

An Analysis of the Impact of the Development of Hong Kong Society on Local Romance Films between 1990-2000

Xulin Tang^{1,*}

¹The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom, EH8 9LH

*Corresponding author. Email: xulintang69@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Hong Kong, has its own historical and political background, has therefore developed a unique film culture. This paper will take Hong Kong romance films created in the 1990s and 2000s as its research subject, and provide an analysis of the development of the genre during this period of change in Hong Kong society. The period of study for this paper is circa 1990, before Hong Kong returned to Chinese rule. The second period is from 1990 to 2000, when Hong Kong was transferring from UK rule to China. The third period is circa 2000, when the handover was complete. By watching Hong Kong romance films from these three periods, and by studying the relevant literature, the following thoughts have been drawn. During this period Hong Kong romance films have blended the characteristics of the West and the East due to various historical, political and social factors. As such the films produced are injected with the values of both Mainland China and overseas territories, allowing for development in terms of plot, direction, and production methods. Finally, it is concluded that societal development reflects Hong Kong romance films from the period.

Keywords: *Hong Kong films, Romance films, Societal Development, Film localization, 1990s-2000s*

1. INTRODUCTION

As a former British colony, and now a Special Administrative Region of China, Hong Kong is a unique location with very a specific film culture. On one hand, evidence shows that there is a close connection between the film industries of Mainland China and Hong Kong. Many of the founders of the Hong Kong film industry came from Shanghai. They moved south to escape the War of Resistance against Japan before settling and working in Hong Kong with local filmmakers[1]. Therefore, Hong Kong film has been significantly influenced by Chinese film. However, as a British colony, Hong Kong has also been suffused with the more prevalent film culture of Western society. Many Hong Kong directors studied at film schools of the United States and the United Kingdom, leading to the development of the New Wave of Hong Kong films between 1970 and 2000. Due to the academic background of these directors, the shooting style of their films shows heavy influence from European films[2]. The period from 1990 to 2000 was marked by a dramatic upheaval in Hong Kong which resulted from the regime change and surrounding developments in Hong Kong

society. As a result, the question of how far local romance films have been influenced by this upheaval has become a question worthy of attention. Therefore, the author will focus on the Hong Kong romance films from this period. This is because local romance films are the evidence of the progress of the times, while their focusing on a variety of important aspects of life for Hong Kong people presents a rich and complex picture of Hong Kong society and culture at the time. This research will by watching Hong Kong romance films from the 1990s to the 2000s and studying the relevant literature as approaches to explore the impact of the development of Hong Kong society on Hong Kong romance films at this specific time. Further, it will explore the changing political and economic situation across these three periods of time, including circa 1990, from 1990 to 2000 and circa 2000, and how the impact of these factors can be seen in the locally produced films. The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship among society, politics, and film, and to offer some feasible directions for further study into the resurgence of Hong Kong romance films.

2. DETAILED ANALYSIS OF THE THREE PERIODS

2.1 Circa 1990: Small Person in a Gang

Before 1990, Hong Kong was ruled by the British Government. Although the Chinese government did not yet have jurisdiction over Hong Kong, the battle between the Chinese and the British governments between 1984 and 1988 shows the determination of the Chinese government to take back the colony, which eventually occurred in 1997. This situation therefore created uncertainty in Hong Kong between 1980 and 1990, during which Hong Kong society faced a crisis of identity and confidence as a result of the unknown future for Hongkongers, a situation which resulted in social turmoil[3]. The situation of anarchy and confusion in the psyche of the public meant that Hong Kong Triad gangs were prevalent at the time. These gangs were in cahoots with the local police, meaning they effectively had free reign to operate however they pleased. At the time, many young boys were proud to join the triads, putting their faith in the values of loyalty, unity, and righteousness[4]. The gang culture that emerged from this turbulent political context was gradually incorporated into mainstream culture. As a result, a considerable number of romance films were made which combined the subject matter of the Triads, and youth, such as *As Tears Go by* in 1988, *My Heart Is That Eternal Rose* in 1989 and *A Moment of Romance* in 1990. These films focus on the fate of the small person, who is seen as drifter. The plots of these films are concerned with the protagonist pursuing the dream of a reversal of fortune, when in the end, the protagonist realizes they are unable to escape their destiny. The theme of conflict is often used to express great joy and sorrow in these films, which keeps the audience deeply engaged. At the same time, directors influenced by Western culture or the New Wave of Hong Kong film show a strong desire to express the dichotomy between local traditions and the impact of western cultures[5]. These directors use filmmaking technology, such as slow-motion, romantic visuals, exaggerated Cantonese tunes and the beautiful setting of the Hong Kong Streets to mean that films from the period are considered classics of the era. Therefore, many of these films focus their attention on ordinary people, promoting individual heroism, and subsequent tragedy, with an eye to artistic form and thematic pursuits.

