chan Kiu-ying joining the company in April 1985]. Our relationship goes way back—we participated in social movements in the 1970s, edited *The 70's Bi-weekly*, and later wandered Paris together. We were penniless at the time and often had but a couple of francs in our pockets. One time, a franc fell into the sewer and we both reached out to pick it up—this is how friendships are formed. I did struggle with my decision to leave TVB as I was already in charge of the creative department at the time and my son was just born. Would it be too risky? After thinking it over, I concluded that I wouldn't be able to come to terms with myself had I not given filmmaking a try. So, I joined D & B as the manager of its creative department.

I was more involved in the commercial movies from which the company aimed at gauging profit, such as *Yes, Madam*, *Royal Warriors*, *Magnificent Warriors*, and *From Here to Prosperity* (1986). Mr John Sham wanted to make movies that catered to the market in order to support the studio's niche features. The team that I led was mainly fronted by two or three young screenwriters, including newcomer Tsang Kan-cheong who came over with me from TVB. I also enlisted the occasional help of Wai Ka-fai, who wrote the first draft of *Where's Officer Tuba?* (1986). The others, such as Siu Kwok-wah, Jo Chan Wai-ye, and Joe Ma Wai-ho were recruited by Clifton Ko. This was our fixed team, but we also hired freelance screenwriters depending on the needs of different projects.

I had to handle two kinds of scripts. The first was for Category A productions, amounting to about five or six films a year. Mr Sham would say that he wanted to shoot such and such a movie, and I would develop the story with the creative team before further discussing with him. The other comprised scripts submitted by directors. Mr Sham would let me review them to see whether it was feasible to turn them into films. It was purely an advisory role and I didn't involve in the decision-making.



*Magnificent Warriors* (1987) is a film with Western influences. (Front row from left: Lowell Lo, Chindy Lau, Richard Ng, Derek Yee, Michelle Yeoh)



*Fury* (1988) explores the bonds of male friendship. (Left: Michael Wong; right: Waise Lee)

### Spending Half a Year in Taiwan to Film *Magnificent Warriors*

I travelled all over with this team that I led. The most gruelling project was *Magnificent Warriors*, which was almost shot entirely in Taiwan. We built an entire city there. I believe it was D & B's biggest investment. Because there was no script, I flew back and forth numerous times over the course of six months. It was a very painful experience. During the day, Tsang Kan-cheong and I would write the script for the next day at the hotel. Four or five well-known directors were filming on set, with Mr Sham being the principal director. After he returned from filming, we would discuss the content to be shot the next day until 2am. He would start work again at 6am and continue thinking about what to shoot on set. We couldn't give him a finished script, because he felt that the mood wasn't right. He insisted on brainstorming together.

It was Mr Sham's decision to make *Magnificent Warriors*, a film with Western influences that would enable Michelle Yeoh to shed her image from *Yes, Madam*. Michelle is Malaysian and couldn't read Chinese texts, so her assistant had to read the script with her. She's very smart and learnt her lines very quickly. She only had a slight accent when speaking Cantonese.

### Choreographing Action Sequences According to Plot Development

At the time, Michelle was already a renowned action star. In addition to performing well at the box office in Hong Kong, her films could also be exported to Europe. She didn't really know kung fu, but she did have a foundation in dance. Her commanding body language made you believe that she could fight. That's the way it is with movies—as long as the audience believes it, it's fine. The only one who could really fight is Cynthia Rothrock of the Hung's Troupe.

Sanada Hiroyuki (aka Henry Sanada), who co-starred with Michelle, is a sought-after Japanese actor and knows Chinese kung fu. His entire team, including the director, came over to get a clear picture of what we needed. I explained the script to Sanada and was able to talk to him on set, because I studied advanced Japanese at The Japan Society of Hong Kong. He did all the action scenes himself except the real difficult ones. It wasn't because he couldn't pull them off, but the fact that progress would've been affected if he got injured. I conceived the sequences together with the action choreographer because the action scenes were necessitated by the plot and not created for the sake of action. So, the screenwriter's input was required.

### 'Man of Steel' John Sham Pushing On with Oxygen Cylinders

Mr Sham likes to improvise. Even if he was given a complete screenplay, he'd rethink the scenes on set. When I brought the creative team to the filming location, the crew would immediately start setting up the lighting to make time for us to work on the script. For example, if they started setting up at 6 a.m., shooting would likely begin at 8 a.m., giving us two hours. Sometimes, we'd also start from scratch and create on site to come up with dialogue within the two hours. The screenplays were mainly written by Tsang Kan-cheong. I was the supervisor.



*From Here to Prosperity* (1986): The treasure hunt film was shot on location in Thailand.  
(Right photo, from left: John Chiang, Annike Pong, Richard Ng, Danny Poon)

After making revisions, I'd pass the script to Mr Sham for further editing. Changes were also made during actual filming. Sometimes, there were impromptu cameo appearances and we had to modify the script on the spot without affecting the main plot. Each movie was basically the product of the chemistry within the team. Obviously, Mr Sham assumed overall responsibility—he was the captain of the ship.

My most memorable project is *It's a Drink! It's a Bomb!* (1985), during which I broke my record of the longest period without sleep. In order to meet the schedule, we had to pull three or four all-nighters. Mr Sham was even more impressive—he didn't sleep for six or seven days. This resulted in him succumbing to hypoxia and he had to carry an oxygen cylinder to help him breathe when he was off-camera [John Sham was also the male lead of this feature].

Mr Sham conceived the story of *Fury* (1988) himself. Gangster films were popular at the time, and Alan Tang had made a series of blockbusters about the inner workings of triad gangs. Mr Sham felt that people from that walk of life also exuded a sense of camaraderie and wanted to make a *wenyi* film about this aspect of the underworld. He recruited Johnny Wong Lung-wei to direct, but it was in fact Richard Cheung Kuen who called the shots due to his reputation as an A-list producer and his familiarity with the underworld. Mr Sham wanted their help to shoot a film about the bonds of male friendship. That was the distinctive theme of this motion picture.

*From Here to Prosperity* was based on Billy Wilder's *The Front Page* (1974) and tells of how two scammers go about cheating others. I'd seen a lot of crime films and often wanted to write a screenplay about scamming, but one that wasn't set in modern times. I talked to the company about it and they were interested. I'm a fan of Billy Wilder—I like his setups and his use of camera angles. It wasn't my idea to set it in Thailand, but that didn't matter.

## Creating Screenplays Through the 'Ouija Board Creative Method'

Mr Sham was my boss. After I approved a story, it needed to get past him. There were always disagreements in the process, and when he no longer wanted to argue, he'd say that the only thing I knew was how to argue. He'd then let it go without resolving the issues we were debating. Of course, I would ultimately ask the screenwriter to do it his way. The reason I wanted to make my case was that collective creation isn't my style. I believe in the Auteur Theory—a script that's written by me with final decisions made by me. There's no right or wrong, no one is better than anybody else. It's the product of the author's inner journey.

The 'chau jap sui style' (the piecing together of arbitrary concepts) was a characteristic of Hong Kong filmmaking in the 1980s. The industry exalted collective creation. There were no scripts or dialogue—it was all improvised. Everyone would say something and then everything was pieced together. I call it the 'Ouija Board Method', that is, a group of people with similar temperaments moving towards a certain goal with no theoretical basis. The outcome determined everything—as long as it's funny, it's fine. 1980s Hong Kong cinema was only

about good punchlines, not well constructed narratives. It was possible to achieve phenomenal success without pouring your heart and soul into a production, so much so that even the West began to look at Hong Kong films differently.

Mr Sham was a very capable producer and provided an excellent platform which enabled me to learn a lot. The problem was that I had yet to realise a work that I was truly satisfied with. After all, I was never really cut out for the collective creation model. I actually had screenplays on hand, it was just that he was never satisfied with them. What constituted a satisfactory script? We'd never reach a consensus. Mr Sham believed in the producer's script, not the director's. He's an adept producer. The advantage is that he was the sole determinant of success or failure. So long as he found the right people, the film would turn out great—but it wouldn't be a creative product of the director.

### Screenwriting Classes Offering Both Theory and Practice

We once organised a training course for screenwriters. The students went to 'class' everyday, which was their job, and were paid to do so. Tsang Kan-cheong and I did the teaching, while screenwriters such as Susan Chan also gave guest lectures. We systematically taught them how to structure story plots, divide a film into scenes, and write dialogue. After about half a year of theory learning, they were given the opportunity to put what they'd learnt into practice. That was towards John Sham's last days of running the company. I also left soon after, so the students didn't really get much hands-on experience before they had to leave. Several graduates eventually became screenwriters, mainly working at television stations.

I learnt a lot in the film industry, but it wasn't a fully rewarding experience. In contrast, I'd managed to accomplish my own works on television, because that was where the Auteur Theory could be practised. I'm good at planning on paper. Scripts could be handled this way at a television station, there was no need to explain your ideas in detail to others. Moreover, screenwriters are required to be on set when making a movie, which was my Achilles' heel. I simply can't go without sleep for six days on the job like Mr Sham.

### The Only Satisfactory Work: *Cops and Robbers*

Frankly speaking, my foray into the film industry through joining D & B wasn't a success. The only cinematic work that I'm truly satisfied with is *Cops and Robbers* (produced by Pearl City and Yigao, 1979), but this was before I joined D & B. I was one of the assistant screenwriters for this feature. It achieved impressive results, earning over HK\$1 million at the box office. The script was also aligned with my creative principles, that is, it adhered to the Auteur Theory. This movie was the inner journey of director Alex Cheung Kwok-ming, a manifestation of his world view as well as his perspective on good and evil. The police are traditionally the heroes who catch the thieves. However, he reversed these roles in this film, which was revolutionary at the time. I think that *Cops and Robbers* marked the official localisation of Hong Kong movies, creating the first blueprint of the local motion pictures that would later become the pride of Hongkongers. It is indeed a spectacular work.

When I left my career in television, I had grand ambitions of making it big in the film industry. After several years, my dream ended in failure. However, I still had an intense passion for cinema. In 2001, I made a second attempt at filmmaking, teaming up with Benny Chan to establish Monster Pictures Entertainment Co. Ltd. The studio made its debut with *Final Romance* (2001), starring Edison Chen. Unfortunately, it flopped at the box office. We met our Waterloo with our first film and the company shut down.

Benny's previous work, *A Moment of Romance* (1990), performed well at the box office and earned widespread acclaim. He'd always wanted to make another similar movie, so he asked Alan Mak Shiu-fai, Felix Chong Man-keung, and myself to write a screenplay. We wanted to create a love story with gangster elements. Benny, Alan, and Felix make a formidable team, while Edison was very popular among girls at the time. It's a pity that the pieces just didn't fit. No matter how great our creative intentions were, the film didn't click with the audience. All I can say is that I was born out of time. And so, my second cinematic journey also ended in failure.

### Third Time Lucky

After that, I went to Beijing to begin the next decade of my career, producing television dramas. In recent years in Hong Kong, my most rewarding experience was being a teacher in the Screenwriter Incubation Programme organised by my mentor Lau Tin-chi. It's funded by the Hong Kong's Film Development Fund and has been held





Photo shot in 1993: (front row from left) Gordon Chan, Jackie Chan, Tony Leung Chiu-wai, Eric Tsang; (second row from left) Chingmy Yau, Athena Chu, Anita Yuen, Maggie Cheung, Anthony Wong Chau-sang, Teresa Mo; (third row from left) Jacob Cheung Chi-leung, Stanley Tong, Tony Ching Siu-tung, Chan Pak-sang, Stanley Kwan, Chan Kiu-ying

twice in three years. One hundred participants are recruited each time, with ten elites selected through an exam. A few of them now work with me. They've given me the opportunity to come into contact with the youngsters of this generation. They also have dreams and are very creative. They're even more capable than our generation. I returned to television a while back to create drama serials and am continuing to work with new screenwriters. I've recently been brainstorming for film ideas too, and plan on going back to the Mainland for production.

My two previous journeys in film didn't go smoothly, but I'm not 100 years old yet, I've just reached middle age. I think there'll be a third journey for me to embark on, because I really love movies.

[Translated by Johnny Ko]

# Ip Kwong-kim

## A Screenwriter Who Transcends Genres and Expectations



Interviewers: Wong Ha-pak, Priscilla Chan, Janice Chow

(6 January 2020)

Collated by Wong Ha-pak

**I**p Kwong-kim is one of the most prominent creatives in the 1980s and 90s. After he wrote his debut film script for the D & B Films Co., Ltd. production *Brotherhood* (1986), he was recruited to be the film studio's script supervisor—providing concepts, perfecting plots, and acting as gatekeeper of the scripts' quality. During the peak years, he needed to attend three sessions daily, from morning to evening, to discuss all types of films with multiple film crews. Ip emphasises in the interview that D & B neither imposed any restrictions on the film genre nor had any intention to hone a particular style—the style would be based on the specific plot and characters within the narrative. Though the avalanche of work was physically draining, he deems that it was excellent training for the mind. In addition, Ip is grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with his close friends Gordon Chan and Chan Hing-kai; the three creatives formed a 'Golden Trio' and subsequently worked together on a variety of film projects. Approaching the millennium, Ip became a 'script doctor' and helped troubled production get back on track. With his dedicated passion in film, he was able to remain calm and work his magic amid crisis and chaotic situations.

### Prolific Writer in Film, Television and Radio

I studied History at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). Being a theatre buff, I had written six drama scripts, all of which were originals. I directed all of them and occasionally performed on stage. By the third year of university, I was already writing radio dramas for Commercial Radio Hong Kong. They were original works with five or six jokes within a half-hour span and were more difficult to write than serials. I have spent two years writing radio dramas for the station, and I'd say the show 'Siyanzi Riji' (Diary of the Boy With Spectacles) was quite popular. I later worked for the Festival of Asian Arts and gained exposure to many stage-related programmes. I also worked at TVB (Television Broadcasts Limited) for two years; I was a copywriter at the publicity department.

Fong Lee-kun, my university classmate, was a deputy director working for Yuen Woo-ping. One day, he came to TVB's publicity department and prompted me into filmmaking, which I did. I joined The Yuen Brothers as deputy director and officially kick-started my film career. The first film I participated in was *Taoism Drunkard* (1984). During the two years working for The Yuen Brothers, I was not involved in screenwriting but was occupied with actual production work. I worked on everything, right from pre-production, production to the post-production stage, handling tasks such as dubbing, soundtrack, publicity and marketing. These hands-on experiences deepened my understanding of the film production process.

### The Police Plot Line: Research and Authenticity

Stephen Shin is my senior alumnus from CUHK. We met one day and he asked me to write for him. I then wrote *Brotherhood*. The concept of the story came from Shin while another two or three screenwriters worked with me on the details. For scenes where the police scheme to entrap the criminals, we did consult some plain clothes police officers to ensure the plot was logical and the characters believable. They would offer counter-suggestions which we put in the script. This really gave substance to the film details as they were based on reality.

We had several screenwriters discussing the plot together. When we were set to write the script, James Fung Shui-hung, one of the co-screenwriters, would come to my place at Sai Kung every day to work alongside with me. Each of us wrote a scene and then exchanged the material for comments. The progress was faster by working this way.

Danny Lee, Alex Man had long been cast for the film. Consequently, the script was tailored to their personalities, temperaments and ways of expression. It is easier to write the script with a confirmed cast as we are able to visualise the characters and their expressions. You will include a certain physical expression into the script only if you believe the actor has the capability to achieve the intended effect.

### Script Supervisor Working Three Sessions a Day

There was no creative department at D & B when I wrote *Brotherhood*. Everything was managed by John Sham who was succeeded by Stephen Shin later on. It was Shin who established the creative department, and my title was script supervisor. I was required to discuss with multiple film crews on an eclectic mix of films. It was really good training for the mind.



Ip Kwong-kim made his screenwriting debut with *Brotherhood* (1986). Soon after, he was invited to be D & B's script supervisor.  
(Left: Danny Lee; right: Alex Man)

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I usually approached each individual film crew and discussed the plot development with the team's director and screenwriters. During peak seasons, D & B could plan up to nine films simultaneously, and I had to discuss the scripts with nine different film crews. I'd need to discuss three films each day: one in the morning, one in the afternoon and one in the evening. The depth of the discussion varied. Although the scene breakdown might not be very detailed, I had to pay attention to the important segments. When we were about to start filming, I'd take part in making changes which would be followed up by individual crews, thus producing the final shooting versions.

The work culture of the creative department at D & B was quite liberal. If a film's plot was approved by me and considered acceptable by Shin, we could start shooting without further approval from the boss. The industry was thriving at the time, and naturally there would be people approaching us to pitch their stories. The creative department had tried to train new talents before, but it took a lot of time and the outcome was not as satisfactory. I was too busy to guide the newcomers anyway.

### **Dickson Poon Ordered to Shoot *Easy Money***

Studio boss Dickson Poon never probed into our productions but there was one exception. We were in a meeting, and he suddenly came in and said: 'We have to make a Hong Kong version of *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968). I love this film and Michelle Yeoh will be the female lead.' As such, we came up with *Easy Money* (1987). When we first worked on the story, the rest of the cast had not been confirmed and it was not being considered until a certain stage. We had George Lam, Kent Cheng on board later on and thought the chemistry was right for a 'buddy' comedy. The film was shot on locations in many European countries. Screenwriters did not get to travel along, but Shin was also the screenwriter and he could solve any problem that came up.

With this film coming up all of a sudden, we did not have a screenwriter team ready and had to seek help from screenwriters at TVB. Pang Tsai-choi was already a team leader at the time and Wai Ka-fai was outstanding in screenwriting. It was an enjoyable collaboration, and they returned to TV station after the film wrapped. We didn't usually seek help from outside because the film crews that approached us often had their own screenwriters; or there would have been no story to pitch in the first place.

### **Yuen Woo-ping Switching over to Police Action Genre**

Yuen Woo-ping is both a mentor and friend to me. I was the one who invited him to work at D & B, and we were fortunate enough to have him joining us. He directed *Tiger Cage* (aka *Sure Fire*, 1988) which did well at the Hong Kong box-office. It was reported that that film was the best-selling D & B production in Cannes, and made a big profit for the company. For him, there was more creative freedom at D & B and film budgets were not too rigid, thus providing more opportunities for him to strut his stuff. So, he went on to make several more films for D & B.

The concept for *Tiger Cage* was proposed by Shin, who wanted the film to touch on family bonds, friendships, parental love and romance. It is a contemporary police film, and we never requested Yuen to follow D & B's style in making contemporary films [Yuen Woo-ping was known to be adept at making kung fu films set in the Early-Republican era]. He went with the flow and adapted quickly. Many people were engaged to shape the film's script, and they all got paid for having completed their tasks. However, Yuen did not find the script satisfactory and there was no budget left for the script. I had to fill in the gaps, so to speak, and almost rewrote the entire script from beginning to end. There were times when the script needed for filming at night was still being written in the early evening. With shooting set to start immediately, the content had to be sleek and precise. It was then handed to Yuen who would also make some modifications prior to actual shooting.

### ***Heart to Hearts* by the Screenwriting 'Golden Trio'**

I was part of the screenwriting team for *Heart to Hearts* (1988). Gordon Chan, who came on board with this project, was a close friend of mine and ventured into the film industry earlier than me; it was me who brought him to D & B. I also sought help from Chan Hing-kai whom I knew from working at Commercial Radio. Creating this film was a very enjoyable experience. We often met to discuss and write the script together. As a lot of ideas popped up whenever we were together, I described the three of us as a 'Golden Trio'. Although we differed in our creative directions, we merged them well and gave rise to a lot of variety. We came up with both verbal jokes and physical humour. As long as we sat down together, engaging discussions ensued. We got along very well and later on wrote *The Yuppie Fantasia* (1989).





Ip Kwong-kim pulled the strings in order to have Yuen Woo-ping (in front of the camera) direct for D & B. Yuen's *Tiger Cage* (1988) and modern cop movies were both popular and critically acclaimed.



*Easy Money* (1987) is a 'buddy' comedy.  
(Left: Kent Cheng; right: George Lam)



The 'Golden Trio' (Gordon Chan, Ip Kwong-kim, Chan Hing-kai) penned *Heart to Hearts* (1988) together; the three protagonists (from left: Vivian Chow, Dodo Cheng, George Lam) clicked well and had good chemistry.



*Vengeance is Mine* (1988): Lee Chi-ngai took over mid-way through the filming and made his directorial debut.  
(Left: Rosamund Kwan; right: Pat Ha)



*Unfaithfully Yours* (1989): It was shot in undue haste to secure the prime release slot.  
(Left to right: Billy Lau, Kelly Tien Niu, Richard Ng, Manfred Wong)

*Heart to Hearts* was conceived by Gordon Chan. It is a love story between a middle-class man and a mother with a daughter. The background of the story was inspired by a Western film [the script was influenced by the American film *The Buddy System* (1984); see 'Gordon Chan' of this book on pp 129-134]. Apart from that, everything else is our ideas. The plot gradually evolved afterwards.

The chemistry between Dodo Cheng, Vivian Chow and George Lam was great. Many factors worked together, which contributed to making the film quite distinctive. The film has no martial arts and it was not a laugh-a-minute story. The audience might at most be amused by the subtle humour. It was therefore a pleasant surprise for the film to make over HK\$20 million at the box office.

### Defying the Classification of 'Middle-Class Films'

For *Heart to Hearts*, we insisted on recording the sound on location to achieve a more realistic feel. Shin went on to direct more films such as *Happy Together* (1989), which I only participated in the discussions by presenting some ideas. I do not like the term 'middle-class films' as these films are made for people of all ages. To me, pigeon-holing a film as 'middle-class' is to limit the audience to those in the middle class. I could write a film about a beggar, too. 'Urban situation comedy' may be a better description.

I enjoy writing films of all genres. The only genre I cannot manage is horror films as I lack the relevant imagination. I think I can still handle if I were to shoot a supernatural film. I'd simply follow the general guidelines, such as making sure the plot is progressing smoothly and the film is scary enough. There are certain standard assessment criteria for different film genres.

*Unfaithfully Yours* (1989) was quite memorable for me, with it having seven directors and several screenwriters. We all went to Hokkaido and the film had to be completed within one week in order to meet the release schedule [it was released on 18 March across the Easter holiday break]. There were no films on hand and Shin made this suggestion. With several screenwriters writing non-stop, in addition to one week of shooting and two weeks of post-production, the film finally met the release schedule. The plot was at least coherent considering that the film was shot in undue haste, but the box-office results were underwhelming. D & B had its own cinema circuit and there was a strong demand for films. It was therefore crucial for the company to compete for and occupy important release slots; otherwise it would lose the big screen slots to other films. That's why the film had to be made in two weeks to fill the time slot, and to maintain the occupancy rate.

I also worked on post-production including audio post-production. I was involved in tasks such as processing soundtrack and background sound effects. The music was provided by others and I decided on their placements. I worked on post-production for several films and they were all exhausting all-nighters.

### The Yuppie Fantasia by People's Productions

After working around the clock at D & B non-stop for two years, it felt repetitive and I started to feel a little tired. This was when Gordon Chan, Chan Hing-kai and Lawrence Cheng established People's Productions to shoot *The Yuppie Fantasia*. They asked me to co-write the script, which I did. We settled on the story and concept, and it was eventually acquired by Golden Harvest (HK) Limited. The box-office was fairly good for the first film but not so for the sequel *Brief Encounter in Shinjuku* (1990). However, I prefer the sequel. It is more realistic, and director Patrick Leung Pak-kin even described it as a 'horror movie'. The story is hard-edged not because we deliberately shaped it to be. Dramatic conflicts appear only when the plot progresses to a certain point and when the characters encounter internal or external clashes.

*The Yuppie Fantasia* was originally a radio drama in monologue. It was adapted into a film because of its popularity. There was no intention to make it a 'middle-class' production when we were in the creating process. There were no particular preferences and it was created based on our likes and habits. The characters are the most important element for a film. It has to take the lead in my work or the screenwriting process would be quite difficult. Take a petty and narrow-minded person for example. If in conflict with others, he will deal with it in very underhanded ways. On the contrary, a generous and ungrudging person will be tolerant in coping with the same situation. This will definitely impact the subsequent dramatic development. If this Mr Nice Guy is really wronged by someone, he may become furious with a breakthrough in his personality. He is suddenly raging and turns into another person. These turning points will be memorable for the audience. Therefore, the writing is much easier and ought to be constructed according to the personalities of the character.

We had a uniform goal when establishing People's Productions and it was to make good films. We did not consider making a certain type of films. Our sole ambition in opening up a new company was to try out new things.

### Comprehensive Diagnosis of Scripts

I became a 'script doctor' with *Purple Storm* (1999). I'd perform a complete 'diagnosis' on scripts using methods similar to those four methodologies of inspection, listening, inquiry and palpation as in traditional Chinese medicine. I'd analyse an entire film from front to back, and deal with issues like why the plot does not move forward. It is in fact similar to the doctor examining a patient. Most importantly, I'd recommend on what needs to be done, and make sure the director agree with me. I usually started to participate when it got to the point that the crew had to stop filming. I never got to take part before shooting. In fact, a script doctor is not unlike a firefighter.

Take Gordon's *The Medallion* (2003) as an example. Sammo Hung is the action director. A set was constructed in Thailand and shooting continued up to a point when they could not figure out what to do with the scenes tomorrow. There were different opinions which could not be reconciled, and shooting stopped. Each day of delay would cost HK\$0.7 million in set rentals and two or three days would have accumulated into millions. As filming could not stop, I was asked to fly over from Hong Kong to solve the problem. I had to be prepared in advance including reading the script and understanding the story. I assumed there would be a lot of pressure. However, I was perhaps too focused that I forgot about being nervous. Such is creative work: you cannot perform once you are nervous. The film was produced by Emperor Motion Pictures, and I was its creative director in 2001.

I tend to read intellectual books. I read novels as well but not as many by comparison. I believe creativity is inspired by daily lives instead of the works by others, so I often observe people around me. I love creative works as well as acting, and I already acted on stage when I was involved in theatre during university. Scripts I wrote before were mainly for others. I have two or three stories that I wish to make into films. The things I write now are my own. I had thought of directing my own film. Perhaps I will shoot the next script or the one after myself, making my inspirations come alive on-screen.

[Translated by Richard Lee]





〈Chapter III〉

## D & B • Pre- and Post-1980s

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## An A for D & B for its Cs: Middle-Class Sensibilities in the Studio's Early Years

Sam Ho ■

Change is the only constant in life<sup>1</sup>. Over a hundred years of Hong Kong cinema have witnessed, recorded and interpreted the lives of Hong Kong people and the people of the Chinese diaspora as they go through transitions in society and the ever-changing times.

D & B Films Co., Ltd. was an important production base of Hong Kong cinema during its 1980s golden age<sup>2</sup>. The company's works, especially in the early years, are very different from those of other major firms of the time such as Golden Harvest (HK) Limited and Cinema City Company Limited. This was largely the result of its unique production environment, a benign confluence of time, place and people. In people terms, there were many. Most important were the two men at the top: Dickson Poon and John Sham. Poon was the boss, a man of vast wealth who could have dictated everything but instead yielded creative liberties to Sham, a man of multiple identities—from company executive to movie star to public intellectual—a visionary member of the culture sector with the executive capacity to turn aspirations into reality. Sparks flew when Poon and Sham came together. The place was Hong Kong. A place where people of different talents converged; where the economy was taking off; where life was stable and peaceful; where education was widespread; where East and West, north and south, old and new integrate; where relative freedoms of creativity and speech were allowed; where the film industry was thriving. The time was the 1980s. The Cold War was

stepping into its last phase, globalisation was taking huge strides, the fake end of history was on the verge, the real turnaround of the Chinese people had begun, and world cinema was entering a brand new era.

