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Title of Assignment / Essay: A Cultural Tradition of Hong Kong International Film Festival
– By Revisiting Retrospective Section in the Past Four Decades

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A Cultural Tradition of Hong Kong International Film Festival
– By Revisiting Retrospective Section in the Past Four Decades

Abstract

This research will focus on recalling what happened in retrospective production side during the past years. For the past four decades, the Hong Kong International Film Festival has held thirty-eight retrospectives of Hong Kong films. The catalogues are seen as important research materials on the study of the development of Hong Kong films. This paper attempts to show how the retrospective producers took the creative road towards reflecting the Hong Kong film history and the local culture under the impact of both foreign influences and culture of local roots in each year’s Hong Kong International Film Festival. I will try to clarify and reorganize past retrospective sections which closely linking with Hong Kong local culture and local society, then to explore more experience and stories in producers’ side. In other words, to explore how does retrospective section narrate the history and nature of Hong Kong films. I hope I can outline the development trend of retrospective section, highlight the important moments, and touch on the unforgettable experience and awaited cultural values during past four decades, in order to find what kind of narratives have been produced. I hope this research will contribute to the historical and cultural understanding of retrospective section as well as Hong Kong films.

Keywords: History; Hong Kong films; Retrospective Section; Narrative;

Introduction

As more and more festivals around the world incorporated Asian programmes as permanent part of their festivals, Hong Kong International Film Festival has continued to renew its relevance by performing perhaps its most significant role to date: to introduce Hong Kong films and the history to the world through the institutionalized screenings of the old classics. There is no doubt that the retrospective section in Hong Kong International Film Festival takes the important role not only in providing high-quality old films to review, but also more positively in evaluating and
studying Hong Kong films through an academic and professional lens. The festival’s retrospectives and publications are a quantum leap in studying history and nature of Hong Kong films, bringing international recognition to local films and filmmakers and also, to recall some collective memories for Hong Kong local people, while laying the ground for the Hong Kong Film Archive.

The retrospective section in Hong Kong International Film Festival has focused on thematic studies of Hong Kong films, which has acquired more and more interest from film lovers and cultural workers all over the world. The retrospective section and the catalogue, which published as an integral part of it, are regarded as an invaluable aid to the comprehensive study of Hong Kong films. They contributed enormously to a balanced understanding of Hong Kong’s film history and the development of its film industry. In short, retrospective section help record and rephrase the development of Hong Kong films at different periods of time, meanwhile it enumerates and analyzes successful craftsmanship and commercial management strategies of Hong Kong films, which will provide a mirror to new challenges in new phase. Thus, the retrospective section is indeed a cultural tradition of Hong Kong International Film Festival.

When talking about the impact of the film festival, what we always concerned is the box-office. However, I think there must be some values of the retrospective section in Hong Kong International Film Festival goes beyond the box-office. In other words, you can’t just select films just because they are popular; retrospective section has to find its focus, as well as the good films that would be worthy of the theme of study. Thus, what’s the further value beyond the box-office?

My research will focus on recalling what happened in retrospective production side during the past years. For the past four decades, the Hong Kong International Film Festival has held thirty-eight retrospectives of Hong Kong films. The catalogues are seen as important research materials on the study of the development of Hong Kong films. Based on this, I will clarify and reorganized the past retrospective sections which closely linking with Hong Kong films and Hong Kong local culture. This research will take a look at the development of retrospective sections from the period from 1978 to 2015, particularly involving Hong Kong Cultural-related topics from the 2nd Hong Kong International Film Festival till now. For instance, some unique retrospective topics are the ones Cantonese cinema, kung fu movies, opera films, and the China factor in Hong Kong cinema, etc.

It attempts to show how the retrospective producers took the creative road towards reflecting the Hong Kong film history and the local culture under the impact of both foreign influences and culture of local roots in each year’s Hong Kong International
Film Festival. Firstly, I will try to clarify and reorganize past retrospective sections which closely linking with Hong Kong local culture and local society. Then I will explore more experience and stories from producers’ side to demonstrate what efforts they have made, what kind of difficulties they have met and what further values they have provide to the whole Hong Kong film history. In other words, to explore how does retrospective section narrate the history and nature of Hong Kong films. Finally I hope I can outline the development trend of retrospective section, highlight the important moments, and touch on the unforgettable experience and awaited cultural values during past four decades, in order to find what kind of narratives have been produced. I have interviewed three retrospective producers cross-over different periods or generations, invited them to talk freely of their own production experience as well as their careers. I believe that this research will contribute to the historical and cultural understanding of retrospective section as well as Hong Kong films.

