

# **Hong Kong Cinema and the 1997 Return of the Colony to Mainland China:**

## **The Tensions and the Consequences**

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*Hong Kong Cinema and the 1997 Return of the Colony to Mainland China:  
The Tensions and the Consequences*

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**2007**

# Abstract

In this paper, I aimed to explore deeply the Hong Kong '1997 handover' theme films by comparison and summary in order to discover the history and cultural meaning of this incident from a human perspective.

1997 is a turning point for Hong Kong people, society and the film industry. The city confronted a historical turning point under an experimental 'one country, two systems' convention without precedent in history. This led many Hong Kong people to lose confidence about their future. In addition, this historical incident brought a series of social issues to Hong Kong people, such as confusion about their identity and uncertainty about the future. Therefore I chose four films from two directors with different viewpoints reveal Hong Kong society and people's life and spirit. Those films are Peter Chan's *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* (1996), *Golden Chicken* (2000), and Fruit Chan's *Made in Hong Kong* (1997), *The Longest Summer* (1997).

Also, I will give a brief introduction about the aspects of the past of Hong Kong politically (colonial rule), economically and with respect of Hong Kong identity to understand its cinema and the possible effects of the 1997 handover.

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# Chapter One

On July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1997, Hong Kong returned to Mainland China rule. During these last ten years, Hong Kong has experienced and survived a series of disasters<sup>1</sup>, and developed to become more prosperous. Although the Asian Financial Crisis, bird flu, and SARS did not devastate the territory, the Hong Kong film industry, as the representative cultural industry, was not that lucky. In the past ten years, the Hong Kong film industry has been continually on the decline in production levels. Numbers of film companies went into liquidation, and the rapidly reducing number of productions pulled the industry more seriously down.

The former 'Hollywood East' was not merely watching its reduced productivity spell an end to its glories, but also leading it to a more dangerous place after each experiment in trying to achieve to more serious, socially aware cinema.

Before the 1997 handover, and after John Woo, Ringo Lam and a few mainstay directors went to Hollywood, and their peer senior filmmakers retired from the industry, the Hong Kong film industry had already started internal structural reform. This indirectly offered opportunities for promotion to a group of younger directors. Those young filmmakers began to reveal their talent with exceptional caution within the scrutiny of public opinion; meanwhile they were warily creating films under great criticism. Among those new figures is Johnny To, who waited long in the industry, and former cinematographer Andrew Lau, who was the cinematographer for Wong Kar Wai's *As Tears Go By* (1987) and switched to become a director. The

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<sup>1</sup> 'Its freedom has allowed it to recover from 3 massive external shocks since the 1997 'Handover''. Hong Kong 10 Years Later, THE LION ROCK INSTITUTE, International Society for Individual Liberty, <<http://www.isil.org/resources/fnn/2007june/lion-rock.html>>, viewed 02/07/2007

former established one of the best known Hong Kong film companies, Milkyway Image Ltd., and the latter has stimulated wide social argument with his *Young and Dangerous*<sup>2</sup> film series, each of which have been successes at the box office.

The gangster films that Milkyway Image produced from 1997 to 1999 like *Dark Flowers*, *Expect the Unexpected*, *The Mission*, *Too Many Ways To Be No. 1*, etc., are considered classic “noir” films in contemporary Hong Kong, but were seen as unsuccessful examples of the film industry at that time. The concept that the “noir” genre equals “uncommercial” thus widely spread, and that made numbers of film investors fear failure and shrink back from involvement. However the wave of these films developed in 1997 was not the invention of Milkyway Image only, but rather like a common symptom among a group of Hong Kong filmmakers. Other representative examples, like new director Fruit Chan’s low-budget *Made in Hong Kong* (1997) and *The Longest Summer* (1998), and veteran director Ringo Lam’s returning Hong Kong works, *Full Alert* (1997), *The Suspect* (1998), and *Victim* (1999), were all responses to the backlash and helped develop the ‘dark’ trend. The Chinese noir genre has matured at present, which has led the Hong Kong film industry from a purely entertaining style toward the dark undercurrent, which contains cultural reflections and commercial risks at the same time. At this time, a considerable number of directors’ works were also tainted with this ‘dark’ element, and without exception were full of desperate fundamental thoughts. The practices of those filmmakers affected the movement and direction of the development of the

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<sup>2</sup> ‘*Young and Dangerous* is a 1996 Hong Kong movie directed by Andre Lau. It is about a group of Triad members, detailing their adventures and dangers in a Hong Kong triad society. This movie contributed a lot to the public image of triads and was condemned by certain quarters as glorifying secret triad societies. However, it was immensely popular in Hong Kong and spun 9 sequels and spin-offs. Its main actors and actresses have also become major stars in their own right.’ *Young and Dangerous*, Wikipedia, <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Young\\_and\\_Dangerous](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Young_and_Dangerous)>, viewed 02/07/2007

Hong Kong film industry and rendered this simple individual movement into something collective, even sparking a huge trend.

