Producing Hong Kong Film Genres for Global Consumption: Milkyway Image, 1996 to the Present

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Abstract

The history of the Hong Kong-based film production company Milkyway Image from its inception in 1996 to present day examplifies the metamorphosis of the contemporary Hong Kong film industry to an era characterised by Hong Kong's integration into a Chinese national context and the transnationalisation of world cinema. Drawing upon literature that studies film companies, this thesis adopts an integrative research framework that primarily combines industrial and discourse analysis to investigate Milkyway from a range of perspectives. It looks into the company's ownership and organisational structure and the constitution of its creative team, comparing its similarities and differences to previous Hong Kong film companies and discussing how Milkyway bases itself on contemporary industry and its production models, business experiences and human resources from established studios such as the Shaw Brothers. Secondly, I explore Milkyway's business and production practices in Hong Kong and mainland China by examining its genre films, including crime thrillers and romantic comedies, illustrating the Hong Kong film industry's cooperation, negotiation and resistance in the process of Hong Kong cinema's mainlandisation post-transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty from Britain to China. I then examine the discourse regarding Milkyway both inside and outside of Hong Kong, focussing on how the company and its work are received by various players in the film industry and community. The Hong Kong cultural community's interpretations of Milkyway's films represent an effort to maintain local cinema's independence and local culture's autonomy. International cultural bodies, such as film festivals, distributors and critics, receive Milkyway's productions against the background of the increased globalisation of cinema and the development of the film industry and film institutions. Milkyway's image changes as the company's films travel across contexts and as various cultural forces provide multiple understandings of contemporary Hong Kong cinema. In shaping the discourse about Milkyway and its work, the company plays an active role by taking advantage of transnational platforms, such as film festivals, and interacting with film journalism and academia.

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Introduction

Twenty years ago, in 1997, the sovereignty of Hong Kong was transferred from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China. From an overseas colony to a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of a nation state, Hong Kong began to reintegrate into a Chinese national context. During the past two decades, China instituted a range of policies in attempting to nationalise and homogenise the SAR. In particular, the signing of the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) in 2003 strongly encouraged trade and investment cooperation between the two sides as well as the integration of Chinese and Hong Kong industries. The CEPA's supplementary clauses on cinematic products substantially affected Hong Kong cinema, as China–Hong Kong co-produced films would not be bounded by quota limits and could enjoy distribution privileges in the mainland as domestic films do. As a consequence of such policies, the Hong Kong film industry significantly increased collaboration and developed partnerships with the Chinese film industry, retargeted the mainland as its major market, and even began to relocate to the mainland.

The integration of Hong Kong's industries, including the film industry, into China was also a result of the growth and expansion of the Chinese economy. In the last decade, China developed into the world's second-largest economy, only next to the United States. The Chinese mainland has become one of the most lucrative markets for any business. The booming economy fuelled the development of the national film industry. Large capital flows, the industrialisation of the film sector, and the further liberalisation of the film market contributed to a flourishing Chinese film industry. On the international stage, Chinese-language films attracted increasing attention from festival programmers, distributors, scholars and critics. China's economic power and the ascent of Chinese-language cinema provided Hong Kong–China co-productions with resources and opportunities that in turn stimulated the increased proliferation of co-productions.

Compared to the Chinese economy's tremendous growth, Hong Kong's economy had been struggling through the past two decades. In the handover year, 1997, the Asian financial crisis, which started from Southeast Asia and spread all across Asian countries, hit Hong Kong hard while China was significantly less impacted. Local industries, including the film industry, were severely affected. After the 1997 financial crisis, even though there have been ups and downs, Hong Kong's economic growth generally remained sluggish. Once one of the Four Asian Tigers – strong economies of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan – and better-off than the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong has been losing its economic edge and fell behind its motherland in economic terms. The situation for the local film industry was similar to that for the local economy. Financial crises and economic downturns in Hong Kong and its traditional overseas markets, such as Southeast Asia and South Korea, among other factors, pushed the Hong Kong film industry into recession, and the industry has never recovered its strength thereafter. The industry, which had been the third largest in the world (after Hollywood and Bollywood), lost its leading position in Asia and began to increasingly rely on the mainland Chinese market and Chinese investment, creating conditions for Chinese cinema's assimilation of Hong Kong cinema.

However, Hong Kong's transition from a British colony to SAR of China, as well as the incorporation of Hong Kong's industries and cultures into a Chinese context, has not been peaceful due in part to clashes at the cultural and ideological levels. The past two decades saw Hong Kong society's continuous resistance to losing political and cultural autonomy after China's takeover of the region. Defending democratic rights and local identities became prominent themes in various aspects of Hong Kong society throughout the years. Conflicts in Hong Kong–China relations manifested in, but were not confined to, numerous pro-democracy protests and movements. There was a profound fear among the local community, including the cultural and film community, that Hong Kong would 'melt' and 'disappear' into China. Regarding cinema, scholars such as Ackbar Abbas (1997) described Hong Kong cinema as a culture of disappearance: it was about, and was itself, fading away. Since the mid-1990s, there has been a recurring idea that Hong Kong cinema was 'dying'. Local critics

strove to protect Hong Kong's film culture, preserve local cinema's legacies and independence, and distinguish the cinema from Chinese cinema. Such efforts were an extension of the campaign for political autonomy. For the local cultural community, it was crucial that Hong Kong cinema would remain creative, pluralistic, self-expressive and self-reflexive.

The image of Hong Kong cinema, however, is always shaped from both inside and outside of Hong Kong. The concept of 'Hong Kong cinema' and its associations, such as commercial genre filmmaking and boundless creativity, largely derived from overseas viewers' responses to Hong Kong films since the 1980s. The reputation of Hong Kong cinema also has been a result of local filmmakers and film companies' engagement with various forces within the international film industry and community. During the postcolonial years, Hong Kong films (as China–Hong Kong co-productions for much of the time) continued to appear at international film events and circulate around the world. The films and interpretations of them offered by a global audience redefined Hong Kong cinema and created perceptions of a post-handover Hong Kong cinema. The perceptions could be in conflict with each other and might disagree with understandings of the cinema from inside of Hong Kong. In the global distribution of Hong Kong films, for example, one finds that Hong Kong cinema remained closely and primarily associated with the action genre as it had been in the pre-handover era. On the international film festival circuit, for example, Hong Kong's post-handover genre productions were raised to the status of quality and art-house films. At other times, such as in the overseas critical reception of Hong Kong films, it was about Hong Kong cinema's up-and-coming auteur directors that overseas critics and reviewers cared about most. Hong Kong cinema's image changes, as the films travel across contexts and are positioned by different players in the international film community. Likewise, the knowledge surrounding the cinema is in constant revision.

Hong Kong cinema's changing image was related to the development of the global film industry's infrastructure during the past few decades. The emergence of a growing number of transnational platforms, such as film festivals and their corresponding film markets, and the distribution industry's increasingly globalised scope facilitated the dissemination of Hong Kong films while

offering multiple opinions of Hong Kong cinema. There were also frequent dialogues and exchanges between producers and the film community, including festival curators, film journalism and academia, which led to a complex discourse on contemporary Hong Kong cinema.

The image of contemporary Hong Kong cinema is the product of an array of particular historical contexts. To understand Hong Kong cinema, therefore, requires regarding both the collaboration and the collision between Hong Kong and China. An understanding of contemporary Hong Kong cinema, therefore, requires an all-encompassing analysis of the political, social, cultural, ideological, economic and industrial dimensions of Hong Kong–China relations. It means to recognise that perceptions of Hong Kong cinema diverge in Hong Kong and overseas and are susceptible to cross-cultural change. It also means considering the varied interests and stakes of players in the local and international film communities. Equally importantly, the cinema cannot be comprehended without examination of the production, circulation and reception of films. Taking all of these factors and elements into consideration, film companies offer a platform to observe Hong Kong cinema's transition into a national context and how the cinema is perceived internationally today. Observation on just one or several film(s) would provide a glimpse into the cinema, so would observation on a filmmaker's career, box-office figures or industrial policies. However, a film company-oriented perspective better explains why a certain film in a certain genre is made at a particular moment, relations among a systematic series of film projects, and the films' positions in the cinema's history. Examining the operation of film companies, which are significant actors in the film industry, helps to discern the development of production and business strategies. A film company's activities and its interactions with other film companies and with cultural bodies and institutions on a global basis also provide a rich site for tracing transnational flows in contemporary world film culture. Film companies offer a 'middle-level' perspective – rather than the political-economy perspective or the textual analysis perspective – to comprehend film history.

Founded in 1996 on the eve of the Reunification of China and Hong Kong, and having produced more than sixty feature films, including some of the most

acclaimed and widely distributed films from Hong Kong's post-handover era, Milkyway Image is an apposite place to embark on the writing of a 'middle-level' history of post-handover Hong Kong cinema. Milkyway represents the first generation of film production houses after Hong Kong's return to China, confronting an industrial environment characterised by inevitable transregional flow between and integration of the local and Chinese film industries. It operates with 'reverse culture shock' as Chinese film culture exerts an increasing influence on Hong Kong cinema as a consequence of the implementation of film policies and investment from the mainland.

Milkyway perhaps also represents the last generation of film production houses within the mainstream sector of the Hong Kong film industry. Over the course of the writing of this thesis, Milkyway changed from a Hong Kong company to a China–Hong Kong joint venture, with the majority of its investment coming from the mainland. The development of Milkyway presents a crystal-clear – though not full – mirror of how the Hong Kong film industry is assimilated into the Chinese film industry. Milkyway's history reveals conflicts of interests and negotiations between Hong Kong film companies and the Chinese censorship authorities, alongside successful strategies for breaking into the mainland market.

Milkyway's productions are among the first generation of post-handover Hong Kong films and are thus a barometer of Hong Kong's changing screenscape. These films provide a means to understand local filmmakers' attitudes towards the Reunification and responses to the fading Hong Kong film culture. Milkyway's films, especially those co-produced with China, have an influence on the outlook of both Hong Kong and Chinese cinema. Milkyway primarily works in Hong Kong cinema's two staple genres, the crime film and the comedy. The company's genre productions represent important examples of post-handover Hong Kong cinema, and discussions of these films constitute a significant part of the discourse on the cinema. Milkyway's crime thrillers, moreover, are among the first post-handover Hong Kong films screened at international film festivals, and the company's output continues to receive attention from overseas festivals, distributors and critics. The reception of the action-oriented crime thrillers plays a vital role in the modification of the

understanding of Hong Kong cinema in general. An active participant in the global film market and film events, Milkyway greatly contributes to contemporary Hong Kong cinema's international profile. The company's activities and the presence of its work in overseas forums exemplify the ways in which Hong Kong cinema engages with contemporary world film culture.

At the same time, Milkyway's productions could be the final generation of Hong Kong's mainstream films. China–Hong Kong co-productions have become the predominant type of films from Hong Kong since the 2000s. With contemporary mainstream Hong Kong films becoming synonymous with China–Hong Kong co-productions in general, the term 'Hong Kong cinema' appears problematic. In order to cater to the mainland market, Milkyway's co-produced films, as well as films from other Hong Kong-based companies, downplay Hong Kong sensibilities and increasingly include more mainland Chinese elements. In the background of the rise of Chinese cinema, international distributors and critics tend to obscure China–Hong Kong co-productions' Hong Kong identity while emphasising the films' Chinese identity. 'Hong Kong films' are fading into extinction. Milkyway's output not only includes some rare mainstream films that are purely 'made in Hong Kong' in the past decade but also, more importantly, record the decline of the concept of 'Hong Kong film'.

Therefore, being uniquely situated among the contemporary Hong Kong film industry's operations and the industry's interactions with the Chinese and international film industries, Milkyway is not only worthy of detailed examination, but also rigorous scrutiny in order to contribute to our understanding of Hong Kong cinema's momentous transition during the post-handover period. Some of Milkyway's films were a focus in the writing of many critics and academics, and the company has received a fair amount of scholarly attention (e.g., Pang, 2005; Teo, 2007; Davis and Yeh, 2008; Bordwell, 2011). However, there is a lack of research that systematically investigates and connects the company's films to their production and reception. There has also been an insubstantial amount of literature on the company's ownership and organisational structure or the company's handling as a business entity.

As the first monographic study of Milkyway, this thesis is an attempt to fill the void and provide a reference for future studies of the company, its films and its filmmakers. Moreover, considering the paucity of literature on contemporary Hong Kong film companies in general, this thesis also presents an effort to fill this gap. Situated within multiple contexts, this research on Milkyway complements existing literature in the fields of the study of film companies, Hong Kong cinema studies and Chinese-language cinema studies. It also aims to contribute to current scholarship on film production, distribution, reception and film festivals. This thesis is organised thematically and analyses Milkyway from multiple angles. It is divided into two major parts respectively dealing first with Milkyway's activities in China (including Hong Kong) and second with the presence of its productions in overseas venues, with each chapter following a rough chronological order. The chapters are arranged as follows.

Chapter 1 conducts a literature review of existing studies on film companies ranging from Hollywood studios to those in Hong Kong film history. Since discourse on the study of film companies was largely shaped by literature on the American film industry, this chapter firstly examines the ways in which Hollywood studios were studied. It explores how industrial analysis became a preferred approach to understanding the operation of film companies and the studio system in the process of the refinement of theoretical frameworks and tools for writing histories of Hollywood cinema, and how studio documents and related materials replaced film texts as the main sources for charting studio histories. Considering differences between the vertically integrated Hollywood majors and small and independent production houses, this chapter explains why an integrative approach proposed in the field of media industry studies, that combines industrial analysis with discourse analysis and other approaches, would be more suitable for studying contemporary independent production houses. By also looking into literature on Hong Kong-based film companies, this chapter identifies topics and themes particularly important in a Hong Kong context, such as identity and globalisation, and points out the lack of scholarly attention on contemporary companies. Through the historiographical survey, the chapter defines a methodological framework for this thesis on Milkyway.

Chapter 2 analyses the state of the Hong Kong film industry during the few years preceding Milkyway's inception (and also preceding Hong Kong's return to China). Presenting incidents and changes occurring in both Hong Kong and local cinema's traditional markets and sources of investment, such as Taiwan, South Korea and Southeast Asian countries, I suggest that the Hong Kong film industry had been experiencing a decline and a transformation before the transfer of sovereignty and the arrival of the Asian financial crisis. Meanwhile, by discussing key film-related events in the Chinese mainland, I show both the difficulties for Hong Kong films to enter the mainland market at that time and potential opportunities for the Hong Kong film industry in that market. Historical data and analyses from scholars and researchers show that Hong Kong cinema's mid-1990 decline exposed the local film industry's weakness and inadaptability. Looking close into the structure of the industry and the states of local film companies, this chapter then reflects on the historical conditions for Milkyway's establishment in the mid-1990s. Pointing out the space for independent and new film production houses, I argue that the mid-1990s was a reasonable moment to launch new film businesses in Hong Kong.

Chapter 3 presents a history of Milkyway from an industry perspective. First, it traces the company's formation and key events in the process of its development. I examine how Milkyway, as a small, independent production house, collaborated with large film companies based in Hong Kong at an early stage in its operation. For example, the chapter explores how the company acted as a satellite production outfit of a large local media group, China Star, for a period of time in order to survive. I also examine how Milkyway formed a partnership with a Chinese mainland-based media group, Hairun, in recent years in an attempt to take advantage of the mainland market. Milkyway went public for four years in its history. This chapter charts how and why the company underwent an initial public offering and eventually changed from a public company back to a private business. Using industry documents and financial reports produced during the years in which Milkyway remained public, I investigate the company's ownership structure, capital structure, organisational structure and business scope. Finally, this chapter looks into the structure of Milkyway's creative team. I provide the background of the company's key

personnel, including founder and director Johnnie To, scriptwriter Wai Ka-Fai and other creative crewmembers. By discussing Milkyway crew's particular association with Shaw Brothers and Shaw Brothers' influence on Milkyway's production model and culture, I reflect on the ways in which Milkyway built a contemporary production house based on the experiences of established local studios.

Chapter 4 moves on to Milkyway's business and production practices, examining the company's film projects. I first look at Milkyway's initial activities in Hong Kong. Through an analysis of the company's early work, I discuss the strategies that Milkyway used to build its brand in the home market; in particular, the chapter analyses how it focussed on similar genres to raise brand awareness and how the films captured the psychology of the local people after the handover and the financial crisis. In Milkyway's production history, a significant strategic move was extending into the romantic comedy genre besides producing crime thrillers. This chapter traces such a move and reflects on this production differentiation strategy's contribution to the company and the Hong Kong film industry. I then turn to Milkyway's shift of focus to mainland China. I provide a background of the proliferation of China–Hong Kong co-productions and present the process of how Milkyway's productions entered the mainland. I explore strategies used to tap into that new market, for example, how Milkyway's films were 'mainlandised'. Specifically, I discuss Milkyway's engagement with the Chinese censorship, revealing that cooperation, negotiation and resistance were all involved in the process of Hong Kong cinema's incorporation into a Chinese context.

Chapter 5 undertakes a survey of the critical reception of Milkyway's work in Hong Kong. First, this chapter outlines the landscape of Hong Kong's cultural community since the mid-1990s. It shows how new cultural bodies, such as film critics' associations, came into existence and existing ones retooled themselves to create and provide platforms for local films, against a background of the decline of the local film industry and socio-political changes in Hong Kong in general. I then analyse how local critics interpret Milkyway's productions with approaches of contextualisation and reflectionism: for example, the critics' reading of Milkyway's work as mirrors of Hong Kong society in transition.

When China–Hong Kong co-productions became the main type of films from the local film industry in the 2000s, local cultural communities attempted to defend Hong Kong cinema by offering a new definition for the cinema. This chapter demonstrates how a new type of Hong Kong film and a 'new Hong Kong cinema' were defined by critics through their reviews and discussions of Milkyway's co-productions. I reveal that local critics' film criticism was deliberately politicised and was part of a resistance movement against China's cultural renationalisation and the political homogenisation of Hong Kong.

Chapter 6 moves to the presence of Milkyway's films in overseas venues. This chapter traces Milkyway's trajectory on the international film festival circuit: how the company's work initially appeared in specialised festivals, such as genre- and identity-based festivals, then received attention from an increasing number of general and mainstream festivals, including A-list festivals such as the Cannes, Berlin, Venice and Toronto festivals. I show that, first, Milkyway films' trajectory diverged from previous Chinese-language films in that the company's rise was largely attributed to the relatively new types of festivals that concentrate on films from specific genres or regions. Second, the premier festivals played a more important role than specialised festivals in the rise of Milkyway's profile, while Milkyway played by the written and unwritten rules set by the premier festivals. Comparing Milkyway's films with other Chinese-language films at Cannes, I suggest that the company has become a representative of both contemporary Hong Kong cinema and Chinese-language cinema. This chapter also provides case studies of retrospectives of Milkyway offered by Subway Cinema (the predecessor of the New York Asian Film Festival) and the Festival of the Three Continents to illustrate how perceptions of the company changed over time on the international film festival circuit.

Chapter 7 presents a case study of the distribution and marketing of Milkyway's films in the United States. Milkyway's films began to be released in the United States in the early 2000s, when US distribution rights of most Hong Kong films went to small and independent distribution companies. This chapter analyses how these distributors' marketing strategies for early Milkyway imports emphasised the films' Hong Kong identity and exploited a clichéd image of Hong Kong film that was action-packed and action-dominated. I then discuss

how Milkyway's films became vehicles for promoting the brand image of developing genre labels and how the films' Hong Kong identity started to be ambiguous. By analysing US distributors' framing and positioning of Milkyway' work in the 2010s, I show how Hong Kong cinema became placed in a subordinate position to Hollywood cinema and conceived as a derivative form of cinema. This chapter also explores how the emergence and growth of a new sector in the US distribution industry that thrived on selling Chinese-language blockbusters emphasised Milkyway films' Chinese identity instead of Hong Kong identity. I argue that differing and changing perceptions of Milkyway and Hong Kong cinema were results of the changing landscape of the distribution industry and the cross-cultural circulation of the films.

Chapter 8 focuses on the development of Milkyway's reputation in the overseas critical reception of its films. By examining critical responses to Milkyway films in general newspapers, trade publications, popular periodicals, scholarly journals and relevant books, I trace how Milkyway developed from an invisible factory to a term denoting a period of Johnnie To's career, and, finally, to a brand and style itself. In the process, I show that, on the one hand, critics gradually identified the Milkyway brand and helped construct an impression of the company's house style. On the other hand, they were disinclined to acknowledge Milkyway as the author responsible for the films and tended to read Milkyway's films within a conventional auteurist framework: for example, critics played a pivotal role in the construction of To's auteurism. This chapter also attends to Milkyway's brand-building efforts against the predominant auteur-centred film culture. I explore how Milkyway revealed itself openly by claiming collective authorship in film credits and paratexts and engaging with cultural forces such as media and academia, and how it raised brand values by fostering junior filmmakers within the company and assimilating local talent and resources from outside. I demonstrate that production companies had an active role to play in shaping their reputation in films' critical receptions and in carving out their own destiny.

This study of Milkyway does not aim to incorporate a variety of aspects, such as the aesthetic, industrial, economic, cultural and political, into a coherent theoretical model. Nor does it provide a definite understanding of Milkyway and

contemporary Hong Kong cinema. The image of the company might diverge from chapter to chapter, and perceptions of the cinema in one chapter could be in conflict with those in another chapter. I argue that post-handover Hong Kong cinema's transition into a Chinese context resists a monolithic chronicle but is a multiple narrative from perspectives of different interest groups and a complex process of compliance and resistance, negotiation and contestation. The meaning of Milkyway's films shifts as they are circulated across cultures and read within diverse frameworks, and the knowledge surrounding Hong Kong cinema are subject to varying contexts and historical configuration. However, whilst a variety of industry and cultural bodies are co-creators of meaning for Milkyway, the company also is a co-creator of the discourse that is around and serves itself.

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Chapter 1

The Film Production Company

Milkyway Image is a contemporary film production company formed in Hong Kong in 1996. Having been in operation for two decades, this production house with a growing reputation has not yet received much scholarly attention despite an increasing amount of work focussing on its founder and principal director Johnnie To (e.g., Teo, 2007; Wu, 2010; Jost, 2011). One of the most active and successful film companies in the contemporary Hong Kong film industry, and one born on the eve of Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty and having come of age in the context of the region's integration into China, Milkyway's history deserves in-depth examination. Milkyway's status as a film production company situates this research within a field shaped by the study of Hollywood film studios; the study of film companies in a Hong Kong context must, however, address the peculiarities of the local industry. Drawing from the literature on both Hollywood and Hong Kong film companies, this chapter presents a survey of how film companies have been studied. I define a research framework for writing a history of Milkyway: industrial analysis and discourse analysis constitute major approaches, with the themes of identity and globalisation running through all chapters. In terms of methods, documents are the main source and films are primarily regarded as projects instead of texts.

Firstly, I look into the establishment of industrial analysis as a preferable approach to the study of major Hollywood studios. Considering the diversity and development of the form of the film company and the changing industry environment, I then discuss how a production company differs from a studio and move on to how approaches proposed in the emergent field of media industry studies supplement industry analysis and why a synthetic approach is especially useful for investigating independent production companies. Finally, by reviewing the literature on Hong Kong film companies, I shed light on prominent topics in the study of contemporary world cinema, such as transnationalisation and globalisation, and on issues germane to Hong Kong cinema, such as identity and subjectivity. In the process, I address the necessity

and significance of extending research to contemporary Hong Kong production houses.

Hollywood studios and industry analysis

The establishment of the studio system and the dominance of a small number of majors during Hollywood's golden age have resulted in the word 'studio' – which has an encyclopaedic definition of 'all buildings on a film company's site' (Spottiswoode, 1969: p. 785) – becoming almost synonymous with 'film company' in the decades-long study of film companies based both in and outside Hollywood. Whilst for some researchers (e.g., Mordden, 1989; Fernett, 1989) the concept of a studio is close to that of a film production company, which has both a physical space and production function, most use 'studio' casually to refer to both film production companies and vertically integrated studios involved in distribution, and in some cases, exhibition but not necessarily in production. Whilst there is existing research on small production companies (e.g., Hurst, 1979), vertically integrated studios, namely, the eight majors dating from Hollywood's golden age – Paramount, Fox, MGM, Warner Bros., RKO, Universal, Columbia and United Artists – constitute the major focus of scholarly studies of the film company. It is also in the literature on these Hollywood majors that specific theoretical models and tools for understanding the film company in general emerged and developed.

The critical study of the film company in a Hollywood context was a product of two rising trends in film studies in the 1970s: first, a turn away from the text- and auteur-centred approach that prevailed in the 1960s and 1970s and second, a shift towards an economic, industrial approach. One type of literature that helped shape studio scholarship entered in conscious dialogue with an auteurist approach, advocated especially by Andrew Sarris (1986/1996), in order to offer an alternative reading of American film history. These works, meanwhile, bore the influence of industry-oriented research (e.g., Balio, 1976), where some initial portraits of Hollywood studios appeared. In addition, Edward Buscombe's (1975: p. 71) provocative call for 'the dimension of the institutional structures which may intervene between the economic base and the final product' in rethinking

film history was among the first to give critical weight to the study of the film company. From directorial studies to industrial analysis, while witnessing the evolution of film studies and the influences that film studies has received from other disciplines, the study of the film company has established theoretical frameworks for its own field.

To pave the way for studio-oriented research, the notion of individual authorship was gradually dismissed. In an early example, Nick Roddick (1983) precedes his study of Warners with a discussion of the auteur theory's restricted, problematic treatment of film history and criticism, which for him disregards the wider production context and places the film studio in an unfairly minor position. Taking issue with the intense focus on the individual artist, he emphasises the integrated nature of the film industry and the industrial nature of film production, claiming that 'any critical approach to film […] which fails to take into account the huge areas of activity which precede and shape the final film cannot hope ever fully to understand that film' (p. 14). He maintains that an effective form of film criticism entails identifying and elucidating the complex nature of cinema – 'cinema as industry, cinema as art, cinema as entertainment' (p. 15), which nowhere reveals itself more fully than in examination of the studio, its production, and its interactive activities with audiences and society. With respect to aesthetics, to discard the association of a film with a director's personal expression, Roddick lays the ground for an individual studio's house style by arguing that '[s]tudio practice required an economy of production method which in turn created an economy of narrative method' (p. 28).

Sharing Roddick's stance, Thomas Schatz (1988/2010) identifies directorial authorship as a principal target in his seminal study of the Hollywood studio system. Schatz underlines the production chief's role in rescinding the director's authority in the auteur theory, claiming that studio production requires shifting the responsibility to orchestrate the entire creative process to the production executive and consequently minimises directorial authorship. For him, instead of individual filmmakers, the production department led by the production chief is where 'various social, industrial, technological, economic, and aesthetic forces' that really determine films conflate (p. 8), and he promotes the idea of a

studio's house style – of which production executives are 'chief architects' (pp. 6–7) – as an antithesis to an auteurist reading of films.

Abandoning the auteur theory as Schatz does, Douglas Gomery (2005), however, debates with Schatz about the most important figure in post-1930s studios – the production chief in Schatz's opinion or the corporation executive. Opposing Schatz's production-centred point of view, Gomery turns from the middle level of studio power to the top, unfolding his version of the history of the Hollywood studio system around corporation executives' business decisions and activities. Underpinning this idea is his perception of film studios as 'profit-seeking corporations, not film-making entities' (p. 2). Defining the studio as an economic institution, Gomery's theory manifests a fundamental transition from viewing the studio as a source for aesthetic study to handling it as a capitalist corporation within a framework of industrial analysis.

A concept developed to further reduce the focus on individuals – directors, production chiefs or corporate bosses – is found in Jerome Christensen's (2012) work, in which he proposes 'studio authorship' in attempting to update the landscape of the discourse of authorship and to formulate a new approach to understanding film as both art and business. He contends that it is the corporate studio which 'qualifies for the status of the intending author' (p. 8) because it authorises its agents to manufacture films, in which involves 'analyzing the concept of the corporation and in marketing that concept to an audience that the studio aspires to incorporate in order that it may achieve its social, economic, and political objectives' (p. 13). In this sense, according to him, studio films are instances of studio authorship, for each 'has the capacity to represent the general conditions of corporate personhood and expression even as it allegorically represents and pragmatically advances the particular interests of the specific studio' (p. 3). Therefore, to understand film art means to interpret the studio's strategic intent. Based on the studio authorship theory, Christensen defines (Hollywood) films as 'corporate art', since 'the corporate organization provides the social conditions for art is more important than evidence of any motion picture's fulfillment of the traditional aesthetic criteria' (p. 2).

It is clear that, with the progress made in this field, capitalist corporations' generality has been privileged over filmmaking entities' particularity. Accordingly, industrial analysis, which, as Gomery (2005: p. 138) explains, 'tries to analyze only a set of institutions, business enterprises (usually corporations), that desire to maximize profits' and 'seeks to understand economic variables, leaving questions of sociology and ideology to others', has become the preferred theoretical approach to studying the film company. In concrete terms, industrial analysis investigates the film company in terms of ownership structure, management pattern and organisational policy, and it pays considerable attention to the company's strategies and tactics in the entire process of production, distribution and exhibition. With the introduction of this approach, the focus of studio scholarship has irrevocably shifted away from making films towards doing business, with business strategy becoming the absolute key-word. The rise and predominance of industrial analysis and the onset of the writing of the economic history of film were not only an outcome of film historians' growing interest in the studio's economic aspects, but also had to do with economists' interest in the film studio as an example of a capitalist profit-seeking organisation. Economists such as Danny Miller and Jamal Shamsie (1996), John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny (1998; 2001; 2004) regard film studios as firms like any others under capitalist economy and use economic tools of analysis and statistical models to parse studios' business performances and financial practices. Although these scholars use studios to test and advance economic theories, they produce valuable insights into the film company and furnish film scholars with analytical tools, thus helping establish industrial, economic analysis as a major approach to dealing with the film company.

The increasing prevalence of industrial analysis compelled research methods to change accordingly. Two traditions apparent in early film studies literature gradually lost currency. The first is the anecdotal tradition found in the works of Bosley Crowther (1957), John Gregory Dunne (1969), Charles Higham (1975) and Roy Pickard (1978), among others. Writings in this tradition, as illustrated by Pickard's (1978, p. i) statement in his *The Hollywood Studios* – the first one-volume study on the subject, do 'not aim at being a critical history of the

American cinema nor a critical appraisal of its films' but concern themselves 'as much with razzamatazz, statistics, scandal and trivia' as they are 'with fine movies and creative directors'. Anecdotal studio histories from the 1950s–1970s, which are often reminiscences-based, cinephilic and uncritical, almost disappear after the 1970s. The other tradition that has declined is film-centred discussion. Both the film text and its artistic creation now receive correspondingly less attention. Industry documents and economic statistics have replaced oral records, memoirs and film texts to become the most important sources relied on by researchers working in this field. A pioneering effort in such a methodological shift was Tino Balio's (1976/2009) investigation of United Artists, for which he managed to acquire a massive amount of studio records along with various other materials, and which resulted in a solid, critical history of the company. Balio's work thus distinguished itself from previous studio histories, with a number of studies (e.g., Hurst, 1979; Behlmer, 1985; Dick, 1992; 1997) following his research method. In sum, as scholars who pioneered the industry-oriented study of film history propose, because 'Hollywood left its legacy not only on celluloid but also on paper' (Schatz, 2010: p. 9), the study of the film company may 'start not from the film texts and the star personalities, but from financial reports and reports of corporate strategies' (Gomery, 2005: p. 5).

Media industry studies and the independent production company

Although the literature on Hollywood majors has offered essential approaches and methods for studying the film company in general, these theoretical tools were originally designed for analysing the vertically integrated studio corporations and media conglomerates into which some of the former later transformed. As a consequence, industrial analysis in film studies, argues Janet Wasko (1994: p. 16), 'uncritically accepts a corporate model as the dominant form of filmmaking activity'. Typically, Gomery's strict industrial analysis of the studio system paints a broad picture of the industry, one that is nevertheless incomplete due to its inattention to production companies which differ from studios in various aspects. Production companies not only have a largely different institutional structure than studios do, but they are also usually smaller

in size, scale, capital and resources. They bear similarities to studios, but are in many ways in a category of their own and thus demand specific research approaches. Alisa Perren's (2013) monograph on Miramax in this respect has filled some gaps left by previous literature by applying sophisticated approaches derived from the emerging media industry studies to the film production company.

Believing that case studies do better than high theory in understanding 'the ways in which members of the media industries define the conventions of production and distribution based on their assumptions of prevailing cultural values and issues of the time' as Timothy Haven, Amanda D. Lotz and Serra Tinic (2009: pp. 249–250) put it, media industry studies emphasises individual organisations and agents. By paying specific attention to production, media industry studies makes itself a particularly useful framework for the study of the film production company. Most importantly, it attempts to recover 'a missing link between political economy's concentration on larger economic structural forces and much of cultural studies' analyses of end products such as media texts and audience interpretations' (p. 247).

Therefore, media industry studies proposes an integrative approach to studying media production to eliminate the conventional separation between culture and industry. Douglas Kellner (2009: p. 288) states that 'both political economy and more sociologically and culturally oriented approaches to the study of media culture should be combined, as should text- and theory-based humanities approaches with critical social science approaches.' That is, as Jennifer Holt and Perren (2009: pp. 47–49) elaborate, uniting 'political economy's interests in ownership, regulation, and production with cultural studies' interest in texts, discourse, audiences, and consumption' and 'bring[ing] together discussions of cultural production, artifacts, reception, and sociohistorical context'. This integrative approach acknowledges the validity of industrial analysis, which draws from political economy, yet complements industrial analysis' weaknesses, especially its application to independent production companies.

It is within such a framework of media industry studies that Perren situates her research on Miramax. To study a film company that operates under a different

system than that of the major studios, Perren (2013: p. 5) further specifies her approach as 'integrating industrial, discourse, and aesthetic analysis', 'blending an analysis of one company's business strategies and marketing practices with journalistic and critical discourses about that company and its films' while 'remain[ing] attentive to the most notable formal-aesthetic attributes of the films released by [the company] and by its main competitors'. In terms of methods, she provides an instructive example of research sources, namely, 'a wide range of documents, including feature articles and reviews in trade publications, newspapers, and magazines; marketing materials such as press releases, press kits, print advertisements, and trailers; and a broad sample of […] films' (p. 12). The inclusion of discourse analysis and relevant sources, in particular, points the study of the film company in a potentially productive direction. Discourse about the company and its output, which interacts with and reflects the company's strategies and practices, is especially worthy of attention with respect to the production company, which is under constant pressure to promote and sell its products due to its insecure distribution and exhibition networks. As proved by Perren's Miramax history, for example, it is fruitful and necessary to look at the independent production company's engagement with institutions such as film festivals, awards and general and trade publications, in order to discern discourses about the company shaped on these platforms.

In the integrative media industry studies approach, in addition, a revived interest in films per se is particularly notable. Christensen (2012: p. 14), though not positioning himself within the field of media industry studies, likewise claims in his recent study of Hollywood studios that 'no adequate understanding of the artistic achievement, social role, and economic objectives of Hollywood motion pictures can be attained without interpretation of individual films'. Although textual analysis and aesthetic analysis are considered complementary for studying the film company, seeing films as projects instead of texts has shown potential as a perspective to gain insight into organisational realities and ambitions. A film company's oeuvre fails to reflect the complexity of the entire production and business process – including but not limited to planning, budgeting, shooting and marketing. However, a film project involves and thus provides a means to understand all these stages. Due to limited resources and

project-based operation in contrast to assembly-line production, independent production houses rely more strongly on the completion and performance of each film project, which makes the handling of individual films as targeted projects particularly suitable in these companies' cases.

Hong Kong film companies: past and present

The study of Hong Kong film companies has a shorter history and smaller body of work than the study of Hollywood studios. In fact, Hong Kong film companies remained an afterthought for a long time. Serious study of Shaw Brothers began late, and much less research on it exists compared with Hollywood majors, even though the studio was arguably the most influential film company in the history of Chinese-language cinema and the one that has garnered most of the scholarly focus. Most studios and production houses in Hong Kong film history have been paid even less attention. Sporadic histories and discussions appeared from at least the 1970s but were mostly of a descriptive nature.[1] The picture started to change in the 2000s, when a systematic study of local film companies commenced.

Three institutions that played a major role are the Hong Kong Film Archive (HKFA), often in collaboration with the Hong Kong International Film Festival (HKIFF), and the Conference on Shaw Brothers. HKFA and HKIFF's endeavours began with publications on major studios such as Cathay Organisation, Shaw Brothers and Kong Ngee (HKFA, 2003; 2006; 2009). Their attention was then extended to smaller and independent production companies, with publications on Film Workshop, Sil-Metropole Organisation, Union Film Enterprise, Sun Luen Film Company and Golden Harvest (HKIFFS, 2009; HKFA, 2011a; 2011b; 2013). All the festival exhibition publications are comprised of commissioned articles, and these anthologies display local film institutions' awakened interest in film companies and pave the way for further research by providing a good deal of information about local industry history. Regarding the Conference on Shaw Brothers, with four editions having been organised on a worldwide basis up to the present,[2] the collection of conference papers turned into a series of books that demonstrate a wider horizon and are

more critical in nature compared with earlier Shaw Brothers literature.[3] These conference outputs, together with the HKFA publications on the studio, launched serious scholarship of Shaw Brothers, while making a great contribution to the transformation of the study of the film company in a Hong Kong context from anecdotal to critical.

Researchers have considered why so few studies were written about a local heavyweight like Shaw Brothers and why there was a surge of publications in the new millennium. Besides the issue of material availability,[4] Wong Ain-ling (2003: p. i) from the HKFA thinks that, to cite her own words, 'a distance of time needs to exist between the subject and the researchers in order to maintain an objective observation and unbiased criticism'. Wong's statement implies, understandably, the HKFA's intent to recover rather than record studio histories. It also helps to explain the general state of the study of local film companies, especially contemporary companies. Compared with a sizable and growing body of literature on contemporary films and filmmakers, there is insufficient research on contemporary film companies in the field of Hong Kong cinema studies. Most studio-oriented publications from the HKFA and HKIFF are studies of past companies,[5] and in these publications one finds authors inviting and urging researchers to conduct archaeological research on past companies. Not only do the authors raise the issue of the lack of visual sources, studio records and other reliable materials (Chung, 2009), but also they suggest efforts to undertake the increasingly difficult task of tracing past film companies geographically in Hong Kong for research purposes (Sek, 2013). Exposing a dearth of focus on local film companies currently operating in a contemporary context, though, the existing literature has in effect warranted the necessity of extending scholarly focus to the current generation of companies and has offered insights on how to fill this void.

Two issues are most prominent in extending the study of local film companies from past to contemporary ones. First is the relationship between the production company and its principal filmmaker(s), which, from a media industry studies perspective, concerns the relationship between 'strategies', 'the larger economic goals and logics of large-scale cultural industries', and 'tactics', 'the ways in which cultural workers seek to negotiate, and at times perhaps subvert, the

constraints imposed by institutional interests to their own purposes', in Havens, Lotz and Tinic's (2009: p. 247) words. In a study of Shaw Brothers, Lily Kong (2008: p. 32) makes a similar point: that to understand the film company, one 'should acknowledge the mutually constitutive relationship between the abstract firm and individual agency', 'appreciating both the firm as an economic entity to be understood in terms of abstract linkages and processes and the firm as a sociocultural site to be understood in terms of relationships and tensions, constituted of a complex of individual networks and decisions'. Studies on local film companies have illustrated how the focus of scholarly research has changed over the course of time. In the industry's studio era, the major concern is how the studio's corporate capacity facilitates the realisation of the filmmaker's aesthetic aspirations and how the filmmaker's struggle for artistic autonomy and power affects the studio's production and business operations. In the phase of the industry's transition from studio production to independent production, as Stephen Teo (2013: pp. 81–82) suggests, this relationship concerns changes in notions of authorship under a 'quasi-independent production scheme' wherein individual directors' or producers' production units co-produce with large companies. In the 1980s and 1990s, of a large spate of newly emerged small-sized independent production houses, including Milkyway, an increasing number were founded by directors and producers. Therefore, it is imperative to reconsider this relationship in the industry's post-studio era, in which the key question has changed to how the congruence of company executive and principal director/producer shapes the development of the production company, both aesthetically and economically.

Secondly, researchers have pointed out, in terms of production models, both the continuity between generations of local film companies and the diversity within a single company. On the one hand, this calls attention to the ways in which contemporary companies inherit the legacies of previous ones, as the authors in the anthology on Golden Harvest show how 'the story of Golden Harvest is […] an extension of the stories of Cathay and Shaws' (Po, 2013: p. 5). On the other hand, this leads to considering the transition of industry models. Kong (2008: p. 34) finds in the case of Shaw Brothers that, 'Although pre- and post-war Shaw enterprise exhibited all the classic characteristics of Fordism, there were also

evidences of elements deemed post-Fordist accumulation even in the early twentieth century. Further, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, evidence of post-Fordist accumulation is also less clear-cut'. Such an observation alerts researchers to a simplistic understanding of the film company especially concerning the contemporary industry landscape in Hong Kong. For example, Milkyway, being independent for most of the time, had acted like a satellite company of a large media group, even though that was long after the local industry's heyday of using a satellite operation model in which a large company contracted out production to its satellite production outfits. Although characteristics pertaining to a post-studio age can easily be discerned in the Hong Kong film industry today, the complexity of industry circumstances and the diversity and highly experimental nature of independent companies' production and business models necessitate careful inspection.

