

The Hong Kong Crime Film:  
Genre and Film Noir from the 1940s to the Present

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**Abstract of thesis entitled:**

**“The Hong Kong Crime Film: Genre and Film Noir from the 1940s to the Present”**

Submitted by VAN DEN TROOST, Kristof  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Chinese Studies  
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The crime film has been one of the most important genres in Hong Kong cinema for the last thirty years. This dissertation examines the development of the crime film genre in Hong Kong from the late 1940s to the present. By taking a genre approach to Hong Kong’s cinematic history, it supplements recent auteur- and studio-centered scholarship, and sheds light on the rarely explored pre-1980s history of the crime film. This historical approach in turn contributes to a better understanding of more recent films. Genre here has been understood not as a clearly delimited structure with fixed narrative and visual conventions, but as a loose framework with an inherent drive towards innovation and variation.

While this study gives a historical overview of the Hong Kong crime film, it pays particular attention to the presence of local films noirs. Arguing that noirish Hong Kong films were made since the late 1940s, recent claims that noir is a new phenomenon in Hong Kong are questioned. At the same time, it is suggested that a distinctly local noir sentiment has grown central to the crime film in the past fifteen years. The dissertation traces back this recent development to the origins of the “modern” Hong Kong crime film in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and in particular to its roots in the martial arts genre. Director Johnnie To and his Milkyway Image company are considered to have spearheaded the current predominance of bleak sentiments in Hong Kong crime films, so their work serves as a case study in the final chapter.

The goal of this dissertation is threefold. First, it aims to complement the dominant, “identity”-driven research of Hong Kong cinema and demonstrate the advantages of a historical genre approach. Second, it strives to strengthen the film studies argument that film noir is neither a genre in the usual sense of the word, nor an exclusively American phenomenon. Finally, it sets out to explore the relationship between film and society, in order to qualify overly reflectionist readings of Hong Kong films.

## 论文提要

在过去的三十年里，犯罪类电影(crime film)是香港电影最重要的类别之一。本文回顾了上世纪四十年代末至今香港犯罪类电影(crime film)的发展。通过分类研究手法(genre approach)来考察香港电影的历史，本文对最近以导演与制片厂为重心的研究学派作了补充，并对较少为人所研究的 1980 年代前的犯罪类电影亦有所涉猎。这样的历史性的回顾也对更好地理解近期的电影有帮助。此处“类型”(genre)并非指某种清晰狭隘的界定，而是被定义为一种更为宽松的框架体系，允许有种种创新和变动。

本文不仅对香港犯罪电影作了历史回顾，且特别注本土黑色电影(film noir)。作者对香港黑色影片是一个新现象这一论述提出质疑，认为这类电影其实在上世纪四十年代末已经诞生，并且在过去的十五年里，黑色元素逐渐衍变为香港犯罪电影的重心。本文通过此种衍变，追溯了 60 年代末至 70 年代初的“现代”香港犯罪类电影的起源，并着重回顾了它在武侠类电影里的根源。作者认为杜琪峰导演及其银河映像公司是最近香港犯罪类电影暗色元素的先锋，因此他们的作品在本文最后一章将作为研究案例。

本文具有三重目的。第一，补充了当今主流以“身份认同”为主题的香港电影研究，并且证明了历史分类研究方法的优势。第二，强调黑色电影不是普通的“类型”(genre)，亦不是美国独有的现象。最后，阐明过度用反映论观点(reflectionist approach)研究香港电影与香港社会之间的关系的局限。

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# **INTRODUCTION**

## **1. What It Is Not**

Identity is often more easily defined by clarifying what something or someone is not, and it is no different with this dissertation. At its most basic level, this text is a reaction against the dominant trends in academic writing on Hong Kong and Chinese cinema, which to a large extent remain focused on “identities” of various types. The most notable of those trends is the preoccupation with the very use of the term “Chinese cinema(s)”: as Pang Laikwan has argued, the attempts to define and negate this term are somewhat paradoxically also pushing forward the academic institutionalization of the field itself (“Institutionalization” 55). Particularly obsessed with identity and “name-giving” is the literature on Hong Kong cinema: Esther Cheung and Chu Yiu-wai devote the introduction of their important anthology *Between Home and World: A Reader in Hong Kong Cinema* to the careful consideration of the various terms used to describe the territory’s cinema, revealing how the issue of naming has been a matter nearly every scholar sees himself or herself required to address at least briefly.

With Hong Kong’s unique situation of being simultaneously a British ex-colony, an Asian metropolis, and a Chinese Special Administrative Region possessing a distinctive local culture and considerable autonomy, it is no wonder that “Hong Kong identity” has been an important concern of local, but also overseas critics. As a result, however, the stress in the literature on Hong Kong cinema has arguably been more on “Hong Kong” than on its cinema. It comes as no surprise that of the nineteen essays in *Between Home and World*, six have the word “identity” in their title, while several others deal with the topic as well.<sup>1</sup> This of course reflects wider academic trends, but a comparison with the literature on Hollywood or European cinemas reveals that significant aspects of Hong Kong cinema remain virtually unexplored. Chief among these is the (historical) study of genres. By attempting a historical study of the Hong Kong crime film, this dissertation is thus charting new

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<sup>1</sup> Some other examples of prominent works that focus on Hong Kong identity while discussing the territory’s films are Ackbar Abbas’s *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, Fu Poshek and David Desser’s *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, and Identity*, and Chu Yingchi’s *Hong Kong Cinema: Coloniser, Motherland, and Self*.

waters and indicating avenues for future research. This does not mean that “Hong Kong identity” will not figure at all in what follows. Chapter Two, for instance, describes how the crime film (along with the comedy genre) was central to the indigenization of Hong Kong cinema in the 1970s. One could say that it is by giving primacy to the “cinema” in “Hong Kong cinema” that this dissertation offers a different angle from which to examine the relationship between Hong Kong culture/society/identity and its cinema (see below).

By focusing on genre, this dissertation also sidelines two other identity-related approaches often used to analyze Hong Kong films. While many of the earlier writings were more interested in local identity in the face of the 1997 change of sovereignty (and thus implicitly adopted a national cinema approach), attention fairly quickly shifted towards the transnational character and connections of Hong Kong cinema, and, to a smaller extent, to the study of gender in film.<sup>2</sup> Again, these are topics pertinent to the study of Hong Kong film, but they are not the focus of this research. In part this is because the crime film has in the last few decades been one of the genres most easily identifiable in the realm of Chinese cinemas as a specialty of Hong Kong, making it less “transnational” in nature compared to, for instance, the martial arts film.<sup>3</sup> To avoid confusion, what here has been understood to be a Hong Kong film is a work made with investment from Hong Kong production companies, employing mostly Hong Kong-based professionals and stars, and shown in local cinemas. Gender will also be sidelined in what follows, though the male-centeredness of the crime film and the figure of the femme fatale are topics that will come up repeatedly.

David Bordwell’s *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* has, in comparison, been a more important influence on this dissertation. Bordwell’s goal in his book is to create an overall picture of Hong Kong cinema and to defend

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<sup>2</sup> Works focusing on transnational connections and/or gender include Gina Marchetti’s *From Tian’anmen to Times Square: Transnational China and the Chinese Diaspora on Global Screens, 1989-1997*, Gina Marchetti and Tan See Kam’s *Hong Kong Film, Hollywood and the New Global Cinema: No Film Is an Island*, Shih Shu-mei’s *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*, Esther Yau’s *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, Pang Laikwan and Day Wong’s *Masculinities and Hong Kong Cinema*.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, in terms of reception, the crime film has been equally or even more transnational than martial arts cinema, it is however more local and identifiably “Hong Kong” in terms of its genre characteristics.

the value of popular cinema. His approach is often oriented towards form, and this leads him to discuss Hong Kong genres at some length as well. While here the focus is much more on genre than in Bordwell's work, an effort was made to also put it in a historical, industrial and social context – the result is a history of Hong Kong cinema (since the late 1940s) through the vantage point of the crime film. This historical approach is also a feature of Stephen Teo's *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions*. Teo is more interested in auteurist analysis, however, and even though he devotes a chapter to crime films, he organizes it according to the works of a few celebrated directors. One of the goals of this dissertation is to illuminate the historical process of generic innovation and reinvention by focusing on specific genres and subgenres within the overarching category of the crime film. In this way, the works of certain "auteurs" appear in their original context, making it easier to discern in which way they broke new ground.<sup>4</sup>

With the proliferation of scholarly work on Hong Kong cinema over the last decade, many studies have appeared dealing with specific directors (such as Wong Kar-wai, John Woo, Johnnie To,...), important studios (Shaw Brothers, Cathay, Kong Ngee,...) and individual films (Stanley Kwan's *Centre Stage*, Fruit Chan's *Durian Durian*, and many others).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, studies of specific genres have been relatively rare. This creates a striking contrast with an earlier period in the study of Hong Kong cinema: many of the pioneering articles and books in English focused on genres. During the 1980s there were the Hong Kong International Film Festival catalogues, which dealt with the martial arts and Cantonese opera film, as well as the melodrama, comedy, and ghost film.<sup>6</sup> From the beginning, most Western interest has however been concentrated on the martial arts genre. The global success of

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<sup>4</sup> The idea of auteurs working within genres might seem inherently contradictory, but it will become clear throughout this dissertation that this is a fundamental characteristic of auteurism in Hong Kong cinema. This phenomenon is of course not unique to Hong Kong: Alfred Hitchcock and Howard Hawks are two famous Hollywood examples.

<sup>5</sup> Examples of auteur studies are Kenneth Hall's *John Woo: The Films*, Stephen Teo's *Wong Kar-wai and Director in Action: Johnnie To and the Hong Kong Action Film*. The Hong Kong Film Archive has been most active publishing various works on older Hong Kong directors (such as *Li Han-hsiang: Storyteller* and *The Cinema of Lee Sun-fung*), and studios (*The Shaw Screen: A Preliminary Study*, *The Cathay Story*, *The Glorious Modernity of Kong Ngee*), as well as various other invaluable works on Hong Kong cinema's history. Hong Kong University Press has an ongoing series of books on individual films.

<sup>6</sup> Examples are *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film* (1980), *A Study of the Hong Kong Swordplay Film* (1981), *The Traditions of Hong Kong Comedy* (1985), *Cantonese Melodrama: 1950-1969* (1986), *Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective* (1987), and *Phantoms of the Hong Kong Cinema* (1989).

Bruce Lee and the “kung fu craze” in the early 1970s quickly led to an article by Stuart Kaminsky (1974) and a book by Verina Glaessner (1974). In the early 1980s followed Marilyn Mintz’s *The Martial Arts Films*, which ambitiously set out to analyze the martial arts film as a global phenomenon. That the Hong Kong martial arts and action film continue to fascinate is obvious from more recent books and articles by David Desser, Leon Hunt, Bey Logan, Stephen Teo, and many others. Other genres are however rarely, if ever, analyzed in depth.<sup>7</sup>

An important, recent work dealing with a specific genre is *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*, edited by Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu. While some of the difficulties with the use of the term “action” as a genre will be discussed later, one of Morris’s observations in her Introduction is relevant to what has been discussed so far. Morris notes that there is a “marked imbalance or asymmetry in the disciplinary organization of film studies”:

*On the one hand, most English-language accounts of ‘action cinema’ overwhelmingly focus on Hollywood (...) This norm setting focus on Hollywood has shaped critical interest in action as a genre. On the other hand, the many action films made in Hong Kong, Japan, India, Thailand, Korea, Indonesia or the Philippines tend to be studied, if at all, by specialists in national or, sometimes, regional (“Asian”) cinema (“Introduction” 3, original emphasis).*

With this division of critical labor a schema is installed in cinema studies whereby a “universalizing West produces ‘theory’ (of film genre, in this instance) for a ‘Rest’ that is rich in eccentric cultural particulars” (“Introduction” 3). This division, Morris argues, impoverishes both film theory and film history, as it misses some vital connections between Hong Kong and other film industries (“Introduction” 4). To begin to address this problem, *Hong Kong Connections* aims to be “not a book about Hong Kong action cinema”, but to “create a contact zone of transnational discussion that could be rendered coherent by a shared sense of connection to Hong Kong cinema, but in which the problem of articulating connections might itself become the primary theme” (“Introduction” 13).

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<sup>7</sup> Some exceptions are the horror genre and the musical film. The former is the subject of several articles (by Darrell W. Davis and Emilie Yeh, Julian Stringer, and Tony Williams) dealing specifically with Category III films as a kind of genre. The latter is the subject of a book by Roger Garcia.

Martha Nochimson's *Dying to Belong: Gangster Movies in Hollywood and Hong Kong* can be considered an example of this problematic division of critical labor. This genre study of the Hong Kong gangster film gets bogged down under its own ambitions: Nochimson tries to deal with Hong Kong and Hollywood gangster films and television series from the 1920s to the present.<sup>8</sup> As a result, she only manages to pay cursory attention to the most canonical works in both cinemas and exhibits a fairly superficial knowledge of Hong Kong crime films, at one point even stating that John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) is the first Hong Kong gangster film (74). More fundamentally flawed is however her central argument that both cinemas depict the stories of immigrant gangsters whose "destiny casts a pall over the generic paradigm of the modern fable of creating a new self and a new place in society, the American and Hong Kong success stories" (8). While immigrant gangsters do play a role in Hong Kong crime cinema, they usually function in a very different way, as will be discussed in Chapter Three.<sup>9</sup>

Meaghan Morris's argument for a transnational focus rests on the assumption that a concentration on the specificity of Hong Kong cinema is caught up in a national cinema studies tendency to define itself in opposition to Hollywood. A transnational approach could certainly overcome this problem, though one could argue a Hong Kong-centered study of genre could do so as well. This dissertation is an attempt at such, and while genre theory based on Hollywood films has been an undeniable influence, it has not been the goal to compare the two industries, or to define the Hong Kong crime film in relation to its Hollywood counterpart. Instead, a close analysis of a large number of Hong Kong films has led here to the formulation of genre categories and characteristics suitable to the territory's output. This does not preclude the mapping of connections with other film industries. Pre-1949 Shanghai,

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<sup>8</sup> A similar problem plagues articles by Michael Vesia and Tony Williams ("Gangster Movie") on the Hong Kong gangster film. While Vesia makes some insightful comments on the "gangster as hero" in Hong Kong cinema, the brevity of his article limits him to mentioning only a few celebrated works. Williams discusses a wider variety of films, but arguably pays disproportionate attention to the particulars of Hong Kong gangster and police culture, and offers more of an introductory overview than a sustained analysis. A reason for the critical neglect of the crime genre might very well lie in the sheer amount of crime films made in Hong Kong, and, especially for earlier decades, the lack of archival materials and film prints. The genre's commercial success moreover made it unattractive to local and overseas critics prone to elitist disdain for popular cinema.

<sup>9</sup> It should however be conceded that Nochimson quite perceptively notes the recent Hollywoodization of the Hong Kong gangster genre, referring specifically to the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy (see Chapter Four).

Hollywood, European and Japanese cinema have been important influences on the genesis of the crime genre in Hong Kong, so they are part of the discussion, although there is certainly space left for further research into this complex network of exchanges, which could also include the impact of Hong Kong crime films on cinemas elsewhere.

## 2. Genre

Genre theory has its roots in the 1940s and 1950s, but became only fully established in the late 1960s and early 1970s – in large part as a reaction against another approach to studying cinema, auteurism. Although auteurism brought critical respectability to the study of certain directors working in the previously disdained Hollywood system, it also, in the words of Steve Neale, “encouraged an approach to Hollywood films which either ignored or defamiliarized their institutional status, their institutional conventions and the audiences to whom they were principally addressed” (11). It was to investigate precisely these aspects that some people turned to issues of genre. A useful definition of the concept is offered by Tom Ryall: “Genres may be defined as patterns/forms/styles/structures which transcend individual films, and which supervise both their construction by the film maker, and their reading by an audience” (qtd. in Neale 12).

Genre theory provides a framework for understanding films, but it is no exact science: genres frequently hybridize and overlap, “thus blurring the boundaries of the genres concerned” (Neale 3). This is arguably even more the case in Hong Kong cinema than in the Hollywood films Neale talks about, so adopting a flexible approach is necessary, as will become clear below. Additionally, while Neale makes his categories broad enough to include many of Hong Kong’s films, a similar overview of the industry’s major genres would look significantly different from the one he creates for Hollywood cinema.<sup>10</sup> Creating such an overview falls outside the scope of this dissertation, but one could for instance assume that the martial arts film would become a major category of its own, while a specific theory of the various types of opera film and musical could be envisioned as well.

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<sup>10</sup> In this regard it is worth stressing that just considering Hollywood cinema, critics have come up with a variety of possible genre structures.

The choice to study the *crime* film as a genre is slightly odd in view of the existing scholarship. While Robert Warshaw's "The Gangster as Tragic Hero" was one of the first essays dealing with a specific genre and has since spawned a mass of critical literature on the gangster film, the term "crime film" is comparatively less often used as a basis for analysis. An important reason for this is that it is seemingly too broad to be investigated as a distinct genre with recognizable themes, characters, iconography, narrative structures, etc. Thomas Leitch has made an interesting attempt at such in his book *Crime Films*, about which more below. In this dissertation, the "crime film" will be used as an umbrella term for diverse genres that nevertheless share various elements and are productively grouped together.

There is a need, however, to further delineate what is understood under the term: as Leitch points out, many Westerns tell stories of crime and punishment, but few viewers would consider them to be crime films (5-6). Neale offers a partial solution to this problem by talking about "contemporary crime" (71), though this still leaves certain ambiguities: *Public Enemies* (2009), a recent Hollywood film retelling the story of famed 1930s gangster John Dillinger, can hardly be called "contemporary." In Hong Kong cinema, this problem also presents itself with gangster films set in 1930s Shanghai, and it becomes even more pronounced with those that simultaneously belong to the kung fu genre (for instance, *Boxer from Shantung*, 1972). The 1970s kung fu film quite naturally resorted to the depiction of a contemporary urban crime milieu, as it was a logical (and budget-friendly) setting to stage elaborate fights and tales of vengeance in. While these hybrid kung fu crime films were fairly common in the 1970s (as can be deduced from a glance at Bruce Lee's oeuvre), only a few pioneering examples like *Boxer from Shantung* are discussed in this dissertation to illustrate the important historical evolution towards the contemporary, more gun-oriented crime film of the 1980s and beyond (see Chapter Two).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Similarly, a specific subset of 1970s "detective swordplay films" will be briefly discussed: although the term "detective martial arts film" is fairly widespread, few people would think of the crime genre when discussing these films. One could however see the relationship between the two genres as parallel to the relationship between the American Western and the Hollywood crime film: they share certain themes, plots and gender ideologies, but are nonetheless perceived as being quite distinct genres. Highlighting the parallels helps to identify persisting themes, conventions and mutual influences, and serves as a further illustration of the inherently blurred nature of genre categories. A related reason for the inclusion of these martial arts films is the notion of action as a mode, discussed below.

The question still remains how to organize the different “branches” of the big crime film “tree”. Neale and Leitch offer remarkably similar solutions to this by focusing on three major figures: the criminal, the victim, and the agent of law and order. For Neale, a film that concentrates on the perpetrators of crime and focuses on criminal activity is a gangster film; a film with a focus on the victims of crime and an emphasis on their response is a suspense thriller; and a film concentrating on an agent of investigation and an emphasis on detection is a detective film (72). While it is clear that these three categories often overlap within one single film, this focus on the protagonists and their activity offers a good basis to begin analyzing the Hong Kong crime film as well, although starting from the 1970s, it makes more sense to use the term “police film” instead of “detective film.”

Leitch, like Neale, starts his definition of the crime film with these three major roles, but then goes on to make a further claim: crime films are occupied with “a pair of contradictory narrative projects: to valorize the distinctions among these three roles in order to affirm the social, moral, or institutional order threatened by crime, and to explore the relations among the three roles in order to mount a critique that challenges that order” (16). He also writes that: “crime films typically move toward endings that confirm the moral absolutes incarnated in each of their three primary figures” (15). If we accept Leitch’s propositions about the Hollywood crime film, a comparison with Hong Kong crime films becomes fascinating. Starting from the late 1960s, it has become increasingly common that order is *not* restored in Hong Kong crime films. The supposedly formulaic happy (or in the case of the gangster, tragic) ending is not a given in many Hong Kong films, with the crime genre being the most obvious example. As Stephen Teo puts it with regard to the gangster film: “A Hong Kong gangster movie can make viewers feel that civilization is indeed at risk and that Hong Kong is the last place on earth they would want to be” (*Extra Dimensions* 233). This is true of the crime film in general and might be seen as indicating a severe distrust towards, and critique of, the existing “social, moral, or institutional order”, giving some credence to Cheung and Chu’s definition of Hong Kong cinema as a “crisis cinema” – the term they come up with after their consideration of other attempts to give Hong Kong cinema a name. Cheung and Chu link the “crisis” to political factors (the Handover and the wider “China complex”), but also to the effects of capitalism and globalization (xxix-xxx).

By illustrating that this crisis cinema dates back to about four decades ago (instead of just twenty years, as Cheung and Chu seem to indicate (xxviii)), this dissertation underlines that “crisis” should indeed be understood very broadly. In fact, a recurring topic will be the problems with an overly “reflectionist” approach, stressing among other things that market conditions and the semi-independent process of generic development matter as well. In this regard, the influence of the martial arts genre where protagonists frequently die a heroic death will be highlighted.

The recurrent mentioning of the martial arts genre points at another issue that needs to be addressed: the relationship between the action genre and the crime film. Bordwell states that since the mid-1970s, comedy and action pictures have been the leading genres in Hong Kong, and he includes “kung-fu, crime thrillers, and swordplay” under the latter category (*Planet Hong Kong* 150). As mentioned above and discussed in Chapter Two and Three, there are certainly connections between these subgenres of the Hong Kong action film. However, discussing them together as one coherent genre tends to obscure various important differences between them. This indicates already some of the problems with the description of the “action film” as a genre, and Yvonne Tasker has convincingly argued for an understanding of action as not only “multi-generic”, but as a “mode”, or a “way of telling a story”, rather than as a distinct genre (“Introduction” 8). Slightly different is José Arroyo’s argument, who, based on a number of *Sight and Sound* articles collected in a volume on “action/spectacle cinema”, claims that action is “a type of cinema that cannot quite constitute a mode but which exceeds the boundaries of a genre” (“Preface” v).

Clearly, the study of action as a genre is riddled with difficulties, even though it does not stop people from using the term. Neale, who speaks of “action-adventure”, highlights the range of genres it encompasses: “from swashbucklers to science fiction films, from thrillers to westerns to war films” (52). He also describes how it has been used to pinpoint characteristics these different genres and films share: “a propensity for spectacular physical action, a narrative structure involving fights, chases and explosions, and in addition to the deployment of state-of-the-art special effects, an emphasis in performance on athletic feats and stunts” (Ibid.). This description would make “action-adventure” an acceptable term to discuss Hong

Kong cinema, were it not for the fact that it has over the last three decades become closely associated with the Hollywood blockbuster mode of production and what is now often called “high-concept cinema” (Arroyo, “Preface” v). High-concept refers to “films whose story premise can be told in twenty-five words or less to allow for saturation marketing that will permit the widest possible release” (Arroyo, “Introduction” xii). It is characterized by a “simplification of character and narrative”, an “excessive use of music”, and a “high tech visual style and production design” that draw attention to themselves (Arroyo, “Introduction” xii). While there have been developments in the Hong Kong film industry towards this type of filmmaking for the last fifteen years or so, most Hong Kong films do not fit well in this category at all, making the use of the terms “action-adventure” or “action” potentially misleading.

An extra reason for the avoidance of the term here is the frequent, but reductive, identification of Hong Kong cinema as an action cinema: if Western works on genre mention Hong Kong at all, it is usually in the context of the action film. Hong Kong directors’ action choreography is undeniably one of their major contributions to world cinema, but there is more than just spectacular action even in the 1980s work of an acclaimed “action auteur” like John Woo. Additionally, while the majority of Hong Kong’s contemporary action films since the early 1980s used a crime film format, not all crime films are action films: In fact, Chapter Four and Five will show how action has, since the mid-1990s, become increasingly less important in Hong Kong cinema, and in its crime films in particular. Finally, a focus on the crime film allows us to look back further into Hong Kong’s cinematic history to the period from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, when action was for the most part confined to the period martial arts genre, and very different types of crime films flourished, which nevertheless had a considerable impact on later developments in the genre. Hence, a historical study of the crime film can shed light on the all-too-often ignored creativity of Hong Kong filmmakers of previous decades, and contribute to a better understanding of more recent Hong Kong films as well.

### 3. Film Noir

In the introduction to his *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*, James Naremore asserts that “film noir has become one of the dominant intellectual categories of the late twentieth century, operating across the entire cultural arena of art, popular memory, and criticism” (2). Film noir does indeed seem to be everywhere, and it comes as no surprise that the term pops up regularly in writings on Hong Kong film as well: in the description of late 1940s and early 1950s films featuring “femme fatale” Bai Guang (Law and Bren 272-274), during Kenneth Hall’s analysis of John Woo’s *The Killer* (1989) and its similarities to the “French noir” of Jean-Pierre Melville, or as “Kowloon Noir” in Stephen Teo’s discussion of *PTU* (2003) and other Johnnie To films (*Director in Action*). Against this background, it is surprising no one has attempted a comprehensive study of film noir in Hong Kong. This dissertation aims to fill that gap by tracing film noir’s presence in genre films since the 1940s, all the while also considering the problems with the term “film noir” itself.

The nature and characteristics of film noir have been debated for decades. Frequently it is defined in terms of a particular “expressionist” look or visual style: unconventional camera angles and movements, low-key or strongly opposing patterns of light, and asymmetrical compositions (Spicer 2). Thematically, oft-cited features are “the focus on mentally, emotionally and physically vulnerable characters, the interest in psychology, the culture of distrust marking relations between male and female characters, and the downbeat emphasis on violence, anxiety, death, crime and compromised morality” (Neale 174). In addition, there are recurring narrative patterns and devices, such as the voice-over and the flashback (Gledhill 14). Finally, there is also the frequent presence of the femme fatale, or “femme noire” as Schatz calls her (114).

While all critics agree that “the beating heart of film noir can be located in Hollywood during the 1940s and 1950s” (Naremore xv), there is considerable disagreement about whether it should be considered a “genre” (as most contributors to Ann Kaplan’s edited volume *Women in Film Noir* do), a “style” (Schatz 11), or as primarily characterized by “qualities of tone and mood” (the position of Paul

Schrader, quoted in Donati). In an attempt to rise above these definitions, which all have their own limitations, Krutnik proposes to simply talk about the noir “phenomenon” (24). An important reason for this terminological disagreement is that film noir is in essence a “critical category” rather than a genre: when these films were being made in the 1940s and 1950s, neither the film industry, nor its contemporary English-speaking audiences, reviewers or critics, used the term (Neale 153). Additionally, the noir “canon” is quite inconsistent: Neale points out several examples of films that have been called noir, but do not exhibit the noir visual style, or lack a femme fatale, etc. He also notes that: “Many of the features associated with noir (...) were separable features belonging to separable tendencies and trends which traversed a wide variety of genres and cycles in the 1940s and early 1950s” (174). Neale’s remark is central to the way film noir has here been investigated in the context of Hong Kong cinema.

When the term originally coined by French critics in the 1940s began to gain currency in American film and scholarly circles in the mid-1960s, a new development started to take shape. What is usually called “neo-noir” consciously evokes the style, themes and narrative devices of “classic noir”. With the term becoming part of popular discourse and studios using it to market their films, neo-noir became more like a recognizable genre. Nevertheless, “film noir” until the present day remains a rather vague concept, which can be used to describe “a period, a movement, and a recurrent style” (Naremore 6). This vagueness needs to be kept in mind when looking for films noirs in a Hong Kong context. Chapter One further details the way film noir has been defined for this research.

The approach here is quite different from the one of Joelle Collier, who in the until now sole systematic enquiry into Hong Kong noir presents film noir as an unproblematic genre with clearly defined features and conventions.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, she claims noir as a “quintessentially American” genre (137) – a previously widespread idea recently challenged both by James Naremore (9-39) and Andrew Spicer (4-7). Not only does the visual style of noir have precedents in German expressionism, but also 1930s French poetic realism is often cited as an influence.

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<sup>12</sup> Collier’s scope is moreover quite limited: she only treats three films (of 1997 and 1998) in depth.

Additionally, many German (or Austrian) émigrés were involved in the production of classic Hollywood noir in the 1940s and 1950s. The European-American link continued in later decades, for instance in the work of French director Jean-Pierre Melville (Spicer 6-7). This dissertation will show that while 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong-based filmmakers were only influenced to a limited extent by classic noir, many Hong Kong crime films since the 1980s can be considered a local form of film noir. Most of these films do not appear to have been meant as a conscious evocation of classic noir or neo-noir, but constitute a development grounded to a large extent in local generic traditions and conventions. Since its appearance, Hong Kong noir has continuously evolved and become increasingly prominent – especially in the last fifteen years.

It is this recent proliferation of noir-like atmosphere, style and narratives in crime films that has prompted this dissertation. Often noted but barely investigated, this phenomenon was in urgent need of appraisal. Of course, not all films noirs are crime films, and many crime films are not noir. Indeed, in this dissertation, mention will be made of noir melodramas, musicals and martial arts films, and from the late 1940s to the 1970s, the noirish characteristics in Hong Kong cinema were mostly found in these other dominant genres. It is however in the Hollywood crime genre that film noir was concentrated most heavily historically (Neale 174), and this has also been the case in Hong Kong since the 1980s. Additionally, even though some early noirish films are more readily recognized as melodramas, musicals or swordplay films, their narratives usually deal with some type of crime. Given the blurry nature of the term film noir, it thus makes sense to look at film noir against the backdrop of the wider historical development of the crime film in Hong Kong.<sup>13</sup>

#### **4. Film and Social Reality**

This Introduction started by defining this dissertation's subject against what is perceived as an excessive interest in various types of "identity" in studies of Hong Kong cinema. What will become clear throughout the following chapters, however,

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<sup>13</sup> One might note the mixed use of the words "noir" and "noirish" throughout this dissertation. Generally, a "noirish" film refers to a film that exhibits some of the traits usually attributed to film noir (see Chapter One), while the terms "noir film" and "film noir" are used to describe films that are more easily recognized as film noir. The boundary between the two terms is of necessity blurred and rather subjective, due to the multiple meanings of "film noir" itself.

is that “identity” remains an important concern: in true dialectic fashion, what one defines oneself against ends up being a profound influence. Nevertheless, by fundamentally questioning the assumed importance of 1997 and the Hong Kong-PRC relationship to Hong Kong cinema, this dissertation aims to avoid a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy evident in much writing on the topic: with the supposed main subject of Hong Kong cinema defined, many scholars and critics selectively discuss those films that confirm their preconceptions or interpret them in such a way that fit these presumptions. At the same time, a vast number of alternative themes and concerns is sidelined and/or neglected. This is not to say that these interpretations and readings are not valid, but they certainly excessively highlight only one aspect among many that are of interest.

To more fundamentally question this identity-centered approach, this dissertation frequently returns to the relationship between cinema and the society in which it is produced. Hence, not only the representation of Hong Kong identity and of the relationship between Hong Kong and the PRC is questioned, but also the representation of women and issues of class identity.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the dissertation aims to be a reaction against what is referred to as an overly simplistic reflectionism. While the original goal of the research was to radically move away from this reflectionist approach, the eventual result can be considered a more complex and self-conscious version of it. While the relationship between film and (social) reality has been a perennial topic of film theory, this is not the place to attempt a comprehensive overview of the literature. It is nevertheless useful to briefly discuss Raymond Williams’ concept of a “structure of feeling”. According to Williams,

*[I]t is in art, primarily, that the effect of the totality, the dominant structure of feeling, is expressed and embodied. To relate a work of art to any part of that observed totality may, in varying degrees, be useful; but it is a common experience, in analysis, to realize that when one has measured the work against the separable parts, there yet remains some element for which there is no external counterpart. This element (...) is what I have named the structure of feeling of a period, and it is only realizable through experience of the work of art itself, as a whole (33, original emphasis).*

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<sup>14</sup> More could be done in this regard. The functioning of class in Hong Kong genres is a rarely explored area and is here only touched upon briefly.

Analysis will as a result never be able to entirely capture the structure of feeling of a period – an unavoidable incompleteness anyone writing or reading about film (and other art forms) is familiar with. Interestingly, however, Williams also notes that “the dramatic conventions of any given period are fundamentally related to the structure of feeling in that period” (Ibid.). Genres, as loose collections of changing conventions, thus constitute an excellent tool to understand the constantly evolving structure of feeling, and to investigate the relationship between film and society.

Robert Ray demonstrates another, more detailed and practical approach. Ray attempts to complement the “two principal traditions of American film history, auteurism and genre study” (19) by studying “a certain tendency of the Hollywood cinema” over a period of fifty years. While his goal is more ambitious than the one strived for in this dissertation, Ray’s main theoretical concern is similar to the one outlined here. Originally starting his project with what he calls a “naïve reflection theory”, Ray eventually realized that “movies not only reflected but also excluded the world”, and that he “needed an approach that would account for both a reflection more complicated than [he] had originally granted and an exclusion more systematic than [he] had reckoned on” (11). He eventually settled on an approach that combined elements of Marxism (Althusser’s discussions of ideology), myth study (Lévi-Strauss’s work on myths), and psychoanalysis (Freud’s work on dreams) (Ibid.). Ray concludes his study by stating that “the American cinema has never reflected ‘real’ events but at most its audience’s relation to those events, and (...) that relation has at no point been free of cultural conditioning” (364). He also settles for “a middle position that defines the industry-audience relationship as a reciprocal one” (Ibid.). Ray’s position is similar to David Bordwell’s characterization of popular cinema as “part of an open-ended dialogue with its culture” (37) – the position adopted in this dissertation and further detailed in Chapter Three.

To highlight the relationship between film and society, each chapter begins by sketching the events in society at large, the changes in the film industry, and the trends in genre filmmaking. Here in the Introduction, some useful information on the histories of the Hong Kong police and the triads will be outlined. This background information is not unimportant, especially for films since the 1970s, because filmmakers often sought inspiration in reality – there even are several

policemen and (former) triad members who switched careers to work full-time in the film industry as scriptwriters, actors, directors or producers.

## 5. Cops and Robbers

The history of the triads is somewhat shrouded in mystery. Martin Booth traces the existence of Chinese secret societies, as precursors of the triads, to the foundation of the Eastern Han dynasty (25-220 CE), but it is generally accepted that the triads first emerged after the invading Manchus overthrew the Ming and established the Qing dynasty in 1644 (1-9). The “original” triad was the *Hongmen* 洪門, a secret society that aimed to overthrow the Qing and restore the indigenous Ming dynasty (Broadhurst and Lee 9). In Hong Kong, the *Hongmen* were, according to Broadhurst and Lee, similar to a number of “mutual self-help organizations among the disenfranchised immigrant Chinese labourers” (9). It assisted in “resolving everyday disputes, provided loans and met welfare needs that were ignored by their alien colonial rulers” (9). Seen as a threat by colonial authorities soon after they took possession of Hong Kong in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the *Hongmen* were forced underground and transformed into the “black society”, “whose members often competed for a monopoly over illicit activities or a particular district and involved themselves in protection, mercenary violence, predatory crime and rebellion” (Broadhurst and Lee 10).

After the Second World War, the British finally banned narcotics in the colony, which, according to Booth, played right into the hands of the triads, who could now reap vast profits with the illegal opium trade: they established large numbers of opium dens while also monopolizing the import and sale of the drug (46-9). Other profitable illicit businesses of the triads were prostitution, protection rackets, labor manipulation and extortion (Booth 51). Until the mid-1970s, the police were largely ineffectual in dealing with the problem, partly because of rampant corruption fueled by triad money. There was in fact something of a police-triad alliance at this time, with the triads keeping street crime at relatively low levels in exchange for police protection of their businesses in other areas (Traver 3). This unusual arrangement – which effectively blurred the boundary between police and triads – has had an important impact on Hong Kong crime films; it is not only depicted in the nostalgic

Big Timer films of the early 1990s, but also influences films set in the present. In more recent films (like Derek Yee's *One Nite in Mongkok* (2004) and Johnnie To's *Election* (2005)), police officers are regularly shown striking some sort of deal with the triads, not necessarily for money, but for the maintenance of stability – the idea being that triads cannot be destroyed, so it is better to just try to keep them under control by working with them.

While in the late 1970s the police prematurely claimed victory over the triads, the problem reemerged “with a vengeance” in 1983, according to Traver (4). The police admitted that several triad societies had become “well structured and held ‘boardroom type’ committee meetings to review policy and organize criminal activities” (Traver 4).<sup>15</sup> This was possibly a factor in the unprecedented popularity of gangster films, especially after the success of John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* in 1986. While exact data on this do not exist, it is estimated that since the 1980s there have been about fifty triad groups active in Hong Kong, with the number of triad members sometimes estimated as high as 300,000 – though other estimates range between 35,000 and 80,000, including triad-associated youth gangs (Broadhurst and Lee 13). The largest triad groups are the Wo Shing Wo, Sun Yee On, 14K and the Wo Hop To (Broadhurst and Lee 13). Triad involvement in overall crime in Hong Kong has however remained close to the three percent level for the last decade (Traver 7), and there is a widespread impression of the decline of triad societies since 1997. Still, Broadhurst and Lee argue that triad society merely has been transformed as a result of “proactive law enforcement (...), changing social values and the evolution of illicit markets” (1). Their observations are worth quoting at some length, because what they describe has also been reflected in films:

*The substantial changes in the political economy of Hong Kong (from a manufacturing to a financial services market and from colonial to neo-colonial rule) and the rapid economic development of China have served to modernize, ‘gentrify’ and transform the organisation of triad-related groups. Aims have become more corporatised and boundaries moved beyond traditional predatory street crime, extortion and drug dealing predicated on brand violence to diverse*

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<sup>15</sup> This type of boardroom meetings became part of the triad film iconography, especially in the *Young and Dangerous* series (1996-2000), though a few examples can be found in the early 1980s as well.

*'grey' business activities that also include trafficking (anything profitable), vice, copyright, Internet and financial service crimes such as money laundering and fraud. Another effect has been to shift some triad-related criminal activities, such as commercial vice or illicit drugs from Hong Kong to the mainland where risks may be minimized due to corruption of judicial, municipal and police officials (1-2).*

Triad societies have their own distinct culture, marked by a specific worldview, rituals, symbols and use of language. A central concept is that of *jianghu* 江湖 (literally “rivers and lakes”), which indicates a sort of underworld or parallel society organized around traditional moral values like *yi* 义 or *yiqi* 义气, which stands for brotherhood, righteousness and loyalty. Giving respect (or “face”) and being loyal to senior or higher-ranking triad members is expected, while the *dalao* 大佬 (“big brother” or “boss”, *dailo* in Cantonese) is supposed to take care of his followers, be responsible for them when they get into trouble, and teach them the correct way to behave in the *jianghu*. This family-like organization makes them somewhat similar to the American mafia, though it is often noted that (contemporary) triad organization is looser and marked by “more risk averse command structures and corporate style relationships” than the American mafia, which is presumably more hierarchically organized (Broadhurst and Lee 11).

It is important to note that not all Hong Kong gangsters are triad members, though it is often hard to differentiate between the two.<sup>16</sup> Traditionally, triads had to go through an initiation ceremony, which could last up to six or seven hours. Among other things, oaths (of loyalty, brotherhood, secrecy,...) had to be recited, a cockerel would be beheaded (to symbolize what would happen if one were to be disloyal to the society), and each initiate’s finger would be pricked to draw blood which was then collected in a bowl of water (Booth 36-7). The depiction of such rituals is often censored in Hong Kong films, and if it is not, the film will automatically be classified as “adults-only” (= Category III). Triad members can recognize each other by hand signs. Booth writes: “The manner in which a cigarette is taken from an

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<sup>16</sup> Broadhurst and Lee mention the Big Circle gangs as an example of this: originally formed by Mainland migrants to Hong Kong in the 1970s, they are sometimes referred to as a criminal group, or as a triad; some of them also became members of the Hong Kong triads, despite their migrant status (4). The Big Circle gangs, as well as Vietnamese criminal groups, often showed up in Hong Kong films of the 1980s and early 1990s.

offered packet; the way in which a tea-cup or chopsticks are held; the way money is offered in payment; the manner of holding a pen – all these actions, and many more, can indicate membership and status to other triads” (38). Along with specific triad expressions and coded phrases, their depiction in films usually leads to some form of censorship as well. Writing around 1990, Martin Booth noted an important change:

*Today, things are very different. Initiation ceremonies are often truncated versions – partly for security reasons, but partly because the old ways are increasingly irrelevant to the new generation of triad street thugs with their designer clothes and expensive Western cars, who require no other encouragement to be loyal to their triad than the threat of violent death if they betray their brothers. (...) Even when longer initiation ceremonies take place the procedures are often inaccurately followed. There is a Chinese saying which, loosely translated, states: 'When history dies, the future has no children.' For the triads, history has long been buried (99-100).*

The abandonment of old traditions by younger generations is a recurrent theme in triad films from *The Teahouse* (1974) and *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) to *Young and Dangerous* (1996) and *Election* (2005).

Although less distinctively local than the triads, the Hong Kong police also have a history and characteristics different from those of most Western police forces. First among these is its paramilitary structure aimed foremost at maintaining public order and suppressing disturbances, rather than fighting crime (Deflem et al. 350). This was originally a result of Hong Kong's status as a colony, with the new British rulers mainly concerned about controlling the local population. Scholars disagree on how long the Hong Kong police has remained paramilitary in nature, with some claiming this changed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, others using 1997 as the end date, and some claiming the paramilitary traditions remain important to this day.<sup>17</sup> During the early period of British rule in Hong Kong, personnel was largely recruited from other British territories (England, India, Pakistan and northern China) (Jiao 2). It was only after the Second World War that local officers began to

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<sup>17</sup> See Deflem et al. (p. 350) for an overview of the literature.

increase significantly in numbers – not because of the change of racist attitude, Allan Jiao argues, but due to Britain’s loss of India and Pakistan (3-4).

During what Jiao calls the “administrative period” (1881-1980), paramilitary policing remained dominant and was institutionalized. The force became highly centralized and militarized, and exercised strong administrative control, focusing on crime control and public order management. Important for its depiction in films, as will be shown in Chapter Three and Four, is the fact that the Hong Kong police were given much wider powers than the police in the United Kingdom: this was the case with “police powers of arrest, detention, and search” (Jiao 4). It resulted in greater efficiency, but also gave rise to resentment and fear among Hong Kong’s Chinese residents (Deflem et al. 351). In the 1960s, the force began to shift its focus gradually towards crime-fighting in response to public discontent (Deflem et al. 351). But public order management remained important: the successful suppression of the 1967 pro-communist riots (a spillover from the Cultural Revolution then raging in the Mainland) helped, somewhat ironically, improve the police’s public image, as many residents resented the disruptions (Deflem et al. 352). Still, the legitimacy problem remained, because, according to Jiao, the police was imposed by a foreign government, and corruption was widespread in the force (5).

This situation improved markedly starting from the mid-1970s, when the colonial government began to do more public relations efforts, and established the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), which Jiao claims was “one of the most significant changes in Hong Kong history”, having a major impact on the Hong Kong police (6). In Chapter Two the importance of this event will be highlighted in the discussion of *Anti-Corruption* (1975), one of the big crime film successes at the box-office during the 1970s, and a fictionalized account of the events leading up to the establishment of the ICAC. Local Chinese were gradually also allowed to climb up higher in the police hierarchy, although it was only in 1990 that an ethnic Chinese officer became Commissioner of Police. As Deflem et al. point out, “as late as the mid-1990s, 60 per cent of the 500 top senior level officers were still expatriates”, even though 97 per cent of the Hong Kong police were ethnic Chinese (351).

In the last years before the Handover, as Hong Kong society became more vocal about democracy, the police began to implement changes towards a more “civil and service-oriented character” (Jiao 9). This transformation began to gather speed in the new millennium, although the force’s paramilitary traditions remain important and provide an impediment towards change (Deflem et al. 353). Not unimportant here is the ambivalence of the public, which on the one hand demanded a reduction of police power, and on the other favored “effective rather than procedurally legitimate policing” (Jiao 7). The 1997 Handover itself did not cause major changes in the Hong Kong police force. Paralleling the greater cross-border triad activity, there has been more contact and cooperation with the mainland Public Security bureaus. Many of the expatriate officers left or retired, and have been replaced mainly by local officers. One noteworthy change has been the greater demands the public has placed on the police, maybe because they consider “their own” police more accountable than the colonial one (Jiao 243).

It is probably useful to highlight some of the bureaus and units that appear regularly in crime films (especially since the 1980s). The most common one is the Organized Crime and Triad Bureau (OCTB), which investigates sophisticated organized crime and major triad societies. Established in 1991, it had precursors such as the Triad Society Bureau (which was first established in 1958) (Traver 3-6). Often working with the OCTB is the Criminal Intelligence Bureau (CIB), which is more of a coordinating body for intelligence. The Criminal Investigation Division (CID) is a sub-division of the CIB, and since its officers spend more time at crime scenes, it is usually they who are depicted rather than the CIB. Two paramilitary units that in the 1990s and 2000s spawned their own series of films are the Special Duties Unit (SDU) and the Police Tactical Unit (PTU). A sub-division of the PTU, the SDU (locally also known as the “Flying Tigers”) is a heavily armed, elite unit usually called in to handle dangerous crimes involving firearms (hostage situations, anti-narcotic raids, etc.). PTU’s main function is crowd and riot control, although they also patrol the streets, and conduct anti-crime operations. Other units and bureaus that sometimes make an appearance are the Emergency Unit (ordinary uniformed policemen who walk the beat but also respond to emergency situations), and the Commercial Crime and Narcotics Bureaus, of which the names are self-explanatory.

## 6. Structure

This dissertation is divided into five chapters: the first four each deal with the developments in the crime genre and film noir within a specific time frame, while the last chapter focuses mainly on the crime films by the Milkyway Image company and its central figure, Johnnie To. The main discussion in each chapter is preceded by a brief overview of the changes in society, the film industry and other genres to help contextualize the crime films of the treated period. Since the goal has been the writing of a history of the Hong Kong crime film (in a sense the creation of a crime film and film noir canon), films are generally not subjected to close textual analysis. Instead, they are part of the larger arguments made in each chapter. Two topics recur throughout different chapters: the relationship between film and society, and, related to this, the depiction of women.

Chapter One deals with the period from the late 1940s to 1969, when Hong Kong was home to both Mandarin and Cantonese filmmakers. It also further details the theoretical framework by simultaneously putting it into practice. The crime films are organized according to the three genre categories proposed by Steve Neale: the detective film, the suspense thriller and the gangster film. A remarkable subgenre that rose to prominence in the late 1960s is discussed separately: the “female detective/chivalrous thief action-adventure film” – a more accurate, but admittedly less catchy name for what Sam Ho has called the “Jane Bond” film. Finally, the approach to film noir in this dissertation is further specified by the discussion of five noir parameters or markers, which separately or in combination serve as an indicator of “noirishness”. The goal here is to give the often rather subjective application of the term a more objective basis – a necessity as the films in this chapter will not be known to most readers. Two observations of this section are the fact that noirish films predominantly appeared in Mandarin cinema, and that the femme fatale did show up quite regularly, despite her relative absence in later decades.

In the late 1960s an important transformation took place in Hong Kong cinema. Not only did Cantonese cinema for some time disappear almost completely, but also the whole genre structure of Hong Kong filmmaking changed dramatically: no longer would films focus on women and melodrama, instead men and action took center

stage. This was to some extent an international development having to do with changing audiences worldwide, but the transition in Hong Kong arguably happened more abruptly than elsewhere. The crime film similarly went through various transformations: the origins of both modern gangster and police genres can be traced back to this period. Chapter Two argues that the crime film, along with Cantonese comedy, played an important role in the indigenization of Hong Kong film in the 1970s: by the end of the decade the cinema was – in a radical change of fortune – dominated almost completely by Cantonese-language films. The chapter also draws attention to the role of martial arts cinema in the formation of the modern crime film and Hong Kong noir.

Chapter Three first evaluates the role of the Hong Kong New Wave, whose filmmakers in effect completed the process of indigenization. Significantly, many of these New Wave filmmakers chose to make their first works in the crime genre and often gave their films a noirish touch. Even more important, however, is John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), which ensured the dominance of crime films in the industry for the next fifteen years. Attention is paid to the various precedents for Woo's seminal film, highlighting its oft-noted borrowing from 1970s martial arts films, but also its precursors in the local crime film. This is followed by an appraisal of the direct influence of *A Better Tomorrow*, by investigating the so-called "hero film" (*yingxiong pian* 英雄片). Next, the critically more neglected police film is treated at some depth, in particular the works of Danny Lee, and the more action-oriented female cop films. As the 1980s also witnessed for the first time more widespread talk of "Hong Kong noir", the final section deals with some of the decade's most noir-like works, and considers the possible impact of the looming 1997 Handover.

With most of the generic characteristics of the Hong Kong gangster and police film already outlined, Chapter Four charts the development of various subgenres, cycles and trends throughout the 1990s and 2000s. As the industry entered a period of depression in the mid-1990s, filmmakers were granted more space for (postmodern) experimentation. Possibly as a result, a gradual move away from the action-heavy crime films of the 1980s is noticeable, especially in what will be called the "cop soap opera" and the "triad boyz" genre. Additionally, two subgenres dating back to

the 1970s and 1980s – the undercover drama and the assassin film – will be discussed as well. Aside from allowing greater experimentation in low- to medium-budget films, studios attempted to recapture the market locally and overseas by producing Hollywood-influenced “international action” films in the late 1990s and early 2000s. To a large extent, this trend was displaced by the enormous success of the *Infernal Affairs* series (2002-3), which effectively created a new local “benchmark”. In the final part of the chapter, the precedents as well as the impact of the series on subsequent Hong Kong crime films will be assessed.

Left out of Chapter Four for separate discussion in Chapter Five are the numerous films made by Johnnie To and the Milkyway Image company. A product of the late 1990s wave of creativity and experimentation, Milkyway Image was possibly the only studio keeping this impulse alive in the new millennium, despite the worsening economic environment of the film industry. Chapter Five makes use of the various categories established in the preceding chapters to put the Milkyway films in their proper generic context. Distinctly local, the company has carried forward the Hong Kong crime film tradition in its own quirky way. Included as an Appendix, a personal interview with Johnnie To provided valuable first-hand information on his and Milkyway’s films, and their film noir characteristics in particular. In this latter aspect, the company took the lead in an industry-wide trend towards noirish filmmaking: aside from the Milkyway noirs, a few more examples of this trend will be discussed. The chapter ends with some final thoughts on Hong Kong noir.

In the Conclusion, the findings of previous chapters are briefly summarized, and some final thoughts on the relationship between the crime genre and society are proposed. Additionally, areas for further research are identified.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

# **THE HONG KONG CRIME FILM AND FILM NOIR FROM THE 1940S TO THE 1960S**

### **1.1. Introduction**

The period of the late 1940s to the late 1960s was a dynamic one for the Hong Kong film industry. With often 200 or even 300 films produced annually, it was the most productive era the industry has ever known, although quality was not always up to par. During this time, Hong Kong was a production base for both Mandarin and Cantonese features, aimed in the first place at the overseas markets of Southeast Asia and also, in certain periods, Taiwan. Films were made in a fairly rich array of genres, many of which went extinct in more recent decades. Maybe most remarkable in view of the later development of Hong Kong cinema was the fact that female, not male, stars were the biggest box-office draws.

It is surprising that this fascinating period remains relatively underresearched, although the Hong Kong Film Archive has done much to address this problem in recent years. The most obscure of this neglected era are possibly the crime films: based on the existing literature, one could easily assume crime films were simply not made during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. But they were, and this chapter is the first attempt to look systematically at both the crime genre and film noir during this period. Drawing on the few films that are available (many are probably lost forever), the goal is to create an impression of the genre at this time, and to see if there were precedents for the gangster films and cop thrillers Hong Kong would become famous for in the 1980s and 1990s. The chapter will show that, while there are noticeable transformations taking place within the crime genre, its history is basically a fractured one: it is only in the late 1960s that the roots of the contemporary crime film become visible.

Before beginning with the analysis of crime films, this chapter will first give an overview of the wider developments in Hong Kong society, the film industry and the other genres prominent at this time. Since this period is one which saw many

changes as well as more or less separate developments in the Mandarin and Cantonese film industries, this section is longer than in other chapters. As was outlined in the Introduction, the crime films will then be divided into three main categories based on whether the main protagonists are criminals (gangster films), victims (suspense thrillers) or agents of law and order (detective films). For this period also a separate category will be created to deal with a remarkable and, for a short while, very popular subgenre that I will call the female detective/chivalrous thief action-adventure film. As the very long name suggests, this subgenre is highly hybrid and contains elements from detective films, gangster films and action-adventure films.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, the chapter will chart the presence of noirish Hong Kong films in this period largely contemporaneous to the "classical" era of Hollywood noir, generally believed to have ended in the late 1950s. The approach here is more probing, and partly aimed at providing a deeper understanding of how film noir has been interpreted throughout this dissertation. Hence, five film noir parameters will be identified to serve as indicators of a film's noirishness. While this search for film noir might seem unwarranted or unnecessary to some, it should be made clear at the outset that various scholars have on occasion made brief comments on the similarity to film noir of certain local films of the 1950s and 1960s. The goal is thus to verify their claims and to see if there was anything like a local "noir phenomenon" as Frank Krutnik has called it in the context of Hollywood cinema (24).

## **1.2. Historical Background: Society and the Film Industry**

Hong Kong recovered remarkably fast after the Japanese formally handed the territory back to the British in September 1945. Under the leadership of a capable military administration, immediate work was made of stabilizing the currency, getting sufficient food and fuel, cleaning up the city and creating employment. As a result of the fast return of relative stability, the population increased from 600,000 in

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<sup>18</sup> Films featuring similar female action heroines have precedents in Hollywood, Europe and India. One could think of the *Perils of Pauline* series of 1914 and its various remakes, or of female detectives like Nancy Drew (created in 1930) and Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, among others. Starting from the 1930s, Indian cinema produced several films starring actress and stuntwoman Mary Ann Evans, known as "Fearless Nadia". I thank Gina Marchetti for these suggestions.

August to well over one million by early 1946 (S. Tsang 140-1).<sup>19</sup> Hong Kong became even more attractive to refugees when the mainland increasingly got embroiled in the destructive civil war between the Communist Party and the Kuomintang, so that by 1950 the population of the colony had exceeded 2 million (S. Tsang 167).

The influx of cheap labor, capital and talent – a lot of it from Shanghai – led to an economic boom lasting into the early 1950s, with Hong Kong resuming its prewar role as a major entrepôt for the China trade. The situation in the film industry was less clear-cut. Cantonese filmmaking did not immediately resume after the war, but when the US-produced Cantonese movies of the Grandview company proved successful and the company subsequently reestablished itself in Hong Kong to produce Cantonese features, the industry recovered at breakneck speed from 1947 on (Law and Bren 145). As in the larger economy, Shanghai entrepreneurs and film talent started to play an important role in the development of the Hong Kong film industry, and the first major studio to emerge in postwar Hong Kong was in fact a Mandarin company, Da Zhonghua (Great China), founded by Jiang Boying in 1946. Da Zhonghua rented the Nanyang studios from the Shaw brothers and started making films for the mainland market. In three years, the company produced thirty-four Mandarin-language films, all made by directors and actors from Shanghai (Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong* 142). Due to reduced revenue from the Mainland market caused by uncontrollable inflation, wrong investment decisions, and an increasingly competitive environment in Hong Kong, Jiang eventually moved his studio to Shanghai - though he was never able to resume production there (Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong* 143-4).

One of Da Zhonghua's main competitors in Hong Kong was Yonghua, founded by Li Zuyong with the assistance of Zhang Shankun in 1947 (A. Wong, "Preface" xviii). Yonghua started off very ambitiously with two lavish historical epics, but quickly ended up in trouble as well when its films were banned in the mainland (Teo, *Extra Dimensions* 12). Zhang left the company after a dispute with Li, and went on to

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<sup>19</sup> Steve Tsang notes however that this dramatic population increase mainly represented the return of residents who had been forced to leave during the Japanese occupation.

establish Great Wall in 1949.<sup>20</sup> Great Wall released a number of remarkable films, and after Zhang left also this company in 1950, it transformed itself into one of the major leftist studios in the territory (A. Wong, "Preface" xviii-xix). This ideological turn reflected a wider trend of the period, as Hong Kong found itself in the midst of the Cold War, with the KMT and CCP struggling to get more influence over the local film industry. This was most obvious in the establishment of leftist and rightist unions,<sup>21</sup> which forced filmmakers and companies to choose sides, leading to a division within the industry along ideological lines. Another indicator of the politically charged atmosphere was the launching of several 'progressive' movements by leftist film people, and the establishment of filmmaking cooperatives.

When Yonghua failed to live up to its goal of becoming the foremost studio in Hong Kong, many Shanghai filmmakers went off to start their own companies (Teo, *Extra Dimensions* 13). On the right-wing side, the Asia Film Company was established in 1953 with American support, while the leftist Fenghuang emerged around 1952 as a cooperative company receiving support from the PRC government.<sup>22</sup> The leftist tendencies in the film industry were not limited to Mandarin cinema: the Cantonese cinema of the 1950s was strongly influenced by ideas of art promoted by leftist film movements. As Lin Nien-tung points out, "the concepts on which they [= the film movements] were founded can be traced back to the progressive ideals of the 1930s and 1940s" ("Some Trends" 18). Maybe the most important movement was the 1949 New Southern China Film Movement: a 'clean-up film movement' within the Cantonese cinema that promoted the making of 'educational' and 'artistic' films. The participants in this movement were some of the most famous stars of the Cantonese cinema who did not longer want to work with Cantonese opera and martial arts filmmakers. This movement was soon followed by a collectivization campaign, and in 1952 Zhonglian (Union) was established to make films under a collective production system. It went on to produce several classics of the Cantonese

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<sup>20</sup> Yonghua struggled on for a few years after Zhang's departure, but was eventually taken over by MP&GI (more later).

<sup>21</sup> On the Left, there was the Hong Kong Film Workers' Association (HKFWA), organized in 1950. On the Right, Zhang Shankun was instrumental in establishing in 1952 what would later be called the Hong Kong and Kowloon Filmmakers Free General Association (Chung, "Story of Kong Ngee" 128-9). Law and Bren point out that: "Before 1951, no so-called 'left' or 'right' existed within Hong Kong cinema, for the simple reason that the 'right' was almost nonexistent" (151).

<sup>22</sup> For a more detailed account, see Zhu xix-xx.

cinema (Chu 13-4). In the same year, Xinlian was founded with support from the PRC government, quickly turning itself into the second major Cantonese film studio (Guo 139).

While the Cantonese cinema entered a golden era, the Mandarin studios faced various obstacles. The left-wing Great Wall and Fenghuang could until the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 depend on relatively stable income and/or direct funding from the Mainland government, but the small right-wing studios, such as Yonghua, Zhang Shankun's new Xinhua film company (established in 1952), and Asia Film Company, were struggling to survive the loss of the mainland market by tapping Taiwanese, Japanese, Southeast Asian and even American investment. The situation took a turn for the worse when the major remaining market for Mandarin films, Taiwan, started to put obstacles in the way of Hong Kong film imports in 1955. In that year, a tax was levied on foreign exchange earnings from the import of Mandarin films from Hong Kong (Teo, "Electric Shadow Show" 21). According to Stephen Teo, this new tax "was widely seen as a political move to punish Hong Kong's Mandarin film people who tended to be lax in showing their political allegiances for 'free China'" (Ibid.). Contributing to the crisis of the Mandarin cinema was the success of Cantonese films, which had effectively improved quality following the film movements of the late forties and early fifties. Since Hong Kong was only a minor market for them at the time, the only way out for Mandarin studios was to cater to the Southeast Asian markets (especially the then British colonies of Malaya, Singapore and Borneo) – something the Cantonese cinema had been doing for quite a while already. It is then no surprise that the companies that would eventually lead Mandarin cinema to a period of prosperity from the late 1950s onwards had strong roots in Southeast Asia: as they had a near-monopoly on the film distribution in the region, Shaws and Cathay were in an excellent position to also monopolize Mandarin film production in Hong Kong (Law, "Crisis and Opportunity" 118).

The Cathay organization led by Loke Wan Tho had been keeping Yonghua alive with loans for several years and in 1955 decided to take over the studio and move into film production itself. Motion Picture & General Investment (MP&GI) officially replaced Yonghua in 1956 and announced ambitious production plans for

the next few years. In 1957, it was the first Hong Kong studio to win a major prize at the Asian Film Festival (Fu, "Cathay Cinema" 68). The Shaw brothers, Cathay's rivals in Southeast Asia, quickly realized they could not sit by idly, and in 1957 Run Run Shaw moved from Singapore to Hong Kong to personally take charge of film production. The Shaw brothers actually had been active in Hong Kong since 1934, when eldest brother Runje Shaw, realizing there was a large market for Cantonese talkies, moved his production base from Shanghai to Hong Kong, establishing Unique Film Productions' Hong Kong studio. Second brother Runde took over in 1936, and renamed the company Nanyang Studio in 1938. After the war, Runde leased the studio to Da Zhonghua but moved back into production after Da Zhonghua's bankruptcy. The studio was now called the Shaw Studio, and Runde set up Shaw and Sons Ltd. to take care of filmmaking. Films were produced steadily throughout the 1950s, but towards the end of the decade competition became fiercer (not only did Cathay move into production, Great Wall and Fenghuang were successfully competing for screen dominance as well). As Runde seemed not very motivated to invest extra time and money in filmmaking, Run Run Shaw moved to Hong Kong in 1957 to ensure supply for their exhibition circuit in Malaysia. He started a new company, Shaw Brothers, in 1958, and invested heavily to attract talent and improve production values (Chung, "Fraternal Enterprise" 5-7).<sup>23</sup>

A struggle for market dominance ensued between MP&GI and Shaw Brothers, with each studio improving facilities and production standards while also stealing each other's talent and ideas. Both companies based their strategies on the Hollywood studio system, with standardized production, limited space for experimentation and vertical integration of production, distribution and exhibition (Chung, "Fraternal Enterprise" 15; Fu, "Cathay Cinema" 70).<sup>24</sup> MP&GI was the leading company in the late 1950s, but the tide started to turn after 1960, and when Loke and several company executives were killed in a plane crash in 1964 MP&GI never really recovered (Yu 56).<sup>25</sup> As a result, Shaw Brothers dominated Hong Kong cinema for

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<sup>23</sup> Shaw and Sons did not cease to exist, but focused on distribution and theatre operation after the establishment of Shaw Brothers.

<sup>24</sup> Ironically, at this time the studio system was already disintegrating in Hollywood.

<sup>25</sup> MP&GI was renamed Cathay Organisation Hong Kong in 1965 and continued to make films until 1971. It then threw its support behind Golden Harvest, which would very quickly become the nemesis of Shaw Brothers.

most of the 1960s and played a crucial role in the eventual global success of the territory's films.<sup>26</sup>

As Shaw Brothers, MP&GI and Guangyi (discussed below) had strong links to Southeast Asia, their success changed the character of Hong Kong cinema. The shift is most clearly outlined in Chu Yingchi's study of Hong Kong cinema's identity: he argues that from 1956 to 1979, "a diasporic consciousness in the triangular relationship between motherland, host country and the territory was expressed in Hong Kong cinema" (23). In his account, this diasporic consciousness was the phase between a Chinese national identity (before 1956) and a Hong Kong-centered "quasi-national" identity (after 1979).<sup>27</sup> Alternatively, as Stephen Teo puts it, the Mandarin cinema in Hong Kong was in the mid-1950s slowly recovering from its 'Shanghai hangover': there was increasing attention for Hong Kong and its lifestyle in the films of mainland émigrés ("Shanghai Hangover" 23). Meanwhile, also Southeast Asia began to feature prominently as a location in many films. Politics gradually disappeared from the silver screen and entertainment became the cinema's main goal. Even the left-wing studios could not escape this trend (Zhu xxiv).<sup>28</sup>

In Cantonese cinema, the shift from didacticism to entertainment comes especially to the fore in the films produced by Guangyi (sometimes also referred to as Kong Ngee). Like Shaw Brothers and MP&GI, Guangyi Motion Picture Production Company was set up in 1955 to provide a steady supply of films to the theatre chain of the He brothers in Southeast Asia (B. Cheng 172). Unlike the other two major studios, however, Guangyi focused on Cantonese films, quickly turning itself into one of the "Big Four" companies of Cantonese cinema (*Cantonese Cinema*

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<sup>26</sup> Shaw's dominance over the Mandarin cinema market was not completely uncontested even after 1964: around that time, the Taiwanese film industry started to blossom and quite a few Shaw stars and directors went to Taiwan to work or start their own companies.

<sup>27</sup> Chapter Two will show how the transition to a "quasi-national" identity took shape throughout the 1970s. Chu chose 1979 as the starting date because this was the year the Hong Kong New Wave appeared on the scene (see Chapter Two and Three).

<sup>28</sup> As Teo points out, the left-wing studios had no choice but to tone down propaganda, since they were facing a right-wing backlash. The KMT-affiliated Hong Kong and Kowloon Cinema and Theatrical Free Enterprise General Association stopped left-wing pictures from entering the important Taiwan market. With the China market shrinking, the left studios had to compete with Shaw Brothers and MP&GI for a share of the Southeast Asian market (*Extra Dimensions* 26).

*Retrospective* 57).<sup>29</sup> Wong Ain-ling describes Guangyi's development as follows: "... the company started out in the footsteps of the Union [= Zhonglian] tradition but effortlessly moved on from the cultural milieu of the May Fourth Movement to cultivate a modern urban bourgeois sensibility" ("Preface" 19-20). The modern urban touch in Guangyi films was also a characteristic of MP&GI's films, and indicated the rapid changes taking place in Hong Kong society.<sup>30</sup> In the 1950s and early 1960s, Hong Kong transformed its economy into a highly industrialized one (S. Tsang 162). Although poverty was still widespread, there was a growing middle-class. The postwar baby boom also made the target audience of the 1960s younger than that of the 1950s. It was these trends that MP&GI and Guangyi reacted to. As Ho Kian-ngiap, second generation member of the He Brothers, recounts in an interview: "Whereas 'ragged clothes dramas' were many of our contemporaries' forte, Kong Ngee [= Guangyi] films catered to middle-class tastes of the growing band of *nouveaux riches*. Contemporary dramas attracted a young audience and going to the cinema had become a popular pastime for young lovers" (B. Cheng 179).

Producing an average of about 200 films every year in the 1950s, the Cantonese film industry went in overdrive in the early 1960s, spurred on by great demand from the Southeast Asian market (Fu, "1960s" 77). The overproduction of badly made films, the increasing competition from Mandarin cinema at home and abroad, changing audience tastes, and problems with some Southeast Asian markets caused the market to shrink and brought an acute crisis to Cantonese filmmaking from 1964 on. Production dropped dramatically, and to a large extent, the gaps were filled with Mandarin films produced by the two big studios and Taiwan (Fu, "Turbulent Sixties" 43). Cantonese filmmakers struggled on for a few years, but the beginning of local television production and programming in 1967 was the final straw that led to the (temporary) death of the Cantonese cinema in the early 1970s.

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<sup>29</sup> The other three majors were the leftist Zhonglian and Xinlian (mentioned above), as well as Huaqiao, established by a "prominent businessman with interests in Hong Kong and Macao" (*Cantonese Cinema Retrospective* 56). Stephanie Chung Po-yin identifies this businessman as Sir Ho Yin ("Story of Kong Ngee" 134). Besides their high production volume over the years, the Big Four are apparently also named this way because of their "pursuit of quality filmmaking" (*Cantonese Cinema Retrospective* 56).

<sup>30</sup> Shaw Brothers on the other hand was mostly known for its historical epics and opera films in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

### 1.3. Dominant Genres

The previous section focused mostly on the industrial, institutional and social history of 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong cinema. In the following a genre history for the same period will be etched out to serve as a background against which the development of the crime film, and the appearance of film noir, can be placed. To some extent, the cinema reflected the rapid societal changes taking place in 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong: one can witness a move from a traditional, conservative and rural sensibility to a more modern, liberal and urban one. This is reflected in the disappearance of once extremely popular genres (eg. the Cantonese opera film, the short-lived *huangmeidiao* 黄梅调 opera film genre), the appearance of new genres (eg. the late 1960s erotic thriller and violent new-style *wuxia* 武侠 films), a toning down of the didacticism so common in 1950s films and an increasing focus on entertainment.<sup>31</sup>

Genres in Cantonese and Mandarin cinema witnessed different *and* overlapping developments. When a certain Cantonese genre proved successful, the Mandarin studios would sometimes try to capitalize on this success as well, and vice versa. Still, the difference between the two industries (and individual studios) was substantial and had a lot to do with the different market segments they were addressing.<sup>32</sup> As Chu Yingchi points out: "It was commonly acknowledged that the Mandarin audience was generally the white-collar class, the modernized urban population, who preferred Hollywood and Shanghai films. By contrast, the Cantonese film audience was comprised mainly of the working classes from a rural background, who were likely to be superstitious followers of Buddhism and Taoism, and with little or no formal education" (17). In Stephen Teo's words: "The Cantonese and Mandarin cinemas [in the 1950s] remained parallel film cultures" (*Extra Dimensions* 14). Over the years, the tastes of the Cantonese audience became more similar to those of the Mandarin audience. As a result, Cantonese filmmakers began to make films resembling those of their competitors in the Mandarin industry.

<sup>31</sup> This last development can be taken as both a reflection of changing attitudes and as a reaction to the boycott of left message films in most markets.

<sup>32</sup> Writing in 1974, I.C. Jarvie summarized the difference between the two industries by describing Cantonese cinema with the following terms "cheap", "simple", "unpretentious", "folk roots", "Southern", and "energetic", and Mandarin cinema with "expensive", "arty", "prestigious", "urban roots", "Northern" and "stiff" (86).

In a situation where they were competing for the same audience, however, the fact that the Mandarin industry was better organized and financed would speed up the temporary demise of Cantonese filmmaking in the early 1970s (Teo, *Extra Dimensions* 31). The differences between the two industries and their respective audiences make their separate treatment here a logical choice.

### 1.3.1. Cantonese Genres

Filmmaking in Hong Kong had blossomed before the war, especially after the advent of sound film, and to a large extent, the prewar genres remained popular after the war. The influence of Shanghai cinema was also important, even before large-scale migration by Shanghai filmmakers to Hong Kong took place. Indeed, the early links between the two cities have been the subject of several books.<sup>33</sup> Some of the genres developed by the Shanghai film industry and adopted in Hong Kong by the mid-1930s were, according to Chu Yingchi, the “social ethics melodrama”, the “traditional costume film” and the martial arts film (15).

Maybe the most popular genre in prewar Cantonese cinema was the opera film. According to Yu Mo-wan, a quarter of the industry’s output in the 1930s consisted of opera films (qtd. in Teo, *Extra Dimensions* 40).<sup>34</sup> Its popularity reached new heights in the 1950s, but by the late 1970s the genre had gone extinct. According to Stephen Teo, one reason for this was the newly found affluence in the 1970s and 1980s: “the emerging middle class could now afford tickets for the theatre whereas in the 1950s audiences found it cheaper to see their favorite opera stars on the screen” (*Extra Dimensions* 43). Besides the social ethics melodrama, costume film, martial arts film and opera film, three other 1930s genres are listed by Fu Poshek: the tragic romance, ghost story, and comedy. The sources of the popular films of that era were “Cantonese opera, folktale, and popular novels” and there were also remakes of popular Hollywood classics (*Between Shanghai and Hong Kong* 64).

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<sup>33</sup> Fu Poshek’s *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong* and the Urban Council publication *Cinema of Two Cities: Hong Kong-Shanghai* are two publications that come to mind.

<sup>34</sup> Teo refers to Yu, Mo-wan. “The Development of Hong Kong’s Opera Film.” *Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective*. 11<sup>th</sup> Hong Kong International Film Festival. Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1987.

All these genres survived the war. Law Kar and Frank Bren include the following genres as being popular in the period between 1947 and 1952: “family melodramas offering tragic commentaries on a devastated postwar society, romantic melodramas urging women’s equality, conservative traditional folklore, the popular Cantonese opera films, and comic satires voicing the frustrations of common people” (151). Elsewhere, they also mention the martial arts, horror, and fantasy genres, and note the appearance of popular espionage and detective films – whose appearance probably was influenced by their popularity in the Mandarin cinema of Hong Kong (145-6).

The most discussed genre of the 1950s is the melodrama. A difficult to define term that has over time carried different meanings and connotations in the context of Hollywood cinema (Neale 179-81), “melodrama” in Hong Kong is further complicated as it is often used as a translation for *wenyipian* 文艺片 (literally, “literature and art films”). *Wenyipian* as a term includes the relatively narrow range of films that we currently call ‘melodramas’ in English, but also refers to adaptations from novels (Law & Bren 150). In his discussion of the genre, Law Kar has proposed to use a different definition of melodrama than the one used in the West (where it is seen as “a form of film or stage theatre that can encompass anything from romances to thrillers”) (“Archetype and Variations” 15). This definition he borrows from Cai Guorong: “Works set in the late Qing or Republican period in which the focus of dramatic attention is on the depiction of human feelings and family relationships.”<sup>35</sup> However, Li Cheuk-to points out: “Most *wenyipian* share the specificities of melodrama: highly schematic characters, plots punctuated by fortuities and coincidences, extreme emotions and conflicts...” (“Introduction” 9). To complicate matters even further, the meaning of *wenyipian* changed over time: in 1930s Shanghai, it indicated an ‘artistic’ and ‘educational’ type of movie, and only later it came to mean melodrama (implying drama with a high literary content) (Teo, “Electric Shadow Show” 19).

It seems that in early 1950s Hong Kong, some of the artistic connotations of the term still lingered in popular consciousness. This artistic aura was to some extent

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<sup>35</sup> Law refers to Cai Guorong 蔡國榮. *Zhongguo jindai wenyi dianying yanjiu* 中国近代文艺电影研究 (*Study of Modern Chinese Melodrama*). Taipei: Taiwan dianying tushuguan chubans, 1985.

confirmed when Cantonese filmmakers adapted several classics of the Chinese New Literature Movement (1910s-1930s) (Li, "Films of Zuo Ji" 67).<sup>36</sup> These adaptations and similar films of that period (the most celebrated ones made by the leftist film cooperative Zhonglian) usually did not go as far as the original novels in their depiction of social reality. The genre's limitations are best described by Li Cheuk-to: "On the one hand, Cantonese filmmakers had adopted the emotional form of realist drama, but failed to be truly social realist in their content. On the other hand, they turned their back on the subtle form of traditional Chinese drama, but failed to eliminate its didactic and unrealistic elements" (Ibid.). The realist strain of *wenyipian* endured into the 1960s, but after its heyday in the early fifties gradually made place for the more conventional romantic melodrama (of which the Guangyi films are good examples) (Teo, *Extra Dimensions* 47). The vagueness of the term *wenyipian* is relevant to the discussion of noir films below, as its use has obscured the existence of films that can be considered film noir.

As mentioned earlier, the films of the 1950s displayed some marked differences with those of the 1960s. This can be seen through the changes within genres, as well as in the disappearance of some genres and the appearance of new ones. In the early to mid-1960s, the series of realist melodramas petered out and the popularity of Cantonese opera films gradually declined. Law and Bren note that:

*martial arts films became more attentive to action choreography; newer special effects like flying swords, monsters, mutants, and miniatures; and more complex structures. Farces and comedies adopted more chase and fight scenes, musical numbers, and, sometimes, more explicit sexual themes. With the demise of heavy social melodramas, light comedies about young city folks in love, or farces satirizing the greed of the new commercial and industrial society filled the void. As more women took to the workplace, a series of comedies on the battle of the sexes capitalized on the trend (...) Many other urban fantasies also appealed to the general public, male or female (175).*

From the mid-1960s on, thrillers and horror films became popular, and there was a trend of 'youth movies' from 1966 to 1969 that expressed the youthful

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<sup>36</sup> A fairly well-known trio of films were adaptations of Ba Jin's works: Ng Wui's version of *Jia* 家 (*Family*) in 1953, Lee Sun-fung's version of *Chun* 春 (*Spring*) made in the same year, and Chun Kim's 1954 version of *Qiu* 秋 (*Autumn*).

rebelliousness of that era. As a genre, these youth movies were quite hybrid, and incorporated elements from the comedy, tragedy, boy-and-girl romance, social melodrama, and thriller (Fu, "1960s" 82). An equally hybrid and short-lived genre were the 'Jane Bond films' that appeared in the mid-1960s and are discussed at more length below. Sam Ho describes the figure of 'Jane Bond' as "Hong Kong's answer to her Western cousin James", "a relative of the lone-wolf jewel thief" and a descendant of the marriage between Cantonese film's acrobatic swordswoman and stoic inspector." Furthermore, "Oriole, The Flying Heroine, a character in a series of popular pulp fiction, is also a major influence" (Ho, "Licensed" 40).<sup>37</sup> In love stories, topics like mental illness, sexual psychology, amnesia, homosexuality, and psychoanalysis were introduced (Law and Bren 177). As the industry further declined and this was the era of sexual liberation, the late 1960 also saw the appearance of softcore erotic films, which became according to Law Kar "the most popular item in the production line" by 1970 ("Stars" 56).

### 1.3.2. Mandarin Genres

If the Cantonese cinema in Hong Kong was influenced by Shanghai, then the postwar Mandarin cinema in the colony was of course even more so. With many of the Mandarin filmmakers in the colony hailing from Shanghai, "the styles, themes and content of Hong Kong's Mandarin films evoked the classics of Shanghai cinema of the 30s" (Teo, *Extra Dimensions* 15). Take Da Zhonghua, which during the late 1940s made films for the mainland market, using mainland settings to produce works in genres such as the "social realist drama, family drama, romance melodrama, comedy, crime thriller, espionage, martial arts and fantasy" (Law and Bren 144). Da Zhonghua's products "aped Shanghai trends: romantic melodramas and comedies with added musical numbers; crime thrillers; and espionage films" (Ibid.).

Even when the mainland market was lost, Hong Kong's Mandarin studios continued to make films with a strong Shanghai flavor. Law Kar remarks that, besides working in the genres of the Shanghai cinema of the past, there were many generic conventions that survived into the 1950s, such as "musical numbers, singing style

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<sup>37</sup> I will discuss the appropriateness of the term "Jane Bond films" later in the section on crime films.

and a narrative structure centered around women” (“Beginning and End” 80). Over the next two decades, Hong Kong cinema (Mandarin as well as Cantonese) would slowly free itself from the influence of Shanghai culture and adopt more and more western elements. Law’s remarks draw attention to one of the characteristics that made Mandarin and Cantonese cinema different: Mandarin pop and the musical genre. According to Stephen Teo, Mandarin cinema’s most representative form was the musical, which evolved from the tradition of sing-song girls. In fact, most Mandarin films, no matter the genre, featured a tune or two (*Extra Dimensions* 29). A related genre was the *huangmeidiao* 黄梅调 film, which became very popular after the release of *Diau Charn* in 1958 (Ho, “One Jolts” 107). The films of this genre usually combined the period film with songs sung in the operatic *huangmeidiao* mode (Teo, *Extra Dimensions* 78). After the 1960s, the Mandarin musical and the *huangmeidiao* film disappeared almost completely.

They were replaced by another innovative genre: the new-style martial arts (or *wuxia*) film. The Mandarin new-style martial arts film was in fact strongly influenced by the innovations the Cantonese cinema brought to the genre in the mid-1960s. Shaw Brothers (the studio that launched the new genre) “got rid of the primitive fantasy special effects component but preserved the youthful and rebellious element by casting younger stars (...) The combat scenes were enriched by realistic touches and more effective choreography” (Law, “Crisis and Opportunity” 121). From 1966 onwards, the swordplay film became very popular and its success was continued by the rise of kung fu pictures, which in the 1970s would for the first time bring the world’s attention to Hong Kong films.

While the musical, *huangmeidiao* and *wuxia* film were probably the most remarkable genres in the Mandarin cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, many films were made in an increasingly varied array of genres. Unlike the Cantonese cinema, the Mandarin cinema was after the mid-1950s dominated by large studios. These studios – MP&GI, Shaw Brothers and the two leftist studios Fenghuang and Great Wall – had a diverse output, but were usually known for a few genres in which they

excelled.<sup>38</sup> In its heyday from 1955 to 1962, MP&GI mainly produced “family/romance melodramas, light comedies, and musicals, all with strong youth elements and a structure and style clearly influenced by Hollywood” (Law and Bren 164). After Loke Wan Tho’s death in 1964, the company “failed either to diversify or to outgrow formulaic genres like costume folklore and *huang mei*” (Law and Bren 165). Shaw Brothers on the other hand constantly renewed itself during the late 1950s and 1960s: the studio was not only responsible for the *huangmeidiao* fad in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the very popular new-style *wuxia* films of the late 1960s, it also had a strong reputation for its costume epics (which as a genre overlap significantly with the *huangmeidiao* films) and, by attracting talent first working for MP&GI, started to produce musicals, melodramas and opera films. In addition, they made “romantic fantasies”, “action dramas”, “detective thrillers” and “sexploitations.” From the mid-1960s on, the company further diversified into “romances, comedies, youth films, James Bond-style actioners, and thrillers” (Law and Bren 168).

Meanwhile, Fenghuang and Great Wall worked mostly in the classical areas of Mandarin-speaking culture, particularly the costumed genres (historical epics, opera films, martial arts films), although they also tried their hand at contemporary melodramas, thrillers and comedies. These modern-era films were often inspired by the left-wing tradition of 1930s Shanghai cinema (Teo, “Shanghai Hangover” 20). While in the mid-1950s both studios made films critical of the colonial capitalists and “intense social melodramas geared to the lower middle class”, they had little choice but to soften their approach towards the late 1950s in order to compete with Shaw Brothers and MP&GI (Law and Bren 173). By the end of the decade Fenghuang tried to promote itself as a producer of light comedies and social satires, while Great Wall made a series of youth-themed romantic comedies. Into the sixties, the two companies followed popular trends, producing “urban romantic light comedies, period folkloric stories, and musicals based on local operettas” (Ibid.). However, the Cultural Revolution in the Mainland threw the left studios in the territory in disarray (Leyda 280), something they didn’t quite recover from until almost two decades later (A. Wong, “Preface” xxiv-xv).

