

## Preface

Kwok Ching-ling

Sex and violence are generally what comes to mind when 1970s Hong Kong cinema is concerned. Films containing such elements were, without question, the mainstream of the time. Looking back at some of these works now, the brutality is still traumatising and excruciating. As a matter of fact, movies of all genres during that period were undergoing various changes. *Hong Kong Filmography Volume VIII* picks up from where *Hong Kong Filmography Volume VII (1970–1974)* left off, chronicling the works of Hong Kong cinema from 1975 to 1979. It can be seen that certain distinctive characteristics of some of the films made in the mid-to-late 1970s would be retained and realised to their full potential in the future. The late 1970s undoubtedly marked a turning point in Hong Kong cinema, a time when movies began developing a local flavour and connecting with the masses.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Wuxia* and Kung Fu**

Amongst the rampant cinematic violence and eroticism of the 1970s, the exceptional King Hu travelled to Korea to film *Raining in the Mountain* (1979) and *Legend of the Mountain* (1979). The former incorporates the clever use of martial arts and rhythm from the northern school of Peking Opera, while the latter is a freethinking work which depicts a love transcending the human world. After the huge success of *Killer Clans* in 1976, Chor Yuen went on to make a total of 19 films adapted from Gu Long's novels in the following years up to 1982, transferring the stories' outlandishness and depiction of human nature to his aesthetic film sets. Chang Cheh, the man responsible for the onset of the 'Wuxia Century', also set off the 'Kung Fu Kid Fever' with *Disciples of Shaolin* (1975) starring Alexander Fu. Lau Kar-leung, born to a family of martial artists, has been practising the craft since a young age, and was the martial arts choreographer for several dozen of Chang's films (between 1968 and 1975). Through his extensive studio and martial arts experience, he became a director in 1975. Lau established his own style and uniqueness with great ease, truly making him one of the masters of Hong Kong kung fu cinema.

Karl Maka directed the odd couple action comedy, *The Good, the Bad and the Loser* in 1976, citing that the inspiration came from cowboy films (please refer to entry 205 in *Hong Kong Filmography Volume VIII*). *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* and *Drunken Master*, both released in 1978 with Ng See-yuen as Producer and Yuen Woo-ping as Director, gave rise to the *kung fu* comedy craze which facilitated Jackie Chan's rise to stardom. Sammo Hung, the most senior of the 'Seven Little Fortunes', was hot on Chan's heels, directing well-received films such as *The Iron-fisted Monk*

(1977), *Warriors Two* (1978) and *Knockabout* (1979), in which he also starred.

*Wuxia* cinema can be said to have entered a new era with Tsui Hark's directorial debut, *The Butterfly Murders* (produced by Seasonal Film, 1979). As for *The Man from Hong Kong* (1975) starring Jimmy Wang Yu, who rose to fame long before Bruce Lee, despite it still featuring displays of physical prowess, this collaboration between Golden Harvest and an Australian company was already considered an action film. Volleys of gunfire later, and it became the world of action cinema.

## **Comedy**

The popularity of comedies is largely responsible for the evolution of kung fu films into kung fu comedies, while elements of action are also found in many laugh-fests. Kung fu films and comedies set in the Republic of China era are full of traditional and local flavour. Apart from creating characters such as Chan Mung-kat and Lun Man-chui, Wong Fung, a master of plot twists, also made *Emperor Chien Lung* (1976), in which Anthony Lau Wing and Wang Yu were partnered up for the first time. Li Han-hsiang went on to make several films featuring the emperor, propelling Anthony Lau into superstardom. After Li closed down Grand Motion Picture Company and returned to Hong Kong, he made films about scamming and sex, setting a trend of small productions which many filmmakers followed at a time when gimmicks were all the rage. Paradoxically, Li then regained the courage to revert to large-scale productions – *The Empress Dowager* (1975) and *The Last Tempest* (1976) were the results of his efforts.

The emergence of Michael Hui, one of the greatest comedians of all time, took comedy to its peak. Riding on the success of *Games Gamblers Play* (1974), the writer/director/actor continued the partnership with his little brothers, Ricky and Sam, to bring movie-goers *The Last Message* (1975), *The Private Eyes* (1976) and *The Contract* (1978), all of which were box-office winners well received by the working class in their respective years of release. With Golden Harvest's development of the international market, Hui incorporated more comical body language into his works to cater to audiences outside of Hong Kong.

