

Post-Handover Hong Kong Cinema

On Coproduction, Censorship, and Chinese Democracy: An Interview with Johnnie To

Twenty years since Hong Kong retroceded to Mainland China, the political and cultural reunification of the two territories remains a fraught affair. Amid fears that China will renege on its “one country, two systems” policy, whereby Hong Kong’s political and economic system is to remain unchanged for at least fifty years, the frequent allegations of Mainland corruption, coercion, and kidnapping have disquieted much of the Hong Kong populace, and deepened the discord between the two regions. Despite these tensions, however, the Hong Kong and Mainland film industries have grown increasingly interlinked since the 1997 handover. Today the China coproduction model is the dominant mode of Hong Kong film production, with more than fifty percent of Hong Kong films produced in partnership with the Mainland.

While some veteran Hong Kong directors (such as Tsui Hark, Peter Chan, and Gordon Chan) have embraced Sinicization by taking up residency in Beijing and helming high-concept coproductions, several of their peers (including Stanley Kwan and Herman Yau) toggle between Hong Kong and China as opportunity dictates. By contrast, Johnnie To – arguably the most indispensable Hong Kong filmmaker in the post-handover years – oscillates between Hong Kong and China as a matter of industrial strategy. He has deftly negotiated the Mainland coproduction model, as demonstrated by his critically-acclaimed policier *Drug War* (2012). And he remains a bastion of “local” film production: *Trivisa* (2016), financed by Hong Kong companies (including Milkyway Image, which To cofounded in 1998), reinvigorated cultural discourse within the city, and dominated the Hong Kong Film Awards in 2017. (The film was refused distribution in Mainland China, effectively reinforcing its local status.)

Both local and Mainland modes of production present significant challenges. Government censors subject Hong Kong-China coproductions to various stages of scrutiny, policing the work once at the scripting stage and twice in postproduction. To confound matters, the criteria imposed by China’s Film Bureau are at best mercurial, at worst mystifying. Locally-produced films, meanwhile, must reckon with a shrinking domestic market and straitened

production budgets. Both pathways are fraught with political implications. To “Mainlandize” is to invite criticism from Hong Kong’s pro-democracy activists. To flout the Mainland, on the other hand, or to flout the Mainland censors, may be to risk being aligned with Hong Kong separatists, and thereby incur the displeasure of Mainland officials.

We spoke to Johnnie To about the procedures and predicaments of Hong Kong-China coproductions; the prospects for Hong Kong cinema amid increasing Sinicization; and the focus of his own political sympathies in an era marked by social division and disharmony.

Since the handover, you have embarked on several Hong Kong-China coproductions. How does working in and with the Mainland differ from making local productions?

The biggest challenge is negotiating the rules that the Mainland censors put in place. In Hong Kong, we are given the freedom to be creative: if we want to make a film that is very violent or has scenes of nudity, or if the story is about politics or even religion, we are given the freedom to do it. But in China, we need to obey the Mainland government’s policies and politics. So, under this situation, the first thing we have to think about is: what will be acceptable to the censors? In other words, our first consideration is not an artistic one. And when we think about ideas for the story, we can look at the things that are happening in Mainland China but we know that we cannot film anything about China. This creates a difficulty for us at the script-writing stage. The point to be aware of is the politics.

Your script cannot address political issues concerning China.

No. No way.

This means that you employ self-censorship at the scripting stage?

Yes. You have to self-censor. In this way, writing a script is like writing for a Hong Kong newspaper nowadays. It’s the same.

Is it difficult to reconcile this necessity for self-censorship with your artistic vision?

For me, it’s very difficult. Under the Mainland censorship system, the censors want to control you. So they have rules for you: “Don’t talk about this thing, don’t talk about that thing.” In

China, maybe the Mainland film directors will be more willing to obey, but in Hong Kong we were promised fifty years of no change, and so we think we should be allowed to keep our creative freedom. In China they don't understand this; they only want you under their control. So there is a different mentality between Hong Kong and China, and a different reaction from Hong Kong directors compared with Mainland directors. I think that when Hong Kong was under British rule, the British government did not try to control what we did. They would not help us; they would not put any effort into developing the Hong Kong film industry. But they were not against our creative freedom. The law and the ratings system – that is all that limited us. Other than that, we were free. In these past twenty years, after the 1997 handover, the Hong Kong government has tried to do more to help the film industry than the British did. But it cannot really help us when it comes to censorship in China.