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<sup>38</sup> There were sometimes differences between the output of Fenghuang and Great Wall, but it seems that overall they followed a rather similar path.

## 1.4. The Crime Film

In his outline of the major Hollywood genres, Steve Neale comes up with a category he calls “contemporary crime.” Neale recognizes three “principal genres of crime as a whole: the detective film, the gangster film and the suspense thriller” (72).<sup>39</sup> The detective film is marked by its focus on an agent of investigation and an emphasis on detection, the gangster film concentrates on the perpetrators of crime and criminal activity, and the suspense thriller on the victims of crime and their response. Neale also recognizes that these genres and their characteristics “often overlap and cross-fertilize in individual cycles and films,” but insists that “all three genres remain distinct, at least as tendencies, and by and large can be charted with respect to three major figures, the criminal, the victim, and the agent of law and order” (Ibid.). One extra category will be added to the three Neale highlights, as it is an important and rather unique Hong Kong cycle of the 1960s: the female detective/chivalrous thief action-adventure films. Neale would probably put these films in what he calls the “action-adventure” genre. In his discussion of action-adventure, he highlights the genre’s highly hybrid nature, and it is thus no surprise that one finds elements of crime films in some of these films.

While the goal here is to sketch some general developments within the contemporary crime genre, in the end there will be a separate section on noirish films of this period – films which often also can be categorized as belonging to one of the four categories discussed first. Unlike their Hollywood counterparts, noirish films in Hong Kong are not focused on the emblematic figure of the hardboiled detective. Instead, when noir appears in Hong Kong, it is usually in the form of the melodrama (the earlier discussed *wenyipian*), the gothic thriller or the romance thriller. While these genres have often been relegated to the margins of Hollywood’s film noir canon, the fact that they were the main vehicles for a noirish atmosphere in Hong Kong could serve as an argument to reexamine the dominant account of Hollywood noir. At the same time, the presence of noir in these genres can also be taken to illustrate the more “feminine” character of Hong Kong’s 1950s and 1960s cinema. In light of Hong Kong cinema’s later development, it is noteworthy that the

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<sup>39</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction, Thomas Leitch came up with a fairly similar framework for the crime film.

femme fatale frequently appears during this period. This figure would be much less prominent after the 1960s. The influence of 1930s and 1940s Shanghai film should not be discarded in this regard; indeed, it will be argued that it were mainly Mandarin filmmakers who produced noir-like works.<sup>40</sup>

#### 1.4.1. The Detective Film

Law and Bren have claimed that one of the genres Da Zhonghua produced in the late 1940s with the Shanghai market in mind was the crime thriller (144). This in turn is said to have influenced the Cantonese filmmakers, who started to produce detective films (Law and Bren 145-6). In the research for this chapter, little evidence was found of early Mandarin detective or other types of crime film made in Hong Kong, but it is true that Da Zhonghua inaugurated the postwar development of the genre with a Cantonese production in 1947, Yeung Kung-leong's *The Beauty's Death*. It was also Yeung who in the same year directed a Mandarin film, *The Net of Divine Retribution* (1947), featuring what would become the most popular fictional detective in early postwar Hong Kong cinema: Charlie Chan.

Now often considered a racist stereotype, this fictional Chinese American detective was created in 1925 by Earl Derr Biggs for a series of books and soon made the move to the silver screen, where he was portrayed by Caucasian actors Warner Oland (1931-1937), Sidney Toler (1938-1946) and Roland Winters (1947-1949) in more than 40 films made over two decades. Ironically, considering the occasional accusations of racism against the series nowadays, the Charlie Chan character was very popular in 1930s China, and the Shanghai film industry started to churn out their own Charlie Chan films.<sup>41</sup> Between 1937 and 1941, four Chinese Charlie Chan films were produced, starring Xu Xinyuan as the title character. The Chinese version did change some elements though: Chan operated a private detective agency instead of being a police detective, and his blundering "No. 1" and "No. 2" sons, who provided comic relief in the original, were replaced by his daughter Manna, who seems to have acted more like Chan's partner ("Charlie Chan in China").

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<sup>40</sup> As mentioned elsewhere in this dissertation, the presence of crime films and noirish elements in early Shanghai cinema is a topic worthy of further research.

<sup>41</sup> In a funny anecdote, *The Chinese Mirror* reports that among the fans of the American Chan films was no one less than Lu Xun! An essay by Lu Xun's longtime lover, Xu Guangping, is quoted as a reference in the website's article on Charlie Chan's Chinese popularity. See "Charlie Chan in China."

Manna did the agency's legwork, and had a talent for assuming false identities in the course of gathering evidence (Ibid.).<sup>42</sup>

It appears Xu Xinyuan was one of the many Shanghai film artists to move to Hong Kong during the turbulent forties. aside from reprising his Charlie Chan role in the Yeung Kung-leong film mentioned above (*The Net of Divine Retribution*), he also appeared as the detective in *Hero of Our Time* and *Charlie Chan Matches Wits with the Prince of Darkness*, the latter both directed by But Fu in 1948. In 1953, a final installment, *The Sex-Maniac* directed by and starring Li Ying as Charlie Chan was produced. The continuation of a Shanghai cinema trend, Charlie Chan never really seems to have moved into Cantonese cinema, despite the fact that the American Chan films were very popular in its main market, Southeast Asia ("Charlie Chan in China"). A possible reason is that the American film series, which the Chinese films piggybacked on, came to an end in 1949.

Almost a decade later, in 1961, Charlie Chan finally made an appearance in Hong Kong's Cantonese cinema. It is, however, ambiguous whether the character is still related to the original American version. The detective of *The Man Killer against the Tricky Man* (1961) is still called Charlie Chan in English, but the Chinese characters for his name have changed from 陈查礼 to 陈尧利. While Chan still runs a detective agency and has a female sidekick (here named Su Shi), the film (directed by Wang Tianlin) is much more interested in adventure and action than in rational deduction. Foreshadowing the female detective/chivalrous thief films of the mid-1960s, gadgets, hidden doors and eccentric villains all make appearances in between the explosions, hand-to-hand combat and gun battles (especially during the climax at the villain's stereotypical hideout).<sup>43</sup> The actor playing Charlie Chan here is Tso

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<sup>42</sup> This more prominent and action-oriented role of the female assistant seems to prefigure the female detective/chivalrous thief discussed below. Also, Manna's donning of various disguises indicates some similarities to the spy film, which was likely an important influence on early crime films. The glorification of criminal heroes in Hong Kong cinema might have its origins in these spy films, in which the spy breaks the law for a noble goal. More research is necessary to substantiate this claim, however. My gratitude goes to Sam Ho for the suggestion about the crime film-spy film connection.

<sup>43</sup> The fact that the first James Bond film, *Dr. No*, only hit international screens in 1962, after *The Man Killer against the Tricky Man* was made, is worthy of more attention. Possibly James Bond was only the culmination of an earlier international film trend that influenced early 1960s films in Hong Kong; or maybe Hong Kong cinema actually developed into this direction before Hollywood and European cinemas did. Simply referring to the influence of the Bond-franchise is then too facile in the case of Hong Kong.

Tat-wah, mostly remembered for his roles in martial arts films, spy thrillers and detective films.<sup>44</sup> Always playing the archetypal good guy, Tso was so known for his detective roles, that people to this day affectionately refer to him as “Detective Wah” or “Detective Tso.” While *The Man Killer against the Tricky Man* was a forerunner of the hybrid action-centered films of the mid- to late 1960s, it is useful to look more closely at Tso’s detective roles and especially the series that played an important role in solidifying his reputation as “Detective Wah”. That series is commonly referred to as the “999” series, as the films of the series put the then newly introduced emergency number in their (Chinese) title (Law and Bren 171).

The series was launched by Chun Kim’s *Dragnet*, made for the Guangyi studio in 1956. As *Dragnet* proved successful at the box office, Guangyi and other companies followed over the next decade with more films of the same type (Law, “Rules and Exceptions” 115-6). The Guangyi films include Chan Man’s *Murder on the Beach* (1957), Tso Kea’s *Dial 999 for 24-Hour Murder Case* (1961), and Ng Wui’s *999 Grotesque Corpse* (1962). Other companies followed suit with Ng Wui’s *Spontaneous Confession* (1963), Mok Hong-si and Wong Yiu’s *999 Poisonous Swan* (1964), as well as Wong Hok-sing’s *Twin Corpses Mystery* (1965) and *Dial 999 for the Three Murderers* (1965). It is in the last two that Tso Tat-wah appeared as the police detective Lee Wah-hak.

Utilizing plot elements common to dozens of other detective films, the “999” series can be taken as a representative sample of the Hong Kong detective film of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>45</sup> The first remarkable thing about these films is how rarely they restrict themselves to merely focusing on the investigator and the process of detection. Often the protagonist is not a professional investigator: the intelligent and curious protagonist runs an investigation into the murder of his/her family member parallel to that of the police, and the police inspector in charge, very often played by character actor Lee Pang-fei, only has a bit part, his main function being arresting the criminal at the end of the film and clearing up some remaining questions (eg.

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<sup>44</sup> He was one of Wong Fei-hung’s pupils in over 70 films starring Kwan Tak-hing.

<sup>45</sup> Mandarin additions to the genre were few: in the 1950s and 1960s, the detective film can be seen as mostly a domain of Cantonese cinema. Of note is a cycle of detective films in which dogs play an important role, launched by Mandarin filmmaker Ma Xu Weibang’s *Dog Murderer*. The trend spilled over into Cantonese cinema as well, and in three years at least 9 similar films featuring dogs were produced.

*Murder on the Beach*, *999 Grotesque Corpse*, *Spontaneous Confession*, *You are the Murderer!* (1958)). This usually lends itself to elements of the suspense thriller: in the course of his/her investigation, the protagonist runs the risk of being killed by the murderer at large (since the crime committed is generally murder) and, to follow Neale's characterization of suspense thrillers, he/she is in one way or another the victim of the crime, or at least closely related to the victim (eg. *Dragnet*, *Murder on the Beach*, *Dial 999 for 24-Hour Murder Case*, *999 Grotesque Corpse*, *Spontaneous Confession*). The culprit is very often another family member (a fiancé, spouse, son-in-law, etc.) who wants to get his/her hands on the family's wealth, and to motivate a crime as serious as murder, the victim is normally very rich. This also determines the location of the action, which is frequently limited to one luxurious mansion – a type of residence the vast majority of Hong Kong's population could only dream of possessing, even today (eg. *Dragnet*, *Murder on the Beach*, *Spontaneous Confession*, *Crime of Passion in the Mansion*). Sometimes, a romance subplot plays an important role, with the investigative agent getting emotionally close to one of the victim's family members – this is usually the case when an outsider gets involved (*A Mysterious Night in a Dead Corner* (1964), *Dial 999 for 24-Hour Murder Case*, *Dragnet*). The focus on the relationships between family members is a clear influence of the family melodrama genre so dominant in 1950s Cantonese cinema. Indeed, Ng Wui, one of the period's most productive filmmakers now mostly remembered for his melodramas, is with around twenty entries in the genre over a fifteen-year period probably the most dedicated detective film director of the fifties and early sixties.<sup>46</sup>

Melodramatic too is the frequent use of hackneyed and very unlikely plot devices. There appear to exist quite a few forgotten twin brothers or sisters in the universe of this genre (eg. *Chain Murder* (1962), *Intense Moment* (1961), *Spontaneous Confession*, *Twin Corpses Mystery*), and pretending to be a ghost is an almost everyday act for investigators and criminals alike to get what they want – whether that is frightening a criminal into confessing his/her crime (*Coming Back to Life in a Dead Body* (1947), *Songs in Misty Night* (1956), *The Cruel Husband* (1959), *999 Poisonous Swan*), or scaring people away in order to get hold of their possessions

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<sup>46</sup> Stephen Teo makes a similar point about Ng's mix of the family melodrama with what he calls the "murder thriller genre" ("Decade with Two Faces" 23).

or to simply conduct criminal activities in peace (*Spontaneous Confession*).<sup>47</sup> Adding in elements of horror allows the filmmaker to give his audience some extra thrills, and the genre is, next to the family melodrama, probably the one mixed most often with the detective film. Besides ghosts and twins, another convention of detective films (as well as thrillers and horror films) is the death of the villain at the end of the film, usually because he/she falls off a cliff or a high building. The conclusion of Mok Hong-si's 1960 detective film, *The Elevator Murder Case* is perhaps the apogee of this type of hackneyed storytelling: in it, the villain is so frightened by the 'ghost' (but actually twin) of a woman he murdered that he falls to his death from a building!

The series used the emergency number '999' as its connecting symbol, using a formulaic sequence of shots to give meaning to it. Usually at the beginning of the film, there is a scream (more often than not a woman's) and then a shot of a body lying on the floor with a knife in the back. Someone says something along the lines of "Call 999!", which is followed by a shot of a hand dialing the numbers. Next, police sirens are heard on the soundtrack, accompanied by footage of police cars driving through the night, supposedly hurrying to the crime scene. In many cases, the credits then appear over more shots of the city at night as seen through the windows of a police car. Considering this opening, it is somewhat ironic that in many of the early "999" films the police plays such a small part. Two factors might have played a part in this. Firstly, the police were very unpopular at this time, and the fact that it was a force operated by British colonial officers probably did not help. The depiction of police teams was moreover a sensitive issue for censorship authorities (more below). Hence, instead of focusing on an investigation carried out by official authorities, detective films focused on domestic intrigue, relying on formulas familiar from numerous family melodramas. A second factor determining the content might have been the star persona of the actors, as many of these films were basically star vehicles. In the early films, the non-professional investigator is often played by 1950s and 1960s heartthrob Patrick Tse, so in quite a few cases a

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<sup>47</sup> The two devices are often combined, with the twin pretending to be or mistaken as the ghost of the deceased. In *Spontaneous Confession*, for instance, the victim of a murder is actually his long-disappeared twin who showed up at a bad moment. The murderer and his accomplice then pretend to be the victim's ghost to scare the supposedly dead person's daughter into giving up her share of the inheritance. A servant meanwhile spots the living twin brother (who is in hiding until the end) and takes him to be a ghost.

romance between him and one of the victim's family members develops (as in *Dragnet* and *Dial 999 for 24-Hour Murder Case*). An actor like Tso Tat-wah, on the other hand, whose persona is strongly associated with that of the righteous martial arts hero, would give occasion to the depiction of more action and fighting.<sup>48</sup>

In the early 1960s, Tso's upright fighting detective served as a transitional figure in a trend towards a more action-oriented cinema dominated by female heroes.<sup>49</sup> Frequently, he appeared next to the female detective/chivalrous thief figure. He disappeared from the screen quite abruptly when this female character took center stage after the success of *The Black Rose* in 1965, when also the James Bond influence became pervasive. Whether mixed with elements from the melodrama, thriller or horror genres, or from the James Bond films and the Chinese tradition of female Robin Hood-like figures, the detective film in Hong Kong did hardly appear in its "traditional" form, namely with a focus on a professional detective like Sherlock Holmes and his rational investigation of a crime (the early Charlie Chan films are a possible exception). As Neale points out, in the US the traditional detective film, unlike the investigative thriller, has disappeared from movie screens and moved to television where the character still regularly appears (74). In Hong Kong this figure disappeared as well, but why this would be the case remains a question, as television only became widely available in the territory after 1967. The influence of Hollywood and especially that of one director, Alfred Hitchcock, can supply at least a partial explanation. The impact of the "Master of Suspense" on Hong Kong films of the 1950s and 1960s will be discussed in the next section.

#### 1.4.2. The Suspense Thriller

In his book *The Suspense Thriller: Films in the Shadow of Alfred Hitchcock*, Charles Derry states: "*The suspense thriller (...) is as a crime work which presents a generally murderous antagonism in which the protagonist becomes either an innocent victim or a nonprofessional criminal within a structure that is significantly*

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<sup>48</sup> Yu So-chau, Tso's female partner in many martial arts films, also regularly joined him in his detective films. As in their martial arts films, however, there is usually little time spent on their romance.

<sup>49</sup> A somewhat interesting detail in this regard is that the villain in many of Tso's films was played by Lee Pang-fei, the same actor who played the secondary character of the police detective in the late 1950s films.

*unmediated by a traditional figure of detection*" (qtd. in Neale 82). While the lack of attention to official detectives or the police is embraced also by Neale as the defining element of suspense thrillers, it is worth noting that in his discussion of the detective film he refers specifically to Hitchcock's films when stating that the "investigation of a criminal enigma need not necessarily be undertaken by professional detectives" (73). Either we take this as a contradiction within Neale's framework, or we accept this as part of the overlap between different types of crime films he remarks on earlier (72).

Several of the "999" films reflect this overlap, downplaying the official detective figure and creating suspense, but at the same time allowing for an investigation by a non-professional to take place. While the investigation is often an important part of the narrative, the viewer is given clues as to who the criminal is, and the audience's engagement with the film stems for a large part from, in Derry's words, the "expectation that a certain action will take place" – "suspense then remains operative until the spectator's expectations are foiled, fulfilled, or the narrative is frozen without any resolution at all" (qtd. in Neale 83). In Cantonese cinema, where actors portray the same stereotyped characters again and again, suspense must have been an important part of many different kinds of movies: a film where Patrick Tse first appears as a villain will have the audience anticipate not if, but when he will reveal his "true" self as a good guy, and when Sek Kin has a part, viewers will be expecting him to be the irresistibly "bad guy" he usually is – even when there is no hint yet that he is up to no good. While characters sometimes were cast against type, this happened very rarely, and often was met with box office failure (as happened with *Sisters in Crime* (1958) where Tse for once really played the villain) (Fung 253). As suspense was widespread and not easily identifiable by the presence of a central character such as the detective in the detective film, the following will focus on the influence of Hitchcock on Hong Kong directors based on their own statements and on particularly derivative films, including a remake of *Rear Window* (1954).

Ng Wui, the director mentioned above as one of the era's most productive detective filmmakers, stated in an interview he preferred to make comedies and crime thrillers, with some critics saying he belonged to the "Hitchcock school" (Nip and

Lam 73). In the same interview, he comments on the modeling of Cantonese films on Mandarin and Western examples and on the remake of *Rear Window* as *Backyard Adventures* in 1955, for which he is credited as the “Executive Director”:

*There were quite a few such cases. But it was the scriptwriter who decided whether or not to borrow plotlines from released films. Since the audience for Cantonese films hardly overlapped with that of Mandarin or Western films, imitations never invited trouble. As for *Rear Window*, Cheng Gang purposefully adapted Hitchcock's film so that every actor in the Hong Kong cinema would have a part. I went to Western films primarily for their techniques and camera movements rather than for their plots (Ibid.).*

It was necessary to create a part for every actor in Hong Kong cinema in this film because it was dedicated to the late comedian and opera actor Yee Chau-shui, with the proceeds going to Yee's family.

*Backyard Adventures*, like *Rear Window*, features a protagonist – in this case the reporter Yu Mong-yuen (Cheung Ying)<sup>50</sup> – who, bored and immobilized by a broken leg starts to spy on his neighbors and witnesses what he believes to be a murder and its cover-up. In both films, the male protagonist has a girlfriend who regularly joins him in his voyeuristic activity. There are however a number of differences between the remake and its source. While the cheap production values and inferior use of film technique could be anticipated, the film is also visibly adapted to a Hong Kong environment. This is most obvious in the types of neighbors Yu and his fiancé (Chow Kwun-ling) spy on, an aspect of the film that invites parallels to a critically acclaimed genre of that era – the realist Cantonese tenement melodrama. Hence, a fortuneteller and the tricks he plays upon his clients is a source of humor and serves at the same time as a warning against superstition. There is also a rich man and his mistress; a taxi dancer; a rich widow; and a gym full of men working out. An opera troupe practices within the protagonist's view – offering an excuse for a ten-minute opera segment – while a blind singer passing by in the street below is the occasion for an extra five minutes of musical entertainment. Another more interesting change is that voyeurism is not associated with Freudian pathology. In *Backyard Adventures*, Yu is recovering in his girlfriend's apartment,

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<sup>50</sup> His Chinese name literally means “I Look Far”.

and she is able to introduce all the neighbors in the opposite building to him when he first arrives: she obviously has been spying on them for a long time already! And although Yu's policeman friend scolds him at one point for violating his neighbors' privacy, the film ends with Yu and his girl happily spying on the neighbors' lives together.

Another Hitchcock film, *Suspicion* (1941), was the inspiration for several Hong Kong films in the 1960s, notably *Nightmare* (1963) and *The Ways of Love* (1964). Focused on the courtship and marriage between an upper class woman and a smooth-talking good-for-nothing, *Suspicion's* suspense derives from one central question: is Johnnie (Cary Grant) a murderer planning to kill his wife Lina (Joan Fontaine)? In his film, director Chow Sze-luk changes the central protagonists Yam Tin-pui (Cheung Ying) and Kwong Chor-wan (Ha Ping) into a couple married for eighteen years. Skipping the courtship stage of the original entirely, *Nightmare* in fact opens dramatically with an attempt on Kwong's life by an unidentified character. Coming home right after the event, husband Yam behaves oddly and Kwong begins to believe he is the one out to kill her. Several scenes are lifted straight from *Suspicion*: there is an episode where Yam is driving very fast and Kwong is so convinced he wants to kill her that she forces him to stop and let her out. Before this, Kwong suspects Yam poisoned her coffee – reminiscent of the famous scene in *Suspicion* where Johnnie brings a glass of conspicuously glowing milk to Lina.

The two most significant changes are the addition of melodramatic plot devices and the removal of any ambiguity surrounding Yam's intentions. The audience quickly learns his strange behavior is caused by the sudden appearance of Jenny (Man Olan), a daughter he never knew he had. Because her mother, who had a fling with Yam more than eighteen years ago, has died, Yam is now expected to take care of her. Embarrassed, he does not dare to tell the truth to wife or daughter, and Kwong's suspicion is further stimulated because she thinks Yam is dating the younger Jenny, who disastrously also thinks that Yam is courting her as he gives her many presents and even an apartment. Because the audience is informed of the truth early on, the suspense arises more from whether Yam's marriage will end and whether he will tell his daughter the truth and how she will react to it, than from whether or not the

husband is going to kill his wife. Extra suspense is added in the Hong Kong version because the audience knows that Yam is innocent, and thus worries throughout the film about the real murderer still at large. This in the end turns out to be the wife's cousin, who was plotting to steal her inheritance. Maybe a tad convoluted, Chow's adaptation marries the suspense thriller to the dominant melodrama genre, once again illustrating the overdetermined ways hybridity was shaped in this era of the Hong Kong crime film.

Li Cheuk-to noted the influence of Hitchcock in *The Ways of Love* (also known as *The Heartless Lover*), a film directed by Lee Sun-fung, often regarded as one of the best directors in the Cantonese melodrama genre of the 1950s ("Li Chenfeng" 76). Unsurprisingly then, this film too is a hybrid of the suspense thriller and the melodrama. Actress Pak Mui's sister is murdered in Singapore by her live-in boyfriend Fan Ling-wong (Patrick Tse), who threatens to also kill the Hong Kong-based Pak Mui (Kong Suet). Around the same time, Pak starts a relationship with a poor scriptwriter (also played by Patrick Tse).<sup>51</sup> A lot of the ensuing suspense is generated by the ambiguity surrounding the boyfriend's character: is he a murderer or not?<sup>52</sup> Li refers to the film as part of the wave of "new-style thrillers" that appeared in this period, but does not elaborate on what films belonged to this category and what characterized them as "new" and as "thrillers". *The Ways of Love* is more usefully placed in the "romance thriller" genre that Law Kar mentions in an article comparing the differences between Guangyi's and Shaws' Cantonese productions. In this article, Law draws attention to the role of Chun Kim in shaping the style and subject matter of Guangyi's films ("Rules and Exceptions" 110-21).<sup>53</sup> According to Law, Chun was crucial in the popularization of several new hybrid

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<sup>51</sup> The doubling strategy employed here to let stereotypical leading man Tse play a bad guy is similar to the one used in films featuring a femme fatale (more below).

<sup>52</sup> This plot also shares some characteristics with Nicholas Ray's film noir, *In a Lonely Place* (1950), where Humphrey Bogart plays a screenwriter suspected by his actress girlfriend (Gloria Grahame) of being a murderer.

<sup>53</sup> Law draws attention to the important role of Guangyi in the development of new genres and trends in the Cantonese cinema from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s. Interesting is his conclusion that Shaws' productions "lacked the depth of Kong Ngee's [= Guangyi] productions, and were not concerned with logical plots or unity of styles. Frenzied singing and dancing would intrude into what purportedly should be a tragic realist drama, and teenage romance would often be tinged with elements of crime and fighting. Comedies sometimes turned into thrillers with fight and chase scenes (...) Whereas Kong Ngee adhered to more unified and pure forms, allowing variations and gradual, measured metamorphosis to take place without resorting to extreme, haphazard juxtapositions, Shaws pulled out all the stops in order to dazzle" (117-8).

genres, starting a trend in light comedies and also launching the “999” series with the success of his *Dragnet* in 1956. Relevant for the current section is his “metamorphosis of the traditional melodrama into hybrids of romances with social relevancy and elements of thrillers and mysteries” (114). This culminated in what Law calls “romance thrillers.”

A closer look at the examples offered by Law of this hybrid genre shows once again that the boundary between these films and the “999” detective films discussed before is blurry – the main distinction lying in the weight given to the romance relative to the rest of the story. This is easily proven by searching Law’s eight examples of Guangyi’s romance thrillers for some of the elements identified before as often recurring within the Cantonese detective genre: besides the elements of (romantic) melodrama strongly present in all films listed by Law, there are horror elements such as fake ghosts in *Blood Stains the Valley of Love* (1957), *Cry of the Ghost* (1957), and *The Psycho* (1961); as well as an investigative agent conducting an investigation in *The Psycho* and *Cry of the Ghost*. It seems the best films in Law’s list are actually those that were less hybrid. Two of those films will later be discussed for their noirishness: *The Rouge Tigress* (1955) and *Sisters in Crime*.<sup>54</sup>

### 1.4.3. The Gangster Film

After the martial arts films of the 1970s, it were mostly the action-oriented gangster films of the 1980s and 1990s that brought Hong Kong cinema to the world and opened Hollywood’s doors to some of its directors. It is thus highly surprising that no one has looked back further than the 1970s to trace the history of the gangster genre in the territory. It is maybe even more surprising to discover the genre was almost non-existent before the 1960s.

Nevertheless, one of the earliest postwar films was a gangster film: entitled *Hot-Tempered Leung’s Adventure in Hong Kong* (1947) and directed by Lee Tit, the film was banned for a while due to its “daring content”, but received approval for release

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<sup>54</sup> Besides the five films already mentioned, Law also mentions *Love Stealer* (1958), *The Affectionate Suspect* (1959), and *Wits Against Wits* (1962).

after a review by the censorship authorities (“Hot Tempered Leung”).<sup>55</sup> A copy of the film is not available anymore, but based on the synopsis offered by the Hong Kong Film Archive the “daring content” probably referred to the fact that gangster “Hot-tempered” Leung in the film saves and works with a government agent to fight the Japanese occupiers. After eliminating a rival gangster and his men, the government agent tries to persuade Leung to return to China, but Leung refuses. Finally, however, “Leung (...) realizes the error of his ways and resolves to do his duty to save China” (Ibid.). This plot gives credence to the notion that the spy film was one of the sources for the crime film and the recurrent heroic portrayal of criminals in Hong Kong cinema: if they fight for the greater good (here: saving the nation), gangsters do not necessarily have to face the inevitable fate of their Hollywood cousins and can become more straightforward heroes. In later periods, the greater good could be stealing from the rich to help the poor (some of the female detective/chivalrous thief films), or the protection of traditional values like brotherhood and loyalty (the “hero film” discussed in Chapter Three).

A few more Cantonese and Mandarin gangster films appeared in the following three years, notably *A Woman's Heart Is Never Mended* (1949) by Wu Pang, which received a favorable review in the (leftist) newspaper *Ta Kung Pao* (*Dagong bao* 大公报): “The production is serious. The director is adept in his use of techniques. The story attempts to describe the workings of the underworld, where the forces of evil are so prevalent and cast such a dark shadow that even the reforms of the county magistrate cannot easily wipe them out” (qtd. in “A Woman’s Heart”). After 1950, however, it seems the gangster film more or less disappeared, only returning in 1955 with But Fu’s *Five Tiger Heroes*. As this film is the first gangster film of which a copy is available at the Hong Kong Film Archive, it is worth spending some time on.

The basic premise of *Five Tiger Heroes* is simple: gangster Chan Tai-hung (Wang Yuanlong) wants to eliminate his rival Cheung Kam-fu (Lam Kau). Under his right-hand man Uncle Kong’s (Fung Ying-seong) influence, Chan tries to catch Cheung through a variety of schemes. With the help of his loyal friends and family, Cheung

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<sup>55</sup> Although this is hard to verify, this early example of problems with censorship might be one reason why the gangster genre did not truly flourish in Hong Kong until the late 1960s (see below for more about colonial censorship).

always stays one step ahead of Chan. In a final face-off, Cheung defeats Chan. This plot outline probably conjures up an action-packed film in most people's minds, especially considering contemporary Hong Kong cinema's penchant for extreme violence. This is, however, not at all what *Five Tiger Heroes* is about. Instead, most of the film is filled with dialogue: Kong and Chan discussing how to get their hands on Cheung, Cheung discussing his strategy, Kong trying to convince Cheung's friends to reveal Cheung's hiding place, etc. Only one fight takes place in the whole movie: the rather short and amazingly clumsily filmed fistfight at the end: these gangsters don't even have guns or knives! Another remarkable element is the crucial role played by women in this film: if the "Five Tiger Heroes" of the title refer to any characters in the film, it must certainly be the women surrounding Cheung Kam-fu. In the final brawl it is even his sister who beats up Uncle Kong, who – as the brains behind Chan – is the bigger villain of the film. Female warriors were nothing new in Chinese cinema,<sup>56</sup> but only after 1956 – when the first film adaptation of "Oriole, The Flying Heroine" appeared – did female Robin Hood-like figures moving about in contemporary Hong Kong begin to show up more regularly, eventually becoming an important influence on the Jane Bond films.<sup>57</sup>

In the late 1950s, there was a brief Mandarin cycle of films centering on gangster protagonists, starting with Wang Tianlin's *Flame in Ashes* (1958). The movie deals with a criminal investigation into the activities of a mysterious gang suppressing the Chinese population in Thailand. Although the protagonist is a representative of the law, the film focuses on this protagonist's infiltration of the gang and the blurring of the divide between gangsters and lawmen. Police inspector Nai Ran (Vilaiwan Wattapanich) allies himself with a goodhearted small-time crook in his battle against the gang, and also starts a passionate relationship with Ling (Zhang Zhongwen), a femme fatale-like figure working for the bad guys. As he would do to an even larger extent in *The Man Killer against the Tricky Man* (with Tso Tat-wah as Charlie Chan), Wang Tianlin adds several elements from the action-adventure film to the mix. According to Neale, the gangster formula of having the detective hero infiltrate a gang and work from the inside to bring it down was common both

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<sup>56</sup> The earliest female martial artist in Chinese cinema was Chin Tsi-ang, who in 1925 played the title role in *The Heroine of Jiangnan* (Guo 54).

<sup>57</sup> This film version was Ng Wui's *The Fascinating Messenger*.

in 1930s 'G-man' films, and in numerous 'noir' gangster films of the late 1940s and early 1950s (80).

While Nai Ran in *Flame in Ashes* digs deeper and deeper into the world of the gang but never works as a mole, the infiltration formula was used in other Mandarin films following it, for example in *The Green Swan Nightclub* (1958) and *Hunting in the Tiger's Den* (1959). Another trend developing in Hong Kong's Mandarin cinema at the time was a type of tragic gangster melodrama, usually depicting a conflict between "good" and "bad" gangsters, and inevitably ending with the death or arrest of all gangster protagonists. Examples include *Love and Hate in Jianghu* (1958), *Watching Home Town* (1958), and *Black Gold* (1959). The genre did not prove enduring, but in 1965 a film similar in plot to *Love and Hate in Jianghu* appeared which will later be discussed as one of Hong Kong's best films noirs of the 1960s: Wang Yin's *Bloodshed on Wedding Day*.

The James Bond influenced films of the mid-1960s with their focus on female thieves and the infiltration of criminal organizations are sometimes hard to distinguish from gangster films, and will be dealt with separately in the next section. In the period dominated by "Jane Bond", two significant and quite unusual films dealing with gangsters appeared: Chan Man's *The Dreadnaught* (1966) and Lung Kong's *Story of a Discharged Prisoner* (1967). Both were part of a late 1960s Cantonese cinema trend for making social problem and youth films, which often touched upon crime problems such as juvenile delinquency, prostitution and drug addiction. As Fu Poshek has pointed out, these films were an attempt of Cantonese filmmakers to lure back younger audiences with displays of youth culture, though at the same time they could not resist a certain degree of didacticism ("The 1960s" 82).<sup>58</sup> This didactic intent also characterizes *The Dreadnaught* and *Story of a Discharged Prisoner*.

*Story of a Discharged Prisoner* is today mostly remembered as the film that John Woo famously remade as *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), which gave birth to the very influential "hero film" discussed in Chapter Three. It is however also one of the

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<sup>58</sup> Maybe the most famous of these films is Lung Kong's *Teddy Girls* (1969), about young female delinquents.

celebrated masterpieces of the late 1960s, when Cantonese cinema had already entered a period of serious decline. More melodramatic and less spectacularly violent than its 1980s version, *Story of a Discharged Prisoner* focuses on an ex-convict's problems when he returns to society and tries to turn a new leaf. Lee Cheuk-hung (Patrick Tse) is arrested after breaking into a safe because he returns to help one of his wounded friends. In jail, he resolves to go straight after his release. When he is out, Cheuk-hung tries to keep his past hidden for the sake of his brother Chi-sum, who is hoping to be promoted. He also tries to find a job, but this is easier said than done for an ex-con: once his employers discover his past, Cheuk-hung is fired. He eventually finds a home in a rehabilitation center, but continues to be harassed by a crime boss (Sek Kin) who wants him to join his gang, and a cop (Lung Kong) who wants him to become an informer in the same gang. Chi-sum is fired when his boss finds out about Cheuk-hung's criminal past, and the crime boss makes use of this to convince him to rob the company. Cheuk-hung heads out to stop his brother, and eventually takes the blame for Chi-sum's crime to keep him out of prison.

*The Dreadnaught*, a direct predecessor of Lung Kong's film, is not so well remembered today. As Wong Ain-ling puts it: "Fusing the genres of gangster, action, romance and family melodrama, *The Dreadnaught* is an archetype of Lung Kong's *Story of a Discharged Prisoner*. Lung's work jangled the nerves of an audience, given the extremely volatile political situation and explosive social unrest of the late 1960s, while Chan's work sank into oblivion" ("From the Union" 105). *The Dreadnaught*, also known as *A Go-Go Teenager*, is more obviously a problem youth picture than *Story of a Discharged Prisoner*: besides being a character study of a young gangster, the film has the typical scenes of courtship and dancing on Western tunes in a nightclub. Centered on the relationship between Lee Cheuk-ho (Patrick Tse) and his police inspector friend, Chow Wai-kit (Chow Chung), *The Dreadnaught* resembles *A Better Tomorrow* even more than *Story of a Discharged Prisoner* does.

In *The Dreadnaught*, young orphans Lee and Chow meet in an unspecified war-ravaged city. Lee takes care of Chow, showing him how to survive by stealing. However, Chow is caught (and subsequently adopted) by police officer Lam

Cheong (Lok Kung). Many years later, Chow and his adoptive sister Lam Sau-fong (Kong Suet) have a confrontation with a local hoodlum, who turns out to be Lee. Now a triad gangster, Lee is smitten by Lam, but ignores Chow's pleas to leave the gang. Meanwhile, Lam Cheong starts an investigation into Lee's gang and ends up getting killed. This delivers a serious blow to the relationship between the three youngsters: Lee refuses to tell Chow who killed Cheong, saying he would not tell him even if he knew. After warning Lee to stay away from Lam, Chow then disappears for three years. Lee has climbed up in the triad ranks when Chow returns as a trained police inspector. Assigned to investigate the drug trade between Lee's gang and a gangster called Big Brother Wu, Chow and Lee find themselves at different sides of the law. Still, having realized that Chow is in love with Lam, Lee ignores his own feelings and arranges for the two to become a couple. When Big Brother Wu betrays Lee's gang and murders his boss, Lee pledges to take revenge, but falls into a trap set up by Wu, who now aims to eliminate the troublesome Chow and shift the blame on Lee. Lee escapes just in time to prevent Wu's plan, and in a gunfight Wu is killed. Having saved Chow's life, Lee promises to leave the gang and turn a new leaf.

Even though it is such a neglected film, the importance of *The Dreadnaught* can hardly be overstated. It is probably the first film to give a slightly more localized and realistic version of a criminal society, as shown by Lee's refusal to spill the beans on who killed Cheong, and his insistence on avenging his boss. It also offers a sympathetic portrayal of a gangster without having him killed or arrested in the end. Going against the trend of female heroines at the time, *The Dreadnaught* is also significant for being male-centered – it was made before Zhang Che's masculine films started to influence the whole industry. It even suggests that a bond between male friends is more important than the one between a man and a woman, as shown in Lee's decision to bring Chow and Lam together despite his own feelings for her.

As mentioned before, the Cantonese cinema was entering a disastrous downward cycle around the time *Story of a Discharged Prisoner* appeared, and although Lung Kong in 1968 directed *The Window* – another sympathetic portrayal of a young criminal which plot-wise interestingly quite resembles John Woo's *The Killer*, the contemporary gangster film would only further develop in the 1970s after shedding

some of its melodramatic/didactic traits and shifting to a more action-oriented kung fu format. A genre that never really recovered from the death of Cantonese cinema, however, was the female detective/chivalrous thief action-adventure films aptly called “Jane Bond films” by Sam Ho.

#### 1.4.4. The Female Detective/Chivalrous Thief Action-Adventure Film

As a genre name, the “female detective/chivalrous thief action-adventure film” certainly is a mouthful. Sam Ho’s shorter “Jane Bond films” seems a reasonable alternative, but glosses over some rather important variations. As he himself admits, the films he discusses are often put in separate categories: “‘women spy’ for some, ‘female flying thief’ (Patti Pan, perhaps?) for others, ‘contemporary action’ for yet some others” (“Licensed” 40). What the term “Jane Bond films” obscures most, however, is the Chinese “female flying thief” tradition, which at least in some of the films of the period was more important than the James Bond influence. A good example of this is Chor Yuen’s *The Black Rose*, which Ho claims introduced the Jane Bond genre to the Cantonese cinema. While it seems to be true that the success of *The Black Rose* caused a boom in films featuring female action heroines, the film is much more indebted to the French Arsène Lupin stories than to James Bond (Sek. “War” 32). In comparison, *The Black Rose*’s sequel, *Who Is Black Rose?*, which came out just a year later in 1966, has plenty of the gadgets, secret weapons and action set pieces associated with the James Bond films. Further complicating the use of Ho’s term is the fact that this James Bond “influence” predates the release of the first Bond film in 1962, as earlier shown in the discussion of some of Wang Tianlin’s films. Further research into this trend towards what is best described as contemporary action-adventure, including the influence of other (Western, or Japanese?) films that appeared before the James Bond series, is necessary, but lies outside the scope of this dissertation.

While Sek Kei refers to gentleman thief Arsène Lupin as an influence, it is actually “Oriole, the Flying Heroine” that was more important in the Hong Kong context. Also known as “Wong Ang, the Cat Burglar” (*Nü feixia Huangying* 女飞侠黄莺), Oriole is a quick-fisted thief who – assisted by two female partners – steals from the

rich and gives to the poor, Oriole first appeared in a popular series of pulp novels in 1940s Shanghai (Duriandave). In the 1950s, the character remained popular in Hong Kong and a series of films were made about her – beginning in 1956 with Ng Wui’s *The Fascinating Messenger*, but only reaching the peak of their popularity from 1960 to 1962.<sup>59</sup> Considering that the Oriole films were action-packed, preceded the James Bond films, and featured a team of chivalrous female thieves who (ironically) help the police in catching criminals, a good case can actually be made for a decade-long “female detective/chivalrous thief action-adventure film genre” which contains the Jane Bond films discussed by Ho as a specific mid-1960s variation of a genre starting with the Oriole films in the late 1950s. After all, the only thing the Jane Bond films add to the original mix is an occasionally higher level of megalomania in the main villain and his schemes, as well as a more prominent presence of gadgets and secret weapons.

That said, it is clear that the female detective/chivalrous thief action-adventure film is also a type of crime film, with its ambiguous semi-criminal protagonists catching or killing villains, often preoccupied with a criminal investigation, or infiltrating a criminal organization as an undercover agent. The moral ambiguity of their activities (ie. stealing from the rich to give to the poor, but also to live comfortably themselves) would seem to mark the genre as a potential site for a Hong Kong-style film noir to flourish. Adding to this potential are the “night scenes (...) shot with atmospheric lighting, complete with all the attendant expressionism” and the fact that the “characters flaunt their wits to outsmart each other, launching intriguing mind games and exchanging clever word plays” (Ho, “Licensed” 40) – a description which calls to mind many hard-boiled detective films of the 1940s now considered a core part of the film noir canon. Ho seems aware of the links to film noir when he later associates the heroines with the femme fatale in postwar American cinema. Despite the presence of all these elements, the female detective/chivalrous thief action-adventure film nevertheless seems to have been an infertile ground for film noir. For that, the genre was too conservative. As Ho puts it, Jane’s mission is a

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<sup>59</sup> Duriandave of the *Soft Film* blog believes the earliest Oriole film, *Oriole The Heroine* appeared in 1957-1958, although its release date is given as 1960. According to the Hong Kong Film Archive website, however, *The Fascinating Messenger* is the earliest film based on an Oriole novel. It should also be noted that some of the Oriole films also featured Tso Tat-wah as the detective working with the three women.

traditional one – “to uphold the integrity of the family” (“Licensed” 45). In the following section a number of films which come closer to film noir will be discussed.

## 1.5. Film Noir

Film noir, as imagined by the French critics who came up with the term after the Second World War, was an exclusively American phenomenon. Naremore explains this by the strong post-war resurgence of Americanism among French directors and critics, “many of whom sought to refashion their art cinema along the more ‘authentic’ lines of Hollywood genre movies” (15). When the term was taken up by Anglo-American criticism, this tendency to regard noir as “purely American” became even more pronounced (Spicer 5). In his more recent, revisionist account, however, Naremore is careful to mention that films resembling “dark Hollywood thrillers” (28) were made in several countries already during this early period, and he states explicitly in the introduction to his book that noir is not a specifically American form (5). Additionally, in recent years several books and articles have appeared discussing the presence and history of film noir in France and other European countries.<sup>60</sup> Except for one article by Joelle Collier on post-1997 noirs, no such study has been undertaken in the context of Hong Kong cinema. In what follows, recent theories of genre and film noir (mainly those of Neale, Krutnik and Naremore) will be used to write a history of noir’s presence in the Hong Kong cinema of the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. While it appears that one can hardly speak of a “film noir phenomenon” (Krutnik’s term) in Hong Kong, a few filmmakers did work with some consistency on noir(ish) films.

As film noir is a notoriously blurry category, some characteristics often associated with it in books and articles on the topic were used to identify promising films.<sup>61</sup> The set of noir parameters employed are: expressionist style (in combination with genre); the presence of a hard-boiled detective or a corrupt cop; a fascination with psychological abnormality; a pessimistic worldview (often evidenced by a fatalistic ending); and the presence of a femme fatale.

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<sup>60</sup> For instance Robin Buss’ *French Film Noir* and Andrew Spicer’s *European Film Noir*.

<sup>61</sup> The sources used were Neale; Krutnik; Naremore; Kaplan; Spicer; and Collier.

### 1.5.1. Expressionist Style

The visual style of film noir is usually described as comprising such techniques as extreme close-ups, low-key lighting, wide-angle lenses and visual distortion. Frequently the link with 1920s German expressionism is mentioned, as a lot of German talent was absorbed by Hollywood following the rise of Nazism (eg. Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder). The assumption that film noir is exclusively characterized by this visual style has been questioned more recently by scholars such as Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik. Krutnik suggests that what is referred to as the “noir style” tends to be “a more disparate series of stylistic markings which can be seen as noir when they occur in conjunction with sets of narrative and thematic conventions and narratological processes” (19).<sup>62</sup> The “noir” visual style is thus “not specific to the film noir, nor to the crime film, nor even to 1940s cinema” (Ibid.). In this section, the stylistic elements associated with noir will thus be considered in relation to the plot, theme and narratological processes of the film under discussion.<sup>63</sup>

Discussing postwar Hong Kong films, Lin Nien-tung notes the “use of asymmetrical framing”, “strong contrasts of light and shade”, and the “similarities to film noir”, which he interprets as “part of a protest against the uncertainties and insecurities of the post-war social and economic depression” (16).<sup>64</sup> However, he also claims that other visual strategies – rather vaguely described as “the fusion of the aesthetics of the sequence-shot and the aesthetics of montage” – distinguish post-war Hong Kong cinema from American film noir “with its preoccupations with alienation, nuclear paranoia and existentialism” (Ibid.). Lin, who clearly employs a national cinema approach, does not elaborate on his rather mystifying statement, but it seems quite obvious that sequence shots and montage were commonplace in American film noir

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<sup>62</sup> In his discussion of “American Expressionism”, Schatz notes the “increased concern for visual contrast (...) and the frequent use of *chiaroscuro* lighting”, concluding that, “[w]hen these lighting techniques were used to depict crime, intrigue, and mental anxiety, especially within a heavily shadowed urban milieu, they gradually assumed narrative and thematic connotations of their own” (113).

<sup>63</sup> The importance of the conjunction of visual style with other factors is illustrated by the works of Ma Xu Weibang, the famous Shanghai director of horror films who made the move to Hong Kong. In Stephen Teo’s words, Ma Xu was “a visionary with a highly refined sense for expressionist imagery” (*Extra Dimensions* 34). As will be clear from the discussion of *Ghost Woman of the Old Mansion*, however, the boundary between noir and horror could be blurred as well. Starting this study from the late 1940s is thus not meant to suggest that no noir-like elements can be found in earlier Hong Kong and Shanghai films. This would be a good subject for further study.

<sup>64</sup> Note the link of film to society Lin immediately proposes.

as well. Furthermore, while alienation, nuclear paranoia and existentialism were indeed not a dominant concern in the few noirish Hong Kong films of this era, these themes were not present in every Hollywood film noir either.

One of the earliest postwar Hong Kong films of which a print is available is *Ghost Woman of the Old Mansion* (1949). A group of reviewers for Ta Kung Pao praised the film's cinematography and its "play with light and shadow", as well as its "maze-like plot and strange proceedings" ("Ghost Woman"). The film tells the story of Mok Ming (Ng Cho-fan) who goes to live in a countryside mansion where recently a woman passed away. Mok dreams his deceased wife will return to him by possessing the dead woman's body, which is still kept in a coffin in the basement. The next day, the woman comes back to life and claims to be his wife. This of course upsets the woman's former husband Po Tak-yan, who eventually confronts the "ghost" with a gun. Mok intervenes and in the struggle Po falls down the stairs to his death. The woman now confesses the truth: she took poison because of Po's infidelity. Saved by the servant of the house, she decided to let everyone think she was dead to escape the scheming of Po and his mistress. Only half-jokingly she promises Mok to continue to impersonate his dead wife for him.

*Ghost Woman of the Old Mansion* contains many elements of the horror film that explain the use of expressionist cinematography. The film's old mansion, hunchbacked butler, coffin in the basement and fluttering candles all are typical of the gothic horror film. But *Ghost Woman* also has a noirish quality, mainly because of Mok's disturbed mental state and the necrophilic aspects of his behavior. From the start there are hints that Mok is obsessed by his dead wife, for instance when he mistakes a woman in the train for her. The pathological elements in his character are also expressed in an impressively edited dream sequence. Further contributing to the film's noirishness is the ending, with the "ghost woman" promising to continue to impersonate Mok's dead wife. In this way, *Ghost Woman of the Old Mansion* illustrates a close affiliation between gothic horror and film noir.

Also employing a (fake) ghost subplot is the Mandarin film *Suspicion* (1957) directed by Huang Yu, which is even more noir-like than *Ghost Woman of the Old Mansion*. Throughout this film expressionist imagery is employed: there are several

scenes set during rainy nights, where the street is shot from a high angle with only one source of light. In the villa where most of the action takes place, darkness reigns as the lights repeatedly fail due to electricity problems. The dark atmosphere underscores the sinister, and eventually tragic, character of widow Li Meiying (Betty Loh). At the end of the film Li heads to the police station to turn herself in for the murder of the man who killed her parents and tried to blackmail her for the assassination of her husband she mistakenly believed she was responsible for. This murdered husband moreover turns out to be the one who originally ordered the killing of her parents for their refusal to marry their daughter to him – a man she didn't love. In a final long shot, the gates of the villa close behind the tormented woman while she disappears into the night to face her punishment... Melodramatic maybe, but also quite noir.<sup>65</sup>

Expressionist lighting also seems to have been used in similar ways in *Adultery* (1958). Wong Ain-ling's remarks: "*Adultery* [was] clad in a dark overcoat of the mystery genre, (...) reminiscent of Gothic novels of the 18th, 19th centuries and in many ways akin to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* or Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, but ultimately fail[s] to throw off the shackles of the family drama framework" ("From the Union" 105). *Adultery* is thus another example of the extensive influence of melodrama on other genres, and also illustrates the close relationship between the gothic woman's film and film noir noted by Neale (163-4). Meanwhile, two well-known directors of Mandarin films, Yue Feng and Li Pingqian, had a reputation for utilizing expressionist techniques and atmosphere. Law Kar states:

*Yue Feng and Li Pingqian both utilized the mood and techniques of Film Noir in their low-key social realist and psychological melodramas. Yue was particularly taken by Citizen Kane (1941) and was fond of using deep-focus, low angle shots, as witnessed in Modern Red Chamber Dream [1952] and An Unfaithful Woman [also known as A Forgotten Woman, 1949]. He had a fondness for using the lighting techniques of expressionism. As for Li Pingqian, many commentators have detected the influence of Lubitsch – but one could also point out that of Hitchcock ("Retrospection" 104).*

Law's remarks further illustrate that expressionist visuals were not limited to film noir in Hong Kong either. His reference to "psychological melodramas" and the

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<sup>65</sup> The special relationship between film noir and melodrama will be discussed later.

examples he gives also indicate that noirishness in this early period was more common in the gothic woman's film often considered peripheral to the Hollywood film noir canon (Neale 164).

### 1.5.2. Hardboiled Detective and Corrupt Cop

Appearing in pulp fiction magazines from the 1910s on, the hardboiled detective is often considered a quintessential film noir character. Compared with his more traditional relative, the hardboiled investigator relies more on action than on ratiocination (the power of deductive reasoning) to solve a crime. Films featuring him usually focus more on suspense than on the mystery element common to traditional detective stories, while “gunplay, illicit or exotic sexuality, the corruption of the social forces of the law, and personal danger to the hero are placed to the fore” (Krutnik 39). The hardboiled detective is also less remote from the criminal milieu he investigates, and operates as a kind of mediator between the underworld and respectable society (Ibid.).

In this hardboiled milieu another equally in-between character frequently appears: the corrupt cop. Both hardboiled detective and corrupt cop are largely absent from 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong cinema. Although there was in the 1960s detective films a trend towards action-adventure (best exemplified by the figure of Tso Tat-wah), “the Detective” can hardly be called morally ambiguous and is also much more in control of his environment than most hardboiled investigators. An action-oriented and more ambiguous fighter for justice can be found in the female detective/chivalrous thief action-adventure films, but as mentioned they are mostly too conservative and naive to be called hardboiled.

This absence of hardboiled characters can be attributed to the lack of a local tradition of hardboiled detective stories. That is not to say that local pulp fiction was not published: Mary Wong notes how the Cantonese Guangyi studio made film adaptations of newspaper serials, “airwave novels” and pulp fiction (locally known as “three-dime novels”) (41).<sup>66</sup> While some of these three-dime novels told detective

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<sup>66</sup> The “three dime novels” got their name from the price for which they originally were sold in the early 1950s. More like magazines, they ran a new story every issue (M. Wong 45). “Airwave novels”

stories (forming the basis of some of the films discussed earlier), it seems the hardboiled mode did not really catch on in Hong Kong. Additionally, there was also the issue of colonial censorship, which according to Law Kar was very sensitive about depictions of the police: crime thrillers and detective movies could only portray a positive image of law enforcers, and the depiction of officers not properly dressed and equipped could lead to a film being banned (“Stars in a Landscape” 57). Film censorship in important overseas markets also played a role; in Taiwan and several Southeast Asian countries, films depicting the police in a negative light would be banned (Ibid.). Hence, Cantonese filmmakers avoided images of uniformed police and only showed plain-clothes detectives. It was only after the riots in 1967 that censorship relaxed somewhat, and the negative depiction of policemen became possible (Ibid.). The image Law sketches of censorship in Hong Kong and its overseas markets during most of the 1950s and 1960s indicates that the moral ambiguity common to film noir and its hardboiled hero were more or less off-limits. Even more so was the figure of the corrupt cop.

The hardboiled detective is thus almost non-existent in 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong cinema. One film detective that comes somewhat close to being hardboiled is *The Thievish Beauty*'s (1966) Situ Fu. Directed by Chor Yuen the year after his success with *The Black Rose*, the film is clearly influenced by its predecessor, although here the hero is a man. Like the female detective/chivalrous thief, but also like the hardboiled detective, Situ Fu has a difficult relationship with the law: he used to be a thief and the police obviously does not trust him; at one point they even let the real criminals escape because they are too busy arresting Situ. Played by Patrick Tse, Situ is also a bit of a ladies' man, and he spends half the film working for the bad guys without realizing it. Not particularly concerned about breaking the law, he follows a woman when he sees her breaking into a house, and does not rat her out even when he has a chance to do so. But compared to Philip Marlowe in *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), Situ still appears somewhat idealistic and naïve.

Although the hardboiled detective film is often considered to be at the core of the Hollywood noir canon, its relative absence in 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong cinema

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were very popular local radio plays in which a single performer impersonated the voices of all the characters (M. Wong 48).

does not mean noir-like Hong Kong films did not exist. As mentioned earlier, the core of local noirishness likely can be found in more “feminine” genres like the gothic woman’s film, or the melodrama. Thomas Schatz, who treats film noir as a style, has written that “classic” film noir was “a system of visual and thematic conventions which were not associated with any specific genre or story formula” (112). According to Schatz, genres marked by the film noir “style” include melodramas, westerns, gangster films, and Hitchcock’s psychological thrillers (ibid). The heterogeneity of the so-called “noir canon” seems to call for a more open-ended approach to film noir, one where several of the visual, thematic, and narratological elements associated with it come together in various combinations.

### 1.5.3. Psychological Abnormality

Steve Neale, who has similarly argued for an open-ended interpretation of film noir, lists the “focus on mentally, emotionally and physically vulnerable characters”, “the interest in psychology” and “the culture of distrust marking relations between male and female characters” as some of the features frequently associated with it (174). These traits are fairly uncommon in 1940s, 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong cinema, although there are some interesting exceptions. The earlier discussed Hitchcock-inspired *Nightmare*, for instance, goes further than its source in making the woman’s suspicion towards her husband appear pathological. The scene where she gets out of the car because she thinks he is going to kill her is immediately (and without warning) followed by a hallucination or dream sequence, in which first her husband and the woman she believes to be his lover are looking for her while holding a scarf ready to strangle her. Then the couple is in a car, laughing madly while driving towards her so that she eventually is pushed off a cliff. When she wakes up in her own bedroom, she grabs a gun and starts firing into the dark, almost killing her (innocent) husband.

An earlier example is the noir-ish *The Three Murderers* (1959), which focuses on the way a man deals with the return of the wife who deserted him years ago. Ng Cho-fan gives an inspired performance as Wong Chi-man, a possessive father who absolutely hates his ex-wife. This hatred takes on pathological forms, as established at the beginning of the film when he goes to turn himself in at the police station for a murder he did not commit – it quickly turns out that he merely vividly imagined

killing his ex-wife! He is so consumed by this hatred that he writes a book about a wife murderer and goes into an uncontrollable rage every time his daughter mentions her. When at the end of the film the ex-wife is eventually really murdered, there is a telling scene where Ng gazes wildly into nothingness while his confused 'inner thoughts' are heard in voice-over.

Maybe the most extreme film dealing with a mentally disturbed protagonist is *The Strange Girl* (1967), which apparently took its plot from John Stahl's *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945), often called a rare example of a film noir made in color. Wu Cuiqin (Patsy Kar) unselfishly marries a rich old man to fund her sister's medical treatment overseas. After taking a dangerous "love potion" with him, Cuiqin wakes up next to the dead body of her husband and goes mad. The film is centered on the love triangle between Cuiqin, her sister Cuiling (Miu Ka-lai) and poor singer Zheng Zhisheng (Lui Kei). Cuiling and Zhisheng are in love, but Cuiqin desires the singer as well. After Cuiqin has used the 'love potion' to seduce him, Cuiling feels she has no choice but to break up with Zhisheng, as she does not want to compromise her sister's unstable mental health. Zhisheng's feelings for Cuiling have not disappeared, however, and jealousy drives Cuiqin to full-blown madness: after more than once failing to kill Cuiling, she commits suicide and makes it look as if Cuiling and Zhisheng murdered her.

Using fairly innovative cinematography in combination with a particularly haunting soundtrack to express Cuiqin's madness, and ending with the self-destruction of the dangerous woman, *The Strange Girl* mixes melodrama with thriller and arrives at something that can be called film noir. Its director Wong Yiu made some interesting remarks about the film that relate to the earlier point made about censorship, as well as to the influence of Hollywood on local films:

*We came up with some good projects for melodramas but they were cancelled at the last minute. Besides, there are too many hurdles: you can't be too high-blown, the lead characters can't die, and so on. Do you know that the censorship system in Hong Kong is most strict towards Cantonese movies? Next is Mandarin movies. Of the foreign movies, there seem to be different criteria for European and American movies. On A Strange Woman, we were taking risks. (...) There are many stories like it in Western cinema and the audiences*

liked them, so we mustered up the courage to make it (Sek, "Wong Yiu" 126).

As Law Kar pointed out, censorship relaxed after the 1967 riots, probably an important reason for why *The Strange Girl* could be made. This relaxation of censorship also seems to have cleared the way for darkly cynical depictions of the world in erotic thrillers and other films from the late 1960s onwards, becoming a full-blown trend in the 1970s. A rather early example is *Diary of a Lady Killer* (1969).<sup>67</sup> The cynical tone is set at the beginning of this film when at a press conference about the suicide of a young woman reporters react disappointed after hearing the less than sensational reason for her death. The "hero" of this film is Zhou Guoxiong (Jin Han), an obstinate philanderer whose conquests are killed one after the other. He is put in jail, but his loyal long-term girlfriend investigates the case, discovering that the real murderer is a family friend long in love with her and jealous of Zhou, whom he (quite rightly) finds not worthy of her love. Zhou is released and the psychopathic friend goes to jail, claiming to have no regrets. While Zhou might have learned his lesson by the end, the film's cynicism and pessimistic worldview give it a noirish atmosphere. This same cynical attitude would lead to a few more obviously noir-like films in the 1970s, discussed in the next chapter.

#### 1.5.4. Pessimistic Worldview

James Naremore puts "a resistance to Aristotelian narratives or happy endings" in the list of characteristics often considered as central to film noir, but actually not present in every single noir film (10). While there are indeed quite a few films noirs that end on a happy note, these films tend to paint at least in the course of the film a disturbing picture of contemporary society and/or the individuals inhabiting it. And even if not present in all examples, fatalistic endings, while not limited to film noir, are a recurring element in many of its canonical films, and can serve as a pointer in the search for its presence in Hong Kong cinema.

A number of Hong Kong films of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s can be found which possess this characteristic and combine it with other traits often associated with film

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<sup>67</sup> This film, directed by Nakahira Ko (also known under the Chinese name Yang Shuxi 杨树希), was a remake of an earlier work of the director in Japan.

noir. An early example – appropriately called a “noirish melodrama” by Stephen Teo (*Extra Dimensions* 18) – is *The Victims* (1951), a Great Wall film starring Li Lihua and directed by Shanghai filmmaker Gu Eryi.<sup>68</sup> Poor peasant Zhao Futian (Tao Jin) is wrongly accused and punished for theft by a local gang leader. Forced to leave the village and to sell his daughter Ah Ying (Li Lihua), Zhao returns after fifteen years to look for her. Ah Ying has however fallen victim to the gang when she went to the city to search for her father. Forced to become a prostitute after being raped, Ah Ying is locked up and can only witness helplessly how her father is cheated of his savings and later even murdered by the gang. She arrives too late to stop the gangsters from throwing him into the sea, and the film ends with her being caught again by her tormentors. Made after Great Wall decidedly turned to the left following the departure of Zhang Shankun, the film has a propagandistic intent, with frequent references to the positive changes in the “countryside” which cause the flight of the local gang leader to the still corrupt city in the course of the film. The link between Shanghai’s leftist filmmakers and the postwar presence of a form of film noir in Hong Kong is significant and will be briefly discussed at the end of this chapter.

Another film directed by a Shanghai émigré, *Bloodshed on Wedding Day* was earlier mentioned as a 1965 hark-back to the brief 1958-59 cycle of Mandarin gangster films. Plot-wise quite similar to 1958’s *Love and Hate in Jianghu*, *Bloodshed* follows the confrontation of Macau smuggler Pan Dasheng (Wang Yin) with his femme fatale ex-wife after he returns from jail.<sup>69</sup> Maybe the most vicious femme fatale in two decades and a half of Hong Kong cinema, Zhang Lifang (Lily Mo Chou) does everything to live up to the term: having ratted out Pan to the police so that she can be with her lover, she is not in the least regretful when Pan returns, and refuses to give him back his money. Running a gambling den, she is powerful enough to lord over a few other gang leaders while also being romantically involved with a young police inspector whom she uses for making Pan’s life miserable. Pan finds out that the police inspector is actually the son he deserted many years ago

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<sup>68</sup> Both Li Lihua and Great Wall played an important role in the history of Hong Kong film noir, as will be discussed in the next section on the femme fatale.

<sup>69</sup> Macau, due to its proximity to Hong Kong, features regularly in Hong Kong films. It fairly frequently shows up as a setting for Hong Kong films noirs, probably due to its reputation as a place of danger and vice.

when he left his first wife. Although Pan is now willing to let Zhang keep his money as long as she leaves his son, the woman instead bullies the young man into a marriage. On the wedding day, a desperate Pan shoots Zhang but is then gunned down by his own son. The young man finds out the truth from a letter he finds on Pan's body.

Wang Yin was inspired to make the film after seeing a play based on Niu Ge's novel *Feuds in a Gambling City* (*Du guo chou cheng* 賭國仇城),<sup>70</sup> and took the title from a 1936 Shanghai film in which he starred as well (and which also ended with a bride being killed). The noirishness of the film derives from the moral grey zone in which all characters seem to live except for Zhang Lifang, who is utterly evil. Pan and his son both have flawed personalities. Wang has obviously erred in the past, because, not only was he a smuggler, he also left his first wife and their son to fend for themselves while he married the evil Zhang. His son is clearly on a path of no return as a corrupt cop: easily manipulated by Zhang, he abuses his official power to harass Pan and lies to his own mother about his relationship with Zhang. The film also has a dark sense of humor: spreading a rumor about a treasure he hid before being sent to jail, Pan manages to get Zhang's fellow gangsters to secretly look for it in her mother's grave! While the men are digging, Pan calls the police and the men have to flee, causing one of them to have a heart attack.

Another noirish film is *Sisters in Crime*, which Law Kar put in his list of romance thrillers discussed before. Its plot is taken from *Mildred Pierce*, a 1945 film noir starring Joan Crawford. Like *Mildred Pierce*, *Sisters in Crime* deals with a divorced woman trying to make a living independently, mostly to satisfy the needs of a family member (a spoilt daughter in *Mildred Pierce*, a somewhat less spoilt younger sister in *Sisters in Crime*). Her efforts are doomed, however, and finally lead up to a murder. Instead of a femme fatale, *Mildred Pierce* and *Sisters in Crime* have a "homme fatale", played by Patrick Tse in the latter film. There are some telling differences between the two films: while Mildred is able to start her own business and be successful, Sze Sin-wan (Patsy Kar) first works as a salesperson and later as

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<sup>70</sup> Niu Ge (the pen name of Li Feimeng) was a famous Taiwanese cartoonist and writer of the 1950s and 1960s. During the war with Japan, Niu Ge worked as a spy against the Japanese, which might have been a reason for the ambiguous character of the protagonists in *Feuds in a Gambling City*, his most famous work as a novelist.

a personal secretary in a clothing store. When it appears her boss Siu Sheung-ching (Patrick Tse) hired her to be his mistress rather than his secretary, she quits the job and has no choice but to become a taxi dancer. Siu does not leave her alone, however, visiting her in the nightclub she works at. Meanwhile, Sin-wan's younger sister Sze Yuet-ying (Molly Wu) falls in love with the same Siu when he meets her at her school in Macau. Siu makes her all kinds of promises, and Yuet-ying soon quits school to marry him in Hong Kong. This brings extra financial pressure to Sin-wan, who eventually agrees to accept Siu's money in return for sex. When Sin-wan finds out her sister came back for Siu, things naturally go wrong. To turn her against her sister, Siu shows Yuet-ying what Sin-wan does for a living. Disgusted with both of them, Yuet-ying tries to kill Siu, but faints before she can do it. At that point, Sin-wan walks in and, believing Siu murdered her sister, finishes what Yuet-ying couldn't. Unlike *Mildred Pierce*, then, it is here the mother figure who turns out to be responsible for the murder, in this way to some extent avoiding the unsettling conclusion of the original. The film, which makes frequent use of flashbacks, is bleak and unconventional enough to be called noir: it is in the end the self-sacrificing Sin-wan who goes to jail.<sup>71</sup>

### 1.5.5. Femme Fatale

Probably the first figure that comes to mind when one thinks of film noir is the femme fatale. A very beautiful and seductive woman, the femme fatale uses her charm to manipulate men and achieve her own ends. While her manipulations often lead to (lesser) men's deaths, she herself is often destroyed at the end of the film as well. Like the other parameters described above, the femme fatale on the one hand does appear in films that are not considered noir, and on the other hand is not present in every noirish film.

Unlike during later decades, the femme fatale appeared quite regularly in Hong Kong films of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. However, as Sek Kei points out, she was

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<sup>71</sup> In the context of the time, this might be because a person of her profession could not be seen to get away unpunished, no matter how pure at heart she really is. This might also be the reason why the filmmakers played down the selfish character of Yuet-ying: at the end of the film, Sin-wan, now in jail, urges her sister to not marry a man for his money or the easy life he offers. Yuet-ying, reformed by the shocking experience, promises to do so and walks off with the good boy mostly ignored by her in the past.

usually relegated to being either a supporting character or a bad woman with a heart of gold ("Blessing" 39). Sam Ho mentions two other strategies used to neutralize her: to double her with a good woman, or to reform, redeem or remove her ("Songstress" 62).<sup>72</sup> An uncompromising femme fatale, such as Zhang Lifang in *Bloodshed on Wedding Day*, is thus quite rare. Nonetheless, there was one actress who built up a reputation as Chinese cinema's only femme fatale. Bai Guang started her career as an actress and songstress in Shanghai during its Orphan Island period (1937-1941) and made the move to Hong Kong where she appeared in several highly acclaimed Great Wall productions. While in 1949's *A Forgotten Woman* (also known as *An Unfaithful Woman*) Bai was a tragic figure, playing a prostitute wrongly accused of murder, in the following year's *A Strange Woman* she shows herself more of a femme fatale, using her sexuality to achieve her aims and eventually even killing a man before committing suicide.<sup>73</sup> Her goal in *A Strange Woman* is to protect her lover, making her deeds still somewhat excusable. The same cannot be said about *Blood Will Tell*, maybe Bai's ultimate femme fatale role, and thus a film deserving a longer discussion. As no copy of *Blood Will Tell* was available, the following is based on the 1955 remake of the film. According to Stephen Teo, this film was "virtually a scene-for-scene remake" ("Blood Will Tell" 185).<sup>74</sup>

Also produced by Zhang Shankun for Xinhua (the company he established after leaving Great Wall), the film was directed by Evan Yang and starred Li Lihua and Wang Yin.<sup>75</sup> Wang Yin, also the husband of the femme fatale in *Bloodshed on Wedding Day*, here is Ma Debiao, a seasoned thief known as the "Red Begonia".

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<sup>72</sup> The doubling here usually happens by having the same actress appear as her own good twin sister, or by showing the character's younger, more innocent self.

<sup>73</sup> Both films were based on foreign stories: *A Forgotten Woman* on Tolstoy's *Resurrection* and *A Strange Woman* on *Tosca*. Note how the Chinese titles of these films play out Bai's femme fatale star persona: *A Forgotten Woman*'s title translates as "The Heart of a Loose Woman", while *A Strange Woman*'s title sounds like "A Bewitching Woman of All Ages" (Stephen Teo's translation). Teo notes that the latter film's title became an epithet for Bai herself ("Oh, Karaoke!" 33).

<sup>74</sup> He adds however that: "In contrast to the earlier film, *Blood Will Tell* is a more accomplished production in its technical details but somehow lacks the noirish atmosphere of the original. Li Lihua gives a more hard-edged performance, making her character less sympathetic than Bai Guang's rendition in the original" (185). It would seem though that a more hard-edged performance would add to, not detract from, the character's femme fatale characteristics.

<sup>75</sup> The film was co-produced with the Japanese Towa studio, shot entirely in Japan, and was in fact the first Hong Kong picture to be shot in the Eastmancolour process (Teo, "Electric Shadow Show" 21). The fact that this remake is in color also makes a difference – it would be interesting to see whether the 1949 black-and-white version used expressionistic techniques.

When his wife Lao Jiu (Li Lihua) is pregnant, Ma decides to give up his profession for the child's sake. Bored with her now ordinary husband, Lao Jiu spends money with a vengeance, flirts with other men and even frames Ma for a crime he did not commit. Ma escapes arrest and, when he goes to confront his wife, finds her with her lover, whom he kills. After asking his police inspector friend's family to raise his daughter, he gives himself up to the authorities. When years later Lao Jiu blackmails their daughter's adoptive family by threatening to take the girl away, Ma breaks out of prison to kill her. Mission accomplished, he is allowed to watch his daughter's wedding anonymously before he is taken back to jail.

Bai played a femme fatale in films for other studios as well. Before her first appearance in a Great Wall film she was the lead in a film directed by, again, Wang Yin. In *The Lexicon of Love* (1949) Bai's character has no problem with using men for material benefit and leading them to tragedy: one lover is reduced to begging, another ends up being killed by a jealous rival who then is arrested. Bai herself is simply deported to cause tragedies elsewhere. In Li Ying's *Songs in the Rainy Nights* (1950) her character chooses the decadent life of a songstress but falls in love with the wrong man and eventually ends up a cripple, humiliated and shunned by everyone. Her fate and character are less harsh in *Destroy!* (1952), but she nonetheless ends up seducing and causing the downfall of a married man.

In his discussion of Bai Guang and other singing stars of the 1950s and 1960s, Stephen Teo writes: "Bai Guang is counted among a group of beautiful Chinese stars of the 50s and 60s that included Li Lihua, Li Mei, Zhang Zhongwen and Lily Ho. They were styled 'sour' beauties with sex appeal in contrast to the 'sweet' stars, of which Zhou Xuan was one" (*Extra Dimensions* 32). The 'sour' beauty that came closest to approaching Bai Guang's femme fatale status was Li Lihua, who, as mentioned above, played Bai Guang's part in the 1955 remake of *Blood Will Tell*, and also played the lead in *The Victims*. Less exclusively identified with the femme fatale persona than Bai, she nonetheless portrayed similar roles in *Blood in Snow* (1956, also known as *Red Bloom in the Snow*) and in *General Chai and Lady Balsam* (1953, also known as *Little Phoenix*).

Worth mentioning is Wang Tianlin's noir musical *The Wild, Wild Rose* (1960), where Grace Chang in the first half of the film portrays a femme fatale with such relish that it becomes delightful. As Deng Sijia, a nightclub singer afraid of nothing or nobody, she starts on a quest to seduce the innocent (and engaged) new pianist of the club simply to win a bet with her colleagues and prove that no man can resist her. She makes her appearance in the film singing to the tune of *Carmen*: "Love is just an ordinary thing, not special at all. Men are only for fun, nothing marvelous either. What is love? What is affection? It's all an illusion. (...) If you're falling in love with me, you're only looking for trouble. If I fall in love with you, you're going to die in my hand..." Which is of course more or less what happens. Liang Hanhua (Zhang Yang) falls for her, leaves his fiancé and old mother, and almost kills Deng's ex-husband when he comes to harass her. After some time in jail, he is unable to find a job, starts drinking heavily but jealously forbids Deng to perform. At this point in the film it has already been established that Deng is a good-hearted, self-sacrificing woman after all. Unfortunately and unexpectedly she has fallen in love with Liang, but she leaves him when her criminal ex-husband threatens to kill him if they stay together. Suspecting she has left him for another man, Liang strangles her at the end of the film and, after hearing she was trying to protect him all along, is taken away by the police, a broken man.<sup>76</sup>

It is striking how few Cantonese films featured femmes fatales. Two films are a partial exception to this phenomenon. *Dragnet*, which inspired the "999" detective film cycle of the 1950s and early 1960s, opens with a situation seemingly taken from *Kiss Me Deadly*, a 1955 film noir directed by Robert Aldrich. In both films, the male protagonist picks up a mysterious and seductive female hitchhiker standing by a deserted road in the middle of the night, involving him in a murderous intrigue.

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<sup>76</sup> The earliest connection between film noir and Wang Tianlin goes back to 1949, when he was an assistant director on Yue Feng's *Blood Will Tell*. Father of filmmaker Wong Jing, Wang Tianlin would later also be a mentor to Johnnie To during his days at Hong Kong broadcaster TVB. In recent years, he has appeared in several of To's noirish films, such as *The Mission* (1999), *PTU* (2003), and the *Election* films (2005-6). In an interview with Stephen Teo, however, To claims to never have seen Wang's *A Wild, Wild Rose* (*Director in Action* 216). In the context of the 1950s and 1960s, another Wang Tianlin film that is noteworthy in terms of its film noir aesthetics is *Death Traps* (1960). With many scenes atmospherically shot at night, *Death Traps* is a Hitchcockian suspense thriller about a female alcoholic who, after seeing her boyfriend with another woman, in a drunken mood pays someone to murder the person who marries him. Since they clear things up between them the next day but she can't find the person she paid for the murder, she becomes paranoid and starts to suspect someone is trying to kill her.

The similarities stop there though, as *Dragnet* then develops further along a more conventional path than *Kiss Me Deadly* (which ends in nuclear holocaust). The other exception is *The Rouge Tigress*, which, appearing a year before *Dragnet*, started off the romance thriller genre (Law Kar, "Rules and Exceptions" 114). But while the female protagonist in this film behaves for a while like a femme fatale – seducing and causing the death of her victim, her behavior is excused as she is acting against a despicable man who caused her mother's death. It is moreover worth noting that a very similar film about an avenging woman was made a few years earlier in Mandarin by the Grandview studio: *A Woman's Revenge* (1953).

## 1.6. Conclusion

This chapter started by mapping at length the parallel development of the Cantonese and Mandarin cinemas in 1940s, 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong. This parallel development is relevant for an account of the crime films of this period, as it was reflected in the types of crime films each industry produced: the modern-day detective films were to a large extent the terrain of Cantonese films for instance, as were the female detective/chivalrous thief action-adventure films that blossomed in the mid-1960s. Naturally, there were similarities between the two cinemas as well, the dominance of melodrama being a good example. Another remarkable fact is the apparent discontinuity between the crime films of these decades and those since the 1970s. While there were hints of what was to come in late 1960s films such as *Dreadnaught* and *Story of a Discharged Prisoner*, the modern Hong Kong gangster and police genres only took shape in the 1970s.

In the second part of this chapter, the concept of film noir as elaborated by Steve Neale, Frank Krutnik and James Naremore was adopted to probe the presence of noir themes and style in Hong Kong crime films. These three scholars all point at the inconsistency of the noir canon and take a more open-ended approach to the category. Their concept of film noir is maybe best explained by a return to the term's origin: "noir" means "black, dark, gloomy" and it is films that tell us "dark" stories, show us "dark" characters", have a "dark" atmosphere or use "dark" cinematography that can be called noir. These different "darks" are not essential and therefore do not have to be present simultaneously in a film noir. If this definition

seems vague, it is so because “film noir” has never been a clear-cut genre, style or movement – instead it is all these things at once, and maybe even more. It is by looking for individual characteristics often associated with noir (the noir parameters) that the films discussed in this and the following chapters were arrived at.

James Naremore’s assertion that film noir is not a specifically American form has been demonstrated in this chapter. What remains to be investigated is what makes noirish Hong Kong films of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s different from their American counterparts. One obvious answer is that Hong Kong lacks the hardboiled tradition of crime fiction so often taken as central to “classic” Hollywood film noir. Since most critical attention on film noir has been on this tradition, other noir-like films have been pushed to the periphery, most importantly the gothic woman’s film (Neale 164). Throughout this chapter, it has become clear that when film noir appears in Hong Kong, it is very often in more “feminine” genres, including the gothic woman’s film, but also the melodrama. One reason for the relative absence of “core” films noirs might have been censorship, which based on Law Kar’s remarks seems to have been more strict than in the already heavily censored Hollywood (“Stars in a Landscape” 57). More research in this area could be useful, but lies outside the scope of this dissertation.

Given the dominance of Hollywood on local movie screens, one way noir-like filmmaking took shape in Hong Kong was via the imitation of American movies. Yue Feng and Li Pingqian are known for adopting the visual techniques of film noir in the late 1940s and early 1950s (Law, “Beginning and End” 104), and it is no surprise that Yue directed one of the most convincing films noirs of the period, *Blood Will Tell*. Narrative borrowing from Hollywood took place as well, but is limited to only a few films. What is remarkable is that Li and Yue were both originally Shanghai filmmakers, as were many of the important figures involved in the period’s most noir-like films: femmes fatales Bai Guang, Li Lihua and Grace Chang, actor/director Wang Yin and producer Zhang Shankun all hailed from Shanghai and worked mainly in Hong Kong’s Mandarin film industry. Partly, this predominance of noir in the Mandarin film industry could be explained by the better production values Mandarin films usually enjoyed – the creation of an expressionist look demanded a certain level of know-how and equipment that the Cantonese

filmmakers possibly did not possess. There might however also be a connection between Shanghai's modernist intellectual atmosphere of the 1930s and 1940s and the making of film noir in Hong Kong in the following decades.

In a chapter called "Modernism and Blood Melodrama", James Naremore points out the similarities between modernist literature and film noir and argues: "If modernism did not directly cause the film noir, it at least determined the way certain movies were conceived and appreciated. There was, in fact, something inherently noirlike in the established tradition of modern art" (41). Before and during the Second World War, Shanghai outshone Hong Kong as *the* preeminent Chinese metropolis, and was from the late 1920s to the 1940s home to a flourishing urban culture. In his *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China*, Leo Lee Ou-fan describes the city's Chinese version of modernism at great depth, pointing out the influence of Western modernists (Charles Baudelaire, James Joyce, etc.) on specific Shanghai writers. The Shanghai filmmakers (and writers) in Hong Kong undoubtedly retained some of this modernist and cosmopolitan sensibility, making it more likely for at least some of them to be attracted to a similar sensibility in film noir. This also might be why Hong Kong's Mandarin cinema seems to have been at its darkest in the period between 1949 to 1952 – just after a long civil war, when it was slowly becoming clear to some Shanghai exiles that they wouldn't be able to return home, and before some of those that could go back did so or retired, and also before political censorship became a serious problem.

In the same chapter, Naremore makes another point equally significant in the Hong Kong context. He asserts that "during the period in question [= 1940s] (...) it makes just as much sense to argue that certain directors, writers, and photographers were trying to invest melodramatic formulas with a degree of artistic significance" (41). Later, he writes:

*Especially in Hollywood, melodrama is a conservative or sentimental form associated with stalwart heroes, unscrupulous villains, vivid action, and last-minute rescues. Certain attributes of modernism (its links to high culture, its formal and moral complexity, its disdain for classical narrative, its frankness about sex, and its increasingly critical stance toward America) threatened this kind of film and were never totally absorbed into the mainstream. High modernism and*

*Hollywood "blood melodrama" nevertheless formed a symbiotic relationship that generated an intriguing artistic tension (48).*

This link between film noir and melodrama, probably very incongruent categories to most people, is also brought up by Neale who shows how, in several films noirs and contemporary reviews of them, melodrama stood for something quite different and broader than it does today, associated as it is with just a few "feminine" genres like the family melodrama, the woman's film, the soap opera, etc. (179-85). Unfortunately, the meaning of melodrama's Chinese equivalent, *wenyipian*, also changed over time from being associated with educational and artistic films to "a kind of drama with a high literary content" (Teo, "Electric Shadow Show" 19). The frequent and varied use of this term when 1940s, 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong films are discussed might thus be obscuring the presence of film noir. For example, *Blood Will Tell*, probably the only film of this period that has been discussed by Hong Kong film critics as a film noir, is classified as a melodrama or *wenyipian* on the Hong Kong Film Archive website. Further research could thus very well reveal a more widespread film noir "phenomenon" during these decades.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **The 1970s: Birth of the "Modern" Hong Kong Crime Film**

#### **2.1. Gangsters as the Pioneers of Hong Kong Cinema's Indigenization**

##### 2.1.1. Introduction

The 1970s was an exciting period for Hong Kong cinema. Not only did the film industry for the first time experience the sweet taste of global success with the spectacular breakthrough of Bruce Lee, it also witnessed the falling apart of the "classical" monopolistic mode of film production, as well as the supremacy and then rapid decline of Mandarin cinema in the primarily Cantonese speaking territory. In light of the further development of the local cinema in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, however, it is maybe the appearance of a truly local consciousness in film that is the most significant. In this chapter, it will be argued that the contemporary crime genre (along with the comedy film) stood at the center of this development. By taking a close look at the generic evolution of the crime film, it will be shown that this localization drive is not solely the work of the young new wave directors rushing on the scene from 1979 onwards, as is often argued, and that big studios like Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest played a role in this process as well.

