



# “Let’s drink to 1997”

The handover of Hong Kong, as seen in Hong Kong cinema 1986-1992

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“Let’s drink to 1997”

Överlämningen av Hong Kong, sedd inom Hong Kong-film 1986-1992

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Simon Zandbergs

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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Film Studies

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15 credits

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Supervisor: Johan Nilsson

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Examiner: Patrik Sjöberg

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# Abstract

Taking a look at ten films from the Hong Kong golden age 1986-1992 and how the common themes in these relate to the handover from United Kingdom to China in 1997, this essay investigates this with the use of a thematic analysis as well as with the theories of seeing “cinema as a mirror” and the way that the society and people of Hong Kong as a whole are reflected and identified in these films. From this it can be seen that the handover and themes closely related to it is recurring throughout the films of this period, but also how society and major political events are reflected in cinema.

*Keywords:* Hong Kong cinema, John Woo, Tsui Hark, handover, heroic bloodshed

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Aim and research questions

Since I have always been very fond of the cinema of Hong Kong during the late 1980s, it came natural to me to actually do some research about this. What I am asking in this essay is first of all what the common themes are in movies made in Hong Kong during the period before the handover from United Kingdom to China. I also want to see how the themes from the movies can actually be metaphors relating to the handover in some way. Another thing I would like to see is if there is any difference in how this would be shown in the different genres; are the themes similar or completely different if you compare the action films with the comedies; and also, how do the differences depend on what year the movie was made?

There are several reasons why I'm asking these questions. One reason I want to do this, is because, at least judging by what I found, there wasn't really any collective research of this particular period; usually the research just focused on one movie, or movies from the same director or on different periods (such as Hong Kong cinema during the actual handover), although I did find a lot of that research very helpful to me. Another reason is because during the years prior and after the handover, many of the big directors and actors went to Hollywood, the largest production company shifted its focus to distributing Hollywood films and thus the thriving Hong Kong cinema was weakened (Hu, 2008, p. 410).

The aim of this essay will be to see how significant political events can influence the cinema, and as already said I have chosen to focus on the handover of Hong Kong to delimit myself. I hope that this can lead to a bigger understanding of how much the cinema can be affected by politics (both locally and internationally), and also how this takes its form in countries that are part of a different culture than the European one. I also hope to present some of the cultural codes in Hong Kong to a Western audience through this essay although this will not be my main goal.

## 1.2. Background

The reason that Hong Kong was a British colony goes back to the 1830s. The western world was importing many Chinese products, but had little products to give in return. Therefore, the British traders tried to introduce opium, a highly addictive drug, to China. This drug was outlawed by the Chinese shortly after that and they begged the British to stop with the opium trading. The British however, responded with a full-scale war (the First Opium War) 1839-1842, where the British troops were much more advanced than the Chinese. This led to Hong Kong being ceded to the British, and later treaties specified that British citizens in port could not be charged for crimes by the Chinese courts. Later it was also specified that Hong Kong would belong to Britain until 1997 (Van Norden, 2010, p. 212).

During the 1980s and up until 1997, Hong Kong, then a British colony with a population of six million, had one of the biggest cinema industries of the world and was the second biggest exporter of films behind the USA. Also notable is that the production cost of a typical Hong Kong movie during this period was about the same as a German or a French film, but there were no subsidies as there were in Europe. The domestic cinema dominated in Hong Kong up until 1997, when Hollywood started to claim that market (Bordwell, 2010, p. 1).

Hong Kong cinema has been indebted to American films since the silent era and the American ways of production and lighting style has influenced the cinema of Hong Kong. The Hong Kong filmmakers have always studied and taken inspiration from American films and in the 1980s the style of the Hong Kong cinema was created by the directors who were inspired by what Hollywood was doing (which, by the late 1990s, had led to Hollywood being inspired by the Hong Kong cinema). Hong Kong cinema, though, hasn't had the same emphasis on the realism, plot plausibility and emotional restraint as Hollywood has, and since the 1970s, violence and gore have been much more detailed than its American counterparts (Bordwell, 2010, p. 12). The 1980s have also seen the Hong Kong cinema featuring and glamorizing triad societies (the Hong Kong mafia). This was also the same time when the triad societies began to invest money in the film industry as a form of money laundry, and also as a great income source (Bordwell, 2010, p. 25, 45).

By the 1990s Hong Kong was the third wealthiest territory in Asia, and the average income of the citizens was higher than that of the citizens in its colonizing nation, United Kingdom (Bordwell, 2010, p. 18). Hong Kong had been successful under colonial rule and had rule of law, individual rights of the citizens, freedom of speech and press, although there were no political parties, and citizens could not vote until 1985. The British were afraid that communists would set up opposition parties, and the Chinese were afraid that a government opposed to communism would be set up; therefore, neither United Kingdom nor China wanted Hong Kong to be self-governing (Bordwell, 2010, p. 18).

Hong Kong films in general don't offer any explicit political commentary; even television dramas deal more directly with that compared to films. While this is partly an issue of censorship, it's also a commercial aspect. Instead of addressing politics directly, they issue it in more oblique ways. For example, there is a lot of mockery about Britain and British people, who are often depicted as brutes, bumbling timeservers, or vain and dense bosses. Also, many films are full of references to the so called "1997 syndrome" (that is worries of the handover), as well as to Mainland China. Governments are generally depicted as corrupt (something that is true for both the colonial government of Britain, Mainland China or Taiwan), and current political anxieties are often depicted as allegories set in the Warlord-era of China (1916-1928) (Bordwell, 2010, p. 24-25).

While Mainland China did have quite a turbulent history, with the fall of the Qing Empire in 1911, the Chinese civil war between the communists and nationalists, and the Japanese invasion of the 1930s, and later repressive phases during the communist regime such as the Cultural Revolution (1965-1976), would lead several mainland Chinese to immigrate to Hong Kong. Hong Kong, with the exception of the Japanese occupation (1941-1945), enjoyed a quite peaceful and successful period, becoming a regional centre of banking, shipping and insurance to name a few areas. A rapid industrial growth launched during the 1950s, and Hong Kong would become a massive experiment of free marketeering by the British and continued to prosper despite the financial crises of the 1980s and becoming a major trading partner with the mainland. The British considered a win-win situation for both sides, and thought that the Chinese might have extended the lease of Hong Kong after 1997, but after a two year period of talking, Britain under Margaret Thatcher decided to give up the claims in 1984, and hand it over in 1997 as planned. The

Tiananmen Square protests in the spring of 1989, which consisted of mainly students and other civilians protesting against the Chinese communist government and demanded democracy while being violently repressed, did lead to the people in Hong Kong feeling shocked over how life would be under the new regime. Also, after 1984 the discussions of a local identity for Hong Kong began to be intensified. The closer 1997 came, the Hong Kong lifestyle seemed to become more aggressively distinctive, as if Hong Kong tried a cultural liberation from China, and by the late 1980s the people of Hong Kong generally identified themselves as “Hong Kongers” (in contrast to Chinese or British) (Bordwell, 2010, p. 19-20).

### **1.3. Previous research**

As for the previous research, the book *Planet Hong Kong* by David Bordwell (2010) has been very helpful to me. This book mentions a lot about Hong Kong cinema in general and of course also about the cinema of the 1980s, most of which has already been mentioned in the *Background* chapter. It also gave a brief history of both Hong Kong in general as well as of its cinema.

Another thing was Fang’s book about the film *A Better Tomorrow* (*Ying hung boon sik*, Woo, 1986). This is about things that connect to the 1997 issue such as a scene where two persons sit on the top of a hill and one of them says “I never knew the beauty of Hong Kong at night could be so striking. But it doesn’t last. Let’s start all over again. Then leave Hong Kong.” (Fang, 2004, p. 70).

