

Hong Kong Film History: Retrospectives, Archives, and Films

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I studied Chinese (Modern and Classical) for my BA at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) primarily because of my interest in Chinese-language cinema. This began when I caught a few Hong Kong films on TV in the UK, back when BBC2 and Channel 4 would occasionally show Hong Kong films late at night. I was immediately attracted by the energy, unpredictability and visual excitement these films had. The standout film from that time for me was probably John Woo's *The Killer* (1989). The first and second years of my BA, in London and Beijing respectively, were spent mainly focusing on learning Mandarin, and to a lesser degree classical Chinese. During the compulsory year abroad in Beijing (2009–2010), I decided to go to the Hong Kong International Film Festival (HKIFF), a festival I had always wanted to attend. I remember eagerly reading the program as soon as it was released to plan my viewing schedule. Previous years of the festival had retrospectives featuring films made by many of my favorite Hong Kong directors including Tsui Hark, John Woo and Johnnie To. I really looked forward to seeing some of these on the big screen, since in the UK it is next to impossible to do so. Imagine my disappointment when I discovered that year's retrospective was to be devoted to Lung Kong, a director I had barely heard of, and a period of Hong Kong cinema (1966–1979) I was largely unfamiliar with apart from having seen many of the re-mastered Shaw Brothers films and some of the Cathay/Motion Picture & General Investment Co Ltd (MP&GI) films on DVD. Looking back at this reaction, I realize I was being close-minded. The thought of not being able to see Chow Yun-fat blaze up the screen, Jet Li fighting on the top of a crowd of people's heads, or Brigitte Lin, Cherie Chung and Sally Yeh enveloped in a whirlwind of color and movement, or "the music of light" as Abel Gance described the cinema, in the finale of *Peking Opera Blues* (1986), ensured my initial dismay.

The experience of watching Lung Kong's films, however, turned out to be an incredibly lucky encounter, and experiences like this are one of the reasons I love retrospectives at film festivals. If this retrospective had not been curated and put together in 2010, I would not be doing the PhD project I am currently working on since I would have had no other chance to watch many of Lung's films. I booked as many tickets as time allowed, and Lung's films made a tremendous impression on me. What struck me was the strong feeling of empathy coursing through the films

towards the characters and the trials and tribulations they go through, mixed with a strong will to entertain, resulting from the way Lung's films are a heady blend of authorial voice and genres. His films are rooted in the cultural, historical and industrial conditions they were made in, while via small gestures we see the characters go through different types of changes, be they redemption or failure. Due to Lung Kong's declared view that cinema should educate, there is a strange tension between the films on the one hand attempting to engage audiences in a dialogue, and on the other, trying to teach them a moral lesson. It is also this didactic style that creates a strong feeling of compassion and inclusiveness towards the often-powerless characters who face overwhelming odds.

After seeing these films, I became increasingly interested in this period of Hong Kong film history, which led to my current PhD project. This interest in film history builds on several essays I wrote during my MA in Film Studies, including topics such as political Spaghetti Westerns, Ozu Yasujirō's silent comedies, and Suzuki Seijun and the *yakuza* genre. More recently, under the influence of writers like V. F. Perkins and Adrian Martin, I am increasingly drawn to issues related to style and aesthetics. Why is a certain sequence in a film so moving? And why could this same sequence move one spectator but leave another feeling neutral? This relates to questions of interpretation and close stylistic analysis. In my PhD project, I blend historical research with close analysis of films. My PhD thesis focuses on Lung Kong, and looks at the question of authorship through a historical approach that acknowledges Lung Kong's active interactions with institutions, other artists, commercialism and the socio-political milieu that all had a hand in shaping his authorship. This approach allows me to consider Lung Kong's films as a result of negotiations between individual talent and aspiration with broader socio-economic, cultural and political factors in Hong Kong, and so my project also looks more generally into this period of Hong Kong film history (1966–1979).

