

# Missing in Action: Hong Kong Films in European Film Festivals 2009-10<sup>i</sup>

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(for HKCinemagic)\*

The Hong Kong Film Awards took place on April 18<sup>th</sup> this year (2010), and Teddy Chen's *Bodyguards and Assassins* (2009) walked off with the key awards for best picture, best director, and best cinematographer. However, it was films with more modest budgets that picked up accolades at both the Hong Kong Film Awards and key European film festivals this season. Alex Law's *Echoes of the Rainbow* (2009), which had some financing from Hong Kong's Film Development Fund, won for best screenplay, best actor (Simon Yam), best new performer (Aarif Lee) and best original song. The film was fresh from the Berlin International Film Festival where it won a very different sort of award, a Crystal Bear in the Generation Kplus category, an award given by a jury of young moviegoers.

Ho Yuhang's *At the End of Daybreak* (2009) also proved lucky for Kara Hui (Ying-Hung), who won the award for best actress on April 18<sup>th</sup>. Hui, of course, had won the award before for Liu Chia-Liang's *My Young Auntie* (1981) at the ceremony in 1982, and it was a particularly poignant moment when she won again with Liu (Lau Kar Leung) in attendance to accept his own life achievement award. While Hui had won at the Asian Film Awards and the Golden Horse Awards for best supporting actress, she was elevated at the Hong Kong awards to simply "best actress," in a role as an alcoholic single mother to a grown son that brought her far from her days as a young kung fu firebrand. This Malaysian

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**\*\* Links of interest:**

Echoes of the Rainbow <http://www.hkcinemagic.com/en/movie.asp?id=10936>

At The End of Day Break <http://www.hkcinemagic.com/en/movie.asp?id=11250>

Perfect Life <http://www.hkcinemagic.com/en/movie.asp?id=11207>

Kara Hui Ying Hung <http://www.hkcinemagic.com/en/people.asp?id=208>

Visit <http://www.HKCinemagic.com> for more interviews, features and a database on HK cinema.

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film with Hong Kong talent won the NETPAC (Network for Promotion of Asian Cinema) award for best Asian film at the Locarno Film Festival in August. Again, as in the case of *Echoes of the Rainbow*, the film won a special competition outside the main awards. In Locarno, for example, another Chinese-language film Guo Xiaolu's erotic adventure of a young woman who journeys from the PRC to the UK, *She, A Chinese* (2009), won the Golden Leopard, the festival's top honor. Hong Kong films and talent garner special awards, but they are not in the spotlight in the major competitions.

Specialty festivals, such as the Udine Far East Film Festival in northern Italy, consistently feature Hong Kong productions. That festival opened with Pang Ho-Cheung's slasher *Dream Home* this spring; however, Udine's commitment to Asian popular genre cinemas puts it in a very different category. In fact, it seems like a long time since Wong Kar-Wai won the best director award at Cannes for *Happy Together* (1997) and Tony Leung won there as well for *In the Mood for Love* (2000) or Maggie Cheung won the Silver Bear at Berlin for her performance in *Centre Stage* (1992). Even more recently, in 2006, Hong Kong films (Tsui Hark's *Seven Swords* and Peter Chan's *Perhaps Love*) opened and closed the Venice Film Festival. However, as interest in Chinese-language film continues to grow, the numbers of Hong Kong films lauded at major festivals shrinks. Certainly, this can be directly attributed to diminishing production figures—fewer films produced mean fewer films to consider. However, other, even more modest, film cultures manage to maintain a significant international presence, and, within the festival circuit, box-office returns, domestic reception, and production costs have little weight in programming decisions.

While festivals acknowledge popular masters such as Johnnie To and John Woo, awards go to those who have been recognized as being aesthetically more adventurous. As the titles mentioned above indicate, the New Wave has traditionally dominated Hong Kong's representation in major European film festivals. Straddling the fence between commercial entertainment and cinematic innovation, most "first" (Tsui Hark, Allen Fong,

Ann Hui, among others) and “second” (Alex Law, Mabel Cheung, Stanley Kwan, Wong Kar-wai, among others) have been able to survive in the Asian commercial market as well as stand out in the arena of global film art. However, festival programming involves more than the quality of the motion pictures involved. It often depends on the background and personal interest of programmers, jockeying for prestige among a small circle of critical or commercial standouts, on the amount of money devoted to cultivating the domestic potential of a particular industry or the buzz surrounding films associated with a specific local festival.

