

Kung fuelled

[The Scotsman](#)

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Back in the Seventies, everybody was kung-fu fighting, and hey, those cats were fast as lightning. To discover the reason behind this upsurge of martial artistry, you had only to cast your eyes eastwards towards Hong Kong - home of the "chop socky" film genre. Although Chinese action movies had been well established since the Forties, it was the work of stars such as Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan in the Seventies which introduced the Western world to the excitement of seeing grown men kick the bejesus out of each other at incomprehensible speed while making scary squealing noises. Playground fights were never the same again, and a cult was born. It permeated everything. Remember Hong Kong Phooey? Monkey? The Water Margin? Charlie Chan? There was even Hai Karate aftershave, for God's sake.

Since then, the popularity of Hong Kong cinema has grown to such an extent that many actors and directors, famous in their native land but previously unheard of in the West, are now regular faces on the Hollywood circuit. Witness the meteoric rise to fame of action hero supreme Chow Yun Fat (The Killer, Hard Boiled, The Replacement Killers and unbelievably, Anna and the King), director John Woo (Face Off, Hard Boiled, Mission Impossible 2), Jet Li (The Hitman, Lethal Weapon 4) and Michelle Yeoh (Tomorrow Never Dies).

In response to this overwhelming demand for Hong Kong action films, independent film and video distributor Medusa Pictures is launching Hong Kong Legends, a new label devoted to bringing the best of the genre to the UK. In addition to new releases, their range of previously unavailable classics, on both DVD and VHS, will make any hardcore fan weep for joy. The first releases, available on 28 February, are Jackie Chan's Snake in the Eagle's Shadow on DVD, and New Dragon Gate Inn on VHS.

Snake in the Eagle's Shadow is an early Chan classic which has been restored to its original glory using the latest digital technology, while New Dragon Gate Inn, starring Tony Leung (Hard Boiled) is renowned for featuring one of the most memorable fight scenes in any Hong Kong movie. These releases will be closely followed by other classics such as Chan's The Drunken Master and the Fist of Fury prequel Legend of a Fighter, as well as contemporary films like Jet Li's The Hitman.

Until the launch of Medusa, the only other company releasing Hong Kong video was MIA Video, with their label Hong Kong Classics, which has always been dedicated to bringing contemporary films to Western audiences. If you're a Hong Kong virgin and want to see what all the fuss is about, 13 March is a day to mark down in your diary as it sees the

release of the ultra-violent *Beast Cops*, which was awarded Best Film, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Supporting Actor and Best Screenplay at last year's Hong Kong Film Awards. Another essential for fans of the genre - or those who want a good introduction to it, is *Cinema of Vengeance*, already available on DVD. A 90-minute history of 50 years of Hong Kong cinema - which includes clips from all the major stars in action, plus the Hong Kong Hall of Fame Gallery - this has all you ever needed to know and probably more.

In order to appreciate the genre fully, it is useful to have some knowledge of the history of Hong Kong's film industry, which is just as colourful as the movies it produces. After the Communist takeover in China, many of the major players from the Shanghai movie industry fled there, where they could continue to make the kind of films they were unable to tackle under Mao's rule. This influx led to a boom in film-making, which went into overdrive when the Shaw Brothers, one of the main studios, introduced colour and widescreen, previously unseen techniques in Asian film. The other major studio in Hong Kong was Golden Harvest, the head of which was Raymond Chow, a former producer with the Shaw Brothers. Golden Harvest was the studio Bruce Lee signed to after his return from Hollywood.

The Shaw Brothers were responsible for introducing the genre to worldwide audiences, producing a slew of kung-fu classics which were lapped up, despite, or maybe because of, their predictability, relatively poor cinematography and laughable dubbing. However, no matter how atrocious the acting and general presentation, one thing which always hit the mark was the fighting. Whether it was pure martial arts movies such as the Shaolin Temple series, or stylised action classics like *The One-Armed Swordsman*, the action scenes could not be faulted.

