

Introduction

A Trip Down the Striving Path of Cinema City

Looking back in film history, I can't help but see a certain butterfly effect. For example, when I watch Cinema City's comedies, I think of the two firemen – played by To Ping and Adam Cheng – in director Chor Yuen's *The House of 72 Tenants* (1973) and the clever Cantonese wordplay they use when they deceive the residents of a poor housing estate: 'Cash Goes Water Flows, No Cash No Show; Money Comes, Money Goes, Without Money Nothing Grows!' In the 60s and the 70s, Cantonese cinema was in poor form due to the Singapore and Malaysian Governments' repression of minority Chinese dialects and the poor quality of Cantonese films in general. The magic of streetwise Cantonese in this film not only brings out laughters, but also revived the audience's interest in Cantonese cinema, bringing it out of the rock bottom. Even though the spread of television's popularity took audiences away from the movies, television also nurtured a new generation of talents, including the Hui Brothers, that would eventually shine in the film industry.

In the 1970s, the baby boomer generation produced a generation of young talents that received their education abroad. When they returned to Hong Kong, they entered the film and television industries, where they joined force with local creative minds, allowing the Hong Kong New Wave to flourish. Meanwhile the martial arts choreographers, who acquired their skills in the industry in 1950s and 60s, were promoted to become directors. They devoted themselves to break the mold of traditional martial arts filmmaking. Influenced by Bruce Lee's films, these young martial arts masters-directors pushed action genre to a new

level, expanding kung fu films to new dimensions.

1970s also saw the rise of Golden Harvest and the beginning of outsourcing in the film industry. This allowed the creation of independent production teams, comprising of young, western-educated talents with different visions of cinema. Among them was Richard Ng Yiu-hon and Lai Ying-chau's Advance Films Ltd, which hired Karl Maka to write and direct *The Good, the Bad, and the Loser* (1976). According to Maka, this film was heavily influenced by the Spaghetti Westerns out of Italy.¹ It was sold to audiences for its use of contemporary Cantonese slangs in a period setting. It was also known as a pioneer in the kung fu comedy genre for inserting bachelor comedy beats into fight scenes.² Maka worked with Advance Films again on *Winner Takes All* (1977), which brought Chaplin's tramp style of comedy to create 'bachelor comedies' in Hong Kong. A year later, Maka joined Sammo Hung and Lau Kar-wing to form Gar Bo Films, producing martial arts comedies like *Dirty Tiger, Crazy Frog!* (1978) and *Odd Couple* (1978). These films featured Dean Shek, who rose to fame after starring in a number of action comedies.

Karl Maka and the Beginning of 'Bachelor Comedies'

Karl Maka would later rope in Dean Shek and comedy writer Raymond Wong to form Warriors Film Co. Straying from traditional martial arts stories about the feuds between different kung fu sects, the company produced several 'bachelor comedies' that depicted the adventures of clever youngsters who defeated goliath with nothing but their street smarts. The films were all about mischievous heroes and action told with plenty of comedic elements. Even the action design of these films was inspired by the tramp's comedic style. In *Crazy Crooks* and *By Hook or by Crook* (the latter released in association with Gar Bo Films), you can even see Chaplin-inspired characters wandering around the streets of Republic-era China.

These two films were released on Lawrence Louey, Ng Siu-chan and Gordon Fung Ping-chung's Golden Princess Amusement cinema chain. These films may not have struck box office gold, but they were impressive enough that Karl Maka and his collaborators were regarded highly by cinema chain owners. Looking into why Golden Princess chose to invest in Warriors Film, Po Fung traces the history of Golden Princess and other cinema chains in the 1970s through box office statistics and release schedules.

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1. Chan Ting-ching (Interviewer), Mak Hak-keung & Chan Ting-ching (collators), 'Hooligan Duos in Action Comedies'. *Film Biweekly*, Issue 28, 7 February 1980, pp 10-11.
 2. Ibid.