From the cultural perspective, it was a gratifying event that Hong Kong film started to make breakthroughs in ideological presentations step by step. Nevertheless, the whole industrial and commercial environment has been affected by this collective movement and driven backward. The reason was this: at the same time Hong Kong film production was letting go of its traditional entertaining elements, its new work creation was taking place in serious but not commercial circumstances that dismantled its advantages, and also took it on a tangent caused by a lack of cultural background in Hong Kong as a colony.

From the statistical data, it appears the Hong Kong film industry was considerably successful in 1997, that 189 films were made, and that the box office revenues of 19 of those films reached over ten million Hong Kong dollars.

The decline of film production in Hong Kong is closely related to the economic situation of the society as a whole. Therefore, in the next chapter, I will introduce the City of Hong Kong in its political, economic, and historical aspects, in order to discover how these factors affected Hong Kong cinema and Hong Kong people's ideology. In Chapter 3, I will give a particular introduction about the development of Hong Kong film industry during the last thirty years since the 1970s, in order to give prominence to the uniqueness of Hong Kong cinema in the past ten years. Compared to the previous golden age, the Hong Kong film industry had a striking decline in quality and quantity during the last decade. It experienced a transforming time from being purely entertaining to being more serious and responsive to societal issues. At some points, some people said Hong Kong cinema has died, but on the other hand it has been reborn in another format.

The last ten years have been a difficult time for people, society and the film industry in Hong Kong. The city confronted a historical turning point under an experimental ‘one country, two systems’ convention without precedent in history. This led many Hong Kong people to lose confidence about their future. In addition, this historical incident brought a series of social issues to Hong Kong people, such as confusion about their identity and uncertainty about the future. This common thinking in society is all reflected in the films from that time. ‘the population of the territory was no longer composed primarily of immigrants from China but was increasingly made up of Hong Kong-born citizens who felt connected to the place and anxious about its imminent return to Chinese control.’<sup>3</sup> And no one knew if capitalism would come to an end when the Communist Chinese government assumed rule of Hong Kong in 1997, In addition, a number of external misfortunes also had a huge impact on Hong Kong society, such as the Asian financial storm, global economic deceleration, and so on, which also encouraged Hong Kong people’s vitality and changed their ideology. Therefore, Hong Kong society, people and cinema are close together and affected by each other. During the last ten years, the transformation of Hong Kong society and people’s minds have stirred filmmakers’ creativity, and Hong Kong cinema in this particular time created a number of deep, thoughtful works. Thus by making clear the relationship between these elements, it helps the further analysis of Hong Kong cinema.

After the discussion about the relevance of Hong Kong society to the film industry, in Chapters 4 and 5, I will choose films by two representative directors, Peter Chan and Fruit Chan, as examples to explore the characteristics of Hong Kong cinema at the ‘handover’ time, and how these works reflect Hong Kong society. In these two chapters, I analyze Peter Chan’s *Comrades*, *Almost a Love Story*, and *Golden Chicken*, and Fruit Chan’s *Made in Hong Kong* and *The Longest Summer* to reveal

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<sup>3</sup> Hong Kong New Wave, ArtandCulture.com

<<http://www.artandculture.com/cgi-bin/WebObjects/ACLive.woa/wa/movement?id=387>>, viewed 05/06/2007

how these films represent Hong Kong people's inner confusion, the crux of society, and predictions for the future. Lastly, I will give a brief summary of the Hong Kong film industry in the last decade. In this paper, I aimed to explore deeply the Hong Kong '1997 handover' theme films by comparison and summary in order to discover the history and cultural meaning of this incident from a human perspective.