The 2009 Cannes Film Festival provides a case in point. While a glamorous cocktail reception “China Night: Celebration of 100 Years of Hong Kong Cinema” was held at Carlton Beach during the festival, Johnnie To’s *Vengeance* was the only new film from Hong Kong to be selected in competition at the festival, that is, if you don’t count the opening film, Lou Ye’s *Spring Fever*, which is technically a Chinese-Hong Kong-French co-production. Lou’s bleak, sensational homosexual tale shot with a handheld camera and natural lighting was awarded Best Screenplay, while To left the festival with his hands empty.

It was similar the year before: the legendary Hong Kong representative at Cannes 2008 was not a new film – Wong Kar Wai’s *Ashes of Time Redux* as a special screening – while the only Hong Kong production title, or co-production to be more exact, appeared to be Liu Fendou’s *Ocean Flame* in *Un Certain Regard*. No other Hong Kong film was present, although Cannes was never short of East and Southeast Asian titles in recent years. Jia Zhangke’s *24 City* and Eric Khoo’s *My Magic* were in competition, with a few other Korean, Chinese and Taiwanese titles out of competition and in special selections.

In general Hong Kong cinema has not had much exposure at Cannes in the recent years, where mainly two auteurs from the HKSAR find favor-- Wong Kar Wai and Johnnie To. Wong and To exemplify the two antipodes of the reception of Hong Kong’s cinema in Western film festivals respectively. It is obvious that Wong is recognized by Cannes for his art film practices. As for Johnnie To, as international film producer and programmer Roger

Garcia suggests in a recent conversation, his pass to Cannes probably has more to do with genre filmmaking, namely action films, thrillers and crime films. These genre films corroborate the opinion of the festival programmers and international audiences about what Hong Kong cinema is or should be like. To first entered Cannes with *Breaking News* out of competition in 2005, and once he got in there, it became easier to get in again, and again, and also elsewhere.

Genre films are relatively audience friendly and can travel more easily between national and cultural communities compared to films that are more restricted because of their local address. The Pang Brothers' horror film *Re-cycle* (2006), for instance, was shown in *Un Certain Regard*. The twins Danny and Oxide Pang are known for their ability to work transnationally, and, in many cases, Hong Kong's cinematic "brand" has been diluted as Hong Kong filmmakers contribute to features made in Thailand, Malaysia, the People's Republic of China, or elsewhere in the region. Recent years have witnessed the emergence of co-productions not only as blockbuster phenomena, but also in the festival film circuit, as is exemplified in the aforementioned *At the End of Daybreak*, *Spring Fever* and *Ocean Flame*.

The two Hong Kong films that competed for the Golden Lion at Venice in 2009 also convey similar patterns: one is Cheang Pou-Soi's crime thriller *Accident* produced by Johnnie To, another is Yon Fan's co-produced Taiwanese "white terror" melodramatic epic *Prince of Tears*. By participating in various forms and scales of co-production, film scholar Cindy Wong<sup>ii</sup> comments that Hong Kong cinema is "fulfilling a traditional role of Hong Kong in that it bridges different Chinese worlds, bringing Chinese language cinema(s) from all over the world to the film festival circuit." Indeed, a prime example is Jia Zhangke's *Xiao Wu* (1998), and, in addition, Li Yang's *Blind Shaft* (2003) and Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002), which both won prizes at Berlinale in 2003 and were co-produced by Hong Kong.