Something else that could be connected to the 1997 issue would be the title itself; however, the Chinese title translates into *True Colors of Valor* or *The Essence of Heroes* referring more to the themes of honour and chivalry prevalent in the movie. The English title provides a different take and also shows how the films are seen from a different context (Fang, 2004, p. 2).

Also something that should be mentioned is the marketing of the film in the west; the actual press kit claims the film is set in 1997, even though the film contains no direct references to it, and even John Woo himself claims that he doesn’t know how that rumor started (Fang, 2004, p. 70, 118).

John Woo also claims that even though he is not interested in politics, he has a great concern for what is going on in Hong Kong, and says that he tries to make a point in his movies that “no matter what happens people need to stick together, to work it out, and keep the good about Hong Kong.” He also says that while *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) is not a political statement, he sees it as him trying to express his feelings about the inevitable and about his dreams for Hong Kong, and that human dignity should not change (Fang, 2004, p. 118). He also says that he had no worries about the handover (Fang, 2004, p. 119). This book was mainly helpful to me due to the interview with John Woo, since it’s always good to have the actual words of the director regarding films I have as an example in my analysis, and also because it gives some actual examples on how the 1997 issue can be addressed in films. I still think however that I do have several things to add in my analysis of this film not mentioned here, which is why I have still decided to include it in my essay.

Other previous research that I have found helpful is an article by Lau (1998) which focuses on comedy films from Hong Kong during the 1980s Lau talks about the “1997 issue” (the handover), and states that some of the most successful films from Hong Kong made after the year 1982 included the “1997 issue” as one of its problems (Lau, 1998, p. 22). The article does however mention the problems that, while the 1997 issue is/was a strong factor in the life of Hong Kong, it’s unfair to the cultural tradition of Hong Kong which goes beyond that in many ways (Lau, 1998, p. 21-22). The same article also mentions that the Hong Kong cinema has always been aware of the question of China for historical and geographical reasons (even when it’s not about the 1997 issue) (Lau, 1998, p. 23). This is an article which again claims that many films address the 1997 issue, and therefore helps me to know that I’m right in doing research on this subject. It basically proves that my early assumptions that Hong Kong cinema of that era contains references to the 1997 issue are true.

I have also found Tony Williams’ article about the cinema of John Woo, which includes the films he made in Hong Kong during this particular period. This article even states that many residents of Hong Kong viewed 1997 as the end of the world (Williams, 1997, p. 70), and does contain a lot of useful information since it also mentions the 1997 issue in other films not by John Woo. Some of them are films that I had already planned to

dig deeper into, such as *Once Upon a Time in China* (Wong Fei Hung, Hark, 1991) which here is mentioned how it compares the handover to historical betrayals by the British and Americans in the 1800s (Williams, 1997, p. 68), which has been helpful to me, because it gave me some more explicit examples of how the 1997 issue can be shown and what I should look for in the films. This article also mentions the struggle between Chinese traditions and Western values in Hong Kong cinema at the time (Williams, 1997, p. 71).

We also have Desser's (2009) article which talks about Hong Kong Cinema during the actual handover; while not of a significant importance to this essay, it is of significance as a sort of continuation of what I'm writing here. Lee's (2013) article focusing on the decolonial visions in Hong Kong independent cinema, is also focusing more on the post-handover cinema, and this also focuses on the independent cinema in contrast to my essay which focuses on Hong Kong's mainstream cinema. As I mentioned before, these articles are mainly for those who read my essay and want to see what happened after this era, and therefore I have included them here.

Cheuk wrote a book about the Hong Kong new wave cinema, and while not really my subject, it does feature a chapter on the director Tsui Hark, mainly focusing on his earlier movies, but it also talks a bit about the film *A Chinese Ghost Story* (*Sien nui yau wan*, Ching, 1987). It mentions how using the past as an allegory for the present and giving voice to discontent with politics. It's written that the Taoist monk says that in the real world, there is no distinction between what is right and what is wrong, and because of this and his disappointment with society, he would prefer to live in the ghost's world. A common theme in the *A Chinese Ghost Story* franchise is that if everybody works together, whether they are human or ghosts, they can achieve anything and overcome the devils. It also mentions that there are certain political issues in the films, such as allusions to the opposition between leftists and rightists, and the division of the nation (Cheuk, 2008, p. 96). The same chapter also mentions certain other films, including *Peking Opera Blues* (*Do ma daan*, Hark, 1986) and how they reflect on the anxiety and frustration which the people in Hong Kong felt at the time. Tsui Hark himself has said that he "merely views the past from a subjective perspective" instead of trying to "replicate the past" due to not seeing any "point in being too realistic", instead being able to "romanticize and modify certain parts". He has also said

that in *Peking Opera Blues* (1986) he wanted to say “that the splitting up of a nation, its weaknesses and its colonization are all due to the selfishness and disunity of its people”. He is still concerned about the affairs of his nation, but he expresses this by satirizing the events, because to be serious is not consistent with his personality or style (Cheuk, 2008, p. 97-98).

Cheuk also writes about the film *Once Upon a Time in China* (1991) and its showing of the conflicts between the east and the west, and how the main character denounces the western ways of living as a symbol of the Confucian moral system (Cheuk, 2008, p. 100-101), also including a character (Aunt Yee) representative of the western culture (Cheuk, 2008, p. 102). This book has again given some examples of certain films that I had already planned to use in my essay, but as with the book about *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), I still have things that can be added in my analysis.

Other research includes a book about masculinity in Hong Kong cinema by Wong (2005), Yip’s (2014) article about realism and speed in the Hong Kong martial arts cinema, Hu (2006) talking about certain aesthetics in modern Hong Kong films and Pang’s (2010) article that deal with Hong Kong as a dialect cinema, just to name a few of many that deals with the cinema of Hong Kong. These haven’t been of any real help to me, but are still interesting reads for those interested in the subject of Hong Kong cinema.

As a summary, there’s some previous research mentioning the 1997 issue, this includes the research by Fang, Lau and Williams, or dealing with certain other things that could be connected to it such as what Cheuk has written. There is however a lack of research that takes a broader look at the golden age era and connecting it to the 1997 issue at the same time, and this is a gap this essay is meant to fill.

#### **1.4. Material and sources**

The films I’m going to analyze all have in common that they were made/released between 1986 and 1992. The reason for this is that many filmmakers consider 1986-1992 to be the last golden age of Hong Kong cinema (Bordwell, 2010, p. 45).

I have mainly included comedies and action films because since the mid-1970s, comedies and action films have been the dominant genres in Hong Kong, while the traditional genres such as the romantic costume drama have been faded out. However, during the 1980s, much thanks to the export market and to satisfy a broader audience, the development of the “multigenre” began, where films often combined action, comedy, romance and Chinese themes. Even if the film is an action movie, it would have some comedy in it, and drama films would usually have a fight scene (Bordwell, 2010, p. 94), so there will also be several films that fit into this category featured in this essay.

I had originally planned to include many more films than I eventually did, including films as far back as 1984 (due to this being the year when the handover became definite) or 1982 (mentioned in one of the articles in the previous research section) or even earlier, and including films up until 1997. During the essay I decided to delimit myself to only include films from the “golden age”, while still having planned to include more movies to be able to have a good overview. Some of the planned films I could not manage to find anywhere, especially some of the lesser known films that didn’t get much distribution in the west, and when I did get to ten films being included in the essay, I decided to not include any more. A problem with this could be that it doesn’t give an exact overview of the era, so this essay should be seen more as a sort of random sample of the period.