Constant transitions are natural conditions of constant changes. With technological advances, transitions have become forever more drastic. In the twentieth century, especially after the two World Wars, the transition of the Chinese-speaking world had been arguably even more drastic than that of the rest of the world. It is not only reflected in films, but also in the film industry, which had gone through many changes. The 1950s was the golden age of Hong Kong film companies. There were four major studios on each side of the dialect divide. On the Cantonese side, there were Sun Luen Film Company, The Union Film Enterprise Ltd, Overseas Chinese Films Co. and Kong Ngee Motion Picture Production Company. For Mandarin cinema, the major studios were Motion Picture General Investment Co. Ltd. (MP & GI), Shaw & Sons Ltd, Great Wall Pictures Corporation and Feng Huang Motion Picture Co, two each for the political left and right. But by the mid-1960s, Shaw Brothers (Hong Kong) Ltd had become dominant. Golden Harvest quickly caught up with Shaws in the 1970s, later surpassing it. In the 1980s, Cinema City joined the fray, performing well at first but exhausted itself after a few years. D & B took advantage of the opportunity, forging a place for itself among the top ranks.

<sup>1</sup> A quote by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus.

<sup>2</sup> 'Golden age' is a meta-concept that means different things to different people due to various reasons and points of view. That the 1980s were a golden age of Hong Kong cinema is this writer's opinion.



*The Owl vs Bumbo* (1984) was the only D & B production directed by Sammo Hung.



The Owl (left: George Lam) and Bumbo (right: Sammo Hung) brings out clashes between different social classes.

### Paradox of a New Middle Class

D & B films are marked by their middle-class sensibilities,<sup>3</sup> representing a key moment in the transition from the grassroots ethos that had defined Hong Kong cinema for a long time, likely from the very beginning. Films in the 1950s, perhaps the first golden period of Hong Kong cinema, are mostly concerned with life in the lower depths. From social realist works like the classic *In the Face of Demolition* (1953) to ‘common man comedies’ starring Yee Chau-shui and Sun Ma Si-tsang to the films of leftwing companies like Great Wall, Feng Huang and Sun Luen—the ‘guiding people towards goodness’ mantra of their plebian-class stories infused with softcore ideology—the lives and values of people enduring the hardships of the pre-boom economy are celebrated.

Even in the 1970s, when Hong Kong was starting to enjoy a hard-earned prosperity, the Michael Hui comedies in mid-decade are still informed by working-class convictions. Class orientation goes even further down in the late 70s with Jackie Chan’s kung fu comedies, their characters often draped in unassuming or even tattered costumes. These comedies belong to a general class of films known as ‘raggedy clothing dramas’, a term of often self-

deprecating endearment that signifies a certain wistfulness for humble lifestyles. These 70s films testify to a state of mind, that as the Hong Kong people transitioned from poverty to stability to prosperity, they retained a ‘pre-middle-class’ quality, at once modest and caustic, contented and anxious. By the 1980s, Cinema City struck gold with signature touches of conspicuous consumption and luxurious assumptions, their ‘glamorous clothing dramas’ flaunting a middle-class lifestyle so willfully that they only betray a deep-seated grassroots rusticity, which is of course a big part of their appeal. By contrast, the bourgeois sensibilities in D & B films come across much more naturally.

D & B productions are diverse. In the early days, *The Return of Pom Pom* (1984) and *The Owl vs Bumbo* (1984) are typical 1980s mainstream comedies, a mishmash of action, slapstick comedy and romance, following in the Cinema City tradition of grassroots sensibilities dressed up in glamorous costumes. The *Yes, Madam* series is a female version of the seasoned police story. However, as a major film company, D & B’s most unique and memorable works are a collection of non-mainstream titles, especially those made in the first few years when John Sham was calling the shots. Examples include *Hong Kong 1941*

<sup>3</sup> The media, including film reviews and news reports, often mentioned the ‘middle-class characteristics’ of D & B films. For example, in an interview with Stephen Shin in a 1989 issue of *Film Biweekly*, the interviewer noted that ‘some believe D & B films to be very “middle-class”’. Shin disagreed with that opinion, stating that the films ‘give the impression of being “middle-class” perhaps because a higher percentage of the directors we use come from the middle class’. See ‘Reng Zou Duoyuanhua Luxian, Fang Debao Dianying Gongsi Xingzheng Dongshi Xian Qiran’ (‘Continuing the Track of Diversification / An Interview with D & B’s Executive Director Stephen Shin’), interviewed by Shek Hon-Kit and Wong On-kei, collated by Wong On-kei, *Film Biweekly*, No 268, 29 June 1989 (in Chinese). Another example is from a news report in *Wen Wei Po* about the D & B cinema circuit becoming the Regal Films cinema circuit, where it was stated that ‘more of the D & B cinema circuit’s audience was from the cultural industries and the middle class’. See Ya Nan, ‘Debao Yuanxian Zhuanruo You Yuanyin, Qie Kan Yonggao Yuanxian Ruhe’ (‘Behind the Waning of D & B’s cinema circuit / Wait-and-See Attitude for Regal’), *Wen Wei Po*, 30 September 1991 (in Chinese). Special thanks to Hong Kong Film Archive Project Researcher Janice Chow for providing the above information.

(1984), about the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong; *Silent Love* (1986) and *The Lunatics* (1986), both about marginal populations in our society; and the romantic yet cynical takes on modern romance in *Passion* (1986), *Love Unto Wastes* (1986) and *Kiss Me Goodbye* (1986). There are also films that simply defy categorisation or can be put into several categories, such as *Dream Lovers* (1986), *An Autumn's Tale* (1987) and *Wonder Women* (1987).

These works are middle-class in each their own ways. Modern love stories such as *Passion* and *Kiss Me Goodbye* are naturally rife with bourgeois details. And, as mentioned above, mainstream blockbusters like *The Owl vs Bumbo* have adopted Cinema City's strategy of hawking middle-class qualities, their 'nouveau bourgeois' touches a big part of their charm. Much of the World War II generation and post-war boomers had struggled through poverty and deprivation. Reaching prosperity in the 1970s and 80s, the entertainment they savour radiates a delightful air of 'nouveau bourgeois'. It is a unique quality of the era's transitional nature—suddenly enjoying the bounties of material abundance, the people of Hong Kong might yearn for a life of luxury and eager to show off their modest but not-quite-rich fortunes, but their grass-root instincts were still dying hard. The paradox of a new middle class.

Action flicks like the Michelle Yeoh vehicles are also informed by bourgeois values. Like Jackie Chan's *Police Story* series, these policewomen movies strive hard to project an image of professional spirit and ethical conduct among law officers. Men or women, Yeoh or Chan, these cops are professionals, exuding the pride and energy of the Hong Kong people as they climb from the lower ranks of society to enter the hallowed realm of middle class.

But the most middle-class of the D & B films are the ones most lacking in middle-class trappings, such as *Silent Love* and *The Lunatics*, about those marginalised by society. These films are, like the social realism school of the 1950s, driven by a pathos for the underprivileged but without the anger, indignation and self-pitying of the earlier works. Instead, there is a heartfelt concern for the unfortunate, extended by those more fortunate. The handling of the physically disabled or the intellectually impaired in the films are not above bias, prejudice and sensationalism. They in fact were greeted with criticism when first released. Yet, looking back, we see a certain spirit of what can be termed 'doing good after becoming prosperous', *fanrong lipin* in pinyin Chinese, a

variation of the traditional Chinese concept *facai lipin*, meaning 'doing good after becoming rich'. This kind of 'doing good' is not actions taken by those who wish to elevate their status or self-image after making a fortune. Rather, it is a collective awakening of the Hong Kong people. Having reached social and financial stability, they began to care about the marginalised and the unfortunate, a manifestation of middle-class ethos.

And the most middle-class among those films is an anti-middle-class film, *Love Unto Wastes*.

### Long Live C Films!

The variety of films produced by D & B is a special contribution to Hong Kong cinema. In the highly-commercialised climate of the 1980s, D & B produced many alternative works, shining the spotlight on otherwise nameless behind-the-scenes filmmakers and casting actors without box-office guarantee in major roles, enriching the creative landscape.

Much credit goes to John Sham. As mentioned above, Sham wore many hats. He was the head of companies, a celebrity, a public intellectual, a musician and radio host. Under his leadership, D & B had a vision broader than simply making money. He said in the oral history interview with the Hong Kong Film Archive: 'In the vibrant 1980s, Golden Harvest had several satellite companies of different orientations—Jackie Chan's Golden Way Films, Sammo Hung's Bo Ho, and also those involving Michael Hui. Cinema City's mainstay was comedy of course, being so resourceful'. Sham was idealistic, but also pragmatic. 'From the start, D & B's positioning was about diversity, using a "two-legged" approach. On the one hand, it heeded commercial demands—genre and cast were essential for overseas sales.... On the other hand, I wanted to shoot topics that creatives were passionate about—quality films, not only box-office hits'.<sup>4</sup>

Starting with its second feature *Hong Kong 1941* (1984), D & B released many alternative titles in its first three years. In addition to *Silent Love* and *The Lunatics* mentioned above, there were also *Dream Lovers*, *Conduct Zero* (1986), *Passion*, *Love Unto Wastes* and *Kiss Me Goodbye*, *Sapporo Story* (1987), *An Autumn's Tale* and *Wonder Women*, among others. John Sham recalls in the interview: 'The plots for most of them were conceived by myself and others, with the exception of *An Autumn's Tale* which is

<sup>4</sup> Regarding the content of John Sham's oral history interview, see 'John Sham' of this book, interviewed by Janice Chow, et al., collated by Eric Tsang Siu-wang, pp 46-53.



In the highly-commercialised climate of the 1980s, D & B produced many alternative works, shining the spotlight on otherwise nameless behind-the-scenes filmmakers and casting actors without box-office guarantee in major roles, enriching the creative landscape.



Love Unto Wastes (1986)



Sapporo Story (1987)



Kiss Me Goodbye (1986)



Dream Lovers (1986)



Carry on Dancing (1988)

not my brainchild. Stanley Kwan's *Love Unto Wastes* (1986) and Tony Au's *Dream Lovers* (1986) were alternative D & B films that didn't come out of market calculations. At that time, *Rouge* (1988)... had not been released yet.'

He pragmatically and strategically divided D & B's products into three categories, labelling them 'A', 'B' and 'C' films. 'We had to have high ticket threshold or big-budget peak-season runs. Such Category A releases run for a minimum of three weeks, and gross at least HK\$20 or \$30 million at the box-office.... Category B screen for at least two weeks and bring in HK\$7 to \$9 million.' In retrospect, the 'C' films are particularly worthy of note. 'Category C need to gross HK\$3 to HK\$4 million with a theatrical run of one week; the shooting budget for this category was usually between around HK\$1 million.' His ideals, pragmatism and strategies converged to facilitate a diversified production environment, allowing for alternative creative endeavors, resulting in an extraordinary level of artistic accomplishment.

There were other notable people other than Sham. In addition to boss Dickson Poon, who gave Sham the free rein, there was also Sammo Hung, whose Chinese name, Hung Kam-bo, furnished the 'B' to D & B. Multi-faceted, multi-talented and always multi-tasking, Hung did not participate in many actual D & B productions. More than simply lending his name to the company's logo, his contribution to the creative direction of D & B was significant. Hung's artistry is rather grassroots, part of its appeal a capacity to capture the transitional mindset of Hongkongers as they emerge from poverty to enter middle class, as well as the integration of modern urban values with folksy Chinese traditions. Amazing effect was produced when this quality meshed with Sham's intellectual proclivity in D & B's early period. In *The Return of Pom Pom* (1984), the company's first film and a sequel to the work of another company, Bo Ho, signature D & B touches are not pronounced.

By *The Owl vs Bumbo*, the company's third feature, the engagement of Hung's sensibilities with those of Sham begins to bear fruit. Hung and singer-actor George Lam play the titled characters. The latter is fashionable and sophisticated, emanating an

air of practiced elegance; the former, all dressed up in nice suits much of the time, is nevertheless resolute in his downscale habits, animated by the Tanka DNA of his fisherfolk ancestors.<sup>5</sup> Flip sides of the same coin, together they are a convergence of divergent class cultures. The men are forced by a former policeman to volunteer as social workers in a reform school, performing a service along the lines of 'doing good after becoming prosperous'. In Chinese, the nickname of Hung's character, Little Flying Elephant, is fashionably cute, capitalising on the rising trend very much a local manifestation of Japan's *kawaii* culture. Western influence is evident too, Bumbo the Little Flying Elephant obviously a take on Disney's *Dumbo* (1941), replacing the 'D' with the 'B' in 'Bo', from Hung's Chinese name Kam-bo, which he often used for outfits he was associated with, like Bo Ho.<sup>6</sup> Such cuteness is one step closer to bourgeois indulgence than 'Fat Dragon', Hung's better-known moniker, derived from his starring turn in *Enter the Fat Dragon* (1978). D & B's next film, *Mr. Boo Meets Pom Pom* (1985), continues this development, with Richard Ng and John Sham reprising their Bo Ho characters, joined by Michael Hui, playing a 'middle-class little man', a popular character type raised to near-mythic level by Hui's comedic persona, known in Japan as Mr. Boo. The beneficial interfacing of Hung's creativities with that of Sham was a key element in the establishment of D & B's creative direction.

### A Different Brilliance

Yet another person of note is John Chan Koon-chung, a literary man even more literary than Sham. Chan founded and was for many years Editor-in-Chief of *City Magazine*, a cultural paradigm for a new generation converging modern metropolitan culture with the idealism of traditional Chinese intelligentsia. At once cultured and cynical, Chan represented the 'post-*Baodiao* Movement'<sup>7</sup> school of Hong Kong idealism: less emotionally connected with China and more spiritually connected with the world, skeptical of capitalism but not above participating or even indulging in consumer culture, all the while concerned with pursuing good taste in thoughts and lifestyle.

<sup>5</sup> Tanka is a fishing people who lived on boats in China's coastal areas and had historically been subjected to prejudice and ridicule. In the film, when first hearing Bumbo's surname, Owl immediately seizes the moment to laugh at the Hung character's Tanka lineage.

<sup>6</sup> The notion of replacing the 'D' of Dumbo with the 'B' of Bo was brought up by Janice Chow in a discussion. Also, there is yet another possible connection, to King Bombo, a character in the Disney studio's *Gulliver's Travels* (1939).

<sup>7</sup> *Baodiao* (Defending the Diaoyu Islands) Movement is a social movement in the Chinese diaspora devoted to defending Chinese sovereignty in the dispute over the Diaoyu Islands, claimed by Japan in the name of Senkaku Islands. The movement started in the early 1970s in Taiwan and Hong Kong, where it acquired symbolic significance representing the awakening of national pride. It also signified a revival of idealism during a time of pragmatic pursuit, especially for the post-war generation that was educated in the colonial system.

Chan's contributions are also related to Sham's vision. Like Hung, he played an important role in the company's early days. After *The Return of Pom Pom*, D & B's second film was *Hong Kong 1941* (1984), written and associate-produced by Chan. In the early 1980s, when the cultural environment was vibrant with opportunities, Chan ventured into film from the literary sector, serving as associate producer for the Dennis Yu-and Jeff Lau-produced *My Darling, My Goddess* (1982). He later wrote the scripts for two major 1980s works, Patrick Tam's *Nomad* (1982) and Tsui Hark's *Shanghai Blues* (1984). He also penned a screenplay for Sham and Philip Chan's Johnson Film Company, a story about the Chinese air force, titled *Dengdai Liming* (Waiting for Dawn). Budget requirements for an air force film would be prohibitive, and the project was shelved. Later, when Chan wrote another script for D & B, Sham liked the Chinese title of the earlier script so much he decided to 'assign it to this film', with the English title *Hong Kong 1941*.

Such was D & B's creative environment that a title could casually float from one project to another. Sham and Chan collaborated on running *City Magazine*, later working on films together, developing a special rapport. *Hong Kong 1941* is a special film for its time. It has national scope but also a sense of local place; there is male camaraderie and also a love triangle; it has sweeping action and also literary touches. Sham remembers with pride: 'Many people wondered, why make films that defy categorisation? For instance, what is *Hong Kong 1941*?' D & B's first film was the very commercial *The Return of Pom Pom*, but by its second feature it was stretching the other leg in Sham's 'two-legged' policy. As head of operations, Sham boldly produced an alternative title not readily categorised by formula or genre, allowing Chan to write and complete a script all by himself, transplanted the title of another script onto it, completing an outstanding film which forged D & B's diverse creative path. For 1980s Hong Kong, D & B represented a different kind of brilliance.

In Sham's terms, *Hong Kong 1941* would fall between an 'A' and a 'B' film. It stayed on the bill for only two weeks, but grossed HK\$7.2 million, ranking 26th in the year's box-office tally. It explores grand issues, looking back at the history of Hong Kong while exploring national identity, all in the context of global dynamics. It also excels on the personal level with vivid characters. The three lead characters are embroiled in a love triangle; they have very different personalities, come from diverse socio-economic

backgrounds and each burdened with unique family issues. Chan's script takes the audience through many levels, from individual to social to national to international, its complexity imbued with humanistic concerns. It is only D & B's second film, and a literary touch rare for its time is already evident.

In its first year of operation, D & B completed three films. In addition to *The Return of Pom Pom* and *Hong Kong 1941*, there was also *The Owl vs Bumbo*, released in the Christmas slot and a textbook 'A' film by Sham's definition.

The following year, 1985, D & B completed four films. Sammo Hung was credited as producer of all four, while the directors were all different. Among them, *Mr. Boo Meets Pom Pom*, *Yes, Madam* and *It's a Drink! It's a Bomb!* are all 'A' films. The only exception is *The Island*, which, with a run of only eight days, is a 'C' film. The development of D & B in 1985 was unique in that its relationship with Golden Harvest began to change. In July that year, D & B entered into an agreement with Shaws and formed the D & B cinema circuit, changing its relationship with Golden Harvest from cooperation to competition. The next year, 1986, Hung was producer in the first three productions, *From Here to Prosperity*, *Silent Love* and *Where's Officer Tuba?*. Thereafter, his name no longer appeared in any other D & B film.<sup>8</sup> 1986 was also John Chan Koon-chung's most active year at D & B. He worked on five films: as associate producer in *Silent Love* and *The Lunatics*, producer of *Conduct Zero*, screenwriter for *Kiss Me Goodbye* and producer and provider of original story for *Caper* (aka *Hong Kong Cyber Brothers*).

Between 1984 and 1986, Chan participated in six D & B films, all of them non-mainstream titles. Although *Hong Kong 1941* is a high-budget production, its vision and insight are wider and deeper than typical commercial fares. *Caper* is likely a 'C' film, a cops-and-robbers story with touches of humour; Chan's story and Alex Law's script creates a unique genre world within the regular boundaries of a genre film, a delightful taste of small-scale creativity. The film centers on two brothers, their Chinese names meaning 'Facing East' for one and 'Facing West' for the other. Separated at a young age, one becomes a cop and the other, a robber. The drastic differences in their fate is a refrain on the traumatic history of modern China, which resulted in people of like backgrounds ending up with unlike lives, leading further to nature-vs-nurture contemplations. The other four films are obviously

<sup>8</sup> Special acknowledgement: this writer was inspired to find the above information relating to the development of D & B in 1985 during a discussion with Janice Chow.





*Caper* (1986): One brother becomes a cop and the other, a robber. People of like backgrounds ending up with unlike lives. (Left: Stephen Ho; right: Cheung Kwok-keung)



*Conduct Zero* (1986): The film centres on marginalised youngsters and expresses concern for the society.

‘C’ films with alternative approaches. They include the aforementioned *Silent Love* and *The Lunatics*. In addition to extending sympathy to the marginalised in the spirit of ‘doing good after becoming prosperous’, they were also the passion projects of their directors, respectively John (David) Chiang and Derek Yee. John Chan Koon-chung remembers that *Silent Love* ‘was John Chiang’s idea.’ On *The Lunatics*, Chan recalls: ‘As soon as Derek Yee sat down, he talked to me about it for two to three hours, starting from the very first shot. I used to think that he was just another good-looking actor who starred in Shaws’ films, but he turned out to be very serious and had already conceived the entire movie before we met. John Sham said, “Sounds terrific, we must let him try.”’<sup>9</sup> The word ‘try’ says a lot about D & B’s readiness to help upstart filmmakers.

*Conduct Zero* and *Kiss Me Goodbye* are both low-budget films with unusual topics. The title of the former is an homage to the French classic *Zero for Conduct* (*Zero de Conduit*) (1933). John Chan Koon-chung says: ‘My becoming a *wenqing* (young man of literature and art) was somewhat serendipitous; it all started with the film section of *The Chinese Student Weekly*, which sparked my interest in films. I remember my then classmate Peter Dunn asked me if I would be interested in seeing French movies, and from that day on, we would always keep each other’s company watching films at the Alliance Française de Hong Kong. I became a *wenqing* because of films, rather than literature.’

While the film does center on juvenile delinquents like the European work, it is also informed by the same social-service spirit in *The Owl vs Bumbo*.

Furthermore, the bicycle race in the climax is strongly reminiscent of the Hollywood film *Breaking Away* (1979). Chan reminisces: ‘Simon Yip, who was an experienced deputy director at the time, said, “Let me shoot a movie.” The company gave him the greenlight, but we only had a shoestring budget. I knew that he liked cycling, so we decided on that as the theme.’ The D & B ‘C’ film, with its modest production cost, gave a long-time assistant director his first chance to direct, and the company encouraged him to pursue his personal interest, which simultaneously pays homage to (or borrow from) a French art film and an American commercial work. As for *Kiss Me Goodbye*, it is a love story between two young idealists, set against a background of the entertainment industry. Chan remembers that love stories were rare then, and leads Loletta Lee and Anthony Wong Yiu-ming were not big names, so the film’s box office was doomed to be at best mediocre. Yet the company green-lit the project. Although both box office and critical reception were lukewarm, the story of two young persons pursuing the arts, each with ideals and ambitions, each with an aura of self-pitying and narcissistic indulgence, captures a facet of 1980s youth culture seldom portrayed. D & B deserves an A for its Cs!

### From *wenqing* to *wenren*

The D & B films in which John Chan Koon-chung participated may not be of high artistic accomplishment, but they are marked by a posture—not entirely commercial, not above commercial concerns, not too highbrow, yet still a challenge to mainstream entertainment. Chan is one of only a few literary persons to enter the film industry in the 1980s,

<sup>9</sup> Regarding the content of John Chan Koon-chung’s oral history interview, see ‘John Chan Koon-chung’ of this book, interviewed by Sam Ho, et al., collated by Wong Ha-pak, pp 148-153.



carrying with him a certain attitude and aura. The Confucian notion of *wenren*—the literati—carried special weight in modern China, especially in the first half of the 20th century. They were the educated, the idealistic, the principled, the upholder of traditions, the hope of the future. In the go-go Hong Kong of the 1980s, they were also the old-fashioned, the unfulfilled, the frustrated. But Chan is a *wenren* with a twist.

Although members of the Hong Kong literati seldom became filmmakers, some did make a big splash in post-war film history. In the 1960s, the *wuxia* films of Chang Cheh and King Hu opened up a new domain for world cinema. Both Chang and Hu were literary figures. Hu descended from a family of scholars. He was denied university education by the war, but his intellectual dispositions were those of a scholar. Chang came from a lineage of government officials and military officers, studying political science in college and entered politics upon graduation. He moved from the Mainland to Taiwan and then to Hong Kong, then worked as a writer and journalist, penning columns and film reviews under different pseudonyms. He also wrote film scripts. The works of Chang and Hu may be extolled for their physical action, but they are imbued with scholarly breeding and intellectual qualities. Even Chang's bloody violence is executed with the romantic touches of Chinese poetry. Another important literary figure is Evan Yang, who received an early education balanced in western culture and Chinese fundamentals. His cinema is characterised by a negotiation between modern, westernised ways with the values and practices of the traditional Chinese scholar. His contemporary, urban-setting films are especially notable, ranging from comedies to dramas to musicals, sketching a unique and vibrant portrait of Hong Kong culture and civilisation of their time.

Literary figures disappeared almost entirely from Hong Kong film in the 1970s and 80s. Hu, Chang and Yang joined the film industry forced by circumstances. After coming south to Hong Kong, they ran into various degrees of difficulty finding a livelihood in the traditional intellectual mode, the result of the complicated and often traumatic developments in Chinese history. As such, they ended up filmmakers in the realm of popular culture, channeling their intelligence towards entertaining the common masses. Turned out that all the stars were aligned, and they forged a place for themselves in film history. In the 1970s, Bruce Lee and Michael Hui, two of the decade's biggest stars, both had university educations, but neither projects an air of the literati in their work, unlike King Hu, who had never attended college. This is obviously the result of drastic

changes in education during the dramatic transitions in history. In the next decade, most of the Hong Kong New Wave directors who took over Hong Kong film had been university-educated. But they were film people, their passion, their idealism and their energy exuded an air of celluloid, not of books.

Yet D & B, founded by business tycoon Dickson Poon, had two genuine *wenren* among its ranks. Sham had an exuberant public persona, putting his literati qualities under veil, but he had the vision of an intellectual, which he worked to realise with his talents and his abilities, creating a unique filmmaking culture at D & B. And John Chan Koon-chung? It can be said he is a member of the literati through and through, even admitting to once being a *wengqing*, literally a young man of literature and art, though the meaning had evolved to now stand for an aesthete or even a hipster.

Chan's foray into the film industry was another kind of coincidence. Although as a young man he started as a *wengqing* by way of film, he ventured into filmmaking for a more pragmatic reason. 'From establishing my magazine in 1976 to the birth of my first child in 1981, I only had a meagre income. I was in a rush to become a screenwriter so that I could make a decent living, but many of the scripts that I wrote failed to materialise on the silver screen'. One of the scripts was a period *wuxia* film written for Sammo Hung. When he later worked with D & B, he produced films with the high degree of freedom allowed him. At that time, D & B had just agreed on a deal with Shaws to take over their cinema circuit: '...the company had to supply at least a dozen or so films each year. It wasn't possible to shoot every single one like a Lunar New Year feature, nor was it feasible to cast all the actors who were popular at the time in comedies, so there had to be some low-cost productions. No one wanted to be involved in these projects with budgets of just over HK\$1 million. I was the perfect person for the job.' As such, Chan's film endeavors, though driven by a desire for better earnings, were qualified by a contentedness with modest earnings. In the late 1970s and 80s, Hong Kong was enjoying not only a booming economy but also a new opening of plentiful opportunities, allowing for the literary inclined to make alternative choices. 'My former university classmate became vice president at a big corporation at the age of 30. I knew another who was the number-two man at an advertising agency. He took over the position from a western colleague and the success came fast. People from that generation were really lucky.'

So it was that in a thriving socio-economic environment, John Chan Koon-chung stumbled into a permissive environment created by the special

chemistry between D & B bosses Dickson Poon and John Sham, enabling this literary figure to participate in a number of unusual films that enriched the cinema of Hong Kong. It also was that Sham, during the first two or three years of the company, established mutually beneficial relationships first with Sammo Hung, the multi-talented filmmaker with a grassroots background, then with Chan, son of a merchant family who graduated from The University of Hong Kong and furthered his studies in the USA, a hipster, a go-getter and an intellectual rolled into one. Under these circumstances, that D & B quickly developed a unique and productive direction of creativity.

### Anti-Middle-Class, but also Most Middle-Class

Sham had a strategy for making 'C' films: setting up teams. In addition to Chan working as a single-member team in various capacities on several films, D & B had several other teams. One was led by Vicky Leung, which produced *Love Unto Wastes* and *Dream Lovers*. Another was the Winnie Yu squad that produced *Passion* and *Kiss Me Goodbye*, a film written by Chan. There was also one led by Linda Kuk, with Ronny Yu, Clifton Ko and Raymond Fung contributing in different creative roles, though this team was responsible for more mainstream works, mostly 'A' or 'B' films. According to John Sham: 'D & B did not operate like a corporation. Affairs of different nature were handled by small teams of creatives. Say, Ronny Yu, Clifton Ko and Raymond Fung were friends; Linda Kuk was tasked with communicating with them.' Each team had their own personalities, as well as their own freedom.