Compared to the mountainous volumes available on more contemporary Hong Kong cinema, it is fair to say that Hong Kong films made before 1984, the year the Sino–British Joint Declaration was signed, have received less scholarly attention. Emilie Yeh Yueh-yu points out that the kind of methodological rigor applied to the articles on mainland Chinese cinema in Nick Browne et al.'s *New Chinese Cinemas* (1994) fails to appear in the articles on Hong Kong and Taiwan cinema in the same volume, creating a sort of mainland-centrism within “Chinese film studies” during this initial blooming of interest in Chinese-language cinema within English-language academia (Yeh 73–76). Adding to this mainland-centricism is the way Hong Kong and Taiwan cinemas have tended to be reduced to regional studies within the broader picture of Chinese cinema, with perhaps a chapter devoted to them in books on “national Chinese cinema.”

When Hong Kong cinema became “worthy” of academic study from the late 1990s onward, post-1984 cinema was often the object of focus, largely due to the domination of discourse around the 1997 handover crisis among film and cultural studies scholars. There is also a stereotypical disdain cast on Cantonese filmmaking of the 1950s and 1960s as being sloppily produced and cheaply made, which is an unfair generalization.

Focusing on earlier periods of Hong Kong film history before 1984 opens up a dialogue with scholarship on post-1984 Hong Kong cinema, especially in terms of evaluating different phases in the continuously evolving and dynamic processes involved in the multiple and conflicting determinations of Hong Kong (cinema’s) identity in relation to the nation. I am especially happy to see that the study of pre-1984 Hong Kong cinema is becoming a burgeoning field of interest, with film researchers in Hong Kong, the US and the UK working on projects related to the still understudied earlier periods of Hong Kong film history between the 1950s and 1970s. A few examples would include Jean Ma’s *Sounding the Modern Woman: The Songstress in Chinese Cinema* (2015), an account of the songstress figure who originated in 1930s Shanghai cinema before being transplanted to the Hong Kong Mandarin musicals of the 1950s and 1960s. Esther Yau and Tony Williams’ edited collection *Hong Kong Neo-Noir* (2017) contains three chapters that trace film noir’s development from around the early 1940s to the late 1970s. Emilie Yeh Yueh-yu’s recent edited collection *Early Film Culture in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Republican China: Kaleidoscopic Histories* (2018) contains several chapters on early film culture in Hong Kong. Victor Fan’s book *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory* (2015) contains a chapter on early Cantonese films, and he also contributed a chapter on the 1950s Hong Kong Cantonese film *In the Face of Demolition* (1953) for Gary Bettinson and James Udden’s edited collection *The Poetics of Chinese Cinemas* (2016). The recently released Gary Bettinson and Daniel Martin edited collection *Hong Kong Horror* (2018) contains a chapter on 1950s Cantonese horror films written by Raymond Tsang.

Beyond academia, more effort has been placed on documenting Hong Kong film history. Publications by the Hong Kong Film Archive and the Hong Kong International Film Festival retrospective catalogues include many brilliant and essential studies of older periods, styles, genres and other topics related to Hong Kong film history. These publications especially excel in their focus on the nuts and bolts of film history and in analyzing the form and aesthetic qualities of older films. As more studies of Hong Kong film history appear, perhaps a bridge will connect these two largely separate spheres, one more related to film criticism, the other to the theorization of academic study (without the space to go into the distinctions between the two here). These studies will also hopefully include analysis of the films themselves as after all,

once the history of competing social, cultural and political forces have been evaluated, what is left is the film itself.

I went to Hong Kong to do fieldwork at the start of the second year of my PhD in 2017, mostly at the Hong Kong Film Archive (HKFA) and the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) libraries. Being able to spend time in Hong Kong for research was particularly important simply because so many essential primary sources I needed are only available in the city. These include newspapers such as *Ming Pao* (明報) and *Wen Wei Po* (文匯報), film magazines such as *Close-Up* (大特寫), fan magazines like *The Milky Way Pictorial* (銀河畫報), and film materials from the Hong Kong Film Archive such as programs and handbills that were released at the same time as the film's original screening. Despite the fact that the SOAS library surprisingly holds a few of the older retrospective catalogues from the 1980s published by HKIFF—which I suspect were purchased by the former librarian of SOAS library's China section who used to visit Hong Kong fairly regularly—there are many books related to Hong Kong cinema in the CUHK library that I cannot obtain in the UK. I have also had the chance to see various older Hong Kong films in Hong Kong that I would not have been able to see elsewhere. These have all aided my research into this period of Hong Kong film history, and it would be impossible to write on certain topics without these primary sources. For instance, there are several Lung Kong films that I can only view at the Hong Kong Film Archive in VHS format, and so I must make sure I take enough notes on those films before I can analyze them in my thesis, for once I am back in the UK, there is no longer a way to access these films.