Independent films such as Ivy Ho's *Memento*-like temporal experiment *Claustrophobia* (2008) and Simon Chung's *End of Love* (2009), about a male sex worker, managed to get selected by Berlinale in the *Panorama* section, which showcases new

independent and art-house films that have “controversial subjects or unconventional aesthetic styles,”<sup>iii</sup> while Dante Lam’s *The Beast Stalker* (2008) was shown at *Forum*. It was not long ago when Pang Ho-Cheung’s *Isabella* received a Silver Bear for Best Music in 2006. While the performance of Hong Kong cinema at Berlinale looks positive, it is worth noting that Berlinale remains relatively generous by showing films from everywhere, especially after the end of the Cold War when it gradually transformed from a political-ideological window showcasing Western films to promote Western ideologies to a more global venue where films from Eastern Europe and from further East are shown.

In their 2009 lineup, Rotterdam Film Festival selected Emily Tang’s *Perfect Life* in their *Bright Future* section, which was the only Hong Kong film chosen that year. A previous entry from Hong Kong is *Windless Wind Chime*’s director Kit Hung’s short *I Am Not What You Want* (2002). Rotterdam concentrates on “worldwide independent, innovative and experimental cinema.”<sup>iv</sup> While only a few Hong Kong titles had been chosen in recent years, mainland independent works are favored and almost invariably one mainland film would be selected each year. Robin Weng’s *Flower in the Pocket* even won the festival’s top honor Tiger Award in 2008.

Pusan, whose strength lies in promoting Asian film cultures, favors Hong Kong films. The South Korean festival seeks to develop and promote young talents in the *New Current* section. Every year a few films from Hong Kong are selected on a par with titles from other Asian countries and regions, covering a variety of categories of films from glamorous productions that have traveled to big festivals to low-budget independent or avant-garde films. In 2009, apart from the Venice picks *Prince of Tears* and *Accident*, Ann Hui’s *Night and Fog* and Ho Yuhang’s Malaysian-Hong Kong-Korean coproduction *At the End of Daybreak* were shown in *A Window on Asian Cinema* section. In addition, Rita Hui’s first experimental feature *Dead Slowly* was selected in *New Currents*, its only competition section “featuring the first or the second feature films by the future leading directors of Asian cinema’ and where all films ‘are restricted to world/international premieres.”<sup>v</sup>

Pusan has showcased works by the independent filmmaker Fruit Chan and Pang Ho-

Cheung, as well as some of the New Wave production titles by filmmakers such as Stanley Kwan and Ann Hui, but it is rare for a Hong Kong title to win a prize in competition. No Hong Kong films have ever won the New Currents Award, while Chinese titles, including *Xiao Wu*, have won three times; the only Fipresci Award from the International Federation of Film Critics given to Hong Kong cinema was for Fruit Chan's *Made in Hong Kong* in 1997. Taking into consideration Pusan's significance in capturing, recognizing and promoting regional identity through the venue of innovative cinema, we may want to ask: why are fewer daring, innovative and challenging works from Hong Kong being made/shown? What kind of interlocking power dynamics between geopolitics, culture, financial situation, film institution, filmmaker and audience are at play?

Known to the world to be a festival of discovery, the famous *Open Doors* section at Locarno showcases different national cinemas in development every year. In 2009, *Open Doors* chose Greater China, and yet among the 23 films shown, only three came from Hong Kong, namely, Fruit Chan's *Dumplings* (2004), Pang Ho-Cheung's *Exodus* (2007), and Emily Tang's *Perfect Life* (2008). Tang's *Conjugation* won an award at the festival in 2001, so picking up her second feature appears to be an easy programming decision. However, Tang's interest in mainland China often draws her work away from an easy identification with Hong Kong film culture. Although *Perfect Life* is partially set in Hong Kong, it is interesting to note that Tang's fiction- documentary hybrid deals with characters from mainland China and stylistically and thematically seems to be more in conversation with China's Sixth Generation (e.g., Jia Zhangke's *24 City*)<sup>vi</sup> than with the Hong Kong New Wave.