A China coproduction is examined by state censors at three distinct stages of production. But there is a different set of censors at each stage, isn't that correct?

Yes. This is the most difficult part. And, for example, if you shoot a China coproduction like *Drug War*, which is a film about the police, the Mainland police department has the right to censor your movie. They will give comments to the Film Bureau, and the Film Bureau will decide whether or not to approve the film based on these comments. If you're shooting a movie about firefighters, the fire department will do the same thing. If you're doing something on customs, the customs department will assess your movie. If your story talks about Christianity or Catholicism or Buddhism, the Film Bureau has a department especially set up to censor religious content. So it's very complicated.

Does the Film Bureau actually arrange special screenings of the film for the relevant departments?

Basically, the Film Bureau consults with the department at the script approval stage. The script is the most important thing for these departments to censor. It is at the first stage of censorship that they worry the most. So, for example, when the Film Bureau receives the script of *Drug War*, they will consider how bad or how good the script says the police are, and then they will send the script to the police department for comments.

When the Mainland censors identify taboo areas in the script, are their notes merely suggestions or mandates that must be obeyed?

They are presented to us as being suggestions. But the truth is, if you do not follow their suggestions then the script will not get approval. If you do not obey the censors' suggestions, then you just waste time. They would just keep on rejecting the script, on and on until we retire! Like I said, the politics in China create the main problem for us at the script stage. Let's say we are writing a script about Japan, a romance story between a Japanese person and a Chinese person. If something happened in the real world between Japan and China politically, then it becomes a problem. Then the Film Bureau would tell us: "The script needs to be rewritten. You need to rethink it."

As the political situation changes, so the rules change.

Exactly. We are always gambling on what will pass the censors. So we must either avoid political subjects or try to predict the problems that might happen in Chinese society. Therefore, we need to keep informed about current affairs. This process is not very creative-oriented, and the rules of coproduction are not very stable. This is the huge problem for Hong Kong filmmakers in China.

Can the censors be negotiated with? Can you meet them face-to-face?

No. When you send the script to the China Film Bureau, they will give feedback in writing. Or sometimes they will say, "This bit of the film is banned: this topic, no way are you allowed to address it." But normally they will not ban something completely; they'll just give more notes to you. More and more notes!

When working in China, have you had to fundamentally change or abandon your typical filmmaking practices?

No. For me, a coproduction is like a ceremony. We will bring all the crew to China to shoot the movie. And after that, all the dubbing, editing, music – the postproduction work – is all done back in Hong Kong. So the change to my methods is not too much. Of course, there are some small differences. For example, we have to obey the rule of one-third: one-third of the setting has to be shot in China, one-third of the cast and crew has to be Mainland Chinese – this is something that the Mainland government insists upon.

How about the speed at which you are able to work in China? Traditionally, Hong Kong movies (including some of your own films) have been renowned for tight

production schedules. Do the logistics of working in China oblige you to work at a slower pace than in Hong Kong?

When we shoot in Hong Kong, the logistics are not a big problem. It's easy. Hong Kong is not a big country, it's only a small city. So we work very fast here because our location choices are very limited: we can go to Hong Kong, Kowloon, or the New Territories – that's all. But China is very big. And in China they have much more time to prepare than we do in Hong Kong. The pace on a China coproduction is not like in Hong Kong. I still make many Hong Kong movies, and normally it takes me half a year to make the movie, from writing the script to the end of postproduction. Generally, it does not take longer than nine months. But when I work in China, under the censorship system, it takes more than one-and-a-half years.

Does this include the various stages of censorship?

Yes, but sometimes, if the subject is more sensitive, the censors may need more time to respond. Usually, if it's not that busy – if there are not too many projects going through the censorship system – script approval takes two months. But sometimes, if the subject is more sensitive, the censors may need four months or more. *Drug War* took a long time, because it's a new type of film for the Chinese market. The amount of time we spend waiting for the censors depends on the content of the film.