Literature Review

As I will focus on how does retrospective section narrate the history and nature of Hong Kong films and what kinds of narratives have been produced, I take my staring point by different perspectives towards narrative theories.

What is narrative? As Barthes defined: “Narrative is a powerful symbolic medium through which events are selected and shown as meaningful and through which identities are constituted and reconstructed”. (Barthes, 1975) It means narrative is a storytelling process from selecting aspects to showing a whole picture, however it is more than a story, since it always comes along with some significant concerns and meanings, which can be historical, sociological, psychological, aesthetic and ethnological, etc. (Barthes, 1975) Thus, narrative is the product of an intertwining of these value codes and narrative genre, presenting in romance, comedy, irony and tragedy. (Agnes, 2001) Although narrative is often articulated through language, epically oral and written words, moreover, narrative is produced as myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, drama, pantomime, paintings, stained-glass window, movies local news, conversation. (Barthes, 1975) In this context, retrospective section of Hong Kong International Film Festival is one of countless narrative forms in telling stories of Hong Kong films. Retrospective section is not only a simple programme to fulfill certain official requirement, or to get reach larger international film festival scale. Instead, retrospective section as a cultural tradition of Hong Kong International Film Festival, which has been held for almost forty years. According to Phelan’s words, “narrative is not just an object to be interpreted and evaluated but also a way of interpreting and evaluating. To tell a story about an experience is to give that experience shape and meaning by setting it
off from other experiences, placing it in the grooves of an intelligible plot, and judging its agents and events.” (Phelan, 2008) Hence, retrospective production team is not only reshowing many classic Hong Kong films each year, but also doing an interpreting and evaluating work on the history study of Hong Kong films in various perspectives – historical, sociological, psychological, aesthetic and ethnological. There is no doubt retrospective section set up an academic section in Hong Kong International Film Festival to show old Hong Kong films and trace the development of Hong Kong cinema, which contributes a lot in technical gap filling about Hong Kong film history.

From Hart’s point of view, narrative is more than description. The emplotment of narrative should entail “providing the ‘meaning’ of a story by identifying the kind of story that has been told”. (Hart, 1992) In this context, retrospective section does a good work. As we known, what have been selected by retrospective section are some classic and old Hong Kong films, which reviewed lots of times by other film critics or cultural scholars separately. Thus, retrospective section put its focus on a systematic research by identifying and evaluating those old films, following different research theme categories to gain a new meaningful understanding.

For example, the first theme category is major genres: A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film in the 4th Hong Kong International Film Festival; A Study of the Hong Kong Swordplay Film (1945-1980) in the 5th Hong Kong International Film Festival; those two retrospective sections together constitute a general research of Chinese wu xia pian. Besides, the Traditions of Hong Kong Comedy in the 9th Hong Kong International Film Festival and Cantonese Melodrama (1950-1969) in the 10th Hong Kong International Film Festival, etc. As Niogret pointed out, “Hong Kong cinema is, more than ever, a cinema of genres (thriller, period film, horror, action, fantasy...), strongly bound to its popular roots and with a form of narration, a choice of visual and auditory forms which are those of the modern world.” (Niogret, 2001)

The second theme category is tracing back to specific historical period: Cantonese Cinema Retrospective (1950-1959) in the 2nd Hong Kong International Film Festival; Hong Kong Cinema Survey (1946-1968) in the 3rd Hong Kong International Film Festival; A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies in the 8th Hong Kong International Film Festival and Hong Kong Cinema in the Eighties in the 15th Hong Kong International Film Festival, etc. Such retrospective sections have filled a gap in the study of Hong Kong local cinema history.

The third theme category is special topic study or comparative study: A Comparative Study of Post-War Mandarin and Cantonese Cinema: the Films of Zhu Shilin, Qin Jian and Other Directors in the 7th Hong Kong International Film Festival; Changes in Hong Kong Society through Cinema in the 12th Hong Kong International Film Festival; Cinema of Two Cities: Hong Kong – Shanghai in the 18th Hong Kong International Film Festival and Early Images of Hong Kong & China in the 19th Hong
Kong International Film Festival, etc. In these retrospective sections, you may find Mainland China films have significant influences on Hong Kong films and make Hong Kong films what they are today. Especially the Shanghai contribution to the Hong Kong film industry cannot be underestimated. According to Mr. Law Kar’s words, “it is imperative that future generations know the antecedence of Hong Kong cinema’s links with Shanghai cinema and the post-war development in Hong Kong which reflected the concerns and politics of the virtual shift of the Shanghai film industry into the territory.” (Law, 1994)

