



China or Bust?

by Piano Ho and Jasmin Wong

A melancholy melody plays in a darkened cinema as the film draws to a close, the lyrics of the theme song say this is a “story seldom told”. As the lights go back on, members of the audience can be seen dabbing their eyes. For the past two hours, they have laughed and cried over the scenes on the screen. Together, they have re-lived or imagined memories of a bygone Hong Kong recreated by local director Alex Law Kai-yui in his prize-winning hit *Echoes of the Rainbow*.

The film is one of the few productions in recent years that appeals to directly to the local audience with its strong Hong Kong flavour. Law conjures up the world of 1960s industrial Hong Kong, the world of small characters surviving hardships with an invincible spirit - you could call it the Hong Kong spirit.

This runs counter to the increasing number of films targeting the swelling Chinese market by catering to the tastes of mainland audiences. The trend now is for many of these films to be co-productions made with mainland partners.

For the film-makers, it is not a hard decision to make, with one of the world’s largest film production markets right on the doorstep. China is currently the third largest film production country in the world, according to Zhou Tiedong, president of China Film Promotion International. Last year alone, 664 films were produced in mainland China; Hong Kong could only manage 70.

The 1980s were the golden years for the Hong Kong film industry. Local filmmakers were able to produce distinctly Hong Kong movies which had a huge market in Chinese communities overseas and also found a loyal following in the non-Chinese speaking world. Hong Kong was crowned the “Hollywood of the Orient” and the films of the time displayed the lives of common people and aspects of Hong Kong popular culture with recognisable wit.

Those days are gone. The local film industry started to decline in the 1990s and faced with a lack of investment, filmmakers began to partner with mainland producers. Every year, an

average of around 10 films were made as co-productions.

To revive Hong Kong’s film industry, co-productions were further boosted when the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) between Hong Kong and the mainland was introduced in 2003. The number of co-productions tripled to 31 the following year.

Through co-productions with mainland partners or making films catering to the tastes of mainland audiences, some Hong Kong filmmakers are able to cash in on the swelling mainland box office receipts. The gross box office takings last year was 6.2 billion yuan, of which more than 10 per cent was made by four Hong Kong films, namely *Red Cliff II*, *Bodyguards and Assassins*, *Look for a Star* and *On His Majesty’s Secret Service*.

Take *Red Cliff II* as an example. While it ranked second in the local box office and earned around HK\$20 million locally, it made 13 times more money in mainland cinemas, where receipts reached 260 million yuan.

But although the mainland market holds so much promise, Hong Kong filmmakers run into problems when they take their films there.

CEPA offers privileges to Hong Kong filmmakers. For instance, there is no import quota set on films produced in Hong Kong and co-produced films enjoy the privileges of state-produced films in distribution. However, the partnership arrangement requires that one-third of the actors in co-produced films have to be from the mainland.

Chapman To Man-chak, a local director, producer and actor, says it could be hard to cast mainland players in a film when the story itself is based in Hong Kong. "Just think about it. In a scene in which two men smoke and chat on a street corner, how come one of them speaks Cantonese and the other speaks Mandarin out of nowhere when the story is all about Hong Kong!" he jokes.

Such requirements could hinder a filmmaker's creativity. To attract more foreign investment, the regulations on co-productions have been relaxed in recent years - the main characters in a film do not have to be played by mainland actors, and the film can



Perry Lam Pui-li says Hong Kong films are important contributors to our cultural identity.

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have plots without any association with China.

Having met the casting requirements, filmmakers face yet another challenge: tight censorship.

Scripts for any films that are to be shown in the mainland must first be screened by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), China's censorship authority. It is fairly easy to run into taboo topics.

At a public seminar held during the 34th Hong Kong International Film Festival (HKIFF), Lawrence Cheng Dan-shui, a TV show host and a director, shared an experience he had with the authority. His film script featured a triangular love relationship in which a girl falls for a married man. The storyline also included couples who lived together before marriage. SARFT rejected these two ideas as being symptoms of a sick society, and the story had to be adjusted.

Pang Ho-cheung, another local director at the seminar, shared a similar experience. Pang's 2006 film *Isabella* featured corrupt cops, another touchy subject in the mainland. Yet the film was given the green light for mainland release, since the story is set before the handover, when Hong Kong was still under British colonial rule.

These two examples show that filmmakers struggle to keep the message of the film intact while wanting to ensure successful entry to the huge mainland market. Some negotiate with mainland authorities by changing some sensitive parts of the film, while others abandon topics that touch on taboos and make films that cater to the market demand.

