

From Martial Arts to Gangsters: Exploring the Transition of the Hong Kong Action Genre

NICO DIVIZIO

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

nicoad2@illinois.edu

I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout its existence, one of the most iconic and integral genres in Hong Kong cinema is that of action. The styles of these films have been portrayed through two primary mediums: the flashy martial arts action movies of the 1960s-1970s, and the gritty gangster movies that were massively popular in the 1990s-2000s. Coming onto the scene in the mid-1980s, films like Johnny Mak's *Long Arm of the Law* (1984) and Stephen Shin's *Brotherhood* (1986) were some of the first of the crime genre in Hong Kong.¹ Once these films did come onto the scene, they gradually gained popularity; in the 2000's, these films piqued in popularity, and Johnnie To was the quintessential director of the genre. Examining this trend, it is curious where and why this shift in genre from martial arts to gang violence occurred. In any culture, politics and government are a popular medium in the media. The introduction of social change reflects changes in the cinema of the time.

Whether it be news stories, film, or satire, politics is ubiquitous throughout. The introduction of a new authority would not be welcomed, so the films were geared to disrespect authority and to show the darker sides of Hong Kong; with these new shifts in control, the mood of the cinema would follow, taking the action genre from lighthearted and full of stunts to dark, brooding, and full of tense, brutal violence. Throughout this essay, the impact of real-life events, political attitudes, and cultural shifts in Hong Kong and their influence on the creation of the gangster films of the 80's and 90's will be examined.

II. RESEARCH

Within the action genre of Hong Kong, the subgenre of martial arts films reigned supreme throughout the 1960s-1970s.² This style of cinema relies on flashy moves from the performers, quick shots, and clever visual effects, involving "... reverse motion, fast motion, hidden

¹ Vesia, Michael. "The Gangster as Hero in Hong Kong Cinema." *Offscreen*, August 2002.

² Bordwell, David. 2000. *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 131. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

trampolines, and whirs and whooshes to emphasize colossal leaps.”³ One movie that demonstrates these qualities is *One-Armed Swordsman* (1967), by director Chang Cheh. This is a film that takes place hundreds of years ago, alluding to a more traditional time. In this film, the protagonist, Fang Kang, seeks revenge against his aggressors after they chop his arm off unjustly. There are glorious fight scenes with animated martial arts moves, stunts that use hidden trampolines and clever camerawork, and fast shot changes to create a sense of urgency for the viewer.⁴ This style of film would be the standard throughout the 1960s-1970s, with many others of this style being released during this period, like *Five Brothers*, and *The Magic Blade*. This new style of film would be due to many factors, some of which include “... unparalleled industrial growth, rapid population increase, a nascent culture of consumption, and the proliferation of a youth-based mass culture...”⁵ Man-Fung Yip discusses how people’s attitudes were brighter, and outlook on life was more positive in this time period. Many things were changing for the better between the 1960s and 1970s, especially economic growth. During the 1960s, Hong Kong’s GDP in exports was at 54%, and the government had begun to

engage in industrial planning.⁶ With the newly flourishing economy, the style of the film was made to match the atmosphere at the time; having a movie genre of mainly darkness and dreariness during a time of growth and expansion would be contradictory. The martial arts films of the 1960s and 1970s focused heavily on astonishing effects and graceful fights rather than brutal violence and dark plots, both of which would be seen as reflecting the attitudes of Hong Kong residents within their respective time periods. Another martial arts action movie that reflected the attitudes of Hong Kong in the 1960s-1970s is the renowned Robert Clouse film, *Enter the Dragon*. Starring Bruce Lee, one of the most legendary Hong Kong action stars, the film follows Bruce Lee portraying a character named Lee. Lee decides to attend a martial arts competition on a crime lord’s island in order to gain intelligence about the crimes he is committing.⁷ Throughout the film, Lee demonstrates genuine prowess and skill in fighting, using his Wing Chun martial arts knowledge. Similar to the tricks used in *One-Armed Swordsman*, there are instances of camera illusions and wires being used to create epic stunts for the audience.⁸

With their fast-paced shots and sense of

³ Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 130.