***Laughing Times* – Cinema City's Charlie Chaplin-esque Inaugural Film**

Cinema City came into being in 1980 with funding from Golden Princess. The company's inaugural film was John Woo's *Laughing Times* (1980, credited under his pseudonym Ng Sheung-fei) —best remembered for Shek's imitation of comedy master Charlie Chaplin. The film transposes the plight of the Great Depression of the United States to a despondent post-war community during the early days of the Republic of China. Infused with Hong Kong-style humour and action, *Laughing Times* tells the story of a tramp-like vagrant who unwittingly takes down an evil child smuggling ring. *Beware of Pickpockets* (1981), which was released shortly after, contains similar comedic and martial arts elements, as well as musical scenes that appealed to family audiences. In fact, heart-warming and family-friendly movies would go on to be an integral part of Cinema City's catalogue throughout the different stages of its development. These works became an indispensable genre that shaped the image moviegoers remember the studio by and also differentiated it from its competitors. Later, films like *A Family Affair* (1984) and *Kung Hei Fat Choy* (1985) followed the same formula with new twists; the former depicts life of a family separated by divorce, while the latter infused E.T.-esque fantasy elements into a typical Lunar New Year comedy.

Bidding Goodbye to the 'Tattered Clothing' Period with *All the Wrong Clues (...for the Right Solution)*

Cinema City began recruiting young talents already at its early establishing stage. Through the introduction by John Woo, they succeeded in bringing in Tsui Hark, a topnotch director among the Hong Kong New Wave directors. Tsui Hark directed the award-winning *All the Wrong Clues (...for the Right Solution)* (1981), which is co-written by Raymond Wong and Szeto Cheuk-hon. The film's vintage setup that resembled early Hollywood glamour, coupled with extravagant scenes featuring beautiful costumed actors, studio sets, colonial architecture, Teddy Robin's outstanding score, as well as Tsui's cartoonish treatment, made it a refreshing hit. The film easily gauged the Best Director, Best Cinematography and Best Film Editing at the Golden Horse Awards. While box office revenues did not reach the \$10 million mark, it achieved the important objective of erasing Warriors Films and Cinema City's previous impression of producing 'films in tattered clothing'. The successful establishment of the company's brand image paved the way for its golden age.

The line-up of Cinema City's 'War Room', which would later become a legend of the film industry, was already established at this point: In addition to Maka, Shek, and Wong, there were also Eric Tsang, Tsui Hark, Teddy Robin, and Nansun Shi. The space was originally a room measuring less than 100 square feet in Maka's home. It was the headquarters where the septet collectively engaged in the creative, planning and producing processes. Although

the environment was cramped, it did not constrict their creativity. In fact, numerous record-smashing blockbusters were conceived there.

With the success of *All the Wrong Clues (...for the Right Solution)*, Cinema City had fulfilled the promise in its slogan, 'Produced by Cinema City, Viewer Satisfaction Guaranteed'. In comparison to the Shaw Brothers' slogan of 'Shaw Brothers Productions, Quality Features Guaranteed' and Golden Harvest's 'Golden Harvest Presents Only the Best' which stressed the superiority of the Studios, Cinema City emphasised on audience-based marketing. The company also ensured its approach was consistent by paying attention to viewers' responses, a guiding principle that was proudly embraced. Wong Ha-pak's article elaborates on Cinema City's strategies in image building and publicity packaging, revealing a whole bundle of events and promotions via printing matters, audio-visual media and events set-up, making sure that their films' information would infiltrate all walks of lives.

Chasing Girls and the Beginning of the Modern Comedy

After *All the Wrong Clues*, Cinema City showed audiences a new Dean Shek, who plays a playboy in the comedy *Chasing Girls* (1981). The film topped the box office and marked another important step in Cinema City's box office dominance. If *All the Wrong Clues* saw Cinema City building its confidence through elegant nostalgia, then *Chasing Girls* saw the company leave behind its Republic-era comedies for a new era of modern films. *Chasing Girls* documented Hong Kong's rapid economic expansion and rampant materialism in the 1980s, as represented by Shek's wardrobe (bell bottoms and suit jackets) and his flamboyant sports car. Designer brands can be seen all over the film, as the men and women are caught in various forms of romantic entanglements in the big city. Later, Eric Tsang Siu-wang would expand on the *Chasing Girls* formula with companion film *The Perfect Wife?!* (1983) and several Cinema City romantic comedies that told stories from the perspectives of everyday men.