The reason I included the specific films are different, so I’m going to describe the reason why film by film shortly here. *A Better Tomorrow (Ying hung boon sik, Woo, 1986)* was included because it can be seen as a sort of beginning of the golden age (it should however be noted that this was far from John Woo’s first movie), and also because this was one of the earliest films dealing with triads. It is also a film I’ve come across very often while reading about Hong Kong cinema before I decided to write this essay, therefore it felt natural to include this. *Peking Opera Blues (Do ma daan, Hark, 1986)* was mainly included because it’s relevant due to being a good example of a multi-genre film, that it takes place during a historical past and also because it deals with the sort of collision between eastern and western culture. *A Chinese Ghost Story (Sien nui yau wan, Ching, 1987)* is another example of a multi-genre film that is set in the past and deals with traditional Chinese culture. *City on Fire (Lung fu fong wan, Lam, 1987)* was included as another example of a

triad film. *The Big Heat* (*Seng fat dak ging*, To, Kam, 1988) also deals with the triads. This was however also included because it seems to be a much lesser known film compared to films by directors such as John Woo and Tsui Hark. *The Killer* (*Dip huet seung hung*, Woo, 1989) I included due to it being a film that is mentioned a lot in articles about Hong Kong cinema, and seems to be a well-known example of Hong Kong cinema in the west. Again this also deals with triads. *Bloody Brotherhood* (*Tong gen sheng*, Wang, 1989) is a film I am happy to be able to include, since I haven't found any research at all about it, and it's certainly not a film as well-known as some of the others. Again this does deal with triads, but it was also included because it deals more explicitly with political issues. *Once Upon a Time in China* (*Wong Fei Hung*, Hark, 1991) was included mostly due to it being a martial arts-movie, and also because it is set in the past and deals with colonialism and east-west culture collisions. *Hard Boiled* (*Lat sau san taam*, Woo, 1992) was included because it was the final film John Woo made in Hong Kong before going to Hollywood; therefore it could be seen as a sort of end of the golden age. Once again it's a film that deals with triads. *Naked Killer* (*Chik log go yeung*, Fok, 1992) was mainly included due to it being a very different film in style compared to the other films, and also because it's a film which has a very blurred line between comedy and action.

A potential problem with the essay would be how certain films have been extremely hard to find, forcing me to find versions in often very bad quality on YouTube with subtitles presumably made by the uploader, and certain times these subtitles has not made any sense. Another problem, not concerning the subtitles, is that these copies of the films might have potentially been changed by the uploader, and might therefore not be the "real" version of the films. The films I had to resort to YouTube to be able to find are namely *Peking Opera Blues* (1986), *The Big Heat* (1988) and *Bloody Brotherhood* (1989) while the rest I managed to find legit copies of (although sometimes the subtitles didn't seem completely accurate anyway). Despite the issues with resorting to YouTube, I did want variety in the analysis, which is why *The Big Heat* (1988) and *Bloody Brotherhood* (1989) was included since these are lesser known films in the west, instead of just resorting to more well-known movies. *Peking Opera Blues* (1986) was a film I have previously seen a legit version of, and as far as I know the version on YouTube had not been changed in any way compared to when I first saw this film.

For exploring Chinese culture, I will use three books regarding that subject and those will be my base that will be used when talking about subjects when this will be necessary. These are namely *Insights into Chinese Culture* by Ye Lang and Zhu Lianzhi, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy* by Bryan W. Van Norden and *Sourcebook of Traditional Chinese Culture* by Qizhi Zhang.

## 2. Theory and method

This will be a thematic analysis where I will take a look at the movies and see what kind of themes that are recurring throughout the different films, therefore during the analysis of the movies I will mainly focus on the actual themes but also on the motives and stories in general, while not focusing much on the dialogue. Although analyzing the dialogue is certainly something that can be helpful, due to my non-existent knowledge of the Cantonese dialect of Chinese, this would be impossible, especially when considering that many of these films have bad subtitling in general, it is also because the Cantonese (and also Mandarin and other dialects of Chinese) often use words that sound similar or the same to something else, as a metaphor for a completely different thing, and this can't be translated well into English subtitles, so it is bound to lose meaning by focusing on subtitled dialogue. I will however mention certain parts of the dialogue where it explicitly talks about the handover.

For this essay I have been influenced by Elsaesser and Hagener's (2010) book *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses*, and more specifically, the chapter which describes cinema as a mirror. This talks about how during the 1960s to the mid-1970s film theory highlighted the reflexive potential of cinema, and claims that any engagement with a film is an act of identification (Elsaesser, Hagener, 2010, p. 56).

This chapter mentions Balázs and his thoughts of how cinema, and close-ups specifically, allows the spectator to see certain aspects of the world in a way not previously known, but also as a way to look themselves as in a mirror (Elsaesser, Hagener, 2010, p. 59). Deleuze talks about how an image can be "a reflecting and reflected unity" at the same time,

meaning that the surface shows both the image that it reflects and the image it shows (Elsaesser, Hagener, 2010, p. 61). While these talk more about close-ups and faces specifically, it's not exactly important for the research I am doing, but it's still important to understand to move on to the next step of the chapter concerning the "mirror".

This "cinema as mirror" part goes far back in history, as far back as Plato who talked about the difference between an artist and a craftsman. According to Plato, an artist creates an object according to his/her inner image or ideal type, while a craftsman has a material prototype which he/she tries to reproduce (Elsaesser, Hagener, 2010, p. 61). The mirror is something that both distances, objectifies and reveals a truth (Elsaesser, Hagener, 2010, p. 61). In the theory of "Cinema as mirror" there are three paradigms. Firstly, the dominant notion regarding the look into the mirror as a window into the unconscious, which refers to a surplus of "self" that the mirror can disclose. Secondly, there is the mirror metaphor pointing to a "doubling" of what is being seen or shown, usually signifying a distancing or estranging effect instead of a disclosing deeper meaning. The third paradigm is how the mirror can refer to a mirror identified by anthropologists as a "component of human identity", and how cinema plays an important part in human affective interaction with others and also the origins of empathy and sympathy. Also important for the essay is Metz thoughts of how narrative cinema is "a chain of substitutions", that is metaphors, and "displacements" that is metonymies (Elsaesser, Hagener, 2010, p. 63).

What I want to use from this theory is to see how the society of Hong Kong was reflected upon the "cinematic mirror", and mainly focusing on the 1997 issue and questions surrounding that. While the chapter talks about personal reflection, a problem with this is of course, that I am not a Hong Konger myself, but I will try to see the films through a perspective of the upcoming handover of Hong Kong during this period although it will obviously be from a perspective of a westerner. Something that is also important to understand is that the "cinema as mirror" is more about the way a person sees a reflection of itself in the films. In this essay, however, I am not talking about the way a specific person would see a reflection of itself. Instead, I am using it a bit more metaphorically, as if Hong Kong itself would be a person and more about how the people in Hong Kong in general

would see the reflections in the cinema, or as a way to see the identification of Hong Kong in the films.

I plan to begin my essay with an overview of what Hong Kong cinema is in general, and some brief description of common elements in it. I will also describe some basic background to the history of the recent China and Hong Kong. After that I will do the analysis to find both common themes, and how these themes can be related to the issue of the handover. I'm also going to try to relate certain of these themes to traditional Chinese culture and beliefs when that is possible.

