The Cinema Development of Hong Kong: Is Hong Kong Still a Suitable Place for Filmmakers to Chase for Their Ambition?
1. Introduction

Film merges art and technology into a wonderful medium that allows dreams to be woven by filmmaking talents. Good films become classics that can sustain their influence for decades to come. Hong Kong, a.k.a. “Hollywood of the East”, has always been a heaven for filmmaking thanks to its strategic geographical location for decades. Hong Kong cinema was once a cult phenomenon not only in Asia but also in the West, however, over the past decades with its popularity of local films, it is seen to have a watershed after the handover in the Hong Kong film history, especially with a drastic decline caused by the local film critics and moved to mourn the death of Hong Kong cinema (Chiu, 2010; HKIA, 2017). The market share of local Hong Kong productions has been declining, falling to only 30 per cent of 1997 in 2006, and the market has gradually been taken over by foreign-language films.

*Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, published by Bordwell (2010), has become a classic study of Hong Kong cinema now, begins with the following paragraph:

> “Hong Kong cinema is one of the success stories of film history. For about twenty years, this city-state of around six million people had one of the most robust cinema industries in the world. In a number of films released, it regularly surpassed nearly all Western countries. In export it was second only to the United States. It ruled the East Asian market, eventually destroying one neighboring country’s film industry. Distributed in the West, Hong Kong films became a cult phenomenon on an unprecedented scale.” (Bordwell, 2000, p. 1)

With such high appreciation from foreign scholars, it is worth to question the reasons for the decline in the Hong Kong film industry. Therefore, the following essay will be discussing the Hong Kong cinema history and its recent development, whether Hong Kong is still a suitable place for filmmakers to start their ambition in the industry. Also, with the internship experience in ifva, how ifva and other organizations like Fresh Wave and CreateHK put in their effort to help
the ambitious people to enter the industry will be elaborated.

2. Literature Review: the Hong Kong Cinema Development

This section will be discussing the development of Hong Kong Cinema on a timeline from early 20th century until handover with important stages and events.

2.1. From Pioneering Phase to Post-war Prosperity

Hong Kong had already played an important role of the gateway enabling foreign films’ entry into Mainland China before the dawn of filmmaking (HKIA, 2017; Wu, 2011). In 1914, the short Zhuangzi Tests His Wife (1914) was made by the Lai brothers, Lai Man-wai and Lai Buk-hoi, who is now considered as the pioneers of Hong Kong cinema. Hong Kong was being widely promoted as the production center for Cantonese films to the mainland and South Asian markets in the mid-1930s. At that time, musicals became the most popular genre among all, followed by literary, detective and romantic genres characterized by their westward-looking local nuance. In 1937, an influx of talents and capital leaving the mainland for Hong Kong, creating a rise in demand for Mandarin films. By the mid-1950s, companies such as Great Wall, MP & GI, as well as Shaw Brothers flocked to Hong Kong to set up their base. Production houses and cinemas flourished after the set up of studios and the recruitment of big troops of production, distribution and screening talents from the city by these large corporations (HKIA, 2017; Wu, 2011). Shaw Studio, the largest and most well-equipped amongst the studios, made many coloured films back then and became one of the most influential conglomerates in the industry in the future. By the end of the 50s, all Mandarin films became studio films.

2.2. The Big Studios of the Golden Era

The epic palace genre and Huangmei Diao opera films launched by the Shaw brothers took the Southeast Asian market by storm. Cantonese drama and fantasy martial arts films were on the decline and gradually replaced by iconic youth musicals, which boosted the brimming careers of
idols like Connie Chan Po Chu and Josephine Siao Fong Fong (HKIA, 2017, Wu, 2011). With these amazing teen hits, Shaw brothers was able to extend its vast kingdom across Southeast Asia. By the late 1960s, the development of Cantonese films has plunged into a dormant phase. This was the era when Hui Brothers’ situational comedies and Bruce Lee’s action-intense Kung Fu films took the focus and became the center stage of the history. Meanwhile, a number of new directing talents was nurtured by the emergence of television who was later coined the “Hong Kong New Wave”. The 1980s was the golden era of Hong Kong cinema, in which the industry opened many untapped markets both locally and overseas. Companies like Cinema City, D&B Films, Century, and Sil-Metropole made its entrance. One after another, they set up dedicated partnerships with mainland China, Hollywood and across Asia. As box office soared, Hong Kong took pride in its newly recognized status as “Hollywood of the East” (HKIA, 2017; Wu, 2011).