The rise of the contemporary Hong Kong crime film in the shape of action-oriented police and gangster films can be attributed to a number of factors. Firstly, crime and police corruption were hot topics throughout the 1970s. Most significantly, in 1974 the ICAC was established, making an end to pervasive police corruption, and also playing a role in bringing to justice several famous crime bosses. Secondly, the beginning of the decade saw the critical and commercial success of several Hollywood crime films, which undoubtedly inspired copycat behavior in Hong Kong. Additionally, Japan had recently preceded Hong Kong in successfully moving away from historical samurai films towards the modern gangster genre in the shape of yakuza films.

The Japanese parallel points to another topic in this chapter: crime elements in martial arts films (especially in detective martial arts movies), and kung fu cinema's contribution to the development of contemporary action crime films in Hong Kong. While here the focus will be on Zhang Che's kung fu crime films, a look at Bruce Lee's movies – especially *The Way of the Dragon* (1972) – confirms the usefulness of an urban crime environment for staging elaborate fight sequences and tales of vengeance. Finally, this chapter also looks at noirish martial arts films, and the mutation of the femme fatale into a deadly action woman.

### 2.1.2. Social, Industrial and Generic Change

In the late 1960s, the first locally born generation came of age. The general population was becoming increasingly wealthy and educated, while a weekly day off from work became the norm. Besides spurring the expansion of the service sector, these developments gave people more time to reflect on their living and working conditions, and they began to make their views known and to play an active role in local society and politics. This in turn encouraged the blossoming of a local popular culture and identity, which increasingly absorbed Western influences. With the economy booming throughout the 1970s, this indigenization process continued, and the population actively participated in social movements, such as the “Defend the Diaoyutai Islands” campaigns and the movement for the recognition of Chinese as the second official language. Corruption, a rampant problem throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, was finally dealt with effectively through the establishment of the ICAC in 1974, which did much to address public concern, and boosted confidence in the colonial administration and the police (S. Tsang 174, 191-192, 204).

Developments in the film industry were arguably even more astonishing. Where in the 1950s and 1960s Mandarin and Cantonese cinema both thrived, Cantonese filmmaking began to decline rapidly from the late 1960s onwards, and in 1972 no pictures were produced in the local dialect. By the end of the decade, however, the tables had turned with Mandarin cinema close to extinction. A variety of factors contributed to this change of fortune, the most important being the role of television. While television had been an important factor in the decline of Cantonese

filmmaking in the late 1960s, it would also be television that provided the talent and ideas necessary for reigniting it throughout the 1970s (Kung and Zhang). Very much in touch with popular culture and also actively involved in shaping it, television offered something that most of the time eluded the Mandarin and martial arts dominated studios such as Shaw Brothers; and to a lesser extent, Golden Harvest. Another factor contributing to the decline of Mandarin cinema was the depletion of its Mandarin speaking talent pool: the Mandarin filmmakers who migrated to the colony in the 1940s and early 1950s were either retiring or dead, and it was not easy to find Mandarin talent in Cantonese speaking Hong Kong. Finally, the Mandarin studios were forced to overextend themselves: not only did they have to replace Cantonese cinema, they also had to enter into competition with Taiwan, where the local industry boomed thanks to support from the Kuomintang government (Teo, "1970s" 91-97).

The adverse turn for Mandarin cinema was accompanied by the decline of the classic studio mode of production so successfully applied by Shaw Brothers in the 1960s. Indeed, at the beginning of the new decade, Shaw Brothers more or less monopolized film production in Hong Kong. While it remained the dominant player until the mid-1970s, the return of Bruce Lee to Hong Kong and the failure of Run Run Shaw to acquire his services signaled the beginning of a new era: Lee was hired by Golden Harvest, a company established in 1970 by two former top Shaw executives – Raymond Chow and Leonard Ho. The astonishing success of Lee's films gave the new company a welcome boost, and it soon took its place beside Shaw Brothers as the industry's other leading studio. Co-producing films with small semi-independent companies and giving filmmakers more creative freedom and higher salaries, Golden Harvest's less centralized business model eventually proved more flexible and durable than the rigid, classic mode of Shaw Brothers (Teo, "1970s" 94-97).

In terms of genre, the 1970s were dominated by the trend for masculine martial arts films set off to a large extent by Shaw director Zhang Che in the late 1960s. Of the two major streams of the martial arts genre, kung fu was dominant, although swordplay (or *wuxia* 武侠) movies continued to be made throughout the decade and witnessed a powerful revival between 1976 and 1978 with Chor Yuen's adaptations

of Gu Long's martial arts novels. Kung fu reasserted its dominance soon after, however, in the form of kung fu comedies, which brought both Sammo Hung and Jackie Chan to stardom. The hegemony of action thus effectively displaced the melodrama as the structuring element of Hong Kong cinema: throughout the decade, very few melodramas were made, possibly because this had become the specialty of the Taiwanese film industry.<sup>77</sup> Another genre that achieved success throughout the 1970s was softcore pornography, most prominently the cynical *fengyuè* 风月 films by Shaw director Li Hanxiang. Sex and nudity were, like action and comedy, not limited to one genre of course, and their presence in, for example, mainstream martial arts films makes for a striking contrast with more recent Hong Kong cinema, which is in this regard constrained by the motion picture rating system established in 1988.

### 2.1.3. Development of the Crime Film

As a result of this rapidly changing environment, films dealing with crime underwent a radical transformation as well: the dominant strain of (family/romantic) melodrama took a backseat, the Hitchcockian thriller more or less disappeared, and while female fighters appeared regularly throughout the decade, they were only to a limited extent descendants of the late 1960s female detective/chivalrous thief action-adventure films of the Cantonese cinema, being both more eroticized and aggressive than their predecessors.

The past somewhat lingered on at the start of the decade, as exemplified by the work of Inoue Umetsugu, the foremost of Shaws' Japanese contract directors. Inoue continued to work for Shaw Brothers until 1972 in genres that were quickly going out of fashion, such as the musical and the romance. One of his films, *The Five Billion Dollar Legacy* (1970), looks in fact like a more luxurious version of the Kong Ngee romance thrillers of the late 1950s and early 1960s. A haunted house mystery with the usual (fake) ghosts, hidden identities, prominent female protagonists, and romance subplot, it is particularly reminiscent of Ng Wui's 1963 *Spontaneous Confession*. In the same year, Mitsuo Murayama, another Japanese

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<sup>77</sup> Of course melodramatic elements remained: Zhang Che's films could in a sense be described as violent male melodramas, and melodramatic excess more generally remained a major characteristic of Hong Kong cinema until the 1990s.

contract director at Shaw, made *A Cause to Kill* (1970), an almost scene-for-scene remake of Hitchcock's *Dial M for Murder* (1954), but with a twist: in Mitsuo's version it is the wife (Ivy Ling) who is planning her husband's murder. The film is a fine example of the rapidly disappearing dominance of female stars: Mitsuo did not make any more films in Hong Kong after 1970 and Ivy Ling went into semi-retirement in 1972.

While several of the more traditional subgenres of the crime film faded away, the gangster film and its mirror image, the police film – both nearly non-existent in the 1950s and 1960s – saw their real breakthrough in this decade, with most of the elements that would come to be recognized as typical of the Hong Kong crime film genre quickly taking shape. As this crucial development has rarely been described in the critical literature, the focus in this chapter will be on the gangster and police film genres. It will be shown that both genres have strong roots in kung fu cinema, but first a brief discussion of crime film elements within the influential swordplay genre is appropriate.

#### *2.1.3.1. Detective Swordplay Films: Martial Arts as a Mode?*

Yvonne Tasker has convincingly argued for an understanding of action as a mode and as multi-generic rather than as a distinct genre ("Introduction" 8). Martial arts, a subcategory of action, similarly can be understood as a multi-generic mode, or simply as a highly hybrid genre: characterized by the prominence of spectacular kung fu or swordplay sequences, this type of cinema is capable of accommodating the themes, structures and iconographies of various genres. It is thus no surprise that, drawing on precedents in Chinese martial arts literature, the *wuxia* or swordplay film has a prominent subgenre of martial arts detective and mystery films. The literary precedent here are the so-called 'Public Case' (*gong'an* 公案) novels that became popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Stephen Teo describes this type of literature as follows:

*The gongan [sic] novels were written according to a formula of adventure, gallant deeds and the solving of a plot involving murder or a conspiracy. Several knights-errant, or a central hero who could be a judge, are moved by an unjust act done to an innocent party and*

go about uncovering the perpetrator of the act and dealing him his just desserts (*Wuxia Tradition* 20).

He also notes how in some respects this type of fiction resembled a whodunit and, as a result, was called "detective novels" (*Wuxia Tradition* 20). In the twentieth century, the detective element remained important in *wuxia* fiction, in the works of the so-called old and new schools.<sup>78</sup>

In the cinema, martial arts films in the *gong'an* subgenre occasionally appeared, a good example being Ho Meng-hua's *Ambush* (1973), discussed briefly in the film noir section below. One filmmaker in particular specialized in this type of film throughout the 1970s: veteran Cantonese director Chor Yuen, who had joined the Mandarin film industry and found steady employment with Shaw Brothers. One of his early Shaw Brothers efforts, the superb *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan* (1972), was the first film to mix *wuxia* with eroticism (Teo, *Wuxia Tradition* 150), and was moreover structured like a detective thriller. This latter aspect was further developed in Chor's successful adaptations of Gu Long's martial arts novels. The first of those, *Killer Clans* (1976), was in fact inspired by another crime film classic, Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) - according to Sek Kei, some details in *Killer Clans* were carbon copies of the American film ("Romanticism" 80). Detective and mystery elements recurred frequently in other Gu Long adaptations by Chor Yuen, including successful films such as *The Magic Blade* (1976), *Clans of Intrigue* (1977), *The Sentimental Swordsman* (1977), etc.<sup>79</sup>

Considering Chor's influence on the later development of the Hong Kong crime film, one should note his idiosyncratic creation of an abstract, slightly surreal version of the *jianghu* 江湖,<sup>80</sup> quite different from that of other important martial arts

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<sup>78</sup> Referring to works by Chen Pingyuan and Xu Sinian, Teo defines the "old school" as "the fiction published under the Republic of China regime from 1911 to 1949", and the "new school" as "the fiction published in Hong Kong in the 1950s" (21).

<sup>79</sup> Teo points out that, in addition to utilizing detective and mystery plots in his martial arts films, Chor also reintegrated themes of the Cantonese family melodrama (*Wuxia Tradition* 151). Sek similarly points to connections with Chor's earlier work in Cantonese cinema, in particular his 1965 film, *The Black Rose* ("Rose" 72-73), which, as discussed in Chapter One, gave rise to a boom of female detective/chivalrous thief action-adventure films.

<sup>80</sup> *Jianghu* is a term hard to pin down, and its interpretations have been plenty. Teo discusses several definitions of the concept, and states that "essentially, it refers to an abstract entity which can mirror the real world in which *xia* [knights-errant] and their code of conduct are put into operation" (*Wuxia*

directors like King Hu and Zhang Che. In several of his best *wuxia* films, Chor turned the limitations of working inside a studio into a benefit: his settings seem intentionally artificial and are given a New Age type of atmosphere through the abundant use of smoke. Additionally, his swordsmen characters act in an uncanny, theatrical kind of way and are endowed with almost superhuman abilities. All of this works together with the convoluted plots full of intrigue and duplicity to create a “Gothic noir mood”, as Stephen Teo has described it (*Wuxia Tradition* 154). Chor in effect created a most stylized *jianghu*, a parallel world somehow outside of history where the normal rules of human behavior and capacity are altered. It is a similar sensibility that returns in the works of many younger Hong Kong directors, including some of Tsui Hark’s, John Woo’s and especially Johnnie To’s best films.<sup>81</sup>

Although Woo and To would become most famous for their gunplay action, all three of these directors debuted with martial arts films, and in this discussion of crime film elements in the martial arts cinema, Tsui and To’s first works are especially noteworthy. Tsui gained a reputation by his successful 1978 TV martial arts series, the *Gold Dagger Romance*, which was, like Chor’s films made around the same time, based on a Gu Long novel. When he made his first foray into filmmaking with *The Butterfly Murders* (1979), Tsui framed the film as a conscious departure from the Gu Long adaptations, stating that there were “quite enough fictional martial arts detectives (...) around already” (173). Hence, the main character is more like a martial arts reporter – only interested in getting the facts, not in delivering justice – and he does not join in the fighting.<sup>82</sup> The film nevertheless maintains a strong mystery element, with the protagonists trying to uncover the

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*Tradition* 18). *Jianghu* can therefore be understood as some kind of “alternate society”, or an “illicit space nurtured by conflict and corruption” (*Wuxia Tradition* 18).

<sup>81</sup> Spectacular action is of course the outstanding element in the Hong Kong martial arts cinema generally, its unreal nature an accepted convention of the mythical *jianghu* universe. Bordwell has correctly pointed out how John Woo’s action style is anticipated in the floating fights of Chor Yuen (103). He also refers to an interview he conducted with Peter Tsi, claiming that Woo’s heroes resemble those in Chor’s Gu Long adaptations (100). While Woo employed one of Chor’s favorite actors, Ti Lung, for his *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), Ti’s performance is more comparable to that in his films with Zhang Che, and the same goes for Woo’s other heroic figures. The melodramatic male bonding characteristic of Woo’s films is mostly absent from Chor’s cinema.

<sup>82</sup> In the same interview, Tsui also made a link between martial arts and gangster films that was already becoming very explicit in Hong Kong cinema at the time, claiming that the film’s different martial arts factions with their own territory were modeled on real-life triad societies (173).

secret behind the killing butterflies.<sup>83</sup> As its title already suggests, To's *The Enigmatic Case* (1980) is similarly structured like a mystery and its complex plot of a man trying to prove his innocence while being set upon by various swordsmen who want the gold supposedly hidden by him is reminiscent of that of *Ambush*. Tsui and To made use of spectacular outdoor scenes (in To's case shot in the Mainland), giving their films a rather different look from Chor's studio pictures.

The swordplay films discussed above already give a good indication of martial arts films' capability to accommodate other genres, including those belonging to the larger crime film family. In the next section, it will be argued that the 1970s and 1980s Hong Kong gangster film has important roots in 1970s kung fu cinema.

### 2.1.3.2. Zhang Che: Godfather of the Hong Kong Gangster Film

In the late 1960s, *wuxia* films set in Imperial China ruled the silver screen, and the genre's top directors were King Hu and Zhang Che. In 1970 the widely discussed return of Bruce Lee to Hong Kong and Shaw Brothers' failure to hire him gave the dominant studio the incentive to preempt the star's impact by launching a series of kung fu films (Teo, "1970s" 97). Unlike the *wuxia* film, which was considered a northern Chinese tradition, kung fu was thought of as a southern Chinese style and the shift towards it signaled a wider trend towards localization (Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong* 206).<sup>84</sup> Zhang Che was the key figure in this development and would in fact shape many of what later would become kung fu films' generic characteristics. One important element in this would be the change of setting: instead of the Imperial China depicted in the *wuxia* films, kung fu would be moved closer to the present – to the Republican period. Examples of such films by Zhang are *Vengeance!* (1970), *The Duel* (1971), *Boxer from Shantung* (1972), and its sequel *Man of Iron* (1972).<sup>85</sup> Each of these films also exemplifies a development related to the different time period: the appearance of urban gangster protagonists. In

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<sup>83</sup> Tsui recently returned to the genre with *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame* (2010), which has more than a few similarities to his *The Butterfly Murders*, but is more conventional and commercial in its execution.

<sup>84</sup> This is of course a generalization: many kung fu films were made by émigré directors from the North and set in cities like Shanghai. Also, quite a few swordplay films were made in Cantonese and/or choreographed by "Southerners" like Lau Kar-leung.

<sup>85</sup> In his memoir, Zhang Che admitted to have gotten the inspiration to make films set in the early Republican era from Japanese cinema, in particular from a subgenre of Japanese films set during the Meiji Restoration period (ca. 1868-1912) (88-89).

*Vengeance!* the gangster identity of the villains is still somewhat unclear: they are treacherous, conniving local strongmen who do not hesitate to break the law if the situation demands it. The film's setting of a town controlled by corrupt and dark forces is however reminiscent of film noir – *Vengeance!* will be discussed at length in the noir section below. *The Duel* is more clearly set in a criminal environment with feuding gangs and other thematic concerns that bring to mind *The Godfather* (1972), which appeared one year later. *Boxer from Shantung* and *Man of Iron*, on the other hand, are reminiscent of the classical Hollywood gangster film, depicting the rise and fall of an immigrant gangster in the big city, Shanghai, and ending with the sympathetic gangster's tragic death.

Almost simultaneously the use of contemporary settings became common as well. Zhang's 1970 *The Singing Killer* was set in the here and now with David Chiang portraying a popular singer with a dark past. Kung fu is only a minor element in this film – a rather unusual mix of the musical, the crime thriller and a romance. Zhang directed a more typical present-day kung fu film the next year: *Duel of Fists* (1971) seems to have been made in anticipation of Bruce Lee's *The Big Boss* (1971) which came out a few weeks later, as both films are set in Thailand.

The international backgrounds of *Duel of Fists*, *The Big Boss* and *The Angry Guest* (1972) – *Duel of Fists*' sequel which moved between Thailand, Japan and Hong Kong – point at another development: the use of foreign settings. Since the 1950s this strategy was often employed by Hong Kong studios to increase the appeal of their films at home and abroad. Indeed, *Duel of Fists* and *The Angry Guest* at times feel like travelogues when at several points throughout the film local celebrations, monuments and scenery are shown without any narrative function at all. In this regard, it is interesting to note that following his international success, Bruce Lee moved from Thailand in *The Big Boss*, to Italy in *The Way of the Dragon* (1972), and finally to an unspecified “international” environment reminiscent of James Bond films in the Hollywood-produced *Enter the Dragon* (1973).

A final point worth remarking on is the working class associations of the kung fu hero. This working class or “ghetto” identity was central to Stuart Kaminsky's pioneering article on the kung fu film, and remains a point of scholarly interest until

the present (as in Meaghan Morris' "Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema"). As Kaminsky points out: "The Kung Fu hero (...) is invariably a lower class working figure who has no extended interest in society" (132). Moreover, the final villain, besides being lecherous, is usually also rich and oppresses the lower classes. Although the protagonist always destroys this final villain by the end of the film, he is subsequently often placed under arrest to face punishment for having violated the law. As Kaminsky points out, however, "the law itself, as in American gangster films of the 1930s, is almost non-existent in Kung Fu films. These are not films of law, but of myth" (137).<sup>86</sup> In the following chapters, it will become clear that this working class identity and the absence of the law are also prominent elements of 1980s and 1990s crime films, and that these elements only began to fade away in the new millennium.

### 2.1.3.3. Making the Gangster Local

The decision to shoot *The Way of the Dragon* in Italy might or might not have been influenced by the success of *The Godfather*, but the latter obviously inspired Ng See-yuen to travel to Rome to shoot the kung fu gangster film *Little Godfather from Hong Kong* (1974). The logical next step was to look at Hong Kong's very own criminal societies, the triads. This shift was very significant: instead of making Hong Kong films "global" by using foreign settings, actors, languages, etc., the idea was now to become globally successful by making films more "local." This "globalization-through-localization" strategy has remained important to Hong Kong film production to the present, and reflects a stronger self-confidence: filmmakers believe that movies with a strong Hong Kong flavor will find acceptance elsewhere as well.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Many of Kaminsky's remarks resonate with Ariel Dorfman's insightful analyses of superheroes in American culture (see his *The Empire's Old Clothes* 67-131).

<sup>87</sup> The attempts to make films more "global" have not been given up either: this topic has been widely discussed in recent scholarship on "transnational" Chinese cinema. To give just a few examples: Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar discuss several Hong Kong films in their discussions of "transnational" Chinese cinema in *China on Screen* (1-16, 66-74, 195-222), as does Gina Marchetti in *From Tian'anmen to Times Square* (1-68, 157-218). Focusing on Hong Kong cinema with a similar interest in the effects of globalization are works edited by Esther Yau (*At Full Speed*), Esther Cheung (*Between Home and World*), Gina Marchetti and Tan See Kam (*Hong Kong Film, Hollywood, and the New Global Cinema*), and many more.

Localization was more or less a logical development, as around 1974 Hong Kong's Mandarin cinema was experiencing difficulties. The death of Bruce Lee brought an end to the kung fu craze in the West, while an economic crisis affected box-office earnings and the important Southeast Asian markets started to impose import quotas or taxes on Mandarin films. The downturn in international demand encouraged the Hong Kong film industry to look inward, and when in 1973 Chor Yuen's Cantonese-language *The House of 72 Tenants* (1973) beat Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon* to top the local box office, studio executives realized that the local market could be tapped more effectively and, subsequently, the fortune of Cantonese filmmaking turned for the better.<sup>88</sup>

Of course, the use of the Cantonese dialect was not the only reason for the success of *The House of 72 Tenants* and the many Cantonese productions that soon followed. After all, Hong Kong films were post-synchronized at the time, and dubbing into Cantonese would not be too distracting because of its similarities with Mandarin. What made these films so successful was their grounding in local society and popular culture, and in this regard television played a key role. *The House of 72 Tenants*, for instance, was a highly localized version of an old Shanghai play, which had been performed by the Hong Kong Drama Troupe in 1964, and was broadcasted as a television play as well. The film featured many television actors, especially from HK-TVB's popular Cantonese variety show *Enjoy Yourself Tonight* (Teo, "1970s" 95, 109).

The trend towards indigenization also involved leaving the studio and shooting on location in the city. Zhang Che's films once again offer an interesting case study. Between 1972 and 1974, Zhang made a series of youth films that exhibit a greater

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<sup>88</sup> Writing in 1974, at the cusp of the Cantonese revival, I.C. Jarvie describes the change in the studios' attitude towards the local market. While in the mid-1960s, people working for the Cathay and Shaw Brothers studios told him that the Hong Kong market was so small that its audiences barely mattered in the preparatory calculations to making Mandarin films, this attitude had completely changed by the early 1970s: a film could recoup several million in Hong Kong alone, and even the international co-productions initiated at the height of the kung fu craze were only trial balloons: the producers still had their eyes fixed on the local audience (56-64). Jarvie did not foresee the spectacular return of Cantonese cinema, and at the time he suggested that Mandarin and Western films were more successful than Cantonese features because they better reflected the modern lifestyle of the colony, in contrast to the "backward" world of Cantonese films. With the advantage of hindsight and with Jarvie's observations in mind, it seems obvious that when Cantonese cinema modernized under the influence of television, local dialect features would naturally displace Mandarin filmmaking.

engagement with Hong Kong than before. The first of these, *Young People* (1972), was filmed at Chinese University's Chung Chi campus, but lacked a substantial plot line and consisted basically of episodic attractions, such as a basketball game, sing and dance performances, a martial arts competition and even go-cart racing. It was nonetheless quite successful at the local box office, maybe because of the presence of stars Ti Lung and David Chiang who were then at the peak of their popularity thanks to their roles in Zhang's martial arts movies.

Similar to Zhang's 1969 film *Dead End*, *The Generation Gap* (1973) focuses on the different values of the older and younger generations via a young couple trying to set up a life independent from their parents who have earlier forbidden the relationship. The boy eventually falls into bad company, culminating in a violent battle at a waterfront site in the harbor. *Friends* (1974) focuses on a group of male friends who get into conflict with gangsters when the girlfriend of one of them is in danger of being sold into prostitution because she can't pay off her debt to the loan sharks. While Zhang essentially is broaching topics that would feature frequently in the crime films later in the decade and beyond (such as loan sharks forcing girls into prostitution and the problem of youth gangs), the films somehow lack the realism and local detail that distinguished later productions. The explanation must be sought in the fact that Zhang was an émigré director from the Mainland, who seemed moreover more at ease working inside a studio.

An interesting case is *The Delinquent* (1973), which Zhang co-directed with Kuei Chih-hung. This film contains the familiar Zhang Che themes and protagonists: it focuses on a restless and rebellious working class youth who in the end avenges the death of his father in an orgy of violence, in the process of which he gets impaled. But it also has a grittier, more realistic feel to it and lots of location shooting that betray the hand of Guangdong-born and Hong Kong-raised Kuei Chih-hung. That Kuei was behind the urban grittiness and realism became clear with a film he made the next year, *The Teahouse* (1974) – arguably the first real “Hong Kong” crime film.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> *The Teahouse* and *Big Brother Cheng* were based on a popular Hong Kong comic book series called *Little Rascals* (*Xiao Liulang* 小流氓), later renamed *Dragon and Tiger* (*Long Hu Men* 龙虎门) (Lui and Yiu 172).

Set in a restaurant opened by recent Mainland immigrants led by Big Brother Cheng (Chen Guantai), *The Teahouse* depicts a very Hong Kong-style community, despite its immigrant owners. The film and its sequel *Big Brother Cheng* (1975) have loose plots consisting of short episodes that uniformly comment on the crime problem in Hong Kong – a hot social topic at the time. Besides stressing the community values also important to the successful *The House of 72 Tenants* (values which recalled Cantonese films of the 1950s), *The Teahouse* and *Big Brother Cheng* interestingly also expressed a profound lack of confidence in the authorities and the effectiveness of the rule of law. Episode after episode show how the judicial system and the police are too soft on crime (especially juvenile delinquency), and therefore fail to protect the ordinary citizen. The owner of the teahouse, Big Brother Cheng, grows increasingly cynical with the authorities and takes justice in his own hands. His protection of the poor and vulnerable and his punishment of the corrupt rich eventually turn him into an urban Robin Hood-like hero. In fact, Big Brother Cheng and his friends increasingly resemble a triad, and are mistakenly believed to be one by both real triad societies and the police.<sup>90</sup> Besides the favorable depiction of a triad-like kind of justice administered by Cheng and his friends, the film also offers an ambivalent picture of the real triads: a bad triad group is counterbalanced by a good one, the 18K (an obvious allusion to the real-life 14K triad in Hong Kong), of which the leader is righteous and responsible. At the same time, it is mentioned that such righteous triad bosses are becoming a rarity – a sentiment shared by John Woo in his 1980s films and a recurring theme in gangster films to this day. The explicit approval of the vigilante justice and triad-like behavior of Cheng and company apparently was deemed too controversial at the time, and the second film ends with the revelation that Cheng is in fact an undercover policeman – a revelation completely incongruent with everything that has happened before!<sup>91</sup> The distrust of

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<sup>90</sup> This impression was possibly strengthened at the time by the star image of Chen Guantai, who portrayed Brother Cheng and had in 1972 to great success portrayed righteous and charismatic gangsters in *Boxer from Shantung* and *Man of Iron*.

<sup>91</sup> An interesting spin-off of the Brother Cheng films is *Big Bad Sis* (1976), which can be regarded as a feminist version of the earlier films. The film adds a gender angle to the crime-ridden milieu of Hong Kong: the “Big Bad Sis” is a female factory worker (Chen Ping) who teaches her colleagues to defend themselves against male sexual predators and who organizes them into a sort of sisterhood. While this film might sound like a feminist manifesto of sorts, it should be pointed out that it simultaneously contains elements of sexploitation that would seem to contradict any progressive reading of it.

the law and the preference for a vigilante or more traditional triad-style justice are sentiments that would remain prominent in crime films until at least the early 1990s.

The two films also reflect a trend in the production of crime films: while the first film was made in Mandarin, the second was made in Cantonese.<sup>92</sup> Despite their often very local character, crime films were originally the terrain of Mandarin cinema. This changed very rapidly, however, and after 1975 the crime film genre became increasingly dominated by Cantonese productions. So while in 1976 about 40 per cent of all films released were in Cantonese, 55 per cent of crime films were in the local dialect. By 1978 75 per cent of all films were in Cantonese, but for crime films the ratio stood at 90 per cent.<sup>93</sup>

Many of the first localized crime films tried to appeal to audiences by depicting real cases that drew a lot of media attention. One early example of this trend was Cheng Gang's *Kidnap* (1974), an excellent film based on a famous kidnapping case that took place between 1959 and 1961 in Hong Kong.<sup>94</sup> The film's success at the box office (it was the third highest grossing local film in 1974), as well as the broadcasting on Rediffusion Television of Johnny Mak's crime drama series *Ten Sensational Cases* (1975-1976), probably convinced Shaw Brothers to produce a series of films called *The Criminals* (1976-1977). The five films in this series each contained two to four short episodes which all depicted real crimes. While Cheng Gang participated in the first film (with a rather disappointing episode), the next four films were dominated by Kuei Chih-hung, and to a lesser extent, directors Hua Shan (also known as Hua Yihong) and Sun Zhong.

One particularly significant event that inspired filmmakers in the mid-1970s was the case of Peter Godber. Armed with the draconian Prevention of Bribery Ordinance of December 1970, the police had started an investigation into one of its senior

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<sup>92</sup> There is some uncertainty about the language in which *The Teahouse* was made: some sources state the film was made in Mandarin, others claim it is a Cantonese film. The above is based on the information provided in the Online Catalogue of the Hong Kong Film Archive. The website is accessible at: <http://ipac.hkfa.lcsd.gov.hk/ipac20/ipac.jsp?profile=#focus>

<sup>93</sup> Data is based on a list of 1970s crime films compiled by the author and the list of all films made in the 1970s published in *Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the 1970s*.

<sup>94</sup> The same case also inspired the 1989 film *Sentenced to Hang* (1989), directed by Taylor Wong and produced by Johnny Mak, and discussed in the next chapter. It led to the last time the death penalty was carried out in Hong Kong.

officers, chief superintendent Peter Godber. When sufficient evidence was gathered two years later and action was taken against Godber, the officer managed to use his privileged access at the airport to slip past border control and escape to England. This case caused quite a stir, and ignited a public campaign against corruption to which the new Governor MacLehose reacted by creating an Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) in 1974. Godber was extradited and tried with wide media coverage. These events were instrumental in changing popular opinion regarding government and police corruption, and the ICAC would in time become an important source of pride for Hong Kong people (S. Tsang 203-4).<sup>95</sup>

Soon after, a film based on these events hit the screens: Ng See-yuen's *Anti-Corruption* (1975) went on to become one of the year's most successful films, only surpassed by a Michael Hui comedy, *The Last Message* (1975).<sup>96</sup> The film was a slightly sensationalized version of the real events, focusing on an honest British policeman (Bill Lake) who comes to work in Hong Kong. Although he is initially committed to fighting crime, the attractions of wealth and power prove too much for him: when he starts to accept bribes, he climbs the career ladder smoothly and amasses an immense fortune. Eventually, of course, he is caught and brought to justice. A noteworthy scene is the one where the recently arrived Englishman is treated to a night out by his corrupt Chinese colleagues: in a scene that would later famously be adopted in John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), one of them burns a bank note to light his cigarette as a way to show off his wealth.

At around the same time, Ng Sik-ho, a triad leader and drug trafficker who had many policemen on his payroll, was arrested and in 1975 sentenced to thirty years in jail. While a figure strongly resembling him appeared in *Anti-Corruption*, this notorious triad boss also inspired a series of films dealing with international drug trafficking and crime lords. Films about the illegal drug trade and traffickers included most prominently Leong Po-chih and Josephine Siao's *Jumping Ash* (1976), a film often touted as a precursor to the New Wave, as well as Stanley Siu's

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<sup>95</sup> The significance of the establishment of the ICAC for Hong Kong identity and crime films was confirmed most recently in 2009, as it inspired Wong Jing's *I Corrupt All Cops* covering much the same story as *Anti-Corruption*, but with more violence.

<sup>96</sup> Revealing once again the interaction between television and cinema at this point in time, the ICAC itself sponsored a series of short television films (the "ICAC" series) to promote its activities in the late 1970s. One of the people working on this series was New Wave director Ann Hui.

*The Rascal Billionaire* (1978), which was based on the story of the Ma Brothers (Ma Xiru and Ma Xizhen) who in the 1970s controlled one of the Chaozhou gangs in Hong Kong (Ng Sik-ho ran another one) and became rich through the heroin trade.

In 1976 there were also a number of films dealing with powerful female crime bosses or crime fighters. The inspiration for these films was possibly one of the most acclaimed episodes of Johnnie Mak's *Ten Sensational Cases* – the final episode “Corpse Wrapped in Bed Sheets” (*Chuangdan guoshi* 床单裹尸). This episode, based on a true story, dealt with a woman who took over the leadership of a triad after her father's death and became a cruel and merciless gangster. The episode proved so popular that Mak produced a television series based on this character the next year: in *Big Sister* (1976) the female boss transformed into a Brother Cheng-like do-gooder, fighting the bad gangsters and protecting the weak. Several films of that period similarly portrayed good and bad female gangsters, for instance *Brotherhood* (1976) and an episode of the second *The Criminals* film, “Mama-san” (*Da jia jie* 大家姐), which focuses on a tough Madam running a brothel and getting involved in a murder. Female gangsters or crime fighters also frequently appeared in films dealing with the narcotics trade. Examples of this trend include *The Drug Queen* (1976), which gave a sympathetic portrait of a female drug trafficker who upheld underworld values, as well as *The Drug Connection* (1976) and *Lady Exterminator* (1976), which focused on female protagonists bringing down drug syndicates.

Gangsters were often portrayed with sympathy, and many films featured likeable gangster figures upholding the underworld code of loyalty and righteousness. Pretty soon, however, there also appeared films that quite openly turned gangsters into glamorous heroes – thereby continuing a tendency visible in several post-war films, especially in the female detective/chivalrous thief action-adventure genre (see Chapter One). This was already visible in the 1976 film *Brotherhood*, but reached a high point in films starring Alan Tang. *The Rascal Billionaire* was one of those films, but a more successful one was *Law Don* (1979), which has a Godfather-like plot and idolizes Tang as the young and righteous triad leader whose organization is threatened because of the inability and disloyalty of his brothers. Throughout, the film stresses his strict application of the triad laws, the *jiafa* 家法, and his character

has nothing of the ambiguity of a Michael Corleone: he does not kill his transgressing brothers, for instance; instead they commit ritual suicide once they realize their mistakes.

These late 1970s films were strongly localized, not only through settings and the use of Cantonese, but also via the depiction of triad rituals. This already occurred in *The Teahouse* in 1974, and remained a point of fascination in many pictures that followed (such as *Brotherhood* and *Law Don*). Of note also in this regard is a series of films directed or produced by Zhong Guoren, which often used numbers in their titles – the numbers being code words used by the triads (Fang 33). Examples of such films are *Ironside 426* (1977) and *Gang of Four* (1978).<sup>97</sup>

#### 2.1.3.4. *The Police Film*

An account of the 1970s crime film would not be complete without discussing that mirror image of the gangster – the policeman. Hong Kong directors started to churn out the first modern police films during the 1970s. Focusing on an investigative agent (usually a policeman and his team), these films belong essentially to the larger category of the detective film as defined by Steve Neale (see Introduction and Chapter One). In comparison to the films focusing on gangsters, police films were quite rare in the 1970s, and it is worth noting that very often these ‘agents of the law’ appeared as gangsters themselves – either as undercover cops, or as corrupt officers colluding with gangsters. Examples of the former are the Hong Kong-Australia co-production *The Man from Hong Kong* (1975), and the above-mentioned *Lady Exterminator* and *Ironside 426*. Corrupt policemen can be seen in the Godber-inspired *Anti-Corruption*, as well as in the 1979 film *Payoff*, similarly inspired by real-life events and dealing with a police inspector who aims to lord over Hong Kong’s underworld.

Zhang Che again played the role of a pioneer in Hong Kong cinema by co-directing (with Cai Yangming) the first local police film, *Police Force* (1973). In this film,

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<sup>97</sup> *Ironside 426* is especially noteworthy as it deals with an undercover cop who grows increasingly successful in a triad, and eventually has to choose between his duty as a police officer and his loyalty to his gang brothers. It thus foreshadows classic Hong Kong films such as *City on Fire* (1987) and the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy (2002-3).

Zhang altered his usual motifs of vengeance and gruesome heroic death, probably to placate the real-life Hong Kong police which – judging from the abundant documentary-like footage illustrating the superb professionalism, training and ethics of the law enforcers – cooperated with Zhang in order to improve its public image.<sup>98</sup> Here Zhang's hero is a youth (Wong Chung) whose close friend is murdered; he pledges revenge and joins the police to achieve it. When years later he finally catches the culprit, he has to make a choice: avenge his friend, or serve the public and safeguard the reputation of the force. He chooses the latter, and as a result is able to break a powerful crime syndicate.

*Police Force* has its fair share of kung fu violence and gun battles, but its attention for police training, practices and procedures push it more towards the modern police film compared to the few other contemporary films featuring cops, where kung fu fighting was pretty much the only concern. Three years later, the more realistic *Jumping Ash* proved the appeal of this new kind of thriller by topping the local box office. Its impact was reflected in Shaw Brothers' *The Criminals* series: the third, fourth and fifth installment coming out in 1977 all contained episodes approaching crime from the police point-of-view. In 1979 there were *Vice Squad 633*, and several early New Wave works, including Alex Cheung's important *Cops and Robbers* (which will be discussed in the next chapter). A local tradition of police films had taken root.

A final point should be made regarding the influence of Hollywood on the development of this genre in Hong Kong. Just like *The Godfather* had a strong impact on the Hong Kong gangster film, so did Hollywood's surge of big-budget police films like *The French Connection* (1971), *Dirty Harry* (1971) and *Serpico* (1973) influence the appearance of the police thriller in Hong Kong. Both Bordwell and Teo have remarked on the similarities between *Jumping Ash* and *The French Connection* (Teo, *Dimensions* 145; Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong* 150), and the latter's popularity most likely led to the English titles of films dealing with the drug trade (although not from a police point-of-view), such as *The Drug Connection* and

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<sup>98</sup> Compared with other 1970s films, *Police Force* is amazingly positive about the police, especially when one considers that it was shot a year before the ICAC was established and widespread police corruption began to be tackled effectively.

*Amsterdam Connection* (1978).<sup>99</sup> Similarly, *Serpico*'s story of an honest cop in a corrupt police force resonates with the theme of *Anti-Corruption* and other Hong Kong films. A final resemblance between these celebrated 1970s Hollywood films and their Hong Kong counterparts is that they are very often based on real cases. In this regard, the investigative thriller thus also participated in the indigenization drive of Hong Kong cinema, going for more realistic depictions of local crime and law enforcement, and an extensive use of location shooting.

## 2.2. The Seeds of Hong Kong Noir

In a postscript to *A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the 1970s*, Li Cheuk-to puts forward cynicism as *the* attitude typical of 1970s Hong Kong filmmaking and television. According to Li, films of this decade became increasingly fatalistic, morally ambiguous, materialistic and anti-traditional (128-30). Put next to the improving technical know-how of local filmmakers and the development of neo-noir in Hollywood, it seemed like the right time for a Hong Kong film noir trend to blossom. That this not fully materialized can be attributed to the dominance of period martial arts and comedy for most of the decade. Still, it will be demonstrated in what follows that the seeds for a future Hong Kong noir were planted in Zhang Che's late 1960s and early 1970s films, and can also be found in a number of other works throughout the decade.

This section deals first with the noir elements present in much of Zhang Che's oeuvre and then discusses briefly two of the director's noirish films of the early 1970s. It then moves on to noir tendencies in other 1970s martial arts films, paying attention in particular to Chor Yuen's *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan*. The first part of this section is concluded with the suggestion that the noir-like characteristics in films like Zhang's and Chor's are most likely a development linked to the influence of cynical and morally ambiguous protagonists in Japanese *chanbara* and revisionist westerns. In the second part, the figure of the femme fatale is traced in several 1970s films set in contemporary Hong Kong. Usually in the shape of the action heroine, the female protagonists in noirish films like *Kiss of*

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<sup>99</sup> Mel Tobias meanwhile saw similarities between *Jumping Ash* and *Serpico* in the depiction of the cop protagonist, whose job jeopardizes his life and his family (151).

*Death* (1973) and *The Lady Professional* (1971) became more transgressive than earlier versions of the female fighter prototype. However, unlike more recent “action babe” films, their transgression often still needed a motivation, which was usually rape.<sup>100</sup>

### 2.2.1. Noir in Martial Arts Films

*I was often asked about the characters in my films, that the knights-errant are not as 'upright' as traditional ones. Indeed they are, and I don't like two-dimensional characters. Modern audience also has learned to accept non-traditional, multi-dimensional characters, and they no longer appreciate the likes of Kwan Tak-hing's Wong Fei-hung. Sometimes, the 'bandit' gets more sympathy than the 'soldier.' Earlier films about the knight-errant punishing the wicked or lawman getting the bandits are now considered outmoded and old-fashioned. I have contributed to this development. (Zhang 143)*

This quote from Zhang Che's autobiography touches upon some of the characteristics of the director's works that can be considered noirish. Firstly, there is his admission that he purposefully created “non-traditional, multi-dimensional characters”: the boundary between good and evil in his films is less clear-cut, and sometimes the conventionally “bad” protagonist is given a more positive, sympathetic treatment. Secondly, Zhang explicitly mentions a “modern” audience that can appreciate moral complexity: this resonates with Naremore's argument for an understanding of film noir as situated between modernist art and traditional sensationalist melodrama (see Chapter One). Zhang correctly assumed that a better educated and generally more prosperous audience familiar with the complexities of modern urban life would be able to appreciate the more ambiguous characters in his films and their tortuous struggles with a corrupt environment.

Another important Zhang theme, fatalism, is also a recurring preoccupation in many films noirs. As Jerry Liu writes about Zhang's heroes: “The heroic individual blindly submits to the fatal cycle of cause and effect while exercising little control over his own actions, except to conform to certain ‘moral’ obligations arising from loyalty, friendship, and love” (161). This type of heroism survives in Hong Kong cinema to this day, to a large extent via John Woo's similarly fatalistic but “moral”

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<sup>100</sup> The term “action babe films” is taken from Marc O'Day.

heroes. While more pessimistic than the many Hollywood films where the hero survives, this affirmation of positive values steers Woo's and Zhang's films away from the darkest visions of some films noirs: even if their moral hero dies in the end, at least he has first removed the "evil" in the limited diegetic world of the film. It will be argued in the final chapter that this type of hero is deconstructed and discarded in several works since the mid-1990s (especially those by Milkyway Image), resulting in a full-blooded Hong Kong-style film noir.

Zhang is of course most recognized for his role in shifting Hong Kong cinema from a female-centered industry to a male-centered one. As in recent Hong Kong noir, his films nonetheless often give small, but crucial parts to women as well. These parts generally fit into the universal "mother" vs. "whore" dichotomy.<sup>101</sup> In a wide array of genres in Hong Kong and elsewhere, women of the latter type habitually contribute to or even directly cause the demise of the male hero. The martial arts film is no different; the male hero is often threatened by aggressively sexual femmes fatales and generally has to avoid them to preserve his integrity and physical strength.<sup>102</sup>

*Vengeance!* and *The Delinquent* are two of Zhang's films that come quite close to film noir. In *Vengeance!*, opera actor Guan Yulou (Ti Lung) discovers that his wife is having an affair with a local aristocrat, Feng Kaishan (Gu Feng). Undaunted by Feng's high status, Yulou humiliates the aristocrat's pupils in a fight and warns him to stay away from his wife. With the help of other powerful members of the local elite, Feng sets up a trap for Yulou and has him killed. The rest of the plot concerns Yulou's brother Xiaolou (David Chiang) arriving in town and setting out to take revenge. Xiaolou succeeds, but at the cost of his own life. The film thus contains the typical noir-ish elements of many Zhang films: the unfaithful femme fatale wife leading to one hero's death, and the presence of the fatalistic but moral hero. Moral ambiguity is less present, but instead we are introduced to the archetypical noir city: the men responsible for Yulou's death are the ones who are running the city – as

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<sup>101</sup> Johnnie To interestingly points at Westerns and 1970s films with Steve McQueen as an influence on the limited, more or less stereotypical roles women play in his own films. See "Author's Interview with Johnnie To", Appendix.

<sup>102</sup> Another type common to martial arts films is the "good-woman-as-prostitute" who helps the hero, but is usually tragically killed as a result.

Xiaolou is told shortly after his arrival, “the whole town is involved.” Xiaolou’s presence disturbs the balance of power and a cycle of violence erupts, in which the former partners-in-crime are very willing to betray one another. While online reviewer Brian Camp points out the possible influence of John Boorman’s *Pointblank* (1967), one can also find similarities with other hallmarks of the literary and cinematic noir canon, such as Dashiell Hammett’s 1929 novel *Red Harvest* or the more recent *Sin City* comic series (1991-92) and their film adaptation, released in 2005. Except for some striking exceptions, Zhang avoids low-key lighting for most of *Vengeance!* and instead opts for full visibility to showcase the excellent production design and stylish martial arts sequences of the film.

*The Delinquent*, co-directed in 1973 with Kuei Chih-hung, is much darker, and in many ways resembles the Hong Kong crime films of later decades. While the darker look, like the more local character of the film, is probably the result of Kuei’s involvement, the film deals with the for Zhang so typical fatalistic rebellious youth, who in the end goes on a (self-) destructive rampage. *The Delinquent* offers a more complex portrait of its protagonists: John (Wong Chung), the youth, is corrupted by a gang that uses a femme fatale and a taste of the good life to get him to cooperate in robbing his father’s employer. Through a twist of fate, John’s father comes in harm’s way and is mercilessly killed by the gang. John’s final rampage serves to avenge his father: when he has killed the gang leader (a rich, respectable looking businessman), he jumps to his death before the police can get to him. The father himself is no innocent victim either: his wife has left him because he used to beat her, and his bad temper has estranged his son from him. As a result, the film becomes a grimmer than usual variation on Zhang’s usual themes. The despair is reflected in the film’s visual style: as mentioned above, it is overall much darker, and a realistic view of the poorer neighborhoods of 1970s Hong Kong is offered. Much of the action takes place at night, with neon-lit streets and plenty of shadows making the desolate urban landscape even more oppressing. *The Delinquent* additionally offers the type of hallucination sequence characteristic of several classic Hollywood noirs: when the police questions John in the hospital after his father’s death, his emotional confusion is conveyed through a point-of-view shot showing the fan whirring above his head over which then various faces are superimposed: those of his worried girlfriend and the policeman interrogating him, that of his dead

father, and visions of his father being beaten up and killed. It is all shown in unreal primary colors and accompanied by a chaotic sound montage combining screams, the laugh of the main villain, the thuds of fists and kicks landing on his father's body and the shrill demands by the policeman and girlfriend to tell them what happened. Another of Kuei's co-directorial efforts is discussed below, and will give credence to the argument that these noirish effects are likely the younger director's work.<sup>103</sup>

As mentioned in the general overview of the crime film's development in the 1970s, Bruce Lee's films parallel Zhang's work in several ways, and this is not different with respect to their noir-like characteristics. While Lee's films won't be discussed here, a remark in Cheng Yu's appraisal of Bruce Lee's career is sufficient to drive the point home. Remarking on the type of hero played by Lee in his first two films (directed by Luo Wei), Cheng writes:

*A tragic hero in the two Luo Wei films, the only way he could acquit himself without betraying his integrity was through violence. His role in this respect is similar to that of the fated hero in Hollywood film noir. The hero wants to stay out of trouble, but gets involved to fight the corrupted world around him. Doomed from the start, his integrity draws him towards his own destruction – self-affirmation and self-fulfillment comes through the use of violence. The only difference between the two is their weapon – fist or guns (“Anatomy” 24).*

Bruce Lee's work and the two Zhang Che films discussed above belong of course in the first place to the kung fu genre. In that other subgenre of the martial arts film, the swordplay or *wuxia* movie, a stylish noir aesthetic and atmosphere also surfaced occasionally. Good examples of noir-like swordplay films are *Black Tavern* (1972), where in the typical *wuxia* setting of the inn various wandering swordsmen engage in murderous intrigue to obtain a mysterious treasure, and *Ambush*, in which a young official is wrongly suspected of being an accomplice in a robbery and tries to clear his name by finding the true culprit and recover the loot while fighting off all

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<sup>103</sup> Not discussed here are the noirish visuals of several Kuei episodes in the *The Criminals* series (such as “Deaf Mute Killer” and “The Informer” in *The Criminals Part II: Homicides* (1976) and “The Teenager's Nightmare” in *The Criminals V: The Teenager's Nightmare* (1977), and sections of his *Big Brother Cheng*. Kuei's noirish visuals found another application in his 1970s and 1980s horror films, and in his martial arts masterpiece *Killer Constable* (1981).

kinds of crooked swordsmen. However, the most outstanding noir swordplay picture of the 1970s is probably Chor Yuen's *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan*.

Quite similar in plot to *The Rouge Tigress* (1955), a film directed by Chor's mentor Chun Kim and discussed in the first chapter, *Intimate Confessions* offers a daring mix of martial arts and erotic thriller. A young girl, Ai Nu (literally 'love slave'), is kidnapped by a gang and sold to a brothel run by Chun Yi (Betty Pei), an icy lesbian madam. Ai Nu (Lily Ho) at first refuses to cooperate, but a series of cruel punishments, which include being raped by several older local dignitaries, finally forces her into submission. Or at least so it seems. After becoming the brothel's most desired courtesan and learning deadly martial arts skills from Chun Yi, Ai Nu plots her revenge: methodically she starts killing one by one the men who raped her years ago. A young official (Yueh Hua) is sent to bring the criminal to justice. While he quickly realizes Ai Nu is behind the murders, he is unable to stop her since she receives protection from Chun Yi, who is engaged in a lesbian relationship with Ai Nu, and since the lustful dignitaries themselves refuse to believe Ai Nu is capable of such acts. With all rapists killed, Ai Nu then murders the men who kidnapped her as a child and causes a split between Chun Yi and the male co-owner of the brothel. Chun Yi sides with Ai Nu out of love, but when the madam is dying after fighting side by side with her, Ai Nu cruelly reveals she never loved her. Chun Yi asks for one last kiss and Ai Nu, in a moment of compassion, obliges: it turns out Chun has poisoned her through the kiss and the two women die together.

Featuring not one but two femmes fatales in major roles, *Intimate Confessions* offers no happy ending, leaving only one character alive: the detective-like upright official who was unable to prevent the catastrophe. Visually, the film avoids chiaroscuro lighting but stages most of the action at night. In fact, *Intimate Confessions* can be considered a visual masterpiece of the studio era: the nightly swordfights in the snow are beautiful in a poetic kind of way, and the attention to detail and setting is probably the best amongst Chor's numerous 1970s swordplay films. The fights in the snow also seem to betray some Japanese influence, possibly from Toshiro Mifune's famous fight in the snow in *Sword of Doom* (1966).

It could actually be argued that much of the film noir characteristics of 1970s Hong Kong martial arts cinema are the result of the obvious influence from Japanese *chanbara* films as well as revisionist Westerns (including Italian “spaghetti Westerns”). A complex network of linkages is at work here: the first film of Sergio Leone’s “The Man With No Name” trilogy, *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) was an unofficial remake of Akira Kurosawa’s *Yojimbo* (1961). *Yojimbo* in turn is often said to have been inspired by Dashiell Hammett’s noir novel *Red Harvest*. Whether Hammett’s novel was a direct inspiration or not, it is clear that both in Japanese *chanbara* and in the western a revisionist trend developed in the 1960s, involving a more cynical and darker approach to the subject matter and its heroes, who often became more morally ambivalent. Discussing Sam Peckinpah’s Westerns, for instance, Stephen Prince, notes how in these films “the signs of historical eclipse are manifest”, how historical forces are undermining the lives of the heroes, and how Peckinpah set the primitive codes of honor of his outlaw protagonists against “the barbarism of Vietnam-era America” (336). This of course brings to mind John Woo’s films, but also the work of his mentor Zhang Che, who spoke of Peckinpah’s as well as Leone’s influence on his films (89-90).<sup>104</sup> Kurosawa is likewise often regarded as an important influence on different generations of Hong Kong directors, including Zhang, Woo and Johnnie To. To find noirish overtones in some Hong Kong martial arts films is thus not that surprising. After all, just as the exciting cinematography of Japanese *chanbara* was copied and improved upon by Hong Kong filmmakers, and Ennio Morricone’s film scores were shamelessly employed in countless kung fu flicks, it seems quite logical that the morally grey characters and cynical storylines of these foreign films would appeal to Hong Kong directors as well.<sup>105</sup>

### 2.2.2. Deadly Women in Action

A few 1970s films copied the basic formula of *Intimate Confessions* but moved the story to contemporary Hong Kong, making the link to film noir more obvious. The

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<sup>104</sup> Zhang also claims he was the first to insert a gun battle into a martial arts film in *Vengeance!* and notes the influence his use of slow motion shots in the film had on later Hong Kong cinema, especially Woo’s films. All this confirms the status of *Vengeance!* as a somewhat unappreciated landmark in Hong Kong cinema.

<sup>105</sup> A detailed account of Japanese-Hong Kong interactions in action cinema is given by Kinnia Yau Shuk-ting.

female protagonists in these films are to some extent descendants of the female detectives or chivalrous thieves of late 1960s Cantonese cinema, but are now in typical kung fu film fashion driven by revenge instead of altruism. Like *Intimate Confessions*' Ai Nu, this mission for vengeance is usually motivated by rape. Two films of this variety – *The Lady Professional* and *Kiss of Death* will be discussed, but first a few words on a more traditional kind of film noir are appropriate to draw out the particular characteristics of these two female revenge films.

Already briefly mentioned in the general overview of the 1970s crime film, *A Cause to Kill* (1970) is a remake of Alfred Hitchcock's *Dial M for Murder* (1954). The Hong Kong film, however, reverses the gender roles of the original: the murderous spouse in the 1970 film is the wife Xin Li (Ivy Ling), whose husband has cheated on her. It was earlier suggested that this reversal is probably the result of the at the time quickly disappearing female dominance of Hong Kong screens. Although the plot of the Hitchcock film is quite noir-like, *Dial M for Murder* is rarely discussed as a film noir. *A Cause to Kill*, however, makes the noir potential of the original much more explicit: firstly, the remake turns the wife into the one contemplating the perfect murder, transforming her effectively into a femme fatale. Secondly, although the film is made in color, a conscious effort has been done to create a film noir effect: frequently only one source of light is used, and at times colored filters serve to create strong contrasts (usually between black and one primary color). This was clearly a self-conscious strategy of the director, and probably the main reason why the attempted murder takes place in the darkroom of the hobby photographer husband (a detail not present in the original film): the red light of the darkroom underscores the horror of the life-and-death struggle between assassin and victim. Finally, the remake ends on a more tragic note than Hitchcock's film: when Xin Li is uncovered as the one behind the attempted assassination, she locks herself up in the bathroom and kills herself, leaving a message stating that her husband's affair was to blame for her behavior.

Unlike in *A Cause to Kill*, most femmes fatales of the 1970s appeared as action heroines. A minor example of this action trend is *The Lady Professional*. Ge Tianli's father has been murdered and his business burned to the ground by a local gang. Although Ge avenges her father, revenge is not the main concern of the plot (the

father's death is shown via a flashback quite late in the movie). Instead Ge (Lily Ho) is introduced when she adroitly carries out an assassination, creating the impression she is a professional assassin. She is also regarded as such by a blackmailer who has proof of her involvement in the murder of the opening scene. This blackmailer forces her to commit another murder commissioned by a seemingly respectable tycoon. When the gang tries to have her killed after she has fulfilled her mission, she turns against them. With Kuei Chih-hung as the co-director, the film has its darker, more gruesome moments and is, like *The Delinquent*, devoid of straightforwardly good characters. In a rather unusual twist for this type of film, Ge is last shown turning herself over to the police after she has killed the evil tycoon/crime boss. This simultaneously makes her a more righteous character (she knows killing is bad) and frustrates spectators' expectations (we want to see her free, as we know she is not bad at heart).

The grimmest film of the 1970s dealing with a vengeful woman is probably *Kiss of Death*. The film's director Ho Meng-hua was also responsible for the above-mentioned *wuxia* thriller *Ambush* and the despairing indictment of authoritarian state power in the minor cult classic, *The Flying Guillotine* (1975). Like these two films, *Kiss of Death* has a more complex and unusual plot than the average action flick, and combines the other films' cynicism and despair with the sexploitation trend of the 1970s. At the start of the film, the "heroine", Chu Ling (Chen Ping), is brutally raped by a gang. Aside from the obvious psychological trauma caused by this event, Chu soon discovers that she has caught a deadly venereal disease as well. Psychologically unable to resume her former life, she quits her job at the factory, leaves the home of her uncaring parents and goes to work as a hostess in a nightclub. She learns that the crippled and stern nightclub owner Wang (Lo Lieh) is a kung fu expert, and begs him to teach her some fighting skills so that she can take revenge on the rapists. After she tells him what happened to her, Wang decides to help and they soon fall in love. Still, Chu insists on taking revenge and begins to eliminate the gang members one by one, using in true femme fatale fashion at least once her feminine charm to get close to her victim. In a final showdown with the remaining gang members (and a few dozens of their pals!), Chu kills the rapists but afterwards dies from her wounds.

Quite similar in plot to *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan*, *Kiss of Death* in fact had the same scriptwriter, Qiu Gangjian (also known as Qiu Dai Anping).<sup>106</sup> *Kiss of Death* is more obviously set in a film noir milieu: the action takes place in dark alleys, abandoned apartment buildings and the seedy nightclub where Chu works – at one point she even kills one of the rapists in a gothic cemetery. Typical for noir are also the many shadows, sometimes barely visible faces and the glaring neon lights of the nightclub district. In a striking final image, nightclub owner Wang picks up Chu's lifeless body and stands still in silent despair under a lamppost, while in the shadows the police surround him with their guns pulled.

Aside from its noir-like characteristics, *Kiss of Death* (and to a lesser extent, *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan*) can also be regarded as a Hong Kong example of the international 1970s exploitation cycle of rape-revenge films. While the exploitation element is obvious in *Kiss of Death*, however, it should be stressed that, unlike many films in the genre, the rape scene is rather short and shocking mostly through montage and mise-en-scène rather than through explicit detail. Much more attention is paid to the aftermath: Chu's dealing with her trauma, the discovery of her disease, her relationship with Wang and friendship with one of the other bargirls, and finally the series of murders she commits to get her revenge. The affinities between classical Hollywood film noir and the rape revenge film are rather obvious: rape-revenge films take film noir's femme fatale and put her at the center of a more violent and sexually explicit tale that is however equally despairing and fatalistic.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Early on in his career, Qiu Dai Anping wrote several scripts for Zhang Che. In the 1980s and 1990s, he was involved in many Hong Kong New Wave films, such as Ann Hui's *The Story of Woo Viet* (1981) and *Boat People* (1983), and Stanley Kwan's *Rouge* (1988), *Actress* (1991) and *Full Moon in New York* (1990). As can be seen from the above examples, his scripts often feature strong female characters.

<sup>107</sup> In her *The New Avengers*, Jacinda Read also points out the similarities of (neo-) noir with rape revenge films and erotic thrillers. For a classic analysis of the rape-revenge genre, see Carol Clover's *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, especially chapter three "Getting Even" (114-165). Rape-revenge films did not become a very popular genre in 1970s and 1980s Hong Kong, but a few were made over the years, including Dennis Yu's *The Beasts* (1980), Lee Chi-ngai's *Vengeance is Mine* (1988) and Lam Nai-choi's *Her Vengeance* (1988). This last film is very interesting as it is a remake of *Kiss of Death* but questions the original's (and with it much of Hong Kong cinema's) endorsement of bloody vengeance and heroic death. The film will be discussed at more length in the next chapter. In the 1990s, more films of the type were made, especially during the Category III boom at the beginning of the decade.

The deadly women in action in *The Lady Professional*, *Kiss of Death* and other Hong Kong films of the 1970s are obviously the mothers (or maybe grandmothers) of the contemporary “action babes” described by Marc O’Day (201-18). Like their more recent counterparts, they combine both elegant beauty and amazing fighting skills. But a few differences from both their direct 1960s predecessors and their more recent incarnations in both Hollywood and Hong Kong are worth noting. Compared to the Cantonese Jane Bonds of the 1960s, the 1970s avenging women are much more anti-traditional: no longer do they commit crimes to help the poor and uphold a sense of justice, and no longer do they find lasting happiness in heterosexual romance. Unlike their recent incarnation, however, these heroines more often seem to need a traumatic past (usually a rape) in order to explain their transgression of traditional patriarchal gender norms. This is a marked difference from the contemporary action babes, who, as O’Day notes, are all professionals and are not pathologised or motivated by personal revenge or gain (208).<sup>108</sup>

### 2.3. Conclusion

The history of the Hong Kong crime film is not very well understood. In her work on gangster movies in Hollywood and Hong Kong, for instance, Martha P. Nochimson states that *A Better Tomorrow* is the first Hong Kong gangster film (74).<sup>109</sup> This chapter hopefully has brought a much more nuanced account of the crime film’s origins in the 1970s. Noteworthy is that a fairly consistent evolution can be charted from Zhang Che’s early Republican films made at the start of the decade to John Woo’s “hero films” in modern Hong Kong fifteen years later: thematically they are almost identical, the only difference is that Woo has given his knightly warriors a modern outfit, put more stress on the theme of brotherhood, and replaced spectacular kung fu with spectacular gunplay. The genealogy of Woo’s 1980s films will be traced in detail in the next chapter.

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<sup>108</sup> As will become clear in the lengthier discussion of this topic in Chapter Three, however, the evolution of female warrior representations in Hong Kong cinema is not quite so straightforward. One could think for instance of the female knights-errant in King Hu’s period martial arts films, who follow the same moral and professional code as the men, or of Angela Mao’s appearance as a female cop in *Stoner* (1974).

<sup>109</sup> Nochimson does recognize some precedents in Zhang Che’s kung fu films, but completely overlooks the films discussed in this chapter

But placing the evolution of the crime film in such a linear scheme is probably too simplistic. In fact, the development of the heroic gangster from Zhang Che's films, via mid-1970s works like Hua Shan's *Brotherhood*, to John Woo's late 1980s films took place against the background of a majority of films that were more interested in realism and "true crime". Figures like Johnny Mak and Kuei Chih-hung played an important role in this type of films in the 1970s – a type that witnessed a strong revival in the early 1990s, with the success of the Johnny Mak produced *To Be Number One* (1991) and the flourishing of the Category III true crime genre. Both streams reflected a strong local sensibility and pioneered the indigenization of Hong Kong-made films – one through tinkering with the generic elements of the gangster film, resulting in a recognizable "Hong Kong" genre format strongly influenced by Chinese martial arts literature and cinema, the other through location shooting, depiction of real Hong Kong triad rituals and crime fighting practices, and through the screen adaptation of real crime stories. In this indigenization movement of the 1970s only Cantonese comedy surpasses the importance of the gangster genre.

In *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* Stephen Teo noted the importance of *Jumping Ash* as a transitional work "pointing to new directions and preparing the way for other, younger directors to venture into more valid new wave aesthetics" (145). This chapter has attempted to address an apparent blind spot in the writing of Hong Kong cinema's history. The extensive attention paid to the young new wave directors has caused the neglect of those filmmakers of the same generation who worked for the big Shaw Brothers studio and equally contributed a lot to the development of Hong Kong crime films and the appearance of a Hong Kong identity in film. Johnny Mak's *Ten Sensational Cases* is mentioned quite regularly by critics for instance, but no one discusses the remarkable *The Criminals* films, even though some of the episodes in this series are examples of rather excellent filmmaking. Of the neglected younger Shaw directors such as Hua Shan, Kuei Chih-hung and Sun Zhong, especially Kuei's crime films seem in need of reappraisal, as this director exhibits a remarkable visual flair and experimentalism in many of his 1970s works. In any case, it is clear that the New Wave was actually less revolutionary than is sometimes claimed, as they for the most part built on existent trends in the cinema. Their contributions to the crime film genre will be examined in the next chapter.

While the appearance of noir-like sensibilities in some 1970s Hong Kong films can hardly be traced back to one single homegrown or foreign source, this chapter has identified their presence as part of the pervasive influence of revisionist Westerns (especially the works of Sergio Leone and Sam Peckinpah) and post-war Japanese *chanbara* (primarily Akira Kurosawa's films). The darker, more violent, often psychologically scarred, solitary heroes, and the male group living according to traditional codes of honor in a rapidly changing and corrupt world in these genres clearly influenced major Hong Kong directors like Zhang Che, Chor Yuen and others. Zhang's promotion of a fatalistic macho masculinity (Desser), in combination with influences from film industries elsewhere (Japan, Hollywood, Italy,...), had a lasting impact on Hong Kong cinema and its noirish tendencies.

One of the archetypal figures of classical Hollywood film noir, the femme fatale, appeared in a small number of 1970s Hong Kong films in a more violent, eroticized version. It seems however that at this point in time, her transgression of patriarchal norms often needed to be explained by a severe trauma (usually rape) inflicted on her by men. While film noir is one generic element in these films, the avenging woman can also be seen as an outgrowth of the female knight-errant tradition in Chinese martial arts fiction and as a Hong Kong variation of the protagonists in rape-revenge films internationally. Their presence in Hong Kong films nonetheless complicates Joelle Collier's argument about the Confucian, patriarchal culture which supposedly causes late 1990s Hong Kong films noirs to lack a strong femme fatale figure (145-150) – a topic that will be addressed in Chapter Five.

## CHAPTER THREE

# Hong Kong Noir and the Crime Film: Development in the 1980s

### 3.1. Introduction

The 1980s is generally considered the golden era of Hong Kong cinema: not only dominated Hong Kong-made action films, comedies, romances, crime films and so on the local box office, but overseas markets proved receptive to the Hong Kong product as well. While young directors further strengthened the revitalization of Cantonese filmmaking begun in the 1970s and thoroughly upgraded production values using special effects, spectacular stunts and explosions in mostly contemporary urban films, new companies appeared to challenge the declining Shaw Brothers and still buoyant Golden Harvest. With the end of British colonialism in sight and Hong Kong set to return to Mainland China in 1997, the issue of a distinct Hong Kong identity and anxiety over Hong Kong's uncertain future became an important factor in films, although in general clear political positioning was rare as a result of censorship.

The decade was also marked by an increasing dominance of crime films, a trend that only abated in the new millennium. This chapter will first briefly give some background information on changes in Hong Kong society, the film industry and its genres in the 1980s. Then it will detail the crime film's importance to the so-called New Wave filmmakers at the beginning of the decade, and its definitive breakthrough with the appearance of John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* in 1986. Woo's seminal gangster film exerted a strong influence until the end of the decade and this section concludes with an analysis of the *yingxiong pian* 英雄片 ("hero films") genre to which it gave rise, drawing attention to how those films were not mere carbon copies of the original but inventively modified it. Next, the discussion is organized around two important characters in the Hong Kong crime film: the immigrant gangster, so common to Hollywood gangster films, who in 1980s Hong Kong cinema gets a whole new dimension, and the Hong Kong male and female versions of the "Dirty Harry"-style cop, which draw on a long Chinese tradition as

well as Western precedents. Finally, the emergence of a first wave of Hong Kong noir in the late 1980s will be discussed.

### **3.2. Changes in Society, the Film Industry and Genres**

After astonishing growth in the manufacturing sector throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Hong Kong started to turn itself into more of an international financial center and capital market from the late 1970s onwards (S. Tsang 175).<sup>110</sup> At the same time, the PRC started to open up increasingly for trade, and Hong Kong could resume its old role as “the premier entrepot of China” – a development that further strengthened its position as a financial center as well (S. Tsang 176). While manufacturing steadily declined in importance as a contributor to the GDP, Tsang puts this in perspective by pointing out how in real terms the value of manufacturing continued to expand significantly until 1992 (176-7). Already in the late 1980s, however, Hong Kong entrepreneurs had been moving their factories across the border, mainly to Guangdong province, where labor was cheap and abundant. As a result, the economies of Hong Kong and the Mainland became increasingly interlinked.

Somewhat paradoxically, the presence of the Mainland north of its border at the same time started to create great anxiety in the colony. As the lease of the New Territories was approaching its end date, the British governor MacLehose had approached Beijing in 1979 in the hope of extending British sovereignty over the colony beyond 1997. This effort somewhat backfired, with Deng Xiaoping insisting that Hong Kong return to the PRC, and led to Sino-British negotiations between 1982 and 1984 in which Hong Kong people themselves had no part. As stated in the 1984 Joint Declaration, the Handover would effectively take place in 1997, while under the framework of “one country, two systems” Hong Kong was promised a relatively high degree of autonomy as a “Special Administrative Region” of the PRC (S. Tsang 211-27). With the memory of the Cultural Revolution still fresh,

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<sup>110</sup> Tsang points at the lifting of a moratorium on the issue of new banking licenses in 1978 as well as the merger of several stock exchanges with the government regulator (creating ‘The Stock Exchange of Hong Kong’) in 1986 as key developments in this process.

however, anxiety in the colony ran high, and the “1997 factor” made itself felt in various aspects of life, including cinema.

The directors that most often tended to explore issues of Hong Kong identity and people’s feelings towards the Mainland belong generally to a group of young filmmakers often collectively described as the Hong Kong New Wave, which appeared on the scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These directors – including most prominently Tsui Hark, Ann Hui, Yim Ho, Allen Fong and Patrick Tam – often had received training overseas and/or apprenticed at local television stations before moving into filmmaking.<sup>111</sup> In the previous chapter the New Wave’s achievements (especially regarding the process of cinematic localization) were brought into perspective by highlighting the contributions of directors at work in the Shaw Brothers studio, but maybe a better way to understand what was happening in Hong Kong cinema at the time is to regard the New Wave as the core of a wider generational shift in the industry – in Cheuk Pak-tong’s words “a huge wave passing through a Hong Kong film industry that was then at a low tide” (7).<sup>112</sup> The young Shaw directors discussed earlier can reasonably be considered a part of this broader shift.<sup>113</sup> Despite the problems with the term “New Wave”, it will continue to be used

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<sup>111</sup> Some scholars refer to the new directors appearing on the scene in the mid-1980s as the “Second Wave” (Teo, *Extra Dimensions* 160, 184-203; Zhang 254-6). These directors were to some extent a delayed part of the first New Wave, and included filmmakers such as Stanley Kwan, Eddie Fong, Tony Ching Siu-tung and Wong Kar-wai (who had worked with the “original” New Wave filmmakers), and newcomers such as Eddie Fong, Clara Law, Jacob Cheung, Mabel Cheung, Alex Law and Lawrence Ah Mon (also known as Lawrence Lau).

<sup>112</sup> Cheuk, however, goes on to discuss the New Wave in the usual, rather narrow way, and starts his book by categorizing certain directors as “core auteurs” (Tsui Hark, Ann Hui, Patrick Tam, Allen Fong, Yim Ho and Alex Cheung), and others as “less experimental, non-core auteurs” (Kirk Wong, Clifford Choi, Lau Shing-hon, Terry Tong, Peter Yung and Dennis Yu). He also chooses not to discuss filmmakers who left the industry after one or two films (such as Lam Kuen and Ng Siu-wan), filmmakers who remained mostly in television (Rachel Zen, Wong Chi and Lee Pui-ken), directors who emerged in an “earlier period of the New Wave” (Leong Po-chih) and directors on the “fringes of the New Wave” (Johnny Mak) (8). While a narrowing of scope is of course necessary for Cheuk’s project, the category of the New Wave becomes rather subjective and based on unstable definitions of what counts as “commercial” and “experimental” filmmaking. The variety in output of the New Wave “auteurs” complicates things further (for instance, Tsui Hark’s “commercial turn” after his initial more “experimental” films). As a result critics and scholars disagree about which directors belong to the “New Wave” and which ones do not – Stephen Teo for instance notes how Kirk Wong has “slipped in and out of New Wave status” (*Extra Dimensions* 148). Finally, the “New Wave” is also a retrospective category in that Teo suddenly considers a director like Johnnie To a part of the New Wave when the latter starts to make his mark on Hong Kong cinema in the late 1990s (Teo, *Wuxia Tradition* 160). In this sense, the term “New Wave” is functioning almost like a genre or a marker of critical prestige, rather than as a specific moment or artistic movement in late 1970s and early 1980s Hong Kong cinema.

<sup>113</sup> Conceiving the transformation of Hong Kong filmmaking as a generational project, instead of focusing on a select group of prestigious, more “artistic” directors, makes it easier to acknowledge

here in its narrow sense: as referring to those young, often Western-educated directors who had apprenticed in television and made their debuts between 1978 and 1984. As Cheuk has pointed out, their influence on the film industry as a whole lies mostly in their adoption of practices from their days in television, including the system of collective creation (of scripts), attention to background research, the development of art direction as a significant aspect of filmmaking, frequent on-location shooting, and the hiring of musicians to make soundtracks instead of using “canned music” (236-9).<sup>114</sup>

The fact that they were in the position to have any impact at all, however, was to a large extent the result of market forces, as already suggested in the quote from Cheuk above. Stimulated by demand in the Southeast Asian and Taiwanese markets in the mid- to late-1970s, independent companies backed by conglomerates had started to appear (Lent 101). While these new players proved willing to support the young filmmakers in their first endeavors, few of them became a lasting presence. In the 1980s one company appeared to challenge the dominance of Golden Harvest, which by that time had replaced the declining Shaw Brothers. This company, Cinema City, was established in 1980 by three comedians (Dean Shek, Karl Maka, and Raymond Wong), and “packaged” its films carefully (employing upgraded production values, special effects, stunts, shooting in international locations, as well as aggressive publicity campaigns), resulting in a series of box office successes (most prominently the *Aces Go Places* series launched in 1982) (Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong* 70). Like Golden Harvest, it allowed its key members to set up their own branch companies – the most successful example being Tsui Hark’s Film Workshop established in 1984 (Y. Zhang 251). Other companies making an impact in the 1980s were Seasonal Film (1974), Always Good Film (1982), Sil-Metropole (1982), and D&B Films (1984) (Lent 103).

In terms of genre, the 1980s were equally vibrant. The early New Wave works were remarkable for the diversity of genres they introduced, but also for the tonal

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important filmmakers who do not fit into the narrow definition of the New Wave but belong to the same generation, such as John Woo, Johnny Mak, Johnnie To, and many others.

<sup>114</sup> Broadly speaking, the New Wave was also daring in depicting taboo subjects, using innovative narrative techniques and cinematic language, and broaching new content and themes (Cheuk 240-3).

consistency with which they approached these genres – generally avoiding the often uneasy mixing of humor, drama, action, eroticism, and other attractions that tended to mar films produced in the big studios. After their initial works, however, many New Wave filmmakers were absorbed by the big studios where generic hybridity reached new heights.<sup>115</sup> Despite the overall blurring of genres, certain trends in the 1980s can be discerned: firstly, kung fu films often left the period settings behind to take in modern urban backgrounds, usually as action-adventure films (Sek, “Advancement” 55; Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong* 207). Secondly, comedy continued to rule the box office throughout the decade, challenged only temporarily by the trend of “hero films” launched by *A Better Tomorrow* in 1986. Another important development in the 1980s was the prominence of horror following the box-office successes of Sammo Hung’s *Encounter of the Spooky Kind* (1980) and *The Dead and the Deadly* (1982), which, typically, added comedy and kung fu to the mix (Cheng, “Spell” 20). Minor trends included a series of youth films in the early 1980s (usually by New Wave directors) and so-called “yuppie films” at the end of the decade (Teo, *Extra Dimensions* 156; Law, “80s” 74). The breakthrough of the crime film was however the decade’s most significant development.

### 3.3. The Role of the New Wave

While several New Wave filmmakers brought a fresh, social realist look to local cinema, it must be stressed that most of them rarely moved beyond existing genres: Patrick Tam and Tsui Hark debuted with swordplay films (Tsui with *The Butterfly Murders* in 1979, Tam with *The Sword* in 1980), Ann Hui with a mystery thriller (*The Secret*, 1979), while Dennis Yu borrowed heavily from Western rape-revenge films for his *The Beasts* (1980). What is striking about many of the early New Wave films is how they are often very bleak visually and story-wise – Teo has rightly pointed out their “fatalistic noirish look,” a point that will be returned to later (“New Wave” 17). Teo’s observation certainly applies to one of the most popular genres amongst New Wave directors, the crime film.

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<sup>115</sup> Cheuk describes how at Cinema City, films would be divided into nine parts, each ten minutes long. Before the plot was created, the filmmakers would determine the appropriate proportion of special effects, gags, and action in each part (24).

As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, the now so familiar Hong Kong gangster and police genres were a relatively new phenomenon in Hong Kong cinema. Although the origins of the modern day action-heavy crime genre can be traced to the late 1960s, it only started to become more prominent in the second half of the 1970s. A fairly early example, Leong Po-chih's and Josephine Siao's *Jumping Ash* (1976), is often considered a precursor to the New Wave, suggesting the attraction of the genre to the young filmmakers. Of the New Wave directors, it was Alex Cheung who specialized in the genre. His debut, *Cops and Robbers* (1979), initially stays neatly within genre conventions, employing quite successfully stock characters and plot elements (the tough but righteous cop, the inexperienced rookie who delivers comic relief, the psychopathic robber, and so on). Two-thirds into the film, however, Cheung allows the main protagonist (played by Wong Chung, probably the first star to specialize in policeman roles) to be abruptly killed by the robber. Drawing attention to the genre's conventions by first affirming and then breaking with them, Cheung leads the viewer into a state of bewilderment and does not let up until the very end as the psychopath goes on to (nearly) kill all the remaining protagonists, only to be brought to a stop through the rookie cop's sheer luck. As a result, the film is genuinely thrilling, while the death of the protagonist also powerfully drives home Cheung's main theme repeated throughout the film: the randomness of fate. Cheung's second film is almost as impressive. In *Man on the Brink* (1981), a landmark in the undercover cop genre further discussed in Chapter Four, Cheung again skillfully plays with audience expectations. Like *Cops and Robbers*, *Man on the Brink* offers some exciting action scenes, which are generally more realistic and gory than was common at the time, and which even employed slow-motion in a way foreshadowing what John Woo would do a few years later in *A Better Tomorrow* (1986).<sup>116</sup>

Chow Yun-fat meanwhile received some initial critical success with his portrayal of a Vietnamese illegal immigrant and professional killer in Ann Hui's *The Story of Woo Viet* (1981). Hui expertly transforms what on paper looks like a straightforward assassin film into a gripping exploration of human trafficking and the grim fate of

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<sup>116</sup> Interestingly, *Man on the Brink* also contains a scene where a gangster burns a bank note and uses it to light his cigarette, rather similar to the famous scene in *A Better Tomorrow*. The first Hong Kong film to contain this shot, however, was *Anti-Corruption* (1975).

illegal immigrants. Her sophisticated, social realist treatment shifts the focus away from action (even though future Tsui Hark collaborator Tony Ching is credited as action choreographer), and makes the film truly rise above its genre. Instead of the usual hyperbolic feelings, Hui expresses the protagonists' complex emotions and state of mind in a subtle and oblique way. For instance, the somewhat hackneyed device of narration through the voice-over reading of letters between Chow's refugee assassin and a Hong Kong social worker who has befriended him gets an effective twist at the end, when the optimistic, "happy ending"-like content of the refugee's letter contradicts his miserable predicament depicted on-screen.

The New Wave filmmakers were certainly capable of making more conventional genre pictures, however, as already seen with Alex Cheung's films. Another outstanding example is Terry Tong's *Coolie Killer* (1982), which set a new benchmark for the action crime film in Hong Kong. A group of ex-coolies, now professional killers, are murdered under mysterious circumstances, with only their leader (Charlie Chin, who here somehow resembles Alain Delon) surviving. A complex conspiracy is gradually uncovered while the protagonist has to simultaneously deal with gangsters who are out to kill him, and a dogged cop who is hot on his trail – the latter however gradually comes to respect the killer, and vice versa. This basic storyline (along with the stylish action) of course brings to mind Woo's *The Killer*. *Coolie Killer* further prefigures the later film by adopting a noirish atmosphere and style.

Worth final mention is *Long Arm of the Law* (1984), directed by Johnny Mak. Mak, who only has this one directorial credit to his name, preferred serving as a producer and behind-the-scenes person, but put a strong personal stamp on most films he was involved in – much like Tsui Hark and Johnnie To did when they began to serve as producers. The first of a series of four films, *Long Arm of the Law* follows a group of Mainlanders sneaking illegally into Hong Kong to carry out a heist, do some shopping and return home with the loot. Sadly, things do not go quite as planned and violent shootouts ensue. The theme of Mainland criminals entering Hong Kong will be discussed below; at the moment its influence on the genre is of more concern. Mak's film not only introduced to Hong Kong cinema such elements as people wielding dual handguns and the staging of Mexican standoffs, but also stressed the

values of brotherhood and loyalty between the Mainland robbers by contrasting them with the treacherous Hong Kong police and the cowardly local gangsters. The stage was clearly set for John Woo to appear on the scene.

### **3.4. The Gangster Film**

#### **3.4.1. *A Better Tomorrow*: Heroic Gangsters, Studio Influences and Impact**

A recent book on gangster films in Hollywood and Hong Kong claims *A Better Tomorrow* is the first Hong Kong gangster film (Nochimson 73-4). This is of course a serious mistake, as the previous chapters already have made clear. Although of the same generation, John Woo is usually not considered a member of the New Wave, being a director who rose through the studio system and started out at Shaw Brothers where he worked under Zhang Che. This different experience in fact strongly influenced Woo, and some of the conventions and themes of the 1970s studio films are what people nowadays often attribute to Woo's directorial vision. By briefly mentioning some of the non-New Wave works that prefigure *A Better Tomorrow* and Woo's later films, it will be shown how his work was much more derivative and generic than often assumed. Before doing so, it is useful to briefly summarize the film's plot.

