

# *The Return of the Golden Age: A Study of "New Hong Kong Films" in the New Era*

Gao Weichen

*Xi'an International University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, 710000, China*

**Keywords:** Hong Kong cinema; New Hong Kong Cinema; *Legal Maverick*; *The Storm Riders*

**Abstract:** With the release of movies like *Legal Maverick* and *The Storm Riders*, as well as Hong Kong actor Tony Leung Chiu-Wai winning the Best Actor award at the 16th Asian Film Awards for his role in *The Storm Riders*, Hong Kong cinema, which has been in a slump for a while, has once again become a hot topic in the media. In recent years, the concept of "New Hong Kong Cinema" has been widely discussed in various online media platforms. But how is "New Hong Kong Cinema" defined, and what makes it new? This paper aims to analyze and interpret the concept of "New Hong Kong Cinema" by examining the historical development and current situation of Hong Kong cinema, drawing upon the research experiences and findings of scholars in the field. Through the use of literature analysis and comparative analysis, this study approaches the topic from a film criticism perspective, with the hope of providing a comprehensive understanding of "New Hong Kong Cinema" and offering additional insights into the subject matter.

## 1. Introduction

Recently, veteran Hong Kong film critic Lie Fu remarked, "*Legal Maverick* has set a new record for the highest box office revenue of a Chinese-language film in the local market, and its reputation is also commendable. It may find a new market direction in the Greater Bay Area of Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macau. Hong Kong cinema can no longer remain in a state of triviality."<sup>[1]</sup> There is a great anticipation as to whether Hong Kong cinema can once again capture the essence of what David Bordwell defined as that era of "excess and extravagance".<sup>[2]</sup> However, amid these high expectations, it is worth conducting a sober analysis of why Hong Kong cinema has resurfaced amidst a prevailing sentiment of decline.

## 2. Hong Kong Cinema on the Eve of Return

Since the 1990s, the development of Hong Kong cinema has gradually waned, to the point where some have even proclaimed the death of Hong Kong cinema. Whether it be in terms of box office performance, film genres, or cast lineups, the formulaic nature of Hong Kong cinema became evident. While this formulaic, assembly-line approach showcased the mature system and star-making capability of the entire Hong Kong film industry, it failed to generate the same level of enthusiasm among audiences as before. Moreover, Hong Kong cinema faced formidable challenges

and impact from foreign films at that time, particularly from the construction of Hollywood films for overseas markets. This impact not only affected Hong Kong cinema but also had a significant influence on Chinese and global cinema as a whole, an influence that continues to this day. Therefore, in the face of a lack of local content, fixed genres, weak box office performance, and the dominant force of foreign films, Hong Kong cinema seemed to have reached a dead end. It is precisely this predicament that led many media outlets to declare the death of Hong Kong cinema. However, is Hong Kong cinema truly without hope?

## 2.1 After the Golden Age

Compared to the Hong Kong cinema of the 1990s, the Hong Kong cinema of the 1980s was a period of great brilliance, characterized by a more distinct Hong Kong-style flavor in its creative style. Films such as John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer*, Jackie Chan's action-comedy films *Project A* and *Winners and Sinners*, and the crime thriller *Police Story* demonstrated the evolution of Hong Kong cinema's "Hong Kong-centric" consciousness and the "Hong Kong-style humanistic ideals". These films focused on the growth or transformation of individual characters, showcasing themes of brotherhood, vengeance, or social justice, while providing minimal macro-level depictions of societal context or national consciousness. This allowed audiences to immerse themselves in the "personalistic cinema" created by the directors, featuring efficient and concise shot compositions, intricate narrative expressions, and a strong sense of identification.

