




# City film industry: Hong Kong





It is probable that this has everything to do with my transplant from Shanghai to Hong Kong at the age of 5. When I got there, I spoke nothing but Shanghainese, whereas Cantonese was, and still is, the local dialect. For some time, I was totally alienated, and it was like the biggest nightmare of my life. It might not be conscious, but certainly I have an intense feeling for geographical upheavals.

Wong Kar-wei




# Learning objectives

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- To understand the history of Hong Kong in relationship to China and Great Britain
  - To situate the development of the Hong Kong film industry in that history


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- To contextualize the two versions of martial arts films embodied by the two stars Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan and the two waves of urban films, the heroes cycle and the New Wave, in the particular history of Hong Kong
  - To analyze the cinematic representations of Hong Kong in their particular and appropriate urban, regional, diasporic, transnational, and postmodern contexts



# Introduction




This lesson continues the discussion of the triangulated relationship of a real particular city, the city–state of Hong Kong, the formation of its film industry, and its imaginary construction by its cinema. Hong Kong cinema is the third largest film producer in the world and frequently outsells Hollywood. Its immense cultural output shows the traces of its unique history in an explicit dialogue with its colonial heritage, its Chinese roots, and its transnational context.



Hong Kong culture is shaped by British colonialism, the legacy of China, the simultaneous intentional articulation of separation from China by a diasporic community and, finally, the transnational education, orientation, and business connection of the post-Second World War generation.






Hence Hong Kong's film culture is discussed here in relation to mainland China, the region, and transnational global culture. An active, contemporary exchange with Hollywood of actors, directors, martial arts coaches, and choreographers, and the cult circulation among African-Americans and Asian-Americans especially in the 1970s, have characterized the reception of Hong Kong action cinema in the USA.



The lesson considers the role that the urban–rural binary plays in the ideological conflict between communist China and capitalist Hong Kong. It then addresses the shift from the martial arts – kung fu – cinema embodied by Bruce Lee to the martial arts comedies associated with Jackie Chan,



a shift which coincides with a change from addressing the Chinese diaspora to a transnational audience, and from nostalgia to urban transnationalism. The discussion concludes with the two groups of urban films that have emerged out of Hong Kong and that still continue, the heroes cycle and the NewWave.



# **A short history of the Hong Kong film industry**



Hong Kong was a crown colony of the United Kingdom until the transfer of sovereignty to the People's Republic of China in 1997, and its experience of colonialism and occupation also included the Japanese occupation during the Second World War. Hong Kong's population was very much shaped by immigration from China, which in turn formed a basis for Hong Kong culture.



Throughout the twentieth century, the importance of urbanism in Hong Kong film increased in proportion to the length of time diasporic producers and consumers of Hong Kong film had been separated from China. A first shift occurred in Hong Kong action cinema from mythical martial arts narratives tied to Chinese history to urban dramas that subordinated martial arts to a cool, stylized look with fetishized gun violence taking place in Hong Kong itself.




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In *The Asian Film Industry*, John A. Lent outlines the development of the film industry in Hong Kong to become one of the most powerful and active in the world: witness “Asia’s largest studio complex,” called Movie Town, the high regular attendance at film screenings, and the Hong Kong International Film Festival.







Li Cheuk-to maps out three phases of modern Hong Kong cinema: the “classical period,” 1946–70, which relied on studio production; the “transitional period,” 1971–78, which saw the emergence of kung fu and the disappearance and then return of the Cantonese language in the martial arts films; and finally the “modern period,” which started in 1979 and led to the New Wave, with a “selfconsciously upscale Cinema City look”.



David Bordwell suggests that “the production boom of the late 1980s launched a fourth phase. For one thing, it attracted Triads, secret societies originating in China, who now saw film production as not only a money-laundering device but also a reliable source of income”



Beginning in 1923 with Li Min Wei's film *Rouge* and continuing through the 1930s, Hong Kong was the center for Cantonese films, including approximately 100 produced by about 50 companies between 1932 and 1936. Ultimately, the expansion of the Hong Kong film industry was a result of political conditions in mainland China, which created two groups of refugees who left, however, for opposite reasons.



One group consisted of politically oriented individuals who made films in the official Chinese language, Mandarin, to express opposition to the Japanese. When the war with Japan broke out in 1937, they fled Shanghai. The other group left for Hong Kong precisely because the Kuomintang (KMT, China's Nationalist Party) decreed that films in mainland China had to be made in Mandarin.

As producers of films in Cantonese in Hong Kong, they benefited from financial and trading advantages, including the free import of raw film, cheap land for building studios, and limited taxes, regulations, and licenses. Subsequently, under the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong during the war, the number of Cantonese films made there increased considerably, and while the film industry continued after the war, production no longer increased, because the political situation in the region remained unclear.




