The Giant Panda's Realist Children:
A study of Hong Kong New Wave

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Before the 1970s, if one were to ask a film enthusiast what their idea of Hong Kong cinema is, martial arts and Kung Fu would be mentioned without a doubt. The mass-production studio system that had been working since the 1950s in Hong Kong would eventually produce films that their objective was to compete with spaghetti westerns and Japanese samurai films. According to movementsinfilm.com, the Hong Kongese directors focused on cutting-edge stunts and celebrations, instead of focusing on Confucian philosophy, in order to attract a wider range of audiences. Economically, it would make perfect sense, because of the massive profit that these movies were making nationally as well abroad enabled these studios to make over 120 movies per year by the late 1970s. This lack of focus on life and its realities provoked a sense of responsibility in young directors to make a change in how films were being made. "From the perspective of Anglophone cinema studies, we often share the assumption that Hong Kong cinema is fundamentally 'mass-produced' and industry-driven" (Fan). The sudden urge of realist films was the product of years of studios' cultural dominance on Hong Kong cinema, and with this new generation of educated directors, Hong Kong New Wave was born.

Formally, the Hong Kong New Wave presents its story world in an almost sensible manner where every element of the film simply exists on its own. The process of narration in the most feature films of this movement, while each being unique in their own way, are relatively unnoticeable. Simply, the movie does not deliver an awareness to how it is constructed. This form of filmmaking requires a straight vision towards life and its realities. Every single element, such as characters, actions, etc. exists to serve their role and to contribute to the film's world. Hong Kong's history of colonization and the society living under the influence of the British as well as People Republic of China certainly made this third-world country to question its identity and the idea of culture. "The sense that the selective curriculum fostered by the colonial education system

deprived Hong Kong of a genuine historical awareness of its own past, coupled with the growth of a distinct local identity in the 1960s and 1970s, supplied a cognitive background that encouraged Hong Kong cultural critics to demand a realist cinema" (Rodriguez 60). This conflict of social identity led most Hong Kong New Wave flicks to convey a common sense understanding of everyday reality as most people experience it. While art-for-art's sake attitude was very popular at the time, this realist movement was needed to portray Hong Kong's realities, sentiments, anger, culture, and ultimately identity. No more stunts and magical exciting fights between Bruce Lee and the villain, the late '70s Hong Kong cinema slapped the society with the reality of its working class and their everyday struggles with poverty, injustice, and crime in an artisanal manner.

Yim Ho (1952) is a Hong Kongese director. His feature, The Extra (1978), started the Hong Kong New Wave movement. He was one of the many educated directors of his time that had the urge to make a change in Hong Kong cinema. "This generation of filmmakers shared common career trajectories: they were all in their 20s and 30s, were educated in film schools and abroad, and returned to Hong Kong to begin their careers at television stations before leaving for the film industry" (Gao). This generation of dedicated and passionate directors were well educated. Some had studied in western universities and acquired western cinema's knowledge. To most of these directors, French New Wave was a big influence. But the most important factor in the process of creation of Hong Kong New Wave was the directors' willingness to take film as a serious art. Therefore, after years of Hong Kong's mass-production system, these auteur filmmakers were to change the country's cinema industry forever. "After the death of cult star Bruce Lee in 1973, there was a noticeable decrease in quality throughout the martial arts genre" (Movementsinfilm.com). The decline of traditional Hong Kong cinema paved the way for these young creatives to express their realist way of filmmaking and to inject fresh blood into Hong Kong cinema's cultural values.

Allen Fong (1974) is another pioneer of this movement who also won many awards during different Hong Kong Film Award as Best Director. His most appreciated films were Father and Son (1981), Ah Ying (1983), and Just Like Weather (1986). As a graduate of University of Southern California, Fong learned a lot about cinema of different countries that he would later use as an inspiration in his works. His favorite movement being Italian Neo-realism, he mostly used this movement's influence to make movies which are based on personal or real-life stories. "Filmmakers such as Allen Fong, Tsui Hark, Patrick Tam, and John Woo had participated in the cine club movement, sometimes collaborated with critical publications, invoked art-cinema conventions in their films, and were ready to dialogue with the critical community" (Rodriguez 63). This community of emerging intellectual directors and filmmakers made Hong Kong New Wave so capable of expressing itself in a serious artistic way.

