



Hong Kong Film

by Andrew Grossman

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When it comes to queer subjects, Hong Kong cinema has enjoyed, and perhaps has suffered from, a special historical and political position. On the one hand, Hong Kong is the inheritor of the traditional Chinese aesthetics of theatrical transvestism and transgenderism. On the other hand, a Westernized, colonial Hong Kong had adopted both the homophobia of European culture and the only slightly lesser homophobia of neo-Confucianism.

As these various cultural and historical strands continued to intertwine in light of the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1991 and Hong Kong's reversion to China in 1997, filmmaking in Hong Kong eventually came to terms with, exploited, and often blurred the lines between Chinese traditions of gender ambiguity and Westernized "out" politics.

The Opera-film

First, the tradition of the opera-film, a dominant genre of Hong Kong cinema in the 1950s and 1960s, had established a cinematic tradition of cross-dressing arguably more transgressive than any of the "out" queer films that came decades later.

Opera actresses such as Yam Kim-fai and Ivy Ling-boh starred in hundreds of stagey film versions of traditional operas such as *The Purple Hairpin* and *Lady General Hua-Mulan*, where they performed cross-dressed in heroic male roles.

Unlike the parody of a drag show, the Chinese opera audience is supposed fantastically to suspend its disbelief and accept whatever gender is being performed, suggesting that the "performativity" espoused by Western queer theory is not such a novel idea.

Years later, director Shu Kei's "out" lesbian film *Hu-du-Men* (1996) would provide a rich account of a Cantonese opera actress coping with her lesbian daughter, joining traditional and modern notions of Chinese queerness in the same family.

The New-Wave Period

The peak of Hong Kong's cinematic artistry is usually considered to be its new-wave period--from about 1977 to the early 1990s--when Western-schooled directors infused Hong Kong cinema with cosmopolitan technology and an eye for naturalism. Two basic trends during this era were the social realism exemplified by directors such as Ann Hui and Allen Fong and the wild, kaleidoscopic fantasies practiced by Tsui Hark and Ching Siu-tung.

Neither of these trends, however, managed to engage queer subjects seriously, and when homosexuality did rear its head, it was framed within terms as homophobic as those of Hollywood during the same period, even in an "important" film such as Tsui Hark's political allegory *Don't Play with Fire* (1980).

Apart from the homoerotic male bonding of the John Woo-style gangster film, the only legitimate appeals to queerness in the 1980s were references to homosexual patronage in films set in the world of Chinese opera, such as Sammo Hung's *The Prodigal Son* (1981), Tsui Hark's *Peking Opera Blues* (1986), and Jacob Cheung's *Lai Shi: China's Last Eunuch* (1988).

The one notable exception here is the work of Clarence Fok (aka Clarence Ford), whose *On Trial* (1980) stars a young Leslie Cheung in a blatantly homoerotic story of unrequited schoolboy longing, and whose seedy *Before Dawn* (1984) portrays the lethal relationship between an awkward young man and a gay killer.

In later, more liberated years, Fok would emerge as a cult director with the erotic lesbian thriller *Naked Killer* (1992), as well as *Cheap Killers* (1998), a rare genre film that positively portrays openly gay action heroes.

The 1990s Period Costume Film

In the early 1990s, producer-director Tsui Hark's obsession for *commedia-dell'arte*-style comedies of disguise would make cross-gender disguise and intrigue a standard part of the reinvented period costume film. Unlike the "permanent" cross-dressing of the traditional opera film, however, this new costume film would only involve diegetic cross-dressing, where we are fully aware that a character only cross-dresses to fulfill some purpose in the plot.

Usually, this involves a girl in disguise for reasons of self-interest (as in Shakespeare) in films such as *Dragon Inn* (1992), *Magic Crane* (1993), *The Lovers* (1994), and the *Swordsman* trilogy (1990-1993), which adds a supernaturally transgendered anti-hero(ine) to the mix.

Yet Tsui's treatment of his latently queer material is often coy, and many of the period martial arts films influenced by Tsui are more open about their transgressive possibilities. For example, frankly lesbian complications ensue between a disguised Josephine Siao and the woman who falls in love with her/him in Yuen Kwai's *Fong Sai Yuk* (1993), and campy homosexual kisses between top male stars highlight costume farces such as Wong Jing's *Flying Dagger* (1992) and Jeff Lau's *Eagle Shooting Heroes* (1993).