The experience of doing archival work at the HKFA and university libraries is largely the same as my experiences with the British Film Institute (BFI) library but with several important differences. Firstly, at CUHK I got to use microfilm for the first time to access several newspapers including *Ming Pao* and *Wen Wei Po*. Despite the microfilm machine appearing to be a little ominous, looks in this case were deceiving as it was much easier to use than I thought, and being able to make screenshots of a newspaper page makes it handy to store materials for later use. Scrolling through months' worth of newspapers is a time-consuming process and after five hours or so of fruitless searching, it can be quite disheartening. It is rewarding, however, when I find an article or review that adds a missing piece to my overall research puzzle. It is also fascinating to read primary sources to help me get a sense of what audiences and critics were feeling about cinema in the 1960s–1970s in Hong Kong.

By contrast, the bureaucratic way in which the HKFA Resource Centre operates is disappointing. You would think the main purpose of the Resource Centre is to allow access to the treasure trove of film related materials they have to enable and aid research. The archive, however, seems to have an obsession over copyright to the extent that

almost nothing is allowed to be photocopied. This makes the HKFA less accessible compared to the Taipei Film Archive I visited in December 2017, where the staff were happy to allow me to photocopy a long interview with Lung Kong from a Taiwanese film magazine. The BFI library is also ready to let users photocopy most things, unless it is something particularly fragile.

For a director of Lung Kong's stature, to have only two films officially released on DVD—his first, *The Prince of Broadcasters* (1966), and second, *Story of a Discharged Prisoner* (1967), without Chinese or English subtitles—is astonishing. This speaks to a larger problem in the current distribution model of older films in Hong Kong. This is not a situation unique to Hong Kong, for the US and many other places face similar problems. Granted, all of Lung Kong's films but one are available to view at the HKFA and all have Chinese and English subtitles apart from three (*Prince of Broadcasters* (1966), *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (1970) and *Laugh In* (1975)). The HKFA has also released two beautifully re-mastered DVDs of Fei Mu's *Confucius* (1940) and Chan Wan's *Colourful Youth* (1966). But I wish they would release more films so that older Hong Kong films (especially those from the 1950s and 1960s) are more readily available and also possible to view outside of the archive building. The amount of films other archives around the world release is far more than two. The Korean Film Archive, for instance, has recently installed a state-of-the-art scanner to digitize around forty aged films per year. Unfortunately, it appears to be a systematic problem at the HKFA, and if I was to speculate I would say that the preservation of local Hong Kong culture in the current political climate is not something the powers-that-be wish to spend money on. I hope that things will change and the HKFA will get around to resolving this issue.

The HKFA itself has a wonderful cinema that regularly screens retrospectives, mainly focusing on Hong Kong cinema history but also including other screenings and seasons from films all over the world. Between September 2017 and January 2018, the HKFA also screened some French and Japanese films, among others. I was especially happy to see Yue Feng's *The Deformed* (1960), featuring a magnificently tender performance by King Hu as the titular character. I also thoroughly enjoyed Zhu Shilin's film *Should They Marry?* (1951), a rambunctious Hong Kong Mandarin dramatic comedy focusing on the struggles of a working class family that glows with a warmth towards and between its characters, and also contains some great sympathetic slapstick: apparently Zhu was a big fan of Leo McCarey and *Should They Marry?* shares a similar temperament to much of the latter's work despite the two directors having differing political leanings. I highlight these experiences since these screenings are the only way to see some of these older films from Hong Kong cinema's illustrious but often overlooked past. These screenings allow me to view films unavailable in

the UK and help me form a better picture of the overall historical development of Hong Kong cinema, so that I can see aesthetic, thematic, generic and political developments happening in this period leading up to the period I focus on in my research project. Again, DVD releases would be beneficial here.