⁴ *One-Armed Swordsman*, Directed by Chang Cheh (Shaw Brothers Studio, 1967)

⁵ Man-Fung, Yip. 2014. “In the Realm of the Senses: Sensory Realism, Speed, and Hong Kong Martial Arts Cinema.” *Cinema Journal* 53 (4): 81

⁶ Schenk, Catherine. “Economic History of Hong Kong”. EH.Net Encyclopedia, edited by Robert

Whaples. March 16, 2008. URL <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/economic-history-of-hong-kong/>

⁷ Bordwell, *Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 130..

⁸ Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 135-136.

urgency, these movies reflected the changes occurring in Hong Kong at the time; the excited camera moves and mystical action shots reflected the excitement held by Hong Kong during their time of growth. With the city flourishing and new freedoms being added, filmmakers were eager to celebrate through their art form. The booming industry, new business freedoms, and greater happiness among the people were driving factors of this identity. Hong Kong had developed its own identity over many years, a feeling that would be reflected in the cinema of the 1960s and 1970s.⁹ As previously mentioned, the GDP of Hong Kong dramatically increased during this time period. This factor certainly worked to incentivize the creation of new, lighthearted, and fun cinema for the people of Hong Kong to enjoy. This, along with the other political factors like new gained independence and identity were paramount in the jovial tone these action films took on at the time. When social attitudes would change later on, the films would match. This trend of the media matching the attitudes of the people at the time is one that would remain consistent throughout Hong Kong's history. The political happenings in the 1990's in Hong Kong held content repercussions for the cinema produced. There would be a shift into the gangster action genre in the 1980s. Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s, these action movies

would focus on martial arts, fast camerawork, stunts, and carefully choreographed fight scenes, the transition into crime and gangster films was a significant change in style and presentation. Instead of elegant fight sequences, there would be brutal shootings and killings, with dramatic showdowns and stories to match the new, darker environment brought on by the changing political climate of British control and a loss of identity.¹⁰ Johnnie To was one of the prominent directors in this new genre. His movies often matched the described grit and brutality, especially in his film *Election*. This film features many shootings, blood, and unfiltered fights. When examining this shift, there appear to be several factors at play. The foremost factor in this shift to grittier, darker times are the experiences and events occurring in Hong Kong from the 1990's onward. A key event which led to this new genre was the introduction of Hong Kong's own political parties, as up until "...the late 1980s and early 1990s Hong Kong had no political representation or political parties."¹¹ This new introduction of political parties would mark a new shift in Hong Kong culture and lifestyle, one marked by a struggle of power between Hong Kong, China, and Britain. In the late 1990s, this would come to a head with Hong Kong being handed over to China in 1997. With this new introduction of Hong Kong's own

⁹ Carroll, John M.. *A Concise History of Hong Kong*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007. Accessed May 2, 2021

¹⁰ Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 13.

¹¹ Carroll, John M.. *A Concise History of Hong Kong*, 6.

political parties, derision and criticism would follow in Hong Kong cinema matching the darkness and doubt looming over Hong Kong.¹² Political and social turmoil would continue in Hong Kong, coming to a head in 1997. Hong Kong was already undergoing immense change and turmoil before the handover of 1997. The economy was slowing down, identity was being lost, and the people were living worse lives than the previous glory of the 1960s and 1970s.