Furthermore, the ability to produce films that captivated Southeast Asia was not only due to the professional maturity of directors, actors, and screenwriters but also relied on strong financial support. In the 1980s, Hong Kong had not yet returned to the embrace of the motherland, and its social environment was characterized by an "open, laissez-faire, outward-oriented, and government non-intervention"<sup>[3]</sup> policy, which was the defining feature of Hong Kong's economy and, by extension, its film industry. Hong Kong cinema constantly absorbed investments from Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan, China, providing favorable opportunities and fertile ground for its development, resulting in the creation of excellent films. This allowed Hong Kong cinema to maintain its distinct local flavor of "Hong Kong people, Hong Kong affairs, and Hong Kong locales" and establish a robust industry ecosystem in Southeast Asia. Behind this, Hong Kong cinema reflected the essence of Hong Kong society itself.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the entry of foreign films into Hong Kong brought a fresh sensory experience to the audience, who had already grown tired of the local cinema. This diminished the fervor for local films that had existed in the past. Starting from the release of *Jurassic Park* in 1993, Hollywood films gradually dominated the top ten box office rankings in Hong Kong, and to this day, no local Hong Kong film has made it into the top ten. However, it is undeniable that Hong Kong cinema is not as hopeless as the media has portrayed. Local directors have continued to create films that are regarded as classics in Hong Kong cinema, such as Wong Kar-wai's *Days of Being Wild*, *Chungking Express*, and the Palme d'Or-winning *Happy Together*.

In addition, Professor Law Kar in his book *The Hong Kong New Wave* mentioned that "they were all born around 1950... and coincidentally left television and devoted themselves to film work"<sup>[4]</sup>. Directors such as Ann Hui, Tsui Hark, and Yim Ho, representative figures of the "Hong Kong New Wave", have created films like *Song of the Exile*, *New Dragon Inn*, *Once Upon a Time in China*, and *The Longest Summer*, which have received positive box office results and international awards. These films represented Hong Kong cinema's resistance against Hollywood films during the 1990s and contributed to the production of remarkable local films, continuing the distinct Hong Kong-style flavor of "Hong Kong people, Hong Kong affairs, and Hong Kong locales" in Hong Kong cinema.

Although Hollywood films had a significant global impact in the late 1980s and early 1990s, causing a cooling effect on the overall environment for local Hong Kong films, the main overseas markets for Hong Kong cinema, such as Malaysia, Singapore, and South Korea, gradually declined in market share. However, the local Hong Kong cinema in the 1990s still had its highlights, and there were new changes in its creative style and film content.

Films of the 1990s such as *Days of Being Wild*, *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*, *Once Upon a Time in China*, *Drunken Master II*, and *Black Sun: The Nanking Massacre* began to reveal a trend of ambiguity, identity recognition, and patriotic undertones. For example, in *Days of Being Wild*, the metaphor of the “bird without legs”, the scenes in *Once Upon a Time in China* where the protagonists defend their homeland against foreigners, and the portrayal of the characters’ confusion and search for security in *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* all reflected the emerging national consciousness and its call at that time.

## 2.2 The Film Environment in Hong Kong before and after the “97 Handover”

The development of Hong Kong cinema, starting from the film *The Burning of the Imperial Palace*, cannot ignore the influence of several migrations of filmmakers from the mainland that began in the early 20th century, most of whom originated from the Shanghai region. As a result, Hong Kong cinema has always inherited the film culture of old Shanghai in terms of cultural aspects, while its operational mechanisms have been influenced by Western film practices due to its history as a former British colony. These two aspects of Hong Kong cinema confirm the statement that it is a microcosm of Hong Kong society. Although the majority of its population is Chinese, its social management, regulatory systems, educational thinking, and ideological aspects all follow Western models. It is precisely because of this situation that Hong Kong has become a cultural hub for both Eastern and Western cultures, and its films have developed a unique blend of both, making it known as the “Hollywood of the East”.

After the handover of Hong Kong, facing a homeland that was both unfamiliar and familiar, Hong Kong people experienced confusion and anxiety. “In the face of this historical transformation, Hong Kong people inevitably had to consider their own culture from various ideological perspectives: should they preserve or abandon it? Should they adopt new governance policies or adhere to the existing capitalist system? For ordinary Hong Kong people, the process of adaptation was also a process of contemplating whether they are ‘Chinese’ or ‘Hong Kongers’”.<sup>[5]</sup> The confusion and anxiety regarding identity and cultural identity before the handover can be captured in the Hong Kong films of the period around 1997. It gradually set the stage for a new path in the development of Hong Kong cinema.