Aces Go Places Successfully Claimed the Territory of 'Lunar New Year Hit'

Encouraged by the success of its early productions, Cinema City began to eye on making more ambitious big-budget productions. Maka said, '*Chasing Girls* was another commercial success for us, only losing out to a Bond film [ed: *For Your Eyes Only* (1981)]. I was bubbling with indignation being beaten by a Western film. It's only fair that Chinese people should watch Chinese films with Cantonese dialogue. Our topic was relevant to the audience, our costumes were beautifully designed and we even two crashed two sports cars in one scene. Why did we lose? Aha! I suddenly realised that they had one thing that

we didn't have—a happy-go-lucky hero with all the high-tech action.¹³ Thus came about the birth of the popular action comedy *Aces Go Places* (1982), starring singer and actor Sam Hui as King Kong, Hong Kong's version of Bond; Maka as a bald detective; and Taiwanese art-house actress Sylvia Chang as a police woman. This casting combination yielded surprisingly brilliant chemistry. *Aces Go Places* was directed by Eric Tsang and involved the participation of numerous aquatic, terrestrial and aerial stunt teams from abroad. Set against the backdrop of Hong Kong's then economic boom, the abundance of exhilarating action scenes, in particular the deadly stunts by Ko Shou-liang in flying his motorbike through windows of a skyscraper, thrilled moviegoers.

Aces Go Places ultimately earned more than HK\$26 million, crushing Golden Harvest's Republic-era film *Dragon Lord* (1982) and setting a new box office record. Writer Stephen Teo believes that critics undermined the creativity of the *Aces Go Places* series, re-examining it as a successful example of a high-concept film done right.

A Wave That is New, But Not Exactly the New Wave

The transition from the 1970s to the 1980s coincided with the rise of the Hong Kong New Wave. Cinema City also recruited some of the rising helmers from this movement. In addition to Tsui Hark, who became a core member of the company's seven-member team, Clifford Choi Kai-kwong, Peter Yung, and Leong Po-chih have also directed movies produced by Cinema City, including *No U-Turn* (1981), *Life After Life* (1981), and *He Lives by Night* (1982). Ng Siu-wan, who had a background in television, also made the refreshing youth melodrama, *Once Upon a Rainbow* (1982) for the company. These forerunners' output for Cinema City had stirred the film industry with a fresh new aura.

This batch of Cinema City films, considered edgy at the time, were the products of a world that had just seen the sexual revolution and the rise of feminism in western societies. The characters of these films used sexuality to build and affirm their identities, and the films defied Cinema City's relatively conservative, mainstream values. Finding comedy in male impotence, Annette Sham's *My Little Sentimental Friend* (1984) provided female audiences with a refreshing alternative from Cinema City's usual style of comedies. Later, Lau Yam studies the effects that filmmakers like Clifford Choi Kai-kwong, Peter Yung, Ng Siu-wan and Annette Sham had on the Cinema City machine as they tried to break from company traditions. Mary Wong Shuk-han's analysis of *Life After Life* and *He Lives by Night* highlights a time when Cinema City shined its spotlight on the darker corners of the city.

3. May Ng, Cecilia Wong, Winnie Fu & Wong Ha-pak (interviewers), May Ng (collator), 'Karl Maka: A Striving Heart of a Hero Is the Key to Success', pp 151-169 in this volume.

Creating New Comedy Dimensions

Cinema City was particularly adept at creating variety under the broad scope of comedy. For instance, *It Takes Two* (1982) is full of local characteristics and nostalgia, *Till Death Do We Scare* (1982) combines Hollywood special effects makeup with elements of superstition and romance, while *All the Wrong Spies* (1983) is a flamboyant musical classic. *Esprit D'amour* (1983), a touching supernatural film in which romance pacifies the eerie ambiance usually associated with the genre, is also representative of the studio's unique charm.