Apart from the need to study current, contemporary companies before the formation of 'a distance of time' demonstrated by the preceding discussion, it is important to recognise the peculiarity of the Hong Kong film industry, as well as a broader socio-cultural environment. Hong Kong film companies share similarities with film companies in Hollywood and everywhere else, with some largely modelled after Hollywood studios. However, the Hong Kong film industry has operated in a territory with an extremely uncertain identity over the years, a vital difference to its Hollywood counterpart, which operates in a country with a stable national identity. Equally importantly, the Hong Kong industry has never had a domestic market large enough to support production and distribution costs. This industry is characterised by a heavy dependence on overseas – including, and now especially the mainland Chinese – markets. These peculiar circumstances result in features and concerns unique to local film companies' practices.

Hong Kong's relations with China have exerted obvious influence – economically and culturally – on the local film industry throughout its history. In a contemporary context, China's weight is most clearly manifested in such aspects as policy, market and capital. For example, inasmuch as new policies from mainland authorities such as the CEPA (Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement) increasingly open up the Chinese market

to Hong Kong films after the handover, Hong Kong film companies have been self-adjusting and self-repositioning in terms of business and production orientation. The restructuring of China–Hong Kong relations leads inevitably to the issue of identity. Researchers have addressed the tension between local and Chinese identities through discussions about the co-existence of Mandarin- and Cantonese-language film industries in Hong Kong from the 1930s to 1970s. For example, Sek (2003) specifies a historical moment of Hong Kong cinema's 'character change' to demonstrate that a 'Hong Kong identity' in cinematic terms was not inherent but established concurrently with an industrial transformation. He notes that the 1970s' 'going out of the studio to shooting on real locations', in contrast to the then-dominant in-studio shooting, resulted in new generation film companies presenting 'Hong Kong sentiments' in their productions to erase the 'China dream' – simulation of Chinese scenery and representation of Chinese folklore – projected by established companies such as Shaw Brothers (p. 43). Through such reoriented production, there appeared what audiences around the globe now perceive as 'Hong Kong style' – metropolitan backdrops, heavy action, fast pace, favouring of audio-visual virtuosity over narrative and dialogue, masculine rather than feminine emphases, and entertainment rather than highbrow qualities. If the 1970s saw the construction of a local cinematic identity or the Hong Kong-isation of local cinema, film companies such as Milkyway operating in the current age are at another historical crossroads, confronting the possible disappearance of local identity in both cinematic and cultural terms. Such a situation requires the study of Hong Kong cinema to attend to contemporary local film companies' interpretation of the identity dilemma, their choice of preserving or abandoning that identity, and their struggle.

For Hong Kong-based film production companies, a limited domestic market always requires them to be as global as possible. Film firms over several generations have shared a common ambition of tapping into the North American and European markets for both commercial and cultural purposes. Existing research conducted since the 1990s has provided insights into local companies' continuous market expansion efforts. Investigating Shaw Brothers' endeavours to expand to urban distribution and exhibition networks in the United States and

to break on to the international film festival circuit, Ramona Curry (2008: p. 193) maintains that the studio's patient market exploration and decade-long investment, successful or not, 'garnered important business experiences and cross-cultural insights that laid the groundwork for future export strategies' for local film companies. Scholars such as Albert Lee (2013), Michael Curtin (2007) and Steve Fore (1994) examine Golden Harvest's trailblazing overseas distribution and production strategies; and David Martinez (2009) relates Film Workshop's reach to international audiences. These significant efforts to delve into the perplexities of Hong Kong cinema's trajectory of globalisation and local film companies' initiatives and strategies point out directions for future research in this field. Moreover, given an increasingly globalised cinematic landscape, questions of how the contemporary film production company produces for a global audience, circulates its films through festival and theatrical and home video circuits, builds its public image, and helps generate and shape discourses about itself, deserve to be an integral part of the study of the contemporary film company.

Conclusion

The foregoing historiographical review has presented, first, the development and appropriateness of industrial analysis as a major research approach to understanding the film company. Secondly, as media industry studies scholars suggest, an integrative approach, combining industrial analysis with discourse analysis, needs to be developed to circumvent the limitation of a political economy-based approach in dealing with non-corporate film operations such as independent production houses. While documents replace film texts as the main source for conducting studio studies under the principles of industrial analysis, films should not be dismissed as they are in purely industrial analysis-oriented research, but should be considered business projects, especially in cases of independent production houses that at times run project-based production systems. Thirdly, in a Hong Kong context, it is imperative to extend scholarly focus to contemporary film companies. Industrial transition, identity crisis and

increasing transnationalisation and globalisation all argue for close investigation in case studies of local film companies operating under new circumstances.

Notes

[1] For example, the Hong Kong International Film Festival included two essays on MP & GI in its publications during its first editions respectively in 1978 and 1979. The year 1979 also saw the coming out of the first monograph on Shaws. In the 1990s, Cathay Organisation (successor of MP & GI) commissioned a book about the history of its film business; in 1997, Hong Kong Film Archive organised an exhibition titled '50 Years of the Hong Kong Film Production and Distribution Industries: An Exhibition', with a catalogue published under the same title.

[2] The first conference was held at the National University of Singapore in 2001. The second edition under the name 'The Shaw Brothers on the International Movie Stage: Interdisciplinary Studies and Cross-Regional Comparison' was hosted by the Hong Kong Baptist University in 2002. The third edition under the name 'Constructing Pan-Chinese Cultures: Globalism and Shaw Brothers Cinema' was hosted by the University of Illinois in 2003. The fourth and latest edition under the name 'The Century of Chinese Cinema: Influence of the Shaw Brothers' was hosted by the Hong Kong Baptist University again in 2006.

[3] The collection of papers from the first two editions turned into *Shaw Brothers Media Empire: Imaging Cultural China*, published in 2003. The third conference generated *China Forever: The Shaw Brothers and Diasporic Cinema* in 2008. *China in Hong Kong: Shaw Brothers Cinema*, comprised of a selection from previous publications along with new articles, was released in 2011.

[4] There is a consensus that it was the re-release of the Shaw Brothers library in digitalised version starting in the early 2000s that ended the shortage of visual sources and thus encouraged research. See, for example, Wong, 2003; Liu, 2006.

[5] The only exception is the HKIFF's tribute to Film Workshop, which is still in operation.

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Chapter 2

Hong Kong Film Industry in Transition

The transfer of sovereignty from the United Kingdom to China in 1997 divided Hong Kong's history into two periods. The terms 'post-handover', 'postcolonial' or 'post-1997' have been broadly used to indicate a distinct era in a variety of social and cultural aspects, including cinema, of the region. The same year, the financial crisis sweeping across East Asia added further turbulence to Hong Kong's society and its industries. The political handover and the Asian financial crisis become signs of local society and cinema's entering an entirely new phase. The expression 'post-handover Hong Kong cinema', however, carries more than simply socio-political and cultural connotations. What is now recognisable as post-handover Hong Kong cinema is in part a result of what happened in and around the industry in the few years preceding 1997. The mid-1990s saw the industry undergoing a series of changes that eventually led to its restructuring, especially with respect to the film production sector. Adopting an industry perspective to Hong Kong cinema in the mid-1990s and drawing on previous industry-oriented literature, this chapter zooms in on a short space of a few years to reflect on the transition of the Hong Kong film industry and the historical conditions that led to the emergence of new local film operations during the transition period.

In industrial terms, Hong Kong cinema was in a decline during the time span covered by this chapter. This state of decline will be discussed with reference to key events taking place both inside and outside of Hong Kong that impacted the development of this film industry, and through statistics that show a difference in the industry compared to its previous phases. Investment, markets and distribution windows will be main focuses through which the scenario is delineated. In addition, the mid-1990s slump will be analysed against the entire history of the local film industry to show that industrial transformation brought about both hardships and opportunities. The second half of this chapter pays specific attention to the aspect of production, looking at the operation and reconfiguration of local film companies, especially production companies, in the

context of challenge and change. It attempts to reveal the direction in which the industry was heading and make clearer the industry background against which Milkyway came into being.

Industry in crisis

The Hong Kong film industry relies heavily on foreign markets. The series of events that started from approximately 1993, the year of troubles for the industry, testify persuasively to the importance of foreign markets, especially the Asian markets, in Hong Kong's case. The industry ended the 1980s on a strong note with Taiwanese investors and distributors but began, in 1993, to lose the Taiwan market, the distribution rights fees from which covered about one-third of general production costs at the time (Chung, 2007: p. 361). In 1993, Taiwan's eight largest distributors formed an 'Overseas Exchange Group' under the Taipei Film Trade Association to bargain with Hong Kong producers on acquisition fees by urging the latter to slash production budgets and star salaries (Chung, 2007: pp. 361–2), which signalled Taiwan's diversion of investment away from film production in Hong Kong. Because Taiwanese investment covered so much of the production costs of Hong Kong films during the late 1980s and early 1990s, in practical terms this meant that the advance capital of production started to drop. The following month, representatives from the Hong Kong film industry went to Taiwan to negotiate. Among other agreements, the negotiation ended with Taiwanese distributors stopping importing Hong Kong films for six months and, in the future, Taiwanese distributors charging commission on the Taiwan box-office ticket sales of Hong Kong films (Chung, 2007: p. 362). In 1994, the Group further specified that Taiwan-based distributors could only import Hong Kong films priced under HK$1.5 million on their own; the Group would decide whether to import those priced above HK$1.5 million (Liang, 2001). Meanwhile, in 1993, Taiwanese authorities had loosened quota restrictions on Western and Japanese films to fill the demand gap (Chung, 2007: p. 362), which in effect announced Hong Kong cinema's loss of the Taiwan market. Even worse, as Zhao Wei Fang (2007: p. 349) suggests, the encroachment of Hollywood films from 1994 as a result of the new quota system

profoundly changed public taste in Taiwan, leaving an ever-shrinking space for Hong Kong films in the following years.

Situations in Southeast Asian markets and the South Korean market deteriorated around the same time. The political and financial turbulence in Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand in the mid-1990s caused Hong Kong films to fade away from these territories. In 1993, the Hong Kong film industry failed to deliver its productions to South Korea in due time and thus had to sell the films at two-thirds of their original price to cover the loss to local distributors, which became a turning point after which South Korea gradually reduced imports from Hong Kong (Zhao X. Q., 2007). For the Hong Kong film industry, this was aggravated by South Korea's increasing fostering of its own film industry – for example, in 1993, it reinforced its 'screen quota system' which guaranteed adequate annual screening time for domestic films. From the mid-1990s onwards, the Hong Kong film industry was no longer able to pre-sell its productions to Taiwan, South Korea or Southeast Asian countries, resulting in the industry's tough financial situation.

Changes taking place in mainland China at that time seemed more complex. In 1993, marked by a document ('Document No. 3') issued by its former Ministry of Radio, Film and Television, China embarked on the structural reform of its film industry. In the next year, a follow-up document allowed the import of foreign films on a revenue-sharing basis, which signified the opening of the Chinese film market. These decisions meant, from the Hong Kong film industry's perspective, both a potential, huge market culturally close to Hong Kong and a latent threat from foreign, especially Hollywood, films that would compete with Hong Kong films for the Chinese market. While China's market liberalisation brought about uncertainty, Chinese authorities' 1994 instructions on co-production certainly caused worry by imposing strict control and restrictions. Stipulating that film printing and post-production of co-productions must be carried out in China, the instructions in effect created obstacles for the production industry in Hong Kong to take advantage of the mainland market.

Another event worth noting is a Hong Kong film industry delegation's visit to Beijing in 1993 to negotiate Hong Kong cinema's interests after the handover.

The Hong Kong side brought forward four concerns – development and status of Hong Kong cinema; authentication of rights of Hong Kong films; collaboration between Hong Kong and the mainland in market exploration; and Hong Kong film practitioners' creative freedom. Responsible government departments in the mainland promised the Hong Kong side creative freedom and assured the delegates that Hong Kong films could participate in international film festivals, including the Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival in Taiwan, under the 'Hong Kong, China' category (Chung, 2007: p. 363). In short, as a representative of the Chinese side remarked, Hong Kong was guaranteed to retain the state of its cinema after the handover (Wei, 2013: p. 531). On the one hand, Hong Kong cinema's independence was assured; one the other, as Stephanie Chung Po Yin (2007: p. 363) suggests, this visit, which took place after the release of Document No. 3 and before the 1994 Instructions, was a telling sign of the trend towards integration of cinemas in the Greater China region in the 1990s. Taking all these events into consideration, it appears that, during the mid-1990s, the Hong Kong film industry faced difficulties entering the mainland to make up for its lost markets, but at the same time saw drastic, promising changes taking place there.

Worsening domestic circumstances exacerbated the industry's predicament as it was losing overseas markets and having trouble in finding alternative ones. Firstly, local investment in the film industry decreased. As Zhao W. F. (2007: p. 348) points out, capital transfer due to the wave of emigration in the years leading to 1997 struck the entire economy in Hong Kong, including the film industry. Because of the real estate boom in the mid-1990s, some local exhibitors who were also financiers, such as Golden Princess and D&B, remodelled theatres for other uses and moved to invest in the real estate industry instead of the film industry (Zhao W. F., 2007: pp. 347–8). Secondly, local audiences began to lose enthusiasm for domestic films. In 1993, *Jurassic Park* (1993, Steven Spielberg) was the first foreign film to lead the Hong Kong annual box office in history. Hollywood features have thereafter changed audience preferences in Hong Kong the same way they won audiences over in Taiwan and China. Local exhibitors started to schedule more foreign films and fewer domestic films, and, as financiers, they reduced investment in local film

production. Thirdly, since the British Hong Kong government approved cable television and satellite television in 1991, television, especially premium television, profoundly affected the film industry, in that an increasing number of theatres shut down. Fourthly, during the mid-1990s, with new platforms such as VCD and DVD partly replacing the old distribution system, piracy exerted a devastating impact on the industry. It was claimed that, during 1993–1995, piracy lost the industry HK$450 million in box-office revenue (Chung, 2007: p. 386).

The situation for Hong Kong films in its domestic market during this period is clearly illustrated by the following statistics.

Table 1. Local audiences of Hong Kong films annual growth rates, 1972–1996[1]

Year	Annual growth rate (%)
1972	36.32
1973	-16.37
1974	-11.23
1975	-16.79
1976	27.10
1977	0.09
1978	25.39
1979	-3.69
1980	17.67
1981	2.13
1982	42.26
1983	-8.21
1984	15.29
1985	1.28
1986	-7.84
1987	20.05
1988	15.91
1989	-20.94

1990	0.16	
1991	-1.88	
1992	7.37	
1993	-14.09	-19.37
1994	-27.34	-24.39
1995	-25.61	-26.62
1996	-20.70	-18.93
	Note: Calculated based on box office receipts and average ticket prices	Note: Calculated based on estimated audience numbers from the Hong Kong Motion Picture Industry Association

Table 2. Hong Kong films local box office receipts growth rates, 1971–1996[2]

Year	Annual growth rate (%)	Five-year growth rate (%)
1971	44.14	
1972	54.02	
1973	8.30	
1974	-4.21	
1975	-13.65	33
1976	31.45	81
1977	10.45	30
1978	33.39	60
1979	17.55	97
1980	38.92	216
1981	31.26	216
1982	67.25	378
1983	1.76	264
1984	36.38	323
1985	8.55	230
1986	5.19	165
1987	21.38	92
1988	31.84	149

1989	-14.27	57
1990	6.57	54
1991	10.29	62
1992	19.42	60
1993	-7.58	12
1994	-15.26	11
1995	-19.34	-16
1996	-12.60	-34

Table 3. Hong Kong films screened in local theatres, 1971–1996[3]

Year	Number	Proportion in all films (%)	Box-office share (%)
1971	86	16.32	32.05
1972	89	17.42	37.44
1973	101	23.17	39.76
1974	98	25.59	36.78
1975	99	24.81	40.83
1976	98	25.72	44.97
1977	94	22.62	37.69
1978	114	27.44	44.32
1979	125	29.9	44.73
1980	143	33.97	48.41
1981	120	29.51	49.94
1982	107	29.4	59.33
1983	112	38.89	70.59
1984	103	30.54.	63.62
1985	97	30.03	70.59
1986	87	23.77	63.62
1987	75	20.55	70.11
1988	117	33.33	79.11
1989	119	25.32	69.99
1990	121	35.28	71.56

1991	126	24.71	75.43
1992	210	41.67	78.82
1993	234	46.15	72.52
1994	187	37.03	68.43
1995	153	31.22	57.87
1996	116	27.1	51.88

Table 1 provides two sets of statistics gained from different sources indicating annual growth rates of local audiences of Hong Kong films. Both show a large decrease in audiences after 1993. Table 2 shows that total local box office receipts experienced consecutive years of negative growth from 1993, which was also the worst one since records began. The set of five-year growth rates, in which the 1995 and 1996 figures become negative, further indicates that the industry's crisis seemed not to be temporary. Table 3, presenting numbers and shares of Hong Kong films screened in local theatres, does not suggest an unprecedented downfall, but does show a decline in the mid-1990s: the number of films screened and their proportion to all screened films had both diminished since 1994, and domestic films' box office share in total box office receipts had dropped since 1993.

The industry as a whole, along with cultural communities, responded to the recession with an array of efforts to show support for Hong Kong cinema. The Motion Picture Industry Association launched local cinema's first film registration and copyright authentication system in 1993. The following year, industry representatives appealed for the establishment of the Hong Kong Film Development Council. It was clear that, during the recession, the industry needed more government support than the colonial government gave, which led to expectations of initiatives from the future Special Administrative Region government. The approaching transfer of sovereignty could be a potential opportunity for the industry at a policy level, even though the mid-1990s decline was largely industry-related.

Various evidence, as discussed, points to Hong Kong cinema's crisis during the mid-1990s. However, critics have suggested this crisis be considered against a

longer history. Zhao W. F. (2007: pp. 348–9) argues that the mid-1990s recession appeared particularly prominent in comparison with the ostensibly prosperous situation during the late 1980s and early 1990s, a prosperity that was as abnormal and no more than a bubble in his view. Without adequate government involvement and regulation, the sudden, massive entry of Taiwanese capital, which involved money laundering for organised crime groups, severely disturbed the ecology of the Hong Kong film industry while creating a false prosperity (Curtin, 1999). Taking the entire history of local cinema into account, Chan Ching-wai (2000: pp. 9–16) suggests that, first, the general trajectory of Hong Kong cinema, as with that of cinemas elsewhere, was positive and, second, that the industry had been generally stable throughout history and thus would not continue the downward spiral. Zhang Jian (1998) further contends that Hong Kong cinema was simply experiencing a period of industrial transformation; he argues that the entertainment industry across Southeast Asia and Hong Kong did not shrink, only that Hong Kong films were replaced by Western films and diversified entertainment media in related markets. Put differently, a variety of external incidents and changes exposed the industry's weakness and inadaptability and showed that it required a restructuring.

Production companies in transformation

In retrospect, Hong Kong cinema did not enter an era in which independent production totally dominated the market in the 1990s. As Mirana M. Szeto and Yun-chung Chen (2013) observe, major studios 'still co-exist with the independents, but they no longer enjoy monopoly in the film-making supply chain'. Curtin (1999: p. 38) even states, 'Unlike the common image of the Hong Kong film industry as populated by small entrepreneurial production houses, the fact is that small producers are marginal players in an industry that is currently dominated by a few distributors, exhibitors, and vertically-integrated firms like Golden Harvest and Win's.' Nevertheless, the mid-1990s was a unique time in recent history in that the space for independent, small-scale production was maximised and a window of opportunity for new players opened. A reshuffle of

production companies took place as the production model in the industry was changing from what Stephen Teo (2013: p. 80) calls a ‘flexible studio system’ to what Szeto and Chen (2013) call a ‘flexible independent system’.

Zhao W. F. (2007, pp. 347–8; 2008: p. 209) identifies two major tendencies, in terms of industrial transformation, during the mid-1990s. The first one was the breakdown of vertical integration based on a satellite production model. Major exhibitors, an increasing number of whose theatre chains became discontinued, stopped investing in their satellite production companies: production and theatrical distribution disintegrated. The satellite operation model, which had dominated the industry for approximately two decades, declined. Meanwhile, a new type of vertical integration of video distributors and production companies emerged. The second tendency was the centralisation of the distribution sector and the marginalisation of the production sector. With respect to the latter, large production companies started to decline, and some even disappeared. Curtin (1999, p. 40) pinpoints major companies’ strategic orientation towards the exhibition business rather than the production business, noting that ‘their fundamental strategy was to acquire ownership or access to cinema screens throughout the region and only then turn to the problem [of] filling those screens with images’. Newly emerging companies tended to diversify their business, though the production function of these companies was also marginalized, and the average production budget was largely scaled down (Zhao W. F., 2007: p. 347).

Taking a closer look at the industry landscape, from the mid-1980s to early 1990s, Golden Harvest, Cinema City/Golden Princess and D&B were the three largest companies in the industry. The latter two ended their business in 1993. Cinema City, the production company vertically integrated with the exhibitor Golden Princess, released its last film in 1991. Golden Princess continued to invest in a few film projects, but finally gave up its film business in favour of real estate in 1993. Likewise, D&B divested itself of its theatre chain in 1991 and released its last film in 1992. Golden Harvest survived the mid-1990s decline and its market share even reached a new peak in 1996 with 35.77% (Chan, 2000: p. 608). On the one hand, the company remained robust enough to expand its cinema chain to concentrate on distribution and exhibition. However,

on the other hand, it 'pursued very conservative strategies regarding the creative process' as Curtin (1999: p. 40) puts it, beginning to shrink its production business and sell the rights of films in its library. As a consequence of a combination of objective and subjective factors, total market share of these large companies sharply dropped in 1993 and 1994 (see Table 4), creating new space for medium-sized and small companies.

Table 4. Large companies box-office shares, 1971–1996[4]

Year	Company			Total (%)
	Golden Harvest (%)	Cinema City/Golden Princess (%)	D&B (%)	
1971	15.35			
1972	17.98			
1973	15.57			
1974	19.35			
1975	17.14			
1976	23.54			
1977	14.08			
1978	19.57			
1979	11.44			
1980	15.85	15.91		
1981	20.06	31.18		
1982	16.13	22.98		
1983	15.60	21.44		
1984	18.38	25.97	4.85	48.93
1985	28.13	23.27	11.01	62.41
1986	32.54	13.69	21.59	67.82
1987	32.52	21.91	14.92	69.35
1988	25.01	18.23	10.15	55.39
1989	22.09	13.62	11.37	47.08
1990	26.36	21.15	20.37	67.88
1991	24.18	10.44	5.48	40.10

1992	26.05	21.02	0.88	47.95
1993	20.82	0.82	0.00	21.64
1994	12.27	3.08	0.05	15.40
1995	27.91	3.16		31.07
1996	35.77			

After Cinema City/Golden Princess became defunct, Mandarin Films, whose exhibition and production businesses began in 1991 and 1992 respectively, and Regal Films, whose exhibition and production both went into business in 1993, attempted to imitate the large companies by retaining the vertical integration system. However, neither repeated the success of Cinema City/Golden Princess, Golden Harvest or D&B. For example, Mandarin's market shares, as shown in Table 5, indicate that the industry seemed irreversibly decentralised in the mid-1990s. The only company able to compete with Golden Harvest in the mid-1990s was Win's Movie Production and its successor Win's Entertainment, established in 1994. After acquiring Star Entertainment in 1996, Win's later transformed into China Star Entertainment, which has become one of the giants in the Hong Kong film industry today. In the mid-1990s, Win's/China Star had not grown into its current size, but new majors' replacement of the old was taking place, creating an unstable yet favourable industry environment also for the independent and the new.

Table 5. Mandarin box-office shares, 1991–1996[5]

Year	Box-office share (%)
1991	1.65
1992	5.41
1993	13.47
1994	11.06
1995	9.81
1996	8.03

A fair number of production houses that existed in the early 1990s were large companies' satellite production houses. Golden Harvest, Cinema City/Golden Princess and D&B all had multiple satellite production outfits. Golden Harvest, which had spearheaded the satellite operation model, had the largest number. Other companies, such as Sil-Metropole, had theirs as well. As the entire industry declined and large companies fell into crisis, many satellite production houses closed by the mid-1990s. Michael Hui, Ricky Hui and Sam Hui's Hui Film Company, Sammo Hung's Bo Ho Films and Johnny Mak's Johnny Mak Production, all supported by Golden Harvest, closed in 1993, 1992 and 1995 respectively. John Woo's Milestone Pictures and Ringo Lam's Silver Medal, both supported by Cinema City/Golden Princess, ended in 1992 and 1995; Jacob Cheung's Filmagica supported by Sil-Metropole ended in 1994. These examples indicate a particularly difficult industry environment, but do not mean that only this period saw the close of satellite companies. Rather, most satellite production houses in the Hong Kong film industry history were short-lived, for which capital instability and personnel changes were two major reasons. Take United Filmmakers Organization (UFO) for example. Financed by Golden Harvest and founded by Eric Tsang, Jessica Chung and Peter Chan in 1991, UFO was one of the most successful – commercially and critically – satellite production houses in the early 1990s. Its market share once reached a high of 11.36% in 1994, second only to Golden Harvest's 12.27% (Chan, 2000: p. 672). Soon, however, cracks in the team surfaced and financial problems emerged, and the company ceded its independence to Golden Harvest after 1996. The sub-contracting model prevalent at that time did not necessarily lead to individual production houses' collapse, but, as Curtin (1999: p. 40) argues, it was particularly detrimental to the quality of films and thus the health of the industry in that 'most independent producers and directors sign away their creative rights at the financing stage for a fixed lump sum. The only way for them to make money on a film is to keep costs down'. In other words, even though the unstable industry structure worked in independent operations' favour, the 'flexible studio system' or 'mixed system' that 'includes satellite systems, director subcontracting, and major–minor relations' (Szeto and Chen, 2013) failed to provide an atmosphere friendly to creative talent.

Tsui Hark's Film Workshop was one of the few satellite companies that survived the mid-1990s decline. Its business and production practices during that time reveal two particularly important points. Firstly, Film Workshop was founded with Cinema City's support – and was also the founders' 'run for the fences from what they viewed as the confines of Cinema City' (Hendrix, 2011b). Basically, the two companies reached an agreement that 'Film Workshop would do the shooting and Cinema City would serve as producer on future projects' (Hendrix, 2011b), but as Cinema City declined in the early 1990s, Film Workshop formed a new association with Golden Harvest. After that, in fact, it made films for both Cinema City and Golden Harvest on what was essentially a project basis. Its moves bespoke a more flexible satellite operation model or a project-based independent model. As Szeto and Chen (2013) state, since 'further "flexibilization" was required for survival reasons' in the 1990s (as in Film Workshop's case), the 'mixed system' 'further gave way to the independent system'. For independent production houses, further flexibilisation of the production system could mean an increased measure of creative and managerial control and less production pressure.

Secondly, Film Workshop co-produced *New Dragon Gate Inn* (1992, Raymond Lee) with a mainland studio in 1992. Zhao W. F. (2008, pp. 196–7) points up the film's strategic significance for the Hong Kong film industry, considering it a stepping-stone for Hong Kong films to enter the mainland market. In the next year, 1993, *Once Upon a Time in China III* (1993, Tsui Hark), also co-produced by Film Workshop and a mainland studio, became the first Hong Kong film released in China on a revenue-sharing basis. These efforts indicated a direction for local production companies, namely, expanding collaboration with the Chinese film industry and paying sufficient attention to the mainland market. Most importantly, Film Workshop's success with a series of co-productions illustrated that the upcoming reunion of Hong Kong and mainland China could bring chances to reinvigorate the Hong Kong film industry and give confidence to local producers and creative personnel.

Commenting on the demise of Cinema City and D&B, Curtin (1999: p. 36) suggests that besides 'a variety of financial, creative, and personnel problems' that forced the companies to close down, there was a lack of industry confidence

caused by ‘changing conditions in the industry, most notably the uncertainties engendered by the impending transition to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 and the emergence of a new breed of competitors, triad producers’. However, Film Workshop’s success with co-productions, as well as the expansion of China Star, which actively engaged itself with the mainland film industry, provided reasons for optimism. Within the doldrums of recession, the Hong Kong film industry had found a new source of confidence – the potential, vast ‘domestic’ market of China.

In most accounts on Hong Kong and its cinema, the 1997 return to Chinese sovereignty is associated with fear and anxiety, a collective mentality thought to cast an even darker shadow over the local film industry. Typically, Teo (1997: p. 243) wrote in 1997, ‘For the last few years Hong Kong cinema has been keeping pace with people’s feverish attempts to prepare themselves for the 1997 transition.’ An anecdote about Johnnie To goes:

> Many began to salt away their earnings, and others sought overseas residences that might provide refuge should the handover turn sour. Johnnie To […] signed an output deal with overseas distributors so that he could buy a house in Vancouver for his family. At the time, among applicants for permanent residency, Canadian law gave priority to those who invested over $500,000 in Canadian assets. (Curtin, 2007: p. 70)

However, the director stayed, formed Milkyway and even put his own money into the company’s productions. It was a personal choice, but it was also a reflection of confidence in the local film industry and its transition.

Conclusion

During the few years leading up to 1997, a range of events and changes took place in and outside of Hong Kong that affected the local film industry. Most importantly, the industry began to lose its markets in and investment from Taiwan, South Korea and Southeast Asia. It was also losing its audience in its home market. The emergence and popularisation of new media and platforms, such as television and video disc, added to the industry’s predicament. Under

these circumstances, organisations and institutions were set up to shore up the local film industry, and the industry negotiated its interests with mainland authorities. Although statistics pointed to the industry's crisis, new conditions, such as China's market liberalisation and the integration of cinemas in Chinese-speaking regions, opened up possibilities.

The transformation taking place in the industry, especially in the production sector, provided specific opportunities for medium and small production houses. Overall, large companies no longer held an absolute dominance over the market, and many of their satellite production houses, as well as a great number of small-scaled, independent companies came to an end, while new forces had yet to grow strong enough to build a new industry order. The structure of the production sector became unstable. Not only did this provide development space for new players and powers, but also such space was even larger because of the decrease in average production cost. Hong Kong cinema was undoubtedly declining, but the mid-1990s also appeared to be a reasonable moment to (re)start. New production companies, such as Milkyway, emerged at such a historical moment, representing new directions within the industry and were ready to define Hong Kong cinema in a new era.

Notes

[1] Statistics are based on and refer to Chan, 2000: p. 19.
[2] Statistics are based on and refer to Chan, 2000: p. 79, p. 81.
[3] Statistics are based on and refer to Chan, 2000: pp. 91–92.
[4] Statistics are based on and refer to Chan, 2000: p. 611, p. 644, p. 655.
[5] Statistics are based on and refer to Chan, 2000: p. 682.

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Chapter 3

Bringing the Old into the New: Formation and Development of Milkyway

Milkyway Image came into existence in 1996, on the eve of the transfer of the sovereignty of Hong Kong and during a decline or crisis in the Hong Kong film industry. It participated in the local film industry's development and transformation in the post-1997 period; its history embodies the history of post-1997 Hong Kong cinema, a history full of adjustments, adventures, and struggles. During Milkyway's twenty-year operation (at the time of writing), there have been changes in terms of its nature and the scope of its business, but, by and large, it has remained a Hong Kong-based independent film production company by definition. Firstly, as a film entity, it is defined by its commercial pursuits and commercial pursuits. For most of the time, it remained independent, and film production continued to be a priority, if not the only business activity. Equally importantly, it was shaped by specific historical contexts, and, as this chapter will show, Milkyway's formation and development represented the Hong Kong film industry in transition. On the one hand, Milkyway had close links with local film companies who had their roots in the studio era, and it inherited traditions that were specific to the Hong Kong film industry. On the other hand, it reacted to contemporary, changing circumstances and trends and developed innovations for the local industry in terms of both production and business operations.

As a production company, Milkyway is both a business entity and a creative team. This chapter is accordingly divided into two parts to provide a full profile of the company, inquiring into fundamental questions such as who Milkyway are, what they do, and how they do it. The following pages investigate a range of issues, including the company's ownership structure, organisational structure, capital structure, scope of business, human capital, and production culture. I do not intend to provide a complete history of Milkyway; instead, I focus on key events in Milkyway's history and key features of the company to reveal the convergence of old and new business models, strategies, and mentalities. It is highly arguable whether we can call Milkyway a new type of film company in

Hong Kong, nor can we claim that Hong Kong cinema and its film industry have thoroughly changed after 1997. That said, the past two decades have seen the fulfilment of what Stephen Teo (1997: p. 254) wrote in 1997: that 'Hong Kong cinema is coming full circle […] to return to the fold of the industry in the Mainland'. The Hong Kong film industry has gone through a substantial, historic (and ongoing) transition – from a regional or quasi-national film industry to part of a national film industry, through coordination and (re)integration of resources – rather than regular ups and downs during those two decades. Film companies, as well as other film institutions, which were directly involved in the process sought and tried – in conventional, innovative, imperative, effective, fruitless, and painful ways – to revive the local film industry and preserve local film culture while striving to survive and adapt to a new age. On Hong Kong cinema's path to recovery or decline, film companies have left revealing footprints. Through an investigation of Milkyway, I take a bottom-up approach, a company-oriented perspective, in order to provide snapshots of and a glimpse into the momentous transformation of a film industry.

Milkyway as a business entity

In 1993, after working for local film companies for over a decade, director and producer Johnnie To started his own business by launching two companies one after the other: Sanqueen and Milky Way Image.[1] Three years later, in 1996, he founded another company under the name Milkyway Image. These entities were actually run by the same people and shared the same office in Kowloon City. In 1997, Sanqueen Limited was transformed into Milkyway Group Company Limited and Milky Way Image Limited was dissolved. The two names Sanqueen and Milky Way Image were struck off after the 'merger', leaving only the unified name Milkyway Image, with the word 'Milkyway' expressing the hope that the company's creativity would be as limitless as the cosmos according to To (Xie, 2006). Retrospectively, the biggest decline of Hong Kong cinema took place in 1993–1999 since records began in 1971; in 1996, the film industry hit its nadir.[2] According to industry data, 1993–1996 was an unfavourable time for launching a film business.

The birth of Milkyway was, apparently, a result of individual decision. Before Milkyway, To had worked for local studios such as Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB) – the television subsidiary of the Shaw Brothers Studio, Cinema City, Mandarin Films, and Cosmopolitan Film Productions. He repeatedly said that towards the end of his pre-Milkyway career, frustration led directly to him thinking about forming his own firm. He was directing some Stephen Chow films for Cosmopolitan Film Productions at the time, wrestling with Chow for creative control. His conflict with Chow was equally a conflict with the star system as part of the studio system. Top stars' power over directors and unsatisfactory control of the filmmaking process within studios in general caused an increasing number of producers and directors, including To, to work outside the studios. More importantly, the decline of a few large studios in the early 1990s changed the market structure, opening up the space to smaller production houses. To's personal decision to launch a production house was made against this wider background of the local film industry's transition from the studio system to independent production. As early as 1991, he made his first attempt with Paka Hill, a short-lived independent production company that he formed with other two local producers.[3] The establishment of Sanqueen in 1993 and then Milkyway in 1996 could well have been expected given the growing trend of filmmakers' going independent.

During Milkyway's short pre-history, from 1993 to 1996, the two co-existing companies, Sanqueen and Milky Way (later Milkyway), were, in effect, like two departments of one studio. The first title released under the Milkyway trademark (*Beyond Hypothermia* [1996, Patrick Leung]) credited Sanqueen as its producer and Milkyway as its production company, suggesting that Sanqueen was responsible for organising and fundraising while Milkyway functioned as a production department. Thus, the integration of Sanqueen into Milkyway formalised the organisational structure to adapt to the reality of the small and nascent company. The integration also indicated that Milkyway's self-positioning as a production company had become definite. Accordingly, Milkyway equipped itself with a series of shooting facilities, such as a Steenbeck film editing suite, several ARRI cameras and Technovision lenses (HKIFFS, 2011: p. 61), and it relocated to a 'multi-story building [which] had floors that

could be dressed as interior sets' (Bordwell, 2011: p. 247). With the new Milkyway Building functioning as a shooting studio and with an expanding range of self-owned facilities, Milkyway was able to state on its official website that it was 'dedicated to providing film companies with comprehensive film production services' (Milkyway Image, n.d.). This strategic positioning renders Milkyway's identity as an independent production house clear while revealing its need for networks, connections and, most importantly, external financing.

When it was a private company, Milkyway self-financed and distributed only one film (*The Odd One Dies* [1997, Yau]). That was during its first couple of years, when the company saw itself as strictly independent. During 1996–1997, Milkyway released five titles, not two of them having the same source of capital. Investments came from various larger local film companies, such as Metropolitan Films, Media Asia Entertainment, Golden Harvest, and Win's Entertainment. The variety of sources showed Milkyway's independence, but meant that it might possibly confront financial difficulties from time to time. As To recalls, Milkyway could not even afford the rent for the office space and employees' salaries during 1996–1998 (Fei, 2016a). Therefore, the company started to seek stable source(s) of capital but struggled not to turn into a subsidiary or 'satellite' company. Popular in the 1970s and 80s in the local film industry, the 'satellite' operation model basically meant that a production house produced for a single film studio in exchange for relatively stable investment. The decline of the major studios (such as Golden Harvest and Golden Princess) undermined the basis of this model, and independents largely replaced 'satellite' companies in the 1990s. Retrospectively, the industry was in a special period in the 1990s when new majors (such as Media Asia, China Star Entertainment, and Emperor Entertainment) had yet to take over the position of the old ones. Operating under a parent company would be a step back for nascent filmmaker-led production houses. Milkyway's vacillation between keeping its independent status and surrendering the status to gain a long-term investor continued towards the end of the 1990s. It once had a relatively stable relationship with an investor (Film City Entertainment) during the late 1990s, but two titles (*Where a Good Man Goes* [1999, To] and *The Mission* [1999, To]) released in 1999 indicated both potential problems in its financing methods and its aspiration to stay

independent. The films were made with money from Chiu Fu Sheng, the owner of Era Television in Taiwan, but were attributed to Milkyway, which reveals the nature of the investment as a personal favour rather than a contractual obligation between two business parties. Financed in a temporary, irregular way, these two projects were exceptional in Milkyway's history. The company put such a model to an end with its vacillation at the end of the 1990s, when rising new powerhouses were to reconfigure the structure of the local film industry. In the early 2000s, 'the film industry in Hong Kong [was] largely dominated by a few major film companies' as Milkyway clearly realised (MIHL, 2003: p. 19).

Among the new powerhouses was China Star, established in 1992 by local mogul Charles Heung, the owner of Win's. Milkyway had had two titles financed by China Star previously, but it was not until 2000 that the two companies developed a close relationship. A watershed event was the 1999 launch of China Star's subsidiary One Hundred Years of Film, under which Milkyway's later collaborations with China Star were released. The subsidiary was actually headed by To along with some other local filmmakers, after To personally joined China Star in 2000. Soon Milkyway's co-founder Wai Ka-Fai followed To in joining One Hundred Years. To was appointed chief executive officer at China Star, meaning that he served as an administrator in a large media group while remaining the boss of his own production house. One Hundred Years made money for China Star and To did not hold shares in it. Formed on a talent-directed, project-based principle, the subsidiary did, however, channel China Star's capital into Milkyway's projects in collaboration with it. To clearly explained that he 'went to China Star to do administrative work [because he] hoped to bring Milkyway more resources and fewer debts' (Wei, 2012: pp. 56–57).[4]

As a consequence of this solution to its financing problems, Milkyway had to re-position itself over the course of its relationship with China Star. Even though To soon resigned from both China Star and One Hundred Years in 2001, Milkyway kept making films for them almost exclusively until 2004, which made it practically a 'satellite' company of the rising local powerhouse. Milkyway's collaboration with China Star, as well as the launch of One Hundred Years, in which a group of established local filmmakers assembled, was a

representative example of a new round of integration of resources in the Hong Kong film industry. With the emergence of new majors, the outsourcing model reappeared, but was now more flexible in that a production house could serve more than one (usually larger) film company at one time. Milkyway, as a recognisable brand, a creative source and a talent pool, constituted part of China Star's expansion plans and of the restructuring of the industry, yet its collaboration with China Star did not change its nature as a private company.

At the same time as it forged a special relationship with a large group, Milkyway took more innovative measures to raise funds. In 2001, it was incorporated in the Cayman Islands with an authorised share capital of HK$390,000 (about US$50,000 at that time)[5] and, in the following year, underwent an initial public offering (IPO), turning from a private business to a public one. Against the background of the impact of the dot-com mania spreading from the United States to Hong Kong at the turn of the 21st century, Milkyway became the first director-owned local production house to list on the Growth Enterprise Market (GEM) in Hong Kong. That was the first major change in the ownership and capital structure of the company. After the incorporation of the company, To and Milkyway's production executive Catherine Chan were the only shareholders. In 2001, after the completion of a film project (*Fulltime Killer* [2001, To]) on which he collaborated with Milkyway, local actor Andy Lau (through his own company Teamwork) purchased 25% of the then-issued share capital of the company. To and Lau thus became the only initial management shareholders of the Milkyway Group. Table 1 is a simplified presentation of the status immediately before and after the IPO. As a result of the IPO, To's shares were reduced but were still the largest. Business director and ex-China Star employee Ding Yuin Shan became the other shareholder who worked at Milkyway. Three shareholders (including two substantial shareholders) acquired their shares through their own companies. Other public shareholders included six independent contractors of Milkyway.