These films, less commercial and more author oriented, are grounded with a society-oriented realism, a realism that had moved beyond the 'social realism' of 1950s cinema. Social problems were plentiful in the 1980s despite the prosperity, but they were of different nature from the post-war years. The mood had changed. From 1984 to 1986, D & B's 'A' films celebrated, pondered and also parodied the people of Hong Kong on their opportunistic dedication to hard work, their optimistic but impatient ambitiousness and the charm of their small-minded pettiness. There was a flip side to that charm, ambitiousness and dedication. With material wealth becoming more and more attainable, Hong Kong people began shaking off the sadness and anger of the past, developing instead concerns for society, contemplations on history and anxieties towards modernity. This side D & B captured, explored and confronted with its 'C' films.

And the 'B' films? Somewhere in between, a little bit of 'A', a little bit of 'C'.

The 'C' films enabled by the booming film market of the time opened up opportunities for personal creative statements, resulting in a compelling portrait of the Hong Kong middle class. That portrayal is not so much a deliberate attempt to explore social phenomena, nor is it a marketing ploy to entice audiences with *la dolce bourgeois*. Instead, it comes about naturally, from the telling of human stories. The portrayal captures the interaction between the Hong Kong people and the Hong Kong environment, a manifestation of the Chinese notion *tianren heyi*, human and nature as one. This middle-class condition is organically depicted in *Love Unto Wastes*.

This is because *Love Unto Wastes* is an anti-middle-class film. By 1986, Hong Kong people had gone past the state of survival that had defined Chinese life for some time. Moving on to abundance, they could afford to be wasteful. They would famously go to restaurants and ordered way more food than they could possibly finish, wasting to their hearts' content. Shu Kei, who was in charge of D & B's marketing and publicity, said proudly in his interview for the Hong Kong Film Archive Oral History Project (dated 6 February 2020) that he came up with the English title *Love Unto Wastes*, because 'it's a film about love, and the characters in the film are wasting their lives, hence....'<sup>10</sup>

The baby boomers in the film come from different social and cultural backgrounds, each living a different kind of middle-class life. A detective investigating the case is a professional. A young model, pursuing her career with languid narcissism. Two Taiwanese women came to Hong Kong to seek their fortunes as entertainers, selling their physical assets, one having bought an apartment and the other with a sizable bank account. A rich boy, heir to a rice fortune, has no interest in the family business, choosing instead to step down the class ladder to live a bohemian life with the model. To different extents, each one is going against the fabled Hong Kong spirit of diligent upward mobility. The life they live may be middle-class, the values that govern their living are anything but. By the 1980s, Hong Kong's baby boomers had clawed their way into the desired middle class, but some began to feel that it wasn't what it's cracked up to be. 'Be careful what you wish for, it might come true', Aesop's Fable continues to ring true. Then again, 'waste not, want not' also rings true. These people have life, so may as well waste it! Wasting is a form of consumption, a form of utilisation.

<sup>10</sup> Shu Kei's 7 February 2020 English response to this writer's texted question.

*Love Unto Wastes* (1986)



It's a film about love, and the characters in the film are wasting their lives. (Left: Tony Leung Chiu-wai; right: Chow Yun-fat)



Rich boy Tony (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) and Billie (Irene Wan) may live a middle-class life, the values that govern their living are anything but.



The film has an emotional sensibility more delicate than most Hong Kong films of the 1980s; it is also more sensual, especially regarding sexuality. (Left: Elaine Jin; right: Tony Leung Chiu-wai)



Jane Chiu (Tsai Chin) performs in a club wearing a man's suit, exuding an androgynous, fetishistic eroticism.

This is yet another kind of charm, ambitiousness and dedication. Throughout history, Chinese people often found themselves lacking in material wealth. When things finally changed for the better, the change in attitude would lead to different behaviours. Perhaps the lowest level of progress can be expressed by the idiom *baonuan si yinyu*, meaning 'nourishment and warmth lead to depravity'.<sup>11</sup> Hongkongers venturing north in the 1980s to shop cheap in Shenzhen, to indulge in affordable prostitution, and to acquire inexpensive mistresses are vivid examples of such depravity. But Hong Kong people would also 'do good after becoming rich'. They would give generously to charity, or establish funds to help the poor, or take vows of morality to declare their character. On that level, doing good is a luxury only

the rich can afford. More altruistic is 'doing good after becoming prosperous', along the line of the idiom *yishi zu er zhi rongru*—'with enough food and clothing, people will think of honor'—a teaching of the early scholar Guanzi. When people no longer have to worry about starving or freezing to death, they can do good without becoming rich. But there are two sides to a coin. The flip side of doing good is wasting—wasting money, love, material properties, environmental resources, and life.

**Nourishment and Warmth Lead to Sexual Desire**

Stanley Kwan, the director of *Love Unto Wastes*, was a new director groomed by Vicky Leung, who gave him opportunity to direct his first film. 'At the time

<sup>11</sup> The literal meaning of *yinyu* is closer to 'lechery', but it is commonly understood that the idiom refers to the more general moral corruption of 'depravity'.



I had already been an deputy director for quite a few of her company's films in a row', says Kwan in his interview for the Hong Kong Film Archive Oral History Project. 'She felt that I worked hard, so she brought it up (to let me be a director), and signed a director's contract with me.'<sup>12</sup> Kwan remained grateful afterward and went back to assistant directing when Leung signed with D & B to produce *Dream Lovers*. His remembrance puts the D & B's 'C' film into a broader scope. 'I casually brought out the idea of *Love Unto Wastes*. That situation was similar to the Mainland today. If someone thinks your story is not bad, and you can land a few stars... they wouldn't worry how mainstream the film is, or how much money it will make.'

Kwan's directorial debut *Women* was released in 1984, putting him among the ranks of either the second or the third wave of the fabled Hong Kong New Wave. He studied mass communications at Hong Kong Baptist University, joined Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB) before graduating and ended up an assistant director in film before becoming a director. Like other New Wave directors, he emanates an air of celluloid, but his is a little different. At TVB, he worked on continuity, unlike New Wavers like Ann Hui, Tsui Hark or Patrick Tam, who were given the opportunity to write scripts and direct episodes to hone their skills, winning critical attention and establishing reputations, earning them the privilege to sit in the director's canvas throne once they entered the film industry. When Kwan got into film from television, he started as assistant director. It was a blessing in disguise, for it allowed him to develop into a director of 'art films'<sup>13</sup>. Not having the experience of directing programs like *CID*, *Social Worker* or *Below the Lion Rock*, he did not acquire the realist touch typical of New Wave directors, leaving room in his artistry to develop into a style that connect more readily with the post-material mentality of the mid- to late-1980s. His style and narrative strategy are closer to European art films, and not the genre orientation of New Wave directors, which were inspired by 1970s American cinema. When Ann Hui was making her first film, *The Secret* (1979), for example, her aspiration was towards the work of French director Robert Bresson but upon finishing it, she found it closer to the American *Chinatown* (1974)

and *Carrie* (1976).<sup>14</sup> By contrast, Kwan's cinema is laced with the delicate aura of European films. In his youth, John Chan Koon-chung's exposure to French cinema started him on his *wenging* path, but most of the films he worked on are not unlike the New Wave works, with hardly any French flavor. Meanwhile, Kwan, under the auspices of Vicky Leung and Sham, was able to finish a feature with an aesthetic closer to the European art film.

The motley bunch in *Love Unto Wastes* is living a middle-class life without middle-class values. For different reasons, they each are deficient of the hardworking drive and aspirational spirit that had come to define 1980s Hong Kong. Instead, they are lost, lacking life goals or doubting the goals they had been conditioned to pursue and are swamped with anxiety. They may be enjoying the fruits of prosperity but they would not do good, and they are best at wasting lives. Such a state of being is best captured with the contemplative style of European films, which in turn enriches the existential angst. The film thus has an emotional sensibility more delicate than most Hong Kong films of the 1980s; it is also more sensual, especially regarding sexuality. The casual nature of the relationship between the model and the rich boy is a ready example. The Taiwanese actress, in a moment of despair, would make love standing on the balcony with the same boy. The singer performs in a club wearing a man's suit, exuding an androgynous, fetishistic eroticism, her luscious lips at the vanguard of a trend taking off in the west, the thickness suggestive of a certain sex act. It is interesting that when the group goes to Taiwan after her death, her sister points out that she was always worried about being ridiculed for her lips and would not open her mouth too wide when she smiled. Her Taiwanese boyfriend has a new girlfriend, their love making so loud that everyone in the next room can clearly hear. All these are an update of 'nourishment and warmth leading to depravity', because they do not involve prostitution, rape or exploitation (though the relationship between the Taiwanese boyfriend and his employee can possibly qualify as exploitation). It is an indulgence born of being lost, perhaps better referred to as *baonuan si qingyu*, 'nourishment and warmth leading to sexual desire'.

<sup>12</sup> Stanley Kwan's oral history interview with the Hong Kong Film Archive (28 February 2014).

<sup>13</sup> The concept of 'art film' means different things to different people. Here, the narrow definition is the opposite of a mainstream commercial film. From the mass market standpoint, works that do not place high priority on entertainment value but are comparatively serious, focusing on the demonstration and expression of individual creativity. The broad meaning is a work that differs from a mainstream commercial film in its creation, distribution and exhibition systems, for example those exhibited in film festivals and art houses.

<sup>14</sup> See Sam Ho, 'Invigorating Contradictions', in Hong Kong Film Archive Restored Treasures: *The Secret* (Blu-ray Disc) booklet, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2019, pp 24-32.



Sexual desire is a subject that appears often casually in European art films, and the European aesthetics of *Love Unto Wastes* in turn fits into the global development of art cinema at the time. The art film, since the rise in prominence of Italian Neo-realism and the French New Wave, gradually gathered momentum as an alternative that challenged mainstream cinema. Film festivals and art houses had begun to spring up in various corners of the world and by the 1970s, art cinema had become a worldwide phenomenon, beginning to take shape as an industry. Its scope had also expanded to include works of Asian and other developing countries. Hong Kong and Chinese-language filmmakers were initially not enthusiastic about the developing trend. Besides King Hu, most filmmakers would not consider the art-film market as a viable one, focusing instead on developing careers in the commercial realm. Even Ann Hui, whose work were often invited to film festivals and had won awards, would not commit. Things changed in the 1980s, with Taiwan auteurs Hou Hsiao-hsien and Edward Yang gaining international recognition on the art-film circuit and the works by China's Fifth Generation exploding onto the scene. Kwan's artistry was drawn into this increasingly viable and desirable alternative. Not only does *Love Unto Wastes* star two Taiwanese actresses, critics of the time would also compare the film favorably to *Taipei Story* (1985), the acclaimed Edward Yang film gamely styled after European aesthetics. Kwan would go on to become a certified art-film director, with a regular presence at international film festivals. D & B's 'C' film approach thus also played a role in the development of art cinema in Hong Kong.

### Transition, Transition, Transition

Although post-war Hong Kong cinema is characterised by grassroots sensibilities, it is not without middle-class touches. The best known and most cherished are the Mandarin films of MP & GI. The wonderful life introduced in such titles as *Mambo Girl* (1957), *Spring Song* (1959) and *Between Tears and Laughter* (1961) is not so much a realistic portrayal of middle-class living but a reality-based projection of one that is imminent, something beautiful to aspire after. In the 1960s, the Cantonese cinema tried hard to appeal to boomer youths whose lifestyles were rapidly improving. A slew of films were pushed onto the market, featuring the pure and beautiful 'jade girls', sporting miniskirts and go-go boots, contriving a vibrant youth culture to show off an emerging bourgeois state of mind. Ironically, the Cantonese film's trendy campaign, with all its fashionable trimmings, was no match against its Mandarin rival, which, after celebrating middle-class modernity in the previous decade, had gone back in time and fashion, finding unprecedented success in action movies set in

the distant past, peopled with men draped in homely period costumes. Jade girls like Connie Chan Po-chu and Josephine Siao Fong-fong were unceremoniously knocked down by the *wuxia* kids Jimmy Wang Yu, Ti Lung and John Chiang. The only company that managed to put up a decent fight was Kong Ngee Motion Picture Production Company, leaning on the narcissistic shoulders of star Patrick Tse Yin to create an ideal middle-class world, in films like *How to Get a Wife* (1961) and *Prince of Broadcasters* (aka *Prince of Broadcasting*, 1966), nearly ten years later than MP & GI.

The attitude towards the emerging middle-class culture in these 1950s and 60s films is positive, never questioning its value. But in D & B's *Love Unto Wastes*, when Hong Kong has finally attained the affluence of the bourgeoisie, characters are drowning in loneliness, despair and anxiety. Middle-class values like diligence, enthusiasm and optimism that were so cherished in earlier times are nowhere in sight. What remains is just the lifestyle, like drinking in an underground bar, then going to the bathroom to induce vomiting. This is probably the natural state of modern civilisation, because this kind of condition has already been portrayed in abundance in the films of Europe, where modern civilisation was a few steps ahead of Hong Kong.

In 1987, D & B's 'C' films underwent another change. That year, John Chan Koon-chung wrote and associate-produced his last film at the company, *The Wrong Couples*. Also that year, Vicky Leung's squad stopped producing films with D & B, leaving the 'C' film mantle to the team led by Winnie Yu. The year before, Yu had already associate-produced *Passion* and *Kiss Me Goodbye*. She did even better in 1987, producing two outstanding films, *Final Victory* and *Wonder Women*. The former is directed by Patrick Tam and written by Wong Kar-wai, the latter written and directed by Kam Kwok-leung. Both works can be ranked among D & B's best. In 1988, *Fury*, released at the beginning of the year, is John Sham's last film at D & B. The Winnie Yu team produced the Kam Kwok-leung and Leong Po-chih film *Carry on Dancing* (aka *Keep on Dancing*), then ceased working with D & B. The company entered into its next phase under the leadership of Stephen Shin, who took it on a path completely different from that of Sham.

Patrick Tam, Kam Kwok-leung and Wong Kar-wai are eccentric geniuses of Hong Kong cinema. Their works are of great artistic accomplishment, and Wong had since gone on to become a world-renowned master, an iconic figure of Hong Kong art films. Since its establishment, D & B had gone through many changes, some large, some small. From 1984 and 1986 to 1987, from Sammo Hung to John Chan Koon-chung, from Stanley Kwan to Wong Kar-

wai, the D & B's 'C' films during John Sham's tenure had gone through several transitions, each with its own characteristics, each with its own achievements and contributions. The company D & B itself also played an important role in the many transitions of Hong Kong cinema. It fostered a unique approach to running a film business, finding a place in the development from the early 1980s, when Shaws and then Golden Harvest dominated the industry, to the 1990s and 21st century, when the industry was less dominated by monolithic entities but instead operating in a more evenly divided scenario. And the 1980s itself was a crucial transition in the evolution of Hong Kong film's hundred-year history.

Transition is an eternal part of the eternal changes.

[Translated by Roberta Chin]

**Sam Ho**, film researcher and former Programmer of the Hong Kong Film Archive.

## Entertainment and Creativity

### —A Look at the Development of Film Music in 1980s Hong Kong Through D & B Films

Angela Law Tsin-fung ■

Upon examination of the development of D & B Films Co., Ltd., it is apparent that the style of its works blended commercial strategies with creativity, using a ‘two-legged’ approach. From practical examples of the use of music in their films, we can trace the evolution of Hong Kong film music from pure entertainment to advanced refinement. From the ‘entertainment above all’ style of Cinema City Company Limited, to the more focused approach on sophistication of UFO (United Filmmakers Organisation), the way D & B handled music in its productions was a culmination of prior experiences, as well as, depending on the combination of creative talents involved, a bringing about of new ideas and chemistry. D & B had the financial support of the prosperous Dickson Poon as founder and two superstar-grade executive directors each flexing their respective muscles—Sammo Hung with his agile commercial mind and extensive filmmaking experience, and John Sham with his considerable cultural influence as the former Editor-in-Chief of *City Magazine*, his Westernised vision and concern for culture and education. The company had genre films such as action, romance and family comedies to fulfil the commercial market, and also had quality films—social issue films and ‘auteur films’ to round out their body of work. The music used in D & B films may not have been of pan-iconic significance, but there are plenty of interesting examples. And its development was a perfect profile of Hong Kong film music from the 1980s to the early 1990s.

#### Poster-child for Film Music in D & B Films: George Lam

In the 1970s, starting with Golden Harvest’s (Golden Harvest (HK) Limited) Hui Brothers films, the trend of adding Cantonese-dialect theme songs to Hong Kong films became a craze. ‘It’s not a film without a song’ and ‘there must be some singing in every film’ no longer applied just to Shaw Brothers’ (Shaw Brothers (HK) Ltd) Mandarin films. It is no exaggeration to call Sam Hui a pioneering hero of local film songs. Throughout the 1970s, Sam Hui’s film songs were expressed to perfection in the four Hui Brothers blockbuster films: *Games Gamblers Play* (1974), *The Last Message* (1975), *The Private Eyes* (1976) and *The Contract* (1978). The results were outstanding, both in terms of attention and influence. It started the trend of inserting Cantonese pop songs (Cantopop) into comedy films. The Hui Brothers films tend to set the tone with the theme song to satisfy cinema audience expectations. Other male-driven ‘bachelor comedies’ of the time were also influenced into having theme songs. D & B’s first film, *The Return of Pom Pom* (1984), had one too.<sup>1</sup> When Cinema City was formed in 1980, a second wave of ‘every film must have a theme song’ started. Leong Po-chih once said, every Cinema City film had to have a theme song; the film company had its reputation to uphold, and could not afford to lose in the market.<sup>2</sup> In two of the films he participated in, *Esprit D’Amour* (1983) and *Banana Cop* (1984), he got into severe arguments with the company due to music issues.<sup>3</sup> Cinema City started with just theme

<sup>1</sup> Examples of ‘bachelor comedies’ with theme songs include: *The Pilferers’ Progress* (1977), *Winner Takes All!* (1977), *Carry on Pickpocket* (1982), *Aces Go Places* (1982) and *Winners & Sinners* (1983), among others.

<sup>2</sup> See ‘From Banana to Nuts: Fangwen Liang Puzhi’ (‘From Bananas to Nuts: An Interview with Leong Po-chih’), interviewed by Zhang Jiu, recorded by Cheng Cheng, *Film Biweekly*, No 135, 26 April 1984 (in Chinese).

<sup>3</sup> The Cinema City management very much disliked the theme song for *Esprit D’Amour*, composed by Violet Lam Man-ye, saying the piano melody was too simplistic. Leong Po-Chih, director of the film, fought for Lam. In the end, the song was kept and became very popular, but directorship of the film was given to Ringo Lam. From my oral interview with Violet Lam Man-ye, April 2008. In addition, Leong Po-chih had indicated in an interview that one must compromise when one directs for Cinema City. *Banana Cop* is another example of that. See ‘From Bananas to Nuts: An Interview with Leong Po-chih’, interviewed by Zhang Jiu, recorded by Cheng Cheng, *ibid*.



The ‘half-Western’ George Lam became the poster-child of D & B’s film songs.



*Silent Love* (1986): Season Ma performs ‘Without the Two of Us’ with natural facial expressions and body language, providing the audience with a moving experience.

songs but gradually added other soundtracks and later even put in film song medleys. It became an audial avalanche<sup>4</sup> and clearly affected the audio-visual strategies of other film companies of the time.

Although D & B never purposely developed their film theme songs the way Cinema City did, in the extreme popularity of other cultural industries at the time (television, radio, record industries), the film company was somewhat compelled to do similar things. D & B did not lack star power; their comedies and young-love films were always full of potential pop song elements. These were all what John Sham called genre films with a big-name ensemble cast ‘to make the numbers’.<sup>5</sup> If at that time we measured the noise generated by the *Aces Go Places* film series, Sam Hui, seen as ‘the local boy’, would be the poster-child for Cinema City’s film songs; for D & B, it would most definitely be ‘the half-Western’ George Lam. Lam had a great relationship with Dickson Poon. Less than six months after setting up D & B, Poon established Dickson Pictures and Entertainment Limited which specialised in producing concerts. Their first event was the *Lam in Concert 85*. Furthermore, Lam clearly was highly favoured by directors of different genres, and extremely popular inside and outside of D & B. Earlier in 1979, when Tsui Hark was filming *The Butterfly Murders* (1979), he had hired Lam to sing the theme song of the same name. The result was stunning. In *Once Upon a Time in China* (1991), his rendition of ‘A Man of Determination’ became a household anthem. Even Allen Fong, with

his minimalist taste in music, couldn’t resist using ‘Moving Forward’ four times in his film *Just Like Weather* (1986). Such is the power of George Lam’s music.

In the D & B era, many fans found two George Lam films, *Heart to Hearts* (1988) and *A Bite of Love* (1990) to be most memorable (both films were made during the era when Stephen Shin ran the company). Their respective theme songs ‘Three Hearts One Mind’ and ‘Like Dreams and Fantasy’ were extremely popular. But George Lam’s songs had been featured even in D & B’s early films, such as ‘Whom Will Understand Me?’ in bachelor comedy *The Owl vs Bumbo* (1984), ‘This Night’ in adventure comedy *It’s a Drink, It’s a Bomb!* (1985), ‘Without the Two of Us’ in social issue film *Silent Love* (1986), ‘Who is Most Beloved’ in romantic drama *Passion* (1986), ‘Dare to Love Me’ in girl-power film *Wonder Women* (1987). All of these songs were very popular and well-loved. Lam certainly gave the impression that he was D & B’s exclusive theme song singer for all eight years of its existence.

As James Wong said, Lam brings a new breath to Cantopop songs with his Euro-American vocal ‘spices’, and ‘his enunciation, resonance and emotional flow are becoming much more natural. And when needed... he can go into falsetto, raising his natural voice by a full octave, adding a unique appeal to Cantonese songs’.<sup>6</sup> Placed in the above films of different genres, George Lam’s unique vocal gave

<sup>4</sup> Film song medleys are mostly made up of love songs, and are often used in young-love movies. One of the best examples is Cinema City’s *For Your Heart Only* (1985). As a whole, Cinema City films, regardless of genre or director, all have an almost continuous soundtrack of film songs.

<sup>5</sup> ‘2020 Xinnian Kuaile John Sham Cen Jianxun Xiansheng Zhuanfang (2)’ (‘Happy New Year 2020: Exclusive Interview of Mr John Sham (2)’), oral account by John Sham, interviewed by William Yuen Wing-hong, *Weige Huiguan* (‘Brother William’s Assembly Hall’) channel, 1 January 2020 (in Chinese). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bhlt2tAuqCA>. Accessed on 14 February 2020.

<sup>6</sup> James Wong, ‘Lin Xixiang Chang Guangdongge’ (‘George Lam Singing Cantonese Songs’), in Huangzhan Suibi (‘James Wong’s Jottings’), *Ming Pao*, 29 July 1979 (in Chinese).



those songs added personality: going into head voice in ‘Whom Will Understand Me?’, the blues folk style of ‘This Night’, the warm plaintiveness of ‘Without the Two of Us’, the calm haplessness of ‘Who is Most Beloved’, the American pop-rock style of ‘Dare to Love Me’. When gentle, his voice was filled with affection and worldliness; when passionate, it expressed his will to have his way. This voice, inserted into the above-mentioned films, became an iconic voice and gave those films a cultured yet playful Westernised image of refusal to follow the norm. George Lam’s singing style and physical appearance were both ‘Westernised’. That classic image of him with his moustache, and that fashionable yuppie image that seemed to exude from deep within, matched flawlessly with D & B’s image of metropolitan bourgeoisie.

### Breaking Through Music-Video Style Heartthrob Romance Films

Eric Tsang, many-time Hong Kong Performing Artistes Guild president, once said that it was natural for long-time superstar-level singers to also be movie stars, and it was nothing extraordinary.<sup>7</sup> Veteran record producer Ricky Fung believed the singers from that era became successful through their music first, and then went into performing in films. The crucial factor was that the singers were already ‘camera-ready’ before they crossed into another medium.<sup>8</sup> Singers/actors who sang film theme songs, like George Lam, became part of the unique landscape of Hong Kong film songs after the 1970s. From a commercial standpoint, they brought ticket sales, fame and fortune to the film industry, music market and to

themselves. In the 1980s era of prosperity, they were winners in every sense of the word. At the same time as this massive creative energy was asserting itself, Hong Kong’s entertainment industry also entered an era of unprecedented amounts of films ‘singing for the sake of singing’: romantic, passionate, unfettered, too numerous to be ignored. The extreme was medley-style hedonism; among them, pop songs were packaged in the most ear-catching (and pleasant-sounding) way. At one point they injected ubiquitous ‘audial hegemony’ into films and was an essential commercial element. Singers became actors, and actors became singers; it was not an anomaly to say that the commercial market was king.

The best example of ‘singing for the sake of singing’ could be found in 1985 when Dickson Poon, boss of D & B, founded Impact Entertainment Holdings Limited with Keeree Kanjanapas and Wallace Cheung. Their first film, *The Story Behind the Concert* (1986), was released in the D & B cinema circuit. The film was shot in the style of a music video. Alan Tam starred as the superstar pop singer. The documentary element was very present, and the lead role fitted Alan Tam’s real-life image and status. The one-and-a-half-hour-long film featured twenty-one of Alan Tam’s popular songs. The visual images were overwhelmed by the ear-catching love songs. Audio and visual had reached an uncoordinated imbalance. In this aspect, even though D & B was pushed by the mainstream market, they clearly never put out such an example of imbalance.

The commercial considerations of D & B had mostly to do with the combination of film genres



*Porky's Meatballs* (1987) uses romantic love songs strategically while working with the plotline to fill up the screen, creating a youthful lifestyle that is romantic and passionate.



*Conduct Zero* (1986) had local band Winds of Mind handle all the original music, especially highlighting the explosiveness of the bicycle race; its theme song ‘Running in the Wind’ is both refreshing and inspiring.

<sup>7</sup> Oral interview with Eric Tsang, conducted by 24 Herbs: 24/7 TALK, episode 17, 22 June 2018 (in Chinese). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L7-H8nbVEfw>. Accessed on 17 February 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Manfred Wong, ‘Ricky Fung Fenxi Yinyue Dianying De Yanbian Guocheng’ (‘Ricky Fung Analyses the Evolution of Musical Films’), *Headlines*, No 581, May 2019 (in Chinese).

and cast. Similar to Cinema City, pop songs usually appeared in young-love romances. With casts made up of young idols, *Devoted to You* (1986), *Kiss Me Goodbye* (1986) and *Porky's Meatballs* (1987) were prime examples. *Porky's Meatballs* featured the most songs; its six soundtracks were sung by the lead actress and actor, Adia Chan and Christopher Chan. These are examples of strategic exploitation of romantic love songs, emotional marketing strategy working with the plotline to fill up the screen, creating a youthful lifestyle that is romantic, passionate, stubbornly refusing to go with the norm. They exhibited the same problem as other films of the same genre: a surfeit of love songs. The plots moved along with the songs, using the brisk music-video rhythms to fill in the blanks. This kind of treatment was certain to miss out on some finesse. Although the song-use strategy in D & B's commercial films was similar to other film companies of its time, they also inserted songs into other alternative film genres as part of the commercial package. In addition, they did experiments that are worth a mention. All produced in 1986, they are *Conduct Zero*, *Dream Lovers* and *Silent Love*. 1986 was a prolific year for D & B, each of its 16 films shone brightly in their different ways.