2.2 1990 to 2000: Sweeping Historical Themes and Big Budget Productions

In the early 1990s, after negotiations between China and the UK, the reunification of Hong Kong with China began to be seen as an inevitability. This resulted in a range of political, economic, and cultural changes. The economy saw a dramatic increase in trade between Hong Kong and Mainland China at an average rate of 28% per

year between 1990 to 1995. [6] In addition to trade with Mainland China, overseas trade also contributed to a heyday for Hong Kong's economy. Hong Kong's GDP rose from US\$76.93 billion to US\$144.65 billion, an average annual growth rate of 6.076%. [7] The favourable economic situation has resulted in a period of success for the Hong Kong film industry. On the political front, the incoming regime change caused an unprecedented sense of anxiety among Hong Kong's public as a result of their changing sense of cultural identity. Influenced by this, many local directors became more concerned with expressing their local identity and their concern at Hong Kong's uncertain future[8]. For example, the films *Comrades Almost a Love Story* was released in 1996 and *City of Glass* was released in 1998. *Comrades Almost a Love Story* is a representative film of the time, and discusses the two waves of migration that occurred during this period. One was the migration of mainlanders to Hong Kong who came in search of financial fortune. The other was the emigration of Hong Kong people overseas, due to their lack of faith in the future, and their frustration with Hong Kong's prospects. Both films explore the theme of the pursuit of self and the search for cultural identity. In terms of film production, the pictures were shot in several countries and used different languages and ethnic groups on screen, as a result of the expanded budgets available to the directors as a result of improved sponsorship. Meanwhile, many directors at the time had experienced life among different cultures, such as Peter Chan, director of *Comrades Almost a Love Story*, who had spent time living in Thailand, the United States, and China. The director of *City of Glass*, Mabel Cheung, had experience studying experiences in the United Kingdom, the United States, and China. This exposure to other cultures meant that the directors' own backgrounds influenced their cultural awareness, identity and their definition of home, thus influencing their work in terms of plot and their knowledge of filmmaking technology and techniques. As a result, most of the films of this period are big-budget production, which has a grand theme, and place the interactions of their characters in a sweeping historical context with a strong sense of political and cultural anxiety. It can be said that Hong Kong romance films produced during this period incorporate diverse cultural themes, connotations and filmmaking technology.

2.3 Circa 2000: Commercial Co-production Becomes a Mainstream Trend

Around 2000, after the handover, the regime gradually began to stabilize under the conceptual framework of "one country, two systems". On 29 June 2003, Mainland China and Hong Kong signed a free trade agreement known as the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA). This not only further strengthened the economic cooperation and integration between Hong Kong and the Mainland, but also fostered

interaction and cooperation in areas like culture and politics[9]. Against the backdrop of Hollywood films dominating world cinema, the impact of rampant piracy and the Asian financial crisis, Hong Kong films were caught in an industrial downturn. Meanwhile, films from the Mainland were also in a state of crisis, having been forced to open their market after the accession to The World Trade Organization (WTO)[10]. Therefore, under the influence of policy and market forces, Hong Kong films have increasingly become co-produced with Mainland China, for example *Marriage with a Fool* in 2004 and *Perhaps Love* in 2005. These films have been injected with financial capital and acting talent from Mainland China, utilizing production from mainland companies, Chinese actors and directors, etc. In addition to the impact of the progressing integration with Mainland China, foreign culture and capital also had a significant influence at this time, seen through several multi-national co-productions such as *Moonlight Express* in 1999 and *A Fighter's Blues* in 2000. These films were sponsored by Japanese companies and featured a Japanese female lead. During this period, directors preferred to place a spotlight on middle-class men and women in the modern city, portraying an egalitarian view of love and providing a greater focus on the inner world of the individuals concerned. Romance films produced in 2000, also added an element of comedy, contributing to a cleaner, lighter, and more enjoyable style, such as *Need You* and *Summer Holiday*, both released in 2000. Hong Kong romance films in this later period were more commercial and diversified in terms of genre, and focused more on pure entertainment in terms of plot, due to the injection of outside capital and culture.