The fourth theme category is figure study: Transcending the Times: King Hu and Eileen Chang in the 22nd Hong Kong International Film Festival; William Chang, Art Director in the 28th Hong Kong International Film Festival; Herman Yau, Director in Focus in the 31st Hong Kong International Film Festival and Filmmaker in Focus: Andrew Lau in the 37th Hong Kong International Film Festival, etc. Besides, retrospective section conducted Cathy Stories in the 26th Hong Kong International Film Festival and The Shaw Screen: A Preliminary Study in the 27th Hong Kong International Film Festival that consisting as the fifth theme category—the study of film studio.

Barthes regarded narrative as the basis of a communication, while there is a giver of narrative (a narrator) and a recipient of narrative (a reader). (Barthes, 1975) The retrospective section plays a narrator role to select and narrate the stories of Hong Kong films for festival’s audiences (readers). There must be lots of interaction between narrator and reader, but in this paper my research angle is retrospective production side, similarly, to find out what took place in author’s position during the narration process.

There are three conceptions formulating the understanding of narrator so far. The first one takes the view that the narrative emanates from a person. (Barthes, 1975) The person should have a name, he or she is the author, “who is the locus of a perpetual exchange taking place between the “personality” and the “art” of a perfectly identified individual who periodically takes up the pen to write a story.” (Barthes, 1975) This conception starts with a very psychological lens to define the author who exists quite independently of others. (Barthes, 1975) The second one regards the narrator as an omniscient who telling stories from an all-encompassing point of view, like God. (Barthes, 1975) However, no one can narrate a narrative without referring himself to the historical discourse and, no one can create a narrative without any rules and limitations. Here comes to the third conception of narrator that sees a narrator must limit the story to what the characters can observe, “the assumption is that each of the characters is, in turn, the transmitter of narrative.” (Barthes, 1975) In other words, from selecting steps to narrating process author’s position may reflect an ideology, a moral choice, a political philosophy are embedded in the narrative. (Dipesh, 1998)
Barthes used a vivid term “paper beings” to describe sorts of authors. (Barthes, 1975) When we talk about author, the poet, the fiction writer, or the social theorist mostly dominates our understanding. (Hart, 1992) However, most recently, a new label attached on author as “participants and to informants who are touched by the experiences being studied.” (Hart, 1992) We may find that retrospective section each year has included many people’s research outcomes, some of them are filmmakers, the other are film critics or cultural scholars, even the super fans – a group of “artisans” collaborate to produce a unique section in Hong Kong International Film Festival. From Hart’s point of view, authors in retrospective section partly are participants in Hong Kong film industry as previous film directors and, also have reviewers and informants of Hong Kong films. There are different identities of authors in retrospective section who differently concerning in historical, sociological, psychological, aesthetic and ethnological perspective about Hong Kong films, but all have in common that they love Hong Kong films. Whether projecting into the future of explaining the past, these authors in retrospective section continues to remark and rephrases Hong Kong local film at different periods of time in a academic way, rather than only provide a entertainment platform, which can accumulate more cultural heritages for further film development. In fact, the aim of this paper is not to evaluate the author’s motivations or measure the influences may have on the audience, but rather to reveal and describe narratives of Hong Kong films in retrospective section’s code.

“Postmodern critiques of ‘grand narratives’ have been used as ammunition in the process to argue that the nation cannot have just one standardized narrative.” (Dipesh, 1998) Similarly, Hong Kong films may not have just one standardized narrative, particularly the grand narrative that created based on macro perspective and great ambitions, providing limited help to cultural practices. On the contrary, narrative must be a kind of “small politics” can be interesting, and the forms must also be diversified. (Pun and Yee, 2003) In addition to written and oral, mass media such as television, movies, theater, cross media creation can work together to construct the collective story, at the same time, diverse forms of narratives can expand and fulfill the possibilities of culture and history studies. (Pun and Yee, 2003) The fact is, we cannot and will not to find the most representative of a set of symbols, a discourse and a dimension, but through reading, writing and advocating while based on small history, small space and small culture, to contend with any kinds of culture and identity integration. (Pun and Yee, 2003) In David Broadwell’s words, Hong Kong films are all too extravagant and too gratuitously wild, they are definitely Hong Kong’s most important contribution to global culture. Then ambitions and enthusiasm fades and there had better be something else to take its place, retrospective section takes this role, an open-ended exploration about the history and nature of Hong Kong films.
Methodology