By the late Seventies, the films coming out of Hong Kong had changed direction. The formulaic kung-fu standards began to be replaced by technically advanced features, with an emphasis on style and design. One of the main protagonists of this new era was Tsui Hark, who came back to Hong Kong after being educated abroad, to set up his own studio, Film Workshop. His company produced a fantastic number of features, all of which found international acclaim, such as *A Chinese Ghost Story*, *The Killer*, *A Better Tomorrow I, II, and III*, and the Sergio Leone-inspired *Once upon a Time in China* series.

The martial arts aspect of the genre began to take a back seat. With action superstar Jackie Chan, who was heavily influenced by Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd, the emphasis shifted to comedy and stunts. Renowned for his cavalier attitude towards broken bones, Chan took on ever-more risky stunts. During the filming of *Armour of God*, he leapt from a 40ft tower onto a nearby tree (without the use of a safety net or

other sensible precautions), and missed. He received a punctured skull for his trouble and came close to dying. And herein lies one of the greatest appeals of HK films: this stuff is for real. For example, when you see Chow Yun Fat looking stricken in *A Better Tomorrow II*, when bombs are going off around him, you should know that it's because his hair was on fire. But, that's the way they play it - the cameras keep on rolling. You've got to respect that kind of dedication.

Shaw Brothers-apprenticed John Woo heralded the next development of the genre, which replaced unarmed combat with guns. Lots of them. Visually stunning, meticulously choreographed, comic-book violence became the new style and Chow Yun Fat was its figurehead. He and Woo worked together on a number of projects (*Hard Boiled*, *A Better Tomorrow*, *The Killer*), all of which have certain trademarks. Things to look out for: good guy and bad guy (with complicated relationship issues between them) sticking guns in each other's faces for several minutes, but not firing; somebody sliding down a banister firing two guns at once; slow-motion gun battles; and a final showdown in a church (usually, but not always, with lots of doves in attendance). Great stuff.

This kind of highly stylised violence has had an enormous influence, in both Hong Kong and Hollywood. The action sequences in *The Matrix*, co-ordinated by Yuen Woo Ping of *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* and *Drunken Master* fame, borrowed heavily from Woo's techniques, as did Andrew Lau's *Young and Dangerous* series, adapted from the Manga animation *Teddy Boy*, which focuses on the lives of a group of young, good-looking Triads. *Drive*, due for release on 17 April, is another Hollywood film which owes much to Hong Kong; its martial arts sequences are said to be unparalleled outside of the Far East.

The violence isn't always confined to the screen either. Rumours abound of connections between the movie industry and organised crime. The mystery surrounding the untimely death of screen legend Bruce Lee has been linked to Triad activity; Jackie Chan allegedly had to disappear for a couple of years when he tried to get out of his studio contract, and Jet Li's manager was executed by a gang. In 1992, the Hong Kong movie industry took a stand against these and other related incidents; they organised a demonstration to demand freedom from Triad intervention. Whether or not they were successful is open to speculation, although it did bring the problem out in the open.

Another problem which is causing the Hong Kong industry to suffer is piracy. New releases are available in the markets for ridiculously low prices, long before they hit the retail shelves, sometimes even before they've hit the big screen. Triad intervention is rife in these schemes too, and once again, the stars of the industry, including Jackie Chan and Andy Lau, stood up last year to demonstrate against the strangulation of their business.

In 1997, Hong Kong reverted back to Chinese rule and it was predicted that this would be the death of the industry. In fact, the popularity of Hong Kong films in the West seems to be the real culprit. The major players in the business have been lured away to work in America and elsewhere. People like John Woo, Chow Yun Fat, Jet Li and Jackie Chan essentially were Hong Kong films and when they moved on, there was not much left in the way of outstanding home-grown talent. Hong Kong was very unusual in the respect that there were a few people who were the core of the industry, and everybody else was, by comparison, mediocre. But the industry is by no means dead yet, and there has been a move towards producing bigger-budget features which will appeal to Western audiences. As long as the demand is there, it seems these cats will carry on kung- fu fighting. n

Hong Kong Legends release *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* (DVD, GBP 19.99) and *New Dragon Gate Inn* (VHS, GBP 13.99) on 28 February. Hong Kong Classics release *Beast Cops* (VHS, GBP 12.99) on 13 March