Before the handover of Hong Kong, there were already co-productions between the Hong Kong and mainland Chinese film industries. Films such as *A Chinese Odyssey* directed by Jeffrey Lau, with the famous line “Once upon a time, there was a sincere love in front of me...” which is still widely known; *Shaolin Temple* directed by Zhang Xin Yan; and *The Opium War* and *The Burning of the Imperial Palace* directed by Li Hanxiang. These films all performed well at the box office and entered the top ten annual box office rankings of Hong Kong films, receiving positive responses in both Hong Kong and Chinese mainland.

After 1997, co-productions also became one of the ways for Hong Kong cinema to attempt a comeback. During the period from 1997 to 2004, the representative work of Hong Kong cinema, known as the “savior” of Hong Kong cinema, was the *Infernal Affairs* series, which clearly reflected the gradual shift of Hong Kong cinema’s focus towards the mainland with the meaning of the “97 handover”. However, due to the differences in social systems between Hong Kong and Chinese mainland, co-productions inevitably brought about differences of opinion. For example, the

ending of *Infernal Affairs III* was modified and edited for its release in Chinese mainland.

On January 1, 2004, the *Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement between the Mainland and Hong Kong* (CEPA) was implemented. Based on this agreement, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) introduced the *Implementation Measures for Strengthening Cooperation and Management of Chinese Mainland and Hong Kong Film Industries*<sup>[6]</sup>, which directly helped Hong Kong and Chinese mainland address the unclear censorship system and the collaborative form of the film industry's business model, assisting them in navigating the exploratory period. Subsequently, the development of co-productions entered a period of rapid growth.

### 3. Where is the “New” in the so-called “New Hong Kong Cinema”?

The so-called “New Hong Kong Cinema” is characterized by its response to the important issues of identity and cultural identity after the handover of Hong Kong. Due to Hong Kong's unique historical background, it possesses both Eastern and Western cultural characteristics. In the face of Hong Kong's return, we cannot simply expect the Hong Kong population to immediately identify with mainland Chinese culture. As historian Liu Cunkuan said, “The key to cultural issues lies in maintaining its progressiveness and strong vitality. Any enduring culture has openness and great inclusiveness. It constantly absorbs, assimilates, and transforms all outstanding cultural achievements created by humanity to enrich, renew, and discover itself for its own use.”<sup>[7]</sup> Therefore, we should gradually diminish the colonial mindset through the passage of time and achieve cultural and identity recognition after Hong Kong's return through mutually beneficial means.

Film, with its three major characteristics of propaganda, artistry, and commercialism, serves as an excellent medium and means of expression during this transitional period. In this section, we will analyze the transformation of Hong Kong cinema and its culture through a selection of films made since Hong Kong's handover in 1997.

#### 3.1 “New” in the Cultural Transformation

“Film is both a product of culture and a carrier of culture.”<sup>[8]</sup> In the co-produced films between Hong Kong and Chinese mainland after the handover, one noticeable difference compared to previous Hong Kong films is the expression of a “roots-seeking” sentiment towards the mother culture. Ambiguous terms such as “Beigu” (northern girl), “Ah Chan”, or “mainlander” used in past Hong Kong films gradually disappeared. There has been a subtle cultural shift in film styles and orientations, not accomplished solely by a single director but rather as a continuation and inheritance by Hong Kong filmmakers. This trace of inheritance is particularly evident in Hong Kong martial arts films, from the *Ip Man* series directed by Wilson Yip, to the *Once Upon a Time in China* series directed by Tsui Hark, and to *The Grandmaster* directed by Wong Kar-wai. While these films prominently feature Chinese martial arts as a primary element, the secondary elements of national spirit and patriotic sentiments have gradually shifted in their significance over time. Behind this shift is the cultural transformation exemplified by Hong Kong cinema's “northward” direction.