## 3. Analysis

### 3.1. Brothers and fathers

Many films do contain stories concerning brothers or fathers as important parts of the story, while sisters or mothers are rarely featured at all and mostly absent, with the exceptions of a few mentions such as in *Hard Boiled* (1992), but even there it's not an important part of driving the story forward. Women instead are mainly shown as either wives or partners for the main characters, even though they are certainly often important characters in the films, especially in *Peking Opera Blues* (1986) where the protagonists are mainly three women.

The 1986 film *A Better Tomorrow* is mainly about two brothers. One, Sung, is a highly respected member of a triad association, while the other, Kit, works for the police in the hope of being promoted to becoming a police officer and doesn't know about his brother's connections with the triad. Due to Sung and Kit being on different sides of the law obviously leads to problems. The police eventually find out that Kit's brother is connected to the triad, and therefore doesn't promote him or let him work on the case. The fact that Kit works for the police also leads to triads killing his and Sung's father as well as a failed attempt to killing Kit. Eventually, Sung ends up in prison, and after he's released he wants to go back to a normal honest life, finding work as a taxi driver, and also tried to get Kit to forgive him several times, while Kit constantly refuses, blaming Sung for their father's death and for him not being promoted. Kit's wife, however, speaks of that Kit and Sung should

reunite, since they are brothers after all. Sung lately gets into trouble with the triads, as they want his help, and threatens to kill one of his friends and Kit. The film ends with Kit and Sung finally reuniting after Sung has shot his old triad boss.

Now, this could certainly be an allegory for the 1997 issue, and it would even be likely that this is “pro-unification”. A theory is that Kit and Sung represent Hong Kong and Mainland China, however, who represents which part, is a bit more complicated. The ending of the film is the key scene and you can see two interpretations of it. One interpretation is that Sung represents Hong Kong, and his killing of his former triad boss represents Hong Kong’s departure from its British colonial government. The other interpretation would be that Sung represents the Mainland China, and the killing of the triad leader is instead a call for the mainlanders to “kill off” the communist government of the Mainland China that is putting China on the wrong track, and then reunite with the Hong Kongers. From this the father can be a representation of the British colonial government of Hong Kong, which by the people of Hong Kong might have been an accurate thought of how they felt before the Chinese would “kill off” the colonial government in 1997. A flaw with this would however be, since the characters are brothers, that the British would indirectly control China. Another representation would instead be that the father represents some sort of “connection” between the people of China, or alternatively even the Qing Empire (when Hong Kong and Mainland China were still united).

To dig a bit deeper into this, we can see that Sung is shown as a complicated character. Even though he’s involved into the triads, he is still shown throughout the film as a good hearted person. When he finds out that his brother has graduated from the police academy, he decides that his next case with the triads will be his last, but ends up in prison, and is then constantly harassed by the triads who want him back, hitting him where it hurts the most, by threatening his best friend, and his brother. Throughout the film Sung is seen as extremely caring of his brother, even though Kit refuses to forgive him. In the beginning of the film, Sung is shown as having a quite typical triad look (as it has been shown in many films, especially after this one), dressing in fine clothes and suits paired with sunglasses and water combed hair, that is a bit longer than most characters in the film, but as the film progress it is shown that Sung isn’t really the bad guy (and he also starts to dress less stylish), but is more shown as being a victim due to not being able to escape the triads. This is

something that makes it more believable that Sung would represent Mainland China, rather than Hong Kong. While it is not explained why Sung joined the triads in the first place, judging by his character a likely explanation could be that he simply didn't know what he was joining, perhaps he joined them to help someone, but as this is not explained it would be unnecessary to speculate too much about it. There is however parallels to Mainland China here to be seen. It is assumed that during the Chinese civil war many people did support the communists, and therefore joining them, but after the country had been transformed into a people's republic, it has been hard to escape from that, not only talking about Mainlanders fleeing to Hong Kong and other places, but also of getting rid of the government in general, and as is shown by the end of the film, the only way to escape it is to "kill it off" literally. Therefore Sung would rather than representing the communist government, instead representing the population of Mainland China.

Kit, instead, is shown as somewhat less complicated. At first he is shown as completely unknowing of his brother's criminal activity, which almost makes him seem stupid or at least gullible, although since he's being withheld of information the audience gets, this is not a fair judgment, while one can still have opinions how he has managed to not know about it since his father knows. He is still shown as a character that wants the best for the ones close to him for most of the film, even though he acts a bit clumsy in the beginning of the film and later he seems extremely unforgiving to his brother as much as it is going out over his wife, although in the end, he still forgives his brother. Since it has already been explained how Sung would represent the mainland, that would mean according to that, that Kit represents Hong Kong, while the connections do seem a bit less clear here, there are still certain things that can be seen that connects to this. His uncaring attitude in the beginning of the film connects to the probably less concerned Hong Kongers earlier in time (before the 1997 issue started to come close), while when he finds out about his criminal brother's activities seems like a representation of 1984 (as already explained, the year when it became completely clear that the handover would happen), and after that he gets hostile and afraid, much like the people of Hong Kong, who realized that there could be potential chaos. Still, this interpretation is not flawless, but all in all, it can be seen as a call for the Chinese and Hong Kongers to reunite, since after all "they are brothers" as already mentioned by Kit's

wife. This would also connect to what has been written about in the interview of John Woo claiming that people must stick together no matter what happens.

*Bloody Brotherhood* is a 1989 film that seems to be one of only a few to deal with explicit contemporary political matters, which could seem a bit surprising since it was made and released before the Tiananmen Square protests. It starts out with a number of immigrants from Mainland China, including the main character (Wah) and his brother (Wai), on a ship that are planning to enter Hong Kong illegally. They are however confronted by Chinese border guards, preventing them to escape from China, although the main character jumps into the water and manages to get to Hong Kong anyway. Trying to make his living in Hong Kong, Wah finds out how difficult it is for mainlanders to find jobs as well as there being prejudices against him because of him being from the mainland. He eventually sets up a stand at a market, but it gets trashed by triads collecting protection money. Eventually, Wah becomes a part of the triad himself, although when his triad leader is framed, he flees to Taiwan, where he eventually becomes a businessman. The triads try to convince him to help them with smuggling, and when he refuses the triads send a person to kidnap Wah's daughter. The kidnapper, who turns out to be Wai, the brother of Wah, accidentally kills the daughter. Wah finds out that his old triad gang is responsible for the death of his daughter and he goes back to Hong Kong for revenge. The film ends with most of the important triad members being killed, while Wah's brother Wai is being killed by the police (after having killed the triad leader himself).

Like *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) this is an example of a film where two brothers end up on different sides, but it's also a bit different, since this film focus on one of the brothers, while the other one basically disappears from the film, not knowing what happened to him, until he reappears during the kidnapping. This is an allegory to the 1997 issue in the way that the brothers are turned against each other, unknowingly, due to external factors (the triad boss), and to put it into context of the 1997 issue, the brothers could be seen as the people of China and Hong Kong (perhaps also Taiwan), and how they are turned against each other due to their different governments in this case. The fact that one of the brothers ends up being killed could mean that only one China can "live".

*Naked Killer* is a 1992 film in which it is shown that a police officer who is one of the main characters, named Tinam, accidentally kills his brother, something that

happened before the story of the movie. This makes it yet another movie where two brothers ends up facing each other, while in this film it's not really explained, we are only told that Tinam accidentally shot his brother, and after that he can't hold a gun without vomiting. This, like some of the other films, could be an allusion to how the Chinese people are turned against each other due to certain factors. A rival assassin is also killing Kitty's (the other main character) father, making this similar to *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) where the main characters father gets killed. The father could here represent the colonial government of Hong Kong, which would mean that Kitty represents the people of Hong Kong, and the rival assassin as Mainland China. This is something I will get back to later in the analysis.