In 1984, Raymond Wong adapted secondary school student Joe Ma's stage play *Scholar Chu* into *The Happy Ghost*, which would later become a hugely successful film series. Film critics had wildly different opinions of the series, which became Wong's breakthrough film. Sam Ho looks back at the series' marketing strategy and hugely effective commercial strategy, as well as what male creators fantasize female sexuality to be throughout the series.

In addition to its comedies, Cinema City was also known for constantly pushing the envelope in special effects development. The company had its own modeling and visual effects teams, whose best works include *Aces Go Places III – Our Man from Bond Street*, *Kung Hei Fat Choy* (1985) and *The Legend of Wisely* (1987). Keeto Lam, who participated in these productions as part of the effects team, writes about the evolution of Cinema City's special effects productions, as well as experiences like learning from a Hollywood professional and working under director Tsui Hark.

Unprecedented Success in Taiwan

In 1981, the year after Cinema City was founded, the company entered into a partnership with Wang Ying-hsiang's Taiwanese distribution company to establish its Taiwanese branch. One after another, Yu Kan-ping, Sylvia Chang, and John Woo had served as the director of this branch, which was tasked with expanding Cinema City's production business in Taiwan. Each of them left their own mark in the studio's history as directors and producers. After Yu resigned from the post, he directed the tragic *Papa, Can You Hear Me Sing?* (1983), which took Hong Kong and Taiwan by storm. Meanwhile, Chang recruited three young directors, namely Lin Ching-jie, Edward Yang and Ko Yi-cheng to shoot *Send in the Clowns* (1983), *That Day, on the Beach* (1983), and *Kidnapped* (1983) respectively. Despite underperforming at the box office, these films fuelled the rise of new talents in Taiwan and *That Day, on the Beach* was hailed as a classic of New Taiwanese Cinema. After Woo took over in 1984, the company continued to shoot and produce films in Taiwan. The results were only mediocre and luck was just not on his side. John Woo left his director's role two years later and Cinema City's influence was gradually taken over by Taiwan's local film companies. Liang Liang writes about Cinema City's tumultuous time in

Taiwan. Wong Ain-ling traces the career path of Sylvia Chang, with a focus on her work in 1983, detailing the company's expansion and how it created a Hong Kong connection to the Taiwan New Cinema movement.

A Better Tomorrow Meets a City on Fire

In 1986, Tsui Hark invited John Woo to direct *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) for Cinema City and Tsui's Film Workshop. The film was an astounding hit and revived Woo's directorial career. Later, Ringo Lam would return to his roots, directing a series of *On Fire* films for Cinema City that began a trend of crime films. The works of both Woo and Lam ooze testosterone, but writer Matthew Cheng exposes their fundamental differences.

In the mid-80's, Cinema City's main figures left to form their own companies. The company followed Golden Harvest's footsteps, co-producing films with independent companies. In addition to its partnership with Film Workshop, Cinema City also worked with companies founded by Yuen Woo-ping and Dennis Yu on films like *Mismatched Couples* (1985) and *The Musical Singer* (1985). Law Kar traces the history of Cinema City by exploring the close relationship shared by cinema circuit owners and production executive, as well as the fierce competition that the company faced in its later days.

In the 1990s, Cinema City withdrew from the frontlines. Nonetheless, its decade of operation, as well as Golden Princess's successful alliance with different cinema circuits, enabled the company to add another legendary chapter to the lore of local film industry. On one hand, Cinema City's savvy mix of innovative music and visual effects in its silver screen spectacles made it a dominant driving force of local pop culture that shaped the identity of the Hong Kong people. On the other hand, through continuously exploring and drawing from their experience in working with foreign professionals, the company had cultivated countless talents in different areas. Moreover, the accomplishments and experience of Cinema City have also witnessed the evolution of Hong Kong's film studio structure from grand studio production to independent film productions, proving that a decentralised mechanism can still allow room of development towards professionalism and enterprising. Its success story can still enlighten us on the development of today's film industry. [Translated by Kevin Ma & Johnny Ko]

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