Other social happenings in Hong Kong would influence this new style of action film, particularly that of the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to China; The Hong Kong handover to China had been in the works since the colonial takeover of Hong Kong began hundreds of years prior. In 1982, that colonial rule was set to expire. British and Chinese leaders met over this matter to negotiate the transition, with British prime minister Margaret Thatcher deciding that British rule over Hong Kong was no longer worthwhile. Thus, Thatcher decided that Britain would hand over Hong Kong to China with no input from Hong Kong itself.¹³ Eventually, in 1984, Britain and China came to an agreement with the Sino-British Joint Declaration, which stated China would assume sovereignty over Hong Kong from 1997, lasting fifty years until 2047.¹⁴ These changes were

very unwelcome by the people of Hong Kong, but they reluctantly accepted the inevitable changes. One 1988 poll revealed that "...more than half of the respondents believed that reversion to Chinese rule would hurt civil rights and individual liberties."¹⁵ Similar to the case in the 1960's-1970's, these social events influenced the moods and attitudes that would influence the cinema at the time.

Along with this new shift in mood, some of the rules associated with British rule were eliminated, leading to fewer restrictions on crime movies. In an interview, Johnnie To explains that while under British rule, filmmakers could "...do what they wanted to do, so long as the films and events... weren't controversial or criminal in nature."¹⁶ He goes on to describe that any language mentioning triads or other gang-related crime was outright banned until the introduction of the three-category film rating system, allowing for cinema to be rated 18+.¹⁷ Johnnie To would take advantage of this new filmmaking freedom in the creation of his action films. The Sino-British agreement provided that China would have sovereignty over Hong Kong as a "one country, two systems" model, meaning that in theory, Hong Kong could govern itself.¹⁸ Of course, China would still hold great governmental influence over Hong

¹² Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 248.

¹³ Little, Becky. "How Hong Kong Came Under 'One Country, Two Systems' Rule." History.com. A&E Television Networks, September 3, 2019.

¹⁴ Carroll, John M.. *A Concise History of Hong Kong*, 180.

¹⁵ Carroll, John M.. *A Concise History of Hong Kong*,

190.

¹⁶ Nochimson, Martha P., Robert Cashill, and Johnnie To. "One Country, Two Visions: An Interview with Johnnie To." *Cinéaste* 32, no. 2 (2007): 37..

¹⁷ To, Johnnie. "One Country, Two Visions: An Interview with Johnnie To." 37.

¹⁸ Carroll, John M.. *A Concise History of Hong Kong*, 6.

Kong, hence some of the disrespectful themes towards China that would be seen in the gangster genre.

After shifting to Chinese sovereignty, members of Hong Kong felt a loss of identity and anger. Hong Kong had adapted to their unique status of being multicultural and diverse. The introduction of new rule over their territory held the consequence of another identity shift occurring, leading to disgruntled attitudes. Accordingly, the identity they had developed over the years felt disrespected and disregarded. Feeling the need to re-establish themselves, cinema at the time, especially of the action genre, would no longer represent the themes of old, with traditional martial arts and customs. Along with these social changes, the gangs, known as triads, moved to the forefront of Hong Kong's media, a shift that would have a lasting impact on the gangster genre.

This new attitude regarding politics is demonstrated in Johnnie To's *Election*. In this film, the stylization that was seen in the martial arts genre is stripped away. There are no fancy stunts or camerawork, but rather a more realistic feel to make the film feel more genuine and less mystical. Since much of Hong Kong felt as if their previous identity was lost, the focus on traditional martial arts and customs would change to a focus on disrespecting authority. Released in 2005, this gangster movie follows Lok and Big D, two political candidates seeking election for the now vacant

chairman position of the Wo Luen Shing, one of the triad societies in Hong Kong. Lok is seen to be the more level-headed and patient of the two candidates, while Big D is rambunctious and tries to buy out the election. Lok is elected over Big D, a result that Big D does not take kindly to. Eventually, Lok proposes a truce to Big D, which he accepts. Later on, this move would be seen as one of sly ambition to gain power unfairly. The two men agree that Big D will become the chairman when Lok's term is up. Moreover, in the final sequence of the film, Big D and Lok are fishing together when Big D suggests that they share the power of the chairman position, prompting Lok to savagely kill him with a rock, after which he tracks down Big D's wife and does the same to her.¹⁹ This can be interpreted as To saying that even when things appear to have a happy ending, betrayal and deceit will follow, making reference to the new Chinese control of Hong Kong. Many of To's other films held a similar theme of a happy ending being impossible with uncertainty of who is actually in power.