*City on Fire* is a film from 1987 in where there is no relationship between two brothers, but it shows how an undercover cop who tries to infiltrate a triad society, and eventually he begins a close friendship with one of the members there. This again shows two men on different sides of the law, and that they after all are not that different from each other. Again being something that can be used as an allusion to the differences between Hong Kong and Mainland China in the way that while they are under different leadership, in the film being the police and the triad, while in the real world (at least during the 1980s) the difference between the communist government of Mainland China and the capitalist-colonial government of Hong Kong, while showing that people living under either of this, can still connect with each other. This does connect to how the people of China should stick together, no matter what happens, as said by John Woo. Even though this is not a John Woo movie (it was directed by Ringo Lam), it was still produced by the same company (Cinema City) that produced John Woo's movies at the time, so it's probably safe to say that they knew each other and quite realistic that they both had similar thoughts about these types of issues.

*The Killer* from 1989 is another film which doesn't feature two brothers, but again a special relationship between a police and an assassin is shown. Here, the triad member Ah Jong, has decided to retire, but during a mission, he accidentally makes a woman blind. He decided that he will take on a final mission to pay for her operation. The police detective, Li Ying, is out to find Ah Jong, but they eventually become friends by the end of the film, once again, connecting it to the brotherhood of the people. This is another

example of John Woo's idea that the people should stick together no matter what, which has already been explained, certainly connects to the 1997 issue.

*Peking Opera Blues* from 1986 does include two father-and-daughter relationships. One is Bai Niu, whose father owns the Peking Opera House, and the other is Yun, who is a revolutionary that tries to overthrow her own father General Cao. This is something that I will come back to under the next heading, where I will also introduce the film more specifically.

### **3.2. Colonialism, western influence and Chinese traditional values**

Another common theme in the films that have been analyzed is that many of them deal with either colonialism directly, or the growing influence of the western world. These films are mainly set in the past during the late Qing Empire, or the years right after it collapsed. Many films use these western cultural influences, not only to make fun of them, but also in a way to make fun of the traditional Chinese cultural values, and often puts them against each other in a humorous way. However, also in films that take place in the then contemporary Hong Kong sometimes also contain some of these elements.

*Peking Opera Blues* is a 1986 film which fits into Bordwell's description of the "multigenre" (combining action, comedy and drama) and is also one of the films that is set in the past. While many films are set in the warlord era (1916-1928), this is set sometime after the fall of the Qing Empire (1912), but before the actual start of the warlord era. It also mentions that the current president of China Yuan Shikai is planning to make himself the new emperor of China (something that would eventually happen in 1915), and would eventually be followed by the warlord era, the Chinese civil war, the Sino-Japanese war, and the eventual creation of the communist People's Republic of China. Basically, this was a very turbulent time period in the history of China. This could most certainly be an allegory for the worries that the people of Hong Kong felt at the time, which Hong Kong was moving towards a turbulent future due to the upcoming handover.

This film also deals a bit more explicitly with political issues that connect with Yuan Shikai. In the elections, although Yuan Shikai didn't win, he still remained in power

mainly due to loans from European powers (also making this a film that connects with colonialism, which I will come back to). In the film, there is a General named Cao, who is helping Yuan with arranging the loan. Cao's daughter Yun, is however helping the revolutionaries to steal papers from Cao to cancel this loan and overthrow Yuan. They eventually get these papers, but still fail, due to a corrupt policeman killing General Cao, meaning that Yun and her comrades must flee (Bordwell, 2010, p. 87). In the end of the film, Yun says that they will all meet in Peking, which right after that cuts to a shot of a painted face of a Peking Opera performer laughing, as if it is mocking the characters (Bordwell, 2010, p. 88). This is more of a comment on the communist takeover of China, and how it didn't really turn out the way that many people had probably hoped. This isn't really something that touches so obviously on the 1997 issue, but it could still be connected to the worries that many people in Hong Kong felt at the time. The fact that General Cao gets killed is also a bit complicated, since while he is "the bad guy", he is also the father of one of the good characters. This is something that could also be applied to the 1997 issue, in that while the Hong Kongers are still Chinese like the mainlanders they still have two different political systems.

As already mentioned, this film has allusions to colonialism, while apart from the actual loans that were mentioned, there's not so much explicitly in the film. It however deals with the emergence of western influence, and also deals with Chinese traditional culture. Most of the western influences are shown in the General's home, or in other things connecting to the general, for example, he has an automobile and record player and several western things that to some of the other characters in the film were basically unheard of. It also talks about western clothing, and how you can't tell who is a man and who is a woman when it comes to western clothing styles. Yun herself dresses as a man which is mentioned several times in the film. To make things a bit more ironic, General Cao, in his very "western" home, still has over 30 wives (it was common for wealthy men to have several wives in old China). Another thing that makes fun of traditional Chinese values is the use of a Peking Opera house, and the owner's daughter, called Bai Niu, who wants to perform there. In traditional Chinese opera, women weren't allowed to perform on stage (mentioned in this film, and it seems that women weren't even allowed into the opera house), so all female characters in the opera were performed by men. To perform Bai Niu basically plays a man,

who plays a woman on stage. This is both a critique against the British colonialism, the western influences and also the traditional Chinese culture, while at the same time embracing them. It can be seen as something that connects with what has already been mentioned previously, that the Hong Kong national identity after 1984 started to become more aggressively intensified. Basically, this kind of both mocking and embracing the influences could most certainly be a comment to the complicated question of the Hong Kong national identity.

*Once Upon a Time in China* (1991) is another film that is set in a historical past and contains several allusions to western culture meeting traditional Chinese culture. It is set in the late 1800s and has many references to the colonialism at the time, mentioning how Hong Kong is British; Macau is Portuguese, as well as the area where it is set (Foshan) has British and American fortresses, as well as French soldiers present. The film is also critical of the imperial dynasty at the time, and shows how the people are critical about how the “Manchurians” (the Qing dynasty’s royal family was Manchurians) are giving the country away.

Again, like *Peking Opera Blues* (1986) it also shows how western influences are growing in China at the time, and how western inventions such as the camera, meets the more traditional Chinese ways such as Chinese opera and martial arts. Another thing it references is the way that Chinese people were lured away to America, in the hope of getting rich, paying very much money for it while later being treated as slaves, putting the blame, not only on the west, but also on the Chinese people that acts as the intermediary between the Chinese people and the Americans. Again, this is likely used as an allegory to the changes that were coming for the people of Hong Kong at the time, although it’s a bit more intensified than it is in *Peking Opera Blues* (1986), likely because this film was made in 1991, after the Tiananmen Square protests.

Also, this is set in a turbulent time period, and might be another allusion to how the people of Hong Kong were worried of the upcoming handover. It’s also critical of the colonialism in general though, and doesn’t seem to criticize China and Chinese culture in general, instead focusing on critique of the imperial government (most likely an allegory the Chinese communist government) and against the Chinese collaborators which could be seen as an allegory for either people being in favour of the handover, or against it, perhaps both

at the same time. In that sense this film seems more like being in favour of an independent Hong Kong, or alternatively, a Hong Kong that is part of a non-communist China.

*A Chinese Ghost Story* is a 1987 film that is based on a short story from a book that was released in China during the 1700s. It is set in the past, but not specified when, although most likely during the early period of the Qing Empire when the book was written. It's only supposed to be loosely based on the book, and since I have not read it myself, I can't say how much was changed for this movie. Therefore, the assumptions of connecting things from this film to more recent political issues might be flawed.