From the martial arts films directed by the three Hong Kong directors mentioned above, we can observe the mutual exchange between Hong Kong and Chinese mainland from the pre and post-“97 handover” period to the early 21st century. Whether it is the directors themselves breaking free from the local mindset of Hong Kong and placing their films within the broader context of Chinese culture, the Hong Kong-style humanistic ideas focusing on personal growth and emotional states, the narrative shifts that gaze at individual transformations within the macro backdrop, or the transition from an identification with “my city” to “my country”, all reflect the vertical exploration

of national consciousness behind the martial arts genre, the expansion from traditional wuxia films to Chinese kung fu films, and the gradual qualitative transformation in terms of cultural identity resulting from the choice of “northward” direction. This transformation is not simply the fusion with external cultures but rather the result of seeking roots in their own mother culture.

### 3.2 “New” in the Update of Path Taken

Hong Kong, as a city, was once able to rival Hollywood and become the world’s second-largest film production hub. One major reason for this achievement was its mature film industry chain, which enabled efficient filmmaking. However, it was also the very procedural nature of this industry chain that determined the eventual rise and fall of Hong Kong’s film development.

Since the release of *Operation Mekong* in 2016, Hong Kong director Dante Lam has been steadily directing a “personal trilogy” (*Operation Mekong*, *Operation Red Sea*, *The Rescue*) at a pace of one film every two years. These three works are not only acclaimed films produced by Dante Lam after his move north, but also representative works of Hong Kong cinema’s updated path. Compared to Lam’s earlier works, I believe there are three notable breakthroughs and changes.

Firstly, the characterization of the film’s characters is no longer based solely on individual images but on the portrayal of a collective character in the context of societal changes. In films like *G4 Agent*, *The Beast Stalker*, and *That Demon Within*, the focus is primarily on the individual’s personal development and the resulting changes, which drive the film’s storyline. However, in the “Operation” series, such as *Operation Mekong*, the focus is shifted to the collective image of Chinese police officers. It is no longer an individual hero’s anthem but a portrayal of ordinary people as heroes. This shift represents the director’s attempt to move away from the earlier style of “individual heroism”. The director transfers the earlier focus on individual human nature to a higher expression of “group-society”, using the backdrop of the real-life “Mekong River massacre” to highlight the evil forces threatening people’s lives and to maintain a resolute attitude of zero tolerance.

Secondly, there is a fusion of film styles. One of the greatest advantages that Hong Kong directors bring to mainland Chinese cinema through their move north is their experience and mature filmmaking system. In the “Operation” series, the realistic aesthetics of Hong Kong-style action films are maintained, and the advantages of Hong Kong cinema in terms of gunfights, fights, and post-production visual and sound effects are preserved. The filming locations are not limited to Hong Kong or China alone but extend to international settings, which is also a characteristic of new mainstream films.

Lastly, there is a breakthrough in Hong Kong film genres. Compared to traditional Hong Kong crime films, the “Operation” series created by Dante Lam not only retains the introspective nature of Hong Kong-style characters but also reaches grander heights by incorporating a larger historical context. Although these films are co-produced between Hong Kong and Chinese mainland, they integrate and develop Hong Kong’s traditional film expression, showcasing a change in the fixed and inward-looking paths of Hong Kong cinema. This change has been partially achieved through the wave of co-production films and the popularity of new mainstream films.

After the “Handover” in 1997, while some Hong Kong directors chose to move to Chinese mainland, there were also those who stayed in Hong Kong and continued to innovate and develop local Hong Kong cinema. In 2012, the film *Cold War*, co-directed by Lok Man Leung and Sunny Luk, was regarded by the audience as the most representative Hong Kong film since the early 20th century’s *Infernal Affairs*. I believe that the *Cold War* film series reflects three major innovations of Hong Kong cinema in the “staying” camp.

Firstly, besides preserving the authentic Hong Kong-style contextual expressions in terms of language and setting, the series also shifts its focus from “individuals” to “groups” in character development. The main characters, Deputy Commissioner Sean Lau and Deputy Commissioner Waise Lee, are portrayed as multidimensional and deep, making it difficult for the audience to discern their morality even from an omniscient perspective. This is also one of the characteristics of postmodernist narration.