This visceral final sequence and the violence throughout gave *Election* an 18+ rating. However, it was still successful at the box office. Looking at the new elements portrayed in this film, there are a number of real life-events and general factors which influenced the darker atmosphere in the film. First, it is important to contextualize the dark triad in the film. Triad groups are similar to American mafias. They are "...not

¹⁹ *Election*, Directed by Johnnie To (Milkyway Image Studios, 2005)

exclusively criminal organizations but are multi-faceted brotherhoods in the form of loose cartels bound by social as well as economic ties."²⁰ Some authorities say that these groups would often hold great power, conducting criminal operations all throughout Hong Kong, including things like human and drug trafficking.²¹ This demonstrates that the general sadness and disdain for the new Hong Kong held a good deal of influence on the brooding moods seen in the film.

The dark triad in *Election* is portrayed as one of these groups, representing the dangers of crime in Hong Kong during the 2000's. This is not to say that these groups were only dangerous in the 2000's; these crime groups have been prevalent ever since the late 1950's.²² In an interview about his gangster films, Johnnie To says that "What was important was not being graphic, but to emphasize the fear and anxiety in the gangsters' world. That's how gangsters operate, they impose fear. They use the word honor, but it's really all about money and profit."²³ Through both the director's own expressions and the film's realistic nature, it is clear that *Election* sought to portray a sense of realism, especially in its message. To masterfully sets up the environment of the film and constructs the plot to match the real fears

and anxieties that the people of Hong Kong felt towards these criminal organizations, all while maintaining a subtle sense of criticism towards corrupt government and practices. In a separate interview about his gangster films, To proves this when he says that "The *Election* films are meant to portray reality, the way things really are. No one shoots guns. It's the way gangsters really behave."²⁴ It is clear that with Johnnie To, his gang movies did not wish to stray away from real world events and accuracy, especially with events that were contemporary. This is a contrast to the martial arts films within the action genre, with many of them having made-up stories and plot lines. This reinforces the notion that authenticity was a driving factor for the new form of action movies. Another film showing the dark triad and gang theme within the action genre is that of *Young and Dangerous*. Directed by Andrew Lau, this film was released in 1996. This film follows a group of teens' involvement in a triad after getting a beat down due to a misunderstanding between the group and a man named "Ugly Kwan" and his men. Later in the film, the teens seek their revenge on Ugly Kwan's men through performing hits, but are quickly caught and punished. The triad then falls apart, and many of the members betray one another.. However,

²⁰ Broadhurst, Roderic, and Lee King Wa. "The Transformation of Triad 'Dark Societies' in Hong Kong: The Impact of Law Enforcement, Socio-Economic and Political Change." *Security Challenges* 5, no. 4 (2009): 3

²¹ Broadhurst and Wa. "The Transformation of Triad 'Dark Societies' in Hong Kong" 6.

²² Broadhurst and Wa. "The Transformation of Triad 'Dark Societies' in Hong Kong" 6.

²³ Eagan, Daniel. "Interview: Johnnie To on Election and Exiled." *danieleagan.com*, June 1, 2007.