The film is another example of a "multigenre" film, this time blending elements from comedy, horror, romantic drama, martial arts, sword fighting and traditional Chinese folklore. The film is mainly based around the main character who is a debt collector, who falls in love with a girl that is actually a ghost, and also includes a Taoist exorcist, who tries to defeat the evil spirits. This film doesn't deal with political issues at all almost, the references are even more subtle than some of the other films, but there are still a few that are less subtle and there are certain themes that could be seen as allegories. The only real obvious thing would be how the guardians in the city (basically the police) seems to run after people just for simple things such as running or yelling, which might be an allegory to how the government of Mainland China has been paranoid about political opposition. Another thing would be when the main character goes to report a criminal, and it shows how the "government" are shown as incompetent and confused. The ghost can be seen as an allegory to the worries of Hong Kong people of the time. Now the ghost has as her mission to seduce "bad" people and steal their souls, it is later shown however that she is forced to do this by the "great evil".

The "great evil" can be seen as an allegory of how the government of China basically forced their people against each other, when hunting down political opponents (especially during the Cultural Revolution), and that the "bad" people represents the political opponents and that we are shown that some of those souls were in fact not bad people, could be alluding to how innocent people suffered during the Cultural Revolution. Now the Cultural Revolution was still quite recent when this film was released, and many people in Hong Kong had fled there during it. Therefore, this is another way of showing the worries of the Hong Kongers at the time. The "great evil" is also shown more as a more of an abstract

being, or a spirit, we do see “great evil’s” tongue (which surrounds whole buildings), but the great evil isn’t exactly a person, it’s more a greater evil supernatural force that cannot really be seen, which if it represents the government of China, doesn’t exactly blame a certain person, but more so the concept of evil in general.

*Hard Boiled* from 1992 does include certain moments where traditional Chinese values are shown, such as the scene where the main character, Tequila, prays that he will get back together with his girlfriend to a Chinese god, while also combining this with showing for example a Christian funeral. Another film by John Woo, *The Killer* (1989), has its final scene take place in a Christian church.

*The Big Heat* from 1988, does contain some references to the British colonial government, such as when a gun is misfiring, and the police tries to complain about this, they are told that they should complain to the United Kingdom because that’s where the guns come from, which makes it a slight allusion to the British colonial government being useless.

### **3.3. Violence, sacrifice and death**

Something else that is recurring through the films are how many of them contain brutal violence, which is even included in films that are otherwise comedies, such as *Peking Opera Blues* (1986) which contains a quite brutal torture scene in a movie that is otherwise comedic. There is also a general inclusion of people sacrificing themselves, which often, but not always, leads to their death, and it is common to see important characters, sometimes even the main characters, die in the end.

*The Big Heat* is a 1988 film in the style of previously released films such as *A Better Tomorrow* (1986). This is another example of an action film dealing with the whole police vs triads theme. Basically the film is about four police officers that are after a businessman that has connections with the triads, after another policeman has gotten killed.

This film deals quite directly with the 1997 issue several times. Lines said by triad members include “Hong Kong only has 10 years left” and “Let’s drink to 1997” (It should be noted that the subtitles might not be correct), and there is a general theme of

how the triads are trying to do as much “business” as they possibly can before the handover. This would then imply that there was a hope for Hong Kong after 1997, and that there would be some kind of “cleanup” to get rid of the triads when the Chinese would take over.

It is also notable for its very brutal and graphic violence and gore, including decapitations and a man burned to death, and some other very bloody scenes, depicting Hong Kong as a very violent society. One scene when the police chase after two triad members, it shows how one triad member picks up a child, and throws it at the police, who is forced to catch it, basically showing that the triad will do whatever it takes to get away from the police. When the main character of the movie, who is considering retiring, takes up the case to seek revenge for the killing of his friend, and later finds out about that a businessman in conjunction of the triads are smuggling something, he takes this to his wife who works in a lab to analyze it. When he gets back to check out the results, he discovers that his wife has been killed, another example of triad brutality in the movie, so there is a general theme that no one is safe in Hong Kong. While one interpretation of this could be that 1997 would become a turn for the better, you could also interpret it in the way, that due to the fact that the handover was getting closer, it has turned Hong Kong into a desperate mess of an apocalypse, where criminal activity is rising due to the upcoming “end of the world”.

*Naked Killer* is a 1992 film about a woman (Kitty) who becomes a professional assassin and a police officer (Tinam) who accidentally shot his own brother and as a result of that now vomits every time he holds a gun. While Kitty originally tries to kill people freelance, she eventually ends up with a superior who teaches her how to become an assassin. As a result of her becoming an assassin, she gets involved with the triads, and also falls in love with Tinam eventually.

This is another film that uses a lot of excessive and brutal violence but also contains many sexual references and mild nudity. Compared to *The Big Heat* (1988) which is another violent film, this film seems to be less about the realism, focusing on a more stylized look of the scenography and cinematography, and has more of a surrealist feel to it, not only because of this, but also because of some of the bizarre situations such as Kitty’s superior who has paedophiles chained up in her basement and a scene where a policeman who believes that what he is eating is actually a sausage while in fact, as is shown to the

audience beforehand, it is a penis. While the violence would most likely have similar allusions as in *The Big Heat* (1988) the overall surrealistic and heavily stylized look of the movie, might be an allusion to the confusion felt by the Hong Kongers about the approaching 1997, which was now getting close.

In the end of the film, Kitty and Tinam is in a house after a battle, surrounded by the police, they kiss, and then fires a gun (due to the gas stove being turned on) which makes the building explode, killing both of the characters. This could be seen as the people of Hong Kong, feeling there was no hope for the future, other than just blowing everything up. Another angle could be that it represents the death of Hong Kong, but also the reunification of China, due to the lovers actually dying together, and could represent the start of something new, which in this case would be a New China. As written earlier in the essay, however, Kitty could represent the people of Hong Kong, losing her father (The British colonial government) who was killed by a rival assassin, which would then be a representation of Mainland China. This does make it a bit complicated, but also interesting, as it portrays both “Chinas” as assassins, meaning that the both would have “bad things” about them. The difference is that Kitty is shown as a more “human” character, only killing “real” bad guys, and eventually finds love with a policeman, while the rival is portrayed as someone almost purely evil and perverted.

*Bloody Brotherhood* (1989) seems to be pro-Taiwan. Because Wah escapes from China and the Chinese communist border troops are showed in a brutal way, while in Hong Kong, Wah fails, due to prejudice, corruption and the presence of the triad. However, when he get to Taiwan, he flourishes, living something of an ideal life, and it even shows how the mighty triad from Hong Kong is virtually powerless when they are on Taiwanese soil. This is most certainly a critique of both the brutal communist government of mainland China, and the British colonial government of Hong Kong (in that it shows how the triads “rule the streets”, and corruption such as how the police force kills Wai). As for the 1997 issue, there is a connection in the Hong Kongers worries of how life under the communist government was going to be, as well as that Hong Kong itself, doesn’t function that well, while showing Taiwan in a positive light, could make this a film that is supporting complete Hong Kong independence, that it should be ruled by neither the British or the Chinese, instead having their own government like Taiwan has.

*Hard Boiled* is a 1992 film that fits into the typical Hong Kong action genre and was the last film John Woo made before moving to Hollywood. The film is about a police officer called "Tequila" Yuen who loses his colleague partner during an attempt to arrest a group of gun smugglers. Frustrated by this, Tequila kills the triad member responsible for the death of his friend, which angers his boss, who wanted that triad member to testify in court. The rest of the film is about Tequila trying to hunt the triads down vigilante style, something his boss doesn't like, and eventually it's shown that one of the triad members is actually an undercover cop named Tony. When this gets known by the triad, they take a whole hospital (which they own themselves) as hostages.