Secondly, their competitive relationship evolves from the personal grudges and conflicts commonly seen in traditional Hong Kong crime films to political maneuvering between “groups” on a larger scale. The “groups” here do not refer to the internal factions within the police force depicted in the film, but rather the two factions within the broader political and social landscape of Hong Kong. This represents an innovation from the traditional “emphasis on action, disregard for plot” crime films to a new approach that integrates action, support, and plot.

Thirdly, the film acknowledges the past but does not seek to return to it. The story may bear traces of the golden age of Hong Kong cinema, but the filmmaking itself no longer adheres to the techniques of that era. The film adopts a gradual narrative approach, where the classic chivalry of Hong Kong cinema is evident in the role of the former Commissioner and the interactions between Waise Lee and his former subordinates. The question of “rule of man or rule of law” posed by Yang Ziwei pulls the audience back from nostalgia for “old Hong Kong” to the reality of “new Hong Kong”. The confidence of the Hong Kong people is felt through the statements made by Sean Lau and the projection of “Hong Kong being the safest city in Asia” in certain scenes of *Cold War 2*. The repeated mention of a Chief Executive who never appears but remains a constant presence throughout the film reflects the lingering “self-anxiety” in Hong Kong shortly after the Handover.

### 3.3 “New” in the Industry Integration

In the context of industrial integration, the film industry is undergoing changes alongside cultural and technological innovations. The film industry consists of three aspects: production, distribution, and promotion. Only when progress is made in all three aspects can the film industry undergo a “new” transformation. Since the implementation of the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) in 2004, co-produced films between Hong Kong and Chinese mainland have gradually achieved the historical goals of “identity recognition” and “cultural recognition” for Hong Kong. However, there have been different political developments between the two regions. The fundamental reason for this divergent development is that Hong Kong is a special administrative region of China and operates under the principle of “one country, two systems”, which means that the film industry in Hong Kong cannot fully align with the mainland film industry. Nevertheless, the two regions have been working through exchanges to alleviate or eliminate the barriers to integration, as evidenced by the efforts made in the subsequent CEPA supplementary agreements. The positive momentum has been continuously promoted through the use of co-produced films, which have not brought about negative effects from Western media, but rather have catered to the mainland market by employing self-censorship, entertainment-oriented themes, and alternative distribution methods such as dual versions and altered endings. After alleviating initial concerns, the supplementary agreements have introduced favorable conditions, such as allowing Hong Kong capital to independently control cinemas and enabling Cantonese films produced in Hong Kong to be screened in Guangdong. These are privileges that have not been enjoyed by any Western media or capital, including Taiwanese films after the signing of the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) in 2010. <sup>[9]</sup>Geographically, Hong Kong and the mainland are separated by the Shenzhen River, and the Lo Wu Port has been established at the bifurcation of the river, which I believe serves as the “gateway” for the film industry connection between Hong Kong and the

mainland. Prior to the implementation of CEPA, collaboration between Hong Kong film production companies and the mainland was often a risky and challenging endeavor, with frequent differences in creative concepts. Therefore, the role of an entity that can help mitigate risks and unify creative awareness between the two sides is crucial. In 2007, the Hong Kong Film Development Council Limited, formerly known as “Long Feng Xin”, was established in Hong Kong. The company is primarily responsible for the promotion and distribution of mainland and Hong Kong films. “The Film Development Council is the only film organization representing Chinese cinema overseas. It has its own mission, consciously considering itself as part of Hong Kong cinema. It not only strives for its own development but also contributes to the prosperity of Hong Kong cinema”<sup>[10]</sup>. Films such as *Cold War* and *The Grandmaster* mentioned above were handled by the Film Development Council, which not only established a unique advantage background for bridging films between Hong Kong and the mainland, but also expanded its involvement in production, cinema chains, and other areas in recent years, continuously broadening the themes of co-produced films and providing guidance in capturing audience preferences for Hong Kong films. Although it may not match the overall scale of major Hong Kong film companies such as Media Asia, Emperor Motion Pictures, and China Star Entertainment, the Film Development Council has a distinct positioning different from other film companies. Based on this foundation, it is advancing and developing other business areas to continuously contribute to the integration and development of the film industries in both regions.