Table 1. Shareholding structure of Milkyway before and after the IPO[6]

Name of Shareholder	Relation to Milkyway	Percentage of shareholding	Percentage of shareholding

		before the IPO (%)	after the IPO (%)
Johnnie To	Executive Director	66.00	51.00
Andy Lau (Teamwork Corporation Limited)	N/A	12.50	10.625
Lee Po Yi Shirley Anne (Grand Sum Assets Limited)	N/A	12.50	10.625
Raymond Chia Chit Man (Bestrade Technologies Limited)	N/A	4.00	1.70
Catherine Chan	Production Executive and Executive Director	5.00	N/A
Ding Yuin Shan	Associate Business Director	N/A	3.00
Yau Nai Hoi	Scriptwriter (independent contractor)	N/A	4.00
Law Wing Cheong	Film Director (independent contractor)	N/A	2.00
Sie Oi Ling	Production Manager (independent contractor)	N/A	2.00
Cheng Siu Keung	Cinematographer (independent contractor)	N/A	1.50

Wu Kwok Chiu	Gaffer (independent contractor)	N/A	1.50
Kwong Ting Fong	Best Boy (independent contractor)	N/A	1.00
Sale Shares	N/A	N/A	11.05

The net proceeds of the share offer were estimated to be approximately HK$17.0 million (US$2.1 million) and if the over-allotment option was exercised in full, Milkyway was to receive additional net proceeds of about HK$4.3 million (US$0.5 million) (MIHL, 2002: p. 5). Financial benefits aside, the IPO showed Milkyway's ambition to grow. At that time, the year 2002, Milkyway was a company of fourteen staff and consisted of four departments – Film Production, Finance and Human Resources, Business Development and Co-Ordination, and Administration (MIHL, 2002: p. 59). It had a gross profit of HK$12.2 million (US$1.5 million) and did not have its own film library, meaning it could not earn revenue from home-video or other distribution of its past productions. As stated in its prospectus, while defining itself as a film production company, it aimed at 'becoming a leading comprehensive film company engaging in film investment, production and distribution' (p. 3). It planned to employ more personnel, establish its own film library, expand the volume of its film production, seek more partnerships, and diversify the scope of its business. With Lau holding shares in the company, for example, it entered into a master production plan with Lau's Teamwork. Obviously, Milkyway considered the IPO a significant opportunity to expand its scale, business, and influence.

Doing an IPO was an innovation for small independent production houses such as Milkyway in the local film industry, but it was also a risky move, especially for these companies. The Milkyway Group failed to keep raising money as expected, and various fees associated with business and legal procedures dragged it into the financial mire again. A comparison of production costs with staff costs and other operating expenses between 2001 and 2007, for example, shows the shrinkage of production vis-à-vis the company's expansion (see Table2). The Group's stock continued to drop and its value shrunk. Serious

liquidity problems emerged. To's IPO gamble eventually backfired, as he almost lost Milkyway. Less than a year after the IPO, in 2003, mediated by China Star's boss Charles Heung, local entrepreneur Dennis Law acquired 44.35% of shares from To for about HK$7.14 million (US$0.91 million) through his Right Opportune Group, becoming the largest shareholder in the Milkyway Group (MIHL, 2007b). Law replaced To as the Chairman of the Board, and To remained only Executive Director (until 2006) and became responsible only for overseeing film production. The other two employees in the management of the Milkyway Group also resigned from executive directorships after the management buy-in. In the year 2004, the Milkyway Group became comprised of six subsidiaries (see Table 3). Among them, Milkyway Image (virtually the previous Milkyway) and Luminous Star (a company complementing Milkyway's shooting and post-production facilities) were practically controlled by To. As such, drastic changes occurred, from ownership to personnel to the structure of the Group.

Table 2. Costs and expenses of Milkyway, 2001–2007[7]

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Production costs (HK$ million)	25.1	83.9	40.3	21.6	27.6	13.4	49.0
Staff costs (HK$ million)	0.7	2.2	6.6	7.6	9.5	11.1	10.7
Other operating expenses (HK$ million)	2.2	5.6	12.8	17.5	18.3	21.8	24.3

Table 3. Subsidiaries of the Milkyway Group[8]

Name of Subsidiary	Principal Activities
Galaxy Image (BVI) Limited	Investment holding
Inspire Film Distribution Limited	Provision of film distribution

Luminous Star Limited	Assets holding
Point Of View Movie Production Company Limited	Provision of film production
Milkyway Image (Hong Kong) Limited	Provision of film production and television movies production
Milkyway Image Limited	Holding of film rights

The decisions of doing an IPO in 2002 and selling shares to Law in 2003 were both direct results of Milkyway's financial situation. Table 4 presents the company/Group's annual turnover and net profit (or loss) from 2001 to 2007. At the time of the IPO, Milkyway's turnover and gross profit increased by 230% and 198%, respectively, compared to the previous year. It is reasonable to assume that such an enormous increase brought confidence and fuelled the ambition to grow. In the next year, however, turnover decreased by 42% and gross profit decreased significantly by 79% to a mere HK$2.5 million (US$0.3 million), creating the conditions for Law's buy-in. As explained in Milkyway's Annual Report 2003, the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in the Asia-Pacific region in 2003 had deleterious effects on the local film industry and constituted a major reason for the decrease in Milkyway's annual turnover. The outbreak of SARS was a contingent factor, but the environment for the industry was generally uncertain and challenging during that time. There were the rising majors' expansion and competition among independents occurring within the industry, and new policies such as the signing of the CEPA (Closer Economic Partnership Arangement) between Hong Kong and China also affecting the industry. More significantly, Hong Kong's economy was still in the doldrums in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis. Going public was a decision that Milkyway made at a time full of possibilities, but to some extent, changing, unpredictable circumstances had predetermined the venture as a leap in the dark.

Table 4. Overview of Milkyway's financial situations, 2001–2007[9]

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007

Turnover (HK$ million)	29.2	96.1	55.7	22.7	36.8	17.3	62.3
Net Profit (HK$ million)	4.1	12.1	2.5	-10.8	-8.4	-18.2	13.3

Milkyway stayed on the GEM for four years. Going public proved a fiasco, as reflected in its financial reports (see Table 4).[10] It took To four years to get the company back under his own control. In 2007, he paid HK$23.4 million (US$2.9 million) to break away from the Milkyway Group (which thereafter changed its name to Brilliant Arts Multi-Media), acquiring Milkyway Image and Luminous Star along with his production team, facilities, and film projects (MIHL, 2007b). Milkyway reverted to a private company. Under Law's leadership, Milkyway commenced to make films for investors other than China Star. This effort was continued after the disintegration. Milkyway collaborated with local companies such as Mei Ah Film Production, Sil-Metropole Organisation, Sundream Motion Pictures, Universe Entertainment, and especially Media Asia, with whom it entered into a master production agreement. Most remarkably, the independent Milkyway followed the breakthrough in collaboration with the Chinese film industry made during the Law years. The signing of the CEPA was a strong signal of the integration of the Hong Kong and Chinese film industries. In the years that followed, more and more Hong Kong filmmakers and film companies sought collaboration with the Chinese film industry and had to rely on Chinese capital and the mainland market.

After several co-productions and co-investments with Chinese film companies, Milkyway reacted to the tendency of integration with the further step of forming an exclusive partnership with Hairun Media Group, one of the largest television production companies in China. In 2010, Hairun Media set up a film production subsidiary, Hairun Pictures. The subsidiary, as described on its website, 'is a fresh platform created by Mr. Liu Yanming [president of Hairun Media] together with director Johnnie To and writer Hai Yan in order to shift the successful genres from [the] TV market to [the] film market for Hairun' (Hairun Pictures, n.d.). Representative of the Hong Kong film industry's contribution to the burgeoning Chinese film industry, To and his Milkyway firstly meant talent and

experience for Hairun when it was extending into a new sector. Secondly, they were brands that could be used by Hairun to raise its profile. For example, in the marketing campaign for its first collaboration with Village Roadshow, a project to extend its influence beyond China, Hairun highlighted its 'exclusive partnership with Milkyway Image' in its self-introduction (Hairun and Village Roadshow Pictures Asia, 2014). For Milkyway, Hairun meant investment and, equally importantly, an opportunity to make inroads into the mainland market. While To personally joined Hairun Pictures as artistic director, Milkyway began to co-produce films for the Chinese media giant. In 2011, Milkyway and Hairun launched a talent agency in Hong Kong, Milkyway Hairun Artists, to strengthen their partnership. The management structure of Milkyway changed in accordance with the new business development. Hairun's president Liu joined To as a Director of the Board of Milkyway, so did Milkyway's Production Manager Elaine Chu, who was also appointed as executive director of the newly launched Milkyway Hairun Artists.

In effect, Milkyway's relationship with Hairun was not so different from that with China Star. Its model of collaboration remained almost the same, except that its major collaborator/investor changed from a local company to a Chinese company. In addition, Hairun Pictures and Milkyway Hairun Artists were, to some degree, similar to China Star's subsidiary One Hundred Years. Nevertheless, engagement with the Chinese film industry represented new business development of Milkyway and of the Hong Kong film industry in new circumstances. Firstly, it was a signal that Milkyway followed in the steps of a great deal of Hong Kong filmmakers and film companies that had produced for Chinese investors. It is crucial to note that there was no sign that Milkyway was to cease production in Hong Kong – instead, a subsidiary named Big Star Production Company[11] was established under Elaine Chu's name in 2012 to release Milkyway-co-financed Hong Kong productions. Even so, it is still safe to claim that Milkyway shifted its focus to the mainland, given that its co-productions were disproportionately large compared to its purely Hong Kong productions in number and production scale.

Secondly, for the first time in its history, Milkyway had a Chinese citizen on its board, suggesting the involvement of Chinese capital and a change in

Milkyway's identity. As such, it joined a growing number of local film companies in becoming a China–Hong Kong joint venture. Because To now holds less than 10% of Milkyway's shares, the company is considered by some to be a Chinese company (HKFCS, 2013d). Most importantly, the coalition and reciprocity between Hairun and Milkyway was a typical example of the integration of resources within Chinese-language film industries in recent years. Specifically, it represented the transition of cooperative arrangement between the Hong Kong and Chinese film industries from project-based collaboration to strategic alliance between business entities. It suggested the advantages of the Hong Kong film industry and the role that the industry could play in the growth of Chinese-language cinema. That is, the core value of Hong Kong-based film production houses such as Milkyway lies in talent, experience, and creativity.

Milkyway as a creative team

Milkyway's awareness of its core value was clearly reflected in the title of its self-commemorative book – *Milkyway Image, Beyond Imagination: Wai Kai-fai + Johnnie To + Creative Team*. It understood the importance of creativity and talent to a company whose primary business activity has been film production. The Milkyway creative team basically consisted of To and a relatively stable crew, even though the company sometimes used 'Milkyway Creative Team' to refer only to its scriptwriters and as a stand-alone brand. Unlike its administrative team, members of which came from various backgrounds, Milkyway's creative team was characterised by the key members' shared background in Shaw Brothers' TVB, the largest television production company in Hong Kong. Milkyway was actually founded by graduates of TVB. The launch of Milkyway was a reaction to traditional studio production represented by the Shaw Brothers Studio and its television arm. However, the predecessor influenced the contemporary independent in a number of ways. The mark that TVB has left on Milkyway is not confined to the two companies, but has also been left on the process of the development of an entire film industry. Therefore, Milkyway's connections with TVB provide a perspective not only to look more

closely at the company but also to observe traditions and transitions in the Hong Kong film industry.

The television station's influence was firstly that it offered members of the Milkyway creative team, especially To and Wai, professional experience to lay the ground for a new production house. Milkyway had reasons to single out To and Wai among its creative team. They were the founders of the company, producers and directors of many of Milkyway's titles, and largely responsible for a recognisable house style. Not only did they play a crucial role in shaping and defining Milkyway, but Milkyway was also in some sense a continuation of their individual careers. Born in the 1950s and 60s, respectively, in Hong Kong, To and Wai have very similar backgrounds. They did not pursue higher education or gain any professional training from academic institutions, but did enter the business of filmmaking at an early age. Initially, they were trainees at TVB. To joined an acting training programme and Wai was trained in a scriptwriting class. Eventually, To became an assistant director and then director and producer on his own; Wai was promoted to scriptwriter and then script supervisor and producer.

In his early career, To co-directed television series and made his directorial debut in 1980. Feeling himself not yet ready to be a film director, he went back to television to hone his skills. In 1986, he joined Cinema City, the most successful film production house of that time, and started making films again while also producing television films. Most of the films that he made for Cinema City were well received at the box office, which earned him a cachet as a successful director within the industry. In 1992, he left TVB to enter into a contract with Cosmopolitan Film Productions to devote his career entirely to filmmaking. Similarly, Wai had made his name well known before Milkyway. He started to write scripts for and produce TVB's television series and films in the 1980s. In 1989, *The Greed of Man* (1992, TVB), a popular television series he wrote, earned him a reputation and an offer from TVB's arch-rival Asia Television (ATV). Having only produced two series for ATV, one of which broke ATV's audience rating record, he was brought back by TVB in 1992 because of their fear of losing talent to a competitor. The first work that he produced after moving back to TVB became one of the most resounding

successes in Hong Kong's television history, turning his name into a distinguished brand in the business. He left TVB in 1993 and made his directorial debut in 1995 prior to the establishment of Milkyway.

Thanks to To and Wai's experiences, Milkyway learned production and operational models from TVB. For example, it adopted TVB's production planning method of setting a target number of annual productions and structured a creative team according to the division of labour within TVB (HKIFFS, 2011: p. 66). It also set a strict timetable on production like assembly-line production factories did. It was noted that the company 'generally takes about five to six months to complete a film project from pre-production phase to the post-production phase' and 'normally takes approximately two months to complete each of the pre-production phase, the shooting phase and the post-production phase' (MIHL, 2002: p. 65). The prospectus provides further description regarding the pre-production and shooting phases (post-production was usually subcontracted to other companies):

> The production of films initially involves identifying or originating concepts for screenplay development either by the [Milkyway] Group or other film companies. The group also receives, from time to time, screenplays for the production of films from freelance script writers and directors. It will then liaise with suitable film directors and executive producers to oversee the entire film production project. When a preliminary proposal, which comprises the concept of screenplay together with a list of principal cast, director and script writer is formulated, the Group will approach a film company. If a film company principally agrees with such proposal, it may enter into a production agreement with the Group pursuant to which the Group is required to refine the screenplay in accordance with the revisions requested by the film company within an agreed period […].
>
> Generally, it is the film company that arranges and engages the principal casting whereas the Group engages other production personnel, generally on a part-time or project basis. Under limited situations, the Group will engage the principal casting. […] The Group will also

> employ principal personnel including production manager, assistant director, art director and location manager. The Group will also engage secondary production personnel such as stuntman or action director, etc. […] The Group is responsible for contracting with independent contractors including (i) principal creative members such as film director, producer and script writer, and (ii) principal production personnel such as production manager, cinematographer, assistant director, art director, as well as secondary production personnel such as stunt man, action director and supporting actors. (MIHL, 2002: pp. 66–68)

To and Wai's networks in TVB helped them find the above-mentioned 'independent contractors' to carry out Milkyway's production plans. The rise of independent production caused many above-the-line artists to work outside traditional studios. Former TVB employees, such as Milkyway's primary cinematographer Cheng Siu Keung and film score composer Cacine Wong, frequently collaborated with the company and had profound influences on the appearance of Milkyway's output. Regarding directing, assistant directors of Milkyway's productions were mostly ex-TVB employees who had worked as To's assistants at TVB, such as Patrick Yau and Law Wing-Cheung. As far as scriptwriting went, apart from Wai, most key members of Milkyway's scriptwriting team had worked for TVB, such as Yau Nai-Hoi, Szeto Kam-Yuen, Yip Tin-Shing, and Au Kin-Yee. Some had already been Wai's assistants at TVB, such as Szeto, and others became Wai's apprentices after working on Milkyway's projects.

As these examples suggest, apprenticeship has been an integral part of Milkyway's production culture. In an article reflecting on relations between local filmmakers, Matthew Cheng (2010) writes that the apprenticeship model has been a peculiar feature of the Hong Kong film industry. He uses Milkyway as an example, regarding To as a master who supported and cultivated directors of Milkyway's films, such as Patrick Yau, Yau Nai-Hoi, Law Wing-Cheung, and Soi Cheang. He goes even farther, arguing that apprenticeship as a production culture has been translated into Milkyway's films and that the films reflect that culture. Apprenticeship as a production model and culture originated and developed in the local film industry's studio era. It embodied Milkyway's

connections with the history of the local industry and local cinema. Once an apprentice of a prestigious local director at TVB, To became an advocate of the apprenticeship model and an inheritor of this particular structure. At Milkyway, he saw himself as the kind of producer who encouraged younger filmmakers to come onto the set, and he described Milkyway as a company that offered opportunities to the talented to create films in their own styles (Teo, 2007: p. 68). In his opinion, the apprenticeship model is a means to sustain the creativity of Milkyway and the Hong Kong film industry. He hoped that, in the future, Milkyway could be not just Wai and himself but a platform from which a steady flow of new directors would emerge (Wu, 2010: p. 371). In short, the collective of Milkyway counts for more than individual artists.

A significant difference between the apprenticeship models in traditional studios and at Milkyway is that whereas 'apprentices' and creative workers in general were usually employees of the former, they were mostly independent contractors of the latter. Milkyway kept its staff to minimum throughout its history. It has never even employed Wai, the co-founder and a key creative source of the company. Like other independent contractors, Wai's collaboration with Milkyway has always been on a project basis. The company's flexible relationship with the artists represented another distinctive feature of the local film industry's transition from the studio system to independent production. Firstly, the model helped small production houses to reduce expenditure. Secondly, project-based contracts were a means to mobilise human resources inside and outside the industry. Thirdly, these contracts facilitated exchange between the local and other film industries against a background of increased globalisation. As Milkyway's business developed, project-based contracts allowed it to choose suitable artists for different films targeting either Hong Kong, mainland Chinese, Asian, or international markets, either mass audiences or film festival juries, all with minimal staff costs. Milkyway's case demonstrates that under an independent production system, the stability and flexibility of a creative team do not necessarily come into conflict. As a creative team, the company has been a microcosm representing the Hong Kong film industry in transformation, revealing the convergence and integration of old and new models and cultures.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced the establishment and development of Milkyway as a business entity and examined the characteristics of its creative team. I have shown that changing geo-historical, socio-political and industrial circumstances largely shaped Milkyway's trajectory. Thus, its history is, to some degree, the history of the Hong Kong film industry over the past two decades. Milkyway was founded as an independent production house when the studio system was collapsing. Its early collaboration with local film companies took place at a time when the old majors in the local industry were in decline and the new majors were yet to dominate. It went public and then reverted to a private company in a volatile industry environment. Against the background of the increasing integration of the Hong Kong and Chinese film industries, it shifted its focus and formed alliances with Chinese film companies. The formation of Milkyway's creative team further reveals the intricacies of the transition of the local film industry.

Milkyway's businesses, especially under the leadership of Law, included film distribution and film financing; it also produced television films and public information films. Its priority, however, remained commercial film production throughout its history. As a production house, it made its name known with its commercial films. Milkyway is not simply a series of business activities, nor is it an assemblage of administrative and creative workers. Its history has been written through over sixty film projects. This chapter has attempted to understand Milkyway through its ownership and structure, but if we are to give an ultimate definition of the company, it is fair to say that Milkyway stands for the production of some of the staple genres of Hong Kong cinema. The next chapter will proceed to analyse its production and business practices, with a focus on its film projects and how they reach different markets.

Notes

[1] The Chinese name of Sanqueen had gone through some changes. The original Chinese name was *Cheng-kun*, one month later, that was changed to *Jin-ling*. Its complete Chinese name indicates that Sanqueen was initially a combination of a record label and an entertainment company, which was probably due to the fact that, at the time, To was the agent and record

producer of a Taiwanese actress who later played the heroine in the first title released with a Milkyway logo. The record label part was removed from Sanqueen's Chinese name a few months later.

[2] The decline is illustrated by a large amount of data and analyses. See, for example, Chan, 2000.

[3] Paka Hill was founded by Raymond Wong, Catherine Hun, and To. The name 'Paka Hill' was a combination of the three founders' Chinese names. The company ended its business in 1993.

[4] The translation is my own.

[5] Historical exchange rates are used for currency conversion throughout this chapter.

[6] Information collected from Milkyway's stock market prospectus (MIHL, 2002). The table is simplified as To's shares had been held in various names, such as himself, his spouse, his family trust, and the trustee for his family trust.

[7] Data collected from MIHL, 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005; 2006; 2007a.

[8] Information collected from MIHL, 2005.

[9] Data collected from MIHL, 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005; 2006; 2007a.

[10] The increase of turnover and net profit in 2007 was due in part to the disposal of Milkyway Image and Luminous Star.

[11] The company was named after the pattern set by Milkyway's another subsidiary, Luminous Star, which reads 'Little Star' as translated from its Chinese name.

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Chapter 4

From Hong Kong to the Mainland: Milkyway's Production and Business Practices

The last chapter provided a general profile of Milkyway and its history as a business entity. For a film company whose primary activity has been film production, business plans are largely realised through and reflected in its production activity. Through an examination of Milkyway's productions, especially those indicating strategic adjustments and redirection of business focus, this chapter takes a close look at the company's responses to changing industrial and socio-political environments and its responses to challenges for the contemporary Hong Kong film industry in general during the past two decades. The examination revolves around the following two questions: what kinds of films has Milkyway produced, and for whom? With a synthetic approach that combines textual and industry analysis, this chapter will show that appearances of individual films provide evidence for the production company's needs and ambitions at different stages of its development. The films are not merely stand-alone texts or artistic expressions of individual filmmakers. They constitute a series of projects that carry out specific or grand business strategies of a company in particular contexts. More importantly, the films, especially China–Hong Kong co-productions, record the transition of Hong Kong cinema and its film industry, the 'melting' of a quasi-national cinema into a new national context.

Based on the work of Yan Yunxiang (2002), Esther C. M. Yau (2015) uses the theoretical framework of 'state-managed cultural globalisation' in her recent research on Hong Kong cinema's integration into the Chinese mainland. She refers the concept to 'the PRC government's top-down policy-making and intervention' in 'expand[ing] the circulation of Chinese cultural products' and 'engineering of Chinese nationalism and content control' (p. 19). 'Relocating creative talents and genre filmmaking experience into China', she argues, 'has been a part of managed globalization (as a gainful outcome of bilateral trade agreement) and an instrument of state assimilation (through cultural

renationalization of film content)' (pp. 17–22). Significantly, she contributes to the framework by emphasising on 'the performances and mutations of Hong Kong cinema in the making of China's commercial cinema that continues to generate responses to cultural globalization, mainland resources, and mainland audiences', which leads to her also suggesting that 'China's cinema does not remain the same when the mediascapes, ideoscapes, and business practices of filmmaking in China have incorporated mixed legacies and ideas from elsewhere' (p. 23). Such an emphasis informs this chapter on Milkyway's business and production activities in that it elicits a bottom-up approach to re-examining the top-down managed cultural nationalisation and homogenisation and to rethinking Hong Kong cinema's post-handover transition and its ramifications. By exploring currents and counter-currents in the process from the perspective of Milkyway and through examination of a systematic series of film projects, I argue that the company and the Hong Kong film industry as a whole have assumed new roles in transforming the outlook of the Chinese screenscape aside from protecting local sensibilities and identities.

This chapter charts Milkyway's production history in a roughly chronological format and is divided into two parts to analyse its production strategies for its most important two markets – Hong Kong and mainland China – respectively. This form by no means indicates that all of Milkyway's films solely target one or certain markets, nor does it suggest a strictly linear trajectory, but the arrangement does reflect the company's shifts of focus for survival or expansion during its twenty-year history. Milkyway has been attentive to the characteristics and needs of different markets and has thus employed distinctly different strategies and tactics for films aiming at specific audiences. Meanwhile, it has been acutely conscious of building a consistent house style and strong brand awareness. Its production practices have therefore worked to meet both needs. This translates into the issue facing Milkyway throughout the years: how to make Hong Kong films for both local and external consumption, and how to carve out a name that can survive and be identified in various markets.

Establishing a brand for the Hong Kong audience

Milkyway officially claims *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1* (1997, Wai Ka-fai) to be its debut, but there had been two films, *Beyond Hypothermia* and *Final Justice* (1997, Chiu Sung-Kee), released under its trademark previously. Another two titles, *Loving You* (1995, Johnnie To) and *Lifeline* (1997, Johnnie To), although released by the Shaw Brothers, frequently appear in the discourse about Milkyway as they were made by the soon-to-be Milkyway team. The inclusion of the pre-Milkyway titles in the narrative of Milkyway in media coverage and academic literature represents a testimony to thematic and stylistic consistency in the inception of the company's production history. From *Loving You* and *Lifeline* to *Beyond Hypothermia* and *Final Justice*, and then to *Too Many Ways*, Milkyway built a recognisable brand through the devices of genre, theme, style and casting, which culminated in its purported debut. Meanwhile, most of these films were markedly indigenous; they corresponded to the collective mentality in Hong Kong at a particular historical moment.

The most effective tools for the audience to link a number of films together are casting and genre. Released in a short span of two years, *Loving You*, *Lifeline*, *Beyond Hypothermia*, *Final Justice* and *Too Many Ways* all use the same actor (Sean Lau) as the leading man, and four of the five use the same actress (Carman Lee) as the leading woman. In terms of genre, they are all crime films. Because of casting and genre choices, even though some of the films were not released by Milkyway, they strongly suggested the existence of a consistent creative team. Milkyway did not reveal itself as the creative source only in the opening or closing credits. It announced the launch of a new production house through *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1*, the Chinese title of which means 'the birth of a brand' and the English title of which implicitly demonstrates the company's ambition – even though Wai refused to acknowledge the implications in the title (Pun, 2006: p. 36). The name of the new-born company was also publicised within the film's text. The last lines (of a dialogue between two hoods) in *Too Many Ways* are:

> Bo: We'll meet in the Milkyway Restaurant at 10 pm, come if you like, bastard!
>
> Kau: Damn you! You are insane!

With the fictional 'Milkyway Restaurant' serving as a conspicuous reference to itself, Milkyway was self-advertising through its output, drawing the audience's attention to the production company behind the film text. Moreover, the quoted lines with which the film ends capture the pitch of the first Milkyway titles and set the tone for upcoming productions. Spontaneous, off-key, cynical, the films were attuned to the Hong Kong people's distress and disbelief towards the transfer of sovereignty. The region's political and cultural identity after the handover became the overwhelming concern among Hong Kongers and spilled over – or was astutely incorporated – into Milkyway's productions. Several early films, such as *Beyond Hypothermia*, *Too Many Ways* and *Intruder* (1997, Tsang Kan-Cheung), directly engaged with issues of identity and recognition. In particular, *Intruder* tells a story in which illegal migrants from the mainland brutally snatch Hong Kong citizens' identities, metaphorically equating the mainland with an intruder. Similarly, *Expect the Unexpected* ends with a local police squad being wiped out by two mainland gangsters. Political attitudes implied in film dialogue comfortably catered to the local population's aversion to the Reunion as well. A piece of dialogue in *Too Many Ways*, for example, ridiculed the mainland authority, which also reveals that, at that time, the company was not thinking about the mainland market at all:

> Matt: No one will have good ending after robbing the Communists!
>
> Kau: We are not robbing the Communists, we are robbing the Triad!

Overall, in accordance with the political climate, Milkyway's work tended to develop a pessimistic outlook. Whereas *Loving You* and *Lifeline* ended on happy or positive notes, later films often had open (such as *Intruder*) or ironic endings (such as *Final Justice*). A tragically 'everybody dies' ending as in *Beyond Hypothermia* became the company's favourite. The pattern was revisited in three consecutive crime thrillers that came out in 1998: *The Longest Nite* (1998, Patrick Yau), *Expect the Unexpected* (1998, Yau) and *A Hero Never Dies* (1998, To). Like most of the previous films, all three star Sean Lau, who became an icon of Milkyway's productions. His lower profile compared with many male leads in previous Hong Kong crime films (such as John Woo's films) was in accordance with Milkyway's characterisation of male characters in its early

films. Heroes in these films were less impeccable or capable but more eccentric in terms of their behaviours and personalities. Problematised masculinity and anti-heroism can be read as suggesting a collective psychology of Hong Kong at the time. From the pre-Milkyway titles to the company's early productions, the style of the films turned darker and bleaker correspondingly. For example, in *Too Many Ways* and *The Odd One Dies*, Milkyway started to use a great deal of lens filters to create a sense of noir. The noirish, hyperconscious style and fatalistic, pessimistic attitude were further developed in *The Longest Nite*, *Expect the Unexpected* and *A Hero Never Dies*.

Generic, thematic and stylistic consistencies quickly gained critical recognition for the Milkyway team. Local critics appreciated the three 1998 films' grasp of the psychology of the local people at the time (discussed in the next chapter). However, critical acknowledgement was not matched by commercial success. As Table 1 shows, box-office revenues of each of Milkyway's films released during 1996–1998 were below HK$10 million. The highest-grossing one during the period, *The Longest Nite*, was filmed on a budget of HK$8 million ('A lang…', 1999), meaning that it received less than HK$1.5 million net profit. The relatively stronger performance of *The Longest Nite* and *A Hero Never Dies* could be attributed to star power from Tony Leung and Leon Lai's joining those respective films. Some of the rest, including *Too Many Ways*, even failed to cover the cost of production (An, 1998: p. 31). After the critically acclaimed 1998 trilogy, Milkyway ran into heavy debts (Pang, 2005: p. 49). Although the local market was sluggish in general during the years, the most popular films could still gross over HK$40 million. That is to say, Milkyway's productions were simply not attractive to a mass audience. From a financial perspective, the company's initial localisation production strategy was a failure.

Table 1. Box-office revenues of Milkyway films, 1996–1998[1]

Film	Box-office revenues (HK$ million)
Beyond Hypothermia	2.6
Final Justice	3.7
Too Many Ways to Be No. 1	3.1
The Odd One Dies	1.7

Intruder	0.4
The Longest Nite	9.5
Expect the Unexpected	5.3
A Hero Never Dies	6.7

Milkyway realised its productions' detachment from the public, as To mentioned on various occasions:

> We are in a recession and I think there is a responsibility to be closer to the audience. […] We felt we need to change, to come back from the cold world and please the audience. (Tsui and Fong, 1999: p. 65)

In another interview, he stated,

> [W]e found with these films that nobody went to see them, so we decided to make films the audience would follow and *Running out of Time* was the result. (Teo, 2007: p. 220)

A revised grand strategy was then formulated within a short time, through several film projects. As To suggested in the statement above, *Running Out of Time* (1999, To) represented Milkyway's first strategic adjustment. The cop caper differs from previous Milkyway films in various ways. It depicts a relatively light-hearted catch-me-if-you-can type of game between a detective and a criminal. There is little graphic violence. The script is not laden with political overtones but punctuated with humorous moments. Although the criminal suffers from a fatal disease that is worsening, the character does not die at the end, which is in stark contrast to the 1998 trilogy, in which death always befalls the characters without warning. Sean Lau played the detective and local megastar Andy Lau played the criminal. The casting of box-office attraction Andy Lau, among other things, showed that Milkyway had begun to pay more attention to the market. After building a filmography of over a hundred titles, Andy Lau played an antagonist for the first time, which potentially increased the appeal of the film. It was also the first time that he cross-dressed in a film. More than creating a comedic effect, this redefined the character relationship and tone of the film. In the transvestism scene, Sean Lau puts his arm around the shoulder

of the cross-dressed Andy Lau and kisses 'her' on the cheek. They are not the enemies or doppelgängers of each other as with male leads in previous Milkyway and other Hong Kong crime films: there is a 'romantic' relationship between them. *Running Out of Time* has an obviously romantic subplot between Andy Lau's character and a girl, for which a bus serves as a rendezvous. In a similar fashion, a café is used as a rendezvous for the detective and the criminal to develop a rather intimate relationship. A continuation of Milkyway's crime thriller series, the film was meanwhile infused with elements of romance and comedy to appeal to a wider audience. In this tentative project, Milkyway choose to balance the creators' genre preferences and public taste. The box-office result was good. *Running Out of Time* grossed HK$14.6 million and ranked number eight at the local box office in that year.[2]

Genre-crossing was not a simple answer to Milkyway's problems at the box office. In the same year, the company also released its first feature with romance as the main plot. *Sealed with a Kiss* (1999, Chiu) is basically a love story between two young people, but it crosses genres as the male lead is involved in gangs. The story is interspersed with gang fights throughout and ends with the tragic death of the young man. The downbeat tone and the tragic ending recall Milkyway's early films, and the film indeed repeated the earlier films' commercial failure grossing only HK$1.4 million. That was even less than the receipts for *The Mission* (1999, To), a tiny-budgeted gangster film released by the company in the same year. A new attempt alongside of *Running Out of Time*, *Sealed with a Kiss* showed Milkyway, first, that it is likely that comedy, rather than romance, sells and, second, that combining romance and crime in one single film does not necessarily work.

Based on that experience, in 2000, Milkyway adopted a new strategy and 'commenced to produce comedy films to increase public awareness' (MIHL, 2002: p. 61). The first such production was *Needing You* (2000, To and Wai), which became a turning point in the company's production history. Not only was it the first comedy from Milkyway, but the film was also the debut product of One Hundred Years. Starting with *Needing You*, the collaboration with, and investment from, One Hundred Years allowed Milkyway to produce films with production budgets of over HK$10 million (MIHL, 2002: p. 61). In addition,

Milkyway's founders admitted that personally joining One Hundred Years and working as administrative staff in a real office environment contributed to the conception of *Needing You* (Shin, 2001: p. 50). Produced on a larger scale, the film was expected to (re)shape the destiny of Milkyway and One Hundred Years. Compared with the process of how it made a name in working in the crime thriller genre, Milkyway's effort to succeed in romantic comedies involved much more deliberation, as would be illustrated in an analysis of *Needing You*. With respect to distribution, the film was the first Milkyway title released in the summer months, which usually leads to larger audience attendance. With respect to the film per se, the words 'I need you', which echo the English title, adequately represents the message from the production company to the domestic audience.

Starring Andy Lau and local pop singer Sammi Cheng, the office romance was the first Milkyway title clearly targeted at a female audience. If not totally absent, women in earlier Milkyway films play mostly supporting, symbolic roles. Occasionally, leading roles for female actors are those stereotypically associated with the opposite sex, such as the killer in *Beyond Hypothermia* and the criminal in *Intruder*. Cheng's character in *Needing You*, on the contrary, is very realistic. The story is familiar – the protagonists meet, encounter difficulties, and end up happily together, but Cheng's character is an ordinary woman living in the city, a working lady, a girl next desk. She works in a cubicle in a corner at the office and sleeps in a single bed in a corner at home. She shops to release stress and has to work hard to pay off a mortgage at the same time. Sometimes scatter-brained and sometimes hysterical, she represents imperfection and ordinariness. In addition, Cheng's spontaneous, effortless acting renders the character better-rounded. The heroine is designed as a mirror of the women sitting in the cinema, a mirror of millions of women in contemporary Hong Kong.

As Lau's character remarks that life is no easier for men, *Needing You* was not made for an exclusively female audience. The film portrays Hong Kong as a stressful city, particularly regarding housing. Because they have to pay for their new home, the heroine's family keeps talking about economic pressures. Her brother is always holding a calculator, ready to calculate the value of everything. The film even gives detailed prices of apartments in different locations in Hong

Kong through the characters' lines. The particular concern about house prices can be seen as a response to the 'land application list system' introduced by the local government in 1999. Basically, the system limited government intervention in land sales and allowed housing developers the right to trigger land auctions, which could potentially increase house prices. Released in the year that followed, *Needing You* commented on local affairs on behalf of the local people. It speaks to and for audiences of the social class represented by the characters on screen. It was a film made for the common people, especially the white-collar workers or middle class. When discussing *Love on a Diet* (2001, To and Wai), a descendant of *Needing You*, To explained the change in Milkyway's production strategy in terms of the target audience:

> This kind of film can be successful because we made sure to aim for the middle-class audience. Before, something like a low-class movie was more popular – stories about people of the streets in Hong Kong. The middle-class did not used to be the major audience. Now you can see something in the stories, in the production values, and in certain creative concepts, Hong Kong cinema's recognition of an emerging middle-class audience. Only a few years ago, many movies in Hong Kong were, for example, films with a lot of dirty jokes or stories about gangsters. But now Hong Kong has changed very much […]. (Leary, 2004)

While describing the stress in the city, ultimately, *Needing You* creates for the local audience a sense of self-confidence through its comments on Hong Kong's relations with China and other Asian countries and the United Kingdom, its former coloniser. Released in the years immediately following the handover, it presents the impact of the historical event through a scene in which the heroine is learning Mandarin on a train, practicing the sentence 'Good morning, comrades!' By using the word 'comrade', strong ideological connotations of which had nearly been lost in common usage in contemporary China, the film recalls a pre-economic-reform China. By associating the country with illegal cabs, counterfeit goods and corruption, the film attempts to create a negative image of China in, or to fit in, the audience's imagination (the film was not released in the mainland). Comment on the former coloniser is more implicit. The villain (played by Lam Suet) is a senior manager characterised by his

preference for English over Cantonese. His use of English instead of Cantonese words is satirised by his colleagues, and his limited English is presented in a way that makes the language sound foolish and ridiculous. We are told that the company in which the protagonists work has business relationships in mainland China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore and other Asian countries. Even though Hong Kong was suffering the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis, it is still presented as a bustling business hub in Asia.

The film, tailored for the domestic market and adopting what Darrell William Davis and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh (2008: p. 49) call a 'new localism' strategy that reworks old forms and genres 'with local sensibilities and references', registered record revenue. It raked in HK$35.2 million and became the first local box-office champion in Milkyway's history. Its box-office receipts even ranked number four of all Hong Kong films for the entire period from 1997 to 2006 (Jiang et al., 2007: p. 117). Pang Laikwan (2005: p. 50) argues that *Needing You* provided a solution to the declining, masculine-dominated Hong Kong cinema, stating that 'its commercial success marked the cinema's collective turn to women[-oriented] genres and female audiences after decades of ignoring this market'. For Milkyway, the film's strong commercial performance confirmed the company's confidence in extending into new genres and made the film an archetype of its romantic comedies. The Lau and Cheng pairing became a staple of Milkyway's romances and one of the most popular and bankable screen couples in contemporary Hong Kong cinema. The Chinese titles of some of Milkyway's later romances, such as *Love on a Diet* ('Man and Women on a Diet' translated from the Chinese title), *Let's Sing Along* (2001, Chow) ('Singing Men and Women') and *Don't Go Breaking My Heart* (2011, To) ('Single Men and Women'), were named after the pattern set by *Needing You* ('A Single Man and a Single Woman'), and the series developed into a label for the production company. Overall, the highly commercially-oriented production line starting with *Needing You* was proved sustainable in the home market. *Needing You*'s success was replicated: *Love on a Diet* ranked number two in 2001, grossing HK$40.4 million; *My Left Eye Sees Ghost* (2002, To and Wai) ranked number four in 2002, grossing HK$20.7 million; *Yesterday Once More* (2004, To) ranked number six in 2004, grossing HK$15.4 million.[3]

Upon realising the need to bow to public taste, Milkyway had tried to balance artistic impulse and commercial concern within one film in *Running Out of Time*, but it finally turned the business question of how to balance artistic and commercial considerations into how to make the most of both. The answer it found was to split its production into two strands, with revenues from its romantic comedies financially supporting the production of its crime thrillers. Milkyway continued to make crime thrillers after the introduction of *Needing You* and subsequent romances and comedies, and lower commercial expectation for the crime thrillers provided more room for creative freedom in these genres. Supporting the making of a film with the earnings of another film was not Milkyway's invention. There had been other examples in the history of Hong Kong cinema: Wong Kar-wai produced the comedy *The Eagle Shooting Heroes* (1993, Lau) to recoup the money laid out on his *Ashes of Time* (1994, Wong Kar-wai); To's *Executioners* (1993, To) was made to recover the cost of his *The Heroic Trio* (1993, To). All such instances had represented expedience and were on a basis of individual projects. At the turn of the century, Hong Kong cinema's revenue growth had declined for seven consecutive years. Fiscal constraints and creative paralysis became a shared experience for local film companies. By developing the tactic into a feasible production system, Milkyway contributed a strategic innovation to the local film industry that not only alleviated financial stress but also fostered creativity through product differentiation and diversification.

Furthermore, although a couple of films tried to blend the genres, Milkyway tended to discriminate strictly between its two lines of production in public. For example, when being asked about a romance and a thriller produced around the same time, To categorically responded that '*Love on a Diet* is a commercial movie. We made that movie so we could survive to make *Fulltime Killer*. It's a common love story – that kind of thing – only for the box-office'; regarding the connection between the two kinds of films, he continued to emphasise that '[t]here was a clear separation between productions' at Milkyway (Leary, 2004). As To's response suggests, Milkyway regarded its crime thrillers as the opposite of its romantic comedies and an antithesis to commercial cinema. Genre films are usually referred to as commercial films in the film community, and crime

and action-related films had been considered highly commercial in the context of Hong Kong cinema. At Milkyway, with the romantic comedies serving as a foil to the crime thrillers, crime thrillers were positioned by the company as a non-mainstream counterpart of the former, a somewhat highbrow form of cinema like, for example, art-house films. As such, the division of production repositioned the darker genres as aiming at a niche audience – critics and festival programmers. Thereafter, the two lines of production assumed different functions in the growth of the company. Milkyway started to develop into a strong brand both commercially and critically. In the early 2000s, it had grown into an emerging powerhouse among local production houses and had secured a foothold in the domestic market.