2.3. The Handover – Watershed in Hong Kong’s Film History

Emigration tide and uncertainties set the scenes of the 1990s. The movie industry also suffered a critical scenario of talent drain (HKIA, 2017). Among the cineastes were adventurers embarking on expeditions to America and Europe in search of expansion capacity, as well as pioneers who head north to blaze new trails in Mainland China. Those who chose to stay in Hong Kong adopted a more cautious approach towards filming (Wu, 2011). Independent film companies emerged, predominantly producing realistic movies inspired by local culture and a rich sense of humanity.

3. The Genre of Localism: Independence and Politics

No one can be completely separated from society, whether in life or as creative artists. Take ifva Award, a competition that is based in Hong Kong and held yearly for independent filmmakers, as an example, it has its emphasis on the independent spirit which has provided platforms for artists to freely express their thoughts and ideas creatively. However, speaking of independent creations, most people will associate these videos with being ‘imperfect’, perhaps the story is lacking in something, or the rhythm is not quite right in resonant with the audience. It is true that these
mistakes occurred sometimes in the videos and shorts that the entrants of ifva present, but it is only explicit when people compare them to the more polished mainstream productions. Justin Wong, one of the jury of 19th ifva Awards has noted that these differences with professional works allow us to see the personalities of the artists, where it is so difficult for the audience to discover in mainstream productions (HKAC, 2014).

On one hand, the entrants have drawn subject matters from social issues, while on the other, we got glimpses of society through these works as well as the feelings and thoughts of artists as they react to various issues. In the past, political issues tend to be hard subjects that do not translate well into artistic creations and gained some sorts of self-censorship from investors, distributors, or authorities, of which can apply pressure to the number of screenings. However, in the past three years, particular political discussions and even certain policies become the inspiration for filmmaking and therefore, awards and festivals serve as the platform for online or even public screenings for these artists who involve some sensitive topics in their productions. At the same time, it can be seen that various types of post-consumerist concerns are now brewing and simmering among young artists. Even though they do not trot out political slogans. Artists have tried to reinterpret subalterns within society from their own points of view through their works.

4. **Challenges encountered for Hong Kong Cinema after Handover**

Saville Chan, one of the jury of 22nd ifva Awards, commented how young artists presented an indie spirit that comes down to earth and the problems that they are facing currently in the situation of Hong Kong (HKAC, 2017). Local filmmakers encounter the lack of investment, competent people and diminishing market – exist globally with Hollywood, mainland China and India being the only exceptions. What really makes people feel vulnerable about Hong Kong’s film industry is the historical achievement that the industry gained in previous decades, which was an outrageous blossom that should never be achieved with such a population.
5. The Shift of Taste of Audience

Hong Kong audience in the 80s to 90s has been interested into heroic gangsters, zombies, Kung Fu, Hui Brothers’, Steven Chow’s comedies, etc., of which called the golden era of Hong Kong cinema. The industry experienced the fruitful achievements with the peak of influence to other Asian regions and markets, therefore, the local filmmakers produced more audience-oriented movie productions of such genres for their entertainment. But when the audience started feeling bored of the topics mentioned, they would search for new presentations from overseas markets, and this shift turned into the driven force for local productions to put in more resources in developing new genres to remain its competitiveness in keeping their audience’s interest (Chan, 2017).

Meanwhile, the business production from Hollywood has created an inevitable impact on Hong Kong cinema with surrealistic genres such as science-fiction, fantasy, horror, etc. with tons of computer arts and visual effects which brought the young audience with innovative sensory stimulation. The use of new techniques and presentation methods in moving pictures has changed the taste of audience who no longer satisfies with the genres that local productions offered, therefore, the decline of Hong Kong cinema industry could be seen from the dominance of ranking from the box office with Hollywood movies (Chiu, 2010; Chan, 2017).