The 2009 Karlovy-Vary Film Festival screened no Hong Kong films. Although South Korea, Japan, Indonesia, Singapore, Taiwan, the PRC, and various Central Asian countries were represented, Hong Kong cinema was conspicuously absent. Like Cannes, Venice, and Berlin, Karlovy-Vary is an "A list" festival, which means that it is recognized as top-tier with a film competition as well as a varied offering of screenings outside of competition. Although tucked away in a spa city in the Czech Republic, the festival is not

small, and, like Cannes, it attracts film programmers, critics, distributors, and others who follow the European film festival circuit. Karlovy-Vary's focus, as can be expected, is on Eastern European film, and, with the end of the Cold War and dissolution of the Soviet Union as well as Czechoslovakia, the festival has established itself as an important venue for "East meets West" entries that explore the often painful emergence of the "new" Europe beyond the divide of the Iron Curtain.

Granted, Hong Kong represents a different meeting of East and West. A former British colony, Hong Kong had traditionally served as a buffer between the People's Republic and the capitalist West at the edge of the "bamboo" rather than the "iron" curtain. However, this position would seem to place it within the orbit of Karlovy-Vary's programming interests—at the meeting of post-socialist East and capitalist West and as a key player within a vigorous Asian film culture. Beyond these rather abstract connections, Hong Kong, more concretely, has had a reasonably "good" year in terms of film production. Although the commercial industry continues to decline, the types of independent and art films favored within the festival circuit manage to surface and find an audience. The Hong Kong International Film Festival holds its own with a film market and the Asian Film Awards held around the same time. This serves as a showcase for Hong Kong as well as world cinema, and, like all film festivals, it provides an opportunity for film professionals to see and compare Hong Kong's output with that of other countries.

Film scholar Chris Berry (Goldsmith's College, University of London) attended the 2009 Karlovy-Vary festival, and we asked him about the absence of Hong Kong film and the strong presence of films from South Korea and Japan. He remarked that European programmers, generally, can only afford to attend one film festival in Asia. Pusan has eclipsed Hong Kong. Berry sees this as cyclical and noted that Hong Kong may become "hot" again in the future. He elaborates:

On the one hand, Hong Kong's commercial cinema is nowhere near as surprising and exciting to people as it was in the late 80s and early 90s. On the other hand,

the burgeoning independent cinema in Hong Kong is very local in its address and not always very cinematically innovative. As a result it also isn't making it into festivals that much. But is this a problem? Only if you believe film festivals are some kind of ultimate arbiter of taste or commercially crucial. These days, they do not do much to sell films (in fact, too many festival screenings kill the global audience for a small film). And the very local address of the HK indies is a great thing in my opinion -- what matters then is if a local audience is enjoying them or not.<sup>vii</sup>

However, there is a chicken-and-egg quality to film festival programming. If a particular industry slips out of favor, the ability to fund films that may be able to compete internationally deteriorates, and the industry continues to decline. At some point, films from a particular place may slide completely off the radar—perceived lack of artistic ingenuity and questionable quality overtaking the merits of what actually exists on the screen.

As a case in point, a comparison can be made between two Asian films dealing with the same topic—Ann Hui's *Night and Fog* and the Korean film *Breathless*, written and directed by Yang Ik-Joon (who also stars in the feature). *Breathless* made the cut in Karlovy-Vary, and *Night and Fog* did not. Both films look at the topic of domestic violence, and both fit snugly within the parameters of the types of films screened at international film festivals. The English rendering of Yang Ik-Joon's *Breathless*, of course, conjures up Godard's *Breathless* (1960) and the international prominence of the French New Wave. The Korean film was financed by a grant from the Pusan International Film Festival. The English title for *Night and Fog* brings the Alain Resnais documentary on World War II concentration camps, *Night and Fog* (1950), to mind and the French film's association with socially committed filmmaking. Ann Hui's *Night and Fog* was one of the opening films at the 2009 Hong Kong International Film Festival. It seems clear, then, from their titles, financing, and exhibition that these films were produced, at least in part, for international festival exhibition.