Expanding into the mainland Chinese market

Due to the size of its domestic market, Hong Kong cinema has depended extensively on overseas markets throughout its history. Since the 1990s, it gradually lost its share in Taiwanese, South Korean and other Asian markets. Meanwhile, because of the growth of the Chinese economy and the Reunification, the mainland became a new priority in Hong Kong film companies' plans for development and expansion. In 2003, on a policy level, the signing of the CEPA further oriented the Hong Kong film industry towards the mainland market. The CEPA had two stipulations that tremendously affected Hong Kong cinema. First, 'Chinese language motion pictures produced in Hong Kong may be imported for distribution in the Mainland on a quota-free basis'; second, 'Motion pictures jointly produced in Hong Kong and the Mainland are treated as Mainland motion pictures for the purpose of distribution in the Mainland' (CEPA, 2003: p. 18). Mainland–Hong Kong co-productions were no longer subject to the quota system for foreign films but were treated as local films. This turned the mainland into a new 'domestic' market for the Hong Kong film industry. This also meant that Hong Kong filmmakers and companies had to serve the new 'domestic' audience. The profound impact of the new policies was well illustrated in Milkyway's case. In interviews conducted in the year that the CEPA was signed, To believed that the potential and future of Hong Kong

cinema lay in the mainland (Gomes and Canau, 2003; Sheehan, 2003). In the same year, Dennis Law became a substantial shareholder of Milkyway. He admitted that he tapped into the film business primarily due to the potential opportunities brought about by the signing of the CEPA, and that exploring the mainland market was on Milkyway's agenda ('Zuo sheng yi…', 2003).

From 2003 on, most of Milkyway's new productions were released in both Hong Kong and mainland China. Table 2 presents the films' revenues in the two markets from 2003 to 2015. In 2007, for the first time, a Milkyway film's mainland revenues exceeded its Hong Kong revenues. After 2008, all new releases earned more in the mainland than in Hong Kong. As the box-office figures suggest, the mainland became the most important market for the company in the 2010s. Among all the titles listed in Table 2, four demand close attention: *Love for All Seasons* (2003, To and Wai), *Linger* (2008, To), *Don't Go Breaking My Heart* (2011, To and Wai) and *Drug War* (2012, To). These four were all advertised as To or Milkyway's mainland 'debuts' in their promotional campaigns. Behind the curious fact that the same selling point was used for all four films, there were business strategies, aesthetic debates and ideological struggles going on during Milkyway's journey to the mainland. The four films outline such a trajectory, and this history represents the Hong Kong film industry's complex attitudes towards the integration of local cinema into Chinese cinema. Most importantly, Milkyway's experience provides a typical example of the process of Hong Kong film's mainlandisation.

Table 2. Milkyway's films released in mainland China, 2003–2015[4]

Film	Release Year	Hong Kong revenues (HK$ million)	Mainland revenues (CN¥ million)
Love for All Seasons	2003	24.7	10.0
Running on Karma	2003	26.2	14.0
Turn Left, Turn Right	2003	13.9	6.5

Breaking News	2004	7.8	6.5
Throw Down	2004	8.2	5.0
Yesterday Once More	2004	15.3	14.0
Election	2005	15.7	6.0
2 Become 1	2006	10.1	8.3
Eye in the Sky	2007	4.1	7.5
Hooked on You	2007	9.2	2.3
Triangle	2007	5.3	28.2
Linger	2008	1.0	6.9
Mad Detective	2008	11.0	2.4
Sparrow	2008	5.5	13.6
PTU II	2009	3.9	6.5
Don't Go Breaking My Heart	2011	11.4	95.1
Punished	2011	2.2	7.9
Life Without Principle	2012	8.2	26.1
Romancing in Thin Air	2012	8.8	21.3
Motorway	2012	14.5	28.5
Drug War	2012	4.8	146.9
Blind Detective	2013	14.9	209.4
Don't Go Breaking My Heart II	2014	12.0	198.4
Office	2015	5.0	47.2

Love for All Seasons was the first Milkyway title co-produced with a mainland company and screened at mainland theatres. In the wake of the success of *Needing You*, Milkyway began to make romantic comedies scheduled to open during the lucrative Chinese New Year period. *Love for All Seasons* was the

third, but catered to both Hong Kong and mainland audiences. The heroine (playd by Sammi Cheng) is mainland Chinese, as is the secondary female lead, played by a Chinese actress (Li Bingbing). Approximately one-third of the film takes place and is shot in the mainland. The mainland location is not an urban area but a Chinese temple easily distinguished from a Hong Kong setting and identifiable by Chinese audiences. Martial arts and traditional medicine are featured to add more Chinese elements and cultures to the film. The debut in the mainland delivered a decent performance, as it ranked number eight at the annual box office, but its mainland revenues were less than half its revenues in Hong Kong. The comparison showed that, first, Hong Kong was still the major market for Milkyway and second, that the first foray into the mainland was not quite successful.

Love for All Seasons was a one-off attempt. After it, Milkyway showed less enthusiasm for the mainland market. In the next five years, its new productions continued to be released in that market, but none of them were intentionally mainlandised or self-domesticated like *Love for All Seasons* was. As Law explained, the company's indifference was due in part to the fact that, as a production company which did not own the copyrights of its films, it benefited less from the CEPA than film financing and distribution companies did ('Luo shou yao…', 2003). In addition, To complained that receipts in the mainland did not always go to Hong Kong film companies as agreed in the CEPA thanks to theatrical distributors' manipulation and fabrication of box-office figures (Chen and Xu, 2008). According to public data (see Table 2), most of Milkyway's films released during 2003–2007 performed only moderately well in the mainland. Even if one-third of a film's revenues went to Hong Kong companies as stipulated in the CEPA, these films would still not earn much for Milkyway.

Another explanation for the company's reluctance to interact with the mainland market frequently found in media coverage was its problems with censorship. Take *Election II* (2006, To) for example: Milkyway and China Star claimed that they decided to give up the mainland market and did not even submit the film to Chinese censors so as to 'preserve the completeness of the film' (Yip, 2006). Although often put into categories not suitable for children and young people, Milkyway's films were rated under a rating system in Hong Kong. Without a

rating system, censorship was nevertheless intangible, complicated and arguably more stringent in mainland China. The experience of Milkyway films indicates what touches the nerve of the censorship authorities. *Exiled* (2006, To), for example, failed to pass the censors due to its gangster themes and graphic violence galore ('"Fang zhu"…', 2006). Most of Milkyway's films released in the mainland, regardless of their genres, were re-edited before screening. For example, religion and spirituality-related content is edited out in *Running on Karma* (2003, To); gang initiation rituals are removed in the gangster film *Election* (2005, To); and prostitution scenes are deleted from the romance *Hooked on You* (2007, Law). In general, because of the company's preference for particular themes, such as fatalism, karma and violence, its films suffered significantly at the hands of Chinese censors. The films were amended in various ways, including changing film titles, cutting shots or sequences, removing characters, changing scene order, rewriting lines, inserting intertitles, and tacking on new endings.

On the one hand, Milkyway cooperated. At its distributors' request, its staff, such as assistant directors, would make changes under the guidelines provided by Chinese censors. On the other hand, To regularly criticised Chinese censorship in interviews as disrespectful to the original works. Many Hong Kong film companies and filmmakers shared Milkyway's anger and frustration, but few grumbled as much or went as far as Milkyway did. For example, To refused to claim the mainland versions of his Milkyway films as his works and stated that he acknowledged only the Hong Kong versions (Zhang and Li, 2011). In this way, the films' Hong Kong and mainland versions were counterposed. They were treated by Milkyway not as different versions of cultural commodities but as genuine and fake works of art. While censorship brought Milkyway troubles, it was also used by the company to both attract media and audience attention and raise the status of the films. Ultimately, though, during this period, Milkyway chose to provide re-edited versions of its films for the mainland market rather than letting concerns about China's censorship impact the conception and production of the films. In other words, it rejected pre- or self-censorship.

The situation was changed by *Linger*, a ghost romance promoted by Milkyway as the first To film released during Chinese New Year in the mainland and a project to test the waters of that market (Zeng, 2008; He, 2011). *Linger* does not have a stellar cast and is not very 'Milkyway' in that, among other things, the script was not produced by the Milkyway Creative Team. It achieved disappointing box-office returns and critical responses in both markets – it was even called To's 'Waterloo' (e.g., Mai, 2008). The pilot project does not stand out in the company's filmography in most aspects; however, it divides Milkyway's production history into two entirely different phases. Before *Linger*, censorship was imposed on the films. Following *Linger*, Milkyway engaged in self-censorship for the mainland market. As Milkyway acknowledged, the film, which touches on spiritual matters and contains sex scenes, was made to measure the scope and limits of film censorship in China (Fang, Wong and Yu, 2011). It was capitulation to the censorship authorities. It demonstrated a willingness to surrender more artistic autonomy to economic interest. It also signalled a shift of focus away from Hong Kong. In addition, *Linger* was the first Milkyway film shot in Mandarin and casting a Chinese actress as the female lead. Five years after *Love for All Seasons*, Milkyway further prepared itself for the mainland. The transformation was possibly a result of the company's situation, as it had broken away from Law's Milkyway Group and become independent again in 2007. Given the growth and potential of the Chinese film market, however, Milkyway's strategic change was more likely an expected and obvious choice for any Hong Kong film company that sought to thrive in new circumstances.

Milkyway continued its steps into the mainland into the 2010s, when mainland–Hong Kong co-productions in general increased to about 30 titles per year (from about ten titles per year before the signing of the CEPA) and became fixtures in lists of top-earning films. It was also in around 2010 that the term 'Hong Kong film' became increasingly problematic, an indicator of which being that the Hong Kong Motion Picture Industry Association (HKMPIA) offered new criteria for the definition of Hong Kong film in 2009 under the impact of the proliferation of mainland–Hong Kong co-productions.[5] Tables 3 and 4 present comparative data showing the market share of first-run Hong Kong films and mainland–Hong Kong co-produced films in the mainland, and the market share

of first-run mainland–Hong Kong co-productions in Hong Kong and the mainland in recent years. The tables show that co-productions became the predominant type of films from Hong Kong in the mainland and that the mainland was the major market for the co-productions.

Table 3. Mainland–Hong Kong co-productions in Hong Kong, 2012–2015[6]

Year	Number of titles	Box-office revenues (HK$ million)	Market share (%)
2012	35	248.30	15.92
2013	26	274.76	17.58
2014	27	234.13	14.46
2015	32	267.46	13.69

Table 4. Hong Kong productions and mainland–Hong Kong co-productions in mainland China, 2012–2015[7]

	Hong Kong productions			Mainland–Hong Kong co-productions		
Year	Number of titles	Box-office revenues (RMB million)	Market share (%)	Number of titles	Box-office revenues (RMB million)	Market share (%)
2012	3	22	0.13	30	2585	15.38
2013	2	16	0.00	22	4863	22.33
2014	4	194	0.65	23	3932	13.26
2015	4	52	0.11	26	7026	15.94

Within this background, while forming a partnership with a Chinese media group, Milkyway released *Don't Go Breaking My Heart*, a co-produced romantic comedy heavily promoted as the first Milkyway film specifically made to crack the mainland market. To told journalists that the film project was

planned seeing mainland China's urbanisation (Fang, Wong and Yu, 2011), and stated that 'I felt it was time [to enter the market] because the [mainland] Chinese audience had grown and matured' (Wong, 2011). According to the production company, the film was carefully self-censored in order to pass through the mainland's censorship without needing to be re-edited before release (Zhang and Li, 2011). After *Love for All Seasons*, which was made without much concern about censorship, and *Linger*, which was made without high commercial expectations, the third 'debut' *Don't Go* announced that Milkyway had eventually retargeted the mainland as its major market. The film ushered in a new era also in being a tribute to *Needing You*, another landmark film in Milkyway's production history. *Needing You* was Milkyway's first commercial hit in its home market and set a template for many of the company's later projects. It proved Milkyway productions' commercial viability in Hong Kong: *Don't Go* was to prove the same in the mainland.

Meanwhile, *Don't Go* was packaged as a remake of *Needing You*. The two are both office romances, with the translations of their Chinese titles being almost identical. *Don't Go*'s conception, narrative and characterisation are partly adopted from *Needing You*. Some scenes are strongly reminiscent of the latter, such as the one in which the heroine is learning Cantonese on a bus, reminding audiences of the scene in *Needing You* in which the heroine is practicing Mandarin on a train. The film obviously wanted to capture the female market. It has two equally-weighted romantic plots revolving around the heroine and allows her to choose between her suitors. She is similar to the heroine in *Needing You* in terms of age, social status, personality and behaviour. *Don't Go* unfolds and develops against the background of the 2008 financial crisis and presents the impact of the stock market crash, especially the massive shutdowns and layoffs, to address a wider audience as *Needing You* did with its depiction of economic stress. Milkyway clearly expected *Don't Go* to become its new ground-breaking production by repeating the formula that contributed to *Needing You*'s success.

A different primary target audience determined that *Don't Go* is nevertheless different in many respects from *Needing You*. Firstly, the heroine is a Chinese character played by a Chinese actress. Her two Hong Kong suitors try their best

to please her throughout the film – as Hong Kong filmmakers were trying their best to please a Chinese audience. Secondly, in *Needing You*, the company in which the protagonists work has business relationships with a range of countries and regions; *Don't Go* nevertheless emphasises mainland China as the focus of the protagonists' company's business. For example, the heroine is sent to identify her company's potential investees in the mainland and asked to draw up reports of China's real estate industry and of mainland companies listed in Hong Kong. Moreover, as a reflection of the then-world economic order, the fictional company in *Needing You* is designed as a subsidiary of a Japanese company. In the year that *Don't Go* was released, China overtook Japan as the world's second-largest economy. The growing Chinese economy became an underlying but ever-present theme in *Don't Go*.

Thirdly, the story begins in Hong Kong, moves to the mainland, cuts back and forth between Hong Kong and a mainland city in the final third of the film, and ends in the mainland, following a trajectory seemingly parallel to that of Hong Kong cinema and its film industry. The first image of the mainland is the city's skyline at night, a sea of lights. The establishing shot introduces key locations in the mainland part and also a busy, vibrant China. *Don't Go* does feature traditional Chinese houses (the heroine's home in her hometown) to distinguish the two parts, but the most important architecture in the mainland section is a building that one of her suitors builds for the heroine. The building develops quickly from a construction site to a skyscraper, as most buildings do in China today. The showdown between the love rivals takes place in two neighbouring skyscrapers, and the film ends with another nocturnal shot of the city's skyline that echoes the opening shot of the mainland section. In general, *Don't Go* presents a positive or at least neutral image of China, which is not found in *Needing You* and many other Milkyway films. The romance was like a love letter from Milkyway, written to renew its relationship with the mainland audience.

After *Love for All Seasons*, *Linger*, and another dozen titles, Milkyway finally achieved a huge commercial success in the mainland. *Don't Go* ranked 19th among local films at the Chinese box-office in 2011 and grossed RMB 95.1 million, more than eight times its gross in Hong Kong. It became Milkyway's highest-grossing film to date. The film was a carefully designed project; it was

also a continuation of *Love for All Seasons* and *Linger*. Although Milkyway's productions were screened at mainland theatres regardless of genre, these romantic films played strategic roles in the company's plans for the mainland market. Milkyway's production of romantic films came after its production of crime films in Hong Kong, but for the mainland, it chose to use romantic films to pave the way. As To revealed, 'after *Needing You*, *Love on a Diet* and *My Left Eye Sees Ghost*, we began to think about stepping into the mainland market with a [similar romantic] film for urban audiences there' (Zheng, 2011). The company learned its lesson from its initial commercial failure in the home market and adjusted its strategy when entering a new market. This time in the mainland, Milkyway 'extended' into the crime thriller genre after the success of romantic comedies.

Two years later, in 2013, Milkyway launched *Drug War*, a co-production widely promoted in the media as To and the company's 'debut' crime thriller for the mainland. Seen by Milkyway 'as a chance to prove ourselves to the censors and to China' (Marsh, 2013), the film was strictly pre-censored and re-edited. To dwelt on the production process:

> When we got the opportunity to film this in mainland China we were very aware of the rules. We did look carefully in advance for what would resonate in the local market, and what would be allowed. We took precautions, making sure we could adapt if the authorities, or the Censor Board, judged a certain scene to be too controversial. (Vijn, 2013)

In another interview, he states further that:

> we shot two versions for quite a few scenes, so that if there's a problem with one cut, we can just replace it. That anxiety about getting approval from the censors was more stressful than the actual production. But the actual engagement with the censors was not that difficult, as we put much thought about what to put into the film. They said there were too many gunfights, and too many detectives dying; they said nothing like that ever happened in the history of the [People's Republic]. So we just trimmed the film along those lines. (Tsui, 2013)

Drug War tells a story of a Chinese narcotics unit chasing a Hong Kong drug cartel. All members of the cartel are killed at the end, and the film ends with the last member executed by lethal injection. In a sense, *Drug War* was a death knell for Hong Kong film. Not the first Milkyway thriller released in the mainland, it was nevertheless the first Milkyway film shot entirely in the mainland and casting a mainland actor as one of the two male leads. A police procedural portraying the police force in China, it is very much a Chinese film, as a growing number of mainland–Hong Kong joint productions are. There are some spectacular extreme long shots in *Drug War*, in which ships with national flags of China on them dock in a port. These shots are visually striking, with the vivid red in the flags against a pale background. They are also symbolically powerful, as they confirm and strengthen the film's identity. From *Love for All Seasons* to *Linger* to *Don't Go* then to *Drug War*, Chinese elements and themes on- and off-screen gradually and conspicuously increased and dominated. The localisation of Milkyway's films epitomised the mainlandisation or (re)nationalisation of Hong Kong cinema.

In *Drug War*, the Hong Kong characters played by Hong Kong actors are the antagonists. In particular, one of the male leads, a drug lord played by Louis Koo, is the type barely found in previous Milkyway crime films. He is characterised by his selfishness and ultimate betrayal of friendship and brotherhood. For him, survival has been the only concern. To admitted that the casting was a conscious decision and a reflection of the current relationship between Hong Kong and China:

> You'll notice [in *Drug War*], for example, that all of the Hong Kongese actors play bad guys. All of the Chinese actors, or at least nearly all of them, play the good guys. This was a very conscious decision. In the 80s and the in [*sic*] 90s, and actually even to this day somewhat, it was common for Chinese actors to play the bad guys in Hong Kong films. But now we wanted to set out specifically to do the opposite. We wanted to show another side. […] So it's not so much the story that seems original, but the situation we show this time. (Marsh, 2013)

Moreover, the '[c]onstruction of Louis Koo's character came from reaching drug dealers in Mainland China' (Saathoff, 2013). Concerning the smaller roles, the director revealed that, 'What happened is that a few weeks after we finished the original script and had the story mostly in place, we realized that the film was missing a Hong Kong touch. It was completely Chinese. That's why we decided to use so many Hong Kong actors in the smaller roles, to give it that Hong Kong feel' (Marsh, 2013). On the surface, 'Hong Kong' is limited to merely symbolic existence, or perhaps nostalgic memories.

However, the finished film implies the situation of Hong Kong and/or its cinema. There is a scene towards the end of the film presented in a typical Milkyway manner. After the shootout and before the arrival of the reinforcements, everyone dies except Koo's character, but his foot is handcuffed to the hand of a dead police officer, so thanks to the weight of the corpse he is unable to escape. In a dusty, bleak setting and against a background of a highway of scattered dead bodies, the Hong Kong drug lord is forcibly and desperately fastened to the Chinese cop. It looks like he is free, but in effect, he is not. The design of the ending was primarily decided based on concerns about censorship – the original idea was that Koo's character escapes, but the director 'doubt[ed] that ending would have passed the censors' (Marsh, 2013). However, this elegiac scene creates a strong metaphor for the relationship between Hong Kong and China.

Engaged largely in censorship including self-censorship, *Drug War* was positioned as an icebreaker for Milkyway's crime thrillers in the mainland and possibly for more Hong Kong filmmakers and companies that work in related genres. In fact, the project's original title was *Icebreaking*, which was rejected by the censorship authority because there had been a mainland film with the same title. Milkyway accepted the request to change the title along with suggested edits to the original script ('Dui hua…', 2014). However, the finished film includes some shots completely irrelevant to the plot, such as the scene of a large number of people breaking the ice on a river to fish; the extraneous scene is inserted right after Koo's character is arrested and loses his freedom. The self-expression or protest is so subtle that the fleeting shots can hardly 'breathe' amidst the procedures of the Chinese police. Such an effort represents Milkyway

and the Hong Kong film industry's struggle during the integration of the industry into a Chinese context.

Drug War earned RMB 146.9 million in the mainland, falling short of the desired result considering the over RMB 100 million investment from Milkyway's China-based strategic partner Hairun Media. As mentioned earlier, Milkyway's collaboration with One Hundred Years/China Star allowed it to produce films with budgets of more than HK$10 million. Its Chinese investors now allowed it to produce on budgets about ten times as large. Apart from a massive audience, capital is the magnet for Hong Kong film companies such as Milkyway. This explains the relocation of Hong Kong's filmmaking personnel and operations in spite of their discontent with limited creative freedom. Films such as *Drug War* were outcomes of China's 'state-managed cultural globalisation; but in the process of the industrialisation of China's film sector and Chinese cinema's assimilation of Hong Kong cinema, Hong Kong filmmakers and companies do not play simply a passive, cooperative role. *Drug War* received an enthusiastic critical reception in the mainland. Even though it was made along the lines set by the censorship authorities, such as reducing scenes of gunfire and the death toll of police officers (Wu and Qin, 2013), the film was acclaimed by critics as a milestone in the history of Chinese police film as it stretched the limits of the genre in Chinese cinema – for example, it was the first time that the carrying out of the death penalty was shown on Chinese screens (e.g., Mo, 2013). As a response to such endorsement, To expressed the intention of changing China's screenscape: 'I hope cop-and-gangster films such as this are everywhere [in China] a decade from now. At that time, when people watch *Drug War* again, they will find it more meaningful' (Feng, 2013).[8] In this sense, *Drug War* was expected to be an icebreaker in a broader context of Chinese cinema. Like in Hong Kong in its early years, Milkyway's romantic comedies and crime thrillers have started to bring it commercial and critical success in mainland China. More importantly, the company has the chance to influence and perhaps redefine Chinese national cinema through aesthetic and ideological negotiation in its business and production operations and in its films. In the late 1990s, N. K. Leung (1998: p. 556), an insider of the Hong Kong film industry, wondered about the future of the industry after the handover: 'will

China open up new audiences for an ailing industry or will Hong Kong filmmakers need to move to China to cultivate a new political and cinematic space [?]'. *Drug War*'s case demonstrates that Milkyway is moving to China to cultivate a new political and cinematic space, not only for the Hong Kong film industry but also for the entirety of Chinese-language cinema.

With films such as *Don't Go* and *Drug War*, Milkyway has certainly considered the mainland its major market in the foreseeable future, but as has been pointed out early on, Milkyway's history does not suggest a rigid trajectory from Hong Kong to the mainland. Recent evidence shows that the company has by no means abandoned Hong Kong. In 2016, Milkyway released two crime thrillers, *Trivisa* (2016, Frank Hui, Jevons Au and Vicky Wong) and *Three* (2016, To), the former only in Hong Kong and the latter mainly for the mainland. Both were presented by Hairun, the investor of *Drug War*, *Don't Go Breaking My Heart II* (2014, To) and *Office* (2015, To) previously. Whereas *Three* is in line with the other Hairun-invested projects in terms of its target market, *Trivisa* represents a new model that Milkyway is likely exploring. An obvious parable (blending fact-based stories with footage of historical events) of Hong Kong's tragic destiny following the handover, *Trivisa* is a deliberate turn away from China's official discourse on Hong Kong and, naturally, from the mainland market. Conveying a bitter reflection on the city's postcolonial history, co-directed by three first-time directors, and produced on a HK$5 million budget (Movie-bigbang, 2016), it very much resembles independent productions from Hong Kong in recent years, despite being Chinese-financed. By producing *Trivisa*, Milkyway thus channelled Chinese investment into Hong Kong's independent production. In contrast to the general viewpoint that 'co-investments will aim at apolitical entertainment to establish a commercial cinema for China' (Yau, 2015: p. 18), Chinese capital served the Hong Kong film industry and the Hong Kong audience owing to Milkyway's mobilisation. Whilst we find Milkyway's resistance in *Drug War* on a textual level, the company's fight for Hong Kong cinema and its film industry has extended to a business level in *Trivisa*. Whether or not *Trivisa* signals a new business strategy or direction, Milkyway continues its role in mobilising resources in Hong Kong and Chinese film industries and in enriching Chinese-language cinema.

Conclusion

Milkyway commenced business with a row of films in similar genres. These crime thrillers that captured the psychology of Hong Kong in the immediate post-1997 years earned critical recognition but experienced commercial failure in the home market. To improve its financial situation, Milkyway adjusted its strategy to make more commercially oriented romantic comedies in the beginning of the 2000s and thereafter split its production into two lines. Product differentiation strengthened the company's foothold in the Hong Kong market and laid the foundation for its ventures into mainland China. Hong Kong cinema's industry environment was tremendously changed by the landmark event of the signing of the CEPA in 2003, a sign of China's 'soft takeover' of the Hong Kong film industry and assimilation of Hong Kong's cinematic culture. At that juncture, Milkyway's productions entered the mainland. Localisation strategies, including compliance with censorship, facilitated its productions' penetration into the market but also led to the mainlandisation of the films. However, the transformation was not done without negotiation and resistance. This history of Milkyway reveals the complexities of the state-led cultural homogenisation from a bottom-up perspective. It shows inconsistencies and discrepancies in operations at project, organisational and policy levels. Hong Kong (co-)produced films are increasingly devoid of local sensibilities and identities. Film companies and talents from the Hong Kong film industry, at least in the mainstream sector, are gradually incorporated into the booming film industry in the mainland. Notwithstanding these overwhelming tendencies, this chapter suggests that Hong Kong cinema's legacies exist beyond narrative strategies and genre approaches and are reflected in film companies' role in, and their capability of, reshaping Chinese cinema and culture.

This chapter gives more weight to Milkyway films' strategic purposes and commercial performance than their critical reception and reputation. While expanding its production scale and extending from Hong Kong to the mainland, Milkyway developed into a celebrated name in the contemporary Hong Kong film industry and cultural community when local cinema declined and

mainlandised. The rise of the Milkyway brand was not the ascent of an individual company without support from external forces. Milkyway's history was deeply embedded in the transition of Hong Kong cinema and in the cultural and ideological conflicts between Hong Kong and China. The next chapter will turn to the critical reception of Milkyway's films in Hong Kong to explore local cultural communities' responses to the (re)nationalisation of Hong Kong cinema and their efforts to define a 'new Hong Kong cinema' through interpretations of Milkyway's work.

Notes

[1] Data collected from Chan, 2000.

[2] Rankings in the chapter are among domestic films.

[3] Data collected from HKNTMPA, 2003; 2005.

[4] Data collected from http://www.cbooo.cn/ and http://58921.com/. Historical exchange rates of Hong Kong dollar to Chinese yuan renmini during this period were between 1.07–0.77.

[5] According to the HKMPIA, 'From 2009 onwards, films considered as Hong Kong Movie by the MPIA must comply with the following requirements stated in (a) or (b): (a) All the presenting companies involved in film production must be registered companies in Hong Kong (For partly companies registered outside Hong Kong, please refer to part b). (b) For partly presenting companies registered outside Hong Kong, bothe requirements must be fulfilled: 1. at least one of the presenting companies is registered in Hong Kong; and 2. Hong Kong permanent residents should take up at least 50% or above of the listed effective post. The effective posts are film, producer, director, script writer, actor or actress. […] For movie without script writer, either the film producer or the director must be Hong Kong permanent citizen. Under usual circumstance where there are five effective posts, at least three positions must be taken by Hong Kong permanent residents.' See HKMIA, 2009.

[6] Data collected from HKMPIA, 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016. Historical exchange rates of Hong Kong dollar to Chinese yuan renminbi during this period were between 0.77–0.83.

[7] Data collected from HKMPIA, 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016.

[8] The translation is my own.

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Chapter 5

In Defence of Hong Kong: Milkyway Films' Domestic Critical Reception

The last chapter outlined Milkyway's production history and examined its films chiefly from a business perspective. The first Milkyway title was released on the eve of Hong Kong's return to China, and all of the company's productions so far have appeared against the background of the transition of Hong Kong and its cinema into a Chinese national context. For the local film industry and the whole of Hong Kong society, the mid-1990s marked the beginning of a new era. Films produced after the handover served as a forum in which the local people responded to the opportunities and, especially, the crisis they observed. In particular, the film community ardently addressed the issue of Hong Kong's cinematic and cultural identity. Spanning the transition period, Milkyway's films constituted an important part in the discourse about post-1997 Hong Kong cinema produced by local film institutions and communities. To continue to investigate the complex process of and conflicting interests in cultural and ideological homogenisation, this chapter undertakes a survey of the critical reception of Milkyway films. It demonstrates that local cultural institutions and communities have played a vital role in promoting Milkyway's films and, more importantly, in defining a 'new Hong Kong cinema' that contests China's nationalisation of Hong Kong film and culture.

Hong Kong's film community since the mid-1990s

Scholars have noted that the cultural world of mid-1990s Hong Kong underwent major changes. The inauguration of the Special Administrative Region (SAR) government, especially the Chief Executive's 1997 policy address, is regarded as a turning point in the promotion of Hong Kong cinema (Chu, 2003; Davis and Yeh, 2008). Darrell William Davis and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh (2008: p. 146) point out that, 'Where film production is no longer Hong Kong's competitive edge, large-scale trade fairs and expositions try to rescue Hong Kong as the heart of Asian cinema.' Due to increased government support since 1997, argues

Yingchi Chu (2003: p. 133), 'Hong Kong cinema is becoming more quasi-national than it had been in the colonial period.' It has to be added that considerable promotion and protection efforts had been made by non-governmental organisations in the mid-1990s, prior to the inauguration of the SAR government. There was a collection of efforts by various players to pull the local film industry out of its doldrums and to intervene in Hong Kong cinema's incorporation into Chinese cinema.

The first significant event was the establishment of the Hong Kong Film Critics Society (HKFCS) in 1995. Its members were mostly high-profile film critics and scholars, and the Society was the first film critics' association in Hong Kong. Engaging in the promotion of local cinema was its major focus, as illustrated in its claimed objectives: 'to unite all critics who share our common goal; to foster an independent spirit of film criticism; to encourage critical writing on Hong Kong cinema from the perspectives of culture and art; to reaffirm the achievements of Hong Kong cinema' ('Xue hui…', n.d.).[1] Later in the same year, another group of critics and journalists formed the Hong Kong Film Critics Association (HKFCA). According to Chan Pak-sang, a member of the HKFCA, the second film critics' association was launched as a reaction to the establishment of the HKFCS, which was seen as an exclusive clique (Su, 2010). Thus, in the mid-1990s, Hong Kong suddenly and thereafter had two film critics' associations contending for influence in interpreting and defining local film in a new era.

As soon as the HKFCS came into being, it created the Hong Kong Film Critics Society Awards. The HKFCA followed suit, creating the Golden Bauhinia Awards the next year 'to promote film culture, protect film critics' interests and foster exchange between the local and overseas film industry' (Stokes, 2007: p. 153). *Historical Dictionary of Hong Kong Cinema* describes the Golden Bauhinia as 'Hong Kong's equivalent of the Golden Globe Awards in the United States' (Stokes, 2007: p. 153), which also applies to the HKFCS Awards. Before the mid-1990s, the only major film-related awards in Hong Kong were the Hong Kong Film Awards, 'Hong Kong's equivalent to Hollywood's Oscars' (Stokes, 2007: p. 173). Chu (2003: p. 62) argues that the appearance of the Hong Kong Film Awards in the early 1980s 'symbolised a recognition by society of the

growth of Hong Kong cinema and indicated that the latter had become a "national" cinema in terms of the participation of its film industry, local government, television, film critics and the community as a whole'. In the mid-1990s, the launches of the HKFCS Awards and the Golden Bauhinia represented a recognition of the decline and the tendency of 'denationalisation' of local cinema.

The Golden Bauhinia was derived from the City Entertainment Awards presented by the eponymous local press, which was also the founder of the Hong Kong Film Awards. One of the most important publications in the history of Hong Kong cinema, *City Entertainment* had become a symbol of Hong Kong's film culture. The replacement of the City Entertainment Awards by the Golden Bauhinia, which was apparently named after the emblem of the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong, was an indicator of local cinema's momentous transition. The replacement also suggested the HKFCA's favourable attitude towards the Reunification. In contrast, the HKFCS made a gesture to demonstrate that Hong Kong cinema was a 'national' cinema while claiming legitimacy for itself. Notwithstanding that Hong Kong was to become a Special Administrative Region of China, the HKFCS joined the International Federation of Film Critics (FIPRESCI), national members of which consist mostly of associations in sovereign states. The divergent directions taken by the HKFCS and the HKFCA testify to Chan Pak-sang's statement that the two organisations had different stances (Su, 2010). Above all, these events show the heightened consciousness and active participation of forces from the local cultural community in writing a new chapter of Hong Kong cinema hand in hand with the filmmaking industry.

As Ruby Cheung (2011) observed, from the mid-1990s onwards, when local cinema went into a downturn, the Hong Kong International Film Festival (HKIFF), the grandest film event in Hong Kong and one of Asia's most prestigious film festivals, redefined its relations and increased collaboration with the local filmmaking industry. Firstly, there was the launch of the 'Hong Kong Panorama' programme and the founding of a corresponding publication. *Hong Kong Panorama*, a separate annual publication from the festival's main

catalogue devoted exclusively to local films, clearly articulated its goal in the introduction in its first issue:

> Other than the political fate that puts us under the international media's blinding limelight […], it is our cinema that puts us on the map of contemporary world culture. I shall not talk about the recession of the local film industry. I am only happy that we still have an industry, and people working independently outside the mainstream, to give voice and shape to our collective hopes and dreams and fears. We may not like what we see, or what we find out about ourselves, but these things come with the package of 'know thyself'. Let us not let up in our efforts to carve out our destiny – 'Made in Hong Kong'. (Wong, 1997: p. 7)

Hong Kong Panorama first appeared in 1997 and ceased publication after 2003. Although short-lived, it served as an important reference for the transforming Hong Kong cinema in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Contributors to the publication and the members of the two local film critics' associations overlapped; altogether, the launches of *Hong Kong Panorama* and the two associations marked a new phase in film criticism in Hong Kong.

In 1999, the HKIFF showed more support for the local filmmaking industry by introducing the 'Hong Kong Director in Focus' programme. After finishing its corporatisation process in 2005, the corporatised HKIFF was managed by the HKIFF Society, an independent non-profit, non-governmental organisation mainly comprised of local critics and film professionals, which allocated more focus to local productions. Whereas previously the festival's evolution into an internationally acclaimed film event had been 'a reflection of the support given by the film industry' (HKIFFS, 2006: p. 1), the festival changed its role given the new conditions. It greatly strengthened its collaboration with the local filmmaking industry, setting itself a mission 'to promote and highlight the achievements of the filmmakers of Hong Kong as well as deepen the appreciation of Hong Kong's cinema history' (HKIFFS, 2006: p. 3). In Cheung's (2009: p. 109) words, the HKIFF eventually turned itself into a stage 'led primarily by the local filmmaking industry and the appeal of individual stars in all sorts of promotional events'.

Aside from the long-established HKIFF, a local circuit and an independent film group jointly launched the Hong Kong Asian Film Festival (HKAFF) in 2004. Claiming to be 'the first of its kind to highlight the outstanding quality of Asian cinema' (HKAFF, 2004), the HKAFF screened local films and designed dedicated programmes for local filmmakers, such as the 'HK First' that showcased debuts of new Hong Kong-based directors. The following year, the Fresh Wave Short Film Competition (renamed Fresh Wave International Short Film Festival in 2010) was launched by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) 'to promote local short films and to support young film talents in Hong Kong' (Fresh Wave, n.d.). Events such as the HKAFF and Fresh Wave were more than attempts to foreground Hong Kong as the centre of Asian cinema; they were also platforms created for promoting local films.

A decade after the establishment of the two film critics' associations, the HKFCA gradually lost to the HKFCS in terms of their influence on the local cultural landscape, a sign of which was the suspension of the HKFCA's Golden Bauhinia after 2007. In comparison, the HKFCS created *HKinema* under the aegis of the HKADC and *Hong Kong Film* in collaboration with a mainland-based media group that year, publications which concentrated on Hong Kong's films and film history. Appearing after the closure of *City Entertainment* early that year, the HKFCS expected *Hong Kong Film* to replace the former and grow into a flagship publication on Hong Kong cinema. Also in 2007, the Hong Kong University Press (HKUP) launched the 'New Hong Kong Cinema' series 'under very special circumstances, during a period of social and political crisis resulting in a change of cultural paradigms' to 'contribute to the sharpening of Hong Kong culture's conceptions of itself' (Abbas and Dissanayke, 2009: p. vii). Whereas the local filmmaking industry's relationship with its counterpart in the mainland became increasingly tight, the cultural community exerted an even greater effort to distinguish Hong Kong cinema from Chinese cinema.[2]

The foregoing discussion has provided a context for the understanding of Milkyway's rise and reputation, which has been inextricably linked with changes in Hong Kong's socio-political situation and cultural scene. Milkyway's films received a variety of accolades at the three major film awards.[3] The Golden Bauhinia aroused controversy and was suspended after a

Milkyway's *Exiled* shared best film with two other titles (*After This Our Exile* [2006, Patrick Tam] and *A Battle of Wits* [2006, Jacob Cheung]). Milkyway's *PTU* was among a small number of titles that the HKUP considered appropriate for defining a 'new Hong Kong cinema'. The HKAFF selected Milkyway films in the line-up of the majority of its editions,[4] and its first 'HK First' programme included a Milkyway title and a documentary on To. The Fresh Wave was instigated by To, and some of its winners have made films for Milkyway. The HKIFF's *Hong Kong Panorama* gave great weight to Milkyway films throughout its publication history, and 'Hong Kong Director in Focus' began with an edition on To. *Hong Kong Film*'s inaugural issue devoted a feature to To and Milkyway. The HKIFF recurrently opened with Milkyway's films. Its thirtieth anniversary, the theme of which was 'Hong Kongers represent Hong Kong's film festival', opened with *Election II*'s premiere and presented a retrospective programme, 'Milkyway Image 1996–2005', at the festival, a seminar entitled 'The First Decade of Milkyway Image' at the Hong Kong Science Museum and a 'Milkyway Image Props Exhibition' at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre. These tribute programmes were part of local cultural institutions and communities' endeavours to preserve Hong Kong's cinematic and cultural legacies.

As Pang Laikwan (2005: p. 38) noted, 'In the depths of one of the industry's most disheartening recessions, Milkyway Image established itself as the leading Hong Kong film company in three years.' Indeed, it established its visibility in Hong Kong at a very early stage of its operation, and during the past two decades, it has constituted a significant part of the discourse on post-handover Hong Kong cinema. For critics, Milkyway was born a barometer of local cinema in transformation and a potential legend intertwined with the fate of this cinema, due to the concurrence of its launch with the handover. Its films have constantly been on local critics' radar. Milkyway's ascent owed local cultural bodies and platforms greatly, and its history was part of a history in which Hong Kong defended itself culturally and ideologically. In the following section, I use materials from the above-mentioned organisations and their publications, such as reviews and overviews in *Hong Kong Panorama*, the HKFCS's commentaries at the HKFCS Awards, and relevant essays in *HKinema* and other venues, to

examine how Milkyway's productions were received and interpreted domestically in critics' efforts to 'make' Hong Kong films.

The writings that I explore are not random comments created by general audiences or scattered in every corner of newspapers, magazines and the Internet. They come from a group of critics who have close links, frequent exchanges and, most importantly, reciprocal relationships with the filmmaking industry. Their stake in the fortune of Hong Kong cinema, more than their 'insider' position, makes them stand out from other critics outside Hong Kong. Even though they perhaps represent a coterie as Chan Pak-sang's criticism of the HKFCS has implied, their resources and leverage provide them with the particular discursive power to shape the discourse of Hong Kong cinema. These critics' writings appeared in venues including but not confined to those covered in this chapter. In fact, a number of reviews to be discussed were originally published elsewhere and were collected, compiled and republished by the HKFCS, the HKIFFS and others in their official publications. These organisations offer us a selective reading in the first place; therefore, I do not intend to claim impartiality and comprehensiveness in this group of critics' interpretations of Milkyway's work and understandings of Hong Kong cinema. Instead, I aim to reveal their interpretations of Milkyway's films as teleological and their film-critical practice in this case, during this historical period, as at once a 'renationalisation' (re-Hong Kong-isation) and a denationalisation (de-Sinicisation) campaign.