6. The Current Solution: Co-productions

Not only the taste of the audience, the transformation of Hong Kong cinema has created an “M-shaped” local film industry which led to its decline from the golden era (Chiu, 2010). “M-shaped society” is a concept first raised by Japanese business strategist Kenichi Ohmae, and can be borrowed here to examine the recent developments in the Hong Kong film industry. Hong Kong film industry has recently witnessed the disappearance of its middle class with the notion of the concept of “M-shaped Society” which has forced many Hong Kong film workers to quit their jobs. Therefore, with a lack of budgets from local investors, filmmakers have to look for mainland
supporters for their productions (Chiu, 2010).

Henry Fong, a senior actor-producer-director, has claimed that co-productions bring Hong Kong actors to the Mainland and it would develop new markets for Hong Kong on the one hand, and provide a healthy impetus for the development of the mainland film industry on the other hand. However, it actually highlights the inevitable situation faced by the Hong Kong film industry in the years to come, since only those highly acclaimed actors can enter the mainland market and the genres and contents are further restricted under the circumstances of the Chinese government and the social ambience. As most co-productions are shot in the mainland to reduce production costs, Hong Kong film workers, apart from a selected few, will not benefit from such co-productions. Moreover, in order to gain maximum profits, restrictions on the investors and distributors are applied to the filmmakers, trapping their ideas and there is no way to express freely. Despite the crying need for mid-budget productions, though, there have recently been fewer and fewer mid-budget productions because of the difficult market conditions in two different cultures. The blockbusters have attracted the lion’s share of investors’ attention and dominate most cinemas in the mainland (Chiu, 2010).

Definitely, it does not mean it is a healthy phenomenon to the industry. Vicky Leung, the director of Hong Kong, Kowloon & New Territories Motion Picture Industry Association (MPIA), expressed the view at the 25th Hong Kong Film Awards that the Hong Kong film industry might “hibernate” in the near future, just as the industry in Taiwan did in the 1990s (Hong Kong Film Award Association Board of Directors, 2006, p. 87, as cited in Chiu, 2010). In shedding the light on the problems of the Hong Kong film industry, the solution to the M-shaped industry was government intervention and supports to filmmakers, in order to tackle the lack of budgets of local productions.
7. The Rise of Film Festival and its Purposes

Film festival originates from the West, it does not serve the public audience only but a linkage with the society, politics and economy, which could have been seen from the year of the launch of film festival of different countries (Lu, 2013). The Cannes Film Festival, Edinburgh International Film Festival, Berlin International Film Festival were all launched during the post-war period, 1946, 1947 and 1950 respectively, especially Germany, which launched 4 film festivals in the 50s. Scholars from film industry claimed that the emergence of the film festival was an influential national cultural strategy in bringing a brand new city after the war (Ahn, 2012 as cited in Lu, 2013). Hong Kong had established its very first International Film Festival in 1977, which held as the center in Asia in line with those Western film festivals. Film festivals have evolved into cultural diffusion under the globalized political economy nowadays.

The main purpose of the film festival is to provide audience the opportunity to appreciate movie productions that are more artistic or politics related, which were hardly seen in cinema. Film festivals, especially the Cannes Film Festival, are described as the cradle of independent productions against the Hollywood productions (Lu, 2013). Secondly, it offers young filmmakers a platform to meet seniors and interested investors and distributors. Janet Harbord sees film festival as:

“the ‘network’ of global commerce creates linkages between sites, creating centers and peripheries, eclipsing other spaces altogether. More than the hybrid mixing goods and cultures, the festival as marketplace provides an exemplary instance of how culture, and cultural flows, produce space as places of flows, in Castells’s terms” (Harbord, Film Cultures as cited in Lu, 2013).