Based on Lung Kong's *Story of a Discharged Prisoner* (1967), *A Better Tomorrow* tells the story of Sung Ji-ho (Ti Lung), a gangster involved in a counterfeiting business with his close friend Mark (Chow Yun-fat). When Ho's father asks him to go straight for the sake of his younger brother Kit (Leslie Cheung) who is becoming a policeman, Ho promises to do so after one final deal in Taiwan. Naturally, things go very, very wrong: the Taiwanese gangsters betray Ho, who helps his follower Shing (Waise Lee) escape but ends up in jail himself, while at home his father is murdered. Mark avenges his sworn brother by killing the Taiwanese traitor, but in the process is shot in the leg. A few years later, Ho is released from jail and still determined to leave the underworld. Although he quickly finds work in Uncle Ken's (Kenneth Tsang) taxi company, going straight proves very difficult. Not only does his brother Kit hate him (for causing their father's death, but also for hampering his career in the police force), Ho also has to worry about the police and is under

pressure from his old counterfeiting organization (now led by Shing) to rejoin their ranks. Additionally, Mark, now lame, hopes Ho will team up with him to reclaim their former glory. Eventually, after Shing and his men almost kill Kit and vandalize Uncle Ken's garage, Ho joins Mark in stealing the organization's counterfeiting plate. Everything comes to a head in a violent shootout at the docks, where Mark dies while expounding on the meaning of brotherhood and admonishing Kit to forgive Ho. Eventually, when Shing goes to surrender to the police taunting the two brothers that he can just buy his way to freedom, Ho receives a gun from Kit and kills Shing. Cuffing himself to Kit, Ho takes the blame for what happened and the two brothers finally reconcile.

The influence of *A Better Tomorrow* on the development of the Hong Kong crime film is maybe best illustrated by the fact that Woo's film spawned its own subgenre, the *yingxiong pian*, or "hero film", which flourished between 1987 and 1989 as the industry frantically tried to recreate the enormous success of the original. The "hero" here refers directly to *A Better Tomorrow's* title in Chinese, "*Yingxiong bense*" or "The Essence of Heroes," and was personified by Chow Yun-fat who went on to play this role in many films of this period.<sup>117</sup> The choice to name the subgenre after the heroic aspect of the original reflects this theme's primary relevance to local critics and filmgoers. This heroism is motivated by the values associated with the Chinese term *yi* 义 (or *yiqi* 义气) – brotherhood, loyalty and righteousness – with the stress in the *yingxiong pian* strongly on the first.<sup>118</sup> As a rule, the main dramatic conflict in films belonging to this subgenre involves

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<sup>117</sup> Other actors who made their mark playing gangsters at this time are Andy Lau, Alex Man, Shing Fui-on and Roy Cheung.

<sup>118</sup> The values surrounding *yi* are central to martial arts literature and cinema, and were first written down between 104-91 BCE by the Han historian Sima Qian in his *Shiji* 史记 (*Records of History*), as Stephen Teo points out (*Wuxia* 17-8). The knights-errant in fiction are called *xia* 侠, and the combination of *xia* and *yi* (*xia yi* 侠义) is translated by James Liu as "altruism" (4). Xu Sinian claims that in the Confucian tradition "knights-errant act on the principle of *yi* largely as a bulwark against the notion of *li* [利], or self-profit" (qtd. in Teo, *Wuxia* 18). Teo further states that "knight-errantry in its Confucianist spirit presupposes chivalry, altruism, benevolence and justice for the common good" (18). The values described quite clearly seem applicable to many Hong Kong crime film heroes as well. Another of Teo's descriptions resonates deeply with many Hong Kong gangster and police films: "Sima Qian defended *xia* on their use of violence and their lawlessness. The breakdown of the imperial houses during the Warring States period had resulted in a perpetual state of political chaos and anarchy. The people could not count on the rule of law. In such situations, *xia* resorted to violence as the only way to ensure justice and defending the common people against tyrants and warlords" (19). In an interview quoted in Lisa Odham Stokes and Michael Hoover's *City on Fire*, director Stanley Tong describes *yi* as follows: "*Yi* means when you are a friend, you can give up your life for a friend" (40). The stress in his definition is thus more on the brotherhood aspect.

brotherhood, with each new film detailing the variable, but without exception enormous, pressures bearing on the (near sacrosanct) relationship between two (or more) brothers. In *A Better Tomorrow*, this is Ho's troubled relationship with his blood brother Kit, as well as the pressure this relationship exerts on Ho's sworn brotherhood with Mark, since Ho tries to go straight for the sake of his younger brother much to Mark's dismay.<sup>119</sup> The highly sentimental feelings between men, by Western viewers often perceived as homoerotic, were not necessarily interpreted this way by Chinese audiences, as the films' values hark back to the long tradition of literary and cinematic martial arts familiar to them (Fang 53). Interestingly, although it still pays abundant lip service to the values of brotherhood in the dialogues, Woo's *A Better Tomorrow 2* is structured more like a revenge story, again highlighting his indebtedness to the martial arts genre.<sup>120</sup>

In essence a "modern-dress version of the old martial arts movies" (Li, "The Return" 176), *A Better Tomorrow* and the *yingxiongpiian* are nevertheless different from the 1960s and 1970s films in that they focus much more on the problems besetting brotherhood. As Li Cheuk-to has noted, the older kung fu and *wuxia* films concentrated in general on an individual hero engaged in a life-or-death struggle against an oppressive world ("The Return" 176). It should be mentioned though that Woo's preoccupations already appear in *The Blood Brothers* (1973), a film by his mentor, Zhang Che, on which Woo served as an assistant director. As the martial arts connection of Woo's films is fairly well-documented, the following will focus on crime films made during the transition from period martial arts domination to the arrival of the *yingxiongpiian* (mid-1970s to mid-1980s). These are films that are generally not considered to be New Wave films and that are often products of the Shaw Brothers studio, illustrating how Woo not only absorbed New Wave influences as described above (after all, Tsui Hark produced *A Better Tomorrow*), but also clearly exhibited his roots in a pre-New Wave studio system and a group of young filmmakers who, instead of going abroad to study or joining local television studios like the New Wave directors, climbed the ranks in the big studios. Actor-

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<sup>119</sup> One should note the slightly different connotations of the English term used to refer to *A Better Tomorrow* and the films it inspired: as argued at the beginning of the next chapter, "heroic bloodshed" should be seen as referring to a wider category of films than the term "*yingxiongpiian*" (hero films).

<sup>120</sup> At one point, Ti Lung even attacks his enemies with a sword, recalling his appearances as a heroic swordsman in countless Zhang Che and Chor Yuen films.

directors like Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung and Yuen Biao also belong to this group, but for the early crime films it is mostly a trio of directors at Shaw Brothers that is relevant. As detailed in Chapter Two, Kuei Chih-hung, Hua Shan and Sun Zhong were younger filmmakers at Shaw Brothers who had a chance to experiment in different genres (including the crime film) at a time when the kung fu and *wuxia* genres were in decline and many of Shaw's stalwart directors approached retirement age or death. From the mid-1970s into the early 1980s, these filmmakers produced a number of action crime films featuring gangster protagonists as modern-day embodiments of the traditional chivalric values of *yi*.

The first film dealing with contemporary triads in a more realistic fashion, *The Teahouse* (1974) – directed by another Zhang Che protégé, Kuei Chih-hung – already introduced some of the themes Woo would also explore, including the existence of “good” triads that are threatened by greed-driven, younger ones, and the accompanying nostalgia for a (mostly imaginary) time when the values of *yi* were still respected. The discourse on *yi* also features in Kuei's *Godfather from Canton* (1982), which uncomfortably combines the rise-and-fall story of a gangster with elements of the political thriller and eventually concludes with the conventional kung fu “heroic-death-through-vengeance”. *Yi* in this film is unconventionally embodied in a corrupt lowly policeman who eventually becomes the leading criminal in town!<sup>121</sup>

The director who most obviously pioneered the *yingxiongopian's* obsession with brotherhood is however Hua Shan (also known as Hua Yihong), as can already be glimpsed from the titles of two of his crime films: *Brotherhood* (1976) and *The Brothers* (1979). In the first film, Hua focuses on a heroic gangster who, like a

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<sup>121</sup> Another link between Kuei and Woo can be found in Kuei's outstanding noirish martial arts film, *Killer Constable* (1980). Towards the end of this film, Kuei stages a confrontation between the “Killer Constable” Leng Tianying (Chen Guantai, also the lead in *The Teahouse*) and the robber Fang Fengjia (martial arts regular Gu Feng) he is trying to catch. The wounded Leng unwittingly finds shelter in Fang's house where he is cared for by the latter's blind daughter. When Fang returns home and finds his enemy there, the two men, swords drawn, pretend to be old friends in front of the blind girl and take their fight outdoors. Soon a mutual respect grows between them, especially after it turns out that they are both victims of a scheming government official. Fang eventually helps Leng survive so he can avenge them both. This set-up is remarkably similar to that in *The Killer*, and both directors most likely borrowed the scene with the blind girl from Zhang Che's *The Invincible Fist* (1969). Zhang possibly got the idea from Lung Kong's *The Window* (1968), where a somewhat similar scene takes place at the end of the film.

modern-day Guan Yu 关羽, embodies *yi*; the concept also features prominently in dialogues throughout the film.<sup>122</sup> In *Brotherhood* women still play an important role, both as love interest and as main villain (in this period a short vogue for female gangsters existed). It is thus to avenge his lover that the male protagonist goes on a suicide mission against the female gang boss who killed the other woman out of jealousy. The switch to male-only gangster dramas is however a trend that *A Better Tomorrow* merely reinforced, as can be seen in Hua's *The Brothers*. This film deals with the "brothers-on-different-sides-of-the-law" theme that would return many times in the wake of Woo's 1986 box-office success. *The Brothers* does not have the Chow Yun-fat character of *A Better Tomorrow* and as a result focuses more on the conflict between adherence to the law and loyalty to a brother. The film is schizophrenic in its treatment of the topic: the criminal rise of the heroic gangster brother is glorified, while at the same time the policeman brother is depicted as being genuinely motivated by a desire to fight crime and create a fair and lawful society.<sup>123</sup> A possible explanation for this schizophrenia is censorship. Films of this period frequently glorified gangsters but had to make compromises to get through the censorship process.

Besides Johnny Mak's *Long Arm of the Law*, the most direct precursor to *A Better Tomorrow* is probably *The Club* (1981), the debut of Kirk Wong, who is generally not considered a "true" member of the New Wave. The film focuses on what is in essence a nascent triad organization: three sworn brothers run successful businesses in Hong Kong's nightlife entertainment world and have plans to expand their influence. Much more realistic than Woo's films (and in this way similar to the New Wave directors), *The Club* details the daily life and business in a Hong Kong nightclub, which typically operates in the murky area between legal and illegal enterprise. As the elder brother is betrayed and killed by a potential business partner, lots of fighting erupts as the remaining two friends have to fend off gangsters attacking the nightclub and make sure their elder brother is avenged.

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<sup>122</sup> Guan Yu was a general during the late Eastern Han dynasty and the Three Kingdoms period (late 2<sup>nd</sup> century and early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE). Fictionalized in the *Sanguo yanyi* 三国演义 (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*), Guan has since been deified and stands for loyalty and righteousness. Policemen as well as triad gangs worship him.

<sup>123</sup> The policeman brother is played by Danny Lee, in an early version of the role he became identified with a few years later.

To summarize, the themes of brotherhood, loyalty and righteousness in a violent melodramatic gangster film were nothing new when *A Better Tomorrow* was made. With this clarified, it becomes more obvious in which ways Woo was an innovator. His main contribution to Hong Kong and global cinema was the creation of aesthetically pleasing depictions of violence, essentially doing for contemporary action what King Hu, Zhang Che and others had done for the martial arts film (not coincidentally, one English term for the subgenre of films inspired by *A Better Tomorrow* is “bullet ballet”). The tendency to stylize modern action was already present in films starting from the beginning of the decade: the stunts, explosions and action choreography in successful action comedies such as the *Aces Go Places* series (first appearing in 1982) are examples, but also in non-comedic films did action look unusually stylized, as in Wong Jing’s *Mercenaries from Hong Kong* (1982).<sup>124</sup> Woo of course took it all to a new level by using cinematic techniques such as shooting with multiple cameras (something originally introduced by Akira Kurosawa), cutting between slow-motion and real-time (as in the work of Arthur Penn and Sam Peckinpah), and, according to Karen Fang, by developing a signature “Woo shot” that is now regularly used in films made around the world – a shot “combining a close-up with a rapid rack focus during an action sequence” (95-96).<sup>125</sup>

In terms of the crime film as a genre in Hong Kong, Woo and *A Better Tomorrow* are relevant because they gave rise to the *yingxiongopian* subgenre, already described above. The *yingxiongopian* proliferated until 1989, after which they rapidly faded away as a distinct genre because audiences began to tire of its persistent focus on the theme of brotherhood.<sup>126</sup> Still, there was also enough flexibility for other directors to

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<sup>124</sup> This film stars Ti Lung and deals with a group of war veterans who initially go on a mission to the Vietnamese jungle but soon return to Hong Kong to fight a powerful criminal organization. Reminiscent of the Rambo films and with a plot resembling that of the Hollywood film *Wild Geese* (1978), it also includes at least one somewhat homoerotic scene with Ti Lung holding and almost kissing his dying friend. The film is actually quite similar to Woo’s *Heroes Shed No Tears* (1986) shot in 1983 as *The Sunset Warrior* but then shelved by the studio, which re-edited it and released it after *A Better Tomorrow*’s success (Law, “Comparative Study” 67-8).

<sup>125</sup> Teo has made a point similar to the one made here, stating that, “in purely conceptual terms, he [= Woo] had not done anything new.” Teo, however, also regards Woo as the modernizer of old concepts present in the action genre since the 1960s (*Extra Dimensions* 175). It is the latter view that is contested here to some degree: other directors had done much of the “modernizing” work before Woo made *A Better Tomorrow*.

<sup>126</sup> Filmmakers would of course occasionally parody, allude to or try to emulate the success of *A Better Tomorrow*. A very recent example is *Invisible Target* (2007), which in Chinese is entitled

create their own interpretation of the template provided by *A Better Tomorrow*, as will be illustrated below.

Probably the first *A Better Tomorrow*-inspired film, appearing just three months after the original, Stephen Shin's *Brotherhood* (1986) is a rather outstanding example of the genre despite being nearly forgotten today. Shin shifts the focus from gangsters to two buddies in the police force, whose friendship comes under pressure when one of them quits the force and, due to circumstances, joins a group of robbers. Shin even adds in the Leslie Cheung-character of the original, the main protagonist's younger brother who is an ambitious, by-the-book policeman who embodies the younger generation's total lack of *yi*. Despite its similarities to Woo's film, *Brotherhood* surprises with an ending that is much more pessimistic than *A Better Tomorrow*'s already downbeat conclusion, illustrating much better both visually and narrative-wise why (mostly overseas) critics came to see these *yingxiongopian* as a form of Hong Kong noir.<sup>127</sup>

Kirk Wong, who had already signaled his interest in brotherhood between gangsters in *The Club*, followed a few weeks later with *True Colors* (1986), an adaptation of the Hollywood crime melodrama, *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938).<sup>128</sup> Compared to the original, *True Colors* puts the stress more on the relationship between the brothers than on the protagonists' pseudo-family (the boys from the orphanage run by one of the men). Wong also ups the action element, while leaving no ambiguity about the heroic character of the gangster protagonist (played once again by Ti Lung). Wong's next film, *Gunmen* (1988), was a loose adaptation of Brian de Palma's *The Untouchables* (1987).<sup>129</sup> Here again he highlights the brotherhood between four cops by starting with a brief scene detailing their close relationship

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"*Nan'er bense*", or "The Essence of Men", in which director Benny Chan, besides staging spectacular action, also pokes some fun at the homoeroticism of Woo's films.

<sup>127</sup> The film's protagonist is Danny Lee, by this time already Hong Kong's most well-known movie cop. Lee's presence is important, as *Brotherhood* fuses the Woo influence with elements of successful films Lee directed in the past, such as *Law with Two Phases* (1984) and *The Law Enforcer* (1986). For more on the reception of *yingxiongopian* as film noir in Korea and the West, see Fang 81-2 and An 104-13. This topic will be returned to at the end of this chapter.

<sup>128</sup> Coincidentally or not, Barbara Ryan mentions this film as a Hollywood equivalent of *A Better Tomorrow* (70).

<sup>129</sup> David Bordwell offers a lengthy comparison between *Gunmen* and *The Untouchables*, to draw out some of the similarities and differences between Hong Kong and Hollywood cinema (*Planet Hong Kong* 19-25).

during the war (the story is set in the 1920s). At the same time, he downplays the family life of the main protagonist (Tony Leung Ka-fai) and even places him in a love triangle – very different from De Palma’s film where this character’s stable family motivates him to bring down Al Capone and make society safer. While these different emphases of Hollywood gangster films and Hong Kong *yingxiong pian* are significant, it is erroneous to extend elements such as the stress on brotherhood and avoidance of domesticity to the entire Hong Kong gangster film genre as Barbara Ryan has done: these are primarily traits of the *yingxiong pian*, which are only a subset of Hong Kong gangster films.

A good illustration of this point is Taylor Wong’s *Sentenced to Hang* (1989), a remake of the early crime film, *Kidnap* (1974). In the 1989 film, the theme of brotherhood is much more prominent – indicating once again its relative novelty in the gangster film. Although Wong adds this theme, it is less central here than in the earlier *yingxiong pian*, a category *Sentenced to Hang* only peripherally belongs to. Its presence illustrates both the popularity of the theme and the ways filmmakers were increasingly exploring new directions by mixing it with other elements, in this case a realist kidnapping drama. In the preceding years, Wong had already introduced elements from *The Godfather* (1972) in films such as the Johnny Mak produced *Rich and Famous* (1987) and its sequel *Tragic Hero* (1987), in which he went for unabashed glorification of the gangster played by Chow Yun-fat.<sup>130</sup> These films forebode the so-called “Big Timer” fad of the early 1990s launched by another Johnny Mak production, *To Be Number One* (1991), in which gangster glorification reached new heights.<sup>131</sup>

Meanwhile, two award-winning directors, Patrick Tam and Wong Kar-wai, brought heterosexual romance back into the mix. Wong’s stylish first film, *As Tears Go By* (1988), very loosely based on Martin Scorsese’s *Mean Streets* (1973), is arguably

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<sup>130</sup> In 1989 Wong directed *Triads – The Inside Story*, another Godfather-inspired film in which Chow Yun-fat, the son of a triad boss who was sent overseas for an education and kept out of the ‘family business’, returns to Hong Kong for his father’s funeral and is forced to take over the leadership of the “family.” The film ends memorably with Roy Cheung telling Chow Yun-fat, who has just saved him: “You are a good brother, but a lousy gangster!”

<sup>131</sup> Another offshoot was the mix between the gambling film and the *yingxiong pian* in Wong Jing’s *Casino Raiders* (1989), which in tandem with Wong’s *God of Gamblers* (1989) launched a fad for gambling films.

more distinguished by its depiction of the romance between small-time gangster Ah Wah (Andy Lau) and Ah Ngor (Maggie Cheung) than by the bond between Ah Wah and his “younger brother” Fly (Jacky Cheung). A year earlier, the Chow Yun-fat and Alan Tang vehicle *Flaming Brothers*, scripted and produced by Wong, somewhat clumsily already included a lengthy romantic episode in an otherwise fairly standard *yingxiongopian*. With *Final Victory* (1987), Patrick Tam meanwhile turned a Wong Kar-wai script into an offbeat parody of the brotherhood theme, by telling the story of a cowardly gangster (Eric Tsang) torn between the loyalty to his imprisoned older brother (Tsui Hark) and his romantic involvement with one of this brother’s two girlfriends. In his *My Heart Is that Eternal Rose* (1989), Tam did away completely with the homosocial bonding and focused for the most part on a love triangle.<sup>132</sup> Still, in the end the man and woman who are escaping on a boat decide to return to save their friend, much like Mark did in *A Better Tomorrow* – and the film naturally ends in a spectacular bloodbath.

Finally, some films set out to demythologize the heroic gangster figure. While in *Final Victory* this was done through parody, more “serious” films also moved in this direction. *As Tears Go By* can be considered a part of this group, as it stresses the pointlessness of Fly’s ambition to die heroically and chooses to tell the story of a gangster whose life seems to be heading nowhere. Ringo Lam’s *School on Fire* (1988), a sensationalized account of triad involvement in schools, is much more cynical in its depiction of gangsters. The gangster villain of the plot (played by Roy Cheung) uses the triad rules and values simply to keep his men in check, but is throughout revealed to be solely interested in his own benefit. Near the end of the film, he does not hesitate to use one of his “brothers” as a living shield against attackers and later is only at the last moment stopped from raping the girlfriend of another “brother” right before the helpless man’s eyes. Maybe because gangsters need to look really bad to make other gangsters look somewhat better and heroic, such characterizations are also common in Woo’s films. Since Lam does not balance the bad gangster with any good figure capable of stopping him, however, the myth of the heroic gangster is thoroughly brought back to reality. Only towards the very end switching to sensationalism, *Gangs* (1988), directed by Lawrence Ah Mon (also

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<sup>132</sup> As I will argue in the next chapter, this makes the film an example of “heroic bloodshed” rather than a brotherhood-defined *yingxiongopian*.

known as Lawrence Lau), adopts a social realist approach to the topic of youth gangs linked to the triads – an approach that makes its anti-triad message more convincing while it allows a serious analysis of the problem.

In conclusion, although Woo's film had precedents in Hong Kong cinema, his powerful integration of visually elegant action with the melodrama of conflicted brotherhood proved powerful enough to create its own subgenre, the *yingxiong pian*, between 1986 and 1989. The most outstanding characteristic in these films is the theme of brotherhood, and the fact that they usually end in death. Naturally brotherhood is not the sole theme of the 1980s gangster film: the following section investigates the notion of the immigrant gangster in the Hong Kong context.

### 3.4.2. The Criminal Immigrant

In *Dying to Belong*, Martha Nochimson attempts a genre study of the gangster film by comparing the Hollywood with the Hong Kong product. One of her main arguments is that both cinemas depict the stories of immigrant gangsters whose “destiny casts a pall over the generic paradigm of the modern fable of creating a new self and a new place in society, the American and Hong Kong success stories” (8). Nochimson's project – basically an attempt to apply an American template to the Hong Kong cinema – brings to mind Meaghan Morris's criticism of a “universalizing West” producing theory (of film genre) for a “Rest” rich in eccentric cultural particulars (3). Considering that Nochimson chooses to focus on films such as *A Better Tomorrow* and the *Young and Dangerous* series (1996-2001), her use of the term “immigrant gangster” sounds very odd indeed.

To be sure, Hong Kong is a city of immigrants, and since the late 1970s immigrant gangsters and cops have featured frequently in various types of local crime films. Their meaning and function are very different in Hong Kong cinema, however, as the immigrants depicted are mostly from the communist Mainland, with their representation changing over time. According to Lo Kwai-cheung, these immigrants frequently figure in 1970s and 1980s films as “the laughable country-bumpkin fool, the tragic and vulnerable prostitute, and the shrewd and violent criminal/dirty cop” (“Borderline Case” 433). Before discussing some of the crime films featuring

Mainland cops and/or criminals, it is worth pointing out that a variant of the American story of the immigrant gangster's rise and fall does exist in Hong Kong cinema. Especially at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1990s, one could point at the sagas of real-life immigrant gangsters such as the 1960s and 1970s Chiuchow (Chaozhou) drug lords, Ng Sik-ho and the Ma Brothers, as well as the corrupt Hoklo cop, Lee Rock (Lü Le 吕乐). These films, more so than their Hollywood counterparts, tend to glorify the gangster and implicitly condone or downplay the violence by which he rises.<sup>133</sup> In the case of the early 1990s films, Stephen Teo has pointed at triad involvement to explain this unusual phenomenon (*Extra Dimensions* 235). Because the focus here is on the 1980s, these "Big Timer" films (in Chinese, *xiaoxiongopian* 枭雄片) will be left for discussion in the next chapter.

As most of the Big Timer films are set in a (nostalgic) past (usually the 1950s and 1960s), the fact that these gangsters are immigrants is not that significant, since the majority of the population at that time were immigrants who had fled China after the defeat of the Japanese in 1945 and before the closing of the Hong Kong-China border in June 1951. The limited contact between the Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong societies and their vastly different experiences (Hong Kong's economic success story, the Mainland's communist experiment) led to the development of a distinct Hong Kong identity from the late 1960s onwards. In the late 1970s, however, the Mainland started to "reform and open up" and more and more immigrants began to flow into Hong Kong. On top of that, the future return of Hong Kong to China was suddenly under discussion, resulting in the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984. These events gave the presence of Mainlanders in Hong Kong films a rather new dimension, and films depicting Mainland cops or "Big Circle" gangsters have since then been read repeatedly as reflecting Hong Kongers' feelings

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<sup>133</sup> In light of the previous section which focused on the importance of brotherhood in the *yingxiongopian*, it might be interesting to consider *Don't Kill Me Brother*, a 1981 film directed by Stanley Siu and starring Alan Tang. This duo had made a few successful *Godfather*-inspired films in the late 1970s, on which this film was a variation. Featuring a Mainland immigrant illegally sneaking into Hong Kong, the film has a lengthy prologue, detailing how this character (played by Alan Tang) is wronged by his brother who has grown up rich in Hong Kong together with their father. During the opening credits, we are shown a montage of images depicting the immigrant's subsequent ruthless climb to the top of a big criminal enterprise. The film proper then starts and focuses on the struggle between the brothers, eventually leading to the deaths of them and their families. The film's message seems to be that not forgiving your brother is the worst kind of crime imaginable – much worse than going over dead bodies to reach the top!

regarding their northern neighbors and their own uncertain future under a regime that only fairly recently had ended the Cultural Revolution.<sup>134</sup> The crime film mentioned most in this regard is Johnny Mak's *Long Arm of the Law*. By discussing some of the writings on this film, the problems involved in treating a film (or a select group of films) as a direct representation of society (the simplistic "reflectionist" approach so common in Hong Kong film criticism) will be drawn out, and the problems involved in neglecting genre as an important aspect of a film will be highlighted.<sup>135</sup>

Li Cheuk-to's discussion of *Long Arm of the Law* posits it as the negative pole of people's perceptions of the Mainland, with Yim Ho's *Homecoming* (1984) as the positive pole ("Return of the Father" 169). However, while *Long Arm of the Law* treats its Mainland characters with condescension at times, the same characters are simultaneously the most sympathetic in the film as well, and embody the value of brotherhood that the Hong Kong gangsters are depicted as lacking. Later, Li does mention the "social predicament and the no-choice decisions they ultimately make", but interprets this as a reflection of Hong Kong's predicament in the face of 1997 ("Return of the Father" 172). A reduction of the film to fears about 1997 does, however, not do justice to one of the major crime films of the decade.

A more complex reading of *Long Arm of the Law* is offered by Chu Yingchi, who discusses the film as part of his project to chart the historical development of a Hong Kong identity as reflected in the city's cinema. Chu convincingly identifies a triangular relationship between the Mainland Chinese gangsters (the Chinese motherland), the Royal Hong Kong Police (the British colonizer), and the local gangster Ah Tai caught between them (Hong Kong) (98-105). However, when one considers the next film in the *Long Arm of the Law* series, released in 1987, one realizes that the original film merely serves as a convenient and well-chosen illustration of Chu's (otherwise convincing) argument about Hong Kong identity. In *Long Arm of the Law 2*, the illegal immigrants are in fact Mainland cops. Offered a deal by the Hong Kong police, they can stay permanently in Hong Kong only if they

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<sup>134</sup> "Big Circle gangs" is the name given to gangs of Mainland immigrants who committed violent robberies in Hong Kong from the 1970s into the early 1990s.

<sup>135</sup> For a plot synopsis of *Long Arm of the Law*, check the discussion of New Wave crime films.

work undercover in the Big Circle gangs. They agree and are partnered with a local undercover cop with whom they bond in the course of the film. This brief summary makes clear that singling out one film for a political analysis without considering its commercial, generic nature downplays the genre's ambiguity and can lead to a one-dimensional, overly political reading of it. The seeming inconsistency of the two films is the natural outcome of genre filmmaking: as a commercial product (which these films clearly are), a genre film has to offer more of the same while also inserting something new to keep the audience interested. For this reason, building a theory on the basis of one single genre film can be problematic.

Like Li Cheuk-to's, Esther Yau's analysis does draw on a comparison of *Homecoming* and *Long Arm of the Law*, but stresses the ambiguity in both films: "*Internal to each film and common to them*, the encounter with mainland China (or its metonymic figures) is presented as both appalling and rejuvenating. In this way, these two films of the mid-1980s mark the range of local sensibilities regarding Hong Kong's return to China" ("Border Crossing" 198, my emphasis). In an account that repeatedly draws attention to the generic character of the films, Yau does not create two diametrically opposed poles as Li does, but stresses the ambiguity and contradictions within these films instead. And this is ultimately a better way to deal with a popular cinema like Hong Kong's.<sup>136</sup>

Further considering the Hollywood trope of the immigrant gangster, one can find an interesting variation in late 1980s Hong Kong cinema. In films like *The Big Heat* (1988), *On the Run* (1988), *Long Arm of the Law 3* (1989) and *Web of Deception* (1989), there appears what could be called the "emigrant criminal." In all four films, the criminal antagonist commits crimes with the goal of becoming rich and powerful enough to emigrate before the impending 1997 Handover. So, unlike the immigrant gangster motivated by a desire to achieve success and be accepted by society, the emigrant gangsters are like the proverbial rats anxious to leave the sinking ship they consider Hong Kong to be.<sup>137</sup> In *The Big Heat*, for instance, the main antagonist is a

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<sup>136</sup> The topic of simplistic reflectionism and its attendant problems will be discussed at more length at the end of this chapter.

<sup>137</sup> Tsui Hark's Film Workshop produced two of the above films, *The Big Heat* and *Web of Deception*. One could also add *A Better Tomorrow 3* (1989) to this list: this Tsui Hark-directed prequel to John Woo's two films makes several allusions to the events on Tian'anmen Square in June

criminal entrepreneur who is working with Soviet (!) criminals planning to make use of pre-Handover anxieties to ship off Hong Kong's riches to the Soviet Union. It is suggested that many Hong Kong officials are on the take as they are eager to make as much money as possible before the Communist takeover. In the words of the chief villain to his Soviet partner, "Hong Kong will be handed over soon, many are waiting to emigrate. Many need money."

A particularly fascinating example is *Long Arm of the Law 3*. As in the other episodes of this series, the film deals with illegal Mainland immigrants in Hong Kong – in this case the focus is clearly on one single protagonist, Li Cheung-kong (Andy Lau), who, wrongly sentenced to death in the Mainland, seeks shelter in Hong Kong. While the film depicts the by now familiar scenes of Li being forced into crime to survive the tough Hong Kong environment, the focus shifts quickly to Li being pursued by a dogmatic Mainland policeman (appropriately surnamed Mao!) who has no regard for the rule of law or the colonial authorities in Hong Kong. As Hong Kong is no longer safe, Li and his girlfriend aim to leave the colony and emigrate elsewhere to start a new life. In a sense, these two Mainlanders become proxies for the Hong Kong citizen, maybe best illustrated by the scene where Li curses Mao for following him into Hong Kong, saying: "You damn communist, I keep telling you I'm innocent!" Unlike *Long Arm of the Law 1* and *2*, the third film ends on a happy note: Mao eventually comes to respect Li and helps the two fugitives leave Hong Kong. Li later confides to Mao that they will return to China once the country adheres to the rule of law. Though inferior to the earlier two installments, *Long Arm of the Law 3* does in this way maintain the ambiguity typical of the series. With Mainland immigrant Li joining in a robbery in order to be able to emigrate, the film merges the tropes of immigrant and emigrant gangster.

### **3.5. Police Films**

Unlike the movie gangster, the figure of the cop in Hong Kong films of the 1980s has received fairly limited attention. Possibly the reason for this is that Hong Kong

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1989 and tells of two Hongkongers who get involved in the Vietnam underworld in order to earn enough money to flee to Hong Kong. This influential producer-director was probably the most consistent and explicit in signaling alarm at the approaching 1997 deadline and renegotiating Hong Kong's complex relationship with China in his works from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s.

police films are, in terms of genre conventions, rather similar to the Hollywood product.<sup>138</sup> Still, some differences can be detected, although these are mostly a matter of degree. The well-known “excessiveness” of Hong Kong cinema – so visible in Woo’s ultra-violent but simultaneously ultra-sentimental gangsters – is present in police films as well, although in a different way. Here the focus will be on two aspects in which this “excessiveness” is most obvious: police populism and the figure of the fighting female cop. Distrust of the authorities and the effectiveness of the rule of law, traditional attitudes towards vengeance, and the generic influence of period martial arts films will be central to this discussion. Returning to a topic raised in previous chapters, the figure of the action heroine, especially her 1980s reincarnation as a female cop, will be further analyzed.

### 3.5.1. The 1980s Police Film

As described in Chapter Two, Hong Kong police films started to be produced in the mid-1970s. This trend continued in the 1980s, and with martial arts films’ general move towards contemporary, urban settings, the visibility of cops on the silver screen increased dramatically. In line with this trend, however, they appeared mostly in action comedies (f.i. the hugely successful *Aces Go Places* and *Lucky Stars* series).<sup>139</sup> While the success of Hollywood’s *Police Academy* (1984) further spurred the production of police comedies in Hong Kong, more serious police thrillers started to have an impact as well. Jackie Chan, who had just appeared in the Hollywood police action movie *The Protector* (1985), returned to Hong Kong to direct and star in *Police Story* (1985), in which he downplayed his trademark humor

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<sup>138</sup> In this regard, it should be stressed that the *yingxiong pian*, with their overriding concern for the theme of brotherhood, sometimes featured prominent police characters. The central conflict in *A Better Tomorrow* focuses after all on two brothers on opposite sides of the law. Hero films like *Brotherhood* and *Gunmen*, moreover, incorporate several of the conventions of the police thriller described in this section, and focus more on police protagonists than *A Better Tomorrow* does. Nevertheless, gangster protagonists overall take center stage in this subgenre. It should also be pointed out that Hong Kong police thrillers in their turn influenced the American genre, especially with their focus on martial arts and gunplay action. The films starring Steven Seagal are good examples of this influence.

<sup>139</sup> The first *Aces Go Places* film came out in 1982, and spawned four sequels in 1983, 1984, 1986 and 1989. In the year of the Handover, *97 Aces Go Places* was a modest commercial success. The *Lucky Stars* series was launched in 1983, and developed more or less in tandem with the *Aces Go Places* films: sequels followed in 1985 (two installments came out that year), 1986 and 1989. In 1996 an attempt to breath new life into the series bombed at the box office.

somewhat.<sup>140</sup> The film became the third highest grossing local film that year, after two films in the *Lucky Stars* series that also featured him. A quote attributed to Chan by online reviewer “MrBooth” reflects the trend well: “When everyone else was being serious, I had to be funny to get noticed. Then when everybody else was being funny, I had to be serious!”

While Chan would return to his *Police Story* role no less than five times in the next twenty years, another actor-director had made his own career-defining movie a year earlier already.<sup>141</sup> Although Danny Lee had played cops before,<sup>142</sup> it was his portrayal of a hotheaded but righteous police officer in the self-directed *Law with Two Phases* (1984) that fixed him in the popular mind as Hong Kong’s foremost movie cop.<sup>143</sup> The plot of *Law with Two Phases* is fairly simple: the first half of the film introduces Chief B (Danny Lee), an experienced CID officer who does not exactly work according to the rules but gets results. B takes rookie Yip Che-kit (Eddie Chan) under his wings, and goes about a number of routine assignments seemingly designed to give the viewer an impression of “authentic” police work. When one of B’s informants is killed, B and Yip look up Blacky (Parkman Wong) – B’s youth friend but also a gang member now suspected of the murder. When Blacky stabs Yip and runs away, B tries to shoot him but instead accidentally kills a child. Suspended from duty and burdened by guilt, B is only talked back into action by Yip who has by now come to greatly respect the experienced cop. As Blacky is the only one capable of giving decisive testimony that the killing of the child was not B’s fault, they decide to look for him. The young gangster, still on the run from the authorities, sees no way out, however, and decides to join a heist organized by another gang. B and Yip arrive at the scene when the robbery is taking place, and in the ensuing shoot-out, Blacky kills Yip but is then caught by B. Refraining from

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<sup>140</sup> The film has of course various funny moments (concentrated especially in the scene where the demoted Chan goes to work at the rural Shataukok police station), but overall the film is structured around a rudimentary but more serious criminal plot.

<sup>141</sup> The *Police Story* sequels are *Police Story 2* (1988), *Police Story 3: Super Cop* (1992), *Police Story 4: First Strike* (1996), and *New Police Story* (2004). To this list can be added a sort of spin-off starring Michelle Yeoh in which Chan briefly reprised his role, *Supercop 2* (1993).

<sup>142</sup> For instance in *The Brothers* (1979) and *The Executioner* (1981), the latter also prefiguring his famous pairing with Chow Yun-fat in Woo’s *The Killer* (1989).

<sup>143</sup> In this self-fashioning Lee was not alone; actor-directors Wong Chung and Philip Chan were associated with a similar image – Wong in the 1970s and early 1980s, Chan parallel with Lee from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, but more or less overtaken by him from the mid-1980s onwards.

killing him on the spot, B merely empties his gun by shooting next to the young gangster. Although B is later allowed to return to the force, he decides to resign.

As already stated in the introduction to this section, the Hong Kong police thriller does not really stray outside of Hollywood conventions. It is thus possible to situate Lee's work in the context of Thomas Leitch's discussion of the (Hollywood) police film's generic parameters. Firstly, it should be noted that *Law with Two Phases* in its first half exhibits characteristics of the police procedural, which Leitch identifies as a tradition originating in the 1950s and as mostly relegated to television and literary fiction.<sup>144</sup> These characteristics include a focus on the "daily routines of a given group of police officers, rather than their rare dramatic breakthroughs, and on the presentation of several overlapping cases simultaneously" (215). Furthermore, "their most potent weapons are informants and databases, and by far the most probable outcomes of their search are that they will not find a likely suspect, or that they will find such a suspect, arrest the suspect, and turn him or her over to the court system for processing, arraignment, and trial" (216). With its plot focusing on the daily routines of the cops and their various crime busting operations (including arresting a gun dealer and preventing the robbery of a gas station),<sup>145</sup> *Law with Two Phases* for a long time does not seem to be headed towards a dramatic climax and has the near-documentary feel of procedurals that Wilson comments on (57-93). This realism is a characteristic of nearly all films directed by Danny Lee in the 1980s, distinguishing his from most other police thrillers. In the final half of *Law with Two Phases*, however, Lee switches to what Wilson presents as the typical Hollywood approach: the more independent police hero (here Chief B assisted by his buddy Yip) begins to "pursue suspects in chase sequences with guns blazing on both sides" (Leitch 216). One wonders if this change of registers is what the "two phases" in the English title of the film actually refer to! Lee does not abandon the procedural approach completely, however, and returns to realism in the end: the criminal, here not a stereotypical villain to begin with, is arrested and handed over to the judicial system.

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<sup>144</sup> In contrast, Christopher P. Wilson discusses the police procedural as a more distinct subgenre and also points to a cinematic precedent, *The Naked City* (1948). Wilson's account, which is much more grounded in history, illustrates a weakness in Leitch's approach, which tends to homogenize the police thriller genre.

<sup>145</sup> Bordwell mentions the brief shoot-out at the gas station as an influence on Woo's action style (*Planet Hong Kong* 103). The action in Lee's films is generally grittier than Woo's elegant "bullet ballets" though.

Leitch argues that the central thematic of police films is the debate surrounding the issues of power and justice: “The ideal police force would be as perfect in its justice as in its power over criminals, and a founding convention of the police movie is the alliance of police power with social justice” (221). Still, nearly all police films tend to challenge this convention in the course of the movie, usually only to reconfirm it emphatically by the end (217). *Law with Two Phases* is no exception: throughout the first part of the film, for instance, it is hinted that the trigger-happy side of Chief B, who regularly brags of his shooting skills, will lead to tragedy, despite his obviously righteous character. Nevertheless, it is clearly Lee’s objective to eulogize this “public servant” (the translation of the film’s Chinese title), and it comes as no surprise that he received several awards from police organizations for the depiction of “realistic police procedures” in his films (Koch). Indeed, Lee would increasingly start to take to new extremes what Wilson calls “police populism” – a “mixed ethos” that “simultaneously expresses chivalric commitments to, and yet a more problematic covert ownership of, urban streets themselves” (216).

In Hollywood, the problems surrounding this “ethos” were most directly addressed in films dealing with rogue cops: *Bullitt* (1968), *Dirty Harry* (1971) and *The French Connection* (1971) established a prototype copied in many films since. According to Leitch, “all three express skepticism about institutional power and justice by asking when law-enforcement officers are justified in breaking the law in order to uphold the moral law that gives legal laws their authority, and all three conclude by endorsing the vigilante cop over the system that has failed them and the society they are sworn to protect” (229). This approval of the vigilante cop is present in *Law with Two Phases*, especially in a scene where an angry mob is attacking a rapist: when Chief B arrives, he first brings the mob under control (this is his responsibility as a policeman), but after hearing what the man has done, brutally beats him up himself (he later explains his behavior by saying he was off-duty!). Two years later, in Lee’s *The Law Enforcer* (1986), a key plot of the film involves a rogue cop whom Lee’s character protects against an internal investigation – sympathy lies clearly with the vigilante, who later is crucial in eliminating a gang of vicious gangsters. The most extreme depiction, however, can be found in Lee’s last directorial work of the 1980s: in *Road Warriors* (1987), a film about the rather inglorious work of traffic cops, Lee portrays an “Inspector Li” who, because the law seems to protect

criminals rather than bring them to justice, instructs his motorcycle cops to lure a couple of rich-kid joyriders into a race, so as to make them crash into a blockade he has prepared for them!<sup>146</sup>

Throughout his work, Lee invites sympathy for rank-and-file cops, a class element key to police populism (Wilson 16). Quite typically they are at odds with (more bourgeois) judges, lawyers, politicians, and even their own bosses. More so than in most Hollywood films, which tend to isolate the rogue cop from his colleagues, a strong solidarity exists amongst Lee's working-class "law enforcers" – creating a clear-cut "us versus them" atmosphere.<sup>147</sup> This is most clearly displayed in a hospital scene in *Road Warriors*. One of Inspector Li's colleagues has been run over by the joyriders and needs a blood transfusion. As the hospital does not have sufficient blood available, Li and the other cops offer their own blood to save their friend. But that's not all: the news is spread and soon cops from all over town come to the hospital to offer their blood. When Li's superior and his British boss arrive, however, it is not to help a fellow cop: instead Li is scolded for getting so many officers away from their jobs and for shooting at the car that ran over their colleague!

Besides reflecting the reality of Hong Kong's police force, where many of the top posts were reserved for the British, the presence of this colonial official is significant in another way as well. Regularly appearing in police films, the foreign bosses are generally shown only briefly, but are usually indirectly criticized via their Chinese representatives, who are in most 1980s films depicted along lines similar to the one in Lee's *Road Warriors*.<sup>148</sup> It could be argued that it is the colonial officials' presence and especially their association with Western-style rule-of-law that causes Lee's and many other 1980s Hong Kong cops to be "dirtier" than Dirty Harry to

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<sup>146</sup> During the 1990s, Lee would bring to new extremes his promotion of vigilante cops, as will be shown in Chapter Four.

<sup>147</sup> Yvonne Tasker has remarked on this difference as well in the context of the action film traditions of Hollywood and Hong Kong ("Fists of Fury" 316).

<sup>148</sup> A notable exception is Norman Law's *Gun Is Law* (1982), starring Philip Chan. The elderly foreign boss is sympathetic in this film, and is more on-screen than usual. However, Chan's main antagonist inside the force is a local officer recently returned from training in England. As a career-minded, better educated and by-the-book cop, this character is a typical foil to Chan's more working-class hero.

achieve some degree of moral justice.<sup>149</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, *The Teahouse* (1974) and *Big Brother Cheng* (1975), arguably the first really localized Hong Kong crime films, already expressed a profound lack of confidence in the authorities and the effectiveness of the rule of law. Despite their sympathies for rank-and-file cops, 1980s police thrillers express similar feelings.<sup>150</sup> Central to these films are an eye-for-an-eye philosophy and the feeling that the law is too soft on criminals, leaving the administration of moral justice to the (rogue) cop – that “dedicated, hard-bitten knight of the city” (Wilson 137).

Of course not alien to Western societies either, as films like *Dirty Harry* and many others suggest, the idea of vengeance outside the law could arguably find even more resonance in a Chinese society like Hong Kong’s. Unlike in the Western law tradition, “certain sorts of acts of revenge were excused or even fostered under provisions of the imperial codes of the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912) dynasties” (Dalby 268). Michael Dalby, who is quick to point out the subtlety with which the complicated social process of vengeance was construed in terms of the law, traces its origins back to the *Liji* 礼记 (*Book of Rites*), the *Zhouli* 周礼 (*Rites of Zhou*) and the *Chunqiu Gongyang zhuan* 春秋公羊传 (*Gongyang Commentary to the Spring and Autumn Annals*) – all texts dating from the fourth and third centuries B.C. (270). It would not be unreasonable to expect this long-standing attitude towards vengeance to persist to some degree, and to clash with the common law system introduced by the British. Possibly, it is in the field of cultural production that this conflict is expressed most clearly.

As Dalby remarks, vengeance has been “an ever-popular dramatic theme in Chinese literature” (268). One only has to look back at the martial arts genre of the 1960s

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<sup>149</sup> In this regard, it is interesting that Cheng Yu argues that the Mainland cops who enter Hong Kong from the (late) 1980s onwards have become the “Dirty Harries of Hong Kong” (“Uninvited Guests” 100). These maverick Mainland cops are not uniformly good or bad, though it is notable that in the earlier discussed *Long Arm of the Law III*, some anxiety can be felt about the Mainland cop’s disregard of Hong Kong’s laws and colonial authorities. Significantly, he redeems himself by the end by sympathizing with the protagonist and letting him escape. As the film is a gangster film, however, it does not operate according to the same rules as the police films discussed in this section.

<sup>150</sup> Gina Marchetti also discusses the topic of frustration with the law in her book on the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy (2002-2003), and points out how “each instance of the operation of judicial procedure in *Infernal Affairs* turns the “rule of law” into a farce” (*Infernal Affairs* 85). Although there are some important differences between this trilogy made in the new millennium and the films of the 1980s, Marchetti’s remarks illustrate how issues surrounding authority and the law are central to Hong Kong crime films in general and the police film in particular.

and 1970s to realize that the theme remained a potent one – most plots involve bloody vengeance for the murder of one's master or father, or on a larger scale, for national humiliation. Indeed, Bruce Lee's influential *Fist of Fury* (1972) combined both. Considering that many of the 1970s martial arts stars (including Danny Lee) went on to make contemporary (action) crime films in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it is not so surprising that the basic theme of vengeance by a righteous hero made the transition as well, further reinforcing tendencies already present in Hollywood antecedents of the local crime film.<sup>151</sup> The female cop film, discussed in the next section, offers further proof of the centrality of this theme in Hong Kong crime films, and also occasions a further consideration of the female warrior figure already begun in previous chapters.

### 3.5.2. The Female Cop Film

In the mid-1980s, after the box-office success of *Yes, Madam!* (1985),<sup>152</sup> the so-called girls-with-guns subgenre became popular in Hong Kong cinema, with especially D&B Films specializing in it.<sup>153</sup> Although not all girls-with-guns movies focused on female cops, many of them did, and it is on this group of films that will be concentrated here. Much more action-oriented than Danny Lee's work, one could say these films reduced to the core the themes that lie at the basis of the police film in general. This will become clear by briefly discussing three prominent girls-with-guns films – *Yes, Madam!*, *Royal Warriors* (1986), and *Righting Wrongs* (1986).

*Yes, Madam!* introduces its main protagonist Senior Inspector Ng (Michelle Yeoh) in a scene directly copied from *Dirty Harry*: after a violent shoot-out with the robbers of a money transport, she has their leader at gunpoint and taunts him to take a chance at grabbing his gun as she is not sure she has another bullet left. When the

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<sup>151</sup> Obviously the *yingxiangpian* and the police thrillers are organized around a similar type of heroism based on the concept of *yi* (or *yiqi*) discussed in the section on gangster films. Instead of brotherhood (which can equally motivate revenge), the police films put the stress more on the aspect of righteousness also inherent in *yi*. Bordwell recognizes the centrality of vengeance to Hong Kong cinema as well, and argues that it is an important factor in its cross-cultural appeal (*Planet Hong Kong* 194-5).

<sup>152</sup> *Yes, Madam!* is the first installment in the series often referred to in English as the *In the Line of Duty* series.

<sup>153</sup> The star of *Yes, Madam!*, Michelle Yeoh (at that time still known as Michelle Khan), would eventually marry billionaire Dickson Poon, the co-founder of D&B. The studio groomed several new female action stars to replace her during her (temporary) retirement.

man makes his move, she shoots him in the hand (unlike Harry, she did have one left!). The film soon focuses on the whereabouts of a microfilm that contains evidence of the criminal activities of a big company. Initially it falls into the hands of three small-time crooks, who as a result find themselves the target of both the gangsters and the police team of Ng and foreign inspector Carrie Morris (Cynthia Rothrock).<sup>154</sup> When at one point Ng and Morris go to arrest the main villain but have to let him go because the evidence they received was fake, the villain's lawyer taunts them saying that women should stay in the kitchen. After this failure, their boss wants them to hide abroad for a while, but, in a scene common to many police films, they refuse to give up and resign from the force to take justice in their own hands. During the final battle at the evil tycoon's mansion, the gangsters succeed in burning the incriminating microfilm. The police arrive to arrest the two women for trespassing, but the main villain, who is taunting them that he will be released quickly since he has money and lawyers, is finally killed by one of the small-time crooks to avenge the death of his friend.

Vengeance takes centre stage in *Royal Warriors*, where villains and heroes alike are motivated by it, causing some (probably unintended) blurring between the two groups. When officer Michelle (Michelle Yeoh), Japanese ex-cop Yamamoto (Sanada Hiroyuki) and security officer Michael (Michael Wong) kill two hijackers on a plane, they incur the wrath of these men's sworn brothers. Soon Yamamoto's wife and child are killed by a car bomb intended for him. Now equally vengeful, Yamamoto uses Michelle and Michael as bait to lure out and kill the bomber. Michelle, who had so far been trying to stop Yamamoto from breaking the law, herself repeatedly pledges vengeance and resigns from the force after Michael dies as a result of the fourth villain's revenge. Helped by Yamamoto, she finally kills this villain, who had used Michael's body as bait to lure them into a trap.

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<sup>154</sup> The presence of the Caucasian Rothrock in Hong Kong girls-with-guns films such as *Yes, Madam!* and *Righting Wrongs* (discussed below) raises questions regarding the representation of race and gender. Lo Kwai-cheung engages some of these questions in his article dealing with these films, "Fighting Female Masculinity: Women Warriors and Their Foreignness in Hong Kong Action Cinema of the 1980s". He perceptively notes how the foreign inspector played by Rothrock seems more in tune with the locals and their proletarian identity than the Chinese hero (Yuen Biao) and even the main villain (Melvin Wong). Lo's main argument however is that she was a "prime target for fetishization": "the fear and anxiety projected onto the racial otherness of a white muscular man that always poses a threat to the Chinese hero in Hong Kong action cinema could be softened by the erotic investment in the petite and blonde Rothrock" (152).

While *Righting Wrongs*' female cop (Cynthia Rothrock) is not the film's main star, it repeatedly drives home the theme of the law's many shortcomings by focusing on lawyer-cum-vigilante Hsia Ling-cheng (Yuen Biao). The opening scene set in England introduces the vulnerability of the law hyperbolically: Hsia and others are listening to a judge who is talking of the necessity of fighting organized crime even if it endangers one's own life. While handing Hsia a lawbook, gangsters gun him down with one of their bullets piercing the book as well (during an attempt on Hsia's life later in the film, the same thing happens once more). Hsia pursues and after an exciting chase dispatches the assassins. This basic sequence of events repeats itself more elaborately in Hong Kong, where a witness against a criminal organization is brutally murdered (along with his entire family) and the criminal – again a rich, respectable-looking businessman – is allowed to go free. It is this event that triggers Hsia's decision to become a vigilante: soon after, he murders the villain's right-hand man. It quickly appears that an even greater evil is lurking behind the tycoon: a Machiavellian high-ranking police officer, Superintendent Wong (Melvin Wong). With the female cop already killed in a fight with Wong, the film ends on a note grimmer than most Hollywood films would: although Hsia manages to kill Wong, he does not survive either. The film in fact nicely illustrates the difference between Hong Kong and Hollywood cinema, since in its international release the Cynthia Rothrock character and Hsia both survive, with Hsia sentenced to a lengthy jail term for his vigilantism.<sup>155</sup> While online reviewer "cal42" interprets Hsia's death in the Hong Kong version as a condemnation of his behavior, it could also be argued that it glorifies this hero in a way similar to that of many 1970s martial arts films.

The point of summarizing these films' plots is not only to further strengthen the arguments about police populism and vengeance made in the previous section, as many other movies could be cited as examples.<sup>156</sup> These female cop films also serve to bring the discussion back to the issues surrounding the representation of women already broached in the previous chapter in the context of the noir-like rape-revenge

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<sup>155</sup> Possibly censorship in Asian markets was another reason for the different endings of *Righting Wrongs*.

<sup>156</sup> For a few typical examples of the 1980s police film illustrating the arguments made about class, the lack of confidence in the rule of law, and the centrality of vengeance, one could point at *Police Story 1 and 2*, *The Big Heat*, *On the Run*, and many others. Several of these films are discussed in other contexts in this chapter.

film. What is clear from these three films is that the killing by 1980s female cops is not always motivated by self-defense or revenge. While according to Christine Holmlund the lack of these motives in Hollywood's 1980s "deadly dolls" is an important difference from its 1970s avenging women in rape-revenge films, Hong Kong cinema has a much longer tradition of women killers who often operate according to the same professional code as their male counterparts. One could think here of the female knights-errant in King Hu's swordplay films of the late 1960s, for which, as Lo points out ("Copies of Copies" 126-7), there were already precedents in early Shanghai cinema of the 1920s and in literary fiction dating back to the Tang dynasty (618-907 BCE). Also in contemporary settings fighting heroines were not uncommon, as the female detective/chivalrous thief action-adventure films of the late 1960s attest. While in the 1970s vengeance was an important motivation for women to kill (as it was for men, this being the period of countless kung fu flicks), they occasionally appeared as modern professionals as well: Angela Mao for instance played a cop beside former James Bond George Lazenby in *Stoner* (1974). Unsurprisingly, then, Hong Kong's 1980s female cops were ahead of their Hollywood counterparts: they both kill more and need fewer reasons for it. These filmic "women warriors" are often seen as having influenced similar Hollywood representations in the 1990s and beyond (Lo, "Copies of Copies" 126). The deeper question of course is whether this female warrior tradition signifies anything in terms of feminism and the status of women in society.

Holmlund argues that these popular depictions of women killers are important, as they "influence greatly how we look at and treat ourselves and each other" (130). To analyze six popular films featuring "deadly dolls", she uses Teresa de Lauretis' concept of "representability": "a standard frame of visibility determining what can be seen, and eroticized in both cinema and society" (Ibid.). Arguing that this frame evolves over time, she goes on to outline certain improvements over past representations (the idea that women can kill professionally), as well as the limitations of these representations (an underlying fear of homosexuality and racial difference). A similar mirroring of film and society is implicit in Sek Kei's overview of 1980s Hong Kong cinema. In his account Sek refers to the growing economic independence and greater social role of women, as well as the "humanizing" effect of the "1997 problem" which made Hong Kong people "more sensitive and

susceptible to emotional feeling”, to explain the increased output of love stories, “women’s films” and female-cop films (“Advancement” 61). In contrast, David Bordwell argues against reading films as straightforward reflections of social reality, and makes a case for other factors leading to the appearance of girls-with-guns movies. Firstly, he states, there is the “variorum nature of popular entertainment”: “Once the male-cop genre is going strong, someone is likely to explore the possibility of a tough woman cop”, especially when there exist local traditions of female warriors to sustain such an innovation. Additionally, “energetic heroines might attract women viewers, who made up half the audience, even for action pictures” (*Planet Hong Kong* 153).

The topic has received the most sustained scholarly attention from Lo Kwai-cheung, who in two articles takes into account Sek’s and Bordwell’s arguments and comes up with more complex interpretations. In “Fighting Female Masculinity: Women Warriors and Their Foreignness in Hong Kong Action Cinema of the 1980s”, Lo uses Judith Halberstam’s concept of “female masculinity” to argue that in female-cop films the “woman” only serves as a “figure or a trope for representing latent dimensions of masculinity or covering up its void” (154). It is in an article published a few years later, however, that Lo comes to his most comprehensive assessment of women warriors in Hong Kong, Hollywood and Mainland Chinese cinema. In “Copies of Copies in Hollywood and Hong Kong Cinemas: Rethinking the Woman-Warrior Figures”, he concludes that these fighting women “may not be mere appearance but a sort of ‘magic’ appearance”: “Even though the onscreen woman warrior is not in herself actual, she could possess some actual efficiency of her own in the sense that her image may give rise to the process of social change and sexual re-articulation” (135-6). This is quite similar to Holmlund’s position stated earlier. On the other hand, however, he simultaneously suggests another interpretation of the woman warrior figure – as conveying the message that “in today’s global capitalist system, [gender identity] does not matter and is not a determining factor at all” (“Copies of Copies” 136). In this world where “we are all reduced to the standardized and leveled-out subject”, these woman warrior representations are only used to “fill out the void and to articulate the artificial, contrived difference”: in the final analysis, Lo thus concludes that “the female sexy/sexed body stands for one of the last limits or barriers for the friction-free capital not to relentlessly roll over”

("Copies of Copies" 136). In this way, Lo gives the female fighter film some meaning beyond it being the outcome of the variorum nature of generic development, while essentially returning its significance to social reality, now more broadly defined as the superstructure of global capitalism. The problem with Lo's argument is that it only applies to more recent representations of the woman warrior, and does not really account for the figure's long cinematic and literary history: the woman fighter's appearance during the Tang can hardly have been the effect of global capitalism's relentless leveling out of the subject! As a result, his insistence that the woman warrior is an empty signifier evades the question of why the representation of this figure has changed over time. At the root of this is possibly Lo's assumption of an imagined (implicitly male) viewer who sees these women warriors as "erotic-objects to-be-looked-at" and is "pretty conscious that these women warriors are the products of artificial, imaginary and contrived representations without any psychological depth" ("Copies of Copies" 135).

Maybe Lo is caught up in what Aaron D. Anderson describes as the "bifurcated language of universal gender" (191). In an insightful analysis of martial arts cinema in terms of its movement (for which he utilizes the concepts of yin and yang as "complimentary parts of the whole and harmonious in nature" (196)), he notes that "in contrast to Western conceptions of movement paradigms, in Chinese martial arts to fight is not always to be male, to yield is not always to be female, and attack and defense are not always opposites" (Anderson 196). Rigid Western categories of masculine and feminine are thus not very appropriate to understand female *and* male warrior figures alike. At the same time, Anderson, like Bordwell and Lo, acknowledges "a distinction between women's actual cultural status and that implied by analyzing the representations flowing from this performance tradition" (198). Unfortunately, also Anderson leaves the changes within woman-warrior representations unexplained. Outside the scope of this research, a study dedicated to this question could possibly reveal certain trends that uncover an increasing consciousness of feminist issues in works by specific directors or made in certain periods. For instance, director Clarence Fok, who apprenticed under Chor Yuen in the early 1970s, has in an interview pointed out that in *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan* (1972) Chor consciously put a lot of feminist ideas, as news of

the women's movements in the West were a topic of discussion in Hong Kong at that time.

### 3.6. Hong Kong Noir

Joelle Collier's "The Noir East: Hong Kong Filmmakers' Transmutation of a Hollywood Genre?" was possibly the first scholarly article in English to investigate the presence of film noir in Hong Kong in some depth. Some of the problems with this seminal article have been mentioned in the Introduction and will be returned to at more length in Chapter Five. Here the focus will be on her periodization of recent Hong Kong film history, which quite typically takes 1997 as its focal point. According to Collier, from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s mainstream Hong Kong cinema was dominated by a sensibility she describes as "High Romanticism" – she compares John Woo's triads and Tsui Hark's swordsmen to protagonists in Schiller's *Die Räuber* (*The Robbers*). In the 1990s, she argues, this "sensibility began to be superseded by a 'lesser' Romanticism of sentimentality and nostalgia" (137), exemplified by the films of UFO (United Filmmakers Organization), the nonsense comedies of Stephen Chow and the romantic tearjerker *C'est La Vie Mon Chéri* (1994). Around the time of the Handover a new shift occurred with Hong Kong films becoming "anti-romantic, anti-heroic, cynical and even despairing" (137). This new attitude was expressed in films demythologizing the gangster, but most interestingly in what she calls "Noir East" – a "reconfiguration" of the film noir "genre" reflecting the "anxieties of post-modern Asia" (138).

While giving some idea of general trends, grand periodizations like this usually do not stand up to closer scrutiny, and Collier's is no exception: as discussed in the section on the gangster film, for instance, the late 1980s already saw several films demythologizing the romantic figure of the heroic gangster. The argument here then is that in the late 1970s and early 1980s the noir traits already present in many martial arts films during the preceding fifteen years "migrated" – along with these films' chivalric values and action aesthetics – into the modern urban crime genre. This section will first briefly address the noirishness pervading the early New Wave films and then move on to John Woo's work which is recently often discussed in terms of film noir. After a reevaluation of Ringo Lam's *City on Fire* (1987), a

number of films that are not so well-known will illustrate how the prevalence of noir in late 1980s Hong Kong – what one could call the first wave of Hong Kong noir – was not limited to the *yingxiong pian*.

As with much writing on Hong Kong cinema in general, articles and books on films of this period have frequently drawn attention to the “1997 factor” – both to explain individual films and wider trends in the industry. Films analyzed from this perspective are read as political allegories or, more problematically, as fairly straightforward reflections of Hong Kong people’s psyche and identity crisis in the face of the approaching Mainland takeover. The scholars who mention film noir in their analyses usually do so in this context, and noir visuals for them become a logical aesthetic choice in view of the anxiety surrounding the Handover. Earlier, some problems with this “reflectionist” approach were already pointed out, and here an argument for a different conceptualization of the film-society relationship will be made so as to come to a more comprehensive understanding of Hong Kong cinema.

In his article “Hong Kong’s New Wave in Retrospect”, Stephen Teo noted how the New Wave films of 1979 all “had a fatalistic noirish look about them, all [were] devoted to an anguished quest about truth, and all [were] inevitably tragic, even morose and portentous” (17). Evaluating the films appearing in 1980-81, he notes “existentialist angst through the ages”, “black humour”, “delinquency, youthful nihilism, racial violence, ... and psycho-pathological portraiture of urban man and woman driven to murder and suicide” (Ibid.). While much of this indeed reminds one of film noir’s dark visions (whether the “original” Hollywood noir, the French New Wave version of it, or the various incarnations of neo-noir since the early 1970s), Teo insists that these noirish images result from the directors’ adherence to the “realism” of Hong Kong society, though he admits the New Wave was also a “syncretic blend of influences” (Ibid.). In an interview published in the same Hong Kong International Film Festival catalogue, director Tsui Hark meanwhile remarks he does not know what the term “New Wave” means, only that it was a term used in the local film journal *Film Biweekly*. Amongst the things it could refer to, he mentions the “use of low-key lighting and shadows rather than flat lighting with lots of lights” (147) – a technique often said to be typical of film noir. Film noir visuals and themes are certainly prominent in many of the New Wave crime films discussed

earlier, with especially the stylishly nihilistic *Coolie Killer* and *Long Arm of the Law* standing out. It is however John Woo's films that have received the most attention in terms of film noir and it is his films that will now briefly be returned to before discussing other noirish films outside the genre of *yingxiongopian* inspired by Woo's films.

Woo's Hong Kong works starting from *A Better Tomorrow* have frequently been perceived by overseas critics as a Hong Kong type of film noir – much in the same way as Collier did a decade later with “Noir East”, and, indeed, much like French critics discovered a new type of Hollywood film, the “original” film noir, in the early post-war period. Jinsoo An notes for example how “Korean journalists and critics discovered something very different in new Hong Kong gangster and action films and coined the term ‘Hong Kong noir’ to conceptualize the peculiarly pessimistic energy and allegorical implications” (105). In her study of *A Better Tomorrow*, Karen Fang provides additional examples of the “tendency to use noir as a generic category in the reception of the film” in the US (*Film Comment*), France (*Cahiers du Cinéma*) and Italy (*Cineforum*) (76-7).<sup>157</sup> As Fang points out, the local reception of *A Better Tomorrow* and the movies it inspired was quite different, as these films were treated as belonging to a distinct subgenre, the *yingxiongopian*, and the noir link was rarely mentioned (63). The parallels with the original genesis of the term “film noir” – as a French critical category not used by American critics and the directors making these films – are striking.

While the noir characteristics of *A Better Tomorrow* are somewhat inconspicuous, one could still point at a few of the film's visual elements that invoke noir, such as the dark dockyard setting used for the shootout at the end of the film, the bright neon light bathing in red the scene where Mark is beaten up by Shing's men, and the scene in the rain where Kit rejects his brother after he has been released from prison. Additionally, the film is marked by the typical noir pessimism: Mark dies tragically, while Ho is in the end unable to escape his criminal past and will return to jail. The film inspired a film noir look and atmosphere in several of the *yingxiongopian* that

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<sup>157</sup> The examples she gives are: Tesson, Charles, ed. *L'Asie à Hollywood*. Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 2001; [Woo, John]. “Le Style Melville: Propos de John Woo.” Trans. Nicholas Saada. *Cahiers du Cinéma* 507 (1996): 80-81; and Nazzaro, G.A. “A Better Tomorrow di John Woo.” *Cineforum* 35.3 (1995): 93.

followed it – Stephen Shin’s *Brotherhood* is a good example, as is Wong Kar-wai’s *As Tears Go By*. The Woo film that evokes film noir the most is *The Killer*. As this film brought him to critical attention in the West, the tendency of foreign critics to retrospectively discuss *A Better Tomorrow* in terms of film noir can at least partly be explained, and one could wonder how much Woo’s obvious references to film noir in *The Killer* in fact facilitated his breakthrough overseas.

In *The Killer* Chow Yun-fat is Jeff, a righteous assassin who accidentally blinds singer Jennie (Sally Yeh) during an assignment. Jeff later befriends Jennie and plans one last job to pay for a cornea transplant. After the job, however, his middleman and friend Sidney (Chu Kong) betrays him and Jeff barely escapes from a trap. Meanwhile, Inspector Li Ying (Danny Lee) is investigating the case and comes to admire Jeff, especially after the killer risks his life saving a child injured during a gunfight. Although Sidney betrays him once more, Jeff forgives him after he sees him begging Wong (Shing Fui-on), the one who ordered the hit, for Jeff’s money. When Li uses Jennie to lure Jeff out, Sidney helps them to reunite. Later, Wong’s new hired killer (Yi Fan-wai) and Li’s partner (Kenneth Tsang) follow Sidney to find Jeff’s hideout, but he manages to lose them. Shot by Wong’s assassin, Li’s partner dies in the hospital after telling Li where Jeff and Jennie are hiding. Li goes to arrest Jeff, but sides with him when Wong’s men attack. With Jennie, the two men go wait in a church for Sidney, who has gone to meet Wong again to get Jeff’s money. Sidney returns with the money, but is seriously injured and begs Jeff to kill him (Jeff obliges). A final battle with Wong and his men follows. Jeff, who had asked Li to use his cornea to help Jennie should he die, is tragically shot in the eyes by Wong and dies in agony. When Wong surrenders to the police who have finally arrived on the scene, Li becomes a criminal himself by shooting Wong.

Typical noir themes of *The Killer* include the blurring of “good” and “bad” (the hero is an assassin who bonds with a cop), a pessimistic ending (Jeff does not escape his fate and is in the end unable to help Jennie; Li breaks the law and will go to jail), the theme of betrayal (Sidney’s initial selling out of Jeff; Wong’s lack of loyalty to his men), and a pervasive sense that true heroes and values like righteousness and loyalty are outdated in a modern capitalist society (a feeling expressed in several dialogues). Kenneth Hall, who discusses the noir characteristics and genealogy of

*The Killer* at length, points at several film noir sources for the film, most prominently *This Gun for Hire* (1942) and Jean-Pierre Melville's French noirs, especially *Le Samourai* (1967), the basic plot of which is similar to that of Woo's film (1-3, 23-56).

Visually, the film evokes film noir imagery at times: several scenes take place at night, and at one point Jeff defends Jennie against two muggers on a dark, wet street that reflects colorful neon signs. Overall though, Woo seems to prefer to use visual devices almost antithetical to film noir such as soft-focus and warm colors, especially during the crucial exchanges Jeff has in the candle-lit church with Sidney and Li in the beginning and at the end of the film.<sup>158</sup> These scenes also exemplify the main thematic concern that keeps *The Killer* (and other John Woo films) in the final analysis somewhat distant from film noir: unlike in Melville's films and many Hollywood films noirs, Woo's characters are not alienated, worldweary or cynical antiheroes. On the contrary, they create powerful bonds with other protagonists (especially, other men) that are marked by trust, loyalty, self-sacrifice and righteousness – and in the process they redefine heroism for the modern age. The chivalric values Woo carried over from the 1960s and 1970s martial arts cinema thus serve as a powerful antidote against the existential angst and worldweariness often associated with film noir: even if the hero is a killer, this does not matter as he is obviously a good guy fighting against extremely nasty bad guys! It is not so much that Hollywood noir has no chivalric heroes (Raymond Chandler's Marlowe is often described as such), but rather that they are much less romanticized and idealized than Jeff and Li, whose world in the end is rather unambiguous. Romanticism is also what sets Woo's heroes apart from those that took center stage a decade later – in this regard Collier is at least partly correct. Still, quite a few films appearing around the same time went for a much bleaker and more nihilistic atmosphere, and it is in this regard that Ringo Lam's "On Fire" series stands out.

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<sup>158</sup> In classical Hollywood noir, soft focus is sometimes used to enhance the alluring character of the femme fatale. The fact that Woo uses it here in combination with warm colors and slow motion in scenes with Jennie but also in scenes between the men is one of the reasons some critics have read homoeroticism in his films. An example of such a reading is Jillian Sandell's "A Better Tomorrow? American Masochism and Hong Kong Action Films."

In 1987 and 1988 Lam directed three films: *City on Fire* (1987), *Prison on Fire* (1987) and *School on Fire* (1988).<sup>159</sup> While all three films deal with the triads in some way and are equally gritty, despairing and violent, only *City on Fire*, with its undercover cop protagonist, falls firmly within the crime genre as it has been discussed so far.<sup>160</sup> Possibly the best Hong Kong film noir of the 1980s, *City on Fire* rises above the *yingxiongopian* category it is sometimes put into (cf. Fang 48). Known as an important inspiration for Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), Lam's film is more realistic and its characters more complex than Woo's. Although the story is straightforward and even somewhat hackneyed, one easily forgets about this thanks to an excellent, multi-layered script, a for that time rather unusual jazzy soundtrack, great performances by Chow Yun-fat and Danny Lee (both cast against type), and the cinematography by Andrew Lau – who would later be behind that other great Hong Kong film about undercover agents, *Infernal Affairs* (2002).

The *yingxiongopian*'s thematic concern with brotherhood only enters *City on Fire* quite late when long-time undercover cop Ko Chow (Chow Yun-fat) bonds with robber Fu (Danny Lee), whom he is by duty forced to betray. Unlike in Woo's films, the characters here cannot be put into simple black-and-white categories: Fu might be a vicious robber not afraid to kill when necessary, but he is at the same time a man who is loyal to his friends and lives by a certain code of honor. Ko Chow meanwhile is initially unwilling to infiltrate Fu's gang, as he would rather resume work as a regular policeman and marry his girlfriend. Left no choice by the higher officers in the force – several of whom are more concerned with their careers than with his safety – Ko Chow is forced to relive the traumatic experience of betraying a friend during a previous assignment. His loyalties are obviously divided, as when after the botched robbery he saves Fu by taking a bullet for him and even shooting back at the police. The film reaches its climax when the gang regroup in their

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<sup>159</sup> Also belonging to the "On Fire" series is *Undeclared War* (1990), the Chinese title of which contains the term *fengyun* (meaning 'turbulence' or 'rapidly changing situation') also used in the titles of the other "On Fire" films. It was an "international" action-crime thriller about terrorists that failed at the box office. Additionally, a sequel to *Prison on Fire* followed in 1991.

<sup>160</sup> *Prison on Fire* is, obviously, a prison film and therefore a crime film. In this author's estimation Hong Kong has produced between ten to twenty films that can be classified as such over the last four decades, so it is not a very important genre. Like in Thomas Leitch's study of the crime film, this genre is left for later research. *School on Fire*, on the other hand, is a mix of the crime, youth and social problem genres and therefore defies easy classification. Earlier this film was mentioned in the discussion of films that demythologize the figure of the heroic gangster.

hideout, and their leader accuses Ko Chow of being a police mole. In a typical Mexican standoff copied by Tarantino, Fu protects the wounded Ko Chow against the leader. Before they can settle their affairs, however, the police arrive and soon all are dead except Fu, who is too stunned by Ko Chow's admission that he really is a cop to even try to make his escape. As in much of the film, Lam here employs a low-key color scheme with blue and grey dominating.<sup>161</sup> When the police shoot at the shed the gang is hiding in, bullet holes allow in the piercing light from the police spotlights and further add to the scene's noirish visual beauty. This is however not the typical noir look of deep shadows and chiaroscuro lighting, but rather an example of "film bleu". This term, used by Shelly Kraicer to describe Andrew Lau's *To Live and Die in Tsimshatsui* (1994), is highly appropriate for *City on Fire* as well: during the film's exemplary final shootout, the bright police spotlights create strong contrasts, while blue toning is used, other colors (except red) seem less bright, and dust specks visibly dance in the air.<sup>162</sup> The final shot is a slow zoom-out starting from a letter of Ko Chow's girlfriend (inviting him to meet her in Hawaii), then revealing the body of the dead Ko Chow, and finally the bodies of several gangsters lying around him. The red blood on his face stands out strongly against the bluish-grey environment. An earlier scene of a very alive Ko Chow doing a silly dance on the street ending in a freeze frame is then superimposed over this shot – it is an appropriately tragic but simultaneously beautiful image that summarizes the visual style, atmosphere and theme of *City on Fire*.

Before moving on to the allusions to 1997 a film entitled "City on Fire" seems to make, a few more films strengthening the notion of a Hong Kong film noir will be discussed. Among these films, Shu Kei's *Soul* (1986) is somewhat atypical and could be described as a film noir comedy. Centered on a strong woman protagonist, without spectacular action scenes and lacking big-name stars, it unsurprisingly did not do well at the box office, but its self-conscious references to both local and

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<sup>161</sup> In an interview the film's cinematographer Andrew Lau remarks that he was the first to experiment with blue toning in Hong Kong. After *City on Fire* he used blue toning frequently, along with the technique of manually rocking the camera. One clearly sees his contributions to the updated noir-style of Wong Kar-wai's *As Tears Go By* and *Chungking Express* (1994).

<sup>162</sup> Incidentally, the term "film bleu" is also used by Roman Lobato to describe the visual style of Michael Mann's *Heat* (1995). Earlier, he details this visual style as consisting of the "frequent use of static long shots, a blue-grey palette, and a dry, arid lighting design" (9). Interestingly, Lobato later mentions that "post-noir" Hong Kong crime movies (especially those by Andrew Lau and Johnnie To) employ similar tactics in depicting and aestheticising the urban experience (11).

foreign noir traditions make it worthy of mention. *Soul*'s central character is Ye Qiang (Deannie Yip), a housewife whose world comes crashing down when her policeman husband seemingly commits suicide and she herself only barely escapes an attempt on her life. A Taiwanese woman she was talking to during the attack is less lucky, and a police investigation reveals that this woman was in fact her husband's long-time mistress! As her husband and the mistress had a child (now an orphan), Ye is asked to temporarily take care of him. Gangsters are still after her, however, and as it seems that a powerful police inspector is somehow involved as well, Ye can only rely on herself. In the ensuing events, she reveals a streetwise resourcefulness one would not expect from a housewife and more is learnt about her "wild" days in Macau before she got married. Fleeing back to Macau with the child, she finds shelter with an old friend, convinces a young gangster (Jacky Cheung in his first film) to become a good guy and join her side, and rekindles a pre-marriage relationship with a jazz musician (Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-hsien in a rare appearance as an actor). In a final confrontation with the cop who murdered her husband, Ye prevails.

The film visually becomes darker as it proceeds, especially after Ye for the first time reveals her toughness when rescuing the boy from the gangsters who had kidnapped him. Winning cinematographer Christopher Doyle a Hong Kong Film Award (in 1987), *Soul* is possibly the first Hong Kong movie to introduce the strong red and blue contrasts evocative of noir that would appear also in *As Tears Go By*, *The Big Heat* and a few other films. References to noir include a poster of Humphrey Bogart prominently visible in the background during one scene, but also an extensive clip of Grace Chang singing "Carmen" in the noir musical *The Wild, Wild Rose* (1960) – signaling awareness of both local and American traditions of noir.<sup>163</sup> Additionally, as in some noirish Hong Kong films before and after it, Macau functions here as the "Orient" does in several classical Hollywood films noirs, in which, according to James Naremore, the Far East was often associated with "enigmatic and criminal behavior" while also being depicted as "a kind of aestheticized bordello, where one

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<sup>163</sup> The Grace Chang clip is set ironically against a conversation between Ye and her old lover about resuming their relationship.

could experience all sorts of forbidden pleasures" (225).<sup>164</sup> As in *City on Fire*, the final shot of *Soul* offers a good summary of the film's noirishness: after the concluding, less-than-heroic gunfight, a jazzy tune begins to play and the camera pans up slowly away from the scene to reveal darkness above, with only a red neon sign reading "ARMS" standing out against the blackness.

A good example of how the deconstruction of the righteous vengeance theme – so central to martial arts films and 1980s crime films like John Woo's – could lead to a more "full-blooded" noir-ness is Lam Nai-choi's *Her Vengeance* (1988), a remake of the noirish rape-revenge film *Kiss of Death* (1973) discussed in the previous chapter. Following the original's straightforward plot of a woman being gang-raped, starting to work in a nightclub and eliminating her rapists, Lam plays down the original's (already quite limited) sexploitation element, and changes a number of details in the plot to question the whole idea of vengeance as a means to get justice. Instead of being the only one to die, the female protagonist Chieh Ying (Pauline Wong) survives the ordeal, but none of the people she cares about do. Turning on its head the typical martial arts narrative of an individual killing all his enemies before his/her own (spectacular) demise, the film thus questions that type of suicidal heroism, making the point that vengeance is maybe not the right answer after all. It turns the already grim original into an even more nihilistic tale where the line between good and evil gets increasingly blurred. As in *Soul* and *City on Fire*, this dark tale is accompanied by noir cinematography: most action takes place at night, while a recurring bluish mist and rain obscure the proceedings and contrast nicely with the colorful neon lights of the city.

The final example, *On the Run* (1988), was mentioned earlier in the discussion of "emigrant gangster" films. The film's director Alfred Cheung, mostly known for his comedies, was also a member of the New Wave: as a scriptwriter he contributed to important works like Ann Hui's *The Story of Woo Viet* and Alan Fong's *Father and Son* (1981). In this for him rather unusual thriller, the focus is on Heung Ming (Yuen Biao), a cop so anxious to leave Hong Kong that he asks his emigrating wife to put their divorce on hold so he can go to Canada as well. Soon after, however, his wife

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<sup>164</sup> Examples of such Hong Kong films include *Death Traps* (1960), *Bloodshed on Wedding Day* (1965), *Her Vengeance* (1988), *The Longest Nite* (1998),...

is killed by a female assassin. When Heung investigates and catches this killer, he stumbles onto a dark conspiracy headed by Lui (Charlie Chin), the police superintendent who had been dating Heung's wife and, it turns out, was responsible for her death: she had threatened to expose his plan to sell a huge load of confiscated drugs. As he knows too much now, Heung is forced to team up with the female assassin, Chui (Pat Ha). They pick up Heung's young daughter and try desperately to stay out of the hands of Lui, who has mobilized the entire police force against them by framing Heung for murder. Heung's trusted friends uncover evidence of Lui's activities, but are brutally killed. When soon after Heung's daughter also dies in a gunfight, Heung and Chui (now romantically involved) decide to face off directly with Lui and his partners in a drawn-out and anxiety-ridden finale (described in more detail below).

With its innocent-man-on-the-run plot reminiscent of Hitchcock films, and its depiction of a world gone crazy, where the police are corrupt and where the good guys and even children die, *On the Run* is decidedly noir both visually and thematically. What is striking about the film, however, is that it explicitly links this film noir atmosphere to the 1997 deadline: every character is in a hurry to leave Hong Kong at all costs, with Lui being merely a more ruthless version of Heung in that he goes over bodies to achieve his dreams of emigration. This theme gets its clearest expression in the final scene. Instead of the straightforward shootout one would expect, the viewer is treated to Alfred Cheung's nightmarish vision of Hong Kong: the crooked cops, disturbed by the intruding Chui and Heung from admiring their enormous pile of dirty money, shamelessly beg for their lives, argue with each other over the money and try to buy their way out. Lui then gives a long speech to explain his behavior: how he had worked hard and slowly climbed in the police hierarchy, not allowed to take bribes while everyone was making money, and how he finally reached a good position in the force just as the 1997 issue came up and he had not made any money yet. He promises Heung and Chui a part of the drug money and a free pass if they spare them, and to prove his sincerity he has one of his partners shoot him in the hand. When Lui uses this surprise to get to a gun, a painful protracted brawl follows at the end of which he laughs madly while lying mortally wounded on the floor. A short text after this scene announces that Heung and Chui did not manage to escape and were sentenced to a long prison term.