This research started in December 2014, and my fieldwork was carried out between June to July 2015, including open-ended, in-depth interviews of three important retrospective section producers, crossover different periods and generations. I firstly interviewed with Mr. Li Cheuk-to, who joined in Hong Kong International Film Festival in 1982, involving retrospective section as programme director from 1984 to 1990. Now he takes the artistic director’s work of the Hong Kong International Film Festival, continues to provide the “new” retrospective section -- Filmmaker in Focus each year that gives fresh blood to this cultural tradition. My second interviewee was Mr. Shu Kei, the famous film critic and director of Hong Kong films. He joined in Hong Kong International Film Festival in 1982 and produced two retrospective section -- Cantonese Cinema Retrospective (1960-1969) in 1982 and A Comparative Study of Post-War Mandarin and Cantonese Cinema: the Films of Zhu Shilin, Qin Jian and Other Directors in 1983 as programme director, who embarking on this retrospective section path after his first movie. Then, I interviewed with Mr. Law Kar, who was invited as consultant of retrospective section at very beginning in 1977, at the same time he wrote film reviews for Chinese Students Weekly. Afterwards, during 1981 to 1990 Mr. Law Kar provided his film research articles to retrospective section every year. Then in 1991, He officially took the place as programme director of retrospective section by establishing Hong Kong Cinema in the Eighties. Mr. Law Kar devoted his hard work to retrospective section for almost forty years; at last he left Hong Kong International Film Festival to Hong Kong Film Archive in 2001.

The interview questions are open-ended questions that allow the interviewees to elaborate on their own views and experiences. Each open question also has a number of further probing questions that not only standardizes the collected interview material, but also gives more useful information. All my interviews and conversations with these producers were in Chinese. I voice-recorded all interviews with fully transcript, also took notes for informal observation, conversation, and their expression on faces — all the gist of qualitative research.

I try to use theoretical lens of narrative theory to offer alternative thematic analysis that examine the micro-politics of narratives making and what kind of narratives have been produced in different periods. In next section, I will focus on their work experience, including regular work, setting topic, form of retrospective and research direction, etc., to tell you what happened in production side. In the last part I will raise some further discussions about cultural issues embedded in retrospective section.

Regular Work in Retrospective Section
I started with a communication of what they deal with apart from film selection in retrospective section, invited them to talk about their regular work. Mr. Law Kar told me that as important as selecting films to play, publishing retrospective catalogue is another task:

“Actually, the retrospective section consists of two parts: one is to look for good films, to select some of them to play in the film festival. This part can be engaged in my own work. The other part is I need invite friends to write some academic articles for catalogue. Because an academic writing is not able be completed within several days, it is not an easy work. Those authors you find in the book today, they spent quite much time in watching a lot of films and conducting some research, it probably need a half of year for the preparation work. I must say it is a heartfelt book.”

Hong Kong was not a cultural center in the past, the tradition of art literature and film criticism haven’t been set up without a strong economic foundation and political support. As Mr. Law Kar told, sorts of professional research and writing about Hong Kong film began in 1978, when the 2nd Hong Kong International Film Festival firstly launched the first retrospective section Cantonese Cinema Retrospective (1950-1959). This has laid the foundation for the future narratives of film researches, where many people would apply patterns to further study on Hong Kong films. At that time, Hong Kong International Film Festival was sponsored by Hong Kong government, in charged by the Urban Council which refers to today is the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, but basically retrospective section was responsible for programme planning. When talked about the collaboration time with the government, Mr. Shu Kei laughed and said:

“We were required to submit retrospective proposal to the government officers. What we usually did was outlining two or three options, to well describe with more details for the topic we really liked, oppositely, to wonder attached with some serious worries for the backup topics. Since the government officers didn’t know much about the film, most of time we could pass.”