²⁴ To, Johnnie. "One Country, Two Visions: An Interview with Johnnie To." 37.

in the end, the members seek to work together. One of the members, Chiang, returns to take the chairman position of the triad group, all while letting fellow member Ho Nam that he will not be forgotten.²⁵

With this gesture, director Andrew Lau wanted to portray these criminals as virtuous towards their own people, while presenting the audience with a dilemma of whether or not to support these criminals; on one hand, they have committed violent acts, but on the other, they are still ethical in the treatment of their own, only using violence for revenge. Portraying the triad members as the “good guys” was used to undermine the impending Chinese takeover of 1997.²⁶ The triad members are portrayed as above the law, going against the laws implemented by the unfavorable Chinese rule. When the film was released, it was said that “...the *Young and Dangerous* franchise may have won some street credibility because of its edgy disrespect of China.”²⁷ This demonstrates the discontent Hong Kong felt with the impending rule of China looming. As seen in films like *Election*, *Young and Dangerous*, *Internal Affairs*, and *To Be Number One*, when the social and political climate got darker, the themes and violence of the cinema followed.

One last factor that is essential to understand the shift to the crime genre of

action movies is the influence and effects of the United States on Hong Kong cinema. The United States held a moderate amount of influence over Hong Kong throughout history, ranging from media to financial impacts. In 1983 “...the plunging Hong Kong dollar was pegged to the American Dollar...”²⁸ This powerful influence would carry over to other aspects of Hong Kong life, such as the film industry. In the 1990’s, the description of directors was “Often trained in the West and in television, less tied to Mainland traditions than older hands, these young filmmakers turned away from the martial arts and toward gangster films...”²⁹ Being trained in the West, these filmmakers would be exposed to the gangster and crime genre, as these films were very prevalent in the United States. While initially this new style of film revived the Hong Kong cinema industry, with some even calling it the golden era,³⁰ this newfound attention to Hong Kong cinema would hold some negative implications. With this new wave of popularity, Hong Kong cinema would not be confined to local popularity.

The United States of America took notice of Hong Kong cinema, being particularly interested in the martial-arts action stars. For example, “Jackie Chan and John Woo became American celebrities, and Tsui, Lam, Wong, and others finished

²⁵ *Young and Dangerous*, directed by Andrew Lau (Jing’s Production 1996)

²⁶ Carroll, John M.. *A Concise History of Hong Kong*, 6.

²⁷ Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 6.

²⁸ Carroll, John M.. *A Concise History of Hong Kong*,

178.

²⁹ Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 3.

³⁰ Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 3.

films in Hollywood.”³¹ Jackie Chan became so popular in the United States that he is largely credited with generating the genre of Comedy Kung Fu in America, a genre that combined legitimate martial arts skills with comedic plot lines and action sequences.³² With Hong Kong losing some of its most iconic martial arts actors, the action industry would again start to lose its identity, hence the turn towards gangster and crime films. Consequently, local action films of the Martial Arts variety would start to fail, going into “...a tailspin, losing its regional markets and failing...”³³ With these new martial-arts films failing locally, the crime and gangster variety would begin its popularity. This resulted in an interesting exchange of genres, as Hollywood received martial arts influence for its cinema, and Hong Kong received crime for its action genre.

III. CONCLUSION

Political climates and culture shifts hold a great deal of importance on the cinema. As was seen in Hong Kong, when the times got dark, the cinema’s contents, attitudes, themes, and characters followed. Triads had always existed in Hong Kong. It took deep political turmoil in the nation to push this dark theme to the forefront of the cinema, away from a focus on tradition,

happiness, and cultural security. Furthermore, the shift to crime and gangsters as the primary type of action film can be attributed to a number of factors; however, it is essential to understand that the cross-cultural influences, political changes, and social changes are largely responsible for this shift in the action genre. The introduction of social and political change reflects in the people’s attitudes, and created a distinct change in the cinema of that specific era. In the case of Hong Kong in the 1990s, the new Chinese rule over the nation created an attitude of disdain towards the new authority. For this, the cinema would focus on gangs, crime, and violence, both to disrespect this authority and to illustrate the way Hong Kong citizens felt during the 1990s. As Hong Kong continues to change, its cinema will match.

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³¹ Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 4.

³² Chen, Xiaxin. *Kung Fu Moves in American Movies*. Boston, Massachusetts: Northeastern University, 2016, 60.

³³ Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 3.

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