This film again, like films such as *The Big Heat* (1988), shows the triads as really ruthless and violent. Under a hospital, they have an arms depot, and in the end when this is discovered, they are trying to take the whole hospital as hostages, even killing some of them and ultimately blowing the whole hospital up. This follows the example of portraying Hong Kong as a city full of ruthless triads, corruption and crime, and the triad member who actually stands up against his boss when his boss is shooting civilians gets killed almost instantly. The fact that the triad member at least stands up does give a small share of hope, that not everyone is ruthless. The fact that also both Tequila, who sacrifices himself to save a baby, although he's not dying in the end, but risks his life, and Tony who sacrifices himself to get electrocuted to open a door, and in the end shooting himself through the stomach to shoot the triad's boss who's holding him and threatens to kill him so that Tequila can shoot him in the head, also shows a sort of good vs. bad scenario, where the good people sacrifices themselves for a sort of greater good. However, none of these two characters die in the end, which is otherwise common.

As for connecting this to the 1997 issue, this film generally has a similar view to that as *The Big Heat* (1988) has, while this film doesn't explicitly mention it, it was released in 1992 (although set in 1991 according to hospital records shown in a scene), which is after the Tiananmen Square massacre. Like *The Big Heat* (1988) it shows Hong Kong as a violent almost apocalyptic society, and what has been said for that film can basically be said for this.

In *City on Fire* (1987) while it doesn't show the triads as extremely brutal, as they are in certain other films such as *The Big Heat* (1988) or *Hard Boiled* (1992) it still shows Hong Kong as a violent society. Triad brutality is shown, but at the same time, police

brutality and torture is also shown, making this a more nuanced film, trying not to be as black and white as the above mentioned films. As already mentioned, this shows a friendship between an undercover cop and a member of the triad, and in the end of the film, the undercover cop gets shot and dies during a raid on the triads by the police, while his criminal friend survives (although he gets arrested). This is most likely referring to the 1997 issue in the way that Hong Kong will die, but there is still hope for the future with China as the triad member isn't really shown as a bad person. This is a bit similar to other films such as *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) showing certain triad members as good guys on the wrong track, which could again be an allusion to how Mainland China isn't a bad place, it is only that it's on the wrong track.

*The Killer* (1989) is once again a film concerning the triads and once again being violent. It does however show again, that the triad member on his final mission, Ah Jong, only does this final mission because he needs to pay for a woman's operation, due to damaging her eyes during a shootout. This at least shows a triad that is not ruthless, and actually goodhearted. In the end of the film, he is killed by his triad leader, while the police detective that was out to get him, shoots and kills the triad leader. This could certainly connect to the 1997 issue in that it depicts "the death of Hong Kong" in a sense.

### **3.4. The presence of rain**

Something that is notable in most of the Hong Kong movies, at least during this era, is that most of them contain at least one scene where it's raining. *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987) features a scene in the beginning of the movie that starts during the opening credits, where the main character, a merchant, takes cover because it starts to rain. While taking cover a bunch of warriors begin to fight in front of him, and eventually only one of the fighters survives. There is also a scene later in the movie, just after the main character has tried to convince the girl he loves to come with him, but she refuses (because she is a ghost and the main character doesn't know about it), and also during a scene when they later meet again.

In *Once Upon a Time in China* (1991) there's a rain scene between a scene where people are preparing backstage of a theatre set, and a short scene which takes place

in a British colonial fortress. The scene consists of the main character following a girl that he wants to give an umbrella (although she already has one) but she leaves, and he stands there, while some prostitutes throw flowers at him from a balcony, and another person is breaking two spears with only his neck. During a later scene, where two people are having a duel, it starts to rain after one of the persons has died. It also rains in a scene where the main character is in house arrest and tries to shoot with a gun for the first time, and it continues until there's another duel and that duel is over.

In *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) the rain starts in the scene where the main character and his wife look at the grave of the main character's father, in the scene after the main character's brother has been released from prison, it continues to rain while the main character and his wife are going home by car, where the brother stands, after they meet the brothers start to fight with each other.

In *The Big Heat* (1988) it rains in a scene after a shootout scene at the hospital, where a police inspector gets killed. This scene is mostly just a transitional scene, showing police arriving to the hospital, and the main character going into a car with some other people to go to a lab and have some suspicious powdered milk analyzed. Also, after this scene, there's another shootout scene where it's not raining although the ground is still wet.

In *Bloody Brotherhood* (1989) the rain starts after scenes of the main character having come back to Hong Kong from Taiwan to meet his old "superior" from the triad who is now living in poor conditions, as well as the main character's brother thinking back of him killing a child (which he doesn't know was his niece). In this scene, the main character and the old triad superior are talking in his run-down home where he admits his drug habits. After this, two people from the triad break into the house and a fight scene breaks out, after/during the fight, the main character sees that it's his brother he's fighting against, and then they talk.

In *Naked Killer* (1992) it's raining already in the opening scene right after the opening credits where you see the main character run into an apartment building, where she murders a man. It also seems to rain outside (at least there's thunder) while the police are investigating a murder case. It's also raining during a scene where one of the main characters, a policeman, is driving his car talking on a cell phone and finds out that the "air

hostess has been shot and is in the hospital” (although this will later show to be a dream), right after a friend of his has been run over by a car. It’s also raining during a scene, after the policeman has visited the main character, where he’s standing outside and smoking while waiting for the main character and also being observed by another woman. The main character eventually shows up and they start engaging in “romantic activities”.

*Peking Opera Blues* (1986) seems to be the exception here, not containing a single rain scene. It does however contain a scene where it is snowing after a major fight at a Peking Opera.

Now, water in the Chinese culture has a quite interesting story. During the so called “Warring States Period” (c. 475 BC-221 BC), Xun Zi said that water (and also fire) have “qi” (that is vapour, or energy) but no life (Zhang, 2012, p. 43). *The Book of Changes* describes eight “trigrams” that form patterns that represents different things, including water, and describes that through this, “natural and social changes can be foretold” (Zhang, 2012, p. 47). Perhaps the most interesting view of water may be that of Lao Zi who urge people to learn about the equality of water. Water is something that appears soft, but can fight everything that is harder and stronger than itself “because it can accommodate to the situation as it flows”, basically meaning that “nothing under heaven can fight it” and can be seen as the essence of Lao Zi’s principle of “the weak overcoming the strong” (Zhang, 2012, p. 51). Lao Zi also talked about that the rivers and oceans can hold so much water because they lie in the lowest position, leading to the theory that a sage that wants to be trusted by the common people should be kind and treat them with humility. He also says that “anything that is strong will die. Anything weak can live forever” concluding it with that everything a person does in his lifetime should be done as “weak as water” (Zhang, 2012, p. 111) also saying that “water is invincible because it desires nothing and contends for nothing” (Lang, Liangzhi, 2008, p. 15).

As for connecting this to the 1997 issue, first of all we can see that most of the scenes where it rains have at least some connection to violence or death in some way, either in the particular scenes, or in a scene before or after the rain scene. Taking this in consideration together with the ancient thoughts by Lao Zi and the time period these films were made, makes it more easy to see it as this is referring to the 1997 issue in the way that all the violence going on is a comment on the society and the turbulent future that Hong

Kong was possibly heading towards due to the handover. The rain then represents that the people of Hong Kong, and perhaps also of Mainland China, should follow Lao Zi's thoughts about being "weak as water" because the weak can overcome the strong (which would be the Chinese government, and also perhaps the British colonial government). Now, there is a certain problem with seeing it this way as well, mainly because it can't be said that this is something specific for this time period or even specific for Hong Kong cinema in general. It is however a relevant thought to mention, since this is at least a recurring theme appearing in the films that have been analyzed.