Milkyway films as mirrors of Hong Kong

Chu (2003: p. 58) has concluded that the criticism of local films in the two decades preceding the sovereignty transfer represent an endeavour 'to shape Hong Kong cinema as a "national" cinema'. In the years immediately following the handover, during which Milkyway released its first slate of films, Hong Kong cinema as a 'national' cinema had become a rather solid consensus among critics. Throughout Milkyway's history, its films were generally read as products of a historical period characterised by drastic socio-political changes and economic crises taking place in Hong Kong. Local critics barely discussed the films with reference to foreign films or with trends in world cinema but

attended almost exclusively to the Hong Kong context in which the films were made. Firstly and most remarkably, contextualisation and reflectionism were the overall approaches used to interpret Milkyway's productions. Critics tended to read the films through a political lens, keen to 'discover' political innuendos in the films. They considered the films reflective of Hong Kong's socio-political situations and representative of the psychology of the local people. Secondly, Milkyway's films were also discussed in the specific context of the local film industry and traditions in local cinema. The films were seen as responses to new industrial conditions, with a major focus being innovations and subversions that they brought to local cinema and its film industry in terms of production models, generic themes and audio-visual styles. The developments, above all, were addressed to confirm a 'national' film industry and a 'national' cinema. These tendencies emerged as early as in reviews and commentaries on the company's debut and other early films, from *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1*, *The Odd One Dies* and *Intruder* to the 1998 trilogy – *The Longest Nite*, *Expect the Unexpected* and *A Hero Never Dies* – and *Where a Good Man Goes*.

In readings of *Too Many Ways*, 'one of the most important movies of 1997' and 'the most striking picture released in 1997' as Athena Tsui (1998: p. 24) and Stephen Teo (1998: p. 12) respectively called it, a major focus was whether the film responded to the political handover and China–Hong Kong relations in general. Li Cheuk-to (1998: p. 18) argued that, on the one hand, '1997 will go down as the year in which Hong Kong cinema got over its China syndrome' as films such as *Too Many Ways* 'demonstrate a maturity that regards Hong Kong with an engaging world-weariness and no longer considers China […] as of primary concern'. On the other hand, he wrote that 'in both thematic concerns and creative impulses, the Hong Kong cinema of the transition year are [*sic*] unable to divorce itself from the 1997 mindset' (p. 18) and saw Milkyway's films as prime examples. For him, *Too Many Ways* and *The Odd One* 'are governed by black humor and a sense of fatalism'; while *The Odd One* 'still retains a trace of hope', '*Intruder* and [*The*] *Longest Nite* have plunged deep into an abyss of despair', and '[t]he dark desperation of the [latter] films betrays the total collapse of hope in their authors' (p. 18). For Teo (1998: p. 11), films such as *Too Many Ways* were also made to provide relief for the local audience, who

were living with ‘visions of chaos engendered by the handover, such as the collapse of law and order, anarchy in the streets, and repression by the PLA [People’s Liberation Army]’. Released around the time of the handover, these films were taken chiefly as direct reflections of Hong Kong society undergoing a political event. The intention of breaking the ‘China syndrome’ and the ‘1997 mindset’ in discussing the films was actually the other side of the same coin. For critics, these films coming out at this particular historical moment, bore a natural responsibility to engage with local affairs and must have reacted to and commented on Hong Kong’s relations to China in some way.

In addition, critics stressed the creativity of *Too Many Ways*, referring specifically to its narrative and formal characteristics, or ‘level of experimentation’ in Teo’s (1998: p. 12) words, in generic terms. Most critics discussed the film with reference to the indigenous *Young and Dangerous* series (1995–2000, Andrew Lau) and placed it within traditions in the local gangster film genre. For them, *Too Many Ways* represented a subversion of a fad started by the *Young and Dangerous* series in local cinema and took the entire gangster genre forward. Teo saw *Too Many Ways* as part of the ‘triad kid fad’ created by the *Young and Dangerous* films, but noted that in the former, ‘The camera gyrates and goes topsy-turvy with extreme fisheye perspectives; the plot situations are very far-fetched and wholly indeed but creative juices oozed out of this off-beat parody of the gangster thriller, black-humoring the “triad kid” genre and thrashing the triads in general’ (p. 12). Tsui (1998: p. 24) wrote that ‘[a]lthough it [*Too Many Ways*] looks like another instalment of the *Young and Dangerous* fad, its unique story-telling and shooting style are rather subversive, violating mainstream commercial modes of production’ and that ‘[i]ts up-side-down camera angles, shewed sensibilities and complex characters […] change the viewing habits of Hong Kong audiences’. Li Cheuk-to (1997: p. 10) argued that while *Too Many Ways* and the *Young and Dangerous* films both ‘eschewed romanticism’ and thus ‘differed greatly from the inflated romanticism of the “hero films”’, *Too Many Ways* was on its own ‘an exercise in absurd black humour and a subversion of the *Young-&-Dangerous* fad’ (Li, 1998: p. 17). Looking beyond the *Young and Dangerous* films, the HKFCS (1998) acclaimed

Too Many Ways at the HKFCS Awards for 'taking the conventions of gangster films to an absurd extreme and a brilliant open-ended conclusion'.

Because the gangster genre had been a signature of Hong Kong cinema since the 1980s, innovations that critics found in films such as *Too Many Ways* were received as indices of industry change. For Teo (1998: p. 11), films such as *Too Many Ways* demonstrated that 'Hong Kong filmmakers [were] putting economic considerations to one side and getting on with the task of making movies in a creative and self-assured way', and that 'the level of creativity in Hong Kong cinema has actually increased in spite of the economic downturn' (p. 13). He made the argument that '[t]he Hong Kong film industry remains the foremost filmmaking center in the Chinese-speaking world' because 'Taiwan and Mainland China would be hard put to come up with films as imaginative and inventive as *Too Many Ways to be No. 1* [and others]' (p. 11). Teo further proposed that the appearance of genre films including *Too Many Ways* suggested another New Wave and a new phase in Hong Kong cinema:

> Like the New Wave in 1979, filmmakers who sought to break through in terms of technique and style concentrated on a specific genre: the film noir or cops-and-robbers pictures. The triad pictures of 1997 bear a relation to these both in genre terms and stylistic breakthroughs. The representative works here are *Too Many Ways to be No. 1* and *Made in Hong Kong* [1997, Fruit Chan]. (p. 12)

> […] 1997 thus heralds the rise of the late 90s generation of directors: people like Wai Ka-fai, Patrick Leung, Herman Yau, Fruit Chan […] who will define the post-handover Hong Kong cinema. (p. 13)

These arguments are provocative because they predicted a new chapter of Hong Kong cinema at the handover from a perspective other than the socio-political, even though the term 'post-handover' was used. Instead, they were made with particular respect to the industrial and aesthetic history of Hong Kong cinema. The genre conventions and cinematic traditions adopted to assess Milkyway's debut pertain to Hong Kong cinema, at least in the critics' writings. Hong Kong's own film history constituted the single framework within which the critics considered the significance of films such as *Too Many Ways* for the local

film industry. On the surface, this contradicted a strong post-handover sentiment read out of the film by the same critics. However, socio-cultural and industrial/aesthetic angles were actually integrated to delineate a full image of a 'national' cinema by persuading readers that the films operated within both local sensibilities and established industry practice.

Reflectionist reading continued in reactions to the 1998 trilogy, and an economic dimension was added in light of the arrival of the Asian financial crisis. Li (1999: p. 14) found in the three Milkyway titles 'that the sense of crisis brought on by recession is indistinguishable from the sense of political gloom before the Reunification'. In his opinion, not only does '[a] forbidding fatalism [run] through all three films, vividly expressing man's helplessness against destiny', but also, specifically, 'The final annihilation in *Expect the Unexpected* even echoes the sense of devastation when, after the peaceful transfer of sovereignty, Hong Kong was hit hard by the burst of its bubble economy' (p. 14). Similarly, Sam Ho (1999: p. 83) argued that 'the cruel and startling force of destiny in the film [*Expect the Unexpected*] perfectly encapsulates the feeling of loss and distress that grips the Hong Kong people when the dreaded Reunification proceeded peacefully, only to be followed by an economic crisis that seems to come out of nowhere'.

In a review of the trilogy, Bryan Chang (1999a: p. 75) observed 'a pessimism buried deep in his [the director's] heart and 'the darkness of our undesirable environment' revealed in the films. Concerning *A Hero Never Dies*, in particular, Chang believed that the 'undesirable environment' for the Hong Kong people was represented in the film as '[a] stable social structure has disappeared and his [the director's] heroes are isolated and […] the persecution and betrayal come from the system'. His reading of the hero's final action as 'an all-out oedipal counterattack' was a more explicit indication of Hong Kong's attitude towards its motherland. Ultimately, Chang revealed the socio-political context as the framework for his interpretation, stating that the director's 'journey through the heart of darkness is unexpected but not coincidental', and it was 'an integral part of the post-1997 phenomenon' (p. 75).

Regarding *The Longest Nite*, Ho (1999: p. 84) stated that the film 'is a superb play on Hong Kong's displaced fear' and 'reaches across the water to haunt the Hong Kong audience with its profound pessimism'. *The Longest Nite*'s story takes place in Macau, which was seen by the HKFCS (1999) as 'having special [political] implications'.[5] A similar interpretation appeared in Chang's (1999b: p. 77) review of *Where a Good Man Goes*. He asked, 'All these [events in the film] happen in Macau. Is it because it's still a colony? Or Johnnie To no longer believes that the story of a prodigal hero can happen in Hong Kong? Or is Macau a nostalgia for the Hong Kong of yesterday?' Pondering the film's possible allegories, the series of questions reveals an effort to read sociological meaning into the film texts. Among a variety of possible considerations for the selection of locations, only an assumed political dimension was prioritised in such examinations, for the probable reason that political allegories serve as strong indications of a film's awareness of its 'national' identity and social responsibility.

Like *Too Many Ways*, these films also fulfilled their responsibility to maintain and develop local cinema specifically because of their generic identity, in critics' opinions. For Li (1999: p. 15), these genre films of Milkyway 'are evidence that Hong Kong cinema continues to make encouraging progress towards maturity'; 'The pairing of mentors to [*sic*] with their protégés [in the making of films such as *The Odd One*] in the development of new blood is another sign of Hong Kong cinema's cautious resolve to maintain maturity and stability. (p. 18)' Ho (1999: p. 79) claimed that '*A Hero Never Dies* takes such generic conventions as male bonding and broken spirits to the extreme' and '[e]ven the generic villains undergo a transformation'. Chang (1999b: p. 77) wrote that '*Where a Good Man Goes* may not set the trend like *A Better Tomorrow*. It offers Hong Kong films an alternative and a little more room for class.' By comparison or association with previous local films including *A Better Tomorrow*, Milkyway's productions were mapped onto the history of local cinema and evaluated by their contribution to the latter. The comments were more than an appraisal of the company and its work; they were a testimony to the health of Hong Kong cinema. The evolution of style and the development of genres were not so much affected by social

changes as film content was, and progress and achievements were still being made on- and off-screen, regardless of economic and political clouds.

As time passed, the handover itself had become a less prominent topic in the reception of Milkyway's films. Discussing *The Mission*, Li (2000: p. 15) claimed that the director 'is absolutely resolute about discarding the pre-1997 mentality'. However, reviews and commentaries still pivoted around how the films represented and reflected Hong Kong society in transition. For example, the HKFCS (2000) spoke of *The Mission* as 'a metaphor of Hong Kongers' spirit of snatching hope from the jaws of despair'. In fact, the Society 'restored' most Milkyway films to Hong Kong's social, cultural and political milieu. *PTU* (2003, To) was seen as 'a desperate metaphor for [Hong Kong] society from the 1997 handover to 2003' (HKFCS, 2004). *Running on Karma* was 'a sympathetic annotation to Hong Kong, the sad city, and the post-9/11 era' and 'a consolation to post-SARS Hong Kong and the world' (HKFCS, 2004), and *Throw Down* (2004, To) 'encourages the Hong Kong people to climb out of the depths again' (HKFCS, 2005). In *Election* and *Election II*, the HKFCS found 'implications for the chaos during the transition period' (HKFCS, 2006). *Hooked on You* 'depicts the local people's emotional ups and downs during the post-handover decade' (HKFCS 2007a), *Triangle* (2007, Tsui Hark, Ringo Lam and To) was also 'a response to the post-handover decade' (HKFCS, 2008), and *Sparrow* represented 'some memories of the Hong Kong city' (HKFCS, 2009). Regardless of whether there are subtextual social and political layers in these Milkyway productions, the reviewers set a grand theme for the films and made them look socially and locally concerned. According to these interpretations, the films were not simply mirrors of Hong Kong society, but also affected ('consoled', 'encouraged', 'memorialised') the people and the city. In other words, aside from being reflective, they were functional. Their impact on the city and its citizens consolidated their identity as Hong Kong productions. They were functional on another level: the local cultural community used these Milkyway films to write a social history of post-handover Hong Kong cinema and constructed a narrative of Hong Kong's post-handover history. In either history, Hong Kong was a full subject in its own right in spite of the shadow of China's takeover.

Redefining Hong Kong cinema through Milkyway films

Critics' emphasis on Milkyway films' concerns about Hong Kong's fate and future can be seen as a response to the notion that appeared even before the handover: that Hong Kong's cultural and cinematic identity was fading out. However, as the proceeding examination has illustrated, there was more certainty than doubt about 'Hong Kong-ness' in and of Milkyway's work in critical reception before 2010. In the preceding chapter, I have suggested that the concept of Hong Kong cinema was fundamentally challenged by the proliferation of China–Hong Kong co-productions in approximately 2009–2010, with the HKMPIA's (Hong Kong Motion Picture Industry Association) new definition of Hong Kong film published in 2009 acting as a landmark event. In brief, the HKMPIA refused to acknowledge China–Hong Kong co-productions as Hong Kong films and thus significantly narrowed and limited the definition of Hong Kong film. After 2010, the majority of the films that Milkyway released were co-productions. There thus arose the problem of how to determine the identity of films such as *Don't Go Breaking My Heart*, *Romancing in Thin Air* (2012, To), *Drug War* and *Don't Go Breaking My Heart II*. Meanwhile, critics had to deal with the more profound problem of how to redefine Hong Kong film upon the HKMPIA's circumscription.

Among Milkyway's post-2010 titles, *Life Without Principle* was one of a few produced without mainland companies involved. Local critics' impulse to claim that Hong Kong cinema is self-reflexive was clearly demonstrated in their reading of the film. The HKFCS found that *Life Without Principle* 'alerts Hong Kong to danger that lies beneath'. Chan Ka Ming (2012) further argued that the film operated in 'imaginations of the local' at a time when people thought that Milkyway had broken away from the theme of the destiny of post-handover Hong Kong after *Don't Go*. He proceeded to assert that *Don't Go* was only an expedient to meet the market, but that with *Life Without Principle* 'the Milkyway Creative Team declared that they were all with Hong Kong' and operated 'in Hong Kong's spirit and veins'. Even though Milkyway's co-produced films continued questioning about the filmmakers' 'loyalty' to local sensibilities and

cinematic traditions, a Hong Kong-centric reading as was found in the above comments on *Life Without Principle* was quite persistent. For the HKFCS (2013), *Don't Go*, an expedient to meet the market in Chan's opinion, was about '[Hong Kong's] being lost in its reintegration with China', a theme that they thought was carried into *Romancing in Thin Air*. In the same fashion, the HKFCS (2015) interpreted *Don't Go II* as 'reflecting relations between China, Hong Kong and Taiwan'. In another review of *Don't Go*, Thomas Shin (2014: p. 27) suggested that the different endings for two Hong Kong characters in the film were indicative of 'the two directions for the Hong Kong people in Hong Kong's reintegration with China'. Notwithstanding the films' nature as co-productions and their 'non-Hong Kong film' status under the HKMPIA's new definition, local critics underlined these works' identification and engagement with Hong Kong's situation. They attempted to provide legitimacy both for these Milkyway productions to be regarded as Hong Kong films and for a self-reflexive Hong Kong cinema to live on.

Moreover, in their commentary on *Don't Go*, the HKFCS (2012) suggested that the film was an announcement that Milkyway (if not the entire Hong Kong film industry) would not 'go north' or reorient its production to the mainland. Regarding *Romancing in Thin Air*, the HKFCS (2013) likewise called it 'a reflection on [the industry's] going north', indicating Milkyway's disinclination to make films for the mainland. Such interpretations were quite surprising, given the obvious tendency towards mainlandisation in these films, such as casting mainland actors as some of the main characters and shooting partly in the mainland. Probably because Milkyway engaged in co-production relatively late compared to other local companies, critics had recourse to its work in the attempt to demonstrate and call for the industry's resistance upon witnessing a growing number of local filmmakers and film companies relocating operations to the mainland. Although Milkyway tested the waters of the mainland market as early as 2003, as I have argued in the last chapter, local critics held the impression that To 'makes films that he likes without being bothered by the CEPA stipulations' at least up to 2007 (HKFCS, 2007b),[6] and they backed Milkyway as a spearhead for identity negotiation over the years. Therefore, in the above commentaries, the expectation for Milkyway was mixed with anxiety about the

absorption of the local film industry into the Chinese film industry and, retrospectively, with a sense of desperation about Milkyway's future direction.

Milkyway's first full-scale co-production with the mainland, *Drug War*, soon posed a more pressing challenge to local critics and provoked a more intense and in-depth discussion, in which the identity of the film naturally became a key issue. Except for Lam Kam-po, who saw *Drug War* as a Chinese film, considering Milkyway's status as no longer a Hong Kong company after Hairun's buy-in (HKFCS, 2013b: p. 10), most critics viewed the film as a co-production. However, they argued that *Drug War* 'differs from the kind of co-productions previously that succumbs to [the rules of the game in the mainland]', to borrow Chan Chi Wa's words (HKFCS, 2013b: p. 9). Chan's reason was that the film reflected the director's personal style within the limits of filming in the mainland and 'attempted to break the rules of the game'. An Na appreciated the film as 'a step forward' since it demonstrated the 'possibilities and potentials' of both Hong Kong–China co-productions in general and Milkyway's aesthetic in particular (HKFCS, 2013b: p. 15). Shum (2013) even claimed *Drug War* to be a 'benchmark for co-productions', suggesting that if viewers watch and analyse the film closely, they would find that Hong Kong filmmakers did not concede or mainlandise. For Shum, 'the brilliance of *Drug War* is that it not only infuses issues that concern Hong Kongers and storytelling and mise-en-scène techniques familiar to Hong Kongers into a production that meets the mainland market but also successfully continues the auteur's style'. He concluded that *Drug War*, along with *Don't Go* and *Romancing in Thin Air*, 'shows that, after years of groping, Hong Kong filmmakers have found a way to keep their own idiosyncrasies and styles while going through censorship to make money'. From aesthetic and stylistic perspectives, critics attempted to distinguish or separate what was Hong Kong-nese and what was Chinese in a single film. Without a clear definition of To's style, Milkyway's aesthetic and a 'Hong Kong style' that the former embody, they offered readers at least the impression that 'Hong Kong-ese' entailed something spontaneous, personal or individual.

The above idea was elucidated further in discussion of the film's theme and content. The critics' final answer to whether *Drug War* could still be seen as a Hong Kong film was most clearly articulated in the HKFCS's (2013a)

commentary, in which the film was defined as ‘a new type of Hong Kong film with a Chinese body but a Hong Kong soul’. The Society elaborated, arguing that *Drug War* ‘extended the *Election* films’ insights on China–Hong Kong relations, cultural collision and the transition of society to respond to the current situation’, and ‘reflected Hong Kong cinema and Hong Kongers’ struggle for survival in the mainland’. Many individual critics agreed with the idea that *Drug War* was made for Hong Kong, despite its apparent Chinese elements. Lam Kee To believed that the film ‘depicted Hong Kongers’ situation’ (HKFCS, 2013b: p. 11). Chan Chi Wa (2014) saw it as ‘indirectly reflecting the Hong Kong people’s deep anxiety about current China–Hong Kong conflicts’. He commented elsewhere that the film ‘actually has a Hong Kong soul, as many lines of dialogues are spoken specifically to Hong Kongers’ (HKFCS, 2013c). For Tong Ching-siu (2013), the ultimate message in *Drug War* was that ‘a similar body but a different soul’ was the key to Hong Kong films co-produced with China, in terms of preventing the Hong Kong film industry’s collapse from within. Shum Long Tin (2013) also echoed the HKFCS’s ‘Chinese body, Hong Kong soul’ argument, claiming that the film was all about ‘China–Hong Kong conflicts, cultural collision and call for local sensibilities’ and was made ‘seemingly for a mainland audience but to be read differently by the Hong Kong audience’. He went even further, suggesting that ‘the mainland audience would think that the film is about anti-narcotics and eulogises their police force, but the Hong Kong audience would understand the metaphor in a number of Hong Kongers going to the mainland and finally having a firefight with the mainland policemen who besiege them’. Likewise, Shin claimed that he ‘has never seen a single mainland Chinese who is able to get the viewpoints that lie deeply within [*Drug War*], as those are the viewpoints of the Hong Kong people’ (HKFCS, 2013c). With the dichotomy of body and soul, some of the HKFCS critics seemed to have found a way to maintain co-productions’ Hong Kong identity. Moreover, by assuming that only the Hong Kong audience could recognise *Drug War*’s ‘soul’ or underlying messages, they defined the locals as the film’s ‘adequate’ audience, if not target audience, and thus further suggested Hong Kong cinema’s independence and self-sufficiency in non-commercial terms.

A number of critics pointed out that a prominent theme in *Drug War* was distrust between Hong Kong and China (HKFCS, 2013b; Shum, 2013; Chan, 2014), and they tended to ascribe the impossibility of trust to profound ideological clash. For them, *Drug War* criticised mainland China from various aspects of the perspective of the Hong Kong people. For example, Joyce Yang (2014) called attention to the implication of the Chinese police's omnipotence and control in the film. Shin believed that *Drug War* portrayed the China that the director saw, in which 'the officials speak no truth and the people hide behind masks' (HKFCS, 2013b: p. 16). Shum (2013) construed the dying Chinese police officer cuffing the Hong Kong drug lord in the film as meaning that the Chinese authorities would never allow freedom and democracy in Hong Kong. He continued to articulate the film's true message in his opinion, that is, 'for the Communist Party of China, democratisation is a drug from Hong Kong that has to be banned and extirpated'. It was in the ideological sense that Tong (2013) maintained that the local cultural community's yearning for 'Hong Kong-ness' was 'not a cheap provincialism clinging to the view that "Hong Kong is better [than China]".

The criticism of China should be considered along with the criticism of the film itself. A major critique of *Drug War* was, according to Lam Kee To, that it 'has a Greater Chinese film look but lacks a Hong Kong insight; it is deprived of a Hong Kong perspective' (HKFCS, 2013d). On the one hand, he explicated the 'Hong Kong insight' or 'Hong Kong perspective' as one 'representing the Hong Kong people when a film was shown to the world' and as 'local characteristics'. On the other hand, he described 'Greater Chinese film' as 'including Hong Kong filmmakers' treatment of films as entertainment and their techniques but excluding their ideologies and messages', the essence of which was captured by Yang as 'a political propaganda of the rise of China characterised by a sense of closure'. Furthermore, Lam attributed the loss of the 'Hong Kong insight' to 'an image of the mainland' that defied sophisticated representation. Li Cheuk-lun supplemented Lam's explanation by suggesting that the 'Hong Kong perspective' implied a nuanced way of thinking, the opposite of a 'black and white' thinking pattern found in the mainland that maintained a positive, uniform image of China (HKFCS, 2013b: p. 11). This flow of ideas was very similar to Shin's reflections

on *Don't Go*, in which he explicitly defined 'Hong Kong's subjectivity' as 'reflexive thinking and the ability to picture every perspective' (HKFCS, 2011: p. 19). Reviews, commentaries and discussions here and there made it increasingly clear that the Hong Kong way of thinking and representation discussed by the critics was essentially an open, pluralistic, humanist and, fundamentally, democratic attitude. Yang took the point forward to respond to the above-mentioned opinion that Hong Kong and mainland audiences had different readings of the film, arguing, 'I will not say the mainland audience have a reading different from the Hong Kong audience, I will say the ruling authority have an official reading different from the people. The common people like the Hong Kong insight. (HKFCS, 2013b: p. 11)' She went on to suggest that Hong Kong's relationship to China was essentially the same as the common people's relationship to the Communist Party and the disgruntled public's relationship to politicians with vested interests. For local critics who appreciated or criticised *Drug War*, in the end, 'Hong Kong-ness', the 'Hong Kong perspective' or the true value and legacy of Hong Kong cinema was autonomy in either artistic or political terms. Therefore, a new type of Hong Kong film was defined less by narrative strategies and techniques than by messages of freedom and democracy that a film carries. This 'new Hong Kong cinema' was distinguished from Chinese cinema primarily on an ideological basis, the same way that Hong Kong distinguished itself from mainland China.

Conclusion

This chapter has continued the investigation of Milkyway and its work against the background of China's takeover of Hong Kong and assimilation of Hong Kong's film industry and culture by looking at the critical reception of Milkyway productions. From the company's inception, the local cultural community read its productions as mirrors of Hong Kong society in transition, as solace to a domestic audience in distress, and as defenders of a local film culture in jeopardy. As the validity of Hong Kong cinema was increasingly questioned, Milkyway's films served as an arena for proposing a new definition of Hong Kong film and a renewed spirit of Hong Kong cinema. Interpretations

of Milkyway films have suggested that a new type of Hong Kong film and a 'new Hong Kong cinema', regardless of Chinese forces involved in financing and production, were ultimately defined by cultural autonomy, which was the extension of the political democracy for which Hong Kong has been fighting. The discourse about Milkyway and its output in its home territory was, to some degree, deliberately politicised. It was shaped as part of a resistance movement against China's cultural renationalisation and political homogenisation of Hong Kong.

Therefore, as I have argued throughout this chapter, local critics' reception and interpretation of Milkyway films were intentional and teleological. Prior to the production of reviews and discussion, when local cinema faced threats of socio-political change, economic crisis and industry downturn, existing cultural institutions and communities retooled themselves to mobilise resources and new ones came into existence to fill gaps, and these cultural bodies created and provided platforms for Milkyway and its work. Thus, the understanding of Milkyway films and Hong Kong cinema presented in this chapter was germane to a certain group of viewers in specific situations and with specific stakes and stances. Other viewers would have other readings within other contexts and for other purposes. From the next chapter onwards, I will look into how Milkyway and its films were received outside of Hong Kong and how contemporary Hong Kong cinema was perceived by players in the international film industry and community such as film festivals, distributors and critics.

Notes

[1] The translation is from Hong Kong Film Critics Society's Wikipedia article, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hong_Kong_Film_Critics_Society.

[2] Efforts from the local cultural community to promote and defend Hong Kong's film culture were not limited to those mentioned in the chapter. For example, in 2011, the Cantonese Cinema Study Association was established to 'promote Cantonese films to younger generations to help them understand local history and confirm local identity', among its objectives.

[3] See appendix 1.

[4] See appendix 2.

[5] Translations of the HKFCS's commentaries at the HKFCS Awards are all my own, except for the one on *Too Many Ways*.

[6] Translations of quotes from *HKinema* are all my own.

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Appendix 1. Milkyway films at Hong Kong's three major awards, 1996–2016

Milkyway films at the Hong Kong Film Awards

Year	Film	Awards
2000	*The Mission*	Best Director
	Running Out of Time	Best Actor
2002	*Love on a Diet*	Best Original Film Song
2004	*Running on Karma*	Best Film Best Screenplay Best Actor
	PTU	Best Director
2006	*Election*	Best Film Best Director Best Screenplay Best Actor
2008	*Mad Detective*	Best Screenplay
	Eye in the Sky	Best New Director Best New Performer
2010	*Accident*	Best Supporting Actress
2012	*Life Without Principle*	Best Supporting Actor Best Supporting Actress

Milkyway films at the Hong Kong Film Critics Society Awards

Year	Film	Awards
1997	*Too Many Ways to Be No. 1*	Films of Merit
1998	*A Hero Never Dies*	Best Director
	Expect the Unexpected	Best Screenplay
	The Longest Nite	Films of Merit
1999	*The Mission*	Best Film Best Director

	Running Out of Time	Films of Merit
2000	*Spacked Out*	Films of Merit
	Needing You	Films of Merit
2001	*Wu Yen*	Best Actress
	Running Out of Time II	Films of Merit
2002	*Fat Choi Spirit*	Films of Merit
	Second Time Around	Films of Merit
2003	*PTU*	Best Director Films of Merit
	Running on Karma	Best Screenplay Best Actor Best Actress Films of Merit
2004	*Throw Down*	Films of Merit
	Breaking News	Films of Merit
2005	*Election*	Best Film Best Director
2006	*Election II*	Best Film
	Exiled	Best Director Films of Merit
2007	*Mad Detective*	Best Screenplay Films of Merit
	Eye in the Sky	Best Actor Films of Merit
	Hooked on You	Films of Merit
	Triangle	Films of Merit
2008	*Sparrow*	Films of Merit
2009	*Tactical Unit – Comrades in Arms*	Films of Merit
2011	*Life Without Principle*	Best Screenplay Best Actor Films of Merit

	Don't Go Breaking My Heart	Films of Merit
2012	*Motorway*	Best Film Best Director
	Romancing in Thin Air	Best Screenplay Films of Merit
2013	*Drug War*	Best Director Best Screenplay Films of Merit
	Blind Detective	Films of Merit
2014	*Don't Go Breaking My Heart II*	Best Screenplay Films of Merit
2015	*Office*	Films of Merit

Milkyway films at the Golden Bauhinia Awards

Year	Film	Awards
1998	*Too Many to Be No. 1*	Best Screenplay Best Supporting Actor
1999	*Expect the Unexpected*	Best Screenplay
2000	*The Mission*	Best Film Best Director Best Supporting Actor Best Cinematography
	Where a Good Man Goes	Best Actor
	Running Out of Time	Best Screenplay
2004	*PTU*	Best Film Best Director Best Screenplay Best Actor Best Supporting Actor Best Supporting Actress

2006	*Election*	Best Film Best Screenplay Best Actor
2007	*Exiled*	Best Film Best Screenplay

Appendix 2. Milkyway films at the Hong Kong Asian Film Festival, 2004–2016

Year	Film	Category
2006	*Exiled*	Closing Film
2008	*Tactical Unit – The Code*	Festival Gala
2009	*Election*	APA 25th Anniversary
2011	*Life Without Principle*	Opening Film
2013	*A Complicated Story*	HK First
2014	*Don't Go Breaking My Heart II*	Opening Film
2015	*Office*	Midnight Craze

Note: In addition, the HKAFF screened two documentaries on To in 2010 and 2013, respectively, namely *Johnnie To Got His Gun* (2010, Yves Montmayeur) in the 'Reel Vision' category in 2010 and *Boundless* (2013, Ferris Lin) in the 'HK First' category in 2013.

Chapter 6

Shaping Hong Kong Cinema's New Icon: Milkyway Image at International Film Festivals

The last two chapters have analysed Milkyway's business activities in Hong Kong (and mainland China) and the domestic reception of its films, showing that its history and discourse were shaped, in a large part, by the transition of Hong Kong society and the local film industry into a Chinese context. The image of the company introduced in the previous chapters is outlined within and reflects the immediate context of Hong Kong's interaction with, and reaction to, China's nationalisation and homogenisation of the region. However, as I pointed out in Chapter 4, Milkyway's films did not target certain markets or circulate in Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland solely: the company has been producing films for global consumption. From this chapter onwards, I shift focus to Milkyway's presence on the international stage, exploring its engagement with overseas players in the film community and how the company was perceived and defined by the latter.

Scholars such as Mike Budd (1990) and Barbara Klinger (1994; 1997) have articulated the idea that film is an artefact of historical processes. That is, cinematic meanings and associations are created and changed as film texts circulate across cultures and over time. As opposed to monolithic, arbitrary interpretations of film and the single explanations or interpretations often sought within a text, these scholars attend to a film's multiple framings and identities that are generated throughout the course of its circulation and across various contexts, calling for historical (or contextual) analysis that contemplates the impact of institutional, cultural, and historical circumstances on the production of meaning and knowledge.

Milkyway's work and reputation travelled to other territories and cultures through various channels over the years, thereby developing understandings of the company and of contemporary Hong Kong cinema in multiple contexts. Following the reception-studies approach, this chapter and the following

chapters will show how various aspects of cinematic practices, such as curation, distribution and criticism, create multiple framings for and configure the identity of Milkyway films outside of Hong Kong. A major channel through which Milkyway films reached their international audiences was film festival screenings. Thus, the second part of this thesis begins with an examination of the role that international film festivals played in the construction of Milkyway's public image and international profile, as well as the strategies employed by the contemporary Hong Kong film industry to create competitive advantage.

Hong Kong cinema has participated in international film festivals since the 1940s. Film festivals offered Hong Kong films and filmmakers a stage to earn global recognition and find overseas markets, with film festival circuits being crucial to many Hong Kong filmmakers' careers. There is already some research on Hong Kong and Chinese-language cinema's presence and trajectories at film festivals. Nikki J. Y. Lee and Julian Stringer (2012: p. 256) note that the Rotterdam and Pusan festivals account for 'the vanguard of developments in the overseas presentation of Chinese cinema'. Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong (2009: pp. 179–184) claims that the Berlinale has been 'the most important festival in helping to globalise Hong Kong cinema' since the 1980s. Wong (2009: pp. 177–192) also points out the important role the Locarno and Stockholm festivals played in promoting Hong Kong cinema through their 'discovery' of auteur directors, such as John Woo and Wong Kar-wai. Taking advantage of transnational platforms, such as film festivals, is becoming increasingly important for the development of the contemporary Hong Kong film industry. This is due to not only the globalisation of cinema but also, more specifically – in an era when this industry is characterised by independent production and vertical disintegration – the fact that a festival presence has replaced a self-owned distribution and exhibition network as the means by which cinema gains cultural capital and international competitiveness.

In Lee and Stringer's (2012) survey of Chinese-language cinema's trajectories at international film festivals, they illustrate the increasing ascendancy of Chinese-language cinema throughout the recent decades while recognising that such a rise is, in turn, attributable to the power and influence wielded by international film events. Moreover, the ascent of Chinese-language cinema has

affected and reconfigured the set-up of film festivals. Thus, contemporary Hong Kong cinema's presence on the international film festival circuit should be understood in the context of China's growing power, and the impact thereof, on the geopolitics of world cinema. Given the prosperity of Chinese-language cinema, Hong Kong cinema has experienced increasing competition with cinemas from other Chinese-speaking countries and regions, such as mainland China and Taiwan, at festivals. Thus, cultural competitiveness becomes vital given such circumstances.

It is also crucial to focus on changes that have taken place in the international film festival scene. The film events with which the contemporary Hong Kong film industry engages are not the same as those of decades ago. Film festivals are growing in number and diversity. Festival programmes are more elaborate and their categories more diverse. Cultural, economic and political fluxes constantly affect the operation of festivals. With the opening of new opportunities and routes to reach global audiences, a new festival environment also means that the industry's engagement with and presence at festivals are different and more complex than ever before. Therefore, an investigation of the local film industry's performances at international film festivals not only will sketch an image of how contemporary Hong Kong cinema is perceived globally today but also help identify patterns of development for the industry in a transnational age.

While most previous scholarship has focussed on film festivals' influence on individual filmmakers' careers, Hong Kong cinema's relationships with film festivals are not limited solely to individual films or filmmakers. Within the broader picture of the local film industry's globalisation process, film companies often are overlooked but significant participants at festivals. Undertaking a historical survey on the trajectory of the presence of Milkyway at international film festivals, I trace the emergence of a contemporary Hong Kong film company on that stage and reflect on the reasons behind its rise. I argue that Milkyway does not follow the patterns that scholars have found in either previous Hong Kong films or Chinese-language films in general. Milkyway's international festival participation represents a new trajectory determined by a

diverse and varied festival landscape and the company's strategic engagement with international film events.

In the following sections, based on a rough chronological order of Milkyway's route through the festival landscape, I examine how different kinds of festivals define Milkyway by presenting the company's productions and offering dedicated programmes, whilst attending to Milkyway's use of film festivals to build the company's reputation and improve distribution. Firstly, I look into the company's emergence on the festival circuit with an emphasis on specialised festivals, such as genre- and identity-oriented festivals, as a springboard.[1] Then, I focus on Milkyway's presence at Category A (or A-list) festivals recognised by the International Federation of Film Producers Associations (FIAPF), especially Cannes, Berlin, Venice and Toronto, and weigh Milkyway's productions against other Chinese-language films. Finally, I outline a brief map of Milkyway's presence beyond major European and North American festivals and use the retrospective of it presented by the Festival of the Three Continents to illustrate how the company's image is perceived by international festival organisers over a decade after its debut on the circuit.

Debut: Specialised film festivals

The appearance of Milkyway at international film festivals started in the company's formative years. Its debut, *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1*, was shown at the sophomore edition of the Fantasia International Film Festival in Montreal in 1997, the year in which the film was released. Subsequently, Milkyway productions appeared at several festivals for a number of years. From 1997 to 2000, each edition of Fantasia screened some of these early works. In 1998, *The Odd One Dies*, was shown at the Montreal Asian Film Festival, winning a Best Asian Film award. While North America became the company's port of entry into the global cinema landscape, European curators quickly gave their attention to the new force from Hong Kong, with the first batch of Milkyway films shown in Europe in 1999. Festivals, such as the Udine Far East Film Festival in Italy, the Deauville Asian Film Festival in France and the Fantasporto International Film Festival in Portugal, included some of the company's films in their line-

ups. Thereafter, Milkyway films were frequently screened at both the Udine and Deauville festivals.

Retrospective screenings emerged during this period. As ‘a fan of To’s work since its inception’ (Totaro, 2000), Fantasia presented four Milkyway films in 1999: *Expect the Unexpected*, *Lifeline*, *A Hero Never Dies* and *Where a Good Man Goes*. To was invited as a special guest to introduce the screenings, and to lead a critical forum on the state of Hong Kong cinema. To’s identity was described as ‘director/producer’ (Fantasia International Flm Festival, 2012), with one of the four titles (*Expect the Unexpected*) not crediting him as director, while all these films were produced by the Milkyway team, even though *Lifeline* does not bear the company’s trademark.[2] Despite the screenings being framed as a tribute to To, no films from the director’s pre-Milkyway career were included. Therefore, the screenings can be seen fairly as a tribute to the nascent company.

At the inaugural edition of Udine in the same year, 1999, four titles from Milkyway were presented: *A Hero Never Dies*, *Expect the Unexpected*, *The Odd One* and *Too Many Ways*. The four films are from three directors at the company; thus, the focus of the screenings was not on individual filmmakers but rather the films attracted attention as Milkyway productions. Because more than 30 titles from Hong Kong were shown at that particular festival, Milkyway’s films were not necessarily in the spotlight. However, the screenings, like those hosted at Fantasia, were among the first efforts to generate awareness about and offer retrospectives of this fledgling production company from Hong Kong.

The first retrospective of the company took place in 2000 at Subway Cinema, the predecessor of the New York Asian Film Festival (NYAFF). Subway Cinema was founded by five Americans who shared a passion for Asian and, particularly, Hong Kong films. It came into existence at a moment, when, according to the founders, all Chinatown theatres, which had been used to screen films from Hong Kong and other Asian countries, were closed down and (Nanda, 2003), as Richard Corliss (2006) suggests, when Hong Kong cinema went into a decline in terms of both quantity and quality. Thus, the organisation set itself the task to ‘preserve interest in Hong Kong films’ and to ‘wake people up to the

variety of Hong Kong film', as one of its founders states (Erickson, 2000). Subway Cinema considered a retrospective of Milkyway appropriate for its debut programme to fulfil the goals. 'Expect the Unexpected: Contemporary Urban Cinema from Hong Kong's Milkyway Productions' was hosted at Anthology Film Archives in New York for three days. This first tribute introduced the company and promoted it with a poster, highlighting its audio-visual style, themes and production orientation:

> Hong Kong is known for action movies, and Milkyway Image is the studio that finally deconstructed them and made beautiful entertainment out of the spare parts. Endlessly innovative, Milkyway was founded in 1996, turning out 12 movies in four years under the leadership of producer/director Johnnie To (*The Heroic Trio*). With their blistering visuals, go-for-broke nihilism, genre-busting narratives, and trance-inducing soundtracks these movies will sear themselves into your brain and leave you begging for more. (Subway Cinema, 2000)

Marie Jost (2011: p. 6) suggests that Subway Cinema's assessments of Milkyway films, although couched in 'typical fanboy hyperbolic purple prose', held up and were identified by critics and scholars a decade later similarly. It is also true that Milkyway's perceived image today was largely constructed by these early promotional texts and that subsequent Milkyway productions would tend to be assessed based on the initial readings offered by the likes of Subway Cinema.

Seven titles were showcased in this first retrospective: *Too Many Ways*, *Expect the Unexpected*, *A Hero Never Dies*, *The Longest Nite*, *The Mission*, *Running Out of Time* and *Spacked Out* (2000, Lawrence Lau). Most fall into the crime thriller category and its related genres and are, in retrospect, Milkyway's 'classics'. Thus, what the line-up showed potential festival programmers and reviewers was that Milkyway's forte is genre films. Secondly, *Spacked Out*, a teen film, was the most unexpected among the line-up but not only because of the genre: it is not a To or Wai film, has no big-name stars, and has remained relatively unknown among Milkyway's body of work. Regardless of the reason for its inclusion, which was probably due to it being shown at the HKIFF (Hong

Kong International Film Festival) as an opening film earlier that year, its appearance in the first tribute to Milkyway implies that the curatorial scope went beyond genres and individual filmmakers, and represented the company's oeuvre. Thirdly, the films presented are from four directors, with only three among the seven crediting To as director. Although, Jost (2011: p. 6) proposes that a pattern emerged for programming Milkyway films from an early stage, which mostly relied on films directed by To, Subway Cinema is an exception to that pattern. The retrospective offered an organisational angle to looking at these films, including To-directed films. Most importantly, it introduced Milkyway as a subject available for prospective curation and programming.