There are obvious advantages to co-producing films with China: access to spectacular rural locations, higher production budgets, wider distribution channels and access to the Mainland theatrical market. What advantage is the most important to you?

The large audience. There are 1.3 billion people in Mainland China. In Hong Kong, there are only 7 million. The audience is bigger in China, and that's the main reason I choose to make China coproductions. I don't care about the bigger budget. But I do have to think about my company, Milkyway Image. My concern is very simple. If my company cannot run, then everything will stop. It's not only me at Milkyway; there are other directors working there too, and their careers would be hurt if the company fails. Sometimes you have to compromise. Sometimes you are able to belong to yourself and can say, "I am going to shoot my movie in Hong Kong – don't disturb me." But if I go to work in China, then I will obey the Mainland rules for the sake of my company. I don't want to put myself into a situation of conflict. My philosophy, my method, is: make a balance. Sometimes you have to make

business decisions that satisfy the boss, and sometimes you can do things that satisfy your own creativity.

The films that you compromise on – are they nevertheless personal, artistic ventures for you, or are they purely commercial products?

They're just commercial products. They are produced just to make money to save my company.

What would be an example of this kind of film?

You can tell by the movie. Maybe 80% of my films are personal. If the movie is not a coproduction with China, the movie belongs to me – it is a personal film. But if the movie is a coproduction, then this is a film that is compromised.

Is this true of *Drug War*?

Yes.

Many critics regard *Drug War* as the personal work of an auteur.

It isn't. Not fully. It is a compromise.

How do you respond to the view that Hong Kong cinema risks losing its identity and individuality as a result of China's increasing influence?

Absolutely, this is true. Hong Kong movies have changed since 1997. But recently, I don't know: If you asked this question five or six years ago, I would have said, "There is no longer a distinctive style of Hong Kong cinema." But now, in these last five or six years, I can see there are some new directors who are making more local Hong Kong movies. They are smart. They make small-budget films, but they have the Hong Kong culture and spirit. They are the hope for the future of Hong Kong cinema.

What films and directors do you have in mind?

Trivisa (2016; dir. Jevons Au, Frank Hui, Vicky Wong). The baseball movie, *Weeds on Fire* (2016; dir. Chi Fat Chen). And also *Mad World* (2016; dir. Chun Wong). You know, in these past few years, the people, under political change, love Hong Kong more. They want more freedom to speak. The people are not against the Mainland China culture. We like the original China culture. We respect the Chinese ancient culture, but we do not accept the

Communist style of Chinese culture. The Communist Party *uses* the culture for its own ends. The Umbrella Movement is doing very good. Some people think the demonstrators have spoiled the city of Hong Kong, but I don't share that opinion. I like the people sitting down in protest. That is amazing. They are doing very good after more than two months. They are just sitting there in Central district. That is the power of freedom.

I understand you would like to make a film about the Umbrella Movement.

If I have a chance to make such a film, of course it is a very interesting subject. But I would make it more peaceful. Let the people know about the political situation, to encourage their support. Of course, we cannot escape the politics. The government would censor any film about the Umbrella Revolution. If you show the umbrellas on film, the government will say, "No way" – they will decide you are one of the people, one of the protestors. But I would say, what is good for the people is peaceful protest. Nobody wants to hurt anybody. We only want to say: "We want change." We don't like *now*.

For all the drawbacks of the China coproduction system, the involvement of Hong Kong filmmakers in China is one way of ensuring the continued survival of local Hong Kong cinema, isn't it?

The China coproduction model is not a monster that you need to get away from. You actually can deal with it and play smart with it. You have to package your movie in a way that will satisfy the censors. You have to try to make something beautiful. Today I tell the young Hong Kong filmmakers: "You have the chance now to make small movies in Hong Kong, but in the future you have to make big movies. You have to go to China."

They could follow your example and zigzag between local productions and China coproductions.

I agree with that principle. I think it's very smart!

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