As a film that uses 1997 anxiety as a motivating force for its characters, *On the Run* most clearly raises the question of how Hong Kong films noirs relate to the social and cultural contexts in which they were produced. As Karen Fang notes with regard to the noirish *yingxiongopian*: “The issue of reunification (...) was of such pressing interest that it surfaced in all forms of film and popular culture, but action/crime movies, and especially the *yingxiongopian*, had a particular potency due to the genre’s Manichean plots and frequent scenes of violence” (57). She, however, goes on to critique overseas critics’ tendency to exclusively read Hong Kong cinema in terms of the city’s political fate, and links this tendency to their “use of noir as a generic category” in describing films such as *A Better Tomorrow* (76), because noir “is usually thought of as an archetypically political genre” (79).

The reading of Hong Kong (crime) films solely in terms of the impending Handover is common to the reflectionist approach, defined by Hector Rodriguez as “an interpretive approach that accounts for the presence of stylistic, narrative, and thematic devices by reference to societal processes, structures and events” (61). But while Fang talks about the *foreign* reception of Hong Kong films, Rodriguez describes this as the dominant approach among *local* critics. When he further discusses reflectionism, Rodriguez notes how Hong Kong critics sometimes crudely and uncritically applied Fredric Jameson’s “symptomatic interpretation of postmodernity as the ‘cultural logic’ of late capitalism” because “it provided something like a sophisticated reflectionist model” (62). Fang similarly notes and problematizes the influence of Jameson on overseas critics’ readings of Hong Kong cinema (67). A possible problem with the Jamesonian preference for allegory as a means of interpretation is the risk of circularity: “interpretations are produced which privilege those elements which can be linked to the pre-determined meaning” (Walsh). The reflectionist approach to Hollywood noir of the 1940s and 1950s has recently also been subject to critique and revision.<sup>165</sup> Frank Krutnik, for instance, notes how “it is not sufficient merely to note the elements which may seem to fit some already formulated notion of 1940s America” (56). Instead, one should

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<sup>165</sup> Besides Krutnik’s account mentioned here, one can also refer to Steve Neale’s *Hollywood and Genre* (156-60) and James Naremore’s detailed historical and cultural contextualizing in *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*.

“specify how such elements functioned within the parameters and procedures of classical Hollywood” (56-57).

With regards to Hong Kong film, more complex understandings of the relationship between culture, society and film have appeared as well. While still preoccupied with 1997 and Hong Kong identity, Esther Yau, much like Krutnik, states that “though one may describe certain correspondences between the constructed ‘present’ of the film texts and the analyzed ‘present’ of history, the correspondences are mediated by narrative and filmic terms including the codes of popular genres” (“Border Crossing” 183). It is probably David Bordwell who has argued most extensively for an alternative to the reflectionist approach:

*Instead of reflecting the mood of the moment, popular cinema is better considered as part of an open-ended dialogue with its culture. People with different points of view contribute, and the result never freezes into a snapshot of a zeitgeist or a national character. Filmmakers, critics, and audiences – or rather, diverse segments of audiences – participate in a vernacular conversation in which familiar subjects, both topical and traditional, are reworked according to various agendas (Planet Hong Kong 37).*

Bordwell later also addresses the role of genres, stating that “although genre pictures bear the traces of the cultural conversation, they are also talking among themselves” (*Planet Hong Kong* 153). Besides this “intertextuality”, market conditions shape genres as well, as do ratings systems – the creation in 1988 of a ratings system that included “Category III” films promoted new genres for instance (*Planet Hong Kong* 155).

Hong Kong crime films in the 1980s should be understood within this context. While the 1997 factor added to the dark, cynical and hysterical character of some noirish films, it was only in the occasional film like *On the Run* that it became something more than a mere afterthought. Equally or even more important for the existence and the particular characteristics of the crime film genre and Hong Kong noir are factors such as the traditions of martial arts cinema (its concepts of heroism and fatalism), local and overseas generic developments (the local resonance of *Dirty Harry*), the workings of the market (the enormous success of *A Better Tomorrow* spawning many imitators), the agency of individual producers/directors (a Tsui Hark

who tends to explicitly address 1997 in his films), and the feedback from critics and audiences (the Hong Kong critics who, according to Rodriguez, insist that filmmakers “depict their social and historical reality” (61)). An open-ended and constantly evolving dialogue indeed, as will be shown in the next chapter.

### 3.7. Conclusion

Continuing a process started in the 1970s, the Hong Kong crime film absorbed elements from martial arts cinema and adapted them to a modern urban environment. The female warrior figures in female cop films, the type of vigilante heroism embodied by Danny Lee’s law enforcers, and the code of brotherhood in the *yingxiongopian*; all have roots in the martial arts genre – itself somewhat of a hybrid as discussed in the previous chapter. What here has been called the first wave of Hong Kong noir should be understood in this context as well. While the code of brotherhood and Woo’s romanticism work against the noir-ness of the *yingxiongopian*, many of the films belonging to the subgenre have nevertheless been likened to film noir. Some films outside the *yingxiongopian* subgenre have been highlighted to illustrate how film noir became an even more relevant category to describe late 1980s crime film .

By tracing the generic genealogy of Hong Kong noir, an argument has been made against any facile linking of the appearance of film noir with the 1997 factor – a reflectionist approach that has been common to both local and overseas accounts of Hong Kong cinema. A more sophisticated understanding of the appearance of Hong Kong noir should at least link it to global generic trends (the simultaneous rise of neo-noir in Hollywood and elsewhere), and point out the films’ specific roots in 1970s martial arts cinema. The next chapter will continue to outline the developments within the crime film genre in the 1990s and 2000s. These decades witnessed several major developments within the genre, including an important transformation of Hong Kong noir that has determined the form of crime films up to the present.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

# **From *To Be Number One* to *Infernal Affairs*: The Decline of the Hong Kong Crime Film (1990-2010)**

### **4.1. Introduction**

The Hong Kong film industry entered the 1990s with confidence. Awash with overseas investment, production boomed and filmmakers were working at a feverish pace to keep up with demand. Just a few years later, the bubble burst and the film industry gradually spiraled into its worst crisis since the Second World War – it seems unlikely it will recover its earlier glory anytime soon. This chapter will deal with this tumultuous period from the point of view of the crime film. In sheer numbers, it remained the dominant genre until the start of the new millennium, and it has until the present continued to deliver many of Hong Kong's most celebrated films. The crisis forced directors and producers to seek various ways to survive, and it is the resulting evolutions in the crime genre that the chapter aims to trace.

The discussion is divided into two major sections: in the first section, the continuation of the golden era of the 1980s will be discussed, focusing in particular on the Big Timer cycle and the rise of Category III films. The second, much lengthier section deals mainly with the period of decline, and focuses on developments within particular genres (the police film and the gangster film) and subgenres (the assassin film and the undercover cop film). It will also deal with two major attempts by the industry to revive the action/crime film: what will be called the “international action” film and the *Infernal Affairs* influenced crime thriller.

Even when not always explicitly stated in this chapter, it should be clear from the description of the films' plots and visual aspects that the Hong Kong crime genre retained definite noir-like characteristics. The topic of Hong Kong film noir will be taken up again in the next chapter, where it will be discussed alongside the study of the films from Milkyway Image. Since its establishment in 1996, this very productive company is arguably the most interesting player in the Hong Kong crime

genre, and while its development is intimately linked to the wider changes in the film industry, it merits a separate discussion.

## **4.2. Changes in Society, the Film Industry and Genres**

The 1989 democracy movement in Beijing had inspired Hong Kong people to pour out support for the students on Tian'anmen Square. The quashing of the protest by Mainland authorities on June 4<sup>th</sup> then understandably had a big impact on the atmosphere in Hong Kong as well, leading many to fear a similar fate awaited them after the 1997 Handover and intensifying the scramble for foreign passports in case the worst should happen. Steve Tsang highlights three measures that came to be seen as essential to prevent the crisis from deepening. The first involved asking Britain's help in providing an "escape route" (either by granting full citizenship or by securing a chance of settlement elsewhere). The British government rejected a proposal along these lines, but it proved more receptive to two other ideas: the acceleration of the process of democratization (against the wishes of Beijing), and the introduction of a bill of rights to enhance the legal basis for the protection of human rights (S. Tsang 249-50). Some concessions regarding democracy were gained in the final draft of the Basic Law (Hong Kong's mini-constitution which would take effect after the Handover), and the last governor, Christopher Patten, repeatedly clashed with Beijing in his push for further democratic reforms in the final years of British rule. Meanwhile, in 1991, the Bill of Rights Ordinance, containing most of the provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, was enacted. The Bill had an important impact on police operations, and indirectly also on representations of the police in Hong Kong films as will be discussed later.

While the Handover on 1 July 1997 went by without much of a glitch and the apocalyptic fears fortunately did not become reality, the new, Beijing-approved government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) led by Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa soon had to deal with the effects of the Asian financial crisis which hit Hong Kong and the region hard in 1997 and 1998. Other economic slumps over the past decade – caused by the bursting of the dot com

bubble in 2000, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the SARS epidemic in 2003 and the current financial crisis which started in 2007 – have combined with a general distrust of, and frustration with, the local and central governments (due to the lack of progress in democratic reforms, a widening wealth gap and a variety of other issues) to create a generally pessimistic and gloomy mood in the city. Nowhere has this sense of doom and gloom been so obvious as in the local film industry.

Before discussing why the decline set in during the early 1990s, it is useful to first ask how Hong Kong, with its tiny domestic market and no state support, was able to sustain such a buoyant film industry. While the accomplishments of local filmmakers should not be disregarded, it seems that the structure of the industry had an important role in creating the boom as well. As Law Kar has argued, starting from the early 1980s three local companies nearly monopolized local exhibition circuits, and were in this way capable of keeping foreign competition at bay. Towards the late 1980s, however, the rise of mini-theatres and multiplexes broke this monopolization of the market and offered more opportunities for seeing foreign films (Law, “Hong Kong Film Market” 73-6). In addition, the appearance of a fourth circuit for local films in 1988 increased demand and combined with overseas as well as triad investment in the industry to encourage overproduction of shoddy, rapidly made films, ultimately undermining confidence in the Hong Kong product both locally and – even more important – overseas.<sup>166</sup> Other factors contributing to the crisis were Hollywood’s aggressive targeting and opening of Asian markets throughout the 1990s, increasing production costs, rampant piracy in the region, and the migration of talent to Hollywood (Teo, *Extra Dimensions* vii-xi; Lim 349-52; Odham & Stokes 292-4; Li, “Melodrama” 96).

The crisis during the second half of the 1990s could to some extent be compared to the depression the industry experienced from the mid- to late 1970s: it did not necessarily spell the end of the industry but signaled a need for new business strategies and creative experimentation. Many excellent works appeared in the late 1990s, and while speaking of a new “New Wave” would be stretching the facts, companies did give directors chances to try out new things, often leading to

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<sup>166</sup> Leung and Chan note that in the early 1990s, the local box-office was good for only one-fifth or one-third of total revenue (147-8).

admirable results. This period will be dealt with in more detail throughout the chapter, as the major English language histories of Hong Kong cinema that appeared at the end of the decade were unable to chart these developments in depth.<sup>167</sup> Unfortunately, the market did not respond and the overall economic situation of the industry continued to deteriorate. By 1999, exhibition circuits faced a shortage of local films, and the gaps were filled by extremely low-budget productions often shot on video (“Hong Kong Filmography” 133-6). Film production went into a free fall throughout the first five years of the new millennium, stabilizing at around 50 films per year since 2005 – the lowest level in the post-war period. On top of that, many of the recent films are co-productions with the Mainland, while films aimed primarily at the Hong Kong market are becoming a rarity. Co-productions with the Mainland are nothing new, but at its current phase, it is clear that the Hong Kong-based film industry is rapidly reorienting itself to first and foremost service the Mainland market rather than Hong Kong itself. This major development will be discussed at more length later.

In terms of genre, the 1990s and early 2000s saw a quick succession of fads as well as some broader shifts. First of all, crime films remained by a large margin the dominant genre in 1990s Hong Kong. As for other genres, the decade started off with the gambling cycle briefly mentioned in the previous chapter. It was a gambling comedy, *All for the Winner* (1990), which launched the career of the decade’s biggest star, Stephen Chow. Chow went on to play in dozens of commercially successful *moleitau* 无厘头 (“nonsense”) comedies. Like the films of Jackie Chan and Jet Li, Chow’s star vehicles function somewhat like a genre of their own. Richard Dyer states: “As with genres proper, one can discern across a star’s vehicles continuities of iconography (...), visual style (...) and structure” (62).<sup>168</sup> Hence, though his/her films might belong to different genres, the star’s image is certain to strongly influence the eventual product. The early 1990s also witnessed a brief martial arts revival and the boom of Category III films (discussed below),

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<sup>167</sup> For example, Stephen Teo’s *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* came out in 1997, and David Bordwell’s *Planet Hong Kong* in 2000.

<sup>168</sup> Dyer is careful to note that “not all films made by a star are vehicles”, but that “looking at their films in terms of vehicles draws attention to those films that do not ‘fit’, that constitute inflections, exceptions to, subversions of the vehicle pattern and the star image” (62). What Dyer insufficiently highlights is that stars and their vehicles, like genres, evolve and have to allow some variation in order to keep the audience interested.

which, oddly, included a fad for gigolo films. At mid-decade, United Filmmakers Organization (UFO) followed the late 1980s impulse of D&B to target local yuppies, and made an impact with medium-budgeted “relationship” films mixing warm comedy with drama and a distinct local flavor (Bordwell 154). Around the same time the “date” series of horror comedies was launched with *Thou Shalt Not Swear* (1993), named so because each Chinese title in this series refers to a specific date – six such films were released between 1993 and 1997. The *Troublesome Night* series of horror comedy films took over in 1997 and saw no less than 18 entries between then and 2003. The international success of the Japanese horror film *The Ring* (1998) further encouraged the proliferation of low-budget horror films in Hong Kong, while in the early 2000s bigger budgets were brought to the genre, for instance in the influential Pang Brothers film, *The Eye* (2002). Surpassing horror in popularity in the new decade was the romantic comedy/drama, in the vein of the 1990s UFO films, and given a new impulse by the box office success of Milkyway Image’s *Needing You* (2000). Blockbuster martial arts spectacles co-produced with China in the wake of the global success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) further reduced the overall importance of crime films in the territory’s output, although the occasional genre entry/update (most prominently, the *Infernal Affairs* series in 2002-2003) proved capable of captivating international audiences.

### **4.3. End of the Golden Years (1990-1994)**

#### **4.3.1. Continuity with the Past**

A new decade did not herald a break with the cinematic past, and Hong Kong filmmakers continued to make the type of crime films they were making by the end of the 1980s at an increasingly frenetic pace.<sup>169</sup> Before going deeper into the major new crime film developments of the early 1990s – the Big Timer and Cat III films – it is useful to briefly outline the continuities with the 1980s. These are most obvious in the continuation of various series. *Long Arm of the Law IV* (1990) continued to deal with the Mainland-Hong Kong relationship, and stands as one of the few Hong Kong films that deals quite explicitly with the events on Tian’anmen Square the year before: based on real events, the film shows how Mainland Big Circle gangsters in

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<sup>169</sup> According to Chen Qingwei, 120 local films were shown in 1990, 125 in 1991, 210 in 1992, and 239 in 1993 (543-67). Various kinds of crime films made up the bulk of this output.

Hong Kong are hired by local democracy activists to smuggle student leaders out of the country. The film did quite poorly at the box office and became the series' final installment, though together with the earlier films it remained a reference for later crime movies, especially those dealing with Mainland gangsters or law enforcers in Hong Kong.<sup>170</sup> While *The Roar of the Vietnamese* (1991) was basically an equally grim but less accomplished update of Ann Hui's *The Story of Woo Viet* (1981), girls-with-guns films continued to appear too, but they generally had little appeal locally and were apparently aimed more at the overseas market. Much more successful and lighthearted were Jackie Chan's new entries in his *Police Story* series, even though he occasionally attempted more darkness to prove his acting chops, for instance in the Kirk Wong-directed *Crime Story* (1993) and more recently in Benny Chan's *New Police Story* (2004). The *yingxiongopian* subgenre so crucial in the late 1980s deserves somewhat lengthier attention, as a terminological clarification should be made to highlight the differences between the films of the 1980s and the 1990s.

In the previous chapter, the melodrama of brotherhood was singled out as the defining element of the *yingxiongopian* ("hero film") subgenre that proliferated after the success of John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* (1986). Now it will be argued that the English term used for these same films – "heroic bloodshed" – should be understood to refer to a wider range of films than the term "*yingxiongopian*", as it is used here, covers. The term "heroic bloodshed" was first coined by British fanzine editor Rick Baker in *Eastern Heroes* to refer to "a Hong Kong action film that features a lot of gunplay and gangsters, rather than kung fu. (...) Lots of blood. Lots of action. Quite often the hero is either maimed or killed by the final reel" (qtd. in Logan 126). Beyond Logan lists some more characteristics of heroic bloodshed in his discussion of the genre. According to Logan, they usually follow the same basic plot: "an innocent is drawn, willingly or not, into the underworld. Often, he has a gruff 'big brother' figure to look up to within the gang. The hero is betrayed and, in the final reel, takes bloody revenge, often dying in the carnage" (126). Although Logan's definition of heroic bloodshed fits quite well with how the *yingxiongopian* as

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<sup>170</sup> Another popular series of films soon came out to deal with the cultural differences between the Mainland and Hong Kong, but in a more comedic manner: the four *Her Fatal Ways* films (1990-1994) followed the travails of a Mainland policewoman on various missions in the colony. Li-Mei Chang analyzes the Hong Kong-China dynamic in this series in her article "Whose Fatal Ways: Mapping the Boundary and Consuming the Other in Border Crossing Films".

a genre is understood in Chinese-speaking communities, Western fanboys often seem to follow Baker's less precise definition of the term, as referring to a "typical" Hong Kong action film containing lots of bloodshed and stylized gunplay, and usually ending with the death of the hero.<sup>171</sup> For reasons of analysis, the definition of *yingxiong pian* has been further limited here to refer to those films most clearly showing Woo's influence in their focus on brotherhood. Using this definition, it is clear that the *yingxiong pian* as a popular subgenre had run its course by 1990, while the more diffuse heroic bloodshed went on for a few more years.<sup>172</sup>

John Woo himself entered the 1990s with *Bullet in the Head*, his darkest and most ambitious work so far, into which he poured his pessimistic feelings regarding Hong Kong's future after the Tian'anmen Square massacre.<sup>173</sup> Brotherhood remained the central theme in this film with epic proportions, which did not confine itself to the gangster genre, and added elements of war and action-adventure films. But even Woo himself moved away from the brotherhood theme after the box office disaster of *Bullet in the Head*, and his *Once a Thief* (1991) was a caper-comedy focused on a romantic triangle. When he returned to more familiar territory in *Hard Boiled* (1992, discussed later), the brotherhood theme was not absent, but much less prominent than before. It was that other celebrated director, Ringo Lam, who, somewhat ironically, abandoned his more realistic and script-driven approach to create an extremely stylized, cartoon-like heroic bloodshed film: *Full Contact* (1992).

*Full Contact* stars Chow Yun-fat as Jeff (or Gou Fei), a mean, butterfly-knife-wielding but still chivalric bouncer in a Bangkok nightclub, out for revenge after being betrayed and left for dead by his partners in a robbery. Simon Yam plays "Judge", the main villain – a gay, overly flamboyant and homicidal criminal assisted

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<sup>171</sup> A "Pocket Essential" devoted to the genre defines heroic bloodshed as follows: "It is used to distinguish between Hong Kong gangster gun operas and the traditional kung fu opuses. Basically in Heroic Bloodshed there are bullets flying across the screen instead of feet. This results in blood, carnage, cars wrecked, family honour insulted and avenged, drugs taken, buildings on fire, war, dead bodies strewn across the streets, and very bad men doing unmentionable things" (Fitzgerald 7). A quick search on Wikipedia reveals how even the *Infernal Affairs* series (2002-3), which contains close to no action scenes, is considered by some as heroic bloodshed.

<sup>172</sup> Patrick Tam's *My Heart Is that Eternal Rose* (1989) is an excellent example to illustrate the difference between the two terms: with its focus on a romantic triangle instead of the bonds between brothers, Tam's film is clearly a heroic bloodshed film, but not an *yingxiong pian*.

<sup>173</sup> Tony Williams devotes a lot of attention to this "apocalyptic" element in his monograph on *Bullet in the Head*.

by a nymphomaniac and a bodybuilder. The movie obviously relishes its campy B-movie nature, while its cinematography, editing and cock rock soundtrack make this the early 1990s Hong Kong equivalent of Robert Rodriguez' acclaimed *Sin City* (2005).<sup>174</sup> Vengeance is the movie's main theme, though brotherhood (along with other chivalric values) is important as well: an important subplot involves Sam (Anthony Wong), who betrays his sworn brother Jeff and marries Jeff's girlfriend in Hong Kong while the latter is recovering in Thailand.

*Full Contact* was probably influenced by the increase of extreme violence in Hong Kong cinema, as 1992 also saw the beginning of the Category III trend (described below).<sup>175</sup> The fact that regular Category III stars Simon Yam and Anthony Wong both appear in Lam's film strengthens this link. More regular genre entries moderately successful at the box office were *Return Engagement* (1990), a fairly typical heroic bloodshed movie starring Alan Tang, which added some father-daughter bonding to the mix, and *Dragon in Jail* (1990), which starts like *Prison on Fire* (1987), but soon becomes a standard triad film. *Dragon in Jail* does signal a shift back to the use of long knives for fights (as in 1981's *The Club*), which is in fact closer to reality as guns are hard to obtain in Hong Kong. The use of guns or knives is an important iconographical difference that, broadly taken, delineates the difference between triad dramas (with a focus on criminal intrigue) and triad action films (where viewing pleasure mostly derives from the action scenes).<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> The film is also noteworthy for using the "bullet-cam" effect, one of the first instances of this effect in a Hong Kong film.

<sup>175</sup> Kenneth Brorsson notes: "The original cinema version played with a Category II rating but later Cat III rated video versions reinstated several moments of gore (the Mei Ah dvd incorrectly states that it's still Cat II). There's also evidence in the film of at least one deleted scene that involves Anthony Wong's Sam forced by Yam's Judge to bring the eyes of Jeff as evidence that he's killed him. Wong reportedly instead cuts out the eyes of one of the killed family members in the house where this all takes place. His exiting the house shows him grasping on something in his hands (a shot that's in the film) and what would've followed was Judge placing the eyeballs in his mouth."

<sup>176</sup> As the police in Hong Kong carry guns, cops-and-robbers films and police films more often feature gunfights. Crime films in the 1990s tended more towards realism (as opposed to the fantastic gunfights in heroic bloodshed), while the overall quality of scriptwriting (and related research) improved. This is possibly one reason for the diminishing numbers of heroic bloodshed films, though undoubtedly many other factors played a role as well. The difficulty of obtaining a gun in Hong Kong is humorously illustrated by Tsui Hark's *Time and Tide* (2000), where one of the two heroes (working as a private bodyguard) spends most of the film's action scenes armed with a toy gun, as this was all he could find!

Final mention should be made of *A Moment of Romance* (1990), the first feature film of director Benny Chan, who would soon become one of Hong Kong's leading big-budget action film directors. Although the film was only a modest success at the box office, it has since then gained status as a classic, and its scenes with gangster Andy Lau driving around on his motorcycle with the young Wu Qianlian holding on to him have been parodied in many a Hong Kong film.<sup>177</sup> The film stands also as a monument to the potential power of genre filmmaking as its plot is rather clichéd, but its execution makes it unusually effective. An important reason for its success was possibly the amount of talent involved: Johnnie To was the producer, Ringo Lam the associate producer, and James Yuen, later one of the main creative forces behind UFO, received credit for the script. As UFO would a few years later excel in "relationship" comedy/dramas, it is not so much a surprise that *A Moment of Romance* brought a tragic romance to a typical heroic bloodshed plot. While this had already been done quite successfully in Wong Kar-wai's *As Tears Go By* (1988), *A Moment of Romance* goes further in putting the romance element at the center, as its title already indicates.<sup>178</sup> Wah Dee (Andy Lau) is an orphan raised by three prostitutes and is now a quiet but capable member of a triad gang. Picked to be the getaway driver in a jewel heist, things don't go as planned, and Wah Dee takes a rich student, Jojo (Wu Qianlian), hostage to make good his escape. When later the leader of the robbers orders him to kill Jojo, Wah Dee instead drives her home on his motorcycle and lets her go without saying a word, presumably assuming she won't betray them to the police. A romance develops in spite of Jojo's upper-class parents' objections and the violent realities of Wah Dee's life in the gang. That this story affects is mostly due to the understated way Wah Dee is depicted: he is a taciturn hero, showing his emotions more through actions than through words, a young man not happy to be a gangster, but if necessary very capable at executing the violence characteristic of life in the underworld. Also remarkable is the cinematography: as is typical for gangster films, much of the action takes place at night, but here great use is made of the colorful neon illuminating the city. The

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<sup>177</sup> Most famously in Johnnie To and Wai Ka-fai's *Needing You* (2000). To also worked as a producer on *A Moment of Romance 2* (1993) and directed the third film in the series (1996) himself. In an interview with Stephen Teo, To actually claims he directed most of the original *A Moment of Romance* as well (*Director in Action* 228).

<sup>178</sup> Further indicating that the romance was really the main attraction of these films is *A Moment of Romance 3*, which drops the heroic gangster background entirely.

brilliant intensity of these colors is a perfect accompaniment to the film's emotions.<sup>179</sup>

### 4.3.2. New Developments

#### 4.3.2.1. *The Big Timer Film*

When *To Be Number One* reached the top ten of the box-office in 1991, a new fad was launched. The *xiaoxiong pian* 英雄片 (usually translated as Big Timer films), as *To Be Number One* and its imitators were referred to, were generally considered to be a sort of follow-up to the *yingxiong pian* that dominated the local screens in preceding years. The term *xiaoxiong*, Stephen Teo explains, "puts an emphasis on the hero as a leader, a general, a first among equals" (*Extra Dimensions* 236). Although some of the Big Timer films tried to integrate the familiar brotherhood theme of the hero films into their plot, this usually was a marriage "ridden with irreconcilable contradictions": the ruthless battle to the top is characterized by egoism, and there was no space for "senseless sacrifice for an abstract 'brotherhood' in matters regarding the quest for wealth" (Li, "Rise": 111). What it did share with the hero films, however, was a preference for a limited stable of actors: whereas the hero films most prominently were characterized by the presence of Chow Yun-fat, the Big Timer films saw Ray Lui and Kent Cheng rise to the top of their box-office appeal. Additionally, Paul Chun and hardworking Andy Lau made several appearances as well.

As was already mentioned in previous chapters, there were precedents for these *Godfather*-like films in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the Big Timer films shared with some of them what Teo describes as a "pre-modern mentality in which virtue, status and wealth were seen as equivalent" (*Extra Dimensions* 242). Indeed, the Big Timer films glorified their criminal protagonists to an almost absurd degree, with their choice for a life of crime easily explained away as their only way out of abject poverty. Ironically they also presented themselves as telling of "real people

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<sup>179</sup> As David Bordwell notes, Hong Kong directors have used "the great latitude of modern film stocks not to create muddy chiaroscuro, as in Hollywood, but to generate crisp, bright images" (118). *A Moment of Romance* is one of the best examples of this approach.

and real events” (Li, “Rise” 108).<sup>180</sup> The latter was usually done through adding period detail and the use of intertitles: between acts, extra information was given about contemporary Hong Kong society, historical events, and, in the case of the *Lee Rock* films (1991), the price of commodities and the salary and assets of the protagonist.<sup>181</sup> Given the hagiographic character of these films, however, the “hero” usually remained rather one-dimensional.

While the Big Timer films focusing on famous criminals have their Hollywood counterparts (the “classic” gangster films like *Little Caesar* (1931) and *Scarface* (1932) come to mind), a more uniquely Hong Kong development was the Big Timer film focusing on the rise of a corrupt cop. The similarities between police and gangsters are sometimes highlighted in American films, but seem more ingrained in Hong Kong crime films. For one, both triads and police worship Guan Yu, who stands for righteousness and loyalty, as their “patron saint”, and shrines to this god are part of the common iconography of police and gangster films alike. Historical factors arguably play a role here as well, as many Hongkongers still remember the days of syndicated police corruption, which only ended after the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) was established in the early 1970s. Since the Big Timer films are set in this period, it makes sense to depict the rise of a corrupt cop.

The fact that these films are made in the early 1990s gives them an additional dimension compared to the late 1970s and early 1980s films in the same vein. While the earlier films were depicting more or less contemporary events, their 1990s counterparts are imbued with a nostalgic sentiment – in this they actually reflect a wider trend in Hong Kong cinema, as Sek Kei has noted (“June 4 to 1997” 124). Usually spanning the period from the 1950s to the early 1970s, they are epic in scope, often boast excellent production values and are very long compared to most

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<sup>180</sup> Stephen Teo (*Extra Dimensions* 235) has pointed at triad involvement to explain this unusual phenomenon. The most extensive account of triad involvement in the film industry can be found in Frederic Dannen and Barry Long’s *Hong Kong Babylon* (24-37). In view of the Big Timer films’ obvious real-life inspiration, their habitual “warning” that the events portrayed are fictional and that any similarity to living persons or events is coincidental, is rather cynical, to say the least!

<sup>181</sup> Interestingly, many of the Category III films that began to proliferate around this time used a similar approach, basing themselves on “true crimes” and using intertitles to give additional information, most commonly at the end of the film to detail the trial and punishment the criminal received.

other Hong Kong films.<sup>182</sup> Enhancing the nostalgic feeling is their structure: they usually start with a scene showing the “Big Timer” in the present before going back to his origins as a poor immigrant at the bottom rank of society.<sup>183</sup> This scene has no function in the narrative itself, but shapes the story as a nostalgic look back at one’s life. The Big Timer films further confirm the establishment of the ICAC as one of the most crucial events in Hong Kong’s recent history: the ICAC would effectively reshape the ways both cops and gangsters operate, and its establishment marks the transformation of Hong Kong from a poor, developing city of migrants to an affluent, advanced metropolis.

To conclude this section, a few Big Timer films will be discussed in more detail. The film that launched the trend, *To Be Number One*, begins with Ng Sik-ho (Ray Lui) sitting in a chapel and listening to a priest who tells the story of the prodigal son and then asks Ng to share his story with the audience. The rest of the film is a lengthy flashback recounting the abuse and poverty he had to suffer when he was working as a butcher, then his criminal rise with the help of gangster boss Kwan (Kent Cheng) to become the head of one of the “Four Families” who received the blessing from police sergeant Lee Rock to monopolize the drug trade in 1960s and early 1970s Hong Kong.<sup>184</sup> Eventually, his boundless ambition and megalomania lead to his downfall when the ICAC in 1974 leads an operation against him with the few cops that were not on his payroll.<sup>185</sup>

While *To Be Number One* was produced by Johnny Mak’s production house in association with Golden Harvest, Wong Jing partnered with Shaw Brothers to make an equally grand epic, *Casino Tycoon* (1992). This film changed the background to the gambling industry in Macau, loosely basing itself on the life story of “The King of Gambling”, Stanley Ho, in the film called Ho Hsin and played by Andy Lau. The

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<sup>182</sup> For instance, *Lord of East China Sea* (1993) and *Lee Rock* (1991) were so long that they were released in two parts.

<sup>183</sup> Li Cheuk-to notes how the story of a Mainland immigrant’s “struggle” and eventual “success” found resonance with recent immigrants from the Mainland. This might have been a factor in the box-office success of the Big Timer films (“Rise” 109).

<sup>184</sup> The Ma Brothers – who controlled another of the Four Families, had a close relationship with the Kuomintang in Taiwan, and in 1969 successfully moved into newspaper publishing – were the subject of *Legend of the Chiuchow Brothers* (also known as *Legend of the Brothers*, 1991).

<sup>185</sup> The real Ng Sik-ho was released from jail soon after the film came out, and died of cancer a few months later (Teo, *Extra Dimensions* 236).

film, in Li Cheuk-to's words, "drove sensationalism to new heights" by making Ho's opponent (played by Paul Chun) look so evil that the rather wicked Ho looked good in comparison ("Rise" 112). The third of Hong Kong's three main vice industries, prostitution, was the background for *Queen of the Underworld* (1991). Unlike the other films mentioned so far, this Wong Jing-produced vehicle looks like it was made in a rush, with a plot so ridiculous one could wonder whether the film was meant as a parody. The film is mainly notable for its focus on a (fictional) female Big Timer, who rises to the top of the prostitution business by having relationships with the powerful men of the times. More or less as a result of this, *Queen of the Underworld* is rife with cameos of actors familiar from other Big Timer films. Even its star, Amy Yip, originally was a supporting actress in *To Be Number One*.

Coincidentally, the last major film of the Big Timer fad was produced by the same people who started it off with *To Be Number One*: co-produced by Johnny Mak and Golden Harvest and starring Ray Lui and Kent Cheng, *Lord of East China Sea* (1993, released in two parts), certainly narrated a very familiar story, but changed the setting to Shanghai (and finally Hong Kong) in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – another period often looked back at nostalgically in many Hong Kong films. Depicting the famous life of Du Yuesheng, China's most powerful triad leader ever, it showed his rise from poor hawker of pears to regular guest of high-ranking Kuomintang leaders, including Chiang Kai-shek. The first part of this big-budget production made less than half of what *To Be Number One* had made two years earlier, while part two did even worse: a sign that the public was tiring of these films (Chen 560-562).

The corrupt cop variation of the Big Timer film was pioneered by *Lee Rock* (1991). A slightly more complex characterization and meticulous attention to period detail and atmosphere (director Lawrence Lau chose to use sync-sound recording, which was quite uncommon at the time) arguably make the film the best in the genre. Andy Lau takes on the role of Lee Rock (or Lui Lok), a police detective who initially resists the pervasive corruption in the force, but is due to circumstances forced to go

with the flow.<sup>186</sup> Eventually, he proves to be extremely adept at it, streamlines the system of taking bribes, and earns the nickname he is now remembered by: “the HK\$500 Million Sergeant.” In the film, Lee’s main opponent is another-high-ranking policeman, Ngan Tung (Paul Chun), the head of syndicated corruption in the force until Lee takes over.<sup>187</sup> Eventually, however, Lee flees as he foresees trouble when the government intensifies its anti-corruption drive in the early 1970s. At the end of the film Lee is enjoying his “retirement” in a nice villa somewhere in Canada, reminiscing about his colorful life.<sup>188</sup> The film illustrates nicely the similarities between triads and the police, as within the force officers vied to gain control over certain prosperous districts to get more income from bribes – much like triads jockey for turf. Lee Rock’s approach to handling organized crime as it is shown in the film also involves the idea that the triads cannot be defeated, so it is better to control them: in exchange for kickbacks, Lee would allow certain groups to operate under his conditions. This philosophy towards organized crime is regularly expressed even in films of the new millennium. To offer just a few examples: in *One Nite in Mongkok* (2004), an officer calls the heads of two families who are at loggerheads and tries to force them to make peace and hand him a scapegoat for a gang-related murder that has taken place, and in *Moving Targets* (2004) a senior cop tells his rookie subordinates that it is impossible to put all 200,000 triad members in jail – they better work with the reasonably decent ones to bring to justice the really dangerous criminals.

Other films detailing the lives of corrupt cops quickly followed. Lawrence Lau directed *Arrest the Restless* (1992) a spin-off of his *Lee Rock* films detailing an episode in the life of another of the Four Great Sergeants, Lam Kong. Here depicted as a righteous and not (very) corrupt officer in an utterly corrupt police force, Sergeant Lam is played by Charles Heung – quite ironic since in real life Charles is the son of the late Heung Chin, who founded the Sun Yee On, one of the most

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<sup>186</sup> A metaphor often used in the corrupt cop films set in this period has it that “you either get on the bus or walk along with the bus; you never stand in front of the bus.”

<sup>187</sup> According to Wikipedia, this aspect of the film is fictional: although Ngan Tung is based on another sergeant (Ngan Hung), he never was in direct competition with Lee Rock. Together with Lam Kong and Hon Sum, they were known as the “Four Great Sergeants”.

<sup>188</sup> This is not too far from the truth: Lui Lok passed away in Canada in May 2010. An article in the *South China Morning Post* on May 22 announced that the ICAC was taking action to finally reclaim his ill-gotten assets, which it had frozen in the 1970s (P. Tsang).

powerful triad societies in Hong Kong (Dannen & Long 30)!<sup>189</sup> *Arrest the Restless* is a distant cousin of the Big Timer films: although many of the actors that appeared in *Lee Rock 1 & 2* show up here as well, the film focuses mostly on the story of its James Dean-like protagonist (Leslie Cheung in a role reminiscent of the one he played in Wong Kar-wai's *Days of Being Wild* (1990)). In typical Hong Kong fashion, some out-of-place absurd humor was added to the mix, making it a tonally inconsistent, but visually quite stunning work.

In the same year, *Powerful Four* (1992) tried to depict the Four Great Sergeants together in one film, suggesting that they were sworn brothers who helped each other rise to powerful positions in the police force. As Li Cheuk-to has pointed out, the brotherhood theme in *Powerful Four* causes severe contradictions with the typical egoism of Big Timer films ("Rise" 111). The situation in this film further deteriorated due to the presence of Danny Lee, whose image as a good cop the filmmakers apparently could not tarnish. With corruption a popular theme at the time, it is not very surprising that a film like *First Shot* (1993) appeared. Produced and directed by David Lam (who had also taken up these roles in *Powerful Four* the year before), *First Shot* borrows (or, less kindly, steals) several plot elements from Brian De Palma's *The Untouchables* (1987) in its depiction of a team of brave cops that battled corruption and were instrumental in the establishment of the ICAC. The fact that a producer-director like David Lam within two years was responsible for two films that took opposite attitudes towards corruption can be seen as a sign of the ambiguous attitudes towards the topic at the time. One film that expresses these attitudes in an almost schizophrenic manner is *The Tigers* (1991), which is set in the present and invites us to sympathize with corrupt cops against the ICAC. Adding to the confusion is the change in tone: it starts as a typical *moleitau* comedy, but soon develops into an extremely grim action drama with a depressing conclusion. Hasty scriptwriting and a reliance on the film's stars to lure audiences probably explain this odd mixture. Marketed as a reunion of the so-called "Five Tigers" of TVB

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<sup>189</sup> According to Dannen and Long, Charles Heung is generally well liked in the industry however, and founded important production companies such as Win's Entertainment in the 1980s and China Star in the 1990s (31). Win's Entertainment (which Charles founded with his brother Jimmy) was one of the largest film companies of the 1980s and early 1990s. China Star is still active in film production today, and produced several of Milkyway Image's films in the 2000s.

(Hong Kong's biggest television broadcaster), the film was certain to generate decent box-office returns.<sup>190</sup>

#### 4.3.2.2. *The Category III Trend*

While the relatively brief Big Timer cycle came to an end in 1992-1993, a new trend at the opposite end of the market developed – the Category III craze. Possibly a reaction to the depression the industry was entering, the turn towards what Li Cheuk-to called “low-budget gimmicks” (“Melodrama” 96) had begun already in 1991, when the Category III office romance *Pretty Woman* (not the Hollywood film) became a smash hit at the local box office (Davis & Yeh, “Warning” 14). Category III came into being when it was revealed in 1987 that, even though it had exercised this power for decades, the colonial government could in fact not legally censor films. As a result a new motion picture rating system was set up in 1988, differentiating between Category I (all audiences), II (not suitable for children) and III (not approved for exhibition to anyone under the age of 18).<sup>191</sup> As Linda Ruth Williams points out, the new ratings system legitimized (and then encouraged) the existing tendencies towards “violent and explicit forms of filmmaking” in Hong Kong (385). For the decade from the late 1980s to the late 1990s, the proportion of Category III productions was around 25 percent of the total Hong Kong output (Davis & Yeh, “Warning” 13).

Davis and Yeh point out that “Category III is an intertextual reworking of styles and genres found in Hong Kong film as a whole” (“Warning” 14). Although Category III is often referred to as constituting its own genre, this usually refers to a specific type of Category III film (see below). The two scholars propose three main types of Category III films: the quasi-pornographic films (often based on Qing dynasty literature), genre films (Category III versions of gangster films, horror, campy

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<sup>190</sup> The “Five Tigers” were the most popular actors on Hong Kong's biggest television broadcaster (TVB) in the eighties. Two of them (Tony Leung Chiu-wai and Andy Lau) have gone on to achieve “superstar” status since then, while the remaining three (Felix Wong, Ken Tong and Miu Kiu-wai) are still active in the film industry today.

<sup>191</sup> In 1994 an amendment subdivided Category II films into IIA (not suitable for children) and IIB (not suitable for young persons). In practice, however, only the Category III is enforced in theatres; the other categories are advisory ones. The most extensive analysis of the Category III phenomenon is offered by Darrel W. Davis and Yeh Yueh-yu in a 2001 article for *Film Quarterly*. Information can also be found online, notably in an article by James Mudge on BeyondHollywood.com.

detective thrillers, and art films), and “pornoviolence” (films that may be unique to Category III and usually the ones that come to mind when one talks about it as a genre) (“Warning” 14-20). This last group they further divide into “gruesome murder cases from police files” and “sadistic period pictures” (“Warning” 17). It is the first subcategory, the “gruesome murder cases from police files”, that will be the focus here – for convenience’ sake they will in the following be referred to simply as Category III films.

An important factor in the emergence of this subgenre was the commercial and critical success of Jonathan Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs* in 1991, and like this movie, many Category III films would mix horror and crime film elements. This influence is obvious in the title of the 1992 Category III hit, *Dr. Lamb* (1992). *Dr. Lamb* provided the template for many films that followed, together making up the largest of the three variants of Category III films discussed here. Films of this type often employ a flashback structure: first comes a brief investigation by the inept and buffoonish team of cops, followed by scenes of torturing the suspect who eventually breaks down and in long barely interrupted flashbacks recounts all the gory details of his crimes.<sup>192</sup> Out-of-place and often vulgar humor is common in these films – in *Dr. Lamb* there is for instance a long piece of slapstick humor involving the preserved breast of one of the killer’s victims. Based on a real-life Hong Kong serial killer case of the early 1980s, *Dr. Lamb* recounts the story of a taxi driver who killed several prostitutes and dissected them at his home unbeknownst to the members of his household. Eventually he was caught when the lab developing his pictures of the dead women warned the police.<sup>193</sup>

Another remarkable characteristic of the genre is the involvement of big name actors: *Dr. Lamb* featured Kent Cheng and Simon Yam, and was produced and co-

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<sup>192</sup> An interesting variation on this structure is Cha Chuen-yee’s *Legal Innocence* (1993), based on a case of 1989 that also inspired Clarence Fok’s *Remains of a Woman* (1993). In *Legal Innocence*, the crime is revealed in brief flashbacks during the retrial of the couple responsible for a cruel murder. Different characters offer their own version of the story (a bit like Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950)), and only at the end is the real story revealed in its entirety. Both *Remains of a Woman* and *Legal Innocence* were nominated for various awards, adding to the list of critically acclaimed Category III films.

<sup>193</sup> The story had already been turned into a TV movie (called *Hong Kong Criminal Archives – Female Butcher*) the year before. Billy Tang, one of the directors of *Dr. Lamb*, acted as the producer of this earlier version, while Simon Yam portrayed the serial killer in both films.

directed by Danny Lee, who also took up his usual cop role in the film. Lee returned the next year with *The Untold Story* (1993), co-starring with Anthony Wong, who won the first of several Best Actor awards for his portrayal of a murderer who turns his victims into delicious *cha siu baau* (pork buns).<sup>194</sup> Also based on a true story, the film followed the format of *Dr. Lamb* very closely, though the setting was now Macau and not Hong Kong. This is in fact another common feature of these films: since they are based on real crimes and Hong Kong has just a very small pool of real serial killers to draw from, many films got their material from events in the Mainland (or in this case Macau). This had certain “advantages” for the filmmakers: mildly self-satisfied fun could be made of the less advanced legal systems elsewhere, while, with the widespread perception of the Mainland police and justice systems as corrupt and open to abuse, scenes of torture could become more extreme and casual.<sup>195</sup>

That it was Danny Lee who was behind several of the more noteworthy true crime Category III films is somewhat surprising to say the least, as he had until then stuck to righteous, tough cop roles (discussed in the previous chapter). His persona in this exploitation fare did not change that much in fact, but his character’s approval of the cruel torture of suspects in *Dr. Lamb*, *The Untold Story* and his 1995 film, *Twist*, is maybe best understood in terms of the events of this period. As mentioned in the introduction, 1991 saw the passing of the Bill of Rights, which curtailed some of the considerable powers that the Hong Kong Royal Police (with its paramilitary tradition) had enjoyed, most notably by introducing the presumption of innocence and limiting the power of arrest. Human rights were a hot topic at the time, and the passing of the Bill effectively marked the beginning of a wider reorientation of the force to a service orientation. As Allan Jiao has shown, this reorientation – still ongoing today – causes dissatisfaction among some officers, especially the more senior ones, who feel their ability to fight crime has been compromised (105-12, 223-48). Danny Lee, who had a long-standing fascination and links with the police force, seems to have shared these more conservative sentiments, and during this

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<sup>194</sup> The film was directed by Herman Yau, another regular Category III director who later headed the even nastier *Ebola Syndrome* (1996) and the comparatively more restrained *Taxi Hunter* (1993, discussed below). Both films starred Anthony Wong. Although widely known for his Category III work, Yau has produced a wide variety of films, and has proven himself one of the most resilient and productive directors during the long decline of the Hong Kong film industry.

<sup>195</sup> An example of a film in which the Mainland police is ridiculed is *Daughter of Darkness* (1993).

period intensified his cinematic argument for wider police powers, once again revealing himself as the foremost proponent of police populism in Hong Kong cinema by consistently depicting the necessity for wider police powers to effectively deal with criminals.<sup>196</sup>

A second variation of the Category III film is the rape-revenge format, precedents of which have been discussed in previous chapters. Naturally, in their Category III version, these films could go to an even higher degree of explicitness and exploitation. A commercially successful example is *Daughter of Darkness* (1993), which was based on a real case in the Mainland and followed the flashback structure of *Dr. Lamb* and *The Untold Story*. Instead of focusing on a serial killer, however, the protagonist here is a pitiful girl who murders her father after he raped her, and in a mad frenzy goes on to kill her unsympathetic brother, sister and mother. Even more shocking was *Red to Kill* (1994), in which a mentally retarded girl becomes the victim of a serial killer and rapist who goes berserk whenever he sees the color red. A sympathetic social worker helps the girl to kill him in a long and harrowing battle. Director Billy Tang and cinematographer Tony Miu bring the story with a visual flair that makes it all the more disturbing.

Tang and Miu also collaborated on *Run and Kill* (1993), which is a good example of the third variation of Category III films: the story of the mild-mannered everyman who due to random, unfortunate circumstances is pushed to murderous madness – one could describe it as a rape-revenge film where a man is the symbolical rape victim. In *Run and Kill* Kent Cheng portrays Cheung, a man who is happily married, and who has a cute little daughter and a stable job running his own small business.

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<sup>196</sup> Around this period it became very common to hear movie villains complain that the police violated their human rights. In *The Untold Story*, there is for instance a fairly typical scene where the serial killer shows the press the bruises resulting from the beatings he received. The Danny Lee character and his team do not show repentance but frustration, and come up with new ways to torture their suspect – one tactic involves locking him up in jail with the brother of a man he murdered. By always torturing the “right” person, the audience is invited to approve of these police tactics. This approach is not limited to Lee’s Category III films, but is also common in the mainstream police thrillers he produced in this period. In the Kirk Wong-directed *Organized Crime and Triad Bureau* (1994), officers from the Complaints Against Police Office (CAPO) are depicted as troublesome bureaucrats when they try to prevent Lee and his team from torturing suspects; they are also directly responsible for the escape of a dangerous criminal when they finally get him away from “Inspector” Lee. Of course, as also mentioned in the previous chapter, the theme of the law’s limitations is central to many police thrillers anywhere, but Lee’s near-fascist attitude makes him a rather extreme example.

When he gets home one evening, he catches his wife cheating on him but is too timid to intervene. Instead he gets drunk in a bar, where a person with contacts in the underworld misunderstands him, takes his money and hires some gangsters to get rid of his wife and her lover. Things spiral further and further out of control after this, culminating in what David Bordwell describes as “one of the most famously barbarous scenes in Hong Kong film” (*Planet Hong Kong* 155). After having lost everything, Cheung finally fights back and survives, but seems to have gone mad when the cops find him at the end.<sup>197</sup>

Other examples of this variation, which did not employ flashbacks, are Herman Yau’s *Taxi Hunter* (1993) and Bosco Lam’s *Underground Banker* (1994). Inspired by a strike of taxi drivers in Hong Kong, *Taxi Hunter* shows how an insurance salesman (Anthony Wong) has several encounters with taxi drivers who bully and cheat him, and eventually even cause his pregnant wife’s death. This last event pushes him over the edge and he begins a campaign against “bad” taxi drivers, killing those whose service is lacking. Making taxi drivers the victims of a serial killer is of course also a humorous play on the murderous taxi driver of *Dr. Lamb*. Interesting here is that *Taxi Hunter* was classified as Category II: the fact that it follows the structure of and even refers to several Category III films indicates the blurry boundary between the different Categories in Hong Kong, much like the box-office success of some of these films does.<sup>198</sup> Classified as a Category III film, but tending even more towards parody is *Underground Banker*, where a trucker (Anthony Wong) gets into problems with loan sharks who, again, push him too far. Assisted by no one less than Dr. Lamb (just released from a psychiatric hospital), the trucker goes to slaughter the loan shark and his men.

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<sup>197</sup> Billy Tang is like Herman Yau one of the more distinguished directors of Category III films who eventually moved into other kinds of films as well. One of the more interesting films in his later career is *Wild* (1996), which tells a nihilistically violent Bonnie and Clyde kind of tale set in Mainland China.

<sup>198</sup> Another example of this blurred boundary is *Retribution Sight Unseen* (also known as *Three Days of a Blind Girl*, 1993), classified as Category II but starring Anthony Wong as a crazy killer and Veronica Yip as his victim – both of them were famous mostly for their roles in Category III fare at this time. As Davis and Yeh state: “In many cases the distinction between the general audience (IIB) and the restricted (III) is arbitrary and feeble. An exploitation auteur such as Wong Jing works comfortably on either side of this shifting boundary, and indeed exploits it” (“Warning” 17).

After the height of the “pornoviolence” boom in 1993 and 1994, the critical and commercial success of these films declined, though they continue to be made occasionally. Most recently, director Pang Ho-cheung attracted some critical acclaim with his *Dream Home* (2010), in which he mixes horror with social commentary on Hong Kong’s sky-high property prices by telling the “true” story of a girl who goes on a killing spree in order to buy the apartment she desires. Aside from causing the proliferation of Category III fare, the decline of the Hong Kong film industry had a strong impact on the development of mainstream crime films as well. Before discussing the major crime genres of the period from the mid-1990s to the present, the next section will outline some of the wider changes in the industry.

## **4.4. Transitional Period (1994-Present)**

### **4.4.1. The Hong Kong Film Industry: Profound Transformations**

As has been described above, the decline of the Hong Kong film industry began in the early 1990s. One can divide the period of 1994 to the present into two phases of decline: from 1994 to 2001 the decline was generally seen as severe, but temporary – in the Hong Kong International Film Festival catalogues of this period, it is quite common to have industry commentators and critics express the hope that next year the recovery would begin. Indeed, when the effects of the Asian financial crisis wore off, there was at least a significant quantitative recovery (from 84 films released in 1998 to around 150 films in 1999 and 2000, and 121 in 2001).<sup>199</sup> After this the number of releases dropped to around 50, however, and while the hope for recovery is still expressed occasionally (for instance after the enormous success of the *Infernal Affairs* series (2002-2003)), pessimism has become the dominant sentiment. The earlier period is characterized by rapid changes and attempts to revive the industry, while the 2000s are shaped by Hong Kong’s changing role in the increasingly interconnected global film industry, and its reorientation towards the Mainland market (especially after the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) was signed in 2003).<sup>200</sup> In their *East Asian Screen*

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<sup>199</sup> Data from Davis & Yeh, *Screen Industries* 30. Another useful indicator is the market share of Hong Kong films, which fell to around 25% in 2006 – while in the first half of the 1990s it easily occupied more than half the market (*Screen Industries* 33).

<sup>200</sup> An indication of the rapid changes is the withdrawal of the big companies with exhibition, distribution and production arms from the industry (Golden Harvest withdrew from film production

*Industries*, Davis and Yeh convincingly demonstrate that much of this is a region-wide phenomenon by detailing the “new sorts of funding, alliances, technologies, innovations, marketing and trans-border talent-sharing” that are taking shape (2).

While the late 1990s and early 2000s were characterized mostly by attempts to appeal to markets globally, from the mid-2000s the influence of the Mainland market was more keenly felt.<sup>201</sup> Both impulses have a profound impact on what we call Hong Kong cinema. As Pang Lai-kwan has argued, “the name ‘Hong Kong’ no longer carries the high value in mainland China that it did before 1997, and Hong Kong filmmakers begin to market their works as generic Chinese films” (“Postcolonial Hong Kong Cinema” 413). The reorientation towards overseas markets generally, and to the Mainland in particular, is likely a reason for the move away from making crime films, though other factors such as changing audience tastes in Hong Kong and generic exhaustion should not be dismissed out of hand. It is certainly telling that the genre that played an important role in the indigenization of Hong Kong cinema in the 1970s (as argued in Chapter Two) takes a backseat at a time when nationalization and globalization are the order of the day. Mainland censorship (or filmmakers’ expectation of censorship) is an additional problem, for crime films cannot be as unfettered in their depictions of violence and sexuality as they could in the past, while the morally ambiguous conclusions typical of Hong Kong’s crime films, as well as the glorification of gangsters, are likely to cause trouble too. This proves severely limiting artistically as several recent releases show (more below).

The changes described above are most obvious in the big-budget releases of recent years, which have to rely on markets outside of Hong Kong to recover their costs. Until the early 2000s, there was still a vibrant group of experienced and new filmmakers that made low- to medium-budget productions aimed at the local market

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in 2003, Cinema City went bankrupt in the early 1990s, Win’s Entertainment (active since the mid-1980s) closed down in the late 1990s, etc.). Instead, the market is now dominated by companies such as Media Asia, China Star, Emperor and Gold Label (Davis and Yeh, *Screen Industries* 104). In 2008 Gold Label was bought up by the Typhoon Group, and the company is now known as Gold Typhoon.  
<sup>201</sup> This influence is not only visible in the number of Mainland actors in Mainland-Hong Kong co-productions (a condition to be recognized as a Mainland production and enter the Mainland market without restrictions under CEPA), but more profoundly in the increasing investment of Mainland companies in Hong Kong productions.

and exhibiting a more local character. In recent years, however, there seems to have been less and less space for such productions. Director-producer Gordon Chan (qtd. in Pang, "Postcolonial Hong Kong Cinema" 424) complains about their disappearance and insists that medium-budget pictures are crucial to a healthy film industry, presumably because they provide a training ground for newer directors. Pang points at the comedies featuring Ronald Cheng and the films directed by Johnnie To as examples of the survival of a local identity in Hong Kong films ("Postcolonial Hong Kong Cinema" 425), but in recent years it seems Cheng has lost much of his appeal, while Johnnie To is arguably a special case (hence To and his Milkyway Image company are treated in a separate chapter). At the moment, productions with a strong local character continue to appear, but they are far apart. In this respect, Hong Kong is beginning to resemble European countries, in that several of the low- and medium-budget pictures now receive subsidies from the Hong Kong government, which has increasingly taken an active role in promoting and supporting the local film industry over the past few years. What makes Hong Kong different from these countries, however, is that it will most likely also play a crucial financing and facilitating role in the emerging Chinese and new Asian cinemas (Pang, "Postcolonial Hong Kong Cinema" 414).

#### 4.4.2. Genre Overview

This section will deal with the changes in the police and gangster film genres. Compared to the previous chapter, it adds several subgenres for separate discussion, such as the undercover drama and the assassin thriller.<sup>202</sup> Next, two new genres resulting from the adaptation to the circumstances of the late 1990s and 2000s will be scrutinized: the late 1990s "international action" film and the new type of thriller inspired by *Infernal Affairs*. There are of course several formal developments that cross genre boundaries. These include, in generalized terms: the widespread use of blue-filtered light and images full of dark shadows (often enlivened by spots of red light or a wider variety of bright colors), which by the end of the 1990s gradually

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<sup>202</sup> A separate section for cops-and-robbers films could have been added, but films of this type can fairly comfortably be discussed under either the gangster or the police film, as often cops-and-robbers films give preference to the viewpoint of one of the two groups.

made way for a colder, more natural palette;<sup>203</sup> the use of voice-over and narrative experimentation in the late 1990s and early 2000s; a move away from romanticism and “big” feelings towards greater realism as well as cool cynicism (and sometimes despair); and a general trend towards better scriptwriting.

A discussion of 1990s and 2000s Hong Kong films can hardly avoid the topic of postmodernism. A notoriously loose concept most famously theorized by Fredric Jameson, it was an important influence on Ackbar Abbas’ often-quoted *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, and continues to underlie more recent work such as Vivian Lee’s *Hong Kong Cinema since 1997: The Post-Nostalgic Imagination*. In the final chapter of his seminal history of Hong Kong cinema, Stephen Teo highlights several elements that are frequently discussed as the characteristics of (cinematic) postmodernism in Hong Kong: the disappearance of old picture palaces in favor of multiplexes and mini-theâtres; the nonsense comedies of Stephen Chow; pastiche; nostalgia; cross-fertilization of genres; and gender-bending (*Extra Dimensions* 243-53). One could take issue with the newness of some of these characteristics in Hong Kong cinema (such as the cross-fertilization of genres, and gender-bending), but here the focus will instead be on what can be perceived as a lack in Jameson’s theorization, which seems to neglect to some extent the precise processes that led to the prevalence of a postmodern attitude or style in recent decades. The goal here is not so much to question Jameson’s assertion of postmodernism as the “cultural logic of late capitalism”, but to try to explain why certain characteristics often associated with postmodernism started to appear in Hong Kong cinema since the 1980s.

Very helpful in this regard is Robert Ray’s discussion of the growing self-consciousness of American culture since the 1960s – expressed in Hollywood movies through the increasing use of irony, parody and camp (256).<sup>204</sup> Hollywood’s

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<sup>203</sup> The work of cinematographer-director Andrew Lau is representative in this regard: the contrast between the blue-filtered, somewhat expressionistic look of *As Tears Go By* (1988) and the sleeker, colder and somewhat drab palette of the *Infernal Affairs* films (2002-3) is striking. Undoubtedly, this change of style has as much to do with budget and technology as with stylistic preferences and trends. One can see a similar development in Benny Chan’s films from *A Moment of Romance* (1990) to a recent work like *Divergence* (2005).

<sup>204</sup> Interestingly, Ray never mentions “postmodernism” in his account, even though he covers several of the phenomena described by Jameson.

increasingly ironic attitude toward its own traditional mythology promoted a new kind of star (character actors with self-reflexive, self-doubting personae), but also gave rise to a reactionary nostalgia for this same mythology (as expressed in the nostalgia film) (Ray 260-1). Ray attributes this growing self-consciousness mainly to the popularization of television, which, by reviving old movies, “exposed the weakest versions of the standard myths and damaged even passable examples by resurrecting them into a new, inhospitable environment” (265). Other developments played a role as well, such as the rise of revival houses, the demise of the old guard of filmmakers and their replacement by young “film buffs” who were “less bound by the industry’s institutionalized conventions”, but who were contained by the conglomeratization of Hollywood (which led to the “corrected” genre movie of the 1970s)<sup>205</sup> (Ray 267). A final factor was “a new awareness of the inescapable interrelationship of media, audience, and historical events” (268).

Starting from the 1980s, growing self-consciousness also began to characterize Hong Kong cinema, a transition similarly marked by the rise to prominence of a new generation of filmmakers and the demise of the vertically integrated studio system. This new self-consciousness (expressed through irony, camp, nostalgia and parody) intensified in the 1990s and the 2000s, parallel to the increasing local identification of films.<sup>206</sup> An important reason was arguably the box-office dominance by local films from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s: only when a significant part of the audience was aware of local cinema’s classics did it make sense to self-consciously refer to them (this development was strengthened by the spread of home video, and efforts to preserve Hong Kong’s cinematic history). The trend is most obvious in the local version of “corrected” genre movies, such as several of the cop soap operas and the triad deconstruction comedies discussed below.

#### 4.4.2.1. *The Police Film*

In the 1990s, continuity with cop thrillers of the preceding decade is best exemplified by, once again, Danny Lee. Despite of his fairly successful forays into

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<sup>205</sup> The development of neo-noir can fruitfully be placed against this background. Interestingly, Jameson himself refers to two famous neo-noir films: *Chinatown* (1974) and *Body Heat* (1981) (204).

<sup>206</sup> Interestingly, 1990s Hong Kong saw the rise of a new type of star (exemplified by Anthony Wong, Francis Ng and Lau Ching-wan) similar to the type described by Ray for 1970s Hollywood.

Category III territory, Lee also continued to produce and star in typical police potboilers like *Red Shield* (1991), *Asian Connection* (1995) and *City Cop* (1995). Typical devices are used in these films, such as the mismatched-buddy-cops convention, the presence of a one-dimensional villain who is brought to justice by the end, and, of course, Lee's trademark tough-cop-who-breaks-all-the-rules! Naturally, there are differences between them as well: *Red Shield* and *Asian Connection* are more action-oriented and include excursions out of Hong Kong (in *Red Shield* Lee and his partner sneak illegally into the Mainland to save the partner's wife, and most of *Asian Connection* takes place in Taiwan), while *City Cop* was meant as a sequel to Lee's acclaimed *Law with Two Phases* (1984) and carried more serious themes. As usual for Lee, these films exhibit an interest in authentic police procedures and culture, as well as his standard politics (elaborated on earlier).

One of the more outstanding productions of Lee was *Organized Crime and Triad Bureau* (1994), directed by Kirk Wong.<sup>207</sup> The film focuses on an OCTB inspector (Lee) trying to capture dangerous robber Ho (Anthony Wong) and his girlfriend Cindy (Cecilia Yip). Ignoring the many protestations of the CAPO representatives, Lee and his team torture the robber and his partners-in-crime to get a confession. After the first day of Ho's trial, Cindy and a few loyal friends free Ho, but they are soon cornered by Lee. After asking Lee to be lenient towards Cindy, Ho commits suicide. Interestingly, the film's basic storyline is almost identical to that of *The Untold Story* (also starring Lee and Wong), which had come out the year before. This time, the story is put into a cops-and-robbers thriller format, however, and Kirk Wong ensures that Lee's favorite theme becomes much more morally complex. He does this by making Ho a more human villain: in a convincing manner we are shown how he, in his own limited way, loves his girlfriend and their young son, how his men respect him, and how he decides to hand himself over to Lee instead of endangering a child's life. Meanwhile, we see how Lee is disliked by most cops except his own team, how he has driven away his ex-wife with his obsessive and difficult character, and how he repeatedly violates prisoners' rights and breaks the

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<sup>207</sup> The film is considered a part of Kirk Wong's "true crime" trilogy. The other two films of the trilogy are *Crime Story* (1993, with Jackie Chan) and *Rock N' Roll Cop* (1994). The third film is the only one produced by Wong himself; for the earlier two he was basically working as a director-for-hire. Wong's visual style and action design is nevertheless visible in each of these films.

law to achieve his goal of putting Ho behind bars. The film, in Stokes and Hoover's words, "effectively raises questions about the ineffectiveness of a system, its practices and abuses" (79).<sup>208</sup>

In his next film, *Rock n' Roll Cop* (1994), Wong proved once again why he was considered one of Hong Kong's top directors in the crime-action genre. This time, he fairly successfully blends a positive view of the coming 1997 Handover into a story of a Hong Kong cop (Anthony Wong) who crosses the border into Shenzhen to cooperate with the Mainland police and catch a heavily armed gang of Mainland robbers that committed a heist in Hong Kong. Showing how the stereotypes many Hong Kong people harbor about Mainlanders are not valid (anymore), Wong ended the film with the Hong Kong cop coming to the help of his newly found Mainland buddy, proclaiming that "We don't know shit about politics, we just know how to arrest criminals!" After this film, Wong departed for Hollywood – one of several Hong Kong action talents trying their luck at the other side of the ocean. Although other directors would soon take their place, the departure of Wong and other top action filmmakers such as John Woo, Ringo Lam, Tsui Hark and Yuen Wo-ping most likely was at least one factor in the gradual moving away from productions in which action was the main draw. Another reason might have been the success of sentimental and nostalgic "relationship" dramas, most visibly the UFO films.

Whatever the reasons, even Danny Lee seems to have made a move in this direction, producing a film like Jamie Luk's *The Case of the Cold Fish* (1995): an intelligently humorous story about the culture clash that develops when a Westernized cop from the big city comes to investigate a murder in the remote fishing village of Tai O on Hong Kong's Lantau Island. The cop who has been stationed there for many years acts as an intermediary, as he is the only one who understands both cultures. Analogies with the popular image of Hong Kong as a "gateway between East and West" are obvious. While in the five years after 1996, Lee's Magnum Films only brought out three more films, its last production – *Sharkbusters* (2002) – is worth mentioning, as it turns the story of policemen in debt to loan sharks into a fairly successful satire about the dire financial situation many Hong Kong home owners

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<sup>208</sup> Stokes and Hoover discuss the film at length in their book, *City on Fire* (75-9).

found themselves in after the collapse of the local property market a few years earlier.<sup>209</sup>

These films already display a preoccupation with the life of cops outside of their crime fighting activities. This interest is central to a new type of police film appearing in the mid-1990s, aptly dubbed the “cop soap opera” by lovehkfilm.com webmaster Ross Chen. The cop soap opera is a type of cop film where various subplots and characters’ private lives take precedence over the exciting action scenes one typically expects of Hong Kong cinema. This often gives them a slightly disjointed and unexpected nature, and even though Bordwell does not group them together as a genre,<sup>210</sup> he uses several of the best cop soap operas to demonstrate the innovative and experimental plotting of mainstream Hong Kong films in the mid- to late 1990s.<sup>211</sup>

The two men most responsible for the proliferation of this subgenre are Gordon Chan and Chan Hing-kar, who respectively directed and wrote the film that started the trend: *Final Option* (1994). The film focuses on the paramilitary Special Duties Unit (SDU) of the Hong Kong police, paying meticulous attention to the demanding training members of this unit need to go through, and also to the tactical element of their operations. In an interview, Gordon Chan recounts how he was deeply moved by a woman on the radio, who called in after a report of a gun fight during which grenades were used. She talked about her policeman husband, and how she was both proud of him and really worried. Hence, Chan decided to do something for the police. The resulting film is an ode to the brave members of the SDU, but also to the girlfriends and wives who stay with them despite their (realistic) fears of losing

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<sup>209</sup> It also shows Lee as still in tune with the concerns of policemen: when an officer has debt problems, it is taken very seriously by the Hong Kong police force and can lead to a demotion or even the loss of one’s job (Jiao 203). Jiao reports that the number of officers who went bankrupt rose drastically in 2001 and 2002, and the topic received some media attention in this period as well, especially after an officer committed suicide due to emotional and financial problems in December 2001 (199).

<sup>210</sup> Bordwell describes one of these films, *The Log* (1996), as a police procedural (*Planet Hong Kong* 196). Unlike a procedural, however, *The Log* barely spends any time on the crime fighting activities of its three central characters. Possibly, what the genre comes closest to is certain TV series focusing on cops, but cropped into a much shorter time frame and usually shot in a much more interesting way.

<sup>211</sup> He also mentions a number of innovative triad films, which shows that filmmakers were generally trying new things with several of Hong Kong’s genres at this time. Some of these films will be discussed in the next section.

them early.<sup>212</sup> The film proved a modest hit, received positive critical attention, and defined the screen persona of Eurasian actor Michael Wong.<sup>213</sup> Gordon Chan and his scriptwriter teamed up again to create *First Option* (1996) and *Option Zero* (1997). *First Option* was worse than the already rather mediocre original, but apparently struck a chord in audience and critics alike - it surpassed the first film's success. The focus in *First Option* is more on the action, but also stresses the importance of teamwork and again offered plenty of realistic details about weaponry and tactics. The stressing of teamwork seems to have been the reason critics liked it. For instance, in view of the approaching Handover, Li Cheuk-to interpreted the film as a call to "put heads together and face the challenge" so that "you can turn defeat into victory" ("1997 Deadline" 11).<sup>214</sup> In *Option Zero* the private lives of the cops took centre stage again, but more important was the fact that it was the directorial debut of Gordon Chan's protégé, Dante Lam (Chan was the film's producer).

Lam would become one of the most prominent Hong Kong directors over the next decade, and the success of Lam and Chan's co-directed cop soap opera, *Beast Cops* (1998), played no small part in this. Again based on a script of Chan Hing-kar, *Beast Cops* took home most of the major prizes at the Hong Kong Film Awards in 1999, even though its box office income was relatively modest. Tung (Anthony Wong), a marginally corrupt cop, and his slacker partner Lee (Sam Lee) get a new boss, the strait-laced Michael (Michael Wong), who also moves in with them. Not very familiar with the ways of Hong Kong street life, Michael's worldview is straightforward: as he explains, addressing the camera directly, there is only "good" and "bad" for him, with nothing in between. Tung and Lee, on the other hand, clearly live in a morally ambiguous world, especially Tung, who is very close to

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<sup>212</sup> The more positive, humane and professional image of the police that comes to the fore in cop soap operas (as well as in more action-oriented films focusing on a group of law enforcers) can be considered the result of generic development, but also of the improved image of the police in the 1990s - a result of its change to a service orientation and greater respect for human rights.

<sup>213</sup> Wong is quite an odd phenomenon in that, as a native English speaker, he speaks Cantonese with a heavy accent and frequently switches back to English, no matter what role he is playing. Wong's mixing of Cantonese and English in *Final Option* might also have been an attempt to appeal to overseas markets. Coincidentally, he started his acting career with a small part in 1985's *City Hero*, the first film to focus on the SDU and to include lengthy training sequences. Wong is also one of the two main characters in *The Case of the Cold Fish*, which appeared after *Final Option* and made fun of his persona in that film to great effect.

<sup>214</sup> This period saw several films focusing on a team of civil servants, usually cops but also firemen, as in Johnnie To's *Lifeline* (1997). Most of these films could be classified as cop soap operas, including To's film, though a film like Benny Chan's *Big Bullet* (1996) dealt with the police team in a more action-oriented narrative, as did several of Milkyway Image's early films.

local triad leader Fai (Roy Cheung). The film shows the process by which these characters' worldviews begin to converge, with mostly Michael moving into the "in-between" zone after he begins dating the girlfriend of Fai, who has fled the territory. During Fai's absence, his lieutenant becomes power-hungry, and this eventually leads to one of the most exhilarating finales Hong Kong cinema has produced. Like many of the better cop soap operas, a plot outline can't really do the film justice, as its pleasure comes from watching the subtle and amusing character interactions, as well as from the quirky cinematography and storytelling techniques.<sup>215</sup>

The above-mentioned finale is a good example of the experimental, quirky "look" of the film: as a heavily drugged Tung goes for vengeance by walking alone into the villain's headquarters, an extremely stylized sequence follows that brings to mind some of the excesses of the best Category III films.<sup>216</sup> Lam and Chan use a bewildering array of techniques in quick succession: extreme close-ups; jump cuts; parallel editing; black-and-white images; slow-motion, fast-motion and smudge-motion; freeze-frames; and even negative images for a short flashback. All of this is used to create a surreal and ultra-violent atmosphere which is meant to be self-consciously appreciated as an ironic celebration of violent excess (the chaotic, dissonant soundtrack alternated with an upbeat, fast-paced rock tune indicates this ironic intent): Tung seems to barely feel the impact of the multitude of gunshots, stabbings and beatings he suffers, and keeps moving towards his target slowly and determinedly – an incarnation of Fate itself. This scene especially highlights the postmodern characteristics of the film: it should all not be taken too seriously, as is indicated by the film's final scene, in which the previously heavily injured and seemingly dying Tung suddenly seems completely healthy again.

Another cop soap opera worth mentioning is Wilson Yip's *Bullets over Summer* (1999). Although Yip frames his story between three violent shoot-outs (two separate ones in the beginning, and one at the end which is shown in two "alternative" versions), the middle part almost entirely drops the crime narrative in

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<sup>215</sup> The term "cop soap opera" might sound negative to some, but, as the descriptions of the films hopefully make clear, it has no such connotation – it is merely meant to indicate the films' interest in character and human interaction rather than action sequences.

<sup>216</sup> That Tung is played by Anthony Wong (who made his name in Category III fare) indicates that this scene is a conscious "quoting" of Wong's earlier roles as a deranged killer.

favor of effective human drama and bittersweet humor. The plot focuses on two cops: the temperamental but responsible Mike (Francis Ng) and his younger, sloppy colleague Brian (Louis Koo). Investigating a violent robbery during which many innocent bystanders were killed, they stake out the home of a rumored arms dealer by commandeering a nearby apartment. The owner of this apartment is a senile old lady (Law Lan), who mistakes the two cops for her children who never visit her. Soon Brian falls for whimsical schoolgirl Yen (Michelle Saram), who moves in with them as well, and Mike gets close to the pregnant Jennifer (Stephanie Lam), whose boyfriend abandoned her. The man they are watching eventually turns out to be not related to the case at all, so Brian and Mike have to move out again. The granny prepares a farewell dinner for her “sons” and their newfound girlfriends, and they are joined in their meal by two of the robbers, who just happen to live in the same building. Eventually a gunfight breaks out of course, bringing the movie to a rather abrupt end. In the Hong Kong tradition, Yip mixes elements from many genres in *Bullets over Summer*, but the interest lies mostly in the temporary “family” of lonely souls that is brought together by circumstance. It is a theme that returns even more successfully in his *Juliet in Love* (2000, discussed in the section on triad films).

The number of excellent cop soap operas makes it impossible to describe all of them in depth here.<sup>217</sup> This is not to say that it was a booming new genre, since maybe only twenty to thirty films that can be classified as such were produced between 1994 and 2001, and only a few of them had significant box office success. What is clear, however, is that many younger directors made their mark with these often innovative, medium-budget films. While Gordon Chan, the genre’s originator, was already an established filmmaker when he made *Final Option*, many up-and-coming directors chose to work in this genre before going on to head bigger-budget productions.<sup>218</sup> The list of notable directors includes Teddy Chen, Derek Chiu, Patrick Leung, Wilson Yip and Dante Lam. The smaller budgets gave them the freedom to make their films more personal, and some of them made their best works in the genre. Wilson Yip, for instance, made several excellent films in this period,

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<sup>217</sup> The most outstanding ones include Teddy Chen’s *In the Heat of Summer* (1994), Derek Chiu’s *The Log* (1996), Patrick Leung’s *Task Force* (1997) and James Yuen’s *Crazy ‘n the City* (2005).

<sup>218</sup> As we shall see, many of the triad films of this period served a similar function. Several of the directors mentioned also made innovative triad pictures that similarly played with the boundaries of genre.

but is now busy directing blockbusters with an eye on the Mainland market, such as the enormously lucrative *Ip Man* series of kung fu films.<sup>219</sup> This of course reflects the wider developments in the industry described above: the reason that the genre eventually faded out seems mostly the result of the difficulties that medium-budget films have in the Hong Kong of the new millennium.<sup>220</sup>

With the industry output dropping to around 50 films a year, and the bifurcated development of blockbusters with the Mainland market in mind along with low- to medium-budget films primarily aimed at the local market, it becomes hard to discern any trends in the police film. One thing that is clear, however, is the influence of the *Infernal Affairs* films (2002-2003). Davis and Yeh call the series a “benchmark” for the Hong Kong film industry, which is a good way to describe their effect. The areas in which the influence of *Infernal Affairs* was most visible, were the types of plots, atmosphere and visual look of big-budget crime films (more below). As the basic plot of *Infernal Affairs* is not that original, some directors and producers initially seem to have concluded that putting traditional genres in a glossy, tightly scripted package would be the future of Hong Kong cinema.

At least, this seems obvious from the films of Wong Jing, Hong Kong’s most famous producer of crass, quickly made entertainment that somehow ends up making lots of money locally. Wong, who was earlier an instrumental player in the gambling and “triad boyz” fads of the 1990s, seemed to reach for *Infernal Affairs*-like success with a few films that appeared, as usual, very soon after the originals. Amongst these, *Colour of the Truth* (2002, co-directed with Marco Mak) stands out. In an opening scene clearly inspired by *Infernal Affairs*, the directors bring together three of Hong Kong’s most famous actors – Lau Ching-wan, Francis Ng and Anthony Wong – for a roof top confrontation!<sup>221</sup> Obviously due to budget

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<sup>219</sup> Yip directed two *Ip Man* films so far: *Ip Man* appeared in 2008, *Ip Man 2* in 2010. Though *Ip Man 2* was a big box-office success in Hong Kong, it made even more money in the Mainland (N.D.).

<sup>220</sup> Dante Lam, the second most successful of the directors who made their mark in the cop soap opera genre, has so far remained more Hong Kong-centered, making several cop films that are basically updates of Danny Lee’s 1980s and 1990s films, but with a darker edge to them. In this sense he creates more commercial versions of the Hong Kong noir films discussed in the next chapter. Examples of his recent cop films are *Beast Stalker* (2008), *Fire of Conscience* (2010) and *Stool Pigeon* (2010).

<sup>221</sup> The rooftop scene in *Infernal Affairs 1* where stars Andy Lau and Tony Leung Chiu-wai finally face off marks the climax of that film.

constraints, the first two of these actors are killed off after the first five minutes, with only Anthony Wong remaining among a cast of younger pop idols.<sup>222</sup> The plot has various twists and turns, but in essence focuses on the sons of the two dead stars (one an ambitious young cop, one a young triad boss) who are out for revenge against Wong, the cop they see as responsible for what happened on that roof top (what exactly happened there is kept from the audience as well). Like in *Infernal Affairs*, glossy and somewhat flashy cinematography is used, and while it does not measure up against the original, the film is one of the more noteworthy crime films of the decade. Another Wong Jing effort along this vein was the less successful *Moving Targets* (2004), which plays like a cross between *Infernal Affairs* and an earlier benchmark, *Gen-X Cops* (1999), while basing itself on a popular TV series of the 1980s. More recently, Wong returned to more ambitious territory again with his *I Corrupt All Cops* (2009), another film that recounts the events surrounding the establishment of the ICAC in the 1970s.<sup>223</sup>

Final mention should also be made of Wilson Yip's attempt to revive the 1980s crime action movie with *SPL* (2005). One of the film's scriptwriters, Szeto Kam-yuen regularly works with Johnnie To, and was partly responsible for the series of acclaimed noir crime films that Milkyway Image produced in its early period (see next chapter). Mixed with the riveting martial arts action of the 1980s is thus an extremely dark and nihilistic version of the familiar story of cops breaking the law to attain justice, only here justice is never really achieved. Before heading into more commercially viable territory with nationalistic, period kung fu action, Wilson Yip and *SPL* star Donnie Yen teamed up once more for the similar, but less accomplished *Flashpoint* (2007).

#### 4.4.2.2. *The Triad Film*

After the hero films and the Big Timer cycle, it seems audiences and filmmakers alike were tiring of films focusing on the lives of gangsters. John Woo, who started the trend, made a duo of cops the heroes in his last Hong Kong movie, *Hard Boiled*

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<sup>222</sup> Additionally, Patrick Tse, the star of 1960s Cantonese cinema, plays one of the villains in a rare appearance.

<sup>223</sup> Wong's *Colour of the Loyalty* (2005, co-directed with Billy Chung) also aspires to *Infernal Affairs* status but belongs more properly to the triad film genre, so it will be discussed later.

(1992, discussed below). He himself has remarked that “at that time, the violence had gone too far in Hong Kong. The gangsters were ruthless with their gun smuggling and brutality. (...) There was so much injustice. So I wanted to make a new kind of hero with Chow Yun-fat, like Dirty Harry, who takes it into his own hands to fight evil” (Fang 118-9). Filmmakers were also getting fed up with the triad involvement in the industry, as it was not uncommon that actors were forced in various ways to participate in films.<sup>224</sup> A famous incident involved actress and singer Anita Mui: a triad-related filmmaker slapped her in a karaoke after she refused to have a drink with him, and another gangster, the “Tiger of Wanchai”, came to her defense. A few days later the offending gangster was murdered, and Mui had to go into hiding (Dannen and Long 25-6). Ironically, a film came out soon after glorifying the gangster who had “defended” Mui’s honor – it did not mention his suspected involvement in the murder! This film, called *The Tragic Fantasy – The Tiger of Wanchai* (1994), is one of the rare triad film box office successes of this period. It plays like a Big Timer film, but then one set in 1990s Hong Kong, and it ends with the tragic death of the “Tiger”, shot by mysterious assassins a few days before he was supposedly retiring from the Hong Kong underworld to enjoy life overseas with his true love... The film’s success was obviously based more on its “fresh-from-the-headlines” nature than from any artistic achievement. Several other films glorifying real-life gangsters followed in the late 1990s, usually along the same lines of *The Tragic Fantasy* and like that film often starring Simon Yam in the role of the smart, righteous and suave gangster.<sup>225</sup>

In 1996, films centering on triads saw a sudden revival with the surprisingly successful *Young and Dangerous* (1996), based on a popular local comic book. The film spawned five sequels, a prequel, three official spin-offs and many more imitators in a short four-year time span.<sup>226</sup> As its title already suggests, *Young and*

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<sup>224</sup> In 1992, many people in the industry took to the streets to march against “violence in the show business” – obviously a thinly veiled protest against triad involvement. Quite a few directors do not mind triad involvement per se, however. Dannen and Long quote Wong Kar-wai as saying that “it’s better to deal with a godfather than an accountant” (44).

<sup>225</sup> Examples are *King of Robbery* (1996), *Casino* (1998) and *Operation Billionaires* (1998).