Economic and other conditions could not support a specialized organization to study and keep record for Hong Kong films, thus retrospective section was assumed to take this role to narrate the history and nature of Hong Kong film since 1978. In other words, although it might lack of manpower and resources, retrospective section enjoyed a higher degree of freedom in selecting topic, which to be investigated and discussed each year. Therefore, when you revisit retrospective topics, a systemic review of Hong Kong films runs through in the past four decades and, you do feel there are common treads throughout the work – the narration of Hong Kong films based on five theme categories what I conclude in literature review part. Hence, the authors in retrospective section are aspiring a pragmatic idea of workable truths,
based on a shared, rational understanding of historical fact and evidence of Hong Kong films. (Dipesh, 1998)

Film Selecting and Research Direction

People always measure the success of film festival through box-office. Clearly, numbers of new films, brilliant performances and super film stars will bring the atmosphere to a climax in festival week. However, the passion fades and there should better be something else to take its place, and we should carefully consider what have been left for us, for Hong Kong films. When we talked about the concern of topic setting, Mr. Law Kar said that it was very different among International film section, Asian film section and retrospective section. Asian and International section prefer to choose films nearly one or two years ago, it is best not released in public. So they must well consider the attraction for mass audiences and super fans, whether or not received awards in other film festival, and are there any super stars and big directors involved in the films, etc. Then he continued saying in a rising tone:

"But our retrospective section is different. We don’t choose the contemporary films; instead, we are interested in old ones, a few decades ago. The contents in the film culture of times are taken into our consideration. But the main concern is still the historic importance of the film; we are making research into the historic importance, cultural influence and artistic achievement. Due to financial constraints and limitations of skills and equipment, some old films didn’t enjoy high artistic achievement, we still adapt them in our research both for the cultural reference and historic contribution in that period of time."

According to Mr. Law, retrospective sections didn’t select films just because they were popular. He cared more about historical and cultural values than pure artistic achievement in topic setting and film selecting.

When retrospective section entered in 1990s in charged by Mr. Law Kar, the focus had been shifted from genres film research to special topic study or comparative study. For instance, the China Factor in Hong Kong Cinema in 1990, Overseas Chinese Figures in Cinema in 1992 and Early Images of Hong Kong & China in 1995, etc. He attempted to trace the origin of Hong Kong films, dating back what situation was in 1950s and 1940s, even earlier, to fill in the historical blanks. “Putting ‘history’ and ‘image’ against the relief of the culture and society in that period is particular meaning.” (Law, 1995) What’s more, retrospective sections in 1990s tried to explore the connection and collaboration between Mainland China and Hong Kong, in order to clarify Mainland China films, epically Shanghai films contributed a lot to Hong
Kong film industry and made Hong Kong films what they are today. Even today, to a certain extent, Hong Kong films are still influenced by Chinese economics, culture and politics. Refers to one article in retrospective section, “it is imperative that future generations know the antecedence of Hong Kong cinema’s links with Shanghai cinema and the post-war development in Hong Kong which reflected the concerns and politics of the virtual shift of the Shanghai film industry into the territory.” (Law, 1994)

From the conversation with Mr. Law Kar, I find he loves doing historic studies, particular border-crossing studies, for example adopting Eileen Chang and King Hu in one research, applying traditional Chinese culture studies into film studies, to stimulate new ideas as well as recall the past. As he always emphasized, each retrospective section was carried out on twin principles of “history” and “image”. “History is a subject primarily concerned with the crafting of narratives. Any account of the past can be absorbed into, and thus made to enrich, the mainstream of historical discourse.” (Dipesh, 1998) Mr. Shu Kei as the programme director established A Comparative Study of Post-War Mandarin and Cantonese Cinema: the Films of Zhu Shilin, Qin Jian and Other Director in 1983, it focused especially on the work of the director Zhu Shilin and Qin Jian. According to Mr. Shu Kei’s words, “The study of director is an important part of film research, whether one approaches it through the auteur theory, or simply, as history. This study encompassed the two directors’ approaches to filmmaking, their style and technique.” Thus, there are countless angles of narrating used by different authors; what can’t be denied is – they can- and they do usually in writing narratives of Hong Kong films.

**New Line of Retrospective Section**

If you go through of retrospective list carefully, you should find the whole section began to turn into another narrative direction in 1999, as Director in Focus: Johnnie To in 1999, Filmmaker in Focus: Eric Tsang in 2008, Filmmaker in Focus: Peter Ho-Sun Chan: My Way in 2012 and Filmmaker in Focus: Sylvia Chang this year, and so on. Mr. Li Cheuk-to is the programme director, he told:

“After returning back in Hong Kong International Film Festival, I developed a new direction, or you can regard it as a new line of retrospective section. I planed to do some contemporary research of Hong Kong films, not only pay attention on the past, but also show our concerns on good films and excellent film workers in recent.”

