

BOOK REVIEW

Main Melody Films: Hong Kong Directors in Mainland China

Yiu-Wai Chu. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022. viii + 280 pp.
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Yiu-Wai Chu's *Main Melody Films: Hong Kong Directors in Mainland China* is one of the very few English-language academic monographs that discuss this film genre at length. It is the third in Chu's "Hong Kong Studies" series of single-authored books devoted to the city's popular culture, including its cinematic culture, in the post-handover era. The previous ones were *Lost in Transition: Hong Kong Culture in the Age of China* (State University of New York Press, 2013) and *Found in Transition: Hong Kong Studies in the Age of China* (State University of New York Press, 2018). Unlike these two books, focused mainly on Hong Kong and the consequences of its 1997 sovereignty transfer to China, *Main Melody Films* explores how, in the 2010s, established Hong Kong filmmakers adapted their filmmaking practices to a new film industry environment in mainland China under new political-economic conditions in China, Hong Kong and elsewhere. These developments were enabled, among other factors, by the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement, concluded in June 2003 between the authorities of the PRC and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government, an agreement which allowed Hong Kong film professionals to tap into the profitable audience market of mainland China. As the author indicates, Hong Kong filmmakers were commissioned by either the mainland Chinese authorities or China-based film companies to make "main melody films" (which Chu calls "main(land) melody films" in order to distinguish them from similar films made by mainland film directors).

These "main melody films" produced in China, which are essentially propaganda works, have a long mainland tradition, but this tradition may not have been easily accessible to the Hong Kong filmmakers in the 2010s. Nevertheless, as Chu convincingly argues, the filmmakers in question helped extend Hong Kong's film culture to the mainland when they were employed to modify "main melody films" to make them more profit-oriented, entertaining, diverse and "blockbusterised" (pp. 2–3, 219). According to Chu, the making of "main(land) melody films" may be understood as a kind of "tactic" (p. 47), whereby these filmmakers juggled between the cultures and politics of Hong Kong and the mainland (p. 3). The result was a win-win situation: 1) while Hong Kong may have thus lost some established filmmakers to the mainland Chinese film industry, these individuals achieved what they were commissioned to do, sustaining their personal ways of making films in the genres they are good at, while also profiting financially from the mainland audience market; 2) main melody films became more appealing to mainland Chinese viewers.

Chu's aim is to provide persuasive cases by discussing some representative "main(land) melody films" created by established Hong Kong filmmakers; the author thereby furthers his theoretical paradigm of Hong Kong Studies. It is a new strand of research that could be grouped under the larger fields of Chinese studies and area studies, and may also establish dialogues with other arts and humanities disciplines, such as film and media studies, cultural studies, literary studies, etc.

To support his argument, Chu persuasively examines six Hong Kong filmmakers and their commercially successful and critically acclaimed "main(land) melody films." Placing their cases into

separate chapters, Chu substantiates his view extremely well. While chapter one is devoted to Tsui Hark and *The Taking Tiger Mountain 3D* (2014), chapter two highlights Ann Hui (who is Tsui's Hong Kong New Wave counterpart) and her *Our Time Will Come* (2017). The location of these first chapters in the book offers a sort of comparison between the career trajectories and visions of the two well-established directors, who started making films in Hong Kong in the late 1970s. A similar approach can be found in the next two chapters: chapter three on Peter Chan and his *Leap* (2020), and chapter four on Andrew Lau and his *The Founding of an Army* (2017) and *The Captain* (2019). Both Chan and Lau started working in the Hong Kong film industry in the 1980s, initially in different below-the-line positions, and eventually moved up the career ladder to the status of respected film directors. Chapter five, on Dante Lam and his *Operation* trilogy (2016, 2018, 2020), and chapter six, on Herman Yau and his *Shock Wave* (2017), are also mutually relevant in presenting these two directors' initial works in the Hong Kong film industry. Lam's action-packed films made in Hong Kong were entertaining, while Yau distinguished himself by his excellent management skills in implementing film projects. They carried over these qualities to the mainland Chinese film industry when they started making "main(land) melody films" there. Chu devotes the last chapter to a discussion of some likewise established Hong Kong film-makers who, however, were less successful in their "main(land) melody film" endeavours. The close readings of these cases are supported with Chu's thorough research on the broader political-economic contexts of China and Hong Kong, as well as with detailed studies on these film-makers' career trajectories before and while they were making the films in question.

Chu's *Main Melody Films* aptly completes his "Hong Kong Studies" book series by taking the discussion of Hong Kong culture, and specifically cinema, to the next level. Even though Chu offers some succinct references to traditional critical approaches in other disciplines – for example, suggesting auteurism in Tsui's case (p. 37), and referring to the cycling film genre in connection with Lam (pp. 145–146), we could wish that such references were expanded so as to allow readers unfamiliar with the paradigm of Hong Kong Studies to recognize connections with some widely-known film-related theories and critical approaches. Having said this, I do believe that *Main Melody Films* is a valuable and insightful addition to the scholarly literature on cultural studies related to China and Hong Kong, and on Chinese-language cinemas. Established scholars as well as students in various arts and humanities disciplines with special research interests in the culture and cinema of China and Hong Kong will very likely include this monograph in their list of must-read books.