Richard Ng was also one of the most sought-after comedians during that period. *Winner Takes All* (written and directed by Karl Maka, 1977) is a fantastic fusion of East and West – a hypnosis session is followed by a series of logic-defying and totally nonsensical events. It was Maka's first contemporary comedy. Ng and Maka both returned to Hong Kong after living abroad and once ran Advance Films together. Maka was still making kung fu comedies at the time (incidentally, after the hypnosis plotline in the latter half of *Winner Takes All*, kung fu fighting ensued) and it was not until his days at Cinema City that he exercised his talent for outrageous contemporary

comedies to its fullest.

Returning to Hong Kong after having honed in on her craft, Josephine Siao appeared as the eccentric Lam Ah Chun on television before the character was transferred to the silver screen. Her co-star in both *Lam Ah Chun* (produced by Hi-Pitc and directed by Chan Kar-suen, 1978) and *Lam Ah Chun Blunders Again* (1979) was James Yi, who played the role of a kind-hearted country bumpkin. Yi often played the role of the small fry who brought viewers laughter, as well as tears. Although his characters were nobodies who suffered the most terrible of fates, they always looked out for the equally oppressed female leads, creating a bond of mutual support between them. His performance in *Bald-Headed Betty* (1975), in which lead actress Meg Lam Kin-ming shaved her head, was particularly moving.

### **Society and Reality**

The films in which Yi played a simpleton, as well as *Bald-Headed Betty*, were productions from Goldig Films and directed by Cheung Sum. Cheung has a knack for making films about strange love and lust. Apart from *Bald-Headed Betty*, he also made *Massage Girls* (1976) and *Miss "O"* (1978), with Candice Yu and Sarina Sai starring opposite Chow Yun-fat respectively. Yeung Kuen, another prominent director at Goldig, made similar features too – *The Hunter, the Butterfly and the Crocodile* (co-starring Cecilia Wong, 1976), also featuring Chow as the male lead, is such an example. In addition, Yeung was responsible for traditional Cantonese comedies such as *Enjoy Longevity – 300 Years* (1975) and *The Drug Queen* (1976), both of which reflected real-life society at the time.

Li Han-hsiang proved to be in a league of his own when it came to period films involving scams and erotica with *The Legends of Cheating* (1971) and *Legends of Lust* (1972). During this time, Western erotic films had become commonplace, as was the case with local productions which regularly featured actors like Lui Kay and Ho Fan. The censorship system came under fire as local filmmakers fought to be seen eye to eye with their Western counterparts, and Hong Kong's first 'real' erotic film, *Starlets for Sale*, saw its release in 1977. Some of these works using erotica to generate appeal are comedies, while many are tales about women who have fallen from grace or acts of social misconduct and lust. Gambling, cons and gangs also began to be featured more and more prominently in films.

With the establishment of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) in 1974, Ng See-yuen made *Anti-Corruption* (1975), prompting a trend of films adapted from real-life news events. Many of such works criticised the corrupted segment of law enforcement. For example, in *The Discharged* (co-directed by Alan Tang and Siu Wing, 1977), the inmates stage a rebellion after suffering the guards'

abuse, while the inspector and warden in *Invincible Enforcer* (directed by Cheng Kang, 1979) are sinister individuals. The resolve with which the corrupted police officer in *Bank-Buster* (directed by Mou Tun-fei, 1978) hunts down the criminal who has incriminating evidence of his misdeeds borders on killing intent and is simply horrifying. As for *The Teahouse* (1974) and *Big Brother Cheng* (1975), they are the renowned works of Kuei Chih-hung adapted from novels by Chiang Chi-nan and depict the police force's inability to protect citizens from gang oppression, forcing Cheng, the protagonist, to take the law into his own hands.

During the same period, Bang Bang Film produced *Jumping Ash* (co-directed by Leong Po-chih and Josephine Siao, 1976) and *The Servant* (co-directed by Ronny Yu and Philip Chan, 1979). Both were a breath of fresh air for movie-goers written by Chan, who happens to be a former officer of the police force. Leong, who had a background in commercial direction, received praise for his style and pacing in *Jumping Ash*, in which a drug trafficking assassin closes in on a conscientious detective. In *The Servant*, the pairing of an honest detective with a reckless partner creates additional tension by suggesting potential corruption as the duo deals with drug traffickers. All four directors were making their directorial debut with these two movies. Other novice directors who kicked off their careers with a bang through crime films include Alex Cheung Kwok-ming and Peter Yung, who were responsible for *Cops and Robbers* (1979) and *The System* (1979) respectively. A veteran detective is paired with a rookie in the former, while the informant in the latter adds an extra layer to the plot, making it a memorable work.