Mr. Li Cheuk-to pointed out two major concerns about the new direction. On one hand, what he is doing now will also become a history many years later, but now he
has conducted the research based on one-hand resources and fruitful information instantly. He explained, “the answer you get from Karwai Wong now must be quite different from what he tells you in forty year later.” Mr. Li laughed and said, “on the other hand, in many people’s opinion, we should take our responsibilities to promote and help Hong Kong films. This new line talking about contemporary films definitely makes contribution to Hong Kong films. What we did in past years has become a part of history, which is valuable but helpless for who is shooting Hong Kong films now. What we hope now is, to do some contemporary film research that is able to provide kinds of help for Hong Kong film workers now. At same time, we hope recall people’s interests and rebuild confidence about Hong Kong films.” Through the interview, I realize Mr. Li Cheuk-to is a precise man with logic. He has a complete set of steps and knows what should do first and do what in different development periods. However, one of his sentences impressed me a lot – “My principle to run retrospective section is, not necessarily must improve on perfection, but must certainly give opportune help!”

According to Hobsbawm described, ‘Good narratives’ are supposed to expand our vista and make the subject matter of history more representative of society as a whole. However, who has authority to define what “good” is a kind of Foucauldian questions, (Dipesh, 1998) what we can make a statement here is, retrospective section is such a good and essential narrative of Hong Kong films that helps routinize innovation, to achieve better development in future.

Narratives in 1970s

From the recovery of the film industry in the postwar years to the present, Hong Kong film has passed through almost seventy years of difficulty as well as success. The retrospective section has grown up with Hong Kong films in past four decades, while it narrated the development of Hong Kong films from social, economic, cultural or artistic perspective since 1978 till now. As I mentioned before, narrative must be a kind of “small politics” can be interesting, and the forms must also be diversified. (Pun and Yee, 2003) The fact is, retrospective section is good at narrating and advocating the stories of Hong Kong films while based on small history, small space and small culture, to further highlight important moments or revise stereotypes.

Hong Kong films in 1970s deserved to be reevaluated as they are generally thought of as a decade full of badly produced, gimmicky and exploitative works. People always regards seventies films are escapist in nature and thus, short of merit. (Li, 1984) Therefore, one of the functions of the retrospective—A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies, is to recognize the outstanding contributions and re-affirm
the status of the filmmakers of the seventies. I invited Mr. Li Cheuk-to to advise more about Hong Kong films in seventies, he said:

"Film critics are not satisfied the films at that time. It is the common thing happened in each times, is the so-called tough love. Because you love it deeply, then you treat it seriously. Some of Hong Kong films in 1970s are badly produced and gimmicky, however, Chu Yuan’s the House of 72 Tenants (1973) and Michael Hui’s Games Gamblers Play (1974) are good films, which re-popularized Cantonese films. Besides, the retrospective— A Study of Hong Kong Cinema in the Seventies was produced in 1984, when people spoke highly of NewWave, on the contrary, they looked down of films in seventies. I thought it’s not fair, so I tried to reclaim and revise some wrong ideas.”

Although mainstream media hold negative comment on seventies films in Hong Kong during that time, we could have just one standardized narrative when it based on macro perspective and great ambitions. On the contrary, retrospective section selected Chu Yuan’s the House of 72 Tenants (1973) and Michael Hui’s Games Gamblers Play (1974) as examples, illustrated their craftsmanship and advantages from a micro angle. It refreshed the stereotype, of course, the profound new reflection of seventies films has benefited from the authors’ superb narrative skills.

It was traditionally thought that Hong Kong films in seventies began to decline following the death of Bruce Lee and by the mid-seventies; the whole Hong Kong film industry was caught in chaos, dictated by opportunistic producers. (Li, 1984) In 1979 a group of young, new directors began to reverse the bad situation, and they called the New Wave directors. There is no doubt that Below the Lion Rock produced by TVB in 1970s is the most representative song to announce the Hong Kong People’s voice. Actually the sense of local identity grew up in 1970s that embodied in variety of TVB production. When a group of directors came out of TV to make their first film, then the Hong Kong the New Wave was launched with new ideas. The retrospective section also established Hong Kong New Wave Twenty Years After in 1999 to recall that history. This retrospective selected 20 film and 60 TV episodes, it recorded the development of the New Wave from 1979 to 1983. Apart from this, more than 15 television producers and filmmakers were invited to share their valuable experience. According to the programme director wrote down in book, “the retrospective attempts to show how the new postwar generation of directors took the creative road towards reflecting the urban culture and lifestyle of Hong Kong under the impact of both foreign influences and the culture of local roots.” (Law, 1999)