Those four films I chose from two directors with different viewpoints reveal Hong Kong society and people's life and spirit. *Comrades*, *Almost a Love Story* has always been highly praised in the Hong Kong film industry. From *Almost Love* to *Perhaps Love* (2006), director Peter Chan consistently unfolds his story over ten years' time. Perhaps ten years' time gathers too much power to touch people's feelings, or maybe his films are just a metaphor for the regret experienced by everyone, but this film always has ability to touch the most inner corner of the audience's heart. If one only considers this film as a love story, it is considerably sad and moving. When the prime of life has passed, two persons are no longer drifting, all their past memories sudden gush to heart, and they finally feel certainty about love. A man and woman's vicissitudes of life, two different cultures compatible and tolerant, three cities interweave and pass. In the vast space created by this film, the protagonists' love story has merged into a wider historical background.

Whereas Peter Chan's other film *Golden Chicken* is a complete comedy, with the same time flying, the same twists in life, but evoking different feelings. Only at the end of the film an unexpected sound, a sad popular song sung by a suicidal singer popular in Hong Kong in the 1980s suddenly sparks people's collective memory and they are involved in sadness without defence.

In comparison, Fruit Chan's two films are similarly serious. Fruit Chan is a nonmainstream independent director. He is best known for reflecting Hong Kong people's everyday life. His films often use non-professional actors to be more realistic to common people's life. *Made in Hong Kong* and *The Longest Summer* are

both works from his '1997 Trilogy'. *Made in Hong Kong* applies a teenager's viewpoint to tell the cruelty of life. A seemingly plain story accuses the ruthlessness and sham of the grownups' world. *The Longest Summer* addresses the Chinese former British army's struggle for life in the 1997 handover, which revealed Hong Kong people's common awkward situation at this historical turning point. But the director frequently insets humorous elements within the film, increasing the drama of the storyline. Another work in Fruit Chan's '1997 Trilogy', *Little Cheung*, develops from a little child's point of view, but it does not represent the whole society; therefore it will not be further mentioned in later analysis.

Whether Peter Chan's or Fruit Chan's work, no matter in what ways they tell stories, these films are in the same way describing Hong Kong society in the handover period of time. Before I start further analysis, the next chapter will introduce the development of the Hong Kong film industry, which will help me later to expound on the cultural meaning of the four chosen examples.

## Chapter Two

Comment on the fact that it is important to understand aspects of the past of Hong Kong politically (colonial rule), economically and with respect of Hong Kong identity to understand its cinema and the possible effects of the 1997 handover.

This year is the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hong Kong's handover to China and 'bid farewell to a rocky decade of financial woes, disease outbreaks and economic recovery.'<sup>4</sup> The economy of Hong Kong is still highly dependent on the world's free trade economy system and 'has ranked as the world's freest economy in the Index of Economic Freedom for 13 consecutive years, since the inception of the index in 1995.'<sup>5</sup> Because Hong Kong lacks natural resources, its food and material supplies must be imported. Therefore her nearest neighbour, mainland China, which has large area and rich resources, became her most important long term partner in marketing, even before the British handed Hong Kong over to the Chinese. According to a Chinese stock exchange news report in 2006, the value of initial public offerings conducted in Hong Kong was ahead of New York, and jumped to being the second highest in the world after London. In previous years, Hong Kong had continually been third on the list. Besides, Hong Kong is also the first region in Asia that is offering NASDAQ stocks. In May 2000, there were seven major American NASDAQ stocks in the Hong Kong stock market.

According to a report of the United Nations World Institute for Development Economics Research, the average per person wealth in Hong Kong is the highest in

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<sup>4</sup> Hong Kong marks 10 years since handover, Hong Kong: 10 years Later – MSNBC.com,

< <http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/19526753/> >, viewed 02/07/2007

<sup>5</sup> 2007 Index of Economic Freedom. Heritage Foundation.

the world, 202,189 American dollars<sup>6</sup>, and by 1990 Hong Kong's per capita income officially surpassed that of the United Kingdom<sup>7</sup>.