The period costume trend--every film of which invariably mandated that some character appeared cross-dressed--climaxed around 1993, the year that also saw Chen Kaige's controversial, gay-themed mainland opera tale *Farewell My Concubine* (1993).

Following the popularity of these films, a new liberal trend emerged that produced countless contemporary, urban, middle-class films with LGBT themes or openly LGBT characters: Lawrence Cheng's *He and She* (1993), Peter Chan's *Tom, Dick, and Hairy* (1993), Derek Chiu's *Oh My Three Guys!* (1994), Leonard Heung's *Love Recipe* (1994), Peter Chan's *He's a Woman, She's a Man Pts. 1-2* (1994, 1996), Joe Hau's *Boys* (1996), Lee Lik-chi's *Killing Me Tenderly* (1996), and many others.

The Emergence of Queer Films

Yet as the 1997 deadline ticked away, and as Hong Kong film directors worried about what censorship the future might hold, a more focused, less apologetic batch of queer films emerged, films poised to challenge the mainland's official denials of Chinese homosexuality.

These films included Cheung Chi-sing's slyly political bisexual seriocomedy *Love and Sex among the Ruins* (1996), Shu Kei's coming-out narrative *A Queer Story* (1997), Wong Kar-wai's highly publicized *Happy Together* (1997), Jacob Cheung's lesbian romance *Intimates* (1997), and Yim Ho's disarming transsexual drama *Kitchen* (1997).

Also during this period, Stanley Kwan, Hong Kong's foremost gay director, decided to come out cinematically with his fascinating semi-autobiographical documentary *Yang and Yin: Gender in Chinese Cinema* (1996). Previously, Kwan's gayness as a director had been limited to a hint of transvestism in *Rouge* (1987) and Maggie Cheung's subdued portrayal of a lesbian in *Full Moon in New York* (1990), a rarity for its time.

"Category 3" Films

Paralleling these trends was the creation of a new censorship category in 1989 to allow for more sexually explicit films. Predictably, queer images in Hong Kong's "category 3" films tend towards lesbian erotica aimed at the fantasies of a heterosexual male audience, as in the *Sex and Zen* series (1991-1996), the *Erotic Ghost Story* series (1990-1992), the *Raped by an Angel* series (1993-2000), or Ho Shu Pau's lesbian thriller *The Love that is Wrong* (1993).

On the other hand, lesbianism in these films is often vibrant, unashamed, and (somewhat) liberated, and we should not overlook the probability that lesbian audiences have covertly, subversively enjoyed such films.

Furthermore, a few of these films offer some politically incorrect surprises, from a mafia syndicate populated by real-life transsexuals in Lau Siu Gwan's *Hero Dream* (1993) to a homophobic male hero becoming the sex object of a diabolical bisexual rapist in Wong Ying Git's *The Sweet Smell of Death* (1995).

Moreover, marginal, low-budget category 3 thrillers such as Joe Hau's *Passion Unbounded* (1995), Lo Gin's *Spider Woman* (1995), and Joe Hau's *Crazy* (1999) offer both gay and lesbian characterizations that are more nuanced than the stereotypes often found in bourgeois, assimilationist fare.

The "One Country, Two Systems" Policy

While filmmakers' fears of what would follow 1997 were justified, the production of queer films continued according to the "one country, two systems" policy, whereby the mainland government would not interfere with Hong Kong's social fabric until 2047.

Recent queer films have been as diverse as Stanley Kwan's existential *Hold You Tight* (1998), Yip Wai-man's lesbian gangster epic *Portland St. Blues* (1998), Yonfan's Japanese *manga*-inspired *Bishonen* (1998), Julian Lee's category 3 art film *The Accident* (1999), and Stanley Kwan's controversial *Lan Yu* (2001), a sexually explicit romance set against the backdrop of Tiananmen Square.

While Hong Kong's film industry is not as strong as it was before the handover, and while production of films overall has lessened considerably, the openness of queer themes in Hong Kong cinema is apparently here to stay.

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About the Author

Andrew Grossman is the editor of *Queer Asian Cinema: Shadows in the Shade*, the first full-length anthology of writing about gay, lesbian, and transgender Asian films. His writings on film and queer issues have also appeared in *Bright Lights Film Journal*, *Scope: The Film Journal of the University of Nottingham*, *Senses of the Cinema*, *American Book Review*, and elsewhere.