Following, the desire of New Wave filmmakers to tackle historical issues of Hong Kong with oppressors and the ruling class led them to sometimes record a part of history in their films.

"Art Cinema criteria of verisimilitude and sincerity frequently undergird Allen Fong's interest in depicting a history that has been suppressed from commercial cinema, and in celebrating those everyday activities and experiences that have been treated as nonevents by the commercial film industry" (Rodriguez 66).

Years of mass-production studios' influence on Hong Kongese society and cinema made Fong and his fellow directors even more so dedicated to analyzing their local history and talk of oppression. It is notable that a few years after Ho's feature film and beginning of Hong Kong Film Award, an annual film awards ceremony in Hong Kong, was founded in 1982. This could be one of the many influences of this movement and its attitude towards cinema. Undoubtedly, Hong Kong New Wave films were very well received nationally, and they started to invoke new

sentiments in society. In spite of the movement's unique approach to filmmaking, many critics believed that Hong Kong New Wave never existed, or that it had a sudden decline. "The New Wave waned in the mid-80s, partly because the directors were absorbed into the mainstream, and partly because the resurgence of highly commercialized, mass-entertainment comedies drew attention away from the experimental, stylized New Wave films" (Gao). Many directors of the movement expressed their frustration of the lack of funding and financial benefits of making this type of film by quitting the movement or by focusing on the more mainstream media and culture. Tsui Hark (1950) was one of these directors who changed their direction in filmmaking towards a less challenging style, such as family entertainment, with titles like Perking Opera Blues (1986) and Warriors from the Magic Mountain (1983). This lack of motivation among most first wave Hong Kong New Wave filmmakers opened the window towards a new generation of filmmakers and auteurs to breathe fresh life into this movement. Wong Kar-Wai (1958) being one of them.

Furthermore, in order to understand Hong Kong New Wave and specifically its rejuvenation by the second-generation directors better, Happy Together (1997) directed by Kar-Wai, qualifies as a good candidate to be analyzed. Happy Together tells the story of a Hong Kongese couple of expatriates in Argentina. The film opens with the homosexual couple making love, and this opening scene is as brutally honest and realist as it could be in its time. Homosexuality is a huge taboo in China and Hong Kong and tackling this issue in such a direct manner screams the filmmaker's attitude towards his movement's objectives, to record local history and to embrace the oppressed class' issues. Additionally, throughout the film, the process of narration is relatively unnoticeable, letting the audience to explore the film's world. While Happy Together is one of the most important LGBTQ films, it also tackles issues such as poverty, racism, and depression. Formally, the narrative does not direct the viewer's attention towards the

plot or the cause/effect, but rather follows the thought of the characters and the worlds that they are living in. The sad reality of the relationship between the two men, played by Leslie Cheung (1956, 2003) and Tony Leung Chui-wai (1962), further puts an emphasis on Wong's initial exploration on abusive relationships and the solitude that both his characters feel all along the film. During an interview conducted by Khoi Lebinh and David Eng, Wong clarifies: "To me, the relationship seems like a plane and an airport. The character Leslie Cheung is to me like a plane. His nature is going to land sometimes and going to take off sometimes. And the character of Tony Leung seems to me just like an airport. But sometimes, when this airport refuses to be an airport anymore and the plane has no place to land, this is the end of the relationship." The movie explores Hong Kongese society through different themes and presents the reality to the viewer through the relationships that each character has with one another and themselves.

In conclusion, Hong Kong New Wave emphasizes on the importance of facing reality in order to find an identity. It is the product of years of colonization and foreign exploitation of Hong Kong's national human and material resources. However, before the movement's initialization, mass-production studios financially milked the Hong Kongese and international audiences as much as they could with the least amount of respect and regards for their art's objective. Hong Kong New Wave directors decided to make films differently by setting new dignified rules and boundaries with regards to the years of exploitation of oppression and ignorance towards the working class and their struggles. This different attitude towards cinema and art surely made Hong Kong New Wave one of the most important movements of film history.

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