The extensive development of Hong Kong's economy was thanks to government rule by both the British and the People's Republic of China that have maintained a low tax policy to encourage commerce and manifesting. In addition, Hong Kong is also a tax free harbour without commercial handicaps, government rarely interferes, and it has a low risk of inflation. In addition, there are few restrictions on banking, funding, and investing. Since 1974 the ICAC (the Independent Commission Against Corruption) has provided a great environment for marketing that has attracted a large number of investments. Hong Kong, therefore, 'places first in the Economic Freedom of the World Report.'<sup>8</sup>

In the past two decades, as mainland China has continued to open her markets, Hong Kong started to reform its traditional industry type<sup>9</sup>, especially after the Asian financial crisis in 1997. Many Hong Kong manufacturers moved to mainland China, which caused large numbers of workers to lose jobs or shift to servicing professions. Also, since Hong Kong has been returned to China, it is more open to import people of talent in various professions from mainland China. Therefore, the working environment in Hong Kong has become more like that in mainland China, highly competitive; people have to get a certificate to find a job, unlike decades ago when they only needed to work hard.

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<sup>6</sup> In May 2007

<sup>7</sup> Yu Tony Fu-Lai. (1997) *Entrepreneurship and Economic Development of Hong Kong*. United Kingdom: Routledge.

<sup>8</sup> Economy of Hong Kong, WIKIPEDIA, <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy\\_of\\_Hong\\_Kong](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_Hong_Kong)>, viewed 06/07/2007

<sup>9</sup> 1970s to 1980s, Hong Kong's dominating sector was financial, and then from the 1990s to 2006, the dominating sector became the service industry.

Because of its unique historical development, Hong Kong has become one of the most distinct regions in the world. It is both a capitalist society and a Special Administrative Region belonging to a communist country which follows the 'one country, two systems' principle. Hong Kong was once a remote fishing village and has since been controlled by England and more briefly by Japan. Recently, however, it has been transformed into a world-famous economic and cultural exchange centre. Hong Kong's political, economic and cultural history makes this former colony unique in today's post industrial society.

According to a survey by The Chinese University of Hong Kong, almost half of the 1,100 respondents clearly described themselves as 'Hong Konger', or 'Chinese', whereas the remainder did not clearly distinguish themselves as 'Chinese Hong Konger' or 'Hong Kong Chinese'. This problem of identity is one of the social issues that most affects the people and culture of Hong Kong.

During its entire history, Hong Kong people have sought a relative, subjective and precise answer to the question of their identity. This issue can be tracked back to 1842 when the Qing government ceded Hong Kong to Britain as one of her crown colonies. Hong Kong then began its fascinating one hundred and forty year colonial history. Fortunately, Chinese culture in Hong Kong was not abandoned during that time. From the perspective of its cultural heritage, Hong Kong followed Chinese culture same like other Chinese communities (Mainland China, and Taiwan). Hong Kong can be particularly compared with Taiwan, which was also a colony, albeit for a shorter length of time. Although it was colonized for longer than Taiwan, Hong Kong has been less affected. There are two reasons for this. First, because Hong Kong is connected with Mainland China people have been able to go back and forth between the two. Taiwan, however, is separated from Mainland China by a channel, making passage and communication more difficult. Second and most important, is the different principles by which the two colonies were ruled. The British did not

intend to transform the people of Hong Kong into replicas of themselves; they neither forced Hong Kong to accept English as the mother tongue, nor did they interfere with cultural freedom. Conversely, the Japanese tried to transform the people of Taiwan into Japanese clones by forcing the Japanese language and culture upon them.

As a consequence of being colonized, people in Hong Kong are residents, but not citizens. Therefore they do not possess 'citizen consciousnesses.' The majority of Hong Kong people are Chinese, but due to its particular history as a former British colony, the hybrid culture of West and East gives Hong Kong unique cultural characteristics.

The major Chinese dialect in Hong Kong is Cantonese, although it's not exactly like the Cantonese province; there, people use simplified Chinese as the official language in writing and reading. Hong Kong people still apply traditional Chinese. Also, the English language is widely used in Hong Kong people's daily lives. English words are often mixed up with Cantonese in people's regular conversations. Furthermore, in Hong Kong it is very common to see direction signs, advertisements, menus, etc. written in both English and Chinese. In fact, a lot of people in Hong Kong have never officially learned English in school, but they still know many English words. Also most Hong Kong people have English names as their nickname. Moreover, white-collar professionals often communicate in English because most companies are international organizations.

Another interesting cultural phenomenon in Hong Kong is the variety of newspapers. Besides world news, local news, business, etc., Hong Kong newspapers also have pages of horse races and inside gossip along with pages about cosmetic surgery, ball games, and celebrities. This is what Hong Kong people are interested in. If you following the news in a Hong Kong newspaper, you would find it has multiple connections with commercial interests. Beyond the surface, commercial interests are

often the beginning or ending point of an issue. When the commercial permeates cultural issues, the culture is only the surface, and the commercial is the ultimate goal. Therefore, some people think Hong Kong is a cultural wasteland, that its culture as rare as its plants. On the other hand, the economic in Hong Kong also permeates the culture until commercial behaviour looks comfortable and civilized.