Although those New Wave young directors were coopted into the mainstream in 1983, today we still can recall the memories and reconsider come debates about artistic and historic achievements through a lot of articles probe into social and cultural relevance of the New Wave in this retrospective section. What we cannot be denied however, is 1979 was an important year, which brings us a group of best
known the New Wave films: Tsui Hark’s *the Butterfly Murder*, Peter Yung’s *the System*, Alex Cheung’s *Cops and Robbers*, and Ann Hui’s *the Secret*. One significant reason of the New Wave’s success is, the New Wave directors broke through stylistic conventions and generic formulae. (Cheung, 1999) If we take a look at the New Wave films from artistic perspective, we will realized no matter Tsui Hark’s *the Butterfly Murder*, Peter Yung’s *the System*, or Alex Cheung’s *Cops and Robbers*, even Ann Hui’s *the Secret*, all films that have a fatalistic nourish look about them, all devoted to an anguished quest about truth, and all inevitably tragic, even morose and portentous. (Cheung, 1999)

The retrospective section narrated the disappearance of the New Wave in a regretful tone, quoting Ann Hui’s words: “we didn’t have an overall ideology; we certainly didn’t think about vision or film language. If we had an ideology and had co-operated with each other, we could have become something like a group, made something economically and ideologically viable. Making a film isn’t just shooting a film – it’s an ideology, you need to make it systemic and an enterprise. Its economic structure and production process was not made clear. I feel that’s a pity.” Mr. Shu Kei also shared his comments with me. In Mr. Shu Kei’s point of view, the New Wave turned Hong Kong films into the global context. Traditions and creations, like film itself, change and adapt with time. What cannot be denied, is those new blood caused Hong Kong films to reinvigorate itself, and it became much more modern and international. Hong Kong cinema owns its place in global world.

There is no doubt that the new talent directors in the New Wave not only enhance and rebuilt the Hong Kong film industry, but also push the industry into a commercial market in 1980s. This retrospective section about the New Wave, on one hand sparks our interest in studying the development of Hong Kong films, at same time, it narrates a new interpretation about the New Wave.

“Modernization amid global, local counter cultures— is the New Wave.” Mr. Law Kar narrated.

**Narratives in 1980s**

There is no doubt that the New Wave has strengthened the Hong Kong film industry in 1980s, brought the industry into a commercial and rational prosperous in a new era. These new talents introduced modern film techniques, western art forms and strong cultural consciousness in traditional Hong Kong films, which in sharp
contrasted with the traditional ones, for instance kung fu and comedy films in sixties and seventies. The Hong Kong films were popularized by absorbing various kinds of entertainment elements and local aspects in 1980s; they undoubtedly gave a hand to push the whole industry to the peak in history.

The research direction of the retrospective section in 1980s concerned with the genre films studies. A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film in 1980 and A Study of the Hong Kong Swordplay Film (1945-1980) in 1981 together made a great contribution to the general research of so-called Chinese wu xia pian. Besides, the Traditions of Hong Kong Comedy in 1985, Cantonese Melodrama (1950-1969) in 1986, Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective in 1987 and Phantoms of the Hong Kong Cinema in 1989 all constituted a series research of Hong Kong genre films. There is no doubt that genre films is a unique form of Hong Kong films, as Niogret pointed out, “Hong Kong cinema is, more than ever, a cinema of genres (thriller, period film, horror, action, fantasy…), strongly bound to its popular roots and with a form of narration, a choice of visual and auditory forms which are those of the modern world.” (Niogret, 2001) Although the genre films studied in retrospective section were some old films in sixties and seventies, the authors analyzed and wrote narratives of them through putting them into a broader historical and social context, to examine their artistic skills, cultural significances and historic contributions in new age, while people began to emphasize much about the term “film industry”. The downturn in the film industry in seventies was surely a concern, however, the New Wave has reinvigorated the film industry in late seventies and push it into a modern era in eighties. Thus, the retrospective section tried to borrow some new strategies and benefits from this modern wave in order to spark interest in reviewing and studying the genre films. In other words, it was necessary to seek breakthrough for new development.