The political tension of left and right – the battle between communists and Kuomintang in mainland China – also existed among the film workers in Hong Kong: leftist–communist production companies included, for example, Fiftieth Year Film Company and Feng Huang (Phoenix) Motion Picture Company, and anti-communist companies including the Shaw Brothers and Cathay. Still other film production companies included capitalists *and* communists and produced propaganda *and* entertainment films.






During the 1950s the industry prospered, which Lent interprets as a result of several factors: refugees with “democratic ideas” entered Hong Kong, and new technical developments, such as “deep focus, asymmetrical framing, medium-long shots, and full-stage shots,” enabled more cinematically sophisticated productions.




Steve Fore situates the take-off of the film industry in the 1950s in the context of the larger industrial development of Hong Kong, which “was stimulated by a combination of the post-1949 influx of refugees from the mainland (many of whom arrived in the territory with useful skills and entrepreneurial experience) and the related embargo on Chinese trade by most of the capitalist West”.







The embargo by the West destroyed Hong Kong's entrepôt status, which had made it an extremely important import–export trading center where no import duties were charged. The end of its entrepôt status, however, created a need for new industries, and additional film production companies were founded, producing mostly swordplays and melodramas.




Joseph Sunn, Lee Tsu Yung, Chang Shin-Kuam, Loke Wan Tho, and Raymond Chow were important in building and maintaining the Hong Kong film industry. The company of Run Run Shaw dominated until 1986, when it stopped production.




Run Run Shaw and his three brothers came from a wealthy Shanghai textile family who became involved in film production in the 1920s. In the late 1930s, their empire included theaters and amusement parks in Malaysia, Singapore, Borneo, Java, and Thailand, and in 1958 they relocated to Hong Kong, where in 1962 Run Run Shaw built Movie Town.




46-acre spread that enclosed ten studios, 16 permanent outdoor sets, three dubbing studios, many film-processing labs, and dormitory and apartment space for staff. The self-contained unit kept 1,500 actors/actresses under contract, as well as 2,000 other staff; maintained its own drama school of 120 students; published periodicals (e.g., Hong Kong Movie News) that boosted Shaw stars; and used a wardrobe of 80,000 costumes of all dynasties.



The Shaw studios dominated the Hong Kong market throughout the 1970s, but in 1986 they ended film production because more money could be made in television. Meanwhile, in 1950 Cinema City had been founded by three filmmakers, Carl Mak, Dean Shek, and Raymond Wong, who were interested in film as a medium and were backed by strong investments.



Cinema City invested particularly in big-budget films such as its big success *Aces Go Places* (1982), directed by Eric Tsang, which paralleled a shift in audience taste to more mainstream and mixed-genre narratives. It also produced John Woo's blockbuster *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), the first of the urban heroes cycle.




Yet another important company, Golden Harvest, was founded in the 1970s by Raymond Chow, who had worked for the Shaw company since 1958 as its publicity manager and head of production. Golden Harvest took on Bruce Lee and began co-producing with Hollywood companies, leading to its kung-fu action films, including the Bruce Lee vehicle *Enter the Dragon* (dir. Robert Clouse, 1973), which “grossed US \$100 million in the United States alone”




In 1980, Golden Harvest took on Jackie Chan as a star and shifted production by prioritizing the international over the Hong Kong market. During that time, a few other production companies sprang up, several of them backed by considerable capital and interested in film primarily as an investment, including D&B Films, established by Dickson Pon, and Far East Motion Picture Development Ltd., founded by Deacon Chiu.






Until the New Wave, which began in the early 1980s, Hong Kong cinema was generally considered *popular* cinema, which meant it de-emphasized narrative. Whereas in the Hollywood studio system a film is developed from a script, in the Hong Kong system, a film develops from the ideas of individual directors who make their pitch to producers.




Then the script is written by the director and a writer or team of writers. Sometimes no real screenplay exists or, as in the famous example of Wong Kar-wei, the director writes the screenplay during the shooting process. Thus Hong Kong films are characterized by their episodic nature, which Bordwell traces back to the influence of martial arts and the Peking Opera, maintaining that popular mass entertainment stages “the tension between ‘spectacle’ and ‘narrative’”




Episodic narratives lend themselves well to the depiction of urbanity, characterized by chance encounters, disjointed experiences, and alienation as theorized by Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin, with whom we are already long familiar.