Therefore the mainstream culture in Hong Kong is about people's everyday lives. It's also wrapped in commercial conduct, and merged into economic society. In Hong Kong, culture is a product of marketing. It is not as dull as traditional culture, not as hard to grasp as sophisticated culture. In contrast, Hong Kong's culture is easy to understand and enjoyable. Therefore, Hong Kong always can not get rid of its reputation as a 'cultural desert'.

However, nowadays this situation has improved. In the gap between different cultures, Hong Kong created its own history, and generated its particular culture. It cannot separate from Hong Kong's economic success.

Mention Hong Kong, and a thousand people might have a thousand impressions: gangsters, comedy, martial art novels, popular songs...Even someone who has never been to Hong Kong might have much knowledge about it. From a geographical perspective, Hong Kong is only a pellet compared to Mainland China, but Hong Kong's popular culture has strongly affected the Mainland and its surrounding countries. It cannot deny Hong Kong's fashion trends that conform to the new generation's tastes and aesthetics, from the way its young dress or speak, to the unusual haircuts or nightclubbing. All of these trends have been imitated by the Mainland's young people. Furthermore, the chivalry in martial art novels and the heroic images in gangster films have lead many peoples' ideologies. Hong Kong's unique cultural format offers resistance to the cultural desert reputation.

While Hong Kong's popular culture affects the Mainland's populace, the city also obtains support from Mainland government.

During the last decade, Hong Kong experienced Asia's financial crisis and the impact of SARS, but each time Hong Kong has changed the portentous into the propitious. In recent years, the economy of Hong Kong has indicated an overall increase, a better and more prosperous foreground for Hong Kong and its people.

In the first few months after Hong Kong officially returned to Mainland China, Asia's financial crisis wiped out the whole of Southeast Asia. Hong Kong as a financial centre, accordingly, was hugely impacted. The stock market, estates, and the economy all appeared to be negatively impacted. At the same time, the Hong Kong SAR (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China) government made vigorous efforts to turn the tide under the support of China's central government. It applied a series of quick actions to stop the decline in economics. At first, the Hong Kong SAR government drew on foreign currency reserve funds, and purchased parts of local stocks to guard Hong Kong's stock market and to protect Hong Kong's dollar from being devalued.

At the same time, the Hong Kong SAR government also increased investments in public projects to increase economic growth. For example, the establishment of the Hong Kong Disney Resort and the extension of the highway and subway brought huge economic benefits and millions of job opportunities. Furthermore, the Hong Kong SAR government also partially returned taxes to reduce people's economic pressures. During this difficult time of financial crisis, the Mainland central government gave strong support to Hong Kong by keeping the Chinese currency rate stable, and became the anchor for Hong Kong when it was fighting for economic stability. Also, the Chinese central government indicated they would do their best to support Hong Kong without hesitation, thus pacifying the Hong Kong people's anxiety during this hard time.

After the effort of the Hong Kong SAR government and all of Hong Kong's people, Hong Kong's economy has progressively recovered for the next two years since 1997. However, challenges came one after another. In the next few years Hong Kong was also affected by the shrinking American economy in 2000. After the 9/11 incident on global economics in 2001, the world's economic growth started to slow. Hong Kong's economy again suffered. In 2003, SARS almost destroyed Hong Kong's tourism industry, public transport, and many other relevant industries.

Confronted by those challenges, the Hong Kong SAR government applied measures to reduce financial deficits, increasing job opportunities and encouraging economic development. Meanwhile, it also adjusted economic structures, promoted high technology in industries as the future strategy of economic development. In the meantime, China's central government also offered a number of policies to help Hong Kong walk out of its difficult position. 'As Hong Kong suffered during the downturn of 2003, China came to its assistance with a scheme giving Hong Kong goods free access to China's markets.'<sup>10</sup> For instance, in 2003 the signing of CEPA<sup>11</sup> allowed many Hong Kong productions to transport to Mainland China with no tax. At the same time, it also loosened the regulations of Hong Kong's service

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<sup>10</sup> Feeling marginalised, Hong Kong's decade under China's flag, Asia-Pacific, BBC NEWS,