As a teen film, *Conduct Zero* was a refreshing film about encouragement. It follows four young offenders under probation supervision as they challenge elite students from the police cadet school. Among other things, a highlight is a bicycle team race. There is also a romantic sub-plot. However, there are no romantic love songs in the film. The motivational theme song, 'Running in the Wind', is the only soundtrack. This showed courage in bucking the trend. A recent film *Men on the Dragon* (2018) made waves when they had RubberBand score the film and compose the theme song. In fact, 32 years earlier, *Conduct Zero* had local band Winds of Mind handle all the original music in the film. In the 1980s, there was a surge in popularity in forming bands. Winds of Mind was Joey Ou from the band Xiao Diao (Small Island) with a new partner, Tommy Chui. The film was the first musical work after the band was formed. Hong Kong films at the time very seldom had a band participate in its original soundtrack.<sup>9</sup> It was a very forward-thinking move and a focal point in the film's publicity. The music in the film was mostly light and airy, placing heavy emphasis on electric guitars, wooden guitars, bass guitars and percussions. The various guitars showed the pure, simple and direct personalities of the young men while the electronic band sounds showed the

explosiveness of the bicycle race. The result was refreshing and unified. This is a case in point that D & B was happy to try new things, in the same way they often cast numerous new actors in their films.

### The Win-Win Singer/Actor Strategy Pioneers Creative Narrations

In 1986, Tony Au had a project, a drama entitled *Dream Lovers*, using 'crossing through' and 'reincarnation' as its themes. Numerous other film companies turned it down. Luckily, he was finally able to convince D & B's John Sham to produce and exhibit the film. The male lead of this film was Chow Yun-fat, at the time considered 'box-office poison'. He and female lead Brigitte Lin both sang the theme song 'Love in Dreams'. Neither of them were professional singers, but with their fame as actors and the newness of the idea, it got the entertainment industry talking. Once the song was released, the reviews were mixed. Chow Yun-fat clearly squeezed out a gentle singing voice he thought would suit this dramatic art film. Brigitte Lin's Cantonese was quite far from perfect. But the melody by Violet Lam Man-yee and lyrics by Andrew Lam were so incredibly beautiful, this bold new combination together with the heart-breaking plot of the film made their voices a kind of 'perfect imperfection', which scored a lot of points for the song. Frequent radio play brought the film much positive publicity.

Starting in the 1970s, the Hong Kong film industry has not only made singers into actors (Sam Hui, George Lam, Kenny Bee are only a few examples), but also taken advantage of the success to make actors, who may not know how to sing, into singers, counting on their 'Midas touch' to create commercial opportunities. This method was particularly suited to a small market like Hong Kong, which guaranteed there would be enough attraction to let the market push them into profit—killing two birds with one stone. Unlike other territories, the success (or popularity) of Hong Kong performers was more or less dependent upon whether, and how well, they could juggle their singing and acting careers simultaneously. From the industry angle, the way to take advantage of this 'Midas touch' era was for the performer to become the idol product on the industrial production line. As much as Chow Yun-fat's reviews in 'Love in Dreams' were disappointing, it still started up his music career. He later starred in and sang the theme songs for two Cinema City films,

<sup>9</sup> Another D & B film produced in the same year, *Kiss Me Goodbye*, had Tats Lau Yee-tat of the band Tat Ming Pair handle the music for the film, while Anthony Wong Yiu-ming, the other partner in the duo, was the male lead. However, the music was not a collaborative effort by the band.

*Diary of a Big Man* (1988) and *Triads: The Inside Story* (1989). Both songs were playful, which suited his rustic image beloved by his fans, and ultimately achieved Platinum Disc status,<sup>10</sup> proof of commercial success.

In the day, film companies sometimes had cooperation agreements with record companies. Using *Dream Lovers* as an example, the theme song ‘Love in Dreams’ came on during the final moment of the film, just as the lead actor and actress separated. In the end credit sequence that immediately followed, big words announced ‘Theme Song “Love in Dreams” provided by WEA Records Ltd.; Singers: Brigitte Lin, Chow Yun-fat; Composer: Violet Lam Man-ye; Lyricist: Andrew Lam’. From a promotion standpoint, it allowed the audience, still in their seats, to listen to the song while reading about it. It was a technique to promote the sales of the film soundtrack. Nowadays, the credits for film songs and music are presented in a far more low-key position in the end credits; with few exceptions, they appear after the film crew’s names.

Inserting a popular song into a film was not only for ‘emotional marketing’ purposes, it could also be an effective promotions technique. In 1986, John (David) Chiang<sup>11</sup>, who had emphasised his refusal to direct mainstream films, made a film about the true criminal activities of deaf-mute youths. The film was originally entitled *Shouyu* (Sign Language), but was changed to *Tingbudao De Shuohua* (English title: *Silent Love*) when it was released. The change was inspired by Lui Fong’s extremely popular 1985 love song of the same name.<sup>12</sup> John Chiang himself said that he knew the subject of the film was unpopular and needed the help of a popular song’s fame to give the audience a deeper impression in order to reduce the pressure on box office figures. One can see that in the 1980s, a time of prosperity in the music, film and television industries, strategic use of different media products creates cross-promotional tools. This is why many of the films and their theme songs have the same title, in an attempt to strengthen each other’s sales. Although the film title was changed in consideration of its commercial potential, the subject of the film and

handling of the theme song were quite well thought-out. The film *Silent Love* did not feature Lui Fong’s song, and the theme song, George Lam’s ‘Without the Two of Us’ was ‘sung’ in sign language by the lead actress Season Ma. John Chiang said he made both decisions after a lot of thought, ‘Someone suggested I use some new songs, but I have my reasons for choosing popular songs. I hope the audience will know the song and not have to look at the lyrics in the subtitles, so they will be able to concentrate on watching the sign language performance.’<sup>13</sup> The song ‘Without the Two of Us’ appeared three times in the film. Matched with Season Ma’s natural and straightforward facial expressions and body language, it is a moving experience. As the plot develops and the characters’ feelings for each other change, every performance brings out different levels of meaning, each more impressive than the last. This also proves that in films with aspirations and ambitions, commercial popular songs can help bring out real emotions. This was mentioned in a film review from the 1980s: ‘In (Season Ma’s) film (i.e., *Silent Love*) she used sign language to “sing” Lam’s “Without the Two of Us” more than once.... Her motions were fluent and natural, which I believe was the result of hard training and not mere coincidence....’<sup>14</sup> So it can be said that quite a few D & B films used popular songs and narratives in unique ways, and they were especially outstanding when placed in auteur works. The best examples of those are Sylvia Chang’s *Passion*, Stanley Kwan’s *Love Unto Wastes* (1986) and Patrick Tam’s *Final Victory* (1987).

### The Sophisticated Use of Songs as Narratives in Auteur Films

Benefitted from the many years of evolution, film songs have endless varieties of subjects, narrative, style, genre, placement in the film and treatment. Starting from the 1980s, a format began to take shape and became more sophisticated. In reviewing the three auteur works of D & B, it can be seen that no matter whether the songs were original songs tailor-made for the film, like ‘Who is Most Beloved’, or pre-existing songs such as ‘Just Like Your Tenderness’, ‘A

<sup>10</sup> Chow Yun-fat’s 1988 album ‘12 minutes 10 inches’ achieved Platinum Disc sales figures. See the official website of the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (Hong Kong Group) Limited. <http://www.ifpihk.org/zh/gold-disc-award-presented>. Accessed on 17 February 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Li Yu, ‘Jiang Dawei: Wo Xiang Yong Dianying Qu Jiang Yixie Dongxi!’ (‘John Chiang: I Want to Say Something Through Film’), *Film Biweekly*, No 182, 27 February 1986 (in Chinese).

<sup>12</sup> Jolland Chan, Showynana Kan: *Love Swims on Paper—Jolland Chan’s Lyrics*, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Hong Kong Company Limited, 2016, p 166 (in Chinese). The song *Tingbudao De Shuohua* (‘Silent Love’) was extremely popular that year. The record by the same name also achieved Platinum Disc status. See the official website of the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (Hong Kong Group) Limited at <http://www.ifpihk.org/zh/gold-disc-award-presented>. Accessed on 27 August 2019.

<sup>13</sup> See note 11.

<sup>14</sup> Meng Changke, ‘Shipianshi Xunluo: Di 200 Zhang’ (‘Screening Room Patrol: Instalment 200’), *Film Biweekly*, No 182, 27 February 1986 (in Chinese).





Chow Yun-fat (left) and Brigitte Lin (right) made their singing debut in *Dream Lovers* (1986). Once the theme song 'Love in Dreams' was released, it became a much talked about topic.



*Final Victory* (1987): The scene where Mimi (left: Loletta Lee) sings 'Deeply in Love with You' at a karaoke bar was a stroke of genius.

'Thousand Sails Passed By' or 'Deeply in Love With You', once they were placed in a film they became part of the storytelling; they seamlessly conveyed emotions and expressed layers of meaning.

Sylvia Chang's *Passion* starts from a women's point of view. The film shows two best girlfriends Ming (played by Cora Miao) and Wendy (played by Sylvia Chang) and their complicated relationship. For years they have both loved John (Ming's husband, played by George Lam) and been trapped in that love triangle with all the pain, suspicion, jealousy, struggles and finally stepping back. In the end, after both their husbands have passed away, Ming, as the 'winner', says she is the one to let things go back to their proper way. As they continue talking, they realise that there are still hidden facts and betrayals in their story. But the object of their love is dead, and they are no longer young. In the end they can just calmly and somewhat haplessly let things end. George Lam's 'Who is Most Beloved' started at the final shot of the camera pulling back. The song title perfectly brought out the audience's question, and the blank that the film had never filled in: who did John love most? As the film's closing song, it cleverly tried to fill in an answer. The melody by Lowell Lo and lyrics by Calvin Poon Yuen-leung spoke for John, who was very reticent in the film:

I searched the world for my lover  
When I found you, I wanted to stay  
But now we've spent half a lifetime together  
And I have regrets....  
Why, when we leave, we would still follow each other  
Yet when we are together, it is unbearably calm

How can I go on? Why can't I guess right?

What is love? And who do I love most....

Let each day pass by like fog

In the silence let the chill wind blow

Who do I love most in my life? Is there a sure answer to that?

With the soft guitar accompaniment, the song portrayed the personality of the character who had passed away, whose indecisiveness caused him to run, hide, and suffer the burdens of contradiction and haplessness: an excellent reason to put the song at the end of the film.

Stanley Kwan's films usually have a theme song.<sup>15</sup> But it is most interesting when he designs characters and makes them sing. These songs are pleasant, many are already popular, and work effectively to open up the internal world of the characters. The second film Stanley Kwan directed, *Love Unto Wastes*, is such a film. Jane Chiu (played by Tsai Chin), a singer from Taiwan, decides to seek her fortune in Hong Kong. Soon after the film opens, she and her Taiwanese friend Liu Yuk-ping (played by Elaine Jin) sing *a capella* 'Just Like Your Tenderness'. There is no gentleness here; just an exaggerated, pointless opening up of the throats. They sing off-rhythm, the sequence fills with ridiculousness. In another scene, Jane is working as a singer at a bar. She sings 'A Thousand Sails Passed By', loneliness and depression on her face. Yuk-ping tells a Hong Kong friend, whenever Jane is sad, she would always sing Mandarin songs (homesick?). The film does not show much background about Jane. Under thirty minutes after the film opens, her dead body was found in blood in her home.

<sup>15</sup> I have done an in-depth analysis of Stanley Kwan's film theme songs. See Angela Law Tsin-fung, 'Shisu Qingge: Guan Jinpeng De Yinghua Zhutiqu' ('Secular Love Songs: Stanley Kwan's Motion Picture Theme Songs'), in *In Critical Proximity: The Visual Memories of Stanley Kwan*, Esther M.K. Cheung (ed), Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Hong Kong Co., Ltd., 2007, pp 179-213 (in Chinese).



'Just Like Your Tenderness' and 'A Thousand Sails Passed By' are both 1980s Taiwanese folk songs in the style of the school campus artistic movement of the mid-1970s, and contain a tinge of political publicity.<sup>16</sup> The original song was mildly sorrowful, but placed in the 1980s capitalist society of Hong Kong, it became stuck between liberation and pretentiousness. As Jane said, the song served as a refraction of the cultural differences between Taiwan and Hong Kong, colliding against and building up a polyphonic world of culture, love and desire—past/present; Taiwan/Hong Kong; culture/secular; conservative/spending; pure love/sexual desire; maintain/change; Mandarin/Cantonese. What we hear is the restrained reminiscences and love-filled concern; what we see is her and a group of Hong Kong young people in their exhausted affections, a waste of youth. The Taiwanese artistic style of sorrowfulness in the lyrics, placed against the Hong Kong style of fast-food love, becomes ironic. In a busy city that is rapidly developing, with its burden of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, a lone girl newly-arrived from Taiwan, anxious and transient, was bound to be 'double-marginalised'.

In *Final Victory*, Patrick Tam also had his characters sing. He used Danny Chan's popular song 'Deeply in Love with You' in two scenes when Mimi (played by Loletta Lee) and Hung (played by Eric Tsang) were singing in the karaoke bar, a brilliant move to show off their sincere and direct feelings toward each other. The use of the song begins from Mimi's Walkman (there is a close-up of the cassette box of Danny Chan's 'Deeply in Love with You'). It is Mimi's favourite song that she often sings to herself. She then introduces it to Hung, who at the behest of her jailed boyfriend (played by Tsui Hark) is taking care of her. After being with each other for a while, they gradually develop feelings for each other. Mimi is first to express her love to Hung with this song at an empty karaoke bar. How moving to watch their sparks fly in a cheap, deserted karaoke bar. Hung suppresses his feelings and evades her advances numerous times, but finally back at the same venue he releases the bonds of morals and propriety, and declares his love for Mimi with the same song. His hoarse voice may not have been the most pleasant, but the audience felt the amount of courage he had had to drum up. At this time, Patrick Tam simultaneously plays Danny Chan's off-screen track with Hung's on-screen track, and finally Danny Chan's voice dominates. It is as if in Mimi's

eyes, her Hung has become the Prince Charming she had always dreamed of. Patrick Tam's use of 'Deeply in Love with You' as the love declaration by both parties cancelled the need for more dialogue, and also saved on awkwardness. Seven years later, a similar device underwent some changes in Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* (1994, Wong was the writer of *Final Victory*): from Danny Chan's song to the 1960s classic 'California Dreaming' by The Mamas & the Papas, from Walkman to CD player. Looking back, Patrick Tam's sensitivity and alertness to songs was amazing.

The above three D & B films perfectly reflected that Hong Kong's film songs had already become a worldly, complex narrative form in the 1980s. Not only did they carry emotion over unfilled blanks, they added a certain life experience, and even further established an auteur's signature style. Here, pop songs do not attempt to hide their commercial tradition, nor that they take advantage of film marketing and publicity for their profit; rather than succumb to customary convention, they have provided another creative possibility.

## Conclusion

Due to space constraints, this essay is only able to outline the development of film songs in D & B films and examine a few important developments and phenomena, in order to better understand creativity as practiced by Hong Kong film songs of the same era. In observing the history of how popular songs served as narration for Hong Kong films, it is hoped to capture a snapshot that will begin an open dialogue about D & B and by extension Hong Kong audio-visual culture. There are in fact numerous topics regarding film music that have not yet been discussed, for example the composers who had scored original music for D & B, including Violet Lam Man-ye, Law Wing-fai, Lowell Lo, Richard Yuen, Danny Chung and a host of other brilliant musicians. They each shone in different ways which, when paired with the right films, produced the most unforgettable scores. Violet Lam Man-ye boldly brought *Hong Kong 1941* (1984) into another dimension by injecting a dreamy quality with her score. Law Wing-fai was incredibly creative in his suspenseful, exotic, theatrical score of *Dream Lovers*. Lowell Lo brought delicate, detailed emotion to *An Autumn's Tale* (1987), and enriched the texture of the film with various

<sup>16</sup> Emilie Yeh Yueh-yu states that in the 1970s it was popular for films to use school campus folksongs, and indicated that the songs were an effective way to publicise political messages at the time, helping to solidify the mainstream awareness and nation-building identity. See Emilie Yeh Yueh-yu, 'Beyond Visual Narration: College Folk Songs and Policy Films', in *Phantom of the Music: Song Narration and Chinese-Language Cinema*, Taipei: Yuan-Liou Publishing Co., Ltd, 2000, pp 67-100 (in Chinese).

accompaniments. Richard Yuen's *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1987) is full of comic humor but also has warm and catchy tunes. Danny Chung's *Heart to Hearts* is fashionable and easy-going, full of yuppie style. In addition, the above composers sometimes blended traditional instruments with electronic techniques. We come to know through their music that the 1980s and 90s were not only the golden era of Hong Kong film, but also a flourishing time for film music, characterised by such unique sounds and styles.

Other subjects this essay could not touch upon include the fact that D & B still used the music editor system. In other words, after the composer had created the music, it would be entirely up to the music editor to edit (with very few exceptions) and place the music to the picture. Back then Hong Kong was a prolific film producer. Often when composers finished scoring a film, they would immediately start work on another one. The work of setting music against the picture had to be done by a music editor. Thus, every once in a while, the composer and music editor would clash in their opinions, resulting in arguments. During the Stephen Shin years at D & B, there had also been attempts at improvements in sound effects techniques, a change from the older local films which were shot without sound and had everything dubbed in post-production. *Heart to Hearts* was shot entirely in sync-sound (this writer especially remembers the scene where Vivian Chow arrives nervously at the recording studio), causing the film to become a box-office hit. This made Stephen Shin decide to use Dolby Atmos for his *A Bite of Love*.<sup>17</sup> Thus it can be seen that D & B was always willing to explore advancements in sound effects, even spending a fortune on them, in order to try to perfect film production. However, in the face of the fact that sound quality was not a priority in most cinemas, no matter how good the soundtrack is, it would still affect how the audience enjoys the music/song or sound effects on the whole. Later in the 1990s, UFO's films were mostly shot sync-sound, which began a new era. These are just the sound issues Hong Kong films faced together in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Due to restricted space, I must stop here but hope to stimulate further discussion on the subject.

[Translated by Roberta Chin]

**Angela Law Tsin-fung** taught Creative Writing and Film Arts in the School of Arts and Social Sciences, the Open University of Hong Kong. She specialises in film music studies and her research interests include cultural studies, film studies as well as modern and contemporary Chinese literature. Her authored books include *Image x Music* (2004), *The Necessity of Silence: Film Composer Talk about the Art and Theory of Writing Music for Cinema* (2010), *Non-Diegetic Music/Sound* (2014), *Diegetic Music/Sound* (2014) and *The Sketch of Impermanence: Remembering Kieslowski* (2016), etc.

<sup>17</sup> 'Fang Xian Qiran: Yiyao OK, Shengxiao Xin Changshi' ('An Interview with Stephen Shin: *A Bite of Love*'s New Attempt in Sound Effects'), interviewed by Wei Hin, collated by May, *Film Biweekly*, No 297, 16 August 1990 (in Chinese).

# ‘Hong Kong 1941’: Cinematic Memories of an Occupied City and Regional Politics<sup>1</sup>

Kenny Ng ■

Radio Broadcast:

The announcement once again emphasised that Britain would not give up on Hong Kong. Various sectors of the community welcomed this reassurance from the British government, believing that it could help maintain people’s confidence. The announcement also said that two battleships, HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse, were on their way to the Far East. On the other hand, the Western Women’s Club, together with a few other expatriate women associations, protested again today against the Hong Kong government’s policy of repatriating the family members of the army and civil servants. They contended that forcing women and children out of Hong Kong and leaving the men behind was inhumane. Meanwhile, another batch of military dependents would set off for Australia by boat tomorrow...

Foreign reporter: Just how serious you think the situation is now, Captain?

British army captain: The Japanese army is very strong. But we are equally strong. There’s nothing to worry about.

Foreign reporter: And what do you think you miss most about Hong Kong?

Family member of the captain: Food, shopping, definitely shopping, especially the small Chinese shops.

British army captain: Chinese girls.

*Hong Kong 1941* (1984)

The Hong Kong New Wave, which emerged in the late 1970s, was an avant-garde creative force that rocked the local film industry, challenging filmmakers to broaden their vision and aspirations, thereby resulting directly in the golden age of Hong Kong cinema in the 1980s and 90s, but also its undoing. Under Hong Kong’s highly competitive commercial environment, many new-generation directors needed to conform to the investment and production modes of mainstream cinema, attempting to make

breakthroughs outside the traditional narrative frameworks of genre films. The commercial model of ‘Hong Kong films’ was established in the 1980s, as well as Hong Kong’s ‘local consciousness’, with works by many new directors who expressed concern for social issues and probed into thorny questions about how people felt about their identity as Hongkongers. In 1982, British Prime Minister Margaret Hilda Thatcher visited Beijing for the first time to discuss the question of Hong Kong’s sovereignty after 1997. Negotiations between Britain and China went on for the next two years until an agreement was finally reached in 1984, with the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration, which clearly stated that the Government of the People’s Republic of China would resume sovereignty over Hong Kong on 1 July 1997. Worried for the future of the city and anxious about the Handover, Hongkongers struggled to find expression for their fears. It was only through the language of commercial cinema, with its satire and ridicule, that they found a channel for catharsis and expression.

A group of Hong Kong directors born after the World War II were particularly known for their humanistic concerns about the local community and Hong Kong society, and they also embraced the notion of ‘exploring Hong Kong and re-cognising China’ through their work. Thus, the 1980s and 90s saw an array of seriously made genre films attempting to re-construct the societies of Shanghai and Hong Kong before and after the Japanese occupation and to examine the history and identity of the people of Hong Kong. Among them was Leong Po-chih’s *Hong Kong 1941*, which was set in Hong Kong during the early days of the Japanese invasion. Both Stanley Kwan’s *Rouge* (1988) and Tony Au’s *Profiles of Pleasure* (1988) take place in Shek Tong Tsui in the 1920s and

<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my thanks to Kwok Ching-ling of the Hong Kong Film Archive, who provided me with much needed information; special thanks also to my research assistant Amber Xu Yuji, who aided in collating the materials. The research paper was undertaken with the support of the Research Grant Council’s General Research Fund (GRF 12613838): ‘Cold War Cosmopolitanism: Chang Kuo-sin’s Asia Enterprises and Cultural Legacies’ (2019–2021).

30s, a once prosperous red-light district in the former British colony. With 'nostalgia' being a prevalent force in cinema at the time, there were also several films which used Old Shanghai as an allegory of pre-1997 Hong Kong, including Tsui Hark's *Shanghai Blues* (1984), Ann Hui's *Love in a Fallen City* (1984) and *Eighteen Springs* (1997), as well as Stanley Kwan's *Center Stage* (1992).<sup>2</sup>

German scholar Andreas Huyssen drew attention many years ago to the politics of memory as a cultural phenomenon much discussed in the Western world. 'Since the 1980s, it seems, the focus has shifted from present futures to present pasts, and this shift in the experience and sensibility of time needs to be explained historically and phenomenologically.'<sup>3</sup> In *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, Ackbar Abbas observes that the visual worlds of Hong Kong movies of the 1980s and 90s evoke nostalgia for the past, but doubts and uncertainties about the future. In this new generation of Hong Kong films, there was a stronger tendency to explore memory discourse. The political connotation behind this was: It is largely because of Hong Kong cinema's confrontation with a new cultural and political space after the announcement of Hong Kong's return to China that made it intriguing in the 1980s. Abbas further adds, 'Now faced with the uncomfortable possibility of an alien identity about to be imposed on it from China, Hong Kong is experiencing a kind of last-minute collective search for a more definite identity'.<sup>4</sup>

As Huyssen notes, we need to go back to history to explore and discover why the phenomenon of nostalgia and the politics of memory occur in popular culture. What exactly are the Hong Kong movies of the 1980s and 90s nostalgic about? What is the cultural intention of such nostalgia and memory? How do we understand the identity politics behind such cinematic memory? Why would filmmakers interested in Hong Kong's history be so passionately committed to recreating onscreen the British colony before and after the Japanese occupation, or in depicting the Shanghai of the same time period, at its most prosperous and also at its darkest?

To thoroughly understand the development of Hong Kong cinema in the 1980s and 90s, it is important to analyse its relationship with wider societal changes and to put it in the broader context

of Chinese cinema culture. In other words, apart from their strong concerns for local culture and identity, 80s filmmakers also felt immense emotional attachment to China. These two sentiments are two sides of the same coin, and their interplay contributes and pushes the cosmopolitan worldview of Hong Kong cinema to its heights—a topic well-worth further exploring. This essay attempts to find a comprehensive historical perspective and context for Hong Kong cinema of the 1980s and 90s, with 'cinematic memories of an occupied city and regional politics' as a fulcrum for analysis. I will delineate what the war meant and was represented in Hong Kong in the 1940s, how Hong Kong constructed its own cultural politics as well as contradictions by juxtaposing this critical period with another key moment in the 'politics of memory' of Hong Kong cinema: the 1980s and the 90s. Filmmakers have never forgotten the history of Hong Kong's occupation. Their memories and recollections of war and occupation never faded with time; instead, they extend into the present day.

### Shanghai and Hong Kong: the Sino-Japanese War and Regional Politics

The Sino-Japanese War saw a great influx of Mainlanders into Hong Kong, which resulted in the rapid expansion of its population from 0.84 million in 1936 to 1.7 million in 1941, just before the Japanese occupation of the territory. Between 1937 and 1941, when Japan took over Shanghai, a lot of intellectuals and filmmakers fled south to seek refuge in the then British colony, and became a driving force that propelled the local film industry into its 'golden era'. Before Hong Kong succumbed to Japanese control in December 1941, these literary writers and artists from the Mainland mingled and collaborated with local film producers, thus contributing to the vital growth of Hong Kong's cultural entertainment industry.

In the late 1930s, apart from the copious amount of Hollywood movies that were on offer, Hong Kong also produced a good number of 'national defence films', which were propagandistic in nature as the name has implied. The term 'national defence' originates from a slogan used in an anti-Japanese cultural movement in Shanghai, and 'national defence films' sought to disseminate the message of protecting one's country through the medium of cinema. Hong Kong can be said to be a key base for anti-Japanese

<sup>2</sup> In 1984, *Film Biweekly* published a special issue (Issue 141, 19 July 1984) on 'Nostalgia and Filmic Image', exploring such films as Tsui Hark's *Shanghai Blues*, Ann Hui's *Love in a Fallen City* and Leong Po-chih's *Hong Kong 1941*.

<sup>3</sup> Andreas Huyssen, 'Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia', *Public Culture*, Vol 12, Issue 1, Winter 2000, p 21.

<sup>4</sup> Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, 3rd ed., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, p 4.



movies. Since the mid-1930s, Moon Kwan Man-ching, Joseph Sunn (aka Chiu Shu-sun), and Esther Eng had made numerous films with 'resistance' as their main theme. According to Chiu Kit-fung, during their stay in Hong Kong, émigré literary artists and directors as headed by Cai Chusheng and Situ Huimin engaged in heated arguments with Cantonese filmmakers over the nature, function and artistic presentation of patriotism in national defence movies.<sup>5</sup> At the heart of the controversy was the way in which national defence films portrayed the 'love of country' and nationalistic ideas, which stirred up opposition voices within Cantonese film circles and presented ideological and cultural challenges. The dispute highlighted the dilemma between the intellectuals' desire for patriotic loyalty versus the need to entertain the masses, and also shed light on the complex regional political issues behind Cantonese filmmakers' efforts to resist sweeping, uncritical jingoism.