# Urbanism in Hong Kong cinema




Leung Ping-kwan points out that urban culture centrally defines Hong Kong's identity and differentiates it from mainland China. In fact, Hong Kong has developed much of its culture specifically in historical dialogue with China – witness two key dates: 1949, the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and 1966–76, the years of the Cultural Revolution.



Ping-kwan explains that the “mainstream literature and cinema in 1930s China,” was characterized by “a clear-cut dichotomy between the city and the country” in which the city embodied “temptation, corruption, vice, and cunning manipulation,” and the country “innocence, uprightness, and fraternity”. Not surprisingly, 1930s Chinese cinema tended to favor the country over the city.




In the 1950s, the choice of the refugees to either stay in Hong Kong or return to China was played out in the Hong Kong cinema – as a “negative depiction of Hong Kong’s urban space with particular emphasis on its poor living conditions and the avarice and selfishness of the residents in a capitalist society,” or as a utopian representation in which Hong Kong was represented as a “lawful, just, rational, and dynamic place where diverse attitudes could be accepted”.



A third model was a “satirical comedy to represent funny and sympathetic individuals who seek survival in the commercial world”

Hong Kong arrived at a turning point during the unrest of 1967 against British colonial rule, when pro-communists were inspired by the Cultural Revolution in the PRC and organized large-scale demonstrations, strikes, and riots in the city.







Afterwards, the government organized such events as “the Hong Kong Festival, pop parties, fashion shows, the Miss Hong Kong Pageant and so on, to design a modern, Westernized image for the people of Hong Kong, in order to make the residents of the colony identify less with its mother country”. The validation of western values ultimately led to a balance of western and Chinese cultural values in Hong Kong cinema



Contemporary urban popular culture was also influenced by television (TVB), which began in 1967 and offered popular series “with an urban background” that led to the creation of “Canto Pop,” Cantonese pop music. Most important for the Hong Kong New Wave and the reflection of the urban environment of Hong Kong in films, however, was the fact that many of the new generation of filmmakers were born in Hong Kong but trained as directors abroad.



Their “self-awareness of the city and its representation” was reflected in literary texts and films that employed “double or multiple perspectives in their narratives to examine Hong Kong’s urban space”, for example in Tsui Hark’s *Dangerous Encounter of the First Kind* (1980), Allen Fong’s *Father and Son* (1981), and Ann Hui’s *The Secret* (*Feng jie*, 1979).



During the years leading up to the important moment of the return of Hong Kong by Britain to China in 1997, the cinematic representation of Hong Kong took on the function of an allegory, which Ping-kwan illustrates with the examples *The Boat People* (1982), by Ann Hui, and *The Wicked City* (1992), produced by Tsui Hark and directed by Mak Tai-wai.

The significance of urbanism for Hong Kong film is limited neither to the ideological dispute between Hong Kong and mainland China nor to the economic development of Hong Kong, because its film industry also could rely on a special relationship with its high-density urban audience. Because of the generally cramped accommodations, those living in Hong Kong go out in the evening and prefer collective but anonymous film screenings over video or cable-TV in their crowded homes.




In the 1950s, theaters were neighborhood centers and inhabitants of Hong Kong became used to seeing their city portrayed on the screen (Bordwell 36). Bordwell suggests that the rapidity of the dialogue and action mirror the speed of daily life in Hong Kong. He focuses on the tradition of midnight screenings, which reflects the urban practice of film reception, and which created a particular local market and a unique instant-feedback system between filmmakers and audiences that enabled the Hong Kong film industry to be a readily responsive one.






# Martial arts cinema




Paradoxically, martial arts cinema is not a particularly urban genre, but it emerged out of Hong Kong and constituted the foundation of its film industry. As a genre, it embodies the contradictions of modern, urban, industrial society and the diasporic projection into the past. Hong Kong action films have used martial arts and the history of China to create a mythical past of a lost homeland.







As the most famous genre associated with Hong Kong film, martial arts cinema represents a crucial counterpoint to and predecessor of the urban cult of the heroes cycle, which I return to below. Martial arts cinema created its own film language, its own cult audience, its own production companies, its own networks of circulation, and its own stars.



Bordwell suggests that martial arts films reflect the historical development of martial arts themselves, and in fact martial arts films did not rely on choreography for fight scenes until the 1950s and 1960s, when editing became more rapid. Lent explains that in the swordplay films of the 1950s and early 1960s the Confucian code dominated, with plots revolving around “filial ties, destruction of which led to violence and revenge, and the master–pupil relationship”



In the 1970s martial arts films adopted the more action-oriented kung fu, hence the phenomenon of Bruce Lee, star of Wei Lo's *Fist of Fury* (1972), *Way of the Dragon* (1972), which he directed himself, and *Enter the Dragon* (Robert Clouse, 1973). Lee was born in San Francisco's Chinatown while his parents were touring the US with a Cantonese opera troupe and waiting to receive American citizenship. In 1941 the family headed back to Hong Kong, where his father worked in the film industry.