<sup>226</sup> Of the series’ official spin-offs, Raymond Yip’s *Portland Street Blues* (1998) is arguably the best. Focusing on Sister 13 (Sandra Ng), a female gang leader of the Hung Hing, the film paints a fascinating portrait of its gender-ambiguous protagonist and plays around with the homoeroticism typical of the Hong Kong triad genre. For a reading of the gender dynamics in this film, see Leung 90-7. Other spin-offs included *The Legendary Tai Fei* (1999) and *Those Were the Days* (2000).

*Dangerous* rejuvenated the gangster genre of the 1980s by focusing on the rise of a group of “young rascals” (the Cantonese term is *guwaakjai*, which can also be translated as “teddy boys”; the films and its imitators are often referred to in English as belonging to the “triad boyz” genre). Aside from the protagonists sporting the hairstyles and clothes fashionable in the late 1990s, the films differ from their 1980s counterparts in that they are much less focused on action. In the violent *jianghu* of these young gangster heroes, fights evidently occur, but when they do, they tend to be chaotic mass brawls, usually shot in a way that makes it hard to follow what exactly is going on. The series’ director and cinematographer, Andrew Lau, who worked on Ringo Lam’s *City on Fire* (1987) and with Wong Kar-wai on the stylistically and narrative-wise influential *Chungking Express* (1994), made use of the latter’s “smudge-motion” technique for the fights in the first few *Young and Dangerous* films in particular, while also using sync-sound and the for him customary handheld camera.<sup>227</sup> All these stylistic choices – often motivated by the lack of time and money – nevertheless helped to give the films a more authentic, local feeling. As the series progressed and budgets increased, a change towards a glossier and flashier look is noticeable. Especially *Young and Dangerous 6: Born to Be King* (2000) shows a clear move towards the sleek look of Lau’s *Infernal Affairs* (2002).<sup>228</sup>

Instead of action, the *Young and Dangerous* series focused on the young gangsters’ personalities, their friendships and romances, as well as on triad intrigue.<sup>229</sup> The plots are very loose: the first two thirds of a typical *Young and Dangerous* film are devoted to fairly random daily life events (the introduction of new characters, relationships, etc.), after which things are brought to a satisfactory conclusion by a sudden crisis (the young heroes are framed for the murder of a triad boss, or another

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<sup>227</sup> Wong’s *Chungking Express* and its companion piece *Fallen Angels* (1995) were, despite their art-house credentials, enormously influential on genre filmmaking in Hong Kong. Wong’s frequent cinematographer Christopher Doyle notes in an interview of this period that the smudge-motion technique they introduced “had been done to death by everybody”, and that “every film released here looks like a homage to Wong Kar-wai” (Ashbrook 65). Part of the attractiveness of the visual style of these films was undoubtedly its compatibility with low budgets, cramped spaces and tight shooting schedules.

<sup>228</sup> The change of editor might have been a factor: Danny Pang did the editing for *Young and Dangerous 6*, and also worked on *Infernal Affairs*. He and his brother Oxide Pang have since then exhibited their technical prowess in their own works, including the horror film, *The Eye* (2002).

<sup>229</sup> The romantic entanglements make these films less potentially homoerotic than the hero films, although the strong bonds between the male friends and their immediate boss regularly inspire sacrifice and vengeance.

transgression of the rules of the *jianghu*), which is swiftly resolved, not through a spectacular one-against-many action scene, but thanks to the help of powerful friends and a show of force (*Young and Dangerous 2* is a good example of this: no climactic final fight takes place, the villains are simply surrounded by a large number of “good” rascals and submit). To spice things up a bit, the series’ main hero, Hung Hing member Chan Ho-nam (Ekin Cheng), sometimes agrees to a final, honorable one-on-one fight. While he always wins and proves he has the guts and the brawn to be a leader, he is definitely not a Woo-style superhero and these fights are not stylized gunplay or kung fu displays. Certain parallels with the cop soap opera should be apparent by now: the move away from action, the shift towards the depiction of characters’ personal life, a focus on the group, and loose plotting are some of the characteristics they share, and it is thus not so surprising to discover that Andrew Lau directed a cop soap opera the same year in which he launched the *Young and Dangerous* series!<sup>230</sup>

Despite the differences with the hero films, however, the characters in *Young and Dangerous* clearly still live in the same modern-day *jianghu* popularized by John Woo. Our gangster heroes are distinguished from their opponents in that they live according to the codes of loyalty, brotherhood and righteousness. Like *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), the distinction between “good” and “bad” gangsters is made abundantly clear by introducing a new grotesque villain in each new film. These villains are amongst the most colorful characters in the series, so much so that Ugly Kwan (Francis Ng) of the original *Young and Dangerous* was given his own film, *Once Upon a Time in Triad Society* (1996, more below). These antagonists usually pretend to be righteous gangsters, but secretly come up with plots to bring harm to Chan Ho-nam and his friends. While the generally “good” Hung Hing triad refuses to participate in the drugs trade, the “bad” gangsters have no such scruples. They are solely interested in their own profit, do not hesitate to use one of their loyal associates as a living shield, and frequently talk about righteousness and loyalty as “outdated”.

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<sup>230</sup> This film, *Best of the Best* (1996), was in fact a sort of (unofficial) sequel to Gordon Chan’s *Final Option* (1994), and also focused on a group of SDU officers. It should be noted that unlike the *Young and Dangerous* films, many cop soap operas have excellently choreographed, though realistic, action scenes even if they are not the main focus of the plot. *Task Force* (1997), for instance, makes it a point to reference four distinct action styles in Hong Kong cinema: kung fu (comedy), swordplay, John Woo’s ballistic ballet, and the more realistic gunplay predominant in the 1990s.

The differences between the righteous Hung Hing boys and their opponents is highlighted in the many ritual scenes that occur throughout the series – most prominently the many funerals that take place, but also weddings, and triad initiation, expulsion or punishment ceremonies.<sup>231</sup> On these occasions, Chan Honam always upholds and subjects himself to the rules (*guiju* 規矩) of the *jianghu*, even when they seem unfair, while his opponents only pretend to uphold them, and often manipulate them. In the first film, for instance, Ugly Kwan and his men kidnap Chan, then drug and film him while having sex with his best friend Chicken's girlfriend (also drugged). Sleeping with a brother's woman is one of the worst crimes one can commit in the gangster world, so Chan is expelled from the Hung Hing. While Chan accepts this fate, Ugly Kwan makes use of the occasion to grab the top seat in the gang and cruelly kills Chan's "big brother" and mentor, the fatherly Bee (Frankie Ng), along with his wife and young offspring. When Chicken (Jordan Chan) returns from exile in Taiwan as a boss in his own right, he helps Chan to take revenge and restore order in the underworld: when they defeat Kwan, they do not claim the top seat for themselves, but instead invite the old gang leader to come back and lead them again. It is through adherence to these "old-fashioned" values that Chan and his friends are able to climb up in the triad ranks, so that eventually, in the last film, the leader decides to retire and put Chan in charge of the whole gang.

Certain changes took place as the series progressed. While the first films were criticized in some quarters for glorifying the triad lifestyle (Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong* 26), later episodes made an attempt to send a more mixed message. After Chan's "true love" Smartie (Gigi Lai) is killed in the third film (1996), Chan fully realizes the price of his lifestyle, so in the fourth film (1997), when he, due to a series of misunderstandings, ends up substituting for a teacher in a problem school, he makes an impassioned speech to the rowdy kids about the tragic and

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<sup>231</sup> In the course of the series, a certain iconography was developed. Besides funerals and other ceremonial occasions, the first few films in the series regularly featured tense "boardroom" meetings of the Hung Hing bosses to discuss vital matters of the gang. Reminiscent of similar scenes in *The Godfather* (1972) as well as the Big Timer films, they have become a fixture of triad films since. Another setting often returned to in several episodes is the soccer field where the young Chan and his friends were bullied by Ugly Kwan and protected by Bee in the opening scene of the first film, signaling their initiation in the Hung Hing. A final signature scene has the group of young rascals and a crowd of followers walking on the street, as if they are claiming ownership of the city.

unglamorous realities of life as a triad member. In the same film, he warns Chicken against competing for a position as a boss in the Hung Hing, and sees his fears come true as yet another of his close friends ends up murdered when Chicken goes ahead anyway.<sup>232</sup> In *Young and Dangerous 5*, he tells his boss that he wanted to leave the *jianghu*, but eventually realized that this is not possible. The hackneyed theme of “once a gangster, always a gangster” also is central to a new character introduced in this film, an old friend of Chan’s who has spent many years in jail and wants to turn a new leaf. Eventually this character realizes that he can’t escape the triad life, as the gangs exercise control (through protection rackets) over the limited jobs available to someone without a formal education and with a criminal record like himself.

Another evolution comes with the rise of Chan through the triad hierarchy. Where the first film is set in Hong Kong’s Causeway Bay district, later episodes bring him to Macau, Holland, Thailand, Malaysia, Taiwan and Japan. And whereas Chan in the first film is in conflict with a lower-level boss of the Hung Hing society, in the later episodes he clashes with other Hong Kong crime families, and finally is involved in a regional conflict between gangs in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan. An important aspect of triad life that Chan needs to master is doing business. Initially, he is dressed fashionably in jeans and glossy jackets and carries out assassinations and other jobs for his boss, but in later episodes he dons a suit and travels around the region to connect with crime syndicates elsewhere and do big business. Still, he remains true to traditional values: when the villain of the last film talks to him about cooperating as they are now all living in a global village, Chan responds that he does not know about the global village, but that he believes in brotherhood and loyalty.

Finally, one remarkable thing about the films is their recurrent referencing of political events and “local sentiment”. The 1997 Handover pops up in dialogues in most of the films, while the triads regularly organize “democratic” elections. In the second film, there is an interest in the Taiwanese triads’ active involvement in politics, and the final film is set against the victory of independence-minded Chen Shuibian in the Taiwanese presidential elections and the concurrent fears of a

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<sup>232</sup> Dying in a *Young and Dangerous* film is a relative kind of affair: several people die throughout the series but the actors are regularly resurrected in the next film as a new character. Actor Roy Cheung dies no less than three times in the series!

violent conflict with China.<sup>233</sup> The prequel (1998) even went so far as to crosscut images of the crackdown on protesters on Tian'anmen Square in 1989 with a violent brawl between rival gangs happening at the same time in Hong Kong!

The triad boyz phenomenon gave rise to a surge of creativity. A minority of films attempted a more serious version of the same story. Raymond Lee's *To Be No. 1* (1996), for instance, tells the familiar tale of an ambitious young man, Fei Chuen (Julian Cheung), aiming "to be no. 1", but shows this to be an essentially vain and empty goal that can only lead to death.<sup>234</sup> Fei Chuen learns this the hard way when, in his aggressive (and initially successful) attempts to carve out a place for himself as a gang boss, he goes too far and offends the wrong people, leading to a cycle of vengeance which costs him his life. Early on in his rise, he encounters "Magic Lamp" (Simon Yam), a figure who survives in the *jianghu* by cowardly accepting humiliation. It eventually turns out that Magic Lamp was once a brash young man quite similar to Fei Chuen, but one who realized in time that that path would only lead him to early death. Fei Chuen comes to this insight too late, and he dies at the end of the film, along with some of his friends. At the same time, however, another character serves to illustrate how maybe Fei Chuen had few choices in his life: his friend Chun is good at studying and is able to escape a life in poverty this way. This is no option for Fei Chuen, who does nevertheless encourage his friend to keep studying and not get involved with the gang.

Another fairly generic film, *Rules of the Game* (1999) questions the omnipresent rules (*guiju*) of the underworld – sometimes also referred to as the "family law" (*jiafa*). It does this by setting up some tragic contradictions: a group of young men led by David Chow (Louis Koo) gets into a fight with triad boss Shing (Alex Fong) over Chow's girlfriend, Ann (Kristy Yeung). Shing ends up beating one of them into a wheelchair, and though David vows revenge, a conflict with another gangster

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<sup>233</sup> Though the allegorical use of triad elections is now mostly associated with Johnnie To's masterful *Election* films (2005-6), this approach is already noticeable in the late 1990s triad films. The topic of triads running for elections in Taiwan was central to a big-budget Johnny Mak production, *Island of Greed* (1997), which was successful at the box office, but is poorly plotted.

<sup>234</sup> In this, it shares some similarities with 1960s and 1970s swordplay films where a swordsman devotes his life to becoming the "Number One" swordsman of the *jianghu*, only to eventually discover that this is an empty pursuit as one day, inevitably, a younger swordsman will kill him to claim that title.

forces him and his friends to seek Shing's protection by becoming members of his organization. David quickly rises to fame as a gangster, but it turns out he has all along been planning his revenge. His attempt fails, however, and due to various circumstances Ann ends up being raped and killed as a result. At her funeral, Shing wants to punish the friends according to the *jiafa*, as one is supposed to forget all earlier grievances when joining a triad society and one certainly should not try to murder one's big brother! But when he justifies his handicapping of their friend by saying that it was acceptable because they were not yet members of his gang, serious questions are raised regarding the morality of this *jiafa* he so blindly respects.

While *To Be No. 1* and *Rules of the Game* critiqued the *Young and Dangerous* films by making tragic versions of the same story, Wilson Yip's *Mongkok Story* (1996) retained some of their value as light entertainment by going for mild parody. In Yip's film, Leung Ping (Edmond Leung) is a waiter who through some of his friends is pulled into a triad gang led by Long Ching (Roy Cheung). Leung is not really interested in being a gangster, but Long's intimidating presence and legendary reputation make him believe he has no choice but to join, so he immediately quits his job. Long is in fact a very nice triad, who prefers not to fight unless he really has to, and who invites his boys to help him build a baby bed in one of the film's many comic moments. The young rascals get into a conflict with Lui Lone (Anthony Wong), a triad who also is a movie star. A cycle of revenge leads eventually to a fight in which Long saves his young followers at the cost of his own life. The rascals try to avenge their boss of course, and Leung ends up alone with Lui in an alley, where both are promptly mugged and tied to each other. When Lui tries to cheat the muggers, they kill him casually. Afterwards, in the film's final scene, Leung is again put before the choice of joining a gang, but now he actually decides for himself instead of going with the flow, and walks away. As in most of Yip's films of this period, a plot summary does not really do justice to the film as it is really in the small moments that it stands out – such as Leung's laconic voice-over at the start of the film, or the soccer game between two gangs that is shot in the style of a typical Japanese sports *manga*.

Other films went much further in their deconstruction of the triad myth, however. One of the earliest ones was Cha Chuen-ye's *Once Upon a Time in Triad Society*

(1996), dealing with the hilariously evil Ugly Kwan (Francis Ng) from the first *Young and Dangerous* film, who tells (in a flashback) about his life as he lies mortally wounded in the hospital after being shot by one of the many people who hate him. In this account, he was tricked to join the triads when they bullied him at the soccer field (where also Chan Ho-nam was recruited in the first *Young and Dangerous* film). Again and again, the loyal and righteous Kwan gets betrayed by his friends, his bosses and the one girl he loves. Eventually, he flees to Japan and tries his best to leave the underworld, starting a small business and getting married. But, of course, the triads do not leave him alone, and murder his pregnant wife. This made him lose all faith in the supposed presence of loyalty and righteousness in triad society, so he decided to return to Hong Kong and be the most evil of them all. At this point in his story, Kwan briefly regains consciousness to see doctors operating on him. Confessing his first story was all a lie, he tells us the real version in a new flashback: from the beginning he was the one who betrayed and killed his friends, bosses, and even his own father. Because people got more and more scared of him, he got ever more powerful and successful. He concludes his tale saying: "Being a triad is real fun! If I don't die and am given a choice, I'd do it all over again!" Kwan does survive the operation and goes on being the nasty triad he always was, surviving again and again while everyone else, good or bad, dies around him, although eventually one of his many victims gets back at him.

Equally inventive and entertaining was the film's sequel, *Once Upon a Time in Triad Society 2* (1996), which weaved together the three separate stories of brave gangster Dinosaur (Roy Cheung) who is heading to a potentially violent negotiation between two gangs, his friend Dagger (Francis Ng) who works as a pimp for the other gang and is also expected to defend his gang's honor even though he'd rather play mahjong, and a harried cop (Cheung Tat-ming) who must try his best to stop the fight from happening. In a darkly humorous twist, the fight breaks out more or less by accident when an elated Dagger, happy that the fight has been called off, affectionately calls Dinosaur using a swearword, which is taken the wrong way by some touchy members of Dinosaur's gang. In an utterly unromanticized way, the gangsters start killing each other. While Dinosaur dies from his wounds and Cheung searches his pregnant wife to make sure she did not get caught up in the riot, Dagger comically ends up being selected to carry out the assassination of his boss's rival.

Especially in the scenes with Dagger, whose cynical thoughts are frequently heard in voice-over, loyalty, righteousness and brotherhood are shown to be values that gangsters only pay lip service to.

Probably the most acclaimed triad boyz-inspired film is Fruit Chan's *Made in Hong Kong* (1997), the first of the filmmaker's so-called 1997 trilogy. *Made in Hong Kong* does clearly rise above its genre trappings, but it is nonetheless useful to place it against the background of the triad boyz films then taking the industry by storm, because on its most basic level it is a reaction to the triad glamorization in these films. Famously using leftover film stock and non-professional actors to shoot his film, Fruit Chan introduces us to Autumn Moon (Sam Lee), a young hoodlum who states early on he is too smart to take just any order from a triad boss. He spends his days mostly lazing about and occasionally saving from bullies his only follower, the mentally slow Sylvester (Wenders Li). Collecting debts for Brother Wing, he meets Ping (Nicky Yim), whose mother is still paying off the debts of a husband who left her. They are attracted to one another, but things are not all rosy as Moon soon finds out Ping is suffering from renal failure and needs a kidney transplant. Moon now finds some direction in his life and decides to try and save Ping, by paying off her mother's debts, and by becoming an organ donor. Meanwhile, he is haunted in his dreams by Susan, a high-school student who committed suicide and left two letters, found by Sylvester and passed to Moon. The three friends deliver one of the letters to her lover, a high-school teacher who tears it up without reading it. The second letter is meant for her parents, but Moon postpones delivering it. Accepting a job from Brother Wing to assassinate two Mainlanders, he can't pull the trigger when facing them and simply runs off. Soon after, a young hoodlum stabs him multiple times in a dark hallway and he ends up in a coma in the hospital. When he finally recovers, Ping has already passed away and also Sylvester is dead – killed by Brother Wing after he botched a job as a drug courier. Considering suicide at first, Moon eventually decides to violently leave his mark on this world, so he kills Brother Wing and the rival loan shark who ordered the hit on him earlier. He bleeds to death next to Ping's grave, where later playing children find him. On the soundtrack we get to hear a broadcast from "People's Radio", on which a speech by Mao Zedong to the young is quoted in which Mao says that the world is theirs and

that they have placed all their hopes on them. The radio host then says: "Let's repeat and study the message in putonghua."

While some critics saw the *Young and Dangerous* films as expressing a "certain pragmatic optimism about facing 1997" (Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong* 27), *Made in Hong Kong* clearly and explicitly expresses the opposite sentiment as is obvious in its ironic use of the radio broadcast at the end. Fruit Chan's film certainly employs many of the settings familiar of the triad boyz films (public housing estates, playgrounds), and also similar plot elements (scenes of triads posturing, an assignment that involves murder, etc.). But it takes these ingredients and uses fairly experimental cinematography and editing to turn them into something different – an essay on youthful despair, alienation and broken families. Moon's father has left the family to live with a woman from the Mainland, and in the course of the film his mother also abandons him. When he at one point heads out with a knife to "chop him to pieces", he first cannot find him and then changes his mind when he sees a boy in school uniform doing to his father what Moon was planning to do to his!<sup>235</sup> There are no simple answers in *Made in Hong Kong*, as the problems Moon and his friends experience are the result of their environment, chance as well as their own choices (a friendly social worker encourages Moon to do something with his life, but he ignores her; despite his mother's objections, he quits his studies).

By *Young and Dangerous 5* (1998), Chan Ho-nam and his righteous triad friends were wearing business suits and clearly did not look that young anymore – so much so that for the prequel detailing their initiation in the gang that came out the same year, a whole new cast of young faces was introduced. It was by then clear, however, that the triad boyz fad was subsiding, and a shift towards more standard triad fare was noticeable. This was most obvious in the films produced by Wong Jing, who had been an important figure behind the triad boyz fad as a producer. In 1998 and 1999, Wong produced two films starring Andy Lau, who had portrayed dozens of gangsters in the late 1980s, but had since left that kind of role behind him. Though plagued by the melodramatic twists and turns typical of Wong's ultra-

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<sup>235</sup> Ping and Sylvester are similarly abandoned by their fathers, and the only character who could pass as a father figure is Brother Wing, who turns out to be completely unreliable and treacherous. In his frequent voice-over commentaries, Moon expresses profound disappointment in the adults around him.

commercial films, *A True Mob Story* (1998) gave a fairly interesting, more psychological take on the heroic gangster, and was allegedly based on the life of suspected triad member and movie mogul Charles Heung. In the film, Wai Cheung-dee (Andy Lau) has made a name for himself in the underworld several years ago, by bravely saving Prince (Mark Cheng), the son of the triad boss, from an attack by Crazy Ball (Ben Ng). However, Wai's wife ended up being killed in the chaos, and although Wai was promoted afterwards, he apparently lost his self-confidence and brashness, burdened by his responsibilities towards his son, but seemingly also suffering from a crisis of masculinity. The latter aspect is symbolized by his motorcycle, which he has not driven in years, but is kept in good condition by his loyal followers who hope one day Wai will ride his "steed" once again – the reference to Andy Lau's role in *A Moment of Romance* (1990) is obvious here. The plot leads up to this inevitable moment by putting Wai in an almost hopeless situation: the police is investigating him as they suspect he is the region's biggest drug trafficker (while in fact Wai was unknowingly used by Prince as a straw man), his triad "family" is not intent on protecting him, and Crazy Ball has just been released from prison and is out for revenge. Eventually, Wai does regain his confidence and masculinity, driving his motorcycle once again and cleverly worming his way out of the situation and bringing down all his enemies in the process. The police eventually also have to let him go after a jury acquits him. The film ends, however, with Wai being killed by a mysterious assassin in full daylight. An utterly dark picture of the triad world is painted here: the other bosses in the gang treat Wai like a joke as they know he lacks the guts to fight back. They use him as a straw man without his knowing and drop him like a stone whenever he begs them for help. Wai's turning of the tables is equally cynical and depends on him using the women in his life to his own advantage, betraying his gang to the police and tricking Crazy Ball in torturing Prince to death.

While the following year's *Century of the Dragon* (1999, directed by Clarence Fok) used the cliché of a gangster (Andy Lau) vainly trying to escape the triad life into respectable society, and mixed it with the moral dilemma of the undercover cop (Louis Koo) who has to choose between his duty as a policeman and his loyalty to his gangster boss, several films experimented with the triad genre, often by making fun of its conventions or by introducing new themes. Riley Yip's *Metade Fumaca*

(1999), Portuguese for “half-smoked” does a little bit of both. An ageing gangster, Mountain Leopard (played by the short, chubby Eric Tsang), returns to Hong Kong after having lived in exile in Brazil for the last 30 years. He hooks up with Smokey (Nicholas Tse), a smalltime hoodlum, who is quite excited to help this self-avowed legendary figure of the *jianghu* with his revenge. The “half-smoked” or “half a cigarette” of the title refers to each of these characters’ personal obsession: Mountain Leopard has actually not returned to take revenge on his rival, but to look for the woman he saw and fell in love with before he had to flee – he kept the half-finished cigarette she was smoking as a memento of his undying love. Smokey for his part was conceived “in less time than it takes to finish a cigarette”, and because the smoke of her cigarette blocked his prostitute mother’s view during the act, she cannot remember what his father looked like. For a while, Smokey, looking for a father figure, regards Leopard as such, as he has always imagined his father to be a legendary triad just like him.

Things are not what they seem however, and it turns out that Leopard’s story (shown in a stylish fantasy swordsman-style flashback) was false, and that in fact he was a lowly butcher who shot his rival in the back and then fled the territory thinking he had killed a man. The real reason Leopard came back is that he is losing his memory due to Alzheimer’s: he wants to see for one last time his dream woman before he forgets her too. A UFO production, the film exudes the company’s trademark nostalgia, with memory and forgetting a central theme. Several times, Smokey and Leopard visit a typical traditional *chachaanteng* (“teahouse”), often seen in triad films since the days of *The Teahouse* (1974), to find out what happened to Leopard’s old rival. Here, ageing triad gangsters, much like Leopard, recount to gullible young rascals their obviously exaggerated or fantasized heroic deeds in the *jianghu* of the past, making seem real a world the kids recognize from the *Young and Dangerous* comic books they read when they are not listening to the men. Although Smokey seems to look down on these naïve kids, he himself is not much better: his mother finally remembers that his father was a cop, which shatters all of Smokey’s imaginations about him and causes him to reevaluate his life. At the same time, however, the film recognizes the beauty of memories, even if they are not very accurate. At the end of *Metade Fumaca*, Smokey helps Leopard locate his dream woman in a club where older women (usually ageing club girls) dance with old men

for a small fee. Despite the environment in which he finds her and the thirty years that have passed, Leopard's dream woman looks exactly the way he last saw her – suggesting that the idealized image in his mind has proven stronger than time or reality. The film tells this bittersweet story using crisp and warmly colored cinematography (by Peter Pau), and an original Afro-Brazilian score, lovingly bringing to life the locations in Hong Kong's Yaumatei district.<sup>236</sup>

Another film where the triad genre format was transformed into a “Hong Kong sentiment” film – as the UFO works of the mid-1990s were sometimes referred to (Sek, “June 4 to 1997” 124) – is Wilson Yip's *Juliet in Love* (2000), in which a small-time gangster (Francis Ng) begins a romance with a waitress (Sandra Ng) who recently underwent a mastectomy, which caused her husband to divorce her. As in Yip's *Bullets over Summer* (1999), the characters are more important than the gangster plot, which here serves to bring the film to a simultaneously tragic and hopeful conclusion. Set in the lyrical rural area of Yuen Long, the waitress and the hoodlum temporarily make up an unlikely family when a gangster boss (Simon Yam) asks them to take care of his illicit newborn while he recovers in the hospital from a stabbing administered by his jealous wife. Through each other, the two find a new direction for their life: the gangster finally knows what he wants from his (settling down with the waitress), while she finds the will to live on (humorously symbolized in the film by a subtle use of coke bottles). The film never spells these feelings out very explicitly, leaving this to the actors.

More interested in self-consciously postmodern deconstruction is Dante Lam's *Jianghu – The Triad Zone* (2000), which tries to find a balance between a serious character study and ironic jabs at genre conventions. The film begins with a voice-over by triad boss Jim Yam (Tony Leung Ka-fai), explaining us what the *jianghu* is and introducing us to his life. We are then thrown immediately in a stereotypical, tense negotiation between Jim and a junior gangster who wants to take his place, claiming that Jim is “outdated”. Jim doesn't say anything while the man is talking, but when he is finished, he throws his cigarette at the other, who reacts by throwing his own cigarette back – in a close-up the two cigarettes clash in slow-motion in

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<sup>236</sup> It also makes excellent use of Taiwanese singer Teresa Tang's 1970s pop songs, recalling that other classic UFO film, *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* (1996).

mid-air. They repeat this action with their wine glasses, and finally a wine bottle.<sup>237</sup> When after this symbolic duel Jim emerges victorious, the lights go out and a single spotlight shines on him while he does an extended “victory dance” on the tables in the restaurant. This sets the tone for the film, which also involves a real-life appearance of the triads’ “patron saint”, Guan Yu (Anthony Wong), who comes to offer his advice to Jim but is ridiculed by the latter when he states that loyalty is most important. At another occasion fun is poked at the genre’s homoerotic undertones, when Jim’s bodyguard (Roy Cheung) touchingly declares his love for his boss. Despite these more surreal comic moments, a serious story is told as well, as someone is out to kill Jim and he has to mend his relationship with his wife when she discovers he is keeping a mistress. Eventually he comes to a better appreciation of the traditional value of loyalty, both towards his “brothers” in the gang and towards his wife, and in the final scene the couple has returned to London – where they first met and experienced their happiest days together – to try and recapture some of that old magic. However, their happiness might be short-lived as just before the credits a point-of-view shot through a sniper rifle settles on Jim and his wife...

One could argue that the triad genre by 2000 had gone through the various stages of genre development outlined by Schatz, who bases himself on Christian Metz’ *Language and Cinema* and Henri Focillon’s *The Life of Forms in Art*: via an “experimental” and a “classic” stage to a “baroque” (or “self-reflexive”) phase that includes parody and deconstruction (36-41). Neale has outlined the various problems of such a schema (211-20), and the fact that in the triad boyz genre all these stages were happening at the same time confirms his observations of other genres. Hence, more “traditional” *Young and Dangerous* episodes and spin-offs were shown alongside exercises in genre deconstruction or parody such as *Jianghu – The Triad Zone* and *Metade Fumaca*. The year 2000 even saw a revival of innovative, more action-oriented gangster films, such as Tsui Hark’s *Time and Tide* (2000), which starts out as a Wong Kar-wai inspired essay on youthful alienation and quirky romance but soon drops this plot to weave together several action set pieces into forty minutes of continuous action, and Alan Mak’s *A War Named*

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<sup>237</sup> This scene is likely a parody of a similar scene in Johnnie To’s *A Hero Never Dies* (1998), which was itself already a somewhat tongue-in-cheek version of the 1980s hero film.

*Desire* (2000), which offered a fresh take on the familiar pair of brothers caught up in a gang war.

As mentioned earlier, the audience in the new millennium suddenly preferred romantic comedies more than crime films, and crime films lost the grip they had held over Hong Kong cinema for over a decade and a half. As a result, it becomes harder to discern trends, though certain developments should be noted: the interest in the gangster who wants to turn a new leaf, and the emergence of glossy genre reinventions after the success of *Infernal Affairs* (an aspect in which the triad film parallels the police film). While the story of the difficulties a gangster encounters should he want to leave the gang was already central to John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow*, the prevalence of this theme amongst the limited number of fairly big-budget triad films that did appear in the 2000s is remarkable. A likely reason for this is the star of these films, which in most cases is Ekin Cheng, who in essence plays an older version of his character Chan Ho-nam in *Young and Dangerous*. Besides these reformed gangster films, Cheng played in no other triad pictures in the new decade, most likely because he remains too strongly identified with his young character in the successful, long-running series of the late 1990s. The films with Cheng (and one starring Louis Koo) do however bring some variation to the reformed gangster theme.

While *Goodbye Mr. Cool* (2001) stays true to the customary tragic nature of the reformed gangster, *Heavenly Mission* (2006) attempts to give the story a new twist: Ekin Cheng's triad hero, here named Autumn Yip, has a religious experience when he gets struck by lightning in Thailand and survives unharmed. Promptly put in jail, Yip spends his time reading. Once released, he approaches a female gangster boss who owes him her life and asks for a huge loan, promising to return the same sum with 100% profit to her in one year's time. Back in Hong Kong, the cops create a special unit to keep an eye on Yip, but he is not interested in returning to his old gang and instead sets up a company specializing in charity while throwing a lot of money around to do widely publicized good deeds. Still, Yip has difficulties proving to both the triads and the police that he has said the underworld goodbye. In particular, one young gangster – who reminds Yip of his younger self – causes him a lot of trouble in order to get in touch with the powerful female triad leader Yip

knows. Eventually, Yip is seemingly assassinated, but it is hinted that this was merely a ruse to make everyone leave him alone. The plot of *Heavenly Mission* is at times so unbelievable that it seems a comedy, which might have inspired Sylvia Chang to direct *Run Papa Run* (2008) and Felix Chong to make *Once a Gangster* (2010).

*Run Papa Run* tells, with a good dose of humor, the life story of Lee Tin-yun (Louis Koo), a typical 1970s triad gangster whose life totally changes when he becomes a father. In an attempt to hide his gangster identity from his daughter, he begins to wear business suits when going to “work”, converts to Christianity, and eventually even starts to run a tutoring school while scaling down his criminal activities to a minimum. Of course, as his daughter grows up this cover is harder to maintain and Lee tries to go straight completely, which is however impossible as he is deep in debt with his triad bosses. Instead he is made the figurehead of the gang: the first one to be arrested when the police decide to crack down on the triad society. Lee nevertheless escapes from his predicament by pretending to have been killed, and he is last shown praying in a church for the eventual reunion with his family. Going even more for parody (and satire) is *Once a Gangster*, starring Ekin Cheng along with his *Young and Dangerous* co-star Jordan Chan. Poking fun at many of the classics in the Hong Kong crime genre, it focuses on Brisket (Chan), once a gangster but now a successful cook, who is being pushed by his gang boss to become the new leader of the gang – something he wants to avoid, as the gang is in serious financial problems due to the global recession and the bad management of the current boss. Also pushed to compete for the seat (by his own drug-addicted mother no less) is Sparrow (Cheng), just out of jail, but more interested in getting a degree from Hong Kong University than in resuming his gang activities. Both ex-gangsters succeed in getting out of their responsibilities to the gang without losing their lives in what is the most upbeat conclusion to this “reformed triad” subgenre so far.

All of these films seem to implicitly signal the end of the triad genre that has been so important to Hong Kong cinema in the past, and in this way reflect to some extent the diminished visibility and apparent decline of real-life triad societies as well. They also indirectly reflect the changed class status/aspirations and average age of the Hong Kong population (and its favorite actors): most of these reformed

gangsters are middle-aged members of the (upper) middle-class, craving respectability and just wanting to lead a stable, comfortable life. They live in nice apartments, are stylishly dressed, drive expensive cars and are maybe somewhat too delicate for brutal street fights.<sup>238</sup> Still, before concluding that the end is near for triad films, it is useful to look at a second development of the genre. The new decade simultaneously saw the appearance of glossy, big-budget but otherwise fairly traditional gangster stories, paralleling a similar development in the police film. Indeed, one of these films, Wong Jing and Billy Chung's *Colour of the Loyalty* (2005) is apparently meant as a companion piece to 2003's *Colour of the Truth*, the *Infernal Affairs*-inspired police thriller. Less ambitious than its predecessor, *Colour of the Loyalty* focuses on a gang boss (Eric Tsang) who learns someone wants him killed and calls into action a group of bodyguards who have been training in secret for a situation just like this. The plot's many twists and turns tell yet another pessimistic tale subverting the conventions of the hero film, showing the high personal cost strict adherence to the rules of the *jianghu* can demand.

Also in the wake of *Infernal Affairs* came *Jiang Hu* (2004), by young director Wong Ching-po, which with a high degree of artistic self-importance tried to get to the heart of the triad film's perennial themes, and through a surprising plot twist at the very end effectively manages to depict the ever-continuing cycle of violence at the heart of life in *jianghu*: young rascals will always believe they can be the boss by murdering their way to the top, only to one day be killed by a new up and coming gangster – something no amount of cunning or values like brotherhood and loyalty are able to prevent. *Jiang Hu* indulged in stylistic excess, a tendency that became even stronger in Wong's next work, *Ah Sou* (2005), where his attempt to bring new relevance to the genre fell flat, possibly because its story was severely compromised to gain access to the Mainland market. In *Ah Sou* (literally, "elder brother's wife"), 18-year old Phoebe (Annie Liu) comes back from a long stay in the United States. The adopted daughter of triad boss Gent (Eric Tsang), she does not know that he many years ago saved her from Nova (Karena Lam), who wanted to kill Phoebe along with her entire family to avenge her husband, murdered by Phoebe's father. At the time Gent was only able to stop Nova by claiming Phoebe is the future Mrs.

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<sup>238</sup> The theme of class will briefly be returned to in the Conclusion.

Gent, but now Phoebe is eighteen and Gent has no intention to marry his adopted daughter. In the conflict that follows, an unseen assassin kills Gent, and his gang falls apart as his three closest friends start to argue about who will be the new leader. Although Phoebe is pushed forward as Gent's replacement, it is quickly clear that the kind-hearted girl is not made for triad leadership, and soon the friends start fighting each other. The climax of the movie has Phoebe running towards her two remaining "uncles" and Nova to try and stop their fight to the death, and with her ending up killed instead. However, her death (which is implicitly paralleled to the death of Christ) makes the gangsters realize the error of their ways, and while one becomes a Buddhist monk, the other gang leaders disband their gangs and give up their life of crime.

*Ah Sou*, with its original but rather silly ending, is one of several recent big Hong Kong-Mainland co-productions that illustrate how Hong Kong filmmakers are struggling to gain access to the Mainland market. *Jiang Hu* was banned outright in 2004 since it allegedly deviated from the approved script, even though the filmmakers, according to Davis and Yeh, did everything right in pre-production and qualified for Mainland distribution (*Screen Industries* 105). Taking no chances with *Ah Sou*, the producers communicated closely with the censors and were allowed to shoot the film after only one script revision. However, just before its announced release in Mainland theatres, *Ah Sou* was held back for a "final inspection" (Martinsen). After the filmmakers added a scene at the beginning and the end to frame the film as a dream, censorship authorities finally allowed it to be shown (W. Zhang). In spite of the media attention it attracted because of its problems with censorship, the film did not do well at the Mainland box-office (Ma). Neither did *Ah Sou* do well in Hong Kong, especially in light of the large number of stars appearing in it. It is clear then that the changing market environment is one of the biggest challenges for the triad genre, though it certainly should not be written off yet.<sup>239</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum was the fairly low-budget, locally-oriented *Men Suddenly in Black* (2003) by director Pang Ho-cheung. As in his debut *You Shoot, I Shoot* (2001), a satirical comedy about assassins, Pang in this film plays around with

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<sup>239</sup> In this regard, Johnnie To's acclaimed *Election* diptych (2005-6), discussed in the next chapter, shows that there is still potential in the genre.

genre (now the cops-and-robbers film) to create a darkly satirical comedy. Based on *The Diary of a Husband*, a 1964 comedy by Chor Yuen, Pang structures his story of four men trying to cheat on their wives/girlfriends as a crime film, with the cheating men taking the role of triad gangsters, and the women as the cops on their trail. When the men get together at the beginning, for instance, they all kiss the hand of their “godfather”, Kwok Tin-yau (Eric Tsang), while there is also a scene involving their old leader, Uncle Ninth (Tony Leung Ka-fai), who, as shown in an exaggeratedly melodramatic flashback scene, took the fall for his “brothers” during a “raid” by the wives on the brothel where they were partying – Uncle Ninth’s wife now keeps him imprisoned in his house, where he repeatedly refuses to sell out his friends even when she promises him a lighter punishment. Later, there are clever parodies of *Infernal Affairs* and the slow-motion shoot-outs of John Woo (in which the guns are replaced by water hoses and cameras).

Like with several Hong Kong directors, Pang’s films generally fall between conventional notions of “genre” and “art” film, as he infuses his innovative genre reworkings with social commentary. His films are also strongly local in flavor, rooted in Hong Kong and full of references to its popular culture and idiom. Additionally, they are also clearly in touch with a younger audience, making Pang one of the foremost directors who can ensure the continued existence of a (small) local Hong Kong cinema.

#### 4.4.2.3. *The Assassin Film*

Though a criminal is the central character in the assassin film, the distinctive conventions of this (sub)genre merit a separate discussion. As described in the previous chapter, the ancestry of John Woo’s influential *The Killer* (1989) can be traced back to “the noir subset of hitman and lone gunman films” from Hollywood, such as *This Gun for Hire* (1942), *Born to Kill* (1947), *Dillinger* (1945) and *Underworld USA* (1961) (Hall 2-3). Another precedent is French director Jean-Pierre Melville’s *Le Samourai* (1967). In Hong Kong itself, there was also the reference of *Coolie Killer* (1982), although Woo’s film proved more influential in the 1990s, with the genre offering an acceptable format to choreograph very stylized violence at a time when the trend was towards greater realism. This is because the

generic (and thus anticipated) assassin is skillful to an almost inhuman degree, and an audience can accept his/her impossible feats more easily as, after all, (s)he is a professional.<sup>240</sup>

What is interesting in the 1990s genre is that there is no significant difference between male and female assassins: the structure and themes of these films usually remain the same. Stephen Teo points at John Huston's *Prizzi's Honor* (1985) as a possible influence on the "post-feminist" female assassin figure in 1990s cinema, but overlooks earlier precedents in Hong Kong cinema discussed in previous chapters, such as *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan* (1972). Before returning to the topic of the female killer, a short summary of the assassin film's recurring themes might be useful. Central to many assassin films, at least initially, is the killer as an automaton: perfectly rational, extremely fast and efficient, and without regrets. Often, the killer is reminded by his/her mentor that emotions are not allowed and will only lead to a decrease in efficiency and certain death. Almost without exception, the killer will break this rule in the course of the film, and develop a bond with a member of the opposite sex. This will then lead to a violent and bloody conclusion, often ending with the tragic death of the killer and/or the love interest. On a deeper level, the figure of the killer frequently symbolizes the modern-day conflicts between professional and personal life, the rapaciousness of capitalist society where only the fittest survive, and frequently, urban alienation (almost invariably the killer's home is the noirish urban jungle).

A 1991 Hong Kong film, *Black Cat*, points at another landmark in the (female) assassin genre: it is a faithful remake of Luc Besson's *La Femme Nikita* (1990), and serves as a good example of the "typical" assassin film. As in the French original, a young, violent woman (Jade Leung) who has killed a police officer ends up undergoing training with a secret (here American) government agency to turn her into an elegant professional killer. After she has learnt to kill efficiently and without hesitation, the agency sends her to Hong Kong to work as a sleeper agent. There she

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<sup>240</sup> There are certain limits to what an audience can accept, however. Based on this author's experiences in classrooms, the climactic action scenes in Woo's *The Killer* regularly provoke laughter. Donnie Yen's *Ballistic Kiss* (1998) is a more recent example of how stylistic excess can estrange an audience – using almost every cinematography and editing trick in the book, the makers of this film apparently did not realize that two professional killers escaping unharmed after shooting multiple rounds at each other while just a few meters apart is more frustrating than exciting.

falls in love with a gentle nature conservationist, for whom she tries to keep her profession a secret. When he eventually sees her at work and the agency wants him dead, she shoots him in the chest knowing that this won't kill him as his heart is on the right-hand side of his body. He survives while the agency moves her to another location.

More obviously rooted in local traditions is Clarence Fok's Category III erotic action thriller *Naked Killer* (1992), which references films ranging from *Vertigo* (1958) to *Basic Instinct* (1992), but is closest to Chor Yuen's *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan* to which it can be considered an homage.<sup>241</sup> Fok's film makes the original's film noir elements more explicit, as he pays more attention to the detective figure, cop Tinam (Simon Yam), a typical anti-hero who accidentally killed his own brother and since then can not use his gun without throwing up. Tinam gets to know femme fatale Kitty (Chingmy Yau) as she stabs a man in the crotch for getting pregnant and then dumping a friend of hers. They have only just started dating (on Kitty's initiative) when her stepmother's lover kills her father, whereupon she goes on a killing rampage in the lover's company where she is eventually caught by his goons. A mysterious female assassin, Cindy (Yiu Wai), saves Kitty from being raped and killed, and adopts her as her pupil, giving her a new identity. In her training, she insists that there is no difference between a prostitute and an assassin – love and seduction are the most powerful weapons for female killers (it is here that the influence of *Intimate Confessions* becomes most obvious). Tinam has not forgotten about Kitty, however, and when an investigation into a series of mysterious killings apparently committed by women leads him to Kitty, he is unwilling to let her go even when she insists she is not the woman he knew, because, he says, she is the only woman capable of curing his impotence. Eventually, Kitty gives in to her emotions and sleeps with Tinam, which disappoints Cindy (who had earlier urged her to kill Tinam), because, “a killer in love does not have the required ruthlessness to be successful.” Her timing to fall in love is also not opportune, as a wayward lesbian ex-pupil, Princess (Carrie Ng), has been hired to kill Cindy. She quickly succeeds at this with the help of a poisoned kiss (a device taken directly from *Intimate Confessions*), so Kitty now has to avenge her mentor,

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<sup>241</sup> As mentioned in Chapter Three, Fok entered the film industry in the early 1970s as Chor Yuen's assistant.

which she does through another poisonous kiss (Princess had fallen for her). Tinam, who has regained his capacity to use his gun and assists her in her revenge, refuses to leave the wounded Kitty as the police arrive outside, and they commit suicide together.

Although *Naked Killer* is visually very stylish and has beautifully choreographed action sequences, its extreme violence, outlandish plot and explicit sexuality make it undeniably a form of high camp, or maybe pulp noir.<sup>242</sup> This brings it in alignment with a very different noir-like film about an assassin, Wong Kar-wai's *Fallen Angels* (1995). As has been shown above, both police films and triad pictures entered a phase of experimentation in the second half of the 1990s, and many of the new things that were being introduced at the time can be traced back to Wong Kar-wai, Hong Kong's best-known "auteur". Wong worked within genres, especially in his first few films, and played around with them to create more personal works. In this way, he was what one could call a Hong Kong-type auteur, and other directors (consciously or not) followed his forays into the murky territory between "art" and "entertainment", including Fruit Chan, Johnnie To, Pang Ho-cheung, and Wilson Yip (in his earlier period), while several others tried and failed.<sup>243</sup> The reason for this development was quite obviously the commercial nature of filmmaking in the territory. As Wong says in an interview about the appearance of gangsters, cops and killers in some of his films:

*It's a strategy to get the film seen. Normally the distributors here in South East Asia will ask, 'Do you have action in your film?' And I can say, 'Yes.' 'Do you have cops?' Of course I have a cop, but my cop is quite different. 'Do you have gangsters and gunfights?' Yes I do, but it's done differently (Ashbrook 64).*

Hence, *Chungking Express* (1994) tells two tangentially related stories of cops in love (one of them with a female, femme fatale-like gangster), and its companion

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<sup>242</sup> A modest success at the Hong Kong box-office, the film has over the years found status as a cult classic among overseas fans of Hong Kong cinema.

<sup>243</sup> Of these directors, only Fruit Chan can be said to have achieved similar respectability, though To's and Pang's works are now regularly shown on the film festival circuit as well. Wong Kar-wai is not the first Hong Kong director to gain recognition as an auteur through his work in genres, many of the New Wave filmmakers discussed in previous chapters preceded him. In the 1990s, he is undoubtedly the most influential one however.

piece *Fallen Angels* – originally meant as the third segment in *Chungking Express* – tells the story of an assassin and his female manager who is in love with him even though they have never met. Loosely structured, the film also depicts the brief relationship between a young man (who breaks into people’s stores at night and forces passers-by to accept his services), and a girl who uses him as a shoulder to cry on and then forgets about him. Both *Chungking Express* and *Fallen Angels* are stories about loneliness and romantic longing, with the crime elements merely serving as a background, or as metaphors for relationship problems. Wong’s subversion of genre conventions is recognized by the audience – in the interview mentioned above he notes how viewers are usually laughing when in *Fallen Angels* the killer gets on the bus after a violent shoot-out and meets an old school friend who asks him about his job and family (Ashbrook 64).<sup>244</sup> The look of both films (especially *Fallen Angels*) is nevertheless decidedly (and rather idiosyncratically) noir, with nearly all of the action taking place at night: colorful, oversaturated neon reflects on wet streets, cameras are placed in almost impossible angles, wide angle lenses are used (expressing the characters’ alienation), as is of course Wong’s trademark smudge-motion. Voice-over monologues and editing that confuses time and space further strengthen the references to film noir. Juxtaposed with the themes of youthful alienation and romantic longing, Wong manages a fascinating deconstruction of the noir look and its usual connotations.

Wong’s experimentation of course did not mean that more straightforward genre pieces stopped appearing. *Beyond Hypothermia* (1996), directed by John Woo protégé Patrick Leung and often referred to as a female version of Woo’s *The Killer*, is an excellent example, even though it also provided some variation to keep the genre interesting. The first film that came out under the Milkyway Image brand, it was actually shot before the company was set up (Teo, *Director in Action* 227).<sup>245</sup> The female assassin of *Beyond Hypothermia*, played by Wu Qianlian, brings the professionalism her job requires to a new height, symbolized in the film by the fact

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<sup>244</sup> Interestingly, a similar scene occurs in Johnnie To and Wai Ka-fai’s *Fulltime Killer* (2001), but here it ends more in line with expectations – the old schoolmate is eliminated as a dangerous witness.

<sup>245</sup> Teo treats the film as bearing To’s stamp since he acted as the producer. To himself claims to have had a considerable influence on the film, but while it shares the look and some of the themes of later To films and stars his on-screen alter ego, Lau Ching-wan, it is a more straightforward genre exercise than what Milkyway would become famous for. Hence it is treated separately from the Milkyway films discussed in the next chapter.

that she suffers from hypothermia – her body temperature is only 32 degrees Celsius, as the Chinese title indicates.<sup>246</sup> Her cold-blooded professionalism goes so far that she can kill a young girl after the child has witnessed her at work. Further adding to her purely mechanical, economical function in this world is that she has no identity: she is an adopted child, and her minder, Mei (Shirley Wong), has kept her real name and past a secret for her, and urges her to take no pictures and to move to another place every three months. Otherwise, Mei threatens, she won't be able to survive in this profession. Despite the repeated warnings, the assassin (whose real name is never revealed) desires to be something more than a mere killing instrument, and secretly indulges in taking pictures of herself. Her ice-cold heart also slowly “melts” for a noodle hawker (Lau Ching-wan), whose simple kindness breaks down her defenses. Mei, who like the female killers in *Naked Killer* desires her protégé physically, opposes the blossoming love with the hawker, and eventually betrays her to a Korean hitman looking for revenge, by sending her on the, for the genre almost obligatory, last job before retirement. Maybe out of guilt, Mei also tells her about her identity and past, though it later turns out the information she provided was false. In a final battle where she dispatches an army of gangsters, her dying Korean nemesis fires the last bullet, and though it is never explicitly shown, we can assume that the assassin and her lover died together.

Despite its similarities to *The Killer* in plot, *Beyond Hypothermia* differs from that film in a significant way, namely the absence of melodramatic heroism and romanticism so typical of Woo's films and many other works of the late 1980s and early 1990s. While Chow Yun-fat's Jeff risks his life to save an innocent girl injured during a shoot-out, *Beyond Hypothermia*'s killer shoots a child merely to get rid of a potentially dangerous witness. The nihilistic pessimism of *Beyond Hypothermia* became more widespread in this period, at least partly due to the work of To's Milkyway Image, and its continued prevalence in the 2000s crime film genre is one of Hong Kong cinema's more striking characteristics. Aside from some of the Milkyway films (discussed in the next chapter), films centering on a professional killer have become a rarity in recent Hong Kong cinema, though two films deserve

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<sup>246</sup> Her icy coolness is further signaled in the first two jobs she carries out: she shoots her first target from an ice factory, and the second after she has bought a drink made of crushed ice.

mention for their original treatment of this familiar figure – *One Nite in Mongkok* (2004) and *Dog Bite Dog* (2006).

Derek Yee's *One Nite in Mongkok* focuses on a Mainland hitman called to Hong Kong to assassinate a triad boss involved in a gang war, and on the efforts of a police team who want to prevent more bloodshed and catch this assassin. However, the film does much more than delivering the expected exciting chase sequences and shoot-outs. It offers a broad look at the underworld in densely populated and claustrophobic Mongkok, considers the nature and role of the police in this underworld, and envisions Hong Kong as a place of death and despair. The depiction of various morally ambiguous characters is central to the film, which additionally manages to give a good sense of the realistic randomness of the events that take place. Laifu (Daniel Wu), the Mainland assassin, for instance, has never killed before and has taken this job to provide for his family, but also to find his girlfriend who had some time ago moved to Hong Kong for work. His employer, the greedy middleman Liu (Lam Suet), comes from the same village as Laifu but has no qualms about betraying him when the police put him under pressure. Laifu is as much a (potential) perpetrator as a victim, which makes him somewhat similar to Dandan (Cecilia Cheung), the Mainland prostitute he saves from a violent local gangster and who joins him on his odyssey through labyrinthine Mongkok. Dandan risks her one valuable asset – her body – to earn money for herself and her family, just like Laifu puts his body on the line for monetary compensation. The team of cops chasing Laifu also contains distinct personalities: there is the weary cop (Chin Kar-lok) who wants to avoid trouble and merely stay alive – he warns a trigger-happy rookie (Anson Leung) not to act like a hero, but this falls on deaf ears. There is also their boss, Officer Milo (Alex Fong), who is emotionally scarred after having killed a criminal in the past. At one point, their search for Laifu leads them to a hotel where the nervous rookie cop kills an innocent man – the cops manipulate the scene to make it look like the cop shot the man in self-defense. It is then discovered that the dead man was smuggling a lot of drugs, and the team is promptly lauded as heroes. Similarly, it is the randomness of Fate that eventually brings Laifu and the cops together in a deadly confrontation that is made all the more tragic because it could easily have been avoided. The noir world of *One Nite in Mongkok* shows Hong Kong as a dark and deadly place, a point driven home when Dandan asks

twice in the course of the film why the city is called “Fragrant Harbor” (the literal translation of Hong Kong’s Chinese name, *Xianggang* 香港). The second time she asks is the last line of the movie, when she is telling Immigration officers she does not plan to return to the city. No one ever answers her question, but an ironic caption follows, dryly noting that Hong Kong was named as such because it was used as a port to ship incense (in Chinese the character *xiang* 香 means both “fragrant” and “incense”) – used to pay respect to the dead.

A film quite similar to *One Nite in Mongkok* in its basic plot outline, but much more violent (and classified as Category III), is *Dog Bite Dog*, directed by Soi Cheang. Less subtly and thoughtfully than Yee’s film it tells of a Cambodian hitman who is shipped into Hong Kong and chased by the cops. One cop, Dick Wai (Sam Lee), goes rogue, using torture and other illegal means to track down the unnamed killer (Edison Chen) after the latter killed his partner. When the assassin kills a few more cops, Dick’s team follows him in his immoral ways to get a hold of the killer. Finally, all cops except Dick are dead, and the killer flees back to Cambodia, taking a mentally slow but very devoted illegal female immigrant from the Mainland with him. The killer and his newfound wife settle down to work the land, but Dick (now deranged after being shot in the head) tracks them down, leading to a finale in which all three die after a vicious fight. While the storyline is nothing too original, Soi Cheang quite effectively uses sound and imagery to drive home a nihilistic vision of life as a Darwinian hell in which “living beings can only exist at the expense of other living beings” – as stated explicitly in a caption at the end. Hong Kong takes on the look of a post-apocalyptic wasteland, and lengthy scenes are staged on a landfill, and amongst ancient ruins in Cambodia. While not completely successful as a film – *Dog Bite Dog* can easily repulse instead of involve, and is a bit too insistent on making its point – it is undoubtedly the film that best expresses the mood of nihilism and despair that has held Hong Kong crime cinema in its grip for the last decade.<sup>247</sup> This mood has been obvious in the films inspired by the *Infernal Affairs* series, as will be shown below.

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<sup>247</sup> *Dog Bite Dog* is reminiscent of the mid-1990s Category III extravaganzas, especially a film like *Run and Kill*. What sets it apart is a much higher budget and, consequently, excellent production values. Additionally, director Soi Cheang’s films before and after are more mainstream horror and crime films (elements of which he mixes to great effect in *Dog Bite Dog*).

#### 4.4.2.4. *The Undercover Cop Film*

In the introduction to her book on the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy, Gina Marchetti offers an astute definition of the issues at stake in films dealing with the undercover cop or triad mole, stating that the character “embodies the predicament of hidden and uncertain identities, concealed motives, moral ambiguity, conflicted loyalties, and the inability to take a stand or find roots in an increasingly complex world of new technologies and post-industrial, transnational economies” (1). Frequently, Hong Kong films centering on undercover cops show how the moral and personal conflicts resulting from being trapped between two worlds can only be resolved in death. The genre is one that has delivered several classics of Hong Kong cinema, such as Alex Cheung’s *Man on the Brink* (1981), Ringo Lam’s *City on Fire* (1987), John Woo’s *Hard Boiled* (1992), and Andrew Lau and Alan Mak’s *Infernal Affairs* trilogy (2002-2003).

During production Woo described *Hard Boiled* as “*Dirty Harry* meets *Die Hard*”, and he wanted to create a style similar to that found in hard-boiled detective novels – hence the title (Logan 132-3).<sup>248</sup> As the *Dirty Harry*-style cop Tequila (Chow Yun-fat) is the film’s main protagonist, the emotional and psychological problems of police mole Tony (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) take a backseat compared to the other undercover films discussed here.<sup>249</sup> In *Hard Boiled*, Tequila will stop at nothing to bring to justice the gun-trafficking criminals who have killed his partner. Tony, the cop undercover with righteous and honorable gangster Hoi (Kwan Hoi-san), is also out to bring down this gang, led by the ruthless Johnny Wong (Anthony Wong). This brings the two cops into conflict, as Tequila thinks Tony is one of the bad guys, and might end up blowing the latter’s cover. Tony gains the trust of Johnny, though this comes at the cost of Hoi’s life. After Tony and Tequila team up and discover Johnny’s arsenal in the basement of a hospital, a lengthy action set piece starts when the gangsters take many innocents hostage. At the end, Johnny has taken Tony

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<sup>248</sup> The influence of hard-boiled detective literature on Woo highlights once again the noirish characteristics of much of Hong Kong’s output in the crime genre.

<sup>249</sup> One could argue that most energy in this film went into the action scenes rather than into the characters: it is without a doubt Woo’s most action-heavy film since *Heroes Shed No Tears* (1986). It also played down his signature male bonding theme somewhat, which makes one suspect the film was really meant as his calling card to Hollywood, though the “outdated” character of the brotherhood theme by 1992 might have played a role as well.

hostage and negotiates with Tequila and the other cops. When Johnny seems about to kill Tequila, Tony grabs his gun and shoots through his own body to kill the gangster.

As in many undercover films, the mole in *Hard Boiled* dies in the end, though Woo added, at the request of his crew, a brief scene with a bandaged Tony sailing away on his boat, ambiguously suggesting that he survived. The film also includes several scenes typical for the genre: early in the film, Tony meets with his police superior, the only one who knows of his true identity, and asks when he can finally stop being an undercover. This scene takes place on a rooftop, a preferred location for many undercover films since, and one that appears several times in *Infernal Affairs*. As in that later film, *Hard Boiled* shows the strained but also precarious and intimate relationship between the undercover cop and his police boss when the latter tosses him a nice lighter as a birthday gift: the police boss is the only person who knows that day is Tony's birthday.<sup>250</sup> Like the typical movie undercover cop, Tony has been a gangster for too long and has been forced to kill too many people – Tequila and Tony himself doubt whether he is really a cop. The undercover life has clearly taken a toll on his character – he tells Tequila that he dreams of moving to Iceland, as he has heard they have sunshine twenty-four hours a day, which is a good contrast to his own life in “darkness”.

Paying more attention to the undercover cop's psychological problems is *To Live and Die in Tsimshatsui* (1994), by director Andrew Lau, who would help create the *Infernal Affairs* films eight years later.<sup>251</sup> A remake of Alex Cheung's *Man on the Brink*, the film plays as a blend between Cheung's film and *City on Fire* – but without much of the earlier works' qualities. Shot in the *Chungking Express*-influenced style that seems to prefigure Lau's cinematography in *Young and Dangerous*, *To Live and Die in Tsimshatsui*'s protagonist is Lik (Jacky Cheung), who at the beginning of the film is shown staring at himself in the mirror while he wonders in voice-over about his identity – is he a “man” (*ren* 人, here indicating a cop), or a “ghost” (*gui* 鬼, here indicating a gangster)? In the course of the film, this

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<sup>250</sup> In *Infernal Affairs*, the police boss gives his undercover (also played by Tony Leung) a watch on his birthday in a scene that is an obvious wink at *Hard Boiled*.

<sup>251</sup> Lau usually worked with/for Wong Jing at this point in his career – Wong would also be the producer of Lau's *Young and Dangerous* films.

theme expands into a broader one common to many (Hong Kong) crime films: what is the difference between the cops and the triads?<sup>252</sup> Lik's confusion is brought to an extreme height in the course of the film, as his sympathetic police supervisor is replaced by a younger officer, who has earlier shot Lik's kindly triad boss, deeply distrusts Lik and even starts dating his girlfriend when she and Lik are having problems due to his life undercover! Adding to his problems is his new gangster boss, Tai (Roy Cheung), who is extremely nice and has a sister (Wu Qianlian) Lik begins to develop feelings for – which makes betraying Tai all the more difficult. Despite this melodramatically tense (and highly derivative) set-up, the film has an implausible happy ending for Lik, Tai and his sister.<sup>253</sup>

Despite their confused loyalties and identities, most moles eventually do the “right” thing – they fulfill their duties as police officers and sometimes manage to also save the righteous gangster they have bonded with. The cop who has completely gone over to the other side is rarely the central protagonist in films, as it would understandably be hard for the audience to identify with a character like that. An interesting attempt to focus on such a character is Marco Mak's *Cop on a Mission* (2001), which in true film noir fashion starts with the protagonist, Mike (Daniel Wu) being buried alive. In one long flashback the story of how he ended up in this situation is told. Mike becomes an undercover cop after being suspended for using excessive force, and joins the gang of boss Yum (Eric Tsang). Gaining Yum's trust, he rises quickly through the triad ranks, and begins to wonder why he should go back to being a poor cop. But he is not only disloyal as a policeman: he also desires Yum's wife Pauline (Suki Kwan), and wants to take over Yum's position as the boss. Killing a fellow undercover cop to protect himself, Mike also gets rid of his police supervisor when the latter begins to have doubts about Mike's loyalties. Manipulating and cheating his way to the top, he almost succeeds but is eventually outsmarted by Yum, who has him buried alive by his men.

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<sup>252</sup> Discussing this topic, one character's comments foreshadow what would become *Infernal Affairs'* central plot: he tells Lik that it is hard to tell cops and triads apart – there are cops amongst the triads, and triads amongst the cops.

<sup>253</sup> This makes the film actually somewhat novel and unique, as earlier and later films almost without exception end in tragedy.

Although starting out promising, *Cop on a Mission* eventually falters as it settles into a fairly typical “gangster’s rise and fall” kind of plot. Another, much more influential film that put a new spin on a familiar tale is *Infernal Affairs* (2002), which pits an undercover cop in a triad gang against a triad mole in the police force. Up to the appearance of *Infernal Affairs*, very few films had utilized the idea of a mole planted in the police force by a triad boss. While both *Crime Story* and *Organized Crime and Triad Bureau* had such figures, they were given little attention and depth of character. The common crime film device of doubling characters at opposite sides of the law is used in *Infernal Affairs* to give both moles equal attention and to further blur the line between the cops and their adversaries. Yan (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) has been undercover with triad boss Sam’s gang for several years, while Sam’s own mole, Ming (Andy Lau), has risen quickly in the police force thanks to the intelligence provided by Sam. When a drug bust led by Superintendent Wong (Anthony Wong) goes wrong, the cops and gangsters realize a mole is amongst them, so Yan and Ming are ordered by their respective bosses to dig the other out. As tensions run high, Sam’s gang ends up killing Wong, which puts Yan in a tough situation as no one else knows of his identity. Via Wong’s phone, Ming gets in touch with Yan and works with him to bring down Sam’s gang. After trapping and killing Sam, Ming hopes to be free to enjoy the comfort and prestige that comes with being a high-ranking police officer. However, Yan discovers Ming’s true identity and disappears before being officially reinstated. Using tapes containing Ming’s conversations with Sam, Yan forces him to meet on a rooftop and wants to turn him over to the authorities. This fails as another of Sam’s moles comes to Ming’s help. After killing this other mole in the elevator down, Ming can step out and say he is a cop with no one left to prove him wrong. In the final scene, Ming pays homage to Yan at his funeral, where he is buried next to Superintendent Wong.

*Infernal Affairs 2* (2003) is a prequel to the first film, and is more of a traditional triad drama with allusions to Coppola’s *The Godfather* series. Yan and Ming (here played by Shawn Yue and Edison Chen respectively) play only minor roles, with most attention going to Superintendent Wong, Sam and a new character, Ngai Wing-hau (Francis Ng). *Infernal Affairs 3* (2003) recounts both the events in the months leading up to Yan’s death, and shows Ming’s demise ten months later.

Fleshing out the psychological aspect of the first film, it completes Ming's process as a double of Yan: he begins to believe he is Yan, and eventually exposes himself, having lost track of his real identity. The impact of *Infernal Affairs* can be traced in two respects: its more diffuse impact on the themes and style of subsequent films, which has already been alluded to before and will be further discussed in a separate section, and its impact as a film belonging to the undercover cop/triad genre, which will briefly be addressed now.

Based on the precedent of similarly successful films such as *A Better Tomorrow*, *To Be Number One* and *Young and Dangerous*, one would expect *Infernal Affairs* to start a wave of imitations. That this did not happen is fairly easy to explain: firstly, the Hong Kong film industry was less dynamic than even just a few years earlier – a situation made worse by the striking of SARS in the first half of 2003. Secondly, the innovative aspect of *Infernal Affairs* cannot easily be copied – films about triad boyz trying to make it have a lot of space to bring variation and keep the audience interested, but films about two moles pitted against one another are too specific to inspire meaningful adaptation. So it was only in 2006 and 2007 that four undercover cop films appeared in quick succession – *On the Edge* (2006), *Wo Hu* (2006), *Protégé* (2007) and *Undercover* (2007). Of these films, Herman Yau's *On the Edge* is the most interesting in that it focuses on the post-undercover life of a mole.<sup>254</sup> This is not entirely new – Benny Chan's *Man Wanted* (1995) dealt with a similar story – but Yau handles it with more realistic detail than the earlier film, which focused more on action.<sup>255</sup>

Based on the statistical fact (shown on a title card at the end of the film) that more than fifty percent of undercover cops don't last three years in the force after

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<sup>254</sup> Marco Mak's *Wo Hu* is one of the several Wong Jing productions of this period that aspire to *Infernal Affairs* status (such as *Colour of the Truth* and *Colour of the Loyalty*). Although its opening premise is a police operation involving the sending out of 1,000 (!) undercover cops to infiltrate the triads, the movie quickly settles into familiar triad power struggles and betrayals. Despite the standard, somewhat disjointed Wong Jing plot, the film entertains with amusing random banter between the gangsters and the cops, and the playing of typical triad issues to comic effect. In the end, one of the top bosses of the gang is revealed to be an undercover cop, but he learns he cannot return to the force: he is trapped in the *jianghu* forever to continue his mission (an obvious reference to *Infernal Affairs*' conclusion). Billy Chung's *Undercover*, on the other hand, is basically a cheaper, inferior version of Herman Yau's *On the Edge*.

<sup>255</sup> However, Yau does copy the dramatic opening scene from *Man Wanted* in which an undercover cop reveals his identity by aiming his gun at his gangster boss and forcing him to stop the car when the latter prepares to crash through a police blockade.

returning to duty, the film tells of undercover cop Harry (Nick Cheung) and his difficulties adjusting to life in the force after he turns in his boss Dark (Francis Ng). His years undercover make his new cop colleagues suspicious of him, while his former triad buddies and hostess-girlfriend treat him like a traitor and eventually frame him by sending a video of his meeting with one of them to Internal Affairs. Harry is promptly put under arrest, but manages to break free and goes to look up the friend who betrayed him. After a tense standoff with the cops, Harry finally turns himself in, but is shortly after shot by another member of Dark's old gang. Clearly, even after one's undercover assignment, one remains trapped between the two worlds.<sup>256</sup>

*On the Edge* is a type of crime film that is relatively rare in recent Hong Kong cinema, in that it is made on a limited budget and focuses rather straightforwardly on serious human drama and emotion. Derek Yee's big-budget *Protégé* gives its tale of an undercover cop a different twist by turning it into a vehicle for a documentary-like exposé on the drug trade, while espousing a straightforward anti-drug message. Police mole Nick (Daniel Wu) has been working several years for drug lord Kwan (Andy Lau), and has become Kwan's most trusted helper. Kwan decides to make Nick his successor, which is basically an excuse for director Yee to show us the ins and outs of the heroin business. Around the same time, Nick gets to know a heroin-addicted woman, Fan (Zhang Jingchu), whose pitiful situation offers him (and the viewer) a different angle on the drug problem. A twist on the hackneyed undercover tale is not Yee's goal here, although Nick is remarkably emotionally composed for a long-time undercover cop. Still, after the death of Fan and his betrayal of Kwan, Nick struggles with a feeling of "emptiness", and is eventually about to shoot drugs when Fan's young daughter (now adopted by Nick) walks in – reminding him someone does need him. Both *On the Edge* and *Protégé* are serious dramas, which makes them quite different from *Infernal Affairs* and the type of tightly scripted thrillers that followed in its wake, as will be shown below.

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<sup>256</sup> In 2009, Herman Yau delivered another entry in the undercover cop/triad genre. A prequel to a popular TVB series, *Turning Point*'s main character is Laughing Gor (Michael Tse), a triad mole in the police force who is sent undercover to spy on his own triad boss! Despite this rather incredible premise, the film became one of the highest grossing crime films of the year. It is also remarkable in that it goes for a grittier, more violent style, which has become quite rare in the post-*Infernal Affairs* era.

#### 4.4.2.5. Hong Kong Benchmarks: "International action" and the *Infernal Affairs*-inspired thriller

At this point it is useful to return to Davis and Yeh's use of the term "benchmark", which, they argue, is "not identical to blockbusters, or even a successful series. The term describes a milestone or interchange at which film industries alter course. A benchmark is a film, company policy or state strategy that not only pays off but is a standard by which to gauge subsequent efforts" (*Screen Industries* 36). In their discussion of a Hong Kong benchmark, they focus on the *Infernal Affairs* films, but here an earlier benchmark will be discussed first. This benchmark, *Gen-X Cops* (1999), preceded and was part of a trend that clearly led up to the appearance of *Infernal Affairs*.

It should immediately be pointed out that *Gen-X Cops* (1999), even though it was the highest grossing local crime film of its year of release, cannot compare to the box-office success that the *Infernal Affairs* films enjoyed. Nor is it the film that launched the trend it was part of, but then, as will be shown later, *Infernal Affairs* was not the first of its type of thriller either. The reason to call it a benchmark is that *Gen-X Cops* is today seemingly the best-remembered of the Hollywood-inspired action films that began to appear around 1997, which will here be referred to as "international action".

Unlike most earlier Hong Kong films, the heroes of international action deal with issues that exceed the scale of Hong Kong itself, usually a terrorist plot to destroy or keep hostage the world or region. For example, in *Hot War* (1998), terrorists are plotting to use subliminal messages in television broadcasting to cause region-wide riots in Southeast Asia, and the heroes, who work for the American FBI, travel to their home in Hong Kong, and later to Kuala Lumpur, to put a stop to this plan and rescue their friend. Further strengthening the similarities to Hollywood blockbusters is the interest of these films in showcasing sophisticated, futuristic technology: in *Hot War* there is not only the subliminal technology used by the villains, the scientist heroes themselves use an experimental Virtual Reality training program of the FBI to become expert fighters in just two days time, while in *Purple Storm* (1999), former Khmer Rouge soldiers plan to release a chemical weapon in the air

so that the whole of Southeast Asia will be killed. Further illustrating this interest in hi-tech gadgetry and global mobility is the frequent use of the futuristic cityscapes of the world's most modern metropolises (including of course Hong Kong itself).

As these films aimed to lure a younger audience away from Hollywood blockbusters, they usually starred pretty pop idols, many of them born and/or raised in North America and, unlike many of their Hong Kong action film predecessors, not proficient in martial arts. As a result, the action scenes themselves also look more like those in Hollywood cinema, with a stress on chases, explosions, and fights shot in such a way that the lack of actual fighting and acrobatic skills of the performer is disguised. In international action, we rarely see the bloody and punishing fights in the dark back-alleys of Kowloon: the sophisticated, young, upper middle-class heroes fight it out with the villains on top of skyscrapers, or in famous landmarks such as the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre. The different class identity of the characters is important, as it marks the changing tastes and dreams of a significant part of the Hong Kong population, which now aspires or is used to upper middle-class comfort and mobility. The shift away from the working class sensibility so typical for earlier triad and police films would be consolidated with the *Infernal Affairs* films.

The plot outlines above already indicate that these films copied many of the worst aspects of Hollywood blockbusters, and, aside from the often ridiculous plots and poorly executed action scenes (at least compared to Hong Kong's previous excellence in this aspect), it is the second-rate special effects that most obviously mark their Hollywood aspirations and, in hindsight, their ultimate weakness: this type of film necessitates enormous investments which the Hong Kong film industry was and still is incapable of mustering, and, despite the box-office success several of them achieved, the films end up looking like what they are – poor imitations of the Hollywood product. Hence, only Benny Chan's *Gen-X Cops* will be discussed as their representative to give a general idea of what these films aimed for.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Benny Chan's *Big Bullet* (1996) can be considered a work that exemplifies the transformation of the Hong Kong action film in this period. The first hour of this film is an exciting urban cops-and-robbers action film with elements of the cop soap opera (such as its focus on a team of cops), and calls to mind later Milkyway films such as *Expect the Unexpected* (1998) and *Breaking News* (2004), especially during the film's superbly executed action set piece that simultaneously plays out in a

In *Gen-X Cops*, three unruly Generation X police cadets – Jack (Nicholas Tse), Match (Stephen Fung) and Alien (Sam Lee) – are expelled from the police training school for their bad attitude and rebelliousness, which brings them to the attention of slightly wacky Inspector Chang (Eric Tsang), who thinks they are the ideal candidates to infiltrate a criminal organization run by the young Daniel (Daniel Wu), who is involved in a high-profile theft of rocket fuel together with a Japanese yakuza boss Akatora (Toru Nakamura). More by impulsiveness, luck and survival skills than any real crime fighting abilities do the young cops enter Daniel's organization and get into contact with Akatora. This gangster has his own designs for the rocket fuel, however, as he is out to avenge his father, killed years ago by another yakuza who has since left the underworld and is now in Hong Kong to give a speech in the Convention and Exhibition Centre. The Gen-X cops discover his plot to blow up the Centre with the rocket fuel and try to stop him. Although they can evacuate the building in time, they fail to stop Akatora and only just in time get out as the huge building explodes behind them (using special effects, of course).

*Gen-X Cops* is actually one of the more Hong Kong-centered international action films, though it does involve a Japanese crime syndicate and the one-dimensional (super-) villain Akatora.<sup>258</sup> Co-produced by Jackie Chan (who appears in a cameo), the film is obviously meant as heralding a new era in the Hong Kong action film with the introduction of hip, mildly rebellious young stars supported by more established veterans (Eric Tsang and also Francis Ng).<sup>259</sup> Often including foreign actors in their casts (in the case of *Gen-X Cops*, Toru Nakamura is the most prominent) along with English-speaking Chinese, Hong Kong's international action

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restaurant and on the street. By the end, however, the film goes into Hollywood-mode, with the team of cops breaking into a military base and driving their car into the gangsters' departing plane for the final battle.

<sup>258</sup> Unlike most other international action films, the film has a more "traditional" Hong Kong-look, at times reminiscent of Benny Chan's *A Moment of Romance* (1990), with many scenes shot at night and enlivened with bright colors from neon lamps. The action and (updated) triad background also make it more rooted than *Hot War* or *Downtown Torpedoes* (1997). The action scenes themselves often retain a sense of the more hard-hitting style Hong Kong is famous for, though the special effects-heavy climax is a good example of the new trend.

<sup>259</sup> Jackie Chan's involvement is significant here, as his career offers a good point of comparison with the international action films. For decades, Hong Kong directors have incorporated overseas settings in their films, and in the 1980s and 1990s Chan was one of the most prominent examples. The difference with the more recent films is that Chan's plots are usually more modest in scale, that his action style makes him recognizable as a Hong Kong star, that he tended to present a more working class persona, and that he did not rely on special effects. Since the late 1990s, Chan's own movies have sometimes assumed more characteristics of "international action".

aimed for a pan-Asian audience (Davis and Yeh, *Screen Industries* 29). With the first one (*Downtown Torpedoes – a Mission: Impossible* (1996) clone) appearing in 1997, these “international action” films were an important box-office presence until 2002, when, at least in the crime film genre, they were mostly superseded by the *Infernal Affairs*-model.<sup>260</sup>

The impact of *Infernal Affairs* on the crime films of the last decade is most obvious in three aspects: the tightly scripted plot and sophisticated editing and cinematography; the interest in psychology and mentally troubled protagonists; and the attempt to give films a deeper significance by using religious, mostly Buddhist, imagery and concepts. Many of these elements had precedents, especially in the Milkyway works (as should become more obvious in the next chapter), and Stephen Teo has quite aptly called *Infernal Affairs* “the best Johnnie To action film that Johnnie To did not make” (*Direction in Action* 211).<sup>261</sup> It most directly recalls To’s *Running Out of Time* (1999), which is also a tightly scripted thriller with doubled protagonists pitted against one another.<sup>262</sup>

As Tony Rayns has noted, *Infernal Affairs* is “plotted and edited so densely that it can do without the usual vacuous action set-pieces” (28).<sup>263</sup> Davis and Yeh write: “Its cool minimalism in performance, production design and cinematography signals a different thriller than most happy holiday movies or swaggering gangster melodramas” (*Screen Industries* 30). They go on to analyze what made it different from previous crime films, and note how it updated “tried-and-true formulae” by changing into “a wardrobe already comfortable to the majority of Hong Kong viewers: the structural reliability, and control, of Hollywood” (Ibid.). It is in their reliance on local genre conventions that *Infernal Affairs* and the crime films in its wake differ from the international action described above, which attempted to adopt Hollywood wholesale. In this new development, only Hollywood’s production

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<sup>260</sup> The films aiming at a pan-Chinese, pan-Asian and, if possible, global audience have since Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (2000) been predominantly in the period martial arts genre.

<sup>261</sup> Teo’s characterization of *Infernal Affairs* as an action film is somewhat misleading. His description of To’s work as “action cinema” is something that will be discussed in the next chapter.

<sup>262</sup> Other similarities are the casting of Andy Lau, sophisticated cinematography, and even some striking scenes with Lau standing on a rooftop.

<sup>263</sup> The dense plotting of the series actually confuses some viewers, as online commentaries indicate. Especially *Infernal Affairs 3* cuts frequently to different points in time, and one has to follow carefully (and know the preceding films well) to understand what exactly is happening.

values and careful scriptwriting are aspired to, and the events in the films take mostly place in Hong Kong itself.<sup>264</sup> The moving away from action in favor of intricate plots and better production values is a characteristic of several of the crime thrillers that followed *Infernal Affairs* – some of which have already been discussed (like Wong Jing’s *Colour of the Truth* and *Colour of the Loyalty*) – and is really the continuation of a trend that was already taking shape in the 1990s.

Films that followed the trend in this respect include some of the later works by the people involved in *Infernal Affairs*, such as *Confession of Pain* (2006, by Andrew Lau and Alan Mak) and *Overheard* (2009, by Alan Mak and *Infernal Affairs* co-scriptwriter Felix Chong). Although less successfully, *Confession of Pain* continued the trend set by the filmmakers a few years earlier by offering a complex investigative thriller less interested in the “who” (the murderer is revealed early on in the film) than in the “why” and “how”. As the film’s title already indicates, it is another tale of mental anguish, with one of the characters (played by Takeshi Kaneshiro) an alcoholic private investigator whose girlfriend committed suicide and who in the course of the film uncovers how his best friend (played by Tony Leung Chiu-wai) has murdered his future father-in-law to avenge a terrible crime committed decades ago. The same noir-like quality can be found in *Overheard*, arguably the better film, about three cops working for the Commercial Crime Bureau, who, while spying on a suspicious business firm, learn of a plan involving illegal stock fixing. The two cops who hear the information first decide to keep it to themselves and make a fortune. Things spiral out of control, however, and they must decide how far they exactly want to go to save their own skins. Notable examples of other big-budget filmmakers choosing plot over action are Gordon Chan, who made *A-1 Headline* (2004), a thriller that considers the responsibilities of the media and tries to create tension without resorting to much action, and even action director Benny Chan, who directed *Divergence* in 2005, focusing more on the characters’ mental burdens and a mystery plot full of twists than on action.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> One could also describe the change as the choice of a different source of inspiration: instead of taking *Mission: Impossible* (1996) or *The Matrix* (1999) as their goal, Hong Kong filmmakers started to take inspiration from Michael Mann’s *Heat* (1995), a film much closer to Hong Kong’s own traditions.

<sup>265</sup> Benny Chan has since returned to more action-oriented films, such as *Invisible Target* (2007), *Connected* (2008, a successful remake of the 2004 Hollywood film *Cellular*) and most recently the superhero film, *City Under Siege* (2010).