As early as 1963 when *A History of Development of Chinese Cinema* was published, co-editor Cheng Jihua already stressed that the national defence movies produced during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong represented a patriotic movement led by elites and intellectuals travelling from China down south. The locally produced Cantonese films were cheap, racy and 'feudal'.<sup>6</sup> This was an opinion deeply entrenched in the mainstream commentaries on Chinese cinema until the mid-1990s, when Hong Kong film historian Yu Mo-wan pronounced Cantonese national defence films as 'patriotic', thus elevating their position in cinema history.<sup>7</sup>

Film historians have long debated the relationships between national defence films and politics, patriotism, commercial considerations, and artistic value. In *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinemas*, Poshek Fu discusses how, during the war period, left-wing filmmakers Cai Chusheng and Situ Huimin spearheaded the patriotic films

movement in Hong Kong. Fu criticises these émigré progressive filmmakers for their 'Central Plains syndrome', in that they sought to marginalise Cantonese/commercial feature films and local culture, and that they included Hong Kong films as part of their nationalist discourse.<sup>8</sup> Fu cites a few national defence movies hastily knocked together by the exiled filmmakers, including Situ Huimin's *My Motherland* (1940) and *Song of Retribution* (Original Title: *March of the Guerillas*, 1941), Cai Chusheng's *The Devils' Paradise* (1939) and *Glorious Parade* (aka *Ten Thousand Li Ahead*, 1941). According to Fu, these films underscore the nationalist directors' sense of right and wrong, in that there is a rigid binary structure between the enemy and us, between good and evil. On top of this, they deride Hong Kong for being an evil and corrupt place.

Focusing solely on patriotism and resisting Japan, national defence films were unable to attract a large audience. To avoid provoking the Japanese, the British government of Hong Kong strictly prohibited any movies that were blatantly anti-Japan. As Han Yanli notes, national defence is used in many Cantonese films as a mere backdrop for the same tropes and kinds of melodrama frequently employed before, such as *The Two Comrades* (aka *General of Love*, 1938). These movies, she adds, also frequently make use of women's bodies and their sexuality as a source of appeal, e.g. *Feminine Spy* (aka *The Woman Spy*, 1936), *The Last of Tyrants* (aka *The Forces Within*, 1937), *The Woman Warrior* (1938), *Women Spies* (1938), and *The Shining Cup* (aka *The Luminescent Cup*, 1939).<sup>9</sup>

Chiu believes that Cai Chusheng and many other intellectuals like him from the north had more or less a 'Greater Shanghai' mentality, feeling that they were superior to others.<sup>10</sup> In his study on Hou Yao, an intellectual from Guangdong, Chiu notes that in the early days of the Sino-Japanese War, Hou had already made a few national defence movies such as *The Desert Flower* (aka *Chu Gon in Mongolia*, 1937),

<sup>5</sup> Chiu Kit-fung, 'Hong Kong National Defense Cinema (1937–1941): The Discourse of Entertainment and the Making of Imagined Community', PhD diss., Department of Cultural and Religious Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong (forthcoming in 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai and Xing Zuwen (eds), *A History of Development of Chinese Cinema Vol 2*, Beijing: China Film Press, 1963, pp 75–77 (in Chinese).

<sup>7</sup> Yu Mo-wan, 'The Patriotic Tradition in Hong Kong Cinema: A Preliminary Study of Pre-War Patriotic Films' in *Early Images of Hong Kong and China*, the 19th Hong Kong International Film Festival Catalogue, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Urban Council, 1995, pp 60–68.

<sup>8</sup> Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinemas*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, esp. pp 51–92. For the Chinese translation of the book, see Poshek Fu; Hui Liu (trans.), *Shuangcheng Gushi: Zhongguo Zaoqi Dianying De Wenhua Zhengzhi* (A Tale of Two Cities: Politics and Culture of Early Chinese Cinema), Beijing: Peking University Press, 2008 (in Chinese).

<sup>9</sup> Han Yanli, 'National Defence Cinema: A Window on Early Cantonese Cinema and Political Upheaval in Mainland China', in *The Hong Kong-Guangdong Film Connection*, Wong Ain-ling (ed), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2005, pp 68–79.

<sup>10</sup> According to Chiu Kit-fung, Cai Chusheng, a Guangdong native, experienced the leftist 'New Enlightenment Movement' in first person; Cai's own enlightenment is more of a 'religion' or 'mission' to him. After the fall of Shanghai, he travelled south with the aim to rebuild Hong Kong as the 'New Cultural Centre'. Cai's arrogance lies in his 'mission' to save the Hong Kong people with his own sense of righteousness. By that time, he had already made a name for himself in the Shanghai's film circle, and his concept of 'Greater China' was somewhat misleading; it's probably more apt to describe it as 'Greater Shanghai'.

*Storm over Pacific* (aka *Incident in the Pacific*, 1938) and *Fortress of Flesh and Blood* (aka *Provoking Father*, 1938). These movies were largely adapted from serial fiction, blended with folktale elements. Although their aesthetic conception erred on the conventional, much effort was exerted in plot development and the creation of sensational effects, which appealed to local Cantonese-speaking audiences with lower education levels.<sup>11</sup> *The Desert Flower* was particularly successful, making Hou one of the pioneers in the genre of local national defence movies. Distinctly different from Hou was Cai, who, following a left-wing ideology, insisted that national defence movies should realistically reflect society, and effectively confront the audience with the cruelty of war. Graphically portraying the violent cost of resistance, *A War at Bow Shan* (aka *The Blood-Stained Baoshan Fortress*, 1938) co-directed by him and Situ is a case in point. Cai was critical of all folktales or movies that used the past to ridicule the present. His feud with the Cantonese-speaking directors never ended, a situation which could be said to have marked the inception of a debate over how patriotism should be presented in national defence movies.

In the late 1930s, as a tool of publicity and mobilising public support, national defence movies actively engaged in topics such as Mainland politics and the Sino-Japanese War, sparking heated arguments between Hong Kong's local filmmakers and the émigrés. Cantonese films, which prioritised entertainment, popular culture and plebeian traditions, experienced an unprecedented challenge from Shanghai's educated elite. The

problematic concept of 'the nation' was at the heart of the ideological conflict between 'patriotism' and 'commercialism' in the making of national defence movies, creating both tension and engagement between national, political beliefs and regional popular culture. See-kam Tan uses the term 'Sinicist melancholia' to describe the tenuous cultural links and relationships that the exiled Chinese directors had with their Hong Kong counterparts. The perils of war afforded Hong Kong filmmakers a historical opportunity for recognising and recalling, categorically and irrefutably, the intricate connection between Hong Kong and the Mainland, in terms of their culture and their people.<sup>12</sup>

### Hong Kong and Shanghai: Cinematic Memory in the Late Cold War Period

In 1945, shortly after Japan's surrender, China's Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) quickly devolved into civil war. At the same time, Britain regained colonial rule over Hong Kong. Due to the subsequent Chinese Civil War, millions moved south to British Hong Kong to seek refuge. Between Shanghai and Hong Kong, many of the leftist filmmakers who had come to Hong Kong during the war returned to the Mainland after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, whereas many of the 'dissenting' filmmakers who had remained in Shanghai during its 'Orphan Island' period were marginalised after the war, and so they chose to 'exile' themselves to Hong Kong. Notable names that belong to the latter group include executive producer Zhang Shankun, actresses Li



*The Desert Flower* (1937) was particular successful, making director Hou Yao one of the pioneers in the genre of local national defence movies. (Left: Wong Siu-hing; right: Ng Cho-fan)



Cai Chusheng and Situ Huimin, who came south to Hong Kong, followed a left-wing ideology; their directorial work, *A War at Bow Shan* (1938), realistically reflected the war cruelty. (Front row, left: Chow Chi-sing)

<sup>11</sup> For the latest research on Hou Yao, see Winnie Fu (ed.), *Transcending Space and Time—Early Cinematic Experience of Hong Kong, Book II: Pioneer Filmmaker Hou Yao*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2014. [Electronic Publication] [https://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/CulturalService/HKFA/documents/2005525/2007294/ebrochure\\_02.pdf](https://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/CulturalService/HKFA/documents/2005525/2007294/ebrochure_02.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> See See-kam Tan, 'Chinese Diasporic Imaginations in Hong Kong Films: Sinicist Belligerence and Melancholia', *Screen*, Vol 42, Issue 1, Spring 2001, pp 12–17.

Lihua, Zhou Xuan, Bai Guang, directors Griffin Yue Feng, Richard Poh (alias Bu Wancang), Ma-Xu Weibang, Li Pingqian, Doe Ching, Tu Guangqi, etc. They made Mandarin films in Hong Kong, a base for Cantonese-language cinema, and their works were characterised by a balance between apolitical didacticism and mainstream entertainment. Later Griffin Yue Feng and Doe Ching even volunteered to join Motion Picture & General Investment Co. Ltd. (MP & GI) and Shaw Brothers (Hong Kong) Ltd., ‘rightist’ studios that were pro-Taiwan. Thus the Hong Kong-Shanghai link played a crucial role in the development of post-war Hong Kong cinema, helping to build the foundations for Hong Kong to become the base for Chinese-language cinema worldwide, and ushering in what was to be the ‘Golden Age’ of Mandarin-speaking films in Hong Kong.

In 1949, after the CCP had established its rule in the Mainland, post-war Hong Kong took centre-stage for the left-right culture war that ensued. Studios such as Great Wall Pictures Corporation, Feng Huang Motion Picture Co., and Sun Luen Film Company were leftist and pro-China, while Shaw Brothers, MP & GI, and Hong Kong and Kowloon Cinema & Theatrical Enterprise Free General Association Ltd. formed the backbone for the rightist side that supported the Taiwanese KMT.

Indeed, such ideological differences heavily influenced how leftist and rightist films portrayed the Sino-Japanese War. For example, the MP & GI production *Four Brave Ones* (1963) was based on the war novel *The Spy War Between China and Japan*; and the more well-known *Sun, Moon and Star* (1961) was adapted from the novel of the same title by Xu Su. Both were epic films about love and personal relationships against the backdrop of turbulent history, about patriotic young people engaging in the war effort in areas under Japanese control. A (non-Chinese) commentator criticised *Sun, Moon and Star* for its omission of the Communists’ role in the war, and even whitewashing brutal Japanese war crimes: ‘Why? So as not to offend the regime of leftover war criminals that, by 1961, had become a firm U.S. ally?’<sup>13</sup>

One must recognise that, in Cold War-period Hong Kong, any form of ‘historical memory’ about the war would be limited and/or editorialised in some way, and that such memory could even be erased and suppressed by the authorities. Thus the erasure

of the anti-Japanese effort in MP & GI’s war films is not surprising. Apart from the fact that Japan quickly joined the US’ anti-Communist alliance after the war, the repression was also likely affected by the British-Hong Kong government’s strict film censorship standards. During this time the government banned a number of Chinese war films, including *From Victory to Victory* (1952) and *Reconnaissance Across the Yangtze* (1954), both about the Chinese Civil War; and *Lin Tse-hsu* (aka *Lin Ze Xul The Opium War*, 1959), a film that touched on the history of Sino-British relations. Among the banned titles were also a number of Communist propaganda films on the Sino-Japanese War, such as *Guerrilla Sweep the Plain* (1955), *Railway Guerrilla* (1956), and *Tunnel Warfare* (1965). Yet, even if these had not been banned by the government, it is unlikely that Hong Kong audiences would have been interested in watching war films or films about class struggle made by the CCP. Having said that, it remains that the British-Hong Kong government censorship policies intended for the ‘long-term stifling of opportunities for Hong Kong audiences to see varying viewpoints of history onscreen’, so as to ‘prevent them from historical realisation and political engagement as colonised people’. This resulted in the ‘ahistoricisation, apoliticisation, and commercialisation of Hong Kong entertainment and culture’ in the 1950s to 60s.<sup>14</sup>

From the ‘national defence films’ debate during the Sino-Japanese War to the left-right struggles during the Cold War period, local Hong Kong Cantonese films have always borne the brunt of criticism and pressure from Sinocentric nationalism. Coupled with political oppression from the colonial government, Cantonese cinema became the crucible for all sorts of cultural wars and political struggles, a reflection of the complexity of local identity politics. At the same time, in the mid-20th century, many ‘exiled’ filmmakers from Shanghai fled to Hong Kong to make use of its unique space as a colonial territory to create art that explored war from a humanistic angle, to tell personal and intimate stories and mainstream historical narratives that broke away from the historical view of class struggle imposed by the CCP. Some thirty or forty years later, on the eve of the city’s return to China in the 1980s and 90s, how did local filmmakers, with a more cosmopolitan perspective, imagine Shanghai from the point of view of Hong Kong? How did they reconstruct the cultural relationship between the two cities, and the story of Hong Kong and China?

<sup>13</sup> Barry Freed, ‘Chinese Shaggy Dog “Epic”’, IMDB, [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0211753/reviews?ref\\_=tt\\_urv](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0211753/reviews?ref_=tt_urv), posted on 20 October 2007.

<sup>14</sup> See Kenny Ng, ‘Political Censorship of Hong Kong Cinema in the Cold War Period’, in *The Cold War and Hong Kong Cinema*, Wong Ain-ling and Lee Pui-tak (eds), Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2009, p. 64 (in Chinese).





*Shanghai Blues* (1984): Director Tsui Hark's focus is clearly not on the trials and tribulations of life in war-time Shanghai or the brutality of the Japanese invasion; it is a typical Hong Kong film, which blends together historical fantasy and romantic comedy.

In the 1980s, the people of Hong Kong faced a legitimacy crisis in the time leading up to the Handover of 1997. This was also known as another golden age of Hong Kong cinema, as the continual negotiation and conflict between political thought and commercial interests led to a wave of bold, new Hong Kong films that reflected the population's collective desire to construct their own cultural identity. *Shanghai Blues* was the inaugural production of Tsui Hark's Film Workshop Co. Ltd., and the first and second drafts of the screenplay were written by John Chan Koon-chung and Raymond To respectively. Kenny Bee plays a nightclub clown Tung Kwok-man who is enraged by the 1937 Japanese invasion of Shanghai and decides to join the army. Before setting off, he takes refuge under a bridge over the Suzhou River during an air raid, where he meets a helpless and despondent Shu Pei-ling (played by Sylvia Chang). The two fall in love in the darkness, and exchange vows that they would meet each other again under the same bridge after the war was won. Ten years pass, and Tung returns to Shanghai after the war. Out of sheer coincidence, he lives in a flat one floor above Shu's—reunited but not recognised. Stool (played by Sally Yeh) enters the picture at this time, and Tung mistakes her for the woman with whom he fell in love ten years ago. Not until the end of the film that Tung realises that the cabaret hostess, Shu, is his true love from a decade ago. As Shu makes her way to leave Shanghai for Hong Kong, the radio broadcasts a piece of music composed by Kenny Bee's character (the film's theme song 'The Wind at Night'), who decides to chase after the train and his one true love.

Typical of Hong Kong cinema, *Shanghai Blues* blends together historical fantasy and romantic comedy. Throughout this tale of lovers meeting, departing, reuniting, bickering and falling in love

with each other, Tsui's focus is clearly not on the trials and tribulations of life in war-time Shanghai or the brutality of the Japanese invasion (in fact, there are no Japanese characters at all, nor are there any scenes depicting the invasion), not to mention that zero screen time is spent on depicting the Chinese Civil War. Historical details are sprinkled throughout the film, such as Tung Kwok-man working as a small-time clown before the war, and even after the Japanese have left he is still destitute and poor, and has to consider selling his own blood to make enough to eat. When he returns to the bridge to find his love, he sees nothing but a group of homeless old soldiers, and people who are harassed by the local authorities for seeking refuge under the bridge. The story also briefly mentions how disastrous fiscal policies lead to chaotic inflation and economic recession, while bloodsucking businessmen and foreign colonisers collude to make a fortune—yet these details are only mentioned in passing (on this subject matter, *Myriad of Lights* (1948), produced by the Shanghai Kunlun Film Company, gives an in-depth portrayal of the lives of petit-bourgeoisie and the working class in post-war Shanghai).

It is apparent therefore that the city Tsui is nostalgic for in *Shanghai Blues* is the glitzy, glamorous Shanghai of the 1940s. Indeed, for Hong Kong audiences in the 1980s, old Shanghai is a unique time and place that represented a kind of exoticism. As Shek Kei observes, the screenplay of *Shanghai Blues* pays tribute to many of the Shanghai productions of the 1930s and 40s: Tung Kwok-man's musician character plays the tuba, like the character played by Zhao Dan in Yuan Muzhi's *Street Angel*; the comedic sparring between Tung and the two ladies who live in the flat below is reminiscent of Shen Xiling's *Cross Roads* (1937); and the scenes of the



bank run and the hysterical buying of gold seem to call back to Zheng Junli's *Crows and Sparrows* (1949).<sup>15</sup> Tung also imitates Nie Er, a real-life musician, as he plays the violin on the roof of a building, against the neon-lit backdrop (see Stanley Kwan's depiction of Nie in *Center Stage* [1992]). Furthermore, I also believe that the scene where Tung and Shu Pei-ling meet under the bridge at the start of the film is a reference to the Hollywood classic *Waterloo Bridge* (1940), a romantic tragedy which took Shanghai by storm upon its release (among its fans was famed writer Eileen Chang). In *Waterloo Bridge*, Robert Taylor and Vivien Leigh play lovers who meet and fall in love on Waterloo Bridge, London, but just as they decide to marry, World War I breaks out. Taylor leaves for the front, and ballet dancer Leigh, through a series of twists and turns, ends up as a prostitute. In comparison, *Shanghai Blues* is more modern in its approach, and considerably lighter in tone and faster in pace as a romantic comedy. The chief similarity is that after Tung joins the army, Shu becomes a cabaret hostess in order to survive. Although she is intimidated and surrounded by the wealthy and powerful, she adamantly refuses to sell her body, choosing instead to return time and again to the Suzhou River Bridge to wait for her beloved.

In the early 1980s, with the rolling out of economic reforms in the Mainland, Mandarin cinema also saw the popularisation of films set in 1930s and 40s Shanghai, including *A Lady from Shanghai* (1982) by Hu Siao-fung, a veteran director from The Great Wall Movie Enterprises Ltd; and *The Last Night of Madam Chin* by Taiwanese director Pai Ching-jui. Yet most notably of all, nostalgia for old Shanghai was a key subject for filmmakers of the Hong Kong New Wave, as it was a way for them to 'directly respond to the contemporary political atmosphere—the 1997 Handover and the sense of identity crisis surrounding it'.<sup>16</sup> American literary critic and postmodernism scholar Fredric Jameson's theories on 'nostalgia films' centre on 70s Hollywood films which, he argues, were essentially 'pastiche'—artistically collaging together different trends and fashions in terms of mise-en-scène, props, costumes, and even music, thereby creating a stylised, 'new' version of the past that communicates a 'pastness' that is not necessarily reflective of history.<sup>17</sup> Yet, for me, Hong Kong's 80s 'nostalgia' is different from Western postmodernism,

in that it engages in topics such as the complexities of the Hong Kong-China relationship, historical context, and even cinematic memory. Its sense of history is not eroded but instead embedded within the sophisticated aesthetics and narratives of the films themselves. Earlier in this essay, I mentioned Abbas' discussions on 'memory discourse', where he argues that few auteurs manage to transcend the limitations of contemporary trends and turn inward into history, to explore one's own experience of history and cultural identity.<sup>18</sup> Yet, as Leo Lee Ou-fan observes, Tsui's films are a creative re-imagining of the connection and interaction between the two cities of Shanghai and Hong Kong, so as to express and explore what links them together.<sup>19</sup>

The opening shot of *Shanghai Blues* focuses on a poster with three portraits of idealised femininity (a female warrior, a nurse, and a teacher), along with the slogan 'Support the Frontlines, United We Fight'—a picture of irony indeed. A few minutes later, the Republic flag appears as well. The camera then moves down to show us the French Concession of Shanghai, guarded by soldiers as a Frenchman takes a Chinese prostitute to the cabaret, believing that the Japanese invasion of Shanghai would not affect the concession areas. Both foreigners and Chinese talk big about flipping essential supplies and food for money, as the Westerner says, 'This is the French Concession! Who cares about that's on loan. Rice, bread, all the same as long as you're full! Let's not worry about tomorrow. Drink up. Cheers!' Revellers talking and boasting on the eve of Shanghai's fall to the Japanese—can this be a subtle dig at the 'end days' before Hong Kong's 1997 Handover back to China? Onstage, the cabaret performers dance and sing, '*Me and you and me and him, we all want to make this wonderful place our home / Have a laugh, sing a song, do a dance! / This tiny place, is our Heaven*' and '*There is no place like this place, so many legends, so great, so beautiful*.' Tsui plays around all kinds of markers of the past to create a light-hearted, playful nostalgia that, at the same time, reeks of decadence and decline. The bustling cabaret at the heart of the French Concession before the end of an era—a metaphor, perhaps, for a city whose future was uncertain amidst ongoing negotiations between China and Britain, but insisted on 'horse-racing and dancing as usual' despite the ever-present sense of anxiety and disquiet at the back of everyone's minds.

<sup>15</sup> Sek Kei, 'Shanghai Zhi Ye—Fengfu Qiqing, You Xiao You Lei' ('Shanghai Blues: Dramatic Story Arc that Evokes Laughter and Tears'), *Ming Pao Evening News*, 12 October 1984 (in Chinese).

<sup>16</sup> Lin Li, 'Tuoxie Yu Zixin' ('Self-Compromise and Self-Confidence'), *Film Biweekly*, No 198, 9 October 1984 (in Chinese).

<sup>17</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, pp 38–52 & 279–296.

<sup>18</sup> Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Third Edition), see note 4, pp 22–25.

<sup>19</sup> Leo Lee Ou-fan, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China 1930–1945*, Mao Jian (trans), Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp 309–310 (in Chinese).

Tsui stated very clearly in an interview that he did not intend to create or emphasise an absolute link between 40s Shanghai and 80s Hong Kong in *Shanghai Blues*. He also rejected the straightforward interpretation of Tung Kwok-man's character as representing Hong Kong, and his love interest Shu Pei-ling China. However, Tsui admitted that the film was not simply a romantic story of love, but an attempt to express a romantic relationship through the act of imagination, a relationship that goes through separation, reconciliation and breaking apart once again: 'much like the Mainland's reclamation of Hong Kong—that feeling of a connection long lost but suddenly re-established, that psychology of conflict, helplessness, melancholy. And to recall oneself as a Chinese stirs up very complicated feelings. When I realised all this, I'd already filmed half the picture, so I tried hard to evoke such emotions at the end of *Shanghai Blues*.'<sup>20</sup>

The film ends with a climactic scene on a train. American professor David Bordwell is highly complimentary on the way it weaves together song, sound, and visual rhythm, even going so far as to saying that it is a feat that modern Hollywood cinema would not be able to replicate.<sup>21</sup> Tung Kwok-man's composition 'The Wind at Night' is broadcast on radio. Yet Shu Pei-ling has agreed to marry a wealthy businessman, and is about to depart the city by train that night. Stool, despite her feelings, tells Tung about Shu's news, and he rushes to the station and jumps onto the train, just as the tune 'Shanghai Blues' begins to play. Tsui stated that he conceived of and planned this series of shots according to the music and lyrics of the song, but his focus was not on the cheap comedic gags, instead he wished to convey to audiences a meaningful historical fable through image and sound. While filming *Shanghai Blues*, Hong Kong was at a stage where it needed to rethink and reconstruct its relationship with the Mainland, and the film attempts to bring such local discourse to the level of story and fable. Shanghai is portrayed as a city as crowded and cut-throat as Hong Kong, where everyone tries to fight their way into showbiz, where life is seeped with consumerist paraphernalia such as 'Calendar Queen' beauty pageants and commercials. Yet at the same time, popular culture and ear-pleasing music become an essential part of collective memory and history. As the train takes the lovers away from Shanghai and southwards towards Hong Kong, we all know that it is heading towards a city that was, back then, second

to Shanghai in its internationalism, and which will eventually overtake its position after 1949.<sup>22</sup>

Shanghai cinema from the 1930s and 40s share much in common with Cantonese films from colonial-period Hong Kong: both founded in a context of urbanisation, industrialisation of the cinema complex, and flourishing consumerist entertainment; both seen as 'other' and commonly rejected outside the discourse of modern Chinese nationalism and cinema history. If indeed the story of Kenny Bee's Tung (Hong Kong) and Sylvia Chang's Shu (China) separating and eventually reconciling with each other reflects the filmmaker's optimism regarding his identity as 'Chinese', re-watching the film may stir up more complex mixed feelings on the subject. The James Wong-penned lyrics of the film's theme tune 'The Wind at Night' also seem particularly poignant: 'My dream tonight / Is it your dream of the future?' Would the couple's loving relationship turn sour, and each pursue different dreams in the future? Or would they share the same 'Chinese dream'? 'I devoutly implore the night wind / To borrow time and let my love stay / To make future pains more bearable'. The male and female protagonists experience 'love at first sight' when they meet under the bridge, but could their mutual love and trust be maintained, or does their embrace at the end of the film actually signify the beginning of the end, a love at last sight?

At the end of the film, after much 'conflict, helplessness and melancholy', the couple leaves Shanghai for Hong Kong by train to begin a new life. Today, reflecting on the past, we may further appreciate and interpret the ending from a historical perspective. The train, packed with passengers, could have been carrying the many intellectuals, artists, entrepreneurs and filmmakers, who brought with them their capital and talent to contribute to the post-war cinema industry of Hong Kong, to build what was to quickly overtake Shanghai as the international hub of Chinese-language cinema. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949, many Mainlanders flocked to Hong Kong to escape Communist rule, and the population in Hong Kong rose rapidly from 1.7 million in 1947 to 2.01 million in 1951. The British and Chinese governments chose to increasingly tighten the border controls from both sides. The British Hong Kong government formed policies to limit the influx of Mainlanders entering the city, essentially implementing a lockdown, and

<sup>20</sup> 'Ganxing Luoji De Diyi Bu: Fangwen Daoyan Xuke' ('The First Step to Becoming Sensually Logical: An interview with Hsui Hark'), interview by Nie Da, You Chongsheng, collated by Zeng Yuying, *Film Biweekly*, No 147, 11 October 1984 (in Chinese).

<sup>21</sup> David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000, pp 139–140.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

the Lo Wu border became a forbidden zone. The newly established Chinese authorities also strictly controlled the number of people who could cross the border into the Mainland from Hong Kong, for fear of spies and intelligence officers infiltrating the country. Effectively therefore, the traffic of people travelling between Hong Kong and the Mainland came to an abrupt halt in 1950, but the cultural ties between them were never fully severed. Instead such historical factors helped nurture Hong Kong people's conflicting feelings towards their own identity and their complex emotions towards identifying as Chinese.

### Pre-Handover 'Hong Kong 1941': A Fallen City and an Occupied Colony

From the Cold War till just before the Handover, Hong Kong cinema mostly lacked a clear sense of identification with Chinese nationalism. In an increasingly globalising and consumerist economy, coupled with the rapidly approaching 'moment of destiny' that was going to be the exchange of power between Britain and China in 1997, mainstream local media and films mostly indulged in a great sense of nostalgia, and many a historical retrospective was conducted in this climate of unease and doom.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, filmmakers, who existed on the fringes of politics, were using different narrative and aesthetic styles to construct a localised voice in historical narrative—a way of responding to collective desires and anxieties in society, to reconstruct colonial history, but more significantly, to rewrite the story of Hong Kong.