In the popular imagination, Bruce Lee's biography is that of the émigré who returned to his homeland and became "the territory's most famous citizen," celebrating "Hong Kong identity" (Bordwell 50). So the kung-fu martial arts films produced in Hong Kong in the 1970s "hastened the end of the didactic, tradition-laden Cantonese cinema" and laid the "foundations of the New Wave and the slicker films of the 1980s".

While Bruce Lee is without doubt the most important martial arts star of the Hong Kong film industry – his global fame has exceeded his lifetime – Jackie Chan will be the focus here, because I read him as a star successor to Bruce Lee who was intentionally created by the Hong Kong martial arts film industry and who functions as a transitional figure from a diasporic concept of traditional martial arts to a transnational star associated with deterritorialized urbanity.





# Jackie Chan, star of transnational urbanity



Whereas Bruce Lee is associated with the traditional martial arts and Chinese diaspora, Jackie Chan represents and functions in a network of urban transnationalism. He is one of the most important popular and mainstream stars coming out of Hong Kong cinema today. His star persona and his roles are symptomatic of the tension between the idealized and mythologized past and the pragmatic, urban attitudes of Hong Kong culture.




Chan's rise to stardom also symbolizes the successful transnational exchange between Hong Kong and Hollywood, since his films have been distributed in the US and it is from there that he has become an international star.

In order to function as a global commodity, however, Jackie Chan's star persona necessarily diffuses the specific reference to Hong Kong identity.






Kwai-Cheung Lo argues: “People in the Hong Kong film industry are therefore being presented with the opportunity to compete in Hollywood at the same time that they are losing the battle of being able to compete with Hollywood in their Asian markets” In contrast to traditional European national cinemas, Hong Kong cinema never was opposed to Hollywood, but rather adopted a positive relationship to it.




Chan's transition from what is coded as East to what is coded as West was apparently without difficulty, particularly in the following films: Woo-ping Yuen's *Drunken Master* (1978), Hdeng Tsu's *Rumble in Hong Kong* (1974), Stanley Tong's *Rumble in the Bronx* (1995) and Brett Ratner's *Rush Hour* (1998).




# The heroes cycle: urban cool




None of the martial arts films by Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan were explicitly marketed as urban films. But in the late 1980s, Hong Kong cinema exploded with yet another hybrid genre that was fully reliant on the depiction of urban cool. John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) began a series of gangster films that came to be known as the "heroes cycle."




It integrated the setting of modern Hong Kong, the American tradition of the gangster film, including the excessive use of gun violence, traces of the martial arts tradition, and a cool, urban aesthetics.



These new urban thrillers offered stylized, sometimes hyperviolent, male melodrama centered on a hero, but they also, according to Jinsoo An, worked through the anxiety of Hong Kong's impending return to China, attracting audiences with the “relationship between Woo's exuberant cinematic style and the social anxiety driven by the historical situation of Hong Kong”.



An also suggests that by situating Woo's films in the context of the national cinema of Hong Kong, critics attempt to rescue them from the lower status of "exploitation action flicks or cult movies." He considers Woo's some of the most important cult films defined by a particular fan base in the US, but he also regards them as representing "[t]ransgression, or the violation of boundaries".




Woo's films share the setting of postmodern urbanism, masculine action, and male melodrama based on male friendship and loyalty coded as heterosexual by the inclusion of a female victim who is treated with honor and respect. The heroes cycle integrates the local tradition of kung-fu martial arts films and setting of Hong Kong with the transnational conventions of the gangster film.






# The New Wave



The urban and cosmopolitan filmmakers of the so-called New Wave belong to the generation born after the war, who grew up without memories of mainland China and who were often educated abroad, raised on popular culture, and trained in television. The New Wave emerged in the early 1990s and includes filmmakers Yim Ho, Allen Fong, Tsui Hark, Stanley Kwan, Ann Hui, and Wong Kar-wei.



The movement was furthered by cultural funding when in the mid-1990s the Hong Kong Arts Development Council made money and production and post-production facilities available for young directors to create film and video shorts.



At the same time that the directors of the New Wave “revealed the myth of urban prosperity, the dissatisfaction of youth, the uncertainty about Hong Kong’s future and identity, and the myriad problems and societal changes of the Crown Colony,” they also created striking new images of the city with fragmented and sometimes mysterious narratives in beautiful shots and succulent colors.