In the following year, 2001, Milkyway films were launched in Australia, with the first official overseas tribute to To. The touring Hong Kong Film Festival (HKFF) presented the tribute at its third edition in Melbourne. Six films were shown: *The Mission, Needing You, Running Out of Time, Wu Yen* (2001, To and Wai), *Comeuppance* (2000, Chiu Sung-Kee) and *Spacked Out*. All are Milkyway productions, and two of these films were not directed by To. The curatorial scope was similar to that of the programme designed by Subway Cinema. The programme showcased Milkyway's signature male-centred genres, the company's then newly launched romantic comedies and the rarely seen teen film: it was a report on the company's expanding production scope. Rather than paying tribute to To personally, it was a response to the emerging power from the Hong Kong film industry. Such a situation, in which the company's achievements were turned into credits to To, would be repeated at later stages. An example is Deauville's homage to To by screening *Lifeline, Running Out of Time, Help!!!* (2000, To and Wai) and *Fulltime Killer* in the following year, 2002. With the programme displaying the production rage of the burgeoning company, it once again points to the fact that the rise of To and Milkyway were simultaneous.

More international film festivals started to show Milkyway films from 2000 onwards. However, two kinds of festivals, as illustrated by the preceding discussion, were the first and most keen to explore and fete the company and its work: genre- and identity-oriented festivals. Fantasia explicitly defines itself as a genre film festival; Fantasporto began as a genre festival and has kept an

interest in genre films. As their full names imply, Udine, Deauville and Subway Cinema/the NYAFF dedicate themselves to Asian cinema, and the HKFF prioritises films from Hong Kong. Some claim to be the largest or most popular of their kind, yet all are far less influential than the general, mainstream, notable festivals, and none are recognised by the FIAPF. The aim and value of these specialised festivals lie primarily in promoting specific film cultures because the festivals usually are developed from an enthusiasm for films produced in a certain region. Not only do the films shown tend to have a closer relationship to specific audiences than those shown at mainstream festivals to a general audience but also the programmers are more strongly connected to the types of films that are screened. Genre-oriented festivals have a specific cinephilic nature, as the passionate interest in certain types of films blurs the distinction between organisers and attendees.

Consequently, it can be argued that, firstly, there is a geocultural reason behind Milkyway's emergence at international film festivals. In some cases, a film festival functions, in part, as a vehicle of cultural diplomacy. Both the HKFF and the NYAFF, for example, are co-organised by the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office, thus sharing the purpose of supporting the local film industry. Moreover, at this early stage, the international exposure of Milkyway's films was due to Hong Kong cinema being an attractive label. Because these festivals, to some degree, grew out of the accumulated interest in Hong Kong films from American and European audiences and critics, local cinema's legacy facilitated new players, such as Milkyway, to take part in the global film festival circuit.

This relates closely to the second point, namely that Milkyway's international ascent has a particularly cinephilic nature and is attributable to the fan base of Hong Kong's genre films. Because the overseas interest in Hong Kong films stemmed from an explicit genre preference for the action/crime film, Milkyway benefited from the continued attention, regardless of whether its works were seen as continuing, updating or subverting norms and conventions of local cinema. For the genre-oriented festivals, for both audiences and programmers, Milkyway's offerings meant not only a new direction in Hong Kong cinema, but also the promise of new pleasures and thrills. Milkyway was perceived and defined primarily as a company that produces genre films for cinephiles. This is

also an essential reason for film festivals playing a significant part in the company's international exposure and reputation. According to the programmers at Subway Cinema, Milkyway films are those that 'have fallen through the cracks of the American distribution system because they are too genre-oriented for art houses and too quirky and culturally specific for multiplexes' (Erickson, 2000), which, in effect, points to their peculiar suitability for festival programmes.

Breakthrough: Cannes, Berlin, Venice and Toronto

From 2000 onwards, Milkyway films extended their appearance beyond specialised festivals, to festivals that are among the most prestigious in the world: Cannes, Berlin and Venice, as well as Toronto, the heavyweight in North America. On the one hand, there was not a time at which the screening of Milkyway films by one type of festival was replaced by another. Specialised festivals maintained their interest in the company's output, with the output attracting increasing attention from mainstream festivals, including A-list festivals. On the other hand, although some high-profile festivals showed Milkyway films early in 1999–2000, the screenings were sporadic when compared to the programmes offered by genre- and identity-oriented festivals during the same period. It was not until 2004–2005 that the company made a real breakthrough at the European triumvirate and Toronto, with its films finding their way to Venice, and especially Cannes, and moving from niche sections, such as Midnight Madness, to high-profile sections, such as Special Presentation, at Toronto.

Festivals such as 'the big three' and Toronto, by virtue of their status and influence, played a more important role than small and specialised festivals in the rise of Milkyway's profile. In light of the premier festivals' preference for 'highbrow' films, entering A-list festivals raised Milkyway productions' status to 'quality' films rather than simply genre fares. Cannes, for example, rarely had screened crime thrillers from Hong Kong. Milkyway films' presence at the festival thus also updated and enriched Hong Kong cinema's image on the international stage and represented an accomplishment of Hong Kong's

commercial filmmaking. In terms of overseas distribution deals, major festivals brought Milkyway films to a wider variety of places and broader audiences. In particular, Milkyway's debut at Cannes with *Breaking News* (2004, To) in 2004 was a watershed for international buyers' acquisition of the distribution rights of the company's productions. Whereas early Milkyway films received occasional and sporadic attention from limited North American and European distributors before 2004, those shown afterwards at major festivals usually had their distribution rights sold to numerous Western countries.

Concerning Milkyway films' presence at primary festivals, as tables 1–4 illustrate,[3] the general trajectory is that films moved from minor to major sections and from out-of-competition to in competition. At Cannes and Venice, Milkyway films first appeared outside competition and then occasionally (at Cannes) or consistently (at Venice) in competition. At Berlin, after seven years of appearance in the International Forum of New Cinema, which is dedicated to non-mainstream cinema, the company finally had a film selected for competition, the category that is 'the heart of the Berlinale' and 'setting trends for new cinema' (BIFF, n.d.). Such an ascent is especially clear in the case of the non-competitive Toronto festival. In the first couple of screening years, Milkyway films appeared in the Midnight Madness category, which explores 'the wild side' of cinema and screens 'the best in action, horror, shock and fantasy cinema' (TIFF, n.d.). They then were placed in the Contemporary World Cinema category from 2003 onwards, where 'compelling stories' with 'global perspectives' are selected. After 2003, with To's fame growing, most Milkyway productions appeared at Toronto in the Special Presentation category for 'high-profile premieres and the world's leading filmmakers', with a few appearing in the Vanguard category, which presents underexplored and new films that are 'provocative, sexy… possibly dangerous' (TIFF, n.d.).

Table 1. Milkyway films at the Cannes International Film Festival

Date	Film	Director	Category
2004	*Breaking News*	Johnnie To	Out of Competition – Midnight Projections
2005	*Election*	Johnnie To	In Competition

2006	*Election II*	Johnnie To	Out of Competition
2007	*Triangle*	Tsui Hark, Ringo Lam, Johnnie To	Out of Competition
2009	*Vengeance*	Johnnie To	In Competition
2013	*Blind Detective*	Johnnie To	Out of Competition – Midnight Projections

Note: Data collected from Cannes's official site (http://www.festival-cannes.com/).

Table 2. Milkyway films at the Berlin International Film Festival

Date	Film	Director	Category
1999	*Expect the Unexpected*	Patrick Yau	Forum
2000	*The Mission*	Johnnie To	Forum
	Running Out of Time	Johnnie To	
	Where a Good Man Goes	Johnnie To	
2001	*Comeuppance*	Chiu Sung-kee	Forum
	Help!!!	Johnnie To, Wai Ka-fai	
2002	*Fulltime Killer*	Johnnie To	Forum
2003	*PTU*	Johnnie To	Forum
2004	*Running on Karma*	Johnnie To	Forum
2007	*Eye in the Sky*	Yau Nai Hoi	Forum
2008	*Sparrow*	Johnnie To	Competition
2016	*Trivisa*	Frank Hui, Jevons Au, Vicky Wong	Forum

Note: Data collected from Berlinale's official site (http://www.berlinale.de).

Table 3. Milkyway films at the Venice International Film Festival

Date	Film	Director	Category

2004	*Throw Down*	Johnnie To	Out of Competition
2006	*Exiled*	Johnnie To	In Competition
2007	*Mad Detective*	Johnnie To, Wai Ka-fai	In Competition
2009	*Accident*	Cheang Pou-soi	In Competition
2011	*Life Without Principle*	Johnnie To	In Competition

Note: Data collected from Venice's official site (http://www.labiennale.org).

Table 4. Milkyway films at the Toronto International Film Festival

Date	**Film**	**Director**	**Category**
2000	*The Mission*	Johnnie To	Midnight Madness
2001	*Fulltime Killer*	Johnnie To	Midnight Madness
2003	*PTU*	Johnnie To	Contemporary World Cinema
2004	*Breaking News*	Johnnie To	Contemporary World
	Throw Down	Johnnie To	Cinema Special Presentation
2006	*Election*	Johnnie To	Vanguard
	Election II	Johnnie To	Vanguard
	Exiled	Johnnie To	Special Presentation
2007	*Mad Detective*	Johnnie To, Wai Ka-fai	Special Presentation
2009	*Vengeance*	Johnnie To	Special Presentation
	Accident	Cheang Pou-soi	Vanguard
2011	*Life Without Principle*	Johnnie To	Special Presentation
2012	*Motorway*	Cheang Pou-soi	Vanguard
2013	*Drug War*	Johnnie To	
2013	*Blind Detective*	Johnnie To	Special Presentation

Note: Data collected from Toronto's official site (http://tiff.net/) and Internet Movie Database (http://www.imdb.com/).

Most apparent about the Milkyway films selected by these major festivals – with the exception of *Help!!!* at Berlin in 2001 – is that they have the same thematic denominator as crime films. In fact, most of the crime thrillers the company produced were shown at the most prestigious film events. Toronto, as one of the first significant film festivals to take an interest in Milkyway films, as seen, initially placed them in a category for genre films: the Midnight Madness. This suggests that specialised festivals' perceptions of the company as one tied to genre films were shared or adopted by A-list festivals. Milkyway split its production in 2000 by extending to romance films, producing great domestic successes in terms of box-office receipts, in the following few years. However, the company's productions were not measured by their realised or potential commercial value. Its romances, which financially outperformed the crime films at home, were treated with indifference at international festivals. After nearly two decades since Milkyway's work first appeared at a significant festival, hardly a film fell outside the crime thriller genre. All female-oriented genres likely have been at the expense of the company brand's tight association with male-oriented genres. Their generic identity was what gave Milkyway's productions entrée into Cannes, Berlin, Venice and Toronto against the context of these festivals' commercialisation and reformation of programming structure.[4]

Engaging with film festivals is set clearly in Milkyway's business plan, as is stated in its stock market prospectus:

> The Directors are of the view that it is crucial for the [Milkyway] Group to be recognised locally and internationally […] the Group therefore actively promotes and markets its films particularly by way of participating in both local and international film festivals […] with the aim of raising public awareness and enhancing the sales potential of its films. Since film festivals are mostly by-invitation, participating in such activities requires minimal expenses for marketing purposes. (MIHL, 2002: p. 81)

The company's association with the genre label at high-profile festivals constitutes part of its branding strategy. As Wong (2009: p. 178) suggests, the impression of Hong Kong film always has been a selective vision manipulated not only by festival organisers and critics but also by Hong Kong filmmakers themselves. The absence of Milkyway productions other than crime films at these festivals was no coincidence, because the company projected a consistent image of itself as specialising in specific genres. The making of *Election* was an illustrative example. Ding Yuin-shan, the production supervisor for *Election*, reveals that after Cannes screened the company's crime thriller *Breaking News* in 2004, Milkyway called a halt to a project under planning and shifted its full attention to *Election*, a film in the same vein as *Breaking News*, targeted squarely at Cannes. To meet the festival's deadline, the crew rushed to finish shooting by the Chinese New Year, and the film was released in 2005 ('Du qi feng…', 2005). As expected, Cannes picked up the film and placed it in its competition section that year. Influential festivals' preferences for certain genres that the company produces and the company's voluntary production and submission of films in favoured genres exerted mutual effects. For Milkyway, it was a means by which it solidified its connections to festivals and built up its brand identity.

Whilst Milkyway films experienced increasing exposure and rising status, To's reputation grew even larger, overshadowing the company brand. Whereas at some genre-based festivals, Milkyway became a cult brand for both programmers and the audiences whom programmers serve, high-profile festivals' conventional priorities towards discovering and constructing auteurs led to the increasing reinforcement of To's auteur image. For instance, the director's personal fame benefited from endorsements by Venice and Cannes, which respectively invited him to serve on their official competition juries in 2008 and 2011, while Toronto devoted an 'In Conversation with… Johnnie To' programme to him in 2013. Moreover, a non-studio orientation in the selection mechanism at premier festivals suggested by Wong (2011: p. 6) resulted in the frequent absence of the company name in introductions and reviews.

Toronto's programming of Milkyway films in its recent editions stands as an explicit example of the different treatment of the auteur director and the production company. The festival distinguished between those Milkyway films

directed by To and those directed by other filmmakers, placing the former in its Special Presentation category, which claims to showcase the work of 'the world's leading filmmakers', and the latter in the Vanguard category, which claims to be 'this is what's next' (TIFF, n.d.). Those in the Vanguard category mainly were discussed either in the context of a director's personal career or as To-produced films in the festival's write-ups (TIFF, 2012a; 2012b; 2012c), with Milkyway tending to be treated as an attachment to To, as illustrated by its description as 'Johnnie To's production company' ('Motorway…', 2012). The company name seemed dispensable and insignificant in the selection of films. While Jost (2011: p. 11) proposes that To had the 'definitive turning point' of his international reputation in 2005, when *Election* was selected for competition at Cannes, it was not necessarily the case for Milkyway, as the company remained a purveyor of sought-after films for premier festivals, whose name nevertheless was not often mentioned.

However, To's auteur image was ultimately a marketing strategy for Milkyway to break into the A-list festival circuit. Take, for example, the case of *Election*. Whereas the credits of the original version of the film read 'Directed by Johnnie To', the film was signed by To as 'A Johnnie To Film' in both the trailer and press kit that the company prepared for and circulated at Cannes ('*Election*', 2005: p. 3). The company was fully aware of what an auteur name could do for its productions at festivals such as Cannes. At the same time, it by no means wanted to make itself anonymous; thus, one finds in the same press kit the elucidation that 'To turned to more personal works in the mid-90s following the creation of his independent film production company Milkyway Image (HK) Ltd.' ('*Election*', 2005: p. 25). Not only is To a brand for Milkyway but also his name serves as an introduction to the company.

Regardless of Milkyway's and To's somewhat different reputations, the production company's power and achievement is remarkable when the presence of all Chinese-language films at prestigious film festivals is considered. By looking at Chinese-language cinema at Cannes – arguably the most prestigious and important film festival – from Milkyway's establishment to the present, the company can be seen as a representative of contemporary Hong Kong film culture and a powerhouse in the film industry across the Chinese-speaking world.

Table 5 shows that 61 films were screened at Cannes from 1996 to 2013 under the categories Hong Kong, Taiwan or China. Among them, 21 (including co-productions) are under the Hong Kong category. Six titles among the 21 are under this category only because of the source of capital, which leaves 15 Hong Kong films with a clear Hong Kong identity. Milkyway films made up six of the 15 films. Milkyway was beyond doubt the most successful Hong Kong film production company at Cannes during this period. As its productions make up about one-tenth of all the Chinese-language entries, it also stands out in the three Chinese-language cinemas.

Table 5. Chinese-language cinema at the Cannes International Film Festival (1996–2013)

Date	Film	Director	Category/Prize	Country of Production
1996	*Goodbye South, Goodbye*	Hou Hsiao-hsien	In Competition	Taiwan
1996	*Temptress Moon*	Chen Kaige	In Competition	Hong Kong
1997	*Happy Together*	Wong Kar-wai	In Competition/Best Director	Hong Kong
1997	*East Palace West Palace*	Zhang Yuan	Un Certain Regard	China, France
1998	*Flowers of Shanghai*	Hou Hsiao-hsien	In Competition	Taiwan, Japan
1998	*The Hole*	Tsai Ming-liang	In Competition	Taiwan, France
1999	*Love Will Tear Us Apart*	Nelson Yu	In Competition	Hong Kong

1999	*The Emperor and the Assassin*	Chen Kaige	In Competition	Japan, France, China
1999	*So Close to Paradise*	Wong Xiaoshuai	Un Certain Regard	China
1999	*The Personals*	Chen Kuo-fu	Un Certain Regard	Taiwan
1999	*March of Happiness*	Lin Chen-sheng	Un Certain Regard	Taiwan
1999	*Layover*	Shen Ko-shang	Cinéfondation	Taiwan
2000	*Devils on the Doorstep*	Jiang Wen	In Competition/Grand Prix	China
2000	*In the Mood for Love*	Wong Kar-wai	In Competition/Best Actor	Hong Kong
2000	*Yi Yi*	Edward Yang	In Competition/Best Director	Japan
2001	*Millennium Mambo*	Hou Hsiao-hsien	In Competition/Technical Grand Prix	Taiwan
2001	*What Time Is It There?*	Tsai Ming-liang	In Competition/Technical Grand Prix	Taiwan, France
2001	*Lan Yu*	Stanley Kwan	Un Certain Regard	Hong Kong
2001	*Run Away*	Yang Chao	Cinéfondation	China
2002	*Unknown Pleasure*	Jia Zhangke	In Competition	Japan, France, South Korea, China
2002	*Double Vision*	Chen Kuo-fu	Un Certain Regard	Taiwan

2003	*Purple Butterfly*	Lou Ye	In Competition	China
2003	*All Tomorrow's Parties*	Nelson Yu	Un Certain Regard	China
2003	*Drifters*	Wong Xiaoshuai	Un Certain Regard	Taiwan, China
2003	*Robinson's Crusoe*	Lin Chen-sheng	Un Certain Regard	Taiwan
2004	*2046*	Wong Kar-wai	In Competition	China
2004	*Lu Cheng*	Yang Chao	Un Certain Regard	China
2004	*House of Flying Daggers*	Zhang Yimou	Out of Competition	China
2004	*Breaking News*	Johnnie To	Out of Competition – Midnight Projections	Hong Kong, China
2005	*Election*	Johnnie To	In Competition	Hong Kong
2005	*Shanghai Dreams*	Wong Xiaoshuai	In Competition/Jury Prize	China
2005	*Three Times*	Hou Hsiao-hsien	In Competition	Taiwan
2006	*Summer Palace*	Lou Ye	In Competition	China, France
2006	*Luxury Car*	Wang Chao	Un Certain Regard/Un Certain Regard Prize	China, France
2006	*Re-Cycle*	Danny Pang, Oxide Pang	Un Certain Regard	Hong Kong, Thailand

2006	*Election II*	Johnnie To	Out of Competition – Midnight Projections	Hong Kong
2006	*Silk*	Su Chao-pin	Out of Competition – Midnight Projections	Taiwan
2007	*My Blueberry Nights*	Wong Kar-wai	In Competition	Hong Kong
2007	*Night Train*	Diao Yinan	Un Certain Regard	Hong Kong, France
2007	*Blind Mountain*	Li Yang	Un Certain Regard	Hong Kong, China
2007	*Triangle*	Tsui Hark, Ringo Lam, Johnnie To	Out of Competition	Hong Kong
2007	*He Fengming*	Wang Bing	Special Screenings	Hong Kong
2007	*Way Out*	Chen Tao	Cinéfondation	China
2008	*24 City*	Jia Zhangke	In Competition	China
2008	*Parking*	Chung Mong-hong	Un Certain Regard	Taiwan
2008	*Ocean Flame*	Liu Fendou	Un Certain Regard	Hong Kong
2008	*Ashes of Time Redux*	Wong Kar-wai	Special Screenings	Hong Kong
2008	*August 15th*	Jiang Xuan	Cinéfondation	China
2009	*Spring Fever*	Lou Ye	In Competition	Hong Kong, France
2009	*Vengeance*	Johnnie To	In Competition	Hong Kong

2009	*Face*	Tsai Ming-liang	In Competition	Taiwan, France, Belgium, Netherlands
2009	*Petition*	Zhao Liang	Special Screenings	China, France
2009	*Goodbye*	Song Fang	Cinéfondation	China
2010	*Chongqing Blues*	Wang Xiaoshuai	In Competition	China
2010	*I Wish I Knew*	Jia Zhangke	Un Certain Regard	China, Netherlands
2011	*Wu Xia*	Peter Chan	Out of Competition – Midnight Projections	China, Hong Kong
2012	*Mystery*	Lou Ye	Un Certain Regard	China, France
2013	*A Touch of Sin*	Jia Zhangke	In Competition	China, Japan
2013	*Bends*	Flora Lau	Un Certain Regard	Hong Kong
2013	*Blind Detective*	Johnnie To	Out of Competition	Hong Kong
2013	*After the Winter*	Jow Zhi-wei	Cinéfondation	France, Singapore, Taiwan

Note: Data are collected Cannas's official site (http://www.festival-cannes.com/).

Of particular note are the entries in 2000, 2005 and 2009. They are the only three times during this period when there were three Chinese-language films in competition. The entries in each of the years came, respectively, from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the PRC,[5] displaying the achievements of Chinese-language cinema as a whole in the new millennium. Concerning all nine titles entering the three editions, the films made in the mainland were from three representatives of the Sixth-Generation directors: Jiang Wen, Wang Xiaoshuai and Lou Ye. Those made in Taiwan were from leading figures from the first and second

Taiwanese New Wave, Hou Hsiao Hsien and Tsai Ming-liang. The Hong Kong entry in 2000 came from Wong Kar-wai, and the entries in 2005 and 2009 were both Milkyway films directed by To. This does not necessarily suggest that Milkyway films are the best that contemporary Hong Kong cinema offers. However, it does demonstrate that they are regarded as adequate to represent Hong Kong and Chinese-language cinema on the most prominent stages, such as Cannes. Nevertheless, it is also with reference to historical data that the weakness of Milkyway reveals itself. Thus far, its productions have not received any awards at Cannes, Berlin or Venice, where entry is one thing, but winning awards is what would really elevate a title to the pantheon of great films. With respect to Hong Kong cinema, given the achievements that local filmmakers, such as Wong Kar-wai, made at these festivals, Milkyway has to create another triumph of Hong Kong cinema on this platform to replace its critically established predecessors as a flagship of that cinema.

To further consider the above three points (the generic identity of Milkyway's screened films, the emphasis of festivals on directorial authorship and the performance of Milkyway's work compared to other Chinese-language films), two traditions need to be taken into consideration to better understand Milkyway's presence on the festival circuit. Firstly, with regard to film festival culture, as Wong (2011: p. 86) points out, it is more difficult for darker genres to gain recognition at these major festivals unless they either break with expectations of the genre or come from auteur directors. Secondly, with regards to Hong Kong cinema's historical presence at these festivals, Hong Kong films took a different route from mainland Chinese or Taiwan films, and they tend to have stronger a generic identity, such as martial arts or action films. These observations offer one possible explanation for Milkyway's hitherto failure to receive awards and also why its films were selected. Milkyway films' presence uses the local cinema's legacy, but such presence also has to do with the company's accommodation of the auteur tradition within the culture of the prestigious festivals. Milkyway films' presence is, hence, a consequence, a continuation and, most importantly, a convergence of the genre tradition of Hong Kong films, as defined by such filmmakers as John Woo and Tsui Hark in

the 1980s and the auteurist tradition manifest by Ann Hui, Stanley Kwan and especially Wong Kar-wai in the 1990s.

Furthermore, the list of Milkyway's productions at Cannes, Berlin, Venice and Toronto suggests an organisational weight built upon auteur influence, which is not found in local cinema's previous festival presence. There was *Triangle*, co-directed by Tsui Hark, Ringo Lam and To, at Cannes in 2007, *Accident* (2009, Cheang Pou-soi) at Venice and Toronto in 2009, *Motorway* (2012, Cheang) at Toronto in 2012, and *Trivisa*, co-directed by three first-timers, at Berlin in 2016. Berlin showed Patrick Yau's *Expect the Unexpected*, Chiu Sung-Kee's *Comeuppance* and Yau Nai-Hoi's *Eye in the Sky* (2007, Yau Nai-Hoi) in 1999, 2001 and 2007, respectively. Most of these directors are too unknown outside of Hong Kong to be regarded as sought-after names, and some of them are associated exclusively with Milkyway. However, these non-To-directed Milkyway films are consistent in terms of genre, if not also following a consistent house style. Therefore, Milkyway's case, rather than fitting strictly into an auteurist pattern reminiscent of the situations of John Woo or Wong Kar-wai, indicates an organisational appearance made possible by organisational strategies. This production company works like a combination of the local studio Shaw Brothers back in the 1950s–60s, which created an image of itself as being tied to a specific genre (period drama) for European and North American festivals, and the American independent company Miramax in the 1980s–90s, which promoted itself with such labels as 'quality', 'specialty', 'sophisticated' and 'independent' as points of distinction to address niche audiences (de Valck 2007: p. 99; Perren 2001: p. 36). For Milkyway, although the credit often goes to To, the company is carving out its name because its work continues to circulate at these important festivals.

Beyond and after major festivals

After the breakthroughs made in 'the big three' festivals, Milkyway's films appeared at an increasing number of international festivals: from those in Europe to Asia and Australia, and from North to South America. Up to 2016, Milkyway's films have been shown at festivals in at least 18 European countries,

including notable festivals, such as the International Film Festival Rotterdam in the Netherlands, the FIAPF-accredited Locarno International Film Festival in Switzerland, the Moscow International Film Festival and the Vienna International Film Festival. Festivals in more than a score of cities in the United States have screened Milkyway films as well; these festivals include the San Francisco International Film Festival, the Seattle International Film Festival and the New York Film Festival. Its films also have appeared in important festivals in Asia, such as the Pusan International Film Festival in South Korea and the Tokyo International Film Festival in Japan, as well as in South America, such as the FIAPF-accredited Mar del Plata Film Festival in Argentina.

Tributes also increased, with most dedicated to To, in line with the earlier programmes of the same kind but focussing on the director-cum-producer's Milkyway period. The festivals offering tributes include the Sitges International Film Festival in Spain (2005), the International Film Festival Rotterdam (2007), the Asian Film Festival (Filmasia) in Czech Republic (2007), the Udine Far East Film Festival in collaboration with the Cinémathèque Française (2008), the Pusan International Film Festival (2009), the Osaka Asian Film Festival in Japan (2011), and the Paris Cinema International Film Festival (2012). Among them, the programme co-presented by Udine and the Cinémathèque Française in 2008 offered a seminar on the company under the title borrowed from Milkyway's 2006 self-commemorative publication – 'Milkyway Image, Beyond Imagination'. Although the whole programme was still framed as a tribute to To, the seminar can be seen as a testimony to the increased focus that the company had gained during the decade after its initial activities at international festivals. This is verified by Udine's promotion of the entire event, which introduced To as 'an old and dear friend' of the festival and described the company as 'his now famous "factory"' (Udine Far East Film Festival, 2008).

After the appearance of these tributes to To and 12 years after Subway Cinema's retrospective, came the company's second retrospective. 'Milkyway Image: A Fast and Curious Team in the City', offered by the Festival of the Three Continents, took place in Nantes, France, in 2012. Because it is one of the two Milkyway retrospectives thus far presented at international film festivals, and because it happened after over a decade later than the Subway Cinema

retrospective, it stands as a barometer to understand how the company is now perceived after much exposure on the festival circuit and whether its image has been updated after the Subway Cinema event. On the event poster, the festival programmers made the following introduction:

> In 1996, Johnnie To and Wai Ka-fai started to produce and direct genre films and gathered unprecedented creative energy. Tight budgets, audacious content and style as well as cinephilia are now the trademark of the Milkyway Image company, whose rejuvenation of Hong Kong cinema relies on a passionate relationship to the city's way of life and architecture. (Festival of the Three Continents, 2012)

There are points reminiscent of Subway Cinema's portrait of the company, such as genre, content and style, but they are accompanied by newer organisational aspects, such as 'tight budgets' and a reflection on the company's relationship to Hong Kong cinema. Indeed, as the brief introduction indicates, if the retrospective designed by Subway Cinema was essentially a fan-based tribute, the Festival of the Three Continents offered an in-depth review of Milkyway.

The retrospective screened 16 titles from different directors, ranging from thrillers to romances, and from Chinese New Year comedies to teen dramas,[6] displaying the whole variety of the company's production. Most importantly, it accompanied the screenings with a comprehensive text from festival organisers. 'Milkyway Image: The Rule of the Game "Go Fast and Creative"', a critical review of the company from festival director Jérôme Baron, does not simply offer an evaluative comment that 'Milkyway is viewed by the world as embodying the only real driving force in Hong Kong cinema today' (Baron, 2012). In the article, the company is analysed and portrayed multi-dimensionally, with Baron providing audiences and scholars with insights into Milkyway rarely found at festivals.

Firstly, the company is mapped against the historical context of Hong Kong cinema. Baron (2012) points out the association of that cinema's international image with the genres in which Milkyway primarily works, and the company's efforts to 'push back the conventional limits' of these genres. Additionally noted is the 'artistic vitality' inherited from the cinema in the 1970s–80s, which carried

over into the 1990s. Secondly, contending that genre is 'a privileged conduit, a condition of the art' (Baron, 2012), Baron argues not only for the entertainment value but also the artistic and cultural value of Milkyway's genre productions. Meanwhile, he questions the equation of Milkyway with genre filmmaking, suggesting that some films are essentially resistant to genre classification. Thirdly, his portrait of the company provides an antithesis to auteurism, which is truly rare in the discussion of Milkyway films in a film festival context. Baron propounds the idea of the permutation of the roles of To and Wai, and even those of all Milkyway team members, in the company's productions. Moreover, the company's intention to cultivate fresh talent is read as an organisational development strategy. Fourthly, the review sheds light on Milkyway's production range, pace and pattern. It notes the diversity of the company's output and its production system, in which its signature genre films are financially supported by more lucrative films, proposing that it is the balance kept between the two production lines that 'guarantees not only Milkyway's longevity, but more importantly its independence and daring' (Baron, 2012).

While the films Milkyway made were what drew Subway Cinema's attention first and foremost a decade earlier, the Festival of the Three Continents' interest certainly stretched into the company that made them, including its organisational structure, intention and strategy. There was an underlying message that these extra-textual elements played a part no less important than the films themselves in Milkyway's success. The Festival of the Three Continents retrospective attempted to define Milkyway and unpack the reasons behind a contemporary Hong Kong film company's achievements on the international stage. With such efforts, auteurist discourse gave way to organisational analysis. The justification the retrospective offered was a landmark in Milkyway's journey through the international film festival scene. Finally, the nature of the festival is not to be overlooked. Dedicated to cinema from Africa, Latin America and Asia – as its name implies – it is an identity-oriented festival, like Subway Cinema and some others, which placed the spotlight on Milkyway. This, in effect, defines Milkyway from its own angle: the company's regional identity has always been vital for it to go further globally.

Conclusion

With the retrospective at the Festival of the Three Continents echoing the first tribute by Subway Cinema, Milkyway is moving in an ascending spiral on the international film festival scene. Its films initially and continually appeared in genre- and identity-based festivals. Specifically, the retrospective offered by Subway Cinema in 2000 was a benchmark event in the 'discovery' of Milkyway outside of Hong Kong. Soon after its debut at specialised festivals, Milkyway productions started to receive attention from mainstream festivals, including the most prestigious ones in the world; its selection by Cannes in 2004, along with other breakthroughs, marked another milestone. However, unlike the 'discoveries' of films from local filmmakers of an earlier generation, Milkyway films were initially known at non-mainstream festivals. Milkyway has been closely associated with relatively new types of festivals that concentrate on films from a specific genre or region.

Several Milkyway films initially appeared at first instalments of specialised festivals, such as Fantasia, Udine, Deauville and Subway Cinema/the NYAFF. The company's trajectory was greatly determined by the emergence of these festivals. At the major European festivals and Toronto, Milkyway emerged from categories such as Cannes's Midnight Projections, Berlin's Forum and Toronto's Midnight Madness. These categories, akin in nature to specialised festivals, as Marijke de Valck (2007: p. 167) suggests, were a consequence of the major festivals' partial reformation of their programming structures, and the establishment of parallel sections in response to the emergence of thematic festivals in the 1970s. This juxtaposition, hence, indicates a genealogy, an alternative circuit, which opened up a path for Milkyway that was divergent from the ones taken by previous local generations, and which served as the premise for Milkyway's international rise. In addition, the appearance of the aforementioned identity-oriented festivals resulted from the ascendency of Asian, and especially Chinese-language films in the previous decades, which also puts Milkyway in the context of Chinese-language cinema's increasing power.

As the ultimate cinematic tastemaker and festival rule maker, the prestigious festivals had a key influence in introducing Milkyway films to wider audiences. To play to these festivals' rules and meet their expectations, Hong Kong cinema has to cling to its 'specificities' while adapting to the commercialisation trend of film festivals by fostering commercial genre filmmaking to remain its currency. However, as the Milkyway case shows, production houses operating in the contemporary Hong Kong film industry have made efforts to build organisational weight upon auteur influence, sharpening local cinema's competitive edge through a stronger film festival presence, especially at extreme competitive festivals. Not only retrospective programmes but also major festivals' invitations to Milkyway's productions from the company's independent contractors or project-based directors attest to the success of the company's production and business strategies. Therefore, Milkyway's engagement with international film festivals provides a model of contemporary Hong Kong cinema that takes advantage of transnational platforms against a historical context, in which the expanding, diversifying film festival circuit itself is opening up more possibilities. Finally, as mentioned earlier, one of the benefits that Milkyway received from film festivals was the improvement of overseas distribution. Distributors circulated and defined Milkyway's work in their own way. The next chapter will turn to that topic to inquire further about the perceptions of Milkyway and contemporary Hong Kong cinema on a worldwide basis.

Notes

[1] The categorisation and concepts such as 'genre-oriented' and 'identity-oriented' are inspired by Marijke de Valck and Skadi Loist's article on film festival studies. See De Valck and Loist, 2009.

[2] *Lifeline* was released in the year before the company's establishment.

[3] The organisation of tables in this chapter is inspired and referred to Nikki J. Y. Lee and Julian Stringer's article on Chinese cinema at International film festivals. See Lee and Stringer, 2012.

[4] For the topic of these festivals' commercialisation and reformation of programming structure, see de Valck, 2007: p. 167.

[5] Due to their sources of capital, Edward Yang's *Yi Yi* was under the Japan category in 2000, and Lou Ye's *Spring Fever* was under the Hong Kong and France category in 2009.

[6] The sixteen films are *Election*, *Election II*, *Expect the Unexpected*, *Fat Choi Spirit* (2002, To and Wai), *Eye in the Sky*, *Gimme Gimme* (2001, To and Wai), *Life Without Principle*, *Motorway*, *PTU*, *Running on Karma*, *Spacked Out*, *The Longest Nite*, *The Odd One Dies*, *Throw Down*, *Where a Good Man Goes* and *Yesterday Once More*.

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Chapter 7

Defining Hong Kong Cinema through Distribution: Milkyway Films in the United States

In the last chapter, I demonstrated through Milkyway's presence at international film festivals that the perceptions of the company varied across cultures and over time. This chapter continues the attempt to provide an understanding of Milkyway and contemporary Hong Kong cinema from a transnational, transcultural viewpoint. Milkyway films, whose distribution rights often are sold at film festivals, have been distributed to a wide range of countries over the past two decades. This chapter takes the distribution and marketing of Milkyway films in the United States – the largest and most significant single film market in the world – as an example to delve into the industrial construction of the image of Milkyway and contemporary Hong Kong cinema outside of Hong Kong. It reveals how the positioning of the films changes at the hands of different kinds of distributors and in various reception contexts with a combined materialist and comparative approach, relying on a range of paratexts – 'a central part of media production and consumption processes' as Jonathan Gray (2010: p.16) argues – such as posters, covers, trailers, advertisements and publicity reviews. Gray proposes that paratexts demand serious attention because they involve heavy investment from screen industries (p. 8). More importantly, they demand careful scrutiny because paratexts are frames and filters through which we encounter texts, and they potentially give value and identity to texts and position, define, create and change meaning for media products (pp. 1–22). Correspondingly, films are always contingent 'either in the process of forming and transforming or vulnerable to further formation or transformation' (p. 7). Therefore, rather than seeking a definite knowledge of Milkyway films or Hong Kong films in general through a paratextual study, I suggest that the films' image is malleable and subject to changing contexts and historical configurations.

Over the past decade, research regarding the study of film distribution has made a marked departure from a political-economy approach that considers the nature and function of distribution within the studio system (namely, Hollywood) and

sees distribution as playing a logistical role in the film industry. One major critique has been that regarding distribution as an auxiliary process to production overlooks or downplays distribution's power on industrial and especially socio-cultural levels. A growing number of scholars (e.g., Lobato, 2007; Greenberg, 2008; Himpele, 2009; Lobato and Ryan, 2011; Havens and Lotz, 2011; Gonring and Crisp, 2015) have tended to view distribution not as a neutral, mechanical or simplistic process but an active, creative and productive one. For them, distribution plays a fundamental role in determining public taste and differentiating audiences; therefore distributors not only distribute cultural products but also knowledge and power (Himpele, 2009), and regulate not merely flows of money but also flows of meaning that constitute film culture (Lobato, 2007).

On a methodological level, Ramon Lobato and Mark David Ryan (2011) go further by suggesting that we should not consider distribution as 'a discrete sector linking production and reception' (p. 192) but rather adopt a new approach that 'transcends conventional sectoral typologies' to understand 'distribution *as* production, distribution *as* textuality' (p. 200). Concerning distribution's productive shaping of audience-text relations, they take East Asian cinemas as an example, writing that 'common misunderstandings of the generic diversity of East Asian cinemas are by-products of distributors' selective acquisition and releasing strategies. What distributors choose to release has implications on how Western audiences interpret and understand Asian cinemas and, by extension, Asian cultures' (p. 198). I agree with their point that a genre or an image of cinema can be constructed at the point of distribution. Nevertheless, this chapter shelves the distinction between understandings and misunderstandings and sees both as interpretations produced by an array of forces under certain circumstances. To put it radically, interpretations can be productive misunderstandings that facilitate the circulation of films and/or expand the realm of the understanding of the films by managing their meanings. As the following survey will show, the significations, associations and identities of Milkyway films are significantly related to the films' distributors, who simultaneously shape and reshape the understanding of Hong Kong cinema through the marketing and promotion of Milkyway films.

The ‘return’ of Hong Kong film

The appearance of Hong Kong films in the United States has a long history dating back to the 1910s. However, as Steve Fore (1997) points out, US distributors had been uncomfortable with handling Hong Kong films, at least until the mid-1990s, since most of the films, including the unprecedentedly successful Bruce Lee films, did not ‘fit comfortably enough within the conventionalized marketing and reception paradigms under which foreign films enter the United States’ (p. 241). The seemingly sudden and surprising breakthrough of Lee films, argues David Desser (2000), had relied on their US distributors’ specific market exploitation strategy. However, it was in the mid-1990s that distributors such as New Line Cinema and Miramax began to deal comprehensively with the paradigms identified by Fore (1997: p. 241) that ‘based especially on locating a “comfort level” of linguistic, racial, and cultural difference’. With New Line and Miramax’s releases of some Jackie Chan films, the US distribution industry gradually became more capable of pitching and marketing Hong Kong imports, especially the action genre, thereby developing Hong Kong action cinema as a market niche with a growing fan base in the country and creating an imagination of Hong Kong cinema in general.

Since the early 2000s, nevertheless, Hong Kong films in the United States have increasingly been placed in the hands of smaller distributors. Miramax, one of the most important distributors of Hong Kong films, such as *Shaolin Soccer* (2001, Stephen Chow) and *Infernal Affairs* (2002, Andrew Lau and Alan Mak), in the country since the mid-1990s, stopped distributing Hong Kong films after the mid-2000s upon the departure of the Weinstein brothers from the company. This was a watershed moment, signalling the end of an era in which Hong Kong films, especially action-oriented genres, had relatively stable international distribution networks. Although the Weinstein brothers later launched The Weinstein Company, for which films from Hong Kong remained an interest, after the early 2000s, US distribution rights of most Hong Kong films went to a variety of independent, mostly smaller companies. In addition, due to the closing of Chinatown theatres which used to constitute a major channel through which

Hong Kong films reached American audiences, newly emerged independent distributors became key agents in presenting Hong Kong films. It was at that juncture, namely the early 2000s, that Milkyway's productions first came to the US market.