Apart from that, the retrospective section conducted a study on the eighties films in Hong Kong Cinema in the Eighties in 1991 by Mr. Law Kar, and reviewed the film works of Tsui Hark’s studio’s in A Tribute to Romantic Vision – 25th Anniversary of Film Workshop in 2009 by Mr. Li Cheuk-to. We talk about the development in 1980s, he told me that Hong Kong society went through many changes from late 1970s to early 1980s, no matter economic, cultural or social structural areas. New generation who born in after war period began to take important duties in society. Old film structure as the Shaw Studio, has been challenged by new trend with western style. The improved dubbing and sound effects, the more serious attention to music plus the more flexible camera techniques all showed a good impact on the previous industry, however, they were not strong enough to change or rebuild the whole film infrastructure in Hong Kong. He continued to said,

“The weakest part of Hong Kong films is the infrastructure, which cannot comparing with Hollywood. Hollywood films always follow the institution to develop step by step systematically. Nevertheless, there are some limitations within the institution although
institution could provide us a clear guideline and a formula. Generally to speak, having the institution is better than not, at least it offers a strong foundation support and operation system for film development.”

Then Mr. Li Cheuk-to quoted a vivid metaphor describing the different characteristics between Hong Kong films and Hollywood films.

“Hong Kong film industry is more like a neighborhood local tea café, while Hollywood film industry has something common with the McDonald’s transnational cooperation. Flexibility, low cost, and countless themes consisting the advantages of Hong Kong films, but lack of a strong high-tech skills, cooperation and infrastructure, which deeply embedded in Hollywood’s tradition.”

Here, I raised my question to ask is it meant Hong Kong films had more possibilities and space to develop?

“Yes, it is exactly why you always feel boring when watching the Hollywood films, you can guest the ending at very beginning. Same pattern always. Just like eating hamburger at McDonald’s quite frequently, you will miss fish cake in tea café occasionally.”

At last, Mr. Li Cheuk-to sighed with in emotion, he mentioned the increasing cost of making films in Hong Kong nowadays. More and more film producers are willing to go to Mainland China to shoot films, since the potential market is waving hands to them. In Mainland China, there is indeed a great demand in the market, investors naturally show big interests in investing films.

In Mr. Shu Kei’s point of view, the eighties Hong Kong films were coopted into the mainstream, and it adopted hot trend and attraction to mass audiences as preference. According to his words, this situation happened around the world not only in Hong Kong, nevertheless, when it happened in Hong Kong, it caused more concerns. Since Hong Kong is a not a big region, once the mainstream dominates the market, there is little space left for small cultural.

Discussion

As we discussed much about the nature and history of Hong Kong films, we haven’t defined what Hong Kong film is, and what Hong Kong characteristics are. The following conversations I quoted from Mr. Li Cheuk-to, Mr. Law Kar and Mr. Shu Kei, may provide us a new angle to rethink this questions.
Mr. Li Cheuk-to: “The definition of Hong Kong films has been redefined all the time. Many people only regard the films produced after the seventies as Hong Kong films. However, the Cantonese films in 1950s and 1960s are very native, they present Hong Kong culture and people’s life in the city. Therefore, in my opinion, anything produced in Hong Kong can be described as local. In fact, I don’t like use the term “Hong Kong film”, instead, “local consciousness” is better.”

Mr. Law Kar: “I can’t agree much with the so-called localness, which widely discussed and quoted by cultural studies. The localness of Hong Kong may be a part of nationalism of China that can’t be separated from China. Hong Kong might not and could not build up its localness within eight or ten years. If Hong Kong must have a kind of localness, it should be flexibility I think. Hong Kong is always good at learning from others and then establish a new develop pattern. We should apply it to our film development in future.”

Mr. Shu Kei: “There is not any so-called local feature for films. Film as a kind of mass entertainment supposed to reveal reality and social fact. Once it fails, it will lose the most audiences at last. Therefore, the all film development is closed linked with the whole society and the times.”

Hart summarized two roles of narrative, one can be a method chosen by social historians to reconstruct the past by using primary or secondary sources carefully problematized, and the other as a sort of “independent variable” that actively in shaping the past. (Hart, 1992) Therefore, we have read fruitful stories of Hong Kong films and got familiar with what happened in the past narrated through retrospective section. In order to classify and narrate the countless of histories, the author needs a “theory”, and must turn to the task of searching for one and sketching it out. (Barthes, 1975) Then working out of such a theory will be much easier if the author proceeds from a model that can provide lots of principles and experiences, undoubtedly, each year’s retrospective section is the model. In summary, the retrospective sections do help rephrase Hong Kong films at different ages. The narratives of Hong Kong films are created and recreated by many author in society, they are collective experience. Last but not least, what Hong Kong film is, still an open-ended question.

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