## **4. Final discussion**

### **4.1. What are the common themes?**

We can see that there are several common themes. First we have the concept of brotherhood which is recurring through many movies, and in the films not featuring actual brothers, they usually feature close friends which have a kind of "brotherly" connection to each other. The fathers often appear in the films as well with differing importance depending on the film, and gets killed in some of the films. Colonialism is sometimes present in the films, either explicitly or not, and several films includes how the new western influences reaches China and "collides" with the traditional Chinese culture and traditions. Most of the films, even comedies, include some brutal violence, and it's not uncommon that important characters, sometimes even the main character(s) die(s), and sometimes if they don't die, they are often close to dying and sacrifice themselves. Many of the films dealing with triads also feature characters (either triad members or policemen) taking on a "last job" before retiring for different reasons. Something not really mentioned in the essay due to not really connecting with my research question is that basically all the triad films includes at least one scene at a hospital, sometimes even shootout scenes. Since it couldn't really be connected to the 1997 issue in any way, it was not included in the analysis, but it should still be mentioned. Also, the fact that it rains in basically every film might not be as connected to the 1997 issue, but the traditional view of water in Chinese culture makes it relevant enough to be included.

Other recurring thoughts are from the previous research, namely the thoughts of John Woo and Cheuk. John Woo mentions that he wants the people of Hong Kong to stick together to overcome the bad things. This is a theme recurring through not only John Woo's movies, but also movies by other directors, something that Cheuk mentions in his research. Also, Cheuk talks about that certain films such as *Peking Opera Blues* (1986), deals with the anxiety and frustration the people of Hong Kong felt at the time, something that can also be seen in the analysis's of this essay.

#### **4.2. How do they connect to the 1997 issue?**

The concept of brotherhood has been shown as a way of showing the people of China and Hong Kong as "brothers" from the same family. They are many times turned against each other and end up on different sides of the law, such as in *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), where one is a policeman and the other is a triad member, and in *Bloody Brotherhood* (1989), where they get separated, and later unknowingly turned against each other due to one of them killing his brother's daughter. *Naked Killer* (1992) shows how the main character accidentally kills his brother in the beginning of the film. *City on Fire* (1987) and *The Killer* (1989) doesn't feature brothers, but instead friends that are as close as brothers. This generally seems to connect to the 1997 issue in the way that the brothers (representing China and Hong Kong) are turned against each other, but in the end they often end up sticking together to defeat a "greater evil". This is something that perfectly matches John Woo's opinions of that the people should stick together to make the best of things. This doesn't necessarily have to do with the 1997 issue in particular, but it still connects to it in the sense that how people can be turned against each other due to external factors, basically showing the brothers as representations of Hong Kong and China.

Also connecting closely to the brotherhood would be the fathers present in certain films such as in *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), *Peking Opera Blues* (1986) and *Naked Killer* (1992) where the father ends up being killed. The presence of the father was a bit harder to analyze, since it wasn't always clear who the father was supposed to represent, it could be read as a metaphor for the United Kingdom, but also as a kind of "uniting" force of the Chinese people.

Another theme recurring through the films were the colonialism and influence of western values and culture on the traditional Chinese culture and values. This is shown both in *Peking Opera Blues* (1986) and *Once Upon a Time in China* (1991), where especially *Peking Opera Blues* (1986) seems to criticize and embrace both the western and Chinese cultures at the same time, something that is to some extent true also to *Once Upon a Time in China* (1991). These themes are not exactly relating directly to the 1997 issue, but it still connects to the confusion of the Hong Kong national identity (“are they Chinese or are they British or something else?” for example). *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987) uses traditional Chinese literature to comment on more recent political issues and worries, while there wasn’t necessarily anything connected to the 1997 issue, the comments on for example the cultural revolution is relevant due to it still being quite recent at the time and would explain much of the Hong Kongers worries. A similar comment exists in *Peking Opera Blues* (1986) where the comment seems to be more on the communist takeover, and how it didn’t really turn out as many had hoped. *Hard Boiled* (1992) and *The Killer* (1989) also includes Christian and Traditional beliefs at the same time, also reflecting on the “middle-ground” Hong Kong could be seen as. *The Big Heat* (1988) calls the British as useless for giving the police guns that misfire, which could be seen as a comment on how the Hong Kongers weren’t satisfied with the British colonial government.

The violence that’s included in basically every film mainly refers to the apocalyptic feeling many Hong Kongers might have had at the time, also notable is how Taiwan is portrayed in a positive light in *Bloody Brotherhood* (1989), while the sacrifices many of the characters make can refer to how the people should always do the right thing. The recurring deaths of important characters seems to refer either to the death of Hong Kong such as in *City on Fire* (1987), *The Killer* (1989) and *Naked Killer* (1992) while in other films such as *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) and *Hard Boiled* (1992) it seems to connect more with an urge to kill off the current Chinese government. The death of the father in *Naked Killer* (1992) could also refer to how the British colonial government was coming to an end, while the father dying in *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) seems to represent a sort of unity. The father general Cao who gets killed in *Peking Opera Blues* (1986) is a bit more complicated, since he’s shown as a bad guy who’s still a father to a good guy (or girl in this case) and could refer to the complicated situation of who is good and who is evil. *A Chinese Ghost Story*

(1987) has a general theme of death going on throughout the movie while not specifically connecting to the 1997 issue. *Bloody Brotherhood* (1989) features a death of one of the brothers, which could refer to how one of the Chinas “must die”.

The presence of rain doesn't necessarily have to do with the 1997 issue but as it has been mentioned, could refer to the Chinese concept of non-action, and that the people should use this to overcome the new era that Hong Kong was moving towards. This has been relevant due to water being an important part in traditional Chinese beliefs dating back a long time, and it is very likely that the directors thought of this, especially considering the time period during these films were made.

As for the previous research, Fang mentions certain things relating to the 1997 issue in his book, but I try to build on this to find even more things to relate to it. Lau and Williams both also talks about the 1997 issue basically confirming that the research done in this essay was relevant.

### **4.3. What are the differences between genres and years?**

The differences through the years wasn't that big, this could have to do with the fact that the period analyzed was quite short, or that the material used was not enough to draw any conclusions from in this area. The only thing that could be said is that some of the later films deal more directly and intensely with political issues compared to the earlier, but even here the line between the films are quite slim. The comedies, which are generally set in the past and the other film set in the past, *Once Upon a Time in China* (1991), does deal more directly with political issues, although historical, they use them to comment on more recent events. The action films generally use metaphors and allusions to comment on political issues and do it very subtle, except in *Bloody Brotherhood* (1989) which deals more directly with them. Certain films, such as *The Big Heat* (1988) also mention the handover directly.

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

In the analysis a number of common themes were found that were present in Hong Kong movies from 1986 to 1992. Also many things could be connected to the 1997 issue through metaphors (be it brothers, deaths, violence or something else), although very rarely was it mentioned explicitly. Political issues were mainly addressed subtly or a bit more explicitly through the use of historical settings. All in all it's shown that the 1997 issue which was a major political issue during the 1980s and 1990s could be "mirrored" in the movies from Hong Kong at the time, although usually somewhat distortedly. Also, from the "cinema as mirror" metaphor it is seen that much of what is shown in the films can be connected to the worries that the people of Hong Kong had at the time.

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