The first distributors to import Milkyway's work started business at about the same time as Milkyway. For example, Palm Pictures and DEJ Productions were both founded in 1998, and Magnolia Pictures was founded in 2001. These companies operated mainly in the home video industry and acquired mostly low-budget films, such as those from Milkyway. Never having distributed pre-1997 Hong Kong films and with little experience marketing Hong Kong films in general, these distributors adopted releasing strategies used by their predecessors, such as New Line and Miramax, seeking to benefit from the 'Hong Kong action cinema' brand among a niche audience. Thus, Hong Kong cinema's conventional image, associated with the action genre in the United States and other Western countries, contributed to the distributors' selective acquisition strategy in the first place. As I pointed out in Chapter 4, since the beginning of the 2000s, Milkyway has used a two-strand production system: making crime thrillers and romantic comedies. US distributors began to import its films in 2003 but, until very recently, almost only acquired films that fell roughly into the crime thriller genre, regardless of the fact that Milkyway's romantic comedies were much more popular and lucrative in the home market. The same conclusion can be drawn from a glance at digital networks. In the US iTunes store, for example, all seven Milkyway productions released onto the platform fall into the crime thriller genre.[1]

Specifically, in the early stages of the history of US distribution of Milkyway's films, distributors generated the impression that Hong Kong film, especially action film, had been revived after a period of decline starting in the mid-1990s. The first Milkyway film to enter the United States was *Fulltime Killer*, released by Palm Pictures, an independent company that positions itself as a distributor of 'innovative music and film projects' ('About Palm Pictures', n.d.). Before the release, Palm, in collaboration with Milkyway's domestic and Asia distributor Media Asia, set up a chain of interviews for director Johnnie To with US-based media ranging from the general-interest *The Los Angeles Times* newspaper to

the specialised film site *Indiewire*, to turn the import of the film into a veritable event. Firstly, the arrival of a new wave of Hong Kong action cinema was indicated by the introduction of To as a potential auteur from Hong Kong to the US audience. *The Los Angeles Times* described the director as 'an inheritor of John Woo's mantle, known for wild roller-coast violence' (Cheng, 2003). *Indiewire*, whose managing member and co-founder was 'part of the executive management team of Palm Pictures' at the time, claimed that while To's pre-Milkyway work 'came up a bit short' compared with the work of John Woo and Tsui Hark, that was no longer the case since the launch of Milkyway (Mottesheard, 2003). In another pre-release publicity interview, critic Henry Sheehan (2003) highlighted the significance of Palm's release of *Fulltime Killer*, noting that it alleviated the unfortunate situation that almost none of the films of a director who 'has been making the most interesting gangster films to come out of Hong Kong for at least the last six years' had been released in America.

Secondly, the film's US DVD cover quotes various sources to create the message that the film represents the revival of Hong Kong cinema, and by accentuating the film's generic identity, the message was tailored to target Hong Kong action film fans. Quotes from *New York Magazine*, the *Village Voice*, and Reel.com read, respectively, 'An action epic… recalls the glory days of Hong Kong cinema', 'Hong Kong action gets its art cred back with Fulltime Killer', and 'An exuberant Hong Kong actioner. Demonstrates that there's still a lot of life in Hong Kong cinema'. These pull quotes suggested that the emergence of films such as *Fulltime Killer* indicated that Hong Kong cinema had come out of its creative crisis and was returning to the global scene. The distributor seemed to market the film on a sense of freshness but essentially exploited a clichéd image of Hong Kong film that was action-packed and action-dominated. *Infernal Affairs*, one of the most internationally high-profile Hong Kong titles created after 1997, adds evidence to this tendency. The film was released in the United States around the same time as the release of *Fulltime Killer*. Its US distributor Miramax's pull quote from *The New York Times* resembled Palm's quotes for *Fulltime Killer*: 'signals a new era of Hong Kong filmmaking', recollecting and rebuilding the memories of Hong Kong film. The DVD cover of *Breaking News*, the last Milkyway film distributed by Palm, not only included

quotes such as ‘A tightly wound thriller! Action-packed!’ (from eFilmCritic) and ‘A white-knuckler of a crime movie’ (from DVD Talk) but also used totally redesigned cover art. The cover of the Hong Kong version presents a peaceful street in which the protagonist carries a gun and looks small and inconspicuous. The US version, in contrast, uses a large image of the protagonist holding a gun with a backdrop of explosions and fire to make the film’s genre self-explanatory.

Palm’s focus on *Fulltime Killer*’s Hong Kong identity was at odds with the producer’s intentions and with the interpretation of most scholars and critics, who instead underlined the film’s pan-Asian identity. Concerning the film per se, *Fulltime Killer* is a Hong Kong–Japan co-production. Its main actors and their characters come respectively from Hong Kong, Japan and Taiwan; its dialogue is in English, Japanese, Cantonese and Mandarin; its locations include Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and South Korea. Director To stated, ‘We hope that the film will be regarded as an Asian film’ (Ti, 2011: p. 196). Stephen Teo (2010: p. 157) further notes that ‘[t]he idea behind *Fulltime Killer* […] to manifest a diasporic, pan-Asian consciousness’ was shared by some other Milkyway films also produced during the company’s early years. The film thus can be considered part of the production company’s attempt to gain the Asian market. However, its Asian identity designed by the producer and identified by film journalism and academia was displaced with an unmistakable Hong Kong identity by its US distributor, who used ‘Hong Kong action cinema’ as a selling point.

Palm’s tactics were employed for several films by a range of distributors. Whereas *Beyond Hypothermia*’s domestic distributor made the film look like a romance by featuring the leading couple on the film’s VCD cover, DEJ Productions, a now-defunct independent distributor, included only the heroine with a large gun on the US version of the film’s DVD cover. A couple of years later, independent distributor Magnolia Pictures released Milkyway’s *Exiled* and *Triangle*. According to Magnolia’s co-founder and president (and former Miramax executive) Eamonn Bowles, his company acquired the rights to *Exiled* because ‘[a] lot of people thinking that the Hong Kong gangster film ran its course in the nineties are going to be pleasantly surprised by the freshness and innovation of “Exiled”’ (Hernandez, 2006). However, ‘the freshness and

innovation' were not reflected in Magnolia's design for the film's DVD cover, which abandoned the design of the main Hong Kong poster that features a vintage-style photo of the protagonists in a peaceful setting and instead featured a design in almost the same style as *Breaking News* and *Beyond Hypothermia*. Quotes such as 'spectacularly violent set pieces has [*sic*] bullets flying and bodies spinning' from *The New Yorker* and 'bloody shoot-outs designed to exhaust adrenal glands' from *Time Out New York* were furthermore added to highlight genre elements. The US cover of the *Triangle* DVD departed from the domestic version as well, which gives no clue about the film's genre at all and added a huge image of a gun inscribed with the prominent, all-capitalised word 'explosive'. *PTU*, re-distributed by The Weinstein Company under its Dragon Dynasty label, which releases Weinstein's Asian titles,[2] is another example. Whereas its Hong Kong poster looks sleek and cool, as distinguished from posters of numerous earlier local action and crime films, the US cover creates an impression of fighting and bloodshed, implying that the film is in the same vein as previous Hong Kong imports.

Tartan Films (now Palisades Tartan) implemented similar tactics for Milkyway's *Election* and *Election II*. The former's main Hong Kong poster was created in plain black and red with a stylish, printmaking effect while carrying no apparent generic clues. Conversely, the US distributor seemed less concerned about the style of the poster – and presumably of the film – but added generic iconography, such as a gun and a knife, to the poster. Tartan also re-titled *Election II* as *Triad Election*, removing the impression of the film's dependence on another film for consumers (apart from making clear that it was not a sequel to the domestic comedy *Election* [1999, Alexander Payne]) and, more importantly, making the title indicative of a crime and gangster film. With the intention of selling the films to established Hong Kong action and crime film enthusiasts, the US distributors constructed a familiar image of Hong Kong cinema that differed from what had been presented by the films' producers and domestic distributors. As the Hong Kong posters of films such as *Election* and *PTU* illustrate, Milkyway consciously distinguished their productions from earlier local titles. Film texts aside, the company and its domestic distributors avoided using clichéd iconography of Hong Kong action films when designing

promotional materials for domestic releases. In addition, as I noted in Chapter 5, Hong Kong-based critics endeavoured to highlight innovations and subversions of Milkyway's films. However, new associations of signification that the company, its domestic distributors and the local cultural community intended for Hong Kong cinema and the Hong Kong audience were neglected or rejected during the process of overseas distribution. In the US distributors' presentation of the films, the same old Hong Kong action cinema 'returned'. The distributors provided an 'ahistorical' reading of Hong Kong cinema, which was unconcerned with the impact of socio-political transition and industrial transformation on the cinema emphasised in the Hong Kong context.

Tartan's positioning of the *Election* diptych also neglected the films' political implications for democracy in Hong Kong, repeatedly discussed throughout the film's domestic and overseas critical reception, just as it re-titled the equivocal *Election II* to the univocal *Triad Election*. Political implications, like stylistic innovations, were sacrificed to the films' generic identity and sensational aspects for marketing purposes. Such tactics were in accordance with the strategy for the 'Tartan Asia Extreme' label under which *Election* and *Triad Election* were released. Shin Chi-Yun (2009) has indicated that Tartan Asia Extreme's evolution into 'the most high-profile label amongst the East Asian film providers' was largely due to 'the reductive nature of Tartan's marketing practices' that repackages Asian films to meet narrow generic expectations. Following the success of the label in the United Kingdom,[3] in 2004, Tartan launched a branch in the United States, where its founder and the creator of the Asia Extreme label found 'a whole niche that was being ignored' (Mottesheard, 2005). As part of Tartan USA's early releases, the *Election* films were used to consolidate a clear and strong Asia Extreme label in a new market.

Likewise, Magnolia released *Exiled* and *Triangle* under its 'Magnet Releasing' label, 'the genre arm of Magnolia Pictures, specializing in films from vanguard of horror, action, comedy and Asian cinema' ('Magnet', n.d.). The label was launched in 2007, between the theatrical and DVD releases of *Exiled*, and *Triangle* was listed among its initial slate:

> Magnolia already has a robust history of releasing acclaimed "genre" titles such as *The Host*, *Exiled*, *Tears of the Black Tiger*, *Severance* and *Ong Bak: The Thai Warrior*; moving forward, Magnet will be home to productions and acquisitions that fit in this vein.
>
> The first releases on Magnet's eclectic international slate define the type of unconventional, risk-taking genre fare it will showcase: Toronto Midnight Madness selection *Big Man Japan* (*Dainipponjin*) by Hitoshi Matsumoto; Tony Stone's heavy metal Viking epic, *Severed Ways*; action omnibus *Triangle* created by the kings of Hong Kong cinema […] ('Magnolia Pictures Launches Magnet', 2007)

The above press release shows that films such as *Exiled* and *Triangle* were selected at the moment of the emergence of a genre label and were supposed to define the label for consumers. As Magnolia's Bowles stated, 'we use Magnet to differentiate the genre films from the other type films that Magnolia releases, such as documentaries, foreign and arthouse films, etc. Magnet really has an eye out for the more complex examples of the genre, not just the typical studio teenagers-in-peril types of films' (Kaplan, n.d.). The distributor expected the films to represent, first and foremost, the new label that would potentially create a new market segment. Whether the new genre that Magnet stands for was a more 'complex' one or a reincarnation of Hong Kong cult cinema, the framing of the films had changed even before they reached the American audience.

Distributors had their logic regarding which Hong Kong films to acquire and how to market them. An interview with Bey Logan, vice president of Asian acquisitions and co-production at Weinstein, the distributor of *PTU*, somewhat explains genre-fication and simplification in the distribution of Hong Kong films: 'The American audience seem to be resistant to some of the older [Hong Kong] titles, especially the more obscure ones' ('Interview', 2008). Dragon Dynasty, like Tartan Asia Extreme and Magnet Releasing, was an explicit genre label. Launched in 2006, it claimed to bring home 'the world's greatest martial arts and Asian action films' ('About Dragon Dynasty'). Its acquisition and marketing strategy was reductive from the outset. In the press release published upon the launch of Dragon Dynasty, parent company Weinstein stated that it 'will be

acquiring titles across all genres of Asian film such as contemporary action, martial arts, epic swordplay and hi-octane thriller' ('The Weinstein Company Builds a "Dragon Dynasty"' 2006). Shin (2008) regards Dragon Dynasty and the like as followers of Tartan Asia Extreme, suggesting that these labels were 'attempts to cash in on the latest trend' set by Tartan. The appearance of the Milkyway titles and the pre-figurative knowledge created for them in this context served the construction and branding of a niche section.

Although a conventional image of Hong Kong action film was suggested during distribution, Hong Kong action cinema did not constitute a label per se for Tartan, Magnolia or Weinstein. Milkyway's films were subsumed under such labels as Tartan Asia Extreme, Magnet Releasing and Dragon Dynasty, which stands for what the distributors would designate as Asian cult cinema. As most typically illustrated by Dragon Dynasty's kinship with Miramax (both launched by the Weinstein brothers) and with UK-based distributor Hong Kong Legends (former managers of which moved to Weinstein), the new labels indicated a renewal, refurbishment and expansion of the somewhat outdated 'Hong Kong action film' brand. More importantly, there was a fundamental change regarding the marketing and promotion of Hong Kong films as a result of the development of strategy and increasing sophistication of the distribution industry in the United States. With the incorporation of the most exportable and exploitable genres from a range of Asian film industries to form a portmanteau, encompassing label, Hong Kong films' generic and geocultural identity were expanded and reconstructed. At the same time, such distribution strategy opened up the space for Milkyway films to be considered against a wider spectrum of contemporary Asian cinema.

Nevertheless, the emergence of the Asian cult cinema labels does not necessarily reflect the fusion of Asian cinemas and genres. Rather than representing Hong Kong or Asian cinema, the Milkyway films were vehicles for promoting the brand image of developing genre labels in the releasing country. Therefore, the US distributors' selective acquisition and 'ahistorical' reading of the films were historical in essence. Their handling of contemporary Asian cinema for their own branding and business development purposes during that period left a particular, but not immutable, mark on subsequent consumption and

understanding of Milkyway films. To borrow Jesse Balzer's (2014) terms from his research on New Line's distribution of Jackie Chan films, these distributors 'authored' their acquisitions from Milkyway by reframing (rather than retooling in Balzer's original context) them. I have argued in Chapter 5 that the Hong Kong cultural community wrote on Milkyway's work in the attempt of 'making' 'Hong Kong' films; likewise, the distributors intended to 'make' Tartan Asia Extreme/Magnet Releasing/Dragon Dynasty films through distributing Milkyway's work. The players in the distribution industry, as well as those in the cultural community and the film festival circuit, acted as multiple authors of Milkyway films (and co-creators of the Milkyway brand) as long as the films are understood not as static texts. It is exactly in this sense that a solid understanding of Milkyway entails interrogation of the practices of criticism, festival programming, distribution and the like.

The 'disappearance' of the Hong Kong identity

Changes regarding Milkyway films' identities had occurred in the previously discussed history. The first couple of films were released against the background of US distributors seeking to capitalise on a 'Hong Kong' brand. A few years later, however, in the midst of a trend for launching genre labels identified by Shin, distributors tended to stress or create an Asian identity for Milkyway's films. From the beginning of the 2010s, it was quite noticeable that US distributors no longer stuck to a strict 'Hong Kong action film' label. Milkyway's *Vengeance* (2009, To), released by IFC Films – AMC's distribution arm for independent films and television shows – was defined on the film's DVD cover and in its trailer as 'a classic western' through a pull quote from a *Chicago Sun-Times* review. As 'a classic western', the film was supposed to address potential viewers beyond the traditional audience demographic for Hong Kong action films. Since the 'action' label had been a substantial part of the 'Hong Kong cinema' brand, underplaying that label suggested a tendency to obscure or eliminate the Hong Kong identity from the imported films.

The cases of *Life Without Principle* and *Punished* (2011, Law), both released by independent distributor Indomina Releasing (in partnership with Vivendi

Entertainment), also pointed to changing marketing strategies. Indomina positioned itself similarly to the earlier-mentioned genre labels, aiming 'to establish a leadership position in the independent film market, focusing on genre based content and creating a destination for young, dedicated consumers of the fanboy culture' (Smith, 2011). Indomina acquired *Life Without Principle* because, according to its vice chairman and CEO Jasbinder Singh Mann, director To's fan following 'mirrors Indomina's target audience' (Marsh, 2011). Indomina did not want to abandon the action film audience, and thus the design for the US DVD cover presented guns, explosions and fires, reminiscent of classic action pictures. However, Indomina not want the film to appeal only to that audience either. Even though *Life Without Principle* involved conspicuous elements of an action film, it was introduced primarily as a financial thriller for a general audience experiencing the fluctuation of the world economy. Specifically, a background of the world economy was created only in the US trailer, which was framed with two lines of added English voice-over saying that 'the euro has dropped nine percent' and 'the bubble has finally burst'. Indomina soon repeated the strategy for *Punished*. The film was described as '[l]oaded with pulse-pounding action' in the synopsis on the poster, but defined through a main quote from *The Hollywood Reporter* as 'an edgy fusion of explosive family drama and hardboiled violence'. A comparison of the subtitles in the film's Hong Kong and US trailers illustrates this more clearly. In the Hong Kong version, the subtitles are 'An eye for an eye', 'Violence against violence', 'Reprisal breeds reprisal'; in the US version, 'A man of great power', 'With one fatal weakness', 'When love is taken', 'Only hate remains'. The domestic distributor depicted the film chiefly as a thriller, whereas the US distributor provided more possibilities for it also to be imagined as a drama.

Similarly, independent distributor Shout! Factory released *Accident* under its 'action/adventure' category, but the design of the poster and the introduction of the film throughout the trailer provided little suggestion that the film featured action. Instead, the trailer included the lines 'Death without a trace. Mystery without any proof' and 'Every move is deliberate. Nothing happens by chance', giving an impression of a mystery thriller. *Accident*'s US poster also erased the typical Hong Kong city block featured in the domestic poster. The name 'Hong

Kong' was almost absent in Shout! Factory's and Indomina's presentations of the films. Such efforts to expand the target audience once again functioned to loosen the films from prominent generic and cultural identities in the home market. We should be careful not to disregard differences among Milkyway's films or deny such differences' effects on the distributors' strategy. Still, the marketing of these films was less reductive, and considerably less reliant on the implication of a 'Hong Kong action film'.

Lionsgate Home Entertainment's marketing of *Motorway* provides another example of the effort to explore new markets. Lionsgate used a tactic almost identical to that used by Indomina, remarking in the film's trailer that 'to stop an underground racing world, it'll take an undercover cop'. Whilst the second half of this sentence would remind audiences of numerous Hong Kong gangster and police films, the first half portrays a racing film to court a new audience. *Motorway* also was marketed in Hong Kong as combining police thriller and racing thriller, yet it was pitched more as a racing film in the United States. The design of its main domestic poster, which realistically features two police officers (the protagonists), was not adopted by Lionsgate. The US distributor probably borrowed the idea of another more comic Hong Kong poster of the film and pushed it to the extreme. The US version featured two cars in an animated, video game-like manner, accompanied by the main quote from *Beyond Hollywood*, reading 'Your ticket to 90 minutes of high-octane fun'. Moreover, while the more comic Hong Kong version pictured the International Finance Centre skyscraper, an icon in Hong Kong, the building was absent from the Lionsgate version. As such, the US distributor showed indifference to the film's local identity so obviously highlighted by its domestic distributor. *Motorway*'s Lionsgate poster, thoroughly distinct from that of earlier US-distributed Hong Kong films and with no Hong Kong elements at all, can be seen as a landmark in the de-Hong Kong-isation of Hong Kong imports in the United States.

Throughout the process of US distributors' strategic shift from exploiting nostalgia for Hong Kong action film to expanding beyond one niche market, localisation strategies further undermined the brand of 'Hong Kong action cinema' or 'Hong Kong cinema' more generally. The distributors' aim of selling their imports to a general American audience led to de-Hong Kong-isation when

acknowledging the production values of the films. As illustrated by the above-mentioned example of the association of Hong Kong action film with western (namely Hollywood) film for the marketing of *Vengeance*, US distributors demonstrated their intent to create cross-references between the foreign films they wanted to sell and their domestic releases. In the case of *Vengeance*, this also was revealed by the film's comparisons to *Unforgiven* (1992, Clint Eastwood) and *Memento* (2000, Christopher Nolan).

Vengeance was not the only release described as resembling American films or television series. For *Election*, Tartan used a quote from *The New York Sun* to piggyback on domestic hits: 'By the time the film is over, you feel like an entire season of "The Sopranos" [1999–2007, HBO] has been distilled to its purest essence and injected directly into your brain'. For *Triad Election*, it quoted the *New York Post*, which called the film 'A *Godfather* [1972, Francis Ford Coppola] with a Hong Kong flavor'. A pre-release promotional write-up opened with references to the American titles as well: 'With Mob fever spiked by the return of *The Sopranos*, now's the perfect time to enjoy the intense *Godfather* variations of Johnnie To' (Schwarzbaum, 2007). Weinstein quoted from *Beyond Hollywood* to comment that *PTU* 'Culminates in a gun battle of *Reservoir Dogs*-like [1992, Quentin Tarantino] proportions'. For the poster and trailer for *Drug War*, Well Go USA quoted from *Screen International* to describe the film as '*The French Connection* [1971, William Friedkin] meets *The Wire* [2002–2008, HBO]'; a publicity review published on *Indiewire* called the film a 'scene-setter' for *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013, AMC) (Kohn, 2013).

Of various sizes and with different focuses, IFC, Tartan, Weinstein and Well Go all used cross-references in their marketing campaigns for Milkyway's films. The rationale behind such references was localisation, namely marketing foreign films in terms of American audiences' familiarity with their domestic, well-known titles. This localisation strategy departed from the 'Americanisation' of Hong Kong imports seen in New Line and Miramax a decade earlier, where the releases were dubbed, re-scored, re-edited and sometimes re-titled to balance the distinctiveness and accessibility of foreign-language films (Dombrowski, 2008; Balzer, 2014). While New Line and Miramax's creative control over their Hong Kong releases sought to remove cultural differences, IFC's, Tartan's,

Weinstein's and Well Go's framing of Milkyway's work was more concerned with constructing cultural genealogies for the films and providing predetermined frameworks for consumption. The references would encourage viewers to compare the imported films to their American 'counterparts', thereby conditioning the ways in which foreign films and even foreign cinema were perceived. As such, cross-references extended the Hong Kong film's associations, most of which were non-existent in the original, domestic context. The American titles mentioned in the marketing spontaneously functioned to define the Hong Kong imports associated with them. Whilst the linkage was set up between the Milkyway films and foreign titles, the former's relation to previous and contemporary Hong Kong films was downplayed or elided. With the films' local cultural identity being sacrificed for a wider audience and circulation, their anchors to Hong Kong's society, culture and cinematic traditions – as were reiterated by local critics discussed in Chapter 5 – were easily detached.

Moreover, these Hong Kong films were questioned in terms of, if not entirely deprived of, their originality. Whereas action-related genre films from Hong Kong previously had been considered (and advertised as) genuine, the contemporary imports became more like variations of, rather than alternatives to, Hollywood productions. Weinstein's pull quote that describes *PTU* as in a *Reservoir Dogs*-like fashion provides the most vivid example, which stands in sharp contrast to Quentin Tarantino acknowledging drawing on a Hong Kong action film, *City on Fire* (1987, Ringo Lam), in the promotion of his *Reservoir Dogs* over a decade earlier. The contemporary distributors' reversal of the relations between their domestic titles and Hong Kong imports placed Hong Kong cinema in a subordinate position. Similarly, descriptions such as 'A *Godfather* with a Hong Kong flavor' were not simply juxtapositions but also hierarchical, implying that Hong Kong cinema was a derivative form of cinema. As such, the circulation of films generated cultural hierarchies alongside genealogies, associations and identities. Milkyway's films engaged in the globalisation of cinema in that they became vehicles for establishing cultural hierarchy and order. Meanwhile, the films' Hong Kong identity became even more dispensable, as the originality or genuineness that had underpinned the

‘Hong Kong action cinema’ brand became problematic. It might also have vanished because the imports were treated as an ambiguous ‘other’ compared to productions from the releasing country. A derivative cinema could not be further from what contemporary Hong Kong film production houses, such as Milkyway, claimed to offer. The company has emphasised originality and creativity and has been extremely careful to defend local identity on- and off-screen. However, interpretations by the Hong Kong filmmaking industry and cultural community were not necessarily carried over into the other contexts from which new significations and associations emerged.

The Chinese connection

From the beginning of the 2010s, the portrayal of Milkyway films and the image of the company were further changed when a new group of distributors brought a growing number of China–Hong Kong co-productions to the US market. *Drug War*, the most recent action-oriented Milkyway film imported to the United States at the time of writing,[4] was released on the largest scale that a Milkyway film has ever enjoyed. In stark contrast to the company’s earlier productions, which received limited or no theatrical release, *Drug War* received national release. It is safe to say that the film’s status as Milkyway’s first full-scale co-production with the Chinese film industry largely contributed to this unprecedented distribution scale for a Milkyway title. However, marketing campaigns in Hong Kong and the United States diverged concerning the film’s identity. In Hong Kong, posters, trailers and television advertisements repeatedly highlighted the tagline ‘global fight against drug trafficking’,[5] accentuating a global identity, while ‘China’ was almost absent. The US marketing campaign, conversely, gave prominence to the film’s Chinese identity. The US trailer opened with the following hook: ‘In China, manufacturing over 50 grams of meth will get you the death penalty.’ Most pre-release publicity reviews from the US media emphasised that the film was the first that To had made in mainland China; a *New York Times* review, for example, was sub-titled ‘“Drug War,” Moving Fast and Furious in China’ (Dargis, 2013).

In *Drug War*'s case, 'China' eclipsed 'Hong Kong' against the background of the emergence and growth of new networks throughout the US distribution business. Claiming to be 'a leader in independent film distribution' that 'specializes in bringing top content, including the best in Action, Genre and Independent films from the US and around the world' ('About Us', n.d.), *Drug* War's US distributor, Well Go USA (in partnership with Variance Films), has developed into a major distributor of Asian and especially Chinese-language films in recent years and has set up offices in Taiwan and China. Well Go has a definite focus on Asian films, through which it differentiates itself from its competitors. According to its president and CEO Doris Pfardrescher, Well Go's main competitors 'are companies like Lionsgate, Weinstein, Sony Pictures Classics and Magnolia – but none of those focus on Asian cinema' (Lowry, 2015). Pfardrescher explained elsewhere that besides their main business – home video distribution – 'We do around one title a month theatrically, which could be Chinese, [South] Korean or other Asian and we also do around three US independent films a year' (Shackleton, 2016b). In recent years, China–Hong Kong co-produced blockbusters constituted a major part of Well Go's Asian acquisitions. In fact, its evolution into a leading distributor of Asian films in the United States was largely due to its successful distribution of a China–Hong Kong co-produced blockbuster, *Ip Man* (2008, Wilson Yip). The distributor has been working closely with the AMC theatre chain, which not coincidentally had been recently acquired by Wanda Group, a China-based transnational conglomerate. The acquisition has made Wanda the world's largest cinema circuit and made AMC theatres a platform for Chinese-language films' exploration of and penetration in the US market. Pfardrescher revealed that 'AMC has been really supportive of our films as its [*sic*] backed by Wanda and they really want Chinese films to support the Chinese market' (Shackleton, 2016b). Well Go embodies a nascent industrial sector that has self-positioned as specialising in Asian films and thrived especially on selling Chinese blockbusters to the United States. Their Chinese connections led to their different interpretation of Milkyway or Hong Kong films from that of the previously discussed distributors and, in particular, to the emphasis that they put on China–Hong Kong co-productions' 'Chineseness'. In addition, Well Go's

trajectory, which it expanded from action films to more Asian genres, foreshadowed further dissociation of Hong Kong imports from certain genres.

Milkyway's *Don't Go Breaking My Heart II*, which received national release at AMC theatres at approximately the same time as *Drug War*, was another explicit example of the emergence and growth of new sectors throughout the US distribution market. This China–Hong Kong co-production was the first romantic comedy from Milkyway that broke into the US market. Its release changed the situation whereby only action-oriented productions from Milkyway could circulate through the United States' formal channels: Milkyway or Hong Kong film's association with the 'action' label was increasingly challenged. Milkyway finally having a romantic comedy released in the United States in the early 2010s, so many years since its inception, was not a coincidence. The film was released by Asia Releasing, a distributor established using the model of China Lion Film, the most powerful and active force in the distribution of Chinese-language films in the United States since its formation in 2010 with capital from China's major film companies. Upon Asia Releasing's establishment in 2013, its founder and CEO, ex-CEO and co-founder of China Lion, Milt Barlow explained his goals and the circumstances for his decision:

> We aim to bring a collection of major Asian releases, art house product and first time director product from across Asia. […] While all the talk right now is China, China, China the entire region is exploding with interesting and ground-breaking product. We will be aiming for a rounded release schedule not only from China and Hong Kong but from Taiwan, Japan, [South] Korea, India, The Philippines, Vietnam, Singapore, Cambodia, Laos and beyond. (Frater, 2013)

The above quote illustrates the blossom of Asian films in the United States and the greatest popularity of Chinese films among all Asian imports. However, the growth of Chinese and other Asian film industries was not the only determinant at play. Founders (and their teams) of the newly emerged (or rapidly growing) distributors, such as Barlow and Pfardrescher, have had considerable experience with importing Chinese-language films and also extensive connections with Chinese-language film industries. The likes of Asia Releasing represent a new

generation of US distributors backed by Chinese capital and networks and thus serve the promotion of Chinese film culture.

China Lion, the launch of which can be seen as marking the beginning of a new era in Chinese-language cinema's globalisation, released Milkyway's *Office* (2015, To) in the United States in 2015. This China–Hong Kong co-produced musical continued to blur the distinction between action-oriented and non-action-oriented work from Milkyway, and between Hong Kong and Chinese productions. Milkyway was no longer a purveyor of a new generation of Hong Kong 'fanboy' films, an image created by its early US distributors. Distributors like China Lion associated themselves not with the Hong Kong action/crime genre but with the Chinese blockbuster genre, because it was the prosperity of Chinese cinema and culture that the Chinese media giants who backed those distributors wished to display and peddle. Due to changes in the type and nature of distributors, the release of *Don't Go II*, *Office* and many other Chinese-financed China–Hong Kong co-productions revised the image of Milkyway in the United States and, potentially, the understanding of Hong Kong cinema.

Conclusion

In the preceding discussion I suggested that there has been a tendency towards downplaying Hong Kong identity throughout the US distribution of contemporary Hong Kong films. However, this does not mean that Hong Kong cinema only has been understood in one way during this period. For example, when distribution companies with a great interest in Chinese blockbusters or co-productions developed into a new force, Tartan re-released *Election* and *Triad Election* with another Hong Kong title, *Triad Underworld* (2004, Wong Ching-po), in a box set called 'Triad Trilogy' as a means to strengthen – while profiting from – its Asian Extreme brand. As Tartan described the films as 'Hong Kong powerhouse thrillers' and 'a cornerstone of Hong Kong triad cinema' ('Triad Trilogy…', 2012), a familiar image of Hong Kong film resurfaced. Moreover, grouping the *Election* diptych with another film modified the understanding of the films previously provided by Tartan itself. For *Election*'s previous stand-alone version, Tartan quoted the endorsement 'the best film of the year' from

Quentin Tarantino, who had contributed enormously to Hong Kong film's profile in the United States, to boost the production values of the distributor's acquisition. Lumping the film together with others effectively announced that, with the passage of time, the film was just another gangster thriller among many others.

The above example, however, does not lead to the idea that films' associations are determined solely by a distribution company or distribution label's brand image, regardless of the environment in which it operates. Tartan's UK branch was responsible for the distribution of *Fulltime Killer* in that country, and the film also was released under the Tartan Asia Extreme label. Unlike Palm, which defined the film strictly as an action film for the American audience, Tartan (UK) pitched the film for the British audience as a combination of thriller and romance. Tartan described in the poster and other promotional materials '[t]wo assassins, two ideals and a love to die for', and presented a man, a woman, and a gun in the poster to 'emphasize a combination of sexuality and violence that was central to the brand's image at this time', as Daniel Martin (2009b: p. 32) argues. Martin has examined the distribution and marketing of To's films – the majority of which overlap the films discussed in this chapter – in the United Kingdom in detail and reflected on the image of postcolonial Hong Kong cinema in that market. Both his and my study illustrate that these contemporary Hong Kong films were not marketed in the same way in the United Kingdom and the United States and that neither agreed with the marketing campaigns in the original Hong Kong context.

The history of the distribution and marketing of Milkyway's films in the United States has provided reflection regarding the perception and positioning of contemporary Hong Kong cinema in an age of globalisation. More importantly, by showing that films' images are contingent upon distributive powers, this chapter displays the value of a transnational, transcultural perspective for understanding a regional or 'national' cinema and cinematic identities. In Milkyway's case, looking beyond a political, ideological perspective and the context of Hong Kong–China relations renders possible a reflective approach to the production company and Hong Kong cinema's recent history. Finally, whilst I have been stressing how the nature, position and strategy of distributors

affected the presentation of Milkyway and its work, there has been a constant interdependence and interaction of various industrial, cultural and social contexts surrounding the production and circulation of the films in the shaping of an entire discourse about Milkyway. As a conclusion of the examination of Milkyway's changing image, the next and last chapter will look into one more reception context – overseas critics' recognition of the company – to trace how Milkyway developed from an invisible factory to a style and a brand.

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[1] Digital distribution of Milkyway's productions in the US iTune store began also with *Fulltime Killer*. At the time of writing, other films include *Exiled*, *Vengeance*, *Accident*, *Punished*, *Motorway* and *Drug War*.

[2] Palm Pictures first brought the film to the United States in 2003.

[3] For this subject, also see Martin, 2009a. Martin points out that the success of the Tartan Asia Extreme brand in the UK 'was due to a carefully orchestrated and long-running branding campaign, which attached a unifying label and an extremely strong brand identity' to films including Milkyway's and other Hong Kong films.

[4] At the time of writing, Well Go has just acquired distribution rights of Milkyway's upcoming crime thriller *Three* (2016, To) for North America, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. See Shackleton, 2016a.

[5] The translation is my own.

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Chapter 8

Building a Hong Kong Studio Brand: Milkyway's Changing Image in Overseas Critical Reception

Milkyway has become one of the most active and remarkable film companies in post-handover Hong Kong due to its commercial achievements in its home market and mainland China and the circulation of its films on the international film festival circuit and in the global marketplace in general. As has been indicated in the previous chapters, a discussion of Milkyway inevitably involves frequent reference to To. In particular, we have found an unbalanced relationship between To and his company – or Milkyway and its star auteur – in the reception of Milkyway films. Film festivals handled To's work and non-To work from Milkyway differently; distributors tended to adopt auteurist marketing strategies, using To's name as a selling point for Milkyway's productions; for example, 'From the producer of *Election* and *Exiled*' was highlighted on the US cover of the Cheang-directed *Accident* as an advertisement for the latter. The hierarchies and perplexities of authorship in Milkyway's work, as this chapter will show, were even more salient in the overseas critical reception of the films. Benefiting from – and sometimes overshadowed by – To's reputation, Milkyway gained international recognition in its two decades of operation, providing a site for tracing both the changing pattern of reception of Hong Kong film overseas and the contemporary Hong Kong film industry's response to and engagement with cultural forces worldwide.

This chapter follows the tradition within reception studies that acknowledges the importance of critical reception in the circulation of films and in the creation of reputation. Since film scholars such as Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery (1985), Mike Budd (1986), and especially Janet Staiger (1992) drew attention to extra-textual materials to understand film as a cultural product, a sizable body of work has been produced that analyses the formation, function and nature of critical discourse. Following this reception-approach from a film studies perspective, Robert C. Kapsis (1992) draws on sociological theories, especially Howard S. Becker's (1982) work, to provide a multi-methodological framework

for investigating the development of artistic reputation. For Kapsis and others following Becker (e.g., Baumann, 2001), a range of members in the 'art world' (Becker, 1982) of film, critics in particular, are responsible for reputation-building and the development of taste in the historical reception of films. They also believe that reputations, as well as the approaches that critics take, change over time. Another crucial point that Kapsis (1992: p. 13) adopts from Becker is the emphasis on self-promotion – 'marketing and publicity strategies developed by film companies and filmmakers' – which goes hand in hand with attention and endorsement from the film community. This insight opens up the possibility of integrating the reception perspective with industrial analysis, which, by focussing on the intention and strategies of the producers of films, helps reveal exchange and negotiation between producers and critics when creating a reputation.

Drawing on the above literature, I apply theories on individual reputation building in critical reception to the shaping of collective reputation. Kapsis and other scholars influenced by his theoretical model (e.g., Klinger, 1994; Jancovich, 2009; Gallagher, 2013) study individual film directors while addressing and unravelling the issue of auteurism, which has played a central role in the history of film reception. In Milkyway's case, auteurism persists in critical discussions about its productions, but at the same time the recognition and reputation of the company brand develops and competes with a director-centred approach. Changes to the meaning of 'Milkyway' and its increasing prominence in critical reception represent an important barometer of the company's reputation. Milkyway developed from an unknown name to a term denoting a period of To's personal career, and eventually to a brand per se and a synonym for a house style. Therefore, by examining the construction of a collective name, this chapter not only extends scholarship on individual reputation-building but also provides a company-oriented perspective on critical reception history, which has been intertwined predominantly with the auteurist discourse.

In the last few chapters, I have called the sole authorship model into question by attending to the 'creative' roles that the film industry and the cultural community played in pre-empting and shaping the significations of Milkyway's work. My

aim was not to argue for author surrogates but to demonstrate interested parties' practical influence on the knowledge surrounding films. At a certain level, this chapter continues to tackle models of authorship as it untangles the relationship between 'the auteurism of To' and the reputation of Milkyway. However, rather than intending 'collective authorship' (Gaut, 1997; Sellors, 2007), 'studio authorship' (Christensen, 2012) or 'institutional authorship' (Hogan, 2013) for Milkyway in theoretical terms, I show that the company worked to parallel (but not replace) the individual auteur with a company brand against film journalism and academia's inclination towards receiving Milkyway's work within the framework of conventional directorial auteurism. Milkyway's brand development efforts and participation in the critical reception of its films shed light on the practice of translating exclusive and sometimes competing forms of authorship in theoretical terms into compatible and reciprocal models of auteurism as promotional strategies within an industrial context.

The practical dimension is emphasised particularly because the reception history of Milkyway is embedded in the context of Hong Kong cinema's globalisation. Scholars have provided many insights into both the overseas reception of Hong Kong cinema and organisational efforts of promoting Hong Kong film internationally. Ramona Curry (2008: p. 174–198) notes that the Shaw Brothers carried out market exploration in North America as early as the 1950s and 60s, garnering business experiences and laying the groundwork for local successors. Golden Harvest's venture into the United States and the US reception of its films in the 1970s and 1990s have received much scholarly attention (e.g., Fore, 1994; Desser, 2002; Walsh, 2007) as a fundamental step in Hong Kong cinema's globalisation. The company's strategies to penetrate Western countries have been well discussed, among which the successful branding and promotion of Jackie Chan is seen as a prominent example of the concerted effort of local and Western film industries to raise Hong Kong cinema's international profile (Fore, 1997; Gentry, 1997; Gallagher, 2004).

However, notwithstanding intermittent international successes, as Steve Fore (1994: p. 51) wrote in the mid-1990s, 'no Hong Kong corporation has the global marketing mechanism of and "brand identity" associated with Hollywood'. A 'global marketing mechanism' has become even more unimaginable for non-

corporate production companies such as Milkyway, who lack capital and resources compared to their vertically integrated, transnational predecessors. Indeed, Hong Kong film companies have not had the clout that major Hollywood studios and certain independent brands enjoy. However, while they might fail to create strong brand identities, an ambition towards creating bankable and influential studio brands has been consistent among local companies for decades. The process of recognition of Hong Kong studio brands outside of Hong Kong, along with local film companies' promotion of company names, prompt substantial questions when trying to comprehend Hong Kong cinema and its film industry. Since the mid-1990s, the decline of creativity and investor confidence in the aftermath of the exodus of high-profile filmmakers makes the promotion of company brands particularly pertinent and even imperative for the industry. Milkyway's self-promotion embodies the contemporary Hong Kong film industry's self-adjustment. Through the following survey, I argue that, first, the changing reputation of Milkyway in overseas critical reception of its films illustrates exchange and negotiation between the production company and various forces within the film community. Second, concerning the post-crisis Hong Kong film industry, such negotiation challenges the conventional, persistent, auteur-focussed reading of Hong Kong film while rebuilding Hong Kong cinema's international image.

Combining the reception approach and industrial analysis, I primarily employ film reviews, which are the focus of most related studies, along with other resources. Considering the thinning line between journalistic and academic critics, I take reviews and critical writing from both journalism and academia into account, delving into general newspapers, trade publications, popular periodicals, scholarly journals and relevant books. In my inquiry into the creation and transformation of Milkyway's reputation in the West, I mainly look at publications in English but include some French ones as well, because of their active role in shaping critical discourse on cinema. Studies in the same vein tend to concern both the promotional and taste-making functions of critical discourse. Taking up Paul M. Hirsch's (1972: p. 647) idea that what is important for cultural products is 'the presence or absence of coverage, rather than its favorable or unfavorable interpretation', I focus solely on the promotional

function of critical discourse in this chapter. I deal with critics' aesthetic judgements of Milkyway films only when such judgements are germane to the construction of the Milkyway brand.