*Hong Kong 1941* was made in 1984, directed by New Wave pioneer Leong Po-chih and penned by John Chan Koon-chung. Chow Yun-fat plays Yip Kim-fay, an orphan who grows up in a theatre troupe and later becomes a coolie worker. During a riot at the rice granary, he encounters and befriends the righteous Wong Hak-keung (played by Alex Man) after some twists and turns. Originally from a prestigious family of officials, Hak-keung has fallen on hard times. His childhood friend is Ha Yuk-nam (played by Cecilia Yip), daughter and only child of rice merchant Ha Chung-sang (played by Sek Kin). The snobbish Chung-sang tries to marry Yuk-nam off to a rich man's son, but she decides to flee and join Kim-fay and Hak-keung in their attempt to move to San Francisco. As fate would have it, however,

their hopes of starting anew in the US are dashed with the start of the Pacific War and the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong. Most of the film takes place in the period during the Japanese occupation of the city (25 December 1941 to 15 August 1945). As a way to exit the love triangle between himself, Hak-keung and Yuk-nam, Kim-fay becomes a Japanese collaborator, thus causing a great misunderstanding and rift between the three friends. In the end, Kim-fay attempts to bomb the Japanese Army's boat at great personal risk in order to help his friends escape Hong Kong. The film ends before the three friends can welcome the arrival of peace; those who escape from death in this great catastrophe can only drag out an ignoble existence, and wait in trepidation for dawn to overcome darkness.

On Christmas Day of 1941, Governor Mark Aitchison Young, signed the capitulation of Hong Kong to Imperial Japan at The Peninsula Hong Kong, marking the official defeat of the British forces and the temporary suspension of British rule in Hong Kong. Days later, Japanese commander Lieutenant General Sakai Takashi issued decrees and established the military government of Japan in Hong Kong, and the city thus formally entered a difficult period of Japanese occupation.<sup>24</sup> The invasion and occupation of the Japanese was in effect the second time Hong Kong had been colonised, and the period of three years and eight months that Hong Kong was under Japanese rule became the metonym of this dark period in the city's history. During this time, the people of Hong Kong endured all kinds of hardships, their lives and livelihoods threatened with no help or recourse in sight. In fact, even as the Japanese army had been approaching Hong Kong, the British were lax in their efforts to defend the city. The commanders in London never considered Hong Kong a strategic stronghold worth spending resources on. Most of the might of the British Navy in Southeast Asia was concentrated in Singapore. Indeed, throughout the entire Sino-Japanese War, the British government had desperately tried to remain neutral in the conflict.<sup>25</sup>

*Hong Kong 1941* opens with the news broadcast: 'The announcement once again emphasised that Britain would not give up on Hong Kong. Various sectors of the community welcomed this reassurance from the British government, believing that it could help maintain people's confidence.' The film was released in 1984, when audiences had just been

<sup>23</sup> See Eric Kit-Wai Ma, 'Re-Advertising Hong Kong: Nostalgia Industry and Popular History', in *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, Vol 9, No 1, Spring 2001, pp 131–159.

<sup>24</sup> Kelvin Chow Ka-kin, *Zhuoshi Xiaomo — Rizhi Shiqi Xianggangren De Xiujian Shenghuo (Leisure in Times of Turmoil: The Leisure Culture of Hong Kong People under Japanese Occupation)*, Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Company, 2015, p v (in Chinese).

<sup>25</sup> Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinemas, Between Shanghai and Hong Kong*, see note 8, p 67.

informed of the Joint Declaration between the British and Chinese governments, and that negotiations for arrangements during the transition of power were yet to begin. The broadcast seems to contain a political undertone addressed specifically to contemporary audiences: would Britain ‘give up on Hong Kong’ after 1997, and would this cause social unease and for people to lose confidence? The opening scene of the film satirises the British government’s role in the war, as it cuts directly from the announcement straight to a scene where the British are evacuating its citizens from Hong Kong. Interviewed on camera, a British naval officer says, ‘The Japanese army is very strong. But we’re equally strong. There’s nothing to worry about.’ The reporter then asks the woman next to him what she would miss about Hong Kong, and she replies, ‘Food, shopping, definitely shopping, especially the small Chinese shops.’ The officer interjects, ‘Chinese girls.’ Later, Yip Kim-fay smuggles on board in an attempt to leave Hong Kong, but he gets bullied by a British girl into playing the slave to her Empress Dowager, once again reinforcing the haughty arrogance of the British colonials.

As Hong Kong falls under Japanese rule, the Japanese army displaces the British to become top of the power hierarchy, and the film depicts how their power, too, is fundamentally colonial in structure. The same roles remain: the rice merchants and New Territories gentry men who act as compradors, such as Ha Chung-sang; small-time ruffians who do the dirty work like Yip Kim-fay; police officers who collude with the local thugs; and working-class men at the bottom of the social hierarchy such as Wong Hak-keung and other coolies and citizens. The only exception is the resistance guerrilla fighters—how they fit into this power structure is less clear. Overall, the screenplay consciously constructs a collaborative colonialist power structure made up of a rural community that is split into upper, middle, and lower classes. As Law Wing-sang suggests, the political rule of the British empire was bottom-up in structure: its goal was to collaborate with local Chinese merchants, the gentry, even intellectuals, so as to both localise as well as stabilise the colonial ruling classes.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, the film tells the story of Ha Chung-sang, the rice merchant who hoards and stockpiles resources from the start of the conflict, and later tries to use his relationship with the British to make a fortune out of the crisis. *Hong Kong 1941* also cleverly uses a very down-to-earth and accessible way

of connecting ordinary folk with lesser-known facets of ordinary life: while people struggled to survive during the Japanese occupation, rice as a staple food became a necessity in wartime, and the fight for rice is a metaphor for the battle for survival in troubled times. On the other hand, rice is also skilfully used to unify and link together characters from different social classes, positions of power and romantic relationships—this is one of the finest aspects of the film.

According to historians, Hong Kong suffered a breakdown in social order during the Japanese invasion, and rice stocks were frequently robbed. Black markets sprung up, and the price for rice remained astronomical. After Japan drove out the British forces and fully occupied Hong Kong, rice granaries were sealed by the Japanese army, and only until January 1942, when rice rationing was in place, were Hong Kong citizens offered a basic level of guarantee for their livelihood.<sup>27</sup> At the time, the population of Hong Kong was around 1.7 million, and the shortage of food on the market forced many people to choose to leave Hong Kong, and seek refuge in Macao or areas under KMT jurisdiction. However, survival being a key instinct of the human race, ‘daily life’ had to continue for the majority of citizens, who simply had to make do and think of ways to overcome everyday obstacles. During the occupation, people did what they had to do to survive, but also what they had to do in order to ‘live’, in the sense that they needed to do everything and anything to prolong their lives. Life becomes all the more precious in troubled times, and each and every day that one gets to stay alive is in itself a blessing.<sup>28</sup>

*Hong Kong 1941* dramatises some of the history of this period. Before the Japanese forces approach, local thugs and gangsters take advantage of the moment to buy up all the rice available on the market, and Chinese policemen also take part in the looting. Non-locals who attempt to buy rice are attacked by local ruffians, a reflection of the struggles faced by non-local refugees in Hong Kong in the 1940s, but also a stark reminder that tensions between local and alien communities have had a long history. After the Japanese take over, the army first seize control of rice supplies in order to threaten the people into subordination. Yip Kim-fay witnesses a child heeding his father’s words and would rather pick up horse droppings than to collect rice from the Japanese,

<sup>26</sup> Law Wing-sang, *Collaborative Colonial Power: The Making of the Hong Kong Chinese*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Kwan Lai-hung, *Rizhan Shiqi De Xianggang (Revised Edition) (Hong Kong under the Japanese Occupation [Revised Edition])*, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2015, pp 138-142 (in Chinese).

<sup>28</sup> Kelvin Chow Ka-kin, *Leisure in Times of Turmoil: The Leisure Culture of Hong Kong People under Japanese Occupation*, see note 24, p vii.



## *Hong Kong 1941* (1984)



Rice is skilfully used to link together characters from different social classes, positions of power and romantic relationships.



The complex relationship of friendship and love between the two men and one woman is reminiscent of François Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1962). (From left: Chow Yun-fat, Alex Man, Cecilia Yip)



Yip Kim-fay pretends to be a Japanese collaborator; in fact, he endures humiliation for a greater cause. (Left: Chow Yun-fat; right: Stuart Ong)



Ha Yuk-nam (back: Cecilia Yip) attacks and kills a Japanese military officer (front: Stuart Ong).

which brings forth powerful emotions of shame and guilt in Kim-fay. At a gathering for drumming up community support, the Japanese army employ a 'carrot and stick' approach: offering rice on one hand but holding a bayonet in the other. They practise their bayonet skills on babies, and force all the civilians to celebrate Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity, play the songs of Japanese singer Li Xianglan (aka Yamaguchi Yoshiko), and to support the integration of Japanese colonials. Having witnessed the brutal atrocities committed by the army, Kim-fay decides to first submit to their wishes before he finds a way out. He is the first to shout 'Long Live Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity', and together with Wong Hak-keung, he drags the defiant Ha Yuk-nam to the rice collection point for fear of retribution from the Japanese. Kim-fay's slogan-shouting saves his friends from danger, but also foreshadow and justify how he is able to fake his way into being a Japanese collaborator. The film focuses on the survival instinct

and the will to live among ordinary folk, rather than traditional pride and moral intransigence as advocated by Chinese intellectuals: 'to starve is a small matter, but to yield a great one.' The viewpoint adopted by *Hong Kong 1941* seems to therefore better reflect the personal attitudes of director and screenwriter (and by extension Hong Kong people). When facing situations of life and death, the desire to survive and live is paramount. And to survive sometimes means to make low-level concessions.

The Japanese military in *Hong Kong 1941* collude with the wealthy locals, and claim that they wish to maintain the stability and prosperity of Hong Kong while driving away all Westerners. These are all based on historical fact. During the war, the Japanese advocated the establishment of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, which claimed to liberate Asian countries from the colonial evils of European Caucasians—a guise for its own imperialist

agenda. Yet the film reserves its harshest criticisms for Chinese profiteers who try to take advantage of the turmoil, such as the merchant who stockpiles rice, the policeman who exploits the chaotic situation, and the wealthy man from rural Yuen Long who captures and abducts young men for the Japanese army. All of these characters come from the middle and upper classes of society. Yet they quickly adjust when British colonisers return and resume control of the city, once again lining their own pockets through collusion, all in the name of restoring order and stability to society.

At one point in the film, Ha Chung-sang talks to a Japanese army officer. The scene is searing in its satire and criticism of his greed and cowardice.

Japanese officer: That's my impression of you Hong Kong people (pointing at the bottom of his foot with his little finger).

Ha Chung-sang: Yes, I know, I know...

Japanese officer: You've been brainwashed by the Westerners.

Ha Chung-sang: I know, I know (spitting).

Japanese officer: Plus some Chinese habits.

Ha Chung-sang: I'll change that.

Japanese officer: This is your chance to be a new man. To join the new government. Serve the new authority.

Ha Chung-sang: I'll do my best.

Japanese officer: We Asians should show the world.

Ha Chung-sang: Yes, I'll try my best.

Japanese officer: Prove to the world we don't need the whites. Hong Kong can still prosper.

Ha Chung-sang: I'll give all of myself.

On his screenplay, which deals with both historical memory and intimate, interpersonal relationships, John Chan Koon-chung once stated in an interview, 'The story itself is rather traditional, but it's not told in a straightforward way. Rather, the narrative jumps back and forth, stitched together by the thread that is the emotional arc of the characters. The lack of clear chronology is perhaps a bit more European in style.'<sup>29</sup> The complex relationship of friendship and love between the two men and one woman is also reminiscent of François Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1962).<sup>30</sup> The three protagonists not only experience conflicts of love and lust, but also find themselves at war with

their own aspirations and ideals, as they are forced to make difficult choices about leaving or staying in the city that they both love and hate. Yip Kim-fay is determined to make a new life for himself in San Francisco or Melbourne; Ha Yuk-nam wants to leave the confines of her very traditional family; and Wong Hak-keung wants to go to the Mainland. The first time the three friends agree to leave Hong Kong together, the Pacific War breaks out on the eve of their departure, and their plans fall through. The second time, as they try to evade Japanese artillery fire, Kim-fay chooses to remain on the pier, vowing to 'leave together or stay together' with Yuk-nam and Hak-keung, a display of friendship, purity and innocence. The three even jokingly say that as individuals, they cannot fall, or indeed Hong Kong would truly collapse into chaos soon. While it has been said that it is easy to leave a city behind, sometimes the choice to remain behind requires profound courage and commitment. To today's commentators, *Hong Kong 1941* is an intimate portrait of personal relationships in epic, turmoil-filled times, as it explores 'how people found belonging in a time before "Hong Kong identity" had been defined. The way it portrays Hong Kong and the characters' awareness of their own identities is profound, and resonates and inspires even today.... Perhaps the question of whether to stay or to remain has never left Hong Kong people's minds during all this time.'<sup>31</sup>

One of the more controversial aspects of *Hong Kong 1941* is Yip Kim-fay pretending to be a Japanese collaborator and traitor to his people. The modern Chinese word for 'traitor' is *hanjian*, which connotes 'betrayal of the han race', which, by extension, also means betraying and deceiving the Chinese people. The word originates from late-Qing dynasty radicals who tried to build a modern, ethnocentric Chinese identity around the Han ethnicity, and *hanjian* was used to describe heretics who betrayed Han interests.<sup>32</sup> Returning to the question of the term *hanjian* and the anxieties around the Chinese identity, male *hanjian* characters have long been an essential stock character in the war and 'national defence' films. As Chiu Kit-fung observes, since the British government had taken a neutral position in the Sino-Japanese conflict of the 1930s and 40s,

<sup>29</sup> Li Cheuk-to, 'Cong Yilunjia Dao Jianggulao: Fangwen *Dengdai Liming* Bianju Chen Guanzhong' ('From Critic to Storyteller: An Interview with Chan Koon-chung, Screenwriter of *Hong Kong 1941*'), *Film Biweekly*, No 141, 14 July 1984 (in Chinese).

<sup>30</sup> Sek Kei, 'Dengdai Liming: Luanshi Qiyuan, Bei Zhong You Xi' ('*Hong Kong 1941*: Finding Romance in the War Zone, An Uplifting Tale'), *Ming Pao Evening News*, 1 November 1984 (in Chinese).

<sup>31</sup> Chan Tsz-wan, 'Ta Zhe Yidai Xianggangren: Chen Guanzhong Yu *Dengdai Liming*' ('Hong Kongers in His Generation: Chan Koon-chung and *Hong Kong 1941*'), *Gangren Zijiang (Hong Kongers' Talks & Words)*, 101Arts.Net, 21 March 2016 (in Chinese). <http://www.101arts.net/viewArticle.php?type=hkarticle&id=2212>.

<sup>32</sup> Yuji Xu, 'Misread Meiji Japan, Overcome Republican China: Rethinking Zheng Xiaoxu's Political Philosophy', MPhil diss., The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 2019, pp 8-13.

they had banned films from explicitly depicting the fight against the Japanese or portraying anti-Japanese sentiments. At the same time, however, due to pressure from the Chinese government and patriotic groups, Hong Kong 'national defence' films had to, to a certain extent, promote nationalistic messages about the war. This put Hong Kong filmmakers (especially after 1939) in an awkward position—having to be somewhat 'anti-Japanese' without explicit expression. So many resorted to projecting such feelings onto *hanjian*, collaborator characters, as though they were, by proxy, the Japanese enemy themselves.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, the Cold War period in Hong Kong offered for exiled Shanghai intellectuals as well as local Hong Kong-born filmmakers a valuable cultural space to explore topics such as *hanjian* collaborators and treason. The colonial city's mix of the East and West also provided fertile ground for re-examining questions such as Chineseness and the Chinese national identity, and cinema proved to be an effective medium for interrogating historical narratives about the Second World War and colonialisation. Chow Yun-fat's role as *hanjian* in *Hong Kong 1941* is perhaps closer to undercover characters commonly found in Hong Kong gangster flicks, collaborating with the colonisers to benefit his own people. In fact, Yip Kim-fay's character is tinged with a sense of brotherhood similar to that in gangster films: he turns down Ha Yuk-nam's love for the sake of his friend, but on Yuk-nam's behalf, he also bravely goes on a one-man rescue mission in Yuen Long for Wong Hak-keung. His willingness to be a fake *hanjian* (or 'undercover') is partly due to his background in petty crime, and his ultimate act of sacrifice in saving Hak-keung and Yuk-nam is also a display of the kind of brotherhood and courage much touted in the criminal underworld. Leftist local film critic Lie Fu astutely points out that Kim-fay is not by nature in any way a classical Chinese intellectual figure.<sup>34</sup> It's also worth noting that even though he is the protagonist of a major Hong Kong war film, his character is not anything like the heroic, perfect paragons of moral virtue shaped by national propaganda and ideology, like his Mainland counterparts. Instead his character is the romantic hero from Hong Kong heroic bloodshed and gangster films, who would go through hell and back for love with his sense of honour.

It is also obvious that the three main characters of *Hong Kong 1941* are not particularly 'patriotic', nor do they espouse any ethnocentric ideas about Han Chinese. Their animosity towards the Japanese is more driven by their disgust towards the atrocities committed by the military. The three witness the Japanese army cutting off the heads of captured Chinese soldiers at the military camp; and Ha Yuk-nam is so haunted and traumatised by the photo of a soldier piercing a bayonet through a baby and waving it like a flag that she attacks and kills a Japanese military officer. Chinese writer Lu Xun was famously so outraged by filmstrip images of Japanese soldiers brutally killing Chinese people that he was resolved that his literature, should serve the high purpose of 'saving the nation'. The execution scene in *Hong Kong 1941*, on the other hand, inspires in the three characters compassion and a determination to distance oneself from evil—a humanitarianism based on individual empathy rather than collectivism.

*Hong Kong 1941* is an ambitious attempt at depicting Sino-Japanese War through the lens of a *wenyi* picture. Hong Kong films are generally not known for epic narrative structures, and perhaps a film of over three hours in length would have been needed to fully tell the story of the three characters and their relationship, and to also convey the scale of turmoil and suffering of a world turned upside down. Leong's film chooses to abandon such epic, macro views of the subject, and instead focuses on fragments and moments of the characters' relationships, or private memory. Yet this *wenyi* approach does not detract from the film's effectiveness and impressiveness. The film's story is intermittently narrated by Ha Yuk-nam's voice, a female perspective, as she reminisces the friendship and bond between her and the two men, and reflecting on the turbulent times before and after the fall of the city. Yuk-nam gives a personal account of the darkest moments in Hong Kong history, which was also at the same time the most memorable dawn she had ever seen. The film opens and ends with dawn time, and the final scene shows Yuk-nam standing in the twilight, recalling and telling her story. She does not say where she has escaped to, but only says, 'Hong Kong was about to fall, but my life had just begun.' Dawn was yet to arrive, as 'there were too many uncertainties about Hong Kong's future.'<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> According to Chiu Kit-fung's analysis, the majority of the existing Hong Kong national defence films all feature the *hanjian* character, including Situ Huimin's *Song of Retribution* (1941), Cai Chusheng's *The Devils' Paradise* (1939), Hou Yao's *Storm over Pacific* (1938) and *Fortress of Flesh and Blood* (1938) and Tang Xiaodan's *Roar of the Nation* (aka *Roar of the People*, 1941); even some supernatural horror films, such as Wong Toi's *The Ghost Catchers* (1939), have undertones of satire against *hanjian*.

<sup>34</sup> Lie Fu, 'Ye Jianfei Bushi Zhishi Fenzi—Zaitan *Dengdai Liming*' ('Yip Kim-fay is No Intellectual: A Revisit on *Hong Kong 1941*'), *Wen Wei Po*, 10 November 1984 (in Chinese).

<sup>35</sup> Qi Chuanhui, 'Weimiao De Sanjiao Guanxi: *Dengdai Liming*' ('A Delicate Love Triangle: *Hong Kong 1941*'), *Film Biweekly*, No 149, 8 November 1984 (in Chinese).

## CODA

Ann Hui's *Love in a Fallen City* was made the same year as *Hong Kong 1941*. Hui's film is an adaptation of the Eileen Chang novella, and it incorporates additional scenes, such as the British surrender to the Japanese and their decision to give up defending Hong Kong. In many ways, it is a reflection of 80s filmmakers' ruminations on the past and future of Hong Kong. Some thirty years later, Hui (herself also a key figure in the Hong Kong New Wave) would return to the same subject and time period in her 2017 film *Our Time Will Come*. Although it was marketed as dedication to the 20th anniversary of the Handover, the film in itself is a thoughtful work of Hong Kong cinema. Hui employs her characteristic *wenyi* style in introducing a mother-daughter pair in a story about the counter-Japanese military operations of the guerrilla unit East River Column in 1942, after the British army had evacuated Hong Kong, thereby grounding the tale from the perspective of family. The Column rescues Mao Dun, Zou Taofen, He Xiangning, Liu Yazi, Liang Shuming, Mei Lanfang, and some few hundred other intellectuals and artists stranded in Hong Kong and bringing them safely back to the Mainland. The film is narrated by Ben, played by Tony Leung Ka-fai, an old man who recalls and reconstructs this historical tale through his subjective point of view. Indeed, the film keeps alternating between subjective memory and 'objective' reality, letting audiences examine cinematic memory on the subject of our city's occupation, and in so doing, reflect on the ever-changing relationship between Hong Kong and the Mainland. As Shanghainese scholar Shi Chuan observes, *Our Time Will Come* should be analysed 'in the context of the complex relationship between the Mainland and Hong Kong, and the duality of the Hong Kong identity'.<sup>36</sup> Nothing is constant but change: cinematic memory of our city's occupation has been explored by both exiled filmmakers and local directors, first in Mandarin and then in local, Cantonese-language productions, before finally returning to Mandarin-speaking co-productions. While the trend first began with Mainland directors coming to Hong Kong to make stories about the Mainland, today Hong Kong filmmakers are travelling north to make films about Hong Kong. Yet that feeling of 'my city has fallen' persists—perhaps because the yearning for peace and normalcy among ordinary people is the only one thing that never changes.

[Translated by Rachel Ng]

**Kenny Ng** obtained his PhD from Harvard University (East Asian Languages and Civilizations) and is currently Associate Professor at the Academy of Films, Hong Kong Baptist University. His research interests include Chinese-language cinema, film censorship, Cantonese cinema history and left-wing politics, literature and film adaptations, critical theory and aesthetics, etc.

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<sup>36</sup> Shi Chuan, 'Our Time Will Come: "Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival" in War-Time Hong Kong', *Contemporary Cinema*, No 8, 2017, pp 19-21 (in Chinese).





*Hong Kong 1941 (1984)*

Appendices

The D & B Chronology

Collated by Wong Ha-pak, Janice Chow

Year	D & B	Events in Hong Kong’s Film and Entertainment Industry
1983		
1983.11.22	Dickson Films Company Limited incorporated in Hong Kong.	
1984		
1984.1.30	Dickson Poon (Board Chairman), John Sham (Executive Director), Richard Ng and Philip Chan jointly announced the launch of D & B Films Co., Ltd. in a press conference.	
1984.2.10	D & B Films Company Limited was officially registered.	
1984.6.22	Debut work <i>The Return of Pom Pom</i> opened in two cinema circuits, Gala and Shaw Brothers.	
1984.7		Dickson Films Company Limited changed its name to Dickson Pictures and Entertainment Limited, focusing on producing concerts.
1984.12	D & B started using the slogan ‘Dak Bou Din Yeng / Goon Jung Ji Bou’ (D & B Films / Treasures of the Audience)	
1985		
1985.1.1	<i>The Return of Pom Pom</i> was distributed by Chi Hsien Film Co., Ltd. in Taiwan and became a box-office hit. D & B made an agreement with Chi Hsien afterwards, agreeing to provide four films to the Taiwan company that year for screenings in its cinema circuit.	
1985.4.13	<i>Hong Kong 1941</i> (1984) secured eight nominations at the 4th Hong Kong Film Awards and picked up the award for Best Cinematography (Brian Lai).	
1985.4	Chan Kiu-ying from TVB, joined D & B to become manager of the creative department. Siu Kwok-wah and Tsang Kan-cheong also joined the team and worked as screenwriters.	
1985.5.1	Rented Kin Shing Studio B for film shooting.	
1985.5.23	Sammo Hung became a board member of D & B; Michael Hui later joined the company.	
1985.6.7	Chow Yun-fat was awarded Best Actor at the 30th Asia-Pacific Film Festival for <i>Hong Kong 1941</i> .	
1985.7	D & B rented four of the Shaw Brothers’ key cinemas—Jade Theatre, Rex Theatre, Golden Theatre and Bonds Theatre—while also developing its own cinema circuit based on Shaws circuit.	
1985.8	D & B announced its partnership with Pearl City Films Ltd for the production of <i>Dream Lovers</i> (1986) and <i>Love Unto Wastes</i> (1986). Also invited Clifton Ko, Raymond Fung and Ronny Yu, known as ‘The Trio’ to join, switching from Cinema City.	

Year	D & B	Events in Hong Kong's Film and Entertainment Industry
1985.11.2	More than 30 members of D & B attended the 22nd Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival, where <i>Hong Kong 1941</i> received three nominations including Best Feature Film. Chow Yun-fat made a triumphant return after winning Best Leading Actor.	
1985.11	D & B partnered up with Shaw Brothers to form S & P Film Laboratory Ltd., which specialised in film printing, editing and other post-production works. Officially set up D & B Films Distribution Ltd.	
1985.11.21		The Shaws cinema circuit released its last film <i>Let's Have a Baby</i> , which ran for five days; it then re-released <i>Behind the Yellow Line</i> (1984) for four days before ending the operations completely.
1985.11.29		Dickson Poon, Keeree Kanjanapas and Wallace Cheung established Impact Entertainment Holdings Limited.
1985.11.30	D & B officially established its cinema circuit and started using the slogan 'Tai Hou Hei / Tai Dak Bou (See Good Films / See D & B Films). <i>Yes, Madam</i> premiered in the circuit, screening in 18 cinemas, including some venues for western movies.	
<b>1986</b>		
1986.1.1	D & B switched to Long Shong Pictures Ltd. as its Taiwan distributor and its works were screened in the Jin-rih Circuit. D & B co-produced <i>Sapporo Story</i> (1987) with Long Shong the year after.	
1986.1.11	D & B co-produced <i>Royal Warriors</i> with Chiba's production studio of Japan. The movie starred Japanese star Sanada Hiroyuki (aka Henry Sanada).	
1986.2.9	To promote the Chinese New Year release <i>My Family</i> , D & B sponsored free MTR rides from 2am to 6am on Chinese New Year Day.	
1986.3		Dickson Poon sold 60% of his shares in Impact Entertainment and exited from the company.
1986.6.5	The day <i>The Lunatics</i> premiered, the film was criticised by The Hong Kong Council of Social Service for its depiction of the mentally impaired. Resent to censorship the same day, it was eventually granted approval for public screening.	
1986.6.18	Dickson Poon and Golden Princess circuit's Lawrence Louey held a press conference to announce the co-release of <i>Royal Warriors</i> .	
1986.7.16		Film workers joined forces to establish the 'Hong Kong Motion Picture Industry Association'.
1986.7	Brandon Lee, the son of Bruce Lee, travelled from the US to Hong Kong to film <i>Legacy of Rage</i> .	
1986.8.1	M2 Theatre in Yau Ma Tei became D & B's main theatre in the Kowloon district. D & B also rented the Majestic Theatre next door for screening foreign language films, scheduled by IFD Films & Arts Ltd.	Dickson Music Industries Ltd (DMI) was officially registered and released the debut album <i>Stare</i> by Danny Chan.