### **Fantasy and Technology**

The development of special effects tends to have a close relationship with supernatural and fantasy films. Apart from seductive Chinese ghosts, Southeast Asian legends and horror stories are also popular topics. The Japanese superhero television shows and films made using special effects during the 1970s created a craze, and Hong Kong filmmakers also jumped on the bandwagon. *The Super Inframan* (1975), a Shaw Brothers production, was directed by Hua Shan, who had a background in cinematography. The studio especially purchased equipment such as an optical synthesiser and blue screens to create the special effects. The crew built a diorama for scenes where landscapes were torn apart, as well as transparent models to make certain characters appear as giants. The content and structure were very similar to its Japanese counterparts.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, American disaster films such as *The Towering Inferno* (1974) were also gaining widespread popularity. Fu Ching-hua fused elements of disaster and science fiction films together in *The God of War* (directed by Chen Hung-min, 1976),

which went on to become an internet sensation in the early 2010s! In this feature, aliens wreak havoc in Central and Tsim Sha Tsui, with Guan Gong coming to the city's rescue. It was shown in Taiwan in 1976 and never made it to theatres in Hong Kong. However, the movie surfaced on the internet under a different name, *Gwangong VS Alien*, in 2011 and achieved cult status. Hong Kong Polytechnic University student Leung Chung-man borrowed this idea to make a short film, winning the Best Creativity Award (Student Division) at the Fresh Wave Short Film Competition in 2011. The rediscovery of the film, in which Guan Gong, wearing a period costume, battles surreal aliens in a contemporary setting, has sent sparks flying 30-odd years after its release. It has even inspired a youngster to come up with a re-creation which reflects the current state of the world.

### **Filming and the Market**

During the Cultural Revolution, the leftist studios of Great Wall, Feng Huang and Sun Luen experienced production setbacks which, in turn, facilitated their success in making documentaries in the Mainland. Prior to the implementation of the reform and opening up policy, the closeness of the relationship between the Hong Kong and Taiwanese film industries in the 1970s<sup>3</sup> was comparable to that between the Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese movie industries today. While many filmmakers travelled to and from both places, some Hong Kong companies hired Taiwanese people to work locally, and many companies filmed in Taiwan after registering in Hong Kong, where they returned for post-production. However, quite a few of these films were only released in Taiwan, while some others could not be screened there after they were shown in Hong Kong.

The audiences of the two markets had different tastes. Romantic art films prevailed in Taiwan, but they performed poorly at the Hong Kong box office. Conversely, due to the more stringent censorship in Taiwan than in Hong Kong, some popular Hong Kong features could not be shown in Taiwan. Apart from this close neighbour, Southeast Asia has always been an important market for movies made in Hong Kong, but this was changed in the 1970s. In order to protect the development of their own local film industries, many countries imposed increasingly limiting restrictions on imported Chinese-language features. With the Asian markets growing smaller by the day, North American Chinese filmmakers looked to cracking the international market. They built movie theatres in Canada and the US, and collaborated on co-productions with foreign film companies.

Action films were easier to sell abroad than other genres, and such movies set in the Republic of China era became quite popular in Europe. Large studios such as Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest developed international markets by working with

sizeable organisations and major filmmakers from the US and Europe to build the foundation for global distribution. For example, Shaw Brothers collaborated with Warner Brothers to produce *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* (1975), for which there are both English and Mandarin versions. Many companies, no matter big or small, filmed their movies overseas in order to generate greater appeal and increase their chances of being distributed abroad. As a matter of fact, close to 40% of the films made in 1975 were shot on foreign soil.<sup>4</sup>

### **Turn of the Decade**

Although a large quantity of martial arts films were made during 1970s as a whole, their production had already begun to wane in 1974. In the years that followed, Cantonese comedies ruled over the box office while Mandarin-language features also slipped into decline. In 1975, the economic downturn, fierce competition between television stations, and poor security at night led to poor evening screenings. The number of movie-goers totalled approximately 70 million, the lowest in 15 years. It was not until the latter half of 1976 that the situation began to improve.<sup>5</sup> Hong Kong cinema then went through a transformation and local films were no longer defined as ‘Cantonese-language features’ or ‘Mandarin-language features’. Although the dialogue was delivered in Cantonese, the movies were very different from their predecessors and were full of local colour and flavour, hence the new term ‘Hong Kong films’. During this period of change, productions were overflowing with vitality. For example, elements of the past and present, no matter in terms of style or content, were fused together to bring audiences something fresh. The camaraderie between swordsmen in *wuxia* films is carried forward, and even romanticised, in the bond between brotherhood members in gangster films, making them different songs to the same tune. This period marked the beginnings of the trend of using modern elements in period films to create gags which would later become very popular.