On the topic of cinemas, I would also like to briefly compare Hong Kong and London cinemas. For a cinephile, Hong Kong matches up with London quite well for film choices on the big screen. Although Hong Kong lacks a repertory cinema like The Prince Charles in London, Hong Kong continually has on-going seasons and retrospectives alongside the larger film festivals and archive screenings that fill this gap. The HKIFF Cinefan initiative is effective, screening a large selection of both old and new films, handpicked and contextualized in various sidebars focusing on stars, directors, national cinemas or thematic topics every month. There are also weekly screenings of independent cinema for free in Mongkok and other ad hoc “community” screenings of independent Hong Kong films that might have difficulties screening in commercial venues. These include recent Umbrella Movement-related documentaries *Yellowing* (2016) and *Raise the Umbrellas* (2016), as well as the documentary *Vanished Archives* (2017) that focuses on the 1967 riots in Hong Kong. One thing missing in Hong Kong is cinema screenings of classical Hollywood films. They are very rare due to the expense of getting the films to Hong Kong. The same is true of older Hong Kong films in the UK.

Being an exchange research student at CUHK from SOAS, I did not have much contact with departments or classes at the university. I did live on campus and attended an MA class on Hong Kong cinema, which was taught much in the same way as it would be taught in the UK, situating John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) in the socio-political context it was made and focusing on an essay that looks at how this film represents masculinity in a moment of historical crisis. The main difference was that this class was from a module in the Centre for Chinese Studies and I gathered that most students in the class were from mainland China. While of course every person has their own point of view, this lack of diversity is something that, especially at SOAS, would not happen. Perhaps mainland students being cocooned in such a way halts meaningful dialogue between Hong Kong and mainland students.

Finally, doing fieldwork in Hong Kong allowed me to engage in academic activities in the broader Asian region, as shown by my two recent conference presentations. The first paper I gave was at the conference “The Third International Conference on the Film Histories of Taiwan and Asia: The Exchange (of Personnel) between Taiwan and Hong Kong between 1950s and 1970s” in Taipei on the relationship between “Auteurism” and genre in the commercial film industries of Hong Kong and Taiwan in the 1960s and 1970s, looking at King Hu and

his films as a case study. The highlight of attending this conference was the chance to hear some of my favorite Hong Kong film critics speaking at length about Hong Kong film history and their involvement with it over the decades. I also learnt about the importance of archival research and the necessity of doing close analysis of film style to discover essential links between different eras of (Hong Kong) cinema.

The second paper I gave was at the second “Backreading Hong Kong” symposium at Hong Kong Baptist University in May 2018. The paper I presented discussed Lung Kong’s fourth film, *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (1970), a film that allegorically depicts the 1967 riots through its story of a plague hitting Hong Kong. This led to a campaign against the film in pro-Beijing newspapers in 1969 while it was still being shot. This conference was a learning experience for me in terms of seeing the different approaches taken in researching Hong Kong’s history and politics. Especially related to my research was a paper presented on the writer Gu Cangwu, since the presenter discussed a letter by him published in the *Chinese Student Weekly* (中國學生週報) about the protests of the Diaoyutai Island Movement. The film section of the *Chinese Student Weekly* is very useful for my research, but since I had previously only focused on the film section of this magazine, it was interesting to see it being utilized in a different way within the context of Cold War institutions and activism in Hong Kong in the 1970s.

I find film history fascinating due to the way a film is the product of a historical and socio-political moment in a particular industrial context in which an artist, a genre, and an audience converge with one another. The range of possibilities that could and do emerge out of this formulation are endless, and the critical and political issues that appear from analyzing the resulting films can be as pertinent today as at the time they were made. Looking forward and along with this focus, I hope to learn more about melodrama and *wenyi* (文藝), and the point at which these concepts intersect and diverge. *Wenyi* films generally focus on depictions of family relationships and romance. In the bilingual *Cantonese Melodrama: 1950-1969*, first published by the HKIFF in 1986 in conjunction with a retrospective, the term *wenyi* in the Chinese articles is mostly translated as ‘melodrama’ in the English translations, done for convenience sake rather than satisfaction. As Li Cheuk-to says in the introduction, while *wenyi* and melodrama share similarities, melodrama is more a mode in which films of many different genres ranging from martial-arts to social drama can fall under, while *wenyi* “is mainly delimited by its subject-matter or theme” (Li 8). Since then, there have been numerous debates in film studies about whether the term melodrama should be replaced by *wenyi* to help better interpret Chinese-language cinemas. I also hope to explore further those issues related to the political status of popular Hong Kong cinema, and think more about the idea of didactic cinema, i.e. those films that are pedagogical in intent and aim to teach the audience a (moral) lesson.

References

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