This interest in mentally scarred, sometimes almost mad, protagonists can be considered something popularized by the *Infernal Affairs* series as well: in the first film, the police mole has to visit a female psychiatrist to deal with his aggressive behavior, and a relationship between the two is hinted at. In the third film of the series, this psychological aspect is elaborated on by flashbacks recounting the development of this relationship, and by the split personality of the triad mole in the present, who spends, in a pivotal scene, some time on the psychiatrist's bench. As Gina Marchetti has argued, the two moles suffer from different psychological ailments: while the triad mole is schizophrenic, the undercover cop is neurotic (*Infernal Affairs* 132). The fascination with psychiatry and mental illness is not exactly new, but seems to have become more prominent and more realistically depicted since the late 1990s. In now more obscure, low-budget works like *Dream Killer* (1995) and *9413* (1998), female psychiatrists try to help the mentally disturbed cop protagonists to return to normalcy. In the international action film *Purple Storm* (1999), the terrorist protagonist loses his memory and is given a new identity by a female psychiatrist to make him an undercover agent for the cops; she helps him solve his mental problems which are shown as caused by a traumatic youth. In more action-oriented films of the 2000s such as *Double Tap* (2000) and its sequel *Triple Tap* (2010), the psychology of the mad killer and his cop double, as well as the mental games between them, are as important as the gun battles.<sup>266</sup>

*Divergence* merits some more attention, as it is one of the films most obviously influenced by *Infernal Affairs*. A dark, noir-like crime thriller it focuses on three characters, all with their own issues, and all in some way connected to the murder of a key witness who was to testify against Yiu (Gallen Lo), in charge of a money laundering operation. Suen (Aaron Kwok), the cop who was escorting the murdered witness, is consumed by a past relationship with a woman who went missing ten years ago, which leads him to stalking a woman who looks just like her. This woman is the wife of To (Ekin Cheng), the lawyer defending Yiu. To is seriously troubled by his job, having to defend obviously guilty men to make a living. Finally, there is also Coke (Daniel Wu), the assassin who killed the witness. More in tune with his issues, he nevertheless tends to take unnecessary risks, and muses he could

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<sup>266</sup> The first film, produced by Derek Yee, was directed by his protégé Law Chi-leung. For the sequel Yee took care of the directorial duties himself.

have been a great cop too. Further complicating the plot are a series of murders and the kidnapping of Yiu's son. In a surprising twist at the end, To is revealed to be a mad vigilante killer, trying to rid the world of at least some of the bad guys.<sup>267</sup> The film collapses somewhat under its overly complex and at times implausible plot, but it does reflect very well the benchmark status of *Infernal Affairs*, as the film visibly altered the course of the film industry and the crime genre's development.<sup>268</sup>

A final aspect in which Andrew Lau and Alan Mak's trilogy has been influential is in its Buddhist theme. The Chinese title *wujiandao* (literally "non-stop way" or "no-space way") refers to Avici (Continuous Hell), the lowest level of the Buddhist Hell into which the worst sinners are reborn. The films begin and/or end with a quote from a sutra, explaining the meaning of the term and the characteristics of Avici: it is a limitless space of continuous, eternal suffering. In the course of the trilogy, it becomes clear that the life of the mole is similar to Avici, and when one of them dies in the first film, a shadow is thrown on the other mole's survival through a quote from another sutra: "longevity is a big hardship in Continuous Hell." When at the end of the third film the triad mole has ended up crippled and catatonic, the last shot of him shows his fingers tapping in Morse Code "H-E-L-..." and the start of another "L" as the picture dims. The theme is also visually integrated, with the first film opening in Shatin's 10,000 Buddhas Temple and the third film containing a scene at Lantau Island's Big Buddha. In conversations, characters often refer to concepts associated with Buddhism, such as retribution, karma and Fate.

Again, *Infernal Affairs* is not the first film to do this: throughout *Director in Action*, Teo describes "Fate" and the "destiny machine" as central to Johnnie To's films, and nine months after Lau and Mak's first part of the trilogy appeared, Milkyway's religiously-themed *Running on Karma* (2003) came out in theatres, becoming one of the year's biggest box-office successes. It is arguably due to these two films that

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<sup>267</sup> This recalls *Righting Wrongs* (1986) and its lawyer protagonist who takes justice in his own hands when the law fails to deliver. The depiction of the vigilante in the two films differs in interesting ways: *Righting Wrongs* shows the lawyer as a fairly straightforward hero, while *Divergence* makes the character look like a psycho -- he even tries to kill the cop, who, in his own mental turmoil, almost strangles him to death during a fight in the pouring rain.

<sup>268</sup> Other Benny Chan films such as *Heroic Duo* (2003) and *New Police Story* (2005), here not discussed at length, also exemplify the impact of *Infernal Affairs* with their bleak endings, mentally troubled protagonists, and, in the case of *Heroic Duo*, the doubled characters.

Buddhist concepts and imagery begin to pop up more regularly in subsequent works. Examples of such films include *Ah Sou* (2005), *Heavenly Mission* (2006), and Lau and Mak's own *Confession of Pain* (2006).<sup>269</sup> Other filmmakers took over the idea of using short written phrases to give their work an added layer of significance: this happens in Soi Cheang's *Love Battlefield* (2004) and *Dog Bite Dog* (2006), Derek Yee's *One Nite in Mongkok* (2004), and many other films. These last two developments most obviously demonstrate the benchmark value of *Infernal Affairs*: filmmakers try to make more sophisticated commercial films while retaining a distinct local flavor.

#### 4.5. Conclusion

As throughout much of its history, Hong Kong cinema went through some dramatic changes over the past two decades. This chapter has shown how the crime film was frequently used as a site of experimentation, and that especially the period of the late 1990s saw an explosion of creative energy in the genre. This did not stem the further decline of the film industry, however, and especially since the mid-2000s it looks as if the end of Hong Kong as a major center of film production is becoming inevitable. Many of its talents are now crossing the border into the Mainland, and Hong Kong is in a sense assuming the role Shanghai played in the flourishing of Hong Kong's film industry more than half a century ago.

From the great self-assuredness evident in the epic Big Timer films with titles as *To Be Number One*, the crime genre has since moved to an existential hell evident in titles like *Infernal Affairs* and *Confession of Pain*. The utilization of dark and fatalistic subject matter in the crime films of the 2000s was popularized by Johnnie To's and Wai Ka-fai's Milkyway Image in the late 1990s. How the films of this company relate to earlier forms of Hong Kong noir will be the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>269</sup> Additionally, both *Ah Sou* and *Run Papa Run* (2008) use Christian imagery and themes.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# Genre Filmmaking at Its Best: Milkyway Image, Johnnie To and the Hong Kong Film Noir

### 5.1. Introduction

It might seem slightly odd to devote the final chapter of this historical analysis of the crime genre in Hong Kong to the output of one individual director and his company. This is, however, a warranted choice as the very productive Johnnie To and his Milkyway Image studio are responsible for many of the celebrated works coming out of Hong Kong in the past fourteen years. Additionally, their films continue to build on the cinematic past of Hong Kong, and are fairly evenly spread over a variety of genres, which can be roughly divided into romantic or “crazy” comedies and crime films. Further indicating their worthiness for separate discussion here is the fact that most writings on the To and Milkyway oeuvre draw attention to their blurring of genre and auteur filmmaking.<sup>270</sup> To analyze the crime films of To and his company, the various categories established in previous chapters will here be put to use.

The focus on genre is partly intended as a complement to Stephen Teo’s book-length study of Johnnie To’s films. Although Teo theorizes about the tension between genre and auteur in his introduction, most of his book is devoted to what is essentially an auteur-oriented approach: he downplays the role of To’s Milkyway collaborators and looks for overarching themes in the director’s works, including those from before Milkyway was established.<sup>271</sup> This leads Teo to some misleading generalizations, the most problematic of which is his characterization of To’s films as “action” films. While To is maybe best known for his unique action style as seen in films such as *The Mission* (1999) and *Exiled* (2006), describing films such as

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<sup>270</sup> For representative examples, see Stephen Teo’s *Director in Action: Johnnie To and the Hong Kong Action Film*, and Andrew Grossman’s “The Belated Auteurism of Johnnie To”.

<sup>271</sup> Almost completely opposite to this approach is Lawrence Pun’s *Milkyway Image, Beyond Imagination: Wai Ka-fai + Johnnie To + Creative Team (1996-2005)*, an edited collection of interviews and articles on specific Milkyway films. As the book’s title already indicates, the company is central here, and especially Wai Ka-fai’s role is highlighted.

*PTU* (2003), *Election* (2005) and *Election 2* (2006) as action films is questionable to say the least.<sup>272</sup> Although less specific, Andrew Grossman's description of the Milkyway films as "generic art films" is arguably more useful, as the company's films consciously play with genres, inventively mixing them, turning them upside down and occasionally – in what To describes as his "personal" films – rising above them.

In what follows, some necessary background information on Milkyway Image and Johnnie To will be offered, and the formal and thematic elements that turn their various crime films into recognizable "Milkyway" films will be considered. Next, several of the company's films will be discussed and placed in their genre context for evaluation. Finally, the scope of the chapter will widen and consider the meaning of contemporary "Hong Kong film noir", a category Milkyway has played a central role in, but in which other filmmakers also made their mark.

## **5.2. Johnnie To and Milkyway Image: History, Teamwork and Survival**

Having worked several years for television, Johnnie To directed his first film – the martial arts detective film *The Enigmatic Case* – in 1980, making him part of the group of young filmmakers that stormed on the scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s (see Chapter Three). Not satisfied with the result, he returned to television for several years before attempting to join the film industry again in 1986 (Teo, *Director in Action* 216). This time he joined the Cinema City company, where he at first worked more as an operator but then was granted more freedom after achieving several commercial successes in the comedy genre.<sup>273</sup> When *The Eighth Happiness* (1988) became the year's top-grossing film at the box-office, To was given the chance to come up with his own story, which became *All About Ah Long* (1989), a melodrama starring Chow Yun-fat that swept the Hong Kong Film Awards in 1990. In the next few years, To continued to turn out several successful commercial films

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<sup>272</sup> Teo considers a number of terms to characterize To's films, including the "crime movie" (*Director in Action* 2). He never explains, however, why "action" is a more suitable description of To's output than "crime". Michael Ingham similarly objects to Teo's designation of To's work as "action" cinema. He also refers to Paul Willemen, who has called into question the designation itself, arguing that it is often "loosely and lazily applied as a classification of films" (5-6).

<sup>273</sup> In this period he also co-directed *The Big Heat* (1988), discussed in Chapter 3.

in various genres, including period martial arts and comedy, as well as the fantasy martial arts films *The Heroic Trio* (1993) and *Executioners* (1993), which were not very successful locally but achieved cult status in the West.

After making *The Mad Monk* (1993), a Stephen Chow vehicle, To took a year off to re-examine his career (Teo, *Director in Action* 220). Tired of being controlled by big stars, he wanted to make a film in which he would be in full control. That film became *Loving You* (1995), the start of his cooperation with actor Lau Ching-wan, as well as with many of the people who would later become regular crewmembers at the Milkyway Image company. Both this film and 1997's *Lifeline* show To (and his crew) moving towards the kind of films Milkyway would become famous for.<sup>274</sup> In 1996 To set up the Milkyway Image company with Wai Ka-fai. Wai had only directed one film at this point – Chow Yun-fat's last Hong Kong film before departing to Hollywood, *Peace Hotel* (1995) – but he was a very popular television producer in the early 1990s (Pang, "Masculinity in Crisis" 327), and had already worked with To on the melodrama, *The Story of My Son* (1990). The moment at which the company was established is crucial: this was the late 1990s period when innovative cop soap operas and triad boyz films with a strong local flavor were appearing. Milkyway took active part in this attempt of the industry to reinvent itself, and in the new millennium it has been more or less the only company to keep this impulse alive.

That it has been able to do this is mostly due to To's keen business sense. The company regularly alternates between more commercial and more "personal" films to stay profitable while still making the films they like. In the early 2000s, in particular, it quite drastically increased the number of commercial pictures, and the enormous success of To and Wai's *Needing You...* (2000) was important in the wider shift of the industry towards romantic comedies. Another Milkyway strategy is to keenly court international film festivals as well as overseas investors: Warner Brothers invested in the "pan-Chinese" production *Turn Left, Turn Right* (2003) (Davis and Yeh, *East Asian Screen Industries* 50), and French money was used to make *Vengeance* (2009), starring French rock star Johnny Hallyday. All of this

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<sup>274</sup> This transitional phase is very useful in delineating what made Milkyway and much of Hong Kong cinema different in the late 1990s – a sort of paradigm shift that will be returned to below.

would not be possible if the company was not able to deliver quality, however. In this respect it should be noted that To tries to foster new talent, by giving young directors more chances to develop (for instance, Derek Chiu and most recently Soi Cheang) and also by allowing his long-time collaborators to direct their own films (scriptwriter Yau Nai-hoi and assistant director Law Wing-cheong are recent examples), although he tends to keep a tight rein on those who work for him.

As already mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the role of To's collaborators at Milkyway Image should be acknowledged. First among those is the company's co-founder Wai Ka-fai, who has taken up various roles in the company, including those of To's co-director, scriptwriter as well as director of his own works. David Bordwell accurately describes the dynamic between the two men as follows: "Wai brought a playful sophistication to the Milkyway product, while To's straightforward professionalism diluted the whimsy and preciousness of Wai's scripts" ("Movies from the Milkyway" 20). Other key contributors are the scriptwriters, sometimes credited as the "Milkyway Creative Team", of which the members regularly shift. The scriptwriters who work most often for Milkyway are Yau Nai-hoi, Au Kin-ye, Yip Tin-shing and Szeto Kam-yuen. Other key personnel include cinematographer Cheng Siu-keung (since 2001 often assisted by To Hung-mo), action director Yuen Bun, editor David Richardson, and sound editor Martin Chappell.

### **5.3. The Milkyway House Style**

Even when belonging to different subgenres, many of the Milkyway crime films exhibit characteristics that can best be described as the Milkyway house style. Certain themes recur frequently across the company's output, but arguably visual, narrative and structural aspects are more important.

First of all, Milkyway frequently draws from a familiar group of faces for their films. Lau Ching-wan and Simon Yam are the most prominent "stars" employed by the company, and there was also a period when Andy Lau was associated with their work. Aside from them, supporting roles are frequently played by Lam Suet, Ruby

Wong, Maggie Siu, Hui Siu-hung and Wong Wa-wo.<sup>275</sup> Bit parts are often taken up by longtime crewmembers, such as Lu Ching-ting, Chiu Chi-shing and Law Wing-cheong. In terms of cinematography, beautiful chiaroscuro-lighting characterizes many of their films – *PTU* (2003) is the most outstanding in this regard. Grossman has also noted the Milkyway films' debt to the French New Wave, and uses *The Odd One Dies* (1998) as an example. Tellingly, the more recent *Sparrow* (2008) was an avowed homage to the *Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964).

Frequently, storylines are simple, and attention is paid to almost random situations or detail, as in *The Mission* (1999), *Throwdown* (2004) and *Exiled* (2006), though films like *The Longest Nite* (1998), and the *Election* diptych (2005-6) are tightly scripted affairs. Quirkiness is common, and humor is often subtle – achieved through deadpan delivery (as when Wang Tianlin keeps eating his spaghetti even after being shot in *The Mission*) and self-conscious irony (as in *Exiled*, where Anthony Wong helps his friend move in to his new home just after trying to kill him as ordered by his boss). Sometimes repetition is used to comic effect, but also to signal character development and narrative progression. In *The Odd One Dies*, an unfortunate gangster ends up losing his fingers twice in confrontations with Takeshi Kaneshiro and Carman Lee, but when the same thing is about to happen for a third time, Takeshi holds back at the last moment and reconciles with his enemy: the effect is both comic (the gangster's lackeys already scrambled to get ice ready for this third confrontation) and symbolic (of Takeshi's growing maturity and will to live meaningfully). In *Running Out of Time* (1999), repetition is coupled with two other common Milkyway motifs, the doubling of characters and the element of gamesmanship. These last two elements appeared earlier already in *A Hero Never Dies* (1998), and are also important in *Fulltime Killer* (2001). The combined effect of all this stylization is the creation of a slightly surreal cinematic universe, a characteristic most obvious in To's more personal works: in *Throwdown* nearly every character seems to know judo and eagerly participates in duels, while *Sparrow* – originally envisioned as a musical – is set in a fictional world of pickpockets, who operate according to their own strict rules.

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<sup>275</sup> In recent years, Taiwanese actress and model Kelly Lin frequently appears in Milkyway films as well. Johnnie To discusses her at some length in the "Author's Interview" (see Appendix).

Thematically, fate and causality are important to several Milkyway films, and it is arguably here that Wai Ka-fai's influence is most keenly felt. The Wai-directed inaugural work of Milkyway Image, *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1* (1997), dealt innovatively with this theme, and shows through two versions of the same story how one small decision can influence a petty gangster's life and that of the people around him.<sup>276</sup> It returns most explicitly in To and Wai's co-directed *Running on Karma* (2003). Fatalism is an important element in film noir, and Milkyway's preoccupation with this theme explains why film noir often pops up in descriptions of the studio's output.

## 5.4. Milkyway Crime Films

### 5.4.1. Cop Soap Operas

A comparison between *All About Ah Long* (1989) – To's first critical success – and the second Milkyway film directed under his own name a decade later – *Where a Good Man Goes* (1999, in Chinese “Goodbye Ah Long”), sheds light on the evolution of Johnnie To as a filmmaker, and arguably also on the broader changes in Hong Kong cinema. Where the first film is melodramatically sentimental in its depiction of a man's emotional maturation, the latter tells a similar story in a much more minimalist and subtle manner.<sup>277</sup> Two of To's pre-Milkyway films, *Loving You* (1995) and *Lifeline* (1997), show To's transition towards a more understated filmmaking style, in which emotions are not spelt out all that obviously and reside rather in small details and gestures. So while *Loving You* is an early attempt at twisting genre conventions and telling a story in a more natural way, it also uses some maudlin English pop songs to spell out the understated emotions of the characters. Similarly, *Lifeline* is an affecting portrayal of everyday heroism, but also includes a melodramatic subplot involving a man whose terminally ill ex-wife “dumps” his estranged daughter on him.

These two films also belong quite clearly to the cop soap opera genre that followed Gordon Chan's *The Final Option* (1994), discussed in the previous chapter. Like

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<sup>276</sup> Wai talks about this aspect of his films at length in *Milkyway Image, Beyond Imagination* (38-40). It also comes up in a more recent interview by Simon Abrams.

<sup>277</sup> *Where a Good Man Goes* will be discussed below in the section on “triad drama”.

these films, *Loving You* focuses on the private life of a cop, downplaying the action component. Unlike them, however, To chose to focus on one character instead of the team of cops. Lau Ching-wan is Lau Chun-hoi, a tough inspector who lives for his job but lacks in sympathy for his colleagues, going strictly by the book and mercilessly causing one cop to lose his job and another to be demoted. His wife is worse off, however, as Lau barely goes home or takes time to talk to her, preferring to get drunk in bars and pick up random women instead. Caught up in a personal vendetta with a vicious drug-running gangster, Lau gets shot in the head but miraculously survives, although he loses his sense of taste and smell (the Chinese title of the film translates as "Tasteless Detective"). His wife, who had earlier told him she wants a divorce and is pregnant with her lover's child, returns to nurse Lau back to health. In the course of his revalence, Lau re-evaluates his life and begins to make amends for his previous misdeeds. Still, accepting the fact that his wife is pregnant of another man is not easy, a situation To skirts over by finishing off with an explosive action scene during which Lau must save his wife from his vengeful gangster enemy. The stress in *Loving You* lies clearly on the characters, and in an interview, To has expressed his intention to make the audience accept a character they dislike at first (Wood 125). Despite the earlier mentioned pop songs, the depiction of Lau's transformation is done in a rather detached way: more is shown rather than told. The film has for instance a theme of failed communication: pagers are ignored, appointments missed, walkie-talkies malfunction at crucial moments, and even at the end of the film Lau discovers he is cuddling the wrong baby!

To's motivation for making his firefighting film *Lifeline* sounds remarkably similar to that of Gordon Chan for making *The Final Option*: while the latter wanted to do something for the police with his film, To told Stephen Teo:

*The main reason I made that film is that Hong Kong needs heroes, but not the heroes from triad societies. We want real heroes (Director in Action 225).*

Most directly, the film is thus a reaction against the *Young and Dangerous* films, at the time making a splash at the box-office. In this regard, it prefigured Milkyway's first production, *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1* (1997), which was a deconstruction of the triad boyz genre. *Lifeline* is strictly speaking not a crime film as crime fighting is

replaced by fire fighting, but it shares so many characteristics with cop soap operas that it merits being included in this discussion. That is, the depiction of these firemen is similar to that of their colleagues in the Hong Kong police force: there is a focus on a group of professionals and on the private lives of select members of this group, while the plot is loosely structured and the action scenes happen more or less at random, as in real life.<sup>278</sup> *Lifeline* introduces us to the firemen of Tsz Wan Shan Fire Station, a unit that has the reputation of being jinxed. This latter element is immediately clear at the beginning of the film, as the team checks into the hospital with food poisoning. When the not-too-ill team members later go to save workers trapped in an elevator, their station officer has an accident, paralyzing him from the waist down. While misfortune keeps bugging the team in the course of several operations (a fire in an apartment, the rescue of a baby, etc.), details are revealed about the private lives of three team members: disciplined station chief Cheung (Alex Fong) with the earlier-mentioned estranged daughter; Madam Lo (Ruby Wong) whose husband pressures her to get pregnant while she puts her career first; and Chief Yau (Lau Ching-wan), who begins an unusual romance with a female doctor (Carman Lee). Additionally, the film considers two different attitudes to firefighting: Chief Yau is willing to risk his own life to “save as many as he can” (an attitude that stops him from getting promoted), while Cheung and Chief Fire Officer Cheng (Damian Lau in a guest appearance) stress the adherence to rules and strict discipline.<sup>279</sup> The final half hour of the film is one long action scene as the team goes to fight a huge fire in a weaving factory.<sup>280</sup> They get trapped inside, but against all odds find a way out, saving two female workers in the process. After a short break, these “common heroes” are called back into action and go to fight fire once again.

Nominally directed by Patrick Yau, Johnnie To took care of a lot of the directorial work on *Expect the Unexpected* (1998), as he did with other Milkyway works Yau is

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<sup>278</sup> *The Final Option*, *In the Heat of Summer* (1994) and *Option Zero* (1997) are the closest cop soap opera analogies to *Lifeline*.

<sup>279</sup> This is a type of conflict familiar from cop soap operas, it appears for instance in *The Final Option*, and other films dealing with the SDU.

<sup>280</sup> This section of the film is very impressive. Although *Lifeline* only had a budget a fraction of that of the comparable Hollywood film *Backdraft* (1991), it delivered some stunning scenes using real fire. In Ted's interview, To mentions that it took him six months to recover from the damage the lengthy exposure to smoke caused to his health (*Director in Action* 226).

credited for (such as *The Odd One Dies* (1997) and *The Longest Nite* (1998)). Teo notes how the film oscillates between “scenes of drama and comedy, action and romance, melodrama and tragedy”, and frames it as the first part of an unofficial trilogy comprising also *PTU* (2003) and *Breaking News* (2004), and as “another milestone in To’s journey to auteur land” (*Director in Action* 93). While his description of the different moods in the film is accurate, *Expect the Unexpected* differs from the two later films in that it can be placed in the cop soap opera genre, which is frequently characterized by many different moods within the course of one film, and which had more or less disappeared by the time the two later films came out.<sup>281</sup> In *Expect the Unexpected*, a team of cops from the Organized Crime and Triad Bureau (OCTB) tries to track down two separate gangs: one a group of bumbling robbers from the Mainland who make a botched attempt to rob a jewelry store at the beginning of the film, and the other a vicious local gang that accidentally gets discovered when the police is searching for the first group. The film’s title is certainly borne out as, in a surprise twist at the end, the two remaining Mainland robbers engage the cops in a gunfight with everyone ending up dead. The title’s warning also applies to the film’s various romance subplots: the two male cops at the center (played by Simon Yam and Lau Ching-wan) both misinterpret the romantic intentions of the female characters. The central theme of the film is the impermanence of life, with the surprise ending grimly reminding us to live as if each day could be our last.

#### 5.4.2. Cops and Robbers

Though not previously discussed as a separate category, cops-and-robbers films have been a fairly prominent part of the Milkyway output. In previous chapters the difference was made between police films and gangster films based on the characters that are the focus of the film, so cops-and-robbers films are, in this definition, films that give nearly equal weight to the perspective of the two parties. In this sense, a film like *Expect the Unexpected* does not belong to the cops-and-robbers category, simply because the characters of the robbers are barely given any attention. An example of the cops-and-robbers film discussed in the previous

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<sup>281</sup> The main element uniting these three films is the presence of a gang of (Mainland) robbers who engage the police in a gunfight. But while the more commercial *Breaking News* does resemble *Expect the Unexpected* quite a bit, the film’s similarities to *PTU* are rather few.

chapter is Kirk Wong's *Organized Crime and Triad Bureau* (1994). It is generally a more action-oriented category than the cop soap opera, though Yau Nai-hoi's *Eye in the Sky* (2007) proves that this is not necessarily always the case. Indeed, Milkyway tends to give a battle-of-wits twist to this kind of film, making it more than a series of shoot-outs between good and bad guys.

To's *Running Out of Time* (1999) marked a shift of the company towards more commercially viable filmmaking, but nevertheless maintained some of the elements of the earlier, gloomier Milkyway films. Based on a script by two French writers (Julien Carbon and Laurent Courtiaud), To during shooting quickly found the role of the robber too perverse for star Andy Lau's image, and had Yau Nai-hoi do a rewrite (Andy Lau, 152). In the resulting film, Cheung (Andy Lau), who at the beginning of the film learns he has only four weeks left to live, lures police negotiator Ho (Lau Ching-wan) into a cat-and-mouse game to steal a diamond from a gangster who once wronged his father. Cheung repeatedly outsmarts Ho, with the three different "rounds" in their game each time ending in a car: here the challenge is for Ho to get Cheung to the police station – something he inevitably fails to do. The two men are more or less evenly matched, however, and, as typical doubles, they bond through their battle-of-wits. Some fun is poked at the film's homosexual undertones in a scene where Cheung (who dons several disguises throughout the film) appears as a woman and asks Ho for a kiss. Cheung gets away at the end, but supposedly dies soon after, even though To maintains that his disease was a hoax as well – a joke played on the audience (Teo, *Director in Action* 233). In his final line in the film, Ho hints at this possibility, telling a girl who knew Cheung that "maybe he'll suddenly show up again and surprise you."

*Running Out of Time* and its (inferior) sequel *Running Out of Time 2* (2001, co-directed by To and Law Wing-cheong) have no gunplay action aside from one fairly short confrontation in the first film. A much more typical cops-and-robbers film in this regard is To's *Breaking News* (2004), one of Milkyway's more commercial films, co-produced with Media Asia and China Film group, and thus also aimed at

the Mainland market.<sup>282</sup> Marking the non-alignment of the film with either cops or robbers is the famous opening sequence, consisting of one single long take that lasts seven minutes and shows a gunfight between the Mainland gang and the CID (Criminal Investigation Division) team led by Inspector Cheung (Nick Cheung).<sup>283</sup> Throughout the sequence, the camera offers us no characters to identify with and maintains an objective, distanced position. A second shootout follows quickly when the robbers get away and the cops give chase. During this second fight, a TV crew happens to be nearby and captures images of a beat cop raising his arms in surrender to one of the robbers, which soon causes a public outcry against the police. OCTB Inspector Rebecca Fong (Kelly Chan) proposes to make a “good show” of the capture of the robbers to restore public confidence in the police, and is put in charge of the operation. However, Cheung is not willing to back off and ignores orders to stop his dogged pursuit of the gang. It is his team that tracks the robbers down to a big apartment building. Fong quickly has a small army of cops lay siege to the building, while the robbers, led by Chan Yat-yuen (Richie Ren), take a family hostage to keep the cops at bay. Two Mainland assassins soon join the robbers, as they happened to be in the building when the police surrounded it.

The film attempts a critique of the role of the media, showing how both cops and robbers manipulate it for their own ends. While Fong has a professional spin doctor (Maggie Siu), Chan uses the Internet to uncover the manipulation of the cops and to taunt them, for instance by uploading images of the gangsters having a delicious “family” meal with their hostages.<sup>284</sup> As Fong states at one point, “the person who knows how to manipulate the media is the hero”, and after the elimination of the robbers, both she and the more conventional cop hero Cheung are celebrated as such by the media. While it feels somewhat tacked on, this critique of the media (and to

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<sup>282</sup> Teo describes the opening scene of the Mainland version not included in the Hong Kong film, in which the Mainland police track the robbers and warn their Hong Kong counterparts of the criminals’ plan to strike in Hong Kong (*Director in Action* 264).

<sup>283</sup> Appropriately, To inserted another long take close to the end of the film which unites the three main characters: in this scene Chan has taken Fong hostage and is fleeing in a minibus while Cheung gives chase on a motorcycle.

<sup>284</sup> In a very brief but funny scene after the police manipulation of images is uncovered, the spin doctor diverts the attention of the press by having a movie star “Jackie” come to voice his support to the force. Also, after the gang uploads images of their meal, Fong orders lunchboxes for both the cops and the reporters.

some extent the police) manages to bring a new angle to the cops-and-robbers genre, and thus keeps the Milkyway tradition of genre reinvention and rejuvenation alive.

This search for novelty also characterizes Yau Nai-hoi's directorial debut, *Eye in the Sky* (2007), in which the focus is on a never-before shown team of the Hong Kong police force, the Surveillance Unit (SU). More in the police procedural mode than the action-oriented *Breaking News*, the film follows this Unit's role in tracking down and capturing a highly efficient gang of robbers, in the process also showing the realistic details of these cops' work and the surveillance technologies they have access to.<sup>285</sup> *Eye in the Sky* is recognizably a Milkyway film, in that it doubles the leader of the robbers, Chan (Tony Leung Ka-fai), with the field captain of the SU, codenamed Dog Head (Simon Yam): both men are highly experienced veterans, and like Dog Head, Chan engages in a form of surveillance as he serves as the look-out for his gang.<sup>286</sup> The doubling is further reinforced through a female rookie, codenamed "Piggy" (Kate Tsui), who joins the SU at the beginning of the film. A scene between Piggy and Dog Head is later repeated between her and Chan, revealing how she has made progress as a cool-headed member of the SU team. In a somewhat unexpected and slightly disappointing twist, it is in the end Piggy and not Dog Head who causes Chan's downfall.<sup>287</sup>

The central theme of the film is cleverly two-fold, and not entirely captured in either the Chinese or the English title: "eye in the sky" can be translated in Chinese as "*tian you yan* 天有眼", which connotes the term "comeuppance". This could not become the film's Chinese title, as a 2000 Milkyway film already carried that name: Derek Chiu's *Comeuppance!* This of course perfectly illustrates the central theme of several Milkyway films: karma, or the belief that each act will have a result, good or bad, in this life or the next. This theme is driven home in *Eye in the Sky* by the way Chan dies after running into a hook, which slashes his throat: earlier in the film,

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<sup>285</sup> The procedural shares several characteristics with the cop soap opera (most notably the attention on police procedure instead of action), but differs from the latter in that it offers much less detail on the police characters' personal lives.

<sup>286</sup> Another element that marks the film as Milkyway is the use of recognizable, local settings, especially the tram on Hong Kong Island – a setting that also featured frequently in *The Odd One Dies* (1997).

<sup>287</sup> In this sense, the plot of a rookie becoming an accomplished professional in his/her own right can be seen as a parallel of the relationship between director Yau and his mentor-producer Johnnie To.

Chan had stabbed two cops in the throat, killing one of them. At the same time, the title refers to surveillance as well, something both cops and robbers engage in, much like in *Breaking News* both groups use the media for their own ends. The theme is made more widely resonant in one interesting and comical scene: during a serious conflict between Chan and one of the gang members, the tension is defused when a woman starts to undress in an apartment opposite that of the robbers – they all get quiet and just stare, then engage in some typical male bonding.<sup>288</sup>

### 5.4.3. Triad Boyz Parody

Despite what some critics might think, the triad genre is arguably Hong Kong cinema's most varied one. In the following, three types of triad film Milkyway has worked in will be discussed. While the company's inaugural work, *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1* (1997), was one of several triad boyz parodies appearing around that time, it is the only such film the company produced (although the second Milkyway film, *The Odd One Dies* (1997) comes quite close). A second category is the standard triad drama, which could be further divided into the drama of the reforming gangster and the triad intrigue film. In the first subcategory, Milkyway produced *Where a Good Man Goes* (1999); in the second, it made the landmark *Election* films (2005-6). A third group of films, the one that Johnnie To is most famous for internationally, are triad action films such as *A Hero Never Dies* (1998), *The Mission* (1999), *Exiled* (2006) and *Vengeance* (2009).

Wai Ka-fai's *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1* most clearly indicates the context in which Milkyway Image was established, as its experimental cinematography and structure clearly make it part of the Wong Kar-wai inspired genre experimentation of the late 1990s. A parody of the triad boyz genre, it shares quite a few similarities with *Once Upon a Time in Triad Society* and its sequel, in particular the plot structure of the first film. Both had appeared the year before, and *Too Many Ways* clearly built on them, driving their experimentalism to a new and unparalleled height. The film is shot mostly using a hand-held camera with a wide-angle lens,

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<sup>288</sup> This instant is a knowing nod at one of the most famous films about surveillance, Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954). It also brings to mind a similar moment in To's *Exiled* (2006). The surveillance theme returns in a 2009 Milkyway film directed by Soi Cheang, *Accident*. This work is discussed in the section on assassin films.

and does not shy away from shooting events upside down or from other unusual angles. While such cinematographic trickery risks being dismissed as empty and pretentious, it is in fact quite appropriate for this film as the narrative moves at a frenetic pace, with absurdly comic scenes that serve to send up the triad heroism and values glorified in the *Young and Dangerous* films. The plot follows what Bordwell describes as a “forking-path pattern”, first presenting one series of events, hopping back to a nodal point, and then tracing out an alternative set of consequences (*Planet Hong Kong* 268).

In the first version, 32-year old low-level triad rascal Wong Ah-kau (Lau Ching-wan) has his palm read by a fortuneteller, and then runs into an acquaintance, Bo (Cheung Tat-ming), who invites him to join a scheme smuggling cars into the Mainland. Kau eventually joins the team assembled by Bo for a meal and a trip to a massage parlor, where each time he ends up with the bill. The second time he does not have enough money with him to pay the bill, and the gang proceeds to rob the place. As they flee, they accidentally kill Bo, but still follow through on his scheme of delivering the cars to a Mainland gang. During the boat trip over the border, one gangster falls off the boat and drowns because his friends only notice his disappearance when they arrive: these are definitely not the macho gangster heroes of the *Young and Dangerous* films. When they eventually deliver the cars, it turns out Bo had lied to them: the gang that accepts the cars had kidnapped Bo’s wife, and instead of being paid, they are forced to accept her. The woman soon takes control of the men, and convinces them to try to rob the gang that had kidnapped her. Having taken Kau as her sexual plaything, she dies during the act, and the men soon are all killed by a group of Mainland soldiers during the failed robbery. The movie then goes back to the starting point of the film, with Kau leaving the fortuneteller’s place. Again, Bo invites him to join his scheme, and Kau goes with the same gang to the same restaurant and massage parlor. The Kau of this version is quite different, however, somewhat more like the *Young and Dangerous* heroes: in the massage parlor, he insists on paying the bill, reminding his friends to honor their reputation as members of the Hung Ying society and also announcing that he won’t be a part of their scheme. His greater self-confidence earns him the attraction of one of the massage girls (Carman Lee). A few days later, as he sees the girl off at the airport (she is going to Taiwan), Kau runs into Matt (Francis Ng), one of Bo’s team

members who, inspired by Kau, has also decided not to join Bo's group, and who now invites Kau to go with him to Taiwan to assassinate a local triad leader there. Kau is eventually convinced to go along, but once in Taiwan, Matt has forgotten where exactly he was supposed to go. A whole series of events unfold, but Kau's upholding of the traditional triad values eventually earns him the respect of the triad leaders in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and he receives his own turf to set up his own triad branch. In the process of all of this, however, Kau has been accidentally shot in the head, and although he survives and achieves success, he is confined to a wheelchair and plagued by a bunch of other ailments. Here the film goes back to the beginning, and we finally learn what the fortuneteller told Kau: no matter where he goes, he will end up either dead or successful, depending on what kind of person he wants to be.

Commentators have offered different opinions on whether the choice between Taiwan and the Mainland in *Too Many Ways* is symbolic, reflecting in some way Hong Kong's limited choices in view of the impending Handover. Peter Rist suggests this in his discussion of the film ("Experimental" 58), as does Bordwell (*Planet Hong Kong* 269), but Pang Lai-kwan argues that "the China/Taiwan choice carries no real meaning" ("Masculinity in Crisis" 329). Stephen Teo disagrees with Pang and places the film firmly in what he calls the "1997 syndrome" (*Director in Action* 77). I would side with Pang in this respect, as Wai Ka-fai has explicitly argued against such an interpretation in an interview ("*Too Many Ways*" 40), and because in the film the fortuneteller tells Kau that the place he goes to does not matter, only his character does.<sup>289</sup>

#### 5.4.4. Triad Drama

As already stated earlier, the films discussed in this section – *Where a Good Man Goes* (1999) and the *Election* diptych (2005-6) – are very different from one another, but they share a preference for drama and a near complete absence of action sequences (which does not mean they do not contain violence). *Where a Good Man*

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<sup>289</sup> One can of course argue that everything matters in a work of art, whether it is intended by the author or not. As in most Hong Kong films, however, this seems to be a case where "1997" is more of an afterthought than, to use Evans Chan's formulation, "an integral part of the creative intent" (299).

*Goes* is more of a character study and subdued romance story, and stands out from most other Milkyway films of this period in that it is told in a straightforward way, without the company's usual quirkiness and self-conscious irony. As mentioned above, the film refers back to To's 1989 melodrama *All About Ah Long*, and while both tell the story of an immature man finding a way to grow up, *Where a Good Man Goes* does so in a much more low-key manner. We first see Michael Cheung (Lau Ching-wan), just out of jail in Macau, as he gets into a fight with a taxi driver, who calls over two of his friends to beat him up. In a scene that establishes this gangster's toughness, he beats the three men, and then finds shelter in the International Hotel run by widowed mother Judy Lin (Ruby Wong). The next day, Karl (Lam Suet), a local cop and friend of the taxi drivers, comes to arrest Michael and publicly humiliates him – even though the taxi drivers were the ones who attacked Michael first. Despite his rough and abusive behavior, Judy testifies in his favor and bails him out, marking the beginning of an unlikely relationship between them, as well as the onset of a conflict with the cop that escalates until the film reaches its climax. Michael continues to live at the International Hotel and initially resumes his old triad life. For some reason, however, Judy and her hotel change him: he becomes less violent, helps out in the hotel and eventually tries to give up his life as a gangster. Although a conflict with his ex-wife ends in a hostage-taking situation, Michael is released a few years later and at the end of the film plans to move to Portugal, where Judy and her son are waiting for him.

Compared to the optimistic and mildly sentimental *Where a Good Man Goes*, the *Election* films can only be described as relentlessly grim and nihilistic. The films, really conceived as one big work with one part complementing the other, are arguably To's (and Milkyway's) best works so far – they are certainly his most ambitious and carefully constructed. They also illustrate once more why Teo's characterization of To as an "action auteur" is misguided – a bit like describing Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy as action films.<sup>290</sup> The films' dark, intricate plot and underworld setting bring to mind Patrick Yau's *The Longest Nite* (1998, discussed in the section on Hong Kong noir), but *Election* is more interested in documenting

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<sup>290</sup> Though they are discussed in Teo's book (in a postscript), the *Election* films came out when he had written the bulk of it already, which partly explains his framework, but even then, several of the earlier films he describes can hardly be called action films.

the history and traditions of the triads, and uses noir lighting only sparingly. Shu Kei has pointed out how “*Election* is a film that refuses to compromise” (318), both in its narrative style and pace, and in its “brazen Hong Kong identity and aura” (326). Regarding the narrative style and pace, Shu argues against those critics who have claimed that, given the film’s long cast list (there are more than 15 speaking parts who contribute to the development of the plot), the film’s pace is too fast and confuses the audience (318). This criticism is not unwarranted, however, and the film clearly benefits more than most from repeated viewing, which can reveal the characters’ subtle interactions, nuances in their personalities, and the intricacies of the triad politics going on. Shu’s other point about the film’s strong local character is certainly correct, and brings to mind the argument made in Chapter Two about the important role of crime films in the indigenization of Hong Kong cinema. As To himself asserts in an interview with Teo, “*Election* is a film that no mainland Chinese director can make, because he or she wouldn’t know what the triads are about” (*Director in Action* 246).

Superficially, the plots of the *Election* diptych bring to mind the *Young and Dangerous* films and their references to “democratic elections” in the triads, something most elaborated on in *Young and Dangerous 4* (1997), where two opposing candidates even engage in a public debate to gather support. Unlike the triad boyz films, however, the goal of the *Election* pictures is to paint a realistic portrait of the triads – something attempted already in 1989 with Taylor Wong’s *Triads – The Inside Story*, which definitely pales in comparison to To’s films (both in terms of the depiction of actual triad culture and as a film).<sup>291</sup> The story is deceptively simple: the Wo Sing Society elects a new chairperson every two years. In *Election* (2005), there are two main candidates for the post: the brash Big D (Tony Leung Ka-fai), who has bribed several of the “Uncles” (the senior triad members who get to vote), and the more restrained and in-control Lok (Simon Yam). Under the guidance of respected Uncle Teng (Wang Tianlin), the Uncles elect Lok. However, Lok cannot be the leader until he gains possession of the “Dragon Head baton”, an ancient symbol of leadership that at the moment is kept

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<sup>291</sup> The depiction of secret triad hand signs and various rituals earned the *Election* films an automatic Category III rating, even though the films feature no explicit sexuality. Scenes of violence occur in both films, but only one such scene in the second film would qualify it for a Category III rating.

over the border in Guangdong province. Unwilling to accept defeat, Big D sets out to get control of the baton, and soon various bosses get involved in the struggle. The baton eventually ends up in the hands of Jimmy (Louis Koo), out to avenge his boss who was locked in a wooden crate and shoved down a hill by Big D. Since in the meantime Big D lost much support after he threatened to split off and start his own society, Lok is able to convince Jimmy to hand him the baton, and finally also talks Big D into accepting his leadership in return for the great profits they can make if they work together. This partnership works well initially, but in a shocking scene at the end Lok kills Big D during a fishing trip by (repeatedly) smashing a rock on his head – because the latter had just suggested a shared leadership of the Wo Sing. This sudden primitive violence by the seemingly more benevolent and reasonable Lok effectively shatters any belief the audience still might have had that there exist “good” triads.<sup>292</sup>

*Election 2* (2006) takes place two years later when Lok’s term is about to end: tradition demands he step down and let a new head take charge of the society. Several of the smaller players in the first film are interested in the top seat, but only Jimmy – the society’s biggest moneymaker – enjoys enough support with the Uncles to be easily elected. Unfortunately, Jimmy is not interested in taking charge, as he is trying to distance himself from the Wo Sing to become a legitimate businessman in the Mainland. Additionally, Lok is unwilling to let go of his power, and tries to manipulate potential contenders into submission. Lok’s attempt could work, but then Jimmy changes his position: a shady Mainland cop, Xi (You Yong), has told him he is not welcome to do business in China – unless he becomes the new head of the Wo Sing. Again, a struggle for power takes place, and with both rivals equally wily, it becomes clear that only by killing the other will the position be secured. This has to happen in a way that cannot be traced back to the candidate, as it is against the triad rules to kill one’s “brother.” In the film’s most horrifying scene, the coolly rational Jimmy, intent on gaining the cooperation of a few of Lok’s captured men, slaughters one of them with a butcher’s knife and feeds him to the

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<sup>292</sup> The primitive character of the violence here is not only symbolized by Lok’s use of a rock to kill his rival, but also by the presence of monkeys in the background. One of them takes its young and flees to safety, suggesting that these gangsters are worse than animals. This point is reinforced when Lok’s young son happens to witness his father’s violent act – the resulting trauma and fear for his father will indirectly lead to Lok’s death in the second film, another example of the chain of cause and effect in the Milkyway films.

dogs. This leads to his victory, but Jimmy has little cause for celebration: welcoming him to do business in China, Xi tells him that the Mainland authorities want him to take the leader position for life and cancel the tradition of democratic elections. Their goal is to make Hong Kong a more stable and prosperous place, and they don't want unpredictable gangsters like Lok replacing Jimmy after his term is over. Jimmy, so eager to get rid of his triad connections, will forever be tied to them, as will his offspring: he is trapped in a Buddhist hell quite similar to the one experienced by triad mole Lau in *Infernal Affairs*.

The two films are very political. In *Election 1*, the symbol of power (the dragon baton) resides in the Mainland, much like Hong Kong's Chief Executive needs to receive the central authorities' blessing to rule Hong Kong. The depiction of "democratic" triads in the undemocratic Hong Kong environment also can be seen as a critique of the status quo, although on closer inspection the election of the chairman by the Uncles is rather similar to how Hong Kong's Chief Executive is elected: by a small committee of powerful individuals. The political undertone is much stronger in *Election 2*, however, as is already clear from the film's tagline: "Even triads can serve their country." This phrase refers to a statement by Tao Siju, an ex-Minister of Public Security in the Mainland, who in 1993 infamously remarked that "there are patriots even among the triads" (Teo, *Director in Action* 181). Additionally, the (unwilling) alliance between Jimmy and Xi parallels that between many of Hong Kong's tycoons and the Mainland authorities, and the need to make certain compromises to gain access to the Chinese market is something Hong Kong filmmakers certainly are very aware of.<sup>293</sup> But the political allegory is more complex than this. As is narrated in the films, the triads came into existence in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as patriotic resistance groups against the Manchurian occupiers of the Qing dynasty. So, in a sense, as To points out in an interview, "history returns to its beginning" (*"Election"* 310). By portraying the changing nature of triad society, he is trying to say something about the changing nature of Hong Kong and its people. The fact that the film is so grim and nihilistic is thus very telling.

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<sup>293</sup> Davis and Yeh note that the first film passed Chinese censors with significant revisions: "First, like *Infernal Affairs* a major triad member is revealed to be an undercover cop; second, To shot a new ending with the undercover police charging from the bushes to arrest the boss and see justice prevail." For *Election 2*, no China-ready version was created (*East Asian Screen Industries* 49).

#### 5.4.5. Triad Action

This category is the one Johnnie To is most associated with globally. Basically To's idiosyncratic rendering of the hero film (*yingxiong pian*), films like *A Hero Never Dies* (1998), *The Mission* (1999), *Exiled* (2006) and *Vengeance* (2009) treat their male characters, their gunplay and their bonding rituals with irony while simultaneously glorifying them through To's unique style.

*A Hero Never Dies* could be considered an exercise paving the way for the maturation of To's style in *The Mission*, which brought him to international attention and which the later two films strongly resemble. As such, it still closely follows the template of John Woo's hero films, especially *The Killer* (1989), as Katherine Spring has pointed out (132-4). Like these films, *A Hero Never Dies* has two heroes who share an unspoken brotherhood: Jack (Leon Lai) and Martin (Lau Ching-wan). The two men are however on different sides in a gang war, and are – bound by loyalty to their respective bosses – obliged to kill one another. This confrontation will inevitably take place one day, but it doesn't stop the two men from engaging in competitive bonding rituals: in a famous scene, the men take turns breaking the other's wine glasses with coins, performing increasingly difficult shots until one of them finally misses. When the fatal day arrives, Jack and Martin seriously injure one another and are left for dead – their bosses subsequently make peace and abandon their former protectors in Thailand while they go back to Hong Kong. Thanks to the enormous sacrifices of their girlfriends, the men survive although Martin's legs have to be amputated. Eventually his girlfriend gets him back to Hong Kong, but when she looks up Martin's former boss, he kills her and has Martin thrown out. Martin now resolves to take revenge, gets injured during the first failed attempt and dies before he can try again. Jack, whose own boss had earlier sent killers to get rid of him, returns to Hong Kong, finds Martin's body and brings it along for a violent showdown in which the bosses and Jack die – the last shot is fired by the dead Martin, who, evidently, gets a little help from Jack.

*A Hero Never Dies'* evocation of the hero film does not happen only through the characters and story: also visually it harks back to those films. A lot of blue and red tones are used, and, as cinematographer Cheng Siu-keung points out, the

“exaggeratedly vibrant colors” serve to complement the hyperbolic characters (124). Interestingly, there seems to be some disagreement among reviewers and critics alike as to the film’s intention: Katherine Spring devotes an article to analyzing its irony, while Stephen Teo (along with several online reviewers) seems to take it as a hyper-stylized tribute to John Woo (*Director in Action* 106). Andrew Grossman for his part describes *A Hero Never Dies* as a “stone-faced parody of the John Woo gunplay subgenre.” The exaggerated doubling of the protagonists (entire scenes are replayed separately by Jack and Martin), and their over-the-top adherence to the codes of the underworld (ie. *yi x*) followed by the ironic betrayal by their buffoonish and cowardly bosses, give credence to Spring and Grossman’s position. The revelation of the boss as someone unworthy of the heroes’ loyalty is something that recurs in To’s later triad action movies as well, and serves as his critique of the gangster myth, while paradoxically at the same time his heroic protagonists perpetuate it. According to Nochimson and Cashill, To intended to de-romanticize the gangster in his triad action films (including *A Hero Never Dies*), but he regards them now as belonging to Hong Kong’s idealized gangster sagas, especially compared to the more recent *Election* films.

If *A Hero Never Dies* can be considered a parody, then *The Mission* clearly marks a new step in the genre. Moving away from the duo of heroes typical of most traditional hero films, To here introduces a group of men, five bodyguards brought together by brother Lung (Eddy Ko) who needs protection as someone is trying to get him killed. The plot is rather simple: the five men bond, learn to work together efficiently as a team, and eventually succeed in eliminating the hired killers and the man who hired them. Then something unexpected happens: Lung has discovered that the junior member of the group has slept with his wife, and leader Curtis (Anthony Wong) receives the order to eliminate him. Other group members do not accept this, and the situation culminates in a typical Mexican standoff, which is resolved without casualties, however, as Curtis manages to fake the murder.

In this author’s interview with To, the director emphasized the strong impact the works of Akira Kurosawa and Sam Peckinpah have had on him (see Appendix).<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> *Throwdown* (2004) is To’s avowed tribute to Kurosawa.

Elsewhere he has also claimed that during the shooting of *The Mission*, he was under the influence of the Japanese master (Teo, *Director in Action* 234). This is most noticeable in the celebrated Tsuen Wan Shopping Mall sequence. Here To for the first time brings a minimalist approach to the normally wild and explosive Hong Kong gunfights: there are long, suspenseful pauses between bursts of gunfire, and the action is carefully choreographed so that the bodyguards stand still at strategic spots to keep the attackers at bay. To claims his goal was to create a sense of movement while using static shots (Teo, *Director in Action* 234). Remarkable in the film as well – and contributing to its abstract, almost surreal character – is how the outside world is cut off once the action begins, as Teo has pointed out (*Director in Action* 121). While this could have been a side-effect of the limited time and budget with which the film was shot, similar scenes occur in *Exiled* and *Vengeance*, for which To had more time and money.<sup>295</sup>

Several cast members of *The Mission* returned for *Exiled* and *Vengeance* to play the familiar role of the cool, professional gangster-warrior reminiscent of martial arts literature and movies (To happens to be an admirer of martial arts novelist Jin Yong, and directed several TV series as well as his first film in the genre). *Exiled* starts with a situation that directly recalls the ending of *The Mission*, even though it is better considered a variation on the earlier film rather than a sequel: four old friends arrive in pairs at the house their “exiled” friend Wo (Nick Cheung) is moving into with his wife and newborn child. Two of them (Anthony Wong’s unnamed character and Lam Suet’s Fat) are there to kill him on the orders of their boss, Fay (Simon Yam), whom Wo had tried to kill several years before. Another pair (Francis Ng’s Tai and Roy Cheung’s Cat) is there to stop this from happening. After an initial gunfight doesn’t result in any casualties, the friends help Wo move in and have a meal with him (a recurring scene in To’s triad action films, symbolizing the men’s friendship, and the fact that killing is just their obeisance to the rules governing this particular version of *jianghu*). Wong agrees to help Wo with a final job so he can leave his wife and child some money before Wong kills him. This delay does not please boss Fay and after a series of shootouts Wo is eventually killed by Fay’s men. Wong and the three others wander around, end up robbing a gold transport, but

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<sup>295</sup> To had a budget of only 2,5 million HKD (= 0,3 million USD). The film was shot in 18 days (see “Author’s Interview with Johnnie To”, Appendix).

return to save Wo's wife and child, who have fallen into Fay's hands. In the final shootout everyone dies, except the wife, her child and a prostitute.

Where *The Mission* was marked mostly by Kurosawa's influence, *Exiled* seems more of an homage to Sam Peckinpah's westerns. Not only is the deadly climax reminiscent of Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), but also the style of the action itself is more chaotic, with To using slow-motion a lot, and showing the impact of bullets on bodies with fine clouds of blood. Additionally, the film takes place in Macau on the eve of its handover to China in 1999, with To depicting the city during this period as an Asian version of the Wild West, where the "sheriff", Sergeant Shan (Hui Siu-hung), takes orders from gangsters and just wants to stay out of trouble until he can retire at the end of the day.<sup>296</sup> The robbery of a convoy transporting gold and the presence of genre archetypes such as the mother and the whore further strengthen this Wild West atmosphere.

Stephen Teo extends Pang Lai-kwan's argument regarding the crisis of masculinity in the Milkyway films to *Exiled*, and stresses how the division of the group leads to its eventual destruction (*Director in Action* 192-5). While the men are certainly divided in the first half of the film, the death of Wo unites them again, although they are now aimless: repeatedly they decide which direction to go by tossing a coin. Tellingly, when they learn Fay has Wo's wife and child, Wong throws the coin away and the men head out for their new mission full of resolve, and when they die, they do so with a smile. As in *A Hero Never Dies* and *The Mission*, these heroes and their masculinity are simultaneously celebrated and ironized, and speaking of a crisis of masculinity in To's works on this basis is maybe somewhat premature and meaningless – a point strengthened by *Vengeance*, the third and most recent film that follows the template of *The Mission*.

As To frankly stated in interview, *Vengeance* came out because people (especially overseas) kept asking him to make another film like *The Mission* and *Exiled* ("Authors Interview"). Made with French money and starring French rocker Johnny

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<sup>296</sup> This depiction of pre-handover Macau is very similar to that of *The Longest Nite*, which was effectively shot around that time. There is a basis in reality for this, as Macau was really plagued by gang-related violence in the period leading up to the handover.

Hallyday, the film does feel less accomplished than the previous two, although it possesses the best production values and a gorgeous, glossy noir look.<sup>297</sup> Again, the storyline is simple: Costello (Hallyday), a French chef (and former assassin), comes to Macau after hired killers annihilate his daughter's family. She asks him to take revenge, so he hires three local hitmen to help him: Kwai (Anthony Wong), Chu (Gordon Lam) and Fat Lok (Lam Suet).<sup>298</sup> The three men who murdered Costello's grandchildren and son-in-law are eventually tracked down and eliminated, but by now the Frenchman's amnesia (resulting from a bullet lodged in his brain) has gotten so bad that he doesn't remember why he wanted vengeance and even who he was doing it for: the philosophical question the film asks is whether vengeance still has meaning if one can't remember, though the film's exploration of this theme does not go any further. Meanwhile, it had become clear that Costello's family was murdered on the orders of Kwai, Chu and Lok's Macau mob boss, George Fung (Simon Yam), and that by taking Costello's assignment they are headed for an inevitable confrontation with him. Dropping off Costello at the beachside house of "Big Mama" (Michelle Ye) and her numerous young Eurasian children, they head back to fight Fung and die in the film's major action set piece, which takes place on a landfill and is staged like an ancient battle with a grinning Fung overlooking the scene from a distance. With the help of Big Mama and her kids, Costello eventually kills Fung and then returns to live with her and the children at the beach.

In *Vengeance*, not much is noticeable of the crisis of masculinity described by Teo and Pang: the symbolic mother figure here nurtures Costello and is instrumental in the success of his final attack on Fung, after which the Frenchman returns to live with her in happy oblivion. While she does dress up as a femme fatale to help deliver Fung to his deserved end, she is doing so in service of another man, who according to the rules of *jianghu* is obliged to avenge his friends (and family).

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<sup>297</sup> The homage here is to Jean-Pierre Melville, though his influence on *Vengeance* is less obvious stylistically than that of Kurosawa and Peckinpah on the previous two films. Melville's favorite actor Alain Delon was asked for the role of Costello, but he turned it down. Costello is also the name of Delon's character in *Le Samourai* (1967).

<sup>298</sup> He bumps into them in his hotel, where they just killed their boss's wife and his bodyguard, who were having an affair – a sly reference to *The Mission*.

#### 5.4.6. Assassin Films

The boundary between assassin and triad action films is rather blurry in the case of the Milkyway works, in spite of the fact that To produced a rather pure example of the assassin film during the establishment of the company: *Beyond Hypothermia* (1996, discussed in the previous chapter). Indeed, the men in the triad action films are highly skilled killers, quite similar in character to the wandering Japanese *ronin* (with the possible exception of Jack and Martin in *A Hero Never Dies*). Unlike the typical assassin film described earlier, the men in these films are not loners, alienated from society and from their own humanity. Instead, they are members of a gang, bond through their professionalism and are only troubled when there is a conflict of loyalties. They are also rarely linked romantically to a woman, so the clash between professional duty and private life takes different forms.

The films discussed in this section can more comfortably be described as assassin films, though each of them pulls the genre in different and unexpected directions. *The Odd One Dies* (1997) belongs to the early Milkyway period and exudes, like its immediate predecessor *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1*, the refreshing genre experimentalism of the time. It is also the Milkyway work in which the Wong Kar-wai influence is at its most obvious, as Teo has convincingly demonstrated (*Director in Action* 80-1). Credited to Patrick Yau, but again for large parts directed by To himself, it most resembles Wong's *Fallen Angels* (1995), particularly through the casting of Takeshi Kaneshiro, whose character almost seems to have walked straight out of the earlier film.<sup>299</sup> Mo (Takeshi), a young rascal who likes to gamble, solicits an assignment to kill a Thai businessman who will visit Hong Kong on the first day of 1997. He promptly uses his cash advance to gamble, and unexpectedly, this perennial loser wins it big. Using the money to hire someone to do the job for him, he ends up with an unnamed female assassin just out of jail (Carman Lee). The two spend their time together preparing for the job, and she uses Mo to find out about Simon, her ex-lover who had induced her to the life of a professional assassin at the age of fourteen. Both damaged souls, they find solace in each other's embrace, with Mo helping the girl to get over her broken heart, and he himself

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<sup>299</sup> Teo refers to an interview in which Takeshi himself points out the continuity between the two roles (*Director in Action* 80).

finding some purpose through his love for her. Untypical for a Milkyway film at this time, the film ends on a happy note: Mo tricks her into believing she will do the hit but does the job himself, getting away safely. We last see him on a boat to Japan, where he supposedly will meet up with his newfound girlfriend.<sup>300</sup>

Although the story is more conventional than would be the case in a Wong Kar-wai film, *The Odd One Dies* uses style in much the same way as he does, telling the story through striking images and editing (Mo does not speak until twenty minutes into the film and when he eventually does, it is at first in the form of an existential voice-over). The effective use of repetition in the film was already described earlier, and the film also employs an elliptical cut and a freeze-frame at crucial moments, denying the viewer an expected climax and keeping him/her in the dark as to what exactly happened. The film's formal experimentalism and genre deconstruction lead Grossman to compare the Milkyway project to the early works of Godard and Truffaut, though, as Teo points out, their influence might also have come by way of Wong (*Director in Action* 84-5).

*Fulltime Killer* (2001), co-directed by To and Wai Ka-fai, was made during Milkyway's more commercially-oriented period, and it could be considered the company's version of the "international action" film described in the previous chapter. An attempt to make a Pan-Asian film, *Fulltime Killer* takes place in several Asian locations (Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Korea, Hong Kong and Macau) and features protagonists that speak Japanese, English, Cantonese and Mandarin. At the same time, the film overtly "quotes" numerous action films from both Hollywood and Asian cinemas (to name just a few examples: Kathryn Bigelow's *Point Break* (1991), Robert Rodriguez' *Desperado* (1995), James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991), Wong Kar-wai's *Fallen Angels*, and even To's own *The Mission*).<sup>301</sup> Based on a novel by Pang Ho-cheung (whose debut film *You Shoot, I Shoot* (2001) came out just two weeks after *Fulltime Killer*), the film's plot strongly

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<sup>300</sup> The fact that the man is murdered on the first day of the Handover year, and that Mo and the girl flee the city on that same day likely is meant as an allegory, though it is not crucial to the story in itself.

<sup>301</sup> The goal of this pastiche seems to be the creation of a transnational appeal by referring to films many people are familiar with and by adopting a "hip", ironic pose towards the film itself. This self-conscious approach is quite common to Milkyway's films, but is usually not achieved through overt quotation as it is here.

resembles that of Richard Donner's *Assassins* (1995), as it focuses on the competition between two assassins to be "Asia's No.1 assassin". As Lo Kwai-cheung perceptively argues, the "freshness *Fulltime Killer* can offer is probably not its story or its cinematography but the perception of what "Asia" means" ("No Such Thing as Asia" 150). In his view "Asian" cinema "can only acknowledge the fact that Asia is missing" ("No Such Thing as Asia" 154), and in *Fulltime Killer*, this is expressed in the "antagonistic difference" that alienates the two killers from within, "preventing [them] from attaining full self-identity, in contrast to a simple differential relationship in which opposition to each other defines identity" ("No Such Thing as Asia" 153).<sup>302</sup> Although it is one of the company's few big commercial successes in the crime (action) genre, the film is negligible in terms of the novelty it brings to the assassin film.

Much more interesting is Soi Cheang's *Accident* (2009), in which Cheang set out to create an assassin film in which not a single weapon appears. Instead, the team led by "Brain" (Louis Koo) stages complex "accidents" to deliver their targets to the netherworld. This demands meticulous planning and attention to detail – after the film's opening "accident", Brain picks up a cigarette butt dropped on the scene by "Uncle" (Stanley Fung), a member of his crew, because the police might possibly trace it back to the assassins. As the murder took place on a crowded street, the idea would seem ridiculous to most, but Brain is a severe paranoid, who does not even trust his own long-time partners-in-crime, and who leaves nothing to coincidence. When just after a new job "Fatty" (Lam Suet) is killed by an out-of-control bus (which also nearly runs over Brain himself), he suspects someone is trying to kill him. Arriving home to find his apartment burglarized, his paranoia goes into overdrive, and he suspects an insurance agent, Fong (Richie Ren), to be behind it all. Moving into an apartment below Fong's, Brain obsessively spies on him to find clues about his possible involvement. Finally convinced that Fong is involved in a sinister plot to kill him, Brain sets up an "accident" that goes wrong when at the crucial moment a solar eclipse takes place (the sun played a crucial part in Brain's

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<sup>302</sup> Another useful point made by Lo is that in the film "Asian" implies a "hierarchy of peoples, categorized according to the degree of lightness in complexion and according to their nations' economic strengths" ("No Such Thing as Asia" 151). Indeed, the assassin protagonists Tok (Andy Lau) and O (Takashi Sorimachi) are respectively Chinese and Japanese, while their victims are primarily South and Southeast Asians.

plan), and instead of Fong, only Fong's girlfriend is killed. A phone call from Uncle (who suffers from Alzheimer's) also just revealed to Brain that the earlier bus accident was indeed only an accident, and Fong notices Brain's involvement in the murder of his girlfriend when Brain at the last moment tries to prevent it. Fong later stabs him to death in the staircase of their apartment building.

Soi Cheang, whose *Dog Bite Dog* was discussed in the previous chapter, was already an established younger filmmaker when he made *Accident* for Milkyway, and the film displays a creative mix of Cheang's style and thematic concerns with the Milkyway house style (To was intensively involved in the film as a producer).<sup>303</sup> The noirish theme of paranoia and death is brought with an unusual restraint, and while the "accidents" sometimes rely too closely on the uncontrollable to be completely believable, the film stands as a worthy entry in the Milkyway project of genre innovation.

#### 5.4.7. Oddities

Before discussing the phenomenon of "Hong Kong noir", some remarkable Milkyway works that have elements of the crime film but are near impossible to classify deserve brief mention. These works include Johnnie To's most personal films – *Throw Down* (2004) and *Sparrow* (2008) – which come closest to being "art films" and rise above genre classification. They also include *Running on Karma* (2003), which defies classification because of its wild genre mixing, and *Triangle* (2007), which is clearly a crime film but one that complicates further classification because of its disjointed character – the result of it being a "relay" film, with three directors each taking charge of one part of a continuous story. The fact that these films all were made in the past eight years is a sign of the company's growing financial stability, allowing To and his Milkyway partners to experiment more freely than ever before. This new phase arguably started with the international critical acclaim To received (after a string of commercial comedies and romances) with *PTU* (2003), a noir police film which will be discussed later.

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<sup>303</sup> Some of the Milkyway motifs noticeable in the film are Brain's surveillance of Fong (which recalls *Eye in the Sky*), Uncle's Alzheimer (which brings to mind *Vengeance*), the focus on a team (which here falls apart), noir-like fatalism and anti-heroes, and a storytelling style that requires the viewer to pay attention to subtle details to understand what is going on.

*Running on Karma*, a joint directorial effort by To and Wai Ka-fai, concerns the story of Big, an ex-monk with a bodybuilder physique (Andy Lau in a body suit), who meets female cop Lee Fung-yee (Cecilia Cheung) and helps her to solve a few crimes involving criminals with supernatural powers. Big himself has his share of unusual abilities, one of which is his “Karma-vision”: he sees people’s previous incarnations, which can tell him something about the fate of these people in their current life. Lee happens to be the reincarnation of a Japanese mass murderer during the Second World War, and Big tries to help her escape the cruel fate that awaits her. She, for her part, tries to help Big find the murderer of his girlfriend. Eventually, Big finds the murderer but does not kill him and attains spiritual enlightenment. As this brief plotline indicates, *Running on Karma* combines elements from crime thrillers, romance, comedy and the superhero film with a spiritual theme.

*Throwdown*, To’s very personal tribute to Kurosawa, is a judo film which, as Teo puts it, “tries to capture the essence of Kurosawa’s humanist philosophy propounded as a poetics of cinema” (*Director in Action* 169). It tells the story of a former judo champ (Louis Koo) who has to learn not to give up in the face of adversity. The film takes place in a unique To universe where everyone seems to know judo. While *Throwdown* employs To’s familiar noir cinematography, its theme is effectively the opposite of noir’s pessimism and existential dread. A similar lighthearted To film is *Sparrow*, a cinematic feast and heartfelt love letter to Hong Kong. Although To originally wanted to make a musical, this idea was dropped out of financial necessity, to the director nevertheless integrates music so well with his visual style that it can still be considered as such. Its lightweight story concerns a group of pickpockets who try to free a beautiful Mainland woman (Kelly Lin) from an unhappy marriage to a rich, old pickpocket. The film’s final “pickpocket duel” in the rain reveals its inspiration in the Jacques Demy musical, *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964).



*Triangle* brings together three of Hong Kong's most celebrated directors: Tsui Hark, Ringo Lam and Johnnie To.<sup>304</sup> The film is recognizably Milkyway, but the three each bring their own style and thematic pet themes to the story of a heist gone wrong, resulting in an inconsistent film that is hard to classify. Tsui Hark directed the first part, and kicks off the story of three average men in financial trouble who steal a chest containing an ancient treasure hidden under the Hong Kong Legislative Council building. Both a corrupt cop and triad gangsters are after them for various reasons, however. The second part, directed by Ringo Lam, focuses on one of the three men, Lee Bo-sam (Simon Yam), and his troubled relationship with his psychotic and adulterous wife. Lam gives darker shades to their personalities, and adds a horror subtheme reminiscent of his *Victim* (1999, discussed below). In the final section, Johnnie To drops most of the plot strands developed by Tsui and Lam, and brings the various parties together for an absurdly comic showdown at a rural restaurant, adding some Buddhist elements and his trademark virtuoso style. Hence, what developed as a noir crime thriller eventually ends as one of To's lighthearted exercises in the vein of *Throwdown*.

## 5.5. Hong Kong Noir

The previous section aimed to put the Milkyway crime films in their precise generic context for two reasons: first, to balance Stephen Teo's focus on Johnnie To as an "auteur", and second, to illustrate how To's company consciously strives to fulfill the requirement for innovation inherent in genre cinema. As hopefully has become clear throughout the previous chapters, innovation (albeit within certain boundaries) is a necessity for successful commercial filmmaking, and the Milkyway films are excellent examples of this process that are at the same time marked by a recognizable house style, which can for a large part be attributed to Johnnie To.

In the section that follows the discussion of Hong Kong noir that runs throughout this dissertation will be brought to a conclusion. It was already shown how the noir themes and visual look have been present in films from earlier eras of Hong Kong cinema. This amply proves that Joelle Collier's proposition that the period around

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<sup>304</sup> The three also worked together on To's return to filmmaking in 1986 with *The Happy Ghost 3*. In 2007, To had clearly replaced the other two as Hong Kong's foremost director.

1997 saw the appearance of a “Noir East” is somewhat misguided. However, Collier’s observation is not entirely inaccurate, and it will be argued that at this time Hong Kong’s noir cinema entered a new phase, while its sensibility also became more widespread.

Collier based her argument about the Noir East on three films, two of which were produced by Milkyway: *Intruder* (1997) and *The Longest Nite* (1997).<sup>305</sup> To’s company indeed took the lead in the formulation of a new kind of Hong Kong noir, so these two films as well as two other Milkyway noirs will be discussed first. It will also be argued, however, that it was Ringo Lam who pioneered the type of noir crime thrillers Milkyway gained a reputation for. After briefly discussing two of Lam’s films, a few other prominent filmmakers who during the 2000s have made several Hong Kong noirs will be highlighted, to further strengthen the argument that this is a major development in recent Hong Kong cinema. Finally, it will be pinpointed what makes these more recent noirs different from what came before in Hong Kong as well as in Hollywood.

#### 5.5.1. Milkyway Noir

*Intruder*, an early Milkyway film directed by Tsang Kan-cheung, tells of a Mainland woman, Yieh Siu-yan (Wu Qianlian), who murders a prostitute in Shenzhen and uses her identity to enter Hong Kong. Here she sets out to acquire an identity for her husband, who is still in the Mainland. This she does by imprisoning misanthropic taxi driver Chen Chi-min (Wayne Lai) in his own secluded house, and torturing him to find out details of his life. When Chen’s mother (Bonnie Wong) and daughter Yinyin (Yuki Lai) begin to check on him, Yieh murders the old woman, but can’t bring herself to kill the child too. Eventually her husband Kwan Fai (Moses Chan) arrives, and it becomes clear why Chen was kept alive: they will use his hands to apply for a Hong Kong ID card for Kwan, who has lost his own hands to police dogs in the Mainland. Kwan is even more ruthless than his wife and wants to kill Yinyin, but Yieh convinces him to merely lock the girl into a rock crevice. The

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<sup>305</sup> The third film is *Sleepless Town* (1998), a Japanese production directed by Hong Kong’s Lee Chi-ngai (who was an important partner in UFO) and starring several Hong Kong and Taiwanese stars among a mostly Japanese cast. The work is a highly accomplished example of Pan-Asian filmmaking.

application for Kwan's Hong Kong ID card goes smoothly, but when the couple gets ready to leave Chen's house they see Yinyin float by in a river: the monsoon rains have dragged her out of the hole. The couple is too late to get her back, and they see Yinyin being saved by workers. They hit the road again, Yieh telling Kwan that she will be more ruthless next time.

In Joelle Collier's article, *Intruder* is the first film discussed at length to argue that the years 1997 and 1998 saw the appearance of a new "Asian" type of film noir. What she does not mention, however, is that the film (also) belongs to the "pornoviolence" type of Category III films, which already began to appear years earlier, as discussed in the previous chapter.<sup>306</sup> This does not mean that *Intruder* cannot be called a film noir, but it strengthens the argument that the whole critically disdained "pornoviolence" category can be considered as such (although this assertion would undoubtedly raise the hairs of those who regard film noir as a "high culture" form of popular cinema). Supporting this argument is an article by James Steintrager, who defends Category III as a site for useful critical interpretation and describes it as "darker than noir" (159). What Collier's article then inadvertently illustrates most clearly are the blurred boundaries of genres, and especially those of "film noir", which she describes as a clearly delineated genre with a fixed set of characteristics. This topic will be returned to at the end of this chapter.

The second film discussed by Collier is another early Milkyway production, *The Longest Nite* (1998), credited to Patrick Yau but mostly directed by Johnnie To (Bordwell, "Movies from the Milkyway" 22). This film – along with Collier's third example, *Sleepless Town* (1998) – is closer to what is generally thought of as film noir: a visually dark crime thriller with an intricate plot, morally reprehensible characters (including a dirty cop), and a deeply pessimistic and fatalistic ending.<sup>307</sup> Taking place in Macau over the course of one night, the film initially follows cop Sam's attempts to prevent the assassination of triad boss Lung, as an unknown person has put out a big bounty on the latter's head. Sam (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) works for another boss, K, who is currently engaged in negotiations with Lung to

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<sup>306</sup> True to its Milkyway label, *Intruder* is however less sleazy compared to most other films of the genre.

<sup>307</sup> Grossman, for instance, describes the film as a "post-neo-noir."

make peace between their gangs. K tells Sam he suspects that the old but very powerful Hung is trying to get both of them out of the way to assume full control of the Macau underworld. Sam works to contain the situation, and goes about smashing the hands of potential assassins who have come to Macau attracted by the bounty. One of the recent arrivals is the mysterious Tony (Lau Ching-wan), who it turns out has been sent by Hung to coordinate a plan that will lead Sam to killing Lung himself. Through complex machinations, Sam is indeed put in a situation where he has no choice but to murder Lung, but unexpectedly escapes after doing so. Aiming to assume Tony's identity to flee Macau, he makes himself look like Tony, and the two men face off in a warehouse filled with mirrors.<sup>308</sup> Sam emerges victorious, but when he shows up at the docks to flee Macau as Tony, he is shot in the head and killed in a trap prepared for Tony by Hung.<sup>309</sup>

Similarly taking place in the course of one long night is To's *PTU*. Shot intermittently over a period of three years, it can be considered one of To's "personal" works, but unlike *Throwdown* or *Sparrow*, it can more easily be characterized as a crime film as well. Aptly called a prime example of "Kowloon noir" by Stephen Teo (*Director in Action* 129), the film follows a PTU (Police Tactical Unit) squad during their nightly patrol of the Tsim Sha Tsui area of Kowloon. Early in the night, the squad led by Mike Ho (Simon Yam) happens across Sergeant Lo (Lam Suet), a detective from the Anti-Crime Division who suspects a group of young triads have taken his gun while he was unconscious after a fall. Normally, the loss of a police gun should be reported immediately, but as this would jeopardize Lo's upcoming promotion, Ho agrees to help him recover his gun. The largely independent search activities conducted by Lo and Mike intertwine with other parties' activities during the same night: Ponytail, the big brother of the triads who supposedly stole Lo's gun, is murdered, and his father, triad leader Bald Head, suspects rival Eyeball, who however claims not to be involved. A CID team led by female inspector Leigh Cheng (Maggie Siu) is also investigating the murder, and

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<sup>308</sup> Obviously, Milkyway's motif of doubling characters appears here as well.

<sup>309</sup> Taiwanese film critic Wang Wei has pointed out how *The Longest Nite* integrates elements of the *wuxia* genre, with the film's "skeleton modeled on the convoluted and uncanny plots that are the signature of *wuxia* novelist Ku Lung [= Gu Long]" (Pun 64). Many of Gu Long's stories were adapted to film by Chor Yuen in the 1970s, as has been described in the Chapter Two. When asked about Chor Yuen's Gu Long movies of the 1970s, To however expressed a preference for Zhang Che and King Hu's films, and Jin Yong's novels (see "Author's Interview with Johnnie To", Appendix).

Cheng is suspicious of Lo, who behaves oddly. All parties get together at the end for a surreal climactic shootout, in which a gang of fugitive robbers that just happens to be nearby gets involved as well. Although Lo recovers his gun at a crucial moment and all the gangsters are eliminated, the final sentiment is one of moral ambivalence, as throughout the film, the cops' routine use of violence and their strong instincts for self-preservation have been powerfully demonstrated. In To's view the police and criminals are "different sides of the same coin": "you cannot have one without the other" (Ingham 2).

To's most recent noir-like work, *Mad Detective* (2008), was a reunion of the filmmaker with Wai Ka-fai, who had gone his own way as a director of crazy comedies for the three years after 2003.<sup>310</sup> In *Mad Detective*, we follow Bun (Lau Ching-wan), a former ace police detective, fired several years ago as a result of his madness. Bun used unusual methods to solve crimes: in the beginning we see him re-enact a crime taking the position of both killer (he stabs a dead pig) and victim (he climbs into a suitcase and has a colleague push him down the stairs). The viewer soon learns that Bun can see people's "inner personalities" (in Chinese, the word used is *gui* 鬼, which can also be translated as "(evil) spirits"), and that he can interact with them (causing other people to think he is crazy). Young inspector Ho Ka-on (Andy On) looks Bun up one day to ask his help with an especially complicated case: an officer disappeared a year and a half ago during a chase in the woods, and his missing gun was later used for robberies in which several people were killed. The main suspect is the missing cop's partner, Ko Chi-wai (Gordon Lam), who has no less than seven "inner personalities", as Bun soon discovers. While Bun gradually solves the case, Ho begins to doubt him due to his seemingly erratic behavior (which includes disappearing with Ho's gun and police ID), and he eventually chooses to trust Ko. Ko had in fact lost his gun to the Indian thief he and his partner were chasing, so he killed his partner and took his gun when the latter wanted to report Ko's loss. Ko leads Ho to the hideout of the Indian thief, planning to recover his own gun and kill all witnesses. Bun arrives to save Ho, but in the ensuing Mexican standoff, Ho distrusts him and shoots him to rescue Ko. When Ko is about to silence Ho, Bun revives and finally kills him. Before he dies, he sees a

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<sup>310</sup> It was also To's reunion with former Milkyway regular Lau Ching-wan, who had last worked with To in 2002. His role here somewhat recalls the "tasteless detective" in *Loving You* (1995).

new “personality” approach Ho, telling him how to manipulate the crime scene to make it look good for himself: a sardonic twist illustrating the uselessness of Bun’s sacrifice, as well as the circularity of events – Ho is now becoming a new Ko.<sup>311</sup>

### 5.5.2. The Role of Ringo Lam

In the epilogue to his book on Johnnie To, Teo remarks how this director “spearheaded a movement of action films infused with noir suspense and despair” (*Director in Action* 212).<sup>312</sup> In the list of examples of such films, he includes Ringo Lam’s *Full Alert* (1997) and *Victim* (1999). In fact, Lam should be regarded as an important precursor to this “movement”, as his *City on Fire* (1987) sounds exactly like the type of film Teo describes. Lam’s *Full Alert* in particular prefigures the Milkyway films in several aspects, except its style which is less quirky and ironic, and more unabashedly pessimistic. Telling an intense cops-and-robbers story in which a highly professional cop engages in a game of cat and mouse with his similarly intelligent robber double, Lam’s film is in particular reminiscent of earlier discussed Milkyway films such as *The Longest Nite* (1998), *Running Out of Time* (1999), *Fulltime Killer* (2001), *Breaking News* (2004) and *Eye in the Sky* (2007). Further strengthening the Milkyway connection is Lam’s casting of Lau Ching-wan as the psychologically troubled cop.

In *Full Alert*, the investigation of a murder leads the cop team led by Baau Wai-hung (Lau Ching-wan) to Mak Kwan (Francis Ng), a former civil engineer. They soon discover Mak and his wife were part of a gang planning a major heist, but are unable to get any useful further information out of the couple. Mak pleads guilty to all charges so his wife (Amanda Lee) can be released. Once out of police custody, she contacts the gang of Taiwanese robbers they are working with, and tries to

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<sup>311</sup> In the course of the film, Bun tells Ho that one should use one’s emotions (right brain) and not logic (left brain) to investigate crimes. In an article on the film published in *Dianying Yishu* 电影艺术 (*Film Art*), Xu Le uses this distinction to criticize the film (and Hong Kong cinema in general), arguing that *Mad Detective* is imaginative but lacks in logic. In his view, the “gift” of the mad detective is too vaguely defined: Bun can see the “inner personalities” of people, but he can also relive and see past crimes. Moreover, close to the end he also foresees a future crime, which he tries to stop from happening (“Right-brained-ness”). One could add another ability Xu does not mention: Bun can apparently also see “personalities” people have lost in the past (he finds an “innocent” version of Ko still stuck in the forest, for instance).

<sup>312</sup> As mentioned before, Teo’s use of the term “action” is not very appropriate: several of the films he cites as examples hardly have any action scenes in them.

arrange the breakout of Mak, who is vital to their plan. The robbers' attempt to free Mak when he is transported to court fails, but Mak not much later escapes by his own efforts anyway and proceeds to rob the Jockey Club vaults with the help of his remaining team members. Baau is hot on his trail, however, and eventually captures Mak and his wife. In the harrowing climax, he loses control and brutalizes Mak until the desperate wife picks up a gun and shoots at him – Baau subsequently kills her in self-defense. Mak breaks free to hold his dead wife, then takes her gun and commits suicide.

The plot outline above already hints that what looks like an ordinary cops-and-robbers film is given rich characterization and detail. Baau and Mak are both men haunted by a past murder they committed, murders that are depicted in short flashbacks: Baau killed an armed man in the line of duty, but still can't forget the thug's death throes, and Mak is deeply traumatized by his own murder of an architect who found out about the planned heist. Despite of this, both men are put repeatedly in situations where they are reminded of the pain that comes with killing: Baau at one point almost kills an innocent bystander when he is chasing Mak, while Mak is forced to kill one of his crewmembers in self-defense. Baau's final brutalizing of Mak and the subsequent tragic events were unnecessary; Baau, who earlier told his wife he is considering to leave the force, was simply pushed too far in his obsessive battle of wits with Mak. In short: this is an action/crime film in which killing causes pain instead of catharsis. The cop does not go home happily after killing the "villain": the last shot is of Baau sitting alone in a police car, crying uncontrollably.