<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/6767861.stm>>, viewed 02/07/2007

<sup>11</sup> "Mainland-Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement signed on June 29, 2003. According to CEPA, Hong Kong logistics companies would be allowed to act as providers of delivery, storage, value-added, loading and unloading and packaging services for ordinary road freight goods." Recourse from Hong Kong Trade Development Council,

<[http://gbcode.tdctrade.com/gb/www.tdctrade.com/shippers/vol26\\_4/vol26\\_4\\_chairman\\_01.htm](http://gbcode.tdctrade.com/gb/www.tdctrade.com/shippers/vol26_4/vol26_4_chairman_01.htm)>, viewed 07/08/2007

industry to more easily enter the Mainland. 'China has also given Hong Kong's economy a big boost by allowing more mainlanders to visit the city'<sup>12</sup>

These treaties all helped Hong Kong's economy come to life again. Soon after, Mainland government relaxed Hong Kong's tourism restrictions, and Mainland travellers brought huge growth to Hong Kong's tourist industry, improving Hong Kong's economic picture. According to the latest data announced by Hong Kong's SAR government statistics department, at present, Hong Kong's market is booming, the unemployment rate is at a historic low, gross trading in the last year is twice what it was 10 years ago. As current Chief Executive Donald Tsang says: Hong Kong's economy is in its best it has been in 20 years.<sup>13</sup>

Today's Hong Kong appears as a vivid life force. The city and its people witnessed storms in last 10 years and finally see the rainbow now. The economic crisis has impacted the society and people's mental status in every aspect.

In the next chapter, I will introduce the impact on Hong Kong's film industry and give an introduction to the development of Hong Kong cinema in the last 30 years, including what has happened in the last 10 years in Hong Kong filmmaking industry.

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<sup>12</sup> Hong Kong marks 10 years since handover, Hong Kong: 10 years Later – MSNBC.com,

< <http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/19526753/> >, viewed 02/07/2007

<sup>13</sup> (Chinese) Times of peace and prosperity of Hong Kong, enorth.com.cn,

< <http://news.enorth.com.cn/system/2007/06/25/001735552.shtml> >, viewed 02/09/2007

## Chapter Three

In addition to understanding Hong Kong's historical past, we also need to understand some of the main conditions of film production in Hong Kong before 1997 in order to understand the impact of the 1997 handover for the nature of Hong Kong cinema.

The Hong Kong film industry is a legend in Chinese film history. Audiences in Mainland China began to learn about the Hong Kong cinema in the 70s. During the last thirty years, the mainland audience was first aware of Hong Kong films, then loved them, and at last disported at them because the level of Hong Kong cinema has dropped during the last decade. Thus, the movie-going habits of mainland audiences was closely connected with the trends of Hong Kong cinema. At the same time, the waxing and waning of Hong Kong film industry was the history of a generation of mainland audiences' collective vicissitudes.

In the 70s, two Hong Kong film companies, GREAT WALL MOVIE ENTERPRISES, LTD. and FENG HUANG (PHOENIX) MOTION PICTURE CO., introduced mainland audiences to an external contemporary but entirely distinct city, where men had long hair, wore bell-bottoms, had double-deckers, and an extravagant lifestyle. However, these two companies, which were the leaders in the industry at that time, were on the wane in later years. Later, SHAW BROTHERS, LTD. and GOLDEN HARVEST ENTERTAINMENT (HOLDINGS) LIMITED grew quickly and gained enough strength to take their place.

At the end of the 70s, Hong Kong started a film new wave movement. It began from a number of mainstream scriptwriters and producers who worked backstage in TV stations and who rose to the forefront of the film industry. These new filmmakers included Hark Tsui, Ann Hui, Alex Cheung, Patrick Tam, etc. They were united in

their eager devotion to film, and they were very young, similar in age, which provided them with particular creativity and sensibilities. In the late 70s and early 80s, they did a lot of signature work that turned a new page for the Hong Kong film industry. However, 'many New Wave productions were creative explorations of social issues and cinematic traditions, but not all were commercially successful.'<sup>14</sup>

The first three films which started the new wave movement were Ann Hui's *The Secret* (1979), Hark Tsui's *The Butterfly Murders* (1979), and Alex Cheung's *Cops & Robbers* (1979). The three directors either studied abroad, or had quickly succeeded in TV at the beginning of their careers. Very soon, new wave directors made more personalized works, like Hark Tsui's *Dangerous Encounters of the First Kind* (1980), Patrick Tam's *NOMAD* (1982) and several others. Those films expressed the directors' feelings and thinking about the social environment at that time. Those filmmakers who have been named 'new wave directors' did not bog down in the Hong Kong film industry's previous typical traditional mode, but rather had their own distinct directing style. In particular, Ann Hui's work normally reveals profound humanity, and the sensibility of a feminist; Hark Tsui's works are full of tensions; and Patrick Tam is good at making films with the themes of police and robbers. These characteristics all expressed the 'auteur' aesthetic in new wave.