Year	D & B	Events in Hong Kong's Film and Entertainment Industry
1986.8.2	<i>Kiss Me Goodbye</i> was pulled out from the midnight screening. Its release was held back until 16 October the same year.	John Woo's <i>A Better Tomorrow</i> was released, which grossed a record-breaking HK\$34 million at the box office. The film was credited for sparking a trend of 'heroic films'.
1986.11	Terence Chang became overseas distribution manager and was responsible for developing the international market.	
1986.12	D & B swept five prizes at the 23rd Golden Horse Film Awards: Best Leading Actress (Sylvia Chang), Best Supporting Actress (Cora Miao), and Best Art Direction (William Chang) for <i>Passion</i> ; Best Supporting Actor (Paul Chun) for <i>The Lunatics</i> ; and Best Costume Design (William Chang) for <i>Dream Lovers</i> .	
<b>1987</b>		
1987.1.1	D & B paired M2 Theatre with Imperial Cinema House 1 to form a new cinema circuit, debuting with the Taiwan film <i>Sayonara Goodbye</i> . The circuit showed mostly foreign movies but also coordinated with the D & B circuit to occasionally show Hong Kong films.	
1987.1.6	Winnie Yu and Kam Kwok-leung announced the launch of A Certain Production Company Limited and produced movies for D & B. Their first work <i>Wonder Women</i> was released on 3 October 1987.	
1987.1.28	Chinese New Year release, the comedy <i>It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World</i> , became a big hit and grossed more than HK\$27 million, the highest box-office receipt for D & B since its founding.	
1987.2	Signed an agreement with Toei Company, Ltd., assuring <i>Royal Warriors's</i> screenings in 160 theatres in Japan.	
1987.2.17	Announced Linda Kuk and Raymond Leung joining the Board.	
1987.2.20	<i>Love Unto Wastes</i> was invited to screen at the 'Forum' Section of the Berlin International Film Festival.	
1987.3	D & B underwent internal restructuring. John Sham and Linda Kuk each have their own team, and each team was supported by different creative units.	
1987.3		There were loopholes in the legal authority of government film censorship. The government released a new film censorship bill and consulted Hong Kong Motion Picture Industry Association and other representatives from the film industry.
1987.5.7	Set up booths in the film market at Cannes Film Festival for the first time. D & B mainly promoted <i>Yes, Madam</i> , <i>Legacy of Rage</i> and <i>Magnificent Warriors</i> . <i>Legacy of Rage</i> was the most popular for foreign buyers.	
1987.5.29	The censorship ban on Tong Shu-shuen's <i>China Behind</i> (filmed in 1974) was lifted. D & B arranged it to be shown in its cinema circuit, which marked the film's first release in Hong Kong commercial theatres.	



Year	D & B	Events in Hong Kong's Film and Entertainment Industry
1987.7.22	Announced the partnership with Alan & Eric Films Ltd to collaborate on the running of cinema circuit. Half of the screening schedule, with at least ten films, will be arranged by Alan & Eric, the latter's first production <i>You're My Destiny</i> premiered on 26 November 1987.	
1987.7	The contract system of employing regular actors was cancelled. It was replaced by project-based contract agreements, where artists were allowed to participate in films produced by other film companies.	
1987.9.15	Dickson Poon announced his resignation from the Board, withdrawing from D & B's administrative and production duties. Raymond Leung replaced him to become the Chairman of the Board.	
1987.10	Stephen Shin joined the Board and served as Chief Executive Director. Norman Chan became the Administrative & Production Controller.	
1987.12.1	Linda Kuk resigned from D & B and the Board.	
1987.12	John Sham announced that he had resigned from D & B.	
<b>1988</b>		
1988.1.1		Gordon Fung Ping-chung and Chan Wing-mei launched the cinema circuit Newport Circuit and premiered <i>Who is the Craftiest</i> .
1988.1	Clifton Ko, Raymond Fung and Ronny Yu terminated their contract with D & B.	
1988.2.12	Production began for <i>In the Line of Duty III</i> . The film stars Cynthia Khan, a Taiwan actress recommended to Stephen Shin by actor Wong Yung, replacing Michelle Yeoh as the 'madam' in the <i>In the Line of Duty</i> series. <i>Tiger Cage</i> (aka <i>Sure Fire</i> ) (the first D & B collaboration project between Yuen Woo-ping and Donnie Yen) and <i>Double Fattiness</i> also started filming on the same day.	
1988.3	Authorised Mei Ah to distribute VHS tapes of D & B works in Hong Kong and Macao. The first four films were <i>The Return of Pom Pom</i> , <i>Yes, Madam</i> , <i>Passion</i> and <i>It's A Mad, Mad, Mad World</i> .	
1988.4.10	D & B works earned a total of 22 nominations at the 7th Hong Kong Film Awards, winning five awards: Best Film, Best Screenplay (Alex Law), Best Cinematography (James Hayman and David Chung) for <i>An Autumn's Tale</i> ; Best Film Editing (Chiang Kwok-kuen) for <i>Final Victory</i> and Best Actress (Josephine Siao Fong-fong) for <i>The Wrong Couples</i> .	
1988.6.25	<i>Student Union</i> (aka <i>Classmate Party</i> ), a D & B and Shiobu co-production, was released in Taiwan. The film was made in support of Wong Yung, and was co-produced by Stephen Shin and Wong Yung. The title was never released in Hong Kong and it was the last time D & B entered into collaboration with a Taiwanese film company.	
1988.8.18	Alan & Eric Films stopped its cinema circuit collaboration with D & B after the release of <i>Women's Prison</i> .	
1988.8	Uncertainties appeared in the process of contract renewal with Shaw Brothers. Golden Harvest showed interest in bidding but D & B made a successful contract extension.	

Year	D & B	Events in Hong Kong's Film and Entertainment Industry
1988.9.15	The first time a Hong Kong Film Festival was held in the US. Senior Member of the Executive Council Lydia Dunn attended the opening ceremony in New York. Eight Hong Kong films were screened, including D & B's <i>Wonder Women</i> . Director Kam Kwok-leung and actress Dodo Cheng joined the Festival and attended the events.	
1988.11.10		The Hong Kong Government established the Film Censorship Ordinance, implementing a three-category system of rating films.
1988.11.26	The D & B office was relocated from Tsim Sha Tsui to 5 Kent Road, Kowloon Tong. The new office housed the Production Department, the Promotion Department, the Overseas Distribution Department, a screening room and a small editing room.	
1988.12	The demolition of M2 Theatre, a D & B cinema circuit theatre, was confirmed.	
<b>1989</b>		
1989.1	Announced the establishment of D & B North American Films in the US, as another platform to develop North American film markets and cinema circuits business.	
1989.7	George Lam signed a contract to be a regular actor, and he was not allowed to be loaned out to other studios.	
1989.8	Taiwan's New Ship Film Enterprise Company Limited set up a production company in Hong Kong. It also supported independent companies such as Chun Sing and Regent Film. All of their productions were screened in the D & B cinema circuit.	
1989.9.15	<i>An Autumn's Tale</i> premiered in Japan.	
<b>1990</b>		
1990.1.18		Harvest Theatre was renamed into Cineport Theatre, which became a primary cinema in the D & B cinema circuit. There were a total of 20 cinemas in the circuit at the time.
1990.1.26	<i>Hong Kong 1941</i> premiered in Japan.	
1990.4.12	A collaboration between Hong Kong and Chinese filmmakers, <i>A Terracotta Warrior</i> was produced by Art & Talent Groupe Inc. and premiered at the D & B cinema circuit. Actors of the film, Gong Li and Zhang Yimou, attended the promotional event in Hong Kong which thrilled the city.	
1990.6	Donnie Yen had an early termination of his D & B contract.	
1990.8	D & B sponsored the ATV Miss Asia Pageant, announcing that the winner would be signed by D & B. Leung Yuk-yin, one of the contestants, was signed by D & B and assumed the lead role in <i>Black Cat</i> (1991) under the stage name Jade Leung.	
1990.8.10		Co-produced by Golden Harvest and Seasonal Film, Stephen Chow's <i>All for the Winner</i> grossed HK\$41 million, breaking box-office record.

Year	D & B	Events in Hong Kong's Film and Entertainment Industry
1990.8.24	Directed by Stephen Shin, <i>A Bite of Love</i> is the first Hong Kong film using a digital recording system for surround sound effect.	
1990.12.4	D & B, Golden Harvest, Hutchison Telecommunications and an American Broadcasting Group founded Metropolitan Broadcasting. They applied for a second commercial broadcasting license that became Metro Broadcast.	
<b>1991</b>		
1991.7.22		Metro Broadcast news service went on air; its two music stations first aired on 2 August and 14 February respectively.
1991.9.5	Announced the closing of the D & B cinema circuit in November 1991, returning four theatres to Shaws, but continued its film production operation.	
1991.10		Raymond Wong partnered up with Stephen Lo Kit-sing, reaching agreement with Shaws to take over the D & B cinema circuit to form the Regal Circuit.
1991.11.29		<i>In the Lap of God</i> , the last production by Cinema City Company Limited, premiered.
1991.11.30		Regal Films' cinema circuit came into operation and premiered <i>The Banquet</i> .
1991		Hong Kong-based Satellite Television Advanced Reception Limited commenced its operation, broadcasting programmes and shows to different regions in Asia.
<b>1992</b>		
1992.1.8		Dallies of <i>All's Well End's Well</i> was robbed, which sparked a demonstration against violence and crime gangs by the show business people on 15 January the same year.
1992.3.31	Raymond Leung stepped down as D & B Chairman of the Board and resigned from Dickson Concepts.	
1992.4.16		Jim Choi, director of Fu Ngai Films, was shot to death.
1992.5		Raymond Wong left Regal cinema circuit and formed Mandarin cinema circuit on 1 January 1993.
1992.10.1	<i>Black Cat II: The Assassination of President Yeltsin</i> premiered, marking the end of all D & B productions.	
1992.12.24		Golden Princess' Lawrence Louey passed away and the company ceased operations.
1992		Hong Kong films reached a historical box-office high of over HK\$1.2 billion in 1992. Ticket sales started dropping the next year, never to bounce back.

# The D & B Filmography

Unless otherwise specified, the film titles listed below are all D & B productions (see ‘Notes’ column for details on co-productions and production companies) executively produced by Dickson Poon (see ‘Notes’ column for co-executive producers).

	Release Date/ Title	Prod/ Assoc Prod	Dir	Scr	Main Cast	Notes
1	1984.6.22 The Return of Pom Pom 雙龍出海	Sammo Hung/ John Sham	Philip Chan	D & B Creative Team	Richard Ng, John Sham, Deanie Ip, Kara Wai	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sequel of <i>Pom Pom</i> (1984, Prod Co: Bo Ho)</li><li>• Consultant: Wu Ma</li><li>• Box Office: HK\$18,455,255</li></ul>
2	1984.11.1 Hong Kong 1941 等待黎明	John Sham/ John Chan Koon-chung	Leong Po-chih	John Chan Koon-chung	Chow Yun-fat, Alex Man, Cecilia Yip, Kuk Fung, Sek Kin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prod Cos: D &amp; B, Bo Ho</li><li>• Exe Prods: Dickson Poon, Sammo Hung</li><li>• The 4th Hong Kong Film Awards Best Cinematography (Brian Lai); The 22nd Golden Horse Awards Best Leading Actor (Chow Yun-fat); The 30th Asia-Pacific Film Festival Best Actor (Chow Yun-fat)</li><li>• Box Office: HK\$7,223,400</li></ul>
3	1984.12.12 The Owl vs Bumbo 貓頭鷹與小飛象	Sammo Hung/ Wu Ma, John Sham	Sammo Hung	Cheung Lai-ling	Sammo Hung, George Lam, Deanie Ip, Michelle Yeoh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Box Office: HK\$21,313,636</li></ul>
4	1985.3.9 Mr. Boo Meets Pom Pom 智勇三寶 (aka 三元及第/ Taiwanese title 大笨賊)	Sammo Hung/ Philip Chan, Wong Yan-tat	Wu Ma	Jo Chan Wai-ye	Michael Hui, Richard Ng, John Sham, Terry Hu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Box Office: HK\$17,089,402</li></ul>
5	1985.10.11 The Island 生死綫 (Taiwanese title 跳動生死線)	Sammo Hung/ Deanie Ip	Leong Po-chih	—	John Sham, Helen Au, Ronald Wong, Timothy Zao	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Co-written by Shu Kei</li><li>• The 5th Hong Kong Film Awards Best Cinematography (Poon Hang-sang)</li><li>• Box Office: HK\$3,819,123</li></ul>
6	1985.11.30 Yes, Madam 皇家師姐 (Taiwanese title 小蝦米對大鯨魚)	Sammo Hung/ Wu Ma, Sze Mei-ye	Corey Yuen Kwai	Barry Wong	Michelle Yeoh, Cynthia Rothrock, John Sham, Mang Hoi, Tsui Hark	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Inauguration film of D &amp; B Cinema Circuit</li><li>• The 5th Hong Kong Film Awards Best Supporting Actor (Mang Hoi)</li><li>• Box Office: HK\$10,019,862</li></ul>
7	1985.12.19 It's a Drink! It's a Bomb! 聖誕奇遇結良緣 (Taiwanese title 汽水炸彈)	Sammo Hung/ Chan Kiu-ying	David Chung	Tsang Kan- cheong	George Lam, Maggie Cheung, John Sham, Lau Kong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• David Chung's directorial debut</li><li>• Box Office: HK\$10,000,378</li></ul>
8	1986.1.9 From Here to Prosperity 奪寶計上計	Sammo Hung/ Wong Yan-tat	Philip Chan	Chan Kiu-ying, Tsang Kan- cheong	Richard Ng, John Chiang, Ko Chun-hsiung, Annikke Pong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Box Office: HK\$5,528,987</li></ul>
9	1986.1.30 My Family 八喜臨門	Linda Kuk/ Ronny Yu, Clifton Ko	Raymond Fung	Clifton Ko; Screenwriting team: Joe Ma Wai-ho, Anthony Chan, Pang Kin-yi, Mak Ping- cheong, Lai Kwok-ming	Richard Ng, Fung Bo-bo, Lui Fong, May Lo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Box Office: HK\$15,291,287</li></ul>



	Release Date/ Title	Prod/ Assoc Prod	Dir	Scr	Main Cast	Notes
10	1986.3.6 Silent Love 聽不到的說話 (aka 小圈子/ Orig title 手語)	Sammo Hung/ John Chan Koon-chung	John Chiang	Siu Kwok-wah, Ivy Ho	Season Ma, Sean Lau Ching-wan, Ronald Wong, So Cho-yee	• Box Office: HK\$5,173,730
11	1986.3.20 Where's Officer Tuba? 霹靂大喇叭	Sammo Hung/ Melvin Wong	Ricky Lau Koon-wai, Philip Chan	Barry Wong	Sammo Hung, Jacky Cheung, Joey Wang, John Chiang	• Box Office: HK\$16,822,229
12	1986.4.11 Devoted to You 痴心的我 (Taiwanese title 我已成年)	Linda Kuk/ Ronny Yu, Raymond Fung	Clifton Ko	Clifton Ko; Screenwriting team: Joe Ma Wai-ho, Anthony Chan, Cheung Cheuk- hung, Lai Kwok-ming, Lo Man-sang	Jacky Cheung, Loletta Lee, May Lo, Michael Wong	• Box Office: HK\$7,469,783
13	1986.4.25 Dream Lovers 夢中人	Vicky Leung	Tony Au	Manfred Wong, Chiu Kang- chien; Story: Chiu Kang-chien	Chow Yun-fat, Brigitte Lin, Cher Yeung, Wong Man-lei	• Prod Plan Co: Pearl City • The 6th Hong Kong Film Awards Best Original Film Score (Law Wing-fai); The 23rd Golden Horse Awards Best Costume Design (William Chang) • Box Office: HK\$7,289,958
14	1986.6.5 The Lunatics 癲佬正傳 (Taiwanese title 天天星期七)	John Sham/ John Chan Koon-chung	Derek Yee	Derek Yee	Feng Tsui-fan, Deanie Ip, Paul Chun, Chow Yun-fat, Tony Leung Chiu-wai	• Derek Yee's directorial debut • The 6th Hong Kong Film Awards Best Supporting Actor (Paul Chun), Best Art Direction (Yank Wong); The 23rd Golden Horse Awards Best Supporting Actor (Paul Chun) • Box Office: HK\$9,350,070
15	1986.6.26 Royal Warriors 皇家戰士	John Sham/ Chan Kiu-ying	David Chung	Tsang Kan- cheong	Michelle Yeoh, Sanada Hiroyuki, Michael Wong, Bai Ying	• 2nd Unit Dir: Johnnie To; 3rd Unit Dir: Philip Chan • Co-released with Royal cinema circuit • Box Office: HK\$14,575,873
16	1986.7.17 Conduct Zero 操行零分	John Sham, John Chan Koon-chung	Simon Yip	Fung Lai-chi	Stephen Ho, Chindy Lau, William Tang, Lam Yan-hong	• Simon Yip's directorial debut • Box Office: HK\$1,158,955
17	1986.7.24 Passion 最愛	John Sham/ Winnie Yu	Sylvia Chang	Sylvia Chang	Sylvia Chang, George Lam, Cora Miao, Huang Man	• The 6th Hong Kong Film Awards Best Actress (Sylvia Chang), Best Original Film Song ('Who Is My Beloved'); The 23rd Golden Horse Awards Best Leading Actress (Sylvia Chang), Best Art Direction (William Chang), Best Supporting Actress (Cora Miao) • Box Office: HK\$8,757,828
18	1986.8.14 Pom Pom Strikes Back! 雙龍吐珠	John Sham/ Melvin Wong	Yip Wing-cho	Jo Chan Wai-yee	John Sham, Richard Ng, Deanie Ip, May Lo	• Box Office: HK\$10,533,418

	Release Date/ Title	Prod/ Assoc Prod	Dir	Scr	Main Cast	Notes
19	1986.8.30 Love Unto Wastes 地下情	Vicky Leung	Stanley Kwan	Lai Kit, Chiu Kang- chien; Story: Lai Kit	Tony Leung Chiu-wai, Elaine Jin, Irene Wan, Chow Yun-fat, Tsai Chin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prod Plan Co: Pearl City</li> <li>• The 6th Hong Kong Film Awards Best Supporting Actress (Elaine Jin), Best Screenplay (Lai Kit, Chiu Kang-chien)</li> <li>• Box Office: HK\$5,088,061</li> </ul>
20	1986.10.16 Kiss Me Goodbye 戀愛季節	John Sham/ Winnie Yu	Calvin Poon Yuen-leung	John Chan Koon-chung, Calvin Poon Yuen-leung	Loletta Lee, Anthony Wong Yiu-ming, Bowie Lam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calvin Poon Yuen-leung's directorial debut</li> <li>• Midnight screening on 2 August 1986; the premiere was postponed to 16 October 1986.</li> <li>• Box Office: HK\$1,835,047</li> </ul>
21	1986.11.12 Caper aka Hong Kong Cyber Brothers 警賊兄弟 (Orig title 太陽之子)	John Sham, John Chan Koon-chung	Allan Fung	Alex Law; Story: John Chan Koon- chung	Cheung Kwok- keung, Irene Wan, Stephen Ho, Fong Kong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Box Office: HK\$4,059,006</li> </ul>
22	1986.11.22 Brotherhood 兄弟	John Sham	Stephen Shin	Stephen Shin, Ip Kwong-kim, James Fung, Ng Wei-yin	Danny Lee, Alex Man, Vincent Lam, Kuk Fung	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Box Office: HK\$7,707,550</li> </ul>
23	1986.12.20 Legacy of Rage 龍在江湖 (Orig title 龍的傳人)	John Sham, Linda Kuk/ Clifton Ko, Raymond Fung	Ronny Yu	Clifton Ko, Raymond Fung	Brandon Lee, Michael Wong, Regina Kent, Michael Chan Wai-man	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Box Office: HK\$9,239,759</li> </ul>
24	1987.1.28 It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World 富貴逼人	Linda Kuk/ Ronny Yu, Raymond Fung	Clifton Ko	Clifton Ko; Orig Script: Joe Ma Wai-ho, Chow Yuk-ming, Lai Kwok-ming	Bill Tung, Lydia Sum, Eric Tsang, Elsie Chan, Loletta Lee, Pauline Kwan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Box Office: HK\$27,141,624</li> </ul>
25	1987.2.19 The Godfy Gang 歡樂5人組 (Orig title 梁山人馬)	John Sham/ Chan Kiu-ying	Feng Tsui-fan	Chan Kiu-ying, John Au Wa-hon	Derek Yee, May Lo, Feng Tsui-fan, Joyce Mina Godenzi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Box Office: HK\$5,080,345</li> </ul>
26	1987.3.12 Final Victory 最後勝利	John Sham/ Winnie Yu	Patrick Tam	Wong Kar-wai	Eric Tsang, Loletta Lee, Margaret Li, Tsui Hark	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The 7th Hong Kong Film Awards Best Film Editing (Chiang Kwok-ken)</li> <li>• Box Office: HK\$5,795,427</li> </ul>
27	1987.3.27 Sapporo Story 異鄉故事 (Orig title 娼館)	John Sham, Wong Wah-kay/ John Chan Koon-chung, Chang Hai- hsing, David Wu, Cheung Yim- kong, Wong Wah-kay	Wong Wah-kay	Chang Hai-hsing, David Wu, Cheung Yim- kong, Wong Wah-kay	Olivia Cheng, Su Ming-ming, Yashima Kenichi, Miura Kao	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prod Cos: D &amp; B, Long Shong</li> <li>• Exe Prods: Dickson Poon, Wang Ying-hsiang</li> <li>• Box Office: HK\$4,347,693</li> </ul>
28	1987.4.15 Magnificent Warriors 中華戰士	John Sham/ Wong Yan-tat	David Chung	Tsang Kan- cheong	Michelle Yeoh, Richard Ng, Derek Yee, Lowell Lo, Chindy Lau	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2nd Unit Dir: Johnnie To; 3rd Unit Dir: John Sham; 4th Unit Dir: Derek Yee</li> <li>• Box Office: HK\$8,324,957</li> </ul>

	Release Date/ Title	Prod/ Assoc Prod	Dir	Scr	Main Cast	Notes
29	1987.6.11 The Wrong Couples 不是冤家不聚頭 (Taiwanese title 一魚兩吃三人行)	John Sham/ John Chan Koon-chung, Dennis Chan Kwok-sun	John Chiang	John Chan Koon-chung	Josephine Siao Fong-fong, Richard Ng, Pauling Kwan, Paul Chun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The 7th Hong Kong Film Awards Best Actress (Josephine Siao Fong-fong)</li> <li>• Box Office: HK\$8,969,422</li> </ul>
30	1987.7.4 Porky's Meatballs 鬼馬校園 (Taiwanese title 校園點將錄)	Linda Kuk/ Ronny Yu, Raymond Fung	Clifton Ko	Joe Ma Wai-ho, Clifton Ko; Orig Script: Chow Yuk-ming	Loletta Lee, Christopher Chan, Adia Chan, Kuk Fung	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2nd Unit Dirs: Ronny Yu, Simon Yip</li> <li>• Box Office: HK\$5,751,420</li> </ul>
31	1987.7.16 An Autumn's Tale 秋天的童話 (Taiwanese title 流氓大亨)	John Sham/ Winnie Yu	Mabel Cheung	Alex Law	Chow Yun-fat, Cherie Chung, Danny Chan, Gigi Wong, Cindy Ou	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The 7th Hong Kong Film Awards Best Film, Best Screenplay (Alex Law), Best Cinematography (James Hayman, David Chung); The 23rd Golden Horse Awards Best Leading Actor (Chow Yun-fat)</li> <li>• Box Office: HK\$25,546,552</li> </ul>
32	1987.8.22 Easy Money 通天大盜	Dickson Poon/ Norman Chan	Stephen Shin	Ip Kwong-kim, Pang Tsai-choi, Wai Ka-fai	Michelle Yeoh, Geroge Lam, Kent Cheng, Kuk Fung	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2nd Unit Dir: Lee Chi-ngai</li> <li>• Box Office: HK\$13,999,516</li> </ul>
33	1987.9.24 You're O.K, I'm O.K! 你OK・我OK	Linda Kuk/ Ronny Yu, Clifton Ko	Raymond Fung	Joe Ma Wai-ho, Lai Kwok-ming, Chow Yuk-ming	Cheung Kwok-keung, May Lo, Kent Tong, Carrie Ng	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Box Office: HK\$3,358,039</li> </ul>
34	1987.10.3 Wonder Women 神奇兩女俠 (Taiwanese title 胭脂雙響炮)	Winnie Yu	Kam Kwok-leung	Kam Kwok-leung	Dodo Cheng, Cecilia Yip, Michael Wong, Tom Poon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prod Plan Co: A Certain Production</li> <li>• Kam Kwok-leung's directorial debut</li> <li>• Box Office: HK\$7,619,506</li> </ul>
35	1988.1.16 Fury 情義心	John Sham/ Chan Kiu-ying	Johnny Wong Lung-wei	Chan Kiu-ying	Michael Wong, Waise Lee, Philip Chan, Carrie Ng	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Box Office: HK\$3,751,247</li> </ul>
36	1988.2.13 It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World II 富貴再逼人 (Taiwanese title 樂樂六合彩)	Linda Kuk/ Raymond Fung, Ronny Yu	Clifton Ko, Francis Sung	Joe Ma Wai-ho, John Ng, James Yuen, Clifton Ko; Script Consultant: Paul Lai	Bill Tung, Lydia Sum, Elsie Chan, Loletta Lee, Pauline Kwan, Lowell Lo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2nd Unit Dir: Ronny Yu</li> <li>• Box Office: HK\$25,814,268</li> </ul>
37	1988.3.30 Bless this House 猛鬼佛跳牆	Linda Kuk/ Clifton Ko, Raymond Fung	Ronny Yu	James Yuen, John Ng, Joe Ma Wai-ho, Clifton Ko; Orig Story: Clifton Ko	Bill Tung, Deborah Lee, Loletta Lee, Stephen Ho	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Box Office: HK\$8,981,182</li> </ul>
38	1988.5.7 Carry on Dancing aka Keep on Dancing 繼續跳舞	Kam Kwok-leung, Winnie Yu	Leong Po-chih, Kam Kwok-leung	Kam Kwok-leung, Winnie Yu	Cora Miao, Richard Ng, Eric Tsang, Mang Hoi, Sun Ma Si-tsang	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Box Office: HK\$4,145,268</li> </ul>
39	1988.5.19 Double Fattiness 雙肥臨門 (Taiwanese title 女鬼當家)	Stephen Shin	John Chiang	Pang Chi-ming, Siu Kwok-wah, Gordon Chan	Bill Tung, Lydia Sum, Eric Tsang, Maggie Cheung	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Box Office: HK\$12,719,337</li> </ul>