Ann Hui had had a particularly good year, winning the Hong Kong Film Award for the earlier film in her Tin Shui Wai diptych *The Way We Are*, about life in one of the poorer residential areas of Hong Kong. Produced by the very commercial Wong Jing rather than



by grants from the Hong Kong Arts Council, *Night and Fog* still merits inclusion in festivals devoted to “art films” and clearly fits in Hui’s Hong Kong New Wave oeuvre, featuring the elaborate use of flashbacks, expressive use of the extremes of crane shots and close-ups, a keen eye for the details of the city’s bureaucracy, and a critical treatment of the current state of working class, mainland, immigrant women in Hong Kong.

*Breathless* provides less social context for its examination of domestic violence, but takes full advantage of its very mobile camera (Dogme-inspired) to follow its characters through a series of violent confrontations. While Yang Ik-Joon’s film serves more as a character study of an ultra-violent debt collector involved with a teenaged schoolgirl who also comes from an abusive family, Ann Hui’s feature uses a notorious “true crime” murder story to expose the underlying social causes of domestic violence. In her film, the characters slip through the cracks of the criminal justice system, the so-called “safety net” of social workers, psychologists, and feminist activists, and even the intimate network of safe house residents who attempt to forge a political lobby for victims of spousal abuse. The film is a tour-de-force for actor Simon Yam who plays the homicidal patriarch of a Hong Kong-mainland family, and his performance resonates in many compelling ways with his portrayal of the stoic, paternal shopkeeper in *Echoes of the Rainbow*.

The relative merits of Hui’s more critical take on the politics of domestic violence and *Breathless*’s focus on the personal drama and psychological consequences of abuse aside, both films conform to the demands of festival programming—*Night and Fog* as an auteur piece, and *Breathless* in conversation with current trends in global art cinema. Then, why should one film be invited to Karlovy-Vary and the other not? Of course, there are many answers to this question—*Night and Fog* may have been invited and the distributor declined or there could be other reasons. However, even if this particular film and this particular case does not prove the point, the fact that no film produced in Hong Kong found its way into this major festival does give pause.

Although Hong Kong's presence was not felt in Karlovy-Vary, Hong Kong still seems to have clout in other venues. As film festival expert Ma Ran points out:

...though the screened films at those film festivals are quite limited, at the film market or film pitching..., Hong Kong filmmakers are quite active. Edmond Pang Ho-cheung is participating pitching projects at Shanghai, Locarno and Pusan in recent years.<sup>viii</sup>

How much of Hong Kong cinema's continuation as a major force within global film culture depends on its ability to attract the attention of European film programmers may be open to debate, but the fact that its fortunes have changed is beyond dispute. Whether co-productions, independent films, and the perennial popularity of Hong Kong action can sustain the industry within the global marketplace as well as festival circuit, then, remains to be seen.

### **About the authors:**

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>i</sup> We dedicate this essay to the memory of JoAnn Elam who passed away in the summer of 2009. Her pioneering film *Rape* must be acknowledged as breaking new ground in the area of the depiction of violence against women, and films like Hui's *Night and Fog* owe much to Elam's legacy of looking at violence against women as part of a larger political struggle for women's access to the public sphere.

<sup>ii</sup> Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong is finishing a manuscript on international film festivals to be published by Rutgers University Press in 2010. Email correspondence on Aug 24, 2009.

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www.berlinale.de/en/das\\_festival/festival-sektionen/panorama/index.html](http://www.berlinale.de/en/das_festival/festival-sektionen/panorama/index.html)

<sup>iv</sup> [http://www.filmfestivalrotterdam.com/en/about/profile\\_iff/](http://www.filmfestivalrotterdam.com/en/about/profile_iff/)

<sup>v</sup> [http://www.piff.org/Template/Builder/00000001/page.asp?page\\_num=2318](http://www.piff.org/Template/Builder/00000001/page.asp?page_num=2318)

<sup>vi</sup> Jia's company XStream, in fact, produced the film. For more on the film, see Shelly Kraicer, "The Problem of Representation: Emily Tang's Perfect Life," Cinemascope, [http://www.cinema-scope.com/cs37/feat\\_kraicer\\_tang.html](http://www.cinema-scope.com/cs37/feat_kraicer_tang.html)

<sup>vii</sup> Email correspondence, Aug 16, 2009.

<sup>viii</sup> Email correspondence, Aug 16, 2009.