8. The Meaning of ifva, Fresh Wave and CreateHK to Filmmakers

Although the existing Hong Kong International Film Festival has offered young artists an opportunity to enter the industry, the threshold is still high for them to meet. Therefore, in order
to support indies in filmmaking and their development in the industry, three alternatives which are specified for new filmmakers have come up, the ifva Awards, Fresh Wave International Short Film Festival, and CreateHK serve as the platform that actively promotes and encourages creative talents in Asia, making short films, videos, animation, and media art. With stepping the industry with short film production and mentor supervision, it is undoubtedly the stepping stones for them to gain a greater leap into their ambition.

ifva, organized by the Hong Kong Arts Center since 1995, it aims to connect creative communities all over the world and engage everyone in the art of creation. ifva includes Awards and Festival, short films, videos, animation and media art in several categories (HKAC, 2016). From the origin of the launch of ifva, it is clearly seen that there is a lack of a platform for filmmakers to express their ideas (HKAC, 2014; 2016; 2017).

The first Fresh Wave Short Film Festival was organized in 2005 by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) and Fresh Wave has further emerged as an independent charity organization led by Founder cum Chairman Johnnie To. In addition to promoting local short films, the Festival aims to discover and to inspire young film talents in Hong Kong by providing a screening platform for their productions and hands-on learning to enhance the quality of their works, striving for diversified film development in the future and to inject new blood into the Hong Kong film industry (Fresh Wave HK, 2017).

CreateHK is a government department which dedicates to promoting the development of creative industries in Hong Kong. CreateHK mainly provides funding support to applicants who initiate projects in creative industry. Their aim is to support and nurture young artists effectively, under the substantial potential of the creative economy (CreateHK, 2017). First Feature Film Initiative (FFFI) is a project under CreateHK which target to support new directors and their film production teams to make their first feature films on a commercial basis in order to nurture talents for the
film industry (CreateHK, 2017).

These three alternatives help those entrants and winners in knowing more technical skills and widening their network not only limited to other entrants but also seniors, actors, investors, and distributors. Taking Tam Wai Ching, who graduated from School of Creative Media from the City University of Hong Kong, as an example, she had awarded a prize from Fresh Wave Short Film Competition and was nominated to the First Feature Film Initiative with a subsidy of 3.5 million (Yau, 2017). Her crew also included other entrants from the same year and her mentor has helped her to link with different powerful and experienced actors in the industry who are interested in incubating new filmmakers and willing to cast. Therefore, these short film festivals have paved an easier and smoother path for young artists to enter the industry.

Although short films have their own aesthetics, and many possess a zest and a sense of experimentation that feature films cannot match, Hong Kong short films have always existed on the margins of the film industry and gain exposure mainly through various short film competitions. However, such attention of often short-lived, and outstanding works lack a stable platform for reaching audiences. Independent film productions require not only the direct investment but also a chance to be seen in order for their creators to grow and mature. Only in this way can the local independent film scene become a fertile ground for creative artists.

9. The Potential of a New Wave and Conclusion

Film making is definitely a high-risk career, mentioned by Saville Chan (HKAC, 2017), with high production costs while low reproduction costs especially with counterfeited copies in reality and online. Filmmakers exhaust themselves mentally and physically while the feedback and reward received, however, never satisfy their expectation, which leaves a lot of discouragement and depression, for them, the audience, and the whole industry development. Jim Jarmusch, a renowned US independent movie director who encouraged young filmmakers stated that,
“Nothing is original. Steal from anywhere that resonates with inspiration or fuels your imagination. Devour old films, new films, music, books, paintings, photographs, poems, dreams, random conversations, architecture, bridges, street signs, trees, clouds, bodies of water, light and shadows. Select only things to steal from that speak directly to your soul. If you do this, your work (and theft) will be authentic”.

Therefore, we could not deny the fact that the industry is declining and it is extremely difficult for it to rebound into the golden era. However, there are still potential to develop, as we could see the burst of the nomination of over 20 new directors in the Hong Kong Film Award. More and more young filmmakers shine in international stages, such as Wong Chun, who was awarded the Best New Director.

All in all, it is still a debatable topic whether Hong Kong is suitable for young filmmakers to chase their ambition, as mentioned above, it is a high-risk career even in the golden era. Yet no matter the seniors or young filmmakers, they are still striving the best in creating a new “wave” for Hong Kong, through any platforms, any methods.

Reference
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