McDull, a cartoon pig created by local artist Alice Mak Ka-pik, is widely regarded as a Hong Kong cultural icon. In the first two McDull feature films, 2001's *My Life as McDull* and *McDull: Prince de la Bun* from 2004, the characters displayed sharp Hong Kong characteristics. The films were



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Pang Ho-cheung shares his experiences at a seminar held by HKIFF.

all set in Hong Kong too. Yet last year, the third McDull film, *McDull Kung Fu Ding Ding Dong*, was criticised for sacrificing McDull to the mainland box office.

In the film McDull heads north and learns tai chi, a traditional Chinese martial art, at Wudangshan in Hubei Province. Mainland audiences loved the cartoon character and the movie brought home 70 million yuan in box office receipts. It was a great return for the film's producers, but Hong Kong audiences had less to be cheerful about. McDull might be "made in Hong Kong", but *McDull Kung Fu Ding Ding Dong* is more a commercial film made for a mainland audience.

The historical action drama, *Bodyguards and Assassins* was another screen hit in the mainland. It ranked fifth in the mainland box office for 2009, earning 220 million yuan. But some local critics have accused the film of being too cynical. "The film calculates and puts too much account on business opportunities to satisfy China's market," says Perry Lam Pui-li, a local cultural critic and editorial director of the arts and culture publication *Muse*.

Bodyguards and Assassins is based on a historical event illustrating Dr Sun Yat-sen's very brief trip to colonial Hong Kong in 1905. The trip was for a one-hour meeting to discuss strategy with leaders of branches of the revolutionary societies across China. The film mainly featured Hong Kong unarmed revolutionaries risking their lives to protect Sun during his stay.

"The film is a patriotic act. It pledges allegiance to China," says Lam. He explains that the film aims to establish the fact that Hong Kong has become part of China and is no longer a British colony through illustrating the patriotic roles of Hong Kong people in 1905.

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Though it was popular with the mainland audience, Lam says the film does not reflect the reality in asserting that Hong Kong people were patriotic even during British colonial days.

Lam explains that after the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, filmmakers have grown keener to portray Chinese historical events in their films, in an attempt to link Hong Kong with Chinese history. It is very different to the 1980s, when Hong Kong people tended to disassociate themselves from China and regarded themselves as Hong Kong citizens. Back then, filmmakers generally felt a sense of pride in their city. Their films were filled with native colour, or the "insider knowledge", that only Hong Kong people could understand.

In this way, films revealed and helped to shape the cultural identity

of Hong Kong people. But, they were more than just a mirror of local society; they also changed the perspective and the ways the world saw our city. This, in turn, determined how successful and noticeable Hong Kong films could be outside the city.

Lam cites the example of Hong Kong legend, Bruce Lee. With his stunning kung fu performances on the silver screen, he put kung fu genre movies on the world map as a specialty and trademark of Hong Kong and paved the way for Hong Kong films to enter the international market. Acclaimed Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai, a winner of the prize for best director at the Cannes Film Festival, is further

proof of the success of Hong Kong films internationally.

"The world understands Hong Kong through its movies, because they see something of Hong Kong's values and distinctiveness in them, something that belongs to Hong Kong," Lam says. "Why do they think Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* is so Hong Kong? It's because it encompasses a sense of freedom unique to Hong Kong."

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Although Hong Kong filmmakers face restrictions when they take their films to the mainland, Derek Kwok Chi-kin, who was awarded the best new director award for *The Moss* at the 28th Hong Kong Film Awards last year,

believes they should insist on and fight for their ideas.

"Even in the old days when filmmakers enjoyed relatively more freedom in film production than they do today, there were things that they had to compromise on with their bosses," Kwok says. In his view, filmmakers should overcome their biases and looking at the restrictions of co-production as setbacks.

And sometimes people can love you for who you really are. Commercial films are not always the best hits. There are mainland investors who prefer films where the directors show a strong persona. "Mainland people are actually the quality audience," Kwok says.

Dante Lam Chiu-yin, the best director in the 18th Hong Kong Film Awards in 1999 and well known for his police films, also believes co-production offers a good opportunity to filmmakers. He points out the demands of the mainland film market are so big that, on average, two new cinemas open there every day. This means filmmakers can gain more experience because there are more chances to make films.

"The mainland market never intends to deprive us of our creativity," he says. "How to play by the rules while making a good film is something a professional filmmaker should figure out himself."

Echoes of the Rainbow, a story seldom told. A distinctly Hong Kong story is now heading towards northern China. Can the same story be retold? Hong Kong's filmmakers are hoping there are blue skies over the rainbow after all. ■