Currently, the “Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area” is not only a core region for national economic development but also an experimental field for the integration of film industries across the Taiwan Strait. Originally, Hong Kong films should have thrived in the “Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area” with its Lingnan cultural influence. However, the reality presents a mix of joy and sorrow. Firstly, Hong Kong capital has shown a positive development trend in expanding its film business in Guangdong. However, it faces the awkward situation of “losing its Hong Kong identity” in film creation. Good films must capture local cultural details to attract attention. If even their own advantages are abandoned, how can they talk about the development of the film industry? In recent years, in co-produced films, the “Hong Kong flavor” is gradually disappearing, and there is a greater focus on catering to commercial trends. Professor Law Kar-biu aptly pointed out, “The best films must be based on their own land, and the best Hong Kong films must be built upon the land of Hong Kong, reflecting their lives and values. Only then can these films go abroad”<sup>[11]</sup>. This accurately highlights what is being gradually lost in the creative process of Hong Kong films.

#### 4. Conclusion

Through analyzing the new characteristics generated by recent Hong Kong-mainland co-produced films, this article argues that the concept of “New Hong Kong Cinema” is not appropriate. “New Hong Kong Cinema” should preserve the unique features of Hong Kong films that have evolved over time, as well as the new artistic forms that emerge in response to the era. By comparing the box office performance of co-produced films in Hong Kong with that of “Vulgaria”, one can intuitively see which works can truly be categorized as “New Hong Kong Cinema”. “Vulgaria” created ripples in the Hong Kong film industry and generated audience anticipation because it revived the long-lost “Hong Kong spirit”. Therefore, in terms of collaborative marketing, leveraging production advantages, and the absence of a fixed artistic style in co-produced films, it is more of a mutual redemption in terms of commercial aspects between the film industries on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. This collaboration may lead to reflections on both mainland Chinese and Hong Kong films, and may influence future domestic film production. It is also possible that new

representative styles will emerge as the collaboration between the two sides deepens.

## References

- [1] Lie, F. "Vulgaria": Is the Record-Breaking Box Office Due to the "Hong Kong Flavor" or Hong Kong-Style "Fairy Tale"? [J]. *Film Art*, 2023(03): 100-102.
- [2] Bordwell, D. *The Secrets of Hong Kong Cinema* [M]. Hainan: Hainan Publishing House, 2003.
- [3] Lie, F. Overview of Hong Kong Cinema in the 1990s [J]. *Contemporary Cinema*, 2002(02): 59-68.
- [4] Law, K. T. *Hong Kong New Wave Cinema* [M]. Hong Kong: Tiandi Publishing Limited, 2003.
- [5] Hu, K., & Liu, H. Globalization, Hong Kongness, and Greater China: A Decade of Reflection on Hong Kong Cinema [J]. *Film Art*, 2007(04): 5-10.
- [6] Zhang, J., & Zhang, Y. CEPA Promotes the Great Development of Film in Both Places [N]. *China Film News*, 2007-6-28(009).
- [7] Liu, C. K. Hong Kong's Return and Cultural Identity [J]. *Hebei Journal*, 1998(02): 84-88.
- [8] Zhou, B. The Aesthetic Pursuit and Theoretical Construction of Chinese Film Schools [J]. *Future Communication*, 2021, 28(04): 97-104.
- [9] Chen, J. Main Melody Films: Visual Representations of Mainstream Ideology [J]. *Film Literature*, 2005(11): 35-36.
- [10] Liu, H. The Game between Ideology and Commercial Interests: A Study of Hong Kong-Mainland Co-produced Films [J]. *Literary and Artistic Research*, 2014(02): 105-114.
- [11] Song, D., Kang, N., & Zhang, J. Ready to Set Sail Again: An Interview with Song Dai [J]. *Contemporary Cinema*, 2011(01): 28-33.