	Release Date/ Title	Prod/ Assoc Prod	Dir	Scr	Main Cast	Notes
40	1988.6.25 (Taiwan) Student Union aka Classmate Party 同學會 (aka 插班生續集, 嘩鬼學校)	Stephen Shin, Wong Yung/ Sum Yu-leung	Lin Ching-jie	Lin Huang-kun	Loletta Lee, Yeh Chun-jen, Kuk Fung, Wong Foo-mei	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prod Cos: D &amp; B, Shiobu</li> <li>• Exe Prods: Raymond Leung, Tsai Mu-ho</li> <li>• A Taiwanese production</li> </ul>
41	1988.7.28 Tiger Cage aka Sure Fire 特警屠龍 (Orig title 赤膽屠龍)	Stephen Shin	Yuen Woo-ping	Anthony Wong Wing-Fai, Ip Kwong-kim	Jacky Cheung, Dodo Cheng, Simon Yam, Donnie Yen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Box Office: HK\$11,534,315</li> </ul>
42	1988.8.25 Heart to Hearts 三人世界	Stephen Shin	Stephen Shin; Exe Dir: Gordon Chan	Nip Wang-fung (aka Chan Hing-kai), Siu Kwok-wah, Gordon Chan, Ip Kwong-kim, So Fung-ye	George Lam, Dodo Cheng, Rosamund Kwan, Vivian Chow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The 8th Hong Kong Film Awards Best Screenplay (Nip Wang-fung, Siu Kwok-wah, Gordon Chan, Ip Kwong-kim)</li> <li>• Box Office: HK\$24,676,380</li> </ul>
43	1988.9.23 In the Line of Duty III 皇家師姐之III雌雄大盜 (aka 皇家師姐接班人)	Stephen Shin	Brandy Yuen, Arthur Wong	Chan Kiu-ying, Man Law	Cynthia Khan, Fujioka Hiroshi, Nishiwaki Michiko, Stuart Ong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arthur Wong's directorial debut</li> <li>• 2nd Unit Dir: Cha Chuen-ye</li> <li>• Box Office: HK\$7,916,312</li> </ul>
44	1988.10.28 Vengeance is Mine 血衣天使 (Orig title 白衣天使)	Stephen Shin	Lee Chi-ngai	Lee Chi-ngai	Rosamund Kwan, Pat Ha, Derek Yee, Kent Tong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lee Chi-ngai's directorial debut</li> <li>• Box Office: HK\$4,518,830</li> </ul>
45	1989.2.2 It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World III 富貴再三逼人	Stephen Shin	Stephen Shin, Stanley Ko	Chan Kin-chung, Pang Tsai-choi	Bill Tung, Lydia Sum, Elsie Chan, Loletta Lee, Pauline Kwan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Box Office: HK\$16,686,891</li> </ul>
46	1989.2.23 Mr. Fortune 發達先生	Stephen Shin	Cha Chuen-ye	Ip Kwong-kim, Lo Wing-keung, Sin Kam-ching, Law Kam-fai	Anthony Chan, Chingmy Yau, Money Lo, Wong Wan-sze	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Box Office: HK\$7,806,989</li> </ul>
47	1989.3.18 Unfaithfully Yours 花心三劍俠	Stephen Shin	Chan Kin-chung, Lily Chan, Rosanna Ng, Bosco Lam Hing-lung, Lam Wai-lun	James Fung, Man Law, Sin Kam-ching	Richard Ng, Kelly Tien Niu, Maggie Shiu, Manfred Wong, Billy Lau	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2nd Unit Dirs: Leonard Heung, Cheng Siu-keung</li> <li>• Box Office: HK\$4,274,980</li> </ul>
48	1989.6.1 Funny Ghost 猛鬼撞鬼	Stephen Shin/ Jeff Lau	Yuen Cheung-yan	Lawrence Lau	Sandra Ng, Elvina Kong, Natalis Chan, Billy Lau	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Box Office: HK\$7,032,239</li> </ul>
49	1989.7.1 The Nobles 單身貴族	Stephen Shin	Norman Chan	Norman Chan, Joe Ma Wai-ho	Dodo Cheng, Jacky Cheung, Michael Wong, Feng Tsui-fan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Norman Chan's directorial debut</li> <li>• Box Office: HK\$7,547,686</li> </ul>
50	1989.7.21 In the Line of Duty 4 皇家師姐IV直擊証人	Stephen Shin	Yuen Woo-ping	Anthony Wong Wing-Fai, Cheung Chi-sing	Cynthia Khan, Donnie Yen, Michael Wong, Yuen Yat-chor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Box Office: HK\$12,100,193</li> </ul>
51	1989.8.19 Happy Together 相見好	Stephen Shin	Stephen Shin	Stephen Shin, Tony Leung Hung-wah, Cheng Siu-keung, Sin Kam-ching	Kenny Bee, Cherie Chung, Vivian Chow, Lowell Lo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Box Office: HK\$16,241,024</li> </ul>



	Release Date/ Title	Prod/ Assoc Prod	Dir	Scr	Main Cast	Notes
52	1990.1.24 Heart into Hearts 三人新世界	Stephen Shin	Stephen Shin	Tony Leung Hung-wah, Chan Kin-chung, Cheng Siu-keung	George Lam, Dodo Cheng, Maggie Cheung, Vivian Chow	• Box Office: HK\$23,275,483
53	1990.2.15 Love is Love 望夫成龍	Jeff Lau	Tommy Leung	Gary Tang Tak-hei	Stephen Chow, Sandra Ng, Kwan Sau-mei, Sing Fui-on	• Box Office: HK\$13,703,364
54	1990.6.15 Middle Man aka In the Line of Duty V - Middle Man 皇家師姐之中間人 (aka 皇家師姐V之中間人/ Taiwanese title 小蝦米對響尾蛇)	Stephen Shin	Cha Chuen-ye	Tony Leung Hung-wah, Patrick Yuen	Cynthia Khan, David Wu, Elvina Kong, Chris Lee Kin-sang	• Box Office: HK\$6,466,231
55	1990.8.11 Tiger Cage 2 洗黑錢	Stephen Shin/ Fong Lee-kun	Yuen Woo-ping	Patrick Yuen, Fung Chi-ho	Donnie Yen, David Wu, Rosamund Kwan, Cynthia Khan	• 2nd Unit Dir: Leung Ka- yan; 3rd Unit Dir: Fong Lee-kun • Box Office: HK\$6,395,102
56	1990.8.24 A Bite of Love 一咬OK (Taiwanese title 一咬200年)	Stephen Shin	Stephen Shin	Tony Leung Hung-wah, Cheng Siu-keung	George Lam, Rosamund Kwan, Tsui Siu-keung, Jacky Cheng Pak-lam	• Box Office: HK\$10,801,790
57	1990.12.21 BB30 BB30 (aka 表哥你好)	Stephen Shin	Stephen Shin	Tony Leung Hung-wah, Lam Wai-lun, Cheng Siu-keung	Kenny Bee, Dodo Cheng, Kwan Sau-mei, Michael Chan Wai-man	• Box Office: HK\$8,795,258
58	1991.2.13 Perfect Match 富貴吉祥 (aka 龍鳳呈祥/ Orig title 開心交響曲)	Stephen Shin	Stephen Shin	Tony Leung Hung-wah, Lam Wai-lun, Lam Tan-ping	George Lam, Maggie Cheung, Jacky Cheung, Vivian Chow	• Box Office: HK\$13,490,889
59	1991.5.30 Forbidden Arsenal aka In the Line of Duty VI: Forbidden Arsenal 地下兵工廠 (aka 皇家師姐之地下兵工廠)	Stephen Shin/ Tony Leung Hung-wah	Yuen Chun-man, Cheng Siu- keung	Tony Leung Hung-wah, Patrick Yuen	Waise Lee, Cynthia Khan, Loletta Lee, Too Siu-chun	• Yuen Chun-man and Cheng Siu-keung's directorial debut • Box Office: HK\$3,682,526
60	1991.6.14 Will of Iron 黑雪	Stephen Shin	John Chiang	Man Law	Maggie Cheung, Jacky Cheung, Michael Wong, Crystal Kwok	• Box Office: HK\$3,970,755
61	1991.8.17 Black Cat 黑貓	Stephen Shin/ Shan Tam, Sunny Chan	Stephen Shin/ Exe Dir: Cheng Siu-keung	Lam Wai-lun, Chan Bo-shun, Lam Tan-ping	Jade Leung, Simon Yam, Thomas Lam	• The 11th Hong Kong Film Awards Best New Performer (Jade Leung) • Box Office: HK\$11,088,210
62	1991.9.14 His Fatal Ways 老表，你好嘢！	Stephen Shin/ Tony Leung Hung-wah	Alexander Chan Mong-wah	Keith Wong, Tony Leung Hung-wah, Alexander Chan Mong-wah; Screenwriting team: Chan Kin-chung, Leung Chi-keung, Lam Tan-ping	Alfred Cheung, Teresa Mo, Too Siu-chun, Hui Shiu-hung	• Alexander Chan Mong- wah's directorial debut • Box Office: HK\$8,353,688

	Release Date/ Title	Prod/ Assoc Prod	Dir	Scr	Main Cast	Notes
63	1991.9.28 Sea Wolves 皇家師姐之海狼 (aka 海狼)	Stephen Shin/ Tony Leung Hung-wah	Cheng Siu- keung	Tony Leung Hung-wah	Cynthia Khan, Simon Yam, Garry Chau, Tsui Siu-keung	• Box Office: HK\$2,449,447
64	1991.10.11 Dreams of Glory, a Boxer's Story 拳王	Stephen Shin	Lawrence Lau (aka Lawrence Ah Mon)	Chan Man-keung, Sin Kam-ching	Jackie Lui, Too Siu-chun, Lam King-kong, Rain Lau	• Thai Scenes Dir: Kwan Park-huen • Box Office: HK\$1,686,048
65	1991.11.14 Tiger Cage 3 冷面狙擊手 (aka 致命黑玫瑰/ Orig title 情殺案中案)	Stephen Shin/ Anthony Wong Wing-fai	Yuen Woo-ping; Exe Dir: Anthony Wong Wing-fai	Patrick Leung, Anthony Wong Wing-fai	Sharla Cheung Man, Cheung Kwok-leung, Michael Wong, Wong Kam-kong	• Box Office: HK\$3,410,007
66	1992.4.16 Heart Against Hearts 三人做世界 (aka 三人賊世界)	Stephen Shin/ Dennis Chan Kwok-sun, Tony Leung Hung-wah	Stephen Shin	Stephen Shin, Lee Man-choi, Ng Wai-shek, Carol Lai Miu-suet	George Lam, Dodo Cheng, Vivian Chow, Elaine Jin	• On 30 November 1991, the operations of D & B cinema circuit were taken over by Regal Films' cinema circuit and all D & B productions were distributed by Regal Films Distribution Co Ltd • Box Office: HK\$5,472,855
67	1992.10.1 Black Cat II: Assassination of President Yeltsin 黑貓II刺殺葉利欽 (aka 黑貓2 刺客風雲)	Stephen Shin/ Shan Tam	Stephen Shin	James Fung, Sin Kam-ching, Ivy Lee Mo-king	Jade Leung, Robin Shou, Skorokhod Alexander, Zoltan Buday	• 2nd Unit Dir: James Fung • Box Office: HK\$5,468,611

# The D & B Cinema Circuit Filmography

The film titles listed below are released via the D & B cinema circuit and are non-D & B productions.

	English Film Title	Chinese Film Title	Release Date	Notes
1	Night Caller	平安夜	1986.1.6	Re-released
2	The Woman of Wrath	殺夫	1986.1.24	Taiwanese film
3	The Story Behind the Concert	歌者戀歌	1986.2.22	
4	The First Stitch	黃花閨男 (台名：在室男)	1986.2.28	Taiwanese film
5	Young Cops	青春差館	1986.3.2	Re-released
6	Super Citizen	超級市民	1986.5.15	Taiwanese film
7	The Story of Woo Viet	胡越的故事	1986.5.17	Re-released
8	Tongo: A Chinatown Story	堂口故事	1986.5.22	
9	The Rape	雪辱	1986.6.14	Japanese film; midnight screening only
10	Happy Ghost III	開心鬼撞鬼	1986.6.28	Midnight screening only
11	Son of the Vampire	殭屍再翻生	1986.9.11	Taiwanese film
12	Magic Crystal	魔翡翠	1986.9.18	Co-released with Gala cinema circuit
13	Soul	老娘夠騷	1986.9.25	
14	Love in a Fallen City	傾城之戀	1986.10.2	Re-released
15	The Heroic Pioneers	唐山過台灣	1986.10.9	Taiwanese film
16	On the Red	紅外線	1986.10.24	
17	The Haunted Madam	師姐撞邪	1986.10.30	
18	9 to 3	9 To 3 靚女登場	1986.11.6	
19	'D & B Movies Showcase'	「德寶電影大巡禮」	1986.12.10	Re-released different D & B old titles daily until 12 December 1986
20	Papa, Can You Hear Me Sing?	搭錯車	1986.12.13	Taiwanese film; re-released
21	Desire	心鎖	1987.1.8	Taiwanese film
22	King Kong Lives	金剛續集	1987.1.22	Western film; distributed by Intercontinental Film Distributors (HK) Limited; co-released with cinemas that screened western films
23	The Seductress	命帶桃花	1987.3.6	
24	Over the Top	飛越巔峯	1987.4.9	Western film; distributed by Skynox International Limited; co-released with cinemas that screened western films
25	The Outsiders	孽子	1987.4.25	Taiwanese film; midnight screening only
26	Jokers Playing Games	娶錯老婆投錯胎	1987.5.7	
27	Always Yours	將冰山劈開	1987.5.15	
28	Ghost's Lover	隔世鬼姦情	1987.5.22	
29	China Behind	再見中國	1987.5.29	Shot in 1974; first time commercial release
30	Four Robbers	四大天王	1987.6.4	
31	Warlords of the Golden Triangle	金三角鴉片軍閥揭秘	1987.6.25	Documentary; narrated by John Sham
32	An American Tail	老鼠也移民	1987.8.6	Western film; distriubuted by United International Pictures; meanwhile, Jade Theatre and M2 Theatre continued the screening of <i>An Autumn's Tale</i>

	English Film Title	Chinese Film Title	Release Date	Notes
33	Private Life	香港小姐寫真	1987.8.13	Co-released by D & B and Gala B-Line
34	City Girl	城市麗人	1987.9.17	
35	Yu Pui Tsuen aka The Carnal Sutra Mat	浮世風情繪	1987.10.15	
36	Mr. Handsome	美男子	1987.10.29	
37	Amnesty Decree	魔鬼天使	1987.11.12	
38	The Haunted Cop Shop	猛鬼差館	1987.11.19	Co-released with Gala cinema circuit
39	You're My Destiny	用愛捉伊人	1987.11.26	
40	Golden Swallow	金燕子	1987.12.16	
41	Girls Without Tomorrow	應召女郎 1988	1988.1.1	
42	The Devil & The Ghost Buster	艷鬼凶靈	1988.1.28	
43	Shocking Asia II	古靈精怪東南亞第二集	1988.2.4	Documentary
44	Chatter Street Killer aka Imaginary Suspects	點指賊賊	1988.3.12	
45	Faithful Spirit	手足情	1988.3.25	
46	The Other 1/2 & The Other 1/2	我愛太空人	1988.4.16	
47	Mr. Possessed	撞邪先生	1988.6.9	
48	Mother vs. Mother	南北媽打	1988.6.29	
49	How to Pick Girls Up!	求愛敢死隊	1988.7.13	
50	Women's Prison	女子監獄	1988.8.11	
51	Police Story II	警察故事續集	1988.8.13	Midnight screening only
52	Goodbye - My Friend	再見英雄	1988.10.6	
53	Starry is the Night	今夜星光燦爛	1988.10.13	
54	The Game They Call Sex	黃色故事	1988.11.11	
55	Blood Call	血 Call 機	1988.11.17	
56	Excape from Kingdom	殺出黃國	1988.11.24	
57	Law or Justice	法中情	1988.12.1	
58	Princess Cheung Ping	帝女花	1988.12.16	Re-released the 1959 film
59	My Dream is Yours	夢過界	1988.12.21	
60	Set Me Free!	我要逃亡	1988.12.31	
61	Dark Side of China Town	西雅圖大屠殺	1989.1.14	
62	The Immigrant Policeman	警察也移民	1989.1.19	
63	The Black Wall	黑色迷牆	1989.1.21	
64	Blood Ritual	血裸祭	1989.3.9	
65	Chinese Cop Out	省港雙龍	1989.3.31	
66	Killer Angels	殺手天使	1989.4.7	
67	Avenging Trio	火爆行動	1989.4.14	
68	Fury of a Tiger	猛虎發火	1989.4.20	
69	Doubles Cause Troubles	神勇雙妹嘜	1989.4.27	
70	The Youth Tigers	靚仔幹探	1989.5.6	Midnight screening only
71	The Last Duel	再起風雲	1989.5.18	
72	The Wild Ones	我未成年	1989.6.15	
73	Live Hard	鐵膽雄風	1989.7.14	
74	Devil Hunters	獵魔群英	1989.8.10	
75	Angel III aka Return of the Iron Angels	天使行動 III 魔女末日	1989.9.14	
76	On the Society File of Shanghai	上海社會檔案	1989.9.29	Taiwanese film
77	Final Run	目中無人	1989.10.4	
78	Big Man Little Affair	大男人小傳	1989.10.10	



	English Film Title	Chinese Film Title	Release Date	Notes
79	China White	轟天龍虎會	1989.11.4	
80	Fight to Survive	我在江湖	1989.11.23	
81	Lucky Stars	福祿雙星	1989.12.2	
82	Erotic Nights	夜激情	1989.12.7	
83	Stars & Roses	愛人同志	1989.12.21	
84	The Dragon Fighter	地頭龍	1990.1.11	
85	Fatal Termination	赤色大風暴	1990.3.3	
86	Here Comes a Vampire	猛鬼霸王花	1990.3.9	
87	My Hero	一本漫畫闖天涯	1990.3.22	
88	A Terracotta Warrior	秦俑	1990.4.12	
89	Spy Games	中日南北和	1990.5.10	
90	Killer's Romance	浪漫殺手自由人	1990.5.17	
91	Family Honor	無名家族	1990.5.24	
92	Vampire Settle on Police-Camp	猛鬼系列之一眉道姑	1990.6.7	
93	A Tale from the East	漫畫奇俠	1990.6.28	
94	Perfect Girls	靚足 100 分	1990.7.7	
95	The Revenge of Angel	水玲瓏	1990.7.19	
96	Look Out, Officer!	師兄撞鬼	1990.7.28	
97	Demoness From Thousand Years	千年女妖	1990.9.7	
98	Brave Young Girls	黑海霸王花	1990.9.21	
99	The Story of My Son	愛的世界	1990.9.28	
100	New Kids in Town	初到貴境	1990.10.5	
101	Fire Phoenix	橫衝直撞火鳳凰	1990.10.12	
102	Midnight Angel	午夜天使	1990.10.19	
103	The Cyprus Tigers	東方老虎	1990.10.25	
104	Fortune Chaser	爛賭財神	1990.11.8	
105	Temptation Summary	三度誘惑	1990.11.15	
106	The Other Half	老婆，妳好嘢！	1990.12.6	
107	An Eternal Combat	天地玄門	1991.1.5	
108	Phantom War	英倫越戰	1991.1.18	
109	Retreat of the Godfather	大哥讓位	1991.1.25	
110	Weakness of Man	偷情小丈夫	1991.1.31	
111	Deadly Deal	烈火危情	1991.2.7	
112	Don't Fool Me!	中環英雄	1991.3.2	
113	Fist of Fury 1991	新精武門一九九一	1991.3.23	
114	Running on Empty	正紅旗下	1991.4.18	
115	Stone Age Warriors	魔域飛龍	1991.4.25	
116	The Plot	佈局	1991.5.11	
117	Vampire Kids	殭屍福星仔	1991.5.16	
118	Fury in Red	轟天龍	1991.5.23	
119	Mission of Condor aka Mission Kill	禿鷹檔案	1991.6.7	
120	Ghost Story of Kam Ping Mui	聊齋金瓶梅	1991.6.22	
121	Return of the Evil Fox	猛鬼狐狸精	1991.6.29	
122	Ghost for Sales	捉鬼專門店	1991.7.6	
123	To Catch a Thief	契媽唔易做	1991.7.12	
124	The Tantana	密宗威龍	1991.7.27	
125	Scheming Wonders	賊聖	1991.8.8	

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126 Temptation Summary II	四度誘惑	1991.8.31	
127 Lethal Panther	驚天龍虎豹	1991.10.4	
128 The Roar of the Vietnamese	越青	1991.10.16	
129 The Fatal Game	毒豪	1991.10.24	
130 Godfather's Daughter Mafia Blues	烈火情仇	1991.10.31	
131 My American Grandson aka American Grandson	上海假期	1991.11.7	
132 Dead Target	奪寶俏佳人	1991.11.23	Distributed by Sil-Metropole Organisation Ltd.; the last film released via the D & B cinema circuit whose operations were taken over by Regal Films' cinema circuit on 30 November 1991

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Researchers: Wong Ha-pak, Janice Chow

English Editor: Natasha Wong

Executive Editor: Cheung Po-ching

Research and Editorial Assistant: Paul Cheng

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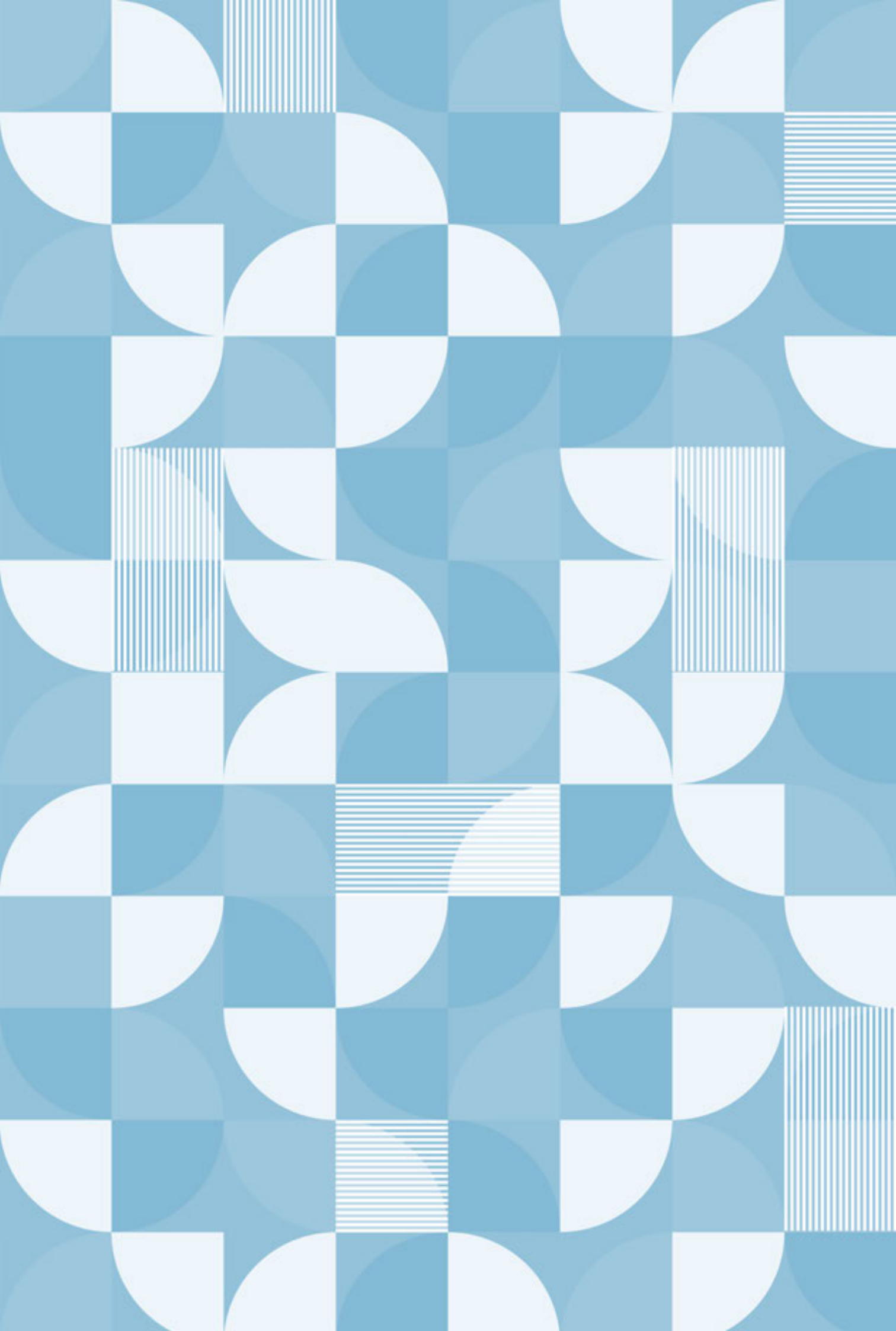
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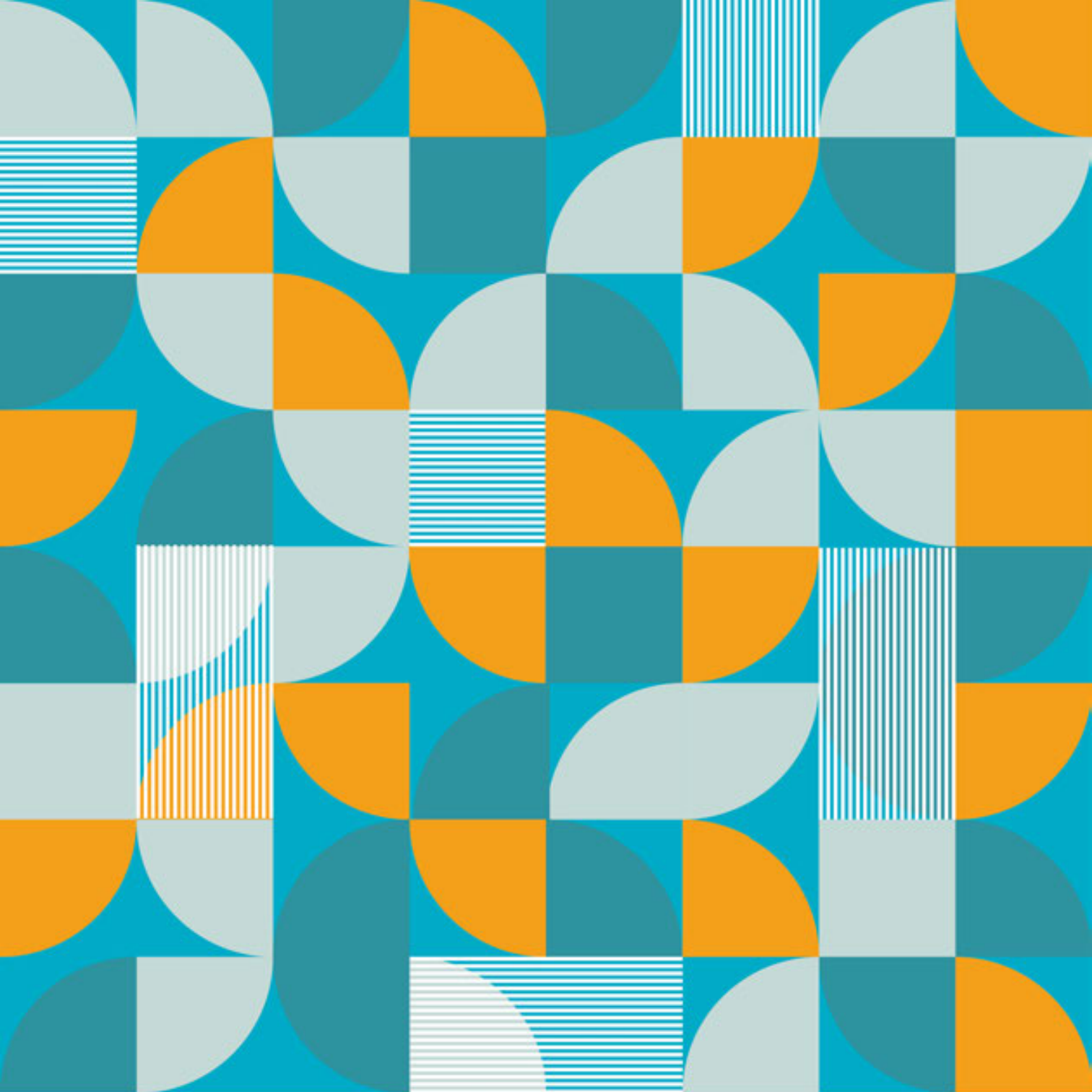
Fax: (852) 2311 5229

E-mail: [hkfa@lcsd.gov.hk](mailto:hkfa@lcsd.gov.hk)

Website: [www.filmarchive.gov.hk](http://www.filmarchive.gov.hk)







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