The new wave movement which started in the late 70s was a milestone, marking the rupture between Hong Kong cinema and the last generation of home grown Cantonese opera. Before this new wave, Hong Kong films made during the 50s and 60s had been highly influenced by Cantonese opera, which was constrained by traditions and hardly ever innovated. By contrast, new wave films contain many elements of urban life, 'New Wave films were that they shared a "Hong Kong-

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<sup>14</sup> Hong Kong New Wave: 1979 – 1984, Hong Kong, Criticism – Ideology, Film Encyclopaedia,

< <http://www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/Criticism-Ideology/Hong-Kong-HONG-KONG-NEW-WAVE-1979-1984.html> >, viewed 05/06/2007

centred” sensibility’<sup>15</sup> and also reveal features of local life. Those modern elements are consistent with the directors’ personal experience, having grown up in Hong Kong and been educated abroad.

In addition, in the new wave movement filmmaking did not depend highly on big stars, as Hong Kong film usually does. Thus, the costs of film production were kept as low as possible; that is also very different from Hong Kong cinema’s previous methods. However, Hong Kong cinema always made commercial success a priority. For this reason, new wave films that won cheers but lost in box-office revenue were accordingly eliminated from the market. To remedy this situation, at the beginning of the 80s Cinema City Co. Ltd., suddenly coming to the forefront, recruited a large number of contemporary new directors who stand out conspicuously as new wave pioneers. Its new members, like John Woo, Hark Tsui, and Ringo Lam etc., created a number of commercial films, most of them comedies. These new films were written by group of scriptwriters in a manner similar to the creation of a TV series. The wisdom of the masses exceeds that of the wisest individual, so the group of directors gave the films constant comedy and action. All the materials catered to the audience’s taste. Representative works of that time were Brother Xu’s films, like *Aces Go Places* (1982) and *City on Fire* (1987). The former overtook *The Shaolin Temple*<sup>16</sup> (1982) as the best selling movie in Hong Kong. The establishment of

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

<sup>16</sup> ‘*The Shaolin Temple* is a 1982 martial arts film directed by Chang Hsin Yen. It starred Jet Li in his debut as a leading actor. The film is based on the Shaolin Temple in China and depicts the Shaolin martial arts. The film grossed a strong HK \$16,157,801 in its Hong Kong theatrical run.’ Shaolin Temple (1982 film), Wikipedia, <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ShaoLin\\_Temple\\_%281982\\_film%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ShaoLin_Temple_%281982_film%29)>, viewed 02/07/2007

*The Shaolin Temple* (1982) was a miracle in Mainland China’s box office, in that the number of viewers reached five hundred million. It was very common that people saw this movie several times. There was a joke at that

Cinema City Co. Ltd. represents the end of the Hong Kong new wave, which was briefly the rage from 1979 to 1983. Comparing this new wave movement to Hong Kong cinema in the 80s, we find that later Hong Kong cinema over-emphasized plots and stars, so that the films were relatively simple, not using the 'auteur' theory. Some people believe that Hong Kong cinema in the 80s was a time when stars were created, but directors and scriptwriters were essentially murdered, and that made Hong Kong cinema walk to the end of its rope. In addition, gangsters have dabbled at the film industry since the late 80s, and that has drastically affected the economics and the development of film distribution. The Hong Kong film industry was second rate by the end of the decade.

Despite the facts above, if we do not count the quality of a film's content, but only measure the box office results and investors' revenue, then we can say without exaggeration that the Hong Kong film industry in the 80s repaid advances made in the years of its development. Furthermore, at the end of the 80s a new director emerged in Hong Kong, Wong Kar Wai. From *As Tears Go By* (1987), to *Days of Being Wild* (1991), his films always moved viewers with his decadent and desolate tone.