3. CONCLUSION

This paper has investigated the relationship between Hong Kong romance films and the development of society during the 1990s and 2000s when Hong Kong changed hands from British to Chinese rule. The scope of this research is split into three time periods, circa 1990, 1900 to 2000, and circa 2000. Circa 1990, although Hong Kong was under British jurisdiction, the uncertainty created by Sino-British negotiations caused Hong Kong society to be dominated by gangs and gang culture. This meant that gangs became a source of inspiration for local romance films. This reality meant that many of the films produced during this time explored the fate of ordinary characters reaching melodramatic endings. In production, these films pursued a strong art form. From 1990 to 2000, Hong Kong's imminent return to Chinese sovereignty government became common knowledge, and it was officially reunited with China in 1997. During this period, the cultural anxiety and identity crises that occurred as a result of the regime change led to a shift in the subject matter of Hong Kong romance films, seeing them begin to explore the interaction of characters in a broad

historical context and incorporating different cultural connotations. Many of the films produced during this time were big-budget productions, resulting from the favourable economic situation in Hong Kong society at that time. Circa 2000, the Chinese government stabilized its influence over Hong Kong. As a result, the improving economic ties between Hong Kong and mainland China, as well as overseas powers, prompted the injection of foreign capital and culture into local romantic films. The majority of films produced during this period explore the inner worlds of characters through the lens of their light-hearted plots. They are entertaining in nature and are more commercially oriented. It can be concluded that Hong Kong romance films have evolved as a result of societal development and influences like economic and political changes and progress, resulting in changes in terms of plot, direction and production methods. However, this study is subject to some limitations, and the relationship between Hong Kong romance films and societal development would benefit from a broader analysis spanning a longer time frame. Future studies could also explore the social factors resulting in the decline of Hong Kong romance films after ten years, and how they might make a comeback in the future.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for helping with this paper:

David Howard, my professor from the University of Southern California, gave me a new angle from which to think about how to incorporate cultural elements into films, leading to the initial inspiration of this paper.

Patricia Routh, my undergraduate lecturer from Coventry University, gave me confidence in my abilities and skills through her encouragement on social media.

My parents and friends for their patience and support.

REFERENCES

- [1] Zhuo, B. (2008). *Hong Kong new wave cinema (1978-2000)*. Bristol, UK; Chicago, USA: Intellect.
- [2] Sun, W., & Zhang, B. (2020). A Study on the Aesthetic Style of Hong Kong Film in the New Wave Movement. *Open Journal Of Social Sciences*, 08(08), 53-60. doi: 10.4236/jss.2020.88005
- [3] Chu, Y. (2003). *Hong Kong cinema: Coloniser, motherland and self*.
- [4] Du, S. (2016). *Du Shaofei: A Review of 160 Years of Gang Culture in Hong Kong*. Retrieved 13 September 2021, from <http://fashion.sina.com.cn/we/lo/2016-08-19/1403/doc-ixvctcc7974204.shtml>

- [5] Jin, W. (2020). Reviewing the New Wave of Hong Kong Film. Retrieved 15 September 2021, from <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1670720749503873692&wfr=spider&for=pc>
- [6] Schenk, C. (2008). Economic History of Hong Kong. Retrieved 26 October 2021, from <https://eh.net/encyclopedia/economic-history-of-hong-kong/>
- [7] Hong Kong GDP 1960-2021. Retrieved 26 October 2021, from <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/HKG/hong-kong/gdp-gross-domestic-product>
- [8] Clarke, D. (2002). Hong Kong art. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- [9] Trade and Industry Department: CEPA. (2012). Retrieved 3 October 2021, from https://www.tid.gov.hk/english/cepa/cepa_overview.html
- [10] Zhang, Y. (2015). Development and Cultural Representation of Hong Kong Urban Romance. *Contemporary Cinema*, 10, 105.