Some filmmakers who were brought up practising kung fu, such as Lau Kar-leung and Sammo Hung, went from being martial arts choreographers to directors. The time was ripe and they secured a place in the industry in their new roles with their experience, taking 1980s and 1990s Hong Kong cinema by storm. This period was also the beginning of the Hong Kong New Wave Cinema movement, during which many new directors emerged. This generation of filmmakers graduated from film schools and were full of youthful spirit. Their work with industry veterans also proved to be pivotal to the development of their careers. For instance, *Boat People* (1982), directed by Ann Hui, was a success partly due to Chiu Kang-chien’s script. Wong Yee-shun, who studied under Tong Shu-shuen and Patrick Lung Kong, served as Editor for the film. During the early years of the New Wave, both Chiu and Wong

played an instrumental part in assisting directors who were new on the scene.

The New Wave directors include the likes of Ann Hui and Tsui Hark, whom had a film school background. They entered into the industry together with those who grew up working in film studios and eventually became directors, such as Lau Kar-leung and Sammo Hung, as well as other filmmakers who would hold their own in the future, injecting life into the golden era of the 1980s. Numerous outstanding filmmakers generated new ideas under similar themes by using creative plot twists. For example, Hong Kong filmmakers played on infinite variations of the crime film, at which they are very adept, finding fresh angles and creating new scenarios with the passing of time.

The continued publication of the *Hong Kong Filmography* series would not be possible without the persistent efforts of our researchers, writers and editors. The Acquisition Unit provided the latest moving images and information, the Conservation Unit assisted with the viewing of film copies, the Resource Centre offered a treasure trove of texts and historical records, while the Systems Unit designed the database which houses the contents of this book. In addition to the mutual support between Hong Kong Film Archive colleagues, many friends, industry veterans, as well as organisations, have also given us valuable assistance. Gratitude must also be extended to Mr Po Fung, the Hong Kong Film Archive's former Research Officer, who has kindly written the 'Foreword' to this publication and verified the contents of this book. (Translated by Johnny Ko)

#### Notes

- 1 In his article, 'Another Year to Conquer' (*The Milky Way Pictorial*, Hong Kong, No 213, January 1976, pp 16–17, in Chinese), Lo Sa stated: 'It is always possible to make money in the Hong Kong market, but the first prerequisite is the localisation of the subject matter.' From this, we can see that the 'Hong Kong flavour' of local films which we often mention today can be traced back to the 1970s.
- 2 At the time, it was reported that some Hong Kong companies actually created so-called 'new' superhero films by purchasing superhero movies or television programmes from Japan, extracting scenes containing special effects from them, and mixing them with footage shot with local actors. Please refer to Huang Jian-ye (ed), *The Chronicle of Taiwan Cinema 1898–2000, Vol. II*, Taipei: Taiwan Council for Cultural Affairs & Chinese Taipei Film Archive, 2005, p 725 (in Chinese).
- 3 For further background information, please refer to the Foreword of *Hong Kong Filmography Volume VII (1970–1974)*.
- 4 Please refer to 'A Year of Hong Kong Entertainment', *1976 Hong Kong Yearbook*, Hong Kong: Wah Kiu Yat Po Ltd, 1976, Chapter 2, p 138 (in Chinese).

- 5 Please refer to 'A Year of Hong Kong Entertainment', *1975 Hong Kong Yearbook*, Hong Kong: Wah Kiu Yat Po Ltd, 1975, Chapter 2, p 125 (in Chinese); 'A Year of Hong Kong Entertainment', 1976, op cit; and 'A Year of Hong Kong Entertainment', *1977 Hong Kong Yearbook*, Hong Kong: Wah Kiu Yat Po Ltd, 1977, Chapter 2, p 121 (in Chinese).