Wong Kar Wai's films and his style was really highly accepted and became popular after the mid 90s when *Ashes of Time* (1994) and *Chunking Express* (1995) were released. Wong's new films were the same, desolate and isolated, but they soon became a dark and decadent aesthetic, which established Wong's status world wide, and made him a fresh topic among film critics.

As the date of the '97 handover' came closer, Hong Kong people started to worry. Everyone it seems had real anxiety. A number of films with an apprehensive tone

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time about people watching this film ten times, seven times to learn the Kung Fu, and another three times to look at the shepherd girl's snow-white legs.

were created, given the social environment, like *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* (1996), *The Log* (1996), and Wong Kar Wai's *Falling Angels* (1996), which was extremely dark.

When 1997 arrived, Hong Kong produced three important films: Wong Kar Wai's *Happy Together* (1997), Wai Ka Fai and Johnnie To's *Too Many Ways to be No. 1*, and Fruit Chan's *Made in Hong Kong* (1997). If Wong Kar Wai's *Happy Together* succeeded because of its literary mood, then *Too Many Way to be No. 1* succeeded because of its imagination. It was a revolutionary work that contains dark humour and intelligence, which made mainland filmmakers ashamed of their inability to tell stories at that time. But what generally hurt the pride of mainland scholars were two films: Peter Chan's *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* (1996) and the new director Fruit Chan's *Made in Hong Kong* (1997). Both films showed the reality of the Hong Kong people's spiritual movement in the year of the handover. The two films are relatively sentimental but not excessively so.

As the 1997 handover came closer and finally passed, the people of Hong Kong seemed a little let down since the historic date did not bring the world-shaking changes that they had imagined it would. The deadline they worried about passed as simply as turning over a page of a calendar. At the same time, in the film industry, filmmakers seemed suddenly to become slack, too. Without worries and confusion, filmmakers seemingly lost the power to support their creativity. Then just as most filmmakers lost their passion for creativity, Stephen Chow's new film appeared as a miracle in Mainland China's box-office.

From historic statistics, most filmmakers did not believe there would be a major change in the Hong Kong film industry after 1997 and the handover to Mainland China. However, early in 1995, a chief editor, who was also an experienced film critic in *Mingpao Monthly* made an advance announcement of 'the death of Hong

Kong film’<sup>17</sup>. He indicated that Hong Kong film, which used to sweep across the Taiwanese, Korean, and Southeast Asian markets, was nowadays struggling, due to short of creativity and funding, and that this had caused the film productions’ quality reduction, which would therefore lead to the industry getting bogged down in low box-office revenue. As he predicted, the Hong Kong film industry encountered a slump in 1997.

Before 1997, Hong Kong film was rarely challenged by the film industries from abroad. However in this year, Hollywood’s high-concept movies quietly occupied the top three best sales<sup>18</sup> positions, in the Hong Kong box office. Till now (2007), the record created in that year by *Titanic*, at 115 million Hong Kong dollars, has still not been broken. At the time it was a shock: suddenly, the whole Hong Kong film industry was dumb-founded.

In the meantime, filmmakers have just started to worry about Hong Kong film’s market in future years. Many have suggested a technical revolution<sup>19</sup>, to be the rescuer of contemporary film, and some have attempted to beat Hollywood at its own game. Unfortunately, although high levels of technical skills can help interpret a story, this does not insure that film will make commercial profits. Hark Tsui’s *The Storm Riders* (1998)<sup>20</sup> and Andrew Lau’s *Chinese Hero* (1999)<sup>21</sup> were both victims of this strategy, because the technique not as good as Hollywood.

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17 (Traditional Chinese) Mingpao Monthly, Mingpao Monthly published: Hong Kong, November, 1995

The title ‘Death of Hong Kong cinema’ was printed in bold black. The picture in the background was a roll of film on fire, and each film frame has a film star’s image (e.g. Chou Yun Fa, Jacky Chang). The red fire and black title made an obvious contrast in colours, in order to catch readers’ attention.

<sup>18</sup> The three films were *Titanic*, *The Lost World*, and *Face Off*. See reference 23

<sup>19</sup> Mostly are new wave directors like Hark Tsui

<sup>20</sup> ‘*The Storm Riders* is a 1998 Hong Kong film directed by Andrew Lau. It is based on a comic book called Fung Wan (or *Tin Ha*). This movie is known for its brilliant special effects. ...The plot involves two children,