Lam continued his depiction of male despair in *Victim* (1999), which similarly contained a doubling of depressed and overstressed cop and robber, but added elements from the horror film – something which Lam also tried to do in Milkyway's "relay" film, *Triangle*.<sup>313</sup> In addition, as Esther Yau has pointed out, Lam made the financial crisis then plaguing the city a part of his story ("Spirits of Capital" 253). Manson Ma (Lau Ching-wan) is a computer programmer who has lost his job and is about to lose his house as well. At the beginning of the film, Ma is

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<sup>313</sup> The strategy of mixing horror and crime mystery is reminiscent of the detective thrillers of the 1950s and 1960s, though they were most likely not a reference for Lam.

kidnapped, but the team of detective Pit Kwan (Tony Leung Ka-fai) later finds him hanging upside down in a “haunted mansion”, where in 1967 a man killed his wife and child before committing suicide. Ma behaves like a completely different person after this experience and refuses to talk about what happened. Moreover, we are led to believe he might be possessed by the ghost of the 1967 murderer: he drinks heavily, is very jealous of his wife, and for no reason at all fills up their flower garden with cement. Soon, the cops find out Ma was kidnapped by gangsters because he owes them money, and that he is helping them rob the money printing company he used to work for. Apparently, Ma and his wife Amy (Amy Kwok) came up with the money they owed the gangsters, but their middleman lost it all gambling, so Ma killed him and buried him under the flowerbed Amy saw him filling up earlier. During the robbery of the company, Ma kills some of the gangsters, takes a case full of money and gets away. He goes to pick up Amy at home, but she does not want to go with her half-crazed husband. This prompts his idea to kill her and then kill himself, so she runs out and is eventually saved by Pit, who chases Ma to a cemetery, where Ma eventually commits suicide. As in *Full Alert*, the cop is experiencing a severe crisis as well: overworked, Pit neglects his family, and suspects his wife of cheating on him. At one point, he almost kills her, just in time discovering it was all his imagination - he makes an effort to be a better husband and father afterwards.

### 5.5.3. The Role of Szeto Kam-yuen

Several of the films noirs of other directors have already been discussed earlier on. Films like the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy (2002-3), *One Nite in Mongkok* (2004), *Divergence* (2005), *Confession of Pain* (2006), *Dog Bite Dog* (2006) and *Overheard* (2009) all can be considered as Hong Kong variations on the noir themes of death, fatalism, despair, etc. Many more films could be added, as dark and troubled emotions have come to dominate the crime genre more than ever. The Milkyway crime oeuvre for instance is infused with nihilistic and fatalistic sentiments, so that films discussed in other categories (such as *Expect the Unexpected*, *A Hero Never Dies*, the *Election* films,...) can be considered noirish as well.<sup>314</sup> Before arriving at a

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<sup>314</sup> The films discussed as “Milkyway Noir” are those that combine noirish cinematography with noir themes. Many other films of the company are marked by only one of these two markers.

conclusion, however, it is useful to consider for once the role of a scriptwriter instead of a director.

Szeto Kam-yuen began his career in television, and became one of the steady Milkyway writers during the first few years of the company's existence – he had a hand in several of its darkest films: *Expect the Unexpected*, *A Hero Never Dies*, and *The Longest Nite*. Possibly by coincidence, he left the company around the time Milkyway started switching to lighter, more audience-friendly filmmaking. While he returned to television for a while, he also continued to work independently as a scriptwriter, and the films based on his scripts in the crime genre are often strongly marked by his style: more often than not, most (if not all) of the protagonists in his films die in the most nihilistic way possible. Recent films written by Szeto include earlier discussed works, such as Wilson Yip's *SPL* (2005) and *Flashpoint* (2007), Wong Ching-po's *Ah Sou* (2005), and Johnnie To's *Exiled* (2006). Most fruitful has been his partnership with Soi Cheang, for whom he wrote, amongst others, cynical works like *Dog Bite Dog* (2006) and *Accident* (2009). Their best work together might however be *Love Battlefield* (2004), which deserves a brief discussion here.

*Love Battlefield* at first looks as if it will be a fairly typical romantic comedy or drama. During a trip to the Mainland, Hong Kong male nurse Yui (Eason Chan) falls in love with a fellow Hong Konger, Ching (Niki Chow). Years later, they are still a couple, but seemingly not very much in love anymore – they constantly bicker and complain about the other's flaws. When Yui's car is stolen just when they need to catch a plane for a trip to Europe, they argue again and break up. As he heads to the police station alone to report his stolen car, Yui suddenly spots it on a parking lot and an abrupt genre switch takes place: the car was stolen by a gang of Mainland drug runners, who decide to kidnap Yui to take care of their wounded friend. Ching, regretful for breaking up with Yui, returns to their apartment and discovers what has happened, but when she goes to report to the police, it turns out Yui is already regarded as a member of the gang. She runs away from the police station to look for Yui herself. Yui meanwhile tries but is unable to escape the gangsters as they take him along on a spree of violent crimes. Finally, Ching finds Yui, but the gangsters force her to steal blood from a hospital – several of the gang members are wounded by now. Picked up by the pregnant wife of the gang leader, Ching ends up trapped

in the car when the woman drives it into the sea. The wounded Yui, who has just killed the gangster boss, jumps into the sea and saves her, while the gangster's wife commits suicide next to her husband's body. Yui drowns after saving Ching, who we last see at the hospital, where doctors were able to save the unborn baby of the Mainland woman.

Describing the film as a "love story in an action package", Cheang has remarked that the action scenes all have emotions enveloped in them ("Love Battlefield" 106). As such it is reminiscent of the 1980s hero films, which, at their best, similarly mixed melodrama and action to create a strong emotional impact. Noticeable also are the themes of Szeto Kam-yuen: the presence of a vicious Mainland gang brings to mind his script for *Expect the Unexpected* – that film incidentally also mixed soap opera romance with a crime narrative. Additionally, there is the typical bleak ending, and another persistent theme of Szeto's scripts: the presence of an orphan child (the orphan appears in *Ah Sou*, *SPL*, *Dog Bite Dog* – directed by three different directors but all scripted by Szeto).<sup>315</sup> The orphan child in these films adds an element of tragedy as well as hope to Szeto's films: innocently born in a corrupt world, these children both offer the opportunity for change and the possibility of continued suffering. Tong Ching-siu has additionally interpreted this "orphan protégé" as a "metaphor for the preservation of the Hong Kong identity" (96). If that is the case, one could, however, wonder whether the death of the orphan in *Ah Sou* symbolizes the end of Hong Kong identity and the beginning of a new era.

#### 5.5.4. Hong Kong Film Noir: Definitions, Comparisons and Masculinity in Crisis

What this section and the dissertation as a whole have been trying to do is to assert "Hong Kong film noir" as a viable, recognizable current of Hong Kong cinema. A basic problem one encounters in such a project is defining, first, what "film noir" as a term actually refers to, and second, whether there is something recognizably Hong Kong in "Hong Kong film noir". A broad definition of film noir was used here, based on what are often considered the basic characteristics of "classic" Hollywood

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<sup>315</sup> One could add to this list Derek Kwok's *The Moss* (2008), where Szeto is credited for the story, but not for the script. An uneven work, it is set in Hong Kong's Sham Shui Po area, which is depicted as a noir-like urban hell.

film noir of the 1940s and 1950s (the use of expressionist style, the presence of a hard-boiled detective or corrupt cop, a fascination with psychological abnormality, a pessimistic worldview, and the presence of a femme fatale), while leaving enough space for specific local qualities that might have an impact on its appearance. This approach has delivered a rich variety of films possessing film noir characteristics, some more obviously so than others. The point of this exercise is, however, not so much to demonstrate the presence of an up to now unrecognized “genre” of films, but rather to show the (overwhelming) presence of noir themes and style in Hong Kong crime films, especially during the past three decades. This use of the term is in line with James Naremore’s assertion that “*film noir* functions rather like big words such as *romantic* or *classic*” (6, original emphasis). Unlike what is sometimes called “neo-noir”, Hong Kong films noirs for the most part do not consciously try to resemble “classic” film noir, and several of the films described here do not use the expressionistic cinematography frequently associated with it, even though they often tell bleaker and more nihilistic stories than classic film noir ever did.<sup>316</sup> Hence, “Hong Kong film noir” has been used mostly to describe what Esther Yau has called “genre films of the ‘bleak emotions’ variety” (“Spirits of Capital” 253).

Still, the use of the term “film noir” is not inappropriate and it is often employed casually in English and Chinese-language reviews and scholarly works on Hong Kong cinema. This chapter frequently referred to Collier’s article on what she has dubbed “Noir East”, as well as to Teo, who proposed “Kowloon Noir” as a potential genre designation for Johnnie To’s films. Besides them, there is also the Mainland film scholar Xu Le, who in his brief historical overview of the Hong Kong triad genre designates the period between 1996 and 2001 as the time of Hong Kong film noir. In this category, he includes the triad boyz deconstruction comedies with their black humor (such as *Once Upon a Time in Triad Society 1 & 2*), the noir films by Milkyway Image and similar works by other directors (such as *Beast Cops* (1998)

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<sup>316</sup> This is contrary to Collier’s argument: she claims that Hong Kong filmmakers around 1997 consciously strived to *appropriate and elaborate* “classic” noir to “reflect the anxieties of post-modern Asia” (138). The influence, if any, of classic noir came for the most part indirectly: via the more recent neo-noir trend, as well as through the transformation of noirish local genres from the past (most directly the hero film). In the “Author’s Interview” Johnnie To reveals that he is not very familiar with classic film noir, although he does mention Alfred Hitchcock and confirms his appreciation of neo-noir directors such as Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola and Jean-Pierre Melville.

and *Victim* (1999)), and the low budget triad films with black humor that appeared slightly later (such as *Jiang Hu: The Triad Zone* (2000) and *Cop on a Mission* (2001)) (“Community and Gangdom” 7-8).<sup>317</sup>

These three scholars all highlight the emergence of a Hong Kong-style film noir around the time of the Handover (1997), which raises some important questions. First, what is the difference between these films and the noirish films of the past described in earlier chapters, especially those of the 1980s, that earlier period during which Hong Kong crime films were sometimes discussed as film noir? And second: is the appearance of noir in this period somehow linked to the 1997 Handover? This second question has been addressed earlier in Chapter Three in the discussion of reflectionism, where agreement was found with Bordwell’s assertion that “popular cinema is better considered as part of an open-ended dialogue with its culture” (*Planet Hong Kong* 37). Other factors influencing filmmaking that argue against a simple mirroring of film and society were pointed out as well, such as genre development and the agency of individual producers/directors. This last element was certainly at work in the late 1990s, as Milkyway’s films played an important role in the reorientation of Hong Kong crime cinema as a whole.

Which brings us back to the first question concerning the differences with the 1980s films. As becomes clear when considering the crime films by Milkyway and others, a central project was the deflation of the heroic gangster and cop stereotypes. This could be seen as the removal of the final barrier that kept the noirish martial arts roots somewhat at bay in the 1980s: if the hero who dies at the end of the film is no longer a “real” hero, and the villain no longer a pure villain, when boundaries between good and evil are blurred, then we stray into noir territory.<sup>318</sup> Films deflating the hero, questioning the use of vengeance or espousing a nihilistic,

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<sup>317</sup> Based on the films he refers to, Xu uses an even more open-ended notion of film noir than has been employed here. Other scholars who mention film noir in a Hong Kong context include Karen Fang, Kenneth Hall (*The Killer*), Kwai-cheung Lo (*Chinese Face/Off* 189-96) and Peter Rist (“Scenes of ‘In-Action’”).

<sup>318</sup> Teo argues that what distinguishes Johnnie To’s cinema is his denial or reversal of the expected happy ending (*Director in Action* 202-13). However, as a look back at the films described in earlier chapters will easily reveal, happy endings are never a given in the Hong Kong crime film – a result, it was argued earlier, of its ancestry in the martial arts genre. The contribution of To lies more in his deflation of the (masculine) hero – a wider development in Hong Kong cinema, but one he played (and still plays) an important role in.

cynical worldview appeared in the 1980s and before, but became much more common since the mid-1990s, with the Category III films at the beginning of the decade basically paving the way. Moreover, as Xu points out in his article, the deconstruction of the triad film in the late 1990s made it very difficult for the genre to recover its earlier shape (“Community and Gangdom” 8). One could extend this argument to the Hong Kong crime film in general.

The deflation of the “hero” was also noted by Bryan Chang in his article on three of Hong Kong’s best actors who gained fame in the 1990s: Lau Ching-wan, Francis Ng and Anthony Wong. Chang’s article is entitled “We’re Not Normal People”, after a line spoken by Francis Ng to Lau Ching-wan in Ringo Lam’s *Full Alert*. He uses this piece of dialogue to examine the rise of these “non-normal men” and basically argues that because the “hero” of the hero films proved untenable, these three actors stepped in the vacuum to portray more psychologically complex and often even mentally ill characters.

Interestingly, Chang compares Lau, Ng and Wong to American actors of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift and Paul Newman, who revolutionized acting by “interpreting roles through character psychology” (91). Earlier in his text, when he writes about *Full Alert*, he notes how in that film “socially-defined killing (for crimes or for law-and-order) or dramatically-motivated fighting is being asked to find a personal or individual reason” (90), which was at his time of writing (around 2000) considered a characteristic of Hollywood cinema rather than Hong Kong cinema. In a short blurb for *Full Alert* published in the Hong Kong International Film Festival catalogue that same year, the Hollywood-like character of the film is stated explicitly. This is then explained by the film’s focus on “two thinking men with independent spirits, a cop and a robber totally devoted to what they do and (...) very good at it.” Also, they “have rich emotional lives that somehow get tangled with their jobs” (“Three Great Characters” 40). From this we can conclude that the newer version of Hong Kong noir is for a large part the result of the increasing attention paid to characters’ (troubled) minds, a shift away from action, and more sophisticated scriptwriting – the same qualities, one might remember, that the *Infernal Affairs* films were praised for a few years later as well.

What is new in the “new” Hong Kong film noir is, in short, its Hollywood-like sophistication (or at least an attempt at such).

One more reason for the frequent use of noir imagery in Hong Kong cinema from at least the early 1980s to the present is the films’ low budgets. In this regard, it should be remembered that 1950s and 1960s Hollywood noir was for a large part the terrain of B-films – or more precisely, what Naremore describes as “intermediates” (142) – and a reason for their dark, shadowy look lies partly in the necessity to hide the poor props and art direction of the films.<sup>319</sup> Johnnie To stated a similar reason for the noir look of his own films, and compared it to traditional Chinese painting, where the painter conceals the spots he does not want to be seen by using white, creating “fog” (Appendix). As Hong Kong filmmakers are famous for the results they can achieve despite low budgets, it is no surprise that noir imagery is commonly used, especially as it is appropriate for the gritty crime stories Hong Kong filmmakers like to tell.<sup>320</sup>

Finally, to clarify what is so “Hong Kong” about Hong Kong film noir, Joelle Collier’s observations on this aspect are worth returning to. For one, she points out the films’ “overt and extremely bloody violence”, especially compared to their American predecessors (150). This, she admits, can be explained by the restraint forced on American films in the 1940s and 1950s by the Production Code, and also by Hong Kong cinema’s general penchant for extreme violence (151). More problematically, she argues that the dominant form of violence in these films – dismemberment – and its function – the acquisition or masking of identity – are significant. This, she concludes, indicates “a deep anxiety about identity in Hong Kong Chinese society” around the time of the Handover (154). Her claims certainly seem valid for the films she has chosen to discuss (*Intruder*, *The Longest Nite* and *Sleepless Town*), but they don’t for Hong Kong film noir in general, even in those

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<sup>319</sup> Naremore describes the “intermediates” as follows: “These productions typically offered a good deal of sex and violence, along with implicit claims to artistic significance and social realism, usually signified by a mixture of expressionist and documentary techniques. They were shot on dark streets or on inexpensive sets, but they also featured well-known actors from the second tier of the Hollywood star system. Sometimes they had enough impact to become “sleepers” and make a good deal of money” (142). He cites as examples Anthony Mann’s *T-Men* (1947), *Border Incident* (1949), *Side Street* (1949) and *Mystery Street* (1950); Edgar G. Ulmer’s *Detour* (1945), Joseph H. Lewis’ *Gun Crazy* (1950) and Robert Aldrich’s *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955).

<sup>320</sup> An additional reason for the prevalence of noir in Hong Kong might also be the global popularity of the form, pointed out by James Naremore (37-9).

noir films that appeared around the same period, such as Ringo Lam's *Full Alert* and *Victim*. This is not to say that Hong Kong identity and the Handover were not on the filmmakers' minds at all – both *Full Alert* and *Victim* make explicit references to the “1997 syndrome”. Rather, it is better to see the Handover anxiety and related elements as an extra layer that can, in various ways, be added in by filmmakers (and critics) who wish to do so. The early Milkyway films (such as *Intruder* and *The Longest Nite*) can clearly be seen to refer to the Hong Kong situation, but Collier's third “Noir East” film, the Japanese-Hong Kong production *Sleepless Town* seems more concerned with the mixed ethnic and cultural backgrounds of its protagonists, in this way reflecting the conditions of its production and considering the effects of globalization on specific places (the Tokyo underworld) and people (the mixed Taiwanese-Japanese protagonist). If one wants to find an underlying thematic concern that underlies most (if not all) Hong Kong noirs, then it is maybe the cliché that crime films reflect the insurmountable contradictions and malaise of capitalist societies, or, more simply, existential dread. What is clear is that these films speak to more than just the Hong Kong subject, and address universal questions – something often neglected in scholarship on Hong Kong cinema.

The second difference that Collier points out is the near absence of the femme fatale in “Noir East”. Again, Collier starts from a simplified notion of noir where the femme fatale is a required presence. As Neale has pointed out, however, several classic films noirs do not feature a femme fatale, while the figure appears in other genres as well (162-3). Nevertheless, the almost complete lack of femmes fatales in Hong Kong noir is striking. Collier explains this by drawing on the widespread understanding that the “demonisation of woman in original film noir” is a “male response to the increased social and economic independence of women in American society” in the post-war period (149). In Hong Kong, and Asian cultures in general, Collier asserts, the woman does not threaten male authority, instead it is the all-powerful Confucian patriarchy that holds these societies in its grip, and as a result the almighty patriarch replaces the femme fatale in Noir East (149-50). This is quite insightful, but really only applies to those noir films that take the shape of the triad film – one could think here of Milkyway films such as *The Longest Nite* (Collier's example), but also *The Mission*, *A Hero Never Dies*, the *Election* films, *Exiled*, etc. It is in these gangster films that the traditional patriarchy is still in place, and the

revealing of its corruption is part of the de-glamorization of triads carried out by Johnnie To and other directors since the late 1990s. If one looks further at noir films not set exclusively in this milieu, such as *PTU*, *Mad Detective*, *Full Alert* and *Victim*, the target is much more ambivalent (the thin line between cops and triads in *PTU*, a pessimistic view of human nature in *Mad Detective*, etc.). Hence, the relative absence of femmes fatales is maybe better explained by the male-centeredness of Hong Kong cinema since the 1970s: as Chapter One has shown, the femme fatale was more common in 1950s and 1960s films. In this respect, it parallels similar developments in Hollywood.

This brings us back to Pang Lai-kwan's argument that masculinity is in crisis in the films of Milkyway Image and post-1997 Hong Kong cinema in general, which, more precisely, she describes as "a crisis of the male cinematic tradition" ("Masculinity in Crisis" 327). This argument certainly resonates with Bryan Chang's discussion of the "non-normal men". Pang links this crisis to the economic depression the Hong Kong film industry has been experiencing since the mid-1990s. This fits into the argument made earlier that filmmakers have been experimenting and deconstructing the crime genre, especially in the late 1990s, but it has to be pointed out that the masculinity-in-crisis argument only works for specific subsets of films and should not be taken as reflective of the whole industry, as Pang seems to argue. Many films in various genres continued to display an unproblematic masculinity at the same time the Milkyway films she discusses were appearing, and it were often these other films that became successful at the box office. It would thus be more precise to talk about a crisis of masculinity in the Hong Kong crime film, but even within this genre there is considerable variation.<sup>321</sup>

## 5.6. Conclusion

In this chapter the films of the Milkyway Image studio were discussed at length to demonstrate how they exemplify the innovation necessary for genres to remain

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<sup>321</sup> One could moreover wonder how useful the concept of a "masculinity in crisis" is when talking about the crime film: crises lie at the heart of crime and action films (and many other genres) – without it there would simply be no stories. Pang refers furthermore to an article by Julian Stringer who writes about the impossibility of masculinity to be reconsolidated in John Woo's 1980s films, which implicitly contradicts her argument that the crisis is prompted by the economic downturn of Hong Kong cinema.

viable, and also to show how their films in various subgenres of the crime film are marked by a recognizable “Milkyway house style” – a style mostly defined by the company’s leading figure, Johnnie To. In this sense, the career of To and his collaborators is a perfect example of James Naremore’s assertion that film noir has become the favorite “pretext” for directors who wish to assert their personalities (27-8). At the same time, the Milkyway films were placed in their Hong Kong cinema context: most importantly, the company’s origin in a period of great creativity and experimentation in the crime genre. Finally, the categories proposed in previous chapters were used here to show their usefulness in understanding Hong Kong films; this categorization makes it easier to recognize specific films’ similarities to others, and to chart the general development of genre filmmaking in the industry. This, in turn, becomes useful when theorizing about Hong Kong films, as hopefully the final section, in which several scholars’ arguments were addressed, has demonstrated.

This final section has also brought the consideration of what a “Hong Kong film noir” is to a conclusion, equaling it to what Esther Yau has described as “genre films of the ‘bleak emotions’ variety.” In addition, the question of what makes more recent Hong Kong films noirs different from their predecessors was engaged, and it was argued that it is their deconstruction of the hero – the appearance of “non-normal men” – that sets them apart from the noirish films of the past. Finally, the differences between “classic” Hollywood noir and Hong Kong noir that Joelle Collier has proposed were scrutinized: their penchant for extreme violence, and the absence of the femme fatale.

## **CONCLUSION**

This dissertation has aimed to bring a relatively new approach to the study of Hong Kong cinema. By tracing the history of the crime film, it both sheds light on the rarely examined pre-1980s history of the genre, and contributes to a better understanding of more recent films as well. The crime film has been one of the most important genres of the last thirty years, and this research in essence has a pioneering function: throughout the previous chapters, promising avenues for further research have been hinted at and identified. Several of these areas for future research are summarized at the end of this Conclusion.

Parallel to this study of the crime film's history, the dissertation has explored the related category of film noir in a Hong Kong context, and by submitting it to a historical enquiry has brought into sharper relief the specific characteristics of the increasingly recognized contemporary existence of Hong Kong noir. In this way, it has also participated in the wider debate about noir in film studies, further strengthening the position that film noir is not a quintessentially American form, and that it is not a genre in the usual sense of the word. In what follows, the historical development of the crime film and film noir as discussed at length in the preceding chapters will be summarized. Next follow some concluding thoughts on the relationship between film genre and socio-political factors.

The history of the Hong Kong crime film can be divided into two quite distinct periods. From the late 1940s to the late 1960s, suspense thrillers and detective films predominated the larger crime film category. While the Hitchcock influence is visible in several films, it is noteworthy that especially Cantonese directors frequently mixed in elements from other genres (particularly the ghost film). The most hybrid subgenre was however the female detective/chivalrous thief action-adventure film, a genre that also illustrates another important characteristic of this period – the centrality of women. With the success of Zhang Che and other Mandarin filmmakers' male-dominated swordplay films in the mid-1960s, the female protagonists and the melodrama quickly faded into the background, along with the previously so productive Cantonese film industry.

It is around this time that the second period of the Hong Kong crime film started and the roots of the contemporary gangster and police films can be found. Hints of what was to come were visible in several Cantonese films focusing on criminals (such as some of Lung Kong's works in the late 1960s), but the Mandarin kung fu films set in the (early) 20<sup>th</sup> century marked another important influence. When the kung fu boom was past its height, Cantonese cinema made a comeback, and crime films played an important role in this process. They did so by adapting famous crimes for the silver screen, by increasingly using real urban locations, and by depicting distinctly local criminal organizations and crime fighting practices. Exhibiting their martial arts roots, these films are also more action-oriented. Both the modern police film and the gangster film made their appearance around 1974 – the year in which the Independent Commission Against Corruption was established. Crime films came to occupy a fairly steady percentage of Hong Kong cinema's output, which was still dominated by martial arts films until the late 1970s.

It was the appearance of the New Wave filmmakers around 1979 that gave the crime film a further boost. In several of their early works, these directors brought a striking realist (and often also noirish) approach to the genre. In 1984, Danny Lee firmly established his tough cop persona and became an important force in the development of the “traditional” police film. Soon after, John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) crystallized several of the themes present in earlier gangster films, and presented them along with his celebrated action style. The “hero film” was born and set off an intense period of genre development and innovation: for the next fifteen years, Hong Kong cinema would be dominated by crime films. Several cycles followed each other in fairly quick succession: most prominently were the “Big Timer” cycle of the early 1990s and the “triad boyz” cycle at the end of the decade. In between these two there was also the Category III boom, where the focus was more on the individual victims or perpetrators of gruesome crimes. Some of the most interesting innovations in the 1990s took place in the new cop soap opera genre, as well as in the various deconstructions and parodies of the triad boyz film.

The 2000s were more clearly marked by the economic depression in the film industry that had already started in the mid-1990s. The “international action” films with their obvious Hollywood blockbuster aspirations did manage to draw in

audiences for some time in the years around 2000, but it were the *Infernal Affairs* films of 2002 and 2003 that eventually proved more influential. Amongst other things, they further consolidated the prevalence of “bleak sentiments” in the crime genre. What they did not succeed in, however, was in reviving the industry, or, for that matter, in returning the crime genre to the dominance it had known throughout the 1990s.

The development of film noir in Hong Kong reflects several of the trends in the crime genre. When film noir was at its height in late 1940s and early 1950s Hollywood, a few Hong Kong films (especially those with femme fatale Bai Guang) explored similar sentiments. While noirish films would be fairly rare in the next two decades, it is noteworthy that those that did appear were made predominantly by Mandarin directors. The period martial arts films and their preoccupation with violence, death and vengeance during the important transition of the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s carried within them the potential to turn into contemporary noir. Indeed, a few of them could be described as “martial arts noir”.

The crime films of the 1980s, strongly influenced by the martial arts tradition, brought this noir potential more to the foreground, both by their urban settings and through the common use of noirish cinematography. The heroic bloodshed films – and their more brotherhood-oriented variety, the hero film – often end with the death of the protagonist, although this death is frequently depicted as tragically heroic rather than nihilistically noir. An influential film like Ringo Lam’s *City on Fire* (1987) and several others can nevertheless be considered a 1980s form of Hong Kong film noir. Throughout the 1990s, the trend away from action and the deconstruction of the hero opened the way to a full-blooded Hong Kong noir. Ringo Lam again played a role in this, but it was this time the Milkyway Image company and Johnnie To who took the lead. The company currently continues to turn out noirish films, and with the success of *Infernal Affairs*, a noirish mood has come to pervade the Hong Kong crime genre in general.

For this Conclusion, it is useful to return to the film-society relationship discussed at various points throughout this dissertation. In an article on the history of the American martial arts film, David Desser first lists five subgenres and then goes on

to discuss the history and main characteristics of each of these subgenres, sketching their recurrent settings, plot motivations, character types, stars, narrative patterns and plot devices. This systematic categorizing is to a large extent what this dissertation has been concerned with as well. In the final part of his article, however, Desser makes the following argument:

*Genres are said to be popular precisely because they answer, within structured fantasy, social, historical, psychological, or cultural issues within the culture that produces and consumes them. A genre may rise when societal issues coalesce around its particular patterns of setting, theme, and motif and fall when these issues seem no longer relevant ("Martial Arts Film" 103).*

While he briefly allows for industrial factors in the rise and fall of genres, Desser ultimately claims historical and cultural factors are more important (Ibid.). This is a fairly common attitude in writings about genre, but one this dissertation has sought to complicate: history and culture are important, but the way they relate to cinema is far from straightforward. Earlier, Bordwell's proposal to regard this film-society relationship in terms of a "cultural conversation" was endorsed. Some of the ideas put forward in previous chapters will here be brought together to try and explain certain turning points in the development of the crime film and their connection to social, historical and political change. Unlike what Desser does with the martial arts film, the crime genre will not be taken as one coherent category of which the emergence is explainable by one or two social phenomena. Instead, Fran Mason's approach to genre is adopted. Mason understands genre as "a field of operations which makes available a range of textual tropes, semiotic codes and narrative patterns", and as "a site of possibility or a space that allows things to happen, rather than a reified codification of delimited conventions" (xv).

The first important shift (or rather fracture) that should be explored is the one that took place in the late 1960s. In Chapter One, it was noted how many suspense and detective thrillers were set in luxurious mansions and took on traits of the family melodrama, the dominant genre of the period. Even the rare gangster movies of that era tended to take place in the *domestic* sphere. From this point of view, the radical break with tradition that Zhang Che's influential martial arts films presented was that they were set in the *public* sphere. Moreover, they exhibit a rebellious,

passionate attitude that resonated with the times: the late 1960s was a period of serious social upheaval in Hong Kong, and was also the time that local social movements and protests began to take shape. Unlike their parents and grandparents, who mostly were poor immigrants who had fled China in the 1940s and 1950s, the younger generation regarded Hong Kong as its home, and became more interested in trying to determine its future. As Zhang himself notes in his autobiography about his swordplay (or *wuxia*) films of this era: “My *wuxia* films were often tinted with the passions of the time – an illustration of the impact of the times on works of art” (87). As was argued in Chapter Two, Zhang for some time also took the lead in the development of the crime film, although he was soon replaced by younger directors more in tune with contemporary Hong Kong.

In 1974, another important historical event directly gave the crime film a strong impulse: the public outcry against corruption and the establishment of the ICAC. As was mentioned in the Introduction, the ICAC played an important role in enhancing the legitimacy of the police, so the depiction of cop heroes would become more acceptable. These heroes could in turn be used to poke fun at or criticize the colonial authorities, through the figure of the usually unsympathetic British police superior. As Traver notes, the establishment of the ICAC also led to increased attempts of the police to deal with the triads: several major operations were mounted to address this problem in the mid-1970s (3). Hence, also the triads entered the spotlight, and the conflicts between the two parties would of course provide good material for films. Another important development was the hero film of the late 1980s, a phenomenon that is often linked to the traditional values the gangster hero embodies vis-à-vis the corrupting influence of capitalist culture. The passionate sacrifice of these gangsters for their “brothers” conceivably could find a lot of resonance with the experiences of the audience in the cutthroat environment of wild economic growth – an experience moreover shared by important markets of Hong Kong films such as Taiwan, Korea and Southeast Asia.<sup>322</sup>

Again, in all these developments, other factors played equally or even more important roles. The restrictions of censorship (in Hong Kong and elsewhere), the

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<sup>322</sup> For a similar argument, see Ong 162-6.

influence of overseas films, budgets, available film technology and changes in the market all had an impact on how films looked and what topics could become popular. Additionally, there is also the influence of previous works on filmmakers, a factor that becomes arguably even more important in 1990s films: the depiction of groups of heroic policemen in the mid-1990s and beyond were to some extent a reaction against the nefarious influence triad glorification films supposedly were having on younger generations. The same can be said about the various parodies or triad deconstruction films that appeared in the late 1980s and late 1990s in reaction to first the hero films, and then the triad boyz films. In this way, genres increasingly begin to lead their own life, until external situations intervene again. The importance of the China market more recently could for instance be a reason for the relative decline of crime films, and also tends to influence these films' basic narratives.

One topic deserves special mention in this discussion: class. The majority of the 1950s and 1960s crime films seem somewhat remote from social reality and are often set in a bourgeois environment that most people in the audience could only dream of. Starting from the 1970s, however, a strong working class sensibility emerges in most police and triad films. In the triad films there is often no negative judgment attached to gangster protagonists and their way of life, as long as they respect traditional values such as brotherhood and loyalty. There seemed to be a tacit understanding that being a triad gangster was a way out of poverty for people without a formal education. This attitude in turn combined with a fantasy of the romanticized triad *jianghu* as a modern-day version of the world of martial arts fiction, where brave men (and women) fight till the end for values such as loyalty and righteousness. Hence, triad heroes as depicted in *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) and *Young and Dangerous* (1996) became (more) acceptable. Similarly, the working-class cops Danny Lee portrays in the 1980s and 1990s frequently place themselves in strong opposition to both higher-level officers and upper-class members of society (who are often shown to be decadent white-collar criminals). In the 1990s, this begins to change, and in Chapter Four the transformation of *Young and Dangerous*' Chan Ho-nam from a street punk to a criminal in a suit engaged in international business was already discussed. In this sense, the depiction of triads reflects reality to some extent, as the triads have been moving more and more into "big" business and over the border into less regulated China (much like the rest of

Hong Kong's economy). While the occasional stabbing (usually related to a territorial conflict) is still reported in Hong Kong media, such events have become increasingly rare. As a result, the depiction of cops and triads in *Infernal Affairs* has become the standard: this film opens with the two moles talking about a luxurious stereo system one of them is buying from the other – both of them appear to be highly capable consumers. Filmmakers have thus made a conscious effort to update their films to the times.

An attempt was made in this dissertation to cover most of Hong Kong's large number of significant crime films, but due to limits of time and/or the availability of films some might have been overlooked. A few subcategories of the crime film were consciously left out to keep this project manageable: the prison film, the courtroom drama and the social problem film can be considered part of the big crime film family, but are relatively negligible genres in Hong Kong cinema. An overview of these genres would nevertheless be interesting, and is thus left for future research. A somewhat special case is the suspense thriller: while the genre flourished in the 1950s and 1960s, this type of film became relatively rare in later decades and seldom delivered noteworthy works. Hence, this genre was not treated separately after Chapter One.

Besides these subgenres, some other areas for further research can easily be located as well. It would for instance be useful to chart the influence of Japanese yakuza films on the development of the Hong Kong gangster genre. The yakuza films emerged as a genre a few years before the Hong Kong gangster film took shape, and could be considered an additional factor leading up to its emergence. Similarly, a comparison between the values governing the life of Hong Kong movie triads and the contradictory values of *giri* (duty) and *ninjo* (personal feelings) underlying the yakuza films could be interesting. More research is also possible into late 1960s and 1970s crime films. As this dissertation has shown, this was a crucial period in the development of the Hong Kong crime film, and with the growing availability of these movies (on DVD), interesting discoveries could be made. The enormous amounts of films produced in the 1950s and 1960s could also hold some surprises – Chapter One only touched upon the tip of the iceberg in this respect. It seems unlikely however that the availability of these movies will improve anytime soon,

and most are probably lost forever. Another useful project would be archival research into the local reception of classic Hollywood films noirs at the time of their release. Finally, the link between local crime literature and crime films is another, virtually unexplored area.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Author's Interview with Johnnie To**

*I conducted this interview with Johnnie To at the Milkyway Image offices in Kwun Tong, Hong Kong on March 9 2010. The interview was mainly carried out in Cantonese, and I was assisted by my interpreter (and friend), Annie Lee Yiu-fong, who also transcribed the text in Chinese afterwards. The translation from the Chinese was done by myself.*

**KVDT: Several of your films have beautiful chiaroscuro lighting, f.i. Exiled, The Longest Nite, PTU, Mad Detective,... It seems to me that this is an important part of the personal style you brought to Hong Kong cinema, a style that has been quite influential in the past ten years. Would you agree with this, and could you tell me why you arrived at this particular dark look?**

I cannot evaluate how influential this look is: being a director, one will never think too much about this aspect while making films, one should only think about what exactly one wants to express. Actually, this style is not something unique to Johnnie To; of all the films I have seen, I particularly like this type. In the films in which I have a high degree of freedom - that is, my more personal films - I will use this style. If it is a very commercial film, this personal style will be downplayed. *The Longest Nite*, *PTU* and *Exiled* indeed all share this style, one could regard it as typical of that part of my career.

I like to talk about different phases in my career. Starting from *The Mission*, the images in my mind had this look. The reason was that I wanted to build up the characters with images. For instance, I would use strong contrasts to cover up some things I did not want to be seen; in this way it is also easier to emphasize something. To "build up" this something, other things should fade into the background, so that what I want to show comes to the foreground. It's a bit like traditional Chinese painting: in the universe of traditional painting, the spots that the painter does not want you to see too clearly will be concealed using fog. In this way the artist can emphasize what he wants you to see.

Maybe the look is also the result of us having access only to limited budgets compared to Hollywood or other foreign films. Most European and American films are brighter and prettier than ours, because of their use of lighting in which details are very important. They like to show everything clearly. As we don't have the means to spend that much on the art direction, it is better to hide the ugly things. This makes creating a cogent scene layout also easier. If you want many objects in the frame, it is simply impossible to make the image cohere. So with this in mind for the art direction and the cinematography, what is most important is to highlight those people and objects I want to emphasize. Whether the rest is all black, fully lit, or whatever, I don't care.

**KVDT: I regard your work since the establishment of Milkyway Image as pioneering a unique Hong Kong style of film noir. I read elsewhere that Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola and Jean-Pierre Melville are some of the directors you like. Would you agree if I said that the noir style and atmosphere in your films is part of their influence on you?**

I believe many directors have influenced me, I can certainly acknowledge that. Speaking of the directors I like, the ones you mentioned certainly belong to that group, and I have probably been influenced by them. But personally, the ones I paid most attention to, remember the best and who influenced me the most are Akira Kurosawa and Sam Peckinpah. These two I can describe to a certain degree as my teachers. I very much admire their cinematic worlds and the way they place their characters in scenes - especially Sam Peckinpah's action romanticism. As to Melville, I also like his style, but when I saw his films I was still small and not capable of analyzing them, although it is possible they already left a deep impression at the time.

I often had opportunities to review Kurosawa's films at the various film festivals in Hong Kong, but Melville's films were not shown so often, and most of them I only saw in theatres in the 1960s and 1970s. So when I was able to watch films more analytically, the influence of Kurosawa and Peckinpah on me was comparatively bigger.

**KVDT: Have 'classical' Hollywood noir films of the 1940s and 1950s (the films of Orson Welles, Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder) had an impact on you?**

When I was small, I attended primary school at Tong Mei Road Government School in Tai Kok Tsui. After school, I had to go to Prince's Theatre [in Prince Edward], to the backstage, where my father worked. Every time I went to the Theatre, I could watch films from behind the screen. I saw many films at the time, but I couldn't read the subtitles, I could only watch the images. I don't know how many films I saw, but many were in black and white. There were films of Hitchcock, Charlie Chaplin, Second World War films, and even musicals, I think with Frank Sinatra. Every day I saw the after-work screening, which were usually Western films, as Chinese films were shown in the morning.

When I was a bit older, I saw mostly Hollywood films, such as *The Magnificent Seven*. It was around this time that I began to know more about films, and also that I began to watch films from the proper angle! At the time, a ticket cost 20 cents in Kowloon City. I saw *Ben Hur*, *Westside Story*, and many other Hollywood movies in the 1960s and 1970s. I went almost every weekend to see at least three or four films when I had the money. I didn't even eat properly: I would buy a snack and go to another theatre. At the time, many theatres were close to one another, and if one show was over, I would go to the next, and then to yet another one.

**KVDT: One of the most striking things about Hong Kong cinema is the high fatality rate: unlike in Hollywood, Hong Kong heroes are often allowed to die a (glorious) death in the end. Your films are certainly no**

**exception. They remind me to some extent of Zhang Che's kung fu films. You have remade one of his films as *The Barefooted Kid* in 1993. Would you agree if I said the fatal endings in your films are part of a tradition? Or has it more to do with your personal view of life?**

I do think my personal love for the *wuxia* world influenced my work. Just as you say, in my films many male protagonists die. I can only say that each person's life experience, or, for that matter, learning and knowledge, can lead to different creative worlds. I am the kind of person who puts oneself in that type of space, because what I know best are the martial arts masters, the sacrifices of heroes and similar extremes of the *wuxia* novels. I don't have any other knowledge, so to say. This is of course to put it simply, putting it in more complex terms makes it too complex: take it as a rather honest way of explaining this. Actually, maybe those endings were the result of not understanding movie scripts very well, which then extends to becoming a fixed element when you tell stories. In essence, the foundation of the story structure was not good. If the foundation was good, there was no need for this type of script to appear. Precisely because it is not good, this kind of thing will appear.

**KVDT: In several of your recent films, it seems you have been moving into a more dream-like universe. This slightly unreal universe can already be glimpsed from the time you made *The Mission*, but it seems it has become more pronounced in recent years (as in *Exiled*, *Mad Detective*, *Linger*, *Sparrow*). What are your views on this? Is this maybe related to your concept of *jianghu*?**

As I said earlier, this way of structuring things is the result of one's own unique maturation process, or one's acquiring of different kinds of knowledge, which changes the way one describes things. So when I finished shooting *Election* in 2006, I asked myself what exactly I could do with my skills. I already filmed so many guns, so many triad societies, but this did not mean I had been very successful: did my mind only contain this kind of thing? At the same time, I asked myself, "What is a literary film?" This question is a bit of a reaction to what I have done before. *Linger* was the first step after I began to think about doing away with guns. *Mad Detective* is also the result of this: it exceeds the cinematic world I can imagine. The film I am shooting at the moment, "*Duomingjin*" [online known as *Death of a Hostage*], is also like this.

I hope very much that I can overturn the space I already had, and search for something new. What I mean by overturning things is to let some other elements enter [my creative world], I don't want people to think that Johnnie To can only make gun fighting or triad films, because that's not how I am. It's rather that at one time I can think of this, and at another I can think of something else. By working on this type of films with this experimental attitude, I hope to find a different side of myself. It does not mean the past works have problems, but I should not be sentimentally attached to these films, otherwise I will feel I'm rather narrow in range.

As to how to put these ideas into a *jianghu* film, that is actually not so difficult. The most difficult part is whether you yourself can think in this way. It's certainly possible, in the world of film anything is possible, as long as one can be excellent in

establishing the film's logic, its strengths and its characters. This is a vision of cinema; if you can implement it, then things are fine. The question is, do you really want to do things this way? I haven't thought of my films in terms of a dream-like, unreal universe, but I would say that my current direction is the exploration of what a literary film is like, and what I can change it into using my own way of thought. That's what I am really aiming for.

**KVDT: So if I understand you correctly, you have basically been trying to move away from *The Mission* since you made that film. But you have made *Exiled* not so long ago, and *Vengeance* most recently. These three films seem very similar. How do you view the relationship between them?**

When I was shooting *The Mission*, Hong Kong cinema was at its lowest ebb. It was more or less in 1998 that the industry began its long slide down. At that time I also felt this atmosphere, and I wondered what course to follow in the future. So when I had a chance to shoot that film, I went to shoot it to the best of my ability. Since the budget was only 2,5 million HKD, I had to finish it in a very short time. When I agreed to do this film, I simply didn't know it had to be done so fast. We couldn't waste anything, because the budget was so small. When I was filming, I didn't even have a script, and we finished it in 18 shooting days - that is about one month. So what did I rely on? I could only rely on what I thought I wanted the most, what I could handle the easiest, and what I liked the most, and that became *The Mission*.

When I was filming *Exiled*, I had just finished the two *Election* films. The two years I was filming these films were very tough, because we had so much data, props and characters. We basically put this ancient triad world into the context of the changes and political problems of the post-1997 Hong Kong society. There were many characters and piles of background data - a real headache! So after this painful process, I made *Exiled*. The title actually refers to myself, I wanted to go into exile! I wanted to return once more to *The Mission*, because I thought that was a more comfortable experience, so when I shot *Exiled*, it naturally resembled *The Mission*. There was also no script and we wrote it while shooting. I took it as a vacation, we even had to go to Macau!

*Vengeance* came out because everyone - including most foreign film critics, film festivals and distributors - said: "Johnnie, you have to make a film like that." So *Vengeance* came out because of *The Mission* and *Exiled*. I really hope that after *Vengeance*, I won't make another film of that type. Because it is really not fresh anymore.

**KVDT: Could you elaborate on the connection between the "surrealism" of these films and Jin Yong's work, which you mentioned as an important influence in other interviews? The atmosphere in some of your films has also reminded me of Chor Yuen's Gu Long films...**

I really like Jin Yong's novels, that's a fact. But I actually don't like Gu Long that much, and I have seen very few of Chor Yuen's martial arts films. I like Zhang Che and King Hu, but Chor Yuen is only mediocre. Maybe because when Chor was making his films, I had already entered television to shoot martial arts series myself.

When I saw Zhang Che and King Hu's works, I hadn't entered the industry yet. So maybe it's because the times were different for me personally.

I think many of Jin Yong's works have had a great influence on my films, especially regarding the depiction of ties of brotherhood (*qingyi* 情义). In their depiction of brotherhood and the martial arts romanticism, Jin Yong's novels have given me a lot of space for my own work.

***KVDT: The most famous character in classical films noirs is the femme fatale - the beautiful woman who manipulates men and leads them to their deaths. In your earlier noir films, this type of woman does appear sometimes, but only has minor roles (as in The Longest Nite, The Mission,...) In more recent films (Fulltime Killer, Triangle, Sparrow, Mad Detective) you have often cast the actress Kelly Lin: she also is the femme fatale-type and is more prominent than earlier actresses you used. Why do you cast her in this type of role? Do you have any plans to make a noir film with Lin as a prominent femme fatale in the future?***

Actually, after *Heroic Trio*, women have been rather rare in my films. I think it's maybe because of all the films I have seen, I remember the more "masculine" films the most – I remember very few women's films. When I am writing, usually men are more important. As for masculine films, many Westerns are good, and in the 1970s there were Steve McQueen's films. The female protagonists in these films are not very numerous and quite similar in character. Maybe this already fixed a certain way of thinking, women only have to fill this role and that was enough – hence I don't write about women. In short, this subtle influence gave me a framework: when I think, this framework will do, I won't go deeper to understand these women.

So why are there more women in my later films? Like Kelly Lin, for instance. I quite like her appearance. She does not act very well, but she is very feminine. If the film needs a woman like that, the battle is already half won! I think her range can be quite broad: she can be very sinister, or very pure, and then again she can enchant you. She has many different layers. There is one more thing I like about her: she does what I tell her to do. Some people have a lot of acting experience, so I let them act and see how I can capture them best. There are also some who don't like to be told what to do, but the result is bad – that's when I get the angriest. It's the same with actors and actresses. If you can't do it, you can listen to me, and do your best to do what I tell you to do. But it only works if you really believe in me, and don't argue with me. Kelly really trusts me to lead her, so we work together very well – she only listens respectfully to what you have to say, and won't go against you. She has turned into a very good instrument through this type of cooperation. It's like with the female leads in Hitchcock's films: most women in Hitchcock's films are beautiful and usually they don't understand acting, but all of them turn in good performances. Hitchcock knew very well how to capture the appeal of women, and used it to drive the entire story.

I think Hong Kong directors are not very careful in this respect. I think each director's way of using actors is unique. Directors can shoot very beautiful women in such a way that they become even prettier, and make not so pretty women look good too; they can turn those who don't know how to act into better actors, and

those who already know how to into even better ones. In my view, one of the most important things is whether this “instrument” suits your film and yourself. Because if it cannot cooperate with the director, no matter how good it is, everyone will be worse off in the end.

**KVDT: In an interview about four years ago, you gave yourself a three-year deadline to determine what kind of director you will be. Have you come to a conclusion since then?**

That’s correct. I could answer you the same way now, I don’t want to trick you. If I can’t slow down, I have no way to change. I mean, I am still running Milkyway, there are other people and other actors who might not be ready to change at this time. I believe I can change after I have cleared all things out, and can focus on something. That could happen very quickly, but also very slowly. I believe it is necessary to search or you will not leave anything in history. And it will turn out that you are just so-so.

**KVDT: Could you tell me a bit more about the projects you are currently working on? I understand you have several films in development.**

I’m currently working on Law Wing-cheong’s *Punish*, which is now being filmed. I am also working on my own film, which is called “*Duomingjin 夺命金*” - it doesn’t have an English name yet [online it is known as *Death of a Hostage*]. Besides that, Soi Cheang is working on a script that will be produced by me. Maybe shooting will start in April. Wai Ka-fai is helping me write a script at the moment, we should start filming in May. The name is *Single Men and Women*, it is a romantic comedy.

# GLOSSARY

## Chinese Names

Ah Mon, Lawrence	Liu Guochang	刘国昌
Au, Kin-ye	Ou Jian'er	欧健儿
Bai, Guang	Bai Guang	白光
But, Fu	Bi Hu	毕虎
Cai, Yangming	Cai Yangming	蔡扬名
Cha, Chuen-ye	Cha Chuanyi	查传谊
Chan, Benny	Chen Musheng	陈木胜
Chan, Eason	Chen Yixun	陈奕迅
Chan, Fruit	Chen Guo	陈果
Chan, Gordon	Chen Jiashang	陈嘉上
Chan, Hing-ka	Chen Qingjia	陈庆嘉
Chan, Jackie	Cheng Long	成龙
Chan, Jordan	Chen Xiaochun	陈小春
Chan, Kelly	Chen Huilin	陈慧琳
Chan, Man	Chen Wen	陈文
Chan, Moses	Chen Hao	陈豪
Chan, Philip	Chen Xinjian	陈欣健
Chang, Grace	Ge Lan	葛兰
Chang, Sylvia	Zhang Aijia	张艾嘉
Cheang, Soi	Zheng Baorui	郑保瑞
Chen, Edison	Chen Guanxi	陈冠希
Chen, Guantai	Chen Guantai	陈观泰
Chen, Ping	Chen Ping	陈萍
Chen, Teddy	Chen Desen	陈德森
Cheng, Ekin	Zheng Yijian	郑伊健
Cheng, Gang	Cheng Gang	程刚
Cheng, Kent	Zheng Zeshi	郑则仕
Cheng, Mark	Zheng Haonan	郑浩南
Cheng, Ronald	Zheng Zhongji	郑中基
Cheng, Siu-keung	Zheng Zhaoqiang	郑兆强
Cheung, Alex	Zhang Guoming	章国明
Cheung, Alfred	Zhang Xianting	张坚庭
Cheung, Cecilia	Zhang Baizhi	张柏芝
Cheung, Jacky	Zhang Xueyou	张学友
Cheung, Jacob	Zhang Zhiliang	张之亮
Cheung, Julian	Zhang Zhilin	张智霖
Cheung, Leslie	Zhang Guorong	张国荣
Cheung, Mabel	Zhang Wanting	张婉婷
Cheung, Maggie	Zhang Manyu	张曼玉
Cheung, Nick	Zhang Jiahui	张家辉
Cheung, Roy	Zhang Yaoyang	张耀扬
Cheung, Tat-ming	Zhang Daming	张达明
Cheung, Ying	Zhang Ying	张瑛
Chiang, David	Jiang Dawei	姜大卫
Chin, Charlie	Qin Xianglin	秦祥林
Chin, Kar-lok	Qian Jiale	钱家乐
Chin, Tsi-ang	Qian Siying	钱似莺
Ching, Tony	Cheng Xiaodong	程小东

Chiu, Chi-shing	Zhao Zhicheng	赵志诚
Chiu, Derek	Zhao Chongji	赵崇基
Choi, Clifford	Cai Jiguang	蔡继光
Chong, Felix	Zhuang Wenqiang	庄文强
Chor, Yuen	Chu Yuan	楚原
Chow, Chung	Zhou Cong	周骢
Chow, Kwun-ling	Zhou Kunling	周坤玲
Chow, Niki	Zhou Liqi	周丽琪
Chow, Raymond	Zou Wenhui	邹文怀
Chow, Stephen	Zhou Xingchi	周星驰
Chow, Sze-luk	Zhou Shilu	周诗禄
Chow, Yun-fat	Zhou Runfa	周润发
Chu, Paul Kong	Zhu Jiang	朱江
Chun, Kim	Qin Jian	秦剑
Chun, Paul	Qin Pei	秦沛
Chung, Billy	Zhong Shaoxiong	钟少雄
Fok, Clarence	Huo Yaoliang	霍耀良
Fong, Alex	Fang Zhongxin	方中信
Fong, Allen	Fang Yuping	方育平
Fong, Eddie	Fang Lingzheng	方令正
Fung, Stanley	Feng Cuifan	冯淬帆
Fung, Stephen	Feng Delun	冯德伦
Fung, Ying-seong	Feng Yingxiang	冯应湘
Gu, Eryi	Gu Eryi	顾而已
Gu, Feng	Gu Feng	谷峰
Gu, Long	Gu Long	古龙
Ha, Pat	Xia Wenxi	夏文汐
Ha, Ping	Xia Ping	夏萍
Heung, Charles	Xiang Huaqiang	向华强
Ho, Kian-ngiap	He Jianye	何建业
Ho, Leonard	He Guanchang	何冠昌
Ho, Lily	He Lili	何莉莉
Ho, Meng-hua	He Menghua	何梦华
Ho, Yin	He Xian	何贤
Hou, Hsiao-hsien	Hou Xiaoxian	侯孝贤
Hu, King	Hu Jinqian	胡金铨
Hua, Shan	Hua Shan	华山
Hua, Yihong	Hua Yihong	华一泓
Huang, Yu	Huang Yu	黄域
Hui, Ann	Xu Anhua	许鞍华
Hui, Michael	Xu Guanwen	许冠文
Hui, Siu-hung	Xu Shaoxiong	许绍雄
Hung, Sammo	Hong Jinbao	洪金宝
Inoue, Umetsugu	Jingshang Meici	井上梅次
Jiang, Boying	Jiang Boying	蒋伯英
Jin, Han	Jin Han	金汉
Kar, Patsy	Jia Ling	嘉玲
Ko, Eddy	Gao Xiong	高雄
Kong, Suet	Jiang Xue	江雪
Koo, Louis	Gu Tianle	古天乐
Kuei, Chih-hung	Gui Zhihong	桂治洪
Kwan, Hoi-san	Guan Haishan	关海山
Kwan, Stanley	Guan Jinpeng	关锦鹏

Kwan, Suki	Guan Xiumei	关秀媚
Kwan, Tak-hing	Guan Dexing	关德兴
Kwok, Aaron	Guo Fucheng	郭富城
Kwok, Amy	Guo Aiming	郭藹明
Kwok, Derek	Guo Zijian	郭子健
Lai, Gigi	Li Zi	黎姿
Lai, Leon	Li Ming	黎明
Lai, Wayne	Li Yaoxiang	黎耀祥
Lai, Yuki	Lai Yuantong	赖苑彤
Lam, Bosco	Lin Qinglong	林庆隆
Lam, Dante	Lin Chaoxian	林超贤
Lam, David	Lin Delu	林德禄
Lam, Gordon	Lin Jiadong	林家栋
Lam, Karena	Lin Jiaxin	林嘉欣
Lam, Kau	Lin Jiao	林蛟
Lam, Kuen	Lin Quan	林权
Lam, Nai-choi	Lan Naicai	藍乃才
Lam, Ringo	Lin Lingdong	林岭东
Lam, Stephanie	Lin Meizhen	林美贞
Lam, Suet	Lin Xue	林雪
Lau, Andrew	Liu Weiqiang	刘伟强
Lau, Andy	Liu Dehua	刘德华
Lau, Ching-wan	Liu Qingyun	刘青云
Lau, Damian	Liu Songren	刘松仁
Lau, Lawrence	Liu Guochang	刘国昌
Lau, Shing-hon	Liu Chenghan	刘成汉
Law, Alex	Luo Qirui	罗启锐
Law, Chi-leung	Luo Zhiliang	罗志良
Law, Clara	Luo Zhuoyao	罗卓瑶
Law, Lan	Luo Lan	罗兰
Law, Norman	Luo Wen	罗文
Law, Wing-cheong	Luo Yongchang	罗永昌
Lee, Amanda	Li Huimin	李蕙敏
Lee, Ang	Li An	李安
Lee, Bruce	Li Xiaolong	李小龙
Lee, Chi-ngai	Li Zhiyi	李志毅
Lee, Danny	Li Xiuxian	李修贤
Lee, Carman	Li Ruotong	李若彤
Lee, Pang-fei	Li Pengfei	李鹏飞
Lee, Pui-kuen	Li Peiquan	李沛权
Lee, Sam	Li Cansen	李灿森
Lee, Sun-fung	Li Chenfeng	李晨风
Lee, Waise	Li Zixiong	李子雄
Leong, Po-chih	Liang Puzhi	梁普智
Leung, Anson	Liang Junyi	梁俊一
Leung, Edmond	Liang Hanwen	梁汉文
Leung, Jade	Liang Cheng	梁琤
Leung, Patrick	Liang Baijian	梁柏坚
Leung, Tony Chiu-wai	Liang Chaowei	梁朝伟
Leung, Tony Ka-fai	Liang Jiahui	梁家辉
Li, Hanxiang	Li Hanxiang	李翰祥
Li, Jet	Li Lianjie	李连杰
Li, Lihua	Li Lihua	李丽华

Li, Mei  
Li, Pingqian  
Li, Wenders  
Li, Ying  
Li, Zuyong  
Lin, Kelly  
Ling, Ivy  
Liu, Annie  
Lo, Gallen  
Lo, Lieh  
Loh, Betty  
Lok, Kung  
Lu, Ching-ting  
Lui, Kei  
Lui, Ray  
Luk, Jamie  
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Luo, Wei  
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Man, Oi-lan  
Mao, Angela  
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Mitsuo, Murayama  
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Miu, Kiu-wai  
Miu, Tony  
Mo, Lily  
Mok, Hong-si  
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Ng, Siu-wan  
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Pei, Betty  
Qiu, Gangjian  
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Wen Ailan  
Mao Ying  
Ma Xu Weibang  
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Miao Qiaowei  
Miao Jianhui  
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Mo Kangshi  
Mei Yanfang  
Wu Yijiang  
Wu Chufan  
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Wu Zhixiong  
Wu Junru  
Wu Siyuan  
Wu Xihao  
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Wu Hui  
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Peng Shun  
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文爱兰  
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Xu, Xinyuan  
Yam, Simon  
Yang, Evan  
Yau, Chingmy  
Yau, Herman  
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Yeoh, Michelle  
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Yip, Tin-shing  
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Yip, Wilson  
Yiu, Wai  
You, Yong  
Yu, Dennis  
Yu, So-chau  
Yue, Feng  
Yuch, Hua  
Yuen, Biao  
Yuen, Bun  
Yuen, James  
Yuen, Wo-ping  
Yung, Peter  
Zen, Rachel  
Zhang, Che  
Zhang, Jingchu  
Zhang, Shankun  
Zhang, Yang  
Zhang, Ying  
Zhang, Zhongwen  
Zhong, Guoren

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Huang Huahe  
Huang Yao  
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Wu Yanzu  
Hu Jia  
Hu, Peng  
Wu Qianlian  
Xu Xinyuan  
Ren Dahua  
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Qiu Shuzhen  
Qiu Litao  
You Naihai  
You Dazhi  
Ye Xuan  
Yi Qiushui  
Er Dongsheng  
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Zhen Zidan  
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Yang Gongru  
Yang Gongliang  
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Ye Zimei  
Ye Tong  
Ye Dexian  
Ye Weimin  
Ye Jinhong  
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Ye Weixin  
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You Yong  
Yu Yunkang  
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<i>Charlie Chan Matches Wits</i>	<i>Chen Chali douzhi</i>	陈查礼斗智黑霸王
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<i>Fascinating Messenger, The</i>	<i>Gou hun shi zhe</i>	勾魂使者
<i>Father and Son</i>	<i>Fuzi qing</i>	父子情
<i>Final Option, The</i>	<i>Fei hu xiongxin</i>	飞虎雄心
<i>Final Victory</i>	<i>Zuihou shengli</i>	最后胜利
<i>Fire of Conscience</i>	<i>Huo long</i>	火龙
<i>First Option</i>	<i>Fei hu</i>	飞虎
<i>First Shot</i>	<i>Lianzheng di yi ji</i>	廉政第一击
<i>Fist of Fury</i>	<i>Jing wu men</i>	精武门
<i>Five Billion Dollar Legacy, The</i>	<i>Yichan wu yi yuan</i>	遗产五亿圆
<i>Five Tiger Heroes</i>	<i>Wu hu jiang</i>	五虎将
<i>Flame in Ashes</i>	<i>Dixia huohua</i>	地下火花
<i>Flaming Brothers</i>	<i>Jianghu longhudou</i>	江湖龙虎斗
<i>Flashpoint</i>	<i>Daohuoxian</i>	导火线
<i>Flying Guillotine, The</i>	<i>Xie dizi</i>	血滴子
<i>Forgotten Woman, A</i>	<i>Dangfu xin</i>	荡妇心
<i>Friends</i>	<i>Pengyou</i>	朋友
<i>Full Alert</i>	<i>Gaodu jiebei</i>	高度戒备
<i>Full Contact</i>	<i>Xiadao Gao Fei</i>	侠盗高飞
<i>Full Moon in New York</i>	<i>Ren zai Niuyue</i>	人在纽约
<i>Fulltime Killer</i>	<i>Quanzhi shashou</i>	全职杀手



<i>Killer Clans</i>	<i>Liuxing hudie jian</i>	流星蝴蝶剑
<i>Killer Constable</i>	<i>Wan ren zhan</i>	万人斩
<i>King of Robbery</i>	<i>Han fei</i>	悍匪
<i>Kiss of Death</i>	<i>Dunü</i>	毒女
<i>Lady Exterminator</i>	<i>A Sir du hou laohu qiang</i>	阿 Sir 毒后老虎枪
<i>Lady Professional, The</i>	<i>Nü shashou</i>	女杀手
<i>Last Message, The</i>	<i>Tiancai yu baichi</i>	天才与白痴
<i>Law Don</i>	<i>Jiafa</i>	家法
<i>Law Enforcer, The</i>	<i>Huangjia fan</i>	皇家饭
<i>Law with Two Phases</i>	<i>Gongpu</i>	公仆
<i>Lee Rock 1</i>	<i>Wuyi tanzhang Lei Luo zhuan</i>	五亿探长雷洛传
<i>Lee Rock 2</i>	<i>Wuyi tanzhang Lei Luo</i>	五亿探长雷洛传 2
	<i>zhuan 2 zhi fuzi qingchou</i>	之父子情仇
<i>Legal Innocence</i>	<i>Rong shi qi an</i>	溶尸奇案
<i>Legend of the Chiuchow Brothers</i>	<i>Si da jiazu zhi</i>	四大家族之
	<i>longhu xiongdi</i>	龙虎兄弟
<i>Legendary Tai Fei, The</i>	<i>Guhuozei jiqing pian</i>	古惑仔激情篇
	<i>Hongxing Da Fei Ge</i>	洪兴大飞哥
<i>Lexicon of Love, The</i>	<i>Fengliu bao jian</i>	风流宝鉴
<i>Lifeline</i>	<i>Shiwan huoji</i>	十万火急
<i>Little Godfather from Hong Kong</i>	<i>Xianggang xiao jiaofu</i>	香港小教父
<i>Log, The</i>	<i>Sange shoushang de jingcha</i>	三个受伤的警察
<i>Long Arm of the Law</i>	<i>Shenggang qibing</i>	省港旗兵
<i>Long Arm of the Law 2</i>	<i>Shenggang qibing 2</i>	省港旗兵 2
<i>Long Arm of the Law 3</i>	<i>Shenggang qibing 3</i>	省港旗兵 3
<i>Long Arm of the Law 4:</i>	<i>Shenggang qibing 4:</i>	省港旗兵 4:
<i>Underground Express</i>	<i>Dixia Tongdao</i>	地下通道
<i>Longest Nite, The</i>	<i>An hua</i>	暗花
<i>Lord of East China Sea</i>	<i>Suiyue fengyun zhi</i>	岁月风云之
	<i>Shanghai huangdi</i>	上海皇帝
<i>Love and Hate in Jianghu</i>	<i>Jianghu enchou</i>	江湖恩仇
<i>Love Battlefield</i>	<i>Ai zuozhan</i>	爱 作战
<i>Love Stealer</i>	<i>Qing zei</i>	情贼
<i>Loving You</i>	<i>Wu wei shentan</i>	无味神探
<i>Mad Detective</i>	<i>Shen tan</i>	神探
<i>Mad Monk, The</i>	<i>Ji gong</i>	济公
<i>Made in Hong Kong</i>	<i>Xianggang zhizao</i>	香港制造
<i>Magic Blade, The</i>	<i>Tianya, mingyue, dao</i>	天涯, 明月, 刀
<i>Man from Hong Kong, The</i>	<i>Zhi dao huang long</i>	直捣黄龙
<i>Man Killer against the Tricky Man</i>	<i>Sharen dazhan niu ji shen</i>	杀人王大战扭记深
<i>Man of Iron</i>	<i>Chou Lianhuan</i>	仇连环
<i>Man on the Brink</i>	<i>Bianyuan ren</i>	边缘人
<i>Man Wanted</i>	<i>Wangjiao de tiankong</i>	旺角的天空
<i>Men Suddenly in Black</i>	<i>Dazhangfu</i>	大丈夫
<i>Mercenaries from Hong Kong</i>	<i>Lie mo zhe</i>	猎魔者
<i>Metade Fumaca</i>	<i>Ban zhi yan</i>	半支烟
<i>Mission, The</i>	<i>Qiang huo</i>	枪火
<i>Modern Red Chamber Dream</i>	<i>Xin honglou meng</i>	新红楼梦
<i>Moment of Romance, A</i>	<i>Tian ruo you qing</i>	天若有情
<i>Moment of Romance, A 2</i>	<i>Tian ruo you qing 2:</i>	天若有情 2 之
	<i>Tian chang di jiu</i>	天长地久
<i>Moment of Romance, A 3</i>	<i>Tian ruo you qing 3:</i>	天若有情 3
	<i>Fenghuo jiaren</i>	烽火佳人

<i>Mongkok Story</i>	<i>Wangjiao fengyun</i>	旺角风云
<i>Moss, The</i>	<i>Qingtai</i>	青苔
<i>Moving Targets</i>	<i>2004 Xin zha shixiong</i>	2004 新扎师兄
<i>Murder on the Beach</i>	<i>Jiu jiu jiu haitan ming an</i>	九九九海滩命案
<i>My Heart Is that Eternal Rose</i>	<i>Shashou hudie meng</i>	杀手蝴蝶梦
<i>Mysterious Night in a Dead Corner</i>	<i>Siwang jiao zhi ye</i>	死亡角之夜
<i>Naked Killer</i>	<i>Chiluo gaoyang</i>	赤裸羔羊
<i>Needing You...</i>	<i>Gunan guanü</i>	孤男寡女
<i>Net of Divine Retribution, The</i>	<i>Tianwang huihui</i>	天网恢恢
<i>New Police Story</i>	<i>Xin jingcha gushi</i>	新警察故事
<i>Nightmare</i>	<i>Zhenbian jinghun</i>	枕边惊魂
<i>Odd One Dies, The</i>	<i>Liang ge zhi neng huo yi ge</i>	两个只能活一个
<i>On the Edge</i>	<i>Hei bai dao</i>	黑白道
<i>On the Run</i>	<i>Wangming yuanyang</i>	亡命鸳鸯
<i>Once a Gangster</i>	<i>Fei sha feng zhongzhuan</i>	飞砂风中转
<i>Once Upon a Time in Triad Society</i>	<i>Wangjiao zha Fit ren</i>	旺角渣 Fit 人
<i>Once Upon a Time in Triad Society 2</i>	<i>Qu ba! Zha Fit ren bingtuan</i>	去吧! 渣 Fit 人兵团
<i>One Nite in Mongkok</i>	<i>Wangjiao hei ye</i>	旺角黑夜
<i>Once a Thief</i>	<i>Congheng sihai</i>	纵横四海
<i>Operation Billionaires</i>	<i>Jing tian da zei wang</i>	惊天大贼王
<i>Option Zero</i>	<i>G4 tegoñg</i>	G4 特工
<i>Organized Crime and Triad Bureau</i>	<i>Zhong an shi lu O ji</i>	重案实录 O 记
<i>Overheard</i>	<i>Qieting fengyun</i>	窃听风云
<i>Payoff</i>	<i>Duji</i>	毒计
<i>Peace Hotel</i>	<i>Heping fandan</i>	和平饭店
<i>Police Force</i>	<i>Jingcha</i>	警察
<i>Police Story</i>	<i>Jingcha gushi</i>	警察故事
<i>Police Story 2</i>	<i>Jingcha gushi 2</i>	警察故事 2
<i>Police Story 3: Super Cop</i>	<i>Jingcha gushi 3:</i>	警察故事 3 之
	<i>Chaoji jingcha</i>	超級警察
<i>Police Story 4: First Strike</i>	<i>Jingcha gushi 4:</i>	警察故事 4 之
	<i>Jiandan renwu</i>	简单任务
<i>Portland Street Blues</i>	<i>Guhuozaì qingyi pian zhi</i>	古惑仔情义篇之
	<i>Hongxing shisan mei</i>	洪兴十三妹
<i>Powerful Four</i>	<i>Si da tanzhang</i>	四大探长
<i>Pretty Woman</i>	<i>Qing ben jiaren</i>	卿本佳人
<i>Prison on Fire</i>	<i>Jianyu fengyun</i>	监狱风云
<i>Prison on Fire 2</i>	<i>Jianyu fengyun 2: Taofan</i>	监狱风云: 逃犯
<i>Protégé</i>	<i>Mentu</i>	门徒
<i>Psycho, The</i>	<i>Yeban youling</i>	夜半幽灵
<i>PTU</i>	<i>PTU</i>	PTU
<i>Purple Storm</i>	<i>Ziyu fengbao</i>	紫雨风暴
<i>Queen of the Underworld</i>	<i>Ye shenghuo nü wang</i>	夜生活女王
	<i>Xia jie chuanqi</i>	霞姐传奇
<i>Rascal Billionaire, The</i>	<i>Baifen shuangxiong</i>	白粉雙雄
<i>Red Shield</i>	<i>Leiting sao xue</i>	雷霆扫穴
<i>Red to Kill</i>	<i>Ruo sha</i>	弱杀
<i>Remains of a Woman</i>	<i>Lang xin ru tie</i>	郎心如铁
<i>Return Engagement</i>	<i>Zai zhan jianghu</i>	再战江湖
<i>Rich and Famous</i>	<i>Jianghu qing</i>	江湖情
<i>Righting Wrongs</i>	<i>Zhifa xianfeng</i>	执法先锋
<i>Road Warriors</i>	<i>Tie xie qi jing</i>	铁血骑警
<i>Roar of the Vietnamese, The</i>	<i>Yue qing</i>	越青

<i>Rock n' Roll Cop</i>	<i>Sheng gang yi hao tongjifan</i>	省港一号通缉犯
<i>Rouge</i>	<i>Yanzhikou</i>	胭脂扣
<i>Rouge Tigress, The</i>	<i>Yanzhi hu</i>	胭脂虎
<i>Royal Warriors</i>	<i>Huangjia zhanshi</i>	皇家战士
<i>Rules of the Game, The</i>	<i>Xin jiafa</i>	新家法
<i>Run and Kill</i>	<i>Wu shu jimi dang'an</i>	乌鼠机密档案
<i>Run Papa Run</i>	<i>Yi ge hao baba</i>	一个好爸爸
<i>Running on Karma</i>	<i>Da zhi lao</i>	大只佬
<i>Running Out of Time</i>	<i>An zhan</i>	暗战
<i>Running Out of Time 2</i>	<i>An zhan 2</i>	暗战 2
<i>School on Fire</i>	<i>Xuexiao fengyun</i>	学校风云
<i>Secret, The</i>	<i>Feng qie</i>	疯劫
<i>Sentenced to Hang</i>	<i>San lang qi an</i>	三狼奇案
<i>Sentimental Swordsman, The</i>	<i>Duo qing jianke wu qing jian</i>	多情剑客无情剑
<i>Sex-Maniac, The</i>	<i>Fengliu mowang</i>	风流魔王
<i>Sharkbusters</i>	<i>Fan shoushu teqiandui</i>	反收数特遣队
<i>Singing Killer, The</i>	<i>Xiao shaxing</i>	小煞星
<i>Sisters in Crime</i>	<i>Hengdao duo ai</i>	横刀夺爱
<i>Sleepless Town, The</i>	<i>Bu ye cheng</i>	不夜城
<i>Songs in Misty Night</i>	<i>Yeban gesheng</i>	夜半歌声
<i>Songs in the Rainy Nights</i>	<i>Yu ye gesheng</i>	雨夜歌声
<i>Soul</i>	<i>Laoniang gou sao</i>	老娘够骚
<i>Sparrow</i>	<i>Wenque</i>	文雀
<i>SPL</i>	<i>Sha po lang</i>	杀破狼
<i>Spontaneous Confession</i>	<i>Jiu jiu jiu wo shi xiongshou</i>	九九九我是凶手
<i>Stoner</i>	<i>Tie jingang da po</i>	铁金刚大破
	<i>zi yang guan</i>	紫阳观
<i>Stool Pigeon</i>	<i>Xianren</i>	线人
<i>Story of a Discharged Prisoner</i>	<i>Yingxiong bense</i>	英雄本色
<i>Story of My Son, The</i>	<i>Ai de shijie</i>	爱的世界
<i>Story of Woo Viet, The</i>	<i>Hu Yue de gu shi</i>	胡越的故事
<i>Strange Girl, The</i>	<i>Renhai qihua</i>	人海奇花
<i>Strange Woman, A</i>	<i>Yidai yaoji</i>	一代妖姬
<i>Supercop 2</i>	<i>Chaoji jihua</i>	超级计划
<i>Suspicion</i>	<i>Zhuo gui ji</i>	捉鬼记
<i>Sword, The</i>	<i>Ming jian</i>	名剑
<i>System, The</i>	<i>Hanggui</i>	行规
<i>Task Force</i>	<i>Rexue zui qiang</i>	热血最强
<i>Taxi Hunter</i>	<i>Dishi panguan</i>	的士判官
<i>Teahouse, The</i>	<i>Chengji chalou</i>	成记茶楼
<i>Teddy Girls</i>	<i>Feinü zhengzhuan</i>	飞女正传
<i>Ten Sensational Cases</i>	<i>Shi da qi an</i>	十大奇案
<i>Thievish Beauty, The</i>	<i>Zei meiren</i>	贼美人
<i>Those Were the Days</i>	<i>Youqing suiyue Shanji gushi</i>	友情岁月 山鸡故事
<i>Thou Shalt Not Swear</i>	<i>Qiyue shisi</i>	七月十四
<i>Three Days of a Blind Girl</i>	<i>Mangnü 72 xiaoshi</i>	盲女 72 小时
<i>Three Murderers, The</i>	<i>Yi ming san xiongshou</i>	一命三凶手
<i>Throwdown</i>	<i>Roudao long hu bang</i>	柔道龙虎榜
<i>Tigers, The</i>	<i>Wu hu jiang zhi jue lie</i>	五虎将之决裂
<i>Time and Tide</i>	<i>Shunliu niliu</i>	顺流逆流
<i>To Be No. 1</i>	<i>Jinbang timing</i>	金榜题名
<i>To Be Number One</i>	<i>Bo Hao</i>	跛豪

<i>To Live and Die in Tsimshatsui</i>	<i>Xin bianyuan ren</i>	新边缘人
<i>Too Many Ways to Be No. 1</i>	<i>Yi ge zitou de dansheng</i>	一个字头的诞生
<i>Tragic Fantasy – The Tiger of Wanchai, The</i>	<i>Zuishengmengsi de Wanzai zhi hu</i>	醉生梦死的 湾仔之虎
<i>Tragic Hero</i>	<i>Yingxiong hao han</i>	英雄好汉
<i>Triads – The Inside Story</i>	<i>Wo zai heishehui de rizi</i>	我在黑社会的日子
<i>Triangle</i>	<i>Tie sanjiao</i>	铁三角
<i>Triple Tap</i>	<i>Qiang wang zhi wang</i>	枪王之王
<i>Troublesome Night</i>	<i>Yinyang lu</i>	阴阳路
<i>True Colors</i>	<i>Yingxiong zhengzhuan</i>	英雄正传
<i>True Mob Story, A</i>	<i>Long zai jianghu</i>	龙在江湖
<i>Turn Left, Turn Right</i>	<i>Xiang zuo zou, xiang you zou</i>	向左走,向右走
<i>Turning Point</i>	<i>Laughing Gor zhi bianjie</i>	Laughing Gor 之 变节
<i>Twin Corpses Mystery</i>	<i>Jiu jiu jiu shenmi</i>	九九九神秘
	<i>shuang shi an</i>	双尸案
<i>Twist</i>	<i>Zei wang</i>	贼王
<i>Undeclared War</i>	<i>Shengzhan fengyun</i>	圣战风云
<i>Undercover</i>	<i>Weixian renwu</i>	危险人物
<i>Underground Banker</i>	<i>Xianggang qi an zhi</i>	香港奇案之
	<i>xixue gui li wang</i>	吸血贵利王
<i>Unfaithful Woman, An</i>	<i>Dangfu xin</i>	荡妇心
<i>Untold Story, The</i>	<i>Baxian fandan zhi</i>	八仙饭店之
	<i>renrou chashaobao</i>	人肉叉烧饱
<i>Vengeance (2009)</i>	<i>Fuchou</i>	复仇
<i>Vengeance! (1970)</i>	<i>Baochou</i>	报仇
<i>Vengeance Is Mine</i>	<i>Xie yi tianshi</i>	血衣天使
<i>Vice Squad 633</i>	<i>Liu san san</i>	六三三
<i>Victim</i>	<i>Mu lu xiongguang</i>	目露凶光
<i>Victims, The</i>	<i>Xuehai chou</i>	血海仇
<i>War Named Desire, A</i>	<i>Ai yu cheng</i>	爱与诚
<i>Watching Home Town</i>	<i>Wang xiang</i>	望乡
<i>Way of the Dragon, The</i>	<i>Meng long guo jiang</i>	猛龙过江
<i>Ways of Love, The</i>	<i>Langxin rutie</i>	郎心如铁
<i>Web of Deception</i>	<i>Jinghun ji</i>	惊魂记
<i>Where a Good Man Goes</i>	<i>Zaijian A Lang</i>	再见阿郎
<i>Who Is Black Rose?</i>	<i>Hei meigui yu hei meigui</i>	黑玫瑰与黑玫瑰
<i>Wild</i>	<i>Kuang ye san qian xiang</i>	狂野三千响
<i>Wild, Wild Rose, The</i>	<i>Ye meigui zhi lian</i>	野玫瑰之恋
<i>Window, The</i>	<i>Chuang</i>	窗
<i>Wits Against Wits</i>	<i>Yanzhi zei</i>	胭脂贼
<i>Wu Hu</i>	<i>Wohu</i>	卧虎
<i>Woman's Heart Is Never Mended, A</i>	<i>Chang shi emei lei man jin</i>	长使娥眉泪满襟
<i>Woman's Revenge, A</i>	<i>Yunü qingchou</i>	玉女情仇
<i>Yes, Madam!</i>	<i>Huangjia shijie</i>	皇家师姐
<i>You Are the Murderer!</i>	<i>Ni shi xiongshou</i>	你是凶手
<i>You Shoot, I Shoot</i>	<i>Mai xiong pai ren</i>	买凶拍人
<i>Young and Dangerous</i>	<i>Guhuozaizhi ren zai jianghu</i>	古惑仔之人在江湖
<i>Young and Dangerous 2</i>	<i>Guhuozaizhi</i>	古惑仔 2 之
	<i>menglong guo jiang</i>	猛龙过江
<i>Young and Dangerous 3</i>	<i>Guohuozaizhi</i>	古惑仔 3 之
	<i>zhi shou zhe tian</i>	只手遮天
<i>Young and Dangerous 4</i>	<i>Guhuozaizhi zhanwubusheng</i>	97 古惑仔战无不胜

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*Young and Dangerous 6:*

*Born to Be King*

*Young and Dangerous: The Prequel*

*Young People*

*Guhuozaizhi*

*longzhenghudou*

*Shengzhe wei wang*

*Xin guhuozai zhi*

*shaonian ji dou pian*

*Nianqingren*

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龙争虎斗

胜者为王

新古惑仔之

少年激斗篇

年轻人

### Other Films

*Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938)

*Assassins* (1995)

*Backdraft* (1991)

*Basic Instinct* (1992)

*Born to Kill* (1947)

*Bullitt* (1968)

*Desperado* (1995)

*Dial M for Murder* (1954)

*Dillinger* (1945)

*Dirty Harry* (1971)

*Femme Nikita, La* (1990)

*Fistful of Dollars, A* (1964)

*French Connection, The* (1971)

*Godfather, The* (1972)

*Heat* (1995)

*In a Lonely Place* (1950)

*Kiss Me Deadly* (1955)

*Leave Her to Heaven* (1945)

*Little Caesar* (1931)

*Matrix, The* (1999)

*Mean Streets* (1973)

*Mildred Pierce* (1945)

*Mission: Impossible* (1996)

*Murder, My Sweet* (1944)

*Naked City, The* (1984)

*Point Break* (1991)

*Pointblank* (1967)

*Police Academy* (1984)

*Prizzi's Honor* (1985)

*Protector, The* (1985)

*Rashomon* (1950)

*Rear Window* (1954)

*Reservoir Dogs* (1992)

*Ring, The* (1998)

*Samurai, Le* (1967)

*Scarface* (1932)

*Serpico* (1973)

*Silence of the Lambs* (1991)

*Sin City* (2005)

*Suspicion* (1941)

*Sword of Doom* (1966)

*Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991)

*This Gun for Hire* (1942)

*Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964)

*Underworld USA* (1961)

*Untouchables, The* (1987)

*Vertigo* (1958)

*Wild Bunch, The* (1969)

*Yojimbo* (1961)

## Hong Kong Film Studios

Always Good	Yongjia	永佳
Asia	Yazhou	亚洲
China Star	Zhongguo xing	中国星
Cinema City	Xinyi cheng	新艺城
D&B Films	Debao	德宝
Emperor	Yinghuang	英皇
Fenghuang	Fenghuang	凤凰
Film Workshop	Dianying gongzuoshi	电影工作室
Golden Harvest	Jiahe	嘉禾
Gold Typhoon	Jinpai Dafeng	金牌大风
Grandview	Daguan	大观
Great China	Da Zhonghua	大中华
Great Wall	Chang Cheng	长城
Guangyi (Kong Ngee)	Guangyi	光艺
Huaqiao	Huaqiao	华侨
Magnum	Wanneng	万能
Media Asia	Huanya	寰亚
Milkyway Image	Yinhe yingxiang	银河映像
MP&GI	Dianmao	电懋
Nanyang	Nanyang	南洋
Seasonal Film	Siyuan	思远
Shaw and Sons	Shaoshi fuzi	邵氏父子
Shaw Brothers	Shaoshi xiongdi	邵氏兄弟
Sil-Metropole	Yindu	银都
Union	Zhonglian	中联
Unique	Tianyi	天一
United Filmmakers Organization	Dianying ren zhizuo	电影人制作
Win's Entertainment	Yongsheng yule zhizuo	永盛娱乐制作
Xinhua	Xinhua	新华
Xinlian	Xinlian	新联
Yonghua	Yonghua	永华

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