Milkyway as an invisible factory

Reviews of Milkyway's films overseas started to appear in the company's formative years, when the local film industry faced a downturn. Reviewing Milkyway's early productions directed by project-based directors on behalf of the company, critics laid out the historical context and linked the directors with established local filmmakers. The first reviews reflected an effort to identify individual auteurs-to-be in the Hong Kong film industry, while not mentioning Milkyway at all. The first title released under the Milkyway trademark, *Beyond Hypothermia*, received attention from both trade publications and specialised magazines. In *Variety*, one of the most influential trade publications, the film was introduced with a link to auteur director John Woo who had migrated to Hollywood: 'Second feature by longtime John Woo assistant Patrick Leung' (Elley, 1998a). *Bright Lights Film Journal*, where the possibly earliest reviews of Milkyway's films in the West appeared, raised a concern about talent outflow in the Hong Kong film industry in the years leading up to the handover in reviews of *Beyond Hypothermia* and *Final Justice*, the second film to carry a Milkyway logo. Like in *Variety*, *Beyond Hypothermia* was introduced as a work of John Woo's former assistant who 'plays to his considerable strengths' at a time when Hong Kong was 'faced with potentially apocalyptic change' (Morris, 1997a). The review of *Final Justice* similarly began with the observation that 'Hong Kong cinema is in clear disarray with the transfer to China, a star system in virtual collapse, talent dispersing to throughout the world, and a general who-gives-a-damn attitude' (Morris, 1997b). The director was then discussed with more references to John Woo and also to Tsui Hark, another prestigious director who had left Hong Kong for Hollywood. At this stage, the hopeful rise of Hong Kong cinema's potential 'key players' preoccupied reviewers, whereas the Milkyway company went un-noticed or could have been buried perpetually,

such as in *Bright Lights Film Journal*, where Milkyway's productions were never featured thereafter.

Variety continued to review Milkyway's so-called 1998 trilogy – *The Longest Nite*, *Expect the Unexpected* and *A Hero Never Dies*. Seeking or discovering talent was still a palpable interest. The career development of the director, 'one of the most exciting new talents working in Hong Kong's quality mainstream', according to a reviewer (Elley, 1998b), constituted a major concern in the discussion of *Expect the Unexpected*. However, in the review of *A Hero Never Dies*, the trilogy was otherwise categorised as a To/Wai dual authorship by comparing it to 'recent works that To and writer Wai Ka-fai have produced' (Elley, 1999). Regarding authorship in Milkyway's films, uncertainty and inconsistency emerged. What further complicated the authorship issue was *Variety*'s identification of the 'Milkyway creative team' in its review of *Expect the Unexpected*. The film was said to be '[d]ifferent in look from the tenebrous "The Longest Nite" but clearly from the same creative team' (Elley, 1998b). Although the word 'Milkyway' was still absent, the term 'creative team', which potentially disavowed an auteurist reading, appeared for the first time in reference to Milkyway's key personnel. This marked the starting point of Milkyway's emergence from invisibility.

Critical responses seemed to have inspired the company's branding practices. The following year, Milkyway credited its scriptwriting team as 'Milkyway Creative Team' in a new release (*The Mission*), a gesture repeated in a number of later productions. Naming and crediting a film's scriptwriting unit with a company name represented a profound step for Milkyway's reputation-building strategy. For one, the designation underscored the originality of the company's productions. For another, compared with a list of individual names, 'Milkyway Creative Team' was obviously catchier and more brandable. With Milkyway's scripts receiving nominations and awards from local film events, and with the dissemination of its films, the increasingly visible label of 'Milkyway Creative Team' was applied by the film community to refer to a wider crew and eventually would stand for the Milkyway company, as had been proposed initially in *Variety*. We cannot confirm whether the idea of the 'Milkyway Creative Team' derived from the media's mention of the Milkyway 'creative

team'. However, Milkyway's creation of the collective, publicity-friendly title for its scriptwriters indicated an intent to further interact with its audience, including critics, on behalf of the company, even though the autonomy of critics would complicate the construction of the collective reputation.

Milkyway as a period in Johnnie To's career

From 1999 onwards, the word 'Milkyway' came up more frequently in reviews, and the company became more recognisable in the critical reception of its films. However, Johnnie To's soaring personal reputation at once facilitated and overshadowed the Milkyway brand. A trigger for this was a tribute programme to To presented by the HKIFF (Hong Kong International Film Festival).[1] Critical responses from academia and journalism followed in the wake of HKIFF's promotion of the director. Possibly the first critical article of an individual Milkyway film in a scholarly publication appeared in *Kinema*, a publication of the University of Waterloo in Canada.[2] The article focussed on the director's reflection and construction of a social reality through a textual reading of the To-directed *Where a Good Man Goes*, while the industrial and business contexts of the film under scrutiny were ignored. HKIFF's tribute also led to a festival report in French film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, a key exponent of auteur theory. The report covered To's career since his directorial debut, mentioning Milkyway within the director's biography: 'In 1995, with *Loving You*, […] To inaugurated a new phase of his career […]. In 1996, partnering with Wai Ka-fai […], To founded his own company, Milkyway Image, which allowed him to produce films directed by younger directors such as his former assistant Patrick Yau, in addition to his own films' (Reynaud, 1999).[3] For the first time, Western critics identified, in accordance with HKIFF's promotion, this periodisation of To's career, assuming that Milkyway's films marked a new phase in To's career. With this festival report, *Cahiers du Cinéma* began to idolise To, frequently featuring him in reviews and devoting feature articles and programmes to his work. This text, moreover, foreshadowed a tradition in which Milkyway, more than just a company founded by To, was defined and identified

as a period in To's personal career, underpinned by a profoundly biographical, auteurist mentality.

The tradition of receiving Milkyway within the framework of To's personal career was then supported theoretically – and at the same time problematised – by Andrew Grossman's landmark essay, 'The Belated Auteurism of Johnnie To', published in film magazine *Senses of Cinema* in 2001. As the title suggests, the essay aimed to bestow an auteurism on To. For Grossman, the auteurism of To was belated because his body of work, throughout his entire career, was 'so multifaceted and chameleonic that it does not evince any particular guiding formal or thematic principle'. Grossman fulfilled his task by dividing To's career into several periods, which, according to him, had respective internal consistencies. Examining each of those periods, Grossman contended that the director's auteurism emerged during his Milkyway period:

> But with the founding of To's Milkyway Image production company in 1996, To began to, after years as a highly competent but hardly individualistic filmmaker, stakes his claim as an independent artist, attempting to join the ranks of Stanley Kwan, Wong Kar-wai, Fruit Chan, and Ann Hui as one of the few remaining auteurs in postcolonial Hong Kong. (Grossman, 2001)

The establishment of Milkyway was seen as heralding an entirely new period for To – the Milkyway period. Thereafter Milkyway had a peculiar existence: apart from being a space where production and business practices took place, it denoted a portion of time, defined along the timeline of an individual career.

Grossman's essay, nevertheless, revealed problems with the auteurism he proposed. He recognised that, 'From 1996, To, as Milkyway's impresario, would collaborate with several directors, as well as screenwriter Yau Nai Hoi and subsequently the so-called "Milkyway Creative Team," a constellation of writers which reportedly changes from film to film.' He also observed, 'What is arguably unique about Milkyway […] is that it represents not a one-shot attempt at genre deconstruction, but a continuous project by a collective of filmmakers rather than an individual director.' In the above statements, we find that the name 'Milkyway Creative Team', invented by the production company, had fed back

into critical discussion and that the collective creativity of the company, as the name indicates, was acknowledged. Aware of the production culture at Milkyway, Grossman's essential defence of To's auteurism, however, was that 'while more than half of the Milkyway films were produced but not directed by To, they nevertheless represent his "house style"' (Grossman, 2001). The paradoxical expression 'his "house style"', which simultaneously acknowledged organisational and individual authorships, spoke of Milkyway's situation. Grossman even proposed the idea of 'Milkyway style', which he used as an equivalent of To's 'house style' but admitted as apparent in non-To-directed Milkyway films, such as *Comeuppance*. Although the collective nature and imprint spoke strongly for the company's productions as Grossman noticed, ultimately, To's rising auteurism – 'the *auteurism* of To's Milkyway period' in Grossman's words – was adopted as an overarching principle. Meanwhile, whereas the director-focussed approach was used inconsistently when discussing Milkyway films by different directors before Grossman's article, it began to be applied almost exclusively to To's work thereafter.

The notion of the 'auteurism of To' was first adopted in response to *The Mission*. The film received a spate of reviews overseas only after Grossman proposed the 'auteurism of Johnnie To' (e.g., Charcossey, 2001; Ferenczi, 2001). Stephen Teo's *Senses of Cinema* review provides an illustrative example of discussion of Milkyway's films in terms of To's individual contribution. Teo presented innovations that To had brought to the genre and to Hong Kong cinema more generally, stating that 'he [To] has almost single-handedly invigorated the industry throughout the 1997 financial crisis that has lasted to the present'. However, like Grossman, Teo was unable to avoid Milkyway's 'ubiquitous' existence when discussing To. Following his 'single-handed invigoration' argument, Teo added, 'I refer here of course to the films that To or his protégés such as Wai Ka-fai and Patrick Yau have directed for the company he set up known as Milkyway'. He proceeded to admit that films produced by Milkyway 'have not only rejuvenated the industry mired in crisis, they have also revivified To's own career' (Teo, 2001). With this observation, Teo touched upon the crucial point that the discourse on To had been an integral part of the discourse on Milkyway, with the former being largely a post-Milkyway phenomenon;

'post-Milkyway' specifies not only a temporal order but also, more importantly, causality. Nevertheless, even with such understanding, Wai, 'the brain of Milkyway' in To's view (Sweeney, 2008), was 'demoted' to being To's protégé so as to foreground To's auteurism.

While Milkyway's staple crime thrillers were increasingly tied to To's name, the company extended into light-hearted genre films such as comedies and romances. The newly launched genres questioned pre-existing models of reception and complicated the authorship issue for critics. Upon finding To's auteurism less applicable to or in conflict with the romantic comedies, some critics chose to discuss the films in an organisational context. Consequently, the idea that Milkyway was a collective force of creativity started to vie with the idea that the company name merely denoted a period of To's career. *Variety*'s review of *Needing You*, for example, found that the film 'shows producer-director Johnnie To and his Milkyway team leaving behind the offbeat crimers with which they made their name internationally in recent years'. Teamwork was highlighted: 'To and scripter-helmer Wai Ka-fai ("Too Many Ways to Be No. 1") have worked together on many Milkyway movies, and their contributions, as well as those of behind-camera talent (including regulars like composer Cacine Wong and d.p. Cheng Siu-keung), blend seamlessly' (Elley, 2000).

For critics, not only was the company growing into a stable force in the local film industry after a few years of development, the Milkyway label also stood out owing to the company's female-oriented line of production. *Senses of Cinema*'s review of the romantic comedy *Help!!!* commented that, visually, '*Help* sustains the Milkyway Image production crew's top notch, even over-generous level of creativity'. On an industry level, the review demonstrated a sound understanding of the film's production context:

> *Help!!!* is Johnnie To and Wai Ka-fai's second collaboration in 2000, a follow up to their wildly successful *Needing You* [Gu nan gua nü]. Both producer/directors are principals of Milkyway Image film company, a consistent source of some of the highest quality and most provocative films from Hong Kong since 1997, even if box office success hasn't kept

> step with critical acclaim. Commercial exigencies seem to have forced a readjustment. In Milkyway Image's new, more populist incarnation, it is subsumed under the umbrella of powerful Chinastar owner Charles Heung's One Hundred Years of Film Company. Though the latter might pull To and Wai's films towards greater commercial appeal, the Milkyway Image label still supplies *Help* with a generous quotient of darkness and acidic bite. (Kraicer, 2001a)

The last sentence of the quote above, in addition, involved efforts to explore the connotations that the Milkyway label holds and sketch out a house style across genres. Most importantly, it suggested that what Milkyway stands for is broader that what To and Wai offer, thus contesting 'the auteurism of To' where, as both a period and a stylistic category, 'Milkyway' is included in 'To'.

When the romantic comedies posed difficulties for critics writing within the auteurist framework, Milkyway's newly released crime thriller, *Fulltime Killer*, was earning unprecedented exposure as the first Milkyway title released in the United States. A variety of media and publications, including film publications, such as UK-based *Sight and Sound* and US-based trade magazine *Film Journal International*, and general-interest publications, such as *Time* magazine, *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, started to take notice of Milkyway's work because of this film. These newcomers paid little attention to the production company; for example, *Time* 'discovered' To through discussion of the film (Corliss, 2001), and *Film Journal International* referred to *Fulltime Killer* only as a To/Wai production (Eagan, 2004). However, the film definitely brought Milkyway's work into the view of more critics, as proven by the above magazines' and newspapers' focus on the company's later productions.

More importantly, *Fulltime Killer* marked the beginning of Milkyway's self-promotional campaign through interviews. The company's key doctrines, which would be reiterated on many other occasions, emerged from *Senses of Cinema*'s interview with To and Wai on *Fulltime Killer*. The two placed greater emphasis on the Milkyway brand than their personal careers. First, regarding production orientation, To gave a clear statement: 'At Milkyway Image, we aim for a balance between the kind of movies we like and the kind of movies audiences

like. That is our goal.' Second, To and Wai sought to establish a new stylistic or generic category in (and possibly beyond) local cinema using the company name. Wai remarked that 'in the creative process, with the extreme the [*sic*] time pressure, what came out was maybe the "Milkyway Image genres"', with To adding that 'we wanted a good quality movie created quickly. We needed a movie good enough to be called a Milkyway Image film.' Third, they took into consideration the company's longevity and the prosperity of Hong Kong cinema over that of their personal brands. The two answered a question about the future of their partnership as follows:

> [To:] I hope that Wai Ka-fai and I can continue to plan projects and make new films. We especially want to support new directors, new writers, and new actors in our production company. This is our plan. I hope we can do it together for many years.
>
> [Wai:] We want to continue collaborating, and continue to foster the next generation of filmmakers in HK. (Kraicer, 2001b)

By the mid-2000s, due to frequent dialogue with Milkyway staff and a consistent focus on Milkyway's output, international trade publications had come to acknowledge the company's production spectrum and the hierarchy within its productions. *Variety*'s review of *PTU*, for example, opened with the announcement that, with the film, 'After a couple years spent helming hit comedies and romances, Johnnie To and his team return to the roots of his own company, Milkyway Image' (Elley, 2003). Niche and specialised publications also played their part in positioning Milkyway as a powerhouse in the contemporary Hong Kong film industry. For example, a review of *PTU* in *Asian Cult Cinema* wrote that 'Milky Way [*sic*] production company […] has become the de facto hallmark of quality filmmaking in Hong Kong since the Handover in 1997' (Leong, 2004). An overview of post-1997 Hong Kong cinema in *Senses of Cinema*, similarly, claimed that company was 'a creative dark star during Hong Kong's film crisis of the late '90s' (Hendrix, 2003). Such texts became ideal advertisements that targeted various audience demographics, and all played into the construction of Milkyway's reputation.

Milkyway itself was keen to pursue its engagement with the media, with To giving frequent interviews to magazines. At times, critics were aware of Milkyway being a requisite for To's rising status: 'it was the creation of the production company Milkyway Image that made the name of To more known to western critics and film festivals' (Gomes and Canau, 2003). More interviews primarily attempted to define To as a new auteur in Hong Kong cinema. Although To acted cooperatively to expand his personal reputation, he made conscious efforts to play up the Milkyway brand. When expected to clarify and assert his auteurism, To would steer focus to the company:

> [Interviewer:] How do you find the balance between Johnnie To the author and Johnnie To the director of straightforward commercial films?
>
> [To:] As I have said, Milkyway Image sets a clear direction in terms of what kind of films it wants to make. We separate our films into 2 categories: The commercial films and the personal films. (Gomes and Canau, 2003)

To's response provides an interesting reformulation and adaptation of auteurism as a branding strategy within an industrial context – an idea adopted from Timothy Corrigan (1990). On the one hand, To was acutely conscious of his capability to guide critical attention and reception. On the other hand, he worked to present Milkyway, not himself, as the intentional agent, voluntarily relinquishing the individual authority. Instead of a throwback to the Hollywood studio era, in which studio signatures were prioritised over director names in film marketing, Milkyway's self-promotional efforts were developed upon the commercial model of auteurism and represented a further exploitation of the concept of auteurism, which had been essentially associated with singularity and individuality.

In the mid-2000s, Milkyway released a group of films in its signature genre. *Breaking News*, *Throw Down*, *Election*, *Election II* and *Exiled*, all directed by To, elevated Milkyway's productions to a higher echelon by entering premiere film festivals such as Cannes and Venice. Festival screenings led to enormous critical attention. As an example, *Breaking News*, Milkyway's debut at Cannes, received, in a single French film journal *Positif*, an immediate review during its

festival screening, a feature programme devoted to it in the next year, and another DVD review later. Moreover, assessments of these films cemented Milkyway's status as a genre film specialist. Dissenting views on *Breaking News* acclaimed the company's productions from complementary perspectives. For *Film Journal International*, '*Breaking News* is an admirably professional and efficient piece of work that ranks far above recent Hollywood thrillers' (Eagan, 2006). For *Variety*, nevertheless, '"Breaking News" doesn't come close to such earlier To pathbreakers as "The Longest Nite," "Expect the Unexpected," "The Mission," or last year's "PTU," all of which re-spun the Hong Kong crime flick in more original, involving ways' (Elley, 2004). *Election* was praised in *Film Journal International* as operating 'on a far different level than the average mob tale' (Eagan, 2007). *Exiled* was seen in *The Hollywood Reporter* as 'one of the finest gangster movies in years' (Honeycutt 2007), and it was also the first Milkyway work to win *Chicago Sun-Times* critic Roger Ebert's admiration (see, Ebert, 2007). A review in French film magazine *Hors Champ* claimed that these films were 'the most beautiful, greatest films of the genre that is possible to imagine' (Habib, 2007).[4] Accordingly, Milkyway was regarded by some as 'a sign of excellence and creativity in cinema' (Austin, 2007).

These films brought the director into the spotlight. Critics applied the vocabulary that would bolster To's auteur standing. He was identified as 'Hong Kong's action meister' (Bradshaw, 2006), 'a maestro of the Asian martial arts genre' (Bradshaw, 2007), 'a steady practitioner of the Asian gangster genre' (Honeycutt, 2007), 'one of the greatest action directors working in the world' (Dargis, 2007), 'the most prolific and accomplished director working in Hong Kong today' (Eagan, 2005), 'a first-rate entertainer' (Scott, 2007), and 'a world-class director' (Eagan, 2007). Together with the exposure that he gained from film festivals and other events, To's name tended to eclipse the Milkyway brand, which nevertheless gained more currency in the critical reception of its productions. Critics initially took Milkyway (read, the Milkyway period) as a time frame within which they sought consistencies so as to legitimise To's auteur status, but the director-oriented approach was problematised by the collaborative and collective nature of Milkyway's production practices. Importantly, Milkyway staff's reiteration of this nature in their exchanges with

members of the film community significantly contributed to acknowledgement of the indispensably organisational context in later critical responses. A competition between and mutual enhancement of individual and collective reputations appeared as an increasingly prominent theme.

Milkyway as a house style and a brand per se

Whilst To's reputation kept growing, Milkyway employed further strategies to promote the company brand. Notions that Milkyway denoted a period of To's career and that the director's personal style equalled Milkyway's house style were challenged essentially after 2006. The company's first initiative was *Milkyway Image, Beyond Imagination*, a bilingual self-commemorative book released at the celebration of its tenth anniversary. Milkyway co-presented the volume and contributed to it by deciding on the structure of the book, arranging interviews and providing production stills and behind-the-scene pictures (Pun, 2006: p. 10). Specifically, the company commissioned a group of overseas scholars and critics alongside local ones to write reviews for the films to be covered in the book (all the titles fall into its featured crime thriller genre to reinforce its image). Endorsements from the authors were exemplified by an introduction written by American film scholar and Hong Kong film expert David Bordwell. Bordwell (2006: p. 16) claimed that Milkyway was the only production company from Hong Kong that 'has adroitly advanced on every front', 'proven the most reliable source of film artistry', and 'pointed the way for a new era of Hong Kong cinema'. The book was just one example and a result of Milkyway's regular exchange with academia. In Bordwell's case, Milkyway had invited him to visit its headquarters and shooting locations and requested essays from him for its releases,[5] demonstrating a clear understanding of the determining role that collaboration and rapport with the film community plays in the creation of a reputation in contemporary film culture.

Another move to strengthen and expand the influence of the Milkyway brand was a two-fold strategy of integrating external resources and grooming young talent. Specifically, Milkyway compelled the discussion of its productions within the framework of To's auteurism to adjust with the release of a number

of non-To-directed crime thrillers, in which there was a strong tendency to dilute the directors' personal styles for consistency with previous Milkyway productions. Films such as *Eye in the Sky* (2007, Yau Nai-Hoi), the *Tactical Unit* series (2008–2009, Law Wing-Cheong, Lawrence Lau, Andy Ng) and *Punished* used and fostered the company's in-house junior filmmakers as directors. Another group, including *Triangle*, *Accident* and *Motorway* represented Milkyway's collaboration with established local filmmakers not on the company's payroll. *Trivisa* was an outcome of the third model, which explored new local talent for the company. The directors of the film were all discovered at the Fresh Wave International Short Film Festival, a platform for young local filmmakers initiated by To in 2005. By offering a launchpad for the most promising talents winnowed through the Competition, Milkyway expanded its potential talent pool.

Admittedly, most of the above films tended to receive relatively little attention and mediocre reviews, and some critics tended not to reference Milkyway as a creative entity. Reviews of *Triangle*, for example, almost all focussed on the alliance of three high-profile directors but hardly mentioned Milkyway as the film's production company, not to mention the company's purpose of increasing product competitiveness by connecting itself to outside resources. Grossman's idea of To's 'house style' resurfaced, typically, in the *Variety* review of *Motorway*, where the film was seen as 'bearing producer Johnnie To's signature cool understatement and streamlined action' (Lee, 2012).

At the same time, critics could not avoid identifying Milkyway either as a brand or as a style. Milkyway, as the company's executives had expected, became a category under which films from and styles of different directors were subsumed and identified – a situation totally different from the company's inception, in which films from different directors were discussed unconnectedly. *The Hollywood Reporter*'s review of *Eye in the Sky* found the film 'similar in tone to much of Milkyway's material' (Kerr, 2007). For *Variety*, *Eye in the Sky* 'has the distinctive whiff of the Milkyway Image brand' (Elley, 2007), and *Accident* 'has the strong imprint of a Milkyway production' (Elley, 2009). In the *Variety* review of *Motorway*, in which To's 'house style' was mentioned, the film's technical aspects were noted as 'bearing the stylistic stamp of a Milkyway Image

production' (Lee, 2012). *Variety*'s review of *Three* wrote that '[t]ech credits again conform to To's production shingle Milkyway Image's slick, stylish standards' (Lee, 2016). Clearly, critics' previous knowledge of and expectations for Milkyway played a part in their reception of the films. A review of *Trivisa* in *The Hollywood Reporter*, in addition, provides an example of critics' responses to Milkyway's effort of incorporating and developing individual styles to a house style. It claimed that the first-time directors of the film 'have delivered a pitch-black, noir-infused debut resembling their mentors' fatalistic classics of yore', expounding, 'While quite a few of To's hallmarks are present – tense standoffs in the night and the consequence of coincidences, for example – the three young directors have all offered variations in mise-en-scene, framing and acting' (Tsui, 2016).

Most significantly, critical reception began to reflect Milkyway's accomplishment in terms of brand building. A review in *The Hollywood Reporter* argued that *Punished* could 'expect brisk business with ancillary distributors catering to Asian cineastes who'll lap up anything bearing the manufacturing stamp of Milkyway Image' (Lee, 2011). With previous work becoming a gauge for future releases, projects assigned or outsourced to different filmmakers worked together to reinforce and refine the 'Milkyway style', the existence of which has become a critical consensus, even though the definition varied. After 2007, the increasingly recognised house style and the company's operating model invalidated the perception that Milkyway merely demarcated an individual career. A brand per se was becoming apparent.

There was also an increase in scholarly interest in Milkyway's films. Book-length studies in English and other foreign languages were published,[6] and dedicated articles that appeared in scholarly and semi-scholarly journals markedly increased.[7] Most books and articles celebrated the innovations and updates To had brought to Hong Kong cinema, thereby demonstrating an intention to build an auteur image on his behalf. However, Milkyway was no longer an unknown production house. For instance, Bordwell's 2011 *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* represented an endeavour to inscribe Milkyway in film history. Bordwell regarded To and Milkyway as the most recent development in Hong Kong cinema and provided

a conclusive account of Milkyway's development and accomplishment. Seeing Milkyway's films characterised by complicated plot and flamboyant visual effects, built out of simple storytelling and stylistic elements and foregrounding an organisational context – 'Milkyway was nothing if not budget-conscious' (Bordwell, 2011: p. 247) – Bordwell connected film style with financial reality to present a full image of Milkyway. For him, 'With a standing team of actors, writers, and technicians, Milkyway began turning out some of the strongest and strangest films of the period' (p. 244). Critics and scholars were using the word 'Milkyway' to indicate an emerging powerhouse, a creative source, or a distinct style, which attested to a developing reputation.

It has to be noted that although a discourse about Milkyway has begun to take shape, directorial auteurism remained the mainstream method of reading Milkyway's work. Glenn Heath Jr.'s 2016 omnibus review of a cluster of To-(co)directed Milkyway films in film magazine *Cineaste* is in place to be compared with most articles arguing for the auteurism of To (e.g., Grossman, 2001; Hampton, 2014). Like the other authors, Heath (2016) incorporated the films into an auteurist framework. However, while the others sought To's auteurism mainly in Milkyway's crime thrillers, Heath tried to connect Milkyway's comedies and romances – early titles such as *Fat Choi Spirit* (2002, To and Wai) and recent ones such as *Romancing in Thin Air* and the *Don't Go Breaking My Heart* films – and reconstruct To's auteurism across various genres. The likes of Heath's article, which not coincidentally omitted the production company, put the brand of Milkyway in the shadow of To's name. However, such an article brought Milkyway's less-known genres and films to light, paving the way for a further discovery or rediscovery of the company in terms of both its production culture and branding strategy.

As illustrated by the foregoing discussion, one thread running through all overseas reception of Milkyway's work was the gradual recognition of the company brand, which stood against conspicuous efforts to discover new star filmmakers in Hong Kong cinema and especially to establish To as both a pillar of the local film industry and an auteur in contemporary world cinema. In critics and scholars' reviews or studies of Milkyway's work, one pertinent concern was what these films contributed to Hong Kong cinema, which was nevertheless

often simplified to the way in which To distinguished himself from earlier local auteurs. Although the construction of the Milkyway brand was a result of a great deal of effort on the part of both the company and the film community, the latter's promotion of individual names conflicted with and impeded the company's self-promotion. Nevertheless, Milkyway recognised cultural discourse as an intangible asset and made conscious use of cultural forces. Furthermore, its promotion of the company brand influenced and even changed the ways in which critics read its films, demonstrating that production companies had an active role to play in shaping their reputation in critical reception and in disentangling film reception from an auteur-oriented perspective.

Auteurism has constituted a major framework within which critics receive and evaluate films. Upon some key filmmakers' departure from Hong Kong in the early 1990s, critics sought to discover successors to continue an auteur-centric discourse of Hong Kong cinema while being less sensitive to alternative self-promotional strategies exercised by entities within that film industry, such as company brand development. As a symbolic resource, a company brand can mean higher visibility for potential distributors of a range of films and also capital for future generations of practitioners. The reputation of a company brand can sell products in advance, regardless of personnel changes. In the past decade, Milkyway's crime thriller and related genre films, directed by To or others, frequently toured international film festivals and have been distributed to a growing number of countries, as discussed in last two chapters; some films' remake rights also have been sold in foreign markets, meaning that cultural capital has translated into economic benefit. The aim of highlighting the company brand is therefore to make the company, which is comprised of various filmmakers and genres including forthcoming ones, a driving force in competition with other film industries in the global arena. Company brands can supplement individual names as anchors of the local film industry and can wield symbolic power in global film distribution and consumption.

Conclusion

In Milkyway's twenty-year history, Western critics gradually identified the company brand and helped construct an impression of the company's house style. In critical responses to its films, Milkyway developed from an invisible factory to a term denoting a period of an individual career, and, finally, to a brand and style itself. In the process, on the one hand, one can easily notice critics' disinclination to acknowledge Milkyway as the author responsible for its productions, behind which was a conventional, persistent, and perhaps convenient auteurist approach preoccupying the reception of Hong Kong cinema. This explains early reviews of Milkyway's films from the company's project-based directors and the later critical construction of To's auteurism. On the other hand, Milkyway made an effort to reveal itself openly. It claimed studio authorship in film credits and paratexts, engaged with cultural forces such as media and academia, and raised brand values by fostering junior filmmakers within the company and assimilating local talent and resources from outside.

Milkyway's efforts and the development of its reputation all took place during a crisis period for the Hong Kong film industry in both financial and creative terms. The aftermath of talent outflow was a period of painful lessons for the industry, whose prosperity had been dependent largely on marquee artists. Worse still, developing film industries in neighbouring territories, such as the South Korean and mainland Chinese industries, took over Hong Kong's leading position in East Asia. Cultural competitiveness became an imperative in the mid-1990s. The building of brand identity and awareness through international critical reception can be seen as a response to these circumstances. Throughout half of the chapters, including this one, I have examined the reception of Milkyway's work and the shaping of the discourse about the company in different contexts and by various players. Nevertheless, rather than dealing with text–reader relations per se, I repeatedly emphasise the production company's active involvement and assistance in the formation of the relations. The production company is not simply the creator (or co-creator if we define the audience as another creator) of the film text: it is a (co-)creator also of text–reader relations from which symbolic and economic values are generated for the sake of the collective – the company and the industry.

Notes

[1] 'Hong Kong Director in Focus' at the 23rd edition of the HKIFF in 1999.

[2] Refer to Wong, 1999.

[3] The translation is my own.

[4] The translation is my own.

[5] For example, an essay from Bordwell is included in the booklet contained in *Mad Detective*'s DVD pack. For his visit to Milkyway, see Bordwell, 2007.

[6] For example, Zanello and Di Giulio (ed.), 2008; Teo, 2007.

[7] For example, Bettinson, 2013; Eisenreich, Codelli and Niogret, 2007; Frodon, 2007; Huber, 2007; Kronengold, 2013; Martin, 2009b; Shapiro, 2010; Walters, 2010; Williams, 2010.

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Conclusion

When I was close to finishing this thesis, Milkyway, as well as the Hong Kong and mainland media, celebrated the company's twentieth anniversary. In closing, I point to Milkyway's recent activities and recent discourse around the company and Hong Kong cinema, and also suggest the value of studying this contemporary Hong Kong film production house. At the twentieth anniversary, Milkyway threw a party in the Milkyway Building. The 'small-concert-like' party, as the local media described it, invited the company's current and previous investors, talents with whom it had worked, and its friends in the industry (Situ, 2016). The event was a proud announcement that Milkyway not only survived but also thrived. To talked about Milkyway's past at the party, revealing that there had been hard times when no one wanted to invest in the company; he also talked about the future, envisioning the company's fortieth anniversary (Situ, 2016). He said that he was about to focus entirely on the filmmaking process and hand over Milkyway to Yau Nai-Hoi, hoping that Yau would team up with Soi Cheang like he himself did with Wai (Situ, 2016; Fei, 2016a). He also revealed that the company's current owner was not himself but Hairun's boss Liu Yan Ming (Situ, 2016). Changes suggested in To's remarks have already been evident in Milkyway's most recent productions and plans. Yau was promoted to replace Wai as co-producer alongside To for *Trivisa* and *Three*, not necessarily indicating the end of Milkyway's To–Wai era but rather signifying a new collaboration pattern in creative terms. More significantly, the company planned to relocate its studios to Yixing, a small town in east China, within the next couple of years; according to To, two studios had taken shape there and six more would join them (Fei, 2016a).

A couple of weeks after the party, Hairun held a press conference in Beijing to announce its forthcoming film projects, among which was a high fantasy film with the working title *King of Kings* in collaboration with Milkyway. Not only will the film be Milkyway's first foray into the epic/fantasy genre, but also it is claimed to be 'the most expensive film in To's career to date' with an estimated budget of RMB 1 billion (Fei, 2016b). Meanwhile, the Beijing International

Film Festival presented a tribute programme entitled 'Romantic Combat: Milkyway Image Twentieth Anniversary', and the Shanghai International Film Festival hosted a seminar also for the company's twentieth anniversary, in which To and Yau had a conversation with mainland scholars and critics.

Whilst Milkyway was developing further collaborations with mainland film companies and cultural bodies and planning to move to the mainland in the mid-2010s, critics from the HKFCS (Hong Kong Film Critics Society) (re)read Milkyway's work in search of the films' local identity and in defence of Hong Kong's dignity. Since the HKFA (Hong Kong Film Awards) presented the best film prize to the anti-Chinese dystopian film *Ten Years* (2015, Ng Ka-Leung et al.) in early 2016, the local cultural community became increasingly outspoken in reviews of films directed by local filmmakers, including *Trivisa* and *Three*, 'two productions for Milkyway's twentieth anniversary' as Bo Bi calls them (Bo, 2016a). In the same vein of previous HKFCS reviews of Milkyway's work yet in a more aggressive manner, Bo (2016b) suggests that *Three* identifies with and appreciates the recent pro-democracy protests organised by local students. Apart from the new releases, the HKFCS compiled and republished old essays on *Election* and *Election II* on the tenth anniversary of *Election*'s release and on the eve of *Three*'s release, commenting that 'the films are specifically provocative in retrospect in terms of their political overtones' (HKFCS, 2016). Conflicts between 'the local' and 'the national', both of which characterise Milkyway productions today, are escalating in the cultural exclave of Hong Kong.

Outside of Hong Kong, Milkyway's work continued to draw attention from festival organisers, distributors and critics as among the most sought-after films from Hong Kong. The Berlinale screened *Trivisa*, 'a double swan song' for Hong Kong and for 'an independent Hong Kong cinema' according to the festival (BIFF, 2016). At approximately the same time, *The Weaving of a Dream: Johnnie To's Vision & Craft* (2016, Ferris Lin), a documentary about the making of *Three*, was screened and sold at the Cannes Film Market (Shackleton, 2016a). Produced and presented by Milkyway's distributor Media Asia, the documentary suggests an increased interest in Milkyway's production culture. However, whereas the non-To-directed *Trivisa* could show up in the Berlinale's line-up, the English title of the documentary about *Three* dropped the word

‘Milkyway’ which was included in the Chinese version. The company brand has yet to leverage its commercial value as To’s individual brand does. The issue is nevertheless increasingly crucial to Milkyway’s future fortunes and its legacy as the director is considering stepping down.

At the ‘Milkyway Image 20 Anniversary’ party, Yau was asked about what he felt about taking over the company from To and Wai. He raised the question facing Milkyway in his answer: ‘It will be difficult, because, after all, Milkyway Image was founded by Mr. To and Mr. Wai. So should we follow in their footsteps or break ground? What should we do? What direction should Milkyway Image take? (Lu, 2016)’ To said that he also has been thinking about what Milkyway will become in its post-To era and hopes the company has a secured future under new leadership (Fei, 2016a). The potential leaders, Yau and Cheang, are apprentices of To and Wai, the consistency of Milkyway’s house style and brand identity and the company’s longevity thus likely rely on the apprenticeship system, which has a long tradition in the Hong Kong film industry. Since apprentices tended to be either in the shadow of their masters or auteurs themselves in local film histroy, it remains a question how this system will contribute to the integrity and development of a company brand.

Milkyway’s history is still being made beyond what I have written in this thesis. But as I have demonstrated, the company operates in constant fluxes of localisation, nationalisation and transnationalisation. Milkyway, as well as the discourse surrounding it, is a product of Hong Kong’s transition in a range of dimensions, from the political to the social, the economic to the industrial, the cultural to the psychological. It produces for the Hong Kong people after the political transfer and economic downturn, but is itself a legend created by the local cultural bodies and mass audience. Milkyway is also a product of the further liberalisation of the Chinese film market, the industrialisation of the Chinese film industry and, ultimately, China’s rise to an economic superpower. It serves the massive amount of its new domestic audience while being molded by the co-production environment and China’s assimilation of Hong Kong. Milkyway’s history, moreover, offers insights into the recent history and development of overseas film industries, such as Hollywood, and of international film institutions, such as the film festival and film criticism. These

players in the international film community shaped Milkyway's history and public image to a large extent. Producing for a global audience, Milkyway is a product of the increasing transnationalisation and globalisation of cinema.

At the same time, this case study of Milkyway consistently emphasises a bottom-up perspective that attends to the production company's efforts at carving out its own destiny. On the one hand, Milkyway tailors its films to different audience groups. It cooperates with both the Hong Kong cultural community's yearning for denationalisation and China's nationalisation of Hong Kong cinema including censorship. It plays by the written and unwritten rules set by film festivals and contributes to the auteur-centric film culture. On the other hand, through negotiation and resistance, it attempts to stretch the scope for creative freedom for itself and the boundaries of Chinese-language cinema in general. Equally importantly, it strives to forge a company brand through exchanges with film journalism and academia. Milkyway's history shows survival strategies for, and capabilities and potentialities of, small-scale independent production houses in the contemporary age.

Finally, the emergence of company brands such as Milkyway is a signal of the Hong Kong film industry's reintegration of resources in the post-handover era and in an increasingly competitive landscape. As a means to sustain Hong Kong cinema's legacy and to restore the film industry's creative edge, film company brands become an industrial strategy in local cinema's recent developments. Forming partnerships with mainland film firms, they also become important agents in the integration and reconfiguration of Chinese-language film industries. Bridging co-produced propaganda blockbusters (such as *Drug War*) and tight-budgeted anti-Chinese commentaries (such as *Trivisa*), and at the forefront of transcultural filmmaking, the production houses provide rich sites for understanding contemporary Hong Kong and Chinese film culture in transformation.

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PTU / *Ji dong bu dui* (2003, Johnnie To)

Turn Left, Turn Right / *Xiang zuo zou, xiang you zou* (2003, Johnnie To and Wai Ka-Fai)

Memory of Youth / *Shao nian wang shi* (2003, John Chan)

Running on Karma / *Da zhi lao* (2003, Johnnie To and Wai Ka-Fai)

Love under the Sun / *Ai zai yang guang xia* (short film) (2003, Andy Lau)

1:99 Shorts / *1:99 dian ying xing dong* (television film) (2003, Johnnie To et al.)

Breaking News / *Da shi jian* (2004, Johnnie To)

Throw Down / *Rou dao long hu bang* (2004, Johnnie To)

Yesterday Once More / *Long feng dou* (2004, Johnnie To)

Open Road / *Zi xing wo lu* (short film) (2005, Johnnie To)

Election / *Hei she hui* (2005, Johnnie To)

2 Become 1 / *Tian sheng yi dui* (2006, Law Wing-Cheong)

Election II / *Hei she hui II* (2006, Johnnie To)

Exiled / *Fang zhu* (2006, Johnnie To)

Eye in the Sky / *Gen zong* (2007, Yau Nai-Hoi)

Hooked on You / *Mei dang bian huan shi* (2007, Law Wing-Cheong)

Triangle / *Tian san jiao* (2007, Tsui Hark, Ringo Lam and Johnnie To)

Mad Detective / *Shen tan* (2007, Johnnie To and Wai Ka-Fai)

Linger / *Hu die fei* (2008, Johnnie To)

Sparrow / *Wen que* (2008, Johnnie To)

Tactical Unit – The Code / *Ji dong bu dui zhi jing li* (television film) (2008, Law Wing-Cheong)

Tactical Unit – Partners / *Ji dong bu dui zhi huo ban* (television film) (2008, Lawrence Lau)

Tactical Unit – No Way Out / *Ji dong bu dui zhi jue lu* (television film) (2008, Lawrence Lau)

Tactical Unit – Human Nature / *Ji dong bu dui zhi ren xing* (television film) (2008, Andy Ng)

Tactical Unit – Comrades in Arms / *Ji dong bu tui zhi tong pao* (television film) (2009, Law Wing-Cheong)

Vengeance / *Fu chou* (2009, Johnnie To)

Accident / *Yi wai* (2009, Soi Cheang)

Don't Go Breaking My Heart / *Dan shen nan nü* (2011, Johnnie To)

Punished / *Bao ying* (2011, Law Wing-Cheong)

Life Without Principle / *Duo ming jin* (2011, Johnnie To)

Romancing in Thin Air II / *Gao hai ba zhi lian II* (2012, Johnnie To)

Motorway / *Che shou* (2012, Soi Cheang)

Drug War / *Du zhan* (2012, Johnnie To)

Blind Detective / *Mang tan* (2013, Johnnie To)

A Complicated Story / *Yi ge fu za gu shi* (2013, Kiwi Chow)

Don't Go Breaking My Heart II / *Dan shen nan nü II* (2014, Johnnie To)

Office / *Hua li shang ban zu* (2015, Johnnie To)

Trivisa / *Shu da zhao feng* (2016, Frank Hui, Jevons Au and Vicky Wong)

Three / *San ren xing* (2016, Johnnie To)